

# KULANU

“all of us”



*Helping Lost Jewish Communities*  
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## *A Women's Happening In Uganda*

The first Abayudaya women's conference was held on December 14. Organized by Naume Sabano, president of the Abayudaya Women's Association, it attracted 65 participants from four Ugandan villages.

The program consisted of a D'var Torah by Mama Deborah Keki, the president's report, communications from the various synagogue representatives, the recitation of blessings on hearing sad news, hearing good news, and seeing the rainbow, and discussions on *Nidah* (Jewish purity laws), the life of Sarah, the observance of *kashrut*, and the story of Ruth.

The president urged the women to continue teaching young girls about Judaism and about the dangers of HIV/AIDS in Uganda today. She discussed the need for higher quality craft products, for funds for a tree-planting project, and for more education and employment for women.

Representatives from the various synagogues spoke about a desire to expand a pineapple garden project, improve a synagogue building, start poultry and goat projects, attract Hebrew books and teachers, purchase mobile phones, and provide inter-synagogue transportation.

It was resolved that working visits of women's groups to each other should be encouraged and that resources for promotion of activities at conferences should be pooled. It was decided that two conferences would be held every year at different venues.

Regarding transport, the women agreed to make an effort to raise money to purchase a van, and each group was asked to raise money to purchase a mobile phone.

The conference ended with the singing of *Hatikvah*.

## Texas Rabbi To Assist Veracruz Congregation

Rabbi Peter Tarlow, through the good graces of Kulanu and the hard work of our Mexico coordinator, Amichai (Max) Heppner, was brought to Veracruz, Mexico, to meet with the local Texas congregation. After a series of discussions, Rabbi Tarlow volunteered to come to Veracruz four times a year to assist the congregation, which had been formerly served by the late Rabbi Samuel Lerer. Tarlow is fluent in Spanish and has a good understanding of Latin American culture. He is the rabbi at the bi-lingual Texas A&M Hillel, and over the next few years, he hopes that some of his students may also be able to visit and work with members of the congregation.



Tarlow noted that North American Jews have much to learn from the people of Kehillat Beit Shmuel. He stated, "The congregants have a wonderful sense of spirituality and *joie de vivre*. There is a deep love for Judaism among them and a sense of *mispachah* (family). There is a great potential in Veracruz for helping many people whose families were severed from the Jewish people to return. Kulanu

must be thanked for all of its efforts in bringing *all of us (kulanu)* together."

Tarlow plans his next visit to the congregation in May. In the beginning, emphasis will be placed on organizational success, *bnai-mitzvah* training, issues of conversion, and Hebrew language skills.

**FULL VERACRUZ STORY ON PAGE 2**

## TUTSI UPDATE

### Never Give Up Trying To Find a Way To Stay Alive

*By Jack Zeller*

*Founder/President of Kulanu*

Let's go see *Hotel Rwanda* with our friend King John Kigeli V, the exiled King of Rwanda who lives nearby in Virginia, Rabbi David Kuperman suggested. The King had been introduced to us by another friend, the director of the Havila Institute, Dr. Yochanan Bwejeri.

I don't usually go to the movies. But then I had another phone conversation with another friend from Rwanda. His sister is portrayed in the film, and he urged me to go and "look the truth in the eye."

Good advice. Go, but on an empty stomach. (We had begun our afternoon with falafel at Max's Cafe.) One of our party, a niece of the King, had to leave during the showing. More than once I just closed my eyes. David, who was sitting next to me, and whose heart began pounding with the opening scenes, says I was shaking with agitation almost the whole time.

The movie contains a lesson about the power of hate and the unlimited power of socially orchestrated hate. In the movie, the people

who escaped to the hotel survive. Among the Tutsi population of Rwanda's capital city Kigali in the spring of 1994, they were the exception. They also conveyed an important lesson: never give up trying to find a way to stay alive.

And there is another lesson to be learned, not in the movie but implicit in the events unfolding now in Burundi, Rwanda's neighbor. Hate once taught is not easily removed by social engineering no matter how well intended, no matter how well funded, and no matter how well orchestrated by statesmen and politicians. The road to hell, the saying goes, is paved with good intentions. Once demonized and dehumanized, a community at risk is always at risk. Asking them to forget and forgive previous massacres, and embrace the hope that it won't happen again, is asking them to close their eyes to the truth.

I can close my eyes in the movie theatre, but there's no one with a machete sitting in the row behind me, just waiting for me to do that.

The Tutsi you see in the movie were killed for being who they

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## Historic Conference In Veracruz, Mexico

By Amichai Heppner

*[As Kulanu's Coordinator for Mexico, I met Rabbi Samuel Lerer in 1999. At that time he was the elderly but vigorous long-time mentor and supporter of the congregation of Anousim in Veracruz. (Anousim are Crypto-Jews, separated from the mainstream through persecution by the Inquisition half a millennium ago.) We talked about his upcoming retirement and Kulanu's role in continuing his work in Veracruz. We were not a bit too early, because just a few months after my visit, Rabbi Lerer's life on earth came to an end. He left an emotional congregation hit hard by the loss. My wife Shana and I made an initial visit to assess needs in Veracruz in 2003. We began our last visit on January 14, 2005, and I was assured, over and over again, that Kulanu's support, even from afar, has meant a lot to the community.]*

For two months, Kulanu planned to bring an ensemble of supporters to Beth Shmuel Congregation in Veracruz (named after Rabbi Lerer) to discuss an expansion to incorporate more of the isolated *Anousim* descendants who live outside the periphery of Jewish life. Planning in Veracruz was no less intense, and *Anousim* descendants came from as far away as 100 miles for the weekend-long meeting in January.

We were met at the airport by Daniel Munoz and his family, including his father, who is vice-president. Daniel was elected outreach chairman by the community, and has proven himself fully capable of handling this job despite his young age (22). By diligent effort joined with fortunate coincidence, we assembled a variety of resource persons to join us for this momentous weekend: Rabbi Peter Tarlow of Texas A&M University; Rabbi Phillip Posner of Temple Bnei Yam in Ajijic, near Guadalajara, Mexico; Maria Aurora Sanchez, an architect from Mexico City (supported by Elena Gallegas Sanchez of Veracruz), who has good connections in the Jewish community in Mexico City; Chaya Weinstein, volunteer coordinator for Kulanu; Larry Slotnick, a Kulanu volunteer from Boston who plans to set up a business in Veracruz; and Daniel Goldberg and Jack Zaglia plus their film crew from Avanti Pictures, now of Montreal, Canada.

Rabbi Tarlow made an immediate hit with the congregation with his warmth, wit, broad knowledge, and fluent Spanish. He was a pulpit rabbi in Chile for many years. Currently, he issues a widely read Spanish-language *Dvar Torah* by email each week and leads a congregation of Hillel students at Texas A&M, many of whom are of Hispanic background.

Rabbi Tarlow led the congregation in spirited services on Friday night and Saturday morning, including a Torah discussion with a very appropriate theme: The Exodus from Egypt following the last three plagues that finally convinced the Pharaoh to "let my people go." The parallel between people trying to find a way to serve their God after a long exile in Egypt and the *Anousim*, seeking the same path after a long Inquisition and aftermath, was moving.

Rabbi Posner led the *Mincha-Maariv* service and Havdalah on Saturday afternoon. He shared his personal path from the edge of Judaism to the rabbinate. He reached out with warmth and humor, and surprised the congregation by presenting them with a huge batch of cookies that he had baked for them the night before. He based his sermon on how the brittle but sweet cookies with their white flour exterior and dark chocolate interior can stand for our condition as people who find brittleness and sweetness, goodness and disappointments in our lives.

