

lost in INDIA



Living in a remote corner of northeastern India, the Mizo people have come to believe they are descended from one of the Ten Lost Tribes. Known as the Bnei Menashe, they practice Orthodox Judaism and long to emigrate to Israel. But controversy, both in India and Israel, has left them in limbo...

BY RACHEL SAFIER



Upon arriving at the one-room airport in Mizoram, I'm stopped by a soldier. "Where are you staying?" he asks me, the only Westerner in sight.

"Mizoram," I offer. He laughs. The name of this Indian state in the northeast corner of the country is Mizoram.

"Do you have papers?"

"The people who are picking me up have them." I cast my eyes about, as if I'd recognize the men who are supposed to meet me amid the crowd milling about. I had been told not to say I was a journalist, but I hadn't been told what I *should* say.

As I try to conjure up an acceptable reason why an American would travel alone to this remote outpost, Asriel Hmar lopes toward me. A tall, good-looking 30-something Mizo with a safari hat pulled low over his eyes, he says my name and firmly shakes my hand. Jeremiah Hnamte, smaller and smilier, is fast behind. “Shalom, shalom,” this dark, round-faced man says, and I echo it, a Jew all at once at home.

In the back seat of Hmar’s car, I look at the visa he and Hnamte have procured for me. It says I have ventured to Mizoram, this state east of Bangladesh and north of Myanmar (formerly Burma) for plastic surgery. This subterfuge is necessary, because travel to Mizoram and the neighboring state of Manipur, just to the north, is restricted due to tribal unrest and sporadic violence between the Mizo and other ethnic groups.

Israeli music plays on the tape deck as we wind around steep hills covered with dense forests of bamboo and timber. As we come into the capital city of Aizawl, I see small supply stores, run-down houses on stilts and haphazard, hilly streets filled with pedestrians and auto rickshaws.

Tourists rarely come to this part of India, but one look out the window makes it clear that Christian missionaries settled in long ago: The panorama is punctuated by a profusion of church spires, a less-than-common sight in a nation largely populated by Hindus and Muslims. Only two percent of the entire Indian population is Christian, according to the National Council of Churches in India. Of these, 30 percent live in this part of the country.

Our destination is Mizoram’s one Jewish center. Built in 2005 by the Israeli organization Shavei Israel (Israel Returns), it is the central gathering place for the local Jewish community. It’s estimated that as many as 8,000 Mizo practice Judaism in Mizoram and Manipur. Unlike the Indian Jews of Calcutta, Mumbai and Kerala, they are relative newcomers to the faith, having gradually embraced the religion over the past 50 or so years.

The Mizo (known as the Kuki in Manipur) came to Judaism in a roundabout way. They were converted to Christianity by Welsh Protestant missionaries who arrived in the wake of the British in the early 20th century and stamped out the last vestiges of their animist

beliefs. As Christians they were indirectly exposed to Judaism through the stories and customs of the Old Testament. In 1951, a Mizo Pentecostal minister named Chalah from the village of Buallawn had a vision: His people were in fact Jews meant to return to the Holy Land. The vision inspired his followers to live by the Old Testament’s laws, sparking what is known as the Buallawn Movement. In the following years, members of the group began to notice similarities between the Mizo’s pre-Christian religious traditions and those of Biblical Israelites, such as these words of a festival song, the “Sikpui Hla,” also known as the “Red Sea” song:

During the celebration of the great festival,
The great red water dried up.
We were led by clouds by day,
Columns of fire by night.
My enemies pursued me day and night,
Swallowed up by the great sea like a plague.
The birds, onward!
Out of the rock, upon the holy mountain,
That which came flowing, we fetched.

From Christianity, the Mizo also learned about the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, which, according to the Talmud and the Book of Ezekiel, had scattered and disappeared while crossing the mythical Sabbath River. This spurred them—both those who were beginning to think of themselves as Jews and those who still considered themselves Christian—to begin to gather what books and articles they could about Judaism. In 1979 they sent a letter to Samson Samson, the manager of Hebrew University’s library, requesting information. Samson Samson—who had made aliyah along with tens of thousands of other Bnei Israel Jews from Bombay—gave their letter to Eliahu Avichail, an Orthodox rabbi who lived in Jerusalem.

