



KULANU

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Resurrecting the Jewish Community of Nicaragua

By Rabbi Gerald Sussman
(Photos by Rabbi Bonita Sussman)

The work that Kulanu does in assisting emerging, returning and isolated Jewish communities is perhaps the most thrilling and significant work I have been involved with in the almost 35 years I have served as a rabbi. As Kulanu volunteers, my wife Bonita and I have journeyed to India, Cameroon, Central America, and even New Guinea, in the service of the Jewish people. The place where I believe we have made the most immediate impact was the Jewish community of Nicaragua.

Our work there began in early 2012 when Kulanu received an e-mail from Kurt Preiss, president



Chuppah and Kiddushin. Four brides celebrate their remarriages in Jewish wedding ceremonies to sanctify their unions according to Jewish law and ritual*
Photo by Bonita Sussman

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of CIN, Congregacion Israelita de Nicaragua. Kurt had previously met Daneel Schaechter, a Kulanu board member and coordinator for Latin American communities. The email asked for Kulanu's help in arranging for the conversion of members of his community.

In June of that same year, Rabbanit Boni and I decided to take the three hour flight from Miami to Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, to evaluate the situation. What we found was a gracious and hospitable community led by Kurt Preiss whose parents had been Jewish refugees

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*Wedding canopy and wedding blessings

from Nazi Germany. At its peak, in the early 1970's, the community had numbered about 250 members and had a lovely synagogue in the center of Managua. The congregation included some of the leading businessmen in the country, most of whom were descendants of Central and Eastern European Jews who had immigrated to Nicaragua beginning in the 1920's.

As a result of Nicaragua's long civil war (1970-1987), the community was decimated. Community members scattered, most finding refuge in South Florida. During the war, the synagogue was torched and subsequently lost to the Jewish community. With the advent of free elections in 1990, which led to the ouster of the revolutionary government, a small revival of the Jewish community began. Some former residents returned. This group was joined by a small stream of Americans, mostly retirees and small businessmen.

When we arrived, we found a community of about 50 members with few children or young people, and very little hope for the future. However, the community did have some pluses going for it. The first was president



*In the Mikvah. A young boy from the community enters the mikvah (ritual bath) as part of his conversion ceremony
Photo by Bonita Sussman*

Kurt Preiss, a generous, dedicated, and capable community leader. The second was Carlos Peres an educated Jew of Converso descent who had received his Jewish education in yeshivot in the USA and Israel. Carlos was a gifted teacher who offered his family's country home to members of the community for gatherings and celebrations. Third and most importantly, there was a group of people who, while not Jews according to Halacha (Jewish law), identified strongly with the Jewish community and were welcomed to its functions as "participants" rather than as "members". These individuals, whom I call Jewish enthusiasts, were invited to all community functions but could not receive aliyot (blessings during the Torah reading) or be counted as part of the minyan of ten Jews needed for communal prayer. These friends of the congregation were, for the most part, the children and grandchildren of Jewish men who had married local women. Many of them had recognizably Jewish surnames.



*The Torah and other Jewish ritual objects displayed in the home of community leader Kurt Preiss and his wife Veronica.
Services are currently held in the Preiss home until the new synagogue can be built.
Photo by Bonita Sussman*

What these families wanted desperately was to be considered integral members of the Jewish community and of the Jewish people. They had been preparing for an eventual conversion for some time without knowing

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*Signing the Ketubah. A member of the Beit Din signs one of the ketubahs (wedding document) before the wedding ceremony
Photo by Bonita Sussman*

exactly how and when it would take place. Carlos regularly conducted classes in Judaism, a mikvah (Jewish ritual bath) was built, and some of the men and male children had undergone circumcision. We were deeply moved by their sincerity and love of Judaism and the Jewish way of life. We were determined to help.

The following November 2012, after a delay caused by Hurricane Sandy, we convened a Beit Din (Jewish court) of three Orthodox rabbis and traveled to Nicaragua. During this visit, we converted 14 individuals including two children. The conversions were followed by four weddings for what now were Jewish families. The joy and the excitement we witnessed was so exciting and enriching, not only for the newly minted Jews, but for us as well. One year later, in January of 2014, we returned with the Beit Din for a second conversion. Professor Tudor Parfitt, Distinguished Professor in the School of International and Public Affairs at Florida International University with a specialty in Jewish studies, joined us and was welcomed warmly by members of the community.

This second group consisted of family members of the first group, as well as a few individuals who claimed no

Jewish background but simply had fallen in love with Judaism. I was most impressed with Pablo, a gentleman almost 60 years old with major medical problems, who underwent circumcision because he wanted to live fully as a Jew. This time we converted ten adults and four children. This was followed by four more Jewish weddings. The excitement and joy of both the brides and grooms, one set of whom were grandparents, on being married as Jews was almost palpable.

Since our first visit, the community has grown to include the first Jewish baby born in Nicaragua in decades. There will soon be a Bat Mitzvah. One of the young men

from the community went to Israel to participate in the Maccabiah games. Another milestone was the gift of a piece of land by a community member for the construction of a new synagogue. With the unexpected and unfortunate passing of Carlos Peres, Akiva Simcha, a young medical student who hopes to eventually attend rabbinical school, teaches a weekly schedule of classes on Jewish subjects.

There is no longer any fear that the Jewish community of Nicaragua is destined to disappear. But rather, there is optimism and hope for the revitalization of a dying community, or what Kurt Preiss called “an extinct community born again....”

This experience has taught me how in all corners of the world there are Jews who courageously and joyfully, and sometimes at considerable sacrifice, are determined to live Jewish lives. It has shown me the power of Judaism and Jewish peoplehood. I feel honored to have played a part in this story.

For more information on the community, please see : <http://congregacionisraelitadenicaragua.weebly.com>

The Igbo Jewish Community of Abuja Joins Kulanu's Network of Communities

by Shai Afsai



*In Providence. Elder Pinchas Ogbukaa and Elder Ovadia Agbai meet Rabbi Barry Dolinger and his wife Naomi.
Photo by Shai Afsai*

Kulanu is excited to report that we have added the Igbo Jewish community of Abuja, Nigeria to Kulanu's network of communities, our seventh in Africa. In addition to Nigeria, Kulanu works with Jewish communities in Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Ghana, Cameroon and Zimbabwe.

