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# Dissertation

Who are the Bene Israel from India?

Dissertation submitted to obtain the academic degree, Doctor of Philosophy.

By

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In memory of my beloved mother, Rebecca.



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## Glossary

<i>Abhangs (Marathi):</i>	Devotional praise of the Hindu god Vitthal
<i>Ahimsa:</i>	Non-violence toward all living beings, a Hindu value
<i>Aliya:</i>	Immigration to Israel, literally “ascent”
<i>Aliya laTorah:</i>	Member of a Jewish congregation reads a segment of Torah on the synagogue podium
<i>Ashkenazi:</i>	Jews of Central or Eastern Europe
<i>Bar-mitzvah:</i>	A ritual performed when a boy turns 13, according to Jewish law the age when he becomes accountable for his actions
<i>Brahmin:</i>	The highest caste in Hinduism, literally means priests
Caste:	Literally means pure breed. Popular and scholarly perceptions of caste present it as an essentially Hindu institution. “In its most literal interpretation,” caste is perceived as “an exclusively Indian phenomenon,” not paralleled by any other institution elsewhere in its “complexity, elaboration, and inflexibility.” It “molds the psychology of the people,” “predetermines an individual’s or family’s pattern of behavior in society” and “plays a major role in the choice of leadership particularly in rural areas.” Further, “from the individuals’ point of view, caste provides him with a fixed social status, limits his choice in marriage, determines his occupation, and dictates to him the customs to be observed in the matter of diet, ceremonies and rituals at birth, initiation, and death”(Chambers, 1951;150). This view of caste as a unique and enduring institution is reinforced by a long tradition in anthropology. <sup>1</sup>
Chief rabbi:	The supreme Jewish religious governing rabbi in the state of Israel
<i>Chit-Pavan Brahmin:</i>	Also known as Konkanashtra <i>Brahmin</i> , <i>Brahmins</i> from the Konkan–Maharashtra
<i>Chuppah:</i>	Jewish wedding canopy
<i>Fatiha:</i>	The first chapter in the Quran prayers
Ganesh:	Hindu deity of new beginnings, success and wisdom
<i>Ganesh Chaturthi:</i>	Hindu festival

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<sup>1</sup> Searle-Chatterjee, Mary and Ursula Sharma, *Contextualising Caste*, 1994, p. 51.

<i>Get:</i>	Jewish divorce
<i>Halacha:</i>	Jewish religious law
<i>Halitza:</i>	Jewish law regarding marriage
<i>Hanukah:</i>	Jewish festival
<i>Histadrut:</i>	The Israeli labor union
<i>Juni masjid:</i>	Congregational mosque
<i>Kabristan:</i>	Cemetery in Arabic and Persian
<i>Kaji:</i>	Magistrate or judge of the sharia (Islamic law) court, literally means chief judge
<i>Ketubah:</i>	Jewish marriage contract
<i>Kibbutz:</i>	Collective settlement
<i>Kirtans:</i>	Reciting and telling stories in Indian religions
<i>Knesset:</i>	Israel's parliament
<i>Kosher:</i>	Jewish dietary laws
<i>Maabara:</i>	Settlement for immigrants in Israel
Maharashtra:	A State in western India. Mumbai is the State capital
<i>Malida:</i>	The core lifecycle events ceremony of the Bene Israel community. Literally means sweetened food
<i>Mapai:</i>	A democratic socialist party–founded by David Ben-Gurion in 1930. Literally means Israeli Labor Party
Marathi:	The language of the Maharashtra region in India
<i>Mehndi:</i>	Traditional Hindu pre-wedding ceremony
<i>Mikveh:</i>	A ritual immersion bath used for the purpose of achieving purity in Judaism
<i>Minyan:</i>	Quorum of 10 Jewish adults required for certain religious obligations
<i>Mitzvah:</i>	Literally means commandment, according to the Jewish law ( <i>halacha</i> )
<i>Mizrahim:</i>	Eastern Jews from Africa and Asia
<i>Mohel:</i>	A Jew trained to perform circumcision
<i>Mudak ladu:</i>	Indian sphere-shaped sweet

<i>Namaz:</i>	Prayer (the term is usually used by Islamic devotees)
<i>Pinkas adom:</i>	A red booklet issued by the Israeli labor union- <i>Histadrut</i> , without which it was impossible to receive services such as health, housing and employment
<i>Poha:</i>	Flattened rice
<i>Puranas;</i>	Ancient Indian literature
<i>Puja:</i>	Religious ritual performed by Hindus to offer devotional homage and prayer to one or more deities. Literally means reverence, honor, homage, adoration and worship in Sanskrit
<i>Puja panchayatana:</i>	Worship performed over a <i>thali</i> (a round metal plate) consisting of five stones representing five deities: Shiva, Vishnu, Devi, Parvati and Surya. This <i>Puja</i> was common in Hindu temples during the 1 <sup>st</sup> century CE
Rabbi:	Spiritual leader and teacher in Judaism
Rabbinat:	The supreme Jewish religious governing body in the State of Israel
<i>Rōzah:</i>	Fasting in Islam
<i>Sabarimalai:</i>	A Hindu temple dedicated to the deity Aiyappan
<i>Sabja:</i>	Basil
<i>Sattvic:</i>	Pure, clean energy
<i>Satyagraha:</i>	Nonviolent resistance, literally means “holding onto truth”
<i>Shabbat-kiddush:</i>	<i>Shabbat</i> literally Saturday, <i>kiddush</i> literally “sanctification,” is a blessing recited over wine or grape juice to sanctify the <i>Shabbat</i>
<i>Shanwar-Telis:</i>	Saturday oil pressers, term used to describe the Bene Israel from India
<i>Shavuot:</i>	Jewish summer harvest festival
<i>Shechinah:</i>	God present with us, God dwelling among us
<i>Shiva:</i>	Seven days of mourning following burial, according to Jewish law
<i>Simchat-Torah:</i>	Jewish holiday that celebrates and marks the conclusion of the annual cycle of public Torah readings, and the beginning of a new cycle
<i>Sukkot:</i>	Jewish autumn harvest festival
<i>Tashlich:</i>	Jewish atonement ritual
<i>Thali:</i>	Indian round metal plate for serving food and <i>Puja</i> rituals, literally means plate

<i>Tu-beshvat:</i>	Jewish festival
Untouchables:	Hindu's lowest caste or outcastes
<i>Vedas:</i>	Ancient Indian religious texts written in Sanskrit
<i>Yebum:</i>	Jewish law regarding marriage
Zionism:	Jewish nationalism movement, operated to establish the Jewish State—Israel

## 1. Introduction

This study explores the identity of the Bene Israel caste from India and its assimilation into Israeli society. The large immigration from India to Israel started in the early 1950s and continued until the early 1970s. Initially, these immigrants struggled hard as they faced many problems such as the language barrier, cultural differences, a new climate, geographical isolation, and racial discrimination. This analysis focuses on the three major aspects of the integration process involving the Bene Israel: economic, socio-cultural and political. The study covers the period from the early fifties to the present.

Studies by cultural anthropologists show that groups that live as a minority society tend to adopt the customs of the general society, but there are cases where a religious community makes great efforts to segregate and prevent influences from the external society.

I will focus on the origin of the Bene Israel, which has evolved after their immigration to Israel; from a Hindu–Muslim lifestyle and customs they integrated into the Jewish life of Israel. Despite its ethnographic nature, this study has theological implications as it is an encounter between Jewish monotheism and Indian polytheism.

All the western scholars who researched the Bene Israel community felt impelled to rely on information received by community members themselves. No written historical evidence recorded Bene Israel culture and origin. Only during the nineteenth century onwards, after the intrusion of western Jewish missionaries, were Jewish books translated into Marathi<sup>2</sup>. Missionary activities among the Bene Israel served as a catalyst for the Bene Israel themselves to investigate

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<sup>2</sup> The official language of Maharashtra State in India.

their historical past<sup>3</sup>. Haeem Samuel Kehimkar (1830-1908), a Bene Israel teacher, wrote notes on the history of the Bene Israel in India in Marathi in 1897. Brenda Ness wrote in her dissertation:

The results [of the missionary activities] are several works about the community in English and Marathi by Bene-Israel authors which have appeared during the last century. These are, for the most part, not documented; they consist of much theorizing on accepted tradition and tend to be apologetic in nature.<sup>4</sup>

The main written sources in all previous investigations of the Bene Israel origins were based on Kehimkar's assumptions.<sup>5</sup> Kehimkar based his assumptions on the observations of the Scottish missionary John Wilson.<sup>6</sup> He thus relied on a foreigner's investigations into a closed community. Kehimkar's urge to fill in the missing historical gaps was overwhelming and he did his best to adjust the story to the historical framework. In doing so, he sometimes presented material that was not corroborated by documented sources.<sup>7</sup> Scholars accepted Kehimkar's notes as a version of Bene Israel oral traditions, disregarding their lack of authenticity and the fact that these notes were used as a political tool by the Jewish agency and Zionist organization, which published them as a book, *The History of the Bene-Israel in India*, 30 years after his death in 1937.

At the Institute of Race Relations, the American anthropologist Laurence D. Loeb reviewed the pioneer study on the Bene Israel which was carried out by the social anthropologist Schifra

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<sup>3</sup> Ness, *The Children of Jacob. The Bene Israel of Maharashtra*, 1996, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Kehimkar, *The History of the Bene Israel of India*, 1937.

<sup>6</sup> Ness, *The Children of Jacob. The Bene Israel of Maharashtra*, 1996, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p.33.

Strizower. Strizower ends her book with the question, “Who is a Jew?” This provides a framework for her study, “Who are the Bene Israel?” At no point does Strizower ask herself or her reader, “Who is an Indian?” perhaps because the answer might confuse her argument. There are two basic definitions of the Bene Israel. One describes them as Jews who live in India, and the second as Indians whose religion was influenced during the last two centuries and became identified with Judaism. Strizower accepts the first definition without examining the second possibility, which I believe might be the authentic one. Interpretations such as these have diverted the history of the Bene Israel onto a misleading track, because they laid the groundwork for all future investigations.<sup>8</sup> Loeb stated that unfortunately her brief presentation “does little more than whet one’s appetite,”<sup>9</sup> while her discussion of “caste” is “somewhat simplistic and only barely adequate for the purpose of her analysis.”<sup>10</sup> Loeb writes that one cannot but be disappointed with this study which relies on the indigenous work of Kehimkar 1937, “rarely questioning the validity of the data and interpretations found there, except in terms of possible apologia.” Strizower does not emphasize the Bene Israel traditions, folk practices, myths, and magic. Strizower concedes that statements are often left unsupported to avoid possible identification of informants and incidents.<sup>11</sup> Such considerations severely cripple our field reports or render them and analysis based on them absolutely sterile.<sup>12</sup> Loeb concludes: “This volume may serve as a limited introduction to a little-known Jewish community, but

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<sup>8</sup> Roland, *The Jews of India: Communal Survival or the End of a Sojourn?*, 1980, p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> Loeb, *American Anthropologist, Ethnology*, 1973, p. 434.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 435.

<sup>11</sup> Strizower, *The Children of Israel: The Bene Israel of Bombay*, 1971, p.9.

<sup>12</sup> Loeb, *American Anthropologist, Ethnology*, 1973, pp. 434-435

unfortunately we must still await a definitive ethnography of the Bene Israel.”<sup>13</sup> The Bene Israel possess an alternative personality, a discarded identity. There is a genuine case for arguing that they remain essentially Indians. Within the theory of national development, the transformation of a lowly rural caste within Hinduism into a self-conscious metropolitan Jewish community is a demonstration of the pressures of modernization, urbanization, and social mobility at work.<sup>14</sup>

Shirley Berry-Isenberg’s research on India’s Bene Israel, consisting of more than 400 pages, was also based on Kehimkar’s book and personal interviews. Shalva Weil based her analyses on testimonies of Bene Israel from the city of Lod in Israel, who apparently abandoned their Indian traditions and customs.<sup>15</sup> This ethnographic study on the Bene Israel, as opposed to all former studies, will focus mainly on the authentic Bene Israel community life from within.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p. 435.

<sup>14</sup> Tinker, *Institute of Race Relations*, 1972, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, p.6.

## 2. Methodology

This is an ethnographic study based mainly on primary data from within the Bene Israel community, originally of north-western India, many of whom moved to the State of Israel after its establishment in 1948. The fieldwork for this study was conducted in Israel and in India from 1997 to the present day. The main methods of documentation consisted of detailed interviews and observation at various Bene Israel cultural performances and festivals. I grew up and lived among the Bene Israel community in Israel. I am a descendant of the Bene Israel from both my parents. I visited the remaining Bene Israel families in India, London, Canada, and the libraries and archives in India to understand the socioeconomic and religious background of the Bene Israel community. Primary data was collected from extensive interviews and conversations with members of the Bene Israel community. My personal knowledge and close association with this community was invaluable for my research, considering that this community is known to be impenetrable.

The most significant information came from the older generation, which experienced the dark realities of the initial period in Israel and were involved in the struggles for equality or the return of some Bene Israel to India, and faced the bitter truth of the skirmishes. Their ability to express their general knowledge of their own community provided me with valuable data. During 2001–2020, I had extensive discussions with various active key figures in the community to learn more. In 1997, I visited my extended family in Mumbai, India, for the first time, and discovered that their lifestyle is exactly the same as that of the native Indians without any religious Jewish affiliations and traditions. In 2001 when I registered for matrimony, I

discovered that even though I was born in Israel, the religious authorities identified me as an “Indian Bene Israel” and not Jewish.

I had the opportunity to attend various social occasions like marriages, *mehndi* celebrations, and *malida*, a ceremony considered the core of the Bene Israel life cycle ritual. This helped me understand the symbols, traditions, and the dying cultural heritages of the community. I have a large extended family in Israel and abroad (15 uncles and aunts, cousins, and second cousins, etc.), in addition to which the approximately 14,820 members of the “Israel Bene Israel” online community enabled me to expand my perceptions and gave me a more comprehensive outlook on the community. Secondary data was collected from various libraries and archives in Germany, India, and Israel.

In the spirit of the ethnographic approach, the research describes and systematically analyses the data through my own personal experience to understand the complexity of the cultural and socio-political reality and avoid the pretense of some “objective” scholarly truth. This research also adopts the approach of researchers as diverse as Max Weber and Ruth Behar, who describe the significance and importance of the emotional involvement of researchers with their research. Weber used the term *verstehen* (understanding) to indicate a process of subjective interpretation, a sympathetic way to understand “the emotional context in which the action takes place.”<sup>16</sup> Behar took a more radical approach while determining that “anthropology that doesn’t break your heart just isn’t worth doing anymore.”<sup>17</sup> She called on anthropologists to write out of a vulnerability and strive to “mixing the personal and the ethnographic.”<sup>18</sup> I find this approach

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<sup>16</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 1978, p.5.

<sup>17</sup> Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer—Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*, 1996, p.177.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 22.

critical for approaching the Bene Israel. Navras Jaat Aafreedi, an Indo-Judaic studies scholar, wrote:

Jabalpur-born Sophie Judah is known for her collection of English short-stories, *Dropped from Heaven*, [ ] All the books I found were written about the Jews of Eastern Europe or America. There was nothing about us.

On the library shelf, there were some books about the Bene Israel, but it was all anthropology. They're looking at you through a microscope: 'Are you Jewish, aren't you Jewish; this tradition, that tradition.' And then the history. But there was no humanity, the human touch was missing.<sup>19</sup>

The study of the Bene Israel has been ignored and only a negligible number of students have taken the trouble to research on this community scientifically in connection with its assimilation socially both in Israel and in other countries. Senior researcher Dr. Shalva Weil, who carried out intensive research on the community and came in close contact with members of the Bene Israel community in Lod Israel (1977), relied on their testimonies. Scholar Joseph Hodes in his dissertation relied on interviews with Samson Samson,<sup>20</sup> and dedicated an entire chapter to his name. The community in Lod Israel and the key members, who are my extended family and close acquaintances, exemplify a completely different picture from what is usually imagined.

Weil commends the enormous contribution of this trivial Bene Israel community to India, however on the other hand she emphasizes that in Israel they failed to attain substantial social

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<sup>19</sup> Aafreedi, *Jew, Judaizing Movements and the Traditions of Israelite Descent in South Asia*, 2016, pp. 72-73.

<sup>20</sup> Samson Samson was the secretary of the Bene Israel action committee in Israel.

status. She hoped that researchers from within the Bene Israel would come forth and enlighten the public.<sup>21</sup>

Weil wrote:

Sadly, and perhaps surprisingly, this very large field has been somewhat neglected in Israel. S. Solomon completed a sociological analysis of the Bene Israel in Maharashtra.

Weil conducted a survey of Bene Israel families and inquired into their changing joint family structure. In Israel and in other countries where the Bene Israel are settled, too few students are researching social scientific issues related to their integration into the host societies. Gail Baker's as-yet-incomplete doctoral thesis on the Bene Israel is an exception. Compared to their enormous contribution to India- especially for such a miniscule community - the Bene Israel have not really taken over top positions in their new host society; the full reasons for this have yet to be explored scientifically. Hopefully, this situation will change, and more researchers will come forth from the ranks of the Bene Israel.<sup>22</sup>

It is known that this community is enigmatic, therefore it is essential to unfold the information from within. Several researchers concluded that the Bene Israel appear to be an Indian caste which rediscovered its Jewishness. I believe that the Bene Israel are an Indian caste which identified an opportunity to start in a new place and upgrade their financial status. Considering that the community already immigrated and lives in Israel, researchers concluded that they are "Indian Jews"; nevertheless, they pointed out that this Jewishness was a remote and less apparent conclusion.

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<sup>21</sup> Katz, et al., *Indo-Judaic Studies in the Twenty-First Century. A View From the Margin*, 2007, p.154

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. P.154

### 3. Theories About the Origins and History of the Bene Israel

#### 3.1. The Bene Israel Background Stories

This chapter is particularly relevant for the present study of the Bene Israel, their roots, and their position in India. An understanding of the community's background is essential to comprehending the process of the transformation of an Indian caste, such as the Bene Israel, which lived as native Indians in India, then into Judaism in Israel.

H. S. Kehimkar's book, *The History of the Bene-Israel of India (1937)*, has been the main source for many scholars and authors. Kehimkar wrote that the Bene Israel left the Galilee in 175 BCE, during the reign of the Greek empire ruled by Antiochus Epiphanes in 164–175 BCE. It is believed that the Bene Israel came to India from the northern Kingdom of Israel. The Hebrew Bible describes the Northern Kingdom as a complex of ten different tribes.<sup>23</sup> The Bene Israel chose to flee through Egypt via the Red Sea and arrived at the Konkan west coast of India (south of Mumbai). Another theory proposed by Shellim Shmuel was that the Bene Israel arrived in the eighth century BCE, while B. J. Israel, also a Bene Israel, was inclined to agree with Kehimkar's theory, while also stating the possibility of their having come in the fifth or sixth centuries CE from southern Arabia or Persia.<sup>24</sup>

The Bene Israel history is based solely on assumptions, without any historical documentation. According to the Bene Israel story, their ship sank near the Konkan coast of India, south of Mumbai, and only seven couples managed to survive. These seven couples who

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<sup>23</sup> Hasegawa, et al. *The Last Days of The Kingdom of Israel*, 2018, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Weil, *India's Jewish Heritage. Ritual, Art & Life-cycle*, 2002, p.9.

miraculously survived went on to propagate thousands of future Bene Israel men and women. In this shipwreck, they claim to have lost their holy Torah scrolls and their religious texts, which leaves us with no concrete evidence of their origin. In addition, they claim that the prophet Elijah is their main holy figure,<sup>25</sup> unfolding two occasions on which he visited them in India and then ascended to heaven. In the first account, the community asserts that the prophet Elijah manifested himself before them and revived to life the 14 unconscious men and women who were washed up on the beach. The second occasion relates a story in which the prophet Elijah ascended to heaven on a fiery chariot (Kings II: 1–18) from the village of Khandala near Alibaug Mumbai. It is believed that as he ascended in his chariot, the wheels and horse footprints left imprints on a large rock. This event is eulogized by the tribe in their prayers and rituals and pilgrimage<sup>26</sup> undertaken to the coast of Navgaon in Maharashtra where the shipwreck took place. The ground there is enshrined and community members use the site to offer prayers.

This legend is astoundingly similar to the mythology of the shipwreck in the *puranic* literature which depicts Hindu mythology. According to Hindu mythology, Parshuram, the famous Hindu sage, discovered 14 corpses on the coast of Navgaon and he immediately recognized them as belonging to an ancient race called *Chit-Pavan Brahmins*. He brought them back to life by chanting some mantras. The Bene Israel believe these resurrected persons to be their ancestors. The Bene Israel adopted the story of the *Chit-Pavan Brahmins*, who were considered to be part of the highest Hindu caste of the *Brahmins* (priests' caste). In the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, the following is stated regarding castes:

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<sup>25</sup> Mittal, et al. *Religions of South Asia: An Introduction*, 2006, pp. 172-173.

<sup>26</sup> On occasions where the Bene Israel pray for health, spouse, abundance etc.

Brahmins, here, were placed at the apex of the pyramid, because of their priestly positions. (However, they were also not allowed to accumulate large amounts of wealth and could not hold positions of direct political power.)<sup>27</sup>

The Bene Israel established a connection, whether imagined or real, with the *puranas*, seeking to tie their story of origin to that of an ancient race—the Brahmins. Later, in the nineteenth century, this story was used by the Bene Israel to assimilate to Judaism, claiming that they are from the 10 lost tribes. They supposedly not only survived their dislocation and diaspora, but preserved all the elements that bound them together to a common ancestry, such as culture, religion, kinship, and dietary laws. In their story of origin in India, allusions are made to the ancient Hindu mythologies in which the ancient race, called the *Chit-Pavan Brahmins*, are compared with the ancient Jewish race. The need to be identified as an ancient part of the history of the nation shows how the narratives of the Bene Israel moved from an imagined community, who find mention in the puranas, to the construction of a consolidated identity in the present day through traditional Hindu legends. In a sense, they imagine themselves through the mythology of a nation in a bid to authenticate their history along with that of the nation. The scholar, Rebecca Reuben connected the Bene Israel origin with the tradition of the *Chit-Pavan Brahmins*, and wondered whether the *Chit-Pavan Brahmins* were the forefathers of the Bene Israel.<sup>28</sup> The Bene Israel and *Chit-Pavan Brahmins* share similarities such as territory, language, and Hindu surnames of the village with the suffix “kar.”

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<sup>27</sup> Jones, et al. *Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Reuben, *Bene Israel of Bombay*, op. cit, p. 4.

Another example of the Bene Israel Indian overlap is the figure of the prophet Elijah. The image of Elijah ascending to heaven in a chariot with horses was also formalized into Hindu culture. The *Vedas* adore horses and for example “speak of the *Vedic* king of the royal consecration as a warrior (Kshatriya) [who] ascends in his chariot, he calls himself Arjuna in the mantra.” Also Uṣás, the *Vedic* goddess of dawn, drives around the world in triple chariots. The Ásvins (Hindu divine twin horses) are *Vedic* chariots of the gods..., etc.<sup>29</sup>

The sense of belonging also arises from a continuous effort to appear receptive to the normative culture of the land, by blending and merging with the dominant culture. Thus, adaptation and acculturation are survival strategies to ensure that the Bene Israel may not be perceived as aliens or outsiders in the Indian subcontinent. Under such circumstances, subjectivity is constructed out of this very desire to be accepted, which is mirrored in the group’s affiliation with the nation and its cultural and moral outlook. But sometimes the different threats of cultural hegemony and right-wing politics make minority communities in India defensive and this takes the shape of aggressive protectionism of their religious practice and way of life. One can view with some skepticism the celebratory description by Benjamin Israel about the community’s appropriation of the different aspects of the dominant Hindu culture. For instance, in their desire for a consolidated history and identity, the Bene Israel construe legitimacy from their claim to be present in the *puranas* and states that: “The puranic legend may have been appropriated by the Bene Israel with suitable modifications to account for their presence on the coast”<sup>30</sup>. Yulia Egorova writes that the Bene Israel also claimed that among the 14 ancestors who

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<sup>29</sup> Parpola, *The Roots of Hinduism. The Early Aryans and The Indus Civilization*, 2015, p.155.

<sup>30</sup> Israel, *The Bene Israel of India*, 1984, p.58.

had survived the shipwreck, some of them had converted to Hinduism and eventually mixed with the local population, whereby they came to be known as the *Chit-Pavan Brahmins*. She also points to a fascinating fact regarding the significance of this story among the Bene Israel and its importance in their socio-political sphere. She writes that on the death of the prominent Indian leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the editor of the Bene Israel periodical, *The Israelite*, David S. Erulkar, wrote an article praising Tilak and made special mention of him as a *Chit-Pavan Brahmin*. He also referred to the common ancestry of the Bene Israel and the *Chit-Pavan Brahmin*.

