

interrogated him about the identity of the insurgents. To save his own skin, he implicated nine young men—Hengin, Khamkhogin, Lalzathang, Paukhogin, Paukhokham, Saitawng, Tunzakhai, Vanlalsiem, and Vungtheng—from the village. The troops seized these men, interrogated them and tortured them inside the village church, gouging out their eyes before finally taking them to the cemetery and shooting them dead.

On April 6, 1986, almost nineteen years after the incident, the villagers erected a memorial stone "in loving memory of the innocent youngsters, who had been mercilessly shot dead in the village cemetery...after being inflicted with immeasurable sufferings in the church by the Indian security forces."¹⁰⁸ The memory of this incident has clearly left a searing impression on the villagers, instilling an understandable wariness in their interactions with the Indian government and the army.

As Roy-Burman has put it, "The traumatic experience of the famine in early 1960's and of the subsequent miscarriages of many development efforts have created a coral reef of distrust in the minds of the Mizos.... The grouping of villages as a counter insurgency measure...has blurred the perception of humanistic nationalism, to which Gandhi committed the [Indian] nation through his life and more so, through his death; and it has strained the articulation of the proto-nationalism of the Mizos with the multi-dimensional nation building process of India."¹⁰⁹

Statehood for Mizoram

The rebels continued to make sporadic raids on the troops and the insurgency did not formally come to an end until June 30, 1986, when Laldenga signed an accord with the Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, whereby the Mizos gave up their dream of independence, contenting themselves with the creation of a state of Mizoram, confined to the territory previously known as the Lushai Hills District (Mizo Hills from 1952).¹¹⁰ The State of Mizoram was formally admitted into the Union of India in February 1987, and Laldenga was elected its first Chief Minister.¹¹¹ The Indian government has been generous in its financial support for the new state, wishing to prevent another uprising.

Most of the population within the new state of Mizoram were proud to have achieved statehood, though others continue to voice their disappointment that the nation-state for which they had fought had ultimately not come into existence. On his return from exile to Mizoram, Laldenga made a speech suggesting a determination to continue the agitation for a "Greater Mizoram," albeit as a part of India rather than as an independent country, and Mizos in the Jampui Tong region of Tripura agitated for inclusion, but settled for the creation of a Mizo "Regional Council" within Tripura.¹¹² CHIKIM outside the new state of Mizoram who had shared the dream of union with their kinsmen, whether in an independent nation or as part of a Greater Mizoram State, were disappointed when these aspirations failed to materialize.

This disappointment led to reluctance on the part of many of those living outside Mizoram to identify as "Mizo," particularly if they did not use the Dulien dialect for communication within the home. "Mizo" had shifted its reference from being an inclusive term for the members of all the related tribes, to identification with the inhabitants of a particular territory within the CHIKIM lands. Although the

people of Mizoram still identify their congeners from other territories as "Mizo," even if they do not speak the same dialect, those outside the state are more inclined to have regard to their particular tribal identities, and to seek out an alternative, inclusive name for the CHIKIM nation.¹¹³

Identification with Israelites

The elements that we have seen as contributing to CHIKIM nationalism: a sense of common origin and a shared destiny, a strong religious faith, mediated through prophecy or the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, have all featured in the "Israelite" movement and the "Judaism" that has subsequently developed among a segment of the CHIKIM peoples, in their expression of what McCall has referred to as "the surrender of directional authority to mere novices in the intricacies of [the] doctrinal confusions which make up institutional Christianity."¹¹⁴ The first "Israelite" community in the region was established in 1951 by Challianthanga (Pu Chala), a barely literate catechist with the United Pentecostal Church in the village of Buallawn, after he had a revelation telling him that the Mizo people were Israelites, that they had to practice the rituals prescribed in the Old Testament, and that to escape Armageddon, they would need to return to their ancient homeland in Israel. Many of Pu Chala's followers were fervent Mizo nationalists and supported Laldenga's cause. While they attempted to live as Israelites, they remained faithful to the belief in Jesus as the Messiah.¹¹⁵

Pu Chala's prophecies reached all corners of the CHIKIM world and found sympathetic audiences throughout the region, particularly in the Churachandpur District of Manipur, with many rebels crossing the border or preaching there. The next major development in this Judaizing faith took place in Churachandpur in 1975, after Thangkholun Lhungdim (known as T. Daniel) returned from Bombay where he had gone to learn Hebrew and the ritual practices of the Jews. T. Daniel reported back to his colleagues in Manipur the astonishing fact that the Jews did not accept Jesus as either God or the Messiah. Consequently he advocated that the members of his community aspiring to live as Jews should abandon the worship of Jesus.¹¹⁶

