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Contents

From the Editors

Articles

Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Buber: Two Approaches to Non-violence
by *Braj M. Sinha*

Varieties of Mystical Nothingness: Jewish, Christian and Buddhist
By *Daniel C. Matt*

Torah-Hindu Parallels in the Narratives of Five Persons
by *Bharat Jhunjunwala*

Israel and Pakistan: Between the State and Non-State Players
by *Joseph Hodes*

Book reviews

C. B. Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*
reviewed by *David R. Blumenthal*

Shalom Salomon Wald and Arielle Kandel *India, Israel, and the Jewish People*
reviewed by *Navras Jaat Aafreedi*

Ithamar Theodor and Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, eds. *Dharma and Halacha – Comparative Studies in Hindu-Jewish Philosophy and Religion*
reviewed by *Nathan Katz*

Obituaries

Zaithunchchi
by *Nathan Katz*

Rabbi Ezekiel N. Musleah
by *Steven Heine*

Sarah Cohen

by Ellen S. Goldberg

Communications

Emergence of Kolkata as a Center for Jewish Studies in India`

by Navras Jaat Aafreedi

Three tin ingots of Haifa shipwreck with Indus (Sarasvati) hieroglyphs reinforces the Meluhha rebus reading *ranku dhatu mûh*, ‘tin mineral-ore ingot’

by S. Kalyanaraman

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Obituary: Sarah Cohen



Sarah Cohen lighting *tiryah*, or ceremonial lamp, for Rosh Hashanah. Photo by Ellen S. Goldberg

Jew Town, Mattancherry, Kochi, Kerala, India – Upstairs in the 16th-century Paradesi Synagogue, Sarah Cohen leaned forward during *Shabbat* morning services to whisper, "Can you hear it? Something is going on at the Hindu temple next door."

Indeed, was is hard to miss the fusion of liturgies between this congregation and the one next door. "We often hear their music and prayers," she smiled. "And they can hear us, too."

The intermingling of Hebrew and Sanskrit chants may seem incongruous to outsiders, but to residents of all faiths here, it's long been a way of life. Sarah Cohen not only understood this, she embraced it. As most of her Jewish friends left the community for Israel or elsewhere, she wanted none of that.

"India is my home," she told me in no uncertain terms. "There's no place else I'd rather be."

Sarah lived for nearly a century – just four days shy of her 97th birthday when she died August 30, 2019 – in the tiny Jew Town neighborhood, her home just a few hundred feet from her beloved synagogue. "At least four generations of her family lived in Mattancherry before her," said Kochi native Thoufeek Zakriya. "She wanted to rest here and was emotionally connected to this land and people."¹

While Sarah and her late husband Jacob did not have children nor immediate family in the area, her funeral was well attended. Her grandnephew Yaakov Finkelstein, Israel's Consul General in Mumbai, flew in. So too, remaining Jews from nearby Ernakulam as well as many non-Jewish friends came to pay their last respects. "Even in death, she brought us all together," said Thaha Ibrahim, a Muslim neighbor and close friend who, with his wife Jasmine, cared for Sarah in her later years and ran her embroidery shop for her when she could no longer do so.²

Friendly and outgoing, Sarah never met a person she didn't like. The feeling was mutual judging by the streams of people who made their way to her door on Synagogue Lane to visit, hear her stories about Jew Town traditions, or to buy her handmade embroidery, *kippot* and *challah* covers. "She kept history alive," said Zakriya, now a Dubai-based calligraphy artist and chef who first met Sarah in 2009 while working on a project on Jewish food and history. "She would tell us about Jewish weddings, functions and food."³

And much more. Sarah was my mentor-*guru-balabus* extraordinaire for nearly a year, from 1986-1987, when my husband Nathan Katz and I lived in Jew Town to document its waning community. Kind and energetic, Sarah took me under her wing to show me life there from a Jewish woman's perspective. Researcher Barbara C. Johnson had worked with Sarah several years prior and described her generosity of spirit and open-heartedness in much the same way.⁴

Almost from the get-go of my tutelage, just before Rosh Hashanah, I saw how important traditions and friendships were to Sarah. Standing alongside her in her kitchen, I watched her whip together a rich confection called "wedding cake," something of a misnomer since it was made for the Jewish new year and was actually many small cakes fashioned in cylindrical aluminum tins. Why so many? As was her custom, she gave them as gifts to her Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Jain and Parsi friends who eagerly came to her door to claim their sweets. I can say from personal experience, it was delicious. And yes, I got the recipe.

While helping Sarah clean one morning prior to the holiday, I unexpectedly learned an important piece of Kochini Jewish women's history. Taking a break to look at old family photos together on Sarah's bedroom dresser, my eyes rested on a pile of yellowed notebooks. Gesturing for me to have a look, I gingerly flipped through the lined pages to see each contained handwritten verses neatly penned in the local Malayalam script.

