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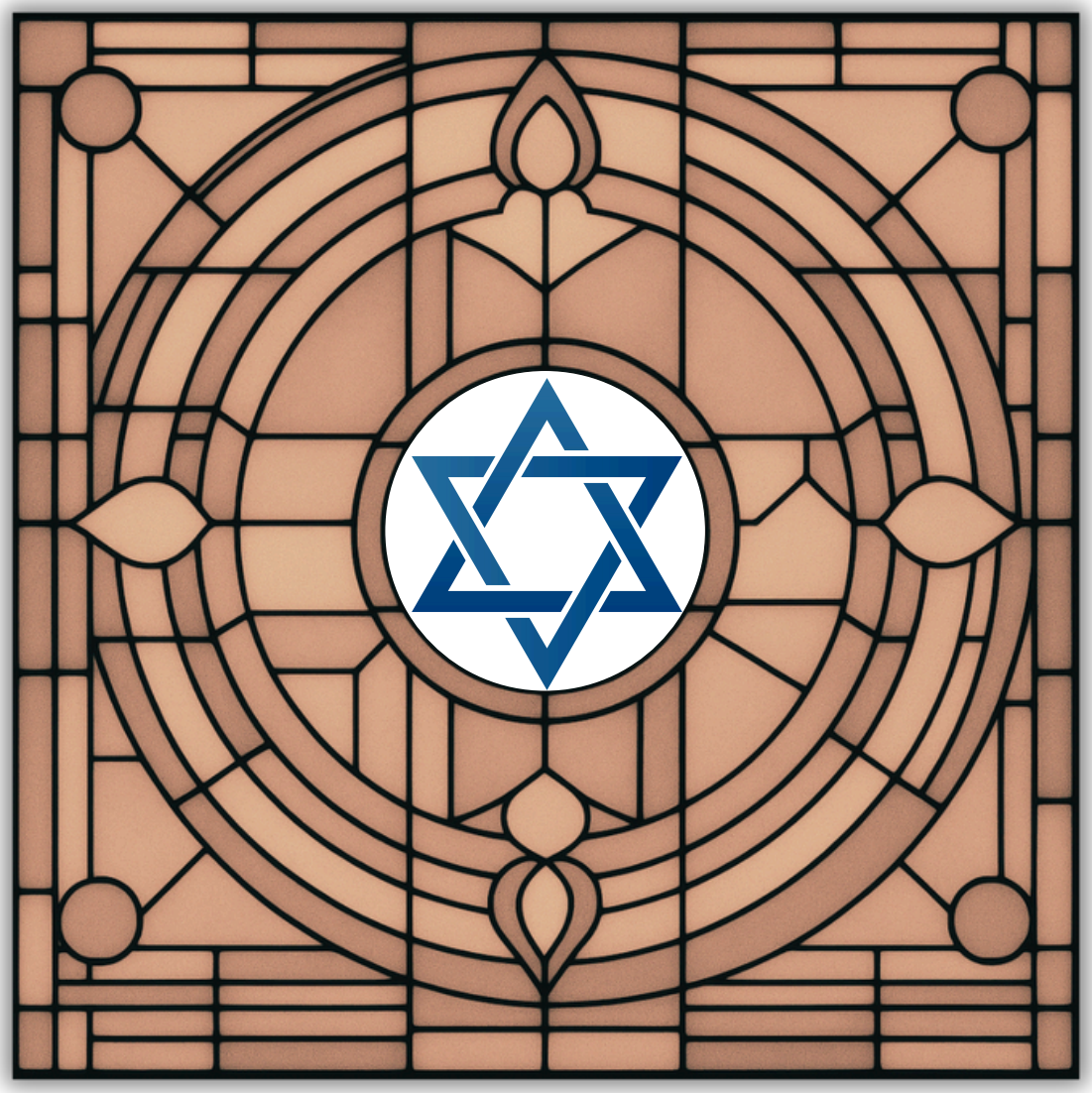

SPECIAL ISSUE

ISSN: 1206-9330 | **Volume:** 18 | **Year:** 2024

Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies

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Since 2019 *Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* is published by the Middle East Institute, New Delhi (MEI@ND), India, and all the issues, including past issues, can be accessed at http://www.mei.org.in/jijs-listing

Cover & Design: Prabhat Jawla

SPECIAL ISSUE

EMERGING JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

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Articles

Indian Jews in Israel and the growing pains of citizenship

Joseph Hodes

On May 14, 1948, Israel became a sovereign nation and opened its doors to Jewish immigration from across the globe. Between May 1948 and December 1951, approximately 684,000 people immigrated to the newly-established country. Never before in recorded history had so much ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity come to such a small place in such a short time to form a new collective. Many of those who came were moving from an empire to a nation-state. This article examines the Indian Jewish community, the Bene Israel, and explores their understanding of national citizenship as they transitioned to this new identity. Using primary documents from the Central Zionist Archives, it examines the complexities of transitioning from an empire to a new nation-state and the notions of identity associated with the state. The article explores the experience of the children during this move and the disappointment and dissatisfaction found in the apparatus of the state, which eventually led many Indian Jews to return to India. This article argues that the Bene Israel did not fully comprehend the concept of a secular country and that they thought they were moving to a religious community.