The growth of Jewish belief and practice in many parts of the world, in spite of continued Jewish vulnerability, is a testament to the eternal message of our ancestors whose words and prophecies speak to the ages. Shai Afsai, inspired by the stories he heard first from Professor William Miles and then from Jeff Lieberman, traveled to Nigeria in February 2013 (for Purim) and again in February 2014 to experience for himself the commitment and radiance of this special community. JM*

As I reported in the Fall 2013 issue of KulanuNews ("Nigerian Jewish Leaders Visit Rhode Island"), two members of the Igbo Jewish community of Abuja, Elder Ovadia Agbai and Elder Pinchas Ogbukaa, enjoyed

an historic twelve-day visit to Rhode Island in September 2013. I initiated the visit after my trip to the community in February 2013. My American partners in that initiative were Professor William Miles** of Northeastern University, who had visited the community in 2009 and 2011, and two Rhode Island rabbis, Wayne Franklin and Barry Dolinger. It was our hope that the visit by Igbo Jewish leaders to an American Jewish community would help reduce their community's isolation from world Jewry.

During their visit, the Elders celebrated Sukkot and met with Rhode Island synagogue members and religious leaders from across the Jewish religious spectrum. They were also able to see Rabbi Howard Gorin, a man much admired and respected by Nigerian Jewry, who flew to Rhode Island from Maryland in honor of their visit. It had been nearly five years since the Elders and the rabbi had last seen each other, and it was an emotional and joyous reunion.

At the same time, an important connection was made by the introduction of the Elders to Kulanu Vice President Judy Manelis, whose interest in the Igbo Jewish community was the result of her interactions over the years with Rabbi Gorin and Professor Miles. (For Professor Miles' article on his first visit to the Abuja community, see "Among the Igbos of Nigeria during the Festival of Lights" in the Fall 2011 issue of KulanuNews.)

After the Elders returned home, Judy and I discussed the possibility of Kulanu including Abuja's Igbo Jewry in its network of communities. For a number of years, Kulanu had enjoyed a relationship with Igbo Jewish lawyer and author Remy Ilona, and most recently it published his latest book on Igbo Jews.*** Kulanu had no relationships with other Igbo Jewish leaders.

As it is the policy of Kulanu to work only with communities that request its help, I wanted to know

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***Professor Miles is the author of *Jews of Nigeria: An Afro-Judaic Odyssey* (Markus Wiener, 2013)*

**** The Igbos and Israel: An Inter-cultural Study of the Oldest and Largest Jewish Diaspora by Remy Ilona, (Kulanu, 2012)*

** Jeff Lieberman is the director of the film *Re-emerging: The Jews of Nigeria* (2012)*

what Remy Ilona thought about expanding the relationship. He was very much in favor of doing so. When I asked the leaders of the other congregations for their input on this question, they also responded favorably. With the positive responses from Abuja's Igbo synagogues, Kulanu's board decided to move forward and to bring the Abuja Jewish community into Kulanu's family of isolated and emerging Jewish communities. The decision was greeted with much optimism in Abuja.

There are currently four Igbo Jewish synagogues in Abuja: Gihon Synagogue, headed by Elder Ovadia Agbai; Tikvat Israel Synagogue, headed by Sar Habakkuk Nwafor; Plant for the Growth of Israel Synagogue, headed by Remy Ilona; and Igbo Israel Heritage Synagogue, headed by Dr. Michael Caliben. All four congregations have been studying and practicing Judaism for some years, and it was hoped that the Kulanu connection would lead to more opportunities for Jewish educational enrichment.

This past February, I visited Abuja a second time, again staying at the home of Sar Habakkuk Nwafor and his family. (For a description of my first visit, exactly one year before, see "Providence writer visits small group of Nigerian Jews, struggling to keep their faith alive" in *The Providence Journal*, July 28, 2013, pages G1 and G4.)

The day after my arrival, members from all four synagogues gathered in the courtyard adjoining

Tikvat Israel Synagogue for a communal meeting. Sadly, Dr. Michael Caliben was unable to attend, as he was mourning the recent and unexpected passing of his elder brother. The meeting, presided over



Community Meeting. Harim Obidike (right) breaks a kola nut at the start of a community meeting presided over by Elder Ovadia Agbai (center) and Sar Habakkuk Nwafor (left).

Photo by Shai Afsai

ANNOUNCING: TWO MAJOR KULANU INITIATIVES FOR THE ABUJA JEWISH COMMUNITY

1. Kulanu has provided a \$5,000 grant to bring Orthodox Rabbi Barry Dolinger, rabbi and spiritual leader of Congregation Beth Shalom, and his wife Naomi Dolinger from Providence to Abuja for two weeks of teaching in early August. An additional \$3,000 is needed to make this trip a reality. Shai Afsai will accompany the rabbi and his wife on the trip and coordinate all details. Rabbi Dolinger and his wife have prepared an extensive curriculum designed to meet the needs of the community based on their requests and on detailed conversations during the Elders' visit to Rhode Island last fall.

2. Kulanu is affording the community the opportunity to send two young men to Mbale, Uganda to study for two months, in June and July, at the yeshiva founded and run by Rabbi Gershom Sizoumu of the Abayudaya community. The grant for this trip is fully funded at a cost of \$6,600. Topics of study will include Modern and Biblical Hebrew, Tanach (Bible), theology, and halacha (Jewish law).



At the Bimah. Sar Habakkuk Nwafor, Moshe Natan Onyckwe of blessed memory, and Harim Obidike at the Igbo Israel Heritage Synagogue.

Photo by Shai Afsai

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*Importance of Hebrew. Izuchukwu Jonathan Onuchukwu stands beside the letters of the Heberw alphabet at Plant for the Growth of Israel Synagogue
Photo by Shai Afsai*

by Elder Ovadia Agbai, began with the traditional Igbo blessing over and sharing of a kola nut. A lively discussion then ensued about the community's recent accomplishments, current challenges, and future plans. Opinions were expressed in an open manner and decisions were arrived at by consensus.

