



KULANU

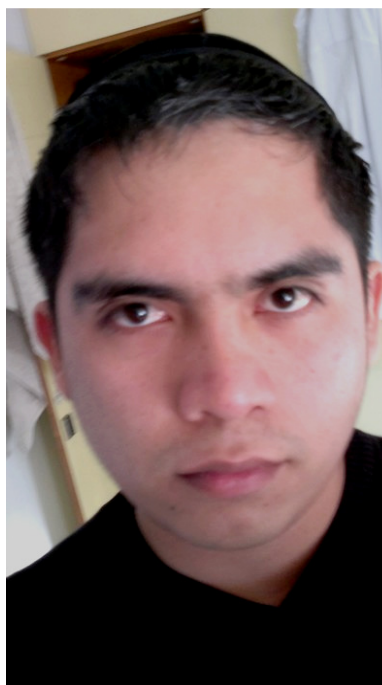
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A Jew by Choice: From El Salvador to Milan to Jerusalem

By Meir Yehoshua Torres

My name is Meir Yehoshua Torres. I am 25 years old. In the last five years I have traveled from my home in Armenia, El Salvador via Milan, Italy to Jerusalem. But my journey has not been about geography; it has been a spiritual quest that has taken me from a small evangelical church in San Salvador to an orthodox Jewish *yeshiva* (intense Jewish religious school) in Israel, where I have fulfilled my dream and become a member of the Jewish people. This is my story.

I was born into a family with no religious traditions or customs and little interest in the preservation of a family legacy. My maternal grandmother was the ex-



Meir Yehoshua Torres

ception. Every Saturday she faithfully visited a small evangelical church on the outskirts of the city to pray. As I was close to my grandmother, I accompanied her each week and spent the day in church.

The congregants there were part of a small religious community of twelve churches. Although they followed mostly Christian practices, they called themselves Israelites and embraced many Jewish rituals and customs. Church leaders wore prayer shawls and

everyone sang *Hatikvah* (Israel's national anthem) and read the *Shema* (seminal Jewish prayer of faith) every Friday afternoon when welcoming the Sabbath. Saturday was the day of rest and church holidays included Passover, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot*, complete with a *seder* (ritual meal at Passover) and a *sukkah* (temporary dwelling place for eating and sleeping during *Sukkot*). Church members did not eat pork, or any other unclean animal mentioned in the Bible, and accepted the Bible as the word of G-d and Jews as G-d's Chosen People. That was my first contact with Judaism.

One day, a young Panamanian Jew* arrived at the headquarters of our Church in San Salvador. He had come to El Salvador to complete his university studies. At first no one noticed him, and it took us a while

** I have chosen not to identify this man by name to avoid compromising him in any way.*

IN THIS ISSUE

A Jew by Choice : From El Salvador to Milan to Jerusalem	1
Among the Igbos of Nigeria During the Festival of Lights	2
Announcing the First Kulanu Cameroon Speaking Tour:	9
Spotlight on Huánuco, Peru	10
Letter from the President	14
Two Worlds Meet in Uganda	15
Accidental Tourist in Kenya	16
Growing Community in Puerto Rico.....	21
Thank you donors	22

Continued on page 6

Among the Igbos of Nigeria During the Festival of Lights

William F. S. Miles

It is the 24th of Kislev, 5770 (2009), *Erev* Hanukkah*, I am in Nigeria. This is not my first visit. In fact, I have made some 15 trips over the last 30 years to conduct a variety of research studies. This time, however, I have come expressly for the purpose of spending *Hanukkah* (Festival of Lights) with a handful of Igbos who, in black Africa's most heavily Muslim nation, proudly but incongruously identify as Jews.

In previous trips, I had little interaction with Igbos and even my knowledge of the tribe was scant. I did know about the bloody Biafra War in the 1960's when Igbos, angry over economic, ethnic and religious problems in the country, seceded from Nigeria and formed the independent state of Biafra. The secession led to a highly publicized civil war in which over a million civilians died. The nation of Biafra was short-lived, however, and, after two and a half years of war, was reintegrated into Nigeria. I also knew that Igbos, who are highly respected as entrepreneurial merchants, have often been called "the Jews of Africa" for their business acumen.

So how did I find myself in Nigeria on this extraordinary mission? It was my interest in both Jewish and African studies that led to this trip. Two years ago, I discovered the community when I reviewed Edith Bruder's book *The Black Jews of Africa: History, Religion, Identity*.** The chapter on the Igbos jogged my memory about an article I had filed away several years before about Rabbi Howard Gorin of Maryland, whose interest and involvement with the community went back many years. I wanted to meet this community.

So thanks to e-introductions by Rabbi Howard Gorin, I would spend this Hanukkah in the company of a people who, not satisfied with having survived the near-genocide of the Biafra war, have assumed another risky identity as a tiny minority of Jews in a mega-country that periodically fractures, in pogrom-like riots, along its Muslim-Christian fault line. Tonight, though, I am more worried about making cultural or



Sar Habakkuk blessing his children after Sabbath
candle lighting -
Photo by William F.S. Miles

liturgical gaffes as I bring my Long Island *Ashkenazi* (Eastern European Jew) understanding of *Hanukkah* to the Jewish Igbos of Abuja, capital of Nigeria.

Only 24 hours before, still in packing mode, I was wondering what I should bring with me. Would they use *latke* mix (for potato pancakes eaten during *Hanukkah*)? Should I bring *dreidels*, (tops traditionally spun on the holiday), *Hanukkah gelt* (money) or *hanukkiah*s (candelabras with nine candles)? I need not have worried about my hosts' lack of Jewish objects. The Igbos possess more precious commodities than I could have stuffed into my duffle bag: a joy-infused

* Jewish holidays begin the night before at sundown.

** Elizabeth Bruder's book was also reviewed in the Spring, 2010 issue of the *Kulanu News*.

Continued on page 3

approach to Judaism, an unquenchable thirst for Jewish knowledge and masterful prayer leaders. And, though it costs 50 dollars at the local market, they even bring a bottle of Kosher Manischewitz wine for the *Kiddush* (blessing over the wine).

In Abuja, I need to shuffle between the *Gihon* and *Tikvat Israel* congregations. Each is over forty-five minutes away, in opposite directions, from my accommodations in the center of town. I find the two congregations have some similarities and some differences. If the *mechitza* (curtain separating men from women during prayer) is a standard litmus test, we can say that *Gihon* is orthodox and *Tikvat* is conservative.

But more striking is the difference in infrastructure. At *Gihon*, the ceiling is finished, there is an ark for the *Torah* and the *hanukiah* is large and lovely. At *Tikvat Israel*, where I lit the first night's candle, the rafters are open, there is no *Torah* scroll and the *hanukiah* consists of painted coke bottles mounted on a wooden frame. What both congregations share in abundance is *kavana*, a sincere devotion to Jewish worship.

