YULIA EGOROVA

SHAHID PERWEZ

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Contesting Caste and Religion in South India

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The Jews of Andhra Pradesh

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1

Introduction

THE HANUKKAH SERVICE in the village began shortly before noon with around thirty members present. Soon after, more people from the village came in, bringing the number of participants to about eighty. They sang and they prayed—most songs and prayers were in Telugu, and some were in Hebrew.

After the service was over, the ceremony of the Torah scroll introduction began. Jacob, the son and nephew of the congregations' leaders, lifted the scroll and placed it on the platform built for this occasion outside the synagogue. The leaders—Sadok and Shmuel Yacobi—blessed Jacob, gave him instructions on how to open the scroll, and he carefully lifted it for everybody to see. He then circumambulated the synagogue seven times, community members following him—all dancing, drumming, and chanting "long live Bene Ephraim." Jacob came back to the platform and showed the scroll to the congregation amidst loud cheers. The people then followed him into the synagogue, where he raised the scroll and took it around the room, so that everyone, including the children, could touch it. After that, his uncle, Shmuel, read a few lines from the scroll. Eventually Jacob closed it, put it in a box, and placed the box on a specially designated shelf.

Everyone came out and took their seats on the chairs under the roof-tent. Community leaders took their places on the platform. First Shmuel talked about the historical context of Hanukkah and the message that it sends to the people. They then called to the stage Shahid and a young Orthodox Jewish man from Amsterdam who came to the village with a film crew to make a reality TV show. After the speeches and a vote of thanks from Jacob and his sisters, most of the congregation departed to their houses. Those who came from outside the village stayed back to have lunch prepared by Jacob's mother.

FIGURE 1 Synagogue in Kothareddypalem. Photograph by Yulia Egorova.

This ceremony of the Torah scroll introduction took place in the village of Kothareddypalem in the Bene Ephraim community synagogue and was part of Hanukkah celebrations. The Bene Ephraim are a group of Christianized Madiga Dalits (untouchables) of the Guntur district in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, who in the late 1980s announced their descent from the Lost Tribes of Israel and their link to Judaism. The group formally proclaimed their religious affiliation in 1991, when its leaders, brothers Shmuel and Sadok Yacobi, established a synagogue—the first ever Jewish hall of worship in the history of Andhra (see fig. 1). Their small congregation began to observe the Sabbath, to eat kosher food, to circumcise their male children, and to celebrate Jewish festivals. The Bene Ephraim at the same time started seeking contacts with overseas Jewish communities and looking for ways to immigrate to the State of Israel. In the meantime, community leaders recorded their origin narratives, which emphasize the antiquity of the Bene Ephraim and the authenticity of their Jewish past.

This book is an anthropological study about the multiple and diverse meanings of Jewishness and the way these meanings are employed and extended by a Dalit group in search of its place in Indian society and in the world. We address these issues through the story of the Bene Ephraim and of their complex relations with their village neighbors, with local and national authorities, and with Jewish and Israeli organizations, and

demonstrate how a Dalit community has reinterpreted Jewishness as a form of social protest.

The brief episode from the life of the community with which we started the chapter encapsulates a number of important aspects and challenges of being Jewish in Andhra Pradesh, and points to some of the main themes of the book. The (replica) Torah scroll, which was donated to the community by two visitors from New York, indicates that the Bene Ephraim have already succeeded to some extent in establishing a connection with Jewish people from abroad.[1] It also indexes their dependence on foreign donors. The Bene Ephraim's eagerness to celebrate Hanukkah—a Jewish festival that is not associated with the history of the Lost Tribes[2]—and to host a European Jewish reality TV show both symbolize their desire to join world Judaism and suggest that to do so they have had to amend their own tradition in accordance with more mainstream Jewish practice. Finally, the episode highlights that the organization of the community's life depends to a large extent on the efforts of one family that is charged with the task of defining and defending community boundaries.

The book will present the story of this community and will situate it in its wider political and social context. We will demonstrate how the example of the Bene Ephraim can throw light on a wide range of issues in national and international politics, such as the caste system and social mobility in India, the conflict in the Middle East, the rhetoric of the "war on terror," public understandings of what it means to be Jewish, and debates surrounding the Law of Return in Israel. We will examine who forms the Bene Ephraim community at the moment, and who can claim membership in it in principle. We will discuss how the definitions of what it means to be a Bene Ephraim have been changing in the past twenty years and how community members see their relationship with and historical connection to other Madiga and to the wider Indian society.

Throughout the book we will be interrogating the specificity of Bene Ephraim Judaism, the community's understandings of Jewish culture, and the mechanisms through which their practice is developing. In what ways do the Bene Ephraim consider themselves to be Jewish? Are there any differences in the way individual Bene Ephraim view the Jewishness of their community? Which particular Jewish practices have the community chosen to adopt, and what kinds of channels are its members using to obtain knowledge of Jewish tradition?

The book will also discuss how the Bene Ephraim are perceived by a wide range of actors, from their neighbors in the village and the local

authorities, to Jewish communities around the world and in the State of Israel. Are they still seen as Madiga untouchables or has their Judaization helped them raise their status in the local hierarchy? Which Jewish organizations around the world have proven to be sympathetic to or cautious of their claims? Which political groups and actors in Israel support or oppose their cause and for what reasons? Did the desire of the Bene Ephraim to move to the Promised Land affect the trajectory of their tradition's development and the way they define community boundaries?

On a more general level, we will discuss how the Bene Ephraim compare to other Judaizing communities around the world and how they challenge conventional understandings of what it means to be Jewish. In the context of Indian politics, we will consider how their social liberation strategies mirror or contest those of other Dalit movements. Finally, the book will use the example of the Bene Ephraim to reflect on the wider questions of conversion and the legitimization of identities. Which "identity markers" has the community deployed in negotiating their place among other Jewish groups of the world? To what extent and in what ways are Bene Ephraim modes of self-identification being shaped by the responses of others, both on the macro level of national and international politics and on the micro level of everyday interactions in the village? What does this case study tell us about the relationship between external categorization and internal group identification?

In the last two sections of this introduction we will explain how each of the chapters attempts to answer these questions, and what methods we used in our study; but first, let us look at the literature that has engaged with academic debates relevant for our discussion.

Lost Tribes and other Jews

What does it mean to be Jewish in the contemporary world? Can any community declare itself to be Jewish, and how do they convince the rest of the world of their right to do so? Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi have observed that the history of Judaism has been characterized by a tension between conflicting tendencies toward universalism, on the one hand, and particularism, on the other. They remind us that though Judaism has never been an actively proselytizing 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, have embraced the Jewish tradition (2002: vii).

In academic and popular literature these communities have been variously described as Judaizing movements,[3] "isolated" and "emerging" Jewish communities, and "lost" or "hidden" Jews.[4] Some of these groups have embraced Jewish practices without trying to establish a genealogical connection with either ancient or modern Jews. A good example of this type of engagement with Judaism is provided by the Russian Subbotniks and the Jews of San Nicandro (Italy). The Subbotniks—the name comes from the Russian word for Saturday and became associated with the community because of their observance of the Sabbath—are the descendants of a movement of Russian peasants who in the eighteenth century started observing Jewish practices. Through the ages some Subbotnik groups actively sought contact with the Ashkenazi Jews of Russia and were open to marriage with them, so at the moment their descendants can reference a connection to a "conventionally" Jewish community. However, originally, the Subbotniks emerged as a group that embraced Jewish tradition without adopting a narrative about Jewish descent. [5]

The movement of San Nicandro was based on an interpretation of the visions of one man—Donato Manduzio, a World War I veteran—who believed that the God of the Old Testament commanded him to re-establish the biblical religion. In the 1920s Manduzio acquired a group of followers, and the community started observing biblical festivals, while Talmudic practices were frowned upon, as Manduzio saw them as contrary to the spirit of the Bible. The first groups of the San Nicandro community moved to the State of Israel shortly after it was established, and made a remarkably successful integration. Those who remained in Italy stayed to practice a Judaism of a more syncretic nature, while at the same time keeping contact with their relatives in the Jewish State (Trevisan Semi 2002a).

A different type of engagement with the Jewish tradition was demonstrated in the twentieth century by the group of crypto-Jews, or Bnei Anousim.[6] Crypto-Jews claim descent from the Jews of Spain and Portugal who were forcibly converted to Christianity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but continued to practice Judaism in secret. Some of them participated in the colonization of the Americas. Anthropologist Seth Kunin has observed that evidence for the existence of crypto-Jews in New Mexico dates back to the end of the seventeenth century, but then it ceases until the beginning of the twentieth century, and it is only in the second half of the twentieth century that Bnei Anousim reappeared as a visible group talking openly about their Jewish heritage (2009: 9). The Anousim thus claim a genealogical connection to the Jewish people, yet they lack "conventional"

evidence to prove their theory and cite family tradition in defense of their right to be Jewish.

Some of the "emerging" communities, similarly to the Bene Ephraim, assert their Jewishness by claiming 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, with ten tribes inhabiting the northern kingdom, while the rest occupying the southern. As a result of the Assyrian invasion of the eighth 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, but the story about the Lost Tribes of Israel has had a lively history (Parfitt 2002a).[7]

The first documented "anthropological" encounter of the Jewish communities with the Lost Tribes narrative occurred in al-Qayarawan (contemporary Tunisia), where in the ninth century a man showed up who identified himself as Eldad, a member of the tribe of Dan. This encounter produced three documents, one being *Sefer Eldad*,[8] which, *inter alia*, detailed the whereabouts of the Ten Lost Tribes stretching from northwestern China to Ethiopia. Many writers challenged the authenticity of Eldad's accounts already in the Middle Ages; however, his narrative proved to be influential and went well beyond the Jewish world (Ben-Dor Benite 2009: 101).

As historian Zvi Ben-Dor Benite observes, "[o]ver the course of 2,000 years, Jews, Christians of various denominations, and, to a lesser extent, Muslims had used the tribes as a point of reference, tying historical developments to their exile and return" (Ben-Dor Benite 2009: 4). The Jewish tradition has developed a rich array of stories about the Lost Tribes (Ben-Dor Benite 2009: 13). In Christian Europe of the period of colonial expansion, the narrative of the Ten Lost Tribes developed as a new means for understanding and relating to people and cultures previously unknown to Europeans (Parfitt and Trevisan Semi 2002: ix). Jews and Lost Tribes featured prominently in modern Christian millenarian discourses, where the conversion of the Ten Tribes was seen as a precursor to the conversion of the rest of the Jews (Parfitt 2002a: 65–90, Ben-Dor Benite 2009: 173–77) More generally, the notion of Lost Tribes came to be widely used by Europeans to explain the communities that were new to them (Parfitt 2002c). Not surprisingly, the encounters between Christian missionaries

and communities perceived by them as Israelite, could have easily led to the emergence and/or consolidation of the Jewish self-identification among the latter. In India, Christian missionaries appear to have played an important role in the development of the Judaism of the Bene Israel of the Konkan coast. As Mitch Numark has demonstrated, it is not only that the missionaries who worked among the Bene Israel failed to convert them to Christianity, but their instruction strengthened the community's Jewishness, as the Bene Israel took from the missionaries what they needed most— knowledge of the Hebrew language and the Old Testament—and disregarded the rest (Numark 2012). To return to the more recent history of Indian Judaizing groups, Christian context was very important for the emergence of the Bene Menashe (Parfitt 2002a: 133, Samra 1991, 1992, Weil 2003), whose movement, as we will discuss in subsequent chapters, may have contributed to the development of the Bene Ephraim tradition in Andhra Pradesh.

A vivid example of nineteenth-century missionary activities associated with the search for the Lost Tribes is Joseph Wolff (1795–1862), a Jewish convert to Christianity born in Bavaria. Wolff first converted to Roman Catholicism, but then went to England and joined the Anglican Church. He decided his objective was to preach Christianity to the Jews in the "East" and search for the Lost Tribes. For this purpose he travelled widely in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and India, leaving multiple journals and travelogues describing his journeys (Ben-Dor Benite 2009: 213). Regarding the Jews of India, he was convinced that the Bene Israel belonged to the Lost Tribes, and he tried to restore them to Christianity (Wolff 1937: 138). He appears to have met some of them in Bombay, but his attempts to preach bit dust. As we noted above with reference to Numark's study, the Bene Israel were happy to send their children to missionary schools, but would refuse to adopt Christian beliefs. Indeed, as Wolff writes, "I conversed with several of them about Jesus Christ, our Lord; they produced objections against his divinity, which they have evidently heard from the other Jews." And yet, Wolff continues, "They know the commandments of our Lord by heart in the English tongue; and they begin now to send their children to the schools of Scotch Missionaries" (1837: 320). Interestingly, we also learn from one of Wolff's journals that he travelled from Hyderabad to Madras via Nellore, which means that he must have passed through the area in coastal Andhra where the Bene Ephraim live today (Wolff 1837: 295–97). There is no mention of them in his travelogues; however, given his interest in the Lost Tribes and enthusiasm in

preaching about them, it is not outside of the realm of possibility that his teachings may have had some influence on local narratives.

A number of groups became attracted to Judaism because the historical experience of the Jewish people's suffering seemed to provide a new model for explaining—and thereby making more tolerable—their own condition of discrimination (Parfitt and Trevisan Semi 2002: viii). In the twentieth century numerous groups declaring Jewish descent emerged in Africa and among African Americans (Bruder 2008).[9] For the latter, reconnecting with the Jewish people implied a promise for a more solid historical grounding and more positive collective memories than those associated with slave trade (Singer 2000, Markowitz et al. 2003, Jackson 2005, Dorman 2006). One such group, which became known as the Hebrew Israelites, was formed from the Black Hebraic groups in Chicago at the height of the Civil Rights movement. Hebrew Israelites turned to the Old Testament in search of their origin and found in it a more promising option for self-identification and political affiliations than fighting for civil rights and an improvement of material conditions in the United States where they faced discrimination, police brutality, and had to negotiate traumatic collective memories. In doing so they employed the narrative of the Jewish diaspora to redefine their kinship in the history of humanity (Markowitz et al. 2003). At the same time, they explicitly dissociated themselves from "mainstream Jews," claiming to be not Jewish, but Hebrew, thus implicitly trying to broaden the conventional boundaries of Jewish identity (Fernheimer 2009: 47–48).

In Africa, some Judaizing communities also found analogies in the experiences of their members and those of the Jews and sought to establish an ancestral connection with ancient Hebrews (Bruder 2008: 134). To give just a few examples, the Igbo of Nigeria, the House of Israel of Ghana, the Lemba of South Africa and Zimbabwe all saw parallels between their religious practices and those of ancient Israelites (Bruder 2008, chapters 9, 10). At the same time, other groups, for instance, the Black Philadelphia Church of Soweto, chose to embrace Jewish faith without making any genealogical claims (Bruder 2008: 175).

The story of the Bene Ephraim both illustrates and puts to the test the wide range of approaches to joining Judaism and the complex and multifaceted net of understandings of what it means to be Jewish. Like other communities claiming Israelite descent, the Bene Ephraim have tapped into the Lost Tribes tradition. Similarly to the crypto-Jews, they embraced a narrative about a "hidden" Jewish past. Like Donato Manduzio from San

Nicandro, some Bene Ephraim have had visions directing them to Jewish practice. Like the Hebrew Israelites, the leader of the Bene Ephraim has tried to challenge recognized notions of Jewishness by dissociating his community from the rest of the Jewish world, while at the same time he has advocated emigration to Israel as a way of social and spiritual liberation.

In the following chapters we will use the example of the Bene Ephraim to explore ethnographically the trajectories that these diverse routes to Jewishness may take. We expect our analysis to call attention to possibilities and pitfalls they present for communities embracing the Jewish tradition, as well as to the potential that they have for redefining notions of Jewishness among different audiences. More specifically, we will return to the wider theoretical debates about varying "dimensions" of Jewish culture in chapter 4, where we will explore the encounters between the Bene Ephraim and Jews from other parts of the world. In the meantime, let us focus on issues raised in the study of Judaism in South Asia that will be important for our discussion.

Indo-Judaica

The Bene Ephraim are not the first group to claim the Lost Tribes status in India, nor are they the first Jewish group on the subcontinent. By the time the Kothareddypalem synagogue was constructed in 1991, the small population of Indian Jews was represented by four communities—the Jews of Cochin, the Baghdadi Jews, the Bene Israel, and the Bene Menashe. The Jews of Cochin and the Baghdadi Jews have always been recognized as Jewish. The history of the Bene Israel resonates with the current experiences of the Bene Ephraim a bit more. Their community originally resided mainly on the Konkan coast of Western India, and some of their members moved to Bombay by the middle of the eighteenth century (Isenberg 1988: 50). Their early practices were remotely reminiscent of Judaic ones, and in the course of the nineteenth century the Jews of Cochin, the Baghdadi Jews, and the Jewish visitors from Europe gradually introduced the community to a wider spectrum of the Jewish religion. According to the most popular tradition of the Bene Israel, their ancestors had been shipwrecked near the village of Navgaon on the Konkan coast of Western India in 175 BCE after they had fled ancient Palestine during the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes. Only seven men and seven women survived, becoming the forefathers of the community. The particular obscurity of the Bene Israel origins contributed substantially to

the difficulties they encountered when trying to gain recognition by other Jewish groups in India and abroad.[10]

The Bene Menashe community emerged in the early 1950s from the Christianized tribes of Chin, Kuki, and Mizo settled in the Indian states of Mizoram, Manipur, Assam, and the plains of Burma.[11] Once introduced to the Bible in the later British period, these groups found parallels between ancient Jewish customs and their indigenous traditions. This led some of them to the conclusion that their tribes were of Israelite descent. In the 1970s the leaders of the movement started seeking contact with Israeli authorities with a view to obtain permission to settle in Israel, and with Jewish organizations in the Diaspora. Their position was strengthened by their connection with Rabbi Avichail from Amishav (discussed in chapter 5), an organization aimed at seeking out the Lost Tribes and assisting them in repatriating to the State of Israel (Halkin 1992, Levine 2008, Samra 1991, 1992, 1996, 2012, Weil 1997, 2003). In 2005 the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel Shlomo Amar announced his decision to recognize the Bene Menashe as a Lost Tribe and to assist in their formal conversion to Orthodox Judaism, which would ease their immigration to the Jewish State. Such conversions were started but had to be halted later in the same year after the Indian authorities informed the Foreign Ministry of Israel that they were not supportive of this initiative.[12] The Bene Ephraim movement in some respects mirrors that of the Bene Menashe, and we will return to this group in chapter 5 to explore the broader socio-political context of the Indian Judaizing groups' development in light of Israel's immigration policies.

Studies of Indian Jewish communities have raised a wide range of theoretical issues that are relevant to our discussion. Not surprisingly, the question of "Who is a Jew?" featured prominently in the history of Indian Jewish groups, particularly in their relations with each other. The so-called Baghdadis—Arabic-speaking Jews from different parts of the Middle East—hesitated to recognize the Bene Israel as "proper" Jews on account of their "obscure" origins and "unorthodox" practices. Toward the end of the British rule, the Baghdadis led a campaign to be categorized as a European community in the colonial society of the subcontinent. They posited that their group should be assigned this status on the grounds that they were culturally closer to the British and that Jews in general were "white." In this context the Baghdadis became particularly keen on dissociating themselves from the Bene Israel, who they thought were culturally and "genealogically" closer to Indian populations (Musleah 1975:

347). In the end their request was rejected, but the episode demonstrates that questions of "documented" origins, "proper" practices, and even lifestyle have played a prominent role in defining "who is Jewish" in colonial India (Roland 1998: 121–22). Baghdadi Jews kept raising doubts about the Jewishness of the Bene Israel and in the second half of the twentieth century the image of a "not entirely Jewish" group continued to haunt this Marathi-speaking group even after they emigrated to Israel.[13]

It appears that it was important for the Bene Israel to defend their story of Jewish origin not just for the sake of establishing a secure place on the map of world Jewish communities, but also to shed the low-caste image ascribed to them by Hindu neighbors. According to their documented history, the Bene Israel were originally associated with the caste of Telis of the Konkan coast, a relatively low-status caste of oil pressers, which put the Bene Israel just above the bar dividing castes into "pure" and "untouchable" (Roland 1998: 13). By the end of colonial rule, the Bene Israel moved considerably up the social ladder with many members adopting middle-class occupations and some of them becoming high-ranking professionals. Nevertheless, they were still perceived as a low-caste group in the local hierarchy (Ezekiel 1948: 26–27, Strizower 1971: 22–23, Roland 1998: 22–23). As we will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, though the Bene Ephraim represent a community with a very different story of origin and history of engagement with the Jewish tradition, their problems of recognition are in many respects similar to those that the Bene Israel have faced. Some of these problems stem from wider debates about what it means to be Jewish; others—such as the issue of caste affiliation—are peculiar to the subcontinent. As we will see in chapter 3, a number of commentators who became aware of the Bene Ephraim's claims have suggested that "becoming Jewish" is a strategic move on the part of community leaders with an aim to attract the attention of foreign Jewish donors, to shed the image of untouchables, and to emigrate to the State of Israel. Our analysis will question these accounts of Bene Ephaim religious development. We will argue that their openness to contacts with the wider world of Judaism is fuelled by a desire both to become full members of the universal Jewish community and to challenge and redefine conventional understandings of what it means to be Jewish. This book will demonstrate that the community's self-identification with the Jewish tradition is as much an expression of their pride in being Madiga as it is a protest against the caste system. To understand the caste context of the Bene Ephraim story better, let us now pause to highlight the main themes

in academic literature on untouchability and Dalit movements, which will be relevant to our analysis.

The Madiga and the Dalits

The practice of untouchability was outlawed in the constitution of independent India; however, just like the caste system itself, it is still present on the subcontinent. The constitutional term for the untouchables is Scheduled Castes (SCs), a category created in 1935 when socially disadvantaged groups were listed on a schedule to obtain access to reserved seats (Hardtmann 2009: 1). Untouchables are also known by the term "Dalits," a Marathi word for "the oppressed." The term was coined in the nineteenth century by the social activist Jyotirao Phule to stress the unfair and imposed nature of the condition of untouchability (Zelliot 1996: 267).

One of the key debates in the anthropology of the caste system has centered around the question about the way Dalit and low-caste groups see the relational nature of Hinduism. Do they accept or reject their place in it? Do they share Brahmanical values? By the 1970s a consensus had emerged among anthropologists of India that Dalit beliefs and practices differ significantly from those of communities located higher in the social structure, and that the Dalits refuse to accept their inferior position in it (Gough 1956, Mandelbaum 1964, Berreman 1971, Mencher 1974). In 1979 Michael Moffat challenged this view to argue that untouchables replicate the caste system by subjecting their inferiors to discrimination (Moffat 1979). This position, in its turn, has been critiqued by Robert Deliège, who suggests that this "replication" of the caste system does not necessarily mean consensus with it. Moreover, he demonstrates that untouchables do not always replicate the caste system, but develop alternative ideologies. When they do replicate it by subjecting their inferiors to its ideology, this does not mean that they accept their own position in the system, he argues (1992). Instead, untouchable groups come up with narratives of origin that explain how their ancestors had lost their higher status by mistake or as a punishment (Deliège 1993).

Anthropologists who have worked among the Madiga of Andhra Pradesh appear to be in broad agreement with this position and suggest that, far from being ready to accept their low status in the caste hierarchy, the Madiga strive to celebrate their caste identity. T. R. Singh notes that in the twentieth century Madiga leaders revisited their narratives of origin to improve their community's image. Their new narratives emphasize the

antiquity and the indigeneity of the Madiga, portraying them as the oldest inhabitants of the region and as former rulers of the country, who were defeated and had to accept a subordinate position that has remained until today (Singh 1969: 7–9). Simon Charsley has discussed the way contemporary Madiga performances of caste *puranas*[14] emphasize the practical importance of leatherwork and account for poverty within a positive context (2004). Clarinda Still has suggested in her recent study of the Madiga that nowadays few members of these communities view poverty and discrimination as a God-given fact to be accepted and tolerated. Most struggle to improve this state of affairs by negotiating better conditions and creating more positive markers of self-identification. People question the bases on which they were ascribed a low status in the local hierarchy (such as the association with "ritually polluting" leather and meat) and instead celebrate these particular markers of their caste group (Still 2007).[15]

In the twentieth century different Dalit movements emerged to challenge the caste system and the status of the untouchables (Hardtmann 2009). As Hugo Gorringe observed in his study of Dalit movements in Tamil Nadu, it would be shortsighted to suggest that nothing changed in the position of untouchables since Independence, as the Indian constitution did undermine the legitimacy of caste and provided disadvantaged groups with the means to improve their status. However, Dalits have to continue to challenge and renegotiate traditional relations of power at the level of local council politics and everyday interactions with their caste neighbors (Gorringe 2005: 20–21). Gorringe observes that the position of rural Dalits is particularly precarious due to their dependence upon upper-caste landlords. In this situation asserting their rights makes Dalits particularly vulnerable to ostracism and violence. Urban Dalits do not escape caste discrimination either, but in both environments caste inequality is increasingly challenged by the modernization of the economy and affirmative action programs (Gorringe 2005: 26). As Gorringe put it, "Whilst Dalit activists contest the efficacy of government programmes, the emergence of an educated, professional and relatively wealthy Dalit middle class constitutes a resource base for social action. The rise of Dalit consciousness and resistance would have been much harder without alternative sources of income and increasing levels of education and self-respect" (Gorringe 2005: 26).

Anthropologists and sociologists of South Asia have fruitfully engaged with the topic of social mobility in India in general and among Dalit and other low-caste groups in particular. The voluminous literature that these

researchers produced has explored various aspects of Dalit upward social mobility in a wide range of ethnographic contexts, focusing *inter alia* on the relationship between social mobility and education, gender, occupation, material well-being, and religion. As Filippo and Caroline Osella observed in their seminal study of social mobility among the former untouchable Izhava community of Kerala, the question about what constitutes social mobility has become the subject of sociological debate. Do the movement of individuals into higher social layers, the abolition of certain social layers and the emergence of new ones, or the re-evaluation of existing social strata represent examples of increased mobility (Osella and Osella 2000: 12)? Accounts of social mobility did appear in our conversations with the Bene Ephraim, some of whom aspire for their children to achieve a higher level of (preferably English-language) education that they themselves had, to obtain middle-class jobs, to shed the stigma of untouchability, and ultimately to have a better quality of life. However, all our respondents were adamant that they did not expect any of these goals to be achieved through Jewish practice. On the contrary, they have stressed to us that in order to be able to study Judaism more in depth, they would first need to move up the social ladder, to become economically independent of the local landlords, and to improve their educational level.

These assertions appear to resonate with the development of the community in the twentieth century. As we will discuss in chapter 2, the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim could be read as a result of one Madiga family's success in achieving higher levels of education and relative economic and social independence from upper-caste neighbors, which allowed them to move out of untouchable quarters, and eventually establish a synagogue, commence Jewish practice, and attract overseas attention. As David Mosse suggests, "The ability to acquire and sustain alternative identities, or to redefine the meaning of symbols of inferiority, depends crucially on having the power and resources to change existing relations of dependence" (1996: 2). As we will argue in the following chapters, in the case considered here, "becoming Jewish" can be seen as an *outcome* of the social mobility of some Bene Ephraim rather than a prerequisite to their expected future social and/or economic advancement. At the same time, their Judaization could be interpreted as an attempt to recast Madiga Dalit identity in terms more positive than those supplied in the discourse of upper-caste Hindus. We would therefore prefer to describe the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim as first and foremost a project in

communal self-empowerment, which may or may not have the potential to result in some forms of social mobility.

The Bene Ephraim are of course not the first Dalit group to adopt an alternative religious affiliation—though they are the first to turn to the Jewish tradition. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed mass conversions of Dalits to Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, all of which were supposed to dissociate the untouchables from their status in the caste system. The first of these movements was famously initiated in the 1950s by Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a key author of the Indian constitution. As Gauri Viswanathan notes, Ambedkar's conversion initiative could be seen as "a re-writing of religious and cultural change into a form of political intervention" (1998: 212) and an attempt at "developing an alternative epistemological and ethical foundation for a national community" (Viswanathan 1998: 213). In recasting Buddhism into a Dalit liberation theology, Ambedkar interprets the history of untouchability as a story of religious conflict. In his treatise *The Untouchables* he describes the Dalits' ancestors as "Broken Men," who converted to Buddhism in 400 CE and were subjugated by caste Hindus in the aftermath of Brahmanism's victory over Buddhism. The "Broken Men" refused to return to Brahmanism and to adopt Brahmanic practices, such as avoiding meat, and as punishment were defined by the upper castes as impure (Viswanathan 1998: 232).

Viswanathan notes that by offering Dalits a narrative that inscribes them as agents of history rather than victims of economic oppression, Ambedkar provided a novel faith-based framework for political renewal. This strategy was also a bold response to Gandhi's offer to rid Hinduism of its discriminatory practices—an initiative that would confine agency to caste Hindus and leave Dalits as passive observers (Viswanathan 1998: 232). One could also add that Ambedkar's framework is not dissimilar to that of the Hebrew Israelites and other African American Judaizing movements, whose leaders reinterpreted the history of slave trade in terms of religious resistance. Thus, subsequently some of them argued that Africa was the spiritual source of the Jewish religion and that Africans had lost the knowledge of their true heritage because of slavery. One of these leaders, Prophet Cherry, conjectured that black people had been exiled from ancient Palestine by the Romans into West Africa, where they were captured and sold as slaves to America (Chireau 2000: 24).

As we will show in chapter 2, Shmuel Yacobi's treatise *Cultural Hermeneutics* embarks on a project similar to that of Ambedkar (Yacobi 2002). In Yacobi's book the ancestors of the untouchables are presented as a community who stood up to the practices of caste Hindus and were therefore punished with untouchability. However, in Yacobi's interpretation of Dalit history this community was not Buddhist, but Israelite. While Ambedkar sought to convert to a religion that still originated on the Indian subcontinent (the only other religion that he seriously considered apart from Buddhism was Sikhism), Yacobi explicitly chose a tradition that was completely "external" to India.

In this respect, his position is akin to the stance of those activists who prefer to dissociate untouchables from Indian religious cultures completely, and see a connection between Dalit practice and that of Muslims and Christians. For instance, Dalit activist and writer Kancha Ilaiah suggests in his critique of some right-wing Hindu ideologues' call to include Dalits in a crusade against Muslims and Christians that Dalits have much more in common with the practitioners of these two religions than with caste Hindus (1996: xi). Similarly, Shmuel Yacobi establishes a connection between Madiga practices and those of a religion that originated outside of the Indian subcontinent, but goes one step further and chooses a tradition with a strong "particularist" image to establish not only a connection of belief and practice, but a genealogical link to it as well.

Finally, it is important for our analysis to engage with Chris Fuller's argument that any study of caste in contemporary India should take into account the fact that caste has been thoroughly delegitimized as a social order (Fuller 1996). Or, as Still commented, drawing upon this argument, "There is by now much evidence to suggest that caste as system has diminished, while caste as a form of identity has grown" (Still 2007: 70). She argues that in coastal Andhra the "Madiga caste" may have been declared dead as a notion in the social hierarchy, but it has been concretized and politicized as an identity: "There is no question that Madigas bear the brunt of different forms of caste-related inequality in their daily lives. But there is no total, all-encompassing caste system into which they easily slot. Rather, individual Madigas draw upon different discourses and practices to make sense of their status in relation to others" (Still 2007: 71). As we will see in the following chapters, Shmuel Yacobi's conjectures about the relationship between Israelite and Dalit histories draw on varied and differing notions of what it means to be Jewish and what it means to be Madiga. These histories present "Jews" and "Madigas" as symbols

for multiple and sometimes conflicting discourses of self-identification, a phenomenon that leads us to another body of literature that has shaped our analysis—literature that deals with wider issues of identity construction and religious affiliations.

Conversion and the Rhetoric of Identity

Our study could be seen as a contribution to anthropological research of religious conversion, though conversion processes discussed here will need to be understood in a very broad and unconventional sense. As Andrew Buckser and Stephen Glazier suggested, the social-anthrop ological-ethnographic perspective is suited particularly well for research which aims to call attention to the "small-scale dynamics of conversion" (2003: xiii), and we expect this book to elucidate the minutiae of the process which in public discourse would sometimes be described as mass conversion to Judaism. We will emphasize throughout the book that community members explicitly refuse to call their return to Jewish tradition "conversion." Nevertheless, in looking for ways to conceptualize the Bene Ephraim's Judaization (the way this term is understood in the book is discussed in the next section), we will use theoretical notions developed by anthropologists and social theorists who have worked with more "conventional" conversion movements.

To begin with, we agree with the observation made by a number of scholars of conversion that the term may be applied to a wide range of personal and collective transformations which could be studied in a variety of contexts—from personal and spiritual to economic and political (Coleman 2003: 17–18). As Simon Coleman has put it, conversion is a "fuzzy term." He made this observation in respect of Christian conversions, where the transition from one system of beliefs to others is supposed to be marked by a much more formalized set of procedures than those in the case of the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim, as well as of many other Lost Tribes communities who have not yet undergone a formal conversion to Judaism. It would therefore be even more true to say that conversion could not be unproblematically used as an analytical tool to describe the Bene Ephraim's engagement with the Jewish tradition, particularly, given that, as we will demonstrate in chapters 3 and 6, for many community members this engagement has been developing in a fluid, syncretic, and incremental manner. As the Comaroffs have suggested in their discussion of Christian missionary activities in southern Africa, the

very term "conversion" carries a European connotation that simplifies the actual social and cultural processes that it attempts to delineate. "How well does it grasp the highly variable, usually gradual, often implicit, and demonstrably 'syncretic' manner in which social identities, cultural styles, and ritual practices of African peoples were transformed by the evangelical encounter?," they ask (1991: 250). This suggestion is certainly useful to build upon in discussing processes of Judaization and Christianization in the subcontinent, which have also demonstrated a high degree of syncretism, and we will return to this topic in chapter 3.

In discussing issues of the more general "Jewish identity" of the Bene Ephraim, we engage with the approach advocated by Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, which states that though identity is an important category of practice, it makes for a problematic category of analysis (2000). What they propose instead is to use references to context-specific processes of identification. This book will use an ethnography of Bene Ephraim narratives and practices to highlight the way notions of the Jewish people, Judaism, and the Bene Ephraim are construed in differing and diverse contexts of our informants' interactions with each other, with their neighbors, with Indian authorities, and with foreign visitors. We will explore the interaction between processes of internal group identification and external categorization and will avoid making generalizations about the emergence or development of a specific Bene Ephraim identity divorced from the actors of identification.

In this respect, we will consider what light this case study might cast on theoretical discussions about the interface between external categorization and internal group identification. It has been suggested that social categorization and group identification are mutually implicated and co-produce each other (Jenkins 2008). The case of the Bene Ephraim raises the question about the degree to which group identification and social categorization should be viewed as oppositional notions. It will be demonstrated that the Bene Ephraim definitions of group membership and their portrayal of the social problems faced by the community have undergone drastic changes since the emergence of the movement twenty years ago. While in the beginning community leaders were keen to stress their affinity to the disadvantaged castes of India and framed their social and economic problems in terms of the upper- and lower-caste dichotomy, later on they modified their origin story to dissociate the community from the untouchables. In the past, Shmuel Yacobi made a claim that all Madiga, if not all untouchables of India, were Bene Ephraim. Recently he

has redefined the community's boundaries to include only a very limited number of Madiga families in Andhra Pradesh. Their self-representation as victims of caste domination gave way to expressions of concern about the possibility of becoming victims of anti-Jewish terrorist attacks. It will be suggested that, on the one hand, this change in the way Bene Ephraim chose to represent their history, determine community membership, and frame the socio-political problems that the community has faced is linked to their attempts to be recognized as a Jewish group and to be accepted in the State of Israel. On the other hand, it indicates that the Bene Ephraim have interpreted Jewishness as a site of agency which opens multiple avenues for self-definition.

Thus, on one level the movement appears to present a process of internal group formation assisted by very few external agents. The Bene Ephraim first emerged as a discursive entity. The State of Israel, local authorities, and even most of the Bene Ephraim's immediate neighbors refuse to recognize the community as anything other than Christian Madiga. However, an analysis of the way religious affiliation is narrated and performed by the Bene Ephraim and of the way group membership is negotiated in the village reveals that community identification is implicated in external categorization to the degree when it becomes impossible to disentangle the two processes from each other. Moreover, it will be demonstrated that in the process of developing community identification, the Bene Ephraim created new classifications while borrowing from existing discourses. The latter acquired "a life of their own" and were adopted and further developed by different groups in the village and in other parts of the state.

In discussing "identity constructions" that the Bene Ephraim perform we found it useful to draw on literature stemming from rhetoric studies, and particularly on the work of scholars who see identity as a rhetorical strategy rather than a broad ontological category. Thus, Dana Anderson suggests that "[o]ne way of viewing identity rhetorically ... is to view it as a kind of persuasive strategy, as a means of moving audiences towards certain beliefs or actions" (2007: 4). Like Brubaker and Cooper, Anderson questions the use of identity as a valid category of analysis, but suggests that it could be deployed as a valuable theoretical tool in describing the person, if "it is considered not in ... *ontological* terms but in *experiential* ones instead, as a word not for what a person or self 'really' is but rather for a person's ability to articulate a sense of self or self-understanding" (2007: 6). He also proposes that one area of rhetoric theory that offers a

"productive alternative" to the vagueness of the concept of identity is the study of "constitutive rhetorics" or "constitutive discourse" (2007: 13). In doing so, he draws on John Hammerback, who suggests that the "rhetoric of reconstitutive discourse" has the capacity to change "the character or self-identity of audiences" in ways that "impell [them] to enact the rhetor's substantive agenda" (2001: 18). Writing specifically about conversions, Hammerback and Jensen posit that conversions could be seen as "rhetorical transformations" that audiences experience as an outcome of successful "constitutive rhetoric" (Hammerback and Jensen 1998: 47; for a discussion see Anderson 2007: 14).

Neither the leaders of the Bene Ephraim nor lay community members describe their experiences of Judaization as conversion. Instead, they talk about their experience of discovering their Israelite origin. In their discourse, these discoveries are sometimes made through exposure to oral histories of older family members, sometimes through research, and the way they narrate these discoveries could be considered rhetorical performances of identity aimed at persuading particular audiences—other Madiga, caste Hindus, local and national authorities, the Israeli public, Jewish communities abroad. Drawing on rhetorician Maurice Charland, one can also consider not just the way the Yacobis aim to persuade other audiences, but also how they use their narratives and practices to create new audiences. Using the example of the Canadian *Movement Souverainete-Association (MSA)*, dedicated to Quebec's political sovereignty, Charland proposes a theory of constitutive rhetoric to account for the process in which peoples are constituted as a discourse. He demonstrates how the rhetoric of the MSA constitutes the identity of the "Quebecois," while it simultaneously presumes it to be a natural given. He therefore argues that "[c]onstitutive rhetorics are ideological not merely because they provide individuals with narratives to inhabit as subjects and motives to experience, but because they insert 'narratized' subjects-as-agents into the world" (Charland 1987: 143). In this way the MSA called into being the Quebecois as a new audience of Quebec political discourse, and offered "a condensed historical narrative of the *people quebecois* as teleologically moving towards emancipation" (Charland 1987: 144).

Michael Carrithers has suggested that rhetoric theory could be usefully deployed in anthropology, where one can speak about "the rhetorical edge of culture" (2009: 6). He argues that cultural agents can address audiences rhetorically with an aim of moving them toward a particular action not only through texts and speeches, but also by way of their practice. This approach "emphasizes the interactive character of life," where "some act

to persuade, others are the targets of persuasion; some work, others are worked upon; some address, others are addressed." Moreover, Carrithers suggests that this approach "challenges social scientists not only to fit things into recurring patterns, but to be sensitive to the possibility that things may fall out of a pattern, may erupt into the new and different ... indeed to the possibility that out of old materials lying to hand new materials can be fashioned" (2009: 8).

The case study of the Bene Ephraim provides an exciting site for the development of rhetoric theory. When explored ethnographically, it demonstrates how new audiences are called into being through rhetoric expressed both through narratives and practices, and how the boundaries delineating these audiences can be elusive both in the discourse of the rhetors and in these audiences' own self-representation. Throughout the book we will discuss how the notion of being a Bene Ephraim has been changing, and how the performance of this notion has been changing in the community's practice with time and from one context to another. Moreover, we will demonstrate how the self-identification of the Bene Ephraim acquired different meanings among different community members, meanings that did not always correspond to the "original" discourses of community leaders. We will see how Shmuel Yacobi's rhetoric about the Lost Tribe of Ephraim translated itself into the emergence of a Bene Ephraim community "on the ground," and how this community started constructing its own categories of the Bene Ephraim, creating new rhetorical audiences.

We also suggest that rhetoric theory could be usefully employed in discussing the nature of the emergence of the Bene Ephraim as well as of other Judaizing movements. What do we mean when we say that the Bene Ephraim "emerged" as a Jewish or Israelite community in the late 1980s? We would not, nor want to, suggest that they became Jewish in some ontological sense, or that they were not Jewish before. But how do we address the problem of describing their affiliation to the Jewish people? What do we mean when we assert that the movement of the Bene Ephraim (or that of the Bene Menashe or any other Judaizing movement for that matter) came into being at a particular moment in time? Needless to say, it is not our objective to prove or disprove the community's origin narratives. Moreover, even if we had set ourselves this task, we would very soon have had to acknowledge that the question is unanswerable due to the paucity of historical sources that could cast any light on the community's prehistoric past. However, what we could probably assert with a greater degree of

certainty is that the Bene Ephraim emerged as a rhetorical entity at a particular moment in time, or, to use Carrithers's insight, they "moved from inchoate pronominality into being a character in a story" (2008: 164).

A Note on Terminology

Having highlighted the main theoretical debates pertaining to our study, we now need to briefly reflect on the bearing that they may have on our use of various "Jewish" and "Indian" terms that will appear in the book. When writing about Jewish communities, we will strive to ensure that our terminology reflects the relational nature of their status vis-à-vis each other. Therefore, when we mention members of different Jewish groups, we will refer in most cases to their specific country of origin and, if necessary, denominational affiliation—for instance, we will talk about "a Jewish woman from Russia," "an Orthodox rabbi from New York," "a man from the Bene Israel Indian Jewish community." However, in a more general discussion concerning the way the Bene Ephraim negotiate different definitions of Jewishness, we will be using terms such as "mainstream" and "conventionally Jewish" when referring to Jewish communities outside of the boundaries of Judaizing movements. We recognize that these terms are not satisfactory, and we will use them to highlight the perceptions associated with these groups and not to imply that we accept uncritically the distinction between "mainstream" and "marginal" Judaism(s). In this respect we would like to draw attention to Janice Fernheimer's discussion of the term "recognized" Jewish communities, which she uses in her study of the Hebrew Israelites in Israel and the United States. She employs this term to refer to American Jews of European extraction, not to imply that Sephardi and Mizrahi[16] Jews are not "recognized," but to call attention to the assumptions associated with the category of Jewishness in the United States (Fernheimer 2006: 9).

Moreover, as we will discuss throughout the book, the very terms "Jews" and "Jewish" have a wide range of meanings in the Bene Ephraim community. Their leader, Shmuel Yacobi, initially argued that though the Bene Ephraim shared a common origin with different Jewish groups around the world, they were nevertheless a different community. As we will show in the following chapters, this understanding of categories of Jewishness is not shared by all members of the community, or even in his immediate family. Instead, the Bene Ephraim have produced a complex set of ideas in respect to how they relate to world Jewry, just as they have demonstrated

varied perceptions of how they relate to the Madiga and to other Indian populations.

Finally, we should note that the terms "Judaizing movements" and "emerging" Jewish groups are not completely emic[17] when applied to the entire Bene Ephraim community, though some group members would probably be more open to accepting them than others. The main tradition of the Bene Ephraim articulated by Shmuel Yacobi connects the community to the Ten Lost Tribes. The Yacobis argue that their ancestors have always known that they were Israelites and were practicing their religion in secret. According to this view, when the Bene Ephraim established a synagogue in Kothareddypalem in 1991, they openly announced their true religious affiliation for the world to see. They declared that they had always been Jewish, rather than converting from a different tradition. At the same time, community leaders admit that most members of their congregation rediscovered their Jewish origins only recently. During our fieldwork we encountered a lot of Bene Ephraim who said that they knew nothing about Judaism or the Lost Tribes before they joined the community (either through marriage or because they became attracted to the teachings of Shmuel Yacobi), and were now learning about Jewish beliefs and practices. However, we also met those who were adamant they were well acquainted with the Jewish tradition already, and were not just "emerging" as a Jewish group.

