



## Costumbres Familiares: Practicing Judaism in Secret And Returning

By Rabbi Rigoberto Emmanuel Viñas

In a *Bohio* in the Pillar del Rio region on the Caribbean Island of Cuba, my great-grandmother, of blessed memory, lit two candles every Friday just before sunset. Hiding her candles in a cabinet, then waving her arms in front of them, she lit the two candles and closed the doors of the cabinet in front of them. In the brief moment that the candles shone into the room, the light lit up her small home, a hut with a thatched straw roof and dirt floor. Her heart filled with the warmth and blessing of having once again completed her mother's custom of lighting candles every Friday night. They also lit up the heart of my father, who was very young at the time and would watch her do this every week. Putting her arms around him, she would bless him that he should grow to be like Ephraim and Menasheh -- "*como efrain y menasheh*".

My great-grandmother was an oral historian. She was the matriarch of the family. Everyone would go to her house for family reunions. At each of these, she would tell stories of the past and celebrate family events. She often told stories of wars, hunger and early Cuban history.

She would tell about how her ancestors had come from Spain to live in Cuba in order to avoid being burned at the stake. But she would warn that others in town were never to hear about these stories because "they disliked us and didn't want to hear our stories." She remembered the story that her grandmother had told her of relatives who had been arrested by the priests and burned at the stake in Mexico. Having left the northern regions of Spain, our family originally lived in Havana. They lived there for a few years but one had been arrested for soaking and salting her meat, as was "our family custom," and for "reading the Bible without permission of the priests." The rest of the family fled deeper into the island and settled in the Pinar del Rio region in order to avoid being noticed or suffering a similar fate.

She explained that in our family there were customs that we were not to discuss with others for fear that they would tell the priest and accuse us of "witchcraft." These customs were "*costumbres familiares*" (family customs), and there were many. My family avoided pork due to health reasons. According to her, we had inherited a digestive allergy to pork from our ancestors. She would slaughter her own meats and then soak and salt them to remove the blood just as her mother had done.

We were always buried in the family plots near our home, not in the large Catholic cemetery in town. My family had a custom to try to acquire soil from the holy land and keep it hidden somewhere in the house. This soil would be placed behind the head of our loved ones

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## A Plug for the Hadassah Infant School in Uganda

By Emily Weinstein

(Editor's note: The author has been a phenomenal volunteer in Uganda for the past six months, but left in April to do helping work elsewhere. The Hadassah Infant School remains in dire need of funding and volunteers. Contact the Kulanu office if you can help with this important and rewarding project.)

The Hadassah Infant School is in full swing! Of 65 students from nursery through grade three, 22 are boarders. They sleep in their tiny dorm in their new triple-decker bunk beds, two to a bed. They have a "slumber party" every night and their chipper voices also ring out at 5:30 every morning! A few more sleep in the anteroom. I work mostly with P-3 class. They are darling children, highly motivated to learn



Hadassah Infant School Children

Hebrew, Jewish songs, and crafts.. Their English has improved dramatically since I came in October. I can't take credit for teaching them much English, but I do think my presence has motivated them. I feel

that I have developed real relationships with them and will miss them terribly when I leave after Passover.

It is not hard to see the benefits of this school. The kids are remarkable.

On Shabbat, they gather in their lacy clothes around the Kabbalat Shabbat table, half in darkness due to the weak electricity, their small, sharp voices ringing out *L'cha Dodi*. They learn other songs so quickly and readily, I wish there could be a choir for them. Truly, many are very talented and it would be great if a musician could volunteer to work with them.

And artistic! In the weekly Hebrew class I teach third grade, the students made *Refuah Shleimah* (Get Well) cards for the rabbi's son Igaal (he fell out of a tree, gashed his knee, and needed stitches; is back at school now). Their artwork was simply incredible. I want to find some card stock and envelopes and see whether we can actually market them.

For the holiday of Purim, 30 kids were so excited about making

(Continued on page 6)

KULANU ("ALL OF US") is a tax-exempt organization of Jews of varied backgrounds and practices 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. The Kulanu Newsletter is published quarterly through Kulanu, 11603 Gilsan Street, Silver Spring, MD, 20902.

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# Ashery Designs New Kulanu Logo

Kulanu begins its tenth year with a new symbol. On the masthead of this newsletter, Volume 10, No. 1, you will see the new logo, depicting people from all over the globe reaching toward and wanting to identify with the oldest Jewish symbol, the menorah. The design was generously donated to Kulanu by Avrum Ashery, a nationally known Judaic artist, graphic designer, educator and lecturer.

For over 30 years, Ashery has created logos, national posters, Judaic fine arts, and stained glass windows. His clients include national and international Jewish organizations, synagogues, day schools, corporations and the US Government. He has also designed logos for NFL and college football helmets!

A graduate of the University of Tulsa in Communications Design and Gratz Hebrew College, Ashery is the former art director of Walter Reed Medical Center and of the National Institute of Mental Health. He lectures on Jewish culture and teaches Jewish Studies in many forums.

We are grateful for his artistic enhancement of our image!



Avy Ashery

## Competition Awards Announced

Kulanu will publish a book of readings on Jewish Diversity some time before the end of 2003. A competition last year encouraged writers to address this topic. Hundreds of entries were received, and the submissions that will appear in the book are still under consideration.

However, the determination of award winners is complete. Our judge was the renowned Washington poet Jean Nordhaus, whose fifth book of poems, *The Porcelain Apes of Moses Mendelssohn*, was published by Milkweed Editions in November 2002. Here are her determinations:

**First Place (winner of \$300): W. Luther Jett, for his poem "Sefarad, 1492"**

**Second Place (winner of \$200): Isabelle Medina Sandoval, for her poem "Medina Frontier"**

**Third Place (winner of \$100): Elaine Starkman, for her poem "Jerusalem Again – January, 2001"**

Only one entry was submitted for the Young Writers competition, and our judge was asked to determine whether it deserved a prize. She responded, "Yes, this is, I believe, entirely prize-worthy – concrete, uninflated, interesting and musical in its structure." And so:

**First Place in the Young Writers competition (winner of \$150): Kokasi Keki (age 11), for his poem "Jewish in Africa"**

Our winners deserve hearty congratulations. This was a stiff competition, with many excellent poems, essays, stories and songs submitted.

The winning poem appears on page 5.

## From the President

### Stanford Lyman, z"l

By Jack Zeller

Dr Stanford Lyman, from Boca Raton Florida, has died at the age of 69. He was a sociologist, the Robert J. Morrow Eminent Scholar at Florida Atlantic University. He was also one of Kulanu's earliest supporters, introduced to us by Barbara Shair. He used to assure me that he would ultimately write about the sociology of our communities and our struggles. When I received word of his death, from Carmen Bulthis, she remarked: "He had so much work left to do."

He was interested in race and color, reflected in his award-winning 1994 work, *Color, Culture, Civilization -- Race and Minority Issues in American Society*. His last book, published in 2001, was titled *Roads to Dystonia -- Sociological Essays on the Postmodern Condition*. The book is about the value of social hopes. Much of that applies to us. As we struggle to bring Jews of color and diversity to our closest social, cultural and personal life, we also need more hope, healthy hope, and the energy to make those hopes real in our lifetime. And all the more so in lifetimes to come.

# My Divine Call Into Judaism

By Yisrael Ben Yehudah, PhD

(Editor's note: The author became an official convert to Judaism in April 2003 in Washington, DC. He is a professor of business subjects in Nigeria, the father of five grown children, the builder of a 500-seat synagogue in his village in Nigeria, and the organizer of a Union of 12 synagogues in his region. This article is excerpted from a longer monograph.)

My journey into Judaism has been a divine intervention. It actually started in 1986 after my encounter with Eliyahu Hanavi in a dream. It was in my first dream that I watched the armies of heavens clothed in bronze apparel riding on chariots, armed with swords. In my second spiritual encounter, two towering beings who had girded themselves in *tzitzit* stood on my right and my left to protect me from some spirits that wanted to attack me.

My spiritual experience became more pronounced in 1987 when I encountered some elderly men with long white beards (wearing tunics and *tzitzit*) who led me into a congregation and laid their hands on my head to bless me. Thereafter, in another encounter, I heard voices from the heavens singing this song: *Father my king please lead me home./ The road is dark but thou art light./ Please lead me home Aba Avraham/Lead me home safely home.* As I joined in singing the song, I started a long journey in a desert wearing a shroud (a white garment). The road was very lonely. As I continued to sing the chorus, tears were running in my eyes. Fortunately, the spirit lifted me into the air in order to enhance my speed. I was taught many songs in my dreams.

In many dreams, I rescued people who were drowning on Yom Hamishi. On many occasions I was a fisherman casting nets; my catch was always scaled fishes. Sometimes I would come across many clean fishes washed ashore by waves.

My family started to practice Judaism on August 13, 1988, by keeping our first Shabbat at home. Within the same period I always spoke about my Jewish heritage, welcomed and admired every Jew that lived and worked in Port Harcourt, the large city in Nigeria where I work.

In the spirit, I was going on a journey. I stood by a road waiting for a vehicle. Suddenly, a commuter bus pulled off. I started running after it.

As I got near the boarding door, a man inside the bus held my hand and lifted me into the bus. All the passengers in the bus were white men. They spoke in a language I could not understand. However, I joined in the songs they were singing. Immediately after this, I started to ask how to get in touch with any Jew living in Port Harcourt.

While enquiring how to get in touch with an Israeli from a friend in 1990, I learned about Captain Fartouk of Niger Shipping Lines, who received me warmly asked me to meet Moshe Ginzberg of Motorola to answer some of my religious questions. Moshe invited my wife and me to his home on Friday evening. When I arrived at his house there were other Israelis waiting to receive my wife and me. We were astonished at the warm reception they accorded us. I went home that night with a copy of a pocket Chumash and a copy of an all-Hebrew Haggadah as gifts. The Chumash was autographed by Harav Rishon of Rechovot and is a treasured item with me up till this day. Moshe told me that during the Pesach of 1991 I would be able to read the Haggadah in Hebrew. It seemed to me as a joke.

