

# Supporting One of the Lost Tribes During a Pandemic

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In March 2020, as the world struggled to deal with the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Jewish Long Beach quickly responded. The goal was to meet the needs of communities both locally and across the world through the newly established COVID-19 Relief Fund. One such community was the B’nei Menashe in Northeast India.

This group has been severely impacted by the pandemic, leaving many unemployed, lacking both food security and access to government welfare programs that other more developed countries have

In an interview, Halkin explained that for thousands of years, this community has preserved ancient Israelite traditions in India without having clear knowledge of their origin. In the wake of the British colonial army, Halkin added, when Christian missionaries arrived in Northeast India in the early 1900s, many of the inhabitants became Christianized. As they learned more about the Bible, they began to recognize many of the stories, folktales and songs that had similar parallels to the traditions passed down by their ancestors in their pre-Christian tribal religion.

Beginning in the 1970s, as the belief of their Israelite heritage spread, a small group decided to live Jewishly and adopted an Orthodox Jewish way of life. They did so with the help of Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, a Jerusalem rabbi dedicated to searching for possible descendants of the Lost Tribes and facilitating their return to their ancient roots.

Then in the 1990s, after a long exile, small groups of the B’nei Menashe community started their return home to Israel. The transition from a Third World country like India to a modernized and highly developed society in Israel has presented significant challenges. “The first B’nei Menashe to arrive in Israel thought they were coming to a biblical country,” says Halkin, who in 2017 helped initiate an oral history project that led to the establishment of Degel Menashe. “Since then, they’ve been exposed to the realities and complexities of Israeli life, but they still have an enormous sense of coming home after 3,000 years of exile. As there are no rabbis in India, the first thing they have to do in Israel is undergo a Jewish conversion, which itself is a difficult process,” Halkin added. Many B’nei

Menashe also arrive to Israel lacking the tools, skills or education needed to make a successful transition to Israeli society and its workforce. The remaining B’nei Menashe in India face bureaucratic challenges to join their families in Israel. Most recently they have faced significant hardships furthered by the COVID-19 pandemic as many have been reduced to poverty and food insecurity.

Degel Menashe responded to the crisis in the spring and early summer by launching two rounds of a food relief program in Manipur and Mizoram. The operation was met with many challenges including total lockdowns that prevented food transport to local communities and delays in gaining permission to circumvent them. This summer Degel Menashe received a grant from Jewish Long Beach that aided their third round of food distribution, helping the organization provide 500 B’nei Menashe families



provided their citizens. Of the approximately 10,000 B’nei Menashe in the world today, between 4,000 and 5,000 have immigrated to Israel, and the remaining members live in the Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur, near the border with Myanmar. Although they claim descent from the Tribe of Menashe, one of the “10 Lost Tribes” of Israel, their adoption of Jewish practice dates only to the 20th century.

There is striking evidence that for thousands of years their ancestors preserved ancient Israelite traditions dating back to biblical times. Many of these traditions are connected to a legendary ancestor, today identified by them as Menashe, according to Hillel Halkin, author of “Across the Sabbath River: In Search of a Lost Tribe of Israel.” Halkin is currently the chairman of Degel Menashe, an Israeli nonprofit organization, founded in November 2019, to support the advancement of the B’nei Menashe in both Israel and India.



with more than 15 metric tons (nearly 35,000 pounds) of their daily staple of rice.

It is hoped that these families will be able to fulfill their dream of immigrating to Israel in the near future. “The B’nei Menashe story,” Halkin says, “is a fabulous episode in Jewish history. The survival of remnants of a biblical tribe and its memories for the 3,000 years in which it lived in isolation from the rest of the Jewish people is a remarkable tribute to the tenacity of our people’s identity, as is the B’nei Menashe’s determination to return to us. We hope that Jewish Long Beach will want to continue to be a part of this story.”

Jewish Long Beach will continue to respond to the needs of organizations and agencies impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. If you would like to contribute to the COVID-19 Relief Fund, please visit <https://jewishlongbeach.org/ways-to-give/donation> or call Yolanda Placencio at 562.426.7601 ext. 1314 to donate by phone. 