The conceptual basis for the nation-state of Israel, by 1942, was that it would be a Jewish Commonwealth integrated into the structure of the new democratic world. For this article, Israel is considered a Western democratic nation. Sammy Smooha, in his article on Israel as an ethnic democracy, noted the following:

> In a study conducted at the behest of the Israel Democracy Institute, Lijphart compared Israel to 24 other democratic states. He places Israel in an isolated category because it scores very high on certain consociational indicators (e.g., the method of proportional elections) but very low on others (e.g., it has a unitary

> and centralized structure). Lijphart explains this anomaly by the fact that Israel is a deeply divided society that needs consociationalism, but is also a small country that can do without federal arrangements. Its regime is overall suitable to its nature, and therefore, there is no need for any far-reaching political reform. In general, Lijphart maintains that Israel meets common democratic standards and belongs to the Western democratic system.[1]

While the definition of citizenship is highly debated, this article can be understood as the legal and political framework for achieving full membership in society.

The Bene Israel in India

The Bene Israel, a Jewish population that, according to its tradition, has lived in India for over 1,800 years, is the largest of the three major Jewish communities in India, the other two being the Cochin and Baghdadi Jews.[2] The Bene Israel, numbering approximately 20,000 at the height of their population in India, began to immigrate to Israel in 1948. By 1960, there were approximately 8,000 community members in Israel.[3] Today, there are approximately 75,000 Bene Israel in Israel and around 5,000 in India, mostly concentrated in Mumbai. For centuries, they lived in villages on the Konkan coast in the state of Maharashtra and self-identified as both Indian and Jewish.

Israel was created, theoretically, as a safe haven for Jews throughout the globe. Before its creation, the Jewish people lived primarily in the Christian and Muslim worlds. In the Muslim world, Jews had been second-class citizens for centuries.[4] In the Christian West, they were subject to the largest genocide in recorded history just before the creation of

[1] S. Smooha, "Ethnic Democracy: Israel as an Archetype," *Israel Studies*, 2, no. 1 (1997): 198–241, Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/179117

[2] Recently, a fourth community, the Bene Menashe, have been added to this list. Since they did not become known to the Jewish Agency or Israel until the 21st century and therefore were not part of the mosaic that made up the early State of Israel, they have been omitted from this study. This is not to say that these Jews are any less significant to the study of India's Jewish heritage, but only that they fall outside of the time parameters of this study.

[3] Nissim Moses, "Bene Israel Genealogy Program," in *Private Archives of Nissim Moses* (Petah Tikva, Israel, 2009).

[4] S D Goitien, 1955. Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts through the Ages. New York: Schoken Books

the State of Israel, although that genocide was not the sole reason for the creation of Israel. The nationalist aspiration of a Jewish nation-state emerged in the modern era as a reaction to the lack of citizenship rights accorded to the Jews in the countries of Europe many decades before the Nazi Holocaust.

Jewish intellectuals in Eastern Europe were excited about citizenship rights in the new nation-states as they were emerging, feeling that Jews would finally escape religious-based persecution and that they could be normalized as citizens in whichever nation they happened to live in.[5] With widespread persecution of Jewish communities in Eastern Europe in late 19th century, Jewish intellectuals began to feel that the Jews would never be accepted as citizens and that they would always be a people apart, subject to great violence unless they had their own nation-state. Leo Pinsker, an early Zionist intellectual in the kingdom of Poland, wrote in 1882 that "the misfortunes of the Jews are due, above all, to their lack of desire for national independence; and that this desire must be aroused and maintained in them if they do not wish to exist forever in a disgraceful state – In a word, we must prove that they must become a nation."[6] He went on to summarize a belief shared by many Jews that hatred of the Jew can never be routed out from society: "Judeophobia is a psychic aberration. As a psychic aberration, it is hereditary; as a disease transmitted for two thousand years, it is incurable."[7] He wrote this 60 years before the Nazi Holocaust.

The creation of a Jewish state can be understood as based on the two beliefs noted above: that anti-Semitism would always exist and that only through creating a Jewish nation-state with a Jewish majority could the Jews free themselves from the violence of anti-Semitism. For the Indian Jew, however, the long history – 1800 years – of their presence featured neither anti-Semitism nor violence, as Jews had lived in India peacefully with

[5] David Vital, *A People Apart: Apolitical History of the Jews in Europe 1789-1939* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2001), 7.

[6] Arthur Hertzberg, ed., *The Zionist Idea* (Harper and Row: New York, 1959), 185.

[7] Ibid.

their Hindu and later Muslim brethren.[8] Thus, for the Indian Jews, what were the notions of the Jewish nation-state that would drive them to leave India and to immigrate to Israel upon its creation in 1948? Their concept was of a religious state, not a nation with a Jewish national identity. It was based on notions of Jewish religious identity, rather than citizenship rights.