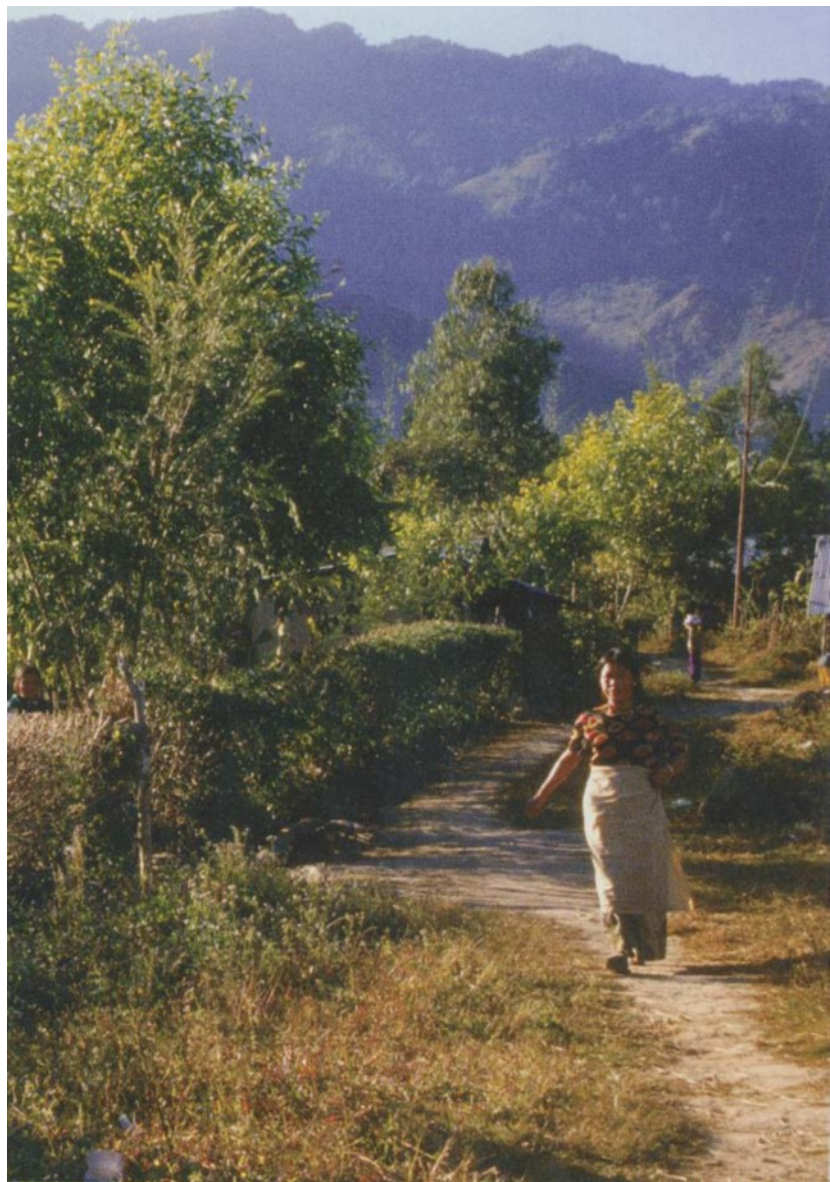
Avichail, a charismatic rabbi with a traditionally untrimmed beard, founded an Israeli group called Amishav (My People Returneth) in 1975 to pursue what had become his life mission: the search for the Ten Lost Tribes. His passion for the subject is fueled by his religious

beliefs. "All the Ten Tribes were exiled by the Assyrians," Avichail, 75, tells me. The Messiah will only return, according to the Midrash Tannaim, after the Ten Lost Tribes return to Israel.

The rabbi had never heard of the Mizo people but was anxious to find out more. After several failed attempts to obtain a visa, he managed to travel to Aizawl in the mid-1980s. He soon became convinced that this group was descended from the Israelites. "In the beginning, there was a little doubt for me," he says, but he was swayed by the echoes of ancient Israelite tradition he found in the old Mizo religion. In addition to the "Red Sea" song, there was a requirement to eat unleavened bread (bread isn't part of the Mizo diet) on a Passover-like holiday, as well as folklore reminiscent of the Tower of Babel and the Great Flood. He learned that eight-day-old boys were passed through a ring of vines in a ritual that resembled circumcision. One description of the ceremony has men pulling back a baby's foreskin while a priest severs it with two heated stones held with banana peels.

Avichail was most excited by Mizo chants that included names mentioned in the biblical genealogies of the Israelite tribe of Manasseh or Menashe. When the rabbi told them about the Manasseh tribe, the Mizo had a revelation. What little was left of their ancient oral tradition spoke of Manasia, a kind of God, and they had long referred to themselves as children of Manasia and addressed many of their prayers to him. With Avichail, they concluded that "Manasia" was "Manasseh," meaning they were descended from the lost Israelite tribe of that name. Avichail named them the Bnei Menashe, the sons of Menashe.

