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PHOTO BY JOSHUA KRISTAL

Mikveh Moments in Madagascar: Immersion and Conversion on the Other Side of the World

by Bonita Nathan Sussman

Reprinted from blog *Mayyim Hayyim*, July 20 2016

This past May, a delegation organized by Kulanu journeyed to Madagascar. It was the culmination of a long process that brought these Malagasy people into the Jewish faith through conversion.

After ascertaining that all the men in Madagascar who wanted to convert to Judaism were proudly circumcised (in Madagascar all men are, per the cultural norm) and they only needed *hatafat dam brit* (a symbolic blood draw done with a hemoglobin needle used by diabetics), our focus was redirected toward the *mikveh*. It was actually the first question we asked more than two years ago and the last question to be

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resolved only four days before we arrived with the *Beit Din* (the Rabbinical Court) to perform the conversions for what we thought would be 60 people. Little did we know it would turn into 120!

Petoela, the communal leader tasked with the responsibility of determining the mikveh location, approached the parks department and asked if he could construct a temporary structure to be removed after the dunking. The answer was “NO!” Thereafter ensued a flood of *Halachic* (legal) questions to the *Beit Din*. Could they dunk with loose-fitting clothes on? There seemed to be precedents in the rabbinic literature for this, and the general consensus was that it may be permitted. However, the concern arose that if potential converts told people they immersed with clothes on, the established Jewish community would most likely denigrate their conversions--doesn't everyone know immersion for real conversion must be naked?!

Petoela had to go back to the drawing board. He finally found a river about an hour and a half out of town, some long bus rides away. The river was deep enough, but Peteola still needed to deal with the concern of privacy. After another flurry of emails, we came up with a tarp and wood structure.



Here's Madagascar!

The men lined up to enter the changing room and dunked one at a time. The women and children did too. Dunk first, say the *bracha* (blessing), *asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav vstivanu al hat'vila*. It seems they all knew this *bracha* by heart with little coaching. Then



PHOTO BY SHEP WAHNON

Women and children waiting their turn at the mikveh

Madagascar, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

dunk two more times. The word *kosher*, meaning that the immersion was done properly, as spoken by the *mikveh* lady and rabbis must have sounded to the new converts like words from heaven.

After community members completed their immersions, the *Beit Din* drew them all together, the men first and then the women. Each group recited the *Shema* and *V'ahavta* followed by joyous dancing.

When I told Elysha, one of the English-speaking Malagasy women, that I would be writing for *Mayyim Hayyim* about the Madagascar *mikveh* experience, I asked her what it meant to her. Elysha referred to the *midrash* that says that a convert becomes like a newborn baby. She said to me, "It is a unique experience to be reborn. I expected that moment for a long time. The *mikveh* was among the best days in my life."

Bonita Nathan Sussman serves as Vice President of Kulanu. She is so glad to see that the Jewish men and women of Madagascar appreciated and valued the *mitzvah* of *tevilah* (immersion) as a cornerstone of their conversion. *Mikveh* is a *mitzvah* that has tied Jewish people together throughout Jewish history.



PHOTO BY BARBARA VINICK

Learning to be Jewish: Beit Midrash study group



PHOTO BY TOUV'YAH BEN YOHANAN

Practicing Torah trope

The Lemba in Zimbabwe: Supporting Each Other and Overcoming Obstacles

by Modreck Maeresera and Colleagues

All photos courtesy of the Lemba Jewish Community



Digging trenches for the irrigation project

Editor's Note: Kulanu has been supporting the Harare Lemba Synagogue in Zimbabwe since 2013. This Lemba community which descends from ancient Israel has proudly embraced rabbinic Judaism and, though in the midst of a very difficult environmental emergency (a drought and political and economic crisis), its people have continually worked very hard to overcome mounting obstacles. This past year we sent an appeal for help with the emergency food program to Kulanu's supporters—thank you for all your support. Thank you to Modreck Maeresera and his colleagues from the Harare Lemba Synagogue for this most recent update as presented in the synagogue's newsletter.

Harare Lemba Synagogue Newsletter

Volume 1 Issue #2 November 2016

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President's Message:

This newsletter is our official publication through which we plan to communicate with our membership, the Lemba community worldwide, our sponsors, our

friends and well-wishers so that we can keep all of you updated about what's going on at the Harare Lemba Synagogue. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Kulanu, our donors, and everybody who has contributed, and is contributing, to make the HLS dream a reality. We started the HLS to create a community for the Lemba who migrated from the villages to the cities for one reason or another. Back in the villages we live in closely-knit communities but when we come to the cities we are like fish that have been taken out of water. Now we have somewhere where we can meet, interact, and practice our religion.

It's slightly more than three years since we started the HLS; it was a slow start with a handful of people coming to attend services on Shabbat. However, the past three years have seen us grow from a congregation of a handful of Lemba to a congregation of 75 strong people of different tribes and races. We have been welcoming everybody who is interested in practicing Judaism, be they Lemba or not. We have also been welcoming visitors from all over the world, including Jews who come to Zimbabwe for business or tourism and are in need of a place where they can attend services or celebrate *chagim* (festivals). We have had four visitors so far this year from the UK, the USA, and South Africa. We are

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happy that we have been able to provide such services and we hope that we will always continue to provide those.

To Kulanu, our donors, and friends, we would like thank you for helping us create this community. Our children will grow up within this community and system that you have helped us create. On Shabbat and chagim, the HLS is always a hive of activity; noisy kids playing together and adults davening. After the service we sit to eat lunch; this is a time to talk about the villages that we left but are still linked to, this community that we now belong to, and our collective hopes for the future as the HLS community. During the weekdays, women come to work on their mushroom project and students come to attend their Judaica lessons. This now truly feels like a community and we would like to thank all who have contributed to make it happen.

*Todah Rabbah,
Modreck*

High Holidays to Remember

This year 5777 was the fourth time that we celebrated Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur at HLS. Our previous celebrations were pretty basic for several reasons, the main one being we are still learning about rabbinical Judaism, having been in isolation for hundreds of years. Our previous Rosh Hashanah observance involved the ritual of eating apples dipped in honey and blowing the shofar. This year it was different because we had learned a lot about Rosh Hashanah and also because, unlike the previous years, we had *machzorim* sourced for us by Barbara Vinick of Kulanu. Our understanding of the Rosh Hashanah service was helped by the lessons that I had with Jevin Eagle (USA) and Abe Reichman (Israel) over Skype.

Both gentlemen taught me about the background of Rosh Hashanah, the sources of the holidays in the Torah, the *Halachah* (law) and *minhagim* (traditions) associated with it. We learned about the structure of the Rosh Hashanah service and how to lead it. A lot of questions that I had were answered, such as: why we call it the New Year, yet it is observed on the first and second day of the 7th month; why it was never referred to as Rosh Hashanah in the Torah; why we have more than one new year in Judaism. The result of these lessons was that our Rosh Hashanah service had a lot of meaning for us. We had a natural *Ba'al Tekiah* (shofar



Zhou practicing blowing the shofar before the Erev Rosh Hashanah service

blower) in Brighton Zhou. This young man is very talented and the notes came out clear and loud. *Hashem* willing, we will get him trained by a professional *Ba'al Tekiah* so he can also train others in the community.

