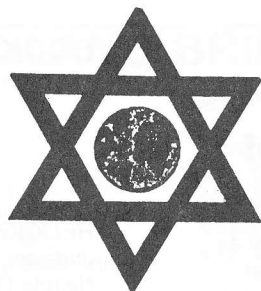


# Kulanu



*Helping Lost Jewish Communities*

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## Meeting Descendants of Kaifeng's Jews

*By Ray Kaplan*

Last May, my wife Rebecca and I had the distinct pleasure of representing Kulanu on a fascinating visit to the ancient city of Kaifeng in Central China. We were on an 18-day tour, led by Professor Xu Xin and his wife Kong, covering five cities in China plus Hong Kong. Prof. Xu Xin, who spoke at a Kulanu event last year, is the founder and head of the Judaic Studies Department at Nanjing University.

Kaifeng today has a population of about 700,000. While somewhat provincial, it is a bustling town, and our three-star hotel was adequate. Bicycles and pedestrians far outnumbered the cars on the streets.



*Proposed new street sign displayed by local guide Liang.*

Kaifeng is located near the Yellow River, which in past centuries often flooded and on at least one occasion wiped out half the city. It was the capital of China in the 11th century, when a Jewish community from the Middle East, fleeing the pogroms of Holy Land-bound Crusader armies, trekked several thousand miles over the ancient Silk Road in Asia and found a haven and a warm welcome from the emperor. He honored them by bestowing on them seven Chinese family names which are still used today by the living descendants of those early Kaifeng Jews. Their community flourished and grew to number some 5000 souls. They built a synagogue in 1163 and installed 13 Torahs, which they had brought with them on their long journey. They existed as a vibrant Jewish community until the first half of the 19th century, when the last rabbi died and the synagogue gradually went into disrepair. From then on, Jewish observance went steadily downhill as intermarriage and assimilation took their toll.

We headed for the Kaifeng Museum and climbed five flights of stairs to the exhibit on the Kaifeng Jews. As we entered the one very large room, we were told by the director of the exhibits, Zheng Guangqing, that this exhibit contained all that had

*(cont., p. 4)*

## REPORT FROM THE PRESIDENT A Truly Unique Seminary

*By Jack Zeller*

We would like to give you an update on the progress of the 5000 Bnei Menashe of Manipur and Mizoram remaining in northeastern India. (Two hundred have emigrated to Israel and formally converted to Judaism.)

The number of practicing Jews in Mizoram and Manipur is growing, and it is hoped that many of the original 5000 will be given the same opportunity to convert.

A new synagogue has almost been completed in Imphal, the capital of Manipur. It is being built by a member of the community, who will be paid rent of \$330 per month. In addition, a seminary will be set up in the synagogue building. It will train 30-40 teachers, at a cost of about \$1000 per month (including the cost of food and lodging). After three years of training, the educators will teach in synagogues and schools throughout Manipur and Mizoram. The faculty of the seminary will consist of both Bnei Menashe and Israelis. The seminary will consist of several classrooms and a dining room, as well as the synagogue.

*(cont., p. 7)*

## "Welcome Them, But Respect Their Fear of Exposure"

*By Karen Primack*

Schulamith Halevy walks a narrow line. On the one hand, she wants mainstream Jewry to be educated about the history of those Sephardi Jews who became crypto-Jews at the time of the Inquisition and its aftermath, and to be welcoming to their descendants who are considering returning to Judaism. On the other hand, she wants to protect the sensitivities and privacy of these *anusim* (Hebrew for "forced ones").

The Israeli scholar and poet, who recently completed a year teaching at the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies in Chicago, organized a one-day conference that brought a capacity crowd of 100 *anusim*, many showing their faces as descendants of secret Jews for the first time. In addition, others who feared exposure approached her in private after the conference, and at least one new person contacts her every day. She calls the phenomenon "more widespread than we realize."

Members of the Chicago Latino community, among others, confided in her about certain customs that were maintained in their Catholic families for 500 years -- customs often discussed in connection with crypto-Jews in the American Southwest, such as lighting candles on Friday night; ritual slaughter, salting meat and separating meat and milk; shunning pork, rabbit and shellfish; and burying the dead in linen shrouds.

Herself a Sephardita whose family left Spain in 1492 and made their way to Israel, Halevy fell naturally into her role as encourager and protector of descendants of *anusim*. (The

*(cont., p. 7)*

## US TOUR PLANNED

### With Gloria Mound. There's Always Something New!

Gloria Mound, renown researcher and scholar on Marrano history and founder/director of the Casa Shalom Institute for Marrano (Anusim) Studies in Israel, is as busy as ever following new leads. She is just getting started on the library -- never accessed before -- of a Marrano schoolmaster who recently died. She is also beginning research with a new source on a Persian community in Israel that remained true to their Jewish heritage in secret for many years while living outwardly as avid Muslims.

Another of her recent research topics is the *Suffocater*. As she has written to Kulanu:

*I followed up a report about an old secret community in Brazil having a Suffocater, who executed this terrible deed if they felt that a dying person would in delirium give away a family's Jewish practices. When I read of this extreme practice I thought it must ONLY apply to some remote village. But I have discovered in documents that right up until the early years of this century there was a Guild of Suffocaters, for the same aims and purpose, connected with each other through towns of Northern Portugal! Does anyone out there have further information?*

Mound will discuss these and other new discoveries on a coast-to-coast lecture tour of the US she is planning for the spring of 1997. Groups interested in hearing her speak (and supporting her exciting work) may contact her through Kulanu or directly at Casa Shalom, PO 66 Gan Yavneh, Israel 70800; tel/fax: Int. 972-(0)88-573 150.

## PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST

### New Book on Crypto-Jews

One of the recent releases of the Jewish Publication Society is *Secrecy and Deceit: The Lives of Crypto-Jews* by David Gitlitz. The publisher says this is "the first thorough compilation in English or any other language of the customs and practices of Crypto-Jews in Spain, Portugal and the New World." For a copy of the JPS fall catalog call 800-355-1165 or 800-234-3151, ext. 3100.

### Three from India

ORT India, which does valuable work with technological training in Bombay, has taken an interest in publishing. It is reprinting an esteemed 1937 volume, *History of the Bene Israels of India*, is releasing a *Demographic and Socio-economic Study of Jews in India*, and is compiling a unique *Marathi-English-Hebrew Dictionary*. Funds are being solicited for these projects, and contributors of over US \$250 will receive a gift set of the three publications. Send donations to ORT India, Sir Elly Kadoorie School Compound, Mazagaon, Bombay 400 020 India.

### About Greek Jewry

Fairleigh Dickinson University Press has just published Rabbi Joshua Eli Plaut's *Greek Jewry in the Twentieth Century, 1913-1983: Patterns of Jewish Survival in the Greek Provinces Before and After the Holocaust*. It is available through local book stores or from the publisher (tel: 609-655-4770 or fax: 609-655-8336). The author is available for speaking engagements (call 508-696-6345).

### Something Important for Children

*The Jews: One People*, by Barbara Bar-Nissam, illustrated by Marlene L. Ruthen, sounds like the kind of children's book Kulanu would want to publish. Aimed at 4- to 7-year-olds, it depicts practicing Jews around the world. According to its publisher, United Synagogue Book Service, "It makes the point that Jews live in many places and look different from one another but they are all One People." Contact USBS at 155 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010; tel 212-533-7800 ext 2003; fax 212-353-

## BOOK COMMENT

### Unusual Treat for History Buffs

©1996 by Irwin M. Berg

*RELIGION AND POLITICS IN UGANDA: A Study of Islam and Judaism* By Arye Oded, East African Educational Publishers, Nairobi (1995)

Arye Oded has written two remarkable monographs that have been published in a book entitled *Religion and Politics in Uganda*. The first monograph is entitled *Kalema: The Muslim King of Buganda* and the second *The Bayudaya: The African Jews of Uganda*. The connecting link between these two studies is Semei Kakungulu, the Protestant general who defeated the armies of the Moslem king, Kalema, thereby stemming Uganda's drift toward Islam, but who later rejected Christianity, adopted Judaism, and established a Jewish community in Uganda.

