



# From **JAPAN** By Michael Freund to **JERUSALEM**

***H**e served as a Protestant minister in Japan's fourth-largest city, presiding over a prominent Christian congregation where he was loved and respected by all. But growing doubts about the veracity of his faith led Nobutaka Hattori on an unexpected spiritual journey. Now, he is a kollel student in Jerusalem, where he follows the customs of the Vilna Gaon, and is currently completing his study of the Talmudic tractate of Makkot ... for the third time.*

Every week, Moshe Hattori sits in front of a computer screen in Jerusalem,

---

*Mr. Freund served as an aide in the Israeli Prime Minister's Office to former premier Binyamin Netanyahu. He is currently chairman of Shavei Israel ([www.shavei.org](http://www.shavei.org)), a Jerusalem-based group that assists "lost Jews" seeking to return to the Jewish people.*

and begins to type. With painstaking care, he tackles issues of faith and Jewish law, preparing a brief commentary on the weekly Torah reading, which he disseminates both far and wide via fax and the Internet.

Hattori culls material from an impressive variety of sources, including the Talmud, the Rishonim and the writings of latter-day luminaries such as the Vilna Gaon, the Meshech Chachmah and Rabbi Aharon Kotler. As a devoted student at the Great Synagogue's Be'er Miriam Kollel in Jerusalem, he spends most of his waking hours immersed in sacred texts. Clearly, the forty-five-year-old enjoys spreading knowledge and wisdom, which explains why his weekly analysis is now in its fifth year of publication.

What makes this periodical unique, however, is that it is issued

simultaneously in two different languages: Hebrew and Japanese, Hattori's native tongue, making it perhaps the only one of its kind in the world.

Even more remarkable, though, is the story of the man whose spiritual journey over the past two decades took him from serving as a Protestant pastor in the Far East to learning as a full-time kollel student in the heart of Jerusalem.

Nobutaka Hattori was born and raised in Nagoya, Japan's fourth-largest city, which is located 200 miles west of Tokyo and serves as the capital of Aichi Prefecture. He grew up in a religious Buddhist family, where the demands of custom and tradition were strictly upheld.

From a very young age, he was visually impaired, which prompted concern among his parents as to where he should be educated. Ultimately, they

decided to send him to the local Christian missionary school because they had heard that the teachers there were kind and would be more understanding of their son's needs.

"It was ... at the Christian school that I became acquainted with the Bible," Hattori recalls. "They presented it as the 'Old Testament,' and [they] also taught us various Christian works."

Much to his parents' dismay, Hattori began attending church, and by the time he was sixteen, he decided that he wanted to become a practicing minister. "They were not so pleased," Hattori says. "When I told them that I wanted to attend a seminary and become a Christian minister, they were shocked, but they could not really do anything about it."

While still in high school, Hattori notes, he and his classmates were taught very little about the Jews. "I remember being surprised by the fact that even though they taught us the contents of the Old Testament, they taught us next to nothing about the Jewish people itself."

One teacher, he says, posed a rhetorical question to the class, "What is the State of Israel?" before proceeding to explain that "the Jews had removed the Arabs, the previous residents, and then built a new state, which is the State of Israel."

"I thought it strange that on the one hand he taught us the history of the Jews during the time of Moses and the Prophets, yet on the other hand he would speak this way about the Jewish people," Hattori says.

Nonetheless, the one Jewish-related subject that did receive a great deal of attention in his studies was the Holocaust. "In high school, they taught us a lot about the Holocaust, what the Nazis had done, and what a human tragedy it had been." Hattori's class was even taken to see Charlie Chaplin's famed 1940 film "The Great Dictator," which ridiculed Adolf Hitler and fascism.

As a seminary student in Tokyo, Hattori began studying Christian theol-

ogy more intensively. But as he did so, questions and doubts began to surface. "They were the types of questions which were forbidden for me to ask, such as those regarding the Christian belief in the Trinity," he says. Driven by a desire to find the truth, Hattori explored the belief systems of various Christian sects, delving into theology, philosophy and mysticism, but it left him feeling distinctly unfulfilled.

