

# KULANU

"all of us"



Helping Lost Jewish Communities

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## Special Section on Beit Din In Uganda: pp. 6 - 11

### 4 Rabbis Visit Bnei Menashe in India

By Michael Freund

(This article appeared in the Jerusalem Post Magazine on March 27.)

The road to Aizawl winds perilously through lush green hills, with hairpin turns and narrow, unmarked lanes adding a tangible sense of danger to the journey. The route passes through numerous villages, many of which are essentially small clusters of makeshift homes built from bamboo, wood and whatever else is available.

After a long and tiring journey, a van carrying four Israeli rabbis pulls up in the town, which is the capital of the northeastern Indian state of Mizoram. The visitors stand before a building whose metal roof is crowned by a sign reading "Shalom Zion Beit Knesset." Dozens of men wearing kippot and *tzitzit*, and women wearing long sleeves and head-coverings, gather at the entrance, greeting the delegation with Hebrew songs and hearty cries of "Shalom." Many have tears in their eyes as they wave Israeli flags briskly in the air.

The Israeli team, consisting of Efrat Chief Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum of the Chief Rabbinate, Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail of the Amishav organization, and his son Rabbi David Avichail of Mitzpe Ramon, are clearly touched by the scene. After all, they are being welcomed by the Bnei Menashe, a group that claims descent from one of the 10 Lost Tribes of Israel.



A young Bnei Menashe onlooker

About 4,500 Bnei Menashe live in towns and villages scattered throughout the Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur, with a handful in Assam and Myanmar as well. Members of the Mizo and Kuki tribes, they have passed down through the generations the tradition that they are descendants of the lost tribe of Manasseh, which was exiled from the Land of Israel by the Assyrians in 723 BCE.

A century ago, when British missionaries entered the region, they were astonished to find that the local tribesmen worshipped one God

(Continued on page 16)

### A Day with the Jews in Ethiopia

By Karen Primack

The facts and figures are astounding. In just a few walled acres in a slum neighborhood in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 1100 preschool children are fed in four hours every weekday. Adult Education (in Hebrew and Jewish Studies) in eight shifts per day serves 1600 in a week. Some 2700 school-age children are educated and fed every day, five days a week. Simple but nutritious meals have been developed costing 17 cents each (\$53 per child per year). And 850 adults (mostly heads of households) are hired as paid employees, 700 of them in embroidery work. On a slow day, when the weather is threatening, morning Shabbat services may be attended by "only" 2500 adults and 500 children and youths.

This magic is performed by the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ), and the chief magician is Andy Goldman, their Country Director for Ethiopia. Goldman also oversees a similar compound in Gondar, serving 2300 school kids and 1300 preschoolers, but our rushed visit in February was limited to Addis, and this will be the focus of our report.

About 7500 Jews live in Addis, many within an hour's walk of the NACOEJ compound, which was set up in 1990 as a holding place for Jews waiting to leave Ethiopia imminently for reunification with family members in Israel. A year later, the historic Operation Solomon airlifted over 14,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel within 36 hours. Although NACOEJ hastily closed the compound, thinking the need was over, it soon became apparent that it needed to be reopened and expanded to accommodate thousands who had been left behind.

According to Goldman, all those now served by the compound are eligible to immigrate to Israel under the Right of Return, having at least one Jewish grandparent. Many have much closer relatives in Israel -- parents or children. Most of the Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jewish community) left in Ethiopia are considered "Feles Mura," whose parents or grandparents converted to Christianity under severe pressure in the past. Most claim to have never become believing Christians, and virtually all are now faithfully practicing Orthodox Judaism. Under supervision of Rabbi Menachem Waldman, of the Chief Rabbi of Israel's Committee on Ethiopian Jewry, a return-to-Judaism program is

(Continued on page 14)

KULANU ("ALL OF US") is dedicated to finding lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people and assisting those who wish to (re)join the Jewish community. Kulanu is undertaking a variety of activities worldwide on behalf of these dispersed groups, including research, contacts, education, conversion when requested, and relocation to Israel if desired. This newsletter is published quarterly by Kulanu, Inc., 11603 Gilsan St., Silver Spring, MD, 20902. Kulanu is a tax exempt 501(c)(3) organization, (51-1919094), incorporated in Washington, DC. For inquiries, contact the above address or call (301) 681-5679, or email <[kulanu@ubmail.ubalt.edu](mailto:kulanu@ubmail.ubalt.edu)>.

# KULANU BRIEFS

## Shi Lei To Speak

Shi Lei, a descendant of the Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, is scheduled to lecture at the 92nd Street Y in New York City on **July 16** at 7:30 pm. The subject of the lecture will be the history of the ancient Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, and the outlook today for their descendants. He also has a speaking date at the JCC in Tenafly, NJ on **July 17** at 11:00 am. Since these dates are subject to change, please check with the institutions before attending.

## Saint Isabella?

Spain's Catholic bishops voted in March to recommend that the Vatican go ahead with the process for Queen Isabella's beatification, the last step before making her a saint. Representing the Spanish Roman Catholic Church, Monsignor Juan Jose Asenjo said the bishops consider Isabella "an exemplary Christian." The decision was criticized by Carlos Schorr, secretary-general of the Federation of Spanish Jewish Communities. "I'm surprised that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they should want to canonize someone who is known for religious intolerance and all the suffering she caused," he said, referring to the monarch who expelled Muslims and Jews from Spain in 1492 and established the notorious Inquisition.

## Ethiopian Seders in Israel

Washington DC's Jewish community raised \$8000 to sponsor three sederim in different places in the Israeli city of Bet Shemesh for 900 Ethiopian Jews. One of the sederim was led by the first Ethiopian Jew to be ordained by the Masorti movement in Israel, Rabbi Yefet Alemu. Alemu highlighted the similarity of the Exodus to the experience of the Ethiopian Jews who came to Israel.

## Kulanu's Web Page

The list of book review links has been considerably expanded on Kulanu's web site <[www.kulanu.org](http://www.kulanu.org)>. Just added are a review of *Suddenly Jewish*, stories of people who suddenly come face to face with their Jewish lineage, and *Who is a Khazar*, which tells the tale of the Khazar linkage to Judaism. Kevin Brook also has an outstanding history on this subject which is linked from Kulanu's web pages. In other areas, "Querido Primas e Primos" (watch out for the man-eating butterfly) is a link to Rufina Mausenbaum's plans for a fascinating tour of Portugal.

## Becomingajew.org

Barbara Shair has announced that The Ambassadors Club for the website "Becomingajew.org" hopes to advertise the message that Judaism welcomes converts by offering free tote bags, bumper stickers and wallet-sized cards with the name of the website. Those interested in serving as "ambassadors" are invited to contact Shair <[shairsware@aol.com](mailto:shairsware@aol.com)> to receive items. "Becomingajew.org" helps people seeking to convert and then helps them integrate into the Jewish community after conversion. They have a section for descendants of Crypto-Jews and a section for foreign conversions which they hope will expand (they are seeking foreign rabbis willing to help).

## Changes on Kulanu Board

All of Kulanu owes a debt of thanks to Robert Lande and Mel Laney, who have recently resigned from the board, having served since 1994. Joining Kulanu founder and president Jack Zeller are newly elected board members Harriet Bograd and Moshe Cotel, both of New York City, and Karen Primack of Silver Spring, Maryland.

## Kulanu in South Florida

The active South Florida chapter continues its frenetic pace. They celebrated Chanukah at the home of Yaakov Gladstone, and their

Purim celebration at Century Villegge, Deerfield Beach attracted more than 400! The Purimspiel portrayed Haman as an Islamist Taliban and acclaimed Canadian Yiddish folk singers premiered "The Song of Kulanu," for which they wrote the lyrics and music, in Yiddish and English.

## Portuguese Synagogue Being Restored

The Portuguese government has announced plans to refurbish the only synagogue in the Azores, located in the city of Ponta Delgada, on the island of São Miguel. Work is expected to be finished during the first months of 2003, after which time it will be opened to the public. The temple was built in 1836 and has been out of use since the 1950s.

## Romaniote Notes

The president of Kehila Kedosha Janina, a Sephardi synagogue of the Greek Jews (and others) in lower Manhattan, has appealed for attendees at Shabbat morning and festival services. Hyman Genee said, "Frankly, we are in serious jeopardy of continuing to hold services." On a happier note, fund-raising for the synagogue's restoration has been successful, nearly meeting the financial requirements for a matching New York State grant of \$50,000. The synagogue's museum is mounting three new exhibits, including one on the story of the Jews of Crete and the resurrection of the Romaniote synagogue there. The Kehila sponsors annual Jewish tours to Greece, and there still may be room on the June trip and the July trip. Contact the Kehila at Cooper Station, PO Box 72, New York, NY 10276, tel 212-431-1619, email [kkj@mymailstation.com](mailto:kkj@mymailstation.com). Their web page is at [www.kehila-kedosha-janina.org](http://www.kehila-kedosha-janina.org).

## Cuba Trip Planned

The Jewish Federation of Greater Washington is sponsoring a visit to the Jewish community of Cuba June 20-24. A minimum donation is required, and space is limited to 30 participants. For information contact Josh Rednik at 301-230-7223 or [jrednik@jewishfedwash.org](mailto:jrednik@jewishfedwash.org).

## Vow to Process Falash Mora

The Israeli Interior Ministry recently promised, in response to a petition in the High Court, to process requests from 18,000 Falash Mora seeking to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return or family reunification. The ministry also promised to let representatives of the families know within four months the current status of the requests. Ethiopian groups appealed to the High Court because Falash Mora, currently waiting in Ethiopia for the right to immigrate, have not been able to get information from Israeli authorities about the status of their requests.

## Chabad in Bombay

Chabad Lubavitch Yeshiva of Bombay is seeking donations of prayer books, tzitzit, and tefillin. Chabad serves the Jewish communities of Mumbai and Alibag through boys' and girls' classes, study with elderly members and young boys, Shabbat meals at synagogue, *shkita*, and providing ritual objects. Send contributions to Aharon Shalom Galsurkar, Chabad Lubavitch Yeshiva of Bombay, 1/24 Dubash Bldg., B. J. Road, Near Byculla Station, Mumbai 400 001, India (tel 91-22-3063129).

## Multi-Cultural Music

Singers Laura Wetzler and Janiece Thompson have developed "Jewels of the Diaspora," a concert celebrating African-American and Jewish song. The program features songs of struggle, survival, freedom and peace from diverse African-American and Jewish sources, sung in English, Hebrew, Ladino, Yiddish and Amharic. To program the concert, community groups, churches and synagogues are invited

# KULANU BRIEFS

to contact [nervygirlrecords@hotmail.com](mailto:nervygirlrecords@hotmail.com) or tel 413-634-5617 or fax 413-634-0133.

## Sephardic House Programs

Sephardic House, an institute for researching and promoting Sephardic history and culture, ran a three-day program in March celebrating the Jews from Iran. To learn about its frequent lectures and concerts, contact Sephardic House at 15 West 16 St., New York, NY, tel 212-294-6190 or email [sephardichouse@cjh.org](mailto:sephardichouse@cjh.org).

## Speakers

**Dr. Yohannes Zeleke** spoke about the Jews of Ethiopia at the confirmation class at Temple Beth Ami in Rockville, Maryland.

**Aron and Karen Primack** were “scholars in residence” for the weekend at Congregation Beth El in Fairfield, Connecticut in April and also spoke at Temple Israel in Norwalk. They discussed the work of Kulanu and the Ugandan *Beit Din*.

## Todah Rabah!

**Laia Katz** donated a sewing machine and Hagaddah to the Abayudaya.

**Rabbi David J. B. Krishef of Congregation Ahavas Israel** in Grand Rapids, Michigan, mailed two cartons of religious books to the Abayudaya.

**Ray Kaplan** sent the Abayudaya three cartons of books (*Chumashim*, High Holiday Prayer books, and Benchers) from his congregation, **Temple Israel Community Center of Cliffside Park, NJ**.

Music tapes for Abayudaya were donated by **Norma Brooks, David Shneyer, Larry Robinson and Robyn Helzner**.

**Logan Brenner** of Penn Valley, PA, had a small bake sale at Hebrew school and raised \$35 for the Abayudaya.

**Diane and Jack Zeller** contributed \$3200, and the **Ben and Esther Rosenbloom Foundation** donated \$1000.

**Judy Neri** donated \$500 in memory of **Lucy Nussbaum, Rabbi Benjamin Z. Kreitman, Rabbi Michael Klayman and Howard Eisenberg** each donated \$500 toward the Ugandan *Beit Din*. A \$250 grant for outreach was received from the **Madav IX Foundation**, a supporting foundation of the **Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland**.

**Debbie and Mark Glotter** contributed \$200, as did the **Jewish Community Foundation of Southern Arizona, Debra Lieblich and Rabbi Jo David**.

**Rabbi Michael Strassfeld** donated \$150

\$100 club: **Dr. Arthur Shay Cytryn, Edith and Marco Rabinovitz, Marc Carrel, Emily Burt-Hedrick and Peter Hedrick, Robert Wiener, Jerome and Lisette Barry**.

