The Jews of India: Their History, Culture, and Music

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Introduction

The lure of the exotic is strong. In the 19th century a wave of exoticism swept through the worlds of Western music and literature. The mythical stories of lands where palm trees grow and blue gods with multiple heads and arms are worshipped were hard to resist. This interest in exotic lands and people continued well into the 20th century. At the same time there was a growing interest in finding out about these exotic lands from a first hand perspective. There were a few surveys of the Jews of India prior to the 1960's, but several of the scholars who decided to study the Jews of India did so during this time when, still riding the wave of exoticism that had grown to incorporate multi-culturalism as well,[1] there was a great deal of interest in non-Western cultures. Joan G. Roland, one of the scholars to take an interest at that time wrote:

> My interest in the Jews of India dates from my first visit to India in 1964, when I was introduced to the Bene Israel of Bombay by Samuel Daniel, a friend from New York who was a member of the community. As I became more aware of the evolving identity of he Jews as a minority group in an imperial setting and some of the intracommunal struggles that were thus engendered, I gradually realized that there were parallels in the situation of the Jews in British India and of those in colonial North Africa.[2]

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[1] Ralph P. Locke, "Exoticism," in *Grove Music Online*, Nov. 6, 2008.
[2] Joan G. Roland, *The Jewish Communities of India: Identity in a Colonial Era*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 4.

Whether the scholars came to India through other research avenues such as Roland's research on North African Jews or through interest in their own culture such as Sara Manasseh, the researchers all found something both unique and universally Jewish about the story of the Jews of India.

The story of the Jews of India is one that has been repeated many times during Jewish history: a small group of Jews makes a life for themselves against a foreign backdrop. Some elements of their story are universal to all communities on earth. They, like all successful immigrants, found a way to fit in to the economic system of their adopted country. They built communities, had children, married, and died. They found ways to entertain themselves and ways to make each special moment have meaning in a uniquely Jewish way. Other elements of their story are unique to their setting. The adopted flourishes from the local cultures make their practice of Judaism individual, but even this adoption of local ritual and flavor may be deemed universal in the history of Judaism in the Diaspora.

If America is the world's melting pot, India is the world's international buffet. Unlike America, complete assimilation is almost impossibility due to the caste system. As of 1997 India's population was approximately 967 million people.[3] Some studies now put that number over the one billion mark. Among this enormous number of people most of the world's religions are represented. Due to the caste system, a hierarchical system based primarily on cleanliness and separation, the religions are kept separate. Perhaps due to this very rigid social structure the different social groups are able to maintain their

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[3] Arjun Adlakha, "Population Trends: India," *International Brief: U.S. Department of Commerce:Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census* IB/97-1, no. April 1997 (1997), 6.

individuality. The Jews benefited from this system in two ways: they were able to hold on to their unique religious practices, and, since they were considered to be on a level with Indians of a high caste, they were left alone to live their lives in privilege.

This study will attempt to lay out the history, culture and music of the Jews of India focusing on pointing out both the unique aspects of these communities that have allowed them to be one of the most curiosity inducing groups in world Jewry, and the aspects that really make them just another community of Jews like Jews all over the world. Conclusions and assumptions about all three communities of Jews have been made based on an examination of the writings of scholars writing about many different aspects of these unique histories and cultures. Other ideas have been garnered through listening to recordings published by both reputable cultural organizations and by the communities themselves. Further flavor has been added to the research process through in-person interviews of members of the communities and those close to them.

I would like to note the following points. Much of the research that is available on the Jews of India is written from a non-Indian perspective. There are certain issues of priorities that are different between Indian chroniclers and Western intellectuals. While history is important to both groups, Western scholarship puts a premium on being able to create a linear timeline of facts. This priority is not necessarily shared by Indian culture. Another challenge of this research is in the musical realm. While Western music values the written score as well as the performance, Indian Jewish music is not a written medium. While these challenges may be hurdles to understanding the Indian Jewish world, they, and many others, are not impossible roadblocks.

The exotic locale may lead one to believe that the Jews of India are something strange and a people to be looked at and studied as something of an anomaly in the history of the world's Jews; this simply is not true. What follows is a look inside the world of three of the communities of Jews that call India home: the Bene Israel, the Cochini Jews, and the Baghdadi Jews. The histories, customs, and music of these three communities serve to show both the universality of being Jewish, no matter where in the world the community has landed, and the uniqueness of these particular groups.

Chapter 1

The History of the Jews of India

There was a shipwreck off the coast of Southwestern India. While not an unusual event, the inhabitants of the ship were unlike any the subcontinent of India had ever encountered before. The seven men and seven women that survived helped to found the new community of Jews that would live and thrive in India for over two thousand years. The veracity of this story is subject to question and is considered to be a myth. These first settlers belonged to the community that called themselves the Bene Israel. They would be joined over the years by two other large groups of Jews that would put down roots in the soil of India and watch those roots take hold and flower.

The first mention of Jews and India probably comes from Megillat Esther.

א וַיְהִי, בִּימֵי אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ: הוּא אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ, הַמֹּלֵךְ מֵהֹדּוּ וְעַד-כּוּשׁ--שֶׁבַע וְעֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה, מְדִינָה.

"It happened in the days of Ahasuerus – that Ahasuerus who reigned over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia."[4] Esther, 1:1. That mention of India in the sacred writings at least implies a familiarity with the region on the part of the writers and possibly on the part of the listener as well. This knowledge of the sub-continent of India indicates both the presence of Jews as possibly traders in the Indian area before the canonization of the Writings and the spread of their information. Famous travelers made

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"Esther," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Mac Zvi Brettler (London: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1626.

other early mentions of Jews in India. As early as 1167 the famous Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela visited the Jews of India and mentioned them in his writings. According to him there were thousands of Israelites on the Malabar Coast, "dark like the other inhabitants."[5] Another explorer that mentioned the Jews of India in his writings was Marco Polo in 1293.[6] The community they met is a matter of debate. It was either the Bene Israel, previously mentioned or the Cochini Jews of the Kerala Coast.

The history of the Jews of India is a rich story of a group of outsiders and refugees that were able to find a home in a new land, and not just live, but thrive. This was made possible by the diversity already present in the native cultural landscape. Indian Jews have never experienced anti-Semitism in the way that Jews all over the world have, and perhaps if there had not been the sheer number of different cultures and religions present in India during the time the Jews settled there, this might not have been the case. The problem of putting forth the history of these communities is made all the more difficult by a different emphasis placed on written histories between the Western world and the Eastern. The history stretches from the days of Solomon's kingdom before the common era to the present day. Over this vast stretch of time stories were created rather then histories so that characters become confused with others and events that happened thousands of years apart seem to have happened within the same week. This history of the three major communities has been pulled together from several different sources and may not be entirely accurate.

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[5] Found in Benjamin J. Israel, *The Jews of India*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Mosaic Books, 1982; reprint, 1998), 13.
[6] Ibid, 11.

Bene Israel

Arguably the largest community is the Bene Israel that has already been mentioned. The community claims that their ancestors derived from the mythical seven couples that survived a shipwreck on the Konkan coast. The origins of these seven couples is said to be "from the North."[7] The community claims that this northern country was, in fact, Israel. Other scholars claim that while the survivors may have initially come from Israel, their immediate origin was either Persia or Yemen. Their date of arrival also varies. While Orpa Slapak, the author of the book on the Jews of India for the Israel Museum, dates their arrival at anywhere between the 8th century B.C.E. and the 6th century C.E. Benjamin J. Israel, on the other hand, writing by request of the Jewish community in India, places the arrival of the Bene Israel at a much more exact date of 175 B.C.E. No matter the exact date, they were there long enough to become a part of the local fabric. They were also away from other Jewish communities long enough to forget much of the particularities involved in day to day Jewish practice. By the time they were "discovered" by other Jewish communities they had retained only a few remnants of the practices that had marked them as Jews and therefore different from their neighbors. The few things they did retain, the recitation of the Sh'ma, abstention of work on the Sabbath, and the separation of certain types of food, all these combined to make it simple for travelers familiar with Jewish ritual to identify them as fellow Jews. Some reports claim that the Sh'ma was known in its entirety, while others claim that it was

[7] Orpa Slapak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 2003), 17.

merely the word "Sh'ma" that was repeated whenever a religious ritual was needed. This last report was attributed to correspondence in 1783 by the Danish Christian missionary J. A. Sartorius.[8] Another report by Moses Maimonides as early as 1199 or 1200 helps to cement the Bene Israel's reputation for maintaining their unique brand of Judaism. He said "The Jews of India know nothing of the Torah and of the laws nothing save the Sabbath and circumcision."[9] How Maimonides, living in Tunisia and Egypt, came by this information is unknown. There were close trade routes established between the west coast of India and Western Asia. Jewish merchants frequently participated in these trading forays and it may be assumed that contact would be made with other Jews, or at least the knowledge of the existence of other Jews would be passed along.

The Bene Israel remained on the Konkan coast from the time of their arrival until their "discovery" by the Cochini Jews from the Malabar Coast. Bene Israel legend says that a visitor, one David Rahabi, first found them sometime around 1000 C.E. and initiated them into the subtleties and rituals of Judaism. The tradition goes on to say that Rahabi chose three young men and trained them to be religious leaders and teachers. These three men are said to be the ancestors of the hereditary Kazis. The Kazis acted as the clergy of the Bene Israel until synagogues were established much later, they were the ones to perform religious rites: marriages, funerals, and the settlement of arguments. There may be some truth to the legend of at least the person of David Rahabi. There was an unpublished history of the Rahabi family of Cochin. A son of Ezekiel Rahabi by the name of David did visit Western India on a commission of the Dutch East India Company. The account of this family also reports that David not only encountered the

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[8] Israel, *The Jews of India*, 13.
[9] Ibid, 26.

Bene Israel during his travels, but that he also stayed and worked among them for a time. The only problem with this story is that the David in the Rahabi family documents did not go around the year 1000 C.E. He went much later. However, whether or not there were two David Rahabis or two visitors and the stories combined in the long memory of the Bene Israel is not the point. Rather, as a long time benefactor of the Bene Israel community, Rebecca Reuben, wrote, "The advent of David Rahabi is a memorable event in the history of the Bene Israel not, as generally supposed, for bringing back to them the religion of their forefather, for that the Bene Israel had never lost, but for breaking that barrier of isolation which for long centuries had prevented all communication with Jews in other parts of the world."[10]

While the Bene Israel claim to be descended from the seven surviving couples from a shipwreck from the north, a vague description at best, there has been some speculation, although nothing conclusive, regarding their actual origins. There has been speculation that the Bene Israel became Jewish when some passing Jewish traders converted them and then left. Other scholars argue that with such a passing introduction to Judaism not even the small amount of dogma and ritual that did make it through the centuries would have. Also, there are distinct physical features that cause some scholars to claim a Middle Eastern origin, perhaps Yemen. There is also the discussion as to whether or not the Bene Israel are actually one of the lost ten tribes. There were stories told to missionaries in Yemen regarding a lost tribe in India. If the Bene Israel really are one of the lost tribes then that would put their arrival in India during the reign of Solomon, around the 10th century B.C.E. before the ten tribes separated themselves from

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[10] Rebecca Reuben, "Religioius Reorganisation," *The Bene Israel Annual and Year Book* (1919-1920), 22.

the other two. There are two main reasons that make identifying the Bene Israel as a lost tribe tempting: A) they have never actually called themselves "Jews." By using the term Bene Israel they do not necessarily claim to be descended from the tribe of Judah. B) They had no knowledge of the fast days that mark the destruction of the Temple, and, still today, there are Bene Israel who do not commemorate Hannukah, although many do since David Rahabi introduced it to them. Scholars continue to argue over this aspect of Bene Israel history.

