



It might have been 2,000 years ago, or maybe even earlier — a handful of Jews stranded on an isolated Indian coast developed into an entire community of Jewish tradition. While over the centuries, the Jews of India have been comprised of several groups, we wanted to uncover the secret of how the Bene Israel around Mumbai managed to cling to a nearly forgotten religion

The Shipwrecked Jews of **Mumbai**

BY Ari Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan
PHOTOS Ari Zivotofsky, Ari Greenspan, Ethan Schuman

Years ago, a rabbi friend from Florida remarked that when a tragedy strikes one of his congregants, they come to him and ask, “Rabbi, what did I do so wrong to deserve this?” But he has yet to have a congregant who, after buying a new Jaguar, comes to him and says, “Rabbi, what did I do so good to deserve this?” The rabbi would have to travel halfway around the world, but in India he would actually find a Jewish community that incorporates a special religious ceremony to thank G-d for all manner of good events.

We were on the outskirts of Mumbai (once known as Bombay), India, on a mission to investigate the remnants of the Bene Israel villages in the region, when we fortuitously bumped into a unique Bene Israel rite known as *malida*, or the “Eliyahu Hanavi ceremony,” a rite in which the community gathers for all sorts of happy occasions in order to give thanks. As often happens on our halachic adventures, we ended up in the right place at the right time.

The one we stumbled upon was being hosted at the Beth El Synagogue in the village of Panvel outside Mumbai, on the occasion of resident Aaron Benjamin purchasing a new car. Who says gratitude is dead today? The 40 or so men and women, gathered separately around a table in the back of the shul and in the vestibule respectively — all progeny of this ancient sect which traces its roots back to antiquity — recited verses in honor of Eliyahu Hanavi and then proceeded to a feast of *malida* (the service is named after this delicacy). *Malida* is a sweet food made of roasted rice or ground bread crumbs mixed with sugar, served

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heaped on a large tray and surrounded by fruits, spices, and flowers.

In Bene Israel tradition, Eliyahu Hanavi is said to have appeared to their ancient ancestors in the village of Khandala in the western coastline region of Konkarn – the traditional place of the group’s origin. There, he is said to have promised the future redemption, and they believe that his ascension to Heaven in a chariot of fire took place at a site of several massive boulders in Khandala. On one of those boulders they even point out markings that are attributed to the wheels of his chariot and the hooves of his horses. Eliyahu’s supposed visit to Khandala took place on the eve of Tu B’Shevat, a holiday that is celebrated with great significance among the Bene Israel. In Israel, instead of the pilgrimage to Khandala, on Tu B’Shevat many of the Bene Israel pay homage at Eliyahu Hanavi’s cave on Mount Carmel in Haifa.

According to the Tanach, of course, Eliyahu ascended to Heaven near the Jordan River, but perhaps his spirit did guide the ancestors of the Bene Israel, protecting their rituals and customs until they’d be found many generations later by mainstream Jews.

The Bene Israel are by far the largest group of Indian Jews today, but their beginnings are shrouded in mystery. According to their tradition, the community traces its origins to 14 Jews (seven men and seven women) who survived a shipwreck near the village of Navgaon about 20 miles south of Bombay. When this happened is not clear: some say they were remnants of the Ten Lost Tribes, others opine that they fled from the Galilee to India in order to avoid the Hellenistic persecutions during the Second Beis Hamikdash, while still others proffer alternate suggestions.

The group claims to have multiplied without marrying out of the fold, and from this internal growth, they eventually dispersed to over 100 villages along India’s

northwest Konkarn coast. But aside from the fact that they remained steadfast in certain Jewish rituals, nothing is known about their history before the 18th century. The first definitive mention of Jews in the Konkarn region was a letter by Danish missionary J.A. Sartorius in 1738. When they were first “discovered” by outside Jews, they still observed some Jewish fundamentals, including bris milah, dietary laws, Shabbos, and a semblance of the Jewish holidays. However, they had no Jewish books, no Torahs, knew no Hebrew, and the only prayer they knew was the Shema, which was recited on every occasion. It’s remarkable how closely this corresponds to what Rambam wrote in a letter to the rabbis of Lunel in 1199, that the Jews of India know nothing of the Torah and halachah except for Shabbos and circumcision. The only Indian community that fits this description was the Bene Israel.

