

The Conversion Crisis:

Preserving the Jewish Character of the Jewish State:



The founders of the State of Israel understood that in order to preserve its authentic Jewish character and maintain the unity of the people, personal status had to be determined by the Chief Rabbinate. However, at the present time, the so-called status quo is under attack from all sides, and concomitantly, national unity is seriously threatened.

The last tidal wave of Russian immigration and the miniscule immigration of the Bnei Menashe provide two quite different examples of absorption into Israeli society. The Bnei Menashe allege to be descendants of the tribe of Menashe and are sincerely interested in

leading observant Jewish lives. In order to resolve the questions concerning their ancestry, members of the group are undergoing full conversion. The Russian émigrés on the other hand, have for the most part, little interest in Judaism, and many of them are not Jewish. It is widely felt that the Russians émigrés need to be integrated into Israeli society by some form of conversion.

Jonathan Rosenblum addresses some of the critical problems that the Russian immigration presents as well as inadequate solutions that have been proposed. Miriam Kitrossky and Ira Dashevsky illustrate a successful method for Russian absorption and conversion. Rabbi Shabtai Rappoport explains the basic halachic requirements for conversion. Jonathan Udren presents the story of the Bnei Menashe.



Marina (with baby) lights a chanukiah at the Absorption Ministry Immigration Hall at Ben Gurion Airport (where immigrants are processed when they land). Marina was one of 200 new immigrants who arrived from the Ukraine on December 4, 2002. Photo: Israel Sun; Russian immigrants arriving in Israel; Bnei Menashe immigrants davening at the Western Wall. Photo: Michael Freund.

The New Israelis

By Jonathan Rosenblum

In a May 16, 2003, interview with *The Jerusalem Post*, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon admitted that one of the reasons for his decision to leave Likud's traditional *Chareidi* allies out of his government coalition was his desire to bring another one million immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Israel. "Without the *Chareidim* in key positions dictating policy on this issue, there is a chance for greater immigration," said the prime minister.

Two months later, in response to Absorption Minister Tzippi Livni's statement that more "Jews" emigrated from the former Soviet Union to Germany last year than to Israel, Sharon lashed out at the Chief Rabbinate for being insufficiently lenient in converting new immigrants from the former Soviet Union. (The prime minister chose to ignore the fact that Germany offers much more generous immigrant benefits than Israel is currently able to, as well as greater economic opportunities and freedom from the daily threat of terrorism.)

Finally, at a ceremony inducting the new chief rabbis in early September, Sharon called on them to shorten the process for conversion. The same week he announced the appointment of Rabbi Chaim Druckman as supervisor of conversions in Israel, with the specific mandate to increase the number of annual conversions.

Behind all these statements of the prime minister lies a clear vision: mass immigration from the former Soviet Union remains the key to Israel's precarious demographic situation, and that immigration depends upon making conversion easier for new immigrants.

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That vision is a dangerous one. One may speak of a million new immigrants from the former Soviet Union, as Sharon does, or one may pay obeisance to the idea of a Jewish state (however defined), but it is pure cynicism to claim to favor both. Fast-track conversion does not provide the magic means for reconciling these antagonistic goals and can only bring a number of negative consequences in its wake.

A Million New Israelis—A Mixed Blessing

The mass *aliyah* of the 1990s was indeed a blessing for Israel and the Jewish people. More importantly, it reunited hundreds of thousands of Jews, who had lived their entire lives almost totally cut off from the rest of world Jewry and unable to practice their religion, with the main body of the Jewish people. Nearly 10,000 children from Russian-speaking homes learn today in a variety of religious school systems, such as Shuvu—which means return—that cater to their special needs. In addition, the large-scale immigration helped fuel the economic boom Israel enjoyed throughout most of the '90s.

But if the mass immigration of the '90s was a blessing for the Jewish people, it was not an unmixed one. Along with the Jews returning to Zion from the former Soviet Union came hundreds of thousands of non-Jews, including the immediate family members of Jewish immigrants. Many others had more tenuous connections to the Jewish people—some gained entry by virtue of a long-dead Jewish grandparent, others by virtue of a familial relationship to someone married to a Jew and still others through the purchase of false identity papers.

Experts in the field place the number of non-Jewish immigrants to Israel in the '90s at half a million or more. By the end of the decade, the vast majority of new immi-

grants from the former Soviet Union were not halachically Jewish. According to official government statistics, which typically understate the problem, nearly two-thirds of the new immigrants were not Jewish. Worse, the Jewish immigrants were almost all elderly while the immigrants who were of childbearing age or younger were overwhelmingly non-Jewish.

Ironically, when then-Prime Minister Ehud Barak went to Ben Gurion Airport to greet the one-millionth new immigrant, there were almost no Jews on the flight. In October 1999, the Knesset heard testimony that of a recent group of 1,004 immigrants from Khabarovsk, only thirty-eight were Jewish. Returning from a 2001 trip to Moscow and Kiev, then-Diaspora Affairs Minister Michael Melchior lamented that on visits to Israeli embassies, “we could not find Jews.” Waiting to immigrate instead were “. . . people . . . with no connection to Israel or the Jewish people.” Typical was one family of eight that “had a grandfather who was a quarter Jewish and who died twenty years ago.”

In short, if Prime Minister Sharon realizes his dream of one million new immigrants from the former Soviet Union, we can be fairly certain that at least ninety percent of them will not be Jewish.

The huge influx of non-Jews from the former Soviet Union reflects the confluence of many factors, one of which is the high rate of intermarriage there. Another is the extremely porous nature of the Law of Return, which grants automatic citizenship to virtually anyone who can identify even one Jewish ancestor as well as to that person’s spouse and descendants. Even worse, the non-Jewish spouse of someone entitled to citizenship under the Law of Return is also entitled to bring in his relatives under the Law of Entry.

But the high rate of non-Jewish immigration is also the result of a conscious policy of the Jewish Agency to maximize immigration in any way possible. The Jewish Agency has consistently interpreted its mandate as to actively search out anyone eligible for citizenship under the Law of Return and bring him to Israel. In short, whatever is permitted is required. Former Absorption Minister Yuli Edelstein once described the Jewish Agency’s policy as “turning over every stone in Vilna in search of a drop of Jewish blood.”

The whole ethos of the Jewish Agency has always been geared to *aliyah*, and today Agency officials feel that means non-Jewish as well as Jewish immigration. At one point, the Jewish Agency even appointed a non-Jewish emissary to the former Soviet Union, until widespread criticism forced withdrawal of the appointment. “Israel welcomes non-Jews,” was the implicit message.

There are also financial considerations behind the Agency’s encouragement of mass immigration of non-Jews. As of 2001, the annual contribution of the American government to the resettlement of immigrants from the former Soviet Union was \$60 million per year, one-fifth of the

Agency’s annual budget at the time. Because the level of United States government support is linked to the number of immigrants, emissaries feel the heat to keep up the numbers. From the point of view of those emissaries, it is easier to round up those with little or no Jewish connection than to concentrate on the smaller pool of remaining Jews.

“The Jewish Agency sometimes gets into the mind-set that they must have a certain number of immigrants, so they end up scraping the bottom of the barrel,” says Eli Kazhdan, the former director general of Yisrael B’Aliya, the Russian immigrant party. One consequence, as Natan Sharansky noted, is that Israel has become a haven for criminals from the former Soviet Union.

