



KULANU

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The Lemba/Jewish Community of Zimbabwe: Its History, Jewish Practice and Challenges

by Modreck Zvakavapano Maeresera

"A tiny beautiful flower surrounded by millions of weeds..."

This is how my grandmother chose to describe the Lemba community in Buhera, my district of origin. Her comment, which may seem harsh to the casual reader, was actually an expression of pride in her Lemba culture and way of life. I have thought a great deal about my grandmother in recent days as I put pen to paper in an attempt to describe the Lemba-Jewish way of life to Jews abroad and to assess what we Lemba need to strengthen our community and to preserve our heritage in the years to come.

Today, the Lemba-Jewish community of Zimbabwe numbers approximately 150,000 souls in a country with a population of 14 million. Our culture and religious practices set us apart from the majority of our



Modreck Zvakavapano Maeresera

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countrymen. That we managed to cling to our unique cultural heritage and traditions and eschewed assimilation into non-Lemba cultures is a miracle. How to reproduce that success for the next generation is our challenge.

So what exactly is it that makes the Lemba distinct from other ethnic groups in Zimbabwe? Chief among our differences are our marriage laws, dietary laws, Sabbath observance, circumcision and the holidays that we observe. In this issue of the Kulanu newsletter, I have chosen to focus on two of these differences,

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Lemba marriage and Lemba dietary laws. I have also described some of the challenges that confront both these institutions and our way of life.

MARRIAGE AMONG THE LEMBA

I believe our greatest fear was and still is assimilation, the fear of being gobbled up by the larger ethnic groups in Zimbabwe and to be lost forever as a distinct people. To guard against this threat, Lemba Elders long ago forbade intermarriage. They prescribed that Lembas must marry fellow Lembas. In total there are 12 Lemba clans in Zimbabwe, and a Lemba was permitted to marry into any one of them. Marriage outside this circle was forbidden.

My father and all my uncles married into one Lemba clan. As a result, all my mother's sisters and cousins married my father's brothers and cousins. These marriages were meant to strengthen inter-clan relationships. Having Lemba relatives from both my father's and mother's sides created a strong bond among the offspring and a sense of togetherness. In fact, we are more than cousins. We don't even use the word cousin to describe ourselves. We are simply brothers and sisters. We also do not use the word aunt or uncle among ourselves. Only the words father and mother exist.

THE 12 LEMBA CLANS:

Tovakare, Bubha, Seleman, Tsadik, Sarif, Hamis, Bakar, Mani, Usingarimi, Hadji, Ngavi

My father, who is from the Tovakare clan, had three brothers. Unfortunately, they are all deceased; may their souls rest in peace. My father, the first born son, married my mother, who is from the Tsadik clan. Coincidentally, my mother is also a first born in her family. Two of my father's brothers married my mother's blood sisters, with my youngest uncle marrying my youngest aunt. The third brother married my mother's cousin. This custom did not start with my father and his brothers and cousins but had existed for many generations.

My grandfather had only one brother and they (my grandpa and his brother) married blood sisters so my father and his cousins, my uncles, were very close, just as I am with my cousins. When my grandmother's sister died, my grandma raised her late sister's children.



Three Lemba elders, left to right, Zano Tofa, Mr Chivhenge and Mr Cikobvu

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It was natural for her to do so because my cousins were like her own children.

What I am trying to point out is that among the Lemba, the institution of marriage has been used to bring together different Lemba clans. This is the reason that all Lemba consider their destiny and identity one and the same. Over the centuries, these communal customs protected our religious and cultural identity from unwanted intrusion from other cultures and from the complications that come with intermarriage.

Long ago it was taboo for Lemba-Jewish daughters to marry non-Lembas. The punishment for marrying a non-Lemba man was excommunication. A great aunt of mine was disowned by my great grandfather because she married a non-Lemba. For 40 years, my great aunt was not able to set foot in our village, not even to attend her mother's funeral. She was allowed to return to the village only after the death of my great grandfather. It was only then that my grandfather relented and readmitted her into the community. But not her children. Such was the severity of the punishment.

Nowadays, Lemba marriage rules are not as harsh. Lemba girls are no longer excommunicated if they marry non-Lembas. My three sisters have non-Lemba husbands. They are only required to observe the dietary laws so that when we visit them we can eat at their tables. If they fail to observe and respect Lemba dietary laws, we cannot visit them.

A Lemba woman who intermarries does not automatically adopt her husband's religion and culture and can

remain a Lemba. However, according to Shona cultural mores (to which we adhere), the children of such a marriage belong to the father and adopt his culture and religion.

Fortunately, all my brothers-in-law follow Lemba dietary laws and are not hostile towards our culture. As a result, I can visit them and eat in their homes. Even

though non-Lemba men are not allowed to convert and become Lembas, they can choose to live like Lembas.

For Lemba men, the demands are different. Lemba men are discouraged from marrying non-Lembas, but they are able to do so without penalty. Although non-Lemba men cannot convert and become Lemba, non-Lemba

women can join our community. But, in order to be accepted as Lembas, the women must undergo a formal conversion, after which they enjoy the full recognition and respect that is accorded other Lemba wives

With a relaxation of marriage laws, however, our religious and cultural heritage is at risk. This situation is compounded by the fact that many of us no longer live in our ancestral villages as we did in earlier times. We are scattered in cities and towns across the country, making it more difficult for us to meet and form relationships among ourselves. This has resulted in more intermarriage. The unusual bond that we created among ourselves through marriage is at risk. If intermarriage continues, our identity will be compromised and we will be strangers to one another.



My son Aviv
Photo by Modreck Zvakavapano Maeresera

The Lemba to Build a Synagogue Near Great Zimbabwe,

by Sandy Leeder

The title of this article is a mystery to most readers. What is Great Zimbabwe? Who are the Lemba? And why build a synagogue now in this unusual locale? I hope to answer those questions and more in the following article.

Great Zimbabwe is a stone, fortress-like structure, built and occupied from 1100 to 1450 CE. You can find it on Google maps about 200 miles south of Zimbabwe's capital city of Harare, near the town of Masvingo, and about 450 miles east of Victoria Falls. It is so unique that the country of Zimbabwe is named after it. For the Lemba, Great Zimbabwe is particularly special as oral tradition suggests they were instrumental in building it. Today, the descendants of those same Lemba live in the area surrounding it.

