

The image features a historical map of Southeast Asia as a background. At the top center, a globe is mounted on a stand. A decorative banner with a scalloped edge and ornate scrollwork frames the title. Below the banner, a scroll with a textured, parchment-like appearance contains the main text. The map shows various regions with Latin labels such as 'CAMBODIA', 'SIAM', 'BREMIA', and 'CACHY CHINA'. The title 'TRACKING A LOST TRIBE' is prominently displayed in the center.

TRACKING A LOST TRIBE

A reporter traveled to a remote jungle in the far northeast corner of India to determine if a small sect is indeed a remnant of the lost tribe of Menashe.

SEVERAL months ago I attended a wedding in Beit-El, a religious settlement in the West Bank. It's not a place I would normally travel to on a foggy winter night, not even for a wedding. But this was an obligation. I had been asked to represent the father of the groom, who was far away.

Earlier that evening, I had found the spot, outside a yeshiva in Jerusalem, where the wedding guests were instructed to assemble and then boarded an armored bus, the kind that plies the roads to the settlements these days. In it were several Israelis and a large contingent of young people who looked Tibetan or Burmese. The boys wore skullcaps. Some were in army uniform and carried guns. During the half-hour trip they laughed and joked in a gentle language that hit sudden, hiccuppy high notes.

The bus pulled into Beit-El and parked by a plain-looking synagogue. The groom, a young man

in his 20s, was waiting for me. We entered the synagogue, where Ya'akov Shimon, a jolly rabbi of Yemenite extraction, filled out the *ketubah*, the marriage contract. Coming to the names of the bride and groom he wrote, "Margi, the daughter of Sarah" and "Ezra, the son of Abraham."

Then it was time for the evening prayer. The groom prayed fluently, with the body language of an Orthodox Jew. I wondered whether he still had my little prayer book, printed in Jerusalem, that I had given him on an impulse four years earlier in the far-away place where his parents lived, when I had seen him staring at its metal binding with the symbols of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. He had kissed it before putting it in his pocket.

The wedding was held in a simple hall near the synagogue. The groom and I linked arms and were escorted to the wedding canopy, in modern Israeli Orthodox fashion, by rows of young men dancing

H I L L E L
H A L K I N



A unique Jewish wedding takes place in Beit-El, a religious settlement in the West Bank where Ezra and Margi exchanged their vows. The young couple, who are converts, belong to the Kuki-Chin-Mizo, a Tibeto-Burmese people claiming to be descendants of the lost Biblical tribe of Menashe. Rebbetzin Rivka Shimon accompanies the bride. Reporter Hillel Halkin (second from right) stands in for the father of the groom, who was far away.

COURTESY OF HILLEL HALKIN

backward before us while they clapped and sang. The bride was honored in similar fashion in an effort to observe the commandment “to make joyous the bride and the groom.” Solemn, the two of them stood beneath the canopy with me on the groom’s left and the rabbi’s wife on the bride’s right. The rabbi chanted the blessings. The wine was drunk. The ring was slipped on the bride’s finger. The traditional glass was broken. The flashbulbs popped. The son of Abraham and the daughter of Sarah—as converts are called for ritual purposes by Jewish custom—were husband and wife.



Darnghaka (pictured far left) is one of two Mizos who originated the Lost Tribe belief in 1954, after having a vision. Yitzhak Thanjom, an interpreter (center), shakes his hand as the author (far right) photographs the scene in a jungle rice field in northern Mizoram. Yosi Hualngo, Ezra’s father (center photo), is about to slaughter a goat in a reenactment of a religious sacrifice.

The guests began to dance to the loud music of a wedding band, men and women separately, as is Orthodox custom. The young speakers of the hickey language joined in. Ezra and Margi were carried high on chairs. A wedding meal was served. The rabbi gave a talk and blessed the newlyweds.

Then it was my turn to speak. The groom had asked me to say a few words. I stepped up to the microphone and began: “This is a special occasion. One doesn’t often witness the Jewish marriage of two people whose ancestors may have been separated from our own 2,700 years ago. The bride and groom have come a long way in time and space to be here tonight. Had anyone predicted four years ago when Ezra first told me of his dream of joining the Jewish people in Israel that I would be attending his wedding in Beit-El, I’m not sure I would have believed it.”

I had first met the groom, whose full name was Ezra Chhakchhuak-Hualngo, in 1998 in Aizawl, the capital of the state of Mizoram, a remote jungle-covered area in the far northeast corner of India. Ezra belonged to the Kuki-Chin-Mizo, a Tibeto-Burmese people, whose seemingly improbable claim that it

descends from the “lost” Biblical tribe of Menashe I had gone to investigate as a journalist.

