

Becoming Jewish

Becoming Jewish:

New Jews and Emerging Jewish Communities in a Globalized World

Edited by

Tudor Parfitt (Senior Editor)
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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-9965-8

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9965-9

CONTENTS

Introduction	ix
New Jews from a Global Perspective <i>Tudor Parfitt and Netanel Fisher</i>	
Of the Seed of Israel? Claiming Descent from the Ten Lost Tribes and Forced Converts (Anousim)	
Chapter One.....	2
Joining or Rejoining the Jewish People in Africa <i>Tudor Parfitt</i>	
Chapter Two.....	25
The Unification of the Ten Lost Tribes with the Two “Found” Tribes <i>Shalva Weil</i>	
Chapter Three.....	36
Lost Tribes Communities, Israel, and Notions of Jewishness <i>Yulia Egorova</i>	
Chapter Four.....	49
Origins and Motivations of Madagascar’s Normative Jewish Movement <i>Nathan Devir</i>	
Chapter Five.....	64
Joining the Conversation from a Distance: A Comparison of the Evolution of Jewish Identity among the Igbo from Nigeria and the Ethiopian Beta Israel <i>Daniel Lis</i>	
Chapter Six.....	83
Kaifeng Judaism Today: Revival or Reintroduction? <i>Noam Urbach</i>	

Chapter Seven.....	106
From Apulia to Sicily: Places and Charismatic Leaders as Agents of Memory among Converts in Italy	
<i>Emanuela Trevisan Semi</i>	

A European and Russian Perspective

Chapter Eight.....	120
New Jews in Europe	
<i>Eliezer Ben-Rafael</i>	

Chapter Nine.....	138
Joining the Jewish Fold: The Changing Conversion Policies in Austria and Germany since 1945	
<i>Susanne Cohen-Weisz</i>	

Chapter Ten	156
“The German Desire to be Jewish”: Conversions of Non-Jewish Germans to Judaism after 1945	
<i>Barbara Steiner</i>	

Chapter Eleven	167
Polish Newcomers to Jewishness: A Reflection in the Wake of the Revival	
<i>Jan Lorenz</i>	

Chapter Twelve	185
Non-Traditional Ways of Joining the Jewish Collective: The FSU Experience	
<i>Vladimir (Ze'ev) Khanin and Elina Bardach-Yalov</i>	

Israel: Joining the Jewish State

Chapter Thirteen.....	204
Disciplinary, Normative and Institutional Aspects of Conversion to Judaism	
<i>Sergio DellaPergola</i>	

Chapter Fourteen	224
Joining the Jewish State: Israel's Conversion Policies	
<i>Netanel Fisher</i>	

Chapter Fifteen	243
Non-Jewish Immigrants from the FSU as Members of Jewish Society in Israel <i>Arie Haskin</i>	
Chapter Sixteen	259
Lay Theories and Attitudes toward <i>Giyur</i> among Israeli Jews <i>Gabriel Horenczyk and Hagit Hacohen Wolf</i>	
Chapter Seventeen	271
The Struggle of the <i>Bene Israel</i> to Be Recognized as Jews in Israel <i>Vivian Hafif Digmi</i>	
Chapter Eighteen	282
Messianic Religious Zionism and the Lost Tribes: The Case of the Bene Menashe <i>Galit Shashoua</i>	
Chapter Nineteen	293
“Your People Shall Be My People and Your Culture My Culture”: Becoming a Jew—a Peoplehood Perspective <i>Regev Ben-David</i>	
New Jews in the American Religious Free Market	
Chapter Twenty	314
Choosing Jews and Jewishness: A Portrait of Converts Married to American Jews <i>Sylvia Barack Fishman</i>	
Chapter Twenty-One	334
Unofficial Conversions: Non-Jewish Participants in Contemporary American Synagogues <i>Yaakov Ariel</i>	
Chapter Twenty-Two.....	353
Participation of Non-Jewish Family Members in Bar/Bat-Mitzvah Ceremonies in the American Reform Movement: Boundaries or Inclusion? <i>Dalia Marx</i>	

Chapter Twenty-Three.....	369
Bridging Messianic Christianity and Liberal Judaism: A Journey of an American Convert <i>Chen Bram</i>	
Chapter Twenty-Four	393
The “Peculiar Institution” of Religion Freedom in the US: Conversion and Jews in the US Context <i>Marla Brettschneider</i>	
Contributors.....	407
Index.....	413

INTRODUCTION

NEW JEWS FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

TUDOR PARFITT AND NETANEL FISHER

Over the last fifty years or so we have witnessed the global phenomenon of a vast number of individuals and groups choosing to become part of the Jewish people, either through marriage, conversion or self-identification as Jews. In many cases this development is being played out through the creation of new religious movements of a Judaic or partially Judaic nature. This overall phenomenon constitutes a dramatic turning point in Jewish history, since traditionally non-Jews had little or no interest in joining the Jewish people. This new reality has many implications, as it is beginning to change the face of Jewish communities and at the same time sharpen the debate over the boundaries of the Jewish collectivity. However it is also creating new opportunities and possibilities both in terms of increasing and reinforcing the world's Jewish population.

The aim of this volume is to examine this new phenomenon in both global and local terms. In this respect this volume is unique. Our hope is that these 'New Jews' and their different kinds of affiliation and identification may be perceived from as many angles as possible. We begin with various groups in Africa, Asia and Europe, who see themselves as the blood descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes, or of those Jews forced to convert to Christianity at the time of the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal (*bene anousim*). The book then moves on to Europe and Russia, where people of Jewish descent are returning to roots which were often obscured or lost as a result of the upheavals of the Russian Revolution or the Shoah. In Israel non-Jews have assimilated into the Jewish majority represented by the Jewish state, while in America a growing number of non-Jews have joined the minority Jewish group in a free religious market.

