

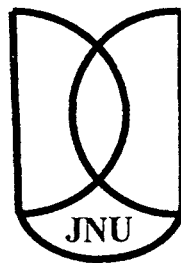


**SEARCHING FOR HOME: READING SELECT WORKS OF  
ESTHER DAVID**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the award of the Degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

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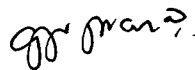
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## CERTIFICATE

This dissertation entitled, *Searching for Home: Reading Select Works of Esther David* submitted by Ms. Anshu Kujur, to the Center for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma in this or in any other University or Institution.

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*... For he Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you"*

(New Testament, Hebrew 13:5)

*These words have been the source of my inspiration during the various ups and downs that I went through the course of my work. His promise to ceaselessly help me continues to inspire and infuse strength within me.*

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Indian landscape sears my eyes.  
I have become a part of it  
To be observed by foreigners.  
They say that I am a singular,  
Their letters overstate the case.*

*I have made my commitments now.  
This is one: to stay where I am,  
As others choose to give themselves  
In some remote and backward place.  
My backward place is where I am.*

- Nissim Ezekiel, Background, Casually from Hymns in Darkness

Within the borders of the Indian subcontinent, we have numerous communities. Each different from the other in language, culture, place of origin, food habits and the profession they follow, from ancient times through the colonial age upto the post-colonial times. It is also home to numerous religious and ethnic communities which originated in the land or came and settled from other parts of the world. Every community seeks to define itself as having different identity and cultural practice unique to its community. The need to situate one's community as different from a host of others is to retain the distinctive essence of its existence. It can also suggest the community's need to forge its traditions, to protect it from being extinct as a community which has its root in history. In this age and time of globalization, where national boundaries are becoming invisible, we find similar threat of disintegration to community identities within the national boundary of India. India as a land has always prided itself on the multiplicity of voices emanating from an array of differing communities residing in it; the threat of a 'melting pot' situation looms large in India's diversified communal status. The threat aside, India remains home to a large number of ethnic communities who live in harmony professing their own beliefs and cultural practices. Each community as it tries to align itself to the larger context of an Indian nationhood; continues to simultaneously hold on to its own special beliefs arising out of its association with a certain community.

The field of literature has provided space to these communities to voice their concerns. It is also a space that allows them to negotiate and articulate the dynamics of their community

identity circumscribed as it is within the larger frame of an Indian identity. Through my work I will be exploring the Bene Israel community- a Jewish diasporic community residing in India. I focus on the works of Esther David, a Bene Israeli art critic, columnist and novelist. Through her narratives about her community which settled in India over 1,500 years, I will analyze and investigate the issues of home, identity and belonging in relation to the Bene Israel diasporic Jewish community. What is of utmost importance is the 'Jewish identity' of this community. Their traditional accounts of their origin, and their subsequent re-settlement on Indian soil harks back to a time when they fled the persecutions in Israel. Their Jewish identity along with their diasporic status, as well as questions pertaining to home as the 'Promised Land', is the basis to discuss the various issues that Esther David raises through her works- issues of identity and community, home, belonging and nationhood or acquired nationality.

If we look into the annals of world history we observe how the Jews as an ethnic and religious community faced persecution, displacement and dislocation from their land of Biblical origin (Palestine) and later in the host-lands. The dispersal of the Jews from their land was nearly complete making them the first diaspora that the world witnessed. In fact, the very term 'Diaspora' as mentioned in Oxford English Dictionary comes from the Greek word "*diaspeirein*, meaning 'scattering' or 'sowing' (*speirein*), and originally used to account for the botanical phenomenon of seed dispersal (hence *dia* completely \_ *speirein* sow)", was initially used to define the Jewish condition of exile beyond Israel, chiefly in the 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E (Before Common Era, as the Jewish historians prefer to call B.C or Before Christ). They were dispersed 4000 years ago from the land of their ancestors, the present day Palestine at different stages in history as suggested in their religious texts and according to historical data. The etymology of the word 'diaspora' assists us to situate the term and the meaning, associated with it and the community it came to originally signify, the Jews. *Galut* or exile is the closest Hebrew (the Jews as a tribal community were called so, or the language spoken by them) equivalent of the word Diaspora. While the former, in terms of meaning is oriented more towards religious notion the latter seems to suggest a political notion. Therefore, the Jewish diasporic condition which began in the ancient times could be more closely associated to *galut* than to diaspora as stated in their religious scriptures. The term is closely related to a condition arising out of their religion wherein the Jews had a history of exile from the land promised to Israel, God's chosen people.



Nonetheless, it was the Jewish exiles that brought the term diaspora into academic usage and it seemed to signify this singular exile till the late nineteenth century. For leading academics of diaspora, this singular implication seemed restrictive and redundant and called for wider discourse. It had set ideas about what makes a community diasporic, thereby hijacking the word solely to define the Jewish exile. Such confining definition limited the scope for a wholesome study of the condition called diaspora, thereby calling for a re-definition. This led to broadening of its meaning whereby other diasporic communities and trans-national communities whose land of origin and current location differed, were brought under its gamut. Moreover, the incorporation of other groups as diasporas, has generated various insights and points of discussion for theorists. Therefore theorists writing on diaspora might begin with the etymology of the word, but in their discussion of diaspora they supersede the dated definition which one finds in the Oxford English Dictionary or the New Encyclopedia Britannica (Micropaedia, vol. 4) and bring forth the multiple issues that these communities bring up as diasporic communities. Therefore, limiting oneself to the dated definition not only proves to be redundant but also forces one to forego various streams of argument that multiple diasporic communities can contribute to the idea of diaspora. Since I am dealing with a diasporic Jewish community, the Bene Israel's of the Konkan, on the western coast of India, this makes it imperative for me to take into consideration the meaning of diaspora as used to explain the condition of Jews.

### **Jewish History and the Diaspora**

The land in the Near East covering Iraq, Syria, and Palestine was a coveted land in ancient times because it was situated on the trade routes and surrounded by seas. The origin of the Jewish community was in and around this fertile land of Canaan in West Asia surrounded by rivers like Nile, Tigris and Euphrates, and by Egyptian and Babylonian civilizations and also by the deserts of Arabia and the highlands of Asia Minor. The land they inhabited was situated on the established trade routes and had important harbours on the Gulf of Akaba and the Mediterranean coast. The land of Canaan which later came to be known as Israel over the years, was also known by other names like Judah, Coele-Syria, Judea, Levant and Palestine and was the 'breadbasket' of the flourishing civilizations around it. The Jews draw their

lineage from the Biblical figure Abraham through Isaac and Jacob (renamed as Israel) who were Hebrews, descendants of Eber, son of Shem who was Noah's son as stated in the *Torah* or Jewish *Bible*. According to Jewish tradition the Israelites came from Jacob's twelve sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Benjamin, Dan, Naphtali, Gad and Asher) who had settled in Egypt. Jacob's descendants grew in population while in Egypt and came to be hated by Egyptians for taking over their land and works. This led to their enslavement. The Jewish tradition later suggests the Exodus of Israelites from Egypt to Canaan led by the Prophet Moses leading to the liberation of the Jews from Egyptian bondage. The Exodus marked the formation of Israelites as a people belonging to these twelve different tribes. The Israelites under the leadership of Joshua (chosen by God to lead the Israelites to the 'Promised Land' after wandering forty years in the wilderness) after Moses, conquered and settled in Canaan; this land was divided between the twelve tribes. These people were led by rulers called Judges and later the Israelite monarchy came into being under Saul's leadership and continued under King David (who conquered Jerusalem and made it his capital) and Solomon. With the end of Solomon's rule the kingdom was divided into Israel consisting of ten tribes (in the north) and Judah consisting of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (in the south). After Israel was conquered by the Assyrian ruler in 722 BCE the people were scattered from this kingdom. The Assyrians had a custom wherein they rounded the "leading citizens of the conquered land, the ruling families the educated, the skilled craftsmen and artisans, the able and productive people-and carried them captive to their own kingdom" (Landman and Efron 1982: 42). The people who made up Israel are often referred to as the Ten Lost tribes of Israel. This first wave of Jewish dispersal took Jews to far off lands to find refuge and created the Jewish diaspora, but lack of information forbids one to continue further. Likewise the kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonian army in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Judahites were taken as slaves to Babylon which caused the second wave of dispersal of Jews and the establishment of Jewish diaspora. Some Jews returned to their homeland Israel after the Persians conquered Babylon; most stayed in the diaspora. The first temple at Jerusalem was destroyed during the Assyrian conquest. After the return of Judahites from Babylon, the construction of the second temple was undertaken with the Persian approval. The leadership of the Jewish people was carried forward by five successive generations of *zugot*

(pairs) of leadership after the death of the last prophet, first under Persian and then Greek rule. By the time the Judahites came under the Greek rule, there was a division into Hellenized and religious Jews. When the Seleucid King banned some of their rituals, the orthodox Jews revolted under the leadership of the Hasmonean family (also known as the Maccabees) which later formed an independent Hasmonean dynasty which ruled between 165 BCE to 63 BCE. This dynasty came to an end as a result of a civil war. Eventually, the people decided they wanted a theocratic clergy to rule over them than a king and therefore they appealed to the Roman authorities. Soon after, a Roman campaign of conquest and annexation followed under Pompey. Judea which was ruled by the Hasmoneans and then Herodians as independent kingdoms came under direct rule of Romans and was renamed as Judaea Province. The Roman rule lasted from 63 BCE to 400 CE (Common Era or AD) and they were brutal in their treatment of their Jewish subjects. This led to a revolt in 66 CE against the Roman rulers of Judea. The revolt was put down by the Roman Emperors. The siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE led to destruction of much of the Temple in Jerusalem and subsequent plundering of the artefacts in the temple like the Menorah. The Jews continued to reside after the destruction of their temple until 2<sup>nd</sup> century when Julius Severus ravaged Judea while putting down the Bar Kokhba revolt. More than 900 villages were destroyed during this and most of the population of central Judea was cleaned out, killed, sold into slavery or forced to leave their land. The Jewish population after the enforced banishment concentrated in Galilee, while others who had fled from their land became refugees in other towns of the Roman Empire, Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa. The Jewish population which left their land after the Roman persecutions came to form the diaspora in other parts of the Roman Empire and countries they had fled to. In the Book of Acts in the *Bible* one finds reference to the diasporic Jews residing in the Roman cities. The dispersion of the Jews brought about a sense of loss and homelessness which became cornerstones of Jewish identity in the diaspora. The policy towards proselytize to Judaism, which spread the Jewish religion throughout the Hellenistic civilization, ended with the wars against the Romans and the following reconstruction of Jewish values for the post-Temple era. Of critical importance to the reshaping of Jewish tradition, from the Temple-based religion to the traditions of the Diaspora, was the development of the interpretations of the

*Torah*<sup>1</sup> found in the *Mishnah*<sup>2</sup> and *Talmud*<sup>3</sup>. The last Roman Emperor allowed the Jews to return to the 'Holy Land' of Jerusalem which they longed to see and also to rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem.

During the Roman rule it was official Christian policy to convert Jews to Christianity. During the last few years of Roman rule over Judea and with the consecration of St. John Chrysostom as the Patriarch, the Christian rhetoric against Jews continued to rise with a series of sermons such as 'Against the Jew' and 'On the Statues, Homily 17' where St. John preaches against 'the Jewish sickness.' This all added to the already deteriorating conditions of Jews in the diaspora and Judea, and also led to creation of a non-conducive environment filled with distrust and hatred towards the Jewish settlements in the Roman towns. By the third quarter of the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE the old Roman Empire was divided into the eastern Byzantine and western Roman Empire with their capital's at Constantinople and Rome. The divide brought Judea under the Byzantine rule, which followed the Greek Orthodox Church. The Byzantine emperors interfered in the internal affairs of the Synagogue (the Jewish place of worship), issued decrees making Jewish persecution official and restricted the civil rights of the Jews.

With the spread of Islam in the Middle East in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE and "Muhammad's preaching in 613 CE, following his first revelation on Mount Hira in 610" (Jana E. Braziel 2008: 13), the precarious existence of Jews under the Byzantine rule came to an end. The Muslim Caliphate overthrew the Byzantine Empire from the 'Holy Land' (known as Levant, defined as modern Israel, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan) within a space of few years after their victory in the Battle of Yarmouk. Jews and Christians residing in the 'Holy Land' under the Arab Caliphate were considered as *dhimmi* (non-believers), points out Braziel. The Jews faced less severe treatment at the hands of the Caliphate unlike the Byzantine rulers. After the Arab Caliphate, the

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<sup>1</sup>Literally meaning "teaching" it consists of the Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The term also refers to the parchment scroll in which the hand-lettered text of the Five Books of Moses appears.

<sup>2</sup>A twelfth-century Torah commentary by Maimonides.

<sup>3</sup>Comprised of the Mishnah and the Gemora, it is the oral tradition of Jewish law which has been written down and serves as the authority in Jewish law.

Crusaders from Europe carried out the non-Christian and Jewish persecution and massacre. The massacre was a result of the call by Pope Urbanus to the Crusaders from Europe to reclaim the 'Holy Land.' This brought forth a spate of anti-semitic<sup>4</sup> sentiments among the Christians in Europe leading to the spread of violence against the Jews and their expulsion from the European countries. After the Crusaders from Europe the present day Israel then was overtaken by the Mamluk Empire around early thirteenth century. The Mamluks also dotted the holy city with madrasahs, mosques and ornamental tombs. In the early sixteenth century the 'Holy Land' was taken over by the Turkish regime and the Ottoman Empire ruled over it for 400 years. During its rule the walls of the Old city of Jerusalem were built and charitable institutions increased in number. In the latter half of the sixteenth century the empire saw an economic decline which continued till the nineteenth century. The land also witnessed continued disputes over the holy places in Jerusalem and Bethlehem between the different Christian sects. The dispute brought about the involvement and conflict between the European powers in the 'Holy Land'. The involvement led the European powers to exert pressure on the Ottoman Empire to promise equal rights to Christians and Jews, an arrangement that the Muslims resisted. Meanwhile, Jewish immigration, mainly from Eastern Europe, changed the city's demographic structure and the relative importance of the Old City compared with the new quarters outside the walls. The growing influx of Jews from East Europe by 1880s as part of a budding Zionist Movement (Jewish nationalism), further alarmed the Muslims, who were reduced to a minority of the city's population.

With the retreat of the Ottoman forces the British troops occupied Jerusalem in December 1917. Jerusalem became the capital of British administered territory under the League of Nations mandate. The Jewish influx to the region was opposed by the Arabs. There was a rapid development in the city's economy and population under the British rule despite the continued Arab and Jewish confrontations. During the end of the Second World War communal violence erupted once again and Jewish militants targeted British forces and their civil and military headquarters. By 1947 hostilities between Arabs and Jews broke out with brutal atrocities committed on both sides. In November 1947 the General Assembly of United Nations passed a

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<sup>4</sup>Hostility towards or prejudice against Jews.

resolution deciding to partition Palestine between Arabs and Jews and Jerusalem and its surrounding areas including Bethlehem to become a *corpus separatum* a separate entity under a governor appointed by the United Nations. When the British High Commission along with the British forces started to retreat from Jerusalem in 1948 the mandate came to an end and the State of Israel was proclaimed on the ancient homeland by the Jews under the leadership of David Ben-Gurion. With the creation of the State of Israel fighting continued between the Jews and the Arabs. During the Arab-Israeli war Israel took over west Jerusalem while Trans-Jordan took control of the Old City and parts of east Jerusalem. Arabs fled from west Jerusalem and Jews from Old City and east Jerusalem which made residential segregation on basis of ethnicity completely total. The immigration to the 'Holy Land' which began during the Ottoman rule continued. Ever since the creation of the State of Israel, the diaspora Jews have continued to make an *aliyah* (return) to the 'Promised Land' of their ancestors.

#### **'Promised Land', home of Jews**

This diaspora across the world flourished in the host-lands despite the persecutions and contributed immensely to art, literature, science and various other fields of knowledge. In the absence of a physical space or home which they could call as their own, they flourished in the host-lands with quality output in different fields of knowledge. Living in a diaspora, they held fast to the belief or dream of a return to the 'Promised Land'. This was yet another defining factor of Jewish diaspora, while they moved around the world with a dream to reclaim the 'Promised Land'. They relied on the writings of the *Torah* to authenticate their tradition of belonging to the 'Holy Land', their place of origin, and the promise of a return to the land of their ancestors. Their un-enthusiastic attempt to be absolutely assimilated into the host society was justified as a means to remain truthful and committed to the memory of the 'ethnic myths' of a common origin, history and a geographical space belonging to the Jews. This dream of a return to the 'Promised Land' was realized by the Jewish diaspora, where they reclaimed the 'Holy Land' and began to rebuild their lives in the land of their ancestors, the holiest place for the Jews. The state of Israel came into being in 1948, many Jews from the diaspora migrated to the 'Promised Land' in the hope of a life free of persecution and anti-semitic sentiments where they

could freely practice Judaism. It allowed them to reside in the land of their ancestors which was long promised to the Israelites (including Israelites and the Judahites) by God.

The identity of the Jews depended on certain reference points or loci of identification like all other identities. An identity could be given i.e. defined by some external reference point like the 'other' within the dialectics of us (governing power) or them (who constitute the other). The above exemplifies a singular marker of identification. Likewise there exist numerous reference points from which identity could be derived. These identity markers could be- ones place of origin, country, religion, culture, language etc. It depends completely on an individual or the identifying body, to which identity marker it would prefer to be identified with or addressed at a particular moment. There exist various identities based on an individual's place of origin or the country which one belongs that make up their national identity. Similarly, there are other identities based on an individual's cultural and religious associations or orientations. Every individual has levels of identity markers for their identification which alters according to situations and requirements. Therefore, identity based on nationality may work in borders or in countries other than the place of origin. The most common identity marker, often used to locate and situate an individual, happens to be one's place of origin, called one's national identity. Similarly, religious, cultural and language practices can make other markers of one's identity along with race. The Jews did not have the luxury of a national identity based on place of origin till 1948 when the state of Israel was created. Prior to the establishment of the state of Israel the Jewish race was based on the basic standards like historical evidence on their race and religion. Therefore, race and religion ranked above other identity markers, constituting the integral identity for the Jews the world over. Jewish identity could be said to be ethno-religious where race and religion played an integral part in constructing their identity as Jews within the diaspora and also in the land of their ancestors, Israel. Race and religion accorded the Jews an ethno-religious collective in the diaspora.

In discussing Jewish diaspora, what is of prime importance and calls for our attention is how the various Jewish non/diasporic communities draw their ancestry or tradition/myth of origin. For instance, there are Jewish communities claiming to be followers of Judaism (religion of the Jews) but may have very little or insubstantial knowledge of tracing their ancestry. Yet

there might be other Jewish communities who fail to establish their Jewish identity because of a lack of direct ancestry from the ancient Israelite race. In both cases the claim to Jewish origin of such groups seems unsatisfactory and brings to question the very basis of Jewish identity. In case of insubstantial knowledge or the absence of direct ancestry from the Israelite race, can Jewish identity then be based on religion? The definition of the Jewish community, we realize, is based on the race and religion. So if race is insufficient, religion with its ritualistic practices becomes the sole identity marker. But in the diasporas, the religion along with race generated anti-semitic sentiments against the Jews. The markers of their identity had become reasons for their persecution and also identified them as God's chosen people as the Jewish *Bible* would have us believe. For them the two streams which marked their identity, situated them in history or the world as a community wherein neither could they forego their identity nor openly accept it for fear for their lives. With the coming of twentieth century and the World Wars, we observe that the traumatic Jewish history of expulsion from the 'Holy Land' was dwarfed by the pogroms in Europe and Russia creating a moment in their history of infinite trauma and horror. The 'Holocaust' and its debilitating effect created a third category for determining the Jewish identity in modern times. Therefore, we find a gradual shift from ancient to the modern times in the reference to base the Jewish identity. The ancient times relied heavily on the ethno-religious identity of the Jews. While Judaism became the cause of their persecution in ancient and Middle Ages, their race was the reason for their persecutions and the pogroms that they faced during Hitler's regime and also in Russia and other parts of Europe. The persecutions and pogroms led to a newer construction of Jewish identity re-defining it anew based on the traumas of the genocide that the Jewish communities faced in Europe, where millions were incarcerated in the concentration camps. The persecutions of ancient times with the genocide combined together to form a common collective of fear across the Jewish diaspora.

The 'Holocaust' redefined Jewish identity in terms of the dread and horror which occupy a permanent place in their history. The traumatic experience which seems permanently etched in their memories, implores one to look beyond race and religion as defining entities for Jews world over. The Jewish identity in context of present times impels one to take into account the horrific experience that most Jews faced living in Europe and Russia. Race and religion would always be the basis for Jewish identity, providing a broad category of definition while it is the



concentration camps and the memories of the concentration camps which bring newer insights and knowledge into the Jewish condition, thereby narrowing and streamlining the Jewish identity construction which now took recourse to three categories to define itself.

For the diaspora Jews, home or homeland was interlinked to the idea of the 'Promised Land' as mentioned in the *Torah*. 'Promised Land' signified their ancestral land as promised by Jehaweh whom they worshipped. After their expulsion from the land of their ancestors they continued to view the present day Israel as their home or the 'Promised Land' to which they would eventually return. The expulsions and continued violence against the Jewish community over the ages in Israel and in the diasporas forced them to recede into a closely knit community life with limited or selective interaction with the immediate world surrounding them. The ghettoization of the diasporic Jewish communities living in far-flung regions became a common feature where the close-knit community constituted the entire world with very little interaction with the people outside their community. If we look at the various diasporas that reside in India, this would seem a common feature within the three Jewish communities- the Cochini Jews, the Bene-Israelis or Konkani Jews and the Baghdadi Jews. The lives of Jews within these communities are concentrated around the synagogue and their interactions with other Jewish families that made up the community. The idea of 'homeland' lay within the four walls of community life that both secured the Jews from the world outside and also built an interdependent community where each helped in the other's progress. When we think of 'homeland', various ideas spring up. It automatically brings to mind the concrete physical space to which one feels attached and evokes a sense of belongingness to one's native land. 'Home' becomes a compact and limited space which provides one a place of security along with being one's place of origin, and favourable to the development of the community. 'Homeland' refers to one's place of origin and has geographical connotations, while 'home' can be read as an individual's place of origin and with which he or she has a sense of belonging. Juxtaposing ideas of 'home' or 'homeland' with the diasporic communities, we come to the conclusion that they built secure spaces within the community but also continued to yearn for a national homeland free from persecution and wars. For a community which was always on the move it became doubly difficult to have a permanent homeland in the lands they had come to inhabit after the expulsions. Still the Jewish diaspora did create a space equivalent to home and homeland where

they thrived and professed their religion, Judaism. The lack of a permanent homeland was substituted by the diasporic communities' ghettoization in the host-lands which were amorphous yet secure spaces for the Jewish people who were free to practise their religion and culture within the confines of community walls. For the diaspora who always lived in fear of expulsion and persecutions, attachment to certain physical spaces or concrete structures was impossible. Therefore, ghettoization became an imperative for a community which was resigned to live in the diasporas, where the imaginary community structure though non-concrete as physical space with imagined boundaries stood as a kind of homeland for the Jewish diaspora.

The issue of 'homeland' in relation to Jewish diaspora brings forth yet another understanding of how Jews in diaspora envisage 'homeland'. The Jews considered Palestine as its ancestral land or the land promised to them. Any diaspora well aware of its diasporic status, would be resigned to its condition in the host-land. But in case of the Jewish diaspora we are well aware that a dream of return always held a place of prominence. The Jewish diaspora was privileged to have a national homeland to return to. The dream became a reason for people living in diaspora who had faced persecution to make an *aliya* to their national homeland or the 'Promised Land'. But for Jews who were born in the diasporas who had never seen Israel, how were they to envisage Israel as their homeland? The history of the diasporic Jews so far forbade them to have a national home. Yet paradoxically enough, the geographical scattering of Jewish diaspora in the entire world created the entire world as their home where they moved from one to the other country in search of a place tolerant to their faith and religion. For them the absence of a national home till the mid-twentieth century and their homelessness seemed to make the world a world without borders, as their home and not just a particular host country. This seems at disjunction with the idea of a need for a national homeland. For Nissim Ezekiel, a Bene Israeli poet and writer, India had been a host-land he was born into and lived all his life in. For Ezekiel who considers himself a "natural outsider" (1976:203) to India in relation to his faith and background, still considered that "circumstances and decisions relate him to India" (203). For him, India had become his 'environment' for which he was eager to work in its development as opposed to criticizing the land and its shortcomings. For him the Jewish nationhood, creating borders in the form of Jewish national homeland, paradoxically seemed to limit the movement of Jewish diaspora as opposed to their earlier condition where the diaspora moved freely across

borders. The varying thoughts about what the Jewish people envisage as homeland calls for an interesting study which I will be dealing with in detail in my chapters.

