Old memories, new histories:

(re)discovering the past of Jewish Dalits

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Abstract. The paper explores processes of self-identification and constructions of historical memory among the Bene Ephraim of Andhra Pradesh, a community of former Madiga untouchables who came to practising Judaism in the late 1980s. Our discussion is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2009-2010, in-depth interviews, and an analysis of written sources on the history of the Bene Ephraim produced by community leaders.   We consider the case study of the Bene Ephraim in the context of broader academic discussions about the universalist and particularist dimensions of the Jewish tradition and suggest that this movement illuminates both the exclusive/genealogical and the inclusive aspects of Judaism. We argue that though the perceived 'ethnocentricity' of Judaism may have been the basic logic for the emergence of the Bene Ephraim movement, it nevertheless resulted in the development of groups demonstrating syncretic practices and diverse modes of engagement with the Jewish tradition.

Key words: Judaism, India, history, Dalits, identity.

Introduction

Thirty to forty years back, in the same place where we are sitting now, my grand-mother once said that we would soon go back to Israel. Though she said this in response to our complaint of the intolerable noise from the adjoining Hindu temple, I became serious and asked why we don't return to Israel now. I already knew through the newspapers that the two of the Tribes (Judah and Binyamin) were returning to Israel since1948 and so I asked my grand-mother. She said we – the Bene Ephraim – are chosen for taking sufferings on us. We have to stay back and fulfil the Covenant. That was the first oral tradition that I have heard of.

[Excerpt from an interview with Shmuel Yacobi, October 2009]

The community of the Bene Ephraim emerged in the late 1980s in coastal Andhra (south India) from a group of Christianised Madiga untouchables who claimed a history that connected them to the ancient kingdom of Israel. The group formally announced their new religious affiliation in 1991, when its leaders established a synagogue in the village of Kothareddypalem in Guntur district – the first ever Jewish hall of worship in the history of the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. At the moment the community consists of about 40 families who joined the movement to be recognised as 'lost' Jews. Subsequently, they began observing Sabbath, eating *kosher* food, and circumcising their male children. Community leaders also wrote new narratives of origin claiming that their congregation were the descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel, and possibly, specifically of the Tribe of Ephraim. Although these traditions are, at times, conflicting and

fractured, they all emphasise the antiquity of the Bene Ephraim and the authenticity of their Jewish past.

Bene Ephraim and the history of Judaising movements

Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan-Semi have observed that the history of Judaism has been characterised by a tension between the conflicting tendencies towards universalism, on the one hand, and particularism, on the other. They remind us that though Judaism has never been an actively proselytising religion, there has always been a small 'trickle' of converts into Judaism. In the twentieth century, this 'trickle' has turned into a more powerful 'stream' of communities who, in one way or another, embraced Jewish identity (2002: vii). Some of these groups did so by claiming physical descent from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.

The narrative of the Lost Tribes goes back to the Biblical tradition, according to which ancient Hebrews belonged to the twelve tribes descending from the sons of Jacob (renamed Israel by an angel) – a patriarch of the Jewish people with whom God made a covenant. The tribes were divided into two kingdoms. Ten of them inhabited the northern kingdom, while the rest occupied the southern. As a result of the Assyrian invasion of the eighths century BCE, the ten tribes of the northern kingdom were driven out of their country. Nothing is known about what happened to them in exile, however, the myth about the Lost Tribes of Israel has had a lively history (Parfitt 2002).[1]

In modern times, the narrative of the Ten Lost Tribes developed as a new means for understanding and relating to people and cultures previously

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[1] For wider discussion of the history of the Lost Tribes, see also Ben-Dor Benite 2009.

unknown to Europeans (Parfitt and Trevisan Semi 2002: ix). The notion of 'lost Jews' has been widely used by Christian missionaries, who turned to the legend of the Ten Tribes to explain new and 'exotic' communities. Thus, the Lost Tribes were 'found' in Kashmir, Tibet, and Afghanistan, to name just a few such 'discoveries' (Parfitt 2002: 117-132). In India alone, Christian missionaries may have played a significant role in the development of the Bene Israel Jews of the Konkan coast,[2] and of the Judaising movement of the Bene Menashe of Manipur and Mizoram, which, as we discuss below, may have contributed to the development of the Bene Ephraim in Andhra Pradesh.