**Roz and Ed Kolodny** and **J. David Zeller** each donated \$100 in honor of Jack Zeller’s birthday.

**Mark and Mona Berch** donated \$100 for the Ethiopian Jews in Addis Ababa in honor of the 60<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary of **Shirley and Morty Kadushin** of Lancaster, PA.

## Mazal Tov!

To **JJ Keki**, former chairman of the Abayudaya community, on his election as a subcounty chairperson in the Mbale district of Uganda. His constituency is 20,000 people.

To **Jacob Mwosuko**, current Abayudaya chairman, who won a seat of councillorship to represent 2000 people in Nyanza parish.

To **Chana and Ben Marmur** on the marriage of their son **Dr. Yonatan Marmur** to **Dr. Ellen Moore**.

To **Lana Coviensky** on her marriage to **Harry Liner**.

To **Chaim Engelberg** on his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday.

To **Malca and Tzvi Feldman** on their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary.

## Refuah Shlemah

Best wishes for a speedy recovery to **Ray Kaplan** and to **Dr. Abraham Lavender**.

## Contribute to Our Book!

## Enter Our Contest!

Kulanu hopes to publish a booklet of special *Readings in Jewish Diversity*. We hope it will be used for synagogue services, home ceremonies, communal gatherings, and quiet contemplation of the rich diversity to be found within Judaism.

We welcome poems, prayers, prose, even songs! Perspectives can be Ashkenazic or Sephardic, white or nonwhite, American or Asian or African, Lubavitch or “Marrano” – you get the idea! The writing can be, but need not be, geared to a particular holiday or life-cycle event.

Both published and unpublished writings are acceptable, by well-known authors and obscure authors alike (we won’t publish anything without written permission).

We know that Kulanu readers include professional writers and poets as well as many eloquent, intelligent others with valuable perspectives.

As an incentive for you to write something especially for this collection – or to submit one of your own unpublished works – we are announcing a CONTEST! Kulanu will award prizes of \$300 for first place, \$200 for second place, and \$100 for third place for the most beautiful, moving and appropriate original submissions by an adult. We are running a separate competition for young writers (16 years of age and under) with awards of \$150, \$75, and \$50. All contest submissions will be considered for publication in the book. Please indicate clearly if your submission is for the contest as well as for publication. There is no reading fee, but submissions cannot be returned. Each submission **should be submitted in triplicate** and should include a self addressed, stamped envelope for notification of results. Deadline for submissions is August 31, 2002.

This idea was inspired by a moving Social Action Shabbaton held in January at Tifereth Israel Congregation in Washington, DC. The service included readings that the congregation printed in a small booklet called *Bring Us Home from the Four Corners: Readings and Prayers of Identity, Hope and Justice*. **Send submissions to Kulanu Book Project, 1217 Edgevale Road, Silver Spring, MD 20910-1612.**

# Hebraic Traditions of the Batutsi

By Yochannan Bwejeri

I have been told of Kulanu's heavy interest in Hebraic *techouvah* of dispersed tribes of Israël. So I am very proud to have your direct confirmation of such a prophetic purpose.

Our own organization, Havila, develops a similar program on a restrictive area: We focus our efforts on the Hebraic remnants of pre-talmudic tribes of Israël, isolated on the "other side of the rivers of Ethiopia," according to Zephaniah, 3,10.

The historical and geographical land pointed out by the Zephaniah prophecy has been identified by the prestigious talmudist RASHI (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak) as the White Nile basin. The biblical name of that land is Havila, according to Genesis 2,11. One of the Hebraic tribes isolated in the sacred land of Havila is called Tutsi or Batutsi.

During these last 40 years, the Batutsi have almost been exterminated, and till now they are being hunted because of their Hebraic identity and their Solomonic legacy. According to their Solomonic and Samsonic memory and legacy, they claim to be the descendants of

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two Israelite Tribes -- Judah and Dan. Those who perpetuated the Solomonic Kingdom of Zagwe in the land of Havila (South of Ethiopia, particularly Burundi, Rwanda, Kivu, Masisi, and Shaba) claim to be the sons of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

Some clans among Batutsi are contemporary with the time of Moses, people who moved from Egypt, judging by the exact knowledge they display about the laws of Moses. Others joined their brothers after the different misfortunes that affected the Israëlite people, such as the destruction of the Holy Temple of Yerusalem. The Batutsi Halakha has kept encoded references to these events, such as the annual Festival of Sukkot, called *Umuganuro* (literally "the festival of return").

The cultural and religious references of Batutsi allude to either the pharaonic monotheism of the 18th Dynasty of Egypt or Moses's laws in the Hebraic Torah.

The Havila Institute has concentrated its efforts on the description and analysis of the biblical culture as carried by the ancient Batutsi. The parallelism of pharaonic practices and symbols with the Batutsi standards refers to the culture of the 18th Dynasty of Egypt and explains the Mosaic faith of the Batutsi. The antiquity of Batutsi monotheism has always been astonishing to the European witnesses, including those who reached the land of Havila in the early 19th century.

The political organization of the Batutsi kingdoms (from the Kush Kingdom until post-Zaagwe Kingdoms -- 1270-1960) are strictly related to the Solomonic system. The Hebraic "kashrut" under the Levitic law is the staple of Batutsi feeding. The Batutsi system of law is the exact copy of the Deuteronomic Code, and none can attest that such a system is of recent import.

Among the numerous witnesses of the Batutsi Hebraicity, we point out the famous 9<sup>th</sup> century traveler, Eldad HaDani. He has con-

firmed the authenticity and the anteriority of the Mosaic civilization of the Hebraic Tribes settled around the River Pishôn (White Nile) in the biblical land of Havila. The geographical localization of the land of Havila and the River Pishôn around the lower Nile, part of Ethiopia, has been attested to in a precious document that has been transmitted from generations to generations of scholars. We are referring to the famous Letter addressed by Eldad HaDani to the Jews of Spain, in 883:

*This was my going forth from the other side of the rivers of Ethiopia, he said.*

And then he relates the local memory of the four tribes which crossed from Israël to Ethiopia, after the death of Sennacherib, king of Assyria:

*And these tribes, being Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher, dwell in the ancient Havilah, where gold is, and they trusted in their Maker, and the Lord helped them.*

Eldad notes strict observance of *kashrut*:

*No unclean thing is to be found with them, no unclean fowl, no unclean beast, no unclean cattle, no flies, no fleas, no lice, no fox, no scorpions, no serpents, and no dogs. All these were in the idolatrous land, where they had been in servitude. They have only sheep, oxen, and fowls, and their sheep bring forth twice a year.*

Batutsi means literally "Those whose permanent occupation is to lead cattle to the pasture," Eldad confirms this connection:

*These four tribes have gold and silver and precious stones, and much sheep and cattle and camels and asses, and they sow and they reap, and they dwell in tents, and, when they will, they journey and encamp in tents, from border to border, two days by two days' journey, and in the place they encamp there is no place where the foot of man enters*

Eldad testifies to the Mosaic faith of the Batutsi:

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**The Hebraic "kashrut" under the Levitic law is the staple of Batutsi feeding. The Batutsi system of law is the exact copy of the Deuteronomic Code, and none can attest that such a system is of recent import.**

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*They are of perfect faith and their Talmud [i.e., ancient Halakha] is all in Hebrew, and thus they learn, ...But they know no Rabbis, for these were of the Second Temple and they did not reach them.*

Indeed, Havila Institute has already pointed out numerous linguistic roots which support the Batutsi lexical system. These linguistic particles are common in Hebrew and Batutsi idiom.

Now, everyone can remember the bitter debates that followed the Eldad testament through the centuries, until now. Thanks to the constant efforts of scholars, working in the Havila framework, under my supervision, it is now possible to give precious and systematic indications on that wonderful phenomenon of encoding Hebraic memory. The ancient material civilization of Batutsi, their language, their mythology, their religion, their political legacy and their general way of life, all those matters can be described exactly as related by Eldad HaDani.

The crossing of Kulanu and Havila paths is certainly written in the Highest's wills. I am now confident that many things will change very soon, in the destiny of all the peoples concerned by our common preoccupations.

*(The writer, a Burundi-born Tutsi scholar, lives in exile in Brussels, where he founded the Havila Institute. He can be reached at <bwejeri@hotmail.com>.)*

# LETTERS TO KULANU

## Thanks for the Memories

Thanks for the Jewish gift of a lifetime.

*Rabbi Andy Sacks*

*Jerusalem, Israel*

*(Editor's note: Sacks was one of the rabbis who sat on Batei Din in Uganda in February.)*

## Seder in Uganda

We had our Seder celebrated at the Nabugoye Synagogue, as it is the central synagogue. Many members from other congregations attended. We ate Matzah and drank wine which were donated by Moshe Kornfeld, an American student who is here teaching. We also ate Marror. Moshe also taught our little ones at Hadassah Infant School the four questions, which made the seder colourful. We sang *Dayenu* and many related songs, both in Hebrew and Luganda.

Rabbi Gershom was the chief celebrant who together with Kornfeld led the congregation in the service. Searching for the *Afikoman* by the children interested me so much as every child struggled to find it. Some children thought it would be found in their mother's breasts! My personal interpretation of it is that the Israelites dared not to leave back anything like food in Egypt because they thought they would not find it in the wilderness.

The official marriage that we had gave us confidence as a married couple. At the same time it makes other people respect us. Our marriage serves as an example to the younger generation in the community. Standing under the *Chuppa* made us feel connected to the greater world Jewish community.

*Naomi Aaron*

*Mbale, Uganda*

## A Piece of Uganda in Kansas

Clearly we are making inroads here in the Midwest! Recently I attended the Kansas City Hebrew Day school rally for Israel Independence Day. From far away, I noticed one kid wearing one of the Abayudaya kippot. As I approached him, I noticed that he was Asian (probably adopted from Korea). I commented to him: "That is a nice kippah you have on. Where is it from?" The answer, given by an Asian Jewish boy, attending Yom Haatzmaut celebration in the middle of America was "Uganda!"

Even better, though, was his tone, implying that it is so obvious and normal that kippot can come from anywhere in the world. *Chazak, Chazak ve Nitchazek*

*Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn*

*Overland Park, Kansas*

## Uganda Spirit in Ithaca, New York

Recently the boys in our 7th grade class handed me an envelope with over \$70 collected for the Abayudaya Orphans Fund. I was very touched. I will add it to the Discretionary Fund to pay for school for three students. Tomorrow, I will be sending Gershom tapes of the service, as he requested, as well as some Hebrew books for Enosh and Amos [and a few prayer-

books thrown in to fill the box]. I have been in touch with Israel Siriri and will be working to raise money for him to purchase tools for his construction company. That's it for right now.

*Rabbi Scott Glass*

*Ithaca, New York*

## Messianics Target Abayudaya

Recently a delegation of Messianic "Jews" visited. I'm thinking of putting up a poster "Messianic Jews Not Allowed." They may be like leopards in goat skins, in order to easily eat the goats. The problem is that we are not used to chasing away visitors. But I have no choice.

*Rabbi Gershom Sizomu*

*Mbale, Uganda*

## Teaching the Abayudaya

I just wanted to give you a little update about my activities with the Abayudaya for the past month and a half. My goal has been to teach as many people as possible and so my activities focus on community members of all ages. During the week, I teach the SI-SIV classes at Semei Kakungulu high school Hebrew and Judaica. I also teach at the Hadassah infant school twice a week and the students now know the Hebrew letters, new Hebrew songs, and I am beginning to work on reading and a little writing. On Shabbat I always speak to the community Friday night and on Shabbat morning. After services on Shabbat I give a class focused for those students in P.3 - P.7 who do not attend Abayudaya schools. Besides these constant activities, I helped run the Pesach seder and organized a Yom Ha'atzmaut celebration.

On Shabbat I try to move around to the different synagogues to teach them small tidbits of Hebrew and answer their questions. For the next few weeks the students at SK have exams and vacation so I will use this time to teach more at some of the other synagogues that do not get so much attention as Nabagoya hill and therefore know much less Hebrew.

In general I am finding this experience both exhilarating and challenging. It is a thrill to teach students who are so eager and excited to learn. This community is really something special. At the same time I try to be sensitive to the community's existing traditions and customs. I don't like to tell people what is wrong and what is right but try to give them information and live out my own belief as an example that they can either accept or reject. This is difficult because there are times when my observance differs from Abayudaya practice and my need to be personally observant conflicts with my efforts not to impose my practices on the community. Additionally, living in conditions so different than those in the United States presents its own challenges.

*Moshe Kornfeld*

*Mbale, Uganda*

*(Editor's note: Kornfeld, an Orthodox student at Columbia University, is living with the Abayudaya for a few months.)*

## A SPECIAL SECTION:

# Contemplating Miracles in Uganda

By Karen Primack

In 1995, following a trip with a Kulanu delegation to the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda, I wrote an article in this newsletter titled "Visiting the Ugandan Miracle." A community faithfully practicing self-taught mainstream Judaism in the middle of "nowhere," having discovered the religion on their own – without benefit of missionaries or role models – did seem miraculous.

