

Avotaynu

RESEARCH INTO THE ORIGINS AND MIGRATIONS OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

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Bene Israel of India

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The Bene Israel of India is one of the world's oldest known Jewish communities. This article briefly describes the group's historical tradition, its current status, the origin of its family names and a project to develop a communal family tree database. Bene Israel tradition holds that in about 175 B.C.E., a group of Jews from the Northern Kingdom of Israel, some of whom were involved in seafaring trade with the west coast of India, set sail together with their wives or other women for the Port of Cheul. As they approached India's Konkan Coast, a severe storm sunk their ships just off the coast at Navgaon. Only seven men and seven women survived; today's Bene Israel are descendants of those 14 people. Bene Israel historian Haim Samuel Kehimkar theorizes that because their original line of business upon arrival in India was oil pressing, they must have been from the tribe of Levi. No documentation exists to verify the community's history, but recent DNA testing is consistent with the tradition.

Welcomed by the local Hindu population, the Bene Israel flourished for 2,400 years in a tolerant land that has never known anti-Semitism, and were successful in all aspects of the socio-economic and cultural life of the people of the region. At its peak in the 1950s, the community numbered about 35,000 individuals, a minuscule group in a population of 1.2 billion Indians that nonetheless accumulated five *Padmashrees* (India's highest civilian honor) after India achieved independence 60 years ago. The group arrived in India prior to the destruction of the Second Temple, well before the Talmud was written and the Torah formalized in its present form. Hence, most of the practice of Judaism among the Bene Israel was that of the Oral Law handed down from father to son. Rabbis, of course, were unknown, since rabbis did not exist at the time they sailed from the Land of Israel.

Despite its safety and economic and social success, most Bene Israel elected to return to Zion after the establishment of the State of Israel, moving in large numbers during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Today the world population of Bene Israel is estimated at 90,000, the majority of whom (70,000) live in Israel. Approximately 5,000 still live in India, mostly in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), with another 15,000 in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States.

At one time, the Bene Israel operated 31 of the 43 synagogues in India, but as a result of the massive emigration, only 20 still are functioning today. On the other hand, the Bene Israel have established approximately 50 synagogues in Israel, all of them named after synagogues in India. The Bene Israel in Israel live primarily in Bersheva, Dimona, Yerucham, Kiryat Gat, Sderot, Petah Tikva, Lod-Ramle, Haifa, Nazerath and Kiryat Shimona. They were instrumental in starting the textile industry, sugar industry and Israel's aircraft industry, having arrived with expertise and licenses in these fields. They have a *Marathi* (an Indian language) newspaper, Indian drama, dance and music troupes.

Origin of Bene-Israel Family Names

For many years, people believed that because Bene Israel family names generally end in *kar*, a syllable implying "from the village or town of," the names must have been taken from the villages in which they lived. This family name format was adopted probably within a generation or two of their arrival in India. Instead, this author (as can be seen in the table above) has traced the surnames of the Bene Israel to Hebrew roots. The misconception about the origin of the names likely arose from the fact that the Bene Israel, like most Diaspora Jews, prayed in Hebrew but read the translation in Marathi and did not understand a word of the Hebrew. It should be noted that, although the surnames of the Bene Israel can be demonstrated to have Hebrew roots, they have no meaning in Marathi. Further, if the Bene Israel took the names of the villages or towns in which they lived, it is logical that they would bear the names Bombay, Pune, Alibagh, Karachi, Ahmedabad, Thane, Mandva, Revdanda, Dharamtar or Revas—all places that had large Bene Israel populations.

Contrary to general belief, the more logical sequence of events is that the villages came to be known by the names of the resident Bene Israel family property around which the village grew. This would thus explain why so many

villages with Bene Israel name origins have disappeared totally and are untraceable today. When a family left the area or sold its property, the name gradually faded away and then disappeared into history.

Family names of single Hebrew words are shown in the first part of the table. The second part reveals that a substantial number of Bene Israel names are composed of two related Hebrew words, such as Ram/Ras or Pu/Gaon. This is not coincidence, but likely reflects a conscious effort to retain the identity of a group through its family names.

Communal Family Tree

Over the past eight years, the author has embarked on a project to develop a communal family tree of the Bene Israel community. The result is an integrated and interlinked database of more than 9,500 names, several thousand photographs and biographical reviews of the achievements of individuals going back about 18 generations to 1670. This database accounts for approximately 10 percent of the world's Bene Israel population.

Construction of the database has relied heavily upon the historical records of various family groups, individual contacts, interviews and visits to a few cemeteries. Most of the information maintained by various synagogues and cemeteries remains untouched due to lack of funds to extend the work. Much of the data is in Marathi or Lodi script and in poor condition. Many cemeteries are closed and their records need to be traced. A modest effort is being made by a voluntary group under the direction of Ralph Jhirad, Honorary Secretary, trying to establish a Bene Israel Heritage Museum and Genealogical Center in Bombay. The group is attempting to prevent the further decay of the cemetery sites by enlisting the involvement of the resident town or village population in the maintenance of the cemeteries and their historical records. Again, the effort is severely restricted for lack of funds. This databank (along with historical and cultural information on the community) with the Bene Israel Museum and Genealogical Center will soon be available for general viewing at interactive computer kiosks to be located at several selected sites in Delhi, Bombay and other locations in India and abroad.

Nissim Moses established and headed the Acoustic Department of Israel Aircraft Industries until his appointment as founder and director of the IAI Marketing and Liaison Affairs Office in India. Among other activities, Moses is

researching the heritage and genealogy of the Bene Israel community in India. In addition to publishing a set of CDs on the heritage of the Bene Israel in India, Moses has produced an ever-expanding database of the Communal Family Tree of the Bene Israel. All this effort has been donated to the Bene Israel Heritage Museum and Genealogical Center for the benefit of the community. Moses lives in New Delhi, India.

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