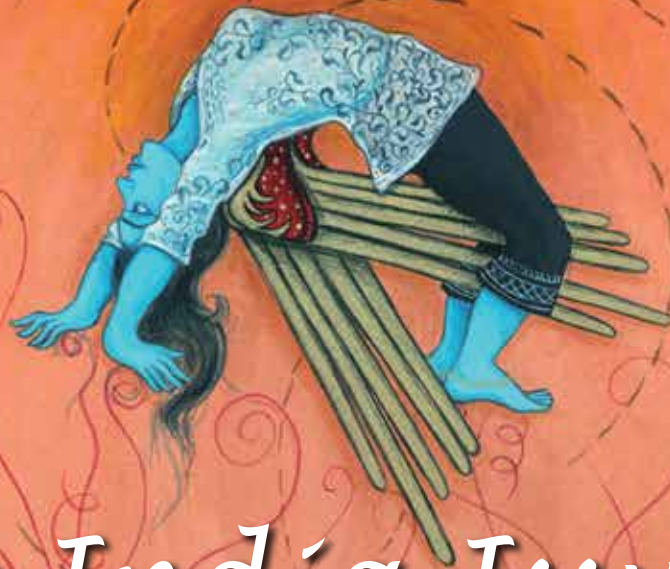


# ASIAN JEWISH LIFE

A JOURNAL OF SPIRIT, SOCIETY AND CULTURE

ISSUE 14 (APRIL 2014)



## *The India Issue*

**The Art of Identity**

Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives

**The Legacy of David Sassoon**

Building a Community Bridge



ISSN 2224-3011  
Key title: Asian Jewish life

# ASIAN JEWISH LIFE



**Asian Jewish Life is a celebration of the diversity of the Jewish experience in Asia as well as of Asian Jewry.**

We publish a quarterly print magazine that is also available online that seeks to:

- Connect the separate pockets of Jewish life throughout the region by creating a contemporary creative outlet to share thoughts, ideas and promote unity through memoirs, poetry, short fiction, historical pieces, book and film reviews, viewpoint articles, artist profiles, photography and graphic art.
- Help preserve the long history that Jewish life has imprinted on the region.
- Break down common stereotypes about where Jews hail from or what we look like.
- Build bridges with local communities by sharing our celebration of Jewish life in the region with the aim of leading to a broader understanding of the richness of the Jewish tradition and culture.
- Help other Jewish non-profit organizations with a regional focus to grow along with us.



**Invest in our vision!  
Make a donation.**

*Asian Jewish Life* is a registered charity in Hong Kong.

*Asian Jewish Life* is also under the fiscal sponsorship of the Center for Jewish Culture and Creativity, a qualified U.S. 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Donations are tax deductible as allowed by law.

For more information, please email us at [giving@asianjewishlife.org](mailto:giving@asianjewishlife.org) or donate online at <http://www.razoo.com/story/Asian-Jewish-Life>



# ASIAN JEWISH LIFE

A JOURNAL OF SPIRIT, SOCIETY AND CULTURE



**Letter from the Editor** 3

## **The Legacy of David Sassoon**

Building a Community Bridge

*by Shalva Weil* 4

## **Spice & Kosher**

Exotic Cuisine of the Cochin Jews

*submitted by Bala Menon* 7

## **Travel Diary**

The Beauty of Traversing Cochin

*by Michael Bender* 11

## **The Paradox of the Popularity of Hitler in India**

*by Navras Jaat Aafreedi* 14

## **This Year in India**

Celebration of Passover in the  
Bene Israel Tradition

*by Nissim Moses* 17

## **The Art of Identity**

Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives

In Conversation with Siona Benjamin

*by Erica Lyons* 20

## **Best of Asian Jewish Life**

A Lesson on Strength in Small Numbers

*by Leah Robinson* 25

## **On Mangoes, Bollywood and Water Buffalo**

Interview with Jenny Feldon

*by Susan Blumberg-Kason* 30

## **Writer's Desk**

A Cup of Tea

*by Sophie Judah* 33

## **Book Reviews**

Identity in Jewish-Indian Middle Grade Fiction

*by Susan Blumberg-Kason* 39

## **The Asian Jewish Life Story**

*by Erica Lyons* 40



Both of the above images were taken in India in 2013.

The top photo shows a traditional oil press still in use by a Jewish family in India. Reference is made to oil pressers in Sophie Judah's story *A Cup Tea* on page 33. Bene Israel tradition tells of that they are descendants of oil pressers who lived in the Galilee in the 2nd century BCE.

The bottom photo shows a handprint made with goat's blood for Pesach to mark Jewish homes. This Bene Israel custom is explained in greater detail in Nissim Moses' article detailing Bene Israel Passover traditions on page 17.

Dear AJL:

Here is my recipe for date charoset made for the Passover Seder. It is a traditional Bene Israel recipe.

One can also use leftover charoset like a spread on matza and it can be eaten as a breakfast meal. Though it tastes best with matza, you can also add a spoonful of charoset to a cup of milk.

## Date Charoset

<b>Preparation</b>	<b>Cook</b>	<b>Ready In</b>
10 minutes	15 - 20 minutes	30 minutes

### **Ingredients**

250 grams Dates (Reddish Brown / Black) pitted  
1 ½ cups water (enough to soak the dates)

### **Directions**

Put the dates and water into a medium sized saucepan and let them soak for 1 hour. To smooth out the paste, puree it in a food processor. Pour back in the pan again and bring to a boil over high heat. Lower the heat. Cover and simmer for 15 minutes, to the desired consistency. Keep in mind that it will thicken slightly more as it cools.

Let the date paste cool to room temperature.

Store the paste in the refrigerator, tightly covered, for up to 4 weeks. For the best flavor, let it warm to room temperature before serving.

Hope you enjoy this!

Regards,

Sinhora Sassoon  
Mumbai, INDIA

## How to reach us:

### **Online**

[www.asianjewishlife.org](http://www.asianjewishlife.org)

### **Mailing Address**

**Asian Jewish Life**  
19/F, Yat Chau Building  
262 Des Voeux Road Central  
Sheung Wan, Hong Kong

### **Email us:**

[info@asianjewishlife.org](mailto:info@asianjewishlife.org)

### **On Facebook:**

[www.facebook.com/AsianJewishLife](http://www.facebook.com/AsianJewishLife)

### **On Twitter:**

at AsianJewishLife

**COPYRIGHT** *Asian Jewish Life* is the sole title published by Asian Jewish Life Ltd. © Copyright 2010. Written material and photographs in the magazine or on the website may not be used or reproduced in any form or in any way without express permission from the editor.

Printed by: Fantasy Printing Ltd. 1/F, Tin Fung Ind. Mansion, 63 Wong Chuk Hang Rd, Hong Kong.

**DISCLAIMER** AJL does not vouch for the *kashrut* of any product in this publication.



Dear Readers:

Welcome to the second *India Issue* of *Asian Jewish Life* (Issue 14). Early on in the process of working on this issue, it became clear to me that a third India Issue will need to follow shortly. There is such a tremendous wealth of information available on Jewish India and so many talented academics and researchers focused on the field of Indo-Judaic Studies.

We have included a great piece by Dr. Shalva Weil entitled *The Legacy of David Sassoon: Building a Community Bridge*. This article explores Weil's understanding of David Sassoon's role in the rapprochement of the Bene Israel and the Baghdadi communities.

Also, though much of this issue is a celebration of Jewish life in India, we have included Navras Jaat Aafreedi's rather sobering explanation for the rise of Nazism and Hitler-worship in India, entitled *The Paradox of the Popularity of Hitler in India*. This piece is an important exploration of this seemingly recent phenomena in India.

On the lighter side, we have a great fictional piece by Sophie Judah, *A Cup of Tea*. This is actually a chapter from a larger, yet unpublished work, *Tales of Grandpa Eli*, also featured in Issue 13. *A Cup of Tea* is, in a rather appropriately timed fashion, set during Passover.

Also taking on the topic of Passover, Nissim Moses details some traditions unique to the Bene Israel in *This Year in India: Celebration of Passover in the Bene Israel Tradition*.

Returning to the literary side of things, we have an inspiring interview by Books Editor Susan Blumberg-Kason. Susan sits down with memoir author Jenny Feldon to discuss her book, *Karma Gone Bad: How I Learned to Love Mangos, Bollywood and Water Buffalo*.

Susan also reviewed two middle grade multicultural novels about girls with both Jewish and Indian roots. *My Basmati Bat Mitzvah* by Paula J. Freedman and *The Whole Story of Half a Girl* by Veera Hiranandani are both recommended reads.

Also exploring themes of multiculturalism and identity is artist Siona Benjamin. I had the pleasure of speaking with Siona about her new exhibition *Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives* and talking about identity with her. I was even lucky enough to be in New York to catch her exhibition at the Flomenhaft Gallery. Siona's work, "Fereshtini", from an earlier collection, *Finding Home*, is featured on the cover of this issue.

Also looking at the beauty of Jewish culture from Cochin, we have Bala Menon who has contributed recipes from *Spice & Kosher - Exotic Cuisine of the Cochin Jews* by Essie Sassoon, Bala Menon and Kenny Salem. *Spice & Kosher* though is much more than a cookbook; it is a walk through history and a snapshot of Jewish life.

Michael Bender also walks through Cochin and talks about how Cochin, known as 'G-d's Own Country', touched him in *The Beauty of Traversing Cochin*.

Last, but most definitely not least, we have our *Best of Asian Jewish Life* feature. This feature first looks at the volunteer experience in the Jewish community of India of one young woman, Leah Robinson. Leah's personal piece is entitled *A Lesson on Strength in Small Numbers*. In this feature we detail three opportunities available through the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to volunteer in India, like Leah.

Thank you again for reading!

*Chag kasher v'same'ach*. Have a kosher and happy Passover from all of us at *Asian Jewish Life*.

Erica Lyons  
Editor-in-Chief



*Asian Jewish Life* is a free quarterly publication designed to share regional Jewish thoughts, ideas and culture and promote unity. It also celebrates our individuality and our diverse backgrounds and customs.

*Asian Jewish Life* is a registered charity in Hong Kong. AJL is also under the fiscal sponsorship of the Center for Jewish Culture and Creativity, a qualified US 501(c)(3) charitable organization.

### Editor-in-Chief

Erica Lyons

### Copy Editors

Joan Marion & Fran Nesson

### Books Editor

Susan Blumberg-Kason

### Photography Editor

Allison Heiliczzer

### Designer

Terry Chow

### Board of Directors

Eli Bitan, Bruce Einhorn,  
Peter Kaminsky, Amy Mines,  
David Zweig



# The Legacy of David Sassoon

## Building a Community Bridge

Photo credit:  
Unknown photographer, mid-19th c.  
(Internet) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

David Sassoon (seated) and his sons

In 1832, David Sassoon (1792-1864) and his family arrived in Bombay (today Mumbai) after fleeing the persecutions of the ruler of Baghdad, Daud Pasha. This wealthy merchantman, who founded a dynasty known as the “Rothschilds of the East”, was also named the Prince of the Exilarch.

David Sassoon began his sojourn in Bombay at 9 Tamarind Street (today non-existent) within the precincts of the city (the Fort walls were destroyed in 1862). He soon moved to Byculla’s bungalow Sans Souci, a former palace named Shin Sangoo, (today Massina Hospital); he also spent the summer months in his second home in Poona (today Pune). Sassoon managed his international enterprises from Bombay, including trade in cotton, jute and most significantly, opium. His commercial intuition and prowess, as well as the scope of his business enterprises, are well documented.

## Relations with the Bene Israel

David Sassoon’s relations with the Jewish community that he discovered when he arrived in Bombay are a sensitive yet important issue. The Bene Israel in India originated in the Konkan, but during the British period, many began to move out of the villages and settle in Bombay. Testimony to that fact was the establishment in 1796 of the first Bene Israel synagogue in Bombay, Shaar Harahamim (the Gate of Mercy Synagogue), consecrated by a Bene Israel officer Samuel Ezekiel Divekar to commemorate his miraculous escape from death at the hands of Tippu Sultan during the Second Anglo-Mysore War. The existence of the synagogue signified the existence of at least ten Bene Israel families in the city, who could make up a minyan (quorum) for prayers.

David Sassoon confronted a community and a synagogue unlike any he had

known in Iraq, Persia, Syria or the Jewish communities steeped in Jewish learning with which he was familiar. The Bene Israel had been cut off from mainstream Judaism for centuries and their knowledge of Jewish halacha (law) was minimal. They observed most of the Jewish festivals, refrained from work on the Sabbath and believed in one God, but they were ignorant of some of the intricacies of the Jewish religion. Since David Sassoon did not travel on the Sabbath (although the Baghdadi Jews later found a halachic (Jewish legal) solution to that by inventing the Shabbat tram card with Rabbinic approval!), David Sassoon quickly set about to establish his own network of synagogues to be led according to the Jewish rites with which he was familiar. At first, he held a prayer hall in his home. In 1861, he built the Magen David (Defender of David) Synagogue in Byculla for members of his community, who streamed in to Bombay as they fled persecution in their

homelands. In 1867, he constructed the Lal Dewal, or Ohel David (Tent of David) red-brick synagogue in Poona, with a famous spire reminiscent of British church architecture, where he would pray during the High Holy Days. In Poona, too, there was a small Bene Israel community, who were mainly army personnel settled there after the British had established army headquarters in Poona in 1856.