But what makes a miracle? Seven years later, on a second Kulanu mission to the Abayudaya with a *Beit Din* (religious court) to perform conversions, I heard Rabbi Joseph Prouser recite the traditional blessing for witnessing a miracle: *Baruch ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech ha-Olam she-asa nisim l'avotaynu ba-makom ha-zeh!* (Praised are You, dear God, Who performed miracles for our People in this very place!) What had made him think he had witnessed a miracle? Let's take a look at the 2002 trip and then return to the question of miracles.

### Arrival

The delegation arrived at Nabugoye Hill near Mbale, Uganda, on February 5 to the typical tumultuous Abayudaya musical welcome. We were coming to participate in the *halakhic* conversion to Judaism of qualified individuals in the 600-member community. The Abayudaya community embraced Judaism in 1919, when their leader, Semei Kakungulu, decided to follow only the laws of Moses – which he read about in the Bible that British missionaries had brought to Uganda. The community has been practicing Judaism – and upgrading its knowledge and observance – ever since.

Among us were three rabbis from the US, one rabbi from Israel, a rabbinical student, two musicians, a journalist, two documentary film makers, a horticulturist, and two Kulanu officers. Among the Abayudaya were community leaders, ululating women, and many, many children.

At the welcoming ceremony, Abayudaya chairman Jacob Mwosuko reviewed the importance of Kulanu to the community. He noted that before the 1995 visit, few Abayudaya were educated, there was no economic development, there was no Torah, and the Abayudaya were isolated: "Nobody knew us."

Since 1995, he reported, the community has university students and graduates, as well as more than 40 students in secondary school. A Jewish high school has opened, the main synagogue is larger and improved, Heifer Project International has several animals in the community, jobs have been developed, and a market has been found for handmade Abayudaya kippot and tallitot. Since 1995, many Jews who had left during Idi Amin's reign of terror have returned, and the community has grown.

We guests were then entertained with songs of welcome by performing groups from the Hadassah Infant School, a synagogue youth group, and the high school.

The *Beit Din* was headed by Rabbi Howard Gorin of Tikvat Israel Congregation in Rockville, Maryland, who had converted two Abayudaya leaders when they were visiting in the US last August. Accompanying Gorin were Rabbi Joseph Prouser, who serves Little Neck Jewish Center in Little Neck, New York; Rabbi Scott Glass of Temple

Beth-El in Ithaca, New York; and Rabbi Andrew Sacks, who is a *mohel* (specialist in ritual circumcisions) and Director of the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel. They were joined by Moshe Cotel, a rabbinical student in New York City who is also a Kulanu board member, and Gershom Sizomu, the Abayudaya spiritual leader, who had been converted by Gorin in Maryland six months earlier.

At an initial meeting between the visiting rabbis and the Abayudaya executive committee, details of the conversion procedures were determined. Two *Batei Din* would convene in the main synagogue and would take candidates in family groups. Candidates would be referred by Gershom Sizomu based on their observance of Shabbat and *kashrut* (dietary laws). In addition to screening by a *Beit Din*, males – all of whom had been circumcised in the past – would undergo a *hatafat dam brit* (ritual circumcision). Finally, all successful candidates – men, women and children – would undergo ritual immersion. Both a nearby river and the community's kosher mikveh, built 70 years ago in the middle of a sugar cane field, would be put to use.

Over the total nine-day visit, the rabbinic courts screened over 300 members of the Abayudaya community, and the vast majority completed *halakhic* conversions and thus became officially recognized under Jewish law. Provisions are in place for the rest to complete the process in the near future.

### At the Beit Din

At the *Beit Din* phase, candidates were asked by the rabbis whether they were converting under their own free will, whether they would raise their children as Jews, whether they recognize Adonai as the one and only God, whether they accept the obligation to observe the *mitzvot* (religious commandments), and whether their children would formally mark their bar and bat mitzvah at the appropriate age. They were also asked to describe the place of Israel in Judaism, and to describe their pattern of religious observance. The rabbis answered questions and counseled candidates about their specific family situations. Questions

and answers were punctuated by crowing roosters, a mooing heifer, and/or distant drumming.

The visiting rabbis repeatedly expressed their admiration for the isolated community's grasp of the practice of Judaism. After the first conversion, Gorin noted, "Today's ceremony is not a conversion, but a strengthening of what you have always believed."

Although most of the candidates had been born into Judaism, there were some exceptions. One 66-year-old woman told the *Beit Din* that she had become interested in Judaism when her Abayudaya boyfriend introduced her to the notion of one God. When she was 15 she – and her parents – embraced Judaism. One of the rabbis responded, "If you've been practicing Judaism for 50 years, that's good enough for me."

When asked what he would do in the coming year to increase his knowledge of Judaism, one young man replied that he planned to be a rabbi. A 14-year-old boy responded to one question with "The land of Israel is the holy land for the people of Israel, and I am part of it." An 80-year-old candidate was the son of the community's first *mohel*. When asked what Judaism's most important teachings are, he replied, "The Ten Commandments and the story of the Exodus, which tells us



Abayudaya family before a Beit Din

that God saves his people.” Another elder said he had been practicing Judaism since 1920.

Most Abayudaya have biblical names, but those candidates who didn't were given Hebrew names by the rabbis. Usually a choice was offered between a few names popular in Israel that begin with the same letter sound as their given names.

Among the candidates were Israel and Abraham Kakungulu, respectively 76 and 80 years of age, the sons of Semei Kakungulu. They hid their Judaism for years, were educated at Christian schools, and passed as Christians, although they never claimed to be Christian or denied being Jewish. But when he furthered his education in London and Bombay, Israel Kakungulu attended synagogues and interacted with the Jewish communities.

Abraham Kakungulu returned to Judaism three years ago when he decided to accept “my father’s God.” He served as the chief of Mbale’s municipal council for 22 years. He expressed gratitude that “we have been given time to correct the mistakes we have done and to convert.” He said he has time to study now, and expressed the desire for teachers to come. In addition to educational connections with Jewish institutions all over the world, he seeks Jewish business entrepreneurs for Uganda – to settle there and help build up the economy with their capital and expertise. He wants to see the land of Israel before he dies, but thinks it is too late for him to settle there.

Israel Kakungulu, a civil engineer, described his belief in “a true God, who wasn’t created, who always was and will be, and who is directly accessible to a believer without an intermediary.” He cited their need for the agricultural knowledge of the nation of Israel.

Israel Kakungulu reviewed some of the Abayudaya history he recalled. In 1926, when his father Semei was asked the question “What will happen to us?” he prophesied that “the white Jews will come here in airplanes and teach you, so stay firm in your belief.” According to his son, Semei built the first synagogue in 1913 and bequeathed 16 acres of land to the synagogue in perpetuity. He says that a few years ago his family increased the land to 50 acres.

At the Kakungulus’ *Beit Din* screening with their children, Gorin told them, “It is a great honor to meet the grandchildren of the man who is responsible for all this. It is an honor to be the grandchildren of such an important man, but it is also a big responsibility, so that the Jewish heritage will go from you to the next generation.”

At one point, one of the *Batei Din* was interrupted by members of the other, and a side conference occurred over an older man with two wives and two families. Gorin, the *Av Beit Din*, resolved the question citing a precedent used when Yemenite refugees came to Israel in the 1950s. A man would not have to choose between his wives; all would be accepted into Judaism with the proviso that no further bigamous marriages were to occur.

The rabbis said they were moved by the way families have taken on the care of orphans. One young candidate named Moshe appeared before the panel with his younger brother and four orphan boys he is raising.

Some Abayudaya were not able to come before the *Beit Din* because they were ill or too old and frail to travel. Others were too far away, in other parts of Uganda. One five-year-old girl attending the *Beit Din* with her family was crying intensely, in pain. She had an extremely high fever, and was immediately driven to the local hospital, where she was admitted for treatment of malaria.

Answers to the rabbis’ questions were direct. When asked “What

has God done for the Jewish people?” one answer (translated from the local language of Luganda) was, “He gave them the land of Israel.”

One woman had walked several miles with her five children on the hot day. She told the *Beit Din* her husband had to work but would find another time to come. She had been Protestant, but married an Abayudaya and is raising their children Abayudaya. She said she herself wanted to practice Judaism faithfully and to learn as much as she could about how to do it. The rabbis told her they expected her to continue learning about the *mitzvot* and holidays, and Gorin gave the family one of his bottles of water. After the husband’s appearance at the *Beit Din* and the needed *hatafat dam brit* and immersions, the family was ultimately converted.

A man named Joshua, who works 150 kilometers away in the town of Jinja, arrived a day after the rest of his family. He has 14 children and has been an Abayudaya all his life, observing Shabbat and *kashrut*.

One elderly woman identified herself as the widow of Nimrod, who was Semei Kakungulu’s successor. When asked what her husband would have thought of all this, she told the rabbis that her husband was committed and would have been happy to undergo this process. Also, he would have wanted to live in Israel, since it is the home for the Jewish people and the source of the Jewish people.

The questions and answers continued every day except Shabbat. Answers continued to be impressive. *Why do you want to be part of a persecuted people?* “Because, as my father taught me, this religion is the path to righteousness and God.” *What is the essence of Judaism?* “The Ten Commandments, Shabbat, festivals.” *Describe one festival.* “On Passover we eat matzah and bitter herbs, and no leaven; it commemorates the Hebrews’ slavery in Egypt....”

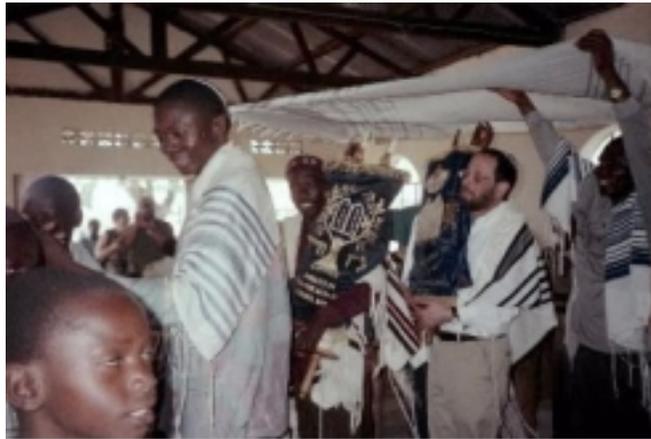
Twenty-two-year-old Eytan, a hotel attendant, was an unusual case. His grandfather was Abayudaya, but he was raised Protestant. He has become part of the Abayudaya commu-

nity, “observing Shabbat and declaring the unity of God every morning.” He observes festivals, and identifies God as the “creator of heaven and earth and all human beings.” He renounced his former religion and committed to furthering his study and understanding of the *mitzvot*.

Eight years ago Sarah, a lifelong Abayudaya in her 30s, named her newborn son Rabin because “I love Israel, so I named my son after the prime minister.”

Not all candidates for conversion were accepted by the *Beit Din*. “Some are not prepared, have not studied enough,” said Gorin. “We won’t pass people simply because they are Abayudaya.” The *Beit Din* counseled a family they deemed not ready, but encouraged the family to study and practice and demonstrate a firm commitment, and predicted that in the future a *Beit Din* would be favorable to it.

In an exceptional case, a family that had been turned away asked to be reconsidered by the *Beit Din*. Although the family, formerly Catholic, had been practicing Judaism for only six months, the young daughters in the family recited the *Sh’ma* prayer for the rabbis. When asked about their motive, the father replied that he wanted to join the Jewish people “because they are the most precious children of God.” The rabbis had witnessed this family at the various synagogue functions over the previous week, noting their exceptional devotion and interest, and assented to their conversion.



*A jubilant Torah dedication ceremony*

### Ritual Immersions

The *mitzvah* of *tevilah* (immersion), which is required for *halakhic* conversions, demands some preparation, especially for women. Nothing should be worn that will interfere with the water touching the skin. Thus jewelry, bandages, and contact lenses are not worn in the mikveh. Also, hair must not be braided, since the water must be able to run through the hair freely.

This last requirement had not reached the Abayudaya in time. Some of the women, in anticipation of this great occasion, had had their hair beautifully and professionally braided in salons or by friends. Some of the hairstyles were very elaborate and had required a great deal of time and expense. The rabbis were heartsick about the situation, and it fell upon me to inform the women of the sad news – the braids would have to be undone if they wanted to undergo ritual immersion. There were no tears; there was no griping. For many hours, women sat on a mat in Gershom's back yard helping each other unravel the scores of tight, perfect braids. There was never a question that this was what they wanted to do.

The ritual immersions in the river or mikveh were a source of great celebration. On the first of many trips to the nearby river, a group of women and children huddled in the back of the truck belonging to the community's high school. Following a slow ride on tortuous roads in very poor repair, the group faced a long, hilly hike through croplands. Since the path was very narrow, the party proceeded single file in a colorful procession.

Rabbi Scott Glass gave this description of his trek to the river in a sermon to his congregation after his return: "I quickly learned the value of a well-placed banana tree which served as an anchor going straight down a ten-foot drop, and climbing straight up that same hill on the return trip. And if you think you've seen me in funny situations, you haven't seen anything until you've seen me lowering myself straight down the side of a hill clinging to a banana tree, surrounded by ululating women."

