

# Jewish existence in Indonesia: identity, recognition, and prejudice

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## **Abstract**

The Jews' arrival to the archipelago began acquainted in the 13th to the 20th century, although, much earlier, history shows the Jew's traffic in the Southeast Asian region had eventuated. In this study, Jew accommodates several meanings, religion – Judaism and the adherents – Jewish or Jewish descendants. Practically, the beliefs' differences are arduously accepted by a few Indonesians. Various stereotypes are imposed on this community as a form of othering. Moreover, radical ideological propaganda encompassing antisemitism incitement is presented conditionally. The absence of legal acknowledgement has impacted limiting Jews' precious wiggle room in enforcing their religious freedom. As a further consequence, they will prefer to conceal their identity to hinder friction or disputes with the opposition. Misleading perceptions about Jews and Israel implicitly politicized identities. Aware of the rising negative sentiments, this paper provides an overview of the Jewish existence in Indonesia, from the historical journey, recognition, and prejudice to identity politics. Analysis of legislation and actual reality is carried out to find out the urgency of recognizing Jews' identity. In the end, Indonesia endures the essential duty to fulfil religious freedom and nurture its diversity for peace.

Kedatangan kaum Yahudi di kepulauan ini mulai diketahui sejak abad ke 13 sampai dengan abad ke 20, bahkan lebih awal, sejarah menunjukkan lalu lintas yahudi telah terjadi di kawasan Asia Tenggara. Dalam penelitian ini, Yahudi mencakup beberapa makna, yaitu agama – yudaisme dan para penganutnya – yahudi dan keturunannya. Secara praktis, perbedaan keyakinan dapat diterima

secara susah payah oleh beberapa masyarakat Indonesia. Berbagai stereotype dipaksakan pada masyarakat ini sebagai bentuk lain. Terlebih lagi, propaganda ideologi yang radikal mencakup hasutan antisemitisme yang disajikan secara kondisional. Tidak hadirnya pengakuan secara legal berdampak pada pembatasan ruang gerak para orang Yahudi yang sangat berharga dalam melaksanakan kebebasan beragama. Sebagai dampak lebih jauh, mereka memilih untuk menyembunyikan keberadaan mereka untuk menghindari perpecahan maupun perselisihan dengan oposisi mereka. Persepsi yang keliru tentang Yahudi dan Israel merupakan identitas yang dipolitisasi secara implisit. Tanggap pada munculnya sentiment negative, penelitian ini mencakup gambaran atas keberadaan Yahudi di Indonesia, dari perjalanan sejarah, pengakuan, dan prasangka terhadap identitas politik. Analisis peraturan perundang-undangan dan realitas yang nyata dilakukan untuk menemukan pentingnya mengenali identitas Yahudi. Pada bagian akhir, Indonesia mengemban tugas yang esensial untuk memenuhi kebebasan beragama dan mengasuh perbedaan untuk kedamaian.

**Keywords:** History, Identity, Indonesian jews, Prejudice, Recognition, Religious freedom

## **Introduction**

Indonesian plurality heretofore is the most interesting and challenging, as it has been recognized for six major religions, which are Islam, Catholicism, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. While other beliefs and religions have not been able to freely exhibit their existence in the public sphere, one of which is Judaism as a minority religion. Jewish has existed in Indonesia for a long time before the colonial era. Some historical traces record evidence of Dutch Jews' existence in Indonesia – they were employed by the colonial government. In Surabaya, we can find the graves of Jews who are considered to be Dutch or at least part of the European group.

Plurality stimulates the country to be more vulnerable to sentimental conflicts related to ethnicity, race, religion, and inter-groups. Historical black notes have at least recorded several religious and belief conflicts that have ever been occurred in Indonesia, including the conflict in Maluku (1999-2002), Poso (1998-2000), and Sampang (2004-2012), as well as radical condemnation,

addressed to Jews over the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in 2009. The political disapproval was especially directed at the Jews, both in Indonesia and Israel. This demonstration was carried out by some people who contradicted two political ideologies, Israelis and Palestinians. It is tough for some Indonesians, who are predominantly Muslim, to accept the Jews' existence. The rigorous political influence of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict seems to hold the reins for extremist thought. Very few people did not perceive their independent thinking and tolerance notion were taken away by their indiscretion in dealing with religious discrepancies.

