

BENE-ISRAEL PURITY JUSTIFICATION COMMITTEE.

Dear Brethren,

From a letter dated the 28th March 1963 addressed by the Vice-President of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of India to Mr. David Abraham Mazgaonker, it is understood that the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and the Rabbinical Council of America in collaboration with the Israeli Religious Ministry and the Jewish Agency in Israel are arranging to depute to Bombay, at the request of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of India, two Rabbis of whom one is to stay for a period of one month and the other for four months. Arrangements are also being made to get a third Rabbi to stay in India for at least two years before the second Rabbi leaves the shores of India. We are told by the Orthodox Union of India that these Rabbis will be placed at the disposal of the entire community for all their religious problems, and to guide the community in the CORRECT way of observing the different Misvoth and ceremonies, to attend to the husband-wife disputes, arrange Get whenever necessary and also conversion according to the terms of Halacha. Our committee has, therefore, attempted to put forward their viewpoints for the consideration of those Bene-Israel institutions and individuals who have not yet been bought over by the bribe of foreign monetary help.

The Bene-Israel have been brought up, during the last two thousand years of their sojourn in India, more on faith and love for Judaism. As they were isolated from the main body of Jews owing to lack of means of communication till the end of the last century, they were altogether unaware of the Halacha which grew outside Palestine. Hence they could not have been expected to pay sufficient, in fact any, attention to the ritual calculus. Though they may have assimilated several local social customs and adopted the local language, as is natural all over the world, their whole religion centered round Torah. But even while living among the idolators not only did they strictly reject idol worship, but also retained certain practices distinctly mentioned in Exodus and Leviticus like circumcision on eighth day, observance of dietary laws which enabled Jewish travellers from abroad to identify them as Jews, and recital of 'Shema' on every conceivable occasion and which they considered the sheet anchor of their faith. They abstained from work on Saturdays which earned them the appellation of "Shanwar Tellis", and did not, like Jews all over the world, resort to the subterfuge of engaging a Gentile (Shabbas Goy) to do work which was forbidden to the Jews. In fact they did not observe the precepts of Torah with the help of those who did not believe in Torah. They buried their dead as against cremation practised by a majority of Hindus around them, and discouraged conversion and mixed marriage by strict segregation of the progeny of mixed unions. No doubt they applied blood of the goat on the door-posts of their houses on Passover Eve, made Nazarite vows and practised the offerings connected therewith which have long since been relegated to the background by the so-called orthodox Jews all over the world, but they never resorted to the blatant hypocrisy practised by the Iraqi Jews of slaughtering a white fowl on the Eve of Atonement (Kapparah) to expiate for their sins. They refrained altogether from eating pig flesh, without the aid of a ban as imposed by an Act of Knesseth in Israel. Above all, if the Census Reports of India during British Period are to be believed, it must be stated with pride that as against the liberal

contribution made to the 'red-light areas' of the city by the Jewesses belonging to Chief Rabbi Nissim's section, not a single Bene-Israel woman figured in the Census as earning her livelihood by prostitution.

Unlike the State of Israel, the Bene-Israel never considered unwed mothers eligible for State and social benefits, because, like the communities surrounding them in India, the Bene-Israel felt that it was an indirect incentive to prostitution. The Bene-Israel sent their children abroad for study in arts, laws, medicine, engineering etc., but detested sending them abroad for Rabbinate because they believed in Torah Lishma, Torah for its own sake, and not for a Rabbinical degree or for earning a livelihood.

The Bene-Israel stuck up to the laws and rituals of Exodus and Leviticus which they considered sufficient for their purposes. The Elders of the Bene-Israel community were never ordained as Rabbis, but were selected from among those who were known for their piety. These elders doled out justice among the parties to the dispute in various congregations by common-sense application of these laws without, in any way, hurting the religious susceptibilities of the Hindus and Muslims among whom they dwelt.

In a well-knit Indian society where husband usually dominated the scene, husband-wife disputes hardly ever arose. As divorce and widow remarriage were looked down upon in India by the Higher Classes, Bene-Israel never resorted to them till the commencement of the twentieth century. A childless widow usually adopted a male child of the husband's nearest relative to keep the name and property of the husband. Hence the difficulty of Halitza never presented itself. One of their scholars, Mr. Joseph Ezekiel Rajpurkar, translated all the Jewish prayer books in Marathi, and through these translations they were aware of all the positive and negative commandments recited in metrical form on the Festival of Shavuoth. Only when they felt some difficulty about tackling problems on the basis of Torah, a rarity in itself, did they refer their problems to the Sephardi Rabbi of England, as India was a part of the British Empire for the last century and a half.