All three weekend services were held in a large hired hall,

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## Evolution of a Congregation In Belmonte, Portugal

By Emily Taitz

There are thousands of *Bnai Anousim* (descendants of forced converts) all over the world, but they all originated in the Iberian Peninsula after the Expulsion from Spain of 1492 and forced conversions in Portugal of 1497. Some of them live in the American Southwest; many more are in Mexico and Central and South America; and still more remain in Europe, especially Spain and Portugal. Some have forgotten their roots but others have nursed the secret for centuries, afraid to admit what was just suspected. Until now.

For the last 20 or 25 years, these *Crypto-Jews*, as scholars call them, have been coming out of the closet. Most are still fearful. They may make a tentative gesture, or a preliminary admission, and then retreat. Others are more open, insisting on being counted as Jews in spite of the reluctance of family members to admit what has always been a secret, and in spite of the rabbinical establishment that often rejects them.

Recently, this disparate population of *Bnai Anousim* has established several websites, and in the relative anonymity of the Internet, they have been attempting to understand their experiences and make contact with others. One of those websites is *Saudades Sepharad* ([www.saudades.org](http://www.saudades.org)). *Saudades* is the Portuguese word for "longing" and *Sepharad* is the Hebrew word for Spain. Through the web, the *Bnai Anousim*, who are often still practicing or lapsed Catholics, explore their roots, compare stories and try to decide what to do with the information they accumulate. Only a few actually convert. Many insist that they are already Jews and consider the demand for Orthodox conversion to be demeaning. The majority, until now, has remained in the cloudy margins of Judaism, unsure of where they fit in.

One group of *Bnai Anousim*, the Jews of Belmonte, are sure. They claim to be the only descendants of forced converts who remained faithful to Judaism for 500 years, secretly practicing the Jewish rituals they remembered. Finally, in the 1980s, when they felt it was safe, they openly declared their faith. The occasion of their declaration was a visit from the Israeli Consul to Belmonte, but that was only the beginning. They were officially converted by a rabbi according to Sephardic practice, all the men were circumcised, and they proceeded to organize a congregation.

Still, the Jews of Belmonte remained on the margins of the Jewish world. They were visited from time to time by traveling Jews. Some gave them donations. One philanthropic North African Jew paid for a rabbi for one year. Others came for short stretches of time, to teach and to learn, to spend a Shabbat or research an article, but the 150 Jews of this tiny community still felt isolated. It was just about this time that my husband and I, together with Portuguese friends, visited the community and saw their beautiful little synagogue and their new burial ground, then only two years old. We also saw that while they were dedicated to their religion and their fellow-Jews, they had none of the necessary ritual objects, no prayer books, no prayer shawls, and only a few ragged *kippot* for visitors to wear. There was no Jewish library and not even a few basic books so that their children could learn Hebrew.

During that visit, I made a promise that I would help them become a stronger and more recognized community and would try to supply them with whatever they needed. I initially established a fund through the United Synagogue's World Council of Synagogues and collected funds for Belmonte. Those collections were soon transferred to Kulanu. During these efforts, I discovered a whole network of Jews, in Israel and all over the world, who were trying to help the *Bnai Anousim* in general, and Belmonte in particular. One of those people was Rufina Bernardetti Silva Mausebaum, a South African woman living in Johannesburg, who was herself a descendant of forced converts, a *Bat Anousim* with roots in Madeira, Portugal. Rufina had con-

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# Evolution of a Congregation (cont.)

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verted and married an Ashkenazi Jew but was personally involved with many Crypto-Jews. She had organized a trip to Belmonte and had set up the *Saudades* website.

I first heard about Rufina from Kulanu. They wanted to name her as coordinator for the Belmonte project, but found that she had just accepted that assignment from the American Sephardi Foundation (ASF). It was decided that both Kulanu and the ASF would work together on the Belmonte project.

Their first job was to establish regular communication with the Jews of Belmonte which, until that time, had ranged from very poor to non-existent. Mail was slow, a community fax machine worked only sporadically, and the Jews there had no personal computers.

The first order of business was to obtain a computer for them and find someone who was computer-literate with whom we could communicate and establish what was needed. The second priority was for a rabbi or teacher to establish himself in the community and then to supply them with prayer books in both Hebrew and Portuguese. Rufina, with the help of Kitty Teltsch and Dolores Sloan arranged to have some money sent for a computer. After several months, it was up and running.

One hundred Portuguese-Hebrew prayer books were ordered from Sao Paulo, Brazil, and shipped to Belmonte. The books were paid for with part of the funds I raised that had been deposited with Kulanu. Another *Saudades* board member, Yaakov Gladstone, collected money for children's books, and others donated and sent *kippot*, prayer shawls, and a few sets of *tefillin*.

In the meantime, we discovered that another organization, *Amishav* (Hebrew for "my people returns") had also become involved with Belmonte and was searching for a rabbi who would be paid from Amishav funds. Ultimately, they found a rabbi, originally from Chile, who stayed in Belmonte for a year and helped strengthen the community. He has now moved to the newly expanding community of Porto to help the *Bnai Anousim* there to connect to Judaism.

The next, and perhaps the most important project so far, is the training of a native rabbi to lead the Belmonte community. *Saudades*, in conjunction with the American Sephardi Foundation and Kulanu, have taken on that project and are now sponsoring a young man, José Joao (Yosef) Rodrigo, who hopes to fill that post in the future. With the help of *Saudades*, Yosef was accepted at the Sephardi Yeshiva in Jerusalem one and a half years ago. He is studying to become a rabbi and a *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) and plans to return to his community when he is ordained. This will take several more years and many more dollars. Yosef's tuition and expenses amount to \$1000 per month for another three years, and these funds will have to come from contributions and grants. They'll have to come from us.

Please consider sending a contribution to help the community of Belmonte have their very own rabbi — the first native Portuguese rabbi in 500 years! Checks can be made out to Kulanu or to the American Sephardi Foundation (c/o Center for Jewish History, 15 W. 16<sup>th</sup> St., New York, NY 10011) and **must be clearly marked for the Belmonte Project**. Please join us in our efforts to bring our Portuguese brothers and sisters home to Judaism.



*Belmonte Synagogue in its idyllic setting*

## BIROBIDZHAN: Yiddishkeit Beneath the Surface

By Michael Gershowitz

It was a dark November evening. It was cold and windy, and the streets were icy. I was hungry and looking for someplace to eat. Unperturbed by the weather, people scurried by. I had passed two or three restaurants, all dark. Finally a neon sign beckoned to me. Its writing was not Russian, but Chinese. Undoubtedly it indicated a restaurant. As a Jew who avoids non-kosher foods, I generally avoid Chinese restaurants, whose menus are permeated with pork and shrimp — definitely not kosher. But the weather and my stomach drove me inside. A waiter ambled over and handed me a menu — one of those intimidating Russian cellophane-wrapped multi-page affairs with prices to the hundredth of a ruble.

I started flipping pages, looking for a familiar word, "ryba" (fish), for instance. When the waiter came over to take my order, I was perplexed. "Ata yehudi?" he asked, in Hebrew. (Are you Jewish?). "Ani yehudi," I responded (I'm Jewish). I established that I wanted a meal that was kosher. The waiter pointed to a few items with comments such as "zeh kosher" (this is kosher) and "zeh tov" (this is good). Not knowing what I was ordering, I agreed. I ended up with a large steaming bowl of seaweed soup and a whole grilled whitefish in a piquant red sauce — both kosher and delicious, washed down by a nice Russian beer.

