

## Book Review

### Shalom India Housing Society

Reviewed by Nathan Katz

Esther David, *Shalom India Housing Society* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2007). Paper, 230 + ix pages. ISBN 81-88965-09-X.

The Bene Israel comprise the largest Jewish community in India, as readers of the journal likely know. At one time numbering more than 30,000, their ancestral home is the Konkan Coast near Mumbai. As the British developed Mumbai, most migrated there and later established satellite communities in Ahmedabad and Pune.

Novelist Esther David is the Bene Israel's best-known voice. She capably fills a niche in world literature: an Indian, Jewish, woman who writes in English and writes very well indeed. This is her sixth novel, enhancing an international reputation that was launched by her first two acclaimed works, *The Walled City* and *The Book of Esther*. Like all of her works, a strong autobiographical thread runs through her portraits of Bene Israel life.

Ahmedabad, the locale for her latest novel, is home to several hundred Bene Israel. They established their community in a Parsi and Muslim neighborhood, anchored in the art deco Maghen Abraham Synagogue, built in 1933. After Gujarat's Hindu-Muslim riots of 2002, Ahmedabad's Jews lost their sense of security. They became afraid of being taken for Muslims by Hindu mobs and most moved to the city's western suburbs so as to avoid the deadly crossfire. A central theme of this work is how some of Ahmedabad's Bene Israel attempt to re-create a sense of community in a fictional housing project, the Shalom India Housing Society. At the same time, they struggle with forging a new identity: modern yet holding to Bene Israel tradition; divided between India and in Israel, with family in each; and redefining relations with their Hindu, Muslim, Parsi, and Christian friends and neighbors.

One of the most distinctive features of Bene Israel religious life is their very personal relationship with Elijah the Prophet or Eliyadoo HaNabi. Many eastern Jewish communities (and Sephardim in general, as well as Hasidim) venerate a figure from Jewish history who comes to resemble the European "patron saint" or the Indian "village god or *gramma devata*," who becomes a refuge from life's travails, an adjudicator of disputes, a mystical healer, the one to whom undertakes vows, a symbol of the community's very identity. Persian and Bokharian Jews tend to venerate the prophet Daniel, Jews of the far-flung Baghdadi diaspora maintain a similar relationship with scribe Ezra, and the Jews of Kochi bring their cares and petitions to kabbalist Nehemiah Mota.

For the Bene Israel, this role is filled by Eliyadoo HaNabi. A colorful print of the prophet's visit to India adorns a place of honor in Bene Israel homes, and a ceremony to venerate the prophet, known as Malida, is the most distinctive rite of the community. Appropriately, Eliyadoo is the leitmotif of this novel. The first chapter is a fanciful and humorous account of his mythical visit to India. He appears in each chapter, offering solace or advice or magical resolutions for his devotee's heartfelt petitions. Through the eighteen interconnected sketches in this work, one gets a very real sense of the role of Eliyadoo in Bene Israel life, as they confront changing interpersonal and intercommunal relationships, including issues of intermarriage, the conflict between modernity and tradition, and a future in Israel versus a past in India.