

RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCES OF THE BENE ISRAEL: PERSISTENCE AND REFASHIONING OF TRADITION

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Perhaps 45,000 of the some 50,000 Indian Jews now living in Israel, are Bene Israel, originally from Maharastra. They have settled throughout Israel, but particularly in the south in towns such as Beersheva, Dimona, Yerucham and Ofakim, as well as in the center in Lod and Ramleh, and in the north, in some of the suburbs of Haifa. The largest concentration is now in Ashdod, about twenty-five miles south of Tel Aviv. In India, they were considered to be Jews; in Israel, the "land of the Jews," they are Indians. This phenomenon can be applied to other Jewish groups who emigrated from the Diaspora to Israel. The Hebrew term *eda* (community) refers to the country of origin of various segments of the Israeli population; one speaks of the Moroccan, Romanian, Egyptian, Russian or Indian *eda*. The dialectic between preserving the culture of one's country of origin while assimilating into (or creating) Israeli society underlies some of the major political, social and economic tensions in the country. Thus the issue of ethnic identity is at the forefront of this nation composed largely of immigrants. Elsewhere, I have presented an overview of the transformation of Indian identity among the Bene Israel in Israel and have explored the adaptation and identity of second-generation Bene Israel in their new homeland.¹

Religion played an important role in the identity of the Bene Israel in India and their religious life was naturally conditioned by the social and cultural environment in which the community lived. Nathan Katz has pointed to "the role of religion not merely as a template of ethnic identity but as a system of rituals and norms which defined and celebrated the very identities of India's Jews."² Now that they have immigrated to Israel, the Bene Israel, like other Jewish groups, have had to "refashion their native understandings, interests and symbols as they accommodate to their new Israeli circumstances."³ This includes their ritual practices. In this article I discuss some of the religious observances and practices of the Bene Israel in Israel and the concerns and questions they themselves have raised about some of these. I have supplemented published and unpublished primary and secondary sources with responses to questionnaires and extensive informant interviews I administered throughout the 1990s. Through the use of on-going snowball sampling (initial respondents, whose names were given to me by friends in Israel and India, referred me to others who would be interested in

answering the questionnaire and/or being interviewed), I currently have data from approximately two hundred Bene Israel living in Israel. They range in age from seven to eighty-two, and reside all over the country. They include students, teachers, physicians, clerks, kibbutz members, army officers, technicians, shopkeepers, housewives, factory workers, lawyers, social workers, engineers, computer experts, and retirees. I have included some of their stories and responses so that their voices can emerge.

This article argues that the preservation of some of their distinctive Bene Israel patterns of ritual represents a refashioning of ethnic identity in the Israeli context. On the other hand, their desire to drop other traditional customs which might be considered "too Indian" manifests their wish to assimilate to normative Judaism as practiced in Israel.

In the early 1960s, the Bene Israel in Israel went through a very difficult period in which they were questioned by the Chief Rabbinate as to whether or not they had observed *halacha* (Jewish law) in relation to marriages and divorces in India. Directives were issued that if officiating rabbis had any doubt whether Jewish law had been followed by the ancestors of a Bene Israel person who was applying to marry a non-Bene Israel, the Bene Israel would have to undergo a ritual conversion. The situation was extremely painful for the Bene Israel, who saw it as a slur on their community's orthodoxy and even on their "Jewishness" and "purity," an important concept in India.⁴ Government intervention finally affirmed that the Bene Israel were Jews in all respects and had the same rights as all other Jews, including in matters of personal status. This led to the deletion of references to the Bene Israel in the Rabbinate's directives.⁵ The immediate crisis was resolved, but the experience affected their early adjustment, and the memory of the humiliation was implanted in the minds of even the second generation of Bene Israel. Occasionally, the problem reappears.⁶

