

## **IN MEMORIAM: RUTH FREDMAN CERNEA (1935-2009)**

Ruth Fredman Cernea, a cultural anthropologist who wrote on topics that included the Jews of, died March 31, 2009, of pancreatic cancer.

Dr. Cernea dedicated her scholarly career to the study and interpretation of Jewish culture and symbols. Her books included *The Passover Seder* (1992), an anthropological analysis of the Passover holiday and ritual; and *Cosmopolitans at Home: The Sephardic Jews of Washington, D.C.* (1982), the product of five years of research among Jewish immigrants from North Africa living in Washington.

Her best-selling work was *The Great Latke Hamantasch Debate* (2006) is a collection of "scholarly" presentations on behalf of the latke, the potato pancake traditionally served during Hanukkah, and the hamantasch, the triangular filled sweet pastry associated with Purim. "Jews have always been able to use humor to lighten the load," Dr. Cernea told the *Chicago Tribune* in 2005. "Jewish humor is not silly, but it is absurd absurdity. It is the opposite of deep seriousness. In Jewish thought absurdity and humor is particularly an antidote to seriousness. . . . It could only happen at a place that is deeply serious."

Dr. Cernea was on her second honeymoon in 1987 when she discovered a little-known Jewish community in Myanmar (Burma) and the country's only synagogue, the historic Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue in Yangon (formerly Rangoon). Her discovery spurred an enduring interest in the Jewish communities of the former British colonies of South and Southeast Asia. More than 20 years of research went into her book *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma* (2006).

She was born Ruth Gruber in Philadelphia and received a bachelor's degree in English literature in 1956 and a doctorate in cultural anthropology in 1982, both from Temple University. From 1982 to 1996, she served as director of research and publications for the Hillel Foundation and edited several annual editions of the "Hillel Guide to Jewish Life on Campus." She lectured at a number of universities and institutions. She was a former president of the Washington Association of Professional Anthropologists.

This issue of the *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* contains her last publication. She was a kind and warm-hearted person as well as a fine scholar, and she will be missed.

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This obituary was provided by her husband, Michael Cernea, and it is adapted from the *Washington Post*, April 7, 2009.

## Notes on Contributors

**KTZIA ALON** is the head of Gender Studies, Beit-Berl College, Israel.

**RUTH FREDMAN CERNEA** has been researching the history of the Baghdadi Jews of Southeast Asia since her first visit to Burma in 1987. She has authored several studies of immigrant Sephardic communities in the United States, as well as other articles on the Jewish experience in Burma and on Jewish ritual and symbolism. Her most recent book is *Almost Englishmen: Baghdadi Jews in British Burma* (2006). For many years, she served as the Director of Research and Publications for the Hillel Foundations in Washington, D.C.

**ELIZABETH CHALIER-VISUVALINGAM** did her doctoral state thesis at the University of Paris X which was published by Peter Lang in 2003, *Bhairav: Terreur et protection. Mythes, rites et fêtes à Bénarès et à Katmandou*. She wrote the article "The Jews in India," for the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1992). She was Visiting Scholar at Harvard University, and then taught at the universities of Boston and Budapest. She currently teaches at the School of the Art Institute (SAIC) in Chicago.

**OPHIRA GAMLIEL** teaches Malayalam at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, where she is also a research assistant in the department of Comparative Religions.

**NATHAN KATZ**, professor of religious studies at Florida International University, is co-editor and co-founder of this journal. One of the leading figures in the field of Indo-Judaic Studies, his most recent book is *Spiritual Journey Home, Eastern Mysticism to the Western Wall* (2009).

**DALYA MARKOVICH** teaches Sociology of Education at Beit-Berl College, Israel.

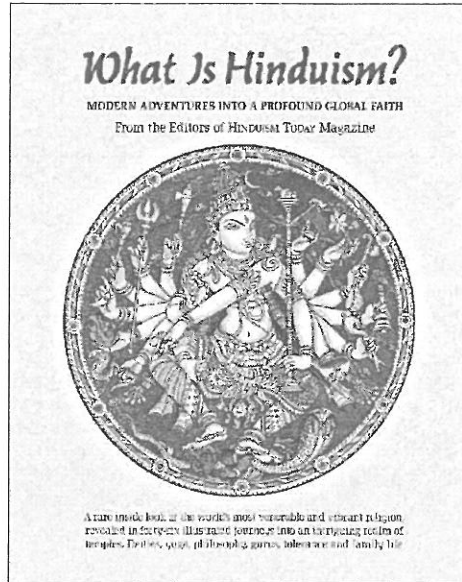
**EPHRAIM NISSAN** is joint co-editor of *Melilah, New Series: The Manchester Journal of Jewish Studies*. He has published ninety articles in various journals in the fields of Jewish studies, the humanities, folklore studies, as well as in artificial intelligence. Some of his computing-oriented work has also been applied to the humanities, for example, to episodes in the reign of Aurangzeb in India.

**LILADHAR R. PENDSE**, MA, MLIS, is Librarian for Slavic/Eastern European, South Asian and Pan-Asian Studies at Charles E. Young Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles. Currently he is pursuing a Ph.D. in Information Studies at UCLA.

**JOAN G. ROLAND** is Professor of History at Pace University, New York City, and is the author of *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era* as well as several book chapters and articles on Indian Jews in India and in Israel. She is currently doing research on the Bene Israel community in the United States.

**BRAJ M. SINHA**, co-editor and co-founder of this journal, has published and presented papers at national and international fora in Indo-Judaic Studies. He is the author of many articles and published monographs and edited works in his primary area of expertise, namely Indic Studies. He has lectured extensively in India, Europe, Mexico, the United States, South Africa, and Canada on a wide range of academic topics. Currently he is Professor and Chair of the Department of Religion and Culture at the University of Saskatchewan.

**ARYEH WINEMAN**, presently living in Northampton, Massachusetts, has written many articles growing out of his research in Hebrew literature and Jewish mysticism. His books include *Mystic Tales of the Zohar* and *The Hasidic Parable—A Collection with Commentary*.



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