A Failed Effort at Social Engineering

As an experiment in social engineering, the import of half a million non-Jews from the former Soviet Union has violated both cardinal rules of social engineering: seek incremental changes over grand designs and make sure those changes are reversible. The entry into Israel of so many non-Jews has profoundly changed the texture of Israeli society, and in ways that can never be reversed.

I mention social engineering because there were clearly



A Pesach Seder was held at Bar-Ilan University for new immigrant students from Russia. Participants used a Hebrew/Russian Haggadah. Photo: Israel Sun

those who saw in the Russian-speaking immigrants the means to change the nature of Israeli society. Dov Kontorer, a senior editor at *Vesti*, the largest Russian-language daily, wrote that the Jewish Agency emissaries have “fully internalized the ideology of creating a new Israeli nation, for which Slavs are preferable to *Chareidim* and Moroccans.” As one of those emissaries told the right-wing weekly *Makor Rishon*, “Israel lacks sane, non-religious, leftist people. There are several ways to solve the problem. One is to bring in *goyim* and create a new nation.” Yuli Tamir, the absorption minister in the Barak government, praised the Jewish Agency policy of maximizing immigration for maintaining “the secular character of the State.”

As a means of limiting the influence of the religious population on Israeli life, the large-scale Russian immigration has been a smashing success. Prior to 1990, the percentage of Shabbat observant Jews in Israeli society was steadily rising due to the far higher Orthodox birthrate. As a consequence of the one million new immigrants in the ’90s, that trend has dramatically reversed.

In the years to come, the large number of non-Jews will have a major impact on the so-called religious status quo. Since there is no civil marriage in Israel, there are now hundreds of thousands of Israeli citizens who cannot marry in Israel. Such a situation is clearly unsustainable in the long run and virtually guarantees that the Russian immigrants will prove to be the horse pulling the cart of civil marriage.

Other consequences of the immigration from the former Soviet Union must have given pause to even those who happily viewed the new immigrants as a counterbalance to religious influence on Israeli society. Israelis are no longer shocked by the sight of soldiers in Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) uniforms sporting large crosses around their necks. Twenty percent of new immigrants in a recent cohort of draftees demanded to be sworn in on the New Testament. Churches and pork shops have also become staples of the Israeli landscape.

Ironically, Israel, which was supposed to be the answer to anti-Semitism, has become an importer of Jew hatred. Damir, a group of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, has documented—over a period of two years—over 500 instances of synagogues and cemeteries being vandalized by non-Jewish immigrants, as well as verbal and physical assaults on Russian-speaking Jews. *Arbat*, a national chain of Russian-language bookstores, sells such titles as *The Holocaust Myth* and *Jewish Fascism in Russia*. Israel even boasts a neo-Nazi Russian-language web site.

A former prisoner of Zion, Rabbi Yosef Mendelevich has called for the amendment of the Law of Return to eliminate much of the non-Jewish immigration. Recently he wrote to Prime Minister Sharon, “We are seeing the influx of those same anti-Semitic types who made life miserable for Jews in Russia. Most of the crime and violence in the immigrant sector comes from non-Jews with criminal pasts in Russia.” One Meretz activist in Karmiel, the city with the largest concentration of non-Jewish Russians, wrote to a regional weekly, “We fled from anti-Semites in Russia in the hopes

of finally reaching a place of Jews, and we find ourselves living opposite a family of Ukrainian anti-Semites.”

Not only do many of the Russian immigrants feel no connection to the Jewish people, they harbor extremely negative feelings about Jews. The Russian-language press recently reported on a veteran teacher in Haifa who was trying to teach a class of recent Russian immigrants about the Holocaust, which none of them had ever heard of. When he asked the class how they explained anti-Semitism, the bored students suddenly perked up and eagerly offered their explanations: “Jews will sell you down the river for even a penny”; “Jews are greedy, crafty people, who think they have all the intelligence and that everyone else is stupid.”

As one secular teacher in Karmiel put it recently: “They are simply another people. I see in them a contempt for Jews and Judaism that has no parallel among Israelis.” A guide at the Diaspora Museum was shocked when a Russian immigrant accused the museum of not displaying *matzot* because “you bake it with our blood.”



A newsstand in Ashdod. There are several daily, weekly and monthly Russian newspapers in Israel. Photo: Israel Sun

Israelis are no longer shocked by the sight of soldiers in IDF uniforms sporting large crosses around their necks.

These examples would be enough to explain why the former head of the Jewish Agency *aliyah* department, Uri Gordon, once called the immigration of hundreds of thousands with no ties to the Jewish people “a form of national suicide.” Yet even the most dramatic examples of the impact of that immigration do not fully capture its negative consequences.

The mass immigration of non-Jews under the Law of Return undermines the very legitimacy of the State of Israel. What answer will we give to the question: Why should Natasha from Kiev, whose ancestors had no connection to the Jewish people, be granted automatic citizenship, while Ahmed, whose family tilled the land around Tzefat for centuries, is denied the “right” of return?

The presence of hundreds of thousands of non-Jews in Israel can only lead to a complete blurring of Jewish identity, with Jewish becoming nothing more than a synonym for a non-Arab Israeli. As a *Yediot Aharonot* editorial put it:

From a true Zionist perspective, the time has come to stop with all these distinctions between Jews and non-Jews. That distinction belongs to the galut. The only relevant distinction here is between Israeli and Palestinian. Everything else is irrelevant rabbinic bull.

Israeli demographers have, in practice, endorsed that conclusion. When they speak of Israel's Jewish population, they are as likely as not to mean the non-Arab population.

As Hillel Halkin pointed out in a *Commentary* article entitled, “The Jewish State and the Jewish People(s)” (May 1998), the recognition of a Thai or Ghanaian child of foreign workers as “Jewish”—“if not by formally converting, then by acculturating like immigrants everywhere and forcing Israeli notions of Jewishness to include him”—is to a very large extent the “logical culmination of secular Zionism,” which has brought about the attenuation of the specifically religious element of Jewish identity for close to a century.

The consequence of this shift, however, as Halkin notes, is that it is increasingly impossible to speak of the Jewish people, as opposed to different forms of Jewish peoples. That transformation has had immediate and profound consequences for the bonds between Israelis and between Israel and the Diaspora.

David Ben-Gurion viewed Jewish identity as the glue that would bind together immigrants from over one hundred different lands. For Jewish identity to perform that function there must minimally be some agreed upon definition as to who is a member of the Jewish family and who is not. Today, however, those calling themselves Jews are likely to view one another with no more kindred feeling than members of a

family would greet their new “cousins” if a wealthy maiden aunt suddenly decided to “adopt” her entire household staff.

Given the magnitude of the threats confronting Israel today, the need for social glue has never been greater. But as Israelis lose their sense of themselves as bearers of a common tradition, the most potent source of social cohesion is lost.

Multiple definitions of Jewish identity will not only weaken bonds between Jews in Israel but also between Israel and the Diaspora. To the extent that modern Israelis no longer define themselves in terms of their Jewishness, they undercut the entire basis of Israel-Diaspora relations. As Halkin puts it:

The coefficient of Jewish identity between, say, the child of a Jewish-Protestant intermarriage raised in a Reform home in California, and feeling little or no ethnic connectedness to other Jews, and the child of an Israeli-Thai intermarriage raised in a secular home in Tel Aviv, and feeling little or no religious connectedness to other Jews, will be low.

Increasingly, Israeli and American Jews resemble each other only in terms of the slight significance they attach to their Judaism, and their bonds to one another diminish accordingly.

