



Manfred Hutter (ed.)

Between Mumbai and Manila

Judaism in Asia since the Founding of the State of Israel (Proceedings of the International Conference, held at the Department of Comparative Religion of the University of Bonn. May 30, to June 1, 2012)

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Introductory Notes: The Context of the Conference in the History of Jewish Studies in Bonn

Two days of discussions and exchange about the knowledge of modern Jewish history and communities in Asia, starting from the Indian sub-continent and reaching to the Far East in Japan, marked the international conference “From Mumbai to Manila”, organized from May 30, to June 1, 2012 by the Department of Comparative Religion at the Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies of the University of Bonn. The idea for the conference was inspired by a research scholarship from the Alexander-von-Humboldt Foundation (Germany) for Dr. Alina Patru (from Sibiu, Romania) who worked on Jews in contemporary China at the department. Therefore the conference was intended to provide a possibility to present her research results to international colleagues. The other aspect which fostered the idea for this conference was the “Working Group of Contemporary Asian Religions” (officially in German: “Arbeitskreis Religionen Asiens der Gegenwart”) within the German Association for the Study of Religions (DVRW), which sometimes convenes workshops or conferences on topics of contemporary religions. On behalf of this working group, the Department of Comparative Religion organized the conference even if studies on Jewry in Asia have not been very prominent in Germany. Meeting for this conference with colleagues from countries in Europe, Asia, Australia and America in Bonn can lead to an exchange of experiences to further the future studies on Jewish history in Asia and also raise the interest in Jewish Studies at the Department of Comparative Religion.

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1. Jewish Studies at the University of Bonn

Since 2005, the Department of Comparative Religion is part of the newly created Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies. All so far independent departments related to Asia or the Orient form this new Institute. Comparative Religion is now affiliated with Asian and Islamic History of Art, Indology, Islamic Studies, Japanology, Sinology, Southeast Asian Studies, and Tibetan Studies. In the Institute there is no department for Jewish Studies (“Judaistik” in German) – that is to say the scientific and historical study of Judaism as religion and as a culture based on religion. Despite the lack of such a specialized department, the University of Bonn in its almost bicentennial history had some prominent scholars who were engaged in Jewish Studies. So it might be suitable to mention in short, how scholars here in Bonn contributed to Jewish Studies.

Let us start with the two theological faculties, one Faculty of Protestant Theology and one Faculty of Catholic Theology. In both faculties you can find basic instruction in Biblical Hebrew and an exegetical approach to the Hebrew Bible, but based on the Christian faith. This is Christian theology and not what we may call Jewish Studies. But we have one exceptional case: in the Faculty of Protestant Theology there was a Jewish scholar, Charles (Chaim) Horowitz, who from 1956 until his death in 1969 taught “Rabbinistik”, as his scholarly subject was named in the official documents (Faulenbach 2009: 436 – 438). Charles Horowitz was born in 1892 in Silesia; he was educated in some *jeschiwoth* (Torah schools) and after World War I he worked as a merchant. From 1928 on he was in close contact with Adolf Schlatter and Gerhard Kittel at the University of Tübingen, regarding both teaching and researching. His lectureship and his co-operation with Schlatter and Kittel ended in 1933. Horowitz emigrated first to the Netherlands, then to France. After World War II, he returned to Germany in 1951 and worked again as a merchant. Nevertheless, he tried to continue his academic career. The University of Bonn offered him the opportunity. By his own request, he started to teach at the Faculty of Protestant Theology, as he did in Tübingen. From the winter term 1956 – 57 on he gave courses covering four hours per week. In each term usually one course was devoted to the lecture of a Talmudic treatise, in the other course he dealt with general topics of the Jewish religion, like the history of the Kabbala, the Jewish divine service both in the synagogue and in the temple, or with the rabbinic exegesis of the Bible. In these years he published the translation of some treatises of the Palestinian Talmud. On account of his merits, the title Honorary Professor was bestowed on him in 1965. The last announcement in the course catalogue can be found in the winter term 1968 – 69. Charles Horowitz died in September 1969. After his death, the Faculty of Protestant Theology tried to continue the lectureship, but due to lacking means all the efforts failed. In defiance of this lack of means, the Faculty

of Catholic Theology has offered – next to the elementary training in Biblical Hebrew – from winter semester 1994 – 95 onward, courses in Modern Hebrew. The courses are given by native speakers; currently there are not only introductory courses, but courses on an advanced level, too.