And neither community appears insecure in its observance of Judaism: it is I, the odd *Ashkenazi* in the *minyan* (ten Jews required for communal prayer; in this case 10 men) of black Africans, who looks like an outsider. But the hand-painted saying in Hebrew on the outside wall of the synagogue serves as a reminder: *Kol Yisrael Haverim Ze l'Ze* (loosely translated: All Jews are brothers).

SABBATH SERVICES

"Where did you put the *aliyah*? (call to the *Torah*)," I am asked at the conclusion of the *Shabbat* morning service. I thought my questioner meant the card with the number of my *aliyah* (seven people say blessings over the *Torah* reading) to the *Torah*. I am number four. Instead, he is referring to my "bid" for the honor of being called to the *Torah*. It is the custom here that all *Torah* readers are expected to pay for the privilege



In the women's section of the Gihon synagogue -
Photo credit: William F.S. Miles

of an *aliyah*. For the honor to have my name, and that of my father, invoked in the benediction over the *Torah* reading, I had pledged to the synagogue five hundred *naira* (a few dollars). The Igbo *gabay* (synagogue beadle) was making sure I placed my money into the appropriate box, lest the bid be forgotten.

This was just one of the customs that makes Judaism in Nigeria unique. Like the ablutions. In "normative" Judaism, I had never experienced washing one's hands before entering the synagogue to begin prayers. Even between prayers (say, between those of *Shabbat* morning and *Shabbat* afternoon), ritual hand washing is practiced. Another first for me was men holding hands and dancing around the altar in the middle of the synagogue – not for *Simchat Torah* (celebration of the sacred scrolls), but because it was *Shabbat*. And finally, at the conclusion of the Sabbath service, the congregation exits the synagogue backwards, in song, to symbolize their reluctance to leave *Shabbat*. I also found the children in the community special. Humbling, too. In contrast to the squirming, running, yelling kids in many American synagogues, I see quiet, obedient Igbo children taking in the hours-long services.

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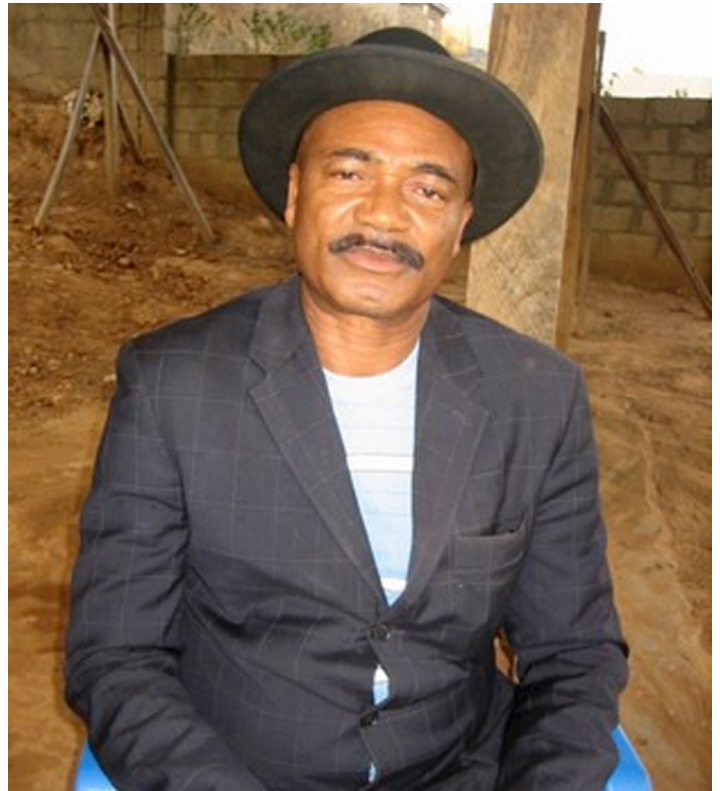
In an ironic echo of the state of Jewry in America, the Igbos express their concern over assimilation. The main problem is the public school system where Christianizing influences are prevalent. “My son was beaten up because he does not accept Jesus,” is a typical comment. “We need our own school. Only that way can they [the children] remain open and proud Jews.” In Nigeria, you must “be” of some recognized religion, or else you are despised or worse. If you practice something unknown—such as Judaism—you may be accused of being a cultist. This is the reason that Igbos dare not display their *Hanukkah* candles in their windows.

“A teacher. That’s all we want. Someone who can come and teach our children.”

Jewish education: this is the main message that Sar Habakkuk, leader of the *Tikvat Israel* congregation, wishes to convey. “A teacher. That’s all we want. Someone who can come and teach our children. We have a building, we have a room for the teacher. But we need to give our children a Jewish education!”

If there was a rabbi, things would be easier. Currently, the congregations are led by “elders” —venerated Igbo men who, over the last two decades, have rediscovered their Hebraic roots. For most, that path was a circuitous one, taking them first through the detour of so-called Messianic Judaism. For some, the theological contradictions eventually began to gnaw mercilessly. “When I first began thinking about it,” says Pinchas (né Azuka Ogbukaa, a member of *Gihon*), “I could not sleep an entire night. The contradiction was too much. If we are to be worshipping the one and unique Creator as God, than how can we also be supposed to worship *Yeshua* (Jesus)?”

In the absence of trained and bone fide local rabbis, Igbos are Internet Jews. While holy books and Jewish texts do make their way to Nigeria, many via Rabbi Goren’s book project, it is by going online—however fitfully, given limited computer access and frequent power outages—that Igbos connect to the greater Jewish world of learning. Miraculously, 29-year-old Moshe ben Natan Levi, who does seamless Torah readings in a beautiful voice and near flawless delivery, learns his Hebrew online.



An Igbo Elder - Photo by William F.S. Miles

HOW MANY ARE THEY?

How many Igbo Jews are there in Nigeria? Numeration is vague among the Igbos, at least in Abuja. At *Tikvat Israel*, I was originally told there are seven active families. But Elder Agbia puts the number at sixteen. Later I am told that there are definitely “more.” For the *Gihon* congregation, there seem to be at least double the number of congregants. Throughout Nigeria there are 20 congregations. Some Igbos talk of 30,000 Jews among them, but there is no way to verify this number. Rabbi Gorin puts his estimate of the number of Jews practicing normative Judaism in the low thousands. Either way, it is a compelling phenomenon.

In describing their Jewish roots, I am told: “As Igbos, we circumcise our sons on the eighth day. We pray at the coming of the new moon. We blow the ram’s horn. This we have done, as Igbos. But we did not know before that we were continuing the acts of our Jewish ancestors.” These are not the only Igbo customs now believed to be Israelite survivalisms. “As Igbos, we have always observed *Shavuot* (harvest holiday) as *Ufegiku*, and *Sukkot*”—the Feast of Tabernacles— “as *Afigolu*.”