Throughout their history they have been citizens of their country. They have fought in the Indian armies, they have held political positions, and they have added much to the cultural, intellectual, and financial arenas of India. They worked as oil pressers, teachers, and doctors in the army. As higher education spread to the Bene Israel and opportunities presented themselves they moved into the cities, particularly Bombay, now Mumbai. There they established synagogues and performed rituals in their native language of Marathi. After the establishment of the State of Israel the Bene Israel, despite having a long history and a history of peace and prosperity in India, began to immigrate to Israel. Today they live primarily on kibbutzim or moshavim together.

Cochin Jews

Like the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews now live in Israel on various *moshavim* and *kibbutzim*. They too immigrated to Israel after the establishment of the Jewish homeland. While their current situation and recent history may be similar to the Bene Israel, the

Cochin Jews are quite a distinct cultural group with their own history and their own legends.

There is a legend that the Cochin Jews, like the Bene Israel, were in India during the time of Solomon. They arrived there as traders in gold, ivory, peacock feathers, and other luxuries for which the Trancore area is famous. If they weren't actually residents during the time of Solomon, perhaps these trade routes are the reason they came to the Kerala region after the destruction of the Temple. Their existence and permanence in the region can at least be dated to around 950 C.E. when a copper plate granting the community privileges amounting to that of minor royalty. The plate, presented to community leader Joseph Rabban, gave the Jews the following rights, among other rights: "a cloth spread before the bridegroom in a wedding procession or before the child taken in a procession to the synagogue for his circumcision; a brass lamp with lights around carried on a chain; a silk umbrella or a piece of silk spread on an umbrella made from the fronds of the palm trees; to ride on an elephant; to be carried on a palanquin."[11]

While the copper plates, which can still be seen in Jewtown today, show evidence of a Jewish presence in Kerala by around 950 C.E., there is little concrete evidence of a permanent settlement in the region prior to that. There is also little evidence as to where they were prior to their arrival in India. A commission from the Jews of Amsterdam to inquire into the Jews of Cochin in the year 1685 sent Moses Pereira De Paiva to collect information. According to his report, the Jews migrated to Malabar around 370 CE from Majorca. They claimed that their ancestors had been brought to Majorca as slaves. There was no mention in the report about why they had left Majorca, nor how they all

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[11] Ruby Daniel and Barbara Cottle Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2002), 9.

managed to leave in one large group. They were said to find favor in the eyes of the King Cheran Perumal. According to the legend reported to the deputation from Amsterdam the King granted the city of Cranganore, 30 miles north of Cochin, to Joseph Rabban in perpetuity. The problem with this story is the two conflicting dates. The copper plates recognize the leader of the Jews of Cochin as Joseph Rabban in 950 C.E.. This could be a case of combining different legends into one story using the name Joseph Rabban as a bridge from one story to another. Another explanation is that the "Joseph Rabban" title could be passed down with the position of leadership.

In this same report, community members reported that after the initial arrival in 370 C.E. there was a second group that arrived in 499 C.E. The combined community that was created with these two waves of migration formed the ancestors of the group of Cochini Jews known as the White Jews. The White Jews, or Paradesis (also spelled Paradeshi), draw a distinction between themselves and the Black Jews, also known both in De Paiva's commentary and by modern scholars as Malabarees. The Malabarees are believed by the Paradesis to be descended from a group of twenty-five slaves of a wealthy Paradesi master. According to legend, these slaves were freed after their master taught them Judaism. They were joined by the slaves of other Jewish masters who were freed upon the death of their owners. By 1685, when De Paiva was conducting his research, the Malabarees vastly outnumbered the Paradesi by about 465 families to 25.[12]

The distinctions between the Paradesis and the Malabarees, or the White and Black Cochini Jews, mattered not only to the Cochin Jews, but also to the higher castes of Indian society. Both groups claim to be the original Jewish inhabitants of the Kerala

[12] Israel, *The Jews of India*, 38.

region. The fight between them is only tangentially over arrival dates, however. The question is whether or not the Malabarees were descended from slaves or not. If their ancestors were something other than immigrants, in other words, if they were descended from a caste that would have been considered unclean or even untouchable by Indian society. If that were so then, according to the social conventions of the caste system of India, the Paradesis would have been within their rights to deny the Malabarees access to the their houses of worship, to refuse to dine with the Malabarees, among other things. This is what occurred between the two factions of Cochin Jews. The Paradesis considered the Malabarees to be the "slaves of slaves."[13] The Malabarees, on the other hand, claimed to be the original Jewish inhabitants of the area and claimed that the Paradesis only arrived in the sixteenth century. They claimed that due to economic issues that Paradesis were able to suppress them, but that they were actually the more authentic of the Indian Jews. They claimed that the Paradesis had stolen the copper plates from them and that now they were refusing them access to their synagogues, refusing to marry them, and other such slights.

Whether or not the two groups really came from different waves of immigration is not really the point. Some scholars claim that the Paradesis really only started making a distinction between themselves and the Malabarees with the arrival in India of the Dutch and the English. They wanted to appear more like the wealthy newcomers and less like the more native populations.[14] Whatever the reason for the distinction, the non-Jewish population also took note. It has been noted that while the Brahmin, an elite caste within

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[13] Ibid, 42.

[14] Barbara Cottle Johnson, "Cochin Jews and Kaifeng Jews: Reflections on Caste, Surname, 'Community,' and Conversion," *The Jews of China* 1 (1999), 47.

the Indian societal landscape, will deign to dine with Paradesis during Pesach, they will never eat with the Malabarees.[15]

Anti-Semitism is virtually unknown to the Jews of India. Reasons for this will be explored later. However, that does not mean that fighting was unknown to them as well. The Cochini Jews were involved primarily in a single trade. While the Bene Israel were master oil pressers, the Cochin Jews were masters of the pepper trade. Their proximity to the coast and their contacts with traders meant that they could be extremely successful in this field. Their involvement in this highly lucrative trade, however, engendered many rivals. They were first attacked by Moors in 1524 that wanted a foothold in the pepper export. The defenseless Jews fled to neighboring province. The king there, seeing the economic boon in having these potentially wealthy merchants owe him a favor helped the Jews fend off their Moorish attackers. The next attack came in 1565 in Cranganore. The Portuguese led this time the attack. Following this attack the Jews of Cranganore fled to Cochin proper. After this point, all but a very small number of the Jews of Malabar were concentrated in Cochin. The enmity with the Portuguese, however, continued until the Dutch were eventually successful in ejecting them from the country.[16]

Either due to a mutual antagonism with the Portuguese, or perhaps due to a mutual desire to extend their trading empires, the Paradesis and the Dutch became allies. From 1665 to 1795, the period matching the Dutch predominance in the area, the Paradesis served as the Chief Merchants for the Dutch. They obtained Indian products for the Dutch to sell in Europe, and they also served as mediators between the Dutch and local rulers in the sometimes delicate negotiations that made it possible for the Dutch to

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[15] Israel, *The Jews of India*, 43.
[16] Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin*,18.

do business in India. The Paradesis also made sure that the Dutch chartered the Jewish owned ships, docked in Jewish owned ports, and used other services that were offered by the Jews of the area. Along with negotiating business deals with the Dutch, the Cochin Jews, all of them, were involved in local government. They served as both functionaries and dignitaries of the local government.

The Cochin Jews, like the Bene Israel, also immigrated to Israel after the establishment of the State of Israel. They moved primarily for economic reasons and settled in the southern part of the country on mainly agricultural kibbutzim or *moshavim.*[17]

Baghdadi Jews

Without a doubt, the last arrivals to the Indian Jewish community were the Baghdadi Jews. While there is still, and will likely always be, debate over the order or arrival between the Bene Israel and the Cochinis, there is no such debate over the Baghdadis. As their name suggests, their primary, although not their only, source was from Iraq. The first settler, as opposed to a trader who was more or less transitory, was not from Iraq. Shalom ben Aaron ben Obadiah Ha-Kohen was from Aleppo in Syria. Ha-Kohen started his life in India in Bombay and moved from there to Surat, and finally to Calcutta where he set up a thriving business with a non-Jewish partner from Baghdad. His son-in-law, Moses Duek Cohen, however, is seen as the real founder of the Jewish community in Calcutta. He set up the infrastructure necessary for a religious community.

[17] Ibid, 102.

For three generations he and his descendants served as the religious functionaries of the community. The stream of immigrants from Baghdad moved from Calcutta to Rangoon in Burma, then part of British India, then on to other major centers of trade and business: Hong Kong, Singapore, and Shanghai. These groups of Baghdadi Jews served as a family network of traders and merchants who became outrageously wealthy and helped the British become so as well.[18]

The Baghdadi community was initially centered in Surat. From there some of the Baghdadis moved to Bombay and then to Calcutta. The first major leader of the community was a wealthy merchant by the name of Soliman ben Jacob Soliman. However, it wasn't until the arrival of David Sassoon in 1832 that the Baghdadi community's business connections really began to flourish. Initially, their business was in the import/export area, but their ties with the British, brought from Baghdad, helped them soon find other areas of interest.

There were stark differences between the Baghdadis who settled in Bombay and those who settled in Calcutta. In Calcutta, the Baghdadis found themselves to be the only settled Jews. Therefore, they had to provide their own synagogues, cemeteries, and other public services. In Bombay, the Baghdadis encountered the Bene Israel. For a while, the Baghdadis worshipped with the Bene Israel, although they must have seemed quite alien to the Baghdadis, and buried their dead in the Bene Israel cemetery. This changed after David Sassoon built a synagogue first in Byculla, the section of Bombay where the Baghdadis lived, and later at the Fort south of town. The Baghdadis also petitioned the Bombay Government to build a separation wall in the shared cemetery citing that they

[18] Israel, *The Jews of India*, 49.

were Arab Jews with separate customs from the Bene Israel. Their request was refused and they still share this cemetery with the Bene Israel.[19]

Perhaps because the Baghdadis were so successful in business that many of them became some of the wealthiest families in their areas, Jewish or not, they were able, as a group, to spend a great deal of effort and money on the infrastructure of their community. In comparison to the Bene Israel and the Cochinis, they were much more concerned with education, comfort, and leisure, than mere survival. The value they placed on these ideas may also have been something they brought with them from their country of origin. A great emphasis was placed on helping the poor of their community. In fact, poor Jews in Baghdad were tempted to move to India simply to benefit from the generosity of rich families such as the Sassoons, Ezras, Davids, and Eliases. In Bombay David Sassoon founded a school for the free education of the Baghdadi children. This school only went through the middle school level and was soon supplemented by a high school built by Sir Jacob Sassoon. These schools were not meant for the education of the wealthy Baghdadi children. They went to school with the English students, although they paid twice the tuition. The free schools initially did not allow Bene Israel kids, but in later years these students as well were taken in and given an excellent education. Baghdadi graduates were expected to continue their educations at universities in England. The educational facilities in Bombay are still there and functioning. The Sir Jacob Sassoon High School is the only school in Bombay that offers courses in Hebrew as a second language. [20]

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[19] Slapak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities*, 42.
[20] Pearl Sofaer, *Baghdad to Bombay: In the Kitchens of My Cousins* (Eastbound, WA: Paper Jam Publishing, 2008), 57.

