

"She Taught from the Heart" The Life and Legacy of a Bene Israel Educator

By Joan G. Roland

Nina Haeems, ed., *Rebecca Reuben: Scholar, Educationist, Community Leader, 1889-1957*, (Mumbai: Vacha Trust, 2000), 305 pages.

Indian Jewish women up front! In the last few years, our knowledge of Indian Jews has been enriched by the appearance of several books by and about women. These include Barbara Johnson and Ruby Daniel's *Ruby of Cochin*; Flora Samuel's memoir in Marathi, *Sanskritisangam*; Esther David's *The Walled City and By the Sabarmati*; Mavis Hyman's presentation and analysis of the recollections of Calcutta Jews, *Jews of the Raj*; Sally Solomon's *Hooghly Tales*, a memoir about the same community; and Jael Silliman's *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames* about four generations of women in her Calcutta Baghdadi family. Beloved Bene Israel educator Rebecca Reuben, who gave up a promising career in the broader educational arena to serve her own community, never wrote her memoirs.

However, Nina Haeems, a recently retired professor of sociology and women's studies from Wilson College in Bombay, has now filled this gap by compiling and editing a book of essays, stories, interviews, recollections, government documents, and photos relating to Reuben, who was her aunt. She includes Reuben's own published and unpublished writings. Haeems, a founder of the Vacha group (a women's resource center) and the editor of an occasional publication about Indian Jewish women, had access to family collections of her aunt's papers and, thus, was uniquely positioned to take up this task. She has accomplished her goal of capturing not only the public life and achievements of this remarkable woman, but also the sense of what she was like as a person.

The result is a comprehensive book divided into six sections: Portraits, Family Album, Years at the Israelite School and Working with the Community, A Teacher's Views on Education, India in Israel, and A Gifted Story Teller. These are preceded by a long introduction in which Haeems offers a biography of Reuben set in the context of Bene Israel history. She argues that Reuben, the principal of the Sir Elly Kadoorie School for almost thirty years, was not only a sensitive and resourceful teacher whose sense of Jewishness enriched Bene Israel education and community activities during the first half of the twentieth century, but also an innovator who made important contributions in the field of education in western India. Oddly, except for the frequent mention of Reuben's being the first woman to earn the highest score in the Matriculation Examination of Bombay University

(in 1905) since the institution of the examination in 1859, there is no reference to her in the written history of education in Maharashtra. Haeems finds this unfortunate since Reuben was a pioneer in her field and, as she exemplifies, some of the earliest women educators in Bombay were Bene Israel (pp. xvii-xviii).

Rebecca Reuben came from a highly educated, upper middle-class family. Her relatives included the first Bene Israel male and female graduates of Bombay University. Her father, Ezra Reuben, was the Chief Judicial Officer in Junagadh under the British and her brother, David, was the only Bene Israel ever to enter the Indian Civil Service.

Memories of Rebecca Reuben, or Daisy as she was known and is often called in this book, enliven Part I. There is some repetition of the facts of her life in this section, but the selections give a good indication of her personality and character. Sarah Israel's "My Amazing Aunt Dija" describes her generosity to family, friends, teachers, students past and present, and people from all communities. Her students still remember her forty-five years after her death. Reuben comes across as a "fun" aunt who wrote amusing poetry to her nieces, some of which is reproduced here. Haeems herself writes a moving portrait of her aunt in this section. I.A. Ezekiel, a Bene Israel journalist, makes the point that although she was intensely religious and moral, she did not preach.

Part II presents some interesting portraits of her family, including essays and short stories for children drawing upon the experience of family members, written by Rebecca Reuben herself. A sketch she wrote about her paternal grandfather whose main interest was *lavni* singing contests is particularly appealing. *Lavnis* were folk poetry about everyday life and the book includes Reuben's translations of two songs her grandfather composed.

Reuben studied at Huzurpaga, the well-known "High School for Native Girls" in Poona, where she took up not only Marathi and Sanskrit, but also Hebrew, the latter mainly with the help of her father. She walked off with all the prizes. Then, after graduating from Deccan College, where she studied history and continued with Hebrew, she went to England where she earned a Teacher's Training Diploma in London and pursued her Hebrew studies with Dr. Israel Abrahams at Cambridge University. The book includes Abrahams' certificate attesting to Reuben's thorough knowledge of Hebrew and his letter to her father telling of the great impression she made in England. She returned to India to teach at Huzurpaga for three years and was then appointed Headmistress of the Teacher Training College for Women in Poona. This was followed by three years as Lady Superintendent of the Government Teachers' Training College at Baroda. During these years, she taught Hebrew classes for Bene Israel children and adults, and also participated in the social and intellectual life of Bombay, giving talks on women and education.

In 1922, however, acting upon her strong ambition to serve her own community, Reuben gave up this promising, more lucrative career in teacher education to become principal of the Bene Israel school, then known as the Israelite School. Haeems sees this as a turning point not only in Reuben's life but in that of the community. Soon after, Reuben began to wear only white, which is how she is remembered today. As Sarah Israel points out, "This was the first generation of Indian women making choices to remain single, to live lives of simplicity, and to commit themselves to social and national causes." (p. 7).

