Bene Israel Aliyah and Absorption in Israel, 1948-1960

By Joseph Hodes

Between May 1948 and May 1960, approximately 8,000 of 20,000 Bene Israel left India and moved to Israel. This article examines some of the challenges the community was forced to over come upon arrival including culture shock, housing, education, discrimination, and employment problems. These challenges drove some to return to India, although many of those who left eventually returned to Israel.

Zionist ideology deeply penetrated the Bene Israel community in India, leading to the creation of Indian Zionist organizations, which promoted it further. Visits by emissaries and the arrival of refugees from Europe further ignited the community. As early as 1936 there was keen interest in immigrating to Palestine, and with the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, large portions of the community were interested in packing up to leave the place that had been their ancestral home for centuries. Representation of the *Yishuv* (the Jewish community in pre-State Israel) as a place of equal opportunity may have fostered their enthusiasm, as the harsh realities of British Mandate Palestine were not made clear to them. The articles in Indian Jewish journals such as *Friend of Israel*, *Zion's Messenger*, and *The Jewish Advocate* were overwhelmingly supportive of the ideology, and emissaries painted a rosy picture of the future and the situation on the ground.

Upon the establishment of the State of Israel, the immigration of families and adults of the Bene Israel community was organized in India by H. Cynowitz, the chairman and J. S. Ezra, the vice president of the Bombay Zionist Association. While some wealthy community members were among the first immigrants, the majority of the first to move to Israel were children who went as part of the Youth Aliyah movement. From May 1948 to December 1950, Indian immigration was slow and steady. Then, due to the extreme conditions in Israel, immigration from India and many other places stopped altogether.[1] On the brink of collapse from more immigrants than it could support, Israel sent this letter to the Jewish Agency in Bombay on December 10, 1950, stating:

> Since the arrangements for the transport of immigrants as well as most of the financial and technical burden of absorbing, housing, and settling the new immigrants fall on the shoulders of the Jewish Agency, certain temporary restrictions which the Jewish Agency feels compelled to impose on the flow of immigrants, owing to a shortage of housing and other difficulties of absorption, have to be borne with patience and dignity.[2]

When immigration resumed in late 1951, the Jewish Agency established an immigration center in Bombay, with F. W. Pollack, previously Israel's South East Asia trade commissioner, as immigration officer.[3] The Bene Israel soon began to immigrate in larger numbers, and by 1952 there were approximately 3,000 Indian Jews in Israel.[4]

Youth Aliyah

The idea of bringing Jewish youth to Palestine began in Germany shortly after Hitler's rise to power and preoccupied the Zionist movement for many years.[5] For Jewish young people in Germany, their only hope of survival was to immigrate to Palestine where segments of the Jewish community were ready and willing to absorb them.[6] The first group of 45 adolescents arrived in Mandate Palestine at the beginning of 1934 and were sent to Kibbutz Ein Harod in the valley of Jezreel. By 1954, 60,000 children and adolescents from over 30 countries had been absorbed into 152 kibbutzim (Socialist collective living communities), 19 moshavim (semiprivate socialist living communities), and 77 educational facilities.[7]

Youth Aliyah began in India in July 1949 as an outgrowth of the Habonim, a socialist Zionist youth organization started on the subcontinent in 1935 by the Baghdadi Jewish community through the Calcutta Zionist Organization. The Habonim program in India as described in its constitution was:

> an educational Zionist youth movement which aims at awakening Jewish youth to the realization of their heritage as Jews; encouraging them in the study of the Hebrew language, Jewish history and tradition, providing them with a cultural environment in which they can live a fuller Jewish life, and in particular, encouraging them to take an active part in the upbuilding of Eretz Israel as a Jewish homeland.... Habonim educates towards Labour Zionism which means we support the establishment of a Socialist Commonwealth in Eretz Israel, and for worldwide achievement of the aims of the Labour movement. We regard the Hisadruth [general Federation of Jewish Labour in Palestine] as the nucleus of the future commonwealth and as the worker's chief goal for attaining this end.[8]

The Habonim movement in India began to focus on Youth Aliyah in 1949 at the suggestion of Bennie Porath, a Jewish Agency emissary (*shaliach*) in Bombay and a member of the HaShomer HaTza'ir Zionist youth group. The group he formed quickly dissolved, however, as Indian parents did not trust Porath, the foreigner. In October of that year, members of the Baghdadi community (including Mrs. Menassah, Mr. G. Sopher, and Mr. V. Moses) restarted the project and established a group of 40 youths to prepare for immigration to Israel. Their six-month preparation included Jewish education, Hebrew language training, and living in a kibbutz-like environment that had been established near Bombay by Habonim. The group received financial support from the Sassoon family, who raised substantial funds in Calcutta.[9] The fundraising generated enough money to create a center for Jewish children from the "Orient" on Kibbutz Lavi, a religious kibbutz overlooking the Yavneel Valley in the lower Galilee.[10] The first group left Bombay in May 1950, followed shortly by other groups from Jewish communities throughout India. Approximately 150 young people were sent to Israel through this organization, including some Bene Israel youth. But the Bene Israel quickly formed their own organization to send Bene Israel groups to Israel. The first such group formed in late 1950, comprised 38 children, 10 of whom were girls.[11] After the provisional halt in immigration imposed by Israel, when both the Bene Israel and Baghdadi groups had to cease immigration, Youth Aliyah started up again at the end of 1952.