#### • **The Jewish Diasporas in India**

India has been home to three prominent Jewish diasporas- the Cochini Jews of Kerala or Malabar Coast, the Konkani or Bene Israel Jews of Konkan Coastal area and the Baghdadi Jews of Calcutta and Bombay. The time of the settlement of these Jewish communities in India cannot be confirmed with certainty; although, the traditions of the Cochini and Bene Israel Jews suggest that they landed in India during the ancient times and since then have been living in this country as close-knit Jewish communities. According to tradition, the Cohini and Bene Israel had trade relations with India before they fled from the land of their ancestors to settle in the port cities with which they had traded. Unlike the information of the trade relations between the Jews and Indians in the ancient times, not much can be said with certainty about the exact time when the Jews came and settled in the Malabar and Konkan coasts. The Baghdadi Jews came much later than the former two Jewish communities. They came to the port city of Surat and moved to Calcutta and Bombay for trade purposes and because of a flourishing trade, settled in Calcutta and helped build the Baghdadi Jewish community in the city.

#### **The Cochini Jews of Malabar**

According to the belief of the Cochini Jews, their earliest ancestors arrived to the southwestern coast of the Indian subcontinent after the destruction of the Second Temple of Jerusalem around 70 CE. Yet another legend suggests that they came thousands of years earlier during the reign of King Solomon. No reliable historical data is available to ascertain the dates of the arrival of the Cochini Jews in India. Reliable historical data are available only from about 1000 CE onwards, which provides references to the existence “of commercial relations between Jews of Southern Europe, North Africa, Egypt, and Aden in Yemen, and the west coast of India” (Eliade Mircea 1987: 168).

According to Nathan Katz and his study of Cochini Jews, their legend suggests, “two fold *yichus* (lineage) emphasizing continuity with two sacred places, ancient Israel and their local ancestral home of Cranganore, or as it is known in medieval Jewish geography, Shingly.” (2000:

11) Thus, their skilfully constructed legend had a balanced Indian-Jewish identity which interwove Jerusalem with the ancient Cranganore (or Shingly). Once again, due to lack of any historical data the plausibility can neither be refuted nor relied upon. What emerges from such balanced identity formation was that it was constructed keeping in mind the highly differentiated and demarcated caste system that existed in Kerala at that point in history. The double lineage and the ruler's patronage situated them high in the social ladder of caste. The King's generosity could be concluded from the copper tablets which exist in the Cochin synagogue which seems to corroborate their legend to some extent. According to the famous inscribed copper tablets which are believed to belong to the tenth or eleventh century in the synagogue of the Cochini Jews the Hindu ruler of Malabar, Bhaskar Ravi Varma granted certain privileges to Joseph Rabban and an estate on the outskirts of Cochin as his hereditary estate. The twelfth century has reports of a Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela who admits to the presence of Black Jews on the Malabar Coast. Between the twelfth and fourteenth century, both Christian and Arab travellers mention the presence of Jews on the Malabar Coast. During the fifteenth century the Portuguese destroyed the Jewish settlement of Cranganore (north of Cochin). After the Portuguese attack, the Jewish refugees fled to Cochin and were given shelter by the ruler of Cochin along with other Jewish immigrants from Spain and Portugal, and also from Aleppo<sup>5</sup> in Syria, Holland and Germany. However, at Cochin, they were allowed cultural, religious and internal administrative autonomy under a *mudaliar* (a hereditary chief). With the coming of the Dutch, the Jews once again were on their way to prosperity under the patronage of the ruler of Cochin and the Dutch.

The Cochini Jewish society was divided on the lines of colour into the White and Black Jews. One could easily draw a parallel between the Jews and their Hindu neighbours on the basis of their skin colour for division which stratified the Jewish society into upper and lower castes. The White Jews were the Jewish immigrants of Near East Europe who joined the Jewish refugees of Cranganore who fled from the Portuguese attack. The Black Jews, as mentioned by Benjamin of Tudela, could be assumed to be children of Jewish immigrants and native Indian women with the addition of native slaves and servants who might have converted to Judaism before the arrival of Benjamin of Tudela. A subgroup called the Meshuararim (a distortion of the

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<sup>5</sup>Is a city in northern Syria, and is considered to be one of the oldest inhabited city's. It is strategically situated on the trading routes midway between the Mediterranean sea and the Eupharates.

Hebrew word *meshuhrarim*, ‘liberated ones’) existed within the Black Jews and consisted of both Black and White Jews. They were considered to be the descendants of White and Black Jewish men and their black slave concubines besides the emancipated slaves of either the Black or White Jews. The caste demarcations between the White and Black Jews were observed strictly where the White Jews denied the Black Jews entry into their synagogue and refused to count them as part of the *minyan* (quorum of ten adult men needed to conduct prayers at the Synagogue). It was a Cochini Jew, Yechezkel Rahabi, who in a letter to his Dutch business partner mentioned another Jewish community the Bene Israelites living on the Konkan Coast. The Bene Israelis later migrated to Greater Bombay, Pune and parts of Gujarat.

### **The Bene Israel (children of Israel in English) of Konkan Coast and Greater Bombay**

The outside world came to know of the Bene Israel Jewish community around 1786. Rahabi, in his letter wrote:

Jews known as Bene Israel are distributed all over Maharatta province [today’s Maharashtra state], living under the Moguls. They live in tents, they own oil presses, some of them are soldiers, they know nothing as regards their faith except to recite the Shema and rest on the Shabbath. (Katz 2000:91)

Before Rahabi, there were other documents which referred to the presence of Jews (Bene Israel) in India: a letter (written between 1199 and 1200) by Maimonides (Moshe ben Maimon, better known as the Rambam) which commented ‘that the Mishne Torah [the Rambam’s encyclopedic Torah commentary]... has enlightened Jews as far as India. They have nothing of religion except that they rest on Sabbath and perform circumcision on the eight day.’ (Katz 2000:92). Another letter written by a Danish missionary Rev. J. A. Sartorius in 1738 reports rumours about a Jewish community residing on the western coast of India which neither had the books of the *Old Testament* nor understood Hebrew. Rather, according to him, they spoke in Hindustani, the language of the country they were residing in and recited the Shema Israel ‘as a formula of prayer of doctrine’ (Katz 2000:92). His report further suggests they dressed like the Mohammedans and did not intermarry with other Indians and kept to their own people. The legend of the Bene Israel which suggests their arrival in India cannot be ascertained with any historical data or references. Like the Cochini Jews, the exact time of arrival of the Bene Israel

cannot be stated with certainty though different theorists date the arrival of the group to periods ranging from 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE to 7<sup>th</sup> century CE and they are believed to have come from Palestine, Yemen or Babylonia. As there exists no data, no consensus could be reached regarding the exact year of their arrival.

The Bene Israel legend first recorded by Rev. J. Henry Lord, suggests that their ancestors were shipwrecked off the port of Cheul near Nawgaon and only fourteen of them managed to reach the shores. The rest were washed ashore and found dead. Their religious texts and the *Torah* scrolls also seemed to have been lost during the shipwreck. So the survivors, seven men and seven women with their meagre possessions and their faith were all washed ashore with only oral stories of their arrival. In terms of their religious practices, they had lost everything except the 'Shema Israel', the observation of the Sabbath and the dietary laws. A closer study of this legend suggests close similarities to the Chitpavan Brahmin legend which claimed an origin similar to the Bene Israel and common ancestry from the seven surviving couples. From the port town of Nawgaon, the Bene Israelis spread to other parts of Konkan villages where they began work as oil-pressers and as they observed Sabbath they were called *Shanwar telis* (Saturday oil-pressers) and were inducted into the caste as a *teli* within the Hindu caste system. The Bene Israel, as their name suggests (children of Israel) claim ancestry from the Lost Ten tribes of Israel that seceded from Rehoboam, the son of Solomon. Therefore, they sometimes refer to themselves as one of the 'Lost Ten Tribes of Israel'. For many years they remained unknown to the outside world. David Yechezkel Rahabi (1721- 1791), a Cochini Jew and his chance encounter with the Bene Israel led to their discovery. Rahabi was instrumental in renewing their belief, taught them Hebrew prayers and selected three people called *kaji* to serve as teachers and preachers of Judaism among them. The Bene Israel had spread to a dozen other villages on the Konkan Coast and by the mid-eighteenth century they started to migrate to Bombay attracted by greater employment opportunities as clerks, skilled labourers and as soldiers in the regiment of the East India Company. It is interesting to note here that the Bene Israel, like their fellow Jews in Cochin had developed certain divisions in their society called the *gora* (white) and *kala* (black) subcastes. The *gora* were recognized to be direct descendants of the seven surviving couples from the shipwreck while the *kala* were considered to have descended from a union between the Bene Israel men and the non-Bene Israel (native) women. Like the Black Jews of

Cochin the *Kala Bene Israel* also had to follow stringent class demarcations set by the *Gora Bene Israel* which became a point of dissension within the Bene Israel Jewish community.

### **The Baghdadi Jews of Surat, Calcutta and Bombay**

The Baghdadi Jews were the last to arrive in India, they came to Surat around mid-eighteenth century. Lured by the promising commercial prospects, some Arabic and Persian speaking Jews established a community in Surat, a port city in the present day state of Gujarat. Soon, they moved to other port cities in India like Calcutta and Bombay and established themselves commercially. Other *Mizrachi* (Eastern) Jews soon followed them and “filled the commercial-entrepreneurial vacuum in the emerging British port cities of Calcutta, Bombay (now Mumbai), and Rangoon (now Yangon in Myanmar, formerly Burma)” (Katz 2000: 128). According to Katz, a closer study of the origin of Baghdadi Jews brings us to the conclusion that the name ‘Baghdadi’ veils their diverse roots in Baghdad, Aleppo, Damascus, Basra, Yemen, Persia, Afghanistan, Kurdistan, Bokhara, Tunisia and Cochin. They acquired the Baghdadi status as a consequence of their encounter with other reference groups that lived alongside both Jews and Gentiles (Non-Jews). The Baghdadi Jews arrival in India was not shrouded in mystery unlike their co-religionist in India. Therefore, there exists no ‘origin legend’ and we may conclude that they arrived in India for commercial purposes around mid-eighteenth century. Yet when we focus our study on the Calcutta Jews, we realize there were no reasons as to what prompted Shalom Obadiah Hakohen, of Aleppo to move further East from Surat and establish a Baghdadi Jewish community in Calcutta.

Aleppo was home for the Baghdadi Community settled in Calcutta but they were soon outnumbered by Jews coming from Basra and Baghdad. The Aleppan identity was overtaken by the Baghdadi identity as they became numerically superior to the Aleppan. Further, the Calcutta Baghdadi Jews underwent four stages of identity transformation from early history, to the mutiny of 1857, to post-World War I, and the post Indian and Israeli independence. Their identity shifted from the Judeo-Arabic to the “Arabian Jews of India and the Far East” (Katz 2000:129) to finally being identified as “Europeans” during the World War. When the Baghdadis reached Calcutta,

they found already established British-Jewish trading houses. The Baghdadis settled near the Armenians, Anglo-Indians, Greeks, Portuguese in the European 'greytown' quarters—away from the Indian 'blacktown' quarters. They developed close ties and business relations with the Armenians along with whom they occupied the 'greytown'. In Calcutta, the Baghdadi community flourished in trade of silk, fine textiles, diamonds, indigo and opium (the most lucrative of all) with other Jews settled in 'tiny satellite communities' along the banks of the river Ganges. Unlike the Jewish community of Calcutta, the Jews who settled in Bombay had their origin in Iraq and were Baghdadis in the real sense of the term. However, they underwent some identity transformation in relation to other reference groups that resided alongside them—like the Cochini Jews, Bene Israel, and Jews from Persia, Afghanistan and Yemen. The most affluent Iraqi Jewish leader of the Bombay community was Sheikh David Sassoon who brought the Baghdadi community under one umbrella in Bombay. But it was Jacob Semah who established the community in Bombay after he arrived from Surat around 1790. In Bombay the Baghdadis were numerically outnumbered by the Bene Israel, but they overtook them in respect of monetary well being. Baghdadi emulation of the British ways made them seem European compared to the Indian Bene Israel. Apart from the three prominent Jewish communities residing in India there existed two smaller Jewish communities in the far north-east and in Andhra Pradesh.

### **Bnei Menahe of the North-East India**

In the north-eastern state of Manipur and Mizoram, there exists a community called the Bnei Menashe who considers themselves belonging to the tribe of Menashe (which is one of the lost ten tribes). They claim that their forefathers were enslaved and exiled during the Assyrian rule and they somehow escaped and reached China. From China they moved to the Chinese-Burmese border and further on to the neighbouring east India states of Manipur and Mizoram. The Manipur Jews believe all the Manipur and Mizoram residents happened to be Jews earlier, and were later forced to abolish their Jewish practises with the coming of the Christian missionaries in nineteenth century. Some Israeli rabbis accept their Judaism while some consider them as converts and not original Jews.



### **Bene Ephraim of Andhra Pradesh**

The Bene Ephraim are a small group of Telugu-speaking Jews in Andhra Pradesh's Kottareddipalem village near Chebrolu, in Guntur District whose recorded observance of Judaism, like that of the Bnei Menashe, is quite recent. They consider themselves belonging to the tribe of Ephraim (which is one of the lost ten tribes). The community believes that their forefathers migrated from northern India, perhaps Afghanistan or the North-East Frontier region (Manipur, Mizoram) sometime during the 9th or 10th centuries CE, and settled around the area of Nandial in what were at that time nascent Telugu-speaking areas. Like the Bnei Menahe there does not exist historical data to suggest their arrival in these places. Nonetheless they follow Judaism zealously and expect to visit the ancestral land of Jews.

### **Esther David (1945- )**

The prime focus of my dissertation is the analysis of the selected works of Esther David (born March 17, 1945), who belongs to the Bene Israel community of Ahmedabad, Gujarat. She is an artist, columnist, art critic and writer. Her father Rueben David founded the Kamala Zoological Park of Ahmedabad and mother Sarah was a schoolteacher. After completing her schooling from Ahmedabad, she joined M S University, Vadodara as a student of Fine Arts and Art History. Armed with her art degree she started her career as a professor in art history and art appreciation. She taught at the CEPT University and NIFT (National Institute of Fashion Technology) Ahmedabad. She started writing about art and became an art critic for the *Times of India*, (Gujarat edition) a prominent national English daily. Later she became a columnist for *Femina*, a women's magazine and was advisory editor with *Eve Times*, Ahmedabad.

Her first book, *The Walled City* was published in 1997 by East West Books, Madras. It is a story about the forces that unite and divide generations and communities in the walled city of Ahmedabad. It was re-published by Syracuse University Press USA and is listed in the library of modern Jewish Literature. Her next book was, *By the Sabarmati* (1999), a collection of short stories which was followed by a collection of short stories in Gujarati *Ane Dhara Dhruji* (2001), *The Book of Esther* (2002), *Sari Sutra* (2003) and, *The Book of Rachel* (2006), and *One Church, One All Jewish Faith, One God* (2008). In August 2006 she wrote her first book for teenagers,

entitled *My Father's Zoo* (2006). The book was a tribute to her father and contains stories of the animals that lived or still live in the zoo in Ahmedabad. Her latest Book, *Shalom India Housing Society* was published in November 2007. *The Walled City* has been translated into Gujarati, entitled *Bhint*, and published by Navbharata Sahitya Mandir, Ahmedabad. *The Book of Rachel* has been translated into Gujarati by Renuka Sheth at Navbharat Sahitya Mandir and in French by Sonja Terangle and was recently released in Paris. She has also contributed a short story, 'The Worry Box' and the 'Laughing Lady', for an anthology: CITY STORIES, published by Scholastic India. A short story 'Nanki Chirai' written by David, has been published in an anthology entitled '*Growing up as a Woman Writer*' by Sahitya Academy, New Delhi and edited by Jasbir Jain. Apart from these works, several articles on art criticism and Jewish history have been published by the national dailies and magazines that she had worked with. A single mother and grandmother of two, Esther David now resides in Ahmedabad, and is a full time writer.

In studying her novels, *The Book of Esther*, *The Book of Rachel* and *Shalom India Housing Society*, I will be looking at the issues of 'home' for the diasporic Bene Israel Jewish community. My study will include the community's perception of home in relation to India, their host-land and Israel, the 'Promised Land'. Her novels deal with her own community where she charts her community's relation to India's formation from an ancient society through British colonization to the present democratic state. She skilfully narrates the day-to-day life of the Bene Israel household alongside their Hindu neighbours and their influences on the former. Through the novels she projects a very Indian picture of this Jewish diaspora, unlike the Cochins or the Baghdadis who are more westernized. Her work suggests levels of engagement, of successive generations of Bene Israel, with the Hindus, Muslims, British colonizers, Indian national movement, India's Independence, Zionism and the formation of Israel. Apart from issues of home and belonging, she deals with identity construction of the Bene Israel in relation to their Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Armenian, and other European Jews and with their Indian coreligionists. She weaves into her novel the divisions between the three diasporic Jewish communities of India and how each negotiated with their original identity and the identity acquired due to their long stay in India. In my work I plan to look into the various issues that have been mentioned above and the Bene Israelis search for a suitable 'home' post the formation of the state of Israel or their 'Promised Land'.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Coming Home to Surrogate Motherland

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'home' as a place where one lives, a place where something flourishes or from which it originated. While it defines 'homeland', 'motherland' and 'fatherland' as a person's native land, where 'homeland' could be specified as an autonomous state occupied by a particular people. A home therefore signifies a place of one's origin, where one is born, and has flourished. As it is defined as a place where something flourishes, therefore home is suggestive of a safe place that provides a sense of locatedness and is one's place of origin or root. Homeland suggests an individual's or a particular community's native land. It suggests a certain kind of belonging or attachment to the land of one's birth or residence.

To a veteran traveller, the whole world may seem like home. But to a person who has been forced to "travel", who has been running away from pogroms and persecution, "home" would signify a safe place, free from hatred and discrimination. "Home" harks back to one's place of origin. Concomitantly, the word "homeland" would suggest one's belongingness to a particular land. The perception of home and homeland may vary for different people. Home would be a place which has been conducive to an individual's development, while homeland could be understood as a native place; place of one's origin where one grew up, a locale which one could identify as one's own. The Jews who considered Israel to be their ancestral homeland were forcefully dispersed from their homeland. Therefore, they had to look beyond the idea of ancient homeland to claim a land as their home which would contribute to their growth and with which they could feel a sense of belonging. As a community, the Jews live scattered all over the globe, therefore as mentioned above, home for them extended beyond the physical borders and the limiting spaces of a particular nation-state. In the case of Jews living across the globe as international residents with no boundaries or place which they could solely claim as their own (before the creation of Israel), it would have been preferable to regard them as residents belonging nowhere in particular but everywhere as Nissim Ezekiel considers himself and the Jewish condition in particular. As international residents with no particular homeland or country they spread far and wide looking for a land as substitute for their lost homeland, where they

could live without fear of anti-semitic provoked persecution; a land that would contribute to their growth as a community.

The Jews, as the Jewish *Bible* states originated in and around the land of Canaan (which later came to be known as Judah, Palestine and Israel). The land of their origin or the 'Promised Land' witnessed the massacre and dispersal of Jews on a large scale. The homeland of the Jews as promised to them after their Exodus from Egypt was no more theirs. Not only had they to flee from the land which was once their home, but wherever they settled they did so with caution knowing that they were hated as a community and would never have a land which they could call home, a land entirely free from discrimination and persecution. Taking a quick view of the Jewish history as mentioned in my Introduction we would realize that their fears were not unfounded, as they were discriminated against, killed in large numbers and humiliated wherever they re-settled after their displacement, initially for their religious beliefs and later as a race which was branded as traitors and therefore responsible for the Aryan race's humiliating defeat at the hands of the Allied forces during the First World War.

The Bene Israel Jews who landed in India, have little or no historical data to suggest with certainty whether they were on their way to trade with the western port cities of India or fleeing from persecution. As the theorization and collection of accounts on the Bene Israel began after the arrival of Christian missionaries in India, not much has been found or written about their date of arrival and place from where they began their journey or even the purpose of their journey. Though Bene Israelis claim that they were the first to arrive in India, due to their isolated state, it was not before a Cochini, Yechezkel Rahabi, found them and made their existence public that others came to know of their existence in India. Like the Bene Israel, the Cochini Jews also claim to be the first to arrive in India where they have the copper plates presented by the ruler of Crangnore to authenticate their time of arrival from tenth to eleventh century. From Crangnore they moved to Cochin and re-settled after the invasion of the Dutch army. There exist various theories and legends to suggest the time of arrival and origin of the Bene Israelis. Esther David refers to few of these in her novel *Book of Esther* (2002), where an Israeli Jew named Shlomo, a historian, who visits the narrator's house, suggests the possible origin of Bene Israelis as:

... the descendants of the tribe of Zebulun, the sixth son of the prophet Jacob and his wife Leah. His tribe has the symbol of a ship, which signifies that his children were a seafaring people. Perhaps they fled Israel during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes IV (the Selucid king who ruled during the Hellenistic period 333-363 BCE) and came as far as India and were shipwrecked on the Konkan coast. (363)

Shlomo states another belief he held about the origin of Bene Israel. He says that they 'observe the fast of Gadaliyah in memory of Gadaliyah, the governor of Judah' (363). According to Shlomo it was a 'minor fast, for a minor hero, but important to Indian Jews'. Explaining the significance of the fast he stated,

After the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C., the Babylonian king Nebucadnazzar unexpectedly appointed an able Jewish governor, Gadaliyah. He was murdered by his own people and the remaining Jews, who were not part of the conspiracy, fled. They feared that Nebucadnazzar would execute them, assuming that it was an act of rebellion on their part (363).

The second theory according to Shlomo, situated the time of the Bene Israel arrival after the fall of the First Temple in Jerusalem. The two observations made by Shlomo sighted different times for the departure and arrival of the Bene Israel onto the Konkan coast. The Bene Israelis, according to their oral tradition of arrival, believed that their ancestors were escaping from the Greek ruler Antiochus, when they were shipwrecked. They lost all their religious books and symbols like the Holy ark (similar to Noah's ark). With all their belongings lost, all they remembered was the 'Shema Israel' in Hebrew (found in the Bible in Deuteronomy VI, verses 4-9), the prayer which they recited during all occasions, and which kept their community together all their years in the foreign land. Therefore, there are different theories and legends which recounted or proved their origin and time of arrival in India. But as none could be sufficiently proved, the various theories and legends have remained as speculations. While such speculations could make for an interesting study and research, my analysis of the novel departs from these speculations into the body of the community. In particular, I focus on their deliberations of what India meant to the first and successive generation, how their extended stay including the cultural and social influences enhanced or re-defined their identity in the host-land which was slowly growing into their possible home or a surrogate motherland which Esther Joshua David Dandekar the narrator of the novel ultimately accepts.

As mentioned in the Introduction to my dissertation, three Jewish groups came and settled in India. The Bene Israel of the Konkan region came and settled in India possibly as a result of persecution or on their way to trade at Indian ports and got waylaid and lost route and all their possessions. As they began their stay in these villages, they realised the communal harmony within it which appealed to a people who had memories and experiences of incidents of persecutions and hatred. But their previous experiences forced them to remain cautious and anonymous in the new land. They settled in the Konkan villages alongside people professing different religions, belonging to different castes, and speaking a different language. They took up the work as oil-pressers which many Jewish historians believed was because that was the work they were familiar with in their homeland. Looking into the archives on Bene Israelis one sees the progress they made from the villages to the metropolis and larger cities like Bombay<sup>1</sup>, Ahmedabad, Pune etc. suggests their social and monetary ascendance. Esther David portrays the shift to the towns as a result of their search for well paying jobs during the pre-Independence days and after the Independence, where they had come to accept this land emotionally as their own alongside the memories of an ancient land as their homeland.

In this chapter I will be looking closely at the Bene Israel community which came and settled on India's western coast, their growth into a sizeable community which spread along the Konkan villages from the seven couples who survived the shipwreck (according to the Bene Israel tradition of origin in India). As Esther David states in her Author's Note to the *Book of Esther*, the book is "inspired by a relevant event, the arrival of my ancestors on the Konkan coast." She makes a case for her community as a diaspora settled in India over fifteen hundred years and situates herself as a diasporic writer aiming to narrate the story of her community and its stay in the adopted land. Bene Israelis explained their arrival to this land as foreigners. Yet, their prolonged stay had made them less distinguishable from their native neighbours, with whom they shared the land, language, and culture and food habits. As the name of the chapter suggests the primary inquiry will be of transformation of host-land into surrogate motherland for Esther. I also propose to interrogate how the Bene Israel community negotiated the idea of residing in a surrogate motherland alongside harbouring memories of their original homeland,

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<sup>1</sup>I am using the old name as this was used by the Jews and is also used in Esther David's novel and Nissim Ezekiel's biography.

and how this transformation coloured their identity as Jews in India, which was based on their religion and their minority status within the host-land. In addition, I will study how they negotiated with their Jewishness in a multi-religious society as India and how the larger society affected and contributed to their identity as Jews living in India.