The reader will have already noticed that we have been employing the term "Judaization" in respect of the development of the Bene Ephraim tradition. Our use of this term could also be problematized. The verb "to Judaize" goes back to the Greek *ioudaizein*. The historian of Judaism Shaye Cohen observes that in Christian Greek the term acquired the following meanings: "to be Jewish or to become Jewish," "to interpret the Old Testament 'literally,'" "to deny the divinity of Christ," "to give support to the Jews by adopting their customs and manners" (1999: 186). Fernheimer has noted that it is appropriate to apply the term to "Judaize" to African American communities like Hebrew Israelites, since the term "historically describes a set of behaviors, but does not necessarily imply religious identification, categorization, or recognition" (2006: 13–14). In other words, it would be more appropriate to describe such groups as Judaizing rather than Jewish, because they do not explicitly identify as Jewish, though they accept that they have adopted some Jewish practices. In the case of the Bene Ephraim, using the term "Judaizing" would be acceptable to some community members, who, like the Hebrew Israelites, distinguish their

tradition from the Jewish one, and suggest that they are ready to embrace only some Jewish practices. However, the term "Judaizing" would perhaps be less acceptable for those who draw parallels between the Jews and the Bene Ephraim more explicitly and would prefer to describe themselves as a Jewish rather than a Judaizing community.

Turning to the Indian context of our story, we need to explain which terms we will be using to describe the caste background of the Bene Ephraim. Clarinda Still has observed that none of the terms associated with the notion of untouchability "is completely free from ideological overtones." "Untouchables, ex-Untouchables, Dalits, Dalit-Bahujans, Scheduled Castes, Depressed Classes, Backward Classes, Harijans, Panchamas, Chandalas, Avarnas, Antyajas, Adi-Hindus, Adi-Dharms, Adi-Dravidas, Pariahs all refer broadly to the same 150 million people in India, but each name implies a slightly different political stance," she writes (Still 2007: 7). Most authors have used the term Dalits, if their informants describe themselves as such, and in the Indian mass media the word Dalit is used almost universally (Still 2007: 8).

In our case, we use this term when referring to Indian Dalits in general, but we hesitate to employ it in relation to the Bene Ephraim, as some of them have explicitly dissociated themselves from the Dalit movement. At the same time, when talking about their experiences of caste discrimination, they do describe themselves as a community perceived as "untouchable" and categorized as a "Scheduled Caste." Most community members seem to be comfortable describing themselves as Madiga, though in Telugu this word carries negative connotations and is often used by caste Hindus as a derogatory term (Still 2007: 148–49).

On Fieldwork and Authenticity

Yulia Egorova first met the Bene Ephraim in 2001 when conducting research on the Indian perceptions of Jews and Judaism (Egorova 2006).[18] She kept in touch with the leaders of the community (Shmuel and Sadok Yacobi) ever since and followed Shmuel Yacobi's publications. In 2007 she met and interviewed Shmuel Yacobi during his visit to London, and in 2008 she initiated a project that focused on the Bene Ephraim. In the course of our research, Shahid Perwez, who was employed on the project as a postdoctoral research associate, lived in Chebrole (a part of the village neighboring Kothareddypalem) and conducted ethnographic fieldwork

among the Bene Ephraim from June 2009 to June 2010, while Yulia visited the community twice in 2009–2010.

In the village our main (and most productive) research method was, of course, participant observation, which involved "being around" the community to witness and participate in their religious practices and day-to-day household and economic activities. Shahid succeeded in establishing a rapport with the Yacobi family—the gatekeepers, without whose support no work with the Bene Ephraim would have been possible—and with the entire community very quickly. After a few weeks in the village, he was already getting invitations to family gatherings, Sabbath services, festivals, Hebrew lessons run by Sadok, and numerous other public and private meetings conducted in the synagogue, to say nothing about countless dinners with the Yacobis and other Bene Ephraim. During our fieldwork we also discussed our research with members of other caste and religious groups in the village—other Madiga, local caste Hindus, and Muslims. Observations which came from these encounters were invaluable in providing better insight into the way the Bene Ephraim and their beliefs and practices are perceived in the village.

In the course of fieldwork we had numerous conversations both with the "key players" in the community—members of the Yacobi family and other Bene Ephraim who were seen as future leaders of the group—and with "lay" community members. Our conversations addressed a wide range of issues related to our informants' experiences of being members of the Kothareddypalem congregation. They were invited to give their life stories and family histories, to describe what it meant for them to be Bene Ephraim, and to discuss their aspirations for the future.

We also conducted a household survey of the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem. The original purpose of the survey was to estimate the number of people who describe themselves as Bene Ephraim in the village, and to establish what their economic, educational, and religious profile was. As we will see in chapter 3, the survey proved to be a fruitful exercise in discerning how group boundaries are constructed, how fluid or rigid they can be, and what a wide range of meanings of Jewishness a community can produce.

Other sites which we visited in coastal Andhra included Machilipatnam, a small town on the coast of Krishna District and current home to Shmuel Yacobi; Vijayawada, a major city north of Kothareddypalem; Guntur, the capital of Guntur district; and a number of towns and villages where

we encountered the communities discussed in the penultimate chapter. These groups, which were "discovered" by Shahid in the first half of his fieldwork, are part of a wider Judaizing milieu of Andhra Pradesh. They stem from Christian Madiga, Mala, and other caste groups who have embraced different forms of Judaism and are now seeking contact with Jewish groups abroad.

It is often the case in conducting ethnographic research that establishing a rapport with one community means not being able to get full access to others. We experienced this to some extent with the Bene Ephraim. As we will demonstrate in chapter 6, for a number of reasons the Yacobi family has complex relationships with these other Judaizing groups in Andhra, and in visiting these communities and observing their festivals we had to exercise maximum tact, while being completely transparent about the nature and objectives of our research and about our position in Kothareddypalem.

It was important for our study to get first-hand insight into how the Bene Ephraim were perceived by the very Jewish and Israeli organizations that the community was relying on to communicate their message to wider audiences. Therefore our study included research conducted outside of Andhra. In 2010 Yulia made a trip to New York and Washington, D.C., to interview different representatives of Kulanu, a non-governmental organization whose aim is to provide support to the Lost Tribes and other "isolated" and "emerging" Jewish communities. In 2010–2011 Yulia conducted three trips to Israel to visit members of Shavei Israel, a Jerusalem-based charity with a similar function, as well as other organizations and individuals who have come into contact with the Bene Ephraim. In December 2009 she also visited Mumbai to talk to the members of ORT,[19] an international Jewish organization whose Indian branch is run by the Bene Israel.

During her field trips to Israel, Yulia visited a Bene Menashe group and interviewed twenty persons about their experiences of living in a Judaizing community in India and of coming to Israel. Material from these interviews and more general observations of their life in Israel provided an important comparative perspective on the Bene Ephraim story. In Israel Yulia also met and had several conversations with Yehoshua Yacobi, the son of Shmuel and the only Bene Ephraim who had made *aliyah*[20] to the Jewish State. These conversations, which will be discussed in chapter 5, provide yet another perspective on the Bene Ephraim movement,

highlighting the possibilities and constraints that the community faces in negotiating their place among other Jewish groups worldwide, and elucidating mechanisms for the development of Jewish culture in Judaizing groups.

In addition, we relied on various written sources. The Yacobi brothers have produced a number of manuscripts (one of them published), which present their view of the community's history, of Judaism, and of Jewish culture. We examined these texts and compared them with the data obtained from participant observation and interviews to determine to what extent the vision of the Yacobis is shared by the community and what changes have occurred in this vision in the past two decades. We also did a search for references to the Bene Ephraim online and in Indian, Israeli, and other mass media, and used newspaper clippings about the Bene Ephraim, generously shared with us by the Yacobi family. These materials, combined with the data described above, helped us understand the perspective of other actors involved in the Bene Ephraim story.

Finally, a note on ethical considerations is in order. We did not think it would be appropriate for us to anonymize either the village where the synagogue was established or the names of the community's leaders, the Yacobis, due to the fact that the Bene Ephraim already have a relatively high media profile. Similarly, the key figures in Kulanu, Shavei Israel, and ORT Mumbai whom we interviewed also appear under their own names. However, we did anonymize all other informants among the Bene Ephraim in Andhra Pradesh and the Bene Menashe in Israel, because some of the issues we discussed with them were personally and/or politically sensitive and could damage our informants' reputation if they were identified.

Throughout our stay in the village we were often asked both by community members and "outsiders" (including numerous local correspondents) about our findings. Did we think that the Bene Ephraim were "really Jewish?" Have we found any evidence to confirm their Israelite origin? We kept responding that it was not our objective to determine whether the "claims" of the Bene Ephraim were authentic or not. Nor were we looking for evidence to cast light on their early history—an answer that our hosts were probably finding somewhat disappointing, thinking that this way we would never get down to any proper research. We only hope that they will find this book of some interest and will forgive us its lack of "real" discoveries.

Chapters

The following chapter will engage with the phenomenon of the Indian caste system and will situate the Bene Ephraim community's life in the context of the socio-economic situation of other Dalit groups in the village and in the state. Here we will explore the community's main origin narratives and religious practices against the backdrop of wider Madiga traditions. It will be demonstrated that building upon the oral accounts of his ancestors and his own research, Shmuel Yacobi suggested in the 1990s that the entire Madiga population of Andhra Pradesh might be of ancient Hebrew descent, and that Madiga practices were originally of Israelite origin. We will suggest that by adopting this inclusive account of Bene Ephraim lineage Shmuel Yacobi reinterpreted Madiga experiences of untouchability in light of Jewish history and offered a new way of celebrating Madiga heritage. The chapter will also discuss how the Jewish practices adopted by the Kothareddypalem congregation allow the community to consolidate its boundaries and to make a claim to a different status in the local society. At the same time, we will note that they resonate with the efforts of other Madiga aimed at developing a sense of pride for Dalit traditions. In the end, the chapter will begin to discuss whether the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim led to any perceptible changes in their social, economic, or cultural standing in the local hierarchy, and will reflect on the way the Yacobi brothers relate to wider Dalit movements.

Chapter 3 goes on to examine the constraints that the community is under in developing their origin narratives and practices. At the same time, the chapter shows that in spite of these constraints the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim emerged as a site of agency and re-signifiability, with different community members offering multiple and diverse interpretations of what it means to be Jewish, Israelite, or Bene Ephraim. Firstly, we demonstrate how Shmuel Yacobi recently modified the Bene Ephraim origin story to dissociate the community from the untouchables, and his brother Sadok redefined community boundaries in the village. We will also see what new steps they have taken to highlight a historical connection between the Bene Ephraim and biblical Hebrews—and by implication with the rest of the Jewish world. At the same time, we will show that though the Yacobis chose to dissociate the Bene Ephraim from other Dalits, most "lay" community members still identify with their Madiga past just as strongly as they adhere to their Jewish beliefs and practices.

Chapter 4 goes beyond the local ethnographic context of the Bene Ephraim and presents a discussion of their relationship with international Jewish organizations that support "emerging" Jewish groups. The chapter will offer an analysis of the wider activities of these organizations; it will also explore what role this support and wider responses to the Bene Ephraim movement on the part of other Jewish communities may have played in the development of Bene Ephraim narratives, practices, and notions of relatedness. We will show that though those who rendered economic and religious support to the community strived to avoid affecting what they saw as the "natural" development of Bene Ephraim Jewishness, they could not help but contribute to the community's engagement with mainstream Judaism. Nevertheless, we will argue that their relationship with the Bene Ephraim and other Judaizing groups demonstrates that in contemporary Judaism the "mainstream" and the "marginal" are mutually implicated, and that this relationship problematizes the perceived divide between "recognized" and "emerging" Jewish communities.

This theme is developed further in chapter 5, which considers the Bene Ephraim in the context of public and academic debates about the immigration policies of the State of Israel. Our ethnography here will focus on the movement of the Bene Menashe, which appears to be of particular relevance to our discussion. This chapter will examine the effect that this case, which may open an interesting new direction in Israeli views of Jewish immigration and citizenship, may have had on the Bene Ephraim and their relationship with Israeli authorities. In the end, the chapter considers the case of Yehoshua, the only Bene Ephraim who has managed to move to Israel so far and who has been settled in the Jewish State for about two decades.

In chapter 6 we return to the Andhra context and discuss Christian groups who have become attracted to the Bene Ephraim movement recently, established synagogues of their own, and have come to outnumber the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem. It appears that most of these communities learned about the Bene Ephraim movement as a result of the educational and mass media activities of Shmuel Yacobi. They are willing to be recognized as Jewish and some of their members have expressed an interest in settling in the State of Israel. However, unlike the Bene Ephraim, these "new" communities do not stress an oral account connecting them to Jewish history, but rather place emphasis on their spiritual connection to the State of Israel. As far as their engagement with Judaism is concerned, these groups are more syncretic in their practice and cast an

interesting new light on the nature of Jewish–Christian relations outside of the Western context. To provide a better understanding of the religious and social context of such groups, we will refer to the history of Christian missionary work in the state and particularly among the Dalits, and will return to the question of caste conflict in Andhra Pradesh, suggesting that caste ideologies have affected even the Judaizing movements of the state.

The book will conclude by exploring the wider theoretical implications that the study will have on academic discussions about definitions of Jewishness, universalist tendencies in Judaism, and Dalit movements. The conclusion will also serve as an epilogue where we will describe some of the most recent developments in Kothareddypalem.

2

Rediscovering the Jewish Dalit Past

> Thirty to forty years back, in the same place where we are sitting now, my grandmother 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 two of the Tribes (Judah and Binyamin) were returning to Israel since 1948 and so I asked my grandmother. She said we—the Bene Ephraim—are chosen for taking sufferings on us. We have to stay back and fulfill the Covenant. That was the first oral tradition that I have heard of.

This is how Shmuel Yacobi described to Shahid his first encounter with his grandparents' oral tradition about their community's Israelite origin. Building upon this narrative and his own research, Yacobi suggested that the entire Madiga population of Andhra Pradesh and possibly even other Dalit groups were of ancient Hebrew descent.

In this chapter we will explore the narrative and practices of the Bene Ephraim community against the backdrop of wider Madiga discourses and in the context of caste relations in the village. We will argue that the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim can be read as the community's way of celebrating not only their Israelite, but also their Madiga and more general Dalit heritage. The first part of the chapter highlights the historical and ethnographic background of the Madiga community from which the Bene Ephraim stem. We then focus on the Bene Ephraim origin stories and demonstrate that, like the Madiga and other Dalit groups, the community has made a claim to a higher status in the Hindu hierarchy by linking their ancestors to high-profile figures of Sanskritic sources. However, instead of directly associating themselves with these characters within the

framework of Hinduism, they created a narrative about a shared Israelite lineage, thus reinterpreting the Madiga past in light of Jewish history. We will show that Shmuel Yacobi's discourse about the community's Israelite descent portrays the Hebrew ancestors of the Bene Ephraim as rebels who had spoken up against caste discrimination in ancient India. We will argue that Yacobi's anti-caste and anti-Brahmanic rhetoric both makes his teachings akin to ideologies of Dalit movements and re-inscribes Judaism as a liberation tool for socially disadvantaged communities in India.

We will then consider how the Bene Ephraim both assert their Jewishness and celebrate their Madiga tradition through beef-eating and burying their dead—practices that are specific to the Dalits. We will argue that like the community's origin narratives, the performance of Judaism in Kothareddypalem is aimed both at helping the Bene Ephraim to make a claim to a different status in the village society and at developing a sense of pride for Dalit customs which are looked down upon by caste Hindus.

The second half of the chapter explores how the Bene Ephraim are perceived by their immediate neighbors in the village. We will demonstrate that despite their efforts at being recognized as Jewish and rejecting the status ascribed to them in the caste system, the Bene Ephraim are barely differentiated from other Madiga practicing Christianity, and are still subjected to caste discrimination. We will show that though the Bene Ephraim are acutely aware of caste inequality and are prepared to fight it, they nevertheless dissociate themselves from Dalit movements, arguing that Dalits need to seek support from abroad to get a chance to improve their position in India. At the same time, we will suggest that though the Bene Ephraim explicitly distance themselves from Dalit political activism, their tactic to engage with foreign Jewish organizations rather than with local authorities is in fact reminiscent of other Dalit leaders' attempts to attract the attention of the international community to caste discrimination.

From Israel to Andhra

Kothareddypalem, where the Yacobi family lives and looks after the Bene Yaacob synagogue, is one of the three Panchayat villages of Chebrole[1] Mandal—the other two villages being Chebrole and Pathareddypalem. The villages are situated some 15 to 20 kilometers south of Guntur city, which is the administrative capital of the Guntur district.

The immediate community that the Bene Ephraim come from was Christianized about one hundred and fifty years ago by the Lone Star Baptist

Christian Missionaries of Valley Forge Pennsylvania. The Yacobi brothers come from a Madiga Baptist family that is well known in Chebrole—their parents and grandparents were well educated and ran a local school. The father of the Yacobis served in the British Army, a well-known route for partially breaking out of the rigid structure of the caste system for untouchable and low-caste groups (Zelliot 1996: 36). He provided his sons with English language education; and one of them, Shmuel, subsequently acquired a Bachelor's degree in Theology from Serampore University and an MA in Philosophy from the Open University in Hyderabad. According to the brothers, their parents privately identified themselves as one of the Lost Tribes of Israel, passing on this knowledge to their children. However, in public they practiced Christianity, like the rest of their Madiga neighbours.

The Yacobi brothers do not possess any documentary evidence of their parents and grandparents practising Judaism, as, they argue, this had to be done in secret. Their father visited Palestine, while serving in the British Army during World War II, and this is where he may have encountered living Judaism for the first time. The history of "emerging" Jewish groups has a record of another example of British Army service providing a departure point for the formation of a Judaizing movement. In South Africa a Xhosa man, Vayisile Joshua Msitshana, met the Jews of Palestine while serving there with the British Army, and noticed the similarities between the Jewish and Xhosa traditions. On his return back home he established a new house of worship and led his congregation to Judaism (Bruder 2008: 175). It is possible that the father of the Yacobi brothers became more interested in Judaism after a similar encounter and started openly talking about Jewish practice with his family then.

Influenced by his parents, Shmuel Yacobi developed an interest in learning more about the Jewish religion. However, in the absence of an opportunity to study Judaism, he trained as a Christian preacher:

> I made a decision to go to a Christian seminary to learn Hebrew ... Unless I enrolled myself at the seminary as a student, they would not teach me. Just [the] Hebrew [language] they would not teach me. So I had to find a way to go to the seminary ... Because they gave me the free seat scholarship, they asked me to service the caste for some time ... I did it for some time and then I quit ... In 1986 I opened a distance education Bible school and it gave me time to study the community.[2]

In the 1980s Shmuel visited Israel to attend a conference of Evangelical Christians and to see live Judaism for the first time in his life. After he got back home, he and his brother decided to declare openly that their family were the Bene Ephraim. Shortly afterward, a number of other Madiga families in the village joined them.

At the moment, the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem constitute about forty nuclear families that account for around 120 individual members, all of them well connected to the synagogue. These families are part of 150 Madiga families that have been living there for over a hundred years. Community elders recall coming to Kothareddypalem to work on the land of the Reddy caste. Most of them have continued to perform the same task for the landlords, with the exception of a few members who took to building contract work or to driving auto-rickshaws. None of them own any farmland.

Two observations could be made with regard to Guntur city to sketch the pattern of the village–city relationship in this part of Andhra. Firstly, the city houses a high concentration of learning and educational institutions resulting in heavy traffic flow during peak hours between the village and the city. Secondly, Guntur acts as a major channel for international exporting of cotton, chilies, and tobacco, which the farmers produce with the help of cheap labor. This would suggest an active social life in the village consisting of farmers and laborers instrumental in agricultural production and in the development of inter-linkages between the village and the city. However, because the farmer-laborer relations in South India had come to be organized around inter-caste relations (Alexander 1975), it is the farmers that come to own the lands and generally belong to upper castes, while the laborers remain landless and belong to Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Mukhopadhyaya 1980).

In the village where the Bene Ephraim are resident, upper-caste Reddys have occupied the role of farmers, while the Scheduled Castes of the Malas and the Madigas are historically brought in from other areas to work as *coolies* (agricultural labourers or sharecroppers). As a ruling caste of Andhra, they are in competition with the upper-caste Kammas who are economically advanced but politically disabled. In the social hierarchy of the Andhra region the Reddys are placed well above the most numerous but least influential castes of cultivators and sharecroppers such as the Kapus, the Padmashalis, the Malas, and the Madigas (Shah 2002: 83).

The status of the Reddys in the village of the Bene Ephraim is reflected in its name—Kothareddypalem in Telugu[3] means "the new village of the

Reddys." It had been formed out of the Pathareddypalem—"the old village of the Reddys." In addition to the Reddys, there is a significant presence in the village of the Madigas (both Christian and Hindu), the Malas (Christian and Hindu), and a number of Backward Castes,[4] such as Hindu Togatti Kshatriyas, Hindu Padmashalis, Hindu Telagas (also called Kapus), and a range of smaller sub-caste groups. The village also has a small presence of a tribal group of the Lambadas and an even smaller community of Dudekula Muslims, a group of former Hindus who converted into Islam a few generations ago and retained some of their original practices.

The Madigas represent one of the poorest segments of Indian society and have been placed in the lowest status among other untouchable groups of the state of Andhra Pradesh. Demographically, the Madiga constitute 46.94% of the total Scheduled Caste population of the state, which, according to the 2001 census is placed at twelve million (Muthaiah 2004: 197–98). Their traditional occupations include mainly shoe-making and agricultural labor (Singh 1969: 1).

An ethnographic survey conducted in the region at the beginning of the twentieth century describes the Madiga as "the lowest caste found in the State. They are a settled people and generally live apart in ill-built thatched houses, in quarters outside the main village ... They are not allowed to use the common village well ... Madigas cannot approach Brahmans within the distance of about twenty paces. Any Brahman who has been touched inadvertently or purposely by a Madiga must purify himself by bathing, and washing all his clothes and renewing the sacred thread" (Nanjundayya 1909: 20–21).

The origin of the idea that low-caste people can contaminate the surroundings of high caste is as old as the Hindu caste system itself.[5] Although the practice of untouchability was outlawed in 1950 by Article 17 of the constitution of independent India, it is still present on the subcontinent, just like the caste system itself. Instances of discrimination against the untouchables—which have included restricted access to temples, water resources, the central parts of villages, and high-caste streets—have been widely reported in the national and international press. Recently the government decided to include caste identification on the national census, a practice which had been discontinued since 1931. This has been described as the state admitting to the fact that the caste system is still present in Indian society (Satyanarayana 2010).

Caste discrimination is a part of life for many Madiga even today. During one of Yulia's visits to Kothareddypalem in 2009, Sadok took her around

Chebrole. This is an historic village, which was once a ruling fort for the Indian dynasties of the Cholas, Pallavas, Chalukyas, and the Kakatiyas (Devi 1993). The village is locally famous for its numerous Hindu temples. One of the main cultural places of interest in Chebrole is the Temple of Lord Brahma. As we drove up to the temple, Sadok looked through the gates and said, "A friend of mine is on duty here today. This means we will be able to see it. Otherwise they don't let in the untouchables." Later in the year, when Shahid settled in the village, Sadok told him that not so long ago, the Yacobis, like other Madiga, would not have been even allowed to walk along the "high-caste" streets of the village, lest their shadow might pollute everything around it.

It appears that Shmuel's research into the Israelite past of his community was partly motivated by his desire to free the Bene Ephraim from caste inequality. Shmuel often recounted to us how, like other Madiga, he was discriminated against in the job market with very few occupations being open to him, despite the fact that he had achieved good results at school. In the village, the dominant Reddy caste tried to prevent the appointment of his father to the post of English teacher. His mother told him stories of how she was made to sit separately in school, often outside the classroom, and forced to use the sand floor to write, instead of writing on a slate or a board. The local tea and food shop keepers in the village served them through the backdoor of the shop—if they ever served them at all—fearing a backlash from high-caste villagers. One of their neighbors on Sundays used to put his television set and a couple of cots outside of his house, so that the whole street could come and join him watching TV. However, if the Yacobis wanted to join him, he would turn the cots upside down and ask them to sit on the ground.

When Shmuel was a young man, he himself was once refused a glass of water by a Hindu neighbor who belonged to a higher caste. He describes this episode as a starting point for his research into the Bene Ephraim past:

> When I started my education, one day I was thirsty. I went to a nearby Hindu house and asked, "Give me some water." They know my parents, my grandmother. But some of them are uneducated Hindu people. They may not recognize me or my parents. They said, "Who are you?" It is a general question in Andhra Pradesh ... We have to tell our caste. I said, "I am the son of the headmaster." They said, "Oh, you are Madiga." They brought some water and

> poured it like this [to make sure I don't touch the cup]. That was the first time in my life to face those things. Before that my parents would tell me, but I did not know what it was like for them in practice ... From that day I took it as a challenge. I started praying to God and I started asking several people, "What is this caste system? What is this discrimination?" In Babylonian exile the Jewish people had to say, "We are unclean." The same situation was here ... So, that's how that began ... [6]

The belief that the touch of a Dalit defiles and that sharing drinks with them is not acceptable appears to be deeply ingrained in the psyche even of the more liberal representatives of higher castes. For instance, Chris Fuller mentions how a well-educated Brahman informant of his who was a Communist representative in the Kerala Legislative Assembly admitted that though he is completely opposed to the caste system and would never discriminate between people on the basis of their caste affiliation, he still could not prevent himself from feeling uncomfortable if a lower-caste person touched him (1976: 48). The Osellas describe an episode when a young man from a Nayar community had an instinctive inclination to refuse a drink offered in the house of his Izhava friend (2000: 230). We agree with Fuller's observation that information like this, which comes from those few frank informants (1976: 48) (or from brief episodes elucidating prejudiced behavior, such as the one described by the Osellas), is probably more revealing of caste attitudes than the more readily available "party-line" assertions that belief in ritual pollution associated with low-caste status is losing its grip on public imagination. The incident with Shmuel's neighbor, brief as it was, therefore goes to the very core of time-old caste prejudices and indicates what an important role caste discrimination has played in the formation of the Bene Ephraim movement. However, instead of reducing the community's Judaization to an attempt to move up the social ladder, we will demonstrate how this process feeds from wider Dalit discourses and helps the Bene Ephraim to promote a sense of Madiga pride.

In the final section of this chapter we will discuss the extent to which Madiga status and experiences of untouchability are still affecting the social life of the Bene Ephraim and shaping their perceptions of the community's place in Andhra society. But first, let us explore how their earlier narratives of origin may have been informed by those developed in the wider Madiga community and by other Dalit ideologues.

Castes and Jews

The early history of the Bene Ephraim is obscure just like the early history of other Madiga groups, as well as of other Dalits. Recorded accounts of the Madiga emphasize their ancient presence in South India. Some sources of the later British period describe the Madiga as the descendants of the earliest inhabitants of the Andhra region (Nanjundayya 1909: 3) and call them an "ancient tribe" (Rauschenbusch-Clough 2000 [1899]). Madiga legends connect the community to Jambavant, a figure in the *Ramayana*,[7] and explain that the low status of his descendants was due to a mistake or a curse (Singh 1969: 5–6). Another important figure of the Madiga mythology is Arundhati, who in the Sanskritic sources is the wife of Vasistha, one of the Vedic sages.[8] In the Madiga tradition, she belonged to their community and cursed her people when they tried to prevent her from marrying a Brahman (Rauschenbusch-Clough 2000 [1899]: 53–55).

As we noted in the previous chapter, in the twentieth century these narratives were revisited by Madiga leaders who developed more positive images of their community's history and social status. Some of the (re) discovered Bene Ephraim traditions are reminiscent of those belonging to other contemporary Madigas. Earlier stories collected in a typescript on the community's history and in a book published by Shmuel Yacobi in 2002 assert that all the Scheduled Castes of southern India and possibly even of the entire subcontinent are the descendants of the Bene Ephraim (Yacobi 2001, Yacobi 2002). Narratives presented in the book entitled *Cultural Hermeneutics* contain three main themes, all of which have informed the problematics of Bene Ephraim self-identification: the story of their migration from ancient Israel, accounts explaining how their ancestors had become untouchables, and representations of their relationship with caste Hindus. Each theme can be linked to broader discourses, which emerged outside of the historical and social boundaries of the community, such as the centuries-old Lost Tribes discourse, constructions of a higher status origin produced by different Scheduled Castes of India, and the anti-caste rhetoric of the Dalit movement.

As we discussed in chapter 1, the Lost Tribes tradition has been prominent in modern Western Christian discourse and has effected the emergence of a wide range of Judaizing movements. The Yacobis posit that the Christian missionaries who worked among the Bene Ephraim ancestors in the nineteenth century noticed that some of their customs appeared to be Jewish. No references to the possible Israelite origin of the Madiga

have been discovered in the records of the Lone Star Baptist Church so far; yet, it appears that the Yacobis were well aware of the Western Lost Tribes tradition. In the book Shmuel refers to *The Lost Tribes* by George Moore, a British writer, who argued that ancient Israelites were assimilated into different populations around the world, including those of India, and that Buddhism may be seen as owing its origin to the Israelite tradition (Moore 1861).[9]

The Yacobis both embrace this narrative and reaffirm it in their practice and interactions with their potential foreign audiences. They take their visitors to Amaravati, a small town on the banks of the river Krishna in Guntur district, which was the site of a Buddhist stupa built during the reign of the emperor Ashoka.[10] The Yacobis show off the town as a prominent place of interest in India's Israelite past.

It is not only Amaravati that holds symbolic significance for the Bene Ephraim and is presented as a material artifact of their ancient history, but also Tirupathi of Lord Venkateshwara, who, according to community leaders, was of Bene Ephraim lineage. In Tirupathi, a hill town in Chittoor district of southern Andhra, Lord Venkateshwara sits as the presiding deity of Tirupathi Venkateshwara Temple. According to a recent compilation of oral traditions of the Bene Ephraim, Tirupathi refers to the seven hills on which the temple is built, which is an exact replica of the seven hills of Jerusalem the patterns of which the Hindus had copied. An apparently strong resemblance between the seven hills of Tirupathi and Jerusalem is reinforced by a locally prominent Madiga evangelist friend of Shmuel, who recently visited Jerusalem and expressed his surprise at the close resemblance between the two structures. Shmuel therefore conjectures that Lord Venkateshwara, who is worshipped by millions of Hindus, was a Bene Ephraim herdsman whose real name was Yaacob and whose life was dedicated to removing people's sufferings. According to Shmuel, the Hindus stole Yaacob's image from the Bene Ephraim and deified him for Hindu worshippers.

The Yacobis thus reinterpret India's ancient history and the Hindu tradition in light of the Lost Tribes narrative. This allows them both to construct a genealogical connection to ancient Israelites—a connection evidenced in two prominent sites of the Indian historical and religious landscape—and to reclaim the narratives and characters of the Hindu tradition, access to which had been denied to the Bene Ephraim due to their Dalit status. Shmuel's reinterpretation of the Lord Venkateshwara story also contains an open protest against the dominant Hindu ideology—he

contends that the Hindus had concealed the true origin of Venkateshwara, reinvented him as a Hindu deity, and thus stole him from the Bene Ephraim and other Madiga.

Discussions of the parallels between Telugu and Israelite cultures, as well as the rhetoric of anti-caste protest, permeate Shmuel's book on the Bene Ephraim tradition. *Cultural Hermeneutics* discusses different aspects of the community's history, which could be broadly summarized as follows. The Bene Ephraim are the descendants of some of the Ten Tribes, who in 722 BCE were exiled from the ancient kingdom of Israel by Assyria. After a sojourn in Persia they were moved to the northern part of the subcontinent, which was then populated by Dravidian groups, including Telugu-speaking communities. The Bene Ephraim established good relations with them and made an impact on their religions and cultures. In the seventh century BCE the subcontinent was conquered by the "Aryans" who moved the Dravidians and the Bene Ephraim down south.

Though the name "Bene Ephraim" implies that the community are the descendants of Ephraim, the son of Joseph and the grandson of Jacob, Shmuel Yacobi applies to this name a symbolic rather than literal meaning. In his interpretation, Ephraimites appear to stand for the Ten Tribes of Israel in general rather than specifically for the descendants of Ephraim. It is noteworthy that in the biblical tradition, Ephraim has a special significance. God chooses Jeroboam, a man from the tribe of Ephraim to lead the ten tribes out of Solomon's kingdom. Ephraim and Manasseh, both the children of Jacob's favorite son Joseph, receive a special blessing from Jacob; however, Ephraim's blessing is greater (Ben-Dor Benite 2009: 9). It is not surprising then that Shmuel Yacobi chose Ephraim to stand for the whole of the Lost Tribes; though, as we will discuss in the following chapter, recently his brother began to emphasize the connection between his community and that of the Bene Menashe on the basis of the biblical account. [11]

A large part of the book is devoted to the description of the alleged similarities between ancient Hebrew and Telugu languages. In his interviews with us, Shmuel also talked about the similarities between biblical practices and those of Telugu speakers, and specifically of the Madiga. In this respect, the Yacobis' tradition is reminiscent of the way different African and African American Judaizing communities have engaged with Jewish history through finding parallels between their religious practices and those of ancient Israelites (Chireau 2000, Bruder 2008). Like the Igbo of Nigeria, the House of Israel of Ghana, and the Lemba of South

Africa and Zimbabwe (Bruder 2008: chapters 9, 10), Shmuel Yacobi builds upon such parallels to affirm an ancestral connection with the rest of the Jewish world.

The typescript on Bene Ephraim history also contains a number of stories discussing the community's origin. Almost every one of them attempts to explain why the Bene Ephraim had forgotten the Jewish tradition, lived in poverty, and had a low status in the local hierarchy. For instance, according to one of these stories, after the Bene Ephraim left the ancient kingdom of Israel, they travelled to the North of India where local priests tried to convert them into the local religion and, having failed to do so, cursed them. As a result of this curse, the Bene Ephraim forgot Jewish customs and acquired the status of untouchables. Another story links the Bene Ephraim to Arundhati, who in the Sanskritic tradition, which we mentioned above, is the wife of Vasistha. In the Bene Ephraim legend Arundhati was an Israelite, who cursed her community for passing the knowledge of the Jewish religion to her husband (Yacobi 2001, for more details see also Egorova 2006: 122–25).

Anthropologist Robert Deliège has observed that origin narratives of different Dalit groups in India often explain how their ancestors had lost their higher status by mistake or as a punishment (1993). As we noted above, the myth about Arundhati being a Madiga is an important part of the general Madiga narrative and it appears that the Yacobis reinterpreted it in light of their own tradition. The Judaization of the Bene Ephraim is thus partly reminiscent of other Indian communities' attempts at reclaiming a higher status in the local hierarchy through a narrative about more distinguished origins, which for one reason or another has been forgotten.

More importantly, the book is full of anti-caste and anti-Brahmanic rhetoric, which also evokes Jewish history and tradition to make sense of the community's untouchable status. The author argues that in ancient times 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 the outcastes (Yacobi 2002). In this respect, one could again draw a parallel between the narratives of the Bene Ephraim and those developed by other "emerging" Jewish communities. Like the leaders of African and African American Judaizing groups, Shmuel Yacobi finds analogies in the experiences of his people and those of the Jews. He interprets the values of Jewish culture against the backdrop of ancient Indian history and social inequality ascribing to the Hebrew

tradition a message of liberation, which allowed his ancestors to stand up to the caste system.

According to *Cultural Hermeneutics*, the Aryans relegated the Bene Ephraim to the position of untouchables, because the latter were against the very idea of caste hierarchy:

> The Bene Ephraim Communities detested this subtle branding ideology of the Aryans and stayed away from the Aryan caste-color system to this very day ... The Sages of the Bene Ephraim Communities openly declared that no one is superior or inferior to any one and all human beings are the children of Adam HaRishon[12] and Noah ... (Yacobi 2002: 260–61).

Shmuel Yacobi argues that the ancient texts that had laid the foundation of the current Hindu tradition contain the knowledge that was stolen by the Aryans from the Dravidians, who in their turn had been influenced by the Hebrew culture of the Bene Ephraim:

> All the stories of the Hebrews were copied and were translated and then became Vedas and Upanishads. The Chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah became the book of Rajatharangini meaning the waves of kings. The five books of Moshe Rabbenu became the four Vedas and Bhagavad-Gita [became] the fifth Veda (Yacobi 2002: 20).

Having appropriated this knowledge, the Aryans, according to Shmuel Yacobi, barred "non-Aryans" from it: "The Aryans never allowed the non-Aryans into their schools because everything they taught in their school was not theirs. They treated all the non-Aryans as Sudra slaves. The Sudra slaves were not even allowed to hear those teachings" (Yacobi 2002: 78).

The practice of depriving lower caste and untouchable groups of the right to learn, critiqued in this passage, is far from an outlived phenomenon. As Ciotti reminds us, drawing on Goody (1968: 12) and Parry (1985: 210), India can be described as a case of "socially restricted literacy," where Brahmans have played an important role in learning and the transmission of knowledge. Studying religious texts is traditionally associated in India with ritual purity and therefore was not accessible to the untouchables and other non-Brahmans (Ciotti 2002: 262). In the later

British period, the elites of low-caste groups started demanding educational opportunities from the colonial authorities. This to some degree increased these communities' upward social mobility, a good example of which is represented by the Izhavas of Kerala (Ciotti 2002: 264, Osella and Osella 2000).

Shmuel Yacobi's writings transform the sacred sources of Hinduism into Jewish texts and thus (re)claim them for the Dalits. As we will discuss in the following two chapters, in the past decade Shmuel and Sadok have also been encouraging the community to learn Hebrew and to acquire a better knowledge of the Jewish tradition. Both stressed in their conversations with us how important in their opinion both Jewish and general secular education was for the empowerment of their community. The Yacobis see education as a key prerequisite for their community's social mobility—a position which has been noticed and discussed at length by anthropologists in respect of other communities of untouchables (Osella and Osella 2000, Ciotti 2002). However, while some other Dalit and low-caste communities appear to describe social mobility and educational development in "evolutionary terms" underpinned by the ideas of "progress" from degradation to social development (Ciotti 2002: 13), Shmuel Yacobi frames his group's potential for educational advancement in terms of an opportunity for reclaiming forgotten knowledge and bringing back the glorious days of the past.

The current state of affairs in the community is explained as an unfortunate result of the Aryan rule under which the Bene Ephraim lost their status and political significance, were reduced to extreme poverty, and, left with no means of maintaining their tradition, almost forgot it. The Judaization project that Shmuel Yacobi embarked on when he initiated a study into the Bene Ephraim, therefore, seeks to enable his community to rediscover their true history and to reclaim the rites that were part of their tradition to begin with. But who exactly are the people who are entitled to this tradition?

Madiga or Bene Ephraim?

Shmuel Yacobi argues in his book that at the time of writing there were about ten million Bene Ephraim living among the Telugu people, and most of them were registered as the Scheduled Castes of the Malas and the Madigas or were converts to Buddhism and Christianity. However, according to *Cultural Hermeneutics*, only 125 families identify

themselves as Israelite. The rest were not aware of their true origin (Yacobi 2002: 133):

> These 10 million members of the Bene Ephraim communities among the 60 million Telugu people do not remember the history as explained in this version unless someone reminds them. Both Bene Ephraim communities and the Telugu people forgot the history, the names, the traditions and stories of this presentation (Yacobi 2002: 133).

To borrow a notion from Hammerback (noted in chapter 1), Shmuel Yacobi "reconstitutes" the Mala and the Madiga groups of Andhra Pradesh into a community of Israelites. In some parts of the book Yacobi suggests on the basis of his research that all the Madiga and the Mala untouchables—and possibly even the entire Dalit population of India—were originally Ephraimites. When Yulia first met Shmuel's brother Sadok in 2001, he suggested that all Madiga were probably Bene Ephraim, but was not sure about the Mala. In the following chapter we will see how in recent years narratives about the common origin of the Bene Ephraim and Dalits gave way to accounts dissociating the Kothareddypalem congregation from their Madiga neighbors, as well as from other Judaizing groups of Andhra Pradesh. However, it appears that in the first decade of the community's existence both brothers were ready to include the wider Madiga population in the Bene Ephraim story of origin.

For the vernacular reader a synopsis of the book is available in the Telugu language entitled "Who am I?" The title suggests that the book is aimed at the Bene Ephraim—or possibly even at the wider Madiga community—and is supposed to inform them what their true origin is. As we will show in chapter 3, irrespective of whether the book reached wider audiences abroad, in the village it is seen by "lay" Bene Ephraim, as well as by some other Madiga, as a document providing the ultimate proof of the community's Jewish origin.

Shmuel Yacobi constructs the Dalits of Andhra Pradesh both as objects of his research and as an audience which is expected to engage with his ideas about the Lost Tribes and possibly to become part of his community. He thus invites the Madiga and the Mala to grant his movement their recognition by altering their self-understanding and joining the ranks of the Bene Ephraim. This again calls attention to Hammerback's insight about the way agents use rhetoric "to change the self-identity

of audiences". Shmuel Yacobi seeks to turn the Madiga and the Mala from agents external to his community into his own group members, prompting them both to recognize the Bene Ephraim as a category and to alter their self-understanding. Indeed, if his efforts are successful, the endorsement of other Madiga will enhance the community's numbers. The Bene Ephraim's recognition on behalf of other Dalits of the state will be both an act of external categorization and of internal group identification.

At the same time, it is clear that the Mala and the Madiga are not the only audiences that Shmuel Yacobi is addressing in the presentation of his research. He is also keen on convincing other communities and organizations who will always remain external to his community, but whose recognition is just as important as that of other Dalits. That is why *Cultural Hermeneutics* is written in English, is presented as an academic treatise, and is offered to foreign visitors as evidence of the community's Jewish descent. The book transforms the oral tradition passed down to Shmuel Yacobi by his grandparents into a historiographic discovery. As Seth Kunin observes in his discussion of a similar engagement with personal history demonstrated by the crypto-Jewish groups in New Mexico, 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). To follow Kunin's analysis, it is not surprising that for foreign audiences Shmuel presents his book as a scholarly text. The author constitutes his overseas audiences as potential interlocutors who are not going to take his parents' tradition at face value, but will demand evidence to support it.

In the following sections we will discuss how the Bene Ephraim assert their Jewishness not just through their narratives, but also through religious practice, which involves celebrating major Jewish festivals, adopting Jewish dietary laws, and using symbols of Judaism to demarcate their possessions, houses, and burial grounds. We will suggest that in doing so, just like in the narratives articulated by Shmuel Yacobi, the Bene Ephraim celebrate not only their Jewish tradition, but also their Madiga heritage and attempt to assert a new status in the society of Kothareddypalem. As we demonstrate below, their first claim to a different position in the local hierarchy manifested itself in their very choice of place to construct a synagogue.

The Synagogue and the Village

All community members, apart from the Yacobis and another Bene Ephraim family, live in the colony of the Madiga, called Madigapalli. Like most Scheduled Caste colonies in south India, Madigapalli is located on the outskirts of the main village. However, the synagogue of the Bene Ephraim is situated right on the entry point of the village. The Yacobi brothers managed to build the synagogue at this prominent site because their parents had succeeded not only in escaping the traditional occupations of the Madigas, but also in avoiding the social pressure to live in Madigapalli. When the Yacobis' father returned from the army, he was employed as a teacher in the village school, which allowed him to rent a house from a Muslim owner near Chebrole. In 1978, with the help of a government subsidy, he managed to buy and occupy a sizeable piece of land next to a Hindu temple in Kothareddypalem. When the parents of the Yacobi brothers died in the 1980s, the elder brother, Shmuel, moved out of the village and settled with his family first in Vijayawada and then in the coastal town of Machilipatnam, to be closer to his wife's family. Here he and his wife Malkah built a house and a second Jewish synagogue, which today serves his family and other close relatives (see fig. 2.1). In the meantime, Sadok Yacobi stayed back in Kothareddypalem to lead the community. He lives in a small house adjoining the synagogue, along with his wife Miriam, two daughters, and son.

The synagogue has a Hindu temple on its right and a family of a Hindu weavers' caste on its left. The road in front of the synagogue leads in and out of the village, while the backyard has an empty lot, which belongs to another Hindu family. The Yacobis have lately been discussing the possibility of buying this piece of land to be able to accommodate the increasing number of community members who come to the synagogue during festivals and other functions. The prominent position that the synagogue occupies in the topography of the village symbolizes not just the new religious affiliation of the Bene Ephraim, but also their claim to a different status in the local hierarchy, a status that would classify them on a par with caste Hindus. As Clarinda Still demonstrates in her ethnography of the Madiga of the Guntur district, areas designated for untouchables are always spatially segregated in Andhra villages. Even if the quarters of the untouchables are not that different from other poorer areas, they clearly represent a *socially* different section of the village (Still 2007: 5–6). Drawing on the work of Andre Béteille and anthropologists who have

FIGURE 2.1 Synagogue in Machilipatnam. Photograph by Yulia Egorova.

discussed village spatial organization in other parts of India, Still notes that the topographic demarcation of the Madiga colonies is indicative of the untouchables' social position in relation to other castes in the village (Still 2007: 5). In the eyes of the villagers, "residential segregation reduces the chance of Dalits 'contaminating' the non-Dalits" (Still 2007: 13).

