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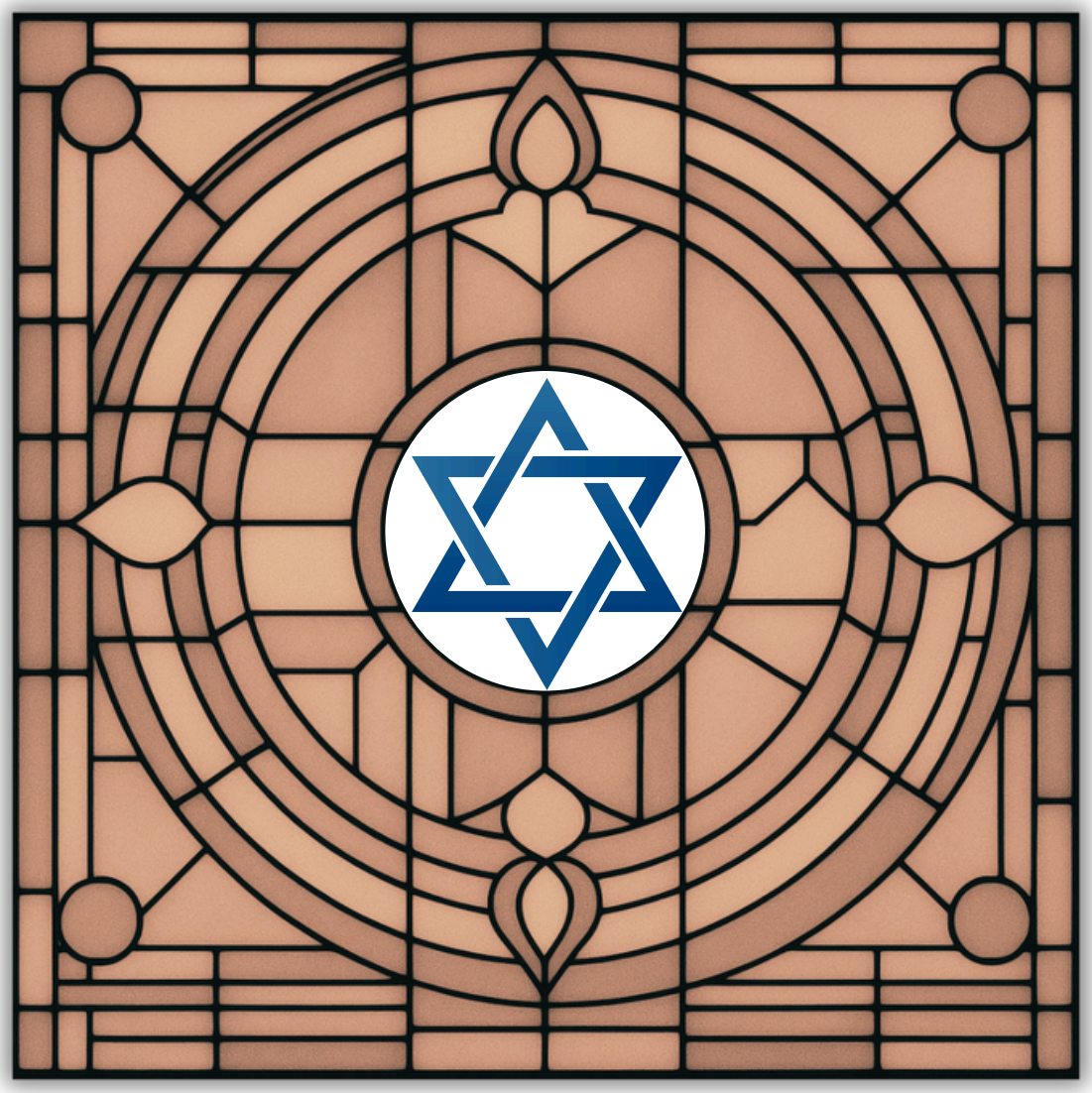

SPECIAL ISSUE

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4545 Royal Palm Avenue Miami Beach, FL 33140 USA
katzn18@gmail.com

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SPECIAL ISSUE

EMERGING JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN INDIA

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Neo-Jewish Political Revivalism in South India: An Overview of the Origin Narratives, Theological Positions, and Religious Practices of the "Children of Ephraim"[1]

Nathan P. Devir

Introduction

As this volume demonstrates, the scholarship published on the lengthy presence of Jews on the Indian subcontinent has covered almost every conceivable aspect of Jewish life in pre- and post-partition India (and, to a lesser extent, Pakistan). Concerning so-called Judaizing or neo-Jewish movements (whose members are unable to furnish any evidence of discursive links with established Jewish communities elsewhere in the world), the work is ongoing. Much has been written on the "Children of Manasseh" movement from the Mizoram and Manipur regions of the northeast, and several publications by Yulia Egorova and Shahid Perwez provide masterful and wide-ranging contextual examinations of the history and religious dynamics of another Judaizing community: the *Bene Ephraim*

[1] Parts of this essay, now updated and revised, were previously published in "Political Revivalism as Religious Practice: The 'Children of Ephraim' of India," which constitutes Chapter 4 of the following monograph: Nathan P. Devir, *New Children of Israel: Emerging Jewish Communities in an Era of Globalization* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2017), 171–221.

(Children of Ephraim) of South India, the group of formerly Christianized "untouchables" on which this study also focuses.[2]

In this essay, I set out to accomplish several things. First, I wish to explore the narratives and discursive strategies surrounding the supposed Jewish origins and customs of the Bene Ephraim, whose ranking in the lowest hereditary hierarchy of their region's "Scheduled Caste" structure has resulted in systemic oppression and suffering on a scale that, in the very least, may explain some of the symbolic affinities their members feel with the Judeo-Christian world's archetypal sufferers. Second, I aim to demonstrate that, in