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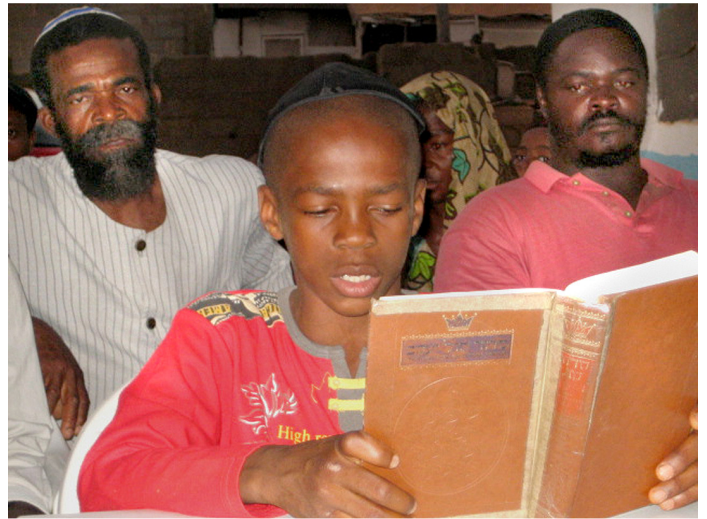
FINAL DAY IN ABUJA

In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe lamented the deterioration of traditional Igbo culture that accompanied the advent of colonialism and Christianization. Reclaiming Jewish ancestry and identity, according to Remy Ilona, the most prolific writer from and about the community, is part of the contemporary Igbo struggle against those colonial and missionary legacies. In his Introduction to the *Chronicles of Igbo-Israel* and *The Igbos: Jews in Africa*,* Ilona claims that one of the aims of the British was to alienate them from their real roots, contemporary and historic. For him, part of the work of cultural decolonization is to reclaim Judaism as the true religious heritage of the Igbo. Whether world Jewry itself is prepared to embrace this or any type of African Judaism is another matter altogether.

The time has come to bid *shalom* (goodbye). Taking leave of Hezekiah, the young *Torah* reader of *Tikvat Israel*, is hardest of all. I see it is difficult for him, too.



Young Igbo girl at Hanukkah – Photo by William F.S. Miles



Young Hezekiah leading prayers at Congregation Tikvat Israel - Photo by William F.S. Miles

He is a prodigy, this eleven-year-old, who chants for the community in soulful Hebrew. Quiet and soft-spoken as a boy, as prayer leader his beautiful and full-throated chanting sails far beyond the unfinished rafters of this Nigerian *shul* (Yiddish word for synagogue). With the deep eyes of a Hasid-in-the-making, this African boy looks up to me and asks, in a mixture of sadness and hope, “Will you come to my *bar mitzvah*?”

* *The Igbos: Jews in Africa* by Remy Ilona is available for sale at kulanuboutique.com

William Miles is a professor of political science at Northeastern University in Boston, teaching courses on Comparative Politics, Religion and Politics, Music and Politics and the Politics of Developing Nations. From 1998-2002, he was the Stotsky Professor of Jewish Historical and Cultural Studies at Northeastern. This article has been abridged and adapted from “Among the Igbos During the Festival of Lights,” *Transition: An International Review* (105:35-45), published by Indiana University Press (2011).

Special note: Dr. Miles returned to Tikvat Israel in August, 2011 to attend the Bar Mitzvah of Hezekiah.

before we realized he was Jewish. He said he was intrigued by our religious service and wanted to understand why a group of Christians, who had no contact with Jewish people, observed many Jewish religious practices.

Initially, he did not speak about his Jewish identity, but many of the younger members of the church begged him to teach us about Judaism. And so began a series of clandestine meetings. Every Saturday he joined us in church and outside of church we learned about Judaism and the G-d of Israel. In time he became an important figure in our community.



Left : Synagogue in Armenia, El Salvador

Upper right: Vittorio Emanuel Gallery, location of Beth Shlomo Synagogue, Milan

Bottom right: Machon Meir Yeshivah, Jerusalem

Photos by Meir Torres

As our interest in Judaism grew, so did our conflicts with the elders of the community. Eventually, the younger members of the church, and those seeking a more direct relationship to G-d, chose to embrace Judaism and dropped all Christian practices and messianic beliefs. It was a process that took several years. In the end, two Jewish congregations emerged out of the original 12 churches. One was in Armenia and one was in San Salvador.

It was from this man that I learned *Torah* (Hebrew Bible) and *Halacha* (Jewish law). It was this man who encouraged my study of Hebrew so I could read the *Torah* and one day pray from the *Siddur*. But our relationship was time limited. When he completed his university studies, he returned home and I was on my own. After he left, I continued studying until I mastered Hebrew reading, although I still had no understanding of what I read. And each week I tried to study the *Torah* portion of the week and learn laws and their implementation.

Those among us who embraced Judaism looked for support from the Jewish community of El Salvador, from Jewish religious organizations and from rabbis.



We found none. I don't think anyone took us seriously. Even without support, we continued practicing and learning. We all agreed that our goal was to convert to Judaism and become part of *Am Israel* (nation of Israel). Once we made this decision we decided that all men

should be circumcised, because it was commanded in the *Torah*.

How would we do it? Almost no one had the money to pay for circumcision in a hospital. One of our members from San Salvador who had recently finished his medical studies agreed to perform the circumcisions for men of both communities. And so each week, in an

Continued on page 7



September, 2009. Meir at the Kotel (wall) the week of his arrival in Israel

improvised operating room in the home of one of our members from Armenia, the doctor performed several circumcisions. I went first so I could serve as the doctor's assistant for the others. School was starting up again, and we had to complete all the circumcisions before the semester began, so in the end, I performed some of the circumcisions myself. When I think about it now, I thank G-d no one was permanently damaged.

MILAN BECKONS

In 2006, at the age of 20. I decided to leave Armenia and spend the year with our congregation in San Salvador. At that time, I was having many personal difficulties. While in San Salvador, I was fortunate to befriend a young man through the Internet who lived in Milan, Italy. With the help of my family and his encouragement, I decided to leave my studies at the university and spend some time working in Milan. I had no particular goals. But once I was settled into my new life there, I decided to reach out to the local Jewish community. Again with the help of the Internet, I located a synagogue close to where I lived and asked them to allow me to pray among them on *Shabbat*. I explained that I was not a Jew but I had studied Juda-

ism in my country and wanted to continue on this path. The congregation's spiritual leader Rabbi Shmuel Rodal agreed.

Never before had I felt so out of place while being happy at the same time. This was my feeling every time I set foot inside the synagogue. I spoke no Italian; I was a stranger and an outsider. And the synagogue, *Beth Shlomo*, was the first synagogue I had ever been in. And yet, I knew it was right. I attended *Shabbat* services every week. I read somewhere that *Chachamim* (wise men) say you can talk to *Hashem* (G-d) as you would speak with a friend or a parent, so in Italy, G-d became my best friend and companion.