Flexibility and spontaneity are useful qualities to possess in Africa, and fortunately the Abayudaya women were able to improvise efficiently in this most novel of situations. First, the women dunked their (often screaming) children in the river, and the rabbinic witnesses recited blessings for the children. The water was much shallower than had been anticipated, so the group proceeded further down the river for the women's immersions. The women crossed to the other side of the river, wading in their long dresses, and gathered in a secluded spot to disrobe down to their under slips or colorful sarongs. They removed these under cover of water. A group of 10 or so would enter the water together, but each woman did the immersions and blessings separately and then received applause and ululations from witnesses. Although some of us Jewish women had been appointed witnesses by the rabbis and were prepared to feed the candidates the mikveh blessings word by word, we discovered that all the younger women had memorized the blessings perfectly, and some under-age children insisted on saying the blessings themselves, even though it was a duty of the rabbis. The women who had not memorized the blessings were coached by Naomi Aaron, president of the Abayudaya Women's Association, who was the first to complete the *tevila*. On successive days, other Abayudaya women assumed this role.

The rabbis remarked that this had to be a novel chapter in the annals of Jewish history.

\* \* \*

During the first women's trek to the river, Rabbi Andy Sacks, the only mohel, stayed behind at Gershom's house to perform *hatafat dam brit* on all the males who had been passed by a *Beit Din*. This procedure, which requires the drawing of a drop of blood in the area of the circumcision, is performed on male converts who have been circumcised in the past. All male babies born as Abayudaya are circumcised at eight days; those who embrace the religion later are circumcised later. The *hatafat dam brit* needed to be performed before the male

candidates could undergo immersion. Glass commented in his sermon, "I don't think I will ever forget the line of men and boys snaking down the hill waiting, warily at first, outside the home of Rabbi Gershom. After a short time, however, as each person emerged and assured his fellows that everything was fine and 'it didn't hurt' there would be calls of '*Mazal Tov!*' to each who completed the 'ordeal.'"

### A Torah and Other Gifts

The delegation came bearing many gifts, but the greatest was a Sefer Torah that Rabbi Gorin delivered. His congregation donated \$6000 for the purchase of this kosher Torah for the Abayudaya. (Rabbi Menachem Youlis of Silver Spring, Maryland, had donated his services as a scribe in reconditioning the Torah.)

The Torah was dedicated in a moving ceremony during which a group of Abayudaya approached the center of the synagogue yard carrying their older, borrowed Torah, singing psalms and prayers in Luganda, the local language. The visitors approached in a group from the opposite direction, carrying the new Torah and singing Hebrew songs, led by the talented singer/songwriter Laura Wetzler with her guitar. The two groups joined in a noisy and joyful procession and circled the sanctuary seven times, carrying the Torahs under a *huppah* (wedding canopy). Torah portions (about the revelation at Mt. Sinai, including the Ten Commandments) were chanted by Gorin in Hebrew and by Gershom in Luganda. The entire congregation joined in the singing of "*Hatikvah*," which even the children seemed to know.

The rabbis all donated their valuable time for these 10 days. All of us brought gifts for the Abayudaya – books on Judaism, school supplies, tape players, toys, clothing. Rabbis brought precious ritual objects such as tefillin and tallitot. Glass's congregation, Beth-El, donated \$2600. Moshe Cotel's friends had chipped in to donate the \$3000 necessary for his trip. I carried some children's vitamins that Noah Mitchel had collected for his bar mitzvah project at Tikvat Israel, as well as \$1182 he had collected so that every Abayudaya household can have candles every Shabbat. I also brought tapes of Jewish music donated by musicians who had played music with JJ Keki when he was in the US – Norma Brooks, David Shneyer, Robyn Helzner and Larry Robinson.

Laura Wetzler brought very popular presents, including a tape recorder, cassettes, a specially recorded tape of 50 Jewish songs and an accompanying book of song sheets, music books, soccer balls, and school supplies.

### Deep Questions on Shabbat

On Shabbat eve, visitors attended services in the main synagogue on Nabugoye Hill, which was lit by candlelight (the community has virtually no electricity). The Kabbalat Shabbat service, featuring beautiful Abayudaya voices singing in Hebrew and Luganda, included, of course, the now-famous Abayudaya melody for "*L'cha Dodi*," featured on their commercial recording (available at the Kulanu Boutique). Kiddush was held at the home of Gershom Sizomu and his wife Tziporah Naisi, who made excellent challah over a flame (they have no oven). About 60 attended the Kiddush, which was followed by an intimate dinner for the foreign guests – chapati, white beans, matoke (plantains), cooked greens and a chicken slaughtered according to *shkhitah* (Jewish law on slaughtering) by Gershom. Glass commented, "I haven't spent 10 minutes here that weren't extraordinary."

Shabbat morning services, which past visitors recalled as always being high-spirited, were especially so on the Shabbat the *Beit Din* visited, in part because many of the Abayudaya had already been fully converted to Judaism by that time. The concept of the *aufruf* was explained, and Gershom and Tziporah approached the Torah and received a special blessing because their wedding would be in the coming week. The concept became popular immediately, and six other couples crowded onto the bimah for a second *aufruf*. Now their weddings would also occur in the coming week.

During the afternoon, rabbis and Abayudaya congregants engaged in informal teaching sessions. The rabbis expressed surprise and de-

light at the depth and complexity of the questions. For example, someone asked why the 5th commandment in Exodus begins with the words *Zakhor Et Yom HahSabbat...* ("Remember the Sabbath day") while that in Deuteronomy begins *Shamor Et Yom Ha Shabbat* ("Observe/keep the Sabbath day").

### Seven Brides

The final two days of the visit were devoted to *huppah* ceremonies for the community's already-married leaders. To prepare, my husband Aron and I, as the Kulanu representatives (Aron is administrative vice president and I am secretary and a board member), went shopping for smashable glasses (Aron bought one to test outdoors on the sidewalk), ceremonial wine, brass rings which we would sell to the grooms, and cases of requested sodas.

On the first wedding day, Gershom and Tziporah were united in a traditional Jewish ceremony with all four rabbis officiating. Glass, who had already surprised and delighted the Abayudaya and his fellow travelers with his world-class tenor voice, adapted the opening words (*Baruchim habaim*) to an African melody. The chief officiant was Gorin, but the *ketubah* (wedding contract) was read by Prouser in Aramaic and English. The *Sheva Brachot* (Seven Blessings) were chanted by Cotel, Prouser, Sacks and Glass. For the first time in history – so we believe – an Abayudaya *hatan* (groom) in Uganda smashed a glass with his foot to commemorate the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem.

Gorin told the couple that it was an especially joyous day because it was also Rosh Chodesh Adar, the beginning of the most joyous month in the Hebrew calendar. He told the congregation, "A wedding is not just a joyous occasion for the bride and groom, but for the Jewish people everywhere." And he addressed the couple, "As long as couples like you unite under a *huppah* there is hope that Jerusalem will be rebuilt." He added, "The presence of four rabbis at a *huppah* is only the beginning. Blessings will come in the way you treat each other and the way you let God into your lives."

At the close of the ceremony, "*Siman Tov and Mazal Tov*" and other Israeli standards were sung and played and danced, and chairs holding the bride and groom were lifted into the air – it was just like Jewish weddings everywhere. This was followed by Abayudaya songs such as "*Tunajuraha sana*," ("We are very happy") and native drumming and men's break dancing – all before the seated couple. Original songs were written by Laura Wetzler and by the 20-year-old Abayudaya singing sensation Rachel Namudosi. And did I forget to mention that ululations by old and young women accompanied the entire celebration?

In an address following the ceremony, former Abayudaya chairman JJ Keki said, "The Abayudaya have witnessed something they have never seen before – the first *huppah* ceremony in our community. To begin something is not very simple. So Gershom and Tzipora have begun this practice for us." In addition to friends and relatives in the synagogue, the proceedings were witnessed by scores of schoolchildren crowding outside the windows and doorway.

Tziporah's intricate wedding dress, a *kitenge* (African style) with gold appliqué and matching headscarf, was a gift of Debra Gonsler Vinik and David Vinik, the documentary film makers with us. Their week of amazing highlights – filming *Batei Din* in progress, immer-

sions (modestly) in mikveh and river, school classes and cooking scenes – culminated in this, the first *huppah* ceremony of the Abayudaya. Following the wedding, the Viniks were off to the airport and home, to prepare a film record of the Abayudaya *Beit Din* experience for Dutch television – and hopefully other outlets as well. (A preview can be seen at <http://www.divacommunications.com/index2.htm>.)

The following day saw the separate and complete weddings of six couples. Wedding dresses for the brides were purchased by Kulanu. We explained that providing for a bride is a *mitzvah*, and that the *mitzvah* would be extended if these dresses were freely lent out to future brides in the community. All assented. It was my special privilege to spend an unforgettable morning shopping with brides. Each selected a special *kitenge* with embroidery or other trim or detailing.

The participants, all Abayudaya leaders, read like a biblical Who's Who: Aaron was wed to Naomi, Joab to Miriam, Enosh to Shirah, Samson to Dinah, Uri to Zerida, and Moses to Esther. Each couple had a separate ceremony, complete with the reading of the *ketubah* in Aramaic (sometimes with Luganda or English translation) and chanting of the Seven Blessings. Officiants participated in various rotating roles. At one of the sermons, Gorin commented, "This week has taught me a lot about our religion." Prouser said, "We are thankful to God that he brought us to you and preserved you all these years." It was here that he recited the blessing one recites when witnessing a miracle. He concluded, "I will carry all that I have experienced this week in my heart for the rest of my life. You have taught me how great and powerful God is."

At the last wedding, that of Moses and Esther, Gershom chanted all of the *Sheva Brachot* in

a melody he had composed for and chanted at the wedding of Jay Sand and his wife Lauren in America last November.

The *huppah* had been made from a white tallit supported by four long stalks of fresh sugar cane. After the final ceremony, the sugar cane poles, which had been supporting the *huppah* through all seven weddings, were hacked into pieces and distributed to the children of the congregation so that they could savor the sweetness of the occasion. This turned out to be a wonderful new tradition that should be adopted in all Jewish communities where fresh sugar cane is available!

### Music and Friendship

On the Sunday following Shabbat, a concert was performed by hosts and guests. An Abayudaya choir, accompanied by Gershom on guitar, Yigal (Gershom's 8-year-old son) on drums and Jon on keyboard, sang three Psalms in Luganda and two in Hebrew. Aron Primack, representing Kulanu, presented the visiting rabbis with a gift of Luganda Bibles so they could learn the Psalms themselves in that language.

The second half of the concert featured the popular vocalist and recording artist Laura Wetzler. Her short program was designed to demonstrate musically how the Abayudaya fit into the various strains of world Jewry. She sang Jewish songs from Israel, Yemen, Ethiopia (in Amharic), Spain (in Ladino), and Eastern Europe (in Yiddish). The American visitors will long remember the African audience joining in enthusiastically on repeated choruses of the Yiddish song with "Oy!" This was followed by two songs she had prepared with Abayudaya children, and then a real crowd-pleaser: Wetzler, Gershom, and JJ



Abayudaya women eyeing river before immersion

Keki sang the Abayudaya version of “*L’cha Dodi*,” which they recorded together in a New York studio last August, and which will appear on Wetzler’s next CD.

On the final day, Wetzler gave her guitar to Namudosi, “for my sister in song.” She also left a different legacy to the teen-agers by encouraging an oral history project. The teens would record the stories of the elders about the history of the Abayudaya. She supplied a tape recorder for collecting the interviews. Wetzler also urged a project to preserve the Jewish music of Abayudaya women.

Wetzler was accompanied by her long-time percussionist Robin Burdulis, who is also a health educator – and played both roles beautifully on the visit. Burdulis had a constant stream of drumming hopefuls following her and begging for lessons (she always complied).

Stacey Schultz, who was covering the trip for *Hadassah Magazine*, felt she had been there before, since her brother Kenny had lived with the Abayudaya for a few months in 1994. While he was there, JJ’s wife Miriam gave birth, and the baby girl was named Stacey after Kenny’s sister. The adult Stacey and the 8-year-old Stacey were inseparable. Schultz spent two nights with JJ’s family on their coffee farm.

(JJ’s home, which he built himself with his own home-made bricks, contains a “Shabbes oven” that he learned to make a few years ago when Rabbi J. Hershy Worch visited the Abayudaya).

Ed Samiljan, a Kulanu activist who had flown all the way from his home in San Diego, joined the group with the assigned role of making a photo record. A retired businessman, Samiljan also consulted with budding Abayudaya entrepreneurs such as Israel Siriri, who recently founded Chaim Lebatim Construction Ltd. (“Dealers in Construction works, Compound designing, Spring protection, Borehole casting, Road building, General renovations and General merchandise”).

Madelaine Zadik, a horticulturist and craft artist, spent hours discussing ecology topics with community leaders. She also encouraged some community members to develop ideas for creating a cottage industry producing new Judaic objects in metal, clay, or grasses.

Aron Primack lent his support both as a physician and as an ambassador with local electricity officials and medical offices.

