

Supporting Isolated, Emerging, and Returning Jewish Communities around the Globe

KULANU

“All of Us”

Contents

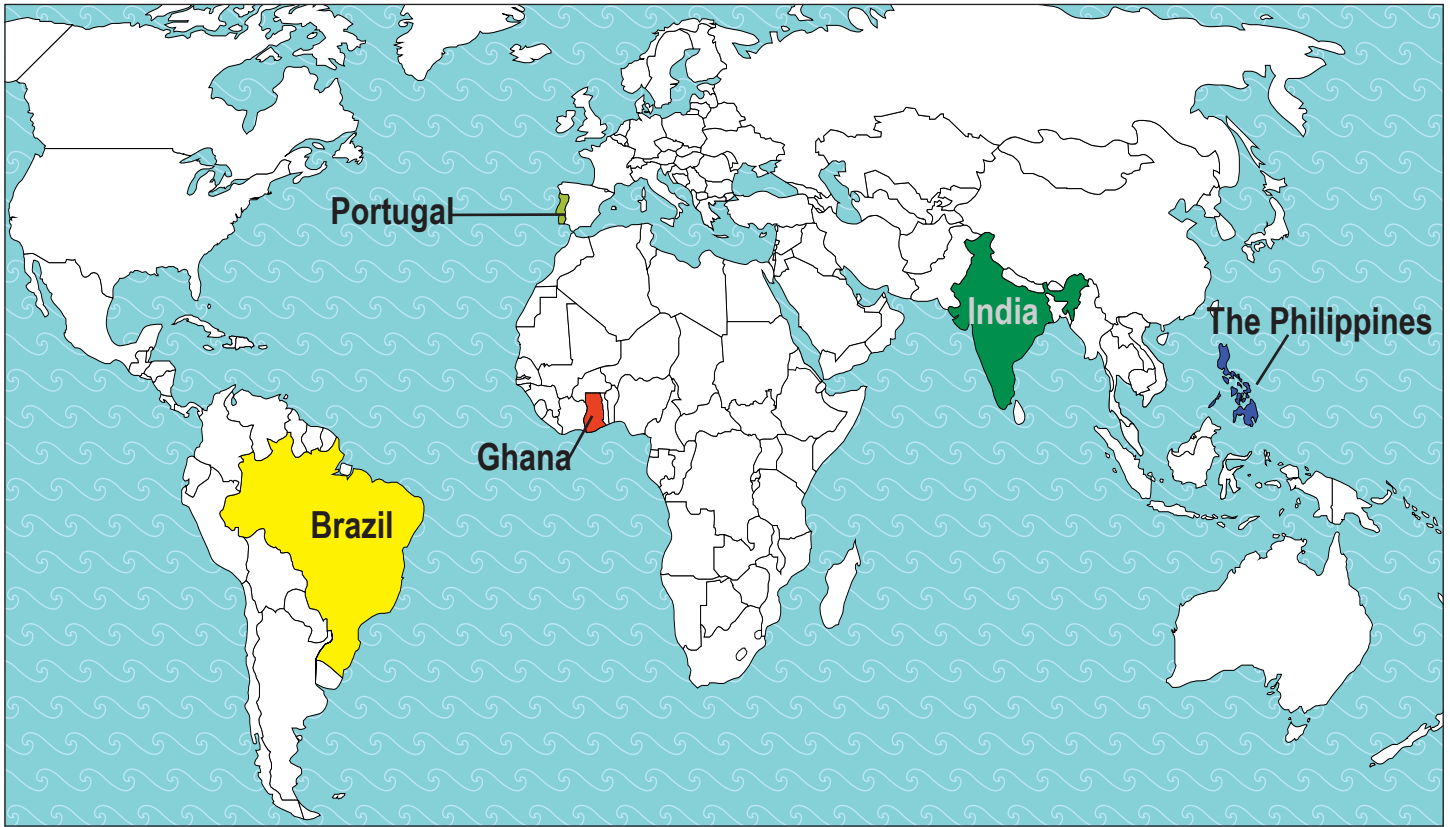
Map: Where in the World is Kulanu?	2
Rural South India Torah Study.....	3
A Call to Service	4
A Tale Of Two Torahs.....	6
Board Spotlight: Rabbi Capers Funnye.....	8
Passover in Portugal	10
Volunteer Spotlight: Gitty Gordon	12
Kulanu Notes	14
Toronto to Ghana.....	17
Thank You, Donors	20
Book Review.....	22
Connect with Us Online	24

While volunteering in southern India, Gitty Gordon (from New York) enjoys a chai with Miryam of the Bene Ephraim community.
See story on page 12.

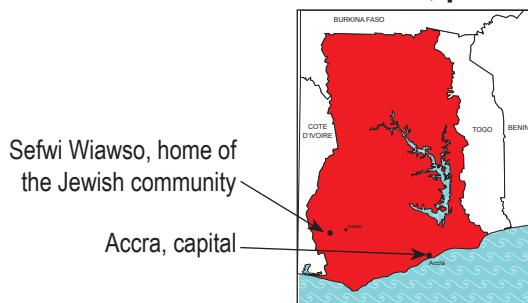


Where in the World is Kulanu in this Issue?

Kulanu is in touch with dozens of communities around the world. If a community contacts us, our first step is always to listen carefully to their needs. Afterwards, we brainstorm, finance, and carry out projects to help them further their study and practice of Judaism and build their communities. This map highlights communities featured in this issue. To see a full list of all our partner communities, visit <https://kulanu.org/communities>.



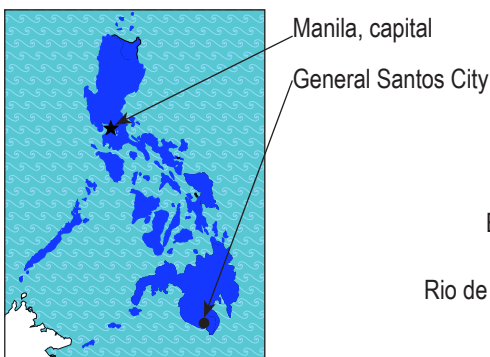
Ghana, p17



Portugal, p10



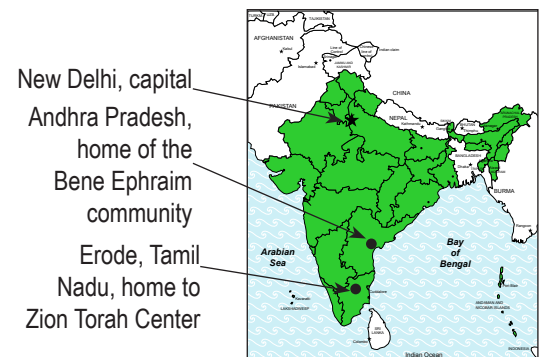
Philippines, p6



Brazil, p6



India, pp 3, 12



In Rural South India, Torah Study Flourishes

Text and photos by Judi Kloper



In January and March 2020, I visited the Zion Torah Center in Erode, Tamil Nadu. The community's roots in Judaism go back to the late founder's grandfather who was a Baghdadi Jew, though its members have only been practicing since 2011. I was welcomed by Moshe Samuel, his family, and many community members. Their knowledge of and dedication to Judaism, Torah, and Hebrew moved me. COVID-19 in India ended my trip early, but the memories and friendships are long-lasting. Read more in the next issue of Kulanu Magazine.