Robin Cohen states that the Jews of India were not a single group, nor did they have a single history and root. They have been multifaceted, with different histories and complicated roots. He writes “The tapestry of Jewish diasporic experiences becomes more nuanced, but more accurate, when we accept a dual model, with the warp of the Jewish diaspora being one of creativity and achievement and its weave being one of anxiety and distrust.”<sup>31</sup>

In India, the Bene Israel represent an important community and are considered an Indian caste which lived as native Indians. The assumptions of their origin as immigrants in India began to manifest only in the nineteenth century because of external religious intercessions. The Bene Israel elders never disseminated this historical assumption from generation to generation, but since the nineteenth century, in order to assimilate to Judaism, like every diaspora, the Bene Israel also adopted a story of their origin in India. Until the nineteenth century, they denied any affiliation with the Jews and chose to detach themselves of their own free will. The Indian

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<sup>31</sup> Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, 2008, p.35

government registered them as “Bene Israel” in their birth certificates, and only in the twentieth century did it begin to register them as Jews, to comply with their request.

It is also assumed that an Indian Jew from Cochin named David Rehabi, whose identity and period of appearance are vague,<sup>32</sup> arrived in Mumbai sometime in the 18th century. He taught the Bene Israel locals the Hebrew language and Judaism. In his missionary quest, Rehabi brought with him sacred Jewish books and ornaments that were alien to them until that time. Rehabi wrote that Jews referred to as Bene Israel are scattered all over Maharashtra State, under the rule of the Moghuls. He further stated that they dwelled in tents, owned oil presses, some served in the army as soldiers, and emphasized that they were completely ignorant of Judaism, with the exception that they recited the *Shema* prayer and rested on the *Sabbath*.<sup>33</sup>

Much uncertainty regarding the community’s history and identity remains; the various narratives by and about them must be examined critically. The Bene Israel I encountered and interviewed did not recall *mezuzah*, *tefillin*, holy books, *talitot* in their homes in India, and were unfamiliar with the Hebrew language. In India, the Bene Israel opposed the authority of the official rabbis, and after learning about Judaism in the 19th century, accepted only cantors mainly from the Cochini Jews, to perform religious ceremonies during festivals, who were chosen on academic educational grounds and not according to their religious knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Weil, “*The Religious Elite and the Secular Elite among the Bene Israel in India*”, 1994, pp. 49-63.

<sup>33</sup> Katz, *Who Are the Jews of India?*, 2000. p.91 (Yechezkel Rahabi, “Letter of 25 Tishri 5528” in Hmeassef (1790), vol. 2, 129–60, 257–76; Koder, trans., “A Hebrew Letter 1768,” 1-6.)

<sup>34</sup> -Multiple Bene Israel members, interview by author, Israel, June 2018  
-The academic background was more essential than cantorial skills.

The Bene Israel were one with the people around them, wearing Indian attire, speaking the local language, and embraced the name of the surrogate village that had adopted them. The class consciousness which prevailed among the Bene Israel was influenced by Hindu society. For example, the tradition of using surnames derived from ancestral villages was practiced by many upper Hindu castes. Benjamin J. Israel mentions that the tradition of using surnames, derived from the names of villages one was born into, was a common practice among the Bene Israel. He writes “The surnames generally comprised the name of the village and the suffix “kar” signifying “belonging to” or “from”<sup>35</sup>. This practice by the Bene Israel can be understood as a means to integrate into Hindu society.

Slapak wrote “the Bene Israel were a purely rural, agricultural community, scattered across dozens of towns and villages. Wherever they settled, they became integrated into the Hindu, Muslim, and Christian surroundings, so that their homes and way of life resembled those of their neighbors.<sup>36</sup> The Bene Israel have a dual personality and they know how to adjust themselves to their host environment. Nathan Katz perceives the Bene Israel as Jews who lived in India or Indians whose religious beliefs were influenced over the last two centuries, from which their proximity to Judaism arose. The former definition is their assimilation as an Indian caste into their host society. Katz refers to the Bene Israel as Jews; however, the Bene Israel did not refer to themselves as “Jew” or “Yehudi” in India. To the Bene Israel the terms “Jew” and

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<sup>35</sup> Israel, *The Bene Israel of India*. Mumbai, 1984, p.120.

<sup>36</sup> Slapak, *The Jews of India. A Story of Three Communities*, 1995, p.99.

“Yehudi” are meant for Baghdadi and other Arabic-speaking Jews who settled in Mumbai with their families in the early years of the nineteenth century.<sup>37</sup>

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the Baghdadi and Cochini Jews built their own synagogues and cemeteries. In their synagogues, they prevented Bene Israel from holding holy scrolls or blowing the shofar. They did not accept Bene Israel as part of the *minyan* (quorum required for the prayers).

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<sup>37</sup> Katz, *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity*, 1995, p.98.

### 3.2. Bene Israel Rituals, Festivities, and Sacred Ingredients

In the Indian caste society, every group has a set of rituals which distinguish it from other societies. The Bene Israel customs are still in practice to help them to imagine and celebrate their “Indianness” in Israel.<sup>38</sup> I examined most of the rituals and beliefs from Bene Israel subjects who were raised in Jabalpur and Mumbai. The Jabalpur community of the Bene Israel did not perform the *malida* ritual, although it is a significant community that held other festivities. “Nina and Alysha Haeems” wrote that there is no knowledge of the exact period of the Bene Israel in Jabalpur. Simon Judah Ashtamkar in 1921 acquired property where all the community held their Rosh Hashana festivities.”<sup>39</sup> The Jabalpur community did not own a single Torah book, and to perform the New Year’s celebrations, they borrowed the book from Mumbai. A cantor was invited from Mumbai to conduct the New Year’s prayers. Each year, when the Torah book was brought to Jabalpur, members of the Bene Israel community along with local Muslims accompanied the Torah, rejoicing and singing. The Muslims covered their heads and joined the community procession from the railway station all the way to the Judah compound prayer hall, where the Torah was placed.

Records in the Israeli museum in Jerusalem presume that the Bene Israel rediscovered their Jewish heritage around the beginning of the nineteenth century, and found it difficult to administer their own religious organizations. They lacked proficiency in Hebrew and were unable to provide their own Torah scribes, teachers, and cantors<sup>40</sup> and other religious

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<sup>38</sup> Hutter, *Between Mumbai and Manila. Judaism in Asia since the Founding of the State of Israel*, 2013, p.13.

<sup>39</sup> Haeems, *Indian Jewish Women Stories from Bene Israel Life*, 2014, p.15.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p.15.

functionaries; these had to be “imported” from other communities and included Jews from Cochin or of Yemenite, Baghdadi, or Syrian origin. As Buchanan mentions the lack of Torah book among them stating: “they seem to have little knowledge of the Jewish scriptures or history”.<sup>41</sup> The first teachers to come to the Bene Israel’s towns and villages, in 1826 and 1833, were from Cochin; they served as cantors (*hazzanim*) and Hebrew and Bible teachers, giving instruction to both adults and children.<sup>42</sup> Without any written sources all of these ways of celebrating that I list and describe, cannot be contextualized historically. I interviewed Bene Israel members and they had no knowledge whether their rituals were conducted before the 18<sup>th</sup> century or taught by Rehabi or other outside influence, since the Bene Israel beliefs were transferred orally from father to son.

1. The *malida* ritual: the *malida* ceremony is at the core of the Bene Israel Indian community’s life cycle rituals and events, and is performed solely by this community. The origin of the *malida* derives from the *fatihah* prayer of the Muslims, in which they distribute a special sweetened food called *malida*. The Bene Israel have adopted the Muslim *malida* to their own ritual, and mixed it with Hindu elements and motives. The *malida* was passed orally from generation to generation, and there is no literature regarding this ritual. The *malida* is performed on auspicious occasions such as engagements, *mehndi*, weddings, child births, circumcisions, house-warmings, etc. Katz wrote that the *malida* form of worship derives from Islam and Hinduism and reflects directly on the interactions between Islam, Hinduism and Judaism (Katz, 2000,101).

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<sup>41</sup> Buchanan, "Christian Reseaches in Asia." London: Society for the Promotion of Popular Instruction, 1811, P. 106

<sup>42</sup> Slapak, ed. *The Jews of India. A Story of Three Communities*, 1995, p.49.

Slapak noted the similarities of *malida* to the Hindu polytheistic ceremony *puja panchayatana*, in which five stones of different qualities and colors represent different gods, whereas the Bene Israel *malida* has five different fruits. The *malida* dish of sweetened flattened rice (*poha* in Marathi) is prayed over and served at the ceremony. It contains coconut flakes flavored and scented with cardamom and garnished with almonds and pistachios served on a large *thali* (metal plate), and adorned with five fruits. Traditionally, the fruits are a banana, an orange, an apple, a date, and a pear; although it could be any other fruit in season. The mounded *thali* is then decorated with roses or rose petals and cloves. The *malida* plate contents are then disbursed to all the guests after blessings. A melody is sung from a text in Marathi. The prayer consists of a song sung by all the participants to glorify prophet Elijah. This is followed by blessings over perfume (usually roses, or cloves), and for the fruit on the plate, which derive from the trees and the earth, and a blessing for the various food ingredients. After the ceremony, a non-vegetarian Indian meal of chicken or mutton is served, out of respect for their Hindu neighbors and the sanctity of the cow. *Kosher* limitations are not observed, tea and coffee with milk are served immediately after. One who observes this ceremony might imagine that a Hindu rite is being performed. Incense sticks are lit, and a mantra by all the participants repeats itself during the entire ritual. In Israel the mantra is chanted in Hebrew more than a dozen times, invoking prophet Elijah. Many of the participants wear Indian attire, speak Marathi, and sing Marathi and Hindi songs. “Scholars note an influence of *kirtans* and *abhangs* on these songs.<sup>43</sup> The *kirtan* is a recitation of a mantra in Hinduism, and *abhangs* (Marathi) is a devotional prayer sung in honor of the Hindu

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<sup>43</sup> Brill, *Rabbi on the Ganges: A Jewish–Hindu Encounter*, 2020, p. 261.

god Vitthal, a Hindu deity predominantly worshiped in the State of Maharashtra. An empty chair is reserved in honor of prophet Elijah. Before the participants depart for home, they are each given a packet from the *malida* plate.



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<sup>44</sup> Pictures courtesy of Liora Isaac, an Indian Musician and singer from the Bene Israel community. (The Hebrew Calendar. Sets Dates for Generations. Heli Tabibi-Bareket. Hebrew.)

2. *Sabja*: are holy basil leaves considered “a must” to integrate during ceremonies. These leaves are considered sacred in the Hindu religion. They are a symbol of purity, health, and spiritual goodness. No ceremony and offering to the gods is complete without these leaves. Using holy basil leaves in *puja* rituals brings happiness, comfort, prosperity, health, and well-being in the family. They remove all kinds of obstacles in life. The Bene Israel participants in the ceremonies consider these leaves so important that they keep them for a long time after the ceremony. In the Hindu legends they were handed over to the deity Shri Vishnu by Shri Bramha. *Sabja* is liked by Shri Vishnu and hence it is specially offered to Shri Vishnu.<sup>45</sup>
3. Coconut: The Bene Israel always use fresh graded coconut in the *malida* plate with puffed rice, and in all other ceremonies. The coconut has great significance in Hinduism. The community performs rituals involving coconut, for example, when a child takes the first step one of the uncles breaks a coconut at the child’s feet, and the child walks through the coconut water, signifying the removal of all obstacles. Breaking a coconut also symbolizes blessings for new beginnings in the Bene Israel culture. This rite is also associated with Lord Ganesh (the most worshiped deity in the Hindu religion, God of new beginnings, success, and wisdom). At the beginning of any auspicious task or journey, people smash coconuts to propitiate Ganesh. For example, in the Hindu rite of *sabarimalai* dedicated to the god Aiyappan [Hindu god of growth], the son of Siva and Mohini, a female form of Visnu:

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<sup>45</sup> <https://www.hindujagruti.org/hinduism/knowledge/article/why-are-tulsi-leaves-used-while-offering-naivedya.html>

Upon reaching the temple, the pilgrim smashes a coconut upon one of the 18 steps of the temple, a symbol of the dissolution of himself into Aiyappan. The pilgrim should undertake the pilgrimage each year, smashing a coconut on each successive step until all 18 have been covered.<sup>46</sup>

Coconut plays a vital role in all *puja* rituals. The coconut is a *sattvic* [Sanskrit: pure, clean energy] fruit. It is sacred, pure, clean, and health giving, endowed with several properties. It is also offered on occasions like weddings, festivals, the use of a new vehicle, house, etc. The marks on the coconut are even thought to represent the three-eyed Lord Shiva, and therefore it is considered to be a means to fulfill our desires.

4. *Ganesh Chaturthi*: this is a Hindu festival which commemorates the arrival of Ganesh to earth with his mother, the goddess Parvati. During this festival the Bene Israel prepare a sweet called *mudak ladu*, considered to be Ganesh's favorite confection.
5. The Shema Israel prayer: every child is taught to say this prayer in bed before going to sleep at night. In India, this prayer was recited automatically without understanding the meaning of the words or even knowing that it is in Hebrew. This oral tradition shows that it was done, like in many other castes, as an obscure tradition from the past.
6. Passover: on the eve of the Passover, a portion of goat's blood is brought and the father in the house dips his right palm in the blood and stamps it on the lintel of the main entrance. This is the only ritual observed for Passover. There was no literature on the exodus from Egypt.
7. New Year's Eve: families organized transport and traveled to the banks of a nearby river to observe the *tashlich* sea prayers, which were conducted by a cantor.

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<sup>46</sup> Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 1996, p.214.

8. Day of atonement: the Bene Israel gathered in a prayer hall, which was usually attached to a private residential house. Mothers distributed white handkerchiefs, which were spread on the floor. Members, in obeisance on their knees, touched their foreheads to the floor four times for the Shema Israel prayer.
9. *Rōzah*: the Bene Israel observed a day of fasting which they called *rōzah* (Persian term for fasting in non-Arab Muslim countries), during the day of atonement. Children fasted half a day.
10. *Simchat-Torah*: prayers were conducted during the first half of the day followed by social and sport activities, after which Indian food and sweets were served.
11. Circumcision: circumcision was done without prayers. *Laddus* (Indian sweet) were thrown in the air for the children's joy and amusement.
12. First haircut: Bene Israel observed the Hindu custom of shaving the baby's head after birth. The newborn baby's hair after birth is considered impure and is associated with one's former incarnation.
13. Turmeric paste ceremony: before marriage, the bride applies turmeric paste on her body to purify herself. This ritual is common among Hindus, irrespective of caste.  
  
Some mothers massage their babies with turmeric paste, a custom observed by the *Brahmins*.
14. *Mehndi*: *Mehndi* is a pre-matrimony ceremony similar to what is known in Israel as *Henna*. The bride and groom sit together adorned in ornaments while the guests throw money at their feet. The bride receives gold jewelry from her mother-in-law.
15. Marriages: in the Bene Israel community are generally arranged where the parents make the effort on behalf of the boy or girl to find a suitable partner. Love marriages require

the consent of the parents. The ceremony was conducted only by exchanging rings, nevertheless, from the 20<sup>th</sup> century some men added the breaking of the glass by their hands instead of the foot as accustomed in the Jewish religion.

16. Divorces: did not exist in the Bene Israel community. If the husband decided to leave his wife, he sent her back to her parents' home.

17. Dietary laws: the Bene Israel never discussed *kosher* issues; nevertheless, they did not consume pork or scale-less fish. The dietary laws were connected to health issues: pigs were considered dirty animals that consume garbage and scale-less fish were not protected from the pollution in the water. Milk was never consumed with meat or fish, because the Bene Israel believed that it generates a skin disease called leukoderma. Nevertheless, they did consume chicken with yogurt in their biryani dish.

The Bene Israel celebrated Christmas, *Diwali*, *Holi*, and Silvester. They did not celebrate the Jewish *Hanukah*, *Tu-Bishvat*, *Shavuot*, *Sukkot*, and did not perform *bar-mitzvah*, *shiva*, *Shabbat-kiddush*, *divorce* and *mikveh*, and worked, cooked, and drove on Saturdays.

Weil relates Jewish rituals to the Bene Israel but attributes them to their unawareness of the Jewish oral law, which is a norm in the Jewish religion. This exemplifies their alienation from mainstream Judaism for centuries, and thus cannot be considered as astonishing nor ignorance.<sup>47</sup> She further states the distinctiveness of the Bene Israel rituals which differentiates them from other Jews. Her observation relating to the dividing line between the Bene Israel community and mainstream Judaism, as I mentioned before, owes to the fact that they never referred to themselves as Jews. This situation of splitting between two identities, the strong Hindu cultural

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<sup>47</sup> Weil, *India's Jewish Heritage. Ritual, Art & Life-cycle*, 2002, p.79.

influence within the Bene Israel, and the new Israeli society into which they fail to assimilate, accentuates the Bene Israel Indian affiliation and allegiance to the caste traditions they absorbed in India. The predicament researchers encountered is understandable but somehow the Bene Israel identity seems obvious to me. They are the personification of an Indian caste which commencing in the nineteenth century, selectively adopted some of the Jewish traditions, thus classifying them as an Indian Bene Israel caste, aspiring assimilation into Judaism.

According to Miri's analysis:

'Reflection about the kind of being we are' is precisely also reflection about our identity. Our identity is thus bound up with the strong evaluation we make. The answer to the question 'What is my identity?' cannot consist in a simple enumeration of properties that I happen to possess. These may indeed figure in the answer, but they figure only insofar as they are important in my assessment of what I fundamentally am or ought to be. Thus, suppose I answer the question, 'Who am I?' with 'I am an Indian above all else', this means that my being an Indian defines me in a way which no other description of me can (...). To be deprived of this identity is for my being—my human being—to be eroded in a way profoundly different from the way in which the non-availability of any of the other descriptions might possibly erode my human identity.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Miri, *Identity and the Moral Life*, 2003, pp. 59-60.

### 3.3 Bene Israel–Muslim Relations

The Bene Israel in Mumbai were close friends with Muslims whom they referred to as their brothers and interacted with them socially and financially. The Bene Israel are mentioned in the Quran, which refers to Jews and Bene Israel as different sects, and that is what intertwined them into their uniquely warm relationship with the Muslims. Scholars on the Bene Israel topic have flexibly adjusted the history, according to the Bene Israel claims over time. For example, Azam Samaji Hassaji a Bene Israel junior commissioned officer in the British army, was taken captive during the Anglo-Mysore War of 1792–99 launched against Tipu Sultan, the King of Mysore, who was a Muslim. Azam was charged for treachery and condemned to be executed on the orders of Tipu. However, according to the legend, the Sultan inquired about Azam’s caste origin. Azam replied that he was a Bene Israel. The mother of Tipu Sultan, when hearing that he was a Bene Israel (i.e., belonging to a community quoted in reverence in the holy Quran and not easy to come across in India), intervened, and had the death sentence revoked. As a token of gratitude, Azam promised the mother, that he would build a mosque in her honor. Azam Samaji Hassaji built a *Juni masjid* (mosque) in 1796, in Mumbai’s Mohalla section and called it Masjid Bene Israel,<sup>49</sup> which was a congregational mosque for Muslims. Scholars referred to this mosque as the first Bene Israel Jewish synagogue.<sup>50</sup> The *masjid* was rebuilt in a new location in Mandvi and toward the twentieth century was transformed into a Bene Israel Gate-of-Mercy (Shaar-ha-Rahamim) synagogue. Azam Samaji Hassaji’s name was transformed into Samuel Ezekiel Divekar, and the mosque for the Muslim Sultan’s mother was transformed to be the first Bene

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<sup>49</sup> Weil, *India’s Jewish Heritage. Ritual, Art & Life-cycle*, 2002, p.14.

<sup>50</sup> “The State of Research into Bene Israel Indian Jews.” *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 1 October 1980, p. 400

Israel Jewish synagogue. Scholars assumed that Azam belonged to the Jews of India, nevertheless, Azam had two wives, as polygamy was customary within Islam and the Bene Israel. Research has focused on establishing the Bene Israel as Indian Jews, on the one hand, thereby disregarding their similarities to the Hindus, and on the other hand, to the Muslims, with whom they had a warm relationship. In Afghanistan and Pakistan, members of the Bene Israel community are known also as Bene Israel and are considered Bene Israel Muslims. Some Bene Israel who immigrated to Israel as Jews belonged to these Muslim tribes. To conclude my point, the Bene Israel who immigrated to Israel are referred to as “Indian Jews,” and Bene Israel from India who immigrated to Arab states like Dubai and Kuwait are considered as “Bene Israel Muslims.” Can branches of the same family tree be categorized as Jewish or Muslim solely on the basis of their geographical sphere? Jonathan shared<sup>51</sup> that his cousin chose to immigrate to Kuwait, thus changed his name from Moshe to Musa and lives as a Bene Israel Muslim in an Arab country.

The Bene Israel have also adopted Muslim terms such as *namaz* for prayers, *rōzah* for fasts, *masjid* for places of worship, *kajis* for judges and cantors, *kabristan* for cemetery. Muslims shared their cemeteries with the Bene Israel because they considered them as a tributary of Islam. The Bene Israel followed the Muslim calendar and observed the fast of Ramadan and prostrated on the floor while praying. Scholars<sup>52</sup> referred to the “Bene Israel–Muslim” relations as “Jewish–Muslim relations”, indicating close and harmonized relations in India. This assumption is

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<sup>51</sup> Jonathan Jacob, member of the Bene Israel, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion, Israel, June 2018

<sup>52</sup> Jaat Aafreedi, *Jewish–Muslim Relations in South Asia*, 2016.

inaccurate and misleading because all the older Bene Israel generation emphasized explicitly that if they were Jews, they obviously would have no connection with the Muslims and vice versa.

Picture of the cemetery in Navgav:



The monument stone in the picture has been renewed and rewritten (on the white portion of the stone). The words on top “NAVGAV JEWISH CEMETRY” were not engraved on the original tombstones, since the term Jew was alien to the Bene Israel.

In Marathi it is written: “Navgav Israeli *kabristan*,” *kabristan* means cemetery in Islam.

On the highlighted Marathi at the bottom is written: “The 2000-year Bene Israel *kabristan*.”

Hinduism has a vast number of sacred symbols such as *om*, *swastika*, *trishula*, *ganesha*, lotus, and hexagram. The hexagram symbol is commonly used in most major religions. Some assume that the Jewish religion adopted the star of David from the *anahata* (Sanskrit: unstruck) symbolizes the fourth primary chakra in Hinduism. Muslims used the seal of the Solomon hexagram in the medieval period. Christians have used it for centuries in many of their churches, etc.

### 3.4. Bene Israel Education and Occupations in India

The Bene Israel who stayed in the Konkan villages were oil pressers and were commonly called “*Teli*,” the Marathi caste name for oil pressers. These theories from 2000 years back are irrelevant assumptions to my research; The term *Shanvar-Teli* refers to the remote villages hundreds of years ago and is a misleading description for modern times, just as the Jews cannot be described as shepherds nor can the Americans be called cowboys today. In the twentieth century, many Bene Israel held high-ranking positions in the British army, Indian educational system, courts, medical institutions, as doctors, teachers and in the Indian government service.

The Bene Israel were permitted to attend the British educational institutions in Catholic and Protestant schools managed by British missionaries. Many graduated Senior Cambridge in India. Weil mentions high-ranking Bene Israel officials who held key positions in the Indian Navy,<sup>53</sup> such as Vice Admiral BA Samson (1916–2016) who received royal medals in the First World War, and Major-General JR Samson (1918–95).

Nina and Alysha Haeems mention Bene Israel career women in professions such as medicine, nursing, teaching and academia. Bene Israel women became some of the earliest female teachers in Maharashtra.<sup>54</sup> Isenberg wrote: “Bene Israel women teachers were highly qualified, competent and much in demand, not only teaching regular subjects but also gym, music, and handicrafts.”<sup>55</sup> Most of the Bene Israel women did not have to work, unless they were

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<sup>53</sup> Weil, *India's Jewish Heritage. Ritual, Art & Life-cycle*, 2002, p.117.

<sup>54</sup> Haeems, *Indian Jewish Women Stories from Bene Israel Life*, 2014, p.19.

<sup>55</sup> Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel, A comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook*, 1988, p.199.

career woman, and this did not derive from a lack of money. The Bene Israel caste did not engage in menial jobs such as cleaning and household services.

Uri Avnery, a German Jew, was an Israeli writer and politician. He met Ezekiel Ashtamkar<sup>56</sup> at his residence in 1962 to discuss the discrimination of the Bene Israel in Israel, which he termed as “Apartheid in the State of Israel.” Avnery wrote: “The community excelled in a non-Jewish trait: Its sons were farmers and professionals, many of whom served in the British and Indian armies and participated in both world wars. In Mumbai, only two families were engaged in trade.”<sup>57</sup>

The educational and Indianized life aspects were the most significant within the Bene Israel community whereas the Jewish religious aspect was absent.