I did not believe this claim when I set out the first time for India. But I was fascinated by the question of why perhaps hundreds of thousands of people in a far-off corner of the world should suddenly decide they were members of one of the Ten Lost Tribes. This belief has led 5,000 of them to live as observant Jews. Calling themselves “B’nei Menashe,” these Judaizers are scattered in numerous urban and rural communities in both Mizoram and the adjacent Indian state of Manipur and—to a lesser degree—in Chin State in western Burma.

Burma is today the only place where vestiges of the old Kuki-Chin-Mizo religion, which in India has been replaced entirely by Christianity, have been kept alive. Unfortunately, Western Burma is closed to foreigners by the Burmese military regime, which makes it difficult to determine whether these vestiges indeed



have in them the eerie echoes of Biblical texts and practices that they are said to have. But I was able to circumvent this restriction by smuggling out Burmese informants, including some of the last practicing priests of the old religion. And I was also able to find in towns and villages in Mizoram and Manipur—many accessible only by jungle roads

CLAIMING THE EXISTENCE OF A REMNANT OF A LOST
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made almost impassable by the monsoon rains—elderly people who still remembered some of the old rites. Once I had to walk six or seven miles through the jungle to reach an 86-year-old man harvesting his rice who was instrumental in spreading the lost tribe belief in the 1950s.

Among the people who helped me the most with my investigations was Ezra's father, Yosi Hualngo. Though raised Christian like all Mizos of his generation, he had devoted himself to gathering information about the pre-Christian religion of his ancestors

best of his ability. I had prayed with many of them in their synagogues, often traditional bamboo-and-thatch structures with an Ark that sometimes held a plastic toy Torah.

The B'nei Menashe had originated in the 1970s, influenced by the Lost Tribe belief prevalent in the Christian society around them, and had been guided since the late 1980s by a Jerusalem rabbi named Eli-



COURTESY OF MILLEK HALKIN

as it existed before the British missionaries appeared at the end of the 19th century.

Yosi was not his original name. That was Biak-enga. He had taken a Hebrew name, and given Biblical names to his three children, after joining the B'nei Menashe. Like others of the group, he was trying to live an observant Jewish life to the



COURTESY OF MILLEK HALKIN

ahu Avichail. It was Avichail who, in the early '90s, began bringing small groups of them to Israel, where they were mostly housed in religious settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—the only places willing to provide them with free board and religious instruction until their formal conversion to Judaism qualified them to become Israeli citizens. There were now some 600 of them in Israel, of whom Ezra was one of the most recent arrivals. There would have been many more had the Ministry of Interior been less stingy in granting them entrance visas.

"This is why Ezra and Margi's parents are not with us," I told the wedding guests. "I've never met Margi's family. But I do know Ezra's—and I want you to know that, even though there are no rabbis or Talmudic scholars in it, it has plenty of *yichus*. I use that word advisedly, in its traditional sense of high standing in the world of religious learning."

A village street in Mizoram, a remote jungle-covered area in the far northeast corner of India where the author first met Ezra Chhakchhuak-Hualngo.

One of Yosi Hualngo's inspirations was his uncle, Lianpui-suaka, who was a village priest. He continued to practice the old religion until the 1960s, by which time few people still followed it. He was one of the last to know all the old sacrificial prayers and traditions, most of which have by now been forgotten. Long before his death, he wrote a last will and testament in 1948 stating his deep connection to his ancient religious faith—and his desire to see it perpetuated.

I read a translation of it to the wedding guests. In it, Lianpui-suaka declared: "I ... am not going to give up the religion of my ancestors. I am not going to worship or believe in the Christian God who can die. I don't want it. This religion of the white people is not the religion of the children of Manmasi our forefather. Therefore, please remember to keep this treasure that has been passed on from our forefathers, who used to remember these names which we, the children of Manmasi our forefather, still do remember today at the time of worship."

I urged the wedding guests to listen carefully to the names that would follow. Some would be incomprehensible, I told them, but others would sound familiar. They were taken from the chant of an old sacrifice that Lianpui-suaka performed—a chant I myself had heard, accompanied by the slaughter of a goat, in a reconstruction of the ceremony that Ezra's father staged for me. It was conducted in a little village close to the border of Burma whose Christian inhabitants disapprovingly refused to look on.

When I reached what I said would be the familiar-sounding part of the chant, I raised my voice so that it could be heard above the murmurs of the guests:

"You who are above and whom I worship ... *Tera, Apram, Iaksak, Muriab, Iakkawp, Si-nai Mountain, the Place of the Covenant, Marab, the Place Where You Gave Us Water ... Who guided us were we went—Omnipresent, Za ...*"

The murmurs of the guests had stopped. They were listening intently as I continued relating Lianpui-suaka's words: "As Za is the name of God, don't ever pronounce it in vain. His name has been guarded and pronounced secretly by our forefathers in order to hide its greatness." He concluded with this admonition: "If you obey me and keep my religion, go only according to what I have told you and do not copy from others. And

do not bury me as a Christian when I die."

