



Michael Freund with Bnei Menashe children in India

Finding a Lost Tribe of Israel in India The long road home

The road leading to the village of Churachandpur winds through lush and verdant fields. Aside from an occasional military checkpoint, there is little vehicular activity along the thoroughfare, in this remote region of India's northeast.

Located in the state of Manipur, near the border with Burma, Churachandpur is a sprawling complex of stone, wood and bamboo structures, interspersed with vast meadows and farmland. The rhythm of daily life is pastoral and tranquil, lending an air of calm and even serenity to the people who call it home.

It is late in the afternoon, and hundreds of members of the local Bnei Menashe

(Hebrew for "Sons of Manasseh") community, a group descended from one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, have gathered in the local synagogue to recite the afternoon prayers.

The men sway back and forth in intense concentration, reciting the words in Hebrew with deliberate precision and care. Naturally, they all rise turn towards the west, facing Jerusalem as they reaffirm their determination to return to the land of their ancestors, the Land of Israel.

To a visitor from abroad, it is a magnificent sight to behold. Indeed, when closing one's eyes, and listening to the chazzan (cantor) recite the repetition of the Amidah prayer, it is easy to forget

that one is standing in a synagogue in northeastern India, rather than in London, New York or Tel Aviv.

A life in exile

The story of the Bnei Menashe is truly breathtaking, one which almost defies rational explanation. Despite being cut off from the rest of world Jewry for more than 2,700 years, they managed to preserve their Jewish heritage, while always nourishing the dream of returning to Zion.

Some 7,000 Bnei Menashe currently reside in the Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur, along the border with Burma and Bangladesh. Their tradition, passed down through the generations,

is that they are descendants of the lost Israelite tribe of Manasseh, which was exiled from the Land of Israel by the Assyrian empire in 723 BCE.

Throughout their wandering in the Diaspora, the Bnei Menashe observed the Sabbath, practiced circumcision on the eighth day, kept the laws of Kashrut and meticulously upheld the rules of family purity. They even established cities of refuge, where people who had killed inadvertently could flee, just as the Torah prescribes.

Evidence of the Bnei Menashe's ancient connection with the Jewish people abounds. On a visit to the community in India, I met with a Bnei Menashe elder named Yossi, a 69-year old resident of Aizawl, capital of the state of Mizoram, where many of the Bnei Menashe currently live.

Two of Hualngo's uncles served as village priests and, speaking through an interpreter, he offered a detailed description of the ceremonies they performed. His uncles, he said, would don white garments before carrying out sacrificial rites, including one with strings dangling from its four corners, reminiscent of the tallit with arba kanfot (the four-cornered ritual prayer shawl) worn by Jews.

In the spring, at Passover time, they would mark an annual festival of deliverance by sacrificing an animal, but not before smearing its blood on people's doorways, just as the Israelites had done during the Exodus from Egypt. Indeed, according to Hualngo, there was a rule that the priests had to carefully remove the meat from the bones of the animal without breaking any of them, just as the Bible instructs regarding the Passover sacrifice (Exodus 12:46).

