



# This Year in India: Celebration of Passover in the Bene Israel Tradition

# Feature

by Nissim Moses

The Bene Israel community originated in Maharashtra in India. According to their tradition, they arrived on the Konkan Coast, south of present-day Mumbai, in approximately 175 BCE. Some date this back to an even earlier date.

Like other diaspora Jews, the Bene Israel celebrated the festival of Passover for eight days, with two Seder nights. In the second part of the twentieth century, it became common practice to perform the first Seder with family and to organize a communal Seder for the second night.

In India, as is common in all Jewish communities, preparations for Passover started with a general house cleaning. Winter clothes and linens were also stored away at this time. Then it became time for the preparation of matzoh for the entire festival. In days gone by, these were prepared at home by the women of the house for the whole week. Each family prepared about one hundred matzot or more depending upon the size of the family. When the "joint family" system still operated, the women of the house cooperated in making the matzoh, but with the advent of the twentieth century and nuclear family units, sisters & sisters-in-laws would go to each others' houses over the ten day period prior to Passover and cooperate in preparing the matzoh together, but then returned home to their own individual families. Once ready, the women put all the matzoh they made in a large clean bed sheet, which they hung from the ceiling of one of the rooms in the house. During the Passover week, the required amounts were taken down and consumed daily. Of course, they also made the three special "shmura matzot" for the Seder. On the night before Passover, all the hametz (leavened bread) was removed from the house. This custom was different from other Jewish communities, in which the



hametz is sold to a non-Jew but still kept in the house. In India, the special vessels, dishes and plates used only for Passover were taken out, and dipped in hot and cold water to purify (kasher) them for use in the Passover week. Other vessels were put away in a separate locker. Further, during the Passover week no dried red masala but only fresh green masala would be used as spices for the food.

A day or so prior to Passover, the family would purchase all the special items for the Passover Seder. Kiddush wine was made from black currants and shira (haroset) was made by each family for the Seder. The shank bone (zero'ah) was prepared from the right

foreleg of a goat or sheep only. Some other Jewish communities used a chicken bone, but this was considered to be an unacceptable alternative by the Bene Israel.

Like other Oriental Jews, the Bene Israel never dropped the wine from a cup onto a plate while reciting the ten plagues. They instead would purchase a new earthenware clay pot and a new inexpensive small wine glass for the Seder each year. The reader used both of these during the Seder only. The wine was dropped into the clay pot while reciting the plagues. The clay pot and the wine glass were then broken and thrown away. As in other Jewish communities, the first-born son of all



Bene Israel families would fast from early morning until the Seder service on the eve of Passover.

Among the Bene Israel who lived in the Konkan villages and small towns of the West Coast of India, families would slaughter a goat for the Passover meal (information provided by Noah Masilof). As soon as the goat was slaughtered, the blood would be smeared on the palm of the hand and imprinted on the door of every Bene Israel home in the area. The custom evolved so that later on, the imprint of the hand was made on paper instead of directly on the door. Each family would post this on their door, as was done by the ancestors of the Hebrews on the night of Passover.

The basic Bene Israel Seder service is very similar to that of other Jews elsewhere, with a few exceptions. Prior to the passage of “Ha Lachmania”, the Seder plate is held by all and lifted and rocked and then set down. This is repeated three times after which the traditional four questions of “Ma-Nish Tana” are asked by the youngest in the family. The Bene Israel particularly revere Elijah the Prophet whom



they believe went to heaven from a spot in the Konkan outside Mumbai (Khandala). Because of this rather special connection to Elijah, when he ‘visits’ each home, the young children are particularly excited. The rest of the service continues in a manner similar to most traditional communities. After the formal Seder service, the festive meal is eaten. This is followed by grace after the meal and then the Bene Israel conclude by singing festive songs. ✡

## Pesach Kiddush Wine:

### Ingredients:

- 0.25 kg Black currants
- 2-3 Glasses of water

**Method:** Add the water to the currants and let it soak overnight. The next day, boil the water and black currants together. The currants will bloat. After boiling, allow the water to cool. Squeeze the juice out of the currants with gloved hands. Add about 1.5 glasses of water a little at a time. The final mixture should be sweet. Then strain the mixture with a fine clean cloth. Pour the juice into a jug or a bottle and keep in the refrigerator for a few hours.

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All photos are courtesy of Dr. Shalva Weil.