The ladies started preparing for the holidays two days before, baking cakes and sweet round pancakes. We had a hive of activity the whole week leading to the holidays. I taught what I learned with Abe and Jevin and from reading books in our library, as well as from the internet, to a group of adults I study with on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We had a Rosh Hashanah evening service on Sunday, *Shacharit* and *Mincha* services on Monday and a *Shacharit* service on Tuesday, and on Wednesday we had an all-day Yom Kippur service. Our high holidays were wonderful and we give thanks to Kulanu for sponsoring us and to Abe and Jevin for teaching us.

High Holidays in Eretz Israel

by Simcha Natasha Butchart

I have officially been in Jerusalem for approximately two months. Two months which have been unique, amazing, and on some occasions filled with anxiety.

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Upon arrival I was rather concerned about the language barrier. My spoken Hebrew definitely needed some exercise and walking on the streets of Jerusalem was the best way to do so. It was perfectly normal to have someone stop me on the street and ask me directions in Hebrew, and at those moments I realized that I did not know how to say ‘around the corner,’ or ‘turn right or left.’ I eventually began to settle in after losing my way on the streets of Jerusalem, and eventually learned to navigate my way home. I remember being so proud of myself when someone asked for directions and I was able to respond in Hebrew immediately without the usual awkward pause while I tried to process in my head how to respond.

I am currently studying in the year program at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in the social justice track. I am so grateful to have this opportunity to advance my knowledge in Judaism while living in Jerusalem. Studying at Pardes means that I have the wonderful opportunity of experiencing the *chagim* in Jerusalem. It is astonishing to have so much choice and a variety of kosher food, Judaica, and endless choices of *shuls* to attend on Shabbat and *chaggim*.

One memorable moment was *Selichot* at the Western Wall before Yom Kippur. It was overwhelming in a positive way to see such a huge crowd of people gather at the Western Wall for *Selichot* that night, and praying all together in one voice, and most of all for me as I spoke all my prayers in Hebrew. Many books and *siddurim* here are mostly in Hebrew, whereas I was used to a *siddur* with Hebrew and English.

Yom Kippur was a totally different experience. All businesses close on this day and there are no cars on the streets. The atmosphere changes and there is a quiet stillness reminding you that it indeed is an important day. Children play and bicycle in the streets. As I walked to *shul* I was greeted by the silence in Jerusalem, and I saw many people dressed in white making their way to *shul* as well.

*Right: Cooking for
Rosh Hashanah*



Simcha Natasha Butchart

Sukkot made me somewhat nostalgic as I began to think of people back home and wish they could experience the festive feeling in Jerusalem during this time. It is hard to have access to kosher food and products in my country, let alone be able to buy a Lulav and Etrog for Sukkot. Jerusalem has all this in abundance. I love the fact that a stranger can walk past me and say ‘*Chag Sameach*’ and I respond. I then see the same stranger the next day, and the next day again, and eventually this person becomes a familiar stranger. Jerusalem is a big city, but it is a small city too.





Families receiving food supplies

I have so much to share about my experiences while here in Israel and will continue to share my journey. I look forward to the day that people from my community will have the same experiences as I am having, and will have greater chances to explore Jerusalem and Israel in a way that is personal for them. I would love to be able to help people from my community to share their story, and make the great journey to visit the land of Israel.

A final word to everyone back home: work hard on your spoken Hebrew--it will come in handy when you arrive here. You will thank me for this advice later!

Emergency Food Program

It's now been four months since we started the emergency food program, a program which was necessitated by the existence of a two year drought coupled with an economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe.

We appealed to the outside Jewish world and through Kulanu we received money to buy food for needy families. Every month the Harare Lemba Synagogue food committee has been buying foodstuffs, including beans, dried Kapenda fish, maize (corn) meal, milk,

and flour worth \$1000. There have been noticeable changes in the congregation since the program was started: kids who were malnourished are now looking healthy, breastfeeding mothers have enough milk for their suckling babies, and stressed fathers who couldn't provide food for their families have peace of mind. We are a happy, healthy community thanks to Kulanu and to our donors. We intend for this program to run until June 2017 and by that time we expect the country to

Tafadzwa Hwingwiri, a married father of two, expressed his appreciation for Kulanu's assistance, writing, "life has become difficult to live here in Zimbabwe, considering the harsh economic conditions of the country and drought which has seen the majority populace suffer. For us Lemba, we are very grateful after being rescued from such a scenario. The food program has seen us having adequate meals daily. The monthly food ration has relieved us physically, socially, morally and even psychologically. As a family, our budget is no longer strained since basic needs are now being addressed by the program. The little income that we get is now able to address some issues such as rental rates and school fees which had become difficult to meet before the provisions. We continue to pray to G-d that the program may stay till the economy stabilizes and we have a bumper harvest."

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Trucks delivering pipes and tanks for the irrigation project

The Buhera Irrigation Project

The Buhera irrigation scheme was born out of the need to find a lasting solution to food shortages for both the people in the village and the members of the Harare Lemba Synagogue. Frequent droughts and unpredictable rainfall patterns have all contributed to perennial food shortages experienced in Zimbabwe as a whole. Added to the economic meltdown and political crisis, the result is the country is practically a disaster zone. This has led to various NGOs converging in the country offering food assistance in the countryside and cities alike.

As noted above, at the Harare Lemba Synagogue we launched, with help, the emergency food program which offers food assistance to needy families in the congregation. But this program cannot go on forever. As the saying goes, it's best to teach people to catch fish than to always give them fish. The communal areas in rural Zimbabwe have enough land to grow food to sufficiently provide for people's food needs and more. So land is not the problem, but rather lack of infrastructure development that can make it possible for the villagers to grow food throughout the whole year.

As I explained above, Zimbabwe has been experiencing frequent droughts and erratic rainfall patterns which make it nearly impossible to grow food while depending on rainfall alone. Also, over the years the droughts

led to the decimation of the village herd of cattle. Cattle are a priceless asset; they are used as oxen power when tilling the land, and without them the villagers cannot till enough land to grow enough food for their consumption requirements. Most of them now depend on zero tillage, meaning that they are digging holes and planting on untilled pieces of land.

Therefore, the village irrigation scheme was created to provide irrigation infrastructure to Zvakavapano village in Buhera. This Lemba village was chosen for several reasons, the most important being there was already some infrastructure development in the form of a borehole, a pump, and a diesel generator. A survey and borehole capacity test done by a local irrigation engineering company confirmed that the borehole had more than enough water for our irrigation plans.

Through Kulanu, well-wishers raised funds to start drip installation on two hectares of land. We found an Israeli company, Drip Tech, which sells such irrigation equipment as well as recommends agents who install the drip equipment. The first step is to fence the land that will be put under drip, and as we are writing this article a fence is being installed on the land. The fence covers not just the two hectares targeted for initial drip irrigation installation, but a total of six hectares so as to provide for possible expansion in the future. Water tanks and pipes have also been installed.

