

The women are draped in saris and the men have that unmistakable swarthy Indian visage, but the yarmulkes on their heads, the rousing clapping in rhythm to the traditional Jewish songs, the supplications for peace in Israel, and the *mechitzah* make us do a double take. Are we really in a Christian village somewhere in southern India?

**W**

e had just finished a spirited dance and young Moshe — a *kippah*-clad boy who kept in step like a *yeshivah bochur* at a wedding — was showing us bottles of sacramental wine made especially for Kiddush. But this was no NCSY *shabbaton* — in fact, the crowd wasn't even Jewish.

This is what life looks like at the Christian “Zion Torah Center” in the Tamil-speaking, southern Indian town of Erode, popularly known as “Turmeric City.”

What we witnessed there is part of a compelling phenomenon taking place around the globe. People in surprising, off-the-beaten-track settings are discovering Judaism and pining to become adherents. While only about 14 million of today's monotheistic believers are Jewish, there's a surprising momentum of non-Jews moving closer to Judaism. Our most recent trip, where we visited a special group of Christians in Erode, India, was yet another manifestation of this quiet movement. As the first Jewish-born people to have visited them, their developing story is even more inspiring for us.

# Praying for Zion in Tamil

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY Ari Z. Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan



**Nuts about Halachah** Our trip to Erode really started two years ago, with an e-mail from India. That in itself wasn't surprising: Our friends like to joke that in our "halachic adventures," we'll run after any "meshugeneh" (used here in a positive, complimentary way for someone "nuts" about researching lesser-studied topics) that comes our way, but it seems like these days, the "meshugenehs" find us. Some bird *meshugeneh* called to ask where he can buy a peacock. A woman, a kosher-locust enthusiast, called from New York and asked for advice on how to raise locusts because it's her dream to bring them to the kosher market. This one needs to learn *milah* and that one wants to know if he can drink yak milk on a trek to the Himalayas. A non-Jewish archaeologist asks for help in cleaning a Roman ossuary and X-raying an ancient copper scroll. Somebody shows up at the house with a hawk, struck in the head by a pop fly at a baseball game, and asks, "We didn't know what to do with it — maybe you want to freeze it for your husband Ari?" Believe it or not, this is a true smattering of the wonderful people who make up our halachic world.

So we weren't too surprised when we got that e-mail asking if we would be willing to meet with an Indian Christian minister and his wife who want to convert to Judaism together with their entire community of 1,500 people. Firstly we informed the minister, Samuel D. Devasahayam, that we are not *dayanim*, not *poskim*, nor part of a rabbinical court. He answered that they read about us being involved with the Abayudaya community in Uganda and thought we might be a good place to start (see sidebar). So in the fall of 2013 we set up a joint meeting together with Aryel Tsion, a Dutch *ger* who now lives in the southern Chevron Hills and teaches Torah, Dr. Aharon Abraham,

an Indian *ger* and physician who lives in Kiryat Arba and works in Bnei Brak, the minister and his wife Anne, and us.

After exchanging introductions, our guests began to explain their attraction to Judaism. It turns out that Samuel's great-grandfather was Jewish, an Iraqi who came to India to work for the British government and married a local non-Jewish woman. Ultimately, he divorced her, moved to England, and was never heard from again.

But the Jewish link endured anyway. Pastor Samuel described his very religious Christian parents, D.W. and Rosy Devasahayam. D.W. was a bank manager in India's leading bank. Although he raised his family in conservative rural India, where they weren't allowed to read the newspaper or watch TV, he made sure they were educated and up to date on world events.

Samuel's father was always very pro-Israel, and would cut out articles from the paper about Israel, clippings the pastor still keeps and cherishes. In 1972, when Samuel was very young, his father started a church named Zion Full Gospel Church, as well as a club called Friends of Israel. He recalls the daily prayer sessions on behalf of Israel and the intense prayer and fasting when Israel was at war or when Jews were in danger, such as during the Entebbe hostage crisis or during the trials of Prisoners of Zion in the USSR.

**Jewish in Secret** Samuel was just 14 when his father died. At first his mother and sisters Sheela and Wilma oversaw the community, but by the time he was 22 he was single-handedly running the church and the Friends of Israel club, which then boasted 3,000 members. He described a focus on the Tanach and their diligent Bible study, and how about ten years ago, he and his wife Anne came to the realization

that Judaism is the true religion.