Next to both theological faculties, the field of Oriental Studies may provide the scope for dealing with the Hebrew language and the Jewish culture. So to say: the orientalists as “the successors of the exegetes” – as it is said in the title of a book by Ludmilla Hanisch (2003) about the German research on the Near East. Just one year after the university was founded in 1818, Georg Wilhelm Freitag was appointed to the chair of Oriental languages. But it was not until 1914 that an official department was established. This happened at Carl Heinrich Becker’s urging, who was appointed in 1913, but soon left Bonn to become a state minister in the Prussian government. His successor Enno Littmann also stayed in Bonn only for a short time. In 1923, Paul Kahle came to Bonn from Gießen, and under his guidance the Oriental Seminar became a centre, not only for Oriental Studies in general, but also for Jewish Studies in particular. Unlike his just named antecessors, and unlike his successors Rudi Paret and Otto Spieß, who focussed their interests on Islamic studies and Islam-related languages, Paul Kahle was also engaged in the research of the oldest text of the Hebrew Bible by using the margins of the masoretes. So it was not by chance, that after the habilitation of Willi Heffening in 1926 and Otto Spies in 1927 – both for “Semitistic and Islamic Studies” – in 1928 Alexander Sperber (cf. Höpfner 1999: 49) obtained the lecturer qualification for “Semitistic with special consideration of the Judaica”, as it is said in the official documents. Alexander Sperber was born in 1897 in Czernewitz, which was then part of Austria (Ginsberg 1970 – 71). He went to school in Vienna. Then he studied in Vienna and in Berlin; in each case both at the university and at the rabbinic seminary. 1924 he gained his PhD in Bonn. After the habilitation until 1933 his academic teaching in most cases covered courses with the broad title “Selected texts of the Mishna”. Which texts he dealt with cannot be found out. In addition to these courses, there were courses with different titles, especially courses on the Septuagint. At the centre of Sperber’s scholarly interests stood – like in his teacher’s case – the reconstruction of the Bible text as close to the original as possible, by analyzing the old translations like the Septuagint or the Targumim. In 1933, Sperber was forced to leave the university. First he went to Palestine. From 1935 on he was connected to the Jewish Theological Seminary in different academic positions. Yet another student of Paul Kahle, who was involved in his research of the biblical text, was the famous Israeli poet and literary scholar Leah Goldberg (Weiss 2010). She came from Lithuania, but was born in Königsberg in 1911. She studied first in her hometown Kaunas, then in Berlin and from 1931 until 1933 in Bonn. In 1933 she gained her PhD. Her dissertation about the Samaritan Targum of the Pentateuch

was published two years later. In 1935, Leah Goldberg emigrated to Palestine. Later she taught comparative literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Leah Goldberg died in 1970. Paul Kahle had to emigrate to England in 1939 (Höpfner 1999: 418 f.; cf. also Kahle 2003). After World War II Kahle returned to Germany, but lived with one of his sons in Düsseldorf. He died in Bonn in 1964.

For the history of Jewish studies in the Department of Comparative Religion one can at first refer to Karl Hoheisel's short paper "The Treatment of Judaism in the History of the Department of Comparative Religion under Carl Clemen and Gustav Mensching" (Hoheisel 2009). Though the department was not established until 1920, the subject has been taught in the Faculty of Arts from 1910 on. In 1910, Carl Clemen left the Faculty of Protestant Theology and joined the Faculty of Arts. Because of his academic training, Clemen was a theologian with special emphasis on the exegesis of the New Testament. His position can more or less be described as close to the History of Religions School. While dealing with the religions and the religio-philosophical movements in the time of early Christianity he focussed his interests more and more on comparative religion. Judaism was not the centre of his interests, but he wrote about it considering different aspects. In 1931, Clemen published the second volume of his "History of Religions in Europe" which, according to the subtitle, dealt with the "still living religions". On nearly 100 pages Clemen gives an overview of the history of Judaism in Europe, beginning with the first mentioning of Jews in the Roman literature of the republic, up to the recent discussions on the different currents in contemporary Judaism (Clemen 1931: 1 – 96). It may be relevant for Clemen's fundamental appraisal, that he called Leo Baeck to write the chapter on Judaism in his book "The Religions of the World" (see Baeck 1927). The German edition of this book was edited three times, and it was translated into several languages.

Carl Clemen retired on April 1, 1933, not because of political reasons, but due to reaching the retirement age. Nevertheless, he continued to teach until 1936 (cf. Vollmer 2001). In that year, Gustav Mensching succeeded him. He was a theologian by academic training, too. Despite his openness to other religions, his view of Judaism was limited in a very unaccountable manner. In his book "The World Religions" there is no chapter on Judaism, but only on the Religion of Israel; this chapter consists of just three parts "The Religion in pre-prophetic times", "The Prophets", "The Religion in post-exile times" (Mensching 1972: 157 – 180).

Two of Mensching's students gained habilitation: first, Hans-Joachim Klimkeit in 1968 and second, Karl Hoheisel in 1975. Klimkeit succeeded Mensching in 1970 as director of the "Religionswissenschaftliche Seminar". Hoheisel was in the position of a private lecturer for long time, and it was not until 1995 that he was appointed to the newly created second chair of history of religions. Klimkeit was the son of a Christian missionary, and was born and grew up in India. He

focussed his research and teaching on Hinduism, Buddhism, Manichaeism and the encounter of the different religions in Central Asia along the silk roads (Vollmer 2005). He had a good command of some oriental languages, but not of Hebrew. Despite his very special interests, he was open for topics his students dealt with. One of these students was Christoph Dröge, who was very interested in Jewish Studies (Dröge 1987; 1988). He wrote a PhD thesis about the Italian humanist Gianozzo Manetti and his encounter with the Hebrew language and Jewish religion. Dröge gained his doctorate in 1983; the thesis was published four years later. In 1988 Dröge published a book in one of Klimkeit's series which contained selected texts of the cabbalistic tradition, starting with the Sepher Yetzirah up to Baal Shem Tow. Unfortunately Dröge died at a very young age before he could gain further academic merits.

