



KULANU

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The Yad Eliyahu Community of Goiania, Goiás, in Brazil, celebrating Havdalah in 2015

If I Were a Brazilian Rabbi...

by Daneel Schachter

PHOTOS COURTESY DANEEL SCHAECHTER

IN THIS ISSUE

If I Were a Brazilian Rabbi	1
BCI-Kulanu Partnership	5
Kulanu in Guatemala	8
Righteous Women	10
Book Review: Sub-Saharan Africa.	18
Thank You, Donors!	19
Notes	22

As I embarked on my year-long Fulbright Fellowship in February 2015, I had no notion of how much time I would be spending with the emerging Jewish communities of Brazil. I was set on teaching English at the Federal University of Pernambuco and interning at a local startup, and assumed that I would do a little Kulanu work in my free time. I had been told that Recife, my future home, had a sizable Jewish community with a thriving Chabad. As the Latin American Coordinator for Kulanu, I had done my due

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2

diligence on a few of the emerging communities across Brazil, some of which claim to be the descendants of B'nei Anusim.¹ On my way to Brazil, I had even brought down a *Sefer Torah* for the Shil do Tatuape, a community in São Paulo, and *tefillin* and *siddurim* to another community in Goiania, Yad Eliyahu. As a naïve first timer to Brazil, I did not realize the extent to which these emerging communities were popping up. Just as Kulanu has worked with one or two communities per country in various Latin American countries, I assumed that it would be the same in Brazil.

The incredible part about this movement in Brazil is that Kulanu and I are not alone in our quest to help. Early on in my journey, a friend and B'nei Anusim activist Rabbi "More" Gilberto Venturas cited research showing that the number of potential B'nei Anusim descendants in Brazil could be upwards of 20 million individuals.

Of course, only a small percentage of them are actively trying to return to their roots and many of the individuals in these communities have no proof of their Jewish ancestors. Rabbi More Venturas is an Orthodox non-pulpit rabbi and educator from São Paulo (where upwards of 50% of the mainstream Brazilian Jewish community lives), and has worked within the mainstream Jewish community to try to increase knowledge of the existence of these burgeoning groups within his own country. He also teaches online Judaism courses to many of these individuals seeking to return to their roots and many others who have recently abandoned Christianity.

Another Brazilian activist and *chazan* (cantor), Sami Cytman, similarly has one leg within the mainstream Jewish community and one leg in the Brazilian emerging Jewish scene. One last big supporter on the ground has been Rabbi Uri Lam who became interested in Kulanu several years ago while he was finishing his studies at Hebrew

¹ B'nei Anusim literally means 'the children of the forcibly converted' and is commonly used as an alternative to the term Marrano or Crypto Jew.

Union College. He has been able to mentor various individuals whose religious tendencies are closer to Reform Judaism, all while recently assuming a rabbinic pulpit position in Belo Horizonte.

My excitement to help all of these emerging communities soon grew more complicated as internal political views and religious differences divided various groups and I often was asked to play the tough role of mediator. One thing I struggled with, within both the mainstream Jewish communities and these emerging groups, was the prominent location of both Israeli and Brazilian politics within the prayer space. In my own religious experience in the United States, I rarely see this mixture. One of these Brazilian emergent communities broke up due to right-wing versus left-wing political strife, which crippled its very existence. Another group struggled with finances and trust and unfortunately couldn't surpass these issues, sadly dividing into several smaller factions.

I have spent a good amount of time trying to navigate another unforeseen complication, the difficulty of achieving conversions in Brazil. I had assumed that the mainstream Jewish communities would be unwelcoming towards these newcomers



Daneel (left) celebrating Sukkot with the COJUBA, the *Communicade Judaica de Ubatuba*

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3

Brazilian Rabbi *CONTINUED*

FROM PAGE 2

as I have experienced in a majority of my previous experiences in Latin America.

The Orthodox establishment of Brazil has prohibited Orthodox conversions within Brazil other than a few rare exceptions, and requires that studies and the final *bet din* almost always take place in Israel or the USA. What this means for a majority of the individuals from the emerging communities who are seeking conversion is that they could not even dream about having an Orthodox conversion because of the prohibitive time and costs.

Additionally, the Orthodox conversion process would most likely ignore anyone outside of Brazil's three largest cities. Other Conservative and Reform rabbis in Brazil have generally not been particularly accepting of these newcomers either, often because of their lesser financial situation or because many have prior experience in Evangelical or Messianic groups.

Most of these rabbis feel pressure from their communities not to help the individuals from these emerging communities, and prioritize converting non-Jewish spouses of Jewish community members. There also tends to be an attitude such as "Oh well, you guys live in a city a few hours away from our synagogue so I can't really help you, even though there is no rabbi in your city" from many of the Reform and Conservative rabbis.

One of the few exceptions is Rabbi Alexandre Leone, a JTS-ordained Brazilian rabbi of B'nei Chaltzim (Alphaville, São Paulo), who has gotten the buy-in from his community to convert some of the individuals from these emerging communities. He has a very hands-off approach, of course requiring candidates to be knowledgeable, but Rabbi Leone himself does not have the capacity to teach and prepare the candidates, many of whom live in faraway cities such as Fortaleza, Eunapolis, and Recife.



Daneel welcomed in São Paulo by Rabbi More Venturas (second from right), Cantor Sami Cytman (first on right), and members of the emerging community B'nei Avraham, March 2015

All of this being said, I certainly understand where many of these rabbis are coming from. The mainstream Jewish community in Brazil (not counting these emerging groups) is estimated at 120,000, and is generally quite wealthy. Increased aliyah over the last few years (due to Brazil's financial crisis and safety issues) and a high rate of intermarriage/assimilation have turned the mainstream Jewish community even more paranoid and fearful of outsiders. If I were a Brazilian rabbi, I would initially also be scared to realize that as of 2016, there are currently a few thousand Brazilians who have started practicing Judaism independently over the last decade and are trying to find rabbis willing to convert them.

