A Musical Journey to Andhra Pradesh

Understanding the Bnei Ephraim
I have always been fascinated by the story of the lost tribes and wished to contribute to their return to Zion. Being neither an anthropologist nor a politician, I decided to go about it using my own talent, music. That is how in January of 2012, equipped with a small mobile studio, I came to start my journey through Africa and Asia to record a CD of music of the lost tribes. After visiting the African Hebrew communities in Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia and then Kaifeng, China my next destination was India.

After visiting and recording the music of the communities of Bnei Israel in Mumbai and Bnei Menashe in the North Eastern state of Manipur, my last destination was the community of Bnei Ephraim, the Telugu Hebrews of South India.

The Bnei Ephraim live in a few villages and towns of Andhra Pradesh. The first stop of my trip was a village near Chebrole in the district of Guntur, a poor village of mud houses adorned with menorahs and the Stars of David and a small white building, the Bnei Yaakov Synagogue, where I observed Yom Kippur and Shabbat. The second stop was the suburbs of the town Machilipatnam on so called Synagogue Street where there is a larger synagogue, where I spent Sukkot. My third and final short stop was the slums of the town Vijayawada, where I was welcome by the leader and founder of the community Shmuel Yacobi at his home.

What really struck me during my visit was the contrast between the poverty of the community members and their generosity, kindness and cordiality. The sari that the Bnei Ephraim gave me for my birthday will always be the sari that I wear for my most joyous and significant events. So it was was in the poor huts and slums of Andhra Pradesh, wrapped in a royal sari and surrounded by numerous “Yiddishe Mamas” of both genders, constantly worrying about whether my plate of rice is full, that I started my bitter-sweet journey into the past and the present of the Bnei Ephraim.

The Bnei Ephraim are a small community of about sixty families that practice Judaism and are part of the tribes Mala and Madiga that follow different religions, mostly Christianity. These tribes are so called untouchables, also called in India Dalits, which means “broken to pieces”. Though untouchability is prohibited by the constitution of India, in the democratic India of the 21st century, they are still very much deliberately discriminated against, humiliated and literally broken by the Indian caste system.

Much of what I learned about the community, I learned from Shmuel Yacobi, the leader of the community who carefully studies and records the traditions of the Bnei Ephraim. He was the first of the community to complete university where he obtained several bachelors degrees as well as a Master of Arts in Philosophy. His father, a subedar (an officer rank) in the British army, was able to save money to educate his son. For forty years Shmuel has been dedicating his life to exploring the history of his people, basing his research on ancient Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish and Christian literature. In our private conversation at his small and clean...
apartment in the slums of Vijayawada, over a cup of fragrant Indian tea, Shmuel revealed to me some of the stories of the Bnei Ephraim.

According to oral tradition, the Bnei Ephraim travelled with the Bnei Menashe from Persia through Afghanistan to Jammu (Jambu), part of today’s Kashmir and to Magadha Kingdom, part of contemporary Bengal and the North Eastern states of India. While the Menashe settled in North Eastern India, some of the Ephraim moved down to South India, to Orissa and Telugu land, today’s Andhra Pradesh. Further, according to oral history, about 120 families came to Telugu country. They were known as Vrathyas, the derivation of Ephrathias, or Parai, the derivation of Ephraim. Tradition tells that they settled down at the bank of the Krishna River where they erected a synagogue in the town of Amaravathi. Later the synagogue was destroyed and a Buddhist, and later a Hindu temple, was built on the site of the ancient synagogue. Archaeological excavations revealed copper plates with Hebrew inscriptions dated to the second century A.D. on the site of the former synagogue.

Shmuel explained that this is not the only evidence that proves the connection between Mala and Madiga and the lost tribes of Israel. There are 450 customs preserved in the summary of laws known as Kavilah, many of which have commonalities with ancient Biblical laws. For example, on the Indian subcontinent it is common to cremate the dead, while Mala and Madiga have always buried theirs, a tradition observed long before the British missionaries arrived. Although other tribes who adopted Christianity bury their dead North-Southward, Mala and Madiga of any faith will bury their dead only West-Eastward. When a child is born, a naming ceremony is conducted on the eighth day after the birth. When a girl reaches the age of eleven years and one day, or a boy the age of twelve years and one day, there is a coming of age ceremony and the child is considered an adult. Furthermore, disputes among tribe members are resolved by the court of elders- something not common among other Indian communities. In Shmuel’s view there are also some Jewish customs that penetrated into the Telugu culture. For example, the Telugu use a lunar-solar calendar similar to that of the Jews. Shmuel also conducts linguistic research of the Telugu language, and has counted more than two hundred words of Hebrew and Aramaic origin.

