



# KULANU

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## *Where Have All the Torahs Gone? The Journey of the Seven Kulanu Torah Scrolls*

*by Bonita Nathan Sussman*

Rabbi Marvin Tokayer in his book, *Pepper, Silk and Ivory*, describes the search for the thirteen missing Torah scrolls from the Kaifeng community in China. He writes: "The mystery surrounding some of the thirteen Torah scrolls from the Kaifeng synagogue continues. One Torah scroll was reported to have been used to make trousers for some Chinese ladies, there are rumors that another Chinese Torah scroll from Kaifeng may be hidden in the mosque in Kaifeng.... Knowing that Southern Methodist University's questions about the Torah in their library finally were answered allows us to hope that the remaining questions



Photo courtesy of Daneel Schaechter

*Daneel and several members of Bnei Avraham Community in São Paulo*

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about all of the Chinese Torah scrolls from the synagogue in Kaifeng will have answers someday, too." (Rabbi Marvin Tokayer and Ellen Rodman; *Pepper, Silk and Ivory*; p.75)

Inspired by Rabbi Tokayer's search for the Kaifeng Torah scrolls, I felt the need to tell the story of the seven Torah scrolls that I have been involved with distributing throughout the world to Kulanu's returning, emerging and isolated Jewish communities so that, for the record, no one can ask with uncertainty, "Where have all the Torah scrolls gone?"

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There are two parts to this story: Two Torah scrolls were donated to Kulanu by Congregation Sons of Israel, Astoria, Queens, after they merged with Congregation Adath Israel, and kept in storage for years by Rabbi Joseph Prouser in the Little Neck Jewish Center, also in Queens. Five Torah scrolls were donated to Kulanu by Congregation Kehillat Jeshurun (CKJ) in New York after their accidental four alarm fire on July 11, 2011. The Torahs we received from CKJ were water-damaged to different degrees in the fire. They were in the CKJ *genizah* (the place in synagogues where holy writings and scriptures are placed to be buried since they are no longer useful). Rabbi Elie Weinstock, assistant rabbi to CKJ, donated the five Torahs as well as a pair of tefillin to us.

One issue which needs to be put on the table before I share this story concerns whether a community that has not undergone conversion be given a Torah at all. This is a debatable question as there are halachic issues and implications involved. As with all halachic questions, there are many opinions, including “of course not” and “of course yes” and everything in between. In the final analysis, Kulanu has taken the stance that emerging, returning and isolated communities should receive Torah scrolls for educational purposes, communal growth and understanding, and communal respectability and acceptance.

First a word on Torahs that are *pasul*, or what I prefer to call ‘Torah scrolls that need correction.’ Predating my time on the Kulanu board, the general consensus was that if we give away Torahs, then we must give them in perfectly-corrected states. This was a great expense which we could not really afford and helps explain part of the reason that the Torah scrolls in Little Neck Jewish Center remained untouched and not distributed for years.

A few things changed this. First, I joined the board and maintained that Jewish communities throughout time and space have had to deal with their Torah scrolls that needed correction. Some have danced with them on Simchat Torah, others have kissed them and let the letters penetrate their souls, while some have buried them in the cemeteries. Yet others have felt it was better to read from a Torah scroll that needed correction than to read from a printed book. I contended that it is up to each community to decide what they would do with their Torah scrolls; as long



Photo by Yakov Zamir

*Ashrey of Madagascar*

as we were honest and not misleading, and told them the truth, then it would not be a problem.

Second, we began to price *sofrim* (those who know scribal arts and correct the Torah scrolls). They vary in price and what seemed to be more eye-opening was that the opinions of what constituted a “kosher Torah scroll” varied from scribe to scribe. In the end, we used Rabbi Yehuda Klapman, a Chabad *sofer* from Brooklyn, New York, to correct two of our scrolls because his price was reasonable.

And finally, once word got out that an Orthodox synagogue of prominence, Congregation Kehillat

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Photo by Bonita Nathan Sussman

*Rabbi Gerald Sussman, in Danite robes, and community members receiving the Torah*

Jeshurun (CKJ), located on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, donated their Torah scrolls to Kulanu to distribute among Kulanu's returning, emerging and isolated communities around the world, the discussion ended.

On December 12, 2013, I went to Congregation Kehillat Jeshurun to pick up five of the Torahs. It was a horribly rainy, wintry day in New York City so the transfer from the synagogue to my car happened without much fanfare, save for a few women who were picking up their children by the entrance of the shul who were so excited to watch the transfer. Five Torahs wrapped in tallitot were squeezed into the back seat of my Honda Fit and strapped in. Nervously, I drove back to my home on Staten Island with the Jewish treasures in the back seat. The Torah scrolls were going to be temporarily housed (until their distribution) at Temple Emanu-El of Staten Island, New York, where my husband, Gerald Sussman, is the rabbi.

The next task was to decide which communities were going to get them. I approached Kulanu's board members, of which I am one, and asked them to submit names of communities which they knew about that either needed or requested a Torah scroll. The conditions were that the community had the ability to read from it and store it properly and safely. Coincidentally or *besheit*, depending on your point of view, we received an email from someone in the Dominican Republic who was looking to

procure a Torah scroll. It was a new community that we had never dealt with before. The board came up with Madagascar, Nigeria, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Brazil and Zimbabwe and, of course, the Dominican Republic if it fit the requirements.

This is the story of how these seven Torahs were distributed, who brought them, and how they were carried on planes, as well as how the celebrations of *Hachnasat Sefer Torahs* (receiving the Torahs) took place. Of the two that were

corrected because the price was reasonable and/or private donors donated money, one went to Nigeria and the other is stored in Israel in the home of Dr. Jack Zeller, a founder of Kulanu, who is presenting it to the Lemba community on the opening of the synagogue in Mapakomhere, Zimbabwe. The construction is being partly funded by Kulanu.

Stored in my home were old Torah covers from a local Staten Island synagogue known as the Wright Street shul. It had closed many years ago and was sold to a church. Some of the Torah scrolls were dressed in these old velvet covers with heavy embroidery that came in many rich colors of deep red, golden yellow and blue.