The structure has many unusual features. First, it is built mostly of small stones, piled one on top of another using no mortar. Second, it is surrounded by a 35 feet high stone wall, which extends to over 820 feet in length and encircles an area called Great Enclosure. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, in its center is a conical stone edifice 50 feet high by 25 feet in diameter with stairways leading up to fire pits and upright stones.* Was the edifice used for ritual observance? No one knows.



Sandy Leeder, Kulanu Coordinator for Zimbabwe

WHO ARE THE LEMBA?

Okay. Now we know about Great Zimbabwe. Let's recapitulate some of what we know about Lemba origins. (See Modreck Maeresera's articles in this issue of KulanuNews for additional details.)

We know the Lemba are Jews who entered Africa from Yemen hundreds, if not thousands, of years ago after some unknown historic events disrupted their lives in Yemen. They were traders, miners, potters and workers of copper, iron and stone. Many of the immigrants married African women who agreed to convert and to follow Lemba practices. Although the Lemba retained memories of their Jewish history,

* While there are similar, but smaller stone enclosures located nearby, Great Zimbabwe is obviously the most important of the structures.



Great Zimbabwe Ruins

Photo by Tim Makins (www.gnomeplanet.com)

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traditions and religious observance, they no longer had anything in writing. According to their historic epic, they lost their Book (the *Torah*) during their arduous journey. As a result, all knowledge and memory from that time forward was passed down orally.

The Lemba in Zimbabwe live among the predominant local Shona tribe. While they look like Shona and share the same Shona language, they are not Shona; they are Jews who have kept their Jewish practices secret from their neighbors. For all practical purposes, the Lemba are hidden, similar to many other Jewish communities in the world.* In this case, the secrecy is to keep the local tribes from copying Lemba practices, as much as it is to keep the Christian and Moslem missionaries away.

The Lemba worship one G-d and don't work on the Sabbath. They circumcise their males, keep kosher and separate milk from meat.

The Lemba, however, are not hidden from other Lemba or from us for that matter. For if we know where and how to look, we will find them easily. The Lemba worship one G-d and don't work on the Sabbath. They circumcise their males, keep kosher and separate milk from meat. They won't eat meat unless the animal has been slaughtered by a circumcised Lemba and cooked in a separate pot. At a non-Lemba sponsored party or social function, Lembas can identify one another because they will always wash their hands before and after the meal, abstain from eating unkosher meat and are usually found subsisting on vegetables and possibly fish.

The Great Zimbabwe Synagogue is the 50-year-old dream of the late Professor M.E.R. Mathivha of the Lemba community of South Africa and is now being actualized in Zimbabwe by his protégé, Dr. Rab-



Great Zimbabwe Ruins
Photo by Tim Makins (www.gnomeplanet.com)

son Wuriga. Yes, Lemba live both in Zimbabwe and in South Africa. While the two groups are related and interact with one another, the communities have their own leaders and often have different priorities.

I first met Professor Mathivha and Dr. Wuriga in 2002 in Tohoyandou, South Africa, at a conference on Judaism sponsored by the South African Lemba Cultural Association (SALCA). Professor Mathivha was the foremost Lemba leader of his day and the founder of SALCA. He was also one of the first South African blacks to hold the title Professor and was a noted leader in the struggle against apartheid.

At the time we met, Professor Mathivha was elderly, although still in full possession of his faculties. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he recognized the historic connection between the Lemba and the Jewish people. Up until that time, the Lemba thought of themselves as a unique African tribe without any connection to tribes elsewhere. In fact, they had kept to themselves for so long and guarded their secret Lemba traditions so carefully, that they were "hidden."

It seemed to me at the time that Professor Mathivha was worried that the community had paid a steep price for its secrecy. After years of missionizing activities,

See article on the Kechene Jewish community of Ethiopia in the Spring, 2010 issue of KulanuNews

many Lemba had become Christians and had forgotten their history and traditions. In response to these conditions, Professor Mathivha had researched and written down the oral history of the Lemba from the time they left Israel to their years in Yemen and their final destination in Africa.

Professor Mathivha felt an urgent need for the Lemba to build a synagogue and to begin practicing their Judaism in public, rejecting the secrecy for which they were known. He wanted the Lemba to initiate contact with western Jews but was uncertain who could lead this effort after him as he knew he was getting old and his time was limited. Rabson, then a graduate student working with Professor Mathivha, seemed to him a good choice. Professor Mathivha died soon after I met him on October 2, 2002.

In spite of Professor Mathivha's efforts, and the fact that the Lemba have become increasingly aware of the wider Jewish community, they still remain mostly unknown and unrecognized by Jewish religious and secular leaders in other countries. They don't talk about their customs or ceremonies. They cannot share their prayers with non-Lembas. Yes, they may be more open to interacting with the larger Jewish world, but they don't want to be missionized... even by Jews. They have had enough with the Christian and Moslem missionaries. As I have often been told, "We know who we are; we are Lemba. We know we are Jews; our parents told us so."

But even with the positive genetic tests for the Cohen Model Haplotype, the majority of the Jewish community appears uninterested.

DNA TESTING CONFIRMS JEWISH ORIGINS

It is fairly well known that the Lemba share the same *Cohen* Model Haplotype, "*Cohen* gene," in the same proportion as do *Ashkenazi* and *Sephardic* Jewish men in Israel and the rest of the Jewish world. The *Cohen* Gene is found in approximately 50% of *Cohanim* (priests), 5-10% of Levites and 1-5% of Israelites, and in less than 1% in the rest of the world.* In the Lemba



Daniel Matatare Zifungo, board member of the Great Zimbabwe synagogue

Bubha "priestly" clan, over 50% of the men have the *Cohen* gene. Thus the Lemba's oral history seems to have validity.

But even with the positive genetic tests for the *Cohen* Model Haplotype, the majority of the Jewish community appears uninterested. And the Rabbinic authorities? They tend to reject the Lemba as Jews most often under the pretext that they have practiced patrilineal descent, while, *Halachah* (Jewish Law) says Jewish identity is transmitted matrilineally, by the mother. Even though Lemba wives converted to the Lemba-Jewish tradition before they were wed to Lemba men, the rabbis still question whether the Lemba are Jewish according to Jewish law. Could it be that when the first white rabbis of South Africa saw the Lemba, they could not believe them to be Jews because they were black?

What is staggering is that the more we learn about the Lemba the more evidence we find that they are Jews. What we are finding out, and what the Jewish world does not know, is that the Lemba actually practice Judaism, from circumcision to *kashrut* (dietary laws) to *Shabbat* (Sabbath) and the *chagim* (holidays).

