



FINDING “LOST JEWS”

A chance encounter led Michael Freund to devote himself to an unusual cause: reaching out to descendants of Jews around the world. Now, he is calling on world Jewry to join him in this task, describing it as “one of the greatest challenges - and opportunities - of our generation” / Dan Zeller



It is late on a Thursday afternoon, at the end of a long and tiring work week, but at the offices of Shavei Israel in Jerusalem there is a steady yet palpable buzz of activity. A plethora of diverse languages fills the air, as recent immigrants from as far afield as China, Spain and India gather amid book-lined shelves to study Jewish culture and tradition in their respective tongues.

Staff members are busy at work in their cubicles, conversing in Russian, Hindi and Catalan with some of the organization’s emissaries abroad, planning events and seminars for far-flung communities seeking to reconnect with their Jewish roots. Meanwhile, in an adjoining classroom, dozens of students from across the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking world listen intently to a series of lectures on Jewish history and belief.

Amid this bustle, Michael Freund, Shavei Israel’s energetic founder and Chairman, is on the phone with one of his organization’s representatives in Poland, discussing programming for young Poles who have recently discovered their family’s Jewish heritage.

Although seemingly disparate, this wide-ranging set of endeavors is rooted in a solid and cohesive vision, one that has become the central focus of Shavei Israel’s work in recent years: reaching out to descendants of Jews around the world and strengthening their connection with the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

Founded seven years ago, the organization has quickly made a name for itself by going where others have yet to tread. Shavei Israel is currently active in nine different countries and works with a variety of communities, all of which share a historical link with the Jewish people. These include the “Hidden Jews” of Poland from the Holocaust era, the Subbotnik Jews of Russia, the descendants of the Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, the Bnei Menashe of India, and the Bnei Anousim (whom historians refer to by the derogatory



term “Marrano”) of Spain, Portugal and South America.

Each community is very much a story unto itself, with its own history, saga and drama, and each one faces unique hurdles in the journey back to their Jewish roots. But many of the strides they have made in recent years are largely thanks to the efforts of one man, Michael Freund, a soft-spoken, affable former American who has devoted himself to this highly unusual cause.

Poland’s “hidden Jews” emerge

“Listen to an incredible story,” Freund tells me, as he hangs up the receiver and welcomes me into his private office. Dressed immaculately in a pinstripe suit, with wire-rimmed glasses covering his soft brown eyes, the clean-shaven and boyishly handsome former New Yorker looks several years younger than

his age of 41.

“On a recent visit to Poland,” Freund tells me, “I met a young woman, whom we will call Marta, who always suspected that her family had a Jewish background, even though her parents vehemently denied it,” he says. When Marta’s maternal grandmother lay on her deathbed, she revealed to Marta that she was a Jew, saying that she had chosen to hide her identity because of her experiences under Nazism and Communism.

More than 90 percent of Poland’s three million Jews were murdered by the Nazis during World War II, including much of Marta’s grandmother’s family. Before passing away, the grandmother pleaded with her not to reveal the secret to Marta’s Polish grandfather - because she had kept this information from him throughout all the years of their life together. “But Marta could not contain herself for long, and shortly thereafter she broke down and told her grandfather the truth - that his late wife



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1. Subbotnik Jews in the Russian village of Vysoky

2. A Bnei Menashe man prepares for Sukkoth

3. Michael Freund with a Bnei Menashe child in Manipur, India

4. Descendants of the Jewish community of Kaifeng, China visit Jerusalem

5. A Bnei Menashe child in India



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had in fact been a Jew," Freund says.

"An even bigger surprise was then in store for Marta," Freund notes, his voice beginning to crack with emotion, "as her grandfather collapsed in tears and revealed to her that he, too, was also secretly Jewish!" Both, it seems, had so desperately sought to hide from the darkness of the past, that they concealed their Jewishness from each other, without realizing they had shared a similar fate.

