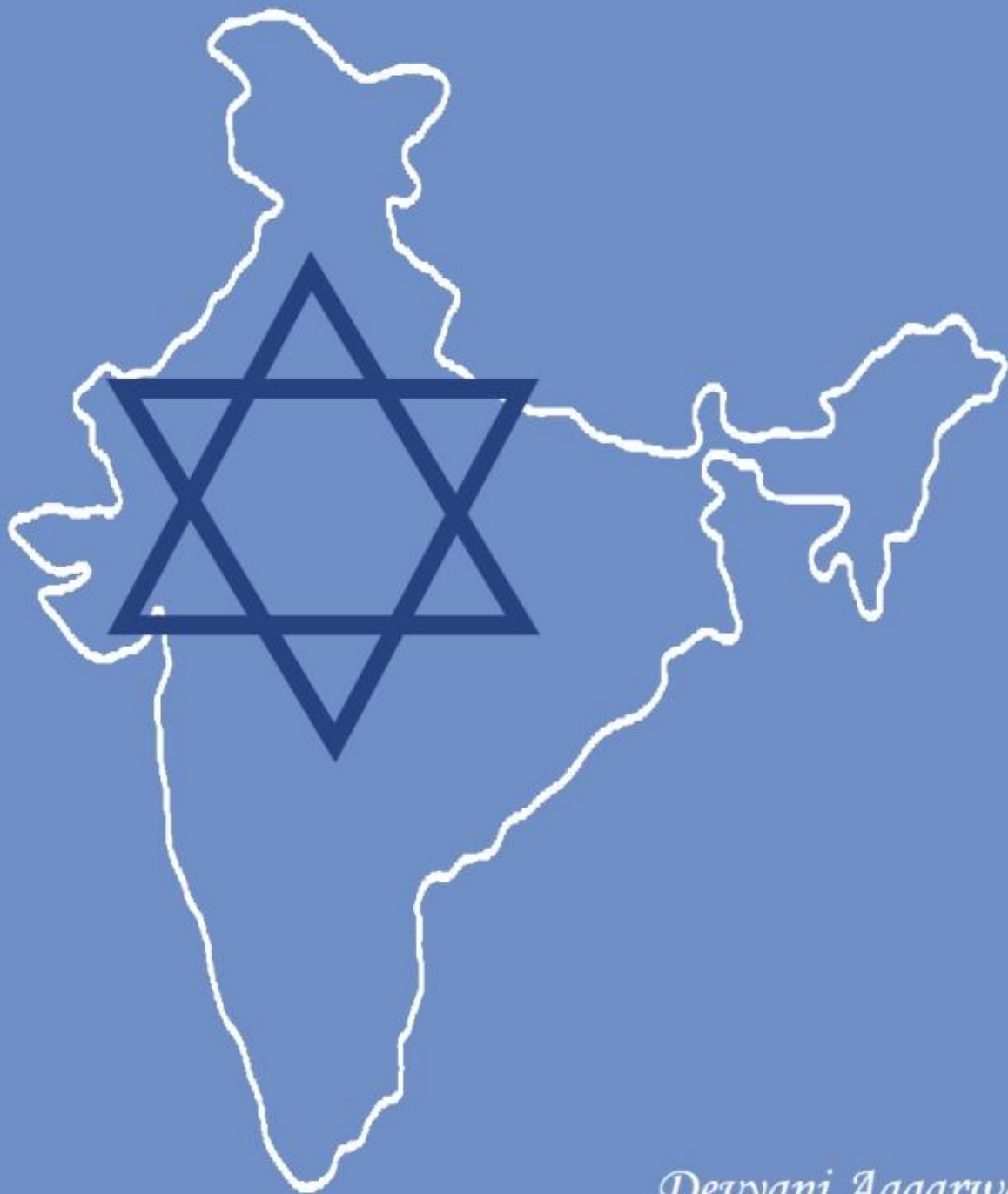


The Jews of India

A People's Story



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FOREWORD

India is a secular and democratic country. Our constitution provides equal opportunities and status to all the religions. We can boast of having members from all the religions and faiths of the world. The Jews though small in number are one such faith.