At times, I have sometimes doubted whether these individuals have actually abandoned their Christian pasts and are truthful about their journeys towards Judaism. Out of the hundreds of individuals I have had the honor of meeting, there have been a handful for which a small red light went off in my head, and I thought to myself, "Hmm, even though he's wearing a *kippah* and *tzitzit*, some of the things he's saying are questionable."

Then there are those that have completely changed their theology and only believe in *HaShem* and the *mitzvot*, but still have remnants of the evangelical world in which they grew up (e.g. a religious

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Brazilian Rabbi *CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3*

fundamentalism, saying *Baruch HaShem* in every other sentence, hatred towards Palestinians and Arabs). If I were a Brazilian rabbi, initially I'd be a bit worried, but I wouldn't allow those fears to stop me.

The stories that I've heard about the collapse of so many Messianic "Jewish" communities across Brazil are impressive. The Congregação Israelita da Nova Aliança (CINA), one of the strongest Messianic church "synagogues," has completely fallen apart in many cities across Brazil over the last few years as many of its members have felt more affinity towards Jewish traditions than to their Christian theology. Imagine thirty-five people in the small city of Navegantes, Santa Catarina, who decided over several months that they no longer believed in Jesus as their savior and wanted to start practicing Judaism sincerely. I understand why many of the mainstream Brazilian rabbis are scared, but they need not be. Instead of Chabad shutting its doors to such newcomers, or the Conservative rabbis in the closest city apologizing that there is nothing they can do for these individuals, wouldn't it be better for the future of the Brazilian Jewish community to try to welcome new sincere people into established communities, or help orient them and train them to be able to start new synagogues?

Yes, they often don't have the same learning resources that those of us who grew up Jewish had, and yes, they have probably learned their Judaism from research on Google and some Skype classes with Rabbi Venturas or Sami Cytman, but that is all that is available to them. While they may be confused or mistaken at times about Jewish questions, if we close our synagogue doors on them, they will continue to be misled.

However, there is reason to be hopeful about the furthering of the plight of these emerging communities and their integration into broader Brazilian Jewish society. During a visit to Brasilia in August 2015, Rabbi Uri Lam and Cantor Sami Cytman sat down with the board of the mainstream Jewish Association of Brasilia (ACIB) to explain that there was a formerly-Messianic emerging com-

munity only a few miles from the ACIB Jewish Community Center. The board was receptive, but explained their fear that without a spiritual leader or rabbi at the ACIB, they were not quite sure how they could advance in terms of integration or conversion. While that question still has not been fully answered, I'm proud to say that many members of the emerging community have begun to frequent the ACIB's cultural events, which is certainly a first step.

Another similar scenario recently occurred when the São Paulo-based emerging community, formerly called B'nei Avraham, was permitted to join the prayer services at the Bet El Conservative synagogue. As sad as it may seem, this community which Kulanu had helped has lost its lease and now ceases to exist. Yet I view the acceptance of many individuals from B'nei Avraham into the mainstream Conservative synagogue in São Paulo as a triumph. I hope this is the first step for many emerging groups that find themselves in cities with established Jewish communities.

Challenges certainly lie ahead in the overall acceptance of these groups by the mainstream Brazilian Jewish community. It truly saddens me to see several of these Brazilian converts practice Orthodox Judaism flawlessly, but not be able to convert with an Orthodox *bet din* in Brazil, instead hoping one day to try to travel to Israel to "officialize" their Conservative conversions, as they often call it.

I wholeheartedly believe it is in the best interest of Brazil's Jewish future to start working with these groups, from Fortaleza and Recife to Goiânia, Navegantes, and São Paulo. The status quo is not sustainable. There must be a better way than a few non-Orthodox Brazilian rabbis charging the equivalent of US \$75-100 monthly for a conversion process in a country where the monthly average salary is less than US \$650.

I look forward to a day when Brazilians, regardless of their financial statuses and past religions, will be able to overcome current prejudices and partake in serious and valid conversion processes across Brazil, strengthening both Brazil's and the Diaspora's Jewish community.

The BCI - Kulanu Partnership: A Source of Learning, Joy, and Power

by Rabbi Barbara Aiello

“A source of learning, joy, and power.” These are the words of Yoash Mayende, whose experience in an innovative international program designed for Jewish young adults has been so profound that it has changed his life.

Thanks to Kulanu’s cooperative efforts with the Brandeis Collegiate Institute (BCI) program, Jewish young people from remote and emerging Jewish communities around the world now have an opportunity to develop leadership skills as well as practical and Jewish ritual skills, and possibly even more important, to take these new skills home to strengthen Jewish life in Guatemala, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, to name just a few.

BCI’s website touts its remarkable history: Known today as the Marilyn and Sigi Ziering Brandeis Collegiate Institute, BCI is an intensive experience in Jewish learning, culture and community offered to young adults (18-26 years) from around the world. Originally founded by Dr. Shlomo Bardin in 1941 as Brandeis Camp Institute (BCI), it was named to honor our nation’s first Jewish United States Supreme Court Justice, Louis D. Brandeis.

Now located outside Simi Valley, California, in the foothills of the Susana Mountains, the rolling hills are reminiscent of Jerusalem’s Judean Hills. Yet this pastoral venue belies a program that is intense in its initiative to combat the problem of Jewish flight and bring young adults back to Jewish learning--something that often ceases after the bar or bat mitzvah ceremony.

Naveh Becker is the Brandeis Collegiate Institute director and in a recent interview she explained how BCI began and how the inclusion of internationally-diverse participants has enhanced the Jewish experience for everyone from staff to participants. “For so many young people, God is frozen in time,” says Ms. Becker, who laments that for too many young people, the Jew-



Jewish young people come to BCI from many different places. Note Kulanu-sponsored participants Rivka Orantes (center right) from Guatemala, Rachman Nachman (bottom right) from Uganda, and Simcha Butchart (left) from Zimbabwe.

ish community gives up on them much too early. Ms. Becker goes on to say that thanks to BCI’s pluralistic approach, no particular Jewish movement is preferred, and the fact that BCI is not officially affiliated means that participants from all denominations of Judaism find a home at BCI.