I spoke about the impact that Elder Ovadia Agbai and Elder Pinchas Ogbukaa's visit had on the Jewish community of Rhode Island, and Remy Ilona formally announced my appointment as Kulanu's regional coordinator for Abuja. At the meeting, I also discussed two Kulanu initiatives (described on previous page).

The news that a rabbi's wife will soon be visiting has been particularly welcome in Abuja. "A rabbi coming with his wife — this will be the first time that has ever happened," Sar Habakkuk Nwafor noted. "I strongly believe that it will yield very good fruits for our women and am very much pleased with their coming."

While in Abuja, I also had the pleasure of meeting Canadian Professor Jeffrey Davidson, a widely beloved and respected former visitor to the community. (For Professor Davidson's account of one of his visits to Abuja, see "Shabbat with a Committed Group in Nigeria" in the Spring 2004 issue of KulanuNews.) Community members visited Professor Davidson at his hotel several times, sharing with him information about their congregations' recent history and growth.

During my time in Abuja, I visited all four synagogues, including Plant for the Growth of Israel Synagogue, which did not have a house of worship when I was in Abuja one year ago. As had been the case the previous year, my host Sar Habakkuk Nwafor never left my side. Throughout my visit, I observed a community working with unity and purpose. At the meeting held the day after my arrival, Elder Pinchas Ogbukaa stood and said, "Let us remember what our focus is: Judaism, Judaism, Judaism. Torah, Torah, Torah. That is what we are working for." It is my hope that Kulanu's grants enabling the journey of a rabbi and his wife to teach there, and the two month study-visit of two young men from Abuja to Uganda, will indeed strengthen Judaism and Torah in Abuja.

NOTE: In the next issue of KulanuNews, Shai Afsai will write a more extensive article on his experiences in Abuja, including a report on the August visit of Rabbi Dolinger and his wife Naomi to Nigeria.

PLEASE HELP:

Kulanu needs to raise an additional \$3,000 to send Rabbi Dolinger and his wife Naomi to Abuja in August. Please donate on line and specify your gift is for Abuja or send a check payable to Kulanu to 165 West End Ave, 3R, New York, NY 10023, and mention Abuja in the memo field.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

Kulanu is working with the Lemba Jews of Zimbabwe to modernize their circumcision and shechting (kosher slaughtering of animals) implements and techniques. We need mohels and schochats to advise us and/or who are able to go to Zimbabwe to perform this great mitzvah. If you are/or know of a trained mohel or shochet willing to assist, please contact Sandy Leeder: Sandy@Leeder.com



Purim in Beth Yeshourun, Cameroon



Purim in Kaifeng, China



Dreidel Dreidel. Chanukah in Bialystok, Poland



Tu B'Shevat in Warsaw, Poland

Our Month with the Lemba of Zimbabwe

*by Elaine and Irwin Berg**



Elaine and Irwin Berg

In the summer of 2013, Kulanu founder and former president Jack Zeller asked us if we would be willing to spend a month in Zimbabwe teaching Hebrew, synagogue prayers and rituals, and Jewish history to members of the Lemba community. As we had recently retired, and had the time and requisite skills to do so, we agreed. We had been involved with Kulanu from its inception, and over the years we had traveled extensively to meet and learn about diverse and isolated Jewish communities in many parts of the world. More recently, we had met Lemba leader Modreck Maeresera in the

winter of 2013 on his trip to the United States and were deeply impressed with him and with his message. So, with the moral support of Kulanu president Harriet Bograd and board member Bonita Sussman, and an invitation from Modreck on behalf of his community, we agreed to make the trip. It was to be a wonderful adventure. And if truth be told, we learned as much or more from the Lemba as they did from us.

As previously reported in these pages, the Lemba have observed kashrut (Jewish dietary laws), niddah (laws of ritual purity), schechita (kosher slaughter of animals), circumcision, Sabbath observance and new moon celebrations for as long as they can remember. But even with their extensive Jewish practice and self-identification, they had somehow lost the connection between their Jewish practices and their historic Jewish roots. We hoped that we might help

them in reestablishing that connection.

Pre-Visit Jitters

In all honesty, we had some concerns about what we would find in Zimbabwe in terms of “creature comforts” and what the political and safety issues might be. We thought of ourselves as pioneers, as we were the first westerners to stay at the new Harare Lemba Synagogue and Guest House that was rented by the community with the help of Kulanu. To soothe our concerns, we brought with us our electronic security blankets, iPhones, iPads and cell phones, hoping they

** Elaine is a recently retired health care executive and Irwin is a retired attorney*

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*At the Harare Community House. From the left,
Violet Chuma, Tafadzwa Chuma and Zvamaziva Nduva
Photo by Elaine Berg*

would work in Zimbabwe. For the most part, they did, and we were able to feel less isolated and be in touch with our families back home.

Teachers and Students

During our month-long stay in the community house with Modreck and his extended family, we taught the five adult members of Modreck's household and any local Lemba who were able to attend our lessons. On average, we had ten students, but not always the same ten, as family and work obligations as well as a lack of money for transportation kept many students away. However, on more than one occasion, there were as many as 15 and more arrived on Shabbat. We taught every afternoon (even on Shabbat) from 2:00 PM until sundown at about 6:00 PM. Sometimes we taught three different groups because the level of Hebrew knowledge varied, depending on how many days a student had been able to attend classes. Our students were enthusiastic and eager to learn about "traditional" Judaism. But their major goal was to learn to read Hebrew so they could pray in Hebrew.

At the beginning, only Modreck could recognize or pronounce Hebrew letters. At the end of our stay, at least eight adults could read prayers from the siddur (Hebrew prayer book). Others made progress but could not attend often enough to complete a study of all the

letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Considering the difficulties students faced in getting to the community house, motivation was high.

In addition to our formal lessons, we spent many hours with Modreck and other members of the community talking about ideas, Jewish customs, and history. It was clear that the students were embracing a new future with sincerity and commitment. They were appreciative of our presence and saw it as a message from the world Jewish community that they were being accepted as Jews. At the same

time, they are committed to preserving their Lemba traditions.

