

Yulia Egorova and Shahid Perwez, *The Jews of Andhra Pradesh: Contesting Caste and Religion in South India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. x-208.

by Galit Shashoua

For centuries, the myth of the Lost Tribes of Israel has served a spiritual role in Jewish history. It spread into the “tool-kit” of Western colonizing nations giving meaning to the “others” they met in new “explored” lands.¹ In recent decades, remote communities with Jewish practices and claims to belonging have attracted attention from religious activists, and scholars. What sets this study apart from the rest are its broad lens, creative theoretical framework, and rich ethnographical detail. In *The Jews of Andhra Pradesh: Contesting Caste and Religion in South India*, Yulia Egorova and Shahid Perwez home in on the process by which the boundaries and meaning of Jewishness are negotiated among the Bene Ephraim. Treating the development of identity as a fluid, ongoing process, the authors explore the broad political and social context in which the Bene Ephraim operate: their Jewish identity takes shape vis-à-vis Indian society with its caste system, on one hand, and the Israeli-Jewish state and related diaspora organizations, on the other. They present the methods by which Bene Ephraim give meaning to their Jewishness and develop practices and ceremonies. The study deals not only with the ways in which Bene Ephraim see themselves, but also with the ways in which the world around them enables and constrains their Jewishness and Jewish traditions. Egorova and Perwez thus seek to understand the ways in which the Bene Ephraim consider themselves to be Jewish, both on the individual and community level, as well as how they are perceived by a wide range of actors on the outside.

Within Indian society, the Bene Ephraim construct Jewishness through their interaction within the institutions, politics, religion and culture of the region. Although the caste system was officially outlawed in 1947, it is still an influential force in daily life. The authors argue that the Bene Ephraim—like other “untouchables”—develop alternative origin narratives to explain their inferior position in the caste system. These stories turn inferiority into a source of strength, a cause for celebration. The Bene Ephraim fit into this discourse of contested identities by emphasizing their Jewishness and their belonging to the Lost Tribes of Israel. They argue that the Jewish tradition of the Bene Ephraim is

¹ Tudor Parfitt, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: The History of a Myth* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2002)

as much an expression of their pride in being *Madigan*, a type of outcast, as it is a protest against the caste system. Bene Ephraim's re-interpretation of India's history and Hindu tradition within the context of the Lost Tribes narrative allows the leaders of the Bene Ephraim – the Yacobi brothers – to claim a connection not only to ancient Israelites but also to Hindu traditions that they were excluded from because of their status. But Bene Ephraim identity is forged not only through narratives but through practices. With rich detail, Egorova and Perwez describe the religious practices of Bene Ephraim: their synagogues, festivals, burials, and dietary laws. Decisions on how to practice are negotiated within the constraints imposed by their material existence, for example, the need to shop and prepare meals on Shabbat (since there is no refrigeration).

Equally important to internal influences on the Judaizing process of the Bene Ephraim are the Israeli state and society, as well as international NGOs in the Jewish world. Within this complex web of relations, the Bene Ephraim construct new meanings of Jewishness, push the boundaries of known Jewishness and in return are impacted by the process. Here again we encounter tension. Their claim to be descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel links them to pre-biblical Judaism, while a desire to conform with norms in the larger Jewish world today makes practices such as wearing *kippot* (male head coverings) and using *siddurim* (prayer books) – both post-biblical practices—more attractive. The two Yacobi brothers lean toward opposite poles of this spectrum, adding another layer of complexity to community change.

In the Israeli context, the story of the Bene Ephraim is related to the Israeli Law of Return. The Bene Ephraim frame their Jewish identity in terms of *teshuvah* (return). They do not employ the language of conversion, but rather, speak about a return to the religion of their ancestors as members of the Lost Tribes of Israel. As far as the state of Israel is concerned, however, the Bene Ephraim do not qualify for the Law of Return unless they convert to Judaism since they are neither Jews by *Halakhah*, nor qualify based on other criteria of the law. So while the narrative of the Lost Tribes is central to Bene Ephraim identity as Jews, in practice their desire to be accepted as Jews in the state of Israel pushes the community toward more mainstream Judaism.

Here I find that the great strength of the book in positing fluid identities is also a source of weakness. The authors are too optimistic in their assumption that identity negotiation is an open process. While they acknowledge the existence of external constraints, they do not go far enough in recognizing the strong enforcing power of the State, particularly regarding *'aliyah*, and the Law of Return. The Bene Ephraim (and Bene Menashe for that matter) serve as examples not only for the changing boundaries of Jewishness in the state of

Israel, but the enduring power of political and religious institutions. The Bene Menashe successfully used their narrative of being part of the Lost Tribes to obtain recognition as *zera' yisrael* (lit. seed of Israel), which enables them to migrate to Israel. But in order to do so they had to convert. The enforcing power of the State and the rabbinical establishment pushes them toward more traditional Judaism. The same is true with Bene Ephraim. Without denying agency on the part of these groups, there is no doubt that the process of Judaizing is being shaped by rabbinical *Halakhah* in the State of Israel.

Nonetheless, *The Jews of Andhra Pradesh* is a remarkable contribution to the growing literature that deals with emergent Jewish communities and the process of Judaizing. Its ability to provide both rich description and a complex theoretical framework to deal with the questions of expanding boundaries of Jewishness raises the bar for other scholars. The book furthers our understanding of how the myth of the Lost Tribes is being employed within the context of Indian society and its caste system, and at the same time how it interacts with the Law of Return and the national and religious debates about “who is a Jew?” Scholars of identity construction theory, as well as specialists on Indian society, Israeli society and Jewish groups outside of Israel will all benefit from this valuable work. It adds an impressive body of knowledge to our understanding of Jewish communities in India and the tension between “old” and emerging communities.

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