They have been residing in India without any instance of negative reaction from the local majority population. The Jews have been treating themselves first as Indians and then Jews. The Jews established major industries and reached at the top of commercial activities due to their acumen and meticulous planning.

They have been following their religious and traditional practices without disturbance. The majority of Jews in the world migrated to Israel since the creation of a state in 1948, even so Indian Jews preferred to choose India as their country.

The present book titled "The Jews of India: A People's Story" penned down by Devyani Aggarwal is based on a comprehensive research undertaken by her across the country. She has made an attempt at documenting the similarities and harmony between different faiths. She has researched tirelessly and deserved to be congratulated.

(SHEILA DIKSHIT)

Oddities Attract: Family and beyond

I doubt the framers of the Indian constitution met my grandfather's family. But had they had the opportunity, I'm sure their belief in what they called "unity in diversity" would be reaffirmed. Even for a culturally and religiously diverse country such as India, it has a mindboggling and endearingly eclectic mix of ethnicities, mindsets, backgrounds and perspectives among its ranks.

My grandfather is the youngest of ten siblings. Since I was a child, I have been listening to stories about all of them. What struck me as a commonality for them was that apart from one of my granduncles, all the ten siblings had married the spouses chosen for them by their parents. Each of them had, what is the norm in most Indian families, an 'arranged marriage' as opposed to the odd one out who chose his own spouse and settled for a 'love marriage' instead. Interestingly, the granduncle also decided to marry someone who was quite different from him not only in terms of persona, but also in terms of religion.

I cannot overstate how different the case of my father's aunt was. She was an example of the most exotic, almost unheard of people - she was an Indian Jew. Somehow, this struck me as extremely atypical and I would always wonder about the origins of the community she belonged to. I was always interested in investigating the various facets of the different cultures that I knew existed and were followed in my country. But there was a whole new community that I had come to know of. Judaism was, till now, just a religion that I had read about in books and on the Internet. Little did I know that it is of so much more relevance to me than just that. From the Golda Meirs and Albert Einsteins of the history books, a whole new, interesting and ancient faith somehow seemed a whole lot closer to me when I discovered that my grandaunt was a practicing Jew. The Jewish community in India was an undiscovered territory for me, but it was also a means for me to delve deeper into the vast multiculturalism I was surrounded by.

Once I learned about the existence of the Jewish community in India, I was obviously eager to know more and learn more about it. But what intrigued me equally was the reason why I learned about it just now. Why was it that the idea of an Indian Jew struck me as such an incongruity despite the fact that India is such a diverse nation? Diversity is the instrument that is capable of causing communion as well as conflict. But why did this section of community seem to be so isolated from the mainstream?



As I found myself finding answers to these questions, I also found myself thinking about how these questions managed to concern me in the first place. After all, in today's fast-paced world, where family relations are cordial at best and frayed at worst, how much could a grandaunt's religion matter? But I guess the question seemed pertinent to me since I tend to think of my origins as a source of my individuality. I considered my background not as the member of a multicultural family, but as a unique and rational member of the human race. I questioned my set of beliefs and morality. The idea of religion had never been amazingly lucid to me. It had always been a source of dilemma. I claimed to believe in God, but did I know if there is one? And if there is indeed a God, what role do we as human beings play in this universe if all things depend on the Almighty? Religion is the entity that allegedly answers these questions. What is most fascinating, though, is that each religion will assert its approach in an extremely different manner from another. Being a Hindu, I am aware of the postulated beliefs that might or might not be acceptable from a rational perspective in society. Then again, look at my last sentence. At what point do I start "being Hindu", and how do I know I am right?