From nearly 150 applicants each year, the young people who are selected hail from all across the United States and, thanks to Kulanu’s participation, from isolated and emerging international communities as well. One such international participant is Yoash Mayende from Uganda. Support

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6



PHOTO BY RACHMAN NAGWERE

Three young men from Uganda (left to right): Yoash Mayende (BCI 2013), Moshe Kase, and Rachman Nachman (BCI 2015), enjoying the Israel Parade in New York City before BCI 2015

from Kulanu brought Yoash to BCI. As a result of his participation, his home community has made enormous strides. Yoash explains:

BCI makes changes in the lives of the youth (who come), and BCI made me a visionary leader and a focused one. I was a BCI-er in 2013 and after camp I raised money that we used to repair two wells. Today my community members are having clean water. It was through what I learned at BCI that I was able to fundraise for the maintenance of the Namutumba Synagogue floor, and fixing of the windows. All these activities were completed in one year after my experience at BCI.



Kulanu-supported BCI participants Shoshanna Nambi from Uganda and You Yeheng from Kaifeng, China, taking in a ballgame

For the 65 to 70 BCI participants who work, play and learn together for one month each summer, the program that BCI offers is rich in

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7

BCI friends before Shabbat, including Rivka Orantes from Guatemala (second from left)



PHOTO COURTESY RIVKA ORANTES

creative and practical pursuits. Young men and women step outside their comfort zone to participate in music, dance, theater, art, creative writing and photography.

Ms. Becker emphasizes that in addition to artistic pursuits, each *beit midrash* team creates a curriculum that is applicable to the lives of their students.

Daily Jewish learning includes hands-on lectures and workshops with leading Jewish thinkers and scholars who engage students in applying Jewish tradition to daily life. Themes include God and spirituality, ecology, social justice, ethics, prayer, Jewish history and the Holocaust, Jewish theology and philosophy—all presented in a safe and pluralistic environment.

This open and accepting environment attracted Kulanu's president, Harriet Bograd, to BCI and propelled her to explore adding students from the multi-cultural groups that Kulanu serves worldwide. "Four years ago we began our work together," Director Naveh Becker says of her initial meetings with Harriet. "To date we've brought nearly a dozen young adults to BCI from areas as diverse as African countries, Guatemala, and China." Thanks to Kulanu, these students, most of whom come from families of very limited means, are provided with travel costs, visa fees, and incidental expenses. And both BCI and Kulanu attest that it is money well spent:

Before going to BCI, I struggled with my faith and the traditions. I thought there were no answers but I guessed wrong. BCI helped me to see the beauty in Judaism and to see that it is not black or white but that it has all the colors that we can imagine. And what connected us as strangers was something really important, something that none can take away from us—our faith.

Rivka Orantes, Guatemala

The first Shabbat after I got home, I had to speak in the synagogue about my adventures and my experience with BCI. I was happy to do so because it was a wonderful experience.

Shoshanna Nambi, Uganda

Ms. Becker is grateful for the partnership that now exists between BCI and Kulanu and she notes that the Kulanu students have had a profound effect upon everyone at BCI. Becker says, "To have people who have to work so hard to be Jewish in their home communities—it reminds us how blessed we are."

And Uganda's Yoash Mayende concurs when he emphasizes:

My piece of advice to those who are going to BCI is to go home and work with your communities. Draw up plans to work together with your communities and never take this chance for granted. It is a place of learning, joy, and a source of power.

KULANU IN GUATEMALA

BY JEANNETTE ORANTES

Briefly, we are a new Jewish Reform community in Guatemala City, founded in 1999 with help from Rabbi Elyse Goldstein of Toronto, Canada. (There had been a Reform community in Guatemala in the 1970s, but most of their members were absorbed by the ‘official’ and traditional community here, which is Ashkenazi-Modern Orthodox, which caused our Reform community to disappear.) In 2011, we adopted the name Adat Israel. Our main mission is to accept any Jewish person who approaches us to share in Jewish life cycle events and in our holy days. Now, we are the Reform Community in Guatemala, known as Asociación Judía Reformista de Guatemala Adat Israel.

In May 2012, we received a message from Rabbi Elyse informing us that someone would visit our community to teach Hebrew and about Shavuot; it was a Kulanu volunteer from America who had been visiting El Salvador. His name was Daneel Schaechter. Our community hosted him in our community house. He stayed with us for one week, and every night we learned some Hebrew words,

roots, and letters, as well as about Shavuot. We felt very familiar with him because of his warm way of teaching.

During September of the same year, Harriet Bograd, a remarkable person from Kulanu, along with Rabbi Elyse, organized to send us Rabbi Diana Lynn and her husband, Dr. Fred Lipschultz, to conduct the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. That was the first time Adat Israel had celebrated the High Holidays with a rabbi. We learned a lot with Rabbi Diana and her husband Fred, including chanting, reading, and singing. It was a very special celebration.

After that, in November 2013, under Kulanu’s directive, Rabbi Elyse selected one of our young members to attend a very special event in Los Angeles: Brandeis Collegiate Institute (BCI), a place that gathers young Jewish adults from many places around the world and gives them the opportunity to make worldwide friends and redefine their identity. He attended in the summer of 2014.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9

Daneel and Adat Israel members visiting La Merced Church in Antigua, Guatemala



KULANU IN GUATEMALA CONTINUED FROM PAGE 8

In August 2014, Daneel sent us information about a Kulanu “mini-grant” program offered to the emerging Latin American Jewish communities. We were selected as one of six winners out of more than ten applications! We were so excited to receive a Hebrew language course (on CDs), a collection of 5 books with tales from the Talmud, and a *Chumash* in Hebrew and Spanish.

Another young member from Adat Israel, Rivka Orantes, was designated to attend BCI in the summer of 2015. It was so remarkable for her that she has now decided to pursue the path to becoming a rabbi. And in November 2015, there was a worldwide Women of Reform Judaism meeting in Orlando, Florida. Kulanu sent some funds so that the president of Adat Israel could attend.