In return for the kind gesture, I organized a dinner for the 27 Israelis who were residing in Port Harcourt. After the dinner, one Mr. Michael invited my wife and me to his house where, after ritually

cleansing his hands (I did not understand *natilat yadaim* by then), he gave me a *talit qatan*, *talit gadol*, and a *tefillin*. The phylacteries were a gift to him from his father during his Bar Mitzvah. He then put his hand on my head and blessed me and said that he gave me the phylacteries because he knew that I was his Jewish brother.

My first pocket siddur was given me by Mr. Perez Kobby of Galil who was working with an Israeli construction company (BBN) in Port Harcourt. I met Mr. Perez through Moshe Ginzberg.

A turning point came in 1995, when returning from work with my wife one evening. Driving past a police station I saw a white man surrounded by police officers. I told my driver to stop and I stepped out of the car after telling my wife that it seemed to me that the person with the police was a Jew. As soon as I approached the man, I greeted him with *Shalom* and he responded. I then called the officers aside to inquire what was the problem. They told me that the man was under arrest and was to be taken to Maiduiguri in connection with some money he obtained on a contract to build the University of Maiduiguri. *Baruch Hashem*, I was able to close the case, and BenZion Shapiro became a close friend of mine. He introduced me to another Israeli, Mr. David Saidon, Chairman of Sunlight Eletromechanical Ltd., who became my first teacher. He gave me a copy of prayers to pray with him daily. He also taught me how to use the *talit* and the *tefillin*.

Thereafter, I began to read Hebrew prayers in the siddur on my own. I grew gradually in the *Ivrit* of the siddur and the *machzorim* but poor in spoken *Ivrit* even till this day. *Baruch Hashem*, today I can

conduct prayers from the siddur and *machzor* in Hebrew. *Hashem* has also blessed me with the knowledge to transliterate. We have a transliterated copy of both the *Siddur Chadashah* and *Sim Shalom Siddur*, and the *Haggadah* (in mimeograph form and on disk) which we can send to any of our brothers and sisters who do not yet speak *Ivrit*. A climax came in March



Beit Knesset Or Vaderech Yisrael in its building stage

1996, when I published a change in name in the Nigerian Daily Newspaper, *PUNCH*. My former name, Ufot William Essen, was changed to Yisrael Ben Yehudah.

My ambition to visit Yerushalayim and to pray at the *Hakotel Hamaariv* was so strong that I started to save all my income towards the trip. I made my first visit to Eretz Yisrael in 1997. I visited the grave of Rabbi Simeon Ben Gamliel in Rochovot and the tomb of Yakov Avinu. It was a wonderful feeling when I finally arrived at the *Hakotel Hamaariv*. After my morning prayer at the site, I made a prayer request on a small piece of paper and slipped it into the walls. In that prayer, I requested that the Holy One, Blessed be His name, should establish a Jewish community in Nigeria. The prayer has since been answered. *Baruch Hashem!*

During my stay in Israel, I met briefly with Rav Cook in a conference that was attended by American Jews and received a copy of Rav Cook's book *War and Peace* as a gift from Dr. Uriel ben Moshe, an African. I brought back several copies of the Art Scroll Sephardic Siddurim and tallitot, which I distributed to some members of our community. The most precious book I brought back from Israel is the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (in two volumes).

I have been making efforts to build a synagogue in Nigeria since 1989. The first structure I built on the Government's site was taken over by the Rivers State Government. I was relocated to another land

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# LETTERS TO KULANU

## Ibo Greetings

Thank you very much for the Kulanu newsletter. It is encouraging, stimulating and inspiring. Expectedly, Kulanu ("all of us") is an Ibo word too, *Kunuha* or *Kunura*, meaning "all of you." Credible writers have mentioned that Ibo language runs a parallel to Hebrew idiom.

Three categories of Ibos are preparing for the Pesach: The Hebrewists, whose only reason for doing it is, "our fathers did it"; the Sabbatherians, who number over 2 million, practice Judaism, but infuse 5% Christianity in it, I guess to guard against persecution from the Christian majority; lastly those in Rabbinical Judaism. Here in Abuja in three congregations about 70 adults are engaged in the practice of Judaism.

Dr. Jack Zeller of Kulanu and Ahab Elijah both donated very good books and other items to us in Nigeria. Thank you once again for the great job you are doing.

*Remy Ilona*

*President, Nigerian Jewish Friendship Association  
Nigerian coordinator of Ibo-Benei-Yisrael. (along with moderator  
Ahab Elijah in the US)  
Abuja, Nigeria*

## Shabbat in Belmonte

Recently I made a sudden and spontaneous visit to Portugal which included spending Shabbat with the Belmonte community, attending both Friday evening and Saturday morning services. I'm happy to respond in a positive light after having been pleasantly surprised by the full synagogue at the Saturday/Sabbath morning service. Both women and men together with the children filled the synagogue and fully participated in the wonderful and spirited service.

Friday evening (as in many communities throughout the world) the men participated due to the wives/women/mothers getting Shabbat dinner ready, this being a very important part of our Shabbat tradition.

What impressed me was that although the synagogue is an Orthodox one (as is our Sephardic tradition), with women upstairs, the women were very actively involved. They were dressed in a modern way, but covered their heads at the opening of the Ark and were very vocal. They stamped their feet and blew kisses at the Torah (some still in the "old way" of touching their forehead, heart and then lips before blowing kisses). Families (wives and children) stood up when the father read from the Torah. Most of the women had the prayers in both Portuguese and transliterated Hebrew so that they could fully understand. I believe it is not uncommon for the women to shout instructions to the men, if they felt it was needed!!

On Friday evening, with only two of us (women) upstairs, the cup of wine was brought up for us to participate in the Kiddush, and at the Saturday (Shabbat) morning service, each and every woman and girl participated in the same way, with those not wanting to drink the wine smelling it instead.

I found a community who openly and proudly displayed their Jewishness in their new-found freedom. They closed their businesses on Shabbat, walking to the synagogue proudly as a family, greeting their fellow villagers as they passed by with a happy "*bom dia*."

They wore their *Magen David's* proudly round their necks together with kippot, and in a few gardens we saw either a menorah patterned into the driveway or a bush cut into a star of David. The openness and pride they took in displaying this freedom reminded me somewhat of our fellow (black) South Africans, who, after the end of Apartheid, somehow walked taller, feeling the freedom and equality at last achieved in an almost palpable way.

*Rufina Bernardetti Silva Mausenbaum  
Johannesburg, South Africa*

## Caution Urged

Upon returning to Nigeria in April, I was surprised to receive a call from one Dr. Ikedife, a prominent Ibo businessman, whom I had met before. There are conflicting claims by many Nigerians who are dubious and want to use the name of the Holy One to exhort money from innocent citizens. Dr. Ikedife told me how they have been swindled by some groups of Nigerians. It is alleged that over 2000 people paid N10,000.00 each to the members of the group. We are yet to investigate the allegation.

*Yisrael Ben Yehudah  
Port Harcourt, Nigeria*

Our web page <becomingajew.org> is being scrutinized by the Evangelicals. Kulanu should have some articles about the machinations of these groups since you deal with so many people with fused religious identities. Try Jews for Judaism [www.jewsforjudaism.org](http://www.jewsforjudaism.org) for excellent responses to the religious snoops. They are most devious in their methods and Kulanu members should have some knowledge of their tactics.

*Barbara Shair  
New City, NY*

## Xu Xin's Eighth Visit to the US

My eighth visit to the US, accompanied by my dear wife, Kong Defang, was initiated by invitations from Kenyon College, Ohio, and the Skirball Educational Center, Los Angeles, and resulted in travel to 11 cities and the delivery of 25 lectures during a six-week period from the end of January to early March.

Credit -- or blame -- must go to Joseph Alder, of Kenyon, and David Welsh, of Skirball, both of whom had attended the May 2002 International Symposium on the History of Jewish Diasporas in China, which I organized and steered at Nanjing University. Once the word got out about my U.S. foray, many additional invitations for lectures ensued. The result was a very full schedule, although I regretfully had to decline a few invitations because of time limitations.

From the very first week -- on the bitter cold day that I lectured on "China and Israel relations" at Northwestern University in a session organized by the Citywide Faculty and Friends of Hillel -- people kept coming. The surprised Hillel organizer had to add more and more chairs, filling the entire lecture hall. This vivid response exemplified the thirst for such information and foreshadowed all that was to follow. Seeing so many people attend talks renewed my determination to work diligently to further even better understanding between our two peoples: Chinese and Jewish.

As it would take reams of paper to try to replicate the entire experience -- including responses to varied lecture topics which included sessions on "Jewish Diasporas in China," "Judaic Studies in China," "Chinese Policies Towards Judaism" as well as "Israel through Chinese Eyes" -- I must limit this to a few of the highlights. One was the touching experience of speaking at Beth Yeshurun in Texas, with its NASA congregants. This was the American Synagogue for first Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon, who was killed during the Space Shuttle Columbia tragedy.

The climax of the trip, however, came on the eve of my departure for China -- at the Skirball Museum. Over 400 people attended, some arriving over one hour earlier than the time set in order to assure a good seat.

Although many people throughout the country had donated to the planned center for Judaic Studies at Nanjing, the biggest surprise came from a generous couple attending the Skirball talk: Guilford and Diane Glazer. While Mr. Glazer made an announcement during the question and answer period, that he and Diane would provide a "small" gift for the Center for Jewish Studies at Nanjing University, it was, in fact, the biggest single gift the Center has ever received.

# LETTERS

## SEFARAD, 1492

By W. Luther Jett

The Sino-Judaic Institute at Menlo Park, CA, prepared a special afternoon event for over 100 people and presented me with a significant check for Jewish studies programs at the Nanjing Center.

Gary Zola, Executive Director of the Jacob Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, whom I met during my visit to Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, agreed that the Nanjing University Center for Jewish Studies will translate *The American Jew 1585-1990* by Jacob R. Marcus into Chinese. This will be part of the program to commemorate 350 years of American Jewish history with a proposed exhibition on American Jewish experience to China in 2005.