"This remarkable revelation led Marta on a journey of personal discovery," Freund states. "She contacted our organization's emissary in Krakow, and is now an active member of Poland's burgeoning Jewish community, along with many others who are only now emerging from the shadows." Stories such as these, Freund avers, underline the potential that exists in countries such as Poland, where it is estimated that upwards of 30,000 so-called "hidden Jews" and their descendants may reside.

In recent years, Shavei Israel has dispatched rabbis to serve full-time in Warsaw, Krakow and Wroclaw, where they are playing a key role in reviving Jewish life and reaching out to Poland's "hidden Jews". "More than 60 years after the Holocaust, these young people are defying social norms and a great deal of latent anti-Semitism and are consciously choosing to embrace their Jewish heritage. How can we possibly turn our backs on them?" Freund asks, somewhat incredulous at the thought. "They are openly choosing to affirm anew their Jewishness, and I can think of no sweeter revenge for what happened there [i.e. in Poland] than if we can succeed in bringing back some of Poland's 'hidden Jews' to the Jewish people," he says.

A vast untapped resource

The 'return' of Jewish descendants such as Marta could provide the Jewish people with a

When people discover or rediscover their Jewish roots, they inevitably develop a certain affinity to the Jewish people and a greater sympathy for Israel and Jewish causes

much-needed shot in the arm, Freund points out. "The Jewish people are small and getting smaller. But at the same time there is this vast untapped resource: countless numbers of people around the world, who have a biological and historical connection with us," he says. "We should be reaching out to them and strengthening their connection with the Jewish people, if only because we stand to benefit from it in a range of fields - from diplomacy to demography to the struggle against anti-Semitism," he insists.

"I have seen it time and time again - when people discover, or rediscover, their Jewish roots, they inevitably develop a certain →



Young Poles in Krakow who recently discovered their Jewish roots

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← affinity to the Jewish people and a greater sympathy for Israel and Jewish causes,” he adds. “And some of them of course will in the end return to our people. This point is so obvious and compelling to me, that I find it hard to comprehend why it has not garnered more attention and resources in the Jewish world.”

In recent years, the organization’s annual outlays have expanded to over \$1.25 million, with Freund and his extended family contributing a sizeable portion of the yearly budget. He raises the rest of the funds from foundations and individuals primarily in Europe and the United States, where an American Friends of Shavei Israel is active. As Chairman, Freund works entirely on a volunteer basis. He does not take a salary, and he even pays for his own travel expenses because, he says, “I want every dollar that we raise to go towards helping the people who need it most.”

Freund was born in New York and grew up in the relaxed and affluent suburbs north of the city. He graduated with honors from Princeton University, where he studied political philosophy and international relations, and then went on to receive an MBA in finance and marketing from Columbia Business School, before making aliyah in 1995.

“I have always loved America, and I still do,” he says. The walls in his office, which are adorned with photographs of Ronald Reagan and various American sports heroes such as New York Giants quarterback Eli Manning, bear this out. But Freund came to Israel, he says, out of a deep sense of Zionist conviction and a desire “to devote my life to the Jewish people, because I can think of no higher calling.”

After Binyamin Netanyahu was elect-

ed Prime Minister in 1996, he tapped Freund to serve as his Deputy Director of Communications and Policy Planning, where the young aide made a name for himself thanks to his staunch and often creative means of defending Israel in the media. Working in the Prime Minister’s Office opened many doors for Freund, and set the stage for what seemed like an almost certain career path leading in the direction of public service.

But one day in 1997, in between his work drafting speeches and preparing policy papers for the premier, as well as dealing with the foreign press, Freund opened an envelope addressed to Netanyahu that came across his desk. It would prove to be a fateful move - not only for Freund himself, but eventually for thousands of descendants of Jews around the world.