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Once this system becomes operational, which it will be by mid-November 2016, it will provide lasting solutions to both the Harare Lemba Synagogue and the village's food security problems. For the villagers who have land but cannot produce anything on it because of erratic rainfall, the irrigation scheme will be an insurance, a guarantee that if they grow crops they will harvest them. Such a guarantee did not exist before. Many times the villagers planted and weeded their crops only to watch their efforts go to naught as they watched their crops wither and dry up for lack of rain. Now they have a place where they will plant and will be guaranteed a harvest.

Having to depend on rainfall also meant that the village farms were productive for only six months during the rainy season; during the dry season the villagers and their farms were idle, with no farming activities whatsoever taking place. From June to November they sat and waited for the next rainy season. With nothing much to do in the village, the young people left the village for the city where they hoped to make a living. But, in most cases, for them the city is worse than the village. With Zimbabwe's unemployment rate above 90%, the city has nothing to offer to the young Lemba who abandoned the villages of their origins hoping to make it big in the city.

This is about to change, as irrigation will mean the villagers will be able to grow three crops a year, keeping them busy for all twelve months. For the first time in many years, they will have enough food to eat. We are sure that bringing back productivity into village farms will stem the rural-urban migration. The youth will have work and a life in the village and will no longer need to lose themselves in the harsh, cold, and inhospitable city life.

The irrigation project is a win-win situation for both the village and the Harare Lemba Synagogue. The village has the land and water and will provide the labor. The funds to install the irrigation are being raised through the synagogue. Once the harvest comes, the bounty will be shared by the village and the synagogue. The harvest from the farm will replace the emergency food program.

The farm will pay for its day-to-day running with those who work on it to produce crops getting a percentage of the produce as payment. Surplus produce will be shared on 50-50 basis between the synagogue and the village. The village irrigation project is just a pilot project, and we hope every Lemba village will have

a similar project. It is our solution to the Lemba food problems and a way of empowering them to take charge of their lives.

HLS Learning Programs

As a young congregation, the HLS still has a lot to learn about rabbinical Judaism. As a people who have been isolated from mainstream Judaism and have only started to come back with the start of HLS, we have a lot of catching up to do; we have to make learning an integral part of our lives and of HLS. In the previous years we studied with teachers from the USA, France and Israel, including teachers brought to us by Kulanu (the Bergs, Feinbergs, Guershon Nduwa, Sara Eisen, Keith and Nili Flaks).

We are still connected to all these teachers: the Feinbergs record the trope for the weekly *parsha* and a group of people who are learning to be *Ba'al Koreh* (Torah reader) can practice to chant Torah, Rav Keith still posts lessons to us via email, and we have songs that Sara Eisen recorded before she left for the USA. We also have teachers who teach us via Skype, such as Abe Reichman and Jevin Eagle. Since we cannot study together on Skype as a big group, because of equipment and logistical constraints, we have arranged it so that Modreck learns with the teachers on Skype and then he in turn teaches a class on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We also have started a WhatsApp learning group which has more than twenty people.

Our congregation is growing! To date we have a total of 75 members who are registered with the congregation, with an average of 45 members attending services. Since May of this year, fifteen new members have joined us. These members had no chance to learn with the previous teachers, so they had to start learning from scratch; we started teaching them to read Hebrew using the Hebrew book sourced for us by Elaine and Irwin Berg from the National Jewish Outreach Program (NJOP). We have made copies for every student so that they take them to learn at home.

Now we are teaching them liturgy and about the holidays so that they catch up with the old members. In December during the school holidays we will have another class for the children. We would like to thank all our teachers past and present. May *Hashem* bless you for your generosity.

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Living Halacha:

**Lemba Kashrut Laws on Receiving Meat
from non-Lemba Neighbors
After Doing *Shechita* for Them**

For hundreds of years the Lemba have been living alongside their non-Lemba neighbors and friends. With time the different groups learned to accept and be tolerant towards each other. The Lemba even helped their non-Lemba friends to till their lands since the Lemba kept large herds of cattle which are used to draw ploughs. In turn, the non-Lemba helped the Lemba harvest and weed their fields. Because of the amicable relationship that exists between us and our non-Lemba friends, when our friends want to slaughter their livestock, they call a Lemba *shochet* to do the slaughtering.

There are several reasons why they call a Lemba *shochet* to slaughter their animals. Living alongside the Lemba for hundreds of years has resulted in some of the non-Lemba adopting some Lemba customs. They believe the Lemba way of slaughtering animals is the best health-wise. Some of them slaughter animals so they can sell the meat, and having a Lemba *shochet* to slaughter is a way of making sure that their Lemba neighbors will also buy the meat.

Usually after slaughtering an animal a *shochet* is given some meat as payment. However, there were several Halachic questions that arose from this custom of getting meat as payment for slaughtering non-Lemba

livestock. One particular incident led to a very memorable Halachic discourse during a Lemba Cultural Association annual general meeting at Mapakomhere in January 2014.

A Lemba *shochet* had slaughtered a cow for his non-Lemba neighbor but the *shochet* didn't carry his meat immediately because it was too heavy for him. Instead he went back home to get a wheelbarrow so he could come fetch his meat. Meanwhile another non-Lemba who resides in the same village had a sick ox that died naturally during the night and he didn't burn or bury the carcass, as is custom in such situations. Instead, they skinned the animal and shared the meat with his neighbors.

The non-Lemba who had his ox slaughtered by a Lemba also got a portion of the non-kosher meat; the slaughtered meat and the *treif* meat got mixed together before the *shochet* came to collect his share. When the Lemba *shochet* came to collect his share he didn't know that the meat from the ox he slaughtered had gotten mixed with the meat from the ox that died naturally. So when the incident came to light it led to the great Halachic debate led by Dr. Rabson Wuriga in January 2014 at an LCA annual general conference.

Many Lemba elders had converged at Mapakomhere from different districts. In the end the elders laid down rules about accepting meat portions from our non-Lemba neighbors after we slaughter for them.

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Thank you, friends!

Lemba, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 10

Below are a list of rules and guidelines that came from the discussion:

- a) A *shochet* should carry his portion immediately after slaughter; he cannot leave his portion at a non-Lemba's home and come back later to collect his portion, since there will be no way of knowing if the meat had gotten mixed with non-kosher meat and other substances.
- b) Other Lemba who want to buy meat slaughtered by a Lemba *shochet* must come to buy the meat on the spot before the meat gets carried into the non-Lemba's home. There must always be a Lemba present to observe the selling process to make sure that no non-Lemba knives and axes are used. If, at any point, the meat is left unmonitored by a Lemba man, the meat becomes unclean for the Lemba.
- c) Lemba men must avoid any jerky from non-Lemba whether the animal was slaughtered by a Lemba or not, because there is really no way of telling whether it's the same meat or not. Also there is no way of telling where the meat was stored and how it was dried, so anything that goes into a non-Lemba's home becomes unclean for the Lemba.

This incident and discussion reminds me of what happened in my own home village in Buhera. A Lemba man's cow was struck by lightning while grazing in the pasture. The Lemba man, maybe because the loss of the cow was too much for him, ended up slitting the throat of the already-dead cow, planning to sell the meat to his fellow villagers. Some villagers bought the meat in front of some villagers who had seen the dead cow before the owner "*schitered*" it, and the villagers told the unlucky villagers that the meat they bought was from an unslaughtered cow. In the end, the unscrupulous Lemba man was lashed at the village head's court and he was fined a cow. The villagers who had eaten the meat went for a cleansing ceremony at the village priest's house. As a result of this incident the following laws were passed:

- a) Any animal that is supposed to be consumed by the Lemba public must be slaughtered in the presence of 5 or more people.
- b) A group of official village *shochetim* were elected to slaughter animals for the villagers.
- c) The village headman has to give his approval before any meat is sold to the public.