One *Shabbat*, I was fortunate to meet a man who spoke a little Spanish and he introduced me to Rabbi Shlomo Bekhar of the *Beth HaLevi* Synagogue. Both men became my close friends and recognized my sincerity in wanting to be a part of the Jewish people.

I decided to move near Rabbi's Bekhar's synagogue. My life was beginning to fall into place. I had found a place to pray every day, a Rabbi who was willing to teach me and a good friend who supported me in my quest.

Continued on page 8

To support myself and pay for my rent and food, I worked several jobs but still it was insufficient. Friends helped, but I understood I had to be on my own. Rabbi Shlomo found me work at a factory owned by a member of the local Jewish community so I could improve my financial situation.

ISRAEL...

One day Rabbi Shlomo called me into his office. He explained to me that in Milan the conversion process takes many years. He asked if I wanted to go to Israel to study at a *yeshiva* and do my conversion there. It was like a dream. Rabbi Shlomo contacted the *Machon Meir Yeshiva* in Jerusalem and they accepted me. By the time I left Milan, I had been there for one year and three months. I had seen and experienced so many things. And here I was about to embark on a new adventure. Frankly, I was frightened. What if they didn't let me enter Israel? It was a risk, but I could not pass up this opportunity.

On September 4, 2008, after saying *Arrivederci* (goodbye) to all my friends in Milan, I left for

Israel. I was 22 years old. I remember that during the flight, I could not remove my face from the window. I thought of the many good people who had helped me on my journey. I looked at the stars and thanked G-d for all His bounties and for taking care of me until that moment. I even thought that if I were denied entrance, it would be enough just to step on the soil of Israel.

The plane landed at Ben Gurion International Airport. As I anticipated, Passport Control took me out of line and questioned me about my passport and my plans in Israel. I had bought an extra plane ticket to Germany so they would not think I was going to stay in the country illegally. They allowed me to enter, but gave me only three weeks to stay in the country, not the usual three months.

On Friday, September 5, I arrived at the entrance to *Machon Meir Yeshiva* located in the *Kiryat Moshe* neighborhood of Jerusalem. I had two small suitcases, a few euros in my pocket and fears and hopes in my heart....

THE YESHIVA BOY

So began a new phase in my life, a new goal to reach. With some angst, I waited for my acceptance by the *Rabanut* (rabbinic authorities), which fortunately arrived in a few weeks allowing me to remain in Israel. Studying at the *Yeshiva* was an enriching experience both spiritually and personally. And it was a happy period of my life. I was preparing for conversion. I was learning about the culture and people of Israel. I was studying *Torah*. I made many friends in the *Yeshiva*. They became part of my family and I of theirs. We have grown together and have known the feeling of brotherhood that exists among the Jewish people.

CONVERSION

A year and two months after having started my studies at the *Yeshiva*, I stood before a *Beth Din* (court) of three *Dayanim* (judges) of the *Rabanut*

CONGRATULATIONS

To Kulanu Board Member Barbara Vinick on the publication of her new book, *Today, I am a Woman: Stories of "Bat Mitzvah" Around the World*, published by Indiana University Press. Co-edited with Shulamit Reinharz, the book is a fascinating compendium of stories from 78 countries on six continents from bat mitzvah girls past and present, their parents and grandparents, and community and religious leaders. With help from Kulanu, Barbara spent a number of years gathering the stories that make up this special book. Also included in the book are biographical notes, descriptions of far-flung Jewish communities and evocative family photographs.

Continued on page 9

of Jerusalem to testify how much I've learned about *Halacha* and Jewish tradition and practice, and declared my desire to become part of the Jewish people. On November 19, 2009 I received the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) of our Holy Torah, the *Halacha*, and the merit and duty that comes with being part of the Jewish people.

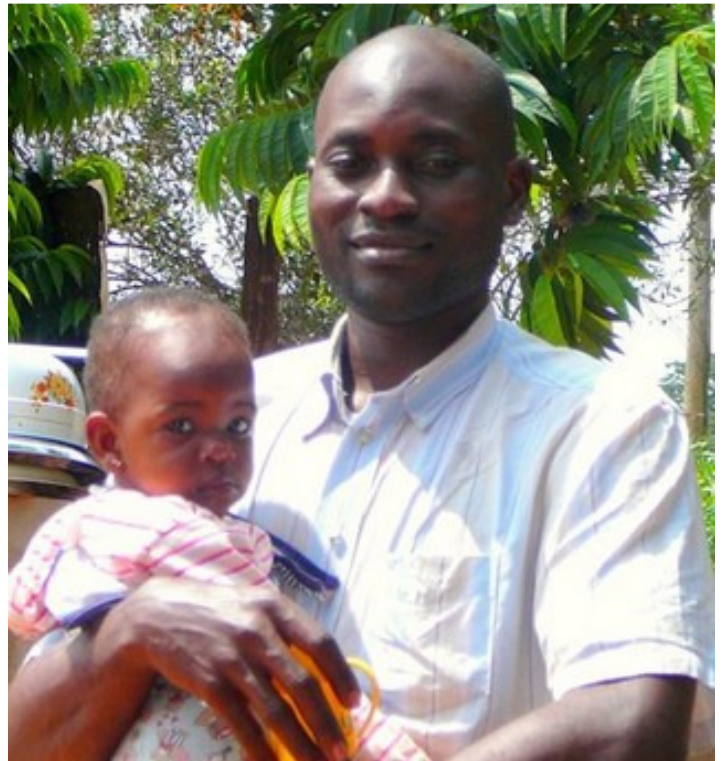
After that emotional day only two things remained for me to do: circumcision (the first was incorrect) and the *Mikvah* (immersion). Once completed, I was ready to close the door on one cycle of life and begin a new one...as a Jew. I have found my place in the world, among my people, and I cannot want for more.

Announcing : The First Kulanu Cameroon Speaking Tour

Serge Etele, the spiritual leader of the *Beth Yeshourun* community, practicing Judaism in Cameroon, Central Africa, will be visiting the United States this winter. Serge, an educator, computer specialist and farmer, will share the amazing history of his community, which began practicing Judaism in 1998.

Using resources downloaded from the Internet, and correspondence with various rabbis, community leaders taught themselves and then their congregants to practice Judaism. Until the summer of 2010, when Kulanu volunteer Rabbis Bonita and Gerald Sussman of Staten Island, NY visited them, they had not met a Jew face-to-face. The community's embrace of Judaism and their success in learning and practicing Jewish rituals and observance on their own will hearten and inspire Jews everywhere.