1 (starting top left, going down): During Shabbat morning services, these men read the parashah (the weekly Torah portion).



2: Moshe, the 19-year-old son of the late founder of Zion Torah Center, now leads the community, studying and teaching Torah, Hebrew, and Jewish history. Here, he plays piano as everyone sings before Havdallah.

3: On Shabbat, the girls and women wear white. The older girls help to serve the Shabbat lunch which Moshe's mom Anne and sister Jerusha (back row, middle) prepare.

4: Before eating lunch, Aaron Kirubakaran, with his daughter Jenny and wife Judith, chants the Kiddush.

5: During Shabbat morning service, Moshe walks through the congregation so that everyone has a chance to touch or kiss the Torah.

6: On Friday before Shabbat begins, Jerusha makes several loaves of challah to serve the congregation during Shabbat lunch. As it bakes in their small oven, the delicious smell of baking bread drifts through their home. *



Heneini: A Call to Service

Text and photos by Chaplain, Major, Sarah D. Schechter, USAF

Editor's Notes: *This is the story of another isolated Jewish community from which we can learn so much. Jews serving in the United States Armed Forces experience isolation being so far from their home communities. Rabbi Schechter can help them find support and practice their faith while away from home.*

Chaplain-Rabbi Sarah Schechter was ordained through Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in 2003, and in the same year was commissioned an Active Duty Chaplain in the United States Air Force. Prior to her current assignment as the Branch Chief of Readiness and Training at the 86th Airlift Wing, Ramstein Air Base, Germany, she was the Staff Chaplain of Personnel and Readiness at Headquarters Air Force Reserve Command in Georgia, where she managed all Reserve Chaplain Accessions. Additionally, she is a Doctoral student (D.Min) on full academic scholarship at Wesley Theological Seminary, and concurrently in the U.S. Army's Clinical Pastoral Education program (CPE). Rabbi Schechter and her husband Rabbi Joe Charnes (who specializes in interfaith studies and dialogue) have a 14-year-old daughter who wants to be a neurosurgeon.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, my husband and I were awakened by a desperate phone call from my mother-in-law. She exclaimed, "A plane just flew into the World Trade Center. Turn the radio on!" We did so, only to learn that our country had been attacked. My heart sank in sorrow as we listened to the horror that unfolded before us. Within seconds, I turned to my husband and said, "I should join the military." Without hesitation, he replied, "Absolutely." I was in rabbinical school at the time, so biblical themes were constantly flowing through my mind.

On that terrifying morning, I heard echoing within me the response of Abraham to God when God tested him: "*Heneini*. Here I am," ready to serve. September 11th was my "*heneini*" moment, and the next day I called the U.S. Air Force recruiter's office. Six months later, on the eve of Passover, the Jewish festival of freedom,



Rabbi Schechter sharing about the Torah and giving a demonstration after a bar mitzvah (Balad Air Base, Iraq).

I took the oath of office before the American flag, pledging to "uphold the Constitution of the United States...so help me God." At that moment I was commissioned as a Chaplain Candidate in the United States Air Force. I was now a second lieutenant. A year later I was ordained and became the first female rabbi in United States Air Force history.

In the United States Armed Forces, all ordained clergy representing the various faith traditions are generically referred to as chaplains. The role of a military chaplain is to advise leadership on religious requirements and protocol, to administer both faith-specific and general pastoral care, and to provide nourishing religious accommodation and programming for communities on the move. Every few years, people pack up their worldly belongings and transfer to a new base, usually to another state or country. For people of faith, a religious community is often the only constant in life, offering grounding, comfort, and certainty for a community that is often on the move. I, myself, have served several communities: Space Command in Los Angeles, California; Basic Trainees at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas; the deployed communities in Iraq, Qatar, and Kuwait; and members of elite team

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Call to Service: *continued from previous page*

Air Force One, to name just a few. My current assignment is at Ramstein Air Base, Germany.

Jews have served in the United States military since before the Civil War, and today are about half a percent of the total military population. They serve in all capacities and are present in every area of service. Whether as boots-on-the-ground or as guiding lights from above, our officers and our enlisted men and women have functioned as warriors, computer technicians, pilots, seamen, mechanics, special forces, military tacticians, doctors, lawyers, and professors. Our military community has been greatly blessed by their presence. Today, there are also over twenty active duty rabbis in the Army, Navy, Marines, and Air Force, both male and female, in addition to many more serving in the Reserves and Guard, providing light, wisdom, and hope for all military personnel. Most U.S. Air Force bases have a small number of Jews who make up the spectrum of Jewish observance. While the frequent transfer of base personnel is not ideal for developing communal connections, the realization that time is short also seems to encourage a “let’s just do it” spirit. Or, as Hillel’s famous dictum says: “If not now, when?” For our base’s Jewish programs, my husband, Joe Charnes, a civilian rabbi, and I attempt to offer an environmental structure and space that allows the beauty of Judaism to unfold and to blossom, both before us and within us. The Sabbath, the holidays, the lifecycle events, and the rituals are the foundational structures, or forms, through which we engage with the holy. But the understanding is always that behind these wonderful structures and forms lies a spiritual landscape to be discovered and encountered. It is wondrous. It is formless. It is transcendent.

Our philosophy and our “theology” for the base’s Jewish programming have expanded over time. We realized that for us, living on a military base was somewhat like living in a commune: everyone is an extended family member. So we decided to become more intimate with our family members’ faith traditions. We always believed that every religious tradition offered its own unique light



Both Jewish and non-Jewish military service members supporting Sergeant Craig Martin becoming a bar mitzvah; he did not have one when he was younger (Iraq, 2008)

into the world of the sacred, and that sharing in each other’s sacred insights would allow us to greater comprehend the holy and the Divine. But living on base, in such close proximity with each other, gave us the opportunity and the blessing of putting our faith and our beliefs into practice. At our Jewish services, all are welcome and all are honored. Every voice has an echo of the Divine, and we are all enriched by such wisdom. This is our platform, and this is our way: to make holy connections with holy people, by sharing the light of Judaism, and in the process, being enlightened by other traditions’ wisdom. Everyone leaves truly enriched. In the words of a deeply-devoted Catholic woman who regularly attended our Sabbath services: “How am I going to keep the Sabbath when you are gone?” And, in the words of a Jewish soldier who was mourning: “A soldier at my base who I was close with died this morning. This is where I come for comfort.” And, the heartfelt words of a young, Jewish Air Force Academy Cadet: “I am grateful for this community. Here is where I learn about Judaism and about other faiths.” What a *m’chaya*, what a life-giving affirmation. How beautiful it is that both Jews and people of other faiths are discovering, or *rediscovering*, the beauty of Judaism. *L’chaim!* *

A Tale Of Two Torahs

By Avraham ben Avraham

Avraham ben Avraham is a Nigerian writer, entrepreneur, and founder of the Jewish Nigeria Blog (Jewish Nigeria Media Network), a contributing writer in the Diaspora section of the Jerusalem Post magazine, and tour guide for those interested in visiting Jewish congregations across Nigeria.

