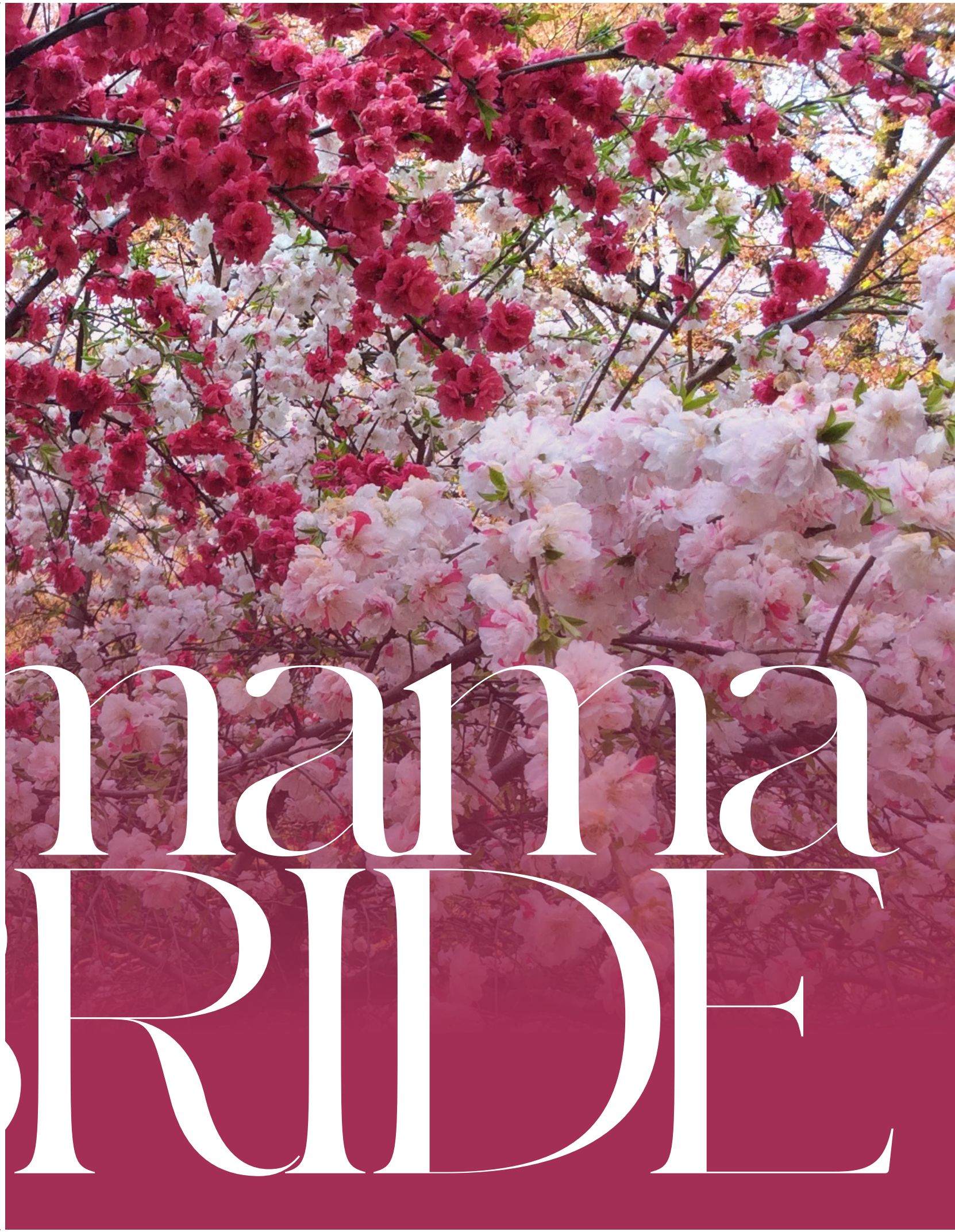


The Wagai B

IRONICALLY, HER
NESHAMAH WAS BROUGHT
TO THE SURFACE IN TOKYO

By Devorie Kreiman



mama
RIDE

● THE WAGAMAMA BRIDE



Shinjuku Gyoen Park, one of the author's favorite Tokyo parks

A lithograph hung on the wall of Liane Grunberg Wakabayashi's childhood home in New York. "The *chasidim*, drawn in pen and ink, were dancing in a circle, coattails flying, heads thrown back, long beards mopping the air. I thought the artist had a great imagination," she says.

The first time Liane walked into Chabad of Tokyo, the lithograph of long ago came to life. A group of *bachurim* sent to help out on Simchas Torah were dancing *hakafos*. The *rebbe's* wife, in a button-down blouse and a long skirt, a baby in her arms, smiled in welcome. "You've come at the perfect time."