Of Jewish seed? Claiming descent from the Ten Lost Tribes and Forced Converts (*Anousim*)

Africa is one of the most fertile grounds in the world for the development of Jewish new religious movements in a variety of forms. The development of Judaism and Israelite identities in Africa has a long and complex history reaching right back to early mediaeval times. The first chapter in this book by Tudor Parfitt looks at some of the most important of the Jewish communities in Africa and compares the processes and discourses which have brought them into being. Lost tribe mythology, colonial constructions and interaction with Jewish immigrants have all played an important role in this process. What is remarkable is to see the way mediaeval mythologies about the Lost Tribes in Africa being worked through with such dramatic effect in the modern world. Shalva Weil's chapter provides a general outlook on the re-traditionalisation and re-interpretation of ancient Jewish identity. Tracing the foundations of the Lost Tribes myth, Weil positions it in millenarian beliefs which from the sixteenth century on were used by missionaries to promote both their religious and colonial agendas. In modern times, through processes of globalization and fundamentalization, the idea of the return of the Lost Tribes has gained strength all over Asia and Africa, in addition to being intensified by mainstream Jewish religious groups. A good example of this is to be found in Yulia Egorova's chapter which deals with her investigations of Indian Judaising groups known as the Bene Menashe and Bene Ephraim. In both cases these tribes reinvented the mythologies of their past, and in the process unearthed a number of customs and traditions with marked parallels with biblical traditions. During the twentieth century both these groupings declared themselves part of the Jewish family and sought justification for their new identities through Lost Tribes mythology. Outside Jewish encouragement and interest played a significant role in the development particularly of the Bene Menashe. Based on ethnographic research, Egorova provides the Bene Ephraim's own perspective—the way they define themselves as part of the Jewish people, the way they perceive the construction of their community in India, and their deeply felt passion to rejoin the Jewish people in the Jewish state.

Moving back to Africa, Daniel Lis's paper compares the evolution of the Ethiopian Beta Israel on the one hand and Igbo Jewish movements of Nigeria, on the other. Using the term "Jewish conversation", Lis contrasts the success of the Ethiopian Beta Israel at gaining mainstream Jewish recognition, resulting in massive immigration to the State of Israel, with

the relative failure of the Igbo to follow the same path. According to Lis, the numerical and qualitative growth of connections between the Igbo and Judaism and between the Igbo and the Jewish people in recent decades justifies the Igbo claim to being “part of the Jewish conversation”. This Jewish conversation is spreading through Africa. Nathan Devir’s chapter analyses the Jewish phenomenon on the great island of Madagascar. Focusing on individuals who have joined Madagascar’s normative Jewish movement which has been established in recent years, Devir provides a contextualized analysis of community modes of ritual observance as well as individuals’ perspectives. A Jewish identity here may include regarding Jewishness as a bio-racial signifier as well as a discursive system of religious thought. These processes have led to the emergence of a Sephardi Jewish community more than 100 members of which have gone through a recent Orthodox conversion in a place which is very far away from any other Jewish centre.

Another remote group is the famous community of Kaifeng Jews which in recent decades has experienced attempts at revival having been cut off from any mainstream Judaism since their arrival in China a millennium ago. In his chapter Noam Urbach interrogates the concept of “sinification”, particularly as used by Irene Eber, to describe the unique mode of adaptation to Chinese society and culture followed by the Jews of Kaifeng, and inserts it into the discussion of contemporary Jewish revival. He isolates two approaches in this revival: the *Youtai* approach which favours a reintroduction of standard contemporary Judaism to Kaifeng, as opposed to the *Yiceleye* approach which favours a reconstruction of the historic “sinisized” Sino-Judaism unique to Kaifeng. The workings of memory with respect to an ancient Jewish past are explored by Emanuela Trevisan Semi in her chapter on new converts to Judaism in Southern Italy and Sicily. She shows how Jewish charismatic leaders are encouraging the return to Judaism of descendants of fifteenth century *Anousim*. The phenomenon of new Jewish manifestations in Southern Italy, which may be traced back to the 1930s and the San Nicandro case, has recently been fuelled by the rediscovery of a Jewish historical presence all over Southern Italy. These processes as elsewhere have reflected changes in modern communications as well as issues of emigration.

A European and Russian perspective

Eliezer Ben-Rafael’s chapter sheds light on the phenomenon of the new joiners of the Jewish people in contemporary Europe. According to Ben-Rafael, European “new Jews” make up about 13% of Europe’s most

numerous Jewish communities. Some 8% are converts while 5% see themselves as “belonging”, in one way or another, without having converted in any religious ceremony. Comparing these different categories of Jews in terms of Jewish peoplehood, religion, of their reaction to antisemitism or attitudes toward Israel and so forth provides a rich picture of Europe’s increasingly diverse Jewish communities. A specific case study of the phenomenon is provided by the chapter by Susanne Cohen-Weisz which deals with the changing conversion policies in Austria and Germany since 1945 and Barbara J. Steiner’s paper on the situation with respect to German conversion to Judaism in Germany post-1945. Cohen-Weisz’s “top-down” perspective analyses the construction of the communities in Germany and Austria and the different paths each of them has chosen in the context of state-establishment communities. The stricter Austrian policy makes it rather more difficult to become a Jew but on the other hand has achieved world-wide Jewish recognition for its conversion policies. In Germany, the more liberal approach has opened up the community gates to newcomers, but their status as Jews is more controversial both within and outside the community. Steiner analyses the German situation using a “bottom-up” perspective. Her main focus is on the converts’ varied motivations for joining the Jewish people, and their social acceptance within the Jewish community. According to Steiner, in the first decades after the Second World War the motivation to convert was based on family connections, spiritual quests and a desire for atonement. However, as one of this volume’s main theses posits, in Germany too “becoming Jewish is considered hip” in general, and converts have been enabled to play significant roles in the Jewish community. In Poland a different situation pertains. Jan Lorenz’s chapter demonstrates how in Poland Judaism is being discovered not by outsiders but rather by Jews who had lost all trace of their Jewishness for a variety of reasons.