Living Conditions and Daily Life

During our stay, Modreck and his wife Brenda and the other members of the household made extraordinary efforts to make us feel comfortable. But some conditions were out of their control. Electricity, for example, was sporadic – there was rarely a day when we had power for 24 hours. Modreck had a generator that he used when there was no electricity, but wifi was not always available. Water was not always accessible. When it was, it was stored in large buckets and in bathtubs to ensure that there would be water when it did not flow through the pipes. For us to take a shower, water had to be heated over the stove and then mixed with colder water stored in the tub (we learned and lived the phrase "bucket shower").

It is important to emphasize that even fairly wealthy people in Harare are subject to water, Internet and electricity stoppages on a daily basis. Wealthy families drill bore holes into the earth, pump underground water into their homes and have automatic emergency generators which support the needs of their families. These practices are both expensive and detrimental to the environment.

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*A quiet moment. With Elaine are Trecey, far right,
her daughter Nyasha and Modreck's son Aviv
Photo by Modreck Maeresera*

Food was plentiful, and we shopped in a local supermarket that could rival any at home. However, it is unclear how many local citizens have enough money to shop there. Rice and a native food, sadza (similar to polenta), are staples. We ate chickens that Modreck purchased live and slaughtered in a kosher manner. Generally, proteins and vegetables are eaten in smaller proportions and starches more often than we are accustomed to. Eggs are a staple for protein, and are generally eaten hard-boiled or fried. Elaine brought the household a non-stick frying pan and taught the women how to make omelets...aside from the Hebrew, this may have been our greatest gift to the Lemba!

Women and Children

The women in the house spent many hours a day on basic household tasks. The access to water required constant attention; water was collected from available sources, moved in buckets, stored, and heated. Plans had to be made around the possibility of a water shutdown (a frequent occurrence), and the inability to heat water due to frequent electrical outages. There was no running water in the kitchen...the best water source was a sink in the back yard, just outside the kitchen. Dishes were carted back and forth, and washed by

hand outside in cold water. With a large household, food preparation was ongoing. Washing clothes (by hand, of course) in a large household was another major task, and was also dependent on the availability of water and the weather (laundry is dried by hanging on clotheslines).

Women universally nurse their babies, until about age two. Our two infant housemates also ate table food. Women nurse everywhere and anywhere. We had women nursing during our classes, during prayer services, and while we were all sitting around watching TV. They also carry their children tied in blankets onto their backs – we did not see any strollers while we were there (they would not have been very

useful as there are no sidewalks except in mid-town, and those are broken and uneven). This system works well – women carry their babies and their hands are free to do other things. We heard that when the British came in, they tried to outlaw this custom, as they felt it was unhealthy...apparently, it didn't work! We also saw many women carrying large packages on their heads, which we are told is easy and practical.

In Zimbabwe, rent is a big expense. Every residence houses as many family members as possible. In this regard the Lemba are no better off than the general population. And people are poor. Modreck had to give some students the dollar bus fare to travel to the community house for classes. We reimbursed him when we discovered what he was doing.

The (traditional, white) Jewish Community of Zimbabwe

There are about 250 (non-Lemba) Jews in Harare, the capital and largest city of Zimbabwe, and 50 Jews in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second largest city, a decrease from a high of 7,000 in Zimbabwe in 1960. Two-thirds of these are older than 65. The last bar mitzvah is said

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*An outside class. With Irwin are, from the left, Brighton Zhou and Tanaka Kufakunesu
Photo by Elaine Berg*

to have taken place in 2006. A few of those remaining are wealthy, but the remainder do not have the funds to relocate.

Harare has two synagogues – one Sephardi and the other Ashkenazi. We attended the Sephardi synagogue on our first Friday evening in Zimbabwe. It is beautiful and huge with a capacity of 400. Since there are so few Jews left in Zimbabwe, the two communities pray together alternatively at each other's synagogue. On the evening we attended services, 15 men and four women were there. The prayers were conducted from a Sephardi prayer book and were entirely in Hebrew.

Prior to our visit, there had been no communication between the Lemba and non-Lemba Jewish communities. We attended services with Modreck and it was his first contact with white locals. When we asked a member of the Bulawayo Jewish community about the lack of contact, he did not deny that racism might play a part in the lack of communication. However, he emphasized that other reasons were equally if not more important. Most of the remaining Jews are not well off, although they do not suffer from the extreme poverty of the Lemba. They are fearful that if they accept the Lemba into their midst, they might be required to support them, further reducing the margin of their comfort in old age.

However, the Jewish community of Zimbabwe could do much to assist the Lemba. Members might share their knowledge of Jewish holidays, customs and prayers and serve as teachers. A Jewish school (the Sharon school) was established for Jewish children many years ago. Today there are few if any Jewish children in attendance; the students are mainly Moslems and Hindus, plus some Christians. Still the school has an Israeli who teaches Hebrew and other Jewish subjects. The Lemba would require financial assistance to attend since the tuition is far beyond their means.

Hopes for the Future of the Lemba

From our discussions with Modreck and other students, we learned that the current generation is not keeping the beliefs and traditions of the Lemba as strictly as prior generations. As long as the Lemba lived in their own ancestral villages, they managed to police themselves. But with flight to the city, observance of religious practices and Lemba customs has become more tenuous (See KulanuNews, Winter 2011, for a complete discussion of the various factors that have impacted this problem.) According to Modreck, about 10% of the Lemba have converted to Islam and 15% to Christianity. (Others have estimated that 50% of the Lemba consider themselves Christian in one form or another while still observing Lemba traditions that are decidedly non-Christian.)

Many elders have been struggling to find ways to combat assimilation and the loss of Lemba traditions. They have concluded that joining the worldwide Jewish community will help them survive, thus the push to expand their knowledge of Jewish practice and their identification with world Jewry.

To conclude: It was a rare privilege and honor for us to be on the cusp of the re-surfacing of an ancient but newly emerging Jewish community, which we hope will play an important role in the future of our people.

From the Inside: American Pioneers in Harare

***By Modreck Maeresera
Harare, Zimbabwe***

The Harare Lemba Synagogue and Guest House, located in Zimbabwe's capital city of Harare, opened its doors on the 1st of May 2013, and is the second Lemba synagogue in Zimbabwe. The Great Zimbabwe synagogue in the Lemba heartland of Mapakomhere is currently under construction and will be a religious center for those Lemba who live in the countryside. While construction is underway, congregants meet in a local school for religious services. Together, the two synagogues represent the fulfillment of a decision made by Lemba elders 15 years ago when they voted to return to mainstream Judaism.



