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The Society for Indo-Judaic Studies

From the Editors

We are pleased to bring you the fifth issue of the Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies, which contains articles from the disciplines of English literature, international relations, history and religious studies. We have contended all along that, like other area fields, Indo-Judaic studies is richly interdisciplinary. We have endeavored to bring our readers a variety of disciplinary perspectives in each issue, and none has been more diverse than the current one.

We open with a study of Nissim Ezekiel, India's most acclaimed English-language poet and playwright. R Raj Rao, a professor of English at Pune University, offers an especially sensitive and insightful piece, which we hope will expand Ezekiel's following outside of India.

P. R. Kumaraswamy, a recently-appointed professor of West Asian studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, brings us a study of the beginning of diplomatic normalization between India and Israel. Much as "ping pong diplomacy" heralded the famous thaw in Sino-American relations in the 1970's, so in the 1980's did tennis assume a similar role as a tentative first step in the process of ambassadorial relations between India and Israel.

Brian Weinstein, an emeritus professor at Howard University, analyzes the energetic commercial activities of the Rahabis. They were among the Malabar's leading eighteenth century spice traders, and served as leaders of Cochin's Jewish community.

The legend of the ten lost tribes probably will always be a part of Indo-Judaic studies, and Tudor Parfitt, director of Jewish Studies at the University of London, revisits this theme in his study.

A translation by Marvin Tokayer of a Yiddish journalist's reports of his voyages in Asia in 1941 presents new and startling information about the customs of the Jews of Burma and the presence of a Jewish community in Ceylon. Although these reports must be read with a critical eye, they inform us about the place of Asian Jewish communities in the Jewish imagination.

This issue also includes a continuation of our ongoing bibliography about Indian Jewry, one book review and an index of issues one through five.

This summer, the Society for Indo-Judaic Studies will host a research conference at Oxford University, "A View from the Margin: The State of the Art of Indo-Judaic Studies," thanks to support from the Stephen and Dorothea Green Family Foundation, the Kashi Church Foundation and Florida International University. Organized by co-editor Nathan Katz and editorial board members Shalva Weil and P. R. Kumaraswamy, this conference will bring together some twenty scholars from India, Israel, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Italy.

We anticipate that some of the papers prepared for this conference will be included in a new book, and that others will find their way into this journal, which will include a report on the conference in its next issue. The conference is another indication of the arrival of Indo-Judaic Studies on the frontiers of scholarship.

Nathan Katz, Florida International University
Braj Mohan Sinha, University of Saskatchewan

The Jewish Background of Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

by R Raj Rao

I knew Nissim Ezekiel, "the father of Indian English poetry," nearly 25 years, as a teacher, as a fellow poet and, finally, as a friend. However, my research was handicapped by Ezekiel's failing memory and by his uncooperative family, so I wrote his biography, *Nissim Ezekiel: the authorized biography*,[1] from his point of view. This article, which follows the poet's Jewish background and religious thought up to age 30, is excerpted from the book.

The biography is subjective. I was not interested in cold, clinical objectivity, or in merely documenting facts and statistics. I wanted to write about things the way Nissim remembered and interpreted them. I restricted my conversations and interviews to those people with whom I was comfortable. The biography is also the response of one writer to another, so I haven't tried to mask my own subjectivity.

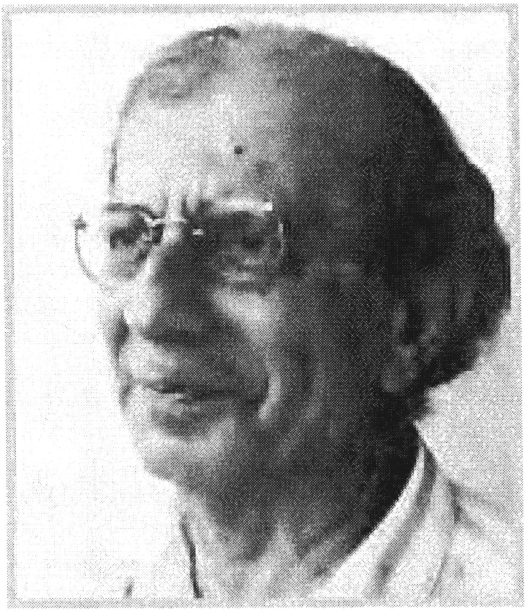
As the biography reveals, Nissim Ezekiel was the child of a complex family, a devoted denizen of Bombay and a Jew whose Judaism was based more in culture than in observance, the culture of India's Bene Israel.

From Chapter I: The Saturday Oil-Man

Nissim Ezekiel was born in Bombay to a Bene Israel family. His mother was an amateur stage actress named Diana. His father was Moses Ezekiel Talkar, who saw Diana perform, fell in love with her and proposed.

She gave birth to their third child on 16 December 1924. Once again, it was a male. Diana's deliveries had a wonderful symmetry, the way (in the case of her first three children) girl followed boy and boy followed girl. Joe's birth had laid the way for his brother's as far as ceremonies were concerned, so the naming and circumcision of Diana's second son were relatively simple affairs. Among the Bene Israel, both ceremonies usually take place on the eighth day after birth. Thus, ironically, it was on the eve of Christmas, 1924, that the child was named Nissim, which means "justice" in Hebrew. As was the custom, Diana's brother carried him for his circumcision at the Magen Hassidim Synagogue at Agripada. Diana herself did not remain present during the circumcision, but her husband and brother did.

The child who came after Joe and preceded Nissim was Sarah, and the one who followed Nissim was Hannah. Lily came last. According to standard religious practice among the Bene Israel, the twelfth day after birth the newborn child was bathed and placed in a cradle for the first time. Also on this day, it was taken to its maternal grandparents' home in Pune, along with its mother, and made to stay there at least until the day of the mother's 'purification.' This took place on



Nissim Ezekiel

the fortieth day of the birth of a male child, and on the eightieth day of the birth of a female child. The child's head was also shaved at this time.

The Ezekiels have no readily accessible family album containing pictures of those early days, by means of which we could establish whether the young Nissim's head was actually shaved on the fortieth day, and whether he was taken to Pune to meet his grandparents. Nissim himself feels it is possible that both things happened. To understand the kind of life that the Ezekiels lived, and to see it in the right perspective, it is necessary to know something of the background of the Bene Israel in India.

Legend holds that the Bene Israel, the "Children of Israel," who are regarded as one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, first landed in southern Maharashtra between 1600 to 2000 years ago after either being shipwrecked after fleeing Muslim persecution in Persia or driven out of Northern Palestine by the Greek ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes.

Seven males and seven females arrived in coastal Navgoan, and buried their dead in two "elongated mounds" which may still be seen. The survivors settled in nearby villages in Maharashtra's Raigad district, where they took to farming and especially oil-pressing (or crushing seeds) for a living. They lost touch completely with people of their own faith elsewhere in the world; the only point of contact that remained was the Sabbath, which they observed on Saturdays. The oil-pressers among them came to be known as Saturday Oil Men or Shanwar Telis, the sect to which the Ezekiels belong. (Interestingly, there are in this region both Friday Oil-Men or Shurkrawar Telis and Monday Oil-Men or Somwar Telis. The former are Muslims, the latter Hindu 'untouchables.')

Other Bene Israel had opened shops. However, to avoid rivalry, they were told by the local people not to sell what others were selling. The Shanwar Telis, too, were not allowed to charge a fee for their services, though they could sell the crushed seed to agriculturists, which became their principal means of supporting themselves.

Much later, Nissim would refer to these origins in one of his most well-known poems, 'Background, Casually:'

> My ancestors, among the castes,
> Were aliens, crushing seed for bread
> (The hooded bullock made his rounds).

The Shanwar Telis were quick to assimilate local conditions. As the villages in which they spread themselves were mostly on the coast (though some were also inland), many of the native inhabitants were fishermen by profession. There were even inter-marriages between the Shanwar Telis and the Kolis, the traditional name by which the fishermen are known, although the Bene Israel were, on the whole, conservative about marrying outside the community. The native population, especially, asked them to avoid such marriages.

Like the upper-caste Hindus of the area, the Shanwar Telis adopted new surnames, based on their villages. Sometimes the Shanwar Telis even 'nativized' existing Jewish names, as for example, when they made the name Moses Mussaji. The word 'Talkar,' which Nissim's father Moses Ezekiel added to his surname (but which he later dropped) is such an invention. However, according to Nissim, they are still registered at the Magen Hassidim Synagogues as Talkar. The village of Tal (sometimes spelt Thal), a few kilometers from the beach resort of Alibag, is the only location that the Ezekiels can rightfully call their "native place."

Jews in India fall into three groups, the Bene Israel, the Baghdadi (or Iraqi) Jews and the Cochin Jews. Of these, the Bene Israel have been in India for the longest time. The Baghdadi Jews and the Cochin Jews came afterward, and their arrival is tied up historically with British imperialism in India.

Relations among the three Jewish communities in India have, on the whole, been harmonious. But it took the Bene Israel some effort to convince the Cochin Jews that they — not the Cochinis — were the first to arrive in India. The Cochin Jews claimed that they had lived in India for hundreds of years and had come here much before the Bene Israel. If the Cochin Jews did not know of the existence of the Bene Israel, it was only because the Bene Israel lived in villages that utterly lacked communications until recent times, and had not yet begun emigrating to the cities.

All the three Jewish communities in India, especially the Bene Israel, are somewhat distanced from Hebrew. The Cochin Jews seemed to know the language reasonably well when they began their 'missionary' activities in India in the nineteenth century, and part of their energies were directed at teaching it to the Bene Israel.

The lack of Hebrew among the Bene Israel is demonstrated by the absence of inscriptions in Hebrew on eighteenth century Bene Israel tombstones. Yet, several such inscriptions decorate nineteenth century Bene Israel tombstones in Navgoan and Bombay.

The Cochin Jews did not succeed in making Hebrew a household language among the Bene Israel. In Nissim's own home, for example, although prayers were said in Hebrew, neither he nor any member of his family learned enough Hebrew to speak it. Marathi came to be the first language of most Bene Israel in India, and some of them were equally well-versed in Konkan. The Ezekiels knew Marathi and regarded it as one of their first languages, along with English, but their use of it was restricted to the domestic sphere. When Nissim grew up and become a poet, one of his chief regrets in life would be that he did not know how to write poetry in Marathi. His younger brother Hannan, who became a distinguished economist and journalist, and was for ten years the editor of the *Economic Times*, was nonetheless poor in Marathi, and confined all his intellectual work to English.

No community in Hindu India, no matter how small, has been able to escape the debilitating effects of the caste system, and the Jews are no exception. Arguably, caste Hindus consider people of all other religions in India to be traitors, lower in status than even the 'untouchables,' no matter what their origins. Often, they are unable to make a distinction between those religious communities that converted to other religions as a result of indoctrination (Christians, Muslims and Buddhists), and those that arrived here in their own right ages ago (Zoroastrians and Jews). What is especially unfortunate is that because of osmosis, minority religious communities also become casteist in their thinking, although there is no place for caste in their religions. It is easy to see how the Bene Israel fell prey to these prejudices. They were at the receiving end, both among the caste Hindus of coastal Maharashtra, as well as the Baghdadi and Cochin Jews, who must have regarded their traditional occupation of oil-pressing as unclean. Thus, in a way, they were considered to be the lowest of the low, and would have to put in a considerable effort to rise above their status.

When the Bene Israel immigrated to cities such as Bombay in the second half of the nineteenth century, it became possible for them to slowly move away from their traditional occupations. Even before the shift took place, some of them had already given up oil-pressing and had become weavers and boatmen. It is not clear whether any of Nissim's own ancestors gave up oil-pressing and took to these other professions. But in the early '50s, when Nissim was broke and earned his passage from England to India by scrubbing decks aboard a cargo ship, it was as if he was especially equipped to do so by something in his genes. It was as if he was only doing what his ancestors must have done decades ago.

Once the Bene Israel arrived in the city, more professional options were open to them. Some became skilled carpenters, for whom there must have been considerable demand in British India. Others joined the British Bombay Native Army. Much later, this is probably how Nissim's grandfather Haskelji Israel found himself fighting in the Boer War; he was charting a course already explored by others in the community. In contrast, Nissim himself would grow up gentle and soft, with none of the ruggedness one expects of soldiers, although he would develop the capacity to rough it on journeys, beginning with his voyage from England to India on a cargo ship.

The Bene Israel experienced further upward mobility in the nineteenth century. In the city, class-consciousness gradually replaced caste-consciousness, and many of them obtained white-collar jobs. By the twentieth century, the social gap between the Bene Israel and upper-caste Hindus on the one hand, and between them and the Jews of Cochin and Baghdad on the other hand, narrowed considerably. The gap closed even more after Independence in 1947. By then, they could take up respectable jobs, such as teaching, with relative ease. When Nissim's grandfather Haskelji left the army, he became a teacher; following his example, both Nissim's parents became teachers. When the time came for Nissim to decide on a career, he gave up more lucrative jobs in advertising and journalism, and opted to take a lectureship in a college.

With social mobility came a sense of cultural superiority. The new-found status of the Bene Israel prompted them to identify with upper-caste Hindus, particularly with regard to dietary habits. They made sure that they did not eat beef. They looked upon lower caste Hindus as unclean, including those such as the Mahars and the Mangs, who ate dead animals and birds (because they were cheaper). The Bene Israel stopped employing members of such castes in their homes. To a large extent, the Ezekiels shared these beliefs and made them part of their daily lives. When Nissim became a vegetarian in his post-LSD years, he attributed the decision to the effects the drug had on his mind and to reasons of health. He advocated Indianness (or Hinduness) in poetry, and self-consciously employed it in his own verse, in an attempt to conceal his cultural and spiritual alienation from mainstream India. It wouldn't be far-fetched to suggest that, on the whole, he wanted the world to see him as a Brahmin Jew.

Shirley Berry Isenberg, in her book *India's Bene Israel*,[2] describes the average Bene Israel as having "straight to wavy black hair, black or dark brown eyes, oval face, straight nose. Obesity was and remains rather rare among the Bene Israel. Skin color can vary from very light to very dark brown."

Nissim has many of the above traits. The wavy hair, the oval face and the light skin are a very definite part of his persona today, and have been since his childhood. He was never obese, even in his middle years. His nose tends to be hooked rather than straight, or at least seems so from certain angles. He is five feet seven-and-a-half inches tall. But he certainly doesn't resemble any of the Maharashtrian castes. Instead, Nissim is easily mistaken for a Parsi, which gives credence to the view that the Bene Israel hailed originally from Persia and were bombed out of their country by the Muslims. In "The Local," he wrote:

> My neighbor says, you are Parsi?
> No, I say genially, acknowledging his interest, Zoroastrian.
> He leaves the subject alone.
> The train has stopped between stations.

Like the Cochin Jews, Christian missionaries of the nineteenth century wanted to prevent the Bene Israel from identifying too closely with local Hindus. Both the Cochin Jews and the Christian missionaries thus performed the role of teachers, and they later recruited some of the better-educated Bene Israel as fellow-teachers to help them advance their cause. This must have suited the Bene Israel, who sought ways to break away from hereditary oil-pressing. Inspired by the missionary activity of the Cochin Jews and the Christians, the Bene Israel began to rank teaching higher than other "wte-collar" job and in the next hundred years or so, they took to academia in a big way. In our own day, the Bene Israel community includes many teachers. Unsurprisingly, three generations of Ezekiels thought teaching was the most noble job they could possibly do.

More significantly, some Bene Israel became writers. The community began its creative career as members became artisans in the nineteenth century. However, the first Bene Israel folk poet, ballad singer Elloji Nagawkar, first appeared as early as the eighteenth century. Another folk poet-cum-singer, Robenji Isaji Nawgaonkar, was born sometime in the 1830s. But both rendered their poems orally, so their work is not available today.

In 1867, author Bahais Joseph Talkar published *Gul and Sanobar*, the first work of literature by a Bene Israel Jew. Shortly afterward, M.D. Talkar came out with a novel, *Bago Bahar*. Later, a highly-respected Bene Israel painter emerged who also had the surname Talkar. However, it is difficult to say whether or not the Ezekiels are related to any of these Talkars.

Apart from creative writing, the latter half of the nineteenth century also witnessed a surfeit of "ecclesiastical" writing by the Bene Israel, evidently the direct outcome of their religious education.

About this time, the Jewish community acquired its first Hebrew printing press in Bombay, and later it acquired another press in Pune. It founded its own publication house, known as the Subodh Prakash Samaj, and brought out its own periodicals. Most of its books in Hebrew were prayer books; it is believed that, in all, the community published 146 books in Hebrew, of which 88 were by Baghdadi and 58 by Bene Israel Jews. Members of the community spent a considerable amount of time and energy translating Jewish liturgical works into Marathi. Joseph Ezekiel Rajpurkar, perhaps the most prolific writer in this respect, published as many as 20 religious books between 1858 and his death in 1905. Some were originally written in Hebrew, others were translated from Hebrew into Marathi.

Nissim both continued and broke away from this religious writing tradition. For one thing, he would not confine himself only to poetry, but also experimented with prose. He began his spiritual journey believing in religion, and was then drawn away from it. As his writing reflects, he came back to it again. The theme of religion recurs in many of his poems, and in the titles of some of his later poetry collections. But he never wrote a religious tract, or "stooped" so low as to write anything preachy and propagandistic. He restricted his passion for religion to community work; it never found direct expression in his writing.

In terms of family life, the Bene Israel were strongly influenced by the Hindus. Until the twentieth century, they lived in joint families of father, mother, unmarried sons and daughters, married sons and their wives, and their children. However, Nissim's family was never a joint family in the conventional sense of the term. In the '30s, when they lived in Readymoney Mansion near the Byculla bridge, the family consisted only of Nissim's parents, himself, and all his brothers and sisters. No grandparents lived with them. However, in the '40s and '50s, after Joe and Nissim married, their wives became part of their extended family for a short time.

Although the Ezekiels participated in few religious rituals, except for customary visits to the synagogue on Yom Kippur, the religious customs of most Bene Israel reflected Hindu influences. The two most sacred days in the year for the Bene Israel, as for Jews all over the world, are Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in September or October. In the old days, on Yom Kippur, the Bene Israel would bathe first with hot and then with cold water, and dress in white clothes. As they went to the synagogue, they made sure they did not make physical contact with non-Jews. This notion of pollution by touch probably could be a more destructive influence of Hinduism. The Bene Israel would spread their handkerchiefs on the floor of the synagogue, kneel and say, "Blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom for ever and ever." Then they would lie prostrate with their faces on their handkerchiefs.

We know for a fact that the Ezekiels themselves went through none of all this, except the customary visit to the synagogue on Yom Kippur. Moses perceived himself as a scientist and a rationalist, and opposed superstition or ritualistic practices. Nissim later justified his father's stand by pointing out that they were not the only family to ignore religious ceremonies: in their day, the members of the community dropped a sizeable number of the rituals described in their holy books.

Although Saturday is inauspicious to the Hindus, the Bene Israel continued to regard it as the most holy and auspicious day of the week. As we have already seen, the Shanwar Telis even derived their name from the word "Saturday." Over the centuries, and particularly once they came to Bombay, where they took up fulltime jobs, the Bene Israel could not exercise their individual choices when it came to observing Saturday as a day of rest. So they became realistic. This is one more instance of a traditional practice being relaxed and it corroborates Nissim's belief that something very rational about the Bene Israel's psyche enables members of the community to take a very unsentimental view of religious dictates. Nissim himself would work as hard on Saturdays as he would on other days of the week. Interestingly, when this biography was being researched, he had long sessions with me on Saturdays — my only days in Bombay — without any qualms.