Vladimir (Ze’ev) Khanin and Elina Bardach-Yalov’s chapter presents models developed in the post-Soviet space of how local Jewish communities act within the “ethnic core” of the Jewish population. But they also show how people of mixed Jewish/non-Jewish origin, non-Jewish members of Jewish families, as well as people attracted by Jews and Judaism without having any genetic or family bonds to them are brought into the Jewish fold in one way or another. In the course of their research they discovered that thousands of people who went through academic programmes on Israel and Judaism were motivated not only by academic interests proper, but also by an attraction to the Jewish collectivity and to Zionism. For such people it is evident that the

traditional ways of entering the Jewish collective (*Giyur* and marriage) are not entirely attractive. Perhaps “non-Jewish Zionists” would prefer identifying themselves with Jewish collectives in accordance with the cultural-behavioural model, which is the closest to the one dominant in Eastern Europe.

Israel: Joining the Jewish State

As a symbol of modern Jewish identity, the issue of permitting non-Jews to assimilate into the Israeli Jewish majority and collective has provoked a fierce ideological and political dispute in Israel for some years. Netanel Fisher’s chapter tracks the history of this dispute from the days of the state’s inception right up to the present time. It reveals three main approaches towards the integration of non-Jews into the Jewish-Israeli collective, namely national and social assimilation, religious-national conversion, and opposition to the integration of non-Jews in Israel. Fisher attributes Israel’s incoherent policy on these issues to the controversies over the interpretations of the meaning of a Jewish state and Jewishness in the modern world. In his paper, “Disciplinary, Normative and Institutional Aspects of Conversion to Judaism,” Sergio DellaPergola frames the Israeli case in a broad perspective in which the keen contemporary interest in converting to Judaism seems to form part of a global resurgence of ethnic and religious identities. DellaPergola outlines the current Israeli dispute regarding conversion, as well as identifying and quantifying the different types of potential converts in the diaspora and in Israel, delineating the highly divisive outcomes and consequences for the unity of the people of Israel. Over the years, Israel has coped with various types of groups and individuals joining the Jewish people or declaring themselves Jewish. Arie Haskin’s chapter focuses on the 300,000 Israelis originating in the FSU (former Soviet Union) who are not considered Jewish according to Jewish religious law or state laws but are integrating into its Jewish society through “social conversion” (as Asher Cohen accurately phrased it). Haskin portrays an Israeli situation in which non-Jews join a Jewish majority. He analyses the motives and profiles of those immigrants who are content in fact with social integration but who insist on going through a religious conversion process. Vivian Hafif-Digmi’s chapter allows us to perceive integration in Israel from another standpoint. The Bene Indian community of western India is a somewhat marginalized community which was commonly recognized as Jewish, although not by everyone, not least because its marriage and divorce customs were questionable as a result of its remoteness from any mainstream Jewish community. Hafif-

Digmi's chapter demonstrates how a political and public protest against the Israeli Orthodox Rabbinate can eventually succeed, based on a preliminary acceptance of a group's Jewish credentials. Another Indian Jewish group whose origins are somewhat obscure are the Bene Menashe already referred to. Galit Shashoua analyses the phenomenon of returning "Lost Tribes" from India via the official Israeli perspective. Shashoua interrogates the question: How did the return of the "Lost Tribes" become a part of Israel's policy? Her point of departure is the fact that the Zionist movement as well as the State of Israel have never lent any particular importance to the religious concept of the return of the "Lost Tribes". Shashoua's thesis is that only the religious resurgence and the infiltration of millenarian messianic ideas into Zionist discourse could have brought about the acceptance of these unknown quasi-Jewish communities. Israelis' perspectives on issues of conversion are dealt with in Gabriel Horenczyk's and Hagit Hacohen Wolf's chapter which focuses on the positions held by Israeli lay Jews with regard to the entitativity of the Jewish group and to the meanings attributed to the *giyur* process, as well as to the connection of these theories to expectations for Jewish behaviour and belief after *giyur*. One of the main findings suggests that the strongest meaning attached to the *giyur* process by lay people is sociological, meaning that the desire of Israeli non-Jews to undergo *giyur* is not based on religious motivations but based rather on a desire to formalize and legitimate their integration into Jewish Israeli society, as well as to be granted the rights of Jews in the Jewish state. Regev Ben-David concludes the Israeli section with his calls for a renewal of the process of joining the Jewish people. In his chapter Ben-David claims that Judaism was never a religion but rather a peoplehood. From this perspective, the new model of Judaism according to which most Jews define their Jewish affiliation in ethno-cultural terms is not an invention of a new modern identity, but rather a revelation of the core of Judaism itself. Therefore, according to Regev, it is time this model was invoked also in the context of accepting newcomers into the Jewish fold.

New Jews in the American religious free market

Sylvia Barack Fishman's chapter delineates the profile of American "Jews by choice". Based on varied sources, Barack Fishman's chapter includes the claim that converts establish both a strong Jewish identity and produce strong Jewish families. However the rates of conversion are not increasing as swiftly as the increase in intermarriages within American Jewry. To Barack Fishman's mind, conversion should be one of the main tools for

strengthening the “ethnic capital” of Judaism and ensuring the flourishing and continuity of Judaism in the United States. Using the case study of a Messianic Christian’s path to Judaism, Chen Bram’s chapter reveals the dynamic and vivid world of Messianic churches and other Christian groups that see themselves close to Judaism and to Jews. As opposed to the common perception of strict boundaries existing between Messianic groups and Jews, this chapter demonstrates the fluidity of such groups. In addition, sometimes Messianic Christian groups become interested in Judaism to the point that they finish up by joining the Jewish people through conversion. Yaakov Ariel’s chapter, on unofficial conversions and the participation of such unofficial converts in contemporary American synagogues, and Dalia Marx’s more specific chapter on the participation of non-Jewish family members in bar/bat-mitzvah ceremonies focuses on non-Jews who have become an integral part of various Jewish communities without any formal conversion. Yaakov Ariel claims that the growing phenomenon of intermarriage on the one hand and groups of people drawn to Judaism for spiritual reasons along with the diversity of the American “religious and cultural market”, have opened the gates of the Jewish religious community to people who were not traditionally part of it. Ariel tracks these changes in detail and explains the various approaches that have developed in the American Jewish establishment and religious movements. According to him, the new non-Jewish joiners are bringing about an advantageous renewal to the American Jewish community. Dalia Marx’s chapter opens a window on the complex situation of Reform congregations where the demographic change of a growing population of non-Jewish family members is forcing the leaders of the community to deal with the question of their participation in religious ceremonies. Delineating the gradual change in response to this challenge, Marx notes: “rabbis and religious leaders understand that the ceremony can be the gateway into Jewish life, and at the same time, it can be an exit point”. Marla Brettschneider’s provocative chapter examines the Jewish American situation from a very particular socio-critical perspective. Presenting the United States as a Christian hegemonic country, not as open and pluralistic as it usually likes to present itself, Brettschneider suggests that the prevailing American Jewish discussion regarding “blurring boundaries” is not about Judaism as much as it is about Christian hegemony in the US context.