Finally, the mass immigration of non-Jews carries within it the seeds of future social conflagration, as Jewish Israelis of Middle Eastern descent, who have just begun to recover from the devastation of their own absorption in the country, feel they are being shunted aside in favor of those who are not even Jewish.

The resentment aroused by this sense of being shoved back into the underclass is only tangentially connected to religion. The pork shops and churches of the non-Jewish immigrants are merely the most potent symbols of the contempt in which the Middle Eastern population feels it is held: even non-Jewish Russian-speakers are preferable to them.

The Conversion Option

The influx of hundreds of thousands more non-Jewish immigrants is impossible to square with Israel's self-image as the Jewish State. That is the central conundrum upon which Prime Minister Sharon's call for a million new immigrants flounders.

Prime Minister Sharon grasps at conversion on a mass scale as the only possible solution. He would assign the rabbinic task of cleaning up the mess left by successive Israeli governments and the Jewish Agency. There are many reasons why such a solution is doomed, but the first is largely that non-Jewish immigrants lose interest in converting to Judaism upon their arrival in Israel.

These immigrants quickly discover that living as a non-Jew

imposes few, if any, burdens in today's Israeli society. Last year only 848 non-Jews from the former Soviet Union converted, about two percent of the total number of such immigrants. Only a minuscule number even bother with Reform conversions in Israel, even though Reform conversions have now been recognized by the Israeli Supreme Court.

Nor is it even clear, given his definition of a Jew, why the prime minister is so eager for mass conversions. In a May 9 interview in *The Jerusalem Post*, Sharon offered his own definition of a Jew: “I say that [a Jew is] whoever comes, sees himself as part of the Jewish people, serves in the army, and fights.” Sharon would go further than the ancient Roman Empire, which in its later stages relied almost entirely on mercenaries, by granting membership in the Jewish nation to anyone willing to join the Israeli army. Sharon's definition of a Jew (recently echoed by Opposition Leader Shimon Peres) is virtually identical to the standard Yossi Beilin proposes for “secular conversion,” which also equates Jewishness with Israeliness.

Nevertheless, the prime minister is aware that for millions of Jews around the world, service in the Israeli army does not constitute a definition of Jewishness. Therefore he continues to search for a bit of rabbinic fairy dust to sprinkle on non-Jewish immigrants to transform them into Jews.

He has even entered the halachic lists himself. “I'm not speaking as a rabbi, certainly not,” the prime minister admits. But that did not prevent him from asking in a recent cabinet meeting, “Why should demands in terms of religious observance be



Shortly before the 1999 elections, a new immigrant in Ashdod (which has a very large population of immigrants from the former Soviet Union) walks past an election poster for a member of the Knesset, Avigdor Liberman, who is also a Russian immigrant. Photo: Israel Sun

made of immigrant converts that none of us could meet?”

An English judge once posed the same question to Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky, when the latter served as the head of the London *beit din*. Dayan Abramsky replied by asking the judge whether the citizenry of Great Britain included any smugglers. “Certainly,” replied the judge. Then Rabbi Abramsky asked whether British citizenship would be granted to someone who listed his profession as smuggler. “Of course not,” said the judge. So it is with us, explained Dayan Abramsky. Even a non-observant Jew is a member of the Jewish nation because his ancestors accepted upon themselves the Jewish laws at Sinai or at some later date. Anyone seeking to join the Jewish people today must accept those laws upon himself.

Nor has the prime minister confined himself to halachic disputation. He has taken concrete steps to realize his dream of dramatically increased rates of conversion among new immigrants. Over the objection of the IDF chief rabbi, Rabbi Yisrael Weiss, the prime minister has called upon the IDF to establish special conversion panels for the purpose of converting 3,000 immigrant soldiers per year. And the Jewish Agency has undertaken to create a special four-week quickie conversion course somewhere in Eastern Europe for new immigrants before they arrive in Israel.

Such attempts to enlist rabbis as problem-solvers for problems created by the State would turn the rabbis involved into the modern parallel of the *rav mit'adam*, the government-appointed rabbis despised by European Jewry. Such efforts cannot succeed because they inevitably seek to turn *gerut* (conversion) into nothing more than a ritual ceremony involving *brit milah* for men and *tevilah* (ritual immersion) for men and women in front of three rabbis holding Orthodox ordination.

Yet the unanimous view of the preeminent halachic authorities of our time has been that those rituals without acceptance of *mitzvot* are meaningless. Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his famous essay “*Kol Dodi Dofeik*,” takes this conclusion as axiomatic. As Rambam describes the process of joining the Jewish people: “When a Gentile wants to enter the Covenant and dwell under the wings of the Divine Presence, and accept upon himself the yoke of Torah, then he needs circumcision and immersion.” Acceptance of the *mitzvot* is the necessary precondition for the rituals that follow; without it, they are meaningless.

Every individual decision to join the Jewish people on the terms described by Rambam, especially when made by one raised in a society in which religion was systematically disdained for seventy years, is a miracle. Miracles by their very nature cannot be mass produced or subject to government quotas; nor can the deepest personal choices be coerced. Only one who views Judaism as trivial could think otherwise, and trivializing Judaism would be precisely the result of fast-track conversion.

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The sad truth is that there is no reversing the clock and returning to the status quo prior to the arrival of half a million non-Jews in Israel. Nor is there any quick fix to the problems created by their presence. At best, we can focus our efforts on providing an intensified religious education for tens of thousands of Jewish children from the former Soviet Union who, in most cases, also lack any Jewish background. At the same time, we must work to prevent the situation from deteriorating further. Those efforts would include reversing the Jewish Agency policy of trying to bring to Israel anyone eligible under the Law of Return and plugging the gaping holes in the Law of Return so that Israel's most famous expression of the community of Jews all over the world does not become the chief instrument for the destruction of Israel's Jewish identity. And above all, let us give up the futile efforts to treat *halachah* as an infinitely malleable instrument in the service of the State. **JA**

A Question of Culture: Why Mass Conversion Won't Work

Machanaim is an organization that works to bring Russian immigrants to Israel into the fold. But "the time is short and the work is great" as two of its founders analyze if—and how—their model can address a problem that threatens the Jewish character of Israel.

By Miriam Kitrossky and Ira Dashevsky

Today in Israel there is a lot of noise surrounding the conversion crisis, and no wonder—out of more than one million Russian *olim*, a sizable proportion are not halachically Jewish. Many of them grew up thinking they were, and, given the opportunity under the Law of Return, came to Israel to join the Jewish people. Imagine their hurt and disappointment when they found that they were not considered Jewish by the very people they had expected to welcome them!

Everyone understands that this situation contains the seeds of a national disaster. While these non-Jewish immigrants qualify as Israeli citizens under the Law of Return,

A founder of Machanaim and a translator, Mrs. Kitrossky has translated works by Nehama Leibowitz and Menachem Elon into Russian. In addition to raising her seven children, she teaches and counsels conversion candidates.

Mrs. Dashevsky, a founder of Machanaim and a daughter of Machanaim President Dr. Zeev Dashevsky, is finishing a two-year stint as a senior fellow at the Mandel School of Educational Leadership in Jerusalem. In addition to caring for her eight children, she mentors and mothers many "children" in her Machanaim classes.

they are halachically unable to marry Jewish spouses or bear Jewish children. Without a focused campaign to connect them to their Jewish roots, these *olim* could threaten the Jewish foundation of the State of Israel. Without a successful effort to convert them and their children, within fifteen years they will be a substantial force, fully capable of divorcing Israel—the democracy from Israel—the homeland-of-the-Jewish-people.

