



# The Untouchables reach out

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It was an incongruous scene. Here we were, looking at a huge modern sugar factory, set back among miles of rice paddies, being stocked with sugarcane. But there were no sophisticated tractor-trailers for transporting the crop — instead, there were small, lumbering, bull-drawn carriages with a driver holding a whip sitting high atop piles of the cane. Our escort explained to us that the factory is actually cutting edge, but that if the cane would no longer be brought by these small carriages, many people would lose their jobs. Welcome to India of 2016 and how the incongruity of modernity and old-world behaviors affect this nation of over 1 billion people.

Our guide knows all too well about this phenomenon of old and new existing side by side. Because he's part of an old-new group who call themselves Telugu Jews. Tucked away in the southeast of this massive subcontinent, where Telugu is the spoken language, is a small and largely unknown community who claims descent from the lost tribe of Ephraim — the self-proclaimed Bnei Ephraim or Telugu Jews.

The story of this community is truly remarkable, and what they lack in contact with other Jews they are compensating for with effort and desire. The core of the congregation is really just one family — the family of Shmuel Yacobi and his brother Sadok.

**Lost Links** It is important to understand that while legally nonexistent, the caste system is still very much alive in India — and this played a major role in Shmuel Yacobi's search for his own roots. The caste system is a social stratification that gives certain groups prominence and others a hard climb out of poverty. The lowest of the lowest are the “untouchables.” They traditionally were not touched — the ones who cleaned the outhouses and swept the streets. Shmuel Yacobi is the eldest of six children and they are from the untouchable caste. Their father Yacob, however, understood that education was the only way up and out, and so he enlisted in the Indian army during World War II, learned English, acquired an education, and became a schoolteacher.

The family had been practicing Christianity from the time missionaries came to India in the 1800s, and once Shmuel Yacobi internalized his father's message, he learned English and became a Christian preacher. Life was good, his salary was respectable, and he established international connections and traveled — yet he was becoming unsettled, feeling a growing disaffection with the Christian world.

Shmuel and his brothers remembered their grandmother telling them that although they were subsumed under the umbrella of Madigas, a Telugu untouchable caste, they descended from Jews. In the early 1980s Shmuel visited Israel for the first time, and, after encountering



people of the modern world actually living Judaism, returned to India intent on living as a Jew himself.

Shmuel eventually convinced his siblings and about 30 other families from his home village to join him in this new religious frontier. His two brothers, Sadok and Aaron, became leaders with him in the community — teaching themselves Hebrew and studying Torah with the materials Shmuel brought from Israel on his initial trip and on two subsequent trips within the next few years.

In 1992 he and his brothers established the Bnei Ephraim congregation — officially called the “House of the Children of Yacobi” — whose members, although certainly not Jewish according to halachah, began living as Jews. (Aaron, a young man at the time, died of tuberculosis in 1993.)

Shmuel Yacobi believes that descendants of the Lost Tribe of Ephraim, originally displaced in what became the Persian Empire, continued their wanderings until ultimately coming to northern India and Afghanistan and eventually settling in nascent Telugu-speaking areas sometime in the ninth or tenth century. He hypothesizes that there was a significant influence of Hebrew on Telugu, having found sources for many words in proto-Telugu.

Furthermore, according to Yacobi, ancient Jewish texts and traditions were used by the local inhabitants in the formulation of their own religions and cultures. He further argues that these Telugu Jews remained a separate and distinct group for many centuries, until Baptist missionaries arrived in the 1800s and converted much of the population to Christianity.

Today, he says, although there are only a few Bnei Ephraim who are aware of what he believes to be their true Israelite origins, he presents and explains his theories in his densely written *The Cultural Hermeneutics: An Introduction to the Cultural Translations of the Hebrew Bible among the Ancient Nations of the Thalmulic Telugu Empire of India* — a 400-page work that he published in 2002.

**Jewish Hospitality** Evidence or not, over the years Yacobi’s group has attracted dozens of additional followers, and it is this community that we were going to meet. We had been leading an OU mission to Jewish India before Purim earlier this year, but had informed the organizers in advance that we would be peeling off from the group on the final day and a half in order to visit this little-known community. We advised our Bnei Ephraim contact that we were really keen on visiting, and that although we would be on the ground for less than 24 hours, we were willing to sleep little in order to meet as many people from their community as possible.

It is a poor community (poor even by Indian standards), although many years ago Shmuel Yacobi helped the members become self-supporting with projects such as organic farming, water buffalo raising, and other small businesses. Today, some of the families still have a few water buffalo that they raise near their home for personal use. They have also received some assistance from the US-based Kulanu organization for poultry and water buffalo projects.

