

The Wei Pei Chinese Restaurant

A Boynton Beach Institution

By William Rabinowitz

There must be something mystical about Jews and Chinese restaurants. Why is it that Jews flock to Chinese restaurants but the Chinese do not flock to Deli's or Kosher eateries? It is not like they will be asked to buy Israel Bonds or to contribute to the local Yeshivah.

Why do Jews eat Chinese food more than kosher food? I do not think it is the Won –Ton soup. Won-Ton soup is a very poor, watery imitation of the internationally recognized health care elixir, Jewish chicken soup and kreplach, with the fat glistening on the surface. What person craves a steaming bowl of string beans, tofu and garlic when you can have a thick corn beef on seeded rye, a chaser of half done pickles, coleslaw and Russian dressing? I don't get it.

When it comes to breaking the fast on Yom Kippur or going out to dinner on Christmas the line of Jews waiting to get into their favorite Chinese Restaurant is huge. The rest of the year it is simply long. The Tribe always contents itself, especially here in Boynton Beach, with the knowledge that they are eating healthier at the Chinese. They are eating healthier as long as they don't watch the MSG and are sure that that stray dog they saw out front is still straying far away from the kitchen. Vegetables are good for you. Not many in the Tribe admit to eating the ribs at the Chinese but the shrimp – whooo boy! Their homes are kosher but eating out doesn't count for keeping kosher. It is sort of like the ten-second rule when the sliced salami falls on the floor. If you pick it up before ten seconds, it still is clean enough to eat.

One of our beloved Boynton Beach Chinese eateries is the Wei Pei. It is a strange name considering that in Boynton Beach almost 80% of the residents have bladder issues. Depends are the best selling personal care product at the Walgreens. Wei Pei must mean something special, something good. Who would have thought that the truth was, Sam Wei and Joe Pei, put their names together and opened a restaurant.

Yesterday, Selma Greenhouse, Ruth Goldstein and the wife, after a brisk afternoon of Mahjong, agreed that they and the husbands would go to an early bird at the Wei Pei. If seated before 5:30 a Buddha stick (Spring role) and a glass of California wine is included, free.

Selma is an interesting lady. Her husband, Seymour, is an OB/GYN with as much personality as a mackerel that has been out of the water for three days. He has eyebrows that Selma must have plucked into shape for him. It gives him a bit of a feminine look. I guess the women like that.

Selma lives for her grandchildren even if they do not call. Her neck is weighted down with seven two inch golden cutouts of children suspended from a golden chain along with a six-inch Hamsa in the middle. - "The Protecting Golden Hand"

Yet she will never admit to being superstitious or believing that the open hand, fingers splayed with intricate designs and Hebrew letters, has special mystical powers to protect her grandchildren from the evil eye. Selma purchased her protecting hand in Jerusalem's old city bazaar at M & M's (Mohammed and Mendel) Discount Jewelry store on her last Federation mission trip to Israel six years ago. They invite you in for a dainty cup of coffee, sit on the carpet and negotiate for a price. She had had two hours to commune with God at the Western Wall and or go shopping. She communed for ten minutes and shopped the rest.

Mohammed explained to her (Mendel was indisposed), that the pure 18k gold Hamsa was made by highly skilled ultra, ultra, ultra orthodox Hassidic artisans in the ancient mystical city of Tzefat, high up in the mountains of the Galilee, not far from the Sea of Galilee, where Jesus walked on the water. The Hassidim studied holy script at the Yeshivah all day. They worked making Hamsas all night so they could support their very large families.

One has to wonder if they studied all day and worked all night where did all those babies come from? It must be a miracle...

Mohammed went on; when there are only two stars left in the night sky the Hassidim carry the Hamsas to the grave of the Ari HaKadosh, the Holy Lion, Rabbi Isaac Luria. Luria, a great mystical Rabbi deeply versed in the Kabala, lived in the 17th century. He is buried half way down the mountainside in an ancient cemetery. It is very dangerous walking down to his grave. The path is built with marble stones has been worn slippery smooth by tens of thousands of feet that walked to his grave.

The Hassidim place the Hamsas on his grave. Blue candles are lit as the Shacharit morning prayers are read. The rising sun sends golden fingers of light into Tzefat and the Hamsa's secret Hebrew letters begin their golden glow, illuminating God's name. Whoever wears the Hamsa and believes, Mohammed told her, will have the protection of the Holy Lion.

