

The Tomb of Rachel - the Bene Israel Connection



**Wanderers, emissaries,
matriarchs and a holy site**

In 1856, Rabbi Yaacov Sapir, an emissary from Eretz Israel, departed on a five-year tour of far-flung Jewish communities, including Yemen, India, Australia and New Zealand. Sapir had been born in Oshmiany near Wilna, but his parents, fired by messianic and religious motivations, had come to Palestine and settled in Safed. Upon his return to Jerusalem from his long mission, he published an amazingly detailed travel log, with first-hand descriptions of the life of the Yemenite Jews, as well as the appearance of the pseudo-Messiah Judah ben Shalom. In 1866, he published an invaluable work called "Even Sapir" in which he details all three communities of Indian Jews: the Bene Israel, the Baghdadis who had settled in Bombay (today Mumbai) and Calcutta, and the Cochin Jews.

In 1859, Rabbi Sapir stayed six months in Bombay. He was hosted by the Baghdadi community, but, as opposed to other emissaries, he also visited the poorer Bene Israel, who claimed they had arrived in India in a shipwreck some time around 175BCE. He wrote that he was moved to find out more about the "lost" tribes of Israel "who are called Bene Israel". The reference was to the ten lost tribes exiled by the Assyrians in the eighth century BCE. He found that the Bene Israel knew about the Jewish religion and were not totally cut off from other Jews; they were also messianic.

He wrote: "And they knew that there are other Jews and the land of Israel, and Jerusalem, and the destruction of the Temple, and that when the Messiah comes they will be redeemed and gathered together in Jerusalem...and they also give charity and donations to the poor of Israel and to messengers who come from Palestine for this purpose." Although some scholars believe that he was actually referring to the wealthier Baghdadi Jews in Bombay,

who were well-known for giving charity, and were a regular stop for emissaries from Palestine, it is also very probable that he was also writing about the Bene Israel community, who displayed generosity despite their modest means.

One of the causes to which the Bene Israel of Bombay contributed was the Tomb of Rachel. This tomb marks the very spot where the Biblical matriarch Rachel died in childbirth on the road to Bethlehem. In the Book of Genesis (35:19-20) it is written: "And Rachel died, and was buried on the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem. And Jacob set a pillar upon her grave: that is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day." Muhammad al-Idrisi, the 12th century Muslim geographer confirmed that: "On the road between Bethlehem and Jerusalem is the Tomb of Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin."

The tomb has been the site of pilgrimage and prayer for Jews in the Diaspora for more than three thousand years. Throughout the centuries, Jews from all over the world visited the tomb, and sent funds to help renovate and maintain it. It was such a revered site that even Jews in far-flung countries, as far away as India, longed to pray there and felt connected to the place.

However, as with many Jewish religious sites, and particularly with respect to tombs of patriarchs, prophets and great Rabbis, the site also had religious significance for members of other faiths. This was particularly well documented in the 15th century with descriptions of Jews, Muslims and Christians frequenting the place. In 1615, Muhammad, Pasha of Jerusalem, gave the Jews exclusive rights to the tomb. In 1830, the Ottomans recognized the legal rights of the Jews to the site. When Sir Moses Montefiore purchased the site in 1841, he restored the tomb and added a small prayer hall for

Muslims. When Rabbi Yaakov Sapir left Jerusalem, emissaries were collecting money for the renovation of the tomb.

It appears that Rabbi Sapir was successful in fund-raising in India for the holy site. Inscribed on the wall of Rachel's tomb is the following plaque: "This well was made possible through a donation from our esteemed brothers, the Bene Israel, who dwell in the city of Bombay, may the Lord bless that place. In honour of the whole congregation of Israel who come to worship at the gravestone for the tomb of our matriarch Rachel, may her memory rest in peace, amen! In the year 5625." This lunar year is the equivalent of 1864, the year that Rabbi Sapir returned to Jerusalem from India.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, while Jewish art in Palestine portrayed Rachel's tomb as one of the most important holy sites, the site also began to be coveted by Muslims and became a source of contention, with the Wakf demanding control of the place on the grounds that the tomb was part of a neighbouring Muslim cemetery. After the Israeli War of Independence in 1948, the tomb was allocated to Jordan and Jews could no longer visit. During the Six Day War in 1967, after Israel occupied the West Bank (previously Jordanian territory), the tomb once again became part of Israel. During the 1970's, when I used to visit the tomb, the keeper of the small tomb was a Bene Israel Indian Jew from Bombay, who felt an historical affinity with the site because of his forefathers.

In 1995, after the Oslo agreement, Bethlehem, with the exception of Rachel's tomb, became part of the Palestinian Authority. The following year, the Israel Defense Forces, fearing a terrorist attack at the site, built a huge fortification around the previously modest tomb. In retaliation, in 1996, the Palestinian Authority declared the place to be on Palestinian land, stopped

Feature

by Dr. Shalva Weil



The security around the Tomb of Rachel

referring to it as Rachel's tomb and made the claim that it was the site of an Islamic mosque.

During the second Intifada in 2000, there were intermittent attacks on the tomb with altercations between the IDF and Palestinian gunmen. Since then, there has been a growing wave of support for the idea that the site was in fact a thousand year-old mosque by the name of the "Bilal ibn Rabah mosque" until, finally, the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) endorsed the idea. In October 2010, it was declared a mosque. Out of 58 member states, only the United States voted against the decision; 12 European and African countries abstained.

In a petition to UNESCO initiated on the internet, petitioners wrote: "In attempting to sever the Jewish cultural,

religious and natural heritage bond with the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Rachel's Tomb, UNESCO denies the history it is mandated to preserve, engages in a political maneuver designed to weaken a member UN nation, and undermines its own principles. ... We demand that UNESCO, whose purpose it is to protect heritage, also protect Jewish heritage, rather than deny it."

The tomb was even known by the Bene Israel of Bombay as one of the holiest sites to Jews over the generations even though they were disconnected from world Jewry. It symbolized fertility, and is of special significance to Jewish women. Rachel's birthday, which falls on the 11th day of the lunar month of Heshvan, has become a day of pilgrimage for thousands of Jewish women, who come from all over Israel to pray for their loved ones or themselves.

Busloads of Bene Israel have in the past visited the tomb to make vows and pray for suitable marriage partners for their children or beg for children for a childless couple. The Bene Israel groups who visit the tomb today, which now more closely resembles a fortification marking the checkpoint to Bethlehem more than an ancient holy site, are few and far between. The Bene Israel guard is no longer there. The memory, though, is still closely guarded. ✧

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