

# JEWS, BURMESE-SPEAKING

ဂျိုး (မြန်မာ)



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**Location:** Although approximately 25 million Jewish people are scattered across the globe, the tiny remnant of just 50 Burmese-speaking Jews in Myanmar represents one of the smallest surviving communities of Jews in any country. At the time of the 1931 census, there were 1,261 Jews in Myanmar. Their population rose to a peak of 4,000 in the 1940s,<sup>2</sup> but decades of tumult and military uprisings have seen their numbers dwindle to just several dozen, although they still proudly have a synagogue, located on 26th Street in downtown Yangon (formerly Rangoon). A small number of Jews also live in Myanmar's second largest city, Mandalay, but they have little or no contact with their counterparts in Yangon.

**Identity:** Apart from the small number of genuine Burmese-speaking Jews, since the 1980s, approximately 10,000 Chin and Mizo people living on both sides of the Myanmar-India border have claimed Jewish ancestry, declaring themselves to be from the lost tribe of Manasseh. Their claims

are based on the belief that some of their customs and traditions are similar to Jewish practices; however, they can find no historical link to Israel, and DNA testing shows no evidence of Middle Eastern ancestry. This movement began when a tribal leader had a dream in which he claimed Israel was their homeland. This profile does not include them.<sup>3</sup>

**Language:** Having lost the use of Hebrew generations ago except when religious rites are being observed, all Jews in Myanmar today speak Burmese as their first language. Many are also fluent in English.

**History:** Located six miles (10 km) from their synagogue, a large Jewish cemetery with 700 graves tells the story of nearly two centuries of struggle in Myanmar. The first Jew known to have lived in the country was Solomon Habirol, who served as a commander in the army of King Alaungpaya (reigned 1752-60). The largest influx of Jews occurred in the mid-19th century as many arrived from today's Iraq, Iran, and from the long-established community of Cochin Jews in south

India. The Jews in Yangon enjoyed a relatively peaceful existence until the Second World War, when the Japanese were poised to take over the country. As Japan was an ally of Nazi Germany, many Jews fled to the West or returned to India. Those who remained faced great hardship after General Ne Win's military coup in 1962 and again in 1964 when the regime nationalized private businesses, which plunged many Jewish families into financial peril.<sup>4</sup>

**Customs:** During the time they have lived in Myanmar, the Burmese-speaking Jews have mostly worked as merchants and operated small businesses. Some of the men of the community "owned ice factories and bottling plants, and others dealt in textiles and timber. The rest were primarily customs officials and traders."<sup>5</sup> At one time, Jewish influence grew to the point that the elected mayors of both Yangon and the city of Pathein were Jews. Jewish culture and ethnic identity was diluted, however, after many men married Burmese or tribal women.

**Religion:** The Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue, built in downtown Yangon by Jews from Baghdad in 1854 and rebuilt in 1896, is the last remaining place in Myanmar for the Jewish community to cling to their culture and to practice Judaism. A second synagogue and a Jewish school with 200 students once flourished in the city but were closed long ago.<sup>6</sup> Meetings in the synagogue often had to be cancelled as a result of too few people attending to reach the required quorum, and the final rabbi in Myanmar left his role in 1969.

**Christianity:** Few sources mention any attempts to evangelize the Jews of Myanmar during the missionary era apart from a few fleeting comments, such as in 1936 when a Sunday school led by W. B. Moffet in Rakhine State reportedly contained "Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and Christians."<sup>7</sup> There are no known Christians among the Burmese-speaking Jews today. To fulfill their dream of migrating to Israel, the 10,000 Chin and Mizo people were required to renounce their Christian faith and convert to Judaism.



Population in Myanmar: 50 (2024)

Location: Yangon Region, Mandalay Region

Language Family: Tibeto-Burman

Main Religion: Judaism (100.0%)

Christians: None known (0.0%)

## OVERVIEW

Population: 50 in Myanmar (2024 Asia Harvest)  
45 (2011 Mizima)  
1,261 (1931 census)

Other Countries: 12,000,000 in USA  
7,742,000 in Israel  
750,000 in France  
700,000 in Canada  
600,000 in Russia  
413,000 in West Bank  
410,000 in United Kingdom  
350,000 in Argentina

Other Names: Jewish, Israeli

Location: Yangon Region: West Yangon District; Mandalay Region

Language: Burmese [mya]

Dialects: 0

Scripture: None

Jesus film: None

Global Recordings: None

People ID: 12267