[2] On the Bene Menashe: see, for example, Yulia Egorova, "Redefining the Converted Jewish Self: Race, Religion, and Israel's Bene Menashe," *American Anthropologist* 117.3 (2015): 493–505; Myer Samra, "The Tribe of Manasseh: 'Judaism' in the Hills of Manipur and Mizoram," *Man in India* 71, no. 1 (1991): 183–202; again, Samra, "Judaism in Manipur and Mizoram: A By-product of Christian Mission," *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 6, no. 1 (1992): 7–22; and Shalva Weil, "Lost Israelites from the Indo-Burmese Borderlands: Re-traditionalisation and Conversion among the Shinlung or Bene Menasseh," *Anthropologist* 6, no. 3 (2004): 219–33. The most relevant works by Egorova and Perwez on the Bene Ephraim are "Old Memories, New Histories"; "Telugu Jews"; and *Jews of Andhra Pradesh: Contesting Caste and Religion in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). On that note, differences between my perspectives on the Bene Ephraim and those of Egorova and Perwez may be attributed to several factors. First, my time with the community was spent almost entirely in the vicinity of Shmuel Yacobi's headquarters in Vijayawada and Machilipatnam, while Egorova and Perwez concentrated their time on the ground in Sadok (Shmuel's brother) Yacobi's community in Kothareddypalem. Second, my experience of the movement, from the time of my fieldwork and since, has been with Shmuel at the head of all the community's leadership tasks, whereas the experience of Egorova and Perwez included the period in which Sadok still played a major role in most activities. Third, our perspectives differ somewhat due to disciplinary variables. For instance, the ethnographic work of Egorova and Perwez tends to focus on quotidian "performances" of Jewishness in social, political, and historical (South) Indian contexts, while mine leans more toward discursive examinations of oral history, rhetorical practice, and creative multimedia, especially in the realm of textually-articulated ideologies.

contrast to Judaizing communities elsewhere (such as in Africa, for instance), their anger is not directed at the former colonial power. Rather, it is directed at the co-national instigators of what they consider to be an oppressive system. Finally, I wish to highlight how Bene Ephraim's theological positions and religious practices both coincide with and deviate from those of normative Jewish persuasions.

In case it does not go without saying, the reader should note that no effort here will be made to "prove" any claims of Jewishness attributed to the Bene Ephraim (especially concerning lineage from the particular lost Israelite tribe to which their name refers), despite many anecdotal accounts suggesting that members of the Madiga caste (the caste from which most Bene Ephraim hail) were long suspected by the colonial-era missionaries who converted them from nominal Hinduism of having ancestral ties to ancient Israel.[3] Customs prohibited to those from higher-level Hindu castes, such as the consumption of water buffalo meat, the burial of the dead, and supposed physiognomic differences between the Madiga and their neighbors, led to the foreigners' speculation about that group's possibly dissimilar provenance.

Shepherding the Flock: Enter the Yacobis

Audiences predisposed to the narrative of a noble origin outside of the subcontinent are not confined to formal members of the Bene Ephraim, whose community comprises a hundred or so families in and around the district of Guntur in the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh. Taken to its logical conclusion, the application of the Israelite "genealogical trope" in this particular regional and caste-based instance would necessitate the inclusion of those millions of people who belong to the region's Madiga—a remark often made by jittery officials from the Israeli Ministry of Immigrant Absorption with whom I have spoken. Other Dravidian and Telugu-speaking lower-caste peoples,

[3] For general information on the Madiga, see Tulja Ram Singh, *The Madiga: A Study in Social Structure and Change* (Lucknow: Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society, 1969); and K. Rajasekhara Reddy, "The Madigas: A Scheduled Caste Population of Andhra Pradesh," *Man and Life: Journal of the Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology, Calcutta* 33, no. 1–2 (2007): 81–88.

particularly those from the neighboring Mala caste, are also a target audience for this kind of "Jewish Sanskritization," which reenvisions their place in society by augmenting the prestige of their genealogical origins.[4] Astonishingly, how almost all such individuals have become exposed to the idea of a noble Jewish ancestry can be attributed to the efforts of one man: Mukthipudi Samuel Sundara Raju, a former Christian preacher who now goes by the Hebrew name of Shmuel Yacobi.

Shmuel has described himself alternatively as an "Israelite," a "Bene Ephraim Jew," an "Elder of the Telugu Semitic Community," a follower of "the traditional *Halakhic* [Jewish law-based] Bene Ephraim Telugu Jewish nationalistic culture," or the leader of "the Council of Eastern Jewry." Most recently, he has begun calling himself "a citizen of *Eretz Ephraim*" (the Land of Ephraim), a future nation that Shmuel hopes to found as a "sister state" to Israel, in the region (currently located in the West Bank) originally inhabited by

[4] For general information on the Mala, see K. Rathnaiah, *Social Change among Malas: An Ex-untouchable Caste in South India* (New Delhi: Discovery, 1991). For relations between the Mala and Madiga, see P. Pratap Kumar, "Andhra Pradesh: Economic and Social Relations," in *The Modern Anthropology of India: Ethnography, Themes and Theory*, ed. Peter Berger and Frank Heidemann (New York: Routledge, 2013), 15–17; and B. Sunil Vara Kumar, *Dynamics of Power Sharing between Mala and Madiga in Church* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), esp. 27–72. On the development of the concept of Sanskritization, see A. M. Shah, "Sanskritization Revisited," *Sociological Bulletin* 54, no. 2 (2005): 238–49; and Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas, *Caste in Modern India: And Other Essays* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1962), 42–62. See also Egorova's perspective on Sanskritization among the Bene Ephraim in her *Jews and India*, 123–25. For the Islamic equivalent of this concept, frequently dubbed "genealogical sophistication," see Fallou Ngom, "Murid Ajami Sources of Knowledge: The Myth and the Reality," in *From Dust to Digital: Ten Years of the Endangered Archives Programme*, ed. Maja Kominko (Cambridge: Open Book, 2015), 348. Finally, it is worthy of mention that during my fieldwork in India, I encountered at least half a dozen Bene Ephraim community members who hail from the Mala caste. This is a notable increase from the previous reports of only one Mala (Egorova and Perwez, *Jews of Andhra Pradesh*, 159) among the other Bene Ephraim congregants of Madiga parentage.

the biblical tribe of Ephraim. The impetus behind the public disavowal of his earlier religious affiliation and subsequent embrace of Judaism came in 1986 when he experienced a vision about the Israelite pedigree of his forefathers. He would later claim to have held previous, albeit incomplete, knowledge about this ancestry, which his parents and grandparents passed down to him orally. Determined to spread this awareness among his fellow lower-caste compatriots, Shmuel made a risky decision: in 1991, after quitting his job as a preacher, he publicly renounced the American-sponsored Baptist movement that had educated and employed him.