A letter from India

“A letter arrived to the Prime Minister from a group in India which called itself the Bnei Menashe,” Freund recalls. “I had never heard of them before, but they claimed to be descended from a lost tribe of Israel and were pleading to make aliyah. It sounded intriguing, so I decided to answer the letter and look into the issue further.”

Freund later learned that the Bnei Menashe, who reside in northeastern India along the border with Burma and Bangladesh, had been writing to every Israeli prime minister since Golda Meir. They had never before received a reply from any Israeli official. “At first, I did not buy into the Lost Tribes bit, but I did view them as *gerei tzedek* - as righteous converts - and felt that the government should do something to help them,” he remembers.

The Bnei Menashe trace their ancestry back to the tribe of Manasseh, one of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel that was exiled by the Assyrian empire more than 2,700 years ago. Their forefathers wandered eastward toward China, before settling in what is now north-eastern India several centuries ago, where they continued to practice a biblical form of Judaism as best they could. This included observing the Sabbath and the festivals, keeping kosher and the laws of family purity, and turning towards Zion in prayer.

As Freund learned more about the Bnei Menashe’s customs and traditions, his view of them quickly underwent a transformation, and he came to believe in the historicity of their claims. After traveling to India on a number of occasions, visiting dozens of Bnei Menashe communities and speaking with members of the community, “I went from being a skeptic to an advocate,” he admits.

In the intervening decade, and especially after he founded Shavei Israel in 2002, Freund succeeded in working through Israel’s imposing bureaucracy and has brought more than 1,600 Bnei Menashe to the Jewish state. All have undergone formal conversion by the Chief Rabbinate to remove any doubts regarding their personal status and have been granted Israeli citizenship. Another 7,000 remain in India, awaiting permission from the Israeli government to make the move.

A question of size

But all that came later. Back in 1999, after Netanyahu left office, Freund found himself at a personal and professional crossroads. “I began thinking more broadly about the issue of descendants of Jews, and it occurred to me that both the Jewish people and the State of Israel were doing virtually nothing to engage them in any meaningful way,” he says, calling this “monumentally short-sighted and inexplicably obtuse.”

“Whether we like it or not, size does matter, whether in basketball, business or international diplomacy,” he asserts, “and to make a difference in the world and live up to our national mission as Jews, we need a much larger and more diverse ‘team’ at our disposal.” This, Freund emphasizes, means that “we not only need to work harder at keeping Jews Jewish, but we also must expand our horizons and look for ways to boost our numbers.” A good place to start, he believes, “would be with descendants of Jews, with communities that have a historical connection with the Jewish people and are now interested in returning.”

He cites, for example, the Subbotnik Jews of Russia, whose peasant forebears converted to Judaism two centuries ago under the Czar and were then expelled to the far reaches of the Russian empire by Alexander I. “More than a century ago, beginning with the First Aliyah, thousands of Subbotnik Jews migrated →



Bnei Menashe
children in a village in
northeastern India

Over the past decade, Freund has succeeded in bringing more than 1,600 Bnei Menashe from India to the Jewish state

← to Israel,” he says, and their descendants include prominent figures such as former IDF Chief of Staff Rafael (“Rafal”) Eitan, former Israel Police District Commander Alec Ron, and the legendary Alexander Zaid, who established the ‘Hashomer’ Jewish self-defense organization.

“There are still an estimated 20,000 Subbotnik Jews left in Russia, many of whom wish to make aliyah, but in recent years the Israeli government has inexplicably been denying them the right to do so,” Freund says. “This needs to change. The Subbotnik Jews survived Czarist persecution and Communist oppression and many were murdered by the Nazis; we cannot turn our backs on them. The remnants of this community now wish to come home, so why shouldn’t Israel open the door to them?”

