

The Legacy of David Sassoon

Building a Community Bridge

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David Sassoon (seated) and his sons

In 1832, David Sassoon (1792-1864) and his family arrived in Bombay (today Mumbai) after fleeing the persecutions of the ruler of Baghdad, Daud Pasha. This wealthy merchantman, who founded a dynasty known as the “Rothschilds of the East”, was also named the Prince of the Exilarch.

David Sassoon began his sojourn in Bombay at 9 Tamarind Street (today non-existent) within the precincts of the city (the Fort walls were destroyed in 1862). He soon moved to Byculla’s bungalow Sans Souci, a former palace named Shin Sangoo, (today Massina Hospital); he also spent the summer months in his second home in Poona (today Pune). Sassoon managed his international enterprises from Bombay, including trade in cotton, jute and most significantly, opium. His commercial intuition and prowess, as well as the scope of his business enterprises, are well documented.

Relations with the Bene Israel

David Sassoon’s relations with the Jewish community that he discovered when he arrived in Bombay are a sensitive yet important issue. The Bene Israel in India originated in the Konkan, but during the British period, many began to move out of the villages and settle in Bombay. Testimony to that fact was the establishment in 1796 of the first Bene Israel synagogue in Bombay, Shaar Harahamim (the Gate of Mercy Synagogue), consecrated by a Bene Israel officer Samuel Ezekiel Divekar to commemorate his miraculous escape from death at the hands of Tippu Sultan during the Second Anglo-Mysore War. The existence of the synagogue signified the existence of at least ten Bene Israel families in the city, who could make up a minyan (quorum) for prayers.

David Sassoon confronted a community and a synagogue unlike any he had

known in Iraq, Persia, Syria or the Jewish communities steeped in Jewish learning with which he was familiar. The Bene Israel had been cut off from mainstream Judaism for centuries and their knowledge of Jewish halacha (law) was minimal. They observed most of the Jewish festivals, refrained from work on the Sabbath and believed in one God, but they were ignorant of some of the intricacies of the Jewish religion. Since David Sassoon did not travel on the Sabbath (although the Baghdadi Jews later found a halachic (Jewish legal) solution to that by inventing the Shabbat tram card with Rabbinic approval!), David Sassoon quickly set about to establish his own network of synagogues to be led according to the Jewish rites with which he was familiar. At first, he held a prayer hall in his home. In 1861, he built the Magen David (Defender of David) Synagogue in Byculla for members of his community, who streamed in to Bombay as they fled persecution in their

homelands. In 1867, he constructed the Lal Dewal, or Ohel David (Tent of David) red-brick synagogue in Poona, with a famous spire reminiscent of British church architecture, where he would pray during the High Holy Days. In Poona, too, there was a small Bene Israel community, who were mainly army personnel settled there after the British had established army headquarters in Poona in 1856.

While many books and articles have focused on the discriminatory and tense relations between the Baghdadi Jews and the Bene Israel, I will argue that in fact David Sassoon tried to relate to the Bene Israel with equanimity. Many of the tensions in the complicated relationship between the two communities were exacerbated after David Sassoon’s death, particularly during the period of Sir Jacob Sassoon. While David Sassoon did not relate to the Bene Israel in the same way that he treated his fellow Baghdadi coreligionists, I maintain that he definitely tried to look after their religious, occupational and civic needs by integrating the Bene Israel in religious life and in his enterprises, as well as extending them philanthropy as members of the Jewish faith, and as well as fellow citizens of Bombay and Poona. There were numerous strategies of rapprochement.

Integration in religious life

While most scholars and members of both communities deny the involvement of the Bene Israel in Baghdadi communal life, there were interfaces where the Bene Israel were accepted, even if they were not considered first-class Jews. According to a Christian source, when David Sassoon first arrived in the city, the Baghdadis and the Bene Israel prayed together and cooperated on religious matters. In Bombay, at the beginning both Bene Israel and Baghdadis were buried in the same Jewish cemetery.



Statue of David Sassoon
Photo credit: Erica Lyons

Feature

by Shalva Weil

Leaders of both groups, including David Sassoon, petitioned the President and Governor-in-Council of Bombay to care for the Jewish cemetery and the petition was signed in Hebrew and English by the “Arabian” Jews and in Marathi by the “native” Jews. But by 1836, relations between the two communities had soured and members of the Baghdadi community petitioned the British Government to erect a wall in the cemetery between the two communities. Sadly, relations deteriorated over time, and, although there were exceptions, the Baghdadis would generally not include the Bene Israel in their minyan (quorum) as “pure” Jews.

Economic incorporation

David Sassoon had prospered from the oil, cotton and opium ventures he set up over the Far East, and in particular, from trade with China. He offered employment to scores of Bene Israel, who had settled in Bombay and worked in the mills he had established.

In addition, the David Sassoon Benevolent Institute, later the Sassoon School, which did not want to accept Bene Israel pupils, provided employment for Bene Israel teachers. It is significant that from 1865 the headmaster of the school was an educated Bene Israel, Joseph Ezekiel Rajpurkar (1834-1905), who five years earlier became a Hebrew teacher, in the school, with David Sassoon’s blessing.

Philanthropy

Certain funds were explicitly funneled to the poorer Bene Israel community. For example, the Sassoon Hospital, built in Pune from a contribution of Rs.213,000 given by David Sassoon towards its endowment in 1863, and completed after his death in 1867, reserved special places for the Bene Israel. The first time that the Sassoons directly helped a Bene



Photo credit: Erica Lyons

Statue of David Sassoon

Israel institution, however, was after David Sassoon’s death in 1882, when charitable funds were made available to the Bene Israel Israelite School.

Civic benefits

David Sassoon established huge philanthropic funds for the beautification and development of the city of Bombay and Poona from which the Bene Israel, like other citizens, benefited. These included the David Sassoon Mechanics’ Institute (1847), which evolved into the David Sassoon Library and Reading Room (1938), the David Sassoon Industrial and Reformatory Institution, David Sassoon Elderly and Destitute Persons Home or the David Sassoon Infirm Asylum (1863) in Poona (today the Nivara Old Age Home), the Clock Tower at the Victoria Gardens (today Veermata Jijmata Udyan), and the Statue of the Prince Consort at the Victoria and Albert Museum (today the Bhau Daji Lad Museum) complete with Hebrew inscription (1861). The Bene Israel, as municipal members of Bombay and Poona, could only be proud of the salience of Judaism and Hebrew in their city.

Sassoon’s Legacy of Rapprochement

While it is absolutely true that relations

between the Baghdadi Jews and the Bene Israel in Bombay (and Poona) were not ideal, David Sassoon utilized particular strategies of rapprochement to endear himself to the Bene Israel. Sometimes, these gestures have been misinterpreted or are unknown. Although subsequent generations of the Sassoon family and the Baghdadi Jews may have been responsible for the deterioration of relations between the two communities, I would suggest that David Sassoon had aimed at harmonious relations with the more numerous and ‘native’ Jewish community of Bene Israel. ✎

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