The quotations in this story come from emails sent to me by the people who carried these Torahs to their destinations. I had asked them the following questions: How did you transport the Torah scrolls? How did the communities receive it? What were your feelings in doing it? Was there anything else that was noteworthy that I should include in the telling of the story?

Chronologically, the first Torah, one that was stored in the Little Neck Jewish Center for many years and corrected by Rabbi Yehuda Klapman, was taken to Israel by Ilene and Charlie Greinsky in August 2011. They are friends of my husband and mine who were going to Israel for one of their many visits.

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Photo by Castillo Castro

*Yehonatan Elazar from the Dominican Republic receiving the Torah for his community in a ceremony under the chupa at the home of Harriet Bograd in New York*

In his email, Charlie wrote, “We carried the Torah scroll in a tallis onto the airplane and placed it in the overhead bin. It certainly was a thrilling and moving experience. This was only second in a religious/spiritual sense of our many trips to Israel. Our nephew’s bar mitzvah at the height of the second Intifada of July/August 2001 ranks number one as it was family...Carrying the Torah scroll off the plane made us think of the thousands of years we as a people have survived. Our thoughts and words to each other were of amazement that we were bringing our faith through our homeland (Israel) to new lands (Zimbabwe) just as Moses led us. We thought of our parents (all deceased then) and how proud they would be of our mission...People in the walkway of the plane and on our way to meet our contact, Jack Zeller, kissed our Torah scroll, all classes of Jews from ultra-Orthodox to the secular. We felt so proud of being Jewish and the small part we were playing in the delivery of this Torah to the next generation of our people.”

The second Torah was given to Rabbi Yehonatan Elazar-DeMota of Beth Midrash Nidhe Israel, located in the Dominican Republic, on July 2, 2013 at the home of Harriet Bograd, President of Kulanu,

in a grand celebration. My husband, Rabbi Gerald Sussman, and I transported the Torah, again in the backseat of my Honda Fit, to Harriet’s home on the Upper West Side of New York. A group of Hispanic friends from Cuba, Columbia, the Dominican Republic and elsewhere, either in the process of conversion to Judaism or having already been converted, sang and danced with the Torah that was presented to Yehonatan Elazar under a chuppah made of a kente cloth tallit from Ghana.

Yehonatan explained, “I transported the Sefer

Torah on the overhead bin on a direct flight from New York to Santo Domingo on JetBlue. Once I arrived to the Beth Midrash, I inspected the entire scroll and began performing repairs by retouching the non-legible letters. About two weeks later, we met on a Shabbat and had a guest from Israel who witnessed our celebration with the Torah. Today, we meet to read the Torah mainly on the holidays, and on some Shabbatot and some fast days. The Torah is used between two of my communities: the capital and La Romana.”

The third Torah was brought to the Beth Yeshourun community in the town of Sa’a in Cameroon by a friend of Kulanu who wants to remain anonymous. Harriet Bograd and I met him in a kosher South Indian restaurant in New York City on his way to Cameroon and handed him the Torah.

Mr. Anonymous wrote, “It was supposed to be carry-on, but they actually wouldn’t let me do it that way at the last minute. Gasp! So I told the guy it was extremely fragile, put it in a very long duffel bag, and padded it with clothes and other soft materials. Thank G-d it got there OK--not a

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Photo by Aron Charles Kono

*Serge Etele receiving the Torah in Cameroon*

scratch. We took it to the village in the trunk of the car, unwrapped it before coming up the road to Serge's house (the leader of the community), and he walked up to meet the community with it. They sang and were very joyous. It was a beautiful moment."

The fourth Torah was brought to Madagascar by Yakov Zamir, also known as Peter Terry. Yakov, a professional opera singer and a convert to Judaism himself, contacted Kulanu asking about our Jewish connections in Madagascar as he was going there to live for a while with his new Malagasy wife. Yakov offered to teach about Judaism. Having spent eight years in Israel on an attempted aliyah with his first wife and having sung with the Beit Knesset HaGadol choir in Jerusalem, I thought he was the perfect volunteer to help organize and develop the emerging Jewish community in Madagascar.

On his way to Madagascar, Yakov stopped at a friend's house in Woodmere, Long Island, New York, where my husband and I met him for the first time and gave him the Torah scroll. This time we tried something new. We bubble-wrapped the Torah and put it in a

large duffel bag which he carried. This seemed to be the best and most sensible solution. We did not know at the time that it did not meet standard dimensions. Despite this, the airlines allowed him to check it in as extra baggage. Yakov said that it was much too long and fat to be stowed above his seat so it went with baggage. The elders of the community came to his apartment a few days after he arrived in Antananarivo, picked up the Sefer Torah and took some photographs with each of those present. Yakov reported that they were very happy. It is now housed in the only synagogue in the capital city of Madagascar. Yakov said, "I felt honored to present the Sefer Torah to this community. It represented their first step towards

international recognition as Jews."

The fifth Torah went to Abuja, Nigeria. Volunteer David Tobis had led an energetic fundraising effort to repair and transport this Torah. Rabbi Barry Dolinger from Congregation Beth Sholom in Providence, Rhode Island, explained the process, writing "I picked up the Torah from Judith Manelis, past editor of the Kulanu Magazine and retired board member, and her husband; they had been storing the Torah in their apartment. We were flying to Abuja, Nigeria, by way of Paris on Air France. After carefully wrapping the Torah in layers of bubble-wrap to protect it and placing it in a garment bag, I approached the check-in counter at Air France. I told the guard that, though it exceeded the travel dimensions for carry-on luggage, we were hoping the airline would let us carry the Torah on the airplane due to its financial but also religious value. I told him that it was a scroll containing the Five Books of Moses, known as a Sefer Torah, written in the ancient scribal tradition on parchment. He jokingly asked if we had heard of the invention of the printing

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press, as books are much lighter and easier to transport. I then explained that this was an ancient religious tradition. The agent then contacted his superior, who arrived to speak with us. 'I'm sorry, but we don't make exceptions,' the superior complained. Then, the original agent, Mohammed, spoke up, 'Sir, these are my Jewish cousins, and I was hoping you would do them a favor, not just for them but for me. It's important to me.' 'Well, alright, I guess we can find some space and do you the favor,' the supervisor replied. Phew. Then, just as we finished checking in our luggage, Mohammed inquired: 'You two are Orthodox Jews, the kind that oppose the State of Israel right?' 'It's complicated,' I replied. We are, in fact, Orthodox Jews, but support the state. 'Have a good day!' And we ran off.

