The Jewish Background of Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry

by R Raj Rao

I knew Nissim Ezekiel, "the father of Indian English poetry," nearly 25 years, as a teacher, as a fellow poet and, finally, as a friend. However, my research was handicapped by Ezekiel's failing memory and by his uncooperative family, so I wrote his biography, *Nissim Ezekiel: the authorized biography*,[1] from his point of view. This article, which follows the poet's Jewish background and religious thought up to age 30, is excerpted from the book.

The biography is subjective. I was not interested in cold, clinical objectivity, or in merely documenting facts and statistics. I wanted to write about things the way Nissim remembered and interpreted them. I restricted my conversations and interviews to those people with whom I was comfortable. The biography is also the response of one writer to another, so I haven't tried to mask my own subjectivity.

As the biography reveals, Nissim Ezekiel was the child of a complex family, a devoted denizen of Bombay and a Jew whose Judaism was based more in culture than in observance, the culture of India's Bene Israel.

From Chapter I: The Saturday Oil-Man

Nissim Ezekiel was born in Bombay to a Bene Israel family. His mother was an amateur stage actress named Diana. His father was Moses Ezekiel Talkar, who saw Diana perform, fell in love with her and proposed.

She gave birth to their third child on 16 December 1924. Once again, it was a male. Diana's deliveries had a wonderful symmetry, the way (in the case of her first three children) girl followed boy and boy followed girl. Joe's birth had laid the way for his brother's as far as ceremonies were concerned, so the naming and circumcision of Diana's second son were relatively simple affairs. Among the Bene Israel, both ceremonies usually take place on the eighth day after birth. Thus, ironically, it was on the eve of Christmas, 1924, that the child was named Nissim, which means "justice" in Hebrew. As was the custom, Diana's brother carried him for his circumcision at the Magen Hassidim Synagogue at Agripada. Diana herself did not remain present during the circumcision, but her husband and brother did.

The child who came after Joe and preceded Nissim was Sarah, and the one who followed Nissim was Hannah. Lily came last. According to standard religious practice among the Bene Israel, the twelfth day after birth the newborn child was bathed and placed in a cradle for the first time. Also on this day, it was taken to its maternal grandparents' home in Pune, along with its mother, and made to stay there at least until the day of the mother's 'purification.' This took place on

Nissim Ezekiel

the fortieth day of the birth of a male child, and on the eightieth day of the birth of a female child. The child's head was also shaved at this time.

The Ezekiels have no readily accessible family album containing pictures of those early days, by means of which we could establish whether the young Nissim's head was actually shaved on the fortieth day, and whether he was taken to Pune to meet his grandparents. Nissim himself feels it is possible that both things happened. To understand the kind of life that the Ezekiels lived, and to see it in the right perspective, it is necessary to know something of the background of the Bene Israel in India.

Legend holds that the Bene Israel, the "Children of Israel," who are regarded as one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, first landed in southern Maharashtra between 1600 to 2000 years ago after either being shipwrecked after fleeing Muslim persecution in Persia or driven out of Northern Palestine by the Greek ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes.

Seven males and seven females arrived in coastal Navgoan, and buried their dead in two "elongated mounds" which may still be seen. The survivors settled in nearby villages in Maharashtra's Raigad district, where they took to farming and especially oil-pressing (or crushing seeds) for a living. They lost touch completely with people of their own faith elsewhere in the world; the only point of contact

that remained was the Sabbath, which they observed on Saturdays. The oil-pressers among them came to be known as Saturday Oil Men or Shanwar Telis, the sect to which the Ezekiels belong. (Interestingly, there are in this region both Friday Oil-Men or Shurkrawar Telis and Monday Oil-Men or Somwar Telis. The former are Muslims, the latter Hindu 'untouchables.')

Other Bene Israel had opened shops. However, to avoid rivalry, they were told by the local people not to sell what others were selling. The Shanwar Telis, too, were not allowed to charge a fee for their services, though they could sell the crushed seed to agriculturists, which became their principal means of supporting themselves.

Much later, Nissim would refer to these origins in one of his most well-known poems, 'Background, Casually:'

> My ancestors, among the castes,
> Were aliens, crushing seed for bread
> (The hooded bullock made his rounds).

