

Coming Home to Israel

by Michael Curtis



Everyone is familiar with the continuing search for a comprehensive and fair settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. For seventy years, discussion of and proposals for a solution have emerged from both acknowledged partisans and well-meaning onlookers. Lately, President Donald Trump has entered the arena with a non-solution: one state, two states and “I like the one that both parties like.”

Ending the status quo may be a little more enticing and more complex with increasing hints of a regional solution. The road to peace may be based on a broader configuration that includes non-Palestinian Arab leaders who are concerned for the security of their own countries, which would be aided by a friendly and even strategic relationship with the state of Israel, while maintaining explicit support for the Palestinian cause. This has become a more serious possibility since 2002 when Saudi Arabia proposed an Arab peace initiative.

For many reasons the wider Arab world has common interests with Israel: checking the influence of Iran in the Middle East, countering Islamist terrorism, and cooperating on crucial issues of border defense and cyberspace. Not the least of these interests is benefiting from economic and humanitarian happenings in the continuing miracle in the desert.

Israel is already world renowned for its technological progress, its start-up companies, its advances in cyber security, and agricultural technology. Most recently, it is planning to provide more resources for the export of medical marijuana products for medical use and pain relief. Israel has succeeded in using these products for treating various ailments, including sclerosis and epilepsy.

A number of Israeli companies are engaged in investment and innovation in this field. Among them are two prominent ones. Sype Medical has developed a hand held inhaler for precisely dispensing marijuana, and claims to have identified the link between psychoactivity, sensation of being high, and pain relief. Teva Pharmaceuticals, headquartered in Petah Tikva, the world's largest producer of generic drugs, is engaged in similar research in this new sector of cultivating and testing cannabis, as have other organizations.

Other Israeli companies have developed marijuana based medicines used in a number of foreign countries. In its research Israel differs from the U.S. in that it allows clinical tests on people.

The Arab world would benefit not only from these clinical tests but also from Israeli example of acceptance of and hospitality towards people anxious to enter the country. That world, including Palestinians, should be conscious of the example set by the extraordinary and joyous events in Israel on February 14 and February 16, 2017. On those days 102 members of the Bnei Menashe (BM) community in the North East Indian state of Mizoram that borders Myanmar (Burma) and Bangladesh. This state and that of Manipur contains small numbers of people who consider themselves Jews.

The BM claim descent from Menashe, one of the Hebrew lost tribes, rumors about which appear from time to time. After the death of King Solomon, the Jewish state was split between the 12 Hebrew tribes, each headed by a son of Jacob.

Two, Judah and Benjamin, set up the kingdom of Judah in the south. Most Western contemporary Jews descent from those tribes. In 930 B.C. the other ten formed the kingdom of Israel. This was ended in 721 B.C. when the Assyrians, under their king Shalmaneser V, came down like the wolf on the fold of deep Galilee, and enslaved the Hebrews.

For 2,700 years the fate of the missing ten tribes has remained a mystery, and various claims have been made. Among the suggestions are that they may be Nestorians, Mormons, American Indians, or the Falashas of Ethiopia. Unlikely candidates appear from time to time. One are the mixed-race Peruvian converts, a community in Iquitos, a city on the banks of the Amazon in Peru. This group of 284 claim to be descendants of Moroccan Jews who arrived in Latin America in the 19th century.

The BM, however, escaped from captivity, travelled the silk road to the east, wandering through central Asia and the Far East, before settling in India where they claim to be one of the lost ten tribes. But are those claims authentic?

Not surprisingly there is controversy about their common genetic origin. DNA tests are inconclusive. Some Israeli authorities hold the opinion that BM as "seed of Israel," while others do not. The positive argument is that they though they are not Jewish according to religious law, their proven Jewish ancestry makes them acceptable as immigrants into Israel. This was based on oral history and long-time practices: performing circumcision, wearing shawls akin to talits, funeral rites, and singing a song "We must keep the Passover Festival."

Their amazing history is curious and intriguing. They have been converted twice. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Western, mostly Welsh Baptist, missionaries sought to convert the BM group, animists at this point, to Protestantism. The

result was that the BM saw echoes of their traditional practices in the Bible, and began thinking of themselves as Jews. Photos show them celebrating the festival of Hanukah in the city of Churachandpur in the Indian northeast state of Manipur, virtually a closed area.

In 1983 the Israel Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, who founded an organization called Amishav (My People Returns) trying to locate the lost tribes, met them and encouraged them to return to Judaism. They had already begun adopting the practices of Judaism in the 1970s. The BM are formally converted after arriving in Israel.

It was the former Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar who ruled in 2005 they were legitimate descendants of former Jews, and declared they could be admitted into Israel under the Law of Return.

After 2700 years they did so. So far, 3,000 BM have made aliyah to Israel, while 7,200 still remain in India. Their exodus has been arranged in part by a non-profit group called Shavei Israel, funded in part by evangelical Christians and led by American born Michael Freund, former journalist and communications aide to Benjamin Netanyahu.

On arrival at Ben-Gurion airport near Tel-Aviv the 120 BM recited the Shema prayer, the oldest daily morning and evening prayer in Judaism, before going to meet fellow Indian Jews in Nazareth Illit in the Galilee.

The BM is a small group, but their eagerness to return to the land of their ancestors 2700 years ago is both politically relevant in any discussion of the disputed area of Palestine and symbolically important in illustrating the reality of the Jewish state, a mosaic not a melting pot. The welcoming of the BM, and anticipation of receiving 7000 more of the Menashe tribe, is a meaningful illustration to the international community of a successful multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, multi-

religious, and multi-lingual society.