By 1953, immigration involved much more red tape, as both Israel and India had learned from past mistakes. Having absorbed as many as 3,000 immigrants with tuberculosis and 1,500 mental patients,[12] Israel now imposed health standards before accepting immigrants. For the Bene Israel this was less of a problem than for the Cochin Jews, some of whom suffered from elephantiasis, a mosquito borne disease causing severe swelling of the legs. For some time, Israeli officials mistakenly thought the disease to be contagious, which made it difficult for many Cochin Jews to make Aliyah.

From India, there were, as well, new standards that needed to be met including a letter of consent from the Central Youth Aliyah Department in Israel declaring that there was space for the newcomers, so that they did not spend long periods in reception camps or have families scattered among different kibbutzim. Written confirmation was also required from the Immigration Department that the group would travel at the expense of the Jewish Agency and be sent within three months of acceptance. In the past, many groups of young immigrants had to cancel at the last-minute because of payment complications or endless departure delays, causing terrible uncertainty leading to many of the groups being dissolved.[13]

Because of all the new requirements, Mr. Shlomo Shmit of the Bombay Zionist office, working closely with the Jewish Agency, informed all the youth planning to make aliyah that

they would be sent to Israel individually, not as part of the Youth Aliyah organization. As a result, the Youth Aliyah movement in the hands of the Calcutta Zionist Organization was dissolved.[14] It appeared that the Bombay Jewish Agency immigration office wanted to control Youth Aliyah matters directly, not through the Calcutta Zionist Organization. The process was therefore taken over by the Jewish Agency Aliyah Office and controlled by foreigners working in India, rather than by Indians themselves.

Israel's objective was to turn its immigrants into Israelis and to have them break away from their Diaspora communities. The Diaspora was generally viewed with disdain by the Yishuv, and immigrants were to take on the new (Western) Israeli identity.[15] Whether they were placed in a kibbutz, moshav, or educational facility, the educational aspect of the immigration process was virtually the same for all who came on Youth Aliyah, and in many ways it marked the start of a unified community in Israel. It was this educational process that cut the immigrant's ties with their enormously diverse cultures, languages, and histories. The process has been referred to as a disintegration process (although it was also an integration process),[16] as it dissolved ties not only with geographical backgrounds but also with social relations—relatives, friends, and acquaintances—and emotional, cultural, spiritual, and linguistic values and norms.[17] This process meant abandoning old ways and beginning to integrate—establishing new connections, accepting new values, and acquiring new images and concepts. Numerous *olim* (immigrants) even took new names. Many of the children who came from Europe were orphaned Holocaust survivors, and a new "family" community had to be created for these youngsters.

Members of the Youth Aliyah were especially susceptible to this process, as the younger they were on arrival, the less attached they were to their place of origin. The Youth Aliyah educational process was divided into seven parts: a change of environment; an organized social life (familiarizing them with the demands and prohibitions of their new society); a special and separate educational framework (in accordance with the new society's needs); integration of study, work, and social life within a single setting; adaptation of the study plan to the child's intellectual capabilities; placement in a village or rural setting; and physical labor.[18] The new norms represented a dramatic change for almost all newcomers. The new climate, food, manner of dress, language, and expectations were difficult for everyone. In the case of Indian olim, the change was particularly dramatic, as the new norms were often the antithesis of those of their original culture.

One girl who was sent to Israel at the age of eight through the Youth Aliyah program reflected how in India, one important cultural norm was that one was never be fully nude—not even while bathing (while she only spoke for herself, this norm is practiced in most places throughout India). Bathing in India, involved an intricate process of scrubbing and cleaning while never fully exposing oneself—she had never even seen herself fully nude. She recalled that upon arrival in Israel she was immediately sent to the large reception camp of Ramat Hadassah, where she had to share the public shower where all the women, young and old, were showering together completely naked. "We couldn't even think of anything more disrespectful and disgraceful than to undress in the presence of someone else or to look at someone else's unclothed body, especially when it was an older woman."[19] This was just one example of the enormous cultural differences between her rural home in India and her new setting in Israel.

She recalled how silence had been the norm in her village in India, where people spoke quietly. To raise one's voice, especially in anger, was shocking. She recalled how her father would not beat her or yell when she did something unacceptable, but merely give her a look of reproach, which hurt as much as a whipping or scolding.[20] When she arrived in Israel, she was so quiet that her counselors thought something was wrong; they kept encouraging her to speak more and participate in discussions. She shared a room with two North African girls, whom she found loud and unruly. In Israel, she explained, the youth from India came "to see ourselves in a different light...we'd begun to feel that our shyness, our exaggerated deference to the wishes of others and the way in which we suppressed our

own personal likes and dislikes—virtues we used to prize so highly—were distinct handicaps to us in our new lives here in Israel."[21] This statement indicates the degree to which the Youth Aliyah program was succeeding in its goal of separating immigrants from their backgrounds. They began to view their past as a handicap and rushed to embrace the new values and norms.