*Irwin Berg and Modreck Maeresera
Photo by Elaine Berg*

With the two centers of Jewish worship established, attention must now focus on the education of Lemba congregants. After centuries of living in isolated villages with no interaction with mainstream Judaism, Lemba religious practice had become a cultural, rather than a religious, expression of Judaism. Yes, we continued to adhere to Jewish practices, but there was no place to pray together or to teach our young.

Over the last two years, with help from Kulanu, we have enjoyed classes from several teachers who provided us with religious instruction through a cyber-learning program. But we have been eager to go from the computer to a direct face to face learning experience with teachers who can help guide us back to mainstream Judaism.

That is where Elaine and Irwin Berg came in.

I first met Elaine and Irwin in New York City at the apartment of Kulanu president Harriet Bograd during my Kulanu speaking tour in the winter of 2013. At a reception held in my honor, I talked about myself and the hopes and dreams of the Lemba community. Irwin and Elaine came over to me after my presentation and introduced themselves. I remember at the time, taking an instant liking to both of them. During my speech, I had noticed Irwin's aristocratic and attentive face in the crowd. He was paying me so much attention that I felt what I was saying was interesting and important to him; it helped calm my nerves. Elaine was sitting at Irwin's side and afterwards when Irwin stood up to ask a question, I remember her looking up at him with so much love and respect that it was like they had only recently married.

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So, when I heard from Harriet that the Bergs were willing and eager to be our first volunteer teachers in Harare, I was thrilled. At the same time, I was concerned that our community house would not be adequate for their needs and our lack of creature comforts would make their stay difficult.

Zimbabwe can be an uncomfortable place, even for Zimbabweans. There are times we have no water; there are times we have no electricity, both of which Americans take for granted. I also felt we needed a visitor who would honestly evaluate our preparedness to host future volunteer teachers and visitors. My instincts told me the Bergs were down-to-earth people and flexible and could handle the deprivations of life in Zimbabwe. I also believed they would be honest in their assessment of the community house. We were right on all counts. But as Elaine jokingly told me later, we used them as guinea pigs.

Almost from the beginning, we felt like the Bergs were part of our family, Elaine especially has a wonderful way with children, and our son Aviv was really taken by the combined effects of her charm and her iPad. Elaine had many children's programs in her gadgets and Aviv and the other kids were soon mesmerized. Even now, Aviv still asks when "Layne" (as he calls her) is coming back.

As teachers, the Bergs were a great success. The students loved Elaine's Hebrew lessons and Irwin's well-researched lessons about Judaism and Jewish history. Another teacher arrived recently who will stay with us for three months, courtesy of Kulanu. He has been surprised to find that most of his students can read Hebrew words. I told him it is all thanks to the Bergs. Not only were they wonderful teachers, but they



A Happy Crew: Elaine with a group of her students

were special human beings: when they found out some students could not attend classes for lack of money, they helped with transportation costs.

There are many things we will always remember about the Bergs. They were pioneers: the first in-country teachers of Lemba education. They made an honest assessment of our community house and suggested how best to make the house more comfortable for future visitors. Based on their advice, we have already replaced old water pipes and improved the building's water pressure so visitors can take a hot shower or bath.

But we will always remember the Bergs as people who left the comforts of US life and came to live with us as part of our family. We will remember what they taught us, how they pointed us in the right direction and how they tried to build bridges between our community and the local white Jewish community. They will forever be part of our history: the history of the Lemba's journey towards re-integration into mainstream Judaism. They showed a true Jewish spirit. Thanks so much, Elaine and Irwin. Todah Rabbah

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Preserving & Enjoying Ethiopian Jewish Music

***By Lucy Y. Steinitz
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia***



Lucy Steinmetz and her husband Bernd Kiekebusch in Lalibela, Ethiopia. Photo by Eileen McIntire

Background

The Beta Avraham* Jews of Ethiopia are the forgotten branch of the Ethiopian Jewish family. Located in the low-income Kechene neighborhood of Addis Ababa, the Beta Avraham is an offshoot of the better-known Beta Israel (House of Israel) Jewish community from Ethiopia's northwest regions. The latter group immigrated to Israel mostly via the historic airlifts Operations Moses, Joshua and Solomon during the 1980's and early 1990's. Remnants of this community relocated to Israel under the Israeli government's policy of family reunification. In contrast, the Beta Avraham community is barely known and certainly not acknowledged by either Israel or most worldwide Jewish leaders.

According to their oral history, the Beta Avraham left the northern reaches of the country, which they shared with the Beta Israel, more than 150 years ago** and moved south to escape the oppression and violence

perpetrated against Jews for their religious faith. Over time, they were forced to keep many of their beliefs hidden and limited their religious gatherings to secret caves in the North Shewa hill-sides known now as Secret Synagogues. However, as they were artisans -- potters, weavers and iron workers—with services in demand, it was difficult to hide completely from the outside world.

Like their Northern cousins, the Beta Avraham were often persecuted and treated as a despised minority. The artisans, in particular, were hated as Jews, lowly laborers and as practitioners of sorcery due to their work with fire. At the same time, the products they created were needed by the general populace and gave them a means to survive.

Over the years, in response to extreme persecution, some members of the Beta Avraham chose to convert. However, like the Conversos*** of Medieval Spain,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

**Previously, the community used the name Beit Avraham to describe themselves but now prefer the name Beta Avraham; both mean "house of Abraham" in Hebrew.*

***The exact time frame is unknown.*

**** Conversos: also known as Crypto-Jews, and Anousim. The word Marranos has also been used in the past, but it is considered a derogatory term.*



*Members of the synagogue gather for a group shot.
Photo supplied by ENSZO Ethiopian North Shewa Zionist Organization*

many practiced Christianity “on the outside,” while still adhering to their Jewish identity and practices at home and in their Secret Synagogues. (See *Ethiopia’s Kechene Jewish Community* in KulanuNews, Spring 2010).