Benjamin J. Israel:

The fact remains that there has been a continuous drift away from active participation in communal religious life of the more highly educated and sophisticated sections of the community, with the inevitable consequence that, in the absence of a trained clergy, religious and intellectual leadership is entirely absent. It is not surprising that, throughout their history the Bene Israel, have produced not a single Jewish religious scholar of any distinction.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ezekiel Ashtamkar was the chairman of the Bene Israel action committee, writer and editor of the monthly editions of the *Voice of Truth*

<sup>57</sup> Avneri, Uri. “Apartheid in the State of Israel. The Outcast Community that Causes a Government Crisis.” *Haolam Haze* 1296 (1962), 14-15. Hebrew.

<sup>58</sup> Israel, *The Bene Israel of India*, 1984, p.75.

#### 4. Zionism—Israeli Emissaries in India

In a lengthy *Times* article subtitled “An Argument Against the Ambition for Separate National Existence,” Count Leo Tolstoy dismissed Zionism as “an awakening of the thirst for imperialism and an evil desire to govern” that was “neither progressive nor national.” The “real Jewish spirit,” he asserted, “is against a separate territory of their own. It does not want the old toy of empire.” For Tolstoy, “the grandest moment in the history of Judaism” had occurred nearly nineteen centuries earlier, during the Roman siege of Jerusalem, when Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai had himself smuggled out of the besieged city in a coffin to request from emperor Vespasian the remote village of Yavneh. There peaceful Jews, not zealots for national independence, might be permitted to study Torah. “It is not the land, but the Book,” Tolstoy wrote, that became the “fatherland” of the Jewish people. Zionism was nothing but “toy congresses” and “childish colonial banks,” exemplifying “the great sin” of nationalism that “borders on blasphemy”<sup>59</sup>

The first World Zionist Congress convened in 1897, however the Bene Israel declined the invitation to participate in this Congress.<sup>60</sup> On April 2, 1919, the Sha’ar ha-Rahamim synagogue in Mumbai convened a public meeting of Bene Israel members to discuss the ideology of Zionism. The brothers Dr. Abraham and Dr. David Erulkar, both educated in England, said: “A Zionist State would provide an excellent breeding place for racial hatred based on color prejudice and that the bond of religion would be a mockery”, and cautioned “that western Jews were not free of color prejudice, even toward fellow Jews.”<sup>61</sup> Vladimir Jabotinsky, leader of the revisionist Zionist movement, stated in 1926 that the “Jews, thank God, have nothing in common with the

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<sup>59</sup> Auerbach, *Print to Fit*, 2019, pp. 5-6.

\*\*\* Count Leo Tolstoy, “Zionism,” *New York Times*, December 9, 1906.

<sup>60</sup> Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel, A comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook*, 1988, p.268.

<sup>61</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, pp. 60-61.

east and an end must be put to any trace of the oriental spirit in the native Jews of Palestine.<sup>62</sup> He was opposed to any integration, assuming negative results in a brilliant people or dull race. He also opposed mixed marriages with non-European Jews, and believed in an *Ashkenazi* Jewish majority in Palestine. Paradoxically, the right-wing party which adopted Jabotinsky's revisionist beliefs is today supported by a majority of easterners (*Mizrahim*). At the nineteenth annual Bene Israel conference in Mumbai in 1935, the president, Dr Elijah Moses, who became Mumbai's mayor two years later, urged the community to maintain its identity and secure better positions within India.<sup>63</sup> In 1930, the Jewish agency emissary in India Gershon Agronovski demanded "Zionism should aim to the east."<sup>64</sup> Jansen wrote:

"The Zionists were only interested in having the support of Gandhi, with his world-wide reputation; they made no attempt to contact the Indian National Congress, a fact which underlines their basic lack of concern with Asian nationalism as such. The Congress consequently identified itself fully with the Arab nationalist movements in West Asia".<sup>65</sup>[...]

"the Zionist attempts to convince Mahatma Gandhi were serious, prolonged, widespread but futile."<sup>66</sup>

In 1936 the Zionists decided to recruit Gandhi's support in their cause to fulfill the Zionist dream at all costs. To achieve that, they decided to send the Polish-born Zionist emissary Dr.

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<sup>62</sup> Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question. Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians*, 2006. p.58.

<sup>63</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, p.64

<sup>64</sup> Lev, "Gandhi's Attitude to the Holocaust. Between Non-Violent Resistance (*Satyagraha*) and the Sanctification of God." 2012, 30-49. Hebrew. p.32-33.

<sup>65</sup> G.H.Jansen, *Afro-Asia and Nonalignment*, 1966, pp. 29-33

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 169-81.

Emanuel Olsvanger to India.<sup>67</sup> Olsvanger failed to achieve Gandhi's and Nehru's support, nevertheless, during his mission he discovered Kehimkar's notes on the Bene Israel, and since he had a political agenda in India he used these notes as a leverage and published them as a book in Israel in 1937. This gave legitimacy to the Bene Israel to be referred to as Indian Jews, assuming this legitimacy would aid in recruiting India's support for the establishment of a Jewish State. After the release of Kehimkar's book in Israel, many scholars resumed researching the Bene Israel community, based on a book which was used initially as a political tool. Can scholarly research be based solely on political agendas?

On July 4, 1947, the United Nations held a hearing of the Jewish agency in Jerusalem. Ben-Gurion who was the representative of the Jewish agency stated: "There is hardly a country in the world, perhaps with the exception of the countries in the far East from India to Japan, which has no direct concern with the Jewish problem and Palestine."<sup>68</sup> History shows that immigrating to Israel was never in the Bene Israel dreams, in contrast to the Jews that came from Arab countries. As opposed to all other immigrations, the Bene Israel were unaware of the Zionist aspirations. For the Bene Israel, the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 heralded an option in life, with the hope to upgrade their standard of living. With the influx of the Jewish emissaries to India, they discovered an opportunity to start a new life, in a new place, with hopes for a better future, although already self-sufficient in their motherland India. Shalva Weil and BJ Israel have discussed at length the intermittent visits by foreign missionaries, Jews from other communities, and Israeli emissaries that had time and again intervened and influenced the community in their

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<sup>67</sup> Kumaraswamy, *Squaring the Circle: Mahatma Gandhi and The Jewish National Home*, 2018, p. 3.

<sup>68</sup> United Nations. "Hearings of the Jewish Agency-UNSCOP 16th Meeting-Verbatim Record-Question of Palestine." *United Nations Special Committee on Palestine*. Held at the Y.M.C.A. Building, Jerusalem, Palestine, Friday, 4 July 1947 at 9:30 a.m., 1947.

practice of Judaism. The Bene Israel assimilated to Judaism only after the intervention of the Jewish emissaries, and immigrated in the hope of a better future as opposed to the Cochini and Baghdadis who considered themselves as Jews.

The Bene Israel in India were under the influence of the Jewish emissaries and western intervention, and this aroused a debate among themselves concerning immigration to Israel. They were not driven by Zionism but were motivated by self-desires to what might be a better westernized life, as promised them by the Jewish agency. Bene Israel who never claimed to be Jews were different from the Cochin Jews who immigrated to Israel as Zionists. In 1904, one of the Paradesi Jews of Cochin had written a letter to Theodore Herzl expressing their support and solidarity with the Zionist movement.<sup>69</sup> Bene Israel Jews as a single entity/group which has evolved in reaction to their experiences in their adopted nation is one of the indigenous-Indian migrant communities of Israel. They were divided into two groups—the English-speaking, British-educated group, and the Maharashtra group who spoke mainly Marathi. The Bene Israel had many internal feuds among them. The Bene Israel, especially the elderly, mentioned that the community was sharply divided over the question of immigrating to Israel. There were rumors about the hardships and the lack of jobs in Israel. The Jewish agency convinced the Bene Israel that the rumors were not true and the complaints were from lazy immigrants who refused to work.<sup>70</sup> The Bene Israel decided to immigrate based on the unreliable information they received from the Zionist emissaries, which portrayed idealistic conditions in Israel; on the other hand, the Bible was their living document, depicting Israel as “Eretz Zavat Halav uDvash” (the land

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<sup>69</sup> Yehudi Prem Doss, *The Shingly Hebrews*, p.38, (note-6)

<sup>70</sup> Izaya Ashtamkar, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion Israel, June 2018, in his interview he stated that while going to the Jewish agency lectures in Mumbai in 1951 with his father Ezekiel Ashtamkar, many inquired about these rumors.

flowing with milk and honey). In the case of the Bene Israel, the decision to migrate, once resolved, was irrevocable; they were issued a laissez passer—a one-way document invariably issued to refugees. All the Bene Israel I know and interviewed have a laissez passer and not an Indian passport, because the condition of the Jewish agency, was that they forfeit their Indian citizenships. In almost all cases, oriental immigrants were forbidden from taking all their personal belongings with them. Despite this economic loss, the alternative of migrating to the newly established Israel was still perceived as more desirable.

Jonathan, immigrated in 1966 from Jabalpur, recalls:

“Since I was born during the British mandate in India I had two options before me, England or Israel. I approached the Jewish agency and they showed me brochures of “News from Israel” green pastoral land which I thought looked like Switzerland. Needless to mention the bitter revelation when landing in a country where only chaos prevails.”<sup>71</sup>

Izayah, immigrated in 1953 from Mumbai, recalls:

“The Jewish agency conducted weekly lectures in Mumbai for the community, trying to convince us to immigrate to a better place. I was 16 and I attended these meetings with my dad. They said it is our land since we are “Bene Israel” and this land is named Israel. We were naïve, we believed them.”<sup>72</sup>

The Bene Israel were flown to Israel as though for free, but after landing they realized the deceitfulness of the Jewish agency which indebted them for their flights, thus compelling them to begin their new life committed financially toward Israel. In an interview with Jonathan, who immigrated to Israel in 1966, stated: “only after I arrived to Israel, the Jewish agency served me

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<sup>71</sup> Jonathan Jacob, member of the Bene Israel, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion, Israel, June 2018

<sup>72</sup> Izayah Ashtamkar, member of the Bene Israel, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion, Israel, June 2018

an invoice to reimburse them in instalments. They never mentioned that before and led us to believe that we are coming at the expense of the Jewish agency.”<sup>73</sup>

This was a continuous source of friction and incredulity in Israel and disrupted the credibility between the Bene Israel and the Jewish agency. The Bene Israel accused the Jewish emissaries of spreading false propaganda, inducing them to immigrate to Israel.

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<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Jacob, member of the Bene Israel, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion, Israel, June 2018

## 5. Immigration to Israel and its Consequences

Aristotle had written, “From the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.” All relations are relations of hierarchy, according to Aristotle; the soul rules over the body, men over animals, males over females, and masters over slaves. Slavery, for Aristotle, was not a matter of law but a matter of nature: “he who is by nature not his own but another’s man, is by nature a slave; and he may be said to be another’s man who, being a human being, is also a possession.” Those who are by nature possessions are those who have a lesser capacity for reason; these people “are by nature slaves,” Aristotle wrote, “and it is better for them as for all inferiors that they should be under the rule of a master.”<sup>74</sup>

Having achieved its independence in 1948, Israeli society has been shaped by immigration patterns, before and after independence, which are significant in understanding major themes that guide this analysis. The creation of the Israeli society is definitely a unique one since no other society in modern times has ever expanded its ethnically diverse population through immigration to such a large extent in such a relatively short period. The nature and origin of this immigration and initial settlement was of a discriminatory nature in the initial post-independence period and pre-existing institutions. The subsequent impact on the oriental Jewish population of the country and the responses to these problems form the core of this chapter.

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<sup>74</sup> Lepore, *These Truths: A History of the United States*, 2018, p.21.

(Aristotle, *Politics*, Books One, parts 1, 3-7. And, broadly, see Anthony Pagden, *Spanish Imperialism and the Political Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), ch. 1; Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949); James Muldoon, *Popes, Lawyers, and Infidels: The Church and the Non-Christian World, 1250–1550* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979); and James Muldoon, *The Americas in the Spanish World Order: The Justification for Conquest in the Seventeenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994)

Immigration ideologies and policies have been at the core of Zionist political movements and institutions for over a century, predating the establishment of the State and changing with its development. Mass immigration of Jews to Israel continues to enjoy wide support on an abstract level from Jews in Israel and abroad, but the fact is that most Jews do not live in Israel. In 1950, the Israeli parliament (*Knesset*) passed the Law of Return, granting all Jews the right to immigrate to Israel, and during 1948–1951 a mass immigration of 690,000 Jews arrived from Europe, Asia, and North Africa.<sup>75</sup> Massive efforts were made to bring in the largest possible number of Jewish immigrants in the shortest possible time, despite the hardships that would inevitably follow.

There were three main ethnic groups which immigrated to Israel: *Ashkenazim*—Eastern and Western Europe, the *Sephardim*—Arab countries of North Africa, the *Mizrahim* (Easterners)—Arab countries from the Middle East.

*Sephardim* were not instilled in the doctrines of socialism, as opposed to European Jews, nor were they highly motivated Zionists. Immigration to Israel was a consequence of their traditional religious values. The concepts like redeeming the land, building a Jewish State, and creating a haven for persecuted Jews were not major components of their basic attitude. While for *Ashkenazim* the imperatives for establishing Israel were invested with additional urgency as a result of the Holocaust; for *Sephardim*, The Holocaust, while virtually annihilating Jewish communities in Germany, France, Italy, Hungary, Poland and other nations in Europe, left their counterparts in Yemen, Iraq and Syria untouched.<sup>76</sup> It was not until the execution of six million

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<sup>75</sup> Friedlander and Goldscheider, *Israel's Population: The Challenge of Pluralism*, 1984, pp.6–7.

<sup>76</sup> Shama and Iris, *Immigration Without Integration: Third World Jews in Israel*, 1977, p.32.

(primarily European) Jews during World War II that the *Ashkenazi* Zionist leadership decided to recruit Jews massively from Asia and Africa. This recruitment intensified when it became clear that Jews from the East European bloc (former USSR) were no longer allowed to immigrate to Israel.

Immigrants from India to Israel can be classified into three distinct groups: Bene Israel of Maharashtra province, Cochin Jews of Kerala, and Baghdadi Jews who were mainly settled in Calcutta and Mumbai. These communities lived in India in complete harmony without persecution. The total strength of Indian Jews in 1948 was over 25,000—about 22,000 Bene Israel, 2,500 Cochin Jews and around 1,000 Baghdadi Jews.<sup>77</sup> Among the Indian immigrants to Israel, the Cochini and Baghdadi Jews lived in accordance with the religious Jewish laws (*halacha*) in India, possessing synagogues and holy books. Both these groups refused to interact with the Bene Israel, whom they considered as native Indians and branded them as impure or non-Jews<sup>78</sup> because of the influence of Hindu/Muslim traditions. The Cochin Jews who also had various diaspora rituals and rites abandoned their unique rituals, after witnessing the great uproar against the Bene Israel by the chief orthodox rabbi, alleging that they were not Jews.

The Bene Israel do not belong geographically, ethnically, culturally, or religiously to any of the Israeli groups (*Ashkenazim*, *Sephardim*, *Mizrahim*), but because of their dark color, the Bene Israel were categorized by the *Ashkenazi* administration as Easterners (*Mizrahim*).

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<sup>77</sup> Benjamin, *The Jews of India*, 1984, p.8.

<sup>78</sup> Roland, *Jews In British India: Identity in a Colonial Era*, 1989, p.102–109.

## 5.1. Immigration and Cultural Clashes

The cultural shock the Bene Israel experienced on arrival in Israel (a result of their traditional lifestyles) would have been sufficient to guarantee a very difficult period of acculturating to the new society. Nevertheless, when one adds to this the fact that the Bene Israel were not committed socialists or Zionists, the problems created were multiplied manifold. The Bene Israel were not menial workers, yet they migrated to a country that forced them to do physical labor. They were not politically active, yet they came to a country where close involvement with a political party<sup>79</sup> was imperative to advance oneself in all walks of life. The Bene Israel were not socialists, yet the economy of their new country was heavily oriented toward involvement in cooperative, collective, and government enterprises.

The period of mass immigration between 1948 and 1951 established some of the basic contours of Israeli society, expanding major social, political, economic, and cultural institutions that came to further strengthen a system whose roots had been planted during the British mandate. This was a period inherently of a discriminatory nature programmed against oriental Jews. It was this period that irreversibly created what came euphemistically to be called the “social gap” between the *Ashkenazim* (European) and *Mizrahim* (Easterners) communities. In 1955, 83 percent of the inhabitants of the transit camps were Easterners. The *Ashkenazi* who had better connections and influence were concentrated in urban cities in reasonably good apartments. Immigrants from Europe and America were taken better care of by the government than oriental Jews. Consequently, oriental Jews were at a disadvantage in the position of low starters. Their large numbers in the early years of immigration, combined with high fertility,

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<sup>79</sup> Every citizen was compelled to be a member of the labor union. The red booklet (*pinkas Adom* of the *Histadrut*) issued by the Israeli labor union was essential to receive services such as health, housing, and employment.

oriental immigrants quickly became a large and increasing proportion of the Jewish population but held a lower socioeconomic status in society. Their arrival changed the pre-independence cultural and demographic homogeneity of that population.

Upon arrival in Israel, many oriental immigrants were confronted with an economic structure that necessitated them to change their occupations. The situation was further complicated by the required change being multidimensional. Oriental immigrants had comparatively large families with multiple children on average than *Ashkenazi* (European) families, which imposed heavier burdens on the breadwinner of the family and society in general, which was supposed to provide additional services such as health care and schools. Not only were obsolete occupations to be abandoned but they were replaced by engagement in agriculture, which was regarded as degrading. Asian and African immigrants faced an alien culture and institutions. Many were considered too old or infirm to engage in physical labor, so consequently many were unemployed or under-employed. As a result, children were coerced to work at an early age to supplement the family income. Deprived of educational opportunities, these youngsters would in 20 years find themselves in conditions of poverty or near-poverty as a result of securing only indigent, unskilled jobs.

Between 1969 and 1970, Soviet immigrants were warmly received by former Prime Minister Golda Meir, who proclaimed that they were the genuine Jews because they spoke Yiddish<sup>80</sup>, which every loyal Jew must know, and that those who did not speak this language were not Jews. She added that the Russians were a superior breed that would provide the country with heroes.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> A language spoken by *Ashkenazi* Jews.

<sup>81</sup> Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question. Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians*, 2006, p.68

The task of European Zionism, as it was discursively described, was to “raise” the cultural levels of non-European Jews to European standards, without being “brought down” to their “primitive” levels.<sup>82</sup> Such horrible negative images and prejudices formed about them that upon arrival in Israel, Eastern immigrants were sprayed with DDT to “disinfect” and “delouse” them.<sup>83</sup> Ben-Gurion even went to the extent of calling these Jews from third-world countries “savages,” venting the common biased views on these immigrants at a meeting with writers and intellectuals in 1949: “Even the immigrant from North Africa, who looks like a savage, who has never read a book in his life, not even a religious one, and doesn’t even know how to say his prayers, either wittingly or unwittingly has behind him a spiritual heritage of thousands of years.”<sup>84</sup>

One of the crueler chapters of that period, which continues to resonate among Easterners to this day, involved the kidnapping of hundreds of mostly Yemenite children from transit camps in Israel and giving them to childless *Ashkenazi* couples for adoption. Supposedly “sick” Easterners/*Sephardim* children were taken from their parents to hospitals; the parents were prevented from visiting and were later informed that their children had died and were already buried. This discourse assigns European Jews the role of adults who had attained evolution after having endured a difficult childhood, and who were now in a position to “help” third-world children reach European-style civilization.<sup>85</sup> This was the generic institutionalized attitude in the early years of mass immigration from the Middle East and North African countries. There are a few cases of children abduction in the Bene Israel community. In an interview with a Bene

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p.61.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p.60.

<sup>84</sup> Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question. Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians*, 2006, p.59

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p.64.

Israel member: “My sisters and I were very young when we arrived in Israel. One of my sisters was taken from my mother, on the pretense that she needs to be checked. We never saw her again and my mother suffers to this day.”<sup>86</sup> The Amram Association<sup>87</sup> raises awareness of the Yemenite, Balkan and Eastern children affair. They documented and recorded 7 cases from the Bene Israel community. Former minister of justice Amir Ohana, who scrutinized and assessed the documentation of the disappearance of these children and infants, concluded that it was governmental policy and in a parliament committee stated: “It is already possible for the State of Israel to ask for forgiveness”<sup>88</sup> and that “it is no longer about kidnappings but also suspicions of murder,” referring to experimenting on infants and children.<sup>89</sup> Sir Max Hastings, writing on his encounter with the Netanyahu<sup>90</sup> family, recalled that Benjamin Netanyahu’s racism wasn’t limited to Arabs. He joked about the Golani Infantry Brigade, the force in which most soldiers were North African or Yemenite Jews. “They’re OK as long as they are led by white officers,” he grinned.<sup>91</sup> These are only a few examples, but they represent the attitude the East European Zionists expressed and seem to continue to demonstrate toward immigrants from the countries of the Middle East and North Africa.

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<sup>86</sup> Interview with Member of the Bene Israel Community (name withheld by request), interview by author, Rishon Le Zion Israel, October 2018.

<sup>87</sup> *Amram Association*. <https://www.edut-amram.org/databases/countries/>. <Amram Association>. \*Many Mizrahi cells in universities and Physicians for Human Rights organization work in collaboration with the Amram association. This association actively participates in the debates held in the Israeli parliament, nevertheless in terms of the State archives, the date for the disclosure of the missing children’s documents was extended until 2041. The public and families were restricted from viewing the documentation.

<sup>88</sup> *Amir Ohana Youtube Page*. June 20, 2017. Hebrew. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqzxwTvHF6Q>>. A special committee in the *Knesset* for the disappearance of Yemeni, Eastern and Balkan children.

<sup>89</sup>, *Amir Ohana Youtube Page*. June 14, 2017. Hebrew. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9QQXZkXR4lw>>. Interview with Oren Weigenfeld in the 'First Edition' on Channel 2.

<sup>90</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s former prime minister

<sup>91</sup> Hastings, *Going to the Wars*, 2001, p.259.

Melanie Kaye-Kantrowitz interviewed Jordan Elgrably who depicts the absorption of her father and uncles, Moroccans who lived in France. She relates about the discrimination they encountered on immigrating to the new Jewish State, where they were addressed as *shvartse* (blacks). Despite their being educated in France and with multilingual proficiency, their qualifications were disregarded by their absorbers and treated irreverently.<sup>92</sup>

The Bene Israel were surprised to discover that Israel was not as rosy as they expected. They were impelled to live overcrowded with other families in tents, and depended on the State's welfare for food, a process that often culminated in regret and frustration. As the decision to migrate was a terminal one<sup>93</sup>, and the people had scarce resources, many immigrants had no alternative but to adapt. Further, these feelings often resulted in a deeper sense of alienation, and increased the tendency toward arbitrators diminishing hope for inter-group interactions.

Avnery, a member of parliament and the proprietor of the newspaper *HaOlam HaZe*, described the social crisis that existed between blacks and whites among the Jews themselves, stating that they were deprived of basic human rights.<sup>94</sup>

Since the European Jews could wield power and determine facts and decide policies while “raising” the cultural and economic levels of non-European Jews, we can safely say that the present lower socioeconomic status of Jews in Israel can be described as a fallout of a cultural and ethnic gap, or a manifestation of the existence of two cultures since the independence days, the seeds of which were sown long before the State of Israel was inaugurated in 1948.

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<sup>92</sup> Kantrowitz, *The Colours of Jews, Racial Politics and Radical Diasporism*, 2007, p.68.

<sup>93</sup> They were issued a *laissez passer*—a one-way document invariably issued to refugee and forfeited their Indian citizenships.

<sup>94</sup> Avneri, Uri. “Apartheid in the State of Israel. The Outcast Community that Causes a Government Crisis.” *Haolam Haze* 1296 (1962): 14-15. Hebrew.

The Bene Israel being the darkest immigration at that time, were treated and acknowledged by the Israeli administration as Easterners (*Mizrahim*), but lacked the boldness which characterized the other immigrants. Immigrants from Arab countries were considered to be loud to achieve their demands. The stigma that characterized the Bene Israel community was that they were too quiet.

In an interview with Jonathan:

“In the 60’s , I met a member of parliament David Cohen from the Mapam (united labor party)in his lecture before the Bene Israel. He told us that we are too quiet and without upturning tables and raising our voices like the North Africans and Easterners, we will never succeed in receiving the attention of the authorities.”<sup>95</sup>

In an interview with the daughter of Isaac Divekar<sup>96</sup>, Reena Daban Levi:

“My dad and the whole community did not advocate turning tables, which was very common during this period and continued for many years after that. Once you upturn tables, you get what you want. You shout you get what you want. That was not the way [of the Bene Israel]. When they [the Bene Israel] were told at the labor bureau "there is no work," they went back home.”<sup>97</sup>

Haaretz Israeli newspaper covered the Bene Israel community’s hardships at length. In an article entitled "The Indians Returning", published on December 14, 1951, representatives of the Bene Israel community were quoted: "We cannot live in a country where something can only be achieved if one shouts or creates a scandal”, “You live here like animals. A man eats another”, “I

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<sup>95</sup> Jonathan Jacob, member of the Bene Israel, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion, Israel, June 2018

<sup>96</sup> Isaac Divekar was a member in the Bene Israel action committee (the action committee, will be discussed later in the chapter ‘the Israeli Rabbinat vs. the Bene Israel community).

