

Scattered through all the earth

The Jews around the world

Tony Benson

One of the most remarkable prophecies of the Bible is the prophecy in Deuteronomy 28:64 regarding the Jews: "the LORD shall scatter thee among all people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other". In this occasional feature we hope to present information that comes to light regarding Jewish communities around the world, past and present.

Lost Jews in India

ALTHOUGH I do not subscribe to the popular view that the ten tribes taken captive by Assyria are now lost amongst the nations, it is intriguing to come across stories of people in various parts of the world who have beliefs and practices similar to those of the Jews. Even if all those taken captive by Assyria are not 'lost', there may have been some who wandered away from the Middle East and lost their identity as Jews whilst preserving some Jewish practices.

An Indian historian, Dr Navras Jaat Aafreedi, a member of a Muslim clan called the Afridi Pathans, claims that about 650 of the 1,500 members of his clan have genetic material shared with forty per cent of Jews. He carried out his genetic research because his uncle told him that there was a tradition in the clan that they were members of the tribe of Ephraim. Similar claims have been made regarding Pathans living outside India. Doubts have been expressed about the value of this genetic similarity, however, for others say that a lot of non-Jewish people in the Middle East have it.

Several years ago I reported on another tribe in India with claims to Jewish ancestry, the Shinlung tribe from northeast India, near the border with Myanmar (formerly called Burma). They claim to be of the tribe of Manasseh and hence have been given the name Benei Manasseh, meaning 'Sons of Manasseh' (see "Lost Jews in India", Sept. 2000, p. 367). Since these people came to light a few years ago, small groups have emigrated to Israel and undergone a conversion process to enable them to be fully accepted as Jews by the Orthodox rabbis who control these matters in Israel. More recently, some of these people have gone through the conversion process in their homeland, and a contingent of 218 arrived in Israel in November 2006 as Jewish immigrants under the Law of Return. The tradition of the tribe is that their ancestors were amongst those taken captive by the Assyrians, that they wandered through Central Asia to China, and that they lived there for many centuries until they were expelled 400 years ago. They then moved to their present home in India.

Michael Freund, founder and director of an organisation called Shavei Israel, which is dedi-

cated to helping the Shinlungs and others to move to Israel, says he was convinced of their Jewish ancestry by the many resemblances he found in their beliefs and practices to Biblical Judaism: worshipping one God they called Yah; practising a Passover-type ritual; keeping the seventh day as holy; and circumcising male babies on the eighth day. An oral tradition in the tribe was that they would one day return to a promised land. Others are more sceptical, claiming that they picked up their Jewish practices from Christian missionaries. Just over 1,000 of the Benei Manasseh have moved to Israel over the years and a further 7,000 are waiting to come. Virtually all have remained religiously observant, and twelve served with the Israeli forces in the Lebanon war last summer.

Sources: "Is Muslim clan the lost tribe of Ephraim?", Matt Zalen, *International Jerusalem Post*, date unknown; "Finding a lost tribe", Leslie Susser, *Jerusalem Report*, 25 Dec. 2006.

More lost Jews waiting to return

THE Shavei Israel organisation referred to above is also working to bring to Israel other groups in various countries of the world, all with some claim to be Jews. The *Jerusalem Report* article "Finding a lost tribe" reports as follows:

"Besides the Bnei Menashe, Freund's Shavei Israel organisation works with other groups with historic connections to Judaism: Bnei

Anousim (Sons of Conversos) in Spain, Portugal and South America; Subbotniks in Russia and the Ukraine; 'Hidden Jews' in Poland; the Chinese Jews of Kaifeng. The Bnei Anousim are descendants of Jews forced to convert to Christianity during the Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions; the Subbotniks are descendants of Slavic peasants who converted to Judaism in the early 19th century; the hidden Jews are descendants of Jews who 'hid' their religious affiliation to escape Nazi or Communist persecution; the 500 or so Jews of Kaifeng, in Henan Province in Central China, are the remnants of a once thriving Jewish community more than 1,000 years old. The idea is to create conditions for all people of once-Jewish descent to return to the Jewish fold".

Jewish musicians at the court of Henry VIII

THE Jews played an active role in England during the Middle Ages until they were expelled by Edward I in 1290. They were not officially admitted again until 1650, when Oliver Cromwell ruled the country. Yet evidence has come to light that in the reign of Henry VIII Jewish musicians from Italy were prominent at his court. Henry VIII is, of course, best known for his marriages and his breaking of the link between the English church and the papacy, but he was also an accomplished musician who both played instruments and composed music.

