

# FORUM

ON THE JEWISH PEOPLE, ZIONISM AND ISRAEL

Spring 1988

Issue No. 61

**Editor**

Amnon Hadary

The World Zionist Organization  
Department of Information  
Jerusalem

## In Pursuit of the Lost Ten Tribes: An Odyssey to the East

The quest for the lost ten tribes of Israel has flamed the imagination of countless travellers for generations. Prominent among them was the twelfth century Spanish Jew, Benjamin of Tudela. When he lighted upon the far distant city of Khyber, he discovered 50,000 Jews dwelling there from "the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and a portion of Menashe... this is the gate of India."

Marco Polo's journey to the East brought him into contact with Jews in China and Japan, as well as in India. Curiously, Christopher Columbus, whose origins are too obscure to pass unnoticed, sought the sea-route to India accompanied by the official Hebrew translator of the court of Murcia, Luis de Torres, a baptized Jew.

Henri Noach is director of aliya and Israel Programs for the World Union of Jewish Students. He also lectures in Judaic and Middle East Studies at the International Graduate Center for Hebrew and Jewish Studies (WUJS) in Arad.

Christopher Columbus, whose real name was Colon, claimed descent from the House of David. His son, Ferdinand, once cryptically related that Columbus' "progenitors were of the blood royal of Jerusalem, and it pleased him that his parents shall not be much known." When Columbus died, a strange bequest was found in his will: "Half a silver mark to a Jew who usually stands at the entrance to the Ghetto of Lisbon, or to another who may be named by a priest." The most authoritative work advancing the thesis that Columbus was a Marrano Jew is a book published in 1940 by Salvador de Madariaga, a former Spanish ambassador to the U.S. and France. Similarly, Dr. Frederick Lachman, one-time executive director of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, wrote in 1975 that a recently discovered document "makes it almost certain that Columbus belonged to a Marrano family of Majorcan origin."

Although Columbus had scheduled his departure for the second of August, 1492, he delayed it for one day — the

Ninth of Av, the Jewish fast day coinciding with the deadline set for the Spanish expulsion. The close link between the Spanish expulsion of the Jews and his fateful voyage was noted by Columbus in his personal log: "After the monarchs had expelled the Jews from all their kingdoms and their lands... they commissioned me in the same month to undertake this voyage to India." Jews were so involved in the funding of his voyage that one historian, Herbert B. Adams, has written that "not jewels, but Jews, were the real financial basis of the first expedition." The only high official intimately involved with Columbus' expedition who wasn't Jewish was the Royal Secretary whose wife was Jewish.

Simon Wiesenthal, in his book *The Sail of Hope*, opines that Columbus expressly set out for India in the hope of reuniting with an independent Jewish kingdom, which he knew about from accounts of past travellers. Five years later, as Jews were being expelled from Portugal, Vasco da Gama set sail in search of India. He, too, commissioned the services of a Hebrew translator.

The Bible relates that the "lost" ten tribes of the northern kingdom of Israel were exiled in the eighth century B.C.E. by the Assyrians to Chavor, Hera and the River Gozan, "...where they are until this day." (*Chronicles* 1:5). These place-names bear a striking similarity to the city of Khyber (mentioned by Benjamin of Tudela), as well as to the Khyber Pass linking modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan; to the "Rud-Jazan", which in Persian denotes the Jazan River, a tributary of the Central Asian Oxus River; and to the Afghani city of Herat. Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, is the name of a biblical city given to the tribe of

Asher in Samaria, the former northern kingdom of Israel. The *Tafsir* of Rabbi Saadia Gaon in his tenth century translation of the Bible into Arabic, identifies the Afghani city of Balkh with the biblical "Gozan."

A nineteenth century commentary to the talmudic tractate of Sanhedrin, "Tiferet Yisrael", refers to the forlorn children of Israel in "Eretz Afghanan" (Chapter Helek, Mishnah 3). Rabbi Israel Ben Gedaliah Lipshitz, author of the commentary, writes that "many of the ten tribes were in China, India and Ethiopia. They know only that they are Jews and they circumcise themselves and keep a few commandments. Their worship of God, however, is mixed with idol worship and on this point Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Eliezer disagree: as to whether in the future those who remained intermixed will return in strength under the wings of the divine presence, even though some of them were absolute idol worshippers who have forgotten the name Israel. Only some Jewish customs remain from those of their ancestors, as in the case of the Afghan nation, who some wise geographers, see as "forgotten Jews".