Shmuel's older brother, Aaron, and his younger brother, Sadok, followed Shmuel's lead. So did Shmuel's wife, Malkah, and their three sons, Yehoshua, Yacob, and Dan. Other family members wished to join their charismatic relative but feared for their livelihood, as they, too, were employed by Christian organizations. In 1993, Yehoshua was admitted to a Jewish seminary during a trip to Israel. Much to everyone's surprise, he was granted the opportunity to formally convert to Judaism, receiving Israeli citizenship one year later. He is the only member of the Bene Ephraim to have been allowed such options by the State of Israel.[5]

Since his fateful revelation, Shmuel has proven to be much more than a religious leader whose theology has shifted. He is widely acknowledged as a talented scholar, popular lecturer and teacher, and a resourceful entrepreneur and Renaissance man. In his efforts to disseminate the idea that many South Indians are genealogically connected to the Lost Tribe of Ephraim, Shmuel has employed diverse media categories. These include musical productions, compositions of prose and poetry, historiographic treatises, a motion picture, and, most importantly, pedagogical outreach tools.

To date, the most notable successes of Shmuel's outreach initiatives have been linked to the activities of his Hebrew Open University Research Study Centre, which Shmuel describes as "the first Semitic cultural educational institute in India." This primarily

[5] See Egorova and Perwez, *Jews of Andhra Pradesh*, 132–39, for more on Yehoshua Yacobi.

distance-learning institute offers "theological courses in the Bene Ephraim community perspective" to "Hindus, Christians, and Muslims of all denominations."[6] According to Shmuel, most students who enroll at the institute are from lower-caste Christian backgrounds. Among them are those "vexed with their denominational interpretations and beliefs" who wish to know "the original cultural meanings from their translated sacred Bibles."[7] Others are "excited to sincerely support our [the Bene Ephraim's] cause and bless us without expecting anything from us."[8] For those students who come from Philo-Semitic Christian backgrounds, such as Messianic or Adventists, there is also an element of prestige involved in being affiliated with the Centre. Shmuel claims that, in the past, many Christian clergy people who "studied this new perspective" at his institute were able to supplement "their theological degrees and [subsequently] got promotions in their churches" because of the integrity of the "authentic knowledge" offered there.[9]

Many students decide to enroll in the Centre's correspondence courses after meeting Shmuel at one of the many Bible Study lectures that he delivers at lower-caste Christian congregations throughout Andhra Pradesh. Over the years, hundreds of such congregations have invited him to speak as the resident expert on "Hebrew culture." These lectures represent valuable economic opportunities to further the activities of the Centre, whether through honoraria or eventual tuition fees, and the possibility of gaining new adherents for the Bene Ephraim movement. This is despite Shmuel's assertion that such meetings are not directed at "promoting religious conversions." When I asked him

[6] Shmuel Yacobi, "Eretz Ephraim Pictures—Educate, Work, and Achieve Peace," Writers-Network, accessed August 4, 2015, http://www.writers-network.com/index.cgi?m=1&do=profile&who=21560.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Shmuel Yacobi, "Writer and His Background," Booksie, accessed July 7, 2015, http://www.booksie.com/shmuel_yacobi.

about the likelihood that such encounters might indirectly encourage a move toward Judaism, Shmuel assured me that there is "no proselytizing involved" because people have paid to gain the information that he is contracted to provide. He has written elsewhere on this subject that "All humans must stick to their own religions and religious beliefs without poking their noses into others' business unless asked for."[10]

Bound to a Noble Lineage

From whence do the Bene Ephraim come? The specifics are fuzzy despite the seemingly exoteric nature of their heritage narratives. Sometimes, the details vary slightly based on how questions regarding the group's provenance are posed. In the same way, the addressee of the question also appears to make a difference. Why is this so? Besides Shmuel Yacobi, who is (among other things) the architect of Bene Ephraim's media project, no one else in the community with whom I spoke could give a detailed explanation of the group's historic migration to India. The synopsis of their heritage narratives, as presented here, thus relies heavily upon information from my interviews with Shmuel. It also references his many print- and web-based publications in English, which, according to him, are intended for "family members, relatives, friends, and well-wishers."[11]

Although Shmuel's providential vision about the heritage of his ancestors did not occur until 1986, he claims that he "was always brought up as a Bene Ephraim," absorbing the sacred traditions passed down to him orally by his parents and grandparents.[12] The entire

[10] Shmuel Yacobi, "The Religious Myth of the Lost Tribes of Israel," *The Lost Tribes of Israel* (blog), June 4, 2011, accessed July 21, 2015, http://shmuelyacobimssraju.blogspot.com/2011/06/religious-myth-of-lost-tribes-of-israel.html.

[11] Yacobi, "Religious Myth."

[12] Cited in Debarshi Dasgupta, "Come as You Are, David," *Outlook*, July 15, 2013, accessed August 2,

2015. http://www.outlookindia.com/article/come-as-you-are-david/286668.

collection of these oral traditions is known as the *Cavilah*, a Hebrew substantive construction whose root connotes "binding," "restriction," or, more severely, "chained." (Before learning about this set of heritage narratives, I had never heard the term before. I recognized the Hebraic root, but the particular nominative construction sounded odd, similar to a gauche neologism.) Shmuel has described the content of the Cavilah as "not [about] religion but [about] the constitution of our nation, history of our people and our cultural heritage." Such content must "be interpreted within our national evolutionary context and not in the religious or theological context."[13]

After Shmuel decides to abandon Christianity and embrace his birthright, he decides that the best method to preserve and propagate the teachings of the Cavilah would be to "record [them] in a systematic fashion before [they are] forgotten"—in other words, to write them down. This was a radical departure from previous custom, which had dictated that "nothing be put in written form" to "keep it out of the hands of the anti-Semites." In the present age, Shmuel reckoned, it was worth the risk. Telugu people were becoming increasingly aware that their true history had been "suppressed," and the time had come to stop being afraid. Moreover, even among higher-caste Hindus, it was an open secret that the Telugu "were not native to this place." The potential benefits outweighed the potential dangers.

Somewhat ironically, the linguistic medium first chosen to record the Cavilah traditions was the colonizers' language: English. And yet, for all practical purposes, this choice was the logical one to make. All of Shmuel's higher education had taken place in English. Many of the scholarly sources that he had to consult were written in English. His intended audience would be those outside of Andhra Pradesh who would not be able to receive the tradition orally, namely, American Jews, Israeli Jews, and non-Telugu-speaking Jewish Indians.

[13] Quotations attributed to oral conversations with Shmuel and others will not have citational references.