I do not know how the old priest was buried. I do know, however, that his children disobeyed his wishes and raised their own children as Christians. Only Ezra's father, the son of Lianpui-suaka's brother, sought to keep faith with his uncle's will. He could not do this by practicing the old religion, which no longer existed. But he could worship the undying God of "Apram, Iaksak, and Iakkawp," by joining the B'nei Menashe. And if the Biblical names I had read aloud at the wedding were, as I believe them to be, authentic parts of an ancient prayer, then Za is the *Yab*, or God, of our Hebrew Bible (the Kuki-Chin-Mizos have difficulty pronouncing a "y," for which they substitute a "z"); "our forefather Manmasi" is indeed Menashe, the son of Joseph and the grandson of Jacob; and Ezra, whose wedding we were attending, was a son of Abraham more than just by metaphor. Incredible as it may seem, the Kuki-Chin-Mizo people, or a part of it, has a real connection to one of the Ten Tribes exiled from the land of Israel by the Assyrians in the eighth century B.C.E. and never heard from again.

"And that, my friends," I told the wedding guests, "is yichus!"

But how do we know that Lianpui-suaka's will is authentic? How can we know that the Biblical names in it were not, under the influence of Christianity, inserted in the 20th century as part of a fabricated Lost Tribe legend?

I am reasonably convinced that they were not. To begin with, handwriting analyses and laboratory tests have borne out Yosi Hualngo's contention that his uncle's will was truly written in 1948; this is significant because, since the now widespread belief that they descend from the tribe of Menashe did not begin to circulate among the Kuki-Chin-Mizo prior to the mid-1950s, Lianpui-suaka could not have been influenced by it.

Furthermore, even if he had known of Biblical names like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob from British missionaries, it is inconceivable that he would have introduced these into the sacrifices he presided over. Lianpui-suaka hated the Christians and their faith for destroying his world. He would never knowingly have put anything derived from them into his own sacred chants.

Most importantly, in my three visits to Mizoram

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Dr. Norman N. Magrid blows the shofar on May 5 to start the 38th annual Salute to Israel parade in Manhattan. The parade—described by the *New York Times* as a "dizzying streetscape of signs, floats, flags, and T-shirts"—consisted of more than 60,000 marchers, including Senators Charles Schumer and Hillary Rodham Clinton, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and former New York mayors Rudolph Giuliani and Edward Koch. As marchers paraded up 5th Avenue from 5th Street to 79th Street, roughly half a million spectators came to witness the scene and cheer and sing in celebration of Israel's independence. This year's parade, which boasted the largest turnout in event history, was also marked by intense security. Thousands of officers were on patrol while police helicopters surveyed the scene from above.

Robert Kalfus

number of registered members of Reform shuls in Israel.

Dovid Zeller, director of the Yakar Learning Program in Jerusalem, and a lecturer in Jewish mysticism, estimates that 99 percent of those who attend the festivals are secular Israelis, despite the increasing Jewish content of the goings-on. He explains it this way: "The realization that we're not going to get peace has put us in touch with the desire for inner peace."

While the search for inner tranquility continues, some Israelis complain that people are deluding themselves if they pretend that life just "goes on," the matsav notwithstanding. Consider the Moment Café in Jerusalem. When the trendy establishment reopened just three months after a bomb blast claimed the lives of 11 young patrons, many of the victim's relatives protested outside. How could anyone drink coffee and socialize as if the tragedy never happened? they asked.

Yet that duality—a veneer of normality amid horror—has woven itself into the fabric of Israeli society. One night a few months ago, the aftermath of a terror attack played out in all its gruesome detail on the TV screen. Up in the corner of the screen,

boxed off from the other reality of life in Israel, was the telecast of a long-awaited soccer game.

The only Israeli constant, though, is wariness. "People are now more careful," says sociologist Illouz. "Last year for example, I bought cell phones for my two children, then aged 7 and 8 and required them to call home as soon as they got to school. That's something we never thought of before. And now when I make plans two weeks in advance, I don't take it for granted that I'll be able to do them." ❧

Judith Sudilovsky contributed to this article.


Lost Tribe *continued from page 60*

and Manipur, I was able to collect much additional evidence showing that there are many resemblances between Biblical stories and rituals and genuinely old Kuki-Chin-Mizo parallels that are too detailed to be dismissed as coincidence. I also determined that there is no way of explaining these as products of post-Biblical influence, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or other. These resemblances are striking enough to have

convinced two of the world's leading universities in the field of Jewish genetics, the Haifa Technion and the University of Arizona, to mount a DNA-gathering expedition to northeast India this coming winter, using my data as their guidelines.