*Jewish men are identified as descended from Aaron (*cohanim*), Levites (from the tribe of Levi) or Israelites (the rest of the Jewish male population). The identification passes from father to son and has been so since ancient times.

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SYNAGOGUE

So for the last question - Why did it take so long for the Lemba to build a synagogue?

Remember, dear readers, the Lemba were trying to maintain their Jewish identity living among native African tribes. In ancient times they prayed and held



*Moshe Musingafi takes a break from uprooting tree stumps
to make way for the new synagogue
Photo by Sandy Leeder*

their ceremonies in secret holy sites in the hills. These practices slowly disappeared during the years of European colonization of Africa. More recently, the only places of public worship open to them were churches and mosques. Obviously, the Lemba cannot be Jews in churches and mosques. The few Caucasian Jews who remained in Zimbabwe after independence were not welcoming. Neither were the Jews of South Africa. This condition led to the changes in worship and openness advocated by Professor Mathivha.

Getting back to the 2002 Toheyandou conference... . It was then that Rabson Wuriga, with the blessing of his mentor Professor Mathivha, committed himself to learning about Judaism, pursuing his Ph.D., and building a synagogue. And through years of perseverance, Rabson earned his Ph.D. and devoted many years to studying Lemba religious practices and culture.

Several months ago, after many years working in Botswana, Rabson Wuriga, Ph.D. in hand, was able to re-

turn to his home town of Mapakomhere, Zimbabwe to accept a teaching position at the Great Zimbabwe University. Now he is ready to fulfill the last of his commitments - to build a synagogue. In his capacity as President of the Great Zimbabwe Synagogue, Dr. Wuriga has obtained the consent of Zimbabwe Elders to openly return to Judaism. In addition, he has organized a local synagogue committee in Mapakomhere made up of Elders, and has obtained a piece of land from the Sub Headman Chief Tadzembwa, for the building of the synagogue.

In Mapakomhere, Rabson is conducting weekly Shabbat services and is organizing Jewish educational projects. All this activity is in preparation for the delivery of a *Torah* scroll that is being held by Kulanu in Jerusalem, waiting for the completion of its new home.

I can report that plans for the Great Zimbabwe Synagogue (GZS) have been drawn up. Building inspectors are surveying the site. The GZS has a board of directors and is in the process of developing a formal charter. It has an official bank account with sufficient funds contributed by Kulanu to purchase most of the materials needed to begin the construction.

In November, 2011, Dr Rabson Wuriga, Dr Jack Zeller and I conducted a *Shabbat* service in a Mapakomhere High School room, across the road from the synagogue site. The aged Chief Tadzembwa oversaw the complete service and looked overjoyed. He was dressed in his best English suit and was proudly wearing his *Tallit* (prayer shawl). I believe I saw tears of joy in his eyes, as if *Moshiach* (messiah) had arrived.

This is a unique moment in history. There are many Lemba who have been battling against Christian and Islamic missionizing who now want to come out of the closet and identify themselves as Jews. And there are at least a few Jews within the wider Jewish world willing to help them bridge the gap. The Lemba have finally come out of hiding and reached out to the wider Jewish world for help. It is important that we respond, and say we are here.

Kashrut (Dietary Laws) Among The Lemba

by Modreck Zvakavapano Maeresera



Zimbabwe leaders of Lemba Renaissance, from the left, Modreck Zvakavapano Maeresera and Dr. Rabson Wuriga

It is a stifling hot and humid afternoon. Thunder clouds rise like monoliths in the sky; they are dark and pregnant with the promise of heavy rain. My uncle Ahid and I are travelling from Gutu, where we have gone to visit my maternal grandmother. My uncle looks anxiously at the cloudy skies. “It’s going to rain soon,” he says, “we better find somewhere to get shelter.” Just in front of us, less than 500 meters away, is a homestead, and instinctively, we make a bee line for it.

The occupants of the home give us a warm welcome. Just as we enter the house, the downpour begins, punctuated by flashes of lightning and claps of thunder. My uncle and the head of the house make courteous small talk about the weather and the state of the crops in the fields.

The woman of the house prepares the dining table for lunch. The appetizing aroma of the food makes my stomach growl. After the long journey I am tired and hungry. A hand wash dish is offered to my uncle and he politely declines saying he is not hungry. I follow his example and decline.

In African culture it is considered rude for a guest to turn down the offer of food from a host as custom dictates that the host cannot eat while guests are looking on. So my uncle is obliged to give a further explana-

tion other than just “we are not hungry,” which surely would not satisfy our host.

“We are Lembas” my uncle explains and immediately everyone in the room nods, satisfied. The three words are explanation enough.

“Aah! So you are Lembas? You don’t eat meat unless you slaughter the beast and you don’t eat food that is prepared in other people’s pots?” our host asks. My uncle agrees and the host explains that he has a Lemba friend who lives in the neighboring village, so he is well-versed in Lemba dietary laws. We are offered tea instead, and we accept.

Dietary laws are one of the major distinctions which separate the Lemba from others in Zimbabwe and identify our Lemba-Jewish culture and religion.

Dietary laws are one of the major distinctions which separate the Lemba from others in Zimbabwe and identify our Lemba-Jewish culture and religion. The laws set us apart as a people with a unique cultural heritage. We have no special dress code to call attention to our differences. And these days we no longer congregate in places of worship, except during ceremonies where elders chant and recite poems in an ancient tongue. We all speak Shona, the official language of Zimbabwe, and our facial features, except in very few cases, are like those of other ethnic groups.

But our unique dietary laws set us apart. From childhood, we are taught what we can eat...which animals, which birds and which insects and which ones we cannot. In most cases, we follow the dietary laws that were given by G-d to Moses.

According to Lemba oral tradition, our people journeyed from the Middle East to Africa via Yemen, eventually settling in Mozambique. The timing is unknown.

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Later we traveled south and arrived here in what is now Zimbabwe. Other Lemba tribesmen continued south and settled in South Africa.

Lemba elder Mr. Seremani Musanhu, who knows our history, tells us how we encountered new varieties of animals and insects on our journey to Zimbabwe. The people were not sure which ones were kosher. In those days, our people had priests and a council of elders. They were able to determine what was eatable and what was not. In those days we also still had our Book.* When there was any question about dietary laws or any other issues, our leaders sought guidance from the Book.

After the loss of our Book, the Lemba adopted an oral tradition, through which laws were passed down from one generation to the next. In this way, we managed to keep and observe our dietary laws for hundreds of years. Even when we came in contact with other ethnic groups, some of whom influenced us in one way or another, our dietary laws remained inviolate.