I also had an opportunity to meet the President and Dean of Gratz College and discuss future plans to provide opportunities for our young faculty members to be trained there.

Coincidentally, my second book in English, *The Jews of Kaifeng, China: History, Culture, and Religion* (The KTAV Publishing House Inc., 2003), which discusses the history of an indigenous Jewish community in the city of Kaifeng in China with a focus on its social and religious history, appeared shortly after my arrival in the U.S. It inevitably added excitement and color to my visit and provided interested readers with new material.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank all friends, institutions, and organizations that made this visit possible and successful.

Now, my wife and I are looking forward to our forthcoming trip to Israel, humbly and with equal gratitude, to accept an honorary Doctorate from Bar Ilan University.

*Xu Xin*

*Nanjing, China*

### Passover Greetings from the Lemba

As we will be preparing for the Pesach may we do this to remember and celebrate the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. May we pray for our Jewish heritage, and dispel the evil that is trying to destroy the land of Israel.

*Bono ben-Sadiki*

*Pretoria, South Africa*

### Racism Charged

Not a week goes by that I do not receive passionate e-mails from emerging Jewish communities all over the developing world. In Africa alone, new native communities in Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe and other places are literally pleading with us to send them Jewish teachers, books and religious articles.

We Jews do not have a demographic problem, we have an attitude problem. That problem is called racism, and we need to deal with it directly and forthrightly.

*Moshe Cotel (Kulanu board member)*

*New York, N.Y.*

### My First Synagogue Service

Yesterday I attended my first Shabbat service at Congregation Agudas Achim, where I was warmly welcomed by everyone. I was greeted by Rabbi Samuel Lerer, whom I had visited with a couple of weeks earlier.

Even though I have kept the Sabbath since childhood as a Seventh-Day Adventist, I was quite nervous prior to my arrival at the synagogue. As the service began, I did not feel out of place. I felt at peace knowing I was keeping the Sabbath as my mother had taught me and as my Crypto-Jewish grandparents had done.

I was a little lost trying to follow the Torah reading. As they read in Hebrew, I tried to follow the English translation. I noticed that the cantor, whom I had a chance to introduce myself prior to the service, mentioned that "on this special occasion" he would be saying the page numbers in English. Everyone was helpful to let me know what was going on and what to do when the Torah scrolls were brought around the chapel.

After the service I was invited to join them for a little challah bread and wine. I chatted with the cantor, another rabbi, and a member of the congregation for a while and I was actually the last person to leave [besides the security guard].

I plan on returning and hopefully one day I will be able to read the Torah in Hebrew.

*Salomon Basaldua*

*San Antonio, Texas*

The oak-trees are sighing;  
how their leaves fall, like the tears  
of a young girl,  
who is longing for her lover --  
He has gone to be a sailor.

The wind blows from the hills, down  
through the bright, deserted valleys.  
Where has everybody vanished --  
Everybody who once lived here?

Above the western city-gate  
is a room where I once lay  
in my love's arms;  
now the dust blows in the window,  
and my lover's arms lie empty.

The moonlight casts no shadows  
where the highway crosses over  
a river filled with teardrops  
that is always over-flowing.

The oak-trees are praying;  
how they lift their naked  
limbs to heaven --  
Who will hear their lamentations?  
None are living that might answer.

The white storks are flying;  
how their wings gleam, over the ocean,  
and the sailors, in the morning,  
hear them crying for lost summers.

W. Luther Jett lives in Washington Grove, Maryland, and has published a chapbook of poems and original graphics, "A Leather Dress Fur Mother". His poems have also appeared in a number of journals, including *The GW Review*, *WordWrights*, *Syncopated City*, *Synesthesia*, *ABRAXAS*, *The Burning Cloud Review*, *Middle Class Review*, and *Main Street Rag*, as well as in several journals published on the World Wide Web. In 2001, he received the "Best of Issue" award from *WordWrights!* magazine, and several of his poems have appeared in the Montgomery County (Maryland) Executive Office Building Poetry Gallery. His own website, a multi-media exploration of the Hyper-text medium, can be found at: <http://members.aol.com/magendror/freebird/entrance.htm>

Jett is a member of Adat Shalom Reconstructionist Congregation in Bethesda, Maryland. He was raised in a Protestant family and came to Judaism after a long spiritual and philosophical journey. One of his sisters also converted to Judaism. He says that he thinks it all started when he was around nine or ten years old and his mother started bringing home Challah from the Giant supermarket every weekend!

# Justin and Friends



**Justin Zweifach donated 10 percent of his Bar Mitzvah gift money to the Abayduaya after meeting JJ Keki and Gershom Sizomu in New York. This came to more than \$1000. Yasher koach, Justin!**

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## A Plug for the Hadassah Infant School (cont.)

*(Continued from page 1)*

and wearing crowns in vivid colors. They also learned three Purim songs. For Passover, they will learn/review the Four Questions and other songs. They are also busy creating greeting cards.

The school means so much to the parents and community. For one thing, children who above grade 3 level must attend public schools, in which only Christian prayers are said regularly, but not Jewish prayers. They also must attend some classes on the Saturday. (Even the local Islamic university requires Saturday and Sunday attendance of Jewish students.) They receive no Jewish education at all. The children at Hadassah know more than many new students at the Abayudaya Sunday yeshiva for older students

Both Semei Kakungulu High School and Hadassah Infant School are run by the Abayudaya community, but admit children of all religions. However, there is a commitment to teaching Jewish culture, among other subjects. The schools are special because they are they promote a positive cultural identity; because of the enormous odds against running a school where almost no one can afford tuition (with special praise for Kulanu and other devoted fundraisers); and because the community is committed to education as the main vehicle for breaking the cycle of poverty.

## Practicing in Secret (cont.)

*(Continued from page 1)*

when we buried them. Additionally, it was customary to have a straw broom in the house that would be opened and spread apart below the body of the deceased when, immediately after death, they were placed upon the floor. (This is a Jewish custom that is practiced to this day prior to the arrival of the *Chevra Kadisha*, the Jewish sacred burial society). The body was then washed according to the ritual of our family -- by dressing the person in white linen clothing. And the person would be mourned for seven days.

When we visited a grave, we would place a stone upon it and kick it gently away so that others would not see it directly on top of the headstone. The graves of my relatives are surrounded by these rocks. Even the Catholic cemetery in Cuba has many graves where there are stones placed upon the markers.

She taught her family to try and stay out of the attention of the local priests. Church was to be avoided, attending only when neighbors or distant relatives insisted that we attend a family event. This, she explained, was because the priests had something against our family that had caused them to try to destroy us by burning our relatives at the stake. When we prayed we would use the name "*El Dio*," avoiding the Spanish word "*Dios*" so that we would never become confused and think there was more than one God. We were also strongly cautioned never to pray to the saints or to the Virgin Mary because this was equal to idolatry. The family would even avoid kneeling in front of the large statues of the saints because this was considered "idolatrous." Confession was also frowned upon, since priests were considered men just like us, and only God had the power to forgive us for our sins. In general, the family considered itself Catholic. We did not consider our customs to be religious; they were simply a way of connecting with our ancestors' way of life. My father was raised in that atmosphere and adopted the family customs, especially adhering to them when he married my mother and began a family life.

In 1960, when Fidel Castro's revolution took power in Cuba, my parents had to flee the island to the United States, seeking refuge from the totalitarian state. They, along with a very large number of Cuban exiles, settled in Miami, Florida. Before the Cubans moved there, Jews had lived in the area. By the time my parents established themselves in that part of Miami, the Jewish community had been moving out towards the Miami Beach area. There were still some operating synagogues, however, including the one that my parents eventually attended.

In the 1970s my sister, who was three years old, was diagnosed with Leukemia. This was a devastating blow to my parents. They had very little money for her treatment and were strangers in a new country, lacking even the ability to communicate with others in English. Along with medical care, they sought the help of God. My father began to visit churches and houses of worship of many denominations. One Saturday, as he drove by the synagogue, he decided to enter that place and pray there as well. He felt so comfortable there that he returned many times. During his visits to the synagogue, he saw that the customs that his family had been practicing were incredibly much the same as the ones being practiced by the rest of the congregation. The congregation was officially Orthodox but can best be described by today's standards as a Traditional (Conservadox) congregation. (The *siddur* was Orthodox, and men and women sat separately, but there was no dividing wall between them.) He began to learn more, discovering the history of the Spanish Inquisition and what Anousim, or "Marranos," are. He realized that he was home. After my sister's death our return to Judaism intensified. It is clear to us to this day that the circumstances around her illness were what God had used to draw us near to the Torah and bring us back home to the Jewish People.

As part of our strong return to who we are, my parents enrolled us in *yeshivot* and Jewish Day Schools so that we would be better edu-

*(Continued on page 12)*

# Jews in Central Africa

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Professor Yochanan (Jean) Bwejeri is a member of the Bene-Zagwei clan of the Tutsi people of Burundi. He claims that he is a Jew by birth. His ancestors and the ancestors of all Tutsi were all Jews by birth and not by conversion. Except where I write in the first person, I relate these claims and the facts and opinions upon which they are based as they were told to me by Professor Bwejeri - and as often as possible in his words.

These claims, facts and opinions are in many instances at variance with what we have been taught as Jews. These departures may create difficulties for traditional Jews to accept Professor Bwejeri, his Bene-Zagwei clan and the Tutsi tribe as Jews. Are these departures bridgeable? There are additional issues. Is Professor Bwejeri sincere or is he trying to obtain Jewish support for the Tutsi struggle to survive the genocide committed upon them by the Hutu majority? Are the Tutsi intolerant or are they trying to maintain their distinct religious beliefs and culture in an alien and hostile environment?

Professor Bwejeri appears sincere in his conviction that he is a Jew and that the Tutsi are Jews. Nevertheless, I am not sufficiently knowledgeable in Jewish law, African history or Tutsi attitudes to answer any of the questions that I have posed. But since he has approached us with sincerity and in need, we are obligated to listen, to have open minds, and to welcome if it is appropriate to do so after having listened with open minds.