Many of those who responded to this call had been members of Dr. H. Thangruma's Church of God (Zionist), a group that already accepted Saturday as the Sabbath, observed the festivals prescribed in the Bible, and believed that the CHIKIM people were descendants of Israelites. Whereas the religious practices instituted by Pu Chala were an entirely local development based upon his attempt to follow precepts from the Bible, T. Daniel introduced practices that he had learned from contemporary Jews in Bombay. As an accomplished songwriter, he composed many attractive tunes to accompany segments of the liturgy, still used today among Benei Menashe in Manipur and Mizoram. Intriguingly, while the notion that the CHIKIM peoples were Israelites had come to Churachandpur from Mizoram, now the practice of Judaism was carried back from Churachandpur to Mizoram in 1976, when T. Daniel's close associate, Jangkhothang Lhanghal (Joseph Jacob) was invited to preach among interested congregations there, mainly members of his former church, the aforementioned Church of God (Zionist). Joseph Rei (Rohluma), who had been a pastor in Thangruma's church in Churachandpur, took his family back to Mizoram that year and commenced the first Judaic congregation in Aizawl.

Gideon Rei, in whose home I had met Mawii, had himself been an MNF rebel. In those days, he had been known by his Mizo name, Vanlalkhuma. Vanlalkhuma had been caught by the army and imprisoned, but managed to escape and flee to Churachandpur. Although the police there came with a warrant for his arrest, his friends were able to induce the authorities to let him retain his freedom. Vanlalkhuma was the younger brother of Joseph Rei. In Churachandpur, he was also a member of Dr. Thangruma's church and had ventured with him in 1974 to meet the Jews of Calcutta, who pointed out to them, as T. Daniel had learned around the same time, that Jews did not worship Jesus. Though Thangruma held to his Christian faith while nevertheless seeking to be accepted as an Israelite, Vanlalkhuma (Gideon Rei) joined the newly formed Jewish congregation.

In January 1981, Gideon Rei was one of two men and one woman from Churachandpur who went to Israel at the invitation of Rabbi Avichail to study at a yeshiva,¹¹⁷ their airfares being met by contributions from various members of the community, both in Manipur and Mizoram.¹¹⁸ Gideon returned to Manipur in March 1983. Although he did not complete his formal conversion to Judaism in Israel, on his return to Churachandpur he was appointed as "chazzan" literally "cantor," but effectively spiritual leader at Beith Shalom Synagogue, the "mother" congregation of the Benei Menashe. Gideon responded to frequent requests from Mizoram to teach there, and the congregation in Churachandpur complained of his frequent absences from duty, until he finally left Churachandpur altogether and moved back to Aizawl in Mizoram.

Many people who wished to identify as Jews or Israelites, and others, looking at these groups from the outside, have not understood the difference between the religion taught by T. Daniel, Joseph Lhanghal, Gideon Rei, and their colleagues, who advocated practicing standard rabbinical Judaism as found among extant Jewish communities, and the belief system introduced by Pu Chala that came to be called "Messianic Judaism."¹¹⁹

It is not clear exactly how many people follow either of these tendencies, though the numbers practicing Judaism have been increasing at the expense of the "Messianic Jews" since Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail first visited Manipur and Mizoram in 1991, and especially as an increasing number of members of the community have settled in Israel. In 1994, Goell cited a recent Indian government estimate of 1,000 "Jews" in Mizoram and 2,900 in Manipur.¹²⁰ Out of an estimated 1,250 Sabbatarians in Churachandpur town in 1992, one author in Manipur designates 200 as followers of Orthodox Judaism and another 150 as Israels.¹²¹ In 2001, a census of the congregations affiliated with the "Benei Menashe Council of India" recorded 2,281 members in Manipur, 22 members in Myanmar, 232 in Assam, and 21 in Nagaland.¹²² These figures do not include members of congregations in Mizoram, since they are not affiliated with the same council. One would expect Mizoram to have half the number of adherents to Judaism found in Manipur. In March 2005, Israeli Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar spoke of up to 7,000 individuals in northeast India practicing Judaism.¹²³

* * *

Having set out the cultural and historical background, we can now turn to examine Mawii's personal experience. We shall seek to understand the process by which she

came to embrace the Jewish faith and the significance of that embrace in the context of Mizo nationalist aspirations.¹²⁴

Mawii's Background and Her Dream

Mawii was born in 1946 in Sakawrdai Village, Mizoram. Her parents belonged to the Hmar tribe and at the time of her birth participated in the Sakawrdai Mission Synod, the local Presbyterian Church. When she was a child, her father transferred his allegiance to the newly established charismatic church, the "UPC" or United Pentecostal Church.

