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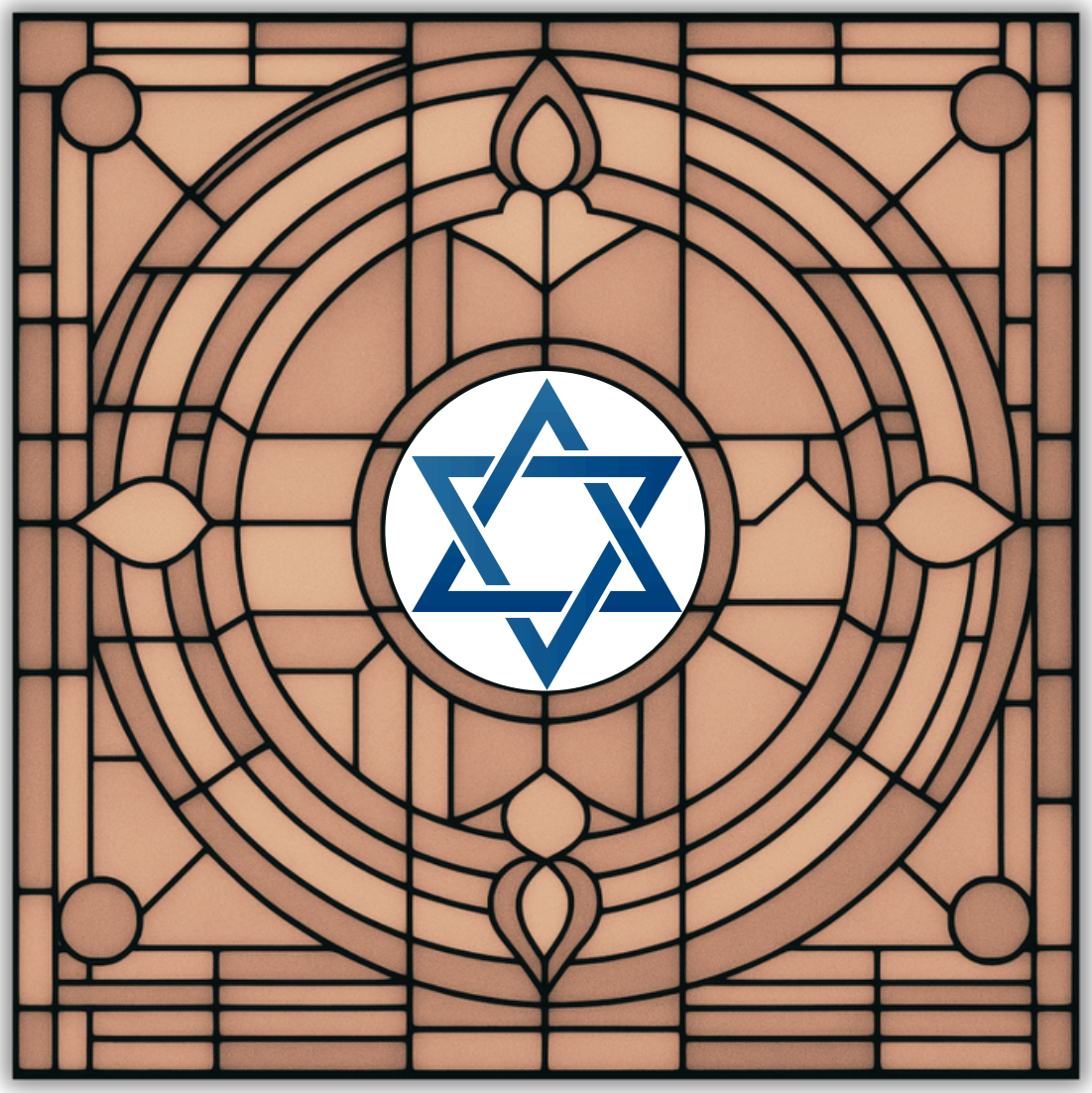

SPECIAL ISSUE

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SPECIAL ISSUE

EMERGING JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

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Kehimkar's Bene Israel Book: Model for Emerging Jewish Communities

Nathan Katz

Over the past seventy-five years, tribal groups along the Indo-Burmese border have been claiming a Jewish identity. About fifty years ago, Telugu-speaking Dalit (the word means 'Oppressed', formerly called 'untouchable') communities around Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states in South India began doing the same. They are known as the B'nei Menashe and the B'nei Ephraim, respectively. In popular parlance, they are 'Lost Tribes', but scholars refer to them as 'Judaizing Movements' or 'Emerging Jewish Communities'.[1] These are groups that claim a Jewish identity and may or may not wish to join world Jewry. They have become a fascinating topic for study, and India's B'nei Menashe and B'nai Ephraim have not been overlooked.