Ha Rav (the rabbi), as the Bnei Menashe address Avichail, began making regular visits to northeast India, teaching his new pupils Orthodox Jewish customs and liturgy. But many of his followers dreamed of returning to the Holy Land, where they could officially convert to Judaism and live among other Jews. Avichail did nothing to discourage this, believing, after all, that the Lost Tribes must return before Messiah. "The Bnei Menashe will come back first before all," he explains, "until step by step all the world will know and all the Ten



BRYAN SCHWARTZ

Tribes will come."

In 1989, Avichail convinced the Israeli government to allow a limited number of Bnei Menashe into Israel each year on tourist visas; once in Israel they could be converted and stay under the Law of Return. Over the next 15 years, 800 Bnei Menashe settled in Israel, most in the settlements, in particular the Gaza Strip and in Kiryat Arba, near Hebron in the West Bank.

The immigration of the Bnei Menashe received little media attention, especially when compared to all the hoopla surrounding the arrival of Ethiopian Jews. Amishav had few resources, in part, Avichail says, because he refused to accept money from Evangelical

A woman walks the path along the new frontier of Judaism in Manipur—Sazal. The village is 15 kilometers southwest of Manipur's capital city, Imphal. Sazal is about four miles from Manipur's main southern route, up a windy dirt road leading into the hills.



Hundreds listen attentively to speeches praising God for finally allowing Jewish visitors to come to Churachandpur, about two hours south of Manipur's capital city of Imphal. Churachandpur has several synagogues accomodating some 1,500 members.

Christians, who are willing to support the return of Jews to Israel in order to hasten the Second Coming.

In 2002, Avichail met a young man named Michael Freund, a columnist for the *Jerusalem Post*, who was serving as the deputy director of communications & policy planning for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Like Avichail, Freund was passionate about Lost Tribes. In the hopes of expanding the operation, Avichail asked Freund to join him.

But in 2003, their mission foundered. A new government came to power in Israel, and incoming Israeli Interior Minister Avraham Poraz, a member of the secular left Shinui Party, halted the immigration of the Bnei Menashe. According to a 2005 article in *Ha'aretz*, the Foreign Ministry was concerned that allowing the entry of the Bnei Menashe would harm Israel's relations with India, endangering a wide-ranging military and economic

relationship highly valued by both countries.

Avichail and Freund parted ways over how best to proceed. In 2004, Freund started his own organization, Shavei Israel.

Four or five steep flights of cement stairs lead to the Shavei Israel Hebrew Center in Aizawl. At the top we're greeted by the word "SHALOM" written in English and painted in blue on a cement wall.

Hmar, who heads a local job-training agency, leaves me to roam the halls with Maurice Ilan, the community's spiritual leader. Ilan emigrated to Israel seven years ago and his six-month stint as Shavei Israel's emissary in Aizawl is almost over. He is eager to return to Israel. Later Hmar informs me that it's hard to get Bnei Menashe in Israel to come back, and they don't yet know who'll replace him.

Ilan walks me through the different rooms of the “Tzenter,” explaining everything in Hebrew with a slight Mizo accent: the kitchen, the television lounge, the dorm rooms and his “office,” which is next to a large map of Israel pinned to a room divider. In addition to functioning as a community center, the building is also home to a few Jewish families.

It’s Friday, and everyone is preparing for Shabbat. In one classroom, girls are on their knees scrubbing the floor. In another, boys play video games, *k’mo bi Tel Aviv*, just like in Tel Aviv, one of them tells me as he waves away my camera. Some young men, wearing yarmulkes, play ping-pong while others stand around the kitchen table braiding challahs. Many of those here made the trip from Kung Pui, a town 56 miles away, for Shabbat.

Ilan ushers me into a room where a wizened old man and woman sit, surrounded by others. They have believed they were Jews for about 20 years, the husband and wife tell me, and now they want to go to Israel. Ilan translates my questions from Hebrew to Mizo. How did they discover they were Jews? I ask. “It was in my heart,” the old man tells me drawing his hands to his chest.

A young woman says she wants to study Torah in Israel. When I point out that there is a Torah in the center, she is undeterred. I tell her I am a Jew, and I live in the United States and that other Jews live elsewhere around the world, but she isn’t the slightest bit curious. “I want to go to Israel to receive the Lord,” she declares.

Michael Freund, who grew up in New York City, became fascinated with the Ten Lost Tribes as a child. “My grandmother, Miriam Freund-Rosenthal, was the president of Hadassah in the U.S. in the 1950s, and she got Marc Chagall to do the stained glass window of the Ten Tribes at Hadassah Hospital,” he says. “She also played a big part in helping Jews come from Morocco to Israel, which left an impression on me.”

