

***Growing Up Jewish in India: Synagogues, Customs, and Communities
from the Bene Israel to the Art of Siona Benjamin***

By Ori Z. Soltes (Editor).

**New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2021
252 pp., ISBN13: 9789389136814**

***Historical Geography of the Bene Israel in Bombay and Konkan:
Their Synagogues and Prayer Halls***

By Shaul Sapir.

**New York: Ktav Publishing House, 2024
256 pp., ISBN13: 9789655986297**

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Five Jewish communities have settled in a historically diverse India: the Bene Israel [Hebrew: Children of Israel]—the largest group—in Mumbai and the Konkan region, the Cochini in Cochin (now Kochi) in South India, Baghdadi in Mumbai and Kolkata, Bene Ephraim in Andhra Pradesh in South India, and the B’nei Menashe in Manipal and Manipur in North East India. These two books present informative, evidence-based, perspectives on various aspects of these communities. *Growing Up Jewish in India: Synagogues, Customs, and Communities from the Bene Israel to the Art of Siona Benjamin*, edited by Ori Z. Soltes, primarily focuses on the material culture of the Bene Israel and their synagogues, ceremonies and ceremonial objects, and customs, while also including a chapter on the Bene Israel artist, Siona Benjamin, along with material on other Jewish communities in India. *Historical Geography of the Bene Israel in Bombay and Konkan: Their Synagogues and Prayer Halls*, by Shaul Sapir, documents historical and geographical aspects of the Bene Israel community which pioneered Jewish settlement in the city of Bombay (now Mumbai).

Professor Soltes currently teaches theology, art history, philosophy, and political history at Georgetown University in Washington, DC. He has also taught across diverse disciplines for many years at other universities, and is the author of numerous books and articles. As well as compiling *Growing Up in India* as editor, he wrote most of the chapters. Chapter 1 takes us from Bene Israel origin stories to the ‘rediscovering’ and reshaping of the community that occurred in the last few centuries, highlighting how, despite overt conversion attempts by missionaries for the better part of a century, the Bene Israel clung tenaciously to their faith. They became isolated from the Jewish world at large and remained so for several centuries, which accounts for their distinctive *minhagim* [Hebrew: customs]; for example, certain strict, Torah-inspired observances of the Sabbath, *kashrut* [Hebrew: dietary laws], and circumcision. Bene Israel synagogues became important centres of religious,



social, and communal life, served by a *chazan* [Hebrew: cantor] who often also served as a *mohel* [Hebrew: ritual circumciser] and *sopher* [Hebrew: Torah scribe]. Several practices, accompanying not only holidays but also life-cycle events, and associated specifically with the Bene Israel, are mentioned—these include the ‘unique’ *malida* ceremony, ‘which accompanies virtually every rite of passage and important occasion and blessings and prayers directed toward the prophet Elijah’, such as, the chanting of the *Eliyahu HaNavi* [Elijah the Prophet] song. Elijah is ‘a uniquely ubiquitous figure within Bene Israel ritual’ (69).

It is noteworthy that many Bene Israel became ‘very proficient’ in Hebrew and English after the Indian Rebellion, or Sepoy Mutiny, of 1857 led to increased access to education, thus ‘exposing the community for the first time to the larger realm of Jewish spirituality and intellect as well as to the larger world of knowledge that was rapidly becoming available through English’; soon after, Bene Israel scholars began publishing translations of classical Hebrew texts, prayer books, rabbinical commentaries, and even sermons available in textual form, into Marathi (61-62). Hebrew learning also became available to the general public: in 1870, India added Hebrew as a second language for national matriculation examinations and higher courses, the only country to do so. A Chair for Hebrew Studies was established at the University of Bombay prior to the creation of the State of Israel, and Hebrew has also been taught at other tertiary institutions, including as a major subject (Hodes 2014).

Detailed architectural descriptions and images of Bene Israel synagogues form the major part of Chapter 1. There are seven Bene Israel synagogues in Mumbai—the first of these, *Sha’ar HaRahamim* [Hebrew: Gate of Mercy], was built in 1796, completely rebuilt in 1860, and renovated in 2009 (74). Among those mentioned on the Konkan coast, approximately 30 miles south of Mumbai and then extending for about 50 miles, are the *Beth-El* [Hebrew: House of the Lord] Synagogue in Revadanda, which was constructed in 1842 and rebuilt in 1876; the *Magen Aboth* [Hebrew: Shield of the Fathers] Synagogue in Alibag, which was built in 1843, rebuilt in 1910 and renovated in 2003 from a sombre ochre to a new, bright pink outer gate embellished with two Stars of David and a *menorah* [Hebrew: candelabra]. A second *Beth-El* Synagogue was founded in 1849 in Panvel, making it one of the oldest along the Konkan coast. In Pen, the *Beth Ha Elohim* [Hebrew: House of the Lord] Synagogue was built in 1861. There are other Bene Israel synagogues: in Pune, east of Mumbai, in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, and a third in New Delhi. A further 11 Bene Israel structures, such as cemeteries, are located down the Konkan coast. The book’s deeply detailed descriptions reference architectural styles across time and cultures, religious philosophies, and the Torah, providing precise references to specific aspects in the photos. A ‘generic relationship’ is observed between the interior configuration of these synagogues and those in other parts of the world. Descriptions of the exteriors