While many books and articles have focused on the discriminatory and tense relations between the Baghdadi Jews and the Bene Israel, I will argue that in fact David Sassoon tried to relate to the Bene Israel with equanimity. Many of the tensions in the complicated relationship between the two communities were exacerbated after David Sassoon’s death, particularly during the period of Sir Jacob Sassoon. While David Sassoon did not relate to the Bene Israel in the same way that he treated his fellow Baghdadi coreligionists, I maintain that he definitely tried to look after their religious, occupational and civic needs by integrating the Bene Israel in religious life and in his enterprises, as well as extending them philanthropy as members of the Jewish faith, and as well as fellow citizens of Bombay and Poona. There were numerous strategies of rapprochement.

## Integration in religious life

While most scholars and members of both communities deny the involvement of the Bene Israel in Baghdadi communal life, there were interfaces where the Bene Israel were accepted, even if they were not considered first-class Jews. According to a Christian source, when David Sassoon first arrived in the city, the Baghdadis and the Bene Israel prayed together and cooperated on religious matters. In Bombay, at the beginning both Bene Israel and Baghdadis were buried in the same Jewish cemetery.



Statue of David Sassoon  
Photo credit: Erica Lyons

# Feature

by Shalva Weil

Leaders of both groups, including David Sassoon, petitioned the President and Governor-in-Council of Bombay to care for the Jewish cemetery and the petition was signed in Hebrew and English by the “Arabian” Jews and in Marathi by the “native” Jews. But by 1836, relations between the two communities had soured and members of the Baghdadi community petitioned the British Government to erect a wall in the cemetery between the two communities. Sadly, relations deteriorated over time, and, although there were exceptions, the Baghdadis would generally not include the Bene Israel in their minyan (quorum) as “pure” Jews.

## Economic incorporation

David Sassoon had prospered from the oil, cotton and opium ventures he set up over the Far East, and in particular, from trade with China. He offered employment to scores of Bene Israel, who had settled in Bombay and worked in the mills he had established.

In addition, the David Sassoon Benevolent Institute, later the Sassoon School, which did not want to accept Bene Israel pupils, provided employment for Bene Israel teachers. It is significant that from 1865 the headmaster of the school was an educated Bene Israel, Joseph Ezekiel Rajpurkar (1834-1905), who five years earlier became a Hebrew teacher, in the school, with David Sassoon’s blessing.

## Philanthropy

Certain funds were explicitly funneled to the poorer Bene Israel community. For example, the Sassoon Hospital, built in Pune from a contribution of Rs.213,000 given by David Sassoon towards its endowment in 1863, and completed after his death in 1867, reserved special places for the Bene Israel. The first time that the Sassoons directly helped a Bene



Photo credit: Erica Lyons

Statue of David Sassoon

Israel institution, however, was after David Sassoon’s death in 1882, when charitable funds were made available to the Bene Israel Israelite School.

## Civic benefits

David Sassoon established huge philanthropic funds for the beautification and development of the city of Bombay and Poona from which the Bene Israel, like other citizens, benefited. These included the David Sassoon Mechanics’ Institute (1847), which evolved into the David Sassoon Library and Reading Room (1938), the David Sassoon Industrial and Reformatory Institution, David Sassoon Elderly and Destitute Persons Home or the David Sassoon Infirm Asylum (1863) in Poona (today the Nivara Old Age Home), the Clock Tower at the Victoria Gardens (today Veermata Jijmata Udyan), and the Statue of the Prince Consort at the Victoria and Albert Museum (today the Bhau Daji Lad Museum) complete with Hebrew inscription (1861). The Bene Israel, as municipal members of Bombay and Poona, could only be proud of the salience of Judaism and Hebrew in their city.

## Sassoon’s Legacy of Rapprochement

While it is absolutely true that relations

between the Baghdadi Jews and the Bene Israel in Bombay (and Poona) were not ideal, David Sassoon utilized particular strategies of rapprochement to endear himself to the Bene Israel. Sometimes, these gestures have been misinterpreted or are unknown. Although subsequent generations of the Sassoon family and the Baghdadi Jews may have been responsible for the deterioration of relations between the two communities, I would suggest that David Sassoon had aimed at harmonious relations with the more numerous and ‘native’ Jewish community of Bene Israel. ✎

Dr. Shalva Weil is Senior Researcher at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel and editor of several books, including (with Katz N., Chakravarti, R., and Sinha, B. M.) *Indo-Judaic Studies in the Twenty-First Century: A Perspective from the Margin* (Palgrave-Macmillan Press), 2007, (with Shulman, D.) *Karmic Passages: Israeli Scholarship on India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press), 2008 and *India’s Jewish Heritage: Ritual, Art and Life-Cycle, Mumbai*: Marg Publications [first published in 2002; second reprint 2004, re-published 2009].





©Avesun-Fotolia.com

# Spice & Kosher: Exotic Cuisine of the Cochin Jews

These recipes are all from *Spice & Kosher: Exotic Cuisine of the Cochin Jews* by Essie Sassoon, Bala Menon and Kenny Salem. *Spice & Kosher* is not a mere cookbook. It tells the story of the Jews of Cochin, walks through their history and captures their unique culture through their food.

“It is often said that our foods link our present lives with that of our ancestors, and it is not easy to explain why the smells of childhood last a lifetime...”



# Lo Mein to Laksa

Submitted by: Bala Menon

## Polappam & Chikkiyathu

The *polappam* is a type of crepe made with black gram and semolina and is a breakfast dish unique to the Jews of Cochin.

Makes 20 polappams.

### For Polappam:

- 3 green chillies chopped fine
- 1 small sprig curry leaves
- 2 1/2" piece of ginger, chopped
- 1/2 tsp turmeric
- 4 tbsp coconut oil
- Salt to taste

### For Chikkiyathu:

- 1 cup black gram, soaked for about 8 hours and then processed in a blender
- 3 cups of semolina
- Two cups of pumpkin, skin removed and cut into cubes
- 2 large onions
- 1 cup grated coconut
- 1 tsp mustard seeds

Steam the semolina and process in blender along with the black gram, with water to get a batter-like consistency. Add salt and keep covered overnight.

Heat 2 tbsp oil in a skillet and fry the onions until they are translucent and begin to brown. Add the chillies, ginger and turmeric. Mix well. Add the pumpkin pieces with 1/4 cup water; cover and cook for 10 to 15 minutes. Add the grated coconut.

In another pan, heat the remaining oil and pop the mustard seeds. Add curry leaves and sizzle for 2 minutes. Pour over the pumpkin. Stir.

In an iron griddle, use the batter to make crepes similar to the dosa.

Serve *polappam* with the *chikkiyathu*.

Optional: Hard, dried tuna (known as *Massa* in Cochin and available in plenty) can be grated and fried in coconut oil. This can be added to the cooked pumpkin, before taking pan off the stove. It adds an additional layer of flavor.



©Paulista-Fotolia.com







## Chukund

In Kerala, these tiny baked/fried rice balls were a popular treat for children during the festival of Shavout.

Makes 80-100 balls.

- 2 cups grated coconut
- 1 1/4 cup sugar
- 1 1/2 cups rice
- Coconut oil for frying (optional)

Soak rice in cold water for about an hour. Drain. Grind the rice to a coarse flour. Dry roast the flour in a deep saucepan. Transfer to bowl. Stir-fry the grated coconut. In another pan, on low heat, melt the sugar with a little water. (Don't let it caramelize). Let cool. Add coconut and rice flour to the syrup and mix well. Roll tiny pellet-size balls from the mixture. Fry the pellets in coconut oil in a wok or steam them in a suitable pot.





# Lo Mein to Laksa

Submitted by: Bala Menon

## Chicken Pastel

The *pastel* is an ancient Cochin Jewish dish, mentioned in Dutch documents from Kerala in the 17th century. In modern Israel, a similar dish is called bureka, but made with cheese filling.

Makes 40 servings.

- 2 medium onions, chopped
- 10 oz cabbage, chopped
- 5 whole mushrooms, chopped
- 1 potato, chopped
- 2 carrots, chopped
- 2 tbsp vinegar
- 1/2 tsp ground black pepper
- 1/4 tsp ground turmeric
- 2 tsp soup mix
- 2 oz cashew nuts, chopped
- 1 boiled egg, chopped
- 1 raw egg
- 1 package egg roll wraps
- Cooking oil
- Dough: 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 4 tbsp margarine, melted
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- 1 tbsp vegetable oil
- Salt to taste

Whisk 2 cups flour and the salt together in a bowl. In a separate bowl, combine margarine, oil, egg and 3/4 cup water. Slowly pour the egg and oil mixture into the bowl with the flour, stirring to prevent clumping. Add flour as needed until it forms a soft dough.

Heat the oil in a large pan. Add the chicken and cook over medium heat until the pink disappears. Add onions, carrot, potato, peppers and spices. Cook for about 30 minutes. Stir in vinegar and chopped coriander in the last few minutes of cooking. Let cool completely.

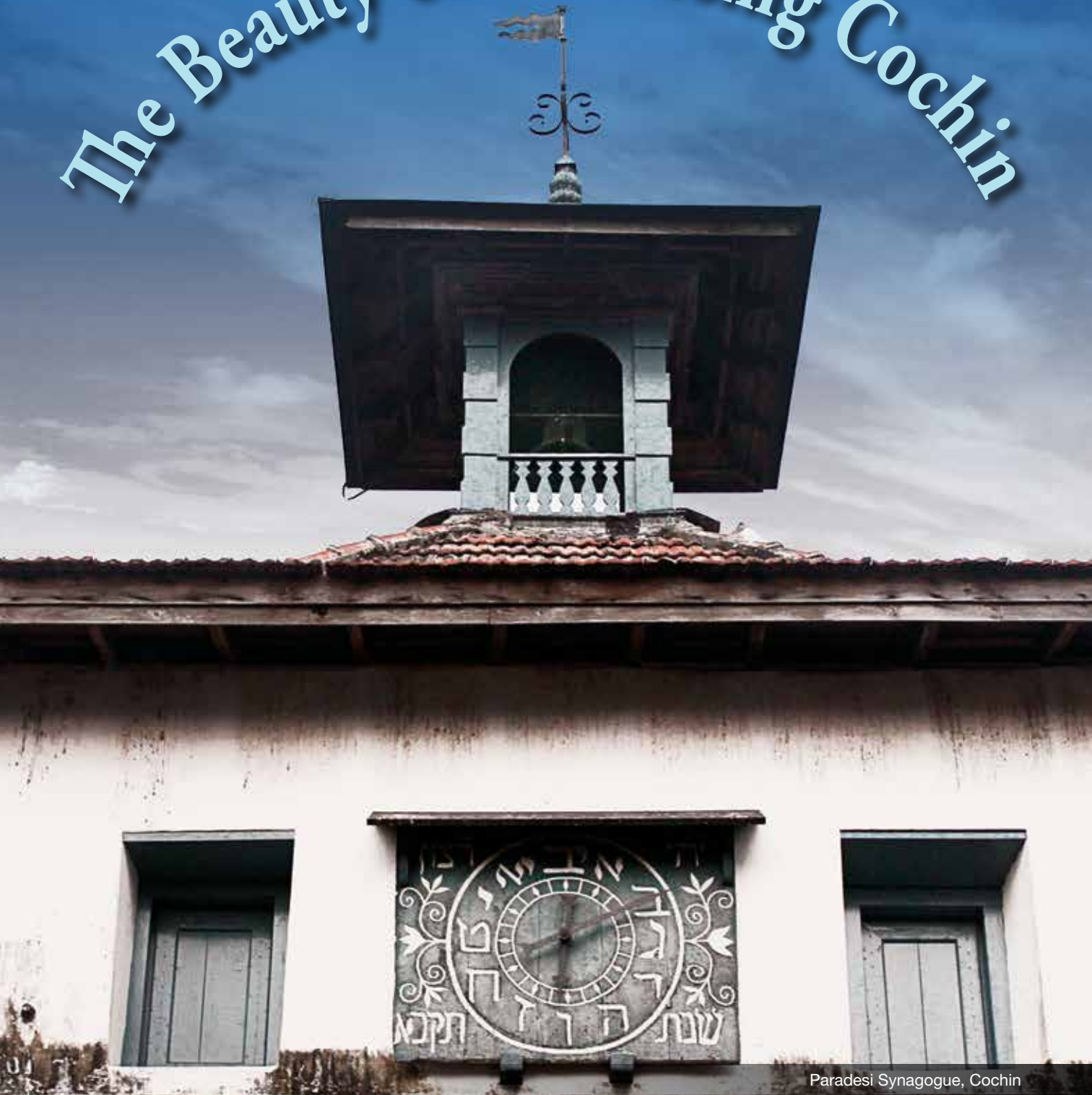
Divide the dough into thirds. Roll it out thinly one at a time. Cut out circles, each the size of a coffee mug. Place a heaped teaspoon of filling on half of each circle, fold, to make half-moons, and crimp to seal. Heat the oil. Deep-fry the *pastels* until light brown, flipping once. Drain on paper towels. ✠



These recipes were taken, with permission, from *Spice & Kasher - Exotic Cuisine of the Cochin Jews*, Essie Sassoon, Bala Menon and Kenny Salem, Tamarind Tree Books Inc. (June 14, 2013), 222 pages. *Spice & Kasher* is readily available online, including on Amazon.



