

## **The Benei Menashe: Choosing Judaism in North East India**

*By Myer Samra*

The Benei Menashe is a small community observing Judaism that has evolved within the constellation of Chin-Kuki-Mizo tribes, known collectively as the "Zo."<sup>1</sup> These tribes are located in North East India and neighboring areas of Myanmar and Bangladesh—particularly within the Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram, and the Chin State of Myanmar. Adherence to Judaism in the region is accompanied by a belief that these tribes are in fact descendants of the lost biblical tribe of Manasseh, the term *Benei Menashe* used to distinguish this group being Hebrew for "Children of Manasseh."<sup>2</sup> The Benei Menashe constitute a small but distinctive segment of the Zo. Out of a total Zo population of perhaps 3,000,000 spread across these territories, in 2005 Israeli Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar estimated 6,000 were following Judaism.<sup>3</sup>

Familiarity with the Bible that presaged this development came about through the activities of Protestant missionaries who began to work in these territories in the 1890s, soon after Manipur, Mizoram, and the Chin Hills had come under British colonial domination. Prior to the arrival of the missionaries, the Zo peoples had been shifting cultivators who were unfamiliar with the written word; today they can boast a level of literacy higher than that in most Indian states and territories. The missionaries have been so successful among the tribal populations in these areas, and indeed throughout North East India, that most today are passionate Christians. Many Zo have accepted a calling to become missionaries themselves within the region, across India, Korea, and in South East Asia. Mizoram has even sent missionaries to Wales in Great Britain—where the missionaries to Mizoram had originated—in an effort to rekindle the faith in the rapidly secularizing West.

### **The Evolution of Judaism in Myanmar and North East India**

Some individuals from this fervently religious people had come to perceive similarities between their own customs and traditions and those of the ancient Israelites as early as the 1920s, sacrifices being a particularly notable area of convergence, although no longer practiced by Jews today.<sup>4</sup> A conviction that in fact the Zo were descendants of the Israelites took hold in the early 1950s, inspired by the visions of one man, a Pentecostal Deacon named Challianthanga ("Pu Chala") from the village of Buallawn in Mizoram, who declared that God had revealed this truth to him. According to Pu Chala, if the Zo were to survive in the forthcoming war of Armageddon, they had to restore the religious practices ordained in the Bible and to return to settle in their Promised Land.<sup>5</sup>

Such beliefs spread throughout the territories inhabited by the Zo thanks to itinerant preachers, who criss-crossed the group's territorial range. Pu Chala's Israelites in fact practiced a Christian faith, coupled with observance of Saturday as the Sabbath and the biblically ordained pilgrim festivals, and refrained from eating pork, the meat most savoured in the region. Members of groups with similar views sought out contact with the Jewish communities and Israeli diplomatic representatives in Bombay, Calcutta, and Rangoon, from whom they learnt by the mid-1970s that Jews did not recognize the messianic claims of Jesus Christ. This led to a split between "Israelite" groups who retained their faith in Jesus, and those who sought to follow the religion of the Jewish people.<sup>6</sup>

The practices of the Benei Menashe have gradually become more consonant with those of Orthodox Judaism, as the group continued its pursuit of Jewish knowledge and the links it forged with Amishav, a small group from Israel run by Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail of Jerusalem, which sought to locate the remnants of the Lost Tribes of Israel. From 1979 until around 2003, Rabbi Avichail was the undisputed religious authority for the Benei Menashe and was instrumental in taking around 850 of them to settle in Israel, where they underwent formal conversion to Judaism and received Israeli citizenship. In turn, these

Israeli members of the Benei Menashe have helped to educate their fellows back home, through such efforts as the translation and transliteration of the Bible, Jewish blessings, and various other religious texts, and visits back to Manipur and Mizoram to pass on their religious knowledge.

From 2004, a new group calling itself *Shavei Israel*, run by Michael Freund, himself an American Jewish immigrant to Israel, has succeeded Amishav in its work with the Benei Menashe, developing centers in Manipur and Mizoram that teach Judaism and the Hebrew language and seek to prepare people for life in Israel. That year, at the urging of Michael Freund and prominent members of his group, a number of Israeli rabbis traveled to Manipur and Mizoram as emissaries of the Israeli Chief Rabbi to investigate the claims of the Benei Menashe. The rabbis were very impressed with what they saw, and in March the following year, the Chief Rabbi called for urgent action to rescue the Benei Menashe by formally converting them to Judaism and bringing them to Israel.<sup>7</sup> Today, more than 2,000 members of this community have made Israel their home.