The Baghdadis' relationship with the other Indian Jews, particularly the Bene Israel, was highly influenced by the English ideas regarding race and superiority. The fact that the Baghdadis came to India after the English had already established themselves as the ruling class, and the fact that the Baghdadis already had business associations meant that they were already aware of the British attitudes toward the "natives." These prejudices combined with the unique nature of the Bene Israel's religious expression, even at that late point in history, meant that the Baghdadis were not highly inclined to think of the Bene Israel, or any native Jews, as their equals.[21]

Their stories are different and their places in Indian society are different, but they are all Indian Jews. The varying histories of all three communities simply add to the multi-layered collage of Indian society. With all the differences it might be assumed that they have very little in common. However, none of these communities of Jews have ever experienced the kind of anti-semitism that has plagued almost all other communities of Jews. All three communities also made themselves a vital part of the economic and social landscape of India while managing to practice Judaism in their own unique way. While many of them have moved to other parts of the world they are still intensely proud of their special heritage as both Jews and Indians.

[21] Israel, *The Jews of India,* 54.

Chapter 2

The Culture of the Jews of India

Culture is hard to define. *Webster's Universal College Dictionary* defines culture as:

> The customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group; also the characteristic features of everyday existence (as diversions or a way of life) shared by people in a place or time as in popular culture or southern culture; the set of shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices that characterizes an institution or organization; the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic.[22]

While this may seem to be a nice academic definition, it does not do justice to the importance of culture. In a society that forced different groups to remain separate due to the caste system individual culture became important as a distinguishing characteristic. So while the dictionary defines culture as a series of traits and values, in the context of this discussion it is also the way those traits and values are projected through food, dress, ritual, dance, and any number of other means that a community uses to define itself.

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[22] "Culture," in *Webster's Universal College Dicitonary* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1997), 198.

The Jews of India display unique cultural traits among world Jewry. According to Nathan Katz, one of the preeminent scholars on the Jews of India, "Jews have lived in three general types of environments: hostile, friendly-but-assimilating, and friendly-and-not-assimilating."[23] The hostile environment, according to Katz, is the most common experience exemplified by the culture that European Christendom created for much of history. While not quite as violent, many majority Muslim cultures have kept Jews in the inferior and despised position of *dhimmi*, a protected minority. In these kinds of environments, whether violent or not, Jewish solidarity was ensured by the hatred and hostility of their hosts. The second type of host culture, the "friendly-but-assimilating," is exemplified by China. Jews lived in several cities in the Middle Kingdom for approximately 1000 years experiencing neither persecution nor discrimination based on their practice of Judaism. Chinese courts were based on a meritocracy, and advancement was made possible through civil service examinations based on Confucian classical writings. Success depended on a high level of acculturation.[24] While there was no mandate for the Jews to choose Chinese teachings over Jewish texts they became assimilated to the point where they were unrecognizable from any of the other inhabitants of the area. Spain during the Golden Age would be an example of a different kind of "friendly-but-assimilating" host culture. While the Jews were allowed to participate in all activities, they were still allowed to be Jewish. Unlike the Chinese Jews, they did not have to become more Spanish than Jewish. The Spanish Jews fall into a category between those that were forced to assimilate and those that were not allowed to

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[23] Nathan and Goldberg Katz, Ellen S., *Kashrut, Caste, and Kabbalah: The Religious Life of the Jews of Cochin* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributers, 2005),134.
[24] Johnson, "Cochin Jews and Kaifeng Jews: Reflections on Caste, Surname, 'Community,' and Conversion,"16.

assimilate. It could be said that America, especially today, offers a similar environment. Despite periods of anti-Semitism America has been largely welcoming of Jews. However, success for the American Jew is defined by American standards: fulfillment of the "American dream," accumulation of money to live a comfortable life, the ability to provide a higher social standard for the next generation, without the addition of Jewish elements and priorities: religious knowledge and continued study, and synagogue involvement. The third type of environment is the "friendly-and-not-assimilating." Some Eastern European Jews and many Jews in Arab lands found their hosts to be welcoming and not insitant that the Jews convert or assimilate. However, this welcoming and open attitude was put to the test, and, at some point in their histories, anti-Semitism caused the welcome mat to be taken off the porch. The Jews of India are the only community of Jews that found a host community that never tainted the relationship with hate.

The particularly unique idea that the Jews encountered in India was the caste system. The caste system describes the social stratification of society based on hereditary groups called *jatis* or castes.[25] Historically there was no overarching religious or national culture for immigrants to assimilate into. Because of this rigorously enforced social structure assimilation was not possible for the newly arrived Jews in India. Strictly speaking, all non-Hindus are considered Untouchable. However, this has not always been enforced and there has been an unstated but important difference between those considered Untouchable and those considered untouchable by reason of not being

[25] "India," in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (London: Encyclopedia Britannica Online, 2008), 45.

Hindu.[26] "Hindu 'tolerance' (a term which does not do justice to the actual experience of Jews in India) is the antithesis of the modern meaning of the term. It does not posit either a universal culture, a universal religion or a universal human nature to which all must conform."[27] The caste system is strictly hierarchical with the Brahmins on top and the Untouchables on the bottom. This system has been challenged and changed by modernity; however, the caste system plays an important role in the history and culture of the Jews of India. As has been stated before, the Jews of Cochin were granted high privileges as befits a community of high status. The Bene Israel were also considered to be high in the caste system primarily due to their separation of certain foods. The Baghdadi Jews were a different case. Since they arrived already associated with the British the resident Indian population generally put them in the same category as the English. This meant that they had no real place in the caste system.[28]

The extent to which they adopted Indian culture into their own is a mirror reflecting the extent to which the different communities became Indianized. The Jews of India had their own calendar of holidays and rituals associated with them. There were also rituals and traditions associated with Jewish life cycle events. While the Jews who traveled to and settled in India carried these traditions with them, they also encountered the rich traditions of India.

> The many customs and ceremonies of Indian Jewry were rooted in part in Jewish tradition, in part in local Hindu and/or Muslim tradition, and sometimes represented a combination of the two. Usually, borrowed ceremonies were

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[26] Ibid, 45.
[27] Katz, *Kashrut, Caste, and Kabbalah: The Religious Life of the Jews of Cochin*, 136.
[28] Sofaer, *Baghdad to Bombay: In the Kitchens of My Cousins*, 57.

> invested with a new, Jewish religious content. Life cycle events and ceremonies were usually celebrated publicly, and the entire community spirit and solidarity typical of all three Indian Jewish communities.[29]

The Indian community, made up of many different cultures and customs proved to be alluring to the Jews of India.

House and Home

Some of the simplest ways to discover the level of cross-cultural influence is to look at the daily life before the ritual life. Although, it must be stated that there is no quantifiable way to measure this influence, food, dress, and home maintenance of the Bene Israel and the Cochin Jews were all highly influenced by the surrounding traditions. The Bene Israel, having lived a life isolated from the Jews of the world had little access to knowledge of how to have a "Jewish" home. For generations they lived an agricultural lifestyle in scattered towns and rural areas. Their homes were built of the same materials and in the same style as the homes of their neighbors with the exception of a mezuzah. Some Bene Israel homes added a Star of David either painted next to the door or carved out of wood or stone. During the celebration of *Pesach* they would mark the facades of their homes with handprints made by dipping their hands into lamb's blood. On Shavuot they would decorate the exterior of their homes with stalks from the first rice harvest hung over the doorpost to ensure blessing and prosperity. This custom became common among other residents of the area showing that the Jews of the area had influence on their

[29] Slapak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities*,143.

neighbors as their neighbors had influence over them.[30] Like their Hindu and Muslim neighbors the Bene Israel home consisted of very little furniture as most activities (eating, sleeping, and household chores) took place while the practitioner was sitting or squatting on the floor. In most homes, in the central living area there was an area reserved for ritual items. This sort of personal shrine was an area to house a small oil lamp for Shabbat, family photographs, and occasionally pictures of biblical figures or modern Zionist leaders[31]Moshe Dayan was particularly popular.[32] Most of these personal shrine areas contained a picture or at least a reference to the prophet Elijah. The importance of Elijah will be discussed later on. While the idea for these shrines came from the Hindu culture, the components were uniquely Jewish. Food was prepared was prepared in similar ways to the methods used by their Indian neighbors and utilized the same general ingredients. Food was prepared from what was available. However, the Bene Israel did distinguish between clean and unclean food.

The Cochin Jews also borrowed recipes and food preparation methods from their neighbors. Their level of kashrut was distinctly higher than that of the Bene Israel.[33] The homes of the Cochin Jews were also very similar to those of their neighbors. They also kept very little furniture as most activities were performed on the floor. This was the coolest place in the house. The outsides of Cochini homes were also distinguished by the addition of a mezuzah and a distinctive oil lamp that harkened back to the one hung on the synagogue.

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[30] Ibid, 99.
[31] Ibid, 100.
[32] Carmit Delman, *Burnt Bread and Chutney: Growing up between Cultures - a Memoir of an Indian Jewish Girl* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002),78.
[33] Claudia Roden, *The Book of Jewish Food: An Odyssey from Samarkand to New York* (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 1996),365-370.

> At the gates of all the Jewish courtyards, a hollowed stone is inserted into the wall as a height of approximately two cubits, and on the eve of every New Moon, Sabbath, and holiday it is kindled with oil, lighting the entire street as brightly as midday. On the gate at the synagogue courtyard and at the courtyard of the esteemed Rabbi Isaac Hallegua of blessed memory, oil is kindled every night at the second hour to illuminate the road for the students returning home from their Torah studies.[34]

The houses themselves were generally two story homes marking their high caste status. The doors of the houses were painted turquoise and pink and ocher. The bottom floors were used for their spice trade and the second floor was used as the living quarters.

The Cochin Jews mainly lived on "Jew Street." This name was not a derogatory name but simply a statement of who lived on this particular street. Other names for these streets and areas in other towns were Jew Town, Synagogue Street, and other iterations on this theme. The central building of Jew Town was the Synagogue, and the entire area was delineated by columns to make obvious the boundary to Jew Town past which non-Jews may not pass during Shabbat and holidays. These areas can still be found today, although there are very few Jews left in any of the areas known still as Jew Town.[35]

Clothing

The dress of both communities of Indian Jews was influenced by the customs around them and still managed to remain unique. The different castes had to be

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[34] Slapak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities*, 111.
[35] Ibid, 115.

recognizable by sight lest someone from a higher caste touch someone from a lower caste that would have made them unclean. Sometimes skin color or other physical characteristics made this possible; other times the distinction in rank was marked by clothing and accessories.

> The Jews of India were never subject to prohibitions or limitations in matters of attire. Thus, like the rest of the population, the Bene Israel chose their clothing according to their needs and means. Then men's clothing testified to the economic status, their rural or urban location, and at times to their occupation. Aside from the skullcaps, beards, and short sidelocks (which became less common in time), their dress was not really an indication of their Jewishness. Moreover, whereas the women's clothing shows little evidence of Western influence, the men's attire has gone through so many stylistic changes since the beginning of the nineteenth century that even members of the community are hard-pressed to reconstruct the traditional costume.[36]

The Bene Israel men's costume changes mirror the costume changes that most of the men, particularly those of the higher castes, went through. The women's costumes of the Bene Israel, as indicated by Orpa Slapak, did not go through the same kind of changes. They dressed, and still dress today, primarily in the traditional sari. The sari is a length of fabric measuring six to nine meters in length and one meter in width wrapped around the body in different manners depending on the activity being done by the wearer. The sari was designed for practicality and comfort.[37] Like the other Indian women around them, the saris worn by the Bene Israel women were generally simple and designed for

[36] Ibid, 119.
[37] "India," 45.

everyday work. The colors of the saris worn for special occasions were highly influenced by the colors that were deemed special by the larger population in the area. The one aspect of their attire that identified them as Jews within their mixed community was their jewelry. "Bene Israel women wore heavy silver anklets (*paynjan*) on their feet, glass, silver, or gold bangles on their wrists, and chains around their necks. They also wore silver and gold rings set with pearls or colored stones (*natha* or *chamki*) in their noses as well as earrings and temple adornments."[38] While the nose rings were eventually discarded or made smaller due to Western influence, the bangles are still a part of the Bene Israel costume today.