# The Beauty of Traversing Cochin



Paradesi Synagogue, Cochin

# Travel Diary

by Michael Bender

It was a quiescent, misty day in the early part of June. I had just arrived in Fort Cochin in the southwest Indian state of Kerala. The very recent onset of the monsoon season here had rendered this popular, centuries-old tourist destination a more peaceful, unperturbed shell of what it had been just a month or two earlier. Wet and lazy afternoons were the norm during my time in a part of India universally known as 'G-d's Own Country' and for good reason. It's not just because of the incredible natural beauty of its tropic landscape or the indelible charm and happiness of its people, both of which hold true in every respect. I found the label 'G-d's Own Country' to be fitting for another reason, a reason that puts almost two-thousand years of Jewish life and experience into context.

As a part of my own research at the time on Hindu-Jewish relations, it became an imperative to visit the location of India's oldest existing Jewish community in Cochin, Kerala. With records of Jewish settlement dating back shortly after the fall of the second Temple in 70 CE and other ancient sources claiming dates that precede this by hundreds of years, the Jewish community that would eventually settle in Cochin would have a societal and historical experience unlike almost any other Jews. It is an experience immortalized in the sites that I perceived as I made my way to the section of this city known as 'Jew Town'.

I traversed the town along paths aptly named 'Jew Street', 'Jew Town Road' and 'Synagogue Lane'. The opulent smells of cinnamon, vanilla and nutmeg fill the air in this land known and coveted for centuries due to the abundance of exotic spices that grow here. Among these Judaic-inspired streets, complete with symbols of six-pointed stars, Hebrew characters and even a Jewish cemetery, is its center-piece-



Torahs in the Paradesi Synagogue



Street signs in Cochin

Paradesi Synagogue. This synagogue, built in the 16th century by persecuted Jews originally fleeing the Inquisition, is the highlight of Jewish existence here and one of the few remaining memories of this once thriving community which stands at less than ten today.

I wandered the area thinking about the unbelievable history and experience

of the Jews of Cochin who, unlike most Jewish communities in the world today, were able to live and flourish for two-thousand years without threat of persecution by their Indian rulers. As I put this into perspective, trying to take in this undeniably unique experience in the story of the Jewish people, I became keenly aware of something that, despite all my studies, knowledge



and experience regarding India and its Jews, had never really been apparent to me. The synagogue and the rest of 'Jew Town' sat immersed in a pluralistic society of people representing many of the world's great religions. Mosques, Protestant and Catholic Churches, Jain and Hindu Temples: they were all here, they were all co-existing peacefully. For centuries the Jewish people lived and flourished in this community without issue or conflict. They interacted, traded, and befriended the people of all these great faiths. In return they were befriended, they were respected and they were protected by their neighbors, rulers and friends.

I paused for a moment to take it all in. This is a place where a Jewish cemetery shares a common wall with a neighboring Hindu temple. It is a place where a Muslim man invites me, a stranger, foreigner and Jew, into his home for tea with his family as a sheer gesture of kindness and hospitality. This is a place where the plurality of religions and G-d's peoples had become a boon to the Jewish community. It is this historical experience of the Jewish people, the unprecedented integration and success of its pluralistic religious society, and my own contemporary experience in Cochin that makes this place unique, not just for the Jewish community and its people, but for the world as a whole. For nowhere else have so many of G-d's people and G-d's different communities lived together for so long in such harmony. It was then that I knew that this truly was 'G-d's Own Country'. ✡

Michael Bender is currently with the Department of International Relations and Politics at Florida International University where he is a PhD candidate.



Street signs in Cochin



Gates of the Jewish cemetery in Cochin

Photography by Erica Lyons





## The Paradox of the Popularity of Hitler in India

It is a paradox that in a country that has never really known anti-Semitism, and where it remains largely unknown even today, Hitler is gaining popularity. Hitler's autobiography has increased in sales to the tune of fifteen percent in just a decade. The phenomena can also be seen in the release of films in various Indian languages with the eponymous protagonist with the namesake of Hitler. Similarly, the name Aryan has recently become popular as a first name among

Indians and there is a growing demand for Hitler memorabilia.

Although Jews have lived in India for at least twelve centuries, most of the Indians are ignorant of their presence among them. This can be explained by the small number of Jews in India today. There are less than 5000 in a total population of 1.3 billion (0.0004 per cent of the total population of India).

Another interesting fact to note is that

despite their long presence in the country, India doesn't teach about the Jews, whereas in the neighboring country of China, Jewish Studies are flourishing at the university level.

Although the University Grants Commission of India prominently mentions Nazism in its syllabus for the National Eligibility Test for Lecturerships in History, the word Holocaust isn't mentioned. Some believe the partition of the Indian subcontinent has been



as tragic an episode of history as the Holocaust has been for the Jews, yet Indian Partition Studies also doesn't exist as an academic discipline in India, the way Holocaust Studies exist in the West. There seems to be a certain degree of reluctance in Indian academia and cinema to deal with issues perceived to be communally sensitive.

*Hitler's Mein Kampf* was translated by the Nazis in all major Indian languages, and is still readily available today across India for less than a dollar, while there is almost nothing available on the Holocaust in Indian languages. The only Hindi (the most widely spoken language in India) book on the Holocaust is a thin collection, *Frequently Asked Questions about the Holocaust*, published by Yad Vashem.

Another paradox is that the very people who have been the most vocal advocates of Indo-Israel relations are the ones who have traditionally admired the Nazis. This has been mediated by their attitude towards Muslims, but it is not only the Hindu Right Wing that should be held responsible for the absence of Jewish and Holocaust Studies in India. Indian politicians fear that the introduction of Jewish and Holocaust Studies might adversely affect Muslim support. They are aware of the anti-Semitism that exists in a section of the Muslim population. This group happens to be the most vocal among them. They express their anti-Semitism in various forms, often disguised as anti-Israelism. They also deny that the Holocaust ever took place or raise doubts about its magnitude and scale. Even if they do acknowledge it as a historical fact, any serious reference to the Holocaust is often accompanied by a comparison with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. It is worth noting how during the post 9/11 American led military strikes against Iraq,

Israel's flag was drawn in addition to that of the United States by Shi'a Muslims in Lucknow (a major centre of Muslim scholarship) on the floor of the entrance to their most prominent monument there, the Bara Imambara. This also happens to be the most popular tourist attraction of the city, so nobody could enter it without trampling on the flags.

Furthermore, Muslim opinion has carried great weight in matters of foreign policy in India. This is seen in India's refusal to have diplomatic relations with Israel for the first four decades of Israel's existence despite the absence of any dispute or conflict with it. During this period, India continued to have relations with both China and Pakistan in spite of the wars India fought against them.

#### **How Did These Opinions Rise to be Accepted?**

To understand how these opinions became accepted requires a look at history. Nazi propagandists were active in India from 1933 to 1939. There were several newspapers that carried direct Nazi propaganda. These included: *Spirit of the Times*, *Salar-e-Hind*, *Princely India*, *Karnataka Bandhu*, *Lokhandi Morcha and Trikal*. What is paradoxical is that the propagandists tried to influence both the Hindus and the Muslims. They raised the issue of Palestine to win Muslim support. To win Hindu support, they highlighted the Nazi symbol of the swastika and the Aryan race theory because they were aware that the swastika is an ancient Hindu symbol and the Northern Indians consider themselves Aryan. They also tried to impress upon them that India belonged to them alone and not to the Muslims and other communities such as Germany belonged only to Germans and not to the Jews, who were outsiders. The Nazis operated in India through various cultural and business organizations, both

Indian and European, which included International Railway Information Bureau of Madras, Bombay Press Service, Indo-German News Exchange of New Delhi, Aligarh University German Society, Bhattachar Movement in Bengal (Bhattachari), German Institute of Bombay and certain branches of Hindu Mahasabha in Maharashtra.

Even India's response to the Holocaust was determined by Muslim opinion. Conscious of the Muslim opposition to the grant of refuge to Jews from Nazi Europe, the British Government of India made it mandatory for Jews seeking asylum to produce proof of guaranteed employment in India before being allowed entry, resulting in a sharp decrease in the number of people able to enter.

Despite this, shortly after Prime Minister Nehru's return from Europe, he sponsored a resolution in support of the Jewish refugees. It was however rejected by then Congress President Subhas Chandra Bose who four years later, in 1942, was reported by the *Jewish Chronicle* of London as having published an article in *Angriff*, a journal of Goebbels, saying that "anti-Semitism should become part of the Indian liberation movement because the Jews had helped the British to exploit Indians (21 August 1942)." Although by then Bose had left the Congress, he continued to command a strong influence in the party. Nehru's proposal was also opposed by the Hindu Right. The fact that Bose met Hitler and tried to win his support in raising an army against the British in India often deludes the Indians into believing that Hitler actually made a significant contribution to India's struggle for freedom.

This absence of Holocaust Studies in India makes it only easier for the Hindu Right Wing to project Hitler as a

hero among the Indian masses hungry for strong leadership. It also sets an atmosphere conducive for them to adopt Nazi-like measures against Muslim and Christian minorities in India if they were ever to form a government with full majority.

Leaders of militant Hinduism have time and again expressed their admiration for authoritarian leaders like Hitler and Mussolini and for the fascist model of society. This influence lingers on through the present day as portrayed by speeches and statements given by the founder of India's right-wing Marathi party, Bal Thakeray and his nephew Raj Thakeray among many others. Interestingly Bal Thakeray's last rites were performed with full state honors in India, a country that prides itself on being the world's largest democracy.

One of the leaders of the Hindu extremist group Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS), Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar expressed his approval of Nazi policy towards the Jews, in the following words: "To keep up the purity of the Race and its culture, Germany shocked the world by her purging the country of the Semitic Race – the Jews. Race pride at its highest has been manifested here. Germany has also shown how well nigh impossible it is for races and cultures, having differences going to the root, to be assimilated into one united whole, a good lesson for us in Hindustan to learn and profit by."

Historically, the Hindu nationalists not only admired the Nazis but were also in direct contact with them. The first Hindu nationalist to come in direct contact with the fascists and their leader Mussolini, an ally of Hitler, was an RSS leader, B. S. Moonje, well acknowledged as Hedgewar's mentor (founding supreme leader of RSS). Between February and March 1931, on his way back from the round table conference, Moonje made

a tour of Europe with a long stopover in Italy, during which he met Mussolini. His thirteen-page account of the trip and the meeting is available at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in New Delhi. During his stay in Italy he visited the Balilla and Avangardisti organizations, the keystone of the fascist system of indoctrination of the youth, strikingly similar to the RSS. The RSS and other Hindu fundamentalist organizations and parties project the structure of the RSS as the result of Hedgewar's vision and work, "however Moonje played a crucial role in molding the RSS along Italian (fascist) lines," as Marzia Casolari, author of the research paper "Hindutva's Foreign Tie-ups in the 1930s: Archival Evidence" found. She points out that as soon as Moonje returned from Italy, he started working for the militant reorganization of Hindu society in Maharashtra on the lines of the work done by the Italian organizations Balilla and Avangardisti.

Soon fascism became so popular among the Hindu nationalists that a conference on it was organized on January 31, 1934, which was presided over by Hedgewar. An intelligence report published in 1933 warned that: "It is perhaps no exaggeration to assert that the Sangh hopes to be in future India what the 'Fascisti' are to Italy and the 'Nazis' to Germany." (NAI, Home Poll Department, 88/33, 1933). Savarkar openly defended the Nazis and the Fascists. As the president of RSS, Savarkar's rhetoric against Muslims became increasingly radical, distinctly unpleasant and continuously referred to the Nazi treatment of Jews as a role model. In a speech he made on October 14, 1938, he suggested the following solution for the Muslim problem in India: "A Nation is formed by a majority living therein. What did the Jews do in Germany? They being in minority were driven out from Germany." (MSA, Home Special Department, 60 D(g) Pt III, 1938,

Translation of the verbatim speech made by VD Savarkar at Malegaon on October 14, 1938).

## A Thread Has Been Woven

What emerges before us is a thread, established in history, in which the fear of losing the crucial Muslim support keeps the Indian politicians from standing up against anti-Semitism and from introducing Jewish and Holocaust Studies in India. But this, as shown, is not entirely unique to the Muslims for it is seen in the Hindu right wing as well. A development that has been simultaneous to the rise in Hitler's popularity in India is the decline in the popularity of M. K. Gandhi among the youth. It may not be correct to see it as a mere coincidence for Gandhi always saw Hitler as his antithesis. It is this very Hindu Right Wing that killed Gandhi.

This absence of Jewish and Holocaust Studies overall makes the general Indian population largely ignorant and therefore vulnerable to propaganda unleashed by the Hindu Right, the Islamophobes in India. They continue to project Hitler as a hero with the aim of developing an acceptance for Nazi-like practices that they would like to adopt, with regard to Muslims, if they ever gain political power with absolute majority.

A minority opinion alone however is seemingly capable of carrying very great weight. ✎

Dr. Navras Jaat Aafreedi is an Indo-Judaic Studies Scholar and Muslim-Jewish Relations Activist. He is an Assistant Professor at the School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Gautam Buddha University, India. He can be reached at aafreedi@gmail.com.