However, the Bene Israel were more willing to imitate the dietary habits of their Hindu and Muslim neighbors. Elul, which occurs around August or September every year, became a month of fasting for them. During this time, they ate only one meal each day, usually in the evening. The only exception was Saturday, the Sabbath, when they ate both meals.

Needless to say, the Ezekiels were not very strict about Elul. Moses and Diana instilled the idea of a balanced diet in the minds of their children as they were growing up. They commended the scientific uses of fasting, as opposed to the religious ones.

Nissim developed the habit of exercising daily, and remains drawn to all kinds of books on good health. Since he turned vegetarian at the age of 45, salads assumed a special significance for him. Nothing about all this is very Jewish; reason, rather than religion, would govern Nissim's concept of diet.

Like the Zoroastrians, the Bene Israel associate certain kinds of underclothing with their religion. Among the Zoroastrians, the kasti and the sadra are worn by all male members of the community, and this has become one of the symbolic ways in which a Parsi in India distinguishes himself from others. The Bene Israel wear the tzitzit, which is a sort of undergarment with fringes at the corners. It may be thought of as the equivalent of the kasti and the sadra, just as Elul is the Jewish equivalent of the Muslim Ramzan.

While the Ezekiels disregarded most of the rituals associated with their religion, or at any rate modified them to suit their convenience, the boys of the household did go through the ritual Bar Mitzvah that marks a male child's passage into manhood. Paradoxically, the Bene Israel did not traditionally observe the Bar Mitzvah in large numbers, though its importance increased slightly in the twentieth century. Although some Bene Israel synagogues, particularly in Bombay, began conducting it, it was still practiced by relatively few families in the community.

Nissim recalls that Joe, Hannan and he all went through the ceremony in their thirteenth year. Although he was Bar Mitzvahed in 1937, Nissim would never wear tzitzit, which is associated with orthodox Jewish values. Moses did not hold his sons' Bar Mitzvahs at the Magen Hassidim Synagogue at Agripada, where they had been circumcised, although this was the synagogue where most Bar Mitzvah ceremonies were solemnized. Instead, he took them to the Rodef Shalom Synagogue near the Victoria Gardens. The Jewish Religious Union ran the synagogue, which is housed in a building formerly known as Matilda House; it was founded in 1925, a year after Nissim's birth. The liberal, progressive Jewish Religious Union attracted broad-minded Jews, such as Moses, who preferred to shorten their prayers and sometimes even say them in English rather than in Hebrew. Many years later, when Nissim was a father, he took his son, Elkana, to this very synagogue in Bombay for his Bar Mitzvah.

From Chapter Two: "I Was Born Here and Belong"

A plaque close to the Tomb of the Matriarch Rachel near Jerusalem refers to Bombay. The inscription on the plaque is in Hebrew, and it was written in AD 5625 according to the Jewish calendar (September AD 1864 to September AD 1865). Translated into English, the inscription reads:

> The construction of this well was made possible through a donation from the esteemed, our brothers the Bene Israel, who are living in the city of Bombay, may the Lord protect it well! In honor of the whole assembly of the community of Israel, [through those] who came to bow over the gravestone at the burial place of our Mother Rachel.
> May her memory protect us, Amen.
> Given in the year 5625, according to the Jewish calendar.[3]

The inscription confirms something we already know: that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the Bene Israel embarked on a steady exodus from their coastal villages to the island city of Bombay. The Bene Israel were among the earliest beneficiaries of the British Indian government's policy of developing Bombay as a modern city.

As Bombay developed, following the path of the East India Company, it became the capital of western India. The Bene Israel migration occurred from

1739, when few Bene Israel lived there, to 1796, when they built their first synagogue. Other minorities, including other Jews, added to the city's cross-cultural integration and its liberating influence, including opening new professions to the Bene Israel oil-pressers.

Thus it was in Bombay that the Bene Israel — a community that had for centuries stayed content toiling for a living — suddenly became exposed to religion, education and culture in a significant way.

Haskelji Israel had aspirations like any other Bene Israel of his day. He wanted to empower himself by joining the tide and migrating to Bombay. But his restlessness could get him only as far as the Boer War, which struck him as a way of leaving the village. This was before the turn of the century, by which time almost everyone who wanted to leave the villages had already opted for a new life in the city. Haskelji did not succeed in going to Bombay; after his war stint, he returned to Tal and settled down to the quiet life of a teacher.

But the aspiration to go to Bombay remained somewhere deep in his psyche. He fulfilled it vicariously by sending his children to college in the city. Thus, his son Moses graduated in science, and became a man of strong scientific and urban attitudes. Haskelji Israel did not encourage Moses or his other children to return to Tal after finishing their studies. He realized that better lives awaited them in Bombay. Even the thought of his own impending old age and loneliness did not make him change his mind and ask his children to return.

Thus, Nissim Ezekiel was born in Bombay. Moses and Diana lived near the Byculla Bridge, in a chawl, where the birth took place. The description of the house and its location clearly indicate their economic status in those early years after their wedding. They were not well-off. In fact, in future years, Nissim would often refer to his parents as "poor." Yet, Diana's participation in some of the religious rituals associated with the birth of children proves that they were not hard-pressed for money, for all such ceremonies usually entail some expense.

Diana taught in a sort of municipal school attended by children from relatively unaffluent homes. It occupied a part of the Tiphereth Israel Synagogue, situated at 92 Clarke Road, Jacob Circle. But the school was not really connected with the synagogue — it was merely its tenant, and the students were not necessarily Jewish.

In 1934, Nissim obtained admission to the Antonio D'Souza High School. Although cosmopolitan, it was a part of the Gloria Church, and was even referred to sometimes as the Gloria Church School. The students admitted to that school belonged to all the major communities — Hindu, Muslim and Christian. Nissim did not regard anyone at the Antonio D'Souza High School, teacher or fellow student, as an anchor in his life. His real companionship came from home, from the family. Moses and Diana, more than anyone else, were the anchors in the lives of the Ezekiel children.

The parents' constant supervision and guidance helped shape the personalities of the Ezekiel children. Nissim identifies one of his personality traits as this feeling, the assumption, that if someone could do something, say, win a hockey match, produce a play or learn a new language, he could too. Reflecting on this, he told me, "This way I tried almost everything under the sun. I now regret it — the feeling that I could do everything...unlike people who from childhood know they're good in some things, and not good in other things."

The Antonio D'Souza High School used to have a five-day week. But like some schools run by the Jesuits, notably the St. Xavier's High School in Bombay's Metro cinema area, it observed Thursday as its weekly holiday, instead of Saturday. Nissim probably first began to write on Thursdays and Sundays, and during his summer and winter vacations, when, like all other children, he found himself with a lot of time on his hands and did not quite know how to spend it. Putting together the various statements he has made over the years, we may conclude that he wrote his first complete poem in 1936, at the age of twelve.[4] At that time, a classmate showed one of Nissim's early poems to a teacher, who exclaimed, "Ah, ha, listen all of you, we have a poet in the class." The remark had its effect. Nissim says, "I decided at that moment, whatever happens, I am going to write poetry, good, bad or indifferent."[5]

Around the year Nissim finished his schooling, the Ezekiels changed their residence. They shifted into an apartment that was part of a colony of bungalows known as The Retreat. It was the perfect name for a poet's house. As fate would have it, Nissim would always return to it, to live first with other members of the family, and then by himself.

Apart from the years he spent in the Warden Road area after his marriage — first in a one-room ground floor apartment with a garden at Mazda Mansion, and then at Kala Niketan, where his wife Daisy presently lives — Nissim has resided in the Bombay Central-Byculla belt since his childhood. This is clearly a sort of Jewish quarter of the city, and his preference for it indicates that, for all his cosmopolitanism, he feels most secure with the people of his own community. Here, as elsewhere, landmarks connected with the community's social and cultural life often determine how important people in the community perceive the place to be. Bellasis Road, Clare Road and Kamathipura, not far off, are known for their Jewish cemeteries and synagogues.

Discussing this phenomenon, Shirley Berry Isenberg speaks of a Bene Israel communal neighborhood in Bombay. She informs us that the original neighborhood was located where the Byculla, Nagpada, Mazgaon and Umerkhadi sections of Bombay meet, making all the residents in those days within walking distance of each other.[6]

A sense of roots and belonging is perhaps essential to every poet, because in the last analysis, it gives him the terms of reference for his writing. Nissim's roots are in Bombay; Bombay is the city where he belongs. He was born in Bombay, has always lived here, and he always came back to Bombay, wherever he went. His longest time away from Bombay was between 1948 and 1952, when he was in England. But even before he went to England, he decided that Bombay was his home, and once in England, he made up his mind to return to Bombay and spend the rest of his life here. Nissim's years in England coincided with the time the Jews in India started emigrating on a large scale to the newly-formed nation of Israel (from 1949 onwards). Though he took interest in this development, he rejected the Zionist notion that Israel was the Promised Land to which all the Jews of the world must return. This is because he thought of himself as an Indian.

The idea expressed earlier, that Nissim was most comfortable in a Jewish neighborhood rather than anywhere else in Bombay, is borne out by his admission that there were large parts of the city which he didn't know or relate to. This includes working class Bombay. He believed in the idea of a neighborhood, which for him was mainly comprised of Byculla where he grew up. To this he also adds Warden Road, where he lived for a while, and Churchgate, where he worked. However, he doesn't see this relation to a special local reality as narrowness, for he feels it is only the starting point from which one can extend one's sphere of interest to the whole country. In this context, he says he has never felt alienated anywhere in India, though he regards himself as a Bombayite.

Nissim doesn't even attribute his preference for Bombay to the fact that it is a cosmopolitan city that has room for minorities. He accepts his minoritism as a given, and says that as far as he is concerned, he relates to people on the basis of their attitudes and values. But he agrees that Bombay is a haven for minorities because of its cosmopolitan character, a characteristic he says it shares with such cities as London and New York. Nissim has always loved Bombay's variety and multiplicity.

Despite his love for Bombay, Nissim also notes its faults, including poor public transportation and poor public manners. Until the trams were abolished in the '60s, Nissim used them for much of his movement around Bombay. When he was a boy of ten, Jewish passengers enjoyed special privileges on trams and, later, on buses. They could buy their tickets for travelling on Saturdays and Jewish holidays in advance, and be assured of seats. Trams were an integral part of Bombay, and he was sorry when they were discontinued.

Bombay is a modern Indian city. The term "modern" implies that the quality of life in the city will be preserved as best as possible. Nissim feels that in this respect, Bombay's administrators have failed. Roads still exist in the same condition as many years ago with scant improvement. Modernity, according to Nissim, has not really touched the lives of the people. For example, Nissim has strongly critized the way Indians indulge in loud talk in public places, or spit, pee and blow their noses wherever they want. In "Background, Casually," he wrote:

All Hindus are
Like that, my father used to say,
When someone talked too loudly, or
Knocked at the door like the Devil.
They hawked and spat. They sprawled around.

"Can you call that modernity?" he asks.

And yet, in spite of all its faults, he objects to the word "hate" when I tell him his relationship with Bombay is a love-hate relationship. "It's only love," he says. What he loves most about the city is that it gives him a "sense of belonging."

In the twentieth century, the city came to mean "home" to the Bene Israel as a whole. Beginning with that first synagogue that they built at 254 Samuel Street, Mandvi, in 1796, which is still in use today (this possibly explains why Mandvi is the most favored residential locality among members of the community), the Bene Israel went on to build several other synagogues in areas they occupied. By the twentieth century, the synagogue became the focal point of community life among the Bene Israel. This was particularly facilitated by the fact that the people themselves conducted the affairs of their synagogues — they had no ordained or professional clergy to lead them.

The Ezekiels maintained a distance from many of these social transactions. They would go to the synagogue, but not fraternize too much. In this they were not exceptional; several well-educated people of the community kept away, at least partially, from these congregations. Two of the Ezekiel's favorite synagogues were the Magen Hassidim Synagogue at Agripada and the Magen David Synagogue at Byculla. The latter is walking distance from both Readymoney Mansion and The Retreat. Then there was the forward-looking Rodel Shalom Synagogue. In the '70s and '80s, with young Bene Israel couples leaving the city and moving to suburban areas like Kurla and Thane, the new synagogues constructed in the suburbs drew a greater number of visitors than the older ones. The old ones in central Bombay remained half to three-fourths empty, and the authorities sometimes even bribed members to attend prayers, for according to rules, one cannot pray in a synagogue without a minimum of ten persons. Nissim himself was never very strict about his visits to the synagogue. He would go there whenever he felt like it, though it is true that in old age he became increasingly involved in the social and cultural affairs of the community.

Due to independence and immigration to Israel, class almost completely replaced caste as a means of determining the status of Bombay's three Jewish communities. The upshot is that the Bene Israel, who were earlier accorded the lowest status among Jews in India, were now able to identify with the white-collar middle class, a slot that previously belonged to upper-caste Hindus. While caste is determined by birth, class is flexible. As a result, all three Jewish communities could boast not just of a sizeable white-collar class, but also of achievers in different fields. Some of them even rose to become celebrities. If the Bene Israel had a celebrity poet in Nissim Ezekiel, the Baghdadis had their film stars; both Nadira and David were important actors in the Bombay film industry. Economic prosperity, however, did not significantly contribute towards a decline in conservative attitudes. Isenberg notes that most Bene Israel of Bombay followed the traditional Indian pattern, conservatively keeping themselves socially separate from their communities.[7] This, of course, does not apply to Nissim, who has always been more liberal than the average person in the community, and who has friends from virtually every community in the world.

While the ordinary Bene Israel may be finicky about mingling with people of other religions, their homes in Bombay have come to resemble those of their Hindu and Muslim counterparts exactly. They live in crowded rooms, usually rented rather than owned. Although as many as ten members of a joint family sometimes share a room, guests are always welcome. However, there is little, if any sense of privacy, which is said to be confined merely to bathing, dressing and sexual intercourse.

Bene Israel homes in Bombay invariably have a mezuzah at the entrance, and a hanging oil lamp that is lit on the evening of the Sabbath and Jewish festivals, as they used to do in the villages. Most households also own the Old Testament in Marathi. Other common things include prayer books and framed portraits of family members, Biblical scenes and sometimes even Hindu gods! Like the people of other communities, they like to give feasts during happy occasions.

The Ezekiels, too, always had a mezuzah and prayer books at Readymoney Mansion and The Retreat. There were a few framed portraits of elderly relatives. But, they had a very strong sense of privacy. They hardly ever gave parties, though on Friday nights, after prayers were said, they had a sort of party among themselves, drinking wine. Even among the educated Bene Israel of Bombay, they were exceptional. Their unconventionality manifested itself in their secularism, which meant not flaunting their religion and culture, or making a public display of it, however indirectly.

During Moses' and Diana's lifetimes, The Retreat still resembled a "regular" household, with everyone in the family living there harmoniously. After their deaths, the circumstances were such that one by one everybody began leaving the place. Today, Nissim lives alone at The Retreat, and hardly anyone knows how he lives. Even by the standards of the rich middle class, who can afford to set up separate households from their parents, he is unusual. At the time of this writing, it just so happens that Nissim, Daisy and Elkana each live in three separate apartments in Bombay — Nissim at The Retreat, Daisy at Kala Niketan, and Elkana and his wife in company quarters at Prabhadevi. In a city where the housing problem is more acute than anywhere else in the world, this surely is luxury.

Bombay is Nissim's city, and he would always depend on it for image and metaphor. "I feel I am a Bombay city poet…I am oppressed and sustained by Bombay,"[8] he has said. In his poem "Island," included in *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), Nissim firmly and finally expresses his commitment to Bombay:

> I cannot leave the island,
> I was born here and belong.

These lines also echo the famous concluding lines of "Background, Casually," the previous poem in the book, autobiographical in nature:

> I have made my commitments now.
> This is one: to stay where I am,
> As others chose to give themselves
> In some remote and backward place.
> My backward place is where I am.

From Chapter Three: Freedom at Midnight

In the summer of 1939, while vacationing at his grandfather's house in Tal, waiting for school to reopen, Nissim picked up his copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* in English translation and went through all 18 chapters. He assiduously read both text and translator's comments. He was shocked. His peace-loving sensibilities and his ethical sense were offended by the doubts Arjuna expressed, and particularly by the advice Krishna gave her — to go to battle in the name of duty. He simply couldn't see the sense of such reasoning. The shock of those boyhood days in relation to Hinduism's, and India's, most sacred text would stay with him for the rest of his life.

It is as if his Judeo-Christian foundations, with their notion of virtue and sin, acted as a barrier and interfered with his ability to grasp the logic of Krishna's teachings: all battle is evil and cannot be justified, even if the ends are noble; ends do not justify means. And to think that Nissim wouldn't have even bothered to read the *Bhagavad Gita* at that time, had the school fathers as orthodox Christians not run it down! It is incredible that a man who harbored such convictions should, less than a decade later, relinquish religion to become an atheist and a rationalist. Yet this is the course that Nissim's life took.

He took his bachelor and master's degrees at Wilson College in Chowpatty, where his father taught. Though his degrees were in English literature, he remained curious about science. "Since my college years," he says, "I've read with great pleasure articles and books on the relation of science to society, to religion, and to everyday life. Well before I was 20, I had become science-oriented, or so I thought, though my emotional life was largely in terms of poetry. Asked about my beliefs, by equally confused companions and acquaintances, I would say, 'I believe in the scientific attitude to life.' Before I knew what was happening to me, I had started announcing my atheism and my faith in a future society dominated by scientific attitudes and values."[9]

Nissim's youthful years in college and beyond, from 1941 until the time he left for England in early 1949, were also India's most politically important and politically sensitive years. These years not only witnessed the Quit India Movement in 1942 and Independence in 1947, but also culminated tragically with the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on 30 January 1948. Nissim's reactions to these events must be seen from two perspectives: one, his own, and the other, that of the Bene Israel community. Often, the two overlap.

As a community, the Bene Israel were much less politically inclined than, say, the Cochin Jews. Isenberg informs us that only three Bene Israel were known to be involved in active politics throughout India's freedom struggle.[10] This is not surprising because, according to the 1921 Government census for the British Districts of Bombay Presidency, the Jews as a whole constituted only .06 per cent of the total population, which was 76.7% Hindu and 19.57% Muslim.

A popular reason given for poor Bene Israel participation in the freedom movement is that, in the twentieth century, the community was only just reinforcing itself economically, and members were too busy looking for opportunities to make a decent living to have the time to take part in politics. However, another factor must not be overlooked. The struggle for freedom in India has always been linked to Hinduism, the majority religion. Nationalism, thus, was — at best — religious nationalism. Microscopic minorities such as the Bene Israel were bound to feel alienated from such a movement. As a community, the Bene Israel did not know, even after Independence, whether Gandhi's methods of satyagraha and nonviolence were ideal. This is directly reflected in Nissim's own doubts about Gandhi's philosophy and his preference instead for the beliefs of M. N. Roy.

No one in Nissim's family was directly connected with the politics of the freedom movement, although they stood for Independence. Neither Moses, nor Joe, nor Hannan, were members of the Jewish (Indian) Nationalist Party, or the All India Israelite League or the Bene Israel Conference. Nissim was interested in political ideology as a college student and became involved through his fellow Bene Israelite, Abraham Solomon. He met Solomon, who was ten years his senior, at the Prayer Hall of the Jewish Religious Union, and they became close friends.

