

Redefining the Converted Jewish Self: Race, Religion, and Israel's Bene Menashe.

*I was waiting patiently in the queue. When it was my turn to face the passport control officer, I heard, 'Are you Chinese?'
'No, I am Indian', said I.
'But you look Chinese!' insisted the officer.
'I am from the North East of India'.
'Show me your passport!' demanded the officer.
I produced my Israeli passport.
'What's that on your head?' asked the officer.
'It is a kippah'.
'What?! Are you Jewish?!'
'Yes, I am'.
'All right. You are a Chinese-looking Indian who wears a kippah and has an Israeli passport. Come this way,' said the officer and took me away for further questioning.*

This is how Rabbi Tsadik Ray¹ described to me his encounter with a passport control official at an airport in North America. Rabbi Ray was one of about two thousand members of the Indian Bene Menashe community who by 2013 had settled in Israel.² The Bene Menashe stem from a number of Christian groups of the Indo-Burmese borderland, some of whom back in the 1950s declared their descent from the Lost Tribes of Israel, and represent one of the numerous groups all over the world who have been variously described as Judaizing movements (Parfitt and Trevisan Semi 2002), or 'dispersed' and 'emerging' Jewish communities.³ In 2005 the Bene Menashe became recognized as people of Israelite descent by the then Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar, and in 2011 were allowed by Israeli government to continue their migration through conversion (Abu El-Haj 2012: 212, Maltz 2015).

The paper will use the example of the Bene Menashe migration to cast analytical light on different ways in which race and religion co-constitute each other in processes of transnational migration. To do so, I will focus on one specific aspect of the Bene Menashe migration – the way the community has to construct and enact their religious affiliation to be able to become Israeli citizens and to be considered part of the Jewish people by their 'hosts'. The paper will argue that in the case of the Bene Menashe race and religion co-produce each other in ways that reinforce racialized understandings of Judaism and Jewishness, and will suggest that what accounts for this phenomenon is that the agency that the Bene Menashe immigrants had in defining their religiosity in Israel was limited by the conditions of their migration, which developed against the backdrop of multiple colonial contexts.

For the most of the twentieth century, students of migration focused on the way immigrants adapted themselves to their new homeland rather than to the ties that they continued to maintain with their place of birth, but since the early 1990s migration studies have undergone a 'transnational turn', which made visible global flows of people, goods, cultural symbols and information, triggered by international migrations (Vertovec 2009: 13-14; Levitt and Nyberg-

Sorensen 2004). Indeed, in the past twenty-five years, scholars of migration have celebrated the cultural translation associated with migration. Thus, Donald M. Nonini and Aihwa Ong posit in their research on Chinese transnationalism that it includes the emergence of 'new Chinese subjectivities found in the global arena', and of 'new cultural identities' (1997: 4-5). Peggy Levitt points out that migration generates 'transnational social fields' that involve all aspects of the migrants' social life (2001: 196). Steven Vertovec, building upon Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge (1989: i), suggests that 'the "fractured memories" of diaspora consciousness produce a multiplicity of histories, "communities" and selves – a refusal of fixity often serving as a valuable resource for resisting repressive local or global situations' (2009: 6-7).

At the same time, other publications in anthropology of migration have highlighted how through practices of policing, surveillance and legal exclusion migrants are forced to conform to specific constructs of a 'good citizen', and are set in opposition to each other. A significant part of this literature has highlighted the way this oppression is permeated with practices of racialization, which was defined by Paul Silverstein as a process that 'indexes the historical transformation of fluid categories of difference into fixed species of otherness' (2005: 364). For instance, Nicole Constable (1997) has discussed how Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong are subjected to a wide system of racial domination perpetuated by multiple actors. Nicholas De Genova and Ana Ramos-Zayas (2003) have examined how racial oppression in the United States makes Mexican and Puerto Rican communities to compete for recognition in radically antagonistic terms. Susan Bibler Coutin (2003) observes with reference to Barbara Yngvesson (1993) that in the USA immigrants have to make their life stories conform to what had been predetermined as a 'deserving' prototype of a migrant. Aihwa Ong points out how in South East Asia the legal status of foreign workers, such as Indonesian and Filipina maids, reinforces their 'biopolitical otherness' (2006).

In this paper I continue the latter approach, which emphasizes that alongside cultural fluidity, transnational migration can involve consolidation of specific forms of identification and has the capacity not only to unsettle but also to reinforce social categories to suit the political agendas of the 'host' society; to make the boundaries of some 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1982) more malleable, while making the notional boundaries of others more rigid. I discuss how racialized immigrants have to negotiate their place within the categories that the 'host' society has reserved for them on account of their origin narratives and perceived physicality in order to find a niche in which they will be seen as 'proper' citizens, and argue that in the case of the Israeli Bene Menashe, the racialized migrants have so far been only able to find this niche by embracing particular types of religiosity.

Religion and race

There is a growing body of academic literature exploring the racialization of religion which has been occurring throughout the history of Christianity's encounters with non-Christian groups and in the contemporary Western world. Nasar Meer points out in his recent analysis of the relationship between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia that the category of race has for a long time been co-

constituted with religion. Drawing on Thomas (2010) and Fredrickson (2002) he reminds us that the othering of Jews and Muslims is paradigmatic of European racialization, and that discourses of modern racism pre-date ideologies arising out of nineteenth-century scientific thought (Meer 2013: 388-389).