During the course of his intellectual and spiritual search, there was one thing that caught his attention, piquing his interest in a way that he still cannot explain, even today. "It was the Hebrew language, the language of the Bible, which I learned in the seminary as part of the training to become a minister," Hattori says. "I really enjoyed it. I don't know why, but I simply loved the Hebrew language." After spending six months learning Hebrew grammar, Hattori picked up the Bible and began reading *sefer Bereishit* in the original.

Armed with his knowledge of Hebrew, Hattori visited Israel twice with organized groups of Japanese Christian pilgrims. And even though he was a student at a Christian seminary, he quickly found himself drawn to the cadences and rhythm of the Hebrew language, while being pulled inexplicably toward anything Jewish.

"I traveled throughout the Land, but the churches that I saw did not interest me—it was the Hebrew prayers that I heard at the Western Wall and the *mezuzot* that I saw on doorposts across the country, and anything else connected to Judaism, which interested me," Hattori says. He took leave of his fellow pilgrims, and headed over to Jerusalem's Meah Shearim neighborhood, where he purchased books about Judaism in English and Hebrew, so that he could pursue his growing interest after returning to Japan.

After graduating from the seminary and receiving his formal ordination, Hattori took up a post as minister of a small Christian congregation on the island of Shikoku, the smallest of Japan's four main islands.

In addition to his pastoral and communal duties, Hattori served as principal of the congregational kindergarten, leaving him with little time to spare for other pursuits. When he did find some free time, often at the end of a demanding day, he would closet himself in his room and study Judaism, using the books he had acquired on his visit to Jerusalem.

As a Protestant minister, Hattori was ostensibly required to get married, because a minister's wife plays an important role in assisting her husband with his various duties in the church. So his fellow ministers fixed him up with a young Japanese Baptist woman named Chie, and the two were married shortly thereafter. What Hattori did not realize at the time, however, was that his bride would come to play a central role in his move toward adopting the Jewish faith.

Not long after the wedding, as his doubts about Christianity continued to mount, Hattori decided to share them with Chie, although he had no idea how she would react. "I told her that although I am a minister, and I work in the church and the kindergarten, and I teach every day about matters such as the Trinity, I really do not understand what it means." To which his wife replied, "Neither do I."

"From that day onward, I found a partner to study Judaism with," Hattori recalls with a smile. And so, the minister and his wife would secretly study Torah together, while continuing to carry out their various communal responsibilities toward the church and the congregation.

While Hattori and Chie enjoyed the learning, it remained in the realm of theoretical knowledge only, having no direct impact on their day-to-day lives. Until, that is, one fateful Friday evening fifteen years ago.

"After we had been studying together for a period of time, my wife suggested that she light two candles in honor of the Sabbath," Hattori says. "She insisted that according to what is written in *sefer Shemot*, the day we are obligated to honor is the Sabbath, and

not Sunday.” Hattori agreed to her proposal, and his wife went ahead and prepared a special meal, in addition to kindling the Shabbat candles.

Initially, the couple agreed to limit their observance to the meal and the candles, if only because they were living in the minister’s residence and serving in their posts at the church. Slowly, however, they proceeded to add additional elements to their practice of Judaism. “It reached a point where my wife was baking *challah* every Friday morning, and I would then recite *Kiddush* in Hebrew on Friday night, using an ArtScroll prayer book that I had bought in Israel,” Hattori recalls. “On the day of the Sabbath, we sat there and did nothing, because we did not know what one was allowed to do or not.”

They watched the clock until the end of the day, when Hattori would make Havdalah. Afterward, he ran to his room in order to prepare his church sermon for the next day.

“As a minister, I was required to give a forty-minute sermon every Sunday morning,” Hattori says. So after carefully observing Shabbat, he would sit down to organize his thoughts for the preaching he would have to do the next morning.