"Next, we brought the Torah through security. The security guards were quite respectful, fearing that any kind of insult to the object would be both insensitive and perhaps a bad omen. We were asked to unwrap the Torah, though, as the scan had yielded biological material (presumably the parchment). After a heavy effort to unwrap and rewrap the Torah, it was on to the airplane.

"On the first leg of the trip, we were actually able to fit the Sefer Torah in the overhead compartment, to our pleasant surprise. After disembarking, we again had to check the Torah through French security for the second leg of our trip from Paris to Abuja. They were more comfortable with the Torah, actually, and had fewer questions. There was no room on the airplane, however, and we were not sure what we would be able to do. Kindly, one of the stewardesses cleared out her locker and allowed us to use it to store the Torah during the flight. To be honest, we were quite nervous at first about how we would transport the Torah. We were, however, extremely and pleasantly surprised with how incredibly deferential, kind, and respectful everyone was throughout the entire process.

"Then we landed in Abuja; there were long lines and mandatory health screenings from World Health Organization officials as the Ebola epidemic was



Photo Courtesy of Rabbi Barry Dolinger  
*Rabbi Barry Dolinger on his way to Nigeria*

nearing its height. As we began to wait on the long lines, power to the airport went out (rolling blackouts in Nigeria for those who have electrical power are a regular experience). I then began an almost two hour process of trying to hold the Sefer Torah, not wanting to put it on the floor, as we waiting on the lines. Towards the end, my strength gave out, and I had to stand the Torah up against the wall.

"In Nigeria, the Igbo Jewish communities of the Abuja federal region and some from the Igboland joined in a joint celebration to welcome the Torah at Sar Habakuk's compound. That morning (it was a Thursday), several boys were called to the Torah during morning services in the synagogue, as they celebrated their turning bar mitzvah, and there was one bat mitzvah as well. With joy, enthusiasm, tears,

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and exuberance, they welcomed the Torah into the Aron Kodesh they had built for it.

“After services, a large ceremonial feast was made for the arrival of the Torah. This featured dancing and music, a cola nut ceremony (the traditional Igbo ceremony), and several speeches and presentations. I taught briefly about the sanctity of the Torah. Since there’s a strong tendency among Nigerian communities to venerate ritual objects, I reminded them that the Torah is primarily to be read and studied (and of course honored), but not only or merely venerated as some kind of omen or relic. Significantly, Uriel Palti, the Israeli ambassador to Nigeria, and Professor Jeffrey Davidson, a professor at Queens University in Ontario, joined us for the Torah’s reception. Ambassador Palti expressed great emotion, thanking the Igbo and Nigerians for their support of the State of Israel against terrorism, and sympathizing with their fight against corruption and the Boko Haram. He led in the singing of Hatikvah, Am Yisrael Chai, and then leined (read) the week’s Torah portion (unscripted, without preparation), with tears in his eyes.

“Throughout the entire (surreal) experience, my wife and I felt joy and the contagious elation of the people. They were truly overjoyed in an overwhelming and whole sort of way, and it was a powerful reminder of the strength and beauty of our holy tradition.”

The sixth Torah went to Abidjan, Cote d’Ivoire. This is the Torah scroll that my husband and I carried to Abidjan in the summer of 2014. Professor Marla Brettschneider, of the University of New Hampshire, accompanied us on the journey to Cote d’Ivoire, Cameroon and Gabon.

The Torah scroll was very long, as they come in different sizes, and we had difficulty finding a duffel bag that could carry it properly. After searching in several stores we finally found one. We had no problems in transporting it because we checked it with the luggage. We had a twelve-hour stopover in Casablanca and were afraid to take it with us on the tour we had planned, so it stayed in baggage. Once we got to Abidjan and delivered it to Alexandre Zouko,

the head of the community in Abidjan, he kept it all wrapped up in the room we had to *daven* (pray) in. We were shocked when we unwrapped it; one of the wooden roller arms had broken off! Oy! Alexandre promised to repair it. A big celebration of Hachnasat Sefer Torah followed. A lot of people attended including some of the Danites, people who consider themselves descendants of the tribe of Dan. We wore our Danite robes and carried the Sefer Torah in with much singing and dancing and joy. The videos of the celebrations are on Kulanu’s YouTube channel ([www.youtube.com/kulanuvideo](http://www.youtube.com/kulanuvideo)).

The seventh Torah went to Bnei Avraham in Sao Paulo, Brazil, carried by Daneel Schaechter, a Kulanu board member. Daneel said, “It was well-wrapped in a duffel bag and checked on my American Airlines flight. The Torah-receiving service was phenomenal, extremely emotional, filled with singing and crying.” Daneel added, “...(it was) one of the most moving experiences (of my life)...There are so many unused Sifrei Torahs (Torah scrolls) in the world and so many communities who would never be able to afford one, even a pasul one (one that needs correction) means the world to them.”

In a way, my story ends like Rabbi Tokayer’s. There is still another half of this story which remains a mystery and that is how did the seven Torah scrolls come to their respective congregations in the United States to begin with. Was one of them carried on shipboard by a pious Eastern European Jew who was coming to America to make a new life but at the same time bringing his traditions with him? Was one written by a sofer (scribe) in Poland before the Holocaust, not imagining the terrible fate which would sweep up both him and his community, leaving the Torah scroll sent to America as a witness to a vanished way of life? Perhaps a stretch, but could one of these Torahs be a lost scroll from China and no one had the expertise to determine if it had the unique characteristics of a Kaifeng Torah? That is a story for another time!

*\*Anyone who has access to a Torah that you would like to donate to a Jewish community which we work with, please contact Kulanu at [www.kulanu.org/contact](http://www.kulanu.org/contact).*

# ***Matchmaker, Matchmaker Make Me a Match: Kulanu as Yente***

***by Harriet Bograd, New York***



Photo courtesy of Serge Etele

*Serge Etele, the Leader of Beth Yeshourun of Cameroon and Rabbi Stuart Fischman  
in Yeshiva in Efrat*

The Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, Shavei Israel, Masorti Olami, Brandeis Collegiate Institute, Tufts University Hillel, Ohr Torah Stone Yeshiva, Union for Reform Judaism: what in the world do these organizations have in common? They represent a few of the many partnerships and sustaining connections that Kulanu has helped "our" communities to forge in the last twenty-one years.