Another Indian, Ruby Daniels from the Cochin community, who has written a book about her life in India and Israel, although she was not part of the Youth Aliyah, noted a similar experience in coming to Israel and having to adjust to the new environment. Clearly many of these cultural norms were not unique to the Bene Israel but were shared by many throughout India. A letter of Daniels sheds light on some of her experiences. She writes:

> My upbringing by a good Indian mother was very different from that of a young girl in Israel. I was forbidden to talk to a man, to laugh too much, and could never say that I wanted to learn to dance. I went to school and in the evenings helped mother. In Israel a young girl takes a partner and dances merrily without fear. Although an Indian woman may be thought of by her husband as a goddess, she does not play a very important role. In Israel I have seen that the woman plays a part equal to that of a man, and is entitled to the same freedom that he is.[22]

This again refers to the impropriety in India of being too outspoken or loud. By contrast, the Israeli culture they encountered is very outspoken: life is to be shouted about, laughed at, and disagreed with, often very volubly. To many outsiders, not only Indians, Israeli culture can seem loud, pushy, and even rude. This is not to say that there are no loud Indians or quiet Israelis; only that the cultural norms of the two nations are quite different. Many of the Bene Israel who came to Israel, either as part of the Youth Aliyah movement or on their own, recounted similar stories of culture shock when interviewed in 2008.[23] Some noted that when their parents arrived a year or so after they did, they were often shocked and dismayed to see how their children had taken on norms they found strange and disagreeable.

Cultural Challenges and Cultural Intolerance

The adults who arrived in the first years of Israel's existence found many of their preconceptions immediately destroyed. It is important to understand that immigrants at that time would have had little understanding of the struggles the country was facing—the mass immigration, the shortages, the security threats, and the legal confusion. So when they arrived at the reception camps, the Bene Israel, like most newcomers, were shocked. Writing of his arrival, one Bene Israel wrote:

> Sha'ar Ha-Aliyah is the first bitter blow at a man's pride and self respect. He is a refugee, nonentity, herded and prodded like cattle—is this the welcome for a long lost son come home? Nothing is explained to him, no hand extended to help him find his way.[24]

Another Bene Israel *oleh* (immigrant), Menchem Sogavker, wrote of his arrival and referred indirectly to the need to strip naked in front of strangers.

> During my month's stay at Sha'ar Ha- Aliyah, I found the place to be like an improved concentration camp with Jews guarding the Jews. I do not wish to write in detail about that place, but one thing I would like to mention: the fact that no information regarding the medical examinations, etc. in Sha'ar Ha-Aliyah was given to our people in India who wished to migrate, has sometimes resulted in much trouble and aroused ill feeling in the heart of some of our people.[25]

This mention of the medical examination refers to the fact that, during the initial bathing and delousing, the immigrants had to strip naked in front of strangers. This very alarming act was demanded of them immediately upon arrival, creating negative feelings in the Bene Israel.

Many Bene Israel spent long periods in the reception camps. Some communities were kept in the reception camps for longer periods than other communities. A selection policy was practiced in terms of housing which worked against the Sephardic and Mizrahi community. (Sephardic Jews trace themselves or their religious customs back to the Iberian Peninsula. Mizrahi are "eastern" Jews who either follow their own customs or have adopted Sephardic traditions. Today the term *Mizrahi* is more commonly used, but both terms are used loosely in Israel in the popular discourse, often falsely labeling any Jew of color as Mizrahi.) Here's what Yehudah Berginski, head of the Absorption Department, told the Jewish Agency Executive:

> I have to present you with a tough problem, and one the public is concerned with: Discrimination against *edot haMizrah*.... We took four hundred apartments that were slated for earlier immigrants from North Africa, who were scheduled to move into housing, and gave them on credit to more recent immigrants.... We did not make this public...I want us all to be aware that we have sinned in this way because we had no choice. I do not need to tell the board why we did it. It was done for political reasons and out of a human concern for the Poles.[26]

Berginski reported on immigration statistics up to 1956 in a special executive meeting saying that Europeans and especially Polish immigrants were receiving better housing than the Jews from North Africa and Asia.[27]

The compassion shown to the Polish community was most likely due to the hardship the community faced during the Holocaust. As housing was limited, there were many who felt the Polish community should be afforded whatever limited comforts the state was able to provide. Nonetheless, the Mizrahi community by Berginski's own admission was often denied the better living conditions.

Not all Bene Israel were sent to settlement towns or to the *ma'abarot* (transitional housing communities made up of shacks of sheet metal, sometimes wood, and often a combination of aluminum and canvas). Some found their way to kibbutzim where they also faced difficult challenges. Menchem Sogavker's letter spells this out:

> If he finds his way to a kibbutz, too often chaverim are too busy with their own lives, tired and disillusioned by newcomers who came and left and faced with a difficult language barrier. No real effort to surround him with warmth and understanding is provided with his necessities. The basic order of life is explained to him, and he is left to face a new social order, difficult work, different food and climate as best he can without understanding the why and wherefore. His children are separated from him, his wife faced with a completely new set of standards, and if the adjustment is slow and difficult he is given little patience or help. He is a stranger, a misfit living in a society of equals and yet not equal.[28]

This letter touches on one of the most difficult cultural changes—the separation of the traditional family. The socialist ideal of the kibbutz movement, especially in the early years of the state, focused on communal ownership of everything, including clothing and children. It was firmly believed that individual desires were evoked by the traditional family unit and that raising children communally would diminish bourgeois desires and free both parents to work. Therefore, children on the kibbutzim were all brought up together in a children's house. There they slept, were educated, and often ate. Children would spend a

few hours each evening with their parents, and then return to the children's house to sleep. (While the kibbutzim felt they were doing what was best for the children, today most kibbutzim no longer follow this practice to the same extent. This change is primarily the demand of those who grew up in such children's houses, who insist that their own children stay with them at night.)

This transition was difficult for many immigrants who came to the kibbutzim. For Indians, who sometimes lived with up to four generations in one home and were used to being surrounded by family, it was shocking and even bordered on psychological abuse. The separation of children from their mothers also meant that women were forced to relinquish their traditional motherhood role and take on entirely new roles. To give up their children would have been terrifying for many immigrants, and we can be certain that many tears were shed. This practice serves as a perfect example of the Zionist educational system that created Israelis out of Diaspora Jews by destroying old norms and replacing them with new norms.

