

Jewish Life

The Shar Harahamim, left,
and Magen Hassidim
Sanctuary. SANDY BORNSTEIN
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Discovering the synagogues of Mumbai

SANDY BORNSTEIN
SPECIAL TO THE CJN

With only a few thousand Jews remaining in India, it's hard to believe that the country has approximately 60 existing or former synagogues still standing. Many are closed, but there are plenty to explore. In most instances, travellers will need to arrange for a driver and/or guide. In Mumbai (formerly Bombay), it's possible to see a handful of Bene Israel and Baghdadi synagogues. Each location provides a cross section of Indian Jewish culture and history

Indian Jewry has three main communities—the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews, and the Baghdadis. The Bene Israel Jews are by far the most numerous. Initially, they lived along the west coast of India. Over time, some of them migrated elsewhere. A handful of remaining Cochin Jews still live in Kochi (formerly Cochin). Baghdadi or Iraqi Jews are mainly found in Mumbai and Kolk-

ata (formerly Calcutta).

The vast majority of Indian's 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 Mumbai alone. Today, the number of Jews living throughout all of India lingers somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000, with the vast majority of Bene Israel Jews living in Mumbai.

Shaar Harahamim and Shaare Rason Synagogues

For hundreds of years, Indian Jewry thrived in Mumbai. Jewish merchants had plenty of trade and business opportunities. Jews were granted religious freedom and didn't experience anti-Semitism. The first Bene Israel synagogue, Shaar Harahamim (Gate of Mercy) was built in 1796. This synagogue is oftentimes referred to as "the synagogue on Samuel Street."

The street was named after the syna-

gogue's builder, Samuel Ezekiel Divekar. During the Second Anglo-Mysore War (1780-84), Divekar and other Bene Israel prisoners escaped from their death sentence after mentioning their Jewish heritage. As a sign of gratitude, Divekar built the Bombay synagogue. When I heard that the oldest synagogue still existed, I wanted to see it. Many people attempted to dissuade me from attempting to find its challenging location. A friend volunteered to escort my husband and me.

Our driver dropped us off on a main road in the Muslim part of the city. As we walked in the direction of the synagogue, we passed many stores selling burkas. I politely shook my head as salesmen tried to lure me into the store. Soon we crossed onto narrower streets where we shoved our way through hordes of people. Some gathered in groups next to small kiosks. If I didn't watch my step, I could easily trip over the vendors who sold their products off the ground. Even though our friend had lived in Mumbai his entire life, he had to

stop several times to ask for directions to Samuel Street. Most shook their heads.

By happenstance, we came upon an unexpected synagogue, Shaare Rason (Gates of Desire). A yellow brick walled building with brown trim and a ceramic tiled roof stood discreetly on a corner. A single Star of David above the front door caught our attention. Luckily, the front door was open and we walked into the courtyard.

We sat in the newly restored sanctuary and building and talked with a few congregants. We learned that the 19th century founders of this synagogue had a disagreement with the Shaar Harahamim leadership. They purchased land a few blocks away and built this synagogue. It was consecrated in 1843.

As the community dwindled, it became more difficult to maintain an aging building. In 2014, funds were raised in India and abroad so that the building could be refurbished. The makeover removed the blemishes and rejuvenated the sanctuary.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

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THE
POMEGRANATE

As Jewish families across the world reach for the pomegranate that they customarily eat on Rosh Hashanah, they may not realize all that the fruit, with its juicy red seeds and crown-like crest, tells us.

The pomegranate is said to have 613 seeds, which correspond with the 613 Jewish precepts or commandments set out by the Torah regulating the Jewish way of life, which represents fruitfulness, knowledge, learning and wisdom.

What wisdom can we derive from the pomegranate when it comes to celebrating Rosh Hashanah with a loved one who has dementia? What do you do when the dynamic has changed, and the holidays can no longer be celebrated in the same way you've become accustomed to? How can we make sure that holidays remain meaningful and enjoyable, as well as safe, for the whole family?

Preparing your environment and proper scheduling are two very important factors in executing an enjoyable holiday experience for everyone.

If you're bringing your loved one home, make sure it's accessible and easy for them to navigate. Have all of your holiday dishes, cutlery, napkins and food ingredients out, and include them in the table setting, and/or in some of the food preparation. Scheduling your celebration for the time of day when your loved one feels best is an important factor in making your holiday celebration a success for everyone.