What I’ve mentioned above are times when Kulanu and its members have taken direct actions in favor of our Guatemalan community. Yet there is something more that Kulanu has contributed to

Adat Israel Guatemala. Kulanu has trust in us and has given us the opportunity to demonstrate how intensely we identify with our Jewish community, how deep our wish to develop Judaism in this country is, and how committed we are to letting our children continue with our Jewish traditions as the Torah says, and to be an open and welcoming community. Our community is reminded to remember all the commandments and to “teach them diligently to your children and speak of them when you sit down and when you walk, when you lie down and when you rise,” to recite the words of God when retiring or rising; to bind those words “on thy arm and thy head” and to “inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Adat Israel is very grateful to our Rabbi Elyse Goldstein and to Kulanu and its members, especially to Harriet Bograd and Daneel Schaechter, and we will remember forever that Adat Israel Guatemala would not exist without them.



PHOTO COURTESY JEANNETTE ORANTES

Rabbi Diana Lynn (front row center) and her husband, Dr. Fred Lipschultz (behind her), during Rosh Hashanah Tashlich celebration

THE TZIDKANIOT: RIGHTEOUS WOMEN OF KULANU COMMUNITIES

BY BONITA SUSSMAN

The Talmud teaches that because of the *Nashim Tzidkaniot* (Righteous Women), our ancestors were redeemed from the land of Egypt.

I was prompted to write this article as I noticed that much of what we know about Kulanu's communities is told by and about male leaders. In my travels I have met amazing women who are actually the ones holding their communities together. Not only do they prepare delicious Shabbat and holiday meals, but they are dedicated participants in services, they open their homes freely for communal use, and they address communal needs in deep and personal ways. They study Torah regularly and give others the opportunity to study as well. If it weren't for these women, their communities would not prosper and could not continue to thrive.

There are many things that these women share: their ability to turn food into something delicious, love of family and friends, generosity of spirit, openness, kindness, spirituality (however you define it), "sticktuitivness," and creative ways of dealing with adversity. They pay attention to detail. They excel in the *mitzvah* of *hachnassat orchim* (hospitality), inviting and welcoming community members and strangers into their homes, embodying the spirit of Sarah, our matriarch.

For this article, I sent out a call to community leaders and others to nominate up to two women in their communities with some words and photos that describe the roles these women play. I have met some of these women personally. I have included eight communities, yet there are many



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE JACOBI FAMILY

Miryam Jacobi (right) and her daughter Keziya of the Bene Ephraim Jewish Community in India

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11

more *Tzidkaniot* in each of them. And there are many more communities that have their share of *Tzidkaniot*.

Of eight communities I contacted, six entries were submitted by women about women. They wrote about cooking, tending to family, friends and community, and participation in Jewish communal life. This article gives a voice to some of these women and highlights and honors them for their dedication and commitment to Jewish life and living in their communities. They are all brave and face similar obstacles and challenges. Some face discrimination, others have been ostracized by family and friends. Some lack financial resources, while others live comfortable lifestyles. All lack easy access to Jewish resources, and they hope to play a role in shaping the Jewish future for the worldwide Jewish community.

This is my way of saying thank you.

**NICARAGUA: CONGREGACION ISRAELITA
DE NICARAGUA (CIN)**

Congregacion Israelita de Nicaragua is a traditional Jewish community founded by European refugees at the turn of the century, and now also includes descendants of Bene Anousim (“Children of the Coerced,” during the Inquisition) as well as families whose parents were Holocaust survivors. Most of the members live in Managua, Granada, and Masaya and gather together for holiday celebrations and milestone events. Kulanu was involved in helping rejuvenate this community with conversions, weddings, and a recent bat mitzvah, the second in Nicaragua.

Veronica (Sara Ester) Preiss is a vivacious woman who brings a sense of pride and real joy to her community. Veronica, whose husband Kurt is the current president of Congregacion Israelita de Nicaragua, is involved in all community activities, arranging festivities, giving support, and holding religious services

and celebrations in her home, usually concluding with meals and Kiddush. She is the guardian of CIN'S library, which has a *Sefer Torah*, religious objects, and historical memorabilia. Not only did Veronica pay attention to the infinite details of the eight weddings that took place in her home a few years ago, but also to the details surrounding the conversion of twenty-eight people. Veronica even went into the *mikvah* with her clothes on with the children who were not so willing to dunk!

Dr. Karen Bermudez is married to Alex Muncado, both knowledgeable community leaders in CIN. Karen, according to Kurt, “is always being helpful in lending a hand at activities, organizing Shabbat evening meals, and as a doctor, she is always concerned about and helpful to the rest of the community.” Her compassion extends to fellow CIN members, and it’s typical that one might find Karen quietly conversing with someone who perhaps hasn’t been feeling well, and offering suggestions and help. Kulanu’s volunteer in Nicaragua, Judi Kloper, recently experienced Karen’s compassion during the Purim celebration as she dealt with pain from a knee injury. Karen has been one of the anchors of this community, especially in Managua.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12



PHOTO BY JUDI KLOPER

*Veronica Preiss (left) and Karen Bermudez (right),
of Congregacion Israelite de Nicaragua*

**GUATEMALA: ASOCIACIÓN JUDÍA
REFORMISTA DE GUATEMALA ADAT ISRAEL**

Jeannette Orantes, president of the Asociación Judía Reformista de Guatemala Adat Israel, has been instrumental in helping this small Guatemalan community grow and thrive. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, a Reform rabbi living in Canada, who has done wonderful work in helping to develop Adat Israel, wrote, “I will always remember first meeting Jeannette eight years ago and sharing her indefatigable passion for Torah and Judaism. Jeannette deeply cares about her community—that they be the best Jews they can be, that they care for one another, and that they grow as human beings. It is because of Jeannette and that first meeting on a Friday night in Guatemala City that Adat Israel is the special community it is now: a member of Kulanu’s international family, an officially-recognized Reform congregation, and a proud member of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

“Jeannette organizes every Shabbat and every holiday celebration at Adat Israel, and especially looks after the teens and young kids of the synagogue, helping them to grow into proud Jews.