The reference, in Sogavker's letter, to a new set of standards for wives alludes to the social equality of women in Israel. While Israeli women have struggled to receive equal treatment, and while no law that stipulates equality can actually bring it about, the position of women in Israel was far more liberated than in India, where before independence they had few civil rights. For the Bene Israel, who knew of Israel's attitude toward women and may even have been attracted by it, it would still have been shocking and challenging to have to assume such new roles immediately. Some Bene Israel were not even aware of what was happening on the kibbutzim before they left India, and they arrived with no time to prepare psychologically for the separation from their children, making their situation even more difficult.

Another shock was the racism to which the Bene Israel, and many other groups, were subjected directly to upon arrival. Sophie Benjamin, interviewed in 2008, recalled that as her family reached kibbutz Kfar Blum in 1950, the children of the kibbutz jeered at her three-year-old daughter: "*Kushi, lechi mi-can*" (go away, black).[29] This incident encapsulated the harsh reality of arrival in the new country and the social challenges the newcomers faced. For the Bene Israel, who had never been racially differentiated from their fellow Indians, this was a terrible new experience. In this case, the children of the kibbutz all became friends and the child adjusted over time, but the Bene Israel of all age groups experienced this entrenched ignorance and bigotry, as recalled in almost all of the interviews conducted for this study. One particularly religious Bene Israel oleh who asked to remain anonymous recounted how he was brought to a nonreligious kibbutz on arrival in Israel. No religious settings were available except at one small table in the cafeteria, where several very observant Jews from Eastern Europe would *bentsh* (recite the Birkat Hamazon) after the meal. When he asked if could join the table, he was told he could not. It was made clear that he was unwelcome because of his ethnicity.[30]

Sometimes ignorance was due to lack of knowledge about India, in general, and the existence of Indian Jews. One interviewee, Asher Raymond, recounted how upon arrival in Israel from Bombay he met a young girl from New York and that they fell in love (they have been married for over 30 years and have two grandchildren and another on the way). When the girl from New York told her father that she was going to marry a boy from India, the father-in-law to be was amazed to hear of an Indian Jew. He wanted to find out if Asher was really Jewish and asked him, "Do you speak Yiddish?" to which Asher replied that he did not. Upon hearing that he did not speak Yiddish, the girl's father erupted, saying, "How can you not speak Yiddish? EVERY Jew I know speaks Yiddish!" to which the cunning young man replied, "Do you speak Marathi?" When the girl's father admitted he did not speak Marathi, Raymond shot back with, "Well EVERY Jew *I know* speaks Marathi!"[31]

As well, many among the Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities viewed the Bene Israel as from the "Far East" and therefore the "jungle," which connoted all things primitive. This stereotyped view was encapsulated in a conversation between a Bene Israel oleh—an

articulate, educated, and worldly engineer from the cosmopolitan city of Bombay and his Polish neighbor in Israel. The Pole retorted to something he said with, "What do *you* know, you are from the jungle?!"[32] In her autobiography, Ruby Daniels recounted a similar story indicating how synonymous India or Indian Jewry was with the jungle in the eyes of non-Indians. She wrote of her experience at the kibbutz:

> Before coming here I knew all about the conditions in Israel. I did not expect anything much different, but what I did not expect was the behavior of the people. Most of the members were from Europe. There were a few boys and girls from Cochin here, so I thought we could get on. But we did not get a good treatment. They thought we have come from the jungle. Everywhere we felt discrimination and still do. No one came forward to help and talk to me.[33]

While almost every other community that entered Israel in the early years was a persecuted minority, discrimination was unknown to the Bene Israel. Conditions in Israel would have been difficult for all newcomers, but Israel would still have been a place of refuge. In the first years of the state, few immigrants came to Israel from countries where Jews thrived, such as Canada and the United States. Instead, Israel drew those who had lived in Hitler's Europe or in the increasingly violent anti-Jewish sentiment of the Middle East and North Africa. The Iraqi community had seen riots in June 1941, which led to the death of 180 Jews, and many more were injured. In Libya, in November 1945, 140 Jews were killed in Tripoli, and all the synagogues in the city were looted. In Egypt in the same year, a synagogue, a Jewish old-age home, and a Jewish hospital were burned to the ground. In India, however, there had been no similar persecution, and being "othered" in Israel would have been a completely new experience for the Bene Israel. The community as a whole, however, was to suffer much greater challenges than race and notions of the "East" by a society struggling with overwhelming diversity.

Education

By 1951, like many other communities in Israel, the Bene Israel felt that the key to securing their children's future was education, and they gave this priority over housing and jobs.[34] Between 1951 and 1960, however, educational opportunities for Bene Israel children were problematic. As Israel grew during the first decade, networks of schools expanded, new academies were established, and opportunities for attending school were extended to and even required of all its citizens. Public elementary schools, colleges, and universities developed to accommodate the needs of the increasing population. The value placed on education, as well as the emphasis placed on learning in Israeli culture, were expressed in the development and location of educational institutions and in the provision of resources for educational development. The ethnic origins of families and the ethnic composition of communities played a role in the location of educational institutions, the quality of teachers, and the curriculum. In examining the educational system of Israel in the first 12 years, it becomes apparent that the Ashkenazi Jews were receiving better education, and according to the 1961 census of Israel, Ashkenazi students spent on average one and a half more years in school then the Mizrahi students, and four times as many Ashkenazi students had a university education.[35]

To combat this, the ministry of education expanded vocational training at the secondary level, extended the number of years of compulsory education, and introduced compensatory education at the primary level. Even with these changes however, and the positive results that ensued, including the decrease in the gap between Ashkenazi and Mizrahi educational levels, ethnic origin remained a powerful force dictating the location and qualities of schools.

