

JUDGE RUTH: PURSUING JUSTICE, SUPREME

# B'NAI B'RITH

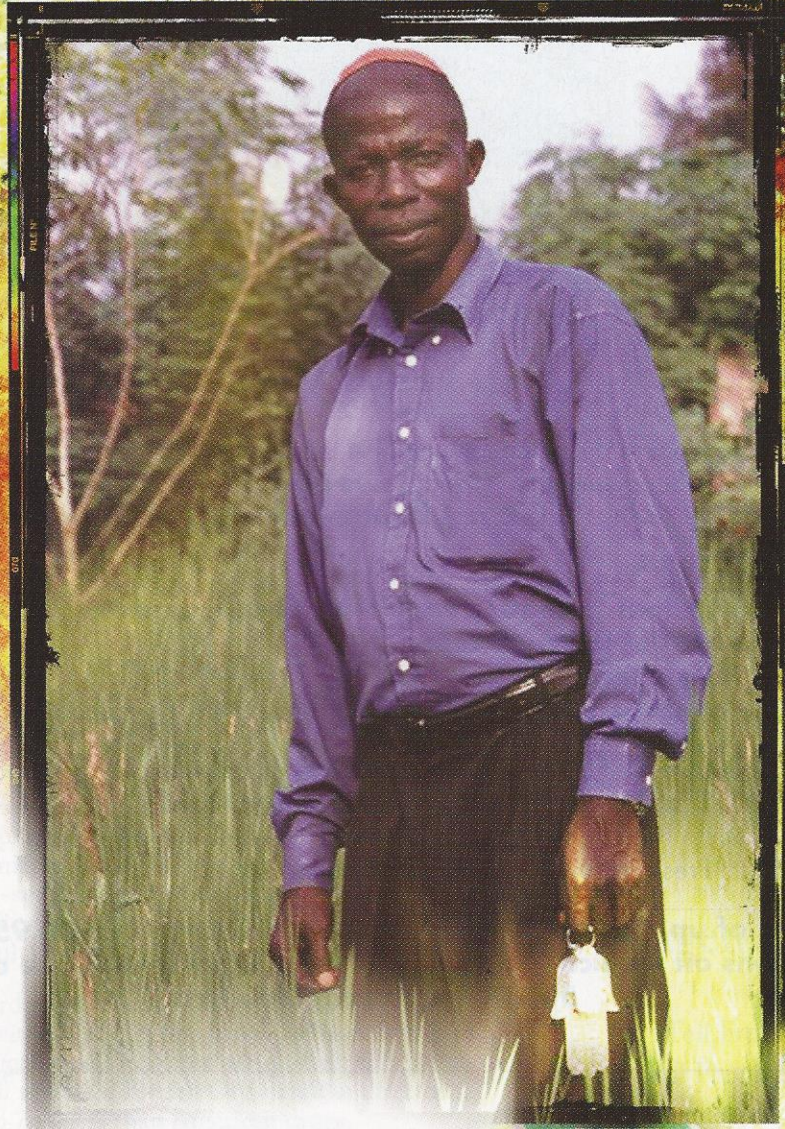
M A G A Z I N E

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## LOST TRIBES

Can They Save The Jews?



David Ahenkorah, Leader Of The House Of Israel, SeWi Wiawso, Ghana

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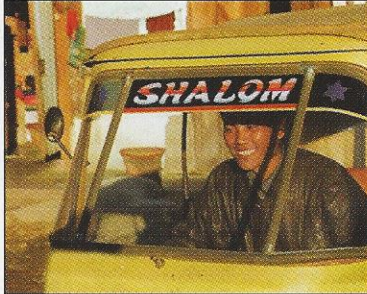
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As the Jewish demographic crisis continues to fester, outreach activists point to a potential solution that is all but invisible to many Westerners. Remote but resolute claimants to Jewish heritage are scattered throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. They may number in the tens of millions, and some trace their ancestry to the legendary Lost Tribes of Israel.