Solomon, an atheist and a rationalist, introduced Nissim to ideas on international atheism and rationalism. Nissim recalls Solomon's very critical comments about religion in general and Judaism in particular. Solomon stated categorically that he was a member of the Rationalist Movement and did not believe in the existence of God. Yet, Solomon continued to attend synagogue so as not to upset his mother. Under Solomon's influence, Nissim proclaimed that he was both a rationalist and an atheist, and would henceforth stop attending prayer services. The decision, of course, was not easy, and he went through weeks and weeks of soul-searching, becoming terribly upset in the process, before he made up his mind to renounce religion. But renounce it he did, and not even the fact that his mother, like Solomon's, disapproved of his decision made him change his mind.

In the '30s and '40s, resisting Gandhi's electric personality was not easy, but Nissim was always skeptical about Gandhism. He would often go to the Chowpatty sands to listen to the speeches of Gandhi and Nehru, but he would disagree with them.[11] Here he was relating to history strictly as a Jew, and a Royist, feeling it was disastrous to speak of non-cooperation during the War. The Bene Israel believed that Gandhi's 1942 demands were inappropriate. They were wounded by the fact that anti-Semitic sentiment, which was responsible for wreaking havoc in the lives of Jews worldwide, meant little to the people of India. Nissim and those who agreed with him had to explain to Gandhi's proponents that, as M. N. Roy said, World War II was, after all, a war against fascism, and opposing the British at that stage would be tantamount to supporting the forces of fascism.

Remarkably, these views that Nissim held in the early 1940s have stayed consistently with him for more than 50 years. "If I was left alone by other politics — M.N. Roy — I would have been like everyone else," Nissim explains. He adds that Roy made him, "agree that there was a case against fighting for Independence when the war against Nazism was still going on after World War II, which was more important. Roy said we shouldn't give up our struggle for freedom, but postpone it. I don't think the anti-Nazi sentiment appealed to me only because I was a Jew, but that must have been there too, though it was not the dominating factor."

Disenchantment with Gandhi led Nissim, who was not yet 20, to the charismatic Roy, who saw failure as the inevitable consequence of intellectual and moral integrity. This appealed to Nissim, who was afflicted with a sense of failure. Moreover, reason was Roy's sole guiding principle, and Nissim always held reason in high esteem. Today, Nissim explains, "I felt closer to his ideas than to Gandhi, Nehru and Congress nationalism…I was convinced that Roy wanted Independence. Roy's personality, his question-answer sessions, his essays, editorial articles, statements about the nationalist situation, I sort of felt sold on all that. But at that age — I was 18 to 20 — this sort of thing happens to most people. But I was also attracted to Roy's rationalism, his critical attitude to God and religion."

Roy espoused cooperative social or community living to test one's rationality and morality. Accordingly, in 1948, when Nissim was a lecturer at Khalsa College, he left his parents' home and started to live on his own, first in the political offices of the Radical Democratic Party and then in a sort of slum with Royist political workers. Luckily for him, Moses and Diana did not construe this as his walking out on them; there was little unpleasantness at home. Though his Royist beliefs led to occasional arguments with his father, his parents respected Nissim's freedom of choice, even if it upset them in the bargain. Moses would visit him in the slum every morning, with tea in a flask and something to eat.

Over time, Roy moved from the Radical Democratic Party to the philosophy of New Humanism.[12] Nissim was disappointed at the dissolution of the party and unenthusiastic about New Humanism, so he grew distanced from politics in 1948. Literature and the arts replaced politics as his first love, as marked by his departure for England at the end of the decade.

Like his inconsistent politics, Nissim's atheism also may be attributed to the overpowering influence of M. N. Roy. In other words, there were no convictions here, and he tried to have his cake and eat it too. His attitude as an atheist was contradictory and, eventually, in the late 1960s, he gave up atheism altogether. Nissim is aware of the contradictions. Speaking about those years, he says, "Paradoxically, I was also a persistent student of religious doctrines and texts...I would agree that I responded to religion and mysticism only as poetry and not as belief. In fact, I needed them to compensate for the spiritual dimensions I had lost."[13]

From Chapter IV: Say Hello to the Queen

In 1948, Nissim went to England under the sponsorship of Ebrahim Alkazi, a pivotal leader in Bombay's arts and theater community. Alkazi included Nissim in his life in London where he directed student plays at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts.

Nissim became a clerk in the Internal Affairs department of the Indian High Commission in England, a job that required him to produce a weekly newsletter. He took evening classes in Chinese and Western Philosophy at the City Literary Institute and registered for a BA at Birbeck College, an affiliate of the University of London. Though he did not complete the BA, his courses cleansed his mind of ideas on rationalism and enabled him to see life anew. He told me, "I discovered there while studying philosophy, that the rationalist thing was too simple, almost as dogmatic as any religion. Just as religious people say there's God, the rationalists say there's no God. None of the professors of philosophy in London were basically championing faith. Rather, they lived in a complex world of ideas."

A year later, Nissim explains, he was, "studying, working, shutting myself up in an underground room for hours together and thinking and writing poems" when he made "a drastic decision" to "resign the job and take to full-time writing, earning a pound here and a pound there."[14]

Alkazi went back to India without offering Nissim return passage, but Nissim continued to write in England, supported in part by his brother Joe, who sent him about ten pounds each month. Most of the poems he wrote in England found their way into his first book, *A Time to Change*, which came out in 1952 before he returned to India. He regards it as significant that he was writing these poems away from home, away from happenings in India, experiencing a new kind of reality in which he was trying to find his own personal voice; they were personal rather than political poems.

Despite all the artistic and intellectual gains that life in London provided, Nissim was fast reaching the end of his tether. The most pressing problems were financial: he realized he hadn't paid his rent in seven weeks and had to depend almost everyday on friends for lunch and dinner. The money Joe sent from Bombay and his freelance earnings from newspapers and magazines were far from sufficient. So what if he had all the time in the world to attend to poetic drafts and poetic crafts? The decision to quit his job at India House had been rash.

He had no alternative but to think of returning to India. As he wrote, "I could no longer remain a wanderer. I decided to return to Bombay, to my roots."[15]

Nissim worked his way home on a ship, washing decks, stoking coal and wiping furniture, a period of manual labor that would prove very influential and instructive. The work was hard and laborious and went on for eight hours a day. But he lived up to it. Not once did he think it was work too degrading for a man of his education and talents, nor did he ever feel he did not have the energy. His ancestors had led rugged working-class lives back in the village, and there was something of their stamina and their sense of dignity in his bones that gave him the determination to keep going.

He was awarded the certificate of "Able Seaman" for honest and impressive work on board. It was an honor he cherished as much as all the literary awards he would win.

Back in Bombay, welcomed by family and friends, Nissim emerged a changed man. He said to me, "I became philosophical. That meant being critical of all ideologies, including one's own." The memory of his unusual journey was deeply ingrained in his mind. Fifteen to twenty years after returning to India, Nissim wrote in "Background, Casually:"

> So, in an English cargo-ship
> Taking French guns and mortar shells
> To Indo-China, scrubbed the decks,
> And learned to laugh again at home.

From Chapter V: Jewish Wedding in Bombay

The year 1952 was important for Nissim Ezekiel several ways. Not only did he come back home after three years in England, and begin his association with the *Illustrated Weekly*, but by November that year, he was married. Only with great reluctance does he reveal anything about his marriage, which remains for him a highly personal affair. He describes it as a "compromising" marriage and a "semi-love marriage," and says that soon after he got back from England, a man from the community met his mother and obtained her permission to introduce him to his daughter. Nissim met her, and the wedding was fixed.

The girl's name was Daisy Jacob Dandekar. She was the daughter of Isaac and Lily, who had nine children. There wasn't much courtship. To quote Nissim, "the courtship wasn't very short or very long." What was important was that he gave his word and stuck to it. "My parents wanted me to take a decision one way or other, so it didn't create an awkward situation for the girl," he says. The marriage happened just like that, with a proposal from a matchmaking third party, as is often the case with the Bene Israel.

Nissim was pleased that he was marrying within the community. Although he's fond of projecting himself as a liberal Jew — and liberal he is in many respects — in his heart of hearts, he has always believed that the Bene Israel should form marital alliances strictly with people of their own community. This, of course, is his personal belief that did not come in the way of his consenting to the marriages of his two sisters, and later of all his children, to outsiders. Within his immediate family, it's only his two brothers and himself who married Bene Israel women. Like his marriage, their marriages were "arranged behind the scenes." But it is something he has held close to his heart, and it has to do with ideas of purity: one of the reasons why the Bene Israel are looked down upon by Arab Jews, is because they frequently marry Hindu women.

Nissim and Daisy were married on 23 November 1952 at the Magen David Synagogue, facing the J.J. Hospital. It is difficult to say whether their respective families settled on this date because it was auspicious. Perhaps it was. There are many marriage customs among the Bene Israel, most of which are inspired by local Hindu rituals. Isenberg, citing other scholarly sources, lists practices such as calling out the names of five widowed or unmarried women; waving a copper or silver coin before the couple; throwing rice on their bodies as a sign of fertility; making them pull leaves out of each other's mouths; and so on.[16] Once again, it is likely that some of these customs, like the applying of mehendi on the hands and feet, or the fastening of the hems of handkerchiefs, were adhered to, while the more obscure ones were disregarded. Both Nissim and Daisy came from educated families that did not place too much emphasis on ritual. The poem "Jewish Wedding in Bombay," which he did not include in any of his individual collections until *Latter-Day Psalms* in 1982, gives us the most complete account there is about his marriage. One of the rituals he mentions in the poem is Daisy's brothers hiding his shoe and making him pay to get it back. He also talks about Daisy's father asking him how much jewelry he expected as a dowry (though he doesn't use the word).

Thus, 1952 was critical for Nissim. He was 28, employed and married. His wild brahmachari days had come to an end, so to speak, as he now settled down to the life of a householder. Except, of course, he hated it.

During the first five years of his marriage — as he neared his thirties — Nissim worked in magazine editing and in advertising, and traveled to the United States. The marriage was not working out well, and he disliked domesticity, but his poetry steadily gained an audience.

His work continues to reflect his thinking about faith, as seen in *Sixty Poems*, published in 1953. The book includes a group of metaphysical, moral, philosophical and religious poems, beginning with the very first one, "A Poem of Dedication:"

> I do not want the yogi's concentration,
> I do not want the perfect charity
> Of saints nor the tyrant's endless power.
> I want a human balance humanly
> Acquired, fruitful in the common hour.

This is followed, elsewhere in the book, by seven consecutive poems, beginning with "Nothingness:"

> If I could pray; the gist of my
> Demanding would be simply this:
> Quietude. The ordered mind."

"Nothingness" includes the line, "Holiness reveals itself in everything"

Nissim's Judeo-Christian religiosity in these and other poems like "Psalm 151," "Nocturne," "Cain" and "Creation," seems inconsistent with the atheism of his youth. The inconsistency is somewhat offset by the ironic or near-ironic tone of some of these poems, but in the end, the poems are faith-affirming. In "Prayer I," there is even an idea that is borrowed from the Buddha's Dhammapada, as a footnote to the poem informs us. And, "Creation" ends with the following stanza:

> Child of flesh and fancy,
> Be equable, as the sages recommend,
> And God-like make a universe
> From chaos,
> Of fire and air and earth and water.

Notes

1. R Raj Rao, *Nissim Ezekiel: the authorized biography*, (New Delhi: Viking by Penguin Books India, 2000).

2. Shirley Berry Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel: A Comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1988).

3. Isenberg, 122.

4. John B. Beston, "An Interview with Nissim Ezekiel," in *Indian Writing in English*, ed. Krishna Nandan Sinha, (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1979), pp. 42-49.

5. Behram Contractor, "Nissim Ezekiel: Poet, Editor and Novelist," *The Afternoon Dispatch and Courier*, 27 November 1994, p. 14.

6. Isenberg, 224.

7. Isenberg, 224.

8. Nissim Ezekiel, "A Poet's Passage," *Bombay*, 22 May-6 June 1983, pp. 34-36.

9. Nissim Ezekiel, "Science and I," *Science Age*, March 1984, p. 23.

10. Isenberg, 253.

11. Visiting the Chowpatty sands for public lectures became one of Nissim's regular habits. The Wilson College is right opposite. On 15 August 1947, Independence Day, he remembers being at the Chowpatty sands to witness a celebration with flags.

12. Quoted by V.B. Karnik in his Epilogue to *M.N. Roy's Memoirs*, (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1984), p. 601.

13. *Science Age*, March 1984.

14. V.C. Harris, "Breaking Patterns, Flowing," *Indian Communicator (Sunday Magazine)*, 26 June 1994, p. 1.

15. *Bombay*, 22 May-6 June, 1983.

16. Isenberg, 132.

Photograph from the Indian Writer's Photo Gallery: http://meadev.nic.in/culture/literature/gallery/gal18.htm

India, Israel and the Davis Cup Tie 1987

By P.R. Kumaraswamy

India's Davis Cup tennis encounter with Israel in July 1987 was an important landmark for a number of political and non-political reasons. Participating was the most controversial decision the Indian government had made since it allowed the incognito visit of Moshe Dayan in 1977 when the first non-Congress *Janata* government was in power.[1] While the tennis match did not bring about any immediate or fundamental changes in India's Middle East policy, it generated new debates over the prolonged absence of diplomatic relations with Israel. Discussion ensued about the politicization of sports and about the need to reexamine India's Israel policy.

Traditionally, the bulk of Indian opinion was not sympathetic toward Zionist political aspirations in the erstwhile Palestine.[2] Indian nationalists viewed the demand for a Jewish national homeland through an Islamic prism and treated the crisis in Palestine primarily as an Arab struggle against British imperialism. Even though India had opposed the partition of Palestine, once Israel came into being, received recognition from a number of states and gained U. N. admission, the Indian government decided to accept the *fait accompli*. India's recognition of the Jewish state in September 1950 was not followed by formal diplomatic relations, but it did allow an Israeli consulate to be established in Bombay (now Mumbai).

The absence of diplomatic ties did not inhibit either country from maintaining formal contacts and interactions.[3] The Israeli consular often met Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the new Foreign Minister. But the Suez crisis and the tripartite aggression against Egypt considerably dented Israel's position and relations began to deteriorate. From the early 1970s, Israel's growing international isolation also contributed to India's adoption of an unfriendly and even hostile attitude. Indeed, when the Israeli consular general made a controversial remark in 1982, he was declared *personal non-grata* and some suggested that Mrs. Gandhi was contemplating closing the Israeli mission.

This provides the changeable political background of India's political policy toward Israel. However, Israel's fortunes were also mixed in the sports arena, especially in Asia.

Politicization of Sports

The post-1945 Cold War rivalry among the camps of erstwhile superpowers influenced, dominated and controlled a number of spheres of human activity. In the post-Cold War era, issues such as emigration, naturalization or commercial interaction became part of political decisions often made at the highest levels. Naturally, then, sports also underwent rapid politicization and all the related issues — ranging from participants to venues — ceased to be the prerogative of the athletes and the bodies that governed sports. Historically, the Olympic Games were aimed at creating comradeship between warring parties, but the modern day Olympics could not revive this ancient legacy and, more often than not, the Olympic Games became political battlegrounds.

The first post-War Olympics, in London in 1948, excluded the defeated powers, namely Germany and Japan.[4] Twenty-eight years earlier, another set of losers — Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary and Turkey — had been excluded from the 1920 Games in Antwerp. The Suez Crisis led to Egypt, Iran and Lebanon's boycott of the Melbourne Games in 1956. Protesting the Hungarian crisis, the Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland also refused to attend the Games. The controversy around the 1963 Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEFO) in Jakarta led to the withdrawal of Indonesia and North Korea from the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.[5]

The 1972 Munich Games witnessed the massacre of the Israeli athletes by Palestinian guerrillas and the subsequent withdrawal of the Israel delegation. In 1976, a number of African countries boycotted the Montreal Games because of New Zealand's sports-related ties to South Africa's apartheid regime. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan paved the way for the US-led boycott of the 1980 Games in Moscow, and the Soviet Union retaliated four years later when Los Angeles hosted the 1984 Games. Controversies over North Korea's bid to be co-host plagued the 1988 Games in Seoul.

Israel and Asian Games

The Arab threat of boycott kept Israel away from the Olympic Games until the Winter Games at Oslo in 1952.[6] Since then, Israel has taken part in all the Olympic Games, in spite of the Munich massacres. However, Israel was less fortunate in Asia and was excluded from the inaugural Asian Games held in New Delhi in 1951.[7] Israel[8] entered the second Asian Games at Manila and has participated sporadically since then [see table, facing page]. In 1962, Indonesia, the world's largest Islamic nation, refused to invite Israel to the fourth Asian Games at Jakarta. The Indian vice-president of the Asian Games Federation, Guru Datt Sondhi, who was also a member of the International Olympic Committee, deplored this decision. Enraged by his condemnation, a 20,000-person mob surrounded and attacked the Indian embassy in Jakarta.[9] To complicate the controversy, in 1963 Indonesia organized the Games for the new emerging forces, which excluded athletes from both Israel and Taiwan.

The 1974 Asian Games in Teheran were important in a number of ways. Iran hosted the Games soon after the dramatic, short-lived Arab oil embargo against the U.S. and the Netherlands for their support of Israel during the October 1973 war. The Shah of Iran, who had maintained close, cordial and even strategic relations with Israel since the 1950s, was unperturbed about the boycotts. Israel, which sent a strong contingent to Tehran, won 19 medals; it stood sixth in the final medal tally and India stood seventh. While Bahrain and Kuwait took part in the Games, the other Arab countries were conspicuous by their absence. However, bowing to the Arab boycott threat at the end of the Tehran games, the Asian Games Federation decided to exclude Israel from the next Games in Bangkok and, then, India offered to host the ninth Asian Games.

In 1981, India argued that the "security of the participants and smooth holding of the Games" would be the paramount considerations in deciding upon participating nations.[10] Toward the end of the year, India pointed out that the rules "of the Asian Games Federation do not state specifically that the Indian Olympic Association is bound to extend formal invitation to all members of the Federation."[11] Citing security considerations, India excluded Israel from the 1982 New Delhi Games. The participants were not satisfied with this informal arrangement and went on to change the name and charter of the Asian Games Federation, the organizing body of the Games. The newly formed Olympic Council of Asia (OCA) excluded countries whose membership "would not be conducive" to the organization of the Games. Thus, Israel was officially expelled from the supreme sports body of Asia,[12] and was thereby excluded from the tenth Asian games in Seoul in 1986.[13]

India-Israel Sports Encounters

This background supplies a better understanding of India's position in general and its tie to the Davis Cup in particular. India's sports policy toward Israel operated at two different levels. At the individual level, Indians competed with Israelis without any inhibitions or controversies. Vijay Amritaraj, India's tennis

Israel and the Asian Games

1951	New Delhi	Not invited
1954	Manila	2G 1S 1B
1958	Tokyo	— — 1B
1962	Jakarta	Not invited
1966	Bangkok	6G 6S –
1970	Bangkok	Not invited
1974	Tehran	7G 4S 8B
1978	Bangkok	Not invited
1982	New Delhi	Not invited and suspended from OCA
1986	Seoul	Not invited

icon, played in the Israeli Grand Prix in Tel Aviv in October 1985.[14] Ramesh Krishnan lost two previous encounters against Shlomo Glickstein, who later came to India to break the Davis Cup tie.[15]

After the Davis Cup tie breaking match, another Indian played against an Israeli, but the contest went unnoticed. Vishwanathan Anand, the World Junior Chess Champion, who later became a Grand Master, met Gad Rechis of Israel in his last match before clinching the title in the Philippines in August 1987.[16] Moreover, Indian Jews have been participating in Israel's *Maccabia* Games.[17]

At the national level, Indians felt no initial reluctance about competing against Israel. In tune with the generally favorable attitude toward Israel in the mid-twentieth century, the two countries' sports teams encountered each other quite a few times. An Israeli football team participated in the Asian Cup's qualifying tournament in Ernakulam (Kerala) in December, 1959. In 1964, a team from India went to Tel Aviv for the final round of the Asian Cup, where it lost to the hosts, the eventual winner. In the 1972 pre-Olympic football match in Rangoon, Israel defeated India by a solitary goal.[18] Besides these direct encounters, India and Israel both participated in a number of international meets such as the Olympic Games.