From then on, he and his family secretly practiced Judaism to the best of their knowledge but did not divulge the new rituals to their community, fearful of the fallout. They began to keep Shabbos to a certain extent, recited Kiddush and accepted other mitzvos, including *kasher*ing their kitchen to the best of their ability. On their first visit to Israel, they purchased a mezuzah, a menorah, and other Jewish ritual items. But the situation was absurd. The pastor was acting like a Jew and nobody in his community knew it. The Devasahayams wanted to share their beliefs with their congregation but felt it was not yet time.

As their faith grew, they knew that they had to somehow reveal their secret. Their son Moshe was the catalyst. He's a sweet-as-sugar 12-year-old who had been raised as a Jew inside his home, although he had no choice but to go to the local Christian school. But as the date approached for his baptism he became agitated. He finally told his father, "Abba, I can't be baptized, I am Jewish." That statement gave Samuel the courage to announce publicly his version of "*Mi laHashem eilai* — whoever believes in Hashem, stand with me." It was at Samuel's older sister's funeral in April 2011 that the pastor revealed to his flock that the true path to G-d is through Judaism. It wasn't easy or without repercussions. At the time he was the vice president of the local Christian association. He incurred many problems and says that he even received death threats, but that Hashem protected him. Soon, the congregation was on board too.

**Alternate Reality** Before we knew all the details, it was with skepticism, maybe even disbelief, that we agreed to meet with Samuel and Anne in Israel. But hearing of their devotion and sacrifices,



1.

**1. THE REAL THING** Ari Z. joins Samuel Devasahayam and his Jewish-loving congregation. Ari and Ari were the first Jewish-born people to visit this group who sat spellbound as they listened to authentic Torah wisdom



2.

**2. SEPARATE BUT EQUAL** Inside the Zion Torah Centre, a *mechitza* separates the genders, with the women sitting modestly in the back behind a sheer curtain as they join in spirited song



3.

**3. NO PLUMBAS** Although non-Jews may not *shecht*, the men of Erode are given a lesson in ritual slaughter of birds by our traveling partner Dr. Ethan Shuman of St. Louis

we were quickly impressed with their story. We were even more interested when they showed us pictures and videos of their community. We explained to them that it won't be a short or easy road to Judaism. We parted company not knowing if they'd continue their journey.

But the e-mails and questions kept coming. It grew clear to us that despite his small stature and limp, Samuel is a giant of a man. He commands respect, is an astute leader, and a savvy businessman. And we could easily discern that Anne is the pillar behind her family and the extended family of the community. As our correspondence continued, Sam asked if he, his wife, and son could come to learn in yeshivah in Israel in order to begin the conversion process. We tried to put them in touch with rabbis, but no concrete plans seemed to be working out. Then we decided to do a *Mishpacha* trip to India, and took the opportunity to visit them.