By constructing the synagogue in the main part of Kothareddypalem and not in Madigapalli, the Yacobis are attempting to shed their community's untouchable status. The position of the synagogue also shows that the Jewish practices of the Bene Ephraim are not hidden from the rest of the village. On the contrary, anyone coming to the village has to pass by the synagogue. When the community has a guest from out of town, a big banner is put up over the gate of the synagogue yard, making it known to everybody in Kothareddypalem who the Bene Ephraim are hosting. As we will discuss later, inviting guests from abroad and from other parts of India has proved to be an important empowerment strategy for the community, because such visits demonstrate to their neighbors from higher Hindu castes that the Jewish status of the Bene Ephraim is recognized by "outsiders."

The houses of the Bene Ephraim, most of which are thatched huts, are easily distinguishable from those of other Madiga in Madigapalli, because they generally bear the Jewish symbols of the Star of David and of the menorah (see fig. 2.2). In most Bene Ephraim houses one can find

FIGURE 2.2 A Bene Ephraim house. Photograph by Yulia Egorova.

a book of the Torah and/or *siddur*, a *mezuzah* or, where it is absent, the word Shaddai[13] written on the doorpost. The Jewish houses of Madigapalli are thus clearly demarcated from the "non-Jewish" ones, and the artifacts of material culture that the Bene Ephraim possess also distinguish them from their neighbors, indicating that though the majority of the Bene Ephraim have not managed yet to escape the traditional spatial caste segregation, they did introduce a new dimension into the religious topography of the village.

Anthropologist Shalva Weil demonstrated in her study on constructions of space in the history of the Cochin Jews that "Indian Jewish topographies" have in important ways extended traditional Jewish geographical horizons (2009). The synagogue and the Bene Ephraim part of Madigapalli have put the village on the world map of Jewish locations. Their pictures appear on the website of a foreign Jewish organization; they have been visited by rabbis from outside India. We have even received a few messages from members of the public interested in Jewish culture asking us how to get to the village, because they would like to include it in their tour of India. At the same time, while the Jewish signs and symbols are used by the Bene Ephraim to assert their Jewishness and to connect to the Jewish people worldwide, they also serve to remind their neighbors about their claim to a different account of origin—an account which initially aimed to include all Madiga Dalits and to challenge their position in the caste hierarchy. As

we discuss below, the Bene Ephraim also try to establish their link to Jews and Judaism and to communicate their message about the relationship between Jewish and Dalit cultures through their practices.

Festivals, Burials, and Dietary Laws

We will demonstrate in chapters 3 and 4 that Bene Ephraim practices appear to be steadily changing to take the shape of mainstream Jewish tradition. For instance, we will see that some festivals and ceremonies—such as that of the Torah scroll dedication which we described at the beginning of the book—were introduced into the community's life relatively recently by foreign Jewish visitors. We will also discuss how different community members have different views of the direction in which the Bene Ephraim tradition should develop and how the Yacobi brothers themselves do not always agree about which practices should or should not be observed by their congregation. However, here we will focus on some of those customs that the Yacobis describe as original. These are the customs that, according to the Bene Ephraim, were brought to the subcontinent by their Hebrew ancestors and that are still practiced by all Madiga. These rites, some of which are specifically associated with the untouchables and are viewed by caste Hindus as ritually polluting, are presented by the Bene Ephraim as proof of their Israelite origin. This trope offers the audiences of the Yacobis what Eric Hobsbawm has famously called "invented tradition," understood as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition which automatically implies continuity with the past" (1983: 1). On the face of it, the Bene Ephraim leaders use Jewish practices to establish continuity with the community's Israelite past. At the same time, we will argue that the Yacobis' interpretation of these practices also aims at normalizing their Dalit past within the wider Hindu framework.

As we noted above, Shmuel Yacobi has conjectured that ancient Israelite theology and practices of his ancestors were stolen from them by the "Aryans" and thus shaped the whole of Hinduism. For instance, he argues that many Telugu Hindu festivals have their analogues in the major Jewish holidays—the Hindus first learned about these festivals from the Bene Ephraim, and once the latter came to be declared untouchables as a punishment for their resistance to the caste system, the Hindus prohibited them from practicing these rites. In Shmuel's view, by celebrating

FIGURE 2.3 Sukkot celebrations in Kothareddypalem. Shmuel Yacobi back center. Photograph by Shahid Perwez.

Jewish holidays, the Madiga are returning to their roots and reclaiming what was theirs in the first place (see fig.2.3). However, Shmuel also suggests that the Madiga and other Dalits did manage to remember and keep at least two Jewish traditions which later became the main markers of their untouchability—the customs of ritual slaughter and of ritually burying their dead.

Most community members claim to command the knowledge of *shehitah*,[14] and say that they can make any meat kosher. However, in the discourse of the Bene Ephraim, *kashrut* means much more than Jewish dietary laws. When talking about the Bene Ephraim practice of eating kosher meat, the Yacobis particularly stress their knowledge of how to make buffalo meat kosher. According to Shmuel Yacobi, the fact that the Scheduled Castes of India possessed knowledge about beef-eating—a practice which caste Hindus consider to be ritually polluting—is further evidence of their connection to the ancient Israelites.

Similar instances of Dalit groups reinterpreting practices associated with untouchability into positive "identity markers" have been well documented by anthropologists of South Asia. David Mosse has described the way Christian Dalit thinkers participate in honoring Dalit cultures through the re-conceptualization of "outcaste" practices—for instance, introducing drumming into Christian liturgy and promoting beef-eating and

drumming in Jesuit schools (Mosse 2010: 254). Still has discussed how beef-eating is celebrated by the Madiga of coastal Andhra, who re-signify it from a repudiated practice into a positive symbol of Dalit culture (2007). Similarly, when the Yacobis speak about the importance of observing the laws of *kashrut*, they not only try to establish a ritual connection with other Jewish communities around the world, but also to glorify the Madiga tradition. Buffalo meat becomes both a symbol of their rediscovered Jewish past and a site of Dalit activism.

Marking the end of life with a burial is another practice that, according to the Yacobis, connects Dalits to Judaism. "This is what the Madiga used to do even before Christian missionaries arrived, and it is a Hebrew custom," Shmuel told us. We did not observe any funerals in the village, yet we were taken to the local Christian Madiga cemetery, where the tombs of deceased Bene Ephraim are marked with the same Jewish symbols as their houses—Stars of David, signs symbolizing the menorah, the words "Zion" and "Shaddai" written in Hebrew (see fig. 2.4). The Madiga cemetery in itself is described by the Bene Ephraim as further evidence of their Jewish origin. They pride themselves on their practice of burying their dead, which is different from the cremating practice of caste Hindus, reinterpreting this practice as a tradition passed down to them by their Israelite ancestors. As is the case with observing *kashrut*, the Madiga cemetery symbolizes for the Bene Ephraim both their Jewish past and their Dalit heritage. It becomes both a new site in what Weil describes as "Indian Jewish topographies" and a prominent place of Madiga cultural history.

As we noted in the previous chapter, Shmuel's attempts at establishing a connection of belief and practice between untouchables and Judaism could be considered in the context of other Dalit conversion movements, as well as against the backdrop of Dalit activists' rhetoric associating the cultures of Scheduled Castes with "non-Indian" traditions and dissociating them from Hinduism. As the Dalit activist Kancha Ilaiah put it, denouncing the Hindutva[15] ideologues' anti-Muslim and anti-Christian stance,

> What do we, the lower Sudras and Ati-Sudras ... have to do with Hinduism or with Hindutva itself?... We heard about *Turukoollu* (Muslims), we heard about *Kirastaanapoolu* (Christians), we heard about *Baapanoolu* (Brahmins) and *Koomatoolu* (Baniyas) spoken of as people who are different from us. Among these four categories, the most different were the Baapanoollu and the Koomatoolu. There

FIGURE 2.4 Madiga Cemetery near Kothareddypalem. Photograph by Yulia Egorova.

> are at least some aspects of life common to us and the Turukoollu and Kirastaanapoollu. We all eat meat, we all touch each other ... (1996: xi).

Like Kancha Ilaiah, Shmuel Yacobi explicitly dissociates Dalit culture from Hinduism, but he also distances it from Christianity with its universalist message which did not help his ancestors to escape the stigma of untouchability. Instead, he offers his Madiga followers a religion that has its own tradition of applying different laws of ritual purity to different categories of persons. To return to the ethnographic context of the community's life in the village, insisting on eating kosher provides the Bene Ephraim with a mechanism to separate their congregants ritually from the Christian Madiga and ensures that their neighbors are more likely to become aware of their Jewishness. We could sometimes observe Bene Ephraim refusing to eat in the houses of other villagers on the grounds that the food prepared in their homes was not kosher. Just as caste Hindus refuse food prepared by the Madiga, the Bene Ephraim now have dietary prohibitions of their own to which they subject their non-Jewish neighbors. Toward the end of his fieldwork Shahid observed another example of the Bene Ephraim trying to gradually distance themselves from other villagers. Sadok Yacobi arranged for a separate building to be constructed in

the synagogue courtyard—the building was supposed to serve as an office where non-Jewish visitors would report upon arrival. Sadok explained to Shahid that it was not appropriate for the "outsiders" to enter the synagogue if they wanted to see him, and he needed to have a specially dedicated structure to accommodate such visits. He thus constructed a new spatial boundary to separate his house of worship from the rest of the village, which allowed him to grant entry rights to some villagers and deny them to others, just as the Hindus would refuse to let him into their temples.

Jews or Christians? Bene Ephraim and their Neighbors

Despite the fact that the Bene Ephraim have been openly practicing Judaism for the past twenty years, not many people in the village recognize them as Jewish or realize that they practice a religion different from Christianity. Their immediate friends and neighbors from the local Muslim and Christian communities are aware of the Yacobis' congregation being Jewish and suggested to us that the Yacobis had to sacrifice a lot when they started practicing Judaism openly. One example of such sacrifice they mentioned was not being able to work on Saturdays—a practice that most employers would not accommodate. They also confirmed that many Bene Ephraim would refuse food in the houses of their Christian friends and neighbors because it was not kosher. However, the majority of villagers even today consider the synagogue to be just another Christian church and remember Shmuel Yacobi as a Christian pastor.

The idea that the Bene Ephraim could be anything other than Christian Madiga was rather badly received by some segments of the Dalit movement. In 2004 the *Dalit Voice*, a radical magazine published in Bangalore, featured an article vehemently denying that the Bene Ephraim were Jewish, arguing that they have chosen this path to seek donations from overseas Jewish communities, and expressing skepticism about the possibility of them ever being accepted in Israel (Bhupati 2004). That a Dalit periodical takes this position is not surprising. As we will demonstrate below, the Yacobis eventually chose to dissociate their community not just from the Dalit movement, but even from the entire history of Indian untouchables, which could not but cause resentment among Dalit activists.

Some people in the village learned that the Bene Ephraim were Jewish from the local and national press. In 2004 the community made headlines

in India when the police of Hyderabad uncovered a plot by alleged agents of an Islamic militarist organization based in Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Tayyiba, to attack Americans in Hyderabad and the Jewish families in Guntur. According to the *Times of India*, it was the first time that anybody in Andhra Pradesh realized that there were Jews in this district (*Times of India* 2004). After this incident and subsequently after the Mumbai attacks of 2008, when the Chabad Lubavitch Jewish Center was taken over by terrorists and an Israeli rabbi and his wife were murdered together with other hostages, the community applied to the police to increase security measures for them in Kothareddypalem. The possibility of terrorist attacks remained a major area of concern for the Yacobis. In the past few years they have been inviting reporters from local and national newspapers and TV channels to tell them about the community and to share their fears about possible terrorist attacks (see, for instance, *Deccan Chronicle* 2008). It appears that it is only as a result of this publicity that some of their neighbors discovered that there was a Jewish community in their village.

We witnessed the Yacobi brothers communicating with local newspaper reporters throughout 2009 and stressing their need for more protection. Subsequently, a high-caste Hindu neighbor, who is also a prominent member of the Chebrole community, told us that he only found out about the Bene Ephraim from newspaper articles published in 2009. He was very surprised to learn that there was a Jewish community in Chebrole and that they were under terrorist threat. In his view, they are Madiga untouchables who are trying to adopt a new tradition to improve their status in the village and to benefit from their engagement with overseas Jewish groups. His comments pertained just to the Bene Ephraim. However, it is noteworthy that high-caste Hindus often tend to be dismissive of the attempts of Dalit communities at raising their status in the local hierarchy, no matter what form these attempts take. Moreover, all over the country caste Hindus appear to be particularly threatened by those low-status groups that are trying to achieve some level of economic and social mobility (Kumar and Robinson 2010: 161). Therefore, a Madiga group led by a university-educated person who managed to establish a prayer-house on one of the village's main streets was very likely to receive the negative attention of caste Hindus, no matter what the content of their claims was.

The local authorities also view the Bene Ephraim movement with a degree of suspicion. Not many people in the village or the district realize that Judaism is not a proselytizing religion (or that it is not a branch of

Christianity for that matter). Shmuel and Sadok told us that they often had to explain to the police that they were not running a movement for mass conversion, and that their foreign Jewish visitors were helping them to rediscover their past and not to convert to a new religion alien to their tradition. The community is obliged to report all their foreign guests, and during Yulia's last visit Sadok had to assure the police that she was not there to facilitate their conversion into yet another denomination of Christianity (which are already numerous in the village). She was even followed by a local intelligence officer who assumed that she was a Christian missionary distributing foreign funds among the Madiga. Both brothers told us they were fearful that even if they were so lucky as to have rabbis sent to the community from Israel to have it formally converted, this would not be allowed by the Indian authorities, as it had been the case with the Bene Menashe.

Ironically, despite the fact that the Bene Ephraim practice Judaism and are perceived as Christian, on paper, like most of their Christian Madiga neighbors, they are still part of the Hindu caste system. When a Bene Ephraim child is born, he or she is given both a Jewish name and a Telugu Hindu name. The former is used in the family and in the community, while the latter becomes the "official" name used in their interactions with the authorities at school and other state institutions. Older community members go by their Jewish names only when talking to other Bene Ephraim, or to visitors like us, while using their Telugu names on documents as well as in their interactions with other villagers. Most Bene Ephraim also have Jewish surnames. It is a common practice in Andhra Pradesh to have the village name as a surname, called *intiperu* in Telugu. It appears that in many cases original Telugu *intiperu* of community members have been translated or interpreted into Hebrew by Shmuel Yacobi in the light of his research into the similarities between the Hebrew and Telugu cultures.

The identification documents of community members bear only their Hindu Telugu names. Retaining these names (as well as remaining "officially" Hindu) is important for securing concessions reserved for the Scheduled Castes under the Indian law. The position that the judiciary of the Indian state has taken on caste inequality is that it is present only among Hindu groups, and that there can be no untouchability in communities practicing other religions. The provision of benefits reserved for Scheduled Castes has been extended to Sikhs and Buddhists, but Dalits who practice other religions, as it is the case of the Bene Ephraim, do not qualify as Scheduled Castes and are not eligible for any benefits. As Ashok

Kumar M. and Rowena Robinson suggest in their study of Lutheran Malas of coastal Andhra Pradesh, Christian Dalits have no option but to declare themselves as Hindu Malas or Madigas to fit into a category recognized as a Scheduled Caste. The structural inequalities that they are subjected to makes their position in coastal Andhra just as marginal and precarious as that of Hindu Dalits, which means that they cannot afford to refuse the benefits associated with their Scheduled Caste status. Moreover, keeping this status entitles them to state protection against caste-based crimes (2010: 158).

Kumar and Robinson's study also discusses how state functionaries openly advise Christian Dalits to register themselves as Hindu, a practice which resonates with the experiences of the Bene Ephraim. Sadok Yacobi told us that he had tried to make the Jewish names of their children become their "official" names—the names that will appear on all their documents. However, the local authorities advised him that doing so would put his children at a disadvantage. By becoming "officially" Jewish, they would lose access to places reserved for the Dalits in educational and state institutions. Sadok and his wife Miriam felt that they should not deprive their children of these opportunities, because, despite being Jewish, they were still subject to caste discrimination on account of their untouchable status. It would be even more the case for other Bene Ephraim, the majority of whom have limited means of livelihood and very low levels of literacy. At the same time, the Yacobis could not help wondering whether maintaining the Madiga status was worth the effort after all, given that reservations mitigated the social challenges faced by the Scheduled Castes only to a limited degree. As we will see below, though the Yacobis would not go as far as renouncing their untouchable status on paper, they have explicitly dissociated themselves from Dalit movements.

Jews or Dalits?

Community leaders appear to be very aware of their group's place in the caste society. Once Shahid asked Sadok's son Jacob if he would be interested in joining his uncle Shmuel in conducting research on the Jewish history of the Bene Ephraim. Jacob was very pessimistic about the outcome of such searches, even if they could prove once and for all that the Bene Ephraim were of Hebrew descent: "We would still be under the four class [varna] system."

Shmuel Yacobi expressed his concern that local caste politics may affect his group's standing even vis-à-vis foreign Jewish communities and Israeli authorities. In chapter 6 we will explore other Judaizing groups of Andhra Pradesh who have embraced the Jewish tradition very recently. When we asked Shmuel what his position on these communities was, he expressed his concern, admitting to us that he would prefer to stay away from these groups, as they were represented by people from castes higher than Madiga and were likely to hijack his movement if he were to collaborate with them. As we will see in the penultimate chapter, these concerns were not unfounded. The new groups, who due to their higher status proved to be more resourceful, have already by far outnumbered the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem. Moreover, they started seeking the support of foreign Jewish organizations themselves and have tried to undermine the claims of the Yacobis about the Jewish descent of their congregation. Not surprisingly, the Yacobis view such allegations as potentially damaging for the image of their group, which already struggles to be recognized as Jewish in the village.

At the same time, despite his strong anti-caste rhetoric, Shmuel Yacobi chose to dissociate his community not only from Indian religious cultures, but also from the Dalit movement. He told us that he was once approached by a radical Dalit activist and asked to join his movement. Shmuel's response was that to change the position of Indian untouchables his interlocutor needed support from abroad. In the case of the Bene Ephraim, this support is expected to come from Israel and international Jewish organizations. It is noteworthy in this respect that recently the Yacobis' anti-caste rhetoric appears to have given way to the "war on terror" discourse, and the role of the most threatening "other" in the village is now assigned to "Muslim terrorists." When Yulia visited the community in early 2009, she was shown faint traces of the Star of David and other Jewish symbols on the huts of the Bene Ephraim that had to be washed off for some period of time. This was explained as a strategy to avoid a possible terrorist attack on Jewish houses. When Shahid arrived in the village later in the year and assured the Yacobis that the possibility of such attacks was highly unlikely, the symbols appeared anew. When talking about their fears of terrorists, the Yacobis kept stressing that their relations with local Muslim communities were exceptionally good, and it is just the international terrorist groups from abroad that they were concerned about. Shmuel and his wife Malkah once jokingly told us that Lashkar-e-Tayyiba seemed to be

one of those (very few) organizations in the world to recognize the Bene Ephraim as Jewish. It is not surprising then that for the Yacobis portraying their community as victims of international terrorism meant reasserting their Jewishness and establishing a connection with Jews worldwide.

However, despite the fact that the Bene Ephraim leaders have come to dissociate their movement from those of other Dalits, it is noteworthy that their strategy to describe the nature of their discrimination in terms which would be more familiar to Israeli and Jewish organizations resonates with the attempts of other Dalit groups to contribute to what Anupama Rao has described as the "internationalization of the problem of untouchability" (2005: 12). To give one such example, some Dalit leaders have tried to equate caste discrimination with racism. They have argued that the severity of their oppression is comparable to if not worse than that of black communities in the West (for a detailed discussion see Prashad 2000, Reddy 2005). This issue was debated in the preparations for the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, which was held in 2001 in Durban. The Dalits argued that caste discrimination should be considered racism and put on the agenda of the conference, while the Indian government insisted on it being unconnected to race (Sabir 2003, Hardtmann 2009).

Other Dalit ideologues have tried to capitalize on the idea that caste groups may be genetically different from each other with upper castes being closer to Europeans and lower castes representing the indigenous populations who were supposedly closer to Africans and Asians (Egorova 2009). In both cases, constructing a socio-cultural or genetic "bridge" between lower castes in India and African communities was supposed to illuminate similarities between caste discrimination, traditionally considered to be peculiar to the subcontinent, and racism, a concept that Western liberal audiences are more familiar with and unambiguously critical of.

Similarly, in the case of the Bene Ephraim, portraying the community as victims of international terrorism was supposed to attract the support of a foreign (Israeli) government and of Jewish organizations. Their expectation that the Israeli authorities would sympathize with potential victims of a terrorist attack was probably not all that far-fetched. John Jackson has noted in his discussion of the Hebrew Israelites that they claim they secured a more solid acceptance from the Israeli state only after one of their members became a victim of terrorism. As Jackson observes, "They were made to feel less foreign as a function of this tragedy, and it served as a mechanism for facilitating their further acceptance as a part of the

Israeli nation" (2009: 105). We would hesitate to speculate whether in the case of the Bene Ephraim the threat of a terrorist attack was perceived or real, but in any case, it appears to have provided the Yacobis with rhetorical ammunition to appeal to overseas Jewish communities for help and to distinguish their congregation from those of the Christian Madiga in the village. After the Mumbai attacks, the Yacobis applied to the local police department for protection against terrorism. Irrespective of whether this protection was practically needed or not, their requests served to remind their neighbors and the local authorities that they were a Jewish community and that their house of worship was a synagogue and not another Christian church.

The story of the Bene Ephraim is rather unique when considered in the context of other Dalit movements. They are the first Dalit community to embrace the Jewish tradition and to seek the support of the State of Israel. However, what makes them akin to some of the other Dalit groups is that in their search for social liberation they are prepared to turn to overseas communities and organizations. Just as the Dalits who participated in the preparations for the conference in Durban felt that they could not succeed in their fight against discrimination without the support of the international community, the Bene Ephraim are more hopeful about the possible support of Israel and Jewish communities worldwide than about getting help from the local authorities or the Indian government.

To return to the wider context of Judaizing movements, this portrayal of the relationship with the Indian state is similar to the way Hebrew Israelites felt about their place in the United States. For instance, this is how dissatisfaction with life in the United States was expressed by a member of the Hebrew Israelites in an interview with anthropologist Merrill Singer: "I was always a good citizen in America, but it did not matter what I did; America is just a terrible place. I worked, I supported myself; my brothers went into the army. I even lost a brother in the army. Even so, America treated me terribly" (Singer 2000: 62–63). These words mirror a response that Yulia received from Shmuel Yacobi when she asked him whether he would be happy for his community to settle in Israel despite the numerous security problems that the Jewish State was facing: "In India [as Madiga] we have seen the worst of the worst,"[16] he replied.

Like the leaders of the Black Hebrews, Shmuel Yacobi is pessimistic about the future of his group in their country of birth and sees an open affiliation with the Israelite tradition as crucial for the social, economic,

and spiritual development of the Bene Ephraim. Just as the Black Hebrews decided to reconnect with their land of origin and to settle in the State of Israel in the context of extreme dissatisfaction with life in their home country, Shmuel Yacobi and his followers chose to encourage their congregation to prepare for *aliyah*. However, as we will see in the next chapters, this tortuous route has led the community on a wide range of paths for recognition, some of which have differed from the one that Shmuel Yacobi originally envisaged.

On Caste, Jews, and Status

Embracing (or reverting to) the Jewish tradition has proved to be an important channel for honoring the local cultures of Judaizing communities. For instance, as Bernard Wolfson has observed in respect to the African American rabbi Capers Funnye from Chicago, for him and his congregation "being Jewish represents a return to selfhood and a celebration of black pride" (2000: 46). Myer Samra argues in respect of the Bene Menashe that the emergence of Judaism in the northeast of India and Burma was, in part, an outgrowth of the nationalist aspirations of the Chin-Kuki-Mizo people, aspirations which arose during the British period and continued to grow in the second half of the twentieth century. In independent India, these communities did not feel sufficiently part of the nation-building project and hoped that they would have a better future in Israel (Samra 2008: 63). In this chapter we discussed the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim in the context of Madiga origin narratives and against the backdrop of the community's experiences of caste discrimination and suggested that the Judaization of the Kothareddypalem community could be read as a way of celebrating Madiga heritage, and in this sense it mirrors the attempts at cultural and spiritual liberation demonstrated by other Dalit groups and other Judaizing movements.

We also argued that though community leaders now explicitly dissociate themselves from Dalit movements, their desire to join a "foreign" tradition and to make *aliyah* to Israel are reminiscent of the attempts of other Dalits to engage the international community in their fight against caste discrimination, and is symptomatic of the exasperation of some Dalit groups at poor opportunities for social liberation open to them in India. However, we would hesitate to read the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim purely as an attempt at social mobility through renouncing Dalit heritage. On the contrary, we argue that it is a way of providing a positive context

for their Madiga practices, and particularly for those elements of these practices that were denounced by caste Hindus.

Quite apart from that, we suggest that so far the Bene Ephraim's Judaization has been more an outcome of the Yacobis' social mobility than an effective strategy to improve Madiga standing in the village. Constructing a synagogue in the middle of the "pure-caste" part of Kothareddypalem was bound to be seen by their neighbors as a bold claim to a new status and to attract comments about untouchables using the Lost Tribes discourse in the name of moving up the caste hierarchy. However, our analysis demonstrates that it is not the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim that has allowed them to make a claim to a higher status and a place for a house of worship outside Madigapalli. On the contrary, the Yacobis were in a position to embrace the Israelite tradition and to move out of the untouchable quarters thanks to their father's career in the British Army, which led to them acquiring a piece of land outside Madigapalli, and a higher status in the village. To draw on the observation made by David Mosse (noted in chapter 1) we suggest that the ability of the Bene Ephraim to develop new forms of self-identification has stemmed from their leaders' *prior* success in a project of social mobility. It is worthy to note that a similar observation has been made by Hugh Tinker in respect of the Judaization of the Bene Israel. Tinker argues that it is not the "newly discovered" Jewishness of the Bene Israel that allowed their low-caste community to move up the social ladder of colonial society and to improve their economic situation, but that their improved socio-economic position was a prerequisite for the success of their Judaization:

> They might have remained an obscure Hindu caste with a vague folk-memory of foreign origin (like so many other castes and clans in India) had it not have been for the intrusion of the West. They were drawn into the military and civil service of the English East India Company; they moved to the island-city of Bombay, with its shipyards and factories, and in 1796 built a synagogue. They had to obtain rabbis and readers from more orthodox Jewish communities, for they had none of their own. Thus began their long bid to obtain recognition from international Jewry. Their progress was very similar to the 'caste-climbing' practiced by low and middle castes within Hinduism, as they obtained some economic advancement which enabled them to put in a bid for higher social recognition (Tinker 1972: 100).

Tinker does not speculate about how and why the Bene Israel may have embraced the Jewish tradition in the first place, but implies that it is not the Judaization of the Bene Israel that enabled them to improve their social position in colonial India. Rather, he argues, it is their collaboration with the British and the relative socio-economic success that came with it, that allowed them to bring the Judaization project to fruition. As we will discuss in chapter 4, the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim did eventually bring the community to the attention of Jewish and Israeli organizations, who provided them with limited financial and cultural support, but (as was also the case with the Bene Israel) it hardly changed their social position in the caste system.

In this respect we also suggest that the case of the Bene Ephraim has a number of implications for debates about the way Dalit groups perceive the hierarchical structure of the caste system and see their place in it. This chapter has demonstrated that the Bene Ephraim are far from accepting their position in the local hierarchy and reference some of their Israelite practices and origin narratives not just as a way of expressing their affiliation to the global Jewish community, but also as a means for changing the perception of the Madiga and possibly even of the entire Dalit community in the traditional Hindu worldview. At the same time, we have shown that by asserting their Jewishness, community leaders are also beginning to separate their congregation from their neighbors and even from those Madiga who have not yet embraced their tradition. As we discuss in the following chapter, recently Sadok Yacobi started moving in the direction of bringing his congregation's practice more in accordance with mainstream Judaism and insisting on all community members developing stricter practices. It will be shown that tighter religious practices also brought the need for redefining community boundaries, and was accompanied by a revision of the narrative about their shared Dalit/Israelite origin. However, we will also see that despite this revision the idea about Madiga being Jewish appears to be taking hold in the village, and many community members continue to identify themselves as both Jewish and Madiga.

3

The Bene Ephraim between Judaism(s)

ONE DAY DURING our fieldwork, we decided to enter the village from a different road, the one that does not lead to the synagogue. The part of the village in which we found ourselves was not on our map of Jewish Madiga houses, which promised to give us a chance to meet those village residents who were not in the community network. As we had never been to this part of the village before, we attracted curious glances, and soon found ourselves in a conversation with a young man named Joseph, who turned out to be a distant relative of the Yacobis. After we told Joseph about our research, he said that he was aware of the Bene Ephraim tradition, but did not want to join the community, because for his spiritual development he preferred to stay Christian. He explained that he had started attending the synagogue in Kothareddypalem, but very soon realized that he was not attracted to the Jewish belief and practice. Nevertheless, he noted that he believed he was Jewish, because he found himself convinced by Shmuel Yacobi's theory about all Madiga being Jewish.

In this chapter we will focus on the diversity of the Bene Ephraim tradition in Kothareddypalem. The concept of Jewish Madiga—or, more correctly, Madiga Jews—came into being as a rhetorical entity in the discourse of Shmuel Yacobi, but, to use Fernheimer's phrase, this rhetoric had practical consequences (2006: 4). Shmuel's notion of the Bene Ephraim stems from his family's oral tradition and his own research, but it became popular among other Madiga in the village and led to the emergence of a new community, which represents both a discursive object and a bounded group with material artifacts and observable practices distinguishing the group from other villagers. In the previous chapter we suggested, drawing on Maurice Charland's insight into constitutive rhetorics, that Yacobi's research inserted into the world of Andhra Pradesh (as well as into the

world of universal Jewry, as we discuss in the following chapter) the Bene Ephraim as "narratized" subjects-as-agents. As we will show here, these new subjects developed their own understandings of what it means to be Jewish, Israelite, or Bene Ephraim, some of which departed from the earlier concepts of Shmuel Yacobi's discourse. In the first two sections of this chapter we will demonstrate that even the brothers themselves have offered differing conceptualizations of being Jewish and do not always agree about the way their tradition should be practiced in the village and whether the community should undergo formal conversion to secure recognition abroad and especially in the Jewish State. While the founder of the movement, Shmuel, seeks to attain identification with Israel through a narrative about a common origin between rabbinic Judaism and the Israelite tradition of the Bene Ephraim without adopting rabbinic Jewish practice, his brother Sadok, who emerged as a social leader of the Kothareddypalem congregation, feels that embracing mainstream Judaism and even formal conversion are imperative for the spiritual liberation of their community.

We will then proceed to explore the constraints that the Yacobis found themselves under in articulating the notion of the Bene Ephraim—the constraints that stem from the perception that any community claiming Jewish origin has to prove its descent. The previous chapter showed how Shmuel strives to offer academic evidence to support the tradition of his parents. Here we discuss the way the Yacobis make further attempts to promote the idea of a genealogical connection between the Bene Ephraim and ancient Israelites—and by implication with the rest of the Jewish world—by highlighting the early history of their first synagogue and by redefining their community's membership. We will demonstrate that Shmuel's initial account of the Bene Ephraim Dalit-Jewish ancestry has changed in recent years. In the previous chapter we noted that in the 1990s and early 2000s Shmuel Yacobi was keen to stress their affinity to the Scheduled Castes and portrayed their social and economic problems in terms of the upper- and lower-caste dichotomy. Here we will show that recently he and Sadok have modified this origin story to dissociate the community from the untouchables, and redefined the community's boundaries in the village.

At the same time, we argue that in spite of these constraints imposed by the broader discourses about "Who is a Jew," for many community members the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim has emerged as a site of agency. In this respect, in the final part of the chapter we will explore how other community members negotiate group boundaries and notions of

relatedness in the village, and will suggest that though the Yacobis are now trying to dissociate the Bene Ephraim from the Madiga, most of their congregants identify with their Madiga past just as strongly as they adhere to their Jewish beliefs and practices. This chapter thus shows that though the community came into being as a result of Shmuel Yacobi's vision, it soon acquired a life of its own both building upon Shmuel's original teaching and borrowing from other Jewish cultures, embracing the account of Jewish chosenness and asserting Madiga self-identification.

Building Israel in Andhra

Shmuel Yacobi describes the Bene Ephraim theology as a "covenantal relationship with the One Living God" (Yacobi 2002: 157). He states in *Cultural Hermeneutics* that the Bene Ephraim "have no religion in modern sense of the term" (Yacobi 2002: 157), however,

> [i]f someone is interested to apply or attribute the term religion to the covenantal life style of the Bene Ephraim Communities, it is basically Israelitism or simply Judaism of the tribes of ancient Israel. In today's terms one can see that the religion of the Bene Ephraim Communities is rather a deritualized, demythologized, dephylosophized, demystified and simple way of life, like the life styles of their forefathers, the ancient Israelites recorded in the Tanach, than just a religion (Yacobi 2002: 135).

Shmuel Yacobi therefore tries to renegotiate the boundaries of recognized Jewish culture by including in it the tradition of ancient Israel, to "reconstitute" (Hammerback, discussed in chapter 1) the universal Jewish audiences in ways that would allow the Bene Ephraim to secure a connection to them. This conceptual engagement with Judaism is akin to the tradition of the Hebrew Israelites, a group of African Americans who left Chicago first for Liberia and then for Israel at the end of the 1960s. The Hebrew Israelites claimed Israeli citizenship, yet they did not identify themselves as Jews and denied that they were following any particular religion (Fernheimer 2006: 3). Their leader Ben Ammi explicitly dissociated his community from "mainstream Jews," claiming that Hebrew Israelites were the original Hebrew Israelite Nation (Singer 2000, Markowitz et al. 2003) and encouraging his group to follow only the rites described in the *Tanakh*[1] and to ignore rabbinic Judaism.

Markowitz, Helman, and Shir-Vertesh refer to the Hebrew Israelites' attempts at (re)connecting with the Promised Land as "soul citizenship." They describe it as "an alternate discourse of belonging," which "emphasizes the right of individuals and groups to assert who they are by matching their self-defined identities with existing states" (2003: 302). By dissociating themselves from mainstream Jewry while still asserting Hebrew lineage and a connection to the Jewish State, they challenged the narrative of Israeli officialdom (Markowitz 2003: 305), implicitly trying to broaden the existing boundaries of Jewishness (Fernheimer 2009: 47–48).

As with Ben Ammi, Shmuel Yacobi advocates immigration to Israel as a way of social and spiritual liberation, while refusing to undergo a conversion ceremony. As we saw in the previous chapter, Shmuel does not see the Bene Ephraim movement of religious change as a conversion movement. He told us on a number of occasions that his community had indeed abandoned Christianity—the religion that, he argues, his ancestors adopted in the nineteenth century to avoid starvation. However, he describes their transition into Judaism not as a conversion but as *teshuvah*, understood as a process of rediscovering one's Jewish heritage. As he explained in an interview with Shahid,

> You do not call it a conversion. If you want to give it a name, in Hebrew, it is called *teshuvah* ... It means "returning," going back home. Once we were lost, now we are coming back. You can call it a *teshuvah* movement. But this is not a religion. We condemn Judaism along those lines, if they say Judaism is a religion. I made it very clear to the Israeli government.[2]

Shmuel shared with us his vision of the Bene Ephraim *teshuvah* in a conversation about the community's possible immigration to the Jewish State. He told us that he first attempted to arrange for the Bene Ephraim to repatriate to Israel in the early 1990s. He made a list of about fifty families who were practicing Judaism in Andhra Pradesh and applied for their visas in the Israeli consulate in India. The visas were rejected, and a story appeared in the Israeli media arguing that millions of Indian people were immigrating to the Jewish State.[3] Unsurprisingly, this response was disappointing, but it did not discourage Shmuel from continuing his efforts to ensure that his community was recognized as Israelite.

Shmuel subsequently realized during a trip to Israel that for the community to be allowed to make *aliyah*, they would need to embrace rabbinic

Judaism. Lost Tribes communities are not considered Jewish according to *halakhah*.[4] Therefore, to become Jewish from the perspective of rabbinic Judaism, they would have to convert, a position that Shmuel opposes, arguing that the Jewish status of the Bene Ephraim is not in any way inferior to that of the recognized Jewish communities.

Shmuel thus reconceptualizes the Jewish tradition to make it inclusive of those groups who are not Jewish according to *halakhah*—who neither belong to the rabbinic tradition through birth nor have converted. As with the Black Jewish groups in the United States who tried to negotiate a shared space of collective identification with communities who had more recognized claims of Jewish heritage (Fernheimer 2006: 4), Yacobi strives for his community to be accepted as Israelite, and, ideally, to be allowed into the Jewish State, while refusing to embrace mainstream Judaism. Interestingly, in doing so, he insists on the importance of the genealogical connection of the Lost Tribes to the Promised Land and upholds the idea of Jewish chosenness. At the same time, he argues that any person who wants to join "the family of Jacob" should be allowed to do so without formal conversion:

> So [there are] two ways [of being part of the nation of Israel] ... either you remember your background, that you are connected to Yaacob and his family, then you are welcome to be in this nation. Otherwise, if you know you are not connected with Yaacob, still there is a way. You take up this burden, to become an instrument for blessing of the whole world. That's it, simple. I always give them an example like this. A king wanted to give a feast to the whole kingdom. It was his aim to invite everybody. But to prepare the food, he invited a few people. Those few people are Israel in my view.
>
> First they [Israeli authorities] said if you undergo the process of conversion we will accept you and I denied that ... [I don't recognize] the present Jewish conversion system in Israel under the Law of Return. They asked me in 1994 ... the easiest way was to accept Judaism. If you are sincere you can come to Israel ... I said ... in ancient Israel there were no religious conversions. If somebody wants to live with them, they come and stay with them ... In my view, Israel is not a religion. Israel is different from Judaism ... so there [should be] no conversion. Israeli culture, Hebrew culture is entirely different from today's Judaism .... [5]

It appears that in talking about conversions Shmuel draws on pre-rabbinic Jewish history, where conversions were only informal. Indeed, as the historian Shaye Cohen describes,

> In pre-Rabbinic times (i.e. before the second century C.E.) conversion to Judaism was entirely a private affair. Conversions were not supervised or overseen by anyone, and there was no conversion ceremony. Circumcisions could be performed by anyone in any manner ... Any gentile who followed (or pretended to follow) Jewish practices could claim to be a convert. The creation of the rabbinic conversion ceremony meant that conversion was now a public affair. A gentile could no longer simply claim to be a convert and could no longer convert to Judaism on his own. He ... must be able to provide proof of his conversion (Cohen 1999: 223).

As we discuss in chapter 5, proof of conversion in modern Israel is often required of those communities that are not Jewish according to *halakhah*, if they want to make *aliyah*, and it is this formal conversion—as well as other rabbinic practices—that Shmuel opposes. He does not deny recognized Jews their place in the Israelite tradition but is keen on sharing it with them as an equal partner. Shmuel is open to contacts with other Jewish groups, but would prefer to limit their influence on the Bene Ephraim tradition, which he sees as Tanakhic rather than rabbinic. However, as we will see below, the actual development of Bene Ephraim Jewishness in the village has taken a rather different trajectory.

From Dalits to Bene Ephraim

As we mentioned above, Shmuel is keen on his community observing the main rites mentioned in the *Tanakh*. He told us he considered the Sabbath, *kashrut*, and circumcision to be particularly important, and these are the practices that indeed appear to be central to the Jewish life of the Bene Ephraim.

Like in many Jewish communities around the world, the performance of Jewishness among the Bene Ephraim revolves around the Sabbath service. Community members gather in the synagogue hall every Friday evening after sunset in order to welcome the arrival of the Sabbath. The Sabbath candles are lit, and a plate of offerings is prepared with flowers and fruits. Taking a purificatory bath before coming to the synagogue

is considered obligatory. The synagogue backyard contains a special basin that was described to us by one of Sadok's daughters as a *mikveh*. [6] The prayer hall of the synagogue consists of one room, where men sit on one side and women on the other. A typical Sabbath service in the Kothareddypalem synagogue consists of reciting the psalms in Hebrew and in Telugu. The service is normally led by Sadok Yacobi. When he is away, his twenty-three-year-old son Jacob, or other family members, take this responsibility. Men and boys wear *kippot* (plural of *kippah*, the traditional Jewish skullcap, brought by Sadok back from Israel or donated by visitors). Women cover their heads with a headscarf or with saris.

The observance of the Sabbath, which for many Bene Ephraim is mainly expressed in their attendance at synagogue, is the key feature that distinguishes them from other Madiga in the village. Sabbath-related activities allow the Bene Ephraim to show their loyalty to the community, to reinforce their Jewish identity in their children who are often taken to the service, and to demonstrate to their Madiga and caste Hindu neighbors that they now belong to a different tradition. In this process, the Bene Ephraim are thus rhetorically constituted not only through a shared narrative, but also through religious performance. This performance serves to consolidate community boundaries, to provide a socialization platform for the Bene Ephraim children, and to impress it upon their neighbors that the community is Jewish. To return to Carrithers's insight into culture rhetoric, or the rhetorical edge of culture, the Bene Ephraim could be described here as cultural agents who attempt to move their audiences toward a particular action (in this case, recognition of Bene Ephraim's Jewishness) not only through narratives, but also by way of practice. However, it is noteworthy that sometimes the scope of this practice is limited by structural problems.

In many Jewish communities the onset of the Sabbath is a reminder that all work should be stopped from now on until Saturday evening. Cooking is also prohibited. However, in Kothareddypalem, most community members are daily wage earners. They cannot stop working on Saturdays completely, as this would mean no food for the day. Those few who can afford not to work on Saturdays do their best to keep it a day of rest and join the Yacobis for prayers around mid-day. The service lasts for about an hour and involves the congregation reciting verses from the *Torah* and the *siddur* and singing songs in Hebrew and in Telugu. People leave for their houses after the service is over, coming back again in the evening after the three stars have become visible in the sky. They then

perform the final ritual of the Sabbath, which consists of a short prayer to bid farewell to the day of rest. As far as cooking is concerned, it is again difficult for most Bene Ephraim to stick to the required practice. Village Madiga do not possess refrigerators and therefore have to cook every day. The Yacobis realize that the community faces many challenges stemming from their difficult material situation, encouraging the Bene Ephraim to do as much as they can do under the constraints of their life style.

Another marker of Jewish self-identification that the community strives to maintain is observing some rites of the Jewish life cycle. As the Bene Ephraim started practicing Judaism in public about twenty years ago, they can now boast a number of young men and women who grew up in the Jewish tradition. For male Bene Ephraim the most important life cycle event is circumcision; every man in the Kothareddypalem congregation reported to us that they had been circumcised. Circumcision in Judaism is supposed to be performed on the eighth day after the baby boy is born. In our interactions with the community, every male member reported to have undergone circumcision either during childhood or at a later age. In the absence of a *mohel*,[7] the circumcision of most Bene Ephraim is performed by a doctor at a local hospital in a nearby town. Some have told us that if they have a boy in the future, they will try to make sure that the circumcision is performed on the eighth day after his birth, as it is done by observant Jews elsewhere.

Some of the rites that the community has adopted go well beyond the Tanakhic tradition advocated by Shmuel Yacobi. As we have already mentioned, the Bene Ephraim men wear *kippot*, which a post-biblical practice. The same is true for the practice of using *siddurim* (prayer books), or, indeed, establishing synagogues. Some community members told us that they would like to keep dairy and meat products separately, and to have separate utensils and dishes for each—which is an important requirement developed, again, in rabbinic Judaism—but cannot do so for sheer lack of utensils. An even more "modern" practice that the Bene Ephraim in the village strive to observe is that of Bar Mitzvah (for boys) and Bat Mitzvah (for girls), which is performed at the ages of thirteen and twelve, respectively. When children reach this age, they are brought to the synagogue, where one of the Yacobi brothers welcomes them into the world of adults. Becoming a Bar/Bat Mitzvah means that the adolescent is now able to conduct prayers within the synagogue as an adult member of the congregation. The ceremony of Bar Mitzvah was developed in Europe about four hundred years ago, while the Bat Mitzvah is a much more

recent phenomenon, which was introduced in the United States in 1922 by the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism Mordechai Kaplan to counteract gender imbalance in the synagogue. Needless to say, neither rite fits Shmuel's vision of the tradition that he believes the Bene Ephraim should be following; yet they both are practiced in the community. How was this state of affairs brought about?