and interiors of the synagogues are vivid and detailed. In the *Sha'ar HaRahamim* Synagogue, for instance, the *aron/hechal* [Hebrew: Holy Ark], in which the Torah scrolls are housed, is located on the opposite wall—the western wall, facing Jerusalem—from where one enters the sanctuary, while the *chazan's bimah/teva* [Hebrew: platform/pulpit] is placed close to the centre of the space (75).

By Soltes's own admission, the volume is intended to be 'a bit idiosyncratic' (35). The three essays that follow the Introduction differ slightly in content and composition; however, they all feature insights and personal accounts of the synagogues and ceremonies of the three largest Jewish communities, those of Mumbai, Kerala, and Kochi. The overarching sentiment conveyed is that Jews lived on the Indian subcontinent over the centuries 'without experiencing anti-Semitism that has been so common in other parts of the world' (38). These chapters are followed by narratives by Siona Benjamin and Soltes, on the personal experience of Siona Benjamin, a Bene Israel from Mumbai who has lived in the US for several years, and her life growing up Jewish in a diverse India and her art that associates with elements of both Indian and Jewish art history. In the epilogue, Soltes suggests that the significant emigration with the vast majority of communities reconstituting themselves in the state of Israel—and with them, the continuing stories of the synagogues—is a distinct direction suggested for the Jewish communities in India.

Shaul Sapir teaches Historical Geography at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel (HUJI). Born in Bombay (Mumbai), Dr Sapir lived in India for the first years of his life. He is the author of *Bombay: Exploring the Jewish Urban Heritage* (Sapir 2013) and *Bombay/Mumbai: City Heritage Walks* (Sapir 2019), and has written on Jewish education in Bombay and the historical geography of Jerusalem. Historical geography is 'the study of the geographies of the past and how the past is represented in geographies of the present' (Wilson 2014). In his new book, Sapir's stated purpose is to fill the gap and 'rekindle the focus' on the historiography of Bombay and Konkan's Bene Israel communities, the villages and towns in which they lived and continue to live today, by tracing as many of their synagogues and prayer halls as possible with the objective of preserving their 'splendid heritage' (8). The first part of Sapir's book sets the historical scene of the city's colonial history focusing on 'the rise of Bombay', its transformation into a 'thriving trading port and commercial centre and into a colonial town of high architectural accomplishment' (29) and its distinctive historical and geographical features, with a description of the seven islands that comprise Mumbai's urban expanse to the city's harbour, 'one of the finest in the world' (*Bombay Gazetteer*, 1831, as quoted in Sapir 2013). Readers must wait until page 38 for the subject of Bene Israel synagogues to be discussed. The villages and towns where the Bene Israel have lived since the late eighteenth century are explored, tracing their prayer halls, synagogues and prominent

sites in two routes of their settlement in India: the coastal area between the Arabian Sea in the west and the Western Ghats [Marathi: mountainous passes] or the ‘Western Route’, and the Sahyadri Mountain Range, in the east or the ‘Eastern Route’. The community erected its first synagogue in Bombay about two millennia after the first members arrived by ship in Navagaon, around 20 miles to the south. Their migration to other parts of Konkan, Bombay, and other areas of the country began during the second half of the eighteenth century. The city of Bombay and its surrounds became the centre of religious and community life for the Bene Israel community and the rest of India’s Jewry on the country’s west coast.

The inclusion of descriptions of the synagogues as a ‘prominent trademark’ of the Jewish community and their identity, catering to the spiritual needs of their congregations and serving as ‘vivacious’ centres of religious and community life, aims to address an inattention to geo-historical features in previous works on the Jews of India. Most synagogues and prayer halls were built in the towns and villages in this region, from the middle of the nineteenth century, and were situated near what was known as the ‘Israil *mohalla*’ [Marathi: neighbourhood]. The original Bene Israel synagogue, *Sha’ar HaRahamim*, is located on Samuel Street in Mumbai. Sapir’s description of the historical locality is replete with pictures and descriptions of trains. Two pages describe the completely rebuilt *Sha’ar HaRahamim* of 1860, with some photos of the interior and exterior; however, the description is not detailed. There is a comment that the new synagogue was built because the older structure was too small and that the name was changed; however, readers are not told *from what* it was changed. The second synagogue, *Sha’are Ratzon* [Hebrew: Gates of Desire] was built approximately half a century after *Sha’ar HaRahamim*, in 1843. Sapir notes it is ‘quite challenging’ to estimate the number of synagogues that remain in Mumbai and Konkan, due to the fact that ‘quite a few’ ceased to exist, while others are in various states of functioning. Professor Jay A. Waronker, author of *The Synagogues of India* (Waronker 2019), offers the slightly firmer estimate of over 40 synagogues standing today. Some of these synagogues remain active houses of prayer, others endure marginally, and the rest have been converted to serve other purposes. It is noteworthy, and indeed a matter of some pride to the wealthy Konkan Bene Israel community, that funds for the building and maintenance of their places of worship came from the income from the vast tracts of land they owned.