### **Analysis**

Ever since man developed ties with the land, settled in a particular land and created borders for the land, he grew attached to it and saw it as his place of origin. Throughout history, we find people being uprooted from their homeland to be re-settled in far off lands for various reasons and purposes. On the basis of various reasons for a community's displacement from its homeland we could demarcate them into different kinds of diasporas. There could be diasporas arising out of enslavement of people and deportation into far-off lands to work in the plantation. The Africans during the period of high imperialism and colonisation were taken to work on sugar plantations in America, West Indies etc. Then we come across the case of people travelling as indentured labourers to newer lands in search of work. Indians who travelled to Fiji, West Indies could be an example of such a diaspora. The case of people running away from their homelands due to persecution can lead to another type of diaspora - the refugee diaspora. The Jews who fled persecutions in Palestine or Israel, or those who fled during Hitler's regime qualify for "refugee diaspora". There is also a diaspora which has come into being in recent times, as a result of people travelling to different countries, especially the developed countries from developing or underdeveloped countries in search of better opportunities of work, life and education. This can be understood as economic migrations. There exists another kind of diaspora called the historical diaspora constituting the Jewish diaspora, whose case brought forth into usage the word diaspora, who were displaced from their homeland at various stages in history from ancient times to the twentieth century Holocaust in Europe as part of Hitler's agenda to eliminate them. They were the first historically displaced community in the world who have been discussed and written about. In fact, it is with the Jewish dispersal that the concept of diaspora came into being. Furthermore, the successive generations settled in various host-lands came to acquire a specific historical baggage of their diasporic status even if they were born, and had grown up in that country. The Bene Israel community that Esther David weaves her narrative

across belongs to the historical diaspora. Their ancestors were people who journeyed such a distance as a result of persecutions or for trading purposes. *Book of Esther* talks of the descendants of the Bene Israelis original settlers in India, who lived between nineteenth, and twentieth century CE, and not the actual displaced people. Therefore, the diaspora which we read in the novel is one which had become distanced from their ancestors' memories of the homeland. This was owing to their lack of actual memory of the homeland and their reliance on the legends and stories as told by their community elders. The exoticised myths which are mentioned later in my analysis, defined their origins and connected them to the land of their ancient ancestors as mentioned in their holy book. Therefore, the diaspora in the novel had grown with a fractured sense of belonging. They were torn between longing for the un-achievable Israel which was yet to be created and their ties with the host-land which were forged since their birth.

The case of a diasporic community is one of 'impossible mourning'<sup>2</sup> filled with trauma as suggested by Vijay Mishra in his essay 'Diaspora and the Art of Impossible Mourning' (Mishra 2001:30). Mishra writes that the diasporic community continually mourns for the loss of a nation-state. Therefore, in diasporic writing allusion to this loss and mourning becomes the recurrent theme. Further, Mishra suggests, as this loss is permanent with no means of retrieval one is left with absence in place of the thing lost which exists in the form of memory within us. This memory as a trope for absence manifests itself in the form of autobiography (Vijay Mishra, 2001:30), through which the memory gains a voice. Since the mourning cannot be given up, as it constitutes a prime place in diasporic sensibility, autobiography serves as trope for memory to voice the loss. He further states as mourning is impossible, even before the realization of the possibility of mourning is achieved, one goes through a period of idealization of this absence. Therefore, before one realizes about the loss and arrives at a possible mourning, the self idealizes the loss and voices it from memory in the narrative of an autobiography. Esther David's reference to her work as loosely based on her family, hints at what Mishra suggests as a possible means of giving voice to her memory and speaking on behalf of her community's shared trauma and collective mourning for their ancestral land. In her novel, *Book of Esther* Esther David negotiates with this absence and loss that the Bene Israel had to deal with, through a narrative of

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<sup>2</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man* (1968).



the Dandekar family. The story of the Dandekar family, as loosely based on Esther David's own family and the lives of her ancestors, narrates the trauma of the Bene Israel, trying to assimilate into the new land, but with a strong need to maintain their ties with their motherland even if it is through memory. They had to struggle to maintain their unique identity in a multi-community country.

*Book of Esther* is a narrative which winds across seven generations of the Dandekar family. It is divided into four sections in a loosely chronological style, and Esther the narrator introduces us to her ancestors, the Bene Israel Dandekar family of Danda. The family moves from Danda to finally come and settle in Ahmedabad. It is divided into four chapters, beginning with 'Bathsheba', who is Esther's paternal great-grandmother, moving to 'David', her grandfather, then over to 'Joshua', her father who was considered a miracle-man, and finally ends with 'Esther's' story. As stated above, the book is both loosely autobiographical and chronological. The former because the narrator's father Joshua David is inspired by the life of author's father David Rueben, the miracle-man of Gujarat, who built the Kamala Zoological Park in Ahmedabad. Moreover, in her Acknowledgement, Esther David writes that the novel is "based loosely around [her]/my family" and her characters are based on her own family and she was inspired by "old family photographs", "notes, diaries, documents, paper clippings" which proved to be of immense help to her along with the inputs provided by her cousins. It deals with the Bene Israel Jewish community at large and microscopically with the Dandekar family as our window to the Jewish community. Esther David states her reason to write about the community as means of providing a window into the lives and ways of the Bene Israeli diaspora in India, through the eyes of a Bene Israel family as she had grown up in such a family and therefore was equipped to capture the lives of her minority community. Moreover, her grandmother's narratives which she heard as a child, and her growing up years spent in a zoo, built by her father Ruben David, aided her to narrate a tale about her community which though unheard by many Indians nonetheless existed. It is loosely chronological in the sense that throughout the book, Esther moves back and forth in time to introduce, and at the same time narrate to us the lives of her ancestors living in the village and their gradual shift into the upcoming cities of Pune and Ahmedabad by the end of the nineteenth century. As we go through the various chapters of the *Book of Esther*, we are introduced into the lives of a Bene Israel Jewish family hailing from the

largest Jewish community in India which resided along the Konkan coast. As stated in Author's Note, the book is inspired by a real incident, the arrival of the Bene Israel to the Konkan coast and the characters in the novel suggest that the narrator has tried to depict a Bene Israel Jewish family inspired by her own family history and her ancestors.

Esther David's locatedness as a diasporic writer, in India, has many resonances which can be read in her works. Her identity as a diasporic Bene Israel Indian English woman writer in post-colonial India calls for a unique treatment of her texts. What sets her apart from other women writers in post-colonial India is her identity as a diasporic Jewish writer who carries a specific diasporic sensibility which had been shaped by her community's long stay in India. Moreover, her identity as a woman and her treatment of the women characters in her work is equally important. I will first be discussing her diasporic identity and later in the chapter will deal with other aspects of her identity.

The narrative commences with Bathsheba, Esther's great-grandmother. Through her life as told by Esther, the narrator, we are introduced to the Dandekar's a Bene Israel Jewish family who resided in Danda village in the Raigarh district on the Konkan coast. Bathsheba was the eldest daughter-in-law in the Dandekar household, married to Solomon who was a soldier with the native British army. She lived in a joint family set-up with her parents-in-law, Abraham and Elisheba. Solomon's brothers were also a part of this household. Menashe (married to Shlumith), was a teacher and medicine man, and Enoch, who was married to Yacobeth. The family owned huge tracts of agricultural land called the *baadee*, had several orchards, an oil-press and had a collection of hens and goats along with dogs and a pair of oxen. Contrary to their ancestors who worked as oil-pressers, over the years, the Dandekar household had risen to the status of landed gentry which owned all the land in and around Danda.

When the novel begins, Bathsheba and her family along with their community were in knowledge of their motherland/homeland as elsewhere to which they had emotional and filial ties at the psychological level. It was psychological because they had heard about it from their elders, and during the prayers at the synagogue where the *Torah* called for their return to their motherland in the future, but they had no experience of it. As they continued with their lives in India, the memory of the homeland which was passed to successive generations was kept alive

through the Jewish *Bible* and the community's elders. But with the assimilation into the native society, maintaining this memory counter to their physical presence and ties in their land of birth and which they inhabited proved to be challenging. Succeeding generations seemed more inclined towards the land they were born into and considered it their homeland which they could claim as their own like any other Indian. The memory which was passed on to the successive generations was slowly turning into a legend. But the religious revival of the Bene Israelis in the second half of the eighteenth century and information about other Jews residing in India made the knowledge of the motherland concrete as a place of return and not merely a fantasy. Therefore, when Bathsheba had a difficult delivery, she was filled with questions as to how long could she help increase her tribe in the host-land to maintain their community. The threat to their community of being appropriated by dominant communities loomed large, while the women helped to salvage their minority status as diasporic Jews in a multi-community society. The culmination of Second World War brought news of the concentration camps where Jews from Europe were annihilated in large numbers. This brought a sudden awareness among the Bene Israel their physical presence in and their ties to their birth land, that they were connected to a larger Jewish community, beyond the boundaries of India. Their status as an internationally spread diasporic community was brought to the fore. The knowledge of "extermination of six million Jews by Hitler" (198) raised the fear of the Jews residing in India, who were aware of the legendary tales of massacre and persecution of the Jews. The Bene Israelis were once again faced with the challenge of negotiating with their identity as Jews and their historical baggage, as a community which was hated and despised. Esther states that this fractured the spell of years of peaceful existence of the Bene Israel. They feared for their lives and shied away from any public display of their identity as Jews as, "They were horrified and afraid, and wanted to underplay their Jewishness or leave for *Yerushlayem*— Jerusalem— the promised land of their prophets" (198). The trauma of their co-religionists forced them to dwell into the past and remember their own traumas told by their ancestors which had long been forgotten during their peaceful stay in India. They were once again reminded of their diasporic status and the incident fuelled their hope for return to the 'Promised Land' of Jews. This restlessness which had seeped into the community looking for a way to make an *aliyah* was further fuelled with Mahatma Gandhi's

view on the eve of India's independence where "he had advised that the Jews offer Satyagrah against Hitler" and had written,

... the Jews are a compact and homogeneous community in Germany... I am convinced that if someone with courage and vision can arise amongst them and lead them in non-violent action, the winter of their despair can disappear in the twinkling of an eye, and be turned into the summer of hope. And, what has today become a degrading man-hunt can be turned into a calm and determined stand offered by unarmed men and women possessing the strength of suffering given to them by Jehovah .... (199)

The letter reminded them of Hitler's crime, isolated them as a community within India to be linked to their European co-religionists, and thereby sites of anti-semitic hatred. In the novel, David, Esther's grandfather who was actively involved in politics and stood for the municipal elections in Ahmedabad, felt similar pangs of isolation and identity crisis when he heard Hitler's comment on resurrection of his Nazi Party after the Catholic Bavarian People's Party lifted the ban on it. Heinrich Held, the Prime Minister of Bavaria who headed the Catholic Party, had made a fatal error by lifting the ban according to David who was left "with a sense of foreboding" (129) of the events that were to unfold in coming years under Hitler's regime. It added to his isolation as a Jew and filled him with doubts about his identity as an Indian Jew and questions about belonging. When the Hindu-Muslim riots broke out after Independence, the entire community faced similar questions and doubts about their identity and belongingness to India. They were left amidst the massacre, as they stood un-decided about their allegiance towards either of the communities. Once again the community was thrown into turmoil where they witnessed the killings on religious lines and feared for their own lives and religion. The land which they had unconsciously come to accept as their home and believed they belonged to, had transformed within a short span into a foreign place from where they needed to be rescued and restored to their homeland.

### **Reading surrogate motherland into host-land**

Moving to the pivotal question of homeland one is beset with further questions. The questions dealing with homeland depend on whether one is looking at homeland as a place of one's birth or origin, or as a place where one grew up or a place of refuge and safety. The categories mentioned

suggests what homeland signifies, and also defines as different for different people, contingent to the situation and time. For a diasporic community like the Bene Israel Jews, escaping from persecutions, a foreign land, gave hope of survival unlike their homeland. In case of India, a foreign land where they landed, they were yet to accept its merit as a safe place where they would not be subjected to the kind of humiliation and terror that they had in their homeland. As the years passed by and their community thrived from seven surviving couples from the shipwreck, they had unknowingly become part of the land and community that their ancestors landed on fifteen hundred years ago. In actuality, India had become a surrogate motherland as Esther, the narrator, suggests in *Book of Esther*. It not only provided safety but also proved conducive to the increase of their tribe and prosperity. One should stop to ponder at the idea-why surrogate and not actual motherland? The answers lie in history and memory. Successive Bene Israel Jews had very little information in the form of legends about the origins of their ancestors. It was only after they came in contact with other Jewish communities. Through a Cochini Jewish, David Yechezkel Rahabi (Katz, 2000:102), were they enlightened about their origin of the ancestors in the land of Canaan and that they belonged to the twelve tribes which came forth from the twelve sons of Israel or Jacob. This was their history. Memory is equally important, as the Jewish community believed that their ancestors landed on India's western coast near Cheul (on the Konkan coast) running away from persecution in the motherland or homeland they previously inhabited. It could not become their motherland because of history or as stated in their *Torah*, the 'Promised Land' was the place of origin of the Jews and it would be reinstated to them. Therefore, though the years in India proved favourable to the Bene Israel community, they had a sense of belonging to the land of Israel and God's promise for the return of the Jews to the 'Promised Land' halted their complete acceptance of the host land as their motherland. It also kept alive the embers of an *aliyah* according to the Law of Return<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the ever-looming

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<sup>3</sup>On July 5, 1950, the Israeli Knesset passed the Law of Return, fulfilling the dream of Theodor Herzl, Zionism's founder. Herzl experienced anti-Semitism in Europe and saw its effects in many countries. He saw that there was only one solution: the mass immigration of Jews to a land that they could call their own. According to the law every Jew has the right to immigrate to Israel, and granting automatic citizenship and benefits to any Jew who makes *aliyah* to Israel. Further it emphasizes the purpose of Israel as a homeland for all Jews.

fear of being persecuted in their acquired land after the Hindu-Muslim riots as well as the Jewish experience in Europe where they were massacred, forced them to conclude that their new land was a passage while they awaited their return to the 'Promised Land'.

The Bene Israel community had found home on a foreign land, still they longed to return to their ancestral land. This prevented a complete acceptance of India as a possible homeland for Bene Israel Jews after their dispersal. Returning to the two operative categories which signify homeland, the Bene Israeli people who first came to the Konkan coast belonged to the category of those who sought refuge as people escaping persecutions. The successive generations belonged to the category who were born and grew up in the host-land and had no memory or recollection of their motherland, Israel, apart from the one as narrated by their family elders as legends or folklores. The legendary tradition of the Bene Israel arrival was fraught with variations and lacked authenticity as it was handed down over generations. The characters in the novel beginning from Esther's great-grandmother to Esther and her children belong to the successive generations. For them Israel as their motherland was distant as a dream relegated to memory. It was as Jasbir Jain states in her essay "...merely the land of their birth, or the birth of their ancestors, and is now merely a memory tucked away in some remote corner of their consciousness." (2004:75)

Returning to Mishra's essay, he states after the untimely breakup of one's ties with one's motherland one is left with the memory and nostalgia for the homeland. This memory and nostalgia fuels an ideal structure of the nation-state. The diaspora clamouring to reclaim the homeland creates an ideal of the lost homeland for the successive generations. Jacques Derrida calls this as fantasising about the homeland to substitute the loss as a reality. However, one could also state that the idealization by older generation could be for the benefit of the successive generation, to help them idealize a nation-state for themselves. In the case of the Bene Israel community, the *Torah*, which describes the 'Promised Land' as a land of 'milk and honey', captured this idea. It tried to restore faith in the younger generation for a better future in the 'Promised Land'. Inclination towards this homeland of which they had no memory could be yet another reason for idealization of the lost homeland. If we look into the text, Esther unlike any in her immediate family, journeys to Israel with her son and daughter. Prior to her journey the

anticipation of visiting the land of her ancestors along with the innumerable postcards and photographs of her cousins residing in Israel, raises her hope for the land which once again was reclaimed as their homeland. Her opportunity to return to “home of my ancestors”, unlike her ancestors could also be read as God’s fulfilment of His promise and a hope for Esther to start new life. Her knowledge and perception of the land as framed and fuelled by the *Torah*, her ancestors, cousins, Israeli and Jewish visitors to her house along with the Israeli immigration centres, all added to build a certain image of the land where greater opportunities seemed to await her. Her father implored her to make an *aliyah* to Israel, for a better life for her and her children. Unlike her parents who believed that their lives were tied with an invisible thread to the surrogate motherland, Esther’s ties were still un-formed or rather her father was of the opinion that she could still make a fresh start in Israel. But this idea was challenged by a Jewish carpet merchant, Eli who had come to their house. His questions about her parents’ plan for their daughter and suggestions of a possible *aliyah* for them for their better future had brought to fore the need to negotiate with their feelings for the surrogate motherland that India had become. They were confronted with the permanent ties that they had developed with the land which was not a homeland and yet unknown to them, had grown into one. Furthermore, Esther’s father seemed the prospect of sending young Esther to Israel as an unfavourable prospect and believed that one could lead a Jewish life in India without having to migrate to Israel. Contrary to this earlier response to Eli’s queries about Esther’s future and possible emigration to Israel, a year before his death, Esther’s father asked her to make an *aliyah*, for a better life that could be awaiting her in her ancestors’ homeland. Esther suggests an ambiguous frame of mind regarding her travel and stay in Israel. She states, “I tried to uproot myself from my surrogate motherland and replant myself in the home of my ancestors. I tried to settle there. I could not. Yet, I liked it.” (371)

Her ambiguity is obvious and she is beset with a dilemma of making ‘home’ in a land that used to be her ancestors’ and had ceased to be for the space of fifteen hundred years. Ironically, she was faced with a similar trauma as faced by her ancestors of staring afresh in a new land which also happened to be her homeland. Unlike her ancestors who were completely new to India, she had to recreate or forge familial ties with a land which had been an ‘imaginary homeland’ to the Bene Israel during their diasporic stay in India. Moreover she construed her

*aliyah* to her ancestors land as an act of uprooting herself from a land which had come to be recognised as a motherland or precisely 'surrogate motherland' for the successive generations of Bene Israelis residing in India. Her ties to India, which she was yet to negotiate and realize, prevented her from making home in the Jewish homeland. In her view, Israel could:

... wipe out my past. Give me a new life. Help me forget India, Ahaseures, Haman, Baroda, Ahmedabad and wagging tongues, suspicious relatives, acquaintances, society. They never seemed to forget my past, nor did they allow me to forget it. I was running away from India.  
(371)

By travelling to Israel she could have forgotten her troubled past, days spent in the M S University of Baroda, studying Arts, loving Ahaseures (a Parsi and fellow Arts student of her department), being physically violated by Haman (her roommate's boyfriend) and the gossip that ensued, her fickle-mindedness leading to the break-up of her engagement with Benjamin, and her divorce from Shree after the birth of her second child- all that besmirched her identity in her community, who scorned over her erratic decisions in life and considered her unreliable. Unfortunately, as much as she wanted to bury her past and welcome her new future in Israel, her ties to the surrogate motherland, days spent living in India and especially her past which shaped her very identity as an Indian Jew, withheld her from committing herself as an Indo-Israeli Jew. Ironically, her diasporic status in India fractured and hyphenated her identity in the homeland of the Jews as an Indo-Israeli. She was in the Jewish homeland, yet she could not break away from her diasporic identity in a land meant solely for Jews. Rather her arrival in Israel further fractured her identity to accommodate her new status as a Jew of Indian origin and not merely a Jew in her homeland.

Her perception of Israel was shaped and imagined by inputs from her family, cousins, the Israeli immigration centres, various Israeli Jewish visitors, news from Israel and also the *Torah*. All of this had raised enough of her father's hopes to suggest that his daughter should make an *aliyah*. Similarly, it had awakened a desire within her to visit and become a part of her ancestors' land. A land that they desired to return to, yet, never had the opportunity to do so. When she made an *aliyah*, she had plans to settle down in Israel, but her inability to find suitable work forced her to re-think her plans of settling in Israel. Esther therefore says, "My departure for



Israel was like a pilgrimage” (371), where visiting the Holy Land held hope of cleansing herself of her sins and seeking forgiveness for her past. Even though she planned to settle in Israel, yet she could not overcome the feeling of a visiting pilgrim. After her arrival, she saw the land through the eyes of a visitor, as her ancestors had viewed India, fifteen hundred years ago. She made plans to visit the various places of pilgrimage and of tourist interest. She began with visiting the various museums dedicated to the-diasporas, Holocaust, modern art, and the ancient synagogues, the Roman amphitheatres, the Greek columns, Mount Carmel, caves of Prophet Elijah (the prophet worshipped particularly among the Bene Israelis), Chagall’s sparkling glass windows in Jerusalem, Zubin Mehta at the Israel Philharmonic, last remnants of King Solomon’s temple called the Western Wall and Masada, the last Jewish stronghold against the Romans. All these places of pilgrimage, brought back memories of the pilgrimage sites in India like the *Eliyahu Hannabi cha tapa* in the Konkan, where the prophet’s golden chariot was believed to have landed leaving the marks of his white stallion on the rock from where he had flown to save the ship carrying the Bene Israel. She rounded off her pilgrimage by visiting Mount Sinai, which her grandmother Shebabeth had dreamt of visiting. When Esther visited it, she felt her pilgrimage had come to an end, and was filled with deep emotions standing on the ancient mount of which she had heard and read so much. She remembered her grandmother, and realised that had she visited it, she would have been disappointed at the dusty and rocky mountain which was unlike the picture of a diamond in the desert that she had imagined. Bathsheba had similar thoughts when she visited Navgaon, where her ancestors were buried in two mounds and Khandala, where the *Eliyahu Hannabi cha tapa* is located. In her imagination the burial place had taken fanciful proportions which led her to believe that the land would be golden, there would be ruby studded palm trees where the sun would be like a diamond and the moon like a pearl. Unlike her imagination, the “earth was brown grey, and stony with dry trees and jagged rocks” (40). For both Esther and Bathsheba who had certain imaginations about the places of pilgrimage they visited, which arose out of what they had heard from their elders over the years with their own fanciful additions to it. The image of the places which had begun as memories took fanciful and exotic proportions, something out of fairytales for the consecutive generations of Bene Israel. With the addition of every new generation to the Bene Israel in India, the original

memory was replaced with a more unrealistic imagination where people believed Israel to be something out of the ordinary as it was holy and sacred and stood like a far-fetched dream.

### **Indigenization and assimilation of the Bene Israel**

Some historical data suggests that Jews from Aden and nearby areas did business with western coast of India. But it is difficult to find whether the Bene Israelis had any prior encounter with the Indians. It seemed that unlike other Jews who had conducted business with the natives and would have some knowledge about them, the Bene Israel were at a complete loss. As they settled down and sought work, they were in yet another dilemma as to what kind of work they could do in this land. The manner of work became a crucial question, as they realized the society was divided into castes based on the kind of work a person did. They chose the work of oil pressing, which was just above the lowest caste of the society. The Bene Israelis preferred anonymity as Esther states:

When they fled their homeland and landed in India after the shipwreck, the Bene Israel had followed the dictum: mix with the people where you have found a new home. Keep your religion a secret. Let nobody know who you are. (199)

Therefore they mixed with the people and chose their profession which situated them within the caste system; thereby making them part of the society. It was important for the Bene Israelis to choose a desirable place within the caste system in order to find favour among the natives and also to emulate them to suggest their higher origins and birth in their homeland. The Bene Israelis after their arrival in India found similarities with the origin legend of Chitpavan Brahmins and their own origins. According to the legend, after the shipwreck near the port of Navgaon, the bodies of the people had floated to the shore. The story stated- while Parshuram was circling the earth to eliminate the Kashatriyas (the warrior caste below the Brahmins) by giving more power to the Brahmins, he came across the burnt bodies of the shipwrecked people who appeared to be from a different land and of an ancient race. He restored them to life and these were supposed to be the Bene Israelis. The Chitpavan Brahmins shared similarities with this Bene Israel legend. It was believed that the Bene Israel might have appropriated the story of high caste Brahmins to achieve easy acceptance among other communities and have a privileged position in the host-land. The story of their high birth, contrary to the work they took up further

suggested their need to put forth their favourable positions back in their homeland and thereby completely erase any previous signs of un-favourability in the homeland. Apart from the appropriation of the Chitpavan Brahmin's story, they followed a particular family structure with a dominant patriarch. This could be traced back to the time of *Torah*, where there are numerous references to the patriarchs like Adam, Abraham, and Joseph (whose sons became the twelve Jewish tribes) to name some. In *Book of Esther*, Abraham, Solomon and David, Esther's ancestors, carried the sceptre of patriarchy. And Esther, who had always resided in a family with a patriarch of sorts, wanted her second husband Golem (an American Jewish artist settled in Paris, whom she had befriended on his visits to India) to become one. The borrowing of the patriarchal tradition from the *Torah* depicted their need to remain connected to a way of life led by their ancestors.

The Bene Israelis' first brush with the native's culture was at the level of the caste system of the society. There were other negotiations during their long stay in the host-land which had come to adopt them as their own and vice-versa. The exact time when the Bene Israel landed near the Konkan villages cannot be stated with certainty but in Esther David's narrative which begins sometime around the mid-nineteenth century, we see a well-framed caste system in place. The caste system which was created to situate the different *varnas* of the ancient Indian society into four groups acquired its rigidity around 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. The system which stratified the society started within the Hindu society and was applicable to them. But by the nineteenth century non-Hindu religious communities like the Muslims and Bene Israel were also made a part of the caste structure on basis of their professional occupation and part of a stratified social structure. The Dandekars who over the years had come to acquire large portions of land in the village Danda, enjoyed a comfortable monetary status. The acquisition of the land had raised them to the social status of land owning class. But when it came to their social status within the society they resided in, it was based on what their ancestors had as their social occupation after their arrival in the Konkan villages. Their occupation as oil-pressers provided them the status of *telis* at the bottom of the caste system just above the *shudras*, the lowest caste. As oil-pressers or *telis*, the Bene Israelis' position within the caste-ridden society stood at par with the native *telis* who hailed from both the Hindu and Muslim communities. What created their unique status within the *tehi* caste was their day of complete abstention from work. In the case of the Bene

Israelis, they rested on Saturdays strictly keeping it holy as it was dedicated to their God and therefore were called *shanwar telis*. There were the *shukrawar telis* who were Muslims and the *somwar telis* who were Hindus. We therefore find that the caste system was all-inclusive and had accommodated all in its rubric to develop a clear stratified society. The entry and acceptance of the Bene Israel into the caste structure held special significance for them. Their incorporation into the Konkani society had begun with their appropriation into the caste structure as *telis* which suggested their assimilation into the native social structure. It had opened doors for their assimilation and thereby acceptance into the host society. Assimilation as *telis* hailed and ensured their nativization as Indians.