Having been well educated under British colonial rule, the Bene Israel community had for decades prized education. As early as 1917, a substantial Bene Israel education fund was established by Dr. Joseph Benjamin Bamnolker, the president of the first Bene Israel conference in India, to provide academic scholarships and encourage achievement.[36] One of the first things they noticed in Israel was the difference in educational level between them and the Mizrahi groups with which they were categorized. In 1960, a letter by Ezekiel Ashtamkar articulated what the community had been saying during their 12 years in Israel: "The position of our community is not on par with the other Oriental communities. Ours is an advanced community, therefore special efforts must be made to keep our educational level in Israel."[37] Shalva Weil has written that "the higher average number of years of schooling which the Bene Israel have received in India is particularly striking when it is considered that in Israeli society in general Indians are thought to be uneducated."[38] She also noted:

> Certain social characteristics of the Bene Israel, however, distinguish them from other Afro-Asian immigrants [in Israel]. The most striking is the Bene Israel's educational attainment in [their] country of origin which exceeds that of other Afro-Asian immigrants either in Lod or nationally. Allied to this, is their favourable attitude to working women, particularly in certain professions, which aligns them with the Western immigrants. An analysis of the social characteristics of the Bene Israel demonstrates the anomalous situation of the Bene Israel as Sephardim who have Western aspirations.[39]

Because of the unequal educational opportunities for Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities in Israel, by 1960 a gap had emerged between the economic opportunities of these two groups, creating bitterness, a sense of discrimination, and an obstacle to integration.

The letter from Ashtamkar in 1960 continued: "If the present state of affairs continues, the Oriental Jews will be relegated as a lower class reserved for inferior types of jobs. We must arise from our complacency and steer our ship of destiny away from a misguided and misleading course."[40] This letter was based on 12 years experience of education in Israel, and its views are confirmed by the Falk Center Report of 1959/1960:

> The major factors causing income differentiations were apparently differences in education and vocational training. Even cases where persons from different communities working in the same jobs and having the same educational qualifications received different pay may well have been the result of differences in the quality of their education and training and smaller opportunities for personal advancement for the earners from Oriental communities.[41]

By the time this report was issued in 1959/1960, severe damage to the Bene Israel community had already resulted from its inclusion by the Ashkenazim in the Sephardic/Mizrahi camp.[42] Often when the Mizrahi attended the same schools as the Ashkenazim, they were placed in separate classrooms, creating a form of segregated education within the country. Thus in 1951/1952, 86 percent of Mizrahi children were in exclusively Mizrahi classrooms with poorer education, inappropriate facilities, a high proportion of unqualified teachers, and a watered-down curriculum. Considering the country's struggle to feed and house the population at that time, it is no surprise that there were severe problems in education, but these problems had long-lasting consequences. By 1956 a full 25 percent of Mizrahi first graders failed to pass to the second grade.[43] Alarmed at these numbers, the Ministry of Education attempted reform, but for the Bene Israel educated in India under British rule, the high failure rate came as a surprise.

As with education, the Bene Israel also felt the gap in economic norms between the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim. The same letter from 1960 states:

> The problem of education is a cause of worry to many [Bene Israel] parents in Israel who find it difficult even to pay for books and other services for their children in the elementary schools. The economic condition of an average worker is not so encouraging and the children after finishing their elementary education have to start working to supplement the parent's income. Education in Israel is so costly that even well placed parents have difficulty footing the bills of their children's education. Higher education has become virtually a monopoly of the rich.[44]

By 1959/1960, the Ministry of Education introduced drastic measures to try to level the playing field. By this time, however, almost an entire generation of Bene Israel children had passed through the educational system, and concerns had been prevalent among the Bene Israel for years. By the mid-1950s, the community already felt neglected and frustrated. Very soon after arrival, the Bene Israel, like many other communities, struggled to find jobs in their professions and were forced to take other employment, often far from their families at extra expense, creating additional stress and imposing on friends and relatives for board and lodging.[45]

Strikes, Protests, and Repatriation

From 1951 to 1959, protests and demonstrations were staged in Israel by many communities, mostly North African or Asian, including the Bene Israel. Many in their community wrote letters of protest to the Indian press, the Indian government, the Israeli government, and to Olsvanger (the Zionist emissary who had influenced and exposed the Bene Israel to the idea of immigrating to Israel), complaining of a lack of jobs, good housing, education, and food (as the rationing until 1952 made both food and clothing scarce). Many even accused the Jewish Agency of spreading false propaganda to convince the Bene Israel to immigrate. Some of the letters clamored for a return to India. A letter to Olsvanger complained, that "we were informed [in India] that there was no shortage of work and that all were profitably employed on land and other projects. Now with errors of back pay, up to two to three months pay are overdue."[46] The letter claims that their employer directed them to the *lishkat avodah* (a labor exchange) where they were informed that the government had not allotted sufficient funds to pay them. The letter also addressed the heavy taxes for irrigation water for their uncultivated land, poor medical services despite paying taxes to cover such costs, inadequate rations, and that "most of the community are not given work according to their trades" although this "was promised them before leaving India."[47] Letters such as these reveal the low morale of the Bene Israel community by 1951. Indeed, engineers, clerks, carpenters, and civil servants from many cultures often found themselves doing manual labor. But the Zionist socialist ideals attached to manual labor and cultivation of land as honorable work were perhaps lost on many of the Bene Israel. The letter does not specify who in India made promises about employment, but if any such promises were made, they were made in bad faith, as no one could have guaranteed employment, especially after the waves of immigration began in 1948.