Jeanette’s family shares her joy of being Jewish, and we look forward to the day when her daughter Rebecca becomes our first Guatemalan rabbi—a dream the whole community shares with her!

“Jeannette always remembers how much I love plantain chips and mole, and is always sending or giving me reminders of my Guatemalan family. I treasure every visit with Jeannette and the community!”

BRAZIL: AHAVAT HATORAH OF BRASILIA

Alessandra Franco and Nelice Franco Alves are two mainstays of this Jewish community in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. Alexandre Coelho Franco, one of the community’s leaders, writes, “The woman—wife and mother—becomes ‘a must’ for the unity of family harmony. For this reason she is called *akeret habayit*, the ‘*estejo*,’ the pillar of the home. The family unit can be defined as a group of people joined by affection or by family ties. In our community there may be genetic ties, but the ‘like-mindedness and harmony’ which women create is what turns us into family. Among all of us, I wish to point out two women who help turn our community into family.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 13



PHOTO BY ALVARO ORANTES

Rivka Orantes (third from right) and her mother, Jeannette Orantes (second from right), lighting candles for Sukkot with members of Asociacion Judia Reformista de Guatemala Adat Israel

“Do you require candles, some wine, maybe chalah?’ You can always count on Alessandra. ‘Do you need curtains, appliances, or any ideas for the holidays?’ You can turn to Nelice. ‘Do you require any help preparing kids’ events? Do you need to organize a group to *daven tehillim* (psalms)? Do you require information as how to *daven* (pray) during the *chagim* (holidays)? Do you need a friendly word from someone who is more interested in others than herself?’ You can find that in Alessandra. From Nelice you can count on someone to direct you and pull at your sleeve to get you on the right path, with a firm voice and a friendly shoulder to lean on. These women work together jointly, keeping the group together without skirting their daily chores and duties at work, at home, and with the kids. A virtuous woman, who can find? What if I say there are two?”

SURINAME:

NEVE SHALOM SYNAGOGUE

Marina Da Costa is a Jewish woman whose family spans Jewish history from the Portuguese Inquisition to New Amsterdam under Peter Stuyvesant, and through the Holocaust to leadership positions in the Jewish community of Suriname, the smallest country in South America.

Suriname hosts the oldest Jewish community in the Western Hemisphere, founded over 375 years ago. The information about Marina is from an article in the Jewish Daily Forward, June 1, 2014: *400 Years After Portugal's Inquisition, a Very Unusual Family Comes Together*, by Jessica Siegel.

The Da Costas are descendants of four Portuguese Jewish brothers who, with their mother, fled the Inquisition in Portugal in 1614 and made their way to Amsterdam in order to live openly as Jews. Marina is the daughter of a Dutch Jewish father and a Christian mother. Her father fought in the Resistance movement during World War II and lost his sister, brother-in-law, and their two children in Auschwitz. The experience caused him to lose his faith, as he questioned the existence of a God who would allow the mass killing of Jews.

Neither Marina nor her siblings were raised as Jews. When at 18 she told her father that she wanted to return to his religion, he balked, “Oh, my girl, what are you doing now? I was the one who made you not Jewish and now you’re going back,” Marina recounted. “I think you will be the first one they will catch.”

Marina's mother, on the other hand, was more interested in the family's Jewish heritage. Though not Jewish herself, Irini Da Costa was fascinated by Sephardic Jewish history in Suriname and spent time in the Dutch archives, photocopying letters, birth records, marriage licenses, death certificates, bills of sale, ship manifests and other public records. In 1973, Irini founded the Joden-savanne Foundation to help restore the remains of the synagogue of the initial Jewish settlement, long ago swallowed up by jungle.

Marina is a tour guide in Suriname and serves as her community's international spokesperson.

COTE D'IVOIRE:

BEIT ISRAEL AND ETZ CHAIM

Chantal and Edith (who do not wish us to use their last names) are two of the leading forces fueling Beit Israel's existence and survival, according to community leader Cornet Alexandre Zouko. "These wonderful ladies have both been playing the most eventful roles in the community. Chantal, a lawyer, came up with the idea that Beit Israel gatherings could take place in one of her properties free of charge. Her home garden has always been a happy place for our Sukkah. Chantal brings yummy meals and drinks to community gatherings, making them memorable in a particular way.

“Edith, a beauty care professional, is a great cook; our meals are always spicy when Edith is around. She also provides financial support to the community. Chantal and Edith support our leaders, Alexandre and Ishmael, in their study projects, and they are Torah learners as well. Chantal likes to read Kabbalah-related books and Edith likes to ask questions for deeper understanding, but more

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

importantly, their caring hearts have been nurturing Beit Israel's survival. Had there been no Chantal and Edith, Beit Israel would have tasted like a half-baked cake."

Hannah and Sarah (who also do not want their last names used), according to Abraham Yago, play an important role in the Etz Chaim community. They were part of a community delegation that spent almost a month in Israel in 2010 during Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Sukkot.

Abraham Yago wrote, "As an early community member, Hannah first joined the congregation when it was an evangelical Christian community called by another name. Years ago, when the community changed its religious orientation and denomination to fully embrace Judaism, Hannah was part of this eventful change. A dental surgeon by profession, she is responsible for financial management and anything related to logistics and supplies within the community.

"Sarah has been in the community for ten years now. She is the one who makes this community the welcoming and nice-looking place that it is. She is in charge of adorning the synagogue with flowers and nice items for Shabbat and holidays. One might think that these two ladies are concerned only with their tasks. No! They are assiduous Torah learners with good religious service attendance. Hannah and Sarah are always ready to help out other women with their tasks; they are a real support for our community."

INDIA: THE BENE EPHRAIM

Miryam Yacobi and her daughter Keziya Yacobi are women of slight stature and strong hands, hands that constantly are moving all day long, preparing chapati and meals and snacks, washing laundry, caring for their active grandson/nephew, washing dishes, sweeping and cleaning the home-synagogue and the yard, and doing it all again over and over and over, all day every day.