## **THE HISTORY OF THE TUTSI**

*(As told to me by Prof. Bwejeri)*

The Tutsi people originated in Ethiopia when it was known as Kush and was a Jewish kingdom. There are numerous references to Kush in the Bible. The Jewish kingdom fell in 1270 CE. As a result, several clans, including the Bene-Zagwei clan, moved south and west to an area Bwejeri calls Havila or the African Great Lakes Region, consisting of Burundi, Rwanda, and parts of Uganda, Tanzania and the Congo. In this region, these clans reconstituted the South Kushitic Empire, which lasted from 1270 CE to 1527 CE. In the South Kushitic Empire the laws of Moses were the laws of the land. But it was the laws of Moses as they were remembered through oral transmission. The link between the written Torah and the Tutsi was broken with their departure from Ethiopia.

Beginning about 1880, Catholic missionaries arrived in the South Kushitic Empire. A period of conflict began between the Tutsi who sought to remain faithful to their Tutsi religion and the missionaries -- a conflict that lasted well into the 20th century. The military tide turned in favor of the missionaries when German forces entered the land and occupied it. Still the Tutsi resisted conversion. The missionaries found success only among the Hutu "*gerim*". Because of Tutsi resistance and Hutu acceptance of Catholicism, Tutsi land was confiscated and given to Hutu "squatters". This is the origin of the conflict between the Tutsi and the Hutu.

About the time of World War I, Belgium became the colonial ruler of Rwanda, Burundi and Kivu (eastern Congo), which were in the historic domain of the Tutsi. Under the Belgians, the Catholic Church "began to destroy methodically the basis of the Tutsi Jewish religion." Rwanda, Burundi and Kivu were separated and placed under different figureheads. The Jewish Rwandan King was exiled, and his converted son placed on his throne. An annual gathering of Tutsi lasting eight days used to take place in what is now Rwanda. The Catholic hierarchy noted that the rituals of the festival were in accordance with the Old Testament rites of Sukkoth, and in 1917 the festival was banned by the Belgians.

The Jewish Tutsi King of Burundi managed to survive by subterfuge. One of his descendants, King Mwambutsa, was the first African sovereign to recognize the State of Israel and make a pilgrimage -- "a

symbolic aliyah" -- to Jerusalem. Nevertheless, one hundred years of "Inquisition and terrorism annihilated" the Tutsi ancient Jewish faith.

## **THE GENOCIDE**

In 1993, the Tutsi of Burundi were slaughtered by the Hutu in the hundreds of thousands, and over a million were killed in Rwanda. Bwejeri is a Tutsi from Burundi.

The Tutsi of Rwanda were able to reorganize to expel the murderous Hutu bands. Today a Tutsi army rules Rwanda, but security is still a problem. In Burundi the situation is much worse for the Tutsi; the Hutu are in control. Although the slaughter has abated, Bwejeri is of the opinion that in the "coming months," the Tutsi of Burundi will face a new "shoah."

The Tutsi have left the Burundi countryside for the towns and cities where they live in "ghettos" for their mutual protection. Should a Tutsi venture out of the protected enclaves, the male would be murdered and the female raped and enslaved. Bwejeri introduced me to his cousin, Joseph, living in the U.S.A. Joseph's brother was ambushed by Hutus while driving in convoy from one town to the next. Joseph returned to Burundi to attend his brother's funeral, but because of the danger did not take his wife -- who has not seen her parents for 15 years -- or his children - who have never seen their grandparents or their homeland.

Bwejeri blames an "International Catholic Network" for supporting the Catholic Hutus in the goal of ridding the country of Tutsis. He blames the Network for being behind the "Arusha Agreements" which called for Tutsi participation in a Hutu led government. According to Bwejeri, these agreements are a "pretext" to establish a system of anti-Tutsi laws and are the prelude to the physical eradication of the "Tutsi Hebraic people."

The plot also includes African "Bantu" forces who have allied themselves with the Hutu. In particular, he singles out the South African "Bantu" Army sent by Nelson Mandela to Burundi. With their dollars they buy the sexual favors of Tutsi women or take them by force. The result is that the virus which causes AIDS has spread from South Africa, where it is widespread to the Tutsi, where it was unknown.

Tutsi women are "unusually graceful." They have never intermarried with the Bantu peoples around them, but are much desired by them. The Tutsi features of both men and women are distinct and therefore an "identity card" for those who want to prey upon them. The refusal to intermarry with the Bantu is but one of the ways the Tutsi have respected the laws of Moses (Deut 7:3-4). The Tutsis and the Hutus are now, and always have been, different people.

I am troubled by Bwejeri's emphasis upon separation of the Tutsi from those Africans he calls Bantu. One of his objections to the Catholic Church is that it supported intermarriage between the Tutsi and the Hutu. Is this objection racial or religious? Jewish history has taught us that intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews where Jews are a minority generally results in assimilation and absorption into the majority population. To my mind, our Jewish objection to intermarriage is religious, not racial; it would not apply to a marriage between a born Jew and a Jewish convert no matter what the race or origin of the convert.

Bwejeri's emphasis upon separation for the Tutsi sometimes has the same religious basis as the Jewish objection to intermarriage and sometimes not. He has written to me that a non-Tutsi can become a part of the Tutsi people and marry with a Tutsi if he or she adopts Tutsi customs and "converts in the Jewish Tutsi religion and law." Very few Hutu converted to the "Jewish Tutsi religion" because the Tutsi priests "avoided proselytism and prohibited forced conversion."

*(Continued on page 14)*

# KULANU BRIEFS

## Jewish Refugees from Arab Lands

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an estimated 900,000 Sephardic Jews were forced to flee the Arab countries where they had lived for more than 2,000 years. Hundreds of Jews were killed in pogroms (*farhoud* in Arabic) or hanged as alleged Zionist spies. Israel's Jewish population more than doubled between 1948 and 1951 as Holocaust survivors and Jews from Arab lands poured into the fledgling state. Because this story remains largely unknown even within the Jewish community, the American Sephardi Federation, the World Sephardic Congress, and other organizations have been sponsoring symposia on "Jews from Arab States: A Forgotten Exodus." Symposia have been held recently in Washington, San Francisco, Paris and Montreal. In addition to providing education, organizers distribute claim forms to those who want to document losses of real estate, businesses and other property. For information see <http://www.jewishrefugees.org/>.

## For Jews of Portuguese Heritage

In addition to <http://www.saudades.org>, the Saudades Portuguese-Jewish History site, those of Crypto-Jewish descent seeking to celebrate and discuss their Portuguese-Jewish heritage can join the 500 already participating in the Saudades-Sefarad Forum (membership is restricted to those with Bnai Anousim heritage). The address is <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/saudades-sefarad/>. Both the web site and the Forum were established by Rufina Bernardetti Silva Mausenbaum.

## A Dialogue with Anousim

A dialogue with Portuguese and Spanish Anousim ("forced ones") who reclaimed their Jewish heritage was held March 25 at New York's 92nd Street Y. Moderated by Alan M. Tigay, executive editor of Hadassah Magazine, the participants were Yaffah da Costa, executive consultant and writer who grew up in the Portuguese community of New Bedford, Massachusetts; Maria Victor-Smith, a New Jersey artist born and raised in Portugal; and Rabbi Manny Vifias, whose Cuban family returned to Judaism when he was a child.

## Jewish Multiracial Network Retreat

The Jewish Multiracial Network was scheduled at press time to hold its annual retreat May 15-17 at Surprise Lake Camp in Cold Spring, NY. Its mission: "to build a community of Jews of color and multiracial Jewish families for mutual support, learning, and empowerment." Contact [amyjmnetwk@aol.com](mailto:amyjmnetwk@aol.com) or tel. 212-924-3131.

## Genealogy Conference in DC This Summer

The Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington (JGSGW) invites genealogists of all levels and interests to attend the 23rd Annual International Conference, July 20-25, 2003, at the JW Marriott Hotel in Washington, DC. A special panel on Bnai Anousim, to be moderated by Jonina Duker, will feature Clara Castelar and Ana Kurland, returnees to Judaism, talking about their family histories of Crypto-Judaism. For information visit [www.JewishGen.org/DC2003](http://www.JewishGen.org/DC2003).

## A Multiracial Evening in the Bay Area

An Institute for Jewish & Community Research gathering in San Francisco in April enjoyed a "Multiracial Exodus Evening." Ethiopian/Israeli comedian Yossi Vassa performed a program titled "It Sounds Better in Amharic." (His performance was cancelled at Yale because he is Israeli.) Yossi and another young Ethiopian comedian, Shmuel, are the subjects of a documentary, "Flour and Videotapes," by Avishai Mekonen. Diane Tobin of IJCR calls the documentary a "humorous and poignant" film that provides a fascinating look at life

in the Ethiopian community in Israel. For information about getting a copy of this video, email Avishai at: [AvishaiMekonen@Yahoo.com](mailto:AvishaiMekonen@Yahoo.com).

## Matzot for the Bnei Menashe in India

Thanks to the organization Amishav, the Bnei Menashe in India, who claim descent from a lost tribe of Israel, celebrated Passover this year the traditional way: with kosher provisions sent from Israel. The shipment included over 100 kilograms of matzah and dozens of bottles of kosher for Passover wine. Rabbi Boaz Pash, Amishav's emissary to the Bnei Menashe, conducted a traditional Passover Seder for the community at the organization's Hebrew Center, located in Mizoram's capital of Aizawal. Local government ministers, in addition to over 200 members of the Bnei Menashe, attended.

## Speakers Spread the Word

April 5, 2003, was an unofficial Kulanu Shabbat in the Washington, DC area. Following his conversion by a *Beit Din* convened by **Rabbi Howard Gorin**, Yisrael ben Yehudah spoke about Nigerian Jewry at Tikvat Israel Synagogue in Rockville, MD. **Rabbi Philip Pohl**, a member of that *Beit Din*, spoke about Yehudah's story at his synagogue, B'nai Shalom of Olney, MD. And **Karen Primack** spoke about Abayudaya women at a special Sisterhood Shabbat at Shaare Tefilah Congregation in Silver Spring, Maryland. (She gave the talk a month later at Beth Torah Congregation in Hyattsville, MD.)