After graduating from Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs, Freund worked for the Israeli Mission to the United Nations as an assistant to the ambassador. He left to earn an MBA in finance

from Columbia University, then made aliyah in 1995. Known as a go-getter, he threw himself into the cause of the Bnei Menashe, in part because he believes they can help with Israel’s demographic problem.

“We are shrinking in size and hemorrhaging Jews every year,” Freund, 39, tells me. “We need to start thinking outside the box. We need to reach out to communities that have a historical connection. These are not just dusty stories from history books. These are living and breathing human beings who are part of the Jewish community and are trying to find a way back.”

Freund believes that opposition to the immigration of the Bnei Menashe has questionable origins. “I was always taught a Jew is not the color of his skin or the country of his birth,” he says.

Israelis who are against the immigration of the Bnei Menashe deny that racism underlies their position. Some contend the Bnei Menashe want to come to Israel to improve their economic standing. Others worry that those championing this particular Indian group are manipulating them for political gain. Benny Ziffer, literary editor of *Ha’aretz*, vilified Bnei Menashe claims in a November 2006 opinion piece. “The authenticity of their descent from the Biblical tribe of Menasseh is comparable to mine from Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf,” Ziffer declared. He called efforts to bring the Bnei Menashe to Israel “an exercise in scraping the bottom of the barrel of the Zionist Idea.”

The Israeli Left considers groups that promote the Lost Tribes’ immigration to Israel to be extreme Zionists motivated by a desire to boost population in the settlements. Hagit Ofran, a member of the “Settlement Watch Team” of Peace Now, says, “It is one thing to convert people into Judaism—which is in my eyes okay as long as it is done from free will—but it is totally different if you bring them to live in settlements. Instead of contributing

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“These are not just dusty stories from history books,” says Freund. “These are living and breathing human beings who are part of the Jewish community and are trying to find a way back.”

positively to the Jewish people and to Israel, as long as they live in settlements, it is a destructive action to the Jewish State.”

In 2004, Freund decided to make an end run around the government’s decision to halt Bnei Menashe immigration: He asked Israel’s chief Sephardic rabbi, Shlomo Amar, to consider issuing a halachic ruling “as they have done in the past,” he says, referring to the rabbinates’ 1972 declaration that Ethiopian Jews were descendants of the Tribe of Dan. Amar agreed and dispatched two rabbinical judges to northeast India to investigate the Bnei Menashe’s roots.

At first all went according to plan. The rabbinate recognized the Mizo as descendants of the Tribe of Menashe in March 2005. Under the Law of Return, the group was now able to make aliyah but for one requirement: They had to undergo full conversions

before entering Israel since they had been separated from Judaism for so long.

The Rabbinate sent a *bet din* (rabbinical court) to convert the Bnei Menashe in Mizoram and Manipur in September of 2005. They began by converting over 200 Bnei Menashe in Mizoram, after which they planned to move on to Manipur.

That’s when the trouble started. The conversion in Mizoram outraged local church authorities. The Indian newspaper *The Hindu* ran an article entitled “Row over Mizo’s Origins.” P.C. Biaksiami, a former government officer who resigned to found the Aizawl Christian Research Centre, was quoted describing the rabbinical declaration as the “work of Satan with the aim of converting the Mizos from Christianity to Judaism, the religion of Jews.” The rabbis never made it to Manipur and were spirited away to prevent violence.

The Indian government, in an uproar over the bad press, took umbrage at the Israeli rabbis’ aggressive action. But the controversy had deeper roots. India’s Christian community fears

that the entire Mizo community of Mizoram and Manipur, totaling over a million, could convert to Judaism. Such a mass conversion could have political ramifications: Both Mizoram and Manipur are relatively recent additions to the Indian union (1987 and 1972 respectively), and the Indian military continues to maintain a presence in both states to quell insurgencies. Some Indians perceive the move towards Judaism as a threat to the fragile balance of power in a region already rife with ethnic tension and separatist movements.

After the rabbis left, India pressured Israel to halt conversions and Israel agreed, frustrating Freund’s efforts. In 2006, he wrote to new Prime Minister Ehud Olmert asking him to intervene. He did, and the converted Bnei Menashe from Mizoram arrived in Tel Aviv last November amid much media fanfare. The remainder waited in India for further word.

Later in the afternoon, before sundown and the start of Shabbat, Hmar brings me to Jeremiah Hnamte’s home to see the mikveh that Michael Freund personally donated in 2005 in honor of his grandmother to facilitate conversions. Hnamte is one of the leaders of the Jewish community in Mizoram and his home is on the edge of his company’s bamboo fields. His wife Tamar greets us at the iron gate, which is topped with stars of David. It has a sign in English of which she is particularly proud, “Closed on Saturday.”