Although there has been much improvement in recent years (especially under the current government and a constitution that guarantees religious pluralism), elements of fear and a deep-rooted hatred toward the Beta Avraham still exist among large sections of the society. To date, the Beta Avraham have only one official house of worship – based in the Kechene neighborhood of Addis Ababa – and this was started only about seven years ago! The synagogue is run by ENSZO (Eastern North Shewa Zionist Organization), made up of young Jews determined to reclaim their heritage and worship publicly.

Personal involvement

My husband Bernd and I made contact with the Beta Avraham in mid-2012, when we moved to Ethiopia after 14 years of living in Namibia. I had

been commissioned to help lead USAID’s (US Agency for International Development) largest program worldwide to assist AIDS-affected orphans and other vulnerable children (500,000 per year in Ethiopia) plus their family members) and to build the capacity of local government, civil society and community groups to assist them. In our spare time we have explored the countryside and set up a volunteer program that currently supports 53 deserving university students who are struggling financially to make ends meet.

When Kulanu president Harriet Bograd learned that we would be relocating to Ethiopia, she asked if I would agree to serve as Kulanu’s Beta Avraham coordinator along with Sam Tadesse, long-time Kulanu activist, who had returned home to Ethiopia after 40 years of working and living abroad. Harriet knew that I had been a long-time friend of Kulanu. I agreed.

Our initial introduction and involvement began with our attending Friday evening worship services at the ENSZO synagogue. The local language of Ethiopia is Amharic and Amharic was the language (along with a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 16

little Hebrew) used by community members during the service. It was also the language used for the Torah discussion afterwards. As our Amharic is limited, we were not able to participate much in the service itself. However, what held our attention from our first service was the traditional Ethiopian religious music sung by the congregants acappella after each service. The music literally carried me away into a different world through a blend of congregational voices that seemed to spiral upwards towards the heavens. Such joy, such yearning! I loved the songs so much that my husband would bring his home-made banana bread to Shabbat services and offer it in exchange for their singing our favorite songs.

Sad to say, none of the traditional melodies were included in the worship service itself as the Siddur (prayer book) and “traditional” melodies used for Lecha Dodi and the Sh’ma came straight out of Israel and largely out of the Ashkenazi tradition. This is because the Shabbat Service, as now practiced, had not been part of the Secret Synagogue tradition and has only been adopted recently. Because of the desire of congregants to pattern their services on those of Israeli communities, I became fearful that their traditional songs would be lost over time.

As the months went by and as congregation members became more involved with learning (what was for them) new practices and melodies, this fear felt increasingly real.

What to do?

It was clear we had to take action to help the community preserve this special heritage. My work contract was ending in the Summer of 2014, and after that, it would be too late for us to do anything . First, I encouraged community members to incorporate their traditional melodies into their Sabbath service. It is the philosophy of Kulanu, with which I wholeheartedly agree, that every community should celebrate its uniqueness and not just try to emulate Jewish communities elsewhere. They may incorporate practices and melodies from other countries, but communities shouldn’t do so at the expense of losing their own unique traditions.

Second, How could we introduce these wonderful melodies to the worldwide Jewish community so others might experience the same soul-filled uplift that Bernd and I experienced? And how could we ensure they would be preserved in Jewish libraries and music archives for future researchers and musicologists? We decided that a CD was the answer both for in-country distribution and for overseas listeners (using iTunes and similar platforms).

Kulanu offered to serve as a conduit for the latter, so that the income garnered via Internet downloading could be passed through to the Beta Avraham group. With financial help from Kulanu volunteers and friends, and with the design skills of my husband Bernd, we were able to create a CD of the Kechene Jewish Sabbath melodies. To prepare “our” CD, we met with congregation members and with lead-singer Demeke ben Engda – the congregation’s general manager and primary Shaliach Tsibur (leader of services) and discussed which songs should be included. This involved multiple sessions. Demeke wanted a mix between old melodies and new ones that he has composed for the Kechene-based congregation,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 17

TEMESGEN

(THANKS TO GOD)

Traditional and modern Jewish songs in Amharic, including those that heretofore have been sung only in the community's "secret synagogues" during generations of their hidden existence.

Miseker (Witness)	traditional
B'Yerusalem (In Jerusalem)	traditional
Min Alu Dawit (What David Said)	traditional
Kiber New (It Is an Honor)	modern/ Demeke
Senbet L'yuna (Sabbath is Unique)	traditional
Temesgen (Thanks to God)	modern/ Demeke & Daniel
Zimare (Song)	modern/ Demeke
Tesfaye (My Hope)	modern/ Demeke & Daniel
B'beta Mekdes (Inside the Sanctuary)	traditional
Tizazu Yemayishar (His Holy Commandments)	modern/ Demeke & Daniel

Modern songs are composed in the traditional style by Demeke ben Engda and Daniel Desalegn Firku
 Singers are Demeke ben Engda (lead)
 with Hilina Engida, Haile Eshete, Ababu Endale & Fisiha Getaneh
 Arranged by Nebiyu Mulu Heada with Simagegne Samuel Kefesho, instrumentalist.
 Nebiyu Music Studio, Ethiopia; Lucy Y. Steinitz, Producer

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 For more information on the Beta Avraham ("Kechene") Community, see www.enszo.org

List of Songs. Back cover on the CD

and we agreed.* Demeke and Sintayehu Gezahegne, another member of the congregation, provided us with background information, which we could include on the insert to be included with every CD.

Getting everyone's green light:

We wanted to make sure that the CD project would not cause controversy among the community's elders (i.e. members of the older generation whose Jewish life still remains largely hidden from the outside world and revolves around the Secret Synagogues in Ethiopia's North Shewa area.) A delegation from the Kechene synagogue took off several days to visit at least five Secret Synagogues and reported that they had reached an understanding with the elders on many issues of common concern. Although the elders agreed to the making of the CD, there were problems when it came to designing the cover. One family feared being "outed" if their daughter's picture became public. Her headshot was part of the photograph that everyone wanted to use for the CD cover. Eventually, Bernd tried his hand at Photo-shop and replaced her portrait with mine. My friends now tell me that I look twenty years younger!

