



KULANU

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Ethiopia's Kechene Jewish Community

A History Lesson and Challenge

by Judy Manelis

I had always wanted to visit Ethiopia and meet members of the Jewish community there. The closest I came, however, was in the 80's when I met Ethiopians in Israel during the airlift and greeted them at an absorption center in Ashkelon right after they landed on Israeli soil. One of the perks, you might say, of being at the time executive director of Hadassah. However, a visit to Ethiopia itself never materialized. That fact changed in January of this year when several Kulanu board members, myself included, traveled to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to visit the newly emerging Jewish community living in the Kechene neighborhood of the city.



Kechene potter

Photo by Laura Alter Klapman

When I first heard of the Kechene Jewish community, which calls itself Beit Avraham, I was intrigued. First there was Amy Cohen's excellent article "The Long Road Home" in the Spring, 2009, issue of the Kulanu newsletter. Then, there was "The Kechene Jews of Ethiopia," prepared last summer by members of the community who are now living in the United States. (See www.kulanu.org/ethiopia for both articles.) I have excerpted some paragraphs from the latter as a way to introduce them:

The Kechene Jews share ancestral origins with the Beta Israel and, like those Ethiopian Jews, most of whom are now in Israel, they observe pre-Talmudic Jewish practices. Separation of the Kechene Jews from the Beta Israel, however, began around 1855..." (when the community moved from its traditional village homes in the Gondar region of Ethiopia south to the Northern Shewa region).

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FROM THE GROUND UP

Kulanu-Abayudaya Education and Economic Development

by Laura Wetzler, Coordinator



Uganda

Dear Friends,

As always, this year's trip to Uganda focused on evaluating on-going projects and developing initiatives that strengthen self-sufficiency and reduce poverty in the Abayudaya Jewish community.

Community Meetings

Our visit with the Abayudaya this January was particularly productive due to the presence of Kulanu President Harriet Bograd. Harriet is a great multi-tasker and a strong leader whose wisdom and pragmatism inspired us all. Meetings focused on Abayudaya community oversight of budgets, the evaluation of 20 different ongoing projects, as well as long term planning. Harriet and I met with Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, the elected Abayudaya community board, farmers, crafts people, health educators, youth, school nutritionists, and micro-finance project leaders, as well as with school headmasters and their staffs.

In addition, Harriet worked with Abayudaya leaders on tourism ideas and helped create a website and informational materials for the Abayudaya Guest House (kulanu.org/abayudaya/guest-house). She also worked with members on improvements to the Kulanu-Abuyadaya craft project, and consulted on marketing at the craft shop in the village of Nabagoye Hill. Last but not least, we conducted sustainable development planning workshops with Rabbi Gershom and community leaders, including work on a new anti-poverty pilot project for the poorest farm village, discussed below.

Delicious Peace Cooperative

It is truly gratifying to report that Kulanu's years of advocacy at the US embassy in Uganda continue to bear fruit for the interfaith Delicious Peace Coffee project.

ration and the cooperative's strong productivity are a win-win for US policy goals in the region. Working with Kulanu, USAID LEAD Program Director Susan Corn- ing, Delicious Peace Chairman JJ Keki, and the Thanks-



Delicious Peace Vanilla Project
Photos by Laura Wetzler

giving Coffee Company, the farmer's cooperative has been awarded several business development grants.

Last year the cooperative built the USAID-supported coffee pulping station, and this year, the cooperative is constructing a USAID-supported 3-story building for a warehouse and offices. Even while in construction, the new building is already housing the cooperative's first forays into

curing vanilla on its own site rather than sending it away for processing to a middleman. (Yes, as reported last year, the cooperative is venturing into other products in addition to coffee!) USAID is also sponsoring the attendance of JJ Keki at two international coffee conferences this year.

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This Spring, USAID is supporting extensive field school training on best practice farming for robusta coffee cultivation in the village of Namutumba. The village, whose lowland elevation cannot sustain Arabica coffee, is learning to cultivate robusta instead. In keeping with this goal, JJ and I met with potential robusta coffee buyers in Uganda's capital of Kampala. During my stay, I was also delighted to meet pioneering Delicious Peace Cooperative farmer Peter Mukone to learn about Peter's groundbreaking introduction of cocoa farming to eastern Uganda. At the coop's request, I was able to successfully connect leaders of our Delicious Peace Project to three major international cocoa bean buyers, just in time for their first cocoa bean harvest in May. Congratulations to all the farmers, to Margot Ellis and Susan Corning of USAID, to Kulanu supporters, to Mike and Herb Stein for keeping faith with the vanilla project, to Thanksgiving Coffee and to JJ Keki for his fearless leadership.

Abayudaya Grain Mill Warehouse Project

One of the most exciting new projects to emerge from Kulanu/Abayudaya farmer business development workshops is a proposal to create a small grain mill, warehouse and office/shop complex to promote economic recovery in Namutumba, one of the poorest and most remote Abayudaya villages. The poverty of this particular community, located five dusty miles off the main road, was exacerbated when dictator Idi Amin was persecuting the Abayudaya community some 25 years ago. During that period, Amin's forces stole their land on the road and forced the synagogue and its community into hiding in the remote flatlands. To develop economically viable agricultural and business options to support Namutumba and lift the living standard of these courageous people has been a difficult challenge due to the location of the village, 50 miles from the main Abayudaya center in Mbale.

Some help has come. Water tanks, two wells, and a low power solar electric battery have been installed in the village. Kulanu has initiated a small micro-finance loan program and organized farmer workshops. Village children attend Kulanu-Abayudaya sponsored schools. Nevertheless, so much still needs to be done in Namutumba and in the other Abayudaya villages where the

persistence of poverty is the enemy. Real change will happen in this potentially rich agricultural area only with more farmer training and business capital.

In the case of Namutumba, farm families grow corn, cassava, millet, sorghum, robusta coffee and pineapples. But farmers have no nearby warehouse to store produce until prices rise, nor a mill to grind their grains into value-added flour. Community members have no place to buy a bar of soap, charge an emergency cell phone or buy an aspirin or a cold drink.

The new economic development project will create a small trading center, complete with electricity, to serve the needs of over 3000-5000 people in the area, both Jews and non-Jews. It will employ a minimum of seven Abayudaya members (and more in ancillary businesses), provide much needed farmer services as well as on-site, in-village training in best practice agriculture, safe food storage, mill repair and maintenance, and bookkeeping and accounting skills.

Profits generated will go to the village synagogue to help support social services for the most vulnerable members of this struggling rural Jewish community. These would include widows, orphaned children, the sick, the elderly and the disabled. It would also provide a small stipend for the village rabbi and pay for the



*Children awaiting lunch at
Abayudaya elementary school*

Photos by Laura Wetzler

completion of the village's synagogue (floors, windows, etc.) We hope it can be a model for other economically challenged Abayudaya villages.

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A grant proposal, submitted to a well-known foundation, was crafted after weeks of business planning meetings with Abayudaya Chief Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, Namutumba Rabbi Eri Kaidiwha and other village community leaders, on every aspect of the design, organization and operation of the mill, warehouse and shop. Together we did market research and took field trips to working mills, met with experienced mill mechanics, and acquired specifications and costs at wholesale equipment supply distributors in Kampala. Community members worked with Kulanu's ten-point business plan questionnaire to organize their business structure, plan for their expenses, cost their services, and determine how to distinguish themselves in the marketplace. The community has already sent a young man to begin training in operation and repair at a town mill business in preparation for running the village's small mill.

The process described above demonstrates Kulanu's philosophy of "development from the ground up." The very exercise of creating the business plan has helped build skills. If Kulanu can secure funding, the project will be implemented in three stages, beginning with extensive training, followed by building construction and then small-scale mill and power source installation. We are also exploring the possibility of the village trading center, located far off the electricity grid, being powered by more efficient solar technology from Israel, as opposed to a diesel engine as is customary. If solar energy is technically feasible (and we don't know yet if it is), it would be the first solar-powered small-scale grain mill in Uganda and could become a model for other rural areas around the world. The cost of the entire project, training, construction and equipment, is relatively modest by US standards. A grant in the amount of \$45,000 will enable Kulanu to continue its goal of sustainable development from the grassroots up.