### Closure

None of the rabbis had been to Africa before, but all are anxious to return. Was it the warm weather, the fresh air, or the deep spirituality of the Abayudaya? Whatever it was, everyone was uplifted and transformed. Rabbi Andy Sacks confided, “Here I haven’t been tense, annoyed or angry for a single minute. I didn’t know one could live like this!” Gorin voiced the desire to return to teach and spend time with the people and form friendships.

At a formal farewell meeting attended by Abayudaya leaders, rabbis, and Kulanu leaders, Keki exclaimed, “Three-quarters of world Jewry now recognizes us!”

Uri Katula, one of the leaders, commented that the Abayudaya are growing stronger through the educational efforts of Kulanu. He noted that previously the community’s poor children were adopted by Christians who could educate them. He says the Kulanu education also makes it possible for the community to defend Judaism better against messianic groups that frequently come to proselytize.

Glass announced, “From the first day, I came away with the feeling that I have been working 25 years to inspire my congregation to feel the way you feel. I will not have the words to convey to my com-

munity what I found here.”

Prouser, who served for a number of years as director of the conversion institute of the Connecticut region of the Rabbinical Assembly, said he was inspired hearing and seeing the deep commitment the community has to Shabbat and their love for Shabbat. He exhorted the community to extend their love for Shabbat to the other festivals.

Glass encouraged the community to realize the great value of their own traditions and to continue to develop their own melodies and sing Psalms in Luganda. (Kulanu produced a commercial recording of Abayudaya music in 1997, available through [www.kulanuboutique.com](http://www.kulanuboutique.com).) Glass urged the community to “retain a special imprint on Jewish practice, as every community in the Jewish Diaspora has done.”

Sacks had a different perspective: “I have never had the experience of trying to teach children when they are hungry and malnourished. I don’t have a concept of sharing these things when people are just trying to survive.” Most Abayudaya live, as their neighbors do, in mud huts with no electricity or running water. Annual per capita income has been estimated at \$600.

Gorin urged Kulanu, which has been involved with the Abayudaya for seven years, to help individuals and congregations assist the Abayudaya by coordinating aid efforts. The rabbis vowed to try to find a way to send an Abayudaya to learn in Israel and then come back to teach and lead. It was also hoped that a young Israeli could come and live with the Abayudaya to teach Hebrew and Judaica.

Gorin told the hosts, “Now the responsibility has shifted and it is yours, but you can still receive guidance from people who have more experience.” He asked the community to determine how the *Beit Din* could assist the Abayudaya in reaching its educational and spiritual goals. There was much praise for the community and the level of practice it has achieved in isolation. Gorin remarked, “I expected to find some individuals who practice Judaism. What I found was a Jewish community.” With that comment, I represented the Kulanu board in formally transferring ownership of the community’s borrowed Torah to the Abayudaya in perpetuity. The Torah, donated to Kulanu for the Abayudaya by Rabbi R Portal and Congregation Beth Abraham in Auburn, Maine, was carried to Uganda five years ago by

Lucy Steinitz and her family. It was on loan for educational purposes because a Torah may not be given to a non-Jewish community. At this point, it had been determined that the Abayudaya were indeed a Jewish community, and the Torah could be given to them.

Gorin summed up the outcome of the 10-day mission: “We convert individuals, not communities. This is not a mass conversion. We convert individuals as individuals.” The rabbis say they have more paper work to do before they can give an exact number of converts.

### About Miracles

When we left the Abayudaya, we drove to Kampala for a little shopping on the way to the airport motel. While four of us were in a handicraft center, our rental car was vandalized and Aron’s video camera and my purse were stolen. What was NOT taken was significant.

Still intact on the floor was a blue portfolio that contained the airline tickets and passports for all 12 members of the group! And, miraculously (dare I say it?), the camera had not been in its case, which contained nine rolls of video film Aron had taken on the historic trip. The camera was gone, but the case was still safe in the rear of the car. I was heartsick because my purse contained my notebook for the journey, which had 30 pages of my detailed shorthand notes. Irre-



*JJ and Miriam under wedding huppah with Rabbi Scott Glass*

## Conference on Portuguese-Jewish Heritage

placeable! But wait, the green notebook was not in my purse, where I always kept it. Miraculously, it was in the rear of the car, safe and sound! A small miracle that allowed me to bring this story to you.

So you want a bigger miracle? Well, five minutes after the Beit Din had adjourned for the last time, it started raining, a nice, two-hour downpour. The Abayudaya said it was a miracle since it *never* rains in this drought-prone area in February

What makes a miracle a miracle? Although biblical Hebrew has no word for "miracle," the "signs" and "wonders" the Bible describes are often major occurrences – such as the parting of the Red Sea -- that defy the laws of nature as we know them and are interpreted as signs of divine intervention.

In the Talmud, the Hebrew word "nes" is used for miracle, and the concept is expanded to include ten minor miracles that occurred in Jerusalem during Temple times, such as the fact that no one was ever bitten by a snake or scorpion and that rain never extinguished the altar fire.

Talmudic literature also recognizes "daily miracles" that do not require a breach of the laws of nature. As we know, the daily Amidah expresses thanks for the "daily miracles, wondrous deeds and benefits which are with us every day, every hour."

The Talmud also provides for the blessing that Rabbi Prouser recited when one comes to a place where miracles were wrought for the Jewish people. But how do we know when we are witnessing a miracle?

For Martin Buber, a person's attitude is the essential element in the miracle. For a person properly attuned, any event may be considered a miracle, in terms of its meaning for him or her.

Webster defines a miracle as a "wonder," and defines a wonder as "the feeling of surprise, admiration, and awe which is excited by something new, unusual, strange, great, extraordinary, or not well understood." But an event may be unusual or extraordinary to one person but not to another.

I feel -- and I believe everyone on our trip felt -- that it's "awesome" that the Abayudaya have been practicing Judaism faithfully for three generations in rural Uganda through such difficulties as isolation, poverty, hunger, illiteracy, and persecution. I feel it's "extraordinary" that four rabbis and a rabbinic student felt strongly enough about the authenticity of the Judaism of the Abayudaya and were courageous enough to come to Uganda and change the course of history by formally recognizing them. I feel that a hundred African women immersing in an African river with the recitation of Hebrew blessings is "extraordinary." I feel that hearing the *Sheva Brachot* at seven totally Jewish weddings in rural Uganda is "great." I feel the outpouring of support from congregations and individuals to help in this effort has been "awesome." I heard exquisite African voices singing familiar Jewish prayers in Hebrew and in an African language, and it was "extraordinary." I feel privileged. In Uganda this year, I witnessed many miracles!

*(I want to give you, the reader, an opportunity to participate in and extend this miracle of the Abayudaya. I encourage you to be in contact with this community, to visit, to buy their recordings, tallitot, and kippot <see www.kulanuboutique.com>. I encourage business owners to supply capital and advice to budding Abayudaya entrepreneurs. I urge everyone to support the following programs.*

*Kulanu's Lorna Margolis Scholarship Fund for Orphan Education pays for tuition and school expenses for primary and secondary school students. The Hadassah Infant School provides a solid Jewish beginning to preschool children, with Judaic and general education, music and the arts, and meals and overnight accommodations for those who live far from the school. The Semei Kakungulu High School, which teaches Judaic and secular subjects and honors Jewish holidays, was founded three years ago by Gershom Sizomu. New wings are under construction, and computers and laboratory equipment are needed. Tax-deductible contributions to Kulanu can be earmarked for any of these projects, or for the Abayudaya generally.)*

An eight-day study program set in historic Jewish sites in Portugal will take place June 9-17, 2002. A few places are still available at the last minute, according to coordinator/director Rufina Bernardetti Silva Mausenbaum.

Sponsored by Saudades-Sefarad, Kulanu, and Root & Branch, this cultural conference-tour celebrating Portuguese-Jewish heritage will feature lectures by such eminent scholars as Rabbi Leo Abrami, historian Elvira Mea (co-author of a Barros Basto biography), historian Antonieta Garcia (a specialist in the crypto-Jewish practices of Belmonte), Art Benveniste, Dolly Sloan, and archeologist Carmen Balesteros (specialist in Jewish vestiges of the Evora area).

There will also be an artistic component. The group will meet with painter Laura Cesana (author of *Jewish Vestiges in Portugal, Travels of a Painter*), and will hear two events with ethnomusicologist-singer Judith Cohen, a specialist in Judeo-Spanish music, including music of the crypto-Jews. The trip will conclude with a slide show by author Richard Zimler on his best-selling novel, *The Last Kabbalist in Lisbon*.

The sites will include the Espaco do Exilio in Estoril, Evora's old Jewish quarter and place of auto-da-fe, the tower at Marvao (the main passageway used by Jews fleeing from Spain in 1492), Valencia de Alcantara (where the marriage took place between King Manuel of Portugal and Princess Isabelle of Spain), the synagogue and Jewish quarter at Castelo de Vide (where everything is almost the same since the departure of the last Jews), the all-important Belmonte (including the synagogue inaugurated in 1996), Guarda's Jewish quarter, the Sacred Art Museum in Gouveia (where a stone with Hebrew inscriptions of an old synagogue is exposed), Trancoso's tomb of Bandarra (the shoemaker-poet whose prophetic poems led him to be tried by the Inquisition), the Jewish quarter at Viseu, the home of Aristides de Sousa Mendes in Cabanas do Viriato, Porto, Coimbra, Tomar, Obidos, and Lisbon.

Special activities will include a tree planting ceremony in remembrance of the lives saved by Aristides de Sousa Mendes, an evening Shabbat service in Belmonte, and a Shabbat service and meeting with members of the Lisbon Jewish community.

Special guest Dr. Rudo Mathivha, of the Lemba community in South Africa, will talk about similarities in the Lemba and Portuguese Jewish heritages.

A special discounted airfare from New York to Lisbon may be available. Land costs, including lectures, bus, guides, farewell dinner, and all breakfasts, are about 1500 Euros, or \$1350, double occupancy. Kosher food is available.

For further information or registration, contact Rufina (in Johannesburg) at rufina@saudades.org or tel (0)11-27-11- 447 5721.

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# Completing the Circle

By Max Amichai Heppner

The day I met Yosef Mont, he was ready to complete the circle. He was going to hand in his resignation as an ordained rabbi. A rabbi in the Messianic Jewish Community. I came to Orlando, Florida, to help him symbolically to complete his circle back to Judaism by welcoming him to the House of Jacob.

The circle has a huge circumference, but, like any circle, it ends at its beginning, at the House of Jacob. It started in 1492, now exactly 510 years ago, when Yosef's ancestors were living in Spain. King Ferdinand and his co-ruling Queen Isabella of Spain expelled all the Jews. To stay, you had to convert.

Typically, forcibly converted families maintained an outward symbol of their origins in some secret place. For Yosef's family, this symbol was a silver menorah, a seven-branched candelabra. The menorah was kept in a secret place and only the oldest son in each generation was told of its existence and its significance.

For Yosef, the revelation began when he was 15. That day, a messenger came to his house with word that Yosef's grandfather, his father's father, urgently wanted to see him. That was highly unusual, unheard of. Yosef had lost contact with that grandfather years ago because Yosef lived with his mother and his mother's family after his parents divorced. So Yosef, puzzled, asked his mother what to do.

Without hesitation, she said: "Get on the bus and go see your grandfather."

"But mama," Yosef said. "Don't I have to go to school?"

"Not today," mama said. "Today you go to your grandfather."

Still puzzled, Yosef took the bus and rode across town to his grandfather's house. His grandfather was sitting on a bench by the door, obviously anxious to have Yosef arrive. When Yosef came within sight, he saw tears on the old man's face. This only heightened Yosef's puzzlement. His grandfather was not an outwardly emotional person.

"Kneel down, my son," grandfather said, to Yosef's surprise. The old man placed his hands on the young man's head and mumbled something incomprehensible. He then raised the grandson up, and the young man could see the tears flowing even more copiously down the old man's cheeks. Yosef sat down and waited, expecting some explanation.

After a long silence, grandpa asked, "When you were younger, I think about 12, didn't you sneak into my secret room?" Guiltily, Yosef admitted he had. He expected to be reprimanded, but that's not what happened. Encouragingly, not critically, the old man asked: "Well, what did you see?"

"The only thing that was different was what you had behind a little curtain on the wall. I pulled it back, and I saw a silver candlestick with seven branches. Is that what you were hiding?"

"I can't tell you," said grandpa. "You're on the right track, that's all

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I can say. The rest is your father's job. Go see him and ask. In fact, I want you to promise to ask. And then I want you to promise me two more things. One: Get yourself out of Cuba and go to the United States where you can live free. Two: Get in touch with your roots and reunite yourself with your people."

With those hardly clarifying pronouncements, Yosef had the feeling he was dismissed. He said goodbye to his grandpa and took the bus back across town to catch his afternoon classes at school. The next morning, another messenger arrived at Yosef's house and told his mother that her father-in-law had a stroke in the night. The old man never was able to take part in a real conversation after that.