Next steps

On a recent trip to the USA, Bernd delivered the CD and cover images to Steve Corn of Big Fish Media, who had helped Kulanu with other CDs for uploading on various digital stores such as iTunes, Amazon and Spotify. We are hoping for the widest possible publicity with friends telling friends and online networking. But the best gift happened at the Shabbat service just before this article was completed. The service content had changed. Now, and hopefully into the future, Senbet L'yuna, a traditional Ethiopian melody, has replaced "Lecha Dodi".

Editors note: We all owe Lucy and Bernd a Kol Hakavod (congratulations) and special thanks for their dedication to the Kechene Jewish community and for their labor of love in creating this special CD. Thanks to Lucy as the birth mother and producer of the CD who labored over many months working with the leaders of the community to select songs and arrange for the recording. And thanks to Bernd for his overall support

of the project, his design of all pieces of the CD, and for the success of his banana bread in bringing these special melodies to our attention.

For more information about the Beta Avraham (also known as the Ethiopia North Shewa Zionist Organization), see www.enszo.org.

To purchase this CD, simply go to itunes.com or amazon.com and search for "Temesgen."

The CD is called Temesgen, which means "Thanks to God" and is subtitled "Worship Songs from Ethiopia's Beta Avraham Jewish Community". The songs on this CD come primarily from the Secret Synagogues, passed down from generation to generation with a sprinkling of original songs by Demeke. Fifteen of the secret synagogues still exist today concentrated in the North Shewa area about 80 miles north of Addis Ababa. Some are located in buildings; others are in caves located hours away by foot from the nearest town. In the largest of these, called Mugar, about 300 men and women live permanently, their numbers swelling at least twice a year when other community members join them to commemorate their martyrs and celebrate their festivals. As with other Ethiopian Jews, their tradition consists only of pre-Talmudic practices.

Although the Kechene community is not recognized by the State of Israel, in their songs, they yearn for Jerusalem and for Israel, the land of their ancestors. Demeke and Sintayehu explain that the traditional music on the CD, carries special significance and takes them spiritually to a different time and place. All the singers on the album remember their grandmothers and grandfathers singing these traditional songs in the Secret Synagogues.

**Only one song had ever been recorded before (by Irene Orlean-sky in her CD, "Music of Israelites and Jews of Africa and Asia"), so we decided to use the song, but to arrange it differently—Senbet L'yuna (Unique Sabbath).*

A Tribute to Bonita and Rabbi Gerald Sussman



Rabbanit Boni and Rabbi Gerald in India

This year Kulanu has chosen to honor Rabbanit Bonita and Rabbi Gerald Sussman, a power couple whose work with Kulanu has had a profound impact on Kulanu communities and on the mission of our organization. In the last four years, Boni and Rabbi Gerald have traveled to India, Cameroon, Nicaragua, and New Guinea on behalf of isolated and emerging Jewish communities. This year alone, they have visited Nicaragua a second time and plan to travel to Madagascar this summer. They are true pioneers and, one might say, holy *malachim* or messengers on behalf of Judaism. Where there are people who seek to learn about our faith, the Sussmans are there. When a community leader has needed access to Jewish education, they have responded; when a community has looked for Jewish books, a Torah, teachers, the Sussmans are on the front line. Together or separately, they continue to make an impact as they crisscross the world on Kulanu business.

Rabbanit Boni and Rabbi Gerald's association with Kulanu began seven years ago when they went for two weeks to visit the Bene Ephraim Jewish community in Andhra Pradesh, India. Today, Boni serves as a Kulanu vice president with special responsibilities for emerging Jewish communities. She is a whirlwind of activity with the energy of three people, always in motion, suggesting new projects, networking and assisting Kulanu communities on their spiritual journeys. Rabbi Gerald holds no formal title in Kulanu, but unstintingly gives his time, energy and Jewish learning to promote Kulanu's mission; he is a true partner in transmitting and spreading Judaism to communities abroad. Currently, he is serving as a spiritual advisor to the isolated community of Madagascar. He has not just accompanied Boni, but he has taken an active role in educating communities on Jewish law and ritual.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 19

There is no way to calculate the number of hours the Sussmans have contributed to building and strengthening Kulanu and extending its outreach efforts on behalf of isolated and emerging Jewish communities. The depth of their commitment to Judaism and on behalf of those who seek us out and ask for help on their journey to Judaism is immeasurable. Their names and reputation are legendary in many parts of the world.

After their visit to Cameroon in the summer of 2010, Serge Etele, leader of the Cameroon Jewish community, wrote to Kulanu, saying, "Thanks to God...our isolation is being broken. We are considering our future now with more hope." And from Sadok Jacobi of India came this recent message about the Sussmans: "We never forget their fellowship. Really we miss them. We send whole-hearted congratulations on behalf of the Bene Ephraim community."

And just this week a message from Kurt Preiss, president of Congregacion Israelita de Nicaragua, commenting on the impact of the Sussman's two visits to his country: "Rabbanit Boni and Rabbi Gerald Sussman will always have a very special place in our hearts and in our community. It is through their great efforts and mitzvahs that an extinct Nicaraguan Jewish community was born again."

It is clear that the Sussmans have created a lasting legacy for current and future generations of Jews both

in the United States and around the globe. They are passionate in their faith, generous in spirit and devoted to the spread of Judaism—and to our isolated and emerging Jewish communities, they are beloved. It is for all the above that Kulanu salutes Rabbanit Bonita and Rabbi Gerald Sussman as our honorees for 2014. JM

Please join us in honoring these two special people by contributing to an on-line ad journal to support Kulanu's important work. The journal will be sent on-line to thousands of Kulanu supporters around the world. Individuals and organizations may join together in purchasing space in the journal or go it alone. You may donate by mail or on-line.

To donate by mail, mail the form below with your contribution to:

Harriet Bograd, President, Kulanu, 165 West End Ave., 3R, New York, NY 10023, USA

To donate online, go to www.kulanu.org/tribute. In the comment field, please write "Sussman Tribute" followed by the text of your ad (limit 50 words). If you have any questions, or to send any images for your ad, use this link: [Katie Rosenthal](#)

I am pleased to honor Rabbanit Boni and Rabbi Gerald Sussman for their outstanding work on behalf of Kulanu. Enclosed is my contribution in this amount:

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Please contact us at www.kulanu.org/contact if we have missed your name or contribution and we will list you in the next magazine. Thanks!