During the first half of the 19th century, before the Europeans became interested in the interior of East Africa, Oded writes that Arab traders were regular visitors at the Bugandan court. At that time, the Baganda tribe was a major military and political power within the territory now known as Uganda. The ruling kings ("kabakas") of the Baganda tribe were anxious to buy firearms from the Arabs. But the Arabs also brought a religion which the younger chiefs and their sons and daughters found attractive. By the end of the reign of Kabaka Mutesa I (1856-1884), Islam had penetrated among the Bagandan chiefs and the kabaka's pages.

When Kabaka Mutesa I died in 1884, there was a scramble among his sons to replace him as kabaka. By this time, Christian missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, had penetrated the area. All religious groups had their pretenders to the throne. The Moslem champion was Kalema, a son of Mutesa I. The period from 1884 to 1890 was one of ruthless and brutal struggle between the Moslems, led by Kalema, and the Christians, led by another son of Mutesa I, Kabaka Mwanga. The Christians, under Mwanga, received the active support of the British and completely defeated Kalema and the Moslems in 1890. The struggle, which caused much destruction and death, widened the gap between the followers of the two religions and put an end to Moslem supremacy in politics. In 1894, Uganda was formally annexed to the British Empire.

According to Oded, Semei Lwakilenzi Kakungulu, the founder of the Bayudaya, is one of the most important and colorful personalities in Ugandan history. He was born around 1860, and proved himself to be a popular leader and a brilliant military commander. In the late 1880s, Kakungulu became a Protestant and was a major factor in the defeat of the Moslems.

About 1910, Kakungulu joined a breakaway Christian sect called the Bamelaki. The Bamelaki were native, dissident Protestants whose faith rested on a fundamentalist reading of the Bible. They regarded Saturday as the Sabbath, declined to eat pork, and permitted polygamy. By 1921, there were about 100,000 Bamelaki in Uganda. The British exiled their leader to northern Uganda in 1926 where he died after a protracted hunger strike.

Kakungulu's devotion to the Old Testament was noted by a Protestant missionary as early as 1901. In 1919, his devotion to the Old Testament caused him to break with the Bamelaki. Kakungulu demanded that the Bamelaki observe all of Moses' commandments, including the commandment of circumcision. The Bamelaki opposed this, claiming that circumcision was practiced only by Jews, who did not believe in the New Testament or in Jesus Christ. Kakungulu is reported to have replied: "If this is the case, then from this day on, I am a Jew (Muyudaya)." In 1919, when over 50 years of age, Kakungulu was circumcised, and he circumcised his next-born son, whom he named Yuda. He urged his supporters and members of his family to circumcise their sons, and many did so.

## KULANU BRIEFS

### NEXT KULANU MEETING

The next quarterly meeting will be held on January 19, 1997, at 12 noon at the party room of The Forum, 11801 Rockville Pike, Rockville, Maryland (immediately south of Randolph Road, opposite Sym's). This will be Kulanu's first Potluck -- please bring a vegetarian dish or dessert to share.

### EDUCATION FOR ALL?

Our Lorna Margolis and Clara Shair Memorial Fund for Abayudaya Education has sent nearly 100 orphans and other needy children to school (primary and secondary) and one young adult to university in Uganda. Since tuition comes due every year, our needs are ongoing. Your donation of \$36 can send one of these Ugandan Jewish children to school for a year. What value! Please consider sending a year-end tax-deductible contribution to Kulanu earmarked for this Fund.

### KULANU NEEDS WRITERS

Kulanu needs an **experienced journalist** to guest-edit an issue of the quarterly newsletter, as well as a **budding journalist** to work as an editorial assistant about 10 hours per month. In addition, experienced **grant application writers** are always needed. Very flexible hours; work on your own word processor or our Mac LC III. All Kulanu staff are unpaid volunteers. The payback? Great people to work with and a great cause to work for! Another plus: building up your resume! Contact Karen at 301-565-3094 or primack@aol.com.

### GIFTS FROM MANIPUR

We have received from T. Hangshing, president of the Menashe Tribe of Manipur, India, a copy of a newly-translated Thadou Kuki-Hebrew (transliterated) daily prayer book, a copy of an English-Thadou Kuki school dictionary, and *tzitzit* (corner fringes of a prayer shawl) made by the Bnei Menashe. Kulanu cherishes these special gifts.

Scanning the new *siddur*, Kulanu officers were able to learn that the first line of the *Shema* prayer in Thadou-Kuki is: *Ngaiyin vuo Israel, Pakai hi eihaw Pathien ahi, Pakai hi khatseh bou ahi*.

The *siddur* was transliterated, translated, and published by Mr. Hangshing in 1995; the dictionary was compiled in 1972 by Mrs. Beisi Hangshing and revised by Mr. Hangshing in 1993. Thadou Kuki is the language most in use by the Bnei Menashe in India.

The Bnei Menashe are seeking donations to further improve these publications and to publish other Jewish religious books. Tax-deductible contributions can be made to Kulanu and earmarked for this purpose.

### A REBIRTH

We noted with interest that 800 people gathered this past summer for the groundbreaking ceremony for a new \$2 million synagogue and Jewish community center in Alma-ata, Kazakhstan. Although some 32,000 Jews live in the former Soviet republic today, most came in the 20th century -- either as exiles during the Stalinist era or as refugees during the Holocaust. Among the exiles was Levi Yitzhak Schneerson, father of the late Lubavitcher rebbe for whom the new center -- Beis Menachem Center -- will be named.

### MELODIES FROM INDIA

An audio tape of *Yom Kippur and Selichot Melodies of the Bene Israel of India* has been developed by Romiel Daniel, a Bene Israel who is past president of the Magen Abraham Synagogue in Ahmedabad, India, and currently resides in the US.

descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. The Yom Kippur and Selichot melodies were part of the oral tradition, meticulously passed down from one generation to another. However, with the dispersal of the community several of these melodies would be lost; this tape is an attempt to preserve these traditional melodies.

The price of the tape is \$12, which includes postage in the US. Make checks payable to Romiel Daniel and mail to him at 95-19 64th Road, Suite 19-D, Rego Park, NY 11374.

### FOUNDATION SUPPORTS HALEVY

Kulanu greatly appreciates the \$500 contribution it received from the Friedman-French Foundation for the *anusim* outreach program of Schulamith Halevy.

### HOW ABOUT A MUSIC EXCHANGE?

The above notice about Bene Israel melodies and Bob Lande's request elsewhere in this newsletter for Jewish music tapes for the *converso* Jewish community he visited recently in Trujillo, Peru, give us an idea. We invite recording artists to donate their Jewish music tapes -- old or new -- for us to send to the isolated communities we work with around the globe. What a wonderful way to make these groups -- sometimes treated as outcasts -- feel a part of world Jewry. Artists can also get the heady feeling that they are being heard in Latin America, Asia, Africa, EVERYWHERE! (Please remember, audio cassettes are more useful than CDs in the Third World, and No copyright infringements, please!)

Furthermore, we can turn this project into an "exchange" by collecting from these communities examples of their own Jewish music that has not been previously commercially recorded (we are already working on a commercial tape of the wonderful liturgical music of the Abayudaya). We also note in this issue the availability of liturgical tapes of the Bene Israel of India.

We hope Kulanu supporters who know recording artists will tell them about this new project. We would love to hear from some Israeli musicians! It would be best if donated recordings could be accompanied by word sheets.

We will acknowledge tape contributions in future newsletters.

### GUIHON INFORMATION AVAILABLE

Dr. Muse Tegegne was in the US recently to obtain UN status for his organization, Felege Guihon International (FGI). You may recall from his lecture before a Kulanu audience a couple of years ago that Dr. Tegegne is a Gojjami Jew (Gojjam is a province in Ethiopia), not a "Falasha" Jew from the neighboring Gonder province. Access to the publications of FGI is at [info@guihon.org](mailto:info@guihon.org).

### LEARN WITH JUDAIC SOFTWARE

Individuals and groups interested in hands-on experiential learning of the Hebrew alphabet and prayers through the Internet can contact Dor L'Dor Interactive Multimedia Judaic Software in three ways: Dor L'Dor, 7103 Mill Run Drive, Rockville, MD 20855 (tel. 301-963-9303) or [dor\\_l\\_dor@radix.net](mailto:dor_l_dor@radix.net) or [http://www.radix.net/~dor\\_l\\_dor/](http://www.radix.net/~dor_l_dor/)

### A SAD NOTE

We learned with sadness of the sudden, tragic death of Lore Steinitz, who was killed in New York by a car speeding out of control. Lore Steinitz was the mother of Lucy Y. Steinitz, a Kulanu activist, writer, lecturer and philanthropist who visited the Abayudaya in 1995 with a Kulanu delegation and again in 1996 with her family. According to Lucy, her mother, age "81 going on 60", led a busy life of good works and actively followed Kulanu's work. May her memory be for a blessing.