Their home is grand in comparison to many I have walked past in Aizawl. Inside, signs of the family’s faith abound: a framed picture of a toddler wearing a yarmulke; a Passover Seder plate affixed to the wall; Israeli flags in a glass on the cabinet; a magnet with the Hebrew alphabet on the refrigerator door. Tamar takes me out to see the mikveh which is on their property. When we return Tamar, who is shy about her English, calls for her daughter to come sit with me.

“My Mizo name is Sijoparis,” the young woman tells me. “And they call me ‘SP.’ And my Jewish name—I have so many Jewish names!” When she was a girl she went by Ruth, but now she’s chosen Avital. At 23, her English isn’t per-

fect, but it's the best I'll hear on my visit, and mixed into her sharp Mizo accent is casual American-teenager lingo. Because of the influence of the Christian church, the Mizo are well-educated and have the third-highest literacy rate of any ethnic group in India. Avital dropped out of college and has been thinking of "taking up the beauty clinic thing," although there are no jobs nearby.

A picture of her grandparents' second wedding, a Jewish ceremony under a chuppah in Israel, is prominently displayed. When asked if she wants to go to Israel, she doesn't hesitate: "Of course," she says.

Her family was Christian before they started "this Judaism thing," she tells me. The move to Judaism originated with her maternal grandmother, the widely smiling woman with her head covered in the picture. "When my grandparents decided to follow Judaism—no, even before, my grandmother was spiritually connected, you know? She said she got a word from God. She dip her finger in the water and wrote it on the floor."

Gesturing in explanation of the Mizo word her grandmother dripped on the floor in bathwater, Avital says, "It means *kodesh* in Jewish.

"They don't know how to read it, but it was Hebrew. She wrote it with her hand, even before she find Judaism. She don't know how to pronounce it in Hebrew but she said it in our language. Like 'cleanliness?'"

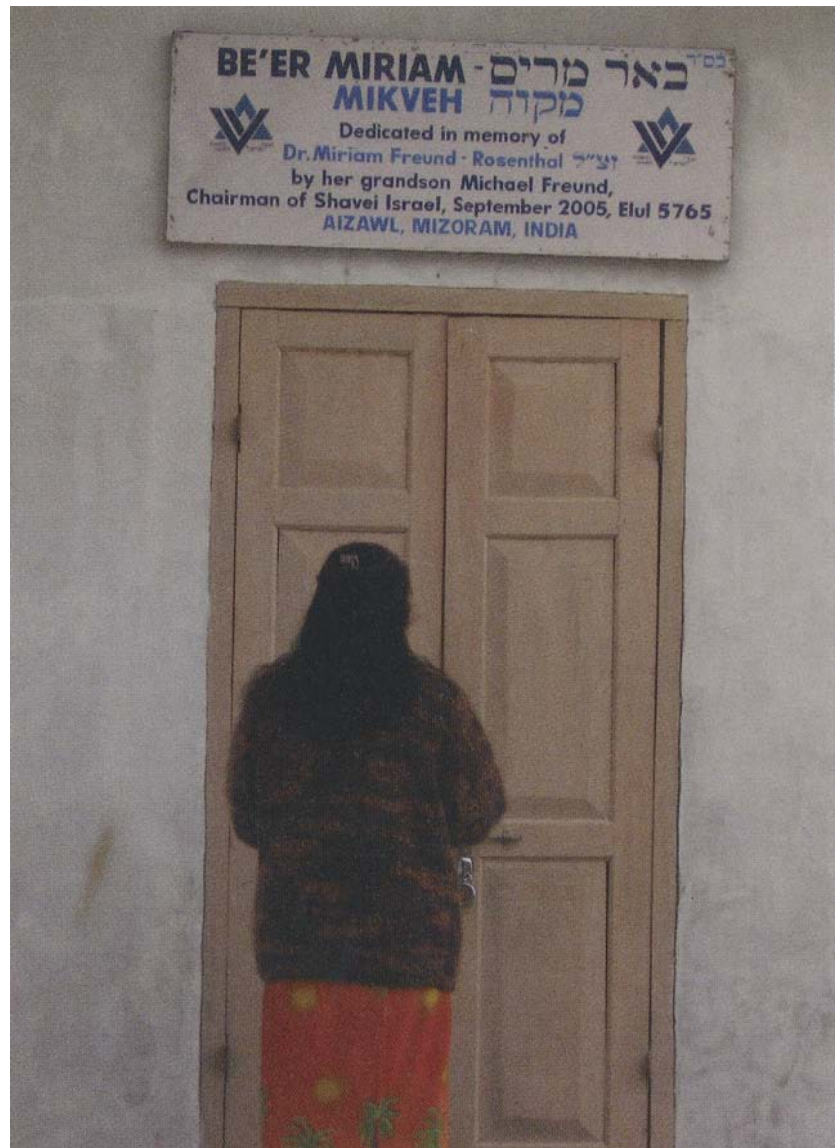
"Holiness," I translate.