Like any newcomers, emerging Jewish communities rely on "reference groups," neighboring communities that assist in the acculturation of other, newer communities. Given the crucial role of reference groups for emerging Jewish communities, including both Jewish and Gentile organizations and communities, we will consider these emerging Jewish communities from the point of view of their interactions with reference groups, and are especially interested in indigenous and foreign Jewish influences.[2]

[1] Parfitt, Tudor and Emanuela Trevian Semi, *Judaising Movements: Studies in the Margins of Judaism.* London, Routledge Curzon, 2002.

[2] An extended discussion of such "reference groups" is the basis of Nathan Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India?* Berkeley, University of California Pres, 2000.

The Texts

Indigenous writings, what Indian Jews had to say about themselves, have played an enormous role in this process of discovery and acceptance. The first work of this genre is by Yehezkel Rahabi of Kochi, and the influence of Haeem Samuel Kehimkar's book about Bene Israel is our central case in point. In 1685-6, a delegation from Amsterdam that was searching for 'lost tribes' visited Kochi. The visitors were Portuguese Jews who had fled to freedom in Amsterdam and soon thereafter set out on their messianic-inspired voyage under the leadership of Moses Pereyra de Paiva.[3] De Paiva asked the leader of the Kochi Jews, Yehezkel Rahabi, about their history, and Rahabi penned his "Letter of 1768." the first and most significant indigenous history of an Indian Jewish community.[4]

Two centuries later, Hebrew University Inologist Immanuel Olsvanger, who translated the *Bhagavadgita* into Hebrew, visited India. There, he came across Kehimkar's 1897 manuscript, a history of his community. Olsvanger brought the manuscript back to Israel, where it was eventually published in 1937. This work was by far the most extensive analysis of the history and practices of an Indian Jewish community heretofore written, and it has become a model for indigenous historiography not only among newer Judaizing movements in India but also—thanks to its availability over the internet—around the globe. We will explore this phenomenon of non-mediated or indigenous research toward the end of this essay, especially as it has become more central to the field.

Emerging Jewish Communities

Reference groups played a crucial role in the emergence of these Indian Jewish identities. These were their neighbors who, in one way or another, facilitated their arrival and helped them acclimate to their new urban environment. For example, the Baghdadi Jews relied on the Parsis of Mumbai and the Armenians of Kolkata; the Bene Israel learned from Christian missionaries in the Konkan; and the Bene Menashe were deeply influenced by

[3] De Paiva, Mosseh Pereyra. *Nostisias Dos Judeos De Cochim*. Amsterdam, House of Vry Levy, 1687.

[4] Rahabi, Yehezkel, "Letter of 1768," *Ha-Meassef* VI, 129-160, 1790. Translated by Sattu S. Koder in *Journal of the Rava Varma Archaeological Society*, XV, 1-6, 1949.

missionaries in far eastern India. From the seventeenth century on, foreign Jews, too, engaged their Indian coreligionists, from the community in Amsterdam to Hassidic rebbes in Brooklyn or Jerusalem, to religious and secular organizations in modern Israel, all encouraged and shaped these communities to navigate their remarkable transformations.

The Bene Israel were the first group to undertake such an intrepid cultural transformation during their 250-year-long journey from an oil-pressing caste in the Konkan region of Maharashtra to urban Jews in modern Mumbai. As such, they became the crucial reference group for the B'nei Menashe and, therefore, for the B'nei Ephraim. Bene Israel had welcomed B'nei Menashe youth since the early 1980s when they were accepted for training at Mumbai ORT.[5] The B'nei Menashe became aware of the Bene Israel transformation of identity, and so they began to model themselves after them, interacting socially and in their synagogues. Through ORT, they also became aware of opportunities for learning, visits to Israel, and comradeship with Western Jews. Like the Bene Israel (and the Kochi Jews, for that matter), the B'nei Menashe traced their line from the kingdom of Israel, meandering through China and Southeast Asia and eventually settling into their home of today.[6]

Like the B'nei Menashe, the B'nei Ephraim[7] developed a narrative about their arrival in South India and discovering their hidden identity. Constructing an appropriate narrative has become a necessity for emerging Jewish communities. The B'nei Menashe likely learned this from the Bene Israel, and the B'nei Ephraim from the B'nei Menashe. It is altogether possible that the Bene Israel was emulating Rahabi's work about the Kochin Jews, but we have no evidence for this. Kehimkar's book has become a model for identity construction, and generating an appropriate narrative is the first step. The second step, following Kehimkar, is to re-interpret their local customs as versions of biblical religion,

[5] ORT, the Organization for Rehabilitation and Training, is a French Jewish NGO.