However, spearheaded by the oil crisis, the post-1973 era saw the growing influence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and spreading international concerns about it, combined with Israel's increasing isolation, especially by the Third World.[19] India's position also underwent a change, going from unfriendliness to an almost hostile stance toward the Jewish state. India's political attitude was apparent when it supported the notorious U.N. General Assembly resolution, which declared, "Zionism is a form of racism and racial discrimination."

This attitude percolated into the arena of sports. India hosted two international table tennis meets that amply testify to its attitude toward Israel. First, India hosted the 1975 World Table Tennis Championship at Calcutta. In spite of the personal intervention of Roy H. Evans, President of the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), India refused to allow Israel to participate. The Israeli team came to Calcutta, was denied entry visas and was sent back. An official of the Indian Table Tennis Federation (TTFI) noted, "It is necessary to understand the sport life of a country in relation to the country's overall policies." [20] In March 1975, the government of India explained its stand to *Rajya Sabha,* the Upper House of the Indian Parliament:

> The Table Tennis Federation of India, which organized the Tournament, did not extend an invitation to Israel to participate in the 33rd World Table Tennis Tournament in Calcutta. Since the Israeli team was not invited, there was no question of issuing a visa for this purpose.[21]

Twelve years later, New Delhi hosted the 39th World Championship and the question of Israel's participation once again became controversial. Israel was invited to the tournament, but its team members were denied entry visas. To avoid controversy, the International Table Tennis Federation (ITTF), the sport's parent body, took on the task of inviting affiliated nations.[22] However, Table Tennis Federation of India (TTFI) President I.S. Bindra argued that when the championship was allotted to India in 1983 and, thereafter, it was made clear that entry visas for Israeli players would be the sole prerogative of the Indian government.[23] An official TTFI spokesman earlier declared, "If the ITTF have extended an invitation to the Israelis, the TTFI it not responsible for it."[24] However, at the biennial annual general meeting, Bindra observed that an invitation had been sent to Israel as per the constitution and the TTFI had nothing to do with the Indian government's policy towards any particular country.[25]

Intervention by the ITTF, the parent body and a few other countries did not improve the situation. West Germany protested Israel's exclusion and Swedish Minister of Sports Ulf Lonnqvist boycotted the Championship.[26] At the annual meeting held in New Delhi, the Netherlands — strongly backed by West Germany — proposed that India should not be allowed to host any international table tennis meets until it would ensure the participation of all member states.[27] In the wake of India's decision, Israel unsuccessfully tried to change the venue of the Championship. Samuel Larkin, the Secretary-General of the Israeli Sports Federation, declared, "We find it beyond our understanding that the ITTF awarded India the 39th Championship, knowing that it previously barred Israeli teams from the events."[28]

Why did India ban Israel from participating in international sports meets held in its borders? India's rationale revolves around an April 1985 government notification that came to light just before it decided to host the Davis Cup in 1987. The policy guidelines of the Indian Department of Youth Affairs and Sports declared that any proposal, "to send Indian teams abroad to participate in international tournaments or for holding international tournaments in India must clearly state whether countries such as South Africa, Israel or Taiwan are eligible to participate in the Tournament and whether they are likely to participate." Under such circumstances, the guidelines added, the Indian team would be denied permission.[29] However, the Indian government lacked foresightedness on this issue, as proven by subsequent events. Taiwan, for example, participated in both the men's and the women's sections of the 1987 New Delhi Table Tennis Championship and in the women's section, it played against India.[30]

The Davis Cup Tie

These developments, declarations and directives make the Davis Cup match controversial. India reached the finals only once, in 1974, when it gave South

Africa a walkover victory over the apartheid issue.[31] From 1981 — when the pattern of world grouping was introduced — India qualified annually for the honor from the Asian zone, except in 1983. Israel qualified for the European Zone only once, in 1986.[32] Israel was included in the European zone, not the Asian one, for political rather than geopolitical reasons.[33]

Israel's qualification in 1986 made Indo-Israeli encounters "a live possibility." When India met Argentina in March 1987, a victory was considered essential *inter alia*, so India could avoid playing against Israel in the next round.[34] Czechoslovakia, which simultaneously took on Israel, was expected to be India's opponent in that round. With this in mind, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi observed, "If you don't wish to play against Israel, all you have to do is beat the Argentineans."[35] However, the pre-quarter finals saw four major upsets: Israel defeated Czechoslovakia, Spain beat West Germany, Paraguay defeated the U.S. and India won over Argentina. Thus, in its next encounter, India was fated to compete against Israel.

According to International Tennis Federation (ITF) rules, which govern the Davis Cup, a country hosting a second round match has to inform the ITF of the venue of the match within a month after the completion of the first round match.[36] However, India conveyed its decision to the ITF as late as May 20, more than two months after the first round match. This inordinate delay reveals the complicated nature of the decision. During the interim period, India tried to create a face saving formula. As early as March 17, Israel expressed its willingness in view of past experience to play India in a neutral country.[37] Israel even suggested England as a possible venue.[38] However, Davis Cup rules permit neutral venues only in the case of a natural calamity and not because of any political animosity.[39]

Under these circumstances, hosting the match would give the Indian team a home court advantage and a grass court. India's decision has been explained two ways, both of which need scrutiny. First, in terms of being allowed to compete in India, it was widely argued that Israel and South Africa were different cases. Highlighting this, former union minister C. Subramaniam pointed out:

> The boycott of South Africa and its exclusion from all international competitive sports and games are beyond doubt powerful sanctions. There is no such exclusion in the case of Israel.[40]

Likewise, Vijay Amritaraj argued, "There is no way you can compare this situation to South Africa. This is a different issue."[41] By its actions, the Indian government seemed to have accepted this distinction and, thereby, apparently questioned its own April 1985 guidelines.

Second, the media began to highlight a number of sports contacts between Israel and other countries with which it does not have diplomatic relations. Israel played against Czechoslovakia in Prague and the USSR in Moscow. And, in the absence of diplomatic relations, China had participated in and even dominated the Seoul Asian Games. Hence proponents asserted that India's decision was neither new nor unprecedented.[42]

In January 1987, Israel cited these and similar examples to convince India to invite its team to the 39th World Table Tennis Championship.[43] In that event, India refused to accept any such precedents for reconsidering its decision against Israel's participation. Why were the things different for the Davis Cup?

Rationales

Describing the decision of the Indian government as a victory for one or another lobby[44] would be easy and simplistic. The reality was rather complex. The primary factor behind the favorable decision was the possibility that India would win the Davis Cup.

India first entered the Davis Cup in 1922, but it reached the finals only once, in 1974, when it refused to play against South Africa because of the issue of apartheid. In that instance, South Africa won the title by default. Since Indian tennis was dependent upon an aging trio — Vijay Amritaraj, Anand Amritaraj and Ramesh Krishnan — it had no bright prospects of advancing further if it defaulted again. As Amritaraj observed, "This (the match against Israel) might be our last big chance to go some distance in Davis Cup."[45] True to these words, India lost the finals to Sweden.

Second, any other Indian decision would have seriously crippled Indian tennis because of the ITF's strict adherence to the rules and regulations. In September 1986, for example, India's team — at the behest of its government — pulled out of the semi-finals of the Asian Zone's Boys qualifying competition in Hong Kong. Topping Group B, India was to have met Israel, the runner-up in Group A. The ITF did not take the decision to pull out kindly and suspended India for one year from the World Youth Cup, the team tennis championship for under-16s.[46] Any Indian default over the Davis Cup match with Israel would have attracted even more stringent penalties, including a three-year disqualification and a $10,000 fine. Furthermore, after the three-year ban, India would have to play in the qualifying matches and would have to promise to abide by Davis Cup regulations in the future and to keep politics separate from sports.[47] In short, the ITF's regulations acted as a strong deterrent of any Indian refusal to play against Israel.

Third, analysts cannot ignore the effect of public opinion about hosting the match. None other than Vijay Amritaraj spearheaded lobbying in favor of the match. His personal efforts and persuasion at the highest level undeniably affected the outcome in large measure. Israeli Tennis Association chairman David Harnik declared, "Vijay played a prominent role in getting the Indian government's approval."[48]

Fourth, various prominent public figures campaigned in favor of the match. Aging Congress leader C. Subramaniam, a former president of the All India Tennis Association (AITA), took an active part throughout this period. He picked up the lots for the fixture, an honor normally given to prominent leaders of the government. While recalling examples of Socialist countries that played against Israel, he went on to question India's basic policy toward the Middle East.[49] AITA, which only a few years earlier had refused to bid for a grand prix tournament due to Israel's participation, joined the campaign, as did Jaideep Singh, member of Parliament and president of the Amateur Athletic Federation of India.[50] Even the public at large supported the match, as confirmed by an opinion poll conducted shortly before the government announced its decision. At the national level, 47.1% favored the match, 20.6% were against it and 32.3% expressed no opinion. The support was much larger in South India.[51]

Fifth, the Arab world was preoccupied with a number of internal and intra-regional issues. With the Iran-Iraq war looming larger, Indian decision-makers believed that a strong Arab reaction was only a remote possibility. Arab inaction or unwillingness to act against Israel's security relations with Sri Lanka pointed in this direction.[52] Morocco, Kuwait, Iraq and Jordan's decision to restore diplomatic ties with Egypt in spite of the Camp David agreement clearly indicated that the Arab world was not united against Israel. Only the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Secretary-General of the Arab League, Chedli Klibi, had come out strongly against the Indian decision.[53] The PLO expressed surprise at the approval. The PLO Ambassador in India, Khaled al-Sheikh, felt that the Indian government could have informed his mission about the decision and declared "the decision to play Israel will certainly harm India's position as one of the leaders of the Non-aligned Movement."[54] In spite of his rhetoric, the Arab reaction was indifference.

One might be tempted to suggest that hosting the match was a pragmatic decision aimed at de-linking sports and politics, but subsequent developments do not give credence to this conclusion. The inordinate delay involved in making the decision only amplified the political inputs. If the media reports were to be believed, the final decision was made in a closed door meeting of the Cabinet Committee of Political Affairs (CCPA), the Indian government's highest decision-making body. This only belittles the claims that sports were de-politicized.[55] Moreover, India refused to play a Davis Cup relegation fixture in Israel the following year, citing the on-going *intifada*.

Conclusion

Unlike 'Ping-Pong' diplomacy, the July 1987 Davis Cup tennis tournament did not lead to any significant or even subtle change in India's policy vis-à-vis Israel. At the same time, it did become part of a subtle change of nuance adopted by Rajiv Gandhi, who took over as Prime Minister in October 1984.[56] Unlike his predecessors, he encouraged contacts and interactions with Israeli leaders as well as with pro-Israeli elements in the U.S. In 1985, he met with his Israeli counterpart Shimon Peres in New York during a U.N. session. Three years later, in June 1988, he held a highly publicized meeting with U.S. Congressman Stephen Solarz.[57] Full normalization of relations, however, had to wait until January 1992.

Seen in this context, the Davis Cup match did not indicate any change in India's policy toward Israel. Moreover, India played against Israel in the 1983 and 1985 World Table Tennis Championships. The decision, therefore, appears to have been a pragmatic one, born out of the larger interests of Indian sports. Outwardly, it seems in tune with India's consistent support of the Arabs, but the controversy generated a lively debate on the need to re-evaluate India's policy toward Israel.

Various developments, such as growing Arab moderation toward Israel, Israel's acceptance by the international community, increasing Israeli contacts with socialist countries and growing Israeli attempts in this direction indicate the possibility of a change in India's attitude. For weeks, the controversy over the tennis fixture dominated the front pages of the newspaper. However, the onset of the *intifada* the year after the Davis Cup match significantly undermined at least some of the goodwill toward Israel that was generated during the Davis Cup controversy.

Notes

1. For a first person account see, Moshe Dayan, *Breakthrough: A Personal Account of the Egypt-Israel Peace Negotiations*, (New Delhi: Vikas, 1981), pp. 26-29.

2. For a detailed discussion see, India, Ministry of External Affairs, *India and Palestine: The Evolution of a Policy*, (New Delhi, nd.); M.S. Agwani, "India and Palestine," in *Man and Development*, Vol. 5, No. 3, September 1983, pp. 31-37; Surjit Singh, "Indo-Israeli relations: A study of some aspects of India's foreign policy," *Journal of Indian History*, Vol. 57, Nos. 2-3, August-December 1979, pp. 387-399; G.H. Jansen, *Zionism, Israel and Asian Nationalism*, (Beirut: Palestine Liberation Organization, 1971); and Gideon Shimoni, *Gandhi, Satyagraha and the Jews: A Formative Factor in India's Policy toward Israel*, (Jerusalem: Leonard Davis Institute for International Relations, 1977).

3. P.R. Kumaraswamy, "India and Israel: Prelude to Normalisation," in *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Winter 1995, pp. 53-73.

4. *Indian Express* (New Delhi), May 10, 1984.

5. This follows the decision of the International Olympic Committee to ban any team that had competed in the 1963 GANEFO, which excluded Israel and Taiwan.

6. Indeed Israel applied for membership for the Summer Olympics at London held in 1950. Interestingly, by then India had recognized the Jewish State.

7. *Israel Yearbook, 1954*, (Jerusalem), p.132.

8. Ron Hendricks, "A sentimental journey," *Indian Express*, Nov.12, 1984.

9. India, *Lok Sabha Debates*, Series VII, Vol. 43, August 20, 1981, col. 251.

10. India, *Rajya Sabha Debates*, Vol. CXX, No. 5, November 27, 1981, cols. 179-180.

11. In 1976, the Asian Football Confederation amended its constitution and revoked Israel's membership. *Asian Recorder*, (New Delhi), October 16-20, 1976, p.13408.

12. Israel unsuccessfully tried to enter the OCA at Seoul. *Indian Express*, April 22, 1986.

13. Ritu Sarin, "Is the promised land out of bounds?", *Sunday*, (Calcutta), November 10-16, 1985, pp. 56-57.

14. *Sunday Mail*, (New Delhi), July 19-25, 1987.

15. The match against Rechis was described as Anand's toughest tie in the tournament.

16. R.K. Srivastava, "India-Israel relations," in *Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 31, No. 5, July-September 1970, p. 260.

17. *Indian Express*, July 21, 1987.

18. The 1970s saw a number of African countries breaking off their diplomatic ties with Israel.

19. *The Jerusalem Post*, February 9, 1975.

20. India, *Rajya Sabha Debates*, Vol. XCI, March 7, 1975, col. 72.

21. This might be due to the experience in 1975 for the Calcutta tournament when the Indian body refused to invite Israel.

22. *The Hindu*, (New Delhi), January 13, 1987.

23. *Indian Express*, January 10, 1987.

24. *Indian Express*, February 23, 1987.

25.*The Hindu*, February 13, 1987; and *Indian Express*, February 3, 1987.

26. *Indian Express*, February 23, 1987.

27. *Indian Express*, January 28, 1987. Israel even contemplated sending a team to New Delhi as it did in 1975. Finally, it was content with lodging a protest with the ITTF.

28. *Indian Express*, February 15, 1987 and February 16, 1987.

29. *Sunday*, June 21-27, 1987, pp. 24-25.

30. In the women's section, India was grouped together with Taiwan, Trinidad and Tobago, and Nepal.

31. For more details on the Davis Cup and India see, R.T. Shahani, "India, Israel and a cup to covet," in *Illustrated Weekly of India*, July 5, 1987, pp. 38-39.

22. *The Hindu*, July 24, 1987.

33. This is true of most of the other international organizations where Israel

has been clubbed in the European zone.

34. T. R. Ramakrishnan, "Davis Cup drew favors India," in *India Express*, March 13, 1987.

35. Quoted in *Sunday*, June 21-27, 1987, p. 21.

36. *The Hindu*, April 16, 1987. The AITA asked for and obtained an extension of the deadline by a month.

37. *Indian Express*, March 18, 1987.

38. *The Hindu*, July 19, 1987.

39. *The Hindu,* May 21, 1987.

40. For the complete text of his statement see, *The Hindu*, March 28, 1987.

41. *The Hindu,* March 20, 1987.

42. *The Hindu,* May 21, 1987.

43. *Indian Express*, January 28, 1987.

44. The India media portrayed the decision as a victory for the pro-Israeli and pro-western lobby. For example, see, *Sunday*, June 21-27, 1987, pp. 25-27.

45. *The Hindu*, March 19, 1987.

46. *Indian Express*, September 23, 1986 and March 5, 1987.

47. *The Hindu*, May 21, 1987.

48. *The Hindu,* July 19, 1987. For similar views see, *Sunday*, June 21, 1987, pp. 21, 26-27.

49. *The Hindu*, March 28, 1987.

50. *Indian Express*, April 25, 1987.

51. For details, see *The Hindu*, May 23, 1987. The top three tennis players being South Indians perhaps explain the higher degree of support for the fixture.

52. For details see, P.R. Kumaraswamy, "Israeli connections to Sri Lanka," *Strategic Analysis*, (New Delhi), February 1987, pp.1341-1355.

53. F. J. Khergamvala, "Arabs indifferent to India playing Israel?", *The Hindu*, May 27, 1987.

54. Quoted in *Sunday*, June 21, 1987, p. 27.

55. *Sunday,* p. 25.

56. "India and Israel."

57. "Leak to media by Jewish leader aborts improvement of India-Israel status," *Middle East Times*, 23-29 July 1988; "Jewish leaders and Solarz meet Gandhi," *India Abroad*, 17 June 1988; M.J. Akbar, "New York diary," *Telegraph* (Calcutta), 12 June 1988; Luswina Joseph, "Solarz gushes over thaw in Indo-Israeli ties," *Pioneer*, 31 January 1992; and Jesse N. Hordes, "Is India rethinking its policy on Israel?" *ADL Bulletin*, Vol. 46, No. 4, April 1989, pp. 3-5.

Jewish Pepper Traders of the Malabar Coast: The Rahabis

by Brian Weinstein

The great success of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) on the southwest coast of India from the mid-seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century depended in part on the Rahabi family, Jews who arrived from Aleppo in the mid-seventeenth century. Three generations of Rahabis were employed by the VOC as chief company merchants, charged with the primary task of purchasing pepper.

The demise of the VOC and the loss of Dutch territorial claims in 1795 marked the end of the Rahabis' economic prominence. They are well remembered for their economic role and even their political role as intermediaries between Dutch and Indian rulers. In addition, they strengthened the Jewish community in south India and the Bombay area and provided an important link between Jews in India, Yemen, and Europe. Because of their prominence, many scholars have written about them, and we know what Ezekiel II looked like because a Dutch portrait of him has survived.

However, sources about this extraordinary family are far from exhausted. Their descendants have archives and Christian sources such as the Syrian Church have not been fully examined. The archives of the King of Travancore, which are located at Kowdiar Palace in Trivandrum, must shed some light on the Rahabis' negotiating skills, and the family also appears in the Tamil Nadu archives, the Kerala archives, and the Jewish archives in Amsterdam. However, the most important resource is the VOC collection at the Algemeen Rijksarchief located in The Hague. In this paper, I want to examine a few documents from the VOC papers, and from the Tamil Nadu State and Kerala State Archives, after explaining the historical background of the Rahabi family.