Many in Israel today insist that the solution lies in some halachic fix—mass conversion or some other religious solution. Some blame "the rabbis" for not accelerating the conversion process. Based on our experience with the Russian community, both in Russia and in Israel, we believe that the real barriers are cultural and not halachic. Russians, having been force-fed Communism and atheism for years, are different from Israelis. Many Russians don't have the cultural models to understand religion and automatically assume that "if the government wants me to do it, it is bad." Until the Jewish community comes to grips with the need to bridge the cultural barriers, the situation will only get worse.

The common wisdom for years—"make it easy and they will convert en masse"—is now being recognized for what it is—wishful thinking. Even the most simplified process—

the conversion of minors—promoted by some rabbis as a relatively innocuous, minimalist process that would bring many of the next generation into the Jewish fold quickly, disappointed its chief advocates. Parents saw no real benefit; instead they saw the “establishment” trying to use their children as chips in a numbers game. They smelled paternalism and reacted with their feet. They stayed away.

These and other well-intentioned attempts at mass conversion continue to fail because they try to deal with specific halachic problems without paying attention to the deeper problems of identity and culture. The cultural barriers—and not the rabbinical courts—block real progress. Most immigrants, uninterested in conversion, never even arrive at the stage where halachic problems (related to parentage, et cetera) need to be addressed. High-quality teachers and efficient conversion procedures may help, but they are not enough. Most Russians do not perceive themselves as religious. Trying to promote conversion among the average Russian is comparable to trying to run a Microsoft Word file on WordPerfect—the program can’t read the file format. And if it tries, sometimes a document may emerge, but it will look really strange!

Conversion is not an automatic corollary of “Let My People Go.” It is a byproduct of acculturation. It comes as a result of the slow, deliberate process of “Let My People Know.” It is not broiling a steak, it is making a cholent.

Many of the Russian immigrants of the ‘90s came after the Soviet Union first opened its gates. In the late ‘90s more immigrants arrived, having been recruited by the Jewish Agency under the Law of Return. These immigrants defy standard Israeli rules of classification, which tend to be based on some aspect of Jewish culture or affiliation. Moreover, the programs formulated to integrate these new immigrants were based on the model used for the previous wave of immigrants. While the *olim* of the ‘70s included many “mixed” families (with both Jewish and non-Jewish members), most of them struggled to get to Israel and sought ways to be part of the Jewish nation. Programs designed for one generation do not sell well to members of a different generation.

The immigrants of the ‘90s came to an Israel that was more fragmented. Segregation between different communities and constant political bickering—a stark contrast to the “we-all-think-alike-and-work-together” Soviet mentality—made most of them skittish about joining Israeli society.

For all of these reasons, finding the right model for programs to integrate the new Russian *olim* has proven to be more difficult than anyone imagined. Understanding more about who these immigrants are is essential in creating effective approaches to bring them closer to Judaism.

The latter wave of Russian immigrants range from observant Jews to anti-Semitic Russian nationalists. In between these two extremes, there are Jews with either some or strong Jewish feelings; Jews who are totally assimilated (wanting, as many sabras do, to be citizens of the world, “like all the nations”); mixed families; children of mixed marriages who may or may not be Jewish and who may or may not identify with the Jewish people; non-Jewish divorced spouses and ordinary Russian Gentiles who somehow obtained Israeli citizenship as a way out of a desperate economic situation.

Generally, the immigrants of the ‘90s tend to be more apathetic about or opposed to religion and other forms of “establishment.” In the Soviet Union, they identified with Israel and Zionism, moving against the tide. There was something fairly strong that united them in the Soviet Union—their sense of being different, of being discriminated against. As one member of a pre-perestroika Jewish

Genya, 33:

I was shocked when they told me that I was not a Jew. Ironically, it happened during a seminar organized in Moscow . . . and I was just starting, for the first time, to feel proud of my Jewish heritage. I honestly thought it was going to become my new world. . . . Is it possible that my Russian [non-Jewish] grandmother disconnected me from generations of pious Polish and Russian Jews?

I made aliyah to Israel with a firm decision to [convert]. I don’t see my conversion as changing my nationality—but rather as making up for some missing or broken link in my family and in my identity.

activist group put it: “In Moscow we never ate pork, while in Israel we gladly do it.” In Moscow not eating pork was a meaningful expression of one’s Jewishness. In Israel it is associated with “the religious,” a segment of society many of the Russians deem irrelevant.

This diversity of the immigrant population complicates the already difficult task of developing a useful approach to promoting Jewishness among them. What’s more, the overall level of Jewish ignorance is sometimes astounding, even among those who are halachically Jewish. Many immigrants do not even know which customs belong to Judaism and which belong to other religions. As one Russian immigrant said: “I see so many *mezuzot* here, shall I cross every one of them?”

This helps to explain the failure of the “mass mar-

What’s more, the overall level of Jewish ignorance is sometimes astounding, even among those who are halachically Jewish.

Lyuda, 55:

I came to Machanaim because I felt an emptiness—something was missing. My husband is Jewish and he belongs in Israel. I guess I do too; I certainly didn’t belong in Kiev where I got sneers and dirty looks from the other medical students because I had married a Jew; my son also suffered the taunts of bullies.

... [In Israel] when the traffic slowed on Friday night and the air changed in the street, I yearned to feel that I really belong, to feel that this country is my home. So I started going to classes. I didn’t want to convert because I heard all kinds of stories about rabbis asking embarrassing questions. I had a friend who was reduced to tears when the rabbi demanded she bring one more document she had never heard of. But no one at Machanaim asked for documents; the instructors didn’t ask me to prove anything. They said the classes were free and I could join any time I wanted.

I learned about Jewish history and decided I would try to keep Shabbat. There I was, all excited and trying to get the family to get dressed up too, and my husband looked at me as if I were crazy. He said he would rather get a divorce. Several times we were on the verge of divorce; eventually he decided to give me a chance, to be more tolerant of my observance. I waited two years until he felt less threatened and things settled down, and he decided he would also give it a try. I converted and Machanaim made me the sweetest wedding with a chupah and everything.

ket” approach to the conversion crisis; the panacea of easy-does-it, mass conversions simply doesn’t work. The real issue is education, not conversion. Once people are educated to understand what Judaism is and what conversion really means, they will see conversion in a different light. All the breast beating about conversion is useless. The effort that we, as a community, put into these *olim* before we ask them to convert is one that will really pay off. Instead of concentrating on who is and who is not halachically Jewish, we should focus on offering no-pressure education about Judaism, without trying to impose ideas or observances upon anyone. This is the kind of education that Machanaim, an organization that works to bring Russian immigrants to Israel into the fold, provides.

The Orthodox community needs to make a fundamental shift in attitude. Should we persist in taking the long customary approach and not welcome anyone who is not already halachically Jewish? Or do we say that in light of today’s complicated circumstances, people who are Jewish enough to qualify as Jews under the Law of Return—people who grew up thinking of themselves as Jews and suffering as Jews and who want to throw their lot in with the Jewish people in Israel—are welcome to explore and to strengthen their Jewish roots? Once they understand what Judaism is, they can make an intelligent choice and decide whether or not to convert.