The preliminary result of this documentary effort was a typescript produced in 2001 with the help of Shmuel's younger brother, Sadok.[14] The contents of the typescript were expanded during the following year, which Shmuel spent in New York City. Shmuel had traveled there to utilize resources from the New York City Public Library to contextualize the historical occurrences recounted in the Cavilah properly. The fruits of the year spent on this research yielded a book published in 2002 titled *The Cultural Hermeneutics: An Introduction to the Cultural Translations of the Hebrew Bible among the Ancient Nations of the Thalmulic* [*sic*] *Telugu Empire of India*.[15] In 2004, Shmuel self-published a much-condensed version of this work in Telugu, divided into two booklets. One presents a concise history of the Bene Ephraim and their migration to India, while the other contains excerpts of spiritual teachings from the Cavilah.

When asked about the historical veracity of the texts in the Cavilah, Shmuel projects a nondogmatic approach. He qualifies the oral narratives as "exegetical," "apologetic," "pseudo-epigraphic," or "apocryphal," maintaining that "fictions, opinions, and ideas from forefathers" are important even if they are not necessarily true. He also refers to the Cavilah as the "Talmud *Mizrahi*" (the Eastern Talmud), ostensibly adding a third version to the two already-canonical compilations (namely, the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud). Deflecting the notion that appendages to the Jewish canon are heretical, he states that the world needs to know about a branch of the Jewish people whose ancient traditions are "not included in the present Bible or related writings." Moreover, Shmuel hastens to add that Jews are a people, not a religion, so minor

[14] I did not have access to this typescript, *The History of Telugu Jewish Community of A. P. India*, as it was apparently lost before the time of my fieldwork in India.

[15] Shmuel Yacobi, *The Cultural Hermeneutics: An Introduction to the Cultural Translations of the Hebrew Bible among the Ancient Nations of the Thalmulic Telugu Empire of India* (Vijayawada: Hebrew Open University, 2002). (Note: in Shmuel's writings, the term "Thalmulic" is equated with the term "Talmudic.")

differences in textual understanding do not automatically disqualify a lesser-known group from belonging to the collective Jewish body.

Details of the Origin Narratives

While the Bene Ephraim have "never forgotten about stories from the Torah," they did not know the Prophetic Books or the Writings (Hagiographa) until their encounter with Christianity in the late nineteenth century. This is because the texts that they and the other nine Lost Tribes carried with them upon their dispersal from the Land of Israel in 722 BCE only included what had been canonized up to that point: the Five Books of Moses. They carried these with them through Persia to Afghanistan, down to Kashmir, eastward to Mizoram and Manipur (the location of the Children of Manasseh movement), and finally down to southeast India around 1100 CE.

Upon their arrival to the area of present-day Andhra Pradesh, they were "welcomed" by "the egalitarian Telugu people," some of whom may have included descendants of the "*'erev rav*" (mixed multitude) that had left Egypt under Moses (Exod. 12:38). Also believed to be present among the Dravidians were descendants of Pashtun tribal peoples named "Ephraim," who built the first synagogue at Machilipatnam, a city in coastal Andhra. In time, due to "wars and famines and foreign forces" instigated by the Aryans against the "bull-jawed Dravidians," the Bene Ephraim were "clubbed with the Telugu Sudra servant castes" and relegated to their present status. In *The Cultural Hermeneutics*, Shmuel estimates that about ten million descendants of these people live in Andhra Pradesh.[16]

Eventually, they lost the written records of who they were, but most never forgot that their common ancestor, "Ephrati," had been of noble blood. This remembrance persisted even after nearly all Madiga were converted to Christianity by the American Lone Star Baptist mission (from Pennsylvania, not Texas) in 1872. Shmuel's father, Yacob, served for fifteen years in the British army in an engineering battalion. During his service in World War II,

[16] Ibid., 133.

Yacob visited British Mandatory Palestine and recognized in the language and behavior of the Jews that there were traces of what had been lost throughout his own tribe's isolation.

A few words on the significance of the group's provenance from the tribe of Ephraim are in order. In the Bible, "Ephraim" is not only the name of a specific tribe whose progenitor was blessed by Israel as the favored son of Joseph (Gen. 48:14). It is also a symbolic appellation for all of the Lost Tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, just like the designation "Judah" refers to all of the "Jews" of the Southern Kingdom. The fate of the lost Israelites depends on the fulfillment of God's promise, as prophesized in Ezekiel 37:19, to "take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel his companions" and "put them unto him together with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick" in the Land of Israel.

Shmuel admits that, given the ancient connections between India and the Near East, not everyone among the Bene Ephraim may be actually from that tribe. Indeed, the figurative aspect of the name does not escape him. He notes that because of the "pride and arrogancy of heart" (Isa. 9:8) of that tribe and the fact that the central cults of early Israelite religion were located in its territory, Ephraim appears in the Bible as an archetype of fortitude. Is it a coincidence that the Bible's depiction of Ephraim vis-à-vis other peoples closely resembles the Aryans' depiction of the Dravidians as "bull-jawed"? It seems unlikely. Referring to the indigenous peoples of South India as "Ephraim" makes them blessed but long-suffering, strong-willed, but temporarily down.

Most importantly, it signals that they will be instrumental in a redemption that will restore them to their rightful place and status. Before that redemption happens, however, every descendant of Ephraim must know that "The Covenant compels you to suffer; you must be an instrument of suffering." Shmuel underlines that the knowledge of this suffering should not be equated with tolerating the "wickedness" of the caste system, which he has also called "a monstrous social disease." Through his activities aimed at fostering awareness about South India's true heritage, he "has been fighting" against this

"monster" by "stand[ing] up for the Bene Ephraim communities and for the other [Indian] victims of exploitation."

Shmuel argues that the typological similarities between sacred Hindu and Jewish texts may also be attributed to such "exploitation": namely, that the Aryans "stole" the narratives of the original Israelite inhabitants of South India. He claims that Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, and most other religions born north of the Deccan plateau are all "offshoots" of Judaism, whose influence there he dates to the sixth century BCE.[17] He stresses that this dissemination of Israelite (Jewish) thought did not take place because of any proselytizing but because of the "moral high ground" of the Bene Ephraim that other groups eventually wished to emulate.

For example, Shmuel maintains that the myths surrounding the character of Manu, the ancestor of all Indian kings who survived a great flood and whom Hindus revere as the first human, are an Aryan corruption of the biblical story of Noah (Gen. 5–9). By the same logic, Harishchandra, a central figure in several major Hindu religious texts who demonstrates faith and moral uprightness in tribulation, is taken directly from it. The story of Draupadi, who was the most beautiful woman of all time, according to the *Mahabharata*, finds its inspiration in the tale of Merab, daughter of Saul, who was given to Adriel despite having been promised to David (1 Sam. 18), just as Draupadi was given to Yudhistara although promised to Arjuna.[18] And so on.