I am aware that claiming to have demonstrated the existence of a remnant of a Lost Tribe automatically makes one an eccentric in the eyes of many scholars and historians, who believe that the exiles of the northern tribes of Israel assimilated quickly into their new environments in the Assyrian Empire and disappeared without a trace. Nor is this an unreasonable attitude in light of the fact that Lost Tribe hunting has been associated over the centuries with a large amount of lunacy. There is hardly a region of the globe, from Japan to Yucatan and from the British Isles to New Zealand, in which someone has not "discovered" a Lost Tribe and written about it. Ninety-nine percent of this literature is pure nonsense.

The remainder, though intriguing, presents no coherent case. And it is precisely such a case, I believe, that can now be made for the thesis that a (probably small) group of Manassite tribesman, wandering eastward in the centuries after their exile from Pales-

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tine, and passing through central Asia on the Silk Road, eventually reached the hilly jungle country northeast of the Ganges River delta. There, having long forgotten that they were Israelites but still preserving certain ancient traditions, they merged with a local Tibeto-Burmese people in whose now nearly extinct pre-Christian religion can be found residual traces of Biblical practices and beliefs.

Does this matter? Should the discovery of the first real remnant of a Lost Tribe do anything more than send a passing chill down our spines?

I think it should.

In the first place, it has implications for Biblical studies. If a group of wandering Manassites, separated permanently from the rest of their people between 732 and 720 B.C.E., retained (although much must have been lost over time) certain Biblical stories, beliefs, and customs, we can say more about the antiquity of these stories, beliefs, and customs. Let me give an example. In the second Book of Kings we read how King Josiah (reigned 640–609 B.C.E.), as part of his religious reforms, commanded the people “to keep the Passover,” for “no such Passover has been kept since the days of the judges who judged Israel, or during all the days of the kings of Israel or of the kings of Judah.” Was the Passover holiday, then, not observed before Josiah’s time? We now can be sure that it was, because a spring holiday called *chol ngol ni nikho*, “the feast of abstinence from yeast,” on which a special unleavened bread was prepared, blessed by the village priest and eaten communally, was kept up until several decades ago in certain rural areas of Manipur. Apart from the Jews, no other people has been known to have such a custom.

The remarkable persistence for thousands of years of a small, isolated Israelite group, wandering on its own through the vastness of Asia, tells us something about ancient Hebrew identity. It demonstrates how tenaciously held this identity was not only among the Judeans of the south, who later became the founders of post-Biblical Judaism, but also among the Israelite tribes of the north, and it makes clear that the sense of specialness that enabled at least some of them to resist assimilation came from the belief in a covenant with a single supreme God.

Moreover, it raises the question of whether there weren’t other such groups, unknown to Jewish historians, who also survived for long periods, the existence of

which may be reflected in some of the many Lost Tribe legends that have come down to us. Scholars are only now beginning to understand fully how the history of normative Judaism—the Judaism practiced in conformity with rabbinic law and authority—has been quite different from the history of the Jews. Like the Falashas of Ethiopia, the “children of Manmasi” are a dramatic illustration of this.

But are the Kuki-Chin-Mizo people, whose biological link to ancient Israel probably runs at most through a few clans, really a part of Jewish history? Is the adoption of rabbinic Judaism in the last 30 years by a small number of them, and the identification of a much larger number with the State of Israel and the Jewish people, something that should interest the Jewish world? Many Jews would say no, including Israeli government officials who have been opposed to accepting the B’nei Menashe for fear of antagonizing the Israeli rabbinate, or of flooding the country with Asian immigrants, or of irritating the government of India. It took Ezra five years to be included in the tiny quota of B’nei Menashe admitted to Israel annually. His younger brother Asriel is next in line. His youngest brother and his parents still have a long wait ahead of them.

Ultimately, of course, the question is not just who are the B’nei Menashe, but who are the Jewish people. Not since antiquity have there been so many kinds of Jews, part-Jews, and pseudo-Jews in the world, and never before, it would seem, have Jews been more confused about who is and who isn’t one of them. Are the links between us primarily biological? Historical? Religious? Ethnic? Is a practicing Buddhist in Los Angeles with characteristically Jewish markers in his Y chromosome more, less, or just as much of a Jew as a Jewishly observant Ethiopian who lacks such markers? And how about a Tibeto-Burmese inhabitant of northeast India who not only tries to observe the commandments of Judaism but may just possibly—we hope to know more about this in a few months—have Jewish genetic characteristics too? Once we abandon traditional halachic standards, are there any objective criteria at all for deciding who is a Jew?

None of these questions, needless to say, have anything to do with if and how the B’nei Menashe, or the Kuki-Chin-Mizo people, are related to ancient Israel. They have everything to do, however, with how we relate to them and to other groups of would-be Jews, whether they have Biblical yichus or not. ☺

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