

Avi Kenyon

Hello everybody. I am your host, Avi Kenyon. Today, we will be covering the Bene Israel, a community of Jews from India. This podcast episode was produced in the Fall of 2025 with Professor Zeedan at the University of Kansas as part of the First Year Seminar titled: Life, death, and afterlife in Israel's society.

In this episode, I will be discussing the origins of the Bene Israel, what a typical Bene Israel family would look like, and how they have changed over time.

This podcast serves as a guide to help us understand the multicultural society in Israel. The information in this episode is based on a survey of the existing literature about this topic. I will be posting my sources online, with more details at the end of this episode.

Before we get started, I would like to introduce the house jazz band. We have Avi on drums, Avi on bass, and Avi on keys. [INSERT MUSIC BREAKS]

And without further ado, let's get started.

[Musical transition]

I would first like to bring on a guest. Everybody, please welcome Rhett Kohlreiter. Rhett how are you doing today?

I'm alright, how about you?

I'm doing great.

So I just had a few questions about the Bene Israel, and I was hoping you would have the answers.

Well, Rhett, you're in the right place. Ask away.

Many Indians are Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, or Christian. You don't hear much about Jewish Indians.

So where the heck did they come from?

Well, many Bene Israels trace their roots to a group of shipwrecked Israelites from the Konkan coast, a stretch of land on India's west coast.

How did the Bene Israel practice Judaism after being shipwrecked and left with nothing?

The Bene Israel integrated themselves into rural Indian life until they were discovered by other Jews from Kochi and Baghdad. The Bene Israels had almost no knowledge of rabbinical Judaism or scriptures, according to jewishlanguages.org. The Kochi Jewish community later educated the Bene Israel by bringing in rabbis and training them to conduct Jewish rituals.

Can you expand on their history a little more?

While the Bene Israels identified with local Indian ties, they would separately practice religion, according to Shalva Weil (2021). The Bene Israelis would reside on the Konkan coast for hundreds of years until many decided to leave for Bombay, now known as Mumbai, and Aden, a city in Yemen, in search of job opportunities around the 19th century.

What job opportunities were there in Aden?

Due to the British occupation of Aden, there were many colonial job opportunities. While in Aden, the Bene Israels were ostracized. They weren't fully accepted by the other Jewish social groups living in Aden at the time, even though their religious practices were practically indistinguishable from those of the other Jews, and the first Bene Israel synagogue, Sha'ar haRahamim, was founded in Bombay in 1796, according to author Shirley Berry Isenberg.

How did Zionism affect the Bene Israels?

With the rise of Zionism, many Bene Israel's loyalties shifted away from India as their 'home', in the exclusive sense that Israel began to appear as their homeland.

Many Bene Israels emigrated to the Jewish homeland in the 1950s after the state of Israel was established. The vast majority of Bene Israel live in Israel today and are settled in development towns such as Dimona, Be'er Sheva, Lod, Ramla, in addition to some larger areas like Ashdod and the greater Haifa area.

Well, it seems like you've answered all my questions.

Thanks for coming on Rhett. It's been a pleasure.

Now that we've covered the Bene Israel's origins and migration, let's take a closer look at what life was actually like for them, starting with family life.

[TRANSITION]

Traditionally, the Bene Israel placed a strong emphasis on the family unit, which was seen as the heart of both religious and social life. Families were close-knit and often multigenerational, with grandparents, parents, and children all living under the same roof. Marriage was highly valued, and the Bene Israels believed in infant marriage, meaning that they would marry before the age of 18...[record scratch] yikes. Men typically worked while women managed the home and cared for the children.

Formally, the Bene Israel were a monogamous group; however, there have been instances of polygamy in the past. This practice was cut off by mainstream Judaism and declined drastically by the end of the 20th century.

Divorce was very uncommon among the Bene Israel, as they highly valued family unity (unless proven adultery were to take place). If the rare case scenario in which divorce were to occur, the husband would be expected to take care of his wife and children while continuing to reside within the joint family.

As the community moved into more urban areas like Bombay, these family structures began to adapt. Men would typically leave their families in search of job opportunities. Spouses would be separated for years on end until the men were established.

