



KULANU

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How I Became a Cochini Jew* *by Arun Viswanath*

Chennai, a large city on the southeastern coast of India, was the place I called home for nine months last year. I was an English teacher with the Fulbright-Nehru program run jointly by the American and Indian governments. Although I enjoyed my time in the classroom, my three main reasons for traveling to India and living in Chennai were personal in nature.

First, my father was born in India, and most of his family still lives in Bangalore, located some six hours from Chennai by train. (This is a short distance by Indian standards, where a trip to another city can mean a three-day journey.) I grew up in the United States and had traveled to India for a few short visits, but was not there long enough to establish close relationships



Cochin, India. The author in the sanctuary of the historic Paradesi Synagogue on the eve of Simhat Torah. Photo courtesy of Arun Viswanath

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with my family members. Living nearby would give me a chance to visit and get to know them better.

My second reason was a linguistic one. I grew up speaking Tamil, a South Indian language, with nobody to speak with besides my father and the occasional relative visiting from abroad. Living in Chennai presented me with the opportunity to gain fluency in my father-tongue.

My third reason for living in Chennai was to be close geographically to one of India's oldest Jewish communities, in Cochin. There are indications of a Jewish presence in India during the First Temple period (c. 950 BCE), when King Solomon engaged in

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**This article originally appeared in Yiddish in Afn Shvel, the literary magazine of the League for Yiddish.*



*Cochin. Jew-Town was once populated entirely by Jews
Photo by Arun Viswanath*

trade with India for its exotic flora and fauna. Over the course of the next two millennia, a number of Jewish communities developed and flourished, primarily in the cities of Kolkata, Pune, Mumbai and Cochin.* With the establishment of the State of Israel the majority of these Jews packed up their belongings and moved to Israel.

One reason for this move was the importance of Zionism in these communities. Former members of the Cochini community recently released a disc entitled *Oh Lovely Parrot*, containing folksongs sung in Judeo-Malayalam, the unique dialect of the Cochini Jews. The album reflects the community's strong Zionist sentiment, with tracks such as "Herzl the Great", "The Fifth of Iyar" (Israeli Independence Day), and "The Israeli Flag". There is even an old custom that is practiced to this day: at the very end of Simhat Torah, community members dance in the street with the Torah scrolls and sing not only the Indian national anthem but *Hatikvah*. In other words, even those Cochini Jews

who did not emigrate to Israel maintain strong feelings for the Jewish national homeland.

In time, Indian Jewish communities grew smaller and weaker. The situation today is critical. Barely anyone is left in Kolkata, and the Cochinis rarely scrape together a minyan (ten Jews needed for communal prayer). Although there is still a sizable population of Jews in Mumbai and Pune, the future remains unclear. Most active community members belong to the older generation, and younger families who want traditional observance and a rigorous Jewish education for their children are forced to seek it abroad. It was clear to me that if I wanted to get to know Indian Jews personally I needed to do it now. And the community of Cochin was only a few hours away.

Chennai itself has no Jewish population (not counting a defunct Jewish cemetery), and observing Shabbat alone each week was a challenging and solitary experience. By the time the High Holidays came around, I was ready to do anything for a greeting of "Shalom Aleichem" or for someone to say "Amen" to my kiddush on Shabbat morning. So I did the only thing that made sense: I packed my things and got on a plane for Cochin. Selfish as my intentions were, I also knew that the Jewish community in Cochin would appreciate visitors.

My host there was an elderly woman named Queenie Hallegua, who has spent her entire life in Cochin. Besides a few elderly cousins and friends living nearby, she is alone. Queenie's husband passed away several years ago, and both of her children have married and moved to the United States. Interestingly, Queenie lives on Jew-Town Road, a street once inhabited solely by Jews.

Although most of the Jewish population of Cochin is gone, one can see the Magen David (Star of David) still visible on many store facades, a testament to the once vibrant Jewish community, which made its home there. The tourist shops that line the road still sell "Jewish" souvenirs trying to lure Jewish tourists who have come primarily to see the beautiful historic Paradesi Synagogue. They gain the attention of passersby with calls of "Shalom!" and other phrases they have learned over the years.

One Jewish store remains, reached through the entrance to Sarah Cohen's house. Sarah is known not only as an artist, but as the "community elder" who

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**The Indian Jewish communities of the B'nei Menashe and B'nei Ephraim have a different history.*

knows Cochini folklore and traditions. Although her old age has clouded her short-term memory, she continues to make Jewish art. Browsing her wares, I searched in vain for something that encapsulated the unique Jewish-Indian nature of the community. I ultimately settled on a challah cover, embroidered with a Star of David and a dove. I also purchased a silver mezuzah-cover, knowing full well that it was imported from abroad. It seemed important to give the community business.

At the very bottom of the street stands the majestic Paradesi Synagogue. Paradesi means foreigner; most of the Jews who used to pray at that synagogue were descended from immigrants in the last 600 years, some from Arab lands seeking business opportunities and others escaping persecution in Portugal.

I arrived in Cochin shortly before sunset on the eve of Rosh Hashanah. I quickly showered and changed into festive garb before heading to the synagogue. Queenie had mentioned to me that a young Chabad couple were staying in Cochin for the duration of the High Holidays. In addition, two or three men were expected to come from Ernakulam, a nearby town that also was once home to a large Jewish community. After tallying up the numbers, I didn't quite see how we would have a minyan. But then again, I hadn't counted on the dozens of Jewish tourists who would drop by for a glimpse of the ancient synagogue. Many were Israelis exploring Asia after completing their military service; others were families of Indian-Jewish origin who had come back to explore their roots. Queenie's son David had come from the US to spend the holiday with her.

Once we had enough for a minyan, the service began. It soon became apparent, however, that we were not on the same page. The Cochinites demanded that prayers be done according to their tradition, but the Chabad



Cochin. Queenie Hallegua keeps the Torah scrolls company while the maniara is deconstructed following Simchat Torah.

Photo by Arun Viswanath

rabbi insisted that it was not permitted by Halacha (Jewish law). The rabbi wanted to lead the prayers, but none of the community members were too keen on that. As I watched the back and forth between the elderly community members and the young Israeli rabbi, I felt that I had to step in as translator. The rabbi's English was weak, and I was able to interpret from Hebrew into English and vice versa. But the real translation was between the two cultures. Being both a Yeshiva-educated Orthodox Jew and an Indian with an appreciation for the diverse traditions of our Diaspora, I was in a unique position to mediate between the two sides.

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In some cases I successfully demonstrated to the rabbi that the local tradition took legal precedence over the mandates of the Shulchan Aruch, seen as the major decisor in Jewish law today. In other cases, I was able to convince community members to capitulate on some minor detail. But for the most part, I tried to keep the service going, for the sake of those poor tourists. When services ended, the congregants dispersed and I followed David to his mother's house.

The next morning, we went back to the synagogue. Since no one had arrived yet, David taught me how to lead prayers in the Cochini tradition. As we practiced the tunes, congregants arrived one by one. Fewer men came from Ernakulam than the previous evening. The number of congregants would continue to diminish over the course of the three days that I spent there. That meant that we had to rely more and more on tourists stopping by.

We finally got a minyan at 10:30 and began the prayers, which were once again interrupted by debates and quibbling over how to lead the service. Once again, I played the middleman, with varied levels of success. The entire scene was comical: on the bimah, an Israeli Chabad rabbi; all around, the Cochini congregants; in the back, the confused tourists; and then there was me, a half-Indian 23-year-old Modern Orthodox Jew. What a minyan!

Throughout my visit in Cochin, I felt welcomed and comfortable. I listened as David and Queenie exchanged greetings and news. Although I couldn't understand every word of the conversation, I was able to follow most of it since the Judeo-Malayalam language is closely related to my native dialect of Tamil. It is unique among other dialects of Malayalam in its vocabulary, which draws on Hebrew, Aramaic, Portuguese and other languages. Just as in Yiddish and other Jewish languages, the Hebrew component of Judeo-Malayalam is not restricted to ritual contexts. Queenie obliged my requests to hear about her childhood and communal traditions. She told me about the biggest holiday among Cochini Jews: Simhat Torah.