# This Year in India: Celebration of Passover in the Bene Israel Tradition



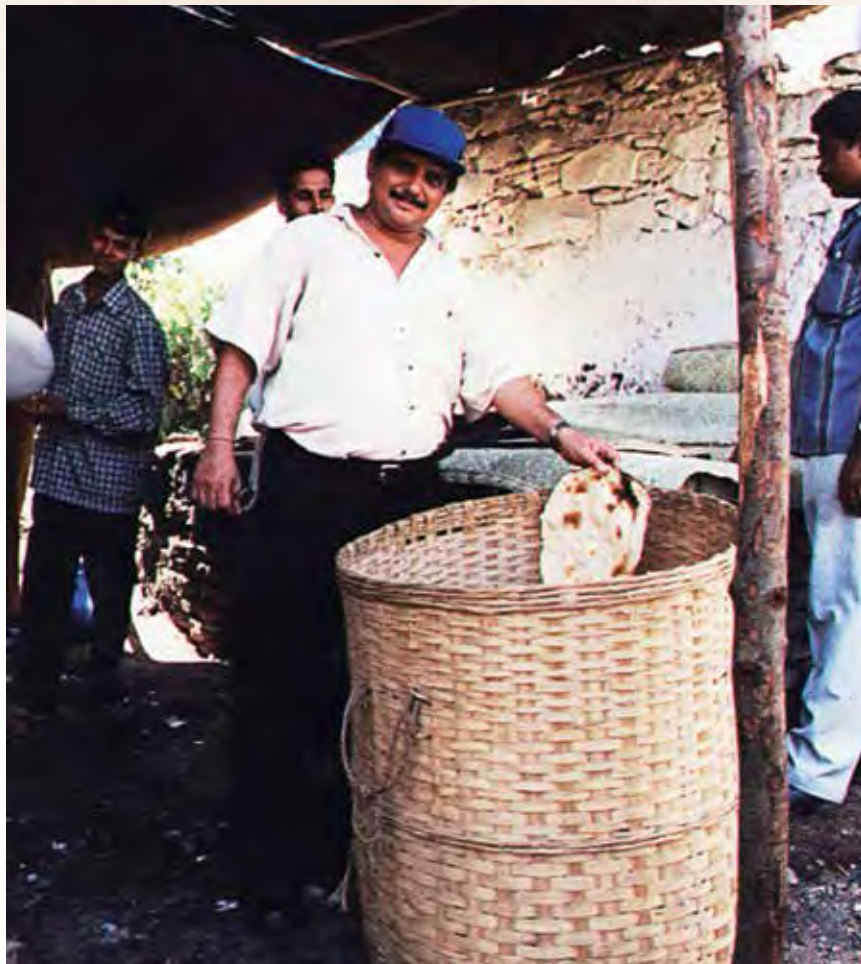
# Feature

by Nissim Moses

The Bene Israel community originated in Maharashtra in India. According to their tradition, they arrived on the Konkan Coast, south of present-day Mumbai, in approximately 175 BCE. Some date this back to an even earlier date.

Like other diaspora Jews, the Bene Israel celebrated the festival of Passover for eight days, with two Seder nights. In the second part of the twentieth century, it became common practice to perform the first Seder with family and to organize a communal Seder for the second night.

In India, as is common in all Jewish communities, preparations for Passover started with a general house cleaning. Winter clothes and linens were also stored away at this time. Then it became time for the preparation of matzoh for the entire festival. In days gone by, these were prepared at home by the women of the house for the whole week. Each family prepared about one hundred matzot or more depending upon the size of the family. When the "joint family" system still operated, the women of the house cooperated in making the matzoh, but with the advent of the twentieth century and nuclear family units, sisters & sisters-in-laws would go to each others' houses over the ten day period prior to Passover and cooperate in preparing the matzoh together, but then returned home to their own individual families. Once ready, the women put all the matzoh they made in a large clean bed sheet, which they hung from the ceiling of one of the rooms in the house. During the Passover week, the required amounts were taken down and consumed daily. Of course, they also made the three special "shmura matzot" for the Seder. On the night before Passover, all the hametz (leavened bread) was removed from the house. This custom was different from other Jewish communities, in which the



hametz is sold to a non-Jew but still kept in the house. In India, the special vessels, dishes and plates used only for Passover were taken out, and dipped in hot and cold water to purify (kasher) them for use in the Passover week. Other vessels were put away in a separate locker. Further, during the Passover week no dried red masala but only fresh green masala would be used as spices for the food.

A day or so prior to Passover, the family would purchase all the special items for the Passover Seder. Kiddush wine was made from black currants and shira (haroset) was made by each family for the Seder. The shank bone (zero'ah) was prepared from the right

foreleg of a goat or sheep only. Some other Jewish communities used a chicken bone, but this was considered to be an unacceptable alternative by the Bene Israel.

Like other Oriental Jews, the Bene Israel never dropped the wine from a cup onto a plate while reciting the ten plagues. They instead would purchase a new earthenware clay pot and a new inexpensive small wine glass for the Seder each year. The reader used both of these during the Seder only. The wine was dropped into the clay pot while reciting the plagues. The clay pot and the wine glass were then broken and thrown away. As in other Jewish communities, the first-born son of all





Bene Israel families would fast from early morning until the Seder service on the eve of Passover.

Among the Bene Israel who lived in the Konkan villages and small towns of the West Coast of India, families would slaughter a goat for the Passover meal (information provided by Noah Masilof). As soon as the goat was slaughtered, the blood would be smeared on the palm of the hand and imprinted on the door of every Bene Israel home in the area. The custom evolved so that later on, the imprint of the hand was made on paper instead of directly on the door. Each family would post this on their door, as was done by the ancestors of the Hebrews on the night of Passover.

The basic Bene Israel Seder service is very similar to that of other Jews elsewhere, with a few exceptions. Prior to the passage of “Ha Lachmania”, the Seder plate is held by all and lifted and rocked and then set down. This is repeated three times after which the traditional four questions of “Ma-Nish Tana” are asked by the youngest in the family. The Bene Israel particularly revere Elijah the Prophet whom



they believe went to heaven from a spot in the Konkan outside Mumbai (Khandala). Because of this rather special connection to Elijah, when he ‘visits’ each home, the young children are particularly excited. The rest of the service continues in a manner similar to most traditional communities. After the formal Seder service, the festive meal is eaten. This is followed by grace after the meal and then the Bene Israel conclude by singing festive songs. ✡

## Pesach Kiddush Wine:

### Ingredients:

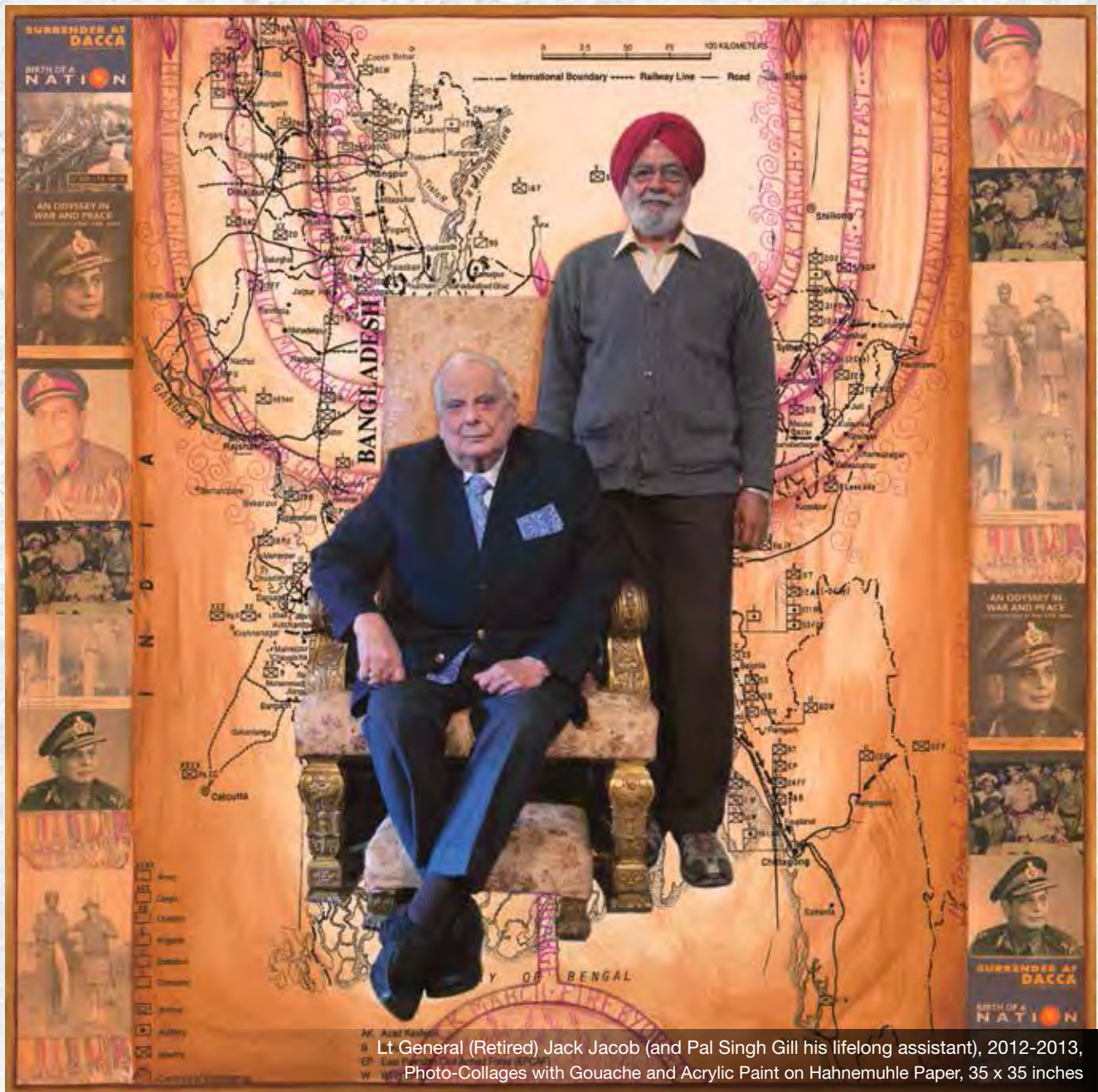
- 0.25 kg Black currants
- 2-3 Glasses of water

**Method:** Add the water to the currants and let it soak overnight. The next day, boil the water and black currants together. The currants will bloat. After boiling, allow the water to cool. Squeeze the juice out of the currants with gloved hands. Add about 1.5 glasses of water a little at a time. The final mixture should be sweet. Then strain the mixture with a fine clean cloth. Pour the juice into a jug or a bottle and keep in the refrigerator for a few hours.

Nissim Moses is the historian for the Bene Israel Heritage & Genealogy Research. He is also president of the Indian Jewish Heritage Center.

All photos are courtesy of Dr. Shalva Weil.





Lt General (Retired) Jack Jacob (and Pal Singh Gill his lifelong assistant), 2012-2013, Photo-Collages with Gouache and Acrylic Paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

# The Art of Identity Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives

In Conversation with Siona Benjamin



The **F**ACES jump from their frames, dance across the walls of the Flomenhaft Gallery. Life flows from the canvases, their stories swirl around them. It is clear that these are not mere pictures of people but the stories of generations, of families and of the Jewish people.

I had last spoken with Siona Benjamin following her return from India before her Fulbright project research for *Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives* had taken form. She had explained her vision for the project to me and shared her photographs of the people that would soon become the subjects of her art. While her passion was clear and her research extensive, it was hard at that preliminary stage to draw a mental picture of how this vision would take shape. But the result could not be more remarkable.

Now as I walked through the exhibition with Siona, she filled in the details that are absent from each canvas but are imprinted on her soul. She spoke about each one of the paintings and the people in them as if they were part of her own story, with a level of sensitive familiarity and deep intimacy. She explains it is because in a way they are parts of her own story, pieces of the puzzle that make up her own identity. "There is something in all of their faces that reminds me of home," she says.

Her earlier series, *Finding Home*, speaks to this same yearning to connect and express all the different parts of her own identity. Though born in India into the Bene Israel community, she defines herself as a contemporary American artist. She seeks to challenge people's perceptions of who is a Jew and who is an American. In the same brushstroke she also challenges gender roles and sees the strength in herself, in her female subjects.



Hannah (Munmun) Emanuel Samuel (Pezarkar), 2012-2013, Photo-Collages with Gouache and Acrylic Paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

In speaking with Siona, she explains that she hopes that the images she presents of the Bene Israel community will help dispel the notion that Judaism is somehow tied to race or ethnicity. We speak about the story of Purim. "This was a story from Persia," Siona explains, "Esther wasn't light skinned. She couldn't have been. That wasn't the definition of Jewish nor was it the definition of beauty." She stresses that even when we look at the Jewish forefathers, we have to look closely at who they were and where they were from before we try and project Ashkenazi characteristics on them. She says Abraham, for example, was from Ur. He too also wouldn't have been light skinned and therefore wouldn't have met conventional notions about who is a Jew, who looks Jewish. He comes from one of the most conflicted places in the

world and a place that is seen to be very 'non-Jewish'.

"This is my Tikkun Olam. I hope that in some small way, I am helping to contribute to a larger discussion. I create my art and I give it out to the universe. I have to then allow the universe to accept, reject or question these ideas. My hope is that a conversation has been started."

And while her message resonates deeply with me, the people and the mental process are equally fascinating. There is a greater message she explains, "My art isn't Jewish and it isn't Indian. They are portraits of humanity. They are stories about a special group but really they are stories about all of us."

She shows me her "Mona Lisa", a beautiful close-up of Maayan Abraham





Three Generation Triptych, 2012-2013,  
Photo-Collages with Gouache and Acrylic Paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches each panel

(Shapurkar). Maayan's photograph is featured in Issue 6 of *Asian Jewish Life* (page 19). Siona explains her face could belong anywhere. She adorned the portrait with a beautiful but simple design on gold leaf. It is a timeless and transcultural beauty that she says quietly can challenge notions about race and ethnicity. We then look at Maayan's grandfather, Samson Solomon (Korlekar) whose photo is also displayed. Siona tells his story with a sense of pride one typically reserves in telling their only family's story.