<sup>97</sup> Reena Daban Levi, Interview in the TV series, *Maabarot. Chapter 3. The Fracture*. Channel, Kan 11–Israeli National Broadcasting. 2019. Hebrew.

did not imagine that there is a country with such brutal human relations”, “we were not told that the best Zionist is the one who shouts the most and demonstrates every day”.<sup>98</sup>

## 5.2.Educational Aspects

One of the first laws adopted by the *Knesset* (Israel’s parliament) was the compulsory Education Law in 1949, which stipulated that all children aged between 3 and 14, without distinction of sex, religion or race, were entitled to free preschool kindergarten and elementary school. In Israel, the educational system is divided into different streams designed to accommodate different religious and ethnic outlooks. Arab and Jewish school systems are administered separately. Jewish school systems are divided into State secular, State religious (orthodox), and *haredi* (Ultra-orthodox), and each system receives separate funding.

At the overall education policy level, the issue of Judaism and Zionism has been dominant. The educational agenda is to sustain the racial and chauvinistically nationalistic narration of the country. It is being dealt with at the top echelons, beginning from the ministry of education, to the local authorities and all school administrations. At the vocational level, the issue has become the basis for curricula in teacher training colleges, schools, and even kindergartens. Dozens of new text books have been written in recent years, mostly privately, following the privatization policy adopted by the ministry of education. On the applied level, there is virtually no teacher or

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<sup>98</sup> Aderet, Ofer. “The Immigrants from India Against Israel: Living Here Like Animals”. *Haaretz Newspaper*, 2014. Hebrew.

teaching staff in the country who does not deal with the issue of combining Judaism and Zionism in education.<sup>99</sup>

The average education level of the Bene Israel upon immigration into Israel was advantageous compared with other communities who came from India to Israel. The Bene Israel in India were educated in the British missionary schools. Most of the Bene Israel were fluent in English, acquired academic education and held decent jobs and key positions in India. Most East Europeans, *Sephardim* and Easterners had no proficiency in English at that time, which made the Bene Israel unique.

Immigration to Israel caused the uprooting of the younger generation from schools and they did not have an appropriate alternative to continue with their studies. The educational growth of the Bene Israel was hampered by their geographical isolation, lacking inclination toward Jewish religious education, economic constraints, lack of quality education in the peripheries, and so on. The Bene Israel blamed the schools for not accepting their children because of the color of their skin. There are cases of Bene Israel immigrants who were initially deprived of education for their children, and there were no education officials to supervise this deficiency, which eventually persuaded them to approach the Christian mission.<sup>100</sup> As mentioned before, the Bene Israel, like other Easterners, were sent to isolated frontier areas or the Negev, where the standards in the rural areas were lower than those of the schools in the cities. There was a general apathy toward the rural schools as most students were Easterners. The rural schools were almost segregated from the mainstream community, provided with low quality educational services, and lacked

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<sup>99</sup> Ichilov and Inbar. *Citizenship Education in Israel—A Jewish-Democratic State Israel Affairs* 2005, pp. 303-309

<sup>100</sup> Hafif-Digmi, “Return to India—The Decline of Immigrants from India in the 1950s.” *Israelis: A Multidisciplinary Journal for the Study of Israel and Zionism* 2007, p.67

adequate facilities. A high percentage of the teachers of these schools were unqualified, and thus coupled with an incomplete curriculum, aroused a depressingly alienated relationship between teachers and parents, deteriorating these institutions from bad to worse. These circumstances resulted in low scholastic achievements and the Eastern students failed to cope with their studies especially in high schools. Hodes emphasizes that the Bene Israel observed the educational gap between them and the *Sephardim* Jews with whom they were classified. Ezekiel Ashtamkar<sup>101</sup> in 1960 expressed what the community had commented on when it compared itself with the other oriental communities. He advocated that the Bene Israel were entitled to special attention because of their unique educational levels.<sup>102</sup> Weil also expressed her astonishment regarding the high standard of education the Bene Israel received in India<sup>103</sup>, whereas in Israel they were disparaged as uneducated.

Daphna Samson-Mosnikov, a Bene Israel anthropologist from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, wrote that many of the Bene Israel were educated and had academic degrees and diverse professional qualifications.<sup>104</sup> In Israel they were cruelly deprived of their basic right for education. In the city of Beer-Sheva and in other cities, Bene Israel children were not allowed to enter schools for more than 8–9 months because of their dark color. Many Bene Israel did not complete high school and were tagged and stigmatized as “special education” schemes categorized for flaccid students. These are examples of the educational discrimination in absorption during the 50’s and 60’s, but it continued much after. From my own experience, I

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<sup>101</sup> Ezekiel Ashtamkar was the chairman of the Bene Israel action committee, writer and editor of the monthly editions of the *Voice of Truth*

<sup>102</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, p.112.

<sup>103</sup> Weil, “The Religious Elite and the Secular Elite Among the Bene Israel in India.”, 1994, p. 55-56

<sup>104</sup> Samson-Mosnikov, *The Struggles of Samson Samson—The Man Who Knew No Rest*, 2018, p.149.

grew up in a neighborhood where the majority of families were Easterners, in 1990, in Rishon Le Zion we were barred from going to higher secondary school in the city because the *Ashkenazi* parents objected to enable us to study with their children. I can recall sitting at home when the school year commenced until the issue was resolved only after demonstrations were held by our parents. I will add that after resuming my education from the age of 12 in the city, which is considered to be a secular and liberal one, there was no integration between blacks and whites, I would never be invited to an *Ashkenazi* home.

### 5.3.Occupations

The Bene Israel were accustomed to the caste system in India, where menial jobs were performed by the lower Hindu castes. The Bene Israel caste did not engage in menial occupations such as cleaning and domestic services. This disrupted a social and cultural clash between the Indians and the Israeli society upon their arrival.

The rural Indians had fewer hardships fitting in and making it than their urban counterparts, who would rather starve than accept menial positions. In one case, an immigrant from Mumbai, a father of 10 children who had managed a large railway station in India, was offered a menial job of cleaning trains in Beer Sheva railway station. He refused to work in a capacity which in India belonged to the lower caste of untouchables.<sup>105</sup> In the *Encyclopedia of Hinduism 2007* regarding castes:

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<sup>105</sup> Hafif-Digmi, "Return to India—The Decline of Immigrants from India in the 1950s, 2007, p.66.

Work that involved dealing with the dead, carrion, cleaning of sewers, sweeping, and other such tasks, was considered “unclean” and was performed only by hereditary untouchables.<sup>106</sup>

Even today, a negligible percentage of the aggregate Bene Israel in Israel is engaged in white-collar occupations, holding executive positions in professional occupations; most are blue-collar laborers employed in unskilled jobs. They work in factories, police, jail wardens, security, sales and many are unemployed regardless of their age. The women are obligated to work menial jobs such as cleaning, unqualified kindergarten assistants, manufacturing, etc. After over seven decades of Israel’s existence, these immigrants still feel discriminated against and deserted in the promised land.

The Bene Israel have undergone infinite suffering in Israel contrary to their expectations. Their lack of proficiency in Hebrew and patronage hampered the economic prospects of the Bene Israel to a great extent. The geographical dispersion policy of the Israeli government further isolated this miniscule community.

According to the ministry of labor and social affairs, 97% of prostitutes in the country in 1981 were of *Mizrahi* origin, a profession unknown to them before their immigration to Israel.<sup>107</sup>

The combined effect of a shortage of housing and food, rationing, racism and bigotry, insecure borders, a perceived fifth column in the country, and an increasingly powerful religious establishment meant that the newly created State of Israel was not at all the hospitable place the Bene Israel had envisioned it to be.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Jones and Ryan , *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* , 2007.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. p.63.

<sup>108</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, p.97.

Lepore in her book *These Truths: A History of the United States* wrote that between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, 2.5 million Europeans immigrated to the American continent and forcefully enslaved 12 million Africans, and causing the deaths of some 50 million natives in different ways<sup>109</sup>. David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, compared the immigrants from the Arab countries, including the Bene Israel, with the African slaves in America.<sup>110</sup> The Afro-Americans who also eventually took upon themselves the local white traditions and Christianity still face discrimination in America in all aspects of life. In the case of the Bene Israel, historical similarities can be found between these two cases. The Bene Israel were deceitfully lured to immigrate, and compelled to forfeit their Indian citizenship, thus causing them to be captives in Israel. They were maltreated, humiliated, and sprayed with DDT.

Many were held hostage in detention camps guarded by armed sentries. The term Hodes refers to as 'reception camps' cannot change the morbid reality of the barbed-wired camps to prevent the immigrants from their freedom of movement. Shai Lahav wrote about the camps after the series "*Maabarot*"<sup>111</sup>.

The immigrant camps were surrounded by barbed wire fences and were guarded by a special unit of the Israel Police, the purpose of which was to prevent uncontrolled entrances and exits to the camps. The aim was a desire to monitor the movement of immigrants and restrict it according to the needs of the establishment, but the public effect was very severe. A significant number of the immigrants in the camps were Holocaust survivors who found themselves again behind barbed wire fences, this time

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<sup>109</sup> Lepore, *These Truths, a: A History of the United States*, 2018.

<sup>110</sup> Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question. Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians*, 2006, p.60.

<sup>111</sup> An Israeli documentary series, which was broadcast on the Israeli Channel 11. The program deals with the camps (*maabarot*) that were established in the State of Israel in its early days, during the great wave of immigration to Israel, and presents rare archival materials and testimonies of the transit camp residents.

in the Jewish State, and whoever does not allow them to go out and punish them in case of escape is a Hebrew policeman.<sup>112</sup>

## 6. The Bene Israel Struggle in Israel

### 6.1. Strikes of 1951

Between 1951 and 1959, protests and demonstrations were effectuated in Israel by various communities like the North Africans, Asian and Bene Israel immigrants. The Bene Israel sent letters of protest to the Indian government, the Indian press, and the New-York Jewry, complaining of lack of employment, housing, education, and food, which was scarce and allocated as if in a country inflicted by famine. Their issue was debated in the Indian parliament, because of the morbid state of affairs that prevailed at that time.

In 1951, the mother of a sick one-month-old infant was denied admission to the infirmary (*kupat cholim*) because she did not have in her possession the labor union membership card (the red booklet), which was with her husband who at the time happened to be at work. The mother was compelled to wait for her husband from Friday until he finally arrived home on Sunday after the baby's death. This incident along with the refusal of the Rabbinate to perform matrimonies for Bene Israel couples, triggered the Bene Israel to get organized in order to demonstrate against the government's discriminating policies. For the first time in the history of the State of Israel, the Bene Israel from India demonstrated against humiliation and discrimination. Hundreds of them adopted Gandhi's legacy of *Satyagraha* (passive resistance) and went on a hunger strike opposite the Jewish agency offices. Their main allegation was that they were lured to leave India

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<sup>112</sup> Lahav, "DDT, barbed wire fences and *Ashkenazim*: 10 facts about the crossings - without stigmas" 16.2.2019.

under false promises, which eventually led to their desperate conditions. They insisted the Jewish agency finance their immediate return to India.

On November 8, 1951, representatives of the Bene Israel community dispatched an ultimatum to the Jewish agency in Tel Aviv and demanded to be returned to India within 8 days. They complained of being deprived in all aspects of life and alleged that all their basic human rights had been cruelly violated by the administration. This letter was dispatched not only to all the members of the Israeli parliament but also to members of the Indian parliament. The Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, agreed to accept the Bene Israel back despite them forfeiting their Indian citizenship on immigration to Israel. Initially, the Israeli government refused to comply with this demand because of the financial and political implications.

On November 20, 1951, 150 members of the Bene Israel community threatened to execute their hunger strike. Israel Prime Minister Ben-Gurion recorded in his diary that he received a telegraph from Yoseftal, a Jewish agency representative, informing him that over a hundred Indians from the city of Beer-Sheva had arrived in Tel Aviv and had issued an ultimatum demanding to be sent back immediately to India, or else they would go on a hunger strike within two days. Ben-Gurion was appalled, certain that some of them were capable of starving to death and the probability of children dying would cause negative international agitation toward the State of Israel.<sup>113</sup> Dr. Olsvanger, who was considered a patron of the Indian immigration to Israel, mediated between the parties and an agreement was reached with the State's assurance to solemnly check these claims and resolve them within two months.

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<sup>113</sup> Hafif-Digmi, *Return to India—The Decline of Immigrants from India in the 1950s*. 2007, p.57. (Ben-Gurion Diary, 20 November 1951, AB”C.).

On December 31, 1951, another group of Bene Israel along with 20 Baghdadi Jews went on a strike also demanding to be sent back to India. Yoseftal illustrates a devastating situation where the Indian immigrants sold their beds and mattresses, and chose to lie on the ground in protest at the irrevocable dilemma inflicted upon them by the false promises of the Jewish agency, which admitted its mistake, resulting in chaos and aggravation to the newcomers.<sup>114</sup>

Yoseftal, head of the Absorption Department of the Jewish Agency telegraphed PM Ben-Gurion:

A horrific picture is revealed, everyone sold their bed and mattress and are lying on the ground. They claim to be sick and cannot go to work. Although there are jobs in the farms, it is not suitable for them. They refuse to receive medical treatment, there is no limit to their superstitions, one of their claims is that the medical clinics take blood from them.<sup>115</sup>

Ben-Gurion instructed the Jewish agency not to mess with the Indians and if they wished to return to just send them back. He further added, “You can mess with the Iraqis but the Indians are going to beat you.”<sup>116</sup> Ben-Gurion was familiar with Gandhi’s doctrine of *satyagraha* (passive resistance) and was afraid that the Bene Israel would adopt the same doctrine in Israel, something that would arouse international confrontation. The protesters achieved their goal and eventually on March 31, 1952, the Jewish agency facilitated the return of 115 Indians in a chartered aircraft.<sup>117</sup> Another group of approx. 100 Bene Israel immigrants exercising Gandhi’s

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. p.77. (Werm, Giora Yoseftal, Diary 6.1.1952, pp.169–170)

<sup>115</sup> *Maabarot. Chapter 3. The Fracture.* Channel, Kan 11–Israeli National Broadcasting. 2019. Hebrew. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OU\\_4uOy4Qb0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OU_4uOy4Qb0)>.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid

<sup>117</sup> Ibid

doctrine of passive resistance also succeeded in subduing the authorities to finance their return to India. Approximately 500 returned at their own expense.<sup>118</sup>

The news media reviewed this event, as it was the first mass descent of immigrants from the new State of Israel. This case highlighted the phenomenon of descent (*yeridah*) from Israel. The term *yeridah* exists only in the Israeli society whereas in other countries they use the term migration. The difference in the terms gives other dramatic national meanings especially in the Israeli society which refers to descending from Israel as disloyal.

Itzhak Rafael, the minister of immigration, expressed his dissatisfaction from the Bene Israel demands to go back to India, defining this descent from Israel as a “public disease” but explained this phenomenon which derived from three main reasons:

- (i) Feelings of malignant deprivation on ethnic grounds;
- (ii) The defective attitude toward “blacks” by the despotic Polish [*Ashkenazi*] administration;
- (iii) The desire to get rich abroad and the encumbrance of assimilating into the Israeli society.<sup>119</sup>

During the years 1952-1953, and after the return of 115 Bene Israel, many newspapers in India wrote about the color discrimination in Israel. India deputy minister of external affairs in Nehru’s cabinet, Lakshmi Menon, said: “one of the reasons which prompted the Indian Jews to return from Israel to India was the color bar”. In May 1953, 58 Bene Israel agreed to return to

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. p.82.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. p.85.

Israel and signed on a document that there was no color and religious discrimination. This served the Israeli government to respond to India's government accusation by denying color discrimination.<sup>120</sup>

## 6.2. The Israeli Rabbinate vs. the Bene Israel Community

What is required of the study of Indian culture and 'religion' in a post-colonial context is an attempt to think across or beyond traditional Orientalist representations – to 'transgress the boundaries' imposed by normative Western models of 'religion'. This must involve an interrogation and displacement of Western (Judeo-Christian/secular) paradigms of what 'religion' is, a problem that continues to dog the discipline of 'religious studies', despite appeals to its apparently non-confessional and non-theological orientation. Such an approach should resist the temptation to redefine 'religion', if by that one means to treat it as an isolated cultural phenomenon, ...<sup>121</sup>

The main questions that raised skepticism among the orthodox rabbis were on the basis of a community that had renounced Judaism for centuries in India, only to adopt it after immigrating to Israel. On the Jewishness of the Bene Israel, the *halachic* arbitrators in the rabbinate did have a solid base for their doubts. Another grave problem was with their mixed marriages with Hindus, Muslims and Catholics, many of whom immigrated to Israel, manipulating the Law of Return. An example is given by Jonathan<sup>122</sup> of a Bene Israel family:

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<sup>120</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, p.119.

<sup>121</sup> King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'*, 1999, p. 210.

<sup>122</sup> Jonathan Jacob, Member of the Bene Israel Community (nephew of Samson Samson), interview by author, Rishon Le Zion Israel, June 2018.

four of his uncles intermarried with Anglo-Indian<sup>123</sup> Catholics and one with a Muslim. His brother, a Bene Israel who immigrated to Israel in the seventies with a Catholic wife, baptized their son in the Catholic Church. Cases of such intermarriages in Israel are myriad. The Muslim wives live in Israel as Jews, and have taken up Jewish traditions. These examples clearly question the authenticity of the Bene Israel community, which has adopted Judaism orally and not through lawful *halachic* conversion (*giyur*). I recall going to family events in Israel with my mother, she always pointed out who is Muslim and who is Hindu, for example one of her cousins married a Muslim and another cousin married a Hindu. I visited my family in India, England, and Canada many times, and witnessed their lifestyle overseas which is completely unfamiliar with the Jewish customs and traditions. In London, my second uncle Moses (Bene Israel) married a Catholic, and their four children were all brought up as Catholics. Their house was decorated with pictures of Jesus and on Sundays I used to accompany his wife to church for the morning service. My second cousin Dennis from New York became a Catholic priest. My second cousin Nina in Mumbai married a Hindu and raises her children as Hindus, this phenomenon of intermarriages is widely practiced amidst the Bene Israel.

The Bene Israel had no institutions for divorce in India, and were accustomed to the same traditions as the other Indian castes.<sup>124</sup> Marriage between relations, e.g., cousins, forbidden by *halachic* law, was prevalent among the Bene Israel, and this not only was customary in India but is habitual in Israel even today. Parents arrange marriages between second grade cousins, I can

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<sup>123</sup> Children from mixed marriages between British and Indian.

<sup>124</sup> Archive. "File 28, A,B Bene Israel." Yad Harav Nissim website. <https://www.yadharavnissim.com/> Itzhak Isaac Halevi Herzog after checking with emissaries and in the book Even Sapir concluded that they did perform divorce and said that there are *Mamzerim* (bastards) amongst them. Letter to chief rabbi Itzhak Nissim 10.8.1957.

testify about a few cases in my family including attempts between myself and other family members. Many of them did not observe endogamy in India and were opened to all other castes and religions. These intermarriage cases among the Bene Israel referred to as ‘Kala Israel’ (*kala* means black in Marathi), this label ‘kala’ is derived from the caste system among the Hindus. The system is based on the hierarchical opposition of the pure and the impure...<sup>125</sup>

Since the word “varna” is used for “caste” and since “*varna*” means “coloured”, it has led scholars to find behind the system a division of humans according to their colors and so an attendant “racism”. According to others, the hierarchy of castes is one of grades of purity and impurity, while still others find here a gradation of power. More notably, Dumont finds a more complicated inter-twining of hierarchy of purity-impurity and power relations. While in its actual practice, the caste system is enormously complicated, as a whole, in its philosophical conception,...<sup>126</sup>

On May 6, 1961, the Bene Israel community appointed an action committee of five members to resolve the acute marriage problems, which the rabbinical authorities aggravated. In the beginning of July 1961, the action committee was summoned for a meeting with Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, in an attempt to unravel the entanglement with the rabbinate, concerning their refusal to register Bene Israel for matrimony. Nothing operative was concluded in this meeting.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Sharma, *Caste*, 1999, pp. 21-22.

<sup>126</sup> Mohanty, *Classical Indian Philosophy*, 2009, p. 97.

<sup>127</sup> Samson-Mosnikov, *The Struggles of Samson Samson—The Man Who Knew No Rest*, 2018, p.75.

In September 1961, Samson Samson<sup>128</sup> was again summoned for a meeting with Foreign Minister Moshe Sharett and chief rabbi Itzhak Nissim. After exchange of words between Samson and the chief rabbi, it was decided to accept the Bene Israel as legitimately Jewish<sup>129</sup>, on condition they cease their demonstrations.

In February 18, 1962, chief rabbi Nissim dispatched special directives concerning the Bene Israel community. (i) He instructed the marriage registrars to demand and investigate whether the mother of the applicant for matrimony was Jewish and to check genetically as far back as possible if there were no gentiles involved in the past generation chain.<sup>130</sup> (ii) To investigate and demand whether the applicant's parents and grandparents, as far back as possible, married after divorce or whether they had in their midst, marriages with relatives. These new directives of the rabbinate added fuel to the fire and triggered the community's rage and contempt toward the rabbinical authorities.<sup>131</sup>

In the summer of 1963, 110 members of the Bene Israel squatted in front of the Jewish agency offices in Jerusalem and demanded to be returned to India. They claimed they were yearning for India and had a disdain for the life in Israel. In July 21, 1964, 25 Bene Israel families demonstrated at the Jewish agency offices in Jerusalem protesting against the injustice by the government. The demonstrators were advised by the secretary of the action committee, Samson and his wife, that they must conceal the true purpose of their strike, that is to be sent back to India, and convey the impression that they were striking for the community's civil

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<sup>128</sup> Secretary of the Bene Israel action committee.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. p.78.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p.82.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p.83.

rights.<sup>132</sup> After a few days, these strikers went on a hunger strike, which was leveraged by the secretary of the action committee for his own political objectives, which were contradictory to those of the strikers. It was clear the community was split into two groups, each with opposing objectives; and this phenomenon existed within some members in the action committee, who differed regarding the purpose of their struggle with the administration. One group was determined to return to India at the expense of the Jewish agency, and the other to consistently wage a campaign for equality and recognition of their basic human rights. The Bene Israel struggle for recognition of its Jewishness was doomed to fail from its very inception because destiny confronted them with chief rabbi Itzhak Nissim, who was a Baghdadi Jew and well versed in the historical past of the Bene Israel.

The foundation of the rabbinate's refusal to acknowledge the Bene Israel as Jews:

- i. In 1835 and 1859, the rabbi of Zefat, R. Shmuel Abu, also honorary consul of France, visited India and investigated the mysterious history of the Bene Israel.
- ii. In 1835, the Bene Israel had no synagogues nor their own *kosher* butcher (*shohet*), they rested on *Shabbat* (Saturday) but nevertheless cooked and baked (unlike the Karaites).
- iii. By the second visit in 1859, the Bene Israel owned synagogues, Torah books, cantors, circumcizers (*mohels*), and baths for ritual purity (*mikvehs*).
- iv. In 1869, his son, rabbi Avraham Haim Abu, visited India and discovered that the Baghdadi Jews kept apart from the Bene Israel and refused to include them in the quorum of 10 Jewish adults (*minyan*) and the Torah reading from the podium (*aliya laTorah*). The Baghdadis asked the rabbis of Zefat how they should

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid. p.101.

correlate with the Bene Israel. The rabbis of Zefat, headed by Shmuel Abu, wrote *halachic* law that the Bene Israel are *kosher* Jews. In this *halachic* decision, rabbi Abu inscribed that he had investigated the Bene Israel case, and came to the conclusion that the Bene Israel are exiles from the first temple, assimilated among the nations, and mingled with gentiles. During Great Britain's rule in India, the Bene Israel received guidance on how to get closer to the *Shechinah*. They must refrain from returning to their wrong path. After this *halacha*, the Jews of India agreed to use the Bene Israel for *minyan* and *aliya laTorah* but abstained from marrying them.<sup>133</sup>

Rabbi Yaakov Sapir in his book *Even Sapir*, 1874, wrote that the Bene Israel were marrying multiple wives, and did not follow the *halachic* laws of marriage and divorce (*chuppah*, *ketubah*, *get*, *yebum* and *halitza*). The Bene Israel were marrying only with the symbolic act of placing a ring on the bride's finger. In cases of separation, the wife is sent away by her husband to her parents' home, without divorcing.<sup>134</sup>

In 1915, the Jews of India asked the Jerusalem and Baghdad rabbis whether they could marry the Bene Israel. The Jerusalem rabbis—Surgana, Avriel and Italki—and the Baghdad rabbis—Moshe Haim Shlomo, Yehezkat Ezra Eliyahu and Ezra Adam—all prohibited marriage

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<sup>133</sup> Zvuluni, Noah. "Half a Century of Jerusalem Press." 1961–1992. *www.ranaz.co.il*. Hebrew.  
<[http://ranaz.co.il/categories/cat\\_8\\_11.asp](http://ranaz.co.il/categories/cat_8_11.asp)>.