Thus started the unfolding of Yiddishkeit in Birobidzhan, capital of the Jewish Autonomous Region in Far Eastern Russia. My *Lonely Planet Guide to Russia* had given the impression that most of the region's Jews had left for Israel or elsewhere, leaving a shell — a prototypical Russian city with a few remaining symbols of Judaism — a large menorah in town and a bilingual Russian-Hebrew sign at the train station. My three days in Birobidzhan showed otherwise. But without my rudimentary Hebrew, I never would have known.

My education in Judaism, Birobidzhan-style, continued at breakfast the next morning. A man at the next table, hearing me struggle to order, leaned over and assisted — then joined me at my table. He introduced himself as Andre, a Russian Jew who had migrated to Israel and was on an assignment for the Jewish Agency. We managed to converse in his limited English and my limited Hebrew. He told me that a recent influx of Jews from Central Asia, principally Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, had swelled the Jewish population from under 10,000 to around 13,000.

Birobidzhan, a city of 90,000 people, was founded in the 1920s by Josef Stalin for two purposes — to get Jews out of European Russia, and to provide a first line of defense against Chinese attack; it's about 25 miles from the border, some 4,000 air miles east of Moscow. At first, 40,000 Jews came to this Jewish "utopia," from all over the world, including America and Palestine. But as a malarial swamp by summer and at 40 below by winter, most failed to see the utopia and moved on. Today, Birobidzhan is an attractive and manageable city with old leafy trees, wide streets and nice downtown architecture. On the periphery, however, the ugly concrete apartment buildings are identical to those in Moscow or anywhere else in Russia. The main drag, Sholom Aleichem St., has been turned into a pedestrian mall and is lined with shops on one side and a cinema and public buildings on the other. One of the shops, an upscale deli (think Zabar's), is named Tzimmes, written in Hebrew-stylized Russian. Its cheeses, smoked fish (lox, \$3 a pound), blintzes and borscht provided much of my sustenance.

A block off Sholom Aleichem St., on Lenin St. (how's that for contrast?), are a spanking new synagogue and the Jewish Community Center, named *Freid* (Yiddish for happiness). I spent a fascinating hour in the company of Freid's executive director, 80-year-old Lev Grigorovich Toitman, and his English-speaking secretary, Kseniya Malyarskaya. There's no gift shop, but they have a closet packed with

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# KULANU BRIEFS

## Marketing Volunteers Needed

Kulanu is seeking volunteers to actively market our wonderful books, recordings, kippot, tallitot, and challah covers outside of our Boutique operation (see page 15 and <[www.Kulanuboutique.com](http://www.Kulanuboutique.com)>). We hope institutions, schools, gift shops, bookstores, and senior homes will buy these products for their own use or for resale. If you are interested in joining a marketing committee, please contact Harriet Bograd at <[hbograd@compuserve.com](mailto:hbograd@compuserve.com)> or 212- 877 -8082. This is important to Kulanu's work, not only for raising funds, but also for getting across our Jewish Diversity message!

## Speakers (and Artists!) Spread the Word

On December 9, **Alan Tigay**, **Dione Pereira**, **Bob Feron**, and **Rabbi Manny Vinas** spoke on a panel at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y in New York City following a showing of the documentary film *Kiddush with Cachaca: Jewish Roots and Revival in the Brazilian Backlands* by Jeremy Seifer.

**Judith and Tamar Cohen** were scheduled to sing Judeo-Spanish songs at the Cervantes Institute in Manhattan on February 17.

**Daniel Baiden** spoke about his Jewish childhood in Ghana at Har Shalom Congregation in Potomac, Maryland on January 11, and his wife **Sarah** demonstrated the preparation of some delicious Ghanaian dishes.

**Harry Stein** was scheduled to speak on Sephardic Jewry at the Arizona chapter of Kulanu meeting on February 6. Stein is the moderator of the Forum at Sephardim.com, where more than 20,000 e-mail messages dealing with Sephardic genealogical research have been exchanged.

**Rabbi Moshe Cotel** has been taking his "Chronicles" presentation of classical piano pieces with Torah commentary on the road in Hawaii and California in recent months.

**Aron Primack** spoke about Kulanu's work on January 15 at the Columbia Jewish Congregation in Columbia, Maryland.

## A Passover Suggestion

The Festival of *Pesach* (Passover) begins on April 23 this year. We wish our readers a joyous holiday. We have a gift suggestion for your seder host or hostess: an Aish Chai lapel pin from the Kulanu Boutique (see page 11 or <[www.KulanuBoutique.com](http://www.KulanuBoutique.com)>). Fashioned of Sterling silver with gold plate, it depicts in Hebrew letters *Chai* (Life) coming out of *Aish* (fire). The pin is offered as a tribute to descendants of *Anousim* who were forcibly converted to Christianity in Spain and Portugal 500 years ago. Just as the Hebrews emerged safe and free from the Red Sea, these *Bnai Anousim* are emerging from the ashes of the Inquisitions and rediscovering their Jewish heritage.

## Recording of Kulanu Book

Kulanu archivist Joe Hantman reports that the Jewish Braille Institute has completed its 4-track recording of Kulanu's first book, *Jews in Places You Never Thought Of*, edited by Karen Primack. The recording requires a special player, available free to qualified individuals from the JBI or through local Special Needs libraries. Hantman adds that one can obtain on tape the entire range of Jewish literature and magazine subscriptions (such as *Moment*, *Commentary*, *Tikkun*, and *Jerusalem Report*). Much of the reading is done by Sisterhood volunteers around the US. For information, call 800-433-1531 or 301-598-4010.

## Shavei Israel is Founded

Michael Freund has left his post as executive director of Amishav to found Shavei Israel, another organization that works to facilitate the return of "lost Jews." Its website is <[www.Shavei.org](http://www.Shavei.org)>. The new organization is continuing much the same work, including operating two Bnei Menashe educational centers in northeastern India, a nursing-assistants training program for Bnei Menashe women in Israel, a yeshiva study program in Israel for future Bnei Menashe rabbis, and educational programs for *Anousim* in Spain and Portugal. It has also sent rabbis to Recife, Brazil and Trujillo, Peru.

One recent project of the new organization is the publication of a collection of stories about Jewish sages in the Mizo language, which is spoken by the Bnei Menashe in the Indian state of Mizoram. The book, called *Juda Thawnthu* (Jewish stories) was compiled by Bnei Menashe scholar Allenby Sela, who serves as principal of the Shavei Israel Hebrew Center in Mizoram's capital, Aizawl. It contains dozens of stories highlighting ancient Jewish personalities such as Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, with an emphasis on the importance of being charitable, loving one's fellow Jew and having faith in God.

## Abayudaya Songwriter Honored

The organization Shalshet featured new compositions of 19 composers from 12 states and two foreign countries in November at its first Jewish Music Festival, in Chevy Chase, Maryland. Out of hundreds of submissions, Gershom Sizomu's new melody for "*Lekhu Neranena*" was selected as one of the 19 winners. Sizomu is the Abayudaya spiritual leader from Uganda who is in rabbinic school in Los Angeles. His compositions and performances are featured on three recordings and are well known to Kulanu supporters. Shalshet seeks to foster innovations in Jewish religious music; it is producing a recording of the winning compositions.

## Seeking Books and Computers For Zimbabwe

The Zimbabwe Chapter of the Lemba Cultural Association has some ambitious plans – to build a Jewish Community Centre that includes a synagogue, library, guest house, clinic, and the Mapakomhere High School computer laboratory and library. They are anxious to have donations of computers, Jewish books, and books in high school subjects of physics, biology, chemistry, economics, accounting, and mathematics. Please send old and new books and computers to: J. S. Madzino and J.R. Museba, c/o Dr. Rabson Wuriga, Mapakomhere Secondary School, P. Bag, 9073, Masvingo, Zimbabwe.

