

MATTHEW POWER

THE MOST LOST TRIBE

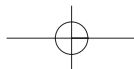
“Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth: a great company shall return thither... Hear the word of the Lord, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock.”—Jeremiah

“A country that’s divided surely will not stand/My past erased, no more disgrace/No foolish naïve stand/The end is near, it’s crystal clear/Part of the master plan/Don’t look now to Israel/It might be in your homelands.”—Megadeth

“I don’t care to belong to any social organization that will accept me as a member.”—Groucho Marx

Thirty hours by train due East from Delhi, across the late-autumn stubble plains of Uttar Pradesh, past the mud-thatch villages and spreading banyans of Bihar, I arrived bleary-eyed at dawn on the roiling Brahmaputra river at Guwahati, the ugly, sprawling capital city of the far northeastern state of Assam. In the trees outside the train station, enormous fruit bats flopped awkwardly into their high roosts and dangled like snagged kites.

I had come across India to see for myself if the reports I had read were true: members of remote hill tribes, the Kuki-Chin-Mizo, living in the northeastern states of Mizoram and Manipur, believed that they were living descendants of Manasseh, one of the legendary



ten lost tribes of Israel. Some of these people, former warriors and headhunters, had decided to return to their supposed biblical roots and live as observant Jews. Since the 1970's some 7,000 members of the Mizo (a collective term for several interrelated tribes which means "highlander") have converted to Judaism, and at least 800 have migrated to Israel. They called themselves the B'nai Menashe, and if what they believed of their own history was true, their tribe, over three millennia, had wandered clear across Asia on the Silk Route and settled in the jungle-covered hills at the edge of the Golden Triangle. So circuitous was their Diaspora that they are the only group in the history of the world that can lay claim to building both the Egyptian pyramids and the Great Wall of China.

What could make a people, with no apparent context or prompting, convince themselves of so unlikely an origin? An elaborate hoax? A mass hallucination? A miracle? My travels around the sub-continent had taught me that scientific fact and ancient myth often found themselves given equal weight, and Western notions of "truth" were highly relative. Even if one accepts the bible as any sort of historical template, the odds that a handful of its minor characters had washed up in Southeast Asia were exceedingly remote. Nevertheless, the Jews of Mizoram believed they were a branch of a family tree that had its roots 4000 miles away in the rocky soil of the Fertile Crescent.

When the Assyrians invaded

Israel in the 8th century B.C., they captured and deported ten of the twelve tribes that had occupied the promised land of Canaan since the death of Moses: "Then the king of Assyria carried Israel away into exile to Assyria, and put them in Halah, and on the Habor, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes." (2 Kings 18:11) With that verse, the ten tribes — they were named Asher, Dan, Ephraim, Gad, Issachar, Manasseh, Naphtali, Reuben, Simeon, and Zebulun, all sons or grandsons of Jacob — vanished from the Bible. They did not, however, vanish from the often-febrile imaginations of a host of crackpots, conspiracy theorists, travel writers, Kabbalists, snake-oil merchants and assorted honey-and-locust-eaters. Tales of the tribes' whereabouts began almost immediately and continue to this day. Elvis had nothing on the lost tribes for posthumous cult appeal, and Biblical prophets mentioned their return as a necessary precursor to the arrival of the Messiah.

Arcane references in the writings of later Hebrew and medieval scholars had the tribes being led in exile beyond the "Mountains of Darkness", or across the river Sambatyon, a fearsome 17-mile-wide torrent that raged and foamed and hurled stones the size of houses from its waters for six days a week. In some permutations of the story, the river had no water at all, but was a physics-defying flow of sand and boulders, its dull roar audible from two days' journey away. On the Sabbath, according to the

Roman historian Pliny the Elder, the river would cease its flow, but since the exiled tribes were observant Jews, they were forbidden to travel on that day and so were trapped forever on the far side.