Archival documents suggest that as the nationalist aspirations of the Jewish state grew, propaganda about losing religious identity was sent to Jews in the Diaspora. This propaganda was effective. For some in the Bene Israel community, concern began to develop that the Jews in India would be assimilated and lose their religious identity and that assimilation would be a problem. Israel employed a multitude of public relations campaigns to convince Jews to move to the new state. Sometimes, that campaign used secular rhetoric; in other cases, it played on religious sensitivities.

For the Bene Israel, the religious rhetoric was effective. One document written to the Bene Israel in India in 1954 stated the following:

> At the same time, the realities of Jewish life in the *Galut* (exile) show us that in spite of an oasis here or there, the danger of assimilation and spiritual stagnation is greater than ever before. Only a strong Zionist movement oriented toward Aliyah (immigration to Israel) can revitalize Jewish culture abroad.[9]

This document suggested that spiritual stagnation can only be saved or advanced through the nation-state.

Despite Israel's status as a new secular nation with the separation of church and state, one can see a clear advocacy for religious advancement based on one's relationship with the state. We see here that the nation, a secular concept, overlaps with religious identity formations, such that the nation for the Bene Israel would have been seen as a religious institution through which their religious identity could be revitalized. While the pull

[8] Joan Roland, *Jews in British India* (London: Brandeis University Press, 1989), 163.

[9] Central Zionist Archives, Jerusalem, (CZA) File S32 308

factor is then perhaps that revitalized identity, the push factor is not anti-Semitic violence but assimilation and the loss of religious identity.

It is interesting to note that the early Eastern European and later Western European Zionist theorists were largely secular; they would have likely sought to assimilate, given the chance. They would have preferred to become citizens of the nations they lived in and to cease being 'the Jews' – a people apart. Theodore Herzl, the father of modern Zionism and a very assimilated Jew, had written about the myriad ways Jews could and should assimilate, including a mass Jewish conversion to Christianity, before realizing that Europe would never accept the Jew.[10] He felt that "progress was on the march for all mankind and that assimilation was both desirable and inevitable."[11]

The state as a religious community

In India, there had been no history of anti-Semitism, so the rhetoric used by Israel to encourage the immigration of Jews to more hostile places in the Diaspora would not have been effective. Israel, for the Bene Israel, would have to attach spirituality and the loss of Jewish identity to the notion of citizenship and the nation-state if they wanted to bring these people to Israel, which they did. One can observe an evolution of identity formation that shifts in the modern period from religious to secular, or from a religious identity to a national identity; however, this pattern does not accurately describe the movement of the Bene Israel. Anna Triandafyllidou noted, "As a theory of political organization, nationalism requires that ethnic and cultural boundaries coincide with political ones. Boundaries between political units are supposed to define the boundaries between different ethnocultural communities."[12] For the Bene Israel, they would still be forced to fit into that requirement, which would have been extremely challenging for Indian notions of identity, based primarily on religion.

[10] Jaques Korenberg Theodore Herzl, *From Assimilation to Zionism* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1993), 116.

[11] Hertzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 199.

[12] Anna Triandafyllidou, *Immigrants and National Identity in Europe* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

In India, religious identity has been and remains the primary concern. One belonged to a larger religious community, and the division of society was based on religious and class lines, with class being defined by religion.[13] So the Bene Israel in India, while living peacefully with their Hindu and Muslim brethren, understood themselves as Jews.[14] Anti-Semitism did not exist in India due largely to the Hindu traditional understanding of conversion.[15] Traditionally, one could not convert to Hinduism even if one wanted to, so pressure was never exerted on the Jews to convert, and as the Jews do not traditionally proselytize, there was no threat to the Hindus from the Jews.[16] When the British officially colonized India in 1858 after the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 (known more widely as First War of Independence) , Indians were not citizens of Great Britain or even India; rather, they were accorded specific rights as subjects of the Crown, but were not equal to their British masters.[17] For example, the Colonial Indian military was composed primarily of Indians, yet Indians could only rise to the rank of Subedar Major, equivalent to today's Captain; the highest posts were reserved for the British.[18] Thus, in the Indian barracks and ranks, despite living and working with British Christians, there remained distinct religious communities that acted accordingly concerning diet and observance.[19]

Thus, just as they had no historical experiences of anti-Semitism, the Bene Israel had no history of secular, national identity, and a move to Israel would necessitate a new understanding of this kind of identity. Archival documents from the Bene Israel refer

[13] K. M. Sen, *Hinduism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 28.

[14] Samuel Haeem Kehimkar, *The History of the Bene Israel of India* (Tel Aviv: Dayag Press, 1937), 14.