The caste system no doubt helped the Bene Israel in gaining access to the native's society. In the wake of the caste demarcations that the Bene Israel had to negotiate, they were simultaneously influenced negatively by the system, which led to an emulation of similar caste divisions within their community. The Bene Israeli and the Cochini Jews were not left uninfluenced with the cultures of the land. They appropriated the Hindu caste system into their own community leading to the creation of sub-castes within their community. In fact, Esther David in her novel refers to the division within the Cochini Jewish community into pure and impure Jew on basis of colour prejudices. Essaji (youngest brother of Samuel Ezekiel Divekar who constructed the first Bene Israel synagogue in Bombay) narrates the case of the Cochini Jews who were divided into similar sub-castes as White and Black Jews:

In the fourteenth century, things changed. The vicious seed of black and white Jew was planted among the Jews. The fair-skinned Jew had a superior status, the blacks were inferior. In 1686, the Jewish Dutch traveller Moses de Pavia referred to the black Jews as Malabarese and the white Jews as Blancos. (65)

The latter were debarred from entering the *Pardeshi* synagogue attended by the former. Similarly the Bene Israel community was divided into sub-castes of *gora* or white and *kala* or black Jew. Essaji notes the above where he suggested similarities between the Cochini and Bene Israel colour prejudices: "With a sigh Essaji commented that even the Bene Israel suffered from this malady of colour." (65)

It would be difficult to suggest what first influenced Bene Israel, the native's caste system or the Cochini caste demarcation. Whatever or whoever was the reason, the outcome was a colour malady which differentiated such minority communities as the Cochini Jews and the Bene Israel. In either case, the Hindu caste divisions were a basis and possible influence leading to the sub-caste system within the Bene Israel and Cochini Jews.

The assimilation that began with their caste appropriation saw similar acculturation in other Bene Israeli and native interactions. Not only had the Dandekar family adopted the various customs of the host-land but also the name of the village as family name with the suffix 'kar' added to it and had even come to adopt its language as their own. Talking about customs, India at the time when Bathsheba lived prohibited women from venturing into the outside world which was considered as a man's domain. The narrator's great-grandmother, reasoned with her patriarchal father-in-law, Abraham, for permission to work in the family *baadee* which was slowly going into ruins with no family member interested in looking after it. Although Abraham frowned upon the native customs and rituals but he had to bow before the age-old traditions of the land to protect the women of his household. The culture of the land had influenced his thoughts and beliefs wherein he did not hear her pleas at first to maintain the moral and customary code of the society in which they lived. But after much reasoning and the depleting produce of their farmland Abraham permitted his daughter-in-law to work in their ancestral *baadee* for the upkeep and monetary stability of the family. According to the narrator, her great grandmother was a strong willed woman who looked after her family's needs in the absence of her husband Solomon. Like Abraham, she was tied by the unspoken laws and customs of the land that they inhabited, yet the Dandekars made concessions when faced with monetary instability. Therefore for Bathsheba and Abraham, who possibly had not seen or known their ancestral land, were guided and moulded into the host-land's customs and laws as it had been home to several generations of Bene Israel. Moving over to David's story, there seemed a different negotiation in process where the question of homeland was concerned. David, according to the family legend, had the opportunity to befriend Vallabhai Patel and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, India's freedom fighters and therefore felt more connected to the country which had come to become homeland. For the Dandekars who lived before David there was the knowledge that they would someday return to Israel. But with David, there came an intermediate

consciousness into the conception of homeland as elsewhere and the return as mythical. The generations preceding him were aware of the promise of return which had taken mythical and legendary proportion due to its fanciful nature, but the generation following him saw an opportunity of possible return with formation of the state of Israel. In fact the generations that followed David had begun to accept and realize that there could be life once again in the 'Promised Land' and beyond the surrogate motherland that India had come to signify.

The knowledge which was there, found sound foundations with the coming of various European visitors, missionaries and religious leaders who tried to theorise upon their story of origin. With David and his direct involvement in politics the dynamics of the relation between the host-land and the diaspora consciousness shifted to accommodate a growing consciousness where people like him began to understand and accept India as their surrogate motherland, which had nurtured them. His involvement in local politics and winning the municipal elections could all be attributed to his understanding of the land as his homeland in absence of ever achieving their original homeland. David's case mirrors a high point in the community's consciousness where they wanted to relegate the memory of return in some remote corner and completely accept their fate in this new land as its new citizens with the re-birth of the land after Independence. Joshua was similar in his proximity to India and considered it as his motherland which had nurtured and looked after him. For him the land and the zoo was his life and he had no wish to make an *aliyah* into a land which would be unfamiliar, even if it was his legendary homeland. For Joshua and his wife Naomi, life was in India, where they lived as Jews following all Jewish rituals, alongside partaking in the culture of the host country necessitated by the absence of their own culture. The return as a possibility rattled their slumbering memory which had always considered the return as a dream.

Through Joshua's insistence that his daughter make an *aliyah*, Esther David makes a break in the ongoing conception of their return to homeland from a mythical dream to a reality. This change was triggered by lack of suitable matches for Esther in her diminishing community, due to the huge wave of emigration to Israel from 1950's. Also his fear for his daughter, who was distanced from her community after her marriage outside the community and her divorce, made him aware of a possible need of Jewish religion and customs for his daughter's

safekeeping. In fact, Joshua's insistence on his daughter's *aliyah* to the holy land brought forth a re-engagement with the idea of return to their homeland. Her journey which she narrates as a pilgrimage was due to various reasons, foremost being the growing awareness of the land as not only iconic of a land of abundance, but also a tortured abundance of "milk, honey and blood" (371). Her insufficient knowledge of Hebrew became a stumbling block where her qualifications as an art critic and an artist did not commend for a well paying occupation. Moreover this land which was in constant turmoil to protect its borders and existence weakened Esther's resolve to settle. She was beset with uncertainties after coming to her ancient homeland. The reality of her homeland shattered her fanciful imagination about the homeland, where she had hoped to re-start a new life as a Jew. But her shattered dreams made her question her need for a Jewish life in Israel, which according to Esther could have been possible anywhere. Moreover, her loss of immediate family in Israel with a growing sense of restlessness amidst her cousins fuelled her desire to return to the protection and support of her own family and the only country she had known as home.

Her relationship with Golem once again raised her hopes of leading a perfect Jewish life married to a Jew. Golem had escaped the Holocaust though he had lost his cousins and other family members to it. This had made him question his own existence and identity as a Jew. He was at a stage where he preferred to keep his Jewishness under wrap, as it proved difficult for him to deal with his religion which had caused much pain and trauma to him and his dear ones. Her marriage to Golem opened new avenues for her to re-build a perfect Jewish life for them and for her re-acquaintance with Judaism. Furthermore, with him she became acquainted with the trauma of the Holocaust, which added yet another fact of understanding to her knowledge and identity of being a Jew. The marriage renewed her faith and proved to be a lifesaver, where she observed all Jewish festivals and tried to live a Jewish life, much to Golem's uneasiness. She wanted Golem to be her saviour to re-define her identity as a Jew. But no rescue seemed forthcoming from Golem, as he was unable to see his religion in a favourable light. Their differences in expectations of one another and difference in opinion about their religion started to break Esther's picture-perfect Jewish life and also her marriage. During the same time, India was struck with an epidemic and her fear for her son's life, laid the last stone over her marriage to Golem, who believed that though she lived in Paris with him, her heart still longed for India. Her

longing and belonging to India and her ties with this land had made her life a dual existence between India and Paris. And her knowledge and realization of the truth of India being her place of anchor helped her recognise it as her home and surrogate motherland.

### **Nativization of the Bene Israel**

The story of the appropriation and thereby nativization of the Bene Israel could also be seen in other areas of this community's customs. The cultural interaction between the diaspora and native cultures provided them with a hyphenated cultural identity as Indian-Jews. The community adhered to and promoted alliances within the community which could be attributed to the influence of Hindu society. Alliances which amounted to inter-caste or inter-religious marriages were strictly prohibited. Like their Hindu counterparts, finding matches for their daughters and sons were taken seriously by the families. According to the tradition, the boy's family sent a *manga* or proposal for marriage to the girl's family, and when accepted they proceeded with other ceremonies related to marriage. The various ceremonies leading to marriage like the *mehndi* ceremony seem a local influence. The men and women of this community married their first, second or third cousins due to their numbered population. Therefore, many characters from *Book of Esther* like Bathsheba's daughter Tamara, her grandson Joseph and Menachem, the narrator's uncle all were married either to their first or second cousins as decided by their families. Such a custom was prevalent to protect and keep the young men and women within the community instead of losing them to other communities. The marriage alliances within one's own community were followed strictly and alliances with other co-religionists Baghdadi's or Cochins were also forbidden. For Jerusha, Esther's aunt, she states the family had difficulty in finding a suitable groom, because she was over qualified as a doctor. While still a student, Jerusha had received a marriage proposal from her professor, Dr. Ezra, who belonged to the Baghdadi community, and was a widower with a young daughter. When the family was informed about the proposal, her father refused the match citing reasons as Baghdadi's and Bene Israelis continued tensions over the former's suspicion of the latter's Jewishness. In his refusal one could read a strong influence of the Hindu society which disallowed any alliances with people outside their community (as they had formulated their customs emulating their Hindu neighbours). Moreover as Jerusha's mother Shebabeth pointed



out to her, the offspring's of such alliances would not be welcome in either community due to their deep-seated differences, and it would have amounted to their ex-communication from their respective communities.

The Bene Israelis not only had problems with their co-religionists, they even avoided exchange of brides between certain families. Esther's first marriage proposal while she was studying had come from one of the families into and from which the Dandekars did not give or take brides. But her parents who did not observe such beliefs, refused on the account of her age. When Esther joined college, she felt as though she had become a slave of her parents' wishes who considered her as carrier of family name and honour. After Esther was molested by her roommate's boyfriend, Haman in the college hostel, her parents felt getting her engaged would be a safe solution to safeguard and protect her chastity and honour. So, she was rushed into an engagement with Benjamin under her parents' mounting fear for the safety of their daughter. But like her parents, Esther was not destined for a synagogue marriage as she had always dreamt. Esther broke her engagement to Benjamin and after completing her course from the Maharaja Siyajirao University, Baroda she married Shree, a non-Jew, a Hindu officer with the Forest Department. She married him as expected by her parents, who feared her fickle-mindedness and had stopped looking for a Bene Israel groom for her. She had a court marriage, which kept the community away. She stood at the border of her community, undecided on her religious moorings in the wake of her inter-religion marriage. The narrator's marriage created a fracture in her community's perception and rules of marriage. It also raised questions about the fruitfulness of the tradition of looking for matches among their own people when their population was decreasing in India. Her marriage had ushered a kind of anxiety where the Bene Israel community was made to acknowledge its vulnerability as a minority community. It also forecasted influences of other communities on the younger people of the community and fractured the smooth flow in the community's existence which compelled them to re-think their minority status and diasporic identity in India. It further propelled them towards making an *aliyah*, by which they could safeguard their faith and identity.

The cultural influence of the host-land was not limited to the Bene Israel marriage tradition. The Bene Israel spoke Konkani, Marathi and Gujarati in this order which was in

conjunction to their stay in Konkan, Bombay or Pune and finally in Ahmedabad and Surat. These languages which were categorically the languages of the places that the Bene Israelis had resided in, suggested the lingual acceptance of the native tongues by the Bene Israel as their own. The dress code of the Jewish woman suggested similar influences. In the novel, Esther tells that her great grandmother wore the nine-yard sari like Konkani and Marathi women. Then they switched over to the five-yard sari according to the changing norms of dressing of the land. Men had similar transformation in their attire, where they switched from dhotis and angrakhas to tight pajamas (the Muslim influence) and finally to pants and shirt as the British came to power. The Bene Israel had accultured and seeped themselves into the norms of the land to intermingle into its population.

Another area where the indigenization of the Bene Israel could be witnessed was at the heart of their identity and existence— their religion Judaism. Though Judaism prohibited idol worship, in a land of idol worshippers, maintaining the status quo of their religion proved challenging. They were seduced by the majoritarian aesthetics of multiple gods and goddesses. To counter the predominant religious practice of visiting places of pilgrimage, the Bene Israel had isolated similar sites at Navgaon, the burial place of their ancestors and Sagav, near Alibaug where the *Eliyahu Hannabi cha tapa* was located. The *Eliyahu Hannabi cha tapa* dedicated to Prophet Elijah, had vermilion smeared over it, as it was worshipped by the Konkani Hindus also who believed it to be “the relic of the Ghodakdev, the horse-headed divinity, who was still to appear on earth as Kalki, the tenth avatar of Vishnu” (43). And the Muslims worshipped it believing it to be the hoof marks of a *burakh*, the human-headed winged horse. The Bene Israel had chosen places of pilgrimage like the Hindu and Muslim which indicated the influence of these communities’ religious aesthetics on the Bene Israel. In fact Bathsheba’s second cousin Abigayail believed it to be their *Ganesh* as all Bene Israel auspicious rituals began by invoking *Eliyahu Hannabi* or Prophet Elijah. Their attempt to protect and guard their religion from outward influences had to contend with the Bene Israel people’s propensity to assimilate the religious social and cultural aesthetics of the land. India, where different deities are worshipped with similar or different names across its length and breadth and across communities, seduced the Bene Israel community. In the novel we find allusion to the snake god as *nagdev*, the village diety of Danda, whom Sombhau, the *baadee* caretaker worshipped along with the villagers. After

Bathsheba had taken up the work of overseeing their *baadee*, she had an unusual experience. Once she almost lost balance and slipped, and when she turned she saw a cobra pulling back its hood. She was plagued by visions of the cobra chasing her leading to her death. This incident confined her to the house and she feared to cross over the threshold of her house. The village and her community saw it as “Parmeshwar was punishing her for breaking the law” (21). The law of the host-land, in nineteenth century India, disapproved women being seen or working in public spaces considered the place of men in the society. Shombhau, assured her, their village deity would be protecting her as she had “dedicated your life to *Gauri*— the goddess of fertility” (22). Her mother-in-law lighted a lamp, as thanksgiving for Bathsheba’s good health.

The story of Moses and Aharon, who turned their rod into a serpent which swallowed other serpents created by the magicians before the Pharaoh, ahead of the escape of Jews from Egypt, troubled Bathsheba. But this land unlike Egypt or Israel, worshipped the serpent god and the serpent created by Moses and Aharon was sent by their God; this dispelled her fears of the snake god and motivated her to visit the local shrine with Pramila, Shombhau’s wife. During her visit to the shrine of *Shesh Nag* she watched Pramila pray and felt herself mysteriously drawn towards it to make a vow for the safe return of her husband Solomon. The crisis and uncertainty looming over the Dandekar household made Bathsheba more receptive to the lure and power of the local gods and goddesses. She fulfilled her vow to the *nagdev* offering coconuts and flowers and lighting a lamp. What actually withheld Bathsheba from making her vow known to the family was her faith which disallowed idol worship along with the stigma attached of being called a *kala Jew*, if anyone saw her praying before the Indian gods. The fear of this social stigma kept the Bene Israel away from the Indian gods and goddesses, and they held to their own faith in a multi-religious society. Joseph, Esther’s great grandfather once had an encounter with the *sheshnag*, the protector of the forest and the people who resided in it, while on one of his trips to the forest. The tribal chieftain who resided in the jungle saw it as a blessing from *sheshnag* and prophesised the birth of a child in his family, who would grow up to become nature’s miracle man. The stories from their holy book like the story of Moses turning his staff into a snake were evoked to justify the worship of local deities and their hope for the successive generation led to having faith in Raghoji’s predictions. Interestingly, this prediction came true with Joshua’s birth, as he was blessed by the *sheshnag* as protector of animals. Evidently, the

Bene Israelis were careful not to succumb to the lure of the indigenous gods but when faced with problems they were ready to bow before any of the gods so long as their prayers would be answered. So, however hard they tried, they were far from being immune to the influence of the innumerable gods and goddesses of the host-land, which were an integral part of the society in which they resided.

## **Conclusion**

Alongside their appropriation of the Hindu caste system, they had picked up the natives' languages and their mannerisms of dressing and various other local Konkani customs. The assimilation into the native society was slow; still it progressed with each successive generation. Though they kept their religious beliefs to themselves and did not trade it with the multi-religions of India, still its steady influence became a reason for this community to be cautious towards it. They feared the loss of young Bene Israelis to other communities and their cultures. Protecting their religion and customs was important for the Bene Israel as it defined their ties to their ancestral land, and delineated their identity as Jews living as a diaspora. So in the absence of any existing symbols of their faith or their way of life in their ancestral homeland, the survivors looked to the natives for the basic framework for their community. This implied choosing a profession of oil-presser as already mentioned, taking up various customs pertaining to everyday life with slight variations to mark their identity as Jews, selecting a language of the land to substitute their forgotten language so as to make a smooth and harmonious integration into the native community. The Cochini's re-introduced the Bene Israelis to Judaism, which helped them to revise and re-reformulate their religious practises. In her narrative, Esther conceptualises India to be a surrogate motherland. This idea paralleled the consciousness of the successive generations of the Bene Israelis who had no memory to construct an alternative image of their homeland. The second generation onwards, people who had grown up with a fractured sense of identity, strove hard to dispel this fractured sensibility and to push it to the recesses of their memory. This led them to forge new ties with this land as their home. Esther, in her journey which is the story of her life growing up as a Jew in a multi-religious society, tries to bring out the trauma of a hyphenated identity as a diaspora. In her own search for her homeland and possible home, she tells the tale of numerous such people who might have felt stranded searching

for their homeland. Her narrative captures the confusion of the diasporic community of the Jews who vacillate between varied conceptualisations of 'home'. They are caught in deciding where home was for them- the ancient land of their ancestors or the land of their birth. For people in diaspora, the issue of home and homeland is of tremendous significance. It is only by resolving this issue that they are able to achieve any sense of the safety and haven that 'home' and 'homeland' signifies.



## CHAPTER TWO

### **In-between Motherland and Fatherland**

*Book of Rachel* (2006) is Esther David's sixth work of fiction. Dedicated to the Bene Israel community like her previous novels it is set in the late twentieth century when the community had been considerably reduced by mass emigration to Israel. Set in Danda, the novel is a poignant tale of a Bene Israel elder named Rachel, who lives alone in Danda, after refusing to accompany her children Aviv, Jacob and Zephra to Israel where they had settled. The synagogue committee of the Danda synagogue had decided to sell the synagogue, considering it to be a burden because it was expensive to repair the dilapidated building. Rachel, who has fond memories attached to the monument, is not in favour of the committee's decision. She therefore makes it her mission in life to protect the synagogue in Danda which epitomises her past and her life with her family, and her identity as a Bene Israel. Her determination to stall the selling of the house of God is the prime concern of the novel. In her endeavour she is helped by Judah, her son Jacob's friend and a lawyer, and her daughter Zephra, who returns to India to lend moral support to her mother in her battle. Through the novel Esther David adds another line of thought that existed within the Bene Israel community about their relationship with India and Israel and their consciousness as an ethnic diasporic Jewish community who had lived long on the Indian soil.

As mentioned above, David adds another perspective to the Bene Israel contention of homeland, which will be the point of departure for my analysis of the novel. In my previous chapter, I dealt with a novel of historical proportion which spread over seven generations with each generation lending a different viewpoint of how they would negotiate with India's, surrogate motherland status while continuing to dream of Israel as their ancestral homeland, or 'Promised Land'. In the present chapter my prime concern continues to be the relation between India and its diasporic Bene Israel community, and specifically how David, through Rachel, the protagonist of the novel, chooses to voice their concern - how she portrays the Bene Israelis view of India after the mass emigration to Israel. In *Book of Rachel*, the synagogue becomes the reservoir of Bene Israel history, marker of their identity and religion, a place which brought the

community together under its roof and in Rachel's battle to preserve it she takes up the challenge to salvage a personal past tied to the place of worship.

### **Analysis**

The novel set in the late twentieth century, portrays a society that has already experienced the mass emigration which began from 1950's onwards, after the State of Israel was created. Like Esther of *Book of Esther*, who was named after a Biblical character, Rachel in the present novel is named after another Biblical character, Jacob's (Israel's) second wife Rachel. The parallel between the holy book and the novel ends with the similarity in the name of the characters. But the allusion could be a means to connect Rachel, a Bene Israeli to her ancient ancestors after whom she is named. Rachel, unlike many of her community people chose to remain in India, living a lonely life in the village of Danda, near Alibaug, where the story is set. As the people from the villages had started to migrate in the mid-eighteenth century to nearby towns and cities in search of better jobs under the British rule, the villages were abandoned. The move from villages to cities, which according to Nathan Katz amounted to the "beginning of the end of their Indian identity" (Katz, 2000:101) meant the interaction of the Bene Israel with the new world which was modern, western and Hebrewized in case of Bombay and Calcutta, where the Baghdadis resided. Many of the Bene Israelis who considered the village surnames that they carried as markers of their origin, after making an *aliyah*, abandoned their villages or the cities they called as home for a land more ancient, which beckoned them as a land promised to them. After the death of her husband, Aaron, Rachel's children- Aviv, Jacob and Zephra too emigrated to Israel according to the Law of Return, giving up their Indian citizenship, to re-start their lives in the land of 'milk and honey'. Her children had tried several times without any positive results to persuade their mother to make an *aliyah* to the 'Promised Land'. But for Rachel, what kept her rooted to India and Danda was a sense of belonging to the land she was born in; where she had spent most of her life with her husband, children and other relatives, and the Bene Israel community. In fact her ties with this land superseded a common Bene Israeli's dream of seeing and living in their ancient ancestral land. Her perception of the land she had grown in shows a sharp contrast from the perception of an average Bene Israeli who was born in India. In the previous chapter we followed the different streams of perception that Esther's ancestors had, and



concluded with how she arrives at a personal and individuated knowledge about her own belonging to India as a surrogate motherland and 'home'. In *Book of Rachel*, there seems to be the overarching viewpoint of India as an intermediate corridor in their return to their forefathers' land. This is opposed to the view of India as a land which signified home and not a break in their journey. In the novel, Rachel is the proponent of the view that India was not just a transitory landscape in their long journey to arrive at the ancient ancestral land, and this keeps her back in what she considers to be literally her forefathers land. As is seen in most diasporic communities, the first generation who had actually experienced the break from the homeland, live with a fractured sense of location and belonging. With successive generations, the memory of the homeland begins to fade away or rather take shape of mythical proportion with consistent exoticisation, as a land which is unattainable, as was considered in the case of the Jews before Israel was created. David, through *Book of Rachel* suggests an alternative condition where the Bene Israelis, irrespective of the myths and legends, choose to stay back in a land which had nurtured them into a thriving community out of the seven surviving couples from the shipwreck as suggested by the Bene Israel traditions pertaining to their origin.

In my close study of the novel my prime concern would be to look at the issues of homeland along with the cultural influences of the various Indian communities on the Bene Israel which shaped their identity as Jews residing in India (or Indian Jews). Looking at the cultural influences, the prime focus would be the parallels between and influences of Indian cuisine on Jewish food habits, which was crucial in shaping their identities as Bene Israeli Jews, which David reiterates, through her creative style of beginning every chapter with a particular cuisine, its origin and significance to her community. I will also be looking at the influences of the Hindu religion on the Bene Israelis own religion and how they contended with the majoritarian aesthetic of the land. Other areas of focus will be the influences in relation to the Bene Israelis language and codes of dressing. I would also delve into the question of what it really meant to be a Bene Israeli Jew, through the lenses of the overarching Indian communities and specifically through the Bene Israeli point of view. Finally, I will be looking at India as a land the Bene Israelis had come to realize as theirs and the changes in their perception in the community after the mass emigrations.

