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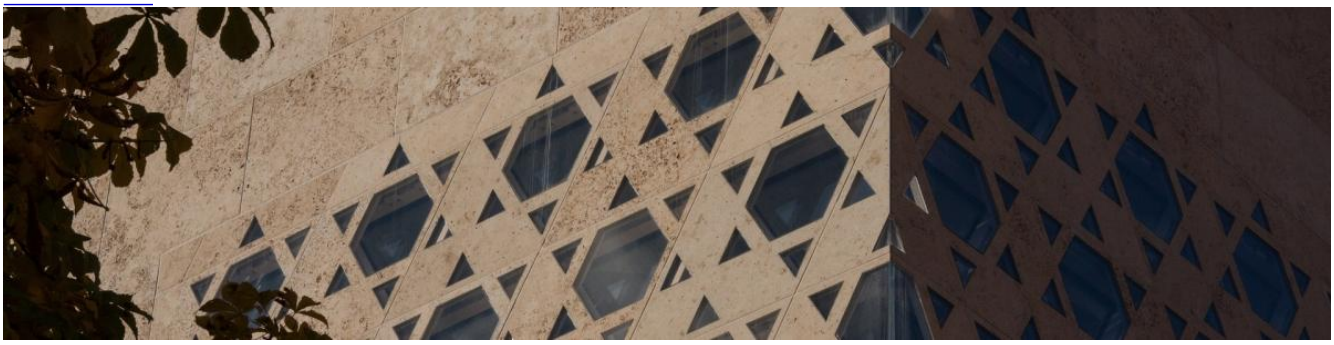

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“Rabbi, what will you do about the rain?”

Exhausted and in shock from my first exposure to the realities of the swarming, squalid city of Mumbai, then called Bombay, I stared back, perplexed and concerned.

“Don’t you know, Rabbi, there is a drought here in Maharashtra.” Their thoughts, though unsaid, were loud and clear: “We have survived as Jews for 2,000 years without rabbis; if you can not bring rain we do not need you.”

My first internal response to the question of rain was to be incredulous. Did they really believe I could bring rain? My next thought was that there is an entire tractate of Talmud that deals in detail with what a community should do when there is not enough rain. For the Jews of India, and for that matter other peoples in the East, the spiritual and physical worlds are perceptibly and intimately intertwined. When there is not enough rain, their immediate, visceral response is to turn to the spiritual realm.

With this first question asked of me as the community rabbi of India, I realized that in many ways I would learn more about Judaism living with the Jews of India than I had from years of Jewish book study.

In the Western world in which I had grown, though quite a religious one, there was a bifurcation of the spiritual and physical realms. No matter how religious one

is in the West, the worlds of spirit and matter are perceived as discrete, even if intellectually or religiously they are believed interdependent. In contrast, in the East, the interweaving of spiritual and physical is viewed as seamless and obvious.

Though I had studied Ta'anit, the talmudic tractate regarding drought, I could not imagine putting it so simply and pragmatically into practice; yet for the Jews of India who had not studied its words, the notion was plainly clear. This must be, I thought, part of the true Jewish meaning of Tractate Ta'anit, an angle less central to intellectual talmudists of my realm. So we prayed, and—lucky for me—it rained, and I was thus able to keep my job.

In 1995 my wife and I were sent by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to India; I as community rabbi and resource to the 4,000-person, ten-synagogue strong Jewish community of India, and my wife as volunteer educator.

The vast majority of Indian Jews live in the city of Mumbai, though several hundred live in smaller Indian cities such as Pune, Ahmadabad, and Cochin, each of which boasts two synagogues, several of them cavernous and beautiful, dating from the period of the British Raj. Some of the native Bene Israel villages along the Konkon coast of India still contain synagogues also. Each Indian synagogue employs a hazzan, a cantor, who often doubles as shohet, ritual slaughterer, and mohel, circumciser.

There are four small but distinct groups of Jews in India today, each with a unique history. The largest is the Bene Israel. According to the Bene Israel's ancient tradition they descend from seven families who were shipwrecked over 2,000 years ago on the Konkon coast, south of what is now Mumbai, in a village know as Nawgaon; home of their ancient burial ground which is still regularly visited.