It is hard to dispel prejudice, stigma, and stereotypes against Jewish. This study examines the practical realities of the lives of Indonesian Jews, regarding recognition and prejudice to earn the apparent outlook of their acceptance by the majority group; delving Jew's arrival history to the archipelago (Indonesia); as well as dig into the identity politics issue attributed the antisemitism in Indonesia. This qualitative research was conducted through a literature study, interviews with several sources (activists) of Indonesian Jews who are also chairman and/or organizers in some socio-religious organizations, and visual observations through some verified recordings. Elaborating the nexus between laws, regulations, and the empirical reality to see the urgency of identity recognition. Thus, I expected this research could provide a clear picture of the current Jewish to demonstrate and maintain its existence in Indonesia. In a practical level, it aims at eradicating misunderstandings among individuals and religious groups.

### **'The Jew' at a glance**

Jewish people generally consist of several major ancestral groups, which are Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi Jews. Ashkenazi Jewish ancestors lived in Central and Eastern European regions such as Germany, Poland, and Russia while Sephardic Jewish ancestors lived in geopolitical areas of the Middle East

and North Africa as well as Southern Europe such as Spain, who allegedly strongly connected to socio-cultural and genetic ties toward Iranian Judaism (Zeublin 1892, 471; Das, Wexler, Pirooznia, and Elhaik 2017, 2, 4). Mizrahi Jews also have a separate Middle Eastern genealogical heritage, their existence has been known since Late Antiquity, where the majority of the community lives in Iraq, Iran, and Yemen (Solomin 2021). In general, the ethnic dichotomy of the Jewish community based on the geographical location of the continent shows the ‘origin,’ in particular, the large continent in the West consisting of America, Oceania, and Europe later known as the base of Ashkenazi Jews and the Asian and African continents, to be precise, the Middle East region which known as the region of origin of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews (Lewin-Epstein and Cohen 2018, 1-2). Jewish family law adheres to a patrilineal system meanwhile the determination of Jewish identity embraces the matrilineal system that is drawn from the female lineage, the mother. Israeli Jews are classified according to patrilineal lines for certain things as exceptions are set to follow a patrilineal system (Cohen 1985, 20). Cohen provides an evolution overview of the descendant principle from patrilineal to matrilineal introduced by Ezra, the Scribe or the Elamite Clan (Southwest Iran) as well as the rules of matrilineal contained in the *Mishna Kilayim* Law on the prohibition of mixing – in this case the attention lies in mixed marriages between Jewish women and non-Jewish men which were considered to have serious consequences, the offspring of the marriage would be considered as *mamzer* or non-Jews (See Mishna Kiddushin 3:12 and Mishna Yevamot 7:5). But overall *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* (Rabbi *Talmud*<sup>1</sup>) as well as most Jews agree that the offspring of mixed marriages between Jewish women and non-Jewish men follow the status of their mother as a Jew (Cohen 1985, 24-5, 30, 32, 35, 52-3). In this case, Cohen speculated,

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<sup>1</sup> The *Talmud* is one of the texts, contains a set of Jewish legal teachings including commentary on the Torah in it.

the development of the kinship system was also possible due to the changing status of women in ancient Judaism.

The “Jew” in this study comprises several understandings, which are referred to (a) nationality or ethnicity related to genealogy (Judeans/Judean/Jewish); (b) one of the Abrahamic religious entities; (c) adherents of Judaism; and/or (d) Torah followers, then in the points ‘c’ and ‘d’ include people who convert to Judaism as well as those who only believe and do not convert. In more detail, the results of interviews with Rabbi Benjamin Meijer Verbrugge and Mrs. Abigail Wiriaatmadja, explain the existence of the Jewish community in Indonesia. Conversion is a way for someone to be recognized as a “Jew” (only in this case as distinguished from the term Judaism adherent or Torah follower) or socially considered to be part of the legal Jewish community. The same holds true for my interviewees, who are Jewish descent inherited by the lineage of their mother. So far, the conversion is carried out under an authorized institution (such as rabbinic assembly or *beit din*), and then the person will obtain a conversion certificate (*teudab*). In Indonesia, there is no competent institution to organize this activity, for someone who needs to convert, it can be done abroad, such as in Singapore and Australia.