Ultimately, Siona sees herself as a storyteller, linking past and present on canvas. It is storytelling that gives her a certain freedom of expression that she says she wouldn't have had if she had been a historian or an archeologist trying to make these same connections.

While she is captivated by all the stories that make us human, almost immediately one facet of the subjects' individuality immediately emerges as vivid imagery. She explains that there is a medium that suits that each piece of the puzzle. For a multicultural/ transcultural artist that moves within and between multiple identities, boundaries and zones, as one would expect, she has mastered the art of multimedia. Ultimately, she says



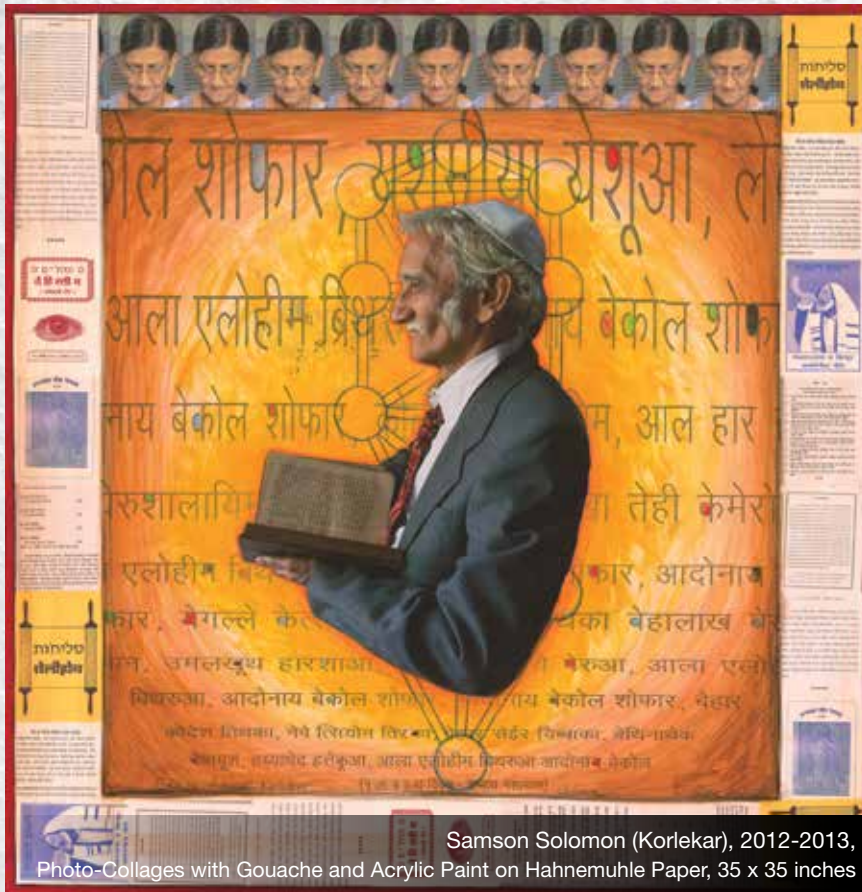
Salome Hyams Parikh (Mumbai), 2012-2013,  
Photo-Collages with Gouache and Acrylic Paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

that all of our stories, like her exhibition, are multilayered. People are never one thing or one story but the sum of parts, identities and experiences.

Clearly differentiating *Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives* from her earlier

series, she creates her art around actual photographs. While she agrees that she is first and foremost a painter, she explains that she did have some training in photography, in black and white, years ago at the Sir J.J. School of Art in Mumbai. While she said she first





Samson Solomon (Korlekar), 2012-2013,

Photo-Collages with Gouache and Acrylic Paint on Hahnemuhle Paper, 35 x 35 inches

telling their stories. I can't stop asking for more details.

She then says regretfully, that *Faces* must come to an end at some point. Her gallery requested thirty pieces for the show and Siona has an additional ten pieces in progress. She says she will need to end this collection with these, at forty. But then, she says she will likely add just one more after that. She is animated as she tells the beautiful story of one brother who donated a kidney to save the life of the other brother. She describes the imagery of a kidney and blood vessels connecting them, like roots to a tree. She then adds, that perhaps, there is just one more after that.

These stories have woven their way so intricately into her story that I am doubtful that we have seen the last of them. I don't think she can really ever let them go. They are part of her now.

Though returning to India in some ways made it even more apparent how American she has become, the trip helped her to reconnect with her past and understand that their iconography has actually always been part of hers too. She was in search of "myself and my family that left [India] to go to Israel... pieces and threads of what is remaining to what once was. Finding people from my home doesn't necessarily mean I found all my answers though."

With pieces still missing to her puzzle, this lingering uncertainty guarantees that her artistic exploration of home, identity, multiculturalism, race and gender will continue. Secretly, I think I am happy that home for her is so many places. While I eagerly await those final 10, 11, 12... pieces in *Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives* to be completed, I can't wait to see what will come next. ✧

contemplated painting their portraits, she felt the photography captured the essence of the people whose stories she was sharing. The photographs give them a stronger voice in the art as beautifully detailed iconography dances around them.

Ultimately, while their faces help tell their story, Benjamin has worked to "take from the specific and make it universal". She invites the viewer, to take for example, the community cook and be able to identify with her. Together we look at the brightly colored saffron background and the pictorial story of Hannah Emanuel Samuel (Pearkar), the Bene Israel community chef. Siona tells her story but says that the work is really about the viewer taking her experience and relating it to their own world. It is not just their

stories that she seeks to tell but her own and the story of family, community and humanity generally. Some of the faces she says without the iconography could have been taken almost anywhere.

As to how the actual community reacted to seeing their images as art, she says they were flattered and deeply moved. She speaks of how warmly she was welcomed and explains that there is something incredibly special when a Bene Israel comes home. As a mere visitor to the community, I can attest to this warmth and an overwhelming sense of welcome.

Over lunch, we continue to talk about *Faces*. Even without a canvas, multimedia presentations, digital art, paint or photography, she can't stop



# music of Israelites and Jews of Africa and Asia



IRENE ORLEANSKY

*Dedicated to my mother Nellie Orleansky,  
may her memory be blessed*

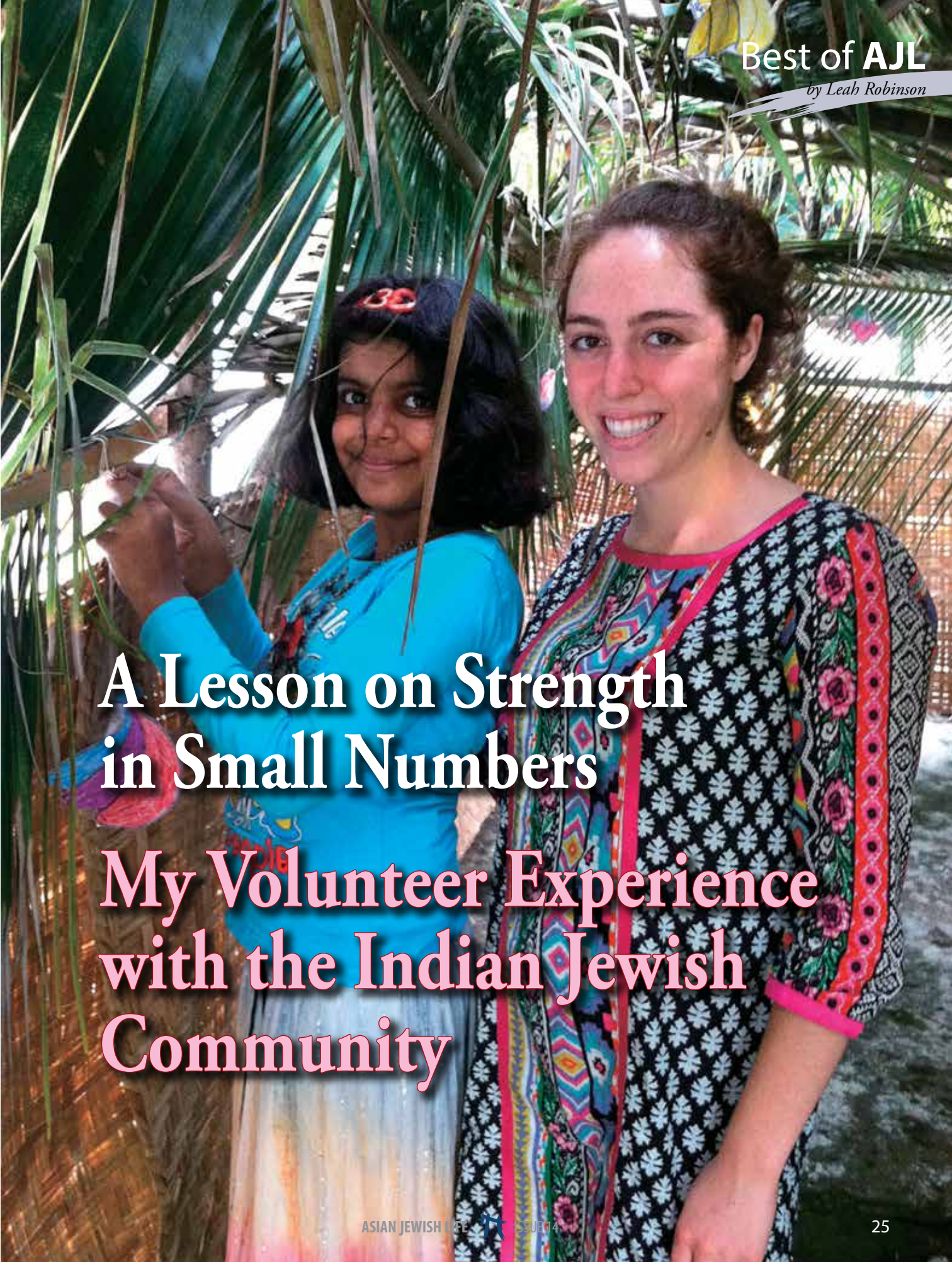
## Music of Israelites and Jews of Africa and Asia, 2013

The result of Irene's two-year journey through Africa and Asia, the album features about 100 musicians from 11 countries, including such renowned guest artists as Jerry Marotta, Tony Levin, Virginia Splendore and Don Schiff.

To order your copy, go to Irene Orleansky's site at <http://www.ireneorleansky.com>

All the money earned from the sales of the album will be spread among the communities to support their music and arts. By buying the CD, you are supporting the Jewish and Israelite communities in Africa and Asia.





# A Lesson on Strength in Small Numbers

## My Volunteer Experience with the Indian Jewish Community



# Best of AJL

by Leah Robinson

Seven months ago I left Los Angeles and the comforts of home to serve with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) as a JDC Entwine Global Jewish Service Corps (JSC) fellow in Mumbai, India. I have now been home three weeks and it feels as though I never left Southern California. It's not just that the palm tree-lined drives, yoga pants, and health food stores are the same as they always have been, it's that I can go three or four days here without having a single incident or a single moment remind me of the six months I lived in India.

Mumbai is swarming with humanity. You simply cannot escape the crowds of purple, yellow, red and blue saris; the smells of curry leaves frying and cardamom steaming; the throat-burning fumes of chili peppers crushed by hot rubber tires in highway underpasses; the drumming and chanting and music blasting from every corner and housing complex. Add to that the taxis battling rickshaws to swerve across five lanes of traffic; men shouting "madam!" to invite you into their shops of walls lined with ground and whole spices, fried snacks, day-old newspapers, too-sweet sweets, dried fruit and nuts, low-quality sandals, scarves, oils, soaps, chocolates, cleaning supplies, broken electronics all for sale at a "very good price." The faces crease with both purpose and desperation and, as with everything in India, the contrast is remarkable.

Los Angeles is a nice quiet town in comparison, but unlike the stereotype of small-town living, it's lonely compared to my experience in the tidal wave of Mumbai. Through all the hustle and bustle, a rather small community of 4500 Jews manages to stay strong, connected, and active. Serving with the JDC opened my eyes to a world of Judaism unknown to most people. In this world, they have Hanukkah festivals where people of all



ages come together to watch youth (and outsiders like me) perform Bollywood dances. In this world, they have prayer books written in Hebrew, English, Hindi and Marathi. In this world, they have deep and meaningful devotions to Judaism on personally religious and globally attuned levels.

The Indian Jews are thirsty for knowledge and community. People who attend Hebrew class want to be fluent. They attempt to have conversations with their classmates solely in Hebrew even though many are beginners. Those who attend Torah study classes demand answers to questions such as, "what is the meaning of life?" and eagerly pile into the classroom after a full day's work. The women's group asserts the importance of the female role in both Indian and Jewish cultures, enjoying workshops on Challah braiding and discussing larger core values with another JSC fellow, the teacher. The youth group challenges themselves to raise money for an education fund, throwing the largest party of the community's year during Hanukkah. All these people call each

other family, and welcome all Jews into their shuls and their homes.

Indian Jews are small in number and mighty in spirit. They understand that they are shrinking and indeed spend much of their time discussing their diminishing community and concern about the future. But it is this sense of uncertainty that draws them closer together and it is this sense of unity that inspires the Jews of India to take care of one another. Like Jews anywhere else in the world, Jewish Indians come from a variety of socioeconomic, educational, and religious backgrounds. Some of these people live in poverty and need financial aid; some are middle-class but need a sense of community in the otherwise vast city; some are not knowledgeable about Jewish traditions and need a teacher. In my time in India, I saw an elderly woman who otherwise would have no home or caregiver singing Hebrew songs and dancing in Bayiti, the JDC-run Jewish old age home. I saw a five-year-old boy questioning why we say the Shema, and receiving wise and varying answers from his elders. I saw





a young man excited to make Aliyah finding a group of peers in which he felt comfortable expressing his hesitation, and receiving love and support in return.