These Halachic rulings and the incidents that led to the laying down of the rulings are worth noting, since we can be confronted by the same problems in our respective communities.

LETTER TO MODRECK AND CHEVRE

November 2016

Dear Modreck and Chevre,

Thank you for sending this well-written and informative newsletter. *Yasher koach* to you and your membership for what you have achieved and what you are continuing to do as part of your emerging community.

My husband and I were among the international visitors to the Harare Lemba Synagogue this past July. It was a wonderful experience. I was impressed by the warmth, welcome, shared leadership, and care for the welfare, knowledge and the spiritual development of your membership.

As someone who works regularly with people and projects in Zimbabwe, I want to reaffirm the incredible hardships facing the Lemba community and others in your country today. Between the drought, rising prices, deteriorating infrastructure, recent government policies and reintroduction of a Zimbabwe-only currency, and your country's incredibly high unemployment (that pushes almost 90% of the people into the informal sector), almost every interaction one has in Zimbabwe is one of hardship, struggle, and crisis.

But through your leadership, Kulanu's support, and the generosity of other educators and volunteers (true '*lamed-vovniks*'), the Harare Lemba Synagogue has become a place of light, hope, learning and mutual caregiving. In these ways, and so many others, you express the very essence of what Judaism is about.

I look forward to spending time with you again and wish everyone a good new year with easier times ahead.

With kind regards, yours truly,
Lucy Steinitz (and Bernd Kiekebusch)



Evocative photograph of Lemba villagers planting corn

***Jewish Identity Among the Igbo of Nigeria:
Israel's "Lost Tribe" and the Question of Belonging in the Jewish State***
by Daniel Lis (African World Press, NJ 2015)

REVIEWED BY REMY ILONA

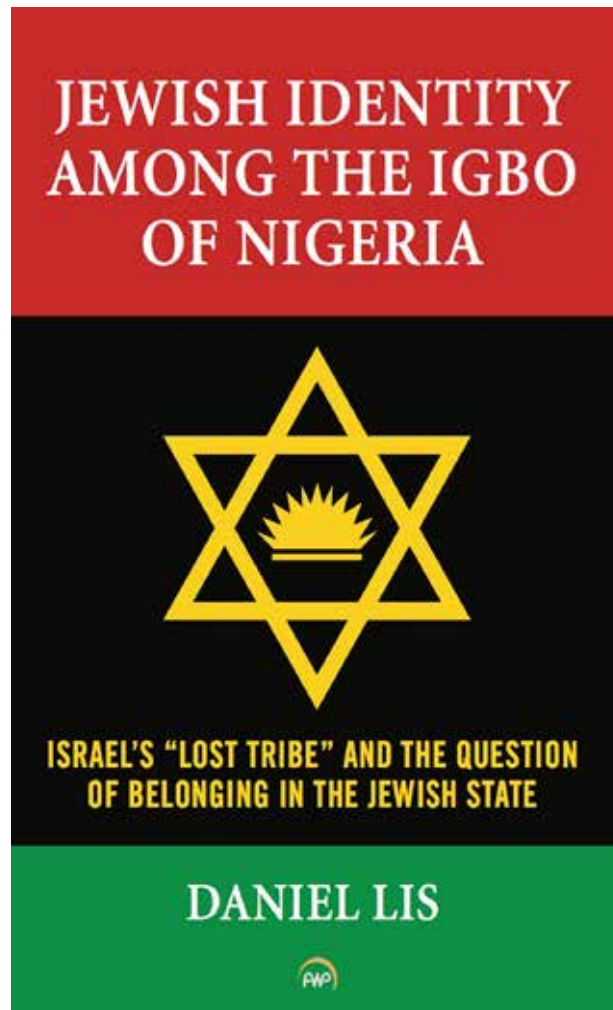
Daniel Lis, PhD, is a Swiss-Israeli social anthropologist who earned his doctorate in Jewish Studies from the University of Basel, Switzerland. He studied general Igbo history, Igbo identification as Jews, and Igbo cultural history as part of his doctoral work. A major aim of his work was to determine if the Igbo actually have ancestral linkages with the ancient Israelites, and how both the Igbo and the Jews, in the Diaspora and in Israel, have responded to and treated each other in modern times.

Jewish Identity Among The Igbo of Nigeria: Israel's "Lost Tribe" and the Question of Belonging in the Jewish State came to fruition as a result of Dr. Daniel Lis having met an Igbo gentleman in Switzerland who told him that he was Jewish and that the Igbo are Jewish. Dr. Lis traveled to Nigeria, touring many cities and various parts of Igboland. While in Nigeria he interviewed many Igbo: in buses and taxis, on motorcycle rides, in people's homes, in the synagogues, and at various Igbo communities such as Nri, which is the headquarters of a certain class of the Igbo priesthood.

He also went to my hometown, Ozubulu. While traveling in Igboland, Dr. Lis visited Abia State University in Abia State and the University of Nigeria in Enugu State to hear what the scholars in both institutions knew about the subject of the Igbo as descendants of the Hebrews. He interviewed officials of the Israeli embassy in Abuja and other Jews living and doing business there as well. After his journey through Nigeria, he traveled back to Europe and attended numerous meetings of the Igbo in his native Switzerland

as well as France. Later he flew to Australia and the United States to meet and interview Igbo based in both countries.

During the time of his research, Dr. Lis asked more than 500 Igbo about the supposed Igbo connection to the Jews. The overwhelming majority confirmed such a connection and only a few individuals outright rejected such a claim.



Throughout this book, the author addresses the widespread belief that the Igbo originated in ancient Israel as well as the supposed Igbo connections to Judaism. In addition to the personal interviews which Dr. Lis conducted, he engaged in a thorough review of much of the academic and non-academic books and papers that have mentioned that the Igbo have, or may have, an uncommon relationship with the Jewish people. He also surveyed the Igbo religion scrupulously by interviewing the custodians: the elders in Nri and in the modern synagogues of the Igbo in Abuja. The book is an in-depth study and a genealogical history of the Igbo's long-time narrative of their Jewish origin and accordingly provides ground for written Igbo history to be looked at from a different

perspective, i.e. from the way it has been looked at since the independence era of Nigeria. He engaged with the Igbo, who in their own words are reverting

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BOOK REVIEW, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

and not converting to Judaism, and studied their culture which they are convinced demonstrates they are returnee Jews and not people that are converting to Judaism.

The book, which incorporates aspects of many of the humanities in its methodology, shows that consistently for at least 250 years the Igbo, and some non-Igbo, have maintained that the Igbo were Jews or were very much like Jews. The book also succinctly captures the place of the Igbo in pre- and post-Biafra, Nigeria, and narrates how the Igbo, having a special relationship with the Israeli government, offered to accommodate the Israelis when the other Nigerians barred them from entering some parts of Nigeria. The author also discussed how Israel helped the Igbo when other Nigerians began to kill the Igbo in 1966, killings which culminated in the tragedy inappropriately called the Nigeria-Biafra War. Lis recounted how one of the chief rabbis of Israel participated in demonstrations in front of the Knesset, protesting the attacks against the Igbo which many have described as genocidal. The chief rabbi condemned the murders, likening it to the Holocaust.