The tour will run from February 23-March 21. We are pleased to announce that Serge's calendar is filling up quickly. For more information about the community, the speaking tour and instructions



Serge Etele and his daughter Aliyah - Photo
by Rabbi Bonita Sussman

on how to request an event in your community, please go to <http://www.kulanu.org/cameroon>

Spotlight on Huánuco, Peru

by Daneel Schachter



Group Shabbat photo in Huánuco, Peru

INTRODUCTION BY RABBI PETER TARLOW

The following article by Daneel Schachter is a wonderful look into the world of Klal-Yisrael (literally, the entire House of Israel, or metaphorically, the love of Judaism and Jewish people). Daneel comes from a Yiddish speaking environment and has chosen to live a modern Orthodox lifestyle. He volunteered to teach in Huánuco and had several lengthy conversations with me regarding his role and the need to work within a reformative pseudo-Sephardic environment. As Daneel's report indicates, he was up to the task. He gave a great deal of himself in the process and received a lifetime of memories and experiences. On a personal note, I feel thankful to have made his acquaintance and

hope that we shall remain friends across the miles for many years to come.

This summer I volunteered for five weeks in a tiny, remote Jewish community in Huánuco, Peru, located some 10 hours by bus from Peru's capital city of Lima. My role, as explained to me by Rabbi Peter Tarlow, Hillel director at Texas A & M University, would be teacher, tutor and cantor. The community, which contacted Rabbi Tarlow in 2007 for help in establishing a viable and knowledgeable Jewish community, has 40 members, most of whom have converted in the last five years.

Three distinct groups make up this "reformative" congregation. One group is descended from Ashkenazi Jews who settled in the Peruvian highland in the mid-

Continued on page 11

19th century and eventually assimilated into the general population. A second group is descended from Crypto-Jews who went underground to avoid persecution during the Spanish Inquisition. These people have maintained emotional ties to Judaism although most knew little of their ancestral faith. The third group is made up of Jews by choice, individuals who were unhappy as Christians and have found joy and meaning in Judaism. My experience meeting and teaching the men, women and children of this community over my five weeks in Peru was more meaningful than I could have imagined.

RESPONSIBILITIES ON THE GROUND

Before I arrived in Peru, Rabbi Tarlow advised me that community members were illiterate in Hebrew. One of my jobs, then, would be to teach Hebrew so the community could pray together using the original text. During my visit, the community would also be celebrating its first *Bar Mitzvah* (coming of age ritual for Jewish boys of 13 years) in over 100 years to welcome a boy into the community of Israel as an adult. My job would be to prepare the *Bar Mitzvah* boy Rolando Holzmann for his big day. A third responsibility would be to lead weekly services in my role as a cantor. And lastly, I would teach an introductory course on Judaism (holidays, traditions, etc.), for everyone in the community, but with the objective of preparing several people in the community for conversion to Judaism.

MY SCHEDULE

In the mornings I often taught both Hebrew and Judaism for older, retired members of the community who shmoozed and practiced Hebrew with me from 8-10 am. The reason I use the word “often” is because in Peru, as I’ve learned, things “often” do not get done or people may not show up. Nonetheless, the active members of the community tried to come as often as commitments allowed. In the afternoon, from 3-4:30 pm, I worked with Rolando to help him prepare for his reading of the *Torah*. Evenings, between 7 and 10 pm, I offered communal classes in Hebrew and Jewish traditions. I found teaching in Spanish all day very tiring and a challenge. My Spanish language skills, acquired in high school and college Spanish classes, are serviceable, but I am not yet fluent. The community knew no English. Nevertheless, the experience was rewarding.



Daneel and Rolo, the Bar Mitzvah boy, leading prayer services together

AN INTERESTING ISSUE

Although the community has chosen to affiliate with the Reform/Renewal movements, it does not count women in the *minyan* (ten men/women required for communal prayer). In time, I realized that the community did not understand the differences among the denominations. Instead, they picked and chose rituals and traditions they found appealing from reading or from the Internet and then incorporated them into their practice. Choices often reflected their own cultural norms. I believe that was the case with the counting of women. As a result, the community’s communal practice appeared random and lacked a certain cohesion.

Near the end of my stay in Peru, Rabbi Tarlow joined me in Huánuco, and together, we tried to explain the differences between orthodox, conservative, reform

Continued on page 12



The three adults converting: From the left, Miguel Bohórquez, Yesenia Araujo Horna and Yelitza Sanchez Ortiz

and reconstructionist Judaism. We talked about customs, rituals and practices and which ones made sense to them and would help them to create a flourishing, self-sustainable community. The Rabbi and I also suggested that members of the community should focus less on practicing their Hebrew and more on traditions, holidays, and Jewish philosophy. We emphasized that while Hebrew is important, it is more meaningful in the context of a more enlightened practice and knowledge.

Another suggestion was to add more Spanish to the Friday night service so community members would feel more connected and engaged while praying. They would understand the words and meanings expressed in the service. And finally, Rabbi Tarlow suggested that the community encourage more members to involve themselves in leadership issues to insure the perpetuation of the community. To put all the responsibility into the hands of one individual would be risky, as the community might not be sustainable with his demise.

The last few days of my sojourn in Huánuco were especially significant and beautiful. Rabbi Tarlow and I converted two women, Yesenia Araujo Horna and Yelitza Sanchez Ortiz, one man Miguel Bohórquez and a two-year-old Angelita. Rabbi Tarlow conducted the *Beit Din* (Jewish court) for the three adult conversions—one at a time. The *Beit Din* consisted of Rabbi Tarlow, a community leader who had already converted and me. In each case, the individual was

asked a series of questions to ensure he/she had studied and prepared for the conversion. Some questions focused on particular Jewish traditions and holidays to test their knowledge and commitment to their new faith. Others looked to the future and focused on Jewish marriage, raising Jewish children, a commitment to synagogue attendance and a continued study of Judaism with the resources the community has on hand. And still others were to ensure

that each person was sincere in giving up Catholicism. As all three adults have parents and families who practice Catholicism, Rabbi Tarlow emphasized the importance of respecting their families and their families' religious traditions.

The *Beth Din* was conducted in an open-ended format to allow each convert to respond to questions and to talk about his or her personal feelings about Judaism and the conversion process. Each *Beit Din* lasted 30 minutes. After all three individuals completed the process successfully and were accepted for conversion, it was time for the *mikvah* (ritual bath of flowing water) to complete the conversion process through immersion and prayer.

The community uses a hidden freshwater river, a tributary of the Huallaga River as a *mikvah*. The spring is located in a remote gorge, a 40-minute drive from Huánuco. Community leaders claimed the spot for their *mikvah* five years ago in preparation for the conversions that would follow. They identified their spot by writing the Hebrew word *Shalom* (peace) on a large stone just above the gorge. The two women were attended by a converted female member of the community. Rabbi Tarlow and I accompanied the male convert. After the *mikvah* ceremonies, we returned to the synagogue to sign the documents of conversion and to prepare for the Bar Mitzvah, which would be held on Friday evening as severe weather conditions were predicted for the following day.

