

INDIAN-JEWISH COMMUNITY DEEPLY CONNECTED TO ISRAEL

By E.B. Solomont

Lael Daniel's first American clients had a hard time assessing the Indian-born businessman the first time they met him. The 38-year-old's dark skin and obvious accent conveyed formative years spent in Southeast Asia. His Western name, and only a passing familiarity with Hinduism belied something else entirely.

Mr. Daniel clarified when asked: He is Indian and Jewish.

Having lived in America for more than a decade, Mr. Daniel is committed to building awareness of the Indian-Jewish community in America, and last year launched the Indian-Jewish Congregation in U.S.A., of which he is an officer.

"The color of your skin doesn't mean the color of your heart, and the religion is in your heart," Mr. Daniel said. As the congregation prepares to march in the Salute to Israel Parade – a nod to their recent involvement in the American Jewish community, and a showcase for their traditions – Mr. Daniel and around 30 other Indian Jews are planning to march with the rest of the Jewish community under one banner: unity, Judaism, and Israel.

According to historical accounts, Jews have lived in India for more than 2,000 years. The main sects were the Cochin Jews, Bene Israel, and the Baghdadi Jews, who arrived in India only 250 years ago from Iraq, Iran,

Afghanistan, and other Arab countries. At its peak, India was home to more than 30,000 Jews, although after the state of Israel was created in 1948, religious Zionism prompted mass migration to Israel, and the population of Jews in India plummeted. By 1960, fewer than 15,000 Jews remained, and in 1990 there were fewer than 8,000. Today, there are fewer than 5,000 Jews in India, with only five functioning synagogues.

In America, Indian Jews represent a minority within a minority. Currently, only 300 Indian Jews live throughout the country, with the highest concentration living in the Tri-State area, according to community leaders. The Indian-Jewish Congregation of U.S.A., based in Queens, formally started only about a year ago, although it began holding religious services at least 12 years ago.

According to community members, Indian Jews have a unique heritage not shared by other American Jews, who are predominantly from Eastern Europe or parts of Spain and Portugal. Indian Jews – of the Mizrahi, or Eastern, heritage – have their own melodies for prayer. They observe the ancient custom of removing their shoes whenever entering a prayer hall, and they consume traditional foods like Hawla – a sweet, almond dessert – on Rosh Hashannah.

By American standards, many are observant, and Indian Jews are cer-

tainly Zionist, having emigrated from India to Israel in droves not for religious freedom or economic incentives, but because of their allegiance to the new Israeli state.

Still, Indian Jews struggle to be recognized by the wider American Jewish community, which they said tends to overlook Jews from their part of the world. "The American Jewish community, many of them are unaware of there being Jewish communities on the other side of the Atlantic. Many of them think the community is right here, or in Israel and that's it – which is not exactly correct," the president of the Indian-Jewish Congregation of U.S.A., and Lael's father, Romiel Daniel, said.

That's why, when he moved to America 12 years ago, the elder Mr. Daniel said he noticed a void in the Indian-Jewish organized community. "I thought, well if nothing was being done, it was time something should be done for the community, and there were people who were eager to retain their identity," he said. By organizing themselves in America, the Indian Jews hope to benefit their community in India, by supporting education, health initiatives, or buying new Torah scrolls – such as they did last year when a synagogue in Panvel, Mumbai (formerly Bombay), was almost destroyed in a flood.

For the younger Mr. Daniel, he wants to impart American Jewish lessons on Jews in India, as well. "I have learned from the Jewish here that to keep our spirit alive, the youth have to be involved, too," he said.

Still, the Indian Jews maintain their deepest loyalty to Israel and Zionism. In recent years, Indian-Israeli ties have grown stronger, and Indian Jews have a celebrated tradition of moving to Israel. Indeed, Jews were never thrown out of India, the elder Mr. Daniel said.

"They left because they felt, 'Now we have a homeland, which is a Jewish homeland,'" he said. Indian Jews in America bear the same relationship to Israel, living in North America for mostly economic reasons, despite a "pull toward Israel," Mr. Daniel said. "We visit Israel quite often, not because we want a holiday," he said, "but because we have our ties there."

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