Other letters shed light on the Bombay Zionist Association (BZA) in India. One letter of complaint written on April 21, 1951 typed out but signed by a Bene Israel in illegible handwriting, indicates that the BZA was in distress and hints at who may have made false promises:

> When I began to piece certain facts together I came to the conclusion that my earlier confidence was misplaced. At the same I thought it would be better to appeal to the good sense of those responsible, and together with a few friends I spoke personally to Mr. Ezra, Mr. Cynowitz, and Mr. Gourgey, appealing to them to lie low for a while

> and to give an opportunity to others to pull the BZA out of the mess to which they [had] consigned it.[48]

This letter is interesting, because it brings to the forefront the important question of how one convinces a community that has prospered without persecution to uproot themselves and move as a community to another country. One possibility is that the community was indeed told lies about jobs, housing, and education being readily available. If such falsehoods were uttered, the men named above may well have been responsible. The assertion that the community was told lies is substantiated by dozens of other letters found in the Central Zionist Archives, including one written in 1954:

> At the time we were in India, the Jewish Agency in Bombay was making very sweet propaganda, and moreover they were promising very good jobs, according to our profession, good education for our children and decent places to stay. To our surprise when we arrived in Israel, we found ourselves in Shaar Aliyah Camp. Can you tell us sir, why did the Jewish Agency in Bombay bring us to this country? Why did your agents deceive us? Why did the Jewish Agency make false promises?[49]

It is impossible to ignore so many letters claiming false promises. Interestingly, this letter clearly identifies the Jewish Agency in Bombay as the source of these promises, yet the Bombay Zionist Organization was responsible for the initial organization of Bene Israel immigrants. Could the writer have confused the BZA with the Jewish Agency? Were their offices working so closely together that they seemed to be a single organization?

It was not only the Bene Israel who seemed to be receiving false promises. Ruby Daniels commented in her autobiography, that

> Representatives of the Jewish Agency...made false promises that they [would] take all of the Cochin Jews to Israel by Rosh Hashana. One of the men took money from the synagogues for their passage, and people were getting ready to leave. They resigned from work, sold houses and property they had, and waited....Two years passed and there was still no reply from him. They ate away the money they had, leaving them with no food to eat and no house to live in.... When I came to Bombay in 1951 on my way to Israel, I went to the office to see this man... "Where is the ship"? I asked him, and he said to me, "It's in the air." I felt like spitting in his face."[50]

While no written evidence of promises such as those mentioned in these letters and autobiography has been uncovered, the writings that emerged from the BZA do use language that suggests a false reality. The rhetoric invokes a land of milk and honey as opposed to a wartorn country struggling for survival. A letter to the Jewish Agency in Israel by J. S. Ezra, the president of the BZA and a Bene Israel himself, paints a most unlikely image. While this letter was written some years later, in 1956, the rhetoric provides important insight into imagery that may have been presented to the Bene Israel in India:

> Far out on the horizon, Israel beckons. Israel to the Jew in India presents a spiritual reawakening. His longing to be in Israel is the climax of years of hopes and dreaming that there in the land of his forefathers his physical inconveniences will be amply rewarded in his spiritual satisfaction. It is this thought which sustains the Jew of India and keeps him alive. There is an ever present yearning, a consuming ardourwhich is keeping him hopeful and alert for the future. He is happy because very soon he will be in Israel and his burdens will be lightened, because there the dream of centuries will come true.[51]

It is disconcerting that the president of the BZA should use such hyperbole to describe their desire to go to Israel as "a consuming ardour" or a "thought which sustains the Jew of India and keeps him alive." It is also strange that Israel, governed by those who did not necessarily have high regard for religion and sought a secular Jewish state, would receive a letter phrased in such mystical language. Perhaps, with such ignorance of India by many in the Yishuv, the letter intended to portray the Indian Jews as similar to the Yemenites, who had indeed gone to Israel out of religious fervor. Regardless of Mr. Ezra's intent, it is clear that many Bene Israel expected jobs, housing, and good education to be awaiting them in Israel, and that the situation they encountered lacked these necessities of life.

By 1951, many Bene Israel children in Israel were in a wretched state, undernourished and with few winter clothes due to the rationing that lasted until early 1952. To rectify this, the community began to organize peaceful sit-ins on their kibbutzim and at the offices of the Jewish Agency, influenced by Gandhi's *satyagraha* movement in India. On November 21, 1951, 150 Bene Israel, including children, seven pregnant women, and a nine-day-old baby, held a hunger strike outside the Jewish Agency offices in Tel Aviv. A second protest on the same spot in March 1952 demanded repatriation to India. On May 11, 1952, 12 Bene Israel again protested outside the office, demanding repatriation.[52] Protests recurred in 1954, once again demanding either repatriation or an immediate solution to the problems of housing, employment, and education. While these protests by the Bene Israel were always peaceful, the police, who were dealing with many different protest groups in Israel, did not always react peacefully.

