

FINDING HOME



Artist **SIONA BENJAMIN** talks to JANET LEVIN about the distinctive style which has enabled her to reconcile all her identities

wouldn't break eggs or sew but they would pick up the phone. Living in India we had servants and they would make vegetarian meals for that day, it wasn't that the gas wouldn't be lit, but we wouldn't eat any non-veg food and we'd have a great meal on Friday evening."

But the tradition became, as she put it, 'dissipated' when her relatives started leaving for Israel, a "sad and traumatic" time for her. Her parents stayed. Her mother ran a

successful private school in the affluent suburb of Bandra where they lived. "Many Jewish women were involved in education." Her father worked for a shipping company. Her relatives were less well off and she thinks their reasons for departure were mainly economic. "There hasn't been any antisemitism, ever. India is a multicultural society. There were always lots of influences that came into India: Greek, Parsee, Jewish, Muslim. It has always been very welcoming to outsiders and when I went back this year I felt that India still has that sense of inclusiveness."

Siona went to art school in Mumbai and then to the State University of Illinois for graduate studies. Her current style also owes much to the teaching of Rabbi Burton Visotzky of the Jewish Theological Seminary. With him for several years she studied midrash (rabbinic interpretations of the Torah), focusing on the women of the

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Is home India? Is it America? Is it Israel? These are questions that artist Siona Benjamin has long been asking herself and 'Finding Home' is the title of the exhibition of her work currently arousing much interest at the JCC, Manhattan.

Her paintings, recalling Indian and Persian miniatures, have archetypal Indian motifs such as lotus flowers and mandalas and sumptuous colours such as azure, teal and iridescent blue. Yet they also include Jewish iconography – menorahs, tallitot and tefillin, as well as startling references to horrors of the modern world.

From her studio in Montclair, New Jersey, Siona explained that after years of searching she had only found her style 15 years ago, when her daughter was born and questions of identity assumed a greater importance. Her delight in finding this style which incorporates all her identities is evident in the enthusiasm with which she speaks of the journey she has made. First she tells me about her background.

Siona Benjamin was born in Bombay, of Bene Israel parents. "My grandmother went to the Magen Hasidim synagogue, one of the largest and most beautiful in Mumbai. On all the festivals we used to go to the synagogue and then to her house to eat. My parents weren't really Orthodox but my mother would observe Shabbat really well, light the Shabbat lamp, an oil lamp with a wick, not just a candle, and go through the whole ritual of doing that." She laughs as she tells me: "They sort of made up their own rules for their own convenience, they

Finding Home # 73: Miriam, 10" x 7", gouache and gold leaf on wood panel, 2006
Courtesy of the artist and Flomenhaft gallery New York



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Torah. Her paintings are her own interpretation, a “visual midrash”, as she puts it.

“Just painting Rebecca at the well and Rachel in the cornfields is kind of boring, so I take these wonderful characters and use them as a jumping board. I want to be able to read today’s newspaper and bring them forward to today; to use their iconography, to use their metaphors and symbols but to talk about today’s issues, today’s social and political problems that trouble me.”

She explains to me the meaning of her painting of Leah (see front cover): “She was a strong woman who gave birth to children. She is building this protective house. In the orange-brown border you can see the bombs falling and she is fortifying her house with a brush, protecting the world against evil. I become Leah and she becomes me so by the *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) of making these paintings, I feel I am contributing in some way to the restoration of the world. Her body cavity is filled with positive images, from birds to a child suckling her breast to an angel tying tefillin round her arm. One part has my mother lighting the Shabbat lamp for my daughter. So all these little things are happening in her body but outside her body there is danger.”

Her painting of Miriam (see page 25) depicts the character almost comatose, her hand on a detonator. There is a nuclear cloud in the background.

Siona tells me she was much influenced by the book *The Power of Mythology* by Joseph Campbell. “Everyone recycles their own mythology. Everything from the clothes you wear to the way you furnish your house

is influenced by your own mythology. When I started this work in the 1990s I thought, well I am a story-teller, I like to recycle mythology. That’s what I did and I haven’t stopped since.”

There is much blue in her work and she tells me that it became a symbol for her of being a “Jew of colour”. I asked her why she needed such a symbol.

“Since I came to America I would get ‘a Jew from India, how is that possible? Jews come from Poland or Russia’. It became a kind of joke for me. So I was thinking what shade of colour I should paint myself. I thought of the sky and the ocean. Blue is a neutral colour and it belongs all over the world, it is the colour of Israel, of Jewishness, and a lot of synagogues in India are painted in that colour. On top of that growing up in India I was surrounded by Hinduism and Krishna and a lot of these gods are blue because they are gods with very dark skin.”

