

# The Abayudaya: Judaism Emerging

*A Spiritual Journey into Africa*



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by

**Menachem Kuchar**

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Front cover photograph: Muzei Solomon Bwete, community elder, Putti, January 2013  
Back cover photograph: Putti Synagogue with thatched roof, June 2011  
Frontispiece: Portrait through a window, Putti, January 2013

*to  
my beloved  
without whom  
there would be  
no book*

*thanks for everything*



Children in Putti  
June 2016

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thank you to my Abayudaya friends, far too many to name here – the reader will meet many of them throughout this volume – for the opportunity to have spent time with them and for the privilege of being with them as they achieve their century old aspirations.

And a very special thank you to Rabbi Shlomo Riskin for his guidance, teachings, friendship ... and for taking me along on “the adventure of a lifetime”.



Rabbi Riskin speaking at the Putti Synagogue on Yom Yerushalayim  
June 2016

## FOREWORD

by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

Judaism has given many wondrous gifts to humanity. These include the Sabbath day of rest, the creation of the human being in the image of God making everyone free and inviolate, and the Ten Commandments of morality which, if accepted, will prevent human beings from destroying each other. But the most important gift of all is the gift of the Messiah, the optimistic belief that at the end of the days, humanity will perfect itself, representatives of all the nations of the world will gather in the Holy Temple of Jerusalem (the City of Peace), and all Gentiles will seek to “learn from Israel’s paths, and walk in Israel’s ways ... so that nation will not lift up sword against nation and people will not learn war anymore.” (Isaiah 2:4).

Maimonides, the great philosopher-theologian-legalist of the twelfth century, goes so far as to write, “Let it not enter your mind that in the days of the Messiah any aspect of the regular order of the world will be abolished; rather the world will continue in its accustomed course. All the Gentile nations will adopt the true religion (*dat ha’emet*); they will neither rob nor destroy, rather they will eat permitted foods in peace and quiet together with Israelites, as it says, ‘the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw’ (Isaiah 11:7)” (Maimonides *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Kings 12:1). And the precursor to this period of universal peace, of blessings to all the families of the earth, who will return to the ethical monotheism of the Abrahamic faith, is the great miracle of our generation: the return of the people of Israel to the land of Israel despite 2,000 years of exile, persecution, pogrom and holocaust culminating in our return to Jerusalem. In a similar fashion another striking proof that we are indeed living in the Messianic Age, is the amazing story of Putti, Uganda and the adoption of Judaism by a significant group of Africans.

Let me tell it to you as I experienced it ... the final chapters have yet to be written. In 2009 I received an email from a young man in Uganda named Enosh. He told me that he had been teaching his community my *parshat hashavua* which he downloaded each week from the *Jerusalem Post* website. He stated that he “was not yet quite



*Learning about tefilin under the mango tree in Putti  
June 2016*

Jewish,” but that his Putti community “had been keeping Torah and mitzvot for over 90 years”, that his greatest desire was to learn Torah in my yeshiva *Mahanayim* – but he did not have the funds for the airfare. “And if you come to Putti to interview and test me, please bring your ritual slaughter’s knife, since many of us have never tasted meat or chicken,” he concluded.