In January 2020, when flight AD2402 touched down at Santos Dumont Airport in Rio de Janeiro, most passengers were unaware they had become part of a mission to bring a Torah to northeastern Brazil. Its destination was a three-hour drive to Recife, home to the first synagogue in the Americas and to several centuries-old Jewish communities. One of these communities waited over 40 years to receive a Torah and this donation marked the culmination of the long-awaited dream of several generations.

A month earlier, as 2019 came to an end, a similar mission to the Philippines was carried out for a Jewish community that emerged there 24 years ago. In 1996, Rabbi Avraham Coalesce Browne (Rabbi Coalesce) arrived in General Santos City to become the spiritual leader of an emerging Jewish community, Q'hilot Benai Yisrael. As with many such communities in that country, they had no Sefer Torah.

"When I was asked to take the Torah to the Bnei Anusim community in Recife, I didn't even think twice! My homeland is Recife, but I have lived in Rio de Janeiro for 28 years. I enthusiastically thought it would be an eternal link between the members of that community, the American community, and Israel. My grandfather would be so happy and honored with my bringing the Torah to Recife, where he lived!"

-Hana Fried

Back in Brazil, the Bereshit Olam community in the Recife area of Pernambuco shared a similar story. Although they did not have a Sefer Torah,

they remained hopeful that someday they would receive one. In the meantime, they stayed committed to living the Jewish lifestyle practiced by their great-grandparents and passed down to them.

As descendants of the Crypto-Jews (also known as Bnei Anusim in Hebrew, which literally means *the children of the forced*) of Portugal, they formally converted to Judaism and many now engage in Orthodox practice. Under the leadership of Carlos Maciel, the community has ended its isolation and continues to grow. They reached out to Kulanu with a request for a Sefer Torah.

Bonita Sussman, vice president of Kulanu, has been involved in securing a number of Sifrei Torah from donor synagogues in the United States. When the Tree of Life Synagogue in Oil City, Pennsylvania closed, Noah Levine of the Jewish Community Legacy Project (jclproject.org) told them of the opportunity to rekindle its light elsewhere. It was an unfortunate situation for this Pennsylvania Jewish community, forced to close down as membership declined. Yet, they are comforted knowing that two of their most treasured Torahs have found new homes in Brazil and the Philippines.

Moe Levine, a Kulanu volunteer, became the conduit for one Torah to travel to the Philippines. On the flight from JFK International Airport,



Hana Fried delivering the Torah to Carlos Maciel (left) and Odmar Braga (right) at Santos Dumont Airport in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on the way to Recife

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Moe became acquainted with an Israeli passenger who helped him carry the Torah to its handover in the Philippines.

"It was nice to be part of bringing a sacred Torah from one remote community that was winding down to another that was trying to establish itself on the opposite side of the world."
-Moe Levine

Rabbi Coalesce and his wife were overjoyed to receive the Torah and welcome Moe to their country. All the members of Q'hilot Benai Yisrael community were ecstatic and welcomed the Sefer Torah by celebrating for two days. So much joy was felt while removing the Torah from the brown-colored ark, circling the *beit kneset* (synagogue) seven times, singing several *tehillim* (psalms), dancing, and then sharing a communal meal. In addition, on each day a portion of the week's *parashah* (weekly Torah portion) was read from their new Torah.

In January 2020, preparations were underway for Hana Fried, another Kulanu volunteer, to deliver the second Torah to Brazil, South America. For Hana, it was a historic trip connecting her back to the community where her grandfather, Moyses Vainstein, had made his home. After fleeing Russia decades ago, he worked in Brazil tirelessly for the *Keren Kayemet L'Israel* (Jewish National Fund) and the local synagogue.

As Hana began her long journey to the Torah's new home, an observant Jewish man at Newark Liberty International Airport insisted on saying a short prayer with her. Even the flight crew understood how sacred the wrapped scroll was and treated it with respect, placing it in the compartment where they keep their own personal luggage.

The leaders of the Jewish community, Carlos Maciel and Odmar Braga, flew in from Recife to greet Hana and the Torah at the airport in Rio de

Janeiro. This was a defining moment for the Brazilian Jewish community of Bereshit Olam. This scroll, from a closing synagogue in North America, was breathing new life into a growing community in South America.

With this scroll, the members of the congregation have an opportunity to forge their own unique identity. They no longer have to travel to another synagogue to have access to a Torah. They can now focus on building their own community and maintaining the traditional approach to Judaism long practiced by their forefathers.

Likewise, in the Philippines, the Q'hilot Benai Yisrael members have been able to expand their practice. Now, ascending to the Torah when there is a minyan has become part of the Shabbat service, as has carrying the Sefer Torah around the *beit kneset* prior to the Torah reading. Many congregants are learning to read from the Torah and consider it a great mitzvah.

Expressing his immeasurable joy, Rabbi Coalesce said, "We give thanks to Hashem for favoring us by allowing Kulanu to assist our community in obtaining a Sefer Torah. I'm grateful for the love, friendship, time, and effort that Kulanu has invested not only for us but in all of Kulanu's global communities." *



Rabbi Avraham Coalesce Browne (left) of the Philippines receives the Torah (wrapped for transport), donated by the Tree of Life synagogue in Oil City, Pennsylvania, from Kulanu volunteer Moe Levine at the Manila International Airport, December 2019.

Board Member Spotlight: Rabbi Capers Funnye

By Barbara Vinick

The author, Barbara Vinick, of Salem, Massachusetts, serves as the secretary of Kulanu. She is currently a research associate at Hadassah-Brandeis Institute at Brandeis University, a center focused on Jews and gender worldwide. She is working on a volume of stories about Jewish brides around the world, a follow-up to her book Today I am a Woman: Stories of Bat Mitzvah Around the World published by Indiana University Press.

Last year the Kulanu Board of Directors was thrilled to welcome a new board member, Rabbi Capers C. Funnye, Jr. Since 2015, Rabbi Capers has been chief rabbi of the International Israelite Board of Rabbis, an organization that includes mainly Black congregations in the United States, the Caribbean, and notably Africa, where he first traveled in 2001, visiting congregations in many parts of Nigeria. Since then, he has journeyed to Nigeria periodically. Five years ago, when Rabbi Capers brought a Torah to one of those communities, he shared that “a powerful experience [was] embedded in my heart and mind,” as congregants danced with it joyfully. Rabbi Capers’ Nigerian contacts have learned about Judaism mainly through the internet, as well as his teaching when he visits and the books he brings with him. (When he first began his trips, he was surprised to see people wearing traditional black hats in the heat of Africa.) Most of the communities he works with in Nigeria, which he describes as very committed to Judaism, have not partnered with Kulanu, but presumably more of them will in the future. While disappointed that he had to cancel a trip to Nigeria this year, he asserted that “whenever the travel ban is lifted, I’ll go.”