As a metaphor for the endurance of belief despite being scattered and divided the story of the lost tribes is deeply poignant. As a starting point for a search party, it is a wild goose chase. Down the centuries, hunters have followed the tribes' hypothetical Diaspora to the ends of the earth, their conclusions met with varying degrees of credulity and derision. A brief catalogue: The lost tribes of Israel became the Native Americans in the Book of Mormon. Or the Pathans of the Hindu Kush. The Maori of New Zealand. The Falashas of Ethiopia. Nestorian Christians. The Japanese royal family. Eskimos. Even the British—from the Hebrew *brit*, covenant, and *ish*, man—make the cut. I'll omit the "evidence" that goes along with the majority of these postulations; it's mostly pretty thin. The most commonly accepted (and least fun) view among Biblical historians is that the tribes were absorbed into the Assyrian empire, their Hebraic identity eroding until they were indistinguishable from their one-time captors. Sadly, that's how it goes more often than not, but this likelihood has done little to put centuries of searchers off the scent, real or imagined. With a world history rife with genocides and deportations — vexed by ghosts of the disappeared from Tasmania to

Tenochtitlan to the Trail of Tears — the enduring fascination with the mystery of the lost tribes of Israel is perhaps a symptom of the existential exile felt by us all.

There are no rail links to the state of Mizoram, a sliver of land wedged between Myanmar and Bangladesh in the northeast of India. Few people there speak the national language Hindi, and it is quite common to refer to India in the third person, with New Delhi a place as remote and inscrutable as any mythic abode of the gods. The people of the Northeast, comprising dozens of tribes and language groups from the mouth of the Ganges to the lamaseries of the high passes, have distinctly east Asian features, or as an unenlightened journalist I met put it: “Everyone here is chinky-eyed chaps.”

By road it takes 20 hours to reach Mizoram’s capital city of Aizawl from neighboring Guwahati, so I decided to fly. From the air, it was easy to see why the few hundred miles between Aizawl and Guwahati take so long to drive. Out of the river valley, fantastically green bamboo-jungle covered hills were patterned like a series of waves or sand dunes. The plane, a mostly empty Indian Airlines twin-prop, landed at an airstrip which was built on a razed hilltop, and we were escorted by Kalashnikov-slung soldiers across the tarmac to the whitewashed terminal. After picking up my bag from the luggage belt, I started for the door, but was waved over to a desk sur-

rounded by more soldiers. A man with a beret and an ascot was seated at the desk, and being considerably fatter than his colleagues, and with more dented brass stars on his epaulets, I took him to be in charge. An exercise in circular logic ensued:

“Your R.A.P., sir.”

“Pardon?”

“Restricted Area Permit.”

“Ah, yes, I was told in Guwahati that it could be obtained here in Aizawl.”

“But they do not have such authority in Guwahati. You must have an R.A.P. to enter Mizoram.”

“But I don’t have one, I was told I could get it here.”

“But you must have one R.A.P. to be here.”

“But I’m here and I don’t have one.”

“But you must have one.”

“But I don’t have one.”

“But you must have one.”

This went on, unwavering, for a surprisingly long time.

Given that India is friendly with none of the six countries it borders, many of its frontiers are strictly off limits. And because Mizoram is in a sensitive border area (Aizawl is 40 miles as the crow flies from the porous border of opium-and-militancy exporting Burma.) all foreigners need a Restricted Area Permit. I was unsurprisingly misinformed about the permit regulations, and managed to get all the way to the air-

port in Aizawl thinking I’d be able to secure a permit when I arrived. As it turns out, I was supposed to get the permit in Delhi, some 1300 miles west. Bangkok was closer. Even fellow Indians from outside the Northeast are subject to these obscure Raj-era restrictions, forced to apply for permits to travel within their own country. It is the Central Government’s means of controlling these far-flung frontier provinces, which they basically have to bribe to keep from declaring independence, or calving off like bergs from an ice shelf.

The isolationist permit requirements have proved an ineffective means to check infiltration of militant groups (of which in the northeast there are hundreds of factions with inscrutable acronyms, almost universally abbreviating Big Ideas: Revolutionary, United, Freedom, Liberation), which operate with impunity in many parts of the region. Entire national parks have disappeared — trees, rhinos and all — under rebel control. Mizoram’s own localized rebellion, now pacified, had already begun in 1959 when the twice-in-a-century flowering and death of the bamboo forests unleashed a plague of rats that devoured the rice crops and touched off a famine. This Old Testament-style misfortune followed closely on the heels of a tribal elder’s vision—supposedly hand-delivered by an Angel of the Lord—that the Mizos were a Lost Tribe, which began the modern resurgence of Judaism in the region.