But there is always one aspect of every religion that will defy rationality almost absolutely, and I find that very aspect of it most appealing in a social context. I know that Hinduism projects God in a particular manner, but that is also the only major projection of God that I have known till now. The only way to get closer to solving the predicament that puzzled me would be to broaden my horizons. Judaism as a religion always captivated me in the sense that it has a very believable history. It seemed like something I could relate to, knowledge of which would probably give me a better understanding of God. Maybe by learning about Judaism, I would adopt a whole new perspective to my own religion and maybe to my relationship with the entity we call God.

Closely related to religion, some would say, is morality. Every religion, in some way or the other, does encourage its followers to be, above all else, moral beings. As cogent and logically thinking as one might be, the human face of any person will be revealed when his moral instinct surpasses the acquisitive makeup that superficially defines him. But in today's world, it is rare to encounter such instances. Morality is practiced by the majority in the four walls of a religious institution while whispering prayers or performing rituals. What proves to determine one's true sense of morality in the long run, however, is how 'moral' one's actions in society are sans any religious compulsions. When one practices the religious teachings on



morality that one preaches, it makes sense to believe that one is respectful of his or her religion and understands the subtleties of the relationship between morality and religion.

I of course cannot claim to pass judgments on the moralities of religions and faiths that have lasted and will last millennia. But anyone would concede that the Jewish faith has been accepted, like almost all major religions, as a route or conduit to morality. Since times immemorial it has been observed that no religion forgoes controversy. But purely based on the beliefs advocated by Judaism, the world has eventually always come to respect it as a religion with a sound moral basis. Of course, religious debate is an ongoing process in terms of specific moral duties, but the overall outcome has proved to be in favor of the community.

This has a lot to do with the concept of monotheology propagated by the religion. God Is One. A Hindu like me would evidently find it incomprehensible since I am used to hearing stories about forty different Gods making an appearance in a single chapter of almost all religious texts. But here was something that made sense for me to believe in a secular setup. It was a nice change to know that there exists a religion, which in a way promulgates a message that is morally sound yet seemingly applicable to routine activities in life. But at the same time, some can also claim that there is no defined religious authority which has hence led to the creation of various Jewish movements that are essentially following the same set of beliefs, but with minor modifications suited to their mindsets. So here we are at diversity once more. But this time it is in a much more understated sense as it is able to portray the subtle paradoxes that one sees in religion, much like the kinds we witness everyday in the course of life.

Judaism was definitely a point of interest for me. But the practice of Judaism in India was even more fascinating. On one hand, it seemed to be something that would be likely to face a number of obstacles to be accepted and on the other hand there was something about it that made me feel as if it blended in perfectly with the kind of social environment I lived in. This oxymoronic view probably has a lot to do with the way I think about Judaism as a concoction of ethnic and religious influences. In a way, it shows a certain similarity with Hinduism, something I am well versed with. When I think of Hinduism, I think of a certain regional influence.

Hinduism finds its origins in the land of India since the time it was known to man. References to the nation are made in various texts as well as the customs that define the religion. It is the



land where Hinduism was born. The relationship between Judaism and Israel is similar. And hence, there is a sense of belonging that the Jewish community would feel towards the land of Israel. After all, they are hailed as 'the children of Israel'. So keeping that very notion in mind, I figured that since this sense of belonging is common to both the religions, the Jewish community of India would have a mixed reaction to their homeland. This would of course be compounded by having the holiest book, the Torah, written in Hebrew and many religious leaders like rabbis drawn not from Indian soil, but from Israel.

One perspective would outline the fact that since the majority of the population is Hindu, they would understand the sentiment, which arises in the majority towards their common homeland. Here I do not refer to patriotism, but 'belonging' in a much deeper sense- a kind of belonging that some would say is inherent in the population of the 'original inhabitants' of such a vast land. This is of course a controversial view which some would say ignores the filial emotions of minorities towards their homeland.

Also taking into consideration the rapid modernization of the world, the Indian Jewish community would consider the idea of secularism as a security and a safeguard to their religious interests so that they can assert their freedom of religion. This perspective seems to portray a comfortable situation for the minority of Jews in India to live a peaceful life with the rest of the population as equal stakeholders.