The Shanwar Telis were quick to assimilate local conditions. As the villages in which they spread themselves were mostly on the coast (though some were also inland), many of the native inhabitants were fishermen by profession. There were even inter-marriages between the Shanwar Telis and the Kolis, the traditional name by which the fishermen are known, although the Bene Israel were, on the whole, conservative about marrying outside the community. The native population, especially, asked them to avoid such marriages.

Like the upper-caste Hindus of the area, the Shanwar Telis adopted new surnames, based on their villages. Sometimes the Shanwar Telis even 'nativized' existing Jewish names, as for example, when they made the name Moses Mussaji. The word 'Talkar,' which Nissim's father Moses Ezekiel added to his surname (but which he later dropped) is such an invention. However, according to Nissim, they are still registered at the Magen Hassidim Synagogues as Talkar. The village of Tal (sometimes spelt Thal), a few kilometers from the beach resort of Alibag, is the only location that the Ezekiels can rightfully call their "native place."

Jews in India fall into three groups, the Bene Israel, the Baghdadi (or Iraqi) Jews and the Cochin Jews. Of these, the Bene Israel have been in India for the longest time. The Baghdadi Jews and the Cochin Jews came afterward, and their arrival is tied up historically with British imperialism in India.

Relations among the three Jewish communities in India have, on the whole, been harmonious. But it took the Bene Israel some effort to convince the Cochin Jews that they — not the Cochinis — were the first to arrive in India. The Cochin Jews claimed that they had lived in India for hundreds of years and had come here much before the Bene Israel. If the Cochin Jews did not know of the existence of

the Bene Israel, it was only because the Bene Israel lived in villages that utterly lacked communications until recent times, and had not yet begun emigrating to the cities.

All the three Jewish communities in India, especially the Bene Israel, are somewhat distanced from Hebrew. The Cochin Jews seemed to know the language reasonably well when they began their 'missionary' activities in India in the nineteenth century, and part of their energies were directed at teaching it to the Bene Israel.

The lack of Hebrew among the Bene Israel is demonstrated by the absence of inscriptions in Hebrew on eighteenth century Bene Israel tombstones. Yet, several such inscriptions decorate nineteenth century Bene Israel tombstones in Navgoan and Bombay.

The Cochin Jews did not succeed in making Hebrew a household language among the Bene Israel. In Nissim's own home, for example, although prayers were said in Hebrew, neither he nor any member of his family learned enough Hebrew to speak it. Marathi came to be the first language of most Bene Israel in India, and some of them were equally well-versed in Konkan. The Ezekiels knew Marathi and regarded it as one of their first languages, along with English, but their use of it was restricted to the domestic sphere. When Nissim grew up and become a poet, one of his chief regrets in life would be that he did not know how to write poetry in Marathi. His younger brother Hannan, who became a distinguished economist and journalist, and was for ten years the editor of the *Economic Times*, was nonetheless poor in Marathi, and confined all his intellectual work to English.

No community in Hindu India, no matter how small, has been able to escape the debilitating effects of the caste system, and the Jews are no exception. Arguably, caste Hindus consider people of all other religions in India to be traitors, lower in status than even the 'untouchables,' no matter what their origins. Often, they are unable to make a distinction between those religious communities that converted to other religions as a result of indoctrination (Christians, Muslims and Buddhists), and those that arrived here in their own right ages ago (Zoroastrians and Jews). What is especially unfortunate is that because of osmosis, minority religious communities also become casteist in their thinking, although there is no place for caste in their religions. It is easy to see how the Bene Israel fell prey to these prejudices. They were at the receiving end, both among the caste Hindus of coastal Maharashtra, as well as the Baghdadi and Cochin Jews, who must have regarded their traditional occupation of oil-pressing as unclean. Thus, in a way, they were considered to be the lowest of the low, and would have to put in a considerable effort to rise above their status.

When the Bene Israel immigrated to cities such as Bombay in the second half of the nineteenth century, it became possible for them to slowly move away from

their traditional occupations. Even before the shift took place, some of them had already given up oil-pressing and had become weavers and boatmen. It is not clear whether any of Nissim's own ancestors gave up oil-pressing and took to these other professions. But in the early '50s, when Nissim was broke and earned his passage from England to India by scrubbing decks aboard a cargo ship, it was as if he was especially equipped to do so by something in his genes. It was as if he was only doing what his ancestors must have done decades ago.