After much begging and cajoling, the commandant gave me leave to proceed to Aizawl and report immediately to the police there. An hour and a half in a dying taxi (the driver had to stop every few miles to blow out the clogged fuel line with his mouth), driving on unpaved mountain roads through bamboo-thatch villages, brought me at last to Aizawl, a city of ill-constructed concrete buildings straddling a steep ridge (and a geological fault line, to boot.)

Upon arrival, I entered into a bureaucratic labyrinth that would have reduced the most jaded Soviet apparatchik to a quivering fetal position. After pleading my case and drinking red tea with the Chief Secretary, Home Secretary, Deputy Home Secretary, District Superintendent of Police, Assistant District Superintendent of Police and Foreigners' Registration Officer (all in different parts of town, mind you) I managed to convince them I was not a Burmese spy, illegal Bangladeshi migrant or Mormon. I was here to find out about the Jewish community in Aizawl. This elicited little sympathy from the desk-bound Assistant District Superintendent of Police: "The Jews?" he laughed, "I am not interested in the Jews."

Nevertheless, I was at last granted a slip of paper with a little stamp on it as a ten-day talisman against agents of the state. In a classic display of logic-defying national autonomy, India is five and a half hours off of Greenwich Mean Time. Why the extra half-hour, I

do not know. And as if a common hour hand is all that holds it together, there is one time zone for the entire country. That means that Mizoram, dangling out on the far-eastern limit of the country, has sunrise at 4 am and sunset at 3:30. By the time I got the permit, the sun was passing behind the hills.

Outside of Antarctica, Mizoram is one of the last places on earth one would expect to come across places with names like Zion Tailors, Moses Snack Shop and Holy Land High School, but that's exactly what I found walking around the streets of Aizawl. The lost tribe belief, clearly, had caught on. As had a cargo-and-satellite cult of MTV-inflected Westernism, interpreted with sincere mullets and bales of middle-American cast-offs airlifted in by the Salvation Army. The city is built high on a ridge, with steep, winding streets and insane taxi drivers who grind their gearboxes to dust on the up hills and ride the brakes in neutral, engines off, on the down hills. There is no doubt that such stealth taxis, coasting silently down the unlit streets, make a substantial contribution to India's 80,000 annual road deaths. Enormous pigs rooted around in the drainage ditches and children in school uniforms improvised cricket matches with their textbooks and small stones. Moses Snack Shop had passable vegetable chow mein, and its gentile owners told me where I'd be able to find the synagogue the next day.

It was the night before the state

elections, so I spent the evening drinking bootleg whiskey with a group of TV journalists from Delhi in my hotel room. The Presbyterian Church (Mizoram, alone in India, is 97 percent Christian) had used its political clout to enact prohibition in the state. This has had the two-fold effect of making bootlegging the backbone of the state economy and getting thousands of teenagers addicted to cough syrup. Injecting cooked-up prescription painkillers was also big, and junkies with tell-tale dime-sized abscesses were a common sight in Aizawl's doorways.

All night the shouts of hooch-drunk party workers filled the streets, putting up last minute posters for their candidates. One of the most common get-out-the-vote measures across rural India is for the candidates to have their goons drive into a town and ply the locals with copious quantities of free illegal liquor. The jungle, though rapidly vanishing, was not far off, and a moth the size of an open paperback flew in and settled on the wall, its bark-patterned wings conspicuous against the Aizawl Ritz's moldering wallpaper. It was a curious visitation. I suspected the Jews of Mizoram must understand how that moth felt, finding themselves suddenly strangers in their own land. A desire for an identity was understandable. But why on earth would they want to be Jews?

By far the most comprehensive exploration of the Mizo claim to a biblical origin is to be found in

Across the Sabbath River, by Israeli journalist Hillel Halkin. In 1998 Halkin, a Brooklyn-born returnee and committed Zionist, went to northeast India with the Rabbi Eli-ahu Avichail, a lost tribes hunter, to investigate the Mizos' claim to Jewish ethnicity. Halkin went as a skeptic, certain that no such link could exist after so many centuries. Three trips and hundreds of hours of interviews later, he published what he considered to be compelling, if not conclusive, evidence of a biblical link to the Mizos.