A number of groups became attracted to Judaism because the historical experience of suffering of the Jewish people seemed to provide a new model for explaining – and thereby making more tolerable – their own conditions of discrimination (Parfitt and Trevisan Semi 2002: viii). In the twentieth century numerous groups claiming Jewish descent emerged in Africa and among African American communities (Bruder 2008). For the latter, affiliation to the Jewish people contained a promise for a more solid historical grounding and more positive collective memories than those associated with slave trade (Markowitz et al 2003).[3] In Africa Judaising communities also found analogies in the experiences of their people and the Jews (Bruder 2008: 134).

These movements may indeed be seen as manifestations of the more 'universalist' tendencies in Judaism. They emerged relatively recently, and in many cases their 'starting points' did not involve documented 'genealogical' connections with other Jewish people. However, at the same time, they

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[2] For a detailed discussion of the Jewish communities of India, including Bene Israel, see Isenberg 1998, Katz 2000, Roland 1999, Katz et al 2007, Weil 2002. For Indian perceptions of the Jewish culture, see Egorova 2006.

[3] For further discussion of the experiences of African American Jewish groups see Johnson 2005, chapter 4, and Chireau and Deutsch 2000.

demonstrate that it is precisely the perceived 'genealogical' dimension of the Jewish tradition that makes Judaism an attractive source of self-definition for communities searching for origins.

By focusing on the Bene Ephraim, this paper will contribute to academic debates about the degree to which contemporary Jewish cultures manifest their particularist and universalist tendencies, as well as to the broader discussion about the relationship between emerging Jewish communities[4] and 'mainstream' Judaism. The Bene Ephraim represent an interesting case study for historians and anthropologists of Judaising groups, as they constitute a relatively young movement. Our ethnographic fieldwork, which was conducted between June 2009 and May 2010, has allowed us to examine the immediate social and political contexts of this movement and to assay the possible causes that contributed to its emergence and determined the trajectory of its development. Our discussion is also informed by an analysis of the written narratives of the Bene Ephraim over the past ten years, and interviews with community leaders conducted in 2002, 2007 and 2009-2010. Drawing on these sources provided us with an opportunity to explore the way the self-representations of the Bene Ephraim have been changing throughout a considerable time period of their history.

It is not our objective to attempt to determine whether the claims of the Bene Ephraim are authentic or not. Nor do we argue that to count as Jewish the Bene Ephraim tradition requires 'external' recognition. Instead, we will explore the variety of channels through which the Bene Ephraim have expressed their Jewishness, as well as the variety of ways in which they have related to and engaged with the discourses of 'mainstream' Jewish groups. The paper will argue

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[4] We borrow this term from Kulanu, an American Jewish NGO working with Judaising movements.

that the movement of the Bene Ephraim illuminates both the universalist and the
particularist tendencies in Judaism, as it oscillates between universalist and
particularist aspirations. It will be demonstrated that, on the one hand, community
leaders are keen on establishing a 'genealogical' connection between the Bene
Ephraim and the ancient Hebrews and that their desire to prove ties of physical
kinship with ancient Israelites – and by implication with the rest of the Jewish
world – is stimulated by their interactions with foreign Jewish organisations.
However, we will also show that the Bene Ephraim narratives of origin differ from
one community member to another even within the core group of community
leaders, with some community members adhering to more inclusive accounts of
the Bene Ephraim history. Moreover, the paper will demonstrate that the
movement has outgrown its original boundaries and has led to the emergence of
communities and individuals who have embraced Israelite identity, but have
rejected the genealogical claims made by the Bene Ephraim leaders. We will
therefore conclude that even though the perceived 'ethnocentricity' of Judaism
may have been the basic reason for the initial Judaisation of the Bene Ephraim, it
was not its outcome.

Retrieving Old Memories

The community of Madiga represents one of the poorest and most
discriminated against segments of Indian society, and has been placed in the
lowest status among the Dalit (untouchable) groups of the state. Demographically,
the Madiga constitute 46.94% of the total scheduled caste (former untouchable or
Dalit) population of the state, which, according to 2001 census is placed at twelve

million (Muthaiah 2004: 197-198). The movement of the Bene Ephraim is led by two Madiga Christian brothers, who in the late 1980s broke away from the Church, and adopted the Hebrew names of Shmuel and Sadok Yacobi.[5] The brothers claim that their parents, in private, always identified as the Lost Tribes of Israel, and passed down this knowledge to their children, though in public they practised Christianity like the rest of their Madiga neighbours.