A friend at school helped Yosef do some research to find an explanation. The two boys found that there was a building in town that supposedly had a symbol that looked just like the Mont family's candelabra. The two boys made their way to that building. It was in bad shape and the double doors were chained shut. Nevertheless, they found their answer staring them in the face. The decoration on the barred doors of the old synagogue represented the same kind of seven-branched candelabra. Half on the left door and half on the right. Yosef had just traversed another arc along his circle.

His journey hardly was over and detoured to the United States. Somehow, his father was able to make his way to the United States, and, when Yosef was 28, his father sailed a ship across the Strait of Florida and spirited Yosef, his wife Chana, and their young son, Jack, out of Cuba.



Yosef Mont with daughter Elisheva and wife Chana

They settled in Tampa, FL, and Yosef got a job with an international bank, eventually heading their Latin-American department. Despite his success in business, his mind remained restlessly focused on his grandfather's urging to discover his roots.

His wife, Chana, helped him with research, and told him that in the

Tampa yellow pages, she had found a listing for a Messianic synagogue. She sensed that this might be a helpful source. Yosef followed up and arranged an interview with the man in charge. The leader said he was originally an Orthodox Jewish rabbi from New York.

Indeed, he proved to be a great help. He knew that *Anousim*, people with a special heritage and a venerated secret, were living all over the Latin world. And the leader told Yosef he could hold on to Jesus, who had saved him alive, and still be Jewish. All Yosef had to do is voice the desire, and the International Federation of Messianic Jews would take him in. This Federation had the sole aim of providing a home for *Anousim* who weren't happy with traditional Christianity. They had worked out a service with a lot of Spanish--the comfortable, native language of most congregants--some English, and a little Hebrew for Jewish flavor.

When Yosef does something, he does it with all of his heart. He joined the Messianic Synagogue in Tampa and became the leader's devoted student. He so distinguished himself that he and just one other disciple were chosen to become leaders in the movement. On February 5, 2000 -- Yosef never will forget the day -- the two disciples were ordained to be rabbis themselves. And he gave them the mission

*(Continued on page 13)*

# Completing the Circle (cont.)

(Continued from page 12)

to spread the word of escape from the secrecy of the *Anousim* tradition by accepting the Messianic Jewish faith. They were carefully instructed to only work with *Anousim*. Traditional Jews were not to be led away from their fathers' faith.

Yosef started his first major assignment, to organize a congregation in Orlando, in December of 2000. However, as he preached and extended Messianic Judaism, he kept wondering about that invisible boundary between the House of Jacob and the house of Jesus Christ in Jewish trappings. What, he asked himself, had Jesus added to the Judaism of Yosef's own forefathers?

Two congregants particularly supported Yosef in finding an answer. One was Marshall Lopez, editor of the Spanish-language publications of the International Federation of Messianic Jews. Ideas he and Yosef developed gradually found their way into the group's website. "Many of them came there straight from my sermons at the synagogue," Yosef said. The other congregant who greatly helped confirm Yosef's beliefs was Elias Diaz, once a minister in the Seventh Day Adventist Church, then a Messianic Jew like Yosef himself, and now a fellow doubter as to whether that way was the right way for *Anousim* to follow.

Yosef kept studying, learning, reaching out. He found that Jews who had left Spain to be able to remain Jews had followed their own tradition, the Sephardic vein of Judaism. He introduced the Sephardic prayer book to his congregation. They liked it.

"So I threw out the prayer books we were using," Yosef says. That was a wrenching step along the circle, for the old prayer books were ones Yosef had written and compiled with his own hand. And Yosef learned about a group of *Anousim* in Recife, Brazil, who had readopted normative Judaism. He saw it was a real possibility. As a further step, Yosef's group renamed itself Kehilat Beit Israel, the Congregation of the House of Israel.

I first met with Yosef on the eve of his momentous trip to Tampa. Yosef and I reviewed his plans to tell his mentor that he was breaking his connection with the Messianic movement. Yosef felt that he was ready to do so. He had personally discussed his plans with each family of his congregation, which had more than doubled from the original 20 at the start of his mission. Now he was ready to make the final arc of his return.

"I am going to resign my ordination, I am going to fire myself," Yosef said, amazed at his own daring decision. "Nevertheless, I'm convinced it's the right thing to do, and I know I have my congregation behind me."

That was evident when I attended a Sabbath service with Kehilat Beit Israel the morning after Yosef had handed in his resignation. The congregation's meeting place is a suitably arranged meeting room at a hotel near Disney World. Except for the prayers and Torah readings in Hebrew, the service was largely in Spanish with simultaneous English translation. People freely drifted in and out--at its peak, there were 57 congregants. They participated with gusto and feeling, and the whole effect was of one big, happy family. After the service, they served a communal meal and stayed, talking and studying, until they completed *havdalah*, the ceremony that signals the end of the Sabbath day.

The mood was charged and expectant, as most congregants knew that the rabbi had just returned from severing the group's ties with the Messianic movement. With evident emotion and relief, Yosef reported that his mentor had accepted his resignation without animosity. And speaker after speaker stood up to vocally express support for the decision and for Yosef to remain the group's leader, despite the formal resignation.

"I feel as if I had been robbed," one congregant said frankly. "You know what it feels like to have what you value be torn from you! Now

I feel I have a treasure restored. The treasure of being with my people."

Of course, the congregation was at the beginning of their return, not at the end. There is much work to do to integrate with the rest of Jewish

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Orlando, and a lot of the talk was about how to go about making the connection and completing the return in depth. Nonetheless, I was proud and honored to be on hand at the end of the 510-year circle on the last step back to the House of Jacob.

Yaffah DaCosta, Kulanu's Coordinator for Jewish-Christian Affairs, attended services two weeks later, on February 23. While the service I attended on February 9 was upbeat, excited, and fulfilled, the later Sabbath was downbeat, scary, and upsetting. Here is her description (her full report is at <http://www.chuckmorse.com>):

*The service started with the customary joy and group spirit. All of a sudden, the door to the meeting room was opened and there stood a man and a woman who entered the room (only slightly) but stayed near to the door. The man was silent, smiling ever so slightly (and nervously it seemed to me). The woman had a very serious, and also a somewhat sad, expression on her face as she screamed as loudly as she could "YOU HAVE NO GOD" towards the group and its leader for several minutes.*

*The group was initially silent in the face of this oppression against the peace of the Sabbath day. But then, little by little, people started to pray the Psalms or the Shema. The praying became louder and louder over the next minute or two. And at one point, I thought it might be that the people would perhaps try to drown out the disrupters, but then the leader of the group asked by hand motions for them to be quiet and calm and he walked over to the couple at the door to usher them out of the room. The man softly began singing something about "Jesus" as they left.*

*Due to a commotion that I understand the woman created in the hotel lobby, the police later were called. Eventually the woman was given a "trespass warrant" which was a warning to her about not returning to this hotel so long as this group is having their meetings there.*

*Obviously this vicious attack followed upon news of the "split," which apparently caused the couple to want to persecute (attack) them. According to some in the Christian world, the Jews of today do NOT worship the God of the Bible and so the Jews are referred to as a "synagogue of Satan."*

I'm happy to say that the Kehila recovered nicely from the shock of the invasion by the screaming woman. They moved their place of worship to another hotel that offered similar facilities and more privacy. I spent a later Sabbath with them there and found them exuding the same easy-going spirit and fervent worship. "Rabbi" Yosef had a last-minute emergency that kept him from leading the service, and Cantor Dan Carter filled in seamlessly. The congregation is now looking for a more permanent home.

(Kulanu president Jack Zeller notes, "The Orlando Kehila is alive and thriving. Many thanks to Amichai and Yaffah who have turned their lives up-side down to serve and be the ever present friend.")

# Ethiopia's Jews (cont.)

(Continued from page 1)

preparing the "Feles Mura" for formal conversion in Israel.

Daily, Shabbat and Festival services are attended eagerly and in huge numbers. The large sanctuary seats men and women separately. On Shabbat the crowd overflows to the outside, and separate services are held for the hundreds of youth participating. Services are led by volunteers from the community who have been trained in Rabbi Waldman's program. Services are the same as – and different from – those one finds in America. The chanting is sometimes done with congregational responses word by word, producing a surreal echo effect that is enchanting. The women, all dressed in the white traditional dress with head coverings, quietly murmur certain responses of their own and use special hand motions.

When Goldman took the job of running the Addis compound 12 years ago, he thought it would be a very temporary position. Formerly a professional photographer, he claims to have had "no qualifications except willingness to do the work." But the compound has continually expanded, his tenure has been long, and his organizational skills have proven to be awesome.

Goldman's 2700 school-age children attend classes from first grade through junior high in very basic classrooms with benches (no desks), but the compound school is accredited by the Addis Board of Education and its students consistently score high in city-wide tests and are admitted to the best city high schools. The curriculum includes the regular course of study for all Addis schoolchildren, plus

Hebrew and Judaic Studies. Unlike other local schools, the compound school operates year-round, with the summer session devoted solely to a Jewish curriculum. Goldman recently convinced the local university to add a teacher-training program on the compound, which should benefit his classes.

The adult education program operates all day, every weekday, in eight 55-minute shifts. Each shift is carried on in four rooms, and each room contains 40 students. Goldman says the shifts before and after *davening* times (*shacharit* and *mincha*) are the most popular. Sunday morning adult education is also available to the 1600 participating adults.

## Food, Glorious Food

A few years ago, when it was noticed that children could not perform well in school because they were starving (fainting was not uncommon), a feeding program started. Goldman researched existing programs, consulted with nutritionists, and conferred with community representatives about their tastes and purchasing possibilities. He says UN personnel have been impressed by the quality and variety the compound provides.

The preschool feeding program serves children from age six months to six years; each child must be accompanied by a parent at each meal. The program has been extended to include pregnant and nursing women. Each child receives a meal that may include many of the following selections: ground carrots, avocado, chopped eggs made with iodized salt and oil, collard greens, beans, potatoes, fafa (a 12-grain porridge), oranges and bananas. The tykes receive one-half ounce of each food to start and can have seconds and thirds if they desire. Pregnant or nursing women receive a roll, fafa, and two ounces

(Continued on page 18)

# Race in Suriname

By Sergio Tjong-Alvares

I read with interest Irwin Berg's multi-part article on the Jodensavannah cemetery in Suriname. I believe that it contains very valuable information regarding the Jewish history of Suriname, and being a proud Surinamer of Jewish descent, I would love it if as many (Jewish) people as possible could not only place Suriname on the map, but know something about its colonial history.

Being the descendant of, amongst others, both Jewish plantation owners as well as African slaves, the issue Berg raised of Jewish slave owners touches me personally. Then again, being a sort of mainstream Surinamer of mixed Creole/Chinese descent, and having grown up in Paramaribo, I don't as a Surinamer directly identify with the Maroons or their struggle. Unlike in the US, where many African Americans tend to revert back to their African roots in slavery, most middle to upper class Surinamese of Creole descent are keenly aware of and in touch with their African roots, yet less concerned with their undeniable link to those who fled the plantations and today form the Maroon populations of the interior. In fact, many an African American might be shocked to find that most Creoles living in the city look down upon the Maroons, and certainly don't identify with them along any racial or cultural lines.

I agree with Berg's conclusion that the explanation for the Jewish involvement in the flourishing of slavery in Suriname is because "they were simply in the place and at the time when economic opportunities based upon slave labor arose, and they took advantage of them." In my mind, the Jews, outside of European society, were simply Europeans, whites. In an environment such as Suriname's, where they were in a majority, there is therefore no reason why they shouldn't act as other whites did at the time. Slavery was simply the order of the day, and I'm not so sure how right it would be to hold the community to a higher moral standard, as Jews often are, considering their options at the time.

Historical scholars in the US and many other parts of the Americas have recorded many instances of Jewish plantation and slave owners. The case of Suriname is only different in that few other Europeans settled there, thus making the pea-sized Jewish population seem relatively "big", and making them the main culprits in the plantation economy of Suriname.

On that same note, the Jews weren't the only persecuted European population to turn "baddie" in Suriname. The French Huguenots, though persecuted for a much shorter time, also happily invested their money in the establishment of slave-driven plantations.

Perhaps it comes across to you as a little strange that I, as a "person of colour" do not immediately run to the defence of my African ancestry in light of Suriname's colonial history. Having been raised in Suriname, however, I grew up knowing that my ancestors were Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, Africans, French Huguenots, Chinese, and Amerindian. Maybe it's because the majority of those European oppressors eventually mixed with their "oppresses" that Suriname's Creole population can make peace with its past. Then again, the presence of the highly successful Indian population and less economically successful Javanese population has also managed to break the racially based economical hierarchy that persisted between lighter and darker Creoles, therefore making for a more even society.

Berg's impression of the present-day Jewish community in Suriname is especially interesting to me as I am familiar with both people who would consider themselves part of the group of 250, as well as others like myself who wouldn't traditionally be counted to that group. It would be interesting to know what percentage of those who still consider themselves "purely Jewish" are in fact mixed at some point in their ancestry. Likewise, I would be curious to know how many non-traditionally Jewish Surinamers are in fact halachically Jewish. I once read that "much" intermarriage between Jewish women and non-Jewish men took place as many Jewish-Surinamese families sent

(Continued on page 20)



Embroidery at NACOEJ compound

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What if you are a snowbird and regularly spend time at another location? The new Kulanu data base can handle that flawlessly providing you tell Kulanu the months you usually spend in each residence.