Now there is another perspective that I take into consideration. History has repeatedly proven that conflict is inevitable whenever there is substantial adversarial opposition expressed by one constituent of society against another- whether it is at the individual level or the community level. A rational analysis of the situation will also reveal that the probability of the minority being the weaker link is reasonably higher. This case should be no different. It is possible that the Indian Jewish community feels absolutely no sense of belonging to India due to the sheer minority of its population. Even if that might not be the case with some members of the community, it is possible that they feel restricted in practicing their religion according to their personal will. It is also possible that the lack of representation for them causes them to fear their continuation as a component of Indian society in the long run.

A lot of possibilities pop up in the process of analyzing the 'Jewish life in India'. It is therefore essential to address all of these issues because these possibilities might some day change into reality. And the only way to address them would be to explore this life extensively and then realize its implications on the bigger picture.



Another very prevalent theme in my life as far as ethnic influence goes, is the influence of religious customs and festivities. Jewish life, in a similar manner, has also had a very strong spirit of celebration of various festivities. I am used to the idea of at least three holidays a month on every work schedule, for some festival or the other. I have witnessed the celebration of a variety of festivals- Christmas, Eid, Diwali and the likes. But never have I been lucky enough to witness the celebration of a Jewish festival. And that is a bit of a shocker to me considering how many there are. Hanukkah and Shabbat were some of the Jewish festivals that I happened to vaguely know about. But the themes and origins of even these festivals enticed me to know more and more.

Festivals always interested me- I loved how among all the fun, food and frolic there was also a certain realization of the culture, heritage and ethos of a particular community. This aspect of Jewish culture was something that I took a special interest in since every festival had such beguiling historical roots. What further increased my inquisitiveness was the fact that the celebration of these festivals in India would have their own regional influence. The way an Indian Jew would celebrate a holiday would evidently differ from the way a Jew from another country would do the same. This also would be impacted by the way they lived as people. So even a small aspect of the religion, such as festivals, was able to attract my attention to delve deeper into the intricacies of the Jewish life in India.

Another aspect of religion that probably differentiates one from another is prayer. Prayer is a common feature of every religious practice- whether it is the Sunday mass at the church or the offering of Namaaz in the mosque or the recital of devotional songs at Hindu temples. However, conventionally, the practice of praying does involve a religious institution such as a church or a temple to carry out the proceedings. But since the Jewish population in India is so minute, I presumed that the frequency of finding a synagogue or Jewish temple would also be minute. However, that is also what brought in me the desire to visit one. It wouldn't be a common sighting in Delhi to spot a synagogue. But its exclusivity made me even more eager to visit it. This would not only give me the opportunity to merely explore a Jewish temple, but also to explore the various other aspects of it- the concept of a rabbi, the architecture and the rituals that define the prayers offered by the Jewish community.

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My proclivity towards exploring the Jewish life in India has largely been due to its cultural and spiritual influence. But it also has another facet. The life of the Jew in a global context is worth



considering when studying Judaism. As far as the social history of the Jews is concerned, it has been turbulent to say the least. One is immediately reminded of widespread anti-Semitism during the Second World War and the dreadful Holocaust that resulted from that very sentiment, in context of this very social status of the community. It has been established since the Middle Ages that there was a fast-developing hostility towards the Jewish community for a variety of reasons. The idea of this massive generalization of a particular community as unworthy of respect by a large chunk of the world population came to me as a very shocking yet stimulating issue. What encouraged me to delve deeper was also the desire to know why my country didn't play a majorly significant role in the entire process. I now knew that a Jewish community resided here. But why then was it that we weren't active participants in this worldwide phenomenon which questioned the integrity of that Jewish community?

This anti-Semitism in the world community had led to a large number of Jews returning to Israel. But the India Jewish community, despite being a very minuscule percentage of the population, did not absolutely shun the idea of staying on in India.