## The Mother of All Volunteers

Chaya Weinstein is Kulanu's Volunteer Coordinator. She spent nine months with the Abayudaya community in Uganda in 2004, and is returning to spend nine more weeks there in 2005 enhancing economic and vocational development for women and youth, with a special grant from the American Jewish World Service. She also recently spent a week in Veracruz, Mexico, to assess the volunteer needs of the *Anousim* congregation there. She urges readers to keep in mind the possibility of volunteering. Contact her at <[madamchaya@earthlink.net](mailto:madamchaya@earthlink.net)>.

## A Little Name-Dropping!

Former Israeli president Yitzchak Navon was scheduled to tour Casa Shalom and open its new Library on January 26. Casa Shalom, at the Institute For Marrano-Anusim Studies in Gan Yavneh, Israel, was founded in 1994 by Dr. Gloria Mound <[www.casa-shalom.com](http://www.casa-shalom.com)>.

# KULANU BRIEFS

## A Convocation of Igbo

Representatives of 26 synagogues from two Igbo states in Nigeria met in Awka in November. Moshel ben Moshe presided in Remy Ilona's absence. From reports it was "a joyous occasion to see Igbo reclaiming their Jewish heritage." There are five wholly Igbo states and numerous Igbo in two other states, so more meetings can be expected. Ilona is still soliciting donations of used Tanakhs (Jewish Bibles) and other books on Judaica, kiddush cups, havdallah sets, tallitot, and Jewish music tapes. These can be sent to: Remy Ilona, P.O.Box 11505, Area 10, Post office, Garki Abuja, Nigeria.

## Multicultural Events on East and West Coasts

The Institute for Jewish & Community Research held the 5th annual Be'chol Lashon Chanukah Celebration for racially, ethnically and culturally diverse Jews in San Francisco on December 12. Rabbi Capers Funnye, Dr. Miri Hunter Haruach, Dr. Alex Karp, Rabbi Gershon Sizomu, and others led thought-provoking discussions with adults, as well as educational crafts and games for children.

On the same date in Manhattan, an African Jewish Chanukah party was held, also in commemoration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Operation Moses (the first airlift of Ethiopian Jews to Israel). The event was co-sponsored by BINA, National Association of Ethiopian Jews, Ayecha Resource Organization, Jewish Multicultural Network, SWIRL, Inc., and Kulanu.

Looking ahead, the 8<sup>th</sup> annual Jewish Multiracial Network Retreat is scheduled for June 3-5, 2005 at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center in Connecticut. For information and to register, visit <[www.jewishmultiracialnetwork.org](http://www.jewishmultiracialnetwork.org)> or call 860-824-5991.

## An Active Supporter in Greece

Pantelis Katzolis, an active Kulanu supporter in Athens, has developed presentations on dispersed Jewish communities around the world and the work of Kulanu for the local JCC and school groups. In December he sent a carton of school supplies, maps and Jewish music to the Jewish community in Ghana. The materials were collected by the students at the Ulpan (Hebrew Classes) of the Jewish Cultural Center of Athens. The carton arrived in Ghana, and David Ahenkorah, the spiritual leader, sent this message to their friends in Athens: "Thank you very much for the concern that you have for our children. May the Almighty bless you and the community." Katzolis is now planning to send to Ghana educational material (in English) for children and adults on Jewish holidays and on the teaching of Hebrew as a foreign language. He also will collect school supplies for the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda. *Yasher koach* to our Greek friends!

## Congregation Forges Ties to Cuban Jews

A delegation of 24 from the Bethesda (Maryland) Jewish Congregation, led by spiritual leader Sunny Schnitzer, recently visited Jewish communities in Havana and the Cuban "hinterlands." The visitors brought gifts to each enclave, provided shofar-blowing lessons, and participated in services, Israeli dance recitals, and celebrations. The congregation is obviously impressed by the inner strength, loyalty, and enthusiasm of Cuban Jewry; this was their second mission to Cuba in two years.

## Condolences

Abayudaya member (Nabugoye synagogue) **Abraham Jere** passed away in December after a long illness. Condolences to his wife Yael, and her children Suzan, Isaac, Samali, Sarah, Binnah and Deborah.

We received this report from Michael Menashe: "One of our most committed Jews, a very good natured gentleman who always made himself useful to Amishav and his entire community, Mr. **Michael Tombing**, was murdered by the Zomar Revolutionary Army (ZRA) in Manipur. Tombing has six sons and daughters who are learning in the Hebrew Learning Center in Churachandpur, Manipur." Condolences to his family and community.

## Mazal Tov!

To the **Abayudaya** and **Rabbi Jeffrey Summit**. The 47<sup>th</sup> Annual GRAMMY Awards has nominated their recent CD in the category Best Traditional World Music Album. The CD, *Abayudaya - Music From The Jewish People Of Uganda*, was produced by Summit and put out by Smithsonian Folkways Recordings in late 2003.

## Todah Rabah

**Lauren Rose Weinkrantz**, daughter of **Barbara Permilla Roth** of San Antonio, Texas, donated \$200 from her bat mitzvah to the Abayudaya Fund.

**Rabbi Leslie Schotz** and the **Jewish Centre of Bay Shore, NY**, sent a carton of *machzorim* and *siddurim* to fledgling Jewish communities in Nigeria.

**Sid Rosenzweig** was kind enough to fill four suitcases with medical supplies for Sefwi Wiawso, Ghana.

We are grateful for donations from our High Rollers: **Lionel Okun** \$3,300, **Temple Isaiah** \$3,000, **Woodlands Community Temple** \$3,000, **Harriet Bograd & Kenneth Klein** \$2,000, **Abe Pollin** \$2,000, **Ben & Esther Rosenbloom Foundation** \$1,500, **Lois Levy** \$1,200, **Moshe Cotel** \$1,000, **Dr. Jules Harris** \$1,000, **Sandy Leeder** \$1,000, **Samiljan Family Fund** of the Jewish Community Foundation \$1,000, **Aron and Karen Primack** \$1,000, and the **Ziv Tzedakah Fund** \$1,000

And to our donors of \$250 - \$500: **Irwin & Elaine Berg, Morris Feder, Summit Jewish Community Center, Drs. Jack & Diane Zeller, Marcia Kaplan, Hope & Matthew Feldman, David Holtz & Diane Glatt, Andre Danesh, Fredman-Philpson Family, Harold, Julie and Jesse Bordwin, Mel & Margery Elfin.**

And to our donors of \$107 - \$200: **Am Yisrael, Ira & Marilyn Polon, Barbara Roth & Lauren Weinkrantz, Christine Smith, Hedy Cohen, Louis Blumengarten, Alisa Goldberg, Edie Rosenberg & Robert Gross, Sherman & Rita Shapiro, Bert Davidson, Donna & Robert Fryd, J. Knoppow, Simeon M. Kreisberg, Steve, Aviva & Shoshan Waldstein, Lew & Erika Schon, Emily Chaya Weinstein**

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# TUTSI UPDATE (cont.)

(Continued from page 1)

were, and they are still being killed for being who they are. At the start of the genocide of 1994, the government of the United States, reeling from events in Somalia and in the former Yugoslavia, sought reassurance that the Tutsi were one of two warring ethnic groups, morally equivalent. Governments today (though not the former colonial powers of Belgium and France, who know better and don't care) still want to believe that. If that were so, then a 'free election' such as the one world governments envision for Burundi would make the conflict go away. But *Hotel Rwanda* shows that a free election provided the perfect infrastructure for the Rwandan genocide of 1994!