Abayudaya Women's Association Conference, Micro-finance, and Abayudaya-Kulanu Deaf Education Project

Mazel tov to Naume Sabano, Athalia Musenze, Ruth Nabaigwa, and Dinnah Samson and all the members of the Abayudaya Women's Association. The Kulanu-sponsored Abayudaya Women's Association Conference, made possible three times each year by Jeanne Bodin and Woodland Temple in Westchester, NY, was held this year in Namutumba. It was, as always, a highlight of our visit, as Abayudaya women from
4 five villages greeted each other excitedly, and sat



Abayudaya Student
Photo by Laura Wetzler

down to a full day of discussion on best practice farming, the counseling of adolescents, income generating craft projects, microfinance and family health issues. There were several inspiring Kulanu-Abayudaya microfinance success stories of women supporting their families with the help of a small business loan to plant and sell their produce. Although this program has been successful, it is still woefully underfinanced. Many are turned away for lack of funds.

The report on the Abayudaya-Kulanu Deaf Education Project was heartening. Last year, six Abayudaya school children began receiving the first appropriate education in their lives at a Ugandan school specifically working with deaf children. Thanks to Rabbi Gershom, Dr. Wamani. Dr. Liz Feldman, Hedy Cohen and other Kulanu supporters. It is a pleasure to see how much better the children are doing now that they are connected to Ugandan Deaf culture, learning to read and write for the first time, and to speak in International Sign Language.

The Abayudaya Schools

Most readers already know that Kulanu is helping the Abayudaya build and support two rural village schools, feeding and educating over 700 economically disadvantaged Jewish, Muslim and Christian children studying together in peace. The needs of the two schools (primary and high school) remain overwhelming. Headmasters Aaron Kintu Moses and Seth Jonadav and their staffs are doing a great job with limited resources. On-going support is needed to keep the schools run-

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Old Synagogue at Namutumba

Photo by Laura Wetzler

ning in these difficult economic times. Right now, the high school is forced to send students home each October to accommodate national testing. High school boys from remote villages have no dorm to live in and many of them must rent rooms in town, where they live unsupervised. A great many of these students are orphans struggling to attend the Abayudaya High School specifically so they can take Hebrew and other Jewish subjects.

The schools continue to need additional classrooms, dorms, a library and for the high school, science laboratories. A place for the kids to eat protected from the torrential rains would also be a plus. Both schools also desperately need storage facilities so food for the children can be bought in bulk. This would save money and ensure a healthier diet for the children, as protein rich legumes and whole grains could be purchased when prices are most favorable rather than on a daily basis. The problem impacts the ability to feed the children who attend the two schools.

If you, or anyone you know, wants to do a *mitzvah* by building a classroom or dormitory, subsidizing the salaries of teachers or helping feed hungry students, the costs are but a small fraction of what it costs in the United States. Naming opportunities are also available. Please contact Harriet or me for information.

Youth Conference, Music & Dance Festival

The Abayudaya Jewish Music and Dance Festival coincided with a much expanded Abayudaya Youth Conference, begun three years ago by Abayudaya teens in

conjunction with Kulanu. This year, the event was sponsored by United Synagogue Youth under the inspired direction of Abayudaya Head Rabbi and Rosh Yeshivah Gershom Sizomu. *Masorti Olami* (world conservative movement) representative Judy Gray volunteered from Israel and was a huge help. Abayudaya youth from every village were in attendance for the three-day conference, as was a delegation of three terrific California high school students who had helped raise funds for the event: David

Weingarten, Elysse Weissberger and Jason Schreiber. Abayudaya teens organized and lead the conference and Shabbat services.

The music and dancing, organized this year by Athalia Musenze and the Abayudaya board, was spectacular. Participants included new community groups from northern Uganda and Nairobi, Kenya, and featured students and adults of all ages keeping alive their rich cultural traditions. Exciting rural dances from six different tribal groups (Ugandan Bagwere, Bugisu, Buganda, Busoga, Acholi, and Kenyan Kikuyu) were balanced by contemporary Jewish African hip hop from Mbale city.

All the performances pulsed with the drum beat of African-Hebrew tam and lyrics reflecting Jewish values. Fees from Kulanu's Jewish Life in Uganda Mitzvah Tour make it possible for Abayudaya community members from every village to celebrate together in what has become an annual international event drawing visitors from around the world. Isaac Byaki, Dinnah Samson and Mama Rachel Wanyenya made us all feel welcome by serving fabulous meals at the Abayudaya Guest House (better than the hotel food in town!).

Thanks to everyone for their ongoing support of this extraordinary community! And if anyone is interested in helping as a contributor or as a volunteer, please get in touch. □

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ETHIOPIA'S KECHENE JEWISH COMMUNITY



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The community played a pivotal role in the establishment of the capital, Addis Ababa, providing crafts and manual labor. But despite their economic importance, they were regarded with distrust, fear, and at times, even hatred because of their Jewish faith. Faced with extreme persecution from their Christian neighbors, who called them anti-Christ, they lived as strangers in the region and were denied basic rights such as the ownership of land, which was granted only to those who accepted the Christian faith and underwent baptism...

...To ensure the survival of the community and its continuity to the next generation, and to minimize persecution and gain access to burial grounds from the church, the elders instructed the community to abide by the following rules:

- Members of the community were encouraged to adapt outwardly to the environment in which they lived, including going to church.
- Judaic practices would continue secretly...(In other words), the mode of religious practice was changed from open to secret.
- Access was denied to outsiders in their quest to learn about the community. Providing information about the community was strictly prohibited.
- Religious wisdom had to be passed orally from generation to generation. It was strictly forbidden to produce any written document until "The Day" when God favors the community and their true identity and their religious practice can be made public without persecution.

A large Jewish community felt forced to live underground.

The Kulanu mission to Ethiopia was planned in response to these articles and to requests by some youthful members of the Kechene Jewish community to help them reconnect with the worldwide Jewish community. Kulanu's coordinator for Ethiopia Sam Taddesse, an Ethiopian-born Jew, had recently retired from an illustrious 40-year international career working as an economist and had returned to Ethiopia to contribute to the economic growth and success of his homeland. Sam would plan and lead this important introduction to the community. For me personally, the trip represented a monumental history lesson and a challenge.

Here was a large Jewish community (some say over 50,000), who felt forced to live underground like the



Young men of Kechene Jewish Community

Photos by Laura Alter Klapman

true to the faith of the Jewish people. Again, as in Spain, Jews had contributed to the building (in this case literally) of the country and capital city, but, at the same time, they were a despised minority and rejected for their religious identity.

I had the good fortune years ago to hear a lecture on the Jews of Spain by the distinguished Jewish historian Professor Yosef Haim Yerushalmi, who held chairs in Jewish history at Harvard and later at Columbia University. Dr. Yerushalmi spoke about the Spanish Inquisition and the *conversos* experience. He admonished the audience not to romanticize the period and to think that "underground" Judaism was the same as the free, open embrace of Judaism, only transferred to the cellar. "It isn't about Jews sitting in the cellar with Shabbat candlesticks and a white tablecloth," he said. No, the Judaism of the cellar was compromised, rituals and laws forgotten, observance difficult if not impossible to maintain.

I couldn't help but remember Yerushalmi's words during my visit to the Beit Avraham. Here was a community of Jews that was so frightened of being exposed that it did not respond to overtures from its co-religionists in the Beta Israel community or attempt to join the *aliyah* (return) to Israel. Here was a community that was still under suspicion even when it attempted to blend in with its Christian neighbors. To this day, many members of the community are fearful of exposure within the greater Ethiopian society and are unhappy that some of the younger members want to practice their Judaism in public. They say, "It isn't the right time."

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But the young people we met are buoyed by the 1994 Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, making all religions equal under the law. For them, the time to embrace their faith in public is now.

But again I must refer back to Yerushalmi....what kind of Judaism survives for over a century and a half underground? We learned the answers to this and other questions during our visit.

How can I describe the joy with which we were greeted by the members of this small community of practicing Jews? When we arrived at the synagogue, Kechene Bete Selam-House of Peace, a group of young men was waiting outside to welcome us and to show us their synagogue. Their young leader Sintayahu Gezahegne proudly led us into the building. Though small by United States standards, perhaps more like the size of a *shtibl* (tiny synagogue), the building is able to accommodate about 30 individuals. It was obviously decorated with great attention to detail and a concern for tradition. On the roof outside was a blue and white construct with a star of David on it. The inside had a small office, an area to display community handicrafts and a sanctuary that was divided

Members support synagogue with personal funds.

into two parts to accommodate both men and women. A lovely crimson drape covered the wall behind the ark. Abraham Kifle Mariam, a young community member, had copied the design from a picture of a synagogue sanctuary he found in a book. A wooden ark was attached to the wall, in front of which was a small table with candlesticks, wine glasses, a menorah. The room had wooden benches to accommodate worshippers and a curtain that could be drawn to separate the two sides. The young men told us they contributed a portion of their personal income each month to pay for the rental of the building, to develop the property and to decorate the sanctuary.

