

# Jewish Life

TRAVEL

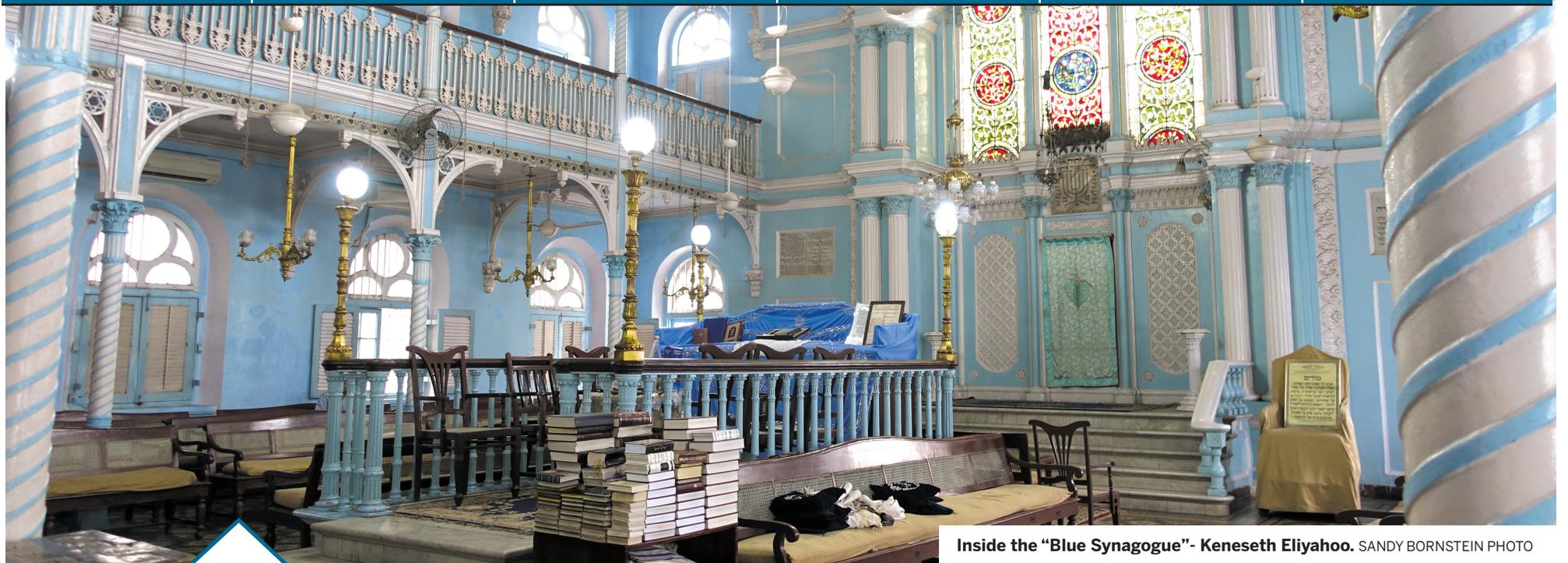
MUSIC

DEAR RABBY

THEATRE

FOOD

PARSHAH



Inside the "Blue Synagogue" - Keneseth Eliyahoo. SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTO

## The incredible Jewish history of India

**SANDY BORNSTEIN**  
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

**T**he Golden Triangle, which includes the cities of Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, is the focal point of many tours of India. Indian history and culture unfold as visitors walk through some of the country's most famous landmarks, including the Taj Mahal. If you enjoy history and love learning about different cultures, it's worth the long haul.

If you think like me and try to search out a Jewish presence on your travels, you'll be disappointed. But you'd be fascinated to know that India does have approximately 60 existing or former synagogues that are still standing, according to the Indian Jewish Heritage Center. While many are closed, there are still plenty to explore.

Travelers with extra time can take a flight to Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay), where it's possible to see a couple of 19th-century Baghdadi synagogues and a handful of Bene Israel shuls.

The number of Jews living throughout

all of India today lingers somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000, with the vast majority living in Mumbai.

The Baghdadis, or Iraqi Jews, are mainly found in Mumbai and Calcutta, and constitute a small fraction of the Jewish population. The Bene Israel significantly outnumber both the Baghdadi and the Cochin Jews. Thousands of Indian Jews made aliyah after India won its independence from the British in 1947 and Israel became a state in 1948. Prior to partition, it is estimated that there were almost 30,000 Jews living in Bombay alone.