Our last newsletter reported the imminence of genocide in Burundi. The date of the predicted onset of that genocide, learned from a Hutu insider, came and went (though the imminence of genocide did not go). The reason is well illustrated in the movie: the hotel manager, Paul Rusesabagina, himself a Hutu, a master of survival skills for his 'guests' and his family, tells a Hutu general that he must spare the lives of the hotel's Tutsi guests because "the Americans are watching." Nothing else, not the French, the Belgians, the UN, or the world, carries such restraining credibility to those who want to kill with an unquenchable desire.

In an article dated October 29, 2004, the Internet organ of the FDD, the largest of the Hutu militias and now part of the predominantly Hutu government of Burundi, reported that an unnamed American was seeking to destabilize the situation in Burundi by sounding false alarm bells about genocide in the U.S. Congress and the White House ([http://www.abarundi.org/actualite/nat3/abarundi\\_031104\\_2.html](http://www.abarundi.org/actualite/nat3/abarundi_031104_2.html)). Forced to acknowledge that the Americans are watching, even while claiming that this particular American's claims are nothing but lying propaganda, the enemies of the Tutsi have had to come to grips with the need for a prudent pause.

Being Americans is an enormous burden and opportunity. Being American Jews is all the more so.

In the short term and long term, an enhanced U.S. interest is critical. Our State Department has had great faith in the shaky and much-postponed "democratic process" that has been imposed upon Burundi. But can democracy provide the restraints that make human rights reliable in a country where human rights died under the stranglehold of Belgium colonialism? I doubt any American life insurance company would want to write policies on the Tutsi of Burundi any more than they would have wanted to sell life insurance to Jews in Germany after Hitler was elected amidst the noise of Nazi hate rallies. Unless, of course, they assumed that no survivors would arise to make claims.

Many of us believe that there needs to be some kind of partition. The Hutu Interahamwe killers seen in the movie remain organizationally intact and armed in the Congo and Tanzania. Remember the failure of the U.N. and the Burundian government to protect refugees from the fighting in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo this past summer, and the resultant slaughter of Congolese Tutsi in Gatumba, Burundi?

Funds for the Hutu militias, once funneled into Burundi by the Catholic Church, are now dwarfed, according to my informants, by funds from Arab lands. Among the hundreds of thousands of Hutus returning to Burundi from Tanzania, Congo, and the other countries to which they fled after the massacre of Tutsis in 1993, many, including a large percentage of those who have influence within the FDD, now have Islamic names (and will likely be able to vote in the coming national election under both their old names *and* their new ones).

The Tutsi need to have a Tutsi state no less than European, North African, and Middle Eastern Jews needed the Jewish state of Israel. It is not a question of nationalism or pride but of dire necessity. They need a state in their Central African Homeland in which they can successfully defend not only their right to live as part of the heritage of Israel but also their very right to live.

The Tutsi of Burundi are one of several Kush communities in the Great Lakes region. There are large reservoirs of Kush in the eastern

provinces of Congo, where the father of my friend King Kigeli lived when he was exiled by Belgium. They are also dehumanized and murdered, threatened no less than the Tutsis of Burundi, and they also look for common ground. The ground they occupy is bizarrely recognized as part of a nation state, which is the last thing that the Democratic Republic of the Congo could be called.

A Congo that threatens to fly apart from centrifugal force and a Burundi that threatens to explode in an orgy of murder despite pious talk of elections may serve European interests. But they do not serve the interests of the Tutsi, and they do not serve American interests. We can't take any lessons from the Europeans. And we can't rely upon the actions of a precious few righteous individuals like Paul Rusesabagina to save our people.

Does that seem too harsh? *Hotel Rwanda* shows you otherwise.

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## Veracruz (cont.)

(Continued from page 2)

since the usual place of worship is a small kindergarten room that the congregation has been using the last few years.

On Sunday an all-day congregational meeting addressed two significant topics: (1) Plans for building a synagogue center in Veracruz and (2) A program to follow up on the myriad support services that the late Rabbi Lerer contributed to the congregation. Architect Sanchez brought a three-dimensional wooden model of a synagogue center for Veracruz, designed by her niece Elena Rendon Gallegos as her graduation project from architecture school. The model was accompanied by a wall full of architectural diagrams and a Powerpoint presentation on a screen.

Rabbi Tarlow brought the discussion back from architectural dreamland to current reality, by pursuing discussions of rabbinical support for the congregation. He offered to take the job of "The Rabbi" himself at no salary, provided that the congregation would pay his expenses. He offered to come up to four times per year during school vacations. Rabbi Posner offered to take over, under Rabbi Tarlow's direction, during times when rabbinical services are needed outside of the pattern of vacation-time visits. The congregation accepted these offers. They will start the process of renting an apartment for visiting rabbis and arranging the loan of an automobile for their use.

Rabbi Tarlow added that he would encourage his University students to help. His final words were: "I'm going to be their Rabbi and I will be in touch weekly by e-mail and/or telephone. I will plan to be with the congregation on site four times during the year. We will start with three or four small, workable projects and build from there. Give us a year, and we'll evaluate as to what else we'll need." He assured us that he will keep us fully informed as to progress and key events.

Architect Sanchez offered resources from among her circle of friends in Mexico City, ranging from legal help to management support. Chaya Weinstein and I spoke about the resources Kulanu can offer and our approach of being enablers of change and quickly encouraging others to take charge of the change. Larry Slotnick offered to advise the congregation on business operations and community planning. His good nature and openness added a lot to the discussions.

We also discussed Daniel Munoz's educational plans. Daniel cannot get away from Mexico until September 2006 but then would be looking for an opportunity to start attending a Judaic study program, hopefully in Baltimore, where my home could be his place of residence.

The film crew recorded the Sunday discussions and will share the product with interested parties for outreach and fund raising. Their filming in Veracruz brings to an end their footage for three films on *Anousim*. Two films are ready, and the third is in production. We are looking forward to the final product so that those who were not here will have a good "second-best view" of the very-much-alive promise made to Rabbi Lerer in 1999.

# LETTERS TO KULANU

## From the South of Brazil

As you know, thousands of baptized Jews went to the Americas as a way to be far from the Iberian Inquisitors. In Brazil there was not an Inquisition Tribunal as in Mexico or Peru. However, at least 300 Brazilians of Jewish origin were imprisoned and many of them were burned in bonfires in Lisbon. The most famous is Antonio José da Silva, nicknamed The Jew. He was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1705 but his entire family was imprisoned and taken to Lisbon. In 1739 he was burned in a stake in Lisbon. He studied law and was a great playwright and poet. Some of my ancestors were also imprisoned and processed by the Inquisition Tribunal.

We have a group of nine persons in Porto Alegre, Brazil. We are not properly organized. Potentially, I believe that in Brazil there are millions of descendants of *Anousim*. Our population is about 180 million inhabitants. I believe that at least 10% have Jewish blood and family customs like mine. My family itself is very big, with more than 100 persons only on my mother's side and a smaller number on my father's side, both being families of *Anousim*. Shulamith Halevy wrote about the Velho (it means "Old") family that lives here in Rio Grande do Sul, with about 300 members, all of them practicing Jewish customs. In fact, the Velho family is mentioned in the history books as a Jewish family from Oporto, Portugal, that went to the Portuguese Islands of Azores and Madeira and to Brazil as well.

I have been studying the *Anousim* families for about 34 years. The Jewish culture is present in many families, but most of them do not know the origin of the customs as they lost a part of the memory chain. The Inquisition made them lose their Jewish identity and forget their origin. But I believe the time has come to uncover the mantle and show the world that the Inquisition failed and the *Anousim* want to come back to their forefathers' home. I am writing a book about the Brazilian New Christians, the *Bnai Anousim* who still practice Jewish customs. The latest custom I discovered in my family is the gold or silver (in this case) coin donated by the grandmother to the firstborn grandson to be put in his bath basin as an amulet, but it is also a symbolic payment to the godfather for the firstborn. I am studying this item and I found it is similar to the *Pidyon Haben* custom in some Jewish communities.