On May 10, **Dr. Gloria Mound** was scheduled to be the weekend scholar-in-residence at the Lincoln Park Jewish Center in Yonkers, NY. Her topic: "Judaism Never Dies! The Anusim/Marranos of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions."

**Hillel Halkin** gave a fascinating and compelling speech about his book *Across the Sabbath River – In Search of a Lost Tribe of Israel* on May 3 at Washington Hebrew Congregation. He encouraged scholars to build on the evidence he has uncovered about the Bnei Menashe of northeastern India.

## Join the Kulanu List

After a brief interruption, the Kulanu Discussion List is active again. To join, contact [kulanu-list-subscribe@yahoo.com](mailto:kulanu-list-subscribe@yahoo.com). Our thanks to moderators Ray Kaplan, Tamu Ngina, and Harriet Bograd.

## The Loja Jews of Ecuador

Jesse Glickstein, a student at New College in Sarasota, Florida, spent three months in Ecuador doing research for his senior thesis. While interviewing many of the members of the Jewish community he heard of a group in poor, isolated Loja, in the south of Ecuador, who identify as Jews and have wanted to formally convert for many years. They follow many customs, give their children Jewish names, read our Bible, and practice many of the holidays. They have not attracted the interest of the Jewish community in Quito, but the cantor did invite them to attend a Seder in Quito if they could pay for it. Jesse raised funds for several members of the Loja community to travel to Quito to attend the Seder. He wants to eventually establish an outreach to the Loja community through which those who want to may formally convert and to help them establish an economic means to raise their standard of living. Jesse can be reached at [eljefe1234@yahoo.com](mailto:eljefe1234@yahoo.com).

## Poll: Most Israelis Favor Outreach to Anousim

According to an Amishav poll, a majority of Israelis believe the government should actively assist descendants of Spanish Marranos, or Anousim, seeking to return to Judaism. About 59% of Israelis are in favor of helping Marrano descendants, or Bnai Anousim, who wish to return to the Jewish people. Just 24% said they were opposed, while 17% expressed no opinion. Michael Freund, Director of Amishav and

# KULANU BRIEFS

a *Jerusalem Post* columnist, noted, "This is the first time, as far as we know, that anyone has sought to gauge what the Israeli public thinks about reaching out to the descendants of Spanish Jewry who were forcibly converted over 500 years ago." As part of its outreach work, *Amishav* runs a Spanish-language conversion and return institute in Jerusalem, where some 50 students, many of them descendants of Iberia's secret Jews, study annually. Upon completion of the course, graduates undergo formal conversion by Israel's Chief Rabbinate.

## American Sephardi Federation Invites Memberships

The American Sephardi Federation and its cultural division Sephardic House sponsor a number of programs, activities and publications. For instance, they have established a Sephardic/Greek Holocaust Library, and recently held a Sephardic Experience Weekend celebrating the Jews from Egypt. See [www.sephardichouse.org](http://www.sephardichouse.org) or, to become a member, send a donation of at least \$36 to American Sephardi Federation, 15 West 16<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10011.

## Seeking Rhodes Jewish Survivors And Other Projects

Isaac Dostis, founder and director of the Greek Jewry museum at Kehilia Kedosha Janina in New York, has left the museum to pursue other projects. One is a children book, *Ten Gold Medals: Glory or Freedom*, about his uncle, who won ten gold medals in competitions in Greece only to have to use them to save his family during the Holocaust. Dostis hopes it will be published in Greek, English and Hebrew by 2004, when the Olympics open in Athens. A film company in California has optioned the story for the screen.

He has completed two documentary films about Greek Jews who suffered during the Holocaust – *Farewell My Island* (about Corfu) and *We Are Not Alone: Greek Jews and the Holocaust* – and is proposing a new film, *Auschwitz: The Return Trip from Rhodes*. Dostis is seeking to interview Rhodes survivors, particularly survivors of the tortuous WWII trip – a boat trip to Athens into the Haidari Camp and up the rail system into Auschwitz. Dostis and at least one survivor will follow the route August 5-17, visiting Jewish communities in Belgrade, Budapest and Krakow. As he puts it, "The project needs participants, interviewees and money." Contact him at [act1presents@aol.com](mailto:act1presents@aol.com) or tel 973-984-6618 or PO Box 333, Lake Hiawatha, NJ 07034 USA.

## A Kulanu Style Megillah Reading

Beth Chayim Chadashim congregation in Los Angeles celebrated Purim by reading the Megillah in multiple languages, including Russian, Hungarian, French, Hebrew, Yiddish, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese, Ladino, English, American sign language, and Afrikaans.

## Challah Cover Proceeds

According to David Ahenkorah, spiritual leader of the Jewish community in Sefwi Wiawso, Ghana, proceeds from the sales of their handsome challah covers (see [www.kulanuboutique.com](http://www.kulanuboutique.com)) has paid for the training of three women in batik and tie-dyeing. After they pass their training, under an employee of the Agricultural Development Bank, they will train the rest of the women and young girls in the community.

## When To Light Candles?

Have you ever wondered how the Jews in Kumasi, Ghana, or Kaifeng, China, know what time to light their Shabbat candles? The Hebcal website <<http://www.hebc.com/help/candles.html#geo>> lets people figure out candle-lighting times by entering a latitude and longitude. We hope to soon have the latitudes and longitudes of Kulanu's far-flung communities on the Kulanu web page.

## Refuah Schlema

To **Joe Davidson**, a volunteer internet consultant for Kulanu, who is recovering from surgery.

To **Morris Feder** in New York City.

## Condolences

**Herbert Sobol**, 83, died in Massachusetts in February. He was the father of Abayudaya photographer and writer Richard Sobol.

**Michael Engel** passed away in Chicago in April. He was buried in the Abayudaya kippah he wore at the marriage of his daughter Jennifer and son-in-law Brian Primack in October 2001.

## Mazal Tov

To **Debra Gonsler Vinik** and **David Vinik**, whose documentary *Faith First: Second Career Clergy* has been nominated for a 2003 Emmy. The program featured, among others, Moshe Cotel, who retired from a professorship at Peabody to study for the rabbinate. The Viniks have recently completed a documentary about the Beit Din trip to the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda entitled *Moving Heaven and Earth*.

To **Moshe Cotel**, who was invited to do several performances of *Chronicles* (his rabbinic piano recital) at the Los Angeles Jewish Music Festival, as well as his extended solo piano fantasy, *Haftarah* (which is based on the haftarah trope)

To **Gloria and Leslie Mound**, who recently became great-grandparents of a beautiful little boy, **Daniel**.

## Today Rabah!

To **Rabbi Howard Gorin** for his tireless efforts in speaking and fund-raising for the Abayudaya. His efforts in recent months have yielded over \$3000.

To **Cantor Adina H. Frydman** and Abraham Joshua Heschel High School for raising \$1000 for the education of the Ugandan Jewish community. The students raised the money through several Adar-related fundraising activities, including daily tzedakah, selling *mish-loach manot*, staging a dance for which donors sponsored students to dance, and collections during the Megillah reading (*machazit hashekel*).

To **Ally Heller** of North Hollywood, who selected Kulanu as one of the ten charities she donated to in honor of her bat mitzvah.

To **Jerry Rumain** and **Nick Russo**, who made a donation in honor of their Seder host, **Irwin Berg**. Nicer than a bottle of wine!

To these donors of \$1000 and more: **Rabbi Scott L. Glass, Dr. Marc T. & Susan Gold Platt, World Council of Synagogues, Tikvat Israel Congregation, The Abraham Joshua Heschel School**.

To donors of \$500 - 999: **Sam Taddesse, Cantor Joel Caplan, Fair Lawn Jewish Center Men's Progress Club, Ziv Tzedakah Fund, Margot & Fred Kann**.

To donors of \$150 - \$499: **West End Synagogue, David and Ellen Scheinfeld, B'nai Shalom of Olney Sisterhood, Harriet Bograd & Kenneth Klein, Jewish Residents of Leisure World, Julius & Barbara Shair, Jon and Paula Mack Drill, Randy Settenbrino, Lenore & Morris Levin**.

To the \$100 club: **Marvin and Sandra Berman, Robert Weiner, Sharon Young, Dr. Stanley Azen, Mr. & Mrs. Sherman & Rita Shapiro, Debbie & Mark Glotter, Temple Beth El, Jack & Stephanie Ventura**.



# A 1929 Account of the “Hindu Jews”

*(Editors note: Erna and Sam Daniel of New York sent us an article by Wolfgang von Weisel, “The Hindu Jews,” that was published 74 years ago (August 30, 1929), in the American Hebrew. The author, who is referred to as “a famous globe-trotter,” relates his experiences visiting the B’nei Israel (whom we now refer to as the Bene Israel) of India. He sounds very much like a Kulanu person! Here are some excerpts from the article.)*

One of the most interesting Jewish communities I have ever seen is the community of the Bnei Israel. The most interesting thing is how these Jews try to adapt themselves to Hindu life, which in its essence is so foreign to the Jewish spirit.

They observe the Sabbath very strictly, they light no fire, do not cook, do not light candles, do not carry money, do not write, but do travel on Saturday in cars and trains.

With regard to kosher dietetic laws, they are much stricter than European Jews. From this point of view they approach more closely the Abyssinian Jews – the “Falashas.” The B’nei Israel maintain “Shochets” for slaughtering cattle, while among the Abyssinian Jews it is only the Rabbis who do the slaughtering. However, both Abyssinian Jews and the B’nei Israel do not eat food cooked by Christians or Mohammedans.

The fact that Abyssinian Jews (who have been removed from the Palestinian and European Jews practically for as long a time as the B’nei Israel, and who up to thirty years ago had been unaware entirely that there were still other Jews in the world besides themselves) observe the same laws of kosher dietetics, proves that they have a common genuine Jewish origin.

They haven’t even their own Rabbi, and whenever they have need of one or need a Chazan they have to invite him from among the “white Jews” of Cochin or Baghdad.

Their biggest pleasure is to give donations to the synagogue, which is their second home and towards which they signify great esteem.