In preparation for the holiday, congregants build a wooden platform in front of the Ark called a maniara,



Cochin. Author stands in front of the maniara, or “wedding room”, a platform built in front of the ark for Simhat Torah.

Photo courtesy of Arun Viswanath

literally “wedding room”. (Simhat Torah is often described in Jewish tradition as the marriage between the Jewish people and the Torah.) Each Torah scroll is moved into a special festive casing, adorned with gold, silver and precious stones. Unlike the soft Torah vestments among Ashkenazi Jews, these casings are hard, as in other Oriental Jewish traditions. The scrolls are placed onto the maniara, which is then covered by a beautiful curtain.

Throughout the year, only a small number of the lamps and chandeliers in the main sanctuary are lit, but for Simhat Torah, every lamp is filled with oil and lit. In addition, a large candelabra is set up outside the entrance of the synagogue. Those entrusted with lighting the lamps are not Jews, but rather Hindu patrons of the synagogue who, in exchange for financial support, request only that they be allowed to kindle

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Cochin. An old building façade on Jew-Town Road with a Jewish star and the name, barely visible of the illustrious Sassoon family
Photo by Arun Viswanath

these lights once a year. The devotion of these non-Jews is particularly remarkable in light of the fact that the Jews who left for Israel and other countries are barely involved in the community.

Queenie's description of Simhat Torah intrigued me and I knew that I had to return to Cochin to experience the holiday for myself. Two weeks later, I returned to Cochin and the Paradesi Synagogue.

Immediately, I was struck by the unique nature of the hakafot, or parading of the Torah scrolls around the synagogue, which contrasted greatly with the wild and spirited hakafot in Ashkenazi communities. The women entered the main sanctuary from the women's section and lined up along with the walls of the synagogue together with the men. The Torah scrolls procession proceeded along the edges of the sanctuary while everyone clapped and sang hymns in honor of the holiday, and each person kissed the Torah scrolls as they passed. It was a memorable experience.

Although Queenie and I had started off our conversations as strangers, the more time we spent together, the more she treated me like one of her own. She joked with me, honored me with leading the Kiddush in her home, and even tried to set me up with girls in Ernakulam and Mumbai. David taught me several *zemirot* (songs) for Shabbat, as well as an authentic Cochini toast, which incorporates several words from Portuguese.

During my stay, I felt a deep closeness both to Queenie

and David as well as to the entire community, almost as though I had been a Cochini Jew in another life and was now learning everything all over again. I lay awake that night, taken by a sense of nostalgia for something I never had.

On Saturday night, we bid each other farewell. Queenie sent along a bottle of Cochini wine, and I promised I'd be back soon.

I kept my promise. Three months later, I visited Queenie during my school's Christmas vacation. She was happy to see me, and I was glad to be back. I set my things down and went straight to the synagogue. But this time, there were no Cochini Jews, and the Israeli rabbi had long

since returned to Jerusalem. But there were plenty of tourists, all waiting for somebody to take charge and lead the prayers. The book of *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) teaches us, *b'makom she'ein ish, hishtadel lihyot ish*. Liberally translated: "Where there is nobody to stand up and do the right thing, it is up to you."

I got up and turned to face the group. After some opening greetings, I said a few words about the community and its long history. I asked if anyone wanted to lead the service. Silence. I realized that I was going to have to fill all the roles: rabbi, gabbai, usher and chazzan. I led the congregants in a Carlebach-style *Kabbalat Shabbat* (welcoming the Sabbath), but reserved a special Cochini tune for the closing Yigdal prayer that I had learned from David. Nobody was able to sing along, but it seemed appropriate to sing at least one Cochini song in a Cochini synagogue...

As we exited the synagogue, several tourists thanked me. I wanted to thank them back: "Thank you for coming, thank you for honoring the community and the synagogue, and thank you for giving me the opportunity, at least for one evening, to really be a Cochini." But instead, I just smiled. When everyone had left, I closed the doors to the synagogue and walked to Queenie's house to make a toast.

Arun Viswanath, 24, a 2013 graduate of Harvard University, spent nine months teaching English in India last year. Currently, he lives in New Jersey, where he works as an efficiency consultant in supply-chain management. His father, Meylekh Viswanath, was born in India and returns frequently to visit family and to help strengthen local Jewish communities.

Beit Polska – A National Jewish Outreach Across Poland*

How We're Doing....

By Rabbi Haim Dov Beliak



Warsaw, Poland. New Prayer Leader Piotr Mirski is blessed by two of his teachers, Mimi Sheffer and Rabbi Burt Shuman
Photo courtesy of Beit Polska

Beit Polska, the national umbrella organization of Progressive Jews in Poland, is engaged in efforts to build Jewish congregations in Poland. In most places there has been virtually no Jewish life since 1968, when the Polish Communist Party expelled thousands of Jewish doctors, intellectuals and professors, or in some instances, since 1939, when the Germans and Russians invaded the country. Beit Polska has succeeded in the creation of 10 communities of Jews where visitors are welcome to observe Jewish holidays, explore their possible Jewish roots, study Hebrew and Judaism,

and/or seek information on the Jewish faith. The 10 communities are: the flagship community of Beit Warszawa (Warsaw), Beit Trojmiasto (Gdansk, Gdynia and Sopot), Beit Lodz, Beit Lublin, Beit Katowice, Beit Poznan, Beit Wroclaw, Beit Bialystok, Beit Konstancin and Beit Torun.

Some visitors suspect or know they have a Jewish family background; others are non-Jewish Poles who have a keen interest in Jewish life and history. A considerable number of these visitors stay to become stakeholders in Judaism through conversion. Although most communities are small by most congregational standards, the numbers continue to grow.

**See KulanuNews Spring, 2013: Rejoining the Family, Progressive Judaism in Poland*



*Warsaw. Rabbi Gil Nativ, right, leads prayers with prayer leader Henryk Kowalski
Photo courtesy of Beit Polska*

For many Jewish visitors to the city of Warsaw, the highlight of their trip to Poland is the celebration of Shabbat at Beit Warszawa, which is led by Rabbi Gil Nativ. It should be noted, however, that in Warsaw, the programs offered go far beyond Sabbath and holiday observance. There is a regular schedule of study opportunities for residents of Warsaw and study weekends for those who come from other communities. There are also conversion classes. In the growing number of regional congregations, besides the celebration of Shabbat and holidays, there are also opportunities for Jewish study.

During the last three years, Rabbi Nativ led a team of scholars who created the first Progressive Siddur (prayer book) in Poland since the 19th century.* In addition to the traditional Hebrew prayers, the Siddur includes a modern Polish translation and a transliteration to make it user friendly for all those who wish to participate in religious services.

Zivah Nativ, Rabbi Nativ's wife, has volunteered her time as a teacher of Hebrew, originated a children's program (*Shabbat Yachad...Sabbath Together*), and taught Torah trope to enable students to read from the Torah. The Israeli couple is beloved by all and their contributions have gone beyond the academic as they have taught Israeli folk dancing, challah baking, and other activities with Jewish content.

Contrary to comments by some cynics, Beit Polska is neither a tourist attraction nor a memorial project. Its goal is to foster Jewish life in Poland. That means the training of leaders, the teaching of Judaism, and making the celebration of Jewish life accessible to anyone who desires it.

Some Recent News: Beit Polska/Beit Warszawa –

Recently, Beit Warszawa was blessed with the visit of 88-year-old Cantor David Wisnia, who as a child prodigy sang in Warsaw's largest synagogue, the Tlumazcki Synagogue. As part of Beit Polska's program for training prayer leaders, Cantor Wisnia and his grandson Avi taught them synagogue melodies. (We currently have nine prayer leaders serving our communities.)