Rabbi Capers is the spiritual leader of Beth Shalom B’nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation, a 200-member merger of several former congregations located in the Marquette Park area of Chicago. Besides African-Americans, the diverse congregation -- Jews for generations and new converts -- includes Jews originally from Mexico and other Latin American countries,



Rabbi Capers Funnye and his wife Mary

Africa, the Philippines, bi-racial couples, and Ashkenazi Jews who have adopted African-American children. He describes the congregation as a “composite of what someday the entire Jewish world will look like.” Designated as Traditional in the directory of Chicago congregations, the community uses an Orthodox siddur and women sit separately from the men, but services are egalitarian, with women able to read from the Torah and girls celebrating becoming a bat mitzvah. In fact, at his insistence, his daughter was the first girl to become a bat mitzvah in the congregation before he became its rabbi, and, he shared proudly, his oldest granddaughter became the most recent bat mitzvah last summer.

Born in South Carolina, Rabbi Capers became interested in religion as a student at Howard University, where he began his journey toward Judaism. He traces his interest in rabbinical leadership to a meeting in New York in 1979 with Rabbi Levi Ben Levy, the previous chief rabbi of the Israelite Board of Rabbis. “He put the idea in my head. He told me that we need young men to carry on,” explained Rabbi Capers. Enrolled in the Israelite Rabbinical Academy, Rabbi Capers studied online for the most part. At the same time, he was a student at Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago

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(where he also had a position as a business manager). This dual association exemplifies Rabbi Capers' commitment to building bridges between historic white Jewish institutions and formerly marginalized Jewish communities of color.

Ordained by the Israelite Academy in 1985 and formally converted by a Conservative *bet din* (rabbinical court) the same year, he has been largely successful. Among a multitude of leadership positions, he is the first African-American member of the Chicago Board of Rabbis and former head of the public policy committee of the Jewish Council of Urban Affairs (JCUA), a major voice for social justice in Chicago, where there has been much to accomplish. When the JCUA and other organizations brought Martin Luther King to Chicago in 1966 (coincidentally to Marquette Park near where his synagogue now stands), Dr. King was pelted with rocks and Rabbi Capers recalls that he had never felt so much hatred.

About 20 years ago, Rabbi Capers met Kulanu's founding president Jack Zeller and current president Harriet Bograd at a meeting of the organization Be'chol Lashon, where he was its mid-west regional director. Rabbi Capers' tenure there ended after the death of Be'chol Lashon's founder, with whom he was close. He characterizes the invitation to join Kulanu's board as *besbert* (inevitable or preordained, in

Yiddish). Rabbi Capers shared, "I am extremely proud of the work that Kulanu does around the world. Harriet is totally devoted to it. My heart is warmed when I speak with her, Rabbi Barbara, Boni, Sandy Leeder, and others. They are opening the gates."

Rabbi Capers and his wife Mary have been married for 44 years. They have four children and twelve grandchildren, including three granddaughters and nine grandsons. And yes, he is a close cousin of Michelle Obama (her grandfather was Rabbi Capers' uncle). The families visited frequently as Capers was growing up, and he and his family joined the Obamas many times to celebrate Hanukkah at the White House. Kulanu is equally proud to have Rabbi Capers Funnye as a leader and representative of our organization. *

Kulanu has had a rich relationship with the network of congregations affiliated with the International Israelite Board of Rabbis (blackjews.org), the organization for which Rabbi Capers serves as chief rabbi. Kulanu's president first got to know members of this network of congregations at a Kulanu meeting in New York on September 10, 2001, and at a "Think Tank" hosted by Be'chol Lashon in San Francisco soon after. Since then, Israelite congregations in the New York area have hosted several Kulanu speakers and have regularly welcomed President Harriet Bograd and other Kulanu volunteers with guests from African Jewish communities at their services and other events. Their rabbis and members have also regularly attended Kulanu receptions at Harriet's home and at film festivals, and members of their community have served as Kulanu volunteers. Robert Azriel Devine, a rabbinical student at the Israelite Rabbinical Academy of the Israelite Board of Rabbis, was chosen to serve as a Kulanu Global Teaching Fellow in the Philippines this summer, but this has been postponed because of COVID-19.



Rabbi Capers leading Shabbat services on the 90th anniversary of Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago

My Passover Journey to Portugal

By Ari Greenspan, photos courtesy of Kulanu

Dr. Ari Greenspan has been a dentist, a mohel, and a shochet for the past 30 years. He studied at Yeshiva University under the famed Rabbi Soloveitchik, and has worked for more than 30 years on collecting mesorot (ancient Jewish traditions) from far-flung Jewish communities around the globe. He is a frequent contributor to Mishpacha magazine and writes extensively for other journals. Dr. Greenspan has been producing Judaic art for 25 years, enjoying wood, metal, and glass media.

A friend in his 80s emailed me. He was going to be alone for Passover but had asked me to share a story from the most interesting seder of my life. He said he would print it and read it during his seder by himself. Perhaps some Kulanu Magazine readers would enjoy it as well, so here it is:

In 2009, I traveled to Belmonte, Portugal with my family to serve as the rabbi for Pesach. I was interested in this community of Bnei Anusim as their genealogy is clear; the *rabbanut* (Israeli Rabbinic Authority) accepted them in the 1980s as Jewish. Prior to identifying as Jews, they attended church. Despite this, everybody knew who they were, and Christians did not marry them. They intermarried among themselves for 500 years, to the extent that intermarrying caused them to have a few genetic disorders.

Part of my goal visiting this community was to gain their trust in order to learn some of

their secret *minhagim* (customs). They continue to keep many rituals such as lighting the Shabbat and holiday candles in the closet, using a unique type of oil lamp; slaughtering meat with a *zecher* of the *gid hanashe* (a remembrance of the sciatic nerve that is removed to make a cow kosher); and many more.

This community also has a unique matzah-baking ritual that interested me since I was there for Pesach: they dress in white, go to a hidden place, and lock their doors. Then, they make the matzah using a type of flowerpot to hold the hot embers, and a clay roof tile to bake on so it will look just like they're using regular things around the house. The women sing an ancient song and often recite prayers as well.

I arrived with two kilograms of *shmura* flour (this is special flour that is guarded from the time the wheat is taken to the mill until it is ground into flour, to ensure that no water or moisture comes in contact with it and that it is clean and whole), my own handmade matzot, a few store-bought handmade matzot, and regular machine-made matzot, and I planned to bake matzah with the community on Erev Yom Tov on an ancient local oven.

Five hundred years of secrecy meant that nobody admitted to baking matzah, let alone having an



An elderly woman in Belmonte's Jewish community



At the time of Ari's visit, this old home belonged to a Jewish woman.

continued on next page

oven to lend for the task. Erev Pesach morning, I was sitting in the square of the village that was at least 600 years old, and an elderly man, Aleppio, came to sit next to me. In my broken Spanish, I explained what I needed, and he went up into his attic and brought down his old oven for me to use. On the balcony of the shul, I started baking. This hadn't been done since the 1980s when the Moroccan rabbi (who had been sent by the *rabbanut*) told them it was not a kosher way to bake matzah. All the women came out to see me baking on the balcony and many had tears in their eyes. It was very meaningful for me as I sat there looking out upon the rolling hills that surrounded me, thinking about the generations of people who had done this before me, and about the generations of people lost to us who had not had this opportunity. There are still many people who know they have a Jewish past, but either do not pursue it or are afraid to.