### **Bene Israel synagogues, marker of their Jewish identity**

When a diasporic community accepts a foreign land as its own, it begins to build markers of its own identity on the new soil which connects its identity to the land. The structures which suggest the community's connections to the land could range from places of historical importance to the community, like Navgaon where the Bene Israel ancestors first arrived, places of pilgrimage like Navgaon where the Bene Israel ancestors are believed to have been buried in two mounds, and Khandala, the place of *Eliyahu Hannabi cha tapa* or the rock edifice carrying the hoof marks of Prophet Elijah's horses which are believed to have been formed when he landed in India directing the ship carrying their ancestors; and structures which could be defined as home, like the village houses of the Bene Israelis and the places and monuments where the community gathered to worship and acknowledge their oneness as Bene Israel Jews. The places mentioned above, indicate the arrival, and are emblematic of their stay and life in India. They considered it rightful to have their own places of pilgrimage and worship in the land which had harboured them for so long and had grown into a land close in the image of a homeland in the absence of one. Concentrating on the place of God, the synagogue, the Bene Israeli hall of worship, these were built in towns and villages where a sizeable population, of Bene Israelis lived. The Bene Israelis profession disallowed a considerable population of them to stay in a single village, as it would have hampered their profession. So the Bene Israelis as oil-pressers or *telis* spread to different villages, where each family was able to find work as this would reduce competition for work, which was limited in every village. Such a situation hampered any village housing many Bene Israeli families. Therefore, there was no specific house of prayer because the community lived scattered across the length and breadth of the Konkan villages. Moreover, their profession as oil-pressers did not allow them to lead comfortable monetary lives. When they themselves were monetarily unstable, the question of building a house for prayers did not arise. But by the mid-eighteenth century, when more and more Bene Israelis enrolled into the native British army, and the Bene Israelis living in the villages had also risen to acquire huge tracts of land and led comfortable lives as land owners, there were willing donors within the community to support and build a house of prayer for their God. This had seemed un-thinkable previously for the above-mentioned reasons and so the community used to meet and worship at the house of one of their influential community members. But in 1796, the first Bene Israeli synagogue was built in

Bombay by Samuel Ezekiel Divekar, also known as Samaji Hassaji, a British army officer, who is believed to have built it as “fulfilment of a vow made when Sultan Haider Ali of Mysore released him from captivity during one of the three Anglo-Mysore Wars of the eighteenth century” (Katz, 2000:120). But like most Bene Israeli events, there is a lack of authentic historical data citing the reason that led to the construction of the synagogue. This has led to numerous stories for the reason leading to the construction of the first Bene Israel synagogue. David in her *Book of Esther*, Haeem Samuel Kehimkar in his *History of the Bene Israel of India* and in Brenda Joseph’s essay where she quotes Shellim Samuel from the Bene-Israel Annual and YearBook 1919-1920 dedicated to this synagogue, suggests somewhat similar reasons for the construction of the first Bene Israel synagogue:

Samuel Ezekiel Divekar, while serving under General Matthews in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mysore War, was taken prisoner by Tippu Sultan and condemned to be beheaded along with other British prisoners, but was saved through the intervention of Tippu Sultan’s mother who was glad to see face to face a ‘Banu Israel’ so much talked of in the Holy Koran. ... In gratitude he built the synagogue at his own expense ... to make good his vow made when he was brought to Tippu’s court to hear his death warrant. (Brenda Joseph, Thomas Timberg ed., 1986:364)

Another story, relating to this particular incident, adds the Cochini Jewish angle to it in contrast to the various Bene Israeli accounts, where Joseph points to an account called “From a Ms. Of the House of Rahabi”, which goes as- when the Rajah of Cochin feared an attack by the army of Haider Ali on Cochin and Thiruthur (where a synagogue built by Rahabi stood), he approached Rahabi, a wealthy merchant with the Dutch East India Company, to intervene on his behalf to avert hostilities between the two kingdoms. Rahabi sent his three sons, with precious gifts to Haider Ali, and when Samuel Divekar an officer with the British army heard of their arrival he implored them to plead on behalf of some captives, as they were Bene Israelis from Bombay. It is believed that the Bene Israelis were freed and Divekar was brought to Cochin with them. Here he saw the synagogue and asked Rahabi to keep his life savings as donation for the synagogue, which Rahabi declined asking him to construct a synagogue for his community residing in Bombay. Though no authentic proof could be found to substantiate the above story, which Joseph states in her essay, nonetheless like numerous other stories it adds to the historical and cultural significance associated with the construction of the Samaji Hassaji synagogue.

Irrespective of the sequence of events which brought about the construction of the Sha'ar Haraamin (Gates of Mercy) or informally, the Samaji Hassaji synagogue, one thing is clear; it was constructed in fulfilment of a vow made by him for liberation from Tipu Sultan or Haider Ali.

According to Katz, most of the Bene Israel synagogues, either small or elaborate, resembled the Sephardic synagogues elsewhere. They had the *tevah* (*bimah* or the altar) at the centre with separate seating arrangements for men and women. Men sat on chairs or benches which lined three walls of the synagogue while women sat in women's section upstairs. The eastern wall had a wooden cabinet or the *heichal* which held the metal or wood encased *Torah* scrolls and special curtains veiled the cabinet. An ornate wooden chair for the Prophet Elijah, their 'Biblical touchstone' their primary Prophet was put on one side of the cabinet. Decorations within the synagogue included the brass Chanukkah lamps, *mezuzah* or *mezzuzot* (which contained the Biblical verses on parchment) affixed to the doorposts, a *ner atmid* or eternal light and chandeliers. Besides the above, the synagogues had huge courtyards where religious and non-religious public gatherings were held. The courtyard also had a *miqveh* (ritual bath) in an outbuilding. These were the basic interiors of every Bene Israeli synagogue. The synagogue at Danda which holds the prime focus in *Book of Rachel* had "Grecian pillars and Ionic roof which betrayed its majestic past" (8). Inside the synagogue, "The chandeliers, oil-lamps, and velvet curtains with gold embroidery gave testimony of the synagogue's glorious past, though they were frayed, charred and greasy." (12). The structure and the interior all stood testimony to its magnificent past. But its present condition suggested its decline from its zenith of a glorious past into a burdensome, ruined structure which looked "weather beaten ... with its chipped Corinthian capitals, moss-covered walls, the arched doorway, the marble plaque with faded Hebrew and Marathi letters" (12). The structure which had gone into disrepair where services were not conducted anymore pointed to the migration of the Bene Israel population from Danda *per se* to nearby cities or more possibly to Israel. Its courtyard where the community had gathered to pray and celebrate *malidas*, festivals or holy days like *Pessach* or Passover which was celebrated in memory of the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt, stood in mute testimony to the talks and laughter of the Bene Israel women who came to make the Indian matzo bread for their Seder table for *Pessach*.

After the first Bene Isarel synagogue at Bombay, many more synagogues were constructed in Bombay, Pune, Ahmedabad, Karachi and places near to Bombay like Alibaug, Khandala, Pen, Panvel etc. Like the Prophet Elijah or *Eliahu Hanabi*, whom Shalva Weil states as the symbol, core to the Bene Israel identity, the *malida* rites were unique to the Bene Israelis. The term *malida* comes from the Muslim and Hindu term for the rice flour mixture. Similar to their Hindu and Konkani Muslim neighbours, the dish is offered in the name of the God. In the novel David explains the *malida* ritual as-

... offering to the Prophet Elijah, Eliyahu Hannabi, for a secret wish fulfilment.

Normally the entire community is invited to partake in a *malida* ceremony or a minyan of ten men must be present for the ceremony. ...

The *malida* platter consists of *Ha'etz*, *Ha'adama* and *Bore mineh mezonaoth*.

*Ha'etz* is fruit which had hard trunk, like dates, *Ha'adama* is fruit with soft trunks, like banana, chikoo, grape, orange, .... *Bore mineh mezonaoth* consists of wheat preparations like biscuits and cakes. ...

The *malida* platter is placed on a clean white tablecloth and covered with a decorative textile, either cotton, silk, crocheted or embroidered.

When the Eliyahu Hannabi prayers begin, a member of the family brings the platter to the *teva* and the cantor, *hazzan* (prayer leader) or rabbi says blessings over it. After this the platter is taken back to an anteroom, where women prepare a plate per person...

... Blessings are said over the *Ha'etz*, *Ha'adama* and *Bore mineh mezonaoth*. The *malida* normally starts with *Ha'etz*, the date, a symbol of the Promised Land, .... A *malida* is followed by a dinner and festivity. The reason of the wish or *malida* is never revealed nor requested. (142-43)

In choosing the kind of food for the ritual there seems an amalgamation of the local and Biblical food. Therefore the ritual, which invokes the Bene Israeli touchstone Eliyahu Hannabi, through its preparation and ingredients, adds the Jewish flavour to a popularly local Konkani custom. Apart from the *malida* ritual which is significantly recognized as offerings for a secret wish fulfilment, Katz states, it is also performed on other two occasions, like the-

... cyclical rites associated with the calendar [such as holy days]; rites de passage which demonstrates the linear progression of the individual through birth to death [such as *brit milahs* or weddings]; and non-repetitive individual rites [such as thanksgiving for a boon, or in fulfilment of a vow]. (Katz, 2000:103)

This he quotes from Shalva Weil's 'Bene Israel Jews'. The occasions for *malida*, makes one question its origin and influences. Katz suggests that in India vows constituted a crucial form of religious beliefs among the women, who enacted it through ritualistic fasting or abstaining from particular types of food like meat and various other austere activities. The women particularly performed it as, according to Hindu conception, they had *shakti* or power to protect their family and community, as its progenitors (Katz, 2000:103). Therefore, the *malida* ritual which was a fairly local custom was adopted by the Bene Israelis to invoke their primary Prophet and take secret vows like their reference groups with whom they resided. In the novel, Rachel's daughter Zephra, plans a *malida* ceremony at the Danda synagogue, as thanksgiving for a wish fulfilment-her mother's recovery from illness and return from the hospital. After many years the Danda synagogue is cleaned and aired to perform a *malida* service, as her mother had always desired the synagogue to become functional once again. It was a rare occasion, in many ways; first, the *malida* which venerated Prophet Elijah for wish fulfilment, which together was the Bene Israel Judaic identity marker, re-instated the lost glory of the Danda synagogue; secondly, the *malida* itself which had become a rarity with fewer Bene Isareli population once again drew the congregation in large number to the abandoned synagogue; and finally and most importantly, it brought the re-instated Judah Abraham, a non-practising Jew, within the fold of the Bene Israeli community. The synagogue at Danda suggested that there resided many Bene Israelis in its vicinity, for a prayer hall of their own, instead of travelling to nearby Alibaug or Bombay. It also suggested the prosperity of the Bene Israelis living in and around the village or the Bene Israel community which might have funded its construction. Whatever made the Bene Israeli prayer hall in Danda possible, it was clear the congregation around Danda preferred the marker of their Jewish faith to be their prayer hall in that village. When Zephra plans for the *malida* service at the synagogue, it draws many Bene Israelis from nearby towns and foreign tourist Jews to participate and pray at the synagogue which had remained dysfunctional after the migration of its congregation.

The construction of the Bene Israeli synagogue or a house of worship, allowed them to practise congregational Judaism and they moved away from Judaism which was based on home rituals before nineteenth century. After the first Bene Israel synagogue, many more were constructed where a sizeable Bene Israeli community resided like in towns, metropolis, and various districts to serve to the needs of the people who resided there. The move from home centred to the congregational Judaism brought new changes to the religious services and liturgy for the services. The Bene Israel followed the liturgy, provided and taught to them by the Cochini Jew David Yechezkel Rahabi, which made ample use of Hebrew central to Judaism. This introduced the Bene Israelis to their religion after a long span of isolation and brought about their religious awakening where they became more systematic and informed about their religion. Rahabi chose three men from the Bene Israel community to tutor as *kaji's* for the community, for conducting various rituals and prayers. Initially, the Bene Israel customs and rituals had all developed as a consequence of influence of their Hindu and Muslim neighbours. But with the first awakening by Rahabi, the Judaism practised by them began to orient itself towards the influences from its Cochini co-religionists. Looking at influences, the foremost that comes to our mind is the Prophet Elijah who was primarily prayed to and whose pictures one could see in many Bene Israeli homes. In India where numerous deities were prayed to, Judaism had to contend with the fear of being substituted by the numerous Hindu and Muslim saints and gods. To sustain its monotheism, within a religious space where numerous gods and goddesses and saints existed, Katz believed what Rebecca Reuben suggests in her work *The Bene Israel of Bombay*, "David Rahabi ... substituted Prophet Elijah for the numerous local Indian saints" (Katz 2000:102), and thereby made the Prophet an integral part and significantly unique to the Bene Israeli practise of Judaism. Rahabi, who had opened a world of Judaism for the Bene Israelis also introduced them to the language of the *Torah*, Hebrew. Under his guidance, the rituals and services were now conducted with prayers in Hebrew and readings from the *Torah* their ancient language. The Hebrewization of the Bene Israelis Judaism initially drew the Bene Israeli to their religion, but soon enough, Hebrew became a stumbling block for many who did not understand the language. People lost interest in a religion which was taught in the *Torah* language which could hardly be understood by the common people. With the coming of the Christian missionaries and the lifting on the ban of the missionary work in India in 1813, a second phase of

religious awakening occurred among the Bene Israelis. The missionaries worked among the Bene Israelis, who were un-educated, thinking they could easily convert them. They translated the *Old Testament* into Marathi, the language of the Bene Israel. They taught them Hebrew and English in the schools established by missionaries that made the access to their holy books easy. Armed with knowledge of Hebrew the Bene Israel began to translate their religious liturgical work and Holy Scriptures into Marathi, for the common Bene Israel. In their endeavour they were helped by the missionaries suggests Joan G. Roland (Joan G Roland, Thomas A Timberg ed., 1986:285), where missions like American Marathi Mission opened schools for Bene Israeli children in Bombay and Kolaba district. Further in the article Roland states, they “developed Hebrew grammars in Marathi so that the community could become more familiar with the religion and the language of it ancestors” (Joan G Roland, Thomas A Timberg ed., 1986:285). The grammars developed by the missionaries helped them translate Hebrew prayers into Marathi; moreover they also “composed Indian style- devotional songs known as *kirtans*” (Katz, 2000:95). In the *Book of Rachel*, Rachel remembers and sings many such Bene Israeli Marathi *kirtans* and *bhajans* while cleaning the synagogue or doing other works. It is interesting to note that the *bhajans* that Rachel sings and hums had tunes similar to the *kirtans* sung by the local Hindus dedicated to Lord Krishna. In fact the *bhajans* seemed as though someone had superimposed Biblical stories over the local *bhajans* to make it apt for the Bene Israelis. One such Bene Israeli *bhajan* sung to the tune of a famous Marathi *bhajan* dedicated to Krishna, depicted the story of child Moses kept in a basket floating down the river Nile. Therefore, the Bene Israel substituted the local gods with Biblical characters to have their own religious *bhajans*. Like the *bhajans*, the *kirtans* sung by the Bene Israelis were translations of songs taught by missionaries into Marathi like, *The Lord is my Shepherd*, which Rachel sings in the Marathi version. Superimposition of Biblical stories did not end with the *bhajans* and *kirtans*, it moved into Rachel’s perception and imagination, as she pondered over the looks of her new born grandson, “Perhaps [the child would look] just like Krishna, plump and all smiles. ... [or] as dark as Krishna” (42). It seemed as though the Bene Israelis compared anything un-known to them to the local socio-cultural perceptions and in Rachel’s grandson’s case Krishna becomes the touchstone. Another interesting comparison that David draws in the novel concerns the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. For Rachel tamarind becomes the forbidden fruit of the Bible which she



longs to taste from the tree in the courtyard of her house. As a married woman she was not expected to climb the tamarind tree to taste the fruit. But when all the family members were away from the house, she climbs the tree to taste the fruit, which leaves her in awkward position in the tree where she is unable to climb down un-assisted. Like the forbidden fruit in the Bible, tamarind becomes her undoing in the novel. The comparisons that David suggests in the novel, suggested local Hindu influences on the Bene Israel religious social and cultural perceptions and imaginations. The local images or aesthetics provided them a framework to superimpose their Biblical characters after the first and second religious awakening and thereby develop their own religious aesthetics.

Apart from Hebrew, English was taught by the missionaries to the Bene Israelis. English opened up the world for them. It paved way for their modernisation and also facilitated their study of world Judaism. This helped them with well-informed knowledge about their religion which strengthened their faith and belief. This proved fruitful for the Bene Israelis as it helped them present counter arguments to the Christian missionaries conversion activities. It even helped the women of the community secure teaching jobs in schools. It also aided them in securing administrative jobs under the British rule. They started to take up jobs though low in the administrative ladder, due to their proficiency in English. and also because the link between the locals and the Bene Israel community had started to rupture with the coming of new reference groups like their co-religionists and the British. Therefore the missionaries, who had tried to convert the Bene Israelis through introduction of Hebrew and English inversely, had augmented in restoring their faith and opening them up to world Judaism.

#### **Danda synagogue- reservoir of past memories**

Rachel, the only Jew in Danda, had taken up the role of the caretaker of the synagogue. Her days were spent cleaning and dusting the synagogue, as she believed that one day there would be *minyan* of ten men who would conduct the service and the synagogue would once again be filled with people praying and celebrating. For her the house of God was not just a monument or structure commemorating the God of Bene Israel Jews, it was a place which was closely knitted with her life and held sentimental value for her. Unlike the synagogue committee members and specifically Mordecai, who equated its worth with money and planned to sell it to local

businessman Satish Chinoy, the place of worship for Rachel stood as testimony to all the events in her life and her family. It held within its roof happy memories of her sons' circumcision and their *bar mitvah*, coming of age ceremony usually held at the age of thirteen, after which they could be counted as the *minyan*, as adult members and conduct services. Unfortunately enough, it was just a relic from the past for the committee who wanted to sell it and put the money to good use for the community. Rachel, who had spent her life taking care of the synagogue after all the Bene Israeli members had left the place and the synagogue was abandoned, was not in favour of the committee's decision. The boundary surrounding the synagogue was long broken down, and it seemed that Rachel's house and it stood in the same compound. She could view it from her own house. Whenever she entered the synagogue she was reminded of her heritage and past. It was as if the synagogue and Rachel had witnessed happiness and sorrow together. Moreover, she felt that she would be lost without the synagogue, which silently gave her the courage to live when everyone had migrated. After she came to know of Mordecai's evil plan to sell the house of God, she realized the special place the synagogue held in her life and her past and memories. It was her close association with the monument which stood as a pillar of support whenever she felt lonely after her children's emigration, encouraged her to challenge the committee's decision. She felt the need to protect the relic of their and her past from being razed down into oblivion and lost to her completely.

In her efforts to protect the symbol of their identity as testimony to their existence in Danda, she seeks Judah Abraham's help. Judah, who was a lawyer, and a Jew, had stayed away from the community for personal reasons. Zephra travels back to help her mother in her efforts, as she was closely attached to the synagogue and had memories of it. The Bene Israelis who had once been members of the Danda synagogue, regularly sent Rachel money for its repair and upkeep. The migrated Jews like her children, relatives and cousins lived with a sense of guilt at having abandoned their God's house and Rachel alone in the village. For the people who had migrated, the synagogue, like the land they had abandoned, held memories of their early lives in India. Therefore, the Danda synagogue emblem of Bene Israeli presence in the village provided the community a collective communal identity, which stood as a testimony to their religious beliefs and housed memories of numerous services conducted under its roof.

## **Creating Homeland within the Host-Land**

For the Bene Israel Jews present-day Israel or the 'Promised Land' was a Biblical land promised to their ancestors. Unlike any other diasporic community, before the formation of Israel, the return to the land of their Biblical ancestors had seemed like a dream, unachievable to them. The continued faithfulness to the Biblical land as homeland in fact accounted for their diasporic condition and also connected them to the Lost Ten tribes of the Bible who considered Abraham as the father of the Jewish race and therefore, their progenitor. In the absence of an actual physical land denoting their homeland, the first generation of Bene Israel diaspora reminisced about their lost homeland. The generations after them, remained true to the idea of homeland though living in India in a far off land which provided them refuge. But this outlook of homeland, started to get dim, with every passing generation with no hope for a return and their lives in the diaspora as permanent. Along with this there arose another idea, that of the diaspora growing closer to the land of their refuge and beginning to accept it as their secondary homeland, where the primary homeland had become a figment of imagination with no hope of a return, after decades of their diasporic existence. But with the rise of anti-semitic sentiments across Europe, the Holocaust, and Zionism (the international political Jewish Movement for the support and re-establishment of a Jewish state in the Biblical Land of Israel in Palestine), the dream of return becoming a reality seemed possible after centuries. For the Bene Israel, reading and hearing about the Holocaust atrocities with rising anti-semitic resentment, and the riots generated after India's Independence collectively provoked them towards re-thinking their allegiance to the land they had come to understand as secondary homeland. With the establishment of the State of Israel and the opportunity to live freely as Jews in the land of their ancestors without having to deal with anti-semitism, aroused within them the desire to visit and live in Israel. This desire was realized with the State of Israel opening up to accommodate Jews from every corner of the globe. The Bene Israelis like their co-religionists chose to make an *aliyah*, to the Biblical land of their ancestors, in the hope of living as Jews and not a diaspora in their ancestral homeland. Apart from the Bene Israel who chose to emigrate, there were some who chose to forego the opportunity of an *aliyah*, in favour of the land where they were born and had grown accustomed and accepted it as their surrogate motherland.

The Bene Israelis who had chosen to remain in India, after mass emigration, were left to live a lonely life, where half their relatives, children, cousins lived in the ancient land of their ancestors. For most the decision to stay back arose out of the fear of the unknown. People like Rachel and her friend Rubybai, who had chosen to remain in India, had done so as they were not ready to make a fresh start at their ripe old age after having lived most of it in India. Rachel's decision to stay back in India was driven by her perception of the land as her homeland. For her India was the land of her forefathers (though certainly not her ancient ancestral homeland) who had fled and arrived at India. Moreover after the death of her husband, Aaron, all she wanted was to be near to the land where he was buried, as she could not think of parting with her beloved husband, with whom she had virtually grown up. This was because the Bene Israelis practised early marriage, and she and Aaron were married when they were teenagers. After his death, though she was separated from her husband, she did not want to break ties from the land where he was buried. She herself wished to be buried beside her husband, so that even in death they would be near. Her reasons for staying behind were of personal nature. But another important factor which stopped her from making an *aliyah* was her unwillingness to live in a land where people spoke a different tongue (Hebrew) and the land itself would have been unfamiliar. Rachel considered India as her own land opposed to Israel as unfamiliar Biblical land of her ancient race. For Rachel who was not highly educated and therefore not well conversant in Hebrew and English, Marathi was the only language she was conversant and fluent in and spoke with the right intonations along with being accustomed to the Maharashtrian customs. "The way she dressed, behaved and spoke made it easier for them to accept her as one of them" (5) this made her a part of the rubric of the Maharashtrian society and her neighbours often introduced her as the '*Konkansath Brahmin*', high caste Brahmin in the region where she lived. For Rachel, the acknowledgment and acceptance by her neighbour Kirtibai was cherished by her. In spite of belonging to a caste of *telis*, her easy acceptance by the high caste Brahmins of her society in Danda due to her proficiency in Marathi was manna to her ears. It was because the Bene Israelis were always stigmatised due to their lower caste status as *telis* even after acquiring education and living in metropolis where caste rigidity was not so stringent unlike the villages. The differentiation did not end in India. It continued in Israel, where the Bene Israeli Jews due to their Indian ways and languages, were considered native Indians and not really Jews living as a

diaspora. The questions plaguing their status and identity as Jews in India started by their Baghdadi co-religionist were carried forth in Israel. Here, like in India, they had to contend with discrimination but of a different manner which was aimed against their typically Indian outlook and mannerisms which put a suspicion on their Jewish origins. Rachel, who was aware of such differentiation based on caste, and their Indian mannerisms, therefore cherished her position alongside the high caste Brahmins who regarded her as similar to them and therefore belonging to the place and society she had always lived in. It made her feel like an integral part of the Maharashtrian society irrespective of belonging to a diaspora and not a native, unlike her children and the Bene Israelis who had immigrated to Israel who continually had to make efforts to claim their Jewish origins. For Rachel, who had a diasporic identity, India and the language she was conversant constituted what was familiar and accounted for her familiarity with the land of her birth. While the Biblical land, was unfamiliar in a physical sense, though it was familiar in a fantastical way.

Unlike Esther in *Book of Esther*, Rachel did not explore the possibility of a life in Israel to reach the realization of what India stood and meant for her. It was a land which was familiar to her, where she had lived all her life. Moreover, she felt, only in India could she live like a free spirit away from the burden of learning a new tongue and growing accustomed to a new land which in reality was her unfamiliar ancestral homeland. Unlike her ancestors who always dreamt of a return, she harboured no such dream of a possible return, even if she believed that that the Jews were to return to the land promised to Israel. She had created a homeland for herself in the land which had provided her community with refuge and shelter several decades ago. Therefore, in *Book of Rachel*, a diasporic individual had created homeland or adopted a surrogate motherland within the borders of a host-land. Her reasons for residing in India was that the land and the language had grown to be familiar and seemed like her own, compared to the image and idea of their supposed homeland. Therefore whenever, Rachel was asked by her children to travel to Israel she was filled with fear as she "... imagined they would imprison her forever in an unknown land and tie her tongue with the language of their prayers" (3). For Rachel, starting life in her supposed homeland, Israel was tantamount to being imprisoned in an unfamiliar land. She considered it unfamiliar, even though she had grown dreaming and hearing about it from her

elders because, her life seemed tied closely to the land she was born into and not the distant land that reserved the identity as her homeland.

