



# Indian Jewish Congregation of USA Newsletter

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## In This Issue

- President's Message
- A Bene Israel Wedding at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan
- Sabbath Evening at the Village Temple in New York
- Children from the Indian-Jewish Community in Israel Receive Stipend Towards Group Activities
- Rebecca Ezekiel "Of Muse and Memories"
- The Return to India
- An Indian Love Story, Dimona Style
- Ahmedabad Jews Today
- Legacies
- Ahmedabad Jewish Community Success Story
- Recipes
- Announcements

## Useful Link

[jewsofindia.org](http://jewsofindia.org)

*The official website of the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA. Here you will find useful information about our organization, our heritage, future plans, and more.*

## Contact Us

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## President's Message (by Romiel Daniel)

At midnight of Nissan 15<sup>th</sup>, 2448(1313 BCE), G-d broke the last shackles of Egyptian bondage after the last of the ten plagues, and the nation of Israel was born as a free people. This was when the first festival of Passover celebrated.

Nissan is the first month of the Hebrew calendar. In Israel, Passover is a seven-day holiday. In the Jewish Diaspora, the holiday is celebrated for eight days.

Many Jews observe the positive commandment of eating Matza on the first night of Passover at the Passover Seder (starting on April 19<sup>th</sup> after 8:28 PM this year), as well as the Torah prohibition against eating or owning Chametz (leavened products) such as bread, cake, cookies, beer, whiskey or pasta for the duration of the holiday.

Together with Sukkoth (Tabernacles) and Shavuot, Passover is one of the three pilgrim festivals during which the entire Jewish populace historically made a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. Passover marks the birth of the "Children of Israel," who became the Jewish nation, as the Jews were liberated from Pharaoh's slavery and allowed to become the followers of G-d instead.

Is it really necessary more than 3,000 years on to still commemorate our ancestors' freedom from slavery in Egypt? Can't we move on to more pressing and contemporary issues?

Friends, the Seder is not just a memorial to events of the distant past—it is a dynamic process of freedom from the challenges of the present.

Even today, we are slaves. Slaves to our own inhibitions, fears, habits, cynicism, and prejudices. These self-appointed pharaohs are layers of ego that prevent us from expressing our true inner self, from reaching our spiritual potential. Our souls are incarcerated in selfishness, laziness and indifference.

How do we free ourselves? By eating Matza. Because Matza, the bread of surrender, represents the suspension of ego, through which we find ourselves—our true selves.

This night is different from all other nights, because on this night we let ourselves go, we liberate our souls to follow G-d unashamed.

That soul is the innocent child within us waiting to be free. This Pesach let us allow that child to sing: "Ma Nishtana Halayla Hazeh..."

Romiel Daniel

President

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## A Bene Israel Wedding at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan



Under the Chuppah at the Bene Israel Wedding Event at the JCC in Manhattan

There was a wonderful staging of a Bene Israel wedding ceremony performed at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan on February 17<sup>th</sup> 2008. It was a close replica of the wedding rituals and ceremony performed in India by the Bene Israel community. The chattan (groom) and kallah (bride) were Lael and Regina Daniel, a longtime married couple, with two beautiful bridesmaids, Yafa and Aviva Daniel.

The ceremony highlighted the typical Bene Israel wedding, with the bridegroom Lael being led to the Bima with the chanting of the Torat Emet (Maimonides's 8<sup>th</sup> of 13 principles of faith). Afterwards, the bride Regina also approached the Bima while the bridegroom sang Yona Thi Ziv.

The ritualistic wedding ceremony, the melody for confirmation of vows, and the exchange of rings were performed by Romiel Daniel, president of the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA. This was followed by the chanting of the Akhtana (wedding contract written in Aramaic) by David Galsurkar and the recitation of five blessings (instead of the usual seven, as this was not a real wedding).

Romiel Daniel explained the wedding's rituals and the unique Indian Jewish ceremony, the Malida. It was pointed out that any auspicious occasion is preceded by the invoking of God's blessings and the request for Elijah the prophet to be the protector. The Malida plate, prepared by Noreen Daniel, was displayed to the audience as part of the explanation.