While Klimkeit supported the Jewish studies only indirectly, Judaism was one of the main subjects of Karl Hoheisel's research and teaching. Hoheisel was born in 1937 and studied Catholic Theology and Oriental languages in Rome (Vollmer 2011). After receiving his doctorate in 1971, he habilitated in Bonn in 1975. His habilitation thesis "Ancient Judaism in Christian perspective" was a critical survey of the theological interpretation of Judaism from the beginning of the 20th century, by the protagonists of the History of Religions School, to the changes after the experience of the Holocaust (Hoheisel 1978: 7 – 130). Therefore, it was obvious that Hoheisel would choose a subject from the field of Jewish Studies for his first lecture at the University of Bonn: his seminar during the summer semester of 1975 was titled "Separation or a new creation? Special developments in Judaism". In the course of his professorial career until 2002, he held numerous classes within a wide variety of aspects of Jewish studies such as "History of post-biblical Judaism" in the academic year of 1980 – 81, "Dimensions of modern anti-Semitism and the Jewish reactions" in summer 1981, which Hoheisel continued in the following semesters with a slightly different title; then "Female numina in Jewish faith and tradition" in 1982 – 83, and also "Jews and Christian mission in the first centuries" in 1985, a yearlong lecture about the Kabbala in 1986 – 87, "Eastern-European Chassidism" in 1991 – 92, the "Jewish holiday calendar" in summer 1993, "Jews and Christians in the Islamic world" in 1993 – 94. In 1998, the class "The image of the Rabbi and its change over the centuries" followed, then "Theoretical and practical (Jewish) Kabbala" in 1999 – 2000, and in 2002 once more "Eastern-European Chassidism in recent research". In addition to his extensive teaching activity, Hoheisel worked for the "Franz-Josef-Dölger Institute for Late Antiquity research" from 1981 to 1995, including as associate director from 1988 onward. Even after leaving that institute and joining the Department of Comparative Religion, he still remained a co-editor of the encyclopedia "Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum", in which he not only contributed numerous articles with an emphasis on Judaism (cf. e. g. Hoheisel

2002a; 2008), but was also responsible for the supervision and editing of the other authors' contributions.

Two substantial dissertations were written under his guidance: "Richard Beer-Hofmann. Jewish self-conception in Viennese Jewry at the turn of the century" by Ulrike Peters (1993), and "Gershom Scholem and the study of religion" by Elisabeth Hamacher (1999), which focusses on the tension-filled relations of Gershom Scholem with other scholars with special regard to methodology.

In his paper for the memorial volume dedicated to his late colleague Hans-Joachim Klimkeit who died in 1999, Hoheisel mentioned two projects which he had planned to realize with him. The first project was a joint lecture about the comparison between structures and developments in rabbinic Judaism and Hinduism – the two religions that represented the research focus of the two scholars, respectively. Due to the untimely death of Klimkeit, the lecture could not be realized. They also planned another seminar "The presence of Jews and the form of Judaism on the Silk Road/s" which stagnated at the stage of material collection. In the just mentioned paper, Hoheisel presented a short synopsis of the collected materials and methodological problems (Hoheisel 2002b). So one can see the present volume as the most recent contribution to the history of Jewish Studies in Bonn which gives new insight into the variety and the pluralism of Jewish life and Jewish thought in contemporary Asia, continuing at least partly and in variation the project ideas of both Klimkeit and Hoheisel.

2. Between Mumbai and Manila

In general the spread of Judaism across Asia, from Baghdad along the Silk Road to Bukhara and further to the East, and across the Indian Ocean to India and China since early times, is well known (cf. the various entries in Ehrlich 2009a). When Bombay (now Mumbai) became the British "gateway of India" in the 18th century, a starting point was laid for the establishment of networks of Jewish traders and commercial interests, but also of community building. As the number of Jewish communities remained low during the course of history, this may be one reason why "Asian Jewry" has not often been the topic of research in the academic study of religions, even if it focuses on minority traditions. If we look at some calculations of the numbers of Jews in Asian countries, starting with Pakistan in the west and continuing eastwards to Japan, one can give the following numbers of Jewish people living in those countries in the year 2000 (cf. Gilbert 2010: 136 f.):

China	3,100
Hong Kong	2,500
India	6,000
Indonesia	16
Japan	2,000
Korea, Republic of	150
Myanmar	25
Pakistan	25 (?)
Philippines	250
Singapore	300
Taiwan	120
Thailand	250

These numbers – compared with those from the first half of the 20th century – generally show a strong decline of Jewish people living in these Asian countries. This is due to the foundation of the State of Israel which attracted Jews from Asia to move to this new state. Thus Jewish communities have played an important role in the social and political context of modern “Asian” countries since the foundation of the State of Israel. Therefore – without doubt – one also has to say that the situation of Jewish communities in Asia for the last decades has been closely interrelated with the diplomatic situation between a given country and the State of Israel, as Israel maintains bilateral diplomatic relations to most of the Asian countries, cooperating also in the fields of economics, technical and rural development. So it is an interesting topic to look at Jewish traditions, communities and developments in Asia during the last decades, as can be seen from contributions presented in this volume.