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by Bryan Schwartz

Cover design by Mark Wright



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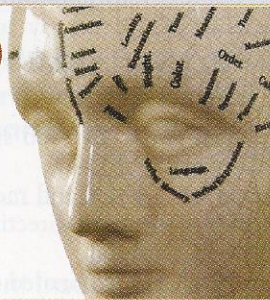
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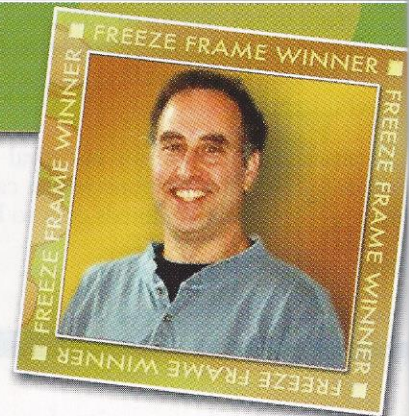
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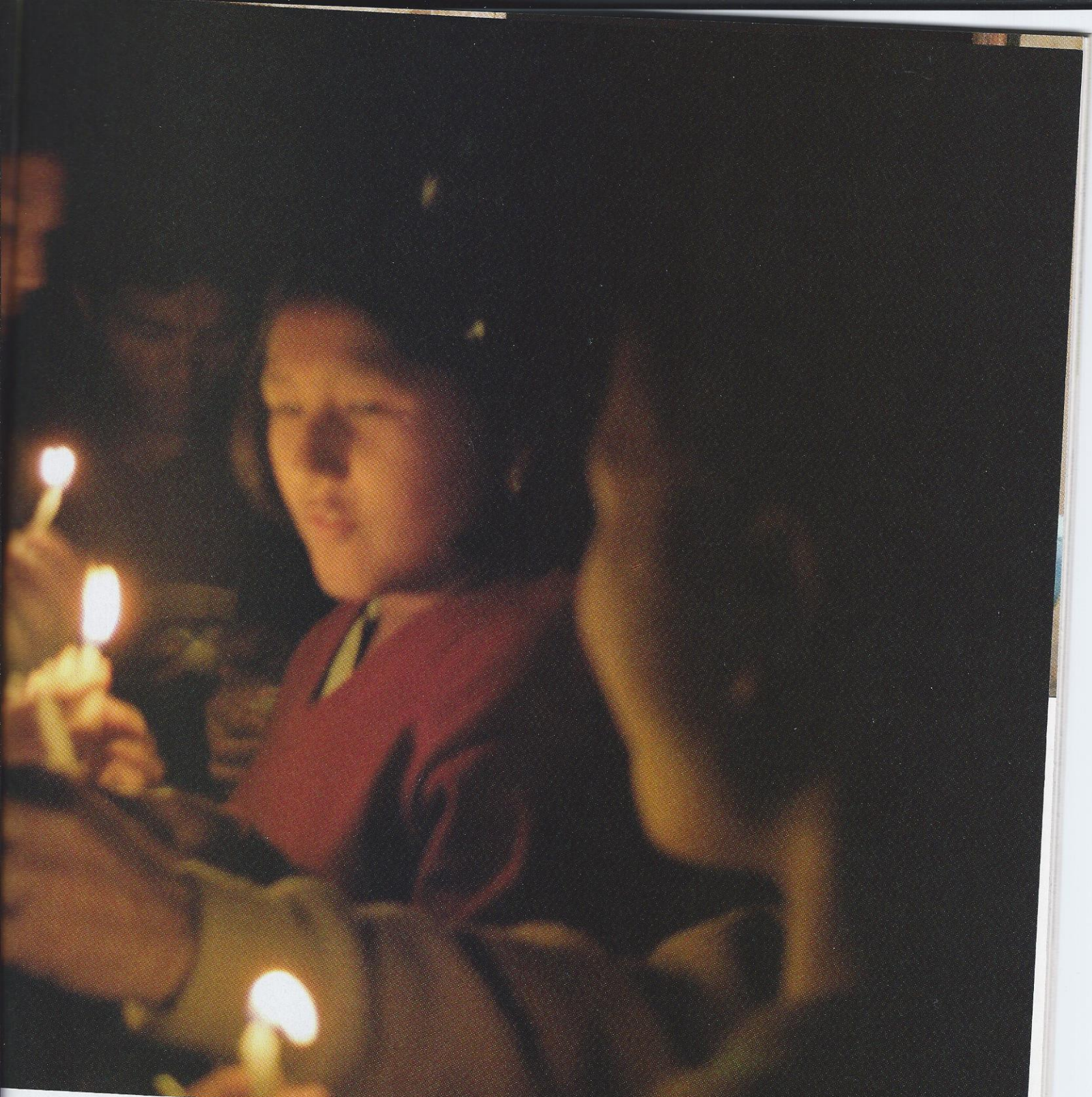
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**Light Unto The Nations.** Women of the Benei Menashe kindle Hanukkah candles in the city of Imphal in northeastern India. The Benei Menashe have officially been recognized by the Israeli rabbinate as direct descendants of the ancient Israelites, and nearly 1,000 have made *aliyah*.



# HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT



The “disappearing Jew” is everywhere, the ghostly protagonist of our lingering demographic crisis. But activists say there may be a solution—and it can be found where few Westerners have thought to look.