Considering that there are actually two Bnei Ephraim communities located several hours apart, we knew that our schedule would be tight. But when our suggested itinerary arrived by e-mail, we were shocked to see that we would be teaching and speaking with them until after 2 a.m. and then reconvening for Shacharis at 7 a.m. We assumed that it was a

bit of hyperbole, but responded that we were good to go. It turned out not to be an exaggeration, and the group that we dialogued with until the wee hours of the morning spanned ages 7 to 77.

Shmuel was actually in Israel during our visit to his hometown in India, and thus we only met him upon our return to Israel. But to describe the communal welcome — even without their leader — as enthusiastic would be a gross understatement. We were received at the small airport in the city of Vijayawada, in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, by a welcoming committee in three cars — the lead one containing a large poster on the front windshield with our pictures on it. We felt a bit like the grand marshals in a parade. If this community’s Jewish lineage is questionable, their Jewish trait of hospitality is well-honed — we were first taken to the home of Shmuel’s sister Jemima, in Vijayawada, just so that we could freshen up, have a drink, and use the restroom before starting the two-hour drive to Kotha Reddy Palem outside the city of Guntur. Jemima’s family also has another Jewish trait: her daughter, son, and son-in-law are all doctors.

We arrived in Kotha Reddy Palem to a different world. These are rural, poor, lower-caste Indians. Nearly all of them are Madiga caste and work in fields. But we pulled up in front of an unmistakable synagogue with Jewish symbols on its facade. While Shmuel had moved to the “big city” of Vijayawada in the late 1980s to found an open university that offers correspondence courses in Torah and Hebraic studies, the community center remained in Kotha Reddy Palem, as did the “shul,” called the Bnei Yacobi Synagogue.

Although they have no pictures or any other documentation, they assert that the synagogue building is on a site that previously marked a small secret synagogue — and the sign over the entrance indeed states “established 1909.” Sadok is the devoted and highly capable leader of this community and spends his time teaching Torah to its members. Their first outside visitor was Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail

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- 1. TIED TO THE TRIBE** In this forsaken Indian village, we faced a packed room of Telugus — already practicing Judaism and thirsty to learn more
- 2. SCROLL UP** In the Bnei Ephraim house of worship, Ari G. takes a paper Torah from the *aron kodesh*. It may not be halachic, but it’s a symbol of passionate allegiance
- 3. WHO’S COUNTING?** It looked like any Shacharis minyan, but we were the only Jews in shul
- 4. MAKING IT KOSHER** The Telugus have their own rules about ritual slaughtering, but were eager to know how to halachically sharpen a knife and perform *shechitah*
- 5. JEWISH HOSPITALITY** Draped in wreaths and a wrap reserved for honored guests, we were given the VIP treatment — even escorted by a motorcade



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z”l of the Amishav organization in 1994, and they have had a few more since them, some staying as long as a month. But this community is both under the Jewish radar and off the beaten track; visitors are still considered a rarity, so they want to gain maximally from everyone who comes.

**Kosher Chicken?** The community had a full schedule planned for us. Gathered in the synagogue was an overflow crowd on chairs and on the floor, eager for knowledge. [As to the prohibition against teaching Torah to non-Jews, we discussed the various halachic opinions and *heterim* in a previous article, “Praying for Zion in Tamil” — Issue #570.] The evening began with a *shiur*/lecture, and with Purim coming up, we spoke about the halachos and meaning behind *mishloach manos* as well as some general Jewish philosophy. While we spoke in English, Sadok was simultaneously translating into Telugu.

Then there was the singing. In general, many beginners find expression through song as music stirs their souls and makes them feel part of a group. Same with the Telugu Jews — they sang some well-known Jewish songs that they had learned from tapes that visitors had left, as well as from videos on the Internet. Sadok also sang a rendition of “Esa Einai” to a

**While the poverty-class Bnei Yacob congregation (left) is primarily made up of Shmuel Yacobi’s extended family, the more urban Bnei Ephraim kehillah in Machilipatnam (right) are his students, not his relatives**



**Ari Z. gets together with Shmuel Yacobi and his son Yehoshua in Israel. Will other Telugus follow them to the Holy Land?**



tune composed by his brother Shmuel. Music is such an integral part of their services that in 2012 they published a booklet called *Tehillos Ephraim: Bnei Ephraim Community Songs*.