These chapters together demonstrate that Judaism and Jewishness are going through very profound changes in our time and it is clear that the constitution of the Jewish collective is being transformed throughout the world with the addition of many different varieties of New Jews.

This volume came about as a result of the happy confluence of two separate developments: one was the establishment of a research group at the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem under the direction of Netanel Fisher, while the other was the establishment of a unit devoted to these issues at Florida International University in Miami directed by Tudor Parfitt. Gabriel Motzkin was swift to perceive the possible synergies from these two developments. We owe him and the Van Leer Institute a great debt of gratitude. We would also like to thank Naftali Rothenberg, Dafna Schreiber, Shira Karagila of the Van Leer Institute for their invaluable assistance. Thanks are also due to Thomas Just, Nathan Katz and Jonathan Symons.

**OF THE SEED OF ISRAEL?
CLAIMING DESCENT FROM THE TEN LOST
TRIBES AND FORCED CONVERTS
(ANOUSIM)**

CHAPTER ONE

JOINING OR REJOINING THE JEWISH PEOPLE
IN AFRICA

TUDOR PARFITT

Introduction

Many of the chapters in this book are written from an internal Jewish perspective and deal with issues arising out of Jewish theology and practice. But inevitably there are other perspectives too, because many aspects of Judaism and Jewishness belong to the abstract realm of ideas and can therefore be accessed by anyone, Jew or gentile, who has the desire to access them. For hundreds of years some non-Jews have been fascinated by Judaism and have wished to join the Jewish people. In order to do so they were required to pass through some kind of process of conversion. Historical Christian and Muslim opposition to their faithful converting to another religion ensured that their numbers remained few. But since the period of the Enlightenment such religious and social barriers have gradually crumbled. This process is accelerating. Since the Second World War, in many western countries, changing from one religion to another has become entirely commonplace. By way of example it is now the case that around “half of the U.S. adult population has changed religion at some point in their life”.¹ Social and religious barriers and social attitudes have changed elsewhere too. Among other things, this has had the effect of bringing Judaism to a wider and wider audience in many parts of the world. Constructions of Judaism and Jewishness have developed into global constructs, manufactured in part by imaginary ethnography and sometimes by indistinct group memories, which touch peoples in every corner of the globe, of every colour, of every faith, of every ideology, and with the advances in the technology of communication, at a faster and faster rate. Throughout the world there are now vast numbers of people—very different from what we may call the Jewish mainstream—who already consider themselves in differing degrees

as belonging to the Jewish world and who, in some cases, are now ready to join the Jewish people in a more formal way.

Following a conference at the Van Leer Institute in November 2014 entitled ‘New Ways of Joining the Jewish People’ which was about the global surge of people wanting to be considered Jewish or wanting to become Jewish, an article in *Ha-Aretz* by Judy Maltz, entitled “Number of Wannabe Jews Equals That of Recognized Jews,” quoted the present author as saying that the estimated number of non-recognized “shadow Jews” worldwide may be approximately somewhere² between 13.5 million and 14 million people.³ This figure was then repeated in other media including Israeli TV and elsewhere and there was some controversy over both the figure (which was indeed the roughest of estimates) and the journalist’s use of the possibly pejorative term “wannabe Jews”. Over the intervening months media interest in the surge of emerging Jewish communities throughout the world has been kept alive by a flood of newspaper and scholarly articles, documentary films and books. During this same period within Israel there has been an ongoing debate about which authority should be permitted to conduct conversions and turn the aspirations of some of these “wannabe” Jews into various realities. Over the same period—and this gives some sense of the changing circumstances—Yona Metzger, the former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Israel was indicted on corruption charges—some of which involved his taking bribes from wealthy gentiles desperately eager to become Jewish.⁴ In response to such events in 1915 Mr. Dvir Kahana, the director general of Israel’s Ministry of the Diaspora created a committee to present recommendations as to what the State of Israel should be doing with some of these groups which it defines as “groups with ties to the Jewish people”⁵ which designation would be acceptable to some of the groups and yet offensive to others. “Some of these groups” said Kahane, “want some kind [of] association with the Jewish people and/or Israel, which raises the question of what ties the government should have with them”. So who are these emerging communities, what is the history of their association with Jews and what do they want from the State of Israel?

Emerging Jewish Communities

“Emerging” Jewish communities cover a wide spectrum. They include groups that claim descent from the so-called “lost tribes of Israel,” such as the *Bene Menashe* from Manipur and Mizoram in northeastern India whom you see often enough in the streets of Israel’s cities or the Bene Ephraim of Andhra Pradesh in central India. There are groups like the