Story and photographs by Bryan Schwartz

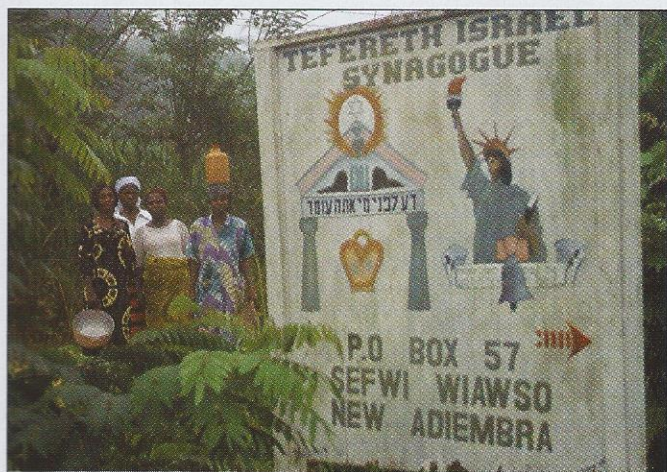
**J**ews have been called the “ever-dying people,” a tiny and embattled group that sees itself perpetually lurching toward demographic oblivion. At first glance, the latest numbers seem to bear out this pessimistic view.

Due to low birth rates, intermarriage, and other forms of assimilation, the U.S. Jewish population has declined 5 percent since 1990, while the overall U.S. population has grown 11 percent, according to the most recent National Jewish Population Survey. The news from other major Jewish communities around the world is hardly more encouraging. The Jewish population in France, as in much of Europe, is rapidly shrinking and aging.

Israel, meanwhile, faces the possibility that “demographics will trump Zionism,” according to *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen, as Arabs proliferate in the territories and threaten to outnumber Jews between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea.

All told, world Jewry is losing as many as 50,000 people per year, and now numbers less than 13 million—a scant one-fifth of 1 percent of the planet’s total population.

The remedies aimed at stemming the outflow are well known. JDate and other online matchmaking services seek to stem the surging tide of intermarriage. Others have proposed expanding the pool of Jews by aggressively proselytizing gentiles. Meanwhile, Chabad Lubavitch representatives engage in another form of outreach—trolling the streets of New York City and other Jewish



**Shul Crossing.** Women of Ghana’s Sefwi Wiawso tribe stop to watch a foreign visitor to the country’s only synagogue, a hand-made structure (concrete bricks and a corrugated iron roof) that is less than 10 years old.

centers to recruit lapsed Jews to Orthodoxy.

Yet, the solution to the Jewish demographic crisis may not be online, in New York, or in other well-established Jewish centers. The solution may be in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, home to a vast reservoir of individuals claiming Jewish ancestry. Some of them are now reconnecting with what they believe is their ancient heritage and are practicing Judaism. Little known in the West, these “lost” Jews are seen by some as our ultimate salvation.

Consider these examples:

- In Nigeria, though so far only hundreds among the 40-million-member Igbo tribe are now embracing Judaism, the number of returnees may be on the verge of exploding, according to some observers. The Jewish adherents, who believe that their tribal name, Igbo, is a corruption of the word “Hebrew,” are establishing synagogues and abandoning Christian and animist religious practices in favor of Jewish traditions that closely parallel longstanding tribal customs.

- Jewish practice is taking root in nearby Ghana, where the tribal chief of the Sefwi people, which has more than 1 million members, says he believes his people may be descended from ancient Israelites who crossed Africa as early traders or refugees.

- In Zimbabwe, southern Africa, some 2,500 miles from Ghana, approximately 2,000 members of the Shona people—a tribe of more than 2 million—believe they have Israelite origins. As a result, they are gravitating to Judaism or are engaging in some aspects of Jewish practice.



**On The Threshold Of Hope.** Dina Haokip with her daughter, Ning Chon Kim, at the doorway of the family home in Imphal, Manipur Province, India. Haokip, who has lost two siblings to violent local clashes, hopes to someday find refuge in Israel.



**Washing For Shabbat, Western Ghana.** After helping prepare the Sabbath meal, Kwame Armah leans out the window of his family's kitchen to wash his hands before nightfall.

- Approximately 100,000 Ethiopian Beta Israel, whose ancestors clung to their Israelite heritage for thousands of years under adverse circumstances, now live as practicing Jews in Israel. Meanwhile, more than 18,000 Ethiopians now anxiously await the opportunity to do the same. The vast majority of them are known as Falash Mura, people whose ancestors converted to Christianity (many under duress) but who today have returned to Judaism.

- In Manipur, northeastern India, a community leader has converted more than 4,000 people to Judaism in the last 15 years. He believes that his tribe, the Kuki, and two related tribes, the Chin and Mizo (the three combined totaling between 1 and 2 million people), are likely children of the biblical Menashe, one of the legendary Lost Tribes. (From 10 of Jacob's 12 sons sprang the legendary Lost Tribes—including Menashe—who were exiled in 722 B.C.E. by conquerors of the ancient Kingdom of Israel.)

Israel's chief rabbi recently recognized this community, known as the Benei Menashe, as descendants of the ancient Israelites. Now, more than 7,000 Benei Menashe (including most of the 4,000 converts) stand ready to formalize their return to Judaism and to join as many as 1,000 of their brethren who already lead Jewish lives in Israel.

