

Disremembered: Poet shares history and memories from ancient Jewish community

By Leslie McGraw

Award-winning poet and esteemed editor Zilka Joseph came to the United States from India in her thirties in the late 1990s. After a few years in Chicago, she moved to Michigan, with many of those years spent in Washtenaw County. As it goes in poetry and writing circles in this neck of the woods, she finds herself in networking spaces quite often. Learning that she is from India or a poet does not hold



Zilka Joseph is holding the original artwork on the front of her upcoming release (Feb 2024) *Sweet Malida: Memories of a Bene Israel Woman*. The Cover Artist is Raina Imig; shamandalservices.wordpress.com

much surprise for people when she meets them. The surprise usually comes when is introduced as being Jewish.

Joseph was born in Mumbai and raised in Kolkata, part of the largest Bene Israel community in India. Her ancestors have an origin story that began before Hanukkah! The Bene Israel community, Marathi-speaking Jews, traces its origin to seven shipwrecked Jewish couples 2,200 years ago on the Konkan coast during Seleucid persecution in Palestine. Settling in Konkan villages, they integrated with the local culture, adopting Marathi and appending “kar” to village names. Known as Shanivar telis, or Saturday oil pressers in Marathi, they observed the Jewish Sabbath, refraining from work on Saturdays. This distinctive practice contributed to their unique identity.

Although Joseph’s upbringing was more secular than religious, they observed Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in personal celebrations at home or with other Jewish families. However, the celebrating was not just between Bene Israel Jewish families. In addition to several major Jewish communities with completely different origins in India, they also had neighbors and friends from every faith.

In her poems, Joseph evokes the culture of her people with the methods, muses, and memories found in the kitchens of her community. In the title poem of her new collection (*Sweet Malida: Memories of a Bene Israel Woman*, available February 2024), “Sweet Malida,” and in the poem “Eliyahoo Hanabi,” Joseph recounts the ingredients used to make the main dish for the Malida ceremony of the Bene Israel. In this Thanksgiving ceremony dedicated to the prophet Elijah, the ritual of how and what is used to make the dish is critical to the keeping of the tradition and culture of this small yet rich community. Jewish influence of dried fruits and nuts are as important of a staple to the dish as the regional fresh coconut, “finely grated by [my] mother’s hands” which is a celebrated item among Muslim, Christian, and Hindu neighbors.

In an interview with Joseph, she recounted days that Hindu neighbors who lived in an apartment nearby would be lighting incense and ringing a bell for worship while in another apartment nearby a Muslim neighbor worshipped. “If you ever lived in a city like that, it’s part of your life. That’s what India was like. Nothing was like, this is your holiday or my holiday kind of thing. It’s all around you. So, if your neighbors are celebrating Diwali, they’ll send you sweets. If your Muslim neighbors are celebrating Eid, they’ll make biryani or meat curry and send you a bowl of that.”

When Joseph explains that she is a Bene Israel woman in the United States, it is generally new information. Part of the reason for that is due to the fact that most of the 8,000 self-reported Jews in Washtenaw County — and the most widely-known globally — are Ashkenazi Jews. “There’s sometimes ignorance, there’s surprise, there’s sometimes curiosity, sometimes dismissal. But in general, I find most people I have met do not know of the existence of this community. I hope very much this book will help to guide them.”

In telling the stories of her family, history, and culture of being a Bene Israel woman, she hopes to raise awareness of not only Bene Israel Jews, but pique curiosity about other Jewish communities across the world such as Ethiopian Jews, Chinese Jews, Hong Kong Jews, Sephardic Jews (primarily from Spain and Portugal), and Mizrahi Jews (from North Africa). She has already received critical acclaim from scholars all over the globe who have kept the research and history of this community at the forefront of their careers. During the process of reaching out to some of the scholars, Joseph connected with some who had learned from her own scholarly relative, Benjamin Israel, author of the 1982 book, *The Jews of India*. “I want this book to be a resource of information” says Joseph, for all people, secular or religious, Jewish or non-Jewish, to learn more about this unique hybrid of culture, both Indian and Jewish. ■

Zilka Joseph

Pantoum for Chik-cha Halwa

—Halwa made for festivals and special occasions

whose hands worked hard to make this halwa
whose hands soaked the mounds of wheat
how we waited three days and nights
how chik was extracted from grain

whose hands soaked the mounds of wheat
knew each step of the recipe
how to squeeze the chik from grain
to boil slowly the thick beads of juice

did they learn each step of the recipe
from a new culture from a new land
to boil slowly the thick beads of juice
did they miss loved ones left behind

from a new culture from a new land
did they taste their ancestors’ food
did they miss loved ones left behind
those lost in the deluge shipwrecked

did their tongues taste their ancestors’ food
was this so different from sweets of home
those lost in the deluge and wreck
would never come back to life

so very different from sweets of home
sugar coconut milk colored pink thickening
those lost in the deluge shipwrecked
would their spirits whisper old recipes

sugar rose-tinted coconut milk thickening
tired arms bated breath silky cubes cooling
do spirits whisper old recipes
in a new land new life new history

tired arms bated breath silky cubes cooling
sprinkled with poppy seed slivered nuts
new land new life new history
food and ways you made your own

sprinkled with poppy seed slivered nuts
how we waited how we waited
the food and ways you made your own
your hands working hard to make this halwa