In the mid-1900s, nearly all the Bene Israel made aliya as it allowed families to terminate co-residential living arrangements, which they would otherwise not be able to economically organize. This was due to the fact that the Israeli government either provided a rental subsidy or a huge monetary grant to immigrants, allowing nominal repayment in specific areas such as developmental towns.

Today, there are about 67,000 Bene Israels living in Israel with just less than 5,000 remaining in India. Many young Bene Israels have been shifting to other cities or countries to set up new households, away from parents and siblings. Media and the rise of feminism influenced ideas about women, inspiring many to reject the social norm of staying at home all day. While there is still a relatively low rate of marriage between Bene Israels and other Israelis, the Bene Israels have been able to freely select marriage partners from other Jewish ethnic groups over the past thirty years.

Now that we have a basic understanding of the Bene Israel, let's take a look at some of their religious traditions and beliefs.

[TRANSITION]

Over centuries, Britannica described the Bene Israel as physically indistinguishable from the people they lived among, heavily influenced by Hindu beliefs and practices. India used to use a caste system, which is a hierarchy where an individual's position is determined at birth. The determining factors are based on an individual's family and their wealth.

As stated by author Karen Jacob from the University of Potsdam, each group in India has a distinguished set of rituals to help them celebrate their culture, and the Bene Israel customs are still celebrated today in Israel. The Jabalpur community doesn't own a single Torah book to celebrate Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, so instead they borrow from the Mumbai community. The Jabalpur also invites a Mumbai cantor to help lead the prayers and songs. This brings the two together each year for high holidays, and even some Muslims join the community in rejoicing and singing until the Torah is returned to the Judah compound prayer hall (Jacob 2022).

The Bene Israel stand as a resilient group of people, being able to carry on their religious practices without the need for a Rabbi or Torah.

When a Bene Israel dies, they are to be buried as soon as possible, which is parallel to many other Jewish groups' beliefs. The mourners wash both themselves and their clothes after the burial, and their house is cleansed three days after the burial. According to authors Joseph Jacobs and Joseph Ezekiel from the Jewish Encyclopedia, this is known as the "Tizova" or the "Third-Day Cleansing". It is customary for all the water in pots or pans around the house to be emptied, and instead, grape juice or milk is drunk by those visiting and consoling the mourners. On the seventh day of mourning, a white sheet with a plate full of cakes, liver, and a cup of liquor is to be consumed after repeating the Shema', to honor the deceased.

According to encyclopedia.com, the Bene Israel afterlife is similar to that of the Jewish beliefs. However, their beliefs also stem from Hinduism. While I was unable to find solid evidence as to what the Bene Israel firmly believe, the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center of New York compares dying to “falling asleep” and any post-death experiences being compared to “dreams”. After death, a person will follow one of four paths: Devayana (the way of the gods), Pitriyana (the way of the fathers), the Path to Hell, or the Path to Vile.

Devayana is for the spiritually advanced who attain liberation from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The soul experiences eternal bliss for eternity and moves beyond all worldly desires.

Pitriyana is where charitable people go, where they enjoy heaven before returning to Earth and are rebirthed.

The Path to Hell is for those who live impurely. They are later reborn as lower forms before returning to humans.

And finally, the Path to Vile. People who have lived wicked lives are reborn repeatedly as small creatures until they are finally cleansed.

This hybrid belief system between Hinduism and Judaism sounds quite interesting, and I can only speculate as to what the Bene Israel truly believe when it comes to the afterlife.

[TRANSITION]

Today, I covered the origins of the Bene Israel, their daily lives, how they’ve adapted and changed throughout history, and their beliefs regarding death and the afterlife. It just goes to show how resilient this minority has been to keep their religion alive and hold true to their

beliefs, considering their lack of guidance. I hope all you listeners learned a thing or two about this small Jewish social group.

Thank you all for tuning in to today's episode on Life, Death, and Afterlife of the Bene Israel. It was a pleasure researching and presenting this semester's work for you all.

All of my sources will be posted online, as well as my podcast script.

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