This group's Maharati (the language native to the region of the Bene Israel) name was the Shanwar Tali, the "Saturday Oil Pressers." They pressed oil from seeds for a living, lived in villages of their own, did not intermarry with local Hindus, circumcised their children, and did something the surrounding Hindu peoples did not, observed a day off each week, a Sabbath each Saturday. Tradition holds they also said the Shemah, and retained such biblically related customs as putting blood on their doorpost in the spring and not leaving their homes for 40 days after the birth of a boy and 80 days after the birth of a girl.

The Bene Israel were "discovered" about 500 years ago by a Jewish merchant named David Rahabi who realized the Shanwar Teli were Jews and began to teach

them. Subsequently, the Bene Israel came in contact with the Jewish community of Cochin, a group connected with the rest of the Jewish world via Jewish Yemeni merchants who traveled the trade winds from Aden to Kerala in the south of India. Many of these traders' letters home and ship manifests, written in Hebrew, were uncovered in the Cairo Geniza.

The Bene Israel do not have a tradition of rabbis and so often perceived me with awe, the likes of which I know I shall never experience again. For example, one Jew said to me, "I just want to look at you, I have never seen a rabbi before." Though the Jews of India are a tiny group in the shadow one hundred million Muslims and almost a billion Hindus, I was often asked to represent the Jewish people to Indian groups, among them the Archbishop of Bombay, the Zoroastrian community, and in newspapers and on radio.

The Jews of India are not like Western Jews, who need convincing that religion is relevant and meaningful. In India almost everyone is religious in some way, and the Jews of India just want to know how to observe, not why. I taught Torah regularly while dancing carefully between honoring their ancient oral tradition and customs and trying to educate them further in halakha, Jewish history, and thought, most of which had been written down long after the Bene Israel had exited the known Jewish world.

Another aspect of Judaism that I came to understand more fully through living with the Jews of India is the nature of our oral tradition. Though not all are fully Sabbath observant, the Jews of India are very pious and scrupulous. Since theirs is an oral tradition and not a written one, they do not have a black and white structure in which to precisely place the various mitzvoth, as we have. The Jews of India might easily consider kissing the mezuzah on par with, or more important than, not riding in a bus on the Shabbat.

I witnessed the development of custom and law before my eyes in this almost purely oral tradition and came to realize that though an oral tradition has its weaknesses such as a less black and white sense of clarity, paradoxically one of its strengths is its consistency and commitment. The Jews of India do not look up their traditions or ritual laws in books to know its whys and hows, they just know what to do and know how and when to do it, which is their bottom line.

For example, when I discussed the Western Jewish practice of selling hametz for Passover they could not fathom it: "You sell your hametz—and then keep it in your house?" While a purely oral tradition does not lend itself to such legalistic innovation as selling one's hametz, it is fertile ground for seeing in real time the

organic development of custom, and it shed light for me on why custom might be the same as law in Judaism. Indeed, in such a mimetic system, gradations of importance that are often predicated on the reasons for customs (rabbinic verses biblical, law versus minhag) are not preserved, only the how and when of the practice it retained.

While for western Jews, books are the storehouse of Jewish knowledge, law, and authority, for the Jews of India such is not the case. Knowledge of how to follow the Torah and how to live as a Jew is embedded in their Jewish culture. We can see from their oral Jewish culture that our oral tradition prior to the Mishna was probably not so much a reciting and teaching of structured legal knowledge but the practicing of Jewish tradition organically passed from one generation into another. In such an atmosphere there is no distinction between the past and present. What is done is assumed to have always been done and is perceived to continue in its current state.

One example I saw of organically developed custom becoming law was in regard to Passover. There are no hashgachot, no kosher stores, no supermarkets and not much processed food in India at all. One buys raw ingredients and cooks from scratch, as had been the case in our more developed countries until the previous generation.

As the month before Passover came the Jews of India gathered to bake matza in a clay oven under the watchful eye of the local hazzan. The cleaning and shopping also began, and I had the opportunity to spend a day shopping with them during the week before Passover. As I was assisting in the open market they instructed me, “Do not buy brown masala (spice mixture) only green masalsa.” When I enquired why, their answer was a curt, “Because it is Pessah.”

“Yes,” I replied “but why only green masala for Passover?”

“Why? Because it is Pessah, Rabbi,” they answered. When I suggested that maybe green masala reflects the spring theme of Passover as carpas, the green vegetable on the seder plate does, they answered me with a blank, inquisitive stare.