As part of our introduction to the Jewish community in Kechene, we attended a meeting in a local school with over 100 leaders, many representing community organizations. Some attendees represented the elderly, many of whom live in poverty; others represented craftsmen. (Women were nowhere to be seen at the meeting.) Some participants came to talk about the lack of a Jewish cemetery where Jews could be buried as Jews and not have to profess their Christian allegiance

in order to find a place for burial; others just came to express their Jewishness in a communal setting. One man talked about the anti-Semitism he experienced as a child. Though now middle-aged, his voice quivered and his eyes filled with tears as he related his feelings of isolation and sadness. The meeting lasted a whole day.

Another day was spent visiting craftsmen in a pottery cooperative with 26 women (we were told there are four such women's cooperatives) and a weaver's workshop of just men. The pottery cooperative provided us with our first opportunity to interact with women. Throughout our visit, we had asked, "Where are the women?" In the synagogue, in the community meeting, in conversations, we had emphasized the importance of bringing women into the decision-making process and stressed the need to empower them.

Now that we had the chance to meet some of them, we asked about their specific needs and wishes. The pottery cooperative had no wheels, no kilns and no electricity. Children crawled in the clay at their mothers' feet as there was no one to care for them at home. Yes, they could use modern equipment and electricity. But what they wanted most was what all mothers want: "a good education and opportunities for (their) children." Would they want to study Hebrew if they could? The answer was "yes."

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Before the Ark

Photo by Laura Alter Klapman



Child at potting cooperative
Photo by Sheila Gogol

We learned during our visit that the pottery cooperatives have an elected board that oversees the business of all four pottery cooperatives and meets regularly to discuss problems; however, the needs of the cooperatives are overwhelming and money is not available for modernization. The interchange was heartfelt, and we invited the women to join us at synagogue services on Shabbat.

In the weavers' workshop, we were struck by the makeshift quality of the equipment. Instead of manufactured looms, the weavers had constructed looms from the limbs of trees, which were cut, shaved of their branches and bound together by rope to create the looms. This was the reality in a community that is largely poor and has few resources. The weavers, all of whom used to work at home, had recently relocated to a government-built complex just for weavers. The facility was clean and well maintained. The weavers stood beside their individual looms and proudly displayed their work. In the government facility, workers must pay a rental fee for space, which further limits their ability to make money from their craft. As a result, some weavers choose to work in the confined space of their small homes.

One of the many highlights of our trip was participating in Sabbath services. We arrived just before sundown and the lighting of the candles. The young men were dressed for services and greeted us with warmth

and pride. Services were led by Demeke Engida, who used a xeroxed booklet with prayers in Hebrew and Amharic (Ethiopian language). He told me the translation of prayers had been done with the help of a family member. A cantor on a CD announced the order of the service and sang introductory songs and prayers. Some of the congregants had learned the songs on the CD and joined in.

Young people thirst for instruction in Jewish ritual.

From conversations during our visit, we learned how much these young people are thirsting for instruction in Jewish rituals and practice and desirous of learning Hebrew. It was obvious that the passing down of Judaism in secret had severely compromised their knowledge of their heritage. And they knew it. Again, I heard the words of Professor Yerushalmi. "Without an open expression of ones Judaism.....there will be losses..." And so it was an emotional experience for us who have grown up with the freedom to practice Judaism, to see what these young people are trying to do to counteract decades of Jewish illiteracy and secrecy.

And the women? Can I tell you that 22 women came to the service, some with babies in their arms or on their backs. The women were all ages and most were unable to participate in the service as they had little if any knowledge of Hebrew or Jewish ritual. Why they came, we were not sure. Was it the attention they received

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Kechene weaver making atarah (collar for tallit)



Kechene pottery drying in the sun

Photo by Sheila Gogol

from us during our visit to the pottery workshop? Was it the fact that we were mostly women? It was impossible to say. But there they were, crowded into the small sanctuary.

At our final meeting with the young men before we left Addis Ababa, we talked about the community's needs... religious/spiritual, economic, educational, medical, communal. As the community's infrastructure is still somewhat fragmented, poverty rampant, living conditions difficult and leadership often in disarray, we all agreed on the following first steps in this new relationship.

First Steps

Generate publicity for the community to encourage awareness, tourism and volunteer efforts within the worldwide Jewish community.

Assist the community in seeking donations of Jewish books.

Help identify a volunteer who could assist the pottery workers in seeking resources for training and modernizing to upgrade their pottery-making equipment and facilities.

Help arrange a visit of a rabbi and/or Hebrew/Judaica teacher(s) to teach/train community members in Jewish rituals and observance.

Explore the possibility that a member of the Beit Avraham community could go to study at Rabbi Gershom Sizomu's yeshivah, near Mbale, Uganda.

Discuss the possibility of having a member of the community visit the United States as a Kulanu speaker on behalf of the community.

Our departure that evening was bittersweet. Friendships had been formed; relationships begun; addresses exchanged. Although we were uplifted by what this small group of young Jews was trying to accomplish, at the same time, we recognized the challenges they were facing. Unlike the descendants of the Spanish *conversos*, the Kechene Jewish community is not 500 years removed from its heritage. Nevertheless, the Kechene Jews have been cut off from their roots for a long time. A small core of courageous Jews is reaching out. We need to galvanize the Jewish community to meet the challenges posed by the Kechene Jews and to help them return home. □

TALLITOT AND ATAROT, BY KECHENE WEAVERS

The Kechene weavers make beautiful handwoven traditional *tallitot* (prayer shawls), 78.75" x 47.25". With guidance from master *tallit*-designer and Kulanu volunteer Susan Schorr, they also have begun making beautiful *atarot* (the collar-strips that go on *tallitot*). Some of the *atarot* are traditional Ethiopian geometric designs, and others say *Shema Yisrael* in Amharic.

Kulanu Boutique is already taking special orders for the *tallitot* and *atarot*. The introductory price is \$140 for a *tallit* with *atarah* or \$18 for just an *atarah*. Special orders will take several months for delivery. To place an order, contact:

www.kulanuboutique.com



Kechene young man holds up new atarah

Suriname's Jewish Community Welcomes First Rabbi in 40 Years

The question is often asked, can one person really make a difference? This winter the question was answered with a resounding YES during the three month stay in Suriname of Rabbi Haim Dov Beliak, a rabbi from Southern California. Rabbi Beliak had recently returned to the States after several months ministering to a progressive Jewish community in Warsaw, Poland. His stay in Suriname, which had not had a resident rabbi in 40 years, followed from yeoman efforts by Stephen Gomes, Ph.D, a visiting professor in Suriname from the Dutch Maastricht School of Management, and Jacob Steinberg, a business consultant and Kulanu Board Member.

Independently, both men had “discovered” Suriname’s Jewish community while in the country fulfilling their own professional assignments. Each man, taken by the determination of the small community to retain its Jewish identification and celebrate its unique Jewish heritage, became involved in supporting the community’s efforts to reconnect with world Jewry and to strengthen its Jewish life through outreach, synagogue projects, holiday celebrations, etc. On return to his Toronto home, Steinberg even founded *Chai Vekayam* (Live for the Future), an organization to support Suriname’s Neve Shalom synagogue and its congregation, created a web site for the community and started a newsletter to report on the community’s affairs and progress.

In celebrating the differences individual people can make within a community or in the world, we surely have to recognize not only Rabbi Beliak, but Stephen Gomes and Jacob Steinberg as well, for their outstanding and selfless work on behalf of the Jews of Suriname.

HIGHLIGHTS OF RABBI BELIAK’S TIME IN SURINAME

On his arrival in late November, Rabbi Beliak received his first request: to marry Betsy Marsan (68 years old) and Leendert Herman Duym (79), a couple celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. The couple’s first ceremony had been a secular one without benefit of *chuppah* (wedding canopy) or *ketubah* (Jewish marriage document), for no rabbi had resided in Suriname at the time of their marriage. This time, with Rabbi Beliak officiating and surrounded by their 6 children, 14 grandchildren and the whole Jewish community,



Rabbi Beliak performing wedding ceremony.

Photos courtesy Rabbi Beliak

the couple enjoyed their long-awaited Jewish wedding ceremony complete with *chuppah* and *ketubah*.

As Rabbi Beliak noted in an email message, “I think for many people it was the first Jewish wedding they had ever seen. The 50th anniversary event was so noteworthy that Mrs. Lisbeth Venetiaan, the wife of Suriname President Dr. Ronald Venetiaan, attended the wedding ceremony and reception.”