Part III of the book is devoted to Reuben's years at the Israelite School and her activism in the community. "First Impressions? Or Depressions!!" a piece Reuben wrote about her first visit to the school after she had accepted the principalship, shows her dissatisfaction with everything: the teaching, the spiritless staff and children, and the physical state of the premises.

Haeems discusses how Reuben's life work was dedicated to changing the cycle of poverty, lack of education, and poor employment opportunities that were the reality of a large section of the Bene Israel community at the time. During the period of her leadership, the Israelite school improved in terms of enrollment and standards and began to accept non-Jewish pupils. In 1928, she succeeded in persuading Sir Elly Kadoorie, a wealthy Iraqi Jew from Shanghai, to make a generous donation to construct a new school building. When it opened in 1934, the building was named after him, over the objections, apparently, of some Bene Israel. The Indian poet and nationalist, Sarojini Naidu, with whom Reuben had had contact in 1916, was present at the opening. Haeems wonders if Reuben and Naidu worked together or kept in touch all those years, but there is no documentation. (p. xxvii). During this period of Reuben's leadership, the Maccabbeans alumni organization was founded. This important innovation inspired young men and women to support the school and work for the greater good of the community.

Reuben was active in other community endeavors. She and her cousin, the noted gynecologist, Dr. Jerusha Jhirad, organized activities for two important institutions which the latter had founded: the Bene Israel Stree Mandal (Woman's Association) and the Jewish Religious Union, which was affiliated with the World Union of Progressive Judaism. While still in her 20s, Reuben edited and published the *Bene Israel Annual and Year Book* from 1917 to 1920. Some of the items in Part III relate to this effort. Reuben wrote in Marathi, English, and Hebrew. Her translations of Panchatantra stories into Hebrew helped bridge cultures. From 1927-1937, she edited *Nofeth*, a monthly magazine in Marathi especially for Bene Israel children. Excerpts from this magazine, which contained stories from the Old Testament and Jewish history, fables, folktales, and puzzles, are included in the book, translated from Marathi by Haeems. They show the breadth of Reuben's interest and knowledge.

In Part VII readers will find some charming stories that she wrote.

Although two generations of Bene Israel remember Rebecca Reuben with love and admiration, and there is little critical of her in this book, Haeems has found evidence in Bene Israel journals and other publications that the educator's work with the community did not go unchallenged. A debate ensued over whether the principal of an "orthodox" Jewish school should be a member of the Jewish Religious Union. Haeems mentions this and quotes from some of the criticism in her introduction, but she does not include more of this material in other parts of the book. The existence of conflict (although over what issue is unclear) between Reuben and the fractious managing committee of the school comes out in the piece by Flora Samuel, translated from her Marathi memoir by Haeems, who succeeded her as principal in 1955. Although these problems and insults hurt Reuben, Ezekiel claims that she harbored no ill-will against her critics. But Sarah Israel points out that her aunt suffered, especially as a younger woman, from severe headaches which may well have been related to stress. Israel notes that Reuben partly relieved this tension by writing. At times, only her belief that the community and, particularly, the children, needed her kept Reuben going.

Indeed, she was principal of the school during a period of great factionalism and conflict in the Bene Israel community. She tried to remain apart from the intrigue but her frustration with this situation is reflected in a brilliant, stinging allegory, "The Donkey on the Common," included in Part III. In it she shows how the donkey (representing the welfare of the community) suffers and eventually dies while the factions engage in abstract theoretical disputes over how to help it. The communal factions, with their conventions, journals, and publications are satirized in this previously unpublished piece. I.A. Ezekiel is the only author represented in the book who talks even briefly about Reuben's political views, saying that she was in favor of India's democratic freedom and the Congress Program and was not afraid of change. One would like to know a bit more about her positions on these subjects, particularly as many Bene Israel were nervous about the possibility of the British leaving India.

It was Rebecca Reuben who spoke to Dr. Immanuel Olsvanger — the Sanskrit scholar sent to India in 1936 on a mission for the Jewish Agency — about the existence of an unpublished manuscript on the origin and history of the Bene Israel. Olsvanger arranged to have the book, written by Haeem Samuel Kehimkar at the turn of the century, printed in Tel Aviv in 1937 and it has remained an important primary source for future scholars.

Haeems acknowledges that the Bene Israel school and community were the core of Reuben's life work, but she also focuses on her role in society at large. Her greatest contribution to education in India, it seems, was her creation of the Ashok readers, a series of English readers for students in non-English speaking schools. Prescribed by the government, they became very popular in the 1950s and 1960s.