Proceeding to post-Biafra, the author discusses how, in a country which is potentially explosive, some Igbo who were born Christians became Rabbinic Jews without prompting from external sources, and how they later received encouragement and assistance from individual Jews, and from Kulanu and other organizations.

Over the past thirty years, many Igbo Jewish communities have been established in Nigeria. As mentioned earlier, Lis described his interactions with members of these communities and how he went to Israel and studied important developments there that have to do with the Igbo and the Israeli government and public. Some Igbo, beginning with one Chima Onyeulo who lived in Italy and was recommended by the Italian-Jewish authorities, made their way to Israel where they, in their own words, reverted to Judaism. Lis studied this development, and also studied the reaction of the Israeli government and public to the phenomenon. While some sections of the government and public showed sympathy to the cause of the Igbo, some did not.

Lis, himself, was also not comfortable that those people who were not sympathetic toward the Igbo cause made no effort to study Igbo history and culture. He repeatedly wondered why Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, who traveled the world in search of lost Jews, did not visit the Igbo, yet felt competent enough to offer an opin-

ion on a matter as weighty as the Jewishness or "Israelitishness" of the Igbo. Lis was uneasy with what the Israeli government relied on when formulating its decision and policy: a report written by an academic without any record of involvement in Igbo studies or knowledge of it. Lis wrote clearly that he was of the opinion that the judgment or decision of the Israeli authorities which was followed by deportations of Igbo that had even undergone ultra-Orthodox conversions was short-sighted.

Lis worked as an interested observer, but a very professional one. This is, perhaps, to be expected, as he is also Jewish. But as I noted earlier, he was meticulously professional. The book is both a history and an ethnography of the Igbo. The author began with what may be regarded as the myths or oral traditions of the Igbo. He then reviewed discussions and references to the Igbo in written sources, some as old as four hundred years. After collating data from all over the world, he moved to Israel to study the Igbo living in Israel and how those Igbo were perceived by the Israeli government.

In my opinion, the survey and the report in the 271 pages of this book are major ethnographic contributions to the study of the Igbo people. As I mentioned, the scholar meticulously questioned numerous Igbo, studied what others wrote and said about the Igbo, and his work touched on many vital aspects of Igbo life and history (for example, the book dealt extensively with Biafra which was a watershed in Igbo experience).

However, no book is totally without some flaws. While considering the matter of the Jewishness of the Igbo, Lis offered that 'some' Jews very likely made their way across the desert. Lis may be implying that Jews and 'Africans' produced the Igbo, a position which though an improvement on what the mainstream in academia believes--that Jews were not known to have crossed the desert--is nevertheless in some measure an agreement with the academic consensus which views Israel in the north and west as established fact, but in a place like Igbo-land as a phenomenon. But this does not in any way reduce the power of the book which is a masterful and seminal study of the Igbo. It is rather an opening which Lis could utilize to do more work among the Igbo.

Remy Ilona is a spokesperson for the Igbo and a long time friend of Kulanu. He has written several books on the topic and blogs for the Times of Israel. He is completing a Master of Arts at Florida International University in Professor Tudor Parfitt's Global Jewish Studies program. Remy recently returned from a trip to Israel.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BNEI ANOUSIM CO-SPONSORED BY KULANU

Address by Bonita Nathan Sussman

Editor's Note: This past September 2016 Kulanu's Vice President, Bonita Nathan Sussman, was invited to speak in Florida at The Institute for Sefardi and Anousim Studies' international conference, *Reinvigorating Shared Latino-Jewish Roots and Heritage*. We would like to share with our readers Bonita Sussman's address on behalf of Kulanu.

It is a great honor for Kulanu to be a co-sponsor of this international conference on Anousim. I thank Salomon Buzaglo for including Kulanu in this worthy endeavor and Ilan Goldstein for introducing me to Salomon. In honor of this occasion, we have updated our Anousim page on the Kulanu web site. As is custom among Jews to give *kavod* (honor) to their rabbis and teachers, I gratefully acknowledge Professor Tudor Parfitt who has introduced me to the academic study of Anousim and other returning communities. There are many people in the audience who have been close friends of Kulanu for many years, and I beg their pardon as much of this may seem repetitive.

Salman Rushdie wrote about the story of his hiding because of the Iranian Fatwa on his life in his novel *Joseph Anton, A Memoir*. Speaking of himself he wrote "This unhoused, exiled Satan was perhaps the heavenly

patron of all exiles, all unhoused people, all those who were torn from their place and left floating, half-this, half-that, denied the rooted person's comforting, defining sense of having solid ground beneath their feet." This is a gathering of those whose forebears were a group that over time, millions of times over, lived lives similar to Rushdie, in hiding and under a different sort of Fatwa.

I was asked to speak about what Kulanu does for Anousim. Kulanu is an organization founded 22 years ago to support emerging, isolated and returning Jewish communities around the world. Emerging communities lived Christian, Muslim and other lives before they found Judaism as what they call "the true religion" which spoke to their hearts and their true selves. Their histories and beliefs do not include stories of their Jewish origins.

Examples of emerging Kulanu communities are the Jewish communities of Uganda, Cameroon, and Cote d'Ivoire. Isolated communities are Jewish communities that were established long ago, have few Jews remaining, and are far from Jewish resources. Suriname, founded in the 1600's by Spanish and Portuguese Jews, and Nicaragua, founded at the turn of the last century, are two such isolated communities. Returning communities either are communities whose histories, often oral, claim to be descendants of Lost Tribes, such as the Bene Ephraim in India or the Tribe of Dan in Liberia. Bnei Anousim, many more in number than the Lost Tribes, are another category of returning Jewish communities. The return of Anousim are part of a worldwide trend and new phenomenon which is challenging established Jewish norms and ways of thinking.

Kulanu is a volunteer organization with a budget of \$300,000. It is multi-denominational in that it addresses Jewish needs across the Jewish spectrum of ideologies. People have asked me, "What is the main way that Kulanu supports communities?" I always say that we validate their journeys. We tell them that what they are doing is amazing, important, and is changing the course of Jewish history and the definitions of Jewish peoplehood and what it means to be Jewish. We



Kulanu's Boutiue features an *Aish Chai* Lapel Pin, designed by Deborah Potash Brodie of Dor L'Dor. Depicting life (*Chai*) coming out of fire (*Aish*), it celebrates the return of Anousim to Judaism.

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say that the worldwide Jewish community wants them, needs them, and loves them, and that we appreciate what they are doing. We let them know that they clarify for us what it means to be Jewish and that they are on the cutting edge of this definition.

While this may seem obvious, individuals and communities who are struggling to create their Jewish identities often lack real models on how to do it; they may feel isolated and are often shunned by family and friends. Kulanu volunteers come around and exclaim, WOW! We are often the only ones who listen to their stories, publish their work, link them to others, connect them to resources, believe in them and take them seriously.