All that changed when a Cochini Jew named David Rahabi stumbled upon them in the mid-1700s. At first he didn’t believe they were Jewish, so he tested them by giving the women assorted fish to cook. When the women singled out the kosher from the nonkosher fish, explaining that they never used fish that had neither fins nor scales, he agreed to teach them.

They built their first shul, Sha’ar Harachamim, in Bombay in 1796. By that time, though, some of the Bene Israel who had made their way to Bombay fell under the influence of Christian missionaries. But the interaction that most impacted them was with the small number of other Cochini Jews who moved to Bombay in the early 1800s, reintroducing the Bene Israel to normative Jewish practices.

Around that time a parallel Jewish community, the Baghdadis, were beginning to prosper in Mumbai. While at first the Baghdadi Jews interacted with the Bene Israel and even buried their dead in the Bene Israel cemetery, by the mid-19th century they had erected an iron curtain between

the two communities and even built a wall down the middle of the cemetery. They opened their own shuls, schools, and old age homes, from which they excluded the Bene Israel. They would not intermarry with them nor count them for a minyan. Today, however, there are very few Baghdadi Jews remaining in the country; soon they will be history and the Bene Israel will carry the living legacy of Judaism in Mumbai. There were an estimated 6,000 Bene Israel in the 1830s, 10,000 at the turn of the 20th century, and in 1948 – their peak in India – they numbered about 20,000, or two-thirds of the Jews in India. Today they number about 4,000 in India and about 30,000 in Israel, where most have emigrated over the last half century.

Jungle Surprises Mumbai, formerly Bombay, is a huge city with over 20 million people, the most populous in India. With its teeming masses, the noise and pollution can overwhelm you; and while it’s the wealthiest of Indian cities, the desperate poverty of the masses juxtaposed with the great wealth of the few is staggering. We arrived late Wednesday night and left immediately after Shabbos, yet due to the pollution, we couldn’t actually see the three stars to signal the end of the day. Thursday morning found us headed for the docks to catch a ferry for the 45-minute excursion down to the Konkarn coast, the place of origin of the Bene Israel.

One of the main goals of our trip was to visit the old shuls in the jungle villages on the Konkarn Coast. These small villages were the original communities of the Marathi-speaking Bene Israel who until the 18th century were concentrated in a small coastal strip just south of Mumbai. But just showing up, as experience has taught us, is not the way to go in order to gain access to the locked shuls and be able to speak to the few remaining Jews. With the help of the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), we set up an entire day with connections in



1.



2.



Mishpacha



3.



4.



1. GRATEFUL FOR THE GOOD In the village of Panvel, in the still-active Beth El synagogue, we stumbled on this *malida* ceremony sponsored by Aaron Benjamin (at the table, right) in honor of his new car

2. ROAD RUNNERS They might look like Hatzolah vehicles, but in the jungle villages outside Mumbai, it’s just about Jewish pride

3. SINGING THE SAME SONG Jacob Dandekar, an aging Bene Israel *chazzan* and the last Jew left in Alibaug (his shul was recently renovated and is visited by tourists), was thrilled that we could join him in the chorus of Lecha Dodi

4. KEEPING THE FIRE GOING The oil lamps of the little shul were draped in cobwebs, but our host, the one remaining Jew in the village of Poinad, lights the *h* every week and keeps a mezuzah on his front door



Built in 1864 by David Sassoon, the Magen David synagogue serviced the Baghdadi Jews who fled to Bombay. Although that community treated the Bene Israel with suspicion, today nearly the entire community is Bene Israel. (Inset) The memorial to the 14 shipwrecked Jews, ancestors of India's ancient *kehillah*



each of the communities. They arranged for Ekta, one of their employees — an educated, non-Jewish young Jain woman who ran the Joint's social programs — to escort us during our 16-hour day and serve as translator and tour guide. We came to find the Jews, but Ekta also gave us a fascinating glimpse into Jainism — an ancient Indian religion based upon nonviolence and loving-kindness toward every living soul. They are absolute vegans and it is against their rules to eat anything that once was alive or that was produced from a living creature. Their vegetarianism is one of the most rigorous spiritual diets in the world, and so concerned are they about harming a living creature, that their religious leaders walk barefoot to lessen the chances of accidentally killing an insect. Ekta explained that their dietary strictures mean no outside food whatsoever is allowed into their restaurants — even if we wanted to get some hot water to stir into our Israeli *manah chamah* instant meal, they wouldn't let it in.