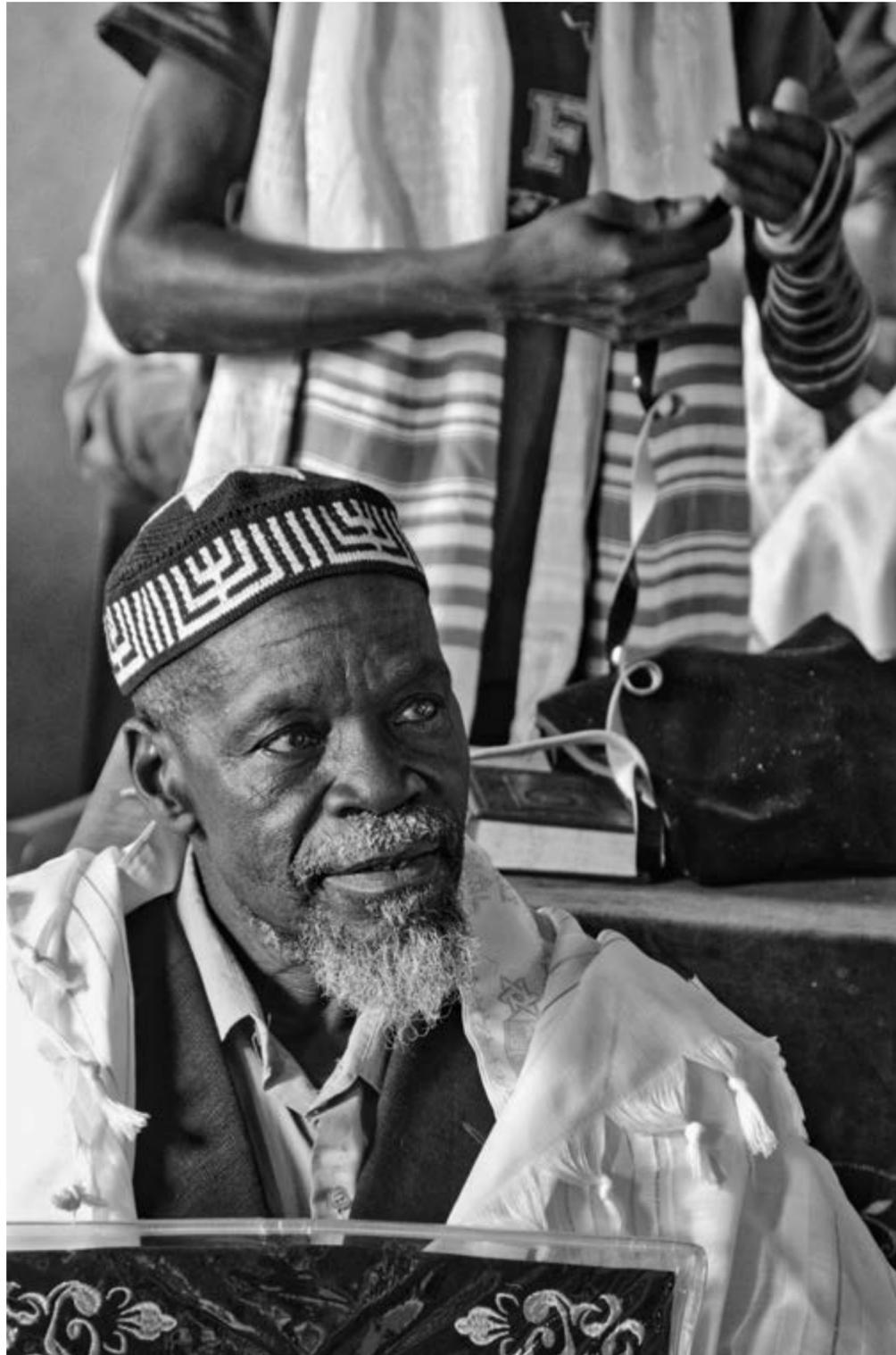
I of course immediately responded positively to him, but did not again hear from him or his community.

In the spring of 2011, Dr. Ari Greenspan (a prominent dentist and ritual slaughterer, known as the Jewish “Indiana Jones”) came back from an African trip and showed me a video of a young man he had met in rural Uganda who said, that while he was studying business, he always wanted to be a rabbi. To say that I was intrigued would be a gross understatement. I realized that there must have been a connection between these two communications.

I decided that I had to see this phenomenon for myself. I took along my grandson Eden for his barmitzvah trip. We were accompanied by Dr. Greenspan and my beloved friend and senior partner in African Affairs, Menachem Kuchar, our scribe and artist photographer. We set out for the adventure of a lifetime.

