

Feature

Yoraan Rafael Reuben



The Beauty of Tradition

Photo credit: Yoraan Rafael Reuben

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Mehendi in full color

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Though much of the Bene Israel community no longer lives in India and have moved, en masse, to their ancestral homeland of Israel, they have carried with them many of the rich and colorful traditions they developed in their nearly 2,000-year history on the Indian-subcontinent. While still in India, they celebrated a peaceful coexistence with their neighbors and though they retained their separate Jewish identity, many local traditions were incorporated into their daily practice.

The henna and mehendi ceremony is a very important part of the Bene Israel pre-wedding tradition with long standing roots.

Mehendi is the application of henna as a temporary form of skin decoration. It is an ancient Indian tradition, still very much alive in traditional Indian communities worldwide. In the Jewish world, this custom is specific to the practices of the Bene Israel which differ from similar practices that developed in other Jewish communities.

In contemporary practice, the application of mehendi is to the bride's hands. Even

though the menendi to be applied is sometimes made by a professionally trained henna artist, it is often a relative however who still applies the mehendi to the bride's hands.

Traditionally, the application of the mehendi used for the outline of the design is done the night before the henna itself is applied, though the index finger would be purposefully kept blank. The application is characterized by elaborate and beautiful intricately patterned designs. The following day around mid-day, the henna is applied, followed by the application of the mehendi on the index fingers of the bride and the bridegroom. The henna, in addition to making the skin glow, is also attributed with medicinal properties. This ceremony typically takes place at home but contemporary communities sometimes move the ceremony to catering halls or other more public spaces.


The ceremonial application of mehendi on the index finger of the bride and groom is a significant point, as this is the finger that the couple customarily puts their wedding rings on.

Traditionally, three days before the marriage, the bride and groom are not

allowed to leave the house and are not allowed to even see each other until the arrival of the chosen auspicious day for these ceremonies.

Following the henna and the mehendi ceremony the ritual Malida ceremony takes place.

The Bene Israel, one of the major groups of Indian Jews, date their presence in India to their arrival on the Konkan Coast 2,000 years. They mingled and often adopted customs and traditions from both their neighboring Hindu and Muslim communities.

As the pictures in this photo essay beautifully illustrate, the Bene Israel are steeped in unique tradition, and their rituals are alive and in full color. 

About the photographer: Yoraan Rafael Reuben was born in Bombay (now Mumbai), India. He currently lives in Givataim, Israel where he works for El Al though he is also a photographer "by hobby, profession and passion." And he notes that he is "passioned by the lens."

You can contact Yoraan through his Webpage: www.yoraanrafael.com or via email: yoraan@yahoo.com

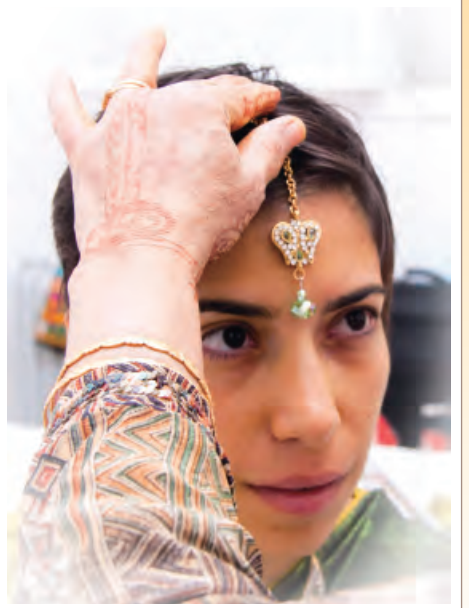


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