

India Journal Life with the Bene Ephraim



In south-eastern India, isolated from the established Jewish communities of India and world Jewry, live the Bene Ephraim of Kotah Reddy Palem, India in the central state of Andra Pradesh.

From 19 July to 7 August 2007, my husband and I visited with this unknown Jewish community as volunteers for the outreach organization Kulanu. This small community's needs are great but they are hospitable and warm, eager to reconnect and establish connections with the worldwide community of Jews. They are led by Sadok Yacobi, the spiritual leader of their congregation.

Since our visit, the Bene Ephraim have begun to reenter the consciousness of World Jewry. In 2007, Sharon Galsulkar, of the Jewish Education department of O.R.T. India, was introduced by us to the Bene Ephraim, to further help this community reconnect with their Jewish roots. In 2008, in cooperation with Kulanu, Sharon went to teach in this community and the visit was documented in Jonas Pariente's film, "Next Year in Mumbai."

Kulanu has also helped start a micro-loan system to enable

families to receive small loans for farming. Money has also been raised by Rabbi Marvin Tokayer to purchase buffalo for families interested in increasing their income by selling buffalo milk. Michael Freund of Shavei Yisrael, has become involved with the Bene Ephraim and is overseeing a project to translate some of the Hebrew liturgy into Telegu.

Here is our journey:

Music, drums and flowers

We finally landed yesterday at around 3:30. On the way were greeted with flowers by Sadok's daughters and nephews in Hyderabad, where we changed planes. A delegation of people from the community then met us when we landed in Vijayawada and accompanied us by cab to Guntur where we checked into Hotel Geetha.

It was hot that July, but not much hotter than New York in the hottest part of the summer. Our hotel had marble floors and a good pure-vegetarian restaurant downstairs which was beneficial for us since we eat only kosher food. Sadok found us transportation in a car to ride the 20 minutes from Guntur

to Kothareddipalem. We planned to spend Shabbat with the community in the village.

When we arrived at the village, we were greeted by a delegation that gave us garlands of fresh flowers and escorted us, with music and drums, to the synagogue, which had a very large welcome sign for us on the front gate. The Bene Ephraim community was very happy to get the *chumashim*, tapes, and other books and things that we had brought in our suitcases. A paper *Sefer Torah* of reasonable size was another gift. We explained to them that they could use this as a symbol for a *Sefer Torah*. Other gifts included a *havdalah* candle, a seder plate, *haggadot*, hand-baked *matzah shemurah* from Israel, and other odds and ends.

Shabbat in the Village

Shabbat in the village was quite an experience. The synagogue consisted of a one-room concrete building with electricity but no running water. It doubled as the home of Sadok and his family. When Shabbat or another large gathering occurred, they had to move their two cots to the side, and various things were put on the shelves.

On Shabbat, we slept in the *shul* while Sadok's family slept in the courtyard. This experience isn't for everyone. My husband, myself and what we called the "Shabbat rat" shared the small *shul* together. We quickly became quite fond of the lizards and chemelions too. The outhouse had a toilet that was non-flushable. It was hot and had lots of flies. There was no running water, refrigeration or Western comforts. Sadok's family cooked on one small gas burner.

On Shabbat morning, the place was completely full. Everyone sat on the floor except for us, Sadok, and one of the elders. There was no room for anyone else. Their service consists mostly of translations of sections of the service in Telegu. The children all read Hebrew and know *brachot*. The women sat separately from the men during the service and they (including the girls) covered their hair with the saris. The girls made the blessing on the *tallit* too.

They were aware that they should not cook on Shabbat, but since there was no refrigeration, they do. They also had someone who acts as a "shochet." He asked my husband to show him how to slaughter a chicken or a buffalo in a kosher manner, the way the rest of the Jewish community has traditionally done. My husband laughed and said while he was a rabbi, and learned the laws of Shecita (slaughtering), he did not know how to demonstrate it, since he buys meat from a butcher shop back home. In the end, we said we would try to find a shochet in India which could teach him.