I was also lucky enough to serve with a Jewish organization called Gabriel Project Mumbai (GPM), a partner of JDC's that provides food and education to slum children, and work for slum women who prepare the meals for 800 schoolchildren every day. Founded on the belief that the Jewish people have an obligation to help vulnerable and needy populations, GPM attracts both international Jewish volunteers and local Indian Jews to educate, motivate, and care for children living in Mumbai's slums. Although the tremendous and striking poverty of India's poorest residents is prominent in an outsider's experience of the country, many Indians largely ignore the issue, regarding it as either unsolvable or the people as unfixable. However, wonderful Indian nonprofit organizations such as REAP are committed to providing opportunities for children in the slums to have a better life and the Jewish community is also rising to the challenge and becoming involved in GPM. They feel a need to



engage in their country's future and created an internship program in which young Jewish Indian interns take on a leadership role in combating poverty.

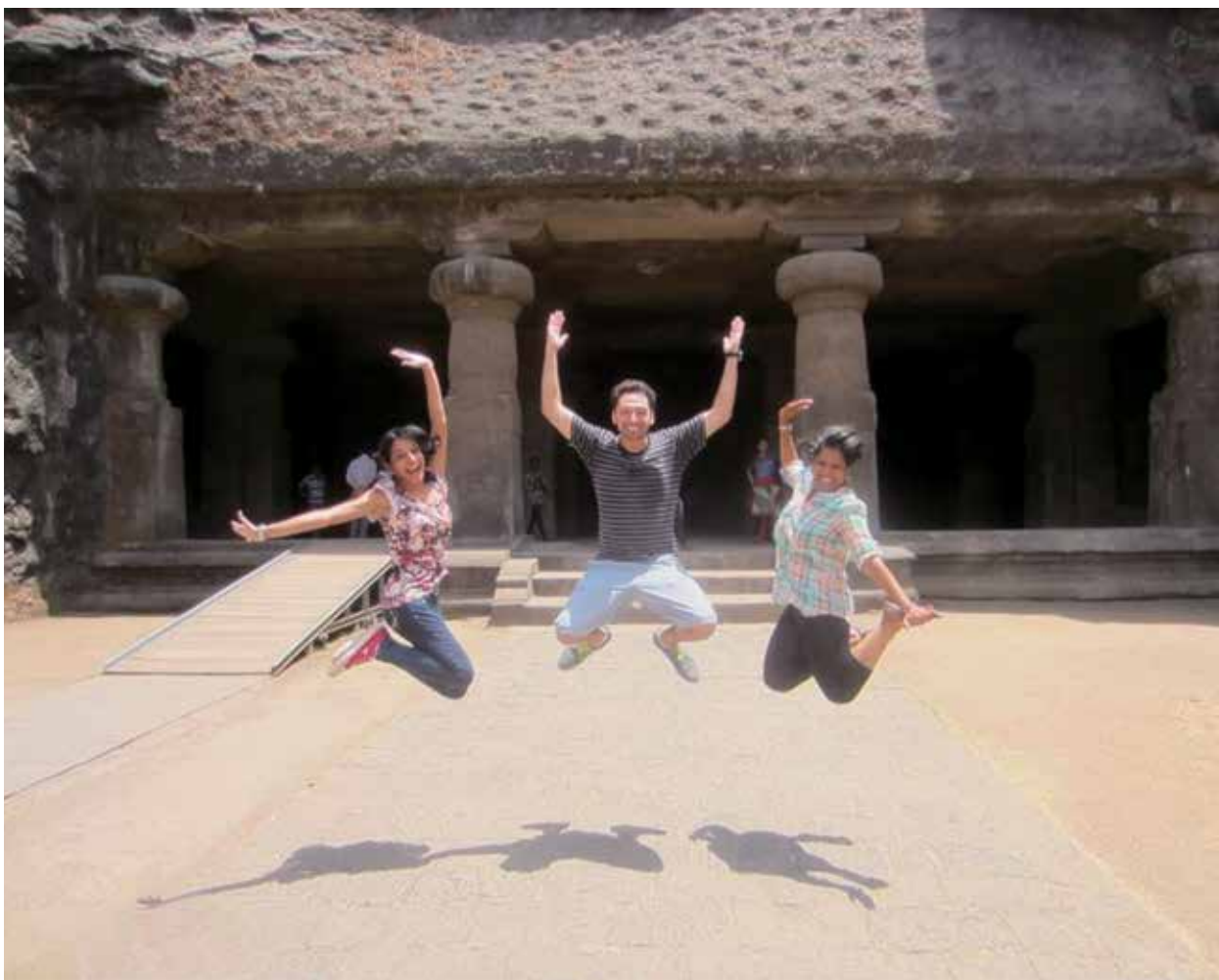
Indian Jews have a tremendous capacity for love and acceptance. Though they have never experienced direct anti-Semitism from their fellow Indian citizens, their devotion to a global Jewish world dictates that they feel each blow to a foreign Jewish community as if it were their own because to them it is. This is why the youth have the ability to feel empathy and compassion for children in the slums. Indian youth have been taught by their elders to align heartbeats with the entirety of the Jewish population; the slum children are simply another needy population. A teenage intern in the GPM program will spend weeks planning an outing for the children. They ensure an educational yet exciting lesson plan, taking them to the aquarium to learn about sea life or a sports field to play with equipment otherwise unattainable. And they care for the children, serving them lunch before taking their own, helping them use a toilet for the first time, wiping mucus from their nostrils.

Years ago, when I first began to travel alone, my mother gave me a piece of advice her mother had given her. She said that if I ever found myself in any kind of trouble, in a situation I couldn't handle or in need of help, all I had to do was find the nearest synagogue. Jews, she said, stick together. I've traveled to many countries, lived in new communities, and met many foreign Jews. This sentiment always seemed to be present and palpable. But the Indian Jewish community takes it to a new level--they care wholeheartedly and undyingly for their fellow Jews, taking them in when necessary, lending a hand when able and always feeling responsible for and connected to Jews worldwide. It's for this reason that in a country so immense, with a relatively miniscule cluster, the Indian Jews were able to create something so powerful.

Though I'm not reminded of my experience in India on a daily basis, it is impossible to forget what my time in the community there taught me. Every day I challenge myself to connect and love as globally, as fiercely, and as deeply as my Indian Jewish community did. And I know that even across the oceans, I am still a part of their Jewish experience and family.



Leah's story is an example of one way to make a difference in the lives of India's Jewish community. There are a number of opportunities to explore India and work with the Jewish community there through JDC Entwine — the young adult movement of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC):



The JDC Entwine Global Jewish Service Corps (JSC) is a year-long, paid opportunity for Jewish young professionals to volunteer overseas with JDC. Responding to international Jewish and humanitarian needs, JSC fellows facilitate and create innovative programs using their unique skills and talents. In India, JDC's JSC fellows lead and develop programming for all ages at the JDC-supported Evelyn Peters Jewish Community Center in Mumbai, including serving as an advisor with the Jewish Youth Pioneers, the community's local Jewish youth group.

More at [www.jdcentwine.org/jsc](http://www.jdcentwine.org/jsc)





The JDC Multi-Week Jewish Service Corps offers 6-8 week placements for young Jews looking to make a difference in communities around the world. In India, Multi-Week JSC fellows work with JDC's partner Gabriel Project Mumbai, a humanitarian organization committed to addressing poverty, hunger and illiteracy in Mumbai slums. Multi-Week JSC Fellows work alongside peers from Mumbai's Jewish community, creating dynamic programs to empower and educate children living in slums while developing lifelong connections to Jewish young adults in India.

More at [www.jdcentwine.org/jsc-multiweek](http://www.jdcentwine.org/jsc-multiweek)



Awarded to one person annually, JDC's Ralph I. Goldman (RIG) Fellowship in International Jewish Service is a one-of-a-kind leadership experience. With senior JDC staff, RIG Fellows design unique overseas placements shaped by their skills, interests and critical needs of communities abroad, including India.

Applications for the 2015 Fellow are open through May 30: [www.jdcentwine.org/ralph](http://www.jdcentwine.org/ralph) 



# Interview

by Susan Blumberg-Kason



On Mangoes, Bollywood and Water Buffalo

# Interview with Jenny Feldon

Photo credit: Rachel LaBrucherie



**Asian Jewish Life (AJL):** Congratulations on the publication of your memoir, *Karma Gone Bad: How I Learned to Love Mangoes, Bollywood, and Water Buffalo* (Sourcebooks, 2013)! It's one of the most honest memoirs about moving abroad in recent years. Culture shock plays a huge part in your story, in which you move to Hyderabad, India for your husband's job. What was the toughest adjustment in Hyderabad?

**Jenny Feldon (JF):** Thank you so much! The toughest adjustment was going from a very full, very independent life in New York to a very lonely, isolated one in Hyderabad. I never thought I'd miss the subway so much, but I longed for it every day (even though my driver, Venkat, became one of the dearest friends I made in India.) My husband worked long hours and I was on my own a lot. Nothing in Hyderabad was the way I'd expected it to be, and my loneliness overshadowed everything, making me blind to anything but my own misery and the "otherness" of my new life. Add that to overwhelming culture shock and it was a recipe for disaster in the beginning.

**AJL:** Hyderabad is not one of the more popular Asian expat spots, such as Hong Kong, Tokyo or Singapore. What is the best piece of advice would you give to someone who is about to move overseas to a remote place like Hyderabad?

**JF:** Talk to someone who lives there, preferably an expat who will know how to explain what to expect and who can give you some basic survival strategies. Living this kind of life starts and ends with attitude, but realistic expectations go a LONG way toward having a positive outlook and giving the expat life the best you have to offer. We had virtually no information on Hyderabad before we arrived. Cultural customs

and expectations were so very different, especially in a city that was 70% Muslim. And there were things you just couldn't get in Hyderabad that were readily available in other parts of India, like tampons and cold medicine and peanut butter. Someone we knew who had visited Hyderabad shortly before we moved was the first person to give me hints about what life there was really going to be like. He told me there were cows and buffaloes in the road, and I just laughed. I should have listened and asked a lot more questions!

**AJL:** It seems as if you and your husband were just thrown into this new life with very little preparation. Do you think employers need to take a more active role in priming employees and their spouses for the changes they will experience abroad?

**JF:** Yes! Our experience would have been completely different if we'd been better prepared and supported by my husband's employer. Other companies send their expats into fully equipped situations, complete with furnished apartments, gas, electricity, phone lines, a driver and a bank account. We had to set up a household completely on our own once we left temporary housing and we had no idea how to do any of it. The red tape in India for Western expats can be really overwhelming. Also, some real training on the realities of expat life and on navigating a marriage through an international assignment would have gone a long way. We had no idea what we were getting into, and there are real challenges to overcome for someone working abroad with an "accompanying spouse," as they always referred to me. Setting up new expats with a mentor couple or family would have been incredibly helpful, as would providing more resources for networking, as well

as for navigating and understanding the new culture.

**AJL:** You write about being Jewish in Hyderabad. At first you keep a low profile about your Judaism because Hyderabad has a sizeable Muslim population. But then you realize that people there don't have a concept of what it means to be Jewish. They view you more as American or white than Jewish. Did your experience in a place with few Jews change your perception of what it means to be Jewish? Do you find that you are now more observant than before you went to India?

**JF:** I never realized how much of my identity was entwined with being Jewish until we moved to India. It was like a whole part of my life had just evaporated. There was no temple to go to, no Passover seders to plan or attend. I've always identified as a Jew more culturally than religiously, and that really hit home when we lived in Hyderabad. Toward the end of our stay, a Jewish family moved in to our development and it was just the best feeling to have Shabbat dinners together. Visiting the synagogue in Kerala was one of the most powerful experiences I had in India. After so many months of being removed from any kind of Jewish life, suddenly we were still right in the middle of India, but immersed again in a religion that really did transcend continents and cultures. I felt I like I was stepping back inside something so real and true, something so much bigger than myself. I loved being able to see India and Judaism intersect in that way.

**AJL:** Your descriptions of the caste system in India are fascinating. You also experienced a sort of caste system in your small expat community! It seemed very disconcerting. But do you think it prepared you well for a life in Los Angeles,



# Interview

by Susan Blumberg-Kason

where you and your family now live? To an outsider, LA seems like a large-scale version of your hotel weekend brunches in Hyderabad!

**JF:** Ha! I love it... LA definitely has its own sorting system... I'd never thought about it like that before! India taught me how to be more flexible, to not let labels and expectations get in the way of my experiences or my relationships. If I could go back and do it all again, I'd walk into those brunches with my head held high and introduce myself to every single person there. LA is a big place and just like Hyderabad, it's easy to get lost in the confusion and vastness of it all. If I'd focused on being true to myself and taking everything in without judgment or fear when we first arrived in India, things might have turned out differently. When we moved back to the US, I promised myself I'd never let judgments or expectations stand in the way of my happiness again. So we got here, and I tried to stay focused on gratitude, and being true to myself. As a result, I've found the most incredible people, the most blessed life in a city I never thought I'd call home... and I'm grateful for it every day.

**AJL:** Your memoir ends when you are about to move back to the United States. Did you experience reverse culture shock upon your return? What was the most difficult thing to readjust to?