On the whole, it appears that despite Shmuel's insistence on the Lost Tribes descent of the Bene Ephraim and their difference from conventionally Jewish groups, in practice the community is moving in the direction of greater conformity with mainstream Judaism under the direction of Sadok. Like his brother Shmuel, Sadok wants the Bene Ephraim to be recognized as an Israelite group by the Jewish communities and organizations outside of India. However, unlike Shmuel, he is prepared to accept formal conversion if this is going to ensure this recognition and subsequent *aliyah* to the Jewish State, which he finds imperative both for the social liberation and the spiritual development of the Bene Ephraim.

Sadok told us on a number of occasions that he would like to have an opportunity to send several young Bene Ephraim to study in a *yeshivah*[8] in Israel or the United States. One of these young people, David, who is seen as a possible future leader of the Bene Ephraim, told Yulia that he would like to acquire formal rabbinical training: "My goal is to go to Israel," he said. "I want to do rabbinical training there, come back to Kothareddypalem and teach the community. People here are not educated. They very much need a rabbi."[9] At the time of writing, Shmuel's son Yehoshua, who attended an Orthodox *yeshivah* in Israel in the 1990s and eventually obtained Israeli citizenship and settled there, is working on a Telugu translation of a Hebrew textbook outlining the basic principles of Judaism. It is Sadok's hope that once the translation is finished, the book will be distributed among the Bene Ephraim to help them bring their practice in line with that of recognized Jewish groups.

As we will discuss in the following chapter, Sadok in recent years has actively sought out the involvement of American and Israeli organizations, as well as of other foreign donors who support "emerging" Jewish communities. Sadok is very much appreciative of this help and frames it in terms of its emancipatory potential. He has stressed to us that due to the low social status of the Madiga and their poor material conditions, not all community members were in an optimal position to follow Judaism. Due to the demands of waged labor, many of them had to work on Saturdays and could not attend synagogue when required, or had to seek work

outside Kothareddypalem, where they did not have access to kosher food. Finding means of subsistence, which would make the Bene Ephraim independent of the local landlords, would therefore help them maintain their very existence as an Israelite group. Like his brother Shmuel, Sadok wants his community to (re)claim the Jewish tradition as a means of social liberation. However, unlike Shmuel, his considers this liberation impossible without closer contact with recognized Judaism.

Sadok once took us to the Madiga cemetery, where individual Jewish graves marked with Stars of David, symbols of the menorah, and Hebrew signs stand side by side with Christian tombstones. Sadok noted that some Bene Ephraim graves, as well as the graves of other Madiga, were not marked at all because the families of the deceased could not afford to put a tombstone on them. He then went on to say that many of the Bene Ephraim did not know what their origin was: "Their ancestors descended into poverty and could not afford to maintain Jewish practices, just like now many Bene Ephraim cannot afford to put a tombstone on the graves of their kin to demarcate them from Christian graves." In Sadok's view, true liberation from this ignorance and an opportunity to reclaim the tradition that rightfully belongs to the Bene Ephraim could only be expected to come from foreign Jewish donors and the State of Israel. "When you educate the Bene Ephraim, they suddenly realize who they are, but otherwise they would not know better," he said. "[My brother] Shmuel has done a lot to open their eyes to it, but there is a lot more to do. That's why I am happy I have established contacts in Israel and with rabbis elsewhere."

Shmuel, on the contrary, is doubtful about this involvement and is critical of the Bene Ephraim adopting mainstream Jewish practices. However, he seems to be finding it more and more difficult to oppose his community's practice. For instance, he told us that he was not entirely supportive of Hanukkah celebrations in the village, as this festival did not belong to the Lost Tribes tradition. However, realizing the importance that this festival had already acquired for the Bene Ephraim, he attended the ceremony in Kothareddypalem and, as Shahid observed in 2009, made a speech for the entire community about the meaning of Hanukkah, which Shmuel emphasized is a festival celebrating the liberation of the Jewish people. Later Shmuel admitted in an interview with Yulia that for the Bene Ephraim children growing up in the village, the tradition introduced by Sadok, which was beginning to resemble mainstream Judaism more and more, was the tradition that they knew best.[10] Shortly afterward, we saw an

example of this in a conversation with a thirteen-year-old boy who grew up in the community. We asked him what his name was, and he told us it was Moshe. We asked if he had a Telugu name as well, because, as we noted above, most Bene Ephraim used their Jewish names only in the community, keeping their Telugu names for other neighbors and the authorities. Moshe first seemed somewhat perplexed, but then looked at us defiantly and said that this was the one and only name he had. Whether he really had a Telugu name or not, at least in his conversation with us he preferred to assert his Jewish rather than Telugu Madiga background. As we will see in the following section, he is not the only community member to dissociate himself from his group's Madiga past. Similar sentiments are now expressed by Shmuel Yacobi himself.

The Real Bene Ephraim

In the previous chapter we noted how Shmuel Yacobi suggests in *Cultural Hermeneutics* that all the Madiga, and possibly all the Scheduled Castes of India, belonged to the tribe of Ephraim. Recently he offered a much narrower definition of his community's membership. He still contends that the Bene Ephraim may have influenced Madiga and Telugu cultures, but he now maintains that they are different from the Madiga, as well as from other untouchables. In this new interpretation of Bene Ephraim history, their ancestors had nothing to do with the Madiga, but were "clubbed" with them by caste Hindus because of their occupations and dietary laws, which allowed them to eat beef. If in the past Shmuel's research into the dietary laws and mortuary rites of the Madiga led him to argue that all Madiga were Israelite, now he leans more toward the hypothesis that the ancient Bene Ephraim became confused with the Madiga because some of their rituals happened to be similar, or because they happened to have settled among the Madiga and influenced their traditions. In any event, he does not support the hypothesis about the common origin of the Bene Ephraim and the Madiga any longer:

> The Israelite tribes who came here were clubbed with the Madigas. That is the main reason we were with the Madigas. When they [Israelites] came here, the local rulers put them in different castes locally. Because of beef-eating, leather work and other handicraft work, Ephraim was clubbed with the Madigas. They are not Madigas. The Madiga is an umbrella kind of identity.[11]

When Yulia asked Shmuel how one could differentiate between the Madiga and the Bene Ephraim, he told her that the "real" Bene Ephraim were those Madiga who knew that they were Israelites and who were known as such. "You Russians may all look the same to me," he added jokingly. "But if you live in Russia, you know who is Jewish and who is not. It is the same with us here in Andhra."

A similar position has been adopted by Sadok. During our visit to the Madiga cemetery described above, Sadok told us that many Bene Ephraim were still marking the tombs of their deceased family members with Christian symbols, because they did not know what their origin was and thought that they were Madiga, like their neighbors. Here the boundaries between the Bene Ephraim and the Madiga are drawn very clearly. In Sadok's view, the ancestors of the Bene Ephraim were different from the local untouchables, but their offspring forgot their true origin. Due to extreme poverty, they could not afford to maintain practices that would distinguish them from the Madiga, just as now many Bene Ephraim cannot afford to put a tombstone bearing Jewish symbols to separate their relatives' graves from those of other Dalits.

While choosing to distance the Bene Ephraim from other Madiga, the Yacobis also started placing greater emphasis on their association with the Bene Menashe of Manipur and Mizoram. The development of the Bene Ephraim movement in many respects mirrors that of the Bene Menashe. Both groups were Christianized in the British period. 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 Bene Menashe movement that led Shmuel to conjecture that his community descended from the Lost Tribe of Ephraim, as there is a special connection between Ephraim and Menashe in the Bible.[12]

Irrespective of whether the Bene Menashe influenced the Bene Ephraim at an earlier stage of their emergence as a visible Jewish group, now the Bene Ephraim follow the development of the Bene Menashe very closely and describe them as their brothers, just as Ephraim and Menashe are brothers in the biblical tradition. In 2009 Sadok Yacobi visited the State of Israel on the invitation of Shavei Israel,[13] a Jerusalem-based NGO, which provides support in religious education for communities rediscovering their Jewishness and assists them in migrating to the Jewish State. He was introduced in Israel to a number of Bene Menashe who had made *aliyah*. Sadok 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, both Sadok and 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 modern Israelite community to establish a link between their group and ancient Hebrews via an already existing and "recognized" Lost Tribe. Historians and anthropologists of Judaizing movements have observed that a number of African and African American Jewish communities have chosen to identify with Ethiopian Jews (also described as Beta Israel or Falasha).[14] Such groups were encouraged by the Beta Israel case, which challenged the popular stereotype that Jews had to be of European descent. However, rather than asserting their right to follow Judaism irrespective of their genealogical connections, they chose to stress their Ethiopian descent to ensure wider recognition. As one of Henry 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 2006a: 386).

A similar process appears to be at work in the case of the Bene Ephraim. Irrespective of whether or not their leaders were aware of the existence of the Bene Menashe 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 different Israeli organizations, and came to be recognized as a Lost Tribe by the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel. The Bene Ephraim thus established yet another genealogical link to the rest of the Jewish world by claiming a connection to an Indian community, which had already been accepted as Israelite.

Images of Jewish History

As we mentioned in chapter 1, some Judaizing movements openly declared their affiliation to 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 respondent 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 2006a: 386).

The Madiga untouchables (as well as other Dalit groups of India) lack "official" early history, which would be documented in conventional sources. This, on the one hand, creates conceptual space for an association with the Jewish tradition. On the other hand, reconstructing a "legitimate" Jewish past requires documentary evidence. Though the Yacobi family cannot offer any material evidence of their Jewish practice prior to the late 1980s, they feel under pressure to shroud their narrative in what Israeli anthropologist Tamar Katriel refers to as "the rhetoric of facticity" (1999). Katriel describes this type of rhetoric in her study of Israeli pioneering museums oriented toward a particular representation of a collective past of Jewish settlers. Just as the creators of settlement museums strive to demonstrate that it was Jewish settlers who massively improved the natural environment of Palestine, the Yacobis argue that it is their ancestors who enriched local cultures. Similar to Israeli tour guides who seek to merge the present of the State of Israel with its constructed Israeli past, Shmuel Yacobi tries to unearth the traces of an early Bene Ephraim presence in India.

The community attempts to present the artifacts that they do possess in a way that Western audiences would recognize as legitimate sites of memory (see Nora 1989) documenting the events of the (Jewish) past of the Bene Ephraim. 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 rabbis and the Israeli authorities. As we will discuss in chapter 5, according to the Israeli Law of Return, a person can settle in Israel if they are either of Jewish descent or have converted to Judaism. Though conversion is often understood as a manifestation of a more universalist tendency in Judaism (it is popularly assumed that anyone can convert, while not anyone can demonstrate Jewish descent), in the case of the Bene Ephraim conversion may become an insurmountable task. As transpired earlier in the case of the Bene Menashe, Indian authorities disapprove of mass conversions. Irrespective of this obstacle, as we noted above, due to social and economic reasons, most Bene Ephraim find it extremely difficult to reach the level of observance required of converts. Moreover, they cannot afford to travel to reach a recognized synagogue to undergo a conversion ceremony.

Therefore, they appear to be increasingly realizing the importance of proving their Israelite descent by reconstructing and documenting memories of their Jewish past.

To give one example of such efforts, in December 2009 Sadok and his wife Miriam mentioned to us that the synagogue in Kothareddypalem, constructed in 1991, was built to replace an older synagogue, which was established in 1909 and was housed in a thatched hut. A few days after we expressed interest in its history, a new sign appeared on the synagogue's front wall bearing the date of 1909 (see fig. 3.). These attempts possibly reflect the importance that reconstructions of history are accorded to in modern Jewish thought. Drawing on historian of the Jewish people Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Katriel observes that the secularization 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 toward a historicization of the past. This shift, in 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 puts 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 reconstructing their past could best be understood. Renegotiating histories and historical memories is often an important aspect of redefining collective identities (Baumann 2002, Webber 2007). This phenomenon is captured in the history of many groups who embraced the Jewish tradition in the twentieth century. Let us stress that our discussion does not aim to challenge the Bene Ephraim accounts linking their history to that of the Bene Menashe or connecting their synagogue to an older prayer hall. Our analysis rather attempts to highlight that the Bene Ephraim leaders may be under pressure to produce evidence of their community's earlier practice. 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. We later discovered a photograph of the synagogue from the early 1990s. It turned out that already then the synagogue bore a small sign saying that it was *re*-dedicated (rather than established as a new institution) in 1991. However, it was only

FIGURE 3 Synagogue in Kothareddypalem. Photograph by Shahid Perwez.

after Sadok's recent visit to Israel that the Yacobis decided to put up a sign mentioning when the original synagogue was established.

Categories of Jewishness

In addition to distinguishing the Bene Ephraim from other Madiga rhetorically, the Yacobi brothers recently also redefined Bene Ephraim membership to make community boundaries more rigid in the village. During our fieldwork in 2010 Shmuel Yacobi told us that though anyone who could come up with an oral tradition linking their practices to those of the ancient Israelites may count as Bene Ephraim, he would insist on the core group of community members living in Kothareddypalem maintaining specific Jewish practices: observing the Sabbath, Jewish festivals, and *kashrut*, adopting circumcision, and consulting the Torah, rather than the Christian Bible, as their sacred text. Sadok, in turn, expressed his concern to us that not all the people in the village who called themselves Bene Ephraim were observing these Jewish practices. This concern was voiced to us when Sadok found 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. Sadok was worried that outside of Chebrole it would be impossible for them to observe Judaism, and he therefore saw such trips as a sign of lack of commitment.

In spite of Sadok's efforts to ensure a higher degree of religious homogeneity among the Bene Ephraim and to have stricter rules relating to community membership, the boundaries between the Bene Ephraim and other Madiga villagers are much more elusive than community leaders would like them to be. Even in the immediate Yacobi family not all members observe the Israelite tradition. One of Shmuel and Sadok's brothers-in-law embraced Islam after ten years of practicing Judaism, though his wife and son stayed Jewish and continued to attend the synagogue. Despite his conversion to Islam he maintains regular contact with his Jewish in-laws and does not object to his family's Jewish practice.

In the wider Bene Ephraim community of Kothareddypalem, even some of the core synagogue-goers demonstrate a degree of religious syncretism. As part of our fieldwork, we conducted a household survey of community members—or to be more precise, of those Bene Ephraim who were described to us as such by the Yacobis. In this survey, among other things, we were asking the Kothareddypalem congregation about their religious affiliation. While most of them were keen to stress that they were Jewish, some were not quite sure about how to answer. One Bene Ephraim responded that he was Christian. He was immediately gently corrected by one of Sadok's daughters, who had accompanied us. Thus while Shmuel Yacobi rhetorically constructed the Bene Ephraim as a new Madiga community in his interviews and publications, his niece is keen on asserting their Jewishness further through our research, making sure that community members appear Jewish on paper.

In the previous chapter we noted that the Bene Ephraim, including the Yacobis, register themselves as (Hindu) Madiga on all documents produced by and presented to the Indian state. However, in our survey aimed at wider audiences the Yacobis wanted them to be recorded as Jewish. Sadok, in turn, is keen on his community asserting their Jewish self-identification through their religious performance and loyalty to the synagogue. During one of our days in Chebrole we wandered off to a farther end of the village and found a house that we had not been aware of before, marked with Jewish symbols. When we reported the discovery to Sadok, he told us he was not sure whether he would count this household as properly Jewish, because its members were not observant enough and were not attending the synagogue regularly.

Like the documents which Indian citizens have to present to the authorities and where the Bene Ephraim have to feature as Madiga, our household survey became what Nikolas Rose has described as space in which

individuals are called to declare their identities (Rose 1996). However, for some community members, declaring their religious affiliation for our survey was hardly a process of pure self-identification. It also reflected the way they were categorized by their community's leaders. By conducting the survey we thus tapped into the time-old history of population classifications in India, which has seen multiple examples of caste and religious categories being imposed on communities "from above." For instance, Viswanathan argues in her discussion of British colonial narratives about the origin of Indian Muslims that "acts of classification ... create an overarching narrative plot in which race, caste, and religion override the self-definitions of groups being enumerated" (1998: 157). Referring to nineteenth-century census takers who took records of Indian Muslims, Viswanathan observes that though they were given explicit instructions to accept each person's self-definitions in matters of religious affiliation, no matter how vague these definitions were, in practice this dictum was systematically overruled, and census takers would often take it upon themselves to categorize each individual as either Hindu or Muslim on the basis of their physical features, customs, and traditions (Viswanathan 1998: 161). It appears that in Kothareddypalem it is the Yacobis that are charged with the task of determining who counts as a Bene Ephraim and who does not, drawing community boundaries around those Madiga who pass the test of practice and loyalty. Those who seem to be faithful synagogue-goers, but who yet demonstrate alternative religious self-identifications (like the participant of our household survey who tried to describe himself as Christian), are reminded that their religious affiliation is Jewish and that it cannot be combined with any other tradition. Knowing that we were in the village to study the Bene Ephraim and no other community, and that our findings were likely to be presented to foreign audiences, the Yacobis found it imperative to monitor the process of our improvised census-taking to ensure that all members of their congregation were recorded as Jewish.

As we discuss in chapter 6, in the view of the Yacobis, being simultaneously Jewish and Christian is apparently not possible, just like it is not possible to be Jewish without observing the main Jewish rites and attending synagogue. These requirements correspond to what Shmuel would ask of an Israelite Bene Ephraim, but they also appear to have become stricter since Sadok has established contacts with foreign Jewish and Israeli organizations. Shortly after his visit to Israel in 2009 he started conducting regular Hebrew classes for his community. Shmuel also told us that his hope was that one day Israeli authorities would come to recognize the

Bene Ephraim the way they had recognized 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 Jewish practice. He even appears to be changing his position on formal conversion to Judaism. Though he still finds it offensive that the Bene Ephraim may have to convert, he now reluctantly agrees that if that is the only way for them to be accepted in Israel, he would have to embrace it.

In the following two chapters we will explore how exactly the relationship between the Yacobis, the community, and representatives of different Israeli and Jewish organizations has developed. But first, let us examine how lay community members see their Madiga past. As we will show in the following section, most of them still identify with their Madiga culture at least as strongly as with their Jewish heritage. In doing so they describe themselves in ways which do not easily fit the categories preselected for them by the Yacobis and demonstrate a set of complex, syncretic, and multifaceted understandings of what it means to be a Bene Ephraim.

Jewish Madiga

As the opening episode of this chapter suggests, the theory that all Madiga are Bene Ephraim gradually began to diffuse in the village among other Madiga and, as we show in chapter 6, among Scheduled Castes in other parts of Andhra Pradesh more generally. Back in the village, a number of community members seem 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 young Bene Ephraim man we mentioned before, who grew up in this tradition and has followed Judaism since a young age. David is very knowledgeable about the Jewish religion and is perceived by the community and by the Yacobi brothers as a future leader.

David recently married a young Madiga woman from Guntur city, Sarah, who used to be Christian and who told us that she hardly knew anything at all about Judaism before marrying David. She explained to us that she started practicing Judaism after she came to the village to live with David and his parents after the wedding. When Yulia 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, he

pointed out that his wife was a Madiga and that all Madigas were Jewish. He agreed to marry Sarah because she was ready to return to Judaism. As he explained to Yulia,

David: If you go to some other village, you see, some Madiga people there still follow Christianity or Hinduism ... because they forgot, they lost and forgot their identity. So depending upon the situation, depending upon the culture and the community, there are still some Madiga people in some villages who follow Hinduism. If you want to marry, you must try to marry a Madiga girl from those Madiga people who follow Jewish rites ... If you don't get this type of girl from the Madiga community, if they follow Christianity, you tell them ... We are Jews. You lost this identity, but we know that we are Jews. You follow Christianity, but if you [agree to] follow Judaism, we are ready to marry you. If she is ready, then you marry her, otherwise not.

YE: So, when you were looking for a wife you were only looking among the Madiga, because they are Jewish?

David: Yes, only the Madiga. We won't accept any other community.

When we asked Sarah about her communal affiliation, she said that she was Jewish because she was a Madiga. She admitted that she did not know much about Judaism before she met David, but was ready to adopt the Jewish practice. "It is a good religion!," she said. She believed that one day she and David would make *aliyah*. Though Sarah now lives in the village, she has to commute to work in Guntur. Thinking that this was a difficult commute, we asked her if she would like to move her family to the city. "I hope we will soon move to Israel," Sarah replied. Thus, despite the fact that Sarah was introduced to the Jewish tradition and the idea of Madiga Jewishness only very recently, she does not question her connection either to Judaism or the State of Israel. Once a complete outsider to the Bene Ephraim community, she has now been incorporated into the synagogue congregation and rhetorically constituted as a Jewish person, a Bene Ephraim, and a potential Israeli citizen both through Shmuel Yacobi's research and through local marriage practice, which appears to be both bringing new Israelites into the community's fold and taking Jewish Madiga away from it, when they find Christian spouses.

Although most community members told us that they would like their children to marry other Jews, in practice they find it difficult. Since the Bene Ephraim are few in numbers, there are not enough young men and

women to marry within the community. Being seen as Madiga, the Bene Ephraim make eligible brides and grooms only for other Madiga. Bene Ephraim boys are generally married to girls from Christian Madiga families in or around the village. We have documented four such marriages, to which Shahid was invited within one year. The brides gave up their Christian past and started identifying themselves as members of the Bene Ephraim. Currently, like Sarah, they are learning the religion of their husbands and attending the synagogue regularly.

As transpired in our conversations with the brides, before marriage none of them had much knowledge of Judaism or of their Israelite past, but they were ready to join the Jewish community. To give a more specific example, two of Shmuel's three sons are married to young women of Christian Madiga background. The brides were found by Shmuel's wife Malkah. She told us that she was looking for brides for her sons from the wider Christian Madiga community. Once suitable families were found, she shared with them that her sons were Jewish. Neither she nor Shmuel were insisting on the potential brides converting to Judaism. They were happy for the prospective daughters-in-law to continue practicing Christianity, provided they were accepting of their husbands' Jewish faith, they said. The girls and their families agreed to this arrangement, and the two couples were married by Shmuel himself in the synagogue in Machilipatnam. When we talked to the girls about their religion, they said they had got to know and like Judaism and therefore embraced it themselves.

As for the marriage of Bene Ephraim girls, we never received any invitations to their wedding ceremonies. Yet, at least two girls were married during Shahid's presence in the field. They were married into Christian Madiga families from nearby villages and are now practicing the religion of their husbands. On the whole, finding grooms for the Bene Ephraim girls appears much more problematic than finding brides for the Bene Ephraim boys. Local marriage practices are such that a girl married to a Christian Madiga is more likely to have to adopt the religion of her husband than a boy married likewise. Bene Ephraim elders are keen on marrying all their children, and particularly girls, to Jews in India and abroad, but this has not happened so far. The only Bene Ephraim who married a Jewish person abroad by the time of writing was Shmuel's son Yehoshua (to whom we will return in chapter 5), who became an Israeli citizen after he studied in a *yeshivah* and formally converted to Judaism. To the best of our knowledge, otherwise none of the Bene Ephraim has married

anybody other than Madiga so far. This is not surprising given that the Bene Ephraim are still perceived as Madiga Dalits within the caste system, and that the only marriage options open for them are coming from the Madiga community.

It thus appears that though for the purposes of obtaining recognition in the State of Israel and appeasing the local authorities in India the narrative about all Madiga being Jewish had to be modified, it is taking hold among regular community members. 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. Young Bene Ephraim can marry other Madiga and continue to be Jewish. Quite apart from that, this practice re-inscribed marriage as a channel for other Madiga to become Jewish, or, to employ theoretical thinking developed by Carrithers, to move from the inchoate into the storyline of the Bene Ephraim and (as we will see in the following two chapters) of the rest of the Jewish world.

At the same time, this movement has hardly led to any Bene Ephraim abandoning their Madiga "identity." None of the lay community members tried to deny in their interactions with us that they were Madiga, no matter how strongly they were attached to the Jewish tradition. Even Sadok's son Jacob, who grew up practicing Judaism, and, like David, is seen as one of its future leaders, told us on a number of occasions that he was proud of his Madiga background and was always ready to stand up to caste discrimination directed against Dalits no matter what their religious affiliation was. At college, he once organized his friends to lead a mobilization rally to protest against caste discrimination. The protests stopped only when college authorities admitted to their discriminatory practices and issued an apology.

In the previous chapter we suggested that by embracing the Jewish tradition the Bene Ephraim were also asserting their Madiga heritage and celebrating Madiga beliefs and practices, which are looked down upon by caste Hindus. This theme came up on a number of occasions in our conversations with Jacob. Drawing on Shmuel's research, Jacob argues that there is a parallel between the fate of the Madiga and that of the Jewish people—the Madiga suffer in India now, just like the Jews suffered, when they were slaves in ancient Egypt. Jacob defines himself first and foremost as a Madiga, though a Madiga of Jewish origin. Since he resents the treatment accorded to his community, he too supports the idea of permanent emigration to Israel. At the same time, he does not want to be at the mercy

of Israeli authorities or any other organizations, and is seeking out opportunities to go abroad, become financially independent, and bring his family to Israel then.

Finally, as we observed one day during our fieldwork, the Yacobi brothers themselves invoke their Madiga heritage even today, if it suits the community's interests. For instance, in 2010 they invited then state minister for secondary education Dokka Manikya Vara Prasada Rao to visit the synagogue and to ask whether they could rely on his support in establishing a Hebrew school. The minister was of Madiga origin and therefore was expected to be sympathetic to the community. The brothers were keen to stress their Madiga origin in their interactions with the minister, while implicitly advocating the idea that they could be both Madiga and Jewish. The minister's visit is a result of what could probably be described as the community's most successful attempt so far to have their claims legitimized in the state "corridors of power." During his visit to the synagogue, the minister made a speech in which he observed that he could not offer the community the support they required. However, he suggested that in seeking help with Hebrew language education they might wish to join forces with the Bene Menashe of Manipur and Mizoram. This statement comes close to a formal recognition of the Bene Ephraim's Jewishness, and what is particularly significant about it is that it was sought and obtained via the community's Madiga connection.

Re-inscribing Bene Ephraim

The material considered here allows us to revisit the discussion of conversion literature that we outlined in chapter 1. When considered on the macro level of social processes and cultural patterns, the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim resembles what is popularly understood as a movement for mass religious conversion. After all, for the external observer, this is a group of people who switched from practicing one religion to another. However, we noted with reference to the Comaroffs that conversion does not make for an easy category of analysis in general, and could not be unproblematically used as such in a discussion of the Bene Ephraim or other Judaizing movements, as most of their members neither see their process of Judaization as conversion nor have undergone an actual conversion ceremony. Indeed, conversion has emerged as a contested concept in the village. As we saw in this chapter, Shmuel Yacobi actively opposes formal conversion, pointing out that in pre-rabbinic times there were no

such ceremonies and persons were free to join the Jewish community just by adopting its way of life. Shmuel's brother Sadok, on the other hand, is much more open to the idea of formal conversion, if this is going to bring recognition on behalf of other Jewish groups. He too believes that the Bene Ephraim are Jewish already, but does not object to them becoming also halakhically Jewish by undergoing *giyur*.[15] Both Shmuel and Sadok adopt a formal rabbinic understanding of conversion to Judaism and use this term only in the "technical" sense that it acquired in the history of Judaism. Both are keen to stress that the Bene Ephraim's Judaization so far could not possibly be seen as a conversion movement, the point that they have to keep proving to the local police, which monitors mass conversions and does not seem to have a clear understanding of the differences between Judaism and Christianity.

At the same time, it should be noted that some community members do perceive and describe their transition to Judaism as conversion. For instance, one of the women who joined the Bene Ephraim through marriage said to Yulia that while initially she continued to observe Christianity, she later became interested in the religion of her husband and *converted* to Judaism. If seen from the perspective of mainstream Judaism, in the absence of an ordained rabbi, this process could not have been a recognized Jewish conversion. However, it is noteworthy that the young woman used the word conversion when describing her experiences to Yulia in English, contributing in her own way to the wider problematics of this phenomenon in Judaism. As Simon Coleman has put it, conversion is a "multivalent idea" (2003: 18), and the story of the Bene Ephraim illustrates this point very well.

We saw in this chapter that it is not only that different community members in the village have different understanding of the role of conversion, but that different actors and audiences perceive and relate to the Bene Ephraim differently and categorize them in a variety of ways. For Shmuel Yacobi, they are a Lost Tribe of Israel, whose ancestors are the authors of Sanskritic sources. For their immediate neighbors, they are Christian Dalits. For the Indian authorities, they are the Hindu Madigas. They use their Jewish names when talking to foreign visitors and to each other, and Telugu names in all other interactions. Shmuel's writings allow anybody who realizes their family connection to the Bene Ephraim to join the community, formally or nominally. However, in the village, the decision as to who counts as Bene Ephraim is made by the family of Shmuel's brother, who takes into account not just one's oral history, but their practice and synagogue attendance as well.

At the same time, local Dalits assert their own notions of belonging to the Jewish people and to the Madiga community, resisting (or accepting selectively) multiple and conflicting categories that community leaders, neighbors, and local authorities impose on them. As we saw above, these understandings include a perception that one can be a Christian Madiga of Jewish descent, that it is possible to attend the synagogue and to identify as a Christian, or that all Madiga are Jewish, an idea that emerged in Shmuel Yacobi's discourse, but then was abandoned by him—only to be resurrected when the Madiga connection could be used to secure the support of the state minister. To draw again on Maurice Charland's phraseology, Shmuel Yacobi constituted the Bene Ephraim as a discourse, but this discourse translated itself into a community. This community came into being to enact Yacobi's ideas, however, it also developed stories of its own, or, to use Michael Carrithers's theory, created new cultural materials out of old ones. In this respect, the community followed Shmuel Yacobi himself, whose interpretation of his family history did not emerge out of a vacuum, but amalgamated a range of traditions already current among other Dalit groups and Judaizing movements.

We would therefore argue that the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim emerges as a site of agency, where both community leaders and lay members can present themselves to the outside world in a variety of ways, mixing their Jewish and Madiga narratives in search of cultural, spiritual, and intellectual self-empowerment, creating new categories of Bene Ephraim selfhood. Their case study also casts light on the relationship between the processes of external categorization and internal identification. On the micro-level of community formation, the boundaries between group identification and social categorization appear to be very fluid. The community is hardly formally recognized by anybody in the village or the district. And yet, the very fact that their numbers are growing may be seen as evidence of outsiders—other Madiga—granting recognition to the movement. To return to the story of David's wife Sarah, it may be suggested that on one level she could be seen as an insider. The fact that she describes herself as Jewish, joined the synagogue, and is willing to immigrate to Israel could be seen as an example of the process of self-identification at work. At the same time, in the not so distant past she practiced Christianity and knew very little about Judaism. Therefore, she could also be viewed as an outsider who, by joining the Bene Ephraim, granted recognition to their movement and came to categorizing a particular group of her neighbors and relatives as Jewish. Joseph provides another example of a situation

where the "self" vs. "other," "internal" vs. "external" logic may need to be suspended. After a brief encounter with the initiative of his relatives, the Yacobis, he chose to continue to practice Christianity. However, he is inclined to believe Shmuel's early version of the Bene Ephraim history and considers himself to be Jewish by virtue of being Madiga. Without formally becoming a part of the Bene Ephraim community, he joined them in classifying all Madiga as Jewish, and by implication started identifying as such himself.

In the following chapter we will continue discussing the way community boundaries and definitions of Jewishness are negotiated in the village by focusing on the relations that the Bene Ephraim have established with different Jewish communities and organizations around the world. We will consider what kind of support the Bene Ephraim have received from these organization, discussing what role this support may have played in the development of the Bene Ephraim narratives, practices, and notions of relatedness. How successful have the Yacobis been in securing their community's recognition in the wider Jewish world? What does the Bene Ephraim case tell us about contemporary Judaism and notions of Jewishness?

4

All of Us

IN FEBRUARY 2010, *Zoek de Verschillen*, a program produced by a Jewish TV channel in the Netherlands, featured an episode on the Bene Ephraim. *Zoek de Verschillen*, which translates as "spot the difference," could probably be described as a reality TV show, in which young Jewish men and women from the Netherlands visit Jewish communities in different parts of the world.[1] In each episode the protagonist is taken to the airport and handed a sheet of paper with the name of an "exotic" place where they will be spending a week with a local Jewish family.

In the case of Eli, a young Orthodox Jewish man from Amsterdam, it was Chebrole, Andhra Pradesh, where he was sent to live among the Bene Ephraim. After spending a week with the Yacobis and other community members, Eli arrives at the conclusion that although he sympathizes with the Bene Ephraim movement and appreciates their devotion to Judaism, he doubts that they could be considered Jewish from the Orthodox perspective. He accepts that he "can see them as his brothers," but not as "Jewish brothers." Eli's explanation for his position is that they lack a genealogy to prove "beyond doubt" that they are Jewish. He therefore concludes that the desire of the Bene Ephraim to move to the State of Israel will remain a dream that is unlikely to be realized.

In this chapter we will focus on the interactions between the Bene Ephraim and an international Jewish organization that supports communities that have recently announced their affiliation to Judaism. We will discuss whether the work of individuals interested in "new" Jewish groups could be seen as an example of the more universalist tendencies in contemporary Judaism. This chapter will offer an analysis of their activities, will discuss whether their involvement has opened new possibilities for economic development and social mobility in the village, and will consider how this support is perceived in the community.

On a more general theoretical level, we will discuss in what ways the case of the Bene Ephraim contributes to contemporary debates about what it means to be Jewish—debates that have been ongoing both within the Jewish communities around the world and in academic Jewish Studies. It will be demonstrated that though the Bene Ephraim may still be far from being recognized in most Western Jewish communities, they did attract the attention and secured the support of a number of organizations and individuals representing different branches of Judaism, from Reform to Orthodox. This suggests that contrary to the perception expressed by Eli, there is still significant conceptual space in different denominations of the Jewish tradition that allows for the Judaizing movements to be accepted as Jewish.

Secondly, this chapter will discuss in what ways and to what extent the interactions between the Bene Ephraim and Jewish visitors from abroad may have affected the development of the community's beliefs and practices. In the previous chapter we demonstrated that in recent years the Kothareddypalem congregation has been steadily moving in the direction of bringing their practice more in accordance with what is perceived as mainstream Judaism. Here we will focus on the minutiae of these processes to explore what role "outsiders" have played in the formation of the Bene Ephraim version of Judaism, and how the boundaries between "mainstream" and "emerging" Judaism(s) are negotiated in the village in the course of such encounters. It will be shown that the people who have been particularly closely involved in the Jewish education of the Bene Ephraim work within a framework that strives to engage with the community's expectations, to nurture their existing traditions, and not to impose upon them any particular "brand" of Judaism. However, despite these intentions, they unavoidably—and oftentimes following the community's request—had to introduce them to their own practices. At the same time, far from trying to proselytize on behalf of recognized Judaism, they see their involvement with Judaizing movements as a two-way process which is supposed to enrich both the communities they work with and their own traditions. Our ethnography of these encounters between foreign Jewish visitors and the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem will therefore suggest that in this case the tradition of dividing Jewish communities into "mainstream" and "emerging" needs to be revisited.

Finally, in considering the impact of foreign visitors' activities in the village, we will continue the discussion begun in the previous chapters about possibilities for the social mobility of the Bene Ephraim. We will argue

that just as the initial Judaization of the Bene Ephraim was an outcome of rather than the reason for the community's relative social mobility, their engagement with an overseas Jewish organization has so far only produced enough social and economic resources for the community to study the Jewish tradition further, but has not radically affected either the material well-being of the Bene Ephraim in Kothareddypalem or their social status. We suggest that this comparable "failure" of the Bene Ephraim to improve their socio-economic situation in the village was mainly due to local social constraints and the fact that, contrary to the perception of some of the community's critics, the economic support that they are receiving from overseas has so far been fairly modest and has resulted more in the Bene Ephraim's spiritual rather than economic empowerment.

The Jews of "One's own Village"

Back in the 1990s Yulia spent a few months in Jerusalem collecting material for a dissertation to complete a Master's degree at the Moscow State University. She was renting a room from a Russian Jewish woman who had made *aliyah* several years before. Her landlady was happy to be in Israel and was very devout to her new homeland. However, every now and then, she would refer to some of her fellow countrymen's traits of character as "peculiar," and explain half-jokingly: "What do you do? They are not Jewish, they are Israeli!"

As anthropologist Jonathan Webber observed, "Right from its origins in Biblical antiquity, Jewish identity has oscillated between two contradictory premises: an underlying belief in the unity and continuity of the Jewish people, despite an awareness of the existence of considerable ethnographic diversity; and a feeling that the Jewish community of one's own village or town constituted the only true Jewish identity, despite the knowledge that other Jewish communities existed, even in very faraway lands" (Webber 1994: 74). The landlady's joke may have implied a number of things, revealing a number of diverse understandings of what it means to be Jewish. It could mean that the *sabras* (Jews born in Israel) fall short of being "really" Jewish because they have not had the experience of diaspora existence—a comment that one sometimes hears from those Israelis who grew up outside Israel. Or she may have meant that to be truly Jewish you have to have shared the experience of growing up Jewish in Russia, to have participated in the local Jewish culture and other cultures: you cannot not be properly Jewish if you have not had to negotiate the reality of being

Jewish in Eastern Europe, if you have not lived in the Soviet Union, if you do not understand Russian/Jewish humor.

The problem of the relationship between different dimensions of Jewishness, some of which are seen to be embedded in Jewish genealogy and others of which are construed along the lines of cultural and religious affiliation, is one of the central issues in anthropology and cultural studies of Judaism. The question about what it means to be Jewish is also one of the most hotly debated issues in the context of Israeli immigration policies, as well as in the public discourse both in Israel and among Jewish communities worldwide.

According to *halakhah*, a person is considered to be Jewish either if their mother is Jewish, or if they formally convert to Judaism. Conversion itself establishes a genealogical connection between the initiate and the Jewish people, as the former is seen as being born into the Jewish community. As we will discuss in the following chapter, for the Bene Ephraim, like other communities interested in repatriating to Israel, halakhic rules defining Jewishness are hard to ignore. Israel is a democracy governed by civil laws, but it is also a Jewish state, where halakhic legal opinions explicitly inform some parts of the law. Issues of personal status are regulated solely by religious authorities, which creates a number of political and social problems in determining who is Jewish and who is eligible to get married in Israel. The situation is often particularly difficult for those new immigrants whose Jewishness may be put into doubt by Israeli rabbinates (Kahn 2000: 73).

At the same time, the question about what exactly constitutes Judaism has also become subject of vigorous public and academic discussions. A number of scholars in Jewish Studies have argued against the approach that seeks to reduce the Jewish religion to a number of set beliefs and practices. As historian of Judaism Michael Satlow has pointed out, "Essentialist definitions of Judaism can never *explain* or account for the diversity of Jewish religious life, both today and through history" (2006: 4). Jacob Neusner has argued that already in antiquity there were a number of Jewish groups adhering to alternative traditions, none of which should be construed as "mainstream" (Satlow 2006: 4–5). In modern Jewish history, Hasids have been accused by their opponents of inventing a new tradition. Contemporary Judaism in the United States is divided into four main branches—Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist. Each branch has to recognize—maybe sometimes reluctantly—the diversity of contemporary Jewish tradition, but also to draw a line between normative

Judaism and other Jewish traditions. For instance, just as Orthodox Jews may dismiss Reform Jews as inauthentic, the latter may consider themselves to be just as mainstream as Orthodox and Conservatives, but reject humanistic Jews, who identify themselves as a Jewish community, but do not believe in the existence of God. Building upon this and similar examples, Satlow has suggested that Judaism "is best seen not as a single organismlike tradition but as a family of traditions." These traditions may share many characteristics, but some of them will have nothing in common with others, and no single component is essential for a tradition to be considered Jewish (2006: 6–7).

Similarly, the question of what should be described as Jewish culture is also debated in academic Jewish Studies. The more conventional discourse about Judaism and the Jewish tradition portrays some practices and beliefs as part and parcel of Jewish culture. As Webber puts it, "the feeling that one does not know or understand Jewish culture is encountered often and indeed is very much a part of the ethnography of today's Jewish world" (Webber 2003: 321). Indeed, some scholars have found it useful to distinguish between "thick" and "thin" Jewish culture or "thick" and "thin" Jewish identities.[2] Thus, "thick" Jewish culture is described as multidimensional, multilayered, and inclusive of a wide range of commitments to the Jewish tradition of a "communal, cultural, ethical, and emotional nature" (Liebman 2003: 346). At the same time, "thin" Jewish culture is seen as a characteristic of individuals with "impoverished layers of Jewish identity," who are "reluctant to accept any binding definitions of Jewishness" (Leibman 2003: 347). And yet, as Webber suggests—and as the example of Yulia's Israeli landlady points out—"in practice, what many Jews would see as their 'culture' is often a rather arbitrary selection" and "today's voluntary Jews are to a great extent self-made cultural *bricoleurs*, constructing their Jewishness ... as they go" (Webber 2003: 320–23).

In academic Jewish Studies essentialist conceptualizations of Judaism and Jewish culture have been challenged in the past decades by commentators coming from the perspective of critical theory, who generally see the theoretical foundations of essentialist thinking as problematic. Thus, Laurence Silberstein, drawing upon Judith Butler's formulation, has suggested an approach which reconfigures such contested terms as "Jew," "Judaism," and "Jewish" into a site of "permanent openness and resignifiability" (Silberstein 2000: 13). Cultural historian Sander Gilman argues that "there is no such thing as a 'purely' Jewish identity," and that "from the prebiblical world to the Babylonian Diaspora to the world of Sepharad

or Ashkenaz, Jews—like all people—have formed themselves within as well as against the world that they inhabited, that they defined, and that defined them" (Gilman 1994: 365). In Israel, further complexity to the question about Jewish cultural diversity is added by the fact that society is divided into various *edot*, or groups of repatriates from different parts of the world, who maintain the cultural and social specificities imported from their counties of origin. The divide between the Jews of "Western" extraction and those from Asia and Africa has been described by some commentators as particularly pronounced (Khazzoom 2003, Shohat 1988, Shohat 1999).

At the same time, critics of the anti-essentialist approach in social sciences have argued that these deconstructive discourses have undermined the efforts to maintain collective identities of specific groups, such as feminists, African Americans, as well as Jews (Silberstein 2000: 13). It has been argued that the approach that attempts to identify parts of Jewish heritage shared by Jews from different societies and recognized as specifically Jewish contains a great deal of analytic mileage. For instance, Charles Liebman reminds us that "it is not only a concern for Jewish survival that directs us to look for the essentialist elements of Jewish culture," but that "the question of which cultural elements are shared by all or most Jews and which cultural elements are or are not rooted in the Jewish tradition is what defines the research program for the social scientific analysis of Jewish identity" (Liebman 2003: 345–46).

Finally, the idea that the Jewish people are connected not only culturally, but also on a genealogical level, has been prominent in the public imagination both within and outside the Jewish communities. The notion that the Jews are a people almost biologically connected to each other was promoted by early Zionist ideologues. This racialization of Jewishness in the rhetoric of early Zionists was a response to the shift from Christian anti-Semitism to racial anti-Semitism, which occurred in Europe in the late nineteenth century. The new wave of anti-Jewish sentiment grounded many of the old-standing stereotypes about the Jews in their physicality and therefore aimed to close the door to assimilation (Weikart 2006). As John Efron has suggested, in Europe this effected the emergence of "race science" in the Jewish communities themselves who saw in it "a new, 'scientific' paradigm and agenda of Jewish self-definition and self-perception" (Efron 1994: 5).

Writing about contemporary constructions of Jewishness among the Jews in the West and particularly in the United States, Susan Glenn has

observed that even "in our post-ethnic age of 'voluntarism,' it is hard to ignore "the centrality of blood logic to modern Jewish identity narratives," the logic, which Jews retained "throughout all of the de-racializing stages of twentieth-century social thought" (Glenn 2002: 139–40).

To go back to the *Zoek de Verschillen* program, Eli's comment about the Bene Ephraim lacking a "genealogical connection" to other Jews, and therefore to him personally, illustrates Glenn's point. However, as we will discuss below, this opinion is not universal among his co-religionists. In the following four sections we will explore how definitions of Judaism and Jewish culture are negotiated in the interactions between the Bene Ephraim and representatives of other Jewish communities and organizations. We will see how in these interactions approaches celebrating Jewish diversity compete with essentialist understandings of Jewish heritage, understandings which stem both from the wider Jewish community and from the Bene Ephraim themselves.

Jews by Choice

During one of Yulia's visits to Kothareddypalem in 2009 Sadok took her around the Madigapalle, and proudly showed the development that had taken place in the community in the past year as a result of the financial support offered to the Bene Ephraim by the renowned writer, traveler, and rabbinic authority Marvin Tokayer.

Rabbi Tokayer started his career in Japan, where he served as the United States Air Force chaplain, and then spent eight years leading the Jewish congregation of Tokyo. He wrote twenty books about different aspects of Jewish culture, which came out in Japanese. English-speaking audiences will know him as the author of *The Fugu Plan*, a book devoted to the European Jewish refugees' sojourn in Japan during World War II (Tokayer and Swartz 2004).