Why did the Dutch Need the Rahabis?

After the opening of sea routes to Asia at the very end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century, the Dutch, newly freed from Spanish control, saw trade opportunities in Indian spices and textiles. To compete with the Portuguese, British and French, and to deal with Indian traders and political leaders, they needed trustworthy, well informed, permanent local representatives to negotiate the delicate annual contracts for pepper and other spices with a multitude of Indian intermediaries. The Dutch met members of the Rahabi family, observant Jews living among their co-religionists in Jew Town, Cochin, and hired them, eventually giving them very important responsibilities for the Company's welfare.

Although some individuals harbored anti-Jewish feelings, on the whole, the Dutch were open and free of prejudice. They had little time or inclination for religious dogmatism, and Jews were welcome in Dutch territory. The Dutch merchants' and traders' motto must have been "business is business," and they lived under a 1579 law guaranteeing freedom of worship.

According to Jonathan Israel, as Dutch trade expanded in the early 17th century, the Dutch realized that they needed more capital, a better credit system, improved exchange facilities and a better method of gathering information about overseas markets. This meant that their commercial institutions had to be open to everyone: "By 1612, there were three hundred licensed brokers at Amsterdam, ten of whom were Sephardi Jews specializing in levant silks and Ibero-American colonial products, especially sugars."[1] New Christians, who had fled the Iberian Peninsula, were welcomed, and some of them rejoined the Jewish community. Jewish influence in The Netherlands (even though the name of the country changed according to its political status, I shall use this term throughout the paper, for convenience) itself facilitated contact with Jews in India, the Caribbean, and the Americas. The Dutch East Indies Company or VOC, chartered in 1602, accepted Jewish investors, who took advantage of the opportunity. One hundred years later, twenty-five percent of VOC shareholders were Jewish.[2]

Jews also purchased a higher percentage of VOC shipments to the Chamber of Amsterdam than their representation in the population would suggest. They were three percent of the total population at the beginning of the eighteenth century, according to Bloom (p. 122). Between 1700 and 1704, "Jews bought 6.97 percent of the total sales of the Chamber of Amsterdam."[3] They were, by far, the largest buyers of diamonds and other jewels, which other Jews cut and fashioned, but their interest in pepper was small. Early in the eighteenth century, Jews purchased only 1.9 percent of pepper imports.[4]

Those Jews who already resided in southern India, and who knew about Dutch openness in contrast with Portugal's oppressive and cruel policies toward non-Christians, helped the Dutch before they had political control, as seen by individual examples and by examples from the community as a whole. On the west coast, a man referred to in the literature as "the Jew Azzelan/Assalan" introduced the Dutch to the Indian merchants of the great port of Masulipatam in about 1605, so that the Dutch could purchase the cotton goods they needed for their commercial interests in the southeast Asian spice islands. In other words, the Dutch traded Indian textiles, so highly valued in the islands of present-day Indonesia, for spices such as pepper which they sold elsewhere in Asia for other products, eventually trading Chinese silk for Japanese silver. Azzelan/Assalan must have had good relations with the government of Golconda, which used the port of Masulipatam: in 1606, a Dutch trader saw him on board a ship that belonged to the king of Golconda accompanying a consignment of iron to the port.[5] Encouraged by its successes, the VOC set up its headquarters at Pulicat on the Coromandel Coast in 1627 and aggressively sent its agents north to Bengal.[6]

Meanwhile, VOC's Portuguese competitors were well ensconced on the west coast of India and doing their best to exclude other countries and monopolize all trade, particularly in black pepper. The Portuguese built a fort at Cochin right in the middle of the black pepper producing area in 1503, only five years after Vasco da Gama landed on the coast. However, they weakened their position by permanently antagonizing the local Jewish residents, who became enthusiastic allies of the Dutch. The latter were already in Ceylon and were trading with Calicut, north of Cochin. In 1661, the Dutch seized Cranganore and, two years later, they took control of Cochin. Then, with their near monopoly of the spice trade, their profits soared 520 percent from 1661 to 1670, and from "1688 to 1698 it went up to...820 percent; other items yielded about 60 percent profit." [7] In 1795, the Dutch lost their Indian possessions to the British East India Company.

Jews on the Malabar Coast

We know that trade with India has occupied a place in rabbinical consciousness at least since the beginning of the Common Era. The Babylonian Talmud, codified during the fifth century C.E., has forty-five specific references to one Indian product, pepper, plus references to Indian ginger and other items of trade. Pepper was so valuable that the Talmud says that if pepper is part of a deceased man's possessions, it must be divided equally among his sons (*Baba Bathra* 126b). Jews living in the Roman Empire benefited from the Roman demand for pepper and other Indian spices by the first century BCE, when Rome conquered Egypt and took over its trade routes with the east. Upper class Romans "began to spend fortunes for dinners," because these Indian products were so expensive. Roman coins found in India testify to the high prices they paid.[8] According to Federico De Romanis, because of the attractiveness of pepper and pearls from southern India, "it is not by chance that the finds of Roman coins in the Indian subcontinent have preponderantly come from southern India, nor that the most vivid memories of this trade are preserved in Tamil poetry."[9]

Indian sources confirm Roman testimonies. De Romanis cites ancient Tamil documents that tell of trade with the Yavarar, traders from the Roman Empire, bringing gold in exchange for pepper.[10] Romila Thapar speculates about the identity of these Yavarar or Yavanas: "On the Roman side, the trade was in the hands of the Greek and Jewish merchants of Egypt..."[11] Tenth century Jewish scholar Sa-adia Gaon referred to India as an attractive destination for Jewish traders, but he made no reference to any Jewish community permanently established there.

However, according to the Jewish traditions of settlement on the southwest coast of India, actual Jewish settlement dates back about 2,000 years to Roman times. No independent evidence supports this testimony. Evidence shows that

Jews have been present for about 1,000 years, and that the Hindu kingdoms never oppressed Jews.[12] The famous copper plates granting certain rights to Cochin Jewish leader Joseph Rabban probably date from the eleventh century. Benjamin of Tudela reported seeing dark-skinned Jews in southwest India in the twelfth century. Documents from the Cairo Genizah tell us that Jewish traders went to Malabar from Egypt via Yemen from the ninth to the eleventh centuries; a Jewish tomb dating from 1269 has been found; and the Paradesi Synagogue of Cochin was built in 1568.[13] More importantly, a vibrant Jewish community composed mainly of "black" or "Malabari" Jews and of Sephardic "white" or "Paradesi" Jews originally from Yemen, Baghdad and the Ottoman Empire existed on the southwest coast of India by the time the Rahabis settled there. The Rahabis would worship in the Paradesi synagogue, the "foreigner" or "white" synagogue, and live among the Paradesi in Jew Town, Mattancheri, Cochin.

Rahabis Arrive

Author Walter Fischel wrote that he believes the family name, Rahabi, is derived from Rahaba, a city along the Tigris, where the family originated. This probably makes them descendants of Babylonian Jews rather than of Spanish and Portuguese Jewish refugees who arrived in this area only during the early sixteenth century. The Rahabis moved to Aleppo, where they must have learned a lot about trade with eastern countries including India. Aleppo was already an important trading center. It had been the western terminus of the famous silk route between west Asia and China, and it was part of a dynamic overland network that included India. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, in 1517 to be exact, Aleppo came under Ottoman rule, which opened more markets in Anatolia and into Europe. "In Aleppo, four major long-distance routes came together." In the first, Aleppo was the intermediary from Istanbul to Damascus to Medina and Mecca. The second linked Aleppo east to Baghdad "by a well-traveled caravan route, which followed the course of the Euphrates" and on to India. The third connected Aleppo "with Mediterranean Sea routes by way of Iskenderun and Payas." And the fourth encompassed Aleppo's Mediterranean trade with Tripoli.[14]

The Rahabis had to be aware of trade with India while they were in Aleppo, and they may have participated directly or indirectly in trade with India long before they actually settled there. It is even possible that they were spice traders whose business was thwarted when the Portuguese and Dutch arrived on the coast of India and effectively ended the overland trade in spices from India through the Ottoman Empire to Europe.[15] Despite European efforts to monopolize the Indian Ocean trade, this vast expanse of water was a relatively free area and attracted foreigners. Even the Ottoman naval fleet briefly made its presence felt. In short,in Aleppo, a lot of information was available about India.

Why would Jews want to leave Aleppo during the mid-seventeenth century?

For many reasons. In Avigdor Levy's masterful *The Jews of the Ottoman Empire*, he explains that all the traders in the Ottoman empire — Jewish, Christian, and Muslim — were losing business to the European maritime powers such as the Portuguese who had found a route to India. In addition, Jews were beginning to suffer certain disadvantages as Jews. Increasing trade with Europe and the increasing involvement of Christians, such as Greeks and Armenians from the Ottoman Empire, worked to the disadvantage of Jews because Europeans tended to prefer to trade with Ottoman Christians when they were available.[16] Textile production, in which Jews were a significant presence, declined in the face of European competition.[17]

As a whole, the Ottoman Empire had been weakened by wars with the Iranians in the 1620s through the 1630s. Off and on from 1623 through 1656, the Ottoman administration was shaken by internal conflicts. The Jewish community suffered a major crisis as a result of Shabbetai Tzevi's declaration in 1648-49 in Izmir, western Anaatolia, that he was the Messiah. He traveled to Aleppo, where he caused great excitement, in about 1665. After Shabbetai Tzevi's arrest and conversion to Islam in 1666, his most important supporter, Nathan of Gaza, settled for a time in Aleppo, the Rahabis' hometown.[18] The economic and political decline of the Ottoman Empire and effervescence within the empire's Jewish community encouraged Jewish entrepreneurs to depart for lands where they sensed new opportunities.

According to the family history, as written in 1939 by Naphtali Roby (who changed his name from Rahabi), Ezekiel Rahabi left his family in Aleppo and went to Cochin in 1646. He seems to have been a small trader in local merchandise. In 1664, his 18-year-old-son David came from Aleppo, arriving too late to see his father who had died.[19]

In Cochin, David married into the Ashkenazi family. His daughter, Esther, married into the Hallegua family and, after his first wife died, David also married into the Hallegua family. The Halleguas traced their ancestry to Spain where the family name was Halioua; they migrated to the Ottoman Empire (Libya and Syria) in the fifteenth century and moved to India in 1586.[20] The alliance between the Rahabi and Hallegua families, which expanded with the later addition of the Koder family from Baghdad, formed the core of the Paradesi community in the twentieth century.

Following custom, David named his first son, who was born in 1694, after his father, Ezekiel. This alternation of names from grandfather to grandson can be a source of some confusion. As a result, the custom has been to give each one a number. So, David's son Ezekiel is called Ezekiel II to distinguish him from the first Rahabi in India, Ezekiel I. (Ezekiel II is also sometimes called "Hagadol" [the great], to distinguish him from his grandfather.)

David firmly established the family business by winning the trust of both the

Indians and the Dutch. From 1680, he was the chief agent of the VOC. He befriended a very rich Indian merchant and promoted the latter's interests with the Dutch: "In 1695, David Rahabi appeared before the Malabar Council as the attorney of the great Babba Prabhu to settle Babba's outstanding accounts with the Dutch." [21] David also intervened in a dispute within the ruling family by giving money to one side and promoting their claims with the Dutch. VOC archives show the extent of Rahabi's involvement, noting that his actions strengthened the Rahabi family's commercial position. Both the Dutch and the Rajah of Cochin seemed to have had complete confidence in David in anything concerned with the buying and selling of spices. The Rahabis' intimacy with, and dependence upon, Indian rulers had immense advantages, but it also carried disadvantages that contributed to their downfall.

David and his descendants had broader interests, too. They were devoted to the Paradesi Jewish community and made contract with the Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam to obtain Torah scrolls, prayer books, the Talmud, commentaries and other holy items from them. Although the Paradesi prayers generally follow the Sephardic custom, the Paradesis have many prayers and melodies that are particular to them. According to historian J. B. Segal, "the *minhag* of Cochin is generally Sephardi. But...Cochin Jewry has preserved an ancient stratum that reaches back to...its probable origins in Mesopotamia....the pronunciation of Hebrew resembles that of Gaonic Babylonia in Yemen."[22]

David I died in 1726 and his son Ezekiel II (1694 - 1771) led the family and the Jews to new heights during the most successful period of Dutch commerce. Succeeding his father as chief merchant of the VOC, Ezekiel II was the VOC's most important intermediary for almost half a century. He, too, married a member of the Hallegua family, Abraham Hallegua's daughter Rahma, who was born in 1694.

VOC and Pepper

As the Chief Merchant of the VOC at Cochin, the "Joods Koopman" (Jewish merchant), one of Ezekiel II's most important jobs was the purchase of black pepper. The Dutch were already obtaining lower quality pepper and other spices in Sumatra, but with control of Malabar production they would have a monopoly and could, therefore, set the price to suit themselves. Furthermore, shipping costs from Malabar to Europe were obviously lower than shipping costs from Sumatra to Europe.[23] Controlling Malabar had the additional advantage of protecting Dutch interests (e.g. cinnamon) in Ceylon, where the Dutch feared attacks from the Portuguese and English.

Even with a powerful Dutch presence on the Malabar Coast, the effort to monopolize the pepper trade required great skill because of the fractious political systems (four major kingdoms and dozens of smaller autonomous entities) and because of the pepper producers' ability to evade control by secretly shipping pepper overland to the western Coromandel Coast if the Dutch prices did not suit them. The Malayalam-speaking Indians logically preferred free trade; the Dutch noticed that individual pepper traders would resist even their kings' efforts to abide by the purchase prices set in negotiations with Rahabi. In addition to the possibility of circumventing the Dutch and Rahabi by going to the east coast, individual small traders could go to Calicut where the English were buying spices. The Indian traders from Gujarat and the expanding power of the Raja of Travancore, Martanda Varma, made matters worse because they threatened the Dutch monopolies in the 1730s and 1740s.[24] Stiff competition from all sides made the Dutch very dependent on Rahabi's skills. The Dutch were not privy to Rahabi's sources and ways of negotiating but, particularly from the 1750s, "the rajas of Cochin and the VOC were thrown into one another's arms as traders, and both depended for their procurement of pepper in quantity upon the Rehabis [sic], the Jewish merchants of the city, who apparently obtained it either from the same hidden sources of supply the Dutch had long tried to stop, or else from the lands of the Zamorin [King of Calicut] (which, as always, remained a free-trade zone)."[25]

Standard agreements — negotiated by Rahabi — between the Dutch and the Indian rulers provided for Dutch purchase of "all pepper at a fixed price, except one-third which the native chiefs or their merchants should keep for their own trade." [26] The Dutch could not be sure if they were, in fact, receiving two-thirds. The VOC was much better off dealing with Rahabi, an employee of the VOC, than with local rulers directly. For example, he was able to procure pepper for 95 Rupees per candy (a weight measure for black pepper equal to 500 lbs. in 1743),[27] a price "very much below the market value,"[28] so the profits were enormous. In Malabar, "the equivalent of 12,000 to 18,000 sterling would buy...a million pounds of pepper, which would be sold in Europe for the equivalent of 50,000 to 80,000 after deducting wastage."[29] Working for the VOC, Ezekiel Rahabi also purchased cloth, which was very popular in the spice islands of southeast Asia.

Adriaan Moens, Governor of the Malabar Coast, wrote a report for his successor in 1781. It is worth quoting to gain an understanding of the Dutch appreciation for Rahabi: "Ezechiel Rabbi [sic] was formerly almost the only merchant here, at least he alone had the title of Company's merchant, and if anyone, Jew, Canarin or Benyan, took goods from the Company in order to sell them to the dealers, it was done through the channel of Ezechiel or with his consent, so that this old man was almost master of the trade here, which, to tell the plain truth, was not to the Company's interest." He separately noted, "This Jew is at bottom an honest and upright character and had much influence over the native princes and the notables of their kingdoms. It must also be acknowledged that this Ezechiel was often and in various circumstances of service to the Company." [30]

During a visit to the archives in The Netherlands, in Tamil Nadu and in Karala, I found several documents that show Ezekiel II's key role as an intermediary and an advisor to the VOC. He had special contracts to meet new or temporarily increased demands for pepper. Here is an example of the latter from 1733:

> "I, the undersigned, Ezechiel Rhaby [sic: the name is spelled different ways], merchant living in Cochin, declare and I and His Honour Adriaan Maten, Commodore and chief of the coast of Malabar, Canar and Vingural, as well as the political board of the Company, have determined and contracted today to deliver to Fort Wilhelmus...and her servant, from today onwards until August of the next financial year a quantity of 500 candies...good and dry pepper at a price of 13 golden European ducats for each candie of 500 pounds without infringing the yearly delivery. Also promising that everything from Cranganoor and further north will be delivered...to fulfill the contract...[to be] paid under condition that no pepper will be sold to foreign nations, neither English, French nor whatever. If this happens, the Company will confiscate the pepper. The undersigned declares that he understands the contents of this contract, which he has ratified with his usual signature. Contracted and determined at police station in the city of Cochin, the 12th October 1733."

The clerk who copied the contract for the records noted that Rahabi signed "with some Hebrew characters [and] ...that they stand for the name Ezekiel Rhaby. J. Steenhuizen signed for the board [Company]."[31]

In a letter dated 3 February 1737, Ezekiel wrote to the Dutch governor of the Coast of Malabar, Julius Valenthijn Stein van Collenesse, that he had met with the Indian leader of a small community. The latter explained current problems with the pepper trade and depended on Rahabi to solve the problems with Dutch backing. The Indian, referred to in Dutch as Aijnicoettij, said that he had fought to maintain his independence from the Zamorin of Calicut.

The Indian lost his position, but with the help of the Rajah of Cochin and the Dutch, he regained his territories. "This was in the time of His Honor Governor Keetel. He posted guards, yes even up to the river Poecaijda, in order to protect the pepper and to bring all the area from Malpapooiu under the power of the Company so that Pepper could be transported...In return for [Dutch] support Aijnicoettij had always given his support as a sign of appreciation.

"Things changed after the last war. The pepper trade declined. Two years ago Aija Pattare had come to Aijnicoettij to collect pepper in the name of the Company...but the pepper was stolen."

The Indian then asked for protection. Rahabi explained that, according to the Indian, "The Company's trade could not be continued unless the merchants could get protection by keeping the roads guarded and under surveillance. He promised to do everything that is in his power, and that is why he ordered two St. Thomas Christian merchants living in his territory to speak with [Rahabi] about the pepper trade."

Rahabi went to investigate and spoke with the Christian merchants who told him that they could obtain pepper for the Company, but for the Company to maintain its monopoly, which meant it would be paying less than other buyers, the Company needed to exert its power: "They need the power to control so that no other pepper is imported; otherwise the Company would have to raise the price to 16 ducats and to protect the merchants." The merchants want to "do their best for the Company."

The Indians asked the Company to build a storehouse and to supply guards while the Indian leader also would supply some of his own men. He also promised to build a market. He requested more protection at his own home, to staff a guard post on the road used to transport pepper and "to continue the watchmen at other places." The local leader promised to supply some of the materials necessary to build guard posts. Rahabi assured the Indians that the Dutch would do all they could to satisfy their requests. Rahabi signed his report to the Dutch in Hebrew.