As we shall see, the claims of the Benei Menashe, their religious practices, and the involvement of Israelis in their conversion and emigration have sparked controversy and hostility from various Zo leaders, both church and secular, and among Indian nationalists concerned with these developments. There are significant differences in the political, ethnic, and religious environments of the Benei Menashe across the range of their territorial distribution. Consequently, before focusing on the relationships between the Benei Menashe and other Zo groups, we shall briefly consider their social context in Manipur, Mizoram, and Chin State.

### Relationships with Non-Zo Communities

The Zo comprise a group of tribes who speak around 45 closely related but distinct dialects, belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family.<sup>8</sup> In Manipur and Chin State, people tend to cling to their particular forms of speech, whereas in Mizoram one dialect, the Dulien, spoken by the historically dominant Lusei tribe, has become the official, unifying language of the state. People in Mizoram tend not to speak or even to learn the tribal dialects of their ancestors and at least in public, seek to play down tribal differences, stressing the unity of all the Zo people as "Mizos," a term formally adopted in 1952.<sup>9</sup>

While in Mizoram the majority of the population belong to the "Mizo" community, in Manipur, the Zo groups constitute around 12% of the state's 2 million inhabitants. A number of Naga tribes make up a similar proportion of the state's population. Like the Zo, most of the Nagas were converted to Christianity through the efforts of Baptist missionaries. By contrast, the majority population of the state are the Meiteis, who have lived and farmed in Manipur's fertile valley for over a thousand years, during which time Manipur has been a centralized kingdom, organized along military lines.<sup>10</sup>

Like the tribals, the Meiteis have Mongoloid features and speak a language that belongs to the Tibeto-Burman family. The Meiteis embraced Hinduism in the 18th century, whereas the tribals followed their traditional animistic practices until the arrival of Christianity. Despite their agricultural occupation and their racial features, the Meiteis regard themselves as having a noble Aryan pedigree.<sup>11</sup> They have assumed Kshatriya status and wear the gold thread, the preserve of the higher or "twice-born" Hindu castes. Most use the surname "Singh," signifying Kshatriya or warrior caste status.

Historically, the Meitei regarded all of the hill peoples as untouchables and treated them as inferior human beings.<sup>12</sup> However, educational opportunities that have been available to the Christianized tribals, reservation of a proportion of university placements and significant administrative posts for members of backward castes and tribes under schedules to the post-independence constitution of India, and the fact that the votes of people of all backgrounds have the same value in the parliamentary democracy that India has become, have all contributed to a leveling of the status of the different communities,

and the often better-educated tribals have learnt to look down upon what they regard as the heathen Meitei.

Members of the Naga, Zo and "Pangal" groups have been elected to ministerial posts and even to the position of Chief Minister in Manipur. The Benei Menashe have shared in the opportunities made possible by their access to education. Several have held prominent positions in the state administration. Some have sought election to the legislative assembly. Others have had close kinsmen in ministerial posts.

The "Pangals" or Manipuri Muslims number around 150,000 souls. They have lived in the state since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and speak the dominant Meitei language.<sup>13</sup> The term *Pangal* is a local adaptation of the word "Bengal" and suggests the provenance of this community. The Benei Menashe in their first few years of history looked upon the Pangals fraternally as they shared many religious ideals in common, such as circumcision, abstinence from pork, and belief in the absolute unity of God.

Before they became more conversant with the strictures of *kashruth*, the body of Jewish dietary laws, Benei Menashe would purchase meat slaughtered by the Muslims. Notwithstanding the suspicion and enmity between Jews and Muslims that has taken hold in many parts of the world, relations between the Pangals and the Benei Menashe have thus far remained positive and friendly.

During the 1990s, the Naga tribes waged communal warfare against some of the "Kuki" or Zo groups, asserting that the latter were interlopers who had recently settled in Manipur and taken lands that rightly belonged to the Nagas. Kukis were given an ultimatum to leave the state or suffer the consequences if they did not. Members of the Benei Menashe were dislocated during this period, and some lost their lives, not because of their religious choices, but because of their ethnic background. In 1998, the family of Neihmang ("Peniel") Haokip, the president of the Benei Menashe in Imphal, grieved over the slaying of their daughter, who had been married to a Naga. The family had been sent photographs of her mutilated body. The fact that her husband was a Naga did not shield her from the fate of a Kuki in a Naga area. The body of another elderly member of the community from the Churachandpur district, a Ngaite who had children and grandchildren settled in Israel, was found floating in the river.