Kulanu began as a small organization and has purposely remained that way. We have only two paid part-time staff. As full-time president, I am a volunteer, along with our devoted board members and regional coordinators. Observers have been surprised that we work so effectively with communities throughout the world with so few paid personnel. As more and more communities have reached out to us, how have we maintained our support without becoming larger and escalating our overhead--for example, by increasing our paid workforce or moving to bigger quarters from our home office? The answer is due in great part to the

network of friends and resources that we have helped communities to build.

We see Kulanu as an "incubator" or "gateway" organization. Once we get to know a community (typically through visitors, volunteers, and correspondence), we help the rest of the world learn about it (through our web site, magazine, social media, speaking tours, and other publicity, and by encouraging community leaders to do their own networking). We then work with the community members to identify goals to meet their needs. But rather than addressing these objectives on our own, we prefer to help the community connect with other resources. We believe that the most beneficial tactic is to encourage community leaders to create and develop relationships with other organizations. These organizations can help the community attain their goals and, perhaps just as importantly, allow access to connections and supporters beyond the scope of Kulanu alone.

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Photo courtesy of Art Spar

*Art Spar and Aaron Kintu Moses at Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs Conference in Miami*

We have learned that in most cases a crucial step in this process is access to the internet, including email and Facebook. These are essential to community members for online Jewish learning, as well as for finding resources and making friends around the world. Kulanu's technology fund provides a laptop and funds for internet connection to communities that cannot afford these tools. Volunteer Sarapage Podolsky, an electrical engineer in Carmiel, Israel, represents a vital resource to help community leaders determine which hardware and internet plans best meet their needs with a modest budget. She takes into account how often there are blackouts (not unusual in third-world communities), whether the laptop user has electricity in the home, and whether the internet will continue to work when the electricity goes off. Significantly, she teaches local people to use spreadsheets to analyze various options and choose the best plan.

We also help communities help themselves by connecting with Jewish religious movements. The most striking example concerns the Abayudaya community of Uganda, a group that has been practicing Judaism for generations since 1919. In 2002, we arranged for a group of Conservative rabbis to conduct conversion rituals to affirm the Jewish

identity of community members. Since then, the Conservative movement has embraced the Abayudaya. With help from Be'chol Lashon (a California-based organization that promotes Jewish diversity, to whom we introduced the community), American Jewish University, and Shomrei Torah Synagogue, Abayudaya spiritual leader Gershom Sizomu attended Ziegler Rabbinical School in Los Angeles. In 2008, Rabbi Sizomu was ordained and he returned to Uganda as a full member of the Rabbinical Assembly.

Since then, the Conservative international group, Masorti Olami, supported an Abayudaya outpost in Kampala called Marom

Uganda. Students, university graduates, and other Jews living in Kampala gather on Friday nights for services and meals. Another outstanding example of our teamwork occurred last year at the annual Kulanu-supported Abayudaya Women's Conference. After the idea surfaced of having a similar group for men, I introduced Aaron Kintu Moses, headmaster of the Abayudaya elementary school, to a leader of the Conservative Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs (FJMC). This year Aaron was able to attend the FJMC national conference, all expenses paid, as a speaker, workshop leader, and active learner. One FJMC region committed itself to an ongoing partnership with the Abayudaya Men's Club.

We have developed connections with the Reform branch of Judaism, too. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, Kulanu's coordinator for Guatemala, has assisted the Adat Israel community of Guatemala City to gain recognition from the Reform movement. Jeannette Orantes, president of Adat Israel, has been invited to the biennial conference of Women of Reform Judaism to take place soon in Florida. The conference will connect Adat Israel with a huge international organization advocating for Jewish

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Photo courtesy of Yehudah Kimani

*Children in Kenya Jewish community use computer donated by Kulanu*

women. This will be an extraordinary opportunity for Jeannette to move the women of the community forward as decision makers, leaders, and activists and to bring back music, ideas, and spiritual growth to her community. The movement is paying airfare and registration, while Kulanu is helping with hotel and meals.

Kulanu has had a remarkable partnership with Brandeis Collegiate Institute, run by American Jewish University in California. Since 2012, ten outstanding young people from “our” communities--two from China, four from Uganda, two from Zimbabwe, and two from Guatemala--have participated in a month-long program that enhances Jewish identity and learning. Before and after the program, these potential Jewish leaders have traveled around the US, enjoying the hospitality of friends of Kulanu and spreading goodwill. BCI pays airfare and all program expenses, while Kulanu and former Kulanu BCI participants help coach the students through visa applications, health inoculations, and travel planning. Kulanu pays for extra costs not covered by BCI. This has been a life-changing experience for participants who return to their communities with skills, knowledge, and enthusiasm to share, and with a network of new friends and allies around the world, and special

friendships with young people in other Kulanu communities.

Kulanu has another rewarding association with Tufts University Hillel. Rabbi Jeffrey Summit has taken on responsibility for raising \$50,000 per year for the Abayudaya community’s higher education program. Thanks to stipends from his program, a multitude of impoverished students have been able to attend university to prepare for better futures. Though his involvement with the Abayudaya started independently of Kulanu, he reports that his partnership with Kulanu has been a great

support in sustaining his work and thinking about how best to proceed.

Through the years, Kulanu has not only encouraged

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Photo courtesy of Rabbi Elyse Goldstein

*Jeannette Orantes, leader of the Adat Israel Jewish community in Guatemala City, and Rabbi Elyse Goldstein at the WRJ (Women of Reform Judaism) Assembly 2015*





Photo courtesy of Yehudah Kimani

*Meylekh Viswanath visits Ol Kalou Jewish Community near Kasuku, Kenya*

other groups to get involved, but even to take over the work that Kulanu has initiated. For several years, for example, Kulanu sent Rabbi Aaron Rehberg, a young rabbi from Israel, to the small emerging community of Armenia, El Salvador. During that time Rabbi Rehberg established a program of daily services, beit midrash independent study, and a Hebrew school for children. Shavei Israel, an Israeli organization with larger financial resources, then stepped in and now sends an emissary rabbi from Mexico for two weeks a month to work in Armenia and San Salvador, the capital. Continuing on this theme, we cannot forget Ohr Torah Stone Yeshiva in Israel, founded by esteemed Rabbi Shlomo Riskin. Rabbi Riskin has provided advanced Jewish learning to Serge Etele, leader of the Beth Yeshourun community in Cameroon, hopefully leading to his eventual rabbinical ordination.