The wedding ceremony was preceded by an Indian kosher vegetarian buffet lunch. The event was an enjoyable and educational eye-opener of the unique rituals and traditions of the Indian Jewish community for the American Jewish attendees.

It was a beautiful affair that showed glimpses of our traditions and culture to the attendees. We thank the JCC in Manhattan and Susan Lechter for fully supporting our Indian Jewish Congregation and giving us a platform to increase the awareness of the Indian Jewish Community. Also thanks to Aylon Samson, Ellen Eichel and others who helped in the ceremony.

**Source:** Based on article from the Jewish Press

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## Sabbath Evening at the Village Temple in New York

The Indian Jewish Congregation of USA participated in a joint Sabbath evening with the Village Temple in Manhattan on April 4<sup>th</sup> 2008.

This was an unusual Shabbat with Rabbi Koster and Rabbi Drew leading the services. Rabbi Drew chanted Sabbath prayers and melodies using the Kirtan style practiced in India, mesmerizing the congregants.

Romiel Daniel spoke about the Jews of India, their history, culture and traditions, He also explained the Kirtans as practiced by the Bene Israel, which was started in India in the 1830's.

This was followed by an Indian Kosher dinner, question and answers session, and some wonderful Zemiroth. David Galsurkar led the singing of the Tsur Mishelo, which was appreciated by everyone.

Thanks for the participation of Sam and Erna Daniel, Evelina Khukhashvili, Noreen Daniel, Lael Daniel and others.

## Children from the Indian-Jewish Community in Israel Receive Stipend Towards Group Activities



The Mayor with children of the Indian-Jewish community

Twenty-five children from the Indian-Jewish community in Eilat, thirteen of whom are new immigrants of the community, received a stipend from the mayor, Mayir Yitzhak Halevi, to subsidize youth center activities. This is the third year in a row where the children from the community receive these subsidies towards youth activities. The kids choose the activities they want to participate in, each at his or her local youth center, and they only need to pay 30 NIS a month. The rest is financed by the city in conjunction with youth center network who grants stipends to children in the framework of the project "Kindle a Dream for Each Child."

Dr. Isaac Solomon, Chairman of the non-profit organization Sitar of Indian Immigrants, accompanied the community:

"The openness of the Mayor and willingness to help the Indian community in Eilat warms the heart. Had it not been for the grants, these children would not be able to participate in these activities."

The non-profit organization Sitar, headed by Dr. Isaac Solomon and managed by Elisheva Malika, has been active in Eilat for the past seven years. There are 120 Indian-Jewish families belonging to this organization as of today and they conduct valuable, authentic and joint social activities. Each week, members of the community meet to initiate activities that the organization implements. These include religious classes and Psalms, which are held every Sunday. Classes to strengthen the community children's education and intensive Hebrew classes (Ulpan) for new immigrants from the Indian-Jewish community are held every week on Mondays and Tuesdays.

All these activities that take place at the Alon site that the city has allocated for the good of folklore activities of the various ethnic groups, including the Jewish Federation of Moroccan Immigrants, Yemenite Immigrants, Iraq, France, and others.

Source: Translated from Eilat, [http://eilati.co.il/article\\_2689.asp](http://eilati.co.il/article_2689.asp)

## Rebecca Ezekiel "Of Muse and Memories"

On Thursday, March 6<sup>th</sup> 2008, the Embassy of India in Tel Aviv organized a function to recognize two talented Bene Israel women: Mrs. Rebecca Ezekiel, the author of "Of Muse and Memories" published in Mumbai in 2007, and Mrs. Sophie Judah, author of "Dropped from Heaven" published in New York in 2007. The excellent presentations were made to a packed hall. The Guest of Honor was His Excellency the Ambassador of India Dr. Arun K. Singh, and the function was chaired by Dr. and Mrs. Maina Chawla Singh. The event was attended by invited guests, journalists, and other dignitaries. Dr. Maina Chawla Singh is doing research on the Women of Indian Jewish Origin and their Integration into Israeli Society.