So, PLEASE, remember us at least once a year, although donations are gladly received as often as you wish!

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## From the President

In the biological world, we have but one life. But for Kulanu multiples are possible. A case in point is **Lionel Okun** from Seal Beach, California, who had several Kulanu Lifetime Supporter contributions on behalf of the Lemba, adding to that the Beit Din fund last December. And most recently (February) the Anousim fund in support of the newly formed congregation in Orlando Florida! A Kulanu Lifetime Supporter ( \$1000 per contribution) has an increased quality of life knowing that he is at the very difficult and early steps of something immensely important that will surely transcend tens and hundreds of years of Jewish renewal. Lionel Okun is always there with each first step. We all greet him with wishes to enjoy his remarkable and richly active life and many lifetimes to come.

## Institute of Jewish Studies Founded in Kaifeng

Kulanuites are familiar with the Center for Jewish Studies at Nanjing University, founded and directed by Prof. Xu Xin. But an Institute of Jewish Studies in Kaifeng is something new.

Such an institute was established in March at Henan University at Kaifeng, Henan Province, China. The university vice-president, Li Xiaojian, was joined at the opening ceremony by fellow speakers Mr. Len Hew (from Canada), Prof. Zhang Qianhong and Prof. Liang Gong. Mr. Hew was warmly recognized by Li Xiaojian for his efforts and his contribution that led to the founding of the Institute. A letter of congratulations from Prof. Xu Xin, director of the Center for Jewish Studies at Nanjing University, was read at the ceremony. Prof. Zhang Qianhong was appointed director of the Institute.

After the ceremony, a discussion was held by some scholars and representatives of the Kaifeng Jewish descendants on the subject of "Jewish Studies in China." In attendance were Mr. Hew, Prof. Zhang Qianhong, Prof. Liang Gong, Dr. Lu Shirong, and Prof. Wei Qianzhi, who delivered a speech. At the meeting, Mr. Hew pledged to offer two scholarships each year, together with the necessary finances, to promote interest in Jewish studies among the population of university students.

The Israeli photo-journalist and videographer, Dvir Bar-Gal (from Tel Aviv), was also present and reported on the event.

The Institute of Jewish Studies welcome all kinds of donations, including scholarships, research funds, books, and teaching aids (religious artifacts). Interested donors are invited to contact Prof. Zhang Qianhong, Director, Institute of Jewish Studies, College of History and Culture, Henan University, Kaifeng City, China, 475001; E-mail: [zhangqianhong@yahoo.com](mailto:zhangqianhong@yahoo.com); Tel: 86-378-2859143

## PUBLICATIONS OF NOTE

### Purim Around the World

The women's Zionist organization Hadassah has published a beautiful book to commemorate the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding, on Purim 1912. Copies of *Esther's Legacy: Celebrating Purim Around the World*, edited by Barbara Vinick, are available for free to all members of Hadassah. The collection is a project of the Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women (HIRIJW) at Brandeis University. The book contains entries about Purim observances in nearly 100 communities, arranged alphabetically from Algeria to Zimbabwe. A limited number of copies are available to Hadassah nonmembers. A copy can be requested from Barbara Vinick at [barba@bu.edu](mailto:barba@bu.edu) or c/o HIRIJW, Mailstop 079, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02454-9110.

### Jews of India

**Prof. Nathan Katz** recently authored a new book, *Who Are the Jews of India?* published by University of California Press. The book gives vivid details of everyday life and the religious life of three Indian Jewish communities – the Cochins, the Bene Israel, and the Baghdadis. Katz uses an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from methods and insights from religious studies, ritual studies, anthropology, history, linguistics, and folklore.

*Guide to Bene Israel Ceremonies* by **Shimeon Kollet** is written in Hebrew and is available only from the author. Send check for \$15 plus \$5 postage to S. Kollet, 4/11 Nechushtan Street, 71262 Lod, Israel.

**Jaël Silliman** has written a book about four generations of women in her Baghdadi Jewish family of Calcutta -- *Jewish Portraits, Indian Frames: Women's Narratives from a Diaspora of Hope*.

*Judaism*, by **Levi S. Jacob and Falphy Jhirad**, has been published in New Delhi. For information email [roli@vsnl.com](mailto:roli@vsnl.com).

(Continued on page 17)

# 4 Rabbis Visit Bnei Menashe in India (cont.)

(Continued from page 1)

and were familiar with many of the stories of the Bible. Before long, the missionaries managed to convert most of Mizoram's population. Yet many of them, Christians and other tribesmen alike, continue to preserve the belief that they are descended from the ancient Israelites.

A little over 25 years ago a group of Bnei Menashe decided to return to Judaism. They began building synagogues and *mikvaot* (ritual baths), and undertook to live in accordance with Jewish law. Shortly thereafter, an Indian Jew living in Israel passed along a letter from the Bnei Menashe to Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail of Jerusalem, who seeks out and assists "lost Jews." As founder and director of Amishav (literally "my people returns"), Rabbi Avichail has since been to India six times to investigate the Bnei Menashe. He is convinced of the authenticity of their traditions.

"As I studied the community and learned about its ancient beliefs, I could not help but conclude that they are in fact descended from the tribe of Menashe," says Rabbi Avichail. "They have ancient songs and chants with words from the Bible. For centuries, their children have been taught to sing, "*Litenten Zion*," which means "Let us go to Zion," even though they had no idea what Zion was." Rabbi Avichail was especially intrigued to learn of the Bnei Menashe's customs, such as laws of family purity, the use of a lunar calendar, and mourning rites - many of which bear a striking resemblance to those in the Bible. "There is simply too much similarity between their customs and ours for it to be coincidental," he said.

In the past decade, Rabbi Avichail has brought some 600 Bnei Menashe to Israel, with the approval of the Interior Ministry and the Chief Rabbinate. Recently he was back in India to introduce his colleagues, Rabbi Riskin and Rabbi Birnbaum to the community.

After entering the synagogue in Aizawl, the rabbis join the 100-odd worshippers in afternoon prayer, led in fluent Hebrew by the Bnei Menashe's chief cantor, Eliezer Sela. Sela, a father of nine, has seven children living in Israel, each of whom has undergone formal conversion. "I cannot wait to go to Israel, the land of my forefathers," Sela says, adding, "we pray for its well-being every day."

At the end of the prayer service, Rabbi Riskin and Rabbi Avichail address the community, emphasizing the importance of adhering to Jewish law and studying the Torah. Rabbi Riskin speaks emotionally about the need to have faith in God's promise of redemption, and he captures his listeners' hearts by telling them, in the local Mizo dialect, "You are my brothers and sisters."

To locals living in Mizoram, there is no question regarding the origins of the Bnei Menashe. Lal Thlamuana, 45, a devout Christian who is the proprietor and principal of the local Home Mission School, has no doubt about the Israelite origins of the Mizo people. Thlamuana is a member of Aizawl's elite, speaks fluent English, has traveled abroad, and lives in a grand home brimming with servants. "Even Christian Mizos believe that we are descendants of Israel," he says, and proceeds to expound on a number of the community's ancient customs and traditions, such as circumcision of newborn boys on the eighth day, levirate marriage, and strict laws regarding menstruation, all of which are strikingly similar to Jewish law.

The British, Thlamuana notes, referred to the Mizo people as Lushei, a mispronunciation of Lu Se, which means "Ten Tribes" in the language of neighboring Burma. According to the Bnei Menashe, their ancestors migrated south from China to escape persecution, settling in Burma and then moving westward into what is now Mizoram and Manipur in India.

A sampling of Christian Mizos throughout Aizawl seemed to verify Thlamuana's assertion. Shopkeepers, airport workers, and others, when asked about the origins of the Mizo people, all respond with the same answer: "we are from the Israelites." Mr. Ropiana, a polished

receptionist at the government-run tourist lodge in Aizawl, replies matter-of-factly, "Yes, of course we are descended from Israel. Everyone knows this." Though a practicing Christian, he was visibly moved when handed a postcard bearing an Israeli flag on it.

Driving through the streets of Aizawl, it is evident that there is a great deal of identification and support for Israel among the general populace. The main market is located on a thoroughfare called Zion Street, and many shops have names such as "Jewish Store" and "Israel Warehouse," none of which are owned by Jews.

While in Mizoram, Rabbi Riskin and his colleagues met with Mr. F.

Malsawma, Mizoram's state minister of law. A devoutly religious Christian, the minister was more than happy to discuss the issue of the Mizos' Israelite descent. "We have a sentimental attachment to Israel, by blood also," he said, noting that "We claim to be Israelites - even our church leaders agree."

Malsawma told the rabbis that the government of Mizoram was researching the link between the Mizos and the Jews. "We are in the process of doing the research to see if we are descended from Menashe. Time will reveal the truth." The meeting between the rabbis and the minister led off the local television news that evening.

As part of their visit, Rabbi Riskin and his colleagues also spoke with a large number of people from the Bnei Menashe community itself. One of them, Yossi Hualngo, a 65-year old resident of Aizawl, provided a key piece of the puzzle. Two of his father's brothers were priests who conducted the ancient Mizo rituals prior to the arrival of the Christian missionaries a century ago. Hualngo, speaking through an interpreter, offered a detailed description of the Mizo rites recounted to him decades ago by his uncles. As Rabbi Riskin noted, the similarities with Jewish ritual are startling.

According to Hualngo, his uncles would don white garments before carrying out sacrificial rites, including one with strings dangling from its four corners, reminiscent of the *tallit* with *arba kanfot* (the four-cornered ritual prayer shawl) worn by Jews. In the spring, an animal would be slaughtered and offered up as a sacrifice, and its blood smeared on the doorways of people's homes, suggesting the ancient Passover rite. Indeed, according to Hualngo, there was a rule that the Mizo priests had to carefully remove the meat from the bones of the animal without breaking any of them, just as Jewish law requires.

Then, in a remarkable scene, Hualngo proceeds to chant one of the incantations that his uncles had told him they used to sing while conducting important sacrificial ceremonies. The words in the song, and their biblical origin, are unmistakable: Terah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the Red Sea, Marah and Shiloh (site of the ancient tabernacle and capital of the Twelve Tribes of Israel until the Assyrian conquest). Those present, Rabbi Riskin included, are stunned. "If anyone doubts the tremendous power of the Jewish soul, if anyone questions the magnificent strength of Jewish traditions, if anyone for one moment would question the eternity of the Jewish people, this proves its strength," Rabbi Riskin says.

"For me, it is surrealistic. I look around, I am in India, near the Burmese border, with tremendous poverty all around me, and here are what appear to be contented Jews living a very Jewish life and having one real hope and dream: to come to Israel as soon as possible and rejoin their people. It is the miracle of Jewish survival," he says.

While in Mizoram, the rabbis visited Bnei Menashe communities outside Aizawl as well, including synagogues in the villages of Vairengte, Kolasib, and Sihphir. In each township, they joined local communities in prayer and study, praising their commitment to Judaism and urging them to learn more about their heritage. After spending three days in Mizoram, the delegation proceeded to the neighboring state of Manipur, where the bulk of the Bnei Menashe live.

Upon arrival in Imphal, the capital of Manipur, the rabbis are

(Continued on page 17)

## Bnei Menashe (cont.)

(Continued from page 16)

taken straight from the airport to a large theater, where over 500 Bnei Menashe have gathered to greet them. The rabbis are presented with flowers, and community dignitaries express hope that the community will soon be allowed to immigrate to Israel.

Manipur itself is a politically unstable region that is home to dozens of underground groups fighting the government. Elections being held contribute to the tension, and the streets of the capital are filled with armed soldiers and policemen in riot gear. Violent protests and riots have recently taken place, though all appears quiet during the rabbis' stay.

Over Shabbat, Rabbi Riskin and the rest of the Israeli delegation stay at Amishav House, a community center and synagogue built by Rabbi Avichail on behalf of the Bnei Menashe. Shabbat services are held, complete with a great deal of singing and dancing.

Rabbi Riskin describes it as one of the most invigorating Shabbats he has ever had. "To see 500 people in a synagogue on Shabbat in Imphal, Manipur, praying with all their hearts, and reading Hebrew and singing magnificent songs - it was just an amazingly inspiring experience."

On Shabbat, the community comes together for a celebration, when the nephew of Bnei Menashe Council general-secretary Lemuel Haokip undergoes circumcision. The ceremony is performed by one of the community's two *mohels* (ritual circumcisers) and the boy is given the Hebrew name Shimon. Afterwards, the child's proud uncle delivered a lesson on Israel's covenantal relationship with God.

Prior to their return to Israel, the rabbis visited Churachandpur near the Burmese border, where the local Bnei Menashe community is completing construction of its third synagogue. Hundreds of men and women turn out and Rabbi Riskin offers a modest donation for the project.

Asked later whether he believes the Bnei Menashe are indeed descendants of a lost tribe of Israel, Rabbi Riskin says he "was very skeptical about the Lost Ten Tribes... the notion of the Lost Tribes and bringing the Lost Ten Tribes back to Israel always had for me an almost fairy-tale kind of aspect." However, his visit to India seems to have altered his view.