Scholars estimate that 18 million in Brazil, Mexico, and throughout the Americas have unexplored ethnic roots that can be traced back to Spanish and Portuguese "New Christian" converts or Jewish colonizers who fled the Inquisition. As these descendants begin delving into their origins, thousands are rekindling their

spark of Jewishness, remembering that their crypto-Jewish grandmothers secretly kindled Sabbath lights.

Although still in its embryonic stage, this global Jewish renaissance has gathered momentum over the past few decades, thanks to a convergence of factors. They include: the ongoing communications revolution; easier access to world travel; advancements in genetic, ethnographic, and anthropologic scholarship; the gravitational pull of the State of Israel; and the proliferation of outreach-minded groups committed to seeking out "forgotten" Jews and shepherding them into the fold.

Michael Freund heads one such group, Jerusalem-based Shavei Israel. "We as a people are hemorrhaging Jews," he explains. "Yet, at the same time, there is an awakening taking place around the world among individuals and communities with Jewish ancestry and Jewish roots. They are knocking on our collective door and asking to be allowed in. I think that it is in our interest to reach out to these groups and to facilitate their return because they will strengthen us demographically, with their numbers, and spiritually, with their passionate commitment."

Freund adds: "Many people are unaware of the existence of these groups, their unique stories, and the efforts they have made to join the Jewish people." He counts Israel's Interior Ministry among the more important institutions hamstrung by what he calls this "barrier of ignorance" that Shavei Israel hopes to overcome. The Interior Ministry determines immigration rights for the purposes of Israel's Law of Return.

Although the far-flung groups Freund and others champion reportedly share a common heritage that dates back millennia,

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**Fringe Benefits—Venta Prieta, Hidalgo State, Mexico.** With *tzitzit* dangling, young Shmuel Islas Overa, son of the Jewish community's president, bikes past a Jewish stranger on his new wheels before turning and asking: "What size is your *kippah* (skullcap)?"

(continued from p. 17)

these communities diverge widely in their Jewish practice and religious identities. Some openly practice Judaism that would instantly be recognizable to Westerners. Others barely think of themselves as Jews in the conventional sense, although many of their customs seem rooted in Jewish traditions. Still others consider themselves both Jewish and Christian.

The evolving saga of the lost Jews is not only complex and intriguing, but controversial as well. Confronted with economic, political, and logistical hurdles, some outreach-minded activists have intimated that institutions who fail to recognize the predominantly African, Asian, and Latin American returnees are intransigent, elitist, or racist. Underlying the controversy is a fundamental question that has dogged the Jewish community, especially since the birth of the State of Israel: Who is a Jew?

## A CENTURIES-OLD QUEST

Speculation on African-Jewish tribes is nothing new. In 883 C.E., the Ethiopian traveler Eldad Ha-dani (also known as Rabbi Eldad) wrote a famous letter to the world's then-dominant Jewish community, the Jews of Spain. In it, he claimed to be descended from the Lost Tribe of Dan, and maintained that the Lost Tribes of Naphtali, Gad, and Asher resided in Africa and continued to practice Jewish rituals there.

In the 1500s, following centuries of debate over Rabbi Eldad's assertions, Egypt's chief rabbi, known as the Radbaz, declared that, according to Jewish law, the Ethiopians were indeed descended from the Lost Tribe of Dan. That ruling was corroborated in the 1970s by Israel's Chief Rabbinate, clearing the way for massive air-

lifts in the 1980s and early 1990s that brought nearly 100,000 Ethiopian Jews, or Beta Israel, to Israel. For many Jews, this dramatic reunion was the first indication of the existence of Jewish-African tribes.

The Ethiopian exodus spurred the creation of several American-based outreach organizations that soon began inquiring about other communities of potential returnees that might have gone unnoticed. Robert Lande, a law professor from Silver Spring, Md., co-founded two such organiza-

tions, Scattered Among the Nations ([www.scatteredamongthenations.org](http://www.scatteredamongthenations.org)) and Kulanu ([www.kulanu.org](http://www.kulanu.org)), both devoted to finding lost Jews, connecting with them, and lobbying on their behalf.

Lande elaborates: "Helping these communities, we help ourselves, sending a signal to the world Jewish community, and in particular our young people, who might be thinking about leaving the faith or intermarriage, that this is such a wonderful religion that people cling to it for more than 2,000 years and are now miraculously starting to re-embrace it."

Meanwhile, in Israel, an organization called Amishav, led by Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, initiated efforts in the 1980s to help gather scattered Jewish remnants as a means of ushering in the Messianic age. Shavei Israel ([www.shavei.org](http://www.shavei.org)) has inherited Amishav's mantle, harnessing Western Jews' newly raised consciousness (largely Internet-inspired) regarding off-the-beaten-path Jewish communities. Meanwhile, Internet-savvy members of the dispersed communities are discovering that they are not alone in the world.

## THE SEFWI CONNECTION

Ethiopia may be only the tip of the Jewish-African iceberg. Nene Nkua Okumdom II, known as the Paramount Chief of the Sefwi people of West Africa, cites documented tribal history in support of his belief that his ancestors, like the Ethiopians, originated in ancient Israel.