The community seder began and some older Jews living in ancient villages in the area joined us. One of them, an elderly woman who was bent and needed two canes to walk, made her way to the table and sat opposite me. I stood up and shared with the group of more than 80 people how excited I was to be with them and gave an introduction to the seder. I explained that we had machine-made matzot, holy matzot from Israel, and even handmade matzot from my own oven. I told them that the most exciting thing for me was preparing the matzah with flour brought

from Israel and baking it on Aleppio's old oven that he had lent me, essentially reinstating a 500-year-old *minhag*. There was silence. All of a sudden the elderly woman jumped up without her canes and, standing opposite me, she threw both arms up in the air and yelled out, "Gracias a Dios, gracias a Dios!" Thank you, God!

On the first day of *Chol HaMoed* (the intermediate days of Passover), one of the men said that the entire community would be going for a picnic. When I explained that I wanted to go touring with my family, he insistently said, "The entire community goes out for a picnic." It turned out this was a *minhag* where they would leave the village to celebrate together. They also did this for a week on Sukkot every year and were able to celebrate away from the village and build a *sukkah*.

Another one of their old *minhagim* for Pesach is to jump over a stream, remembering the crossing of the Red Sea while singing a song. I asked one of the older men to show me, but he looked at me as if he didn't know what I was talking about, maintaining their secrecy of this *minhag*. I asked his 13-year-old granddaughter if she knew the *minhag* and she said she did not. So I brought her to him and said that if you don't pass it on to her, it will be lost for eternity. Then, he and a friend started singing the song, and together we jumped back and forth over the stream, linking different Jews from different places together with customs from a different time.

The Bnei Anusim and their descendants are part of a sad but not forgotten portion of Jewish history, a history that is rich with strong and beautiful customs. The whole experience – from beginning to end – was moving and enlightening. It was a pleasure and an honor to spend time with, and to learn from, the Bnei Anusim of Belmonte, Portugal. May we always recognize the true blessings we enjoy in our lives: the liberty and freedom to do mitzvot that generations of our ancestors could only dream of. *



On this bench, Ari met the elderly gentleman who brought him the matzah oven.

Volunteer Spotlight: Gitty Gordon



Gitty and Rivka, the youngest child of Gitty's host, Anne Samuel, had loads of fun together at the Zion Torah Center in Erode, Tamil Nadu, India.

Gitty Gordon, age 22, her older brother, and her four younger sisters are from Far Rockaway, New York. She currently lives in Manhattan with 3 roommates and a cat named Oliver. Gitty is working toward her Ph.D. at Long Island University, and

when she isn't studying, researching, or planning her next travel adventure (post-pandemic, of course), you can find her cooking all sorts of new vegan recipes, painting, drawing portraits of people she loves, going to concerts, exploring the city, and writing poetry. Although she is currently living a city girl's life, she loves to grab any opportunity for a camping trip or a day hike. She absolutely loves nature and needs to feel that fresh air in her life. We would like to honor Gitty for not only volunteering for two short trips, but for embracing Kulanu and its work. Gitty represents one of many Kulanu volunteers who visit a partner community and "get hooked."

When I first drafted an email to Harriet Bograd asking her about Kulanu's volunteer opportunities with the Abayudaya in Uganda, I was 19 years old. In my teenage naivety, I genuinely believed then that I would be heading into a

one-time adventure, a summer immersion into a different culture and community. The trip felt almost coincidental at the time and, certainly, I never could have imagined that what began as an adventure would amass into a long-term enthusiasm and a sense of meaning I never knew existed. I had heard of certain scattered Jewish communities, had read up about the lost tribes and the story of the Abayudaya, but I didn't know then how the individuals, the communities, the kindness, the warmth, and the music could integrate into a multisensory experience that would fill a deep void I'd always had inside of me.



Gitty visited Rivka of the Bene Ephraim in Andhra Pradesh, India, who is 87 years old! Together they sang some Hebrew songs and then Gitty received some blessings from her in her native language, Telegu.



Gitty and Keziya (left), Miryam (right), and Ryan (pronounced REE-on) of the Bene Ephraim make challah together.



Visiting with Sippora and her son Daveedu in their home in the Bene Ephraim community in Andhra Pradesh, India

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Gitty Gordon, *continued from previous page*

Growing up as an Orthodox Jew, I remember being overcome with a realization that there was a lack of diversity within the Jewish community and it was something that really troubled me. I understood that as a religious community which has experienced continuous persecution, we could be much better at embracing other minority communities less privileged than ourselves. Looking back, although I was initially seeking a meaningful adventure as a Jew deeply passionate about social justice, chancing to find Kulanu was like finding a gem. Kulanu's mission just felt so right and so critical. The longer I worked with them, the more I realized that Kulanu's mission for making sure that no Jews are left behind meant a lot to me on a personal level.



Sadok Yacobi and Gitty visiting with one of the Bene Ephraim community members who invited Gitty for tea



Gitty with the Shodman family of the Zion Torah Center in Tamil Nadu, India: Eva (left), Lily (age 23), Solomon (21), and Idzik. Gitty wrote, "This family was wonderful to spend time with. Idzik and Eva care for their children, who both have microcephaly, so beautifully. Their kids are amazing and joyfully partake in all of the Shabbat services and festivals."

forever touched by the communities as a whole and the individuals I met in Uganda and India. As I entered their homes, they entered my heart and they've never left. Although many miles from me, their names linger in my mind constantly:

Keziya, Miriam, Yehoshua, Ephraim, Beulah, Rabbi Gershon, Ahron, Binah, Sarah, Yonit, Rachel, Dinah, Gila -- names forever infused with warmth and good feelings. I remain in touch with many of them and despite my hectic life and their less-than-satisfactory internet connections, when I manage to get in touch with them, they ground me and never fail to inspire me about what is important. They give me energy when life becomes redundant, and they teach me what it means to thrive beyond adversity and to be a light unto others. Anyone who has been to my apartment knows that I have a shelf dedicated to artwork, crafts, jewelry, and gifts given to me by my friends in those communities.

Although I miss the faces, the warmth, and the love, it is comforting to know that the plane rides I took to spend time among Kulanu's partner communities in Uganda and in India won't be the last journeys I take to these and other partner communities. I currently spend all my time working on a Ph.D. in clinical psychology with a focus on program development in Africa, and I look forward to being more involved and engaged when I have a bit more time. I am passionate about someday utilizing my professional resources to give back to the communities I love. *



Enjoying a lovely day at a bird sanctuary near the Bene Ephraim community, Beula (left) holding her son Yonatan, Gitty, and Beulah's son Ryan in front

If you are interested in volunteering in one of our partner communities when it is safe to travel again, contact Kulanu: <https://kulanu.org/volunteer/overseas-volunteers/>.

Kulanu Notes

COVID-19 Hunger Relief Assistance



At Kulanu, we continue to work with Jewish community leaders across the globe to ensure the well-being of their communities during these uncertain times. Due to COVID-19, we witnessed communities overseas adjust their large community seders to single-family tables by hand-delivering a newly-printed Haggadah and food staples to each family. We've assisted with hunger relief in various communities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Armenia, El Salvador recipients pictured) to date. We've teamed up with the Cantors' Assembly and many other partners to promote an Abayudaya Unity Concert which raised more than \$40,000 in response to COVID-19. While this type of emergency aid is not our primary mission, we feel it is imperative to step up and continue to support our partner Jewish communities in the way they need it most now.