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**KULANU has been an enthusiastic supporter of Beit Polska programs. One grant was given in January 2013 in support of Beit Bialystok. A second grant was given in October 2014 to support the publication of the Polish-Hebrew prayer book.*



*Special Visitors. Cantor David Wisnia and his grandson Avi meet with prayer leader Iza Rivkah Foremniak, program coordinator
Photo courtesy of Beit Polska*

Later, Iza Rivkah Foremniak, a program coordinator for Beith Polska, interviewed Cantor Wisnia. Cantor Wisnia was visibly moved by the presence of young people in the synagogue and said he now feels hopeful about the Jewish future in Poland. Ms. Foremniak, in turn, was overwhelmed by Cantor Wisnia's presence and cried when she heard him sing melodies, which reminded her of the Holocaust and the loss of Jewish life.

Cantor Wisnia's clear, modern Hebrew was reminiscent of the Hebrew taught in the Javneh school system in pre-World War II Poland, where there was an active progressive Jewish movement at that time. Contrary to

what some may think, Poland was not simply an enclave of orthodox Jewry, but had the full spectrum of Jewish religious observance. In fact, there are estimates of up to 40 Postempowy (progressive) Jewish congregations in Poland before the invasions of 1939.

Beit Polska Teachers/Leaders and Their Unique Challenges

Beit Polska is blessed to have several inspiring young leaders serving the communities. Most of them are young native Poles or Polish speakers who have come from abroad to volunteer for Beit Polska. Those who choose to work and teach in our emerging Jewish communities are highly motivated and deeply committed. The challenge they face includes navigating the complexity of Jewish history in Poland within the context of the current Polish cultural reality and what that may mean for them personally.

It is helpful to note that World War II and the Communist takeover of Poland continued the oppression of both surviving Jews as well as Poles until the Soviets withdrew from Poland in 1989. Under the Soviet system, the official educational curriculum did not deal with the fate of Jews during World War II. And

little was said about the suffering of Poles during the occupations by Germans and Russians. The Russians were portrayed as liberators rather than as occupiers.

When memories and memorials were permitted expression after 1989, many younger Poles were curious about Jews but did not understand the prominent role of Jews in the culture and history of Poland. They knew about the Holocaust, but most of them had not fully explored its implications for the country and for themselves personally.

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*Visiting teacher. Dariusz Szajnert spent eight months in Poland as a teacher and organizer
Photo courtesy of Dariusz Szajnert*

As a student in Torun, Miriam has begun to develop a community that gathers for weekly Sabbath services.

Dariusz Szajnert was born in Lodz but grew up in Belgium, Chicago and North Carolina. Three summers ago, Dariusz served as a Beit Polska volunteer organizer in the city of Lodz. This year, he has worked as a teacher and organizer based in Poznan. For the past eight months he volunteered in Torun, Gdansk, Katowice, Lublin, Warsaw and Wroclaw, in addition to Poznan.

Before coming to Poland to volunteer, Dariusz taught Jewish history at the American Hebrew Academy in Greensboro, North Carolina for five years and completed a degree in social work. In addition to teaching and organizing, Dariusz has provided a surprising skill as a videographer and

Three Young Leaders

film editor.

Piotr Mirski (see page 6) was already in the process of becoming a member of the Jewish community when I met him in 2010. He was a student in Beit Polska's Introduction to Judaism class, which we call Step by Step. The name was chosen because it can lead to conversion for those who complete the program. Subsequently, he completed his conversion and then joined our first training program for prayer leaders.

Mirski, who is a musician and composer in addition to being an aspiring intellectual, is currently pursuing a doctorate in contemporary thought at the University of Lublin. During the last four years he has fostered a Jewish community in Lublin and has traveled the country leading services and introducing Jewish culture.

Miriam Klimova (see page 10) is originally from the Ukraine. Last year Miriam completed the Beit Polska training program for lay cantors. Her class is continuing to study Jewish life cycle services in order to lead weddings, britot (circumcisions) and funerals. At the same time, she is studying at The School of Hebrew Philology (Wyższa Szkoła Filologii Hebrajskiej) in Torun, Poland.

Miriam grew up in the Progressive Movement in Ukraine, where she was an elementary school teacher.

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Beit Trojmiasto. Kasia Muzurkiewicz is one of two prayer leaders to lead the three-town Jewish community



*Graduates of the Prayer Leader program: From the left, Elzbieta Genius, Henryk Kowalski, and Miriam Klimova
Photo courtesy of Beit Polska*

Beit Trojmiasto: a Success Story

Beit Trojmiasto is one of our ten Jewish communities. It is made up of Jewish groups from three geographically close cities – Gdansk (19th century Danzig), Gdynia and Sopot. The remarkable growth of this special community is due to the determination of a few individuals who embraced their Jewish heritage with special gusto, and, over a two-year period, traveled back and forth to Warsaw on a weekly basis (five hours each way) to study Judaism at Beit Warszaw. Their goal was to reconnect with their Jewish heritage and to prepare for their conversions. With the help of Rabbi Nativ, their efforts were successful and the Beit Din of the Progressive Movement (EUPJ) confirmed their Jewish status. Today the three communities have joined together to form a vibrant and exciting Jewish enclave.

When the community reached two and a half minyanim (one minyan represents the 10 Jews needed for communal prayer), the group applied to the city of Gdansk for a place to hold their services. They had long outgrown the cramped private apartments they were using. In December, the group was notified that their request had been granted.

Although the apartment was in poor condition and in need of paint, repairs, a working heating system and

an electricity hook up, the enthusiastic members of Beit Trojmiasto gathered on Chanukah, bundled up against the frigid Polish winter in their candle-lit room, and sang Hanukah songs and lit the holiday lights. Plans for a formal dedication of the synagogue are underway.

To Conclude:

In a few short years and with a shoe-string budget, Beit Polska has challenged the conventional wisdom about the future of Jewish life in Poland. We have accomplished this with the help of many volunteers both Jewish and non-Jewish who support our work and volunteer in our communities. Yes, the

once vibrant rich Jewish life in Poland is no more, the majority of its Jewish population lost. But we have an opportunity to build on the ashes of this legacy. There are people who want to know about Judaism, embrace Judaism, celebrate Judaism. And many Poles are eager to accommodate and foster Jewish life.

What Can You Do to Help?

Beit Trojmiasto is looking for a “twinning” partner, a congregation, club or organization. It can use a close relationship with an established Jewish community from abroad, one that will take an interest in its development and help community members acquire Jewish knowledge and reduce the isolation that community members feel so far away from the major centers of Jewish life. Twinning is a way of fostering Jewish life not only in Poland but in an American community. Such a relationship would provide a wonderful opportunity for conversation and a relationship building. If you are interested in twinning with Beit Trojmiasto or want to help Beit Polska on its historic journey of revitalizing Jewish life in Poland, contact Rabbi Haim Beliak: RabbiBeliak@JewishRenewalinPoland.org.

14 Conversions and a Wedding in Uganda

By Rabbi Peretz Rodman



*"I do, I do". Yosef Njogu and Rut Wangechi of the Kasuko Jewish community of Kenya exchange vows at their Jewish wedding ceremony in Uganda. Rabbi Gershom Sizomu officiated
Photo by Rabbi Peretz Rodman*

Rabbis like to share "You won't believe the day I had" stories with each other. Some stories are amusing, some amazing. But in December, I experienced a day of rabbinic activity that can only be described as extraordinary. And I was not alone. I shared the day with my colleague Rabbi Dov (Dubi) Haiyun, rabbi of Kehillat Moriah in Haifa, and our friend and colleague Rabbi Gershom Sizomu in his home community of Nabugoye Hill in eastern Uganda.

Rabbi Haiyun and I, together with my wife Miriam Laufer, arrived in Uganda on Tuesday, December 9th, as emissaries from the Rabbinical Assembly of Israel. It was our task to report back on this unique community of Jews and to meet candidates for a proposed MASA* program in Israel for some of their young leaders.

*MASA (Hebrew word for journey) is a program of the Jewish Agency and the Government of Israel to promote and subsidize long-term programs in Israel for young people from the Diaspora.

Although we had arrived with a mandate, Rabbi Sizomu had another task in mind. He had arranged for the three of us to meet the next day as a bet din (Jewish court composed of three rabbis) to interview a family of thirteen, who were traveling from their tiny emerging Jewish community in Kasuku, Kenya, to Uganda for conversion.