The physical violence during these protests came to a head in April 1956, at another peaceful sit-in outside the Jewish Agency office concerning unmet housing, work, and educational needs. Dr. M. Young of the Jewish Agency promised that their needs would be met and asked them to cease the protest. The group ceased and went to the offices of those who could make good on the assurance, where they were told that the Jewish Agency did not currently intend to meet Dr. Young's promises. After appealing to every available government agency for help, the community resumed its protest. The official complaint report issued by the community records that the police battered all those present, including the elderly, the children, and the infirm. A five-month-pregnant woman beaten by a police officer was taken to hospital where she miscarried.[53]

The strike continued, despite some members being taken to hospital. During the night more police arrived, assaulted the protesters more severely, forced them into police vans, and dumped them on a roadside far from the Jewish Agency office. One young man was arrested and sentenced by a magistrate to a month's imprisonment.[54] Some members of the community were now scared to protest for fear of violence.

This further trauma to the community, in addition to all their hardships and thwarted expectations, was shared by other immigrant communities. What was unique to the Bene Israel, however, was their status and position in their country of origin, as a community that had never experienced any violence from the state. For this reason, as early as 1951, many in the community urged the Israeli government to repatriate them to India.

Shalva Weil has written that the community's initial demand for repatriation marked "the first time in the short history of the country that a complete group of immigrants demanded to be returned."[55] This is not entirely accurate. Although some demanded repatriation to India, later work by Joan Roland suggests it was not the entire community. A Jewish Agency enquiry headed by Olsvanger found that "fewer than thirty-five families, mainly in Bersheba, were unhappy," and that they "had been stirred up by agitators—a few Bene Israel men."[56] While there are no exact figures of how many wanted to leave there were those who would never have left Israel, even with the opportunity to do so. And it was not only Bene Israel members who left. As previously noted, in the difficult first years of the state many Ashkenazim and Mizrahim who could leave for Canada, the United States, Australia, or England did so (there were more such opportunities among the Ashkenazim). Certainly, the Bene Israel who were dissatisfied and wanted to leave were not alone. It is

clear, however, from interviews among the community in 2008 that more than 35 families wanted to leave Israel. What is particularly interesting is that many of those who were repatriated to India then decided to return to Israel.

The government of Israel did pay their repatriation costs, and on April 2, 1952, an initial group of 115 flew back to India.[57] Shortly thereafter, more Bene Israel were returned to India by Israel. They discovered, however, that India was no longer the home they had left. Most had left jobs that were no longer available, had sold their homes and many of their belongings. Some communities had sold communal properties such as synagogues, so that when they returned they found no jobs or readily available housing, nor an intact community. While Israel certainly had problems with housing, education, and work, the challenges in India now appeared even more overwhelming. Within a year of the first repatriation, a letter from many of the returnees to the Israeli government requested their return to Israel.[58]

Between 1952 and 1953, due to the repatriation of the Bene Israel community, the Indian press contained articles accusing Israel of being a racist state. In the *Times of India* and the *Bombay Chronicle,* claims that "Indian Jews weren't up to the mark" painted a picture of a racist state that would not accept the Bene Israel due to their skin color. The Bene Israel now seeking to return to Israel fought these allegations, and by May 1953, these newspapers were retracting their accusations in articles such as "Indian Jews Back Israel— Discrimination Denied."[59] Reprinted in many newspapers across India, this article said: "Neither at work, nor socially, was there any trace of discrimination on account of color or origin. It is indeed contrary to the very spirit which inspired the creation of the state of Israel."[60]

The articles denying racism in Israel were a response to the declaration in India's parliament by Mrs. Lakshmi Menon, Deputy Minister of External Affairs in Nehru's cabinet, that "one of the reasons which prompted the Indian Jews to return from Israel to India was the colour bar."[61] A prompt response to the Indian government, signed by 58 Bene Israel returnees on May 17, 1953, denied any trace of discrimination in Israel on account of color or origin. It continued:

> We regret the controversy which attended our return to India—it was a confession of failure to come up to the high standards demanded by a pioneering country. As you are fully aware there are many of us today who would like to be given another chance to take part in the great work of reconstruction that is in place there. Had we the means, many of us would have already been in Israel today. If the Jewish Agency gives us another opportunity and pays for our passage again, we would today be all going to Israel with a greater determination to make good. In the interest of truth we would like you and hereby authorise you to convey this letter to all concerned. We feel that the good name of Israel should not be sullied by unjustified criticism of its government or people.[62]

The community was dependent on the Jewish Agency, as most could not afford to re-immigrate on their own. Because of the cost to the Israeli government, their repatriation was not a high priority for the Jewish Agency. Over the next several years, however, most of the repatriated Bene Israel who sought to return were brought back at the expense of Israel, along with additional Bene Israel olim. On their return to Israel, housing, education, and work remained problematic, even if they felt this was not due to racial discrimination.

By 1959, however, many Bene Israel felt the greatest hindrance to the prosperity of the community was its disunity. The community had arrived in Israel without official or recognized political or religious leadership, and by 1959 was just beginning to form unified bodies to meet the issues facing the entire community. Factions, dissension, and jealousies (Bene Israel who were from Bombay felt distinct from those from the villages of the Konkan coast, and those from Karachi felt they were distinct from the Bombay community) had

seriously obstructed progress and caused demoralization.[63] In the community organ, *Truth,* Daniel Talker of Rishon LeTzion wrote that "to raise our standard of living and to live in peace and plenty in spite of turmoil and discord, it is up to us alone to help one another by active co-operation."[64] This call marks the start of community organization. It had taken just over a decade for the Bene Israel to relinquish their expectation that they would all be integrated and looked after equally as Jews in the State of Israel.