Attached to this document is a later intelligence report to the Dutch on pepper production. Rahabi obviously had people all over the area collecting information for him. On 12 March 1736, he sent the VOC a report on pepper that was being transported against the will of the Dutch, to the east or Coromandel Coast where the Dutch had no control. "The whole of Peritalij is like a pepper garden which yearly produces 3,300 candies." He explained the sources of 13,795 candies of pepper.[32] Rahabi also advised the Dutch to begin paying the Indians with gold pagoda coins instead of with fanums, which they are obliged to change into pagodas to purchase items from others. They lose money every time they change or purchase goods from others.[33]

Like his father, Ezekiel II intervened in royal family quarrels by supporting one side or the other, by explaining what was going on to the Dutch and by supplying money to one of the parties. [34] It was no secret that the Rahabis prepared intelligence reports about the King for the VOC. On the first of October 1771, the Governor General of India, residing in Batavia, wrote to the Raja of Cochin complaining about the latter's lack of cooperation: "It was not proper on Your Highness' part to have increased the customs duty; perhaps Your Highness may not be aware that the merchants, especially the Jew Ezechiel, have given us better information about the new tariff of duty."[35]

Another document shows that the Rahabis' relationship with the Dutch was not always perfect. In 1732, only six years after Ezekiel II succeeded his father, one Mr. De Roode accused him of shipping opium and other goods on his own account. Ezekiel II was interrogated: "The Jewish merchant Ezehiel Rabbij has answered that he, directly or indirectly, had not the slightest information about the sending and shipping of the mentioned opium or other contraband goods..." He challenged his accusers to "try to prove this." [36]

The Dutch depended on the Rahabis and other Jews, such as Isaac Sargun, for various diplomatic assignments. For example, the King of Travancore, who was gradually expanding his control, presented a serious threat to Dutch pepper purchases. He demanded much higher prices than the Dutch were accustomed to paying. In the early 1740s, the VOC sent Ezekiel II to negotiate with him, but Ezekiel was not successful.[37] Indians also wrote their complaints to Ezekiel II. In 1763, for example, the king or Zamorin of Calicut, a very powerful person, wrote complaining that the Dutch seized the revenues of territories belonging to him because he owed the VOC some money: "We request Your Honour [Ezekiel Rahabi] to speak with Your Honour [the Dutch governor] to stop the seizure in order to maintain our mutual alliance. The debt we have to the Company will be paid soon... Your Honour is a good person with an intimate knowledge of our affairs. Therefore we request you to do your best by His Honour [the governor] for the continuation of our friendship...and let us know the result." [38]

Another Jew was more famous as a diplomat for the Dutch. Issac Sargun, an independent merchant not in the employ of the VOC, lived in Calicut, then an independent kingdom. His family, like the Rahabis, may have hailed from Syria, but he was born in Constantinople. He probably arrived in South Asia in the early eighteenth century. A very successful trader at Calicut, Sargun served the VOC as a diplomatic intermediary in their dealings with Haydar Alli Khan and Tipu Sultan from 1756 to 1793.[39]

As Ezekiel II became older, the Dutch began to change their strategy of depending on one person to represent their interests, but because of their respect and even affection for Ezekiel II, they did not want to replace him while he was alive. Adriaan Moens wrote, "So it would have been a hard blow to the old man if in order to put a stop to his monopolizing the trade, we had wished to keep him out of it in his old days and in the last moments of his life, and so I had made up my mind to set to work imperceptibly and by degrees. For this reason, I occasionally discoursed with him on this subject, and showed that the trade should be free, and could not be carried on with propriety any longer as before, and that anyone, who should deserve the title of Company's merchant, ought not to buy the Company's goods in parcels, after first having found buyers, for the Company could do business in this way as well itself; but that a merchant ought to buy up the whole cargo, and that no one could trade without running risks." Thus, Ezekiel agreed to train more than one person to replace him eventually.[40] Moens also warned against putting the monopoly on trade into the hands of one ethnic group or another.

Ezekiel, on his side, realized he could not depend exclusively on his employment with the VOC for his financial welfare. Shipping lists from Nagapatnam, which was controlled by the VOC until 1781, show that a "sloop called 'Johana

Catherina' belonging to the Jewish merchant Elias [sic] Rahaby came to Nagapatnam on June 14, 1769, with areca nuts, indigenous lacquer and rosewater. The "Cochin Ghoerab," belonging to the same merchant, was noted to arrive at Nagapatnam in 1779 with areca nuts, incense…and rosewater."[41]

Inevitably Ezekiel II had some dealings with the British without betraying his commitment to the Dutch. The British East India Company knew that they could depend on Rahabi for accurate information. One document from their archives indicates that when they were looking to purchase sandalwood in 1765, the British at Tellicherry wrote to Bombay: "We are sorry to acquaint your Honours with our ill success in attempting to procure Sandal wood at foreign ports as not a stick can possibly be got at Mangalulore, Callicut or Cochin from which latter place Ezekiel Rabbi has informed the Chief none is procurable and by return of the Person sent to inquire privately for this Article we learn the whole of what that Merchant had which was about four hundred /400/ candies had been contracted for by private traders...."[42]

Ezekiel's relations with other Jews were interesting, but the Dutch were sometimes a bit suspicious. For example, the Dutch were always worried that Malabar pepper would slip through their control and would be sold for higher prices to the British or to buyers outside India. Once they interrogated Rahabi about his relations with Yemen. The police, acting on the authority of the governor or Commodore, asked him about his "correspondence with a certain Jewish favorite of the Imam of Mocha [in Yemen]." The latter has regularly informed Rahabi about the prices for pepper in Mocha, and the Dutch want to have that information. He tells them that the price is more than twice as high in Yemen as in India. He also knows the prices in China and in the Sind region further north in the Indian subcontinent.[43]

The connection between the Jews of Malabar and Yemen is very ancient. There is plenty of documentation in the Cairo Geniza collection about trade between Aden and Malabar during the ninth to eleventh centuries, as S.D. Goitein pointed out in his many, very valuable publications.[44] Ranabir Chakravarti of the University of Calcutta has made extensive use of such Indian sources as copper plates and inscriptions on stones, and has found valuable Indian references in the Goitein publications. For example, a Jewish trader refers to an Indian shipowner named Fatanswami or, in "Arabicisation of Sanskrit *Pattanasvami*...The Jewish trade letter of 1139 clearly demonstrates that the *Pattansvami/Fatanswami* in question owned sea-going vessels, plying on the Malabar-Aden run."[45]

No doubt exists that Adenites settled in Cochin, often as brides. They became part of the tiny white or Paradesi community. Cochin had 40 Paradesi families near the end of Ezekiel II's life compared with about 430 Malabar or Black Jew households. Ezekiel II considered the Black Jews to be inauthentic. Rather, they are "gentiles who wanted God's closeness. They have equal rights with us; we do not marry them but live alongside them."[46] His contributions were, therefore, to the Paradesi community: a clock tower for their synagogue, Chinese tiles for the floor and the construction of a small synagogue outside Cochin for ten Jewish families. Despite his antagonism to the Malabari Jews, he was paradoxically sympathetic toward the Bene Israel or Marathi-speaking Jews of the area of Bombay. He also helped the Syrian Christian church.[47]

After the death of Ezekiel II in 1771, the company decided to have more than one chief merchant. They had four — of whom two were Jews, David II (born 1721) and Ephraim Cohen, and two were Indians, Tamil-speaking Chettiars.

David expanded contacts with the Bene Israel of Bombay and supplied them with teachers in order to bring them closer to normative Judaism. He continued the intellectual traditions of his family by writing *Ohel David*, "a Hebrew treatise on the correct calculations for the fixing of the Hebrew calendar...and *Debir*, a commentary on the Hebrew prayer book..."[48] He died in 1791, four years before the end of Dutch control of Cochin.

The Rahabi family's fortunes declined. The British were less interested in Cochin than in Calicut, and David II's successor, his nephew Meyer, went bankrupt. Some details about the bankruptcy of the Rahabi family show their precarious position as intermediaries. In 1801, Meyer's creditors complained in a petition to Lord Clive, the Governor of Madras (under whose authority Cochin was placed), that Meyer had not paid his creditors. The Commissioner at Cochin, J. H. Oliphant, did an investigation and reported back to Fort St. George, the company headquarters at Madras, that Meyer had been paying the interest on loans made to him, but he ran into trouble: "Meyer Rabby [sic] and all the white Jews of Muttoncherry equally amenable to the authority of the Cochin Rajah and the Dutch government, were in late years so ill protected by either that he became discouraged in his commercial enterprises and, burdened with the interest of a heavy debt, he stopped payment and delivered in a Schedule of his property in June 1799..." The schedule showed that Meyer could have repaid his debts, but there was one big problem, as stated in Cochin on July 3, 1801: "this property is within the limits of the Cochin Rajah and amongst other outstanding claims due to Meyer Rabby his Inventory contains one on the Raja exceeding Eighty thousand Rupees..." If the Rajah paid the Rahabis, the latter could repay their own debts, "but the Cochin Rajah is not likely to pay the amount...or to allow of the property which consists in Houses and Grounds within his limits to be disposed of without Government's special interference to that end."[49]

In short, the very intimacy with the Indian ruler that helped the Rahabis establish themselves in Malabar was their undoing. When the Rajah could or would support them, they had advantages in trade, but when the Rajah needed their money, they had no choice but to turn it over to him. Then, they had no leverage on him for the return of their money. The Rahabis' relatives, the Halleguas and Koders, ultimately fared better. They invested in land on which they planted co-

conut trees and the Koders, in particular, established shops and stores that carry their name to this day.

Conclusions

Jewish traders and intermediaries had great advantages over others as long as they monopolized certain skills, such as languages and overseas connections, and as long as they had protection from foreign companies and local rulers. This pattern applied as much to the Rahabis as to the Jewish traders operating out of Egypt in the tenth and eleventh centuries, who were protected by the Fatimid rulers in Egypt and Adenite authorities in Yemen, as Genizah documents show. New rulers and new competition — the Mamluks in Egypt and the British in India — and problems with the local rulers of India — the Maharajah of Travancore and the impecunious Rajah of Cochin — undermined the Jewish advantages.

For a century and a half, the Rahabis shaped the spice trade, particularly pepper. In the end they disappeared, but not without making an important cultural contribution with their profits. These Sephardic Jews will always be an important part of Indian and Dutch history, a key link between Europe and Asia.

Notes

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30. Adriaan Moens, "Memorandum on the Administration of the Coast of Malabar," 18 April 1781, in *Galletti*, pp. 222-223.

31. ARA 2281: ff. 1973-1975.

32. ARA 2389: ff. 849 - 859.

33. ARA 2389: f. 867.

34. ARA 2231: f. 2862.

35. Kerala State Archives: Regional Archives, Ernakulam, "Album of Dutch Records 1704-1805," p. 11. The Dutch caught the King cheating thanks to intelligence supplied by Rahabi. Letter of 1 October 1771 from the Governor General to the King of Cochin, "Album," p. 10.

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38. ARA 3086: f. 307, received by the VOC 28 July 1763.

39. See Walter J. Fischel, "The Jewish Merchant-Diplomat Isaac Surgun and the Dutch-Mysore Conflict 1765-1791," in *Revue des Etudes Juives—Historia Judaica*, Vol. CXXVI, Jan-Mar 1967, No. 1, pp. 27-53. Also see ARA 3695, f. 70.

40. Adriaan Moens, "Memorandum on the Administration of the Coast of Malabar," 18 April 1781, in *Galletti*, pp. 222-223.

41. Information supplied by Dr. Bhaswati Bhattacharya, working in VOC archives, July 2000.

42. Maharashtra State Archives, Secretariat Inward Letter Book, Vol. 19, 1765, p. 259.

43. ARA 2446, f.1053.

44. S.D. Goitein, *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

45. Ranabir Chakravarti, "Nakhudas and Nauvittakas: Ship-Owning Merchants in the West Coast of India (C. AD 1000 - 1500)," in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 43, Part I, February 2000, p. 46.

46. *History of the House*, p.17.

47. See Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India*, (Columbia: University of S. Carolina, 1993), pp. 93-101.

48. Walter J. Fischel, "The Literary Creativity of the Jews of Cochin on the Malabar Coast," in *Jewish Book Annual*, Vol. 28, 1970, p. 27.

49. Tamil Nadu Archives, Public Department, Consultations 1801, 24 July 1801, Vol (Serie) 255, pp. 3089 - 3097.

The Land of Hard Bondage:
The Lost Tribes in India

by Tudor Parfitt

Today the population of India is around a billion people, making it the second most populous nation on earth, after China. The Jewish population of India reached perhaps 30,000 after the Second World War[1] but today is much less. In other words, Jews count for a minuscule fraction of Indians. Why then in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, a novel set mainly in Bombay, should Salman Rushdie use a Jew from Kerala as a figure of baroque, incarnate evil? Why should the equally gifted Amitav Ghosh, in his novel *In an Antique Land*, be fascinated by a twelfth century Jewish merchant, Abraham ben Yiju of Mangalore? Why does a surprising number of Indian literary works deal with Jews?

India has a dazzling array of problems, of problematic situations, real and imagined. It is difficult to imagine that the Jews figure prominently among them. And yet they seem to do so.[2]

Did Westerners impose a Judaic identity on Indians as a feature of colonial intervention, as they did so frequently almost everywhere else in the world?[3] To the majority of western travellers, the multitudes of India do not immediately suggest a monolithic Judaic ancestry. However, historically, comparisons between Indians and Jews have been made with astonishing regularity.

As early as the seventeenth century, publisher and traveller Melchissedec Thevenot (1620-1692) asked François Bernier, a scholar who was in India from 1656-1668, to discover if Jews had lived in Kashmir for a long time. Bernier reported that Jews had once lived there, but that they had converted to Islam. Nonetheless, as he put it:

> "There are many signs of Judaism to be found in this country. On entering the kingdom after crossing the Pire-penjale Mountains, the inhabitants in the frontier villages struck me as resembling Jews. Their countenance and manner and that indescribable peculiarity which enables a traveller to distinguish the inhabitants of different nations all seemed to belong to that ancient people. You are not to ascribe what I say to mere fancy, the Jewish appearance of these villagers having been remarked by our Jesuit Fathers, and by several other Europeans, long before I visited Kachemire. A second sign is the prevalence of the name of Mousa, which means Moses, among the inhabitants of

> this city, notwithstanding that they are Mahometans. A third is the tradition that Solomon visited this country and that it was he who opened a passage for the waters by cutting the mountain of Baramoulé. A fourth is the belief that Moses died in the city of Kachemire, and that his tomb is within a league of it. A fifth may be found in the generally received opinion that the small and extremely ancient edifice seen on one of the high hills was built by Solomon; it is therefore called the 'throne of Solomon' to this day."[4]

M. de la Créquiniere's "Conformity of the Customs of the Indians with the Jews and Other Peoples of Antiquity" (*Conformité des coutumes des Indiens orientaux, avec des Juifs et des autres Peuples de l'Antiquité*), one of the most striking of the early works devoted to comparisons between Jews and Indians, was published in Brussels in 1704. The following year, the translation by John Toland, a well-known historian of philosophy and religion, appeared in London.[5] De la Créquiniere spent a number of years in India and paid particular attention to inland peoples whose traditions had not been overtly affected by contact with outsiders. His intention was not to throw any particular light on Indian society, but rather to "clarify antiquity" and especially to cast light on the Bible.[6] In other words, he wanted to hold Europe's own religious legacy up to the mirror of India to see what it reflected.

At the time, intellectual circles in France often discussed various Jewish customs, including circumcision, which de la Créquiniere wrote about at length in the context of India.[7] He enumerated many other similarities between the Israelites and the Indians: their 'enchantments,' funerals and public buildings, as well as their way of eating locusts, their esteem for the arts, their aversion to wine, their similar behaviour, their ointments, their sweet-scented waters, their way of fighting, their shared love of washing and their extreme cleanliness. In this later point, Indians "may dispute with the most scrupulous Pharisees with whom they agree in many things beside."[8] He concluded:

> "The Indians agreed with the Ancients and particularly with the Jews; but one that would Reason like a Pagan would find a far greater Resemblance between these two Nations...the people of Judea and those who dwell in the remotest Countries of the Indies agree very well in their Temper, their Customs and Manner of Governing. First, both of them Lived in Hard Bondage, to which they were so much the more subject, because they lov'd it and even ador'd their Captivity; I mean that of the Law which was the hardest slavery...the learning of both consists

> only in getting by heart what they say the Gods have done for them; besides, the Books of Morality whose precepts they take care to learn...The Jews and Indians have preserved at least in a great measure the Simplicity of the Primitive Ages of the World; which they make appear in the food, their Cloaths; and their Pleasures; wherein they always seek after that which is most Natural; for they love that most which most readily offers itself to their thoughts and most Naturally gratifies their Fancy...They practise very punctually all the Rules which the Religion they profess prescribes; and considering that no Man can live independently, but is in a manner born for Subjection, they love rather to serve their Gods and submit blindly to their Law than to be Slaves to Caprice and Ambition....they never trouble their heads about Novelties but follow their Traffick or exercise themselves in that Trade which they have learn'd from their Fathers."[9]

This passage suggests that the Indians' passivity, their closeness to nature, their learning by rote, their lack of ambition, their "Simplicity of the Primitive Ages of the World" were similar to what the writer perceived in Jews and that both possessed something close to a natural religion.

The Abbé Dubois, a scholarly Catholic missionary, also made such comparisons. He arrived in India in 1792 and was attached to the Pondicherry mission at first. Then he went to work in the Dekhan and the Madras Presidency until 1823, when he returned to France. The bearded Abbé, who travelled around in native dress, knew classical and colloquial Tamil and spent his years in India studying the lives and customs of the Hindus. His research was written up and his manuscript was handed to an English officer in 1806. It remained unpublished until 1816, when it appeared in London under the title: *Description of the Character, Manners and Customs of the People of India and of their Institutions Religious and Civil.* The Abbé did not believe that Hinduism derived from Judaism, but — like de la Créquiniere — he noted, "Many passages in the Hindu sacred writings recall the rules which the law of Moses laid down for the children of Israel concerning the various kinds of defilements, real and technical...It is, in fact, impossible to deny that there are many striking points of resemblance between Jewish and Hindu customs."[10]

Such comparisons continued. For instance, C.T.E. Rhenius, who was sent to South India in 1913 by the English Church Missionary Society, noted that, "The Vishnu and Siva sects and religious worship exhibit a strong likeness to the Jewish dispensation."[11] Similarly, many perceived the Brahmin caste as having specifically Jewish attributes. As R. Lovett wrote of the Brahmins in his *History of the London Missionary Society 1795-1895*: "Each is an infallible pope in his own sphere. The Brahman is the exclusive and Pharisaic Jew of India."[12]

Explanations of the Brahmins' origin often followed this path. Some said that high-caste Hindus were actually Scythians and, as such, were probable descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel. English writer G. Moore, the author of a book about the Lost Tribes published in 1861, "transcribed" Indian inscriptions into Hebrew to prove his contention about the Lost Tribes. According to Moore, the Lost Tribes had brought Judaism to India intact and Buddhism was a fraudulent development of it.[13] Like others before him, Claudius Buchanan — one-time vice-provost of the college of Fort William in Bengal and a member of the Asiatic Society — was inclined to the fairly popular view that Hinduism had borrowed substantially from Judaism in ancient times. He furiously dismissed suggestions that the opposite might be the case.[14] He held fairly sober views on the issue of the Lost Tribes. For instance, he maintained that "the greater part of the Ten Tribes that now exist are to be found in the countries of their first captivity." Nonetheless, he, too, believed that many of the populations in Afghanistan, Bokhara and Kashmir were of Jewish descent.[15]

Godfrey Higgins (1772-1833) was a key thinker in the evolution of the discourse that linked Jews and India. His chief works were *Horae Sabbaticae* (London, 1826), which examined the origins of the Sabbath; *An Apology for the Life and Character of Mahommed*, London, 1829; T*he Celtic Druids or An Attempt to show that The Druids were the Priests of Oriental Colonies Who Emigrated from India; and were the Introducers of the First or Cadmean System of Letters, and the Builders of Stonehenge, of Carnac, and of Other Cyclopean Works, in Asia and Europe* (London, 1827), and *Anacalypsis — An Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of the Saitic Isis; or an Inquiry into the Origin of Languages, Nations and Religions* (London, 1833-36).[16] Higgins was quite a remarkable man and is still evoked regularly by Theosophists, seekers of the Holy Grail, Lost Tribes enthusiasts, Afro-centrists, Hebrew Israelites and various esoteric sects. He studied law at Cambridge before joining the Volunteer Corps when it seemed that Napoleon would invade England and was promoted to major in the Third West York Militia in 1808. Subsequently appointed Justice of the Peace in the West Riding of Yorkshire, he used his position to expose the appalling treatment of "pauper lunatics." He campaigned for the reform of Parliament, and opposed excessive taxation, the Corn Laws and the exploitation of child labor. But Higgins made his mark as a religious thinker and student of comparative religion. He became a member of the Society of Arts, the British Association for the Advancement of Science and other learned bodies, and devoted himself wholeheartedly to the origin of religious phenomena.