Then, in a remarkable scene, Hualngo proceeded to chant one of the prayers

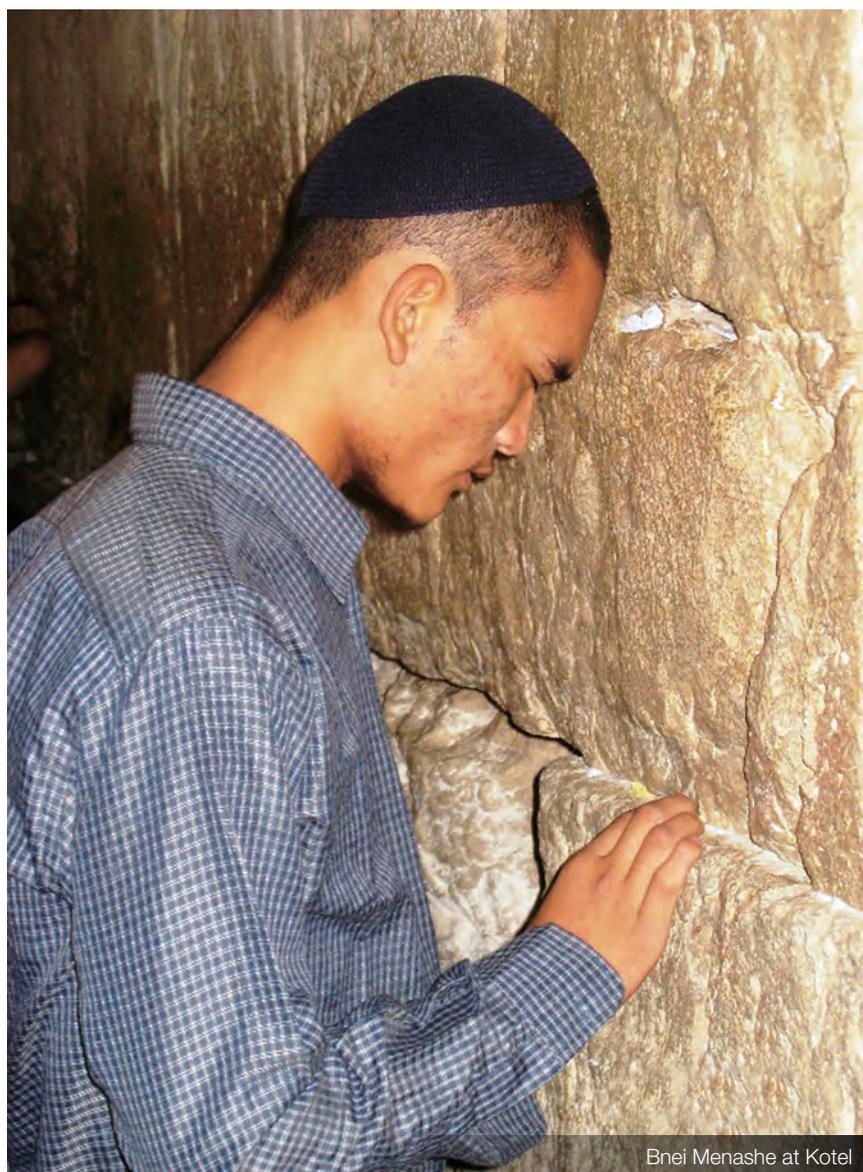
that his uncles used to say while conducting the sacrificial ceremony. The words in the song, and their Biblical origin, are unmistakable: Terah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the Red Sea, Marah and Shiloh (site of the ancient tabernacle and capital of the northern tribes of Israel until the Assyrian conquest).

This ancient Bnei Menashe prayer, known as "Miriam's Song", parallels the Biblical account of the Exodus from Egypt: "We had to cross the Red Sea, our enemies were coming after us with

chariots, the sea swallowed them all, as if they are meat. We are led by the cloud during the day, and by fire at night. Take those birds for the food, and drink water coming out from the rock."

In their community, among strangers

To locals living in Mizoram, there is no question regarding the origins of the Bnei Menashe. Lal Thlamuana, 45, a devout Christian who is the proprietor and principal of the local Home Mission School, has no doubt about the Israelite



Bnei Menashe at Kotel

origins of the Mizos (the local name for the tribe from which the Bnei Menashe come).

“Even Christian Mizos believe the Bnei Menashe are descendants of Israel,” he says, and proceeds to expound on a number of the community’s ancient customs and traditions, such as circumcision of newborn boys on the eighth day, levirate marriage, and strict laws regarding menstruation, all of which are strikingly similar to Jewish law.

The British colonialists, Thlamuana notes, referred to the Mizo people as Lushei, a mispronunciation of Lu Se, which means “Ten Tribes”. According to the Bnei Menashe, their ancestors migrated south from China to escape persecution, settling in Burma and then moving westward into what is now Mizoram and Manipur in India.

A century ago, when British missionaries first arrived in India’s northeast, they were astonished to find that the local tribesmen worshiped one god, were familiar with many of the stories of the Bible, and were practicing a form of biblical Judaism. Before long, the missionaries succeeded in converting most of Mizoram’s population. Yet many of them, Christians and other tribesmen alike, proudly continued to preserve the tradition that they are descended from the ancient Israelites.

Some, however, did not convert, and remained faithful to the ways of their ancestors. Indeed, in recent decades, the Bnei Menashe have built dozens of synagogues across India’s northeast, and three times a day they turn fervently in prayer, with their eyes raised toward Zion.

Over the past decade, thanks largely to Shavei Israel (www.shavei.org), the organization that I chair, some 1,700 Bnei Menashe have moved to Israel, where they have undergone formal conversion to Judaism by Israel’s Chief Rabbinate



Bnei Menashe in Churachandpur Manipur

in order to remove any doubts regarding their personal status.