We believe in this second method because of the spiritual journeys that we ourselves made in the ‘70s. Under the watchful eye of the KGB, we, along with a few others, used to get together to learn about Judaism. Ultimately, our group grew into an underground network of classes. In 1987 we received the long-awaited permission to make *aliyah*. At the time, we had no intention of continuing to educate others. We were sure there were plenty of educational facilities in Israel. But upon arriving in Israel, we discovered that there were no educational programs that were geared to the Russian community. Friends began pressuring us to start a center to provide Jewish education for Russian-speaking Jews in Israel.

In 1990, we opened Machanaim with the first formal Russian-language conversion class. Additionally, we began publishing books and other resources. Today, we have over one million books in print and a Russian-Jewish web site that has over 6,000 pages of resources (www.machanaim.org). We also offer video *shiurim*, study guides, educational tours and seminars, teacher training and a Russian-language program that airs on Israeli television.



Russian supermarkets, full of Russian imported food, can be found in many areas including Tel Aviv, Rechovot, Ashdod, Beit Shemesh and Karmiel. Photo: Israel Sun

Our pluralistic, non-coercive approach is very different from the quick, results-oriented approach. We do not guarantee instant results. Like most of our countrymen, we are scornful of smooth bureaucrats and apparatchiks. Our strategy works because our formula is simple. We invite Russians, no questions asked about their Jewishness. We communicate with them in Russian. Our classes are sort of a Judaism 101, where students get acquainted with the various aspects of being Jewish as well as with Jewish culture, history and literature. Through our classes, we invite Russians to be part of the Jewish people—intellectually and culturally; we show them our traditions and explain how and why they are done. Students also learn how to cope with being non-Jews in the Jewish State, as well as what becoming Jewish entails. Our courses are the basis for our success in inspiring people to convert and helping them through the process. But we let our students decide, each at his own pace, when and if to take the plunge and convert.

In the last decade, Machanaim has helped over 1,000 people and their extended families convert. For us, the bottom line is that they get there—not how long it takes.

Can this approach be implemented to reach the vast numbers of non-Jewish Russians in Israel today? Can such an approach be practical on a large scale? The answer is no—and yes. No, because it is not easy to finance. There is a lot of money for “Let My People Go” but little for the long-term project of “Let My People Know.” It is also tough to fund because—although it is unquestionably successful and one hundred percent of those who sign up for our official conversion program make it through—it can take some

Masha, 25:

My father is Jewish, my mother is not. My father sacrificed everything to bring us to Israel so we would have a better life. When he got sick, I was in high school. I had a hard time watching my strong father deteriorate because of the pressure to find a job and to make a life for us.

I heard about Machanaim, and I started going to the classes. The classes were interesting and no one pushed me—they let me ask questions, voice my doubts. They didn't expect me to change one day and sign a bunch of papers. They let me pace myself. I started and stopped several times, and each time they welcomed me back with a smile and an attentive ear. I tried to act Jewish in the army; I took Machanaim “Foundations of Judaism” courses at the university.

It has taken me a long time; I look at some of my friends and realize that it is going to take them even longer. I'm lucky because at least my father gave me something—a heritage. Even though technically he wasn't right, he insisted that we were Jewish and that we belong here. I have students in the Machanaim classes I teach now whose parents raised them with the idea that Communism is better than any religion and that science is God. I worry about how long it will take them; I bet my teachers at Machanaim worried about how long it would take me.

as long as seven years to decide to convert. This is a difficult sell in today's education-is-a-business environment.

On the other hand, our programs can be expanded. With adequate funding, Machanaim and programs like it could do a lot more. We need to change our attitude; we need to focus on education, rather than on conversion, and on developing programs that will help cross the cultural barriers. That's the real challenge: to create programs to help Russian Israelis understand what it means to be Jewish. In this way, even those who decide not to convert will have a deeper respect and appreciation for being citizens of the Jewish State. **IA**

False Solutions: A Halachic Analysis of Conversion

By Shabtai A. Rappoport

During the past decade, the exodus of millions of Jews from the former Soviet Union and their immigration to Israel was nothing less than a miracle. The opening of the Iron Curtain was certainly part of the fulfillment of God's promise to the prophets—that all the Jewish people from the four corners of the earth will return to Israel. Some of us thought that we had finally reached the final stretch on the road towards redemption. But as Ramchal explains, often even God's miracles do not solve all the problems, and, in fact, they may even create new ones, which require creative solutions. According to Ramchal (*One Hundred and Thirty Eight Gates to Wisdom*, Gate 61), God's creation of the world itself was imperfect; man must therefore continually perfect Creation. Improving on God's manifestation of kindness is our main challenge. History has borne out this observation; time and time again, our nation's salvation was accompanied by new challenges.

Rabbi Rappoport is the rosh yeshivah of Yeshivat Shvut Israel in Efrat. He studied under Rav Moshe Feinstein and was chosen by him to edit various volumes of Dibrat Moshe. Rabbi Rappoport also edited the last three volumes of Iggerot Moshe and is currently working on editing Rav Moshe's commentary on masechet Peah of Talmud Yerushalmi.

Indeed, the miracle of the Russian exodus brought along an immense problem, namely, the mass immigration of non-Jews to Israel. These non-Jews were awarded Israeli citizenship, and now serve in the IDF and play an active role in Israeli society. Sociologists perceive in this situation a social time bomb that would not only bring the scourge of intermarriage to Israel but would ultimately lead to the division of Israeli society into two groups: traditional Jews who care about Jewish identity, on the one hand, and Russian *goyim* and the Jews who see them as their Israeli brethren, on the other.

Hence, even if we accept that the mass immigration of Jews—as well as non-Jews—to Israel is part of God's process of redemption, it is still our obligation to try to solve the unprecedented demographic and social problems that have been created. Any solution must be executed with love and wisdom and with full allegiance to *halachah*.

There are those who claim that were the rabbis to make an ad-hoc halachic decision to make it easy for these non-Jewish immigrants to become Jewish, most of them would convert to Judaism. The conversion of the masses would avert any split in Israeli society as well as the catastrophic

The conversion of the masses would avert any split in Israeli society as well as the catastrophic wave of inevitable intermarriages.

wave of inevitable intermarriages. However, even if the masses of non-Jewish immigrants would be willing to convert, the question is whether it is halachically permissible to relax the standards for conversion in order to avoid the disastrous consequences outlined above. (Relaxing the standards, in this case, implies eliminating the requirement that new converts undertake to live as religious Jews.)

Nation-Oriented Conversion

It might be argued that a lenient conversion should be based on a “nation-oriented” reason—that is, on the desire to join the Jewish people as opposed to the desire to join the Jewish religion. In fact, a possible basis for such a conversion is found in the Talmud (*Shabbat* 68b):

A proselyte, who is converted in the midst of Gentiles and performs many labors on many Sabbaths, is liable to one sin offering only. And he is liable to one [sin offering] on account of blood, one on account of chelev and one on account of idolatry.

This convert who violates laws out of ignorance incurs one sin offering for the violation of each law, regardless of how many times he violates each one. Since the convert is liable to bring a sin offering—from which a Gentile is clearly exempt—this person’s conversion must be considered halachically valid. Moreover, the Gemara informs us that this *ger* is not just ignorant of Jewish law; he is ignorant of the very foundations of religious Judaism¹—specifically, the prohibition against idolatry and the obligation to observe the Shabbat. Since he is ignorant of the Torah, his conversion must be based on his desire to join the Jewish nation and not on his desire to fulfill the Torah’s commandments. Hence, it would appear that a conversion made on such a basis is valid.