As the group is strict about observing kashrus laws, from the moment we first made e-mail contact, they kept asking if we could teach them *shechitah*. We explained that it’s impossible to learn *shechitah* in one visit, and that there are myriad laws to learn, practical knowledge to acquire, and lots of experience to accrue in order to be able to slaughter properly. They were particularly excited that we could at least give them a *shechitah* demonstration, though. They procured two chicks, and with a large group of spectators all around us, Yacob, one of Sadok’s sons, demonstrated how they perform *shechitah*. While it would certainly not be kosher, it was fascinating to see how they had developed their own tradition, clearly an attempt at imitating *shechitah*, which contained certain elements of our tradition. They had rules about the knife, about how to hold the bird, and about bleeding it out. Yacob knew how to recite the *brachah* on *shechitah* in Hebrew, and even knew the same for the mitzvah of *kisui hadam*, covering up some of the blood after the slaughter. After Yacob showed us how they do it, Ari G. sharpened a knife and showed them how we do *shechitah*.

Then came the most interesting part of the evening — the question-and-answer session. Community members asked if we would be willing to field questions and we said we would answer what we could. The questions were varied and intelligent and showed real knowledge and excitement to learn more.

There was no politics or small talk, just practical questions about halachah, liturgy, and *hashkafah*.

It was easy to forget where we were. Was this an NCSY Shabbaton or a group of lost Jewish descendants in some forsaken Indian village? There was no running water, the toilet in back was an outhouse, and the kitchen was primitive. This region is the poorest of the poor and these rural untouchables are from the lowest strata in India. Yet, here we were, engaged in a real Torah exchange. The little kids were up to speed about the basics of *brachos* and the *parshah* and the older people had serious questions. The men and women naturally sat separately, as is the custom of these modest people and culture.

At the beginning, many of the questions were coming from the men’s side. But when the women began asking, it was clear there was a superstar in the room — Sadok’s daughter Keziya really knows her stuff! We asked Keziya what the women do on Friday night, and she described candlelighting and even recited the *brachos* for Shabbos and Yom Tov lights. We asked about Motzaei Shabbos, and she recited Havdalah from memory. When she got to the *brachah* on spices, she stopped and said, “now it depends on what spice you have,” and proceeded in quite a scholarly fashion to discuss the three different *brachos* that can be said depending on the source of the aroma.

Just try and visualize this image: We were sitting with Sadok on a small table up front and 25 or so men were seated to our left on rows of chairs in front of us, with kids either on their laps or on the floor; the “*aron kodesh*” was in front, containing a paper Tanach; and the women — both married and single — sat on the floor to the right, draped in vivid-colored saris with modest scarves over their heads.

What was on their mind? One woman wanted to know what to do for Kiddush if one doesn’t have wine or grape juice — could one use sugar water? The obvious answer was that they should make Kiddush on the challah. We were shocked by the next question: Is this equally valid for Friday night and Shabbos day? The distinction is of course correct, and the challah solution is only acceptable Friday night. (On Shabbos day, since there is no real Kiddush except for the *brachah* on wine, if there is no wine or grape juice, then it is appropriate to make a *brachah* on another drink before *hamotzi*, in order to set the meal apart from a regular weekday meal.) Another interesting question was whether there are special clothes for synagogue attendance, which precipitated a discussion about both the role of clothing and proper respect for shul.

**Night of Questions** It’s truly amazing how much knowledge this community has, and much of it can be attributed to Shmuel Yacobi and his wife Malka, who are highly educated, intelligent individuals. They continue to study, research, and teach. Today their livelihood is predominantly from teaching Bible to everyone, but their true passion is learning and teaching about Judaism to their community. Shmuel has apparently undergone a proper conversion with a US *beis din*,

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and is currently in Israel trying to work out his status in the Holy Land.

His son Yehoshua, though, is so far the only Bnei Ephraim member to successfully make aliyah. He arrived in Israel in 1993, began studying in Dvar Yerushalayim and after six months transferred to Yeshivas Nachalas Zvi. During that time he converted and then continued learning for another two years. Today he lives in Bnei Brak and we had met him both before our visit and several times since.

In fact, it was Yehoshua who served as our translator via Skype on our next stop two hours away, in the town of Machilipatnam. Here poverty wasn't so acute — in fact it was what, for India, is considered middle class. This crowd was more urban, and was made up primarily of Shmuel Yacobi's students — unlike the first group, which included many members of the extended Yacobi family. Some in Machilipatnam were actually children and grandchildren of Indians who had served in Palestine as members of the British military during World War II and were somehow attracted to Judaism and found the Yacobi family.