"They came from Israel, via Egypt and Sudan, across to Mali, down to Ivory Coast, and into Ghana," the chief explains. "These ancestors circumcised their boys after the first week." They also rigorously observed the Saturday Sabbath and, as mandated by the Torah, separated men and women during the women's menstrual period, according to David Ahenkorah, the leader of the Sefwi Jews, who call themselves the House of Israel. "Even those among the Sefwi who would not call themselves Jews practiced these traditions," Ahenkorah says.

Contemporary Judaism only began to gain a foothold among the Sefwi in the 1970s, after a charismatic leader, the late Aaron Ahomtre, had prophetic visions that he maintained called him to the ancient faith. Ahomtre's early followers say he performed miracles to demonstrate to others in the tribe his newfound, almost saintly, powers.

Today, although Christianity remains the dominant faith among the Sefwi, Ahenkorah—one of Ahomtre's disciples—is confident that modern Judaism will soon be “accepted most easily” by the Sefwi people because of the natural connection between Jewish traditions and Sefwi tribal rites.

In fact, Ahenkorah has taken it upon himself to hasten that transition, spearheading the recent construction of Ghana's first synagogue, Tefereth Israel, in the regional capital of Sefwi Wiawso. Ahenkorah visits the synagogue at least three times daily and practically lives there on *Shabbat*, when he leads services for the entire practicing Jewish community, walking home only for meals.

“Very soon, Sefwi Wiawso will not have the only Sefwi-Jewish community,” Ahenkorah declares, mentioning two other villages in Ghana's western region where he is already teaching Jewish traditions.

## “AFRICAN JEWRY WILL TAKE OFF”

“I am pure Jewish,” says Daniel Baiden, a United States government employee, who, like Ahenkorah, is from Ghana. Baiden lives outside Washington, D.C., but regularly returns to Ghana to visit the Sefwi Wiawso Jewish community. Baiden believes that the Sefwi are neither the only West African tribe with Jewish links, nor even the tribe with the strongest historical ties.

“There are many Jewish peoples in Africa, though most of them do not even know they are Jewish,” Baiden claims. One example is the Ga tribe, which numbers more than 1.5 million, and is dominant in the region of Ghana's capital, Accra. Some Ga profess Jewish roots, as do members of a 400,000-strong people in the remote Kwahu Mountains of Ghana that border the small West African country of Togo.

“African Jewry will take off, one way or another—it is beginning to pick up now,” Baiden proclaims. “Once the tribes understand that their tribal customs are really Jewish, many more Africans will embrace Jewish practice.” Baiden concludes optimistically, “I believe that the return of our African-Jewish ancestors will be the redemption of the Jews.”

Baiden is not alone in his optimism. Jay Sand, a Philadelphia-based freelance journalist, musician, and liberal activist, has visited returnee communities in six African countries. Sand hosts the websites [www.jewsof africa.com](http://www.jewsof africa.com) and [www.scatteredamongthenations.org](http://www.scatteredamongthenations.org), and regularly gives musical and photographic presentations about African Jewry to both Jewish and black audiences around the United States.

Through his websites and presentations, Sand has been contacted by dozens of Africans claiming Jewish or Israelite (that

is, pre-rabbinic) heritage in every part of Africa—including Angola, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Namibia, Nigeria, Swaziland, and Zimbabwe. Sand believes that Africa's potential for future Jewish growth is nearly limitless—and that the world Jewish community needs to pay attention.

“I think that the discussion of envisioning [a] demographic shift in Judaism is not only worth having, but essential—right now,” Sand states, emphatically. “There might not be millions of Jewish Eastern Europeans any more, but we are going to find ourselves with many many communities around Africa and around the world with an attachment to Judaism. It is happening today that

people are coming back to Judaism—we have to open our eyes. Among the Jewish community and Jewish leaders we must discuss what we will do when people whom we do not consider traditional Jews appear out of, quote-unquote, nowhere. It is not just hypothetical—it is reality.”

For example, Sand relates that in Zimbabwe, he met members of a community of 2,000 Shona people who energetically practice Judaism, following the teachings of a former American slave preacher, William Crowdy, who said that the African people are descended from Israel. Sand's own wedding in Pennsylvania was conducted by a visiting rabbi from Uganda, where 600

Abayudaya—a Bantu group—have been formally converted to Judaism by a panel of Conservative rabbis sponsored by Kulanu.

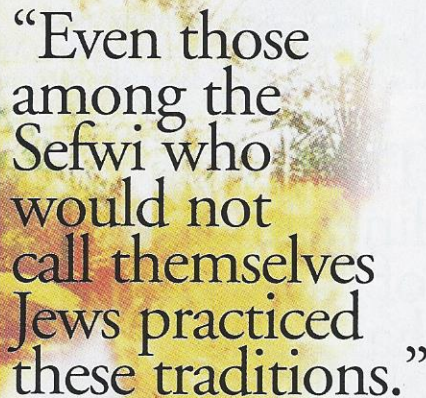
Sand adds: “The growth of African Jewry is potentially monumental for the Jewish people because of the sheer numbers of people in Africa who are members of groups that claim Israelite lineage. The numbers are rather small among these African groups practicing now—in the tens of thousands—but there are tens of millions of people in the Igbo group in Nigeria alone who might potentially connect with Jewish roots.”