In the preface to the 1829 edition of his book on the Druids, he stated that he was preparing a new work which would review "all the ancient Mythologies of the world, which, however varied and corrupted in recent times, were originally one, and that one founded on principles sublime, beautiful and true." He posited that there were ancient civilizations that acquired superior religious knowledge, much of which has since been lost, and that all religions have a universal origin. He was struck by the "absolute ignorance displayed in the writings of the ancients, of the true nature of their history, their religious mythology and, in short, of everything relating to their antiquities." By contrast, he was convinced that "there was a secret science possessed somewhere, which must have been guarded by the most solemn oaths. And though I may be laughed at by those who inquire not deeply into the origin of things for saying it, yet I cannot help suspecting that there is still a secret doctrine known only in the deep recesses, the crypts, of Thibet, St. Peter's and the Cremlin."[17]

Convinced that Hebrew place names were to be found all over India, Higgins ridiculed the idea "that the old Jewish names of places have been given by the modern Saracens or Turks."[18] To prove this, he observed that when the first Muslim conquerors arrived at Lahore they already found that the name of the Hindu prince defending the city was "Daood or David." [19] However the great cities of India. "Agra, Delhi, Oude, Mundore, etc., which have many of them been much larger than London, can hardly have been built, all of them, by 'the little Jewish mountain tribe (the "Lost Tribes")'." The only way of accounting for them and other features of India was "the supposition that there was in very ancient times one universal superstition, which was carried all over the world by emigrating tribes, and that they were originally from Upper India."[20] The Jews, specifically the Tribe of Judah, thus originated in India: "...the natives of Cashmere as well as those of Afghanistan, pretending to be descended from the Jews, give pedigrees of their kings reigning in their present country up to the sun and the moon, and along with this, they shew you the Temples still standing, built by Solomon, (the) statues of Noah and other Jewish Patriarchs...the traditions of the Afghans tell them that they are descended from the tribe of Ioudi or Yuda, and in this they are right, for it is the tribe of Joudi noticed by Eusebius to have existed before the Son of Jacob in Western Syria was born, the Joudi of Oude, and from which tribe the Western Jews with the Brahmin (Abraham) descended and migrated…"[21] Similarly, "in the valley of Cashmere, on a hill close to the lake, are the ruins of a temple of Solomon. The history states that Solomon, finding the valley all covered with water except this hill, which was an island, opened the passage in the mountains and let most of it out, thus giving to Cashmere its beautiful plains. The temple which is built on the hill is called Tucht Suliman…Forster says, 'Previously to the Mahometan conquest of India, Kashmere was celebrated for the learning of the Brahmins and the magnificent construction of its temple.' Now what am I to make of this? Were these Brahmins Jews, or the Jews Brahmins?"[22]

India and the surrounding countries thus became a rich hunting ground for remote Jewish communities and continue to be so. Behind most speculation on the subject lurks the old idea that the Lost Tribes may have reached India in remote times. This discourse is clearly rooted in medieval thought on the subject. Sir Mandeville, for one, claimed that the Lost Tribes were to be found in mountain valleys in a distant land beyond Cathay "toward the high Ind and toward Bacharia." Specific Lost Tribes were supposed to have spread throughout the surrounding area as well. The American Biblical scholar A. H. Godbey mentions the Kerala tradition that the tribe of Menasseh was sent East by Nebuchadnezzar and that many of them spread through India and the surrounding countries.[23]

Afghanistan was one of the favoured supposed homes of the Lost Tribes. According to Afghani belief, the Afghan people were banished by Nebuchadnezzar into the mountains of Ghur where they maintained a relationship with the Jews of Arabia. When some of the Arabian Jews converted to Islam one of their number — a certain Khaled — wrote to the Afghans and invited them to convert to Islam. A number of Afghan notables arrived in Arabia under a leader who traced his descent back forty-six generations to King Saul. Muhammad greeted him with the deferential title *malik o*r 'king.' At the end of the nineteenth century, the leading families of Afghanistan still claimed descent from the man so honoured by the prophet and the Afghanis' claim to be of Israelite descent is accepted by the majority of Muslim writers as well as by many others.[24] Buchanan noted, "The tribes of the Affghan race are very numerous, and of different castes; and it is probable, that the proportion which is of Jewish descent is not great. The Affghan nations extend on both sides of the India...some tribes have the countenance of the Persian, and some of the Hindoo; and some tribes are evidently of Jewish extraction..." In the case of Bokhara, Buchanan seemed to think there was firmer ground for speculation. With Giles Fletcher's well-known book *The Tartars Or, Ten Tribes* (1609-11) in mind, he observed, "This is the country which Dr. Giles Fletcher who was Envoy of Queen Elizabeth at the Court of Muscovy assigned as the principal residence of the descendants of the Ten Tribes. He argues from their place, from the name of their cities, from their language, which contains Hebrew and Chaldaic words, and from their peculiar rites which are Jewish. Their principal city, Samarkand, is pronounced Samarchian, which Dr. Fletcher thinks, might be a name given by the Israelites after their own Samaria in Palestine." It is worth noting that this is apparently what the Bukharan Jews thought, too: Joseph Wolff, the missionary, Lost Tribes hunter and Jewish convert to Christianity reported, "The Jews in Bokhara are 10,000 in number. The Chief Rabbi assured me that Bokhara is the Habor and Balkh the Halah of II Kings:17:6." Wolff was also told that the tribes of Naphtali, Dan, Zebulun and Asher were still to be found in the heights of the Hindu Cush and that they still knew the *Shma Yisrael.*[25] Wolff also found traces of the Lost Tribes in Afghanistan. "Some Affghauns," he wrote, "claim a descent from Israel. According to them, Affghaun was the nephew of Asaph, the son of Berachia, who built the Temple of Solomon. The descendants of this

Affghaun, being Jews, were carried into Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar, from whence they were removed to the mountains of Ghoree in Affghanistan, but in the time of Mohammed turned Mohammedan."[26] Local experts supported him: a certain Captain Riley, who was, according to Wolff, "the best Arabic scholar in India," looked on the Affghauns as of Jewish descent.[27] Wolff found traces of Israelite descent in Peshawar among the "Kaffre Seeah Poosh" and, as he noted, "Some of the learned Jews of Samarkand are of my opinion"[28] on this point.

By the end of the eighteenth century, this view was widespread. In 1799, Charles Crawford located some of the lost tribes in Afghanistan. Citing "the best Persian historians," he said that some lived among the Tartars, "who boast of their descent from the Jews." He noted that "The Tartars have a town called Jericho" and he understood the name of the town of "Samarkand" to be a corruption of Samaria. In the vicinity of Samarkand, he also found a Mount Zion and a River Jordan. Missionaries had reported back that not only were the inhabitants of these areas Jews but that they had found people in Tartary who spoke a language similar to that of some American Indians — who are, of course, also Lost Tribes.[29]

John Chamberlain, a Baptist missionary in India in the second decade of the nineteenth century, was quite convinced that the Ten Tribes were to be found in the vicinity of Afghanistan. He noted, "I find there are many of the Ten Tribes toward Candahar. Many of the Afghans are undoubtedly of the race of Abraham. One person I saw at Delhi had all the appearance of an Israelite, and on asking him whether he was not a son of Israel, he confessed, 'I am.' They are now become Musulmans; but have not forgotten that their progenitors were the sons of Israel..."[30] In fact, the idea that the Afghans were of Jewish descent was commonplace in Christian circles throughout the nineteenth century. Sir William Jones, who was a Sanskrit scholar and member of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Sir Alexander Barnes and the missionaries Carey and Marshman are all mentioned as espousing this view,[31] which, in turn, gave further credence to the idea.[32]

Some of these Indian and Central Asian "Lost Tribes" were spotted in Europe. In 1833, the *Anglo-Germanic Advertiser* reported, "The Lost Ten Tribes of the Jews have been found in Li Bucharia, some of them attending the last Leipsic fair as shawl manufacturers. They speak in Thibet, the Hebrew language, (and) are Idolaters, but believe in the Messiah and their restoration to Jerusalem; they are supposed to consist of ten millions, keep the Kipour, and do not like white Jews, and call out like the other tribes, 'Hear, O God of Israel, there is but one God,' are circumcised, and have a Reader and Elders."

In 1840, J. Samuel — a Christian missionary who had converted from Judaism — announced in a long pamphlet entitled *An Appeal on Behalf of the Jews Scattered in India, Persia and Arabia,* that a "population of many hundred thousand Jews, descendants of the Twelve Tribes" are just "waiting to be converted"[33] in the area of Afghanistan.

The notion that the Afghans were of Jewish extraction became even more widespread and popular in 1928, when the *Boston Herald* (27 April 1928) noted a controversy caused by "the visit of the King and Queen of Afghanistan to England, over the so-called Jewish origin of the Afghan people...as to the Afghans, quite a number of British officers well acquainted with them are said to be strong believers in the Hebrew theory. And what of the evidence its favour? One thing, which travellers sometimes tell us after investigation on the spot, is that nearly all the Afghan women and many of the men are 'of a distinctly Jewish cast of countenance' and that a large number of them have Jewish-Christian names, such as Ibrahim for Abraham, Ayub for Job, Daoud for David, Ismail for Ishmael, Ishak for Isaac, Yohia for John, Yakub for Jacob and Suleiman for Solomon. The Afghans, moreover, are known to recognise a common code of unwritten law which appears to resemble the old Hebraic law, though it has been modified by Mohammedan ordinances...And eager as are the subjects of the King of Afghanistan to claim Hebrew descent, there is little likelihood of them joining the Zionist movement or swelling the twentieth century migration to the Holy Land."[34] Isaac Ben Zvi, the second president of the State of Israel, also supported identification of the Pathans in Afghanistan and elsewhere as Israelites. Among other things, he noted that all Pathans acknowledge an oral constitution known as *Pushtun-Wally*, which he claimed closely resembles Hebrew law.[35]

Today the Pathans of Western Pakistan and Afghanistan are widely believed to be of Israelite extraction. This belief became even more widespread after a TV documentary by the Emmy award-winning film maker Simcha Jacobovici was shown in the United States in the spring of 2000. *The Jerusalem Report*, a relatively sober Israeli periodical, noted in 1993 that the Pathans are, in many respects, among the more serious Lost Tribes claimants: "Numbering at least 15 million, the Sunni Muslim Pathans live on both sides of the Afghani-Pakastani border (and as far east as Indian Kashmir) where part of the ten tribes are believed to have settled. Indeed, the names of Pathan sub-tribes seem to echo those of the Israelite tribes: Rabani (Reuven), Shinwari (Shimon), Daftani (Naftali), Ashuri (Asher) and Yusuf-sai (sons of Yosef).The mostly illiterate Pathans have a centuries-old tradition of Israelite ancestry, and some still call themselves "Bani Israel," the children of Israel. A retired Pathan diplomat living in the U.S. is translating a book on basic Judaism into Pashtu, the Pathan language. The Amishav group, an Israeli organization dedicated to the finding and rehabilitation of the lost tribes, plans to distribute the book among educated Pathans.

With the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, interest in the Pathans increased overnight.[36] The *Kulanu* list-server carried many communications on the Pathans, most of them sympathetic. In the charged climate after the attacks, many feared for the safety of the Pathans and expressed a kind of fraternal solidarity with them. Jack Zeller, the President of *Kulanu*, observed, "I would hope that a

Kulanu inclination would be to greet every Pathan with sincere warmth, if only to make up for neglect and denial that is not without pain." Another contributor observed, "In spite of the fact that the Pathans are not Jewish in the modern sense of the term, we are still their brothers, and it hurts me deeply that they have joined our most bitter and implacable enemies."

In 1982, Amishav organized an expedition to visit the Pathans and the Kashmiris. One of the delegates was Henry Noach, a young rabbinical student and a descendant of the illustrious Manuel Noah (1785-1851) who had been such a strong supporter of the Israelites in America theory. According to *The Jerusalem Report*, "While visiting the Kashmiri national museum, Noach met its director, Prof. F.M. Hassnain, who asked the young tourist where he was from. Noach...replied that he'd come from Jerusalem looking for traces of the ten tribes. Hassnain became visibly excited. 'I've waited for you for 30 years!' he said, explaining that he'd written a book tracing the Israelite origins of the five million Kashmiri Sunni Muslims." Indeed, the claim to be of Israelite extraction is widespread among Kashmiris, who point to the similarity of place names which appear to reflect Biblical names like Mamre, Pisgah and Mt. Nevo.

The Internet is not deficient in web pages which purport to show historical connections between India and the Jews; India and Jesus, who is alleged to have gone there; the identical nature of Hebrew and Sanskrit, and so forth. On one such website, a certain Gene D. Matlock unwittingly follows in the path of Daniel Defoe who claimed a connection between Hebrew and the languages of the "Subjects of the Great Mogul, that is to say, in that Part of the World we call more properly India."[37] Matlock more specifically believes that Sanskrit is Hebrew and quotes "part of his complete manuscript showing the global influence of ancient India's culture and language." He shows that Judaism started in India and points to the presence of a vast number of Hebrew and Biblical place names scattered throughout India," including "ancient Seuna-Desa (Zion Land) in what is now Maharashtra...the city of Paithan, on the banks of the river Godivari...The Indo-Hebrews named the part of the river passing through Paithan's territory Paithan (Pison, Phison), the city of Satana...According to the legends of the Yadavas (Indo-Hebrews), Satana would have made the folks in Sodom and Gomorah envious." Matlock concludes, "The truth about the origins of the Hebrews has been screaming in our faces for thousands of years, but our benumbed minds have chosen not to hear it."

Jews were not immune to Lost Tribes enthusiasms in the sub-continent. In 1883, Isaac Hayyim Barukh, a young Sephardi Jew armed with a letter to the Sons of Moses, like so many of his predecessors, set off from Tiberias and in 1886 arrived in Calcutta. In an article in a Jewish Judeo-Arabic paper called *Ha-Perah* — a publication of the Indian Baghdadi community — he explained that he was an emissary from the Holy Land and that he was seeking the Sons of

Moses who live beyond the Sambatyon. The same year, he published a further announcement in the paper that in Tibet and on the way to Tibet he had discovered traces of the Sons of Moses. In 1885, he founded an organization, 'the Society of the Founders of the Flag of Israel,' and a couple of short-lived journals in Bombay. The society helped to fund a further mission to find the Sons of Moses but, unfortunately, the British stopped the Jew from Tiberias on the borders of India and forced him to return to Bombay. In a farewell article in *Ha-Perah*, he denounced the British authorities, saying that they had deliberately aborted his mission because for their own inscrutable reasons they wanted "to put off the Redemption of Israel." [38]

Tibet continued to offer scope for speculation. *Israel's Messenger* noted a further theory in 1904, an idea first put forward by American J. D. Eisenstein, that the Luz of the Book of Judges was none other than the Tibetan capital Lhassa. The newspaper commented, "Mr Einstein quotes the Talmud to the following effect: It is the same Luz where Sennacherib ascended but could not disturb it nor could Nebuchadnezzar destroy it. It is the same Luz where the Angel of Death never predominated. 'What did they do with aged? They took them outside of the city walls, where they died.' The city was therefore distinguished for its impregnability and for the longevity, or, rather immortality, of its inhabitants. The former qualification is undoubtedly descriptive of the city of the Dalai Lama."[39]

The Benei Israel community of Western India shared many of these ideas. In 1898, a Bombay Jewish journal noted that the discoveries of a Hungarian Jew, a certain Dr. Stein — an Orientalist who for some time occupied the chair in Sanskrit at the University of Budapest — would, "finally settle the descent of the Afghans from the Ten Tribes. The Afghans themselves believe in the Israelite descent and call themselves Been Israel. Circumcision is said to have existed among the Afghans before their conversion to Mahomedanism in the first century of the Mahomedan era, and they still maintain the old customs prevalent in Israel of yore, such as the punishment of stoning and the obligation to marry a deceased brother's widow. There are many inscriptions in Afghanistan and the surrounding country in the so-called Arian or Bactrian language, which make good sense when transliterated into the Hebrew language and defy interpretation otherwise…."[40] By 1926, this notion had become sufficiently anchored in Jewish thought that Jacques Faitlovitch, the activist for the so-called Black Jews of Ethiopia, the Falashas, tried to persuade the American Pro-Falasha Committee to send a mission to Afghanistan to study the Jewish element in its population.[41]

One of the most obvious candidates for membership in the Lost Tribes was the community of Bene Israel itself. Israel ben Joseph Benjamin (1818-1864) — the Rumanian Jewish traveller, otherwise known as Benjamin the Second (a somewhat self-serving nod in the direction of Benjamin of Tudela, the great twelfth century Jewish traveller) — left a somewhat confused account of the Lost Tribes in India in his well-known book *Eight Years in Asia and Africa from 1846-1855.* The Bene Israel, according to him, otherwise known as the White Jews, lived in the "East Indies since the remotest ages. I have the firm belief and do not consider it difficult to prove, that the Bene-Israel are not only real Jews, but are likewise lineal descendants of the Ten Tribes, who in the time of Hoshea, the last king of Israel, were carried into exile by the Assyrians to Halah, Nabor, the shores of the Ganges, and the cities of the Medes....The river Gozen, mentioned in the Bible, is according to the assertion of the Bene-Israel, no other than the Ganges which flows through India, on the shores of which this tribe dwells in great numbers. The Indian word 'Ganges' contains all the letters of the Hebrew word 'Goshen'...it is known that the Ganges has its rise in Upper Thibet, a country bordering on the kingdom of Cabul....The Jews, who travelled through the desert, have, as it were, left a trace of their passage behind them, for several brethren remained there whose descendants exist to the present day."