Mawii was educated to grade 6, in the Mizo medium. Like most Mizos, her family were traditional jhum, that is, swidden (slash and burn) cultivators. She was married at 19 years of age, and her husband was aged 30. He too was a jhum cultivator, and they had 5 children. When I met her, she had separated from her husband because, she said, "He practised immorality," that is, he had committed adultery. Mawii had shifted to Aizawl, the capital of Mizoram, in February 1991. She told me "I can't work [that is, engage in cultivation] because of bad health, and bad back. I have a little stall, selling eatables, biscuits, by my house. My eldest son is now 27 years old, but works for daily wages, living with me. If he got work from someone, he works. Sometimes, not find work, he rests." She continued:

I joined UPC 1956 while I was a child. My father liked to join UPC, and at the time I was very young, so joined as part of family. I was in UPC till 1976. I didn't know how to worship, but in my dream, the Lord called to me, 15 September 1976. In my dream, the MNF [that is, the Mizo National Front, who had initiated their revolt in 1966, a full ten years before Mawii's dream] got independent status [for Mizoram] and they selected me to be a nurse. I appreciated their selection very much, but I balked at the offer to work as a nurse, because with blood and sweat, many people had fought for our freedom. Those freedom fighters, I felt, should hold the good positions. After them, if there is some post for me, I will join. Because I am not a freedom fighter, I feel unworthy to hold the good position.

Mawii indicated that her husband had not been a "freedom fighter" either. However, it was significant that Gideon Rei in whose home we met had been one. This background afforded him some respect and prestige, independent of his religious role, among the people of Mizoram. Mawii continued:

But the MNF brought me a letter, as an enforcement, to serve in Ratu Village. During my preparation to join I awoke from my deep sleep. Then I kept in mind that letter, intensely. It was very big in my heart, day by day. Then I looked for an explanation, interpreting that dream, but nobody could explain this dream.

It is noteworthy that Mawii belongs to the Hmar, a tribe that is found in substantial numbers in northern Mizoram and across the border in the southern Churachandpur District of Manipur. The Hmar are known as an "Old-Kuki" tribe as

they had been residing in this region perhaps as early as the fifteenth century, the presence of some of their clans being first recorded in the Manipur chronicles in 1554.¹²⁵ Linguistically, they are quite close to the Lusei, who, as we have already seen, have only moved into the area since the eighteenth century.¹²⁶ They also differ from the Lusei in that they had a looser system of village administration and were less warlike than was the latter's highly organized system of chieftainship.

As we see, Mawii was educated in the Mizo language, and from the content of her dream, she clearly identified with the Mizo nationalist movement. While this may be typical of the Hmar in Mizoram, in Manipur, thanks in part to the efforts of Rochunga Pudaite—a gifted member of the community who was sent by Baptist missionaries to study theology in America—and financial assistance that he could garner from abroad, the Hmar have become one of the best organized, best educated, and most united communities in the Churachandpur district.

Pudaite's work, *The Education of the Hmar People*, identifies the Hmar as a separate nationality and advocates that they should have autonomy in their own areas, while schools should be established teaching in the Hmar medium.¹²⁷ Pudaite won considerable sympathy for his cause and has been funded to set up a hospital and other facilities for his community. Adherence to the Baptist Church is common among the Hmar in the Churachandpur District, whereas among their kinsmen in northern Mizoram, where the Welsh missionaries had operated, Presbyterianism prevails.