The dress of the Cochini men followed the same trends as the Bene Israel. The women modernized later than the Bene Israel women, and continued to go bare-breasted, their traditional style, until around the eighteenth century when Western travelers and merchants began to be offended and the women began to cover up nominally with either a loose piece of fabric draped over one breast or a draped as a loose bodice. The Cochini women did wear a sari but they also had other traditionally Indian costumes that were worn as well. They wore a *podava*, a wrap skirt covering the legs down to the ankles usually made of a checkered fabric a little over one and half meters in length and one meter wide. This was traditionally clasped using a silver chain of variously shaped links. While the Bene Israel women wore saris of a particular color only for special occasions (red for weddings, white for the High Holidays and Shabbat), the Cochini women a saris of a specific pattern on a daily basis. The fabric was in a check design much like a Scottish plaid. Different colors were worn by different ranks of individuals for different

[38] Slapak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities*, 123.

occasions. This preoccupation with color and occasion was most likely adopted from the local custom. On Simchat Torah, at weddings, and circumcisions it was customary to wear a fabric made up of yellow, red, and orange checks. Purple and blue was also acceptable. White was worn on Yom Kippur, Hoshana Rabbah, and at one's own wedding. The introduction of white into the Bene Israel wardrobe is attributed to Western influence. However, the Cochini Jews have used this color for most of their history.[39] Therefore it may be concluded that the Cochinis brought this tradition with them from their point of origin: Green was worn for Sukkot; red and white checks were saved for Rosh Hashanah; on special Shabbatot synagogue attire included white garments edged with silver and gold embroidery. On ordinary Shabbatot the women wore checks of no particular color with white shirts, and on days of mourning they wore a combination of white and black. The closer the wearer was to the deceased the greater the amount of black in their outfit.[40]

Religious Rites

After the basics of life: food, shelter, and clothing, are taken care of a society may focus on creating aspects that distinguish that society from the others. For the Jews of India, seeing to the basics of life meant that they could concentrate on being Jews in their own unique manner. Many of the holidays celebrated are the same ones that are celebrated and commemorated by Jews around the world. The manner in which they are celebrated however showcases the kind of ritual sharing that was able to take place in a

[39] Johnson, *Ruby of Cochin*,27.
[40] Slapak, ed., *The Jews of India: A Story of Three Communities*, 129.

setting of tolerance and welcoming. There are rituals that have been developed by the Jews of India that are completely unique to this community.

The Cochini Jews marriage ceremony was highly influenced by the superstitions and beliefs of Near Eastern philosophy. A Jewish wedding in the Bene Israel community or the Baghdadi community is a long affair lasting for days. The Cochini Jews, however, win the prize for the longest wedding celebration: three weeks. While mimicking the length and elaborateness of the surrounding culture, the Cochini Jews varied the rituals to begin on Shabbat. The rituals of the traditional Jewish wedding ceremony are broken up to occur on subsequent days rather than occurring consecutively. The names of the rites associated with the Cochini wedding were still the Hebrew names, although some of the traditions associated with each phase were somewhat different. For example, on Sunday during the wedding rites the ceremony known as *kinyan*, acquisition, or *harei* is conducted. While this ceremony is used to validate the engagement agreement it was also marked by a local custom of eating a meal of fish and the groom's manufacturing of a ring of silver and gold for his future bride.

Before most holidays and all lifecycle events the Bene Israel practice a ritual unique among Jews, a *malida*. The blessings recited during the *malida* include praises of thanksgiving to God for granting fertility, health, and prosperity. There are also prayers addressed to the prophet Elijah. Elijah the prophet was highly thought of by both the Bene Israel and the Cochini Jews put Elijah figures most prominently in the folklore and religious life of the Bene Israel. He is featured significantly in their foundational myth.

> The Children of Israel fled their land in the second century BCE, it is told, their ship was wrecked and only seven men and seven women were washed ashore near the village of Navagon. It was Elijah who revived the survivors. To this day, members of the community point out his footprints in a rock on the shore. In the village of Khandala, south of Bombay, one is shown a rock with the hoof prints of Elijah's horse – evidence of his ascent to the heavens, which traditionally too place on the fifteenth of Shevat.[41]

The Bene Israel still celebrate this day as a holiday. This story and the subsequent shrine making out of the places where Elijah was said to have walked is quite similar to what occurred within both Muslim and Hindu tradition. There are shrines all over the subcontinent marking where influential prophets and leaders walked and performed miracles. This seems to be another example of the sharing of ideas and sharing ways of making those beliefs tangible.

The *malida* ceremony itself is a highly ritualized meal that takes place around the *malida* plate. There are five fruits that are placed on the plate along with roasted gains of rice mixed with raisins, almonds, coconut flakes, pistachios, sugar, cardamom, and nutmeg. The five fruits are placed on the rice with a twig of myrtle and basil or a fragrant flower placed in the center. Other foods are also served including chicken livers and goat meat is also served as substitutes for the sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. Incense, a custom borrowed from Indian neighbors, is burned throughout the house at which the *malida* is taking place. The ceremony would typically be held in the celebrant's home in the case of a lifecycle event, or at the home of a wealthy member of the community in the

[41] Ibid, 145.

case of a holiday observance. The *malida* was almost never practiced in the synagogue as this was considered a home ritual. The fruits, after being blessed, are wrapped in white scarves or other pieces of material and presented to the celebrant or host. Those present, which would typically include the entire local community and any guests, would share the remainder of the food.

Some scholars postulate that the name *malida* comes form Persian and comes from the Muslim custom of leaving a sweet offering at the grave of a saint. In this Muslim ritual the foods were also distributed to the participants at the conclusion of the ritual. Other scholars believe that while the name may have been co-opted through contact with the local Muslim population, the ritual itself may be traced back to Temple rituals as described in the Torah. This theory, however, has a problem. When the Bene Israel were "rediscovered" they were said to have retained very little ritual practice. Why maintain this practice and lose so many others? Another explanation, and the one most commonly accepted, is that the *malida* mirrors a Hindu ritual in which an offering of food, called *parasadam*, is offered to the god being honored and then distributed to the worshippers. The arrangement of the fruits on the *malida* plate clearly indicates Hindu influence.[42]

The ceremony itself is a partnership between food and liturgy. With the entire community gathered at the *malida* home each person is given a smaller, personal version of the *malida* plate. The ceremony begins with a *pizmon* entitled "Eliahyoo Hanabee." This important hymn is sung at the beginning of the ceremony and it is repeated again towards the middle of the ceremony. The chant invites Elijah the Prophet into the home

[42] Romiel Daniel, 2008.

and into the festivities. After the first singing of "Eliyahoo Hanabee" the rice on the plates is eaten. Whoever is taking the role of chazzan, there were very few official chazzanim among the Bene Israel, and then recited six verses form Genesis and eleven verses from Deuteronomy. "Eliyahoo Hanabee" is repeated at this time. This time the hymn is sung in a call and response manner. The chazzan or the host would then make two blessings: one over the banana, the fruit of the tree, and the other over date, the fruit of the earth. The ceremony ends with the recitation of Psalm 121. The food is then consumed with it's own ritual.[43]

[43] Shalva Weil, *India's Jewish Heritage: Ritual, Art, and Lifecycle* (Mumbai: Marg Publications, 2002), 52.

Chapter 3

The Music of the Jews of India

The music of the Jews of India, as many other groups, can be divided into two categories: music for liturgical purposes and music that is not for use is the religious arena. The music in the second category may use liturgical or para-liturgical texts but what separates it from the categorization is its purpose. While all three communities share these categories, the non-liturgical music shares characteristics with the communities that surround them. For example, the non-liturgical music of the Cochin Jews more closely resembles the music of other communities living on the Kerala Coast than the music of the Baghdadi Jews.

The similarities of the liturgical music between the Bene Israel and the Cochin Jews are most likely due to the close contact and history that the two communities share. After the Bene Israel were "discovered" by the Cochin Jews and instructed in the rituals and vocabulary of Judaism, the Cochin community continued to provide the Bene Israel with cantors for many generations after that. With that level of cultural interaction, it is only natural to assume that the musical tradition of the Bene Israel was highly influenced by the Cochini traditions. With that said, the other challenge to discussing the music of the Jews of India is that most of the studies of their music have been done since their

arrival in Israel. While both the Bene Israel and the Cochini Jews have managed to stay fairly segregated from the Israeli mainstream culture with respect to custom and practice, there has been some influence. Indeed, the difficulty in discussing the music of any of the Jewish communities is the lens through which it is viewed.

The Music of the Bene Israel

The religious life of the Bene Israel is centered on the synagogue. Initially, religious rituals were conducted in the homes. Synagogues were not built by the Bene Israel until they moved into the major cities after the British came to India. Religious services and lifecycle rituals were held in a private home owned by a member of the community. However, as community members moved out of their rural homes and into the cities, the synagogue grew in importance as a community center as well as a center for religious practice. The synagogue in Bombay is set up in the manner of most Sephardic synagogues with the bimah in the center of the room and the men sitting around the bimah. This set up either echoes their pre-migratory practice, or it mirrors the tradition of the Porteguese that came into contact with them. The women's gallery is located behind he raised platform of the bimah so that whoever is standing on the bimah is standing with their back to the women and facing the ark. Music in the synagogue, following the influence of the Cochini tradition, is provided by two unpaid community members that act as cantors. These men, women are not permitted in this role, are responsible for the transmission of traditional practice to the community through educating both the children of the community and through continuing education for the

adults. It is believed that the musical tradition sung and taught by these volunteers is unchanged from that which was sung by their predecessors. This tradition can be "dated" to the arrival of David Rahabi and the subsequent education provided by the Cochin community. As stated in a previous chapter, however, this interaction between the Bene Israel and the Cochin Jews is very hard to date. Due to this fact, the community regards their melodies as unique to their community and history.[44]

In general, the music of the Bene Israel is designed for community participation. Short repetitive melody lines with a limited vocal range are characteristic of their style. A call and response style is also common. Prayer books came late to the Bene Israel, really not until the 19th century, therefore the call and response style helped the congregation participate in the service without the aid of written prayers. Similar to other musical systems of the area, the music of the Bene Israel is modal in nature. Rita Moscovich claims that the principle of melodic type underlies a modal and she quotes Karl Signell's definition of a melodic type: "I regard melodic type as containing two components: first, a recognized succession of intervals forms a scale, and second, there exists a system of stereotyped motives and phrases."[45] The Bene Israel musical system meets these requirements. While there is little evidence that the early Bene Israel had any musical education their music is based on a fixed scale. Even today, there is very little music written down and that small amount can mainly be attributed to researchers from outside of the Bene Israel community. Most of the communities music is vocal music sung either in a synagogue setting or in home rituals that are religious gatherings as well.

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[44] Rinat Krut Moskovich, "The Role of Music in the Liturgy of Emigrant Jews from Bombay: The Morning Prayer of the Three Festivals," *Asian Music* 17, no. 2 (1986),88.
[45] Ibid, 93.