House of Israel of Ghana, the Diaspora Jiosy Gasy (Malagasy Jewish Diaspora) of Madagascar, the Beth Yeshourun (House of the Righteous) of Cameroon, the Lemba of southern Africa and a number of communities from among the Igbo of Nigeria, some of them of great numeric significance, who also trace their origins to some remote, less defined but ancient Israelite population, all of which groups have been the object of recent scholarly investigation.⁶ Others are converts like the Abayudaya of Uganda whose warrior ancestors adopted a kind of Judaism around a hundred years ago. Other African groups with some form in the matter of being considered Jews include the Ashanti, Yoruba, Tutsi, Zulu, Xhosa, Masai, Bassa, Ibibio, Fula, Banyankole, Baluba, Khoikhoi, Shona, Makalanga, Esan, Efik, Amazigh (Berber), Baluba, Fon, Fulani, Meru, Nga, Soninke, Tiv, Yibir among others.⁷ Most but not all of the claims of such groups are dormant but new groups keep springing up and there are some recent ones numerically significant which are gathering momentum. Outside of Africa, others often cited as having links to ancient Israel include the Pashtuns of Pakistan and Afghanistan which are for the most part not particularly active, and the Maori of New Zealand. There are also many groups in Pacific islands with similar claims and in western New Guinea (formerly Irian Jaya), Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands hundreds of thousands perhaps millions of people actively claim Jewish origin. On Israel Independence Day you see more Israeli flags in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, than you might in many Israeli towns. We must also include “*bne anousim*”—descendants or people claiming descent from Jews forced to convert during the Spanish and Portuguese inquisitions who in South and Central America—in different forms and with different religious beliefs and practices, many of them Pentecostal Christians—number millions of adherents. Outside the Americas, in India, Africa and Indonesia there are groups which may trace their origins back to Portuguese and Spanish *anousim* who intermarried with local women, and have recently begun to interrogate their roots. Very often, their starting point is a realization that they are Jewish. Some wish to formalize this sense of identity; some do not. In 2014 Abigail Wiriaatmadja was one of seventy-five people in Indonesia of mixed ancestry who had always had a sense of being Jewish but who decided to convert formally to Judaism.⁸ Throughout the world today there are then millions of people who are not Jewish by conventional Jewish criteria but who in many cases consider themselves to be Jewish. Some of these lead what they consider to be Jewish lives and practise a number of Jewish rituals and some want to convert.

Colonial Constructions

One overall theme of this book concerns contemporary and recent ways of joining the Jewish people, which in some respects are different from traditional methods. One of the relatively new ways of being constructed as Jewish or constructing oneself as Jewish is via the colonial mechanism which was busy constructing Jews from the first western penetration of the Caribbean in 1492 through the colonial incursions into many parts of the world from the Pacific to Peru. Christian missionaries and colonists would frequently invoke the Bible to explain the strange religious and cultural practices they observed on the colonial frontier and would regularly and systematically explain such practices through the prism of descent from the ancient Israelites.⁹ Throughout this book scholars address some of the consequences of such colonial activity in the creation of communities from the Bene Menashe to the Bene Ephraim and from the Bene Israel to the Beta Israel. In Africa there are hundreds of thousands of Igbo and Tutsi, and syncretistic church members in Kenya, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and South Africa and countless other groups and tribes in Madagascar, Cameroon, Ivory Coast and elsewhere whose Jewish origins lie for the most part in these colonial constructions, although in some cases penetration of the interior in the sixteenth century by Portuguese *conversos* may underlie some Judaizing manifestations along both the eastern and western coasts of Africa.¹⁰

By now there is something of a *longue durée* in these affiliations and identities. Some Africans both in Africa itself and in the Americas have been claiming a Jewish identity or a Jewish origin for around two hundred years. Over time, the reasons for claiming an Israelite or Judaic identity have changed. During the colonial period very often the adoption of a form of Judaism was an attempt to acquire dignity and improve status by taking over the sacred history of colonial masters. This motivation was to be found in many African groups and social classes from the most disadvantaged to the elites. In Ghana for instance, when the king of the Ashanti Osei Agyeman Prempeh II was restored to the throne in 1935 he wrote a book demonstrating the pure Israelite origins of his dynasty as a way of stressing the legitimacy of his line and proving the sacredness of the Golden Stool.¹¹ Later, Africans with memories of the trans-Atlantic slave trade or more recent memories of genocides in Ruanda or Biafra felt a strong identification with the suffering of Jews historically and most strikingly during the Holocaust. But perhaps the strongest link in the chain that binds some Africans to Jews is a powerful ethnic and racial identification.

Fantasies of Race

In Africa, this process has much to do with nineteenth-century notions of race. With the weakening of biblical authority during the period of the Enlightenment round the end of the eighteenth century, new racial theories started to develop. One such theory, which was a blend of nineteenth-century racial theory and biblical exegesis, was called the Hamitic Hypothesis, which argued that people of a superior “racial” composition in the African continent were the descendants of Ham and that they had conquered the “negro” population at some remote point in history. The Hamitic hypothesis was conventional academic wisdom from about 1800 until around 1965. The Hypothesis conscripted biblical history and what was becoming known of the history of ancient Egypt in such a way as to make Caucasians the legitimate heirs of these histories, neatly excluding “negro” Africans from this Eurocentric framework, while preparing the ground for the conferral of a ready-made history on certain other groups of favoured Africans who were considered to be closer in looks and behaviour to Europeans. “Hamites” now began to refer to a variety of lighter-skinned peoples who were thought to descend from the ancient Egyptians, Phoenicians, Canaanites, Ethiopians and Israelites.¹² A good deal of western investigation of “Hamitic” tribes was associated with establishing “sameness” between them and Europeans. This was a way of proposing that these superior Africans had some kind of a link with their colonial European masters and their sacred history, while “negroid” Africans had no such links. Edmund Dene Morel (1873-1924), the British journalist, wrote ecstatically of the remarkable knowledge one of these superior Hamitic tribes—the Fula—had of the Hebrew legends and of their wonderful racial characteristics: “the straight-nosed, straight-haired, relatively thin-lipped, wiry, copper or bronze complexioned Fulani male, with his well-developed cranium, and refined extremities; and the Fulani woman, with her clear skin, her rounded breasts...”¹³ These superior peoples were often dubbed Israelites while perceived Jewish physical and other characteristics were systematically attributed to them throughout the African continent. At the same time, their religious practices and beliefs were explained, systematically, as being the product of some ancient Israelite template. The creation, suggestion or imposition of identities, narratives and histories by colonists, missionaries and others was a modern reiteration of mediaeval works including by the ninth-century Jewish writer Eldad ha-Dani, Christian Prester Johns and the fabulously successful Sir John Mandeville which had insisted that the unknown heart of Africa was peopled by Jews.