[17] This idea has much in common with (for instance) the theory propagated by George Moore, in *The Lost Tribes and the Saxons of the East and of the West, with New Views of Buddhism, and Translations of Rock-Records in India* (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), 143–60.

[18] For background on the characters of Manu and Harishchandra, see John Dowson, *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History, and Literature* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1961), 199–201 and 118–19, respectively. For more on Draupadi, see

The Cavilah: A Heretofore Unknown Jewish Source Text

How does the Cavilah compare to conventional Jewish writings? The differences are few but significant. In the same way that Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and other "alternative" streams of non-Orthodox Judaism have reinterpreted seminal Jewish texts and doctrines according to Western humanistic and liberal traditions, it appears that the Bene Ephraim have reinterpreted key Jewish stories, symbols, texts, and tropes according to their situational contexts. Overwhelmingly, they have done so along the lines of emphatically Madiga-based concerns, accentuating existing themes and discourses while marginalizing others.

The most significant revisions seem to be the near-total abandonment of traditional notions of subservience, punishment, and sin and the embellishment of the notions of equality and justice. According to Shmuel, these themes prevalent in the Cavilah are emphasized to Bene Ephraim children starting at a young age so that they avoid being indoctrinated with theories of higher-caste Hindu superiority or with Aryan or Christian "contaminations" of the Divine Word. In that sense, Egorova and Perwez's comment that "the community's self-identification with the Jewish tradition is as much an expression of their pride in being Madiga as it is a protest against the caste system" is especially relevant for an examination of the Bene Ephraim's approach to Jewish textual praxis.[19]

The primary lesson of the Cavilah is that God does not "rule over" anything. When God made man in his image, it was not so that man should have "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth" (Gen. 1:26). Rather, it was that man should be a *caretaker* of these creatures, just as God would be a caretaker of man. For instance, the Cavilah recounts that after God made Adam the first man, he did not "order" him to

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Tripurari Chakravarti, "Main Women Characters in the Mahabharata," in *Great Women of India*, ed. Swami Madhavananda and Ramesh C. Majumdar (Mayavarti: Advaita Ashram, 1963), 169–81.

[19] Egorova and Perwez, *Jews of Andhra Pradesh*, 11.

"do" anything.[20] Instead, God came "every day, with angels, to teach him everything in a patient way." When Adam and Eve went against God's "recommendations," they were not expelled from the Garden of Eden. Rather, God "explained their mistake to them, and they understood." They were then turned into spirits—the only spirits in which the Bene Ephraim believed because Adam and Eve are the parents of humanity—and were there to answer the prayers of God's subsequent human creations. Interestingly, there is no serpent figure in this Cavilah story. When I asked for clarification on whether or not Satan exists in the Bene Ephraim tradition, Shmuel jokingly answered in the affirmative: "Satan does exist. He is the Aryans!"

The Cavilah also "corrects common misunderstandings" about certain biblical events that might be considered shameful or dysfunctional. For instance, the "fabricated" scene involving the incestuous union between Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:30–38) does not appear in the Cavilah. Instead, the Cavilah tells of "shape-shifting demons" who coupled with Lot's daughters. The truth about the matter was discovered by Abraham, the first Jew, who knew that his "brother's son would never do such a thing." Concerning Abraham, the Cavilah also corrects widespread misconceptions about his actions regarding his sons, Isaac and Ishmael. It seems Abraham never intended to sacrifice his son Isaac physically (Gen. 22). This "near-sacrifice" is a corruption of the original tale, which was altered according to themes present in Babylonian mythology. Abraham merely "offered up his son to continue the service of the Covenant." Moreover, Abraham had never cast out his firstborn son, Ishmael or the boy's mother, Hagar (Gen. 21). The two merely decided to dwell in a nearby "forest area," where they were visited frequently by Abraham and Isaac "during vacation times."

Abraham's descendants encountered misfortune, but not as great as commonly believed. For example, Jacob, Abraham's grandson, did not "flee" to his uncle Laban in Haran (Gen. 28:10) due to the earlier threat of fratricide (Gen. 27:41–42). Instead, he was called there

[20] The portions of the Cavilah as they appear in this section were recounted to me in English by Shmuel.

to be "Laban's commander-in-chief" and never worked as a shepherd. Rachel and Jacob returned to Canaan with the blessing of Rachel's father, but not before Rachel encouraged Laban to "forget his idols." In this version of the story, Jacob does not suffer in bondage to Laban (Gen. 29–30) but chooses to leave of his own free will. Rachel, for her part, neither steals her father's idols (Gen. 31:19) nor defiles them by menstruating on them (Gen. 31:34–35). Rather, with a disapproving nod to the Hindu phenomenon of worshiping household gods, she calmly points out that such gods are "false ones."

However, not everything was rosy in the lives of Abraham's descendants. The Cavilah recounts that Jacob and Rachel's son, Joseph, was sold into slavery in Egypt, just as in the biblical account (Gen. 27:38). However, Joseph had requested that no one "ever publish the event" because "it will ruin our relationships, as future generations will say to the descendants of Reuben and Judah, 'You are the ones who sold my father.'" Later, in Egypt, Moses, the assimilated Hebrew, had no idea about this ignoble occurrence in his people's history. He had not much of an idea at all about his own origins. He had been a contented member of the "expatriate" Israelites who worked for the Pharaoh and paid taxes without molestation. When Moses became interested in his parents' ethnic background, he went to Midian, where he learned Cavilah with the elders from Goshen. He and the Israelites then made a collective decision to leave Egypt, but not under threat of death. The Pharaoh did not try to stop them, realizing that "because they came through the Covenant, they must leave through the Covenant." In the Cavilah, Moses is depicted as a "social reformer" rather than a liberator.

While journeying through the desert en route to the Promised Land, the Children of Israel learned "administration, handicrafts, and other useful things." They also received "the world's first constitution"—The Ten Commandments. The instance of idol worship involving the golden calf and the so-called "generation in the desert" story are corruptions of the original text of the Cavilah. On those points, Shmuel insists that God forgave the small number of people who engaged in idol worship and that the Israelites had to linger before entering Canaan only because that particular waiting period had been established by the Covenant long beforehand. The agreement had always been to sojourn in seven places of exile: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome, and "all nations." After

these seven exiles would be the long-awaited ingathering in Israel. This ultimate return to a common territory highlights the fact that Israel is a confederation, not a religion. Shmuel stresses that, according to the Cavilah, the people of Israel never did anything wrong. They were sent into exile only because "they were the instrument."

