

SHINGLY IN COCHIN JEWISH MEMORY AND IN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

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Many traditions of the Jews of Cochin, on the Malabar coast of southwestern India, attest that their community continues the heritage of Shingly, a nearby Jewish settlement in the city of Cranganore that was destroyed in the sixteenth century. Both the remembered character of Shingly and the connection between Shingly and Cochin have long provoked questions. The various inconsistent Cochin traditions make it difficult to form a picture of historical Shingly in the absence of solid external confirmation. According to some traditions, the Shingly Jews arrived in India before the First Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, in 586 B.C.E., but, according to others, the Jews arrived after the destruction of the Second Temple, in 70 C.E. Other traditions mention a later immigration from Mallorca. The founding of Shingly is variously attributed to the earliest Jewish settlers, to a later wave of arrivals, and to the grant of nobility to a Joseph Rabban and his descendants. In some accounts Shingly was an independent Jewish state under a dynasty of seventy-two kings, beginning with Joseph Rabban and ending with Joseph Azar, although such complete independence sounds implausible. Cochin traditions recall several destructions of the Shingly Jewish settlement in the 16th century and the flight of the last Shingly king to Cochin. Cochin Jews also have proudly preserved "Shingly songs," distinctive religious rituals and customs that they trace to Shingly. These memories have been effective communal myths for Cochin Jews, but are they accurate? The scarce evidence about Shingly from outside Cochin traditions has made it impossible to decide.

Aside from the legends and brief, scattered reports by medieval travelers, the major evidence about that time in Shingly is the set of copper plates kept in the Paradesi, "foreign," synagogue in Cochin, and claimed by other Cochin Jews, the Malabaris. The plates record the privileges that the Hindu ruler, "King of Kings" Bhaskara Ravi Varma, of the dynasty of Cheraman Perumal, granted to Joseph Rabban in about 1000 C.E. Joseph Rabban and his descendants received the ceremonial honors of a high caste, such as "tolls on female elephants, ...a lamp in daytime, a cloth spread [in front to walk on], a palanquin, a parasol," and exemption from "[the dues] which the [other] inhabitants of the city pay to the royal palace." They received "*Añjuvannam* [as] an hereditary estate for as long as the world and the moon shall exist." Some scholars have interpreted *Añjuvannam*, or *Ancuvannam*, to be a village, others a guild.¹ Who were the descendants who benefitted from this grant? How had the Jews arrived in Malabar in the first place? Were Judean refugees from First or

Second Temple times connected with Joseph Rabban and with the port city of Shingly in a single historical sequence? Or did Cochin Jews, or perhaps only a faction among them, at a fairly recent time harmonize the available stories of glorious antiquity into the unilinear story? Or are none of the traditions reliable as history? Answers to these questions require more evidence.

New evidence about the character of Shingly and its connection with Cochin is now available, from three long-forgotten Hebrew documents that I had the good fortune to find. The autograph manuscript of the notebooks of Yohanan Alemanno, a rabbi, physician, teacher and writer in Florence, Mantua and Padua in the late fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth, contains three hitherto ignored accounts of Shingly. One document is a letter written in Jerusalem in 1496; the second records the oral testimony of a Portuguese converso who was probably a member of Vasco da Gama's second expedition to India; the third is a letter written by a Shingly Jew early in 1503 to represent the community to European Jews. These documents confirm some Cochin memories, contradict others, and raise entirely new topics.

The recovered documents about Shingly are found in marginal notes on leaves 41a and 41b of the Hebrew manuscript, *Reggio* 23, in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.² Alemanno recorded all three in Hebrew, although the oral testimony probably was given in another language. The letter from 1496, written by Rabbi Abraham of Siena, a student in Jerusalem of the eminent *Mishnah* commentator, Rabbi Obadiah Yare of Bertinoro, transmits Jewish travelers' reports about Shingly.³ The oral testimony is from a Portuguese converso whom Jews knew as Hayim Franco. In Mantua in 1503-1504, he told Alemanno about his voyage from Portugal, by way of the Cape Verde Islands, to Shingly. The Hebrew letter from Shingly itself is signed by "Moses, son of Abba Mori," and dated "Sunday, the 25th of the month of *Shevat*, 5263" (Winter, 1503). The letter briefly surveys the origins of Shingly, manifestations of its independence, its external relations, and details of its Jewish scholarship and observances.