The Bene Israel Heritage Museum and Genealogical Research Center pioneered the publication of the book by Mrs. Rebecca Ezekiel as its first effort in the field of giving exposure to Bene Israel talent.

Mrs. Rebecca Ezekiel's book combines art with Bene Israel history. It is an exceptional piece of work and we are all very proud of her achievement, and we feel that she has been given due recognition for this work.

Mrs. Rebecca Ezekiel is Romiel Daniel's cousin Isaac Ezekiel's wife, and the couple was featured as Personality of the Month in July 2007.

Congratulations, Rebecca, and we hope you continue the good work.



From Rebecca Ezekiel's Book Sabbath Table. Oil on Canvas

## The Return to India



Roe'e Tzari at "Chatni" in Tel Aviv

In a new store in Tel Aviv the brothers Tzari return to the tradition of Indian food from their grandfather's home.

When Sharon and Roe'e's grandfather immigrated from Bombay to Israel with his extended family, he was informed in the Jewish Agency that he is about to be settled in "Center of the Country." "But center is a relative," jokes Sharon Tzari from his home in Tel Aviv. The family was sent to Dimona like many immigrants from India.

Forty years past since, and now the grandkids to the house of Tzari opened a pioneer store, "Chutni" which dissipates scents on 79 Ha'Hashmonaim Street in Tel Aviv. Heavy incense scent welcomes patrons. In one corner of the store, shelves with Indian movies and music, on the ground sacks of Indian legumes: whole mung beans, all kinds of lentil, and many types of rice. The main table displays spices like white poppy, black cardamom, Rose Chai (tea), Masala Chai, mince meat preserver, and barbecue seasonings.

Sharon's and Roe'e's grandfather and grandmother were also in the same business: they opened the first Indian food stand in Dimona. "It was a small food stand where my grandmother cooked all types of food which was complicated to make at home," says Sharon Tzari. But the parents

of the brothers Tzari abandoned the cuisine trade and the Indian culture in general. Their father worked at the electric company and their mother was a nanny.

During adolescence Sharon, who is 30 years old now, started to be interested in the family's culture: "It was important for me to speak to my grandfather and grandmother in Marathi, I asked to watch Indian movies. Slowly I noticed that my peers feel like I do, they do not want to erase this chapter from their lives." When he was released from the army he was employed in various areas and later opened an Indian restaurant in Be'er Sheva. After his marriage he moved to Ashdod and opened a store for food products and spices from India. When he considered opening a similar store in Tel Aviv with his brother, he decided to also hold cooking classes for "Authentic Indian food, because cookbooks which are sold in Israel exclude spices that can't be obtained here and imitations were accepted".

Among the products sold in the store is ghee butter, made from cow's milk and refined seven times in various temperatures. According to Tzari, the process turns it to be relatively healthy. Also sold are Jagri, sugar cane mixed and packed with molasses that is considered to a relatively healthy sweetener. Soon stainless steel products imported from India will be sold at the store as well as natural cosmetics. During the weekends, home cooked Indian food is sold by the two brothers: two types of stuffed Samosas—rice and peas and potatoes and peas; and a cauldron of Indian dishes.

Source: Translated from Haaretz, <http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/spages/945412.html>

## An Indian Love Story, Dimona Style

Dimona residents gathered in the city's Cultural Center to watch a new play. The play, based on the well-known Indian film "Sangam," is in Hindi and the actors are local residents of Indian origin. The hall has 600 seats. On the first night the hall was packed and for the second show two-thirds of the theater was full.

Production started over a year ago. David Mirage, an American Jewish millionaire, came to the city, was moved by its cultural diversity and decided to donate money to different projects. Director Ilan Greenberg met with Dimona's Indian residents and decided to turn "Sangam" into a play. After staging the play in Dimona, Greenberg started receiving offers to perform it all over Israel.

And so the play begins. The curtain opens to reveal a young boy, Sunder, who is in love with a girl named Radha. A girl and a boy, Radha and Gopal, approach Sunder. Sunder and Gopal fight, and Gopal



leaves with Radha. Sunder promises himself that one day he and Radha will marry. These words foreshadow all that is to come.