Turning to the more recent history, a number of scholars have explored how in contemporary Western discourse Muslims have become increasingly racialized and how Islamophobia can be read as an articulation of racism (Modood 2005, Meer and Noorani 2008, Taras 2013, Soyer 2013). Scholars working in the anthropology and history of Judaism and Jewish communities have discussed how notions of racial anti-Semitism, which gained strength in Europe in the nineteenth-century, grounded many of the old-standing stereotypes about the Jews in their physicality (Weikart 2006). In Europe this effected the emergence of 'race science' in the Jewish communities themselves, who saw in it 'a new, "scientific" paradigm and agenda of Jewish self-definition and self-perception' (Efron 1994, but see also Veronika Lipphardt (2011) for an account of German Jewish scientists who resisted racialist discourses). At the end of the twentieth century, the racialization of Judaism and notions of Jewishness found new expression in genetic tests that aimed to reconstruct Jewish history, including the history of communities who, like the Bene Menashe, declared their affiliation to Judaism in the past century (Abu El-Haj 2012, Egorova 2014, Tamarkin 2011). This genetic re-inscription of the Jewish tradition provided further impetus for the already existing "ethnic" discourse about Jewish culture, and, as Noah Tamarkin has argued in his discussion of the DNA research on the Lemba of South Africa, obscured the ways in which tested communities experienced and understood their racial and religious identities (Tamarkin 2011).

The case study of the Bene Menashe serves to complement and to offer an interesting counter point to research on the racialization of religion, in that it examines processes through which a group of migrants who are perceived by their 'hosts' as racially different are expected to embrace and enact specific forms of religiosity to be accepted as bona fide citizens. I will first focus on the legal and administrative aspects of the Bene Menashe migration, and will highlight the constrains that those wishing to relocate from India to Israel are under in developing their religious beliefs and practice. I will then examine the challenges that the Bene Menashe immigrants encounter in their day-to-day interactions with other Israelis and argue that racialist public discourses about Israeli meanings of Jewishness contributed to the development of a specific ideational consensus regarding the forms of religiosity that the Bene Menashe immigrants were expected to demonstrate to be seen as 'proper' citizens, once their immigration was completed. Finally, I suggest that because of the racialized way in which the Bene Menashe immigrants are perceived in Israel, they are forced to emphasize their religious 'superiority' vis-à-vis other migrants to be able to develop a positive sense of self. But first, a few words to set the historical background.

The Children of Menashe: a conversion to citizenship?

Bourdieu and Wacquant posit that migration is always a product of the historical context of international relations (2000). Indeed, the migration of the

Bene Menashe could be described as an outcome of such complex historical and political factors as Christian missionary activities of the later British period, the politics of the region after India gained Independence in 1947, the conflict in the Middle East, and the domestic politics of the State of Israel.

The Bene Menashe occupy a special place among different South Asian diaspora communities in the world, as well as among other communities of immigrants, in that the explicit motive for their migration is intricately connected to their professed religiosity. Moreover, their migration became intertwined with and dependent upon their formal conversion to Judaism, which in itself was a product of complex political factors.

Scholars of religious conversion have discussed at length how conversion movements often represent territorialized expressions of local and global politics (Hefner 1993, Van Der Veer 1996, Keane 2008, Viswanathan 1998). Similarly, in the case of the Bene Menashe, the community's acceptance of Judaism was intertwined with the political aspirations of the groups that they had stemmed from. It has been suggested that the earliest instances of identification with the biblical Israelites occurred in the North East of India in the first half of the twentieth century among the Christianized tribes of Chin, Kuki and Mizo settled on the territory of present-day Indian states of Mizoram, Manipur, Assam, and the plains of Burma (Samra 1996: 112).⁴ The community's emergence as an Israelite group appears to be closely linked to their Christianization, which occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, when, following the British gaining control over the region through the Chin-Lushai expedition and the Anglo-Manipur War, the people of the Indo-Burmese borderland became target of Christian missionary activities (Samra 1992: 7). Once introduced to the Bible, these groups found parallels between ancient Jewish customs and their indigenous traditions, an idea which may have been suggested by the missionaries themselves (Samra 1992: 11). This led some community members to the conclusion that their ancestors descended from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel.⁵

The narrative of the Lost Tribes goes back to the biblical tradition, according to which ancient Hebrews belonged to the twelve tribes descending from the sons of Jacob (renamed Israel by an angel), a patriarch of the Jewish people with whom God made a covenant. The tribes were divided into two kingdoms, with ten tribes inhabiting the northern kingdom, while the rest occupied the southern kingdom. As a result of the Assyrian invasion of the eighth century BCE, the ten tribes of the northern kingdom were driven out of their country. Nothing is known about what happened to them in exile, but the story about the Lost Tribes of Israel has had a lively history.

As historian Zvi Ben-Dor Benite observes, “[o]ver the course of 2,000 years, Jews, Christians of various denominations, and, to a lesser extent, Muslims had used the tribes as a point of reference, tying historical developments to their exile and return” (Ben-Dor Benite 2009: 4). In Christian Europe of the period of colonial expansion, the narrative of the Ten Lost Tribes developed as a new means for understanding and relating to people and cultures previously unknown to Europeans (Parfitt and Trevisan Semi 2002: ix). Jews and Lost Tribes featured prominently in modern Christian millenarian discourses, where the conversion of the Ten Tribes was seen as a precursor to the conversion of the rest of the Jews (Parfitt 2002a: 65-90, Ben-Dor Benite 2009: 173-177). Not

surprisingly, the encounters between Christian missionaries and communities perceived by them as Israelite, could have easily led to the emergence and/or consolidation of the Jewish self-identification among the latter.