The issue was particularly devastating for the Bene Israel because most are devout believers, regardless of their degree of outward observance. Many consider themselves religious, or traditional (*Masoreti*) Jews, but not orthodox (*dati*).⁷ They believe, they pray, they say *kiddush* (a blessing over wine) and bless their bread on the Sabbath, and adhere to the laws of *kashrut* (dietary laws) to varying degrees. They are probably less observant than most *Sephardic* or *Mizrachi* (oriental) Jewish communities and certainly less so than Orthodox *Ashkenazis*, but most are more devout than most western Reform or even Conservative Jews. Many Bene Israel feel that the *datis* (the ultra-Orthodox, sometimes referred to as *haredim*) are fanatically religious people who brainwash others, without understanding the values of religion. Bene Israel want their children to retain close ties to religion and not become secular. They donate to the synagogue. One young high school teacher who did not consider herself particularly religious was shocked that so many of her (non-Indian) students were atheists. "How can you be Jewish and not

believe in God?" she asked. Her impression was that it was more the *Ashkenazi* than the *Sephardic* children and she surmised that a lot of *Ashkenazis* had lost their faith in God because of the Holocaust, having lost their families; she could understand that.

Some informants feel that when the Indian Jews first came to Israel they were not guided properly with respect to their religious needs. In the 1950s and even early 1960s, the Jewish Agency sent both *Cochinis* and *Bene Israel* to secular *kibbutzim* (communal settlements), where they discovered that the only ones who were religiously observant there were themselves. No one else was doing very much in the way of saying prayers, lighting candles, keeping *kashrut*, etc.⁸ They were surprised, because they thought that "being in a Jewish state, everyone would be religious, but that was not the case." So gradually some of the Indians stopped being "so religious" and assimilated into the milieu around them. Only if *Bene Israel* children were sent to a religious *kibbutz* could they maintain their observances. But most immigrant children were sent to secular schools.

Bene Israel often compare attitudes toward religion in Israel and India. The religious pluralism in India enabled the *Bene Israel* to live in an environment of mutual tolerance among Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Christians and Jews. One informant stated:

"In India they had such respect. In the villages, the non-Jews would refrain from making noises during Yom Kippur and stop playing music during a religious procession of their own when they passed a synagogue when the Jews were praying. Hindus and Jews would never play music in front of a mosque, even if it was a wedding procession. I will never forget such tolerance and respect. It doesn't exist in Israel."

Degree of Observance

When seventy-two *Bene Israel* respondents were asked if they themselves were more religiously observant in India or Israel, forty percent said more in India, twelve percent said more in Israel, and twenty-eight percent said the same (the percentages do not add up to one-hundred because not all responded to this question on the form). But when asked if members of their community in general were more observant in India or Israel, fifty-three percent said more in India, twenty-two percent said more in Israel, and fourteen percent said the same. For those who said they or other *Bene Israel* were more observant in India, reasons given included the need to assert one's identity and sense of belonging, the fear of assimilation, family or community pressure, the desire to keep the community unified, the fact that India was a more religious country, the authority exercised by the head of the family who saw to it that all observed, and the greater cohesion among Jews in India.

They felt people were less observant in Israel because the community was too spread out, society as a whole was less religious in Israel than in India, life was hard in Israel and there was no time or energy for religion, people resented religious coercion in Israel, and Israel had too much western culture and too many alternatives and life styles. "In Israel you can be Jewish without being religious. This is less true in India," said one informant. Shlomo Deshen and Moshe Shokeid have also observed the difficulties North African Jews faced when they discovered that in the Israeli environment, religion was no longer the main criterion and expression of Jewish life.⁹ One Bene Israel who was highly respected for his knowledge of religion said,

I sent my children to government religious schools from the beginning, but they are still less religious than I am because they live in a secular neighborhood. They started out going to synagogue on Friday nights and Saturday mornings, but then stopped when they realized that their friends were going to parties.