### **Relationships with Zo Christians**

Generally, members of the other ethnic groups in Manipur seem indifferent to the Jewish leanings of the Benei Menashe, whose Zo status is a more salient consideration. Religious affiliation, however, is far more relevant among the Zo. This is particularly noticeable in Mizoram and the Chin State, where the majority of the population are themselves Zo.

The Benei Menashe community has remained rather small in Myanmar, possibly because of the repressive nature of the government, which has sought to spread Burmese culture among the minority ethnic groups in the country. In 1996, a Benei Menashe prayer hall near the border town of Tamu was bulldozed, seemingly because it was not considered to belong to a recognized religious denomination. Christian village chiefs in the Chin State had previously expelled villagers who adopted Sabbatarian practices, because of their disruptive impact on the unity of the community. Nowadays, the prerogatives of chiefs have been circumscribed by the placement of individuals who serve as the eyes and ears of the regime, watching out for deviations from the accepted norms.

Historically, chiefs owned the land within their domains and allocated plots to their followers to cultivate or to build their dwellings. The plots allocated to a villager were often not contiguous, so one might need to pass across the homes and fields of other villagers to get from one's home to one's farmlands. In Mizoram, following a vigorous political

campaign, chieftainship was abolished in 1954.<sup>14</sup> In Manipur, the chief, usually the founder of a village or one of his descendants, has retained the right to control the residence of his subjects and his territory.

Individuals hailing from different parts of Manipur have mournfully related to me how they were expelled from their homes by the chiefs of their villages because of their beliefs. The chief might give a variety of explanations for his decision. The Sabbatarians might be considered to be disturbing the peace and harmony of the community on account of the fact that they observed the Sabbath on a different day from the rest of the village or because they would have to cross over the land held by other villagers to work their plots on a Sunday, when the rest of the community were trying to rest. Furthermore, the example of the waywardness of the Benei Menashe could "corrupt" other villagers, leading them to waver from accepted Christian practices. Such experiences, ironically, recall the history of the early Christian converts among the Zo, many of whom were expelled by chiefs, because their newly acquired religion conflicted with their traditional, ritual obligations to the service of the chief.<sup>15</sup>

I recall the bitterness of an elderly member of the Haokip clan, recounting his expulsion from his village when he began to observe Saturday as a day of rest. He now dreamed and hoped that he might one day be selected to settle in Israel; then he would return to laugh in the face of the village chief. With a daughter who had in fact already gone to live in Israel, it was only a matter of time before his opportunity to fulfill this dream might eventuate.

The twists of fate are often more surprising than fantasy. My informant did fulfill his dream to make *Aliyah*, that is to settle in Israel, but so too in due course did the chief who had opposed his religion. My informant's daughter married the son of the chief, who followed his son to Israel, and therefore into the Jewish fold.

This story highlights the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the Benei Menashe and Zo Christians. Although the number of Zo who have adopted Judaism is small, many others willingly entertain the possibility that they might be descendants of Israelites, without wishing to venture into the Jewish religious community.

Such a view of their origins has been fostered by numerous small publications, in English, Thado, Mizo, Paite, and other dialects, which have sought to trace the history of the Zo as Israelites, banished to the far corners of the empire after the Assyrians had conquered the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8th century B.C.E. From the lands of the Medes and Persians, these booklets recount the eastward progress of the ancestors of the Zo, through Afghanistan, across the Khyber Pass, through the Hindu Kush, Tibet, and eventually to China, then through South East Asia and Myanmar before finally settling in their current territories.

Pi Zaithanchhungi, a popular writer from Mizoram, has expounded similar ideas, along with an extensive catalogue of parallels that she sees between Mizo tradition and Jewish practices found in the Bible, in her popular booklet, *Israel-Mizo Identity*, which has appeared in several editions in both English and Mizo.<sup>16</sup> On the strength of these parallels, Zaithanchhungi concludes that the Israelites and Mizos must either have had the same ancestors or had lived as "neighbours close enough to copy each other's customs, traditions and social life."<sup>17</sup>

While in Manipur there have been some prominent individuals who have joined the Benei Menashe, in Mizoram Judaism has tended to be associated with poverty: the humble circumstances of Benei Menashe places of worship contrast strikingly with the grand churches found in the state.