The Baghdadi community built two magnificent synagogues in Bombay. During the 19th century, the Sassoon family became major Jewish and secular benefactors of the city of Bombay. David Sassoon and his descendants were able to take advantage of a booming economy and lucrative trade deals with China. When the American Civil War caused a shortage of cotton, the Sassoon family's cotton businesses thrived. David Sassoon chose to donate substantial sums of money to construct numerous buildings throughout the city

and other places in India. The family's citywide influence was demonstrated by the Bombay Electric Supply and Transport Company's issuance of passes for observant Jews to travel on Shabbat without money.

In 1861, David Sassoon paid for the construction of the Magen David Synagogue, with its notable clock tower, to service the Baghdadi population in the Byculla area of Bombay. David Sassoon and his family lived in what is now the Masina Hospital in Byculla. The synagogue addressed the needs of the growing community by offering a variety of communal services. Additional buildings were constructed on the adjacent land. Near the turn of the 20th century, David Sassoon's grandson, Sir Jacob Elias Sassoon, expanded the existing elementary school to include the Sir Jacob Sassoon High School. This school still exists, but nowadays only a handful of Jews attend.

It's hard to miss this tall building that still hovers over the surrounding neighbourhood. Unfortunately, the harshness of the monsoons, coupled with a lack of maintenance, have left their mark on

this Gothic structure. It will take more than a coat of paint to restore this aging edifice to its original grandeur. Chunks of plaster from the walls and ceiling lay haphazardly on the ground. The vaulted sanctuary and upper gallery have fallen into disrepair, but the interior details – arches, ornate moldings and an elevated Aron Kodesh – allow one to imagine its original beauty.

Jacob Sassoon catered to the communal needs of the Jews in the Fort area by constructing the elaborate Keneseth Eliyahoo Synagogue, also known as the Blue Synagogue. The exterior craftsmanship and aquamarine colour aren't the only standout features. Most will gaze at the stained glass windows above the Aron Kodesh and be intrigued by the carved wooden doors that lead to the place where the sefer Torahs are kept. Arched windows on the main floor and the gallery level bring natural light into the sanctuary.

This spectacular synagogue was dedicated in 1884 to Jacob Sassoon's father, Eliyahoo Sassoon.

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Above the exterior of the Keneseth Eliyahoo and right and below, the Magen David Synagogue of Mumbai.

SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTOS

In its heyday, congregants used an on-site mikvah (ritual bath), social halls and schoolhouse. I recommend attending daily, Shabbat or holiday services.

These two Baghdadi synagogues are beautiful structures that exhibit elements of European neoclassical design, but project a different feeling, both inside and out. Most would probably agree that they resemble churches.

They have vaulted ceilings that initially allowed for an upstairs women's gallery section. Since these second floor areas have become unsafe, a partitioned area is now located on the main floor. The bimahs are situated in the centre of the room, with the Aron Kodesh a short distance away. Another common feature is the assortment of glass lanterns and chandeliers hanging

from the ceiling. Two special chairs – one for the prophet Elijah and the other for brit milah ceremonies – are on display near the front of each sanctuary.

Just a few blocks from the Blue Synagogue, one can see the striking 19th-century Victorian Gothic building that is now referred to as the David Sassoon Library. This structure is the oldest library in Mumbai.

In 1847, a group of workers and supervisors from the Royal Mint and Government Dockyard formed an association to advocate knowledge and learning. In 1863, David Sassoon contributed substantial funds to construct a building that was completed seven years later.

Decades later, the original name, the Sassoon Mechanics' Institute, was changed to the David Sassoon Library

and Reading Room. Even though I'm not a member, I was allowed to traverse up the ornate wooden staircase and also walk into the small backyard garden. People were sitting at long tables and reading in the upstairs gallery. A tiny breeze from the open balcony doors cut through the musty, humid air. The library's collection includes over 40,000 books in several languages.

Despite the minuscule size of the Indian Jewish population and the lack of funding, Jewish communal leaders are attempting to maintain synagogues throughout the country. Travelers to India should try to include these Baghdadi Jewish treasures in their itinerary. ■

*Sandy Bornstein holds a master's degree in Jewish studies.*



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