Internalising Extraneous Constructions

In time these constructions were internalized, and created a vast number of Judaising or Israelite communities throughout Africa. The number of tribes who have at some point or another been constructed in this way, as we have seen above, is staggering. In Nigeria alone, there are hundreds of thousands perhaps millions of people who believe that they are descended from ancient Israelites. In addition, there are emerging Jewish communities or Judaising communities throughout Africa from Uganda to Kenya, from Cameroon to Zimbabwe to South Africa to Ghana who to one extent or another owe their genesis to colonial intervention.

Jewish Outreach

The Zionist movement had anticipated that substantial numbers of the six million Jews lost in the Holocaust would provide immigrants for their great project of building a Jewish state in Palestine. With their loss, the Zionist leadership first brought in survivors from the DP camps. Then Zionist agents trawled the Arab and Muslim world and flew in hundreds of thousands of Jews from around the Middle East in airlifts such as Operation Magic Carpet (1949) and Operation Ezra and Nehemiah (1952) which brought in the ancient communities of the Yemen and Iraq. But it was feared that with the hostility of the surrounding Arab and Muslim states even this influx might not be enough to create a demographically viable state. Where else could immigrants be found? Once the full scale of the Holocaust became known, in about 1946, a group of influential and high-ranking Jews living in Palestine anticipated the demographic problem a future Jewish state might face and made the decision that the Holocaust losses would need to be replenished. To this end, a number of bodies were set up including the *agudah le-ma'an gere tzedek be-yisrael uva-olam* (the Association for Righteous Converts in Israel and the World) and the *agudah le-ma'an nidhei yisrael* (Association for the Lost Tribes of Israel). The latter proclaimed “in the early days of our history several tribes separated from the great Golah of ‘Beith Israel’. They wandered as far as China, India and Abyssinia and even reached the American Continent thus becoming estranged tribes...Now with the establishment of the Jewish State it is our noble duty to bring these alienated brethren back to us”. The chief players in this association were Jacques Faitlovitch, scholar of Ethiopian languages and culture and the so-called Father of the Falashas or Beta Israel; Nahum Slouschz, the Hebrew scholar and intrepid traveller in North Africa; the ecumenically minded journalist Shalom ben Chorin

(1913-1999); and the Labor Zionist pioneer, scholar of some of the marginal groups of Judaism, and second president of the State of Israel, Yitzhak Ben Zvi. These and other individuals shared a utopian and quasi-messianic vision that went far beyond the normative Zionist goal of bringing Jews to their ancestral homeland. These associations decided that the time was ripe for Judaism to do what it had rarely done before—proselytize throughout the world. Indeed shortly before his death in 1955, Faitlovitch was making plans to set off for Japan to set up a Jewish outreach centre there.¹⁴ It was also believed that the time had arrived for the Jewish world to incorporate the “estranged tribes”, mainly in Africa, but elsewhere as well, who were looking for a way to join or rejoin the Jewish people.¹⁵ In the *imaginaire* of the western world—Jewish and gentile—the idea that the unknown continent of Africa was peopled with Jews, among others, had prevailed at least since the ninth century. In the dark days after the Holocaust it was perhaps to be expected that Jews would look around the world anxiously hoping to be able to replenish the human reservoir of their people—and Africa was thought to be a promising pool of candidates. These associations received a number of informative communications about various African groups and decided that they could and should be brought into the Jewish fold. Moreover, they discovered to their surprise that beyond the confines of Africa the world was not deficient in peoples who were longing to be considered Jews. To them this must have been a source of some considerable astonishment because who, in the 1940s in the shadow of the greatest genocide the world had seen, could have imagined that there were people volunteering to be Jewish?¹⁶

Estranged Tribes or Constructed Jews

I shall now describe the processes by which a couple of these “estranged tribes” have evolved as Jews or been socially constructed as Jews and I shall try to assess their place in the Jewish world. The two communities which I propose to take as case studies are the Beta Israel or Ethiopian Jews and the Lemba tribe of southern Africa. One question here is: were the Beta Israel and the Lemba constructed out of European myths and racist and colonial fantasies of the “other”, or are they “authentic” historical Jewish communities, who may be viewed as descending from some ancient Israelite, Hebrew or Jewish stock? A secondary question of much greater importance is does it matter?

The Lost Tribes of Israel

Biblical prophecy maintained that one day the Lost Tribes of Israel, exiled 2700 years ago, would one day return to the Land of Israel. It followed therefore that they must still exist in the world in some remote place. The creation of the Lost Tribes topos was a joint Judeo-Christian enterprise which spanned most of the Christian era. One of the key players in the elaboration of the myth as it related to Africa was a ninth-century Jew called Eldad, who wrote an account in Hebrew of the ongoing existence of the Lost Tribes on African soil. Elements of Eldad's account were incorporated into the documents attributed to Sir John Mandeville—the most widely read work of travel in the mediaeval period, which placed some of the Lost Tribes in Africa—and also into the works of the Muslim convert to Christianity Leo Africanus who spoke of Jewish law being practised in Africa as well as the existence of a number of Jewish kingdoms in the interior. The widespread nature of this discourse and its continuing relevance over time may be adduced from the fact that when the British were planning a first expedition up the Niger in 1842 to the unknown interior, two London rabbis asked the expedition leaders to take with them letters, in Hebrew and English, which they were to hand to the spiritual leaders of any Jewish communities the Expedition might encounter along the banks of the Niger. That two busy rabbis should take the time to compose letters to lost Jewish groups in the African interior is proof enough that the discourse surrounding Jews in Africa was still taken very seriously, even by experts on Jews. The Sephardi rabbi David Aaron de Sola (1796-1860) wrote to his putative African co-religionists: "Peace to our Brethren the children of Israel in all places of their habitations. I the servant of the Lord named David is he who writes this in order to inquire after your welfare and the number of your souls, and wishes also to know your occupation and what books are to be found amongst you after the conclusion of the Talmud, and to what customs you are adhered."¹⁷ These mediaeval fantasies were gradually buttressed by the construction of newly encountered people as Jews and became an innate feature of colonialism as travellers, missionaries and colonists endeavoured to reconstruct the outer margins and limits of European society by re-constructing its most visible religious and ethnic minority.