Notwithstanding the difference in status between the two religions, various Christian leaders have felt a need to vigorously attack the "heresy" that Judaism represents. In 1992, I attended an International Seminar on the Mizos in Aizawl, Mizoram, where I delivered a paper with the title "Judaism in Manipur and Mizoram: By-Product of Christian Mission." Whereas I was elucidating how Judaism in the region had essentially developed out of

Christianity, these defenders of Christianity saw a need to attend the seminar for the purpose of denouncing the heresy discussed in my paper, the belief expressed by some that the Zo were descendants of Israelites, and to challenge the suggestion that there might be some positive value in this belief. My paper had suggested that seeing their ancestors as Israelites might "display a positive, creative potential," bringing pride and confidence to a people who had been led by missionaries and colonial administrators to regard their ancestors as "head-hunting savages."<sup>18</sup>

The notion of the Israelite origins of the Zo peoples has also been energetically promoted by the late Lalchhanhima Sailo, whose Chhinlung Israel People's Convention has campaigned for an independent nation in the Zo territories, for this people who claim descent from the ancient Israelites, while retaining a strong Christian faith. Rather than advocating migration to Israel, Sailo in effect sought the creation of a second Israelite state in territories currently ruled by India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh. More of a politician than a theologian, Sailo's views were attractive to a large number of people. His organization claimed a membership of around 250,000,<sup>19</sup> especially among the poorer and less educated groups in Mizoram. This popularity stemmed perhaps less from the Israelite claims than from Sailo's campaign for the debts of Mizos to be wiped out in 1994, the Mizos' "jubilee" year, being the centenary of Christianity in the state.

The fact that not all people who identify as Israelites want to be regarded as Jews was brought home to me during my first visit to Manipur in 1990, when a person with such beliefs stressed that he was not a "Jew," as he was not one of those people who had "condemned Jesus to the cross ... (and) refused to accept Jesus as Messiah."<sup>20</sup> The punishments that the Jews warranted for this, including the Holocaust, apparently did not apply to the descendants of the other Israelite tribes.

As we have noted, in March 2005, Israeli Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar recognized the claims of the Benei Menashe's Israelite origins and called for their reintegration into the Jewish people through formal conversion to Judaism and settlement in Israel.<sup>21</sup> This led to widespread disputation between supporters and opponents of the concept, with Sailo and P. C. Biaksiamia, a staunch supporter of mainstream Christianity debating the issue on local television in Mizoram. Members and supporters of the Benei Menashe have also been involved in polemics with conventional Christians over many years. While Sailo's disputes with the church center on the reputed ethnic origins of the Zo, the Benei Menashe have also argued over whether Judaism or Christianity is the true religion. Buatisaihtu's "Quo Vadis Aw Mizo?" and Lemuel Henkhogin Haokip's article on the origins of Judaism in North East India are critical of Christian deviation from practices commanded by the Bible.<sup>22</sup>

Whereas in disputes with conventional Christians the Benei Menashe may sometimes find themselves aligned with groups such as Sailo's who believe the Zo are descendants of Israelites while they choose to practice Christianity, and with "Messianic Jews" who observe Saturday as their Sabbath though they retain their faith in Jesus, the doctrinal differences between them are also significant, leading to conflict between the Benei Menashe and these others. Many of the Benei Menashe had belonged to "Messianic Jewish" groups prior to their adoption of Judaism. One prominent individual recounted how he came to join the Benei Menashe after his expulsion from a Messianic group for having undergone circumcision. That act, of seeking out physical circumcision, apparently marked him out as someone of insufficient faith in Jesus, for Jesus had made it possible to enter God's covenant without the need to mutilate the body; "circumcision of the heart" had obviated the need to perform the physical ritual.

Rabbi Avichail's first visit to Manipur and Mizoram in 1991 had a dramatic impact on the fortunes of the Benei Menashe and Messianic communities in both states. The Messianic groups were largely working on their own to try to develop appropriate prayers and rituals, while the Benei Menashe had the benefit of following a defined liturgy and practices recognized by Jews across the world. Furthermore, the fact that Rabbi Avichail had succeeded in arranging for the settlement of a small number of Benei Menashe in Israel

strengthened the apparent validity of Judaism. Over the next few years, a number of erstwhile Messianic congregations across Manipur voted overwhelmingly to go over to Judaism. Soon after such a vote in the congregation at Kangpokpi in Manipur, the former "Messianic," now "Jewish," prayer hall was vandalized, apparently as revenge on the part of some who opposed the move.

While Rabbi Avichail's visits mainly affected "Messianic" groups, Rabbi Amar's pronouncement and the subsequent visit in September 2005 of a delegation of Israeli rabbis to carry out conversions in Mizoram and Manipur drew an outraged reaction from mainstream Christian leaders in the region, apparently concerned at the prospect that more people might abandon Christianity for Judaism. After they had converted 218 people in Mizoram, the rabbis' visit was terminated abruptly, before they had a chance to enter Manipur.<sup>23</sup> For many in Mizoram, identification with Jesus has become a fundamental element of Mizo identity, such that they find it impossible to conceive of a Mizo who does not love and follow Jesus. A leading political figure from the state expressed his indignation with the conversions by suggesting that Israelis would also be offended if Mizo missionaries were to go to Israel and attempt to convert their children.