Wednesday

The family's strenuous journey overland by public transport (funded by Kulanu) had taken many, many hours over a two-day period, and the family arrived in the late afternoon, tired and bedraggled. While the timing was not ideal given their long trip, nevertheless the family was eager to be interviewed together and then individually by our panel of rabbis before the sun set. (Rabbinic courts do not meet at night.)

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*“Extraordinary.” So said Rabbi Peretz Rodman of Jerusalem describing his experiences in Uganda
Photo courtesy of Rabbi Rodman*

It was clear immediately that the commitment of this family to Jewish life and practice and their practical knowledge of how to live a Jewish life would have been impressive in any setting. But to see such a dedicated and knowledgeable family, living as subsistence farmers in rural East Africa, was truly amazing. Even the young children, when asked whether they could eat in their friends’ homes, distinguished immediately between kosher and non-kosher food items. As special as our introduction to the family was, the next day proved unimaginable.

Thursday:

We all arose early, planning to leave before breakfast for the nearby river, where the Kenyans—mother, father, ten children, and one grandchild—would immerse as the last stage of their conversion. Early in the morning, the father and sons underwent the ritual of *hatafat dam b’rit*, the taking of a tiny droplet of blood at the place of circumcision, and we guests expected then to set out right away. However, Rabbi Sizomu had a surprise for us: a local lad of 14 who, although raised among the Abayudaya, was the child of a non-Jewish mother and wanted very much to be Jewish.

The young man made a very positive impression on us. He knew what responsibilities he would be taking on and was nonetheless eager. But our deliberation hit a snag when Rabbi Sizomu brought up his family situation. The young man was living in the home of Jewish uncle and a non-Jewish aunt, a situation that would involve violation of the Sabbath and *kashrut* (dietary laws) and other traditional strictures taken seriously by the Abayudaya community. A solution was found that had no precedent in our training, nor had we ever witnessed its like.

Rabbi Sizomu called over his brother Aaron, the principal of the Kulanu-assisted elementary and middle school and asked him whether he would be prepared to take the young man into his own home. “You mean, he would come to live with me, and I would raise him as my own son?” asked the brother. Rabbi Sizomu leaned over to me and explained that adoptions are handled much less formally in Uganda than in, say, Israel or the United States.

I turned to look at the young candidate’s response and found him grinning so broadly I thought the ends of his smile would reach the ceiling fan. Aaron is a beloved figure among the children. And so it was that our candidate,

after being questioned, was accepted as a convert. (We learned later that his family did not object to his move into Aaron’s home.) Soon the entire entourage packed into two vehicles and descended the bumpy road to the river for immersion in the waters, which would be the final ritual of their conversion.

When we reached the river, we found ourselves asking (and later paying) a middle-aged father and his three adult sons to interrupt their daily labor gathering mud from the riverbank for sale to construction and brickmaking crews. A far greater impediment was the reluctance—no, the abject fear—of the Kenyans to enter the water.

The lake near their hometown in Kenya has hippopotamuses, feisty and territorial animals that can be dangerous to the local population. They are to be avoided at all cost. As a result, the prospective converts had never been swimming in any body of water in their lives. Assurances were not convincing.

When it was the women’s turn (and the men had completed their immersion and were standing on the

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*Conversion complete. The sons of Yosef Njogu and Rut Wangechi immerse in a nearby river to complete their conversion to Judaism
Photo by Rabbi Peretz Rodman*

river bank out of view, with the idle mud-diggers), it took more than cajoling to get the women, especially the young daughters, fully immersed in this natural mikveh. Gershom's wife Tsipora joined them in the water to give them the confidence to submerge themselves.

After the ritual was completed, we returned to Nabugoye Hill for breakfast and a shacharit service, conducted by some of Rabbi Sizomu's students. During the service, the Kenyan family had a festive collective aliyah to the Torah, and the local young convert celebrated his instant transition to being a bar mitzvah with an aliyah of his own, cloaked in Rabbi Haiyun's tallit (prayer shawl) and tefillin (phylacteries)..

As the service ended, Rabbi Haiyun reflected on the morning's many events and added, "All we need now is to give [the Kenyan parents] a proper Jewish wedding." Rabbi Sizomu asked the couple: "Would you like to get married

today?" They said "yes" with perplexed smiles. What followed was an East African version of the Mickey Rooney "We can put on a show, let's take it to Broadway" films of the 1930's, this one for real.

Within minutes a sound system was set up in the village's open center under a large tree. A huppah (marriage canopy) was erected using Rabbi Haiyun's large, decorative tallit, and poles were prepared to hold it up. Rabbi Sizomu produced a Ketubah (marriage document), into which I penned the details of the date, place and names of the wedding couple. We had brought bottles of kosher wine from Israel. Soon thereafter, a wedding dress for the bride, a suit for the groom, rings... all appeared as if by magic. Within the hour a goat was procured and slaughtered using a large slaughtering knife I had brought from Israel.

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*Rabbi Dov (Dubi) Haiyun, left, rabbi of Kehillat Moriah in Haifa, sits with Rabbi Gershom Sizomu after the wedding ceremony
Photo by Rabbi Peretz Rodman*



*Joyous Celebration. The happy married couple are held aloft after their wedding ceremony in Nabagoye Hill, Uganda
Photo by Rabbi Peretz Rodman*

The ceremony took place before a crowd of over 100 guests, and a feast, including the meat of the goat, was served. And the dessert? The Chuppah poles, which (I now learned) were sugar cane, were cut into small enough pieces for everyone to enjoy. A full wedding planned and completed within several hours!

And so the day went: conversions, adoption, immersion, bar mitzvah, wedding—all before the afternoon Mincha prayers!

Friday night:

At the very musical and festive Friday night service, we learned that our young friend had already moved into Aaron's spacious house. He looked as radiantly happy as he had the day before.

Postscript:

After an incredible week in Uganda, we returned to Israel energized and excited to help the community in whatever ways we can, including marshaling political support to convince Israel's Interior Ministry to grant

members of these communities visas to visit Israel, to study in Israel, and, for those who wish, to come to Israel as olim.



*Father and son. Yosef Njogu with his son Samson, who studies in the Abayudaya Yeshivah in Uganda
Photo by Ari Witkin*

Peretz Rodman is an American-born, Jerusalem-based educator, translator, writer, and peripatetic Masorti (Conservative) rabbi. He serves, as a volunteer, as Av Bet Din (president) of the Israeli Masorti rabbinical court.

From Kenya to Uganda A Wedding and Conversions

By Yehudah Kimani, Kenya



Leader. Yehudah Kimani, one of the young leaders of the Kusuku Jewish community and son of the happy wedded couple.

Klal Yisroel (Nation of Israel). Both he and my mother were very excited as were my brothers and sisters, who would accompany them to Uganda.

On arrival, everyone stayed in the Abayudaya guest house located near the synagogue. My brother Samson Nderitu, who lives with the Abayudaya and currently studies in Rabbi Gershom's yeshivah, was thrilled to be present for such a joyous occasion. Unfortunately, I remained at home.

From all accounts, the interviews and conversion with the Bet Din went very well. And so it was that on Thursday, December 11, the fifth day after Shabbat and the 19th of Kislev 5775 according to the Jewish calendar, the rest of my family joined the Jewish people.

In December, my parents Yosef Njogu and Rut Wangechi and 11 of their 13 children traveled to Uganda from their village of Kusuku, Kenya to convert to Judaism. Our community in Kenya is very devoted to Judaism and has been practicing under the guidance of Rabbi Sizumo of the Abayudaya Jewish community for several years. My brother Samson and I have studied at the rabbi's yeshivah and had already converted.

Because of the dedication and Jewish commitment of community members, there are many who are sufficiently knowledgeable and able to take this important step in their Jewish journey. Unfortunately, the cost of transportation is prohibitive and there are not always three rabbis available to sit as a Beit Din for the purpose of conversion.

However, when my parents decided they were ready to move forward in their observance, and two visiting rabbis from Israel would be in Nabagoye Hill, the time seemed right. I contacted Kulanu and my regional coordinator Ari Witkin for assistance.