Online Speaker Series

In the Spring of 2020, Kulanu began conducting an Online Speaker Series to connect people during the time of COVID-19 when most were stuck in their homes due to stay-at-home orders. The first three-part series was titled, "How Kulanu Partner Communities are Sustaining Jewish Life during the Time of COVID-19." Jewish community leaders in Italy, Zimbabwe, and the Philippines (pictured) gave an overview of the current situation in their communities, how they have been affected by the pandemic, and how they are responding. A second two-part series about returning and emerging communities in Latin America shared the stories of historian, author, and genealogist Genie Milgrom, and Rebecca Orantes, community leader of the Jewish community of Adat Israel Judaismo Reformista in Guatemala City, Guatemala with Rabbi Elyse Goldstein of Toronto. You can watch the recorded sessions on Kulanu's website: kulanu.org/recorded-sessions.



Pan African Conference and

Global Teaching Fellows Delayed



Kulanu has postponed the **Pan African Conference** which was to be held in May 2020 in Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa. When it is safe to travel again, the conference will bring together our partner communities from across Africa to learn about Jewish history, philosophy, anti-Semitism, kosher laws, music, and conversion. This invitation-only conference is being held in conjunction with Ohr Torah Nidchei Yisrael. The prospective participants have been meeting with Kulanu staff and board members on WhatsApp to share ideas and teachings with each other. It is our hope to create a regional structure and to foster independence in order that these communities can advocate for themselves.

The **Global Teaching Fellows** program has also been put on hold during this time. Typically, the Fellows, who are rabbinical students, would be traveling over the summer months but it is not possible this year. Some of the Fellows are working to develop connections with partner communities through online teaching and learning.

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Haggadot Delivery to the Philippines and Printing in Zimbabwe



Just in time for Passover (and before the impact of COVID-19), Kulanu was able to arrange for a volunteer to travel to the Philippines and deliver 20 matching *Haggadot* (books used for the Passover seder), as well as 15 *Chumashim* (printed books of the Torah text). The community is pleased to have these quality materials to enhance their Jewish learning and practice.

In Zimbabwe, Kulanu funded the reprinting of 450 additional Haggadot (pictured) so each family would have their own Haggadot to celebrate Passover in their home this year. Last year we helped the community publish 500 copies of a uniquely African Haggadah in Hebrew, English, and Shona (the local language), which included Lemba stories and content.

Scholars-in-Residence in St. Louis

More than 200 people attended scholar-in-residence programs in February at Congregation B'nai Amoona and Traditional Congregation, both located in Creve Coeur, near St. Louis. Kulanu board member Rabbi Capers Funnye (right), Kulanu First Vice President Bonita Sussman (left), and her husband Rabbi Gerald Sussman (second from left) were the featured speakers. Rabbi Seth Gordon of Traditional Congregation stands second from right.



The two synagogues ran successful parallel programs during Shabbat, with Rabbi Funnye at Congregation B'nai Amoona and the Sussmans at Traditional Congregation. All three speakers came together with members of both congregations on Saturday evening at Traditional Congregation and Sunday morning at Congregation B'nai Amoona.

If you are interested in hosting a virtual Kulanu Scholar-in-Residence (using Zoom), please contact us at <https://kulanu.org/contact>.

UPDATE: Social Hall and Kitchen in Kenya



Thanks to our many Kulanu supporters, the new social hall and kitchen in Kenya (pictured) is nearing completion. The construction phase is ending and now the community is beginning to furnish the building. The tables and benches are going to be handmade by community members with local timber; the government approved cutting the trees for this purpose. This moves the community one step closer to completing this impressive project that will improve their quality of life once everyone can gather together to celebrate again. Thanks again to

Wyatt and his family and friends who gave a huge start to this project in honor of Wyatt's bar mitzvah!

Kehillat Kasuku in Kenya also received a mini-grant from Kulanu to pay for internet access, a new router, and some seeds for the community farm.

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Harare Lemba Synagogue Offers Recorded Shabbat Service



Modreck Maeresera, spiritual leader of the Harare Lemba Synagogue, and Hazzan Mike Stein of Temple Aliya in Woodland Hills, California together recorded a Shabbat service for Shabbat Bamidbar. Watch it at <http://kulanu.org/hls-shabbat>. A week later, they, along with Modreck's wife Brenda, recorded a Shavuot and Shabbat service. Watch it here: <http://kulanu.org/hls-shavuot>.

Remy Ilona Discusses Igbo History on Visit to California

"My story about the Igbo will sound incredible," stated Remy Ilona. "We are among the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria. If we add members of Igbo Sabbath religion, the Community of Hashem (COH), which has gradually, over the years moved towards Rabbinic Judaism, and members of the Igbo Rabbinic Jewish community, we can say that over 1.5 million Igbos observed Yom Kippur and Sukkot." During his talk in December 2019 at Temple Beth El in Riverside, he shared the fascinating history of the Igbo people and their present-day life. Remy is an author, a Kulanu speaker, and a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Riverside.



Volunteer Connection Continues to Warm Hearts

Recently we received a joyful email from Nili Salem in Israel who has volunteered in many Kulanu communities since 2005. She wrote that she and the community in Papua, Indonesia, where she volunteered two years ago, are in touch via WhatsApp almost every day with both group and personal text messages. They received a Torah in 2018 and have been translating it into Indonesian! The people have many questions as they study Torah, and together they seek answers. "They celebrate every holiday with beauty and dedication," Nili wrote. The women in the community have signed up for a Zoom program at Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin in Gush Etzion (Israel) and are learning Torah every day. "I'm just so impressed by their beautiful souls, their curiosity, and their daily practice and so I wanted to share with you."

The community got to know Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin in 2019 when Herlina Anace Yawang, a young woman from West Papua who goes by the name Tikvah, spent three months studying there. Jack Zeller, Kulanu's founder and president emeritus, spent a lot of time working with Tikvah in the Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin garden and reported back that everyone there loved her.



Nili wanted to send matzah for Pesach but couldn't due to COVID-19. Now that things have opened up, she sent them what she was going to send with the matzah: hundreds of Star of David necklaces and some pretty Jerusalem signs for their shuls (pictured). *

Special Delivery: From Toronto to Ghana

By Rebecca Sealfon, photos courtesy Rabbi Eli Courante

About the Author: Rebecca Sealfon was raised as a Conservative Jew and is a member of West End Synagogue, a Reconstructionist congregation in New York City. A graduate of Princeton University's Creative Writing program, she has been published in the *New York Daily News*, *Smithsonian* magazine, and the *Daily Beast*. She maintains online forums about Israel-Palestine peace (<https://www.quora.com/q/unityisstrength>) and other Jewish and Middle Eastern topics (<https://www.quora.com/q/mena>) on Quora.com, where her writing has been viewed millions of times. Rebecca is also a professional software engineer and instructor, and was named one of the top 50 female all-around software developers in New York City by RecruitLoop. She lives in Harlem, New York City.