Rabbi Tokayer has been interested for a long time in the Jewish communities of India and the Far East, as well as in groups that have claimed the Lost Tribes descent. After leaving Japan, he founded and led an Orthodox synagogue in New York, while continuing to research and lecture about the Jews of Asia, and organizing tours of Japan, India, and China. In the early 1990s he was contacted by Shmuel Yacobi, got in touch with the Bene Ephraim, and has been following their development ever since.

Yulia met Rabbi Tokayer twice—once in New York, where he lives, and one more time in Jerusalem, where he stopped over to spend a week on

the way to India. She asked Rabbi Tokayer whether he was happy with us mentioning in the book the support that he had rendered to the Bene Ephraim. He said he had no secrets and it was absolutely fine to describe everything that he did and to mention him by name. He then added, "I thought you were going to ask me why I support them, which is what everybody asks me." Yulia said, "Please, tell me." "There are Jews by birth and there are Jews by choice...," Rabbi Tokayer replied. "The Bene Ephraim have chosen to be Jewish and I respect that." He added that he was not concerned about the veracity of their claim to Jewish origins, and if they believed it themselves, he was prepared to respect that. Though he draws a distinction between "Jews by birth" and "Jews by choice," for Tokayer both kinds are acceptable in Judaism. He does not need the Bene Ephraim to produce any evidence to back up their story, to have any genealogical connection to his own community. The expression "Jews by choice" is widely used in Jewish communities to refer to converts, [3] and it is noteworthy that Rabbi Tokayer does not hesitate to apply it to describe the Bene Ephraim, though they have not converted to Judaism.

Rabbi Tokayer went on to say that he was touched by their devotion to the Jewish tradition and their efforts to practice Judaism. In his view, by embracing Judaism they were losing out financially. He pointed out that the entire community had lost the support of Christian donors and that the more observant ones had to sacrifice their Saturday wages.

Several years ago, Rabbi Tokayer organized a tour of India for people interested in the Jewish communities of the subcontinent. He invited Sadok to come and join them in Cochin and encouraged him to make a presentation about the Bene Ephraim to raise money. In Rabbi Tokayer's opinion, his help was just a minor compensation for what the Bene Ephraim lost when they became Jewish, and it was only fair that they should seek help from Jewish sponsors in the West. He has made his own financial contribution, by providing ten families in the village with the means to purchase buffalos to produce milk and sell it to the state, or to find some other source of income. Most families opted for the buffalos, while some used this money to buy a scooter and open a taxi business in the village or to rent a piece of a rice paddy. In addition, Rabbi Tokayer helped the community purchase bicycles for their school children, which was again very much appreciated.

In Sadok's assessment, all these initiatives have been extremely helpful. He told us on a number of occasions that this was exactly the kind of support that was required to allow the community to become more

independent, to lift them out of the clutches of the caste system, where they had a fixed place at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, and therefore to enable them to practice Judaism properly—to avoid working on Saturdays, to observe *kashrut*, to have the spare time to learn about the Jewish tradition.

Rabbi Tokayer has limited his involvement in the life of the Bene Ephraim to economic and "moral" support, without interfering into the community's religious life. He appreciates that it is hard enough for the Bene Ephraim to adhere to their own Jewish practices, and does not insist on them embracing the full range of the Orthodox or any other specific Jewish tradition. Just as he is accepting of their "non-verifiable" connection to the Jewish people, he is accepting of their practice, no matter how different it is from that of his own.

Rabbi Tokayer does not represent the opinion of the majority of Orthodox rabbis on this matter; however, he is not alone in his attitude toward Judaizing movements. In the United States similar views are espoused by the members of Kulanu, an organization that has played an important role in putting the Bene Ephraim on the world map of Jewish communities.

All of Us

Kulanu (Hebrew for "all of us") is a New York based non-profit non-governmental charity established in 1994 with an aim to support what their website describes as "isolated and emerging Jewish communities."[4] Kulanu works with such groups in different countries worldwide. Some of the communities declared that they belonged to one of the Lost Tribes of Israel. Others—for instance, the Abayudaya of Uganda—embraced Jewish practice without claiming Jewish descent.

The history of Kulanu's formation elucidates the complex relationship between earlier Judaizing movements and the more recent ones. The organization was established by Jack Zeller, currently President Emeritus of Kulanu, who in the past had served on the board of the American Association for Ethiopian Jews. In 1991, when thousands of Ethiopian Jews were airlifted to Israel, he and his wife, Diane Zeller, an African history scholar, decided to explore the broader issue of isolated Jewish communities. For a while Jack Zeller worked with the Israel-based organization Amishav (see chapter 5) and eventually founded Kulanu in 1994.[5]

Kulanu's website describes the organization as "a network of people with a variety of backgrounds and religious practices." "We do not proselytize," Kulanu members say, "groups and individuals ask for our help; we do not seek them out."[6] The people who are formally involved in the everyday running of Kulanu today are Harriet Bograd, its president since 2008, her assistant (the only person officially employed by Kulanu), and a number of officers and board members. The rest include supporters who help the organization either by making donations or by visiting communities and working with them directly. As Harriet put it in a conversation with Yulia, "This is a diverse group of people interested in the 'new' Jewish communities. Most of them have secular Jewish background or adhere to Reform Jewish practice, though individual Conservative and Orthodox Jews are also present among Kulanu donors and volunteers."

The help that Kulanu provides for the communities includes mainly educational and economic support. The former is rendered through rabbis and other volunteers who visit communities and teach them about the Jewish tradition. They also offer help with primary and secondary education and conduct projects on health education, nutrition, and women's empowerment. Economic support usually includes attempts at providing communities with new sources of income and making them economically independent through projects in agricultural development and microfinance. Another aim of Kulanu is making new Jewish communities better known to the outside world. To do so Kulanu publishes quarterly newsletters with updates on the life of different groups they work with and organizes tours of these communities for outside visitors.

To be noticed by Kulanu, communities need to make initial contact with the organization themselves. One could argue that in the age of Internet making such contact and therefore opening the community to Kulanu's support has become very easy. This may indeed be the case, yet, as the story of the Bene Ephraim demonstrates, effecting significant social and economic development in an emerging Jewish community may require structural changes and financial input that small organizations like Kulanu are not in a position to provide. One could also assume that opening up a community to an organization whose members practice mainstream Judaism and are ready to share their knowledge with new Jewish groups is likely to alter the community's Judaism. However, even here the picture is much more complex.

The case of the Bene Ephraim both illustrates communication processes between Kulanu and the communities they sponsor and

problematizes conventional understandings of the relationship between particularist and universalist tendencies in Judaism. The first accounts about the Bene Ephraim started appearing in the mass media in the mid-1990s. In 1995 Israeli photographer Shimon Lev published an article about them following his trip to Andhra Pradesh (Lev 2005). Around the same time they were also noticed by Kulanu, after they were "discovered" for English-speaking audiences by Jason Francisco, a photographer who happened to be working in Guntur district (Francisco 1997, 1998). The organization has become more actively involved in the welfare of the Bene Ephraim in the past several years. Their most recent project, started in 2010, included raising money to enable the community to establish a small poultry business. Kulanu members assert that they try to address both the economic and cultural needs of the communities they work with, without imposing on them any particular way of being Jewish.

Harriet Bograd feels particularly strongly that this is the only way such an organization should work. Harriet is a professional volunteer, and since the 1960s has led programs in poor neighborhoods and Jewish communities, working as a staff leader and consultant for community organizations in the areas of poverty, child care, health, and education.[7] Yulia met Harriet in the Bograds' apartment in New York, which also serves as Kulanu headquarters. A year later they met in London, where Harriet and her husband had stopped over on the way to visit the Abayudaya of Uganda. Yulia and Harriet talked about the projects that Kulanu were conducting in Chebrole, and the question about the religious development of the Bene Ephraim inevitably came up.

When Yulia told Harriet that some community members seemed to be keen to embrace mainstream Judaism, she replied that it was not Kulanu's objective to convert the community into any particular branch of Judaism. This was the position not just of the secular and Reform supporters of her organization, but of its Conservative and Orthodox members as well. To illustrate her point, Harriet gave an example of a rabbi working for Kulanu, who adhered to some of the more orthodox Jewish practices. More specifically, for example, he would avoid granting rabbinical ordination to women. However, when one community he worked with expressed an interest in ordaining their female members, he was happy to help them.

Interestingly, this inclusive position is not always shared by everybody in the congregations Kulanu work with. In London Harriet invited Yulia to attend a meeting of the British supporters of her organization. Harriet gave a presentation after which the audience asked questions about the

Kulanu activities. Some people in the audience belonged to groups whom the organization was helping in Africa. One Igbo man asked Harriet what Kulanu were doing about those members of his community who practice a more syncretic version of Judaism and combine beliefs and practices from both Judaism and Christianity. He himself was an adherent of mainstream Judaism and was not happy with such frivolities. Harriet replied that it was a tricky issue because she would not want everybody to have to embrace one and the same form of Judaism. A rabbi in the audience supported her by saying that Judaism is not a proselytizing religion and all that the organization could do was to help the communities practice whatever it was that they were interested in observing to begin with, even if their tradition had just some elements of Judaism.

At the same time, Harriet admitted that sometimes it was difficult for Kulanu to make a decision about whether to work with a particular community or not. The organization had to stay away from those groups that were clearly Messianic,[8] because this could upset many of their Jewish donors and make raising funds for Kulanu difficult. They also preferred not to get involved with those groups that proselytize. Thus, despite the intentions of promoting the most inclusive and liberal understanding of what it means to be Jewish, Kulanu still has to engage in boundary-making work to demarcate the "real"—though very diverse—Jewish groups from those that could not "pass" as Jewish after all. As Satlow has suggested, "although there may not be a singular tradition called Judaism, not every religious community can be called Jewish" (2006: 7). He points out that while some cases may be easy—for instance, Roman Catholics and Muslims do not consider themselves to be practitioners of Judaism and should not be identified as such against their will—other cases, including those of the Messianic Jews, are much more complicated, as these are cases of contested self-identification. Satlow asks if it is possible to explain what unites these diverse traditions into Judaism "without making normative judgments based on unjustified essentialist assumptions of what is to 'count' as evidence for 'authentic' Judaism" (2006: 7). It appears that as much as the members of Kulanu try to avoid making "essentialist assumptions" about the nature of the Jewish tradition, they have to differentiate between "feasible" and "unjustified" claims to Jewishness, as well as between cultural features that could be considered Jewish and those that could not. Going Messianic or proselytizing are cultural traits that some sponsors of Kulanu would consider to be too "non-Jewish" to tolerate. Thus, despite the organization's commitment to celebrating Jewish

diversity, no matter how radical this diversity may be, Kulanu members have to adopt an approach which essentializes at least some cultural features as Jewish and bars others as quintessentially non-Jewish, echoing Liebman's dictum that no matter how diverse Jewish communities around the world may be, they all have to have something in common that would be "recognizably part of Jewish culture" (2003: 345–46).

On the level of the day-to-day communication between Kulanu supporters and communities they help, the situation may be even more complicated, and, as we will show in the following section, the case of the Bene Ephraim provides a good example of it.

New York Jewish

In 2007 Kulanu responded to Sadok's request to send a rabbi who would teach Jewish practices to the community. They sent Rabbi Gerald Sussman and his wife, Bonita Nathan Sussman, to work with them for three weeks in the village. The Sussmans brought with them a number of artifacts of Jewish practice, such as a *havdalah* candle (a candle lit on completion of the Sabbath), a *seder* plate (a special plate used during Passover celebrations), and a replica Torah scroll, and taught the community each day for a few hours about the holidays and life cycle events in Judaism (Sussman and Sussman 2007).

Yulia met Bonita and Gerald in a kosher Indian restaurant in New York. We were very keen on learning more about these people who appeared to know the community so well and about whom we heard so much from the Yacobis. Yulia asked them how they became interested in working with the Bene Ephraim. Bonita said that now that their children were grown up, they wanted to do some voluntary work for the wider community. They learned about Kulanu and asked if they could go to Africa, but Harriet Bograd told them that the organization already had a lot of volunteers working with African Jewish groups, but they did not have anybody who would go to Andhra Pradesh. Bonita did Religious Studies in college and was interested in Hinduism, so they decided to go to India.

The Sussmans found the practice of the Bene Ephraim to be rather different from that of their own, but thought that the community members were very sincere in their belief. Bonita and Gerald told Yulia they tried to teach the Kothareddypalm congregation as much as they could, always making sure they were following the community's wishes. For instance, once they were asked by Miriam and other ladies in the community to teach

them how to prepare *matzot* (unleavened bread eaten during Passover). In the past the Bene Ephraim had *chapattis* (Indian unleavened bread) for Passover, but realized that that was not what a Jewish community was supposed to eat for Passover. The Sussmans did not know how to make *matzot* from scratch, because they would normally buy them from a shop. However, to make sure the ladies were not disappointed, Bonita went to a small Internet café behind the hotel where they were staying and found a YouTube video of how to make *matzot*. She showed it to Miriam, who quickly learned how to do it.

Yulia asked Bonita and Gerald what their position on communities like this was. In Bonita's view, these were "new" communities, but it did not matter for her what their origins were. "The important thing is that they want to live like Jews," she said. "If you follow the Jewish life cycle and observe festivals, that is all there is to it." Both Bonita and Gerald felt that it was very encouraging that some communities wanted to be Jewish, particularly given the long history of anti-Semitism in different parts of the world. The Sussmans kept stressing that there was a wide rage of denominations in Judaism. They said that they tried their best not to affect the "natural development" of the Bene Ephraim religion too much, and not to teach them "New York Jewish." For instance, they were impressed that in Kothareddypalem girls were called on to read from the Torah on Sabbath—a practice that would not be allowed in an Orthodox synagogue. When the Yacobis asked them if this was all right, Bonita and Gerald replied that it depended upon whom you asked and that the Bene Ephraim should feel free to continue this practice.

Meeting the Sussmans provided the Bene Ephraim with the first opportunity to be taught contemporary Judaism by practitioners from abroad. This encounter between a Judaizing community in Andhra Pradesh and a Jewish couple from New York points to a whole range of issues in the study of contemporary Jewish diversity. What kind of Judaism would such an encounter produce? Who has the final say in determining the trajectory of a community's development as a Jewish group? How are the boundaries between different Judaisms negotiated in such an encounter on a day-to-day basis?

To go back to the quote from Jonathan Webber with which we started this chapter, the Sussmans, probably like many other rabbis working with Kulanu, are aware of the diversity of Jewish communities worldwide more than most of their co-religionists. They believe in the unity of the Jewish people, but for them it is the cultural and spiritual dimension of this unity

that is more important than the genealogical or historical dimensions. For the Sussmans, like for Rabbi Tokayer, it did not matter whether the Bene Ephraim origin narrative was verifiable. They were ready to recognize them as Jewish and to respect not just their claim, but their own version of Judaism.

At the same time, as much as they tried to avoid teaching the Bene Ephraim "New York Jewish," it would hardly be possible for them to teach their hosts a tradition which would be completely alien to their own. Moreover, in coming to Kothareddypalem, they responded to the Yacobis' request to teach them "proper" Judaism, the full knowledge of which, in the perception of the Yacobis themselves, the community was lacking. Some practices were taught on request, while others were introduced in response to the community's general desire to learn as much as they possibly could about Judaism. One such example is *havdalah*—the ceremony marking the end of the Sabbath—which the Sussmans introduced on their own initiative (Sussman and Sussman 2007). During our time in the village we saw on many occasions that *havdalah* was strictly observed. Sometimes we would be invited to come to the synagogue on Saturday evening, because it was a good time to interview community members. Each time we would be reminded that we could only start working with them after the appearance of three stars in the sky.

The Sussmans, as well as other rabbis working with Kulanu, contend that for them helping "emerging" Jewish communities is not a one-way process. One Kulanu member noted at the meeting in London that working with these groups was a moving experience for him, because irrespective of the extent to which their practice resembled mainstream Judaism, they were very devout to Jewish culture. "Jews in the West could learn a lot from them," he added. Similarly, Bonita observed in her journal that baking *matzot* with the Bene Ephraim women was one of the most meaningful experiences in her life: "Just to watch all this happen for the first time in the community. Mrs Yacobi will teach all the women how to do this and they will have real *matza* this year" (Sussman and Sussman 2007).

Bonita was touched by the Bene Ephraim asking her to introduce them to her tradition and to help them change their practice, and what in her view was so moving about it was that they had asked for it themselves. She told Yulia that it also made her appreciate how much harder practicing Judaism was for them than for her—*matzot* had to be baked from scratch rather than bought from a local shop, and yet the Bene Ephraim ladies were determined to do it. The Yacobis' interactions with the Sussmans

demonstrate how decisions regarding "which Judaism" to practice—which rites to embrace and which to ignore—are made in the village. Sadok and Miriam are keen on learning as much as they possibly can about the traditions of mainstream Judaism and have already learned a lot from literature and the Internet—hence Miriam's request to show her and other ladies how to bake *matzot*. However, at the same time, they leave room for reinterpreting these practices in light of the local traditions.

Satlow has observed that "each community of Jews creates its Judaism anew, reading and understanding their traditions through their own peculiar and historically specific worldviews" (2006: 7). We saw an example of this phenomenon in the village. One of the more affluent members of the community bought chairs for the synagogue. The chairs began to be used during services for men to sit on. In the past, when there were no chairs, both men and women sat on the synagogue floor on different sides of the room. We asked Sadok's son Jacob why, now that they had chairs, they were reserved specifically for men. Jacob—a young educated man with more progressive views—seemed to be somewhat embarrassed by the situation. He thought it was not right, and blamed it on the sex bias in his community. We then asked Miriam. She first said that women did not make good chair users during services, as they tended to move around and make too much noise with the chairs. She then added that by putting men up on the chairs and letting women sit on the floor she could introduce a larger degree of separation between men and women, which otherwise was very difficult to achieve. "You see, I have a small synagogue," she said. "In other synagogues women sit in a separate room or on a balcony. I don't have enough space to do that."

It is not all synagogues outside of Chebrole that insist on a *mehitzah*—a partition to separate men and women. Conservative synagogues do not always have them, Reform synagogues do not use them at all, and even Orthodox Judaism was divided over this issue in the past, though today the use of a *mehitzah* is the norm in Orthodox synagogues, and Miriam decided that it is the Orthodox model that her community should aspire to. This decision could be explained in the context of gender relations in the village, where it is customary for women to sit on lower surfaces than men. If a man sits on a chair, women present in the same room are supposed to sit on the floor or on lower benches. Therefore, once the chairs were introduced in the synagogue, it would not be appropriate for women to sit on them. However, when the practice had to be explained in light

of the Jewish tradition, it is Orthodox Judaism that, in Miriam's view, provided an answer to fit the local practice.

The phenomenon of Indian traditions adopting elements of "foreign" religions in order to develop and/or reinforce local practices has been discussed in detail by Susan Bayly in her book exploring the social history of Islam and Christianity in South India (1989). Bayly argues that these religions, which were "new" to the subcontinent, became "authentically Indian" (1989: 2) and managed to take hold in South India because they had an ability to forge links with the local religions (1989: 14). More specifically, she demonstrates, for instance, how South Indian Christians did not opt out of the indigenous moral order, but were seen as a Christian sect or caste within the local society, or how Islam made indigenous forms of faith in South India deeper, rather than eliminating them. The Bene Ephraim case provides an example of Judaism forging such links with the local traditions, and therefore illustrates ethnographically mechanisms through which Judaism manifests its more universalist tendencies. As we suggested in chapter 2, the Judaization of Chebrole Madiga could be read as a way of consolidating and celebrating Madiga Dalit heritage. The example described above also highlights how local practices can be mapped onto the landscape of the Jewish tradition—the need to place women on the synagogue floor is read as a Jewish rather than a local custom. In both cases the Bene Ephraim reaffirm local forms of belief and practice while "creating their Judaism anew." Their interpretation of the community's practices illuminates novel definitions of what it means to be Jewish and unsettles common assumptions about what may constitute a "typically" Jewish cultural feature. As we will see in the following section, local Indian cultures can also provide a background allowing the Bene Ephraim to connect with other Jewish communities and to enhance the practice of those who have chosen to embrace mainstream Judaism.

ORT Mumbai

The Bene Ephraim attracted the attention of international Jewish organizations not only abroad but also on the subcontinent when they got in touch with the Bene Israel—another Indian Jewish community that in the past faced problems being recognized by other Jewish groups abroad. Some of the earlier documented references to the Bene Israel of the Konkan Coast (currently in the State of Maharashtra) suggest that back in the eighteenth

and beginning of the nineteenth century only some of their practices were similar to mainstream Jewish rites. By the later British period the Bene Israel brought their practices more in accordance with the standard Jewish tradition of the time. Shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel (and the emergence of India as an independent state) a large proportion of the community went abroad.

The Bene Israel of Mumbai run the Indian branch of ORT, an international non-profit Jewish organization aimed at providing vocational training for the Jewish people. In India the offices of ORT offer such training to everybody interested in applying, irrespective of their communal affiliation. As far as the Jewish population of India is concerned, ORT proved to be particularly helpful for the Bene Menashe. By 2009 hundreds of them have been through ORT, acquiring training that could be useful in Israel.[9]

One of ORT's senior members, Sharon Galsulkar, was contacted by the Yacobis and became interested in the community. When we met him in 2009 he was open to sharing his experiences with us. Sharon said that the Yacobis had contacted him in 2006 and invited him to visit the village. Since then he has been to Kothareddypalem twice and would be happy to go there more often if he could raise enough funding to do so.

Sharon told us that he was very impressed with the community. "They seem to be very devout, sincere and their faith is clearly very strong," he said. When Yulia asked him what he thought about their claims, she got an answer similar to the one we heard from the others—there was no way the Bene Ephraim's claims could be either proved or disproved, but it was not the authenticity of their origin narrative, but the sincerity of their belief that mattered. Sharon said he was particularly moved by the beauty of their liturgy. It did not belong to any known Jewish tradition, he said, but he noted that most community members knew the *Sh'ma*[10] in Hebrew and were familiar with the Telugu translation of the Old Testament.

During her visit to Mumbai in 2009, Yulia asked Sharon and Benjamin Isaac, the head of the ORT Indian branch, if many Bene Israel knew about the Kothareddypalem community. They replied that it was just them and possibly a few others. She asked if the community would be prepared to accept brides and grooms from the Bene Ephraim. Sharon and Benjamin did not see any problem with that in principle, but pointed out that the Bene Ephraim were too far away from Mumbai, were culturally different, and did not speak Hindi or Marathi, while the Bene Israel did not speak Telugu, and their economic situation was very difficult. Sharon added that

once, when he was going to Guntur, a Bene Israel lady told him that he should look out for potential marriage partners for her children among the Bene Ephraim, but he was not sure whether she was serious. When Yulia asked Benjamin if ORT was prepared to work with the Bene Ephraim, he answered in the affirmative. Sharon said he got a strong impression during his visit that all community members were keen to know more about Jewish practice and, he contends, they should be given such an opportunity. He thought that ORT could be more involved in their case in principle, but felt that the language barrier, cultural differences, and lack of funding would make this involvement extremely difficult.

It appears that what it would take for the Bene Ephraim to benefit from the support of the Bene Israel is overcoming the regional, financial, and linguistic divides of their own country. They would need to become more like the Bene Israel, a community that has already been recognized in the world as Jewish, and has been put on the map of international Jewish organizations, such as ORT. In the previous chapter we saw that establishing a genealogical connection with a recognized Israelite group proved to be one way of affirming one's Jewishness. Sharon and Benjamin's suggestions here highlight the wider cultural dimension of "becoming Jewish." Speaking English, Hindi, or Marathi, having a more secure economic position, and being culturally closer to their compatriots from Mumbai are construed as prerequisites that would help the Bene Ephraim to become Jewish through an association with the Bene Israel. Just as in the past European Jewish organizations, such as *Alliance Israelite Universelle*[11] or *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden*,[12] used French and German (rather than Hebrew) to educate "the Jews of the East" into becoming "Western Jews" (Gilman 2003: 14), ORT Mumbai positions English, Hindi, and Marathi as the languages through which the Bene Ephraim could learn about Judaism from the Bene Israel. A community that was once considered to have unclear Jewish origin becomes a role model for the Bene Ephraim. The specific cultural characteristics of the Bene Israel that they share with other populations of Maharashtra become symbols of Jewishness and a milieu through which the Bene Ephraim could enhance their practice. As with Kulanu, the Bene Ephraim's association with ORT Mumbai is likely to set the community on a path toward mainstream Judaism. Both Kulanu supporters and Sharon Galsulkar reported that in educating the Bene Ephraim about Judaism they were fulfilling the community's wishes. But has their involvement been appreciated by everybody in the village?

Whither Judaism?

We suggest that our analysis of interactions between Western Jews and the Bene Ephraim reveals that such encounters further problematize the divide between "mainstream" and "new" Jewish traditions. While on one level the Bene Ephraim in the village appear to assert the primacy of the mainstream tradition, on another level their case challenges the very idea of dividing Jewish groups into "authentic" and "self-proclaimed." The Bene Ephraim emerged as an Israelite community without any involvement of external cultural and religious actors from overseas Jewish groups or organizations. Soon the community started seeking recognition from these groups, and their subsequent involvement reshaped the practice of the Kothareddypalem congregation. Though individuals who worked with the Bene Ephraim were far from trying to impose on them any particular kind of Judaism and carefully followed the community's wishes, they unavoidably introduced the community to what Liebman has described as "cultural elements that are shared by all or most Jewish people" (2002).

However, as we demonstrated above, in the perception of Kulanu supporters, working with Judaizing movements is not a one-way process. As one Kulanu member observed at a meeting in London, these communities were often more devout to Jewish culture than Western Jews were. Similarly, Bonita Sussman noted in her journal that she was very touched by Miriam's request to teach her how to make "real *matza*." Both commentators thus engage with discourses of authenticity in the Jewish tradition. The comment made by the Kulanu supporter in London implies a belief in the existence of some quintessential "Jewish culture" that "emerging" Jewish communities seem to be more devoted to than Western Jews were. Bonita Sussman is pleased that the Bene Ephraim will now have "real *matza*" in the village, as opposed to the (non-Jewish) *chapattis* that they used to have for Passover. Both commentators clearly distinguish between the "real" Judaism of their own communities and the "self-styled" traditions of the Judaizing groups they have worked with, and yet they consider the latter to be imbued with a potential to enrich mainstream Jewish cultures.

What about the impact that the involvement of foreign Jewish donors has had on the economic development of the Bene Ephraim? As we mentioned in the previous chapters, the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim has been dismissed by some Dalit commentators as an attempt to lift their community out of poverty through the support of sponsors from

abroad. Yet, we have argued that the relationship between the community's economic advancement and the development of their Jewish practice appears to be much more complex than that—the initial Judaization of the Bene Ephraim *required* rather than produced social mobility and relative economic independence from the caste system. In this chapter we saw that the community's encounter with external sponsors, like Rabbi Tokayer and Kulanu, has brought some material support that allows the Bene Ephraim to maintain their practices. However, we would argue that it has hardly changed anything in the larger scheme of things, as the community still struggles financially, and is still considered to have untouchable status. The small poultry business that Kulanu supporters tried to establish in the village was not bringing any profit at the time of writing, which is not surprising, because due to the fact that Madiga have traditionally been unskilled laborers, none of the community members had any prior experience with raising chickens and only very few had the knowledge of microfinance. To change the social and economic position of the community more radically would require financial support that Kulanu is unable to provide. Indeed, the poultry business was established with a modest amount of money that was raised for Kulanu by a group of American Jewish teenagers.[13] The grant application was well thought through by Sadok, but when it came to establishing the business with the raised money, it turned out that the project would require expertise that was not available in the community.

Has the community's connection with Kulanu and ORT led to its social advancement? As Still has observed, "globalisation has opened up unexpected opportunities for Dalits" (2008: 94), and the Bene Ephraim undoubtedly represent one fascinating example of this phenomenon. They receive overseas visitors; their pictures feature on Kulanu's website; their leaders have travelled abroad. At the same time, it appears that in the context of the village, the state, and the country their status has hardly changed and their connection to foreign organizations has not yet opened any visible opportunities for social advancement.

Anthropologists who have worked with Christian groups from *adivasi* (tribal) communities in India have observed that in some cases embracing Christianity has opened for them new educational opportunities and possibilities for social and economic development. For instance, Susana Devalle notes that Christian *adivasis* of Central India have achieved some level of prestige and social mobility through education at Christian missions, a process that began in the middle of the nineteenth century (1992:

163). Devalle suggests that Christendom provided a "replacement community" for the *adivasis*, because converting to Christianity allowed them "to acquire a parallel identity by adhering to what is considered to be a prestigious community" (1992: 163). Peggy Froerer has demonstrated in her ethnography of Hindu and Christian Oraon *adivasis* in rural Chhattisgarh that the latter had social and educational advantages over the former because the Church both facilitated Christian communities' educational success and proved to be an important source of social capital. Here the Catholic Church established schools that not only provided a rigorous educational system, but also instilled in its pupils solid proficiency in Hindi, the language of the city, which improved their employment opportunities. Moreover, the Church offered Christian youth a solid network of connections that enhanced their chances to secure employment after they finish school (Froerer 2011: 705).

In the case of the Bene Ephraim, the "universal Jewish community" could also be described as a "replacement community." As we argued in the previous chapters, openly embracing Jewish practices and an Israelite origin narrative has allowed the Madiga to find a positive frame of reference for their history in the context of the caste system and has put the community on a path to spiritual self-empowerment. However, it has not yet brought any tangible social advancement. The numbers of Jewish individuals involved in their cause are too small, and the financial support that they have received so far has been very limited. Similarly, the local Jewish communities of India are not numerous and lack resources to offer the Bene Ephraim significant educational or employment opportunities. The Bene Israel leaders of ORT Mumbai are ready to provide the Bene Ephraim youth with vocational training, but their organization is not wealthy or far-reaching enough to accommodate Bene Ephraim trainees or to teach them English, Marathi, or Hindi, which would be a prerequisite for successful training.

However, if this support has not yet effected significant economic or social progress, has it changed the community's practice? How has the involvement of foreign Jewish organizations been perceived by the Bene Ephraim? Has it inspired the community to adopt a particular type of Judaism—the Judaism of their sponsors?

The Yacobi brothers do not always agree on the importance of donations from other Jewish communities and on the involvement of Western rabbis. Shmuel, who argues that the Bene Ephraim have a tradition of their own, which shares its roots with rabbinic Judaism, but which is different

from it and does not have to mimic contemporary Jewish practices, feels it is imperative for the community to become independent not just from the caste system, but from the foreign benefactors. Shmuel told us on a number of occasions that to make the community more independent from foreign aid he is doing his best to find other means of income—such as teaching Hebrew, offering various courses through the Open Hebrew University that he had established, and writing film scripts, which he hopes one day will be noticed by producers.

Sadok, on the other hand, appears to be more comfortable with the idea of actively seeking out Jewish sponsors who would not just make one-off donations, but provide the entire community with a new means of subsistence. As we saw in the previous section, a better economic position would also allow them to establish closer links with the Bene Israel, who had already obtained recognition from abroad, set up Jewish religious and communal organizations, and are willing to share their cultural and educational resources with the Bene Ephraim, if the latter could afford to send their representatives to Mumbai.

Sadok's acceptance of educational help from other Jewish groups is not surprising given that, as we saw in the previous chapter, he contends that embracing mainstream Judaism and becoming closer to other Jewish groups around the world contains for the Bene Ephraim a promise of spiritual liberation. In chapter 3, we described an episode in the cemetery, where Sadok told us that to bring the Bene Ephraim back to Judaism and to help them remember their roots, he had to seek the help of Israeli and other Jewish visitors. In his opinion, without this help, his and his brother's efforts to rediscover the true origin of their community were doomed to failure. We discussed Sadok's attempts to ensure that the core group of community members observes what they identified as the key Jewish practices and demonstrated that not all Bene Ephraim were in a position to do so. We have also shown that for Shmuel embracing Jewish practice means rediscovering the tradition which was theirs to begin with and of which they have been deprived. It appears that this is also how some of the lay Bene Ephraim conceptualize their engagement with the Judaism of their guests from abroad.

Toward the end of Yulia's last visit to the village, we attended a Sabbath service in the synagogue, and were asked to say a few words to the congregation afterward. We thanked the Yacobis and the rest of the community for their friendship and hospitality, and said that we were going to miss the village and its people. One of the men present in the room (Shlomo,

who was an active community member and a frequent synagogue-goer) asked us what our preliminary findings were—a question that had been posed to us many times by the journalists coming to the village. We said that we were extremely impressed with how devoted the Bene Ephraim were to the Jewish tradition. Shlomo asked, "Do you think our practice is all right?" We said it was amazing how much they had learned about Judaism just during the year that Shahid had spent with them. Not satisfied with the answer, Shlomo pointed out to us that the Bene Ephraim were learning the modern Hebrew language and still had to make progress in it. However, as far as the rest of the Jewish tradition was concerned, it was their own practice and they knew what they had to know already, he said.

The religious practices that Shlomo observes are not radically dissimilar to those of other Bene Ephraim in the village and combine customs described in the *Tanakh* with those developed in rabbinic Judaism. On one occasion Shlomo invited us to come to his house and proudly showed the recently acquired Torah and *siddur*. He had a *mezuzah* on the doorpost, and he and his family members made sure to touch it and then kiss the hand before they entered the house. Shlomo does his best to observe *kashrut*, and regularly comes to the synagogue to celebrate Jewish festivals, both Tanakhic and rabbinic. On the whole, Shlomo, like many other Bene Ephraim in the village, appears to be open to learning about modern Jewish practice, pointing out, for instance, that his son had undergone a Bar Mitzvah. However, he felt he had to stand up to us when we inadvertently implied in our answer that the Bene Ephraim tradition was moving along a developmental trajectory. Shlomo theorizes even the contemporary Jewish practice of his co-religionists from overseas as practice that belongs to his community, as a tradition that by virtue of being Jewish the Bene Ephraim have always already embodied and just had to be reminded of. This conceptualization of the community's relationship with Judaism allows the Bene Ephraim to (re)claim as their own even the more recent Jewish practices, such as, for instance, Bat Mitzvah, discussed in the previous chapter. This approach both affirms and dismantles the idea of a connection between Jewish culture and Jewish genealogy. Like the Bene Ephraim leaders, Shlomo believes that his community belongs to the Lost Tribes of Israel rather than to mainstream Jewish communities. Nevertheless, he constructs contemporary practice of the latter as his own, as a tradition that naturally belongs to him. In this brief episode—and in his everyday life—Shlomo articulates the past of the Bene Ephraim through a new frame of reference. As he encounters new Jewish visitors from whom

he learns about Judaism, he recognizes more and more features of this religion as his own. What was an unknown entity for the community yesterday, becomes an inherent part of the religious life of the Bene Ephraim today. To employ Carrithers's theory, one can suggest that Just as the Bene Ephraim through the rhetoric of narrative and performance have moved from the inchoate onto the map of world Jewish communities, in the community's terms of reference, Jewish religious artifacts, festivals, and even the modern Hebrew language have moved in their turn from the inchoate to the world of the Bene Ephraim.

In the following chapter we will see how further complexity in the conceptual divide between mainstream and "new" Jewish groups emerges in the context of Jewish immigration to the State of Israel, when we discuss how definitions of Jewishness adopted by different actors and organizations in Israel—from those who are hardly aware of the existence of Lost Tribes communities to those who are actively lobbying the Israeli government on their behalf—may affect the development of the Bene Ephraim practices, narratives, and notions of belongingness.

5

The Children of Israel

DURING ONE OF Yulia's trips to Israel she was stopped by a passerby in Jerusalem who asked if she would be interested in joining him for a drink. Yulia politely refused and said she had to be elsewhere.

> "What are you doing here in Israel?," asked the stranger.
>
> "I came to visit the Bene Menashe."
>
> "The Bene Menashe? Hang on a second ... I have heard about them ... They are the people who are trying to be Jewish!"

The reaction of the man on the street is probably somewhat indicative of how this other Indian Lost Tribes group—the community of the Bene Menashe—is perceived by many Israelis. At the time of writing the Bene Menashe numbered about 2,000 people in Israel with about 7,000 left in the northeast of India.

What happens to a Lost Tribes community in Israel? How well are they received and what place do they find in Israeli society, which is famously diverse socially, politically, and religiously? In this chapter we will consider the case of the Bene Ephraim against the backdrop of public and academic debates about Israeli immigration policies, other Lost Tribes communities, and organizations seeking out "emerging" Jewish groups and assisting their migration to Israel.

The Bene Menashe movement and the relocation of some of their members to Israel will be of particular relevance to our discussion, as it provides an intriguing "litmus test" for the reaction of Israeli authorities to the possible migration of the Bene Ephraim and highlights the possibilities and challenges that making *aliyah* presents for the Lost Tribes groups. In the end, we will consider the case of Yehoshua, the only Bene Ephraim who has moved to Israel so far and has been settled there for about two decades.

The chapter will use the example of the Lost Tribes communities to explore how Israeli politics shapes the implementation of the Law of Return and (re)defines the meanings of Jewishness in the Israeli State. First, we will suggest that though on the face of it the immigration of the Bene Menashe fits within existing Israeli immigration law, it nevertheless represents a new type of *aliyah*, which required new discursive and pragmatic legitimization strategies. Second, this chapter will demonstrate that in the religious landscape of Israel the non-halakhic Jewishness of the Bene Menashe and similar Lost Tribes communities is normalized by the presence of secular Israelis and other waves of immigrants who struggle to prove their genealogical Jewishness. Finally, to continue our discussion about the cultural liberation aspect of Judaization, we will engage with the concept of "soul citizenship" introduced by anthropologists Markowitz, Helman, and Shir-Vertesh (noted in chapter 3) and will explore the way it intersects with notions of formal Israeli citizenship in the case of the Lost Tribes.

The Law of Return

In the previous chapter we noted that Judaizing movements have opened new directions in popular and academic discussions about what it means to be Jewish and what counts as mainstream Judaism. Unsurprisingly, these movements also presented a challenge for Israeli immigration law, which revolves around particular definitions of Jewishness.

Who is considered to be Jewish in the Jewish State? In 1950 the Knesset[1] passed legislation regulating the immigration of the Jews to the State of Israel—legislation that became to be known as the "Law of Return." According to the 1950 formulation of this law, "every Jew has the right to come to this country [Israel] as an *oleh*."[2] 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.[3] Thus, without trying to change the definition of "Who is a Jew?," the 1970 amendment made the Law of Return applicable to persons of wider Jewish ancestry.

According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the purpose of the amendment was "to ensure the unity of families, where intermarriage had occurred" (quoted in Lustick 1999: 422). However, different commentators

have offered varying explanations for the rationale behind introducing the Jewish ancestry clause. Some have noted that it was imperative to provide immigration rights to those who would have been subjected to discrimination under the anti-Semitic Nuremberg Laws adopted in Hitler's Germany in 1935. Critics of Israel's Zionist agenda contend that the amendment was supposed to counteract the perceived "demographic threat" presented by the Arab population of Israel (discussed in Lustick 1999). At the same time, the religious right have opined that the amendment was introduced by the secular Israeli leadership to "water down" the religious base of Israel by allowing in people who were less likely to be committed to Jewish practice.[4]

The amendment guarantees that under the Nationality Law persons of Jewish ancestry enjoy the same rights of an *oleh* as repatriates defined as halakhically Jewish. However, the calculus determining "who is a Jew" in Israel is not entirely under the jurisdiction of secular authorities. For all Jewish Israelis issues of personal status are regulated by the Chief Rabbinate, an Orthodox authority, which adheres to a strictly halakhic definition of "who is a Jew." Though Israeli rabbinates recognize civil marriages performed abroad, they refuse to authorize marriage (or divorce) between two Jews if one or both of them cannot prove that their mother is Jewish (however, two non-Jews may marry each other in Israel, under the auspices of their own religious authorities). As a result, many *olim* of Jewish descent (or those who had undergone Conservative or Reform conversion to Judaism) who are eligible for Israeli citizenship are not eligible for Jewish marriage unless they convert to Judaism according to Orthodox standards.

Some repatriates have successfully dealt with the issue by travelling abroad to get married—there is even a special travel agency in Israel that arranges "wedding trips" to Cyprus and the Czech Republic.[5] The service appears to be particularly popular among the immigrants from the former Soviet Union, many of whom find it difficult to present themselves as eligible for Orthodox Jewish marriage due to their "partial" and therefore non-halakhic Jewish descent. While for some *olim*—and especially those who are secular—not being able to get married in Israel amounts to an inconvenience, for others it comes as an insult and a personal drama. This is particularly the case when individuals who consider themselves observant Jews are found ineligible for marriage by Israeli rabbinates on account of the "unclear" origin of their entire community, as it happened in the early 1960s with the Bene Israel Jews of India.

As we noted in the previous chapter, the early history of the Bene Israel is not well documented. This "obscurity" of origins contributed substantially to the difficulties they encountered in being recognized as Jewish in British India and in the Jewish world at large. [6] Shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel, which occurred just a year after India gained independence, a significant number of the Bene Israel made *aliyah*. Israeli immigration authorities did not raise any doubts about their Jewish descent, but in 1964 the then Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel, Yitzhak Nissim, refused to allow Bene Israel to marry Jewish Israelis, unless they were able to provide proof of no intermarriage over several generations. The Chief Rabbi's argument was that in the past the Bene Israel had been ignorant of Jewish laws relating to divorce and levirate marriage, and their failure in the past to follow such laws would have led to *mamzerut*, or a situation when a married woman has a child by a man other than her husband. As a result of a campaign led by a number of Bene Israel organizations, which received the general support of the Knesset and other secular bodies, the problem was resolved to the satisfaction of the Bene Israel (Parfitt and Egorova 2006: 108–109).

However despite the support the community received, the scars of this encounter remained (Roland 1998: 249–51). The episode of the 1960s repeated itself relatively recently. In 1997 the Chief Rabbi of the town of Petah Tikvah, home to a sizeable Bene Israel community, ordered his employees not to validate new marriages for them (*Hindu*, November 20, 1997). Similar doubts about the Jewishness of a Bene Israel couple were raised by the Petah Tikvah Chief Rabbi as recently as 2005.[7] The old struggle for full recognition, which was started back in the nineteenth century, when the community first became known to other Jewish groups, therefore continues for the Bene Israel even today. Nevertheless, the attitude of Israeli society toward groups like the Bene Israel and Lost Tribes communities cannot be reduced to the reaction of individual rabbis. Some Israeli organizations, as well as religious authorities, are not only strongly in favor of the emerging Jewish communities, but are actively lobbying on their behalf to facilitate their immigration to Israel.

Lost Tribes in Israel

At the moment there are two communities in Israel who have claimed the Lost Tribes status—the Jews of Ethiopia and the Bene Menashe. Ethiopian Jews, also known as Beta Israel and the Falashas,[8] entered European

Christian discourse and Jewish historiography in the middle of the nineteenth century, when the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews started an evangelical campaign to convert the "Falachas of Abyssinia," while the *Alliance Israelite Universelle* led a counter mission to reunite the Falashas with world Jewry (Haynes 2009: 240–41).

The community has attracted a lot of interest from historians and anthropologists, some of whom have attempted to ascertain what kind of historical connection the Beta Israel may have to ancient Israelites. As Bruce Haynes has put it, "the authenticity of *Beta Israel* claims to Jewish roots seems to remain in the eye of the beholder" (2009: 244); however, in the early 1970s the two Israeli Chief Rabbis recognized the Jews of Ethiopia as the Lost Tribe of Dan. This eventually led to the airlifts, which brought Ethiopian Jews to Israel in 1984 and 1991. By 2008, the Ethiopian community of Israel numbered about 120,000 people.[9]

The Bene Menashe was the second Lost Tribes group to be officially recognized by a Chief Rabbi of Israel. As we noted before, the recognition came in 2005, when the Rabbinate sent emissaries to northeast India to organize formal conversions to Judaism for those community members who were ready for them. Conversions were deemed necessary, as the Bene Menashe had been cut off from mainstream Jewry for a very long time, and were not acquainted with the full range of Orthodox Jewish practice. More importantly, their Lost Tribes descent was not suitable for immigration purposes; therefore they had to opt for a conversion, another route for becoming an Israeli citizen.

In the previous chapter we noted that the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem appear to be moving in the direction of adopting more mainstream Jewish practices. We showed that though Shmuel was opposed to it (at least initially), Sadok contends that embracing the Judaism of overseas Jewish communities and establishing contacts with Israeli and other foreign Jewish organizations was imperative for his community's religious development. We also noted that both brothers would like the Bene Ephraim to make *aliyah*, a step that (through conversion) would require demonstrating knowledge of Orthodox Jewish practice. But why would their conversions have to be Orthodox?