It took a move to the other end of the world—for an assimilated New Yorker and for the *shluchim* of Chabad—to bring a long-lost woman and the family she created in Tokyo back home.

Liane's memoir, *The Wagamama Bride*, is geared toward a secular reader and is about seeking one's own truth. In her early days in Japan, a friend told Liane, "A foreign wife married to a Japanese man must be *wagamama* to survive."

LIANE WAS HIRED BY THE JAPAN TIMES AS A COPY EDITOR IN 1987 ON A ONE-YEAR CONTRACT. SHE STAYED THIRTY YEARS.

Wagamama means selfish. Liane says, “Not selfish in the way of hoarding cookies, but a grander selfishness, to lead a life that goes counter to Japanese family values.”

Liane had been raised as a Conservative Jew in a family that got smaller and smaller with every generation; many of her relatives were married to non-Jews or not married at all.

In 1985, when she was 25 years old, Liane traveled to Japan to research art exhibitions in Japanese department stores as part of her graduate studies. Kimono shops dating back hundreds of years—and their trendy competitors—were luring in visitors by offering an enhanced gallery and shopping experience. Liane fell in love with this and many other novel experiences in Tokyo.

She describes Tokyo as a “horizontal city,” in contrast to the vertical crush of New York’s buildings. She found delicate touches of beauty everywhere—potted plants on the sidewalks, people taking pride in their neighborhoods, even sweeping the streets. She was moved by the elegance and decency of the Japanese people, the way they went out of their way to show kindness to a stranger. On a few occasions, when she stood on a street corner with a map, people stopped to help and accompanied her on the subway all the way to her destination.

Liane returned to Japan in 1987 on a writing assignment for a travel magazine and was hired by *The Japan Times* as a newsroom copy editor. Her contract was for a

year. She stayed 30 years.

Her grandmother worried that her choice to live in Japan meant that her chances of marrying a Jewish man were dwindling. She wrote Liane long letters expressing love and concern, with a touch of sarcasm. “This year in Tokyo. Next year it will be the moon.”

During her second year in Japan, Liane bought a package of therapeutic treatments at a shiatsu clinic. Her therapist, Ichiro, was a Taoist who adhered to ancient Chinese philosophy and traditions. Ichiro’s speciality was consciousness and the roots of illness. He was a wise teacher, and he was curious about her Judaism.

Liane and Ichiro had long, serious discussions about faith. Ichiro’s beliefs resonated with her. He told her that religion has to go beyond the mind and reach the heart, that every situation is an opportunity for spiritual growth, and that happiness doesn’t come from outside. She didn’t see at that time that her *neshamah* recognized these teachings from the Torah. When Ichiro offered to teach her macrobiotic cooking, she accepted. The relationship deepened.

They’d known each other for only a few weeks when they visited Ichiro’s grandfather in the hospital. His grandfather was of samurai descent; he’d been knighted by Emperor Hirohito for inventing a rice-polishing machine. When the two of them went to see him, he was unconscious. Ichiro held his grandfather’s hand, told him about the Jewish journalist he’d met, and then

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● THE WAGAMAMA BRIDE



Liane's home in Tokyo

asked his permission to marry her.

For a second, his grandfather came to life. He made a noise, a loud “*ra*,” which Ichiro declared to be a “yes.” Years later, Liane would find out that *ra* means evil in Hebrew. She would wonder if his grandfather was connecting to them at a spiritual level and warning them off. She writes, “I shudder to think this is how the most important decision of my life was made.”

Her mother warned her, “If I were you, I’d think carefully about making your life with someone from such a different background.”

“Mom, this is who I want to marry. He inspires me to think more deeply about the spiritual purpose of life than ever before.”

Her mother countered, “You won’t just be marrying this man. You will also be marrying into the culture and traditions of his country.”

When Liane’s mother realized that her daughter wasn’t going to change her mind,

she stopped pressuring her and got involved in the wedding plans.

Ichiro’s parents welcomed her into their family with warmth and affection. To them, her Jewishness wasn’t much of an issue since she wasn’t observant. They were generous with money and gifts. But as the wedding drew near, Liane couldn’t ignore her own jitters. She acknowledges, “Something was off. But intuition is essentially patient. It whispers rather than picking up a megaphone. The whispers I could ignore. I was determined to go through with this wedding and prove that it could work out just fine and that we would live happily ever after.”

Ichiro and Liane had two weddings. The first was under a *chuppah*. The *brachos* were recited in Hebrew by Liane’s Israeli friend, Zohara, rather than by a rabbi.

The second wedding, a Shinto ceremony at the five-star Imperial Hotel, was arranged by her in-laws. The Shinto priest spoke about this marriage as a union of two cul-

tures. Liane wore a designer silk gown with long puffy sleeves and a long train. For the reception, she changed into a bright red kimono embroidered with white cranes—a symbol of prosperity and longevity.