[6] Zaitthanchhungi, *Israel-Mizo Identity*. Aizawl, L N. Thunaga, 2008.

[7] Yacobi, Shmuel, *History of the Bene-Ephraim Communities of Andhra Pradesh, India.* Vijayawada, The author, n.d. [ca 1977]

especially the Temple rituals, and Kehimkar thoroughly explores their rituals for biblical roots.

Rahabi's 1768 letter brought news of the Bene Israel to Europe, but it was not until Rev. J. Henry Lord's 1907 book that their origin story, which he called "sensational and romantic," was brought to the world's attention. Their story tells of their departing the northern kingdom of Israel during the eighth century BCE, reaching the Konkan Coast in a shipwreck.[8] Perhaps based on the origin story of the local Chitpavan brahmins, the Bene Israel narrative also bears traces of the Kochin Jews' arrival as refugees from the Roman sack of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Kehimkar's book is likely also a source for the B'nei Menashe and B'nei Ephraim who also report an arduous journey from Israel to India.

The B'nei Menashe's story is a complex journey from Israel to China, where their precious parchment scrolls were lost. (The Bene Israel story also tells of their scrolls being lost, in their case during the shipwreck.) Unsettled conditions led them to relocate to southwestern China, where they entered into religious disputes with the "Legalists," from there they made their way to the regions to the south that they inhabit today.[9]

B'nei Ephraim author Shmuel Yacobi describes his grandmother telling him that his group had been "chosen for taking suffering on us. We have to stay back to fulfill the Covenant," meaning that their mission is to teach other Dalit groups about their true identity as Jews, or so one assumes.[10] An extrinsic origin is often a mark of status in India, and all of these Indian Jewish groups proclaim Israel as their home as well as their destiny.

The bulk of Kehimkar's book is an explication of Bene Israel's ritual life, tracing their practices to biblical times, particularly the Temple era. Many ancient practices resembled Bene Israel customs, but the most striking of their rites is the Malida ceremony, an

[8] J. Henry Lord, *The Jews in India and the Far East.* Kohlapur, Mission Press, 1907.
[9] Zaithanchhungi, *op. cit*, pp. 11–14.
[10] Yacobi quoted in Yulia Egorova and Shahid Perwez, *The Jews of Andhra Pradesh: Contesting Caste and Religion in South India.* Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 31.

offering associated with the Prophet Elijah, his visits to India and his key role in establishing them in their new home. So central is the Malida rite that it marked their identity as Jews in India and, later, as Indians in Israel. The most expansive set of Bene Israel rites were associated with pregnancy and childbirth, which Kehimkar was at pains to connect to biblical Judaism and its purity/pollution codes. But he managed to do so. Later and perhaps in emulation, the Bene Menashe especially connected their practices to the Temple era, as do the Bene Ephraim to some extent.

In these three ways, the emerging Indian Jewish communities connected their ritual life to normative Judaism: calendric rituals, the holy days and festivals; *rites de passages* that mark an individual's progression through life's stages; and irregular rites of thanksgiving or vow fulfillment, Malida in particular.[11] In her book, Zaithanchhungi devotes twelve of its fourteen chapters to the religious observances of the B'nei Menashe. Expansive discussions of their "theology" of spirits and even demons, the afterlife, and sacrifice play a large role in their religion, cosmology, and ethical and moral teachings. All are connected to biblical Judaism, or at least such an attempt is made.[12]

The story of the B'nai Ephraim is presented in *History of the Bene-Ephraim Communities of Andhra Pradesh, India,* by community leader Shmuel Yacobi.[13] He makes his case for their Jewish roots by several strategies. Like other Indian Jewish communities, an origin in Israel is asserted. He describes their forced exile from the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE (as do the Bene Israel), tracing their journey through Babylon to Kashmir, which has its own traditions of Jewish identity, and from there to Magadha (approximately today's north-central India), and then southward to Telangana, where their language, Telegu, is spoken, and where they are known as Malmadiga, a Dalit group. Similarities between some Telegu words and biblical Hebrew are discussed at considerable length[14]. Sacrificial rites are viewed to correspond to the Temple service, and

[11] Nathan Katz, *op. cit*, pp. 96–120.

[12] Zaithanchhungi,*op. cit,*, pp.17ff.