Of those who felt that people were more observant in Israel, the reasons cited included easier access to synagogues and kosher food, living in a Jewish nation in a Jewish environment, better religious education and understanding of Hebrew, pressure to observe, and *Shabbat* (Sabbath) and festivals as public holidays where no work was required. One informant noted:

After living in a state where religion and state were separate...now living in a state where both are one creates a kind of religious coercion not easy to accept. Our children are changing to become more observant. Being in Israel all their lives in completely Jewish surroundings they have never been exposed to cosmopolitan society like us to know any other views.

A very few Bene Israel have become extremely religious in Israel, generally as a result of having been educated in ultra-orthodox schools.

Practices

When seventy respondents were asked which rituals were important to them, fifty-nine mentioned *brit* (circumcision), fifty-four *bar* and *bat mitzvah*, forty-two *Shabbat*, forty *kashrut*, thirty-nine unique customs of Indian Jews and thirty-one attending synagogue.

As in most other communities in Israel, there is a process of secularization. It seems that the older people are more observant than the younger ones. (When seventy-two respondents were asked if they were more religiously observant than their parents, fifteen percent said they were more observant, thirteen percent the same, and sixty-one percent said less so.) Although limited space prevents a discussion of all Bene Israel practices, comments on a few are in order.

Synagogue Attendance

Synagogues, with their primary function as centers of worship, are markers of Jewish identity in the Diaspora; in Israel they have become markers of ethnic identity, particularly among the Eastern communities. Like other communities, the Bene Israel have built their own synagogues so that they can hear the familiar melodies, celebrate certain holidays according to Indian customs, speak in their own language, and maintain their accustomed decorum. Israel has approximately forty Indian synagogues in Israel. Some towns, where there are large concentrations of the community, have three or four. This topic will be taken up in a separate article.

Many people who do not necessarily go to the synagogue nevertheless observe certain practices.

Shabbat (Sabbath)

Even those Bene Israel who were the least observant in India often celebrated the Sabbath in one way or another. For most this generally meant lighting candles (in India it was often oil lamps in glasses) and having a special meal-usually consisting of a mixture of Indian and western style food-with the ritual prayers and hymns, especially on Friday night, but not necessarily on Saturday, and perhaps going to the synagogue. Most Bene Israel will travel and use money (strict Sabbath observers would do neither). Shalva Weil pointed out that during the Yom Kippur war, most of the Bene Israel employees of the Israel Aircraft Industries agreed to work on Saturday.¹⁰ One informant says she doesn't cook on *Shabbat*, but she travels and watches television. One family in Dimona lights candles, does not cook on Saturdays, makes *kiddush*, and reads Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible). Their children say they would continue with candles and *kiddush*. Some young people have discontinued even this, in some cases because their non-Bene Israel spouses (often husbands) "don't believe in it." One young couple does not consider themselves particularly religious or observant but they light the candles, say *kiddush* and have a nice family meal together with their three children to "make it something special to honor *Shabbat*." They see this as being Jewish rather than Indian. Another problem is that on Friday nights, young people want to be with their friends, and not come home for *Shabbat* dinner and *kiddush*.

An informant who claimed that she was not very observant, but did *kiddush* at home and observed *Shabbat*, discussed an incident that occurred when her son was in the army. The usual rabbi couldn't come one *Shabbat* and there was a question of who could say the *kiddush*. The only one who volunteered was her son, and he said it the way it was done at home, in the Indian style. His own commander was surprised and asked, "how do you know that?" The boy replied, "I'm not religious but I know it. I've heard my father say it." The same boy, as a young man living in Australia, was the only one who volunteered to say *kiddush* when the Israelis there came together to celebrate Passover.

Kashrut (dietary laws)

On the whole, most Bene Israel keep some form of *kashrut*. They generally do not eat forbidden foods, do not eat milk and meat together, and may or may not keep separate dishes and cooking utensils for milk and meat. In some cases they just keep separate Passover dishes, particularly the older generation. Like many other Sephardic communities, the Bene Israel consider fish to be a meat product and therefore will not eat dairy at the same meal. In India it was believed that fish and milk together caused some kind of "disorder."¹¹ One woman volunteered,

"In my son's house they mix up all the dishes, but in my own flat, I keep them separate. In my son's house I do it their way, in my house, mine. If my son eats meat at my house, I serve tea without milk rather than coffee with."