During the British regime, Missionary schools operated in exclusively Bene-Israel areas for the benefit of Bene-Israel children. But Bene-Israel had a strong religious belief of their own. They were neither afraid of the likelihood of their children being converted to Christianity, nor did they resort to hooliganism as was done this year in Jerusalem when a large group of Yeshiva students attacked the Finnish Mission. Even poor Bene-Israel parents, laden with debts, did not fall a prey to the offer of food, accommodation, education and promise of employment by Christian missionaries. Religion to them was not a saleable asset or an insurance against poverty and want. The reverse is the case in Israel where many poor, and even some rich, Jews have opted for Christ. The fact should convince the religious authorities in Israel that they have failed to interpret the lessons of Judaism. Their first task is to prevent conversion among Jews who have settled in Israel.

In Israel, the Rabbinical Courts have exclusive jurisdiction in matters of marriage and divorce, and now the rulings of these tribunals have the law of the land behind them to endorse and, if necessary, enforce them. Refusal to accept the judgment of Rabbinical Courts will make a person liable to contempt of Court

since these Courts are free to apply to a Higher Civil Court to enforce implementation of their own verdicts. What is the guarantee in India that the verdicts of the visiting Rabbis will be accepted by the parties to the dispute? What is to prevent the party, which has received an unfavourable Rabbinical verdict, from applying to civil or criminal courts of the country for redress of their grievances? Will not these visiting Rabbis, who are already non persona grata with Bene-Israel in India, be a laughing stock if the Courts in India give a verdict which is contrary to that of the Rabbis?

In the past Rabbis have been visiting us, giving us sermons and we have always accorded them a warm welcome, but we see a sinister significance in the intended visit of these Rabbis, especially when the Israeli Religious Ministry and the Jewish Agency in Israel are co-sponsoring their visit. It is no secret that the Religious Ministry is anti-Bene-Israel to the core. It has been mainly instrumental in humiliating our brethren in Israel and in pursuing discriminatory attitude towards them in matters of marriage with Jews of other countries. It is this very Ministry that contributed to the defeat of Mrs. Emma Talmi's Bill which sought to punish the marriage Registrars who refused to perform marriages between Bene-Israel and other Jews. This move to send Rabbis to India cannot, therefore, be considered an act of goodwill - it has evil designs which will have far reaching effects, if not checked immediately. Like the Iraqi and Cochín Jews in the past, these Rabbis will avail of our hospitality whilst with us and, on expiry of their term, return to Israel, magnify even our minor drawbacks and attempt to justify the Acting Chief Rabbi Nissim's slanderous verdict against us.

The Jewish Agency of Israel has still a greater role to play in this diabolical plot. Once these Rabbis, biased as they are, find some imaginary loopholes in our observance of Jewish laws, as they interpret it, the Jewish Agency will step forward to stop Bene-Israel migration, for the simple reason that the Bene-Israel will not accept second class citizenship in Israel which is attempted to be foisted on them by the Acting Chief Rabbi Nissim of Israel who, in all his actions, is merely giving vent to his feelings of personal hatred for the Bene-Israel who, unlike his own section in India, are respected by the other communities in India for high morals. If the Jewish Agency is so solicitous about our religious welfare, why did its representative, Mr. Kelman, send Bene-Israel youth to non-religious Kibbutzim in Israel inspite of their expressed desire to join religious Kibbutzim?

We feel that in the name of Halacha, Rabbis sometimes tend to overdo things for modern taste. The Bene-Israel, though religious in a sense, were never imbued with a sense of being the elect. They always felt that people must be helped - not coerced - towards orthodoxy. If the Bene-Israel did not have, nor felt the necessity of a Rabbi during the dark days of illiteracy gone by, we fail to understand why today, with printed codes in the English language to guide them, the Orthodox Union felt the need for guidance by a Rabbi, especially from Israel, to solve their imaginary problems?

The authorities of the Orthodox Union, which receives aid from foreign sources, need not worry about Bene-Israel settled in India, whose forefathers kept the torch of religion burning without any outside help, and will surely keep it burning hereafter with a strong faith of their own without the aid of mercenaries from abroad.

We see great danger ahead and, therefore, wish to sound a note of warning. In return for monetary and other material considerations, our self-appointed leaders have allowed themselves to be bought over by foreigners who are now in a unique position of dictating to us the manner in which we should conduct our communal affairs.

We think that before negotiating for the import of Rabbis from abroad, representatives of the Synagogues on the Executive of the Orthodox Union would have been well-advised to consult their congregations and find out if these Rabbis would be acceptable to them. We, therefore, earnestly hope and pray that the Lord grant them - the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of India - wisdom not to rush headlong into actions which might be detrimental to the interests of the community as a whole.

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IS THE UNION OF ORTHODOX JEWISH CONGREGATIONS
OF INDIA ATTEMPTING TO MAKE US BELIEVE THAT
IT IS THE SOLE SPOKESMAN OF THE BENE-ISRAEL
COMMUNITY???

Bombay - 8th April 1963.