"I have now become convinced from listening to the stories that they record from their grandparents about the ancient customs, and from the fact that their Christian neighbors recognize that they too come from that same background. The fact is it is very difficult not to accept their traditions that they come from the tribe of Menashe," Rabbi Riskin says. "The Bnei Menashe have maintained fundamental ceremonies and practices of Judaism for what seems to be thousands of years, despite the fact that they have been cut off appreciably from the rest of the Jewish people."

Summarizing his impressions of the Bnei Menashe, Rabbi Riskin says, "They have tremendous commitment, a tremendous sense of sacrifice, and tremendous love for Judaism and for the State of Israel. I can't think of better future citizens for our country," he adds.

Those sentiments are sure to bring a smile to the face of Lemuel Haokip and his fellow Bnei Menashe, all of whom are longing to come to Israel. As a child, Haokip recalls that on special occasions, such as a lunar or solar eclipse or upon feeling the tremors of an earthquake, his father would rush out of their home, gaze toward heaven and declare: "The Children of Menashe still live! The Children of Menashe still live!" And so, it seems, they do.

(For further information about the Bnei Menashe of India, contact Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, chairman of Amishav, at (02) 642-4606 or via e-mail at: [bnei\\_menashe@yahoo.com](mailto:bnei_menashe@yahoo.com))

## PUBLICATIONS (cont.)

(Continued from page 15)

*Jews of Cochin-India*, by **Joshua M. Benjamin** was also published in New Delhi. For information contact [shulanoel@hotmail.com](mailto:shulanoel@hotmail.com).

### Coverage of Beit Din in Uganda

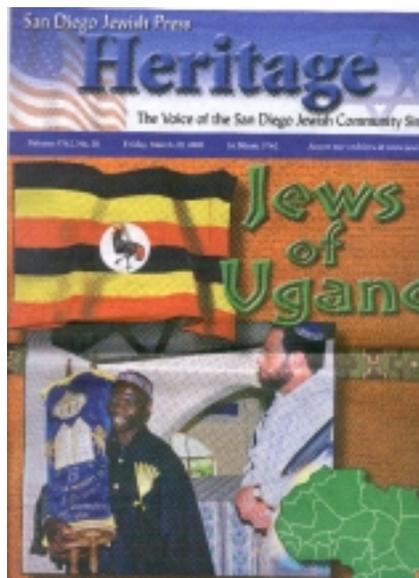
*The Jerusalem Post* carried **Haim Shapiro's** story, "300 Ugandans in 'Jewish' Village Since 1919 Convert to Judaism," on February 23. The story carries Shapiro's interview with Rabbi Andrew Sacks of Jerusalem, one of the participants on the Beit Din trip to Uganda.

**Stewart Ain's** article, "Big Splash in Uganda: Rabbis Convert 300," appeared in *the Jewish Week (NY)* on March 1.

A JTA article by **Rachel Pomerance**, "Jews Finally Have Their Day at the Mikvah," appeared in the *Chicago Jewish News* and other papers.

**Matthew J. Rosenberg's** "Uganda - The Found Tribe" was carried by the Associated Press in March.

The *San Diego Heritage* of March 29 carried a 7-column spread by **Ed Samiljan** with three large color photos and a full cover page in color. Entitled "Welcoming Uganda's Abayudaya into the Tribes of Israel," the story relates Samiljan's observations as a member of the historic delegation.



### Tudor Parfitt Has a New Book

Tudor Parfitt and Emanuela Trevisan Semi have co-authored *Judaizing Movements: Studies in the Margins of Judaism*, published by Rotledge/Curzon in

London in April. The book deals with general issues of the Lost Tribes in colonial discourse, the evolution of the Sons of Menasseh, the Lemba, the 'Lost Tribes committees' in Palestine in the 1930s and 40s, the conversion of the community of San Nicandro in Italy and the black Jews of Harlem. Parfitt, well known to Kulanuites as the British anthropologist who has studied the Lemba of Southern Africa, is professor of Modern Jewish Studies at the University of London and director of the Centre of Jewish Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies. Emanuela Trevisan Semi is Professor of Modern Jewish and Hebrew Studies at the University of Venice in Italy.

Tudor Parfitt's next book, *The Lost Tribes of Israel*, will be published in London in August by Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

### Call for Recipes

"The Food Maven" of the *Forward* is seeking previously unpublished Jewish recipes, either Ashkenazic or Sephardic, traditional or modernized, for a cookbook featuring Jewish food from around the world. It will be published by HarperCollins in 2004. Submissions should include background information about where the recipe comes from and how and when it was traditionally served. Send to "The Food Maven" c/o the *Forward*, 45 E. 33<sup>rd</sup> St., New York, NY 10016 or to [mgoodman@forward.com](mailto:mgoodman@forward.com).

# A Day with the Jews in Ethiopia (cont.)

each of beans, carrots and eggs. The compound measures waste to evaluate the food and the feeding process. Goldman says he has noticed "visible improvement" in the appearance of the young ones since the feeding program started. He likes to show visitors an old picture of a child and compare it to the way the child looks now.

School students, who attend classes in either a morning or an afternoon shift, also have their meal in shifts. Early-shift students receive the meal as breakfast, afternoon students as lunch. The shifts change every two weeks. Either way, this is usually the only meal the child receives that day. These meals include a hard-boiled egg, a small potato, carrots, beans cooked with oil and iodized salt, rolls, and oranges. An optional slice of cheese has been added, thanks to a generous donor in Los Angeles. Most are not familiar with cheese, so only about 50 percent so far take advantage of this excellent source of calcium.

In addition to the feeding programs, another food program enables needy families and each family with a school-age child to take home 3.3 pounds of dried beans and tef grain for Shabbat. And the community makes Shabbat wine from raisins in 20-liter batches.

Goldman says the food programs cost \$10,000 per month.

Sanitation measures are surprisingly rigorous. A slew of paid employees (hired from the community) keeps all surfaces spotless, and no perishable food is stored more than 24 hours. In the storeroom that holds beans and grain, a fan operates continuously to keep away insects. To assure careful and clean food preparation, employees are required to eat from a random batch selected by a manager!

Goldman had faucets installed so the children could learn to wash their hands before eating. Since water is expensive -- city residents pay for it by the bucket -- he soon found that a considerable amount of bathing was going on at the faucets and installed more.

Anxious to replace scarce wood as a cooking fuel, Goldman convinced an airline pilot with engineering skills to design a safe and effective kerosene stove.

## The Privilege of Working

NACOEJ decided to institute an employment program to offer pay and dignity -- rather than welfare payments -- to Ethiopian Jews in Addis. An embroidery project was the result since embroidery is a traditional skill of Ethiopian Jews, both male and female. Goldman points out that this was also a natural choice since many Jewish leaders who had been in prison -- for the crime of teaching Hebrew -- had gotten a lot of practice doing embroidery there! Seven hundred heads of households hand-embroider pillow covers, challah covers, matzah covers and tallit bags, which NACOEJ sells for money to fund the program. The embroidery work is intricate (about 40,000 stitches go into every product) and colorful, and comes in at least two dozen charming folk designs depicting biblical stories or festival themes -- designed for the American market. We learned a little-known fact: Andy Goldman is the artist behind all the designs.

When daily services are not going on, it is impressive to see the large sanctuary filled with embroidery workers. The fastest, most expert workers can complete one item in five days, while the slowest might take 22 days. Either way, the worker is limited to producing one product per month, 12 per year, because the market is not large enough

for greater numbers of embroideries. Goldman would like to see a major market expansion so that these workers can earn more, and so that another embroidery project can commence in Gondar.

The striking covers and bags are available for a \$100 contribution to NACOEJ, \$70 of which is tax-deductible. Donors interested in choosing from all the designs can see color illustrations in NACOEJ's web site or by requesting their brochure (contact information below).

The Addis compound also offers after-school activities for students. There is an orchestra, a singing group, and a circus. Circus Ethiopia is one of Goldman's pet projects, since it has been popular at European performances and has been adopted by the Ethiopian government to use in schools all over Ethiopia. Goldman conceived the idea in 1990, secured private funding, and convinced a Canadian circus buff to teach the children circus skills such as juggling, balancing and tumbling. As visitors to the compound can attest, the results are impressive.

Goldman took us on a tour of some Jewish homes near the compound (no one lives on the compound). We saw mud hovels, cow dung drying outside for fuel, a woman with TB who can't keep her medicine down because she has no food, and Hebrew signs on interior walls. The tour reminded us what a paradise NACOEJ has created in the compound. The NACOEJ brochure refers to it as an "oasis." Whatever it is, it certainly deserves our support.

When we asked Goldman what we could do to help, he said, "Push the feeding program, a real bargain -- only \$53 feeds a child for a year!" Of course, there are other opportunities for those who can afford more. A \$100 contribution brings the donor a cherished embroidery. A \$10,000 donation will allow Goldman to feed the community in the Addis compound for a month. Also, contributions in any amount are needed for special

meals for the sick and elderly, blankets and warm clothes, and supplies for science classes. In-kind donations of tefillin, prayer books and basic Hebrew primers for children are also welcomed.

NACOEJ is still looking forward to the day when the compounds in Ethiopia are no longer needed. A promise was made recently by Israel's Interior Ministry (in response to a petition in the High Court) to process in a timely manner requests from the Feles Mora seeking to immigrate to Israel under the Law of Return or family reunification. The promise was to let the families know within four months the current status of their requests. So far, this information has been hard to come by. Most of the people in the Addis compound today have been there, waiting, for four or five years.

Andy Goldman spends about every other month in Addis Ababa and the rest of the time at the small Washington, DC, office of NACOEJ (headquarters are in New York). His Addis office, at the time of our visit, contained a computer, a huge heap of donated clothing (which we had carried from America), donations of school supplies, and cheeses hanging from the ceiling to age. For now, the Jews in Ethiopia are his life, wherever he is staying.

About half of NACOEJ's funding goes to Ethiopia programs. The other half benefits Ethiopian Jews in Israel with such programs as after-school enrichment classes, assistance for college students, high school sponsorships, and bar/bat mitzvah twinning. But that's another story. *(Send checks and/or in-kind donations to NACOEJ, 132 Nassau Street, Suite 412, New York, NY 100-38. For information, call 212 233 5200, fax 212 233 2543, or email [nacoej@aol.com](mailto:nacoej@aol.com). Check their web site at [www.nacoej.org](http://www.nacoej.org)).*



*Children's feeding program at the NACOEJ Compound*

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*A lso accessible online at [www.KulanuBoutique.com](http://www.KulanuBoutique.com)*

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***Hand-woven Bnei Menashe Tallitot***, white with black or blue stripes; bag included. *Proceeds benefit the Bnei Menashe.*

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# Race in Suriname (cont.)

(Continued from page 14)

their sons abroad over the course of the 19th century. Then again, considering that these marriages would not be registered at the synagogue, it would be practically impossible to trace their descendants, especially in light of the abominable bureaucratic state of Suriname's genealogical information.

Looking into the future of the Jewish community, the hopelessness of Suriname's contemporary political and economic situation continues to encourage the exodus of many Surinamese youths in search of a college education. In addition the level of racial, ethnic and cultural assimilation and integration in Suriname is so deep that whatever is left of the Jewish identity in absence of religious education is probably mostly dormant. When you add to this the fact that only about 250 people are known to be halachically Jewish, the probability of intermarriage and further shrinkage of the Jewish community are almost unavoidable.

My personal experiences in the Surinamese Jewish community are limited to a few trips I made back home after having moved to the US and become part of a Jewish community in Washington, DC. Having become more aware of Jewish culture, I was more capable of scanning Paramaribo and its population for traces of its Jewish past. Though I sensed that there had been a sudden surge in interest in the Jewish community in Suriname in the late eighties and early to mid-nineties, I was sad to realise that movement of interest had not quite gained momentum. It seemed to me that despite all the good will from some of the commu-

nity's leaders, the lack of a minyan capable and willing to dedicate its time to services, and the absence of a rabbi, chazan, and *shochet*, really weighed down their efforts. The various times I contacted the community's leaders to express my interest in the *kehila* I was actually disappointed at the lack of enthusiasm with which I was received. Then again, from their perspective I must have been just another Surinamer living abroad and incapable of actually dedicating himself to the community.

Berg's comment on the persisting rivalry between Sephardim and Ashkenazim in Suriname is also very interesting, though I can only comment on my experiences in Holland and Israel. Before coming to Israel, I had only attended Ashkenazic shuls. Though I mostly attend the Sephardic synagogue now, I occasionally still go to the Ashkenazi shul. The last time I went to the Ashkenazi shul, an acquaintance from the Sephardic synagogue questioned me regarding my whereabouts. When he realised I had been back to the Ashkenazi shul, he apathetically replied that "everyone should go where they are the most comfortable." My experience with Judaism was good in the US, but it's absolutely great in Israel. Nowhere I visited did I gain acceptance to the point of becoming the subject of a rivalry between different congregations. (Of course the main reason for any rivalry has to do with each congregation trying to hold on to as many of its young people as it can.)

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