The Jewish community in Indonesia, not only consists of Indonesian citizens but also expatriates where they have their respective associations and are not centralized in one institution that houses them. Some of the Indonesian Jews gather with expatriate Jews or are in a community organization with other fellow Indonesian Jews, such as those who join *The United Indonesian Jewish Community*. The community was officially founded in 2010, aiming to be a forum for both Jews and people who are interested in studying Judaism, regardless of their biological inheritance or even having no Jewish lineage at all (Interview with Verbrugge 2021). There are three developing Jewish sects in Indonesia, including Orthodox, Conservative, and Progressive (Reform) Jews. It also does not rule out the possibility of other sects’ existence, such as

Reconstructionist, Humanistic, and Renewal. Orthodox Judaism is the mainstream of Judaism which teaches strict adherence to Judaism's traditional beliefs, laws, and traditions, for example reflected in its worship activities that separate men and women (Yomtov 2019, 57-8; Interview with Rabbi Verbrugge 2021). The Jews who disagree with the orthodoxy, at the beginning of the 19th century encouraged the emergence of Progressive Judaism which was oriented towards adjustment to modern social, political, and cultural situations, offering 'freedom', so it displays a change or abandonment of beliefs, laws, and traditional Judaism customs that are considered inappropriate. Equality promotion provides opportunities for women to be ordained as rabbis (Interview with Verbrugge 2021). While the renewal movement, a religious revival emerged in the mid-20th century initiated by Hasidic Jews who sought to explore Jewish mysticism and spirituality and establish more intimate communities (called *havurah*) than traditional synagogues due to loss of trust in communal rabbis as a representation of traditional leadership structures (Goodman 2018, 424; *the Pluralism Project* 2020).

In addition, for Jews who oppose Progressive Jewish ideology, developed a conservative ideology, started in the 1800s in Germany which carried a "middle way" between Orthodox Jews and Progressive Jews thereby flexible modifications were still made to suit the times but sticking to the core teachings of the Torah and the beliefs of Judaism (Yomtov 2019, 61-2). The next development was the emergence of the Jewish Reconstructionism sect in the 1920s in the United States which held the view that reforms needed to be carried out in order to maintain its vitality and relevance, Judaism was not only devoted to the nation of Israel but was open to all those who wished to have a spiritual relationship with God (Yomtov 2019, 63, 65). While Humanistic Judaism was born in the 1960s, but it differs in characteristics from most Judaism sects, it denies theism but retains the culture of Judaism – Judaism and theism are considered detached entities (Neto 2019, 2).

On the sentences: “*Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone*” in Deuteronomy 6:4 (*Shema*) and “*He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath; there is nothing else*” in Deut. 4:39 represents Jewish identity as a monotheistic religion that upholds the oneness of God, the Creator of the universe – *creatio ex nihilo* (Tuling 2020, 133; Lebens 2020, 31, 107). Jewish theological rationalism emphasizes the transcendence of God – the existence of life is embodied in the idea that the Torah is “inside everything” not only the mystical spiritual provisions contained therein but also a source of knowledge which disclosing extraordinary in-depth efforts are needed to find out God’s rationale (Tuling 2020, xx, 26).

Jewish community solidarity expresses the social process in society in which religion and law together play a role in social control and provide a value function through the collective consciousness internalized in the Jewish individual directing him to be cooperative (Kadish, Shmidman, and Fishbane 2020, 212). Therefore, faith places more emphasis on personal relationships with God or the supreme being and in carrying out human principles. In Judaism, the Jews worship God Almighty only and are not allowed to worship others, including idols (Gruenwald 2003, 160-1; Boyarin 2017, 254). In Leviticus (Lev.) 25:42 and 55 and Kiddushin 22b declare the people of Israel in this case, the Jews, are not servants of kings but servants of God – *Hashem* the just ruler as stated in Lev. 24:22 (Freehof 1953, 17). The fundamental principles of Judaism according to Lebens, include: (a) creation – from nothing into something ‘existence’ (Lebens 2020, 31), (b) The event of revelation on Mount Sinai (Lebens 2020, 195, 198), and (c) messianism, the creator destined to care for his creation – coming as savior (Lebens 2020, 233, 239). One prominent Jewish vision is *aliyah*, returning – coming back home to Israel as this practice has historically arisen due to the discomfort of the Zakhos<sup>2</sup> Jews at that time in

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<sup>2</sup> Inhabits the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

Iraq, so they emigrated to the territory of Israel which is considered the “home” of the Jews and this notion transformed into the basic tenets of Zionism (Gavish 2010, 335).