Sometimes a young person will marry someone (usually non-Bene Israel) who is strictly observant and not only will the Bene Israel spouse become more observant, but so will his or her parents. The Bene Israel will make the parents observe *kashrut* more strictly than they ordinarily would have, so that the spouse can eat at their house. Guy reported that because of the Bene Israel reputation for *halachic* laxity, the Orthodox Jews who constituted the majority of the population in her Negev development town were unable to eat in Indian homes.¹² Yet, one Bene Israel informant felt that it was important to love your religion, but not to be too fanatical. He was angry that when his sister and her husband came to visit, the husband (a Bene Israel) who was "very *dati*," would not eat in his home, because although his wife "cooks kosher, it's not kosher enough for my sister and her husband. But they were willing to eat in the hotel. They're hypocrites."

Brit (circumcision)

In all communities, Elijah the prophet is invited to the *brit* and honored: his chair is ready. The Bene Israel, along with some other communities, traditionally recited the *Eliahu Ha-navi* prayer after the *brit* and they still do so in Israel. One young woman had an Indian *mohel* (ritual circumciser) for the *brit*, who knew to give the baby wine, honey and milk (in the Indian tradition) when he performed the circumcision (In Israel, *mohels* often have cards spelling out what each community needs). The Bene Israel also sing a special song in Hebrew after the circumcision, in addition to the customary one performed by other Jewish communities.

Head-shaving

It was a Bene Israel custom to shave the head of a newborn boy after forty days and that of a girl after eighty days. Hindus and Muslims in India generally shaved the head too, unless they made a vow that they would keep the hair for three or five years (for example, if they had a boy). The mother is purified on those days.¹³

The younger generation of Bene Israel in Israel sees this as a cultural, not a religious custom. Most women say they would not stay at home forty days, but some will shave the baby's head. Many won't, however, even though the mothers ask if they will and promise a big party after it. "You have a *malida* (see below); the mother gets new clothes and a big portion of the *malida* for her prosperity and fertility. Then there's a big dinner," one grandmother-to-be explained to her daughter. One young wife said "absolutely not" to her mother. Another young woman told her mother when she was pregnant that she would not shave the head of her baby and warned her that if she asked her about it, she would take the baby and her mother would never see it. But in another, large working class family from Haifa, the young people, when they have children, observe this custom. Some will do it even if they prefer not to, just to make the parents happy, because they know they are expecting it. In another case, the baby didn't have much hair anyway and the daughter-in-law was willing to do it, having been told that the hair would grow in thicker afterwards! It is less likely that a Bene Israel husband can persuade his non-Bene Israel wife to perform this ritual.

UNIQUE CUSTOMS

Eliahu Ha-navi or malida ceremony

This is a custom unique to the Bene Israel and reflects their strong belief in the powers of the Prophet Elijah—a Biblical hero honored by Jews, Muslims and Christians—whom the Bene Israel believe will return as a precursor to the Messianic era. The ceremony consists of reciting specific prayers invoking the prophet and blessings, accompanied by the *malida* ritual, an offering to God of certain foods, including a special mixture of rice, coconut, fruits, nuts, cardamom, sugar and rosewater. It is usually followed by a festive meal. Traditionally, an *Eliahu Ha-navi* or *malida* was sponsored by a family as a calendrical or life cycle rite as well as at other times: in the seventh month of the first pregnancy; on the day of purity of a new mother; on the day of removing the hair of the newborn; at the time of a circumcision, bar mitzvah or wedding. It was also done as thanksgiving after recovery from illness or the occurrence of good events, or for the redemption of a vow to perform the offering if a particular goal was achieved. And it was performed on *Tu B'shvat*, the Jewish New Year for trees, a holiday that has a special significance for the Bene Israel as they believe that on that day Elijah appeared to them at Khandala, a village in the Konkan where the footprints of his horse are said to be found.¹⁴ In Israel the Bene Israel commonly perform an *Eliahu Ha-navi* on some of these occasions as well as when moving to a new home or upon the departure to and/or safe return of a soldier from the army. This latter occasion is seen as being similar to the custom in the past whereby people in India would make a *malida* when someone was going on some kind of pilgrimage or leaving

the country and traveling by sea or air, and also when the person returned. As one informant explained,