Continued on page 13

For the *Bar Mitzvah*, I led a Carlebach *Kabbalat Shabbat* (a service welcoming the Sabbath using Shlomo Carlebach's music) and *Maariv* (evening service) and an abbreviated *Torah* service in which Rolando read eight verses from an original 1870 Lithuanian *Torah* scroll. After the reading, he gave a *Bar Mitzvah* sermon and Rabbi Tarlow spoke to him about this significant event in his life. Attendees included five members of Rolando's non-Jewish family. (Rolando and his grandmother converted by choice several years ago, but his mother, stepfather and step-siblings are practicing Catholics.)

As Rolando read from the *Torah*, Rabbi Tarlow and I helped him with a few words here and there. He did a wonderful job and made me proud. As he recited his *Torah* portion, I looked at the audience and saw some people tearing up. They were so proud. For every single Peruvian in that room, this was the first *Bar Mitzvah* they had ever attended. And it was the first *Bar Mitzvah* in Huánuco in over 100 years. Rabbi Tarlow gave a speech about continuity of tradition and the beauty of reading the *Torah* and what it meant for the community to be continuing in the footsteps of their ancestors. Throughout the speech, Rolando was beaming in a way I'd never seen before.

We moved to the dining room and went around the table, where everyone said something special to our *Bar Mitzvah*. One older man, Shanti, broke into tears while talking about how Rolando is the future of Judaism in Huánuco. I'm still not sure what exactly he said that made me bawl but he spoke with such emotion. It was like a chain reaction and I couldn't hold back my tears.

Back home, I was filled with pride with what the Jewish community in Huánuco was able to achieve this summer, and filled with joy that I was able to help them on their journey. I hope and pray that they continue to practice Judaism and that the community grows in knowledge and practice.



Signing the conversion documents.

Rabbi Peter Tarlow is Hillel Director at Texas A & M University. He has visited Huánuco five times in the last five years. He also has brought student groups on a regular basis to the community. Rabbi Tarlow is fluent in Spanish and writes a weekly *Torah* column that is read and studied weekly not only by the Jews of Huánuco but also by other small Jewish communities in both Peru and Bolivia. Tarlow conducts a regular Skype meeting with the community's president.)

Daneel Schaechter is a 20-year-old student at the University of Pennsylvania with a double major in Latin America Studies and Linguistics. He grew up in a conservative Jewish home in New York City. After graduating from Hunter College High School, he spent a year studying in an orthodox *yeshiva* in Jerusalem where he honed his Jewish knowledge and skills.

Daneel volunteered with Kulanu as a senior in high school when he became interested in Jewish communities in Latin America and has continued to volunteer periodically as a translator with Kulanu's Spanish-speaking communities.

For additional information on the founding and growth of the Jewish community of Huánuco, please go to the Kulanu web site at www.kulanu.org and search for "Huánuco."

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

The stories in this issue of Kulanu News demonstrate once again the universal desire and need for spiritual connection and fellowship that characterizes people the world over. In this case, the seekers are reaching out to Jews and Judaism to find their place. Throughout the history of Kulanu, we have been blessed to witness and help individuals and communities who identify with the people of Israel and embrace Judaism. Once they have made the commitment to be Jews, they then embark on a journey of self-discovery and Jewish knowledge and practice. Whether they are from Central or South America, Asia, Europe, Africa or the United States, their stories demonstrate many commonalities. They yearn for Jewish knowledge; they take pride in their identification with Jews everywhere and the State of Israel, and they embrace their commitment to Judaism.

In many cases, the resident Jews in their countries of origin are not supportive or encouraging. On the contrary, they are often rejecting. But when the desire is real and the heart is strong, the individuals and communities press on and continue on their journey more determined than ever to be Jewish.

A case in point is the Abayudaya Jewish community in Uganda, which originally faced a lack of interest from mainstream Jewish organizations and religious leaders. But the community persisted and today, they are a source of pride and interest throughout the Jewish world for their strong commitment to Judaism and the enrichment they offer to us all. They have an ordained rabbi and a community of 1450 individuals converted and practicing Judaism in their seven synagogues. Kulanu was the one organization that listened and responded in 1995, and we are proud of our vital connection to the community forged over the past 16 years.

Today, the light of the Abayudaya has found its way to Kenya where Rabbi Gershom Sizomu and his brother JJ Keki have reached out to help a small, fledgling community that wants to be Jews. In this issue, Ari Witkin, a young man from Baltimore, visits this community and is overwhelmed by the spirituality he finds in this small Jewish enclave.

They have no *Torah* and few prayer books, yet they create a deeply moving *Kabbalat Shabbat*.

In Nigeria, Bill Miles discovers Nigerian Jews who are concerned with the same issues as we are in the United States....assimilation, the importance of a Jewish education and a thirst for Jewish knowledge. His interaction with a young boy who shyly invites him to attend his upcoming *Bar Mitzvah* touches the heart.

In a remote village in Peru, 10 hours from the capital of Lima, a community embraces its Jewish past that was lost after years of isolation and even persecution for the *Sephardic* remnant. Daneel Schaefer from the University of Pennsylvania visits this summer and helps the community reconnect with its Jewish heritage. He also helps train the first *Bar Mitzvah* in the community in over 100 years.

And finally, our front-page story is the emotional and inspiring journey of one young man, Meir Yehoshua Torres, from Armenia, El Salvador to Israel via Italy. Today, as a converted orthodox Jew, he is serving in the Israeli army. Meir tells his wonderful story of perseverance and heart, which took many years but culminates in a sense of pride and belonging in his adopted faith and country.

I think it is important here not only to applaud the courage and commitment of these people, but to salute several individuals who answered the call in these particular communities: Rabbi Howard Gorin of Maryland, who has worked for so many years on behalf of the Nigerian Jewish communities; Rabbi Aaron Rehberg, who is working on behalf of Kulanu, with the Jewish community of El Salvador; Rabbi Peter Tarlow who mentors the Jewish community in Peru and Rabbi Gershom Sizomu who reached out to the small community in Kenya to assist them on their journey. And we should acknowledge the rabbis in Milan who encouraged and assisted Meir.

I hope you enjoy this issue as much as I did when I read it. I thank our editor Judy Manelis for her extraordinary leadership in pulling it together.

Continued on page 15

Before I go, I would like to acknowledge a special person in this issue. Serge Etele from Cameroon. Our wonderful and artistic layout and photography editor Enid Bloch has gone on to other projects after working with us for four issues and redesigning our newsletter. We have chosen Serge, the spiritual leader of the Cameroon Jewish community, to take

her place. He also has assumed responsibility for the designing and updating of Kulanu's web site. We are excited that Serge can take on these responsibilities and work with us from his home in one of Kulanu's cherished communities. We look forward to meeting him when he comes to the US for his first speaking tour this winter. (*See page 9*)

Two Worlds Meet in Uganda

by Judy Manelis



Rabbi Eric & Yoash arrange the mill bags in the new grain mill store

In January, 2009, I traveled with several Kulanu leaders and volunteers to visit the Kechene Jewish community in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (see Spring, 2011 issue of Kulanu News) and the Abayudaya Jewish community in Uganda. The weeks in Africa were life changing for me as a person and as a Jew. However, at the same time, I was experiencing so much excitement and joy, I was also feeling sad, as I had left for Africa at a difficult time in my life. My good friend Ruth Horak, a Holocaust survivor, was dying. Before the trip, I had traveled to NYC from Boston twice, each time for several days, to sit with her, comfort her and hold her hand.