*Sérgio Mota e Silva*  
Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil

## Conversion Efforts Through the Web

Though the Jewish Community continues to ignore conversion as a means of invigorating the religion, we have seen many successes. Our website, [Becomingajew.org](http://Becomingajew.org), will reach 10,000 visitors despite limited advertising. The Ambassadors for Judaism Club hosts over 175 members who are using tote bags, bumper stickers, and cards to help advertise the website and let others know that the Jewish Community welcomes converts. We received a request from a Florida resident who saw a bumper sticker on a car in South Beach. We have added over 25 new articles that tell fascinating stories about Jewish conversion journeys, illustrating how conversion has entered the mainstream of Jewish news.

The Reform movement offered Taste of Judaism in 10 synagogues in Manhattan and drew over 450 people, many of whom will go on to convert. Doris Feinstein, who prepares students for Orthodox conversion, has 15 students this year from various backgrounds, all studying hard to become practicing members of the Jewish Community, and Rabbi Celso Cukierkorn ran successful conversion seminars in South America, California and Miami. Next year Europe and New York will be added to the list. Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn got great newspaper coverage about performing conversions in Spain and Ecua-

dor and was off to Poland to lecture there on conversion to Judaism. Perhaps most important is the formation of a new organization called *Shlach Ameer* which will help people who are attempting to prove they are halachically Jewish through documentation, thus avoiding a conversion process. The success of this organization may help a large number of people who are halachically Jewish but were raised in other faiths return to the fold.

Please help provide support and guidance for those seeking to convert by telling all interested parties about our website, <[Becomingajew.org](http://Becomingajew.org)>.

*Barbara Shair*  
New City, New York

## Teen Interest in Abayudaya

My name is Jesse Bordwin, and I am a high school student in Westchester, New York. Last year, I found out about the Abayudaya from my temple, and soon became fascinated with the people and their way of life. I bought the photo-journal (*Abayudaya: The Jews of Uganda* by Richard Sobol and Rabbi Jeffrey Summit) and found and talked to people who had lived with them, and began to develop a very strong link to their community.

Someday I would love to go to Uganda and visit these incredible people (I was just in Southern Africa over the summer), but because that is impossible at the moment, I started raising money for them instead. Having been to Africa and seeing that a nice bit of money goes a long way, a few friends and I slowly but surely raised this money, all from students at Edgemont Junior/Senior High School and members of Scarsdale Synagogue-Tremont Temple.

I am writing this note to thank you for what you do for these people and Jews everywhere. I would also just like to make sure that this money gets into the hands of the Abayudaya. Finally, I would like to know if there is any possible way to know how our money ends up getting used, just because a whole bunch of us here have an emotional attachment now to these people who live on the other side of the Atlantic.

*Jesse Bordwin*  
Westchester, NY

(Editor's note: The letter was accompanied by a check for \$250. Jesse will be informed how the money was spent.)

**Why not use the book *Under One Canopy: Readings in Jewish***

***Diversity* for exciting, unique, and unusual readings for your seders? In it, for example, you will find the Four Questions in Luganda as asked at an Abayudaya seder!**

**To order, see page 11 or**

# Rosh Hashanah in Nigeria

By *Hartley Springman*

Next year in Nigeria? Probably not. But if you ever find yourself in the Republic of Nigeria around a Jewish holiday, you might want to get connected with one of its Jewish communities.

I was lucky enough to find out about the Jews of Nigeria just before Rosh Hashanah. My guide was Remy Ilona, a Nigerian Jew from the Igbo ethnic group. To hear him speak of the history of the Nigerian Jews is to witness true passion, love and commitment for Judaism and, of course, Israel. He first took me to Shabbat services a couple of weeks before the start of the New Year at the Gihon congregation in a town outside Abuja, the capital city.

I had no idea what to expect before that first Shabbat service. I had heard rumours before I arrived in Nigeria that some Igbos believed they were Jewish, but after seven months in Nigeria I had almost given up my quest to find them. On our first visit, Remy told me that he believed all Igbos were once Jewish, originally coming to southeastern Nigeria through the old African trade routes from Israel as part of the original Diaspora.

Over the years, most Igbos converted to Christianity and lost their connection to Judaism. Nevertheless, small pockets of Igbo Jews have survived and passed on their traditions, while at the same time helping other Igbos to Judaism, if they so desire.

In the weeks leading up to Rosh Hashanah, I received many calls from my new friend Remy. While he was excited that I was planning to attend the service with him at Gihon, he was also planning another special event that day to coincide with the New Year. On that day, he planned to open a Hebrew Research Centre – the first of its kind in Nigeria – in the same town as the synagogue, and he wanted me to preside over the opening ceremony.

On Rosh Hashanah morning, Remy was at my home by 7 a.m. and we were off to the synagogue. Upon entering, I was greeted by simple nods and smiles as if I were a longstanding member, and with a look of contentment from the elders who appeared pleased that I had made good on my promise to join them.

While foreigners in Nigeria are looked at with suspicion in some circles, I suspect these Jewish Nigerians looked at a Jew from another land as a link to the broader Jewish community. And the fact I had spent a few months in Israel after high school (I left out the fact I was actually teaching hockey at the Canada Centre in Metulla) gave them an even greater connection to a land and community they hold so dear.

But the Gihon congregation didn't really look to me for any recognition or guidance. As I walked in that morning, the service continued and everyone's attention remained on the elder who led the prayers. The men and women were separated (albeit by only a few feet), as in an Orthodox congregation. The men were all adorned in kippot and tallitot that had either been donated by other foreigners who had passed through or, in some cases, had been crafted by the congregants themselves.

After a couple of hours, I left with Remy to help with the opening of his Hebrew Research Centre. With Yemeni Jewish music playing in the background, I was introduced by Remy to give some opening remarks. (Luckily, he had prepared a speech for me.) After Remy gave his speech, we spent some time inside the centre having a cold drink and browsing through the books, maps and pictures that he had gathered over the years.

When I returned to Gihon, the congregation was taking their lunch break. As I sat down, a soft-spoken elderly man placed what looked like a seder plate in front of me. It was filled with sliced apples and a bowl of honey. After that traditional snack, I was given a small cup filled with Manischewitz peach liqueur, and then a fish head on a plate, which, after seven months in Nigeria, was not so strange for me.

As we ate – and in true Jewish fashion, they kept telling me to eat more – the man beside me told me more about the history of Igbo Jews and their struggle to keep their congregations strong.

It is fascinating how these Nigerians struggle to keep their families and community practising Judaism in a country so dominated by Christianity and Islam. Fortunately, while they are seen by some Nigerians as a bit strange, they do not face any anti-Semitism. Of course, they do not find many allies in their support for Israel, but that should not come as such a surprise.

We've all heard stories about Jews in Ethiopia, and even in Uganda, but the story of Nigeria's Jews has yet to register on the radar of those seeking to help isolated Jewish communities. If you want to learn more about the Nigerian Jewish community, you can e-mail me – [hspringman@sympatico.ca](mailto:hspringman@sympatico.ca) – and I will keep you updated as I learn more about them myself.

*Hartley Springman is a project officer with Prospect-Nigeria, a group that helps leaders of civil society understand economics so they can help formulate economic policy. This article appeared in the Canadian Jewish News.*

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## A Mystery, Historical Romance, Political Thriller and Travelogue

Book comment by *Anne Herschman*

***The Wind of the Khazars* by Marek Halter, translated from the French by Michael Bernard, Toby Press 2003.**

I read this book recently and was very much taken by the story. The translation is fluid and graceful. It's a combination of mystery, historical romance, political thriller and travelogue. Marc Sofer ("sofer" means scribe in Hebrew) seems to be the author's alter ego.