Once the Bene Israel arrived in the city, more professional options were open to them. Some became skilled carpenters, for whom there must have been considerable demand in British India. Others joined the British Bombay Native Army. Much later, this is probably how Nissim's grandfather Haskelji Israel found himself fighting in the Boer War; he was charting a course already explored by others in the community. In contrast, Nissim himself would grow up gentle and soft, with none of the ruggedness one expects of soldiers, although he would develop the capacity to rough it on journeys, beginning with his voyage from England to India on a cargo ship.

The Bene Israel experienced further upward mobility in the nineteenth century. In the city, class-consciousness gradually replaced caste-consciousness, and many of them obtained white-collar jobs. By the twentieth century, the social gap between the Bene Israel and upper-caste Hindus on the one hand, and between them and the Jews of Cochin and Baghdad on the other hand, narrowed considerably. The gap closed even more after Independence in 1947. By then, they could take up respectable jobs, such as teaching, with relative ease. When Nissim's grandfather Haskelji left the army, he became a teacher; following his example, both Nissim's parents became teachers. When the time came for Nissim to decide on a career, he gave up more lucrative jobs in advertising and journalism, and opted to take a lectureship in a college.

With social mobility came a sense of cultural superiority. The new-found status of the Bene Israel prompted them to identify with upper-caste Hindus, particularly with regard to dietary habits. They made sure that they did not eat beef. They looked upon lower caste Hindus as unclean, including those such as the Mahars and the Mangs, who ate dead animals and birds (because they were cheaper). The Bene Israel stopped employing members of such castes in their homes. To a large extent, the Ezekiels shared these beliefs and made them part of their daily lives. When Nissim became a vegetarian in his post-LSD years, he attributed the decision to the effects the drug had on his mind and to reasons of health. He advocated Indianness (or Hinduness) in poetry, and self-consciously employed it in his own verse, in an attempt to conceal his cultural and spiritual alienation from mainstream India. It wouldn't be far-fetched to suggest that, on the whole, he wanted the world to see him as a Brahmin Jew.

Shirley Berry Isenberg, in her book *India's Bene Israel*,[2] describes the aver-

age Bene Israel as having "straight to wavy black hair, black or dark brown eyes, oval face, straight nose. Obesity was and remains rather rare among the Bene Israel. Skin color can vary from very light to very dark brown."

Nissim has many of the above traits. The wavy hair, the oval face and the light skin are a very definite part of his persona today, and have been since his childhood. He was never obese, even in his middle years. His nose tends to be hooked rather than straight, or at least seems so from certain angles. He is five feet seven-and-a-half inches tall. But he certainly doesn't resemble any of the Maharashtrian castes. Instead, Nissim is easily mistaken for a Parsi, which gives credence to the view that the Bene Israel hailed originally from Persia and were bombed out of their country by the Muslims. In "The Local," he wrote:

> My neighbor says, you are Parsi?
> No, I say genially, acknowledging his interest, Zoroastrian.
> He leaves the subject alone.
> The train has stopped between stations.

Like the Cochin Jews, Christian missionaries of the nineteenth century wanted to prevent the Bene Israel from identifying too closely with local Hindus. Both the Cochin Jews and the Christian missionaries thus performed the role of teachers, and they later recruited some of the better-educated Bene Israel as fellow-teachers to help them advance their cause. This must have suited the Bene Israel, who sought ways to break away from hereditary oil-pressing. Inspired by the missionary activity of the Cochin Jews and the Christians, the Bene Israel began to rank teaching higher than other "wte-collar" job and in the next hundred years or so, they took to academia in a big way. In our own day, the Bene Israel community includes many teachers. Unsurprisingly, three generations of Ezekiels thought teaching was the most noble job they could possibly do.

More significantly, some Bene Israel became writers. The community began its creative career as members became artisans in the nineteenth century. However, the first Bene Israel folk poet, ballad singer Elloji Nagawkar, first appeared as early as the eighteenth century. Another folk poet-cum-singer, Robenji Isaji Nawgaonkar, was born sometime in the 1830s. But both rendered their poems orally, so their work is not available today.

In 1867, author Bahais Joseph Talkar published *Gul and Sanobar*, the first work of literature by a Bene Israel Jew. Shortly afterward, M.D. Talkar came out with a novel, *Bago Bahar*. Later, a highly-respected Bene Israel painter emerged who also had the surname Talkar. However, it is difficult to say whether or not the Ezekiels are related to any of these Talkars.