Chanukah brought more celebrations. A sizable menorah was placed outside the synagogue, and it was lit each night with members of the community in attendance. The children, in particular, were excited to participate in the candle lighting. Inside the synagogue, smaller menorahs were placed and lit. On the third day of Chanukah, Rabbi Beliak was hosted at a family day Chanukah party, which brought out 80 to 100 com-

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The small South American country of Suriname is located north of Brazil, between Guyana and French Guiana. Its Jewish population can be traced back to the first Jews to arrive in Suriname in the 1630’s. Most of those men and women were descendants of

Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition, who had traveled to Suriname from Holland, Portugal and Italy, via Brazil.

For additional historical and current information, please visit:

www.suriname-jewish-community.com

munity members for food, dreidle playing and games. The party concluded with the lighting of the Chanukah lights.

Rabbi Beliak described his feelings about the synagogue and the community in an e-mail message: "I've invited the people to come back each night for lighting the candles. It is so impressive at night to see the *Chanukiah* (Chanukah candelabra) lit in front of the venerable old *shul* ...When I entered the synagogue, I walked over to the the rabbi's seat and to the magnificent *Hechal* (Ark for the Torah). I felt the majesty and gravity of this job. There is a dignity and power to the building that in many ways has been the secret of why the community has survived. As a child of the 60s, complete with my own anti-edifice complex, I never thought I would say that about a building."

Through Jacob Steinberg's newsletter, readers have followed the community's attempts to protect its two active Jewish cemeteries by erecting protective fencing around them. The cemeteries, overgrown with vegetation, were also

The community always opted to enhance Jewish observance.

vulnerable to trash thrown on the property by passers-by. Because the community has limited resources, it often had to decide whether money should be spent on Jewish religious observance, such as purchasing Pass-over foods for the community seder, or on building the cemetery fences. When faced with such choices, it always opted to purchase items to enhance Jewish observance.

In the last year, with help both from community members, who dug deep in their pockets to support this project, and from supporters outside the community, the fences were ready for placement. Thanks are due also to the city of Paramaribo, which supplied heavy equipment and labor to clear the jungle areas surrounding the cemeteries, at no cost to the Jewish community, and to local businessmen, who discounted the materials needed to construct the fences.

With the community vice president Lilly Duym, the community organized a major cleaning day with 30 people participating; the young did the heavy outside clean

up and the older members provided refreshments. The cemeteries' grounds were weeded and trash removed; fences were erected complete with gates. As Jacob Steinberg writes in his newsletter: "After decades of neglect, the cemeteries are now protected with a solid iron fence and gates and look clean and respectable."

Rabbi Beliak's presence also jump-started a series of classes devoted to Jewish learning. The rabbi taught

Judaism to 25 young adults from ages 18 to 30 who had never participated in any formal Jewish education classes before. Their interest and attendance attest to their desire to learn and to live as Jews. Many of these young people hope to participate in the Birthright to Israel program, enabling them to connect in a

direct and meaningful way with their heritage and with other young Jewish men and women. In addition to Rabbi Beliak, their instructors were Errol Abrahams, a beloved history teacher, and Shul Donk, president of the congregation.

Other classes included one for students preparing for their Bar Mitzvahs, another for five individuals completing the conversion process, which had begun prior to the Rabbi's arrival, and a class for 20 adults meeting regularly to study Judaism and practice Hebrew. In addition, a weekly Torah portion class discovered the world of classic Jewish study. With a view to the future, the new education committee of Neve Shalom, initiated by Rabbi Beliak, began its efforts to educate 20 children in the community.

And so it went: Jewish education, holiday celebrations, community activism, community building, life-cycle events. Along the way, Rabbi Beliak managed to meet most of the Jews of Suriname at least once in their homes. Rabbi Beliak's three months in the community were a resounding success. While his visit highlighted what could be done, it also identified what else needs to be done. *Pirke Avot*, a book of ethical maxims from the Talmud, teaches us that it is not incumbent on any one person to finish the job, but it is incumbent on each person to begin.



Celebrating Hannukah in Suriname



COMING OUT: A VISIT TO THE ZIMBABWE LEMBA

by Tudor Parfitt

MARCH 3, 2010

The last couple of weeks have been one of the most momentous periods in the history of the Lemba people in Zimbabwe in many years. Hitherto if you went anywhere in the country and asked about the tribe, no-one would have a ready answer. Indeed the Lemba were practically unknown except to their immediate neighbors and a handful of experts in the ethnology of the country. However, this has now changed, and only time will tell if this is for the good or for the bad.

The reason for my trip was an invitation from the British Council and the Zimbabwe Department of Museums and Monuments to visit the country. I would give a couple of talks on my book, *The Lost Ark of the Covenant*, about the *Ngoma Lungundu*, a wooden object that the Lemba and Venda believe is sacred to their tradition and which has clear parallels with the Ark of the Covenant. In addition, I would speak at the opening of a special exhibition at Harare's Museum of Human Science that would highlight this object.

***I had heard these stories, but
I thought they were fanciful.***

The object itself was fascinating. Lemba tradition taught that the *ngoma* had been carried with them on their migration from the Middle East to Africa at some point in the remote past. The central theme of their oral thesis, recounted to me many times, was that the Lemba had come from a place called Sena, that they had crossed Pusela, and had come to Africa, where they rebuilt Sena, one or two times. The oral tradition also maintained that when they got to Africa, the precious object which they brought with them went up in smoke, flames and a dreadful noise. Using a plug from the original object, a new *ngoma* was built by the priests.

Years ago when I lived with the Lemba in a small, remote village, with no running water, electricity, or paved roads, in Mposi near Mberengwe, I heard this story and many others like it. The elders explained that this object was like the Ark of the Covenant – they knew their Bible – and that it too was taken into battle, that it

was the dwelling place of God, that it was carried on two poles by the priests, that it was never allowed to



Tudor Parfitt viewing *ngoma* in Zimbabwe's Harare Museum

touch the ground, and that it would strike dead anyone who touched it, other than the High Priest. I used to scribble away in my notebook around the embers of the fire, listening to the women sing and to the traditional drums, and I would dream of their long-lost *ngoma*. But I thought the idea of connecting it directly with the Ark was fanciful.

Over the years a few things happened which made me take their tradition more seriously. In the first place, my own travels and research, as related in *Journey to the Vanished City*, put some bones on the oral tradition and seemed to confirm it. Then DNA research carried out in the labs of University College, London University, confirmed that Lemba ancestors were from the Middle East and likely to be Jewish. And most intriguingly, the Buba priestly clan, the first ones to leave Israel according to the traditions I had heard, had a particular genetic signature which was characteristic of the Jewish priesthood. Indeed, the Buba and the Cohanim shared a distant ancestor who lived somewhere in the Levant about 3000 years ago, about the time of Moses and his brother Aaron, the founder of the priesthood.

At this point I began to take the oral traditions of the Lemba with respect to the *ngoma* more seriously, and over the years, I came across a lot of unknown material which appeared to suggest that the Ark of War, the Ark made by Moses as detailed in the Book of Deuteronomy, and subsequently mentioned by Rabbinic au-

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thorities, had made its way into Arabia. It's worth just pausing here over Rashi's commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy:

At the end of forty days the Lord granted me, Moses, a favor, and said, "Carve for yourself," and, afterward, "make for yourself an Ark." I made the Ark first (before I took the Tablets of the Law) for, where would I have placed the Tablets when I arrived with them in my hands? Now this was not the Ark which Bezalel made. This was a different Ark. This one went with them when they waged war, while the one Bezalel made did not go to war, except in Eli's time (Samuel 1, 4.), when they were punished over it, and it was captured.

I rediscovered the ngoma in a dusty, rat-infested storeroom.

And so my quest for the sacred object described in my last book, *The Lost Ark of the Covenant*, began. I knew that the *ngoma* had been found first in the 1940s by Harald von Sicard, a German-Swedish missionary. He had photographed it and placed it in the Bulawayo Museum, Bulawayo being the second city of Zimbabwe. However, when I went to look for it, it had disappeared. The Lemba told me that it had not been possible to leave the sacred relic in a museum and that it had been removed and hidden in a cave in the mountains of central Zimbabwe. My efforts to find it proved fruitless. But one evening by chance someone told me that during the civil war some ethnographic objects had been removed from Bulawayo and taken to the capital. There, 65 years after it had first been discovered by von Sicard, I rediscovered it in a dusty, rat-infested storeroom along with other old drums and artefacts, none of which had ever been exhibited.