Rituals are inseparable from the religious domain in a theological discourse in which spiritual values are manifested (Gruenwald 2003, 143). Judaism is basically a family religion, most rituals are applied in homes, or synagogues (Interview with Verbrugge 2021). Rituals of worship conducts in the family’s internal sphere and exclusive communally in the synagogue are essentially very private, so that they are very sacred and solemn in their implementation. *Sabbath* is one of the institutionalized rituals of the Ten Commandments – a “holy” day that is used as a momentum to draw closer to God. The Jews have an understanding that God is transcendent and invisible but that He is personal and approachable (Yomtov 2019, 38). Through the inner attachment, the incorporeal implies His existence. The *Sabbath* ritual starts at sunset (evening) on Friday until sunset the next day, Saturday as is contained in Exodus (Ex.) 20:8-11; Ex. 31:13, 16, and 17; and Deut. 5:12-15 (Sarna 1989, 14; Gruenwald 2000, 21).

### **Headed east**

Historically, the arrival of Jews to the Malay-Indonesian archipelago is divided into several periods: the ancient time, the Holocaust, colonialism, independence, and post-revolution.

#### **1. Ancient times (500s BC to 1512 AD)**

In the period around 500 to 550 BC when the Persian empire expanded, the Jews chose to migrate to Europe due to persecution and forced expulsion from Palestine (Jerusalem) during Roman times (Park 2004, 14). In the period 586 BC to 70 AD Jerusalem Jews traveling to eastern Indonesia (Maluku, East Timor, and Papua) via the silk (trade) route (Interview with Verbrugge 2021). In its development, in the 8th to 13th centuries



international trade networks had been built in the Indian Ocean region (Reid 2010, 374). In the period 960-1289 AD, precisely when the Song Dynasty was reign in China, the mobilization of the Jews through the trans-Asian silk route was quite intense, especially seen from the inter-regional migration from Harbin to Shanghai, Shanghai to Manila, Penang to Surabaya, and Surabaya to Singapore (Goldstein 2015). The Cairo Geniza document shows Jews had entered Southeast Asia in 1290 AD with evidence of the tomb of Jewish merchants from Fustat, Egypt at Barus Harbor, Sumatra (Reid 2010, 374; Goldstein 2015).

The arrival of Portuguese Jews occurred in the period from 1512 AD to 1641 AD in which the expelled Jews went east, assisted by Vasco da Gama to flee to India, Malacca (Kristang Community), Maluku, East Timor, and Papua (Interview with Verbrugge 2021). In the 1600s, the Dutch East Indies trading company (VOC) took over the territory of the Vasco da Gama colony in the Dutch East Indies, specifically Maluku, where an estimated 80 percent of its members were Jews (Reade 1898, 601; Interview with Verbrugge 2021). Rapid trade encouraged Aceh to open its ports in the 18th to 19th centuries to support international trade traffic in which Sephardic Jewish traders took advantage of these market opportunities, including avoiding the Dutch and British trade monopolies (Reid 2010, 374).

## 2. Holocaust time

The security crisis occurred in Europe in 1933-1945, the Nazis just established and ruled up to Germany surrendered to the Soviets on May 9, 1945 (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2021). The year 1933 marked the first flight of Jews from Germany since the Nazis governed, then conditions were exacerbated by the abolition of Jewish civil rights two years later (Davies 2008, 26). The rise of antisemitism spread at those times throughout Eastern Europe made the Jews find rejection and this was

heightened by the domestic crisis provoked by the Wall Street crash in 1929 (Davies 2008, 27). Consequently, European Jews migrated to America (Yomtov 2019, 34) and Asia, one of which was to Indonesia to seek refuge. At first, the Holocaust was a movement initiated by the Jews in Germany to claim their rights which had been taken away by the cruelty of Nazi absolutism, but gradually the Holocaust was remembered as the single worst history in Jewish life. The establishment of Israel in 1948 became a momentum for Jews to return or emigrate for the sake of protection and security, including the Yemeni Jewish community (Verskin 2019, 12).

### 3. Colonialism era

During the reign of the Dutch East Indies, the Jews were considered to have been in Indonesia in the 17th century whom they became part of the government (*Vereenigde Oost Indische Compagnie* – VOC). In this era, Jews are attached to the negative stereotype of “kafir” as the basis for alienating this community from the existence of the largest majority religious adherents in Indonesia (Zarman 2018, 6-7). In the 1920s, Jews on the island of Java alone were estimated at 2,000 people who lived in economic ease and could enjoy political privileges, one of which, the resident governor of Surabaya called *Coen* or *Cohen* was a Jew among the Jews among those who held many government positions. (Goldstein 2012, 105). According to Goldstein, there were also Middle Eastern Jewish traders from Baghdad-Iraq and Aden-Yemen – Sephardic or Mizrahi Jews – who practiced Judaism like European Jews and built close trade relations with their relatives in Southeast, East, and South Asia, such as Singapore, India, Hong Kong, and China. Solidarity led some European Jews from Surabaya and Padang to found the Dutch East Indies Zionist Association (*Nederlands Indische Zionistenbond*) in 1926 (Goldstein 2012, 106). Goldstein asserts, in the decade after the end of the 1920s, Jewish refugees migrated to Surabaya due to the rise of fascism in Central and Eastern Europe.

