

SHALOM PUNE

The Jewish community is one of the most interesting communities in Pune with a rich history and a deep-rooted connection to India and its people. As their most popular festival- Hanukkah is just round the corner, **Sanika Diwanji** finds out more about the Jewish community and it's connection to the city

Rarely has history noted an instance of a community that has so cohesively merged with the local populace keeping their own identity intact as the Jewish community in India. This community has been associated with India for over 2000 years and there has never been an instance of conflict. On the contrary, the Jewish community in India has not only seamlessly assimilated in the mainstream society but, they are looked upon as one of the most altruistic communities in the country.

TRACING THE ROOTS

Maharashtra specially has been mainly associated with the Bene-Israel Jews who were shipwrecked on the shores of Navgaon, a village in Konkan, nearly 2000 years ago, and their survival is a miracle of history. For centuries they were unknown to other Jewish communities in India and abroad. Living in isolation with their Indian brethren, they adopted some of the local customs but kept intact the religion of their fathers, till finally they were discovered and brought back into the fold of the Land of their ancestors.

Dr. Nathan Aston, Former Principal and Head Department of English, Nowrosjee Wadia College explains, "The survival of the Bene-Israel of India is, however, different from the survival of the Jews in Europe and other countries. India has been known as a land of tolerance, and the Hindu religion is the most tolerant

of all faiths. It received in its fold members of different faiths and religions. This, coupled with the caste system, was responsible for the preservation of this ancient limb of Israel. In these circumstances, the Bene-Israel formed themselves into a distinct community, having their own name, tradition, customs, characteristics and religion. As was usual with other castes, the Bene-Israel did not marry outside their fold. We were thus able to preserve the community- not to say that inter-mariages were completely absent"

The Bene-Israel ancients lived in this manner, cut off from the mainstream of Judaism and following what little of the Jewish religion they knew and handing it down from generation to generation. The Bene-Israel per force had to adopt some of the local customs as far as marriage, festivals and other ceremonies were concerned, but this by no means usurped the fundamental tenets of their religion.

Some have said that the ancestors of the Bene-Israel who belong to the seafaring tribes of Asher and Zebulum had some knowledge of oil-pressing in ancient Israel. This they brought back to bear on their work in India and the Bene-Israel were considered in the Konkan as oil pressers of the highest order. And because they scrupulously abstained from work on Saturdays, they were known and are still known as 'Shanvar Telis'.

“The whole Bene-Israel Jewish Colony in the town of Poona traces its origins to a single inspector of Police in 1863; after him came a few of his own family and then others. The Baghdadi Jews, who came to India from Baghdad, came to Pune much earlier than the Bene-Israels, with the arrival of David Sassoon in 1832. Today, we have about 225 Bene-Israel Jews and less than ten Baghdadi Jews in Pune”, explains Dr. Aston.

“

Judaism is a way of life. The Jewish religion does not worship any idol or any particular God. We believe in the thirteen principles of faith and worship our holy books. Even in the Synagogue, the most important place is reserved for the Holy books.

Dr. Irene Judah

”

JUDAISM IN A NUTSHELL

According to Dr. Aston, “Judaism is one of the oldest and the first monotheistic religion in the world. It teaches that every person is created in the image of God. Judaism is connected with the well being of humanity and the Torah is our most important text. We believe in reciting the prayer ‘*Shema Israel Adonai Elehenoo Adonai Eyad*’”

meaning ‘Hear O Israel, The Lord is our God, God is One’ throughout the day. A blessing is recited at a specified moment during a prayer, ceremony or other activity, especially before and after partaking of food to show that God is the source of all blessings. Judaism as we practise it is not Biblical, it’s Rabbinic, which means that it is about studying and engaging with the text but not stopping at mere face value.”

“Judaism is a way of life,” simply explains Dr. Irene Judah, committee member of the Succath Shelomo Synagogue at Rasta Peth. “The Jewish religion does not worship any idol or any particular God. We believe in the thirteen principles of faith and worship our holy books. Even in the Synagogue, the most important place is reserved for the Holy books. All synagogues contain a *Bimah*, a table from which the *Torah* is read, and a desk for the prayer leader. The *Torah* ark is a cabinet in which the *Torah* scrolls are kept. I believe Judaism is about learning and understanding the holy texts and applying them in day-to-day life.”