For centuries, Kochini women composed and sang Jewish songs, from playful tunes about parrots that must be coaxed with milk and fruit in exchange for a story or a blessing, to biblical narratives spiced with *Midrash* retelling familiar stories of the matriarch Sarah, baby Moses and the exodus from Egypt. Others included

devotional hymns, blessings for special occasions and later, some Zionist songs preparing the community for *Aliyah* to Israel.⁵

While Kochini men and women sang together a unique repertoire of Hebrew *piyutim*, or religious songs, it was the women alone who wrote and performed Jewish songs in Malayalam. The notebooks show the women's literary prowess, something not surprising in Kerala, which historically has emphasized literacy in general and the relatively high status of its women in particular. Passed down through the generations, all Kochini women preserved these songs, hundreds of which are now housed in the Ben-Zvi Institute in Jerusalem.⁶

A deeply committed Jew, Sarah showed personal and religious strength on Yom Kippur when she took on the *chumra*, or voluntary stringency, of standing throughout the day-long synagogue services, all the while fasting and praying fervently in ferocious tropical heat. Trying to keep up with my mentor who was some 30 years my senior, I too stood and prayed for the duration, which, for this then-unobservant Jew, resulted in a profound spiritual awakening.

Early on in our relationship, I got a peek into Sarah's character. After a week of shadowing her to observe painstaking, hours-long Shabbat preparations, by Friday afternoon I figured she'd put her feet up for a well-deserved rest. Instead, she was intent on giving *tzedakah* (charity), a *mitzvah* (religious obligation) before Shabbat. Looking outside, she spied her opportunity: a beggar woman perched on steps across from her home. Without hesitation, Sarah carried a pot of freshly prepared food to the woman, ladling out a generous portion for her onto a plate. Despite the late hour, Sarah didn't rush the woman. Instead, she engaged her in conversation, making sure she had her fill. Finally, by the time the sun's last rays slipped below the palm fronds and her husband Jacob and brother-in-law Shalom had gone off to synagogue, Sarah had finished her chores, bathed, dressed, kindled the Shabbat lights and, in the uncommon quiet, chanted her prayers. I sensed there was pride and relief that her duty to G-d had been fulfilled for one more week.

Not long after the Chanukah candles cooled, Sarah's preparations began in earnest for Pesach. This involved myriad back-breaking projects, including a thorough housecleaning; *kashering* the indoor and outdoor kitchens; swapping out every day dishes, cutlery and pots and pans for stored kosher-for-Pesach versions that were

scrubbed, sun-dried and placed in the newly-*kashered* kitchen; varnishing all wood furniture; and painting the house, inside and out. All Pesach foods were made from scratch, including wine and grape juice, and huge quantities of rice were cleaned three times.

And then there was *matzah*, or *massa*, as the Kochinites pronounced it. As was custom, the women and children baked *matzah* to supply the entire community for the seven-day festival. There had been great talk and buildup among the community about *Massa Day*. Joining Sarah and the other women, I learned firsthand how grueling the process was, made all the more so by the sweltering, pre-monsoon heat. Eight hours later, our “sweat equity” resulted in every household carting home containers filled to the brim with freshly baked, rounded *matzot*.

“Now that you have made *matzah*,” Sarah told me with authority, “you *know* what is Pesach.”

I know that, as surely as I know how much I owe to Sarah Cohen for all she taught me about Jewish life in Kochi. The intent of my year-long stay in Jew Town was to document the history and transformation of a community. I did that. What I hadn’t expected was to be transformed in the process. Thank you, Sarah. May your memory be a blessing.

Ellen S. Goldberg

¹ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Kochi/sarah-cohens-death-marks-the-end-of-an-era-in-kochi/article29303672.ece>

² <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Kochi/sarah-cohens-death-marks-the-end-of-an-era-in-kochi/article29303672.ece>

³ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Kochi/sarah-cohens-death-marks-the-end-of-an-era-in-kochi/article29303672.ece>

⁴ Barbara Cottle Johnson. “Our Community in Two Worlds: The Cochin Paradesi Jews in India and Israel.” (Ph.D. dissertation, Dept. of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts, 1985)

⁵ Barbara C. Johnson. "Cochin: Jewish Women's Music." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 27 February 2009. Jewish Women's Archive.

⁶ Barbara C. Johnson. "Cochin: Jewish Women's Music." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 27 February 2009. Jewish Women's Archive.

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Formally launched in February 2010, the Middle East Institute, New Delhi seeks to promote the understanding of contemporary Middle East. It is India-based and not India-centric and its main research focus is geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East including, but not limited to, military matters, economy, energy security, political system and institutions, society, culture and religion, and conflicts in the region. The institute also encourages research on burgeoning Asian interest in and engagements with the Middle East. MEI@ND documents bilateral relations amongst the Middle Eastern states and strives to produce updated analysis of the region's changing strategic landscape.

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