After giving a lecture in France, Sofer is asked an intriguing question by a beautiful young redhead. She leaves the lecture hall before Sofer can find out who she is. Later that night Sofer is visited by a Mountain Jew from the former Soviet Union who gives him a silver coin stamped with a menorah. His visitor claims it was minted by the Khazars. So the story is set in motion.

The novel moves between the present time and 939 CE, the beginning of the Khazar decline. The beautiful redhead is the Khazar Princess Attex, and Sofer is the young Isaac ben Eliezer of Cordoba, emissary of the great Jewish scholar and diplomat Ibn Shapsut. This part of the story is based on the "Khazar Letter" which was found in the Cairo Genizah about a century ago.

There is also a "Raiders of the Lost Ark" quality to the story as a group of students tries to protect the Khazar treasure from a greedy oil company. I do not wish to give away any more because I'm sure you will enjoy reading it yourself.

It's worthwhile to pay attention to the question of "silence" that Marc Sofer raises. That is the strategy of withholding and destroying information in order to twist history. This has been done too often in order to obscure Jewish contributions to civilization and minimize Jewish suffering. The Russians and Soviets have systematically destroyed Khazar burial and cultural sites, especially Sarkel, the capital. However, as archeologists are fond of saying, "Absence of evidence, is not evidence of absence." Now, we do not have to rely solely on physical proof; other means such as linguistics, oral traditions, and genetics can be used to determine the history of a group.

Unfortunately, Khazar history has also been used to discredit the ancestry of European Jews. Arthur Koestler, in his book *The Thirteenth Tribe*, claims that Ashkenazi Jews are the descendents of the Khazars and not the Judean Diaspora. This was used by the Arabs to show that Jews don't belong in the Middle East. Recent advances in DNA testing disprove that theory and confirm that all Jews originated in Northern Iraq (Ur), just as the Bible says. Our closest relatives are the Kurds, Turks and Armenians.

*(Continued on page 10)*

# PUBLICATIONS OF NOTE

• **Gloria Golden's** new book, *Remnants of Crypto-Jews Among Hispanic Americans*, was published in December by Floricanto Press. Through photographs and oral histories, it examines the vestiges of Judaism still alive in the Hispanic communities of New Mexico and Texas. It has received some excellent reviews: "Five hundred years after the Inquisition, Gloria Golden manages to turn the little-known subject of Crypto-Jews into an inspiring tale of identity. The rich portraiture and captivating oral histories offer a poignant view of what it means to discover and embrace one's Judaism." (*B'nai B'rith Magazine*) "Gloria Golden's images and text provide a valuable insight into the Crypto-Judaic world. All who are drawn to this fascinating subject will find great rewards in this volume." (Rabbi Joshua Stampfer) "The impact of these photographs and related interviews cannot be measured. Surely, through their existence, we touch a part of our past, and preserve it for our children's children. It is another piece in the great puzzle of our scattered people." (Flora Sussely)

Golden is available for lectures, slide presentations, and exhibits; she can be reached at [BGDR529@aol.com](mailto:BGDR529@aol.com).

• Devora Publishing has come out with *DNA & Tradition: The Genetic Link to the Ancient Hebrews* by **Rabbi Yaakov Kleiman**. The book reports on the latest discoveries in the field of molecular population genetics which confirm Biblical history.

• The January issue of the UK's *Jewish Renaissance Magazine* focuses on the Jews of China. From its full-color picture on the cover, to its 16 articles within, the topic is explored over 13 pages, with photos and maps. The magazine's website is [www.jewishrenaissance.org.uk](http://www.jewishrenaissance.org.uk)

• A January 18 article in the *NY Sun*, "Discovery of Buried Synagogue Prompts Brazilian City To Probe Jewish Past," by **Daniela Gerson**, tells of Rinaldo de Lima Andrade and other *Anousim* who have recently converted back to Judaism in Recife.

• "Ethiopian Jews Yearn for Entry to Promised Land: Israel," by **Marc Lacey** and **Greg Myre**, appeared in the *NY Times* on January 3. It tells of the Falash Mura Jews who have been waiting nine years in Addis Ababa for emigration to Israel.

• The January issue of *Hadassah Magazine* contains "Aliya of the East Wind," an article by **Wendy Elliman** about Shi Lei and other descendants of Kaifeng Jews who have been studying and living in Israel.

• An *LA Times* article on December 12, "Mexican Conversos Embrace Judaism," by **Vince Beiser**, reports on Carlos Samuel Salas, a Methodist minister who converted to Judaism, became a rabbi, and founded a thriving synagogue for *Anousim* in Tijuana, Mexico.

• "Congressmen Blast Israel for Slow Pace of Ethiopian Aliya" is the title of **Hilary Leila Krieger's** story in the December 28 *Jerusalem Post*. It reports on efforts by Congressmen Jerrold Nadler and Charles Rangel urging Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to increase the rate of absorption of Ethiopians. This followed **Rachel Pomerance's** November 30 JTA article, "As Falash Mura Plight Drags On, Federations Taking Up the Issue," examining a lobbying effort by a handful of federations in America. These actions may have had an effect. A February 1 article in the *NY Times* by **Greg Myre**, "Israel to speed immigration for Jews in Ethiopia," reports that the Israeli government will accelerate the process and bring the Falash Mura to Israel by the end of 2007.

• The *LA Times* carried the article "DNA Clears the Fog Over Latino Links to Judaism in New Mexico" by **David Kelly** on December 5. It discusses the surge of interest in genealogy among Latinos looking for Jewish connections, particularly through Bennett Greenspan's Family Tree DNA company. Father William Sanchez,

a Catholic priest in Albuquerque who had his Jewish roots confirmed through DNA testing, has encouraged his relatives and parishioners to get tested, claiming that his Jewish history complements his Catholic life.

• **Dina Kraft's** November 2 JTA article, "Israeli Government to High Court: Only Orthodox Conversions Count," reports on a state opinion submitted to the court in a case where 15 foreigners sought state recognition of their Conservative or Reform conversions performed in Israel.

• **Oksana Dragan's** article, "Ethiopian Jew Shares Music and Heritage in America," appeared in the *Voice of America News* on November 5, featuring Alula Tzadik, the gifted and inspirational singer whose CD is available at the Kulanu Boutique (see page 11 or [www.kulanuboutique.com](http://www.kulanuboutique.com)).

• **Brian Harris's** JTA article of October 18, "There's More than Just a Canal: Panama's Jews Active, Observant," reports on this Orthodox community of 8000 that has seen its numbers triple in the last 20 years.



*Have a Very Happy  
Pesach*

## BIROBIDZHAN (cont.)

(Continued from page 3)  
tourist items. I left with a gift-pack of three bottles of locally-distilled vodka, T-shirts with the words "Jewish Federation of Russia" in Russian and Hebrew superimposed over a map of Russia and a menorah, a Hebrew primer, and an illustrated book of Jews in Birobidzhan.

Kseniya had been so helpful that I asked her to join me for lunch, an offer that she accepted. On the way to the restaurant, we met a friend of hers, Yelena Belyaeva. Standing on a street corner, she told me, in good English, that she had a degree in Yiddish from Columbia University in New York and was a professor of Yiddish and Hebrew in the Department of Jewish Studies at the local university. I would have liked to get to know her better (and hope that I will), but it was windy and freezing so it was not the time. We did, however, exchange email addresses; hers is [yelenabell@hotmail.com](mailto:yelenabell@hotmail.com), and she welcomes correspondents.