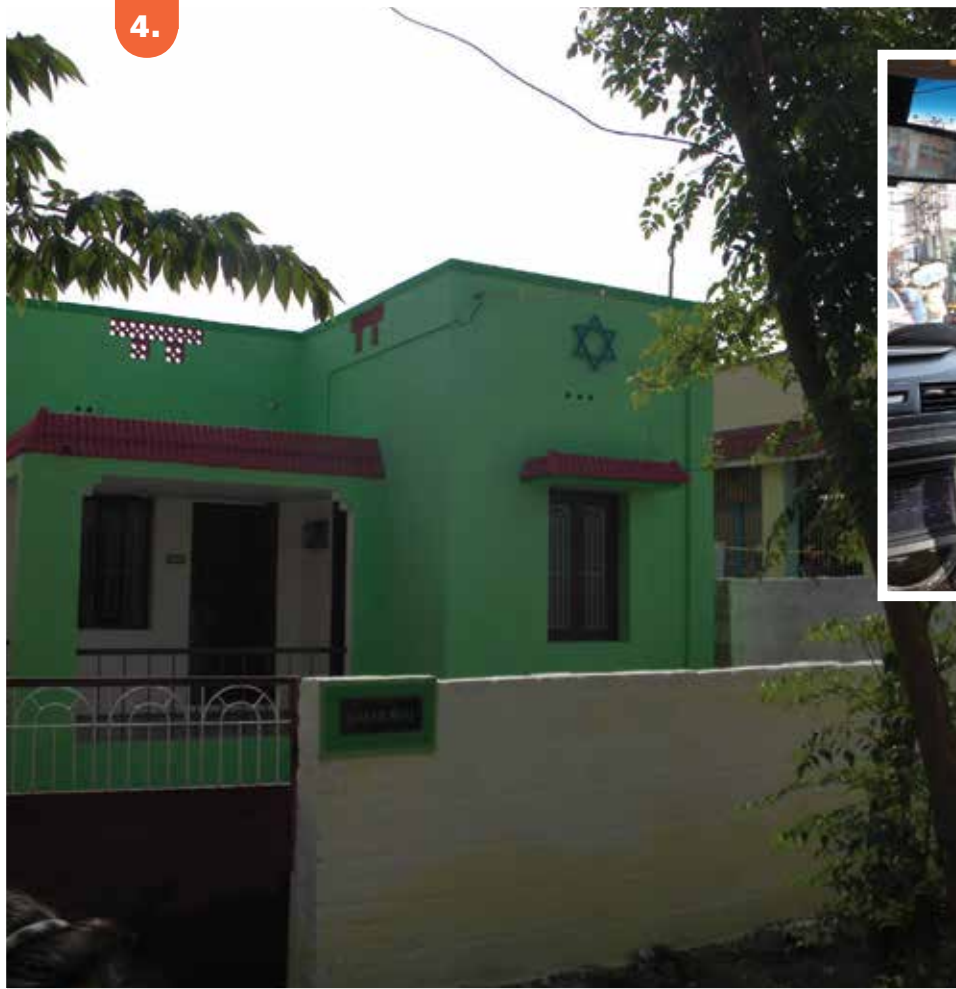
During the ten days we were in India we visited five cities. The pace was frenetic — not quite in keeping with the character of the local population. The country is so vast and people are so not rushed that when we e-mailed them to ask about visiting, Anne wrote back: "How long will you stay, two weeks?" When we replied that we could stay only a day or two they were shocked. But they quickly got their bearings and arranged a visit that really packed in the action.

The Devasahayams picked us up in coastal Cochin and drove us the eight hours east on abysmal roads to inland Erode. When we arrived at 1:20 in the morning, there were 30 people — with men wearing *kippahs* — waiting to greet us with songs of Shalom Aleichem. Little children put garlands of yellow flowers around our necks as a symbol of welcome.

As we walked into their home, we noticed a mezuzah on



4.



**4. THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD**  
This new house was built on the Zion block, once the Christians decided to stop renting to the community

**5. SAFETY ON THE STREET** Samuel wants to feel connected even while on the road. He put a mezuzah on the “doorpost” of his car

the door and Jewish pictures and posters along the living room walls; siddurim were on the bookcase. A model of the Mishkan sat on a table and there was a glass cupboard with silver Kiddush cups, Shabbos candlesticks, a challah board and the like — a collection that would have made any *balabusta* proud. When we finally collapsed in bed, we realized that they had graciously given us their own bedroom, in which one of the bookcases contained ArtScroll *seforim* and biographies of *gedolim*, including the Steipler. We felt a bit disoriented, as if we had entered some alternate reality.

5.



**At some point the band struck up with a repertoire of Jewish songs and before we knew it, the hundreds of people were dancing along**

The following morning, we began to daven. Moshe, their son, asked in an Indian form of respect, “Uncle, is it okay if I pray with you?” Then Samuel, who has a printing business, showed us the yearly Jewish calendar he prints in Tamil. When we asked about Shabbos candle-lighting and Havdalah times, Anne showed us that they send out a weekly SMS to tell the community when to light candles and when to make Havdalah. In our original meeting in Israel two years ago, we had asked them about circumcision. They explained that they do not do it. We suggested that if they are serious about conversion, they should begin by circumcising the newborns, since if they ever do convert, it would make the procedure much easier in the future. Now they told us that they’ve adopted that practice.

They also begged us to teach them

*shechitah*. Clearly, one cannot learn *shechitah* in an hour or two, nor may a non-Jew *shecht*. But Dr. Ethan Schuman, our traveling partner, sat down with a group of men, including young Moshe, and gave them a three-hour class on the basics of *shechitah*. We drove out to a local hardware store in a beautifully restored 1942 British army Jeep, bought a bunch of knives, cut them down to shape and size with a disc, taught the men the rudiments of knife preparation and demonstrated how to *shecht* birds. They brought several dozen chickens and a few quail that were then *shechted*. After they cleaned the birds, we explained the basics of kashering, and while the birds were soaking Moshe suddenly appeared with stickers they had printed attesting to the “kosher” status of the birds. They weren’t *plumbas*, but they would do for Erode.