While there may have been folk music traditional to the community, there has been very few recordings or mention of this genre of music in the research. Unlike in music from the Eastern European Jews that produced names for the different modes, the Bene Israel have different modes but not separate names for the distinct modes. Please see Appendix 1 for examples of the modes Moskovich identified. The Bene Israel have a strong tradition of chanted music and melodies for communal singing. Music in their community seems to be primarily used to convey prayer text or traditional stories rather than for performance for the sake of creating beautiful performance. If the former assumption is correct based on available music and research then it comes as no surprise that their music is characterized by short vocal phrases that closely follows the style of natural speech. Also, as the music is meant to be a communal activity, it is logical that their music is punctuated by a call and response style with a minimal vocal range, usually no more than an interval of a fifth.[46] An example of a communal song, "*Adon Olam*," may be seen in Appendix 2. Note the use of a repetitive tune and a small vocal range. These musical features made it easy for community members to join in the singing of this song.

Rina Moskovich made a study of the Bene Israel's music specifically for the three festivals. Her research revealed several qualities of the music for these occasions. While her findings are not unique to the music of the Bene Israel or even to the music of India, they do show some of the similarities between the music of the Bene Israel and the music of both the surrounding communities and Jews all over the world. The following is a

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[46] Dr. Sara Manasseh, "The Musical Tradition of the Bene Israel of Bombay," in *Eliyahoo Hanabee: The Musical Tradition of the Bene Israel of Bombay*, ed. Yuval Shaked (Tel Aviv: Beth Hatefusoth Records, 1996), 13.

summary of Moskovich's findings. The nusach, for lack of a correlating word in the Bene Israel vocabulary, is very similar to the purpose of traditional Ashkenazic nusach in that serves as a musical calendar. Different modes and motives can be used to distinguish time of year, day, and section of the service. The motives that make up the longer phrases can be identified as either standard or complex. This distinction seems to be determined by the complexity of the melodic line involved. Musical sections begin with a standard motive. This is followed either by a series of standard internal motives or a complex internal motive. A phrase typically ends with a complex cadential motive. Lengthening of a phrase may be accomplished by the repetition of either a standard or a complex motive. While Moskovich does not elaborate, it would seem that using a standard motive to elongate a phrase would result in lengthening a phrase for the purpose of accommodating a longer textual phrase. Alternately, using a complex motive to elongate a phrase results in a more ornate phrase that emphasizes specific words central to the text being sung. An example of this style of music may be found in Appendix 3. This Shabat Kiddush sung by the Bene Israel of Toronto is believed by that community to be identical to that sung in India. You can see the use of several different kinds of motives. There are both standard motives to move the chant along and there are complex cadential motives used to end phrases

Moskovich identifies two styles of singing within the festival music she studied: straight singing and singing with melody. Whether or not these are her terms or terms that belong to the Bene Israel musical vocabulary is unknown. She explains that the two styles are similar in vocal production, the configuration of their musical phrases, and their motivic structure. The differences between the two styles "result from the consistent

augmentation in the singing with melody type of every musical component in the straight singing type."[47] The other main difference between the two styles is in the use of the mode. In the straight singing style there are approximately eight tones in the mode and their widest gap between notes is an interval of a sixth. In singing with melody there can be up to eleven notes in the modes and the largest gap between notes may be up to a tenth.[48]

The non-religious music of the Bene Israel is primarily in Marathi, the regional language of Maharashtra. These songs are heavily influenced by the Muslim and Hindu neighbors of the Bene Israel in form and content. Marathi folk songs include translated texts of Hebrew prayers and writings, hymns from the Jewish tradition as well as other traditions, stories of biblical figures and figures from Indian history and myth, and texts for lifecycle events. The instruments, which are used only in the accompaniment of music outside of the synagogue, are borrowed from their Hindu and Muslim neighbors. These instruments include the harmonium, a simple keyboard instrument attached to a bellows, the sitar, a long necked fretted lute, the violin, the bulbul tarang, translated as the caprice of the nightingale this instrument is a plucked board zither with a mechanized keyboard, and the table, an asymmetrical pair of tuned drums.[49]

The Music of the Jews of Cochin

[47] Moskovich, "The Role of Music in the Liturgy of Emigrant Jews from Bombay: The Morning Prayer of the Three Festivals," 103.
[48] Ibid, 104.
[49] Manasseh, "The Musical Tradition of the Bene Israel of Bombay," 13.

As stated before, the Bene Israel religious and musical traditions were heavily influenced by the Cochini traditions. The Cochini traditions of cantillation and prayer song were adopted into the Bene Israel tradition and then adapted by the Bene Israel into something unique. The Cochini music however was also adapted from a previous tradition. Although scholars argue about the origins of the Bene Israel their music may aid in solving the mystery. Johanna Spector, one of the preeminent ethnomusicologists to study the Cochin Jews, studied the cantillation of the Cochin Jews. Spector believed that cantillation might have remained less influenced by other musical sources than other aspects of this Cochini musical tradition. She notes several aspects of the Cochini cantillation:

> The overall impression is European Sephardic, descendent from the Spanish tradition. There are however several curious motifs from the Yemenite cantillation. It is the more remarkable since Yemenite cantillation does not resemble any other cantillation in the world. Not even the direction (high and low) of the motifs is the same. It seems that there was no direct transmission of cantillation from Israel of antiquity to Yemen...It is therefore significant that Cochin cantillation should have neumes, namely Rabia and Zakef closely resembling the Sof Pasuq of the Yemenites. There are also resemblances with Kurdish cantillation, which bear the oldest elements of all Babylonian cantillation. Since the centre of diffusion in the recent centuries as mentioned above has been traced to Baghdad, the Kurdish element must be an older heritage pre-dating Baghdad.[50]

[50] Johanna Spector, "Shingli Tunes of the Cochin Jews," *Asian Music* 3, no. 2 (1972), 35.

What is unclear in Spector's analysis is whether these elements came into Cochini cantillation because these were the traditions of the original immigrants or through contact with other Jews. Spector also comments that there might be an influence on the cantillation from local Kerala music. She credits the Kerala influence with the softness of the vocal line and the relaxed style of singing.

The label of prayer songs of the Cochini Jews really encompasses two types of songs: the traditional Hebrew prayers and the unique Shingli tunes. The Shingli tunes take their name from the original area of Cochini settlement, Cranganore. The Shingli tunes are Malayalam translations of Hebrew prayers that are used in a liturgical setting, although they are considered somewhat secondary in liturgical importance. The Shingli tunes are relegated to the second days of holidays and festivals while the Hebrew texts and the tunes that accompany them are saved for the first days of celebrations. The community considers the Hebrew texts and their tunes to be older, possibly originating in ancient Israel, and therefore of greater importance.[51]

The style of vocal lines also distinguishes the Hebrew songs from the Shingli tunes. The Hebrew songs tend to be of a more call and response style as they were designed for use in communal prayer. The range of the vocal line also tends to be limited to aid in the participation of the congregation. The songs also very rarely change mode or key during a single song. These songs are led by a hazzan during the performance of a prayer service or by a host when these prayers are presented during a home service. The most important element of the music is the rhythm. Spector points out that the rhythms

[51] Ibid, 37.

are quite reminiscent of the Yemenite rhythms.[52] The Shingli tunes, by comparison, tend to be more melismatic and less participatory than the Hebrew songs. While the Hebrew songs showcase the rhythm of the Yemenite tradition, the Shingli tunes showcase the melismatic aspects. These similarities to Yemenite music, like the similarities between Cochini cantillation and Yemenite cantillation, could result from either the inheritance of an original tradition or from contact with other Jewish traders combined with the influence of Hindu and Muslim neighbors. These similarities might also be the result of coincidence or an as yet undiscovered cause.

Aside from the Hebrew melodies and Shingli tunes, both used in prayer services, the Cochin Jews had a long tradition of songs in the local colloquial language of Malayalam. "Though historically Malayalam is an offspring of Tamil, already in the 14th century its morphology and phonology were clearly distinctive enough in literature to afford a separate linguistic entity."[53] The Malayalam language is prone to hybridization. Orpa Slapak is currently working on identifying a strain of Malayalam that is uniquely Jewish to compliment the already identified strains of Arabic-Malayalam and other hybrids. Malayalam songs were folk songs primarily sung outside of a synagogue setting. They were traditionally sung by women with no accompaniment other then handclapping or, on rare occasions, small drums. Most often the songs were sung by a group of women either from the same family or sometimes all the women of a town. Since many of the songs were sung at community events, weddings, funerals and the like, the practice sessions were a unique communal event as well. The songs themselves were written down in notebooks that would be consulted during these practice sessions to

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[52] Ibid, 38.
[53] Slapak, Orpa. Malayalam Folksongs. Jerusalem: Hebrew University, In Press, 8.

ascertain which version was correct. When a bride went to a new town she would take a copy of these songs from her village with her to her new home thus sharing the songs from village to village.[54] Some of the same stylistic characteristics are borrowed from the Hebrew songs of the Cochin Jews. The small vocal range and the call and response style were popular as many of these songs traveled widely and these techniques made them easy to learn and share in a social setting. Please see Appendix 4 for an example.

The Music of the Baghdadi Jews

The Baghdadi Jews are unique among the Jews of India. While they adapted local customs into their own in order to relate to their neighbors and therefore do business, they did not allow a great deal of cross-cultural influence into their ritual lives. Their synagogue music was imported directly from Iraq. Their religious music included both liturgical and para-liturgical texts. The latter group of texts is primarily made up *piyyutim,* songs and poetry inspired by the liturgy. Synagogue music was acappella due to prohibitions against instruments on Shabbat. Instruments such as the *dumbek*, *qanun*, *oud*, *riqq*, and *nay* were added for communal events performed outside of the synagogue such as weddings and family celebrations. While the vocal music of the Bene Israel and Cochin Jews was primarily for communal purposes and therefore contained a limited range both in tessitura and difficulty, the Baghdadi tradition encompassed both communal singing and a cantorial tradition with more melismatic and difficult repertoire.

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[54] Barbara Cottle Johnson, "The Kerala Jews and Their Songs," in *Oh Lovely Parrot*, ed. Barbara Cottle Johnson (Jerusalem: The Jewish Music Research Centre, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2004), 14.

The music itself used two important Arabic aspects: the adaptation of popular Arabic songs and the use of the *maqam* or mode.

> In the psalms and *piyyutim*, Arab music's cornerstone, *maqam*, determined the melodic and rhythmic performance style. From the *maqam* all Arabic music was created. In the Middle East, the Iraqi *nagham*, the Iranian *dastgah*, the Egyptian *naghmah*, the Syrian *wasle*, the Turkish *fasil* and the North African *tba* function along the same standards as the *maqam*. The adaptation of the *maqam* to Jewish music demonstrated how the popularity of a musical device could reach many people. The musical compositional form of the *maqam* has its own set of rules.[55]

While folk songs are an important part of the Iraqi Jewish tradition, this aspect of their musical tradition did not translate in the written music of the Baghdadi Indian Jews. They primarily passed down their religious music. The one exception is a small number of songs written about the pilgrimages that Jews would make to holy sites much like their Muslim neighbors would make to their holy sites and the graves of important saints and martyrs. Please see the Appendix 5 for an example.

The Baghdad Jewish community is one of the oldest outside of the land of Israel. Consequently the community prides itself on maintaining one of the oldest musical traditions. They claim to be able to trace their music back to the music sung before the Diaspora. While this claim has not been extensively challenged, the religious music of the Iraqi Jews has also been heavily influenced by Arabic musical styles. The religious music is also linked to the folk music of the Iraqi Jews in both style and structure. The religious music is based on the Arabic *maqamat* described previously in the same manner

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[55] Ami Yares, "The Evolving Tradition of Contemporary Iraqi Jewish Music" (Rutgers, The State University), 25.

that Ashkenzic religious music is based on the modes that scholars have identified.[56] Examples of the style and rhythms typical in Iraqi Jewish may be seen in Appendix 6.