The father of the Yacobi brothers managed to escape traditional occupations of the Madiga by joining the army – a well-known route for partially breaking out of the rigid occupational structure of the caste system for untouchable and low caste groups in India (Zelliot 1996: 36). The father provided his sons with English language education, and the eldest son, Shmuel Yacobi, acquired Bachelor's degree in Theology and a Masters degree in Philosophy. His good knowledge of English and his interest in Theology allowed him to train as a Christian preacher. He continued to serve his congregation as a Christian pastor until 1991, when the brothers managed to build a synagogue in the village. Registering a synagogue meant for the Yacobi brothers a formal break from Christianity. At the same time, it marked the beginning of the community's fight to be recognised as a Jewish group by Israeli authorities and other Jewish organisations in the world.

Sadok and Shmuel admit that they do not have any evidence of their parents and/or grandparents practising Judaism, as, they argued, this had to be done in secret in order to save the community from the wrath of anti-Semitic people. It would be hard to determine which generation of the Yacobis started practising Judaism before Shmuel and Sadok. Their father visited Palestine, while serving in the British Army during World War II. One can only speculate that this is where

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[5] We use Jewish names for the Yacobi brothers and fictional names for other members of the community.

he may have encountered living Judaism for the first time. There has been a similar Judaising movement in South Africa which was established in the 1960s by a Xhosa man, Vayisile Joshua Msitshana, who had noticed the similarities between the Jewish and Xhose traditions after he met Palestinian Jews while serving with the British Army during World War II (Bruder 2008: 175). It is possible that the father of the Yacobi brothers became interested in Judaism after a similar encounter and sowed the seeds of the ongoing movement for Jewish identity.

A more likely source of 'external' influence may have come from another Indian community that embraced the Lost Tribes tradition. By the time the movement of the Bene Ephraim surfaced in the early 1990s, a number of Christianised tribes of Chin, Kuki, and Mizo, settled in Mizoram, Manipur, Assam and the plains of Burma, had already been running a social movement in order to be recognised as a Lost Tribe of Israel for about forty years. In the early 1980s the movement attracted the attention of Amishav, an Israel-based organisation seeking out the Lost Tribes. The head of Amishav, Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, became convinced that the group were Jewish and named it Bene Menashe (Hebrew for 'the Sons of Menasseh') , because the community worshiped a local ancestral deity named Mannasi/Manasia, who Avichail equated with Menasseh, the elder son of Joseph (Weil 1997). Shortly afterwards, the Bene Menashe started coming to Israel on tourist visas, undergoing conversion and settling in the Jewish State for good.[6] In 2005 the Chief Rabbi of the Sephardic Jews of Israel Shlomo Amar announced his decision to recognise the Bene Menashe as a Lost Tribe and to assist in their formal conversion to Orthodox Judaism, which would ease their

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[6] For more information on the community of Bene Menashe see Samra 1992, 1996, Weil 1997, 2003 and Halkin 2002.

immigration to the Jewish state. Such conversions were started, but had to stop later in the same year after the Indian authorities informed the Foreign Ministry of Israel that they were not supportive of this initiative (Egorova 2006: 117-8).

The development of the Bene Ephraim movement in many respects mirrors that of the Bene Menashe. Both groups were Christianised in the nineteenth century. Both of them were either placed at the margins of the Hindu caste system or excluded from it. Both lacked a written history. It is quite possible that it is the Judaising movement of the Bene Menashe that inspired the Yacobi brothers to initiate a movement of their own and/or choose to identify specifically with the tribe of Ephraim, because of a special Biblical connection between Ephraim and Menashe.[7]

The oral tradition of the Bene Menashe describes their exodus from Israel via Assyria, and a sojourn in Persia, before being driven out to Afghanistan. From Afghanistan, they went further east to Hindu-Kush, crossed Tibet, and finally stopped in China. After a hundred years in China, they were again driven out towards Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia, with many moving further down to Burma and finally crossing the Indian border to settle in the north-eastern parts of India. The oral tradition of the Bene Ephraim, which explains how their ancestors migrated from ancient Israel to India, describes the same route, but adds that they did not stop in the north-east of India, but moved further down south.