### **Attitudes of Indians to the Judaism of the Benei Menashe**

Whereas the non-Zo communities in the region inhabited by the Zo are indifferent to the religious affiliation of the Benei Menashe, sections of the broader Indian society, including the central government, have reacted with concern over their conversion to Judaism and the connections that they might have with Israel.

When India achieved independence, the tribal areas of the North East were administered as part of the state of Assam. In the interest of forging a cohesive national identity, efforts were made to promote the use of the Assamese language and to assimilate the tribals into mainstream Indian culture.<sup>24</sup> The Christianized tribal populations strongly resisted these efforts, leading to revolts by the Nagas, Mizos, and other groups in the region. Christianity, seen by many Indians as "a hand maiden of colonialism,"<sup>25</sup> was blamed for the failure of normative Indian culture to take hold in the region, and foreign missionaries were accused of encouraging rebellion. Michael Scott, a missionary working among the Nagas was arrested and deported in 1966, and all foreign missionaries in India's North East were expelled in 1969.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, some Indian nationalist groups have looked upon the judaizing movement in Manipur and Mizoram with suspicion. Already in 1980 the *Blitz*, a communist newspaper, was expressing alarmist concern that Israeli agents had planted the notion that Mizos were members of one of the lost tribes, as a means of subverting the integrity of India. At a time when Mizos had been involved in a bloody campaign seeking to establish an independent Zo nation, the paper alleged that "some of those actively connected with the Underground Mizo National Front movement have been identified as having been trained in America and Israel."<sup>27</sup> This was at a time when relations between Israel and India were strained. In Cold War terms, India supported Russia against the United States and the Palestinians against Israel.

At the time, Israel had no interest in the Benei Menashe, was wary of their claims, and banned their members from traveling to Israel. As reported by the *Telegraph* newspaper in Calcutta, Israel was not prepared to grant any visas to the self proclaimed "Mizo Jews," or indeed to anyone from either Manipur or Mizoram.<sup>28</sup> To get around this ban, Rabbi Avichail was offering advice to any who wished to travel to Israel: they should link up with an Indian Christian tour group to the Holy Land.

While the relationship between Israel and India warmed considerably in the 1990s when the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in India, Rabbi Amar's proclamation came when the Congress Party was back in power, with the support of the Indian Communist Party. The Communist leader Farkish Kret condemned the rabbi's declaration, asserting, "It

is forbidden to export a community," and called for the cessation of security cooperation with Israel.<sup>29</sup>

The conversions of 2005 caused a diplomatic incident between Israel and India. While the rabbis had traveled to India following Rabbi Amar's proclamation, they were employees of the Israeli Prime Minister's office. They had not paid the courtesy of visiting the Indian Prime Minister or explaining their mission before visiting the North East. Although in fact the people whom the rabbis had come to formally induct into Judaism had already been practicing the religion for as much as 30 years, to many observers, including the Indian government, it appeared that the Israeli government was "trying to aggressively convert Indian citizens."<sup>30</sup> In response to this pressure, Israel halted the conversions.<sup>31</sup> Thereafter, any Benei Menashe who sought to be recognized as a Jew has had to travel abroad to go before a *Beth Din*, a Jewish rabbinical court that can conduct conversions.

The Indian government's reaction was in part a response to the agitation of Christian leaders in Mizoram who portrayed conversion to Judaism as virtually an act of treason, since under Israel's Law of Return, every Jew has a right to settle in the country. Thus, P. C. Biaksiama of the Christian Research Centre in Aizawl argued that "the mass conversion by foreign priests will pose a threat not only to social stability in the region, but also to national security. A large number of people will forsake loyalty to the Union of India, as they will become eligible for a foreign citizenship."<sup>32</sup> Curiously, I have not seen any claim along these lines in regard to the many Indian nationals who each year immigrate to other parts of the world and take up citizenship in different countries.

A number of Indian commentators have recognized the irony of this position, in the light of the history of Christian missionary activity in the region.<sup>33</sup> Indian nationalists who were concerned that Christian missionaries had created a barrier between themselves and the tribal population were now supporting the Christianized tribals against another religion, which appeared to be threatening the hold of Christianity on a segment of that tribal population.

