

The Bene Ephraim Jews of India

For the past two months, I attended weekly Shabbat services in the synagogue, on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. We lit candles to welcome Shabbat and smelled *B'samim* to say goodbye to it. We sang *Eshet Chayil*, heard the weekly *Parasha*, and blessed the meal with *Hamotzi*. We drank grape juice from a *Kiddush* cup and ate kosher chicken.

I had intense discussions with my close friends and community members about Jewish identity, the meaning of God, and Israel. We spoke about how Jewish tribes migrated out of the Middle East during Biblical times, and slowly found their way to where they are today. "How did they keep their traditions alive for thousands of years?" we wondered together. We marveled at the power of *Hashem* to watch over *Hashem's* people, and we pondered the idea of one day being collected and returned to the Holy Land.

But, we looked through the leaves of palm trees, not pine trees, in order to find the three stars before *Havdalah*. The *Parasha* was delivered not in Hebrew or English, but in Telugu. The chicken was much spicier than it tends to be around here. And we said *Hamotzi* over chapati.

This is because, for the past two months, I had the great honor to live with and learn from the Bene Ephraim Jewish community of Andhra Pradesh, India. During the last semester, while studying in Hyderabad, I

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realized that my experience in India would be incomplete without visiting at least one or two of the six or so Jewish communities in the country.

Now, India is home to several distinct Jewish communities, including, the Bene Israel and Baghdadi Jews of Mumbai, the Bene Menashe of the Northeast, the Cochini Jews of Kerala, in addition to small communities in Kolkata, Delhi, Ahmedabad, and more recently, in Tamil Nadu. But overall, Jews make up a tiny, roughly 0.0006 percent of the total 1.3 billion people in the country. I was particularly interested to learn how the Jewish people there keep their sense of identity in a place where there are so few of them.

After doing some research, I found that there was a Jewish community about six hours by train from me, in the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh. Being one of very few Jews in Hyderabad, I was excited to meet this community with the hope that I could connect with them as a Jew, and as someone who had started studying their language.

Realizing that I wanted to spend more time with them, I decided to make them the focus of my senior research project for college. I applied for, and was awarded, a grant from my university to stay in India for the summer, to live and learn with the Bene Ephraim.

The Bene Ephraim community is located in a village in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh, in the southeast of India, about forty kilometers from the coast. The climate is very hot and humid in the summer months.

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Their synagogue is located next to the house of the community leader, Sadok Yacobi, and his family, with whom I stayed. The rest of the families live in a section of the village about seven minutes away by foot.

Weekly, the community joins together in the synagogue for Kabbalat Shabbat, Saturday morning services, and Havdalah. Services are fully participatory – several congregants, women and men, take turns leading prayers. Holidays are festive occasions where people put on their best clothes and prepare special foods. One friend, Leah, told me her favorite holiday is Sukkot, because she loves seeing the whole community come together. The young people gather wood, build the *sukkah*, put branches on top, and decorate the inside with fruits. “Every day we sit there, eat, and sleep,” she said, “even when it rains.”

All families kiss the paper or wood *mezuzot* on their houses as they enter and exit. They light candles before Shabbat and wear *kippot* inside the synagogue. Prayers are said in a combination of Telugu and Hebrew.

I was awed, humbled, and inspired by everything I saw and learned from the Bene Ephraim. There were several things that immediately struck and impressed me, and I think I can best describe them in three categories.

The first is their devotion to Judaism, and the way they carry out Jewish values. As Jewish people constitute only a small minority in their country and also in their village, many people on the outside have never

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heard of Judaism. India is extremely religiously diverse, and one needs to look no further than their village to illustrate this. Between the endless collection of Christian denominations, the Hindu temples to all different Hindu deities, and the mosques, the area feels like it is home to more religious institutions than it is to actual houses. Not to mention that each of these religious communities has a loudspeaker at the top of its building, blasting religious songs, prayer calls, and announcements throughout the day. One particular Hindu temple directly neighboring the Bene Ephraim synagogue plays the same song every morning from about six AM to ten AM, and again at night. (That song is *still* stuck in my head.) When I speak on the phone with my friends there, I can actually hear it playing in the background. I say all this to show that in the midst of a village bursting with many religious faiths, the Bene Ephraim hold on tightly to their Judaism. Further, in an admirable embodiment of Jewish values, they have very good relationships with their neighbors of other religions. Since the community leader is well respected by the whole village, many non-Jews will also come to ask for his blessings, and he will always give them.

In Guntur, keeping Shabbat can be a difficult task. Saturday is a working day there, and to go to synagogue instead of work means to lose out on a day's worth of income. Most of the families are financially

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disadvantaged, and will therefore work as many days as they can. Yet, they will not go to work on Shabbat or on festivals.

Another thing that I admire about the Bene Ephraim congregants is their detailed knowledge of the Torah. Almost all community members have Hebrew names derived from the Torah, and they know not only which *parasha* and *pasuk* they are from, but also who they were related to. For example, Keziya, the community leader's daughter, and a very good friend of mine, traces her name to the book of Job, as Job's second daughter. In spare moments, Miriam, the wife of Sadok (and the backbone of the community), will sit with a copy of the Old Testament in Telugu in one hand, and a *Chumash* in the other, comparing translations. Even with all of this knowledge, community members are always eager to learn more.