In its present context the community of the Bene Ephraim appears to follow the development of the Bene Menashe very closely and describe them as their

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[7] According to the Biblical tradition, Jacob had 12 sons, who were the ancestors of the tribes of Israel – Reuben, Simeon, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, Levi, Judah, and Binyamin. Each tribe (except Levy, who were set apart) had a separate territory. At the same time, the sons of Joseph – Manasseh and Ephraim – were elevated to form their separate tribes.

brothers. In 2009 Sadok Yacobi visited the State of Israel on the invitation of

Shavei Israel,[8] a Jerusalem-based NGO, which provides support in religious

education for emerging Jewish communities and assists them in migrating to the

Jewish State. In Israel Sadok Yacobi was introduced to a number of Bene

Menashe who had made an *aliyah*.[9] He returned to Kothareddypalem hoping that

his community would soon be able to join the Bene Menashe in Israel. A few

months later, when it became clear that this process might prove much more

tortuous than he had anticipated, he and his elder brother Shmuel expressed to us

their intention to arrange for their community to join the Bene Menashe in

Manipur and Mizoram and live a fuller Jewish life there. At the time of writing,

this intention remains unfulfilled on account of lack of funds and language barriers

between the two communities to initiate such a move.

   The Bene Ephraim are not the first emerging Jewish community to attempt

to establish a link between their group and ancient Israelites via an already existing

and 'recognised' Lost Tribe. Historians and anthropologists of Judaising

movements have observed that a number of 'new' African and African American

Jewish communities have chosen to identify with Ethiopian Jews (also described

as Beta Israel or Falasha).[10] Such groups were encouraged by the case of Beta

Israel, who challenged the popular stereotype that Jews had to be an essentially

'European' community. However, rather than asserting their right to follow

Judaism irrespective of their genealogical connections, the 'new' African and

African American Judaising groups chose to claim Ethiopian descent, as it

seemed to be a 'safer' option for ensuring wider recognition. As one of Henry

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[8] Hebrew for Israel Returns.
[9] Aliyah (Hebrew for ascent) is a term used in Israel to describe the migration of Jews to Israel
     under the Law of Return.
[10] See, for instance, Trevisan Semi 2002.

Goldschmidt's African American (Christian) informants put it, 'There's many of us who believe that there's something called Ethiopian Jews, who are Jewish but they're Black. … And there has been documented proof that slaves, many slaves, came out of those Ethiopian Jewish groups' (Goldschmidt 2006: 386).

A similar process appears to be at work in the case of the Bene Ephraim. Irrespective of whether or not the leaders of the Bene Ephraim were aware of the existence of the Bene Menashe back in the 1980s, in the end they claimed a genealogical connection to this community, which had already become visible in the mass media, attracted the attention of organisations like Amishav and Shavei Israel, and, more recently, came to be recognised as a Lost Tribe by the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel. By claiming a connection to an Indian community, which had already been accepted as Israelite, the Bene Ephraim groups demonstrated yet another route for establishing a 'genealogical link' to the rest of the Jewish world.

Bene Ephraim as historians: narratives of an ex-Dalit group

As we mentioned above, some Judaising movements embraced Jewish culture while looking for ways to embed their past in a more specific narrative of origin than the one available to them through conventional historical sources. Some have argued that because their earlier history was unclear, nobody could prove that they were not Jewish. This is how Goldschmidt's informant put it, continuing to reflect on the relationship between African Americans and Ethiopian Jews: 'So, because we don't have a history… how can a Jewish person tell me that I'm not Jewish? He can't, 'cause he doesn't know my history!' (Goldschmidt 2006: 386).

Like African Americans, the Madiga untouchables (as well as other Dalit groups of India) lack 'official' early history, which would be documented in 'conventional' written sources. However, their oral traditions often speak of quite specific and higher origins as the rulers, the warriors and the kings of ancient India.

Anthropologist Robert Deliège demonstrated that narratives of origin of different Dalit groups in India often 'explain' how their ancestors had lost their higher status by mistake or as a punishment (Deliège 1993). The legends of the Bene Ephraim resonate with those of other Madigas. For instance, they mention Arundhati, who is an important figure in the Madiga mythology. In the Sanskritic tradition, Arundhati is the wife of one of the Vedic sages, Vasistha. In the Madiga narrative she was a Madiga who cursed her people when they tried to prevent her from marrying a Brahman (Rauschenbusch-Clough 2000 [1899], 53-55). In the Bene Ephraim tradition, Arundhati was their Israelite ancestor, who cursed her people when they objected to her teaching the wisdom of the Jewish religion to her husband Vasistha (Yacobi 2001).