The first step toward unity was the creation of a Bene Israel Conference, which sought to address the community's problems, including absorption, economic progress, provision of technical and professional education, encouragement of fine arts, sports, and guidance for new immigrants.[65] The Bene Israel were now spread across the country in towns such as Kiryat Shmone, Haifa, Ramle, Lod, Ashdod, Be'er Sheva, Kiryat Gat, and Dimona.[66] Communication between areas was often difficult, as most homes did not have telephones in the 1950s, but the effort to bring the community together from as many regions as possible was largely successful. Although the conference took place in 1959, it was not until 1961 that the community successfully established an Action Committee.

Conclusion

The initial challenges the Bene Israel faced on arrival were not unique to their community. All newcomers had to deal with culture shock, a lack of housing, and employment, and often unequal education. It was slightly different for the Bene Israel in that things like Indian spices were initially unavailable, which affected what they were used to eating, but this is not vastly different from other communities such as the Germans, who were not used to olives and who had to eat them frequently, as that was the food that was available. What was unique to the Bene Israel, however, was the contrast this presented to the situation in the country they had left behind.

Because the Bene Israel had not suffered in India but prospered there, their experience of the struggles and challenges in the first decade of the State of Israel was perhaps unique. The fact that they had a country to return to may also have made their hardships more difficult to bear. Those who can never "go home" are psychologically more prepared to face the challenges that confront them, for what choice do they have? But a sense of being able to return to a kinder, gentler place may produce resistance to an educational process aimed at renouncing the past and embracing a new reality. Most who did return to India seemed eager to return to Israel upon discovery that there were no longer jobs nor homes waiting for them. In fact, for the Bene Israel community, the first 12 years in Israel may be seen as a time of coming to terms with the notion that there was no going back. This assertion may be supported by the fact that only after 13 years did the Bene Israel create a unified representative body. There is no question that the community was always highly capable and strong enough to overcome whatever challenges they encountered in Israel.

Notes

[1] While it was officially stopped, according to Israel's Bureau of Statistics a very small number continued to immigrate.
[2] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6150.
[3] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6147.
[4] Joan Roland, *Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era* (New Brunswick: Transaction Press, 1998), 248.
[5] Martin Wolins and Meir Gottesman, eds., *Group Care: An Israeli Approach* (London: Gordon and Breach, 1971), 44.
[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.
[8] Habonim Constitution, Central Zionist Archives, S32/1293.
[9] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6392.
[10] http://hotel.lavi.co.il/HOTEL//2/84/755.aspx
[11] Central Zionist Archives, S25/10607.
[12] Dvora Hacohen, *Immigrants in Turmoil* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 140.
[13] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6392.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Avi Picard, "Soft Religiosity: The Identity of North African Youths in Israel in the 1950s," *Journal for the Study of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry,* vol. 1 (March 2009): 18.
[16] Wolins and Gottesman, *Group Care: An Israeli Approach*, 29.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 34.
[19] Chasya Pincus, *Come From the Four Winds: The Story of Youth Aliya* (New York: Herzl Press, 1970), 322.
[20] Ibid., 319.
[21] Ibid., 322.
[22] Central Zionist Archives, S4/2227.
[23] Bene Israel community members, interview by author, Israel, June-August 2008, responded to the question, "What difficulties, if any did you encounter upon arrival?"
[24] Central Zionist Archives, S4/2227.
[25] Ibid.
[26] H. Malka, "The Selection: (Racial) Selection and Discrimination against Moroccan and North African Jews, during the Immigration and Absorption Processes in the Years 1948-1956," Master's thesis, University of Haifa, Kiryat Gat, Dani Sfarim, 1997. As quoted in Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 37.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Central Zionist Archives, S4/2227.
[29] Sara and Sophie Benjamin, interview with author, Lod, Israel, June 6, 2008.
[30] Bene Israel member who asked to remain anonymous, interview by author, Ramle, Israel, July 7, 2008.
[31] Asher Raymond, interview by author, Ashdod, Israel, June 19, 2008.
[32] David Reuben, interview by author, Lod, Israel, July 19, 2008.
[33] Ruby Daniels and Barbara Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995), 105.
[34] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6149.
[35] Calvin Goldscheider, *Israel's Changing Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 133.
[36] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6149.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Shalva Weil, "Bene-Israel Indian Jews in Lod, Israel: A Study of the Persistence of Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity" (Unpublished dissertation, University of Sussex, 1977), 127.
[39] Ibid., 137.
[40] Ibid.
[41] The Falk Project for Economic Research in Israel (1959/1960).
[42] Dvora Hacohen, *Immigrants in Turmoil* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 168.
[43] Shlomo Swirksi, *Israel: The Oriental Majority* (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1989), 25.
[44] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6149.

[45] "The Federation of Indian Jews in Israel," Personal Archives of Samson J. Samson, Jerusalem, Israel.
[46] Central Zionist Archives, S4/2227.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6147.
[49] Central Zionist Archives, S4/2227.
[50] Daniels and Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin*, 96.
[51] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6391.
[52] Weil, *Jews in Lod, Israel*, 70.
[53] Central Zionist Archives, S4/2227.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Weil, *Jews in Lod, Israel,* 70.
[56] Roland, *British India*, 248.
[57]Weil, *Jews in Lod, Israel*, 70.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6327.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6149.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6149.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Central Zionist Archives, S6/6329.
[66] Weil, *Jews in Lod, Israel*, 85.