How do the newly recovered reports affect our knowledge of Shingly and its connections with Cochin? First, they supply incidental details that adjust the established picture of the community. For example, they give the names of the first "king" of Cochin and the names of two rulers of Shingly. The Shingly letter asserts that priests arrived among the refugees from Jerusalem, although no priestly families remained in more recent times. Also, contrary to the statement by Moses Pereyra de Paiva, in 1686, that "They do not wear *sisit* for the reason that they do not use dress of four corners. (Their dress is of Eastern fashion.),"⁴ Hayim Franco observed two rabbis to wear fringed garments, one in an eccentric fashion: "And under his robe one of them had a small fringed *talit*, and the second wears it on his head like a turban, and its fringes hang here and there." Such incidental observations add to the general circumstantial evidence which must be integrated into the history of the Shingly Jews.

More substantially, the newly recovered documents offer evidence from before the destruction of Shingly that is pertinent to four central questions about the settlement:

1. When, and from where, did Jews come to Shingly?
2. Was Shingly actually independent and under a Jewish king?
3. Did Cochin religious practices indeed continue those of Shingly?
4. Did the division of Cochin Jews into Paradesis and Malabaris begin in Shingly?

The documents substantially confirm much of the legendary continuity between Shingly and Cochin in religious observance, as well as in the memory of an independent Jewish community. Their accounts of the origins of Jews in Malabar and of the independence of Shingly deviate significantly, however, from the Cochin Paradesi account and agree with traditions of the Malabaris. The documents offer only indirect testimony about the internal divisions of Cochin Jews. The age of these documents offers the best available control on the reliability of the later memories and conflicting traditions of the Cochin Jews.

I. ORIGINS OF SHINGLY

Do the various Cochin stories about the origins of Jewish presence in Malabar, and specifically in Shingly, reliably transmit traditions from Shingly? The Shingly letter gives an account of the arrival of Jews in India:

Before the destruction of the First Temple, in the days of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, nine-and-a-half tribes went and settled in Cush until this day. We who live in the land of Shingly are from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin.

The statement emphatically distinguishes the ancestors of these Jews, pre-exilic arrivals in India from the two tribes of the Kingdom of Judea, from the nine and a half tribes of the Kingdom of Israel who were exiled (ca. 820 B.C.E.) to an area north of India, as divine punishment for idolatry:

In the ninth year of Hoshea, the king of Assyria captured Samaria. He deported the Israelites to Assyria and settled them in Halah, at the [River] Habor, at the River Gozan, and in the towns of Media... (II Kings 17:6) [This happened] because they did not obey the Lord their God; they transgressed His covenant—all that Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded. They did not obey and they did not fulfill it. (II Kings 18:12)

Hayim Franco's testimony conforms to the letter: "And they...come from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin and first left Israel before the exile of Nebuchadnezzar and did not return during the time of the Second Temple."

To the account of the first arrival of Jews in India in biblical times, the letter adds a second arrival of exiles from Israel, 800 years later: "After the destruction of the Second Temple, our revered master and teacher, Samuel Halevi, and Israelites and priests came into the land of Melibara." As in the first account, Jews fleeing a catastrophe in Judea, in 70 C.E., took refuge in India. Shingly Jews were doubly connected with the generally known history of the Jews, from both biblical and rabbinic times. These stories of successive waves of Jewish refugees, like Hindu stories of origins, perform a second function:⁵

These Jewish groups also resemble many Hindu *jatis* in holding to two kinds of origin story. One explains the cosmos and the nature of human society, the other justifies the actual or sought status of one's group in the social order. The cosmic explanation of the Cochin Jews came from the Hebrew rather than from the Sanskrit scriptures.

