

THE BENE ISRAEL OF INDIA

Does Judaism believe in "metempsychosis" -- the doctrine that the soul makes many voyages in this world, each in a different guise?

This is the kind of question that was asked of me after almost every one of the more than thirty lectures I delivered in early 1961, when I visited the Indian Jews on behalf of the U.O.J.C.A. It indicates both the similarities and the differences between the Bene Israel and our Westernized Ashkenazic Jews. On the one hand, there is a deep loyalty to Torah and a love of all our people. On the other, the Indian Jews, in their long winter of isolation, have absorbed many of the superstitions of their pagan environment.

A casual American Jewish visitor would not recognize anything specifically "Jewish" in the appearance of the Bene Israel, of which there are some 16,000 in Bombay and who form the majority of India's 22,000 Jews. Their color ranges from almost-white through shades of brown to near-black. They have lived in the area, according to their tradition, for some two thousand years since their fourteen ancestors survived a shipwreck whilst voyaging from Palestine in the days of the Macabbean revolt. Their mother tongue is Marathi, one of India's many languages. They read Hebrew, but hardly any of them understand the language. They are devoted to Torah and the mitzvot to the best of their ability -- their extreme poverty prevents them from observing some of our basic commandments.

Despite their lack of Jewish education, they are most anxious to improve their lot. That is why they asked me, as I mentioned at the beginning, if some of their cherished beliefs, obviously taken over from their Hindu neighbors, are compatible with Jewish thought. Many of them actively believe in ghosts, use amulets to ward off evil, and even exorcise dybbuks. (In this they are not much different from the Iraqi Jews in India.)



The Bene Israel women generally dress the same as their Indian neighbors -- sari, etc., but without the typical Hindu red spot on the forehead. They have little time for community work -- they usually have large families, and if they do not they must go to work to supplement their husbands' meager incomes. Nevertheless, I met a group of charming Bene Israel women who had organized the "Stri Mandal" (literally, ladies' circle) which meets every Shabbat afternoon in the Magen Hassidim Synagogue. They review the biblical portion of the week, hear Bible stories, and sing their lovely, enchanting Sabbath melodies. Old ladies and young girls attend together, and their comradeship is a joy to behold. The Sabbath I spent with them they had also invited some of the young orphan girls from the local institution for the homeless. One of these was a young girl of about 16 who had just become engaged and was soon to be married. One of my friends in New York had given me some money to spend for tzedakah, and when I told her that I would use it to provide her with pots, pans, etc. her eyes lit up in complete incredulity. It was a silent happiness of the kind that is unforgettable.

The Bene Israel wedding ceremony is similar to that of the Iraqi Jews and is most interesting to a Westerner. Presided over by the dark-skinned, long-bearded Hazzan in his white robe (generally barefoot in the synagogue), it includes a hymn in which the groom sings certain sections.

The children of the Bene Israel are almost uniformly beautiful, and possessed of big, captivating eyes. Many are so poor that they own no shoes. Their diet is skimpy; a great number are undernourished. The few dedicated young people who have trained in Israel for a year or two and are now teaching in India, as well as some of the ladies of the Stri Mandal, desperately need children's books to teach the children the elements of Torah Judaism. The Union is now making available to them quantities of the "Jeremy and Judy" series sponsored by Women's Branch, amongst a large amount of other, pertinent literature.



The above paragraphs are far too meager to convey even a superficial notion of the way our beloved Bene Israel brethren live, work, and worship. Now that we have "discovered" them we must make every effort to keep up our contacts with them. Any of our people who visit India ought to make arrangements beforehand to visit with them, see their synagogues and other institutions, and bring them the regards of their Orthodox brethren in the United States.