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At WRT, an introduction to, yes, Indian Jews

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The Jews of India aren't so much forgotten as unknown.

Dr. Shalva Weil, a senior researcher at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the author of more than 80 articles in scholarly journals, disclosed the fascinating history of this ancient population in a PowerPoint presentation Tuesday night at Westchester Reform Temple.

Many, if not most, Westerners react with disbelief when they learn of the existence of the sizable number of sari-clad Jews, who have adapted Indian music, art and cuisine and thrived in the Hindu country, largely free of persecution. Many even look "Indian" — dark hair and skin tone — quite distinct from the European norm.

But it's all a matter of perspective. Weil, who holds a bachelor's from the London School of Economics and a master's and doctorate from the University of Sussex, told a story about taking two Indian Jews out for dinner at a kosher restaurant in London. The other people in the restaurant, one told her, "don't look Jewish."

Indian Jews rose in society, becoming "educated and cosmopolitan" after several generations, boasting a poet laureate, top doctors, scholars — and contributing to Bollywood, she said. In fact, the first Bollywood talkie, released in 1931, "Alam Ara," was written by a Jew, who gained experience writing pageants of biblical stories. And a descendant of an immigrant from Baghdad, Lt. General J. Jacob, was the governor of Goa until 1999, then Punjab. Though most Jews have left, the community still functions, providing "transnational" marriages with Israel and "roots" tours for relocated descendants.

There are three Jewish communities in India, Weil said: The largest Bene Israel (pronounced Benny) now in the Mumbai area, Baghdadi Jews from Baghdad and Aleppo, and Cochin Jews in Kerala. There

are other groups, she said, the Bene Menashe and Bene Ephraim, who "are not really recognized [by religious authorities] and now in the process of converting."

Bene Israel's explanation of how and when they arrived "is an Indian sort of legend, a very different way of telling a narrative," she said. They claim to be from the sea-faring tribe of Zebulun and fled Judea around the time of Antiochus, who triggered the rebellion commemorated by Hanukkah, and were shipwrecked south of Mumbai. "If you go to India today, there isn't a single Bene Israel Jew who doesn't know the story of the shipwreck," she said, showing a slide of the site.

"They crawled up the coast and the first thing they did was bury their dead," Weil said, in separate mass graves for men and women. Seven men and seven women survived the voyage, she said. "Then people appeared on the coast and asked, 'Who are you?' 'We're Bene Israel,' they said. 'We're Hindus,' said the people." The Hindus were — and still are, Weil added — very hospitable, and invited the Jews to live there.

Bene Israel, she said, took up the traditional occupation of coconut oil pressing and were called the shanivar teli, Saturday oil-pressers, because they refrained from work on the Jewish Sabbath. Until very recent, she said, they kept the occupation and were incorporated into the Indian caste system at this level.

Bene Israel, she said, observed the Sabbath and "other manifestations of Judaism." They lit Sabbath candles, circumcised boys and celebrated most but not all festivals. "They didn't celebrate Hanukkah, because they left before it took place," Weil said. Though they had a slightly different observance of Shavuot, they celebrated Passover, she continued, and showed photographs of Indian-looking women making matzos.

The Bene Israel community emigrated en masse to Israel, she said, motivated chiefly by religious fervor.

"Then in the 19th century, along came a new community of Baghdadi Jews, escaping pogroms in Muslim countries," Weil continued. They also settled in Mumbai, and were active in the textile and jute industries. "They were Orthodox Jews and built their own synagogues and influenced the Bene Israel, whose liturgy "became more in line" with tradition. The Baghdadi Jews "were a reference model for Bene Israel, but they didn't intermarry," she said. Baghdadi Jews built many of the large buildings in Mumbai, including the Sassoon Docks and Library.

Some Cochin Jews trace their arrival from the time of King Solomon and went to India in search of building materials for the first temple. They had a close relationship with Indian rulers, she said, that was recorded on a set of copper plates allowing them to live freely and ride elephants "as long as the world and moon exist." There were "black" Cochin Jews and "white," she said; the groups didn't intermarry. (The white Jews probably fled the Spanish Inquisition.) Both were traders, she said. Their synagogue, Paradesi, "is the most beautiful in the world, in my opinion." It's clad with blue and white tiles from China, she said, "and they're all different." Salmon Rushdie's novel "The Moor's Last Sigh," she said, "begins with someone getting dizzy from the tiles."

Most Cochin Jews emigrated to Israel, she said, and have been "quite prosperous," managing a multimillion dollar flower business, exporting Israeli flowers all over the world. There are eight Jews left, she said, "and they look like you and me."

Weil was en route to Stanford to deliver a lecture about the adaptation of Indian music forms. Temple members Iris and Howard Burkat, she said, had tracked her down after seeing a replica of the Cochin synagogue in the Israel Museum. Their exchanges had all been by Internet. "It's been a dream come true," said Weil. "We finally met tonight."