The letter and Hayim Franco's informants connect the cosmic origins of the community with the ancient exile from Judea, and the origins of the Jews' status in Malabar with exile in the time of the Second Temple. To explain the community's high status in the Hindu social order and the institutional form of the Shingly community, the letter narrates:

At that time all the land of Malabar and the land of Calicut and the land of Keshi were all in the hand of one king. Samuel Halevi asked the king for a place in which to build the synagogue. What did the king do? He gave each king a separate city. To the King Samri he gave the city, Calicut. And to Rabbi Samuel he gave Shingly. To King Bevili he gave Keshi.

Rabbi Samuel Halevi led the second wave of exiled immigrants to India, where he received permission from the Hindu ruler to establish a synagogue. (Moses Pereyra de Paiva noted, in 1686, "the tomb of Reby Samuel Levi is seen even today," in Cherigandaram.)⁶ The letter treats the permission to found a synagogue as equivalent to the grant of autonomy to two other port cities, Calicut, the rival of Shingly, and Cochin, its ally. The parallel of "the King Samri" (*Samrudi Rajah*, "Lord of the Sea"), ruler of Calicut, and "King Bevili," of Cochin, to Rabbi Samuel Halevi implies granting a rank equal to royalty to the Jewish founder of a synagogue. As one scholar has remarked, "The support and protection of temples was one of the defining acts of south Indian kingship."⁷ Permission to found a church that was given to the leader of a group of Christian refugees from Iran in the middle of the ninth century was recorded on copper plaques.⁸

The newly recovered documents do not mention Joseph Rabban or the grant of nobility on the copper plates. This silence may be explained by Barbara C. Johnson's distinction between Malabari and Paradesi historical

legends in Cochin: "From what is now known of the Malabari Jews, it seems that the symbols of Cranganore, Cheraman Perumal and Joseph Rabban are present in their folklore, but not emphasized to the extent that they are by the Paradesi." The inference is reinforced by other incomplete agreements between the Shingly letter and Malabari traditions:⁹

Another Malabari chronicle states that the original Kerala Jews came to Calicut before the destruction of the First Temple, an oral tradition which I have heard from Malabari Jews, but which is not found in Paradesi sources. According to the same account, Joseph Rabban came to Cranganore after the destruction of the Second Temple and Cheraman Perumal is not mentioned.

Hayim Franco evidently encountered and transmitted what later would be considered Malabari traditions, even though the Paradesi tradition of origins may also have been current in Shingly at the time. The striking differences between the account of the city's origins in the Shingly letter and in the Cochin Paradesi tradition may reflect older divergences between the communities that bore these traditions. These divisions may have been among the Jews inside the city of Shingly, between Jews in the city and those who were scattered throughout "the land of Shingly," or among groups from various places who later settled together in Cochin. The Paradesi story that traces Jewish autonomy to Joseph Rabban and the copper scrolls may have become prominent only in Cochin, after Shingly disappeared.

II. INDEPENDENCE

Hayim Franco says, "They are independent of anything and anyone." The letter adds:

And we are loved by the king of Keshi and he is loved by us, but not the king of Calicut. And our governor is Master Joseph Hasar, son of Master Sa'adia Hasar. And we collect taxes from Ishmaelites and gentiles and from all the nations of the earth and we live here like a kingdom and they cannot do us any harm.