**JF:** The quiet! I'll never forget driving on the highway on the way home from the airport and being astounded at how silent everything seemed. All those horns honking 24 hours a day had embedded themselves into my subconscious, and without them I felt like I was walking around underwater. Driving a car again after so many years (first in New York, when I took the subway or cabs everywhere and then in Hyderabad,



Photo credit: Shannon West

where I had a driver) was a really big adjustment, especially living in LA, where you have to drive EVERYWHERE. And I'll never get used to pomegranates not being in season year round! I had one every single morning in India and they're my absolute favorite fruit. I miss them so much!

**AJL:** A big difference between your life in India and your new one in Los Angeles is that you are now a mother! Do you talk to your children about India? If so, do you feel a need to connect that life with this one through teaching your children about Indian culture?

**JF:** India is such a huge part of my life and who I am now. We probably talk about India at least once every single day. My children are fascinated with India, and my daughter, who is almost six, is begging to go visit. We have souvenirs from our travels all over the house — bedding, furniture, artwork. We take off our shoes at the door, which my kids know is a custom we learned in India. I can't wait to take them there someday, and show them a little of the magic and beauty of the country that truly changed their parents' lives. Also, we have a large collection of Ganeshes...my daughter may be the only kid ever to show up to the first day of religious school at our synagogue with a tiny brass Ganesh

idol as a transitional object! She carries him with her everywhere. Luckily her teachers were really understanding.

**AJL:** Before you left New York for India, you blogged about your life in Manhattan. This blog continued during your time in Hyderabad. Can you discuss how it developed into a book?

**JF:** I always knew that I'd want to write about my experience in India — writing is not only my true passion in life, but one of the most important ways I connect to other people and make sense of the world around me. What I didn't realize was how rocky my journey would be or how profoundly it would change my life. It took me several years to process and understand that journey, to look at it as objectively as possible and to find the words to express it all. The blog I kept while I was in India was invaluable — I can go back and read what I was feeling, in my own words and in those raw, unfiltered moments.

**AJL:** In *Karma Gone Bad*, you talk about a novel you hoped to finish in India. Do you plan to write more non-fiction or will you return to that novel or other fiction? And do you think India will figure into your future work?

**JF:** India is a huge part of who I am now, so I'm fairly certain elements of it will be present in everything I write! But for now, I'm taking a break from memoir. Fiction is my first love, and I really want to publish a novel someday. I do, however, have the sequel to *Karma Gone Bad* tossing around in my mind... I returned to the US pregnant with my daughter, and then my husband went back to India for a year shortly after she was born. Our story didn't end when the book does, and I'd love to pick up where I left off and share more of our adventures, and how India continues to shape our journey. ✨

# A CUP OF TEA

Tales of Grandpa Eli  
*(Part 2)*







Life in Grandpa's house was a definite improvement over the one I had led in Dimona. My grades improved. I made friends who did not smoke so I cut down on my cigarettes. My father phoned every Friday although we did not have a telephone in the flat. He used the public one outside our makolet, or grocery store. My mother was being let out of the rehabilitation center for Passover. They would come to Grandpa's house for Seder Night. I cleaned the house and rearranged the clothes in my cupboard. I was worried that my mother would not be completely cured and the four cups of wine drunk during Seder service would start her off on a drinking spree again. Perhaps Grandpa had the same doubts. He purchased bottles of Carmel Grape Juice over which the blessings for 'fruit of the vine' can be said.

Passover is the time Jewish homes undergo a thorough cleaning. All the clothes are washed but first all their pockets are turned inside out to remove any leaven that may linger there. Mattresses and carpets are beaten. I do not know how much leaven flies out but dust certainly does. Bedding is hung in the sun. Kitchen cabinets are emptied and cleaned. Every effort is made to prevent leaven from remaining in the house during Passover week.

Grandpa took down all his books from the shelves and wiped each one with a dry cloth. My cousins had been sent to help clean Grandpa's house. Batiya began to grumble about the work. Aunt Erusha had made her wash all the windows at home and now she was doing the same for Grandpa. Ronit added that Passover is a hard time for the women of the house. When the men help they never return things to their proper places.

I listened as I polished the brass candlesticks and the channukiya Grandpa had brought from India. I could understand Batiya's annoyance at having to clean windows but Ronit's grumbling began to get on my nerves. The aspersion she cast on men's abilities rankled. She knew that I had done all the cleaning at home and my mother was the person who never put things in their proper places. I might have got into an argument with her if Grandpa Eli had not spoken.

"You think that it is difficult to observe Passover here, in Israel," he said. "Try and imagine what it was for us in India." He then told us, this story. We later called it his 'Cup of Tea,' story.

The Jewish women of Jwalanagar began their preparations for

Passover immediately after Purim. The cleaning was not much of a problem because almost every household employed an ayah. This 'servant-woman' worked harder than usual before this festival for an additional monetary compensation. There were no washing machines or dishwashers in those days, so the ayah scrubbed, scoured and washed to help the Jewish family get ready for its important festival. The children were expected, if not forced, to help too. In spite of all the help the heaviest work fell to the Jewish women.

Making matza was a tedious task if it was performed alone. The women got together for this. Laughter and gossip made the work enjoyable. Less attention was paid to aching backs and sore muscles. It also gave the ladies, who did not have much of an opportunity to leave their homes except in the company of their families, a chance to get together in an informal atmosphere. In the absence of men, the women used language and told jokes that they normally would not have done in male company.

Eli's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Bhonkar came to Jwalanagar around Passover time in search of a Jewish bride for their son. His mother thought that the best place to watch a girl without making her nervous was at the matza making sessions. The girls would be their natural selves in the company of other girls and women they knew well. There would be no strange male presence to distract or restrain them. The future mother-in-law would evaluate every word and gesture of the prospective brides. Choice of words, modesty of dress even when only in feminine company, and the cheerfulness with which heavy and repetitive tasks were performed would be judged as evidence of a girl's nature.

Mrs. Jacob Bhonkar was a guest in the town so she was treated with respect and curiosity. She arrived early at the kitchen they had decided to meet in and looked around with a critical and experienced eye. Everything was clean and tidy. Hand-mills from several Jewish homes were placed on the floor near the window. The mud and brick stoves had been white washed with chuna, or lime paste, the evening before. A young woman sat on the stair just beneath the kitchen verandah with a hammer and chisel. Mrs. Bhonkar watched her make dents on the upper and lower stones of the hand-mills, wash them carefully and then replace the wooden pegs in their centers.

"Hello, I'm Ruth Bhonkar. When will the other ladies arrive?"

"Good morning. My name is Malka David. It is still early. The others will only arrive after breakfast. Can I make a cup of tea for you?"

"David? Isn't this the Samson house?"

"Yes, it is. I just came in early so that I can get the uninteresting work out of the way before the others arrive. If there is no taki on the millstones, it will be difficult to grind the wheat. Nobody likes to do it. The man, who usually comes around to the Jewish houses to do this work, did not come this year. I thought that I'd finish this. Shall I make you a cup of tea and get you something to eat?"

Mrs. Bhonkar looked at the girl. The absence of a wedding ring and a mangal sutra were signs of an unmarried state. There was willingness to work and an intelligence that made her see the real character of people. Her age seemed just right too. She judged Malka to be around twenty years old. But no! This was not the girl for Eli. She was not pretty enough. In fact her skin was dark and marred with small-pox scars. She seemed to have poor eyesight too. Ruth Bhonkar had her heart set on a beautiful bride. To her it was as important as the other qualities she was seeking. Being proud of her own beauty she wanted a girl who her son would not be ashamed to be seen with. Mrs. Bhonkar realized that the girl was looking at her for an answer so she said, "I've not had my breakfast but we'll eat together a bit later. Can I help you in any way?"

"Not yet. I've almost finished. You can light the primus stove and put on the kettle. There is Mrs. Samuel coming through the garden. She will definitely have brought something to eat. She has three small children and lives at the other end of town, yet she is always the first to arrive. I don't know how she does it. We will have to use the dining room so as not to get any khametz or leaven into the kitchen."

"The girl knows how to appreciate, not only criticize. It is a pity she has no looks to talk about," Mrs. Bhonkar thought.

One of the Samson daughters-in-law came out of her house and went to the gate to meet Mrs. Samuel. The four ladies finished their breakfast before the others arrived. Mrs. Bhonkar asked questions about the Jwalanagar Beni Israel community. "I did not know that there were Jews living in this town. When did the first families arrive?" she asked.

"In the late eighteen hundreds," Mrs. Samson answered. "Three Beni Israel soldiers decided to start a new community here. Subhedar Bension Moses and Havaladar Joseph Nawgaonker were friends since the war in South Africa and they bought houses here soon after they returned. Mr. Samson, my father-in-law, was a contractor who supplied the army with meat and vegetables. He came to this area during the Great War and



liked it here. He got this house through some other contractor he knew. Subhedar Major Herman Kilekar settled here after the Great War too. For some reason he did not wish to return to his village. He sold his land there and now he lives near the textile mill. Other Jews came in with the Railways, the Banks or the Post and Telegraph Services and stayed on. We have a lawyer, a few policemen and a medical student too. The Ordnance Factory and Textile Mill employ a few more of our men. This is a nice town and life is better than in the crowded cities. Soon we will be an even larger community." Pride was palpable not only in the words but the tone in which they were spoken. Mrs. Jacob Bhonkar tried to keep the conversation on the community and away from herself in order to avoid raising suspicions that she was 'bride-hunting,' but she was not too successful. Questions about her family were asked as a matter of politeness not of curiosity, although there was a trace of that too. She managed to side step the issue by saying that her children were all grown and living away from home. The women naturally assumed that they were all married.

When the girls arrived she watched them and picked out three girls as 'possibilities.' Nina Jirad was a bit shorter than Eli would like, but she had a pleasant face and an open expression. She seemed intelligent and obedient. Tikva Aaron was good looking but she seemed haughty. Perhaps her parents' wealth had gone to her head. If it had, Mrs. Bhonkar would reject her but she would keep an open mind until she was sure that it was not just her intuition. The girl had to say or do something to confirm the older woman's suspicions. Leah Joseph seemed to be a bit too young to manage a house, but since she came from a large family she must have learned a lot while helping around the house. Mrs. Bhonkar was careful not let the girls sense that they were being watched, appraised and judged.

Tikva kept shirking the heavy work and pretending to be busy with things that really should have been offered to the women who sat at the hand-mills grinding the flour to relieve them from the hard work. One woman turned the heavy upper stone round and round over the lower one with the help of the wooden peg that was fixed in the upper stone. A second woman poured a handful of grain at a time into the hole at the center. The biggest hand mill had two women holding the peg and turning it around. The flour was collected and only a little bit at a time was kneaded into dough with cold water drawn from the well. Mrs. Bhonkar noticed the smirks on the faces of the women, each time Tikva spoke about how difficult the work was and what fun it was to be together. Nobody

seemed to want to say anything to her. Obviously she was unpopular. Mrs. Bhonkar could see the reasons for it.

Eventually Nina Jirad spoke up. "Come on Tikva. It is your turn to grind now."

Tikva seemed surprised. "I can't do that work. I can't understand why we don't send it to the chakki at the crossroad."

"You know the answer to that. The miller does not do agalla to his grindstones the way we do. Any flour left over from a previous grinding may have khametz in it and it would not be kosher for Passover. We all work together. Now it is your turn. Milkha has been grinding since morning and deserves a break."

Mrs. Bhonkar was pleased with Nina. The girl had a sense of justice and fair play. She was not intimidated by wealth.

Mrs. Aaron came to the defence of her daughter. "I am sure that Milkha does not mind. She is used to hard work. My daughter isn't."

"Milkha may not mind but I do. It is not right to push everything on to her. Your daughter will not be too delicate to eat the matza, I am sure," Nina said.

"Let somebody else relieve the girl but leave my Tikva alone," Mrs. Aaron said.

"You will have to get her married to a lord so that she will not have to work," Mrs. Samuel said. "I will grind the wheat now. I too am used to hard work and I am proud of it."



Mrs. Bhonkar crossed Tikva off her list of 'possibles.' The girl was spoilt. Even worse, her mother fought her battles for her. Mrs. Bhonkar put her down as one of those wives who run home to their mothers each time they fight with their husband. Quarrels and misunderstandings were bound to arise in any marriage. Instead of leaving the young couple alone to work out their problems by themselves, Mrs. Aaron would try and run the show there too. The daughter would be one nuisance and the mother another. "Only a fool will marry that girl," Mrs. Bhonkar decided and moved from her seat to sit beside Mrs. Joseph.

"Your daughter has a pretty dimple when she smiles," she said. "She reminds me a bit of my daughter at that age. Some young man is going to fall pretty hard for her."

"Thank you," Mrs. Joseph replied pleased with the compliment. "I only hope that it will be a nice Jewish boy so that no hearts will be broken. In any case Lily will have to learn to cook and sew if her young man is to get a competent wife. This matza making is one of my ways of teaching her. She has two elder sisters who spare her most of the work. It just won't do for a girl who will have to leave her parents home and manage one of her own."

"How old is the child?" Mrs. Bhonkar asked.

"Fourteen."

"She has plenty of time. You don't have to worry. With a mother like you she is bound to learn."

"I hope so," Mrs. Joseph replied.

That was the end of Leah Joseph as a prospective wife for Eli. His mother had thought that the girl was at least seventeen. "That figure is going to run to fat," she decided. "The mother is on the plump side too. It may run in families. Besides that she is far too young for my son." She turned her attention to the work and the small talk that her companions made.

