Helping “Lost Jews” Find the Way Home
To suggest that one man alone is able to change the course of Jewish history may sound a little far-fetched, but Michael Freund is certainly making a valiant attempt to change the future of many.

Since founding the organization Shavei Israel 10 years ago, the former New Yorker has overseen the aliyah of several thousand "Lost Jews" from India, China and South America, as well as other countries. From northeastern India alone, 1,700 Bnei Menashe, who are descended from a lost tribe of Israel, have moved to the Jewish state and are now fully integrated into Israeli society. A further 7,200 are still hoping to make aliyah.

In 1997, Freund was working in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office as Deputy Communications Director, when he was handed a letter from the Bnei Menashe, asking for assistance. “The Bnei Menashe had been writing to Israeli Prime Ministers since Golda Meir, pleading to come home again,” recalls the 43-year old. “When I first read the letter, I thought it was nuts, but something about it struck me. Then I met them and thought: ‘If someone is crazy enough to join us, shouldn’t we welcome them with open arms?’”

Although the Jerusalem Post columnist peppers his conversation with light-hearted anecdotes, it is clear that he takes his work seriously. “Through no fault of their own, many Jews were taken from our people over the centuries as a result of persecution and exile,” Freund says. “I believe we have a historical, moral and religious responsibility to help them return.”

Whenever he hears about a community of “Lost Jews,” however, he approaches their claim “from a position of skepticism,” adding: “It’s easy to get swept away emotionally and to find Jews in all kinds of places. But we need to remain faithful to the historical record.” Thus, Freund researches the background of each claim before deciding whether or not to offer assistance.

“Some years ago, we received a letter from a community of Native Americans, writing to seek recognition that they were a lost tribe of Israel – a belief that some people held in the 19th century. It was clear that it was just fanciful. People of course are free to identify themselves as they wish, but that doesn’t necessarily obligate us. It is the facts that matter.”

In the case of the Bnei Menashe, Freund became convinced of their authenticity after going to India to meet them. “They are fully Sabbath observant, they keep kosher, celebrate the festivals and pray three times a day. You can walk into one of their synagogues, close your eyes and think you are in New York or even Hong Kong.”
Furthermore, DNA testing showed that they had genetic markers indicative of Middle Eastern origin, says Freund.

The belief is that the Bnei Menashe are descendants of the Tribe of Manasseh, one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The Assyrian Empire sent them into exile more than 27 centuries ago.

Their ancestors wandered through Central Asia and the Far East for centuries, before settling in what is now northeastern India, along the border with Myanmar (formerly Burma) and Bangladesh.

Freund says that there is evidence in the diaries of British missionaries and colonial military officers (written 100 years ago), that the community kept various Jewish practices in India. They worshipped one God and referred to him by the Hebrew word, ‘Yah.’ Though the missionaries converted many to Christianity, a core group held onto their Judaism. “They built dozens of synagogues and even set up an umbrella organization for their community’s institutions – which is a sure sign of Jewish DNA.”

Until the Christian missionaries arrived and started writing things down, the Bnei Menashe only had an oral tradition. “We might look askance at that, but they come from an oral tradition. If you ask a Bnei Menashe for a family tree, you had better pull up a chair, since they can name ancestors going back generations.”

Five years ago, the Israeli government under Ehud Olmert decided to freeze the aliyah of the Bnei Menashe. When the government changed, Freund, who moved to Israel himself 17 years ago, lobbied to restart the aliyah process. “At the time of going to print, the aliyah process was slated to resume after Pesach.”

The Israeli government and Chief Rabbinate condition the aliyah of “Lost Jews” on their undergoing an Orthodox conversion when they move to Israel. “Ultimately it is in their interest, because then no one can cast doubt on their Jewishness, which allows them to integrate fully into Israeli society,” says Freund. “Indeed, their absorption has been a great success. Only four per cent of Bnei Menashe immigrants rely on social welfare benefits. Many of them go into higher education and several young men have already received Smicha (rabbinical ordination).”

Rather than live in concentrated communities, as was the case for Olim from Ethiopia and Russia in the 80s and 90s, the Bnei Menashe are encouraged to live in small clusters throughout the country. Initially, they considered opening their own synagogue, but the consensus was that it would hinder their integration.

Freund says that the Bnei Menashe
haven't experienced racism from fellow Israelis, just curiosity. “Some people ask if they are from Thailand, since Israel has a lot of Thai construction workers.” However, Israeli society is very different today than it was 50 years ago. “Then, the cultural lines were very stark. Nowadays, it’s much more common for Ashkenazim and Sephardim to marry one another. It’s part of the natural process of integration.”

The case of the Bnei Menashe is part of a wider phenomenon, says Freund. “More and more people are looking to reconnect with their Judaism, with their roots. I consider it a blessed development, since it strengthens us spiritually and demographically.”

In addition to the Bnei Menashe, Freund has also helped a growing number of young Chinese Jews from Kaifeng, China, to make aliyah. Despite the valuable work he is doing, it is not without comment from naysayers but even Freund himself admits that at first, before investigation, he too had his doubts. Hearing from someone firsthand who Shavei Israel helped, liked Jin Jin, a Kaifeng Jew who recently spoke at an Asian Jewish Life/Hong Kong Jewish Community Centre event, however, melts away doubt. Some decisions are best made from the heart.

As Freund explains, “There is an awakening taking place among the Chinese Jews of Kaifeng, many of whom are looking to return to their roots... The continued existence of Kaifeng’s Jews is not only testimony to the power of Jewish memory, but also to the bonds of friendship that have existed between China and the Jewish people for well over a thousand years. We have a responsibility to them – and to ourselves – to reach out and help them.”

For his own part, Freund’s drive is hugely inspired by the work of his late grandmother, Dr Miriam Freund-Rosenthal. She was the national president of Hadassah, and helped facilitate the Aliyah of North African Jews during the 1950s.

“Reaching out to lost and hidden Jewish communities is essential to our future. We need more Jews. They are part of the extended Jewish family and wish to return to the fold. It’s not yet a mainstream idea, but it’s something I am trying to change.”

For further information, visit www.shavei.org or write to michael@shavei.org.