Yet another respondent wrote that he had a huge collection of books on religion comprising Indian Yoga, Sufism, Kabbala, Judaism and Islam. According to a fellow Bene Israel who shared his broad interests in religion, he was a practicing Sufi.

**Conclusion**

The immigration to Israel of the Bene Israel of India entailed, as for all immigrant groups, a great many adjustments. Coming into contact with Jews from all over the world, each community discovered that it brought along its own cultural constructs, some of which were different from those of their co-religionists from elsewhere. Diaspora Jews had naturally assimilated certain customs from their non-Jewish environments and these contributed to each community’s sense of ethnic distinctiveness. In the early years of the state especially, Ashkenazi (Eastern and Central European) traditions—in particular those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Jewish settlers in Palestine who eventually founded the State of Israel—were upheld as the norm and immigrants from Asia and Africa were expected to conform to them. Partly as a result of this policy of encouraging assimilation to Ashkenazi cultural values, the issue of ethnic distinctiveness and identity amongst Jews became one of the major concerns in Israel.

Ritual was an enactment of identity, just as religion served to establish, define, and maintain identity, but when it came to deviations from normative Jewish religious ritual (which was practiced by Mizrahi and Sephardic as well as Ashkenazi Jews) the key element to be considered was whether or not the practice in question was contrary to Jewish law. If it was, a community was likely to discard it; if not, it might be kept. In the latter case, it would become a marker of the ethnic identity of that particular community. A conscious concern with the traditions of a community is an aspect of ethnicity, and religion is an important part of the heritage.

For the Bene Israel, the religious issue was a particularly sensitive one. As devout as they were, some of their practices (or lack of them) had already been criticized in India by Baghdadi Jews and when they arrived in Israel, they were subjected to the humiliating doubts of the Chief Rabbinate. Furthermore, many Israelis seemed less tolerant of what they suspected might be Hindu accretions in Jewish customs than they were of Christian, or even Muslim, influence. In their eagerness to prove that they were truly Jewish, the Bene Israel were particularly concerned about conforming to mainstream Jewish norms, even if this meant shedding time-honored customs. Those particular traditions, such as the Eliahu Ha-navi, which were uniquely Indian and yet not in conflict with Jewish law, assumed special importance.

Partly because of the “religious crisis” of the 1960s, the Bene Israel were slower than many other Mizrahi communities to begin to assert their pride in their own ethnic identity. It was only when they felt confident that they were
fully accepted as Jews that they could begin to publicly display some of their “Indianness” through annual festivals, demonstrations of their customs, and other manifestations. To what extent the Bene Israel will maintain any of their distinctive cultural and religious traditions will, of course, depend on the second and third generations, which are both more secular and more “Israeli” than the immigrant generation. Many of the younger people take pride in their Bene Israel heritage but they express it mainly through their fondness for Indian food, films and music. Whether or not they will incorporate the maintenance of distinctive Bene Israel religious customs as they refashion their identity as Israelis remains to be seen.

NOTES


6 The most recent incident occurred in November, 1997, in the Israeli town of Petach Tikvah when a rabbi refused to marry a Bene Israel woman to a non-Bene Israel man unless she underwent ritual conversion. The young couple had to find another rabbi in a nearby town who would sign the certificate. See Alison Kaplan Sommer, “Indian Jews Fight for Recognition Again,” *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 November 1997.


11 Abraham reported that sixty-seven of her informants said they maintained strictly kosher kitchens with another fourteen percent maintaining some kosher observances. See Abraham, “Ethnic Identity,” p. 211.


13 A woman with no male offspring might vow that if she bore a boy, his hair would not be cut until after a specified time. Then the shaven hair was weighed against gold or silver which was given in charity or presented to the synagogue: the hair was then thrown by the Bene Israel into the sea, there being no Temple altar on which to burn it, as provided in the Book of Numbers 6:18. This is called *Korban Nesor* or the Offering of the Nazrite. Isenberg, *India’s Bene Israel*, pp. 116, 131, 144, note 7.

14 For an excellent discussion of the importance of Elijah, see Isenberg, pp. 111-117.


16 See Weil, who discusses its similarity to the Islamic *slamatan*: “Bene Israel Indian Jews in Lod, Israel,” pp. 325-27; and Isenberg, *India’s Bene Israel*, pp. 115-117.

For a description of a *malida* as performed in Israel, see Guy, pp. 173-175, 179-180.

Guy, pp. 177-178, 183-84.

Guy, pp. 185-186. Guy saw this as an Israeli innovation. In Ahmedabad, however, the Bene Israel would do a *malida* ceremony once a year at the synagogue during the festival of the New Year for Trees, *Tu B’shvat*, because they felt that the community should participate in rejoicing for the new fruits. Since not everybody could afford the new fruits, they could join in this communal ceremony. Noreen Daniel, private communication, June, 1998.


Guy, p. 200.

Guy, p. 187.

*Yad*, Sept., 1993, no. 6. There is a similar Moroccan custom at least for a house warming. I am grateful to Noreen Daniel for translations from *Yad*, which is in Marathi.


Iseberg, *India’s Bene* Israel, p. 123, note 4. Iseberg points out that it is not uncommon in the Konkan that the *padukas* (footprints) of Hindu saints and ascetics are worshipped after their death and that there are also “footprint” features in Islamic legend.


*The Friend of Israel*, Aug.-Sept. 1973, pp. 26-7. When Shimon Bar Yohai and his son, Eliezer, were sentenced to death by the Romans, they escaped to the caves of Meron, where they lived until the day when the Romans were defeated and they were liberated; that day was *Lag b’Omer*.

Weil, “Bene Israel Indian Jews in Lod, Israel,” pp. 331, 332; Iseberg, *India’s Bene* Israel, p. 231, note 5. Sometimes young Bene Israel couples make a vow to visit the Cave of Elijah and perform the circumcision there if a son is born to them.

Isenberg, India’s Bene Israel, p. 91.
Pe’amim, September, 1997 (in Hebrew).
Weil, pp. 297-298.
Yad, August, 1995, p. 28. On Shila San, see Isenberg, India’s Bene Israel, pp. 5, 15 note 12, 120.
Weil, p. 288 and see ch. IX, passim.
One highly respected member of the community questioned whether Yad was really necessary, pointing out that the older generation knew how to pray and what the customs were and that the younger generation didn’t read Marathi. She wondered for whom it was really being published. If a question was asked and if a knowledgeable writer, such as Chaim Kolet, gave answers for which he cited authoritative sources, that was one thing. But if the answers were given by people who were not recognized as authorities, what was the point? (This individual also felt that there was a certain inconsistency in the attitudes of the editor who, in Yad, seemed to be urging people to become more religious but then, in another magazine [Shaili published in India], wrote a story about a family whose son became ba’al tshuva and would no longer eat at his parents’ house. So he seemed, on one hand, to be telling people to be more observant but, on the other hand, he criticized people who had become “too orthodox.”
Yad, no. 6, September, 1993, pp. 24-25.
52 Yad, May, 1991, p. 11.
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