Kowner in his short article “An Obscure History” as related to his journal article “The Japanese Internment of Jews in Wartime Indonesia and Its Causes” refers to Hadler's research (2004) which reveals that in the 1930s, Jews in Indonesia consisted of several elements, namely a) descendants or citizens of the Netherlands who worked for the colonial government, b) people of Iraqi descent or nationality and countries in the Middle East who worked as traders, and c) Jewish refugees from mainland Europe – those fleeing Nazi persecution (Kowner 2011). At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, colonial government officials and Jewish entrepreneurs established community relations, especially according to van Gelder, these entrepreneurs are able to manage their community and maintain its sustainability even though the next generation tends not to preserve the exclusivity of their community and it indicates degenerating Jewish heritage due to mixed marriages (Kamsma 2010, 389-90).

During World War II there were about 375,000 people (men and women) from Africa employed by the British to be part of the allied forces who participated in campaigns in various regions, such as Italy, North Africa, East Africa, the Middle East, and the Far East<sup>3</sup> (Tucker 2013, 22). The number of Jews in Indonesia in the period 1941 to 1945 reached 3,000 followers (Kowner 2010, 349). At the end of World War II, the international community began to respond to cases of gross human rights violations against the Jewish community until 1942 (Davies 2008, 28) even though at the same time, under Japanese rule in Java, Jewish refugees were exiled in the tent of seclusion and rendered him unable to communicate with the outside world. Rabbi Verbrugge's \*grandfather experienced it,

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<sup>3</sup> Considered covering the Southeast Asian region because at that time the distribution of troops reached up to the territory of Myanmar. Although it did not explicitly write whether or not the troops were sent to the archipelago (Indonesia).

\*Benyamin Verbrugge, who that year was captured by the Japanese Military but at the crucial moment, he did not admit his identity as a Jew (Interview with Verbrugge 2021). Apparently, the shadow of antisemitism was still burning, he was sent to Hiroshima for forced labor, was also subjected to violence until he was imprisoned for 3.5 months, before finally surviving the Hiroshima bombing in 1945. The concealment of his Jewishness was due to the unpleasant agenda of the Germans who planned to take 1,000 Jews from Indonesia. On the other hand, Jewish immigrants from the east (Middle East) ended in 539 BC when the Persians succeeded in conquering Babylon and they were allowed to return to their territory, Judea, around Bethlehem, Palestine (Bloom 2007, 14). In the 19th to 20th centuries, the migration of Yemeni Jews was an organic response to the economic and political instability in Yemen at which time Islamization was intensely carried out on orphans born to non-Muslim parents because Zaydi law stipulates the perspective of Islam as a natural religion (Ariel 2014, 45, 118).

#### 4. Independence time

At the time of independence, there were more than 1,500 Jews in Indonesia based on a survey conducted by the World Jewish Congress (Hadler 2004, 306). The Indonesian Zionist organization that still existed in the 1950s based in Surabaya was asked to be the most settled Zionist organization in East or Southeast Asia (Goldstein 2012, 107). Until the mid-1950s-1960s, Goldstein explained, some Jews also emigrated to Israel, and among those who remained in Indonesian territory they carried out their Jewish life by tending their synagogues and funerals (Goldstein 2012, 102, 107).

#### 5. Post-revolutionary period

It could be seen from the establishment of the independent organization which houses the Jews. In 2004, Rabbi Verbrugge studied the Bible in his spiritual identity, while he found moments where Jewish descendants were trying to expand their network towards each other through social media.

This was the beginning of the local Jewish community establishment (Interview with Verbrugge 2021). Currently, he estimates that there are more than 5,000 Indonesians who are Jews and spread across several regions in Indonesia, let say, Jakarta, Surabaya, Ambon, and Papua. These Indonesian Jews then joined a community called the *United Indonesia Jewish Community* which was founded in 2010 by Rabbi Verbrugge although not all Indonesian Jews became members.