Many of our communities in poor countries lack essential services and seek opportunities for economic development. Though on occasion Kulanu works with a community in one of these areas, we prefer to empower community leaders to reach out to other sources for help in obtaining important building blocks for development, including clean water, electricity, better farming methods, and micro-credit services. Among a host of volunteers who have mentored community leaders in finding

resources in these areas are current volunteers Meylekh Viswanath, professor of finance at Pace University with a specialty in microfinance (who recently visited our community in Kenya), and Peter Persoff, a sanitary engineer who works with leaders in Uganda on water issues. New volunteers with expertise in these areas are always welcome.

Since its founding, Kulanu has been blessed with a cadre of skilled and caring teachers and other volunteers, too numerous to mention in a brief article, who have visited communities worldwide at their own expense. We owe them a tremendous debt of gratitude for making a difference to isolated and emerging communities around the globe. Many others would like to help, but do not have the money for travel. Likewise, community leaders lack funds for travel that would benefit their own and other communities. Donating funds specified for travel will help community leaders take advantage of opportunities like the ones we have documented in this article. Do you have frequent flyer miles you can donate? That would be a tremendous mitzvah. Finally, please introduce your own organization to Kulanu and get in touch with the leaders of our far-flung communities. We and they would love to hear from you!

## Kulanu Notes



Photo courtesy of Hugo Fernandes

### Young Leaders Network

On August 26th we held a dessert party with Ugandan visitors Yoash Mayende, Sarah Nabagala, and Shoshannah Nambi during their visit to New York after their summer camp activities. We used the occasion to begin discussions of what a Kulanu Young Leaders Network (20s/30s) would look like and what it could bring to Kulanu. If you or someone you know are interested in joining, please contact Evan Davidoff, our Program & Development Coordinator, at <http://kulanu.org/contact>.

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### Torah Ceremony

On August 30th, Kulanu joined Temple Emanuel of North Jersey as Rabbi Joseph Prouser presented a Torah to the Abayudaya Jewish village of Nasenyi, Uganda. Four young Abayudaya were able to visit Franklin Lakes, NJ for a big celebration, and then Yoash Mayende carried the Torah home. This had special meaning to Kulanu's president, Harriet Bograd, because this was her childhood congregation. See [www.NorthJersey.com](http://www.NorthJersey.com), "Franklin Lakes temple makes gift of Torah for Ugandan Jews" by Marina Villanueva, August 30, 2015.



Photo by E. Chaya Weinstein

Link to photo album: <http://tinyurl.com/AbayudayaTorahCeremony>

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### **Volunteers in Zimbabwe**

Nili B'Simcha and Rabbi Keith Flaks of Israel traveled to Zimbabwe in April to celebrate Pesach (Passover) with the Lemba Jewish community. See Nili's article in the Jewish Journal here: <http://tinyurl.com/PassoverinZimbabwe>.

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### **The Feinbergs in Zimbabwe**

See Mickey and Mordy Feinberg's fascinating blog about their second month-long stay last August at the Harare Lemba Synagogue in Zimbabwe at <http://tinyurl.com/FeinbergBlog>, and their beautiful photos at <http://tinyurl.com/FeinbergZimbabwePhotos>.



Photo courtesy of Mordy Feinberg



### **Tribute to Daneel Schaechter**

Daneel Schaechter of New York, NY, is Kulanu's youngest board member and our Regional Coordinator for Latin America. His many accomplishments in the Jewish, Anousim/Crypto-Jewish, and Latin American worlds are impressive, and we are proud to be honoring him this year. You can view the tribute journal at <http://tinyurl.com/DaneelSchaechterTribute>.



# ***Ephraim's People And Me: Connected By Traditions And Love***

***by Judi Kloper, Corvallis, Oregon***

December 2014:

I stepped off a small plane in Vijayawada, India, in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, and walked into the tiny airport building while our luggage was unloaded. Though I'd been traveling to India for 28 years, and had even been to this area a number of times over the past ten years, I had no idea what was awaiting me. I was obviously the only foreigner, the only one who had no one to talk to as we waited patiently. I scanned the crowd outside the door, those who were waiting for their loved ones to get their luggage and come outside. Right there at the entrance was a face I'd seen just a couple of times in someone's blog online: Sadok Yacobi. Thus began my stay with the Bene Ephraim community in the village of Kottareddypalem, an hour away.

"What led you to do this?" people always ask me. Why would someone leave the comforts of a western lifestyle for remote village life where most people do not have electricity, where running water and plumbing (including toilets) are practically non-existent, and where there's no basic comforts and conveniences that we're accustomed to? No washing machine, no sofa or overstuffed chair to sit on, no oven, not a lot of privacy. Internet? Not always available or consistent. What really did draw me to this experience, I still ask myself.

Finding myself with time to do what I'd wanted to do for a very long time, and a desire to go beyond my comfort zone, I began searching the internet for a Jewish organization which would reflect my view on Tikkun Olam and offer opportunities to work overseas with people of any faith, anywhere. One click led to another, and to another, and many clicks later (hours and pages of websites later), one particular website caught my eye and interest. KULANU, it said on top, All of Us...and a description of its mission: "...works around the world to support isolated and emerging Jewish communities..." This,



Photo by Judi Kloper

*Judi with children of a Bene Ephraim family*

I thought, could be something I am interested in. After spending about ninety minutes looking at the website and skimming some of the articles and newsletters, I called the office in New York City and spoke to Kulanu's president, Harriet Bograd. That was in August 2014, and almost immediately my decision was made: I would leave in November for India and, along with my travels and volunteering with organizations related to the non-profit work I'd been doing in the past, I would volunteer in a Jewish community that just days earlier I hadn't

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Photo by Judi Kloper

*Beulah with her son Ryan and her mom Miriam*

even known existed. Sure, I knew about the three or four other Jewish communities in India (Bene Yisrael, Bene Menashe, Cochini, and the Calcutta/Delhi/Mumbai Iraqi Jews), but even though I had traveled to Andhra Pradesh a number of times for work and volunteering, and the young man (and his family) who I've been sponsoring for eight years lives there, the thought that there are possibly Jews who live there never crossed my mind. Once I made that decision, my to-do list increased and I began preparing for my journey of a lifetime.