The persecution of Jews by the Portuguese in Goa, in fact, was a setback to the Jewish community. However, ultimately, the pan-Indian Jewish population did make a decision to not abandon their homeland.

After a considerably long period of time since the Goa inquisition, it would be interesting to identify the opinions of the members of the Jewish community on the social history of their community in relation with the past, the present and the future. They are likely to express the sentiment of regret and disbelief at occurrences such as the Holocaust. But in addition to their outlook on the happenings of the past, I was also curious to know their perspective on the status of the modern Jew in today's world. The opinion reflected by the Jewish community after such turbulence in relevance to their present standing in a wider social context is something I could obtain only by discovering their past history and then knowing their approach towards their future.

Another aspect of the life of any minority community in a country would involve its economic conditions. It is fascinating to see how economics applies to our everyday life in such a brilliant way. But it has wider implications, especially concerning a certain group of people. The economic status of the Indian Jewish community would be interesting to explore.



Traditionally, the Jewish community has had an economically successful history. But was that true for the Indian Jews as well? India is a country with great economic disparities among several communities. So did the Jewish community rank among the well to do ones, was it relatively backward or did it fare somewhere in the middle? And what underlying factors of everyday living among them could affect this very status? The answers to these questions would give a much better understanding, not only of their economic condition, but also of their status vis-à-vis the rest of the country.

It seemed like a golden opportunity for me to embark on a journey that would not only satisfy my curiosity, but also contribute to enhancing my experiences and expanding my knowledge. A study on the Jewish community in India seemed to be an exciting prospect. I had so much to look forward to. This was something that would make me acknowledge the various aspects of the society that I live in- diversity, unison and conflict. This was a means for me to get closer to my family and its origins. It was a means for me to venture into an alien territory- that of a social faction of the Indian population that I had negligible knowledge about. It was something that would redefine my belief in God and religion. It was a means by which I could discover the socioeconomic standing of a fraction of the world population whose existence was a mystery to most. It would not only enlighten me about the religious and ethnic influences of cultural diversity, but also act as a tool that would enable me to know where I come from and what I stand for. I would get a chance to know India through the eyes of those who weren't as recognized as the rest of us were. This was more than just a project to me; it was a method of determining my identity as part of a larger society as well as an evaluation of that very society that I call myself a part of.



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The Myrtle and the Tulsi

The first step to knowing about the Jewish life in India was to know what Judaism was. There was no better way to do that than to consult the nearest known setting that could potentially answer my queries and clear my doubts. The Judah Hyam Synagogue, the primary place of worship for the Jewish population of Delhi, seemed to be the ideal location to solve the purpose.

Situated in the prime location of Central Delhi, the synagogue was a compact building, managed by Rabbi Ezekiel Isaac Malekar, who lives with his wife on the same estate. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have been able to know Judaism the way I do now. Mr. Malekar was the one responsible for introducing me to the religion in a way such that I was able to grasp its numerous facets in a slow yet steady manner. I didn't have to process all the information at once- if that were the case, I would have been unable to even imagine myself understanding its multiple aspects and assertions.

He first gave me a brief history of Judaism as a religion and then went on to elaborate on the history of Jewish culture in India, which has existed through roughly two hundred centuries. A tour of the shul (synagogue) and the little pieces of information about the typical Jewish symbols and rituals helped me get a sense of what the themes of the ideology disseminated by Judaism are. Mr. Malekar assisted me in getting a broader understanding of the process by which the Jewish community is able to blend in with Indian society, keeping in mind various other factors including their Israeli origins, their strong sense of national identity and the impact they have on society among others.

The visit to the synagogue did not merely help me understand the origins of Judaism, but also helped me put the religion and what it propagated in perspective of other things around me.

As a follower of another faith, I found it to be strikingly different and also amazingly familiar.

