

## JEWS: PRESENT AND ABSENT

In August 1997, my son David and I traveled to Eastern Romania and Kishinev in Moldova. This was a trip that I had been thinking about for several years. I had been wondering about what the birthplaces of my mother and father were like. My friend Sol used to say, I don't want to die wondering. To end the wondering I began to plan the trip.

I read lots of guide books. I contacted several travel agents who specialized in Eastern Europe. But what really made the trip were two remarkable and fortuitous connections. I came up with the brilliant idea to write to Morris Abram, and the second brilliant idea was to ask the staff at the Boston Jewish Community Relations Council involved in a program to help the Jews of Dniepepotrovsk, if they know of anyone from Kishinev. They said Mikhael Khazin.

Morris Abram, whose father came from Vaslui, gave me the name of his cousin Jack Feldstein, who had emigrated to Israel, but whose daughter Edith Barad, still lived in Bucharest. Another cousin, Otto Abram, lived in Vaslui. Mikhail Khazin, and his wife Luda, gave me the names of Rabbi Abelsky, the Chabad Rabbi of Kishinev, and a friend, Zoya. Connecting with all these wonderful and generous people transformed the trip.

Most Jews of my generation, when traveling, keep looking for other Jews, or at least signs that Jews once lived there. I suspect it is part of our DNA. Whether we are visiting the East Side of New York, Eastern Europe, East Africa or East Asia, we look for Jews. When I was growing up, I learned that there were 18 million Jews in the whole world, out of a population of 2 billion. After the holocaust, there were 12 million Jews left. Over the past two generations, the world population has grown to 6 billion, but the Jewish population has increased to about 14 million. Jews are less than .3 of one percent. That is infinitesimal. In the US, we are less than two percent.

There are different ways of looking at this situation. Some point out that most of the people we read about in the bible are now gone—but Jews are still around. In addition, for the past 2,000 years, the Jews have been persecuted, tortured, slaughtered, exiled, ghettoized, forced to convert, and in recent times, many have voluntarily walked away from their Jewish identity. For the past couple hundred years there has been an ongoing discussion, and a great deal of confusion about the definition of "Jew." Religion, nationality, culture, ethnicity.