Kulanu agreed to pay for the transportation costs. *Abba* (my father) has served as the community's rabbi and the Judaica teacher and wanted so much to join

The conversion was followed by a real surprise. My parents had traveled to Uganda for the conversion; they did not expect that they would also be celebrating their Jewish wedding. But with the help of the two visiting rabbis, Rabbi Peretz and Rabbi Dudi, and with Rabbi Gershom officiating, the wedding took place on the very afternoon of their conversion, organized with a blink of an eye.

The bride's gown and attendants' dresses were given by the Abayudaya community through Athalia, who serves as community treasurer. They made the wedding colorful and festive. It was one of the best days in the lives of my parents who felt doubly blessed to have two important ceremonies in one day.

The wedding took place on the hill of the Nabugoye synagogue where many Jews and non-Jews celebrated together by dancing to Hebrew and Luganda music that played on loud speakers. Truly the presence of Hashem was felt by everyone and their spirits were elevated.

For more information on the Kasuko community, see: [Facebook.com/kimyehudah](https://www.facebook.com/kimyehudah) or <http://tinyurl.com/helpkenyajews>

Anousim* Communities in Colombia

by Daneel Schaechter

Cartagena

We arrived in Cartagena, Colombia just before Shabbat, and my father and I set out immediately for the Sinagoga de Cartagena to attend Friday evening services. As a Sabbath observer, I do not use the telephone or public transportation on Shabbat. I thought that I had done the due diligence necessary to reach the synagogue in time for the Kabbalat Shabbat service (the greeting of the Sabbath). I had written down the synagogue address on our small map, and expected the path would be easy to follow. However, as I have learned over the years during my travels in Latin America, the unexpected often thwarts the simplest plan. In this case, after wandering for an hour,

and asking no less than 30 locals for help in locating the synagogue, we seemed no closer to our destination. Just as we were about to give up hope of arriving on time for the service, we met a member of the congregation, also late, who recognized the two yarmulke-wearing American Jews as the congregation's Sabbath visitors and accompanied us the rest of the way.

The synagogue service followed a Sephardic (Spanish) Orthodox tradition, as synagogue members see themselves as descendants of the Crypto-Jews of Spain who survived the Spanish Inquisition of 1492 only to lose much of their Judaism with the threat of persecution by the church authorities. Their goal is to reestablish a Jewish presence in Cartagena that began some 500 years ago.

It is important to note that from 1610 to 1821, Cartagena was the home of one of Latin America's three Inquisitions imported from Spain to find and punish those converts who engaged in suspicious Jewish practices. Many Jews were identified as Crypto Jews and were burned at the stake. Today, dozens of Colombian descendants from hidden Jews are hoping to reclaim their lost Jewish heritage.

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*Shirat Hayyam. Young adults of the congregation pose with Daneel and Binyumen Schaechter
Photo courtesy of Daneel Schaechter*

It was 4:30 am on November 28, the day known to inveterate shoppers as Black Friday. But I was not waiting in line to secure a good deal at Best Buy or the Apple Store, but for a flight to Colombia to visit emerging Jewish communities on Colombia's Caribbean coast. Although I had traveled to Latin America on various occasions, this would be my first trip with my father and my first to Colombia.

Over the last three years, I had visited Jewish communities in Brazil, Nicaragua, Peru, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Ecuador. My task generally was to spend a week or two teaching Hebrew, Mishnaic texts, and Torah. This trip, however, would be a mixture of leisure activities (pristine beaches and verdant national parks) as well as Kulanu-related work; i.e., visiting three Jewish communities to meet and get to know their members and see how Kulanu might assist them on their journey to Judaism.

**Anousim is the Hebrew word used to describe Crypto- or hidden Jews, descendants of Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition.*



*Santa Marta, Columbia. Children from Congregation Javura Shirat Hayyam at their weekly Hebrew School class. With a Kulanu Good People Fund Grant, the community was able to purchase new chairs, books and Hebrew Alphabet magnets and stencils
Photo by Daneel Schaechter*

As in most Latin American emerging Jewish communities, congregants are eager to share the personal histories of their families and their often difficult return to Judaism. On the road to claiming their long lost heritage, many have suffered rejections by mainstream Jewish communities. This is a story that I have heard repeated on all my visits to emerging communities... the difficulty of merging or integrating with established Jewish communities in their respective towns and cities.

When discussing community problems with congregants, one of the most urgent needs was the difficulty of their unmarried members meeting eligible Jewish singles in other Latin American Crypto-Jewish communities. On my return home, I created a Facebook group for these Jewish singles to enable them to build a network of people from similar backgrounds. A few weeks later, nearly 75 singles had joined the group and begun meeting each other virtually.

Santa Marta

From Cartagena, my father and I traveled to Santa Marta, South America's oldest surviving city (1531) and the second most important colonial city on Colombia's

Caribbean coast. Here we visited the egalitarian congregation of Javura Shirat Hayam synagogue, whose members were recently converted at a Bet Din organized by Rabbi Juan Mejia, originally of Bogota, Colombia and currently living in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

We arrived Sunday night and were greeted by the warm and welcoming community leader, Adal Alfaro Lopez, who had organized a Hebrew School Classroom Dedication Ceremony and dinner to celebrate our visit and the refurbished classroom. The community is small and composed of approximately 25 individuals.

I had already communicated with members of the Santa Marta synagogue which had requested help to equip their Hebrew School with new furniture

and educational resources. The money was awarded by Kulanu from a grant by the Good People Fund. It was gratifying to see how they had used the grant. I was able to bring some final decorative touches such as Hebrew alphabet magnets for the classroom and some elementary Hebrew books.

We visited briefly and then did some personal sight-seeing. When my father returned to the United States toward the end of the week, I returned to Santa Marta for the Sabbath. I led services, and the community and I shared a lovely communal Shabbat dinner, and sang Zemirot (songs) together. After I stayed the night in the modest guest room at the synagogue, I joined a smaller group of the community who gathered Saturday morning for the Shacharit service.

While the community had hoped they would have a minyan (the ten adults required for the reading of the Torah, sadly we did not make it. Several key community members have required college classes or work on Saturdays, making it difficult to conduct a complete Shabbat morning service. Nevertheless, I considered the visit a success and made several close friends in the community.

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*Barranquilla. Community members gather to greet author Daneel Schaechter
Photo courtesy of the community of Barranquilla*

Barranquilla

The third community I visited was in the large industrial city of Barranquilla, where the once substantial Ashkenazi/Sephardic Jewish community has dwindled, mainly due to intermarriage and assimilation. In Barranquilla, I met with members of Congregation Javura Nahariya, another of Rabbi Juan Mejia's egalitarian communities. The community has an unusual group of individuals.

One of the leaders of the community was Tadashi Barros, a Japanese-Colombian engineering student who is in charge of the community's website and social media outreach. Tadashi and his family were kind enough to host me overnight. Another was the congregation's Hebrew School teacher, a 30-year-old woman who had spent a short time during her conversion with a Satmar Chasidic sect active in Colombia. After six months as a Crypto-Jew/quasi-Chasid, Mary Jo joined Javura Nahariya.

In my 36 hours with the Barranquilla community, we were able to identify some important communal needs.

The community would like to have a real Torah Scroll, be it kosher or *pasul* (not kosher), which they think would help build their Jewish identity and would reinforce their commitment to Judaism. They, along with the community in Santa Marta, would benefit greatly from a volunteer teacher who could come and teach basic Hebrew, English, and other classes on different areas of Judaism.

To Conclude:

My brief trip to Colombia was meaningful, informative and lots of fun. I danced salsa with local Jews, led Shabbat

services for egalitarian communities, taught Hebrew School classes in Santa Marta to young children, and learned an infinite amount from each and every one of my newfound friends in Colombia. The trip also reinforced my belief that there is a pressing need for an organized network of Latin American anousim communities. While many emerging Jewish communities are often not accepted by mainstream Jewish congregations, a support network would help reinforce their Judaism and provide them with hope that their dreams of reclaiming the Judaism of their ancestors can be a reality.