[15] Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Anthony Fisher. *The Proudest Day: India's Long Road to Independence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), 128.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Pati Biswany, *The 1857 Rebellion* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), 7.

repeatedly to the religious aspect of Israel. The Indian Jewish journal *Shema*, which informed the Bene Israel in India, had this to say of Israel shortly after its creation:

> The restoration of Palestine as a National homeland for the Jews has brought with it the revival of many of the ancient rites practiced by our ancestors hundreds of years ago. Whatever steps, statesmen and legislators, educators and economists, industrialists and labor leaders may take to make the world better and improve the lot of men, the indispensable foundation for the structure of society, for the preservation of human liberty, for the enhancement of human dignity, and for the secure life itself, is the Divine Law as summarized in the Decalogue.[20]

Here, Israel is referred to as Palestine, and the reference to "hundreds of years ago," as opposed to thousands of years, or something more accurately portraying the scope of Jewish religious observance, suggests that it was written by someone without a full grasp on Israel or the complex notion of citizenship and secularism. It also emphasizes that the community desired a religious connection with the Jewish state. It suggests a limited or different understanding of secular citizenship and identity formations, or what the nation-state entails.

If this were the only archival finding to illustrate this type of rhetoric, one might dismiss it as an anomaly; however, the archives appear to hold many documents that illustrate this type of language. It is challenging to determine what the Bene Israel community believed about emigration; however, at the very least, tensions between national identity and secularism are evident in these writings.

Another example of this imagery notions of the secular nation-state was found in a letter written to the Jewish Agency in Israel by J. S. Ezra, the president of the Bombay Zionist Association and Bene Israel himself.[21] It paints a most unlikely image. While this letter

[20] CZA, File S32 1293. This archival document had no date attached to it, but we do know that the journal *Shema* ran in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

[21] Benjamin Israel. *The Bene Israel of India: Some Studies* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1984), 88.

was written in 1956, some years after the state was created, the rhetoric provides important insight into the imagery that may have been presented to the Bene Israel and by 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 ardor which 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.[22]

Again, we see the representation of the nation as a spiritual oasis, which had nothing to do with the grim realities of the war-torn, economically and socially challenged state.

A secular democratic state makes no promise of spiritual fulfillment, and Israel was created again as a safe haven for a minority population to escape centuries of anti-Semitism. Was it possible for the Jew who had not suffered anti-Semitism to understand the implications of the creation of a Jewish country, or – for the Zionists enterprise to attract Jews from India – was it necessary to create the image of a spiritual oasis? This imagery was created either through the amateur pen and writers who were swept up in a notion of the nation-state they could not understand, or it was deliberate propaganda on the part of the Zionist enterprise that understood that there would be no immigration from India if the truth about the harsh conditions on the ground were known.

The description above is certainly not an accurate portrayal of the Bene Israel. While they desired to immigrate to Israel, they were a busy community of doctors, civil servants, engineers, high-ranking military personnel, and farmers.[23] They were not idly sitting by hoping and yearning for Israel. Anthony Richmond, in his *Immigration and Ethnic Conflict*, discussed the role of ethnic minorities in the postwar world and noted, "The

[22]CZA, File S6/6391.

[23] Joan Roland, *Jews in British India* (London: Brandeis University Press, 1989), 24.

dominant ideology became that of nationalism, which idealized the secular state and deprecated the maintenance of any linguistic, religious or other sentiments that might conflict with loyalty to it. Nationalism became synonymous with patriotism."[24] For the Bene Israel, however, we see not an embrace of the secular state but rather the embrace of the idea of a religious community or religious identity in another place.

There may, however, be another consideration. The Bene Israel would have been anxious about what India would look like after the British departure. It is possible that as India neared independence, the Bene Israel experienced growing anxiety about their future. What would be the fate of a tiny religious minority in a new India? This anxiety may have created a push factor that encouraged them to pursue a life in Israel. It would be difficult to estimate the impact of that anxiety on a community. What is clear, however, is the great violence that surrounded the partition of India in August 1947. When British India was partitioned into India and Pakistan, the largest human migration in recorded history occurred, with approximately 10 million people moving from what would become India to what would become Pakistan and vice versa.[25] Some put the displaced as high as 20 million, with 12 million alone coming from the Punjab (the province in the northwest that was partitioned).[26] Incredible violence ensued in this migration, resulting in the deaths of an estimated two million people.[27] Both India and Pakistan had to absorb millions of refugees, and both nations dealt with the difficult situation differently.

Youth Immigration

Although the anxiety attached to Indian Independence is difficult to quantify, its presence within the Bene Israel community is indicated by the fact that they sent their children ahead of the parents to the war-torn Jewish state. Would spiritual fulfillment alone prompt parents to send their children away? Whatever the adult conception of citizenship

[24] Anthony Richmond. *Immigration and Ethnic Conflict* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 21.

[25] Bipan Chadra, *India's Struggle for Independence* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 28.

[26] Ibid.

[27] David Fisher, *The Proudest Day: India's Long Road to Independence* (New Zealand: Random House, 1998), 38.

and the nation-state was for Indian Jews, archival documents show very little hesitation to send their children to the new state, alone, ahead of the parents. Of all the Zionist enterprises on the ground in India trying to bring about immigration, none was more successful than the youth program entitled Habonim. The Habonim, an international organization, was established in 1935[28] as "an educational Zionist youth movement which aims at awakening Jewish youth to the realization of their heritage as Jews… encouraging them to take an active part in the upbuilding of Eretz Israel as a Jewish national home."[29] The Zionist goals here were rhetorically secular, with an emphasis on Israel as a national home.