From a few emails exchanged with Sadok, the leader of the Bene Ephraim, I learned which Judaica items the Bene Ephraim needed and wanted: siddurim, yarmulkes, Havdalah candles, tallitot, children's texts and curriculum, Hagaddahs, Tanakh, and Hebrew dictionaries, to name just a few. After I sent emails requesting items to my own synagogue's list-serve, I received numerous donations from our members as well as donations from Kulanu. In fact, the response was amazing. I brought two 50-pound suitcases filled with books and supplies with me.

So there I was, having finally arrived at the Vijayawada airport, being welcomed by Sadok. He'd hired a car and driver to pick me up and we traveled for an hour through the dry and crowded

cities of Vijayawada and Guntur and the little towns and villages in between. I remember looking out the window pensively, while Bollywood music played up front. My thoughts were all-encompassing: Do I know what I'm getting into? Never mind... it doesn't matter. There's no turning back now, I thought to myself as I watched the lives of these people unfold before me while I sat in the back seat, mesmerized by it all. Will I have my own sleeping space? Will I have a shower? What kind of food will I eat? I was quite familiar with what life was like for so many Indians, and I was about to find out exactly what kind of life I would soon be living.

Kottareddypalem is a village less than a mile from the crowded tiny town of Chebrole, twenty-five minutes from the little city of Guntur. Its residents are of the low-caste Madiga, and many of them, women and children especially, work in the fields. People live simply and their lives are difficult. Some live in homes of thatched roofs and sides, and others have concrete walls and thatched roofs.

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Photo by Judi Kloper

*Jacob working at his small farm on rented acreage*



Most people do not have water; there is a community pump that the government controls so that only twice a day can people (usually the girls or women of a family) line up to fill their buckets. There's what appears to be a stagnant river that runs through the village and at any time of the day one might observe people washing their clothes there, washing themselves, washing their dishes, washing their autorickshaws, and washing their buffalo. Sometimes children are swimming and playing in it. People relieve themselves nearby.

Very few cars travel these unpaved streets, but most people do ride bicycles or motorcycles, and there are occasional autorickshaws that carry passengers to and from Chebrole. Lots of the villagers walk to wherever they need to go, which could be far. There are Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Jews who live here, and they appear to get along. The quiet of the night is quite often interrupted by the Muslim call to worship, the pastors of the churches preaching over loudspeakers so that everyone throughout the village will hear them (even at 1:30am), and the singing, chanting, and bell-ringing at the Hindu temples (one which is immediately adjacent to Sadok's family's home and to the Bene Ephraim synagogue). In fact, around Christmastime, the Jews were the only ones not broadcasting our holiday spirit!

Amidst all this daily living sits the Bene Ephraim center of learning and worship, located at Sadok's family's home. While the rest of the members live throughout the village, and some live even a half hour to a few hours away (and do come for services as often as they can), the Yacobi family lives on this property which was actually given to Sadok by his father, who had been a schoolteacher in the village many years ago. Sadok and the Bene Ephraim believe that they are the descendants of the lost tribe of Ephraim, and they give many examples to back up their claims. Much of this has been written about in a few other articles (some posted on the Kulanu website) and in one particular book, *The Jews of*



Photo by Judi Kloper

*Keziya washing clothes*

*Andhra Pradesh: Contesting Caste and Religion in South India* by Yulia Egorova and Shahid Perwez. (I highly recommend reading this book for a history and reflection of this community; Egorova's and Perwez' research and narrative provide detailed and fascinating explanations and descriptions of what the Bene Ephraim believe is their ancient heritage, as well as queries and contrasting opinions offered by those who question the Bene Ephraim's authenticity. This book is one that you won't want to put down most of the time that you're engaged in reading it! It is fascinating.)

The Yacobi family, including Sadok, his lovely wife Miriam, their son Jacob (Yacob), daughter Keziya,

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Photo by Judi Klover

*Celebrating the last night of Hanukkah with Sadok and daughter Keziya*

and daughter Beulah and her son Ryan (pronounced Ree-on) all live together in one room for sleeping, which also serves as the synagogue. When Beulah's husband comes home monthly from working several hours away in another city to join his wife and toddler son, they are provided a separate room. This synagogue/home has what we would call a kitchen and living room on the other side of a dividing wall. There is a two-burner propane stove (though some of the cooking is done on a fire outside), and mats to sit on. Much of the food preparation is done in the back yard. The family has a refrigerator that is kept in a new building which was being completed. Eventually there will be rooms for guests to stay (I stayed in one of the rooms), a kitchen, and a sleeping room for the family.

There is no indoor plumbing, but there is a well (one of the few homes in the village that has one) and an electric pump which is used every morning to pump water to fill the barrel in the outhouse for bathing. Dishes are washed outdoors, and laundry is done the

old-fashioned way, with manual labor and a large stone to clean the clothes on. The saying "A woman's work is never done" is very true in this part of India, in this community. The women are responsible for completing most of the household chores each day, all day. I was humbled as I tried to wash my own clothes a number of times but could not master it to the point where they actually got clean. Miriam and her daughters eventually came over to where I sat wringing out my clothes and smashing them on the rock, gently taking them from me and cleaning them quickly and efficiently.

Jacob, having taken some organic farming training in the Pondicherry/Auroville area south of Chennai, about a ten hours train ride, now rents a small plot of land near his family's home and, with a few friends, grows vegetables to sell to vendors in the marketplaces. Some of the families of the Bene

Ephraim were provided with buffalo a few years ago by Rabbi Marvin Tokayer, a world-renowned expert on the Jews of the Far East who has set up a charitable fund; the goal was that these families would be able to sell the buffalo milk and earn an income. The few families that are raising the buffalo have been successful at it, and now some of the buffalo have had babies which can be sold to other families, thus providing more of an income. (Side note: chai made with buffalo milk is delicious and fattening, especially given that it's served four to five times a day!)