Kulanu sends Jewish supplies, *siddurim*, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot* to Bnei Anousim communities and others. When we can, we donate *Sifrei Torahs* to them. We send teachers. Sometimes we set up Skype classes. We send them to study in Israel. We publish articles about our visits to their communities. We share their photographs and videos. We have had, over time, hundreds of inquiries for information from Bnei Anousim; we network with them. We have funded projects in Latin American countries. In 2015, we gave money to three Bnei Anousim communities in Brazil for *tefillin*, *siddurim* and to build a *mikvah*, to Guatemala for Jews to attend a Jewish conference in the United States and to print *machzorim*, to Nicaragua for *siddurim* for two communities, to Peru to help build a *bima* and buy *siddurim*, and for *tefillin* to be shared in Columbia.

Currently we have two people on Kulanu's board who assist the Bnei Anousim communities in their return to Judaism, Daneel Schachter and Rabbi Barbara Aiello. Daneel--with his backpack--single-handedly is helping to develop many new communities of young people with Converso roots.

Daneel writes that "Kulanu has helped many Anousim communities that otherwise would have received no support from the Jewish communities in their home country or from abroad. Often times in their own country, these emerging groups are viewed as menacing to the 'mainstream' community, who fear them for their previous religious affiliations, racial makeup, and often lower social class than the existing Jewish community. By bringing Jewish activists, teachers, rabbis and cantors to volunteer in the emerging communities across Latin America, Kulanu is able to show them that their paths to Judaism, whether proven as the descendants

of Marranos or not, are important to world Jewry. By helping these communities network amongst themselves, and slowly but surely, work towards inclusion in the mainstream communities (where possible), we validate their search to be part of something greater."

Rabbi Barbara, known as the "Radio Rabbi," has helped to develop the Jewish community in southern Italy. She writes, "As a *bat anusim* (daughter of the forced ones), I have personal experience with this tragedy. My own ancestors, Spanish Jews, were forced to flee Toledo, Spain, then Portugal, then Sicily and finally flee to the mountains of Calabria to escape persecution, arrest or death. In fact, my great grandmother, Angela Rosa Grande, was a direct descendant of Matheo de Grande, a neofite or 'New Christian,' whose property and goods were confiscated by the Inquisition authorities in the Sicilian town of Naro. The family was arrested for 'Judaizing.' Finally they settled in the tiny mountain village called Serrastretta, but given their frightening experiences, they chose to continue their clandestine observance. For centuries they lit candles on Friday evening, abstained from eating pork and, when a loved one died, they sat on low chairs and covered the mirrors throughout the house which they practice till today."

Thanks to Rabbi Barbara, today the Jews in Calabria hold services and classes and have two new *chavurot* in Sardinia and Matera that have received donated Torah scrolls. They are egalitarian and open to interfaith families. Rabbi Barbara explained, "We do not force the non-Jewish partner to make conversion--our personal histories that date back to Inquisition times affirm that forced conversions are always problematic and never appropriate." About her serving on the Kulanu board, she says, "I am delighted to be part of this incredibly strong worldwide initiative. Now I don't feel so isolated and alone." And of course, Rabbi Steven Leon, sitting next to me, whom I've met for the first time here, has retired from the Kulanu board after many years of service.

While each email we receive is different from another, here are some testimonies that I personally have received from Bnei Anousim (with names omitted):

"My name is Y.M. I live in Denver, Colorado. I have been studying Torah for about 20 years now. For the last 5 years I have felt the desire to study nothing but Tanakh with rabbis from the internet and some that I have visited. The teachings at the beginning I

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had were from Messianic teachers and I knew that there was much more than what they were teaching me. My wife and children and I are ready to do the conversion to real Judaism....Now, I have several groups of people that I have been teaching Torah and Halacha; in Colorado, about 40, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, about 35, in Managua, Nicaragua, about 25. I am asking if you can convert us?"

Here is another message from a member of the Beth Moshe community in Mexico City that has 20 members and wants to return to Judaism. The community chose this name because at the time of the Inquisition, the Jewish people were punished because they practiced the Mosaic law or they were from the Mosaic faith:

"*Shavua tov*, Dear Bonita. By the way, Bonita is beautiful Spanish word :) We are a little group of people who love Judaism; each of us has a personal history, I work for Judaica store here in Mexico City, and because of it I know a lot people interested in Judaism. I make relationship with each of them, and somehow I connected all my friends interested in Judaism, and we began to celebrate the festivities.

"We consider ourselves Bnei Anusim. For example, in my family, the surname of the mother of my dad is 'Palestino' (Spanish word for Palestine). That they called themselves Palestino is dated from 1600, at records of New Spain (Mexico). Another family of our group, they have the surname Izaac (Spanish word for Isaac). We practice the Spanish Portuguese ritual. We sing Ladino songs. But we know we must convert to Judaism. It's for that we connect with you. We want your help. We want to open a little place at Mexico City, for Anousim people. I have a page of Israel and Judaism news, in Spanish. That page is reached by 2 million people a week, firstly from Mexico and Latin America. And it has 100,000 followers. We know there are many people here in Mexico who want to return to Judaism but don't know how. We know your organization helps people who want to be Jews."

A word on Kulanu and Nicaragua: One of the communities that Kulanu helped develop and where I have been personally involved is Comunidad Israelita de Nicaragua. The official community consisted of a remnant of the pre-civil war community of Jews of Eastern and Central European origin. Along with this core group were the children and grandchildren of Jewish

men and Nicaraguan women and a number of Bnei Anousim families who were both called participants rather than members. The religious teacher of this group was a man of Bnei Anousim origin, Carlos Peres, who had studied in various yeshivot in Israel and the United States.

With the help of BADATSLI (Bet Din Tzedek Latfustot Yisrael), the Rabbinical Court for the Diaspora), Kulanu arranged for the conversions of 28 participants, turning them into full members and immeasurably



PHOTO BY JOSHUA KRISTAL

Bonita Nathan Sussman

strengthening the community, and also performed 8 weddings, with *chuppah* and *kiddushin*. A bat mitzvah took place and three Jewish babies have been born since, the first three in over 50 years. Another group of Bnei Anousim that grew out of a listserve called Descendants of Marranos, whose members had previously been Messianic, moved toward Judaism and are now seeking to arrange their conversions. They are known as Comunidad Judía Sefaradí en Nicaragua. We also facilitated Reform conversions in Guatemala.

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A word about Bet Din Tsedek Latfustot Yisrael (known as BADATSLI), which I mentioned earlier. A group of Halachic *shomer* Shabbat rabbis have joined forces to promote and help develop Jewish communities around the world. They serve as teachers, *mara d'atras*, and gather as a Bet Din to perform conversions. Please visit their newly-created website: rabbinicalcourtdiaspora.weebly.com.

Members have been involved with conversions of Anousim in Italy, Nicaragua and elsewhere. While the organization is independent, it works closely with Kulanu. In this context, I must mention the emerging Jewish community in Madagascar where, this past May, over 100 people underwent Orthodox conversions performed by BADATSLI and facilitated by Kulanu. Though not of Bnei Anousim origin, Madagascar Jews have chosen to identify with Sephardic culture and refer to themselves as Madagascar Sepharad.