Geographically isolated, the head-hunting tribes of the Lushei hills were left more or less alone until the late 19th century. When Christianity hacked its way into the deepest jungles, it subsumed almost all aspects of the previous culture in short order. Old Mizo religious traditions were abandoned or absorbed, but a few fragments of a lost way of life remained, worn and polished as sea glass, remembered only in isolated pockets. But the evangelical fervor with which Christianity spread, fast as small pox, left few places unchanged. In the 1950s, a tribal elder claimed that he was visited by an angel, which announced to him the Mizos were a lost tribe, and that they should follow the laws of the Old Testament. Some of the earliest adherents, feared to be organizing a separatist insurgency—an independent Mizo Promised Land—were violently purged by the Indian government. But by the 1970s a sort of Judaism had begun to spread in rural Mizoram and Manipur, and

when the Mizos wrote to Israel and made contact with the charismatic Rabbi Avichail, they had found their Moses figure. For Avichail, the discovery of the Mizos had overtones of the end-of-days: the ingathering of the exiled tribes was a precursor to the construction of the Third Temple in Jerusalem and the ushering in of the Messiah.

Halkin undertook his research with considerable skepticism. Having accompanied Avichail on many of his tribe-hunting expeditions, he arrived in Aizawl expecting to debunk yet another fraudulent claim. But in extensive interviews with the oldest living members of the Mizo-Chin-Kuki he could find, Halkin catalogued a host of dimly-recalled rituals and songs that, to his surprise, made a strong case that the Mizos were actually descendants of the vanished tribe of Manasseh.

To begin, many Mizos spoke of a common ancestor named Man-masi or Manasia, a possible corruption of the biblical Manasseh. There was a story of an ancient scroll they'd carried that had been burned by the Chinese. The pre-Christian religion featured a single god "without beginning or end" named Za (a possible Mizo speech-defect pronunciation of Ya; that is, Yahweh). There were faint memories of an eighth-day circumcision ritual conducted with hot stones held by banana peels. This ritual had evolved into a "symbolic circumcision" where a tribal elder would pass a knife over a newborn's penis. They also practiced a

seven-day mourning period like the Jewish *shiva*. A traditional folk song had featured an escape from a land with an "eight-branched river", a host of enemies being swallowed by the sea, and water springing from a rock. Another song featured the words "TSION aloo tang tang": we will enter Zion together. Perhaps unlikeliest of all, for a tribe that subsisted on rice: a "feast of abstention from yeast" held in the springtime, which, like the biblical Passover, involved the ritual eating of unleavened bread.

If their origin story was true, they had somehow wandered after the Assyrian exile down the entire length of the Silk Road centuries before—and further—than either Marco Polo or Alexander the Great. Halkin found pre-Christian chants that placed the Mizos at one point in Afghanistan, at another on the Silk Road north of Tibet. They believed that after centuries of drifting they had been enslaved by the Chinese, forced to work on the Great Wall. Their subsequent escape brought them from Hunan down through Burma to the highlands of Mizoram and Manipur in the 1400's, all the while keeping a spark of their ancient traditions alive. But in a quest for hard evidence, Halkin had his work cut out for him.

There were plenty of incongruities for the skeptic, not the least of which is the Mizos' historical penchant for head-hunting. When questioned on this point by an Israeli reporter, one tribal elder who had converted to Judaism responded, "Didn't David also cut

off the head of Goliath to prove he'd slain him?" And wasn't it more likely that the land of the eight-branched river was the vast peacock fan of the Ganges delta rather than pharaonic Egypt? Still, the details Halkin uncovered were too obscure to indicate fraud, and he felt that the absences—no creation of many obvious details, the Ten Commandments, say, that would make the story too perfect—reflected a lack of guile. Halkin's remarkable book unfolds with exhaustive research, the plotting of a detective novel, and great empathy for his subjects. Looked at in its entirety, with its diversity of sources, the evidence he presents is difficult to explain away. Unlikely as it seems, the Mizos could well have biblical roots, the first evidence of a Lost Tribe in modern times.