The following papers are presented in three thematically arranged sections. The volume starts with descriptions of Jewish communities in Asia today, bringing to light the current situation of these local communities and the changes which arose during the last decades. Gabriele SHENAR’s paper gives a thick description of India’s Bene Israel in their new environment in Israel, where they resettled during the second half of the 20th century. In the paper the author discusses the *malida* ritual which has become the core symbol of Bene Israel ethnic identity, but she also outlines how other Bene Israel customs are still in practice in order to help these Jews of Indian origin to imagine and celebrate the “Indianness” in the “new” homeland Israel. Creating or shaping identity is also one of the topics in Edith FRANKE’s paper on traces of Judaism in Indonesia. There are hardly any traces of the traditional Jewish community in Surabaya or Jakarta, but in a Christian environment in North Sulawesi one can observe a revival or implantation of Judaism; this is – differing from other areas in Indonesia – possible because the local Christian minority in this area allows such

an exceptional development. Some other papers show that Jewish communities also profit from activities of the Lubavitch-Chabad movement (cf. Ehrlich 2009b with references). The idea of this movement is to provide centres for all Jewish people all over the world, and the presence of the Chabad rabbis also backs the small local communities. Vera LEININGER shows the situation in Singapore, with its history of Jews having started in the 1830s and the Israel-Singapore contacts in the military field (since the 1960s). The recent activities of Chabad – following strict halachic laws and representing Jews in the Singaporean public – are of importance on the religious level, but at the same time one can observe that a strong Jewish expatriate group, and immigrants from the USA and Israel, bring pluralism to Jewishness, by using the religious service of Chabad on the one hand, and by organizing their own secular cultural functions on the other hand as well. In a comparable way, Manfred HUTTER gives a short religious-ethnographic description of the tiny communities in Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia; while Myanmar's Jews consist only of a handful of people, Thailand has a longer – and more diverse – history which since the last two decades was also religiously stimulated by the Chabad movement to foster the community's awareness of its Jewish way of living. Highly interesting within this paper is the situation in Cambodia, where since a few years, Jewish life has been developing “out of nothing”. Based on field research and interviews in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Shanghai, Alina PATRU gives stimulating insights into the dynamics of intercultural exchange in the community of Hong Kong. As can be seen from her results presented along the lines of an interview, the situation in Hong Kong is highly complex, bringing Jewish people with very diverse cultural backgrounds together, who refer to different “homelands”. In this way Hong Kong's community is on the one hand arranged along the lines of different Jewish congregations, often staying apart from each other, but on the other hand they have to mix with each other because of the host country's tendency to avoid interactions between locals and foreigners. This mixing for Hong Kong's Jews creates greater transnational bonds than in other communities. Suzanne RUTLAND focuses on the role of Australian Jewry in bringing the small communities in Southeast Asia into contact and providing a framework for their cooperation on an organized level, by arranging conferences and educational projects to give religious assistance. In this way her paper not only widens the geographical focus out of Asia to the Pacific rim, but the paper makes clear how such cooperation – from 1969 to the mid-1990s – had a deep impact on the development of local communities in Southeast Asia. But at the same time such cooperation between Australian and Asian Jewry also played a helping role in the course of establishing diplomatic relations between Israel and some Asian countries, including the PR China.

As one cannot study Judaism without taking Israel's political role into con-

sideration, there are papers arranged in the second section of the book, which mainly focuses on such relations between religion and politics. Meron MEDZINI provides as lively overview on Zionist federations and Zionist diplomacy which struggled to win votes from Asian countries for the United Nations' plan of partition of Palestine into a Jewish State and a Palestinian territory. As Medzini can show the influence of Zionist federations on Asian countries was rather limited because voting in favour of partition from the side of Asian countries was mainly the result of America's political weight to influence Asian countries. When Zionist spokesmen realized this they shifted their focus from Asian countries to American politicians to find in them allies who could bring other countries to vote for the partition, thus laying out the field for the creation of an independent State of Israel. Other papers to follow illustrate a number of political detail studies. For the Philippines, Jonathan GOLDSTEIN and Dean KOTLOWSKI in a joint paper, clearly document the role of Jews in the Philippines in assisting Holocaust refugees, focusing also on the activities of Paul McNutt, who was the US High Commissioner to the Philippines between 1937 and 1939. Due to his efforts in cooperation with Manuel Quezon, the then president of the Philippines Commonwealth, in 1938 and 1939 many German Jews could find a safe haven, having escaped the Nazi terror of the "Reichskristallnacht". Thus during the first years of World War II the number of Jews in the Philippines significantly increased, but after the war – and the Philippines' independence – many of them left the country for the USA and for Israel. In the political sphere, the Philippines were among the first countries to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel after 1948. A less prosperous relation exists between Pakistan and Israel, as Malte GAIER shows in his paper. The Pakistani-Israeli history can mainly be described as a neglected history, and until 1997 when the foreign ministers of both countries met in Istanbul, there had hardly been any official contacts between the two countries for five decades. Since then, Pakistan looks to Israel mainly from a military and economic perspective. As both countries are nuclear powers, this can be seen as the main aspect of their mutual relation, as they both see each other from the angle of strategic security interests. In the context of military-orientated estrangement, most Jews of Pakistan (mainly of Bene Israel background) have left the country for Israel. The bilateral relations between Israel and the PR China are studied by Pingan LIANG and Zheng LIANG in their co-authored paper. In the first years after the foundation of Israel, there were incentives to promote bilateral relations which stopped and later turned to hostility between 1955 and 1978, also due to the cultural revolution in China. It took all the 1980s to slowly change the situation of cold or frozen bilateral relations, until in 1992 full diplomatic relations were taken up by the two countries. Neglecting Jewish / Israeli presence in the Straits is the topic which is analyzed by Theo KAMSMA. Looking on the surface, one cannot see traces of