The next section focuses on synagogues such as the *Tipheret Israel* [Hebrew: Pride of Israel] Synagogue in Jacob Circle which was constructed at the time of a significant increase of the Bene Israel population in Bombay during the 1870s and 1880s, accompanied by industrial expansion. Despite the community’s existence in India for centuries, there is no historical documentation referring to a ‘Prayer House for conducting communal services’ before this time. Sapir’s descriptions start by characterising 12

elements of a synagogue. Some essential features of Bene Israel synagogues are mentioned, for instance, the absence of images, a separate women's gallery in Orthodox synagogues, the continuous burning of an oil lamp in the space for the *ner tamid* [Hebrew: eternal light] in front of the *hechal*, and a special Chair for the Prophet Elijah on either side of the *hechal*. A detailed description of *Magen Hassidim* [Hebrew: Shield/Defender of the Pious] Synagogue, including its interior layout, an explanation of what a *hechal* is, and the origin of this feature between the destruction of the First and Second Temples, would have benefited from an explanatory note in the preliminary list of synagogue characteristics. Prayers and other religious ceremonies were conducted by a *chazan*, whose services were paid for from congregation funds. The description, such as, the interesting history of the layout and contents of the *Etz Hayim* [Hebrew: Tree of Life] Prayer Hall Synagogue, draws on the research of Professor Waronker (Waronker 2019)—in places more description of the general layout and contents of synagogues would have been useful as a reference point or frame for subsequent descriptions. Other examples are descriptions, photos and extensive details of synagogues in suburban Bombay, such as *Sha'ar Ha'Shamaim* [Hebrew: Gate of Heaven] Synagogue in Thane and prayer halls in Kurla, Parel, and Bandra.

The story of *Rodef Shalom* [Hebrew: Pursuer of Peace, Pursuing Peace], a branch of the progressive Jewish Religious Union (JRU), founded on the initiative of Dr. Jerusha Jacob Jhirad and other dedicated young Bene Israel, is interesting, although the connection between the photos and story is not always clear. Dr. Jhirad, who won the Padma Bhushan, the highest award in India, for her contribution to medicine, exemplifies the contributions made by notable Bene Israel. Other examples are Professor Nissim Ezekiel of the University of Bombay, who dedicated his life's work to Indian poetry in English, and Dr. Elijah Moses, who was a Mayor of Bombay.

Discussion is scattered and sporadic throughout the book. For instance, in the sub-section "The First War of Independence"—a contentious title in itself—, readers would have greatly benefited from knowing how the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 impacted the Bene Israel and the general Indian population, and not only about the festive ball held to mark the transition of control from the East India Company to the British Crown. In the context of this book, the assertion that David Sassoon was the 'head of the Jewish Community' is uncertain, as there is no evidence or record of this claim—readers might assume the statement perhaps refers rather to leadership of the Baghdadi Jewish community.

While the book aims to fill a gap and rekindle an interest in the Bene Israel community and their rich heritage, the flow of the narrative is neither smooth nor seamless, making the knowledge it contains less accessible to the general reader. For instance, sections on the Portuguese and British colonialists and their transition from Calcutta (now Kolkata) to Surat and finally to Bombay are prolonged and convoluted, and readers are left with questions: only a

cursory mention is made of the local population who accepted and supported the Jewish population for centuries without persecution when they first settled in the Raigad and Konkan regions, an immensely significant factor. And, what was the impact on the Bene Israel of the dramatic changes brought by technological developments, such as, the development of communications between the inhabitants of Bombay and the Deccan Plateau, which includes part of Central and most of Southern India; the opening of two main thoroughfares within the city limits in 1838; and the infrastructure of the new railway system?

A further query with this book about the Bene Israel is the amount of attention paid to Baghdadi Jewish landmarks and contributions, including the Baghdadi Sassoon family, proprietors of the largest textile mills in pre-independence India and ‘pioneers of the silk industry’, and their knighthoods and appointments, with images of their mansion in inner city Bombay, fascinating though these may be to some.

In conclusion, while there are parallels in the subject matter of these two books, they approach their subject differently and with different levels of success. Soltes’s distillation of a broad swathe of history into important insights for the topic has a clarity and coherence that carries the reader along with him. The breadth of the historical, cultural, and architectural knowledge contained in this book illuminates its treatment of the synagogue buildings—both text and image. By contrast, Sapir’s goal is big and important, but difficult: recording the very existence of the many synagogues that represent the Bene Israel community in Bombay and its regions over time, for future generations. Although there are inconsistencies in style and at times irrelevant information, there is also some substance. Both books can become a valuable resource for future work.

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