<sup>134</sup> Archive. "File 28, A,B Bene Israel." Yad Harav Nissim website, <https://www.yadharavnissim.com/> / Zvuluni, Noah. "Half a Century of Jerusalem Press." 1961–1992. *www.ranaz.co.il*. Hebrew.  
<[http://ranaz.co.il/categories/cat\\_8\\_11.asp](http://ranaz.co.il/categories/cat_8_11.asp)>.

with the Bene Israel. The Bene Israel from India are as *Din Karaim*, where divorce is not implemented according to the Jewish law, which facilitates the problem of bastards (*mamzerut*). Rabbi Uziel and rabbi Herzog agreed that if the Bene Israel performed the ritual of body immersion (*mitzvaht mikveh*) this would exempt them from performing divorce, and render them legible to marry, thus embracing and bringing them closer to Judaism.<sup>135</sup>

The father of the rabbinical court in Jerusalem, rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Voldenberg, wrote his own *halacha* which prohibited marriage with the Bene Israel. This *halacha* was published in Israel and the United States. Albert Menashe, the head of the Jewish community in Mumbai, updated rabbi Voldenberg and Ovadya Yosef that until 1925 the Bene Israel were not *kosher* Jews for *minyan*, *aliya laTorah* and marriage, and their synagogues and cemeteries were separated from the Jewish community in India.<sup>136</sup>

10.2.1961: The rabbinate decided that the Bene Israel from India are Jews and marriage with them is allowed.

In 1962 the rabbinical system agreed to marry Bene Israel after couples were thoroughly investigated. The information demanded from the Bene Israel couples regarding their previous generations, and whether they intermarried in their family was frustrating. Also, to inquire whether there were marriages after divorce. The marriage registrars were instructed to decide if couples should convert into Judaism (to perform *giur* and *tvila*). These instructions caused a lot of tension within the Bene Israel community, which later went on hunger strikes and demonstrations.

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<sup>135</sup> Zvuluni, Noah. "Half a Century of Jerusalem Press." 1961–1992. *www.ranaz.co.il*. Hebrew.  
<[http://ranaz.co.il/categories/cat\\_8\\_11.asp](http://ranaz.co.il/categories/cat_8_11.asp)>.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*.

23.2.1962 –The Bene Israel action committee instructed its members not to cooperate with the rabbis investigations into their origin, claiming that “these guidelines constitute a racist document.”

28.2.1962–The Bene Israel claim: “The rabbinate’s new guidelines make our situation worse.”

15.3.1962–The rabbinical institution in Jerusalem rejects registering marriages of Bene Israel couples.

27.3.1962–A decision was made by the authorities that marriage registrars will be appointed especially for the Bene Israel community.

29.3.1962–Bene Israel appealed to the Knesset alleging against the rabbis discriminating instructions.

2.4.1962–After the refusal of the rabbinate to register Bene Israel marriages, a first marriage registrar was appointed.

21.5.1962–The Bene Israel community approached the president, prime minister and all the *knesset* parties to recognize and grant them equality as part of the people of Israel.

27.6.1962–The rabbis attempt to discuss the Bene Israel situation failed, since many of them refused to accept the invitation from the chief rabbi, Itzhak Nissim.

28.6.1962 –The heads of the Bene Israel community appealed to the president, prime minister and the State’s officials to remove the “yellow badge” from them. In their appeal they stated that all the other communities were permitted to marry excluding the Bene Israel. They claimed: “this racist crime is committed in accordance with the law and in the name of religion in Israel,” the head of the community promised not to restrain. The secretary of the community, Samson

Samson, said that 7000 members of the community will approach the Jewish agency to demand their return to India on the agency expense.

16.9.1962–The Bene Israel threatened to escalate their struggle.

20.9.1962–The rabbinate discriminates against the Bene Israel by specifying their origin. The community heads approached the president, prime minister and Knesset members to annul this discrimination. The Bene Israel will be registered as “Bene Israel,” whereas all the other immigrations are registered as Jews.

5.1963–Following the decision of the ministry of religious affairs to send three rabbis to investigate the purity of the Bene Israel in India, the Bene Israel action committee approached the Indian embassy and requested them to deny visas for the deputation of rabbis.<sup>137</sup> The Indian consulate cooperated with the action committee and refused to issue visas for the rabbi’s delegation. Eventually, Rabbi Zev Gotthold, who possessed American citizenship, was the only rabbi sent to India.

9.5.1963: The action committee dispatched a telegram to the Indian Bene Israel federation informing them: “DEPUTATION OF RABBI GOTTHOLD BY RABBI NISSIM TO INDIA DETREMENTAL [mistake in original] TO BENEISRAELS GOTTHOLD ARRIVING BOMBAY TUESDAY FOURTEENTH DONT COOPERATE PICKKET [mistake in original] AIRPORT WITH BLACK FLAGS WITH ALL FRIENDS. ASTON SASOON.”<sup>138</sup> The telegram articulates and accentuates the candid disparagement the Bene Israel community had toward Jewish rabbis in particular, and of the rabbinical institutions generically. The community held no

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<sup>137</sup> Samson-Mosnikov, *The Struggles of Samson Samson—The Man Who Knew No Rest*, 2018, Hebrew. p.91.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.* p.91.

personal resentment toward the orthodox rabbi envoy to India, but repudiated the rabbi's authority.

15.5.1963–Rabbi Gotthold arrived in India to investigate some complicated issues of Bene Israel couples, which immigrated to Israel, with problems of divorce and marriage permits.

2.8.1963– Bene Israel's action committee threatened to go on hunger strikes in Jerusalem. They asked the government to check the new rabbinate instructions. The community disapproved of the adventurous actions of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and its emissaries in India and the racist guidelines of the chief rabbinate.

5.8.1963 –Bene Israel strikes in Jerusalem: “our only goal is to annul the discriminating instructions of the chief rabbinate.”

6.8.1963 –The Bene Israel threaten to start a hunger strike against the chief rabbinate. –The heads of the community, Ezekiel Ashtamkar and Samson Samson, met Rachel Ben-Zvi (the wife of Israel's second president, Itzhak Ben-Zvi), to discuss the education problems. They were asked by the president's wife to stop the strike.

6.8.1963–Conflict between the ministry of religious affairs and the rabbinate regarding the Bene Israel. Rabbi Gotthold was sent on behalf of the ministry of religious affairs to rectify flaws in the personal affairs of the Bene Israel and handled 30 cases of divorce and conversion. When rabbi Gotthold returned to Israel, the chief rabbi, Itzhak Nissim, refused to acknowledge these cases.

27.7.1964–The Bene Israel action committee threatens to start “an Indian hunger strike” as of tomorrow.

31.7.1964—A mass protest by the Bene Israel took place in Jerusalem. –120 strikers, among them 45 children, the youngest 20 days old. The protest entered the fourth day. No official institution found it appropriate to handle the strike and there was no medical supervision over the protesters.

5.8.1964 – The Bene Israel held a large demonstration in Jerusalem (will be reviewed in the following chapter).

11.8.1964 – A letter was sent to chief rabbi Itzhak Nissim via an attorney, Aaron Papo, the communities' legal advisor: "On behalf of my client Ashtamkar, chairman of the Bene Israel association and secretary Samson I am addressing you in demand to cancel or cause the cancellation of the guidelines you published according to the decision of the chief rabbinate (...). The law of the Jews of Bene Israel should be same as the other Jews in marriage. Please correct the injustice (...). In the absence of a positive decision, my client will be forced to approach the courts."<sup>139</sup>

16.8.1964—A conference was held by the rabbis to protest against the disgrace that the Bene Israel demonstrations caused the rabbinate in the capital.

17.8.1964—In an emergency conference, chief rabbi Unterman instructed to annul the verdict which sees the Bene Israel as Jews. He claimed that the rabbi's positions are based on *halachic* laws and nothing will change in matters of kosher which derive from the Torah and *halacha*. In the conference they discussed; (i) the blasphemy of the rabbinate in the demonstrations of the Bene Israel; (ii) protested against the unrestrained slander directed toward the rabbinate; (iii) expressed complete confidence in the rabbinate's position on the Bene Israel community.

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<sup>139</sup> Archive. "File 28, A,B Bene Israel." Yad Harav Nissim website, n.d. <<https://www.yadharavnissim.com/>>. 11.8.1964 translation from Hebrew

19.8.1964–Discussions were held in the rabbinate emphasizing that the council would consider the proposals to calm down the atmosphere; however, the rabbinate will not allow the uprooting of basic *halachic* laws.

1.6.1971–The scattered Israel association (nidahei Israel) established that its purpose was to unite the Karaim, Shomronim and Bene Israel. <sup>140</sup>

The Bene Israel action committee:



Standing left to right: Isaac Divekar, Sasson Ashton.

Sitting left to right: Samson Samson, Ezekiel Ashtamkar, Haim Reuven. <sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Zvuluni, Noah. "Half a Century of Jerusalem Press." 1961–1992. [www.ranaz.co.il](http://www.ranaz.co.il). Hebrew. <[http://ranaz.co.il/categories/cat\\_8\\_11.asp](http://ranaz.co.il/categories/cat_8_11.asp)>.

### 6.3. The Large Demonstration of August 5, 1964

In August 5, 1964, in the afternoon hours, a large number of about 3000 demonstrators from the Bene Israel community gathered in the Gerar-Bachar square in Jerusalem. Private buses drove into the square one after the other and dropped off protesters arriving from Beer Sheva, Kiryat-Gat, Dimona, Yeruham, Ofakim, Ramle, Lod, and other towns in the country. The demonstrators came prepared with signboards and banners on which were printed slogans like “the Bene Israel are like all Israel,” “abolish discrimination.” They held large effigies of Chief Rabbi Itzhak Nissim, and gathered in the people’s square near the Israeli parliament. They marched in groups on the streets, which the police had evacuated and prohibited for traffic. At the head of the demonstration, marched the leaders of the community, accompanied by politicians from the United Labor Party, *Mapam*, members of parliament Emma Talmi and Shem-Tov Levi from the liberal party, representatives of the Labor Union, *Histadrut*, and professors such as Uri Yadin and Uzi Ornan from the academy,<sup>142</sup> deputy mayor of Beer-Sheva and members from the municipality accompanied by police vehicles which headed the procession. The leading van drove those who were on hunger strike from the month of July, near the Jewish agency. As the demonstrators marched, they called out “who are we?” and the masses answered “Israel”. When the protesters passed by a church on the way, they held their silence out of respect for the sanctity of the place. When the procession arrived at the Jewish agency offices, Ezekiel Ashtamkar, chairman of the action committee, gave a speech to the community in Marathi. The final stop was at King Solomon’s Hall, where Samson Samson and Sasoon

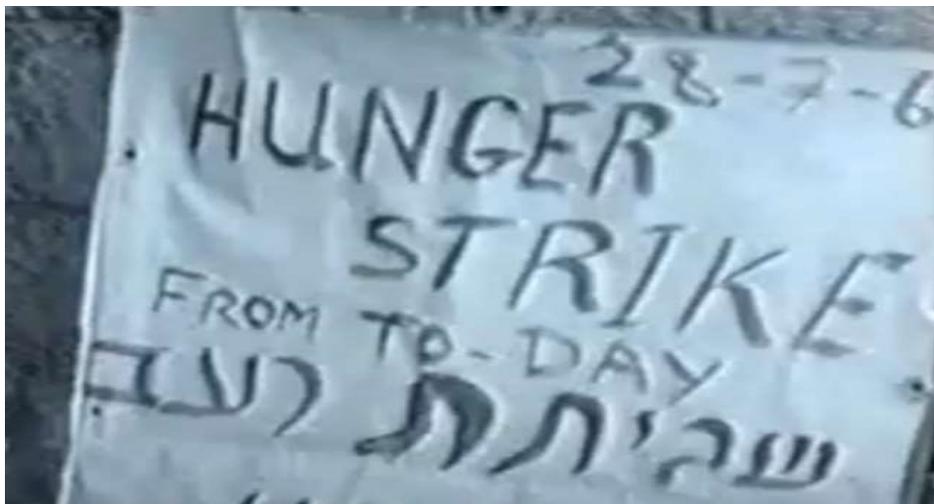
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<sup>141</sup> Pictured by the author, in 2018 at the residence of Samson Samson’s wife, Julie Samson in Jerusalem.

<sup>142</sup> Samson-Mosnikov, *The Struggles of Samson Samson—The Man Who Knew No Rest*, 2018, p.15.

Ashton addressed the demonstrators. Samson spoke in English, comparing the struggle of the Bene Israel in Israel with that of the blacks in America. After his speech, he was notified that the demonstrators had ignited an effigy of Chief Rabbi Nissim, urinated on it and said *kaddish* (a Jewish prayer after burial). Samson decided to disperse the demonstration to avoid violence and negative survey by the media, many of whom were present throughout the rally.

The hunger strike<sup>143</sup>:



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<sup>143</sup> From Yad Harav Nissim Website







The demonstration<sup>144</sup>:



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<sup>144</sup> From Herzelia studios.







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Samson Samson and Sasson Ashton. Samson addressing the demonstrators in English accusing Israel of being an apartheid and comparing the Bene Israel to the African-American in the U.S.A.

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<sup>145</sup> Picture from: Samson-Mosnikov, *The Struggles of Samson Samson—The Man Who Knew No Rest*, 2018, p.17.

The case of the Bene Israel visibly expresses the oppressive policies of an “ethnocratic religious State.” The *Ashkenazi* elite, who were in power, gave the religious orthodoxy complete monopolistic control over issues like matrimony, divorce, and *kashrut* nationwide. This is the reason why minorities like the Bene Israel had to adjust into the Jewish religion to attain equality. The Bene Israel transformed to “Indian Jews” in Israel. They were not officially accepted as Jews, and they still face difficulties in cases of matrimony. The sense of ambivalence, alienation, and skepticism, is embedded in most Bene Israel, like in the rabbinic system itself. The objectives of the demonstration were undermined by the igniting of the effigy of chief rabbi Itzhak Nissim, who was renowned for his knowledge of the *halachic* sphere and had the support of rabbis not only in Israel but also among the Jews in the diaspora. The Jewish orthodoxy had acquired immense political power and was a coalition partner in the Mapai Labor government, and this act was perceived as a challenge to the rabbinic authority and was regarded with rage and contempt. What was considered an obscure and controversial community had dared desecrate the religious Jewish orthodoxy, and above all, the honor and status of Israel’s chief rabbi. Following the provocative events which occurred in the Bene Israel demonstration, new directives were issued to all the rabbinical branches across the country. The rabbis received explicit instructions from the rabbinic in Jerusalem to examine and assess stringently all applicants for matrimony within the Bene Israel community.

#### 6.4. The Biographies of Two Active Bene Israel Families

I wish to elucidate two central Bene Israel families that while in India were well settled socially and financially. In India these families were detached from Judaism and Zionism, and were compelled to cope with the grave consequences of the Israeli administration after immigrating to Israel. I show how the new generation abandoned its life-long traditions and the education imparted by their elders, and adopted Judaism to gratify the demands of their host society. Today, the first generation of immigrants to Israel, witness with contempt, the new generation's loss of identity and distortion of ancient traditions. The older generation, in their testimonies, perceives them as spineless and irrational. In full disclosure I wish to declare that Ezekiel Ashtamkar is my grandfather and Samson Samson is my second uncle (the brother of my grandmother).

##### Ezekiel Ashtamkar

Ezekiel Ashtamkar was the chairman of the Bene Israel action committee, writer and editor of the monthly editions of '*Truth*' which reviewed the activities of the action committee and the current events in the social, educational and religious spheres. These editions were sent to the New-York Jewry, which supported the struggle in Israel. Prior to immigrating to Israel, Ezekiel and his wife Sarah lived in a spacious apartment in the city of Mumbai India, with their seven children. He owned a textile store which exported goods to Malaysia, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka. One of his closest friends and business associate was a Muslim gentleman named Abdul Kader, who in the early fifties was elected mayor of Mumbai. Although the family was large, Ezekiel succeeded in preserving a comfortable life style in India. His wife Sarah took care of the children and the household activities. The children attended school and had Christian and

Muslim friends, but had no interaction with any synagogue or Jewish community. They lived in honor and self-respect with their Indian and Muslim counterparts, and questions of religion never arose. During the violent Hindu–Muslim riots in India, Ezekiel’s family sheltered Muslims in their home.

The Bene Israel in Mumbai were close friends with the Muslims, who they referred to as their brothers, and had very close social and financial ties. The Bene Israel are mentioned in the Quran and that is what intertwined them into their unique relationship with Muslims. The Bene Israel consciously stayed aloof from the Jewish Baghdadi community because of the wide cultural gap that engulfed them. Polygamy was customary among the Muslims and the Bene Israel alike, and Ezekiel’s father, who left his first wife married again without divorcing. The children of both wives live in Israel.

Moshe, Ezekiel’s youngest son, recalls: “We lived in Mumbai, Muslims saw us as their brothers, and respected us as Bene Israel. We perceived Jews as inferior to our caste. When rabbis came to our villages in their missionary quest, we rebuked and drove them away, they were not welcome.”<sup>146</sup>

Izayah Ashtamkar, the eldest son of Ezekiel Ashtamkar, clearly stated in his interviews<sup>147</sup> that the Jewish agency knew for certain that this community was not Jewish, but nevertheless pursued them with misleading information to convince them to immigrate to Israel. The immense damage resulting from the aggressive intervention of the Jewish agency literally ruined the future of entire families.

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<sup>146</sup> Moshe, Member of the Bene Israel Community, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion Israel, June 2018.

<sup>147</sup> Izaya Ashtamkar, Member of the Bene Israel Community, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion Israel, June 2018-2020.

In 1949 the Jewish emissaries organized weekly sessions for the Bene Israel community in Mumbai, to convince them to leave India for a better future. Ezekiel and his eldest son Izayah attended these sessions and the aggressive propaganda had its effects on him and the rest of the Mumbai community. Izayah, aged 16 at that time, was in his final year in high school. He had plans to continue academic studies. Bat-Sheva, Ezekiel's daughter aged 15 at that time, was an intelligent and gifted student, studied the Sanskrit language, and was a candidate for medical studies. Needless to say, all the children were in a family where education was the parent's top priority.

Ezekiel and his family immigrated to Israel in 1953. His youngest daughter was only two years old, the youngest among seven children. As soon as Ezekiel got off the plane in Israel, he perceived his fatal mistake. On descending the stairs of the plane with five young children,<sup>148</sup> he was confronted by a nurse who stood staring at one of his youngest boys, Eliyahu, 5 years old. She offered to take him on the false pretense that he seemed to have an eye infection. Eliyahu, was the healthiest and strongest boy in the family, good looking and with a fair complexion. Ezekiel told his wife Sarah to keep a close eye on the children, because "they are abducting children here in Israel." The children were kept safe and sound because of Ezekiel's alertness.<sup>149</sup>

They were transported to a detention camp *Shaar-Aliya* where representatives from the *kibbutzim* came to check and select the fit and healthy for physical labor on the *kibbutz*. Crippled and old people were repudiated, homeless, and unemployed without food. This selection aroused questions on the true intentions of the Israeli government. Izayah recalls: "representatives from

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<sup>148</sup> Two daughters came to Israel together before the family.

<sup>149</sup> The Yemenite Children Affair refers to the disappearance of between 1,500 and 5,000 children of new immigrants in the State of Israel from 1948 to 1954. Many children were abducted from the Bene Israel community as well.

the kibbutzim came and looked for immigrants for menial jobs, and they picked out the physically fit and strong.” Izayah, today aged 84, narrated painfully the initial days of absorption in Israel:

“Upon our arrival to the airport in Tel Aviv with our best clothing, they (the *Ashkenazim*) sprayed us with DDT without any warning. We were given one bucket of water [for seven children and two parents] to drink, wash, brush our teeth, what kind of a ‘promised land’, with no water, electricity and decent sanitary conditions. My parents regretted their decision till the day they died.”<sup>150</sup>

The Bene Israel were loaded into cattle trucks in a standing position, overcrowded with men, women, and children, and were driven after sunset so that they had no idea of the direction in which they were traveling. Initially each family got a tent, or two families would share a large tent. The living conditions were unbearable and cleanliness was unusually insufficient. Tents and huts were lit with kerosene lanterns but the detention camps (*maabara*) in general were left in the dark. There was a shortage of supplies like vegetables and milk and the Bene Israel did not fight for necessities, unlike the Yemenites and Moroccans. In all my conversations, the older generation regretted immigrating, calling it a grave mistake. As opposed to the younger generation, I could not find an elder who was happy in Israel, and some of them still call it Palestine.

Ezekiel and his family were taken to *kibbutz* Yagur and later to *kibbutz* Cabri. Rebecca, then two years old, was torn from her mother’s arms and placed in the children’s hostel to enable her mother to work as a cleaner.

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<sup>150</sup> Izaya Ashtamkar, Member of the Bene Israel Community, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion Israel, June 2018-2020.

Israel was born on the foundations of socialism. The Zionist aim was to destroy old norms and replace them with new norms,<sup>151</sup> thus capitulating the Bene Israel traditional way of life for an alienating one. The system of the *kibbutzim*, a socialist-communal ownership which included the children, had not been revealed beforehand to the immigrants. Tearing away young infants and children from their mothers was cruel and inhumanly insensitive. Israel's founders imposed their socialist agenda and beliefs on a community that lived in India in extended family cells. This transition was met with revulsion by the Indian immigrants who perceived it as psychological abuse.<sup>152</sup> The damage was irreversible psychologically and physically. Rebecca cried incessantly, and eventually they were compelled to leave the *kibbutz*. These communist ideas which the east European Jews implemented in Israel in the form of *kibbutzim*, proved to be a source of both physical and sexual exploitation. These crimes were so severe and outrageous in some *kibbutzim* that they were published in the Israeli press.<sup>153</sup>

Ezekiel Ashtamkar's wife, Sarah, worked menial jobs in Israel, cleaning homes of *Ashkenazi* families. In the caste system in India only the "untouchables"<sup>154</sup> worked menial jobs like cleaning. Many Bene Israel who refused to do so were called lazy by the State leaders.

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<sup>151</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, pp.107-108

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> - Alon, Amir. "My mother said that in the kibbutz children did not cry. I replied: 'Maybe you just were not there when we cried.'" 4.12.2021. N12 The Israeli channel 12 news website. <[https://www.mako.co.il/news-n12\\_magazine/2021\\_q4/Article-810ad33ddd2d71026.html](https://www.mako.co.il/news-n12_magazine/2021_q4/Article-810ad33ddd2d71026.html)>.

- Barzilay Levi, Vered. *Macom Website*. Ed. The Haaretz newspaper. 19.01.2001. <[https://macom.org.il/definitions/topic\\_kibbutz/abuse\\_in\\_the\\_kibbutz/](https://macom.org.il/definitions/topic_kibbutz/abuse_in_the_kibbutz/)>.

<sup>154</sup> Gandhi compared the European Jews with the untouchables.

All of Ezekiel's seven children educated in India and who were supposed to enter academic institutions were deprived of an education in Israel and had to work to support the family. Ezekiel wrote periodicals called, *Truth – The voice of the Bene Israel action committee*, and also financed it. He was chosen as the leader of the community and held most of the meetings at his residence.

In an article in the community organ, *Truth, The Voice of the Bene Israel Action Committee*, they wrote, "We accuse the Jewish Agency. The question we ask now is, why did the Jewish Agency uproot hundreds of families and bring them to the Holy Land to face religious discrimination by the so called 'pure Jews'? Does it think that this small and politically unimportant Eastern community can be suppressed and repressed?"<sup>155</sup>

As I stated before, the community was split into two groups. One group aspired to return to India and the other fought for equal citizens' rights in Israel. The members discussed strategic and logistic consolidation prior to demonstrations and guided the strikers to conceal their true intentions to return to India, and focus on discrimination and citizens' rights.<sup>156</sup> Ezekiel's main goal was to return to India but he lacked finances for the nine members of his family. Each immigrant was permitted to leave India with only three pounds sterling and only 18 kilograms in personal belongings, which left them paralyzed economically.

The Israeli government officials tried to bribe Ezekiel and offered him a house in Raanana, and the Mapam party offered him a seat in parliament. He refused both offers.<sup>157</sup> He instructed his seven children to leave Israel because of its color discrimination and radical

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<sup>155</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, pp. 129-130. (Ezekiel Ashtamkar (ed.), "We accuse the Jewish Agency," in *Truth* (September 1961)

<sup>156</sup> Samson-Mosnikov, *The Struggles of Samson Samson—The Man Who Knew No Rest*, 2018, p.101.

<sup>157</sup> According to his daughter Rebecca Jacob (maiden name Ashtamkar), the author's mother.

religious nature. His final wish was to end his life peacefully in India and to be buried on Indian soil but woefully, Ezekiel failed to return to India and died in grief at his residence in Israel.