Apart from creative writing, the latter half of the nineteenth century also witnessed a surfeit of "ecclesiastical" writing by the Bene Israel, evidently the

direct outcome of their religious education.

About this time, the Jewish community acquired its first Hebrew printing press in Bombay, and later it acquired another press in Pune. It founded its own publication house, known as the Subodh Prakash Samaj, and brought out its own periodicals. Most of its books in Hebrew were prayer books; it is believed that, in all, the community published 146 books in Hebrew, of which 88 were by Baghdadi and 58 by Bene Israel Jews. Members of the community spent a considerable amount of time and energy translating Jewish liturgical works into Marathi. Joseph Ezekiel Rajpurkar, perhaps the most prolific writer in this respect, published as many as 20 religious books between 1858 and his death in 1905. Some were originally written in Hebrew, others were translated from Hebrew into Marathi.

Nissim both continued and broke away from this religious writing tradition. For one thing, he would not confine himself only to poetry, but also experimented with prose. He began his spiritual journey believing in religion, and was then drawn away from it. As his writing reflects, he came back to it again. The theme of religion recurs in many of his poems, and in the titles of some of his later poetry collections. But he never wrote a religious tract, or "stooped" so low as to write anything preachy and propagandistic. He restricted his passion for religion to community work; it never found direct expression in his writing.

In terms of family life, the Bene Israel were strongly influenced by the Hindus. Until the twentieth century, they lived in joint families of father, mother, unmarried sons and daughters, married sons and their wives, and their children. However, Nissim's family was never a joint family in the conventional sense of the term. In the '30s, when they lived in Readymoney Mansion near the Byculla bridge, the family consisted only of Nissim's parents, himself, and all his brothers and sisters. No grandparents lived with them. However, in the '40s and '50s, after Joe and Nissim married, their wives became part of their extended family for a short time.

Although the Ezekiels participated in few religious rituals, except for customary visits to the synagogue on Yom Kippur, the religious customs of most Bene Israel reflected Hindu influences. The two most sacred days in the year for the Bene Israel, as for Jews all over the world, are Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in September or October. In the old days, on Yom Kippur, the Bene Israel would bathe first with hot and then with cold water, and dress in white clothes. As they went to the synagogue, they made sure they did not make physical contact with non-Jews. This notion of pollution by touch probably could be a more destructive influence of Hinduism. The Bene Israel would spread their handkerchiefs on the floor of the synagogue, kneel and say, "Blessed be the name of the glory of His kingdom for ever and ever." Then they would lie prostrate with their faces on their handkerchiefs.

We know for a fact that the Ezekiels themselves went through none of all

this, except the customary visit to the synagogue on Yom Kippur. Moses perceived himself as a scientist and a rationalist, and opposed superstition or ritualistic practices. Nissim later justified his father's stand by pointing out that they were not the only family to ignore religious ceremonies: in their day, the members of the community dropped a sizeable number of the rituals described in their holy books.

Although Saturday is inauspicious to the Hindus, the Bene Israel continued to regard it as the most holy and auspicious day of the week. As we have already seen, the Shanwar Telis even derived their name from the word "Saturday." Over the centuries, and particularly once they came to Bombay, where they took up fulltime jobs, the Bene Israel could not exercise their individual choices when it came to observing Saturday as a day of rest. So they became realistic. This is one more instance of a traditional practice being relaxed and it corroborates Nissim's belief that something very rational about the Bene Israel's psyche enables members of the community to take a very unsentimental view of religious dictates. Nissim himself would work as hard on Saturdays as he would on other days of the week. Interestingly, when this biography was being researched, he had long sessions with me on Saturdays — my only days in Bombay — without any qualms.

However, the Bene Israel were more willing to imitate the dietary habits of their Hindu and Muslim neighbors. Elul, which occurs around August or September every year, became a month of fasting for them. During this time, they ate only one meal each day, usually in the evening. The only exception was Saturday, the Sabbath, when they ate both meals.

Needless to say, the Ezekiels were not very strict about Elul. Moses and Diana instilled the idea of a balanced diet in the minds of their children as they were growing up. They commended the scientific uses of fasting, as opposed to the religious ones.