For centuries the Sefwi people of Ghana have observed a Saturday Shabbat, as well as Jewish dietary and ritual purity laws, Jewish mourning laws, and circumcision of boys eight days after birth. A few decades ago, a spiritual leader in Sefwi Wiawso, a sparsely populated, 1,000-square-mile district in Western Ghana seven hours' drive from the Ghanaian capital of Accra, had a vision that the Sefwi people's ancestors were actually Jews. Thus began the determination of some Sefwi Wiawso residents to connect with other Jewish communities and formally convert to Judaism. Sefwi Wiawso Jews believe their people migrated from farther north,

perhaps Timbuktu, and brought ancient Jewish traditions to Ghana.

Rabbi Eli Courante of Toronto's Lodzer Centre Congregation, a Conservative Egalitarian synagogue, is a busy fellow. In addition to ministering to his congregation, he also runs a business specializing in Jewish travel. He arranges trips to Jewish communities, as well as trips for traditional Jews that cater to needs such as *kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws) and a prayer *minyan* (a meeting of at least 10 Jews for public worship). He's visited Jewish communities all over the world, from Norway to New Zealand, from India to Ethiopia. He'd known about Kulanu for years and finally, at the end of 2019, found the time to start working with the organization. Kulanu immediately connected him with the Jewish community of Sefwi Wiawso.

At first, Rabbi Eli communicated with Sefwi Wiawso Jews by phone and WhatsApp. The community of around 70 members had received 22 smartphones from Kulanu, and were putting them to good use to look up information about Judaism. Most spoke English with Rabbi Eli, and a few spoke French. They had many questions. Some questions were directly relevant to community practice. Could a woman come to synagogue during her period? Could she come wearing shorts? How can a meal be kept warm on Shabbat if, without a Jewish neighborhood, congregants may be traveling from far away? The people of Sefwi Wiawso did not know about hot plates, so Rabbi Eli taught them. Other questions were more theoretical. They wanted to know what various verses of the Psalms and Prophets meant, and whether it was time for the Third Temple to be built in Jerusalem. Rabbi Eli was struck by their warmth and passion.

He asked them what the community most needed. They mentioned *talaisim* (prayer shawls) and *tefillin* (a pair of black leather boxes — one



Congregants joined Rabbi Eli to sing parts of the Shabbat service on Saturday night, after Shabbat was over, so it could be recorded.

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for the head, one for the arm — containing Hebrew parchment scrolls). Rabbi Eli started a collection within the Lodzer Centre Congregation to obtain them. He had arranged to visit Sefwi Wiawso in February 2020, and by that time, he had dozens of *talaisim* and seven or eight sets of *tefillin* for them. As a representative for Kulanu Canada, he then embarked on a week-long trip to meet the people of Sefwi Wiawso.

Having seen many kinds of Jewish communities in many parts of the world, Rabbi Eli isn't easily surprised. But on the drive through back roads to Wiawso, the town of 1,500 that is the capital of Sefwi Wiawso district, he was surprised to learn that for his first two days, he would be joining a raucous gathering. Loud music blasted from many speakers, and everyone was singing, dancing, and shaking hands. An elder of the community had died, and the people of Sefwi Wiawso called this ceremony a funeral. Donations were collected for the late elder's widow and family in his memory. The ceremony is performed a year after the actual death, so the event could also be described as a memorial service or a *yahrzeit* (among Jews, the anniversary of someone's death).

The funeral ended at the start of Shabbat. On Shabbat, Rabbi Eli spoke a few words to the congregation in Twi and Sefwi, having learned some phrases in these local languages for the occasion. The Jews of Sefwi Wiawso have their

own synagogue, Tifereth Israel Synagogue, complete with two Torah scrolls. Nearly the entire community attends services, including people of all ages. This community has a number of distinctive traditions. For example, on Shabbat, they do not eat meat. Although they take the scrolls out during services, they read from a *chumash* (the Torah in printed form) in Sefwi translation. The *hazzan* (the cantor who leads the congregation in songful prayer) also told Rabbi Eli about an older tradition from years back, of actually pronouncing the *Tetragrammaton* (the four-letter Hebrew name for God).

And for the first time in his life, Rabbi Eli received a middle name. He was sitting in a room with a half-dozen community members, sharing a meal and talking. As chance would have it, everyone there, including him, was born on Shabbat. In Ghana, children are given the name of the day of the week on which they were born, either as a first or as a middle name. Hence, Kofi Annan, the former United Nations Secretary-General and a Ghanaian, is named for having been born on Friday. Everyone in that room took out their Ghanaian ID, and their IDs all had their middle names Kwame. They said that since Rabbi Eli was also born on God's day, he was Rabbi Kwame.

Rabbi Eli met many members of the Sefwi Wiawso community. The *hazzan*, Shmuel Tetteh, read Hebrew fluently, having taught himself online. Rabbi Eli also spoke at length with Aharon (Alex) Armah, a member of this community who had left to lead and grow the Jewish community near Accra. With hundreds of prospective converts, the Accra congregation is far larger than that of Sefwi Wiawso. Aharon had been sponsored by Kulanu to attend yeshiva in Uganda for four years, and clearly seemed to be the most knowledgeable Sefwi Wiawso resident about Jewish tradition. He hopes to be ordained as a rabbi.



Congregants holding the new cell phones donated by Kulanu Canada

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From community members, Rabbi Eli learned quite a lot about Jewish life and general culture in Sefwi Wiawso. For example, he was told a person without a god is viewed as someone who cannot be trusted. In contrast, Jews are not hated at all in Ghana, despite their religious differences from their neighbors. The country and district have great religious diversity, with many Christians and Muslims of various types as well as practitioners of traditional African religions. Regardless of their religious affiliations, the people live quite harmoniously together. Judaism is known in Sefwi Wiawso because of the local community, which is well respected by the other religious groups.

In fact, Aharon had some exciting news to share. His uncle, a non-Jew, had been a local king of an area near Sefwi, close to the Ivory Coast border. In earlier times, if children of the king were designated as successors they would be at risk of assassination. To prevent assassinations, the tradition began to designate a nephew or sibling rather than a child as a king's successor, chosen by a number of councils after the king's death. Last year, Aharon was chosen as the heir. As king, he will almost certainly become the first Jew ever to hold that position in West Africa, if not in all Africa. To Rabbi Eli, Aharon seemed passionate, willful, and warm.

At night, Rabbi Eli stayed in the guesthouse, which was built with money donated by the family of the late Michael Gershowitz and from Kulanu's sales of Sefwi Wiawso handcrafts. The guesthouse even had electricity, and he could sometimes catch internet signals. However, there was no running water. When renovations are completed, the community plans to name the guesthouse after Michael Gershowitz, Kulanu's first volunteer coordinator for Ghana.

From his trip, Rabbi Eli brought back twenty-five handmade challah covers for Kulanu Canada to sell. Sefwi Wiawso-made challah covers are



Rabbi Eli and Aido Jabin hold one of the beautiful challah covers made by the Jewish community in Sefwi Wiawso.

available for \$36 on www.kulanuboutique.com/sefwi-wiawso-ghana or, in Canada, email: andria@kulanucanada.org. The money is sent directly to the Sefwi Wiawso community, where they may use it for future projects such as laying pipes to bring water into the guesthouse.