The Amishav Hebrew Center in downtown Aizawl is a three-story concrete house with an enormous Israeli flag painted on a sign out front. The center was started the previous year with donations from the Amishav organization (literally, "my people return"). Rabbi Avichail is its patriarch, though now he is too frail to return to India. I was greeted by the Rabbi Hanoch Avizedek, a huge, smiling, bearded Israeli who must have been a foot taller than any Mizo. Avizedek, a West Bank settler and 11th generation Israeli, is an olive farmer, and told me stories of driving his tractor with a machine gun on his back. He had come on a mission here to teach

Hebrew and the basics of Jewish life to the Mizos. It has been a long struggle, teaching them how to be Jews, a radical change of life from diet to language. Many of the converts have moved to Aizawl from tiny villages to be closer to Amishav, and Avizedek is clearly moved by the commitment they've shown. They come at six in the morning to pray, study from their phonetic Mizo-Hebrew prayer books while learning the Hebrew alphabet. On top of that comes learning the elements of life in modern Israel with its attendant political realities. The study involves daily Torah and language classes and all-day services on the Sabbath. The Rabbi was clearly moved by their devotion. He described mud and thatch synagogues out in remote jungle villages, where the ark contained a plastic Torah, but the people came every day to worship.

Such a commitment, as Avizedek saw it, is incredibly difficult in a place like Mizoram, and should be enough to dissuade any doubts about the Mizos' motives. Saturday is a workday across India, and many converts have had to give up their normal jobs to take part in Shabbat services every week. Pork is a staple of the Mizo diet—complemented by dog, cat, monkey, elephant, python and almost all things that walketh upon the earth—and there isn't a Kosher butcher for thousands of miles, so any attempt at a Jewish diet is a huge sacrifice. The Christ-

ian majority in the state is at best indifferent to the Jews, and anti-Jewish bias is common. In the tight-knit culture of a village, the decision to live as a Jew can lead to a heartbreaking alienation. Avizedek told me of a Jewish funeral he had been to recently, where only a handful of non-Jewish villagers attended.

While I spoke with Avizedek, two men stopped by the Center, Azrael Kartruama and Peter Zokuma. Zokuma had a fedora with a Star of David pin and a tzitzit, the four-tasseled garment worn by orthodox Jews. He had left his job and spent most of his savings to be nearer Amishav. Both men had been circumcised recently—one without anesthesia, which is reserved in Aizawl for emergencies—as part of their process of conversion. Zokuma showed me a tattoo of a cross on his forearm that he had gotten as a youth to keep Burmese Christian militants from harassing him. It was scarred and mangled at one end, as if he had tried to flay it off himself, but now he said he would go the following week to a doctor to have it removed. Azrael has a prominent job in the ministry of education, which he hopes to quit to immigrate to Israel, where he knows he would be starting out at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. He told me he often feels "mocked and humiliated" by the Christian majority in Aizawl, that the only encouragement to be Jewish comes

from within him. Hanoch says the skeptics in Israel who would call the Mizos economic migrants don't appear to understand what they are enduring to be called Jews. As far as vindicating evidence, Azrael only has his belief to sustain him: "I know in my heart that this is so," he told me.

Halkin, during his last trip to India, had said he planned to return with scientists to do DNA testing of the Mizos, to see if his theory was borne out by science. There is a Y-chromosome genetic marker found across the entire Jewish Diaspora, and if they had the same common ancestor—in this case, Abraham—then they would be vindicated in their claims. Some of the Mizos were understandably nervous about this, because if the test was negative, they would be even further marginalized, the results held up by their detractors as evidence of fraud. Rabbi Hanoch rejected the need for testing, telling me "Judaism is not interested in DNA. If the test will say you came from Abraham, but you are not living like Jew, until conversion you are not Jew. All the people came to Israel in the last 10 years from maybe a hundred different states, and nobody asked them to make genetic tests." There was something disturbing about the desire for these tests, an insistence on biological identity coming from a people who had been victimized more than any other by notions of racial purity.