The Law of Return recognizes conversions into all three main denominations of Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—if they are performed abroad. However, if they are performed in Israel, they have to be Orthodox for the converts to be allowed to become Israeli citizens (and, as mentioned above, the conversion has to be Orthodox for the convert to

have a Jewish marriage in Israel). Even before 2005, hundreds of Bene Menashe had come to Israel as tourists, stayed in the country, and studied in a *yeshivah* with an aim to undergo conversion. These conversions inevitably had to be Orthodox, as otherwise Bene Menashe converts would not have qualified for Israeli citizenship and would not have been able to stay in the country. As far as the Bene Menashe who stayed in India were concerned, "theoretically" they could have converted into Conservative or Reform forms of Judaism and still qualified for *aliyah*. However, in reality, they had no access to Conservative or Reform synagogues, but, as we discuss below, succeeded in attracting the attention of organizations that could arrange Orthodox conversions performed by Israeli rabbis.

Israel Returns

The emergence of the Israelite tradition in northeast India dates back to the early 1950s and, according to community members, it was triggered by a dream from a mystic named Mela Chala from Mizoram (Weil 2003). This is how Mela Chala's son, who now lives in a Jewish settlement in the West Bank, described it in an interview with Yulia: "My father was a Christian and in the year 1952 he had a vision. He said to the community that it is time for all the people of the northeastern part of India to go back to Zion... Instead of going to the church these people started gathering at his house and praying. They started preparing to go to Israel."

The socio-historical context and factors which contributed to the emergence of a Lost Tribes tradition among the Christianized tribal groups of the Indo-Burmese borderlands have been discussed at length by anthropologists Myer Samra and Shalva Weil. It has been suggested that the Judaization of these groups could be related to a general dissatisfaction with Christianity combined with a desire to return to some of the pre-Christian traditions of the region (2003: 48). According to Weil, it is significant that the movement emerged shortly after the establishment of the State of Israel and received support from certain groups in the Jewish State (2003: 48, 55). It appears that this support has been crucial in the migration of some Bene Menashe to Israel and continues to be important for the community now present in both countries.

In 2011 Israeli media reported that the entire 7,000-strong Bene Menashe community of India was finally going to be allowed by the Israeli government to make *aliyah*. As we were completing the final draft of this book in December 2012, we learned that the first plane bearing the new

Bene Menashe immigrants had just landed in the Tel Aviv airport. By the time the 7,000 Bene Menashe from the Indo-Burmese border were officially allowed in Israel there were already about 1,700 people living in the Jewish State who were recognized as "descendants of Israel" by the Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar (Benari 2011). Some of them came to Israel over twenty years ago with the help of an Israeli organization called Amishav ("My People Return") and its founder Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail.

What is the wider historical and religious background of Amishav's activities? As we noted in chapter 1, searching for the Lost Tribes of Israel has become an integral part of both Jewish and Christian traditions. In the theologies of both religions the return of the Ten Tribes is associated with messianic expectations. As Ben-Dor Benite observes, these theologies have been based on the biblical narrative, which not only describes the history of the tribes, but also outlines their present and future as deduced from various prophecies: "For centuries, the Bible was seen as proof of the facticity of the ten tribes' story, and the validity of the related biblical prophecies remained beyond doubt... For many, it is beyond doubt even today... For centuries, to talk of the ten tribes was to talk theologically, but it was also to talk scientifically and factually—and for many, it still is" (Ben-Dor Benite 2009: 15).

The place to which the tribes are supposed to return is Jerusalem, which in the prophecy of Isaiah becomes the center of messianic activity involving the ingathering of both the descendants of Judah and of the Lost Tribes. The Midrashic literature[10] elaborated on Isaiah to tie the return of the Ten Tribes to the coming of the Messiah in clearer and more unequivocal terms—here the return of the Lost Tribes is going to provide an impetus for the return of the whole of the Jewish people. As Ben-Dor Benite has put it, in the midrash on Isaiah the tribes emerge as "an integral part of the messianic package" (2009: 83).

In modern times the search for the Lost Tribes acquired a political dimension when the study of the tribes attracted the attention of Zionist thinkers. In 1928, Menahem Mendel Emanuel, a rabbi, historian, and traveller from Jerusalem published a book on the Lost Tribes which, in addition to referring to Jewish religious sources and the accounts of travellers, appealed to the nations of the world to make a concerted effort to bring the tribes back and to reunite them with the rest of the Jewish people. The book was endorsed by a number of rabbis, including Abraham Isaac Kook, Chief Rabbi of Mandate Palestine,[11] who put the Ten Lost Tribes in the context of contemporary Jewish history and Zionist thought. He suggested

that the British interest in the Lost Tribes might have led to the acceptance of the Balfour Declaration, which recognized the right of the Jewish people to a national home. Kook is the founding father of the theology that considers the establishment of the modern Jewish State to be the beginning of redemption, and for him the ingathering of exiles would logically include the return of the Lost Tribes (Ben-Dor Benite 2009: 222).

It is exactly this thinking that Amishav's ideology has a direct connection to. As Rabbi Avichail told Yulia in an interview in Jerusalem, he was a disciple of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, the son of Abraham Isaac Kook and the spiritual leader of the religious Zionists, and his search for the Ten Lost Tribes was inspired by Zvi Kook's teachings. In the best tradition of Lost Tribes searches, Amishav's activities merge theological doctrine with academic conjecture. As Avichail's treatise on the topic states, the objectives of Amishav include "the scientific research of the Lost Tribes of Israel, and the actual ingathering of these lost people, first back to Judaism, and then to the Jewish People, and to the Land of Israel" (Avichail 2004/2005: 8). Rabbi Avichail's approach to the Lost Tribes is rather different from that of Kulanu. He is mainly interested in providing religious, rather than economic support to these communities with an aim to introduce them to Orthodox Judaism. Rabbi Avichail is convinced that the Lost Tribes should join rabbinic Judaism, and for him the origin of these communities matters. As we saw in the previous chapter, Kulanu-inspired activists refrain from making any judgment about the descent of the communities they work with. In their rhetoric, discourses of authenticity appear only implicitly. Rabbi Avichail, on the other hand, does not shy away from extensive origin checks. Like the travellers, scholars, and missionaries of the past who were keen to establish the exact geographic location of the Lost Tribes, Rabbi Avichail applies scientific logic to this work, and Amishav would not "take on" a group claiming an Israelite connection, unless Rabbi Avichail becomes convinced through his own research that their claims are true. To verify their stories he has travelled all over the world meeting community members, recording their origin narratives, and observing their practice.

The Bene Menashe attracted Amishav's attention in the 1970s and Rabbi Avichail came to believe that they were of Israelite descent.[12] Back in Israel, he arranged for those Bene Menashe who wished to formally convert to Judaism to undergo training at a *yeshivah* in Jerusalem. After the training, the applicants converted to Judaism and stayed in Israel as citizens. Thus, to use Fernheimer's expression, at the end of the twentieth

century the time-old Lost Tribes discourse had its "practical consequences" and resulted first in the emergence of communities who have embraced Israelite origin narratives and then in their physical relocation to the Promised Land. Though Rabbi Avichail is one of very few activists in Israel who try to facilitate the repatriation of the Lost Tribes, his endeavors have received ideological support from the community of religious Zionists. Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, who was the spiritual leader of the settlers' movement, encouraged the establishment of Amishav and supported its early development (Avichail 2004/2005: 8), and, as we will see in the following section, religious Zionists still represent an important support base for Lost Tribes communities.

In 2001 another Israeli NGO, Shavei Israel (Hebrew for "Israel Returns"), took a lead in assisting the immigration of the Bene Menashe. Shavei Israel emerged to support groups that have claimed the Lost Tribes origin, communities and individuals rediscovering their Jewish ancestry, as well as communities who have embraced Judaism without claiming Jewish descent. Like Kulanu, members of Shavei Israel have a more liberal attitude toward the question of what it means to be Jewish, and claim that they help communities and individuals in their quest to (re)discover their Jewish heritage in whatever form this help is needed. As the chairman of Shavei Israel, Michael Freund, told Yulia in an interview, "Say, you have discovered that you may be a descendant of the Jews who were forcibly converted into Christianity in Spain. You don't want either to embrace formal Jewish practice, or to come to Israel, but would like to learn more about Judaism. We would be more than happy to help you and will supply you with literature."At the same time, if a community does want to settle in Israel, Shavei Israel will try to help them both by raising funds to facilitate their migration and by lobbying the government on their behalf. The Bene Menashe *aliyah* is one example of these activities.

Yulia met Michael Freund for the first time in his Jerusalem office in 2010 and asked him how he became interested in the Lost Tribes communities. He said that in the 1990s he used to work in the prime minister's communication office under Binyamin Netanyahu, and came across a letter written by the Bene Menashe asking for their case to be considered by the government. Michael said he was very touched by it and thought that it would be only fair if Israel extended a helping hand to them. He thought it was encouraging that communities in different parts of the world wanted to join Judaism, whether they were rediscovering their Jewish roots or embracing the Jewish tradition anew.

In the case of the Bene Menashe, Michael had visited their community in India and became convinced that their claims of Lost Tribe descent have historical validity. Irrespective of the historical evidence that the community can present, they strike him as sincere believers, and he was impressed with the degree of their religious observance, he said. As far as the Bene Ephraim are concerned, in Michael's opinion further research into their claims is needed, but if they are keen to embrace Judaism, Shavei Israel would be ready to help them learn more about it.

Michael explained that the reality of the Law of Return was such that the only way for the Bene Ephraim to come to Israel was to convert. He admitted that communities like the Bene Menashe and the Bene Ephraim presented a new challenge for the Israeli immigration system, because they created an unprecedented situation. At the same time, he felt that as a matter of principle, there was nothing wrong with people showing an interest in Judaism.

The activities of Kulanu and Shavei Israel thus appear to be adding a new dimension to the Lost Tribes discourse in the Jewish tradition. As Ben-Dor Benite suggests, the story of the Ten Tribes, which is a story of profound loss, has had its mobilizing impact: the emergence of "the idea of restitution, redemption, and wholeness" (2009: 226). While the theologians and travellers of the past were trying to achieve this restitution by searching for the geographic location of the Lost Tribes—and in contemporary world it is still on the agenda of Amishav—Kulanu and Shavei Israel see this search in a new light. They welcome not only the communities who might have Israelite descent, but also those who have an interest in Judaism irrespective of what their origin is. As Gerald and Bonita Sussman put it, it was encouraging for them to see communities expressing a wish to *join* the Jewish people rather than to persecute them. For the Sussmans and Michael Freund, Judaizing movements, no matter what their origin is, have an invaluable redemptive capacity to counteract centuries of anti-Semitism around the world.

The activities of Kulanu, Amishav, and Shavei Israel also capture further complexities in the relationship between the universalist and the particularist trends of Judaism. The leaders of all three are adamant that they do not proselytize. Indeed, it appears that to be noticed by these organizations, the communities have to approach them first. As shown above, the Bene Ephraim had been asking Kulanu for years to send in a rabbi. The Bene Menashe had written to the office of Binyamin Netanyahu and thus became known to Shavei Israel. While Rabbi Avichail and Michael

Freund do not necessarily see this as a problem, other commentators in Israel have expressed concern about Lost Tribes claiming Israeli citizenship, which, they argue, can lead to a potential exacerbation of Israel's political problems. In chapter 3 we noted that one of the possible reasons Shmuel sought to make community boundaries firmer by modifying the Bene Ephraim origin story was that his activities received bad publicity in Israeli media, where it was argued that the Bene Ephraim movement could lead to millions of Indian Dalits trying to claim Lost Tribe descent and to make *aliyah*. Similar anxiety was captured in public debates around the migration of the Bene Menashe, to whose case study we will now turn.

Bene Menashe

A film made about the Bene Menashe by Amishav in the 1990s states that the entire population of the Indian state of Mizoram belongs to the Lost Tribes.[13] The population of Mizoram accounts for over a million people. Unsurprisingly, the prospect of such large communities adopting the narrative about Israelite descent engendered concerns by some Israeli commentators and members of the public. More importantly, the Bene Menashe *aliyah* became subject to criticism by the political left in Israel, because a considerable number of its immigrants were settled in the occupied territories. [14] When Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, the Bene Menashe were relocated, but over a half of them still lives in the West Bank (Hider 2010).

It appears that in the past two decades, the political dimension of mass migrations to Israel became intertwined with discourses about what it means to be Jewish. Political scientist Ian Lustick has observed that in Israel debates about the immigration of groups of non-halakhic Jewish descent, such as the Lost Tribes communities and individuals of mixed origin, often go hand in hand with debates over the territories, with the annexationist right encouraging the migration of such groups. Drawing on his analysis of the Israeli debates over the Russian *aliyah*, Lustick observes that, ironically, the annexationist religious figures who in the past advocated the strict halakhic definition of "who is a Jew" were now ignoring this definition and welcoming even those *olim* who were not halakhically Jewish. At the same time, secular "doves," who used to oppose the use of the *halakhah* in determining individuals' legal identities, were raising con-

cerns about the genuineness of the Jewish descent of Soviet immigrants to counteract the expansionist aspirations of the political right (1999: 426).

The immigration of the Bene Menashe appears to have invited similar responses from both camps. When left-wing journalists and political commentators in Israel suggest that this *aliyah* will contribute to further oppression of the Palestinians, they also tend to raise questions about the veracity of the Bene Menashe claims to the Lost Tribes status (Sirohi 2010). At the same time, those leaning to the right appear to be more positive about the Bene Menashe's presence in Israel proper and in the territories.

How do the Bene Menashe themselves see their place in the Jewish State? Their fascinating story has already attracted a great deal of academic attention in its own right; however, it is important for our discussion of the Bene Ephraim and of the wider constructions of Jewishness to devote some space to their situation in Israel here as well.[15]

During Yulia's visits to Israel she interviewed twenty Bene Menashe, all of whom lived in Jewish settlements in the West Bank. She visited some of them several times and got acquainted with their families. Below we present three case studies of families who have been settled in Israel for over ten years and are in a good position to comment on their community's experiences in Israel and their interactions with wider Israeli society. We will then reflect on these case studies to explore new images of Jewishness that the Bene Menashe have introduced into Israeli discourse.

The Jorams[16]

Moshe and Berucha Joram came to Israel from Manipur in 2002. Moshe is very observant and has been described to Yulia by his friends as a *haredi* (Hebrew for a Jewish person who adheres to the most strict form of Orthodox Judaism). To support his family Moshe works in his community, but having also been ordained as a rabbi, he travels to different settlements to teach the Bene Menashe about Judaism, as well as to give lectures about the Bene Menashe to other Israelis. When Yulia asked him why he decided to come to Israel, he said that that was to fulfill his dream to live in the Jewish State.

Moshe told Yulia that back in India he and his eleven siblings all went to college and were professionals. "We lived a good life," he said. "But

when I was about thirty, I thought to myself, if I am a Jew, I have to go back to the Jewish land. So, I came, and I studied and I became a rabbi, and now I serve my community and give lectures on Judaism for the Bene Menashe in Israel and in India."

He stressed that his reasons for making *aliyah* were not economic and that it would be very hard for him to enjoy life in Israel if his objective was financial gain, because in India his life would have been easier. "Here they charge you for everything," he said and laughed. "Everything is taxed and there is a bill for everything. You can't just have land and live on it the way you can in India. Well, maybe not everywhere in India, but in many places." "Israel is a place for the religious Jews," he added. "It is not a fun place. It is fun, if you are religious, but if you are not, you are going to struggle here." Moshe pointed out that back home many Bene Menashe continued practicing Christianity, and he would not want them to make *aliyah*. He is convinced that these Bene Menashe would not like it in Israel.

Back in India Moshe was a photographer and his wife Berucha was a beautician and had her own beauty parlor. "We were very middle class," she told Yulia. Like Moshe, Berucha was very keen to immigrate to Israel: "When we came here it was very exciting. It was my dream. I could not believe it." However, in terms of her family's material well being the first years of life in Israel were very difficult. Berucha said that she was eager to support her husband in his studies, because she wanted him to become a rabbi, but this meant big sacrifices, as it was hard for Moshe to combine studying with work, and she could not work either, because her children were little.

When Moshe finished his rabbinical training and started working as a security guard, their financial situation improved. In the meantime, Berucha learned Hebrew and found a job at a local kindergarten. Now the Jorams have five children, live in a three-bedroom caravan, and say they are satisfied with their economic situation. "Now I am doing fine," Berucha said, commenting on her house. "I can buy lots of things now."

Unlike Moshe, Berucha does not strive to observe the strictest kind of Jewish practice. She describes herself as *masorti* (Hebrew for "traditional," also the name of the Israeli version of the Conservative movement). She joked that their thirteen-year-old son took after his father and was also very observant. She said, in her opinion, her husband and son were too strict in their practice, and she did not want to be like that. Nevertheless, she wanted her son to become a rabbi and encourages his

religious education: "It is more work, but I really want him to learn more about Judaism," she said.

The Levins

Ruth Levin came to Israel from Manipur in 1994, when she was eighteen years old, and was later joined by her parents and four of her six siblings. Three years later she met her husband, Sacha Levin, an *oleh* from the former Soviet Union. Ruth went to study for a BA degree in Jerusalem, but then she and Sacha had two children, and Ruth had to interrupt her studies. She hopes to resume studying for her degree once the children are older.

Ruth and Sacha used to live in Jerusalem, however, shortly after their marriage they had to move to the West Bank, because they could not afford comfortable accommodation in Jerusalem and because Ruth needed the help of her Bene Menashe family, most of whom lived in the settlements. Ruth has two sisters in Manipur. As she told Yulia, they miss their family, most of whom are now in Israel, but they are not ready to make *aliyah* themselves. She explained that in India they were doing very well, while in Israel they would have to start from the beginning. Ruth herself was happy in Israel. She has been here for seventeen years and speaks very good Hebrew—the language in which she communicates with her husband, children, and even with some of her siblings living in Israel. Ruth says she does not want to go back to India, other than to visit her family. She said that it was also probably the case for most Bene Menashe who made *aliyah*. "We feel with all our heart that we are Jewish," she said. "It is our home."

On the whole, Ruth considers living in a more religious community of a Jewish settlement to be a positive experience. Like most other Bene Menashe Yulia interviewed in the West Bank, Ruth feels more comfortable among religious Israelis than among the secular. She found that the latter were dismissive not only of the Jewish religion, but of her very community, claiming that the Bene Menashe were nothing more than economic migrants. "Here it is very different. Everybody knows who we are, and they appreciate it that we have the same tradition [as them]."

Ruth adheres to Orthodox Jewish practice herself and wants to bring up her children in this tradition, though her husband, by her own admission, is completely secular. Ruth says Sacha does not object to her religious practice, but does not observe Judaism himself at all: "He drives on

Sabbath and he would not mind cooking on Sabbath, but I refuse. I don't want to do that." Ruth appears to be quite successful in steering at least her children in the direction of Orthodox Judaism, and even—maybe to a modest extent—involving in this practice her in-laws. She invited Yulia to come to her newborn son's circumcision ceremony, which was attended by about thirty Bene Menashe friends and Ruth's relatives, and Sacha's mother and brother. Sacha's mother Yanna was pleasantly surprised to find another Russian-speaker and a former compatriot with whom to share the joy of the occasion. Though not religious herself, Yanna does not question either Ruth's belief and practice, or her Lost Tribes origin. For her, what Ruth does is the norm for the religious Jews living in Israel. "Shall we put on some head cover?," Yanna asked Yulia before entering the synagogue. Yanna opened her bag and took a hat out of it. She looked around as if wondering whether she should be putting it on after all. "I had to borrow one of Ruth's hats," she said somewhat apologetically. "I don't normally wear them, but in Ruth's family women are very religious..."

The Solomons

The Solomon family arrived from Manipur in the year 2000. Mr. and Mrs. Solomon have five children, four of whom came with them to Israel and settled in the West Bank, and one who stayed in India. The Solomons describe themselves as very religious Jews, though Mrs. Solomon grew up as a Christian, but then embraced Jewish practice after she married Mr. Solomon, who grew up practicing Judaism. Two of their daughters have studied in a girl's boarding school in the West Bank. Both the school and the community of the town the Solomons live in are oriented toward Orthodox Judaism. When Yulia asked Esther, their elder daughter, why her family decided to move to Israel, she said that that was their dream. They had to study a lot for their formal conversion, but, according to Esther, it was worth it.

Esther told Yulia that she was very particular about her practice. She was engaged to a young man of Russian Jewish origin, Alec, whom Esther described as *hiloni* (Hebrew for "secular"). Her fiancé lived in Jerusalem with his parents and was working as a part-time teacher. Esther told Yulia that Alec's friends and family were not observant at all, but she was trying to introduce him to Orthodox Judaism.

Yulia asked Esther if in her opinion other Israelis knew much about the Bene Menashe. "The *dati'im* [Hebrew for 'religious'] know exactly

who we are," she said. "The *hilonim* don't know anything about the Bene Menashe ... "

The three case studies illuminate the place that the Bene Menashe occupy in the religious and political landscape of Israel. The demographics and Israeli perceptions of the Bene Menashe may change now that more community members are arriving from India, but at the time of writing, the majority of Israeli Bene Menashe were settled in the West Bank, though there was also a sizeable community living in Israel proper.[17] Where the Bene Menashe *olim* have been settling in Israel so far has been to a large degree determined by both economic and socio-cultural factors. Thus, Ruth and her husband have been "priced out" of Jerusalem. Esther admitted that she might have to seriously consider moving into a caravan on the West Bank after her wedding because she would not be able to afford any other type of accommodation.

Another factor that appears to make the territories an attractive destination for the more recent Bene Menashe immigrants is that a sizeable number of their compatriots live there already. When Yulia asked Ruth whether she would move to Jerusalem if she could afford it, Ruth said almost without hesitation that she would still prefer staying in the West Bank to be close to her family. A similar pattern has been observed in other immigrant communities. For instance, it has been noted that the Russian Jews and the Jews of Ethiopia tend to choose those neighborhoods that already contain Ethiopian and Russian populations (Offer 2007, Siegel 1998).

At the same time, we would suggest that cheap accommodation and community ties are not the only "selling points" that attract the Bene Menashe to the territories. They have also appreciated the positive attitude toward the Lost Tribes communities exhibited by their religious Zionist neighbors, a point that was confirmed to Yulia during her fieldwork in the West Bank on a number of occasions. During one of her visits to Ruth's settlement, she talked to Ruth's neighbor Pavel. Pavel is an Orthodox Jewish man who came from Russia twenty years ago. Pavel said that he had a lot of respect for the Bene Menashe because they were a "cultured" and a "deeply religious" community, knowledgeable about the laws of Judaism. "You should talk to Rabbi Dan, [a Bene Menashe] who lives nearby. He is truly amazing. I wish I knew one tenth of what he knows about Jewish religion and philosophy."

As Rachel Levine observed, in Israel the Bene Menashe have already become stigmatized as "third-world economic refugees" exploiting the

myth of the Lost Tribes in search of a better life in an industrialized state (2008: 146). At the same time, it appears that in religious Jewish settlements the Bene Menashe seem to enjoy a more positive image. The millenarian beliefs that may have guided the Judaization of the Bene Menashe to begin with were not dissimilar from the messianic expectations of some of the settlers who associate the return of the Lost Tribes with the coming of the Messiah (Weil 2003: 53). According to a Bene Menashe woman Yulia interviewed in the West Bank, this was exactly the response she once received from a couple on a bus, who recognized that she was a Bene Menashe: "You are very welcome!," they both had said. "Lost Tribes coming back is the fulfillment of the prophecy."

It is also noteworthy that in the predominantly Orthodox environment of the settlements, the "unclear" Jewish descent of the Bene Menashe is normalized through the presence of secular Jews (such as Ruth's in-laws and Esther's fiancé) who feel much more out of place in a community where strict observance of dietary rules and conservative dress code are almost obligatory. In fact, the way our informants negotiate this dress code elucidates the complexity of their status in the Jewish State and their relations with other Jewish Israelis. When Yulia asked her Bene Menashe informants how their community was perceived by other Israelis, the beginning of their responses would often be as follows: most Israelis (unless they live on the settlements) do not know who the Bene Menashe are and often mistake them for labor migrants, but fortunately, most Bene Menashe men and women are religious and wear *kippot* and head scarves, which distinguish them from foreigners. Just as in Kothareddypalem the Bene Ephraim men wear *kippot* to signal their Jewishness to their neighbors, in Israel the Bene Menashe have to put on "Jewish" headgear to confirm their claim to the Lost Tribes origin. At the same time, wearing headgear is not just an externally imposed rule our informants have to abide by to avoid prejudice and discrimination. It is also a way of expressing their religiosity and asserting the authenticity of their Jewishness vis-à-vis that of the secular immigrants. As Esther put it when talking about her secular fiancé, "When he comes to visit me, I make sure he puts his *kippah* on."

Madiga as Jews and Converts

Though Israeli authorities did not have to introduce any changes in the Law of Return to accommodate the Lost Tribes communities such as the

Beta Israel and the Bene Menashe, their *aliyah* has cast new light on the way Jewishness is defined by Israeli officialdom, and particularly on the status of converts. As discussed above, in the case of the Bene Menashe, conversions to Judaism were an unavoidable prerequisite to immigration, which in a sense made their status in the Jewish State very clear. Israeli Bene Menashe are now halakhically Jewish because they have converted to Orthodox Judaism. However, the history of their interactions with Israeli authorities and organizations lobbying on their behalf demonstrates that such conversions were only allowed because of the alleged genealogical connection between the Bene Menashe and ancient Israelites. Their latent *aliyah* began in the 1980s after Rabbi Avichail became convinced that they were a Lost Tribe. In 2005 the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel officially recognized the Bene Menashe as a Lost Tribe after he considered the evidence presented by the rabbis he had sent to India to investigate the Bene Menashe case.

To be allowed to come to the Jewish State as a community, the Bene Menashe thus had to "qualify" as a Lost Tribe in the eyes of Israeli rabbinic authorities. Their community was legitimized as an Israelite group first by Rabbi Avichail after he examined their practices and narratives, and subsequently by the Chief Rabbi's emissaries, who were impressed with their practice and became convinced that their account of origin connected them to ancient Israel. If the conversions were a prerequisite for the Bene Menashe *aliyah*, then proof of a genealogical connection to the rest of the Jewish people was a prerequisite for such conversions.

Similar examples come from the history of the Ethiopian Jews in Israel. In the case of the Beta Israel, the question of the genealogical connection of the community to world Jewry, and even of the supposed "Jewish look" of Ethiopian Jews was being raised time and again throughout their migration. To give just a few examples of this discourse described in detail by Steven Kaplan, in 1985, Nate Shapiro, president of the American Association for Ethiopian Jewry, an organization which supported the *aliyah* of the Beta Israel, wrote that "[a] different degree of blackness of skin characterizes the Falasha from other Ethiopian tribes" (quoted in Kaplan 2003: 83). In 1988 Rabbi David Chelouche, the Israeli Chief Rabbinate's registrar of Ethiopian marriages, who advocated a lenient approach in deciding on the religious status of the Beta Israel, noted that "[i]n the colour of their skin and the shape of their faces there are clear differences between them [Ethiopian Jews] and the Amhara" (quoted in Kaplan 2003: 83).

In the early 1990s, thousands of Ethiopian Jews who were hoping to be taken to Israel were joined by *Faras Mura*, Christian Ethiopians who claimed to be the descendants of the Jews. The latter were not included in the 1991 Beta Israel airlift known as Operation Solomon, but later some *Faras Mura* were admitted to Israel after a conversion ceremony. The chief criterion that Israeli authorities used in determining which Ethiopians should be allowed to immigrate under these circumstances was not the willingness to adopt Jewish practice, but the ability to prove a familial link to the Ethiopian Jewish community (Kaplan 2003: 89).

As we discussed earlier, recently the Yacobi brothers began to put greater emphasis on the genealogical connection between the Bene Ephraim and the Bene Menashe. It is again not surprising given that though converts are supposed to be equal in status to "Jews by birth" and anybody should be given an opportunity to convert, when it comes to mass conversions, the Israeli authorities favor those who can prove their historical connection to the Jewish people, and for the Bene Menashe this connection had already been accepted by the Rabbinate. As we will demonstrate in this section, the idea that the Bene Ephraim have to find evidence of their Israelite origin, as well as to convert formally to Judaism, is strongly advocated by Yehoshua Yacobi, the son of Shmuel and the only Bene Ephraim who has settled in Israel so far.

Yehoshua

Toward the end of our research, Yulia was invited to give a paper at a conference held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The night before her departure she was going through her participant pack sorting out the papers from the conference. Her attention was caught by a small brochure promoting academic degrees at the Hebrew University, which contained pictures, testimonies, and brief biographies of five students who had benefitted from scholarship support offered by the university. Yulia was pleasantly surprised to see that one of the pages was devoted to Yehoshua Yacobi.

Yehoshua, the elder son of Shmuel and Malkah Yacobi, moved to Israel in the early 1990s. He came as a tourist with his father, but then joined a *yeshivah*, and after completing its program converted to Judaism. Eventually, Yehoshua acquired Israeli citizenship, and, like most young Israeli men and women, served the compulsory three years in the army.

After that he joined the Hebrew University to do an MA in Bible Studies and met his future wife Svetlana, a recent immigrant from Kiev.

At the time of writing, Yehoshua and Svetlana lived in Ramat Gan, a small town near Tel Aviv, where Yehoshua was working as an assistant at a shoe shop. When Yulia felt she got to know Yehoshua better, she asked him how he liked his life in Israel and if it had been hard for him to settle in. Yehoshua replied that in the beginning it was very hard. He was missing his family, while trying to get used to his new environment, but was committed to studying Judaism and very much wanted to live in the Jewish State. He explained that the *yeshivah* where he studied for his conversion had lots of Bene Menashe students. It had a connection to Rabbi Avichail, and it was he who had helped Yehoshua get a place there for free.[18]

Yehoshua described his *yeshivah* as an educational institution for *ba'alei teshuvah*—Jewish people who were coming back to Judaism. Like Rabbi Avichail's teachings, its establishment was inspired by the doctrines of Rabbi Zvi Kook, and the *yeshivah* was therefore more likely to open its doors to the Lost Tribes groups than any other religious institution in Israel.

Yehoshua told Yulia that studying at the *yeshivah* was a positive experience for him. He quickly learned Hebrew and soon started helping other students with it. At the same time, he felt that outside the *yeshivah*, people would often question his Jewishness, implicitly if not explicitly: "Sometimes, when I try to explain to other Israelis where I am from, they would say, oh that's interesting, but I can see that they don't really believe me."

Yulia suggested that Yehoshua was probably finding this attitude disappointing, but he said that he was not in the least surprised by it. Moreover, he thought it was only fair that in the absence of proper evidence people would not take the Bene Ephraim claims at face value: "Why would they not question our Jewishness? They don't know much about the Bene Ephraim. You can't just make a claim like that. You have to prove it. When I go back to the village, I will look for evidence."

To prove his community's Jewish descent, Yehoshua plans to continue his father's research into the connection between the Madiga and the Lost Tribes. In chapter 3 we discussed how Shmuel's original theory about all Madiga being Jewish had taken root in the community despite the fact that the Yacobi brothers did not support it any more. Yehoshua, like some of the other Bene Ephaim we interviewed in the village, adheres to the original

theory. Yulia asked Yehoshua what kind of evidence he was hoping to find back in Andhra. "You know, all Madiga, both Hindu and Christian, bury their dead in the direction of Jerusalem," he said. "This is one piece of evidence that we already have. Also, when they prayed they used to wrap around their arm something similar to what is known in Judaism as *tefillin*. We already know that much and I hope to be able to find more."

In the meantime, Yehoshua feels it is imperative for the community to embrace Orthodox Jewish practice and eventually to convert. He is convinced that this is the only proper form of practice for a Jewish person, and as the Madiga are Jewish, they should aspire to follow Orthodox Judaism if they are at all interested in returning to the Jewish tradition. At the time of Yulia's last visit to Israel, Yehoshua was planning to go to Andhra for three months to visit the community and to teach them Jewish practice. He felt that now that he had learned so much about it himself, it was time for him to share this knowledge with his entire congregation. Unlike Kulanu's "Western" Jewish supporters, Yehoshua recognizes only rabbinic Judaism. Having been educated at an Orthodox *yeshivah* and being very observant, he is keen on his community following his denomination of the Jewish religion. At the same time, Yehoshua sees the Bene Ephraim as different from other Israelis, and thinks it will take time for them to join the "melting pot." During Yehoshua's last meeting with Yulia he told her that he first wanted to bring about ten Bene Ephraim families to Israel. He said this was going to take a lot of time—at least five years—because his community had to learn a lot. It is not only that in order to be able to come to Israel they would have to convert, he said, and to do so they would have to study a lot. He feels he also needs to teach them about life in Israel, so that they would be able to cope better once they make *aliyah*: "If they are not ready, it would be very difficult for them to adjust in Israel. Israel is very different from what they are used to. Everybody seems to want to come, but they just don't know what is going on here and what Israel is like. If they are not ready for Israel, they will just come, start missing their families, and leave."

However, despite the fact that Yehoshua constructs his community as different from that of other Israelis, there is no doubt in his mind that due to their Madiga connection they are Jewish, and that through Orthodox conversion they should find home in the Promised Land. Ideally, one day Yehoshua would like to move most of his community to Israel. Yulia asked him how many people that would be. His estimate was that there were about one hundred families in Andhra who were "serious about Judaism."

Yehoshua was worried that more people were getting interested in joining the Bene Ephraim, because his father and uncle had attracted the attention of the mass media. Yehoshua thought it was not a good idea, as only the Madiga could trace a connection to the Jewish people. "They [Israelis] are not trying to convert people. If you feel very strongly that Judaism is the right way then you can convert, but otherwise, the Jews say, observe the seven [Noahide] commandments."[19]

To be considered Jewish in Israel, you need to be known to be Jewish. You need to be recognized as Jewish by a recognized member of a recognized Jewish community. Just as the Bene Israel struggled in the 1960s to prove to the Sephardi Chief Rabbi that they were Jewish, because of a lack of a consensus on their status, the Bene Ephraim (as well as the Bene Menashe) cannot point to an appropriate rabbinic authority that would confirm their Jewishness. Yehoshua is aware of this logic and realizes that for him personally and for other Bene Ephraim obtaining complete recognition from his new compatriots is going to take time. He noted that in this respect the Madiga will be different from other repatriates, such as, for instance, the Jews from the former Soviet Union, who, similarly to the Bene Ephraim, had been deprived of an opportunity to practice Judaism and were now rediscovering it anew, but who at the same time did not have to defend their genealogical connection to the wider Jewish community.

The parallel that one can draw between the two communities also came up in Yulia's conversation with Yehoshua's wife. Svetlana asked Yulia to tell her more about our research and particularly about the Bene Ephraim's religion and culture. Svetlana explained that she had never been to India and only met Yehoshua's parents when they visited them in Israel. She said it was clear to her that Yehoshua's family were very observant, but she wanted to know more about the practice of the wider community. Yulia told her that many Bene Ephraim became aware of their Jewish ancestry not so long ago and most were actively learning about Judaism. Svetlana replied that it was very similar to the situation in the Ukraine, where she comes from. A lot of Jews from the former Soviet Union had to learn their Judaism almost "from scratch," she added, and some discovered that they had Jewish ancestry very recently because their parents and grandparents had changed their names and surnames to hide their Jewish origin.

Svetlana's words reminded us of another episode of the Dutch *Zoek de Verschillen* program, where the protagonist spends a week with a Jewish family in the Ukraine. The story presented by the family is in many respects reminiscent of that of the Yacobis. The family's ancestors

were observant Jews, but they were prevented from practicing Judaism by the Soviet authorities. Their synagogue was shut, and their children were rediscovering their practice only now. The husband and wife in the family have learned Hebrew and now teach it to the community. They do their best to observe Jewish practice, but it is still very hard—buying kosher meat is expensive, attending the only existing synagogue in town presents logistical problems, wearing a *kippah* outside the house invites anti-Semitic abuse from passersby. Though this account is not entirely dissimilar from that of the Bene Ephraim, the viewers of *Zoek de Verschillen* are invited to relate to it differently than to the one of the Yacobis. Unlike Eli, who went to Andhra, the protagonist in the Ukranian episode—young Nachshon—does not doubt his hosts' story. This is not at all surprising. The history of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union is well known and well documented. However, what is also important is that the historical and political consensus on the origin of Eastern European Jews is much clearer than that on the Lost Tribes communities. The former's lack of Orthodox practice is more likely to be forgiven. If Eli states at the end of his visit to Kothareddypalem that the Bene Ephraim "consider Judaism a solution out of their current situation," Nachshon frames the perceived alterity of his Ukrainian hosts in a very different way: "I have seen what happens when your Jewishness is denied since you were born. What kind of effect it has on a whole community when it is forbidden to practice your faith."

The "blood logic" of identity narratives (Glenn, noted in chapter 4) appears to be hard at work in the story of the Lost Tribes communities. The Bene Ephraim will have to make an effort to convince Israeli authorities that they are Jewish just to be allowed to convert, and we saw some examples of such endeavors in chapter 3. However, we suggest that the ethnography considered here demonstrates that the Lost Tribes tradition has also emerged as a domain of multiple possibilities for self-identification and for the development of empowering concepts of belonging. For "the man in the street," the Bene Menashe are still "the people who are trying to be Jewish." And yet, for the Orthodox Jewish settlers, the Bene Menashe are the fulfillment of the prophecy and a good example for secular Jews. To be even allowed to convert, the Bene Menashe had to undergo the scrutiny of rabbinical origin checks. However, once they were recognized as the Tribe of Menashe, they were offered a special form of conversion, which was quicker and easier. The collective consensus of the Israeli public opinion on the origin of the Lost Tribes is still far from clear. However, the

cultural work initiated by Mela Chala's vision has already brought tangible outcomes. If a Bene Menashe person in India decides to make *aliyah*, it will no longer be an insurmountable task.

More importantly, as Yehoshua's example shows, the very idea that the Jewish people are connected to each other on a genealogical level and that to join them one needs to undergo a complicated conversion ceremony, can be seen as attractive and empowering. During Yulia's last meeting with Yehoshua, he told her a story, which we had already heard from Shmuel. "When people get angry at the Jews [for being exclusive], I say, it is like this. Imagine a king is organizing a dinner and everyone is invited, but only a limited number of people are told to prepare the party so that everybody else could come and enjoy. Jews are those people who have to work to prepare the party for everybody else to come and be happy. There is no reason to be angry with them for this. This is what I tell people when they get upset that only the Jews are chosen."

Israeli Frontiers

The funding opportunities brochure of the Hebrew University does not question the Jewishness of Yehoshua's ancestors. It describes him as a member of "a small Jewish community in southern India, which traces its history to the lost Ten Tribes of Israel."[20] The brochure is entitled "Meeting Israel's Future" and features five students who have studied at the Hebrew University. Three of them appear to have been raised in Israel. The other two—Yehoshua and a young woman from Ethiopia—represent the *olim*. The brochure uses the students from the Lost Tribes communities—groups that had particularly problematic histories of being recognized as Jewish in Israeli society—to signal that the Hebrew University is willing to accept the cultural diversity of its cohort. At the same time, it sends a (not so subtle) message that these groups are in particular need of financial aid and educational opportunities, which they are grateful to receive. The brochure thus portrays these students as subjects located on the socio-economic margins of the Israeli society, who need to be helped to join the Israeli educational and socio-economic mainstream. While the pages of the *sabra* (native Israeli) students speak solely of their academic achievements, the page devoted to the Ethiopian student notes that in order to join the Hebrew University's "competitive nursing program" she had to "improve her academic skills" via a preparatory course. It then offers her testimony: "It's a privilege to acquire knowledge and education.

The Hebrew University gave me this chance, and I couldn't ask for anything better."

Yehoshua's page mentions that his wife—also a Hebrew University alumna—is an immigrant from Kiev, and states that "[t]he couple is grateful for the financial help and support they've received, support that is making their career possible." In reality this support has hardly advanced their careers. At the time of writing, and as mentioned above, Yehoshua worked as an assistant in a shoe shop—an occupation which, ironically, is reminiscent of that of the Madiga back in Andhra, reminding us again that the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim has not yet set the community on a path to social mobility. However, what his education did enable him to do was to become a teacher of Judaism for his community. As with our Bene Menashe informant Moshe, after settling in Israel, Yehoshua chose to take his education in the direction that would allow him to help his community learn more about Judaism rather than to secure immediate employment. Similarly to Moshe, who decided to forsake the security of employment to become a rabbi, Yehoshua put his efforts in doing a degree in Bible Studies, which could help him learn more about the tradition of his ancestors and to continue his father's research into the origin of the Madiga. Both Moshe and Yehoshua now devote a considerable amount of time to the religious education of their respective communities. Both recognize only Orthodox Judaism and contend that this is the branch of the Jewish religion that their congregations should follow. Will their life stories become a model for the Bene Ephraim in the future should they succeed in making *aliyah*?

In this chapter we have considered the factors that could potentially affect the development of the Bene Ephraim tradition in light of the community's desire to immigrate to the State of Israel. It was demonstrated that these factors include Israeli immigration law, which sets specific parameters defining the genealogical and religious requirements for potential repatriates, and the debate about the post-1967 borders of the country. We showed that in both contexts the Lost Tribes communities, as well as other *olim* who cannot be described as halakhically Jewish, have become the subject of public discussion. Interestingly, as the Bene Menashe example demonstrates, notwithstanding the non-halakhic origins of such groups, at the moment their presence in Israel is particularly appreciated by the religious right.

In the previous chapter we demonstrated that individuals and organizations that have become involved in the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim

adopted a liberal approach both to the question of this community's origins and of their religious practice. Here we can see that the community's desire to immigrate to Israel is likely to impose more specific constraints on the way their religious practice develops in the future. Their only chance to make *aliyah* is to pass the test for the religious conversion. To be able to do so, they need to adopt mainstream Jewish practice. Additionally, the Bene Menashe case indicates that to be even allowed to convert the Bene Ephraim may need both to come up with a more "convincing" narrative of their Lost Tribes descent, and to demonstrate that the boundaries of their community are more clear-cut. It is partly because of these formal and unwritten requirements that Yehoshua has expressed his concern about larger numbers of individuals in Andhra joining his father's movement—a phenomenon that we explore in the following chapter.

At the same time, we would argue that the context of the Lost Tribes' search for Israeli citizenship creates possibilities for a reinterpretation of the formal Israeli definitions of what it means to be Jewish and illuminates a new challenge for the approach which divides Judaism and Jewish culture into mainstream and marginal. In reflecting on these possibilities we find it fruitful to engage with Sander Gilman's frontier model of Jewish history, which he presents as an alternative to the center-periphery model of describing the Jewish past and reading Jewish experience. In this model Gilman advocates an approach that abandons attempts to distinguish between core and peripheral elements of Jewish cultures, histories, spaces, and experiences, and focuses instead on the frontier of such experiences without referencing any assumed center (2003). Writing specifically about Israel as the perceived center of the Jewish tradition, Gilman reminds us that it is both a land where religious authorities are allowed by the state to endorse a specific definition of "Who is a Jew," and a place where being Jewish has multiple meanings (Gilman 2003: 18). Yehoshua Yacobi and our Bene Menashe respondents in Israel tend to construct Israel as the center and their Indian home as periphery. However, their own life stories demonstrate that Israeli society is way too diverse—socially, culturally, and religiously—to lend itself easily to the core/periphery dichotomy. Thus, as we saw in the previous sections, the unconventional and originally non-halakhic Jewishness of Yehoshua and the Bene Menashe in Israel is normalized not just through the official conversion route, but also through the presence of other Jewish groups, such as, for instance, immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The latter have not always been able to demonstrate a halakhically accepted descent either,

and yet under the 1970 formulation of the Law of Return they have been accepted as Israeli citizens without having to convert.

Finally, we suggest that the example of Indian Lost Tribes casts an interesting new light on the notion of soul citizenship introduced by Markowitz, Helman, and Shir Vertesh. As we observed in chapter 3, they developed this concept building upon the Hebrew Israelites' tradition of engaging with Israel. Hebrew Israelites claimed Israeli citizenship on the basis of their spiritual connection to the Jewish State, but refused to adopt mainstream Judaism or convert. Our Bene Menashe informants and Yehoshua, on the contrary, were willing to convert and to observe Orthodox Judaism; however, we suggest that this formal connection that they chose to establish with the Jewish State (and to obtain actual citizenship) could be seen as yet another trajectory for acquiring soul citizenship.

