

Gideon Rei

(born in Mizoram in 1940)

It was now 1972. Our group had begun to call ourselves the Zion Church of God and had spread from Churachandpur to other places in Manipur and Mizoram. We observed our day of rest on Saturday, the biblical Sabbath. We sang songs of longing for Zion. One went:

Israel tlang kaihna hli a chuan, Israel tlang kahinna pui a chuan

Ka taksa le ka nun le ka engkim

Ka peh ang Zion, Ka peh ang, Zion na lenna tur.

Can you translate what you just sang into English?

On Mount Israel where wind blows, on Mount Israel where my life flows,

With my body, with my spirit, with my all,

I will give everything to Zion, everything to live in Zion.

Our leader was Thangruma, who was a theological doctor. He had a doctorate in divinity from some institution in America, for which he had studied by correspondence course and written a thesis. With him were my brother and Bella, who was a good speaker. They had set up Church of God congregations in many villages.

Did the Church of God also observe the other biblical holidays?

Some of us tried to. On Passover, for example, we knew we had to abstain from certain foods, but we weren't sure which. Since our main food was rice, we didn't eat that, but bread was not considered a real food and we ate it.

Did you build a *sukkah* [tabernacle] on Sukkot [the Feast of Tabernacles]?

Not in those early days in The Church of God. That happened only after we embraced Judaism.

Some of us in The Church of God were already struggling to make our way towards Judaism at this time. Thangruma and I were reading all we could get hold of about it. A letter was sent to the prime minister of Israel, Golda Meir, informing her that we were a lost tribe. It had a translation into English by Thangruma of the Song of the Sea [an ancient song with details resembling the biblical account of the Israelites' crossing of the Red Sea] and of the words of another song we used to sing. Part of it went:

Dear mother Jerusalem embrace me as a little babe.

The lovely words of thy mouth

Are sweeter than the best honey.

We long for thee, thou good peaceful land.

No answer was received.

Had you known of the Song of the Sea before this?

By then I knew of it, although it wasn't something I knew in my childhood. You have to remember that it's an old Hmar [a tribe living in northern Mizoram and southern Manipur] song. It wasn't always general knowledge. I first became aware of it when I entered the Church of God.

We wrote to a group in Israel called the Indian Jewish Federation. They requested an account of our history, which we sent them, and they sent us back some Siddurim [Jewish prayer books] and *tallitot* [prayer shawls]. Thangruma traveled to Calcutta and met twice with Stanley Ezra, the head of the Jewish community there. Nothing came of it. We approached Sam Abraham from the Bombay Jewish community; He told us that it was not his part of his job to deal with lost tribes. Ginzamung [a fellow Church of God member] wrote to the Chief Rabbi of Bombay, Ephraim Eleazari, asking for help; the answer he received was brief and non-committal. T. Daniel [another early Judaizer] then set out for Bombay himself, and found a kindly woman in the Jewish community named Esther to be his teacher. She taught him Hebrew and the Jewish prayers, and he spent four months there studying.

We collected donations from community members to fund these trips. There was a spiritual thirst, a yearning, for Israel. The word "Zion" was on everybody's lips.

Eventually, though, we realized that we could never gain acceptance in the Jewish world as members of a Christian church. We understood that we had to be part of Judah.

In July 1974, I went back to Manipur, to Kawnpui, near Churachandpur. My family lived there and I had not seen my father for some time. It was on this visit that I decided to join Judaism. While I was in Kawnpui I met with Zangkhothang and T.Daniel and we decided that Judaism was the true path. We stood together on this. I had not informed our leader, Dr. Thangruma, about this. It was a secret and I kept it to myself. We made our headquarters at the Judean Photo Studio on Teddim Road in Churachandpur, which belonged to Zangkhotang, and started a new organization called The United Jews of North East India.

This was all in 1974?

Yes, in 1974. By this time I had read both the Old and New Testaments as many times as I could. I had compared them and looked deeply at their differences and contradictions. It had become clear to me that the New Testament was not part of the Torah. I was firm in my beliefs. Jesus was Jesus, he had gone from Bethlehem to Calvary, but that didn't make him the Messiah. He didn't gather in the exiles of Israel or usher in an era of world peace as the Messiah was meant to do.

You rejected the New Testament completely?

Yes, I did, along with a few others like me. But I have to say that if it hadn't been for Christianity, we would never have connected the rituals performed by our forefathers with the Torah. The old religion was still widely practiced in Manipur as late as the 1960s.

Was the belief that Manasia or Manmasi was Menashe already prevalent at this time?

It was in the air. It wasn't just a religious belief. Lalthanhawla [a ranking Mizo politician] had declared at a session of the State Assembly that the Mizos come from the tribe that crossed the Red Sea, and there was another politician, Lalduhoma, who announced at a party meeting that we were descendants of Israel. We were all aware by then our forefathers had invoked the name Manasia in their prayers, and that this

was the son of Joseph. They hadn't known who Joseph was but for generations they kept the name of alive.

That year a general conference of the Church of God was convened in Birkothlir. That's the second town on the Silchar road after you enter Mizoram. I had not told anyone in advance about my embrace of Judaism. On one of the days of the conference, though, while sitting in my host's house by the kitchen fire, I began to talk about it. The people who were there were mostly older members of the church. I was able to convince a majority of them that I was right.

The last day of the conference was on a Sunday. There was an old woman there, an unassuming, poor, and rather shy person, who had a reputation for being a kind of prophetess. Her name was Chhungi and she had taken the biblical name of Deborah. That Sunday night she said to us, "The Lord made it known to me long ago that when you set out on the way that will take you to the land that is your true home, a heavenly angel will sound a trumpet. The way is Judaism and the angel is Gideon Rei. This is the word of the Lord." She went on, "I am a poor old woman, a widow with nothing to my name, but I say in front of you all that you must leave Dr. Thangruma and follow Judaism. Like the water flowing in the river, we must move on. I ask the congregation to join me in worship." We all prayed. She turned to bless me and asked all present to join her. They placed their hands on me and prayed again. I declared before the congregation of the Church of God that I would be faithful to our new path. Deborah prayed that I might never be afraid, for God would always be with me. She gave me much spiritual strength.