Though the Judaization of the Bene Menashe had stemmed from their earlier Christianization, it can also be read as an effect of their dissatisfaction with Christianity combined with a desire to return to some of the pre-Christian traditions of the region (Weil 2003: 48), as embracing the narrative of their Israelite descent allowed these communities to restore dignity to their ancestors who had been denigrated by the missionaries (Samra 1992: 10). The idea of the Israelite origin of the Mizo people took hold in the region following a vision from a mystic named Mela Chala from the village of Buallawn in the Mizo Hills (Weil 2003). In 1966, when, following a famine mishandled by the authorities, Mizoram rose to fight for independence, Mela Chala's followers sympathized with the rebels. The latter were also positively received by the culturally related populations of Manipur, who started developing an interest in their possible Israelite origins.

In 1979 community leaders established contact with Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, a disciple of Zvi Yehuda Kook, the leader of religious Zionists and a supporter of the settler movement, which emerged following Israel's occupation of Gaza and West Bank in 1967. Rabbi Avichail's Amishav (My People Come Back) organization was on a mission to look for the Lost Tribes to 'reconvert' them to Judaism and thus help bring on the Messianic era (Samra 2009: 1018-1221). He became convinced that the Zo groups were of Israelite origin, and it appears that it may have been Rabbi Avichail himself that suggested the name Bene Menashe (the Children of Menashe) to the community, as they were already identifying with the tribe of Manasseh, and it was fitting with the ancestor figure of their pre-Christian beliefs, Manmasi.⁶ With Amishav's support, the Bene Menashe started arriving in Israel on tourist visas in 1989, and then proceeded to studying for conversion at a *yeshivah* (Jewish religious institution) in Jerusalem, accepting *giur* (Jewish conversion) and settling in Israel as citizens. In 2004, a new group called Shavei Israel (Israel Returns), which grew out of Amishav, took over these activities, and offered further opportunities for those Bene Menashe based in Manipur and Mizoram who were willing to embrace Orthodox Judaism to learn Hebrew and prepare themselves for conversion. The support of Shavei Israel has continued to be crucial for the migration of the Bene Menashe to Israel until today.⁷

It thus appears that the emergence and the development of the Bene Menashe tradition have been shaped by three clusters of socio-historical factors – British colonialism, which provided opportunities for missionary activities, the nationalist aspirations of the Zo communities of the Indo-Burmese borderlands, and the politics of the State of Israel, where the migration of the Bene Menashe was facilitated by religious Zionists, represented by organisations like Amishav and Shavei Israel. One can therefore argue that the Bene Menashe movement emerged against the backdrop of multiple colonial contexts, such as the British expansion into the northeast of the subcontinent, and the marginalization of the region in independent India. In Israel, most Bene Menashe immigrants were initially settled in Gaza and the West Bank (Samra 2009: 1222, Abu El-Haj 2012: 207), yet again finding themselves in a situation, which some commentators would describe as colonial.

Accounts of conversion and migration

The context of Israel provides a spectacular example of issues in religious conversion being intertwined with the politics of the state. As Michal Kravel-Tovi has discussed, in Israel, Jewish conversion is a highly politicized phenomenon, because the state is not completely separated from religion and conversion is linked to immigration and naturalization (2012: 373). In 1950 the Knesset (the legislative branch of the government) passed legislation regulating the immigration of the Jews to the State of Israel - legislation which became to be known as the Law of Return. According to the 1950 formulation of this law, 'every Jew has the right to come to this country [Israel] as an *oleh* [somebody who makes *aliyah*, which means immigration of the Jewish people to the State of Israel]'. In 1970 the Law of Return was amended to include those who have at least one Jewish grandparent - maternal or paternal - and their spouses.⁸

Regarding the position of converts, according to the Law of Return, any convert to Judaism can become an Israeli citizen too. The Law recognizes conversions into all three main denominations of Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—if they are performed abroad. However, if a conversion is performed in Israel, it has to be Orthodox for the converts to be allowed to become Israeli citizens. Moreover, for all Jewish Israelis, issues of personal status are regulated by the Chief Rabbinate, an Orthodox authority, which adheres to a strictly *halakhic* (pertaining to *halakhah*, Jewish religious law) definition of 'who is a Jew'. As the web-site of an Israeli Reform organization, the Centre for Jewish Pluralism states, 'While we Reform Jews may be major players in North America, we're not major players in Israel, where our rabbis cannot officially do marriages, divorces, burial services, and conversions.'⁹ This means that those new immigrants who had obtained Israeli citizenship through a Conservative or Reform conversion would not be eligible for Jewish marriage, even though they were eligible for Israeli citizenship.

For the Bene Menashe, there could be no migration without conversion, because Lost Tribe communities are not considered to be Jewish according to the *halakhah*, and are therefore not eligible to settle in Israel under the Law of Return without conversion. At the same time, to be able to convert, the Bene Menashe first had to come to Israel as tourists. Though theoretically they could have converted to Judaism anywhere in the world, in practice, Israel was the only place where via activities of Amishav and Shavei Israel they had institutional support available for such an endeavor, which means that they had to convert to the Orthodox form of Judaism. The conditions of the Bene Menashe *aliyah* thus shaped the religious practice of the Bene Menashe in a very particular way.

Back in India, the Bene Menashe community is very diverse both in terms of the religious self-identification of its members and of the way they relate to the State of Israel. As Shalva Weil observed, some community members 'have chosen the path of conversion to Orthodox Judaism and emigration to the Land of Israel; others have selected the same path of conversion without emigration. Some ... define themselves as Christian, but believe in the imminent return to Zion in conjunction with the Jews; others define themselves as Israelites, but believe they can build Zion in Mizoram' (2003: 53).