Malida is the symbol for prosperity. If you wish that good things will happen to your family or that any good occasion or ceremony will pass without troubles or problems, you do a *malida* before it. It can only be held on "auspicious" days according to the Jewish calendar.

Weil points out that this ceremony "remains a religious expression which is nowhere prescribed in the Jewish religion, and yet, which is in no way in contradiction to it." She cites it as "one of the core symbols of Bene Israel identity".¹⁵ It is certainly a key item in the persistence of ethnicity. The Bene Israel point to the Jewish origin of the *Eliahu Ha-navi* ceremony. Some say it symbolizes the *Minchah* (offerings) that Jews used to bring to give the priests at the temple before it was destroyed. Elements in the ceremony are similar to those performed by Hindus (the offering and distribution of *prasada*) and Muslims (offerings at the grave of a saint known as *durgah* or commemorations of dates connected with the Prophet Muhammad in India).¹⁶ Guy has offered an analysis of how this ritual operates as a South Asian cultural strategy for the creation and intensification of the participants' Jewish identity and communal affiliations: she argues that by eating of the food which Elijah has partaken, i.e. absorbing Elijah's substance, the participants in this ritual are imbued with Elijah's nature.¹⁷ In Israel, Bene Israel maintain that their community is different from other communities by stressing their unique relationship to Elijah: only they truly pray for his return as a precursor of the Messiah. He is said to visit Bene Israel homes at the end of the Sabbath and drink the wine left in the *kiddush* cup.¹⁸ Traditionally the communal meal that followed a *malida* ceremony performed at home was omitted if the occasion was a circumcision celebration because the mother was considered unclean and should not be preparing food, but in Israel some Bene Israel couples follow the Israeli custom of holding big catered parties in rented halls, where the food is not cooked by the mother. Also in Israel, if a large number of non-Bene Israel are being invited to a big party for a circumcision, a *bar mitzvah*, or a wedding, the *malida* ceremony might take place separately, in the Indian home, with just Bene Israel present and the larger, mixed, party might be held later in a rented hall, rather than the two being continuous.¹⁹ (This is similar to the practice of other *Mizrachi* [Eastern Jewish] communities in Israel, where a private *henna* ceremony for the family and a larger marriage ceremony are held in separate arenas.) In Israel at the close of the *malida* rite, a collection is taken for the synagogue. Also, on occasions which involve the whole community, such as the celebration of *Tu B'shvat*, the synagogue, rather than a single family, sponsors the rite.²⁰

Guy sees the performance of the *malida* ritual as a means by which the Bene Israel constitute their community as an *eda* (a distinct ethnic community) within the larger Jewish entity:

The oneness and uniqueness of the BI community can no longer be maintained by the traditional conjugal and commensal strategies with which the Bnei Israel differentiated their community as Jews from the Hindu, Christian and Muslim milieu of India.²¹

Now everyone is Jewish. Therefore it is appropriate that they mix in commensally and conjugally with non-Bene Israel. They resent what they see as attempts to restrict this mixing by certain Orthodox Jewish dietary and marital restrictions.