Jewish culture or Jewish and Israeli activities in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. But under the surface Israel is highly active in the fields of military contacts like training of pilots or selling of equipment, but also in the fields of water supplies and in humanitarian support after the tsunami catastrophe in Aceh, Indonesia. In all these cases, the Israeli / Jewish identity of the participants has to be hidden, but it is also a node from where new connections between Israel and Southeast Asia can be built.

The papers in the third section show that studying Jews in Asia not only refers to religion, but Judaism is also part of everyday history – in society and culture in general. Heinz Werner WESSLER's paper on Jewish authorship in India analyses some works of Nissim Ezekiel, Sheila Rohekar, and Esther David. While in the writings of Ezekiel and David, Jewish background is clearly visible, Rohekar's Jewish topics are less obvious and only detectable at second glance. But all three authors provide – from their Indian background – glimpses on Jewish identity and life in an Indian (and Hindu) society. Two complementary papers by Yudit Kornberg GREENBERG and Annette WILKE describe, analyse and comment on the Hindu-Jewish summits. The first leadership summit in 2007 and the following one in 2008 resulted in a joint Hindu-Jewish declaration which initiated a dialogue between the two religions. Participants of the summits were high ranking Hindu swamis and religious leaders, including representatives of the Shankaracaryas, as well as people from the Israeli foreign ministry, the Rabbinate of Israel, and the American Jewish Association. Central topics of the meetings were shared values and the common recognition of One Supreme Being, but also hot discussions about the Hindu "idolatry" and "lack" of monotheism which are hard to be understood by some Jewish participants. So despite the summits, the overcoming of old theological preconceptions regarding each other's faith, symbols and practices is still a task for the future. Even if some misunderstandings remain throughout the ongoing discussions and dialogues between some participants of the summits, partly due to the lack of skills in dialogue processes and in-depth-study of the other religion in all its historical, cultural and everyday setting, the meetings represented a major step forward in Jewish-Hindu interreligious dialogue. Also in a comparative way, Ping ZHANG focuses on Jewish wisdom, as it was understood or misunderstood and partly even faked in China during the last two decades. What is highly interesting is the way of perception, because Zhang clearly shows that "Jewish wisdom" is mainly based on secondary or tertiary sources which are often not named as such, and even sayings or legends can be presented as "Jewish wisdom". This means, there is an interest and market for presenting ideas which are labeled as "Jewish", but serious introduction of knowledge of Jewish *halacha* in China has still to be established. Of course, besides the book market presenting such faked "Jewish wisdom" for a larger audience, there is also academic interest in studying Ju-

daism, as Gilya Gerda SCHMIDT works out in her article on Chinese people's interest in Judaism, based on her personal encounters with Chinese people. Some of the main topics (or perceptions) of Chinese interest in Judaism are the perception that Judaism is an old civilization, comparable in age to Chinese civilization, but also the comparison of Confucius and the Hebrew prophets. Stressing the value of education and family life, as well as the experience of persecution in the course of history, makes Judaism interesting for Chinese. So Chinese people regard Jewish culture worthy of study despite the very limited number of Jews living in China.

In this way, the papers in the volume offer a diversity of facets of Jewry between Mumbai and Manila. While some papers make references to the important factor how politics and religions are often intertwined, other papers are arranged along the lines of "area studies" – from South Asia via Southeast Asia to China and the Far East. Even if these papers at first glance concentrate on "local" minority communities they always refer to a broader approach bringing Jewish Studies into international links and "crossing borders" – thus also opening comparative perspectives to broaden our knowledge of Jewish history. Many of the papers put a lot of questions which clearly reach far across the local Asian countries: What is Jewry? Is it "really" a minority? What's the importance of Israelis in Asia now? Are they (secularized) "Jews" or are they "only" citizens of Israel (or other "Western" countries), just living and working in an Asian country? So from the contributions in the papers of the proceedings we surely can reconsider many aspects of Jewish studies for the future, which can also take into account that the Jewish communities in Asia take part in interactions of religions which can help to foster mutual understanding.