A great part of the B’nei Israel are very embittered against the Zionist Organization, which has recourse to them only for money, sends them pamphlets and pictures for propaganda among the school youth, but does not think even of transferring any part of them to Palestine.

“They want only our money but do not want us,” I was once told by the President of the Community, Mr. Shlomo Moses, in the presence of all the members of the committee, and I was under the impression that all agreed with him.

I promised the B’nei Israel as well as the Arabian Jews to remind the world of their existence, and I want to keep my promise. It is painful to see how great and important Jewish communities on the eastern and southern sides of the Suez Canal are becoming removed from all the other Jews and dulled in their spiritual and religious life, only because there is missing the link which should attach them to the living spirit of European Judaism. We cannot help all the other Jewish communities in Asia in the same way, but we could very easily and very simply help the Jews of Bombay. I promised them also to try to create a possibility for two young men – one from the Arabian Jews and the other from the B’nei Israel – to come over to Palestine and study for a few years in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in order later to be able to undertake the position of Chazan in Bombay.

The Hindu Jews will help themselves too. They are looking now for a religious-minded teacher who could also teach Jewish history and Hebrew, and introduce sports into the schools. The question of money, however, stands in the way.

I should be very happy if I could help them to muster the necessary funds to enable two Jewish young men to study in the Hebrew

University in Jerusalem and thus help in the raising of the spiritual and material standard of the young generation.

Before concluding I should like to dwell a moment upon the question of transferring five or six families to Palestine. Undoubtedly, the matter is somewhat difficult, particularly if we take into consideration the attitude of the Palestinian Jews: that 90 per cent of the Jews all over the world, with the exception of 40,000 Abyssinian Jews, 10,000 Hindu Jews and perhaps a few thousand Chinese Jews, belong to the white race so that a mass immigration of colored Jews might weaken the political position of the Jews in Palestine.

But these Jews could be of very great use. The Jewish wood-carvers of Bombay are known all over Asia for their skill.... Alongside the Palestinian carpet industry of Boukharian Jews, the filigree industry of the Yemenite Jews and the textile industry of the Jews of Lodz there could also be created a new industry of carved furniture.

Since the awakening of Jewish nationalism, the Hindu Jews are beginning to complain of the change which is now being observed in the attitude towards them. Whenever there is need of candidates for an official position, the Moslems appoint only Moslems. The Hindus carry on propaganda to buy only from Hindus.... It is true that the B’nei Israel state their claim to be helped to immigrate to Palestine is purely a moral claim but, in an invisible way, the fear manifests itself among them that the anti-Semitism which has started to operate also in India may spread more and more and the question arises: What will be then?

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## Purim in Orlando



*Purim was celebrated for the first time this year by Congregation Kehilat Beit Israel of Orlando, Florida. Founded by Yosef Mont in 2002 (see Kulanu Newsletter, Autumn 2002), this congregation of Anousim was formerly messianic and now has returned to Judaism. (Photo by Amichai Heppner)*

# PUBLICATIONS OF NOTE

► **Elaine Romero's** new play, *Secret Things*, was featured in a reading in New York on April 8. The play involves a cynical journalist who returns to her hometown to disprove the claims of New Mexicans who say they are descended from Spanish Jews, only to find faith in her own Sephardic legacy, to be pulled into the world of the Kabbalah, and possibly to find her capacity for love.

► *Ruby of Cochin*, the book by **Ruby Daniel** and **Barbara C. Johnson**, has just come out in paperback. The book is a memoir of a Jewish woman in Cochin, Kerala, India, but it also contains historical legends and folk tales, descriptions of Jewish celebrations, and translations of women's songs from the local language of Malayalam.

► In a page-one article in the April 10 *Washington Jewish Week*, **Stacey Schultz's** "Visions of Judaism" reports on the conversion of a Nigerian, Yisrael Ben Yehuda, to Judaism.

► A *New York Times* article on February 19 featured the Abayudaya community, with two pictures, on page A6. **Marc Lacey's** "600 Ugandans Struggle for Recognition by Israel as Jews" highlighted the shortage of marriageable Jewish men in Uganda.

► In an article in *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* on November 28, 2002, entitled "Many Jews Reconnecting with Roots this Holiday," **Steve Heisler** wrote about the return to Judaism of Frank Rodriguez of Bradenton, Florida. After attending a synagogue lecture by Dr. Gloria Mound, an Israeli scholar who founded Casa Shalom Institute for Marrano-Anusim Studies, the Catholic Hispanic decided to return to his Jewish roots. His supportive rabbi at Temple Beth-El is Barbara Aiello, herself a descendant of Anusim.

► The Spring 2003 issue of *Casa Shalom Journal*, edited by **Dr. Gloria Mound**, features articles on a Majorca family, a Puerto Rican returnee, Anusim in Colonial America, Balearic Jewish customs, and a secret brotherhood of priests during the Inquisition. To subscribe, see [www.casa-shalom.com](http://www.casa-shalom.com).

► The Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women at Brandeis University (HIRIJW), together with the American Sephardi Federation, have co-published *Jewish Women from Muslim Societies Speak*, a collection of personal essays on Jewish life in Egypt, Iran, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco and Turkey. The free publication includes a program guide for planning community programs. To order a copy email [hirijw@brandeis.edu](mailto:hirijw@brandeis.edu) or call 781-735-2064.

► *Hidden Heritage: The Legacy of the Crypto-Jews*, a new book by **Janet Liebman Jacobs**, is an ethnography of contemporary descendants of Iberian Crypto-Jews struggling with identity issues. Its contents suggests it will be of great interest to a healthy segment of Kulanu readers:

*Introduction. Crypto-Jewish Descent: An Ethnographic Study in Historical Perspective*

1. *Secrecy, Antisemitism, and the Dangers of Jewishness*
2. *Women and the Persistence of Culture: Ritual, Custom, and the Recovery of Sephardic Ancestry*
3. *The Self-in-Relation and the Transformation of Religious Consciousness*
4. *Syncretism and Faith Blending in Modern Crypto-Judaism*

5. *Conversion and the Rekindling of the Jewish Soul*
6. *Jewish Ancestry and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity*

*Conclusion. Ethnic Loss and the Future of Crypto-Jewish Culture*

► **Paul Wieder** wrote a very favorable review of the new Abayudaya CD, *Abayudaya Music of Worship and Celebration* in the online Jewish Jukebox on [JewishWorldReview.com](http://JewishWorldReview.com). The CD is attached to the book *Abayudaya: The Jews of Uganda* by Richard Sobol. The review reads in part:

*Their music is much like that found on Paul Simon's "Graceland," in both its sprightly guitar picking and haunting choirs... Their second release is "Music of Worship and Celebration." The first 13 tracks are prayers done with the whole choir- including children- singing a cappella in close harmony, ending up somewhere between gospel and madrigal. The final seven songs, also prayerful in content, are accompanied by breezy guitars and playful synths. These tracks are a breath of tropical air. "We Are Happy" one highlight, is a Purim song, and like the others, is done in a light reggae style, more like Jimmy Cliff or Ziggy Marley than Peter Tosh or Bob Marley.*

► **Loolwa Khazzoom's** op-ed piece, "American, Iraqi, Jewish," appeared in the Feb. 2 *Washington Post*. In it, she discusses her move from America to Israel at a time of frequent suicide bombings. As a Middle Eastern Jew in America, she wrote, she never fit into the perceived Jewish mould or the Middle Eastern community of Arab Muslims and Christians. In Israel, she and her fellow Mizrahim (Jews indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa) are the majority Jewish population. And, as founder of the Jewish MultiCultural Project, "I just wanted to be in the place where the international Jewish story would be all around me."

► The March 27 edition of the *Washington Jewish Week* featured two brief items of special interest to Sephardim. Some 1000 medieval Hebrew manuscripts have been found hidden inside other books in Girona, Spain. Also, a memorial plaque in Ladino was unveiled at Auschwitz in memory of 150,000 Ladino speakers who died during the Shoah.

► "Africa Comes to Heschel High," by history teacher **Lisa Epstein**, appeared in the *Heschel News* on February 7. The article recounted the visit of Abayudaya leaders J.J. Keki and Gershom Sizomu to the school. "Even as we listened to Gershom and J.J. singing *Ma tovu* and *Lekha dodi* in the gentle melodies used in their community, we began to think of ways to reach out and help this branch of the Jewish family," she wrote.

► "Are Their Waiting Days Over?" asks **Steve Lipman** in a February 7 article in *The NY Jewish Week*. It discusses the so-called Falash Mura waiting in Ethiopia to make aliyah to Israel. The article also mentions the Abayudaya of Uganda, Jews by choice rather than roots, who are waiting for recognition by Israel.

► A *Forward* article on February 28 by **Daniel Treiman** reported on Xu Xin's recent speaking tour of the US. The title was: "Far East of Eden, a Scholar's Fascination with the Jews."

# Practicing Judaism in Secret (cont.)

(Continued from page 6)

cated and be able to live fully Jewish lives. My father was a construction worker during the day and agreed to serve as the school's handyman after work in exchange for a reduction in tuition. Their love of Torah and Jewish life was so deep that all I ever learned was to love being a Jew and appreciate the opportunity that I had in living a fully Jewish life. This feeling is especially true if you understand that for the past 500 years, my ancestors loved the same thing and could only wish in their souls to be able to live the life that I live now. The freedom that my family and I have in America to be Jews is the reward we have received from the faith of my ancestors. To this day, I thank God for having allowed my family to live in a country that encourages each person to live according to his own conscience and I realize that had it not been for the freedoms that this country has granted us, we may have never found our way home to what our ancestors wished us to be.