The basis of Judaism lies in the rejection of idol worship and ritualism and the endorsement of a more ethical and spiritual approach to life. It advocates monotheology- the Oneness of the Universal Creator. Ceremonies involving sacrifice are believed to be an abomination unto the Lord. The establishment of such a religious system of beliefs at the time when Judaism came into existence marked a historical leap for man. What also makes Judaism distinct is the kind of social justice advocated by it. Discrimination of any kind is forbidden. For example, even on



the day of Sabbath, which is supposed to be observed as a day of rest for all Jews, no person including servants and so-called subordinates is precluded from the observance.

As a Hindu, I do not find an opposing system of beliefs to be something inscrutable. Idol worship, ritualism and other such established systems that are opposed by Judaism, in fact, form an integral part of the Hindu faith. The caste system, which divided Indian society into various classes based on the professions followed by various people, was prevalent during earlier times. This system is precisely what caused an outright denial of equal rights and social justice. In that respect, there were a number of conspicuous distinctions that existed between the systems of beliefs that were advocated by each faith.

As far as other aspects of Judaism go, there is much to be explored. It was fascinating to study the beautiful communion of culture and creed that was reflected in the traditional Jewish practices and ideals. The Torah, the holy book of the Jews is a collection of all the major beliefs propagated by them. It also contains the Ten Commandments that form the foundation of the Torah- the way of life and learning. The regulations advocated according to the Commandments- all of 613- are recalled through the fringes of the prayer shawl called Tsitsit. Expression of the love for God is an essential part of Jewish culture. The 150 Psalms or devotional hymns reflect that very aspect of it- the fact that they are couched in simple language also indicates that they are meant for universal application. The Tanak or Bible has 52 weekly parts called Sidras, which are read on the day of Sabbath as part of prayer. Minyan is a ten-member congregation employed by the synagogue for religious service. Talmud is the Jewish oral law that contains thirteen articles of Jewish Creed.

As I delved deeper into the broad theme of Judaism, I started to discover individual facets of it that began to stand out.

It is starkly noticeable in all that represents Judaism that the religion is closely integrated with daily living. Acts of hatred or violence find absolutely no mention. Tolerance towards those belonging to other faiths is strongly supported, as is the protection of human rights. Jewish scriptures praise a peaceful approach. Crime and murder are seen as acts of disgrace and repugnance and passive reaction to injustice and violence is also not encouraged in any circumstance.

Charity emerged as a significant factor as it is considered to be the 'tangible expression of love'. Education was another. The Jewish seemed to value education and learning a great



deal as is reflected in practices like the Bar Mitzvahs for thirteen-year-olds that commemorate their attainment of maturity. They also seemed to be supportive of a healthy family life, without any harsh insistence on celibacy. The respect for God and recognition of his goodness, mercy and power is also mirrored in their beliefs.

A striking aspect of the customs, though, was the practice of circumcision. It was interesting to know that this practice was instituted by the Father of the Jewish people, Abraham, himself and is seen as a sign of Covenant of Divine Favor and Protection. Dietary laws of the Jewish community, which prohibit particular types of food, are seen as symbols of the willingness of the Jewish people to deny certain options for the sake of divine mandate. A number of festivals and functions including the Passover, Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, Purim, Succoth and Shabuoth among others constituted a key element of the Jewish calendar.

The deeper understanding of Jewish origins and observances gave me an insight into the world of Judaism. But despite that, I was eager to find the relevance of this system of beliefs in a broader context. After all, Judaism promulgates that its customs along with the day of Sabbath are what ensure the survival of the Jewish people. It has truly been said that more than Israel (i.e. the Jews) has preserved the Sabbath, it is the Sabbath that has preserved Israel. Judaism is an ancient religion that has managed to find significance in human society through the ages. The fact that Christianity and Islam are offshoots of Judaism only validates that very understanding.