Unlike her, Judah Abraham, Rachel's lawyer and her spiritual son, was an outcaste in the Bene Israel community. His grandfather's desire to be cremated and not buried, distanced the community from his family, who considered them as social outcastes, not following the norms of birth and death ritual of their community. Even after the family's disassociation from the community, his family continued to observe all the Judaic holy days, fasts and celebrated festivals. His mother educated him regarding his religion and identity as a Bene Israel Jew. But the antagonistic attitude of the community towards his family after his grandfather's death left a lasting impression on him, where rare visits to the synagogue left him bitter towards the community and his identity as a Bene Israel. After his parents' death, what little connection that existed between him and the community, came to an end and he remained a non-practising Jew born to Bene Israeli parents. Therefore, when he began his enquiry about the legality of selling the synagogue property, and his relationship with Zephra, other community members begin to question his identity as a Jew and his right to question the members of his community. His distance from the community and the Judaic practises gave Mordecai and Rubybai the weapon to question his origin as a Jew and belonging to the Bene Israel community. Unlike Rachel who was a practising Jew, Judah had become detached and indifferent to the various Judaic observations like the Saabath and stopped celebrating any festival or holy days. For him the community and its hostile attitude had numbed all religious concerns within him. The community, which had discarded his family and left him embittered, had discarded him and questioned his claim to being a Jew. In retaliation he had stopped visiting the synagogue and carefully stayed away and maintained a distance from the community. His growing resentment and distance from his community had pushed him to forge greater connections with the Indian metropolitan secular community. Judah, like Rachel held similar beliefs about India. His growing relationship with Rachel as her spiritual son aided her in directing and eventually restoring him to the Bene Israel community. Through Rachel, and her faithfulness to the cause of saving God's house, Judah was re-united with his community. Rachel's religiosity and her *kirtans* woke up his slumbering faith which urged him to return to his diasporic community. For him India was the land where he had grown up and the Indian society as an alternative

community in the absence of the Bene Israel community. This added to his indifference to the idea of making an *aliyah*, as his non-practising and community outcaste status would have disallowed him to find easy acceptance in the Israeli society in Israel. In fact, his distance from his community had cultivated an atmosphere where, Judah as an outcaste started to relate closely to the Indian society, the land as his own, and a possible homeland. It made the hope of a return impossible with his ties breaking down with his Jewish community. Even after he returns to his community through Rachel's efforts, he continues to view India as his homeland with which he enjoyed a sense of belonging and locatedness. Therefore, like Rachel, Judah accepted and viewed India as his homeland where he would not have to negotiate with his uneasy relationship with his community. Rachel considered India as her homeland due to its familiarity, while Judah, considered India the same due to his initial detachment and uncomfortable relationship with the Bene Israel community. Each armed with separate reason and specifically Judah even after his re-instatement to his community, arrived at a common consensus where India had substituted their ancestral homeland as a possible homeland and surrogate motherland.

Zephra, Rachel's daughter, who had made an *aliyah* according to the law of return, was torn between her heart and her head, with each defining homeland differently for her. While her heart continued to reminisce and view India as her homeland, the land of her parents, the mind waged a war in favour of Israel as her homeland armed with the reality of it being her ancient Biblical homeland. Her initial years in Israel, were filled with growing accustomed to a new way of life in the Kibbutz<sup>1</sup>, which advocated community living. But with considerable time spent, and her acceptance of the land as her homeland complete with new opportunities, she begins to long for her mother and her recipes which indirectly translate as longing for the land of her birth, India. She often felt homesick in Israel, longing for her life in Danda, which had taken fantastical proportions ever since she began her life in Israel. For Zephra and her brothers, Aviv and Jacob home was still Danda, where their mother continued to reside and which was their ancestral

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<sup>1</sup>Kibbutz, is a cooperative village or community, in Israel, where all property is collectively owned and work is organized on a collective basis. Members contribute by working according to their capacity and in return receive food, clothing, housing, medical services, and other domestic services according to their needs. Dining rooms, kitchens, and stores are central, and schools and children's dormitories are communal. A kibbutz may support itself through agricultural, entrepreneurial, or industrial means.

village in India. Zephra felt torn between her motherland Israel which existed in her head and her fatherland India which existed in her heart. For her, India was the land of her father, while Israel signified the Biblical homeland or the motherland. For both mother and daughter, who considered Israel as their ancestral homeland, India continued to be their forefather and father's land. After she decides to marry Judah, Zephra once again feels troubled and confused thinking about her future, living in two countries and wishes that she could hide from the confusion of home, life and country. For Zephra, who made an *aliyah*, the confusion continued to reign in her life, where she longed for a familiar land and life at the same time tried to be content in a land which was her historical motherland. Irrespective of the confusion between motherland and fatherland that she lived with, Zephra hoped to create a home with Judah. She dreams of a home with Judah "... here or there with fragments from the past, present and future, real and imaginary, merging dreams into reality" (196). For her home had acquired new definition, which defied any confined or pre-determined space. It would rather be an amalgamation of memories, reality and dreams along with a space where both she and Judah could make new beginnings. Her idea of home seemed to be a state of mind, where they could reside peacefully with their past and present looking towards the future.

There seemed to be two different kinds of perception of homeland and home existing in the narrative of the novel. For Rachel and Judah, India defined everything that was familiar. Their idea of home and homeland was based on this familiarity and closeness to the land of their birth. Zephra, who had given up her Indian citizenship like her brothers Aviv and Jacob, had done so as to completely assimilate into the homeland society. For them, home was still defined as a place where their mother lived and where they had grown up. In travelling to the Biblical homeland they fulfilled the law of return, but their ties to the land of their birth or surrogate motherland or secondary homeland had remained intact. In fact the manner in which the three referred to Danda, made it evident that home was still in India. They had travelled far to a different country from their home in Danda in search of better opportunities, and also to claim a land promised to the Jews. Hence, for Rachel and Judah, homeland obviously signified Israel yet they chose to remain in the surrogate motherland or a secondary homeland. Irrespective of the knowledge of the law of return which they were supposed to fulfil they chose to adopt the land of their birth as their homeland therefore making it their secondary homeland. Unlike Rachel and



Judah, Zephra and her brothers, though they made an *aliyah* according to the law of return and claimed their homeland, continued to view India and Danda as their home and therefore their land of origin as against Israel which ideally was their land of origin according to the holy book. They therefore lived with a sense of home, where their mother lived, alongside Israel as the land which allowed them to restart their lives away from home which could not have provided them with similar opportunities. Zephra hinting at her dilemma confesses in the novel that she felt torn between the homeland of her heart and her head, India and Israel, and would have preferred a home which would rise above her confusion and accommodate everything that she and Judah felt dear to them.

### **Food, marker of Bene Israeli identity**

The uniqueness of this novel rests in David's style of beginning every chapter with a recipe from the Bene Israel or Indian kitchen. Each chapter is accordingly named after a particular dish followed by the recipe for each. As we proceed into the chapter we read the importance of the dish mentioned at the beginning of the chapter which depicts the narrator's own knowledge of Bene Israel cooking, her likes and dislikes, and suggests a particular idea through these recipes. David therefore, through the dishes infuses new ideas into her chapters and links the idea of food to that of an individual's cultural, racial, national and religious identity.

Food connects Rachel to every other character in the *Book of Rachel*, be it her husband or her children, Judah, her neighbours, Rubybai her friend, synagogue committee members or Mordecai or the Chinoys. In fact her daughter suspected her of knowing secret recipes which had special powers to augment non-verbal communication where any other information was least likely forthcoming and which helped Kavita's husband Satish, Jacob her son and Judah to open up and confess their hearts' desire to her. Therefore, in moments when verbal language failed to aid the characters in their endeavour to express themselves, Rachel's secret recipes acted as a potential catalyst to help them open up before her. In the novel we find, when Jacob was unable to communicate to her mother about his love for Ilana, a non-Bene Israel Jew, her mother prepared the tongue of the goat, to loosen him and open up before his mother. Likewise, when Rachel was sure that Judah and Zephra were in love, yet none shared it with her, she prepared her famous *puranpoli*, which brought matters to a start as Judah not only confessed his love for

Zephra but also sought her hand in marriage from her. When Rachel had invited the synagogue committee members to her house, with a motive to unveil Mordecai's dubious plans of selling the synagogue as his personal property which it wasn't, Rachel had prepared minced cutlets, which loosened Mordecai's haughty demeanour into revealing the truth and also had woken the synagogue committee members from their slumber which had almost cost them the Danda synagogue. Rachel was aware of the power of the dishes that she served to various characters in the novel. In every case the dishes that she served acted as catalyst to cure the various maladies that every character was suffering from. As a community elder armed with the knowledge of Bene Israel dishes, she assisted in infusing energy into her fast disappearing community by saving the synagogue which marked their presence on Indian soil.

The recipes which David puts down within the ambit of literature served a purpose for her. It helped her prise out the Bene Israel dishes from memory and put them within a literary space so as to prevent them from vanishing into oblivion. As the synagogue marked their past glory and heritage in India likewise, the Bene Israel cuisines marked their Jewish identity. While Rachel worked to restore her heritage in the form of Danda synagogue, David tried restoring the Bene Israel cuisines which according to her served as a signifier of their community. The recipes that David recollects through her narrative, though they had acquired local flavour due to continued life of the community in the Konkan villages, still retained certain basic Judaic premise of Jewish dietary law, which disallowed mixing of milk products and meat. Another practise particular to the Bene Israel was the avoidance of fishes which did not have fins or scales. This particular practise had earlier helped David Yechezkel Rahabi to conclude the community of *shanwar telis* as Jews. Hence, from the time that the Bene Israel were discovered, food had contributed in structuring their identity from other dominant communities and cultures. As mentioned above, the Bene Israelis had local influences in their dishes which could be attributed to their re-adjustment to the availability of certain kind of food in the new land. Such influences could be seen in their preparation of the *malida* platter which itself was a local influence as mentioned above where dates symbolised the 'Promised Land' and similarly in the preparation of the Seder platter<sup>2</sup> which consisted the *matzo* bread, *sheera*, *Jerova*, *Karpas*-

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<sup>2</sup>Seder platter is prepared during Anashi Dhakacha San (in Marathi) or Pessach or Passover which commemorates the Exodus of Jews from Egypt towards freedom. It is observed world over by the Jews by eating unleavened bread

*Maror*, *Limbu cha ras* and Kiddush<sup>3</sup> for *Pessach* or Passover symbolised the Jews hardship in Egypt and their Exodus from Egypt. The *malida* ritual and the contents of the *seder* platter of the Bene Israel suggested certain influences of the dominant local cultures alongside the use of fruits like dates which reminded them of the 'Promised Land'. For example the Bene Israelis never mixed dairy products with meat, but as a result of local influences they substituted their use of milk products with coconut milk which seemed to be in abundance in the coastal villages. Moreover, like the natives they believed that it was a symbol of auspicious beginnings. Not only did the various local influences flavour the Bene Israeli cuisines, but it also charted the changing cultural dynamics from that of a village to a city life. Mordecai, who lived in Bombay, was fond of *peethal*, a dish made of gram flour, while his wife considered it a villager's food. Hence some dishes were seen as typical of the village culinary while others as the metropolitan culinary practise. The demarcation of food into village and metropolitan food, suggested the differing cultural patterns between the lives of Bene Israelis in the villages and in the cities and metropolis. Food was therefore seen as a basis of cultural differences between Bene Israelis living at different places.

It was also believed that the Bene Israelis abstained from cooking non-kosher meat and considered beef as non-kosher. In India with Hindus as one of their reference group, the consumption of beef would have served to outcaste them. Therefore, beef which the Bene Israel ancestors might have consumed before arriving in India had become taboo. This clearly suggested the local influence on their food habits which got eventually shaped by the various reference groups that they emulated. Marks of local influences could be seen in the community's decision of what was considered edible by the Bene Israelis in the villages that they had come to inhabit.

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Each ingredient of the platter symbolized something. The matzo bread was a symbol of the poverty in which the Jews lived in Egypt as slaves and also of the unleavened bread that they carried while fleeing from Egypt, the Indian sheera or halech or haroset was a symbol of the mortar used by the Jews while constructing the pyramids, jerova was a symbol of sacrificial Passover lamb, offered to the lord as thanksgiving when they came to dwell in their ancestral land after many years of wandering, karpas-maror made of bitter herbs and bottle gourd along with salad leaves and parsley along with nimbu cha ras was a symbol of bitterness and hardships that the Jews suffered in Egypt, boiled eggs symbolized the sacrificial lamb and the Kiddush made of black currants which was needed for each phase of the Passover prayers. Wine was optional.

<sup>3</sup>Santification, in particular the blessing over wine used in on all joyous occasions: Sabbath, festivals, weddings, etc.

As the Danda synagogue was a marker of the presence of the Bene Israeli and their past and ultimately the diminishing population of the community which brought about its closure, similarly through the Bene Israel cuisines, David tries to re-instate her own creativity along with the racial, cultural and religious assertion of her community's identity. Through the dishes like the synagogue which were doomed to sure oblivion with the decreasing Bene Israeli population in India, David suggests the community's long existence and survival before the mass emigrations. Dishes served as symbols for the cultural religious specificity of the Bene Israel, which otherwise would have swept away by the dominant culture aromas and spices. And in rendering the fast disappearing Bene Israeli cuisines to the "pages of literature" (Shweta Rao, Dr. Rajyashree Khushu-Lahiri), David attempts to preserve her diasporic identity alongside her own identity as a creative women writer who used the subversive powers hidden within the parameters of the kitchen to narrate a history of her community. Her expertise in the kitchen empowers her in her battle to restore the synagogue, and fight for her own preservation and existence which the Danda synagogue signified.

## **Conclusion**

The narrative, which had the Danda synagogue and its preservation as its focal point, concludes with Rachel's expertise in her kitchen enabling its restoration. The synagogue a monument which signified her nostalgic past and life in Danda is ultimately restored and transformed into a museum. Not only does Rachel win a public battle against the likes of Mordecai who had resorted to earn money from the house of god, but also gets a personal wish fulfilled when Judah and Zephra decide to marry.

For Rachel, the conclusion to *Book of Rachel* seems a fitting closure, as it manages to preserve and protect the relic of her past and her community. Moreover, in choosing to remain in India with her diasporic identity, she creates a homeland within the borders of the land of her birth. In her decision to re-consider India as a possible homeland she asserts her own perception of what home and homeland signified for her. Unlike Esther in *Book of Esther*, Rachel is adamant about her ideas of what constituted her homeland. She did not feel the need to travel to Israel to reconsider her ties to India. From the beginning, she had set notions, where India was a land of her forefathers which was familiar to her along with its language. There seemed no

indecisiveness in her acceptance of the land of her birth as her secondary homeland where she foregoes the possibility of making an *aliyah*, according to the Jewish Law of Return. Her firm resolve to continue her life in the land she considered home could be attributed to her old age. At her ripe age, when she had lived most of it in India, the fear of life in an unknown land, even though it was her ancestral land, had helped her in her decision to remain in India. Her ties to the land of her birth seemed too powerful to make a life in a new land. Like Rachel, Judah was driven by similar ties to the land to consider moving to Israel. In his case it was his community, which had hardened his resolve to maintain a distance from it and seek an alternative secular community. Having grown with the bitterness that his community had generated within him, *aliyah* would have only aggravated his traumatic relations with his community. Even after he decides to marry Zephra who had made a secondary home for herself in Israel (as home was Danda for her), he seemed unsure of making a home with her in Israel due to his long disassociation with his community. The time spent away from his community, had generated a particular consciousness within him about what place India occupied in his life. Like Rachel he had also resolved to live in the land close to the family that lay buried in the land of his birth. Zephra, unlike Rachel and Judah, came across as an indecisive character, torn between her longing for home in Danda opposed to her ancestral home where she was trying to familiarise herself and re-create a home for herself. Therefore, the novel generates different perceptions of homeland based on the premise of homeland and home as a land one is accustomed or familiar with or as a land of one's birth or one's ancestral land. Based on this perception of homeland as familiar land Rachel her daughter and Judah, introduce their individual perceptions of why and how they viewed India as their homeland or as a land of their nostalgic past.



## CHAPTER THREE

### **Framing their own Law of Return**

For the Jewish community, that had had an uneventful stay for several harmless centuries on the Indian soil, the rosy picture started to get disfigured and mired by the ugly Hindu-Muslim divide which plagued India. The Hindu-Muslim tensions started right after India's Independence and with the creation of Pakistan. The Bene Israelis found themselves at the borders of this hatred, where they saw their once friendly neighbours attacking each other. This contributed to their uncertainty of a peaceful stay in India any longer. With the creation of the free state of Israel in 1948, many therefore left for Israel to live in a land specially created for the Jews. Mass emigrations began by the end of 1950's which decimated the Jewish population on Indian soil. The few who chose to remain in India, now resided in cities like Bombay, Ahmedabad, Pune etc., while some continued to stay in the rural villages along the Konkan coast. The Gujarat earthquake in 2001 caused unlimited havoc on the land, people and property along with the wildlife and no sooner had people started to re-build their lives another human calamity occurred throwing the state once again into turmoil. In 2002 Gujarat was rocked with the Hindu-Muslim riots, especially Ahmedabad, where a sizeable Bene Israeli community lived who had refused to travel to Israel. Ahmedabad, where Esther David resides, was in a state of turmoil with the rioting mobs everywhere. After the heavy toll on humans with the natural calamity, the hope for the semblance of normalcy returning to the state was broken down with the riots. The consecutive forces of destruction which threw the state into turmoil, is the background to the present piece of fiction that I would be analyzing in this chapter. Set against the human and natural calamity, alongside the mass emigrations of the Bene Israelis to Israel, which began with 1950's, is the backdrop of *Shalom India Housing Society* which was published in 2007. The text is an anthology of short tales, precisely nineteen in number, relating to Bene Israeli families residing in an exclusive Jewish Housing Society and happens to be a humorous and tragic tale in parts narrated by the author.

## Analysis

Like Esther David's other pieces of fiction, this work is also heavily inspired by and steeped in memory. In the Acknowledgement to the text, apart from thanking the people who helped her with this project, David mentions that the inspiration for writing about a Jewish housing society came after she had seen Jews residing in a single building in Bombay before and after the mass emigrations. Something similar she states had occurred in Ahmedabad where the Jews in Ahmedabad moved towards the western part of the city after the riots of 2002. The tales are all inspired by her own experience of observing the Bene Israeli families of Alibaug, Bombay and Ahmedabad, the location of her text. She further suggests in her Acknowledgement, that in her endeavour to write on her community which called for close study of the same, she garnered much information regarding it and further "it helped ... to understand my own mini-microscopic community, which has held onto its Jewish roots in an Indian environment" (x). Through the novel she introduces her main protagonist Prophet Elijah or Eliyahu Hannabi, the Prophet that Bene Israelis prayed to and consider as their guiding spirit and protector after their god of the Jewish *Bible*. In the book, David, provides the prophet with a human nature, one she states in the Prelude to her work who "is a fun-loving mischievous character, who enjoys watching the theatre of human follies and good-heartedly intervenes when necessary" (3). David in the beginning of the Prelude provides details on the earliest mention of Prophet Elijah in the *Old Testament* or the Jewish *Bible*, in Kings 1 and 2. The novel begins with the first day of Passover or *Pessach* celebrations commemorating the Exodus of Jews from Egypt. On the first day of Passover, the Bene Israelis decorate a Seder table with flowers, candles, a fresh tablecloth, a special *Pessach* platter covered with embroidered cloth, and the table is set with best and shining tableware. The food is laid on the table as mentioned in previous chapter; they eat unleavened bread for seven days to remind them of the Jewish slavery in Egypt and

... On the first two days of Passover, a chair and a goblet of wine on the Seder table are kept aside for the prophet Elijah. When the prayer to the prophet is recited, the door of the house is opened as it is believed that the prophet visits Jewish homes on this particular day. Unseen, he sits on the chair allotted to him and drinks wine from the goblet. (2-3)



The Prophet on the first day is mentioned as preparing himself for the global drinking from the numerous goblets that would be offered to him on Passover. So after his leisurely bubble bath, he readies himself in a fine purple robe tied with a gold girdle at the waist, with his hair flowing and blue mantle with brooches on his shoulder and completes it with the gold bracelets. He resembles the poster image of himself which he had seen in most Bene Israeli homes. He descends near Shalom India Housing Society and after following the ritual of hiding his chariot and horses enters the gates of the housing society before the Passover prayers or Haggadah is recited. He peeps in at all the Bene Israeli households, awaiting his arrival and enters their houses after the recital of the prayers. Through the Prophet's visits to various houses for tasting his goblet and listening on to their prayers, David introduces the various fictional Bene Israeli families residing at the housing society. The riots had brought about the ghettoization of the city, where the people preferred to live close to their own community members as it gave them a sense of protection against other communities that might harm them. Set up after the Ahmedabad riots, by a Jewish contractor Ezra, the housing society seemed a means to protect their identity as Jews, define their collective status as Jews, and therefore uphold their difference from other minority communities which resides in India. The complex had two apartments where apartment A had only Jewish families, while apartment B had non-Jewish residents, as Ezra was unable to find any more willing Jewish families for it. The chapters that follows the first chapter, portrays the happiness, loneliness, fears, anxieties and sadness that plagued the lives of the Bene Israeli families in the housing society. Narrated in a humorous yet touching manner David allows us a voyeuristic view into the personal, religious and public lives of the residents of the building. Each tale narrates the story of the well sketched out character, his or her background, and how the characters view their Jewishness alongside a fast transforming Indian society with rising modern sensibility and their highly diminished population after the emigration.

The Jewish holy book forbids idol worship. Despite this fact, we find this community of Jews living in India having raised a Prophet to counter the numerous idols that were worshiped by their Hindu neighbours. Katz, in his essay on Bene Israel suggested it to be the handiwork of David Rahabi, the Cochini Jew, to help the Bene Israel continue in their faith without being seduced by the Hindu idols and their worshippers. Therefore, the Bene Israelis for purposes of countering the majoritarian Hindu aesthetics had provided themselves with an image against the

tenets of their own religion to be venerated during every ritual and every holy day. As mentioned above, the Prophet now had a definitive look as could be seen on the posters in the Bene Israeli houses. With the image, David adds a playful nature to the Prophet, who is both indulgent towards this community and at the same time angered by their poor faith and double standards.

In the first chapter, David provides a humorous take on a suggestively humane prophet Elijah and his Passover visits to every Jewish home in the Shalom India Housing Society. Narrating the Prophets likes and dislikes on his E-goblet or the drink served for him during Passover, David engages with each family and their ways of celebrating Passover and pleasing the prophet. From the second chapter onwards, David devotes every chapter to her fictional character and introduces the various problems ailing the character or the community at large. In my analysis of the present anthology of short stories, I will delve into the insecurities and fears of the ever-diminishing Bene Israel community, along with their negotiations with a modern India that threatened their community and their age-old traditions by seducing their youth; their possible Indianization and Hebrewization to maintain their identity as Bene Israeli Jews; also their ideas on home and homeland and how it coloured their identity in twenty-first century India; and finally the idea of Israel as a greener pasture for the young as opposed to the life in India and its own misgivings. Finally, as the text is situated in the twenty-first century, David introduces a new theme, wherein Indian Israeli Jews return to India the land of their birth, and engage with it to provide an insight into what brought about their return to claim it as their home.