## Unusual Treat for History Buffs (Cont.)

(cont. from p. 2)

Until 1926, there is no evidence that Kakungulu had ever met a Jew or had ever read a book written by a Jew -- other than the Old Testament. His desire to be a Jew developed without external influence. In 1926, Kakungulu met a Jewish trader in Kampala who is remembered only as Yusuf or Joseph. Joseph was amazed to hear about Kakungulu's "conversion" to Judaism, but he was also astonished at how Kakungulu confused Judaism with Christianity. Kakungulu invited Joseph to his home in Mbale to instruct him and the other Bayudaya in the Jewish religion. As a result of Joseph's instruction, the Bayudaya stopped the practice of baptizing children; they kept the Sabbath strictly; they said customary Jewish blessings and prayers; and they learned to slaughter in the kosher manner and would only eat meat slaughtered by themselves.

At the time of Kakungulu's death in 1928, there were about 3,000 Bayudaya. By 1962, when Oded first visited them, they were only 300. Some of the Bayudaya had returned to the Bamalaki sect, others to Christianity or Islam. Many Bayudaya children became Christian while attending Christian mission schools. Moslems made persistent attempts to convert the Bayudaya, stressing that they were isolated and had no patrons to protect their interests or aid them materially.

The decrease in numbers resulted primarily, however, from the inability of the Bayudaya to maintain the Jewish school that had been established by Kakungulu. That school came under the control of the Church of Uganda (Anglican) when, as a Jewish school, it could no longer cover its expenses. By the 1960s, the Bayudaya consisted mainly of elderly people, women and small children. The youth of school age had abandoned the Jewish faith.

Oded spent two days with the Bayudaya in May 1962, and met with them several times over the next five years. The first request of the Bayudaya leaders was to make permanent contact with Jews of Israel and the world. With Oded's help, letters were exchanged with the president of Israel, the president of the World Jewish Congress and the chairman of the World Union for the Propagation of Judaism. Several editors of Jewish newspapers in Israel, England and the United States wrote to Samsoni Mugombe, the leader of the Bayudaya. The contacts with world Jewry contributed spiritually and morally to the community and led to an increase in numbers to about 800 in 1971.

Just as things were getting better, the Bayudaya were severely hit by Idi Amin's coup in 1971. The community was outlawed by Amin, and all synagogues were closed. The Bayudaya had to conceal their Jewishness or be arrested. Several Bayudaya families, including that of their leader Samsoni Mugombe, became impoverished and suffered from hunger. Many members of the community left Judaism out of fear.

As long as Amin was in power, all contact between the Bayudaya and the outside world ceased. Oded feared that the community had vanished. It had not, but its numbers had again greatly decreased. The work of reconstruction of synagogues and the school started under the leadership of Samsoni Mugombe immediately after Amin's fall. Youth groups were set up and were given Hebrew names such as *nearim* (youngsters) and *kokhavim tikvah* (stars of hope).

Mugombe again wrote letters to many Jewish organizations in Israel and all over the world appealing for urgent help. He asked for books in English on Jewish laws and faith; he asked for a rabbi to be sent to teach them Judaism; he wanted one member of the community to be sent to Israel to study at a yeshiva so that the community would have a leader and a teacher. He also requested financial assistance to maintain the synagogues and school.

In 1994, while serving as Israel's ambassador to Kenya, Oded again visited the Bayudaya. He noted that their relations with their Moslem and Christian neighbors had improved. Still, no rabbi had been sent to the Bayudaya, and no Jewish institution had

pay for a course of study. Although the Bayudaya consider themselves to be good Jews, none of them has yet been given the opportunity to convert according to the *halacha* (Jewish religious law).

Oded's monographs are thoroughly footnoted. To a very large degree, his sources are unpublished manuscripts, private correspondence and interviews, many of which were conducted by Oded himself. Oded is, in fact, the first historian to document the history of the Bayudaya. Most of Oded's research was done in the early 1960s and resulted in an article published in the 1970s in the scholarly *Journal of Religion in Africa*. The current monograph is an enlarged and more fully documented edition of the earlier article. The major additions to the earlier article are three chapters dealing with events after 1970.

Oded's history of Islam and Judaism in Uganda was not written for the purpose of comparison and does not readily permit a comparison of the experience of those two religions in that country. Nevertheless, having been in Uganda and seen the power and success of the Moslems, I cannot help but ask why the Bayudaya are struggling to survive after 77 years whereas the Moslems fit comfortably into the landscape. The Moslem experience could have been otherwise. Kileleshwa's defeat in 1890 was total. After 1894, when Uganda was a British colony, it was unlikely that the Moslems of Uganda were allowed to receive any significant financial support from their co-religionists in North Africa or the Middle East. Nevertheless, they established numerous mosques and religious schools throughout the country. Did the knowledge that they were part of a world religion with a billion adherents give the Ugandan Moslems the confidence to be fruitful and multiply?

(cont. on p. 5)

## Kaifeng's Jews (Cont.)

(cont. from p. 1)

been saved from the Kaifeng Synagogue when it went into disrepair in the mid-19th century. On exhibit were two of the original three stone steles (engraved pillars) that were created in 1489 and had stood in the courtyard of the synagogue for hundreds of years. The third original stele is missing. These steles tell the history of the Kaifeng Jewish community and describe the building of the original synagogue. Another stele, dating from 1679, tells the history of one Kaifeng family, the famous Zhao family. On one of the walls were photographic impressions of all three steles, made by the Canadian missionary Charles William White around 1900, when he was studying in Kaifeng. Also on display was a huge map of Asia showing the route the Jews took in the 11th century, from the Middle East to Kaifeng, over the Silk Road.

From the museum, we bused to the site of the old synagogue, upon which now stands a Chinese hospital. A street near the synagogue is still called Teaching the Torah Lane, identified in a street sign in Chinese. Prof. Xu told us that he had made up a plaque with the street name in Hebrew, English and Chinese, but had not yet obtained permission from the local government to erect the plaque on the street.

From the synagogue site, we walked to the house of Mrs. Zhao, at 21 Teaching the Torah Lane. She is the widow of one of the acknowledged Kaifeng Jews, who died several years ago. (In China, when a woman marries, she takes on the religion of her husband; that is how over the years the Kaifeng Jews got to look more and more Chinese. The descendants today all look very much like their Chinese neighbors.) Mrs. Zhao has two grandchildren, a 15-year-old grandson named Zhou Lea and an 18-year-old granddaughter named Huang Shan. I am told they would both like to study in Israel but were having difficulty getting visas from the Israel embassy. Mrs. Zhao proudly displayed two large menorahs

# Living with the Abayudaya and Their Non-Jewish Neighbors

By Kenny Schultz

## Part II

*(The author was a University of Rochester student who wrote an honors thesis after living with the Abayudaya for two months in autumn 1994. In Part I, in the last newsletter, he described meeting local people, attending an Islamic funeral, and sharing Shabbat with the Abayudaya. This is the concluding part.)*

### Samson Mgombe

We celebrated the following Shabbat at the nearby synagogue where Samson Mgombe, revered leader of the community since 1944, leads the services. The building, located atop a small incline along the eroded path that leads to the center of Mbale, was a small clay building sheltered by a roof of rusty sheets of metal. On the outside there were no signs indicating that it was a synagogue. However, the interior was decorated with Jewish symbols meticulously drawn on the old gray walls. We arrived before the other members and sat quietly on one of the wooden benches until I peered through the open window and noticed a tall elderly man draped in a long black garment walking slowly toward the synagogue. He had a wooden cane in his right hand that aided each step. He entered the synagogue and strolled over to where I was sitting. He smiled brightly and said while shaking my hand, "Shabbat Shalom, Shabbat Shalom." He turned away and sat at the wooden table that acted as the podium. There was something spiritual about looking at this man resting under a painting of a lighted *menorah*.

Aaron looked over to me and whispered emphatically, "That is Samson Mgombe."