Feature

by Bonita Nathan Sussman and Gerald Sussman

On Shabbat, we went over the Jewish holiday picture book Kulanu members sent us with and I explained *Yom Hashoa*, *Yom Haatzmaut*, *Yom Yerushalayim* and *Yom Hazikaron*, which they knew nothing about. We also taught them *havdallah*, which they promised they would now do. We also played games with the children consisting of a wooden aleph bet block set. Everyone had to pick out the letters of their names. The blocks have *nekudot* (vowels) on them too and they had to find them as well. Also we bought a beautiful children's book which those who know English translate for the others. They recited the months and days of the week in Hebrew for us.

Sadok told us that there are about 15 children from the community attending school. He took a loan for his children's education and is paying 120% interest. The local newspaper said they are beginning to put legislation in place around these moneylending practices.

As soon as we heard the congregation pray, we decided we wanted to record their liturgical music. After Shabbat we brought a tape recorder to record their music. Some of their liturgical compositions are of the *Shema* and *Esa Ainai*, and *Yevarechecha*. We taught them some American Jewish favorites of *Shabbat Shalom*, *Am Yisrael Chai*, *Shalom Chaverim*, *Hinai Matov* and *Eretz Aavat Chalav Udevash*.

A Year of Holidays

We observed one actual holiday while we were there — *Tisha B'Av*. It was a new holiday for them. We explained it and told a long version of the story of *Kamtsa* and *Bar Kamsta*. We sang *Im Eshkachech Yerushalyim* and read excerpts from *Aichah* and *Kinot*. Quite a few, I'm told, fasted though I'm not sure if they meant from eating and drinking or just from eating.

We taught the holidays in their order, starting with *Sukkot*. We had the children draw pictures of their *succah*, and they all signed their names in Hebrew.

When we taught about *Chanukah*, we made *levivot* (*latkes*) for everyone. I bought lots of potatoes and onions; Mrs. Yacobi and daughters peeled, I chopped onions, and we made *levivot* for about 50 people. The women were given the recipe for next *Chanukah*. In addition to *Chanukah*, we taught about *Purim*. I bought some magic markers and the kids made masks of Indian Queen Esther and Mordecai. On the Queen Esther masks, some of the girls drew the "bindi" the red dot placed between a girl's eyes to make her more beautiful.

Sadok's wife asked to learn *matzo* baking. Until now, they just used *chapatis* (flat Indian bread made with oil, flour, and



salt), but there was a picture in one of the holiday books that shows an Indian woman baking *matzo*. She was pictured wearing a sari and had a star on her forehead. This peaked their curiosity.

In response to Mrs. Yacobi's request for a *matzo* recipe, I bought a roller and a fork to pierce holes in it, and she had the flour. (In India they don't own forks, only spoons). We didn't have an oven, so we used a flat skillet (like one you could make pancakes on). The *matzos* came out looking perfect!. Mrs. Yacobi's daughters helped too. We found out later on in our trip, that the Jews of Cochin made *matzos* the same way.

We also brought the leftover hand-baked *matzo shemurah* from Israel that we had from Pesach. We gave out this *matzo* too. They made a *Shecheyanu*. I must say that this *matzo* baking was one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. Just to watch this all happen for the first time in the community was a truly moving spiritual experience. Mrs. Yacobi said she will teach all the women how to do this and they will have real *matzo* this year for the first time, not *chapati* as they were used to.

We also taught about the use of tefillin and discussed Jewish weddings. The community told us that they circumcise their sons on the eighth day of life.

“God’s People”

The closing ceremony was somewhat of a love festival. We asked them about their origins. They told us that they had a tradition that said they came to India in 722, after the fall of Samaria, from Assyria to Persia to Afghanistan to Kashmir and somehow to where they are now. What they said was a little bit confusing because they also said that there was a period where they worshipped idols like Hindus. They made some connection between themselves and the Madiga people, a group of untouchables. Since their ancestors made sacrifices, they knew about slaughtering animals, which was the traditional work of the Madiga peoples. They said that the Hindus also referred to them as “God’s people” and asked their advice on butchering animals.

We are coming home with what we feel is a huge responsibility to get the word out about this community. ✡

Gerald and Bonita Sussman are native New Yorkers and have interests in developing religiously and economically emerging and returning Jewish communities around the globe. Photographs are courtesy of the Sussmans.