Similar examples of Judaizing movements combining elements of Christian and Jewish practices are found all over the world. Shahid Perwez and I observed numerous examples of communities and individuals identifying as both Jewish and Christian in Dalit groups of coastal Andhra Pradesh (Egorova and Perwez 2013). Courtney Handman has demonstrated that the Guhu-Sumane of Papua and New Guinea embraced the Lost Tribes tradition after one hundred years of Christian mission to reaffirm their sense of successful conversion to Christianity (2011: 658). Other Judaizing groups came to combining Christian belief with some forms of Jewish practice. For instance, the Sabbatarians belonging to the Igbo of Nigeria practice a Jewish tradition of their own and at the same time read the New Testament (Bruder: 143), while some of the Lemba of southern Africa consider themselves to be Jewish, but belong to different Christian denominations (Parfitt 2002, Tamarkin 2011).

In the case of Israeli Bene Menashe, the religious origins of community members were diverse - some of them had been born into Christian families. Earlier Bene Menashe immigrants who had come to Israel in the period between 1990 and 2012 had to undergo a 'conventional' conversion procedure, which often involved more than six months of study. It appears that in the past few years, the conversion procedure for the Bene Menashe has become simplified. As one of my Bene Menashe participants described it to me, 'Nowadays, rabbis from Israel go to India and through an interview process select those people who are ready for *giur*. They help them come to Israel, and here the Bene Menashe undergo conversion, but this is just a formality.' It therefore appears that though the actual conversion procedure has been simplified for the Bene Menashe, they still have to face a selection process in India, in the course of which the emissaries of Shavei Israel decide whether the candidates' level of Jewish religious observance is advanced enough in the eyes of the emissaries to support them in coming to Israel and undergoing formal conversion.

Most of the Bene Menashe I interviewed did not question the necessity of their conversion. Everybody stated that it was only those Bene Menashe who were particularly devoted to Jewish practice that were coming to Israel. At the same time, their accounts of studying for *giur* demonstrate that their conversion-migration often required a reconfiguration of their religious practice and sometimes even a radical change in their beliefs. For instance, Ariel, one of the first Bene Menashe immigrants, told me that though he had always considered himself to be Jewish, it was hard for him to relinquish his belief in Jesus Christ even after he came to Israel. Edna admitted that unlike some of her friends, she took a while to acquire enough knowledge of Jewish belief and practice to be able to convert. 'It depends on the person', she said. 'For me it took a long time, but there were some people who were ready within a month. It is the same as in a class, there are students who are very intelligent and there are students who are very weak. My strength was not in religion and it took me a long time.'

Edna's account suggests that in some cases the religious self-understanding of individual community members did not map all that well on the image of religious observance that the Bene Menashe were expected to embody in Israel. Though, by her own admission, Edna had always considered herself to be Jewish, to become an Israeli citizen, she first had to become a 'proper' Jewish person in the eyes of rabbinic authorities, and her *non-halakhic* Israelite descent meant that her pathway to Israeli citizenship lay through

mastering a type of Jewish religious practice from which she was still quite far. Religion was not her strength, as she admitted, and becoming a religious Jewish person, which for her, like for all other Bene Menashe was a prerequisite for becoming a citizen, was a challenge that required an effort not only in her practice, but also in redefining her understanding of what it means to be Jewish.

While Edna appeared to be on the whole content with the conversion process and did not challenge the authorities' assumption of her lacking a particular type of Jewish status, Rivka initially thought that the conversion requirement was insulting. Rivka told me that she had always considered herself to be a *religious* Jewish person and, at first, she could not accept that her form of Jewishness was not considered to be legitimate grounds for citizenship in Israel. 'I had always been practicing Judaism,' she said, 'and when I first came here I could not understand why unlike *olim* from other countries, I had to convert'.

For some Bene Menashe, lack of 'appropriate' religious observance has become a major stumbling block on the way to immigration. This is how Rina, who has been in Israel for a decade, has described the implications that the selection process in India had for her brother:

'He is keen to come to Israel, but his wife is Christian and is not keen on conversion. She does not know Jewish practice, and therefore would not be able to pass the test when the rabbis come from Israel. If she does not know about Judaism, it means that nobody from her family will be able to come because it is the mother that is supposed to organize the religious life of the family. There is a lot to study in Judaism. You need to know how to observe the Sabbath and what to eat, and she has not even started learning it yet. She has a long way to go before she will be able to come here.'

Rina's account shows how the migration of the Bene Menashe is dependent on their observance of a particular type of Jewish belief and practice to the extent that one person's failure to demonstrate good knowledge of the rules of Judaism and refusal to convert can jeopardize the immigration of her entire family – something that would not happen in the case of immigrants from recognized¹⁰ Jewish communities, who, under the Law of Return, can make *aliyah* together with their non-Jewish spouses.

It may be argued that the conversion requirement which the authorities have put forward to communities claiming Lost Tribe descent points to the racialized nature of the Israeli state's perception of the *olim* hailing from communities with 'undocumented origins'. The constellation of the South Asian/*non-halakhic*-Israelite background of the Bene Menashe, in Israel translated itself into a perception that designates them as non-Jewish/foreign 'others' who have to make an extra cultural effort to be accepted as bona fide citizens. In this respect, the experiences of the Bene Menashe are similar to those of other groups from Asia and Africa.