**Dance of the Heart** There is some Christian-Jewish tension in Erode and when the group announced plans to become Jewish, their Christian neighbors refused to continue renting any property to them. And so Samuel and Anne bought a parcel of land and have started building a “Jewish” neighborhood. As the congregation members acquire the money, some have built their own homes in the area. We walked among the new homes and saw mezuzos and large Magen Davids plastered into the walls. In keeping with India’s reputation as a land of contrasts, across the road are the Hindu death grounds, where locals burn corpses and throw the remains in the river. On this side there’s an entire community hoping to convert.

Later that morning, we joined a convoy of cars on the way to the community center, a building with a large sign proclaiming “Zion Torah Centre.” Hundreds of people, men in the front, women in

the back — separated by a sheer floor to ceiling curtain — were waiting patiently for our arrival, sitting cross-legged on the floor. The women were dressed in traditional Indian white cotton garments, all with their heads covered. Little children smiled and bowed as we returned the gesture, and all of the men and boys had *kip-pahs* on their heads. The Indian custom of respect is to put one’s hands together in a supplicating gesture and to give a little bow; hundreds of people were doing this to us. As we called out “Shalom,” they enthusiastically answered our greeting.

We went up to the platform in the front, and Samuel introduced us and asked us to teach. Immediately, concerns about the prohibition of teaching Torah to non-Jews swirled through our heads. But we’d done our homework: We had looked it up beforehand and were familiar with the surprising *teshuvah* of the Rambam (No. 149 in the Blau edition) in which he rules that it is permitted to teach mitzvos to Christians and attract them to our religion. According to the Rambam, they believe in the text of the Torah, but simply have erroneous interpretations. However, if we teach them the truth, they may yet come to good. The Sridei Eish (2:56) understood that the Rambam permitted teaching all mitzvos to Christians. In the previous *teshuvah* the Rambam had explained that a non-Jew is actually rewarded for fulfilling mitzvos as long as he is doing so because he believes that they were transmitted by Moshe and commanded by G-d and not for some other reason. The Meiri (on *Sanhedrin* 59a and *Avodah Zarah*) expresses similar sentiments. We discussed our questions with a *rav* experienced in this field before going, and followed his guidance.

Thus we began several hours of instruction, as Samuel translated. We spoke of the importance of Yiddishkeit, the belief in one G-d and other basic concepts of



## Communal Conversion— A Growing Trend?

Entire communities converting has been a rare phenomenon in our history. Still, there is the famous case of the early medieval Kuzari king who became convinced of the truth of Torah and converted with his people. In his *Oznayim l'Torah* (Shemos 16:29 and Devarim 13:4), Rav Zalman Sorotzkin (1881-1966) describes a group of converts living along the Caspian Sea who were descended from a long line of Christians. They were simple farmers who used to diligently read the Bible on their holidays, and through their reading, as they came to realize that the foundation of all religions is the Mosaic tradition, they converted to Judaism en masse. The Russian government sent priests to try to bring them back to Christianity, but to no avail. Rav Sorotzkin writes fondly of his recollections of a meeting with the elder of that community.

In biblical times too, there were conversion movements. When the Jews were saved in the time of Mordechai, for example, it was so good to be a Jew that Megillas Esther tells us that “many of the locals became Jewish.” By the same token, when people converted out of fear that if they were not Jews their situation would worsen, they were called “*gerei arayos*,” or converts out of fear of being eaten by lions. According to one opinion in the Gemara this was referring to the Samaritans. Chazal viewed this conversion phenomenon negatively and said that such motives negate their claim of wanting to convert for noble and true reasons and they should not be accepted. The Gemara (*Avodah Zarah*) notes that during the time of both Kings David and Shlomo, when the kingdom had a strong influence across the Middle East, *geirim* were not accepted because their pure motives were suspect.

But today we've seen a growing momentum across the globe, where believing communities are moving toward Judaism as a group.

The Abayudaya, about whom we wrote a while back (Issue 481), have their own fascinating story. In 1919, an important Ugandan military leader, Semei Kakungulu, was unable to get answers to his questions of belief from the Christian missionaries. He read the Bible, realized its truth, and understood that the missionaries were not accurately keeping the laws as given. After being told that circumcision of the eight-day-old male child was practiced only by Jews — who did not believe in the New Testament or in the Christian messiah — Kakungulu replied, “If this is the case, then, from this day on, I am a Jew.” He circumcised thousands of his followers and, for the last hundred years or so, this small community in eastern Uganda has lived, to the best of their ability and knowledge, as Jews.

