

Book Review

Shalom India Housing Society

Reviewed by Nathan Katz

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

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

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

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

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

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

Declaration of the Second Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit

The Hindu-Jewish Leadership Summit took place in Jerusalem 11to 14 of Adar 1, 5768, corresponding to February 17-20, 2008, and maghacaturdasi suklapaksa during Vikram Samvat 2064 by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel in cooperation with the American Jewish Committee (AJC). An initiative of the World Council of Religious Leaders (WCROL) to promote understanding and mutual respect between the Rabbinic leadership and the major Religious leaders of The Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha, this second meeting provided the opportunity to The Chief Rabbinate to reciprocate the gracious hospitality enjoyed at the historic first successful summit in New Delhi last year. The Summit in Jerusalem was followed by meetings in Haifa with the religious leaders of the other official religions of the State of Israel.

Pursuant to the discussions between the delegation of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Hindu religious leadership representing the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha, the following affirmations were reached:

1. In keeping with the Delhi declaration, the participants reaffirmed their commitment to deepening this bilateral relationship predicated on the recognition of One Supreme Being, Creator and Guide of the Cosmos; shared values; and similar historical experiences. The parties are committed to learning about one another on the basis of respect for the particular identities of their respective communities and seeking, through their bilateral relationship, to be a blessing to all.
2. It is recognized that the One Supreme Being, both in its formless and manifest aspects, has been worshipped by Hindus over the millennia. This does not mean that Hindus worship 'gods' and idols'. The Hindu relates to only the One Supreme Being when he/she prays to a particular manifestation.
3. Central to the Jewish and Hindu world view is the concept of the sanctity of life, above all the human person. Accordingly, the participants categorically reject violent methods to achieve particular goals. In this spirit, the participants expressed the hope that all disputes be resolved through dialogue, negotiation and compromise promoting peace, reconciliation and harmony.
4. As the two oldest religious traditions of the world, the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha and the Jewish religious leadership may consider jointly appealing to various religious organizations in the world to recognize that all religions are sacred and valid for their respective peoples. We believe that there is no inherent right embedded in any religion to denigrate or interfere with any other religion or with its practitioners. Acceptance of this proposition will reduce inter-religious violence, increase harmony among different peoples.
5. The participants expressed the hope that the profound wellsprings of spirituality in their respective traditions will serve their communities to constructively address the challenges of modernity, so that contemporary innovation may serve the highest ideals of their respective religious traditions.
6. In the interests of promoting the correct understanding of Judaism, Hinduism and their histories, it was agreed that text books and reference material may be prepared in consultation with the scholars' group under the aegis of this Summit.
7. Svastika is an ancient and greatly auspicious symbol of the Hindu tradition. It is inscribed on Hindu temples, ritual altars, entrances, and even account books. A distorted version of this sacred symbol was misappropriated by the Third Reich in Germany, and abused as an emblem under which heinous crimes were perpetrated against humanity, particularly the Jewish people. The participants recognize that

this symbol is, and has been sacred to Hindus for millennia, long before its misappropriation.

8. Since there is no conclusive evidence to support the theory of an Aryan invasion/migration into India, and on the contrary, there is compelling evidence to refute it; and since the theory seriously damages the integrity of the Hindu tradition and its connection to India; we call for a serious reconsideration of this theory, and a revision of all educational material on this issue that includes the most recent and reliable scholarship.
9. The bilateral group of scholars may engage in further elaboration of the foregoing affirmations, exchange material to enhance mutual understanding, clarify the positions of the Hindu and Jewish traditions regarding contemporary challenges in science and society, and identify programs of action for the future.