As the rest of the congregation began to arrive, another elderly man, who was the oldest son of Mgombe, stood up at the podium and read the opening prayers in Luganda. Since I was not able to contribute, I sat quietly and observed the surroundings. In one corner, I noticed a beautifully hand-crafted drum. I looked over to Aaron, who said softly, "On Friday a member of the congregation plays the drum to introduce the Shabbat. If you listen around 6 o'clock on Friday, you will be able to hear."

After a half an hour or so, Mgombe rose from his chair and began his lengthy sermon. In the beginning, Aaron tried to translate, but the attempt was fruitless as Mgombe spoke without pausing. He talked for nearly 90 minutes and by the end, everyone seemed to be exhausted. Although I did not understand the service, after observing a Shabbat conducted by Samson Mgombe and witnessing the pride he had in Judaism, I refused to believe the service was any less Jewish than the one at the larger, brick Synagogue.

As we were all walking out of the service, I asked Mgombe's son, also an elderly man, if he ever had thoughts of converting during the time of Amin's regime. (During the 1970s Idi Amin outlawed Judaism and some Abayudaya synagogues were destroyed; faithful adherents went underground.) He replied in Luganda, which Aaron translated, "Ah, Amin was a very bad man and he did very evil things to us but it is our religion that kept me strong. This is all that I had. And if I let go of it for something I did not believe, then I would no longer have been a person."

"What about the people of the congregation who did convert to Christianity or Islam?"

"That is okay for them, but it is not me. This is what I was taught by my father, and this is what I am."

Later Joab said to me, "You see, I don't like so much the service here. I get very tired. But I must respect it. Mgombe has done very much for our community and I am grateful. And do you know what he also said in his sermon? He said that we must always remain together and I agree."

### The Circumcision

We returned home and ate a small lunch. I had some bread and porridge that was kept warm in a thermos. After getting

At around 3 o'clock, Joab and I headed toward a circumcision. We walked away from town and through *shambas* (yards or gardens) that were divided by man-made plateaus on the beautiful green hills of Uganda. We approached the Christian home where two brothers were going to be (cont., p. 6)

## For History Buffs (Cont.)

(cont. from p. 4)

As long as Kakungulu was alive, his high social status and his substantial financial means protected the Bayudaya politically and materially. It may also have sustained their morale so that they could practice their religion in almost total isolation. Once Kakungulu died, that support was gone. They were scorned by their neighbors, by their rulers, and by the religious establishment. They had no financial support from the outside; but perhaps more importantly, they had no intellectual support from the outside. It would be interesting to know how the Bamalaki have fared since 1921, when they numbered about 100,000 since they, like the Bayudaya, have had to survive without outside recognition.

Oded has given us the details of a rare event in Jewish history: a people who spontaneously sought to become Jews and continue to seek to become Jews with no encouragement, active or passive, from their co-religionists. We are entitled to ask ourselves several questions after reading Oded's monographs: Would contact with or support from the world Jewish community have increased the number of the Bayudaya and their chances of survival? What kind of contact with or support of potential converts is permissible under Jewish law? What kind of contact or support would make us like the missionaries who feel compelled to fish to save souls?

## Religion and Politics in Uganda



ARYE ODED

Arye Oded has made copies of this special work available through Kulanu. Send a check for \$10 for each copy desired, plus \$2 each for US mailing, to the Kulanu office. For readers in Israel, copies are available from the author c/o African Studies Dept., Hebrew University, Mt.

# KOVNE TODAY

## On the Street Where I Lived

By Tina Lunson

(Editor's note: The author, a specialist in Eastern European Jewish history, began research in 1994 on the destruction of the Lithuanian Jewish community of Kaunas -- "Kovne" in Yiddish -- and found, to her surprise, a charming city of 800 Jews where some of the young people speak Yiddish.)

This time in Kovne, I live in an apartment in *Senamiestes*, the Old Town. The practiced eye can still trace the outlines of Jewish lives under the red-tiled roofs, by an occasional *mezuza* scar on a doorpost, even today as yet another generation trods the cobblestone streets. The old-new shops bustle with the business of Lithuania energetically pursuing a modern economic life.

Lithuanian economic life began here in the 1300s, when Vytautas the Great invited Jews to his land to develop trade. The medieval princes enlarged the physical area of Lithuania from the Baltic to the Black Sea, expanded the idea of Lithuania into that of a great power, and brought Lithuania into the European Community of those days. Jews helped to bring that about, settling along the Vilija River -- in Kovne on Jonaver Street and across the river in Slabodke -- and going about their businesses, collecting tolls at bridges, shipping Lithuanian lumber and flax to the ports of Northern Europe, serving as *arendars* to local landlords, operating customs houses.

At one corner, my new street joins *Muitines gatve*, Customs Street, a reminder embedded in the city plan. At another corner it joins *Kurpiu*, Shoemakers Street, an alley of *shusters*. One block over is *Mapu gatve*, which turns into *Zamenhofo gatve*, two streets named after two Jews known for linguistic innovation: Avrom Mapu, who reinvented Hebrew as a language for everyday speech and writing; and L. Zamenhof, who invented Esperanto, apparently not comprehending that there was already an inter-European, even inter-continental language in Yiddish.

My street itself was once known as *Yatkever gas*, Butcher-shop Street. That was its Yiddish name, which few remember now. But those who do, remember quite clearly. Feyge Fridman was born in 1914 at the corner of Yatkever and Jonaver Streets, once a grand concourse of Jewish business. On opposite corners, Segal's and Kapulski's bakeries, one for *khalah*, one for bagel. Kliacko, Lichtenstein, Lomasai, manufacturers, distributors, wholesalers.

Feyge looks down the street: "In that building, my aunt lived. And on this side, Eliashev, the Yiddish writer, the poet...."

"Eliashev? Bal Makhshoves?" I ask, incredulously repeating the name of the subject of my Master's thesis.

"Yes. Yes, Bal Makhshoves. And there, a candy company. In this courtyard, a troop of scouts had their headquarters."

Then, the whole street smelled of Rozenmarin's smoked meats and sausage. Besides their shop here, they had two stores on the broad, tree-lined *Laisves aleja*, and they shipped their products to *Erets Israel*. Even the man who owned the "Maistes", a big meat processing plant across the other river, used to come to here for sausage -- Rozenmarin's was better. And kosher.

At the other end of my street -- across *Vilniaus gatve*, once the main shopping street for groceries, shoes, household goods, modest clothing -- and approaching the river, there are mostly old apartment houses. Mirjam Shafir was born in Slabodke, but came to Old Town to shop and to visit. "*Un vu du lebst* --- And where you live, was my mother's aunt's house. She married a Polanski. The whole building, upstairs and down, was Polanskis. We used to go there to visit on *Shabes*." There was a *kloyz*, a little synagogue, in the courtyard. There is no sign of it now, except an empty spot. In Kovne, in the old, tightly built neighborhoods, an empty spot is often strong evidence of a Jewish past. After Nazis, after Soviets, the ubiquitous "absence of a presence."

"*Gants alt-shtot is geven idishe krumen* --- all old-town was Jewish shops..." Today I need Lithuanian, not Yiddish, in the stores. Pomadorn works for tomatoes, but it's *duona*, not *breyt*, to get bread. The black is the best. In fact, the black bread might be

fragrant, delicious. Feyge makes phenomenal *blintzes*, but says that none of the food is quite the same. Mirjam makes pickles in a huge glass jar; in a few hours we eat warm pickles with herring that she has prepared. Jankl makes *tsholent* in the oven built for that purpose. Later, Mirjam's *teygleh* and tea.

This little Jewish community comprises some of the finest people, and these are some of the finest moments, that I have encountered in my entire life. I can see plainly that things are not the same. Things are how they are.

Bal Makhshoves used to contribute to a newspaper column called "*Shtiklekh un brekhlekh*", "Crumbs and pieces". If that's what this community is, then I can pass on the whole loaf, a dank, as long as my crumbs are black bread and I can eat them at this table.

## Non-Jewish Neighbors of the Abayudaya (Cont.)

(cont. from p. 5)

circumcised and, according to Joab, this was common. He clarified, "There could be one, two, three or four boys being circumcised at once. You see, when a boy of the Bugisu tribe, which is most people in this area, reaches 18, he must be circumcised. And if he has brothers who are younger, maybe as young as 14, they might also do it with him. **We Jews are the only ones who do not participate in this tradition.**"

"Have you ever seen any of these boys cry?" I asked, wondering if a 14-year-old could be as brave as his older brother.