According to Benjamin II, the Bene Israel once owned a chronicle that covered their history until the time of their arrival in India. However, on account of, "the many wars they had with Europeans, with regard to their occupation of the country, this chronicle was lost, the Bene Israel being forced always to flee from one province to another." Benjamin also brings the famous Cochin Jewish community into his record of Lost Tribes in India, although he gives no evidence for their origin. He also cites the Malabar Coast community of the Canarinz, who, says Benjamin, "appropriated to themselves a great many Jewish practices."In the same vein, an 1899 article from the *Jewish Chronicle* quoted in *The Bene Israelite* (a Bene Israel Bombay newspaper) noted that in general the Bene Israel indignantly reject the title of 'Jew.' The article observed that the German Jewish orientalist, Dr.Gustav Oppert (1836-1906), who held the chair in Sanskrit at the University of Madras before taking up a teaching post in Berlin in 1894, is of the "opinion that they are survivors of the Lost Ten Tribes, that were made Assyrian captives. Other reasons in support of this belief are the absence till recently of the Torah from their ritual, and that they did not possess the later books of the Hebrew canon."[42] In recent years, the Bene Israel are no longer the focus of international interest as likely claimants to the mantle of the Lost Tribes of Israel. That has passed to another, much larger group known as the Bene Menasheh on the other side of India in the states on the Burma frontier. However, one of the rather unsuspected legacies of colonial intervention in the Indian sub-continent is the continued presence today of a colonial invention — the invention for very specific purposes of a Judaic identity or a Judaic past for a variety of indigenous peoples in the sub-continent. This myth — which has already produced discourses surrounding issues of origin and identity — shows every sign of maintaining its grip on the imagination of Indians.

Notes

1. See A. A. Bhende and R. E. Jhirad, *Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics of Jews in India,* (Mumbai, 1997), p. 3.

2. Yulia Egorova is currently writing a doctoral thesis at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, devoted to the subject of Indian perceptions of Jews.

3. See T. Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: the History of a Myth,* (London, 2002) passim; T. Parfitt and E. Trevisan-Semi, *Judaising Movements Studies in the Margins of Judaism*, (London, 2001) passim.

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6. See M. T. Hodgen, *Early Anthropology in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,* (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 346.

7. One idea was that all the circumcision in the world had started with the Jews. A counter-argument then current had it that the Jews could not have passed the habit of circumcision to Negroes since it was absolutely necessary for the latter to circumcise in order to have children, but de la Créquiniere observed that he himself had seen Negroes in Guinea, America and Asia, and "they are not otherwise made as to these Parts than we are." Others had argued that the Jews, too, needed to circumcise to have children but if so how did they manage for 40 years in the wilderness when they did not circumcise and how about those converts from Judaism who did not circumcise and who had children?

8. The Agreement, pp.132,136-140.

9. *The Agreement,* p.19.

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18. *Anacalypsis*, Vol. 1, p. 438.

19. *Anacalypsis*, Vol. 1, p. 432.

20. *Anacalypsis*, Vol. 1, p. 432.

21. *Anacalypsis*, Vol. 1, p. 740.

22. *Anacalypsis*, Vol. 1. p. 771. On Higgins and his influence on theosophy see L. Shepard 'The "Anacalypsis" of Godfrey Higgins, precursor of H.P.B.," in *Theosophical History* (July, 1985), Vol. 1 No. 3 pp. 46 ff.

23. A. H. Godbey, *The Lost Tribes a Myth—Suggestions toward Rewriting Hebrew History*, (Durham, 1930), p. 372.

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28. *Narrative, i,* p.19.

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36. I. Ben Zvi, *The Exiled and the Redeemed,* (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 216.

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From Japan to Palestine via Colombo with a Hasidic Journalist in 1941

Translation by Marvin Tokayer

Leibel Bein (1892-1966) was a prominent Yiddish journalist in pre-war Warsaw, Poland. He was a Kazinitzer Hassid, a follower of the Kaznitz school of Hassidism, which continued under the leadership of Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro, the rabbi of Piastznah. Bein wrote primarily about matters of Hassidic interest. He was on the staff of the Warsaw newspaper, *Letzte Neyes* (The Latest News). He was also a correspondent for Reuters and the author of *Aish Kodesh*, a religious work.

In 1940, Bein was among the refugees from the Nazis who made their way to Japan. While in Japan, he was invited as a European journalist to meet Japanese dignitaries, including the foreign minister and even Tojo himself.

In 1941, he went via a Japanese ship from Kobe, Japan, to Palestine via China, Singapore, Colombo, South Africa and Madagascar. His articles record his meeting with Bene Israel Jews in Ceylon, and contain possibly the earliest mention of the Bene Manasseh of Burma.

Bein attained distinction as a Yiddish journalist in Palestine and Israel. Throughout his travels, he wrote articles for Yiddish newspapers. His son collected the articles and — after Bein's death in 1966 — selected some of them and had them translated into Hebrew by Mordecai Selifoy. He published the collection privately in Jerusalem in 1968 (5728) as a 190-page book, *Mepinkaso Shel Itonai Hassid* ("From the Notebook of a Hassidic Journalist"). The book contains a photograph of the author, replete with black hat, beard and peot (sidelocks). Apparently his voyage was not all he had expected, and we pick up his narrative on pages 166 to168, where he describes meeting a Burmese Jewish family:

"To the list of disappointments, we can add Burma to the list of places where we had planned to dock on our itinerary, but the ship did not stop there and continued on her voyage. In Singapore, several hundred Indians boarded the ship. They were traveling to Colombo in Ceylon. During my conversation with them, I learned that traveling with them was an assimilated Jewish family from Burma — husband, wife and three children, Deena, Esther and Joseph. The family was traveling to Ceylon where they had huge tea plantations. All of them wore gold bracelets and very expensive jewelry. I attempted to speak to them in Hebrew, but was able to explain only a few isolated words in the holy tongue.

"It was difficult to differentiate any distinction in their facial appearance from the other Indians. In my conversation with them, they told us that they are descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but they reacted with mistrust to our statement that we are Jews. They told us that they had heard of the existence of a Jewish diaspora and also of a Jewish community in the land of Israel, but could not imagine that Jews looked this way. They conveyed greetings from 65 Jewish refugees who accidentally found refuge in Burma, and said that even there, not one local Jew believed that the refugees were actually Jews. The Jews of Burma consider themselves to be typical, authentic Jews and see others as only 'imitations.'

"The Burmese Jews knew that thousands of years ago, one of the ten lost tribes was exiled to Burma — the tribe of Manasseh, child of Joseph. This tribe wandered via Babylonia, Persia and other distant nations until arriving in Burma, where it settled.

"During these thousands of years, the descendents of Manasseh forgot their origins. Some assimilated with the local people and became idolaters and some adopted Buddhism, but a small percentage remained faithful to the ancient Jewish traditions, which protected them from assimilating among the nations.

"The Jew from Burma continued to answer my inquiry concerning ancient customs that fellow tribesmen continue to observe. One very common tradition is the obligation of the man (upon reaching the age of 40) to leave his home and family and to be exiled for 10 years. During this time, he could not be seen by his relatives and friends, and even by his countrymen.

"This directive was enacted by one of the tribal leaders, Joseph Rabban, and it is meticulously observed to this very day. As a direct result of this event, the complete separation of the husband from his environment for a protracted length of time, the woman rules the family and home. The woman deals with business and employment, and the property is registered in her name. The children are registered according to the mother's name, and not according to the father's name. With all these rights, the woman is also responsible for all the debts and for everything in the home.

"A companion from Burma explained that the reason for this revolutionary change in the management of the Jewish family was to protect the Jewish woman and her rights. Rabban, the leader of the Manasseh tribe, was quick to realize after arriving in Burma, that women held a very low status among the Indians and the Chinese. He had to prevent a similar situation from happening among the Jews, so he enacted many rules for the benefit of the Jewish woman. However, in contrast to the benefits granted to the woman, he also set serious boundaries, including that a woman may marry only once in her lifetime, and if her husband dies or she is divorced, then she must remain a widow or divorcee for the remainder of her life.

"The husband acts as housewife, does all the market shopping for the house, cooks and serves the meals, washes dishes, cleans the house and so on.

"The Jew from Burma emphasized that the rules of the Manasseh tribe were very strict, and that severe punishments were meted out to anyone who married a foreign woman. A young man or woman of that tribe who stumbled by intermarrying lost all their property, and were exiled from their community. A former leader of the tribe by the name of Arvari Vanara, enacted these rules and was greatly admired by fellow tribesman.

"My companion believes that if the Manasseh tribe followed these limitations strictly, their numbers would be as great as the sand on the beach. But, the foreign environment overwhelmed these rules and regulations, and there was much intermarriage. Many of the young people of the tribe assimilated with the Indians and this caused an idolatrous influence to enter into their faith."

The Japanese had warned Bein that their ship would be prevented from docking at British ports, and they encountered difficulties at Colombo. Once there, he managed to learn about a community of Bene Israel that lived on the island. He described them on pages 153 to 154 of his book.

"In fact, what the Japanese predicted did, in fact, occur. Even in the port of Colombo, as in the other British ports, the British pilot ordered our ship to anchor five kilometers from the port. The Colombo police assigned a group of policemen to our ship, to protect us, it seems, from the Hindus who were employed to load and offload cargo, so they should not steal our possessions. Since we were prohibited from disembarking, we asked the Indians to bring some food to us on the ship. They did us this favor and brought us food, primarily pineapples, a delicacy of Ceylon, aside from its tea and coffee, but at tenfold the usual price. Nevertheless, we appreciated the favor.

Since we did not have an opportunity to visit Ceylon to meet the local Jewish community, I had a pleasant conversation with one of the policemen. (It is common procedure for a journalist, that if he cannot meet the designated person, he interviews a policeman.) I asked him to tell me about the Jews who reside in Colombo. According to him, he did not see any Jews with a beard or side curls, as I had. In Ceylon, there were but a few wealthy Jews who were engaged in the export of tea and coffee.

"Notwithstanding, in Ceylon there are many Hindus who claim to be Jews. We are referring to a specific group that observes the Sabbath on the seventh day, and received permission from the government to work on Sunday instead of Saturday. The policeman was also a mulatto (a mixture of black and brown whose hair was black and very curly), and is himself a member of the Sabbath-observing group, but he did not know much of their origin or history. He knew that other Hindus who do not observe the Sabbath as their day of rest, called his group 'Jews' as a derogatory term. According to him, those members of the 'Sabbath observers' of Bene Israel descent, had assimilated among the Hindus because they did not observe the Sabbath.

"It became clear to me from my travels in Asia in general, and in India in particular, that there is a need for serious Jewish research of the scattered remnants of Israel, because in all these places there are traces to be found. Whatever had been done until now in this field is not sufficient."

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by
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The Walled City by Esther David. Chennai (Madras): EastWest Books, Manas Imprint, 1997. 204 pp. Indian Rupees 135. Paperback. ISBN 81-86852-00-X. Distributed in the United States by South Asia Books.

Those interested in the Jewish communities of India will welcome the publication of *The Walled City*, a novel centered around the life of a young Jewish girl growing up in the city of Ahmedabad. Much has been written about the Jewish communities of Cochin and Bombay, but works — either fictitious or historical — about the Jews of Ahmedabad are few. David's book also deserves to be read because of her ability to draw us into the thoughts of an adolescent girl who is trying to learn how she might maintain some control over the shape of her future. The novel focuses on her observations about the other women in her family.

When the novel opens, the narrator lives with her mother, Naomi, and her father's joint family in a closely settled section of the old walled city. Naomi must endure the jealousy of her sisters-in-law because she works outside the home while the others perform the household chores. Naomi was traumatized by the suicide of her own mother, who took her life out of desperation when her husband, Naomi's father, moved in with a Hindu woman. Determined to become economically independent under all circumstances, Naomi secured a job, and then found and proposed to her husband-to-be.

Soon after the novel opens, Naomi decides that she and her family must leave her husband's extended family, so they move in with her aged father, who still mourns the wife he drove to suicide. Naomi's daughter sees the price that her mother has paid for her certainty and independence: Naomi now dwells with a father whom she has never forgiven, so she cannot even appreciate how much the sad old man loves his granddaughter and enriches her life. Naomi forces her daughter to conform to her stern ideas of proper behavior and forbids her to participate in any of her school friends' Hindu festivals. They may have moved far beyond the walls of the city, but her mother's walls, constructed of fear, keep her separate from those around her.

Naomi's daughter sees things quite differently, nostalgically recalling her earlier years amid the bustling, busy joint family, where Granny presided over the household. David portrays Granny as an affectionate, big-hearted woman who matured when the Jewish community was still large and robust. She once loved to perform the Sabbath rituals, but her daughter-in-law, Hannah, no longer finds ritual practices fulfilling, so Granny's remaining expression of Jewish identity focuses upon creating barriers between the family and whatever seems non-Jewish, and upon preventing intermarriage. With the Konkani Jewish community shrinking each year, her boundaries are wrought out of fear — just like the strictures that Naomi imposes upon her daughter.

The narrator's Aunt Jerusha has lived quite a different life from the other women in the novel because she chose to go abroad and study medicine. Upon her return, she refuses to wear saris. She spends her free time with her nieces, helping them with their homework. She tells Naomi to allow her daughter to wear smart, well-fitting clothes and to learn to dance, thereby earning her sister-in-law's hatred. Eventually Jerusha moves out of the city to run a hospital elsewhere, taking Granny to live with her. After their departure, the narrator comments, "Despite her fancy clothes, I think Aunty is a very spiritual person. I now realize that God means service to humanity" (p. 113). Yet by the end of the novel, Jerusha is bitter and Granny longs to make *aliyah*.

Throughout the novel, David explores the complex function of walls and other kinds of limits. The narrator wonders whether walls provide protection or just make people inward-looking and fearful. She sees that the physical walls sometimes only echo inner self-created walls. She reflects that the closed courtyard guarded her against alien influences and nurtured "Elderly Granny's Jewishness" (p. 161). Throughout, David maintains the strong sense that one must keep separate from those outside the community, even though the middle generation seems more concerned with keeping themselves apart than with transmitting a sense of the spiritual fullness of Judaism.

In David's world, a complex ambivalence informs parental decisions: those within the community who marry out are cut off from the community. Nonetheless, those same parents fail to present their offspring with positive reasons for being Jewish. The boys grow up and leave the city to attend universities or immigrate to Israel, but neither option is open to the girls. Their parents find it difficult to find grooms for them within the tiny Konkani Jewish community. Higher-status boys from the Baghdadi community look down upon them. Ultimately, the narrator and her cousin care for their parents, the last childbearing generation of Ahmedabad Jews.

Like many members of minority communities, the children in the novel want to enter the culture of the dominant community, a desire that makes their parents feel threatened. The narrator says of Holi, "The happy screams of girls drenched in water, running wildly with color in their hair, somehow seemed sinful to her. If only my mother could open herself to the blaze of colors and the fragrance of pollen in her hair" (p. 38). Hindu girls are presented as freer to express themselves, at least partially because they are groomed to be attractive as brides, whereas the narrator's mother forbids her to wear any clothing that might attract the eyes of men.

The servants provide other viewpoints as a foil to the inward-looking family members. Mohun, the servant to Naomi's father, venerates his employer in his *puja* shrine after the old man dies. A family maidservant, who calls herself Mani or Mumtaz, depending upon the situation in which she finds herself, does not maintain the rigid religious boundaries erected by the family. Thus, the narrator turns to her for knowledge when she is puzzled by her parents' silence or by their refusal to accept change. In the end, however, the desire to avoid change is thwarted. Communal riots in Ahmedabad make it clear that even if the family is determined to wall itself off from the larger society, it is impossible to do so. Eventually, they move beyond the familiar crumbling walls of the city.

The novel contains 45 short, tightly written chapters, each with the clarity and coherence of a short story. A number of stories bear the names of Hindu deities, such as Hanuman, Lakshmi, Vishvakarma and Durga, as if the Hindu culture that the Jewish elders tried to wall out still manages to provide categories through which the narrator processes parts of her life. Esther David, an art historian and critic, as well as a screenwriter, also created the illustrations that accompany the initial page of each chapter, adding another element of representation to the novel.

This novel contains perceptive insights into the complexities of history and social location in Indian religious communities that live in proximity to each other, but maintain a strict social distance from each other. The book subtly explores the dangers of too much repression and self-absorption, as well as the effect that immigration to Israel has when it radically decreases the population of a religious community. This beautifully produced novel would add depth and texture to any course dealing with gender issues and Indian communities in South Asia.

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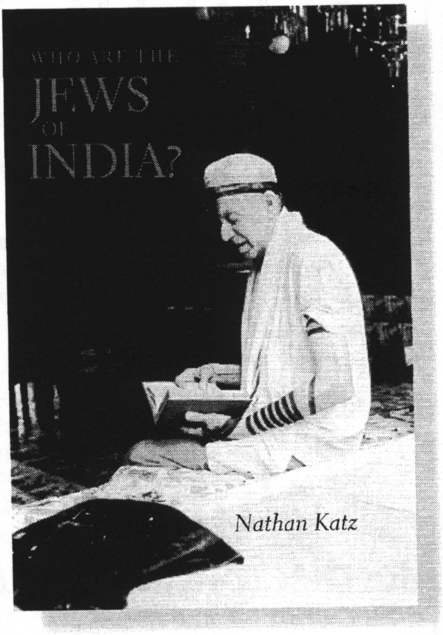

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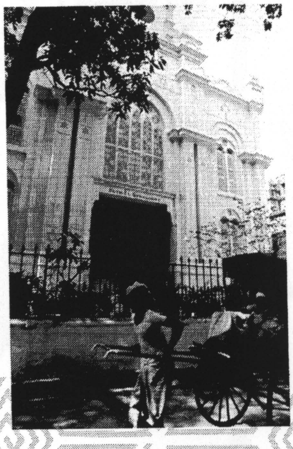

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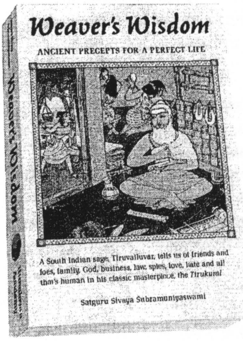
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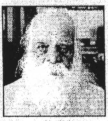

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The region of South Asia—comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka—is home to one quarter of the earth's population and some of its poorest states. Yet South Asia also contains the world's most populous democracy and includes the sixth and seventh declared nuclear weapons states. The region has spawned the great world religions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism.

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New Publication from the Jewish Historical Society of Hong Kong

A Resource Guide on the Social History of the Jews of Hong Kong
by
Dr. Caroline B. Pluss

In its over 150 years' existence, the Jewish Community of Hong Kong has evolved from a small, distant outpost of the Diaspora into the hub of Jewish life in East and southeast Asia. It is most appropriate that an in-depth study of the social history of Hong Kong Jewry has begun at this time. In the process of carrying out this project, Dr. Caroline B. Pluss, D. Phil., Oxon, uncovered, and gathered together, a wide variety of resources that have never before been readily available to researchers in one body of collected materials. Many new, and hitherto not widely known, materials have been unearthed in this process. In the interests of sharing this historical wealth with other scholars and researchers, Dr. Pluss has produced a bibliography which has now been published as an Occasional Paper of the Jewish Historical Society of Hong Kong.

Covering the period from 1842 to 1998, this bibliography lists 216 newspaper & newsletter articles, 62 books & journal articles, 8 items of private correspondence, 22 private collections of documents, and 51 photographs. Copies of all the materials listed are now archived in the Judaica Library, Jewish Community Centre of Hong Kong.

Copies of the *Resource Guide* are available by mail order, at a cost of US$10.00 plus shipping, from:

General Manager
Jewish Community Centre of Hong Kong
Attn: Book Sales
One Robinson Place
70 Robinson Road, Mid-levels
Hong Kong

The final results of Dr. Pluss' research will be published early in the year 2000. It will be entitled *Hong Kong Jewry: A Social History of the Jewish Community of Hong Kong*.

Copies of Leventhal, D. A. & M. W. Leventhal (Eds.), *Faces of the Jewish Experience in China*, Monographs of the Jewish Historical Society of Hong Kong, Volume III (1990), are still available. Cost, US$15.00 plus shipping.

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