Jews in Ethiopia

For hundreds of years Ethiopia was the locus *par excellence* of the Israelites-in-Africa myth and until the nineteenth century, attempts were

still being made to locate the Lost Tribes of Israel in and around this mountainous African kingdom. The mediaeval world buzzed with strange rumours of the Lost Tribes and other Judaic peoples in Ethiopia. The arrival in Rome's San Stefano degli Abissini monastery at the end of the fifteenth century began to provide some more reliable-sounding information. Abraham Farissol (c.1451-c.1525) the great Sephardi polemicist and geographer who spent most of his life in Ferrara commented on accounts he had heard from "the black priests, who relate in detail the reality of many Jews among them (in Ethiopia)". Further information about Israelites in Ethiopia was provided by the seventeenth-century Portuguese Jesuit missionary Balthazar Tellez (1595-1675) who wrote "there are still many of these Jews, whom they there call Falaxas. These still have Hebrew Bibles, and sing the Psalms very scurvily in their synagogues". Tellez and Farissol both constructed the Beta Israel as Jews. Tellez claimed they had "no settled dwelling" and suggested (falsely) that they owned Hebrew texts and spoke Hebrew "but with much corruption in the Words, as" he stressed "there is in their Lives and Manners". In reality, the Beta Israel community had no knowledge at all of Hebrew. There is no mention in any of the literature that they owned or held any Hebrew texts, of any description, but of course Jews elsewhere in the world had Hebrew texts, as Tellez knew, and knew Hebrew, and therefore in order to construct their Jewishness, Tellez made the Beta Israel Hebrew-speaking and singing and provided them with Hebrew books.¹⁸ For those travellers and missionaries who penetrated the kingdom, the construction of extraneous origins for some of Ethiopia's peoples was a way of accounting for certain unexpected phenomena such as sophisticated building, complex social structures or Israelite-like practices as was the case elsewhere in Africa and the world, along the lines of the Hamitic hypothesis.

When the Scots traveller James Bruce who travelled in Ethiopia between 1769 and 1774 came across the Beta Israel they explained "that they came with Menelik from Jerusalem" so Bruce could note "that they perfectly agree with the Abyssinians in the story of the Queen of Saba" and that they had arrived at the time of King Solomon. As a result of western influence however non-Beta Israel sources began to suggest that the Beta Israel were not noble Israelites but Johnny-come-lately Jewish Christ killers who had come to Ethiopia after the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70. Their status as Jewish immigrants from Palestine starting with Farissol and Tellez became institutionalized when the Swiss Lutheran missionary Samuel Gobat (1799-1879) urged the London Society for the Promoting of Christianity amongst the Jews to take over the mission to the Beta Israel which it did in 1859. There was not exactly

a stampede on the part of western Jews to go and greet their long-lost black brethren in Ethiopia. Filosseno Luzzato (1829-1854) the erudite Italian Sephardi scholar was one of the first to take an interest when he read about them in Bruce's *Travels* when he was a young lad. Subsequently he made contact with the Franco-Irish traveller and *savant*, Antoine d'Abbadie, who travelled in Ethiopia between 1837 and 1848, whose replies to Luzzato's probing questions made their way into the European Jewish press including the *Jewish Chronicle* in London. Despite this, western Jews only started to show anything other than a superficial interest in them once it became known the Beta Israel were being targeted as Jews by the London Society.¹⁹

The Beta Israel certainly did not perceive themselves as Jews (*ayhud* in the Ge'ez language). They thought of themselves as Israelites. In earlier periods, *ayhud* had been one of several derogatory designations for the Beta Israel by Christians, but the term was equally used to describe pagans or Christian heretics. It was never used by the Beta Israel of themselves. Joseph Halévy (1827-1917) the Ottoman born Jewish-French Orientalist and traveller, most famous for his remarkable journeys in the Yemen, and the first western Jew to my knowledge to contact the Beta Israel, did not realize this when, in 1867, he went to Ethiopia as an emissary of the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*. At his first encounter with the Beta Israel he whispered in Amharic "Are you Jews?" They looked a little embarrassed but didn't respond. Then he asked, "Are you Israelites?" and, as he wrote, "A movement of assent mingled with astonishment, proved to me that I had struck the right chord". Jacques Faitlovitch (1881-1955) did much to consolidate a construction of the Beta Israel as non-Ethiopian outsiders descended from a pre-Talmudic lost tribe of Israel which had found its way from ancient Israel to Ethiopia.²⁰ This racial-religious construction was accompanied by another racial construction which was at odds with the Beta Israel's account of themselves: the construction of the community as black. The colour terms in Ethiopia include "white" for foreigners (*ferenji*), "red" (*qey*), "black" (*t'equr*) and "light brown" (*t'eyem*). The Beta Israel never considered themselves as the "racially inferior" *t'equr* but as *qey* or *t'eyem*. If you were *t'equr* the chances were that you were a slave. Faitlovitch described the Beta Israel both as Jews and "black". "They have kept the flag of Judaism flying in their country" he wrote "and can proudly proclaim 'We are black but comely'".²¹ Thus from the nineteenth century Beta Israel were constructed as black Jews, who had come to Ethiopia at some time past from the land of Israel. They are still widely accepted as black Jews, of non-African origin and their "blackness" and foreignness have

underpinned most discussions of the Beta Israel to this day. Once the Beta Israel rejected the appellations “Jew” and “black”, but now in Israel where they are universally known as “Ethiopian Jews”—and often as “black Jews”—they have been obliged to accept them.

Following the usual logic of the Hamitic Hypothesis “Jewish” features were soon discerned among the Beta Israel. Henry Aaron Stern (1820-1885), a German Jewish convert to Christianity who worked as a missionary to the Beta Israel with the London Society, observed of them: “there were some whose Jewish features no one could have mistaken who had ever seen the descendants of Abraham either in London or Berlin. Their complexion is a shade paler than that of the Abyssinians, and their eyes, although black and sparkling, are not so disproportionately large as those which characteristically mark the other occupants of the land”.