As for the historical connection, Hanoch has no doubt in his

mind that the Mizos are from the Lost Tribes of Israel, but he says it doesn't matter. "They are not Jews. Really, we lost them a long time ago." Whatever connection they once had is not as important as how they live now. Hanoch is certain of their genuine desire to live as Jews again. The Mizos see Israel as the only place they would truly feel at home, and the violence there is no deterrent. Zokuma told me that he would happily live "in the most sensitive [i.e. dangerous] part of Israel, because live or die, it is the chance to worship Torah in its own place."

If he ever makes it to Israel, Zokuma will likely end up in just such a "sensitive" area. Many of the 800 Mizo immigrants to Israel have found themselves placed in settlements in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, with one of the largest communities on the outskirts of Hebron. This is a de facto ghettoization, though one based more on assorted economic factors than a coherent policy. Many of the young Mizos who have emigrated have joined combat units of the Israeli Defense Forces. Michael Freund, the director of Amishav, was quoted in the Israeli press as saying the Mizos "constitute an untapped demographic reservoir to help us maintain a Jewish majority in Israel." The fear that the burgeoning Arab population in Israel will tilt the scales has grown since the slowdown of Jewish migrants from the former Soviet Union. Were the Mizos being allowed in to fill up the Occupied Territories

like pawns in advance of peace negotiations, or being used as cheap and safe replacements for the Palestinians in the unskilled labor pool?

Such demographic imperatives have done little to allay the doubts of the Israeli immigration authorities, which view the Jews of Mizoram with great suspicion. An Israeli immigration minister in the 1990's, when told of the claim by the Mizos of their Jewish heritage and their desire to return to Israel, allegedly accepted that they could—so long as the Messiah was there to greet them. Whether or not this is apocryphal, the Israeli authorities still suspect the Mizos have economic motives for emigration. Despite being a nation in the midst of what amounts to a civil war, the per capita GDP of Israel is 40 times greater than that of India.

Whatever their motives the Mizos are *not* covered by the Law of Return (which permits any person of Jewish ancestry to become an Israeli citizen) because they are not considered ethnically Jewish by the Chief Rabbinate. The less than one thousand Mizos who have successfully immigrated have had to fly to Israel on a limited tourist visa, declare their intention to convert and undergo the strict Orthodox conversion process. When I called the Israeli embassy in Delhi, I asked the honey-voiced press attaché what her government's opinion on the Mizos' ancestry was. "We are more than skeptical of their claims," she told me. When I told her that my mother was Jew-

ish, she asked if I wanted to become a citizen. It was immaterial that I hadn't been to Hebrew school since I was six, never had a Bar Mitzvah, had set foot inside a synagogue maybe twice in my life. I looked at Peter and Azrael, so clearly sincere in their motives—I mean, circumcision without anesthesia!—and felt a surge of guilt. Unlike me, the Mizo Jews, many of whom have devoted their lives to the practice of their adopted religion, are largely shunned by the country they consider their homeland.

In fact, the Mizos' quest for belonging has resulted, most recently, in the door to Israel being closed in their faces. This past July, Interior Minister Avraham Pozar made a ruling that the limited number of visas (100 per year) that had been granted to Mizos wishing to travel to Israel and convert would be frozen for the foreseeable future. The drop in the bucket that they had represented was now to be turned off completely. Hillel Halkin wrote an open letter in the *Jerusalem Post* decrying the minister's decision and the array of suspicions about the Mizos' motives it revealed:

I know of course what the objections to the B'nei Menashe are. I have been hearing these objections for years. The B'nei Menashe come, we are told, from the social fringes of their own society. They are freeloaders, taking advantage of Israeli law to migrate from a Third World country to an affluent one under the pretense of

an interest in Judaism. They are pawns of the Israeli nationalist Right, which has been settling them in the occupied territories to beef up the settlements. They are the vanguard of a yellow horde that will flood our country. We do not want them here.

Halkin disputed all of these points, and accused the immigration authorities of creating an "ugly and discriminatory" system of "two castes, a superior one of born Jews and an inferior one of adopted Jews." Halkin thought anyone who was as committed as the Mizos to being Jewish should be welcomed with open arms. Instead, the Mizos seemed to be caught between opposing forces in Israeli politics, all of which wanted to use them to further an agenda that they could scarcely comprehend. By this political calculus, the Mizos were too Jewish for the Left, not Jewish enough for the Right. Who was using who?