[13] Shmuel Yacobi, *History of the Bene-Ephraim Communities of Andhra Pradesh, India*. Vijayawada, The author, ca. 1977.

[14] Yacobi, op.cit., pp. 30–42

many of Yacobi's sources are missionary works that also sought correspondence between local custom and biblical religion, albeit for their own reasons. Their rules for sacrifices require their priest, the Madiya, to wear bells on his robe to save him from evil spirits, a striking parallel to the kohen gadol in performing the Yom Kippur service.[15]

According to Egorova and Parwez, the B'nei Ephraim find themselves "between Judaism(s)." Two brothers, Shmuel and Sadok Yacobi, presented differing approaches to B'nei Ephraim Judaism. The former "seeks to attain identification with Israel through a narrative about a common origin between rabbinic Judaism and the Israelite tradition of the Bene Ephraim without adopting rabbinic practice," whereas Sadok "feels that embracing mainstream and even formal conversion are imperative for the spiritual liberation of their community."[16] One notes that similar conversations are being held around the world between Jewish vs Israelite groups, from South India to Nigeria to the United States. As for the B'nei Ephraim, their writings do not focus on detail about any links in religious practices between their traditions and biblical Judaism, as their objective is to become increasingly mainstream in Jewish terms. Their identity is rooted in their historical narrative. They discover "an opportunity for reclaiming forgotten knowledge and bringing back the glorious days of the past."[17] Like the Bene Israel and the B'nei Menashe, the B'nei Ephraim discuss similarities between Temple-era practices and those found among Indian groups. Their new identity also reflects the complex caste-Dalit fissures of India and is likened to Jewish slavery in Egypt. Following Kehimkar's paradigm, B'nei Menashe and B'nei Ephraim point to their ancestral customs and history in biblical terms. For both these reasons, we see the interactive process by which their identity has been generated.

To sum it up, all of India's emerging Jewish communities claim origin in ancient Israel, describe an arduous journey by which they arrived on the Konkan, along the Indo-

[15] Yacobi, op.cit., pp.51–53.

[16] Egorova and Perwez, *op. cit.*, p. 64,

[17] Egorova and Perwez, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

Burmese border, or in Andhra Pradesh. All describe their unique ritual practices in biblical terms, at least as an aspiration. Journeys and rituals pervade their identities.

The Internet

A silent partner in these global events is the internet. I have found that a group of B'nei Ephraim in Andhra Pradesh regularly communicated with a group of Igbo in Nigeria.[18] Once, when I was speaking about India's emerging communities, I mentioned Kehimkar's role, an Igbo audience member was intrigued, and he obtained a copy of the book. He was especially interested in Kehimkar's connecting his ancestral practices in India with biblical sacrifices, and now I can detect this theme of authenticity on Igbo Internet sites. Groups from the Andes to Papua New Guinea to Andhra Pradesh to Uganda are in touch in a cyber-community of emerging global Jews. I even learned of a virtual "tefillin event" (morning prayers) linking Jews and near-Jews around the world. Such an exciting and unprecedented phenomenon must be explored and analyzed as religions assume new modes and forms that reflect their far-flung situations.

The media have changed everything. During the print medium era, as Marshal McLuhan might remind us, news spread slowly and did not engage the participants in the compelling way the electronic, television, and now social media and the Internet do. From letters to books to blogs and web pages, their stories are instantly retold for all the world, and the stories reinforce each other in their ambitious transformations and simultaneously present themselves to the larger Jewish world in Israel and the Diaspora.

These examples from India should help us understand the global phenomenon of emerging Jewish communities. Do all such communities develop a narrative to connect them to both their origin, Israel, and the home in which they live? Do all tell of arduous journeys? How do they learn about their "true" identities? Do all rely on local reference groups?

[18] My student, Remy Ilona of the Igbo Jewish community of Nigeria, and I discussed at length the nature and role of such narratives, as well as about Internet communications between the Igbo and Indian communities.

There are vast resources to learn about Judaism on the Internet hosted by the Orthodox Union, Chabad, and so on, as well as numerous websites maintained by the emerging communities. To what extent are they used, which ones, and why? More pointedly, can social media discussions, chats and events function as urban reference groups in India? And are the sort of fissures between "Rabbinic" and "Israelite" religions hinted at by the Yacob brothers and pervasive among emerging Jewish communities in the United States, Nigeria, and elsewhere generalizable? Are there specific conditions leading to this divisiveness, can we understand it better from these examples?

As my colleague Tudor Parfitt observes throughout his writings, there are few issues of greater long-term significance for world Jewry than how it responds to emerging communities.