However, the convert referred to in the Gemara did not refuse to fulfill the commandments; he was simply unaware of their existence. We may assume that once he is informed of the commandments, he will observe them. Thus, the above ruling cannot apply to a convert who knowingly refuses to adhere to the laws of the Torah.

Who Is a Heretic?

The distinction, however, between being ignorant of Torah law and refusing to accept Torah law because one

does not believe in God, is not so obvious. A heretic is defined as someone who was properly educated in Judaism and is aware of the Torah’s laws but who nevertheless either intentionally transgresses those laws or proclaims that there is no God. However, the Chazon Ish (*YD* A6, B28) rules that a heretical Jew who was raised in an atheistic environment is considered to be ignorant (*tinok shenishbah*), even when he possesses the proper knowledge. His transgressions are considered to be committed unwittingly, and thus he still belongs to the Jewish community. The reason he is considered a *tinok shenishbah* is because even when an atheist is aware of the Torah, he is not persuaded by it.

Traditionally, a heretic was considered to be an intentional transgressor of Torah laws because it was possible to properly inform him of, and educate him in, the Jewish faith. When such education was attempted and the heretic still refused to change his ways, he was considered to be intentionally relinquishing the faith and the community. Nowadays, however, heresy is so widespread that it is impossible to ensure that one understands its fallacy. Thus, nowadays, heresy resulting from an atheistic education is tantamount to ignorance.

An Unjustified Justification

Some claim that the leniency that applies to a *tinok shenishbah* should apply to a convert. In other words, in the case of a convert who does not intend to keep the *mitzvot*, should his conversion be considered valid if the rabbis failed to convince him that there is a good reason to fulfill those *mitzvot*? Rav Moshe Feinstein, z”l, considers this question in a number of places. In one instance, he discusses the case of a Gentile woman who lived with a non-observant Jew. The woman converted in order to marry him, but the couple did not change their lifestyle. Rav Moshe presents a prima facie argument to validate her conversion (*Iggerot Moshe* *YD*, part I, 160):

The fact that her husband, for whom she converted, desecrates the Shabbath, and recklessly violates other commandments, caused her to believe that there is no great obligation to observe Torah laws. Thus she is like a ger “who is converted in the midst of Gentiles,” who according to the Talmud’s ruling is a valid ger even while he is still practicing idolatry. The reason for this ruling is that this ger took it upon himself to be like all Jews, which is considered to be an adequate commitment, even [though he lacks] any knowledge of the Torah’s commandments. Knowing the commandments is not necessary for conversion, as

Entering into the Covenant and accepting the Torah constitute the very essence of conversion.

indicated by the fact that there is no obligation to learn the entire Torah law before conversion. [Since Torah is indivisible, partial knowledge is essentially equivalent to no knowledge.] Only one who is aware of these commandments and refuses to commit himself to them cannot convert. Therefore, even though this woman was told by the rabbinical court that Shabbath must be observed, she may believe that it is not a strict requirement, only an adornment to Jewishness, just as a Jew who does not observe the Shabbath mistakenly considers his Jewishness to be appropriate and adequate. Hence, according to her mistaken notion, she committed herself to all of the commandments that Jews are obligated to observe, which validates her conversion, even though because of this notion she will actually not observe the commandments.

The above argument has some merit in considering this woman a valid gioret, and is a bit of a justification for those rabbis who accept such converts, so that they not be considered worse than uneducated laymen.

The above clearly shows that Rav Moshe did not really believe that the woman’s conversion—which lacked a genuine commitment to the Torah—was truly valid. In similar cases, Rav Moshe rejects this kind of conversion even post factum—(*Iggerot* *YD*, part I, 157, 159 and part II, 125). In another responsum, he rejects the validity of the conversion of a woman whose husband was a non-observant Jew (part I, 194). In yet another responsum, Rav Moshe calls for imposing restrictions on conversions because of the abundance of conversions made in order to marry non-observant Jews (part 3, response 106).

Conversion at Mount Sinai

Why did Rav Moshe consider the argument he brings to be invalid? I believe the answer lies in the very essence of conversion. The process of conversion, which includes circumcision and immersion—and in the time of the Temple a special sacrifice—is derived from the following verse: “One ordinance shall be both for you of the congregation, and also for the stranger who sojourns with you, an ordinance forever in your generations; as you are, so shall the stranger be before the Lord” (Numbers 15:15). The word “stranger” is understood to refer to a person who is about to convert.

The Talmud (*Keritot* 9a) quotes Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi as saying:

“As you” means as your forefathers. As your forefathers entered into the Covenant only by circumcision, immersion

and the sprinkling of the blood, so shall they [converts] enter into the Covenant only by circumcision, immersion and the sprinkling of the blood.

As Rambam in his discussion of the laws of conversion states (*Isurei Biah* 13, 1-4):

By three actions did the Israelites enter into the Covenant, by circumcision, immersion and a sacrifice. . . . Similarly, in the following generations, when a Gentile wishes to enter into the Covenant, and dwell under the wings of the Shechinah and assume the yoke of the Torah, he requires circumcision and immersion, and when the Temple will be built, the offering of a sacrifice.

Our forefathers’ acceptance of the Covenant serves as the Biblical source for conversion to Judaism, and thus every convert is obligated to fulfill the same requirements. In his discussion of the laws of conversion, Rambam uncharacteristically elaborates on the story of our forefathers’ entry into the Covenant. But Rambam’s elaboration is not tangential—he does so because entering into the Covenant and accepting the Torah constitute the very essence of *gerut* (conversion). Any conversion subsequent to *Matan Torah* is a mere reenactment of all that our forefathers did before accepting the Torah. Our forefathers did not enter into the Covenant with one another or with the nation of Israel—as they constituted the entire nation. Their Covenant was only with God.

This is why Rambam describes a prospective convert as one who “wishes to enter into the Covenant, dwell under the wings of the *Shechinah* and accept the yoke of Torah.” This desire is not a mere requirement for conversion similar to circumcision, immersion and a sacrifice; it is the very essence of *gerut*.

When the rabbinical court accepts a new convert, it must be convinced that the candidate truly wants to enter into the Covenant and observe Torah law. Even if the court accepts a convert who wants to marry a Jewish spouse or has another seemingly ulterior motive, as long as he wishes to enter into the Covenant, his conversion is valid post factum. The validity of the conversion stems from the fact that the convert—even though he is driven by an ulterior motive—agrees to pay the price of entering into the Covenant in order to attain his goal (marrying a Jew, et cetera). He genuinely agrees to enter into the Covenant, and thus the conversion is valid.

It might be argued that conversion should be based on the desire to join the Jewish people as opposed to the desire to join the Jewish religion.

However, when a convert is unwilling to pay this price, and only pays lip service to accepting the yoke of Torah, there is no foundation for the *gerut*, and it is thus invalid even post factum.²

Let us now consider the argument of those who advocate a nation-oriented conversion. Their argument goes as follows: A. *Gerut* basically entails joining the nation of Israel, and B. Since a commitment to Torah is not the very essence of the *gerut*, only an explicit refusal to accept such a commitment will invalidate the conversion and C. Because this convert is unaware that a traditional commitment to Torah is essential for conversion, his conversion—even without a commitment to Torah—should be valid. This argument, however, is unacceptable. Just as our forefathers' entry into the Covenant was based on their sense of duty to God as His chosen nation, any subsequent *gerut* must be based on a willingness to serve God and to accept one's role as a member of the chosen nation.