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Part 1: Jewish Communities in Asia

Bene Israel Transnational Spaces and the Aesthetics of Community Identity

1. The Imagination of Diaspora, Aesthetics, and Identity

In Amitav Ghosh's view, the links between India and her diaspora are lived within the imagination and the Indian diaspora is "a diaspora of the imagination" (Ghosh 1989: 76). He places the specialist of imagination – the writer – at the centre of this imagining process, and, in so doing, points to the importance of aesthetics in the perpetuation of identity. By contrast to Ghosh my concern with diaspora, identity and aesthetics in the present context does not, however, rest solely with a cultural elite placed at the centre of acts of collective imagination. Clearly, like other communities too, the Bene Israel, the largest Indian Jewish community, boasts its own writers and artists who explore their roots through various genres and styles. Moreover, there are numerous Bene Israel community activists and historiographers who endeavour to bring their community's concerns to a wider national or transnational audience. While acknowledging the significance of artists and community leaders, my own particular concern here is with a cluster of "ordinary" Israelis, Bene Israel immigrants and their Israeli-born children, who collectively create and reproduce for themselves, in various settings, both religious and secular, their own version of an "Indian" ambience, staging, performing and experiencing in meaningful, and sometimes playful ways their Bene Israel, Indian Jewish or Indian Israeli identity. Significantly, this imagining process of a diasporic past interlaces the diasporic memory of the immigrant generation with contemporary imaginaries of Indian

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culture as mediated through transnational flows of commercialized Indian popular culture.

From claims to descent from one of the lost tribes, or being shipwrecked off the Konkan coast in Maharashtra in the 2nd century BCE, to encounters with Jewish co-religionists, visiting Christian missionaries and travellers, British colonial officials, and finally Zionist emissaries and World Jewry in various places of settlement today, Bene Israel oral tradition, historiography and history evoke narratives of migration, diaspora, transnational and trans-local relations at various historical junctures (see, for example, Isenberg 1988; Katz 2000; Kehimkar 1937; Roland 1989; Weil 1977). Historically, these encounters have in significant ways impacted on the formation, as well as, more specifically, the self-portrayal and self-perception of a Bene Israel community identity, engendering continuity and change as well as concerted community action or intra-communal discord. Although, in recent years, there has been an upsurge of interest in the history of India's Jewish communities, which is reflected in various research and film projects, academic publications, novels, community publications, and exhibitions by individual members of the community, individual Bene Israel continue to encounter curiosity as to their origin and the Jewishness of their community identity as US- based Bene Israel stand-up comedian Samson Koletkar, among others, epitomizes during one of his shows (see Koletkar 2012).

How then does the Bene Israel community fare in today's world which is perceived to be essentially "en route"? What impact do modernity's motilities – the internet, various social media, media technologies, mobile phones and travel – have on the promotion and constitution of a Bene Israel community life? More particularly, how do members of the worldwide Bene Israel diaspora negotiate the multiplicity of social and cultural ties and identities they embrace both within the nation states where they have settled and the transnational spaces they have carved out for themselves to explore, celebrate and perform their community identity? The paper will address these questions from the perspective of Israel, where the majority of Bene Israel are settled today. I suggest that a transnational perspective enables us to conceive of the Bene Israel not merely as the descendants of an obscure Indian Jewish community whose dwindling numbers and community centres in India have become an object of research, of tourist attraction or Jewish roots projects, but as modern global players, citizens and nationals as well as Jewish religionists who reflect upon and negotiate mundane everyday life assumptions about what the nation, "home-land", identity, and more generally "home" mean and are. Significantly, "while much of post-identity literature presents an image of free-floating individuals who move between social, geographical and cultural spheres of a newly founded and liberating cosmopolitanism ... a significant trend in diaspora research struggles to understand and conceptualize continuity, change, and the growing

complexity of identity and community in transnational times” (Georgiou 2006: 49). The present paper concurs with the latter view and highlights the Bene Israel’s multiple and multi-local sense of belonging, the creation of alternative diasporic public spheres, as well as the complex and hybrid interplay of an emerging contemporary Bene Israel identity that negotiates categories of “Indianness” and “Jewishness” in the transnational space they inhabit between Israel and India, as well as other diasporic places such as the USA, the UK, Canada or Australia. It is argued here that the public and private performance of an Indian Jewish and / or Bene Israel social, cultural and religious identity and milieu is one way to counterbalance the community’s relative marginality, both within World Jewry and its various places of settlement. Moreover, increased mobility, that is travel between India, Israel and other places of Bene Israel settlement, advanced media technologies and also in particular different forms of web- and mobile-based social media, increasingly facilitate transnational flows of information on community activities and concerns, while also enhancing the endeavour of local and trans-local community activists to promote a transnational or at least trans-local platform for the Bene Israel community.