The Jewish collective experience, with its ancient roots, history in many other civilizations, and strong traditions of scholarly debate, is a crucial element of cultural diversity. Connecting to other Jewish communities, the isolated and dedicated community of Sefwi Wiawso is able to join the larger Jewish world in ways that would not have been possible even a few decades ago. The *talaisim* and *tefillin* which Rabbi Eli provided are in good hands, where they will be used and valued. Rabbi Eli returned home knowing he would continue to share his knowledge and help lay the groundwork for building a vital Jewish community in Ghana. *

Thank You, Donors

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Kulanu is especially grateful to Kulanu Scholars-in-Residence Bonita Sussman, Rabbi Gerald Sussman, and Rabbi Capers Funnye for their appearances throughout the country, most recently in two synagogues in St. Louis, Missouri. Thank you! *

An Entertaining Voyage

Book Review of *Recipes of My 15 Grandmothers – Unique recipes and stories from the times of the Crypto-Jews during the Spanish Inquisition*, by Genie Milgrom (Jerusalem: Gefen 2019)

Reviewed by Karen Primack

About the Reviewer: Karen Primack and her husband Aron are among the founders of Kulanu, which was named in their living room in Silver Spring, Maryland in 1994. Karen was secretary of the board and editor of the Kulanu Newsletter (later renamed Kulanu Magazine) until she retired from this position in 2008, and continues to be an honorary board member. She edited Kulanu's two books, *Jews in Places You Never Thought of* (1998) and *Under One Canopy* (2003). They now live in Washington, DC.

This book is a sequel to the 2012 book *My 15 Grandmothers* by Genie Milgrom. The earlier volume tells the religious and genealogical story of the author, who was born to a Catholic family in Havana and raised Catholic in Miami – without any knowledge of her Spanish-Jewish background. But Milgrom had always been attracted to “all things Jewish” and converted to Orthodox Judaism in her 30s. Later, genealogical research revealed to her an unbroken maternal lineage going back 15 generations in Spain and Portugal, generations that lived as Jews before the Inquisition, as Crypto-Jews (Bnai Anousim) during that tragic time, and as Roman Catholics thereafter. (She has since traced back to find 22 grandmothers!)

The current book was made possible when the author's maternal grandmother needed to move to a healthcare facility. While cleaning out her Miami apartment, Milgrom found a treasure trove of family documents and recipes. She writes: “Through the centuries as the grandmothers moved [through five countries] and then to Miami, these cookbooks and loose papers that I now cherish were always with them.”

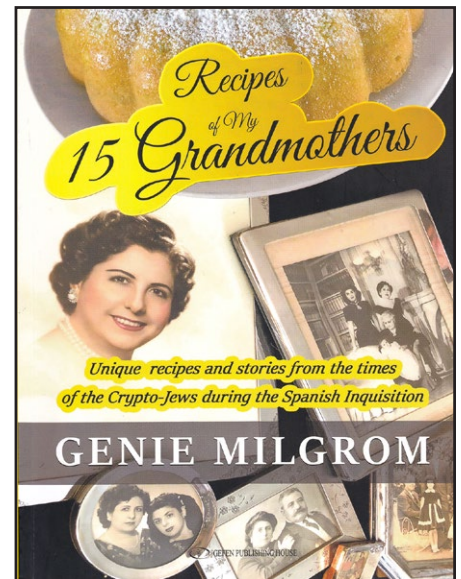
A total of 93 recipes, all kosher, included in this rich volume were tested and “tweaked” with the assistance of 44 of the author's friends and colleagues. Although most of the grandmothers did not practice Judaism and some of the meats used were not kosher, Milgrom notes that out of

the hundreds of recipes, only one mixed milk and meat. That rule, and others about inspecting lettuce for insects and eggs for blood spots, were strictly maintained through the ages as “family traditions” rather than actual rules of kashrut.

The categories of recipes include chicken, meat, fish, side dishes, sauces, desserts, and beverages (all alcoholic). The largest section, by far, is desserts, with over 40 entries. Each entry includes a brief description and often an anecdote. The author sometimes speculates about the place of origin of a recipe, based mostly on the ingredients. The level of difficulty is also listed, as is the suitability for use on Passover.

The dishes can involve interesting combinations of ingredients. Her Baked Chicken Ajiaco (difficult) combines white potatoes with sweet potatoes, corn, and red wine. A typically Caribbean Chicken Fricassee (also difficult) combines green peppers, tomatoes, potatoes, apples, white wine, lemons, raisins, capers, olives, canned green peas, pimentos, and toast triangles for decorating. Similar ingredients are used in an easy Chicken Salad: hard-boiled eggs, red apples, celery, pimentos, potatoes, sweet peas, and mayonnaise or olive oil.

In the meat category, the difficult Cocido Madrileño is “meaty,” to say the least; it contains



continued on next page

skirt steak, meat bones, chicken, sausages, smoked turkey thigh, garbanzo beans, eight eggs, and vegetables. The fish, a Snapper in Beer Sauce (medium difficulty) includes Tabasco sauce, light-colored beer, gruyere cheese, and farmer cheese.

Side dishes tend to be simpler. The easy Beets with Oranges is not too unusual, but it does include sugar and pistachio nuts. The easy Decorated Rice (a pilaf) includes raisins, sweet wine, saffron, almonds, and optional cinnamon. The reader can also choose an easy Stuffed Eggplant and easy Sweet Carrots, as well as the famous Tortilla Española (Spanish omelet), labeled easy and made with a dozen eggs plus onions and potatoes.

With 41 desserts, choices abound, and most are easy or of medium difficulty. The Aceitadas are shortbread-type cookies made with quite a bit of anise liqueur. The fried Bollos de Leche (sugar donuts) would be nice on Chanukah. Less familiar are the Buñuelos de Yuca (fried cassava), a Cuban delicacy, and Chiricaya, a pudding-like dish from the Canary Islands made with milk, cinnamon, sweet red wine, eggs, and lemon zest.

The recipes that Genie Milgrom shares in her book are not just “recipes.” They are great recipes with a history. As she explains in her book’s prologue, “It is incredible that when they packed their belongings and moved their families to new villages or even across the oceans, these recipes were traveling with them as their most cherished possessions . . . I have brought the grandmothers back out into the open to proudly proclaim that they were Jewish. The Inquisition silenced many families, yet I was blessed . . . to find my way back to Judaism. I give honor to my grandmothers today. All twenty-two of them.” Genie Milgrom certainly presents an entertaining voyage, and the reader’s palate will be grateful! *

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This magazine is published by:
Kulanu, 165 West End Avenue, 3R
New York, NY 10023

To report changes of address:
kulanu.org/contact

For further information:
kulanu.org

Magazine Editor

Judi Kloper

Layout and Photography Editor

Lisa Yagoda



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**165 West End Avenue, 3R
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An Important Message from our Board

At this time of heartbreak and division for Americans and others around the world, Kulanu aims to stand as a resource for hope and inspiration. Kulanu, which means "all of us," has devoted itself to supporting Jewish communities around the globe, welcoming people of any race who long to be Jewish or who identify as Jewish. Kulanu in its essence reflects Jewish values of unity among diversity. We hope that you stay safe in the midst of the challenges that we are facing.