Today the Bnei Ephraim, or Telugu Yudulu (Telugu Jews) as they are called in Andhra Pradesh, have adopted a modern form of the practice of Judaism. They are mainly taught online by Yehoshua Yacobi, Shmuel’s son and the only member of the community who managed to make Aliyah to Israel. His brother Dan Yacobi also contributes to the Jewish education of the community. He studied at the Yeshiva Dvar Yerushalaim in Jerusalem and Yeshiva Chadar Hatora in Brooklyn and he serves as the chazan of the Bnei Ephraim synagogue in Machilipatnam.

While attending holiday and Shabbat services at the synagogues of the
community, I could not stop wondering how in total isolation, against constant persecution and with little support from world Jewry, the Bnei Ephraim maintain such a deep connection to Judaism.

Touched by their depth of determination, faith and kind-heartedness, I developed a special bond with the community. They accepted me as their sister and I also accepted them as my family. I was touched by their communal struggles as untouchables but also by their individual stories.

I think of Ovadia Kudara, 37, who lives with his wife and three children in a village close to the town Visakhapatnam. Though he got his B.A. degree and worked in a governmental institution as a social worker, he decided to leave his job, since his job required working on Shabbat. In his village, his family is the only one practicing Judaism, a religion unknown to the local institutions. Ovadia sees the only solution in spiritual understanding of the issue, and therefore is totally dedicated to studying Judaism.

Yaakov Yacobi, 38, lives with his wife and children in Chirala town. When talking about his challenges, he mentioned that he was discouraged when his visa to Israel was cancelled along with the other Bnei Menashe in 1994 and his family’s repatriation file was delayed indefinitely.

Yachin Raju Vepuri, 23, lives with his parents, two sisters and a brother in a village near Srikakulam. His parents rent fields where they grow rice and lentils. Yachin had to leave his college where he was studying electronic engineering to help his family at the farm. While still in school, he was continuously humiliated by students of higher castes.

Chandrababu Kale, 28, from Kunchinapalli village, tells that though he has his degree from an Industrial Training Institute in the field of electrical and communicational engineering, he works at a construction material factory and is paid less than other workers in the same position which he attributes to caste discrimination. While a student though, Chandrababu also became interested in photography and his hobby has become a part-time job. (Chandrababu provided most of the photographs for this article.)

Returning to Judaism created additional problems for Bnei Ephraim. There is a tense relationship with the Christians communities to which most of Mala and Madiga belong. As Shmuel Yacobi explained, “They express love outwardly but expect us to embrace Christianity. They always hate us inwardly.” In 2003 there was an attempted terrorist attack against the community by a Muslim terrorist organization. Another problem is the burial grounds. According to the laws of Andhra Pradesh, a burial ground is given according to the caste or tribe. Christians have a burial ground and this
is the only place where Bnei Ephraim can bury their dead as the other faiths cremate their dead. The Jewish graves are constantly vandalized. The community has requested their own burial ground for many years, but have been denied because Judaism is not a registered religion in the State of Andhra Pradesh.

The synagogue in Machilipatnam receives little support, aside from very small donations for their building and siddurim that have been donated from several Jewish organizations. For those that think that Bnei Ephraim adopted Judaism in an attempt to improve their economic condition and escape discrimination, they are obviously mistaken.

Even though their return to Judaism brought additional economic and social strain to the Bnei Ephraim, it is from their faith that the community members draw strength and motivation to overcome their difficulties. During long hours of intense conversation they shared their challenges, dreams and hopes with me through words and song. Among their highest aspirations and dreams, all the community members named studying the wisdom of the Torah and their return home to Israel. Their faith also inspires them to move towards prosperity.

Identifying with their pain and shattered hopes, I became one of them, a daughter of Ephraim, an untouchable, in the enigmatic land of snake charmers, yogis and maharajas.