### Samson Samson

Samson was born in central India in August 1923. After completing his senior Cambridge in a Catholic school, he studied three years in the Robertson College, where he graduated with a bachelor's degree. He worked as a teacher for eight years in the Christ Church Protestant school. He was highly appreciated by the principal of the school for his high standard of efficiency and for maintaining discipline in school. Samson immigrated to Israel in 1954, with his pregnant wife and his three-year-old son Edwin, who was disabled mentally and physically. Samson's father Jonathan, who was very close to his grandson, pleaded with him to wait for at least another year, explaining "those who immigrate to Israel are orphans and unemployed. You don't leave a stable job!"<sup>158</sup> In spite of his father's pleas, he left India with his family; the humiliating reception they experienced on landing in Israel haunted him till the day he died. Without any warning, they were sprayed with DDT<sup>159</sup> while dressed in their best festive attire. Samson was transferred to a detention camp in Haifa in a cattle truck, in standing position. They were packed into old British army barracks and received ration cards which were almost impossible to materialize because of the commotion and long queues for food supplies. They had to share their barracks with three other families and three bachelors, and the only furniture was a row of beds. They had to use the public toilets and bathrooms which were outside. After a few months, Samson's family was transferred to Jerusalem where the winters were cold and severe, accompanied by strong winds,

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid. p.58.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid. p.53.

which penetrated the old shack which had no heating devices. During this period of endless hardships, Samson was in constant correspondence with his father in India, and wrote detailed letters describing the dire position confronting him and his family in their struggle to survive in the promised land. Samson's father Jonathan was tall, sturdy, and healthy, and the proprietor of a body-building gymnasium in India. The predicament afflicting his loved ones was too overwhelming for him to endure, and just eight months after his son Samson immigrated to Israel, he succumbed to a heart attack and died prematurely at home. Samson's eldest sister Sarah (my grandmother who lived with us in our home) mentioned on several occasions that the letters her brother Samson sent from Israel broke her father's heart and precipitated his untimely and tragic death.

Samson's eldest son Edwin, who was disabled, was maltreated in two government institutions. The Park Sanatorium in Gedera-Israel, subsidized by the ministry of social welfare.<sup>160</sup> Ezekiel Ashtamkar published articles on this child abuse in the monthly edition of the *Truth* and aroused the fury of the New York Jewry, which intervened in this matter and eventually brought about the closure of the Park Sanatorium institution, referred to by the press as "The House of Torture and Slow Death". In April 1965, Edwin was admitted into a second government welfare institution. After seven months, in November 1965, the institution informed the parents that Edwin had choked to death from a hard-boiled egg.<sup>161</sup> He was 14 years old when this tragedy occurred, which Samson believed was out of negligence.

The gruesome state of affairs which prevailed during the sixties, both socially and financially, forced Samson's younger brother, David Samson, to escape to the Kingdom of

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid. p.120.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid. p.123.

Jordan (approx. 1967), which at that time was in hostilities with Israel. He was arrested and interrogated by the Jordanian authorities. Samson received a call from the Israeli foreign office, which broke the stunning news about his brother's desperate action. This event never reached the Israeli media and his release from Jordan to Israel was kept secret, to avoid international criticism against Israel's discriminating policies toward the Bene Israel immigrants. The struggle of the Bene Israel for civil rights between 1960 and 1964 aroused the criticism and intervention of the international Jewry and media. Egypt, which was at that time hostile to Israel, offered the Bene Israel community asylum in their country.<sup>162</sup>

In spite of all the humiliation and grief that Samson's family had been subjected to and his comparing Israel with South-African apartheid, and the Bene Israel to the black slaves in America, he paradoxically agreed to go to India as an emissary for the Jewish agency in 1970, to encourage immigration to Israel. The same Jewish agency that had spread false propaganda in India and caused unbearable suffering to the community who wished to return to India. I interviewed Samson's nephew (2019), and he responded, shockingly, "Samson's mission to India on behalf of the Jewish agency was like sending Martin Luther King to Africa to bring more slaves into America."

Hodes quoted the secretary of the Bene Israel action committee, Samson Samson, who led the struggle against the Israeli government's discriminating attitudes toward the community: "The policy pursued by the Rabbinate of Israel smacks of South Africa's apartheid". He found it preposterous to investigate the Indian Bene Israel nationality when this practice excluded other immigrants. He openly accused Israel of international discrimination of the most obsolete kind

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<sup>162</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, p.4.

and analogous to the South-African government, which “does not bother about a negro marrying a negro, the rabbinate could not care less when a Bene Israel marries another Bene Israel. The only difference between the two is that South-Africa practices apartheid openly, whereas Israel practices it under the cloak of religion.”<sup>163</sup>

In 2013, Samson’s daughter, Daphna Samson-Mosnikov lit a torch on Israel’s 65th Independence Day. She admits that she was chosen because she was in the process of writing a biography on her father, Samson.<sup>164</sup> Her book, published in 2018, consists of many pretexts and inaccuracies which contradict the true origin of the community and her father’s conceptions. She discloses that while they lived in India the community never addressed themselves as Jews,<sup>165</sup> but she consistently and desperately makes an effort to prove the community’s Jewishness, which is one of the younger generation’s symptoms of self-deception, and attempts to assimilate into Judaism.

She states that the community hired Muslim servants in the kitchen because they kept halal kosher,<sup>166</sup> however, Muslims were not a servant caste, and most servants belonged to the lower Hindu castes. Samson’s elder sister Sarah also kept Hindu servants, and questions of kosher food never arose among the Bene Israel families. In an incident in 1956, a servant asked Sarah<sup>167</sup> (Samson’s sister and my grandmother) from Jabalpur, India, whether they were Jews. The question arose when a movie called “Yehudi Ki Beti” (Hindi: The Jew’s daughter) was

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<sup>163</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, pp. 140-141. “Statement to the press by Samson J. Samson” (private archives of Samson J. Samson, Jerusalem, Israel).

<sup>164</sup> Samson-Mosnikov, *The Struggles of Samson Samson—The Man Who Knew No Rest*, 2018, p.207.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.* p.29.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.* p.34.

<sup>167</sup> Sarah Jacob immigrated to Israel in 1971 with her husband. Her 8 children also immigrated to Israel.

released in India in 1956. Sarah responded indignantly: “No, we are not Jews! We are Bene Israel!” The clear understanding was that the Bene Israel held a completely different ethnic identity. They did not consider themselves as an integral part of the Jewish religion, but this did not deter Sarah and her family from immigrating to Israel in 1971.

Samson-Mosnikov emphasizes that the community in India “preserved the Jewish tradition,” and did not intermarry with gentiles.<sup>168</sup> Nevertheless, her cousin Nina,<sup>169</sup> whom I visited in Mumbai, married a Hindu, and has children who grow up as Hindus. Nina’s father, whom I also visited, Asher Samson had a large portrait of Sai-Baba (a Hindu sage) on his living-room wall. Nina’s parents, both Bene Israel, approved the marriage on the basis of the groom’s academic background. The older generation of the Bene Israel object to their children marrying into the other communities in Israel, because it opposes the caste system culture.

The Bene Israel never owned holy Jewish books and were ignorant of the Jewish religion. Samson’s father asked in one of his correspondences with Samson: “What is *Ivrit*? Is it Hebrew?” He also had no idea of the terms *Ashkenazim* or *Sephardim*.<sup>170</sup> The life of the Bene Israel in India was completely detached from the Jewish religion; they had no knowledge of the Jewish history including the recent history of the Holocaust.

Samson-Mosnikov refers to the great demonstration in Jerusalem on August 5, 1964 as a successful religious struggle.<sup>171</sup> The community demonstrated and struggled to be returned to

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<sup>168</sup> Samson-Mosnikov, *The Struggles of Samson Samson—The Man Who Knew No Rest*, 2018, p.34.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.* p.34.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.* p.58.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.* p.20.

India at the expense of the Jewish agency, and not to be recognized as Jews. I spoke to Samson's wife (2018) Julie in Jerusalem. When I told her, "you know that the marriage problem exists till today", she expressed her astonishment. But it is enigmatic that if Mrs. Samson perceived the problem as solved in 1964, why then did Samson summon two orthodox rabbis to perform the ceremony of his daughter Daphna's marriage (who married an American kibbutz member in 1983) to prevent any problems which may arise in the marriage ceremony?<sup>172</sup>

Samson-Mosnikov's father Samson died in 2011 in an old age home called Golden-Hills, in Jerusalem, which he referred to as the "Golden Cage." Old age institutions were completely alien to Indian Bene Israel traditions and normally one of the sons took responsibility for the welfare of his parents in his home till the day they died. Samson, in his will, declined to undergo a Jewish burial in Israel because of his aversion toward the rabbinical institution. He clearly stated that he did not want the religious undertakers to touch his body after death. He donated his body to the pathology department in the Hebrew University<sup>173</sup>, and stressed that his body should not be returned to the family for burial, and instructed his family not to observe *shiva*,<sup>174</sup> the Jewish seven days of mourning and praying. Samson identified himself as an Indian Bene Israel till the day he died; even his mother who lived with him, always referred to Israel as Palestine. Samson regretted his life in Israel till the day he died.<sup>175</sup> His family did sit for seven days and decided to bury him in kibbutz Ketura (his daughter's residence).

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid. p.118.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid. p.196.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. p.197.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid. p.189.

I assume that Samson-Mosnikov has encountered a problem revealing the bitter truth because of social and political pressure. As a kibbutz resident married to an American Jew and raising her children in Israel, she chose to write a biography which concealed Samson's multifaceted character. Samson-Mosnikov admits toward the end of her book that her father, if he had been asked to light a torch on Israel's Independence Day, to the glorification of the State of Israel, he most probably would have refused.<sup>176</sup>

Both Ezekiel Ashtamkar and Samson Samson strived to advance the interests of the community, nevertheless, the Bene Israel community is characterized by its disintegration and obsessive impulse to impede premeditatedly the successful members of its own tribe. This envy has for decades set back any hope for progress in politics, which in Israel determines the survival and self-determination of all minority sectors. The multicultural structure of the State of Israel coupled with the lack of a constitution, have ensured unrepresented minorities to remain neglected and deprived of their basic citizens' rights. Few examples for this impeding in the Bene Israel community are:

1. Samson Samson, received fundings from the government for the *Bene Israel federation*, and used this money with integrity to help many of the community members. In an interview with Jonathan he recalls: "A meeting of the Bene Israel community activists was held in the 80's, because Samson wanted to transfer the federation funds in a democratic election. A young Bene Israel attacked Samson verbally calling him "you are a dead horse". Samson got angry and transferred the responsibility of these funds to his niece's husband.<sup>177</sup> Many of the

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid. p.212.

<sup>177</sup> Jonathan Jacob, Member of the Bene Israel Community, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion Israel, May 2018.

community members who applied for scholarships from the new federation secretary were invariably declined leaving a bewildering and frustrating community.

2. Ezekiel Ashtamkar wanted to continue the distribution of the '*Truth*', which proved as a helpful political tool. The New-York Jewry urged him to send them updates and news from Israel, they were waiting for his publications and shared with him their gratification from his English style of writing. Ezekiel asked the community for a meager sum to cover the distribution expenses from each Bene Israel member, but they refused thinking maybe he would benefit financially and personally. As a result, the publications of *Truth* came to an end.

### 6.5. The Bene Israel Younger Generation's Efforts to Assimilate

From about 2015, social activists from the Bene Israel community approached the former minister of education Naftali Bennett and asked why the education system in Israel and the history books have completely ignored the Bene Israel immigration to Israel. The minister replied that the community was too small (approx. 60,000 in number) to be mentioned in the education system. Their main claim was that the Bene Israel were the first immigrants to demonstrate and go on hunger strikes Gandhi-style in the fifties and sixties in Israel, because of color and religious intolerance. They were also the first community the Jewish agency sent back to their native land India.

In 2019, the younger generation of Bene Israel, in their efforts to assimilate into the Israeli society, succeeded in convincing the Israeli association of the Hebrew annual calendar to include the *malida* ritual as a Jewish holiday. Their first claim was that the *malida* ritual derives from the Jewish custom of the sacrifice (*mincha*) offering in the temple. Second, they claim that the *malida* equals the *Tu-Bishvat* Jewish festival because of the use of fruit on the *malida* plate. Third, they alleged that the flattened rice is stacked in the shape of Mount Sinai. For decades of celebrating the *malida*, I never once heard about any of these concepts from my ancestors. All the Bene Israel community members I interviewed, were unaware of these claims, and they were hearing about them for the first time. As stated before, the Bene Israel never celebrated the *Tu-Bishvat* festival and were completely ignorant of its existence. Between 2019 and 2020 I phoned a few active members of the younger Bene Israel generation to reveal the reasons for the sudden changes in the *malida* ritual. I realized from the conversations that the main reason was

governmental funding and political recognition.<sup>178</sup> For many in this community, the connection to *Tu-Bishvat* is new; the *malida* is a life cycle ritual for invoking prophet Elijah to attain abundance, blessings, and success and it correlates to the Hindu *Puja*.<sup>179</sup> In the interviews with the Bene Israel elders, they stated: “we pray mainly to prophet Elijah” explaining that for them he is the main figure in times of crisis and celebrations in opposed to praying to God or Jesus in other religions.<sup>180</sup> The cave of Elijah the prophet in Haifa Israel is considered to be the most sacred place for the Bene Israel community for pilgrimage.<sup>181</sup>

A convention comprising the two largest immigrations from India, Cochin Jews, and Bene Israel, was held in Israel between September 20, 2018 and October 1, 2018. They gathered to share and relate Jewish folklore from India. The Cochin members had many stories of their Jewish past in India whereas the Bene Israel spoke only of Bollywood and Indian songs and movies. I interviewed an active community member who attended this convention, she said: “I felt ashamed every time a Bene Israel member spoke. The Cochins had so many stories about their synagogues and Jewish festivals, while we had none”.<sup>182</sup>

The Cochin Jews perceive the Bene Israel as non-Jews, and refuse to marry with them to this day. The Bene Israel community was constrained to endure isolation from immigrants not only from *Ashkenazim*, Easterners and *Sephardim*, but also from the Indian Jews of the Cochini

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<sup>178</sup> Member of the Bene Israel Community (name withheld by request), interview by author, Lod Israel, June 2018.

<sup>179</sup> Worship performed over a *thali* (a round metal plate), offerings to the Hindu deities, the *Puja* is a customary Hindu ritual.

<sup>180</sup> Multiple Bene Israel members, interview by author, Israel, June 2018

<sup>181</sup> On occasions where the Bene Israel pray for health, spouse, child, abundance etc.

<sup>182</sup> Member of the Bene Israel Community (name withheld by request), interview by author, Lod Israel, June 2018.

and Baghdadi communities.<sup>183</sup> Therefore they had high motivation to assimilate into the Israeli-Jewish society. Nowadays, many Bene Israel define themselves as belonging to the Easterners social group in Israel.

### 6.6. East–West Encounter

The immigration of the Bene Israel to Israel created an East–West encounter, forcing them to deal with the cross-cultural consciousness of immigration and alienation of the uprooted individuals. The elders of the Bene Israel have a constant identity crisis and suffer from exile, alienation, and humiliation, chiefly on account of racial and cultural prejudices, and from regret about their past decisions.

Immigrants experience different forms of alienation, distress, insecurity, and social, cultural, or self-estrangement brought on by differences between individual needs or expectations from the social order. The theme of conflict between East and West and the resulting feeling of rootlessness and sense of not belonging lead to an individual's isolation. The majority of the Bene Israel community in Israel to this day lives in segregation. The Bene Israel always remain “*Hodim*” (Hebrew for Indians) in Israel, and nowadays also discarded by the Indians in India who regard them as *firangi* (Indian slang for foreigner).

The experience of exile, which begins as a condition of living, often becomes a condition of mind. The cultural displacement, which causes loneliness, results in attempts toward adjustment. Bene Israel are an uprooted community neither accepted in their country of birth,

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<sup>183</sup> Hafif-Digmi, “Return to India—The Decline of Immigrants from India in the 1950's.”,2007, p.69

India, which today considers them as foreigners, nor in their adopted country, Israel. There is no recollection of this immigration in any of the educational books in schools. The *malida* entering the Hebrew calendar in 2020 signifies the first milestone of Israel's acknowledgment of the Indian immigration.

Migration, a widespread phenomenon of the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, causes distress among immigrants due to language problems, dissimilar culture, employment insecurity, racial harassment, and, above all, the sense of displacement. These individuals are uprooted not only physically but emotionally and psychologically as well. Cultural shocks lead them to cultural conflict, which forced many immigrants to return to their native homes in search of their lost identity. These immigrants are traumatized by experiencing the loss of their nationality, culture, family, and sense of belonging. An uprooted individual, whichever part of land they may have belonged to, fails to keep ties with their homeland and also experiences isolation in the foreign land. The hopes and goals of the younger generation of the Bene Israel community are to feel that they belong in an Israeli Jewish State that exists for all the Jewish people. This compels the community to find a creative solution to integrate into the State of Israel.

I tend to agree with Gandhi's perception of racial issues which correlates with the universal laws of nature, which cannot be desecrated. When Gandhi stated that "Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French"<sup>184</sup>, he attempted to prevent the unnecessary aggravation that eventually led the Bene

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<sup>184</sup> "(AICE), American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise". Jewish Virtual Library. <[www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org)>. Buber's letter to Gandhi, Jerusalem, Seagon, November, 20, 1938.

Israel community losing its 2000-year-old Indian tradition: analogous to many species in nature that are in a continuous process of extinction because of human exploitation. In an interview with Izayah, he expressed his concern stating that the Bene Israel community is heading towards extinction similar to many others cultures such as the Mayans.<sup>185</sup> The Bene Israel community observed in India a lot of spiritual rituals, unique folklore stories, and were the founders and owners of the Free-Masons in India. In this dissertation I did not write about the community's spiritual aspect because it is a separate and a vast mystical field.

The European Jews conceived themselves to be the white superior race opposed to *Mizrahim* and *Sephardim* Jews. The American historian Jonathan Schorsch has also opened a new analytical approach<sup>186</sup> [ ]...Schorsch notes the common assumption by European Christians that Jews in general were not “white,” at a time when the whole invidious concept of “race” was evolving in Europe, and when the *Sephardic* Jewish exiles from Spain and Portugal were particularly vulnerable to continuing persecution. He argues that the desire of some Jews to define or construct themselves as “white” was grounded in the “whiteness” of their cultural surrounding and that such “whiteness” acquired a particular importance in areas under colonial rule.<sup>187</sup> The *Ashkenazi* administration in Israel perceives the Bene Israel as blacks (referred to them as *schwartz*). The young generation of the Bene Israel testify that they still suffer discrimination from police brutality, they are thoroughly scrutinized at the Israeli airport compared to other “white” Israeli Jews, apprehended for identification on the streets as suspects, and banned from entering places of recreation like nightclubs, pubs, etc. Hodes criticized both

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<sup>185</sup> Izayah Ashtamkar, member of the Bene Israel, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion, Israel, June 2018

<sup>186</sup> Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in The Early Modern World*. New York, 2004.

<sup>187</sup> Katz, et al. *Indo-Judaic Studies in the Twenty-First Century. A View From the Margin*, 2007, p.132.

the discretion and integrity of the Jewish agency emissaries for promoting misleading information to a small community in India, which was completely unaware of the prejudiced western way of thinking toward colored minorities.<sup>188</sup>

### 6.7. Self-Deception

Self-deception is the ‘action of deceiving oneself’. This is how the Oxford English Dictionary defines ‘self-deception’. The definition embodies at least an apparent paradox and yet captures much of our ordinary understanding of the notion. To take the latter point first, the notion of self-deception occurs most significantly in our moral discourse, and our moral attitude toward it is not as straightforward as, say, our moral attitude toward lying. Lying is morally blameworthy in a relatively unobscure way. Although there may be cases of lying to which it may be difficult to take up a definite moral attitude, the obscurity involved in this is different from that involved in self-deception. The latter, it seems, results from the very nature of self-deception. If self-deception is the ‘action of deceiving oneself’ here we have a case where one and the same person, with regard to the same action of his, is both morally blameworthy (insofar as he is a deceiver) and deserving of moral sympathy (insofar as he is a victim of deception). I think our moral attitude to any genuine case of self-deception does, in fact, contain both these conflicting elements.<sup>189</sup>

Mrinal Miri, an Indian philosopher, explains the phenomenon of self-deception from a very fascinating perspective. I chose his analysis to explain why a community disowns its own roots and creates a new identity. Hence, although derived from an Indian caste, the community adopted self-deception in order to assimilate into Judaism.

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<sup>188</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, p.165.

<sup>189</sup> Miri, *Identity and the Moral Life*, 2003, p.25.

On 28.3.2019, Dr. Arun Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi came to Israel to lecture on his book *The gift of anger*. One of the young Bene Israel identified himself to Arun, saying that he is an Indian-Jew from the Bene Israel community. Arun answered "There is no such thing as Indian-Jews, you are a Jew so be a Jew, and be proud of it and that's it ...!" The Israeli audience applauded him with enthusiasm.<sup>190</sup>

A way out of this paradox may be sought in assimilating self-deception to cases where it would not be held paradoxical for the same person to hold two mutually contradictory beliefs at the same time. Thus, I may believe both that a triangle is a rectilinear figure having three sides and three angles and that the sum of the three angles of a triangle is  $250^\circ$ . This would not normally be regarded as paradoxical; it would merely be taken to reflect my ignorance of elementary Euclidean geometry, or the fact that I have forgotten my school geometry and am misremembering it, or the fact that I fail to notice or work out the implication of my knowledge of what it is for a figure to be a triangle. Similarly, in deceiving himself about his love for B, A knows that he loves B, but also at the same time believes that he hates her. This is possible because in his state of self-deception A forgets or does not notice his knowledge that he loves B.

But this assimilation of self-deception to ordinary cases of holding two mutually contradictory beliefs at the same time fails to account for a crucially characteristic feature of self-deception, namely, its intentional character which is what makes the notion morally significant [...] A knows that he loves B, but deliberately, so we say, avoids believing that he does so and in fact believes the opposite. The paradox now seems to deepen instead of being removed. How can one deliberately not notice, deliberately be ignorant of, a piece of knowledge about oneself that one possesses? This, it seems to me, is the crux of the philosophical problem about self-deception.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Interview with Member of the Bene Israel Community (name withheld by request), interview by author, Lod Israel, May 2019.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid. p.26.

The Israeli society—both *Ashkenazim* and *Mizrahim*—referred to the Bene Israel as “*schwartz*” (black). Although the Jewish agency in India encouraged members of the Bene Israel community to immigrate to Israel, former Prime Minister Golda Meir referred to them pejoratively: “*mamzerim* (bastards), we don’t need you here.”<sup>192</sup> The nickname—bastards—used by the rabbinate and government representatives derived from the fact that the Bene Israel never performed divorce, *yibum* and *halitza* (Jewish *halachic* laws). Bene Israel men practiced polygamy, like the Muslims.

Israel today, in particular, is a country for Jews alone (most members of parliament call it: “A Jewish Democratic State”). The recent law of nationality<sup>193</sup> clearly deprives all minorities of equal citizen rights. The community developed an alternate identity to gratify their oppressors. This examines the dilemma the tribesman faces in his attempt to be loyal to his tribal identity on one hand, and to collaborate with the expectations of his host society on the other.<sup>194</sup> The members of the initial Bene Israel immigration never claimed to be Jews, and this fact is conspicuous in the demonstrations held in the fifties and sixties against the government’s discriminating directives.

It may be appropriate to describe this community as *anusim*—misled into abandoning their own culture and entrapped into accepting the culture of the Israeli founders. Although the term *anusim* applies to Jews in the diaspora, I find it adequate in describing the predicament

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<sup>192</sup> *Maabarot. Chapter 3. The Fracture.* Channel, Kan 11–Israeli National Broadcasting. 2019. Hebrew. <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OU\\_4uOy4Qb0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OU_4uOy4Qb0)>.

<sup>193</sup> The law of nationality which was passed in the Israeli parliament on 19 July 2018.

<sup>194</sup> Miri, *Identity and the Moral Life*, 2003, p.65.

which confronted the Bene Israel community into adopting Judaism due to psychological, social and economic pressures.

The Jewish virtual library defines *anusim*:

ANUSIM (Heb. אָנוּסִים; “forced ones”), persons compelled by overwhelming pressure, whether by physical threats, psychological stress, or economic sanctions, to abjure Judaism and adopt a different faith (in contradistinction to “meshummadim,” or voluntary apostates—see \*Apostasy). Here attention will be directed only to instances of group compulsion. An edict or systematic attempt to force Jews to convert to another faith is termed in Hebrew *gezerat shemad* (“edict of apostasy”). In Jewish sources, the term *anusim* is applied not only to the forced converts themselves, but also to their descendants who clandestinely cherished their Jewish faith, attempting to observe at least vestiges of the \*halakhah, and loyalty to their Jewish identity. Both the elements of compulsion and free will enter the psychological motivation of the forced convert. The concept denoted by the term *anusim*, therefore, is fluid, bordering on that applying to apostates and even to \*Marranos; it has been the subject of much discussion.