One more thing that inspires me is the Bene Ephraim's understanding of themselves – the way they embrace many identities at once – through history and in the context of today. Their oral history, which was recently written into a book by Sadok's brother, Shmuel, traces them back to Israel. According to this history, the Ephraim people migrated through the Middle East and north India to reach the region where they are today, and in that process, became part of the Telugu people, and were grouped into the lowest caste.

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Telugu refers to both people who live in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and to the language that they speak. Telugu is an extremely sophisticated language with its own script of more than 50 letters, in which most words have almost as many syllables as we say in a whole English sentence.

Their caste, called Madiga in South India, is one of the formerly “untouchable” castes. Caste is a rigid social hierarchy and Madigas are at the absolute bottom of the ladder. Even though untouchability has been outlawed, the hierarchy has not changed and discrimination still exists. Therefore, many Bene Ephraim families are facing a very difficult situation. Most men work as farm laborers, and earn very little income. Besides the community leaders’ family, the adult generation is mostly uneducated. Due to their caste status, they sometimes face injustices in schools or in daily life. As the Bene Ephraim community lacks many resources, I hope we as a community can help to support them, without seeing them as any less. “Helping them” is not synonymous with “making them look more like us”, but rather, with enabling them to have more freedom to chart their own paths.

While I was still in India, I started emailing with the staff at Temple Emunah to let them know where I was staying, and to see if the congregation would be interested in helping out the Bene Ephraim

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community. I am extremely grateful to Susan Mayer, Jodie Parmer, Rabbi Lerner, Rabbi Fel, and the Social Action Committee, who were incredibly enthusiastic about this idea. They not only gave me the opportunity to speak here today, but also have done extensive work in order to start a fundraising project at our synagogue, in partnership with Kulanu, an organization that helps to support small Jewish communities around the world. As the families there have very low income, we would like to raise funds for small projects, such as helping to pay school fees for the children and youth of the community. You can see more information about this on flyers outside and by email from the Temple. The community would be immensely grateful for your support.

Now, Madigas, the lowest caste in Andhra Pradesh, were historically excluded from Hindu society because they have customs that are considered unacceptable to Hindus, such as burying their deceased, and eating beef. These same customs, however, are present in Judaism, and this link was important in the recognition of their Jewish origin. Community members are proud of their Jewish origins and accepting of their Madiga ones. More importantly, being one does not take away from the other.

Since others in the area don't know about Judaism, community members explain that their people, Jews, are originally from Israel and have spread out all over the world. Despite having so few Jewish and

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public resources, the community members are extremely knowledgeable, self-assured, practicing Jews.

In my time with the Bene Ephraim, I chose to focus on learning about what it means to be a Jew. In a phase of life where I am thinking a lot about identity, and in a society where people give so much importance to labels, I am always left wondering.

I hoped that by learning what it means to be a Jew in India, I could learn a bit more about what it means to be a Jew. Jews are so diverse, and come from all corners of the world, yet we are all one people. What does that mean, in a society where the prevailing systems of thought draw hard lines of difference based on color and national origin? And when those surface differences lead to very real and challenging consequences, from discrimination to language barriers to significant economic disparities, is it presumptuous to say that we have anything in common, that “we are all connected”?

One of the many important things I learned from the Bene Ephraim is to be able to say with more confidence than before that we can be many things at once. We are not just a collection of different parts, but rather, we are fully everything. Although the world is divided into countries by political borders, which do affect the way we are socialized, educated, and the rights that we have; people are deeper than that, and do have the

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capacity to exist between, among, around, and through. The Bene Ephraim, like all Jews, are living at an intersection of multiple identities. The community taught me that, in order to balance being fully Jewish with being fully everything else that we are, we need to understand that those things do not have to be mutually exclusive.

But, the thing is that these differences – these disparities, barriers, and injustices – are real. It sounds nice to say “All Jews are one big happy family,” but unfortunately, it is not always that way. To cite the example of the Bene Ephraim, they face many injustices due to their socioeconomic and caste status that most of us at Temple Emunah do not have to face. Further, they live in an entirely different national, cultural, and geographic context than we do. At weddings, the newlyweds drape traditional Indian flower garlands over each other. They make grape juice by squeezing fresh grapes (there is no Manischewitz in Guntur). Married women cover their heads while praying with fabric from their saris, rather than hats or doilies. But that does not mean the Bene Ephraim are “unusual,” nor that their brand of Judaism is “exotic”.

We do not all get equal treatment in the world, nor do we all agree. But that does not mean that we cannot connect. I think it is better to see Jews as “one complex, diverse family” where we can unite not just *despite* our differences, but can connect even more strongly in recognition and

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celebration of them. There are systems at play in the world that have put us in these very different positions, as a result of which we all become combinations of different things. So if I can say anything of what it means to be a Jew, I would say it means, to be everything at once.