As mentioned above, the leniency shown (by the Chazon Ish) towards a Jew who was raised among atheists cannot apply to a Gentile who wants to join the nation. The Jewish people are the sons of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov; our lineage makes us Jews. The only way for one who does not share our lineage to become a Jew is by entering into the Covenant with God.

In his discussion of the laws of conversion, Rambam refers to a Gentile who “wants to enter into the Covenant and dwell under *Shechinah*.” He doesn't say the Gentile who “wants to join the Jewish nation,” because such a motive is irrelevant.³

When discussing converts, Rambam cites the question that the rabbis ask the candidate for conversion (*Isurei Biah* 14): “Are you not aware that Israelites suffer nowadays from exile and persecutions?” Hence, it would seem that *gerut* is indeed nothing but the joining of the Jewish people. But this is not so. The above is not posed to the convert in order to question his motive for joining the nation, but to question his motive for deciding to serve God. The Jew endures exile and suffering because he is part of God's chosen nation. “Only you have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2).

Mass conversion of immigrants who lack a basic faith in

God and the wish to enter into the Covenant and heed the Torah's laws could be a seemingly easy way out of our demographic problem, but it is fundamentally false. The true path to solving the problem of the Russian immigration is the path of education. Mass conversion without a genuine acceptance of *mitzvot* will have no lasting beneficial results. What we need is a deep faith in God and in the belief that we dwell under His Providence, and that any challenge that He poses to us will be resolved if we adhere to His Truth and His will. **JA**

Notes

1. How could it be that the convert is unaware of the commandments? Don't the rabbis have to notify the convert about them? Rambam (*Hilchot Sheggagot* 7b) and other commentators explain that the discussed conversion is valid because the convert happened to be a minor at the time of his conversion, and he therefore did not have to be notified of the commandments. The Tosafot (*Shabbat* 72b) amend the Gemara text to omit the example of idolatry and state that a convert who was never told that idolatry is forbidden cannot be considered Jewish.

However, Rav Moshe Feinstein (in *Dibrot Moshe, Shabbat* 2, p. 520, 2) explains that conversion can be valid even when an adult convert is ignorant of the prohibition against idolatry. This is either because he was told that God is the Creator of the Universe but was not told that there is no other deity besides Him or because the convert wanted to join the Jews because of their traits—compassion, humility and benevolence (*Kalah Rabati* 9:6). Rav Moshe stresses that even conversion that is based on the latter motive—that is, the desire to join the Jewish nation—must be accompanied by acceptance of the Torah's commandments. However, general acceptance, even when lacking any awareness of any specific commandment, suffices to validate a conversion.

Even according to Rav Moshe's second argument that a person may convert because of the traits of our nation (without being aware of specific commandments), a basic acceptance of the concept of a Covenant with God who gave the Torah to his chosen nation must be the foundation of the conversion.

2. That is why Rambam (*Isurei Biah* 13, 15) says that the Great Rabbinical Court, during the times of King David and King Solomon, neither accepted nor rejected those who converted, as it was suspected that they converted for ulterior motives. Only when their subsequent behavior demonstrated their sincerity was their conversion fully accepted.

3. Despite this, if—as the *gemara* in *Shabbat* quoted earlier shows—a prospective convert wants to join God's nation and be obliged by the nation's duties but has no idea what these actual duties are, his *gerut* is valid.

The Long Journey Home

By Jonathan Udren

Nestled in the picturesque, rolling green hilltops of Samaria, the small settlement of Shavei Shomron rests quietly, despite its proximity to the flaming Arab cities of Tulkarem and Shechem. But some fascinating new neighbors have created a murmur across the *yishuv*. In August of 2002, the Amita Absorption Center, along with Amishav—an organization dedicated to bringing lost Jews from around the world to Israel—opened the settlement's doors to the Bnei Menashe, a group of people from northeast India who claim to be Jews.

Currently 150 religious families reside in Shavei Shomron, most of whom live in one of the many single-family homes that line the settlement. But upon following the winding road down the hilltop, out of sight of the main thoroughfare, one finds a colony of meager caravans resting near the fence border, each housing one of the eleven Bnei Menashe families.

“We are so excited that the Bnei Menashe have come to Shavei Shomron,” says Rivka Bonde, Amita's educational director and a resident of the settlement. “The atmosphere here is similar to how it was when the Russians were first allowed to come.”

But the excitement of the community members is nothing compared to that felt by many of the new residents. For sixty-four-year-old Emuna Miso and her thirty-something daughter, Ruby, who live in Shavei Shomron with Ruby's two young children, there is a sense of relief; their family has finally been released from the oppressive Christian environment that provided no rest on Shabbat or holidays and minimal opportunities for Jewish learning.

“When we had to go to work on Yom Kippur, it hurt here,” says Ruby as she points to her heart. “The best part of being in Israel is being able to keep Shabbat and the festivals.”

Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, the founder and chairman of Amishav, hopes that the excitement felt by the Bnei Menashe will help them through the rocky stages of Israeli

Mr. Udren, a resident of Jerusalem, is a freelance journalist and editor.

integration. Within six months to a year, they are expected to not only gain the Jewish knowledge required for the Israeli Rabbinic conversion exam but also to grasp a language completely new to most of them.

According to Amishav, the two million members of the Shinlung tribe from the Indian states of Manipur and Mizoram are descendants of the tribe of Menashe, which was expelled from Israel by the Assyrians in the eighth century BCE. Members of the tribe reached Assyria, and from there, according to Bnei Menashe tradition, they went to Afghanistan, to Mongolia and then to southern China. Some 5,000 to 6,000 years ago, the Bnei Menashe began to wander toward their current home, located on the border between India and Burma. Before Christian missionaries started forcibly converting members of the tribe in the late 1800s, the entire group practiced traditions that so closely resemble Judaism, they are difficult to disregard. Some decades ago, some 5,000 members of the Shinlung tribe chose to live observant Jewish lives. These people anxiously wish to immigrate to Israel.

Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum, a judge on the Israeli Chief Rabbinical Court, has been involved in converting the Bnei Menashe. He has researched the group and has taken numerous trips to India. His conclusions, as well as those of the rest of his conversion court, are that the Bnei Menashe's claim is valid.

“It's clear to me that the Bnei Menashe are descendants of Jews,” says Rabbi Birnbaum.

Some of the pre-rabbinic Jewish traditions of the Bnei Menashe include circumcising male children on the eighth day after birth; celebrating three major holidays that mirror Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot; observing Pesach laws and rituals including a prohibition against having yeast in the bread; wearing garments such as *tzitzit* with *techelet*; taking tithes from crops that are given to the *Kohanim* and not pronouncing the name of God.

Before Christian missionaries started converting members of the tribe in the late 1800s, the group practiced traditions that so closely resemble the Torah, they are difficult to disregard.

On Rabbi Avichail's initial visit to India, he was particularly moved by one of the ancient songs of the Bnei Menashe that is very similar to a passage from Selichot: "Answer me, answer me from Moriah; Answer me, answer me from Sinai; answer me, answer me from *Yam Suf*; answer me, answer me from Zion."

Soon after the creation of the State of Israel, the Bnei Menashe expressed their longing to return to their beloved Promised Land. However, the Israeli government not only denied their *aliyah* but dismissed their claim of Jewish ancestry altogether.