A word about Kulanu's work in El Salvador: Over the course of many years Kulanu funded a yearly Torah study program (*Bet Midrash*) for three months at a time in the city of Armenia, and a Hebrew school. It is a community that considers itself to be Bnei Anousim and Orthodox. From this program a daily *minyán* was created which exists until this day. This group is presently working with Shavei Yisrael to ultimately make *aliyah*.

In looking toward future needs and directions, Kulanu hopes to fulfill the following in our Bnei Anousim communities: more Torahs donated, funding for *siddurim*, *machzorim*, *mezuzot*, funding for BADATSLI to continue its work of conversions, more academic study, more publicity and news coverage, and linkages with Israeli institutions to fund Torah study. But Kulanu's main wish is to make this work part of the mainstream, to break barriers so that integration of all communities can begin, to find all Bnei Anousim a home, and to have them welcomed back with open arms.

As I conclude this journey into Kulanu's work abroad, it is important to note, too, that Salman Rushdie's exile finally ended. The fatwa was removed. It is my hope that the work Kulanu and others do to help the Bnei Anousim reintegrate into the worldwide Jewish community will end their exile.

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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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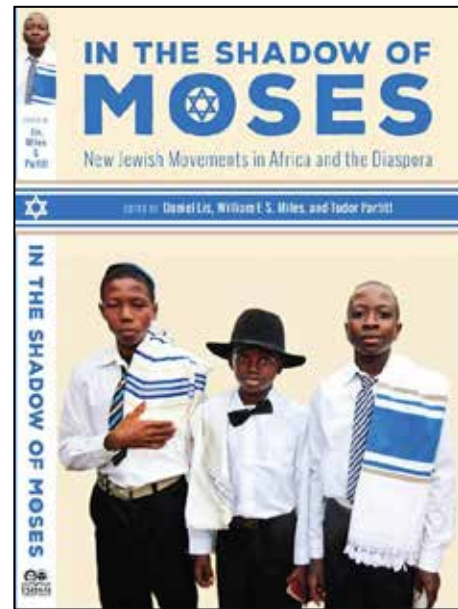
KULANU NOTES

In the News

Kulanu's activities in Madagascar received much press coverage over the summer. Kulanu supporter Deborah Josefson wrote for the JTA, and her article was reprinted in the Jewish press around the world: "In Remote Madagascar, a New Community Chooses to be Jewish." Sam Kestenbaum's article, "Joining Fabric of World Jewish Community: 100 Convert on African Island of Madagascar," was published in the *Forward* and features an in-depth analysis of the reasons that Malagasy Jews chose to formally convert. Josefin Dolsten's JTA article, "In Madagascar, 'World's Newest Jewish Community' Seeks to Establish Itself," has appeared in the *Jerusalem Post* and the *Times of Israel*.

Kulanu Academic Cohort

Kulanu-affiliated scholars continue to produce literature to spread the word about global Jewry. The Kulanu Academic Cohort has recently produced/contributed to two books released in December 2016: *In the*

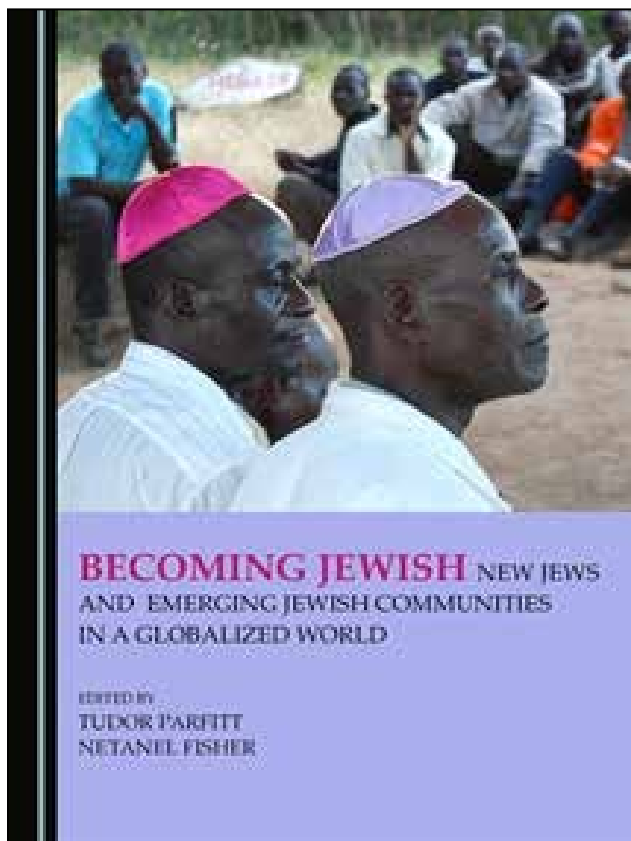


Shadow of Moses: New Jewish Movements in Africa and the Diaspora (eds. Lis, Miles, & Parfitt) and *Becoming Jewish: New Jews and Emerging Jewish Communities in a Globalized World* (eds. Fisher/Parfitt).

Conference Representation

Vice President Bonita Nathan Sussman has been busy representing Kulanu on the US conference circuit this year. Her first appearance was at Florida International University's Center for Global Jewish Communities symposium on the theme of "Black Jews." The second, the International Conference on Anousim, was hosted by the Israeli-based Institute of Sephardi and Anousim Studies in Florida, and was co-sponsored by Kulanu. Boni also joined members of the Kulanu Academic Cohort at a roundtable discussion at a meeting of the African Studies Association in Washington, DC. Their panel discussed the topic "To Convert or Not to Convert, That is the Question."

At the Society for Ethnomusicology's annual conference, a panel on African Jewry included presenter Mili Leitner. She spoke about her work with Kulanu's musician-affiliates that she has carried out in her capacity as a staff member at Kulanu. Lior Shragg, a PhD student at Ohio University, gave an update on the musical life of the Igbo Jews of Abuja, Nigeria, as part of the same panel, building on his visit to the community in 2014.



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Kulanu Filmmakers Forum

To celebrate the ever-increasing number of films about our partner communities, Kulanu is excited to launch our filmmakers forum. Please enjoy the following web page, which is a new hub for professional films about global Jewish communities: bit.ly/kulanufilmmakers.



New York Jewish Film Festival

The Ghanaian Jewish community in Sefwi Wiawso will be the feature of a documentary shown at the New York Jewish Film Festival on January 11. *Doing Jewish: A Story from Ghana*, is director Gabrielle Zilkha's first feature-length film. Two screening times are listed on the Film Festival's website at: nyjff.org/schedule.

View the trailer and learn more about the film at: doingjewishthefilm.com. It will be shown during the Festival in a Film Society of Lincoln Center theater along 65th Street between Broadway and Amsterdam Avenue.

If the USA approves his visa, Alex Armah from Ghana will be coming to New York to join the filmmakers and Kulanu to celebrate!



Gabriel Zilkha, director of "Doing Jewish: A Story from Ghana."