...while the Bnei Israel insist on their Jewishness, nevertheless they view their Jewish community to be different from non-Bnei Israel communities. The need to be both Jewish and Bnei Israel underlies the continuity of the *malida* rite as a compelling and powerful Bnei Israel ritual practice. In the *malida* rite, the Bnei Israel enhance the uniqueness of their community and renew its oneness.²²

Yet, since the ritual is accompanied by prayers and blessings taken from the standard Jewish prayer book of the Sephardic tradition, the prayer book which other communities use in their services and observances, the *malida* rite also makes the Bnei Israel more Jewish, better Jews, Guy argues.²³

When Bene Israel in Israel asked whether it was acceptable to use wheat bread for the *malida* instead of the typical parched rice grain or, in the past, rice bread, N. S. Efraim, a Bene Israel who had made a deep study of Jewish texts, said they should use parched grain, not wheat bread since wheat was offered at the temple in the time of Solomon. He mentioned that when other communities in Israel saw how the ceremony helped the Bene Israel, they wanted to do it too, and sometimes people did it with the help of the Bene Israel.²⁴

Weil sees the flexibility of the purpose of the ceremony as the main reason for its persistence. "*Eliahu Ha-navi*, the complex of religious activity performed in his name, is at once a statement of personal belief and an important boundary-marker reinforcing ethnic distinctiveness in a country where all Jews share the same religion."²⁵

Many young Bene Israel in Israel seem to think that the custom is important and would preserve it. They will often go to their parents' home for the ritual or invite the parents to their home to perform it. Some young women do it with the *henna* ceremony before the marriage and wear saris as well. Since it is necessary to have a *minyan* (quorum) of ten men to perform an *Eliahu Ha-navi*, some young people think that when the generation of their parents passes, it may disappear. Others disagree, saying, "If you're going to have a big celebration for something wouldn't you have twenty people?" Some young Bene Israel say it will all depend on themselves, how much they're willing to carry it on. I asked people if they saw the *Eliahu Ha-navi* as a religious ceremony or just as a cultural one, suggesting that perhaps if

they saw it as part of their Bene Israel cultural heritage, the younger generation might wish to preserve it. The older generation saw the rite mainly as a religious ceremony, but the younger generation sees it as both, and may continue it because their parents did it. Indeed, some young Bene Israel do it only to honor their parents, such as when children are born or when they move into a new home, but would not do it at other times, "although my parents look for occasions on which to do it," one young woman said. In another instance, a rather secular family did it rarely: in one case to give thanks that the family wasn't hurt when they were in a very bad auto accident. Another young woman commented,

My parents did an *Eliahu Ha-navi* when I was pregnant, although I don't believe in all this. They also did it for my brother when he got out of the army and moved into a new house at the same time, so they did one for both occasions at the same time. They do it for the right occasions.

Another couple had a *malida* when they moved into their new house mainly because the wife's parents asked her to.

Some young Indians in Israel who were not too well acquainted with Indian Jewish ceremonies asked about the *malida* when the author was discussing it with their parents, who did not perform it. One mother explained, "It's when you make a vow, or a thanksgiving, like when you come back to Israel after your travels, I'll make one, or when your brother passes his *bagrut* (high school final examination), or goes into the army." Another mother, from Delhi, where the old traditions were observed less than in Bombay and the villages, and who had only performed an *Eliahu Ha-navi* once, also explained it to her son as a "thanksgiving ceremony." Her father had done it once in Israel after the Lebanese War.

Pilgrimages

In India, it was customary for Muslims and Hindus to make pilgrimages to shrines, tombs of pious individuals, mosques and temples. Bene Israel did make pilgrimages to a few sites at times, particularly on the Jewish New Year for Trees, to the village of Khandala, near Alibag, where it was thought that Elijah's chariot had left imprints in the stone, and to the synagogue in the small town of Panvel, which was thought to have special power. They would recite the *Eliahu Ha-navi* prayer and perform a *malida* ceremony there. Muslims and Hindus also considered Khandala a holy spot. Hindus believed that one of their own goddesses appeared there and Muslims thought the prophet Muhammad's chariot was sent there.²⁶ Other than going to Khandala or Panvel, Jews could not participate in this major form of religious expression in India. In Israel, however, pilgrimages to the tombs of holy men also take place, and now many Indians also choose to perform these rituals, which have not been dislodged by the forces of modernity.