The first group to claim Lost Tribe status in Israel were the Beta Israel, or the Jews of Ethiopia,¹¹ who arrived in Israel during two major operations in 1984-1985 and 1991, and had to go through a simplified version of a formal conversion process (Weil 2012: 205). In the early 1960s conversion was also suggested as a requirement for the Bene Israel, another Indian Jewish

community with 'unconventional' Jewish origins (Hodes 2014). The Bene Israel had been practicing a form of mainstream Judaism for over a hundred years, and were encouraged to come to Israel by the secular authorities of the newly-established state, but in 1961 the then Sephardi Chief Rabbi refused them the right to marry other Jewish people. The community led a fierce protest campaign, as a result of which the secular authorities of Israel put pressure on the Chief Rabbi to change his opinion on the question of the Bene Israel marriage, but incidents when individual rabbis in Israel would refuse to grant Bene Israel marriage licenses were happening as late as 2005 (Egorova and Perwez 2013: 117). What is particularly interesting for our discussion is that it transpired in the course of negotiations between the Bene Israel and the rabbinate in the 1960s, that the Chief Rabbi was ready to reconsider his position on the condition that back in India the Bene Israel would stop using the services of their Reform rabbis and replace them with Orthodox rabbis (Hodes 2014: 130). This condition, which was not accepted by the Bene Israel leaders, was illustrative of the pressure to embrace a particular form of Judaism that the religious authorities of the State of Israel were ready to put on communities who were not recognized as 'conventionally' Jewish by the mainstream society.

To return to the theoretical discussion with which I started the paper, it appears that the migration of the Bene Menashe involves political techniques that translate a wide range of diverse forms of religious and cultural self-identifications present among the Indian Bene Menashe into a very specific form of Jewish religiosity, which is considered to be mainstream by the Orthodox authorities of the state, but which does not map onto the cultural and religious diversity either of the communities that the Bene Menashe stem from in the subcontinent, or of the wider Israeli society. The religious self-understanding of the Bene Menashe in Israel thus becomes shaped by the specific pathway to citizenship that the Law of Return has reserved for them on account of their origin. One could argue that once the conversion test has been passed and citizenship granted, the new immigrants are free to embrace forms of religiosity different from those that they had to adhere to in order to be able to convert. However, I suggest that once the conversion process is completed and the Bene Menashe *olim* are settled in their new homeland, the religious aspect of their lives continues to play an important role in the way they negotiate their place in Israeli society, and issues of racialization become even more pronounced in their relationship with their 'hosts'.

In Israel

Drawing on Foucault (1989, 1991), Aihwa Ong has stressed the importance of paying academic attention to the day-to-day processes through which immigrants are made into the citizens of a particular nation-state (1996: 737). My case study demonstrates that the Bene Menashe immigrants are made aware of the way they need to enact their religiosity in order to be considered 'proper' Israeli citizens through their exposure both to power relations expressed in the control administered by the state **and** to different discourses of who counts as a legitimate Jewish citizen that they experience in daily encounters with their new compatriots.

As most of my Bene Menashe respondents, as well as other Israelis involved in their case, pointed out, once the converts have obtained Israeli citizenship, they are free to settle in Israel wherever they wish. Moreover, they are free to practice whatever form of religion they wish. At the same time, the overall consensus on the Bene Menashe community expressed by the same interviewees was that the majority of them were *dati*, a Hebrew term for 'religious', which in Israel is normally used to describe those who adhere to Orthodox Jewish practice, but who are not 'ultra-Orthodox' (described by a different term, *haredi* (God-fearing)).

The forms of religiosity that the Bene Menashe demonstrate in Israel are to a degree varied. As one of my Bene Menashe respondents put it when I asked him about the religion of his community, 'Orthodox Judaism itself is very diverse. You have strict Orthodox, moderate Orthodox, modern Orthodox, not-too-Orthodox-kind-of-Orthodox, and the Bene Menashe are found all over this spectrum'.

At the same time, I will argue that the conditions of the Bene Menashe conversion-migration have put them in a situation where at the moment they feel more comfortable occupying the *dati* niche of Israeli society. The first Bene Menashe immigrants were accommodated on the settlements of Gaza and the West Bank. This was partly caused by socio-economic reasons, as at the time when fieldwork was conducted, the overwhelming majority of the Bene Menashe *olim* struggled to find employment outside of the low-paid market of working class jobs and many could not afford accommodation in Israel proper. However, more importantly, the communities of religious Zionists of the Gaza strip and the West Bank were the only groups in Israel that were prepared to support the Bene Menashe in Israel.

As Weil observed, the millenarian beliefs that may have guided the Judaization of the Bene Menashe to begin with were not dissimilar from the messianic expectations of some of the settlers who associate the return of the Lost Tribes with the coming of the Messiah (Weil 2003: 53). This was precisely the response Rina once received from a couple on a bus in the West Bank, who recognized that she was a Bene Menashe: 'You are very welcome!' they both said. 'Lost Tribes coming back is the fulfillment of the prophecy.'

At the same time, most respondents noted that outside of the closely-knit communities of settlers, their claims to Jewish status were often viewed with suspicion. It appears that the reason for that was not only the community's lack of a *halakhically* Jewish background, but also their perceived embodied appearance. As one of my male research participants has put it, ' Luckily, I am a religious Jew, and wear a *kippah*. Otherwise, because of the way I look, they would think I am [a non-Jewish immigrant] from South-East Asia.'

It is probably not surprising that my Bene Menashe informants would feel uneasy about being mistaken for a migrant from South-East Asia. As Claudia Liebelt has demonstrated it in her ethnography of the Filipina domestic workers in Israel, this community encountered problems with status legalization, has been criminalized in the public imagination, and suffered from police surveillance (2011). In addition, being seen as an illegal migrant from South-East Asia, contains for the Bene Menashe the connotation of not being recognized as Jewish.