"Yes, a few do. And it is very interesting to see. Here it is the custom that if you cry or do such things as show fear, like shaking, then you are called a coward and unfit for the community. And, you are abused all the time. Another thing is that the friends who have given gifts might ask for them back, and the circumciser, who has to perform under great pressure, fines the father of the boys three goats and some money."

"Does the father protect his son from the abuse?"

"The father is usually the first one to hit him. One father even wanted to kill his son with a *panga* (machete)," Joab replied excitedly.

"What does the son do? Does he remain at home?"

"Yes, where is he to go? He has no money. But the son usually does not get married. The women no longer respect him."

We heard the parade approaching. The rhythmic chanting with the beat of drums permeated quickly throughout the small neighborhood. People at once left their homes, and owners closed their restaurants.

We walked over to the place of the circumcision, which I suppose was the home of the family. In the middle of the courtyard, there was a big white circle. As the two brothers walked confidently down the road, their male friends screamed at the top of their lungs, "Be Brave. Don't move. Don't cry. Don't shake." The boisterous crowd filled with young, sanguine women surrounding the circle while young boys feverishly climbed the trees to witness their eventual fate. The two stoic boys were taken behind the house for one more moment of encouragement. The father, who was strangely draped in a beautiful, flowery dress holding a rusty *panga*, walked over to the anxious crowd and playfully threatened anyone who entered the circle. His face looked strained with anticipation. I glanced over to the circumciser, who was holding the sharp knife in preparation and standing quietly by himself. I asked Joab about him and he joked, "Don't worry. He is trained in a proper manner. In the past, ah, it was very dangerous, but now the circumciser must go through a course. And the first thing he learns is to sterilize the knife."

## "Welcome Them, But Respect Their Fear of Exposure" (Cont.)



Schulamith Halevy at summer Kulanu meeting in Maryland.

(cont. from p. 1)

Portuguese word *marrano* is also translated as "forced one" but this usage is sometimes avoided since a Spanish translation of *marrano* is "swine".)

"We need to relate to our Sephardi brothers and sisters who are now coming back," Halevy argues, and her lectures focus on how to do this. As guest speaker at the Kulanu summer meeting in Silver Spring, Maryland, she emphasized the secret Jew's pain of publicly returning to Judaism.

The return may be painful for a number of reasons. The returnee often loses his or her family and community in the process, and there is no family or encouraging community waiting on the other side. Also, there is the shame of being descended from one who succumbed to the pressure of the Inquisition and converted outwardly to Catholicism. As one eloquent returnee, Magda Aliza Hinojosa, has written:

*Personally, it has been very painful to return; it is a very lonely life. Yet again we are reminded that we are separated from our families; as conversions did, as massacres did, as forced emigration did, it is separation one more time. I have no one in my family with whom to share my Jewish holidays, and, believe me, it hurts...Please remember that we have a lot of pain inside us which we have to deal with. It's wonderful to have talks about history, but remember, this one soul still feels the pain, the burden of apostasy of our ancestors over a 600-year period.*

How, then, can we "open the door"? Halevy suggests maximizing privacy and minimizing pressure by having information about Judaism and Sephardic history available for browsing at libraries, Hillel houses, and friendship centers, particularly in Latino neighborhoods. Net and phone numbers should be supplied for those wishing further information in private.

Halevy is particularly interested in reaching Sephardi descendants in Portugal, where large numbers live, although not actively as Jews. She advocates establishing Israel-Portugal friendship centers in cities, particularly those where Jewish centers were known to have existed, including Coimbra, Lisboa, and Oporto. Ideally, these would feature libraries, news from Israel and the rest of the Jewish world, music, films, folk dancing, cooking and craft classes, Hebrew language instruction, and basic Judaism courses.

What is the *halachic* status of these *anusim*? According to a

*I am taking the liberty to write about the people in the Americas who claim to be descendants of the marranos of Spain and Portugal.*

*They must be treated like full Jews in every way (counted for a minyan, given aliyot, etc.)*

*Only when one of these anusim wishes to marry a Jew, must he or she undergo full conversion...*

For Jews who are interested in working on a personal level with an appropriate friend or acquaintance, Halevy advises taking one's time to build sensitivity and trust until you feel the friend "might wish to be reached out to." At that point, she has been successful saying something like "you look like my cousin" (if it is true) or "I think you may be one of us."

For those interested in meeting *anusim* around the world, Halevy has as many precautions as suggestions. First, study and connect with their history. "It is yours, too," she reminds her audiences, "and will help you act and feel like the brother or sister that you are."

Guard against being an "ugly" Jewish tourist, she warns. She advises praying with *anusim* in their community synagogue if there is one. She encourages the giving of gifts (kosher food, prayer books in the local language, Jewish decorative objects) but not of charity. Above all, "Be real slow taking out your camera."

"*Anusim* DO want relationships with caring Jews outside their isolated community; they just don't want to be rare beasts on anyone's picture safari," Halevy teaches.

True to her philosophy of outreach, Schulamith Halevy has left numbers where she can be contacted back in Israel: Mail: PO Box 14582, Jerusalem 91145, Israel. Home: 16/4 Tiferet Israel Rd., Jerusalem 91904 Israel; tel and fax: 972-2-627-3440. Office: Department of Computer Science, Hebrew University at Givat Ram, Jerusalem 91904 Israel; tel: 972-2-658-5266; fax: 972-2-658-5439; e-mail: nachum@cs.huji.ac.il.

## A Truly Unique Seminary (Cont.)

Also, a kibbutz will be developed to expand and deepen the Jewish education of families for six months just prior to making *aliyah*. About 20 families will work at the kibbutz at any one time, supporting themselves with kibbutz industry. Huts will be built at the kibbutz to accommodate the families.

This project has been designed primarily by the communities in Mizoram and Manipur, with the collaboration of the first generation of immigrants who have successfully completed absorption in Israel. The result will be that more members of the community in Mizoram and Manipur will be able to convert and make *aliyah* -- and the size of the community remaining in India who formally convert to Judaism will enlarge.

Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail has raised \$15,000 for this project so far, with a significant amount raised in Bnei Menashe communities. An additional \$3000 has been raised by Kulanu supporters. To finish, \$7,000 is needed. Some of you have visited Rabbi Avichail and the Bnei Menashe in Israel and know how far a dollar is stretched in his hands.

We urge you to start the New Year 5757 by becoming one of the early supporters of this *aliyah* (tax-deductible contributions to Kulanu can be earmarked for this purpose). And perhaps some day you or your children will visit Manipur, Mizoram, or Israel to meet the Bnei Menashe who have remembered their origin and proudly know what their future brings.

## LETTERS TO KULANU

### Visiting Peruvian Jews in Israel

I met last summer with the Peruvian Jews of Elon Moreh, Israel. It was an exhilarating experience and reminded me of my trip in 1994 to Belmonte, Portugal, since Elon Moreh is also situated on the top of a mountain -- with a spectacular view of the western Jordan Valley. Elon Moreh is deep, deep in the territories, northeast of Shechem, pretty much surrounded by Arab villages. It took me hours to arrive by car because many roads (through any Arab jurisdiction) are closed to (or highly not recommended to) Jews.

I called ahead to David Gerah, a young man who hesitantly accepted my unexpected interest in visiting. When I mentioned Rabbi Avichail, Amishav, and the basic goals of Kulanu, he became more open. Anyway I arrived, we greeted, and he invited me into his nice townhome, where he lives with his young Peruvian wife and two children, both born in Israel. The Peruvian Jews have been in Israel five or seven years depending on the particular wave they came on. The Gerahs came on the second wave.

We talked for about three hours on all subjects, interspersed by Cokes to cool us down from blistering outdoor temperatures, a walk to their synagogue, and also a Peruvian lunch of rice, beans and chicken. I only saw seven or eight other members of the community, mostly children, as it was a quiet Friday afternoon. I decided to try to go next time for a weekend so I can meet members at Shabbat services. I will make visits as often as I can.

Mr. Gerah, only 27, is one of the leaders of the 20-family community and as such has written songs, stories and interviewed many members of the community on cassettes. He would like to write for the Kulanu newsletter and I think he would be much better at it than I would! Rabbi Avichail was very supportive of my visit.

Thanks for getting me started on another great project! I look forward to continued contact with this very strong-willed and resilient group of Jews.

*Eytan Berman  
Rehovot, Israel*

### Ugandan Jews Need Penpals

I have received encouraging letters from the Abayudaya teenagers about Kulanu's penpal program with Jewish American teenagers.