Today the music of the Jews of India lives on in the new locales where they live. In Toronto and Israel the music of the Bene Israel continues to be sung as it was on the Malabar Coast. The same is true for the music of Jews of Cochin on their *moshavim* in southern Israel. The Baghdadi tunes are still sung around the world wherever they set up shop: in Los Angeles, Australia, Hong Kong, and London. The music of the Baghdadi Jews is also available to the world through Rahel Musleah's book of published music from her community. The repertoire of Indian Jewish music offers new options for synagogue musicians looking for melodies to enhance their musical repertoires while still keeping traditional melodies in the synagogue. These melodies also offer a way to teach about world Jewry in a new and interactive way.

[56] Dr. Sara Manasseh, "Jewish Music, Secular, Oriental Communities," in *The New Grove Dicitonary of Music*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London, New York: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980), 1967.

Conclusion

The tale of the Jews of India has received very little attention from the rest of the Jewish world. The stories of the Jews of Europe and America are much more present in most of our minds as these histories represent the majority of our family histories. Other communities of exotic Jews received attention following rescue efforts, such as the Jews of Ethiopia. The Jews of India, however, have remained on the fringes of Jewish scholarship and on the edge of Jewish acquaintance. One of the fascinating aspects of the story of the Jews on India is that they managed to remain unknown and unstudied for so long. The universal Jewish tale of survival is also theirs. The unique aspects of their story are the exotic locale and the foreign spice that the Indian subcontinent lends.

The history, culture, and music of the Jews of India are, however, not singular. The Jews of India are made up of three separate and distinct communities each with their own history, culture, and music. The distinctions may seem small but to the communities themselves they are critical. The differences make them unique even from each other and add immeasurably to the richness of the tapestry that is world Jewry. These three communities each offer a window into a special corner of the Jewish world, one that may look different from ours, but that is still Jewish.

The differences between communities of Jews are what keep them apart, but the similarities are what connect us to each other. The communities of the Jews of India show through exceptional histories, rituals, and music that they are both connected to and unique in the wider Jewish world. This study outlines the aspects of Indian Jewry that

are exclusive. Not only the differences between the Jews of India and the rest of the Jewish world have been highlighted, but also the similarities. This study was partly inspired by Nathan Katz's standards from his book on the study of Jewish-Indian identity. He states his case thusly:

> This book is about at least two subjects. First, it is descriptive and ethnographic. It describes the beliefs and attitudes, the rituals and histories, which conditioned the identities of three distinct communities of Indian Jews. Second, it is analytical and there reflexive; it adheres to the standard scholarship which insists that in studying the "other" we learn about ourselves.[57]

How much more can we learn about the "other" when we are studying an "other" that is one of us?

In America we have to ask the question are we American Jews or Jewish Americans. In India that question isn't asked due to the caste system. Jews there can be equally Jewish and Indian since one is a nationality and the other is seen as a place within the society that the caste system creates. The, perhaps unintended, result of this system is not just a sense of dual identity free of the need for prioritization, but also an almost complete absence of anti-Semitism. This lack of hate for Jews left the communities of India free to practice their religions in an atmosphere full of outside influences. However, the caste system insulated these rituals from being too diluted by assimilation. Their place in the caste system forced them to stay Jews even if assimilation and conversion had been desired.

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[57] Nathan Katz, *Studies of Indian Jewish Identity* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers and Distributors, 1995), 1.

All aspects of their lives were therefore kept unique. While the rites and rituals associated with the religious lives of the Jews of India may have been influenced by those of their neighbors, but because the Jews and their neighbors were in differing castes their rituals could not have been the same. At the very least there was different access to materials and privileges. The music sung at both social and religious functions also shows the influence of other styles of music. Following the establishment of the State of Israel and other world events the majority of the Indian Jewish community, from all three communities, moved. The Bene Israel community moved to Israel and to Canada. The Cochin community went to *moshavim* in the south of Israel, and the Baghdadi community moved to other places where they had set up trading posts: Australia, America and Hong Kong among others. With these moves the caste system no longer protected from assimilation by the caste system. However, the Jews of India have preserved their traditions by continuing to live in closely-knit communities. The move to new parts of the world has raised interest in the world of the Indian Jews.

The Indian Jewish Congregation of the USA helps to foster Indian Jewish identity by being a part of both the wider Jewish community and the wider Indian community. Services in the Indian style are offered monthly, as well as holiday observances and special events. The community tries to incorporate as many traditions from all three communities as possible as there are members of all three communities living in America. The Indian Jewish community has also welcomed scholars such as Dr. Barbara Johnson, Dr. Shalva Weil, and Dr. Sara Manasseh, herself a member of the Baghdadi community, into their midst in order to study and document this little known tradition.[58]

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[58] Daniel.

The story of the Jews of India continues to add spice to the bigger story of world Jewry. They occupy a unique place in the continuing conversation of how to be a stranger in a strange land. Their history, culture, and music provide new ways to answer the questions of "What does a Jew look like?" "What does Jewish music sound like?" and, "What is the story of the Jews." By looking at them and seeing how they answer these riddles, we get to take a very different peek at our own world.

The tale that is eventually told by all three communities of Indian Jews is one of adaptation, resourcefulness, and continuity. The Bene Israel and the Cochin Jews went from being shipwrecked refugees to full citizens of their adopted land. The Baghdadi Jews went from being the new neighbors in town to being some of the wealthiest and most influential businessmen in the British Raj. All three communities took their local resources and found ways to incorporate them into their Jewish lives. From the Jews of India we see a focused picture of the universally Jewish ability to not only survive as strangers in a strange land, but thrive.

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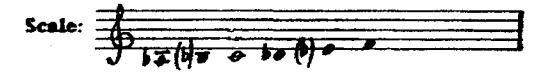
Appendix 1

The following examples are Dr. Rinat Moskovich's identifications of the modes and styles used in the Bene Israel music for the Three Festivals. They show the scales the make up the modes upon which the Bene Israel melodies are comprised.[59]

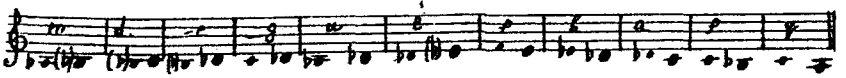
[59] Rinat Krut Moskovich, "The Role of Music in the Liturgy of Emigrant Jews from Bombay: The Morning Prayer of the Three Festivals," *Asian Music* 17, no. 2 (1986).

Example 4: **Mode I, First Form, "straight singing":**

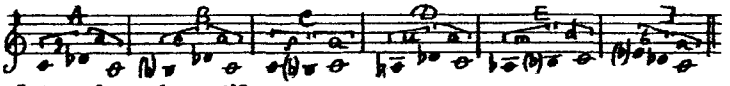
Scale:



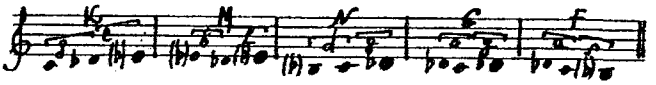
Standard motifs in an ascending and descending order:



Cadential complex motifs:

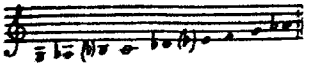


Internal complex motifs:

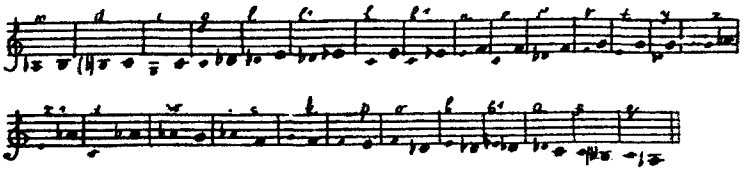


Example 5: **Mode I, Second Form, "singing with melody"**

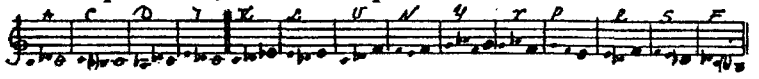
Scale:



Standard motifs:

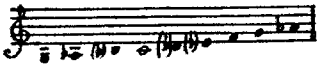


Cadential complex motifs; Internal complex motifs:

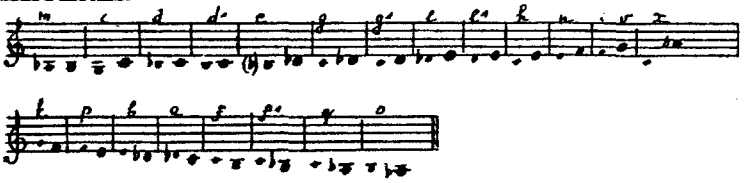


Mode I, Third Form, "singing with melody"

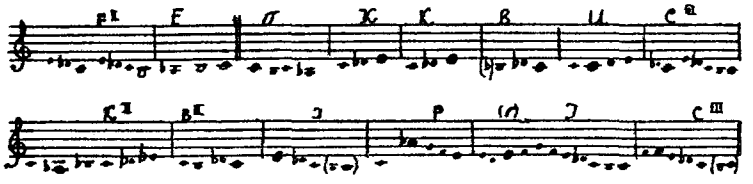
Scale:



Standard motifs:

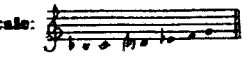


Cadential complex motifs; Internal complex motifs:



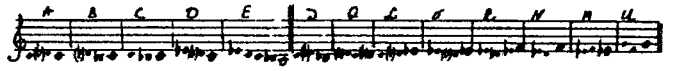
Example 5 (cont.): **Mode II, "straight singing"**

Scale:



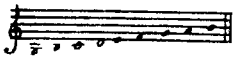
Standard motifs:

Cadential complex motifs; Internal complex motifs:

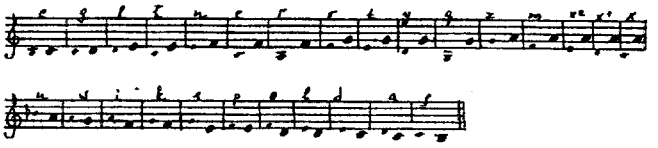


Mode III, "singing with melody"

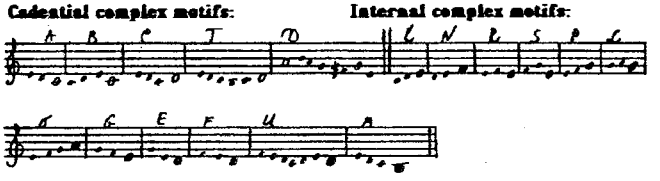
Scale:



Standard motifs:

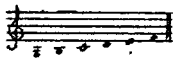


Cadential complex motifs: **Internal complex motifs:**

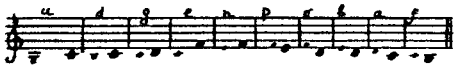


Mode IV, "singing with melody"

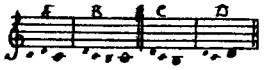
Scale:



Example 5 (cont.): **Mode IV, Standard motifs:**

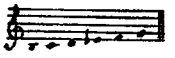


Cadential and internal complex motifs:

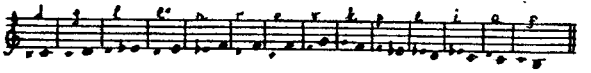


Mode V, "singing with melody"

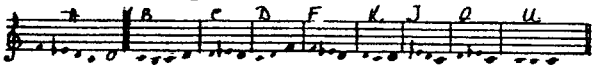
Scale:



Standard motifs:

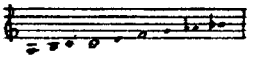


Cadential and internal complex motifs:

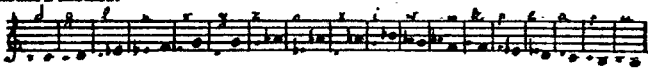


Mode VI, "singing with melody"

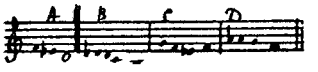
Scale:



Standard motifs:

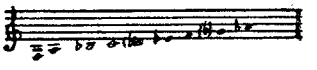


Cadential and internal complex motifs:

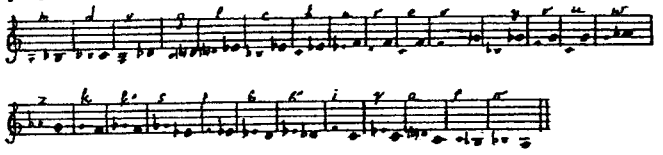


Mode VII, "singing with melody"

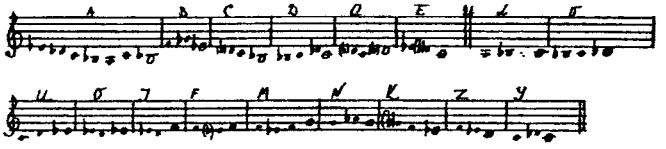
Scale:



Example 5 (cont.): **Mode VII, standard motifs:**

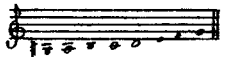


Cadential complex motifs: **Internal complex motifs:**

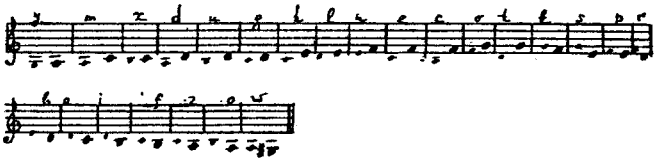


Mode VIII, "singing with melody"

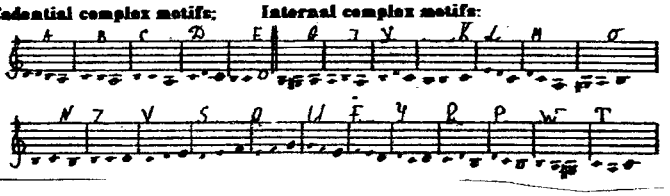
Scale:



Standard motifs:



Cadential complex motifs: **Internal complex motifs:**



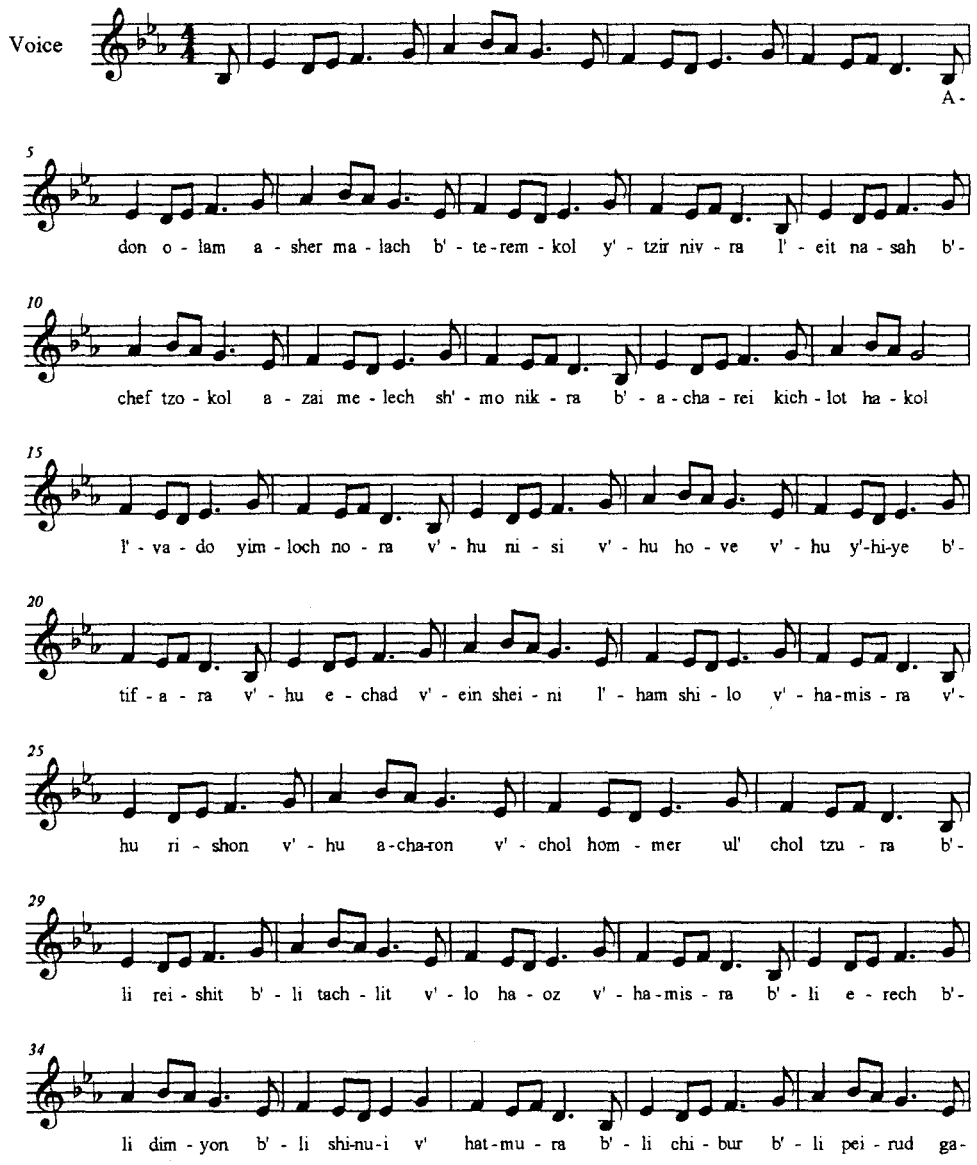
Appendix 2

The following piece is an example of a communal song sung by the Bene Israel Jews. It was transcribed from a recording put out by the Museum of the Diaspora. The recording itself uses modern instrumentation to accompany traditional pieces. Please make note of the repetitive nature of the melody. This technique allowed for everyone to participate without the need for printed music.[60]

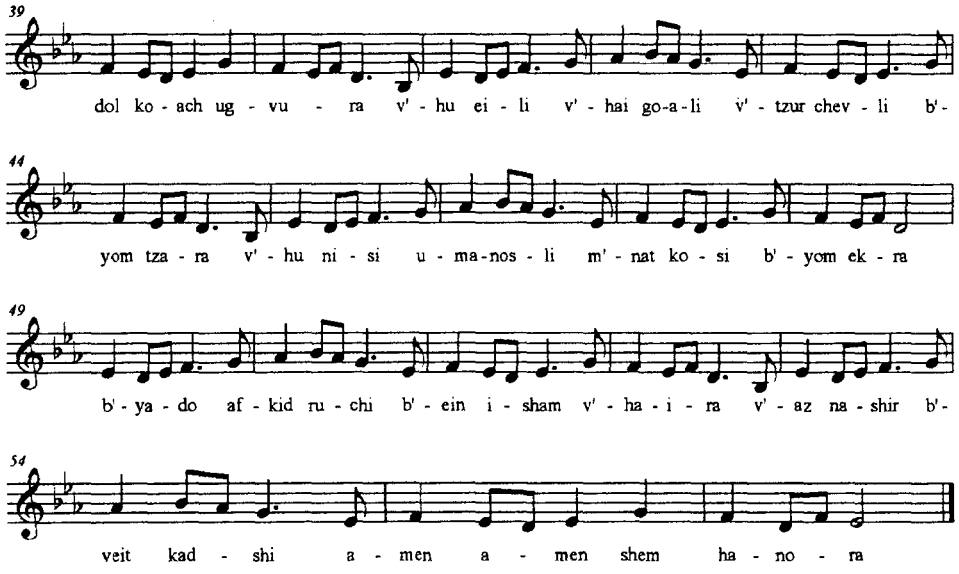
[60] Dr. Sara Manasseh, "The Musical Tradition of the Bene Israel of Bombay," in *Eliyahoo Hanabee: The Musical Tradition of the Bene Israel of Bombay*, ed. Yuval Shaked (Tel Aviv: Beth Hatefusoth Records, 1996).

Adon Olam

traditional Bene Israel melody



Adon Olam


39
dol ko - ach ug - vu - ra v' - hu ei - li v' - hai go-a-li v' - tzur chev - li b' -
44
yom tza - ra v' - hu ni - si u - ma-nos - li m' - nat ko - si b' - yom ek - ra
49
b' - ya - do af - kid ru - chi b' - ein i - sham v' - ha - i - ra v' - az na - shir b' -
54
veit kad - shi a - men a - men shem ha - no - ra