According to their story, a Jew named Yosef, possibly an Adenite or Yemenite, met Kakungulu in a courthouse in Kampala, stayed for three months and taught Kakungulu and his followers the basics of Judaism. They've been persecuted for that affiliation as well. In 1976, after the Israeli Entebbe rescue mission of the hijacked plane, Uganda's Idi Amin kicked all Jews out of the country. The Abayudaya went into hiding, as the deranged dictator was looking to kill them. Throughout the years, the fortunes of the tribe have waxed and waned but the 1,000 adherents today are quite devoted to Judaism; some are even *shomrei Shabbos*. Part of the tribe has had a Conservative conversion and many are hoping for an Orthodox conversion to be full-fledged Jews.

Although the Abayudaya community piqued the interest of our new friend the Indian minister, there are in fact pockets of Jewish revival all over the globe. In Bello, Colombia, in South America, for example, a group of committed evangelicals who once belonged to a fire-and-brimstone church have embraced Torah Judaism after studying classic texts and realizing their own ancestry might be connected to the Jews who were expelled from Spain and lived as Christians 500 years ago. About ten years ago, the group converted but since the local community didn't fully accept them, they built their own shul, where they daven three times a day and practice a strict life of Torah and mitzvos.

Jewish theology. We told stories of life in Israel and mentioned other groups that also want to convert. We taught some Torah and gave them a history lesson about the Land of Israel and Yerushalayim accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation.

At some point the band struck up with a repertoire of Jewish songs. Everybody began singing and clapping. Ari Z. whispered to Ari G. that we should get up and dance with them. Ari G. was a little embarrassed, but Ari Z didn't care; he went down from the platform, grabbed some cute kids and before we knew it, the hundreds of people were dancing along. Samuel and Anne's niece, an amazing young woman who is getting married soon, headed to the women's section and initiated the dancing there. They pulled Israeli flags off the walls, dancing with them and singing “Am Yisrael Chai” and “Shema Yisrael” at the top of their lungs in a joyous frenzy. When it was over, the entire congregation stood and sang “Hatikvah.” It was like an NCSY Shabbaton at its best.

After this emotion-charged experience, we were hustled out. It felt awkward to be treated like celebrities, but we were glad

to interact with as many people as we could in our limited time. People wanted to hold on to us. Parents handed us their children for pictures. (Unfortunately, Ari G.'s photo op with a little baby ended with the kid wailing.)

Samuel then escorted us to a wine cellar where the multi-talented one-time pastor produces “kosher” wine so the community can have wine for Kiddush and Havdalah. Of course we could not drink it because a non-Jew made it, but they even have “kosher” labels on the bottles that say “Mt. Zion Sacramental Grape Juice” and “This grape wine is made as per the ancient methodology of red wine making by the people of Israel 3,000 years ago.”

**Passengers on the Journey** Time was tight and we had to make our next flight, so we quickly exited and began the two-hour trip to the airport. Along the way Samuel showed us his coconut orchard. This plot of land grows 3,500 coconut trees — a substantial source of income. “We don't want to come to Israel to be a burden on the state,” Samuel explained. They want to come with a means of *parnassah*, perhaps to settle in the sparsely populated Negev.

Thanks to the Internet, they are able to continue learning and teaching. Anne has taken an online Hebrew course so that she can read and even understand some basic texts. Their son Moshe gathers material and for each holiday publishes a booklet for the other children of the community. He proudly showed us some of them and we were duly impressed. Anne has even prepared a workbook with all 613 mitzvos — in English and Tamil. She's also printed English-Tamil siddurim; and of course they have song sheets with traditional Jewish songs.

Our short stay in Erode was an eye-opening, enlightening experience. We're in the process of trying to help facilitate opportunities for some of the young men to learn in a yeshivah in Israel. What will be with these amazing people who love Hashem with such unadulterated devotion? It's impossible to read the future, and their path will certainly be a long and arduous one. The trains of Jewish history have passed through many places, crisscrossing along the route and picking up and dropping off many types of people. Erode is another small station along the route. Jewish history will tell us what will ultimately occur. We are just passengers on the journey. ●