The Joint, by the way, has been very helpful to us in the past and we've run programs for them in a number of countries. They are unsung heroes, helping Jews in distress for the last 100 years. Their most formidable work involved helping and providing for displaced Jews after World Wars I and II, including printing the first complete Shas after World War II for survivors in the DP camps. The Joint is still active today wherever Jews are in need.

Our first stop was the renovated shul in Alibaug, about 100 kilometers (62 miles) from Mumbai. There is one old *chazzan*, the key word for the person who is the most knowledgeable Jew. Jacob Dandekar, in his late 80s, is the last Jew left in the city, although as Alibaug is a coastal town, there are occasional tourists. (The Jews in these scattered villages derived their surnames from the names of the villages by adding the suffix *kar*; Dandekar means from the village of Dande.) He sometimes travels to nearby villages to help with religious ceremonies like bar mitzvahs and funerals. Jacob's wife died a few years ago and today he's all alone, although Ekta keeps an eye on him and the Joint provides some basic medical care. He only speaks Hindi, so communication is challenging, but he

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did become a bit more animated when we asked to see the *mikveh*, and then requested he sing a traditional song for us. He started Lecha Dodi, and although we didn't recognize the melody, when he saw that we knew the words, he became enthused and paused every time he got to the refrain.

The cemetery in Navgaon, not far from Alibaug, has tombstones written in Hindi, Hebrew, and occasionally English as well. There is even a large monument to the original 14 Jews who were shipwrecked there once upon a time. We saw a large outdoor pool that they told us was the *mikveh*. In the nearby Cheoul cemetery, we noticed another phenomenon — many graves of elderly single individuals. Ekta pointed out that part of the problem common to all the Indian Jewish communities was finding Jewish spouses, and thus a high percentage actually remained single to their dying day.

Fingerprints on the Walls One of the biggest surprises was our visit to the village of Revdanda. We arrived at a house in the jungle and saw large Magen Davids that were part of the exterior plaster work. As our host started to walk toward us, we heard "Hatikvah" on his ringtone! Benjamin Waskar, who lives in the village with his wife Shoshana and son Israel, is the last of the traditional Jewish oil pressers. The Bene Israel were commonly known as *shanwar teli*, meaning "Saturday oil pressers," because they would not work on Shabbos. Once in Mumbai the Bene

Israel entered professions, worked with the British administration, and began to move up the socioeconomic ladder.

We were shown the press in an old hut and then our roving eyes spotted a wooden cabinet with some ancient *seforim* and a siddur. Then our host took us into his house and we immediately noticed the traditional Jewish oil lamps on the wall. And there was the Shema, written on a small piece of paper taped on the wall above his TV set. Benjamin showed us a picture of his father and his mother and his "second mother" — his father's other wife. When we asked him about keeping kosher, Benjamin explained that he *shechts* every Thursday for the small community. He proudly went and took out his knives and we were duly impressed after checking them. Here we found a truly devout man, living the way his ancestors had for centuries. His sister and her son, whom we also met, were making aliyah in the next month. Later, when we stopped at his brother's house, out came a young man wearing a *kippah*.

We noticed something else strange on the outside of their doors. There were pieces of paper with handprints on them, taped up on the walls. Benjamin explained that Erev Pesach after they *shecht* sheep for the Seder meal, they have a unique custom: They put their hand in the blood, make a handprint on some paper or the wall itself, and paste it up (leaving it up all year), in remembrance of the plague of the killing of the firstborn.

The Bet El synagogue, originally built in 1842, still gets a minyan in this little village. Sitting on one of the benches was an ornate wooden box containing a stone. Benjamin explained that the stone was used to break the glass at weddings. We speculated whether that custom developed because it would be difficult to break a glass while barefoot. It reminded us that not all communities stomp on the glass; the German Jews, for example, used to



throw the glass at a designated area on the outside of the shul.