The traditions concerning the remnants of the lost ten tribes in the midst of the Afghan nation were revived and investigated by Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, second president of the State of Israel. He took an avid interest in everything concerning the dispersed of Israel throughout the world, and devoted much time and energy to the amassing of information on the subject. The fruit of his endeavors is his little known book, *The Banished of Israel*. Alluding to the hardy Pathan tribesmen, he wrote:

"The tribes of Afghanistan, among

whom dwelt the Jews of Afghanistan for many generations, are Muslim tribes which kept, and still keep, the wondrous tradition regarding their origin from the ten lost tribes. This tradition which circulates among the people of the Afghan tribes, is an ancient one and has historical backing. Some researchers, and travellers, Jews and non-Jews who visited these places dealt with it, as did researchers of the land and its population from literary sources alone. Only a few facts have been published on this matter in books and encyclopedias, either in European languages or in Hebrew.

Jewish travellers of the Middle Ages, and emissaries from the land of Israel who found themselves in these eastern cities spoke of the Israelite source of the tribes of Afghanistan. Some researchers and travellers from Europe who visited these tribes reiterate this fact, and their words were recorded in all the important encyclopedias. They appear in old Afghan chronicles, and recent Afghan authors repeat it. For some reason, our modern researchers and travellers did not pay proper attention to it, and perhaps because of the numerous imaginary legends on the matter in certain literatures, a negative attitude arose among the people of an enlightened generation. The main reason seems to be that Afghanistan is so remote; mountains and deserts divide it from Jews of the European Diaspora; and researchers barely had means of contact with this sparse banished Judaism in the lap of these mountains of darkness.

Ben-Zvi saw in the birth of the State of Israel, and the subsequent repatriation of the Jews of Afghanistan, a fortuitous confluence of events that made possible

his collecting of evidence from "live witnesses, eye witnesses who spent many years among these tribes, and got to know their traditions and customs. These are Jews who speak honestly and tell what they saw with their eyes and with their ears."

Ben-Zvi's collection of eye-witness accounts regarding the Hebrew origins of the Afghan tribes has been pursued more recently by *Amishav*, an association of scholars and laymen established in 1975 to trace the alleged Hebrew origins of numerous peoples around the world. Its founder and chairman is Rabbi Eliyahu Avichayil, formerly the rabbi of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Prominent among the groups that the association studies are the 15,000,000 Pathans of Pakistan's northwest frontier province and eastern Afghanistan, one of the largest tribal groupings in the world.

Etymologically, "Pathan" may derive from Piton, a grandson of Jonathan, the son of King Saul. (*Chronicles I 8,35*). Another version claims that it derives from "baton", denoting their penchant for guerilla warfare. Indeed, the British failed in their three-fold attempt to conquer Afghanistan in the nineteenth century, repelled by these very same Pathans, whom they called "Jews", on the basis of their physiognomy.

Of the 21 peoples of Afghanistan, the Pathans are the only ones with semitic facial features. Ben-Zvi wrote that the Pathans "looked Jewish" and "acted Jewish." They grow sidelocks and beards, and wear a type of tallit called "Joy-Namaz" (a place of worship in Afghani) made long and square to cover the head and part of the shoulders. The Pathans pray upon it, as is the custom of

Islam, to which they were converted in 662 C.E. by Khalid ibn al-Walid, an emissary of Mohammed. According to the Muslim tradition, he returned to Mecca with 76 converts and seven leaders of the children of Israel. The Pathans also wear a smaller tallit which is called "kafan", a four-cornered garment to which they tie strings resembling the Jewish ritual fringes or *tsitsit*.

Shalom Dadush of Herat, who now lives in Israel, arrived by way of Peshawar: "On the border, we were stopped by one of the guards for questioning. When he saw that we were Jews he asked: 'Are we Jews or not? You see, I wear fringes and my father does too. My mother lights candles, my grandmother lights candles, so are we Jews or not?' I asked him jokingly: 'Why do you not return to Judaism?' He answered: 'The day will come when we return and become Jews.'"

A similar encounter with a Pathan border guard deeply moved Yehezkel Batsal, an Afghani immigrant to Israel: "In 1948 we immigrated to Israel and we reached the Indian (now Pakistani) border. It was Sunday and the Punjabi officer at the crossing station, who was in British employ, refused to stamp our passports on the official day of rest. This distressed us greatly as we feared that the Afghan government might change its mind at the last minute and revoke our exit permits. We tried again to influence the officer to stamp our passports. He asked us our final destination. When we replied Jerusalem, he was taken aback, and repeated: 'To Jerusalem?' He asked us if there was a wall there of tears crying? 'Yes' we answered. So he immediately stamped all our passports. When he finished, he turned to us and

asked: 'When you arrive at the wall of tears (Kotel), make a request for me because I am also of the seed of the Jews. I am from Punjab. And ask of the Blessed Name that he return his lost sons.' And we saw tears in the eyes of the officer."

The Pathans are known in their own language as the *Pashtu*, which may be a derivative of the Hebrew root "pasht", meaning to disperse or to be dispersed. Markedly less hypothetical evidence of their Hebrew antecedents are the Hebrew origins of the names of their sub-tribes: Shinwari (Shimon); Levani (Levi); Daftani (Naftali); Jaji (Gad); Ashuri (Asher); Yusufzai (the sons of Joseph); and Afridi (Ephraim).