## **Recognition and prejudice**

### ***Recognition***

The following legal provisions are embodied in the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia regarding the recognition of human rights to embrace and believe in certain religions and/or beliefs, which include:

#### 1. Main Articles

- Article 28 E paragraphs (1) and (2)
- Article 28 I paragraph (1)
- Article 29 paragraph (2)

#### 2. Supporting Articles

- Article 28 D paragraph (1): The right to recognition, guarantee, protection, legal certainty, and equality before the law.
- Article 28 I paragraph (1) and (4): The right to be free from discriminatory treatment, protection, and fulfilment of human rights is the responsibility of the state.
- Article 28 J paragraph (1) and (2): Respect for human rights, subject to restrictions established by law.

In general, the fulfilment of these human rights is limited by the provisions of Article 28J paragraphs (1) and (2) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. Guarantees of freedom of religion are also contained in the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Human Rights Act.

1. Universal Declaration of Human Rights

a. Article 18 Declaration

- Everyone has the right to embrace a religion or belief.
- Everyone is free to change his religion or belief.
- Everyone has the right to manifest their religion or belief.

2. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

a. Article 18 paragraph (1), (2), and (3)

- Everyone has the right to embrace a religion or belief according to his choice and freedom.
- Everyone has the right to manifest their belief in worship, in practice, or through teaching.
- Restrictions on freedom in the manifestation of religion or belief are determined by law in the interest of public order.

b. Article 27

- Protection of the rights of minority groups.

3. Law No. 39 of 1999 concerning Human Rights

a. Article 4

- The right to religion is a human right.
- The right to religion cannot be prosecuted on the basis of a law that is retroactive and reduced under any circumstances and by anyone.

b. Article 22 paragraph (1), (2) and Elucidation of Article 22

- Everyone is free to embrace religion and worship according to their beliefs.
- The state guarantees freedom of religion and worship.
- Freedom to embrace religion means that it does not contain elements of coercion from any party.

The 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia regulates the life nation and state based on monotheism, as stated in Pancasila and Article 29 paragraph (1). In the foundational principle (*grundnorm*), Pancasila, the first principle reads “Belief in One Supreme God”. The word “*Esa*” has various kinds. Practically, one means one or singular. Meanwhile, in the next paragraph, the State provides space for people to carry out worship according to their religion or belief. Indirectly, the State recognizes religious diversity. Based on the Decree of the President of the Republic of Indonesia Number 1/PNPS of 1965 concerning Prevention of the Abuse and/or Blasphemy of Religion Elucidation of Article 1 states that six religions are recognized for their existence in Indonesia, namely Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. These six religions get more protection with the enactment of the Presidential Decree. The adherents of beyond official religions could not fully obtain these privileges. Elucidation of Article 1 of the Decree of the President of the Republic of Indonesia No. 1/PNPS of 1965 concerning Prevention of the Abuse and/or Blasphemy of Religion, confirms that the existence of other religions in Indonesia, such as Judaism, Zoroastrian, Shintoism, and Taoism is not prohibited, continue to receive full guarantees as stated in Article 29 paragraph (2) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia as long as it does not violate any legal provisions.

This explanation indicated the State realizing diversity, including the existence of Jews since then. This provision is not an acknowledgment of a ‘Jew’ institution but at least *de facto*. The legal consequences affect Jewish social life. Problems faced include marriage certificates, resident identity cards, and permits related to building construction. It is in this grey area which law should govern it. The Identity Card (ID) is a form of population administration system as a gateway for citizens to access their civil and political rights. Previously, believers of beyond official religions could not write their religion and belief in the religion column, so they often chose to leave it blank by using a hyphen (-)

or write it with another religion. Actually, filling out the religion column on the ID aims to ensure handling the burial.

### ***Prejudice***

Many assumptions develop, there is a contradiction when Jews openly admit their Jewish identity in public. One of the most opposed to its existence is the Muslim extremists. A shallow perspective in practicing the contents contained in the Koran appears in a provocative view that only puts forward the idea of a 'Jewish figure' which is contradicted and considered to override Islamic principles that uphold difference and tolerance in the context of humanity. Extremists utilize religion as a political tool to even gain political interests (Beyers 2015, 142). So far, prejudice and illegitimate justification have developed as an exasperating narrative that possibly divides the nation. The identification by conflating 'Jew' with 'Israel' is an ironic misapprehension (Interview with Verbrugge and Wiriaatmadja 2021). It is considered a mistake. The following is also stated by Rabbi Baruch in *The Times of Israel*:

“Generally speaking, Indonesians don’t differentiate between being Jewish and Israel. They think Jews and Israel are the enemy of their religion and state,” – Rabbi Yaakov Baruch (Brieger and Buol 2019).