Despite the fact that the majority of the Bene Israel have been settled in Israel since the late 1940s, and despite the fact that they have struggled to achieve Jewishness and Israeliness, they persist in sustaining a rich, evocative, distinctive aesthetic culture which is performed, celebrated and sometimes defended vis-à-vis co-religionists in Indian synagogues and prayer halls, during pilgrimage and acts of ceremonial giving, as well as during wedding celebrations. Moreover, the consumption and performance of commercialized Indian popular culture, in particular in the form of Bollywood and its *filmi* song and dance, by Israelis of Indian origin, is increasingly noticed by other Israelis and has in a sense become a marker of Indian identity in Israel (Shenar 2013). In the present context I define the Bene Israel in Israel as a “multiple” or “counter” diaspora, highlighting the fact that they are both part of the returning Jewish diaspora, as well as part of the worldwide Indian and more specifically, Bene Israel diaspora. Although Israel has no politically sanctioned concept of herself as a multicultural society, the celebration of cultural diversity as part of the Israeli cultural sphere is now acknowledged and officially promoted. Since the 1970s, Israeli society has undergone significant structural and ideological transformations which resulted in a profound critique of the so-called melting pot ideology, paving the way for a multicultural and, some would argue, increasingly privatized Israeli identity (Gutwein 2004). This shift gave rise to the public assertion of diverse ethnic milieus and interest groups within Israeli society that interlace with other identifiable social, political, ideological and cultural cleavages, a fact that an exploration of community and identity within Israeli society needs to be cognizant of. Focusing in particular on the Bene Israel *malida* rite, as well as on

the performance of the pre-wedding henna party, the *mehndi*, I will explore these questions in the context of Bene Israel popular and popular religious performance.

2. The Bene Israel Indian Jews of Maharashtra in India

In India, the Bene Israel, the largest of India's Jewish communities, lived mainly in Maharashtra, in Bombay (Mumbai) and surrounding areas and towns and spoke several North Indian languages, particularly Marathi, a language members of the community continue to speak in Israel, although the Israeli-born generation often has only a basic or no grasp of it. According to their preferred oral tradition, and as retold by members of the community, the ancestors of the Bene Israel were shipwrecked off the Konkan coast in West India in the year 175 BCE. For many centuries the Bene Israel were known as Shanwar Telis (Saturday oil pressers) and lived, scattered over numerous Konkan villages, apart from and mainly in ignorance of mainstream Jewish law and tradition. Over many centuries, they developed, like other Jewish communities around the world too, their own unique community traditions through encounters with the cultural, social and religious context of their place of settlement (see, for example, Isenberg 1988; Katz 2000; Kehimkar 1937; Roland 1989; Weil 1977). In the second half of the 18th century, in their search for economic opportunities, many Bene Israel began gradually to move to nearby cities and towns, in particular Bombay (Mumbai) and nearby towns, but also farther away, for example to Delhi or Karachi (now Pakistan), where they established an urban community infrastructure. The socio-economic development under British rule, growing Indian nationalism, as well as the launching of various Zionist activities in Bombay, had a decisive influence on the formation of a Bene Israel ethnic identity in India (see Isenberg 1988; Roland 1989). Members of the community were attracted by the chance presented by military service under the British, as well as by a demand for skilled artisanship such as carpentry and masonry (Strizower 1966: 128). In the late 19th century, educated Bene Israel found employment as clerks or administrators for the government railways, customs or post and telegraph departments, while others followed a career as engineers, contractors, architects and a significant number of women took up the teaching profession (Isenberg 1988: 199). Members of the Bene Israel community also contributed to Bombay's emerging Hindi film industry both as actors and behind the screen (Shenar 2013).

While the Bene Israel initially did not embrace Zionism, and did not, for example, participate in the first Zionist Congress in 1897, eventually they initiated Zionist activities, and a religiously defined Zionism in the sense of be-

longing to the wider Jewish collective brought about large-scale emigration (Weil 1982: 173 – 75). Today, approximately 5,500 Bene Israel identify as Jews in India, while the majority have moved to Israel, and some to English speaking countries like Australia, Canada, Britain, and the USA (Weil 2002: 14). Bene Israel who have remained in or returned to India live mainly in Mumbai, in particular in Thane, Pune, Panvel and Alibag, as well as other towns and villages in Maharashtra, and there is a small congregation in Delhi, centred around Judah Hyam Synagogue. The Bene Israel community in India has in recent years attracted considerable attention by the media, not least because of the 2008 Mumbai attack on a Jewish community centre. Clearly, visiting Jewish and non-Jewish tourists, Israeli diplomats, businessmen and representatives of various organizations, as well as backpackers and students who participate in Jewish heritage tours to India, form an integral part of the Bene Israel's transnational encounters with the wider Jewish collectivity. Yet it remains to be seen whether the community in India will be able to reassert itself and what kind of relations they will foster with the various Jewish organizations that are active in India, and in particular the numerous Chabad-Lubavitch Centres that have sprung up in India.

3. The Bene Israel Community in Israel

Within Israeli society, the Bene Israel are a comparatively little known *edah* (ethnic community) or *kehilla* (community), numbering, according to estimates by members of the community, approximately 50,000 to 70,000. The Bene Israel's status as Jews was initially contested by orthodox religious authorities in Israel, a dispute that traces its roots back to encounters with Jewish co-religionists in India, in particular the Baghdadi Jews, but was finally resolved in 1964 (Weil 1986: 20). In spite of some socio-economic and educational mobility among them, Israel's Bene Israel are disproportionately found in the lower socio-economic strata and in Israel's peripheral towns, often classified as problematic. The political and socio-economic marginality of the Bene Israel community is a concern for Bene Israel activists, who have undertaken numerous attempts to establish Indian political movements, such as, for example, the Tnuah Hodit Israelit (Indian-Israeli Political Movement), also named Hodaya, in the mid-1990s or the more recent Shivtei Israel in Beersheva in 2008. Bene Israel activists have lobbied various established political parties in order to enter the Knesset (Israeli Parliament) on an Indian ethnic ticket (see Shenar 2003). So far, these plans have not materialized and there are plenty of rumours circulating as to why the community does not succeed in uniting behind a single Bene Israel candidate. Some members of the community, however, are successfully involved in