There is a working *mikveh*, although the pump used to bring the water needed to be kick-started and without going into more detail, let's just say it was a *mikveh* that most of us would not want to step into — but it's still in use. And of course, our curiosity got the better of us and we asked to see the “junk room.” Sure enough, it was packed with what we thought was interesting stuff, including an old wooden stretcher to carry the body to the cemetery. When Benjamin figured out how much we liked “old junk,” he smiled and led us up a flight of stairs.

He unlocked a big padlock and escorted us into a dimly lit, musty, dusty room. Sure enough, an old beautiful menorah was hanging on the wall and a cabinet held old drawings — some on parchment — and framed items along with some *seforim*. In another cabinet we found a 20-meter-long chain of handmade cloth pennants with a Magen David on each one. They once were hung on a line outdoors during celebrations. Our guess is they were from the days of the beginning of the State of Israel.

Benjamin discussed some of the popular rituals among the Bene Israel. For Tashlich, they would gather by the thousands at specific sites along the Bombay water

front in order to recite the Rosh Hashanah prayer; and they have an interesting practice of eating a particular local bean before Tishah B'Av because of its bitterness.

But India is a country of contrasts. Here we were, in a colorful pink shul, the walls around the compound and the gate festooned with Magen Davids, the houses opposite with niches for mezuzahs — and yet less than 20 feet from the gate is a small shed with an idol, the deity of the locals.

In the city of Pen, a bustling Indian town, we found the market packed with people, even after dark. We fought our way through the *shuk*, and behind a high wall was the shul — another beautiful restored building, with the classic Indian shul lamps and oil globes. Behind the dirty, noisy *shuk* was this oasis of beauty and serenity. Before walking into any shul in India, the custom is to remove one's shoes — a sign of respect in both Hindu and Muslim tradition. And so on our trek through the villages of the Kankon coast, our shoes went on and off as we went from shul to shul.

Who Is a Jew? By the mid-20th century, 200 years of contact with other Jews had brought the Bene Israel into the modern Jewish world, or so it seemed. Because the Bene Israel were essentially Indian in culture, they were slow to

emigrate after Indian independence in 1947, as opposed to the other groups of Cochini and Baghdadi Jews, who soon found their place in Eretz Yisrael. The first group of Bene Israel to make aliyah soon after Israeli independence realized that in religion they were Jewish, but in culture they were Indian, and they begged the Jewish Agency to return them to India. Shortly after, though, almost all regretted their request and were brought back to Israel several years later.

But the bigger problem for the Bene Israel was acceptance of their Jewishness by the chief rabbinate. Throughout the late 19th and early 20th century, the Baghdadi Jews treated the Bene Israel with suspicion, fearful that they had intermarried and not properly followed the laws of marriage and divorce through the generations. It is known that queries about this were sent to the rabbis in Baghdad in 1843, 1869, 1893,

1914, and 1944 — with mixed responses.

In a 1943 responsum, Sephardic chief rabbi Rav Benzion Meir Chai Uziel quoted from the Rambam's letter to the Chachmei Lunel, surmising that the Rambam was unquestionably talking about the Bene Israel. He ruled them to be Jewish and not *mamzerim* (which would be their status if they did not practice halachic marriage and divorce), and instructed that it is a mitzvah to bring them into Klal Yisrael and educate them about Torah. After consulting with Rav Uziel, Ashkenazic chief rabbi Rav Yitzchak Isaac HaLevi Herzog reached the same conclusion. Yet after Rav Herzog's passing in 1959, Sephardic chief rabbi and Baghdad native Rav Yitzchak Nissim again raised the possibility of them being *mamzerim* due to questions about their marriage and divorce practices. But based on the *teshuvos* of Rav Uziel and Rav Herzog, the

Chief Rabbinate decided in 1961 that their policy would be to accept the Bene Israel as full-fledged Jews.

By the late 1960s, they had more or less become accepted as Jews, although periodically the issue reemerged. As recently as 1997 the Petach Tikvah rabbinate initially refused to marry Bene Israel member Orly Solomon until Chief Rabbis Bakshi-Doron and Yisrael Lau ordered them to do so. Today in India, the remaining Baghdadis, Bene Israel, and Cochinis all freely marry each other, although periodically the issue reemerged as many leading *poskim* expressed concern about their halachic status.