The couple settled into married life. Liane’s mother-in-law—whom she called *okaasan*, meaning mother—gave her weekly lessons in the art of flower-arranging and patiently coached her in Japanese. Liane says, “I got the impression that my mother-in-law enjoyed teaching me as much as I enjoyed learning.” The mutual love between Liane and her in-laws was to endure beyond the marriage.

Ichiro worked long hours and was often home only between midnight and early morning. The clinic where he worked was gaining nationwide recognition for its work in healing diseases, but the stress of living “on the knife’s edge”—sleep-deprived and on a low income—was wearing both of them down.

The issue of religion rose often between them. Liane was at a disadvantage; she didn't know enough about the Torah to push back against Ichiro's staunch Taoist and Buddhist beliefs.

Six years passed. Liane faced another challenge—infertility. She tried conventional and alternative medicine. She felt that she was being pulled in two directions—by despair and by hope. She didn't know yet that this was a struggle between her *yetzer hara* and her *yetzer hatov*. Despair was smothering hope. What if she and Ichiro remained childless and grew old on opposite sides of their small apartment, with opposite views of life and faith?

Art, which she'd always loved, became the means by which she created what she

wanted. She drew herself pregnant. She drew a healthy baby girl, a happy family. She drew every day. She painted and she yearned.

Finally, Liane gave birth to a healthy baby girl. She had to reach back four generations to find an ancestor with a Jewish name. She says, "Call it a mother's intuition, a glimpse of things to come—my daughter had announced her Jewish presence. Shoshana was born on the holy day of Rosh Hashanah. Her soul seemed to be telling me to pay attention."

But Liane needed Torah-observant role models to show her and her daughter how to live a Jewish life.

Just in time for Shoshana's third birthday, a Rosh Hashanah package arrived at their

door: an apple, a packet of honey, and an invitation from Chabad of Tokyo to come for Yom Tov.

Liane went to the Chabad House on Simchas Torah and immediately felt at home. She returned the following Shabbos. Ichiro joined her, pushing Shoshana in her stroller. They went the Shabbos after that too. They became regulars at Chabad, going for *davening* and staying for *kiddush*. After the meal, Liane learned the *parshah* with the *rebbezin*. Soon she began going during the week to help the *rebbezin* with her Shabbos preparations.

She says, "One Shabbos at a time, Torah lessons helped me acquire more strength to own my beliefs. I had no idea how essential this would be in the years to come."



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● THE WAGAMAMA BRIDE



House in Tokyo - garden

Her son, Akiva, was born just before Shoshana turned five. The Chabad rabbi arranged for a *mohel* from California. At the *bris*, Liane thought of the generations of her family lost to *Yiddishkeit*. It fell on her to change direction, to raise a new generation of proud and knowledgeable Jews.

She enrolled Akiva in the Chabad preschool. Ichiro respected the rabbi and began to see him as a mentor. Every so often, the couple discussed the possibility of Ichiro converting. Sometimes she brought it up, even though she knew that it had to come from him; sometimes he brought it up. But then reality would hit. Ichiro was the oldest son of a prestigious traditional family. He was expected to follow Buddhist traditions and to visit the cemetery every month to pray for his ancestors' souls.

Ichiro's parents were gracious. When Liane started to keep kosher, they accommodated her needs. They provided generously for their grandchildren, paying for

private school education, among many other things. As a way of thanking them, Liane's mother invited them to come on the family vacations. The children spent time with their grandparents in the Berkshires, the Hamptons, West Palm Beach, and London.

At home, Liane searched for creative ways to nurture her children in an environment of joy and togetherness. Again, colorful art was the answer. It was easier to talk, even about sensitive topics, while focusing on a drawing. Soon art supplies spilled out of all her drawers and closets, and Liane realized she was ready to take it a step further and teach other parents and children how to foster better communication through art.

She set up a studio and offered classes. The name Genesis, from *Bereishis*, came to her immediately: Out of nothing comes everything. She created 44 cards with images inspired by Torah and ran workshops using the Genesis images as prompts for exercises and conversation. Liane's studio was

busy, especially on the weekends. At first, she made a commitment not to work on Shabbos, but as the pressure mounted, she had trouble keeping to it. She convinced herself that Hashem would understand...

When Akiva was four years old, he injured his finger so severely that he needed surgery. Liane paced in the hospital, said *Tehillim*, and talked to Hashem with an intensity she'd never felt before. She promised to do *teshuvah*, give *tzedakah*, and keep Shabbos if Akiva regained the use of his finger. He did. And Liane became *shomer Shabbos*.

The Chabad House was a three-and-a-half-hour walk away. Liane walked. When Shoshana was a young teenager, she walked too. Ichiro was amused. "Come on," he said. "Take the bus." But there was no turning back.