local and municipal politics, especially in areas with a larger concentration of Indian families. What seems to drive individual Bene Israel activists, from both the fringe as well as the centre of Bene Israel community politics, is the wish to participate in the power structure of Israeli society in order to further Bene Israel social, economic, political and cultural interests. Bene Israel life in Israel is largely grounded in intergenerational social relationships within the family, which interlace at varying degrees also with existing community networks. Local and trans-local community activists and event organizers operate through numerous Indian-Israeli organizations such as the Central Organization for Indian Jews in Israel, the Indian Women's Organization, the approximately 50 Indian synagogues and prayer halls that have emerged all over Israel, local interest groups, cricket and other sports clubs, as well as neighbourhood and local and trans-local friendship networks.

A significant impact on the community's self-perception relates to the relations between India and Israel. Since the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between India and Israel in 1992, bilateral trade and economic relations between the two countries have continuously grown. Today, Israel and India are partners in counter-terrorism and security operations, humanitarian efforts, the environment, renewable energy, and medicine (see Embassy of India 2012). India and Israel have also expanded tourism and cultural exchanges in recent years. Israeli youth in particular are attracted to India with tens of thousands of Israeli backpackers travelling to India every year, often, though not exclusively, after completion of their mandatory army service (Maoz 2005). Not least because Israeli backpackers have acquired a somewhat notorious reputation in India, young Israelis of Indian origin prefer, it seems, visiting relatives in India or participating in especially organized return visits, rather than joining the Israeli backpacker community. An increasing number of young Israelis of Indian origin also take advantage of one of the schemes promoted by the Indian embassy in Israel, such as the "Know India Program"-Internship Program for Diaspora Youth (IPDY), a programme conducted by the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA). The programmes are officially promoted during Indian community events, that members of the Indian embassy attend regularly, as well as through the various Indian community institutions. Interestingly, while various organizations and entrepreneurs in Israel promote an officially sanctioned international cultural exchange between Israel and India, a parallel or alternative transnational flow of cultural-cum-aesthetic genres, repertoires and material goods between Israel and India is initiated by and targeted primarily at Israelis of Indian origin. Indian popular cinema, in particular Bollywood's *filmi* music and dance, visiting artists and TV celebrities from India, wedding supplies, as well as other items in demand by Israel's Indian community, feature significantly in these parallel and alternative transnational flows (see Shenar 2013). These al-

ternative transnational flows of goods and people impact in significant ways on the community's imagining process of home and diaspora.

4. Bene Israel Jewish Folklore and Religious Popular Culture: the *malida* Ritual

The Bene Israeli *malida* or *Eliyahu Ha'navi* rite forms an integral part of Bene Israel Jewish popular religious belief and practice and is performed in the transnational diasporic spaces members of the community have carved out for themselves between India and Israel, as well as other places of settlement. The contemporary form of this ritual food offering to the Prophet Elijah takes it essentially a liturgy-based ritual, although there is some room for more elaborate ritual enactment, depending on the occasion at which the *malida* is performed. For example, when the *malida* is performed as part of the pre-wedding henna ceremony, a portion of the *malida* offering is wrapped into a white cloth which is then handed to the bride who holds open a green cloth, symbolizing fertility, into which the *malida* portion is placed. The term *malida* is derived from the Persian word for a confection Muslim offering and is also commonly used by other Marathi speaking people. It means anything crushed or a cake made up with milk sugar and butter (Isenberg 1988: 115). In Israel both terms *malida* and *Eliyahu Ha'navi* are used to refer to the rite, as well as, more particularly, to the actual picturesque offering that is presented on a platter. Hence my own preference of the term *malida* in the present context.

Malida offerings are usually sponsored by individual households or local Bene Israel congregations. The gift, containing a sweet rice mixture, five kinds of fruit, as well as scented twigs and sometimes flowers, mostly roses, is offered to Elijah on a white cloth, usually on a table. Before the liturgical readings commence, candles or a lamp are lit and if a *minyan* (quorum of ten men required for public prayer) is present, prayers are said. This is followed by various liturgical readings from Genesis and Exodus, as well as the Sephardi prayer book, during which all participants are seated around a table or tables, to invoke Elijah's presence. The readings may vary but always contain a *pizmon* (hymn with a refrain) commencing with the words *Eliyahu Ha'navi, Eliyahu Ha'tisbi*, which is sung in an Indian tune, as well as *va'yeten lecha*, a blessing said after *havdala* (termination of the Sabbath). The readings may be conducted by a *hazan* (prayer leader), or any other male sufficiently qualified for the reading or chanting of the liturgy and the senior male of the household that sponsors the *malida* takes a seat of honour next to the person conducting the rite, unless he performs it himself. After the readings, the *malida* platter is brought to the table and the man