When Friday comes, Miryam and Keziya are even busier as they prepare for Shabbat. Suddenly they, with daughter/sister Beulah, are crushing grapes to make grape juice for Kiddush, and preparing



PHOTO BY JUDI KLOPER

Keziya Jacobi (front center) and women of Bene Ephraim during Shabbat morning service

the family's sleeping area to be transformed into a sanctuary, complete with an ark and Torah, books and *siddurs*, and chairs and sitting mats. Shabbat begins and Miryam steps back and enjoys a bit of calm with her three children, grandson and husband, as Jacob, the son of the family, along with his dad, sings *Eshet Chayil* to his mom with a smile on his face. Miryam listens pensively, enjoying a few minutes of quiet respite from her always-busy day. Soon the congregants of Bene Ephraim arrive and Shabbat service begins.

In a small village in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, a small Jewish community of about 35 to 45 families who call themselves the Bene Ephraim live with their Hindu, Christian, and Muslim neighbors. The leader of this community, and one of its founders, is Sadok Yacobi. While Sadok is skilled at bringing people together for worship and sharing his knowledge of Judaism, what a visitor would most likely notice, as a participant or as an observer, is the important role two women have in serving their community. These two women are Sadok's wife, Miryam, and his younger daughter, Keziya.

Keziya is a young woman who has learned since childhood to recite the blessings and songs in Hebrew, sometimes from memory and sometimes from the transliterated Hebrew-Telegu prayer book. She sits with the women on the floor on the

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

left side of the sanctuary (the men often sit on the right side), and stands to lead a song or prayer. She and Miryam make sure the Kiddush cup is filled and an extra pitcher is nearby.

Keziya enjoys having an *aliyah* at the Torah and even carrying the Torah. When services are over, she and her mom make sure to offer everyone *chapati* and fruit, usually bananas. They also help with *Havdalah*. Keziya wanted to learn some Jewish dances, and her enthusiasm was caught by some other younger members of the community, as well as some of the older ones. Dancing after *Havdalah* and on holidays such as *Hanukkah* is very exciting for everyone. Keziya and Miryam honor their faith with the recitation of the *Shema*, kissing the *mezuzah* as they enter and leave each entryway, and thanking *HaShem* for their blessings.

Judi Kloper, a Kulanu board member who recently spent time with the Bene Ephraim, wrote, "One very touching example for me of Miryam and her daughter's thoughtfulness, of their commitment to the very basics of Judaism, was when, one night, a beggar woman came through their gate and asked to use their well to get some water. Miryam brought her to the well and helped her get water. Later on, the woman returned. Miriam quietly went to her kitchen area and prepared a plate of food for her. The woman was truly happy for this offering. Miryam once told me that no matter what she and her family think they may be lacking, they have much and they will make sure to take care of others."

CAMEROON: BETH YESHOURUN

Blanche Mfegue is the wife of Serge Etele, the head of the Beth Yeshourun community in Cameroon. Serge is currently studying for rabbinic ordination in Israel at Ohr Torah Stone Yeshiva in Efrat.

One of the most touching and memorable moments of all my travels was watching Blanche bake *challah* for *Shabbat*. It began with sifting the flour. Blanche handed me the sifter and said, "You do it." Not being a baker, she had to teach me. It was my first time. Then Blanche made the dough, kneaded it, and carefully braided it. "Where did you learn

that?" I asked. She said, "My mother-in-law taught me." It just made me chuckle. There are no ovens in Sa'a, the town where the Beth Yeshourun community is located and where Serge and Blanche make their home.

A fire from freshly chopped wood was lit to begin the baking process. But before the braided dough was put into the dutch oven with hot coals on top to bake the *challah* evenly, she took a small handful of the dough and threw it on the flame to burn as a remembrance of the dough offering given to the Cohen (priests) in ancient times, and recited the blessing *asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav v'stivanu l'hafrish challah* (...that has blessed us and commanded us to separate the *challah*). The glow on her face and the spirituality of the moment caught me by surprise and tears came to my eyes. The *challah* was delicious.



PHOTO BY SERGE ETELE

Blanche Mfegue making challah for the Beth Yeshourun community in Cameroon

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

There are two women in Cameroon that I would like to mention. Teshua (Francine Biloa) was one of four wives in her household and the only practicing Jew. When she wanted to attend services for Rosh Hashanah, her husband said, "If you leave, you can't come back." She left and when she returned she found her bags packed outside her door.

The second woman was the elder of a new branch of Bet Yeshourun in Douala, the largest city in Cameroon. She was the widow of a prominent pastor who left Christianity but did not join Judaism. A meeting place had been set up in his home where those who followed him gathered and worshiped. After the pastor died, the remnants of this group evolved into the new Jewish group in Douala and they are still praying in the widow's home.

ZIMBABWE: THE LEMBA

Brenda Maeresera is the wife of Modreck Maeresera, the leader of the small Lemba Jewish com-

munity in Harare, Zimbabwe, which developed with the help of Kulanu. Mickey Feinberg and her husband Mordy were two of the first teachers to go to this Lemba community.

Mickey has written, "The Harare Lemba Jewish community would not be as welcoming, warm and charmingly fun without Brenda's constant contributions. Brenda is an accomplished and eager weekly Torah reader, a supportive mother and wife who appreciates the accomplishments of her husband and children, and an amazingly hospitable host to the constant flow of participants in the community's religious services and meals.

"I'll never forget her reaction to my suggestion that we might bake our own challah instead of purchasing it at the local grocery store. 'Make it ourselves?' exclaimed this smart and accomplished teacher, mother and community leader. Later, when she showed her beautiful and tasty challah to all to admire, there was a deep sense of pride and joy in having achieved yet another Jewish accomplishment."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 17



Above: Brenda Maeresera and her husband, Modreck Maeresera, leading a service for the Harare Lemba Jewish community in Zimbabwe

Left: Brenda toting her younger son Schlomo

PHOTOS BY IRWIN AND ELAINE BERG

UGANDA: THE ABAYUDAYA

Naume Sabano was the founding president of the Abayudaya Women's Association. This is what Kulanu wrote about her when we honored her and her husband Aaron Kintu Moses in our tribute journal in 2012:

As leader of the Abayudaya Women's Association until last January, Naume has organized three conferences each year since 2005, where women from eight villages had, and still have, empowering opportunities to share successes and challenges and to implement ideas to better their lives. Among AWA's achievements are a successful micro-credit program and a Torah study course for women. An eloquent speaker, Naume was elected to her regional government council last year, gaining the support of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim voters.