Today, we have non-Lemba neighbors and friends. Interestingly, many of them have chosen to observe Lemba dietary laws so that when we visit each other, we can eat together at the same table. And when our neighbors want to slaughter an animal for meat they call a Lemba tribesman, who will slaughter the animal according to our dietary laws. Those neighbors who find it difficult to keep and observe the strict Lemba dietary laws simply buy new kitchen utensils, which they will use only when Lemba neighbors visit.

As a result, we have maintained a cordial and harmonious relationship with our non-Lemba neighbors. They respect us for who we are. We, on the other hand, attend their functions and help them till their land. Lembas traditionally keep large herds of cattle, which provide them with an important source of draft power since Zimbabwean rural farmers still use ox-drawn ploughs. Today, the greatest challenge to our survival as a people and our observance of Jewish dietary laws is modernity.



*Young Lemba woman
Photo by Jack Zeller*

GEOGRAPHY

Previously, most Lemba lived in agricultural villages, where it was easier to maintain our dietary laws. But today most of us live in cities and towns scattered throughout the country. There are no Lemba abattoirs or butcheries. If Lembas need meat, they have two choices. They either buy a live chicken, which they slaughter themselves, or they

travel as a group from the city to rural areas where they buy and slaughter a cow. Then they divide up the meat and take it back to the city.

What We Need:

The Lemba need synagogues where we can worship as Lemba-Jews. We need Lemba butcheries and abattoirs to ensure that we have kosher meat. We also must have Lemba schools where we can teach Judaism and observe our traditions. After all, Christians have their own boarding schools where they teach Christianity; Muslims have their schools where they teach Islam. Why not us, why not the Lemba?

* Lemba oral tradition identifies the Book as the Torah.

However, many Lembas in the cities find it too cumbersome to observe the dietary laws. Some simply cease to observe them; others buy Halal meat from Moslem butcheries as a compromise. But according to Lemba tradition, unless a beast is slaughtered by a circumcised Lemba-Jew the meat is not kosher.

EDUCATION

Another problematic area is the education sector. Mission boarding schools provide the best education in the country. Attending a mission school almost guarantees entrance into the best schools of higher education. The problem is that the mission schools are Christian, and they teach Christianity. They also do not respect Lemba dietary laws. So Lemba families are always looking for schools that are sympathetic to our traditions.

I used to slaughter cattle for all the Lemba students at the mission school I attended. One day, a new headmaster took over who was not sympathetic to Lemba

traditions. Instead of letting me slaughter the cattle, he simply shot the beasts with his gun. The result was that all the Lemba students at the school would not eat the meat and asked for passes to go home to get some food. My father and uncle accompanied me back to the school with the parents of other Lemba students and met with the headmaster to resolve the issue. After that, I resumed my duty of kosher slaughtering and was able to provide meat for Lemba students at the school.

MILITARY

Other difficulties are faced in the military. Lemba elders discourage Lemba-Jews from joining the army because of the difficulty of maintaining *kashrut*. However, the paucity of jobs and professional options makes the military hard to avoid as it provides steady employment and a regular salary. With few job opportunities available, many Lembas do join the army. As a result, they receive and eat regular food rations like all soldiers, and ask no questions.



*Lemba elders in Chiniki - from the left, Headman Mushavi Mufandaedza and Mr. Mutazu during the visit of Sandy Leeder and Jack Zeller
Photo by Jack Zeller*

President's Letter

Dear Friends,

This issue of KulanuNews highlights the Lembas of Zimbabwe and Kulanu's growing involvement with the community. Kulanu leaders have maintained relationships with Lemba leaders for some years. Recently, however, we have taken a more active role in supporting Lemba leaders in Zimbabwe in an attempt to encourage a resurgence of Jewish life there.

Over the years, Lemba leaders from Zimbabwe and South Africa have claimed Jewish descent and pointed to Lemba religious observances as proof of their origins. Their claims were generally ignored by Jewish religious leaders. However, with advanced technology, the community has found a way to substantiate its claims. As noted by Professor Tudor Parfitt in the Spring, 2010 issue of KulanuNews, and again in Sandy Leeder's article on page 4 of this issue, research studies have identified the priestly *Cohen* gene in more than 50% of all males in the Lemba Bubha priestly clan. This figure is the same or a little higher than the percentage for *Cohanim* (priests) in *Ashkenazi* and *Sephardi* Jewish groups around the world.

While we rejoice with our co-religionists in Africa who feel vindicated, we are equally sad that their detachment from mainstream Jewish life over many centuries and their need for secrecy regarding their religious observances have led to a loss of knowledge of and involvement in the Lemba heritage by the young. It has also led to the targeting of the Lemba by messianic and evangelical Christians eager to gain advantage and convert Jews

Today, we must report that the community is at risk of losing knowledge of their special rituals and observances as well as their connection to their Jewish roots. It is only with determination and attention that Lemba leaders can hope to reverse this trend. Kulanu supports the efforts of Zimbabwean



*Harriet Bograd wearing a Cameroonian dress, a gift from the Beth Yeshourun community of Cameroon
Photo by Viviane Topp*

Lemba to help turn detachment to commitment. With this goal in mind, we have included three articles by Lemba leader Modreck Zvakavapano Maeresera in an attempt to educate the worldwide Jewish community about Lemba customs and practices. Sandy Leeder has provided additional historic information. We are hoping to rouse the Jewish community to assist us in this mission.

Our first goal is publicity. This issue of KulanuNews is the first installment. The second goal is a commitment to help Lemba leaders develop a Jewish cyber learning program. This program was initiated this fall. We have committed Kulanu funds for the building of the first Lemba synagogue and we have already acquired a *Torah*, which sits in Jerusalem awaiting completion of the synagogue and the training of Lemba *Torah* readers.

We hope Kulanu supporters around the world will help make the resurgence of Jewish life in Zimbabwe a reality.

My Asian Adventure

by Andria Spindel

Last fall, I had business in Asia. As C.E.O. and President of March of Dimes Canada, I had been invited to participate in the International Symposium on Employment for Persons with Severe Disabilities in Seoul, Korea. As much as I looked forward to my trip to Korea, its proximity to China excited me even more. A stop off there would give me the opportunity to return to Nanjing, China, where in 1994, I had adopted my daughter, Mattea, and I would visit the historic Jewish community of Kaifeng. My itinerary would also include visits with Shi Lei, a travel agent and interpreter, who would plan my visit to Kaifeng and other former centers of Jewish life in China, and Professor Xu Xin of the Nanjing Jewish Studies Institute, both of whom I had hosted during their visits to a Jewish social service agency in Toronto.