What did I do there? What did the Bene Ephraim need from me? I arrived just before the start of the first night of Hanukkah, and when, that evening, we lit the hanukkiya together and sang the blessings, I felt a deep sense of connection. I was with my people. Over the course of my time with the Bene Ephraim, I contemplated what makes one a Jew. Are we 'more' Jewish because we are born into a Jewish family?

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*Keziya lighting Shabbat candles*

Photo by Judi Kloper

Could people who are from an untouchable caste in India really be Jews? How did these people become Jews? They have their own story to tell which I encourage you to read in the aforementioned book, and better yet, visit the Bene Ephraim and spend some time volunteering with them.

Each day we spent time learning new melodies and preparing for Shabbat. The community has its own traditions and melodies with some infusions introduced by Israeli visitors. Eight years ago Rabbi Gerald and Rabbanit Bonita Nathan Sussman, Vice President of Kulanu, had visited and even taught them to make potato latkes. What could I teach them, then, that would be significant and lasting?

Villagers gathered for services every Friday evening, as well as twice on Shabbat morning at 8 and 11. Members of Beit Am, my congregation in Corvallis, Oregon, as well as people from around the USA (who had seen my Facebook posts) had begun sending me songs for Shabbat via email, and together we learned new tunes. The Bene Ephraim had tunes that they had created over the course of at least one or two generations and were now teaching to their young children. We shared traditions with each other: my western Jewish rituals with the Bene Ephraim rituals, some of which have hints of the Hindu influences of their Indian habitat. Many of the community can read Hebrew, and others read the transliterations in their language, Telugu. They chant the blessings before and after reading from the Torah, and they sing psalms set to melodies so beautiful that at first all I could do was listen, enchanted, while everyone sang together. Soon I found myself singing along, as I had learned the melody and words.

I began studying the weekly parsha in advance when I realized that most of the community did not understand what they were reading; when I explained what the parsha was about, I was encouraged to continue to do so

weekly. Preparing a d'var Torah was challenging as I had to find a way to relate it not to our western lives but to the lives of these people whose reality was so completely and unfathomably different than ours. How could I make each week's parsha relevant to them when I only seemed to be able to relate it to my life of opportunities? This, for me, was a journey of Teshuvah, of returning--learning what was and is real in life, what matters.

The most beautiful moments of Shabbat, though, were those of Havdalah—truly ethereal. With the Havdalah candles provided by Beit Am members, each week we rejoiced in the light of the flame reflected off our fingernails throughout the darkened room.

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Photo by Judi Klover

*Bene Ephraim family standing outside of their home*

There were local spices to pass around. Each Friday the women of the family pressed grapes to make grape juice which we drank communally throughout Shabbat and Havdalah. The Bene Ephraim took to heart that we can carry that light and the sweetness of the spices, the sweetness of Shabbat, with us into our week until the next Shabbat. Then we danced—another beautiful memory as the women and men experienced dances they never knew before--Hava Nagila and Mayim Mayim. Dancing for joy, dancing with joy: women and men and children who had never danced a step in their lives were filled with elation and delight that exuded from their faces, their hands, their feet...their laughs.

Many evenings the children of the village, some Jewish, some Christian and Hindu, and a few Muslim, would come to visit me. We would sing children's songs that I played on my laptop with attached speakers: Baby Beluga, Five Little Freckled Frogs, Head Shoulders Knees and Toes, and others to help the kids learn some English...and then Jewish songs, including Shabbat Shalom, I Have a Little Dreidel, and Zum Gali Gali. It didn't matter that the children were of various religions. They loved it, and I loved

being with them and seeing the excitement in their eyes.

My four weeks in the village passed quickly. I left to volunteer and travel in other parts of India for two months, and then returned for a few more weeks until the triple-digit heat became unbearable. When I departed, the hugs were many and long, and tears rolled down our cheeks as we said Shalom, knowing that it would be a long time before we would be able to meet again.

As I write this, it's been eight months since I left the Bene Ephraim to complete my journey throughout India. As I traveled around the country that has been like a second home to me, I carried with me the spirit of the Bene Ephraim, a people who are committed to deepening their understanding of their faith. Kulanu purchased a laptop computer for the community and they have been using it to learn more about the holidays, Torah, the parshas, and some are even studying the Zohar. Sadok's children, Jacob and Keziya, as well as a few other young people, have

been taking a more active role in learning and leading parts of the service, and I deeply believe that with their dedication and motivation, the Bene Ephraim will grow stronger as they find their place in the greater world of Judaism. What makes a Jew? While the rabbis and Jewish scholars have their answers, I tell myself and others that I believe that there is more than one answer, and that the Bene Ephraim do their best to live their lives accordingly.

My life has been forever changed by the experience of living with the Bene Ephraim. I learned so much, receiving the gift of friendship and rejoicing in the love of our shared faith. I encourage those of you who wish to go beyond your comfort zone to offer your knowledge and skills to a people so eager to embrace you. You will receive so much more than you will give, and you will, perhaps, find a path to Teshuvah.

For more information about the Bene Ephraim community, see [www.kulanu.org/india](http://www.kulanu.org/india), and to view videos of the community, please go to the India - Bene Ephraim playlist at [youtube.com/kulanuvideo](https://youtube.com/kulanuvideo).

# *A Jewish Journey from Uganda to URJ Camp Coleman*

*reprinted from the URJ Camp Coleman blog  
(<http://coleman.urjcamp.org>), JULY 30, 2015  
by Rabbi Noam Katz, MAJE, the Dean of Jewish Living  
at The Leo Baeck Day School in Toronto, Ontario*



Photo by Seth Jonadav

*A Bat Mitzvah ceremony*

*Kol yisrael arevim zeh lazeh.* This oft-quoted Talmudic teaching – “All of Israel is responsible, one to another”<sup>[1]</sup> – never resonated so deeply for me as when I said goodbye to family and friends in the winter of 2003-04, and set out on a three-month volunteer stint in, of all Jewish destinations, East Africa.