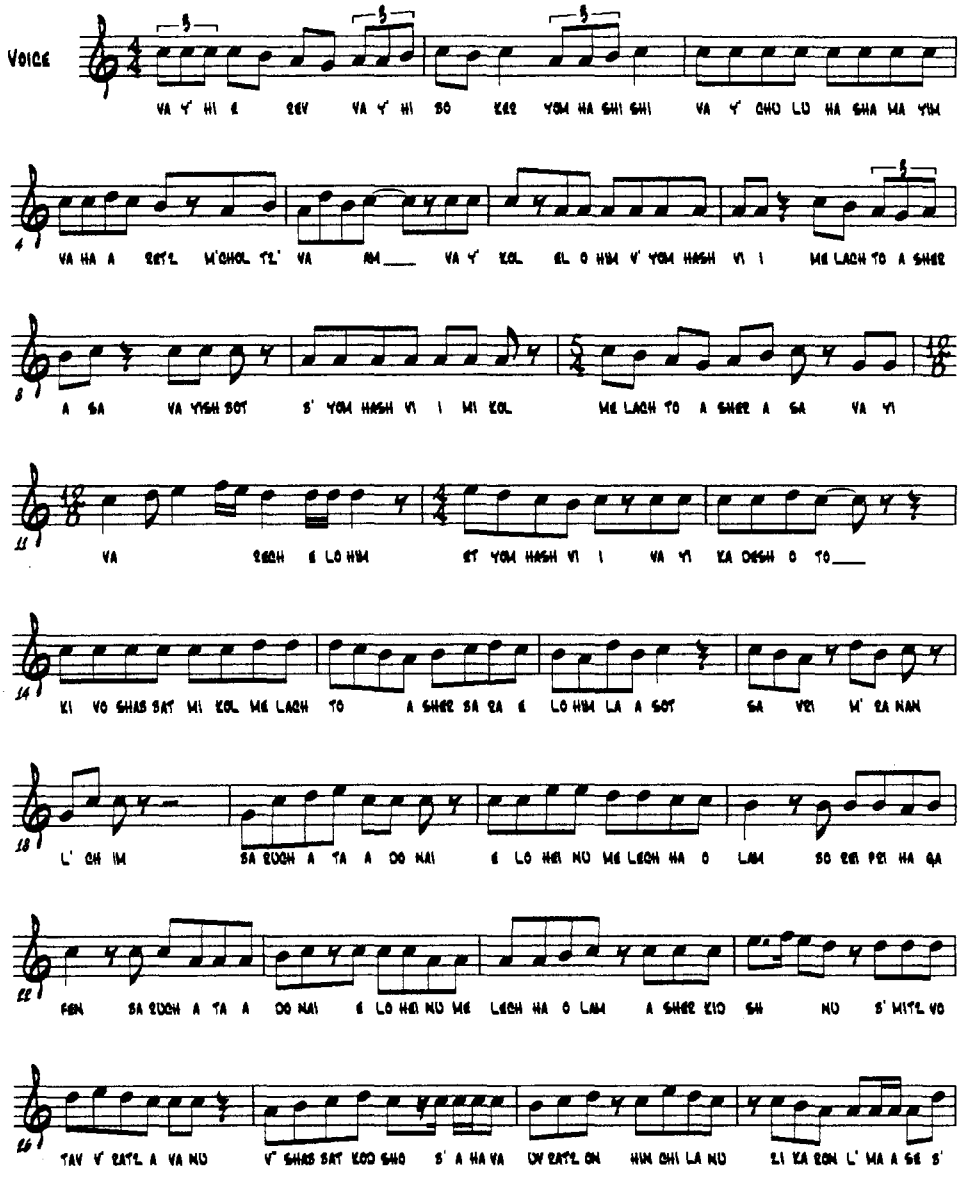
Appendix 3

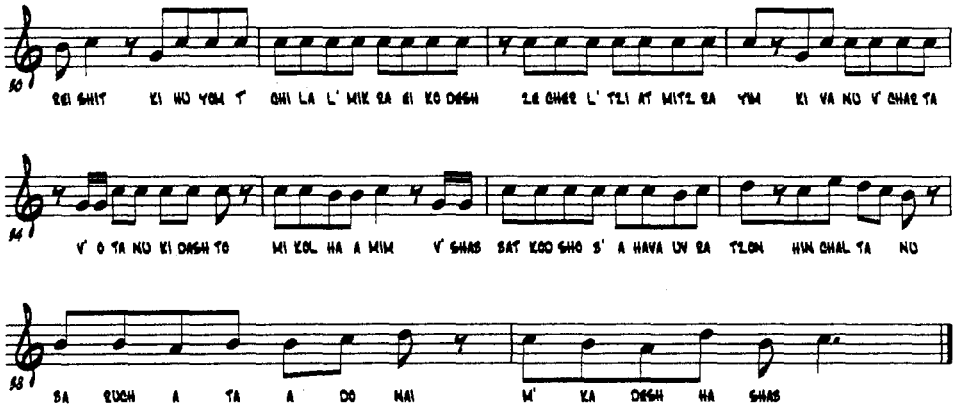
The following is an example of a prayer song as sung by the Bene Israel community of Toronto. The family that supplied this example has been in Toronto for only two generations. They can trace their roots back to the Bene Israel of Bombay, now called Mumbai. This is the tune for the Shabbat Kiddush that was taught by their patriach Ezra Kolet. The example shows the combination of different kinds of motives and phrases put together to build a prayer chant. The key is unimportant as the chant would be performed acapella. The vocal range is small and would easily be able to be sung by a lay person, not just by a professional singer.[61]

[61] Edna Langley, 2008.

Bene Israel Kiddush

TRADITIONAL

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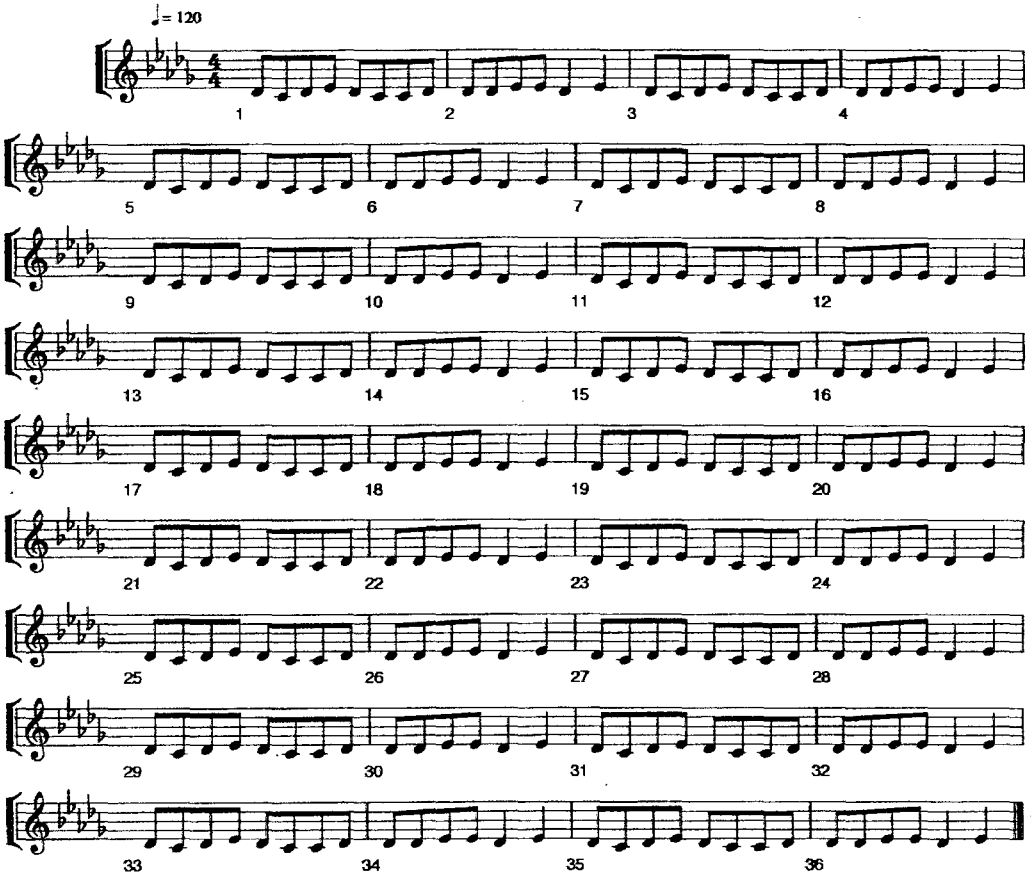
REI SHIT KI HU YOM T' OHI LA L' MIK RA EI KO DAGH LE SHAB L' TZI AT MITZ RA YOM KI VA HU V' SHAB TA
14
V' O TA HU KI DAGH TO MI KOL HA A MIM V' SHAS SAT KOD SHO S' A HAVA LN RA TZON HIN CHAL TA HU
18
SA RUCH A TA A DO NAI M' KA DEGH HA SHAS

Appendix 4

The following example of a Malayalam folksong shows several typical elements of the style. The extremely limited vocal range and repetitive melody line are used in an effort to make the songs communal. Pieces such as the following one are also passed down aurally so these techniques also make that easier. The transcription was taken from the recordings of Dr. Barbara Cottle Johnson. The words were not transcribed due to a lack of understanding on the part of the transcriber. The piece uses the same phrase repeated to different lyrics. The rhythm speeds up as the piece goes on moving from a moderate speed to a very fast pace with the participation of those singing increasing as the piece continues.[62]

[62] Barbara Cottle Johnson, "The Kerala Jews and Their Songs," in *Oh Lovely Parrot*, ed. Barbara Cottle Johnson (Jerusalem: The Jewish Music Research Centre, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2004).

Track 7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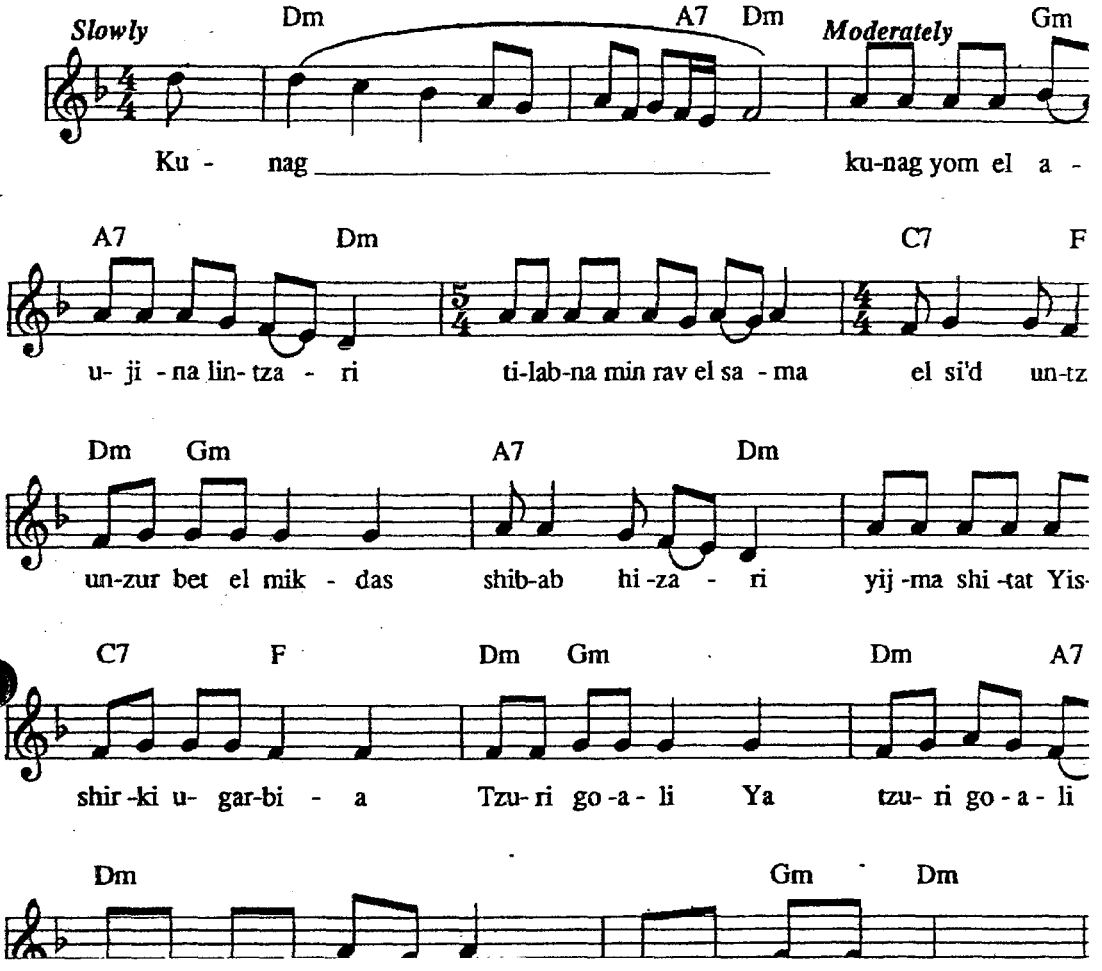
Appendix 5

The following folksong is about the pilgrimages that Arabic Jews would go on in an emulation of those that their Arab neighbors would go on.

KUNAG

Kunag, which in Arabic means intermediate stations on a journey, details pilgrimages t shrines in Iraq and Israel. In Iraq, the shrines included the tombs of Ezekiel the prophet Ezra the scribe. In Israel, they included the Cave of Machpelah. The author of **Kunag** wa unknown until recent times. The search of Abraham ben Yaakov, the scholar of Iraqi Jew and the late professor Ezra Haddad, led to Saleh Farha, a popular writer and humorist Baghdad at the end of the century.



Appendix 6

The following is an example of the Baghdadi tradition. The style is florid in comparison to the folksong tradition that has been highlighted before. Professional cantors were employed by the community to perform the liturgy.[63]

[63] Dr. Sara Manasseh, "Jewish Music, Secular, Oriental Communities," in *The New Grove Dicitonary of Music*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London, New York: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1980).

Ex.18 *Hammawdil*, Baghdad; rec. and transcr. E. Gerson-Kiwi