As thrilling as it is for the Americans to receive letters from Uganda, the significance of the correspondence is far more profound to the Abayudaya. Most Abayudaya have never received a letter in their lives! Furthermore, they number only 500 in a country surrounded by Christians and Moslems. They have been struggling to survive as Jews for four generations without outside help or recognition; and they feel their isolation keenly. Every Abayudaya child who receives a letter from an American child is encouraged to face life as a Jew under difficult psychological and sometimes physical conditions.

Those who wish to write to the Abayudaya should also realize that it takes three weeks to a month for a letter to reach its destination in Uganda and a similar amount of time for the reply to arrive. And, letters don't always arrive, so you might save a copy and mail it again if you have not received a reply in two months. Also, the cost of postage is a heavy financial burden for the Abayudaya. Therefore, letters are often sent as a package to one person in the US, with the request that he or she re-address and mail them. Thus, it might take months to hear from a Ugandan penpal.

The following are some Abayudaya youth, with ages, who would be overjoyed to receive letters from Jewish American teenagers: Seth ben Jonadab Keki (20), Enos Keki (17), Samson

Yashira Moses (12), Moses Wetege (14), Sarah Namatome (10). The address for all of them is c/o Abayudaya Community, PO Box 225, Mbale, Uganda.

I encourage everyone to partake in the pleasure as well as the mitzvah of writing to the Abayudaya.

*Irwin M. Berg  
New York*

### CONVERSION HOME PAGE

I'd like to thank readers who forwarded comments and suggestions about the Conversion to Judaism Home Page (<http://members.tripod.com/~epst>). I've added new materials and plan to add more. The reaction has impressed upon me that there are, indeed, many thoughtful people who are serious about exploring the possibilities of becoming Jewish.

*Larry Epstein  
Stoney Brook, NY*

### 1496-97 OBSERVANCES

Many may not be aware of the following observances that will take place this year to commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Portuguese expulsion and forced conversion of its Jewish population.

**IN PORTUGAL:** The mayor of Lisbon, Dr. Joao Soares (the son of former President Mario Soares) requested of Mayor Olmert of Jerusalem, and received from him, a Jerusalem stone, from which a monument to the victims of the Inquisition will be made by a Portuguese sculptor. The monument will be placed at Sao Domingos Square, between the S. Domingos church (where the forced conversions took place) and the National Theatre D. Maria (built in the place of the ancient Palace of Estaos, from where the Jews were taken to the church and where later the Inquisition headquarters functioned). Many *auto-de-fe's* took place in this same little square. The monument will be inaugurated on December 5 by President Jorge Sampaio, who has invited President Ezer Weizman of Israel to co-preside with him. President Weizman has not answered yet. In the same evening, a reception will take place at the D. Maria Theatre.

The following entities are involved in the observances: The president and prime minister of Portugal, the Jewish community of Lisbon, the Embassy of Israel in Lisbon, the Portugal-Israel Friendship Association, and the Institute of Jewish Studies of Lisbon.

On the evening of December 4, the synagogue of Belmonte will be inaugurated.

**IN ISRAEL:** A committee has been formed with the participation of the Hebrew University, the Embassy of Portugal in Tel Aviv, and the Israel-Portugal Friendship Association, over which I am honored to preside.

**IN BRAZIL:** The University of Sao Paulo has prepared a program of commemorations and will also honor Dr. Elias Lipiner, historian of the Jews in Portugal and Brazil, on the occasion of his 80th birthday.

*Inacio Steinhardt  
Israel*

### A CEMETERY IN INDIA NEEDS HELP

The Jewish Cemetery Committee of Baroda, India, is in the process of building offices and stores adjacent to the city's walled cemetery. The two main cities in the State of Gujarat are Ahmedabad and Baroda. These cities are close to each other, and there is a sizeable Jewish population involved. This project will help not only to make the cemetery more secure and safe, but also help to raise much needed funds (from the rental of the offices and stores) to maintain various Jewish cemeteries all over India. The total cost of this project is about \$15,000.

## LETTERS (CONT.)

Donations are urgently needed. Names of donors sending \$50 or more will be inscribed on a marble tablet and fixed on the cemetery wall.

Please make your check out to the "Jewish Cemetery Committee, Baroda" and mail to the Jewish Cemetery Committee, 33 Tana Apartments, Near Ellora Park, Race Course Circle, Subhanpura Baroda 390007, Gujarat State, India.

*Samuel M. Daniel*  
New York

### A NEW COMMUNITY IN GHANA

I have started working with another community at the place where our community's founder, Aaron Ahomtre, had the vision about the lost tribe of Israel. These people have accepted Judaism very well, as evidenced by their request to me to help teach them the Torah faith. The community is located in a town called Sefwi Sui. When Daniel Baiden comes here again, we shall visit them. The people at Sefwi Sui were already with us during Aaron's time, but due to some matter the community was not able to keep as proper a standard as we at Sefwi Wiawso. Moreover, they were not having any teacher to direct them to the Torah faith. Therefore, I have gone to Sefwi Sui to strengthen that community this time. They already know the customs as we know them now. I need more prayer books and other Torah books for the community at Sefwi Sui. Since that community at Sefwi Sui are farmers with much land, the chief at Sefwi Sui has asked me if I want some land to make a development for our Jewish community. He says he will give me as much as I can use.

*David Ahenkorah*  
PO Box 57, Sefwi Wiawso, New Adienbra St., West  
Africa, W/R Ghana

### CAPE VERDE'S INTRIGUING SECRETS

The article in the last newsletter by M. Mitchell Serels, "An Unusual Society in Cape Verde," offers interesting information about the lost Jewish Community in the Cape Verde Islands; the author should be commended.

Being myself a descendant of Berber-Moroccan Jews who immigrated to Cape Verde via Gibraltar in the last century, and being Capeverdean born, I was happy to learn about the formation of the Cape Verde-Israel Friendship Society. No doubt it is a step in the right direction and long overdue. Let us now hope that this new Society bears good fruit.

The formation of the Society undoubtedly opens new horizons in the relationship between Capeverdeans and Israelis, especially in the area of archaeological research. I am reminded of the ancient rock inscriptions found in some of the Cape Verde islands which, for generations, have puzzled scholars. The Capeverdean writer Luis Romano refers to these inscriptions in some of his writings as mysteries that have been waiting for centuries to be deciphered.

And who better than the Israelis, with their vast resources in the field of archaeology to help solve these mysteries?

And if we attend to the fact that in ancient times, centuries before the birth of Christ, both Phoenicians and Carthaginians undertook voyages of exploration along the west coast of Africa, among them the famous Carthaginian navigator Hanno -- who some historians suggest might have landed and may even have established settlements in the Islands of Cape Verde -- wouldn't it be worth the effort, for the sake of culture and human history, to try to discover the origins of those inscriptions?

I was thrilled to learn from Serels' article about descendants of Portuguese Jews -- Lima, Carvalho, Rodrigues -- whose ancestors settled in the islands from the period between 1460 and 1497 (immediately after the islands were "officially" discovered

and old schoolmates of mine. As a matter of fact, both Policarpo Anahory, one of the officers of the Society, and his brother Terencio Anahory (a poet) were my classmates.

As for Ruth Marcal, nee Ruth Cohen, she is of Jewish ancestry, but not her late husband Antonio Marcal, whose parents were Portuguese. Ruth Cohen was one of the prettiest girls in our high school, and I still remember her very well! I was happy to learn from Serels' article that Ruth is the grandame of Santo Antao.

Kulanu's efforts in finding lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people, and its concern in making its findings known to its readers are highly commendable and deserve the appreciation and support of everyone.

*Donald M. Wahnnon*  
New Bedford, Massachusetts

## PERU NOTES

### Be a Penpal

On return from his short visit with the Jewish community in Trujillo, Peru, Bob Lande immediately solicited Spanish-speaking penpals for the community on the Internet. The response was, as Lande puts it, "too fantastic for words!" Those who plan to write are advised to read, for background, the two fascinating articles by Rabbi Myron Zuber in the Kulanu Web Site (<http://www.ubalt.edu/www/kulanu>). Interested penpals may write to Comunidad Beney Abraham, Pasaje Godofredo Garcia #406, URB.CHIMU, Trujillo, Peru, or Blanca Argandona, Av. Tapac Amaru, Km. 8 #299 Sr. Carabaio - Comas, Lima, Peru, to be matched up. Lande suggests you enclose \$1 for postage since some of the Peruvians are so poor that even the return postage is a lot of money for them.

