

*Immigration problems are cropping up all across the globe. This article is reprinted with permission from the Los Angeles Times, August 29, 1994.*

# 'Lost' Jews Force Israel To Rethink Immigration

By Mary Curtius

Ten families from India who believe they are descended from one of the 10 lost tribes of Israel are at the center of new controversy over Israel's Law of Return.

For the first time, senior Israeli officials are asking publicly whether the time has come to change the policy that any Jew, from anywhere, can claim instant citizenship upon arrival in Israel.

A note of hysteria was introduced into the public discussion this month after newspapers reported that Israel's ambassador to India, Ephraim Dubek, sent a secret cable to the Foreign Ministry warning that representatives of another Indian group numbering many millions had recently inquired about the possibility of emigrating to Israel.

For a nation of 5 million, still struggling to absorb about 500,000 Russian immigrants who have fled the former Soviet Union in the last four years, the ambassador's cable hit like a bombshell.

In recent days, Immigration Minister Yair Tsaban and Deputy Foreign Minister Yossi Beilin have said Israel might have to rethink the Law of Return if dilemmas such as those posed by the Indians continue to occur.

"The Law of Return was adopted against the background of the Holocaust," Tsaban said. "The basic assumption was that the Jewish faith was not such a splendid one that non-Jews were eager to join it."

Now, however, Tsaban and other officials say Israel has become an attractive alternative for Third World residents eager to escape civil war, poverty and unrest.

"The truth is, Israel has no control over its immigration laws once someone claims to be Jewish," complained one senior official.

But in Kiryat Arba, a Jewish settlement near Hebron, Rivka Lunkhel is unconcerned about the furor.

"I wanted to live here because this is our country," said Lunkhel, a 22-year-old member of India's Shinlung tribe who came to Israel two weeks ago on a tourist visa. Lunkhel said that she has every intention of settling here for good with her husband, Haokhothang — now called Joshua — and their 15-month-old daughter, Runi.

"We are happy here," she said as she sat in one of the sparsely furnished mobile homes that the Shinlung have been given as temporary housing. As she spoke, members of the nine other families who flew to Israel with the Lunkhels were studying Hebrew prayer books nearby. The men have adopted the skullcaps and fringed undershirts commonly worn by observant Jews. The

women cover their heads with scarves and wear long skirts, as do many Orthodox women.

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Israel's Interior Ministry has not recognized the Shinlung claim that they are descended from the ancient Israelite tribe of Menashe. So the Shinlung families entered Israel on tourist visas and are now undergoing strict Orthodox conversions under the supervision of Kiryat Arba rabbis.

Once their conversions are completed, the state will have to grant them citizenship under the requirements of the Law of Return. The Shinlung then will be able to apply for family members to follow them.

The frightening thing for the Israeli government is that the Shinlung, who number about 1.5 million, appear to be only the tip of the Indian-Israeli iceberg.

Even as the first Shinlung were arriving in Israel, Israel's ambassador to India had cabled the Foreign Ministry, informing officials that he was receiving letters and phone calls from members of another Indian tribe, the Dalit, who also say they are long-lost Jews interested in emigrating to Israel.

Also known as Harijans or untouchables, they are at the bottom of India's caste system and were once subject to discrimination and social restrictions.

Indeed, people claiming to belong to the "lost tribes of Israel" are appearing everywhere. There is a petition now before the Israeli High Court from Chima Onyeulo, a member of the Ibo tribe of Nigeria, demanding that he be granted citizenship under the Law of Return. Onyeulo insists that Ibo is simply a corruption of the word "Hebrew" and that the Ibo, most of whom are Christian, are members of one of the lost tribes of Israel. There are several million Ibo.

But Tsaban is not amused by the efforts of Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, founder of the Amishav (My People Return) organization, who is dedicated to scouring the earth for the lost tribes. It is Avichail who "found" the Shinlung and is now active in bringing them to Israel. ■