The stage is divided into three parts and a musical ensemble is a part of the background. Behind the stage hangs the screen with the Hebrew translation. The set design allows the play to look just like a well-edited film. In tense moments, the music grows louder than the voices in the scene and the singers from the musical ensemble sing instead of the actors. Just like in Indian films, say some of the people in the audience. Some recognize the actors as their neighbors. They laugh, critique their fluency in Hindi and occasionally applaud.

During the intermission, the auditorium turns into a sort of little India. The snack bar sells Indian snacks and Indian films are on sale to all interested. The director of the community center, Noam Cohen, reveals what everyone who is familiar with Indian film knows. That friendship is valued above all else.

You can view photos from this event at the below link:

<http://www.smahot.co.il/gallery.aspx?key=weitxowxyrqofpb>

Source: Adapted from Haaretz, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/953263.html>

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## Ahmedabad Jews Today

The Ahmedabad Jewish Congregation at the Magen Abraham Synagogue is one of the most vibrant Jewish Communities in India. The community has continued the prayers, traditions and rituals since the Synagogue came into existence more than 70 years ago.

The members of the community and their teacher and Hazzan Johnny Pingle have maintained the vibrancy of the Synagogue and the community. Johnny has studied with his predecessors and with Aaron Erulkar, an esteemed member of the congregation who now lives in Israel. He is a self-made teacher and cantor. He has maintained the glorious traditions of Mizrahi and Sephardic Jews who become knowledgeable with their own efforts and study. We have never had Yeshivas or Jewish Institutes of religious study and learning in India. In spite of that, every ritual, practice and prayer has been faithfully studied and passed on to future generations. Johnny Pingle is an outstanding example of this tradition.

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## Legacies (By Noreen Daniel)

### Why Was That Passover Night Different from All Other Nights?

The year was 1982. The city was Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat, India. The place—Magen Abraham Synagogue.

As commonly seen in religious organizations, there was a discord between the committee members. As a result, besides the daily prayers, most of the religious and social gatherings had stopped.

Romiel met some young boys and girls at the Synagogue one Saturday evening. They discussed the possibility of having a Passover Seder, which had probably never been done by any orthodox synagogue in India until that time. Their enthusiasm prompted me to hunt for a record which had popular Passover tunes for some of the prayers in the Haggadah. Romiel made a tape from an LP owned by Mr. Enoch Ezekiel from Bombay. We had one Haggadah, from which Romiel would learn one or two songs every week and then teach those songs to the boys and girls who regularly came on Saturday evening to the synagogue. The Hebrew songs were handwritten phonetically in English and Marathi, as some people did not know Hebrew well. They were asked to repeat the songs several times until they had perfected the tunes and memorized the words.

The commitment of the children drew their mothers to get involved. They too started coming to the synagogue on Saturday evenings, bringing snacks for everyone after Havdala. They also expressed a desire to participate in the Passover Seder. I translated a few of the readings and passages into Marathi. At that time, in Ahmedabad, only two families had Seder prayers at home, the Best family and our family. The rest of the families observed Pesach for eight days by not eating Chametz.

Matza was made by washing wheat grains and drying them on an old sari in the hot April sun. Then the grains were ground into flour in a flour mill. The owner of the mill knew that the Bene Israel celebrated the forthcoming Passover holiday, and he cleaned the mill thoroughly before grinding the wheat for Matza. In fact he gave a fixed time for taking the wheat for grinding. Little dough was made each time. Two women rolled the Matza, and then two other women baked them. A few afternoons went into making Matza in each other's homes. In those days, no ready-made Matza packets came to India from Israel or from the USA.

Haroset was made by boiling dates that had been cleaned and pitted. After being boiled, they were crushed by hand into a pulp. The juice was strained through a sieve and again boiled to have a thick liquid of the consistency of honey.