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Mazel Tov and Todah Rabbah to Kulanu activist Joshua Uhlfelder who raised \$622 as his bar mitzvah project to support a Jewish community in Nicaragua.

Speaking Tour



Shoshanna Nambi
Photo by Hedy Cohen

Shoshanna Nambi, articulate community activist and public health educator and advocate, will be visiting the United States this fall from October 23 to November 24 on Kulanu's annual Abayudaya speaking tour. Shoshanna is a former youth leader, a knowledgeable participant in her local synagogue congregation and an administrator and field manager for organizations that address issues of public health. During her presentation, Shoshanna will talk about her personal story and her Abayudaya community and offer a fresh perspective on the role of women and the issues they face in a changing world.

Born in Kenya in 1988, Shoshanna lived in Mbale, Uganda as a child. When she moved to the home of her grandparents near Nabugoye Hill, the main Abayudaya Village, she began to study Hebrew as well as Jewish thought and ideas. A quick learner, she began teaching younger children on Shabbat mornings, while gaining facility in Hebrew, learning to read Torah, leading prayers in the synagogue and acting as an English translator for visitors. In 2006, she became a bat mitzvah, a highlight of her religious life.

Shoshanna is a graduate of Kampala International University with a degree in accounting and business management and the mother of a five year old who attends the Abuyadaya pre-school program. Today she works in the area of public health, both for RAIN-UGANDA, an organization that addresses previously unmet health needs for men and women of all faiths, and as a field manager for Aspire Global Health (AGH), working with foreign medical students at Busitema University Medical School and Mbale Regional Referral Hospital. AGH is devoted to improving health care delivery and outcomes for patients around the world.

For more information on Shoshanna and to find out how your community can host Shoshanna during her speaking tour, please see the Kulanu web site, www.kulanu.org and contact speakers@kulanu.org.

Letter from the President

Dear Friends,

I am often asked how big Kulanu is, how many people are involved in our organization? I never know how to answer that question. But each year we publish in our blog a list of the people we do know who have helped promote Kulanu's work in the past year - I think of it as something like the scrolling credits that we watch at the end of a movie. I just counted the number of people listed this year, and it was well over 100! We invite you to look at the list <http://tinyurl.com/kulanucredits2013>.

And what about our staff?

Though Kulanu is primarily a volunteer-run organization, we are blessed with wonderful part-time staff members who help make things run smoothly.

As of the end of March, Kulanu said GOODBYE to Justina Shaw, who had served as Programming and Development Coordinator since the spring of 2013. We thank Justina for the great work she did for Kulanu and wish her well in her new endeavors, now based in Washington, DC.

We are thrilled to say WELCOME to Katie Rosenthal, who has worked for Kulanu off and on since December 2007. Katie has agreed to return as Programming and Development Coordinator two days a week. Katie left us last spring to pursue her passions of holistic health and yoga. The Programming and Development Coordinator helps manage fundraising, our web site, emails, social media, speaking tours, and volunteer recruiting.

And a THANKS and SHOUT OUT to Jerry Krasny, Kulanu's part-time Bookkeeping and Database Coordinator, who continues to make life easier for all of us in the office, helping with all sorts of management tasks. Jerry is in the office Mondays and Wednesdays from 12-5 pm and also works from home.

HELP!

Donate Your Used Kindle Device, Smartphone, Camera, or Laptop

Ever since the US Post Office quadrupled its book rates in 2006, it has become increasingly difficult for us to send large quantities of books abroad. We are now exploring the sending of used Kindles and other



The Home Team. Harriet Bograd, back center, with from the left Justina Shaw and Katie Rosenthal. Jerry Krasny is in front

devices. Are you getting a new Kindle or tablet or iPad? Did you know that if you have many books on your Kindle device and you upgrade to a newer model, you are able to donate all your books to a new owner? All you have to do is de-register your Kindle from Amazon, turn off wi-fi, and send it to Kulanu. So long as we don't register the Kindle to a new account, we can keep all your books. To transport a kindle is much easier than sending a carton of books.

We also welcome:

- **Phones:** donations of working unlocked quad band smartphones. More of our communities now have access to cell phone charging stations, and some have access to wifi – so these phones can be very useful. The phones must accept a SIM card.
- **Cameras:** digital cameras in good condition, 5 megapixels or more.
- **Laptops:** Windows XP or newer in good condition, at least 1 GB RAM.

To donate any of these, please contact us first at kulanu.org/contact and describe what you are offering, and we'll send more instructions.

Thank you,

Harriet

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

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Two Celebrations in El Paso



Rabbi Stephen Leon of El Paso, Texas

Anusim* Conference

The 11th annual Anusim conference will take place this year in El Paso, Texas from August 8-10 at Congregation B'nai Zion, 85 Cherry Hill Lane. Conference highlights will include presentations by David Gitlitz, author of *Secrecy and Deceit* and *Drizzle with Honey*, two of the classic books about the history of the Anusim; Rabbi Daniel Mehlman who has worked with Crypto-Jews around the globe; Corinne Joy Brown, author, free lance writer, and vice-president of The Society for Crypto-Jewish Studies, and Gabe Galambos, whose novel *The Nation by the River* about the Anusim focuses on Crypto-Jews in the Azores.

Conference co-chairs are Kulanu board member Rabbi Stephen Leon and artist/activist Sonya Loya. Joseph Lovett, whose film "Children of the Inquisition," is currently in production, will serve as honorary co-chair.

During this year's conference, The Sephardic Anusim Cultural Heritage Resource Center (SACJRC) will be dedicated. The building, located on the site of the former El Paso Holocaust Museum at 401 Wallenburg Avenue, will be part museum, part research facility. It also will be a place where individuals can seek answers to their Jewish ancestry questions and explore a return to the Jewish people. Displays will be devoted to the Spanish Inquisition, with emphasis on the Crypto-Jewish experience and on those descendants of Spanish Jewry who have returned to Judaism.

For further information on the conference or the dedication, please contact Rabbi Leon at [915-526-3693](tel:915-526-3693) or rabbisal@aol.com

*Anusim or Anousim are the descendants of forced converts from Judaism to Catholicism starting in 15th Century Spain and Portugal. They are also called Marranos, New Christians, Conversos or Crypto-Jews.