It is a double mitzvah to buy one, he told her. If she always wears the hand near those she loves, it will protect them. If she buys a Hamsa, then he, Mohammed will be able to return to his cousins and buy more Hamsas. "We are all children of Abraham are we not".

If she buys the Hamsa she will enable the Hassid to feed his poor children.

I never could tell her that Jewish artisans do not make Hamsas that are blessed in Tzefat plunked on graves of Holy Rabbis dripping with blue candle wax. Senguta and Cohen importers import most of them for the tourist trade from India. It isn't little Hassidic children in Tzefat that she is supporting. Let her think what she will, does it hurt anyone?

Selma gladly paid \$327 for her golden hand, before V.A.T. Since she has been wearing the Hamsa near her seven golden children on a necklace, none of her grandchildren have been sick with diphtheria, cholera, snake bite or run over by an Eskimo escaping an enraged polar bear.

It is unfair to say that Selma is the only one with *stuyot* superstitions. We all have them. Most of the time we don't even know why or where they came from. We just do them.

At Wei Pei last week, Juan, the illegal busboy who hardly speaks any English, broke a plate while cleaning up a table. Half the diners in the Wei Pei, suddenly, shrilly cried out in unison, "Mazel Tov!" It scared old Juan half to death. He thought they were calling for the "*Immgracion*" in Yiddish to come and take him away because he broke a plate. One of the good-natured Mazel Tov yellers, smiling, told Juan it was good luck to break a plate. At Jewish weddings, breaking a plate is a Tribal superstition for good luck, Mazel Tov. I doubt if Juan got that message. Joe Pei was in his face – something about docking his pay for seven months for each plate he broke or really calling the "*immigracion*".

Ruth Goldstein has never been to Jerusalem. She is afraid to go because she is afraid to go, something about a terrorist on every

corner. She will not step outside her Boca condo at night for the same reasons. Perhaps, if she wore Selma's Hamsa she would not be afraid. Ruth is a sweet lady. Her thing is red bendles. What is a red bandle - it is simply a red piece of material tied into a tiny red bow and worn on your clothing. If you do not want people to know that you are superstitious and are trying to ward off the evil eye with the red bandle it is o.k. to wear them on your underwear. The evil eye can see right through your clothes and will be turned away when it gets to your underwear.

The red bandle was something new for me. When Judy and I were married, my mother in law wanted to put a red bandle on my coat lapel. I refused saying it was a ridiculous superstition. My family never heard of it. So under the chupah, she slipped one in my coat pocket when I was not aware of it until after the wedding ceremony. I had to have a heart to heart talk with my mother in law about her superstitions and red bendles. So to try and make her a bit crazy with the silliness, I started inventing superstitions that my family practiced. I told her that when a bride and groom came back from their honeymoon there had to be a dead chicken hanging in the refrigerator with the feathers still on it. Without the feathery avian, the young couple would know hunger. For the entire week of our honeymoon, my new mother in law ran around town trying to find a dead, kosher, chicken with the feathers on it to hang in our refrigerator when we came home. She did it. Do you know how stinky a hanging feathered chicken can make a refrigerator in just a few days....

When our children were born, she insisted on putting red bendles on their diapers. I just gave up.

To be honest, I have my own irrational superstitions. As a kid, if someone would step over my legs when I was lying on the floor my mother would throw a hissy fit until they immediately walked back across my legs. She believed I was being hexed. I would not

grow if someone walked across my legs. I used to walk across my sister's legs over and over and over – hoping she would not grow, maybe, she would shrink out of this world. It never worked.

The Greenhouses and the Goldstein were late and the early bird special was over if you were not seated by 5:45pm. Joe Pei's daughter, Feng Shwei Pei, is the greeter. She managed to get them seated at 5:44. They scooted in the door, just in time, or no Buddha Stick or glass of California's best.

Fred and Harriet Goldstein were a bit agitated. Harriet ordered a Cosmo and Fred a single malt scotch. We knew something was up and settled back to hear what was what.

Harriet started talking after a few sips of her Cosmo. I guzzled my glass of California's finest and shifted Harriet's freebie to me for sipping.

“The kids are driving us crazy,” she began. “I often wonder if we should have been more careful during those magical four minutes in the back of Fred's Chevy. Well, you know, from those magical four minutes, we have had 9 months and forty-seven years of stress from our Jonathan. And of course there was that furious interlude in the kitchen one wintry night the ended breaking Grandma Tillie's porcelain vase that brought Susan along forty-three year ago. Sometimes, I really wish we could take everything back.”