If bringing your loved one to your home is not a feasible option, then bring the celebration to them. Many retirement homes have private rooms and/or spaces that families can have a celebration in. For your loved one, being in an environment that is familiar to them assures that you can celebrate as a family without the hyper stimulation or challenges they might experience outside of their home environment.

At One Kenton Place, we often have families celebrating birthdays, holidays and other events right here in their loved one's home environment. The result is always a happy resident, a happy family and a stress-free celebration!

Like the 613 seeds of the pomegranate, we should merit to represent the values of wisdom, knowledge, learning and fruitfulness this Rosh Hashanah and all year round!

To see for yourself how One Kenton Place helps people live with dignity and respect in the face of Alzheimer's and dementia, visit our photo gallery of daily life at www.onekentonplace.ca/gallery

Shannah Tova u'Metuka to all of our friends and families!



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RUTH DAYAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Ruth Dayan has almost two decades of experience working in the healthcare industry, with a special focus in Alzheimer's and Dementia care. Her experience spans across all sectors of healthcare, including the management and day-to-day operations of two large Long Term Care homes. Ruth is a certified Long Term Care Administrator. She also holds certifications in Quality Improvement Facilitation, Alzheimer's and Dementia Care (Montessori, GPA, Hush no Rush) and Lean Principles.



The Tifereth Israel Synagogue is illuminated by numerous well-spaced windows. SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTOS

Mumbai's rich Jewish history found in its many synagogues

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After the caretaker turned on an assortment of glass lanterns and chandeliers, the marble floor shone and the sanctuary took on a golden hue offset by the dark wood bimah, Aron Kodesh, and benches. The Aron Kodesh was opened so we could see the Torah scrolls. A staircase led up to the women's gallery in the rear of the sanctuary.

As dusk approached, our congenial hosts gave directions to Samuel Street. If we weren't paying close attention, we would have passed right by the blue doorways adorned with Stars of David. Vendors and patrons consumed every inch of space of the narrow street.

The current Shaar Harahamim building was completed in 1860 and sits on the original location. Even though the caretaker was advised that we were on our way, he wouldn't allow us to enter the dilapidated structure. Our friend tried to reason with the man in Hindi. The caretaker wanted an excessive sum of money to let us into the building. Eventually, we gained access into a tiny vestibule for a quick photo. After all of our efforts, we left without being let inside.

Tifereth Israel and Magen Hassidim Synagogues

While talking to a few of the members of Shaare Rason, we learned

the location of the third Bene Israel synagogue. As the Mumbai Jewish community expanded and moved into different areas, the Bene Israel Jews built synagogues and communal buildings. In 1886, a congregation formed near Jacobs Circle. Initially this group met at a rented location that the congregants called Jacob Circle Prayer Hall. Ten years later, the name was changed to Tifereth Israel (Splendour of Israel). (The exterior synagogue sign reads Tiphareth Israel Synagogue while printed material refers to the synagogue as Tifereth Israel Synagogue.)

In the 1920s, the group converted an existing building into a synagogue. The structure has been modified and updated numerous times. This synagogue stood out from the others because it didn't have an upstairs gallery for women. Rather, it had a designated area on one side of the sanctuary. The caregiver didn't need to illuminate any of the glass lanterns hanging from the ceiling because natural light flooded the room from numerous well-spaced windows.

After we entered Tifereth Israel, the police guard told our driver that there was another synagogue a short distance away. We followed his directions and eventually came upon Magen Hassidim (Defender of the Shield of the Pious). This active congregation dates back to 1904. A

difference of opinion among members of Tifereth Israel caused some congregants to consider another option. The disenchanted members established this congregation, initially referred to as the Jacob Circle New Prayer Hall. In the 1930s, they constructed a synagogue compound in the Madanpura area of central Mumbai that eventually became the nucleus for a larger Bene Israel group.

Magen Hassidim is the only Bene Israel synagogue that physically stands out in its neighbourhood. Its western styled architecture with art deco and modern elements makes a bold statement along with its larger size and its farther distance from the street. Standing in the back of the second floor women's gallery, one can appreciate the fine detail and elegant detailed work in the sanctuary.

Even though I had initially set out to find the oldest Bene Israel synagogue in Mumbai, I discovered three additional synagogues. While a significant percentage of the Jewish community have left Mumbai, the remaining observant Jews continue to congregate and celebrate in synagogues throughout the city. (My Google search listed a few more places.) My sampling revealed remnants of a few Jewish neighbourhoods and the efforts being made to transmit Jewish traditions to the next generation. Jewish life continues in India, despite a diminishing population. ■