Nissim developed the habit of exercising daily, and remains drawn to all kinds of books on good health. Since he turned vegetarian at the age of 45, salads assumed a special significance for him. Nothing about all this is very Jewish; reason, rather than religion, would govern Nissim's concept of diet.

Like the Zoroastrians, the Bene Israel associate certain kinds of undercloth-ing with their religion. Among the Zoroastrians, the kasti and the sadra are worn by all male members of the community, and this has become one of the symbolic ways in which a Parsi in India distinguishes himself from others. The Bene Israel wear the tzitzit, which is a sort of undergarment with fringes at the corners. It may be thought of as the equivalent of the kasti and the sadra, just as Elul is the Jewish equivalent of the Muslim Ramzan.

While the Ezekiels disregarded most of the rituals associated with their religion, or at any rate modified them to suit their convenience, the boys of the household did go through the ritual Bar Mitzvah that marks a male child's passage into

manhood. Paradoxically, the Bene Israel did not traditionally observe the Bar Mitzvah in large numbers, though its importance increased slightly in the twentieth century. Although some Bene Israel synagogues, particularly in Bombay, began conducting it, it was still practiced by relatively few families in the community.

Nissim recalls that Joe, Hannan and he all went through the ceremony in their thirteenth year. Although he was Bar Mitzvahed in 1937, Nissim would never wear tzitzit, which is associated with orthodox Jewish values. Moses did not hold his sons' Bar Mitzvahs at the Magen Hassidim Synagogue at Agripada, where they had been circumcised, although this was the synagogue where most Bar Mitzvah ceremonies were solemnized. Instead, he took them to the Rodef Shalom Synagogue near the Victoria Gardens. The Jewish Religious Union ran the synagogue, which is housed in a building formerly known as Matilda House; it was founded in 1925, a year after Nissim's birth. The liberal, progressive Jewish Religious Union attracted broad-minded Jews, such as Moses, who preferred to shorten their prayers and sometimes even say them in English rather than in Hebrew. Many years later, when Nissim was a father, he took his son, Elkana, to this very synagogue in Bombay for his Bar Mitzvah.

From Chapter Two: "I Was Born Here and Belong"

A plaque close to the Tomb of the Matriarch Rachel near Jerusalem refers to Bombay. The inscription on the plaque is in Hebrew, and it was written in AD 5625 according to the Jewish calendar (September AD 1864 to September AD 1865). Translated into English, the inscription reads:

> The construction of this well was made possible through a donation from the esteemed, our brothers the Bene Israel, who are living in the city of Bombay, may the Lord protect it well! In honor of the whole assembly of the community of Israel, [through those] who came to bow over the gravestone at the burial place of our Mother Rachel.
> May her memory protect us, Amen.
> Given in the year 5625, according to the Jewish calendar.[3]

The inscription confirms something we already know: that by the middle of the nineteenth century, the Bene Israel embarked on a steady exodus from their coastal villages to the island city of Bombay. The Bene Israel were among the earliest beneficiaries of the British Indian government's policy of developing Bombay as a modern city.

As Bombay developed, following the path of the East India Company, it became the capital of western India. The Bene Israel migration occurred from

1739, when few Bene Israel lived there, to 1796, when they built their first synagogue. Other minorities, including other Jews, added to the city's cross-cultural integration and its liberating influence, including opening new professions to the Bene Israel oil-pressers.

Thus it was in Bombay that the Bene Israel — a community that had for centuries stayed content toiling for a living — suddenly became exposed to religion, education and culture in a significant way.

Haskelji Israel had aspirations like any other Bene Israel of his day. He wanted to empower himself by joining the tide and migrating to Bombay. But his restlessness could get him only as far as the Boer War, which struck him as a way of leaving the village. This was before the turn of the century, by which time almost everyone who wanted to leave the villages had already opted for a new life in the city. Haskelji did not succeed in going to Bombay; after his war stint, he returned to Tal and settled down to the quiet life of a teacher.

But the aspiration to go to Bombay remained somewhere deep in his psyche. He fulfilled it vicariously by sending his children to college in the city. Thus, his son Moses graduated in science, and became a man of strong scientific and urban attitudes. Haskelji Israel did not encourage Moses or his other children to return to Tal after finishing their studies. He realized that better lives awaited them in Bombay. Even the thought of his own impending old age and loneliness did not make him change his mind and ask his children to return.