Visit to Glazer Institute for Judaic Studies, University of Nanjing, from the left, Judaic scholar Xu Xin, Kulanu board member Andria Spindel, Sandy Kashen and Professor Emeritus Hou Hanliu

As a board member for Kulanu, I had learned a great deal about the history of the Jewish community of Kaifeng and was privy to the work Kulanu was doing to support the *Beth HaTikvah* school where members of the community learn about their Jewish heritage.

Prior to my tenure on the board, I did not think any remnants of the ancient community remained. Now, I would see the revival for myself, meet members of the community and report back to the board on my experience. My traveling companion during the trip was my friend and colleague Sandy Kashen, President and C.E.O. of Reena, a Jewish social agency in Toronto.



It was clear from the moment I landed that this visit would be in dramatic contrast to two earlier trips I had made in 1972 and 1973 during the rule of Chairman Mao Tse Tung, and the two weeks in 1994, when my focus was on the adoption process. I was not prepared for the extraordinary rate of economic development that I found. Surprises abounded everywhere I looked. While overwhelmed with China's transformation, my major interest on this trip would be Jewish history and revival. My plans included visits to Harbin, Kaifeng, Nanjing and Shanghai, all historic destinations for Jewish settlement.

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Prior to my departure, I was fortunate to have the encouragement and support of Kulanu founder Jack Zeller, who put me in touch with the small, but active community of Beth HaTikvah; Eric Rothberg, the school's founder, who identified Wang Jiabin, a member of the community, who had studied in Israel and spoke English, and Denise Yeh-Bresler, Kulanu's Kaifeng coordinator. They had prepared me for my visit, but not for the enthusiastic welcome I received or the level of excitement and interest in their Jewish roots that I found among members of the community.

HARBIN

But let's start at the beginning. My first stop was Harbin, a city known for the Russian Jews who immigrated there and made that city home. According to some historic accounts, some were sent by Czar Nicholas during a period of expansion in 1899, while others were Jews in flight from the violent anti-Semitic pogroms sweeping Russia in 1903. But whatever their origin, they found an environment devoid of anti-Semitism, a city in which their intellectual and creative gifts were appreciated.

In Harbin, Sandy and I visited both the famous cemetery of the Russian Jewish community, where former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's grandfather is buried, and toured the magnificent Harbin Synagogue, which now houses a museum. The 85-year-old building, once the biggest synagogue in the Far East, was restored with funds from American and Israeli Jews as well as a generous grant from the Provincial government of Hallongjiang and the Municipality of Harbin.

The museum presents the story of Russian Jewish life in Harbin and the myriad contributions made by the Jews who made the city their home. In fields as diverse as agriculture, medicine and pharmacy, textiles and manufacturing, education and culture, Jews made their mark and helped turn Harbin into a thriving and vibrant center of education, industry and culture. It was obvious this small community of Russian Jews, which at its peak numbered only several thousand, had a great impact on the city. Today, they are all gone, having moved to the West or Israel at the time of the



*Museum display in Harbin
Photo by Andria Spindel*

Japanese invasion of Northeast China in the 1930s and later with the establishment of Israel in 1948,

KAIFENG

On September 29th, we flew to Kaifeng, arriving a little late for *Shabbat* dinner. The *Beth HaTikvah* community was waiting for us, with a feast of dishes prepared by members for their weekly Sabbath meal. The dinner was even more lavish than usual, we were told, as it was the end of *Rosh Hashanah*. Unfortunately, we came too late to participate in the service, which was conducted by a businessman/member of the community. We were greeted warmly, not as short term visitors, but like returning family. Although few spoke English, all wanted to be near us and to hear from us.

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The most significant moment came when we unpacked the student *Torah* that I had carried in a large, unwieldy suitcase throughout my trip. The scroll was a replica of a real *Torah*, with the text, a printed facsimile of a handwritten original. It was relatively small with a miniature breast plate, *yad* (hand=pointer) and other accessories. But this gift from Kulanu was received with joy by community members, who took turns holding it.

Following dinner there were prayers and *Shabbat* singing. Interestingly, we were able to view the missed service which had been recorded by a community camera

with other nascent or re-emerging Jewish communities around the world in support of each other and for the State of Israel.

It is not easy for me to describe how much commitment and joy I found among community members. Not all those present were Jews; some were spouses of Jewish descendants. But even spouses appeared interested and supportive of their partners. Happily, I also saw young people in attendance and was able to speak at length with one teenage girl about her aspirations. This 15-year-old, along with her peers, expressed her



Kaifeng community members gather at Beth HaTikvah school to welcome Andria Spindel, at left, and colleague Sandy Kashen

and was replayed on a big screen in the second room of the apartment cum school. We were also able to see other material available to the community in its regular pursuit of Jewish learning.

After the presentation of the *Torah*, I spoke on behalf of Kulanu,. I told them what a pleasure it was for me to be the bearer of the student *Torah* and expressed the hope that one day, as the community continues to thrive and reclaims its heritage, it would have the benefit of a real *Torah*. In addition, I urged them to join

longing to be part of the Jewish world and her desire to meet other Jewish youth.

As Sandy and I both have experience with Jewish residential camping in Ontario, we pledged to look for sponsors and partners to support an invitation for four to six *Beth HaTikvah* teens to travel to Ontario in either the summer of 2012 or 2013 to attend a Jewish summer camp program.

While in Kaifeng, we also toured the Shi family mu-

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

seum, which houses some Jewish artifacts discovered in the Shi family burial ground, and wandered down the famous Teaching *Torah* Lane, the Jewish neighborhood of long ago which still bears its original name. The Lane is almost invisible from the street and empties into a local open air tea house. Although little remains of the illustrious history of Chinese Jewry, there were several emblems of Jewish institutions still visible. And one Jewish family still lives there.

NANJING

From Kaifeng, Sandy and I flew to Nanjing to visit the Glazer Institute of Jewish Studies, which takes up a complete floor in a modern university tower on the campus of Nanjing University. The Institute, which is part of the Foreign Studies Department, offers what I call a “holistic overview” of Jewish history, thought, literature and culture. Here the scholar, archivist, historian, storyteller, raconteur, tour guide, Judophile Xu Xin, presides over a small but eager student body. With his guidance, the students participate in many aspects of Jewish life and religion.