### **Case Study: A Nepali Member of the Benei Menashe**

The following vignette may help in understanding the attachment of the Benei Menashe to Judaism, the attitudes of Christians in Mizoram to Jesus, and the attitudes of both to people of Indian racial stock.

During a visit to Kolasib in Mizoram in the year 2000, members of the local Benei Menashe community took me to visit the home of a Nepalese man, born and raised as a Hindu in Mizoram, who spoke the Mizo language like a native. This man had been impressed with the religious teachings of Judaism as practiced by the Benei Menashe community and wished to join them. The congregation in Kolasib were unsure as to how they should respond to this request. They themselves had adopted Judaism on the strength of a belief that this was the religion of their ancestors. Was it permissible, I was asked, for someone not of the blood to enter the religious community?<sup>34</sup>

Unsure as to whether they could induct this racial stranger into the fold, they had eventually decided to do so, requiring him to undergo circumcision, giving him a Hebrew personal name, and appending "Benei-Israel Benei-Menashe" to his name. In this way, they were ritually symbolizing not only the man's incorporation into the religious community, but also his adoption into the tribe of Manasseh of the Israelite nation.

While the Nepalese man was happy in his new religious community, some members continued to look down upon him. One lady hurriedly came to visit me as soon as she learned of my presence in Kolasib, before I left the town. She was indignant that my hosts had taken me to visit the home of "a mere Nepali" and not to hers, she of course being a true Mizo and long a member of the Jewish congregation.

I was interested in the experiences of the Nepali Benei-Menashe individual following his embrace of Judaism. He recounted how on the night of Purim, a Jewish festival when

people celebrate the biblical story of Queen Esther and the rescue of the Jews of Persia from a decree to annihilate them, he was walking home from the synagogue, alone in the dark, in an enthusiastic and merry state. He was stopped by some Mizo youths who questioned him along the lines "Nepali, why are you out so late?" He responded happily that he had been celebrating a Jewish festival with his friends. His answer offended his inquisitors who took it upon themselves to beat him up for having rejected the saviour, Jesus.

It is significant that the thugs had not attacked the Mizo Jews, but only the Nepalese man—even though this man had never been a Christian, whereas the Mizo Jews had been.

This story illustrates the fact that for the Benei Menashe, their acceptance of Judaism is not a superficial matter, a means to the end of improving their living standards by acquiring the opportunity to leave India and settle in Israel, as many skeptical Israeli officials and commentators have asserted over the years:<sup>35</sup> these people genuinely believe they are returning to the traditions of their forefathers by following Judaism.

The hesitation of the Benei Menashe in accepting the Nepalese man into their fellowship also suggests a sense of superiority over the Nepalese: clearly they see it as a signal honor for this man to join them, to elevate him from his Hindu origins. The attitudes displayed by the lady and the men who accosted him in the dark again highlight the superiority that these people, as Mizos of whatever religious faction, feel in their encounter with the Hindu *vai*, people of what one would see as "Indian" appearance, regarded with suspicion and disdain by the Mizos.<sup>36</sup> We also see the offense that the Mizo Christians felt that this man should choose to follow Judaism rather than Jesus, to whom most Mizos now have a close, emotional attachment.

### Summing-up

As we have seen in this article, the Benei Menashe interact with people of many different backgrounds within the region they inhabit and, as citizens of India and Myanmar, within the wider circle of these national polities. Their religious practices are of only limited interest to the non-Zo communities within their region. In this sphere, the Benei Menashe's identity as persons of Zo ethnicity is more significant and affects the way that they are seen.

However, in the wider national context, the Benei Menashe's adoption of Judaism draws them into the political arena. Given the connection between Judaism and the state of Israel, and the fact that many Benei Menashe contemplate migration to Israel where they can practice their religion most fully, attitudes to the Jewish state affect how the members of the Benei Menashe are seen by their fellow citizens. Those who disapprove or are suspicious of Israel are inclined to be hostile to the expression of Judaism in the area as an Israeli plot to gain supporters.

Furthermore, Indian nationalists who have been wary of the impact of foreign missionaries on the tribal populations of the north east region have equated the activities of the rabbis who came from Israel in 2005 with those of the missionaries who were held responsible for creating a chasm between the tribal population and the broader Indian populace. These rabbis had come to carry out the formal conversion of people who were already practicing Judaism, not to persuade others to join them. By proscribing the activities of the rabbis, such nationalists have thwarted the dreams and aspirations of many Benei Menashe to become fully recognized as Jews—as members of the religious community whose practices they follow.