The Museum authorities had now agreed to display the object. It was unveiled with great pomp by the Ministers for Home Affairs in the presence of other ministers, church leaders and members of the diplomatic corps. There was even a prophetess who claimed to have had visions that the Ark was soon to be revealed.

Apart from any religious connotations, it was intrinsically worthwhile. It had been radio-carbon dated by archeologists at Oxford University to 1300 or thereabouts and was said to be the oldest wooden object ever found in sub-Saharan Africa. But the Lemba tradition had maintained that the original had destroyed itself – according to them this was a replica of the original object, the son or daughter

of some earlier Ark.

Having arrived in Harare, I was surprised to discover that the symposium on my book at the University of Zimbabwe was to be opened by one of the two Vice-Presidents of Zimbabwe, John Nkomo. What is more, half the cabinet was expected to turn up. And they did.

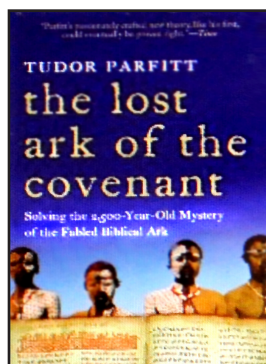
What was for me even more surprising was that the secretive Lemba were in fact in positions of great power in the country. I had been in correspondence with the Hon. Hamandishe, an Opposition Member of Parliament and a proud Lemba. So I knew about him. But it turned out that there were other Lemba MPs too. And there were even Lemba members in the cabinet, including the Minister for the Constitution, the remarkable, courageous and charismatic Eric Matingenga. As the day of the opening of the exhibition and symposium approached, it was clear that the Lemba had decided to come out of the closet!

Many Lemba were wearing resplendent kippot.

When Vice President John Nkomo opened the symposium, he said the discovery of the *Ngoma Lungundu* had resulted in a lot of excitement and was testimony to Zimbabwe's rich spiritual heritage. He added that the symposium would enable the people of Zimbabwe to understand the nature of the sacred drum as well as to explore its links with the biblical Ark of the Covenant. "The sacred object has now been linked to the biblical Ark of the Covenant," he said. "This discussion will not only allow us to learn more about our ancient communities, in particular the Lemba community, but it should give us insight into the origins of the *Ngoma Lungundu* and its links to the Ark of the Covenant, the repository for the tablets engraved with the 10 commandments given to Moses at Mount Sinai."

MP Hamandishe had asked me to bring some *tallitot* and *kippot* for the Lemba of Zimbabwe. Thanks to the kindness of some London rabbis, generous members of Kulanu, and some academic colleagues in Israel, I was able to bring a good supply of these items. At my first lecture, which was held in a packed

hall in the Jameson Hotel in Harare, I was delighted to see dozens of Lemba. Many of them were wearing resplendant *kippot*, and had come from distant villages. At the symposium many more came, as well as a distinguished delegation from the South African Lemba.



And among the many cabinet members present was Eric Matenga, who clearly and fully identified with his Lemba kinsmen.

"*Matenga a Lemba? Lemba MPs?!!*" people whispered in astonishment. The following day it was as if Zimbabwe had discovered a lost tribe. The story of the Lemba and the Ark were headlines in the national newspaper and the top slot in the TV news.

MP Hamandishe was delighted, but worried that the new visibility could lead to trouble. "We've been unknown until now," he said, "but now we're part of the political landscape in this country. I have one question as far as the outside world is concerned. Where are the Jews? What do they think of us?"

Reports in the Zimbabwe press were soon quoting Lemba lamenting that the Lemba religious and cultural practices were dying out. "It is unfortunate that some of us do not know much about our rich history," said Mr. Nikisi, who was initiated in 1987. "But I am happy that despite pressure on our culture, the VaRemba (Lemba) culture has stood the test of time. It is one of the few in Zimbabwe and Africa as a whole that is almost original."

Another Lemba traditional leader, the venerable Mr. Zvinowanda, the tribe's most revered circumcisor, who is proud of what he sees as his Jewish roots, observed that "some of us are marrying strangers. Some have converted to Christianity. It makes me sad."

While I was there, I broached the idea of creating a Lemba Museum somewhere in Zimbabwe. The Brits were quite keen on the idea. The Swedish Ambassador too was helpful. There was one ambassador, however, who was conspicuous by his absence throughout the days of celebration of the Ark/*ngoma*. The Israeli ambassador was nowhere to be seen, either at the symposium or at the opening of the exhibition. This makes me sad. There is a community of very fine people in Zimbabwe who have every reason to believe that they have a special relationship with Israel. It can only be to Israel's advantage to acknowledge them. □

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RABBI GERSHOM SIZOMU VISITS THE LEMBA IN SOUTH AFRICA

In the fall of 2008 and 2009, Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, spiritual leader of Uganda's Abayudaya Jewish community, was an invited guest at the Lemba Cultural Association Conference in Lempopo, South Africa. In an interview conducted during the author's visit to the Abayudaya community in January, Rabbi Sizomu described his enthusiastic and heartfelt welcome by the South African Lemba leadership and conference attendees and the community's ties to Judaism.

***There was singing, ululations
and shofar blowing.
I had not expected such a response.***

Q: Rabbi Sizomu, How would you describe the Lemba's relationship to Judaism today?

A: While the majority of the South African Lemba practice Christianity, the community has always celebrated its Jewish roots. Today, many of them are curious and appear interested in exploring their heritage. In 2008, the American-based organization Bechol Lashon donated *siddurim* (prayer books) and *kippot* (skull caps) with the intention of showing conference attendees how to wear the *tallit* (prayer shawl) and to demonstrate the appropriate prayers. Once there, however, conference organizers decided that my colleague Rabbi Joshua Salter and I should present them as gifts to the leadership. Each one was called to the podium by name and recognized. As each leader walked across the stage, we blessed him and presented him with the symbols of Judaism. The response was deafening. There was singing, ululations and *shofar* (ram's horn) blowing. I had not expected such a response. They were so excited.

In 2009, it was the same story, only this time the number of attendees had jumped from 1000 to 1500. In addition, Rabbi Salter and I were asked to conduct a Sabbath service, which took one and a half hours, in contrast to the half hour presentation of the previous year. The conference was only one day and lunch was served from 2-4, so the time allotted to the service was significant.

Q: Do you think the increase in numbers was because of your prominent role in the program?

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Yusef Abad Synagogue in Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran.
Photographed by Charles London during writing of *FAR FROM ZION*.

FAR FROM ZION: IN SEARCH OF A GLOBAL JEWISH COMMUNITY

BY CHARLES LONDON

PUBLISHED BY HARPERCOLLINS, 2009

Reviewed by David Scholem

Opening a non-fiction book is a reader's declaration of intent, of expecting something to think about, mull over, recommend. *Far from Zion: In Search of a Global Jewish Community* is the story of a personal journey by the author Charles London in search of his Jewish self. It is a journey that the reader can observe and follow, but one that is hard to identify with unless you share similar life experiences, interests and perhaps biases.

The starting premise is plausible: a Jewishly-alienated New Yorker with a stable, committed gay identity searches far afield to find what has kept Jews Jews, and perhaps deepen his own sense of Jewish connection. The journey, more travelogue than cross-cultural *bildungsroman*, is a literary "on the road" experience for the reader, accompanying the author to a series of communities and countries as he tries to discover the hidden or not so hidden meaning of each community's endurance and what still holds its people together. The author's choice of destinations is an odd one: isolated Jewish communities such as Myanmar (Burma), Iran, Cuba and Bosnia (three out of four very small), Uganda, with a community of Jews by choice, New Orleans and Arkansas, small American Jewish communities, and Israel. It would have made interesting reading for the reader to know why the author chose these particular communities. What were their similarities and differences? One can only speculate.

The book is written in a breezy, hip style, which makes it easy-to-read but, at the same time, detracts from the seriousness of tone. I was hoping to find more self-examination and reflection along the way and to understand how the author's experiences affected his sense of Jewish self and added to his knowledge of his Jewish heritage. However, the author does explain when and why he embraces the idea for the journey. It is a reunion of multiple generations and branches of his family, descendants of his Jewish great-grandparents, that creates the spark and raises the question: In a family of relatives, connections seem clear. But is there a glue of universal Jewish values common to otherwise unrelated Jewish communities that keeps them intact? That

RABBI SIZOMU, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 14

A: I don't know. But it was clear that there was more activity this fall. In addition, conference organizers had invited the Premier (governor) of the Lemba province and two ministers from the South African government, who read a message from President Zuma. The governor addressed the rabbis present first. It was obvious the officials hold rabbis in high esteem. Then, in another surprise, the provincial governor revealed his own Lemba background, which took great courage. During the service, we wrapped the governor in a prayer shawl. The response to the whole service was joyous. Again, people danced, ululated and blew the *shofar*. We conducted the service in Hebrew. My experiences there made me feel honored and optimistic about the Lemba's Jewish future.