### **Bene Israeli traditions versus Modern Indian Notions**

The anthology begins with the introduction of the Bene Israeli families residing at the housing society, who are visited by Prophet Elijah on the first day of Passover. From the second chapter onwards, David introduces every character, through the ‘fancy dress’ completion in the Synagogue courtyard as part of the Simchat Torah festival<sup>1</sup>. David states that her experience of judging one such fancy dress competition at a synagogue helped her to come up with this idea

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<sup>1</sup>It is celebrated commemorating the receiving of the laws by the Jews, and at the synagogue the silk curtain which covers the Holy Ark is pulled aside and the Ark itself opened by the highest bidder. Then the ornamental caskets containing the Torah are brought out, cleaned and aired and carried around the synagogue with men dancing around the Teva. The Bene Israel saw it as a night of fun and food which finally ended with a fancy dress completion.

and also to understand the younger Bene Israelis and their reactions to the modern Indian society with its fast changing value systems and its effect on them. Twenty-first century India with its modern outlook to life brought about a disjunction in the traditional ideas of the Bene Israeli Jewish community. In the stories of Leon and Ben Hur, residents of the housing apartment, there arises a conflict between the traditional Bene Israeli way of thinking and the contemporary ways and manner. India in this century had had its share of contacts with the outside world. It is fast growing into a global and modern country, with its people adopting newer and modern means. In the cities people are adopting newer cultural practices from the western world, which has brought about a break from the age-old traditional way of life. Leon, the resident of apartment number A-108, was Yehuda and Rivka's son. Like any other youngster in the apartment complex he was excited and looked forward to dressing up for the fancy dress competition. His parents wanted him to dress as the patriarch Moses<sup>2</sup> though Leon had his own plans- he wanted to dress up like his favourite film star Madhuri Dixit. In fact he did dress up like her and had practiced to dance to her song. But when Leon's parents saw his attire for the fancy dress competition, they were both livid. His father wanted to cane him for dressing as a girl while his mother pleaded with his father to spare him. Rivka had started to see the signs of Leon's liking for everything feminine at an early age. His favourite place was in front of her dressing table where he stood mesmerised and spellbound with all the fragrances and cosmetics and experimented with them. His mother thought his liking for women's stuff as childish and believed that he would soon get over it. From a young age he loved applying make-up and dressing up like a woman and continued to do so even when he became a teenager. His mother believed that he might be interested in fashion. But things came to a start when once she saw him in her sari blouse along with a printed *churidar* with his face all made up like a *bharatanatyam* dancer and his feet soaked in soapy water for a pedicure, she realized her earlier fears were not unfounded. Having found him in female attire dressed as a dancer she started to question his orientation and his attraction towards feminine things. She was plagued with the thought of how the community would view Leon's liking for everything feminine as a grown up teenager. She knew if she told her husband he would spank Leon. Therefore, to divert him away from his liking for everything feminine, his mother made him join a gym and also sent him for football and cricket matches, in

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<sup>2</sup>Moses delivered the Jews from Egypt and away from slavery as mentioned in their holy text.

the hope that these would help him move away from his secret feminine fantasies and orient towards a more normal male attitude. But his tastes in clothes continued to suggest his earlier attraction, wherein he coloured his plain t-shirts, slit his jeans and even started to wear fancy Lucknowi *kurtas* over his *pathani* pants. He even saved up money to buy himself an embroidered *kurta* for the Yom Kippur<sup>3</sup> prayers where they were supposed to wear white on the Day of Atonement<sup>4</sup>. She feared his father, but fortunately enough he did not notice the embroidery. With her knowledge of her son's love for women's make-up and dresses, and unable to share it with anyone, she felt suffocated. After watching a late night show on homosexuals, men with female tendencies and love for other men, she was in a dilemma and wondered if her son had even developed such tendencies unacceptable in the society. She felt trapped between her husband, in whom she could not confide, and her son who seemed to be becoming vocal about his feminine tendencies. She prayed to Prophet Elijah for deliverance and solution to her problems, to make a man out of Leon. Her husband saw no harm in the choice of clothes that Leon wore, as he believed that his son was a real man under the clothes he wore. But their worst fears were realized on the afternoon of the fancy dress completion, where they were faced with the reality of Leon's feminine inclinations. His mother averted an altercation between father and son and made his son dress as Moses. After the fancy dress competition, when everybody were enjoying themselves, his parents sat like statues. He was dancing with his mother's red dupatta on his head tied as a scarf, while everybody stood clapping. Much to his parents embarrassment he had mesmerised the audience with his filmy jhatkas and seemed nowhere near the patriarch that he was dressed as. For his traditional parents, accepting their son's feminine inclination seemed impossible in a community where the men were brought up to emulate the patriarchs of the holy texts. In fact Leon's own traditional society only served to aggravate his situation where he would have felt suffocated. In contemporary times the larger Indian society might have tolerated

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<sup>3</sup>For Yom Kippur or *Darfalnicha san* (the festival of closing the doors) the Bene Israelis observed a fast and dressed in white, removed their footwear's and locked themselves inside their houses to avoid contact with non-Jews or the gentiles from five o'clock in the evening to seven o'clock morning of the next day. On this day the Bene Israelis believed that the souls of the departed visited their habitations and left a day after the Day of Atonement.

<sup>4</sup>The day after Yom Kippur also known as *Shila san* (stale holiday) where no fresh food was prepared and its observance dealt with the belief about the dead, where they invoked through intercession by the dead for granting a good new year.

such behaviour, but for a traditional Bene Israeli family, it seemed more an aberration which affected the young of the community.

Unlike Leon, Ben Hur's story suggests a modern influence on the Bene Israeli ideas on job preference and marriage. Ben Hur the youngest son of Ezra and Sigaut who resided in A-111, had plans to study fashion which was frowned upon by his father who believed that his son would take up a much-respected profession unlike stitching clothes. Nonetheless, his father agreed to his wishes on the condition that he would not start to dress-up like a woman. As for the fancy dress competition he wanted to wear the multi-coloured coat like the Biblical character Joseph which was made by his girlfriend Lolo or Lata Patel who studied fashion with him. Ben Hur was quite besotted by Lolo, who had spent her childhood in London and was soft spoken. What started as a friendship between them soon transformed into an intimate physical relationship between Lolo and Ben Hur. He believed that he was in love with her and wanted to marry her, and believed that true love could transcend the barriers of community. But his father had different beliefs where inter-religious marriages were concerned. He believed that such marriages were doomed to be failures and people needed life partners from their own community who shared everything from food, to values and traditions to community matters. Therefore, when Ben Hur was a child, his parents had selected Diana as his bride, daughter of Jacob and Leeraz, who were related to Ben Hur's parents and resided in A- 113. It was like an unsaid agreement between the two families. But Ben Hur took confidence from the inter-religious marriage of the Abhiram's Juliet a Jew and Rahul a Hindu, who were accepted into the community and the housing society. Similarly, he thought if he married Lata they would be accepted by his community if his mother agreed to a non-Jewish daughter-in-law and if Lata converted to Judaism. His father who was taken aback by his decision to marry a non-Jew wanted to give his son the freedom to choose his life partner. At the same time, he felt that he had failed as a father and had been unable to impart sound Jewish customs and traditions to his youngest son. He sensed the larger contemporary social norms eroding away the traditional Bene Israeli perceptions of marriage and profession. As for Lata, she loved Ben Hur but her problems were of a complex nature. After her mother's sudden death, she had returned to India with her stepfather Mr. Patel, who abused and tortured her physically. To her, Ben Hur was a knight in shining armour who would rescue her from her stepfather's ill-treatment. Unfortunately, Ben Hur

was a mere teenager and not independent enough to marry her and protect her from her stepfather. Lata realized this and planned to leave for London for her six months of office training as part of her fashion-designing course. It had dawned on her that even if she had consented to convert to Judaism, she would not be accepted in Ben Hur's family as their daughter-in-law. This was because, if they came to know about her father's physical abuse she would have never been accepted into this miniscule Jewish community. Moreover, as the Bene Israeli community was a close-knit community, even in contemporary times they preferred to marry within their own community keeping their lineage pure and free of modern and other social influences that India was slowly waking up to. Therefore, in this age, where people were opting out of arranged marriages, the Bene Israeli community adhered to its old ways and allowed no or little hope for change. The parents preferred to do the matchmaking for their children at an early age though they waited for their children to secure jobs before they were married. They were wary of these influences which had started to make inroads into the Bene Israeli schema of things especially in bigger cities and towns where the elders feared for their children being lost to other communities through inter-religious marriages. Moreover, in Ben Hur's case, his intimate relationship with Lata and a possible live-in relationship to escape her stepfather, had posed questions to the age-old traditions and ways of Bene Israeli life. Not only was Ben Hur torn between his love for a non-Jewish girl, he was also tormented by his community's perceptions on marriage and pre-marital relationships. His father Ezra, who had raised him in the traditional Bene Israeli way, blamed the fast changing Indian society for the non-Jewish influences on the younger generation of their community.

The community which frowned upon inter-religious marriages was made to deal with the rise in such alliances in the wake of mass emigrations which had depleted the number of suitable partners. The younger generation was moving beyond the community, and inter-mixing and interacting with other communities. Diana, who was tied to Ben Hur at an early age as his supposed bride, had grown up dreaming about her marriage to him. But unlike his father with whom he had discussed his relationship, Diana concluded for herself that Ben Hur was in love with Lata and that he had no desire to marry her. Her realization questioned the soundness of the matchmaking traditions by the Bene Israeli parents. They believed it to be suitable for their children but in this time and age it proved to be imprisoning them. Ben Hur's preference for Lata

was a humiliation for Diana that only got aggravated with her parents looking for other suitable Bene Israeli men from India and Israel. But Diana emerged as a fighter who saw the situation as an opportunity for her to explore her life beyond her community. She began her post-graduate studies and worked part-time as telephone operator at a modelling agency. It was at the modelling agency that she met Manav, a non-Jew, who helped her learn to appreciate and love herself. Manav was struck by her features and lithesome body beyond her dark skin and found her pretty unlike Ben Hur's mother or the numerous reluctant Bene Israeli suitors who considered her ugly and dark. She completed her study and went on to work as a model. The dated community norms which had tied her closely to the community and created her identity became the very reason for her move beyond her community boundaries and achieve independence and identity beyond what she was raised into. A girl who had believed in her community and its ways as the only life, which would have fulfilled her hopes of a Jewish marriage, felt suffocated and her self-esteem crushed which brought about her distance from her community after her marriage to Manav. Her parents were happy for her, as together they had faced the embarrassment of rejections from Bene Israeli suitors over her looks and appearance. The community, which had been unhelpful in her plight held no charm for her any longer and the first chance she got she broke off from it to lead a life beyond the traditional Bene Israeli Jewish customs and traditions and join the larger community which had accepted her as she was. It seemed as though the community's laws and customs were at cross purposes with the values of this new age and served to confine and distance the younger generations who clamoured for much needed freedom beyond their minority community's norms, which expected them to keep alive its customs opposed to the numerous contemporary influences.

Juliet and Rahul's story touches the high point in the inter-religious marriage theme that is a prime theme dealt through various stories. Inter-religious unions generate so much discourse within this community as the Bene Israeli consider it as an outside influence which served to diminish their already reduced population and bring about ruptures in the community through which outsiders could find access to them. Juliet and Rahul were childhood sweethearts, oblivious to their respective families who were neighbours and family friends. They discussed everything like Juliet's supposed marriage and their children. Juliet and her brother Gideon and Rahul and his sister Megha were good friends who had grown up together. Often people got

confused between the names Abraham and Abhiram. During the Hannukah<sup>5</sup> celebrations at the synagogue Juliet planned to dress as an Indian bride. Rahul's mother lent her her wedding dress for the fancy dress. Attired as a bride, on their way to the synagogue she fell ill and returned home. Her mother who was unable to pray worrying constantly about her daughter, returned home only to find Juliet and Rahul in a compromising position. Juliet was sent to Israel to her aunt Hannah and all relations between the two families broke down. The children though remained in touch which provided Rahul the information on Juliet's whereabouts. After a year, Rahul travelled to Israel and worked as a trainee chef at a kibbutz. After meeting Juliet with Aunt Hannah's help, they travelled back to India before she was to be married to Ralphi, nephew of aunt Hannah's husband Rahmim. After reaching India, with aunt Hannah's friend's help they were married according to the Arya Samaj rituals and soon Rahul started the process for his conversion. The families though shocked at their marriage, welcomed and accepted the newlyweds. After his conversion, they had a synagogue marriage followed by the wedding reception where people from both the communities were invited. The reception was an amalgamation of both Jewish and Hindu rituals and each were given new Hindi and Jewish names, so Rahul became Romiel while Juliet became Priya. Their parents gifted them the flat at Shalom India Housing Society, where all the families were fond of the young couple. They invited Rahul's family for the *malida* ceremonies at the housing complex and even invited them for the Eliyahu Hannabi ceremony before they immigrated to Israel. Juliet-Priya and Rahul-Romiel had been exceptionally blessed as they were welcomed back into their community and Rahul was easily accepted after his conversion. The fast transforming social norms had proved favourable in their marriage that would have seemed impossible earlier. Such marriages threatened the traditional Jewish norms of marriage within the community. It forced the community to realize the outside influences which were fast encroaching upon their Jewish lives and traditions. When faced with such situations they made concessions, but brought up on strict Jewish customs they still had reservations towards them and preferred that the young would marry within their own community.

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<sup>5</sup>In Judaism, an eight-day festival of lights that takes place at the beginning of December. It celebrates the recapture of the Temple in Jerusalem from Antiochus IV of Syria in 164 BC by Judas Maccabaeus, and its re-dedication.



Therefore, for Juliet-Rahul, Diana-Manav and Ben Hur-Lata, the strict codes of Jewish marital preferences forbade their choice of life partners. But in this age and time and with ever decreasing Jewish suitors and their parents consistent but failed matchmaking contributed to their children moving away from the traditions they had grown up with to embrace a life beyond their own community's which suffocated them. The elders of the community as guardians expected the younger generation to follow in their footsteps and continue to maintain and observe all Jewish traditions and rituals. The ever-increasing influence of the world outside their community and the greater degree of interaction between the young people from different communities made young Jewish men and women yearn for a life beyond the limited scope of their own community. This community which in earlier days had served to maintain and contain their Jewish identity in a land of multi-religious societies could no more prove fruitful; rather, its traditional ways only served to distance the young out of its fold in search of greater liberty and freedom alongside their identity as Bene Israeli in the ever-changing Indian social fabric. Moreover Diana believed, the traditional ways of matchmaking, though they served the community's purpose of containing the young within the community, it led to loveless and monotonous marriages, where two people seemed bound to each other for the community and not for love. For the young the perception on marriage was fast changing unlike the Jewish traditions which clung to its out-dated norms. Therefore, there seemed a rise in inter-religious marital alliances after mass emigrations. The Bene Israelis living in India were finding it hard to find suitable grooms, an ill which plagued their society for being a minority community, and therefore they were forced to look beyond their own community where their marriages would not just be for others but filled with love and laughter like Diana had always dreamt of.

### **Indianization opposed to Hebrewization**

For this minority community that had chosen to make home in India, the charm of the Indian non-Jewish life loomed large alongside the lure of an Israeli way of life. The young in the Indian Bene Israeli community, had to contend with the lure of the above two kinds of lifestyle. In their need to adopt a different lifestyle the youngsters considered their own Bene Israeli ways as limiting and confining. Like the case of marriages which were enshrined within the Bene Israeli traditions which preferred parental matchmaking and marriage to people from their own

community, the community also followed certain codes of dressing which had evolved over the years with local influence and long stay in India. For the Bene Israeli's who lived in Ahmedabad, they had to contend with the Gujarati influences, which were flamboyant where dressing was considered. The community lived by certain rules where exposing one's body parts were disapproved and they were expected to be properly covered from head to toe in the synagogue. Such codes of dressing could have been local influences from the past where women lived confined within the walls of their houses. Moreover, they were expected to cover themselves properly before other men. A woman's body was considered sacred and preserved for her husband till she got married. In the present times, the women from other community had more liberties than some Bene Israeli women allowed themselves. They clung tenaciously to such fully covering dress as means of preserving their Bene Israeli traditions. So unknown to them, earlier local influences had not only slipped into their everyday practises it had also become an important and discerning part of their Bene Israeli tradition and therefore identity. For this microscopic community which had several tenets that shaped their identity, their ways of dressing was one such. In the anthology we come across characters who desired to be dressed like Gujaratis in mirror worked *chaniya choli* or as Israeli in shorts, short skirts, well fighting Jeans and tee shirts. Each seemed dissatisfied with the rules that their community or parents imposed on them.

Yael who resided in apartment A-110 with her mother Abigail and aunt Lebana had to contend with her own community's alongside her mother and aunt's codes of dressing. Ever since her father had died, her aunt had taken up the role of the decision maker in their family. Her aunt who was a spinster, a retired nurse, and her mother, a widowed housewife, followed the community's traditions pertaining to one's attire, religiously. In fact Yael had to bow before their strict adherence and could only dream of ever donning a Gujarati dress which would have pleased her and helped attract Leon towards her. For the fancy dress competition she tried to convince her mother and aunt to allow her to wear a *ghagra* with a *choli*, but to her disappointment they refused stating the dress was too vulgar for her which would put the female anatomy on display. Instead, much to Yael's displeasure she was dressed as a mummy by her aunt and mother. In her mummified state she felt like a corpse even when she was alive. Her aunt and mother "...flattened out her young breasts and continued in the same way with her slim

waist, ...” (40). In flattening out her feminine curves and covering every inch of her body they followed the age-old dictum which stated that a Bene Israeli woman’s body and virginity needed to be preserved for her husband.

Though shalt not show your breasts or your tiny belly button. It has to be preserved for the eyes of your husband.’ They wrapped the bandages round her hips like a chastity belt. Her virginity was being protected like a jewel for her future husband. (40)

Through her mummification they tried to preserve her and her body for her husband. She was suffocated by both her Bene Israeli traditions and the mummified state which left her uncomfortable, as she was unable to move freely with her hands stretched apart like Christ’s when he was crucified. For her dressing in *ghaghra* and *choli* meant freedom. Moreover, living in Ahmedabad she could not have possibly been able to overlook or escape the various influences where attire was concerned. She wanted to dress like Nefertiti the Egyptian queen or the Gujarati girls her age, but her community along with her family disallowed it. The community which protected them and preserved their identity suffocated the young who were constantly being seduced by the ever-changing local influences. Therefore, Yael in her liking for Gujarati dresses and desire to dress as a Gujarati girl suggested her inclination towards an external influence which charmed her but was at cross-purposes with her community and family. She stood torn between her need to follow the traditions of her community and dress as a well brought up Bene Israeli girl and a desire for flamboyant Gujarati dresses which occasioned showing her figure to full advantage during festivities. With the bandages she felt her desires hidden behind its many folds and was angered at her cowardice for not standing up for herself. In fact through her desire she suggested her own disability to completely comprehend the Bene Israeli strict traditions. She believed that residing in Ahmedabad gave her the reason to dress in a *chaniya choli* suit like all other girls her age. She was unable to comprehend why living alongside the Gujarati community, her community felt the need for its own traditions in place so that it could contain and maintain its own community opposed to the outside influences.

Through the story of Miriam who became Mariam after her conversion to Islam, David deals with the issues of outside influences like inter-religious marriages, conversion and making a home in an anti-Zionist land. Miriam, which was her Jewish name, had immigrated to Israel

from Pune at the age of five. While in India they had friends and neighbours from different communities. But after settling down in Israel her father had become inclined towards the right wing politics and despised the Palestinian and Arab Muslims. Miriam saw it as a complete transformation in her father's behaviour but attributed the hostilities to the prevailing turmoil and constant fighting between the communities in Israel. While visiting India to shop for her wedding trousseau she met her Pune neighbour's and her mother's friend Afsana Khan. Unlike Israel, the changed situation within India with certain degree of tolerance and harmony between the two communities helped her view the eastern Muslims in a favourable light. While attending a party thrown in her honour at her aunt Afsana's house, she is mesmerised by the Indian lifestyle and enticed with its carefree ways opposed to the hard and difficult life in Israel. The place, the ambience, along with the ghazals everything had her longing for a life different from what she had to settle for in Israel after marrying her Bene Israeli fiancé Aaron. Moreover, Soha's fiancé under whose spell she had fallen immediately, contributed to her despair at the loveless and hard life in Israel. For Miriam who loved Hindi songs and movies, returning to the land of her birth opened a new door for her where she could choose to escape the life in Israel. She chooses to abandon her family and her Jewish identity for a Muslim lover Zulfikar, to marry him, and settle in Pakistan. The life in India alongside her love for Zulfikar all contributed to her decision to make home with a man who would have been disliked by her community and in a land which was unsympathetic to the Israeli and the Jewish cause. But the life in India gave an impression of a life out of her dreams inspired by the Bollywood movies that she loved and she felt it would be the same in Pakistan, which helped her trade her Jewish identity for a new one. Like Yael, she felt enticed and seduced by everything Indian which stood in contrast to the life she had led in Israel. After giving up her Jewish identity she converted to Islam and married Zulfikar to make a home with him in Pakistan. Pakistan seemed similar to India in many ways to her, where the deaths and killings were not part of everyday life unlike Israel. However, when she receives a letter from her mother informing her about the flat that she owned in Ahmedabad, where the recent Hindu-Muslim riots had occurred, Miriam now Mariam realized the hatred between the communities. Earlier it was the harmonious way of life which enticed her to make home away from Israel but after the riots and with her conversion the dream had gone sour and she did not have the courage to restart life in Ahmedabad or accept her mother's generous gift of

a flat at Shalom India Housing Society. Diana alludes to similar hardships in the life led by people of her community in Israel. Also, Samuel and Sharon who lived in Israel mentioned about the difficulties they had to face while living there. Sharon from the moment she was married and moved to Israel with her husband and in-laws realized that she would have to find work in order to contribute to their family income. The carefree and easy life of India was overtaken by a rigorous lifestyle which left little or no time for enjoyment. The people who had immigrated were trying to adjust to a different life from what they had led in India. While there were people who found life difficult in Israel, there were people like Rachel in the housing society, who viewed Israel as a land which would provide her the freedom to live beyond the suffocating laws of her community and the Indian society.

For Rachel, who resided in apartment A-102 with her father Hyams and mother Sheba, the traditional Bene Israeli ways were equally suffocating. Unlike Yael who constantly craved to emulate and imitate her Gujarati friends, Rachel aspired for an identity beyond the land of her birth. She aspired for an Israeli identity which was based on her perception of freedom in the 'Promised Land'. Moreover, her idea of an Israeli identity was different from her Indian identity as a Jew because she felt the Jews of Israel had a different attitude to life unlike the Indian Jews who held on to the aged Bene Israeli belief system as a means of preserving themselves in India. In her young mind she imagined an Israeli identity solely based on her Israeli cousins' way of dressing. To her the Indian saris, salwar kameez, all seemed to suggest an Indian identity which she wanted to leave behind. In her case, the confining traditions of her community had driven her to desire for a life which allowed the freedom to dress as she liked unlike being covered from head to toe in her Indian dresses. She saw the Indian attire as limiting like her community, while an Israeli lifestyle beckoned her, complete with surprises and greater opportunities for her to explore. Therefore, for the fancy dress competition she dressed in a pair of well fitting jeans and a black tee shirt which had "someone's waiting for me in Israel" painted on its front which hinted at the promises and the new beginnings that awaited her in her ancestral motherland. For Sippora another resident of the housing society who tried to reason with Rachel about her supposed belief of differences between Israeli and Indian Jewish identity, Rachel's answer and her attire only suggested her desire to escape to the 'Promise Land' where a different life awaited her. For Rachel, an Israeli identity stood opposed to everything Indian and the Bene Israeli

traditions. She comes forth as the proponent of Jewish identity having different meanings in India and Israel. Therefore, she longed for a life free of the Indian and Bene Israeli ideas and perceptions which only served to limit and confine its young within the fold.

Sippora, resident of A-112, had fruitfully devised an amalgamated outlook to her Bene Israeli Jewish existence. Though she chose to avoid dressing in Indian dresses yet unlike the teenagers Yael and Rachel, she managed to create a unique identity for herself where she followed the Bene Israeli traditions at the same time dressed in non-Indian dresses. As a Jew Sippora followed the traditions but tailored it to suit her own lifestyle and likes and dislike without offending her community. In fact her husband Opher who would have liked to see her dress in Indian dresses at the synagogue, she still proved to be non-indulgent and chose to lead a life on her own terms. Running a beauty parlour from her house gave her the much-needed monetary independence to indulge herself. Likewise, she dressed her three daughters in attires which made them happy unlike Yael's parents who only remembered to follow the rule without taking into consideration what their daughter preferred. In Yael's situation her difference in opinion from her mother and aunt arose from her longing to imitate what she saw outside her community. Further, her parent's decision only served to distance her from her community's traditions and a dislike for it. In Rachel's case she managed to dress as she longed for in the fancy dress, which suggested her assertiveness and her inclination towards everything Israeli, which shone as a hope for better and freer life other than the Bene Israeli within the Indian social norms. Therefore Yael inclined towards a possible Indianization in her choices while Rachel towards Hebrewization. Yael yearned for an identity beyond the limiting Bene Israeli identity and as an Indian Jew while Rachel longed for an Israeli identity beyond the Bene Israeli and its very Indian undertones. While Sippora managed to project her identity as an amalgam of the Indian and Bene Israeli traditions without losing herself between the binary of Indianization and Hebrewization.

### **Journeying back to land of shipwrecked ancestors**

Though the life in Israel continued to seduce the microscopic Bene Israel community, still, in *Shalom India Housing Society*, David introduces some characters who chose to return to the land of their birth. Each character who returns to India where their community still had close ties with

the larger Indian society, did so with their acceptance and realization of the fact that they could still live as Jews anywhere in the world and not necessarily in Israel. Israel with its continued wars and cross border terrorism had created a horrifying picture in the mind of the people who resided there as opposed to a calm and harmonious life they had lived in India. For them it was challenging to handle the continued fighting and life's uncertainty on a regular basis. Such a situation is aptly suggested through Miriam's story who mentions that her father feared for her life every time she stepped out of home and lit a candle before Prophet Elijah as thanksgiving for the safe return of his daughter. It appeared as though the dream of a peaceful life in the Jewish ancestral land could not be fulfilled where the state had to continually defend its borders and its independent existence. The Bene Israelis, as Indian diasporic Jews, had to contend with a new set of challenges foremost being the suspicions of the Israeli Rabbinate which raised doubts about their Jewish ancestry with the publication of the "special directives" in 1962, where instructions regarding how to deal with the Bene Israeli- non-Bene Israeli marriages were given. There followed a general strike opposing the "special directives" which were finally revoked in 1964, but the suspicion once planted had taken root and continued to create problems for the Bene Israelis. Secondly, the Bene Israel community kept to themselves and did not interact much with other diasporic Jews. Finally, the language of the 'Promised Land', Hebrew, proved to be another impediment for the Bene Israeli who settled in Israel. As David in *Book of Rachel* mentions about Rachel's fear of an unknown tongue, similarly the people belonging to the Bene Israeli community in Israel had to first apply themselves to acquiring a new language to restart their lives within the Israeli society.

The characters in David's *Shalom India Housing Society* who returned from Israel had emigrated to it during different phases in their lives. Miriam with her family had emigrated when she was a young child, while Sharon emigrated after her marriage to Samuel who had emigrated long back with his family and Juliet and Rahul emigrated after their runaway marriage and acceptance by their family and community with Rahul's conversion. Miriam seemed to have adjusted into the Bene Israeli society and engaged to be married to Aaron, another Bene Israeli who was born in Israel. In case of Sharon, and Juliet and Rahul, they had to relocate and find their space within the Israeli society. Sharon found a job as a music teacher at the Indo-Israel cultural association, while Juliet and Rahul worked different hours at the kitchen of King David

Hotel. Though the land belonged to them on account of their Jewishness yet they were all ill at ease, finding life difficult and full of hardships within the Israeli society.