In attending *yeshivot*, I had many good times and many bad times. In my studies I came across a lot of discrimination and misunderstanding of my ancestry. Too many times in front of me, I would listen to discussions regarding people who were "crazy" and had converted to Judaism. Others suspected that converts had joined the Jewish people only for marriage and others thought it was for "money." Few knew the real reason for many conversions, including mine -- that. Judaism is sweet, deeply mystical, romantic and holy and has an all-encompassing lifestyle that calls to you from the deepest part of your soul. Few seemed to know that the Jewish soul seeks you out gently but persuasively. That you can ignore it for a while but it gnaws at you, remembering you and following you from generation to generation. That it is constantly offering you an opportunity to remember and participate in its many blessings. I realized that those who did not have these feelings suffered from a form of self-denigration, probably as a product of having lived for so long among enemy cultures that sought to degrade them; or they were simply the kind of people who practiced Judaism but if given the choice would never consciously select the lifestyle. In other words, they themselves would have never converted to Judaism. Through my experiences with the Jewish community and my Torah learning I have become convinced that Jews need to reconvert or renew their commitment to the faith of their fathers, just as converts today choose to join the Jewish people.

I sought out every opportunity to learn more Torah. When I moved to New York I began studying at Yeshiva University and decided that I wanted to become a *sofer*, a scribe of Torah, *Tefillin* and *Mezuzot*. I was blessed with an excellent teacher and was later ordained (given *Kabalah* in *Sofrut*.) by Yeshiva University. I continued practicing as a scribe and working as a Social Worker in the Latino communities of New York City, especially in the Bronx. I met my wife Erica and we established a happy home together. We now have three daughters.

Three years ago, I accepted a job as a Jewish educator at a Jewish community center. After a few weeks there, the purpose of my work became evident. I was asked by a board member (Judy Underberg) to read an email that had been sent seeking help from a scribe. It told the story of a small synagogue in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, that had been ravaged by Hurricane Mitch. It described a Torah scroll that had been found in four feet of mud around what was left of the synagogue. Could he find a scribe somewhere in New York City who would be willing to evaluate the status of the Torah and determine what could be done, if anything, to save it? I accepted the job right away! My uncle lives in Tegucigalpa, along with my cousin and his family. My aunt had died a year earlier and had been buried there. I thought that this would be an excellent opportunity to do a favor for the community as a tribute to her memory.

The Underbergs and I organized a volunteer group that would work on the Torah. We saw that it was going to be a huge job but decided to take it on anyway, seeing that it was a 150-year-old scroll

from Hungary and that it would serve as a symbol for the community of its ability to rebuild. Twice a week forty volunteers gathered around the scroll and cleaned it, removing the mud and mold. We reshaped the crinkled parchment and repainted it. We separated some of the panels, cleaned the seams, and re-sewed them. We sanded the Torah poles and re-stained them. An entire year went by. The next year, I began working on filling in the letters that were broken or erased. It took an entire year to return it to Kosher status. *The New York Times* and many other media covered the story. It was also featured in many Spanish language publications.

After the publicity, I began to get calls from Spanish-speaking Jews who were seeking a place for Jewish activities in Spanish. They could tell from the stories that I was a native Spanish speaker and many of the stories had provided some of my family background. Many of the calls were from people of "Marrano" descent. I decided to begin a group that would help people re-connect with Judaism in Spanish.

The name of the group is "El Centro de Estudios Judios--Torat Emet." Our group has begun to grow. We now have an active mailing list of over 200 families. With the help of Rabbi Weiss of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale, we now meet at his synagogue. I was also awarded a two-year fellowship by Joshua Venture, a San Francisco-based organization that provides seed capital and training for young Jews who are building innovative nonprofit organizations. The congregation has developed a web site and activities that provide Jewish events for learning and celebrating in Spanish. The congregation is made up of Jews from Ashkenazic and Sephardic backgrounds from all over Latin America, including Argentina, Mexico, Guatemala, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Ecuador, Colombia and Peru. It is organized in the style of a *Bet Midrash* (house of learning), which means that most of our activities are centered on "learning spirituality." We now meet twice a week for activities and all are welcome to participate. We also email lessons and communicate with 25 different families throughout Latin America who are seeking to return to Judaism.

Those of us who are building "El Centro" have so many dreams. One of the most exciting is an outreach entitled *El Instituto Para Regresar al Judaismo*, the Institute for the Return to Judaism. We envision this outreach beginning in the United States at first and then, with proper funding, to Latin America -- especially in Dominican Republic, where we have many contacts and there is a growing interest.

As part of this project, we will collect stories and interviews with families that, to this day, practice *costumbres familiares* and will help them find their way home to Judaism.

Our motivation is two-fold. The first is an intimate and deeply personal feeling that it would be a shame if we were the only ones to have found our way home and left the others behind. And the second motivation is that the Jewish people need *chizuk*, strengthening. We believe that all who come in contact with this part of "Jewish-ness" will better understand their own Jewish-ness and gain a fuller picture of our people and our culture.

As the project grows we are seeking help. We need contacts to other communities, and to individuals and professionals who can help. We also need funding to support our work. Any kind of help, including a *Yasher Koach* or *Hazak Ubaruch*, is appreciated.

El Centro De Estudios Judios Torat Emet

P.O. Box 630043

Bronx New York 10463

[rabino@centrojudio.org](mailto:rabino@centrojudio.org)

[www.centrojudio.org](http://www.centrojudio.org)



# Divine Call into Judaism (cont.)

(Continued from page 3)

measuring approximately 8 plots. Unfortunately, our Israeli brothers who were taken to the site complained that it was outside the metropolis. Thus, I did not utilize the property. I reapplied for another location. The Government allocated another 7 plots of land for the building of the synagogue. I immediately started to put up a temporary structure at the site. Unfortunately, the workers were attacked by some people who claimed that the land did not belong to the Government. They destroyed the structure and vandalized our building materials.

This experience motivated me to conceive of building the synagogue in my village, where I have enough property about one hour's drive from Port Harcourt. Fortunately, in April 2000, during the eight days of the Pesach, I was able to lay the foundation in my village of the first synagogue that I know of in Nigeria in: *Beit Knesset Or Vade-rech Yisrael. Baruch Hashem*, the building has been completed and is at the stage of putting the necessary fittings and fixtures.

I consider the building of our 500-seat synagogue a miracle. By March 2000 my monthly take home pay was US\$200.00 (N23,000.00). Surprisingly, in May 2000, the Federal Government approved a new salary structure for the Nigerian university academic staff. My income rose to N84,000.00 (approximately, US\$800.00). Within the same period, I received additional income of about US\$4,000.00 from projects. I am a statistician specializing in data analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). I immediately became a consultant to more than 50 graduate students, earning additional income which I invested in the synagogue project. I have built the synagogue purely with my income without any assistance from anybody, in fulfillment of the vow I made to the Holy One that I shall not build my personal house until I build a place for His glory. In addition to the synagogue we built two bungalows of four-bedrooms each. This is a miracle, for I don't know where my income has come from!

My excitement came a crescendo in April 2002. I arrived in New York April 10, 2002, with my two college-bound children, Mirian and Michael. When I arrived at Kew Gardens for a brief stopover, I started to look for a Beit Knesset where I could participate in a minyan maariv. The search led me to Beit Knesset Adath Yeshurun. I was warmly received by Rav R. Sokoloff for my first Shabbat in the US.

When we arrived in Madison, Wisconsin, I found places to pray at Hillel Centre of Langdon Street and at Bet Israel Centre. We were filled with joy by finding a place where we could be participating in the congregational worship.

Back in Nigeria, I came across Rabbi Moshe Edelman's e-mail address in Bet Israel Centre's magazine. I immediately subscribed to the COMPACT which opened an opportunity for me to relate with Rabbi Moshe as my teacher.

I returned to US in October 2002 and was privileged to meet Rabbi Moshe Edelman and Epstein in New York before traveling to Madison. It was an overwhelming experience when Rabbi Moshe lent me his talit to clad myself in to remove the Sefer Torah from the Aron Hakodesh for the morning Torah Service.

My arrival in Madison was an uplifting spiritual experience. I was able to join a minyan for an erev Shabbat when I arrived Madison. At the end of the Maariv service, Rabbi Katz of Bet Israel Centre permitted me to chant "*Yigdal elohim chai veyistabach.*" Rabbi Katz also asked me to repeat the chant in the morning Shabbat service. That was a memorable day in my life!

I was warmly received by members of Bet Israel Centre throughout my stay in Madison. I participated in every minyan during *shacharit*, *minchah*, and *maariv*. I had an aliyah during my last Shabbat at Bet Israel Centre. That was a great honor.

I returned to New York to meet with Rabbi Moshe Edelman before leaving for Nigeria in late October 2002. I want to use this forum to thank the staff of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism for the warm reception they accorded me during my visit. Before my

meeting with Rabbis Katz and Edelman, I had been toeing the Orthodox tradition. I must state here unequivocally that the apparent fine difference between Orthodoxy and Conservatism is infinitesimal, based on the egalitarian concept.

When I returned home in October 2002, I immediately summoned a national general meeting of the erstwhile Orthodox Nigeria Hebrew Community. At the meeting I declared to the members that we should adopt the Conservative approach to enable our women (wives and daughters who were hitherto alienated before) to participate in congregational worship and activities.

My greatest inspiration and motivation came when I received a Kulanu e-mail. I strongly believe that our community's relationship with Kulanu will facilitate our integration into the greater world Jewry.

*ADDENDUM of April 2003*

The dream of procuring a Sefer Torah for our community came to fruition after I appeared before a *Bet Din* on April 3, 2003, in Washington, D.C. My Moreh Haruchani, Rabbi Howard Gorin, led us to the Jewish Bookstore of Greater Washington for the possible purchase of a Sefer Torah. Three different Scrolls were shown me by Rabbi Menachem Youlis, the scribe, from which I chose the one we paid for. It history is very exciting. The 150 year old Torah is originated in Morocco in North Africa. And so, after 150 years of "exile," the North African Sefer Torah comes back to the continent.

My homecoming with the Torah was an exciting experience. Despite the security at the arrival hall of the Port Harcourt Airport, some of my leaders were able to find their way onto the runway to welcome me as I alighted from the aircraft.

Video coverage started immediately after I was through with the customs. We then drove to the headquarters of our Union of 12 synagogues at Ikot Oboroenyin, Edemayah in Akwa Ibom State. Just about half a mile before our headquarter, we disembarked from our cars and joined the brethren who had thronged the road awaiting our arrival. There were tears of joy on the faces of all our brethren when we came out of the cars with some people carrying the bag that contained the Torah.