Shabbos Guests In the villages and jungles we visited five Bene Israel shuls and two cemeteries. But for the last several generations the center of Bene Israel life has moved to the city, primarily

1. CUTTING EDGE Benjamin Waskar *shechts* fowl every Thursday for Revdanda's small Bene Israel community. We checked his *chalaf* and were impressed

2. FINGERPRINTED These door signs, made with sheep's blood, remind the village Jews of Yetzias Mitzrayim

3. COUNTRY OF CONTRASTS Less than 20 feet away from the shul gate decorated with Magen Davids is an altar for the local *avodah zarah*

4. IN THE PINK We were amazed at how many old shuls dot the villages along the coast. The “pink” synagogue in Revdanda still gets a minyan on Shabbos

to Pune and Mumbai. We thus decided to spend Shabbos in Mumbai and get to know some of the city folk. Fortunately, we had a contact with one of the community leaders, Ralph Gerrard, whom Ari G. knew from Ralph's visit several years ago to Efrat. We decided to stay in the older part of town where the Jewish community used to be centered, and when we asked Ralph about davening and food, he told us not to worry and to just show up at the Knesset Eliyahu shul. We booked a room in an old hotel and were given a fourth-floor room (although we discovered that the elevator only went to the third floor). In our Shabbos best, we showed up on Friday afternoon to a magnificent structure that had been built in 1885 by Jacob Elias Sassoon and his brothers in honor of their father, Eliyahu Sassoon, in the heart of downtown Mumbai. While the greater Mumbai area is still peppered with active Bene Israel shuls, the two biggest shuls, Knesset Eliyahu and Magen David, were once Baghdadi. Today however, the community is almost exclusively Bene Israel.

Friday night davening was followed by an Indian-style Shabbos dinner, in which a wide assortment of guests partook. Shabbos morning davening was followed by the same. But the real treat for us was the vision — it was clear that this community has a future. Ralph's two sons led the davening, acted as *gabbaim*, led *zemiros*, and were veritable hosts to the interesting assortment of out-of-towners. The older of the sons has already made plans to spend the summer in a yeshivah in Har Nof and to continue next year in another Jerusalem yeshivah.

The one last Jewish "tourist site" that we felt compelled to see in Mumbai is not historic in the classic sense, although it's etched into our consciousness for its modern heroism and tragedy. For Shabbos Minchah we davened at the Mumbai Chabad House, where in a 2008 terrorist attack six Jews, including *shluchim*

Rabbi Gavriel and Rivka Holtzberg were murdered. The building has been rebuilt and was reopened in the fall of 2014. In several places in the building, including the *beis medrash*, there are plaques describing the horrific events that took place at the spot. Having heard much about this special couple, davening in their *beis medrash* was especially meaningful.

Still Burning The Chabad House services the thousands of Jewish travelers that make their way to Mumbai, and they'll be coming as long as the Far East holds its mystical spell over young people. But what about the old folks, those who've traced their Indian roots back centuries? We felt the contrast in the tiny village of Poinad. We parked near a fancily decorated horse-drawn carriage belonging to the last Jew in town, and as we opened the door to a squat building, we found a small room with benches on two of the walls and an *aron kodesh* surrounded by some handwritten amulets. Old large glass globe lamps that once held oil were still hanging, draped in cobwebs. Yet there was still a *neir tamid* flickering above the *aron kodesh*. It was probably the smallest shul we have ever seen, able to accommodate little more than a minyan.

Our host was a man in his 20s, the last Jew in the town. His family has gone to Israel but he's chosen to stay. He is married to a non-Jewish woman and has a horse-and-buggy business — used for couples on their wedding day. Yet despite everything, he still comes to this small shul and lights the *neir tamid* every week — and his simple home bears a mezuzah as well. He is quite literally the last man holding the key. His story is in a way symbolic of what has happened to much of Indian Jewry. Despite the fact that his family and community are gone, his practice is minimal, and his Torah knowledge nil, he still feels connected to his past and loves the faith of his fathers, not letting the fire die out. ●