Back in Kothareddypalem, Sadok Yacobi encourages his community to embrace mainstream Judaism, but, like the leader of the Hebrew Israelites, he frames this way of relating to the Jewish tradition in terms of social and spiritual liberation. The three Bene Menashe families we considered here chose formal citizenship; however their connection to the Jewish State—which they all describe as a dream come true—could also be read as spiritual. It is noteworthy in this respect that in Israel the narrative of Ben Ammi's group had undergone a shift. The Hebrew Israelites continued to assert their special place in Jewish history, but interpreted "Jews" as a wider category to include everyone with a spiritual connection to Israel. Following this discursive change, by 1993 they acquired de facto citizenship (Markowitz et al. 2003: 306). While on the one hand, it appears that the Hebrew Israelites thus made a step toward embracing a more conventional version of Jewish history, on the other hand, their continuing presence in Israel and negotiations with the authorities of the state have diversified Israeli perspectives on the nature of Jewish people's connection to the Promised Land. As John Jackson has observed, the Hebrew Israelites, whose community in Israel had started with 100 immigrants and by 2005 numbered 3,000 members, "have established themselves as a recognizable segment of contemporary Israel's multicultural landscape" (Jackson 2009: 100). The same is true for the Bene Menashe. Like Sadok Yacobi's group in Kothareddypalem, the Bene Menashe were ready to undergo formal conversion to Orthodox Judaism, which allowed them to obtain Israeli citizenship. They therefore managed to satisfy the formal requirement of the Law of Return, but at the same time, their example opened a new direction in Israeli debates about what it means to be

Jewish. As a community with a strong narrative about Israelite descent, they were allowed to convert *en masse* and were offered an easier conversion route than the one reserved for regular proselytes. It remains to be seen whether the Bene Ephraim will succeed in making *aliyah*, but their case is bound to index new ways for making Israeli understandings of Jewishness more nuanced and multi-faceted. In the meantime, as we will discuss in the following chapter, back in India, both local and foreign constructions of Jewishness have led to the emergence of new forms of Judaism, which spilled well outside of Kothareddypalem.

6

The Other Bene Ephraim

DURING ONE OF Yulia's visits to Kothareddypalem in 2009 she was in a car with Sadok, when he received a call on his mobile phone. After a brief conversation he hung up and said, "Somebody is calling from outside of the Guntur district. This man is convinced he is a Bene Ephraim and is about to undergo circumcision. He called to ask for my blessing." Yulia asked whether he often received such requests. "Every now and then," replied Sadok. "There are Madiga people all over Andhra who do it." As we shortly learned, people rediscovering their Jewish roots in Andhra Pradesh do not solely come from among the Madiga.

In the fifth month of Shahid's fieldwork Shmuel introduced him to a group of young people who came to the Kothareddypalem synagogue during Sukkot celebrations. The Yacobis described them as "members of the Bene Ephraim communities of Andhra Pradesh." Indeed, these men and women, all of whom were in their late twenties to early thirties, have come from different places all over Andhra. Some were from the major cities of Hyderabad, Vijayawada, and Vishakhapattnam. Others had come from smaller towns and villages from Guntur and other coastal districts. The "newcomers," most of whom belonged to the Dalit Mala caste, had a distinctive urban look and, in addition to Telugu, spoke Hindi and English.

Later in the evening, when the local village members departed to their homes, Shmuel invited Shahid to talk to these young men and women. The latter told Shahid in a group discussion that they were Jewish and that they belonged to the Bene Ephraim community. As with the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem, some of these young people talked about their forefathers' Jewish descent. One man showed Shahid photographs of his great-grandfather and his great-grandfather's brother wearing what he described as a Jewish beard. Another told him that his grandfather had been circumcised. However, in contrast to the Yacobis' almost

singular emphasis on the oral account of their Israelite history supported by Shmuel's research, the newcomers' narrative explaining how they had conjectured their Jewish origin included new forms of evidence. The majority of them shared with Shahid stories of receiving a dream in which their forefathers revealed to them their Jewish roots by reminding them of one or another Jewish practice being present in their family's tradition. Shmuel suggested to Shahid that he was supportive of these oral accounts, as he believed that some of the Jewish traditions were still kept by many Telugu families even outside the Madiga caste. These Mala men and women were therefore accepted in the village as Bene Ephraim and were allowed to come to the synagogue in order to observe Jewish rituals, ceremonies, and festivals.

The next evening when the young people were leaving the synagogue, some of them invited Shahid to visit their communities across different parts of coastal Andhra. As Shahid's fieldwork in the village and outside of it progressed, he found even more groups than those indicated by the young people he met during Sukkot. Most of them belonged to the Mala caste and, like the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem, in the past had practiced Christianity. Many among them preferred to be identified as Jewish or Israelite and were keen to immigrate to the State of Israel. They adopted Hebrew surnames and some Jewish practices while often combining them with Christian beliefs and identifying themselves as both Jewish/Israelite and Christian. It is difficult to assess the exact number of such followers; however, it appears that they by far outnumber the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem. In addition to the two synagogues established by the Yacobis in Kothareddypalem and Machilipatnam, we discovered at least two more synagogues and three Jewish prayer halls in coastal Andhra.

In this chapter we discuss these "other" Telugu-speaking Jewish groups who either started identifying with the Bene Ephraim or founded their own Jewish communities and synagogues. Though they hardly consider themselves to be members of the Kothareddypalem group and some even dissociate themselves from the Bene Ephraim, they all seem to have had contact with Shmuel Yacobi in the past and were influenced by his teachings. While some of them claim Jewish origin on the basis of their oral tradition, others state they discovered their Jewishness through dreams and spiritual experiences. We focus on two Israelite groups we encountered outside the village and reflect on the understandings of Jewishness that these case studies thrust into the analytical fore.

Firstly, this chapter will discuss the nature and consequences of the Jewish-Christian syncretism of Telugu Jews, which will be considered against the backdrop of other Judaizing communities in India and abroad. We will explore the specifics of their claim to Jewish origin, their current belief and practice, and their relationship with the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem. It will be demonstrated that though these groups' Israelite narratives and practice were initially informed by the research of Shmuel Yacobi, these communities soon started to challenge the Bene Ephraim tradition and to identify themselves in opposition to the Kothareddypalem community.

In the second half of this chapter we will situate the new Israelite groups and their relationship with the Bene Ephraim in the wider historical and social context of the development of Christianity and of caste relations among different Dalit groups in coastal Andhra. It appears that just as Dalit Christians in Andhra Pradesh are divided along caste lines, Telugu-speaking Israelite groups are aware of caste differences among their members. We will examine the way caste-awareness manifests itself among our informants from within and outside Kothareddypalem and will discuss whether "becoming Jewish" offers Indian Dalits a promise of liberation from caste that their earlier Christianization failed to fulfill.

Israel in India

Prasad, age thirty-six, was born to a Hindu Mala family in a village in coastal Andhra. At the age of seventeen he converted to Protestant Christianity and joined the local church in his village. In 1998 he joined the Hodu Yerushalaim (Hebrew for "Indian Jerusalem") ashram in West Godavari district after listening to a public speech delivered by its spiritual leader in his village. Indian Jerusalem is an offshoot of the Indian branch of the Assemblies of Yahweh, a Christian organization with headquarters in Bethel, Pennsylvania. Members of the Assemblies of Yahweh propagate the importance of using the revealed personal names of the Christian God (Yahweh) and of Jesus Christ (Yahoshua). They also insist on following the practices of the Old and the New Testaments as closely as possible, which led them to observe a number of rites traditionally associated with Judaism. They keep Saturday as the day of rest, follow the dietary laws described in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, and among other festivals, celebrate Passover, Shavuot, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot. Because of these practices the Assemblies of Yahweh are sometimes seen as a syncretic mixture

of Judaism and Christianity, though on the level of doctrine the group by its own definition is Christian.

Prasad was one of the young people Shahid met in the synagogue during Sukkot, and by that time Prasad had already abandoned Indian Jerusalem. He told us that when he first met its guru he was deeply influenced by his sermons on the significance of observing the Sabbath and Jewish festivals, joined the ashram, and spent four years there. During this time he formed his own ministry and went out propagating the ashram's practice. By 2003 he grew dissatisfied with evangelical work, left the ashram, and moved to Vijayawada. There he made new friends who told him about Shmuel Yacobi and his Hebrew classes conducted through the Hebrew Open University. Prasad went to meet Shmuel and seek clarification regarding the differences between the Old and the New Testament, the concept of the true God and of the true Hebrew religion. Shmuel invited him to come and live in the Kothareddypalem synagogue to learn about the Hebrew tradition. In the village Prasad met other Bene Ephraim, realized that he had an Israelite connection, and underwent circumcision, after which he would travel to Kothareddypalem and come to the synagogue during Jewish festivals.

The story of Prasad, who came to rediscovering his Jewish roots via an encounter with Christianity, is similar to the story of many other Telugu Israelites, as well as of different Judaizing movements in India and abroad. In India, where the numbers of local Jewish communities and therefore local populations' exposure to knowledge about Judaism have always been limited, it is not at all surprising that an interest in the Jewish tradition emerged firstly among Christianized groups—both the Bene Menashe and the Bene Ephraim have Protestant backgrounds. However, these two groups are hardly an exception. A vast number of the Lost Tribes communities around the world have emerged in the context of prior Christianization. Some of them adopted Jewish practice, while others chose to stay Christian insisting on their Israelite descent.

For example, anthropologist Courtney Handman has demonstrated that the Guhu-Sumane of Papua and New Guinea embraced the Lost Tribes tradition after one hundred years of Christian mission. Handman argues that the Lost Tribes discourse has been deployed by Christian Guhu-Samane to overcome the fierce denominational struggle that the community has been experiencing since the 1970s. As Handman has put it, "even though denominational division has split Guhu-Samane Christians into highly antagonistic groups that they uncomfortably recognise as not sharing

Christian spirit, the Lost Tribes Hypothesis circulates among members of most churches. Almost everyone seems interested in contemplating a *shared* genealogical connection to the Ancient Israelites" (2011: 657).

The Guhu-Samane appear to be very far from developing links with mainstream Judaism. On the contrary, as Handman suggests, they established an ideational connection with the Lost Tribes discourse in order to reaffirm their sense of successful conversion to Christianity: "if they are one of the Lost Tribes, then they are a people whose distant Jewish origins ratify their potential to be truly Christian" (2011: 658). Other Judaizing groups came to combining Christian belief with some forms of Jewish practice. Thus, the founder of the first organized community of African American Jews, William Saunders Crowdy, was a Baptist preacher who started having visionary experiences suggesting that Christian churches were not favored in the eyes of God anymore and had to return to Judaism. Crowdy therefore founded a community that incorporated ritual traditions of both the Old and the New Testaments. Today Crowdy's principles are followed by the Jews of Rusape, Zimbabwe, who chose to combine different components of Judaism and Christianity in their belief and practice (Bruder 2008: 82). The Jews of Rusape are not the only African Judaizing community to adopt a syncretic approach to religious practice. For instance, the Sabbatarians belonging to the Igbo of Nigeria practice a Jewish tradition of their own while at the same time reading the New Testament (Bruder 2008: 143). Some of the Lemba of southern Africa consider themselves to be Jewish, but belong to different Christian denominations. As Parfitt observed, "Those Lemba who perceive themselves as ethnically 'Jewish' find no contradiction in regularly attending a Christian church. Indeed by and large the Lemba who are most stridently 'Jewish' are often those with the closest Christian attachments" (2002b).

As we discussed in the Introduction, some Jewish communities around the world came into being as a result of the quests for the Lost Tribes carried out by Western Christian missionaries themselves. It appears that the Telugu-speaking Jewish groups have not avoided this type of influence either and provide a fascinating ethnographic example to illustrate the role that Christian missionaries have played in the development of the Lost Tribes discourse both in "theory" and in "practice" for over a century. During our fieldwork outside Kothareddypalem, Shahid met and interviewed Thomas Smith,[1] an evangelist with a strong interest in the Lost Tribes tradition. Thomas belongs to the Assemblies of Yahweh and leads

a local branch of this denomination in a village in West Godavari. Thomas told Shahid that he came to India from the United States in the late 1990s on an invitation of local churchmen in coastal Andhra, who had read his evangelical writings. Thomas first spent a few years with the millenarian Christian groups in the northeastern states of India and then settled in Andhra Pradesh, where besides representing the Assemblies of Yahweh he runs an English-medium school for the local children. Thomas explained that he was interested in the Hebrew roots of Christianity and believed in observing the practices described in the Old Testament, such as conducting circumcision on the eighth day after birth, keeping the Sabbath as a day of rest, and celebrating the festivals of Sukkot and Passover. In addition, he was interested in the Lost Tribes history and believed that some of the Lost Tribes had been living in India since antiquity. According to Thomas, the Bene Ephraim movement is just one instance of these "hidden" communities reclaiming their Judaic past, and more such groups are gradually returning to the Hebrew religion. In his estimate, at that moment Telugu Israelites accounted for about 5,000 people.

Thomas claims that more and more people in Andhra join the Assemblies of Yahweh in search of the true God and the true religion. Along with the help of local pastors he has constructed a prayer hall and a school and has organized the Assemblies of Yahweh activities in other parts of Andhra Pradesh. Thomas stressed that he belonged to a Christian denomination and would not identify himself as Jewish; however, because the building of his prayer hall was marked with Hebrew characters and the practices of his community were similar to the rites observed by the Jews, his congregation was sometimes mistaken for Judaic.

As the example of Prasad demonstrates, some people join the Assemblies of Yahweh (or its offshoot Indian Jerusalem) because they are attracted to their Christian message; however, due to the Old Testament nature of the ashram's practice, they then become interested in Judaism and leave the community for the Hebrew tradition of the Bene Ephraim. Others seem to have joined the Assemblies of Yahweh because they were interested in Judaism to begin with, but then left realizing that the Assemblies were Christian and were not teaching "real" Judaism. Some of the young men whom Shahid met during Sukkot told him that they had joined Indian Jerusalem after they discovered they were of Israelite descent. They turned to the leader of Indian Jerusalem in the hopes of learning Jewish laws and practices and to reconnect with their Jewish past; however, soon they realized that what they were taught was, in their

FIGURE 6 Bene Abraham Synagogue, Andhra Pradesh. Photograph by Yulia Egorova.

words, a mixture of Judaism and Christianity. This realization dawned upon them after they met Shmuel Yacobi, who had a good insight into the ashram's tradition because he was the one who had taught its guru about Judaic practices.

Shahid met a number of ex-members of the Assemblies of Yahweh who had joined either the Bene Ephraim or one of the two Jewish groups that we describe below. One such group centers around the Bene Abraham synagogue near Vijayawada, which is looked after by a young Mala man who resides on the synagogue premises together with his wife and child (see fig. 6).

He told us that he had learned Judaic teachings and practices under the guidance of Shmuel Yacobi and in the company of the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem. When we first met the Bene Abraham group, its leadership was represented by a Mala man popularly known by his Hebrew name, Aaron. Aaron told Shahid that he was born into a Hindu family, which later took to millenarian Christian theology and became associated with a Christian church that used to receive funding from US missionaries. As we will discuss in the following section, Aaron's claims to an Israelite past are based on his dreams about belonging to the people of Israel and a reinterpretation of a biblical prophecy; however, his search for his Jewish roots appears to have been encouraged by Thomas Smith.

Aaron first met Thomas and shared his dreams about Israel with him in a live "chat" over the Internet. The very next day Thomas paid him a visit at his house in Vijayawada, which resulted not only in the mustering of a close bond between the two, but also exposed Aaron to the Assemblies of Yahweh. Aaron told us that it is under Thomas's guidance and companionship that he first learned about Judaic practices, though later he also established a connection with Shmuel and occasionally attended synagogue in Kothareddypalem. Aaron, in turn, spread the knowledge about Judaism and Shmuel's community further. During our fieldwork we met one of his close aides, Shlomo. Shlomo was born to a Hindu Telaga[2] family, but converted to Christianity in 2001 after joining Indian Jerusalem. He soon became disappointed with the ashram and came to live in Vijayawada, where he met and befriended Aaron. The latter introduced him to Shmuel Yacobi, whose teachings influenced Shlomo to such an extent that he took no time in undergoing circumcision and adopting Jewish practices.

Thomas Smith's and Shmuel Yacobi's activities thus appear to have been instrumental in developing our respondents' commitment to the Jewish tradition, though in the case of Thomas it was hardly his objective. Despite his own interest in the Lost Tribes, and his conviction that some local populations are Israelite, Thomas is firm in his Christian belief, which he tried to instill in the "lost Jews" of Andhra. The latter, however, appear to have perceived his teachings as both Jewish and Christian—an understanding which further extends the boundaries of Judaism and meanings of Jewishness.

Shmuel and Thomas are keen to polarize the two traditions. Indeed, syncretic communities like that of Telugu Jews present a challenge for those who study Jewish-Christian relations outside of the Western context. Can such communities be both Jewish and Christian? Do they lean toward one tradition or another? In those cases where the community appears to combine key Christian beliefs with some forms of Jewish practice, is it the doctrinal or the ritual dimension that is more important? What happens when Christian belief intersects with an oral tradition about Jewish descent (as is the case with some Lemba groups and with our Christian Madiga informant Joseph whom we mentioned in chapter 3)? Like the tradition of the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem, the tradition of the wider Israelite Telugu congregations appears to be moving in the direction of adopting more mainstream Jewish rites. Our interviewees became dissatisfied with the Assemblies of Yahweh and Indian Jerusalem when they realized that their practices were not properly Jewish, and that these were

essentially Christian denominations. But in what sense did they become essentially Christian in the perception of our respondents, and how did the latter arrive at this conclusion?

Just as it is clear for Shmuel that the Bene Ephraim tradition is not Christian, it is clear for Thomas Smith that his religion is not Jewish. However, was it the opinion of the laypeople in their respective congregations? It appears that in many cases the Telugu Israelites' dissatisfaction with their Christian ashram was confirmed (or emerged) only after an encounter with Shmuel's teachings and the Bene Ephraim community. Whether they had an initial interest in tracing their Israelite connection and in adopting Jewish practices, or developed it as a result of their exposure to the Assemblies of Yahweh and Thomas Smith's activities, there is no doubt in Shmuel's mind that pursuing this interest through a Christian connection is not appropriate. He told us on a number of occasions that he disapproved of such groups, as they were Christian in essence, and their engagement with Judaism was superficial. He was open to those who were ready to come to the Kothareddypalem synagogue to study, but was doubtful of those who had established prayer houses of their own.

Though Shmuel's teachings dissociate the Bene Ephraim tradition from rabbinic Judaism, and the Judaism of the recognized Jewish communities, he constructs his own understanding of what true Judaism is. He wishes to demarcate his tradition from mainstream Judaism, but he also draws a clear boundary between his teachings and those of different denominations of Christianity in the state. He opposes his community celebrating Hanukkah, but also wants to ensure that the Bene Ephraim stop identifying as Christians. We were once looking through a family album of the Yacobis and saw a picture of the Kothareddypalem synagogue taken in the 1990s. The picture showed the synagogue plaque bearing its name and the date of its dedication. Unlike the plaque we saw on the synagogue during our fieldwork, the one in the picture noted that the synagogue was dedicated by Rabbi X. [3] We had never heard about this man before and asked Shmuel who he was. Shmuel replied that this was a local Christian man who was originally interested in the Israelite tradition, but then preferred to return to Christianity. His name had to be removed from the synagogue wall, Shmuel explained, as he now had nothing to do either with Judaism or with the Bene Ephraim community. Just as years later it became imperative to put a sign confirming that the original synagogue was established in 1909, the name of a person who later returned

to Christianity had to be erased from the walls of the community's prime symbol of Jewishness.

Sadok and Miriam share Shmuel's concern about the alleged Christian loyalties of the "other Bene Ephraim." While Shmuel was keen to distinguish the Bene Ephraim from other Telugu Jews on account of their beliefs, Sadok appeared to be more concerned about their practice. He told us they were welcome to come to his synagogue to learn about proper Jewish practice, but he doubted they were able to replicate this practice on their own without prior study. Sadok thus re-inscribed onto "the other Jews of Andhra" the categories of difference that had been applied to his own group.

In matters of drawing a boundary between Judaism and Christianity, belief, practice, and descent all come into the equation. For most Orthodox rabbis a Jewish person who does not observe Jewish practice is still Jewish and is always welcome to come back. The Hasidic Chabad-Lubavitch group represents a particularly illustrative example of this approach. They actively "proselytize" among secular and non-Orthodox Jews trying to bring them back to the Orthodox tradition (Goldschmidt 2006b: 21). However, Judaizing movements present a new challenge to this position. The example of Telugu Jews provides an insight into wider issues at the interface between Judaism and Christianity, as well as between different dimensions of Jewishness. Does one strive to bring back to Judaism "lapsed" Israelites who not only practice Christianity, but have never even had halakhically Jewish ancestors? Is it possible to arrive at a definite answer about the "exact" religious affiliation of these syncretic groups? We saw in the previous chapter that concerns have been raised in the Israeli media in respect of the Bene Menashe, many of whom back in India continue to practice Christianity or a syncretic form of Judaism and Christianity. As the Israeli author Hillel Halkin shows in his engaging book describing his and Rabbi Avichail's visit to the northeastern states of India, many Bene Menashe combined beliefs and practices from both religions (Halkin 2002). Weil observed that "[s]ome Shinlung have chosen the path of conversion to Orthodox Judaism and emigration to the Land of Israel; others have selected the same path of conversion without emigration. Some Shinlung define themselves as Christian, but believe in the imminent return to Zion in conjunction with the Jews; others define themselves as Israelites, but believe they can build Zion in Mizoram" (Weil 2003: 53). Samra thus notes the example of Lalchhanhima Sailo, a local politician who campaigned for the creation of an independent nation for

those people in the northeast of India who claim Israelite descent while retaining Christian faith (2012: 49).

Some commentators in Israel, including Halkin himself, find these diverse types of engagement with Judaism perfectly acceptable, while others, most notably Rabbi Avichail, are adamant that the boundary between the two religions should be maintained in the communities much more firmly (Halkin 2002). As we saw in the previous chapter, one of our Bene Menashe respondents and Yehoshua Yacobi were not prepared to accommodate Jewish-Christian syncretism in their communities either. Back in the village, the Yacobi brothers strive to divorce their congregation from their Christian past, though, as discussed in chapter 3, even some core Bene Ephraim still demonstrate a great deal of syncretism in their understanding of what it means to be Jewish. Moreover, we saw that some local Madigas embrace the narrative about their Israelite descent without even contemplating the adoption of Jewish belief and practice. Local Israelite groups thus continue to challenge conventional Jewish/Christian dichotomies. As we will see in the next section, "the other Bene Ephraim" not only adhere to syncretic practices, but also develop new pathways to claiming Jewish descent.

The Dream of Israel

Aaron, the leader of the Bene Abraham synagogue, whom we mentioned above, refrains from definitively identifying himself as a Jewish person. He argues that one should not claim Jewish origin on the basis of oral traditions alone, as these traditions could not possibly be verified. This is not to suggest that he does not believe in the Israelite origin of the Telugu people. Instead of making a scientific conjecture, Aaron argues that his community may belong to the Ten Tribes of Israel on the basis of the biblical prophecy of the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37.

In this prophecy God takes Ezekiel to a valley full of dry bones and asks him to tell them to rise and come to life by the command of God. When the bones come to life, God tells Ezekiel that these are the people of Israel and orders him to prophesy to them that they were going to return to the land of Israel. God then commands Ezekiel to take two sticks and write the names Judah and Ephraim on them:

> Son of man, take a stick of wood and write on it, "Belonging to Judah and the Israelites associated with him." Then take another stick of

> wood, and write on it, "Belonging to Joseph (that is, to Ephraim) and all the Israelites associated with him." Join them together into one stick so that they will become one in your hand. When your people ask you, "Won't you tell us what you mean by this?" say to them, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I am going to take the stick of Joseph—which is in Ephraim's hand—and of the Israelite tribes associated with him, and join it to Judah's stick. I will make them into a single stick of wood, and they will become one in my hand." Hold before their eyes the sticks you have written on and say to them, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land" (Ezekiel 37:16–22).

The prophecy of Ezekiel has played an important role in the development of the Lost Tribes discourse. Ben-Dor Benite observes that in 1750 the dry bones vision was mentioned in an encyclopedia entry on Sambatyon by Isaac Lamponti, an Italian rabbi and physician. At the end of his treatise Lamponti tries to affirm the Jewish belief that the Lost Tribes of Israel will remain hidden until the end of days. As Ben-Dor Benite notes, this was probably a response to the emergence of the Ten Tribes as a secular and geographic entity in the writings of contemporary gentile commentators (2009: 208). Lamponti reminds his readers that the Jews should stick to the prophecy promising the return of the Lost Tribes and asserts that this return will happen according to Ezekiel 37. Ben-Dor Benite argues that Lamponti prefers to use the prophecy of Ezekiel and not that of Isaiah (discussed in chapter 5), because the latter points to specific locations where the Lost Tribes were to be found, an approach which Lamponti finds problematic, while the former speaks about the tribes in much more abstract terms (2009: 209). We suggest that this fact also allows Aaron and other Telugu-speaking Israelite communities to use Ezekiel 37 as a rhetorical tool to affirm their Jewishness.

Aaron is convinced that only God knows which people are Israelites, and God will call on them in due time to get united and to go to Jerusalem. Aaron told us that his own Jewish connection was revealed to him through multiple dreams in which he either had a premonition of events that later took place in Israel or a reminder that his family descended from the tribes of Gad and Asher. Aaron says that he had never heard these names before. Curiosity drove him to search the Internet and it was then that he

realized that the term referred to two Lost Tribes of Israel and that he was their descendant. He took this as a beckoning from God for him to join the people of Israel and underwent circumcision as the first step.

Aaron's assistant Shlomo told Shahid that he had had two separate sets of dreams that he took as a guiding route for returning to the true religion, Judaism. One set of dreams, which he had had before becoming a Christian, directed him to Palakol where he joined a Protestant group. He then had another series of dreams in which his deceased father appeared to him saying, "we belong to the land of Israel." Shlomo did not understand the meaning of these dreams then, but when Aaron later told him of a Jewish group living in Kothareddypalem, he began to make sense of it. After meeting Shmuel Yacobi, Shlomo had another dream, which convinced him that he belonged to the Lost Tribes. He therefore underwent circumcision, started attending the synagogue in Kothareddypalem, and later became an active member of another local Judaizing group, the Bene Israel of Guntur.

The community of the Bene Israel[4] was originally headed by its spiritual leader David, who was introduced to us by Aaron and Shlomo. David was born into a Christian Mala family and was once an active missionary associated with a local church in Guntur. David told Shahid that his father and grandfathers had intimated to him about a possible Judaic past of their family but he could never understand their hints until he began having dreams about Israel. In his first vision the God of Israel appeared to him as a white-clothed man with dots of color on his clothes. He lamented that there was hardly any believer left on earth and urged him to restore his people to the Promised Land. These dreams kept recurring to David until he responded to them by immersing himself in an in-depth study of the Old Testament, and particularly of the Pentateuch. Like Aaron, David linked his dreams to the biblical passage about the Valley of Dry Bones, which David took as a call to mobilize his people in order to move to the State of Israel. In his words, God gradually filled him with confidence to start talking to the followers from his Christian sect about his Israelite connection. Soon members of his congregation started having similar visions and dreams.

By the end of our fieldwork, Shahid observed that the number of (former) Christians who discovered their Jewish descent and started identifying as Bene Israel on the basis of dreams continued to rise. A lot of their accounts had one common theme—their dissatisfaction with Christianity led them to self-speculation and a critical reading of the scripture, followed

by a series of dreams or miraculous events pointing to their Israelite connection. For example, one of our respondents, Eliezer, an auto-rickshaw driver in his early forties, converted to Christianity at a young age. He told Shahid that when he was in his thirties he started having doubts about the true nature of God. He went to many Christian pastors and fellow churchmen seeking clarifications, but nobody could give him a satisfactory explanation until one day he met David, who told him about his possible Jewish connection. Eliezer then started having dreams—in the first of which it occurred to him that his association with a Christian church was a mistake, that Christian doctrine was wrong, and that Jesus was not the son of God. Eliezer then turned to reading the Old Testament and soon had a series of dreams directing him to embrace Jewish practice. The dreams were followed by a number of miraculous events, which happened when he was going through a difficult time in his life. He told Shahid that in the first instance God blessed him by dropping bags full of food in his courtyard at a time when he was starving to death. In the second event, he found a golden coin hidden in a fireplace. On selling the coin he earned the exact amount he needed to repay the loan he had taken from the local moneylender who was threatening him with violence should he fail to return the money the following day. Thirdly, Eliezer challenged God by asking him to bring rain only on his auto-rickshaw. God did this three times during the day, Eliezer told us. As a result, he underwent circumcision, and started donning *peyot*[5] and observing the Sabbath.

Both the Bene Abraham and the Bene Israel eventually came to define themselves in opposition to the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem, though some of their members opine that they themselves belong to the tribe of Ephraim, and most of them used to call their groups Bene Ephraim in the beginning. As discussed in the previous section, the Yacobis themselves strive to dissociate their group from these wider communities on account of the syncretic beliefs and practices of the latter. Modes of claiming Jewish descent appear to be another nodal point at which the two groups differ. Satlow observes that "[t]o assert a Jewish identity is to locate oneself within the sacred history of the people Israel." "To be a Jew is to make, primarily, a historical claim," he argues (2006: 10). Both the Kothareddypalem community and the congregations of the other synagogues of Andhra Pradesh make such a claim. However, the former do so through recourse to more conventional means of validating Jewish ancestry—they reference family tradition and do research into the Jewish origin of the Madiga. To use Kunin's observation discussed in chapter 3, their tradition formed

the basis for further genealogical and historical research, which was then used to validate their oral histories using a form of evidence provision that is recognized in the West.

The "other" Jews of Andhra Pradesh invoke a different type of evidence. Their Jewish ancestry hypothesis is based on dreams, visions, and miraculous events. Anthropologists who work with their informants' dreams have argued for an approach which considers dreams to be embedded in the worldviews and shared cultural and social knowledge of their respective communities (Heijnen and Edgar 2010: 220) and that dream-experiences and dream-narratives are shaped by and shape the dreamer's social experiences, and emerge as spaces where persons construct the self and explain their life choices (Kirtsoglou 2010). As Elisabeth Kirtsoglou observed, "dreams can be seen as instances of radical imagination, sites of human agency and creativity, and self-making contexts imbued with culture, historicity and sociality" (2010: 332).

The dreams which our respondents recounted to us appear to be one such site, where new meanings of Jewishness are construed, informed by the dreamers' prior experiences of seeking the knowledge of the true God, personal encounters with other community members, the study of the Bible, and their awareness of wider discourses about Judaism and the State of Israel. For instance, Eliezer started having dreams about his Jewish ancestry after a period of grappling with doubts about Christianity and a subsequent encounter with David, who told him about the Lost Tribes tradition. Another community member shared with us a series of dreams in which he saw the Israeli State being attacked. This dream confirmed to him his Lost Tribes connection and inspired him to adopt Jewish practices. An item of world politics and an assumption that Jewishness is inextricably connected to contemporary Israel are thus used in his dream-narrative as a departure point for making a claim of Lost Tribes descent.

At the same time, it is worth noting that though Israelite groups outside Kothareddypalem invoke dreams as a source of evidence of their Jewish descent and not an oral tradition passed down to them from their ancestors, their dream-narratives nevertheless contain a message about their genealogical connection to the Jewish people. Sometimes this message is intimated by the dreamer's father, sometimes it is implied in the dream that God himself wished for the dreamer to know about his Israelite origin. The dreamers' accounts are hardly different from those of the Bene Ephraim in Kothareddypalem in the sense that they rely on a "message" about Jewish descent, which is perceived and described as

external to the person's will. Just as the Yacobis claim that they were once told by their parents and grandparents about their Jewish descent, the "other" Bene Ephraim describe how they received an indication of their Jewishness in a dream. In both cases the message is presented as something that "just happened" to them, a revelation which was communicated by an outside force and which they could not help but accept and act upon.

And yet, while the Yacobis' claim is framed in terms which are recognized in Western discourses of Jewishness (see, for instance, our discussion of the Ukranian episode in the *Zoek de Verschillen* program in chapter 5), the Bene Ephraim outside Kothareddypalem demonstrate a way of asserting Jewish descent which is much more removed from mainstream tropes of Jewish self-identification. Indeed, claiming Jewish descent (or any genealogical connection for that matter) on the basis of family tradition and historical research fits "Western" epistemologies of relatedness better than "acting upon a dream."[6]

Nevertheless, Telugu Jews are not by any means the only group who have embraced the Israelite tradition on the basis of narratives about dreams or visions. Samra discusses how in the case of one of his Bene Menashe informants, the link between her nationalist sentiments and Judaism was mediated by a dream (2008). In fact, as we discussed in the previous chapter, according to the Bene Menashe, their Israelite connection was revealed to Mela Chala, a local Christian preacher, in a dream. The movement, which thus emerged as a result of one person's dream-narrative, resulted in the Bene Menashe receiving official recognition by one of the Chief Rabbis of Israel half a century later. The socio-religious context of this dream was not accidental. Prior to their Judaization, the Bene Menashe practiced forms of Protestant Christianity that contained a strong revivalist message with its emphasis on personal experiences and the idea that any believer can be a prophet. Weil has suggested that the indigenous beliefs of the local populations may also have been imbued with millenarian notions, which explains why revivalist Christianity spread in the northeast of India with such ease (2003: 47). It is not at all surprising that in this context one mystic's vision led to the emergence of a religious movement, and there are examples of similar phenomena in the region (Weil 2003: 47–48).

Dreams or visions also formed the basis for the Israelite claims of the first African American Jewish group led by Crowdy (Bruder 2008: 82) and for the Judaizing movement of San Nicandro (Trevisan Semi 2002a).

However, the example of the Bene Menashe appears to be particularly spectacular in terms of the scale of its engagement with the Zionist idea and its success in gaining recognition within the framework of rabbinic Judaism. Within a few decades, Mela Chala's dream led to his community adopting Jewish practices, attracting the attention of Israeli authorities, and succeeding in initiating *aliyah*, which was an important part of his vision to begin with.

As with the accounts of Mela Chala, Crowdy, and Donato Manduzio, claims of Jewishness of the Telugu-speaking Israelite groups, expressed through narratives about dreams, visions, and miracles, are framed in terms of religious belief. For some of them the ultimate proof of their Israelite origin can come only from God, who will unite them with the People of Israel in the Land of Israel, if their claims are just. For instance, Aaron believes that his ancestors had come from Israel, but chooses not to call himself Jewish, since he has not been able to leave for the Promised Land yet. It is only if God brings him to Israel that he will have the confirmation of his Jewish descent, he told Shahid. As God has not done it yet, he feels he does not have the right to call himself Jewish. In his view, it is only successful *aliyah* that will provide the ultimate proof of his descent, not an oral tradition or research into his origins.

In Aaron's story claims of authenticity thus intersect with discourses of uncertainty. He frames his assertion of Israelite heritage in terms of belief rather than historical conjecture. Other Telugu Israelites we interviewed outside Kothareddypalem also told us they believed it was up to Adonai[7] whether they would be able to make *aliyah* to Israel or not. If God summons them to Israel, they told Shahid, they will leave India then; otherwise, they were content to live as Diaspora Jews.

We will continue our discussion of the differing ways in which claims of Jewish descent are narrated in Andhra Pradesh at the end of this chapter. In the meantime we would like to focus on another dimension of the relationship between the Kothareddypalem community and the "other" Telugu Jews—the dimension of caste conflict.

Judaism, the Mala, and the Madiga

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, the new Israelite groups of Andhra Pradesh differ from the Kothareddypalem community in one important respect—a significant number of them belong to the Mala caste, another major Dalit group of the state. The Mala are the main

rivals of the Madiga in terms of their place in the caste hierarchy. The two groups do not intermarry, live in different parts of Andhra villages, and have a limited scope for social interactions (Srinivasalu 2002). In coastal Andhra most Malas and Madigas are Christian. Their ancestors converted to Christianity *en masse* early in the nineteenth century, but continued to observe caste practices. Moreover, due to caste differences the two groups adhere to different churches. Kumar and Robinson observe that there is a clear Mala majority in the Lutheran church in the coastal region, while the Madiga prefer the Baptists. The reason for this is that the Malas were introduced into the Lutheran Church before other missionaries established their influence on the coastal region. Once the Baptists came to Andhra, their activities involved mainly the Madigas, because the Lutherans had already become associated with the Malas and therefore were not an attractive mission for the Madiga (Kumar and Robinson 2010: 154–55). In coastal Andhra the Mala outnumber the Madiga (even though the Madiga outnumber the Mala in Andhra Pradesh as a whole) and have arguably been ahead of the Madiga in many aspects of Dalit social and economic life.

The synagogues of coastal Andhra also appear to be divided along the lines of caste difference. Though a number of Mala Israelites have been visiting the synagogue in Kothareddypalem intermittently, there is only one Mala person, Jacob, who attends this synagogue regularly and maintains close relations with the Yacobis. Jacob introduced himself to us as an old friend of Shmuel's and a devotee of his teachings, which he had been following for many years. Interestingly, Jacob's brother is the leader of one of the other Telugu-speaking Israelite communities. His brother is very critical of Jacob's Kothareddypalem connection and has been encouraging him to return to his own synagogue.

Most of the time, none of the leaders openly frames their criticism of the "other side" in terms of caste conflict. Instead, as we showed above, they critique the practice of their interlocutors, or raise doubts about their descent. However, whether the leaders of the synagogues talk about caste differences among the Judaizing groups of Andhra Pradesh or not, their congregations do appear to be caste aware. For instance, the Bene Israel community, which claims to include over forty families with about one hundred individual members across Guntur district, "in theory" is open to anyone who can in one way or another substantiate their claim of Israelite past, irrespective of their caste affiliation. In practice, almost all of its members belong to the Mala caste.

When Shahid first met this group he was invited to a Scheduled Caste colony of Mala households in a village close to Kothareddypalem. During later parts of our fieldwork, Shahid was taken to another Mala colony that was described to him as the "Land of Israelites." The colony included about twenty thatched-rooftop huts inhabited by young Mala families, one of which served as their synagogue for Sabbath prayers and other Jewish ceremonies. Community leaders shared with Shahid their plan to construct new buildings and to introduce various community services for the Bene Israel, once they receive official permission from the district administration. Eventually community leaders intend to settle all their members on this land irrespective of their caste affiliation, but at the moment the settlement includes only the Mala.

The Bene Abraham congregation includes both the Mala and the Madiga, though the Mala constitute the majority. Interestingly, though there are hardly any "official" contacts between the (Madiga-only) Bene Ephraim and the (mixed Mala/Madiga) Bene Abraham communities, some Madiga members of the Bene Abraham have maintained links with the Bene Ephraim and frequently participate in synagogue festivals and ceremonies in Kothareddypalem.

The Jewish Mala and Madiga do not seem to be keen on intermarriage, though both groups have shared with us their anxiety about finding Jewish partners. One of our Mala respondents belonging to a synagogue outside of Guntur district seemed to be particularly concerned about finding a Jewish bride. We pointed out to him that there was a potential bride among the Jewish Madiga in the village, a girl he knew. The young man politely replied that though the girl was indeed an excellent match, he doubted her parents would ever agree on her marrying him. Neither he, nor any other member of his community openly told us that they would not marry a person who practiced Judaism but was Madiga, but, to the best of our knowledge, no such marriages have occurred so far.

Shmuel and Sadok hesitate talking about caste in relation to their community. They explicitly told us that though the Bene Ephraim were subject to the same caste discrimination as other Dalits, their community should not be described as an untouchable group in search for social mobility. The brothers do not often mention caste when talking about the Telugu Jewish congregations outside Kothareddypalem; however, Shmuel once told us he was concerned that the Mala and other higher castes could high-jack his movement unless he entirely dissociated the Bene Ephraim from them. Sadok shared his anxiety. As he mentioned in a conversation with Shahid,

the Mala had suppressed the Madiga in the past and, if allowed to join the Bene Ephraim, were likely to take over the community.

Sadok was also skeptical about local Hindus belonging to higher castes trying to join the Bene Ephraim. He told us that one local man from the Kamma caste went to Israel pretending to be Jewish and was found out, which gave all the Jews of Andhra a bad name. As we mentioned in chapter 3, shortly after Sadok returned from his trip to Israel he closed the synagogue doors to the outsiders. One of his reasons was that more and more people were becoming interested in joining his community, though they were not of Jewish descent. He told Shahid he was not entirely against the idea of other groups adopting Judaism, as in any case anyone was allowed to convert. What he was opposed to was other groups claiming a genealogical connection to the Jewish people. As noted in chapters 2 and 3, back in 2001 the community's tradition upheld by both brothers was that all the Madiga and possibly even all the Mala belonged to the Lost Tribes. We saw that later this narrative was changed, and now both brothers argue that it is only a limited number of families who had become confused with the Madiga that are Israelite. Interestingly, Shmuel told Yulia in a more recent interview that Jewish families could possibly be found among other castes as well. They were related to the Jewish Madiga, he said, as the Lost Tribes may had been scattered among different castes of Andhra. Nevertheless, he was worried that if individuals from higher castes started joining the Bene Ephraim *en masse* this would lead to the discrimination of the Madiga within his own movement. "The story would repeat itself all over again!," he laughed.

Shmuel's concern does not appear to be unfounded. In chapter 2 we argued that one of the important factors that allowed the Yacobi family to declare openly their affiliation with the Lost Tribes tradition, to establish a synagogue and to help their community to embrace Jewish practice was their relative economic independence and the status that their parents enjoyed in the village. The Israelite groups we met outside Kothareddypalem were led by persons who were much more affluent than the Madiga in the village, and seemed to have more resources to observe Jewish practices and to make their claims known to the Jewish communities outside India. For instance, in stark contrast to our informants in the village, most of whom worked as unskilled agricultural laborers, most members of the Bene Abraham congregation we interviewed ran small family businesses or had middle-class jobs as salesmen and insurance agents. The relative affluence of their congregation was evident in the fact

that they managed to raise enough money to construct a large two-story building, which was used as a synagogue. The leader of the congregation had a modest printing business and produced a Jewish calendar to be used in the community and shown to foreign guests.

Another Israelite group we came across, the Bene Israel of Guntur, also appeared to have enough resources to produce multiple artifacts of their (Jewish) material culture. For instance, they gave Shahid a Pesach (Passover) ceremony invitation card from 2009. After the end of our fieldwork, they sent us a film showing their celebration of Passover, the production of which must have required an effort that the Bene Ephraim in the village would not have had the financial means to make. Similarly to the Bene Ephraim, most Bene Israel of Guntur have menial jobs. They are employed as auto-rickshaw drivers, agricultural and construction workers, carpenters, and automobile mechanics. However, recently there has been an increase in the number of persons employed by the state health and administrative services joining their congregation. Unlike most Bene Ephraim, these people can speak fluent English and are in a better position to communicate with foreign visitors should such an opportunity arise.

Shmuel's concerns appear even more pertinent when considered against the backdrop of the history of caste discrimination in non-Hindu Indian communities. Anthropological and socio-historical studies of Dalit Christians have vividly documented the way caste hierarchies found their way into Indian Christianity, though this religion is supposed to build on a strong egalitarian message. As Robinson and Kujur put it, "Dalits encounter caste even after they become Christian"—they continue to be discriminated against by caste Hindus, they face discrimination from those considered upper-caste Christians, and the Indian state itself discriminates against Christian Dalits by denying them the benefits reserved for the Scheduled Castes (Robinson and Kujur 2010: 3).

As we discussed in chapter 2, Robinson and Kujur's observations made in respect of the state and Hindu discrimination resonate with the experiences of the Jewish Madiga in Kothareddypalem. They are still looked down upon by the caste Hindus, and though they identify themselves as Jewish, on paper they have to declare themselves as Hindu Madiga or risk losing the limited privileges granted to former untouchable groups and the protection that the Dalits are entitled to under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. It appears that when it comes to caste discrimination within their own religious group, the Bene Ephraim may not be an exception either,

which is hardly surprising given the history of caste perpetuation in the non-Hindu communities.

The Christian promise of social liberation was probably one of the factors that led to the mass conversions of Dalits in the nineteenth century. According to the 2001 census, 98% of Christians in Andhra Pradesh belong to Dalit communities (Rajpramukh 2008). Writing about the neighboring Tamil Nadu, where the majority of Christians are also Dalits, Mosse suggested that this must be indicative of at least some liberatory opportunities that Christian affiliation was supposed to offer low caste groups. The specifics of low castes' mass conversions to Christianity remain the subject of academic debate; however, there is some consensus that for the Dalits themselves embracing Christianity meant a step in the direction of rejecting their inferior social status and affirming a more positive religious identity. One possible indicator of such liberatory potential of conversions to Christianity was upper-caste attacks against Christian converts, which signaled that conversions were seen as a bid for social advancement. At the same time, most missionaries did not have a radical agenda for the social liberation of low-caste groups. The eventual consolidation of church structures and the reassertion of rural dominance patterns meant that Christianity failed to provide Dalits with a sustainable route for upward social mobility (Mosse 2010: 236). In his ethnography Mosse demonstrates how caste hierarchies reproduced themselves in Christian village communities of Tamil Nadu in ritual and public space. Writing about local Catholics, he noted that their Dalit members were excluded from "upper-caste" churches, and had to accept separate arrangements for seating in churches, receiving communion, and burials. Moreover, they were denied offices in the churches and were excluded from church leadership (Mosse 2010: 238). Protestant missions historically were less tolerant of caste discrimination, but this resulted in different caste communities tending to join different churches to ensure that caste separation was maintained even after they became Christian.