Although I had met and worked with many Holocaust survivors during my career in Jewish communal service, Ruth was my friend. I had never been so close. In our conversations, she shared many of her experiences. The family, which lived in Prague, had been wealthy, assimilated and cultured. But, as in many Holocaust stories, their life changed overnight. Her father was taken in an early round up of Jewish men and disappeared. She and her mother were sent to Terezinstadt and then on to Auschwitz and Bergen Belsen. They had barely survived a death march, bombs dropped by the allies when they were slave laborers in Germany and starvation, humiliation and deprivation on a daily basis. Ruth was 11 years old when she entered the camps. The miracle was that they survived, both of them.

On liberation, the two were sent to Sweden to recuperate as they were malnourished and their health fragile. Ruth would spend three months in a hospital. She liked to repeat the words of the Swedish doctor who told her she would be dead by the age of 50 as her body was damaged beyond repair. Ruth died two days before I returned home from Uganda. She was 86 years old.

Throughout her life, Ruth refused to succumb to depression and sadness. Instead, she was feisty and full of energy, living every minute of her life to the fullest. She loved medicine and science; she loved art and music; she was politically aware and devoured the newspapers and news shows. She loved to dance.

Continued on page 20

Accidental Tourist in Kenya

by Ari Witkin



Community members outside the synagogue - Photo by Ari Witkin

Sometimes we search for things in the most mysterious of places, things that may be close at hand or right in front of our eyes.

As someone who has spent a lot of time trying to figure out the place Judaism should have in my life and how best to tap into it, it was no surprise to family or friends that I decided to take my search to sub-Saharan Africa. As with any open-ended trip, however, the unfolding of events was anything but predictable.

My adventures began with four wonderful months living and learning with the Abayudaya Jewish community in Uganda. Most of my time was spent learning *Tanach* (Hebrew Bible) with Rabbi Gershom

Sizomu, the spiritual leader of the Abayudaya, and his *yeshiva* students, as well as assisting the administrative staff at the Tobin Medical Center, a facility opened two years ago by the community. However, I also spent a lot of time immersing myself in the life of this beautiful and welcoming Jewish community, which taught me something new about Judaism and myself every day I was there.

One of the many friends I made during my stay in Uganda was an incredible young man named Samson Nderitu, a student at the Smei Kakungulu Jewish High School. Samson grew up in an emerging Jewish community in Kenya. The story of his community is not unfamiliar in Africa, though it may not be so

Continued on page 17

common in the United States. It was my relationship with Samson that led me to the next stop in my journey of exploration.

KASUKU JEWISH COMMUNITY

Deep in the rolling hills of Kenya's rift valley, there is a tiny Jewish community where some 20 families have embraced Judaism as their own religious tradition. About ten years ago, the men and women of the community became disenchanted with the Messianic tradition they had been following, and, after a brief interaction with Western Jews in Nairobi, decided they wanted to be Jewish. Although the Nairobi community made it clear they weren't interested in supporting or fostering new Jewish communities in Africa, the members of the Kasuku community pushed on nonetheless. Though they faced obstacles with the ex-pat community in Nairobi, Rabbi Gershon and his brother JJ Keki of the Abayudaya reached out to them and have been helping the Kenyans build a dedicated community with knowledge of ritual and practice. It is through this relationship that my friend Samson came to study in the Ugandan Jewish high school.

After four months in Uganda, and feeling that it was time to move on, Samson and I headed out on a Thursday afternoon in order to reach his home outside of Okalau, Kenya in time for *Shabbat* (Sabbath). The first 12 hours of our trip was spent on an overnight bus from Mbale, Uganda to Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. From there, Samson and I rode for the next four hours crammed into a minibus overflowing with bodies and baggage to reach a tiny trading center about two miles from his home. Unfortunately, we arrived in the middle of a heavy down pour, which filled the road with ankle deep mud and made it almost impassable. After a considerable wait and multiple negotiations, we were able to beg our way into a ride with two motorcyclists who would take us up the hill.

When we finally reached Samson's house, I knew instantly the long trip was worth it. We were met by his parents. His father Joseph had donned a beautiful hand-made *kippah*, (skull cap) and his mother Ruth greeted us with the words *Baruch Hashem* (Blessed be G-d), thankfully rejoicing in our safe arrival.

Because of the wet and muddy roads we were unable to go to the synagogue that night. And so we made



Samson with his father - Photo by Ari Witkin

Kabbalat Shabbat (welcoming the Sabbath) at home as a family. In addition to Joseph and Ruth, there were 13 children plus me in their small country house. Like many of the homes I have become familiar with in Africa, Samson's house was more than modest, assembled like a quilt of sheet metal held together on a frame of 2 x 4's. But this tiny carcass of a home held within it a spiritual energy that left a smile on my face and an imprint on my soul that I can't fully describe.

KABBALAT SHABBAT: MY DESCRIPTION

In the dim light of one kerosene lantern I can see the elegant silhouette of Ruth, dressed in her very best *Shabbat* clothes, lighting our *Shabbat* candles. We are all gathered now in the small sitting room, huddled around a charcoal stove for warmth. There are only two *siddurim* (prayer books) for us to share. The text is illuminated by our *Shabbat* lights. As our service unfolds I feel as though I am in the midst of a truly heartfelt devotion not only to prayer but to being Jew-

Continued on page 18

ish. As I sing the *Kabbalat Shabbat*, surrounded by this huge family absolutely full of love, my smile is uncontrollable. Then, in the most wonderful moment of human interaction, my eyes meet Joseph's and together we acknowledge how grateful we are for each other's presence here, right now, and the true wonder of *Shabbat*.

I can see that much of the liturgical structure has been brought here by the Kenyan high school students who are studying in the Abayudaya schools in Uganda. Although the proficiency of ritual practice I have become accustomed to in Uganda has not fully come to fruition here only ten years after this community's inception, nevertheless, the *kavanah* (spiritual intention) is as palpable as anywhere I have ever been.

THE SYNAGOGUE

The next morning we head to the synagogue. The structure looks more like a *sukkah* (temporary dwelling used during the holiday of *Sukkot*) than a building. It is made of tree limbs, scraps of tarp and a thatched roof, with the words synagogue, *Beit Midrash* (House of prayer) and drawings of Jewish



A woman outside the synagogue - Photo by Ari Witkin

stars and *menorahs* (candelabras) on the outside. What I didn't realize until now is that I am only the second white person to ever visit this community. The service is all in Hebrew, and it is led by Samson's 17-year-old brother with the assistance of his father. There are only about 15 of us this morning, because the roads are still impassable for many in the congregation. According to Joseph, there are usually about 25 additional congregants on *Shabbat* morning.