Discussing what might ignite an Igbo Jewish explosion, Sand recalls a recent meeting he had in New Jersey with the visiting governor of Nigeria's Abia State, Orji Uzor Kalu. This charismatic, up-and-coming politician told Sand that his ancestors were from Israel, that the Igbo people are Jews, and that he himself observes Jewish holidays. Kalu said that if he ever becomes his country's president—a possibility, since he is running for election in 2007—he will lead Nigeria as a Jew, a first for the most powerful and populous nation in Africa, and no doubt a boon for returnees throughout the subcontinent.

## THE IGBO RETURNEES

A Reconstructionist rabbi, Brant Rosen, of Evanston, Ill., in suburban Chicago, recently became one of the first rabbis to visit the Igbo, spending a month teaching Torah to Judaism-practicing or reportedly Israelite-descended communities in Nigeria. Rosen says he was received “regally,” and was struck by how many parallels exist between Igbo tribal customs and ancient Jewish practices.

Rosen describes the similarities: “The Igbo festivals roughly parallel the Jewish festivals, especially the *shalosh regalim* [Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot]. They circumcise their sons on the eighth



“Even those among the Sefwi who would not call themselves Jews practiced these traditions.”



day. They have extensive laws of ritual purity which echo the Levitical laws of the Torah. They follow the lunar calendar. They have high priests similar to the *Cohanim*. They have a very extensive clan system which is unusual among African tribes, but which is very similar to the proto-biblical system, where each tribal member could trace his ancestry all the way back to the common ancestor."

According to Rosen, there is also a sociological commonality between the Igbo and the Jews: The Igbo identify themselves as an oppressed minority, the victims of an attempted genocide in Biafra.

Currently, Rosen explains, almost all of the 40 million Igbo are Christian, having been missionized by British colonialists. Yet their deep-seated ancestral link with the Israelites has engendered such a strong connection with the Jewish people, according to Rosen, that over the last 10 years, some Igbo have begun to shed their Christianity and establish synagogues.

"There is an organic growth of Judaism," Rosen says. "These Igbo believe they are making *teshuvah* [returning spiritually] and reclaiming their Jewish birthright."

Rosen visited five synagogues and spent two Sabbaths in Abujah State (Nigeria's capital region), and in the process observed at least 100 people actively practicing Judaism. Although no scholar has yet quantified this trend, eyewitnesses confirm that at least hundreds are practicing Judaism throughout Nigeria. Rosen believes that of all the Jewish-inspired African tribes, the Igbo have the greatest potential for a global impact.

"Most of the Igbo I met—even the Christians—called themselves Jews," Rosen adds, noting that many of them refer to their Jewish ancestry and belief in Jesus without seeing any contradiction—like an American saying he or she is both Italian and Catholic.

Rosen says he and local leaders have not tried to convert Christians to Judaism, because, as he explains, "religious triumphalism has not been kind to Africa," as evidenced by the devastating impact of European colonialism and Arab conquests in the region. Rosen explains that he and others are merely "trying to encourage the Judaic renaissance that is going on."

## DESCENDANTS OF THE BIBLICAL MENASHE?

Maccabi Touhang has led what is arguably a Judaic renaissance among a group of Jews known as the Benei Menashe, who claim descent from the lost tribe of Menashe. They live in Manipur and Mizoram, northeastern India, straddling the border with Myanmar (Burma)—an area isolated by thousands of miles from the nearest recognized Jewish community.

Whereas David Ahenkorah has shepherded a community of hundreds in Ghana, Touhang has over the last 15 years personally helped more than 4,000 Kuki tribe members immerse

themselves in Judaism, and in some cases, formally convert.

The Kuki and related northeastern Indian and Burmese tribes, the Chin and Mizo, began embracing modern Judaism in earnest in the late 1970s, shortly after the Old Testament arrived in northeastern India via Christian missionaries.

After reading the Scriptures, many among these tribes drew parallels between its teachings and the traditions that had been passed down to them across the generations—connections which were highlighted in two widely-circulated, locally produced publications, *The Tukbemsom Tribe* and *We Are Israel*. Touhang says that *We Are Israel* convinced him to become a practicing Jew.

These publications argue that the expelled Israelites of antiquity trekked through Persia, Afghanistan, China, and Southeast Asia to Myanmar and finally, northeastern India. As evidence, the publications cite indigenous folklore that tells of a

sacred parchment that tribal ancestors carried for generations before it was lost (possibly a Torah); Kuki songs describing an Exodus-like crossing of the Red Sea; and special springtime sacrifices akin to ancient Passover rituals.