As Jonathan Webber observed, “Right from its origins in Biblical antiquity, Jewish identity has oscillated between two contradictory premises: an underlying belief in the unity and continuity of the Jewish people, despite an awareness of the existence of considerable ethnographic diversity; and a feeling that the Jewish community of one’s own village or town constituted the only true Jewish identity, despite the knowledge that other Jewish communities existed, even in very faraway lands” (Webber 1994: 74). As I noted in the introduction, the idea that the Jewish people are connected not only culturally, but also on a genealogical level, has become prominent in the public imagination both within and outside the Jewish communities in Europe in modern times. As Sander Gilman has pointed out, ‘the category of race present within Western, scientific, and popular culture has shaped Jewish self-perception’ (1994: 366-367). Writing about contemporary constructions of Jewishness among the Jews in the West and particularly in the United States, Susan Glenn has argued that even ‘in our post-ethnic age of ‘voluntarism,’ it is hard to ignore ‘the centrality of blood logic to modern Jewish identity narratives,’ the logic, which Jews retained ‘throughout all of the de-racializing stages of twentieth-century social thought’ (Glenn 2002: 139-140).

In Israel, the question about the diversity of Jewish regional origins is complicated further because Israeli society is divided into various *edot*, or groups of repatriates from different parts of the world, who maintain the cultural and social specificities imported from their countries of origin. The divide between the Jews of ‘Western’ extraction and those from Asia and Africa has been described by some commentators as particularly pronounced (Khazzoom 2003, Shohat 1988), and there is voluminous literature demonstrating that throughout the history of Israel, the *olim* of European descent have retained their privileged socio-economic position and maintained claims to cultural superiority (e.g. Schwarz 2001, Shenhav 2006, Hodes 2014, Lavie 2014).

In Israel the Bene Menashe occupy a relatively low place in the economic hierarchy, as the majority of them are engaged in manual labor, and their position is therefore comparable to that of the working class *edot-HaMizrah* (Jewish groups from Asia and North Africa). However, because in the imagination of some of their Israeli compatriots and of non-Jewish ‘outsiders’ (such as the above-mentioned airport official) the Bene Menashe do not ‘look’ Jewish, they have to manifest their Jewishness externally through their sartorial practices, which include wearing a *kippah* for men, dressing conservatively for women and covering hair for those women who are married. The Israeli State does not prescribe wearing headgear either to the Bene Menashe or to any other citizens. This is a matter of choice and is associated with particular groups of religious Jews. However, adopting the sartorial practices of religious Jewish Israelis allows the Bene Menashe to get closer to being accepted as an appropriate category of citizens.

The Bene Menashe case is reminiscent of that of North African Jews in France, as discussed by Kimberley Arkin (2009), who has argued that in order to be accepted as ‘properly’ Jewish, the latter feel they need to follow specific consumption patterns and make expensive fashion choices. Arkin suggests that in order to escape some forms of French racism, Sephardi young people in France prefer to dress in a way that would signal to the external observer that they are Jewish, and would allow them to avoid incidental conflation with Arab

Muslims (Arkin 2009). Just as these young Sephardim use their sartorial practices to distance themselves from their Muslim compatriots, who in the French public discourse are associated with poverty and religious radicalism, my Bene Menashe informant felt reassured that wearing a *kippah* would safeguard him from being mistaken for one of Israel's labor migrants, who are seen as temporary residents and, as Liebelt has put, 'are essentialized in their status as foreigners and their function as workers' (2011: 187).

An analysis of the Bene Menashe willingness to embrace conservative clothing could also benefit from theoretical insights regarding headcover that have been offered in the academic discussion of the Muslim communities of Europe. For instance, as Pierre Bourdieu suggested in his analysis of the initial debates about French policies regarding Muslim women wearing headcover, the explicit question about whether headscarves should be accepted at school contains an implicit question about whether immigrants from North Africa should be accepted in the country (2002: 305).¹² Ruth Mandel suggested in her discussion of the position of the Turkish community of Germany that throughout Europe 'the headscarf crystallizes the "foreigner problem" in that it symbolizes the essential intractability of the "other" – Turkish/Muslim/Arab outsider' (2008: 294). Similarly, I would argue that in Israel, the situation with the Bene Menashe appearing to be more comfortable adopting the dress code of religious Jews (even though this dress code is not formally prescribed by the state), points to the racialized nature of Israeli society's attitudes towards this community. Just like European Muslims have to alter their sartorial practices to manifest that despite their 'foreignness' they are loyal to the state, the Bene Menashe have to signal through their dress code, behavior and life style that they are 'properly' Jewish.

As most of the Bene Menashe I interviewed were observant Jews, conservative clothing style did not bear negative connotations for them. Many stated that that would be their choice of clothing anyway, irrespective of what other Israelis thought of them. However, their life stories indicate that under a different constellation of circumstances they could have adopted both a different life style and a different dress code. This is well illustrated in the story of Yosef, who came to Israel on request of his parents, and whose trajectory towards adopting religious practice in Israel was particularly radical. While back in India, Yosef was a student and excelled in his studies, in Israel, he found himself in a settlement, where he had to do manual labor. One of his Israeli neighbors noticed that he was bright and suggested that he continue his studies at a *yeshivah* (Jewish educational institution). 'I had no interest whatsoever in doing this.' Yosef told me. 'In those days, I had long hair, I liked rock music, and the *yeshivah* in my understanding was like a Bible school, and there was no way I was going to go there.' However, once he was persuaded to go to a *yeshivah*, he liked studying there, and eventually was ordained as a rabbi.

Though secular education was always available for Yosef, his Bene Menashe background meant that he initially had to settle in a religious community and, once his capacity for intellectual learning became obvious to his new compatriots, he was directed to an institution of religious education. Yosef's *aliyah* led to his personhood being shaped in a way that involved a second 'conversion', a conversion from secular education and life style to a life of an Orthodox Jewish person serving the religious needs of his community.

Bene Menashe and Israel's religious self.