Though the community is certainly still in its infancy, I am touched by their devotion and commitment. Many of the things we take for granted are not present here. The congregation does not have a *Torah* (hand written scroll containing the five books of Moses), yet the reverence and affection they show for the single *chumash* (Pentateuch) they do have is overwhelming. After the service, we sit and talk for hours as each member asks more and more in-depth questions about liturgy, theology and the basics of Jewish practice.

Though some members of the community have officially converted before a *Beit Din* (Jewish Court) in Uganda, most of the community has not. And yet the knowledge and commitment to learning by members of this community is deep and sincere. What I find most striking and wonderful is the three requests they



Inside the synagogue - Photo by Ari Witkin

Continued on page 19

ask of me. Not one is for money. Can you leave us your copy of the *tanach*? (Of course, I did). Can you send us a Jewish calendar? (I will.) And, most importantly, can you help us find a teacher who will come here and teach us to learn Hebrew and improve our Jewish literacy? (I will try.)

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A JEW IN KENYA?

Though I know many in the broader Jewish community would not consider these people part of *Klal Yisrael* (literally the entire house of Israel), I do. Two small encounters affirm my belief that they are. The community's founder is an elderly man named Avraham who said to me, "Ten years ago I had a dream that one day we would be members of the children of Israel and today there is a Jew in my house celebrating the *Shabbat* with me and this is the most wonderful thing I could ever imagine." As I *benched* (said the blessing after meal) with this man at the completion of our meal, I couldn't help but be aware of my own expanding sense of *Klal Yisrael* and all that it means for me as an individual, and for us as a community, to be apart of such an special covenant.

And then there is Ruth, Samson's mother, who displayed not only her devotion to, but her knowledge of Judaism when she said "I chose the name Ruth because of her story. I was not born a Jew, but I love this people and this *Torah*." Quoting from *Megilat Ruth* (scroll of Ruth), she said, "where you go I will go, where you die I will die, your people shall be my people, and your God my God?"

For those who don't know the story of Ruth, she is for me the most central figure in understanding the power and importance of building bridges with our African communities. Ruth is a Moabite, a widow,



Ari with Joseph, Ruth and some of their children

who fights for her place in the community of Israel, much like the Jews in Kenya are doing. And through her perseverance and her love she becomes the matriarch of the Messianic lineage through King David. For the Kasuku Jews in Kenya, her story is their story, and in just two short days I discover what the power of faith and love really look like.

Ari Witkin is a 24-year-old graduate of Goucher College, Class of 2009. He grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. When Ari is not off exploring, he lives in Baltimore, Maryland, where he is an interfaith organizer who works with religious communities through social engagement.

For additional information on the Kenya Jewish community, see <http://kulanu.org/kenya> and "Kenyan Branch" by Jacob Silverman, 2011 (from tabletmag.com)

Two Worlds Meet in Uganda *Continued from page 15*

She was also a beautiful woman... petite, with a delicate build and high cheek bones. She still could turn heads into her 80's. She loved to dress up. She loved to wear hats and boasted of the bargains she found in local thrift shops. She loved nature and the trees that she saw from the window of her apartment. She said she never missed the monied life of her childhood. She was just happy to be alive.

As I sat by her bedside during the last weeks of her life, we spoke about many things. She told me that she felt she had lived a positive life in response to the tragic circumstances of her early years. She had no regrets. However, during the last year or so, the positive mind-set that she had nurtured during her post Holocaust life, became a bit shaky. She ad-

mitted to experiencing dark thoughts and recurring memories. She repeated the story of a friend who returned to her village and waited at the train station every day hoping someone in her family would return home. No one ever did. Like many Holocaust survivors, Ruth had pushed the painful experience of her past into the deepest recesses of her mind, only to see them resurface toward the end of her life.

When Ruth died, her daughter Nina and I spoke about a fitting memorial for her mother. Nina decided that the Abayudaya community, persecuted as Jews by dictator Idi Amin, seemed a perfect fit. The choice of gift was for the

village of Namutumba, the poorest of the Abayudaya's seven villages. Its extreme poverty was due to the confiscation of their land by Amin during his dictatorship and anti-Jewish policy.

When Kulanu Ugandan coordinator Laura Wetzler developed a grain mill project with leaders of the Namutumba community in hopes of helping them rise out of poverty, Kulanu reached out to donors to pay for this development project. The South Peninsula Jewish Community Teen Foundation of the Jewish

Abayudaya children -
Photos by Judy Manelis



Community Endowment Fund and Ruth's daughter, Nina Horak, answered the call.

So this January, 2012, almost two years to the day, I will be traveling to Uganda again. This time one of the highlights of my visit will be the dedication of the grain mill in Namutumba and the affixing of a plaque in honor of the California teen philanthropic project and in memory of my friend Ruth Horak.

Growing Community in Puerto Rico



Rabbi Lawrence Goldstein with his granddaughter Chaya

Congregation *Ahavas Torah* de Puerto Rico, founded by Rabbi Larry Goldstein in 2010, now has a home of its own. Rabbi Goldstein, originally from New York City, has lived in Puerto Rico since 2008 and has made it his personal mission to reach out to members of Puerto Rico's Jewish community (2,000) as well as to "hidden Jews," descendants of Crypto-Jews forcibly converted during the Spanish Inquisition. The synagogue also provides a home base for those who are seriously contemplating conversion.

Rabbi Goldstein offers an ongoing *Mishnah* class and has plans to offer a Hebrew class beginning on Sunday, November 20, at 5:00 P.M. Services are held on major holidays and every Sabbath. Friday services begin at candle-lighting time; Saturday services at 9:00 am and 30 minutes prior to candle-lighting. The address of the congregation is Calle 15 B-7, Jardines de Caparra, Bayamon, Puerto Rico 00959. The building is only a few blocks from Carretera (Highway) 2 and the Jardines station on the train. The site is in suburban San Juan.

For more information, please contact Rabbi Goldstein at (347) 583-7183. Drop-ins are welcome.

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Continued on page 23

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Zimbabwe



Kulanu volunteers Jack Zeller and Sandy Leeder of Israel recently returned from a ten-day visit to Zimbabwe, October 31-November 10, where they visited the Lemba community of Mapakomhere to launch the building of a synagogue. This photo was taken at a *Shabbat* service on November 5 at the Mapakomhere high school.

From the left, Jack Zeller; Daniel Zifungo, Chairman of the Great Zimbabwe Synagogue (GZS); William Mhuka, Treasurer, GZS; Dr. Rabson Wuriga, President, standing, and Chief Tadzembwa, seated to the right by the windows wearing a tallit. An article about the visit will appear in the Winter, 2011 issue of the Kulanu News.