Mawii's situation highlights how different the fortunes of the Hmar had been across the border in Mizoram. Judaism has attracted many Hmar adherents in Mizoram, whereas very few of the better-off and better-educated Hmar from Manipur have chosen to join them. This is so even though tribals of all background interested in identifying an Israelite past, to validate their claims, often cite an ancient Hmar song with verses that ostensibly refer to incidents from the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt, such as the parting of the Red Sea, drowning of the enemies, being guided by "cloud by day and fire at night," obtaining water from a rock and feeding on quails.¹²⁸

Mawii was educated in the Mizo medium, and clearly we see from her dream that she identified as a Mizo more strongly than as a Hmar. I am not aware how well she might speak the Hmar dialect. My experience has been that Hmar from Manipur use their own language for daily intercourse, whereas their kinsmen in Mizoram tend to think in Mizo and are less fluent in Hmar.

Significantly, Mawii was overjoyed to "learn" in her dream that the insurgents, the "freedom fighters" as she calls them, had achieved their goal by creating an independent Mizoram. Also worthy of note is the fact that she could remember the exact date of her dream, which was a full ten years after the revolt had begun, and that the dream remained so clear in her memory and powerfully significant to her, so long after she had dreamt it. Remarkably, the dream had retained this potency even though manifestly the MNF did not win their struggle outright.

The fact that Mawii does appear to place such great store in her dream reflects her upbringing in the UPC denomination, described as an "off-shoot of the revival movement."¹²⁹ This is a charismatic church whose members seek guidance through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit inspires favored members of the community with revelations, through dreams or speaking in tongues. Mawii's readiness to treat

her dream so seriously shows her pride that she has been privileged to receive such a revelation.

Into the Covenant of Israel

I think you will agree with me that, so far, the dream appears to have a strongly nationalist character without any particularly religious or Judaic overtones—except for one crucial detail: the location of Mawii's hospital, in the village of Ratu. As we shall see, Mawii certainly places considerable spiritual significance on the location.

You will recall that Pu Chala, who himself had previously been a UPC catechist, preached his message that the Mizo were Israelites and were obliged to observe the Sabbath, festivals, and dietary restrictions prescribed in the Bible. Pu Chala lived and preached in Buallawn Village, in the northern, Hmar-populated sector of Mizoram, and he himself was a Hmar. Pu Chala died in 1959, before the Mizo uprising. His followers were regrouped from Buallawn to Ratu Village at the start of the Mizo revolt in 1966.¹³⁰ In Ratu, they remained faithful to Pu Chala's teachings: They observed Saturday as the Sabbath, refrained from eating unclean animals, and observed the festivals ordained in the Torah. Yet with all that, they clung to their faith in Jesus as Messiah.¹³¹

Mawii continued her story:

This dream, I meditated on it, talked about it to everybody, and so in my mind arose the intention to go to Ratu Village to meet one mystic, Neikhuma, leader of the Jews there.¹³² My mother guided me to Ratu Village. When we stepped onto the veranda of Neikhuma, my mother opened the door. The householder, Neikhuma and 5 Jewish members were sitting together inside.

Neikhuma got up to shake my mother's hand, but it was impossible. He aimed to shake hands with my mother, but his hand went towards me, and he said "O, my hand is to join my sister's hand before her mother's". Before we said a word, when he shook my hand, he called his wife who was working outside, "Wife, come!" and he said, "My Sister has something to say in a spiritual matter"—before I said a word...

And I sat on the bench. His wife approached me and put her hand on my head and then she prayed for me. After she prayed for me and said "Amen", I told all of my dream. They did not really interpret my dream, but they seemed to understand it well, because they clapped their hands saying "O, God will lead you into the covenant of Israel".

But in my mind, from long ago until today, I looked askance at those who called themselves Israelites in my neighbourhood, so I hesitated to join the Israel group.¹³³ Now I thought in my mind I will join the Israel group secretly, but I will walk and hold in the future the same position in UPC, as a teacher of children and secretary of our local church. I will work openly with them. But

Mr Neikhuma, the Judaism leader, understood all of my secret thoughts, saying "Though you refuse the eternal calling, nonetheless you must join us in the Israel covenant. God will compel you."

The community was starting to learn Hebrew at the time, short blessings before eating, at bedtime, eating and drinking. So I copied what was written into my notebook, the Hebrew prayers.

After one week, I went back to my village but continued to be a member of UPC. One Friday night I felt longing, a sentiment of melancholy hit me hard. What directs my longing I cannot say, but the emotional sentiment, the longing working on my heart, I didn't know what direction. I said, anyway, I will this night join the service of Israel group. And then I joined with them, the Friday night service. They embraced me with a warm welcome. But I didn't join.