It appears that embracing Orthodox Jewish practice came to play an important role in the community's social self-making in their new homeland not only in that it allowed its members to fulfill the expectations that the wider society had in respect of the Bene Menashe, but it led them down the path of reinforcing a particular type of Jewish religiosity, the adoption of which allowed the community to compare themselves positively with other segments of Israeli society.

Some of my Bene Menashe respondents even succeeded in involving secular Israelis in their practice. For instance, Ruth was married to a secular Jewish man Sascha who came to Israel from the former Soviet Union. Ruth appears to be successful in steering her children in the direction of Orthodox Judaism, and even—maybe to a modest extent—involving in this practice her in-laws. Once Ruth invited me to come to her son's circumcision ceremony, which was attended by both Ruth's and Sascha's relatives. 'Shall we put some head cover on?', Sascha's mother Yanna asked me before entering the synagogue. 'I had to borrow one of Ruth's hats,' she said apologetically. 'I don't normally wear them, but in Ruth's family women are very religious...' Yanna was respectful of Ruth's religiosity, and did not question her origin. Religious Jewish practice was not part of Yanna's upbringing, and in matters of religious observance she felt that Ruth's family was superior to hers.

Esther was another Bene Menashe woman married to a man from the former Soviet Union. When I first met Esther in 2010 she and Alec were engaged to be married and she told me that Alec was completely *hiloni* (secular) and did not know anything about the Jewish tradition, however, being very observant herself, Esther was determined to introduce Alec to her practice. When I visited the couple two and a half years later, Alec's religiosity was much more in accordance with Esther's. 'He now knows a lot about Judaism and observes as much as he possibly can. He wears his *kippah*, observes the Sabbath and sometimes even corrects me when I make a mistake about *kashrut* [Jewish dietary laws],' she said proudly.

I witnessed this change in Alec's religiosity myself, when I happened to be visiting Esther and Alec in their caravan on the West Bank one New Year's eve, two years after I first met them. I wished Alec in Russian to have a happy New Year. 'I am Jewish and I don't celebrate the New Year', he replied. 'It is a Christian custom, you know'. The celebration of the secular (or Christian?) New Year presents one of the numerous fault lines in the relationship between the religious authorities of the State of Israel and the secular Jewish (and non-Jewish) Israelis from the Soviet Union, and Alec's rejection of it could certainly count as a small-scale but exciting victory for the former. It could also be argued that this is a victory in which Alec's Bene Menashe spouse played an important role. However, what is particularly significant for our account of the Bene Menashe migration is not whether the community has made an actual impact on the belief and practice of other Israelis, but that their relationship with their secular compatriots demonstrates how in the conditions of contemporary Israel, Orthodox forms of Jewish religiosity present the Bene Menashe with a mechanism for allowing them to attain a positive sense of self even if this occurs

at the expense of a discursive marginalization of other notions of Jewishness, notions that they themselves were denied on account of their origin narrative and embodied appearance.

The *olim* from the former Soviet Union represent an *edah* which is very different from that of the Bene Menashe. They account for a much more numerous community, the majority of which has strong secular values. Moreover, an estimated one third of the 'Russian *aliyah*', which altogether numbers over a million people, are not *halakhically* Jewish, as they acquired Israeli citizenship on the grounds of their paternal Jewish descent (Kravel Tovi 2011, 2012). Unlike the Bene Menashe, these Israeli citizens managed to demonstrate a degree of *halakhic* Jewish ancestry, which was enough to allow them to immigrate to Israel without conversion, but, they were not Jewish according to the Jewish law, and are therefore not allowed to marry a Jewish person in Israel.¹³ That is not to say that in comparison with the Bene Menashe Russian-speaking Jews in Israel occupy a marginal position. On the contrary, their *edah* is not only numerous, but also quite powerful politically. However, the importance that Orthodox rabbinic law is accorded in Israel, creates conceptual space which normalizes the presence of Lost Tribe communities who are lacking 'recognized' Jewish descent, but are *halakhically* Jewish nevertheless due to their Orthodox conversion.

To continue on the theme started in the previous two sections, the Bene Menashe appear to see the narrative about their *halakhic* superiority in relation to Soviet Jews as empowering, because of the racialized nature of the way they are perceived in Israeli society. Demonstrating that they are more 'properly Jewish' persons/citizens than many other Israelis is important for the Bene Menashe as they are often perceived as non-Jews on account of their appearance.

Conclusion

Rabbi Tsadik Ray's story had a happy ending. He told me that the aim of his visit to North America was to give a series of lectures which were publicized in the mass media, and when he was going through the passport control on the way back, the same officer recognized him and gave him a much warmer greeting. 'I read about you in the news, I know who you are!' she said and smiled. Now that she learnt about Rabbi Ray's community from the news, his status became clearer to her and she managed to move beyond the racialized picture that her imagination painted when she first saw him.

This paper has posited that the tradition of the Bene Menashe, which emerged against the backdrop of a wide range of political factors spanning different historical eras and geographical regions, is now taking a particular turn in Israel. It is not at all my suggestion that the specific modalities of the community's Jewishness were shaped solely by the way the Bene Menashe were perceived by Israeli society. Indeed, all community members whom I interviewed identified as Jewish, and the majority of them had always felt very strongly that they should make *aliyah*. At the same time, this paper argued that the specific trajectory for the development of the Bene Menashe religious self-identification in Israel was determined not just by the community's own tradition and cultural and religious aspirations, but also by the expectations of the wider society which associated their claim to Jewishness and to Israeli

citizenship with particular modes of religiosity. Sander Gilman reminds us that Israel is both a land where religious authorities are allowed by the state to endorse a specific definition of 'Who is a Jew', and a place where being Jewish has multiple meanings (2003: 18). It is a diverse society marked by public disagreements between the secular and the religious, the Orthodox and the Reform, regarding how Israeli citizenship should be defined and what level of importance religion and religious authorities should be accorded in the country (Ben-Porat and Turner 2011: 1). At the same time, it appears that in the case of the Bene Menashe, both the power relations of the state expressed in the formal laws regulating the immigration of the Jewish people and public discourses surrounding the question about what it means to be Jewish, have sent the community down the route of conversion and subsequent adherence to the Orthodox model of Jewish religiosity.