Dr. George Judah, Retired Air Force Officer and Management Guru, has a different outlook about the religion. He says, “Judaism is about being happy. The basic teaching is about how one should live one’s life and be happy. Every time we have prayers at the Synagogue, I try and find the deeper meaning from what is written. The best thing about Judaism is that it is very flexible. It teaches a person to live life peacefully and with humour.”

HOLIDAYS, FESTIVALS AND TRADITIONS

Jewish holidays are special days in the Jewish calendar, which celebrate moments in the Jewish history, as well as central themes in the relationship between God and the world, such as creation, revelation, and redemption.

The Jewish New Year called as *Rosh Hashanah* is observed on the

Dr. George & Dr. Irene Judah





A traditional Menorah lit during Hanukkah

first of *Tishri* every year in memory of the creation of heaven and earth. It is not exactly celebrated as a festival but is observed as a Days of Awe. *Yom Kippur* or the Day of Atonement is the holiest day for Jews. On this day every Jewish person asks for pardon from God for sins that may have been committed by them. Its central themes are atonement and repentance. Jewish people traditionally observe this holy day with an approximate 25-hour period of fasting and intensive prayer, often spending most of the day in synagogue services.

Another beloved Jewish festival is Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights. This festival is observed in memory of the miracle performed by God when oil meant to last only for a day was enough to keep the perpetual lamp in the Synagogue burning for more than eight days. Therefore the Jews light lamps for eight days at home and at the Synagogue on a traditional candle stand known as the *Menorah*.

Many other festivals and occasions including *Purim*, Passover and the *Bar Mitzvah* are celebrated joyously by the Jewish community throughout the year. Dr. Irene Judah explains "Judaism is a very communal religion. We always celebrate festivals and various holidays together. And most of all, since our community is so small, it is an even more joyous feeling when everyone comes together at the Synagogue and we can pray together. However, these days, it is not possible to attend prayers in the evening on time because of various reasons. As such, many people pray at home with the family and go to the Synagogues as and when time permits."

The traditional Jewish attire for men and women consists of simple garments. Men wear a *Kippah* which is a slightly rounded brimless skullcap worn while praying, eating, reciting blessings, or studying Jewish religious texts. Men also wear a prayer shawl or a *Tallit* during prayers and other auspicious times. *Tzitzit* are fringes tied on the corner of the tallit and all other four-cornered garments, kissed at certain parts of the prayer service. Women do not have any particular attire as such but they have to cover their head and shoulders before entering the Synagogue.

THE PUNE CONNECT

The Bene-Israel Jews and other Jews in Pune are largely concentrated in the Rastha and Nana Peths (City wards) and the Hadapsar area. This cluster was formed since earlier days because of the proximity of the few Synagogues to these areas of the city. Located near the Military cantonment area in Camp, the Ohel David Synagogue also known as the *Lal Deval* in Marathi, is a beautiful red brick building that has a prominent high tower with a chimney clock. The Succath Shelomo Synagogue in Rastha Peth is

another important landmark for the Jewish community in Pune.

Along with these religious landmarks, the most important medical facility in Pune- the Sassoon hospital was also built by a Jewish philanthropist David Sassoon as early as 1863. The hospital premises are so impressive that even today it remains one of the largest state-run medical facilities in Pune. Earlier the hospital used to have a separate Jewish patient's ward that catered to the dietary needs of the Jewish patients.

Since the Jewish community has been living in India for so long, they have obviously adapted to many of the local customs and traditions. Bathsheba Aston, former teacher at JN Petit School explains, "The Jews in Maharashtra have incorporated many of the local traditions. Right from our dressing to our cuisine and language, we are as Maharashtrian as the local people. Many of the Jewish women wear sarees and *salwar-kameez* and the married women even wear a *mangalsutra*. We speak in Marathi and prepare traditional Maharashtrian food as well. And what's even more interesting is that because many of us are educated in Marathi medium schools, the Hebrew prayers are also written in Marathi to aid those who cannot read Hebrew."

The Jewish connect with India and Pune goes a long way back in history. It is because of all these reasons that, at the recently held celebrations commemorating 150 years of the Ohel David Synagogue, the Governor of Maharashtra C Vidyasagar Rao suggested that a chapter be dedicated to the Jewish community's involvement in nation-building in the school curriculum.

sanika@crememagazine.in



Dr. Nathan Aston in a traditional Tallit reading the Torah