"You have no idea what a wonderful mitzvah you will be performing. They have been so isolated for so long, they really want to join the Jewish community, and your letters would mean so very much," Lande says.

### Help a Peruvian To Study in the US

A very nice 27-year-old woman in Trujillo, Peru, named Rachel Valderrama has enough money for a plane ticket to the United States and a sincere desire to come here to study Judaism. Her English is passable, but she could not yet enroll in a degree program in a United States college. She reads Hebrew and is very observant but has not yet been able to convert to Judaism. Would anyone be willing to find out what is needed so that she can come to the US and study Judaism, and then help her make all the necessary arrangements? Please phone Bob Lande at (301) 585-5229.

### Hebrew Bentshers, Kippot, Tapes Needed

The communities of Peruvians that we have been working with have no *bentshers* (Grace After Meals booklets). If anyone has extra *bentshers*, preferably ones that are entirely in Hebrew (we won't bother asking for Hebrew-Spanish ones!) and preferably a large group that are all in good condition and are identical, here is your chance to do a mitzvah.

The community also has a burning desire to learn Hebrew songs -- songs for the holidays, Shabbat, or just general Hebrew songs. Tapes with an accompanying songbook would be best.

They can also use *kippot*.

Please mail your donations to the Kulanu office or, if you have questions, phone Bob Lande at (301) 585-5229.

### Gifts Already Sent

Meanwhile, Rabbi Myron Zuber has been busy purchasing and sending the Peruvian Jewish community books and ritual objects with a grant from Kulanu. This past summer he sent 30 copies of *siddurim*, 25 copies of *chumashim*, three copies of laws

## ***The Abayudaya and Their Non-Jewish Neighbors (Cont.)***

Suddenly the younger brother emerged from the group of his friends and entered the circle. He was wearing only gray shorts, and his body was covered with a white powder. His eyes looked bloodshot but his face was expressionless. His father whispered one last thing to him and he nodded. The circumciser then unzipped the boy's pants and pulled out his penis, which was also covered with the powder. The circumciser quickly pulled the foreskin forward and sliced it as his friends increased their pitch and cried, "Don't move. Don't shake. Never fear." The boy remained still, although his eyes seemed to redden. Fortunately, he did not glance down as the blood began to drip. The circumciser paused for a second, covered the penis in brick ashes to protect from slippage, and then quickly made the second and final cut that caused the blood to freely flow into a small puddle. The shouting increased until the father walked over to his youngest son, smiled, and told him to sit down on a wooden chair to get treated with a bandage and antibiotics.

**The older son was now ready. He walked confidently down to the circle with his hands raised in the air. Joab looked over to me and said, "This boy chooses to do it the brave way."** The circumciser, who now had a different sterilized knife, quickly made the first cut. The boy smiled boldly, raised his pumped fists, and went dancing into the streets with his male friends, who sprinkled symbolic water all over his thin body. Blood dripped from his open shorts leaving a dark path on the red soil. During this time of waiting, I noticed the severed skin of the boy lying on soil that covered a plastic bag. I asked Joab what they did with the dead skin and he replied, "The parents of the boy will bury the skin in a secret place. There is a tradition that if someone takes the skin, it might disorganize the boy. He might not marry, or other things bad could happen. The boy does not even know where it is buried."

After 20 minutes, the boy returned and the circumciser made a second cut. The crowd went into a frenzy as the boy, again, left the circle and went dancing throughout the neighborhood. Joab smiled and cried, "I have never seen a boy do it twice. He is most brave. People are very, very happy." The boy returned about 15 minutes later, and before he received his final cut, he danced in front of everyone. The crowd joined in as the ceremony became a fantastic celebration. Finally, he went bravely back into the circle and was officially circumcised.

On the way home, I inquired about the future of the two boys. I was interested to know how this rite of passage affected their lives. Joab responded, "It will take them about one month to recover. Then with all the gifts they received the boys will begin their new lives. You see, now the boy no longer plays sex with various women and seeks one woman to marry. **That is why you saw many women there, because they first want to see if he is brave. So, you will see, he will be married very soon, maybe just after he recovers.**"

When I returned home and explained to Aaron what I had just witnessed, I realized that this tradition united the entire community and transformed it into a communal society. In a way, this rite of passage transcended all the barriers that divided the people according to their respective religions and became an all-encompassing spiritual experience. Throughout the ceremony there was not one mention of tenets of Christianity or the beliefs associated with Islam that might alienate a certain person or a group of people; everyone was free to participate in the mystical event.

However, according to Aaron, this ceremony was ever-changing. **Besides the beneficial introduction of safety precautions, the government was attempting to alter and possibly abolish this practice.** Aaron said, "The government of Uganda is already discouraging it in some areas. Sometimes, they (people of the ceremony) dance almost a

**whole part of the year and do nothing but celebrate. This is causing economic problems because people do not work. Dancing has even been restricted this year until 9 o'clock."**

### **The Bris**

Gershom and Uriah, the only two in the whole Abayudaya community who performed circumcisions, were preparing for the *bris*. I asked Gershom who taught them and he said, "It was a training. My father and Uriah's father did it so we followed them."

**"Well, then, how did you learn to do a *bris* ceremony according to Jewish law?"**

**"From the *siddur*, of course," Gershom replied as he pointed to the black book in his hand.**

The short service started with prayers read in English. Then Gershom removed a tiny sterilized blade from his pocket, read a few prayers in Hebrew, and began the circumcision. Uriah held the screaming baby as Gershom carefully made the first incision. He was very precise and patient as he struggled to control the cheap blade. At one moment, he even stopped to wipe the sweat from his forehead. Before the final cut, I turned away and noticed the mother of the child standing, alone, outside the circle, and every time her son released a horrifying shriek, her face cringed with fear. Only after Gershom was finished and she realized that the baby was fine, did she and her friends rejoice by chanting the traditional cry. Gershom read the concluding prayers in English and everyone drank a cup of wine to celebrate.

We then returned inside the home while the women tended to the boy. I asked Gershom if he was nervous and he replied, **"Ah, I was very nervous. I was shaking, man. I must take very long to separate those skins from the real body because the blade is not good.** It is very dangerous to use. Also, you know, what makes us shake is the environment. The people become very frightened and scream, especially when they see blood. They yell, 'Please stop there. You are hurting him. You might kill him.' And if you take a long time people say, 'Why don't you do this quickly? This is very bad what you are doing. This is mutilation.' That is why we get nervous."

Aaron looked at Gershom and said while shaking his head, "These men are most brave. What they do is much more difficult than the circumcisers for the older boys. They must be precise, man. We are very thankful for having them. I don't think I could do it."

On the way home, Joab and I discussed what the surrounding people think of the Jewish custom to circumcise the son after eight days, compared to the African tradition of circumcising the son as a rite of passage into manhood. He said that when he was young and he would try to observe the traditional circumcisions, the kids would treat him badly. He stated, "I would be called a coward because they did not like that I was circumcised as a child. They thought I was avoiding their custom. So, immediately, I was alienated from the rest of the kids."

"Did you ever want to be part of the African tradition?"

"Yes, when I was a kid. I like to dance very much and when the kids yelled at me to stop and threw things at me, I was very upset because I wanted to join them."

"What made your feelings change?"

Joab paused and then replied, "I do not know exactly, but I began to realize that at times I would always be different than them and it made me feel strong and happy."

"Do the kids still harass Jewish boys?"

"Not in the same way, because now they recognize our existence and we are all friends. But there are still comments made against Jews in school."

### **Hanukkah and Farewell**

My final week was spent in preparation for my farewell Hanukkah party that would take place at the home. At first,

# Meeting Descendants of Kaifeng's Jews (Cont.)

(cont. from p. 4)

doorpost. Prof. Xu knows the family, and we were grateful that he had arranged this most interesting visit.

That night, we had the unique opportunity to meet, at our hotel, with several of the living descendants of the Kaifeng Jews. Both Xu and our local guide, Liang, acted as interpreters, since none of the descendants speaks English. The people we met with included Zhang Xing Wang, a physical education teacher who told us that his Hebrew name was Moshe; Shi Hong, an elderly man; Shi Ping, the grandniece of Shi Hong, who works in the Kaifeng Bureau of Industry and Commerce; Chao Liang, the five-year-old son of Shi Ping (I gave him a *dreidel* and showed him how to spin it, getting an enthusiastic response); and Zhang Liao with a female colleague, who worked for the Kaifeng daily newspaper and who said they would report on the visit.