I suggest that instances in the racialization of religion which involve both historical and contemporary racialization of Jews and Muslims, and the phenomenon discussed here are the two sides of the same process, which involves the marginalization and stigmatization of the migrants and/or 'minority' communities. Indeed, in the case of the Bene Menashe the very 'religionization' of their community goes hand in hand with their racialization in ways that are reminiscent of the racialization of European Muslims, which has obscured the actual diversity of their religious and regional affiliations and led to other immigrants from Asia and Africa being perceived as Muslim. As I noted above with reference to Arkin (2009), in France, Sephardi Jews from North Africa have to make an extra cultural effort to avoid being racialized as Arab, as this could lead to being seen as Muslim and being subjected to Islamophobic discrimination. Or, to return to the theoretical point made by Tamarkin in relation to the identity of the Lemba, just as the racialization of Judaism effected by the DNA tests obscured the way the Lemba had experienced their religious identity, the 'religionization' of the Bene Menashe, which has pushed them in the direction of embracing and performing Orthodox Jewish identity, similarly, has obscured the diversity of their religious identifications.

Finally, one could also argue that the case of the Bene Menashe illuminates the continued role of colonialism in the production of the race and religion nexus that contributes to the marginalization of migrant and 'minority' groups. As Alanna Cooper has demonstrated in her historical ethnography of the Bukharan Jews, encounters between groups inhabiting the perceived core and periphery of the Jewish world have often produced tensions and the need to negotiate power relations in different Jewish communities (2012). To achieve a better understanding of the factors that may have determined this particular trajectory in the development of the Bene Menashe religiosity, it is useful to compare their migration to that of the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem (AHIJ), who offered their own account of who constitutes a Jewish person and settled in Israel on their own initiative without the help of any organizations in Israel and without converting to Orthodox Judaism. As John Jackson has convincingly argued, the AHIJ problematize the assumption about the Europeanness of the Jewish people, and by offering their own interpretation of the history of transatlantic slave trade and re-conceptualizing Israel as a part of Africa, they explicitly pursue the project of redefining both what it means to be African and what it means to be Jewish (2013). The migration of the Bene

Menashe could have similarly been a story that challenges time-old accounts that racialize Judaism as a religion of a European group. However, the socio-political reality of the Bene Menashe migration to Israel led it to reinforcing rather than to challenging conventional racist assumptions which link Jewishness with European origins and suggest that a 'non-European' person can only become Jewish through conversion. What might account for this is that the Bene Menashe *aliyah* occurred in a context that some commentators have described as colonialist, as it has been entirely dependent upon actors from specific religious Zionist circles on a mission to 'reconvert' the Lost Tribes (Abu El-Haj 2012). It is not surprising then that from the very beginning of their migration, the opportunities that the community members had in defining the specifics of their religious affiliation have been limited. Once they immigrated to Israel, their need to enact Orthodox religiosity was strengthened even further by encounters with their 'hosts' who racialized them as foreign others that did not 'look' Jewish.

At the same time, it remains to be seen how the Bene Menashe tradition is going to develop in response to its socio-political environment – the environment that is likely to change now that larger numbers of the Bene Menashe are officially allowed to immigrate to the Jewish State, and that the new arrivals are initially settled in Israel proper rather than on the West Bank. It also remains to be seen how the Bene Menashe collective narratives of self will be affected by the emergence of second generation community members for whom Israel will be there first and only home.

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¹ For the purposes of protecting my informants' anonymity I have changed all their names.

² Fieldwork on which this paper is based was conducted in Israel in the period from 2010 to 2013.

³ See, for instance, www.kulanu.org.

⁴ These communities have not developed one single name of appellation to designate all their members. Myer Samra uses abbreviation CHIKIM for Chins, Kukis and Mizos (Samra 1991) and Zo (Samra 2012) to refer to these groups.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the history of the Lost Tribes narrative see Parfitt 2002, Parfitt and Trevisan Semi 2002, Ben-Dor Benite 2009.

⁶ Personal communication with Myer Samra.

⁷ For a more detailed account of the activities of these organization and their role in the Bene Menashe migration see Samra 2012, Abu El-Haj 2012 (chapter 5), and Egorova and Perwez 2013 (chapter 5).

⁸ The text of the Law of Return is available on the web-site of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, www.mfa.gov.il.

⁹ Though Reform Rabbis can perform Jewish marriages in their synagogues in Israel, they won't be recognized by the state unless the couple performs a civil marriage abroad <http://www.irac.org/SearchResult.aspx?searchValue=marriage> (accessed on 2 December 2014).

¹⁰ I borrow the term 'recognized' Jewish communities from Janice Fernheimer (2006: 9).

¹¹ For more information on Beta Israel see Parfitt and Trevisan Semi 1999, Haynes 2009, Trevisan Semi 2002, Kaplan 2003, Weil 2012.

¹² For a commentary on this episode see Bowen (2007).

¹³ In the recent decade the religious authorities of Israel have intensified their efforts aimed at converting Russian-speaking immigrants to Judaism. As I was finishing this paper, the Israeli cabinet approved a new conversion law, which could potentially make the conversion process easier for them.