Q: What do you think the next step might be for reaching out to the Lemba?

A: The community needs Jewish programming on a regular basis. They need visiting teachers and rabbis. They need a community center. And they certainly would benefit if a member of the Lemba community could visit and see how the Jewish community functions. But it must be the result of a spiritual calling, not simply a fact-finding mission.

Q: Do you want to attend the fall 2010 conference?

A: Yes, I would very much like to do that. The leaders are now my friends and I feel very affectionate toward them. I also see an important spiritual journey here. God's goal for us is to help others be what they want to be. Perhaps my relationship with the Lemba should be seen in that light. □ **JM**

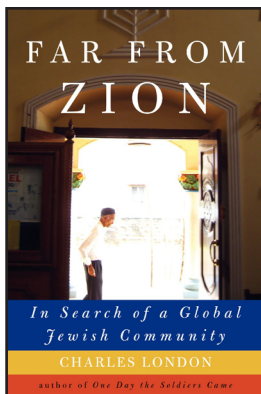
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is the question that London sets out to answer...as he seeks a “model” of what those values might be. While the journey is colorful and features several memorable interchanges with members of globally far-flung communities, there is no satisfying summing up of what he has learned. His most inspiring comments describe his impression of the Kulanu-supported Abayudaya community in Uganda.

Nor does the author tell whether or how he prepared for this important personal journey or how he made up for his acknowledged initial unfamiliarity with the beliefs and ways of his people. Nevertheless, one is caught up by the book’s premise. London is in full raconteur mode as he talks about challenges he faces traveling the globe, from when he enters the closed society of Myanmar (Burma) through to his skeptical fact-finding trip to Israel. Noteworthy is his unconcealed discomfort with things “Zionist.”

The book ends with the author reconfirming his interest in and commitment to his spiritual community back home in New York at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah, whose Judaic orientation and congregational spirit resonate with him. It is a Wizard of Oz Dorothy moment. Although he has traveled to exotic places as well as more familiar locales (in the US), there is no place like home.

In the end, despite shadowing his travels and reading his colorful commentary about history, customs and remnant communities, we are left knowing neither the inner author, nor whether he believes he has found the answers to the questions that inspired his journey. □



Charles London’s
Far From Zion
was a finalist for the
2009
NATIONAL JEWISH
BOOK AWARD

THE BLACK JEWS OF AFRICA: HISTORY, RELIGION, IDENTITY

BY EDITH BRUDER

PUBLISHED BY OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
2008

Reviewed by Barbara Vinick

This is an impressive academic work by an author with a grasp of many disciplines. To cast light on her complex subject, Edith Bruder makes use of a wide range of writings from African history, anthropology, sociology, history of religion, Biblical studies, Jewish studies, African American studies, and epistemology, the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge and its foundations.

The title of the book, *The Black Jews of Africa*, is somewhat misleading, for it is not a polemic offering evidence as to the legitimacy of many African groups who claim Jewish ancestry from the Lost Tribes of Israel. Rather, Dr. Bruder, a researcher at the University of London, asks the questions: why do so many African groups identify with ancient Israel and what are the antecedents of their claims? An academic treatise with voluminous citations and notes, the book seeks to provide answers from a wide variety of secondary sources in a dispassionate and evenhanded manner, exploring both external (mainly European) and internal (mainly native African) influences and their interplay.

Answers to those questions take the author first to Biblical texts and speculative commentaries about the whereabouts of the Ten Tribes “lost” in the eighth century BCE. One of the places mentioned most notably in ancient literature is the land of Kush, generally considered to be Africa. Bruder chronicles in detail how this “narrative of exile” in Africa created a potent “myth” or story. The reader should keep in mind that “myth” does not exclude a core of historical truth. Moreover, as Bruder states in the second half of the book, “myth reveals a living pattern rather than a pure fiction,” – a “sacred history and therefore a ‘true history,’” citing many studies of myth in general and in African societies in particular (page 98).

She goes on to describe the continuity and embroidery of the story through the centuries. Initially, the story was impacted by the rudimentary knowledge of geography prevalent at that time, such as confusion between India and Ethiopia. Other influences were the legend of Solomon and Sheba, which had currency in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thought, and the wealth of Ophir mentioned in the Bible. Early Europeans who

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met unfamiliar peoples perceived them as “Moors” or “Jews,” and as time went by, race (non-white) became conflated with religion (Judaism) to classify “others.” Thus, explorers from Marco Polo to Amerigo Vespucci attributed Lost Tribe status to natives from China to North America. The notion that Jews were non-white (black) persisted through the nineteenth century, even into the twentieth, as Europeans encountered “exotic” societies in their colonial incursions abroad. In her chapter on “Encountering and Reinventing the Africans and the Jews,” Bruder does a good job of leading the reader through this complicated process in the history of ideas.

One of the most interesting chapters in Bruders’s book concerns African Americans and their appreciation of the Lost Tribes story. Beginning in the nineteenth century, expounded by authors and thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, the idea of blacks as descendants of a great cultural heritage gained support as a response to the discrimination and cultural deprivation they experienced in the United States. Citing alternate “accusation and spiritual identification” with Jews, from the anti-Semitism of Louis Farrakhan to Rabbi Capers Funnye’s Alliance of Black Jews, Bruder’s description

***One of the most interesting chapters
concerns African Americans’
appreciation of the Lost Tribes story.***

includes the Hebrew Israelites who went from Chicago to Israel in the 1960s and the Rastefarians of Jamaica who trace their origins to Ethiopia.

The second half of the book begins with the attempt to “disentangle – in regions with little written history – the true from the likely and the unlikely” regarding the historical presence of Jews in sub-Saharan Africa. Chock full of unfamiliar geographic and historical names, this chapter must have been challenging for the author and is a challenging one for most readers, as well.

This reader was struck by the evidence of early Jewish traders and refugees throughout Africa. The long-term results of this Jewish presence are mixed, however. Some populations whose interactions with these Jews are relatively well-established (groups from Sudan, for example) have shown little interest in their possible Jewish antecedents and are unknown in the West. Other groups (such as those from Timbuktu, Mali) are slightly better known, have justifiable claims to Jewish origin, but, as Kulanu discovered in the 1980s, have little interest in living Jewishly.

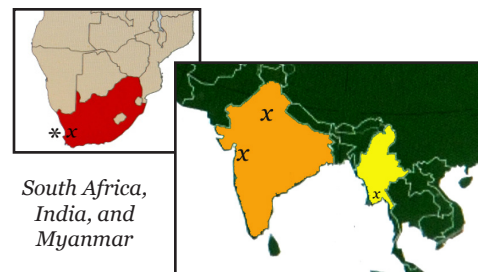
African groups whose intertwined political and religious histories Dr. Bruder explores include the Igbo of Nigeria, the House of Israel of Ghana, the Tutsis of “Havilah” in Rwanda and Burundi, the well-known Abayudaya of Uganda, Jewish-Christians of South Africa and Zimbabwe, a group in Madagascar, and the Lemba of South Africa and Zimbabwe. As an associate of Tudor Parfitt, the researcher who found a genetic link between one of the Lemba clans and Jewish *Cohanim* (priests), she devotes several pages to the historical record of the Lemba, their self-identity based on their oral tradition and Western perceptions of them through the centuries. She cautions against the “oversimplification” of the genetic findings as fueled by the media. One would have to know more about genetics than she provides in order to explain that oversimplification in genetic terms, but perhaps she means that genetic testing does not necessarily find practicing “Jews.” One significant result of the genetic findings was increased certainty among the Lemba themselves concerning their Jewish identity. But while some Lemba have shown increased interest in learning and participating in mainstream Jewish practice, others have maintained Christian or Muslim religious traditions.

The book ends with a brief epilogue that suggests several factors that might have influenced the “Judaizing movements” that grew more numerous in Africa in the last part of the twentieth century. Bruder notes the erosion of traditional religion and the resultant loss of identity, dissatisfaction with Christianity and the moral and historical power of Judaism. She might also have mentioned parallels between modern Jewish history and the history of African groups that have endured war and deprivation and have risen from the ashes. But somewhat disappointingly, “exactly which circumstances triggered the identity shifts in question is not clear.” Perhaps that specificity is work for another day. The question “Why now?” has a more clear-cut answer. Globalization based on technology allows the swift dissemination of ideas and encouragement from Jewish groups around the world.