"Holiness. That's how she said it."

"Holiness," her mother calls out from the kitchen.

Avital goes on to say that her grandparents keep in touch by phone and computer and report that Israel is "a wonderful place, those Israelis treat them very well."

Well-known Israeli journalist Hillel Halkin first traveled to Mizoram with Avichail in 1998, then returned to determine whether the traditions of the Bnei Menashe predated their introduction to the Old Testament. The book that resulted from these journeys, *Across the Sabbath River*, recounts his madcap adventure over broken roads and through rain forest, and his meet-



RACHEL SAFIER

ings with residents, who offered more conflicting messages and dead ends than Abbott and Costello's *Who's on First?*

Halkin started out as a skeptic, but his research ultimately convinced him of the Bnei Menashe's Israelite origins. "I think almost any single piece of evidence no matter how sensational—the Passover-like ceremony, the 'Red Sea' song—could have been dismissed as a statistical freak, a strange coincidence," he says. "But one piece of evidence and then a second and then a third and a fourth and a fifth—there comes a point where the possibility of coincidence becomes totally impossible. When coincidences are ruled out, there can be only two possibilities: historical connection or an elaborate hoax. I think a hoax can

Tamar Hnamte unlocks the door to Aizawl's mikveh, which was donated by Michael Freund in 2005 in honor of his grandmother.



RACHEL SAFIER

Bnei Menashe families from outlying communities travel into Aizawl to celebrate Shabbat at Shavei Israel's Jewish Center.

be ruled out as beyond the organizational capacities of any group of people in Manipur or Mizoram,” he says with a laugh.

But Shalva Weil of the Hebrew University continues to question the authenticity of the Bnei Menashe. In 1991, she curated an exhibition at the Museum of the Diaspora in Tel Aviv that documented people who claimed to be Lost Tribes of Israel. She says she considered the Bnei Menashe “just another group” that made such a claim and sent off an invitation to Mizoram. “The next thing I know, I received a postcard saying, ‘We are on our way’ and they are knocking on my front door. They are tribal people and they left their world and came to my exhibition,” a distance she notes was “awfully far and awfully expensive.” Still clearly amazed by the recollection of them, she recounts that “they arrived with feathers in their hair and all their tribal gear” for her to incorporate in the exhibition, including a pig altar. “I still have it in my house. The Israel Museum didn’t want it. I don’t know what to do with it.”

As an anthropologist who has written academic articles on the Bnei Menashe, Weil has

a different perspective from Avichail, Freund and Halkin. “In Roman, Greek, Jewish, Christian literature there is reference every so often to someone who appears and says, ‘Hi, I’m a lost Israelite,’ or, more commonly, someone else says, ‘That person is a member of a Lost Tribe.’” In the case of the Bnei Menashe, she points out, there is never a mention in text from any era.

Weil also notes that, since the Mizo lost most of their own traditions thanks to zealous missionaries and centuries of migration, they were easily influenced by Avichail. Avichail, she says, met with the Mizos and “had an inspiration. He said that a [name in a] Menasse song sounded like ‘Menashe,’ and that name stuck.”

Biaksiana, the head of the Aizawl Christian Research Centre, continues to be surprised that anyone would take the claims of the Bnei Menashe seriously. The author of many articles in the local Mizoram press, he vehemently dismisses the rabbis’ claim that the Bnei Menashe are Jews. “There is no scientific proof or cultural evidence,” he insists. “Recently they

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constructed a link between the Middle East and Mizoram. They say the lost tribes have migrated east through Persia, Afghanistan to China and then down south into Myanmar and then to Mizoram. If you try to connect two communities, you can always construct a link.”

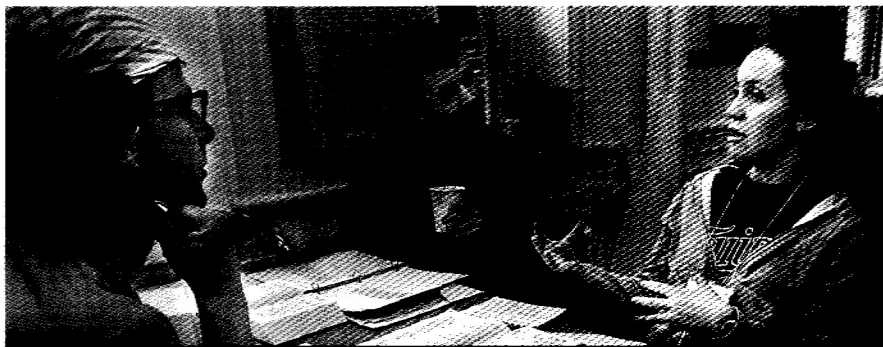
The debate over the origins of the Bnei Menashe has led to two genetic studies. The first was conducted by the Central Forensic Institute in Calcutta, using DNA samples collected from several hundred members of Mizo ethnic groups. Published solely on the Internet and detailed in a 2005 *Ha'aretz* article, it found that