The Sabbath in Aizawl happened to fall on Election Day, and Elisheva Zodingliani was routed in her bid for an assembly seat in the state parliament. One of the less feasible platforms of her Ephraim Union Party was the formation of a new state of Israel in Mizoram, recognized by the United Nations. I had stopped by her home/campaign headquarters before the election and she invited me to Shabbat.

As Elisheva—school-marmish, diminutive, with enormous glasses—prepared dinner, I hung out with her sons, Ephraim and Yosef, both in their twenties. One had a boot-leg Colorado Rockies t-shirt, the other a St. Louis Blues jersey with a fading, illegible autograph across the front. The nearest ice rink was probably on the other side of the Himalayas in China. If that anonymous player had any idea where fate had led his Sharpie scrawl, he would probably follow the shirt here and become a Buddhist monk. Ephraim asked me how much an Ibanez electric guitar would cost "in U.S.," and could I find one for him. I didn't have the heart to tell him it was roughly the same as the annual income of most Indians. Ephraim told me there was a hole in his heart, that only moving to Israel could fill. I could no more tell him that there he would find himself in an army, plagued by suicide bombers and stone-throwing children.

Elisheva announced that first we would have prayers. A family friend who was visiting from Israel read them, dressed in yarmulke and talit, as I tried to follow along in the phonetic prayer book. The younger children giggled and squirmed during the prayers, just like kids anywhere, and a neighbor's husband, clearly drunk on some locally brewed concoction, came in the middle of the chanting and tried to get money out of his wife's purse.

Elisheva was off-beat, but relentlessly determined to say every word. As Mizoram is a dry state by order of the Presbyterian Synod, the only factory-made alcohol available is smuggled in and very expensive. So the blessing of the Sabbath wine was done over a bottle of Coca Cola, which was decanted and passed around to all of us. During the prayers, Yosef leaned over to me and asked in a stage whisper: "Can you help me get visa to U.S. so I can come there and witness huge Megadeth concerts. I love metal."

It would have been so easy to see Shabbat in Aizawl as a comedy sketch, but there was an unimpeachable sincerity in Elisheva's prayers, in her. There was no irony to be had. They had a mezuzah on their door, and a beautiful silver menorah. The house was festooned with Israeli and U.S. flags and postcards of the Wailing Wall and the Statue of Liberty. The placemats were AIDS awareness posters, distributed by some international non-profit. The family sang Hebrew songs, which I recalled dimly from the mists of my own childhood, with the absurd beat of a Karaoke machine playing in the background, and Elisheva cried when she sang the same ancient Mizo song about returning to Zion that Azrael had mentioned. Talking in broken English, they all expressed the same ineffable longing: to return to Israel. They did not belong to Mizoram. There was something inexpressibly sad about

the whole thing. Theirs was an exile inside themselves, far more than it was outside the walls of Jerusalem. How could so long a separation be bridged? They seemed mired in an unbearable lostness.

Everyone wants to belong somewhere. A lucky few get a burning bush to tell them the score, and everyone else has to make it up. The Mizos were Indian but not Indian, Chinese but not Chinese. Colonialism and Christianity had temporarily convinced them they were something they were not. There was nothing they had ever been that had not been as quickly taken away by some larger entity. Perhaps being a lost tribe made them see themselves as found for the very first time, fixed their origins unassailably in a past that could never be altogether proved or dissolved. Or perhaps some fragment of an ancient world had survived, beyond all hope or reason, with only a faint memory of home to sustain it. The Mizos insisted on their exile, and the jungle had become a desert to them.

Whether or not it is a true exile (and everything in this part of the world is half legend and half fact, and it doesn't matter which most of the time) the Jews have a long history of being outsiders. To be outside the outsiders, wanting to be welcomed in, seemed a very lonely place. But listening to the Mizos sing their Shabbat prayers in a language they, and I, the actual Jew, didn't understand, half-familiar

echoes of traditions from half a world away, tinged with a longing that could not be faked, I believed them. ★