The Constitution of the Habonim discussed the secular goals of the organization. It stated the following:

> We recognize the need for a thorough education of our members, which includes a Jewish and Zionist education [and] a social education. By Jewish education, we understand the teachings of Judaism as a spiritual heritage of which every Jew should be proud. We regard Zionism as an inevitable consequence of Jewish life in the Galut [Diaspora] and as the only solution to its abnormality.[30]

The secular rhetoric could not be clearer here, discussing how Jewish life in the Diaspora evolved into something unnatural and how the only solution was a secular nationalist solution. It discusses Jewish education as something to be proud of, which should lead not to traditional Jewish religious observance but to the creation of a secular state. The document says, "By social education, we mean a comprehensive survey of the world we live in and the problems that confront us as citizens of the world."[31] This represents a clear departure from traditional religious norms, which did not attempt to make the Jew a citizen of the world but sought instead to create an observant religious follower of the divine law.

[28] CZA, File S6/6327.

[29] CZA, File S32 267.

[30] CZA, File S32 267.

[31] Ibid.

Yet we see a strong leaning towards the religious identity of the Bene Israel in India. The Bene Israel Habonim wished to identify itself as a religious organization. The Bene Israel wrote of their Habonim chapter: "In all its activities, *kashrut* [dietary laws] and religious observance have always been adhered to."[32] Again, a stronger relationship to the religion of the nation was more apparent than the secular notion of the citizen, despite the attempts made by the secular Zionists to create a nation based on separation between church and state. The document goes on to say the following:

> Notwithstanding the explanation contained in our letter of May 30, 1949, we understand that our organization is still considered a non-religious group. However, to avoid any further misunderstanding and to make clear that we are a religious organization, we have resolved to call ourselves Habonim Torah and Avodah.[33]

It is clearly of little importance to the Zionists in Israel that Habonim is a religious organization. It may have even been seen as detrimental, as the early Zionists had no great love of religion, but for the Indian Jews, what was their connection to Israel, if not a religious one?

Regardless of the notions of citizenship, the Bene Israel in Bombay, via the Bombay Zionist organization, eagerly sought to send their children to Israel. A letter written to the Jewish Agency for Palestine on November 29, 1948, emphasized this desire. The letter states the following:

> On behalf of the Bombay Zionist Association, I take the opportunity of contacting you on a most pressing and vital subject. It is in respect of a few hundred Jewish boys and girls, active and ardent Zionists, who desire to settle in the state of Israel and to do their bit for the country. We are receiving frantic appeals from them for help to achieve their object in emigrating to Israel, but we are not in a position to

[32] CZA, File S32/308.

[33] CZA, File S32/308.

> help all those Jewish boys and girls because we lack the necessary finance for their passage . . . Our present target is to provide passage for 300 individuals.[34]

It is remarkable in many ways that hundreds of young people wanted to immigrate to Israel and that their parents supported the move, as this would be a move without their parents, who would join them later, sometimes up to two years later.[35]

Moreover, the children were not being sent to a theocracy. Israel's goal was to turn its immigrants into Israelis and have them break away from their Diaspora communities.[36] The Diaspora was largely viewed with disdain by the Zionists, who taught the immigrants a new language upon arrival and who created a dynamic wherein many of the immigrants changed their names to Hebrew names.[37] An example is the first Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, who changed his name from David Grun.[38] Members of the youth Aliyah were especially susceptible to this type of education. The youth education process was divided into seven parts: a change of environment and organized social life, a special and separate education framework, the integration of study, work and social life, the adaptation of a study plan to enhance the child's intellectual capabilities, placement in a rural setting or village and physical labor.[39]

The new norms, including language and name changes, represented drastic lifestyle changes for most immigrants. It was a thoroughly secular educational process, and when the parents arrived, often up to two years later, they were shocked and dismayed at the

[34] Ibid.

[35] Chasya Pincus, *Come from the Four Winds: The Story of Youth Aliyah*, (New York: Herzl Press, 1970), 298.

[36] Calvin Goldscheider, *Israel's Changing Society* (Boulder Co: Westview Press, 1998), 133.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Shabtai Teveth, *Ben-Gurion the Burning Ground 1886-1948* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), 206.

[39] Martin Wolins and Meir Gottesman, eds., *Group Care: An Israeli Approach* (London: Gordon and Breach, 1971), 44.

person their child had become.[40] The parents being shocked at the secular Westernized identity formations of their children attests to the idea that the parents were expecting to find religiously observant children. This further supports the thesis that the Bene Israel perceived themselves as joining a religious community.