But Hinduism as a faith has always been distinct. It can be inferred that Sikhism is also in a sense an offshoot of Hinduism. But there is no direct relation that links it with Judaism. They seem to be diametrically opposite systems of faith. But there is definitely a certain similarity that can be realized if both faiths are juxtaposed together. situation where both Firstly, when one considers religion, the mode of passing on the teachings of a faith is of extreme significance. The traditional Hindu scriptures, the Vedas follow an oral and written tradition, as does the Torah. The Vedas have four versions or samhitas called rig veda, yajur veda, sama veda and atharva veda. Similarly, the Torah is a collection of the Sefer Torahs- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy along with the written law. Both these holy texts are extensive in providing limitless knowledge and are spiritual masterpieces.

Both Judaism and Hinduism follow the lunar calendar. The rationale behind the celebration of various festivals in the respective faiths is also regarded to be similar. For example, Purim



and Holi, a Jewish and a Hindu festival, are both celebrated on the same day and signify the triumph of good over evil.

The shankh or conch that is blown as a ritual in Hinduism finds its Jewish counterpart in the Shofar or the Ram's Horn. Both are symbols of prayer for their respective religions.

Marriage ceremonies of both the religions take place under canopies and are solemnized in presence of witnesses. The occurrences of weddings and special functions, in both religions, are decided according to the auspiciousness of a particular date.

One particular belief, common to both religions, which I found to be startling, was that of isolation of women from prayer during menstrual period and after childbirth. This is supposed to be a religious practice that serves to show devotion to the Almighty. But the manner in which it precludes women from worship owing to an inevitable bodily process only goes to show a slight hypocrisy in the institution of religion itself- whether it is Hinduism or Judaism. The very principles of tolerance and equity that define faith are challenged when such limitations are imposed. However, it also has to be taken into consideration that the period of time in which the belief was devised was one in which there was not much room for the acceptance of absolute equity in society.

Among other similarities, it is seen that Hebrew and Sanskrit share a number of similar words. The book of Psalms is also similar to passages of Sanskrit shlokas.

Hindu Brahmins wear the sacred thread called Janevery, which is similar to the Jewish sacred thread worn on Bar Mitzvahs.

The lighting of lamps is another a common religious practice in both Hindu and Jewish temples.

The crematorium also reflects a parallelism in the Jewish and Hindu faiths. Mr. E. I. Malekar writes in his article, 'Inter-faith Perspectives on Vedas- A Judaism View'-

It has been observed that in many crematoriums it is written in Sanskrit "Ko Ah Hum" which means "who am I?" and on the other side of the wall it is written "So Ah Ham", which means "I am that I am". The similar words could be found in the Book of Exodus during encounter between God and Moses on Mount Sinai at the site of the burning bush. When Moses asked God, "And who shall I say sent me to release Jews from bondage?" and God replied that "I am that I am". This identical description of the omnipresent is found in both religions.



A number of similar teachings and traditions thus emerge, as the discovery of Judaism reveals its purpose and relevance in context of the modern world. But what is most imperative to realize is how this basis of a distinctive and ancient religion defines the basis of modern society. The ethical and moral standards found in two ancient religions find significance and relevance even in today's world.

Relating this knowledge to the context of the Jewish life in India, it can be inferred that since Judaism finds a strong and deep-rooted link with the original belief system of India, it is bound to explain a strong connect with India as a nation as well. To determine this seemingly profound connection, I had to investigate the way of life of the Jewish community. It was important that I understood how its members blended their Jewish identity with their Indian identity. With such a rich religious heritage, would they find it easy to adapt to a rich national heritage as well?

As I departed from the synagogue on Humayun Road in Delhi, Mr. Malekar showed me the beautiful arboreal splendor that surrounded it. Among all the various species of plants was the Myrtle- the holy plant of the Jews. As I took in its intoxicating scent, I noticed another familiar looking plant growing next to it. It was as if my fate was replicating my thoughts as I bent down to see the Tulsi plant, considered sacred by the Hindus, blooming next to the blessed Myrtle. My conjecture of the existence of a connection seemed to be confirmed by my destiny.