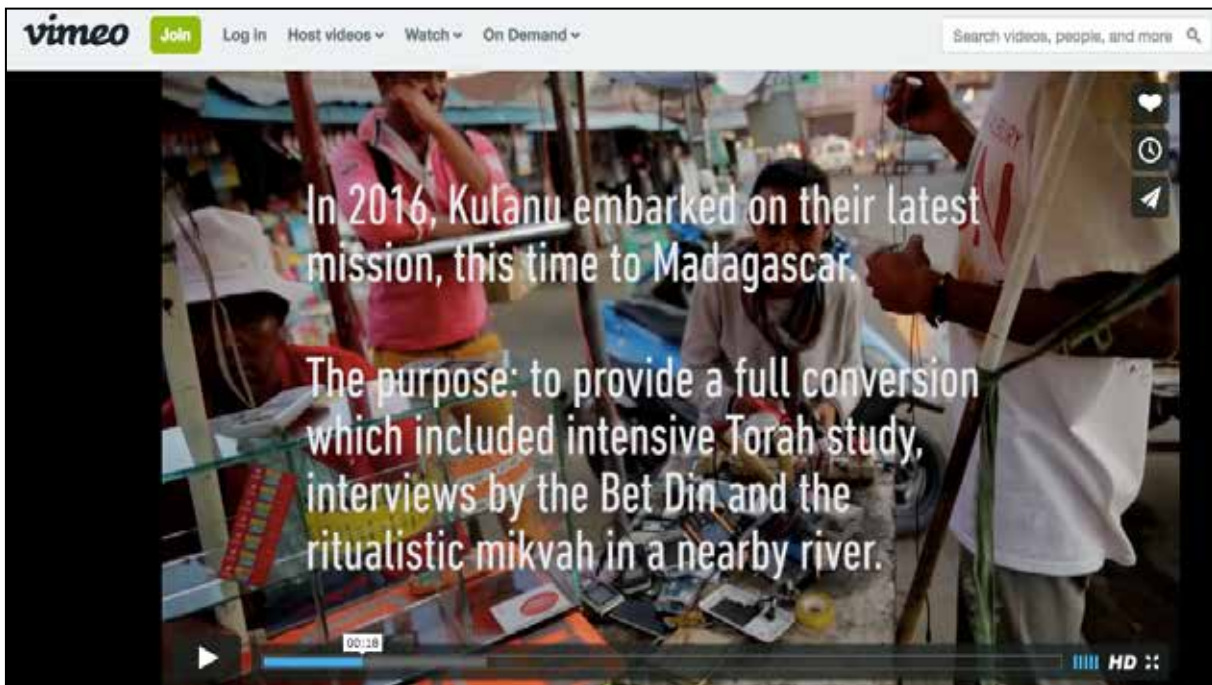
We will be co-sponsoring a party on opening night (place and details to be announced) and hope you can join us if you are nearby.

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New Trailer:

Lost/Found: The Jews of Madagascar

We are excited to share a 12-minute “working draft” of on opening night a forthcoming documentary about Malagasy Jewry. Filmed during Kulanu’s trip to Madagascar in May 2016, videographers Joshua Kristal and Shneur Menaker have captured the community’s passion and commitment to Judaism and the role of the Kulanu team in supporting them during their conversion process. We are seeking funding for the full-length documentary in order to bring this exciting story to the world--get in touch if you would like to be a part of this! To see what we’ve done so far, please visit: bit.ly/kulanumadafilm.



***Rabbi Gershom Sizomu Elected
to Parliament***

Ugandan Rabbi Gershom Sizomu was sworn into office after winning election to the nation’s Parliament as representative of Bungokho North district. He is the first Jew ever to be elected to this office. Sam Kestenbaum’s article in the *Forward* covers this story in more depth at: tinyurl.com/gershomparliament.

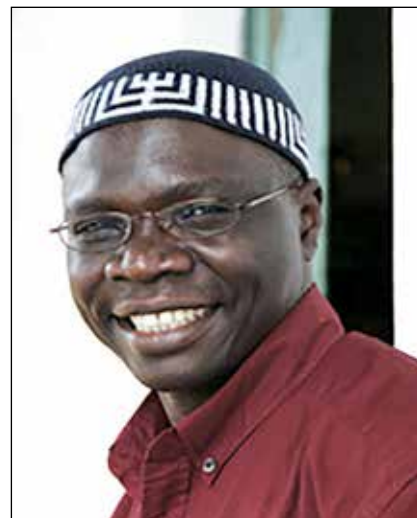


PHOTO COURTESY WIKIPEDIA

Rabbi Gershom Sizomu

Jewish Life in Nicaragua

Photos and text by Judi Kloper

Continually seeking to avoid the cold and rainy winters of the Pacific Northwest, it was with excitement that I departed Oregon in November 2015 for six months in the heat and humidity of beautiful Nicaragua and to share experiences with Congregacion Israelita de Nicaragua. Warmly welcomed into this community whose members have become dear friends, I felt right at home as

we celebrated Hanukkah, Purim, Pesach, a wedding and a bat mitzvah together. I am impressed by the depth of this community's commitment to Judaism and was thrilled when Siegfried Fried Orochena was accepted into Brandeis Collegiate Institute's summer program in California, visiting Kulanu in New York first and finishing his journey with a stopover in Oregon with Yacob from the Bene Ephraim (whose family I lived with in India the year before) and Yehudah from Kenya, all of whom attended BCI together. I shall always be grateful to my Jewish friends around the world who have become like family, and I thank Kulanu for making it real for me!



Reyna and Amir David's wedding photo



Brenda and mom Ada celebrating Passover



Hannukah: Judi teaching dreidel game to transfixed children



Purim Party

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Gravestone in old Jewish cemetery



Sinaí leading service, with her dad in background



Sinaí, joyous and proud upon becoming Bat Mitzvah

Visiting Judi in Oregon: Three Young Men from BCI

Photos by Judi Kloper



Arriving at Portland's airport: Yehudah from Kenya, Siegfried from Nicaragua, and Yacob from India

Siegfried and Yacob encountering snow for first time in their lives, on Mt. Hood



Yacob on farm, picking blueberries for Shabbat in the Park



KULANU

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around the Globe*

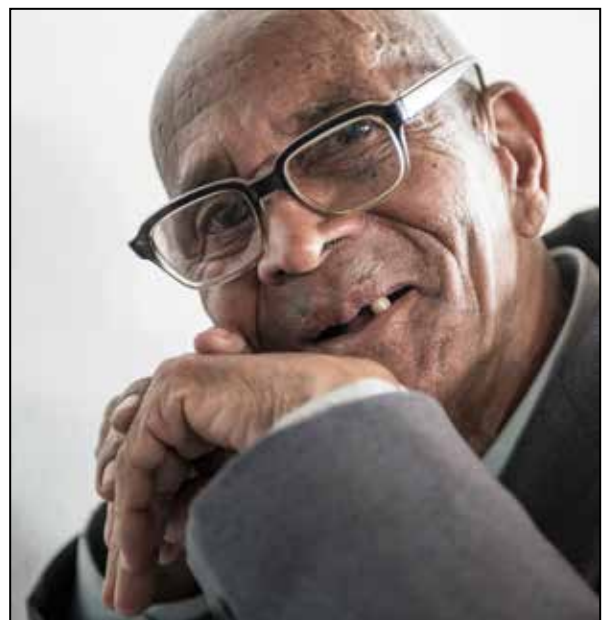
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***Beautiful Faces
from Madagascar's
Jewish Community***



Photos by Joshua Kristal