The tribe traces its lineage back to a common ancestor, Manmassi, or Manasseh—whom the locals believe was the biblical Menashe. In fact, countless generations of mourners at Benei Menashe tribal funerals have formulaically referred to the ancestors of the deceased as "Manmassi," "Geled," and "Ulam"; the latter two are Menashe's descendants, according to the Old Testament. Yet it was not until the late 20th century that the Benei Menashe received a copy of the Old Testament translated into their language.

The Benei Menashe's claim that they are descended from the Israelites has also been bolstered by recent scientific tests linking the genetic profiles of the Kuki and those of Middle Eastern peoples and other Jewish communities. On another level, this group's commitment to Judaism is demonstrated by the presence of dozens of well-attended mud and bamboo synagogues with corrugated iron rooftops that dot villages across northeastern India.

Now, it appears there is additional incentive for potential converts from this region to come forward—official recognition in Israel. In late March, the Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, Shlomo Amar, formally recognized the Benei Menashe as "descendants of Israel."

Having already practiced Judaism for decades, 200 Benei Menashe recently were converted in India after diligently studying Jewish tradition and laws, passing tests imposed by a panel of Israeli rabbis brought to India by Shavei Israel, and then submerging in a ritual bath known as a *mikvah*. Approximately 7,000 additional Benei Menashe are awaiting conversion and the resultant opportunity to emigrate to Israel under the Law of Return.

Touhang, however, says that we should not expect to see millions of Benei Menashe suddenly flooding Israel, quipping, "Rome was not built in a day." Then he adds, seriously, "We must all

The Jewish lineage of some of these groups has been challenged—and so has their rationale for seeking refuge in Israel.



**She Really Cooks.** Marta Nipah, a member of the House of Israel, Sefwi Wiawso, is renowned for cooking spicily flavorful dishes, such as fried fish and plantains, over wood and charcoal fires, the only “stove” she can afford. She is seen here leaning against a neighbor’s wall covered with Jewish-themed drawings rendered with lumps of coal.

ensure that only genuine and deserving people are selected for *aliyah*,” because, he contends, no honor could be greater.

## THE HIDDEN JEWS OF THE AMERICAS

In Sao Paulo, Brazil, more than 10,000 miles from northeast India, Hélio Daniel Cordeiro typifies another group of returnees—*Anusim*, Inquisition-era Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, who secretly retained Jewish customs for more than 500 years. Despite the peril of being discovered, the Cordeiros never really internalized their outward veneer of Catholicism—studying the Old Testament, refusing pork and shellfish, lighting candles on Friday evenings, and refraining from work on Saturdays.

“A large portion of the Portuguese colonizers were Jewish or New Christians with Jewish roots—perhaps one-third of Brazil’s early white settlers,” Cordeiro explains, estimating that 18 million Brazilians have Jewish history. After formalizing his return to Judaism nearly 20 years ago, Cordeiro founded a center for returnees called Shema.

Cordeiro estimates that each year for more than a decade he has personally helped 100 descendants of *Anusim* reconnect with Judaism. Their experience is not unique, according to Cordeiro, who notes that many “lost Jews” in Spain, Portugal, and Mexico are rediscovering their heritage, even adopting Orthodox practice in places like Venta Prieta, Mexico, and Belmonte, Portugal.

## SKEPTICS AND OTHER ROADBLOCKS

Not everyone in the Jewish community regards these long-isolated groups as a potential panacea, however. The Jewish lineage of some of them has been challenged—and so has their rationale for seeking refuge in Israel. Although many immigrants are no doubt motivated by a genuine desire to reconnect with their heritage by relocating to the Jewish state, skeptics say that others are doing so primarily to escape economic deprivation. In fact, Israel, fearing a tidal wave of Ethiopians, recently limited the number of immigrants from that famine-ravaged country, and still caps the number of Ethiopian émigrés every year.

On an institutional level, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) takes the lead in assisting needy Jewish communities worldwide—primarily those who enjoy widespread moral and monetary support from elsewhere in the mainstream Jewish world. Unlike Soviet Jews, for example, groups such as the Benei Menashe and the House of Israel do not have such backing, according to a high-level JDC official who asked not to be named.

“As soon as there is momentum in the Jewish community that says, ‘We need to help these communities,’ then the JDC will get on board,” according to another JDC insider who also requested anonymity. “Once you see an avalanche of support, like you did with Soviet Jewry, then you will see the JDC take action—but it

takes a lot to create this momentum.”

Moreover, according to the first JDC source, the organization has an unofficial policy of assisting only Jewish communities that have official recognition from the State of Israel, the final arbiter of Jewish status for purposes of the Law of Return. Israel, in turn, has demonstrated its reluctance to accept newly emerging communities for various political and economic reasons.