Religious affiliations and beliefs have been far more significant in the relations between members of the Benei Menashe and fellow members of the Zo community. Many other Zo accept the view that they might have Israeli ancestry and look upon Israel sympathetically, while like the Benei Menashe, "Messianic" congregations attempt to follow biblical precepts such as observing Saturday as the Sabbath and refraining from unclean foods. However, for these groups, such beliefs and practices tend to be associated with an equally strong attachment to, indeed a love for Jesus as the Saviour.

Christianity has become such an integral part of Zo identity that for many it is unthinkable for a person to be a Zo without a strong bond with Christ.<sup>37</sup> One can therefore only admire the will power that members of the Benei Menashe need to exhibit to hold to their Jewish beliefs while living in the society of their *volk*.

A prominent young member of the community now living in Israel related to me how difficult he found it, growing up in Mizoram at a time when the numbers of the Benei Menashe were small. He felt cut off from his peers and resented his father for having adopted and stubbornly maintained what seemed like peculiar religious rituals and beliefs in the Mizo Christian context. Over time, my friend has come to admire his father's tenacity and has himself become a strong advocate for Judaism, translating many Hebrew religious texts into Mizo and returning to teach the religion to the members of his community living in Mizoram.

Although the people now known as the "Benei Menashe" have only begun to practice Judaism in the past 35 years, they have done so in the face of considerable pressure, from within the cohorts of their ethnic groups, and the suspicion and hostility of elements within the broader Indian society. How long a community can survive in such a state of tension, only time can tell.

One means of resolving that tension is through immigration to Israel, where Judaism is the normative religious tradition. In turn, the interaction of members of the Benei Menashe in India and Myanmar with their friends and kinsmen who have settled in Israel might help to bolster the practice of Judaism in North East India and the Chin State in Myanmar.

As for those Benei Menashe who choose to settle in Israel, how long they will be able to retain a separate ethnic identity is also open to conjecture. The challenges that lie ahead for them herald another chapter in the history of this remarkable religious community.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although the members of these tribes generally recognize that they have common backgrounds, similar customs, shared folklore, and closely related dialects, there has never been a widely accepted name embracing the whole collectivity. The British called the groups on the Indian side of the border "Kuki," and those in Myanmar "Chin," while the Meitei of Manipur referred to them as "Khonjah" or "Khongsai." The population in the erstwhile Lushai Hills took upon themselves the name "Mizo" a term meaning "Zo People," a poetic inversion of the grammatically correct "Zomi," which has been adopted by members of the Paite tribe. Following Vumson, *Zo History, With an introduction to Zo culture, economy, religion and their status as an ethnic minority in India, Burma, and Bangladesh* (Aizawl, Mizoram, published by the author, no date), I shall use the name "Zo" to refer to this constellation of tribes. In referring specifically to members of the group living in Mizoram, I shall use the term "Mizo."

<sup>2</sup> Shalva Weil, "Lost Israelites from the Indo-Burmese Borderlands: Re-Traditionalisation and Conversion among the Shinlung or Bene Menasseh," *The Anthropologist* 6, no. 3 (2004): 228 records that Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail suggested the appellation "Children of Menasseh" to the group.

<sup>3</sup> BBC News "Rabbi backs India's 'lost Jews'," BBC News South Asia, April 1, 2005, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/4400957.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4400957.stm)

<sup>4</sup> Myer Samra, "Judaism in Manipur and Mizoram: By-Product of Christian Mission," *The Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 6, no. 1 (1992): 7-22.

<sup>5</sup> Myer Samra, "Buallawn Israel: The Emergence of a Judaising Movement in Mizoram, Northeast India," *Religious Change, Conversion and Culture*, ed. Lynnette Olson (Sydney, Australia: Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture, 1996), p. 112.

<sup>6</sup> Myer Samra, "The Tribe of Manasseh: 'Judaism' in the Hills of Manipur and Mizoram," *Man in India* 71, no. 1 (1991): 191.

<sup>7</sup> Ian MacKinnon, "Lost tribe dreams of return to Israel after 2,700 years in exile," *The Times Online*, April 2, 2005, [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,3-1550821\\_1,00.html](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,3-1550821_1,00.html)

<sup>8</sup> Frank K. Lehman, *The Structure of Chin Society: A Tribal People of Burma Adapted to a Non-western Civilization*, 2nd ed. (Aizawl, Mizoram: Tribal Research Institute, 1980), p.14.

<sup>9</sup> Binod Behari Goswami, *The Mizo Unrest—A Study in Politicisation of Culture* (Jaipur: Aalekh Publishers, 1979), p. 105.