In addition to this unanticipated secular indoctrination, the Bene Israel were surprised by conditions in Israel.[41] In November 1948, Israel had just undergone a war with the surrounding nations of Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.[42] The nation was also suffering from ethnic strife among different Jews and housing, health, and jobs crises.[43] Were the Bene Israel in India aware of those conditions? While the international press did not expose all the struggles facing Israel, Bene Israel, who had gone ahead, wrote back with dire letters.

One letter written to the Bombay Zionists still in India in February 1948 stated the following:

> Well, I guess you are anxious to know what life is like here nowadays… Leaving out of consideration high-level politics (since all I know is about them is what I read in the papers, and undoubtedly, you have the same sources of information), life is rather grim, especially in Jerusalem. Since all roads lead through Arab territory, Jerusalem is more or less under siege. Thus, some foods are hard to get – we get one egg per person per week.[44]

The situation in Israel during the first few years of the state was much more inhospitable than the letter describes. Between 1948 and 1951, Israel absorbed 684,000 people with

[40] Chasya Pincus, *Come from the Four Winds: The Story of Youth Aliyah*, (New York: Herzl Press, 1970), 322.

[41] Bene Israel community members, interview by author, in Israel June–Aug 2015. Responded to the question, "What difficulties, if any did you encounter upon arrival?"

[42] Howard Sachar, *A History of Israel from the Rise of Zionism to Our Time* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1996), 317.

[43] Ibid, 403

[44] CZA, File S32 267.

almost no infrastructure to support them.[45] There was a lack of housing, and the Israelis had to turn to the destroyed army barracks left behind by the British to house people.[46] Barracks that had been converted into temporary housing camps, which initially held 28,000 people in early 1949, were accommodating 90,000 people by the end of the year.[47] Severe food shortages and health concerns were encountered.[48] Epidemics set in, and those who had arrived in poor health became even more ill. Disease spread rapidly through the camps, and the health of those most susceptible, including a large percentage of the children, deteriorated rapidly. It was reported that 200 of the 370 children in the Raanana camp were ill.[49] In April 1949, the government felt compelled to impose food rationing, and later, it rationed other consumer goods.[50] The children did not attend school, as initially there were neither schools nor daycare centers, and the adults sat idly waiting for jobs while a food shortage developed.[51] In September 1949, with vegetables at the camps reduced by two-thirds, immigrants at the Pardes Hannah camp staged a hunger demonstration.[52] As Howard Sachar wrote, "Until the Sinai campaign [1956], Israel had been regarded in many diplomatic circles, less as a state than as a kind of besieged refugee camp, frantically seeking to organize and defend itself in the midst of awesome economic, social and military difficulties."[53]

[45] Itamar Rabinovich and Jehudah Reinharz, eds., *Israel in the Middle East: Documents and Readings on Society Politics and Foreign Relations* (New England: Brandies University Press, 2008), 48.

[46] Dvora Hacohen, *Immigrants in Turmoil* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 130.

[47] Tom Segev, *1949: The First Israelis* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), 124.

[48] Dvora Hacohen, *Immigrants in Turmoil* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 137.

[49] Ernest Stock, *The Chosen Instrument: The Jewish Agency in the First Decade of the State of Israel* (New York: Herzl Press, 1988), 91.

[50] Orit Rozen, "Food Identity and Nation Building," *Israel Studies Forum*, (2006): 36.

[51] Ernest Stock, The Chosen *Instrument: The Jewish Agency in the First Decade of the State of Israel* (New York: Herzl Press, 1988), 93.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Howard Sachar, *The Course of Modern Jewish History* (New York: Vintage books, 1990), 763.

The Bene Israel would not have had all this information, but they did have some notion of difficult conditions. Yet they sent their children nonetheless. By October 1949, the Bene Israel Habonim had assembled a group of 40 children to emigrate.[54] In December 1949, Rabbi S.D. Sassoon came to Bombay from Calcutta and assured the Habonim chairman A Manasseh, of his support.[55] According to archival materials,

> Rabbi Sassoon then proceeded to Calcutta and was able to collect a substantial amount of money towards the establishment of a Hossad (settlement) for Children from Oriental and Eastern Jewry. This amount was subsequently given to Kibbutz Lavi, and a Hossad was founded at Lavi in 1950, now known as Mossad Hodayot. Rabbi Sassoon then informed our Chairman to write to the *Brit Olamit* (association for language and culture), and they, in turn, asked us to write to the Aliyat Hanoar Hadati (department of youth immigration). By March 1950, this group was accepted to be absorbed at Lavi. The first group left Bombay in May 1950. Subsequently, other groups were sent through this organization, including a group from Calcutta and a group from Cochin. About 150 boys and girls were sent in groups through this organization.[56]

One of the interesting aspects of Rabbi Sasson's endeavor is the attempt to create a unified emigration from across India.

While it may seem from the outside that there is a unified Indian Jewry, this is not entirely accurate. There were three distinct Jewish communities in India, as discussed above, and they did not have the same passion for Israel and sending their children there.[57] The notions of citizenship and the sacrifices made to become a citizen were diverse. While it seems that the Bene Israel, centered largely in Bombay (Mumbai), were quite prepared to organize, fundraise, and send their children to Israel to become part of the new state, the

[54] CZA, File S6 6392.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Shirley Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel: A Comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan Press, 1988), 62.