We learned that there are now about 200 families (600 people in all) in Kaifeng claiming to be descendants of the Kaifeng Jews. These families carry the seven family names given by the emperor to the original Kaifeng Jews, and most still keep some of the old customs. For example, many don't eat pork and drain the blood from meat before cooking. Some still remove the sinew from the animal's thigh before cooking. Some of the older people still partially observe some holidays, but not much since the old synagogue was destroyed in about 1850. (The elderly man said that in his youth they observed holidays by having meetings and discussions.) They don't circumcise their sons, nor do they know about bar mitzvah.

Shi Ping, who bakes her own *matzoh*, said that her father knew quite a bit about his ancestors and their customs, but that he passed away about two years ago. His name was Shi Zhon Yu.

Zhang told us that, from his childhood, he knew his Hebrew name was Moshe and that he was descended from the "chosen people." He is very active with the Jewish descendants in Kaifeng, but there is no formal organization at this time. He said that he reads the Bible every day, having received his Chinese-language Bible from a church in Kaifeng (he reads only the Old Testament). Zhang, when asked, claimed that none of the Kaifeng Jews ever converted to Christianity or Islam; he was insistent on this point. He said that he lights candles on Saturdays.

We were told that all Jewish descendants in Kaifeng are very proud of themselves, act as good citizens, never get into trouble, and never worship idols. They know that other Jews in the world, both Ashkenazim and Sephardim, have had some very bad experiences.

Relations with Israel seem to be developing. Zhang said that he visited the Israeli embassy in Beijing three times and that the Israeli commercial counselor came to Kaifeng to visit the

community after formal relations were established between Israel and China in 1992. He indicated that soon they will twin with a city in Israel, Kiryat Motzkin (outside of Haifa). This was being promoted by the second Israeli ambassador, who himself visited Kaifeng. A doctor from Shi Hong's family visited Israel for six months and studied medicine while there. He was no longer living in Kaifeng.

We also learned that these descendants meet with Jewish visitors to Kaifeng about three or four times a year. Zhang believes that there are a number of descendants who would be very interested in learning about Jewish history, customs, and holidays, and would be very delighted if a Chinese-speaking teacher would come and spend some time with them.

I had brought from the US some Jewish artifacts, which I presented to our new Chinese friends. These gifts included the *dreidel* for the young boy, a number of *yarmulkes* for Zhang, and a translation of the *Shema Yisrael* prayer in English, Hebrew, and Chinese. The translation into Chinese was provided by Denise Yeh Bresler, a Kulanu supporter in Maryland, for which I am very grateful.

After our discussion, we all had dinner together at the hotel, and after taking photographs, we parted from these wonderful people.

Later that same night, Xu and I went to the apartment of Wang Yi Sha, the retired curator of the Kaifeng museum, although not himself a descendant of Jews. According to Xu, his good friend Wang is an eminent scholar and has done considerable research on the Kaifeng Jews. He knows more about the history of the Kaifeng Jews than any other person, according to Xu. He had injured his hip recently and was bedridden; hence the meeting at his apartment. He and his wife and daughter have an unpretentious two-room apartment with a small kitchen and bathroom on the third floor of a walk-up building. He greeted us warmly from his bed. He shared with us some completed manuscripts that represented many interviews that he had conducted with present descendants of the Kaifeng Jews. He plans to publish this material (in Chinese, as was his first book on the Kaifeng Jews). I wished him success in his most noble endeavors.

During our visit the following day to the Kaifeng Guild Hall exhibits, we spotted pictures of the old synagogue showing the three steles standing in the courtyard of the synagogue. (Incidentally, there is a model of this synagogue in the Museum of the Diaspora in Ramat Aviv, Israel.)

We spent only two days in Kaifeng, but they were a fascinating two days. We left with the feeling that one day the Jews of Kaifeng will return to their roots -- along with so many other communities that Kulanu is working with.

**Think of memorializing a loved one with a Kulanu endowment. Consider including a bequest to Kulanu in your will.**

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## Non-Jewish Neighbors of the Abayudaya (Cont.)

(cont. from p. 10)

Aaron refuted the location but Joab replied convincingly, "Mr. Aaron, how can we not have it here? This is where Mr. Kenny stayed with us and got to know the neighbors. **The guests will not just be the Abayudaya people but everyone in the area.**" He looked at me and said, "That is how we have a party in Africa. You can not leave anyone out. Ah, that is very bad." Joab and I were in charge of the party. We bought two huge turkeys, three kilos of cow and goat meat, fish, a barrel of African beer, and all the trimmings, like spices, tea, and sugar. The additional food (bananas, sweet potatoes, and beans) were taken from the *shamba*.

When we purchased the meat, I asked Joab if anyone in the family ate it. He answered, "Miriam and the children enjoy the meat very much and sometimes I will buy it for them. Miriam is free to make her own decisions and so are our kids. Would it be fair if I said 'No, you can not eat that?'"

"Me, I do not eat it because Moslems slaughter all the meat and do not properly cover the blood. And this restricts me because I am Kosher. However, I do not know if I would buy it even if I were not Kosher. The Moslems are very arrogant when it comes to their business. **They feel they are superior to us and the Christians and are the only ones with the right to slaughter animals. I was even arrested for slaughtering an animal. During Amin's regime, I owned a calf who accidentally swallowed a plastic bag that got caught in the digestive system. The calf was suffering terribly so I slaughtered it. The Moslems became outraged and brought me to court. Thankfully, the Court let me go after hearing that the calf was mine.**"

The party was extremely entertaining. The elders sat in one corner drinking the entire barrel of African beer and two bottles of whiskey while the young people danced to the musical tapes played on Aaron's radio. In the middle of this festive occasion, Joab signaled to everyone that the food was ready. Everyone took a short break from their respective activities and ate the deliciously prepared food. When we finished eating, there were a few kind speeches thanking me for coming and inviting me to return the following year. The party finally ended when the last sip of alcohol was drunk.

After the party, Miriam went inside her home and brought her beautiful, newborn baby over to me. The baby girl had been born during my stay. Joab smiled and said, "Mr. Kenny, have we told you her name?" I shook my head. He paused for a second and then answered, "We decided to call her Stacey after your sister in America. We think she will be our bridge to your family."

## Our Soul and Heart Live in the Promised Holy Land

By L. Mecabbi

(Editor's note: This memorandum was submitted to Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail in Imphal, Manipur, India, in March 1996.)

We the descendants of the Menashe Tribe, having been separated from our ancestral home for about 2716 years, have been yearning to return to the Promised Land. Men, women, boys and girls, young and old alike, wish to live in the land of ours, which God has promised to our forefathers, so that we can perform, profess and observe the commandments of the Torah. Physically we live in Manipur, but our soul and heart live in the Promised Holy Land. When can our soul, heart and body live together in Zion and worship Almighty? We cannot have a wink of sleep at night when we think of not going to be settled in the Promised Land during our lifetime. We bow towards the Holy Land and pray every day for the fulfillment of our aspiration.

It is better for us to die than to be condemned, maltreated and hated in this foreign land of gentiles.

We are losing our strength and hope in this land. So, kindly take us back to our Promised Land to enable us to serve HaShem with all our heart, soul and might.

Rabbi, you are the only hope of ours and we have no others but only you to help us. You are HaShem's gift for us. Your plan of taking only those parents whose children are already in Israel will leave out many of us. So we want you to change your plan and take all of us to the Promised Land instead. How long should we stay in this land which is not ours? Are you not going to fulfill our cherished dream? Undoubtedly we are the descendants of Menashe and we have accepted and practice Judaism. We have accepted the laws of God, given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. But how can we sing the Lord's song in this strange land? How can we learn and know the laws of Torah where there is no Torah school and rabbi? But even old men and women can learn the laws of Torah in the Promised Land.

Even if we are taken at the rate of 20 persons in a year, it will take over 50 years, and most of us will be buried in this foreign land. Our ancestors Jacob and Joseph did not like their mortal remains to be left in Egypt. So, they ordered that their mortal remains should be taken and buried in the Promised Land. So also is our highest aspiration to die and be buried in the Promised Land.



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