Thus, Nissim Ezekiel was born in Bombay. Moses and Diana lived near the Byculla Bridge, in a chawl, where the birth took place. The description of the house and its location clearly indicate their economic status in those early years after their wedding. They were not well-off. In fact, in future years, Nissim would often refer to his parents as "poor." Yet, Diana's participation in some of the religious rituals associated with the birth of children proves that they were not hard-pressed for money, for all such ceremonies usually entail some expense.

Diana taught in a sort of municipal school attended by children from relatively unaffluent homes. It occupied a part of the Tiphereth Israel Synagogue, situated at 92 Clarke Road, Jacob Circle. But the school was not really connected with the synagogue — it was merely its tenant, and the students were not necessarily Jewish.

In 1934, Nissim obtained admission to the Antonio D'Souza High School. Although cosmopolitan, it was a part of the Gloria Church, and was even referred to sometimes as the Gloria Church School. The students admitted to that school belonged to all the major communities — Hindu, Muslim and Christian. Nissim did not regard anyone at the Antonio D'Souza High School, teacher or fellow student, as an anchor in his life. His real companionship came from home, from the family. Moses and Diana, more than anyone else, were the anchors in the lives of the Ezekiel children.

The parents' constant supervision and guidance helped shape the personalities of the Ezekiel children. Nissim identifies one of his personality traits as this feeling, the assumption, that if someone could do something, say, win a hockey match, produce a play or learn a new language, he could too. Reflecting on this, he told me, "This way I tried almost everything under the sun. I now regret it — the feeling that I could do everything...unlike people who from childhood know they're good in some things, and not good in other things."

The Antonio D'Souza High School used to have a five-day week. But like some schools run by the Jesuits, notably the St. Xavier's High School in Bombay's Metro cinema area, it observed Thursday as its weekly holiday, instead of Saturday. Nissim probably first began to write on Thursdays and Sundays, and during his summer and winter vacations, when, like all other children, he found himself with a lot of time on his hands and did not quite know how to spend it. Putting together the various statements he has made over the years, we may conclude that he wrote his first complete poem in 1936, at the age of twelve.[4] At that time, a classmate showed one of Nissim's early poems to a teacher, who exclaimed, "Ah, ha, listen all of you, we have a poet in the class." The remark had its effect. Nissim says, "I decided at that moment, whatever happens, I am going to write poetry, good, bad or indifferent."[5]

Around the year Nissim finished his schooling, the Ezekiels changed their residence. They shifted into an apartment that was part of a colony of bungalows known as The Retreat. It was the perfect name for a poet's house. As fate would have it, Nissim would always return to it, to live first with other members of the family, and then by himself.

Apart from the years he spent in the Warden Road area after his marriage — first in a one-room ground floor apartment with a garden at Mazda Mansion, and then at Kala Niketan, where his wife Daisy presently lives — Nissim has resided in the Bombay Central-Byculla belt since his childhood. This is clearly a sort of Jewish quarter of the city, and his preference for it indicates that, for all his cosmopolitanism, he feels most secure with the people of his own community. Here, as elsewhere, landmarks connected with the community's social and cultural life often determine how important people in the community perceive the place to be. Bellasis Road, Clare Road and Kamathipura, not far off, are known for their Jewish cemeteries and synagogues.

Discussing this phenomenon, Shirley Berry Isenberg speaks of a Bene Israel communal neighborhood in Bombay. She informs us that the original neighborhood was located where the Byculla, Nagpada, Mazgaon and Umerkhadi sections of Bombay meet, making all the residents in those days within walking distance of each other.[6]

A sense of roots and belonging is perhaps essential to every poet, because in the last analysis, it gives him the terms of reference for his writing. Nissim's roots

are in Bombay; Bombay is the city where he belongs. He was born in Bombay, has always lived here, and he always came back to Bombay, wherever he went. His longest time away from Bombay was between 1948 and 1952, when he was in England. But even before he went to England, he decided that Bombay was his home, and once in England, he made up his mind to return to Bombay and spend the rest of his life here. Nissim's years in England coincided with the time the Jews in India started emigrating on a large scale to the newly-formed nation of Israel (from 1949 onwards). Though he took interest in this development, he rejected the Zionist notion that Israel was the Promised Land to which all the Jews of the world must return. This is because he thought of himself as an Indian.