males shared no DNA with recognized Jewish communities. “On the female side of the profile,” the article reports, “there is a certain resemblance to the genetic profile of the Middle Eastern peoples and to that of Jews of Uzbekistan (who also have a tradition of belonging to the Ten Tribes)—a closeness that distinguishes the [Mizo ethnic groups] from the members of other tribes that live nearby.”

A more comprehensive study is now being conducted by internationally-renowned geneticist Karl Skorecki, director of Nephrology and Molecular Medicine at the Technion Faculty of Medicine in Haifa, working with academics at the university in Manipur. The results will be announced next year. But Skorecki and others involved with the Bnei Menashe stress that individuals do not need genetic proof to be Jewish. “Jewishness is something that is not measured by physical parameters,” says Skorecki. “It is metaphysical.”

Whether or not a genetic link is found, Halkin believes the story of the Bnei Menashe has significance for modern Jews. “It shows Judaism has an appeal beyond anything most Jews would have realized. That in itself is enough to make Jews ask themselves whether they don’t have something to offer the world.” But there is more, says Halkin. “If there really is a connection between ancient Mizos and Israel, then it becomes a far more dramatic and extraordinary story. It’s an incredible story that faith survived in a disembodied form for 3,000 years and suddenly this chopped-off limb of a people becomes restored to it. It makes a great drama of Jewish history.”

I spend Shabbat morning in Aizawl with about 100 members of the community at Shalom Tzio Bet Kneset, a tin-roofed synagogue down a steep flight of stairs from the street. Most of the men wear carefully folded *tallit*. Many women are wound in coverlets against the mountain



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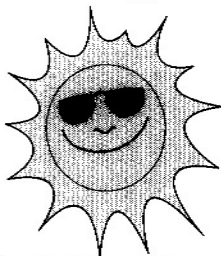
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cold—sometimes two to a blanket. As in any American or Israeli Orthodox synagogue I have ever visited, the women talk to each other as much as they pray. Listening to the ancient words I know by heart but would be unable to read in their transliterated prayerbooks, I can physically feel the faith of those around me. It's breathing on me as I sit shivering in my dress and sneakers. It prays for a return to Israel, a place that only Ilan, who leads the service, and I have ever been.

The desire of the Bnei Menashe to leave the land of their birth is fierce. I have been here only two days and I can understand how people here would ache for something beyond this isolated corner of India. I can only imagine what relief they felt upon finding they might actually belong to something more.

But I can't help noticing that a side effect of the decision to embrace Judaism has been the splintering of families. Hmar will tell me, "I am alone in this community" because his mother, "a deep Christian" shares his love for Israel, "but she doesn't like to abandon her religion." A Christian shop owner I meet is divorced from his wife, who has taken their children and moved to Israel.

Though the vast majority of Mizos are Christian, Hmar believes a hunger for Judaism pulses just below the surface. "This is what the Christian leadership fear," he says. "If this aliyah comes formally without any problem, more and more people of Christianity will join this because, since the beginning of Christianity in Mizoram, the love for Israel remains unchanged. If we collect those who love Israel and are ready to die for Israel, the number will be many many thousand right now. If Israel army center come here, so many will turn out instead of joining Indian army." He says it is futile for Christian leaders to declare, as they do, that "the Israel people are a cursed people... a lying people" because the Mizo people, "in their heart cannot abandon the love of Israel."



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When asked if it will be difficult to emigrate to Israel and live so far from his mother, Hmar assures me, "There is no problem from the state of Israel for me to come here."

Tzvi Khaute, who made aliyah from Manipur, lives with his wife and three children in Kiryat Arba, where he studies in a yeshiva and works part-time for Shavei Israel, assisting new Bnei Menashe immigrants. He calls aliyah a "dream come true" but says he'll be "incomplete" until his brethren can also come home. No Bnei Menashe have been able to immigrate since the group that was converted in Mizoram came in 2006. That group remains in an absorption center in the north of Israel, and Shavei Israel intends to help them find homes throughout the country, not solely in the settlements.