From across the table Selma, as if spitting to the side three times expressed a sound like pifoo, pifoo, pifoo. It was her way of keeping the evil eye away. “You never speak bad of the life God gave you that way. God could take it back, that is not what you want is it?”

“No”, Harriet said, “but sometimes we just have to hold our tongues no matter what”. She was seriously distressed.

Harriet and Fred had done nicely for themselves. They started the \$.99 per shirt, any shirt, laundry and dry cleaning business back in Freeport, L.I. It soon expanded to twelve stores. Three years ago, they sold the business to the Kims from Korea who moved into the neighborhood. The Kims paid on their note to the Goldsteins, regularly, at first. Lately, the checks were getting erratic.

Fred continued, “Jonathan called just before they we were to go to the Wei Pei. Chandler, (their grandson) wanted to attend a prestigious private college in New England”. *Chandler’s choice of schools was made by the size of the football stadium, the rank of the school’s basketball team and something vague about the academics.*

“Jonathan explained the difficulty that he and his wife faced. Unless Fred and I significantly help with the cost of the school, things will have to change. Chandler will have to work a few years to save to up money for school and he will miss the best years of his life. Jonathan doubts that Chandler will get to see his grandparents much as he has to save every penny and won’t be able to take the time or spend the money to come to Florida for visits”.

The Goldstein’s understood everything crystal clear. It was not like the grandchildren called them all the time or came to see them regularly anyway. Unless they dipped into their own resources for braces, trips, bar mitzvahs, high school trips to St. Croix, and now college, access to the grandchildren will be more difficult.

The magic of the single malt scotch let Fred open up. “Why should I fill the college fund for the grandkids? So they can learn to drink beer, fool around with girls all year, be brothers at a fraternity and attend football, basketball and lacrosse games all the time. In the summer they work at summer camps in the Pocono

Mountains for little money, demonstrating their new learned college beer drinking skills in the evening and fooling around with the girl counselors, having a grand summer. You fill up their college fund again for the next year. They actually go to school about 20 weeks a year. The balance of time is vacation, or some form of rest from the extremes of studying four hours a day or pulling the occasional, desperate all nighter.

I have run businesses. Figure out the cost. The school runs about 30k/year and you have to supplement their living expenses say 10k. and miscellaneous expenses. They go to school 20 weeks a year minus their summer income (net) not gross. The cost to teach the grandchildren how to drink beer, fool around and party is \$108,000 per year. They graduate with a useless college degree in English or History. They have no job skills or marketable ability, but they are proud alumni of their school. It is a poor investment. The topper is they do not want to work for the salaries offered to young people with their ability - \$35,000/ year.”

This was not starting out as a fun dinner at the Wei Pei. The truth was that the Goldstein's are not alone in this lament.

Harriet reached across the table to pick up a Chinese fried noodle to dip into the peach flavored Duck sauce that Juan had brought. Absent mindedly, she knocked over the open salt bowl and spilled it on the table. Bad –luck.

Quick minded as usual, Judy pinched up the pile of salt and threw it over her shoulder – something about avoiding bad luck. The little pinch was not just a little but a lot. It floated like snow in the air. The blithely thrown over the left shoulder salt landed in the eyes of the waiter, Fang, Feng's brother.

Fang was carrying a tray with bowls of heaping, steaming white rice and two huge fried whole fish. The fish sat regally on their

plates, eye balls staring, fins straight out, scales glistening, mouths open wide angrily displaying tiny rows of sharp teeth. Each fish swam in a virtual ocean of brown sauce with green scallions.

With an “ooff”, the startled waiter slipped and the tray flew. It was quite embarrassing and very noisy. Those large open-mouthed fish landed perfectly draping the shoulders of the gentleman at the table next to us. It looked like he had put his tallis on with brown sauce. A rice bowl graced his head like a keepah only steaming. Rabbi Meyerhoff was not a happy man at that moment.

I wish I had had my camera with me.

Dinner ended shortly after profuse apologies. No physical injuries here. We had something to talk about and even laugh about over the next few weeks. Rabbi Meyerhoff never did see the humor.

We have all taken solemn oaths not to talk about that evening at the Wei Pei again, unless, we are all wearing our Depends.

Yeshivah - Jewish religious school

Kreplach - Stuffed noodles resembling ravioli

Hamsa - Kabbalistic religious amulet shaped like a hand with fingers extended

Sharharit - Morning prayers

Stuyot - Silliness

Bendle - A piece of red material shaped into a bow

Tallis - Religious prayer shawl

Keepah - Skullcap