On entering the study hall, students are instructed on how to kiss the *mezuzah*. In a board style room, there is a full *Aron Kodesh* (holy ark), with a dressed kosher *Torah*. Throughout the area, there are display cases, showing the accoutrements of a Jewish home, from *Shabbat* candlesticks and *challah* (traditional *Shabbat* bread) knife to a *shofar* (ram’s horn) and *tallit* (prayer shawl). The departmental library is replete with literature by and about Jews. Surprisingly, the students are even encouraged to take on Hebrew names. And every holiday and festival is marked and celebrated. At the time of our visit, students had just experienced *Rosh Hashanah*. I forgot to ask if they would be fasting on *Yom Kippur*.

The visit with Professor Xu Xin was particularly special as he had fulfilled my request to locate and invite retired Professor Hou Hanliu to the school during my visit. Professor Hou Hanliu had been godfather to my daughter and was the person most responsible for arranging her adoption. And lo Hou was present and he looked marvellous and healthy at age 75. For this I was grateful.



Kaifeng community member holds student Torah
Photo by Andria Spindel.

SHANGHAI

The next day, Sandy and I arrived in Shanghai for the final leg of our journey. We visited the former Jewish ghetto where the Ohel Rachel Synagogue is located. It was the house of worship for many of those Jews who found refuge during WWII, when Shanghai was one of the only places in the world to welcome Jews fleeing Europe’s Holocaust. The city remembers and honors the history of the Jews who came and lived there.

LOOKING BACK

With only a week to cover four cities and several generations of Jewish life in China, we were elated that we were able to cover so much territory, meet so many wonderful people and have so many unique opportunities. We have to thank Kulanu and Shi Lei as well as all our kind and knowledgeable guides, the students at the Beth HaTikvah School and Professor Xu Xin for these rich experiences. We are eager to return. Next time, with my daughter.

Can Cyberlearning Save the Future of Lemba Judaism?

by Modreck Zvakavapano Maeresera

For hundreds of years, we Lembas have been cut off from the larger Jewish world and from mainstream Judaism. The unfortunate result of this lack of contact was the death of most of the religious aspects of our lives. With no organized worship, no synagogues and having lost our Book (the *Torah*), a religious vacuum developed in Lemba communities.

Yes, we still observe the Sabbath and most of the holidays; yes, we still keep most of the *mitzvot* (commandments) such as circumcision and *kashrut* (dietary laws). But with no places where we can meet together and worship, with no rabbis and no *Torah*, our religious beliefs are



*Young man at the Lemba Passover Seder in Mapakomhere, Zimbabwe
Photo by Sandy Leeder*



*Lemba women greet Sandy and Jack with singing and dancing at Mapakomhere
Photo by Jack Zeller*

certainly in the intensive care unit.

Other religions have been quick in trying to fill the religious vacuum. Muslims and Christians have been trying to convert us to their respective religions with such intensity that today there is a mosque and a church in almost every Lemba Village.

In the cities, these problems have been magnified as many Lembas no longer live in closed communities such as their ancestral villages. In Harare, for example, we are scattered all over the sprawling city. Hence we are more vulnerable to Christian proselytizers.

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*Lemba women gather at the local water hole to do their laundry
Photo by Sandy Leeder*

To counter this problem, Lemba leaders have developed an ambitious Jewish education program geared to Lemba adults, which encourages men and women to come together for Judaic studies through the use of the Internet. Our goal is to provide Jewish learning opportunities to city Lembas who come from different rural areas with the hope they will visit their respective communities and share what they have learned with their fellow Lembas. In this way, we hope to begin to fill the religious vacuum that currently exists and give our people an alternative to the message promoted by messianics and Christian institutions that Christianity is a variant or successor to Judaism.

In November, Kulanu founder Jack Zeller and board member Sandy Leeder visited Zimbabwe from their homes in Israel and met with community leaders. Our leadership team suggested that an extensive program of cyberlearning could be an effective tool to counter proselytizing efforts by outside groups and reeducate Lemba about their Jewish heritage and religious observances. We all agreed it was worth trying.

Our first challenge was to set up the necessary logistical framework. Jack who has many contacts with religious institutions and *yeshivot* in Jerusalem, took on the task of finding volunteer teachers. My job was to set up a study schedule that would be convenient for

both teachers and students. The lessons would be conducted through Skype. The challenge would be to find a strong and reliable broadband Internet service to use for the classes. In Zimbabwe, Internet service is costly, with time bought in gigabyte bundles. The more data you download, the more costly it becomes. Voice over is particularly expensive. With some research, we were able to select a service that would meet our needs.

The second challenge was how to record the lessons so that the lessons would be available for students who might miss a class. We also hoped to be able to use the lessons for other groups as the program expanded. The solution was to download an MP3 Skype downloader. The software automatically records and saves the Skype lessons.

Challenge three was where to store the recorded audio lesson files. On average, our recorded lessons are 20 megabytes each. So in one week we would have close to a hundred megabytes of recorded audio files which require a great deal of storage space. Our solution came with our primary teacher Rabbi Micha Lindenberg of Jerusalem who had sufficient space on his personal equipment to store his lessons.

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Serge Etele's Visit to the United States

By Harriet Bograd

It was a great joy to host Serge on his visit to the United States and to see things through his eyes. He approached America and the Jewish community with an open heart and deep appreciation. I can report that his six weeks here were filled with many memorable experiences and a number of firsts.

In addition to his public speaking events, Serge took his first airplane flight, saw and held a Torah, visited several major U.S. cities, helped a Jewish scribe repair a Torah scroll, prayed at the world Chabad headquarters, visited two Jewish museums, had a coaching session on public speaking, attended classes at several rabbinical schools and colleges and met with students to share stories about his community and their embrace of Judaism.



In addition, he was hosted by Jewish families in several states, prayed at orthodox, conservative, reform and reconstructionist synagogues and visited Jewish religious schools and community centers.

Most importantly, on Wednesday, February 22, 2012, Serge Etele formally converted to Judaism, presenting himself before a three judge *Beit Din* (Jewish court) and submerging himself in a *mikveh* (ritual bath).

HB



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Top:
Serge Etele wearing tallit designed for him by Susan Schorr

Middle:
Serge Etele speaking with students at Temple Aliyah, Needham, MA

Right:
Serge visiting the Niagara Falls in Buffalo, NY

Right:
*Serge Etele at the Chabad headquarter in
Brooklyn for Mincha prayer and study.*



Down:
Serge Etele with the Sofer Neil Yerman



Above:
*Serge works with Susan Schorr (left) and Harriet Bograd
to select material for his tallit*
Left:
Serge plays guitar during a presentation

CYBERLEARNING, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

Once classes began, there were glitches here and there that needed addressing. The first week, for example, required a series of adjustments in the scheduling of classes. Since most of the students are employed, it was a challenge to synchronize the schedules of the students with those of the teachers.