<sup>10</sup> Gangmumei Kabui, *History of Manipur, Vol. 1 Pre-colonial Period* (New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1991), pp. 90-92 attempts to unravel the historicity of the Meitei chronicles concerning Pakhangba, acknowledged as the founder of the kingdom. Dates for his accession range from 33 to 980 C.E.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Challan Hodson, *The Meitheis*, 2nd ed. (Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1975), p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> Kabui, *History of Manipur*, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Binod Behari Goswami and D. P. Mukherjee, "The Mizo Political Movement," *Tribal Movements in India, Vol. 1*, ed. K. S. Singh (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1982), p. 136.

<sup>15</sup> Lal Dena, *Christian Mission and Colonialism: A Study of Missionary Movement in Northeast India, with Particular Reference to Manipur and Lushai Hills 1894-1947* (Shillong: Vendrame Institute, 1988), p. 101; Ferdaus A. Quarishi, *Christianity in the North Eastern Hills of South Asia: Social Impact and Political Implications* (Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1987), p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Pi Zaitanchhungi, *Israel-Mizo Identity* (Aizawl: St Joseph's Press, 1990; English edition Aizawl: S. T. Press, 1992, First Mizo edition).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> Dena, *Christian Mission and Colonialism*, p. 110.

<sup>19</sup> Tathagata Bhattacharya, "Descendants of Lost Tribe of Israel Found in India" (posted September 9, 2004), *Farshores Ancient Dimensions News*, <http://farshores.org/a04mizo.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Samra, "The Tribe of Manasseh," p. 196.

<sup>21</sup> Yair Sheleg, "Amar: Bnei Menashe are descendants of ancient Israelites," *Haaretz*, April 1, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Buatsailhtu (Ben-Aryeh Pachuau), *Quo Vadis Aw Mizo* (Aizawl: H V Publication, 1995); Lemuel Henkhogin Haokip, "The Origins and Development of Judaism in North East India Up to the Present Day," *Judaism 25th Anniversary Souvenir*, ed. L. H. Haokip (Manipur: The Benei Menashe Council, 2001), pp. 20-21.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew Wagner, "Bnei Menashe conversions halted," *Jerusalem Post*, November 9, 2005, online edition.

<sup>24</sup> Quarishi, *Christianity in the North Eastern Hills of South Asia*, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Prafulla Dutta Goswami, quoted in Quarishi, *Christianity in the North Eastern Hills of South Asia*, p. 55.

<sup>26</sup> Quarishi, *Christianity in the North Eastern Hills of South Asia*, pp. 60-64; Robbins Burling, "Tribesmen and Lowlanders of Assam," *Southeast Asian Tribes, Minorities, and Nations, Vol. 1*, ed. Peter Kunstadter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 215-229.

<sup>27</sup> S. Berindranath, "Mythology of Zionist propaganda: Mizos are the 14<sup>th</sup> lost tribe of Israel!" *Blitz*, March 29, 1980.

<sup>28</sup> *The Telegraph*, "No Israeli visas for Mizo Jews," February 27, 1987.

<sup>29</sup> *Arutz Sheva'* [Channel Seven, the name of a radio station in Israel], "India Leftists Fight Bnei Menashe Aliyah," April 8, 2005,

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/news.php3?id=79840>

<sup>30</sup> Wagner, "Bnei Menashe conversions halted."

<sup>31</sup> Hilary Leila Krieger, "Bnei Menashe aliya, conversions halted pending government review," *The Jerusalem Post*, July 2, 2006,

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid+1150885896057&pagename=Jpost%2FJP>

<sup>32</sup> *Deccan Herald*, "Taste of their own medicine: Judaism threatens Church in Mizoram, Manipur," April 22, 2005,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> For a previous discussion of this case, see Myer Samra, "Searching for the Ratu Hospital: Dreams and Judaism in the Imagining of Mizo Nationalism," *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 9 (2008): 63.

<sup>35</sup> See discussion of such attitudes in Yossi Klein Halevi, "The Unwanted Immigrants," *The Jerusalem Report*, November 17, 1994, pp. 26-27, and in the *Jerusalem Post*, "Poraz mulls Benei Menashe policy," June 18, 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Binod Behari Goswami, "Outgroup from the Point of View of Ingroup," *Man in India* 55, no. 4 (1975): 326-330.

<sup>37</sup> See Samra, "Searching for the Ratu Hospital," p. 75, n.154, for an example of the pressure to follow Jesus, which the Benei Menashe face within Mizo society.

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