For Miriam, who was doing religious studies in Israel to become a woman rabbi, life had surprises in store for her when she travelled to India. Though she did not travel to India seeking a different life and home, nonetheless her journey concluded with her finding home in Pakistan where few Jews who lived as “Parsis” (189). As she had stayed most of her life in Israel, coming to India proved to be a fascinating journey. She was mesmerised and seduced by everything Indian, the comfortable life, people and their mannerisms and dresses. In fact travelling to India and Bombay had added to her long fascination with Bollywood. Her stay in India allowed her a voyeuristic view into the colourful and exhilarating life in India that she felt transported to the set of Hindi movies. At aunt Afsana’s house, she felt transported into a different era and the garden party seemed like a leaf out of some Hindi movie where she found the life “...was in complete contrast to the rather harsh life she led in Israel.” (184). It stirred something within her that seemed buried long which was only expressed through her fascination for Hindi movies. For her it was a land different from where she had grown. All her senses were enticed by the colours and smell of India and Zulfikar’s couplets, who she realized to be the unknown poet of her dreams. Her journey to India, apart from charming her also proved to be a turbulent time emotionally, where she had to make choices between her family, country, community, Judaism, Islam and her allegiance to her motherland and her love for a non-Jew and settlement in an anti-Zionist state. While Aaron to whom she was engaged felt uncomfortable about her fascination for Hindi movies and her religiosity, she dressed unlike other women covered from head to toe, followed her Jewish religion and all its rituals correctly. He found her Indian inclinations difficult to fathom alongside her Jewishness and her long stay in Israel and therefore her Israeli identity. To Miriam everything happened with mechanical precision in Israel-even her relationship with Aaron. But with Zulfikar, she felt cherished as a woman. Though she settled in Pakistan, across the border from India, nonetheless the land felt similar to India in many ways. She accepted and adopted a land other than Israel as her home. She had made an *aliyah* long ago yet something had stayed with her of the land of her birth. This brought her back to the land of her birth, to find home in a land which had been part of the land of her birth. Curiously enough invisible ties to the



land of her birth had drawn her back to India and irrespective of the promises of the 'Promised Land'; her engagement with India and love for Zulfikar overrode everything she once held dear.

Miriam's mother Shoshanah, travelled to India in search of her daughter which concluded in her return to her land of birth. A journey which started as her search ended with the mother setting home in India. Mother and daughter had each returned separately to their land of birth and re-started life afresh. According to Miriam's own admission settling in Pakistan proved equally difficult for her with no family and only her husband for support. But soon she adapted herself to this new land. For her mother, who had made an *aliyah* according to the law of return, coming back to India held hope of a return of her daughter into their religious fold. Her re-settlement in India seemed to surprise Miriam who believed her mother to be happy with her life in Israel. But as we read further into Miriam's story we are informed that her mother found a place close to her sister Eve in Ahmedabad. Her husband Yonathan, followed his wife to India hoping to be reunited with his daughter in the land of her birth, where she was last seen by her relatives. India stood as a place where they awaited any news or information on their daughter hoping that she would contact them. Living in India helped Shoshanh share her grief; moreover it was closer to Pakistan where their daughter had immigrated. In many ways India held a ray of hope for Shoshanh who believed that Prophet Elijah would answer her prayers and restore their daughter to them.

For Samuel and Sharon, the return is actualised with Sharon's pregnancy. Sharon, who had accepted her life in Israel, had proved difficult from the moment she stepped onto the Ben Gurion airport. Life in Israel left little time for anything, between their respective work and looking after his old parents. Sharon's day began early where she prepared food for her in-laws for breakfast and lunch, which Samuel left in their apartment in their duplex house. Though she tried to be cordial to her in-laws, the pressure of work along with Samuel's reserved nature transformed her cheerful nature. Unlike the cheerful nature of Sharon in India, where life seemed less stressful, Israel's hardships left no room for any kind of enjoyment. Their lives were set into a routine pattern, where each performed one's part. The reality of life in Israel was in complete contrast to what most believed back in India. Perception of Israel as a land promising new beginnings and a different life seemed far from reality for Sharon who felt life in Israel "... meant

hard work, accepting a different lifestyle and learning Hebrew...” (211). Her strained relationship with her in-laws added to her problems in Israel, where she had to make many adjustments to make a home for herself in Israel. Her in-laws death seemed to lessen her burden however it left Samuel feeling guilty of neglecting his parents. All he wanted was an escape from his guilt and the land which tired him through its hardships which contributed to his neglecting his parents. Therefore, when his wife became pregnant and longed for her family, he decides to return to India with her. Their journey back to India helped Samuel forget his guilt. For Sharon, returning to the land of her birth and familiar surroundings and people helped her find her previous self. For them returning to their surrogate motherland was driven by a sense of longing for familiarity and their own community, which continued to reside in India. Though many Bene Israeli had immigrated to Israel, Sharon realized she could not really adapt to and adjust into the land of her ancient ancestors, as it was not a land of her birth where she had grown and had accepted its ways alongside her own community’s traditions.

Juliet and Rahul, who had immigrated to Israel according to the law of return, continued to view it as a land of new beginnings that it had promised to be. But their realization that their dream of opening up an Indian restaurant in Israel had many obstacles before it could be fully achieved forced them to re-think their lives in Israel. In Israel, they had to make their own decisions without any support or help from their family. Juliet and Rahul’s dream proved longer to be actualised than they had hoped. Every passing day and the distance between them and their dream made them re-consider their future in Israel. Moreover, Ezra’s inability to find a buyer for their flat at Shalom India Housing Society, added to their problems, as they had planned to utilise the money from its sale to start their restaurant. As they were unable to make any headway achieving their goal, they considered it the Prophet’s way of suggesting them to return to the land of their birth. After their decision to return is finalised, Juliet writes a letter to Ezra informing him of their return. In her letter she pours out her views on Israel. For her Israel was a land of their ancestors which they had claimed as Jews. While in present times, their ill adjustment along with its difficult life had forced them to reconsider the matter of Israel as their motherland. She believed that though she felt connected to the land still something held her from it, it was like a land ‘... which was yours but not exactly yours, [where] you have to work harder’ (223). As a Jew she was confused between her desire for a life in Israel, and the numerous

difficulties and hardships they had to contend with to make out a living. Her longing for the land of Israel had changed after she realized the promise of new beginning was just a dream of their own making with no similarity to the reality of life in Israel.

It was not that Miriam, Shoshanah, Samuel and Sharon and, Juliet and Rahul had no desire to work in the land which held a promising beginning. In their desire to settle in their ancient motherland, they had all tried to accept and adapt to the land and made adjustments to this effect. They applied themselves to learning the cultures, customs and language of this new land. Still a longing for a familiar landscape and people continued within, which made them reconsider the lives they led in Israel. In journeying back to India they were not escaping from the hardships of Israel; rather, they were returning to a land whose language, customs, cultures seemed as their own like the land itself. In India they had led a peaceful life unlike Israel where bloodshed was part of their everyday existence. Therefore Juliet while planning her return to India is plagued with questions of where home was for people of her community; as a Jew in travelling to India was she returning to her homeland or travelling away from her homeland? For many travelling to India proved to be a return in several ways as they had accepted it as their homeland after the loss of their previous homeland. In their acceptance of India as a homeland they had applied themselves to learning the ways and means of the land and those who were born into it, had unknowingly accepted it as their supposed homeland in absence of their ancient homeland. For every character their attachment to India as the land of their birth and its acknowledgement as the homeland of diasporic Bene Israel Jews, had helped them to seek it in their moments of crisis and therefore claim it as their home after their lives in Israel. The hope of Israel as a land full of opportunities for Jews continued to diminish with the cross-border terrorism and the uncertainty of life. In the twenty-first century, David suggests a different kind of emigration taking place through her work *Shalom India Housing Society*. The Bene Israelis were increasingly becoming disillusioned with the 'Promised Land' and thinking of returning to a land where they had lived peacefully as Jews.

## **Conclusion**

Through *Sahlom India Housing Society* Esther David, has tried to recapture and deal with various issues that plagues the diminishing Bene Israeli community in Ahmedabad and Bombay.

The anthology talks of various influences that the community considered responsible for attracting the young Bene Israelis away from their Jewish customs and traditions. The community with its traditions, which were a healthy amalgamation of the local influences along with the Jewish traditions taught by the Cochini Jews, when challenged by the changing local influences, clung tenaciously to its dated traditions as means of preserving its unique identity and individuality in a land where several other communities and religions existed. In their endeavour to secure the community which had decreased in number after the mass emigration, it expected strict adherence to the Jewish traditions as means of warding off external influences which had began encroaching upon it. For the young, the fast evolving Indian society and its influence on them appeared to entice them as opposed to the Jewish traditions which suffocated them with its dated traditions. Their highly reduced population along with the riots had cornered them into ghettoization, the young felt the limiting pressure of the community, now that the interaction among the communities was even more limited. This all pushed the young to look beyond their community, and interact with the larger Indian society. What began as interaction with the larger Indian society and emulation of its ways by the young came to be viewed by the elders of the community as rising outside influence. This influence among the youth spelt doom for the mini-microscopic community which was trying hard to keep them within the community's fold. But with their highly diminished number, and the lack of enthusiasm on part of the elders to teach their youth Jewish traditions, served to distance them from the community. They perceived the community as a means of safeguarding their faith and identity, but beyond that the youth found no intellectual stimulation to constantly reside within its fold with limited or no interaction with the larger society outside its community walls.

One of the influences that plagued this society most was the inter-religious marriages, which the elders believed to be an outside influence unheard or rarely practised among them. Their Jewish traditions allowed the parents to be matchmakers, where the youngsters were convinced that it was the way of increasing their tribe. With the mass emigration, their number reduced, which brought about a dearth of suitable matches, which the parents and the young adults realized. Many were sent off to Israel to be married to Bene Israeli suitors settled there. Moreover, the parents believed sending their children helped their children make an *aliyah*, and live in their Jewish ancestral land or the 'Promised Land'. Those who stayed back in India, for

monetary and other reasons, had to contend with this problem. The Bene Israelis who were of marriageable age could not find matches to their liking, nor were they content with their parents acting as matchmakers. They had grown vocal about parental high-handedness and wanted to make their own choices in life. Therefore, Juliet, Miriam and Ben Hur in *Shalom India Housing Society*, made their own choices opposed to community traditions. However their parents and community elders saw such independence in selection of life-partners as unheard of and an outside influence. They felt that the young within the community, were emulating what they saw in the larger social rubric of India. Similarly, Leon's liking for women's dresses and everything feminine, was seen by his mother as an influence of modern times, when young men dressed differently. In his parent's view his outlook to life and his mannerisms, which were in contrast to the sound patriarchal teachings of his father would have isolated him in his community. The patriarchal tradition of the community did not allow Leon's parents to accept him as he was. Rather, they sought ways to change him and blamed the Indian society which had contributed in the effeminate attitude of his son.

As mentioned above some characters seemed inclined towards an Indian way of life, while others longed for an Israeli identity and life. Yael, who was burdened by her mother and aunt's demands on her along with her community, wanted to break free and live like any Indian without the suffocating and dated community's traditions. Her desire to dress in a Gujarati *chaniya choli* suit seemed to be a way of liberating herself of her community's customs and traditions. Through her Gujarati dress she wanted to experience freedom in body and soul and from her community and family. For Rachel, who longed for an Israeli identity and felt saddled by her community's traditions along with the Indian way of life, making an *aliyah* to Israel was an escape. Israel held a ray of hope as a place of new beginning by which she could have escaped the limitations of Bene Israeli and Indian society. In dressing as an Israeli in jeans and a tee shirt, she showed her knowledge of what she believed having an Israeli identity was all about. She wanted to travel to the 'Promised Land', of which she had painted a glamorous picture and believed it held her key to an exciting and fulfilling life. But Rachel's dream are in disjunction to the characters, Miriam, her mother Shoshanah, Samuel and Sharon, and Juliet and Rahul, through whom David brings forth before the reader a different picture of the 'Promised Land'. This picture does not seem all promising and has limitations and is short of perfection. The holy

book suggested it to be a land of milk and honey, but the land where the Bene Israeli immigrated to was a different land from the holy book's where along with milk and honey, blood flowed on its land. It had become a land where fighting and terrorism were common which added to the hardships of life. Making an *aliyah*, was the beginning, setting up home within this land called for many adjustments and only after that the Bene Israelis could settle down completely and accept it as their homeland. The working conditions with the added burden of learning a different language along with no security in the form of family and close knit community like in India, made life difficult. Therefore, for the people who returned to India to claim the land which had continued to hold its identity as their land of forefathers and therefore native land, formulated their own law of return. The return, held a promise of new beginning in India, which they had grown to know and love, without having to make adjustments or compromises. The backward journey seemed to open up the Bene Israeli to the realization that wherever they travelled, they could only feel home in India, which had protected and nurtured their community ever since the times of their shipwrecked ancestors. The realization also re-reiterated that the Bene Israeli had unknowingly created ties with this land and being a Jew was no more a hindrance for them to continue living in this acquired homeland or the motherland. In India they had an Indian identity where their religion, Judaism, was another religion, among other religions. But in Israel, their community was seen as diasporic community irrespective of the fact that the land belonged equally to all practitioners of Judaism. Such demarcations made them feel isolated in a land where they had hoped of living as Jews and not as Indian Jews or non-Israelis.

## CONCLUSION

In the Introduction I had stated my primary enquiry as a search and location of home and homeland of the Bene Israelis diasporic community. The Bene Israelis, after landing in India, re-started life as oil-pressers and lived along side their non-Jewish neighbours. The shipwreck which caused them to land in India was responsible for the loss of their holy books and scrolls of the *Torah*. In the absence of their religious books and symbols, the Bene Israelis practised certain basic Jewish rituals like, circumcision, Sabbath, and the dietary laws. Therefore, their identities as Jews were based on some basic Judaic practises. When they came in contact with the Cochini Jews, they learned other aspects of Judaism and rituals and prayers related to their religion. This helped in reformulating their religious identity in the light of newer practises which were taught to them. The Bene Israelis, who continued to reside in India did not forget their ancestral land and hoped to live in it once again as suggested in their scriptures. Therefore, though they had lived for many decades in India, they continued with their view of ancestral land as elsewhere. With each successive generation, the memory of homeland was replaced with an idea of a homeland which got exoticised with every passing year. With the formation of the state of Israel, the dream of Bene Israelis, of living in their ancestral land became a possibility. But after years of living in India, many Bene Israelis stood torn between their desire to make an *aliyah* to their ancestral land and their familiarity to the host-land as their surrogate motherland.

While they resided in India the Bene Israelis were influenced by successive reference groups and movements like their non-Jewish neighbours, their co-religionist (the Cochini Jews and the Baghdadi Jews), the British, Indian nationalist movement and Zionism. Each had contributed in the creation of their Jewish identity within India. I have tried to look at how various reference groups and movements affected the Bene Israelis stay in India and their supposed assimilation into the native Indian society and its culture and customs.

Through the analysis of Esther David's works, *Book of Esther*, *Book of Rachel* and *Shalom India Housing Society*, I have tried to delve into the various perceptions of India before the establishment of Israel and after it. In the first chapter based on *Book of Esther*, by means of

the primary character Esther's narrative, I have tried to bring forth how various generations of Bene Israelis negotiated their relationship with India. While Esther's ancestors had adopted various customs of the land and forged close ties with their non-Jewish neighbours and the host-land, they continued with certain Jewish customs and traditions which was the basis of their Jewish identity. In *Book of Esther* David tells the tale of the Dandekar family through the various members of this family. We find that the generation preceding Esther- Bathsheba, David and Joshua-had grown accustomed to the host-land with little hope of visiting their ancestral land. In a manner they had created home for themselves in the land which had harboured their forefathers. As they had adopted the customs and culture of the land likewise they had accepted the land as their supposed homeland in the absence of their ancestral homeland, Israel. Esther, who was born in India, had spent most of her life in it, gets an opportunity to make an *aliyah* to Israel. Similar to her ancestors and her father, Esther had grown accustomed to the life in India, which she was born into. For the Dandekars and the Bene Israeli Jewish community at large, India had provided them with an alternative space in the absence of their ancestral land to re-create home for themselves. Esther, as expected, travels to Israel in search of the 'imaginary' homeland (I call it imaginary as she had no memory of the land like her shipwrecked ancestors and heard of it in legends and myths from her grandmother) or her ancestral homeland in search of her Jewish roots. Her *aliyah*, marks the return of a diasporic individual to acquaint itself with the ancestral land. The return also signifies a break or rupture in the Bene Israeli perception of India as a host-land, as many Bene Israelis immigrated to Israel after the creation of Israel. Esther following in the footsteps of many Bene Israelis makes an *aliyah* with her children. The ancestral land, which was theirs as suggested in their holy books and now claimed by efforts of Jews all over, was a far cry from her imagination which had been supplemented by her grandmother. The land with its markers of Jewish history of origin left Esther disillusioned, and she longed for the land of her birth and its familiarity. The ancestral land was a new land for her, waiting for her to make inroads into its customs and cultures and assimilate herself within its society. Much to Esther's displeasure she finds herself jobless and rootless in a land which reserved the right to be her ancestral land. In Israel she witnesses the uncertainty of life (due to continuous attack on Israeli territory by the bordering countries) quite unlike her host-land. This all leads her to re-evaluate her *aliyah* and reconsider a possible return. The opportunity to live in



her ancestral land serves to reaffirm her understanding and recognition of her host-land as her surrogate homeland or motherland where she wanted to spend the rest of her life. Esther David through Esther takes the reader through the various understanding that the Bene Israeli had of the host-land and the ancestral land. Through Esther she allows this Jewish community to realize its dream of a return to 'Promised Land', only to return to India in search of a land which had grown to occupy the space of a homeland, left vacant several decades with the occupation of this land by non-Jewish civilisations. Therefore Esther's return to her host-land marks a personal acceptance of this land as a possible homeland beyond their ancient homeland.

In *Book of Esther*, David deals with the Bene Israelis re-formulation of their religious and cultural identity. Their religious practises which were basic were enhanced into advanced form of worship with the contact of Cochini Jews with the Bene Israelis. With the Cochini contact they received information on their co-religionists. The co-religionists re-introduced them to other practises of Judaism which they had forgotten due to their isolated lives in the Konkan villages. Apart from their Jewish identity, the Bene Israelis even re-formulated their social and cultural identity in relation to the various reference groups that they came across. From appropriating the language of their neighbours to their attire, the Bene Israelis re-created their social and cultural identities alongside their religious identity. The Bene Israeli Jews in their host-land re-created a new life and new identity for themselves in relation to the various reference groups they came in contact with. Their Jewish and cultural identity which witnessed rupture with the shipwreck was slowly revived but with a suggestive amalgamation hinting at influences of the non-Jewish society.

In *Book of Rachel*, Esther David chooses to discuss the Bene Israelis residing in the villages, and how they negotiated with the burden of their glorious past in the form of Bene Israeli synagogues and the rising number of them making an *aliyah* to Israel. Rachel, the narrator and Judah, her lawyer, unlike several Bene Israelis find the prospect of making an *aliyah* to Israel unexciting. For Rachel, whose life was limited to Danda where she resides, the dream of a return to her ancestral land held no charm. This could be attributed to the fact that she had lived most of her life in a land where she had grown up and was familiar with its culture and customs. There was another reason for her refusal to make an *aliyah*, the Danda synagogue, which had

stood witness to the thriving Bene Israeli community and now faced abandonment as a ruin. Saving the synagogue becomes her mission in life, which provides her the reason to forego the Jewish dream of return. In choosing to stay in her host-land, Rachel clarifies her perception of it as a familiar land. At her advanced age, the dream of return held no new hope, because she was not in favour of a life which would require her to newly acquaint herself with life and language of her ancestral land. Unlike Esther of *Book of Esther*, she does not travel to Israel in search of her Jewish roots. Rather in her obstinacy to continue with her life in the host-land she upholds this land as her homeland, her native land for all practical purposes. She felt no desire to relocate herself to her ancestral land in order to live a complete and fulfilling Jewish life; rather, she feared life in Israel due to its obvious unfamiliarity. Similarly Judah, though distanced from his Bene Israeli community, wanted the familiarity of the life he led in India opposed to the life in Israel which would have been unfamiliar. His reasons for foregoing a life in Israel had roots in his own distancing from his community with which he was disillusioned. Unlike Judah and Rachel, Zephra her daughter made an *aliyah*, in search of the land which held keys to the origin of her community and the Jews at large. Zephra who was young and was seduced by the promise of opportunities in the 'Promised Land', travels to Israel to claim the promises it held for her. Even after claiming an Israeli identity for herself she finds herself torn between her present in Israel and her past in India. Though she assimilates into the Israeli society, her life in India had left a lasting impression. This impression disallows her to completely let go of her past, and recreate a life in Israel and accept it as her home. So Rachel, Judah and Zephra, all continue to view India as their home, and Israel as their ancestral homeland.

Further in the text we come across the symbols and cuisines of Bene Israel in the host-land which marked their existence in India. Through these markers David suggests the close and deep connections that the Bene Israelis had developed with the land which had housed them for several years. The synagogues or prayer halls of the Jews suggested that the Bene Israelis considered the land as their own after residing in it for many generations. It also suggested a complete Jewish existence within their community where the synagogues were places where the community prayed together. The Bene Israeli culinary uniqueness arose out of its influence from its neighbours and their own dietary laws. In fact it becomes a means through which the Bene Israelis were provided another yardstick to formulate their Jewish identity differing from their

neighbours. Like the attire and language, certain Bene Israeli cuisines serve to formulate a Jewish identity within India, which though hinting at various influences nonetheless carried the stamp of being categorically prepared by the Konkani Jews. Cuisine interestingly helps this community to build its cultural and social identity apart from language.

In *Shalom India Housing Society*, an anthology of short stories, Esther David, talks of the various ills, fears and anxieties that plagued this community. Through the characters in these short stories David suggest the various influences which the community believed responsible for distancing the Bene Israelis from its community. It is interesting to note here that David, through these short stories, builds into the discourse of what ailed this community, the problems within the community which served to distance its young from the fold. We find in the stories of Samuel and Sharon, Miriam, Shoshanah her mother and Juliet and Rahul, a growing disillusionment with the Israeli way of life. In their continued re-reiteration of the hardships of Israel, there exists a veiled reference to the fulfilling and harmonious life in India. The characters believed that the difficult life in Israel was owing to their residence in a land which was theirs and still not theirs. Juliet in stating her non-belonging to her ancestral land suggests India's position as her supposed homeland. Similarly, other characters in returning to India renegotiate with their past and present to arrive at the conclusion of what signified home for them. Israel was their ancestral land, a land they had imagined and dreamt of, but India truly pulled at their heartstrings and had become the home of this community. Not only did they have a sense of belonging to India unlike Israel, but it also signified as their place of anchor. Though the community believed the Indian ways and means responsible for distancing the young Bene Israelis, the return suggested that its dated traditions and customs were responsible for distancing the Bene Israelis from the community. The outside influences that David reiterates in her work led to inter-religious marriages and desire to live and dress like other Indians; while the former certainly suggested the disassociation of the Bene Israelis from their dated traditions the latter suggested a continuation of what the Bene Israelis had begun long ago, emulating the reference groups. Both proved to be a means by which the Bene Israelis wanted to re-create their identity in modern India.

In conclusion it would be fitting to state that Esther David, through her fictional work, deals with a diasporic community's dilemma to find and re-create a home for itself. In the three texts that I have tried to analyze, David leads her characters on a journey of self-discovery through their search for a land which held the key to their origin. *Book of Esther* and *Shalom India Housing Society* allow the characters to juxtapose their past in India and the present in Israel, which ultimately leads them to conclude, their filial ties with the surrogate motherland are stronger than the ties to their ancestral land. Moreover, India as a place of anchor or the location of their lived past provides them a sense of belonging and rootedness. In the *Book of Rachel*, unlike the above-mentioned texts, the protagonist alludes to her belonging in suggesting her familiarity to the host-land. In her fight to protect the marker of her Jewish identity, she continues to claim the host-land as her surrogate homeland. Further, it is not essentially important for a Jew to reside in Israel to lead a holistic Jewish life because their diasporic status signifies their identity as global citizens. David, through the diasporic Bene Israeli Jewish community's re-creation of home in its host-land, suggests the diaspora's decision to make home for themselves outside the 'Promised Land'. In their choice of home and homeland they choose to continue with their ties to the host-land which was their place of anchor and belonging.

Through my analysis of the texts I have tried to focus on the issues relating to the Bene Israeli community's search and quest for a home and homeland. I have also tried to look into the issue of their Jewish identity and how it gets transformed owing to the influence of different reference groups. I have therefore tried to focus on the issues I had proposed to enquire into at the beginning of my research. Still there exist many issues like the Bene Israelis occupation with the European Jews and the Holocaust, within these works of fiction, which are not directly related to my area of study but would nonetheless make for an interesting study into the diasporic Bene Israeli community. Owing to time constraints and limitations of my dissertation I had to forego various other readings of the texts which I hope to continue further through a doctoral research, which would allow me greater flexibility and lesser constraints.

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