After two weeks, Ngurliamthang, a Hmar speaker from Vairengte Village,¹³⁴ came and invited me to participate in the service of Israel group. Then I joined them. At that service, Ngurliamthang preached the sermon. First he said "You, my brethren, did you send your name to Zion, because we already sent our names from Vairengte to Zion".¹³⁵

Those words moved me so much. Suddenly from my innermost depths, came out my name, "Elizabeth", so I named myself Elizabeth till now. After this happened for two years, I didn't decide whether to join Judaism permanently or not, but I joined Judaism, not knowing any procedures, any conditions of Judaism. I joined blindly for two months, not knowing how to celebrate.

The "Israelite" group in Ratu remains essentially Christian to this day, in that they continue to worship Jesus—although they observe Saturday as the Sabbath, refrain from pork, and celebrate the Pilgrim Festivals, the New Year and Day of Atonement from the Bible, rather than Christmas and Easter. By contrast, the community in Vairengte had begun to adopt rabbinical Jewish practices in 1976, the year that Mawii encountered them. As the congregation has developed, they pay no heed to the figure of Jesus. Curiously, having been inspired by a dream about Ratu, Mawii ended up attaching herself to another "Israelite" congregation, one that came to be theologically quite distinct from the people of Ratu.¹³⁶

The way Mawii took up her new name, Elizabeth, is interesting. While for her it appears that she has once again heard the word of God, the name, though of Hebrew origin, appears in this altered form through the Septuagint and the New Testament, but not in the Hebrew Bible. Consequently it is not a name that to an English speaker would be identified as particularly Jewish. Thus, while she had moved essentially from Christianity to Judaism by becoming a member of the Israelite congregation of Vairengte, she had in fact adopted a name that is associated more readily with Christian than with Jewish usage.

Interpreting the Dream

Some four months after Mawii had her original vision and after she had attached herself to the local, Vairengte Congregation, she finally "learns" its meaning. As she recounted to me:

In January 1977, I went to collect ginger from the field. The interpretation of my former dream came to my head, not by spoken word, but from my head, and inside me, suddenly, saying "I will interpret your dream". The words that came to me said: "In your dream, when MNF invited you to join the hospital, it is not a reality, but MNF is a personification of Zion, the Israel movement. So you will be a guide in your village for Israel group".

Therefore the word persuaded me that I am also [to be] a guide of Israel group in my village. Then we started to collect money for fare of Gideon's travel to Israel.¹³⁷ Then I remembered suddenly—when I was a little child, my parents often stated, in time of eclipse and earthquake, "We the children of Manasia are still living". Now I realised that our way is the authentic way, I confirmed it till now.

What we have here, strikingly, is a situation where an apparently Mizo-nationalist dream is somehow reinterpreted to be a call to embrace the Jewish religion. However, this is not really an abandonment of the Mizo-nationalist aspiration, as we see from the reference to Mawii's recollection of the use of the name "Manasia," connecting her back to her childhood and to the traditions of her people. The congregation that she has joined consider that the CHIKIM peoples are descended from the tribe of Manasseh, proof of which is evident from their identification as the "children of Manasia," who is taken to be Manasseh, the son of Joseph in the Bible.¹³⁸

In the Mizo language—but not among many of its cognates—masculine names always have the suffix "-a", so that "Manasia" would be the male "Manasi."¹³⁹ Pu Chala did not initially declare which tribe the Mizos belonged to. He eventually came to believe that they were from the tribe of Manasseh, not on the strength of direct revelation or received tradition, but apparently through the advice of a *puithiam* (priest) from Burma.¹⁴⁰

Manasia is also sometimes rendered "Manasa."¹⁴¹ There is a Bengali Hindu goddess "Manasa," worshipped among the Meitheis, the dominant population of Manipur, who were Hinduized early in the eighteenth century, and among other Hindu communities of North East India.¹⁴² However there is little to suggest that any of the CHIKIM communities in Manipur had previously worshipped any of the gods of the Meitheis.¹⁴³

Neither "Manasa" nor "Manasia" would seem to be the original form of this word; indeed individuals hostile to the Judaizers in Mizoram informed me that this was a deliberate corruption of the earlier form "Manmasi," to bring the word closer to the biblical name. Writing before Judaism had arisen in Manipur, Pudaite held that "The first Hmar man is called Manmasi."¹⁴⁴ The formulation that Mawii remembers commencing "We the children of Manasia" would presumably have referred to the children of "Manmasi" in its original form.