It has long been known that in the late 1530s Henry VIII imported musicians from Venice, then a centre of musical excellence.

Their names are known, and recently Roger Prior, an academic from Belfast, has researched these individuals in Italy and discovered evidence that they had other surnames which indicated that they were Jews, for example Moyses (Moses) and Cuson (Gershon). There was also evidence that these families of musicians had originated from Spain and Portugal, from which Jews had been expelled at the end of the fifteenth century. It is thought that they were Marranos, the name given to Jews who outwardly professed Christianity but secretly practised Judaism. Intriguingly, there is evidence of Portuguese Jews being temporarily imprisoned in England in 1541 following pressure by the envoy of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, who then ruled Spain and Portugal, but they have not hitherto been linked with Henry's court musicians.

These Jewish musicians helped shape the nature of English music. They were mostly string players, and they brought the use of the word 'violin', meaning 'little viol', to the country. They mostly played dances, and a viol consort, Fretwork, has recently developed a programme of pieces by these Jewish musicians which they have played at concerts all over the USA. These Jewish musicians were also excellent instrument makers, and the daughter of one such family, the Bassanos, makers of stringed instruments, has another claim to fame. Emilia Bassano is thought to have been the mysterious Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets.

Source: "Of Marranos and musicians: did Jewish 'ministers of pastime' shape the music of the Tudor court?", Corinna Da Fonseca-Wollheim, *International Jerusalem Post*, 10-16 Nov. 2006.

The ostrich-farming Jews of South Africa

THERE are over 60,000 Jews in South Africa today, mainly in big cities like Cape Town and Johannesburg, but the first area in South Africa to be colonised by Jews in any number was around the small town of Oudtshoorn in Cape Province, about 470 kilometres east of Cape Town. What brought the Jews to this remote area was the growing popularity in nineteenth-century Europe of ostrich feathers as decorations for hats and clothes. Afrikaners who settled there from the Netherlands developed ostrich farms to meet this demand, and in the 1880s Jews from Lithuania found their way there and established themselves as buyers of the ostrich feathers, which they exported to Europe. By 1910 there were 277 licensed Jewish feather-buyers.

The Dutch settlers were members of the Dutch Reformed Church and were pleased to have those they regarded as the people of the Bible in their midst. They helped the Jewish settlers to establish their first synagogue in 1886, a Jewish cemetery was established at this time and a government-funded Jewish school opened in 1906, with compulsory Hebrew lessons.

The Jews established their own ostrich farms, and by 1914 there were 600 Jewish families in Oudtshoorn alone, a third of the population. They became lawyers and doctors, as well as members of the town council, and the wealthiest landowners and businessmen were Jews. One man alone, Max Rose, owned 870,000 ostriches on his farms. The town became known as "The Jerusalem of South Africa".

However, during the First World War the market for ostrich feathers collapsed in the fashion market, and they never became fashionable again. The feather dealers went bankrupt and the farmers switched to other livestock. The Afrikaners tended to favour Germany rather than Britain, and many supported the Nazis at the time of the Second World War, causing them to turn against the Jews. The Jews of Oudtshoorn were persecuted and many of their businesses burned down. Most left for other areas, and today only seventeen families are left.

Source: "The Jerusalem of South Africa", David Zetler, *International Jerusalem Post*, 9-15 Feb. 2007.

The Jews of Barbados

BARBADOS is the most easterly island in the Caribbean. It is small (twenty-one miles long and fourteen miles wide) and quite thickly populated (about 300,000 people). It was first settled by the British in 1627 and became an independent nation in 1966. Almost as soon as it was settled Jews came there. They were Portuguese Jews, fleeing from persecution in Brazil, then a Portuguese colony, and these Jewish immigrants helped develop coffee and sugar plantations. More Jews went there over the years, and by the end of the eighteenth century 800 Jews resided in Barbados. In 1833 a large synagogue was built called Nidhei Israel Synagogue, but in the following years, due to deterioration in the economy, most of the Jews went to the USA. The remainder, being aged, died out, and in 1925 the last surviving Jew sold the synagogue for community use.