Before independence, Ben-Gurion was fully aware of the electoral power the orthodox factions constituted. He was also well aware that their sole ambition was the creation of a theocratic State, and reconstruction of the third temple in Jerusalem. Bene Israel were left to cope with the extremist Jewish orthodoxy. This is an example of the impertinence of the missionary religious parties when combined with white supremacy, orientalism and (western) political expediency, to impose their beliefs on the neglected black Jewish immigrants.

Up to the present day, the rabbinate institution in Israel creates problems for the Bene Israel during marriage. The rabbis question the Jewish lineage of the Bene Israel and refuse to allow them to marry with other Jewish groups without ritual immersion, or proper *halachic* conversion. The American historian Jonathan Schorsch pointed out that “according to Jewish law, only a slave ritually immersed in water becomes obligated in certain minimum biblical

commandments. This ritual immersion, “for the sake of enslavement,” in other words, to make someone ritually fit to be a slave, bore many similarities to immersion “for the sake of conversion,” since the former constituted a partial step toward full conversion to Judaism.”<sup>195</sup>

In 2010, a Bene Israel married a Cochin Jew in Israel, she was asked to do *giur* immersion before marriage because her last name was Ashtamkar which is a Hindu name (the suffix ‘kar’ in the name is of a Brahmin caste). Another Bene Israel girl married a Baghdadi Jew in 2001, her mother, in order to prevent problems and humiliation with the registration rabbi, approached a Cochini who worked in the rabbinate to register them without questioning, and the girl was exempted from immersion.

The inevitable question is: Was the rabbinate establishment completely mistaken or was its strong opposition to acknowledging the Bene Israel as Jews justified? I suppose this derived from the unique status of the Bene Israel which differed them from other communities and the fact that there are only assumptions regarding their origin. Prof. Tartakover extensively explored the Bene Israel community from India, and defined them as one of the “weirdest groups in the Israeli nation, and the world.” He wrote that their “unique characteristics categorizes them a place with the rejected Israel groups, like the Shomronim and Karaim.”<sup>196</sup>

During the early 80’s many of the Bene Israel families hosted missionaries of Jehovah’s witnesses in their homes on Saturdays. These two Bene Israel couples I interviewed are examples of young families in Israel ‘living on the fence’, in self-search of their religious identity.

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<sup>195</sup> Schorsch, *Swimming the Christian Atlantic. Judeoconvertos, Afroiberians and Amerindians in the Seventeenth Century*, 2008, p.226.

<sup>196</sup> Tartakover, “The Bene Israel Community in India.” *Mahanaim—The Chief Military Rabbinate Periodical* 1964.

In an interview with Jonathan:

Two young girls came to our house on Saturday mornings to read with us from the Torah, especially from the book of Job. Our 3 children ages 5, 7, 10 also participated in reading the text with them. After some time my wife and I were invited to a secret Jehovah meeting in the city of Lod, where I was surprised to see many of the Bene Israel community. Most of them were young in their 20's-30's and they got on the stage calling themselves Christian-Jews, some also wore crosses. I was about 35 year's old and for me, believing in Jesus wasn't new. Being educated in a protestant missionary school 'Christ Church', I was familiar with the morning assembly prayers and believed that Jesus was the Messiah. The stories of Jesus I forwarded on to my 3 children who were born and raised in Israel.<sup>197</sup>

Another couple I interviewed:

During the 80's, on Saturday mornings two girls from Jehovah's witnesses came to our house, one named Iris read for us from the Torah. My three children all under the age of 10, participated in their Torah lessons.<sup>198</sup>

Some will say that the Bene Israel struggle to be acknowledged as Jews. But some of the older generation refuses to be called Jew to this day, stating that their main goal was to return to India. Tartakover's presumption comparing the Bene Israel with the Shomronim and Karaim intensifies my revelations from within the community. We may conclude from these two above testimonies that many things were done in a secretive manner in the Bene Israel community. The two main figures who led the struggle against the rabbinic authority, Samson Samson and Ezekiel Ashtamkar are relatives of both the couples I interviewed. Both these couples expected

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<sup>197</sup> Jonathan Jacob, interview by author, Rishon Le Zion Israel, June 2018.

<sup>198</sup> Interview with Members of the Bene Israel Community (name withheld by request), interview by author, Rishon Le Zion Israel, June 2018.

the rabbinical authorities to acknowledge them as Jews in the matrimonial documentations and not as Bene Israel which the rabbinate insisted on.

The process of adaptation to the Jewish religion drove some of the second generation to the extreme orthodox groups like *Chabad*<sup>199</sup> and generated constant friction and enmity between parents and children. For example: on one occasion at a wedding reception the son of Ezekiel Ashtamkar overheard his aunt asking the waitress if the food was *glatt-kosher*<sup>200</sup>, he responded by asking her “do you know what *glatt-kosher* means? You know we are not Jews”.<sup>201</sup> Ezekiel’s grandson, in his twenties joined the extreme orthodoxy, and coerced his mother and sister at home, to change all their cutlery and to observe all the *halachic* laws. Ezekiel’s other grandson did *halachic* hand washing (*netilat yadayim*) before meals. His mother scolded him and warned him not to perform these Jewish rituals in her home. These incidents like many others cause immense tension and friction within the Bene Israel community especially between the older and younger generation. I can recall from all the community gatherings the older generation criticized this phenomenon as ‘going crazy’. The elders of the Bene Israel still feel the bitter delusion and longing for mother India, accusing the younger Bene Israel generation of lacking courage to withstand their oppressors and to be proud of their provenance.

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<sup>199</sup> Also known as Lubavitch, a known Jewish orthodox Hasidic movement.

<sup>200</sup> *glatt kosher* is meat from animals with smooth or defect-free lungs. Today, the term is often used informally to imply that a product was processed under a stricter standard kashrut

<sup>201</sup> Interview with Member of the Bene Israel Community (name withheld by request), interview by author, Rishon Le Zion Israel, June 2018.

## Conclusion

Think of the marvelously different natures of the tributaries of the great River Brahmaputra, and the difference which is made to them by the sources which keep them running and the difference each of them makes to the nature of the great river itself. The River Brahmaputra would certainly not be what it is but for its tributaries.<sup>202</sup>

The Bene Israel caste lived for centuries in the Indian subcontinent in peace and harmony in a multicultural environment. During that period, India was ruled by empires such as the Moghuls, Rajputs and British yet experienced neither discrimination nor religious persecution.

The decision of the Bene Israel to immigrate to the newly founded State of Israel was entirely speculative, prompted by *irrational expectations that disregarded the important warnings of the community's intellectual elite in India*. Obviously, the Jewish agency emissaries aggressively circulated misleading information within the community, leaving out the adversities they would have to confront on immigrating. Bene Israel claim that the Israeli emissaries painted a “pink-rosy” picture of a land of milk and honey.<sup>203</sup> They were honest in the sense that they declared candidly that they immigrated to Israel, not for the love of Israel or Zionism, but because they were promised a better quality of life<sup>204</sup> and jobs<sup>205</sup>. The reality they encountered was far beyond their imagination, they suffered color discrimination and lacked basic living conditions. During the fifties, the conditions in the detention camps were despicably inhumane.

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<sup>202</sup> Miri, *Identity and the Moral Life*, 2003, pp.112-113.

<sup>203</sup> Hafif-Digmi, “Return to India—The Decline of Immigrants from India in the 1950s.”,2007, p.93.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid. p.93.

<sup>205</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, p.82. p. 115

Supplies of food were rationed, meager, and mothers were forced to give their portions to their children and go hungry. The situation was so severe that inspectors armed with handguns searched the immigrants' quarters without court orders and held the women responsible in cases of transgression.<sup>206</sup> A United Nations nutrition expert who visited these camps stated that he had never anywhere else in the world encountered more cases of malnutrition than in Israel. There are stories of many suicides where mothers burned themselves to death,<sup>207</sup> and many families were destroyed. An entire community has been almost completely erased, and this historical injustice has never been recorded in the history of this immigration. The grave consequences of immigration to Israel compelled the entire community to fight for something illusive in order to receive their basic human rights as citizens of the country.

The community in Israel faced a reality imposed upon them, which aroused frustration and perplexity. I find it imperative to emphasize the aggressive deprivation of an entire community's culture, with irrevocable consequences. The experience of having to forcibly intertwine into an alien culture deprived them of the chance to integrate comprehensively in Israel.

The first wave of immigrants in the early fifties rebelled against the maltreatment inflicted upon them by the authorities and retaliated with demonstrations and hunger strikes in accordance with Gandhi's *Satyagraha*, or passive resistance. Their initial encounter with the patronizing *Ashkenazi* absorbers whose conspicuous revulsion toward the dark-skinned Indians was perceived as highly offensive. The transfiguration was unbearable and the immigrants

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid. p.82.

<sup>207</sup> Vitz, "Despair to Death: Immigrants from India Talk About Violence, Oppression and even Self-Immolation." *Maariv Online* (2017). Hebrew. <<https://www.maariv.co.il/news/israel/Article-579372>>.

reciprocated to the malicious attitude they encountered on arrival. Eventually, the Jewish agency had no alternative but to finance their return to India. Despite these events, immigration from India continued and the newcomers were also subjected to the same degradation and humiliation as their former comrades. The principal dilemma facing the community was the refusal of the rabbinate to recognize the Bene Israel legitimacy for matrimony because they had ignored the Jewish *halachic* laws in India. The truth is the Bene Israel in India became a homogeneous cell within the hosting cultures of the Muslims and Hindus. The term “ingathering of exiles” did not pertain to the Bene Israel who lived free of religious persecution in India. The immigrants from India agitated not only the *Ashkenazim* but also other Eastern communities such as the North Africans. The Zionist emissaries in India were well aware that the Bene Israel were an obscure caste in India; nevertheless, the impulse to invigorate their immigration reveals their latent intentions which primarily targeted this community and reviewed it as a source of black labor for menial positions in the new State of Israel. The action committee which was appointed in the early sixties failed to achieve its objectives in convening religious equality, and many members of the community remain rejected by the rabbinical authorities today. All the demonstrations, hunger strikes and meetings with leading politicians were futile. Sadly, the older generation failed to comprehend that declaring war against the Jewish orthodoxy was doomed to fail at its very outbreak. Since Israel was founded, no political party has ever ruled without compromising a coalition with the religious parties, a situation that prevails today.

There can be no philosophical explanation or rational justification for an entire community to leave their motherland India, and enter into a process of annihilation of its own free will. I see this as a social and cultural suicide. In craving for a better future in Israel, the Indian Bene Israel community pays an enormously heavy price as a people that are today

discarded by the East and disowned by the West: because they chose to become something that they never were and never could be. As it is written, “know where you came from, and where you are going.”<sup>208</sup> A community with an ancient history from a spiritual culture has completely lost its identity and self-esteem.

The prophecy made by the brothers Abraham and David Erulkar at a convention<sup>209</sup> on April 2, 1919 manifested itself.

Dr Abraham Erulkar, who had been educated in England, suggested that a Zionist State would provide an excellent breeding place for racial hatred based on color prejudice and that the bond of religion would be a mockery. His brother, David Erulkar, a barrister, also educated in England, argued that to form a Jewish nation from people who were widely divergent in civilization, way of thought, and economic conditions would set back world progress by several centuries. He cautioned that Western Jews were not free of color prejudice, even towards fellow Jews, and noted that the Bene Israel had been denied their rights as Jews by the Baghdadi synagogues in India. He suggested that this was only the tip of the iceberg in terms of social problems that might arise.<sup>210</sup>

In concluding this dissertation, I realize the dilemma with which I have confronted the members of the Bene Israel community which I have reviewed after strenuous and constant self-examination. I chose to evolve the diversifications of the younger generations urges towards acceptance, and wish to clarify my intricate analysis of this controversial community. The complexity of living in a Jewish State, where citizens cannot fulfill their basic desires, like

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<sup>208</sup> Mishna, tractate “Avot,” said by Rabbi Akavia son of Mahallal’el.

<sup>209</sup> Convention in the Sha’ar ha-Rahamim synagogue in Bombay, public meeting of Bene Israel members to discuss the ideology of Zionism.

<sup>210</sup> Hodes, *From India to Israel: Identity, Immigration and the Struggle for Religious Equality*, 2014, pp.60-61.

matrimony,<sup>211</sup> forced an entire community to conceal their true identity and perjure themselves to blend in, for the sake of national integration. Although scholars accepted their new claims,<sup>212</sup> the skepticism of the rabbinic authorities prevails, and they refuse to marry them to this day, suspecting they are an Indian caste.

Sociologist Hugh Tinker summarizes this controversy: “ There might be two basic definitions of the Bene Israel: one, describing them as Jews who live in India, and the second as Indians whose religion has, under influences exerted during the last two centuries, become increasingly identified with Judaism.”<sup>213</sup> Those who adhere to the former implicit definition downplay the perspective of caste, which after all is very Indian and not very Judaic. Most Bene Israel, whose Jewishness has been challenged both by the Baghdadis in Bombay and by the rabbinic in Israel, tend to take the former, “Judaicist” stance, probably motivated, in part, by a desire to demonstrate their Jewishness. Yet, as Tinker observes, “The Bene Israel possess an alternative personality, a discarded identity , which still effects their life in Bombay city today,” and “They might have remained an obscure Hindu caste with a vague folk-memory of foreign origin (like so many other castes and clans in India) had it not been for the intrusion of the west.”<sup>214</sup>

The vague folk memory of this caste which confused Rehabi and other foreign intervention, was the fact the Bene Israel did recite the *Shema-Israel* (although it was done without knowing the meaning of the prayer and the fact that it was in Hebrew). They celebrated *Tashlich*, *Simchat Torah* and also marked their door’s lintel with an imprint of a goat’s blood on Passover. These rituals I managed to track down until the 19<sup>th</sup> century and that is why I consider the Bene Israel as a tributary of the Jewish religion, nevertheless, a different new sect which

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<sup>211</sup> In Israel the rabbinic holds a monopoly in cases of matrimony and divorce.

<sup>212</sup> Only in Israel they call themselves Jews, whereas in India they refused to be identified as Jews.

<sup>213</sup> Katz, Who are the Jews of India, 2000, p.99

<sup>214</sup> Ibid. p.99

adopted some of the Jewish customs along with those of the Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. Weil wrote: ‘The Bene Israel are unusual in that they are a group of Indian Jews adhering to a monotheistic religion, yet culturally akin to Indians of other faiths.’<sup>215</sup> Had this community viewed Israel through a nostalgic angle it would have been a virtuous option to demand religious autonomy similar to the Shomronim. The first generation of Bene Israel immigrants showed their true perspective of objection toward Judaism. The younger Bene Israel generations in Israel have abandoned the ancient traditions of their forefathers. Traditions such as the *malida* rite, which correlates to the Hindu Puja, and symbolizes their unique traditional identity, was distorted after immigrating to Israel to integrate into the Jewish religion thus losing its original essence.<sup>216</sup> The younger generations of immigrants from India completely lost their 2000-year-old traditions, and above all, their authentic heritage. In India, fellow Indians treated them with equality and integrity; in Israel they suffer discrimination and lack of acceptance. The paradox is that a State that was established after religious persecution in Europe now deprives an entire community of its identity and self-respect. I personally see no logical reason for the young Bene Israel generation concealing or being ashamed of their Muslim/Hindu/Christian roots and affiliations. Religion should not be a barrier between people in modern times, especially in countries which define themselves as westernized enlightened democracies.

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<sup>215</sup> “The Bene Israel Indian Jewish Family in Transnational Context .” *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 2012, P. 71.

<sup>216</sup> Jacob, Karen. Master Thesis: The Transformation of a Hindu-Muslim Ritual into Mainstream Judaism - The Malida Ritual, 2020.



World Jewry is shocked over the Israeli Rabbinate's unjust and unholy directives which it has issued "in the name of God, the Lord of Universe" against Bene Israel. The Hitlerite holocaust is yet fresh in our minds, the Eichman trial is still ringing in our ears, reports of anti-semitism in other countries are pouring in and now to hear of this strange and unusual problem in this Holy-land is nothing but creating doubts in the minds of an average Jew as to the reason of all this suffering. Is it because of causeless hatred that we bear towards one another? Whatever may be the reason the fact remains that Jews have suffered ever since the temples were destroyed and now with the establishment of the State of Israel it is the turn of the innocent Bene Israel.

The Government of Israel has failed in its basic duty to protect the rights and honour of a small community, and is acting in contravention of the Proclamation of Independence of Israel of May 14, 1948 which states inter alia as under:

" The State of Israel . . . will rest upon foundations of freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the Prophets of Israel. It will maintain complete equality of social and political rights for all its citizens, without distinction of creed, race or sex. It will guarantee freedom of religion and conscience of language, education and culture. It will be loyal to the principles of the United Nations Charter. "

This state of affairs will not continue for long, as young freedom loving Israelis will dominate the Israeli scene when religion will no more have a bargaining power as a political weapon.

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#### A PROBLEM EVADED

by

B. J. Israel

From reports appearing in the Jerusalem Post it would appear that the problem of freeing members of the Bene Israel community in Israel from discriminatory treatment is as far from solution as ever. Instead of adopting the straightforward course of withdrawing the directives of the Chief Rabbi which are the source of offence, the Government of Israel is adopting the device of instituting regional registrars to whom references may be made by local registrars who have scruples about performing a marriage.

If the appeal machinery is to operate only in case of the Bene Israel, it will constitute yet another measure of discrimination. If it is intended to have general operation, it may provide a useful check on arbitrary decisions by local registrars, but it will not remove the real injustice done to the Bene Israel, which is subjection to a degrading enquiry into origins, and, therefore, will not provide the requisite relief. Nothing short of absolute uniformity of procedure for Bene Israel, and other

Jews will do this. It is impossible to believe that responsible authorities in Israel have not realised this. The most charitable explanation for their action is that they fear that simple withdrawal of the Chief Rabbi's directives would involve for him and for the Council which he leads a loss of prestige greater than they can afford to suffer.

It may possibly be argued that as the Israeli Minister of Religious Affairs seems to hold, it is only a question of a few stray cases of difficulty where the local registrar has a tender conscience, and, consequently, the charge of discrimination against the Bene Israel as a community is unjustified. To argue thus is to ignore the implications of the Chief Rabbi's directives. These are that, in the case of the Bene Israel, as in the case of no other community of Jews, doubt exists as to the acceptability of every single individual, and this doubt has to be cleared by investigation. This puts a stigma on the community even if, in practice, there is only a formal and perfunctory investigation and the theoretical doubt is, in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, resolved in favour of the individual concerned. Still more objectionable is the fact that this stigma has been applied to the community when, after prolonged and detailed investigation, it has been ruled that the Bene Israel as a community are as completely Jewish as any other group of Jews.

In this connection, it would be pertinent to observe that the argument of the Minister for Religious Affairs that the question was not one of discrimination on the basis of race, colour or origin, but purely one of halacha is disingenuous and unworthy of one holding his high office. The halachic issue was loudly proclaimed in October 1961 to have been settled in favour of the Bene Israel by their recognition as eligible for marriage with other Jews. The directives issued subsequently by Rabbi Nissim are in flagrant contradiction to this ruling, which alone represents the authoritative halachic pronouncement. The Minister's further Statement that halachic difficulty had existed for two hundred years is also demonstrably untrue on the evidence collected by Rabbi Nissim. No doubt was raised until 1843, and rulings favourable to the Bene Israel were given, except, perhaps, for an equivocal ruling as late as 1914. The directives issued by Rabbi Nissim clearly discriminate against the Bene Israel on the basis of origin, and anyone who has any knowledge of the history of the question will recognise that the existing discrimination stems from racial and colour prejudice in India on the part of Jews from Iraq. The Knesset unfortunately did not agree to the matter being fully debated. From the point of view of the unfortunate Bene Israel, perhaps, this is of not much moment, since, even if a debate had been held, the real Bene Israel case would probably have remained unstated.

Compromise and expediency are legitimate counters in the game of practical politics. Some, perhaps, would even excuse a certain slickness on the part of a minister in a tight corner. But here we have an issue which involves important moral and spiritual values relating to human worth. Any solution which fails to resolve the basic moral issue in this case will, therefore, be not only ineffective but also dishonest and pernicious.

Reproduced from "Mebasser" Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of India Publication Vol. II, No.5.

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## MASS PROTEST MEETING IN BEERSHEBA

A public meeting of the Bene Israel community was held on Saturday, the 21st July 1962 at 10 a.m. in Keren Hall, Beersheba. More than 800 men and women mustered strong bubbling with feelings of resentment.

Mr. Sassoon Ashton, a member of the Action Committee, who readily agreed to help a band of enthusiastic volunteers desiring to organize a big protest meeting, requested Mr. Asher Kollet, Chairman of the Action Committee to take the chair. A solitary voice "I object" caused quite a flutter for a few seconds. The volunteers quickly restored order and the business of the meeting started.

Mr. Ashton in his opening remarks explained how the meeting was organized and he and the volunteers who worked so hard were happy to see that it was a thumping success. He further said that the whole problem was due to the coalition which he described in his usual joking manner. When the Government says that two and three make four, all coalition partners agree but when it says that two and two make four, opposition disagrees.

Mr. Kollet thanked the individual who said "I object" showing his independent spirit. We Bene Israels are freedom loving and will never tolerate injustice and unjust treatment. He also thanked the Israeli public for its lip sympathy, but was sorry that beyond that no concrete help for the solution of our problem was forthcoming. The committee will agitate for the cancellation of the directives and against the appointment of regional marriage registrars.

Mr. S.J. Samson explained in detail all the developments that had taken place up-to-date and also explained why the community would not and should not accept the directives and the arrangement of regional registrars. During his talk he said that he was sure that the same purity test was applied to all the other Jews, 99% including Rabbi Nissim will have to leave this country.

Mr. Jariji, Mayor of Beersheba, condemned the Rabbinate for causing ill-feeling and hatred in Israel. He further promised whatever action the B.I. community takes, he and his party would be with the community in its struggle.

Mr. Gideon Ben-Israel, Advocate and now member of the Knesset, said that this was not only a problem of Bene Israel but every Jew. To-day this problem is for Bene Israel, to-morrow it would be for some others. He expressed his fear as to what would happen to the Russian Jews who would be coming to Israel in the future. He further announced that a public committee was being formed which would work in co-ordination with the action committee.

Representatives of all the centres offered held and co-operation and some of them suggested that if no action was taken in the near future, they would themselves organize for action. Mr. Isaac Joseph said "In 1952 we were only 150 and we shook Israel, to-day we are 7000, we will shake the whole world",

Mr. Saul Joel, a student of the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, made a very fine speech befitting his calling and advised the community to have faith and courage.

## THE FOLLOWING RESOLUTION WAS ADOPTED UNANIMOUSLY

A meeting of more than 800 representatives of the Bene Israel Community was held in Beersheba on the 21st July 62 and the following resolutions were unanimously adopted.

The Community strongly denounced the stand taken in Parliament by the Government in dealing with the Bene Israel problem. It demanded the immediate cancellation of Rabbi Nissim's infamous directives which are an insult to the whole community and to India itself.

The Community rejected the appointment of Regional Registrars and considered the arrangement a move to evade the issue.

The underhanded attempt made by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in trying to meet those who did not represent the Community with a view to causing a split in its ranks was very strongly condemned.

The Community is deeply grateful to the Liberal, Herut, Mapam and Communist Parties for their bold stand in supporting its struggle against tyranny and injustice when the question was taken up in the Knesset. It also conveys its thanks to members of Ahdut Haavoda who abstained on the vote in favour of regional rabbis.

It asked for the punishment of rabbis refusing to grant marriage licences to members of the Community. A special request for sanctions was made against the Rabbi of Eilat for his insulting remarks which smacked of antisemitism and were most provocative.

Secretaries of all centres were requested to prepare lists of persons willing to join in strikes and passive resistance demonstrations (A list of 440 volunteers was prepared in Beersheba).

The Action Committee was requested to continue its struggle against the Directives and Regional Registrars and was promised the whole hearted support of the Community.

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## A FRIEND OF BENE ISRAEL APPEALS TO CHIEF RABBI NISSIM

New York, Feb. 25, 1962

Rabbi Nissim,  
Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel,  
Jerusalem, Israel.

Dear Sir,

I have before me today's New York Time's report of your most asinine and stupid policy concerning marriages between two rooms of the House of Israel. You are, without a doubt, the last person one would expect to bring onto the Holy Land of Israel such racial policies as those that have plagued us, the Children of Israel, throughout our history. A Jew is a Jew regardless of his personal origin. He who calls himself a Jew - even when it is easier for him not to - especially, should not be questioned by you nor anyone else.

My Jewish brothers from India are just as dear to me as are my Jewish brothers from England or from Russia or from wherever they may be. And you too, Sir, misguided as you are, are my brother.

The disgraceful act of seeking a person's family tree - of seeking his "purity" ranks as unjust as the racial laws of our greatest prosecutors and persecutors. One can only hope that your words will be recognized as coming from a man not in mental health and so they will be treated as such and you as a person will be thought of in pity instead of in hate. My prayer to-day is that sanity and liberal reasoning return to your mind, and I look forward to your early confession to our people in general and your asking for forgiveness of our Indian brothers in particular stating that yours was a greivous misstatement.