I hope that supporters of Kulanu and like-minded organizations do not reject this book because they are worried that too much knowledge is a dangerous thing. Even if it is not possible to trace the origins of some black African communities directly from the Lost Tribes of Israel, they deserve recognition and support if they are sincere in their desire to learn about and practice Judaism. If groups are motivated to live Jewishly (without syncretism with Christianity), they should be encouraged. Without proselytizing, the world needs all the Jews we can find. □

A 'Bucket List' Visit To Distant Jewish Communities

by Rabbi Stephen Leon



South Africa,
India, and
Myanmar

As my wife Sharon and I approach our 42nd wedding anniversary in June, we rejoice that our lives have been filled with incredible blessings. As we celebrate the past and the present, we also look forward to the future and to the experiences that we hope to share and the places we wish to visit in the coming years together. And so, inspired by the film, "The Bucket List," which tells the story of two terminally ill patients who create their list of desired goals they wish to accomplish before each "kicks the bucket," Sharon and I composed our own "bucket list." We have begun to set goals and select places, which we hope to visit while we are able to travel and enjoy these far-away destinations.

This past summer, we enjoyed a 32-day cruise and had many memorable experiences. We experienced an African safari, viewed the breath-taking Taj Mahal and visited the home of Mahatma Gandhi. In addition I used the opportunity of this "Sabbatical" granted to me by my synagogue, Congregation B'nai Zion of El Paso, Texas, to continue writing a book about the *B'nei Anousim* (descendants of crypto-Jews) of the Southwest, a lifetime passion of mine, and to visit some interesting and remote places of Jewish interest. It is this part of my "bucket list" which I would like to share with Kulanu readers.

Cape Town

The first Jewish community we visited was on October 16th when I spoke at Temple Israel in Green Point, Cape Town, South Africa during Friday night Shabbat service. The Rabbi of the synagogue is Rabbi Malcolm Matitani, who also serves as the head of the Progressive congregations of South Africa. I have spoken in many places throughout the United States and in Israel about the return of the *B'nei Anousim* to their Jewish roots in the Southwest of America, but the reception I received in Cape Town was particularly special as most congregants had never heard the subject being discussed before. I felt very satisfied that I had brought the story of the return of the crypto-Jews to Judaism to a new audience and educated them about a Jewish phenomenon which is practically unknown in that part of the world.

Mumbai

Another Shabbat experience was particularly poignant and frustrating and involved our attempt to attend Shabbat services at the Knesset Eliyahoo Synagogue in Mumbai, India. The synagogue, built by Jacob Sassoon in 1911, was heavily guarded with armed security. Our visit coincided with the one-year anniversary of the terrorist attack on the Chabad House in Mumbai and we were told that all Indian synagogues were under very secure watch. Although I showed the guards my passport, my identification that I was a Rabbi and yes, even my own *yarmulke* (skull cap), no one was allowed to attend services without a written invitation. We could visit the synagogue only after services were over. I felt very sad that I was not being permitted to attend a synagogue service for fear I might be a danger to the other congregants. I specifically wanted to *daven* (pray) in that *shul* (synagogue) on Shabbat so that I could say *Kaddish* (prayer for the dead) for Rabbi Gavriel and Rivka Holtzberg, the Chabad Rabbi and Rebbetzin who were murdered in that terrorist attack a year before.

I was able to offer my prayers in front of the Holy Ark.

After the service was over and the *daveners* (people praying) had left the synagogue, Sharon and I were able to visit this beautiful house of worship and speak with a gentleman named Ben Tziyon who showed us the synagogue. I was able then to offer my prayers in front of the Holy Ark. After Shabbat ended I met with one of the local heads of the Jewish community, Mr. Ralph Jhirad, who serves on the executive committee of the Federation of the Indo-Israel Chamber of Commerce. Ralph was very knowledgeable about the history of the Jews of India and taught me about the different communities. He also brought me a DVD about David Sassoon, one of the founders and philanthropists of the

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***Bucket List*, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18**

Jewish community in India. It was Sassoon's grandson who built the Knesset Eliyahoo Synagogue. Before we left Mumbai, Ralph gave me a beautiful gift, a replica of the Mezuzah which adorns the Sha'arey Hashamyim Synagogue, the oldest synagogue in Mumbai.

New Delhi

The next day we traveled to New Delhi and visited with Ezekiel Isaac Malekar, resident caretaker of the Judah Hyam Synagogue. This synagogue accommodates the small Jewish population of New Delhi, but also serves primarily as a place of worship for the many Jewish visitors, diplomats and businessmen who come to the city. According to Mr. Malekar, several thousand visitors come to this congregation every year. The residence for the caretaker and the Prayer Hall was constructed in 1954 and is named for the father of Dr. Rachel Judah. Dr. Judah was associated with the Women's Hospital in Jodhpur and made a significant contribution to establish a place of worship for the Jewish population of New Delhi. Mr. Malekar took us on a tour of the beautiful sanctuary and informed us of the wedding that had just taken place there. He said that it is not uncommon for foreigners as well as Jewish Indian residents from remote communities to come to the Judah Hyam Synagogue for lifecycle events. It was heartwarming to see the importance of synagogues to the Indian Jewish community.

Yangon

The last place of Jewish interest that we visited was in Yangon, Myanmar, formerly Burma. We had arranged to visit the Jewish community there through a travel company called Myanmar Shalom Travel. We arrived at the 110 year-old Musmeah Yeshua Synagogue, the only synagogue in the country. Ironically my own synagogue, Congregation B'nai Zion of El Paso, is also celebrating its 110th birthday this year. We met Moshe Samuel, who is the caretaker of the synagogue, and his daughter Anna, who is a travel agent and guide. Moshe informed us that there are only seven Jewish families left in Yangon, and yet there is a *minyan* every Friday night. One can truly admire the dedication of those families and of Moshe for insuring Jewish continuity and identity in that remote and insular country. On the High Holy Days some 25-30 congregants are at servic-

es. There is an Israeli Ambassador to Myanmar who reads Torah at the synagogue.

Moshe told us of the location of the Jewish cemetery, which contained graves dating back over 130 years. The cemetery was not easy to find as it was in a very poor neighborhood and the key to the gate was kept by a resident of a nearby house. The graves were covered with a great deal of unkempt foliage and some dirt, and it appeared to have been neglected for a long time. In order to read the names on the stones, I had to kneel

***I wondered how long it had been
since anyone had said the
Kaddish for the deceased.***

next to the grave and brush away some leaves and dust to identify the person buried there. After visiting several of the monuments and placing little stones on these old tombstones, I chanted the *Eil Molay Rachamim*, the memorial prayer for the dead, in memory of the Jewish souls who were interred in this sacred and holy ground. I wondered to myself, how long it had been since anyone had said the *Kaddish* for the deceased in the Jewish cemetery of Myanmar.

As I prepare to observe Passover this year and as we fill the cup of Elijah, I will be thinking of the Jews of South Africa, Mumbai, Delhi, and Myanmar and I will know that they, too, will be gathering to remember the story of the Exodus from Egypt through the Seder and the reading of the haggadah. As we open the door for Elijah this year, it is my prayer that new doors of opportunity, freedom, and identity will open for the entire Jewish population in every corner of the world and that soon every one of us will truly be free. □

CONDOLENCES

*To Kulanu board member
Barbara Vinick, on the loss of her father,
Dr. Isidor Tolpin, of Swampscott, MA,
and Delray Beach, FL, in December.*

Thank You, Kulanu Donors

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Advocate Health Care; Aron & Karen Primack; Otto & Marianne Wolman Foundation.

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The Irving Moskowitz Foundation; the Sperber & Steinfeld Families' Charitable Trust.

Mazel Tov, Jake

Mazal tov and special thanks to Jake Diamond, who became bar mitzvah last November at the Hevreh of Southern Berkshire in Great Barrington, MA. Jake raised \$1506 for the Abayudaya schools by holding a skate-a-thon with his friends!

Kulanu gladly works with bar mitzvah students and other school and youth groups to help them plan meaningful bar mitzvah projects. See kulanu.org/mitzvahprojects for many good ideas.