In other words, not only did these people follow Jewish customs and the Jewish faith, they also looked like European, Ashkenazi Jews. A member of the Beta Israel community, who spent many years outside Ethiopia and who had internalized these constructions of Beta Israel appearance mentioned to a western researcher that the community could recognize one another by their faces and particularly by their Jewish noses. Some foreign observers, persuaded that the Beta Israel were Jews, thought that their skin colour was temporary and that once they moved to the more temperate climate of the land of Israel it would revert to an appropriately Jewish off-white. Attempts to discover phenotypical features specific to the Beta Israel continue until modern times. In a hostile pre-review of my book *Operation Moses*, the president of the American Association for Ethiopian Jewry disputed my claim that the Beta Israel looked very much like other Ethiopians. He claimed that he had observed that “a different degree of blackness of skin characterizes the Falasha from other Ethiopian tribes...they are less African and more Mediterranean than the others—they have less frequency of African associated chromosomes”.²²

In other words, the same kind of process has been at work among the Beta Israel as pertained during the same period among many other constructed Jewish groups from Africa to Australia.²³ We now know that the origins of the Beta Israel do not lie either in the Lost Tribe of Dan, as claimed by the Israeli Sephardi Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef, nor in the Jewish colony of Elephantine on the Nile, nor yet in wandering Karaites as some have claimed, but rather in the evolution of an entirely legitimate form of Judaic faith in Ethiopia which may have grown out of Ethiopian Christianity. This scholarly de-construction carried out over the last three decades and since about 1999 supported by geneticists, has produced a somewhat different perspective on Beta Israel history “which denies

their direct links to any ancient Jewish groups, dates their emergence as a separate people to the last five hundred years, and places their evolution firmly in the context of Ethiopian history and society".²⁴

This body of work, which inevitably has been seen as politically incorrect in Israel, given that the Beta Israel are now citizens of the Jewish State and, as relatively poorly educated newcomers, have enough problems as it is, has shown that in fact there is no "blood" connection between the Beta Israel and Jews elsewhere. Yet a good deal of scholarly and publicistic writing continues to maintain, along the lines of the Hamitic Hypothesis (and despite a truly impressive lack of evidence) that the Beta Israel were blood relatives of mainstream Jews. What can be said is that a form of Judaism was practised on Ethiopian soil for hundreds of years by indigenous Africans, they suffered as a result and when they were rescued by Israel from refugee camps in Sudan during the Great Ethiopian Famine of 1984 they were the first black people ever taken out of Africa not in chains.²⁵

The Lemba

The historical evolution of the southern African Lemba tribe has a good deal in common with that of the Beta Israel although our knowledge of its origins is by necessity more speculative given the total or near total absence of any documentary evidence before the eighteenth century. Since the beginning of the twentieth century many Lemba have claimed to be of Israelite origin, and many Europeans have made similar claims for them, although until now these claims have been denied by most South African Jews. The Lemba claim to have come from "Sena" which they placed across the sea, somewhere in the north, is similar to Hamitic Hypothesis induced traditions found among very many African ethnic groups. Much of the colonial, travel and early ethnographic literature on the Lemba proposes an extraneous origin. From the first weeks of colonial intervention in the areas they inhabited, the Lemba tribe were identified as Jews and defined in precisely the same way as so many other peoples have been before and since, and for reasons embedded in the worldview of the Hamitic Hypothesis. Within months of the arrival of white settlement in Mashonaland an English colonist noted the similarity between Lemba customs and those of the Jews. These customs, he wrote, "together with their lighter skin and their Jewish appearance distinctly point to the ancient impress of Edomite Jews".²⁶

Over the last few decades as prevailing attitudes about "race" and Africa have changed, the construction of the Lemba as a "Jewish" and

non-African community, particularly given their claim to have been associated with the highly sophisticated monolithic building tradition of the Great Zimbabwe civilisation—one of the glories of Black Africa—which are situated more or less in the middle of present-day Zimbabwe—has taken on a somewhat politically incorrect character particularly among Africanists, much in the same way as the contrary presentation of the Beta Israel as an African people has taken on a politically incorrect colouring in Israel.²⁷

In many respects, the modern identity of the Lemba seems to have been constructed by outside observers following the usual paradigm of the Hamitic Hypothesis. The Lemba are physically similar to their African neighbours in South Africa and Zimbabwe and (to me at any rate indistinguishable). Members of the tribe display a wide degree of colour variation as do many other neighbouring peoples but in general they are termed black and their “look” if one can generalize, is similar to that of other local groups. This did not prevent the travellers who ventured into Lemba areas in the past, and who thought of the Lemba as Jews or Semites, expressing the conviction as others did with respect to the Beta Israel, that the Lemba had phenotypical traits which confirmed their extraneous racial origin. An English writer in the 1890s spoke of “the lighter skin and Jewish appearance” of the Lemba. Another described a Lemba group whose “noses are straight, and not flattened out at the base like those of the true African. It was easy to believe that they were descended from some scattered remnant of the great Hebrew race.” Karl Peters—the sadistic founder of German East Africa—and later a childhood hero of Adolf Hitler, writing of Lemba in the 1890s noted: “How absolutely Jewish is the type of this people!” He wrote, “they have faces cut exactly like those of ancient Jews who live around Aden. Also the way they wear their hair, the curls behind the ears, and the beard drawn out in single curls, gives them the appearance of Aden—or of Polish—Jews of the good old type”. There is little possibility that Karl Peters really came across Lemba in the nineteenth century with sidecurls (*peot*). Did he imagine it? Did the various aspects of Lemba life so perfectly conform with what he knew of Jews as to project upon his memory the one most obvious point of physical difference between Adeni Muslims and Jews, or between the *Ostjuden* of the time and Germans—the sidecurls?²⁸

A.A. Jaques noted in 1931 that European people of the northern Transvaal claimed to be able to distinguish a Lemba from his features and Jaques agreed, “many Lemba have straight noses, rather fine features and an intelligent expression which distinguish them from the ordinary run of