The Cavilah also contains post-biblical legends and characters in their chronology and context. For instance, the *golem*—an anthropomorphic figure from Jewish folklore familiarized to the world mainly through its kabbalistic iterations—is part of the Bene Ephraim oral tradition.[21] However, unlike the conventional Jewish portrayals of the *golem*, in which the monster ends up turning on its creator and running amok, the *golem* in the Bene Ephraim tradition is an obedient watchman who possesses not only a corporeal body but "free will," to boot.

Similarly, the post-biblical conception of the *Shekhinah* also appears in the Cavilah, albeit in a slightly different form. Known alternatively as the "Divine Presence," the feminine counterpart of God, the "Sabbath Bride," the messenger of God, or the mystical representation of all the Jews in the world, this composite of the feminine attributes of God is said to have gone into exile with the Jewish people, destined to return only when they fully repent of their transgressions.[22] However, in the Bene Ephraim lore, the presence has never left. "No matter how unclean the community is, she is always with us because of our Covenant," Shmuel says.

While listening to these histories, I wondered: If there is no sin, then what of the afterlife? Does the Bene Ephraim entertain the concepts of Heaven or Hell? According to Shmuel, the Cavilah tells of an afterlife, not one that separates people according to good or bad

[21] The most comprehensive account of the golem legend is Moshe Idel's *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

[22] For more on the origins and symbolism of the *Shekhinah*, see Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), esp. 96–135.

deeds. Rather, everyone has "his own colony according to his own ethnic or religious group," and the soul "never rests until it finds like-minded people." The location of the afterlife is in a place called by the Hebrew name *Har Etzion* (Mt. Zion), which was also the first thing that God created, even before the sun or the moon. The souls of the Bene Ephraim serve as guides there, showing other souls the way to go. The learning and instruction they receive at Mt. Zion "takes forever,"—and this is what it means for a member of the Bene Ephraim to go home to the arms of God.

The dominant tone of these reenvisioned biblical stories is, in a word, *accepting*. This is not liberation theology in the traditional sense but a redemptive narrative that provides a countermeasure to themes and discourses that have contributed to a sense of inferiority. Offering such an alternative recreates the perception of self and one's place in God's creation. In that reenvisioned universe, there is little iniquity or ill will. God cares for his people and strives to show them the right way to live lovingly. The Covenant is in place forever and can never be rescinded. Everything is, therefore, part of a benevolent divine plan. As indicated, "miracles" are absent from these narratives, even in the realm of the afterlife, further buttressing Shmuel's declaration that the Bene Ephraim "do not fear hells, fires, judgments or any other religious-fantasies."[23] Also important is the trope of belonging to the Land of Israel, embodied by the mythical topos of Mt. Zion as Heaven. This recasting of the primary diasporic signifier for the site of lost Jewish sovereignty (and eventual Jewish redemption) into the be-all and end-all address of creation itself is highly significant, especially for a community whose leadership has made no secret of its desire to be "repatriated" to Israel.

Observance and Weltanschauung

The Bene Ephraim follow several customs they point to as associative evidence of their historical ties to ancient Israel. However, not all of these customs necessarily demonstrate

[23] Shmuel Yacobi, "Three-Tier Human Lives," *Three-Tier Human Lives* (blog), December 23, 2012, accessed May 1, 2014, http://www.threetierhumanlives.blogspot.com/2012/12/three-tier-human-lives-we-humans-have.html.

an Israelite origin. Some of the customs, such as the consumption of water buffalo meat and the burial of their dead, are seen as anathema by their upper-caste Hindu neighbors. But many other lower-caste Telugu peoples commonly practice these throughout Andhra Pradesh.[24] Less "touchy" practices, such as using a solar-lunar calendar, are commonly acknowledged as throwbacks to the cultures of South India's original inhabitants. The observance of a Saturday Sabbath is increasingly in vogue among Christianized former untouchables who belong to Sabbatarian, Seventh-day Adventist, Messianic, or Prophetic movements, despite the heavy economic consequences that such observance carries.

Other rites, such as circumcision and ritual slaughter, are practiced by local Muslims but have only recently been (re)introduced among the Bene Ephraim. Shmuel recounts that Bene Ephraim elected to stop practicing circumcision in the eighteenth century when Islam gained a foothold in Telugu country. This was done so that they would not be mistaken for Muslims. Unsurprisingly (and courageously), Shmuel has been instrumental in bringing these observances (back) to his community. At the age of 29, he underwent elective surgical circumcision. He has also endeavored to educate his compatriots about proper practices of ritual slaughter, helped along by contacts from overseas Jewish communities.

The Bene Ephraim deny that their practices may have been influenced by behaviors prevalent among their Muslim neighbors. The idea of "contamination" by Islamic practices is not even entertained. The same is true for any supposed linguistic similarities. On that point, Shmuel insists that the approximately 200 Hebraic-sounding words in the Telugu language should be attributed to the influence of Hebrew among the early settlers of Andhra Pradesh and not to any influence from neighboring Islamic cultures. When Shmuel pointed out his theory of a vanished "Assyrio-Telugu" language, akin to proto-

[24] See Santosha Bharatiya, *Dalit and Minority Empowerment* (New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan, 2008), 52; and Raj Kumar, *Encyclopedia of Untouchables Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Delhi: Kalpaz, 2008), 399.

Hebrew, to the editors of the Telugu Historical Dictionary Project, the "Telugu pundits," as he now calls them, responded with a contemptuous silence.[25]

Certain customs surrounding issues of gender propriety, such as Levirate marriage and polygamy, are common among the *Adivasi* (tribal or aboriginal peoples) of South India and are, therefore, not exclusive to the Bene Ephraim.[26] The laws of menstrual seclusion are said to be upheld according to the Levitical text, with the corporeal purification carried out in streams, rivers, or with the aid of wells or natural springs. Concerns about maintaining separation between menstruating women and other community members have much in common with mainstream Hindu ideas about corporeal propriety, according to which a woman must refrain from certain religious duties during her menstrual period. The Bene Ephraim's insistence upon maintaining menstrual separation also resembles similar tribal customs common to South India, where menstruating women are, according to Dianne Jenett, "considered vulnerable" to possession by spirits and must, therefore, be isolated.[27]

[25] A detailed summary of and examples buttressing this theory can be found in Yacobi, *Cultural Hermeneutics*, 295–374. Similar arguments on such linguistic connections have been posited in the past, most notably by Madan Mohan Shukla. For more on this topic, see Shukla's "Hebrews and Vedic Aryans," *Vishveshvaranand Indological Journal* 14, no. 1 (1976): 41–47; and his "The Hebrews Belong to a Branch of Vedic Aryans," *Journal of the Oriental Institute* (University of Baroda) 28, no. 3–4 (1979): 44–57.