The Pashtu collectively trace their genealogy to Afghana, a legendary grandson of King Saul. Each tribe has a family tree on deerskin with gold letters: from the sons of Jacob until the present head of the tribe. The veracity of this tradition was attested to by Moshe Khardim, an Iranian student who travelled from Israel to Afghanistan in 1975.

The Afghani royal family in particular traced its ancestry to the tribe of Benjamin. Up until the time of Habibula Khan, who reigned in the early years of this century, the kings would be blessed by the Jews on their coronation day, whereupon they would display their lineage from the sons of Benjamin. When Habibula's son, Aminula Khan, wanted to reform the Afghan constitution, he asked the Jews for their books of personal and monetary laws in order to use them as a model in establishing his reforms. This section of the Pashtu law code, the Pushtun-Wali, is called "Tawra" (Torah). Hiya Zaorov, to whom this information was relayed by a

former Afghani minister, had the distinct impression that the king sought in this way to reestablish the original Afghan constitution — the law of Israel. Aminula's successor, Nadir Khan, appointed a Jew from Bukhara, Eliyahu Yisakhar, to advise him on state matters. It was by virtue of Eliyahu's pivotal position in the palace that many Bukharan and Afghani Jews came to Israel.

Among those of the Pashtu tribesman of Pakistan who similarly ascribe their ascent to the tribe of Benjamin, tradition alleges that their ancient forebears never resided in the land of Israel, but fled from their brethren while still in the desert. They speak of a civil war which broke out between the tribes of Israel, and of the great defeat of the original tribe of Benjamin; the survivors among the latter fled, never to return, but rather to wander until they reached India. Rashi, the renowned biblical commentator of the eleventh century, hands down the legend of a war between the tribes of Israel in the 40th year of the Exodus (*Deuteronomy* X, 65).

Pashtu customs have impressed numerous researchers as to the likelihood of the Pathans' Hebrew origins. Many are known to circumcise their sons on the eighth day and to perform levirate marriages. The women immerse themselves in a river or spring a full week after menstruation. Professor S. M. Immodin, of the University of Dacca, wrote that they celebrate passover during which they eat unleavened bread and that in times of plague they sacrifice animals and smear the doorposts of their homes with blood, as in Egypt on the fateful night of the plague of the firstborn sons.

The Pathans' preservation of Jewish

customs has blended in with their presently strict adherence to Islam. Amnon Eliyav, an immigrant from Afghanistan, related that in 1947 he had arrived at one of the villages of the Afridi tribes late one Friday afternoon. "I stayed with a Moslem family, but imagine my astonishment when they lit candles, and hid them in a corner — a relic of an ancient custom, so they described it, but they were unable to explain the reason for it. In the evening they served grape juice to the members of the household. By Islamic law it is forbidden to drink of the vine, but they have an ancient tradition which must be preserved."

In 1980, a team of Hebrew University and Amishav researchers explored the customs and lifestyle of Pashtu tribesmen in the Kashmir. They entered a Pashtu village straddling the Himalayan foothills where the village elder told them that he descended from the "Banu Israil" (Children of Israel) and that they refrain from working on Saturday.

Such encounters between Jews and Pashtu may at times be fraught with danger. Yaakov Danieli haplessly strayed by one village near the Gozan River with one of his children. The child had sidelocks: "Suddenly... the people of the tribe came upon us in their multitudes and simply wanted to kill me. They thought that I had taken the child from their region. When I succeeded by a miracle to quiet them down a bit and asked why they attacked me, they explained that it was clear to them that I had kidnapped the child, for to grow sidelocks is only the custom of the sons of the tribe, for they are the sons of Israel, and only they grow sidelocks."

The Pathans have preserved to this day the perennial tradition of their ulti-

mate return to the land of their ancestors in Israel. Jewish tradition has similarly nurtured the messianic yearning for the time when "the House of Judah shall walk with the House of Israel" (*Jeremiah* III, 18). The Jewish sage Abarbanel established the tradition of the return of the lost ten tribes as a fundamental tenet of Jewish faith (*Mashmia Yeshua*. Fourth Principle). Saadia Gaon explained that the sounding of the shofar on Rosh Hashana also serves to recall our faith in the future ingathering of Israel's dispersed, and to awaken our longing for it.

Today, two million Pathans live in squalid Pakistani refugee camps, uprooted from their homes by Soviet

"liberators". They are currently waging a relentless war against the Soviet military machine. Their staunch resistance has transformed Afghanistan into Soviet "Vietnam". Little support has filtered down to them from their Islamic "brethren".

Might we venture to apprehend in the unfolding of these dramatic events the burgeoning of an historical process of prophetic portent? As it is said: "And it will be on that day God will extend again His arm to the remainder of His people which remain in Assyria and in Egypt and from Patros and Kush... and will gather the banished of Israel and the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the Earth."