For example, Israel has declined to recognize the Igbo tribe, which has tried to secede from Nigeria on the grounds that it is an oppressed minority. Though officials at the JDC and at the Israeli Embassy in Washington did not comment for this article, as requested, Rabbi Rosen offers this assessment of the Igbo situation: “It would be politically very disadvantageous for the Israeli government to recognize a secessionist tribe, since Israel has a very friendly relationship with the Nigerian government and Israel has many business interests in Nigeria.”

Likewise, in November, Israel halted efforts to convert India’s Benei Menashe and bring them to the Jewish state, reportedly following complaints from the new Indian government that rabbis were aggressively proselytizing would-be converts.

Freund, meanwhile, says he has encountered financially based opposition from Israeli authorities. For example, the Interior Ministry claims that the cost of absorbing the next 18,000 Ethiopians is prohibitive, more than \$100,000 per immigrant, so only a limited number are permitted entry each year. But Freund contends that cost estimate is inflated, and that some American-Jewish organizations have been willing to raise the funds to offset expenses.

Others, like Lande, see more insidious barriers to the would-be immigrants. “We run up against charges that we are trying to bribe people to be Jewish, or that they are not sincerely interested in being Jewish—that all they are interested in is bettering themselves socio-economically. Even though I think these charges are by and large bogus, still, we get so much criticism from people who are skeptical—people who look at these lower-class people, who are extremely poor, in some cases. Some people look at any brown or black convert with suspicion and say, ‘I do not care what the rabbi said, these people are not really Jewish.’”

Rosen says that, regrettably, “We tend to think of Jews as white Europeans.” But, he adds: “This white-centric definition of what it means to be a Jew [historically] has never been the case. In the Torah, it says that a mixed multitude went out of Egypt, the *erev rav*. In terms of my own little *shetl* here in Evanston, we have a large number of interfaith families. We have people adopting children from China and Latin America. We have mixed-race families. We have Jews of color. In many ways we have a Jewish community in our congregation that reflects the diversity in America. We should be embracing that, instead of fleeing to this concept that being Jewish means being white. The irony is that I had to go to visit the Igbo in Nigeria to truly understand my own congregation here in Evanston.” Rosen concludes, “In the 21st century, we need to define being Jewish in much more inclusive terms than we have in the past.”

## THE REALITY ON THE GROUND

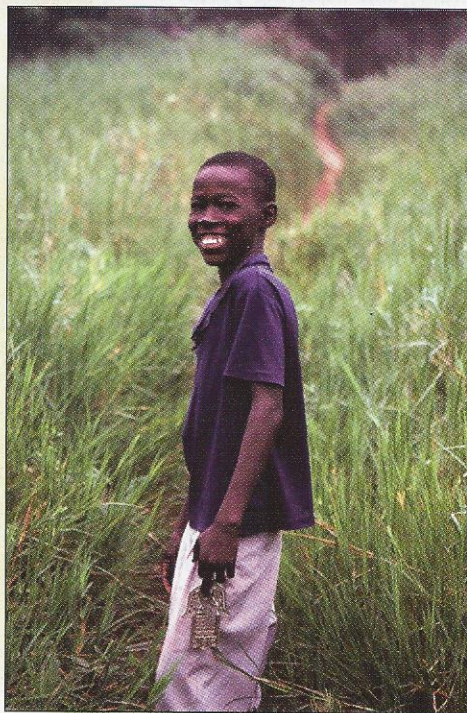
Esther Thangiom-Schomberg is the human face behind the demographics.

She was born and raised in Manipur, northeastern India, where her father was one of the first leaders of the Benei Menashe. In 1997, at age 22, she came to Israel as part of the early wave of Benei Menashe *olim* (immigrants), formalizing her Jewish conversion soon after she arrived.

She married a Jewish man with European roots (hence, the surname Schomberg), and they have one young daughter and another child on the way. Thangiom-Schomberg works for the Israeli branch of an American high-tech company, where she supervises 10 employees. She still finds time to raise her family in an observant household in Jerusalem.

“People see those, like me, who don’t ‘look’ Jewish at all, and yet are so passionate about it, and it makes them think twice,” says Thangiom-Schomberg. Although she is proud of her young family’s mixed ethnicity and her Benei Menashe heritage, she adds emphatically: “We concentrate first on trying to be a Jewish family.”

As for her children, it seems likely that Israel and Judaism are the only life they will ever know—although it remains to be seen whether they will remain an ethnic anomaly in the Jewish state. If the vision of the outreach activists is realized, they will not be. Perhaps in 20 years or so, under this scenario, the Thangiom-Schomberg children will be surrounded by like-minded Jewish contemporaries who happen to have Igbo, *Anusi*, Shona, or Ghanaian backgrounds. And unlike today’s Jews, none of them will feel that their people are hanging by a demographic thread. ☺



### Hitting The Trail, Ghanaian Style.

Kwame Armah, proudly displaying a *hamsa*, a hand-shaped ancient symbol used as a protective amulet by both Jews and Muslims. The keys to the local synagogue are attached to the *hamsa*.