This term, "Manmasi," appears in many of the CHIKIM dialects, though its exact meaning is unclear. Halkin notes that William Shaw, who wrote about the Thadous, "was not quite sure whether 'Manmasi' was a proper name or a word," but was inclined to believe it meant a human being, as against a spirit being.¹⁴⁵ Prim-Vaiphei notes that "Manmasi" "means human progenitor in Vaiphei, Thadou etc., but in Chiru Chothe it is used to mean man."¹⁴⁶ Whatever the origin of these terms, suffice it to observe that Mawii and many other CHIKIM, whether they have moved along the path to Judaism or not, are ready to accept that Manmasi, Manasia, or Manasa is synonymous with the biblical figure Manasseh, the eponymous founder of the tribe of that name, and that they therefore do draw from it the implication that they have an Israelite origin.¹⁴⁷

I found it intriguing that Mawii's dream, which on the surface appeared to be a strong declaration of support for the MNF, could be recast by the small voice which spoke to her while working in her field. The national dream is now seen as an "illusion," the MNF becoming a representation of Zion, something perhaps more important and more enduring than national aspirations—or perhaps the reworking of those aspirations in the face of disappointment.

I can understand how the presence of Ratu in her dream could lead Mawii to want to visit the village, and perhaps to wish to adopt its religious practices. Yet apparently unwittingly, Mawii has gone beyond the Ratu group. Not fully recognizing at first the differences between "Israelites" who retain a faith in Jesus and those who have forsaken the Christian Messiah for Judaism, she has, perhaps unconsciously and a little hesitantly, taken herself out of the Christian community to which she had previously belonged.

And this process was aided by the very church that had taught her to look for signs and meaning in dreams, to follow revelation rather than precast doctrine. Ironically once again, however, this pursuit of her personal vision has led Mawii into another more structured system of behavior, as we find in her visit to Gideon Rei, seeking guidance in the performance of the Passover rituals.

Judaism as an Expression of Mizo Nationalism

Although Mawii had committed herself to her new congregation before she had reflected on the way her forebears called out to Manasia, identification as a descendant of Manasseh is nevertheless a significant element in the emergent *Weltanschauung*, for it is in effect a proclamation of ethno-national identity, in a sense that perhaps makes the differences between "Messianic Jews" and those attempting to follow rabbinical Judaism less significant. Both groups recognize themselves, and each other, as members of the one nation, based on common descent, whatever their specific religious practices might be. This nationalism still incorporates the whole Zo, Mizo, CHIKIM nation, with its multifarious subdivisions, known to have a common origin. However, by identifying with one of the lost tribes of Israel, the "nation" of descent has now been expanded to include among its members the whole of the Jewish people.

The attraction of Judaism in this context is not so much that it is a world religion, replete with universal truths that resonate with the spiritual leanings of its Mizo followers, but rather that it is one of the national accoutrements of the descendants of the ancient Israelites, and the Mizo followers identify as descendants of those same Israelites. A similar notion is in fact embedded in Jewish

consciousness. Even though Judaism does accept converts, for many centuries it has not been a proselytizing religion; converts are accepted, but not specifically sought after. Judaism is infused with the ideology that Jews are the descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and converts are "adopted" into this "family" as sons or daughters of Abraham.

An implication that can emerge from this perspective is that only an individual descended from Israelites has a right to practice the Jewish religion. Such a view is seen among the Syrian Jewish community in America who will not admit converts into their congregations. Anyone from that community who marries a convert is also ostracized, being excluded from synagogue membership, honors in the synagogue, and from participation in the social functions of the community. The spouse of a convert cannot be buried in the congregation's cemetery, and their children are not accepted into the community's schools.¹⁴⁸

The same concerns are present among CHIKIM who identify themselves as descendants of Manasseh. In the year 2000, in the town of Kolasib in northern Mizoram, I witnessed the struggle of members of the Benei Menashe with the implications of the nationalist-religious aspects of the Judaism that they had adopted. A man of Nepalese background, born and raised in Mizoram who spoke the Mizo language as well as any Mizo—and who in fact taught the language at a local school for Nepalese children—was attracted to the religious practices of the Benei Menashe congregation and sought to join them.