Similarly, the Bene Ephraim claim that the Hindu god Venkateshwara was of Bene Ephraim descent. In Tirupathi/Tirumala, a hill town in Chittoor district of southern Andhra, Venkateshwara is the presiding deity of the Tirupathi Venkateshwara Temple. According to a recent compilation of oral traditions of the Bene Ephraim, Tirumala is an exact replica of the seven hills of Jerusalem, while Venkateshwara is a Bene Ephraim herdsman called Yacob, who dedicated his life to alleviating people's suffering. According to Shmuel Yacobi, Hindus stole the image of Yacob from the Bene Ephraim and deified him for Hindu worshippers.

The topic of Judaism influencing Indian, and particularly, Telugu-Dravidian culture, is a major theme of Shmuel Yacobi's discussion of the Jewish heritage of the Bene Ephraim. In 2002 he published a book entitled 'Cultural Hermeneutics'. He told us that he was inspired by the stories of his parents and grandparents and decided to conduct research into the history of his community to find proof for its Jewish origin. He started by noting the similarities between Hebrew and proto-Telugu words, customs and festivals.[11] The book, which is an outcome of his ten-year intellectual labour, asserts that all Madigas – and by extension possibly all the ex-untouchable groups of southern India, if not of the entire sub-continent – are the descendants of the Bene Ephraim. They were the ones who had enriched the cultures of the Dravidians by assimilating themselves with the latter, and, hence, the alleged similarities between Hebrew and Telugu customs and languages (Yacobi 2002). It is claimed in the book that at the time of writing there were about ten million Bene Ephraim living among the Telugu people, but most of them were registered as the scheduled castes of Malas and Madigas or were converts into Buddhism and Christianity. However, according to Yacobi, only 125 families identify themselves as Israelite. The rest have forgotten what their true origin was (Yacobi 2002: 133).

As Michael Satlow has observed, '[e]ach community of Jews creates its Judaism anew, reading and understanding their traditions through their own peculiar and historically specific worldviews' (2006: 7). The Bene Ephraim are hardly an exception. Yacobi's book is full of anti-caste and anti-Brahmanic

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[11] For examples, one such Telugu word *asura* today stands for a demon and was frequently used by later Vedic Aryans to designate Dravidians. Relying on the meaning of the term borrowed from Brown's (1903) Telugu to English dictionary, Shmuel Yacobi argues that *asura* is derived from the word *Asur* which refers to a place in ancient *Assyrian* Kingdom from where the ancestors of Bene Ephraim came to Andhra Pradesh (see Skold 1924 for a contention on: were the Asuras Assyrians?) He argued that it was on account of their association with the ancestors of Bene Ephraim that the local Telugu-Dravidians came to be referred as *Asuras.*

rhetoric, and evokes Jewish history to make sense of the untouchable status of the Madiga. The author argues that the ancestors of the Bene Ephaim had rebelled against the 'Aryan invasion' of the subcontinent, and, as a punishment, were moved down south and were relegated to the position of outcastes (Yacobi 2002). In this respect one could again draw a parallel between the narratives of the Bene Ephraim and those of other emerging Jewish communities. John Jackson demonstrated that some Black Hebrew Israelite groups in New York re-conceptualised the history of slavery in light of Jewish history (2005). A similar motif appears in the discourse of Shmuel Yacobi, who explains his group's condition of discrimination and experience of untouchability as a result of ancient Aryans persecuting their Jewish ancestors. In doing so, he promotes an account of Bene Ephraim history and identity which is inclusive of the wider Dalit community of India.

   Cultural Hermeneutics is written in English and is offered to foreign visitors as evidence of community's descent. The book transforms the oral tradition passed down to Shmuel Yacobi by his grandparents into a historiographic discovery. As anthropologist Seth Kunin observes in his discussion of a similar engagement with personal history demonstrated by representatives of crypto-Jewish groups, in such studies '[t]he tradition becomes the basis for historical or genealogical research, which then is employed to validate the tradition using a societally privileged form – the language and forms of evidence of academic historiography' (2009: 29). For the vernacular reader, a synopsis of the book is available in the Telugu language entitled 'Who am I?' Irrespective of whether the book reaches wider audiences abroad, in the village it is seen by 'lay' Bene Ephraim, as well as by some other

Madiga, as a treatise providing the ultimate proof of the Jewish origin of the community.