In 1979, Rabbi Avichail learned of the lost tribe's desire to return to Zion.

"I was the rabbi at Hebrew University at the time, and I had an Indian friend who worked with me," Rabbi Avichail says. "He showed me a letter that they [the Bnei Menashe] had written [about their desire to come to Israel]."

Reaching out to lost Jews has been Rabbi Avichail's business since 1961, when he first became interested in locating the lost tribes. In 1975, with the support of his *rav*, Rav Tzvi Yehuda Kook, he founded Amishav (My Nation Returns).

Over the past decade, Amishav has invested resources into Bnei Menashe communities, both in India and in Israel. The organization established learning centers in India to teach Judaism. But Amishav's most consuming effort has been assisting close to 800 Bnei Menashe members fulfill their dreams of immigrating to Israel.

"We pay for their airfare [\$800 per person] and for their education once they're here," says Michael Freund, the director of Amishav. "We believe that these people are a blessing to this country, and that is why we are doing this."

Since the State of Israel does not recognize the Bnei Menashe as Jews (under the Law of Return), Amishav has made special arrangements with the Interior Ministry and the Chief Rabbinate to allow them to remain in the country and study towards their conversion. Rabbi Birnbaum explains that the need for conversion is due to their long exile and forced Christian conversion. The Amita Absorption Center, which is located in Shavei Shomron, prepares the Bnei Menashe for conversion by offering classes on *halachah*, holidays and general Jewish topics.

One of the greatest challenges facing the Bnei Menashe is securing financial independence. Only after their conversion, which takes place between three to nine months after their

arrival in Israel, are they considered new immigrants. Several months later they begin to receive government benefits, including healthcare and a benefits basket that ranges from \$7,000 to \$10,000. But until then, many are dependent on Amishav's support, which amounts to a monthly budget of \$150, from which rent, food and other expenses must be paid.

"It's very difficult for newcomers to survive for six months or even a year without [government] help," explains Shlomo Gangte, a Bnei Menashe member who lives in Shavei Shomron with his wife and two young children. "I wish the government would treat us like other new immigrants."

"When people hear India, they automatically assume that the Bnei Menashe are coming for economic reasons, but that's just not the case," explained Freund. "Many of the Bnei Menashe live very well [in India] by local standards." Indeed, many families had land and livestock they were forced to sell or abandon in order to come to Israel.

"In India I had a printing press and my own publishing business," says Gangte. "I worked as much as I liked. Now I have to work ten hours a day. We did not come to have a better life materially. If that was the case, I don't think we made a very good choice."

Finances also determine the placement of the immigrants. Though Shavei Shomron has not experienced any terror attacks, nearby communities like Emanuel, as well as the surrounding roads, have been plagued by terrorist activity. Furthermore, the largest groupings of the Bnei Menashe happen to live in two of the most hostile areas in Israel: Kiryat



Ruby Miso, a member of the Bnei Menashe. Photo: Laya Millman

Arba, outside Hebron, and Neve Dekalim, in the Gaza Strip. Other concentrations of the Bnei Menashe are in Beit El and Ofra, both of which are located next to Ramallah.

"I don't object to the fact that the Bnei Menashe are living in Yehuda, Shomron or Gaza," says Freund. "But the bottom line is this: they don't come under the Law of Return. We need to find communities that are willing to take these people in while knowing that they're not going to be receiving budgets from the government so quickly. Thus far the only places willing to do so are located in Yehuda, Shomron and Gaza."



The sign over the Shalom Tzion Beit Kneset (Synagogue) in Aizawl, the capital of the Indian state of Mizoram. The synagogue was built by the Bnei Menashe; A young Bnei Menashe immigrant at Ben Gurion Airport after his arrival in Israel. Photos: Michael Freund



"Last summer we were in touch with Mitzpe Ramon, which is in pre-'67 Israel, and Sderot about the possibility of accepting some members of the Bnei Menashe," says Freund. "They were willing in principle, but they just didn't have the resources."

New beginnings in Israel involve much sacrifice, and no one understands this better than sixty-five-year-old Zayir Lotjem, a formerly wealthy land-and-cattle owner from India. Lotjem traded in his life of comfort for a meager caravan. He no longer has to wake up at three o'clock in the morning to take a two-hour walk to shul, but the real reason Lotjem took on such a challenge is indicative of the simple desire felt by many of the Bnei Menashe. "I wanted to die here in Israel," he says.

The journey that the Bnei Menashe have taken over the past two-thousand-plus years through Persia, Afghanistan, China and, most recently, India, has brought them back, ironically, to the Biblical boundaries of the tribe of Menashe. But the long exile has not only stripped them of their religion but also of their physical identity as Jews.

"Because we have been in the Diaspora for so long, no one believes us [about our Jewish identity]. They think that we look like the Thai workers," says Gangte.

"The body may have changed," says Rabbi Avichail. "But you can tell that the soul was at Sinai."

The Gangtes' caravan on Friday night looks like a typical Jewish home. The candlesticks are displayed on the counter. The pots are arranged on the hotplate in anticipation of the next morning. Instead of a European cholent, a mixture of mustard leaf, chicken and other spices is simmering in a pot. As evening comes, nearly the whole Bnei Menashe community in Shavei Shomron crowds together in the Gangtes' house; they huddle around the book *The Midrash Says*, digging for answers while munching on vegetable-filled pitas. As the stars appear, they sing the Birkat Hamazon aloud in the familiar tune sung by Jews the world over.

For the last ten years, the Interior Ministry has allowed one hundred Bnei Menashe members per year to enter Israel, which is a far cry from Amishav's goal of welcoming 1,000 to 2,000 members a year. With the latest election, the new minister of the interior, Avraham Poraz of the Shinui Party, has frozen Bnei Menashe *aliyah* in order to gather more information about the situation. In several statements he made to the Israeli media, he declared that he does not want immigrants from third-world countries to come to Israel.

Despite the fact that the Israeli Chief Rabbinical Court maintains that the Bnei Menashe's claim is authentic, according to Rabbi Birnbaum, the Interior Ministry has not contacted his office or the office of the chief rabbi concerning the situation.

Additionally, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Rabbi Shlomo Amar has not yet discussed the Bnei Menashe situation with his conversion court. Rabbi Birnbaum explains that "since [Rabbi Amar] is new, there are a lot of different issues that he's working on now." Rabbi Birnbaum hopes that his court and the chief rabbi will soon unite in calling for reinstating the Bnei Menashe *aliyah*.

While remaining hopeful that the *aliyah* will continue soon, Amishav is not waiting idly for a decision. The organization coordinated a meeting between Minister Poraz and Bnei Menashe members and is pushing for a sub-committee under the chief rabbi to investigate the Bnei Menashe's claim. If the government ends the Bnei Menashe *aliyah*, Amishav is prepared to do whatever is necessary to reverse the decision.

"If that means going to the prime minister or the courts, that is what we'll do," says Freund. "I don't think it's fair that after ten years of allowing the Bnei Menashe to come, one man can halt the process, particularly since the Bnei Menashe have proven to be productive members of Israeli society. They work; they support themselves; they live religious Jewish lives, and they make a contribution to Israeli society. There is simply no reason to halt the process."

"We will find the best way to bring them back to Am Yisrael," says Rabbi Birnbaum. "These people have a Jewish identity, and we have a moral, historical and religious commitment to help them come home." **IA**