Calcutta Jews did not seem to have the same zeal.[58] They were largely Arab Jews from the Middle East, primarily from what is now Iraq, who had begun to immigrate to India in the 18th century and had collectively become known as the Baghdadi Jewish community.[59] While many of those Jews did arrive from Baghdad (a center of Jewish life and learning in the Middle East since rabbinic times), they also came from Mosul and Basra, with small numbers from Syria, Iran, and Yemen.[60] They left what is today Iraq to escape the persecution, disease, and severe flooding that ravaged their community.[61]

Initially, the Bene Israel, who had begun to settle in Bombay, welcomed the Baghdadi newcomers, inviting them to worship in their synagogues and to bury their dead in their cemeteries; but the friendly relationship gradually dissolved.[62] The Baghdadis began to actively dissociate themselves from the Bene Israel for several reasons, including a desire to maintain close ties with the British, which meant avoiding being mistaken for Indians, as well as feeling that the Jewish practices of the Bene Israel were not in line with their own.[63]

Adult Immigration

The Bene Israel adults who arrived in the newly-formed state of Israel between 1948 and 1956 found themselves in a different country than they had imagined. Coming from Bombay and Calcutta, the Bene Israel were shocked at the underdevelopment in Israel. Upon arrival, some were taken to specific locations, such as kibbutzim or small development towns, while many more went to temporary reception camps, where they

[58] Joan Roland, *Jews in British India* (London: Brandeis University Press, 1989), 14.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Nissim Rejwan, *The Jews of Iraq: 3000 Years of History and Culture* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985), 187.

[62] Joan Roland, Jews in British India (London: Brandeis University Press, 1989), 142.

[63] Shirley Isenberg, *India's Bene Israel: A Comprehensive Inquiry and Sourcebook* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan Press, 1988), 49.

had to wait several months or, in extreme cases, up to two years for housing.[64] Housing was arranged by a selection committee that tried to accommodate the 250,000 Holocaust survivors and the Jews from Poland first, as it was felt they had suffered enough.[65] It meant long waits for everyone else. On the kibbutzim, the culture was particularly challenging for newcomers. The socialist ideals of the kibbutzim meant that members shared everything, including the children, who slept, were educated, and sometimes even ate in their dwellings separate from their families.[66] They saw their families for a few hours each evening. For Indians who traditionally lived with multiple generations in the same home, this was extremely difficult.[67]

The combination of these challenges, including housing, health, ethnic strife, and the lack of infrastructure, amongst others, such as war, made the initial years of the state extremely difficult. Unlike most of the other communities that came from either post-World War II Europe or the Middle East and North Africa, which had seen rising anti-Semitism throughout the prewar years into the war years, the Indian Jews found themselves in an inhospitable situation with a seemingly hospitable India to return to.

When faced with extreme difficulties on the ground in Israel, the community, by 1956, began to appeal to the Israeli government to send them back to India. One letter written from the Haifa branch of the Association for Indian Jews in Israel to the director of the Absorption Department of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem stresses the community's desire to return to India:

> Dear Madam: We are, for the past three years, appealing to the good offices at of the Jewish Agency in Israel, Absorption Department, to help us & our

[64] Dvora Hacohen, *Immigrants in Turmoil* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 116.

[65] 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: Rutledge, 2010), 37.

[66] CZA, S4/2227.

[67] Ibid.

> families in getting properly fixed jobs. But we received only promises, which were not kept. We, therefore, decided to make a peaceful sit-down strike in Jerusalem on July 1, 1956. Then also, we were promised that our grievances, that is, work will be given to us in the near future, and we dispersed peacefully. Since that date and up to August 5, we were again at the gates of the Jewish Agency in Jerusalem. We therefore appeal to you in the name of humanity to help us getting fixed jobs or send us back to India.[68]

Additional archival evidence indicates that appeals had been made to the Jewish agency for three years. A letter written to the Chairman of the Jewish Agency on Nachlat Binyam Street in Jerusalem, two years earlier in 1954, stated the following:

> We have become beggars and lost our beautiful homes, our permanent jobs, our respect, our good names and have become victims of your false promises and propaganda. In this way, you have put a blot on the fair name of Israel. We are near starvation and have become desperate, and our only remedy is to go back to India, our birthplace. You brought us to Israel, and we want you to send us back to India respectably.[69]

At the bottom of the page, the writer pleads:

> We call upon you to please arrange to send us back to India, or otherwise we, along with our wives and children, will resort to a strike, a hunger strike with black flags and many other things which we cannot disclose at present. We are ready to be shot dead, and our chest is wide open for your bullets.[70]

While the imagery here is certainly very dramatic, it also indicates a stark transition from a language in India that was flowery and looked to the nation-state as a place of spiritual renewal to dealing with the nation-state itself as a citizen on the ground. The rhetoric has

[68] CZA, S6/6001.

