

INDIAN HANUKKAH CELEBRATIONS 2006

City Hall celebrated Hanukkah on December 21st 2006 showcasing the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA. Hanukkah celebrated by Jews all over the world was special for the Jewish community in the USA and especially the Indian Jewish community in New York, New Jersey, Washington and Connecticut.

The unity of USA with India and Israel came to the fore with all the three national anthems being sung by the approximately 350 people present representing the three Indian Jewish Communities viz. the Bene Israel, the Cochin Jews and the Baghdadi Jews originally settled in India.

A citation was presented to Romiel Daniel for his outstanding work done for the Indian Jewish Community in USA. He is the first Indian Jew to be the President of the Rego Park Jewish Center, one of the oldest and largest Ashkenazi synagogues in Queens, New York. Another citation was presented to the whole of the Indian Jewish Community recognizing their presence as an important arm of the diversity of New York and USA. Councilman Alan Gerson who really has been the backbone and the guiding light of this event stressed the importance of the Indian Community and its vital role in New York City. He pointed out how the melting point of New York City has helped in the integration of all communities into one large American community on the basis of which New York City will thrive and grow.

Romiel Daniel, President of the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA outline the History of the Jews of India tracing back its origins to the time they left Judea around 175 BCE the very time when The Maccabees revolted against the Greek Syrian ruler Antiochus the fourth, took back control of the Second Temple of Solomon in 165 B.C.E. and rededicated it. The Hanukkah celebration is the rededication of the Temple of Solomon, a victory of light over darkness, the miracle of one cruse of pure untarnished olive oil lasting for 8 days. Hence this is one of the reasons why Hanukkah was and is celebrated for 8 days even 2171 years later.

It was left to the Deputy Consul General of India, Mr. A.R. Ghanashyam who beautifully brought out the link between Hanukkah, the Jewish Festivals of Lights and Deepavali, the Indian Festival of Lights.

Charles Kahn from Councilman Michael Nelson's office also spoke on unifying nations in peace.

Hon. David Weprin Council Member, Chair, Finance Committee told the audience of how India had voted at the UN in 1948 for Israel to become an independent country. He stressed the unifying factor was peace and understanding between leaders.

Rabbi Glass gave the invocation and prayed for peace at the time of Hanukkah and after. Manny Behar attached to the Office of Christine Quinn was the coordinating link between the Council and the Indian Jewish Community who put everything together beautifully.

Lively Hanukkah songs by the children belonging to the Indian Jewish community added to the evenings celebrations. Avraham Pincus the famous Greek Jewish singer gave the evening that special Hanukkah vote.

All in all a glorious celebration of Hanukkah.

The Jews of India have a history going back 2180 years or so when they left Judea because of the oppression of Antiochus 4. Some came down to Cranganore on the South West coast of India and became the Cochin Jews.

Some landed on the Konkan coast, 30 miles south of Mumbai and became the Bene Israel. A third group came around 1790, first from Aleppo, Syria and later from Iraq and became the Baghdadi Jews.

All the three communities lived in India without being oppressed or suppressed for centuries. They thrived, became an important part of the local administrations, part of the British army and basically were Indian in every respect. So important especially since Jews in practically every part of the world have had to go through terrible trials and tribulations. Not so in India.

It was only when Israel became an independent country and favorably voted for into the UN by India, that Indian Jews started migrating to Israel because of religious Zionism. Today there are less than 5000 left in India but more than 70, 000 in Israel.

There are around 350 Indian Jews in the United States forming the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA with headquarters in New York. It started with helping the Beth El Synagogue in Panvel, India that had lost all of its six Sifrei Torah in the monsoons of 2005. It sent two Sifrei Torah plus Bibles. The Sifrei Torah are the heart and soul of any synagogue. Without them there is no synagogue. There are 14 synagogues left in India most of which are in Mumbai, two in Pune, one in Alibag and one in Delhi.

It has started giving scholarships for higher studies to deserving Indian Jewish students. The Indian Jewish community has been conducting High Holyday Services for the past twelve years in New York besides organizing other socio-religious functions.

It has plans to expand its activities to preserve the culture, heritage, traditions and rituals of Indian Jews as well as to bring into its fold the second and third generation Indian Jews settled in USA to know and appreciate these values. At the same time to integrate with the American Jewish communities as well as the larger American Secular community. The objective is integration with distinctiveness.

Jews with roots in India trek to City Hall

New York's Indian-Jewish community shared traditions with members of Tribeca's Synagogue for the Arts at a Hanukkah celebration at City Hall Dec. 21.

Soho resident Ellen Eichel is a member of the White St. synagogue but attends high holiday worship with Jews of Indian ancestry, drawn by their tunes and their services. She organized the event after Councilmember Alan Gerson, who is Jewish and represents Tribeca and Soho, told her he wanted to find out more about the traditions of this community, called Bene Israel. About 300 Jews with roots in India are living in the New York area.

"The Jewish Community from India in the metro area wants to be involved with the larger Jewish community," said Eichel. "By having this event at City Hall we were able to introduce the City Council to another tradition of our Jewish family."

Romiel Daniel, president of the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA and also president of the Rego Park Jewish Center in Queens, said: "We wanted to show our different traditions within a common history. Hanukkah was a time when Jews left Judea for India around 175 B.C. E. They settled in the southwest and western part of India. Our history starts there. The community grew to its largest in the time of Indian independence — 1947 — when there were 35,000.

"The community has been in this area since the '50's but has never been recognized; the American Jewish Community is not fully aware of us."

Jews have been in India since the time the struggle for rededicating the Second Temple took place around 168 B.C.E. Oil burning receptacles like those in Temple times adorn the walls of many Indian Jewish households.

People from New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Washington D.C. attended last Thursday's event. "We're trying to showcase there is a Jewish community outside of the Eastern European Jewish community and are happy the community was recognized," Daniel added. "We're interested in integration with distinctiveness."

— Tequila Minsky



Downtown Express photo by Tequila Minsky

New York area Jews of Indian ancestry joined Councilmember Alan Gerson last Thursday at City Hall for a Hanukkah celebration with Synagogue for the Arts.