[26] See P. K. Mohanty, *Encyclopedia of Scheduled Tribes in India* (Delhi: Isha Books, 2006), 75.

[27] Dianne E. Jenett, "Menstruating Women/Menstruating Goddesses: Sites of Sacred Power in India," in *Menstruation: A Cultural History*, ed. Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2005), 176. For more on the rituals connected to menstruation in South India, see Sarah Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother: Sexuality, Violence, and Worship of the Goddess Kali* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 115–22.

Other supposed parallels between Telugu peoples and the Israelites have to do with the eating of bitter chutney during the Hindu festival of *Ugadi*, which marks the beginning of the Deccan New Year (similar to the eating of bitter herbs during the Jewish Passover), marking the doorframe on certain ceremonial occasions with the blood of a recently sacrificed goat (again, similar to the Jewish Passover); the pouring of libations; and excommunication. The similarities between these and other Madiga customs and "ancient" (which the Yacobis suggest means "Israelite") methods of worship were remarked upon as early as 1899 by the American Baptist missionary Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough in *While Sewing Sandals: Or, Tales of a Telugu Pariah Tribe*.[28] When I asked Shmuel if the Aryans had ever influenced the customs of the Bene Ephraim, he admitted that there were "*goyishe*" (Yiddish: non-Jewish; Gentile-like) things absorbed because of the long sojourn in Teluguland. But these things, which he did not detail, were superficial, not fundamental.

Since the Bene Ephraim began making extensive contacts with overseas Jewish groups, their observances have shifted somewhat toward normative Jewish practice. Access is still a problem, although the introduction of smartphones and the connections they provide have changed this paradigm (at least among the younger generation). Besides the Yacobi family, few congregants possess the funds or the connections needed to obtain written materials from conventional Jewish sources. For Bible study, these individuals make do with Telugu Bibles (distributed by Christian missionaries) without the pages containing the New Testament, which have long since been ripped out. The stubs of the removed pages were shown to me repeatedly as evidence of this unambiguous severance from

[28] For instance: "The Aryans had their strong Brahminical hierarchy, while the priests of the Dravidians were self-created, respected according to their skill in magic and sorcery. The Aryans burned their dead; their widows were not allowed to re-marry; they abhorred the eating of flesh and the spilling of blood. The Dravidians, on the other hand, buried their dead; their widows re-married; they ate flesh of all kinds, and no ceremony could take place without the excessive use of strong drink and the spilling of blood." Emma Rauschenbusch-Clough, *While Sewing Sandals; or, Tales of a Telugu Pariah Tribe* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1899), 11.

previous religious affiliation. For standard Jewish prayer services, Shmuel has transliterated the basic Hebrew prayers into Telugu letters, such as those found in the morning, afternoon, and evening Sabbath liturgies. Also in transliterated Telugu is the entire text of the Hebrew Scriptures—a monumental task on which Shmuel spent an entire year. Services usually consist of a reading of Psalms in Telugu, followed by an attempt at reading the Hebrew prayers. For the many illiterate community members—their precise number has been difficult to quantify—prayers in Telugu or approximate Hebrew consist of recitation and repetition. Partitions to separate men and women exist in two of the three community synagogues. Men wear skullcaps in the synagogue but usually nowhere else.

Shmuel freely admits that most members of his community "do not pray much," although they do "observe the major commandments." Shmuel can ultimately discern who among the Madiga is a true part of the Bene Ephraim according to each person's "attempt to live religiously." Such discernment does not come about based on that person's level of worship or praise because the "pure humanism" of the Bene Ephraim will inevitably cause one to refrain from "easily praising God like a habituated religionist." Instead, maintaining the necessary dietary restrictions, avoiding work on the Sabbath, and circumcision (for men) are the basic requirements to join the organized community. Learning the basics of Judaism as a matriculating student in community education classes is also recommended. Concerning marriage, Bene Ephraim may wed other Madiga who have been raised as Christians since, ostensibly, all Madiga are, in Shmuel's words, "Jews who just don't know it yet." To be safe, no "love marriages" are allowed, and any potential mate's family tree must be checked at least three generations before the marriage arrangement can be formalized.

Those who wish to become formal members at any of the three community synagogues must undergo a trial period of one year, after which God will "put in the heart [of Shmuel], who is a true part of the tribe."[29] That person may then take on a Hebrew name or its

[29] See also Egorova and Perwez, *Jews of Andhra Pradesh*, 73.

functional equivalent. (When I met a girl from the community and introduced myself to her using my Hebrew name, Natan, she proudly informed me that her Hebrew name was 'Golda Meir,' after Israel's fourth Prime Minister.) If anyone is found to be still practicing Christianity on the side, that person is immediately ejected from the community. One university-aged man whom I met during an audience with some younger Bene Ephraim openly challenged this policy, protesting in front of the assembled crowd that they were, as Shmuel has repeatedly said, "a nation, and not a religion." "Why," the young man asked, "are we not allowed to worship someone who lived his entire life as a Jew?" The man left the meeting hastily but was pursued to the edge of town, where he was told not to show his face in the community again.

The most learned of the community are the members of Shmuel's immediate family. They also are the ones who officiate at religious services and community events. The original congregation in Shmuel's home village of Kothareddypalem, near the town of Chebrolu in the Guntur district, is led by Shmuel's younger brother, Sadok. Shmuel directs services at the improvised synagogue (sometimes called the Bene Ephraim Yeshiva Community Center) in the city of Vijayawada, while Shmuel's youngest son, Dan, frequently leads the congregation in the synagogue located in the city of Machilipatnam, where Shmuel's wife, Malkah, has a family plot. Shmuel's eldest son, Yehoshua, who still lives in Israel, usually holds weekly Zoom sessions on Sundays with at least one of the congregations, teaching them about Jewish history, Hebrew language, and Israeli culture in preparation for their eventual move to the Jewish state. At the time of this writing, there are only a few dozen fervently observant people in the community besides those in the immediate and extended Yacobi family. None of them hold leadership roles in any congregational capacity.