Siona Benjamin spent a few months in India earlier this year to start work on an ambitious new art project, *Faces: Weaving Indian Jewish Narratives*, which will be based on her photographs and interviews with members of Mumbai’s current Bene Israel community. The project, financed by a Fulbright Scholarship, is impelled by her desire to tell the world about the community, following the reactions she heard to the attack on Chabad House in Mumbai in 2008 in which the rabbi and his wife were killed. “I would get questions like ‘Was the establishment of the Chabad house the first time Jews lived in India?’”

I ask Siona about her current Jewish involvement. She tells me that her daughter

Rachel was Bat Mitzvah and they go to a synagogue in Montclair. “My husband is part Jewish, part Russian Orthodox, but he is also an atheist, he is a scientist. He is studying and practising Buddhism and so my house is very eclectic. I have Hindu idols, Muslim prayer rugs on the walls and Buddhas; because I am an artist, I have all these influences.”

As she explains in her ‘artist’s statement’, multi-culturalism is a key element of the message she has for the world.

“After having struggled long with my own hybrid background and experience, I am beginning to see more clearly now that this blend can be humorous, enlightening and revealing. The ornate culture from which I come once seemed difficult and unnecessary to apply in my work. Now I have found a way to use it, to be able to weave current issues and parts of my life in its intricacies, thus making this ornateness strong and meaningful. In this way, I attempt to create a dialogue between the ancient and the modern, forcing a confrontation of unresolved issues. This work emphasises women’s issues and raises questions about identity. The forms, though, may appear unconventional and exotic to some. In this multicultural society, I would like the viewers to transcend this apparent exoticism and absorb the core message – tolerance of diversity.”

Finding Home: The Art of Siona Benjamin continues at the JCC Manhattan until 29 July 2011. *Siona Benjamin: My Magic Carpet* is at the Flomenhaft Gallery, 547 West 27th Street, New York, 15 September-29 October 2011. See www.artsiona.com for more of Siona Benjamin’s work.

FIND OUT MORE

All Communities

Who are the Jews of India, Nathan Katz, California, 2009

The most recent history to thoroughly cover all communities

India’s Jewish Heritage, Ritual, Art and Lifecycle, ed. Shalva Weil, Marg Publications, 2002

The Jews of India – A Story of Three Communities, Catalogue of exhibition at Israel Museum Jerusalem 1995.

Both of these have excellent information on heritage with superb illustrations.

Bene Israel Jews

Genetics, Mass Media and Identity: A case study of the Genetic Research on the Lemba and Bene Israel, Tudor

Parfitt and Yulia Egorova, Routledge, 2006

The Bene Israel A comprehensive Enquiry and Source book, Shirley Isenberg, Brandeis, 1988

The Book of Esther, 2002 and other novels by Esther David See page 24 and www.estherdavid.com

Dropped from Heaven: Stories Sophie Judah, Schocken, 2007

The Girl from Foreign, Sadia Shepherd, Penguin, 2009

Shepherd returns for two years to India to learn about her roots.

The film *Next Year in Bombay, 2010*, Directed by Jonas Parienté and Mathias Mangi, is currently doing the rounds of the film festivals. Its main protagonists are Sharon and Sharona Galuskar. Trained in Israel to provide

education in the community, they are wondering whether to stay in their native Mumbai or return to Israel.

Cochin Jews

The History of the Jews of Cochin B. Segal, Vallentine Mitchell, 1993.

Ruby of Cochin: An Indian Jewish Woman Remembers Ruby Daniel and Barbara C Johnson, Jewish Publication Society, 1995

The Last Jews of Kerala, Edna Fernandez, 2008. Fernandez spent several months in Cochin talking to its Jewish residents

The Moor’s Last Sigh, Salman Rushdie, Vintage 1996.

Contains an evocative account of Jewish life in Cochin
Kashrut, Caste and Kabbalah: The

Religious Life of the Jews of Cochin, Manohar, 2005, Nathan Katz and Ellen Goldberg

Baghdadi Jews

Jews in British India: Identity in a Colonial Era, Joan G. Roland, 1989

The Sassoons, Stanley Jackson, Heinemann 1968

Jews of the Raj See page 18
Indian Jewish Cooking, Mavis Hyman, Hyman Publishers, 1992

For many more books see: www.jewishindia.com

Our thanks to Jyotika Jain for making her splendid photo archive available to us. Her complete Jews of India collection can be viewed on: www.lightstalkers.org/jyotika