In Ahmedabad, lettuce and celery was not available in the market in summer, but St. Xavier's College had it growing in their kitchen garden. Our children were studying in the same school, so the priests of the school made it a point of keeping the plants until Passover and gave it to us when required. Due to the heat, the plants became quite bitter by the time it was Passover.

A circular to notify the community of the upcoming Seder was carried personally by the Shamash on a bicycle. The subscription was 20 rupees for adults and 10 rupees for children. Almost every one of the 250 members willingly signed and agreed to participate. Four goats were to be sacrificed on Erev Pesach morning in the Synagogue compound. One person from the community raised an objection and said that the slaughter of the goats would not be permitted and the police would be informed. At 5 AM, the leading male members of the community of both the opposition parties were in the Synagogue, standing near the two front pillars of the synagogue to make sure nobody stopped the slaughtering of the goats. That really showed the strength of the community.

All the big vessels of brass and copper were kashered by tinning them a few days before Passover. The grape juice bottles were also made ready by kashering fifty empty squash glass bottles. We boiled ten pounds of dried black grapes, then crushed them using a kashered hand machine and passed them through a clean cloth into a big vessel. We had to clean and kasher enough glass plates, big and small glasses, and other utensils to serve 250 people. One hundred copies of the Haggadah were made.

There were about 30 children, all dressed in new clothes, who came at 3 PM to prepare the dinner tables. Twenty-five seder plates were made under Romiel's direction.

The 250-member congregation came for the Passover Seder evening, which was a fantastic experience. Everyone happily read their portions in Hebrew, English, Marathi and Gujarati. The children and adults that had learnt the songs sang beautifully. They answered all the questions, and if one person started everyone would all join in.

After the fabulous dinner of meat curry, rice and salad, we started singing the songs and the celebration reached a crescendo. It was just before midnight that the Seder service was completed to loud applause and cheering. Everyone felt that they had reached a spiritual high. We all were so elated with the success of the Seder. An American lady that attended the Seder that year saw that there was only one Haggada for all the members, she sent 100 books the following year, and they are still in use by the community.

Twenty-five years have passed since that community Passover Seder. Many of the members have migrated to different parts of the world. Whether in Israel or the USA, on Passover, we still think of our community Seder in Ahmedabad. I know that those who are still in Ahmedabad remember it too. This community has remained a model community. Even today they make it a point to celebrate every festival with all the traditions and have truly passed on the baton from generation to generation.

When I see many synagogues going empty in the USA, in spite of there being millions of Jews in the country, I ask, "Why can't the youth take up the challenge and revive the Jewish congregations and keep the practices and traditions from one generation to another?"

I think the younger Jews owe it as a sign of honor and respect to their earlier generation who kept these traditions and religious practices in spite of all the difficulties. Young and old readers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, let this be your sacred mission.

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## Ahmedabad Jewish Community Success Story

We received the following article from Shulmith Solomon Awaskar whose husband Menashe is the Secretary of the Synagogue. The President is Benjamin Reuben Kehimkar and the Vice President is Serena Jacob Agarwarkar. Serena is a diligent student of the Sunday Hebrew class.

These are all good friends of Romiel's and their commitment to Judaism, the community and the Synagogue is praise worthy.

The Jewish community of Ahmedabad is comprised of approximately 35 families, with about 40 families all over Gujarat. The Sunday Hebrew coaching classes, managed by Mr. Johnny Pingle on the Synagogue premises, are the pulse of the congregation. About 15 students of all ages gather religiously at 10:30 a.m. to learn the daily prayers, holiday prayers and Hebrew Scriptures. During various festivals, everyone gets to proudly witness even the children reciting prayers from our sacred books. It is truly said that "Knowing is not enough; one must apply. Willing is not enough; one must do."

We are successfully able to continue all the High Holyday services and also celebrate festivals like Hanukkah, Purim and Pesach with a lot of enthusiasm from our small but committed community.

We at Ahmedabad take pride in having such a loving and encouraging environment to make our congregation a viable one. Part of the credit of this success story goes to our sponsor of Sunday classes Mr. Raphael Nadel of the USA, whose continued support has been responsible for nurturing the Ahmedabad Congregation.



