



PHOTO ESSAY / COMMUNITIES

Finding Faith

The lives and rituals of the Lost Tribe Jews in Mizoram

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PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT
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I first learnt about Jewish communities living in India while traveling through the country in 2017. A friend from Assam told me about “Lost Tribe” Jews in neighbouring Mizoram. Those who identify as members of Lost Tribes believe that they are the descendants of the ten Jewish tribes that were exiled from ancient Israel after the Assyrian empire conquered it around 722 BCE.

I had previously been aware of the existence of Lost Tribe Jewish communities around the world but had not actively given it much thought. I was raised in a Jewish family—my parents are observant Jews, but I had never fully embraced the religion. However, I was curious to learn more about these communities in India who identified so strongly with the Jewish faith—something that I had simply taken for granted for most of my life.

In March 2017, I travelled to Mizoram and parts of Myanmar to meet the Lost Tribe communities and document their rituals and daily lives. The first thing I photographed was a Jewish funeral in Aizawl. What surprised me most were the personal interactions after the funeral when I had put my camera away. I experienced what would become a pattern through the rest of my journey—the Lost Tribe members warmly and wholeheartedly welcomed me into their homes and services. I was no longer a mere photographer documenting their rituals, but rather a fellow Jew from the outside world, the kind they had only limited contact with and looked upon with great curiosity. They were eager to know about my upbringing and had many questions about what life was like in Israel, where I had briefly lived. Almost all expressed a desire to return to Israel.

Over the last two decades, Jewish-Zionist groups, with funding from private donors and evangelical Christian organisations, have facilitated the relocation of members of the Lost Tribe communities from northeast India to Israel. The communities are known as the Bnei Menashe, meaning Sons of Manasseh, one of the ten lost tribes. At present, there are about three thousand members of Lost Tribe communities from India living in Israel. Another seven thousand live and practice Judaism in India. As reported in the Israeli press, the Bnei Menashe require special government authorisation from Israel to move to the country. They are not automatically covered under the Jewish Law of Return which requires proof of at least one Jewish grandparent.

In 2005, Israel's chief rabbi officially declared that the Bnei Menashe are descendants of the original tribe of Manasseh. As a precondition to immigrate to Israel, they must formally convert to Judaism. After the ruling, Israel sent a team of rabbis to northeast India to facilitate the conversions. However, the process was halted at the time following complaints by the Indian government. In 2007, the Israeli government briefly stopped giving visas to the Bnei Menashe, but has since reversed the policy.

In my conversations with Lost Tribe communities, I found that many held an idealised view of what it may be like to live in Israel and were mostly unaware of the challenges they may face in the country. Upon moving to Israel, the Bnei Menashe have sometimes joined the Israeli army. Yet, a full integration into Israeli society remains difficult, with the possibility of racial discrimination or economic hardship.

As I photographed the community in India, I would look for scenes that piqued my recognition of the familiar—being or representing something Jewish that I had known—entwined with another element that was an expression of indigenous histories and local practicalities of the areas they lived in. I found this aspect of my project to be the most interesting because it brought to the fore the malleability of Judaism when practiced by the Lost Tribe communities, and how something as old and self-contained as Judaism is actually not as monolithic as it may be considered. It is still evolving in the many ways that it is kept alive by different communities across the world.

A photograph of a hanukiah made with local wood, inside of a building occupied by a Lost Tribe congregation is an example of Judaism blending with indigenous culture. The hanukiah, a religious candle holder, is a common item seen in Jewish homes and temples, but I had never before seen one made out of a mix of wood and bamboo. A bamboo hanukiah perfectly symbolised the mix of Jewish iconography and ritual with the Lost Tribes members' own practices arising from their home environment.

A photograph of the graveyard where both Jewish and people of other faiths are buried is another scene of the familiar and foreign intermingling. In most places around the world, Jews are not buried with members of other religions. It would be very hard to find the symbols of the Christian cross and the Jewish star side-by-side on gravestones in a cemetery in any other place, as I did in Mizoram.

Despite these indigenous nuances, all the Lost Tribe services seemed familiar to me because they were carried out in an almost identical

manner to the way I had experienced them. Though I was in a different part of the world, documenting a group of which I was not a member, their services had a particular resonance with my own history —something that I had not expected.

While photographing members of the Lost Tribe communities, I began to dwell on my own relationship with Judaism. My family and I celebrated Jewish holidays and went to temple every Saturday for Shabbat services. As I grew up, I found myself uninterested in my religion and did not actively consider it a part of my identity. Photographing the Lost Tribe members during their prayer rituals was the first time I had been at a Jewish religious service in many years.

Through my conversations and the time I spent with them, I found members of the Lost Tribes communities to be firm in their belief and practices. I was moved by the way in which they were upholding the Jewish faith in a distant land. They were embodying a Jewish way of life that drew on multiple facets including ritual, fraternity and a shared sense of identity. Many I spoke to said that they sometimes found it difficult to get time off from their employers to observe Jewish rituals and holidays. It was ironic to explain to some of the Lost Tribe members that I thought they were more Jewish than myself—despite my having been born into a Jewish family—because they were actively living out a Jewish life in way that I was not. I began this project driven by a sense of intrigue about these communities. But by the time I left Aizawl, it had taken on a personal dimension too, presenting an opportunity to reevaluate my own relationship with Judaism.

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