This prejudices indirectly affects the careful attitude of the Jews to show who they are, in that context they often conceal their identity in public. The Jews decided not to publicly reveal their identity or carry out their worship in public (Interview with Verbrugge and Wiriaatmadja 2021). This doesn’t mean that they are not proud to be a Jew, but the concealment is meant to avoid conflict and prevent insecurity and discomfort for themselves. The discriminatory labelling cannot be separated from the political history which is closely related to Judaism, as for the two major issues, antisemitism and Israel’s occupation of Palestine. The first issue occurred in Europe during the reign of Hitler (Nazi Germany) which lasted for 12 years. The mass killing of Jews at



that time was considered an international crime of genocide. Hitler is even said to have succeeded in channelling his apocalyptic ideas into real political action (Dawidowicz 1975, 33). Antisemitism and Islamophobia have something in common in terms of initiating a criminalist ideology with the racial idea of “hatred” against followers of a particular religion. But on the other hand, there has been an extensification of the problem to the point of involving other identities, the bias between Judaism and Zionism and Islam and Terrorism. Zionism today is known as a national movement of the Jews that is full of political agendas, although in the pre-war period in Italy, in the 1930s, the existence of Zionism was considered more as a cultural-based movement than a political movement (Dawidowicz 1975, 428). The movement underlies the idea of establishing Jewish land in Eretz Israel as it is believed to be a place promised by God to Abraham and his descendants (Yomtov 2019, 59).

### ***Identity politics***

Nowadays, the existence of Jewish in Indonesia visibly noticed from a firmly standing synagogue, *Shaar HaShamayim*, in Tondano, Manado and from the historical traces and sites. In Surabaya, a synagogue called *Beth Hashem* or *Beth Shalom* has been firmly established since 1948. The synagogue is a cultural heritage building according to the Decree of the Surabaya Culture and Tourism Office No. 646/1654/436.6.14/2009 (Ali 2019, 90) before it was razed to the ground in 2013. The omission of the synagogue by its owner, a Jewish family, since 2009 led to it being finally transferred to a private party who bought the land for the synagogue (Interview with Wiriaatmadja 2021). The closing of the synagogue was published in the Dutch online newspaper, NRC, in 2009 by Elske Schouten, “*De sjoel van Surabaya, de dingen die voorbijgaan.*” At the moment, there were mass demonstrations defending Palestine in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Allegedly, the result of the brutality of the demonstration had an indirect impact on the closing of the synagogue in Surabaya (Banka 2019).

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict is highly politically charged. The influence of political propaganda was able to destroy the solidarity and tolerance that had been built by the community where politics used differences in identity (ethnic, religious, racial, and inter-group) as a means of pitting against each other or it could be called “*Divide et Impera in Post-Colonialism.*” Intolerance towards the Jewish community is considered a form of antisemitism in Indonesia, based on the Indonesian State Report on Human Rights Practices in 2011. Antisemitism is closely related to radical Islamic ‘politics’, those relating to the following: (a) the application of divine rights, (b) religious and political unity, (c) othering – the in-group and out-group distinctions for people who are considered believers and non-believers, (d) militancy-based jihad (leading to radicalism), and (e) differentiation of the concepts of ‘house of Islam’ and ‘house of war’ (Fastenbauer 2020, 281). The perception of the majority (progressive) Muslim understand “Jew” as a religion and society – “dissimilar” with their groups, ‘Islam and Muslims’ – and try to place Judaism in the Islamic traditions and history (Ali 2010, 331). People’s ignorance of the background of the Jews further exacerbates the situation.

Antisemitism prejudice against the Jews is not actually a resultant form of religious conflict but a religion, in this case, is used as a tool to create an arena of sentimental scrimmage. Political motive is very dominant for distinguishing them (Beller 1997, 102). “Jews” has a negative connotation in Indonesia, which means a threat (Samsuri in McVey and Feith 2002, 183; Siegel 2000, 39). According to Siegel, the presence of Jews who are considered as a threat is very difficult to identify, it is impossible to even know where the influence of the “deemed bad” Jews came from – Jews are not something to be afraid of, but are possible to give a traumatic impression to the Indonesian people. However, in fact, Siegel admits that the source of the trauma is vague thus in this case, false narratives, negative propaganda, and expletive for antisemitism are

perhaps simultaneously wrapped up in a conspiracy which in the end makes things worse.