Thus far, I can report that participating students are excited by the process and overwhelmed by Rabbi Lindenbergs knowledge of Judaism and his teaching skills. Our initial efforts at cyber learning appear to be successful. Only time will tell if the project can be replicated and expanded.

I must acknowledge here the contributions of Jack Zeller, who has been working hard to coordinate the program, and of Kulanu for giving us the moral, financial and material support necessary to make this program work. Finally, our thanks go to Diane Tracht, a

Yeshivah student in Jerusalem, who drafted the extensive curriculum we are using.

FUTURE PLANS

In time, we hope this project will grow to include high school students, and later, even preschool and elementary school children. The sooner Lemba young people learn about their Jewish heritage, the easier it will be for them to remove themselves from the Christian influence that pervades our society.

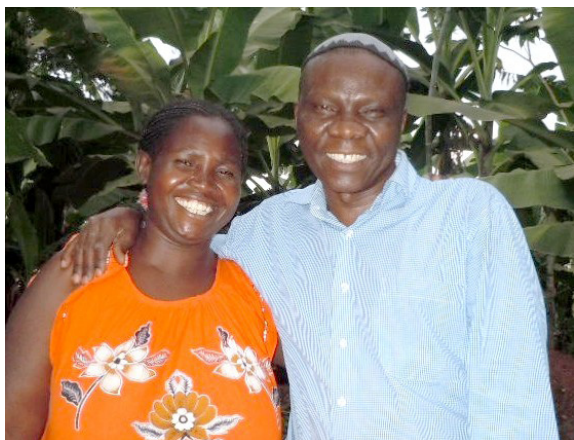
Once the Harare group is running successfully, we will try to replicate this program in other cities in Zimbabwe as well as in rural areas. As early as next year, we plan to hold Jewish education workshops throughout the country wherever there is a sizable Lemba population. Our goal is to teach Hebrew and Jewish observances with the goal of preparing Lembas for *Torah* reading and familiarity with *siddur* liturgy. In our most optimistic moments, we envisage a future where Judaism will be the principal Lemba religion, a future where Lembas will cease to be religious tourists, a future when Zimbabwe Lembas will be totally integrated into the larger Jewish community. Hopefully, we will have Lemba rabbis and synagogues too.

LEMBA HERITAGE

Once our people are equipped with their new knowledge of Judaism, we hope they will want to investigate Lemba customs and observances that have been privately held by our elders for centuries. This is an important task which needs to be carried out with utmost urgency in order to preserve our unique Lemba history and culture. If we do not do this research, our Lemba heritage will die with the few elders who still have knowledge from our ancestors. There are words and prayers, for example, that we think have similarities to Hebrew or Aramaic. But dedicated scholars are needed to do this research. This will be possible only when Lemba know enough Hebrew and Judaism to compare prayers and customs.

All the steps described above will help us to reclaim our heritage and reintegrate ourselves into mainstream Judaism. Once we have the knowledge of *Torah*, we can return to the faith of our forefathers. We can look to the *Talmud* for inspiration: It is not our task to complete the work; only let us begin.

Tribute Journal



Naume Sabano and Aaron Kintu Moses in their vegetable garden - Photo by Harriet Bograd

Kulanu is delighted to be honoring Abayudaya leaders Aaron Kintu Moses and Naume Sabano for their outstanding service to their community in Uganda and for their wonderful collaboration with Kulanu. We will be publishing an online tribute journal with ads from donors honoring them, and many photos of their 16-year relationship to Kulanu. Please go to www.kulanu.org to view the detailed announcement on our home page.



THANK YOU, DONORS

Donations between Nov 2011 and Feb 29 2012

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See the Kulanu Blog (www.kulanu.org/blog) for a full list of all of our donors, in a March 2012 post named, ‘“Todah Rabah” to Kulanu Supporters!’

Campaigns and Mitzvah Projects – Mazel Tov and Todah Rabah to Kulanu Activists

Dr Elizabeth Feldman: raised close to \$3,000 for the Abayudaya Deaf Education Fund, which supports six deaf Abayudaya children from Namatumba, Uganda.

David Uhlfelder: sponsored the visit of Aaron Kintu Moses of the Abayudaya community of Uganda to his congregation in Aspen, CO, and also raised over \$1800 for the Abayudaya Education Program as part of his Bar Mitzvah project. David became Bar Mitzvah on August 20, 2011.

Hayden Gutt: raised nearly \$1500 for the Abayudaya School Nutrition Fund through his online Personal Fundraising Page as his Bar Mitzvah project. Hayden became Bar Mitzvah on January 14, 2012.

Jeanne Bodin's grand-daughter Emily: collected many boxes of books for the Sarah Horowitz Memorial Library at the Abayudaya Elementary School in Uganda. She carefully selected appropriate books, and her mother and grandmother shipped some and personally delivered others to the school. They also helped children make their own books for the library.

Donations in Honor of and in Memory of . . .

These were received between November 1, 2011 and February 29, 2012. Please let us know if we have missed anyone (go to www.kulanu.org/contact), and we will list them in the next newsletter.

Donations in honor of someone.

Donors are in italics.

Jeanne Bodin - Arlene Silverstein, Norman Goldberg, and Ellen Serwer, Riva and Jerry Edelman;

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

Harriet Bograd - *Lawrence Gross, Jeremy Ronkin and Rabbi Margie Klein*; Harriet Bograd and Ken Klein - *Susan Merewitz*; Matthew Feldman - *Beverly Feldman, Gail Margulies*; Robert and Shirley Goldman - *The Goldman Family Fund, a Fidelity Charitable Gift fund*; Rabbi Amy Katz (Temple Beth El, Springfield MA) - *Linda A. Weiss*; Phyllis and Don Keith - *Lincoln and Marian P. Hallen*; Rabbi Allan Kensky of Beth Hillel Congregation Bnai Emunah (Wilmette, IL) - *Rabbi Michael Cohen*; Avi and Hili Kister - *Henry Z. Kister and Susana Chang-Kister*; Suzanne Silk Klein - *Myra Schiff*; Linda Kornberg - *Lewis and Monica Fried Kornberg*; Aaron Kintu Moses - *Violet and Richard Zeitlin*; Dr. Brian Primack and family - *Marcia Kaplan*; Karen and Aron Primack - *Rabbi David Shneyer and Kehila Chadasha (Washington DC), Jonina Duker and Alan Lichtman*; Shulamit Reinharz - *Barbara H. Vinick*; Natanya Rosen - *Anne Katz Jacobson and Robert Jacobson*; Jack Sarick - *Shereen Sarick*; Robert L. Schneider - *Alberta Schneider*; Rabbis Gerald and Boni Sussman of Temple Emanu-el (Staten Island NY) - *Burt and Susan Migdal*; Al and Sherrie Weiss - *Erica and Dr. Samuel Weisz*; Laura Wetzler - *Angela and Carl Milner*; David Wise - *Steven M Zellman*; Barbara Vinick - *Harriet and Daniel W. Tolpin*

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Donors are in italics.