Khaute is frustrated that there appears to be no official policy change on the horizon. "It is a little bit unfair!" he says. "If you want to make aliyah from America, you decide. Australia, they just make aliyah. For us—all my community members still want to make aliyah and it depends on the government of Israel."

The Bnei Menashe often compare themselves to the Ethiopians, who were transported en masse to Israel. But thousands of Ethiopians, too, remain in limbo. Many live around the Israeli Embassy complex in Addis Ababa, having left their villages with the hope of making aliyah. The Israeli interior minister tightened immigration laws in February, making it much harder for the Falash Mura—Ethiopian Jews who previously converted to Christianity but have since returned to Judaism—to make the move. Some 18,000 have been in Addis Ababa for years, separated from their families as they wait for Israel to relax its immigration laws.

Shavei Israel continues to pressure the Israeli government and remains hopeful. Meanwhile, other groups, including the large Chicago-based

International Fellowship for Christians and Jews, have also thrown their weight behind the Bnei Menashe.

The Fellowship, says its founder Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, has allocated \$1.6 million to support the aliyah of the Bnei Menashe. "We [will] pay for everything so the Jewish Agency does not have to spend any money," he says.

The groups advocating on behalf of the Bnei Menashe are no longer working

"It's an incredible story that faith survived in a disembodied form for 3,000 years and suddenly this chopped-off limb of a people becomes restored to it. It makes a great drama of Jewish history."

together. Source says that Amishav has been overshadowed by Shavei Israel, whose founder has access to family money and a wide range of international donors, allowing him to fund projects such as the mikveh, the Jewish center in Mizoram and two more in Manipur. According to Avichail, as well as others, Shavei Israel has accepted money from Evangelical Christians, which Freund denies. Avichail and others also believe that Freund's aggressive outreach to the media has jeopardized their mission.

The split between Amishav and Shavei Israel has caused a schism within the Bnei Menashe community. Many feel loyal to Avichail, who worked on their behalf for many years. Avichail remains close with the Bnei Menashe in Israel and continues

to explore Israelite links with other peoples, including the Shinto of Japan.

Another rift has also appeared in the Bnei Menashe community, explains Shimon Gangte, a Bnei Menashe rabbi in Kiryat Arba, who came to Israel 14 years ago. A split between Sephardi and Ashkenazi Bnei Menashe came about after the Mizo began moving to Israel and discovered that there were indeed two "branches" of Orthodox Judaism. "In some ways they have collapsed into a quarreling family," says Halkin sadly, adding that it's important for the Bnei Menashe to stay united.

Gangte remains hopeful that the Bnei Menashe's Israeli and international supporters will also find ways to work together. "The ultimate goal is to bring all the Bnei Menashe to Israel," he says. "Whoever does it, I'm happy."

There's something about the narrow, serpentine roads and the cold mountain air in Mizoram: Though beautiful in its own way, it's a beauty borne of separateness, of isolation. At times I feel like I am not among Jews but impostors meticulously reading from a script. At other times, their utter faith makes me question my own. Only in that one fleeting moment at the airport, when Jeremiah Hnamte wished me shalom, have their actions and my own sense of self come together to make me feel I am a Jew among fellow Jews.

It is the rote of it—the centuries-old practices swallowed whole, so that the women even know to gossip behind the gauzy curtain that serves as their *mechitzah*. Perhaps it is the manner in which they speak of Israel, wholly unfamiliar to me, an American woman who has lived in Jerusalem and has close family there.

The Bnei Menashe repeatedly tell me they want to go to Israel to receive the Lord. Their belief is so glowing and perfect and untouchable that the only

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frame of reference I can conjure up is Evangelical Christians, who speak of God with the ease of one who has just had Him over for dinner and is about to pull out the sofa bed for His overnight stay.

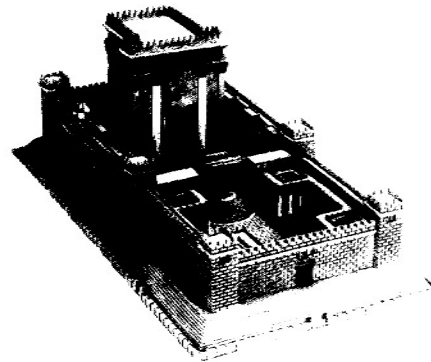
And that is the disconnect: The Jews I know don't relax into Judaism, and they certainly don't accept it without questions, without awareness of—and complaints about—the burden. Even the Orthodox, far more faithful than I have ever been, love to spar and question their rabbis' interpretations. An American Jew, an Israeli Jew, knows full well the truth of the old saw, "Two Jews, three opinions." But here are possibly thousands of Jews and one opinion: They want to go home. ☺

Additional reporting for this story was conducted by Karin Tanabe.

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