Another potential source of information is the local Chabad house. The way to contact them is by telephone. From America, dial 011-7-42622-20402; fax 42622-60193.

I was in the Russian Far East on business, and just had to make a side trip to see Birobidzhan. If you want to go there, the best route from the US is on Korean Air to Seoul. From there, Korean Air makes the three-hour flight to Khabarovsk, the Russian Far East's major hub, a few times a week. You can probably save a few hundred dollars flying Aeroflot from one of its US gateways to Moscow, then connecting to Khabarovsk, but it's a longer distance and the flights are not as comfortable. There are frequent buses and trains for the three-hour ride to Birobidzhan. The best place in town is the Hotel Vostok, which cost me about \$25 a night.

I would be happy to discuss Birobidzhan with you; write to me at [gershowitzgrants@yahoo.com](mailto:gershowitzgrants@yahoo.com).

# *The Pardesi Synagogue Does Not Disappoint!*

By Karen Primack

We searched out Jewish sites on our recent one-month trip through the Hindu temples, palaces, gardens, and game reserves of South India (just before the tsunami hit).

My husband Aron and I were looking forward to seeing the renowned Pardesi Synagogue in Kochi (Cochin), Kerala State, ever since we read about it in Emma Kimor's fine piece in *UNDER ONE CANOPY: Readings in Jewish Diversity* and in Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*. And it did not disappoint us. The ornately carved and gilded ark in red and gold, the many clear glass chandeliers, the colored oil lamps, the famous blue and white Chinese tiles, were all familiar from our readings, but so vibrant in the surprisingly small space. The outside clock tower was also familiar, with Hebrew, Roman, and Malayalam numerals on its three faces. There were many tourists, but we were told that we were the only (self-declared) Jews at that time.

In surrounding "Jewtown," shops offered souvenirs for Jewish tourists – sequined kippot sewn by Sarah Cohen, one of the few remaining Cochini Jews (most have moved to Israel), an old mezuzah in an antique shop, and embroidered organdy challah covers by (non-Jewish) fishermen's wives. At the synagogue, we had also purchased a facsimile of the famous 4<sup>th</sup> Century copper plates given by the local maharaja, King Cheran Perumal, to Joseph Rabban, leader of the Jews who had recently arrived in nearby Cranganore. The plates, written in an archaic form of Tamil, granted to the Jewish community a village and its proprietary rights "so long as the world and moon exist."

More unexpected, and almost as exciting, was a lovely abandoned synagogue located behind a shop in nearby Ernaculum. On a tip, we directed our driver to Jew Street in Ernaculum, and, after asking directions many times, found a shop with a sign reading COCHIN BLOSSOMS, with a Star of David on it. We walked through an open gate, past some caged birds, fish tanks, and workers packing Christmas ornaments, and into the old sanctuary. It was clean and in excellent condition, with red and gold carved walls and ark – more ornate than the Pardesi Synagogue. There were many hanging glass lamps, and beautifully carved benches. The fine print on the sign outside identified the place as the Kadavumbagam Synagogue. We were not able to find out what is to become of the dramatic space, but we were told it is owned by a Jew who now prays at Pardesi.

In Goa, we were particularly anxious to find some traces of Jewish presence before the ruthless Portuguese occupation of that Indian state in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (both Jews and Hindus suffered). This time we were disappointed. Our guide, a college graduate, did not even know what a Jew was! He did not know about the Inquisition, but was aware that the Portuguese treated Hindus cruelly. We were, however, assured we were very fortunate in arriving while the remains of Francis Xavier were being displayed, perhaps for the last time before they discontinued this annual exhibition! So we dutifully toured the basilica and cathedral, and joined the very, very long line that filed past the revealing glass coffin. Christians, and even some Hindus, knelt and kissed the casket, but we used our time to reflect on this person who might rightfully be called the father of the Portuguese Inquisition in Goa. In my preparatory reading for this trip, I had come across these sentences from A. K. Priolkar's *The Goa Inquisition: The Terrible Tribunal for the East* (Voice of India 1961 and 1991):

"In so far as any one date can be taken as of prime importance in the ruin of the Portuguese empire, it is 6 May 1542, when Francis Xavier set foot ashore at Goa. From then on the Jesuits did their worst, using every form of bribery, threat, and torture to effect a conversion."

This was not our first time in Mumbai (Bombay), and we could not revisit the synagogues during our brief time there en route to the airport, but we did have a memorable lunch with Jonathan and Ruth

Solomon and Benjamin Isaac. Jonathan is a Bene Israel attorney and former chairman of ORT in Bombay. Benjamin is director of ORT India and the initiator of the new ORT Computer Center in Manipur that serves the Bnei Menashe. Ruth has the distinction of being a child of Bene Israel and Baghdadi parents – a "mixed Jewish marriage" Indian style!

Once again we experienced reminders of India's rich Jewish history. Although the Kerala Jewish community has dwindled due to emigration, the synagogues remain and we are the richer for it.



*The author at the Ark of the former Kadavumbagam Synagogue*

## **A Mystery, Historical Romance Political Thriller and Travelogue (cont.)**

*(Continued from page 8)*

Some scholars believe that only the Khazar nobility converted, since there is no significant sign of "Asiatic DNA" in the Ashkenazi gene pool. My opinion is that Turkic people are so close genetically to the Jews, that their DNA would not show up as dramatically distinct and that large numbers of Khazars converted and were absorbed by various Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. Most interesting is the theory of Simcha Jacobovici, a documentary film maker. Based on the wording of the Khazar letter as well as artifacts found in the area, he believes that the Khazars were of Israelite (lost tribe) and Turkic origin. King Joseph wrote to Ibn Shapsut "we have returned" to Judaism not "we have converted."

The memory of the Khazars refuses to die and continues to intrigue Jews. I hope that more research is done and that more sites and analytical tools become available. It would be wonderful to know more about the Jews of the steppe and their civilization.

Another novel on this subject that I did not have a chance to read yet is *The Rabbi King, David of Khazaria*, by Monroe Kuttner.

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# When Variety Rhymes with Richness

By Issaka Sourwema

On Friday, October 29, a Shabbat dinner was held at the Jewish Community Center (JCC) in Manhattan, NY, co-sponsored by Ayecha Resource Organization, Beta Israel of North America Cultural Foundation Inc. (BINA), Kulanu, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ), Swirl, Inc., the American Sephardi Federation (ASF) and the Jewish Multicultural Network (JMN).

Accompanied by fine drinks and good food and embellished by touching songs, that Shabbat dinner was very exciting. Two hundred African-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, Whites and Africans were seated side by side, taking refreshment together. The huge number of participants was surprising since the entrance fee was relatively expensive. As a result, the participants, the organizers, and particularly the JCC's Judy Manelis, were touched.

Certainly, the spirit of The Only One led from the beginning to the end of that Shabbat dinner and helped fulfill its objectives, which were:

- 1 To gather together at the same time and in the same place, in order to reunite the daughters and the sons of Israel regardless of their racial and cultural differences; those differences should be considered as riches, since our world is one of differences.
- 2 To confirm one of Judaism's core creeds: life in community; wherever they have settled, Jewish people are taught that living in community is a religious duty.
- 3 To institutionalize such events. "Watering a plant only one time does not help it grow," advises African wisdom. More occasions and more initiatives should be organized or taken to fight cultural stereotypes and racial prejudices.

At the dinner's end, people were exchanging addresses in a friendly atmosphere. There can be no doubt that the dinner achieved its goals. In fact, it was a masterstroke.

*(The writer is from Burkina Faso, West Africa)*

**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. This newsletter is published quarterly by Kulanu, 11603 Gilsan St., Silver Spring, MD 20902.**

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