Upon investigating further I learned that brown masala is made from dried spices and green masala from fresh ones. I finally understood what I think is certainly the historical roots of this Bene Israel Passover “law.” Green masala, composed of fresh herbs would have no suspicion of being hametz, but brown masala whose ingredients were dried spices could have the occasional grain speck mixed in

from the market in which it was purchased. When I explained my theory, I again received only incredulous looks. Indeed, the power of the oral tradition.

Later that day I entered the Jewish community office. Excited that it was ‘erev Pessah the secretary ran toward me: “Rabbi, do you want my eldest brother to dip his hand in goat’s blood for you?” she asked excitedly. “Goat’s blood?” I repeated, confused. “Yes, yes,” she exclaimed, “Passover is coming tomorrow. You know, for your door!” I looked up and sure enough, there above the front door of the office was a sheet of lined lose leaf paper with a big red bloody handprint.

Processing quickly, consciously trying to balance between respect for tradition and all I knew of Judaism and halakha, I answered, “yes, of course I would like him to,” fervently hoping she would forget to relay the message.

Before I left for India, my first rabbinical position after graduation from Yeshiva University’s Rabbi Isaac Elchonon Theological seminary, Rabbi Norman Lamm, then president of Yeshiva University called me into his office. He related that 30 years prior he had gone to India and met with the Bene Israel. They had had one important question for him which was asked several times and he wanted to be sure I was prepared for it. He said that the answer I would give was very important and had enormous bearing for them on who they are as Jews. The question, which is hardly ever asked of me in the United States, was asked of me often in India: “Rabbi, do we Jews believe in reincarnation?”

The answer I must give them, Rabbi Lamm told me, was not a complex one drawing on Kabbala or the Talmud, but rather, a clear, “no, we Jews do not believe in reincarnation.” Reincarnation is perhaps the central tenant of Hinduism, the Bene Israel’s host culture. The Bene Israel work hard to be separate from their polytheistic Hindu neighbors while still living integrated among them. Knowing full well that much of Kabbala, philosophy, and even Midrash does accept the notion of reincarnation, I tried to muster a definitive “No!”

In addition to such customs, there is a religious ceremony which is unique to the Jews of India, the Melida. In celebration of Jewish semahot, five kinds of fruits and a large mound of sweet rice is placed on a decorative plate, the Melida. Blessings are made on the fruits which are then consumed by the participants and finally prayers are said which center on Eliyahu haNavi, Elijah the prophet, who is perhaps the most important Jewish figure for the Bene Israel.

Aside from semahot and special events, there is one other time that the Melida is held—upon pilgrimages to the spot at which the Bene Israel believe Elijah the Prophet's chariot took off for heaven. This spot, in the tiny Jewish native Konkan village of Alibag, is marked by a deep cleft in a large rock in a clearing in the village.

My wife and I merited to take this pilgrimage with the Stree Mandl, the women's sewing group, which has in recent years morphed into a Rosh Hodesh gathering in which they sing traditional Bene Israel songs about Jewish history and Torah in their native language. After several hours by slow bus over bumpy roads we arrived in the native Bene Israel village of Alibag. There indeed was a large rock approximately 40 feet long with a deep gouge in it, reminiscent of wheel skids, which I was told was the place of the chariot's wheels lifting off.

Coconut milk was poured on the chariot track marks and candles lit in deference to Eliyahu haNavi. We gathered nearby for the Melida. "You are the rabbi, you should conduct the Melida of course," they instructed me matter-of-factly. Though I must have missed Melida day in my rabbinical studies at Yeshiva University, I apparently did a plausible job, and the women were happy to have the rabbi facilitate the holy ceremony.

Following the ceremony the women solemnly warned me, "Rabbi, be sure when you return to America to tell the Jews there to come to Alibag, to see the Eliuyahu haNavi and make the Melida." And so I have taken it upon myself at the end of every lecture about the Jews of India to admonish the Jews of America to make the holy pilgrimage to Alibag. Indeed after living in India for a year, I came to understand that one never knows, the world is a much more mysterious and mystical place than we Westerners would have it. So dear reader, I say it again now: come to Alibag, light a candle, and make the Melida. It is a mystical place.