

'Lost Tribe' Has Israelis Pondering Law of Return

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In the knitted yarmulke and prayer shawl that he brought from his home in India, Haokhothang Lunkhel says that all he wants is to live as a Jew in Israel.

"I wish to pray here in the Holy Land," said Mr. Lunkhel, who arrived this summer from Manipur state on India's border with Burma and went almost immediately to a trailer in the West Bank settlement of Qiryat Arba. "We can't do all the commandments in Manipur. Here, we can."

He is doing no more than chasing the Zionist dream, he says.

For many Israelis, though, his dream is their nightmare.

The problem for Mr. Lunkhel, and for 56 other Indians from the northeastern states of Manipur and Mizoram who turned up in August, is that virtually no one in Israel recognizes them as Jewish -- certainly not the Government and not rabbinical leaders. They were brought by an Orthodox rabbi who traces supposed remnants of the 10 lost tribes of Israel, exiled by the Assyrians 2,700 years ago. Their ostensible connection to Judaism lies in assertions that they are descendants of the tribe of Manasseh.

Israelis are skeptical, to put it mildly. Nonetheless, the Indians were allowed in, and now they live in Qiryat Arba and Jerusalem, studying Hebrew and religious customs that are unknown to them so that they can convert formally to Judaism in a manner acceptable to the Chief Rabbinate.

But their arrival touched off Israeli alarms about whether the gates had been opened to potentially millions of foreigners with similar assertions of being children of lost tribes. Fears were stoked by scare headlines about how 300 million such migrants were poised to surge in from the third world.

And though the news articles were dismissed by critics as not only wildly exaggerated but perhaps also racist, they set off a continuing public debate on what for Israelis is an existential question: Has the time come to amend or even repeal the Law of Return, which gives all Jews, with few exceptions, and specified non-Jews an automatic right to relocate here?

The law was enacted in 1950, two years after Israel came into being, and it is a bedrock of modern Zionism. But some leading figures in the Zionist establishment warn that if they do not close what they call legal loopholes, Israel may be swamped by immigrants with dubious ties to Judaism, and find its Jewish character in peril.

Supposed members of lost tribes, while attention-grabbing, are the least of their concerns for now. More immediately worrisome, they say, are many of the roughly 500,000

immigrants from the former Soviet Union who have poured in since 1989, helping to swell Israel's population to 5.4 million. Government officials now acknowledge what they used to deny in the heady first days of the Soviet flow: that an estimated one-third of the immigrants are not the least bit Jewish.

They have been allowed in under a 1970 amendment to the Law of Return, extending immigration rights to any person with a single grandparent who was Jewish, even if the connection to Judaism ended there. That person's spouse, again even if non-Jewish, enjoys the same rights.

This three-generation standard for Jewishness was the same one used by the Nazis, and it closed an historical circle. If someone was Jewish enough for Hitler's ovens, the reasoning went, he was also Jewish enough for Israel.

But times change.

Israel has become an increasingly prosperous country in recent years seemingly on the verge of peace agreements with its Arab neighbors. Foreigners who once would not give the country a second glance are now looking for ways to resettle here. And as their numbers grow, the spirit of come-one, come-all no longer reigns supreme.

<http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/06/world/lost-tribe-has-israelis-pondering-law-of-return.html>