Freund notes that throughout Jewish history, expulsions and persecutions have shorn away untold numbers of Jews from our ranks, leaving just a small remnant of what might have been. “Historians estimate that during the Herodian period two millennia ago, there were approximately eight million Jews in the world, who represented 10 percent of the Roman Empire,” he explains. “At the same time, the Han Dynasty in China conducted a census in the year 2 CE which found that there were 57.5 million Han Chinese.” Jump ahead 2000 years to the present, the numbers are of course quite different, with China having soared to more than 1.1 billion people, even as world Jewry barely numbers more than 13 million souls.

“We might never be able to match China’s demographics,” Freund states, “but we can and should look for new opportunities for growth. Our precarious state as a people, and

the threats we face at home and abroad, demand as much.”

A broader agenda

Obviously, not all of the millions of people of Jewish descent will convert and seek to make aliyah, and Freund is quick to emphasize that his work is not confined to these two goals. “It goes far beyond that. The agenda is much broader and more multifaceted,” he says, adding emphatically that “Judaism is not a missionary religion, and we are most certainly not a missionary organization.”

“My goal is not to put a *yarmulke* on everyone’s head or to get people to make aliyah. It is to help descendants of Jews to connect to the Jewish people in whatever way they feel comfortable doing so,” he insists, “be it culturally or spiritually.”

As an example, Freund cites his work with the Bnei Anousim, whose ancestors were forcibly converted to Catholicism at the time of the Spanish Inquisition but continued to preserve their Jewish identity in secret down through the generations. Historians estimate that in Brazil alone, there are at least three to five million people of such descent. Shavei Israel has emissaries serving in Spain, Portugal and Brazil, and has published numerous books in Spanish and Portuguese on topics such as Jewish history and festivals.

“Many of the Bnei Anousim whom we work with have no interest in organized religion, but they do have an intellectual or emotional curiosity about Jews because of their Jewish ancestry,” he says. “Whether they are seeking a cultural or spiritual or even just a cerebral connection with the Jewish people, I feel just as strongly that we need to help them,” Freund says.

He points to a study published last winter in the *American Journal of Human Genetics*, which revealed that 20 percent of the population of Spain and Portugal has Sephardic Jewish ancestry. The results, *The New York Times* said at the time, “provide new and explicit evidence of the mass conversions of Sephardic Jews” which took place over 500 years ago on Spanish and Portuguese soil. “Think about it: it is as if a large mirror were suddenly being held up in front of every Spanish and Portuguese person, forcing them to look at themselves and see the reality of their national and individual history,” Freund says.

“But even more compelling than what it says about the past is what it might just say about the future. If Israel and the Jewish people undertake a concerted outreach effort toward our genetic brethren in Iberia, it could have a profound impact in a variety of fields,” he argues. “Some will choose to return to Judaism. But even if most do not, it still behooves us to reach out to them. The very fact that such large numbers of Spaniards and Portuguese have Jewish ancestry could have a significant impact on their attitudes toward Jews and Israel.”

Earlier this year, at the height of the conflict in Gaza between the IDF and Hamas, a large pro-Israel demonstration was held in Madrid, and many of those in attendance were Bnei Anousim.

One nation, many faces

“We are living in a world that is growing smaller by the day, thanks to the reach of the Internet. In order to thrive in this global village, we need Chinese Jews and Indian Jews and Polish Jews no less than American and Australian Jews,” Freund insists. “We are one nation, with many faces, and we have to learn to leverage our diversity and view it as a strength rather than a weakness.”

As Freund escorts me to the door, I notice several Chinese men waiting to meet with him. He introduces me to the group, all of whom are descendants of the Jewish community which thrived in the Chinese city of Kaifeng for over a thousand years before succumbing to a wave of assimilation and intermarriage. Shavei Israel recently brought the men to Jerusalem to study Hebrew at an ulpan.

Before I leave, Freund turns to me and says, “I do this because I believe it is good for Israel and good for the Jewish people. We have a moral, historical and religious responsibility towards these people - they are part of the extended Jewish family. I just hope that more like-minded Jews will join us in our efforts because this is the wave of the future.” ■

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