Every time I visit a new country, I hear stories of persecution and of the difficulties inherent in former-Crypto Jews reclaiming their heritage. The stories are similar whether in Central America, the interior of Brazil, or the coast of Colombia. What keeps me going, and one of the reasons I am spending 2015 as a Fulbright Scholar in Brazil, is that everyone has a unique story to tell and by being an active listener and a partner in their Judaism, I feel that I am making the world a better place and strengthening the Jewish people.

The Relationship between the Lemba and Kulanu

*By Dr. Rabson Wuriga
Masvingo, Zimbabwe*



*Lots to do. Dr. Rabson Wuriga at work in his study
Photo courtesy of Dr. Wuriga*

Since the late 19th century, the Lemba have been trying to establish an institutional framework that could manage their affairs. These efforts were unsuccessful due to southern African regional political cum military turmoil and cultural upheavals among different tribal groupings.

In the mid 20th century, that situation changed drastically. With the advent of advanced technology, which facilitated communication worldwide, and later, the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, the Lemba became more active in their pursuit of tribal organization. At the same time, Lemba leaders began to reach

out to Western Jewish organizations for help in establishing their place in the Jewish world.

Only one organization was responsive and took interest in the history of the Lemba. That was Kulanu. Kulanu believed as we did that the Lemba were descendents of Jewish traders who came from Israel via Yemen into Africa and were determined to help us take our place in the Jewish world.

Initially, communication took place between the then president and founder of Kulanu Jack Zeller and the president of the Lemba Cultural Association, the late Prof. M. E. R. Mathiva (z'l) of South Africa. The relationship between the two men, leaders of Kulanu and the Lemba respectively, led to an increase in the visibility of the Lemba as a people with a Jewish background. Eventually, there was some acceptance that the Lemba were a pre-rabbinic Jewish community.

Although we had lost the Torah [which Lemba sages and oral tradition continued to celebrate in the form of traditional songs and payers], the Lemba never doubted their heritage and history. Throughout the centuries, they had maintained and cherished the pillars of their religious faith: they continued to practice the ritual of circumcision, the observance of the Sabbath, kashrut (Jewish dietary laws), Schehita (ritual slaughter) and niddah (ritual purity).

But in spite of these religious practices, the Lemba still experienced fragmentation both religious and cultural. This was in large part due to the pressures of assimilation by Christian and Muslim missionaries and the isolation of the Lemba from the rest of the Jewish world. Not only did others not understand the many faces of Judaism, the Lemba themselves became unsure of their place and faith due to the above mentioned losses.

Dr. Rabson Wuriga is Acting Director of the Centre for African and Asian Studies, Great Zimbabwe University, Masvingo, Zimbabwe, and the author of the book: *Of Sacred Times, Rituals and Customs: Oral Traditions of the Lemba Jews of Zimbabwe* (available from kulanu.org/books)



Lemba leaders. From the left, Modreck Maeresera and Dr. Wuriga

What had we lost during the centuries without a Torah to guide us? Where was our place in the Jewish Diaspora?

In the late 1990s, the Lemba asked Kulanu to send a rabbi to South Africa to meet with some members of the Lemba community. The Lemba wanted to understand the difference between the Judaism practiced by mainstream Jews today and the Judaism as practiced by the Lemba since their separation from the Jewish people so many centuries ago. Kulanu recommended Rabbi Leo Abrami of Arizona for this mission. From that dialogue, it was clear to Lemba leaders that we had lost a great deal and that much work was required if we were to return to the mainstream and revive the religion of our forefathers. It also led to a closer engagement between the Lemba and the Jewish world.

Then in 2001 a series of "Recapture Seminars" were convened by the Lemba Cultural Association, not under the auspices of Kulanu as some suggested, but by the Lemba themselves. There were those skeptics who claimed that Kulanu wanted to convert the Lemba to Judaism. A ridiculous suggestion! Members of Lemba communities from both Zimbabwe and South Africa attended the seminars. Conveners also invited Kulanu representatives as a way of engaging fellow Jews from western communities.

After the seminars, Kulanu continued to open doors for the Lemba to meet other Jewish communities through organizations such as the Institute for Jewish Community and Research* that used to organize the International Think Tank Conference. This gave the Lemba a platform to meet other Jewish communities such as Chinese Jewish descendants from Kaifeng, China, the Bnei Israel from India, the Beta Israel from Ethiopia, and others.

Out of these dialogues, some members of the Lemba Zimbabwe community decided that it was critical that we take leadership and organize our people for a full return to our Jewish faith before the pressures of assimilation and missionaries made more inroads among our people. That meant the building of Lemba synagogues, educating Lemba in

how their rituals and practices fit into the overall Jewish religious practice post our exodus from Judaea, and recapturing our ancient Jewish customs and heritage.

The Lemba community in Mapakomhere, Zimbabwe in the Lemba heartland resolved to establish the first Lemba Jewish congregation, and did just that. I lead the congregation each Shabbat in worship services. Kulanu once again stepped up to the plate and offered financial assistance to help us build a synagogue which is currently under construction.** Kulanu also helped in the establishment of the Lemba Synagogue and Community House in the Zimbabwean capital of Harare. This urban center is led by my friend and colleague Modreck Maeresera. Finally, Kulanu has provided teaching materials, teachers, and educational opportunities both in Mapakomhere and in Harare.

Kulanu continues to support the efforts by the Lemba to recapture the culture and religion of their forefathers. These efforts have not nor ever have been imposed on the Lemba community in Zimbabwe and have been the sole decision of the Lemba community.

**Now called Bechol Lashon*

***Additional funds are needed to complete the building and to provide the furnishings. The community also hopes to raise sufficient funds to construct a guest house that can accommodate local and foreign visitors, including guest teachers.*

The Great Zimbabwe Synagogue: a Progress Report

*By Modreck Maeresera
Harare, Zimbabwe*



*Synagogue site. Rabbi Keith Flaks of Jerusalem tours construction site on his visit during Passover
Photo by Nili Flaks*

Last Sunday I traveled to Mapakomhere in the Lemba heartland in the company of a journalist who is doing a story about the Lemba's journey back to mainstream Judaism. We went straight to the site where the synagogue is being built and we found the builders and their helpers busy erecting the walls. All around the building site there were heaps of building material like sand, aggregate stone and bricks. Some newly molded bricks were laid on top of the slabbed foundation to dry.

As Rabson explained, congregants are divided into two teams: the building team and the brick molding team. The building team works Sundays and Mondays and the molding team Wednesdays and Thursdays. Every team includes women who fetch water and cook for the workers. On Sundays, when Rabson is off from work, he uses his car to help fetch water to the building site. If things go well, the structure should be ready for roofing by June. And hopefully, by year's end, the building should be completed.

During my visit, I couldn't help drawing parallels with this week's *parsha* (Torah portion of the week), where the Israelites under Moses leadership came together to build the *mishkan* (Hebrew word for Holy of Holies). It was something that brought the community together,

with each and every person contributing what he or she could afford. They were stronger as a community after that.

I can see the same thing happening here in Mapakomhere. The congregants are united and are of one purpose: they are all contributing to the building of the first ever Lemba-built synagogue in Zimbabwe. When it is finished, each and every person will have played a part and they will see it as their own and they will be proud of the part they played in making it happen. The synagogue is the glue that holds the community together.

Community members still meet every Shabbat in the school classroom, where Rabson leads services. But they are already looking forward to the day they will be holding services in the synagogue.

Thanks to Rabson for multi tasking. Thanks to the villagers for the unity of purpose. And thanks to Kulanu for helping make this happen.

SHALOM

This is my last issue as editor of KulanuNews. It has been a great joy to serve in this position for the last six years. I have had the pleasure of working with writers from around the globe and telling the stories of Jews in far away places, some of whom I have met, most of whom I will never meet. Nevertheless, we all shared the same goal, that of telling the stories of Jewish journeys, of those who want desperately to be a part of our people. Surprisingly, with anti-Semitism on the rise around the world and Jews so often at risk, these hardy and committed souls persist in their quest to join us. It has been an honor to write about them and to publish their stories. A final word for my noble partner in this venture...Serge Etele, our KulanuNews designer. Thank you, Serge.