In addition to her role as the effective manager of the high school nutrition program, she owns a small shop, helps to organize the production and sale of Abayudaya *kippot*, and farms vegetables and coffee with her husband Aaron.



PHOTO BY HARRIET BOGRAD

*Naume Sabano
Abayudaya community leader*

I think you will agree with me that these Righteous Women deserve Kulanu's wholehearted respect and thanks for their often unheralded efforts. They allow Jewish life to flourish in these emerging and isolated communities and inspire us by their examples.

**ADVENTURE IN
NICARAGUA**

Families from Congregacion Israelita de Nicaragua surprised Kulanu volunteer and board member Judi Kloper (center) on her birthday. Judi has been living in Nicaragua, following several adventurous years exploring Costa Rica and India.



PHOTO BY JUDI KLOPER

**REVIEW OF MARLA BRETTSCHEIDER'S
"THE JEWISH PHENOMENON IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA"**

BY RABBI GERALD SUSSMAN

This is not a book of facts, nor is it a report about what is occurring in various communities in Africa. Rather, the import of this deep and provocative volume is to question and examine commonly held assumptions about the nature of Jewishness.

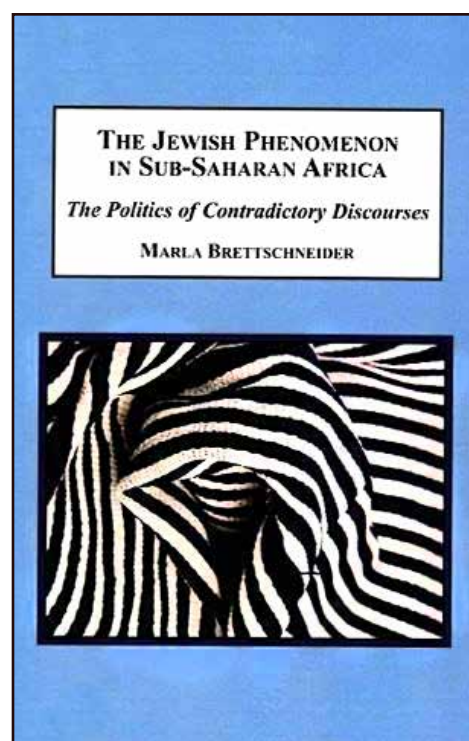
Dr. Brettschneider, professor of political science and women's studies at the University of New Hampshire, contrasts the "Global North," which includes the Jewish communities most familiar within Europe, North America and Israel, with those of the "Global South" in sub-Saharan Africa. Dr. Brettschneider points out the essential inequality in the relative power of those in the Global North versus those in the Global South. In this relationship the Jews of the Global North are seen as sources of legitimacy and authority while those of the Global South take on the role of supplicants, or at least students.

Dr. Brettschneider raises the issue of why Jews from the Global North tend to ask, when confronted with African Jews of non-European origin, "Are they really Jewish?" Raising the issue of who is "really Jewish" leads us to ask searching questions about our own identities. She provocatively raises the issue of peoplehood and suggests that rather than using the term "People of Israel," we should instead think of "Peoples of Israel," a much broader definition.

She asks why non-observant Jews of the Global North are to be considered unquestionably Jewish while those of the Global South are expected to fit into Rabbinic paradigms. She questions why African communities whose Judaism is "Toraitic" rather than Rabbinic need to fit into Rabbinic definitions. Why are Jews from the Global South constantly asked to prove their identities, and their responses often disbelieved? Incidentally, she points out that "Jews of Color" in the Global

North are often faced with the same issue. Much of the answer lies in the habits of thought created by the history of racism and colonialism as well as the continuing imbalances of power and the legacy of imperialism.

In our increasingly globalized world, the issues raised have come to the fore in a very immediate way. Jewish communities of the Global North have become increasingly aware of the Jewish phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the Global South and are struggling to come to terms with it. This book raises crucial issues in this discussion and asks us to pose profound and probing questions. It is a must for all who are interested in or engaged in the field.





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Our thanks to all the organizations who hosted Modreck Maeresera of Zimbabwe during his U.S tour. Speaking Tour proceeds benefit Kulanu's work with the Lemba Jewish community of Zimbabwe.

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Did you know? The ring-tailed lemurs of Madagascar were our ancient ancestors!

Madagascar, Here We Come!

Kulanu is sponsoring a Beit Din in Madagascar, which is being partly funded by a Jewcer campaign. We thank all donors who contributed to this effort!



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Kulanu Tribute Journal

Kulanu honored board member Daneel Schaechter for his outstanding work in Brazil. We thank everybody who contributed to his tribute journal!

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KULANU NOTES

Purim Project

The children and teachers at Beth Israel Congregation of Ann Arbor, Michigan, did a special Purim project for Kulanu. They made masks, groggers, *mishloach manot* bags and *hamentaschen* for Purim and videotaped instructions on how to make these. They sent what they made, as well as more materials, to Tikvat Israel Congregation in Abuja, Nigeria. They also donated funds for mini-grants to two communities in Uganda and one in Zimbabwe to purchase supplies to make similar things. To see their written and video instructions and the great videos from the Namutumba community in Uganda, please go to:

<http://tinyurl.com/KulanuPurimProject>.

Abayudaya Summer Camp Counselors

Long-time Kulanu friends Shoshana Nambi and Sarah Nabagala, young Abayudaya leaders, are working with summer camps sponsored by the Reform branch of Judaism in the USA. Shosh came to Brandeis Collegiate Institute in 2012 and Sarah in 2013. They both worked as counselors at Camp

Coleman in Georgia last summer. Shosh and Sarah identified 20 Abayudaya candidates, and three people representing the Reform camp movement traveled to Uganda to screen the candidates. We are delighted that this year Shosh and Sarah have helped place 11 Abayudaya counselors in six Reform camps without any assistance from Kulanu.