The fact that there has not risen another leader for the Bene Ephraim outside of the Yacobi family has much to do with the relatively privileged economic status of Shmuel and Sadok. Because their father, Yacob, was able to escape many difficulties created by the caste system by rising to the military rank of *Subedar* (the equivalent rank of a British lieutenant for colonial subjects), subsequently receiving training as an English teacher, purchasing land, and educating his sons, the Yacobis have linguistic and monetary means

that most of their fellow Madiga do not. Even the plot of land on which the synagogue in Kothareddypalem sits is nearer to the town center than the other areas on the periphery traditionally reserved for untouchables. Shmuel supports himself with the activities of the Hebrew Open University Research Study Centre, and Sadok sells insurance. To be sure, they are by no means well-off. By Western standards, they are quite impoverished. But their particular background and experience are almost unprecedentedly more advantaged than those belonging to their religious flocks.

Ephraim, the Darling? Concluding Remarks

In Jeremiah 31:19, the tribe of Ephraim is referred to as God's "darling son," for whom the Lord's "heart yearneth" and upon whom he "will surely have compassion."[30] Whether other branches of God's chosen people will do the same for the supposed remnant of Ephraim in South India remains to be seen. Tudor Parfitt's observation that representatives from international Jewish outreach organizations have "not been especially moved" by the predicament of the Bene Ephraim, even though the Telugu Jews are, in his view, "as 'Jewish' as their cousins in Manipur [i.e., those from the Children of Manasseh movement]," speaks volumes.[31] This is especially true when one considers that both Shmuel and his youngest son, Dan, underwent Orthodox conversions to Judaism in New York City. They did so despite Shmuel's earlier insistence that, since Judaism is a people and not a religion, he and his followers should not need to convert to "another

[30] The full verse is as follows: "Is Ephraim a darling son unto Me? Is he a child that is dandled? For as often as I speak of him, I do earnestly remember him still; therefore My heart yearneth for him, I will surely have compassion upon him, saith the LORD."

[31] Tudor Parfitt, "DNA, Indian Jews, Manipuris, and the Telugu Speaking Community," Kulanu, 2002, accessed June 14, 2013, http://www.kulanu.org/india/dnamarker.php. See the similar comment by Parfitt in his article "Tribal Jews" in *Indo-Judaic Studies in the Twenty-First Century: A View from the Margin*, ed. Nathan Katz, Ranabir Chakravarti, Braj M. Sinha, and Shalva Weil (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 190.

Jewish denomination." To no avail. Israel does not recognize these conversions because they did not take place in the Yacobi's home country.

Why has the relationship between the Bene Ephraim and the international Jewish community not been closer? It seems that a variety of factors are involved. First and foremost is the widely held assumption that the community is, as Shmuel bitterly sums up the perception, "claiming their links with the Ten Tribes of Israel to escape from poverty and untouchable status and to go to Israel and live as happy, rich Jewish converts."[32] As mentioned, officials in Israel with whom I have spoken also acknowledge their fear, maintaining that a recognition of the Bene Ephraim would open the floodgates to millions of impoverished South Indians, who are far greater in number than their (somewhat) recognized cousins from the northern part of the country. (As a general rule, members of the community outside of Shmuel's family can only obtain nonrenewable tourist visas to Israel for a maximum period of two weeks. Such an unusual measure almost reflects a specific concern about this particular community.)

Shmuel's insistence on maintaining the nomenclature of "Bene Ephraim" and the specific provenance that it connotes also presents a problem for those connected to the Israeli state. Purportedly, representatives of Israel's rabbinical authorities have told community members to drop the claim of tribal affiliation and refer to themselves as "active Judaizers." According to the officials, that approach would allow the Bene Ephraim to connect with other established Jewish communities in India, which would then put them in a more likely position to convert in a manner acceptable to the Israeli Rabbinate. No one has yet agreed to act on this advice because of the ethnic, linguistic, economic, and cultural challenges inherent in making such a move. But even some in the Yacobi family quietly admit that insisting on the tribal claim was a mistake.

[32] Shmuel Yacobi, "The Andhra Pradesh Bene Ephraim Community," *Bene Ephraim Community* (blog), September 12, 2012, accessed September 15, 2012, http://www.thebeneephraimcommunity.blogspot.com/2012/09/the-andhra-pradesh-bene-ephraim.html.

Concerning connections with the non-Israeli Jewish world, the tide may shift slightly. In recent years, the Bene Ephraim have been featured in a documentary film on Indian Jewry and on a CD showcasing music from non-conventional Jewish groups around the world.[33]They maintain relationships with several American NGOs and Jewish volunteer organizations, but the extent of these relationships has been, as one person involved put it, "superficial rather than transformative." Part of the reason may lie in the disinclination of American Jews to actively assist the Bene Ephraim in achieving their goal of "repatriation" to Israel. Therefore, while such contacts may represent sources of potential encouragement, they do not necessarily translate into a tangible support system.

What will happen to the Jewish recognition campaign of the Bene Ephraim after Shmuel Yacobi, now in his seventies, is gone? The future is anyone's guess, but in this author's view, all the signs point unsurprisingly to a dead end. His eldest son, Yehoshua, no longer has Indian citizenship and, therefore, would not be able to remain in India again for any extended period. Shmuel's younger sons have neither the theological training nor (as they admit) the requisite finesse with public speaking that would be crucial to carrying out Shmuel's role in the community. Recently, after suffering a stroke, Shmuel was given a special medical visa to convalesce for some time in Israel under the care of Yehoshua. In his absence, no clear leader has arisen. Given these factors, it seems likely that this Judaizing movement, which has been centered on one man's brain, heart, conviction, and doggedness, may disappear when that man does. After all, for Ephraim to be proven in this instance as God's veritable "darling," it would take circumstances heretofore unimagined—perhaps even outright miracles (or, as Shmuel calls them, "religio-fantasies")—to turn the tide of perceptions about the history, motivations, and aims of the Bene Ephraim of South India.[34]

[33] The film in question is *Next Year in Bombay*, directed by Jonas Parienté and Mathias Mangin. The CD is by Irene Orleansky, *Music of Israelites and Jews of Africa and Asia* (Moscow: Music Brothers Records, 2014).

[34] Yacobi, "Three-Tier Human Lives."