Judy Manelis, editor

“I have a Confession to make”

By Rabson Wuriga, on visiting the Harare Community House for Services...



*Preparing for Shabbat. Volunteer Sara Eisen, left, helps Brenda make Challah in preparation for the Sabbath meal
Photo by Modreck Maeresera*

... There are so many things to celebrate in the life of a Jew: but the major one should be the return of God's people to his service and finally to his house. I was so touched and impressed...when I visited the Harare Lemba Synagogue. My dreams, my prayers and hope are being fulfilled ...

When I sat there at the back of the shul seeing and listening to, by your permission, Rabbi Modreck Maeresera leading the Shabbat service, there was a mixture of reactions in me. I experienced joy at the return of the Lemba to Judaism and pain at the loss of time and Torah by our ancestors. It was this mixture of pain and joy that made my tears feel like hot needles in my eyes. I was overwhelmed...

Modreck took me by surprise! I felt like I was in any Jewish synagogue around the world. I have no doubt in my mind that he is a great Rabbi. As if this was not enough...I was awed by Brenda, his wife. To me she has become the personification if not reincarnation of the spirit of Ruth. She is such an energetic, powerful, and respectful mother of the house. She is happy and proud of being a Jewish woman. She has gained this huge understanding of Jewish life.



*New Books. Modreck, Brenda and their sons Aviv, 6 and Shlomo, 2 1/2 hold the books brought from Jerusalem by Rabbi Keith and Nili Flaks
Photo by Nili Flaks*

Are There Lost Jewish Tribes in Cameroon?

*By Serge Etele**
Cameroon



*Near the Ngok Lituba hill. From Left: Frederick Ndawo, Serge Etele, Menachem Kuchar, Mr Song, Abia Viany
Photo courtesy of Serge Etele*

In February of 2014, Menachem Kuchar, an emissary of Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, chief rabbi of Efrat, Israel, joined me in Cameroon to examine the claim by some local tribes of their Jewish background. The visit was in response to an article written by Rabbi Israel Oriel Nguimbus, a resident of Great Britain on possible Jewish tribes in Cameroon.

According to the article, Rabbi Oriel's grandmother was a Sabbath observer and lit candles on Friday evenings. When Oriel, who was raised in Cameroon, traveled to Europe for advanced academic studies, he discovered that these observances were Jewish in origin and decided to convert and became a rabbi.

Before I read Rabbi Oriel's article, I had not given much credence to claims by local tribes of their Jewish origins. And there were several, including the Bassa, the Bamileke and the Douala (I later heard about the Mboo in the South West region of Cameroon). The article encouraged us to investigate the claims.

What I did know was that many local tribes (including my own—Eton) had once observed rituals and customs similar to Jewish ones. The time line of these observances put them before the arrival of Christian missionaries, who had discouraged them.

I can remember from my own childhood that we did not eat the animals that are forbidden in the Bible, and we practiced circumcision, definitely not a Christian custom. We also practiced *Halitzah*, which demands that a brother take the wife of his deceased brother or relative, to ensure a child is born to the widow and the husband's name is not lost or forgotten. The custom is no longer practiced.

Menachem had just returned from Spain and Portugal where he was studying the emigration patterns of the Jews after 1391, especially to Africa. He offered to accompany me to visit some of these tribes. In the end, we visited the Bamileke and the Bassa. I was unable to make arrangements with the other tribes during his visit.

**Serge Etele is the leader of the Beth Yeshourun Jewish community of Cameroon and the designer of KulanuNews*



*Bassa leader: Frederick Ndawo
Photo by Serge Etele*

For the purpose of this article, I will focus my comments on the Bassa. Our guides were Frederick Ndawo, a Bassa who had joined my own Beth Yeshourun Jewish Community of Cameroon, and his uncle, Mr Song.

The Bassa tribe

The name Bassa in the Bantu language means “conquerors”. According to Frederick, Bassa tribesmen are taught that they are Jews. As in many parts of the world, tribal leaders are the keepers of all traditions and history, which they impart through an oral tradition. Frederick is one of his tribe’s leaders.

History

According to Frederick, the Bassa immigrated to Africa from Egypt thousands of years ago with Melek, their chief and one of the great grandsons of Judah, son of Jacob. The Bassa oral tradition describes Melek as a military chief in the Egyptian army who chose to stay behind to protect his privileges rather than to follow the uncertain journey espoused by Moses. However, when Melek learned of the death of Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea, he feared the Egyptians would take

revenge against the Hebrews who had remained behind.

With the rest of the Israelites gone, Melek led his family and followers from Egypt. First, they traveled south along the Nile, but eventually moved westward, crossed Nigeria, and entered Cameroon. They eventually reached Ngok Lituba, their final destination. The Bassa called G-d, *Elolom*, the “God of the creation”) and, according to tradition, it was G-d who spoke to Melek and directed him to Ngok Lituba.

The Ngok Lituba Hill

Throughout the centuries, the hill of Ngok Lituba has served as the holiest place of the Bassa people, the place where they used to gather once a year to perform sacrifices. They did this for centuries until German priests arrived in Cameroon in 1845 and forbade the practice. The community continued with their sacrifices in secret until

the arrival of the French who stopped them completely by putting to death anyone who performed the sacrifices according to their ancient tradition.

Rites and customs of the Bassa

Circumcision

Whenever possible, circumcision was performed on the eighth day after the birth of a son, and was considered a festive event. If the tribal leader responsible for circumcisions was not available, uncircumcised children would be gathered together later between their eighth and 11th year and would be circumcised in a group ceremony all on the same day.

Family’s purity Laws

When a woman was in her menstrual period, she isolated herself for eight days. During that period, she would not have intercourse with her husband and was not allowed to cook food for her family or do any kind of work in the house. After eight days, she performed her purification and then resumed her normal life.

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*Travel Guide. The Bassa believe the Ngok Lituba Hill (pictured) traveled in front of them from Egypt to Cameroon
Photo by Serge Etele*

Dietary Laws

The Bassa did not eat the animals forbidden in the Bible. They did not eat blood. And when they slaughtered an animal, they would dig a hole and let the blood flow into it. Then they covered it over.

A day of rest

Bassa worked during six days and rested on the seventh, called *Ngwa noye u Nlo hinoye* (the day of rest). The 7th day was a special day with no agricultural work allowed. People stayed in the village and spent time in rejoicing, eating and drinking and dancing. The priests would pray to Elolom.

The calendar

The Bassa followed a lunar calendar. They watched the moon to know when to celebrate the new month.

Purification

Anyone who attended a funeral had to perform purification. Men had to perform purification after any sexual intercourse. Purification consisted of washing oneself with a plant they call hyssop, then immersing oneself in a river. It could be only one activity or both.

Holidays

The most important Bassa holiday was the Gansaye festival (The Festival of Purification) celebrated at the foot of Ngok Lituba Hill, which took place once a year, some time between the ninth and the 11th month. People came from all the villages and brought animal sacrifices. Other holidays included a new moon festival and a harvest festival.

Priests

The priests were guardians of tribal traditions and ruled over the society. They played many roles, some were judges, others performed rituals.

Marriage

Marriages were arranged between families. The dowry brought by the man's family had to include 70 items. A man who could not afford a dowry would work for the wife's family for an agreed period of time after which he received his wife.

The Bassa didn't give their daughters to other tribes that they called uncircumcised. The only tribe they al-

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*Friends. Serge Etele and Menachem Kuchar in Israel
Photo by Enosh Keki*

lowed their daughter to marry was the Eton tribe that they believed descended from a brother of one of their ancestors.

Mourning

Five days after the burying of a man and four days after that of a woman, there was a rite of separation that allowed the soul to leave the area and not continue to wander around.

Conclusion

The above descriptions are abbreviated, but demonstrate some similarities to Jewish customs and rituals. The information was given to us by Frederick and his uncle, Mr. Song who is a Bassa chief. During our discussion with Frederick and Mr. Song, Menachem asked them where they learned about the Shabbat if they didn't attend the giving of the Torah in the desert of Sinai. They told him the giving of the Torah was only a revelation of something the people already knew from their ancestors.