Arriving at 11 p.m., we were escorted into the home of a man named Israel Sudhir, where we found about 50 people waiting for us, with Yehoshua on Skype from his home in Bnei Brak. Israel's son Aharon has been learning in Yeshivas Machon Meir in Jerusalem since 2014. We sat in the front of a packed living room, wreathed in a thick beautiful garland of flowers — and Yehoshua from Bnei Brak didn't fail us. First the kids did a show for us singing some Hebrew songs and it was absolutely adorable. They asked to be taught a new song and in the spirit of Purim we taught them "LaYehudim Haysa Orah."

This was followed by another question-and-answer session, and some of those questions caught us off guard. They asked what to do if they are invited to a non-Jew's house on Shabbos. Are they permitted to go? An interesting query, considering they aren't really Jews either. We naturally discussed kashrus concerns and they asked about keeping kosher in general. They wanted to know how to *kasher* meat, and they wanted

to know if Jews have a custom like Indians do of cutting a baby's hair at one year. They then asked a question about the different types of wood mentioned in the Torah — what is the difference between the cedar of Lebanon and acacia wood used in making the Aron Kodesh? They asked whether Yisro or Iyov were full Jews, and wanted to know how sacrifices were brought in the Temple. They are knowledgeable and immersed in Jewish topics, and in fact when a group of local messianic Christians wanted to join them, it led to a temporary disagreement within the community, but in the end they decided to keep them out.

Then the questions moved to a more complicated subject. Although some have a dream of being Jewish and staying where they are, others asked if we could help them come to Israel. We needed to tread lightly — firstly we have no official standing on that question, and secondly we needed to explain to them that there is a dichotomy between wanting to be Jewish and the ability to make aliyah.

**The Biggest Donation** By 2:30 a.m. we were exhausted, but they were still happy to continue. We tried to extricate ourselves and when we did, they took us out to the street they are trying to have renamed as "Synagogue Street" (their synagogue is at the end of the street), insisting we see their house of worship. When we got outside, there was a tremendous racket in the distance. It turns out that there was a Hindu festival going on in which they stay up all night in their temple singing. The temple was across a big open field from the street we were on and the voices of the thousands of Hindus could be clearly heard in the crisp nocturnal air.

On the way to the synagogue, the "*chaz-zan*" took us into his home adjacent to the shul. There were indeed some *seforim* on the shelves, and Jewish pictures and a tallis hanging on the wall — next to a black hat. Again, the absurdity of the moment hit us. We were in a community of not-yet-Jewish Indians devoted to Hashem, in the house of a *chaz-zan* who has *seforim* on his shelf and a black hat on his door. All of this thousands of miles

from any Jewish *kehillah* — with a cacophony of Hindu prayers across the field. We finally bid our hosts good night, promising we'd join them for Shacharis in a few hours.

In the morning, we came back to the shul, where indeed a regular weekday davening was taking place. As we prepared to take our leave, two poignant events occurred that spoke volumes about the sincerity of these people. Somebody came up to us with a thick envelope and handed it to us and, knowing we were leading an OU mission, asked us to give it to the OU as a donation. Knowing how poor these people were, the gesture was astounding — but we explained that charity begins at home and that they should disperse it to their own needy. And then, as we were with one foot in the car, ready to go to the airport, a young man came over and asked us to send him tzitzis. Shlomo Carlebach once told us about a person he met in Russia who asked him to send him a *kippah*. Shlomo took his off and handed it to the young man, telling us how all the *frum* people stared at him because he flew to Israel and landed without a yarmulke. Thinking of Shlomo, Ari G. took off his tzitzis and handed the garment to him.

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Are the Telugu Jews really descendants of the Tribe of Ephraim? It's impossible to know. But they are certainly a group of individuals striving to increase their connection to G-d and the Jewish People. In our Midrashic tradition, the "Bnei Ephraim" had such a burning desire to leave Egypt and get to the Land of Israel that they miscalculated the time of the redemption by 30 years, took weapons and left Egypt on their own initiative, and in the end were slaughtered in the fields of the Pelishtim. Yet according to *Targum Yonasan* on Shemos 13:17, this impetuous act did not go unrewarded — they are the "dry bones" that would be resurrected according to the prophet Yechezkel's vision.

Today's "Bnei Ephraim" are patiently waiting their turn to rejoin the Jewish People and come to the Promised Land. They are coming with books rather than spears, and rather than preceding the nation, they are hoping to follow the rest of us home. ●