The procession took us about 20 minutes to our HQ. It was an inexplicable, euphoric experience! At the HQ we were joined by other brethren who were busy arranging things at the feast site. We danced, sang, and praised the Holy One, Blessed be His Name! The only hitch we had was the inability of the carpenter to complete the Aron Hakodesh which I had paid for before leaving for the US. However, we were able to hire another carpenter who was able to complete the job in 4 days. We were able to finally give the Sefer Torah a home.

Two hundred and eleven persons attended our Seder night. Some of our members couldn't attend owing to the fuel scarcity to the country experienced during the period (transportation cost almost went up to 300% during the week of the Pesach). We still bless the Holy One for the number of persons who sacrificed so much to attend. We were able to complete the 8 days of the feast at the HQ. We had enough food and matzot for everybody. Unfortunately, we had to dilute the kosher wine with water to make it go around everybody during the festival days.

We inaugurated the Board of Directors of the Union on Thursday, April 24<sup>th</sup> 2003. The members include 12 spiritual leaders of the 12 synagogues that are affiliated with the Union. At the general Meeting, it was unanimously agreed that the community should start an elementary school by September 2003. A special committee was inaugurated, chaired by Yosef Ben Yisrael, who holds a degree in Education.

My dreams of fulfilling the mitzvah of a "*baal teshuvah*" have finally been achieved. My next goal is to lead members of our communities before a bet din in the future. It is however, my strongest desire to undergo a DNA test to satisfy my curiosity of whether I am a *nefesh yehudi* rather than a *ger tzedek*.

# Jews in Central Africa (cont.)

(Continued from page 7)

At the same time he quotes with approval a French anthropologist who wrote: "One is born a Tutsi; none can become Tutsi afterward." This lack of clarity may be a defense to the most difficult and dangerous position in which the Tutsi find themselves but it is also one which must make Jews cautious.

## LINKS TO ANCIENT HEBREWS

Insofar as the Tutsi trace their origin to Ethiopia, I expected that they would adopt the same mythic origin to which the Ethiopian Beta Israel adhere: namely, they are descended from the union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and the priests which Solomon sent to accompany the Queen upon her return to Ethiopia. But Bwejeri, while never denying the connection, more often emphasizes the common Egyptian origin of the Hebrews and the Tutsi -- a connection which pre-dates Solomon.

Under the Pharaoh Ikhnaton, a monotheistic religion was imposed upon the Egyptian people. As a result, an opposition party of priests who had served the traditional Egyptian gods developed. Sometime after Ikhnaton died, the priests revolted and compelled the followers of Ikhnaton to flee. Some fled with Moses to Sinai and others fled southward to Ethiopia. All who fled shared the religion, customs, symbols and laws that were developed under Ikhnaton. Thus Moses, the Beta Israel and the Tutsi were original Hebrews.

I pointed out to Bwejeri that the Torah traces the origin of Jewish monotheism not to Moses but to Abraham, who was a Mesopotamian, not an Egyptian. His response was that the stories about the patriarchs were later inventions made up by Jews during their Babylonian exile to curry favor with their Babylonian masters who were in conflict with the Egyptians.

During the course of this conversation with Bwejeri, I expressed the opinion that the Ethiopian Beta Israel might have originated with the Jews who settled in Elephantine between the years 600 and 400 BCE. Elephantine was the site of a large military camp of Jewish mercenaries situated in Egypt where the Aswan Dam is now located. Bwejeri dismissed this view: the Hebrew origin of the Tutsi was much older than 600 BCE.

Linguistically, Bwejeri links the Tutsi to the ancient Hebrews. The Tutsi homeland -- which extends beyond the regions where the Tutsi now reside -- is called by him Havila. Havila is the name applied in Genesis 2:11 to the territory watered by the Pishon River which, according to Bwejeri, is the White Nile. (*The Jewish Encyclopedia* expresses the view that the location of Havila and the River Pishon are unknown).

The original name of the Tutsi patriarch was Himai, a descendant of Ham, one of Noah's sons. The word "Tutsi" is built from the root of Kushi. Kush or Cush is the land situated south of Egypt along the banks of the Nile. The Cushites and the Hebrews have many biblical contacts. One of the most interesting is that the Cushites encouraged King Hezekiah of Judah to resist the Assyrians. (II Kings 19:9.14).

The Tutsi are "traditionally devoted" to the "auburn ox" which in the Bible is called the red heifer (*parah adumah*). The sacred auburn ox was sacrificed in the Temple built by Ikhnaton. Under Jewish law (Numbers 19), the ashes of the red heifer were used in the ritual purification of persons defiled by a corpse.

Sometime between 1270 and 1527 CE (during the period of the South Kushitic Empire), the Tutsi secretly codified their oral Mosaic law into the Twelve Hidden Codes of Havila. Pursuant to the Codes, they developed a national festival of return called Umuganuro, which he compares to Sukkoth.

The Jewish emblems of the South Kushitic Empire are the Drums of Solomon, the Lion of Judah and the Scepter. The Scepter recalls the

institution of the 70 elders according to the suggestion of the "Kushitic" priest, Jethro, to Moses. (I have been unable to identify this specific suggestion in the Bible but Bwejeri has referred me to Exodus 18, Numbers 10:29-30 and Habakuk 3:7). These three emblems remained the sacred symbols of the Tutsi into the early 20th Century. The Drums of Solomon were exhibited once a year at Sukkoth (Umuganuro). Beyond the three symbols and the attachment to the auburn oxen, the Tutsi share with Jews the worship of one God and the prohibition of intermarriage with non-Hebraic peoples.

## SHABBATH WITH BWEJERI

Bwejeri spent the Shabbat of December 13-14, 2002, in New York City with me and my wife, Elaine. On Friday evening, I took him to the Carlebach Shul for services, kiddush and dinner. Prayer in the Carlebach Shul is accompanied by singing, dancing and other expressions of exuberance. A glance at the high *mechitzah* (barrier) which separates men and women and the number of black-hatted men make it unmistakable that the Carlebach Shul is an Orthodox synagogue.

Bwejeri cannot read Hebrew and is not familiar with the service. Nevertheless, from his clapping, swaying and singing this would not be apparent. He participated with enthusiasm. The *parsha* (selection of the Bible to be read) was about Joseph's meeting with his brothers in Egypt, and a lengthy *dvar Torah* (lecture) was given on the *parsha*. Bwejeri was totally familiar with the story from his reading of the Bible in French. The style in which the *dvar Torah* was rendered and the way new meanings were derived from the text kept him enthralled.

During the dinner, there was also a considerable amount of singing, including the rendering of "*Ashet Chayil*" (woman of valor). I told him that it was customary for a man to sing these verses to his wife every Friday evening. When he asked me for a copy of these verses, he was delighted when I told him that they were the last 22 verses of the book of Proverbs. It was a tradition, he said, that he would like to introduce to his followers since it reinforces the reverence that the Tutsi have for their wives.

During the dinner, there were several speeches relating to the survival of the Jewish people in the United States and of the Jewish State of Israel. He was all attention. The emphasis on the dangers of assimilation were as near to him as to us. He resonated to the speeches in support of the State of Israel and the settlements. One concept repeated in the speeches attracted him greatly: that all Jews are responsible for the safety and well-being of all other Jews. This became clear next morning when I took him to the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue.

The Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue was founded by *anousim* (the forced ones), Jews who were compelled to convert to Catholicism but returned to Judaism at the first opportunity. The Tutsi are *anousim* in Bwejeri's view. They were forcibly converted to Catholicism by the missionaries and prevented from returning to the religion of their ancestors by the Catholic "inquisition." He donned a *talit* (prayer shawl) with no apparent discomfort and sat attentively through a rather long service. In comparison to the Carlebach Shul, he found the regulated atmosphere of the service and some of the tunes to have a Catholic flavor.

After the service, he was invited by Rabbi Marc Angel to say a few words to the congregation at the Kiddush (blessings over the wine). It was here that he repeated the theme heard at the Carlebach Shul, that all Jews are responsible for the safety and well-being of all other Jews, while talking about the Hebraic origins of the Tutsi and their dire predicament.

On the way home from the synagogue, I explained to Bwejeri the traditional Jewish view of who is a Jew -- anyone born of a Jewish woman who was descended from a line of Jewish women or anyone

(Continued on page 16)

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# Jews in Central Africa (cont.)

(Continued from page 14)

who was a convert to Judaism. The test (except in the case of a convert) was less the acceptance of Jewish beliefs and practices, but one of birth. Bwejeri replied that he hoped that someday the Tutsi would be able to prove to all Jews that they were Jews by birth going back to biblical times.

## THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

Bwejeri recognizes that there is much that the Tutsi must learn about Jewish beliefs and practices. They might be willing to accept the yoke of the Torah if they were familiar with it. There are about 1,000 Tutsi living in Belgium, of which about 200 are members of the Havila Institute.

Bwejeri is the President of the Havila Institute. The purpose of the Institute is to research the Hebraic origins of the Tutsi tribe and reacquaint its members and all Tutsi of their Jewish origins, customs, symbols and religion. He regrets that the Havila Institute has not received any encouragement from the Belgian Jewish community. As a first step, he would like Tutsi children to be invited to go to Jewish schools, and Tutsi families to be invited into synagogues. There is not a sufficient comfort level for the Tutsi to attend uninvited.

I would urge Kulanu to use all its resources to contact Belgian Jews and synagogues in and around Brussels to work with Professor Yochanan (Jean) Bwejeri to make available a Jewish future for the Tutsi if they wish to have one. This may not be a remote possibility. While at the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue, I met a young woman who knew Tutsis who were Seventh Day Adventists. Seventh Day Adventists have many customs and attitudes that appeal to Christians who have a belief in a Jewish origin. If these Tutsis had been welcomed in synagogues, would they have found a more comfortable home in the synagogue than in a church with the Seventh Day Adventists?

Professor Bwejeri can be contacted at tel. 0032 477 89 44 35; fax 0032 10 45 37 46; institute \_\_ de \_\_ havila@ yahoo.fr; bwejeri@hotmail.com.

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