Could these customs be a result of Bassa exposure to the Christian Bible? No Christian group is known to have adopted such practices. Or are they really part of the tribe of Yehuda as they claim? Most of these practices have fallen into disuse over many years. We will

probably never know if they represent a real link to the ancient Israelites.

Even with their descriptions of ancient practices, neither Frederick nor his uncle recognizes Rabbi Oriël's claims regarding Bassa Jewish practices. Nor do they claim to be one of the lost tribes exiled from Israel as does the Bamileke tribe. They say they never went into the Promised Land but they know they will also go there one day and rejoin their brothers from whom they have been separated for 3,500 years. According to the Midrash, only 20% of the Israelite population in Egypt left with Moses, with 80% remaining behind. Does this corroborate Frederick's story? We may never know.

New School:

My community Beth Yeshourun will be launching a Jewish school in September, B'H. Students will be welcome from all faiths, but will receive an education based on Torah values. We expect to have 600 students from primary school to high school. We already have the site and received the necessary authorization. We are now recruiting teachers. We hope volunteers from abroad will come and teach English and Jewish subjects such as Talmud, Hebrew, Bible and ethics.

Kulanu 2015 Tribute Honors Activist and Board Member Daneel Schaechter



Tribute Honoree: Daneel Schaechter

Daneel Schaechter at 23 is Kulanu's Latin America coordinator and the youngest member of the Kulanu Board of Directors. Since his senior year in high school, he has worked as a passionate, resourceful and effective advocate for Kulanu. His youthful energy and enthusiasm, as well as his knowledge and love of Judaism, have enabled him to meet and introduce Kulanu and the world to new Jewish communities throughout Latin America. In recognition of his extraordinary accomplishments and commitment, Daneel was chosen as Kulanu's 2015 honoree.

A Little about Daneel

While still in high school, Daneel was already an activist and a mover and shaker. He was on the executive board of Yugntruf: Youth for Yiddish, an organization dedicated to the preservation of Yiddish as a spoken, living language. As a college student at the University of Pennsylvania, Daneel received several research

awards for oral history projects in Latin America. In addition, he was a Fellow at Jerusalem's Ein Prat Academy for Leadership, an alumnus of Germany's Close Up Fellowship (in Berlin), an organization working to strengthen German-American-Israeli foreign relations, and a founding member of Action: Active Cross-Cultural Training In Our Neighborhood for disadvantaged elementary schools in Philadelphia.

Daneel brought that same enthusiasm and zeal to his work for Kulanu, where he has focused on isolated and emerging Jewish communities in Latin America. Daneel, who is fluent in Spanish (as well as English, Yiddish, Hebrew and Portuguese), has been able to interact with members of the various communities he has visited as well as to help them on their Jewish journey, leading services and teaching Jewish customs and rituals. In addition, he has assisted Kulanu in establishing and maintaining contact with Jewish communities in Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua and Peru.

Thanks to his efforts, Kulanu has been able to assist these vibrant and hopeful communities through visitations by Kulanu supporters and activists. In addition, Kulanu has supplied communities with Jewish ritual objects and educational materials for their classes in Judaism and Hebrew. Last year, for example, Daneel, organized and directed the purchase and distribution of siddurim and educational materials for needy communities in Brazil, Guatemala and Ecuador through a Kulanu grant from The Good People Fund, and the transmittal of funds for a Hebrew school classroom to Colombia.

In the summer 2013, after graduating magna cum laude from the University of Pennsylvania, Daneel was awarded a prestigious internship at the United States Embassy in Quito, Ecuador. While in Ecuador, Daneel was able to meet with and mentor several emerging communities of Jews. This year, Daneel is residing in Recife, Brazil as a Fulbright Scholar teaching English at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco, working at a local startup company, and helping the Anousim communities in Brazil.

Please join us as we honor Daneel Schaechter, the vanguard of a new generation of Kulanu leaders. See <http://www.kulanu.org/tribute/#contribute> to contribute to Daneel's tribute.



THANK YOU, DONORS!

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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. Thank you!

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President's Letter



Harriet Bograd
Photo by Viviane Topp

friends from Ethiopia, Burundi, Uganda, and the US. He has taught me so much of what I needed to know to become Kulanu's president.

Judy Manelis joined Kulanu's board in 2008 and became vice president soon afterward. Her many years working as an executive for national United Jewish Appeal, UJA-Federation of New York City and Hadassah, as well as her years in Jewish journalism, proved a wonderful foundation for her work with Kulanu. In 2009, Judy became the editor of KulanuNews. I first got to know Judy when she was developing a rich multicultural program at the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan. Judy brought to our board a keen mind and a passion for our work, and spent endless hours on Kulanu tasks. She also has been giving wonderful presentations about Kulanu. Collaborating first with Enid Bloch and then with Serge Etele as photo and layout editors, and building on the impressive foundation set by Karen and Aron Primack, she developed our magazine into a rich and beautiful publication that has been universally lauded by both volunteers and outside readers.

Kulanu has been blessed with many extraordinary volunteers. This spring has been a time of transition, with three key board members stepping off the board and two new board members stepping in. We deeply appreciate the service and devotion of each of these outstanding leaders.

Jack Zeller founded Kulanu in 1993. His vision, passion, warmth, and tireless energy have guided Kulanu ever since, as president until 2008 and then as board member. He will continue as Kulanu's president emeritus and volunteer. Jack's activism began when he served as a board member for American Association for Ethiopian Jews. After Operation Solomon, which airlifted thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel in 1991, Jack and his wife Dr. Diane Zeller, a specialist in African history, decided to take on the broader issue of dispersed and isolated Jewish communities. Over the years, he has played a special role in working with Tutsis, Lemba, and Ethiopians. He has emphasized the idea of Jews as a world-wide family. He embraces new volunteers and new communities that want to work with us. Jack and Diane have offered extraordinary home hospitality to

Marcy Stein called me to ask about Kulanu in January, 2012, and I was so impressed that I invited her to visit a board meeting the next evening, and soon after we invited her to join the board. She manages both not-for-profit and commercial projects for Levien & Company, a construction consulting firm in New York. Marcy has nearly 20 years of project management experience. Her varied professional experiences and relationships, as well as her ability to assist with construction plans and business development, made Marcy an excellent addition to the Kulanu board. The Kasuku Jewish community in Kenya particularly appreciated her helping them envision their future synagogue.

Our board will miss the day-to-day involvement of Jack, Judy and Marcy in our deliberations, and wish them well as they move on.

We now are enjoying getting to know two new board members: Judi Kloper, who has been attending board conference calls while traveling in India, and Isaac Reshad, who is a master networker. Watch for more about them on our web site (kulanu.org/about-kulanu).

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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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www.kulanu.org/about-kulanu

Magazine Editor: Judith Manelis
Layout and Photography Editor: Serge Etele

Fall 2015 Lemba Leader to Tour US



Modreck Maeresera, a talented visionary and an impressive leader of the Lemba Jewish community of Zimbabwe, will visit North America this fall to share the story of his community. The speaking tour will run from October 15 to November 23.

Modreck, who is the prayer leader in the Harare Lemba Cultural Center and Synagogue, will describe the Lemba story of perseverance and commitment to Judaism over hundreds of years, as well as their recent reconnection to the worldwide Jewish community. In his presentation, he will share the Lemba’s fascinating history and the community’s devout religious observances passed down through generations of oral tradition, practices that mirror our own today.

Recent DNA research has found the “Cohen” priestly gene among the Lemba. These results have substantiated Lemba oral history of the community’s descent from ancient Israelites.

The Lemba number many thousands and are found today in Zimbabwe and South Africa. Modreck will also discuss the threat to Lemba’s Jewish traditions by both Christian and Moslem missionaries.

For more information about Modreck and on how your community can invite him to visit your community, visit <http://www.kulanu.org/lemba/speakingtour2015.php>



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*Modreck Maeresera and Rabson Wuriga pray on a hillside near Masvingo, Zimbabwe with
Rabbi Keith Flaks of Jerusalem during his visit to the Lemba with his wife Nili
Photo by Nili Flaks*