'Memory sites' of Dalit Jewish history

The Bene Ephraim assert their claims not only through their oral tradition and research collected in *Cultural Hermeneutics*, but also by constructing material symbols of their heritage. The most prominent site that marks the Bene Ephraim as Jewish is their synagogue and its premises. The synagogue is located right on the entry point of the village. It has a Hindu temple on its right and a family of caste Hindus on its left. The Yacobi brothers managed to build the synagogue in the central part of the village, on a site surrounded by land belonging to caste Hindus, because their parents escaped not only the traditional occupation of the Madiga, but also the untouchable quarters, which are traditionally situated on the outskirts of the main village. The synagogue thus may be seen as a symbol not just of the new religious identity of the Bene Ephraim, but also of their claim to a new status.

The synagogue was constructed in 1991, but Sadok Yacobi and his wife told us that it was built to replace an older synagogue, which was established in 1909 and was housed in a thatched hut. We expressed a lot of interest in the history of the synagogue, and a few days later a new sign appeared on its front wall bearing the date of 1909. Though the Yacobi family cannot offer any material evidence of their practice prior to the late 1980s, they strive to present the artefacts that they *do* possess in a way that Western audiences would recognise as legitimate *sites of memory* (see Nora 1989) documenting the events of the (Jewish) past of the Bene Ephraim. Moreover, these efforts are not dissimilar to the

'rhetoric of facticity' that was described by Tamar Katriel in her study of Israeli pioneering museums oriented towards a particular representation of a collective past of Jewish settlers. It is also reminiscent of the practices of Israeli archeologists aimed at justifying the territorial claims of the state (Abu El-Haj 2001). Just like the creators of settlement museums strive to demonstrate that it was Jewish settlers that massively improved the natural environment of Palestine, the Yacobis argue that it is their ancestors that enriched local cultures. Just like Israeli archeologists and tour guides seek to merge the 'present' of the State of Israel with its constructed 'Israeli past', Shmuel Yacobi tries to unearth the traces of early Bene Ephraim presence in India.

Unsurprisingly, given the content of their claim and their strong desire to live in the Jewish State, the audience that the Yacobi brothers consider to be particularly important to convince is that of 'mainstream' rabbis and Israelis. According to the Israeli Law of Return, a person can settle in Israel if they are either of Jewish descent or have been converted into Judaism.[12] Though conversion is often understood as a manifestation of a more universalist tendency in Judaism (it is popularly assumed that anyone can convert into Judaism, while not anyone can demonstrate Jewish descent), in the case of the Bene Ephraim, conversion could become an insurmountable task. As transpired earlier in the case of the Bene Menashe, Indian authorities disapprove of mass conversions. Irrespective of this obstacle, most Bene Ephraim find it extremely difficult to reach the level of observance required of converts into Orthodox Judaism due to

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[12] According to the 1950 formulation of this law, 'every Jew has the right to come to this country [Israel] as an oleh'. The Law uses the halakhic definition of what it means to be Jewish – you are Jewish if your mother is Jewish. In 1970 the Law of Return was amended to include those who have at least one Jewish grandparent - maternal or paternal - and their spouses. The new formulation of the Law also excluded those who were born Jewish, but then voluntarily changed their religion. The text of the Law of Return is available on the web-site of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (www.mfa.gov.il).

social and economic reasons. To note just a few such constraints, most of them cannot afford to abstain from daily wage work on Saturdays, or eat only *kosher* food, because keeping meat and dairy products separate is highly problematic for sheer lack of kitchen utensils.

As we will demonstrate in the following section, community leaders have recently started insisting on stricter practice among their followers. However, they also appear to be increasingly realising the importance of 'proving' their Israelite descent by reconstructing and 'documenting' the memories of the Jewish past of the Bene Ephraim. These attempts possibly reflect the importance that reconstructions of history are accorded in modern Jewish thought. Drawing on the historian of the Jewish people Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Katriel observed that the secularisation of Jewish history at the time of the Jewish Enlightenment involved a shift from a communal transmission of the knowledge of the past through ritual practices towards a historization of the past. This shift, in its turn, led to a quest for collective memories, which involved 'the emergence of newly constructed, ritually-enclosed memory-building practices' (Katriel 1999: 102). As Jonathan Webber put it, 'History, first in scholarly forms and then later in more popular forms, became the medium for arriving at new definitions of Jewish identity'. Following the establishment of the State of Israel, re-identifying as a historical people became a particularly important part of Jewish self-understanding (Webber 2007: 86).