Charcoal fires were lit and new earthenware bowls were turned over it. This served in place of the usual tava on which the bread is baked. The convex surface helped in preventing the bread to rise. Some women rolled the bread into fine chapattis, others pierced holes in them, while still others pressed the bread with clean cloths to prevent any air bubble from rising. Nina seemed quite accomplished. She smiled and joked as she worked. She asked about members of other families without being inquisitive. By the end of the day Mrs. Bhonkar was pleased to think that she had found the girl who would suit her son and adjust to his family. She relaxed and began to enjoy herself. She told the local women about life in Poona and the quarrels that the Beni Israel who worshiped at different synagogues had among themselves. They discussed recent films and Mrs. Penkar, who had a fine voice, sang a few film songs with the others joining in from time to time.



©mayavisotskaya - Fotolia.com





By evening, all the women had their share of matza tied up in clean pieces of cloth and placed in new baskets. Malka offered to make something for everybody to eat at her house. "It is not far and I will have everything ready in no time at all," she said.

"You have done a lot already," one of the older women said.

"We don't often get a chance to get together," Malka's mother said. "Come over and we will sing a few more songs and gossip for just a bit longer."

"You go home Malka and make the special tea you always make for us. We will clean up here and join you soon," Mrs. Samson said. "I'll bring some of the phenis that I made last week. Let the men make their own tea today," she added with a wink.

At the David house Mrs. Bhonkar contrived to sit beside Nina. She wanted to speak a bit more to the girl so that she would have something more concrete than "I feel that—" to say to her son when she gave her reasons for choosing the girl.

"You did not make too many matza for your family," Mrs Bhonkar said pointing to Nina's basket.

"My father wants hot chapattis so we usually make fresh ones from rice flour for breakfast and dinner every day during Passover."

"I see that you enjoy it all," Mrs. Bhonkar said with a smile.

"Not at all," Nina replied. "It is something that has to be done so I do it the best I can. The food is fine for two or three days but then it becomes boring. No fried food because the oil presser does not have kosher vessels. Everything is cooked in coconut milk. No sugar for the same reason. The only spices used are those we grow in our gardens. I often go to visit a friend just in order to get a cup of coffee with milk and sugar and a samosa made in the Punjabi style. I hope I have not shocked you," she added when she noticed the expression on Mrs. Bhonkar's face. "Your children must have done the same thing."

"I hope not," Mrs Bhonkar said.

Malka came up to them with a tray. "The cup with the bamboo design is yours," she said to Mrs. Bhonkar. "I used different cups so that they do not get mixed up. You said that you like

massala chai. Here it is. One and a half spoonfuls of sugar if I remember right."

Mrs. Bhonkar was surprised. This was her favorite tea but she did not remember mentioning it. Malka had ginger tea for Mrs. Samson and she had added lemon grass to Mrs. Samuel's cup. Samosa, Bhajia and chaklis were served as accompaniments. The women all laughed and joked and had a good time. Mrs. Bhonkar joined in. 'Hen parties,' as her husband described them, could really be fun.

Six months later Eli Jacob Bhonkar came to Jwalanagar to marry the girl his mother had chosen for him. He did not have the usual Haldi and Menhdi ceremonies because he did not have much leave. The day after the wedding he went up to his mother and asked her the reason she had chosen that particular bride for him. He was surprised when he heard her answer.

"She cared enough to give me the best cup of tea I had in Jwalanagar," she said.

"Oh! Come on, Grandpa," Batiya laughed. "You want us girls to be proficient cooks but you do not have to describe Grandma as scared and half blind to prove a point. We know that caring about people is more important than being beautiful but we simply can't believe this story."

"Imagine finding a bridegroom because of a cup of tea," Ronit added. "You must think we are really stupid if you think that we would believe all this."

"Marriages have been made for stranger reasons," Grandpa replied. ✡

The colorful tales of the fictional Grandpa Eli will be featured in future issues of *Asian Jewish Life*.

Sophie Judah was born in 1949 in Jabalpur, in Central India, to Bene Israel parents. In 1972 she moved to Israel where she later studied English Literature at the Bar-Ilan University. In 2007, she published a collection of short stories, *Dropped from Heaven*, that chronicles life in a mythical Indian town, Jwalanagar, which is not unlike the Jabalpur of her youth.

## Identity in Jewish-Indian Middle Grade Fiction

*Asian Jewish Life* spices it up this issue with reviews of two recent middle grade novels. Although these books are geared toward children aged eight to twelve, they are also insightful for adults and are wonderful reads.

*My Basmati Bat Mitzvah* (Abrams, 2013) by Paula J. Freedman tells the story of Tara Feinstein, a sassy New Yorker who is preparing for her bat mitzvah. The only problem is that she's not sure she wants to go through with it. Tara's mother is from India and converted to Judaism after she married Tara's father. But at twelve years old, Tara feels unsure about her identity. Her friends at Hebrew school and public school are mostly Jewish, but her best friend is Catholic and she starts to feel their friendship slipping away as she delves further into her bat mitzvah preparations.

Most of all, however, she wonders if by going through with her bat mitzvah, she would betray the memories of her beloved Nanaji, her late grandfather. Tara is also close to her rabbi, who she consults about her reservations. When she eventually decides to become bat mitzvah, her next obstacle is figuring out how to combine her Jewish and Indian traditions. Her plan to wear an heirloom sari backfires after it's ruined in a careless accident. Tara can't tell her mother, who would be heartbroken to learn about the sari, and she doesn't think her father can help her either. So she turns to Nana, her paternal grandmother. Nana lives close by and gives Tara the courage and hope to forge ahead with her plans to unite her Jewish and Indian backgrounds.

She is surrounded by a strong Jewish community in her New York neighborhood, but still has hesitations about her bat mitzvah. Some children in Hebrew school question her Judaism because her mother wasn't born Jewish and because Tara doesn't look like most of the other kids at Hebrew school. Another boy in her Hebrew class was adopted from South Korea, so Tara feels an affinity with him.

*My Basmati Bat Mitzvah* is a lighthearted novel about identity and adolescence. Tara's Jewish Indian background provides a different perspective compared to the usual middle grade fiction.

In *The Whole Story of Half a Girl* (Random House, 2012) by Veera Hiranandani, eleven year-old Sonia Nadhamuni has everything a girl could want: loving parents, a fun younger sister, a positive school community, and a fabulous best friend. Sonia's mother is Jewish and her father Indian, but the Nadhamunis aren't observant Jews. They celebrate Jewish holidays with Sonia's

maternal grandparents once or twice a year at most. Otherwise Sonia's Judaism is more cultural than religious.

All this changes when Sonia's father loses his job and the family has to cut costs. Sonia and her sister Natasha must leave their close-knit private school to attend the public school in town. Although Sonia is used to living in a non-Jewish environment, her friends and teachers at her private school are accepting of all backgrounds whereas the people she meets at her public school are not as tolerant of other cultures.

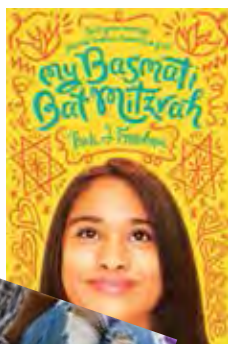
Sonia finds it odd that the white and black kids at school sit at separate tables during lunch. The white kids are not as open-minded when it comes to people who don't look like them. Sonia doesn't know where she fits in at this school as both groups of students ask if she's white or black. It's a question she never thought about before because in her family and in her old school, she was just Sonia.

Kate, a popular girl at Sonia's new school, befriends her and convinces her to try out for the cheerleading team. Sonia's mother is opposed to it because she thinks Sonia should aim for intellectual endeavors. But Sonia wants to fit in and feels honored that Kate asked her to tryout. Plus, Sonia's father has been acting strange—yelling at the family and sulking—even though he says he's happy to have the chance to spend more time with his daughters while he's out of work. At about the same time Sonia makes the team, her father finds a new job and Sonia thinks her life will go back to normal. But it's soon apparent that her father's depression won't be solved by a raise and a new position.

While Sonia feels torn between two sets of friends at her public school, she also feels like she's lost her best friend from her old school. She is also confused about her own identity. Is she Jewish? Is she Indian like her father, or white like her mother? Or neither? Her sister Natasha is six years younger so Sonia doesn't feel like she can confide in her. Just when Sonia feels the most confused, things suddenly come crashing down both at home and school.

*The Whole Story of Half a Girl* takes a more serious tone than *My Basmati Bat Mitzvah*. Veera Hiranandani addresses issues like mental illness and immigrant assimilation. It's interesting that these authors are both women in Indian-Jewish cross-cultural relationships. Freedman is a Jewish woman married to an Indian man who writes about the daughter of an Indian mother, while Hiranandani is an Indian woman married to a Jewish man who writes about the daughter of a Jewish mother.

Both of these books provide insightful looks into Indian-Jewish family life and how children in cross-cultural families deal with and understand identity. ✧





## The Asian Jewish Life Story

By Erica Lyons

The story of how and why *Asian Jewish Life* was founded is perhaps long overdue. Though I have recounted it numerous times, I have yet to tell it in our own journal, but it is particularly relevant to this issue because our story is very much an India story.

Though I sit in Hong Kong as I write, our story began in Mumbai on 26 November 2008. The entire Jewish world watched as events in Mumbai unfolded.

In Hong Kong though, most of our community had an even deeper connection. Most of us had been to Mumbai, had been to the Chabad House, knew the Holtzbergs or had lived in Mumbai and been part of the Jewish community there.

We gathered together in our Jewish Community Centre and prayed together. Like most communities, we sometimes have our differences and see one another as 'an other', divided though really only by levels of observance. That evening however, those differences melted away. They no longer mattered.

Without ceremony and pretense, people stood up and shared their own stories and their own personal experiences in Mumbai and with the Holtzbergs, obm. Some community members had only just recently returned from Mumbai while others announced that their spouses were there that night in one of the hotels under siege.

It is in that room, that I began to understand the Jews in Mumbai were our Jewish neighbors. Growing up in New Jersey, and most recently hailing from New York, my Jewish neighbors were always one town away: a quick subway trip or car ride away. Living in Hong Kong in a tiny pocket of Jewish life in a vast region, now for twelve years, those quick subway trips to neighboring Jewish communities are rather short-haul flights over international borders. The notion of distance changes when you live 'off the radar'.

It was a direct result of watching our Jewish neighbors from our wider Jewish community under attack, that I was determined to try to develop a way to try to link and better connect the Jewish communities across the Far East. It shouldn't have taken tragedy for us to see these connections.

In India, six years later, it is clear that they have not forgotten 26/11. We haven't either.

The connections between pockets of Jewish life were firmly rooted well before this. They run deep and so should the connectivity. An exploration of the history in the region shows that much of our history is shared. The Sassoon family, for example, settled first in India and their trading empire took them to Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai as well. Other families moved throughout the region, tying the Jewish stories across the Far East to one another.

I was in India this past December. I can't begin to describe the warmth of the people I met there and their gratitude for the chance to better connect with communities around the region.

Moreover, it is incomprehensible to me that some people have questioned their authenticity, their Jewishness based on a misguided notion that race or ethnicity has something to do with Judaism. I hope that *Asian Jewish Life* is having some small role in helping to eliminate stereotypes within the Jewish community.

The Jewish India story is one about a beautiful life built in a place off most of the Jewish world's radar. Some people were entirely unaware of their community's existence until 26/11. Their story is not one of mere survival and dwindling numbers as some articles might suggest. It is a community with a deeply rooted history and filled with vibrant color, unique culture and rich flavors not seen in other parts of the Jewish world.

I am honored to be able to help share pieces of their story, which are pieces of all of ours. ✎





Limmud China is a unique regional conference that brings together Jews from across East Asia and the globe to meet, exchange, and contribute to a communal learning experience.

Join us and guests from: Greater China, Hong Kong, Japan, Philippines, India, Israel, USA, Australia, UK

## VENUE

**BEIJING**  
**JI XIA SHAN ZHUANG RESORT**  
BY THE GREAT WALL

CLICK HERE TO

**REGISTER NOW!**

## PROGRAM

### SPEAKERS

<b>Professor Xu Xin</b>	University of Nanjing
<b>Erica Lyons</b>	Asian Jewish Life
<b>Jon Kaiman</b>	The Guardian
<b>Judy Amit</b>	American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee
<b>Bryan Withall</b>	Sino - Outbound
<b>Jesse Appell</b>	Laugh Beijing
<b>Monte &amp; Shari Rosen</b>	The Essential Learning Group
<b>Ted Plafker</b>	The Economist

### SESSIONS

Impact of Jewish Studies in China  
**Global Jewish Communities**  
 Special Education in China Today  
**Insights: Entrepreneurship in China** Confucianism and Judaism  
**Food Dragon** Chinese and Jewish  
**Comedy Martial Arts, Yoga, Dance**  
 Peking Opera **Movie Screenings**  
 Live Music

...And much more...

## COST

Limmud **700 RMB**  
May 1-2

Limmud & Kehillat Beijing Shabbaton **1150 RMB**  
May 1-3

**CLICK HERE TO REGISTER NOW!**

FOR ENQUIRIES

✉ [INFO@LIMMUDCHINA.ORG](mailto:INFO@LIMMUDCHINA.ORG)







# THE STAR THAT MAKES WISHES COME TRUE



**When you fly EL AL to Israel, you get there faster.**

As soon as you board the plane, you're surrounded by an atmosphere that's uniquely Israeli. Warmth, friendliness, bagels-for-breakfast and welcome-home feeling. EL AL - simply the best way to catch the Israeli spirit even before you arrive.