Does the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim exhibit a potential for liberation from caste inequality? On the one hand, as shown above, the Judaism of Telugu Jews already appears to be divided along caste lines. Moreover, declaring their Israelite connection has hardly helped any of these communities to move up in the caste hierarchy, as they are still perceived as Dalit groups and are treated accordingly by the upper castes.

On the other hand, the Bene Ephraim movement is outwardly oriented enough to overly depend on the local caste relations. We argued in chapter

2 that the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim could be seen as a way of celebrating Madiga heritage, which resembles the attempts of other Madiga and wider Dalit groups to provide a positive context for their tradition, which caste Hindus hold in disdain. In this endeavor, the Bene Ephraim share the successes and failures of other Dalit movements, which may have achieved the recognition of their immediate members, but still have a long way to go before they have new meanings of Dalit identities accepted by those outside their communities. As Mosse puts it, "Establishing Dalit cultural festivals, the formation of professional troupes, associations for the promotion of Dalit art and the like, all open up new possibilities of meaning; but such redefinition of identity is unlikely to be meaningful to all Dalits, and more particularly is dependent upon the unlikely recognition of dominant castes" (Mosse 2010: 255). As we saw in the case of the Bene Ephraim, the recognition of dominant castes does not appear to be forthcoming. They do not consider the Bene Ephraim to be Jewish, and are not prepared to grant them higher status in the local power structures. The only state official who came close to accepting the Kothareddypalem community as Jewish by drawing a parallel between them and the Bene Menashe was a minister of Madiga origin. In this sense, the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim was hardly more successful than their Christianization. Neither led the community on a path toward social mobility on the subcontinent. However, what makes the Bene Ephraim "Judaization project" different from conversions to Christianity performed by their ancestors is that it generated a movement the success of which depends not so much on the unlikely recognition of their neighbors from the higher castes, but on the recognition of overseas Jewish communities and Israeli authorities. The ultimate goal of the Bene Ephraim—making *aliyah* to the Jewish State—depends upon decision-makers outside their village, state, and even country.

At the same time, ironically, local caste hierarchies still have the capacity to play a negative role even in the relations between the Bene Ephraim and foreign Jewish communities. The higher caste Malas from the "other" Telugu Israelite movements already challenge the authority of the Yacobis, call their claims into question, and seem to have more resources to advertise their own course. Local social context thus throws new light on the attempts of the community's leaders to tighten the boundaries of their group (discussed in chapter 3). It appears that to have the Kothareddypalem community recognized by foreign Jewish organizations, the Yacobi brothers need to ensure that its numbers are limited and that it stays free of

caste divisions. A larger movement involving other castes would not only be less likely to satisfy the Israeli "acceptance criteria" in matters of immigration, but would also threaten to relegate its Madiga members to an inferior position, if not to undermine entirely their narrative of Jewish origin.

On Dreams, Beliefs, and Uncertainty

We demonstrated in this chapter that the wider Judaizing movements of Andhra Pradesh exhibit different types of engagement with the Jewish tradition, create new meanings of Jewishness, and are colored by the realities of the local social structures. It appears that the development of the Lost Tribes tradition in Andhra harks back to two main sources—the research and educational initiatives of Shmuel Yacobi and the evangelical activities of local Christian missionaries who propagate Old Testament practices and promote the hypothesis about the Lost Tribes being scattered among Indian populations.

While in the previous chapters we focused on the accounts of the Yacobis, which were expressed mainly in terms of their oral tradition and results of academic research, in this chapter we have discussed those Bene Ephraim who frame their claims more in terms of belief generated as a result of dreams and spiritual experiences. We noted that the two pathways to establishing a connection with universal Jewish community appear to be radically different in terms of their presentation; however, what appears to play a key role in both communities' self-representation as Jewish or Israelite is the rhetoric of performance and narrative. They attend their respective synagogues and perform Jewish rites, but they also believe that they have a genealogical connection to the Jewish people, and in the absence of material artifacts or written sources from their earlier history this connection manifests itself through their origin story. Some accounts of origin take the form of family traditions; others are recounted as dreams. The type of narrative that the communities adopt appears to have become an explicit boundary marker between the two groups. Following the lead of the Yacobis, the Bene Ephraim of Kothareddypalem cite family tradition as proof of their Jewishness. At the same time, members of other Telugu Jewish communities rely on dream narratives as a means of communicating their Israelite claims more than on oral histories. Some even explicitly reject the very possibility of establishing a genealogical connection between the Lost Tribes of Andhra and other Jews through

family tradition or historical research. In any event, as the history of other Judaizing movements demonstrates, the Jewish tradition provides enough conceptual space to accommodate different avenues for asserting Jewish descent, and dreams and visions are hardly an exception.[8]

Debates between the two groups revolve mainly around issues of belief and practice, as well as ways of proving one's Jewish connection. The Yacobis point to their interlocutors' syncretic Jewish-Christian beliefs and practices and possible lack of genealogical Jewishness. The latter in their turn critique the genealogical aspirations of the Kothareddypalem community, arguing that their family accounts are not verifiable. Both groups deny each other "real" Jewishness and portray themselves as the only true bearers of the local Lost Tribes tradition. On the face of it, their disagreements focus on matters of belief, practice, and modes of proving one's Jewish descent. However, this chapter also showed that such disagreements appear to hark back to age-old rivalry between the Mala and the Madiga Dalits of Andhra Pradesh. The way Judaizing movements of Andhra seem to be divided along caste lines appears to be predictable when considered in the context of similar hierarchies among Indian non-Hindus. Just as the caste divide found its way into local Christian churches, it is now affecting Judaizing movements.

While this case elucidates the pervasiveness of the caste system on the subcontinent, it also reminds us how adaptable Judaism can be to the demands of local social contexts. Indeed, examples of this phenomenon are hardly limited to South Asia. Satlow discusses how in the United States Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform synagogues have turned issues of gender and sexuality into boundary markers (Satlow 2006: 48–53). Indeed, the Conservative movement ordains female rabbis, while the Orthodox does not; Reform synagogues have accepted openly gay rabbis since the late 1980s, while the Conservative movement did not until 2006. These divisions did not appear out of a vacuum but build on the debates surrounding issues of sex and gender in American identity politics. As Satlow puts it, "American movements create distinctly American-style borders" (2006: 53). Positioned within this wider perspective, caste divisions of Telugu Jews should hardly be surprising.

Finally, this chapter demonstrated that as much as different Telugu-speaking Israelite groups engage in boundary-making work, constructing descent, practice, belief, and now even caste affiliation as markers of Jewishness, their case further challenges conventional understandings of "who is a Jew" and what constitutes the Jewish religion. We showed

that on the tapestry of local Judaisms and Christianities the boundaries between the two religions are evasive and that when it comes to choosing between them personal loyalties can change from one day to another. As much as the Bene Ephraim leaders try to make the boundaries of their respective groups firmer, the "outsiders within" make such efforts almost meaningless—some Bene Ephraim in Kothareddypalem still identify as Christian (while some of their "formally" Christian neighbors consider themselves to be Jewish), the Madiga of Vijayawada formally belong to the Bene Abraham synagogue, but also attend the synagogue in the village. Even though the Yacobis try to dissociate themselves from the "outsiders" and particularly from the Mala, some of them still every now and then come to the Kothareddypalem synagogue. Practically all Bene Ephraim had in the past been Christian, and many of those considered in this chapter, engaged with different denominations of Christianity before settling on the Israelite tradition.

Moreover, some Bene Ephraim have challenged conventional understandings of what it means to be Jewish by invoking beliefs imbued with uncertainty. To return to the example of Aaron discussed above, he will only be certain that he is Jewish if God allows him to make *aliyah*. Interestingly, discourses of uncertainty—though in this case research-related rather than faith-based—appear to be espoused also by Shmuel Yacobi himself. As he told Yulia during their last interview, "Do let me know if you find evidence [going contrary to our claims]. I don't want to pretend that I am somebody I am not." Now that we have come full circle and returned to the origin of the Bene Ephraim story, let us reflect on its wider implications.

7

Conclusion

IN THIS BOOK we tried to tell the story of the Bene Ephraim, exploring the way it highlights, challenges, and extends contemporary understandings of Jewishness, shows how narratives of Jewish origin can be used as a form of social protest, and illuminates a radical new direction in Dalit Indian discourse.

We noted that at the heart of popular and academic debates about what it means to be Jewish is the issue of the relationship between the universalist and the particularist dimensions of the Jewish tradition, as well as discourses about the possibility of essentializing Jewish culture. Does one need to be born Jewish to be properly Jewish? Are some aspects of Jewish culture more Jewish than others? Can some strands of Judaism be considered mainstream and others marginal?

The story of the Bene Ephraim does not offer simple answers to any of these questions. Instead, it invites us to reflect on the minutiae of the processes through which diverse understandings of Jewishness are constructed (and broken down) in different social and political contexts and on different levels of interaction between multiple agents and audiences. One could argue that the case of the Bene Ephraim exemplifies and reinforces the idea of Jewish particularism. Community leaders are keen to construct a genealogical link to the Jewish people and to recreate the same boundaries demarcating Jews from non-Jews that they themselves had been subjected to, often tapping into time-old European stereotypes about "Jewish difference." As we showed above, Shmuel Yacobi now suggests that the "real" Bene Ephraim look different from the rest of the Madiga, just like, he argues, Russian Jews stand out among other Russians. Moreover, during one of Yulia's visits, Sadok inquired if she could invite geneticists to come to the village to perform DNA tests on community members to prove once and for all that the Bene Ephraim were indeed Jewish.

Community leaders engage with various discourses naturalizing Jewishness and Jewish culture—looking for Jewish genetic markers being one of the more recent incarnations of these discourses.[1] Nevertheless, the story of the Bene Ephraim, as well as the history of other Judaizing movements, suggests that the Jewish tradition offers enough conceptual space to reconfigure the genealogical aspect of Jewishness into a site of openness and thus to blur the division between the particularist and the universalist dimensions of Judaism. Indeed, as we discussed in chapter 5, the Bene Menashe would probably have struggled to be allowed to convert if they had not had a tradition of belonging to the Lost Tribes of Israel. However, once this tradition became discursively firm enough to be convincing for Rabbi Avichail, they embarked on a journey toward recognition, which resulted in the formal acceptance by the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel. The Bene Ephraim are still far from achieving similar recognition from Israeli authorities, but they have secured the support of Kulanu, Shavei Israel, and individual rabbis who are ready to accept them as Jewish. Even "DNA evidence," which the Yacobis theorize as the ultimate proof of one's Jewishness, offers a space for flexibility in the project of Jewish identity construction. When Yulia pointed out to Sadok that the DNA tests he was willing to conduct in the community might produce "negative" results, Sadok replied that it was not possible. "If the geneticists came back with a negative result, it would only mean that they had not tested the right people," he said.

What implications do these multiple facets of the Jewish tradition have for the Bene Ephraim and other communities who are willing to embrace Judaism (or were born into it for that matter)? Can one shed or take on markers of Jewish heritage as one pleases? To what extent do discourses naturalizing (if not, biologizing) Jewishness still control popular accounts of "Who is a Jew?" and does the suggested flexibility which we find in the Jewish tradition have enough potency to allow individuals and communities to choose whether or not to be Jewish? In the case of the Bene Menashe, this flexibility allowed them to be Jewish to the extent that they could become Israeli citizens, but not to the degree when they would be recognized as unquestionably Jewish by "a man in the street." They can set an example of Jewish observance for the secular in a religious community, but cannot avoid suspicious looks and accusations of being economic migrants once they leave the community of their immediate neighbors. Their recognition vis-à-vis other Jewish groups and communities is therefore context-dependent and filled with ambiguities to which we will

return in a moment. In the meantime, let us reflect on the possibilities and limitations that becoming Jewish may have locally, as well as on the meanings that Judaization acquires in the contexts from which the "new" Jewish groups emerge.

The Difference of Jewish India

We have suggested in the book that it is the perceived 'genealogical dimension' of Judaism that makes it an attractive tradition for Judaizing movements, particularly if they stem from socially disadvantaged groups, as it allows them to re-conceptualize their condition of discrimination within the context of Jewish history, and in some cases, to embrace origin narratives that are more positive than the ones imposed on them by their societies' dominant groups. The case of the Bene Ephraim illuminates the challenges and possibilities that embracing the Jewish tradition presents for communities in India.

When taken outside the European context, the trope of Jewish difference produces new imageries of alterity, but it also does important cultural work with a promise of spiritual liberation and self-empowerment. Zygmunt Bauman has argued that what lies at the core of European anti-Semitism is the idea that the Jews are perceived as a group of people fundamentally different from everybody else, a community that does not fit any of the existing structures and cannot be mapped onto any of the established categories. Drawing on the Polish-Jewish literary historian and critic Artur Sandauer, Bauman introduced into academic discourse the term "allosemitism" to refer "to the practice of setting the Jews apart as people radically different from all the others, needing separate concepts to describe and comprehend them and special treatment in all or most social intercourse—since the concepts and treatments usefully deployed when facing or dealing with other people or peoples, simply would not do" (Bauman 1998: 143).

In India, the Jews represent a very different type of "other." Local Jewish communities are miniscule, while the religious traditions of the subcontinent are much more diverse than those of modern Europe. And yet, allosemitism again finds its expression in the very inability of the "Jews" to fit pre-existing categories. Shmuel Yacobi told us in one of the interviews that several years ago he had tried to have his community officially registered as Jewish with the local authorities ("India is a land of categories," he laughed). The response that he received was that the Bene Ephraim

could be registered as Madiga Christians, but not as Jews, as there was no category for the latter.

The non-existence of the Jews as a category on the socio-political landscape of Andhra Pradesh makes the Judaization project of the Bene Ephraim challenging in terms of acquiring the recognition of the local authorities. At the same time, it infuses this process with a potential for cultural liberation. As the Jews of Andhra do not officially "exist," the Judaizing movement of the state does not need to fit any pre-set niche and is free to develop its own understandings of Jewishness. It also means that by choosing to be Jewish the Bene Ephraim can (at least discursively) opt out of the existing social order.

Writing about Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, Viswanathan conceptualizes it as a process through which social classes who were denied access to power sought "a course of action that *preserved* rather than eradicated difference" (emphasis original, Viswanathan 1998: 213). Viswanathan describes Ambedkar's conversion as "a form of political and cultural criticism" and as "a clear political statement of dissent against the identities constructed by the state" (Viswanathan 1998). At the same time, she contends that Ambedkar was not just reacting to the authorities, but "exploring the possibilities offered by conversion (especially to "minority" religions) in developing an alternative epistemological and ethical foundation for a national community" (Viswanathan 1998). Robinson and Clarke similarly posit that conversions in India are often associated with dissent and resistance (2003: 15). As we have pointed out in this book, the Yacobi brothers refuse to describe the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim as a conversion movement. Shmuel, in particular, prefers to call it *teshuvah*, or a process through which Jews who discontinued practicing Judaism in the past are rediscovering the tradition of their ancestors. The brothers, as well as other Bene Ephraim we talked to, are also adamant that their Judaization should not be viewed as a mere attempt at escaping the caste system. However, as we discussed in chapter 2, Shmuel's discourse about his community's *teshuvah* is permeated with anti-caste rhetoric and, by his own admission, he made a decision to initiate research into the Bene Ephraim history after a specific incident of caste discrimination. It was thus a protest against caste inequality that marked the beginning of his return to Judaism. His *teshuvah* became both a way of connecting to the wider Jewish community and a socio-cultural critique of the caste system, a critique that (to build on Viswanathan's terms) preserved and expanded the idea about the Madiga being different from the "pure" castes.

Moreover, as we discussed in the previous chapter, to succeed in the project of embracing "Jewish difference," the Bene Ephraim do not need to seek the endorsement of higher castes. We noted in chapter 6 that caste inequality does come into play in the way the Bene Ephraim perceive and enact their relationship with overseas Jewish communities. However, their movement is still outwardly oriented enough to be overly dependent on local caste relations. "Mahatmaji, I have no country," uttered Ambedkar as he left his first meeting with Gandhi in 1931, when the latter opposed the demands of the untouchables on sharing political power with the Indian National Congress (Viswanathan 1998: 219). The discourse of Shmuel Yacobi echoes Ambedkar's words of desperation. In the context of the Bene Ephraim movement these words acquire a literal meaning. If Ambedkar encouraged Indian Dalits to convert to a religion that was different from that of Indian society's dominant layers, but had still originated on the subcontinent, Shmuel Yacobi took a step further. Judaism is a religion that is not just "foreign" to India, but that can potentially set the community on a path toward leaving India and obtaining citizenship in a different country. Like Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders, Shmuel Yacobi feels that his community is politically disempowered in India. He is pessimistic about dominant groups responding to the demands of the untouchables and refuses to leave the project of Dalit liberation in the hands of the upper castes. However, unlike Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders, he is prepared to take a new and distinctly radical step to fight inequality. He does not just dissociate the Bene Ephraim rhetorically from the tradition of the higher castes, but prepares them to leave India for a different state, a place where, he argues, they won't feel they have no country.

And yet, though the community's Judaization can be read as a way of rejecting the tradition of the dominant groups (to the extent of possible emigration), it also provides the Bene Ephraim with a means to honor and celebrate those features of their cultural practices of which higher castes are contemptuous. In seeking ways to rediscover the lost tradition, the Bene Ephraim thus both deploy the tropes of Jewish difference borrowed from Western discourses (for instance, the idea about a distinct "Jewish look") and create new ones. In the Bene Ephraim discourse—which emerged in the writings of Shmuel Yacobi but rapidly spread in and outside the village—being Jewish, amongst other things, means being Madiga. It means to eat beef and to bury one's dead, to denounce inequality and to fight caste discrimination.

Throughout the book we have been comparing the narratives of the Bene Ephraim to those of African American Israelite groups, who have highlighted the parallels between their conditions of discrimination in America and the persecution of the Jewish people. It is worthwhile to note in this respect that Judaizing groups are not the only communities in recent history who have redefined their Jewishness as a protest against the ideology of the establishment. Lerner, Rapoport, and Lomsky-Feder demonstrated in their study of Russian Jewish immigrants in Israel that some of their research participants conceptualized their Jewishness as an intellectual opposition to the Soviet regime (Lerner et al. 2007: 173). Soviet policies of secularization meant that religious practice was almost out of reach for most Jewish communities. Under these circumstances, Soviet Jews developed new meanings of Jewishness, which included acquiring higher education and being part of the intelligentsia. As Lerner et al. observe, the Jewishness of Soviet Jews was expressed and recreated through education. For instance, the authors note how one of their informants chose not to reveal her origin on identity documents—a step understandable in light of the discriminatory practices that the Jewish communities were subjected to in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, the young woman strongly identified with the Jewish people and decided to express her pride in being Jewish and in having a connection to Judaism through pursuing a higher education degree (Lerner et al 2007: 178).

Discourses of Jewishness developed by the Bene Ephraim present a mirror image of the way Jewishness and Judaism are constructed by Lerner et al.'s respondents. The latter belong to a community which used to be conventionally Jewish—or, to refer to the imagery invoked by Yulia's Israeli landlady, some Russian Jews describe themselves not just as a conventionally Jewish, but as a quintessentially Jewish community. However, they had to reinvent Jewishness and Judaism by adding to them characteristics of Soviet socialities that were both associated with a protest against the regime and could serve as a means for social mobility or even survival. The Bene Ephraim, on the contrary, use traditional images of Jewish history, belief, and practice to protest against caste discrimination and to honor their Madiga heritage. The Jews of the Soviet Union re-inscribed education as a new "marker" of Jewish culture, while having to hide their Jewish origin by changing their names and registering as Russian on identity documents. The Yacobi brothers, on the contrary, have tried to have their community officially recognized as Jewish by the

local authorities. Both communities perceive themselves as Jewish but their political and socio-cultural contexts have produced differing ways of expressing this self-perception. Both cases, different as they are, introduce Jewishness as a form of social protest, as a mode of self-identification and self-realization for communities in search of social and cultural liberation. The trope of Jewish difference is reinterpreted here into a symbol of dissent. This also highlights how varied and diverse the notions of what constitutes Jewishness, Judaism, and Jewish culture can be—a question that has informed another major theme of this book.

On Status, Core, and Periphery

The case of the Bene Ephraim demonstrates that even such a small community can produce wide-ranging meanings of "Who is a Jew." For Shmuel Yacobi, a Jew is a person who feels an affiliation to the Israelite tradition understood widely, and not limited to the narrower definitions offered in rabbinic Judaism. For his son Yehoshua, it is anybody who is Jewish according to *halakhah*. For Sadok, it is a villager who attends his synagogue. For Joseph, it is any Madiga, no matter what his faith is. For Aaron from Vijayawada, the decision about "Who is a Jew" is left with God. Both Shmuel and his son describe the Jews as the "chosen people" (recall the story about the king each of them told us in response to our question about how they understand Jewishness). However, if for Yehoshua this chosenness is determined by *halakhah*, for Shmuel it is a matter of one's family tradition and spiritual commitment to the Jewish people.

Satlow has suggested that "communities become 'Jewish' first and foremost because they say they are; they buy in to some model or story that links them to past and present Jews. Jewish communities may or may not accept the claims of 'Jewishness' of other groups, but all draw ultimately on similar sources" (2006: 10). Shmuel's account of the Bene Ephraim history certainly draws on the same biblical stories that rabbinic Judaism is based on, but it tells a story of its own, creating yet another branch of the Jewish tradition. Shmuel does not necessarily object to his Judaism not being accepted by other Jews. He does not claim that his tradition is superior to the Judaism(s) of others, but he hardly sees the Judaism(s) of others to be more authentic in comparison to his own. In this sense, his position fits well into the time-old Jewish tradition noted by Jonathan Webber of distinguishing between different Jewish cultures while building one's own narrative of origin on the idea of Jewish historical continuity; believing in

the unity of Jews all over the world, and at the same time being aware of Jewish diversity.

The story of the Bene Ephraim challenges the approach that positions Jewishness and Judaism along a developmental trajectory—from the emerging to the mainstream, from the periphery to the core, helping the student of Jewish culture to move beyond debates about dividing it into "thick" and "thin" (discussed in chapter 4). Instead, it illuminates the elasticity of the Jewish tradition, suggesting that it can take on multiple features, which can switch from dominant to peripheral from one context to another. The Bene Israel may be seen as a peripheral community by some Orthodox rabbis in Israel, but they represent a dominant group in the context of ORT providing training to the Bene Menashe. The Bene Menashe may be peripheral to the Bene Israel in India, but they are central in respect of the secular Jews in Israel. Hypothetically, the same Orthodox rabbis who deny the Bene Israel their right to marry other Jewish Israelis might accept the Bene Menashe, a community whose members declared their affiliation to the Israelite tradition much later, but who have undergone an Orthodox conversion ceremony.

The case of the Bene Ephraim unsettles the received notions of the core and the periphery not only in the context of the Jewish tradition, but also within the Indian social order. Anthropologists of Indian Dalit and tribal communities have argued that though these groups occupy a marginal place in local social hierarchies (even in Christian congregations, as discussed in chapter 6), they constantly undermine the core (such as the state or the church), for it is at these margins that the authority of the dominant structures is constantly under threat (Froerer 2007, Froerer 2010, Robinson and Kujur 2010). As Robinson and Kujur put it, in this situation, "paradoxically, and from the anthropological perspective, certainly crucially, the margins must be perceived as a core—and the principal focus of consideration—for it is there that the dominant order has to shed its complacency and cannot take for granted its control and must continuously prove its command in battle with the forces of the other" (2010: 4).

As we discussed in chapter 2, the Bene Ephraim make a claim to the core of Indian religious cultures by re-inscribing the ideational foundation of the latter as Israelite. They put their own tradition at the core of Hinduism and contend that in its original form it was void of the notions of caste difference and discrimination. By openly declaring their Hebrew origin, the Bene Ephraim therefore made a bid not only to assert their place among other Jewish communities around the world, but also to offer

an alternative reading of the Hindu tradition, which would allow them to connect to and make their own the religious tradition of the dominant castes.

The Bene Ephraim's protest against the caste system should also remind the authorities about the dissatisfaction of the groups which are perceived as marginal within the existing social order. The desire that the community expressed in relation to making *aliyah* cannot be reduced to this dissatisfaction. As we argued in chapter 5, immigrating to Israel and even converting to Judaism is seen by some of its members as a path toward spiritual development, which would allow the Bene Ephraim to establish closer links with other Jewish people and to learn more about the rabbinic Jewish tradition. However, irrespective of their intention to acquire Israeli citizenship, it is clear that many Bene Ephraim do not see enough potential for their community's self-realization either as Jews or as Madiga in India. Shmuel Yacobi is pessimistic about Dalit movements succeeding in attracting adequate attention of the authorities to the plight of the untouchables and suggests they need to seek the support of foreign governments. Sadok's son Jacob, who strongly identifies himself both as Jewish and as Madiga, does not want to depend on benefits from Israel to maintain his family, but is still more hopeful about obtaining employment and financial security abroad than in India.

This brings us to another set of questions that we raised in respect to the public debates surrounding the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim. Has declaring their affiliation to the Israelite tradition allowed the community to achieve observable social liberation? Has it led to an improvement in their economic position? Potential socio-economic advancement has been quoted in the mass media as a motive for the Bene Ephraim embracing Jewish practice and establishing links with foreign Jewish organizations. Our ethnography questions these conceptualizations of the community's decision to announce their affiliation to Judaism, conceptualizations which rely on anti-Semitic stereotypes about perceived Jewish affluence. As we argued in chapter 2, such advancement has hardly occurred so far. The relative economic success that the Yacobi family managed to achieve in the village is a factor that allowed them to establish the Bene Ephraim as an openly Jewish community to begin with, and is not an outcome of their Judaization. The community did receive some support from foreign donors, but at the time of writing, their involvement has hardly produced any visible economic improvement in the village. Similarly, embracing the Lost Tribes narrative did not bestow upon the Bene Ephraim social

mobility. Their community is still perceived as untouchable, and the social status that the Yacobis have in the village is a result of their parents' and grandparents' educational success, not a product of their Jewish practice. We have therefore argued that the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim can be read as a pathway to social, spiritual, and intellectual liberation and self-empowerment, but not as a means for social mobility.

Rhetoric of Jewishness

Finally, let us return to the discussion started in the Introduction about the way different terminologies could be applied to the study of the Bene Ephraim and other "new" Jewish communities. Throughout the book we have been referring to the Judaization of the Bene Ephraim as a process through which this group has developed Jewish belief and practice, as well as the narrative about their Lost Tribes descent. As discussed in the Introduction we use this term in its broadest sense, which includes both being and becoming Jewish. When we say that the Bene Ephraim embraced Judaism or Jewish culture at a particular point in time, we do not imply that ontologically they had not been Jewish before. What we mean is that this is when they started talking about their Israelite origin and practicing Judaism openly.

In this respect we find it useful to turn to rhetoric theory, which was discussed in the Introduction. We mentioned Hammerback and Jensen's suggestion that conversions could be seen as "rhetorical transformations." As noted above, the leaders of the Bene Ephraim describe their community's Judaization not as a conversion movement but as *teshuvah*, or a return to the Jewish tradition understood as Israelite. We suggest that their *teshuvah* can be seen as one such "rhetorical transformation." This is not a process through which the Bene Ephraim have become Jewish in ontological terms. The year when they constructed their first synagogue was not a moment when they became "properly" Jewish. It is rather a point in time when their Jewishness became articulated, when the Bene Ephraim emerged as a rhetorical entity, or, to use Charland's expression, they became Jewish as "narratized" subjects-as-agents.

Following the theoretical insight of Brubaker and Cooper, we have aimed in the book to avoid using identity as a category of analysis. In fact, we suggest that the story of the Bene Ephraim illustrates this perspective on identity theory particularly well. It would be impossible to talk about the emergence of the community's "Jewish identity"—or about the

emergence of a separate "Bene Ephraim identity"—without specifying the exact context of these identification processes, without indicating who exactly is described as Jewish or as Bene Ephraim, by whom, when, and under what circumstances.

Instead of talking about the Bene Ephraim adopting Jewish identity, we suggest one can draw greater analytical mileage from referring to the Bene Ephraim engaging with or expanding and developing notions of Jewishness. Our usage of the term "Jewishness" is theoretically close to that offered by Lisa Silverman in her study on German Jewish cultural history. Silverman suggests using Jewishness instead of Jewish identity as an analytical category to refer "to the relationship between the constructed ideals of the 'Jewish' as opposed to the 'non-Jewish'—rather than any fixed notions of religion, ethnicity and culture" (Silverman 2009: 109). She proposes that the application of "Jewishness" as a category of analysis can help us theorize about what it means to be Jewish, since this concept stems from a premise that "what is 'Jewish' and what is 'not-Jewish' are constantly changing cultural ideals stemming from, but not equal or reducible to, individual Jews and non-Jews" (Silverman 2009: 110).

Silverman's definition of Jewishness as an analytical framework helps those who seek to explore the multiple and expanding understandings of "Who is a Jew" in different socio-cultural contexts, a task which has been at the heart of this book. As shown above, the history of the Bene Ephraim provides plentiful examples of new notions becoming associated with Jews and Judaism, as well as of the dissolution of "conventional" ideas about which cultural features count as Jewish (note, for instance, Shmuel Yacobi's suggestion about formal conversion being a non-Jewish practice). Having engaged with Silverman's proposition to use Jewishness as an analytical framework, we would also suggest that our ethnography illuminates the elusiveness of its boundaries. We saw that in our informants' narratives notions of being Jewish intertwine with ideas about what it means to be Madiga. Jewish self-identification is revealed in some contexts and is surrendered in others. New members join the community to declare their Jewishness, while others leave the group.

Let us conclude with an example demonstrating how boundaries of Jewishness are negotiated in one more encounter between the Bene Ephraim and Israeli Jewish groups. A few months after Shahid left the village, the Bene Ephraim were visited by representatives of the Israeli NGO Adam Le'Adam,[2] which organizes volunteer programs in India, aimed at introducing local communities to sustainable development. Yulia

later met in Tel Aviv a representative of Adam Le'Adam, Ram Efrat, who described to her the activities that his organization had been involved in in India in general and among the Bene Ephraim in particular. According to Ram, his NGO tries to harness the interest in going to India that a lot of young Israelis have demonstrated already[3] to give them an opportunity to engage with local communities more actively by both helping them in development projects and learning about their life. His co-workers found out about the Bene Ephraim from Sharon Galsulkar in Mumbai, and visited them in Kothareddypalem.

Ram stressed in our conversation that Adam Le'Adam was established to work with Indian communities in general and its members were not by any means interested in either converting these communities to Judaism or limiting the NGO's activities to groups who declared their affiliation to the Jewish people. During their visit to the village, the purpose of which was to gather information about the community's needs, Ram and other workers were asked by the Bene Ephraim to tell them more about the Jewish religion. Ram was taken by the community and was keen to continue working with the Bene Ephraim to address their economic and educational needs, but stressed that he also wanted to engage with other Dalit groups in the village in order both to learn from them and to help them establish community projects.

Adam Le'Adam thus appears to be mainly an outward-looking organization, which seeks to establish contacts with communities in South Asia irrespective of their origin. At the same time, according to its leader, the organization's vision and activities are informed by the values of *tikkun olam* (Hebrew for "repairing the world"), a concept which is explicitly associated with the Jewish tradition. The website of Adam Le'Adam also mentions that the NGO's volunteers include not just Israelis, but "young Jewish people around the world," reinforcing the Jewish rather than the generally Israeli character of the organization.[4] Kothareddypalem may become a site of the organization's activities, which will involve different Dalit groups irrespective of their religious affiliation, and yet, the village has attracted the attention of Adam Le'Adam's volunteers because it is home to a Jewish community.

This example demonstrates that as the history of the Bene Ephraim unfolds and the publicity around them grows, the community is likely to continue attracting the attention of a wider range of groups and organizations in and outside India and Israel. It remains to be seen whether the community develops firmer externally imposed boundaries in the future,

if and when the Bene Ephraim acquire wider recognition in the state, the country, and the world. While at the moment, for most Bene Ephraim, declaring their affiliation to the Jewish people appears to be a matter of choice, for their children Jewishness may one day turn into an ascribed category, which they will honor and hide, celebrate and reject, accept as a given and inject with new meanings.

Notes

CHAPTER 1

1. This was a replica Torah scroll brought by Bonita and Gerald Sussman (to be discussed in chapter 4).
2. Hanukkah is a Jewish festival commemorating the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the Maccabean revolt against the Seleucid Empire in the second century BCE.
3. See Parfitt and Travisan Semi 2002.
4. The terms "isolated" and "emerging" Jewish groups were introduced by the Kulanu organization, and "lost" and "hidden" Jews are the terms used by Shavei Israel. Both organizations aim at providing support for such groups and will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5.
5. For more information on the Subbotniks see, for instance, Breyfogle 2011 and Chernin 2012.
6. Bnei Anousim is Hebrew for "the children of the forced ones."
7. For an excellent wider discussion of the history of the Lost Tribes discourse, see also Ben-Dor Benite 2009.
8. *Sefer Eldad* is Hebrew for the Book of Eldad.
9. For a recent collection of papers on the topic of Judaism in Africa and African American communities see Bruder and Parfitt 2012.
10. For research on the Bene Israel, Cochini, and Baghdadi Jews of India see Isenberg 1988, Katz 2000, Katz et al. 2007, Roland 1998, Weil 2002, 2005, 2009. For a discussion of Indian attitudes toward the Jews and Judaism see Egorova 2006.
11. Shalva Weil observes that the community has also been referred to as Shinlung (Weil 2003: 43). Myer Samra also uses the abbreviation Chikkim for Chins, Kukis, and Mizos (Samra 1991) and Zo (Samra 2012) to refer to these groups. The name "Bene Menashe" is explained as fitting with the community's pre-Christian association with the ancestor spirit of Mannasi (Weil 2003: 52).

12. There are two Chief Rabbis in Israel—one Ashkenazi and one Sephardi. They are the religious leaders of Israeli Jews. The role of the Chief Rabbinate in Israeli society will be discussed in chapter 5.
13. For a full discussion of this controversy see Samra 2012.
14. This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.
15. For more research on the Madiga of coastal Andhra see also Still 2009, 2010, 2011.
16. *Puranas* are religious stories narrating the history of the universe.
17. *Mizrahi* is a Hebrew word for Eastern. This term has been used to describe the Jewish communities of Asia.
18. In anthropology the terms "emic" and "etic" have been broadly used to describe approaches which seek to describe the cultural situation from the perspective of the "insider" and the "outsider" respectively (see, for instance, Pelto 1970: 67–89).
19. I am very grateful to Tudor Parfitt for encouraging me to do further research on the Bene Ephraim (YE).
20. ORT was created in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. The abbreviation stands for Obschestvo Remeslennogo Truda (the Society for the Development of Artisan Labour).
21. *Aliyah* (Hebrew for "ascent") is immigration of individuals of Jewish descent to the State of Israel. We will discuss Israeli immigration laws in chapter 5.

CHAPTER 2

1. In Telugu pronounced "Chebrolu."
2. Personal communication, January 7, 2010.
3. Telugu is a Dravidian language, which is primarily spoken in Andhra Pradesh.
4. "Backward castes" is a collective term that the government of India uses to classify socially and economically disadvantaged groups.
5. For a theory of purity and pollution in the context of caste and untouchability in India, see Hutton 1947, Bouglé 1971, and Dumont 1972; for a contestation of these views, also see Srinivas 1962, Béteille 1965, Berreman 1979, and Quigely 1993.
6. Personal communication, Machilipatnam, January 7, 2010.
7. The *Ramayana* is one of the two ancient Sanskritic epics (the other one is the *Mahabharata*), which forms an important part of the Hindu tradition. The epic tells the story of Rama, an incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu, and of Rama's wife Sita, who was abducted by the demon Ravana. Jambavant is depicted as a character who helps Rama find Sita and her abductor.
8. Arundhati's life is described in a number of Hindu scriptures, including the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Puranas*. Some of the *Puranas* describe Arundhati as the wife of Vasistha, one of the authors of the Vedas (the oldest scriptures of Hinduism).

9. For a discussion of George Moore's work see Parfitt 2002: 120.
10. For more information on the development of Buddhism in the Krishna Valley see Padma and Barber 2008.
11. Shimon Lev notes that when he visited the community back in the mid-1990s, community leaders identified it as the tribe of Dan (Lev 1995). It appears that the Bene Menashe also used to consider other names of the Lost Tribes before the name Bene Menashe became widely used (see Weil quoted in Levine 2008: 12).
12. *Adam HaRishon* – Hebrew for Adam, the first [man on earth].
13. Torah is Hebrew for Pentateuch. *Siddur* is a Jewish prayer book containing the order of daily prayers. *Mezuzah* (Hebrew for "doorpost") is a decorated piece of parchment with specific verses from Deuteronomy inscribed on it. *Shaddai* is one of the Hebrew words for God, and it is written on the reverse of the mezuzah.
14. *Shehitah* is ritual animal slaughter in Judaism, which ensures that the meat of the slaughtered animal is kosher.
15. Hindutva, which could be translated as "Hinduness," is a term used to describe Hindu nationalism. The term was coined by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in 1923.
16. Interview, Machilipatnam, January 7, 2010.

CHAPTER 3

1. *Tanakh* is a name used in Judaism for the Hebrew Bible. It is an abbreviation which stands for the *Torah* (the Pentateuch), the *Neviim* (the Prophets), and the *Ketuvim* (the Writings).
2. Interview with Shahid Perwez, August 8, 2009.
3. Shmuel Yacobi's interview with Yulia Egorova, April 2009. See also "Israel cancels visas of 50 Indians," *Indian Express*, November 7, 1994.
4. *Halakhah* is Jewish religious law, which includes biblical law and later Talmudic and rabbinic law and tradition.
5. Interview with Shahid Perwez, Kothareddypalem, August 8, 2009.
6. A *mikveh* is a bath used in Judaism for ritual immersions.
7. A *mohel* is a person trained in both the surgical procedures of the circumcision and the Jewish law.
8. A *yeshivah* (Hebrew for "sitting") is a Jewish religious educational institution.
9. Personal communication, Kothareddypalem, January 3, 2010.
10. Personal communication, Machilipatnam, January 2010.
11. Interview with Shahid Perwez, Kothareddypalem, August 8, 2009.
12. According to the biblical tradition, Jacob had twelve 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.

13. Hebrew for "Israel returns."
14. See, for instance, Trevisan Semi 2002b.
15. *Giyur* is Hebrew for conversion.

CHAPTER 4

1. We are grateful to Gwynned de Looijer for providing us with an English translation of this and other episodes of the *Zoek de Verschillen*.
2. See Liebman, Cooper, Klier, Gitelman, and Gudonis in Gitelman et al. 2003.
3. I am grateful to Rabbi Barbara Borts for bringing this to my attention.
4. http://www.kulanu.org/about-kulanu
5. http://www.kulanu.org/about-kulanu/kulanubios.php#HarrietBograd
6. www.kulanu.org
7. http://www.kulanu.org/about-kulanu/kulanubios.php#HarrietBograd
8. Messianic Judaism is a movement that combines evangelical Christian belief with some elements of Jewish practice. It is mainly a movement of Jewish people who believe that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and that Jews should accept him as a messiah and as the son of God. Due to its doctrine about the messiahship of Jesus, the movement is generally considered to be a denomination of Christianity. For more information see, for instance, Cohn-Sherbok 2000.
9. *Sh'ma Yisrael* (Hebrew, "Hear, O Israel") are the first two words of a central prayer of the Jewish liturgy.
10. *Alliance Israelite Universelle* (International Israelite Association), is an organization which was set up in France in 1860 to provide political and organizational support to poorer Jewish communities, particularly in Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa.
11. *Hilfsverein der Deutschen Juden* (the Welfare Society of the German Jews) is an organization established in 1901 in Berlin to provide cultural, social, and political support to the Jews of Eastern Europe and of the Levant.
12. Personal communication with Harriet Bograd, 2011–2012.
13. Interview with Benjamin Isaac, Mumbai, December 22, 2009.

CHAPTER 5

1. Knesset represents the legislative branch of the Israeli government.
2. *Oleh* (plural, *olim*) is someone who makes *aliyah*. In Hebrew *oleh* literally means "one who ascends."
3. The text of the Law of Return is available on the website of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, www.mfa.gov.il.
4. Poltinnikova-Shifrin, E. (2002), "The Jewish State and the Law of Return," http://foundation1.org/wp-en/2002/01/01/the-jewish-state-and-the-law-of-return-2/ (accessed July 5, 2011).

5. "Israeli couples wed in mass Cyprus civil ceremony," *Guardian*, June 17, 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/9700898/print (accessed June 17, 2011).
6. For a more detailed discussion see Parfitt and Egorova 2006: 108–109.
7. http://jewsofindia.org/forum/index.php?PHPSESSID=f249e01e7a8c553616cae08396b86427&topic=46.msg58#msg58 (accessed July 5, 2011).
8. Beta Israel is Hebrew for the "House of Israel." Falasha is a word from the Ethiopian language Ge'ez and is often translated as "foreign" or "exile" (Haynes 2009: 237), or possibly as "landless person" or a "wanderer" (Haynes 2009: 250). The term "Falasha" is considered to be derogatory by the members of the community in Israel (Trevisan Semi 2002c: 100).
9. "The Ethiopian Community in Israel," press release, November 15, 2009, http://www.cbs.gov.il/hodaot2009n/11_09_252b.pdf (accessed July 6, 2011).
10. The word "midrash" means "interpretation" in Hebrew. It can also refer to a book containing a compilation of commentaries on a particular book in the Tanakh.
11. Rabbi Kook was the chief rabbi for the Old Yishuv—the community of Jewish settlers who lived in Palestine up to the beginning of Zionist settlements.
12. For an engaging account of Rabbi Avichail's travels among the Bene Menashe see Halkin 2002.
13. *Bnei Menashe*, Amishav.
14. In the early 1990s some of the Bene Menashe immigrants were settled in Gush Katif in the Gaza strip and some in Kiryat Arba in the West Bank (Weil 2003: 52). For a discussion of the Bene Menashe resettlement from Gush Katif, see Levine 2008.
15. For an engaging ethnographic discussion of the Bene Menashe life in Israel see Levine 2008.
16. For the sake of protecting our informants' anonymity we use fictional names for them and do not disclose in which settlements exactly each one of them lives.
17. For a discussion of the community's location points in Israel see Levine 2008. The new wave that was arriving in Israel as we were finishing the book in December 2012 – January 2013 was being settled in the north of the country (personal communication with a number of community members).
18. This is the Nahalat Tzvi *yeshivah* in Jerusalem, which is affiliated with Mercaz HaRav *yeshivah* circles supported by religious Zionists.
19. The reference here is to the Seven Laws of Noah—the commandments which, according to the Talmud, are binding for the entire humankind and not just for the Jewish people.
20. Meeting Israel's future. Scholarship Support at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Division for Development and Public Relations, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

CHAPTER 6

1. The name is fictional.
2. Telaga is one of the land-owning castes in Andhra Pradesh. It is one of the "forward" castes, or castes which do not qualify for any benefits granted to Dalits and members of lower castes.
3. We prefer not to give the rabbi's name to protect his anonymity.
4. No relation to the Bene Israel of the Konkan coast.
5. *Peyot* is Hebrew for sidelocks, which are worn by some men and boys in Orthodox Jewish communities. Wearing *peyot* is based on an interpretation of an injunction given in Leviticus (19: 27) not to cut the corners of one's head.
6. For a discussion of the way dreams may be invoked as legitimate justification in decision making processes in some populations, but not others, see Lyon 2010.
7. Adonai (Hebrew for "my master") is one of the names for God in Judaism.
8. For an analysis of the way dreams are used by contemporary practitioners of Judaism as a means for establishing a common national identity, see Knafo and Glick (2000), who discuss the example of modern Jewish Moroccan pilgrims.

CHAPTER 7

1. For an analysis of the socio-historical aspects of genetic research conducted among the Jewish communities, see Egorova 2009, Parfitt and Egorova 2006, Prainsack and Hashiloni-Dolev 2009.
2. *Adam le'Adam* is Hebrew for "from person to person."
3. For an analysis of this interest see Moskowitz 2008.
4. See http://www.adamleadam.org (accessed February 28, 2012).

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