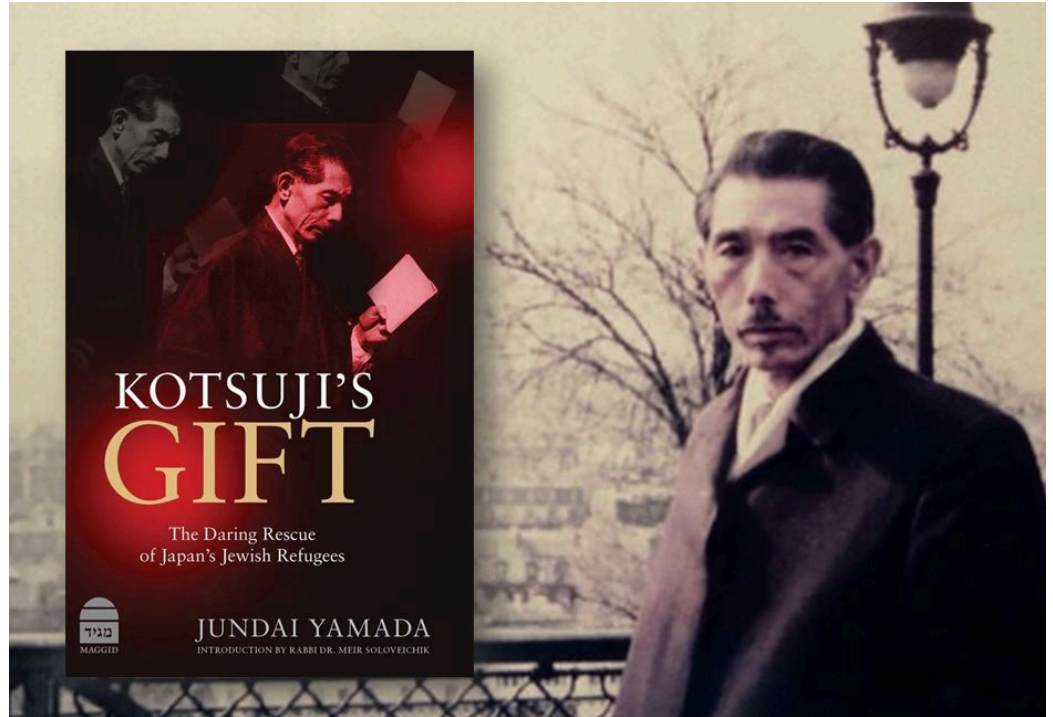


REVIEW: Kotsuji's Gift

Emmanuel Navon | Tradition Online | October 14, 2026

Jundai Yamada, *Kotsuji's Gift: The Daring Rescue of Japan's Jewish Refugees*, introduction by Meir Soloveichik (Maggid Books, 2025), 380 pp.

On Shabbat Nahamu, shortly before leaving for Japan as Israel's ambassador, it was my privilege to deliver a farewell dvar Torah at our synagogue in Efrat. I told the story of the Amshinover Rebbe's encounter with Japanese authorities in 1941. Asked why the Germans hated the Jews, the Rebbe replied: "Because we are Asian, like you."



The congregants loved the story. A Hasidic rebbe finding precisely the words to reach Japanese military officers was an irresistible episode to recall before departing for Tokyo.

That encounter, recounted in Rabbi Meir Soloveichik's foreword to *Kotsuji's Gift*, also brings into view a less familiar figure: Setsuzo Kotsuji, the Japanese scholar who helped secure the refugees' safety. Jundai Yamada's volume combines Kotsuji's 1964 memoir, *From Tokyo to Jerusalem*, with Yamada's own account, first published in Japanese in 2013 and updated for this edition. Bringing the two together restores both a neglected life and its subject's voice. Soloveichik's foreword adds the perspective of a descendant of Jews who found refuge in Japan, including his own grandparents.

[Read Meir Soloveichik's introduction and a sample chapter of *Kotsuji's Gift*.]

Chiune Sugihara, Japan's vice-consul in Kaunas (Kovno), Lithuania, issued transit visas in 1940 that enabled thousands of Jews to escape Europe and reach Japan. But permission to pass through a country did not confer the right to remain there. Kotsuji intervened to obtain extensions, giving refugees precious time to arrange onward passage. There is a lesson here for anyone who works in diplomacy: an official document's promise depends on people willing to make it effective. Kotsuji assumed responsibility for strangers whose lives could otherwise have been lost between one jurisdiction and another.

Born into a Shinto family in Kyoto, he became a Christian minister and a Hebrew scholar before converting to Judaism in Jerusalem in 1959. His memoir introduces that spiritual journey from an operating table at Shaare Zedek Hospital, where, aged sixty, he is about to undergo circumcision. The opening then returns to the world of his childhood: his father's prayers, his mother's affection, the rituals and memories through which he first experienced religious awe.

These intimate scenes give the account much of its interest. Kotsuji sometimes writes of his childhood self in the third person, regarding that distant boy with tenderness and curiosity. His Jewish destination does not erase his attachment to the Japanese home from which he set out. We are invited to consider how a religious education can bear fruit in circumstances its teachers could never have imagined.

Kotsuji himself identifies two sources of courage for his decision to help the refugees: the samurai ethic that condemned evasion of one's duty, and the assurance of Isaiah that, although grass withers and flowers fade, God's word endures. The verse is Isaiah 40:8, from the *haftara* of Shabbat Nahamu. The connection to the Shabbat of my farewell sermon is striking. Words through which Jews have received consolation after recalling destruction had reached a Japanese scholar and helped move him to protect living Jews. His reading of Scripture acquired practical consequences.

Since arriving in Japan, I have encountered other people whose attachment to the Bible finds expression in affection for Israel. During Sukkot, nearly a hundred members of the Makuya movement came to our residence. Accompanied by accordions and guitars, they sang Hebrew songs about Torah and Jerusalem. To our embarrassment and delight, they knew some of the words better than we did. Listening to the children, I could hear how that friendship was being passed from one generation to the next.

Such experiences give Kotsuji's story a particular immediacy for me. They also remind me how much an ambassador inherits. Yamada's acknowledgments thank four of my predecessors for their support. Preserving this history has itself become part of the relationship between our countries. Alongside the daily business of representing Israel, there is an obligation to remember those who stood beside our people when we had no state to represent us.

Kotsuji paid a heavy price for helping the refugees. His advocacy exposed him to persecution, and he eventually had to flee his own country. When he took those risks, he had not yet converted to Judaism. Long before he became one of us, he had made our fate his concern.

Kotsuji's Gift asks us to carry that debt forward. In Efrat, the Rebbe's answer made a distant country feel closer. Now, serving in Japan, I think also of the scholar whose persistence helped give Jewish families a future. Soloveichik's foreword, written by a grandson of refugees, is itself a small part of that future. I came here to speak for Israel. I also have the privilege of saying, on behalf of a people whose story Kotsuji helped continue: we remember, and we are grateful.

Dr. Emmanuel Navon currently serves as Israel's ambassador to Japan. His book, *The Star and the Scepter: A Diplomatic History of Israel* (JPS, 2020), was reviewed at TraditionOnline.