Joan Lipnick Abelson - *Forrest and Miriam Foss*; Mordecai Armoza - *Harriet and Jacob Armoza*; Rose Baily - *Francine Levy*; Linda Bickert - *Francine Levy*; Rabbi Moshe Cotel - *Cohen-Konig Family Fund of the Jewish Community Foundation, Los Angeles*; Myrna Ferguson - *Francine Levy*; JJ Greenberg - *Irving and Blu Greenberg Family Foundation of the Jewish Communal Fund*; Joe Hantman - *Sonya M Okin, Dr. Lawrence and Madeline Tannenbaum*; Shirley Hartstein - *Patti Sheinman and the Wellesley College Hillel*; Hyman and Nettie Kaplan - *George and Toby Wakstein*; Golda Meyers - *Francine Levy*; Martin Ritvo - *Keith and Karen Melaas*; Mortimer S Smith - *Aleene Smith*

**Fall 2011 Kulanu-Abayudaya
Speaking Tour Hosts**

Temple Beth Shalom/JCC (Mahopac, NY); Yorktown Jewish Center (Yorktown Heights, NY); Congregation Adath Jeshurun, Elkins Park (Philadelphia, PA); Congregation Shaarai Shomayim (Lancaster, PA); Syracuse University (Syracuse, NY); Baobab Cultural Cent-

er (Rochester, NY); Max and Marian Farash Charitable Foundation (Rochester, NY); Temple Sinai (Rochester, NY); Hillel at Ithaca College (Ithaca, NY); United Synagogue of Hoboken (Hoboken, NJ); Louis D Brandeis Law Society (Philadelphia, PA); The Barristers' Association of Philadelphia (PA); Hopkins Hillel (Baltimore, MD); Goucher College Hillel (Baltimore, MD); Temple Emanu-El (Birmingham, AL); Living Stones Temple (Birmingham, AL); Aspen Jewish Congregation and the Uhlfelder family (Aspen, CO); Congregation Rodef Shalom (Denver, CO); The Abrahamic Initiative at Saint John's Cathedral (Denver, CO); BMH-BJ Congregation (Denver, CO); Suffolk Y JCC, Long Island (Commack, NY)

**Winter-Spring 2012 Kulanu-Cameroon
Speaking Tour Hosts**

The 92nd St Y (New York, NY); Temple Emanu-El (Staten Island, NY); Hebrew High School and Department of Jewish Education, Jewish Federation of Southern New Jersey (Cherry Hill, NJ); Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (Wyncote, PA); Congregation Beth El (Voorhees, NJ); Temple Aliyah (Needham, MA); South Area Jewish Education Collaborative (Canton, MA); Shirat Hayam Congregation of the North Shore (Swampscott, MA); Wellesley College Hillel (Wellesley, MA); Northeastern University African-American Institute and various departments (Boston, MA); Congregation Tifereth Israel (Washington, DC); University of Virginia-Charlottesville (Charlottesville, VA); Congregation Beth Israel (Charlottesville, VA); Beth El Congregation (Harrisonburg, VA); Ahavath Achim Synagogue (Atlanta, GA); West End Synagogue (New York, NY)

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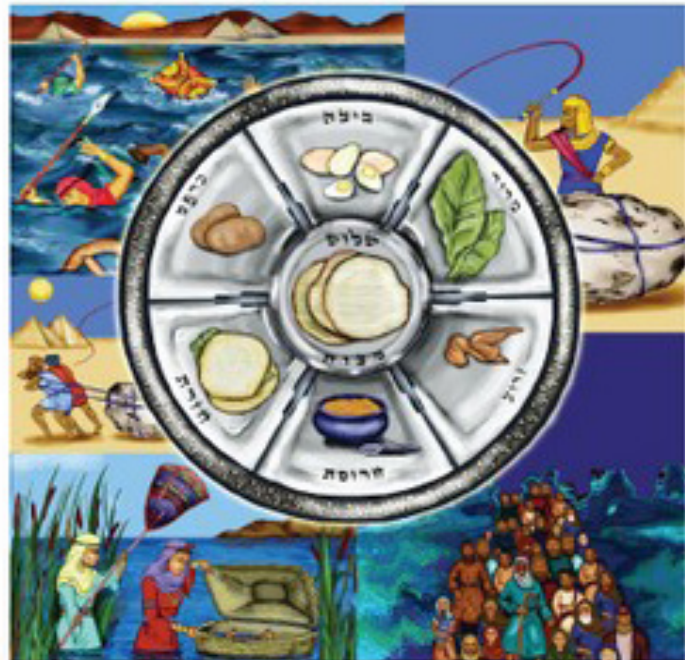
One of our best-loved festivals is just a few weeks away and we are currently arranging a Seder night for Friday 6 April. It will be a joyous evening of eating, drinking, singing and reading and we want you to be there

THIS PROMISES TO BE A VERY SPECIAL
Seder night, with lots of laughter and some wonderful food. The cost per head is €22, payable in cash at the door. Can you please confirm by return if you will be joining us? In order to finalise catering arrangements, we need the names of all those attending as well as their choice of entrée.

Chicken / Salmon / Vegetarian

Details of the venue and start time will follow within the next week. Looking forward to seeing you.

Please note the new Community email
address jewishcommunitysp@live.com



The power of the Internet continues to bring Kulanu riches from around the world. In this case, we received an invitation to a Passover Seder from the small, but growing Jewish Community of South Portugal (the Algarve). Over the years, articles have appeared about the

Jewish communities in Lisbon, Porto and Belmonte, but somehow, this community escaped notice. In the next issue of KulanuNews, we hope to correct this omission and include an article on this interesting and diverse community.