Even in retrospect, Hattori is unsure what prompted his wife and him to take upon the practical observance of Jewish rituals. “I don’t know why we took that first step beyond lighting Sabbath candles,” he says. “Until today, there is no answer to this question other than what *Chazal* say: ‘One mitzvah leads to another.’”

Subsequently, Hattori and Chie moved back to his hometown of Nagoya, where he began ministering to an even larger congregation. But their level of Torah observance continued to grow, albeit in secret.

Nevertheless, neither he nor Chie was considering conversion to Judaism.

“We really did not have any intention at the time to convert,” Hattori says. “We simply liked the Jewish lifestyle, and so we tried to implement it in our own lives. At that point, I felt a connection with the Jewish religion, but not yet with the Jewish people.”

The turning point came one Sunday morning, when Hattori stood



*Moshe Hattori, a Japanese convert to Judaism, has been a full-time kollel student in Jerusalem for the past ten years. Photo: Michael Freund*

before his congregation to perform a Christian rite involving bread and wine, similar to that practiced by Catholics. Holding up a tray of bread, he accidentally began to recite the *Hamotzi* blessing, having become accustomed in the privacy of his home to saying it before consuming bread.

The Hebrew word “*baruch*” started to leave his lips, when he suddenly caught himself and stopped. While none of the church-goers seemed to notice, his wife most certainly did, saying to him afterward, “You almost said ‘*baruch*,’ didn’t you?”

This incident led Hattori and Chie to conclude that it was time for them to leave the church. “I realized that I no longer believed in the Christian faith, and that were I to con-

tinue working as a Christian minister just in order to make a living, I would be nothing more than a big fraud, and that is something I could not do.”

Hattori requested a leave of absence from the church, explaining that he wished to go to Israel to study the Bible. In June 1993, he and his wife arrived in the Holy Land with just two suitcases. They rented an apartment in Jerusalem, but remained unsure of what path to take.

“Even at that stage, we did not have an answer as to what we would do next,” Hattori says. “Yes to conversion, no to conversion, perhaps we would abandon all faiths. The one thing that was clear was that we could not return to the church.”

Hattori began attending an *ulpan* at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he improved his knowledge of modern, spoken Hebrew. He and his wife continued to discuss the possibility of conversion, though they feared how their families in Japan

would react, and remained unsure as to whether they would be accepted in Israel.

Two months after their arrival in Israel, the couple decided that they could no longer continue living in between two worlds, practicing Judaism yet remaining non-Jews. They did not wish to drop their observance of the *mitzvot* so they contacted Rabbi Shlomoh Slomoviz in Jerusalem in the hopes of studying toward conversion.

Initially, Rabbi Slomoviz refused to teach them, pushing them off for nearly three months before he finally relented and agreed to give them a single class. “He came to our apartment and wanted to begin by teaching us *sefer Bereishit*, but he was amazed to see this Japanese couple who was not only

familiar with Bereishit, but [who] also knew things such as the recitation of the blessings and the rules of the Sabbath, albeit imprecisely,” Hattori says.

At the end of the lesson, the rabbi suggested that they meet again the following week, and he gave them the names of various books to read, such as Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin’s *To Be a Jew*. The classes were conducted in English, with Hattori translating each sentence into Japanese for his wife.

They continued to progress, and eventually opened a conversion file with the Jerusalem Rabbinical Court. Hattori began studying in a yeshivah, while Chie started learning Hebrew.

Finally, a year after their arrival in the Jewish State, the former Protestant minister and his wife were formally converted to Judaism, with Hattori adopting the Hebrew name Moshe, and Chie choosing Tzipora.

Asked how he felt after the Rabbinical Court agreed to accept them into the Jewish people, Hattori recalls the immense joy that it brought him. “I was truly happy,” he says. “I was certain that I wished to observe the *mitzvot* as a Jew, and I wanted to be able to say ‘...Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us...’ with a full heart, because so long as I was not Jewish, I had not been commanded.”