The idea expressed earlier, that Nissim was most comfortable in a Jewish neighborhood rather than anywhere else in Bombay, is borne out by his admission that there were large parts of the city which he didn't know or relate to. This includes working class Bombay. He believed in the idea of a neighborhood, which for him was mainly comprised of Byculla where he grew up. To this he also adds Warden Road, where he lived for a while, and Churchgate, where he worked. However, he doesn't see this relation to a special local reality as narrowness, for he feels it is only the starting point from which one can extend one's sphere of interest to the whole country. In this context, he says he has never felt alienated anywhere in India, though he regards himself as a Bombayite.

Nissim doesn't even attribute his preference for Bombay to the fact that it is a cosmopolitan city that has room for minorities. He accepts his minoritism as a given, and says that as far as he is concerned, he relates to people on the basis of their attitudes and values. But he agrees that Bombay is a haven for minorities because of its cosmopolitan character, a characteristic he says it shares with such cities as London and New York. Nissim has always loved Bombay's variety and multiplicity.

Despite his love for Bombay, Nissim also notes its faults, including poor public transportation and poor public manners. Until the trams were abolished in the '60s, Nissim used them for much of his movement around Bombay. When he was a boy of ten, Jewish passengers enjoyed special privileges on trams and, later, on buses. They could buy their tickets for travelling on Saturdays and Jewish holidays in advance, and be assured of seats. Trams were an integral part of Bombay, and he was sorry when they were discontinued.

Bombay is a modern Indian city. The term "modern" implies that the quality of life in the city will be preserved as best as possible. Nissim feels that in this respect, Bombay's administrators have failed. Roads still exist in the same condition as many years ago with scant improvement. Modernity, according to Nissim, has not really touched the lives of the people. For example, Nissim has strongly critized the way Indians indulge in loud talk in public places, or spit, pee and blow their noses wherever they want. In "Background, Casually," he wrote:

All Hindus are
Like that, my father used to say,
When someone talked too loudly, or
Knocked at the door like the Devil.
They hawked and spat. They sprawled around.

"Can you call that modernity?" he asks.

And yet, in spite of all its faults, he objects to the word "hate" when I tell him his relationship with Bombay is a love-hate relationship. "It's only love," he says. What he loves most about the city is that it gives him a "sense of belonging."

In the twentieth century, the city came to mean "home" to the Bene Israel as a whole. Beginning with that first synagogue that they built at 254 Samuel Street, Mandvi, in 1796, which is still in use today (this possibly explains why Mandvi is the most favored residential locality among members of the community), the Bene Israel went on to build several other synagogues in areas they occupied. By the twentieth century, the synagogue became the focal point of community life among the Bene Israel. This was particularly facilitated by the fact that the people themselves conducted the affairs of their synagogues — they had no ordained or professional clergy to lead them.

The Ezekiels maintained a distance from many of these social transactions. They would go to the synagogue, but not fraternize too much. In this they were not exceptional; several well-educated people of the community kept away, at least partially, from these congregations. Two of the Ezekiel's favorite synagogues were the Magen Hassidim Synagogue at Agripada and the Magen David Synagogue at Byculla. The latter is walking distance from both Readymoney Mansion and The Retreat. Then there was the forward-looking Rodel Shalom Synagogue. In the '70s and '80s, with young Bene Israel couples leaving the city and moving to suburban areas like Kurla and Thane, the new synagogues constructed in the suburbs drew a greater number of visitors than the older ones. The old ones in central Bombay remained half to three-fourths empty, and the authorities sometimes even bribed members to attend prayers, for according to rules, one cannot pray in a synagogue without a minimum of ten persons. Nissim himself was never very strict about his visits to the synagogue. He would go there whenever he felt like it, though it is true that in old age he became increasingly involved in the social and cultural affairs of the community.

Due to independence and immigration to Israel, class almost completely replaced caste as a means of determining the status of Bombay's three Jewish communities. The upshot is that the Bene Israel, who were earlier accorded the lowest status among Jews in India, were now able to identify with the white-collar middle class, a slot that previously belonged to upper-caste Hindus. While caste is determined by birth, class is flexible. As a result, all three Jewish communities could

boast not just of a sizeable white-collar class, but also of achievers in different fields. Some of them even rose to become celebrities. If the Bene Israel had a celebrity poet in Nissim Ezekiel, the Baghdadis had their film stars; both Nadira and David were important actors in the Bombay film industry. Economic prosperity, however, did not significantly contribute towards a decline in conservative attitudes. Isenberg notes that most Bene Israel of Bombay followed the traditional Indian pattern, conservatively keeping themselves socially separate from their communities.[7] This, of course, does not apply to Nissim, who has always been more liberal than the average person in the community, and who has friends from virtually every community in the world.