The letter illustrates the independence of Shingly by noting that Shingly has its own ruler, the power to tax other peoples, external alliances and enmities, military prowess and miraculous divine protection. An important sign of independence is their ruler. Both Hayim Franco and the Shingly letter call the current ruler "Joseph Hasar," which resembles the name of the traditional last "king" of Shingly, "Joseph Azar." What may be a vernacular family name also resembles the Hebrew title, *Sar*, "Ruler," "Governor," or "Chief." Hayim Franco calls him a "king" ("*Hamelekh hamoshel aleha nikra Yosef*.")) and describes Joseph as presiding over trade in a manner that resembles

Portuguese accounts of the behavior of the ruler of Cochin and of the samrudi of Calicut.¹⁰ The Shingly letter, in contrast, avoids the term, "King," and keeps to the less definite "Sar." "Our ruler is Master Joseph the ruler, son of Master Saadia the ruler. (*"Hasar shelanu R. Yosef Hasar, ben R. Saadia Hasar."*) Abraham of Siena reports the name of the "reigning" Shingly ruler in 1496 to be a Master Joshua (*"hamolekh aleihem nikra R. Yehoshua"*). If this news was accurate and current, in 1503 Joseph had only recently attained his office, and apparently not by inheritance.

The fighting ability of Shingly's forces and the divine providence that miraculously sank the fleet of its Muslim enemies guarantee the city's independence: "And we fight with Ishmaelites and kill them with a great blow. And many of their ships gathered to fight us, but a miracle occurred for us and they all sank in the sea." One ruler of Calicut, which was dominated by Muslim merchants and opposed to Cochin and Shingly, had the title *Samrudi Rajah*, "Ruler of the Sea." The Shingly Jews believed that God, "Ruler of The Universe," had defeated the mere "Ruler of The Sea." The letter of Abraham of Siena more prosaically mentions that shallow water prevents enemy ships and even boats from attacking Shingly. Shallow water, their own strength and miraculous storms, protected the Shinglians.

The Jews of Shingly express pride in their independence through another practice that the letter-writer describes as the concluding celebrations of Purim:

...And on the day of Purim, after the prayer, they read the *megillah* and drink and are happy and get drunk and fall asleep. And afterwards they make an effigy and take it out into the city street and burn it and stone it with rocks, all Israel. And all of the nations of the world and Ishmaelites and Christians and everyone is embarrassed and ashamed by this act. (Or, "stone it with rocks. All Israel and all of the nations of the world...are embarrassed and ashamed")

The unclear grammatical connection of "all Israel" with either the stoning or the embarrassment does not obscure the zeal some Shingly Jews demonstrate in expressing their political sentiments without constraint or the specifically Jewish significance that they give to their local conflict.

The degree of independence that the letter describes for Shingly was remarkable among pre-modern Jews, even though it was ultimately guaranteed by another ruler. Shingly appeared to confirm, to its own Jews and to Jews elsewhere, the medieval apologetic contention that the existence of an independent Jewish community demonstrates that the exiled Jewish people has not been abandoned by God.¹¹ The Shingly letter describes the status of the city with a more cautious nuance: "We live here like a kingdom and they cannot do us any harm." Much of Shingly's autonomy appears to have continued for the Cochin Jews, as Walter J. Fischel, for example, has described:¹²

[T]he Rajah of Cochin...granted them religious and cultural autonomy. He appointed a hereditary *mudaliar* ("chief") from among the Jews as their recognized spokesman and invested him with special privileges and prerogatives and with jurisdiction in all internal matters of the communal organization of the Cochin Jews, though without any political power. This office continued in force under the rajahs and even the Dutch.

Our newly recovered documents substantiate to a surprising extent, then, the legendary independence of Shingly that medieval Jews admired and that Cochin Jews proudly recalled. The special configuration of "the typically south Indian overlord/'little king' relationship" between the Nayar ruler and the leadership of the Jews allowed the Jews to show and feel themselves independent to a degree that was inconceivable to Jews from Europe.¹³ Although the unusually ample privileges that the Jews received roughly correspond to the grant recorded on the copper plates, the Shingly letter does not mention the plates. Did the Jews of Shingly emphasize the glory of their independence by avoiding mention of the grant of privileges by Hindu rulers? If so, the pride with which Cochin Jews preserve the copper plates reflects a different attitude towards their granted autonomy. The possible difference between the attitudes of the two communities may be worth examination.