Nestled in the lush green Mbale region of Uganda lives an extraordinary Jewish community, known as the [Abayudaya](#) (“children of Judah” in the local dialect,

Luganda). The Abayudaya trace their roots to 1919, when a regional chieftain named Semei Kakungulu adopted the beliefs and practices of Judaism after receiving a copy of the Torah translated into Luganda. Kakungulu was such an influential leader that no less than 3,000 people “converted” to Judaism<sup>[2]</sup>, as he

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<sup>[1]</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Shavuot 39a.

<sup>[2]</sup> In 2002, a Beit Din comprised of four Conservative Rabbis from Israel and the U.S. convened an official conversion of several hundred Abayudaya Jews. Many of them considered it more of a religious “affirmation” than conversion, as they had grown up in Jewish households spanning three generations.





Photo by Arthur Glazer

*Sarah and Shoshanna leading the camp in a song session*

oversaw the construction of synagogues, schools and a communal center in his home on Nabugoye Hill. Following Kakungulu's death in 1928, the Jewish population gradually began to dwindle, as few leaders emerged and Jewish practice was banned under the tyrannical reign of Idi Amin in the 1970s. However, following the overthrow of Amin's government, a group of Abayudaya youth (not much older than our current NFTYites and URJ camp counselors) re-established their right to practice Judaism, committing themselves to Torah-centered lives consisting of prayer, *mitzvot* and ongoing Jewish learning.

Fascinated with their unique history and inspired by their beautiful [Afro-Jewish melodies](#), I traveled thousands of miles to begin my volunteer work in early December 2003.<sup>[3]</sup> In addition to teaching English and Hebrew in their village schools, one of my major responsibilities was to organize the community's fledgling youth group. Having grown up in NFTY-NEL and working on staff at URJ Eisner and Kutz Camps, I figured I was up to the challenge. But nothing could prepare me for this eye-opening experience. Laser tag and broomball were replaced by hikes to the top of a waterfall; sing-alongs in Hebrew and Luganda became an everyday occurrence; and an unbreakable spirit exuded from the smiles of every youth, despite the very real hardships they faced on a daily basis, including malaria, malnutrition and poverty.

While these young Ugandan Jews all dazzled me with their enthusiasm and amazing ability to overcome adverse living conditions, a few stood out from their peers. Two of these impressive youngsters happened to be best friends: Shoshanna Nambi and Sarah Nabagala. Thirteen years old, they carried themselves with maturity, poise and impressively sharp intellect that was rare among most B'nai Mitzvah students I had met. Though

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<sup>[3]</sup> My volunteerism was made possible, in part, by the support of two global-reaching Jewish organizations: [Kulanu](#) and [American Jewish World Service](#).

neither stood higher than five feet, Shoshanna and Sarah seemed to tower over others in terms of leadership. Each possessed a gentle spirit, humility and a genuine desire to make a difference in the world. And what a difference they would make...

Fast forward 12 years. The first stop on my 2015 summer camp tour—in which I serve as a musician/educator-in-residence and help to train young songleaders—was [URJ Camp Coleman](#) in Cleveland, Georgia. I had seen my friend, director Bobby Harris, at NFTY Convention just months earlier, where he had mentioned his idea of bringing two members of the Abayudaya to serve as counselors at camp. It didn't take much for him to get my overwhelming endorsement.

Upon walking into the *chadar ochel*, two young women greeted me with familiar smiles as if no time had passed. Shoshanna and Sarah, now impactful leaders in their home community, had brought their talents and gifts to Coleman for the summer. While adjusting to new surroundings and the rich culture of URJ camping, they were helping their own campers to see the richly diverse tapestry of global Jewry today.

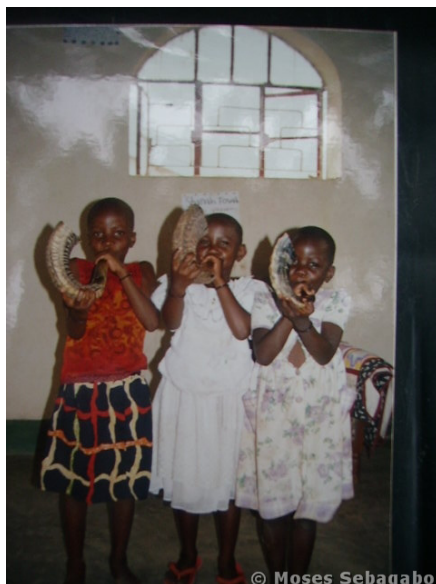


Photo courtesy of Rabbi Noam Katz

*Noam and Abayudaya youth visit Sipi Falls, 2004*

Though I have shared the stories and songs of the Abayudaya with numerous camps and congregations over the past decade, nothing felt quite like sharing the *bimah* with these two extraordinary souls. In front of an entranced group of campers and counselors, they sang their rendition of “[Hinei Mah Tov](#),” spoke about growing up in Uganda, and discussed ways that North American Jews can engage with Abayudaya youth through *tzedakah*, travel and online communication. I mostly stood to the side, beaming with pride as I watched Sarah and Shoshanna show that same energy, that same indefatigable spirit, that had wowed me so many years ago.

What began as an interest in overseas volunteer work materialized into my own education about what it truly means to value and uplift one's fellow Jew. Because of the audacious hospitality and inherent leadership exhibited by the Abayudaya, I was forever transformed. And now, Sarah and Shoshanna are transforming hundreds of young Jewish lives with their work at Camp Coleman.

*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh lazeh*, indeed.



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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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## ***The Judeo-Malagasy Encounter***



Photo by Mark Roth

### *Shabbat dinner in Madagascar*

Kulanu Vice President Bonita Nathan Sussman and Madagascar Coordinator Yakov Zamir are at work planning a conference, many conversions, and perhaps a few weddings in Madagascar from May 8 to May 19. They are exploring the possibility of including others to join them in witnessing this historic event in the lives of this Jewish community. All the details will be worked out, we will all be in the same hotel, and it is, of course, pay your own way

with a contribution of \$600 to Kulanu. The fee will go to cover Kulanu costs of the conference, conversions and weddings.

Please let us know if you are interested by contacting Bonita Sussman and Yakov Zamir at [www.kulanu.org/contact](http://www.kulanu.org/contact) and choose: "Visit a Community: Madagascar."