We suggest that it is in this context that the efforts of the Yacobi brothers aimed at constructing their past could best be understood. Renegotiating histories and historical memories is often an important aspect of redefining collective identities (Baumann 2002, Webber 2007: 86). As the example of other Judaising

groups demonstrates, it appears to be very much the case for communities that have embraced Jewish identity in the twentieth century. It is noteworthy that in Kothareddypalem the date changing event occurred shortly after Sadok Yacobi came back from his trip to Israel, where he would have had a chance to register the importance that reconstruction and documentation of Jewish history is accorded by the state (Katriel 1999, Abu El-Haj 2001). In the following section, we will demonstrate that the Yacobi brothers' search for the Jewish roots of the Bene Ephraim has led them to not just producing 'new' historical evidence, but also to re-negotiating community boundaries.

The 'other' Bene Ephraim

Recently, Shmuel Yacobi offered a definition of the membership of his community which is much narrower than the one suggested in his book where it included all Madigas, and possibly even all scheduled castes of India. He still argues that the Bene Ephraim had influenced Telugu-Dravidian culture, but he now maintains that they are different from them and other Dalit communities. In this new interpretation of the Bene Ephraim history, their ancestors had nothing to do with the Madiga, but were classified together with them by caste Hindus because of their occupations and dietary laws, which allowed them to eat beef. When one of the authors (Egorova) asked Shmuel Yacobi how one could differentiate between his Madiga neighbours and the Bene Ephraim, he told her that the latter were those who knew that they were of Israelite descent (personal communication 2007, 2010).

Co-incidentally, the Yacobi brothers recently re-defined Bene Ephraim membership to make community boundaries more rigid not just on the level of discourse, but also 'on the ground'. In January 2010 Shmuel Yacobi told us that though anyone who could come up with an oral tradition linking their practices to those of Israelites may count as Bene Ephraim, he would now insist on the 'core' group of the Bene Ephraim living in Kothareddypalem observing Sabbath, Jewish festivals and *kashrut*, adopting circumcision, and consulting the Torah, rather than the Christian Bible, as their sacred text. In the meantime, Sadok expressed his concern that not all the people in the village who called themselves Bene Ephraim were observing these basic practices. This concern was voiced to us in the context of Sadok finding out that some members of the community were 'slipping away' from the village to far-off areas in response to demands for seasonal farm work without letting the leaders know about it.

It appears that SadokYacobi adopted a stricter definition of community membership, as well as a stricter observation of practices in following Judaism, after his visit to Israel in the autumn of 2009. Shortly after his return he started conducting regular Hebrew classes for his community hoping that somebody from Israel would soon visit his group. Shmuel Yacobi stated that his hope was that one day Israeli authorities would recognise the Bene Ephraim the way they recognised the Bene Menashe. However, he was worried that mass conversions would not be acceptable for the Indian government. Therefore, he thought it was necessary to ensure that the numbers of the 'real' Bene Ephraim were not inflated by those who were not sincere enough about following Judaism.

In the meantime, the idea about all Madiga – and possibly all untouchables – being Bene Ephraim gradually began to diffuse among the wider

Madiga community. Back in the village, a number of community members seemed to be following this narrative of origin, despite the fact that it had been abandoned by the Yacobi brothers. In December 2009 we interviewed David, a thirty-year old Bene Ephraim who grew up in this tradition and has followed Judaism since a young age. David is seen by the community as one of the future leaders of the Bene Ephraim. He would like to train formally to be a Rabbi in order to teach his community about Jewish religion and culture, and eventually to go to the State of Israel, when his services are not needed in the village anymore. David recently married a young Madiga woman from the city, Sarah, who was a practising Christian, and who revealed to us that she was oblivious of Judaism as a religion before marrying David. On account of coming to live along with David's parents in the village, she had embraced a Bene Ephraim identity and started to follow Judaism.

When we asked David whether it was acceptable for the community that his wife used to be Christian, he said it was not a problem at all. Referring to Shmuel Yacobi's research presented in *Cultural Hermeneutics*, he pointed out that his wife was a Madiga and that all Madigas were once Jewish. He conceded to marry a Christian Madiga woman because she was ready to 'go back' to Judaism. When we asked Sarah about her community affiliation, she said that she was Jewish because she was a Madiga, and that she was willing to immigrate to Israel. During our stay in the field, we observed two more such marriages in which both the Jewish Madiga grooms and the Christian Madiga brides unequivocally adopted the Yacobi's claim of a Jewish past.

The same theme appeared in our conversation with Joseph, a Christian Madiga from Kothareddypalem, who was a distant relative of the Yacobi brothers.