III. CONTINUITY WITH SHINGLY RITUAL: *SIMHAT TORAH*

The Cochin community's distinctive Jewish practices prominently include the custom, on *Simhat Torah*, of performing three afternoon *haqafot*, processions, outdoors with specially decorated Torah scrolls and special songs. These afternoon *haqafot* are unique to Cochin among all Jewish communities of the world. "The entire liturgy for the afternoon *haqafot* was composed in Cranganore, according to local tradition."¹⁴ The Shingly letter describes the practice as being distinctive to that community.

And we have a custom, and the second holy day of *Shemini Atzeret*, after praying the additional service (*musaf*), they bring out eight Torah scrolls, in precious drapes and chains and golden pomegranates, outside the synagogue, and utter song and praise and thanks in a loud voice and circle three times and pray *minchah* (the afternoon prayer).

The distinctive ritual of Cochin and, it now appears, of Shingly, expresses the Jews' independence and God's sovereignty, both in Jewish forms that Hindus could understand, as Nathan Katz and Ellen Goldberg have explained:

Three singular aspects of the Cochin *minhag* for *Simchat Torah*-displaying the *Sifrei Torah* on a temporary ark, adding

afternoon *haqafot* outside of the synagogue building, and ritually dismantling the ark—are the Jews' creative responses to their Hindu environment in Malabar. Specifically, Hinduized symbols and metaphors of royalty and nobility have been adopted.¹⁵

The clear continuity from the documented features of Shingly practice to the distinctive Cochin Jewish religious practice lends trustworthiness to other assertions of continuity between Cochin and Shingly.

IV. CASTE DIVISIONS FROM SHINGLY?

Scholarship is divided over whether the divisions in Cochin between Paradesi and Malabari Jews, which have been compared to Indian caste divisions, were old and traceable to Shingly, or took shape only after large numbers of Iberian refugees arrived in Cochin during the sixteenth century. J. B. Segal reports Cochin stories about Shingly in which opposition of "White" and "Black" Jews went back to the fourteenth century and significantly affected struggles between the ruling Azar brothers, Aaron and Joseph.¹⁶ David G. Mandelbaum, however, doubts that the division is so old:¹⁷ "[I]n the seventeenth century both divisions of the Cochin Jews knew this story of the exodus from Cranganore to Cochin, but there was no mention of caste divisions among Jews during the centuries when they had lived in Cranganore." He says, "The earliest account known so far of caste-like divisions among the Jews of Cochin," is the halachic question to Rabbi David Ibn Abi Zimra, from about 1520.

The newly recovered documents do not mention communal division in Shingly. Hayim Franco's brief observation that the Jews of Shingly are "black and white, like the (other) Indians" (*vehem shehorim ulevanim kahodiim*), may mean as little as that the Jews were indistinguishable from other Indians in their appearance, or as much as that they, like other Indians, were divided among themselves according to color. Remarks of other travelers to India do not clarify the meaning of the statement. The Spanish-Jewish traveler, Benjamin of Tudela, remarked in 1167 that in Khulam (Quilon), "The inhabitants are all black, and the Jews also."¹⁸ The Portuguese chronicler, Duarte Barbosa, wrote in 1516, "...The Kings of Malabar are...brown, almost white, others are darker."¹⁹ Moses Pereyra de Paiva reported from Cochin in 1685, "Their colour is brown which is due to the climate as they are totally separated from the Malabarees in rank and consider it a disgrace to marry them. They allege that the Malabarees are the slaves of slaves and are mixed with the Cannanites, Gentiles and Ismelims."²⁰

Although the new documents do not mention caste divisions in Shingly, they do provide information that bears upon the *responsum* of Rabbi David Ibn Zimra. The questioner noted that self-styled *meyuhasim* ("well-born") in Cochin found reasons to avoid marrying Malabari Jews and accepting their