[69] CZA, S4/2227.

[70] Ibid.

turned violent. The writer is threatening the state and seems to feel that the state may shoot and kill innocent, nonviolent protestors. This represents a striking difference between the concept of the nation before arrival and the concept of the nation after arrival.

After more protest letters, the Israeli government, in a very challenging financial situation, actually repatriated many of the Bene Israel back to India. Shalva Weil noted that the repatriation marked "the first time in the country's short history that a complete group of immigrants demanded to be returned.[71] What was it about them specifically that they wanted to be repatriated? Perhaps it was because they had not suffered anti-Semitism in India, and that they may have been one of the only communities who would even have the opportunity to return somewhere safe. Certainly, the Polish Jewish immigrants in Israel or the German Jewish immigrants did not feel they had a safe home to return to in Europe. But perhaps the movement from subject to citizen was never clear to the Bene Israel, so when they arrived in Israel, they were completely unprepared for the responsibilities and challenges of citizenship.

Initially, 152 Bene Israel members were repatriated to India in the early 1950s, and more were returned shortly thereafter. When they returned to India, the Indian press picked up the story and attributed the discontent of the Bene to racism in Israel.[72] This was a convenient story, as India took a hard line against colonialism after independence and viewed Israel as a colonial construct.[73] The Bene Israel themselves rejected the allegations of racism, maintaining that their struggle was not one of racism but one of not being accepted as Jews.

[71] Shalva Weil, "Bene Israel Indian Jews in Lod Israel: A Study of the Persistence of Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity" (PhD Diss., University of Sussex England, 1977), 70. Dr. Weil wrote her groundbreaking work in the 1970s, and since then, further studies by scholars such as Joan Roland have indicated that it was not the entire community that wanted to be repatriated, but Weil's assertion brings up an interesting question about this community.

[72] CZA, File S6 6327.

[73] P. R. Kumaraswamy. *India's Israel Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

Conclusion

The creation of nation-states throughout the globe from the French Revolution onward has been anything but a straightforward and linear path. Although India transitioned from being part of the British Empire to an independent state in 1947, the process has been fraught with difficulty, to say the least. For Indians, much of the support for the move from empire to nation was as much about freeing themselves from imperial rule as it was about being a nation-state, especially after the Jallianwala Bagh massacres of 1919, where the British military under General Dyer opened fire on an unarmed crowd, killing hundreds of people (conservative estimates place the number at 390 dead, whereas other estimates place the number of dead at over one thousand). India had done a remarkable job with that transition, despite setbacks and challenges, but not all Indians understood what it would entail to become a nation.

For the Bene Israel in India during this initial transition, it seemed to them that their livelihoods were in jeopardy due to their religion. While there had not been any religious persecution of the Jews in India, the British had used a divide-and-conquer policy, pitting the Hindus against the Muslims. To run the empire, they used small minorities, such as the Jews and Zoroastrians (Parsis), to run the affairs of the state. Many Bene Israel were civil servants and high-ranking military personnel. During India's transition from empire to nation, the Bene Israel felt their livelihoods were in jeopardy, as they wondered if a majority Hindu population would allow so many non-Hindus to maintain their key positions as civil servants and military officers. This anxiety, coupled with an opportunity to move to Israel, a place where they would be part of the religious majority, inspired many of them to move to the new state of Israel. Their conception of that nation-state was that they were moving to a Jewish commonwealth, not a nation of Jews.

When they arrived, they found a nation struggling against overwhelming material and logistical problems. Although Israel had opened its borders to Jews throughout the globe in 1948, it never envisioned that so many people would come. The pre-state government of Israel (the Yishuv) felt it needed 150,000 new citizens to create a stronger military and a more vibrant economy, and to spread the Jewish population across the breadth and width of the country. Therefore, they opened the doors of immigration. The Yishuv,

however, was clear that it could not sustain many more people than 150,000 and felt that 250,000 could be dealt with at most, but anything over that would be a nightmare.[74] No one could have imagined that 684,000 people would arrive or that Israel would double its Jewish population over three years. Due to these overwhelming difficulties, the state focused on the logistical challenges of settlement, rather than the national religious identity.

The Bene Israel were not incorrect in feeling that they had not been accepted as Jews in Israel. While the timeline for this study was the early years of the state, in 1960, twelve years after the state was created, the Bene Israel who had remained in Israel would be specifically targeted by the state and religious authorities as not being "pure Jews," and they would have to fight a long and bitter civil rights struggle to gain religious equality.

The transition from empire to nation-state was challenging for the Bene Israel who migrated to Israel. Having come from a place where religious identity was the most dominant form of identity, it seemed reasonable to believe that a Jewish homeland would be a place that united all Jews and where their Jewish identity would gain their inclusion. Instead, they found a modern country struggling with overwhelming material and social challenges. Those challenges were larger than the state's religious identity, and many returned to India feeling disappointed in the nation-state's apparatus.

[74] Labor Party Archives, File 386098