Joseph was aware of the Bene Ephraim tradition, but did not want to join the community, explaining that for his spiritual development he preferred to stay a Christian. At the same time, he believed that he was Jewish, because he found himself convinced by Shmuel Yacobi's early theory about all Madiga being Jewish.

It appears that though for the purposes of obtaining recognition by the State of Israel and pacifying the local authorities in India the idea about all Madiga being Jewish did not seem suitable, it 'took hold' among 'lay' community members. Many of them told us that they would only marry a Jewish person, which presented a challenge given the small numbers of the Bene Ephraim and a lack of recognition in other Jewish groups. Accepting the notion that all Madiga were Jewish provided the community with a suitable channel for seeking marriage partners outside the immediate congregation of the synagogue.

In recent years the Bene Ephraim movement spilt outside of Kothareddypalem and even outside of Guntur district. The synagogue in Kothareddypalem is often visited by Madiga from other parts of Andhra Pradesh, who have recently embraced Judaism. It is hard to assess the exact number of these followers, though they clearly outnumber the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem. One such group has got a separate synagogue established near Vijayawada. It appears that most of these communities learnt about the Bene Ephraim movement as a result of the educational and mass media activities of Shmuel Yacobi. They are willing to be recognised as Jewish and some of their members have expressed an interest in settling in the State of Israel. However, these 'new' Bene Ephraim communities do not put forward a particular oral account of their Jewish history. Instead, they suggest that they have a spiritual

connection to the State of Israel (a similar engagement with the Jewish culture demonstrated by Hebrew Israelite groups has been described by Fran Markowitz et al as 'soul citizenship', 2003). Some have told us that they decided to embrace Judaism after having a dream about Israel. As far as their engagement with Judaism is concerned, these groups are more syncretic in their practice than the Kothareddypalem community, and have adopted only a limited number of the elements of the rabbinic tradition.

Conclusion

The movement of the Bene Ephraim highlights the interplay between the particularist and universalist tendencies in Judaism. It appears that, as it was the case with a number of other Judaising groups, the Bene Ephraim 'chose' Judaism precisely because of its emphasis on the genealogical connection and common origin of its members. Jason Francisco, a journalist and a photographer who encountered the community in the mid 1990s, has called the teaching of the Yacobi brothers a Jewish liberation theology (Francisco 1997). Indeed, the case of the Bene Ephraim illuminates the social possibilities that the Jewish tradition presents for communities put at a disadvantage by a lack of 'documented' history and/or marginalised by the dominant cultures in their societies. To return to the local context out of which the Bene Ephraim movement emerged, it may be argued that it is the perceived 'ethnocentricity' of the Jewish culture that allows it to offer a chance for social mobility and freedom of self-expression for groups like the Bene Ephraim, whom 'universalist' religions like Christianity are unable to free from stigma and low social status. Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin have

observed that while 'the genius of Christianity is its concern for all the peoples of the world; the genius of Judaism is its ability to leave other people alone' (1993: 707). In the case of the Bene Ephraim, embracing Jewish identity meant 'leaving alone' the wider milieu of caste Hindus and distancing the community from the history of caste discrimination.

However, despite the fact that the perception about the importance of the generational connection in the Jewish tradition may have been the reason for the Judaisation of Bene Ephraim, it was not necessarily its outcome. The Yacobi brothers chose to stress the possible genealogical connection between their group and other Jewish communities. This strategy is understandable in light of the pressure that groups and individuals willing to make an aliyah to the State of Israel are put under in order to prove their 'genealogical' Jewishness and/or to demonstrate their religious practice - a requirement which, as we discussed above, the community would struggle to meet. However, despite the attempts of the Yacobis to make group boundaries more rigid to include only those who already have oral traditions about their Jewish descent and who are more committed to Jewish practice, the movement has grown and now includes individuals and whole groups who embrace Jewish practice without claiming Jewish descent, or, if they do claim such descent, they base their claims not on conventional 'evidence' accepted by rabbis but on dreams and spiritual calling. As Webber observed, 'like all social groups, Jews are constantly redefining themselves – which today means also reformulating the main features of their historical consciousness' (1997: 275). The historical consciousness of the Bene Ephraim appears to have undergone some radical changes since the community openly engaged with the Jewish tradition. It remains to be seen if this engagement will also affect the perceptions

of Jewish culture current in other Jewish communities around the world, and whether it will broaden their understandings of Jewish history.

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