While the ordinary Bene Israel may be finicky about mingling with people of other religions, their homes in Bombay have come to resemble those of their Hindu and Muslim counterparts exactly. They live in crowded rooms, usually rented rather than owned. Although as many as ten members of a joint family sometimes share a room, guests are always welcome. However, there is little, if any sense of privacy, which is said to be confined merely to bathing, dressing and sexual intercourse.

Bene Israel homes in Bombay invariably have a mezuzah at the entrance, and a hanging oil lamp that is lit on the evening of the Sabbath and Jewish festivals, as they used to do in the villages. Most households also own the Old Testament in Marathi. Other common things include prayer books and framed portraits of family members, Biblical scenes and sometimes even Hindu gods! Like the people of other communities, they like to give feasts during happy occasions.

The Ezekiels, too, always had a mezuzah and prayer books at Readymoney Mansion and The Retreat. There were a few framed portraits of elderly relatives. But, they had a very strong sense of privacy. They hardly ever gave parties, though on Friday nights, after prayers were said, they had a sort of party among themselves, drinking wine. Even among the educated Bene Israel of Bombay, they were exceptional. Their unconventionality manifested itself in their secularism, which meant not flaunting their religion and culture, or making a public display of it, however indirectly.

During Moses' and Diana's lifetimes, The Retreat still resembled a "regular" household, with everyone in the family living there harmoniously. After their deaths, the circumstances were such that one by one everybody began leaving the place. Today, Nissim lives alone at The Retreat, and hardly anyone knows how he lives. Even by the standards of the rich middle class, who can afford to set up separate households from their parents, he is unusual. At the time of this writing, it just so happens that Nissim, Daisy and Elkana each live in three separate apartments in Bombay — Nissim at The Retreat, Daisy at Kala Niketan, and Elkana and his wife in company quarters at Prabhadevi. In a city where the housing problem is more acute than anywhere else in the world, this surely is luxury.

Bombay is Nissim's city, and he would always depend on it for image and metaphor. "I feel I am a Bombay city poet...I am oppressed and sustained by Bombay,"[8] he has said. In his poem "Island," included in *Hymns in Darkness* (1976), Nissim firmly and finally expresses his commitment to Bombay:

> I cannot leave the island,
> I was born here and belong.

These lines also echo the famous concluding lines of "Background, Casually," the previous poem in the book, autobiographical in nature:

> I have made my commitments now.
> This is one: to stay where I am,
> As others chose to give themselves
> In some remote and backward place.
> My backward place is where I am.

From Chapter Three: Freedom at Midnight

In the summer of 1939, while vacationing at his grandfather's house in Tal, waiting for school to reopen, Nissim picked up his copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* in English translation and went through all 18 chapters. He assiduously read both text and translator's comments. He was shocked. His peace-loving sensibilities and his ethical sense were offended by the doubts Arjuna expressed, and particularly by the advice Krishna gave her — to go to battle in the name of duty. He simply couldn't see the sense of such reasoning. The shock of those boyhood days in relation to Hinduism's, and India's, most sacred text would stay with him for the rest of his life.

It is as if his Judeo-Christian foundations, with their notion of virtue and sin, acted as a barrier and interfered with his ability to grasp the logic of Krishna's teachings: all battle is evil and cannot be justified, even if the ends are noble; ends do not justify means. And to think that Nissim wouldn't have even bothered to read the *Bhagavad Gita* at that time, had the school fathers as orthodox Christians not run it down! It is incredible that a man who harbored such convictions should, less than a decade later, relinquish religion to become an atheist and a rationalist. Yet this is the course that Nissim's life took.

He took his bachelor and master's degrees at Wilson College in Chowpatty, where his father taught. Though his degrees were in English literature, he remained curious about science. "Since my college years," he says, "I've read with great pleasure articles and books on the relation of science to society, to religion, and to everyday life. Well before I was 20, I had become science-oriented, or so I thought, though my emotional life was largely in terms of poetry. Asked about my