She kept searching, reaching. She rented an apartment near the Chabad House just for Shabbos.

Shoshana and Akiva grew. So did their

SHE PROMISED TO DO TESHUVAH, GIVE TZEDAKAH, AND KEEP SHABBOS IF AKIVA REGAINED THE USE OF HIS FINGER. HE DID. AND LIANE BECAME SHOMER SHABBOS.

challenges. They were bicultural, biracial, and bilingual. Akiva's features were similar to his father's, with one unusual difference—he had Liane's blue eyes. Shoshana was a straight-haired brunette. The stamp of her Ashkenazic ancestry marked her clearly as "half-Japanese." Not an easy label for a child

growing up among Japanese peers.

They took their own kosher lunches to school and missed out on activities that took place on Shabbos and Yom Tov. When Akiva missed the biggest event of the school year, Sports Day, Ichiro insisted that Liane had gone too far and asked her to go with

him to the rabbi and *rebbetzin* for counseling. He said to the rabbi, "This was my son's last year of elementary school, the biggest Sports Day of his life. He is my son too, and he's just as much Japanese as he is Jewish."

The rabbi asked, "Was Sports Day on Shabbos?"

Liane said, "No. On Yom Kippur."

In 2011, when Shoshana was 14, she began to have trouble at school, which led to difficulty sleeping, manic energy, and acute psychosis. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and was hospitalized in a nightmarish old-school psychiatric ward.

The rabbi met her at the hospital and told her that when he was growing up in Kfar Chabad, his parents opened their home to people who had mental illness—war veter-

					
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An intuitive drawing by the author made in Tokyo

ans and others struggling with depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and other conditions—and that many of them led productive, joyous lives. He suggested that Liane look into treatment options in Israel, where care for patients with mental illness was more advanced and more compassionate than in Japan.

Shoshana did better once she was in treatment in Israel, and Akiva celebrated his bar mitzvah there. Liane's mother joined them even though she was suffering from advanced cancer.

When they were in Israel, someone suggested a high school program, Naale, that was free for foreign students. Liane thought about all the ways Akiva stood out in Japan and begged Ichiro to consider letting him go to high school in Israel. Ichiro refused.

Liane says, "A marriage doesn't just fall apart. It self-destructs, word by unkind word."

In 2017, Shoshana had another breakdown. The idea of confining her in a Japanese hospital again terrified all of them.

WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A MONTH-LONG TRIP STRETCHED INTO AN ENTIRE SUMMER. LIANE POURED OUT HER HEART AT THE KOSEL, BEGGING HASHEM FOR STRENGTH.

Liane made arrangements to take her to Israel. Ichiro agreed that this was the best option.

Under medical care in Israel, Shoshana stabilized. What was supposed to be a month-long trip stretched into an entire summer. Liane poured out her heart at the Kosel, begging Hashem for the strength to make Israel her home. Akiva was accepted into Naale, and he told his parents he wanted to go. Though Ichiro had been dead set against it, when he heard how his son felt, he gave in.

Liane flew back to Japan to take Akiva to Israel. She says, "We left most of our things behind. Stuff is left stuff. This was the price to pay, and I could accept it. This is how my life with Ichiro ended. Our marriage was over, just like that."

When the plane lifted off, she looked down at the shimmering green rice paddies disappearing below the clouds. "I breathed deeply and felt my soul return to my body."

In the least likely places, the *brachos* had sprung up. Liane's *neshamah* had been awakened in Japan, not in her native New York, which thrums with Jewish life. And the struggle with mental illness turned into the catalyst that brought the family home.

They settled in the German Colony area, accepted Shabbos invitations, and made friends. Liane established the Genesis Art Intuitive Academy. Students come from all walks of life to attend her workshops in

drawing and painting.

Liane was concerned about Akiva's identity when he entered high school in Israel. In Japan, someone who is Jewish and Japanese is considered half—not Jewish enough, and not Japanese enough. What she wanted was for him to recognize that he wasn't half. He was fully Jewish. Akiva was surprised to meet three other students from Japan, and the four became close friends.

After his high school graduation in 2020, he returned to Tokyo. He now works for a company that exports Japanese food to Israel and markets kosher food in Japan, putting his English, Japanese, and Hebrew to good use. He can be counted on to make the *minyan* at the Chabad House.

Shoshana became an accomplished mosaic artist.

Liane's favorite part of the day is sunrise, which brings new hope and new opportunities. Many of her friends are *baalei teshuvah*. "There is great comfort in knowing we have this shared background," she says, "and now we are all moving forward here, restarting our lives in Israel through observing the *mitzvot* and learning Torah."

She offers her story so that others who are in adverse situations will know that they are never alone, that there are "members of the tribe" who can be counted on to help bring them home, that Hashem is "only a prayer away." ●