

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.

CITYVIEWS

■ Hanukkah Celebration at New York City Hall

It was very special Hanukkah celebration for Indian Jewish community

By V. Thacker

It was a very special Hanukkah celebration for the Indian Jewish community in the United States. The celebration was at Council Chambers at New York City Hall featuring the tradition of the Jewish community in India.

Approximately 375 people packed the Council Chambers on Dec. 21 at the event, mostly organized by the 'Indian Jewish Congregation of USA,' the 'Bene Israel,' the 'Cochin Jews,' and the 'Baghdadi Jews' originally settled in India.

It all started with a welcome address by Councilman Alan Gerson (D-NY), who has been an active supporter of the Indian Jewish community. He spoke of how New York's 'melting pot' allows all ethnicities to thrive and grow. The national anthems of the United States, India and Israel, symbolically spoke of the unity among the Jewish community in all the three countries.

Councilman David Weprin (D-NY) spoke of how India had voted at the United Nations in 1948 for Israel to become an independent country. He said the unifying factor between the two countries was the message of peace and understanding. Rabbi Jonathan Glass of Synagogue for the Arts, gave the invocation and prayed for peace at the time of Hanukkah and after. Councilman Michael Nelson's office sent Chief of Staff Charles Kahn, who also spoke on unifying nations in peace. Manny Behar from Speaker Christine Quinn's office also spoke on a similar note.

Romiel Daniel, President of the 'Indian Jewish Congregation of USA' and President of the Rego Park Jewish Center — which is one of the oldest and the largest Ashkenazi synagogues in Queens, was presented with a citation for his outstanding work he has done for the Indian Jewish community in the US. He traced the history of Jews in India, he spoke of the time when they left Judea around 175 BCE when the Maccabees revolted against the Greek Syrian ruler, took back control in 165 BCE and rededicated it. The Jews in India as the history goes — some came down Crangmore on the Southwest coast of India, and came to be known as the 'Cochin Jews'; some landed on Konkan coast, 30 miles south of Mumbai, and became the 'Bene Israel'; and the third group came around 1790, first from Aleppo, Syria and later from Iraq and those are the Baghdadi Jews. All these three communities, with their history going back 2180 years, thrived in secular India to become an important part of the local administration and the British army. For the Jews, this was a very different experience because they were oppressed in practically all the parts of the world.

Currently, there are less than 5,000 Jews left in India and there are more than 70,000 Indian



PHOTO INSET, Romiel Daniel, President of the 'Indian Jewish Congregation of USA' and President of the Rego Park Jewish Center in Queens, addressing the guests at the Hanukkah celebrations at Council Chambers at New York City Hall on Dec. 21. PHOTO BELOW, guests at the event. (Photos: Kriti Mukherjee)



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Jews in Israel. There are approximately 350 Indian Jews in the United States, who formed the Indian Jewish Congregation of the USA with headquarters in New York. For them it all started with wanting to help the Beth El Synagogue in Panvel in India which has lost all of its 6 Sifrei Torahs during 2005 monsoons. The Congregation sent two Torahs and Bibles. There are about 14 synagogues in India, most of them in Mumbai, 2 in Pune, 1 in Alibagh and 1 in Delhi. They have been conducting High Holyday Services for almost 12 years now. The group also gives scholarships for higher studies to Indian

Jewish students.

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 eight days. This is why the celebrations have continued to be for eight days even 2171 years later.

The Deputy Consul General of India in New York, A.R. Ghanshyam, brought out the similarities between the Deepavali and Hanukkah, both festivals of lights.

The children of the Indian Jewish community sang Hanukkah songs and Avraham Pincus, a

Greek Jewish singer, also added to the festivities of the evening. Of the 375 people at the event, approximately 40 percent were Indian American Jews, who received a citation recognizing their presence in the US. The rest included representatives from various Jewish groups — UJA, JCC Manhattan, Queens Jewish Community Council, Rego Park Jewish Center and White Streets Synagogue. Among the Rabbis present besides Rabbi Glass were Rabbi Marvin Tokayer, Rabbi Akiva Glickman and Rabbi Vinas. The buffet dinner was Indian Kosher vegetarian. (Bhavna Kaul also contributed to the report.)

Images



PHOTO LEFT, Charles Kahn, chief of staff at councilmen Michael Nelson's office lighting the Menorah at the event, as children look on. India's Deputy Consul General, A. R. Ghanshyam, is seen at far right. Kindling Hanukkah lights is an important tradition. Hanukkah candles are lit to remember the miracle of the Maccabees' victory and the miracle of the oil that burnt for eight days in the holy Temple. Traditionally, the candles are placed on the Menorah from right to left and they are lit from left to right — this to respect both the sides. PHOTO RIGHT, children gather near the Menorah before it was lit.