After their conversion, Tzipora quickly found employment in her field, working as an acupuncturist and earning enough to support them both. With Tzipora’s backing, Hattori decided to continue studying Torah, and he has not stopped since.

His passion for learning is clear: “I love learning a *sugya be’iyun* [topic in depth],” he says. “First, I will study a certain topic in the Talmud together with the commentaries of Rashi and Tosafot, and then I will look in the Rishonim before examining the *Shulchan Aruch* to see how the *halachah* is determined. And then, I will study the views of the Acharonim on the subject.

“This type of learning,” Hattori

states, “is truly a delight for me. It allows me to gain a more in-depth understanding of the *mitzvot*.”

Using this methodology, he is currently studying the Talmudic tractate of *Makkot* for the third time, noting with pleasure the *chiddushim* (new insights) it has brought him in his comprehension of the text.

Having dedicated himself to full-time Torah study for over a decade, Hattori has amassed a vast amount of knowledge. Asked if he has ever thought of becoming a rabbi, he is quick to reply, “I do not have rabbinical ordination, nor do I want it. Many people ask me why I don’t get ordination, but I have no desire to do so because I want to learn Torah only for the sake of learning Torah, and not for any other reason.”

“HE WAS AMAZED TO SEE THIS JAPANESE COUPLE WHO WAS NOT ONLY FAMILIAR WITH BEREISHIT, BUT [WHO] ALSO KNEW THE RECITATION OF THE BLESSINGS AND THE RULES OF THE SABBATH, ALBEIT IMPRECISELY.”

Hattori’s schedule is a demanding one. During the day, he studies at Be’er Miriam Kollel, where he also delivers a weekly lecture on Thursday mornings. In the evenings, Hattori regularly takes part in a Talmud class in Jerusalem’s Shaarei Chesed neighborhood.

Hattori is a keen student of the Vilna Gaon’s writings and commentaries, as well as those of his disciples, such as Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin. Prior to his conversion, Hattori was profoundly inspired by stories he read about the Vilna Gaon and his commitment to Torah. As a result, when he embraced Judaism, Hattori adopted many of the Vilna Gaon’s customs, and continues to view him as a mentor.

There is one story in particular about the Vilna Gaon that resonates deeply with Hattori, due to a painful experience he had six years ago, when word reached him that his father back

in Japan lay on his deathbed.

In the wake of his father’s illness, Hattori found himself facing a dilemma. “In Japan,” he explains, “when a person dies, everyone bows down to him, and people pray to him. The deceased is treated like a deity. Since I was my father’s firstborn, I knew that were I to go [to Japan], I would be expected to do this, which is clearly a form of *avodah zarah*.”

In the end, after consulting with a number of rabbis, Hattori decided not to travel to Japan, knowing that his family would likely never forgive him as a result, in effect cutting his last remaining ties to his birthplace.

After recounting this episode, Hattori relates a famous incident involving the Vilna Gaon and a Polish nobleman named Count Potocki, who had converted to Judaism and adopted the name Avraham ben Avraham. After local church authorities learned of Potocki’s conversion, they arrested him and sentenced him to death.

The Vilna Gaon went to visit Potocki in prison, and found him weeping in his cell. Asked why he was crying, Potocki said that his only regret was that he would die without having had a Jewish father, brother or children. The Vilna Gaon comforted him, citing a *midrash* on a verse in Yeshayahu, telling him that since he had thrown his lot in with the Jewish people, God would take the place of his family and loved ones.

It is evident that the story means a great deal to Hattori, who left behind his own past to tie his fate with that of the Jewish people. “After my conversion, I lost many things: my mother country, my friends and even my family,” Hattori explains. “But, thank God, I was able to find my place in our Holy Torah. If I no longer have a motherland, then the Five Books of Moses are my motherland, and if I lost my friends, then the Talmud and the Codes of Jewish Law are my companions. And if I no longer have a family, then the *mitzvot* will serve as my parents, my brothers and my offspring.” **IA**