ISSAJ Founded:

International Society for the Study of African Jewry
www.issaj.com

Growing numbers of African communities are embracing a Jewish identity and practicing various forms of Judaism in Africa and in the African Diaspora. In recognition of the importance of this development, Dr. Edith Bruder and Ph.D. candidate Daniel Lis, two scholars who have researched and published on the subject, founded the International Society for the Study of African Jewry (ISSAJ), in 2009. The organization defines itself as: "a community of scholars and students engaged in the study of African Jewry and its diverse cultures, historical environments, religious beliefs and practices." The organization, whose members represent several academic fields of study, hope to "facilitate scholarly collaboration, research and discussion" among disciplines.

An international conference entitled, "Jews, Judaism in Black Africa and its Diasporas," organized by ISSAJ, will take place at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, on October 30 and 31, 2010. Organizers hope to bring together individuals from across the academic spectrum to share their research data and cooperate on future research projects. For more information, see www.issaj.com/conferences.php. If you are interested in submitting a paper or attending this conference, please contact edithbruder@gmail.com.

Summer Conferences

The 7th Annual Anousim Conference, sponsored by the El Paso Jewish Federation, will take place July 16-18, 2010, at Congregation B'nai Zion of El Paso, Texas. The theme of the conference this year will be: "Past, Present and Future Identities of B'nai Anousim." Keynote speaker will be Andree A. Brooks, author of *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Dona Garcia Nasi*. For further information, contact Rabbi Steve Leon at rabbisal@aol.com or Sonya Loya at tav_22@yahoo.com.

The International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) will be holding this year's conference from July 11-July 16, 2010, at the JW Marriott at L.A.Live in Los Angeles, California. Kulanu activist Jonina Duker will speak on "The Captives Return: Descendants of Forced Iberian Converts Find Their Way Back to Judaism."

SURINAME, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

If we were to list some of the important priorities for the Suriname Jewish community, they would be:

1. *Keeping this community connected to the world-wide Jewish community;* 2. *supporting the community's goal of preserving its rich heritage;* 3. *assisting the leadership in strengthening the community through its own effort to train its teachers and adults to involve themselves in the educational process;* 4. *encouraging rabbis and Jewish educators to volunteer their time in Suriname so that both young and old can have the benefit of a Jewish education;* and 5. *convincing other Jewish organizations to take an active role in strengthening and preserving this community.*

Rabbi Beliak has many ideas and perhaps you, our readers, will have some too.

Rabbi Beliak is now back in the United States. He describes his experience in Suriname as both "inspiring and humbling." But what is clear is that he wants to bring more attention to this once flourishing outpost of the Jewish Diaspora. □ *JM*

LATE-BREAKING NEWS !

Birthright Israel has just accepted 16 young people from Suriname as participants on the Birthright Israel trip in August, 2010, all expenses paid. This invitation is the result of volunteer efforts by Rabbi Haim Beliak (see article on Suriname, beginning p.10) and Jonathan and Orly Kahane-Rapport of Toronto. The only caveat is that the young people need to travel to Miami, Florida, to join the journey. Plane tickets from Suriname to Miami will cost \$773 per person. With an average family income of \$400 per month, the plane fare is beyond their reach. Kulanu is seeking donors to support this extraordinary opportunity to connect the Suriname Jewish community with Jews and Jewish organizations in the U.S. and Israel. To donate, use the attached donation envelope, and mark "Suriname" in the comments field, or donate online at kulanu.org/donate.

Letter from the President

I'm so proud to share this beautiful issue of the Kulanu newsletter with you! Special kudos to our new team, Judy Manelis, board vice president and newsletter editor, and Enid Bloch, our photography and layout editor (and my close friend from college since 1959).

After Kulanu board members and other volunteers traveled to Uganda and Ethiopia in January, we decided to devote this issue primarily to Africa. It would provide an opportunity to focus on Kulanu's accomplishments and how we do what we do. Thus in Uganda (article by Kulanu Uganda Coordinator Laura Wetzler), we celebrate the results of 15 years of volunteer efforts working with the Abayudaya Jewish community to help them flourish educationally, religiously, and economically. In Ethiopia (article by Judy Manelis), we look to the future and show how we are working closely with the Kechene Jewish community to evaluate their needs and determine how to help them achieve their goals.

The article on Rabbi Haim Beliak's three-month stay in Suriname reflects the efforts of Kulanu volunteers and others to assist this Jewish community on the northern tip of South America. We are hopeful that our efforts with these and all our communities will continue to bear fruit and prosper.

We are grateful for the opportunity to do this very meaningful work, and we salute our volunteers who continue to work with great enthusiasm to support Jewish communities around the globe.

Thank you,
Harriet Bograd
President



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A Letter from Rabbi Larry Goldstein

*Kulanu Coordinator
for Puerto Rico*

"... for the first days of Passover we rented a small hotel about 80 miles from San Juan. I prepared the kitchen for Passover and cooked the meals. We had 23 people. I was the only one there who was born Jewish. Everyone else either already converted or is planning to do so. We had services (no *minyan*, though), some Torah learning, both seders as well as lunches and a few additional meals. Much of the seder was in Spanish. Incidentally, Artscroll just came out with a Haggadah with a Spanish translation and a low price. The people were pleased and so was I. We are planning future events on a more frequent basis."

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

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For further information, see:
www.kulanu.org/about-kulanu

Newsletter Editor: Judith Manelis
Layout and Photography Editor: Enid Bloch

Congratulations!

To Yankle Yaakov Gladstone on the publication of his article, "Celebrating Purim on the S. S. Negbah, February, 1951," in the Century Village Reporter, February 2010 issue, p. 40A.

To Remy Ilona and his wife Ifeyinwa on the birth of their son Chijindu Daniel Iddo Ilona on January 22 in Nigeria.

To Rabbi Hailu Paris, recipient of the Kiruv Award for "bringing the Jewish community closer together," given by Brooklyn Borough President Marty Markowitz and The Boston Jewish Heritage Committee, on April 13.

To Schulamith Halevy, who was awarded her Doctorate at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, June, 2009. The title of her dissertation: "Descendants of the Anusim (Crypto Jews) in Contemporary Mexico."

To Alex Armah of Sefwi Wiawso, Ghana, on his adult bar mitzvah. Alex has been studying with Rabbi Gershom Sizomu at his yeshivah in Uganda.

To Natalie Pergam, who received a Certificate of Appreciation award from Kulanu's board for her year of devoted volunteer service to Kulanu. Natalie worked in Kulanu's office two days a week for a year handling donations and thank you letters, filling boutique orders, and sending out literature and products for special events.



KULANU

*Supporting Isolated and
Emerging Jewish Communities
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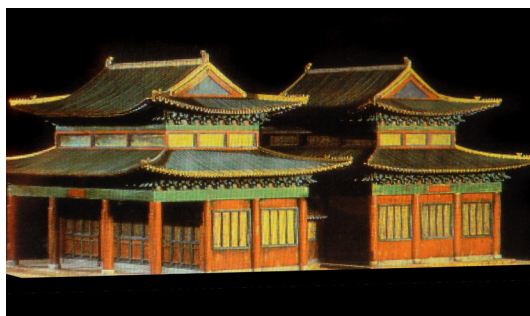
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In Our Next Newsletter: **THE CHINESE JEWS OF KAIFENG**

Reports from
SHI LEI'S KULANU SPEAKING TOUR



Wooden Model of Former Kaifeng Synagogue
Beit Hatefutsoth Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, Tel Aviv

Shi Lei visits the following cities between April 29 and May 23, 2010: Baltimore MD; Fulton, MD; Tarrytown, NY; Marblehead, MA; Wilmette, IL; Waco, TX; El Paso, TX; New York City, NY; Lexington, MA; Toronto, ON; Poway, CA; Pasadena, CA; Tustin, CA; Savannah, GA; and Wayne, NJ. For further information, see kulanu.org/china.

Even if you have missed Shi Lei's talks, be sure to view "History of the Kaifeng Jewish Community," a beautiful and informative slide show at:

kulanu.phanfare.com

KULANU-ABAYUDAYA SPEAKING TOUR FALL 2010

Kulanu is sponsoring a visit to the U.S. and Canada next Fall by JJ Keki of the renowned Abayudaya Jewish community. A very experienced speaker and musical performer, Joab Jonadab Keki, or "JJ," is an outstanding leader of the Abayudaya and its neighboring community. You may already be familiar with his inspired music. In 2005, JJ's recordings were nominated for a Grammy in Traditional World Music!



JJ Keki
Photo by Lorne Mallin

We need your help in identifying possible venues for JJ's speaking tour, which will run from October 8th to November 9th, 2010. For further information and updates, and to learn what your group needs to do to host a visit by JJ, consult the Kulanu website at www.kulanu.org. JJ's calendar always fills up quickly, so reserve your place early!