Magen Abraham  
Synagogue, Ahmedabad

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## Recipes from Noreen's Kitchen

### Hameen

This is a typical Bene Israel and Baghdadi Jewish dish prepared for the Sabbath (Saturday) lunch. In many Indian homes, there were no hot plates or crock pots or slow cookers. The food was cooked on coal stoves (sigdi) to get a warm Sabbath dish. When all the ingredients were mixed, the thick copper pot which was tinned from inside was placed on the coal 'sigdi' which was covered with ash for slow burning. A tight lid was placed on the pot and on the top of the lid was also placed ignited coal covered with ash. This was left overnight until next afternoon. This Hameen, i.e. meat cooked with rice and spices, was very aromatic, and even the neighbors delighted in its aroma.

### Ingredients:

1 pound mutton (ribs or small bones preferred)  
½ pound rice with broken grains  
1-inch piece of ginger  
6 garlic pearls  
1 teaspoon coriander powder  
1 teaspoon cumin powder  
1 teaspoon turmeric powder  
½ teaspoon ground black pepper  
2 tablespoons salt (to taste)  
1-inch stick cinnamon, crushed  
6 cloves  
6 green cardamoms  
½ can or 1 cup coconut juice

### Preparation:

Cut the meat into about 1½ inch pieces. Clean and wash the pieces. Apply about 2 tablespoons of salt to the meat and set aside for one hour. Wash at least 2 or 3 times before use. Grind ginger and garlic together into a paste.

In a pot, add meat, ginger and garlic paste, and salt and turmeric powder. Also add coriander and cumin powder. Half cook the meat until thick gravy is left enough to par cook the rice. Add rice and the remaining crushed spices and cook until the gravy dries up. Add coconut juice and cook on a slow heat, stirring sometimes. Hameen is ready when it has a consistency of a thick porridge. Serve warm with lime juice.

Do try making this Hameen for one of the days of Passover, and surely those who enjoy it will never forget its taste.

## Lamb Stew with Spring Vegetables

This preparation was popular in some Indian Jewish homes that had British influence. It is made with some aromatic spices to suit the Indian pallet. This stew can also be made for one of the days of Passover. Oriental and Sephardic Jews eat rice for Passover. So rice flour can be used for thickening the gravy instead of corn flour.

### Ingredients:

1 pound boneless mutton, cleaned and cut into 1 ½ inch pieces  
2 carrots, scraped and cut into 1 inch pieces  
10 French beans, cut into 1 inch pieces  
2 potatoes, peeled and cut into 1 inch pieces  
6-7 florets cauliflower or broccoli  
8 small onions, peeled  
½ cup green peas  
2 tablespoons rice flour or corn flour  
1 cup coconut juice  
1 inch piece ginger  
5 garlic pearls  
1 inch stick cinnamon  
7-8 cloves  
10-12 black peppercorns shelled  
7-8 green cardamoms pounded  
1 ½ teaspoons salt (to taste)

### Preparation:

Wash mutton well. Apply about 2 tablespoons of salt and leave aside. Wash the vegetables and steam for 5 minutes. They should not be overcooked.

After approximately one hour, wash the mutton and drain. Grind the ginger and garlic into a paste.

In a pressure cooker, cook the mutton in the ginger-garlic paste. Add salt to taste and all the whole spices. In about 15 minutes it should be tender. In a non stick pot, add the cooked mutton and all the vegetables. Make a paste of rice or corn flour in a bowl. Add it to the stew on a low fire. Lastly, add the coconut juice. Stir gently till the gravy of the stew looks thick like porridge. Serve hot.

This stew is a welcome change from the curries and is enjoyed with rice by all young and old.

For more recipes please visit our online forum at: <http://www.jewsofindia.org/forums>

Click on the "Recipes" category.

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## Submissions to the Newsletter

We would like all our members to send us articles of interest, birthdates or birth months, wedding anniversaries and any other information of interest to the community. Submissions are subject to editing for clarity and style.

Please send newsletter submissions to Evelina or Aylon latest by May 15<sup>th</sup> 2008.

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