But this was not the end of Jewish presence in Barbados. In 1931, a Polish Jew was travelling



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The harbour at Bridgetown, Barbados.

on a ship bound for Venezuela, where he intended to start a new life. The ship docked at Bridgetown, Barbados, and he decided to stay there. Others from the same area came out to join him, until there were thirty families. They met in a home for worship, but eventually a campaign began to regain the Nidhei Israel Synagogue for Jewish worship. They succeeded in getting government permission to do so, and, aided by wealthy Jews from North America, fully restored the synagogue, which opened for worship in 1987. Since then a museum of the history of the Jews in Barbados has been developed, and the synagogue is open daily for tourists. However, the Jewish community now numbers only thirty-six members, due to young people moving to other countries.

Source: "Jewish island spirit", Lauren Kramer, *International Jerusalem Post*, 17-23 Nov. 2006.

Little-known Jews of Greece

THE Greek province of Epirus is situated in the northwest of the country, on the border with

Macedonia and well away from the cities that are well known to us from the preaching of Paul: Philippi and Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth. To this area, 300 years before the birth of Jesus, came Jews from Alexandria in Egypt, centre of the Jewish Diaspora. They settled in and around the city now known as Ioannina, and, in the days when the city was part of the Eastern Roman Empire, they became known as the Romaniotes, a name which indicates that they were citizens of the Roman Empire.

About 500 years ago, Jews came to Greece, then part of the Ottoman Empire, from Spain, from which they had been expelled. These Jews were part of that segment of Jewry known as the Sephardim, who occupied Mediterranean countries, but the Romaniotes remained a separate community. In 1900 there were about 5,000 of them, and at the time of the Second World War only 2,000 were left, with others having emigrated to the USA. In 1944 German forces captured the city and killed all the Jews, apart from a few who escaped into the mountains. Today there



The Statue of Liberty at New York commemorates the millions of people who entered the USA to make a new life for themselves. They included many Jews.

are just forty, with others having emigrated to Israel.

The main community of Romaniote Jews today exists in New York, where they had their own enclave in the close-packed area of Lower East Side, home to many immigrants, and established a synagogue called Kehila Kedosha Janina, meaning the Holy Congregation of Ioannina. Death, removal to other parts of the USA and assimilation have caused this unique community of Jews, with traditions dating back to Roman times, to diminish to the point where it is threatened with extinction.

Recognising the danger, Jews from this community have mounted a campaign to preserve its identity. The synagogue has been recognised by the city authorities as a historic landmark and is being renovated; artefacts and documents relating to the community's history have been gathered together in a small museum and a website developed (www.kkjsm.com). The Romaniotes may die out as a distinct community, but details of their existence will be recorded for posterity.

Source: "The invisible Jews", Deborah S. Esquenazi, *International Jerusalem Post*, 27 Oct.–2 Nov. 2006.

How many Jews in the USA?

BY far the largest number of Jews outside Israel is to be found in the USA. Recently it was announced that there are now more Jews in Israel than in the USA. The number of Jews in the USA has reduced, due mainly to assimilation into Gentile communities, with many Jews marrying non-Jews.

In contrast, the number of Jews in Israel has risen consistently over the years. The most recent assessment of the Jewish population in the USA (in 2001-02) came up with the figure of 5.2 million, a decrease of 300,000 on the previous assessment, made in 1990.

The 2001-02 assessment was made by an organisation called the United Jewish Communities. The accuracy of this assessment has been challenged by two other organisations, both of which have come up with much

higher figures. An assessment made for the 2006 American Jewish Yearbook came up with the figure of 6.4 million, and one made in February 2007 by Brandeis University said it was likely to be in the range 6-6.4 million.

No specific record is kept of numbers of residents of the USA who are Jews, and researchers use a variety of techniques to get to their totals. Moreover, there are problems in defining precisely who is a Jew, given that many do not attend synagogues or Jewish schools. If these revised assessments are anything like accurate, then the USA will continue to hold the largest Jewish community for some time to come.

The revised figures may have an impact on the numbers emigrating to Israel from the USA. An organisation called Birthright Israel finances visits to Israel for young American Jews with the intention partly of encouraging them to emigrate to Israel. The Jews who are believed to have been missed are thought to have been mainly in the 18-29 age range, because the 2001-02 assessment is thought to have grossly underestimated the number of Jews of that age still living with their parents.

If there are many more Jews of that age than previously thought then the Birthright Israel programme needs to be extended, and on hearing of the revised figure a donation of \$25 million has been made to Birthright Israel to enable more young Jews to visit Israel. The effect of this may be that more Jews will be encouraged to emigrate to Israel from the USA.

Source: "When Jews count", Eetta Prince-Gibson, *Jerusalem Report*, 5 Mar. 2007.