May truth and justice find you in the wrong - and may you gain stature by admitting your error.

I remain,  
Hopefully yours,  
Sd. -

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EXCERPTS FROM ADDRESS

RABBI LOUIS FINKELSTEIN

Chancellor, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America

We all know the human tendency to xenophobia - fear and hatred of the stranger. That is why the Torah commands us forty-six times to love and respect the stranger, whereas only one commandment to love our neighbour seems quite sufficient.

The wisdom of this commandment, as well as the validity of its moral insight, like that of other norms, is being spelled out in our times, in a manner in which even the simplest can follow. The indictment of a whole group, which, in general, cannot be fought in the courts and remains only a moral transgression, is in fact far more dangerous than the libel or slander of an individual.

The individuals can seek redress in the courts, and can demand that their accuser substantiate his charges or withdraw them. This is not true of nations, religions and other groups. Yet, the results of group calumny are frequently lethal, both to those calumniated and to the calumniators themselves.

When I was a student at college, a professor who considered himself a liberal told a class, almost every member of which was either himself an immigrant from Southern or Eastern Europe or the child of such an immigrant, that ever since this immigration had begun, American culture had been in danger, and that it ought to be stopped.

The theory of the superiority of the Nordic Race was thus promulgated as scientific dogma, not to be questioned, even by its victims. Little could that professor have imagined that his sons or grandsons might be called upon to risk their very lives because the theory so casually announced was adopted by Hitler, and made the fulcrum on which he was going to shake the world.

Common sense as well as experience would tell us that prejudice derives not from anything in the object of prejudice, but from a moral fault in the person who possesses it.

The sin of evil talk applies not only to those who speak of individuals, but to the more lethal destroyers, who speak ill of whole peoples.

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## WORLD COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES BEFRIENDS BENE ISRAEL

The first international gathering of synagogue leaders was convened by the World Council of Synagogues, New York, in Jerusalem in the Binyane Haocoma on May 29 - 31, 1962. The hall presented a colourful display of 32 flags of various countries including India. The United Synagogue of India was represented by 10 delegates and seven observers of whom Mr. B.B. Benjamin was its leader and one of the vice-presidents of the World Council. Mr. Benjamin took this occasion to explain to the convention the history of the Bene Israel struggle in this country, the relevant portion of which we are printing elsewhere.

The members of the Action Committee took this opportunity of meeting top ranking leaders of the World Council on Tuesday the 29th May 1962. They met Mr. Charles Rosengarten, President of the World Council, Dr. Simon Greenberg, Vice Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Prof. Abraham Joshua Heschel, Prof. of Jewish Ethics and Mysticism of the Seminary, Mr. Morris Laub, Director and Mrs. Adele Gilead, Executive Secretary and Convention Director, who after hearing our case agreed that a suitable resolution be drafted and presented before the convention and invited two members of the Action Committee to join their resolution committee for drafting the same. Accordingly the following resolution was passed unanimously by the convention on Thursday, the 31st May 1962, amidst loud applause.-

" We note with pride that the Bene Israel throughout the centuries of their separation from the mainstream of Jewish life have nevertheless maintained their loyalty to the Jewish tradition so that to-day they are in all respects members of the World Jewish Community. We affirm that as Jews they are our brethren in all respects and are entitled to the same rights, privileges and treatment as all Jews in all countries of the world."

The Bene Israel community of Israel is thankful to the World Council of Synagogues for championing its cause and arousing the conscience of the world Jewry.

The B.I. community of Israel has not affiliated to the World Council of Synagogues, New York, nor were any strings attached for presenting the above resolution.

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## PLAIN SPEAKING

The Bene Israel community is relentlessly agitating for the cancellation of the directives and vehemently opposing the appointment of regional registrars which in itself constitutes discrimination and segregation of the community. Two big protest meetings were held in the month of July - one in Beersheba and the other in Kiryat Shmona which were attended by hundreds of men and women. Young and old have willingly come forward to fight for the honour of the community. Speaker after speaker walked up to the rostrum and condemned the discriminatory directives and their originators. The community has now become impatient and is now anxiously asking "What action?". Some are blaming the Action Committee for not disclosing its programme of action and putting too much faith in negotiations and correspondence. "This stage" they argue, "is already over". "Passing pious resolutions expressing righteous indignation will not move these men of stone. They need a stone-crusher".

Some are attempting to console the community that only a small percentage is against the Bene Israel. Mr. F.W. Polluck, former Consul General of Israel in Bombay, went so far as to give an accurate figure of 2%. Even if we take it for granted that only 2% is against the Bene Israels, why then is the Government of Israel, which is supposed to be democratic, unable to ignore and discard this numerically insignificant fanatic section, and do justice to this community? We cannot understand why Mr. Ben Gurion, Lion of Israel, is behaving like a lamb before this truculent rabbinate which is causing so much damage to the good name of Israel? Of course Mr. Ben Gurion is with us but is unable to help us. The crucial point is "Coalition" and the fear of creating yet another cabinet crisis with all its implications.

Government has already appointed four regional marriage registrars ignoring strong protests by the community. Paradoxically, one of these registrars is a rabbi of Dimona who only a year ago refused to marry Bene Israel groom which caused so much publicity and embitterment. How this sudden change has come over him is a mystery. He hopped to Eilat to officiate at Bene Israel bride's wedding which the local rabbi refused. These interpreters of Halacha are only responsible for making it a subject of mockery. We can safely assume that there is something deeper than religion and halacha at the bottom of the B.I. problem.

During all this controversy, the Jewish Agency, has maintained a studious silence as if, it's not its concern. Someone tries to explain that it is the agency for supplying goods and if some goods turn out to be defective what can it do? We must remind them that this is not a commodity but human material.

In the month of March of this year the Jewish Agency had appointed a committee consisting of Messrs. Sharret, Sizling, Shragai and Kol to look into the discrimination against the Bene Israel. It would be interesting to know what the Committee had done since its formation.

Sooner this chapter is closed the better it is for all. We had an opportunity to meet and discuss these infamous directives with free and right thinking men and women in Israel who condemn them unequivocally and deplore "they are a disgrace to the Jewish race and creed". A gentleman feelingly expressed "If this is the justice what good is the Judaism and to be a Jew".

Prof. Abnimelekh compared these directives in the local Hebrew daily "Ha'aretz" as parallel to the Nazi idea of race superiority and the conception of the master race, which caused the destruction of six million Jews.

A correspondent writing in the Jerusalem Post made a fervent appeal, "It is about time that intelligent, God-fearing and God-believing Jews, who claim to be liberal, become acquainted with some of the suffering, physical and spiritual, that is being caused daily in our 'Modern' Israel by religious fanatics who still have to learn to love their neighbours as themselves".

"We Jews are always so outspoken and indignant about racial discrimination and religious persecution elsewhere - we have a lot to clean up right here at home. It is about time decent Jews spoke up".

The peaceful life of the community is disrupted, children in schools, men in factories and workshops and women in kitchen are all distressed. The fate of the whole community is in balance and such a situation is not congenial to its progress and well being.

"Religion should have no place for persecution, discrimination and intolerance and whose whole purpose should be to aid humanity, which is its true and divine nature. Superstition is a great enemy of man but bigotry is worse".

In the interest of all these directives should be cancelled without any further delay. "Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us?" Malachi 2:10.

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In his report to the World Council of Synagogue Convention in Jerusalem in May 1962, Mr. B.B. Benjamin referred to the B.I. Problem. He said:

" And now I will refer to our brethren's case in Israel. It is indeed most unfortunate and tragic that Bene Israel should have been singled out for discriminatory treatment in our own land when we talk of antisemitism and persecution of our people in other countries. All the same it has happened, and we feel it most because we who lived in India peacefully for over 2,000 years and maintained our identity as true Israelites, we who knew no persecution or antisemitism, we who were treated like brethren by our alien neighbours, we who shared equally with others all the honours and privileges granted by our Government, and we who left our country out of sheer love for the Holy Land, should now become the subject matter of this controversy? Zo Torah We Zo Sekhara? And who are those who are sitting on judgment of our case? They are eminent rabbis of the realm, men of piety and wisdom, and last but not least men of God. Should they treat us in this manner? However whatever may be the reason for their action, it is our fervent appeal that the controversy must cease forthwith. In his article on "Bene Israel Battle" which has appeared in the Jewish Chronicle of March 16, Dr. Zvi Werblowsky, Lecturer in Comparative Religion, Hebrew University, has given us an excellent idea of the case. He says inter alia:

' A fortnight later the Chief Rabbinate met, and after a thorough discussion declared that -

- (a) the Bene Israel were Jews, and
- (b) that there was no evidence that could cast doubts on their family status and divorce procedures.'

Having made this declaration that Bene Israel were Jews and that their family status was in order, the only action that was called for was to instruct all local Rabbis who are marriage registrars to solemnize marriages of Bene Israel with other Jewish members in accordance with the normal procedure followed in other marriage cases. Instead new directives not intended by the declaration were issued whereby our people are now required to answer an undignified and humiliating questionnaire before they are permitted to marry. It will thus

be seen that those directives are not only unwarranted and unjustified, but are innovations and the result of afterthought, and it is on this point that I appeal to the World Council to intervene and take up the matter with the Government of Israel.

Why this should have happened is a mystery. But Dr. Werblowsky's article contains a probable clue. He says:

A number of self-appointed watchmen over Israel took matters in hand. Active rabbinic busybodies in Israel, England and the U.S.A. began to organise a campaign against the Chief Rabbinate's ruling, casting aspersions on its legitimacy and mobilising the whole extremist "Right-wing" against Chief Rabbi Nissim. A kind of whispering campaign was initiated and subtle (and less subtle) pressure exerted on the Israeli rabbis, who were given to understand that they would lose their unblemished Orthodox reputations if they acted in accordance with the instructions of the Chief Rabbinate. Pressure was so effective that some of the rabbis who had originally written positive responsa retracted (without giving any reasons). One of the leading Talmud scholars from Eastern Europe, now in the U.S.A. was sent to Israel to prevail upon Chief Rabbi Nissim to change his mind.'

However, whatever may be the true story behind the directives, the fact is clear that they are totally inconsistent with the Israeli Rabbinate's decision and declaration and are repugnant to Bene Israel feeling. As for the interference of the self-appointed watchmen and active rabbinic busybodies mentioned by Dr. Werblowsky, we too had a similar dose in India when a President-Rabbi was specially sent to prevail upon the people not to join the United Synagogue of India. I have already referred to this incident in my speech.

Once again I appeal to this august body to consider what steps should be taken to give justice to my people which has been denied to them in our own Holy Land."

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#### PRESIDENT BEN-ZVI'S CONCERN

The B.I. problem struck head-lines in all the local papers on the refusal of local marriage registrars to register marriages of two Bene Israel girls with members of other Jewish groups.

President Ben-Zvi called Chief Rabbi Nissim and the Minister of Religious Affairs, Dr. Zerah Warhaftig to discuss the situation. The President expressed his concern at the undesirable international and internal ramifications of the regional rabbis' refusal to register marriages of Bene Israel with other Jews. He urged them to put a quick end to the present ambiguous situation.

The B.I. Action Committee issued a statement on 2nd July 1962 branding "Apartheid" any policy which does not grant the community the same unqualified Jewish-legal status that is enjoyed by all other Jews.

The statement condemned the Chief Rabbinate's "racist directives" and called on the Knesset to pass a law granting the community equal status.

B.I. Problem in the Knesset

The B.I. question came up before the Israeli Parliament on 2nd July 1962. There were two motions for the agenda by Mrs. Emma Talmi - Mapam - and Mr. Moshe Kol - Liberal.

Their motions for a parliamentary debate on the subject were defeated by a vote of 41-30. The motions were supported by Liberals, Herut, Mapam and Communists. The opposing majority consisted of Mapai, National Religious, and Agudat Israel.

Mrs. Talmi - Mapam - said that the Chief Rabbinate's directives constituted discrimination between Jew and Jew and were a disgrace to the nation. As there was no doubt of the Jewishness of the Bene Israel, the directives required special tests for that community which no other group of Jews was required to meet.

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RELIGIOUS MINISTRY'S DODGE

The Ministry of Religious Affairs in order to side-step the problem has appointed four regional marriage registrars to whom local registrars would refer marriage applications which they refuse to register. The Action Committee immediately reacted rejecting such a special arrangement especially for Bene Israels. Performance of marriages is not a solution of our problem. The community will stand firm and continue its struggle unabated for annulment of the directives.

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An extract from the article "Dispute Among The Rabbis" by Mark Segal of the Jerusalem Post is reproduced below:

" The would-be brides and bridegrooms of the Bene Israel community who cannot marry because of Rabbinate refusal to perform the ceremony are in fact victims not su much of a halachic dispute as a campaign to undermine the authority of Chief Rabbi Nissim and lessen his chances for re-election, according to National Religious Party circles."

Extracts from an open letter addressed to the President and the Prime Minister of Israel dated 6th May 1962 by Dr. Mrs. Ruby S. Solomon, President, Women's Branch Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of India, published in "MEBASSER" Vol.II, No.4 dated 15th June 1962.

" If as is so loudly claimed, Israel is a democracy in which the freedom, dignity and worth of the individual, is respected, then it is incumbent on the Government to save every individual citizen from humiliating discrimination. The Bene Israel in India never recognised the validity of the rulings said to have been given impugning the validity of their marriages and divorces and they always regarded themselves free to marry Jews from other countries. In their synagogues they performed several marriages between Bene Israel and Iraqui Jews. Migration to Israel should, on the showing of those who clamour for it, provide fulfilment to every Jew, alas for the Bene Israel, it has brought frustration and shame.

We would, therefore, ask that, if the Chief Rabbinate cannot be made to withdraw its obnoxious directives, then the Government of Israel should exempt the Bene Israel from the requirement of securing ecclesiastical approval to marriages between them and other Jews and permit them to perform marriages according to their established customs in India, even if one of the parties is not Bene Israel.

Failing this, the only course for the Government, we feel, is to confess that it is unable to get the Bene Israel accepted as full Jews by other groups of Israel and therefore no longer recognises them as Jews for the purpose of the ingathering of the exiles. This will entail immediate cessation of all migration from India to Israel. While those who have already settled in Israel will not be saved from the consequences of their simple-minded acceptance of the propaganda of the Jewish Agency, to the Bene Israel in India will be brought the long belated awareness that their rightful place and destiny lies in India among Hindus and Mohamedans who never molested the Bene Israel females - although minority citizens - during their sojourn in India for the last two thousand years, till such time as God gathers all nations and tongues, and of them also takes for priests and Levites."

Isa.LXVI. 18 & 21.

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#### EDUCATION LAG MENACES NATION

Warning that Israel was producing a generation of uneducated persons, the Prime Minister's Adviser on Integration and Absorption Problems on Friday called for an annual budget of IL,500m. to afford higher education to children of large families.

He said there were 200,000 families in Israel with more than four or five children, most of them of the Oriental Communities. They were unable to feed and house their families properly, let alone assure them of proper education.

In a modern state an uneducated person is an unemployable one, who will be a burden to the community for the whole of his life.

J.P. March 11, 1962.

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CIVIL MARRIAGE BILL TABLED

A private member's bill authorizing civil marriages - while retaining religious marriages for couples who wish it - was tabled in the Knesset. The bill was submitted by Mrs. Emma Talmi - Mapam.

With regard to divorce, the bill provides that a couple who were married in a religious ceremony shall be divorced by a religious court, and that a couple who were married in a civil ceremony shall be divorced by the District court.

The bill will not be discussed before the Knesset reconvenes after its recess, after Succot.

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Then there was light.

When worshippers arrived at the New Synagogue, Manchester, last Shabbat morning they found the place in semi-darkness - the shabbos goy had failed to turn up. The Beadle thereupon went outside to look for a likely passer-by, and ultimately found a helpful postman, who came in and switched on the lights. "I am sorry we can't give you a tip", a congregant told him. "It's all right", replied the postman in Yiddish, "on Shabbos I don't take tips".

CHRONICLER

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## FIRST REFORM SYNAGOGUE OPENED IN JERUSALEM

Israel's first Reform synagogue was consecrated in Jerusalem on Friday the 27th July 1962.

The Progressive Congregation has appointed its own rabbi, 32 year old Rabbi Jerome A. Unger, trained at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.

The State has shown no opposition to progressive Judaism, but on the other hand, Rabbi Unger's status as a rabbi is not recognized by the Chief Rabbinate and consequently he is not authorised to perform marriages.

"Our idea" Rabbi Unger states "is not to develop an American Reform Judaism or German Reform Judaism or Hungarian Reform Judaism. The idea is to develop an Israeli Judaism. The idea is to develop an Israeli Judaism that meets the spiritual and intellectual needs of contemporary Israel".

The "Yahadut Mitkademet" was founded by Jerusalemites four years ago. The congregation has so far used the prayerbook of Dr. Mordechai Kaplan's Reconstructionist Movement, but now its own original Sabbath prayerbook has gone to press. It was prepared by a special liturgical committee, who based themselves on the Reform prayerbooks and traditional Siddur, original writings, and practices of the group. Printed in booklet form entirely in Hebrew, the new prayer book will be used by all the group here.

Two young Sabras are currently preparing for the Reform rabbinate at the Hebrew Union College. One of the two is a Sabra of Yemenite origin, which is a sure sign that progressive Judaism is taking root in Israel.

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## INCOME DIFFERENTIATION

The poorer half of Israel's families received only one quarter of the country's total income in 1957/58 while the upper ten percent of the nation's families also received nearly a quarter - 24.2 per cent - of the total income.

But the major factors causing income differentiation were apparently differences in education and vocational training. Even in cases where persons from different communities working in the same jobs and having the same educational qualifications received different pay, this was not necessarily due to discrimination but may well have been the result in differences in the quality of their education and training and to the smaller opportunities for personal advancement for the earners from Oriental communities.

Despite this the study finds that these differences, even if they were not the result of overt discrimination, tend to create strained feelings and social relations and give rise to charges of discrimination and hinder the absorption of immigrants.

Falk Centre Report for the year 1959/60.

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SOME INTERESTING STATISTICSHow the national income is divided.

	<u>Workers</u>	<u>Income</u>
Eastern Communities	50%	23%
European "	30%	54%

How the indirect taxes are paid

Income up to	150 p.m.	18%
"	150 - 600 "	9.1%
"	600 -1000 "	6.8%

Percentage of workers in Agriculture

European Communities	15%
Eastern "	30%

Average income of Eastern & European worker  
per annum

Eastern	IL. 2074.-
European	3039.-

Percentage of students from Eastern Communities

High School	8.8%
University	4.0%

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## A GENUINE GRIEVANCE

If a section of Israeli citizens is victimised, it is the newly married couples and bachelors - many of whose parents have not yet come to Israel. These boys and girls were mostly sent by their parents in the Aliyat Hanoar for adequate education and training and who would eventually build a home for their parents' painless settlement in Israel.

After reaching military age they are immediately drafted for national service for two and a half years. Their friends and relatives help them during their military service as it is humanly impossible for them to manage with their paltry monthly allowances.

A sea of trouble starts after finishing their military service. Instead of helping this young generation which is a pillar of Israel and which should justifiable get priority is made to run from pillar to post to get even a modest living accommodation. The Jewish Agency accords a step-motherly treatment and unreasonably demands payment for such living quarters when it is fully aware that they are not in a position to make

such a payment. They forfeited their immigrant rights for being a long a long time in Israel up to the age of 18 in schools and afterwards two and a half years in the army. Many young married couples pass a miserable life for a long time without their own houses.

One only realises the depth of their feelings after talking to such aggrieved persons. This could be easily avoided if the Jewish Agency would appreciate their difficulties and sinerely try to help them. It takes a long time to efface wounded feelings.

It is high time that the Jewish Agency amend its rules and regulations and offer help to bachelors and married couples in obtaining decent living accommodation to settle in life.

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PARK SANATORIUM, GEDERA

2.4.1962

Dear Mr. Shimshon,

The Minister of Social Welfare has just received the opinion of our Ministry's legal adviser in connection until your complaint concerning conditions in the Park Sanatorium.

The legal adviser could see no possibility of taking legal action but brought the director's unseemly conduct towards you to the Minister's attention.

The Minister of Social Welfare has asked me to convey his deep regrets over the needless suffering that you were caused and also asked me to inform you that the director of the institution has been reprimanded and that steps shall be taken so that other parents will not suffer in the future from the conduct of the director of the said institution.

We thank you for drawing our attention to the incorrect conduct of the director of the said institution and for cooperating with us in uncovering this fault (defect?).

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September 7, 1962

## Wedding Postponed Because Groom Member of Bnei Israel

### Pardess Hana Rabbi Refuses Registration

Jerusalem Post Reporter

Printed invitations were sent out for a wedding for August 15, in Pardess Hana, but the wedding did not take place because the local rabbi refused to register the couple, one of whom was a Bnei Israel, a spokesman of the community's action committee told *The Jerusalem Post*.

Just back from Pardess Hana and displaying an invitation, the spokesman reported that a few days before the scheduled marriage between Miss Ruhama Sasson, of Pardess Hana, a member of the Baghdadi community who came to Israel 11 years ago from Calcutta, and Mr. Aharon Shapurkar, of Beersheba, five years here and of the Bombay Bnei Israel, the local rabbi, Rabbi Zalman Diskin, notified the prospective bride that he would not marry them.

He advised the couple to

get married in Beersheba as in any case they intended to live there, it was said. According to Miss Sasson, Rabbi Diskin had previously agreed to marry them.

#### September 19 Date

The couple have now set September 19 for the wedding, but insist on having it in Pardess Hana. A few days ago, it was said, Miss Sasson and relatives again went to Rabbi Diskin, and he again refused.

Rabbi Diskin in 1958 sparked a Government crisis when he refused to bury the body of Aharon Steinberg, child of a mixed marriage in the local cemetery.

The spokesman of the Ministry for Religious Affairs said yesterday that the Ministry had received no information on the subject, but that the Marriage Department was nevertheless looking into it. It had sought to contact Rabbi Diskin, who is on leave.

If it was a question of registration, he said, the couple could have this performed by one of the recently-appointed regional registrars, e.g. Rabbi Kaniel of Haifa.

The spokesman of the action committee expressed the hope that the couple would stand firm. They had the right to be married by the local rabbi if they so wished, he said.

Nothing was known of the matter at Chief Rabbi Nissim's office.

September 4, 1962

## Bnei Israel Plan to Renew Drive Against Discrimination

### Await B-G's Return to Take Action

By MOSHE KOHN, Jerusalem Post Reporter

The Central Jewish Board of Bombay and the Bnei Israel Community in Israel plan to launch a general campaign for the nullification of the Chief Rabbi's directives concerning marriage between Bnei Israel and other Jews.

Before Mr. Ben-Gurion went abroad, he received a letter from the Board, which also sent a copy to the Minister for Religious Affairs, Dr. Zerah Wahrhaftig, threatening to launch the campaign unless the Israel Government had satisfactorily dealt with the matter by Rosh Hashana (September 29).

Local Bnei Israel leaders have been promised a meeting with the Prime Minister as soon as he returns. They met with him not long before he left, and last week they met with Mr. Reuven Barkatt, Mapai Secretary-General.

#### Rank Discrimination

It is understood that they stressed to Mr. Barkatt that they cannot continue to be moderate in the face of what they consider rank discrimination against them, and that Dr. Wahrhaftig's appointment of "regional marriage registrars" to officiate at Bnei Israel weddings after a number of regular local registrars had refused to do so in no way mitigates the discrimination.

It is also understood that the Community's leadership had been somewhat amenable to suggestions that they permit time to do its part

in solving the problem rather than press for an immediate radical solution which might exacerbate religious-secularist relations and undermine coalition stability. The rank and file, however, have become impatient with the policy of moderation and gradualism.

Mr. Shlmschon Shimson, the Jerusalem Bnei Israel leader, told *The Jerusalem Post* yesterday: "We can no longer rest on a matter which affects our Community's honour — and, I might add, the honour of Israel and the entire Jewish people."

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<sup>217</sup> A copy from the late Ezekiel Ashtamkar.

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## Eigenständigkeitserklärung

Hiermit versichere ich, Karen Jacob, dass ich die Dissertation “Who are the Bene-Israel from India.”

selbstständig und nur mit den angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmitteln verfasst habe. Alle Stellen der Arbeit, die ich aus diesen Quellen und Hilfsmitteln dem Wortlaut oder dem Sinne nach entnommen habe, sind kenntlich gemacht und im Literaturverzeichnis aufgeführt.

Weiterhin versichere ich, dass weder ich noch andere diese Arbeit weder in der vorliegenden noch in einer abgewandelten Form als Leistungsnachweis einer anderen Veranstaltung bereits verwendet haben oder noch verwenden werden.

Es handelt sich bei dieser Arbeit um meinen ersten Versuch.

Potsdam, 2022

Karen Jacob

*Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high  
Where knowledge is free  
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments  
By narrow domestic walls  
Where words come out from the depth of truth  
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection  
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way  
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit  
Where the mind is led forward by thee  
Into ever-widening thought and action  
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.*

*Rabindranath Tagore – Gitanjali*