In March 2005, after I approached Israel’s Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar and asked him to study the community and its origins, the Chief Rabbi formally recognized the Bnei Menashe as “descendants of the Jewish people,” and agreed to facilitate their return.

In September 2005, Rabbi Amar dispatched a rabbinical court to India, which converted 218 Bnei Menashe in Mizoram back to Judaism, and in November 2006, they all made aliyah to the Galilee, in Israel’s north. An additional group of 230 Bnei Menashe from Manipur made aliyah in 2007, completing the conversion process once they arrived in Israel. Part of the group settled in the city of Upper Nazareth, with the rest making their homes in Karmiel. In recent years, two Bnei Menashe scholars have since received rabbinical ordination, while another is a certified religious scribe whose quill has

produced beautiful Scrolls of Esther. In the summer of 2006, over a dozen young Bnei Menashe served as soldiers on the front lines in Lebanon and Gaza.

Those still in India continue to grow in Jewish knowledge and practice, and hundreds of Bnei Menashe currently study at one of the three educational centers that Shavei Israel has established on their behalf in Mizoram and Manipur. Patiently, they await the day when Israel’s government will allow them to make aliyah and be reunited with their friends and family already living in the Jewish state.

Khaute’s journey

For Tzvi Khaute, a Bnei Menashe community leader in Israel, the separation from his family back in India has not been easy. Though he has been living in Israel for ten years, and has successfully been absorbed in the country, he still feels pangs of yearning for his close relatives who remain behind.



Michael Freund with a Bnei Menashe boy in India

One of six children, Khaute's youngest brother is serving in the Indian army. He has a cousin who is the chief of the Indian Police Intelligence department in his home state of Manipur, and another cousin who is a former government minister. As a child growing up in Churachandpur, Khaute recalls, he didn't pay all that much attention to Jewish tradition.

Like most kids, Khaute was more interested in playing soccer with his friends and doing well at school. Nonetheless, even from a very young age, he always knew that by being Jewish he was different. "My grandfather, who was the chief priest of the village, told us that our living in India was only a sojourn and temporary, and that we Bnei Menashe are separate from the rest of the country - politically, socially and ethnically," Khaute recalls.

His family instilled within him a deep pride in their roots as Bnei Menashe, and as he grew up, Khaute began to take more interest in his heritage.

He took note of the rituals of the Bnei Menashe that he would later learn were in many ways parallel to modern Jewish observance. "Shabbat was always observed as a rest day from work," he says. "We never mixed milk and meat, and chicken and cattle were slaughtered by the community priest."

Other Bnei Menashe customs Khaute remembers include a form of brit mila (circumcision) which was followed by a community feast; a mourning period that lasted 30 days (rather than the usual Jewish custom of seven); tithing one-tenth of one's agricultural produce to sustain the community's priestly caste; and a strict policy against intermarriage.

Rediscovering Zion

The community yearned for Zion, but "we thought Zion was in heaven. We didn't know it was real," Khaute says. After the creation of the State of Israel, the Bnei Menashe began their struggle

to reach the Promised Land. "The first official letter was sent in the name of the Bnei Menashe to (then prime minister) Golda Meir in 1974. We wrote 'we are Jewish. We want to come back home.' But we received no answer."

After his arrival in Israel ten years ago, Khaute began working in the greenhouses in the village of Sussia. But he didn't actually get his hands dirty. With a degree in economics from India's prestigious University of New Delhi, he served as the greenhouse's in-house statistician. And in order to deepen his knowledge of Judaism, he spent six years studying Torah part-time at the Machon Meir yeshiva in Jerusalem.

Khaute's grandparents - who were influential in his initial Jewish reawakening - died over ten years ago, and never fulfilled their life-long vision of reaching the Promised Land. But he remains confident that the rest of his family, and community, will soon be able to come on aliyah. "We pray and hope for them every day," he says.

The saga of the Bnei Menashe is testimony to the power of Jewish history and Jewish memory. The Bnei Menashe clung to their identity despite 27 centuries of wandering, never forgetting who they are or where they came from, even as they nourished the dream that one day they would return. Their story is our story, and it underscores our people's faith and resilience even in the most trying of circumstances. May they reach their destination speedily and without delay. **✡**

The writer served as deputy communications director in the Prime Minister's Office under former premier Binyamin Netanyahu. He is the founder and Chairman of Shavei Israel (www.shavei.org), a Jerusalem-based group that facilitates the return of the Bnei Menashe and other "lost Jews" to the Jewish people.