Members of the community were in a quandary as to whether they could accept him. They themselves had joined because they were persuaded by the belief that Mizos were Israelites and should therefore observe the religion of their ancestors. Was it also possible for a complete stranger to the tradition—as they perceived this Nepalese person so to be—to be included in the religious community? Eventually, uncertain as to whether they were acting appropriately, the local community permitted him to join, requiring him to undergo circumcision, and to append to his name the words "Benei-Israel Benei-Menashe," in effect identifying him as an "adopted" member of the Manasseh tribe within the Israelite nation, as well as a member of its religious community.¹⁴⁹

Notwithstanding the particular features in Mawii's passage to Judaism and her unique personal experience, we see that in fact hers is consistent with the experience of other Benei Menashe. Mizo nationalist aspirations and prophetic dreams have been fundamental in this process, commencing with the revelation that initially propelled Challianthanga and his followers away from the received orthodoxy of the Christianity the missionaries had taught them.

Roy-Burman has highlighted the alienation of many Mizos from India's nation-building project, on account of perceived differences in race and religion, and the fact that Indian nationalists have failed to include them within their vision of the nation. As he observes, "Perception of a common present, participation in creating a common future, depends largely on the perception of a common past. ... If the rest of the nation fails to make the past of the Mizos a bit of its own past, the Mizos cannot be expected to be affectively tied-up with the future of the rest of the nation."¹⁵⁰

If the hope of an independent Mizo/CHIKIM nation has already been dashed, and the Mizos and their congeners fit but awkwardly as part of the Indian nation, perhaps there is a better future for them in Israel, as part of the Jewish nation. In March 2005, Israel's Sephardi Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Shlomo Amar announced that he had accepted the claims of the Benei Menashe that they were descendants of ancient

Israelites, declaring that it was important to help them return to the Jewish religion. Accordingly Rabbi Amar proposed to send qualified rabbis to the region to formally convert to Judaism those who were living as Jews and wished to be recognized as Jews.¹⁵¹ Once they had undergone conversion, they would have an automatic right under Israel's Law of Return to settle in Israel and to take up Israeli citizenship.¹⁵²

Rabbi Amar's decision has vindicated the efforts of those in Manipur and Mizoram who have for many years asserted an identity as descendants of Manasseh and sought to live as Jews. They have in effect been given entry into the Jewish nation, with recognition that they have a unique past and a distinct history—yet a past that is bound up with that of the Jews, apparently as fraternal descendants of the ancient Israelites. Whether the Benei Menashe who take up the opportunity to settle in Israel will retain a distinct identity or assimilate into the broader Jewish world is yet to be seen. The racial difference from other Jews is not apparently as significant in this context to the Benei Menashe as the differences that the Mizos perceive between themselves and the *vai* of India.

Mawii came to understand her dream as indicating that she would become a guide for the Israel group in her village. Indeed, as events have transpired, she has become a pioneer in Mizoram along the road to Judaism and identification with the Jewish people, having trod the path before many of her compatriots.

Postscript

In the year 2000, I visited Mawii at her home at Bungkawn on the outskirts of Aizawl. In the years since I'd first met her, much had changed in the practice of Judaism in Mizoram. In 1992, only around 20 Benei Menashe had managed to settle, as Jews, in Israel. By 2000, the figure was now close to 500 individuals and slowly continuing to grow. The increased contact and familiarity with Israel that had developed has had its impact upon the Jewish knowledge available to the community in Mizoram, who have gradually brought their practices more and more into line with the Orthodox Judaism to which they aspire.

Although she seemed a little subdued on this occasion, Mawii was still a member of the Benei Menashe and was following Judaism along with her children. One must admire the strength of commitment to Judaism manifest among the Benei Menashe, who remain a decidedly small proportion of the population. Although one finds throughout Mizoram a deep admiration for the State of Israel and the Jewish people, and Mizos are generally proud of their putative descent from ancient Israelites, many nonetheless find it inconceivable for a Mizo to reject Christianity, so intimately bound up has that religion become with their identity as Mizos.¹⁵³ Such people place pressure on wayward souls who would follow Judaism, not to forsake the Saviour.¹⁵⁴

In the light of the greater familiarity with Jewish practices, I found it telling that Mawii was now calling herself "Elisheva" rather than Elizabeth. I did not ask her what she thought about the name, having regard to the almost mystical way the name Elizabeth had originally come to her.