Conspiracy theories in pre-revolutionary Indonesia were sparked by ultra-conservative Islamic groups together with radical leaders and thugs who created national and international conspiracies to carry out a coup against the New Order government (Hadiwinata 2009, 282). Hadiwinata emphasized that the conspirators had based their conspiracy on political motives by explaining the conspiracy of domestic and world official institutions, including the international Jewish business network that acted simultaneously to destroy the country's economy and impeach the Suharto government. This conspiracy is a form of spreading antisemitic ideology which at that time they considered a "caution" to prevent the opportunity for the transfer of power to fall on the Zionist group. This conspiracy at least shows the possibility of other reasons that are implicit, hidden, and abstract (Bruinessen 1994). The ignited antisemitism is also possible for other purposes, namely the rejection of guilt or giving empathy to past wounds (persecution and negative prejudice) so that they tend to show a negative portrait of the Jewish people regardless of their accuracy and truth (Bergmann 2008, 357). Conspiracies are very vulnerable or sensitive to emerge at certain situational moments (Grzesiak-Feldman 2013, 112), especially in political contestations. All prejudices reflect intergroup anxiety related to negative historical perceptions so when they make contact with others they tend to behave negatively (Stephan, et. al. 2005, 15; Bilewicz 2007, 553, 561; Grzesiak-Feldman 2013, 101). Aware of the vulnerability of the Jewish minority in Indonesia to be misunderstood and scapegoated, the media is considered as one way to convey the truth in order to deny false news and foster a sense of tolerance among religious believers. This is the concern of *Eits Chaim* to protect the purity of the Jewish religion, the humanistic side of Judaism, and the land of Israel as part of it (Interview with Wiriaatmadja 2021).

## **Conclusion**

The arrival of Middle Eastern and European Jews from the 500s BC to the 1930s AD stimulated an outset of Jews' existence in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, but its presence is often misunderstood and even misrepresented – seen as threatening by some, extremists. Prejudice against Jewish communities led them strictly protect their religion and disguise their identities in some cases to avoid conflict. Jews' issues are hardly disjunct from antisemitism discourse which is strongly connected to identity politics in the homeland and religious politics in the Middle East. While some people are reluctant to argue about beliefs and take immeasurable reckless steps and carry out physical and verbal persecution and judgment. The creation of an image of superiority herds him apt to be antipathetic to the obvious distinction. What is most feared is how radical extremists and politicians use identity politics as a means of provocation for local people in the regions. Antisemitic sentiments were echoed and a negative stigma against the Jews was inherent in those who embraced radicalism. They identify multiple distinct entities into a single entity, assuming that Jews are Israel and Israel is Jews. His dislike for one party, call it Israel – in a political context, becomes a one-sided justification for Judaism, which incidentally is a religion, not politics even though most of the Israeli people embrace Judaism. This knowledge gap reflects a 'less mature' attitude in dealing with differences as a necessity. Tolerance indicates pragmatic recognition. Recognition of religious freedom has consequences for treating them fairly and actualizing equality. While the guarantee of religious freedom has two legal consequences, first regarding life choices to choose what one adheres to and second regarding the manifestation.

Practically, the existence of the Jewish community is accepted by the majority of Indonesian people, yet, only the rejection by a small number of people and/or groups who have a “misunderstanding” or racist mentality towards it. Nevertheless, vigilance requires to be done considering provocative

and discriminatory movements and even racism are latent threats. Recognition of other religions and beliefs outside the official religions, is an important matter of fulfilling human rights. So far, the absence of legal recognition of Judaism has neglected some of the essentials of religious rights, such as the non-recognition of Jewish marital status and the potential for disturbances that cause discomfort. Jewish marriage could be registered when they carry out a marriage with a written document stating that they are embracing one of the official religions so that the marriage becomes legal according to state law. In addition, it is not uncommon for Jews to experience humiliation to the terror which causes them to be limited in their space of movement in relation to the implementation of their right to freedom of religion. If until now Judaism has not been recognized as an official religion, it does not mean that its existence is not allowed. As long as the Jewish community does not do things that are prohibited by laws and regulations and social norms, its existence should not be prevented or considered a social and cultural threat because essentially Jew, is politically free.

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### Interview

Online interview with Abigail Wiriaatmadja from Eits Chaim Indonesia on November 25, 2021.

Online interview with Rabbi Benjamin Meijer Verbrugge from United Indonesian Jewish Community on November 17, 2021.