Reuben gave the entire royalty to charity. The book includes an amusing sketch of a Burma Shave advertisement featuring one of the Ashok readers in the hands of a schoolmaster. Reuben also published English-Marathi and English-Gujarati grammars. Additionally, she was a member of various important government education boards in the state of Maharashtra, where she helped shape educational policy. Unfortunately, there are hardly any records of her contributions on these government boards. After 1948, there was some controversy over when the teaching of English should begin in the vernacular schools. The government wanted to delay the introduction of English until high school so that more time could be devoted in middle school to teaching Hindi and crafts. Reuben felt that this de-emphasis of English would basically hurt poorer children, as wealthier families would find other ways to provide English lessons for their children, and proposed that the language at least be made optional from grade five on. This was not adopted at the time, although Haeems notes that in 1999, Maharashtra introduced English in the first grade throughout the state, even in the vernacular schools. (p. xxxv)

Part IV contains some documents pertaining to these activities and also includes some of Reuben's writings on education in the form of articles, radio talks, and notes that were found in her papers. They include material about women's education, reading English poetry aloud, teaching English spelling, and school tests, and on Hebrew and religious instruction for young children. From this last selection, one gets a good idea of the Jewish education received by Bene Israel students in the school. Reuben comes across as a very clear, analytical thinker, with modern views. Some of her views, especially on the role of examinations, still seem relevant today.

Rebecca Reuben was appointed Justice of the Peace in 1947 and an Honorary Magistrate in 1953, in which capacity she served at the Umarkhadi Juvenile Court. Here too, there are no records of her activities. Haeems laments the fact that so little material is available of the work that Reuben did outside of the community. Indeed, the book contains only one published article from a non-Jewish source and that one is based on material that appeared in a Bene Israel journal.

Section VII, "India and Israel," is particularly valuable. In 1947, Rebecca Reuben was invited to represent Indian Jewry at the First World Congress for Jewish Education in Jerusalem, where she was asked to speak at the opening convocation. She remained in Palestine for two months that summer, shortly before the civil war broke out there. She comments very little on the political situation, although she does note that the Indian papers gave no idea of the current situation in Palestine. Her letters to her father about her experiences are full of excitement about her visit to the Holy Land. They reveal her sense of Jewish identity and the Biblical associations she was able to make as she traveled throughout the country. Reuben did not seem to have much sympathy for the ultra-orthodox Jews she met and implies that the prayers at and kissing of the western wall

of the ancient temple were superstitious. She visited many institutions and found kibbutz life interesting, wondering if there could be a joint Jewish-Arab kibbutzim. Olsvanger, whom she met again there (and whose letter about the excellent impression that Reuben made in Palestine is included in the book) explained why this would not be possible. She was extremely well received during her trip and managed to give some speeches in Hebrew, although she found it difficult to express herself in and understand the modern vernacular. Everywhere she went, apparently, people asked her, "When are your people coming? We want them!"

In fact, many Bene Israel did begin to emigrate to Israel and by 1952, although most were integrating themselves well, a group of 150 who were unhappy chose to return to India. Some of them claimed there was color prejudice in India and this was picked up angrily by the Indian press and parliament. Reuben wrote a beautiful "Open Letter to Prime Minister, Mr. Jawaharlal Nehru," which was published in *India and Israel* and reproduced here. She explains how Indian the Bene Israel are and expresses their love and loyalty for the country. Then she writes,"

We are Indians, Sir, but we are Jews as well and, as Jews, we have an equally deep-rooted love and loyalty for the spiritual heritage of our people and for the land of Israel, which is the fountainhead of that heritage.... We are thus a people of two loyalties, Sir, but not divided loyalties. We have been sustained and nourished by India and Israel, and to both we owe a deep debt of gratitude. (pp.273-74)

She strongly refutes the charge made by the Indian parliament that there was a color bar in Israel, even though, "some disgruntled emigrants who found conditions difficult in a raw pioneering country," may have made such statements. She is particularly concerned about the attention given to accusations in the Indian press and legislatures because relations between Israel and India were deteriorating at that time and she feared, "the evil spirit of prejudice against Israel that is trying to raise its head in India." She wanted Nehru to do something to reverse this situation. The returnees eventually wished to go back to Israel and their letter to the Jewish Agency begging it to pay their return passage is printed here.

Rebecca Reuben died in 1957. The book ends with a poem, "World I must Leave Thee," written by Sarah Israel shortly before her aunt died. At the condolence meeting held at the Sir Elly Kadoorie School, the speeches of the students were particularly moving. "Plain living, high thinking," was the theme. It seems to have summed up her life.

Haerms says, "Rebecca Reuben's work was mainly concerned with one field - education, with one region—Western India, and with one community—

the Bene Israel, which might explain why many people are not aware of her work, her inspiring qualities and deep sense of values, and the beauty of her life." (p.xxxix) Thus, although the Bene Israel remember her great legacy, her contributions in the broader society may remain overlooked. Hopefully, this book will serve the purpose of making Rebecca Reuben's achievements better known among a wider readership. It will be appreciated not only by those who study Indian Jews, but also by readers who are interested in Indian and/or Jewish women, and in education in Maharashtra.