Modreck Maeresera: From Zimbabwe to Jerusalem

Nili (Salem) and Rav Keith (Flaks) B'Simcha were thrilled to unexpectedly meet Modreck Maeresera, a leader of the Lemba community from Zimbabwe, upon his arrival to study at Rabbi Shlomo Riskin's Ohr Torah Stone yeshiva in Efrat, Israel. Keith invited Modreck to speak at Yeshivat Orayta in the Old City of Jerusalem. Modreck described the occasion first-hand: "It was one of the best days of my life. I wasn't expecting such a warm and 'decibel-icious' welcome from you and the students at the Yeshiva. It was wonderful! It was so great that I cannot adequately put it into words. Singing and dancing all the way down to the Kotel was another

CONTINUED ON PAGE 23

beyond-description experience. I loved it when the police and the security joined us. It will forever be etched as one of the best days in my life.”

***Kupakwashe Marazani:
From Zimbabwe to Tel Aviv***

Kupakwashe Marazani arrived recently in Tel Aviv from Harare, Zimbabwe. He is working with the Tik-kun Olam Tel Aviv-Jaffa Program, currently volunteering in three locations: Kadima, an after-school program for kids from some of the lower-income neighborhoods of Tel Aviv, where Kupa helps with homework and sports; Porter Day Care Center for senior citizens in Tel Aviv-Yafo, where on Mondays and Wednesdays he helps provide food and activities for elders; and Yale Africa, an organization which works with young people from around Africa to make a difference and help them to express themselves with Facebook posts and social media strategy. It’s great to see Kupa immersed in the Tel Aviv nonprofit sphere.

***Remy Ilona: From Nigeria
to Florida and New York***

Recently we welcomed Remy Ilona, a student at Florida International University and a longtime friend of Kulanu from Nigeria, to New York City. President Harriet Bograd and her husband Ken Klein hosted a reception for Remy at their home. It was wonderful for Kulanu friends and supporters to get a chance to meet Remy. He wrote a wonderful blog about his experience in the Times of Israel, which you can read here:

<http://tinyurl.com/RemyBlog>

Yehudah Kimani to Visit in May

We are excited that Yehudah Kimani of Kenya will be coming to the United States in the beginning of May. Volunteer Alan Pransky has helped organize a speaking tour and personal visits for Yehudah. He will be in many areas of the USA, including South Florida, New York City, Boston, Milwaukee, Chicago, Los Angeles, Portland, Oregon and others. To see his schedule, please check <http://tinyurl.com/YKTourCalendar>. To request a visit to your community or to offer housing, use this form: <http://tinyurl.com/YehudahForm>

(SEE PHOTOS OF YEHUDAH ON PAGE 24)

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Kulanu (“All of Us”) is a tax-exempt organization of Jews of varied backgrounds and practices, which works with isolated and emerging Jewish communities around the globe, supporting them through networking, education, economic development projects, volunteer assignments, research, and publications about their histories and traditions.

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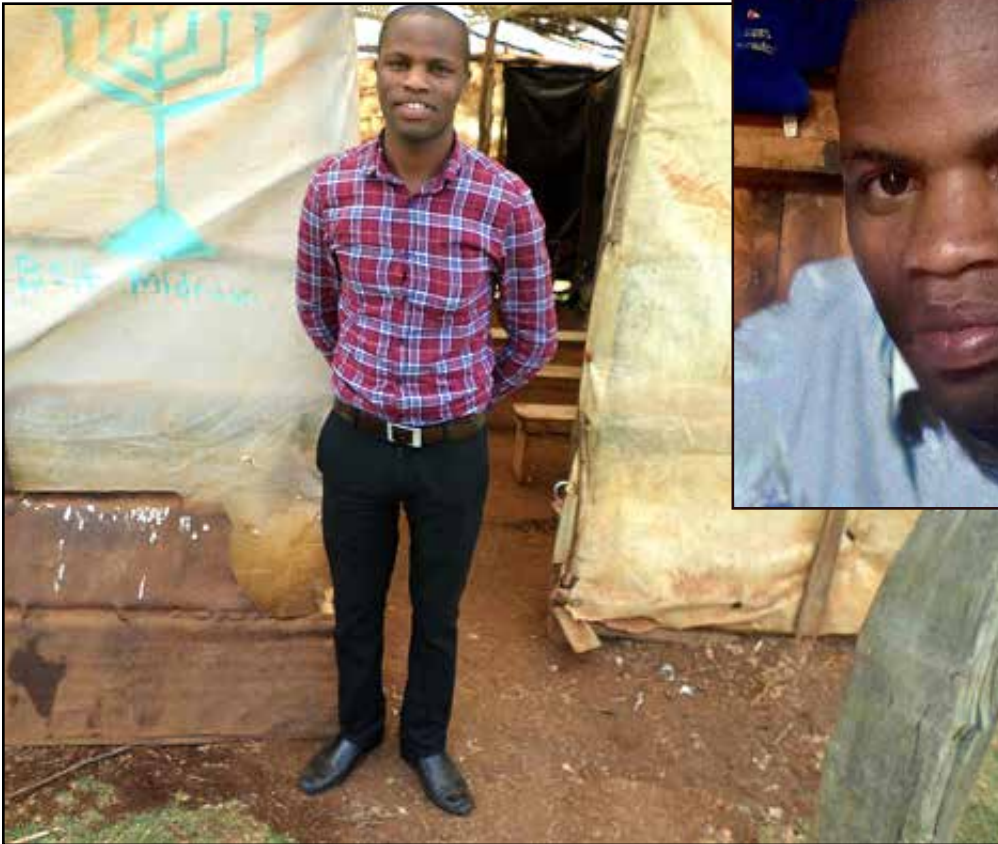
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Yehuda Kimani of Kenya will be coming to the US for a speaking tour in May. See Kulanu Notes, page 23, for information about his visit.

PHOTOS COURTESY YEHUDA KIMANI