We first spent Shabbat in Nairobi. On Sunday morning we went on a four hour safari of lions, monkeys, elephants etc., then flew to Eldoret from where it is a relatively short drive into Uganda. There we came upon a surrealistic scene of handsome African men with large “menorah” kippot, graceful women with covered hair and beautiful, colorful dresses, and a choir of bright-eyed children singing Hebrew songs (mostly from *t’filah*, prayers) in our honor. The “Elder” of this 250 people community, Muzei [a title of respect for an older gentleman] Solomon Bwete, welcomed us and reviewed the history of his kinspeople. Speaking slowly and in a somewhat sing-song he told us, “During the nineteenth century British colonialization of East Africa, the English came upon Uganda and its environs. Kakungulu, a fearless military hero who was also a charismatic intellectual and inspiring leader, was appointed regional governor. He had been previously converted by Christian missionaries who taught him to read the Bible, ‘Old and New’ Testaments. Kakungulu read the ‘Old Testament’ becoming hypnotized by its grandeur and mesmerized by its morality. He was less impressed by the ‘New Testament’ because he felt that a Jewish Jesus must have kept Shabbat, not Sunday, must have eaten only kosher and certainly must have celebrated the passover seder not Easter at the ‘last Supper’. He wanted his people to live by the Old Testament, to which he had become committed as the words of God. He was told that an ancient people, the Jews, live by the Old Testament, but Kakungulu had never met a Jew.

“After some research, he wrote three letters, one to Rabbis in Jerusalem, one to Rabbis in Johannesburg, one to Rabbis in New York. He asked that they send a representative who could speak English to teach his people how to live by the Old Testament.



Abraham Wajala, one of the original residents of Putti before the breakaway, sitting in the current synagogue June 2016

“Some time later, there appeared in Uganda a Jewish man named Yosef, a kind of Elijah-the-Prophet visitor, who immediately taught Kakungulu Jewish practice. One of the community members learnt the art of circumcision (that person’s grandson Uri is the performing mohel in Putti today). Yosef spent six months with Kakungulu teaching his new community how to keep the commandments ...”

As soon as Muzei Solomon concluded his oral history, Enosh Keki Mainah, the *rabbi* and leader of this Khazar-like community, the young man who had emailed me in 2009, said that his people were fuelled and comforted by two dreams which they believed would be fulfilled, dreams which empowered them to go underground during the anti-semitic persecutions of Idi Amin and always to be faithful to their Jewish traditions: that they would live to recite the *sh’he’khanu* blessing upon becoming converted and be formally accepted as Jews, and that they would live and flourish in Eretz Yisrael. Enosh said that he often dreamt that he was living in Israel, and that in those dreams he would ask God to enable him to awaken as a resident of Israel. When he introduced us to his community Enosh announced, “This is the Rabbi Riskin whose Jerusalem Post articles on the weekly Biblical portions I have been downloading from the Internet and teaching you for the past few years.” I could only pray that we representatives from Zion may be privileged to help this extraordinary community fulfill both of their dreams.

During the past five years, two Putti residents, Moshe Madoi Yashiirah (the young man in the video who said he dreamed of being a rabbi) and Tarphon Kamyia, and subsequently Enosh, studied at our Ohr Torah Stone Yeshiva, *Mahanayim*, for a year. They returned to their home community as teachers and ritual slaughterers, setting up Torah classes via Skype with members of our faculty. Several of our teachers, along with several of our Kollel members, visit Putti every year.

We supplied Putti with prayer books, tefilin, prayer shawls, as well as building a *mikveh* and an *eiruv*. To date we have converted to Judaism 180 residents of Putti and Nairobi who are presently occupied in studying Torah, performing the commandments and working their land.

Due to the generosity of Albert Dadon of Melbourne, Australia, we have established a fund to encourage an African Studies Program, which has benefited leadership from other African start-up communities in Nairobi, Yaoundé, Harare and Johannesburg. This year Moshe and Enosh have begun a long-term study program in our Strauss Rabbinical Seminary.

May we continue to rise to the enormous challenges of these most miraculous and momentous times.

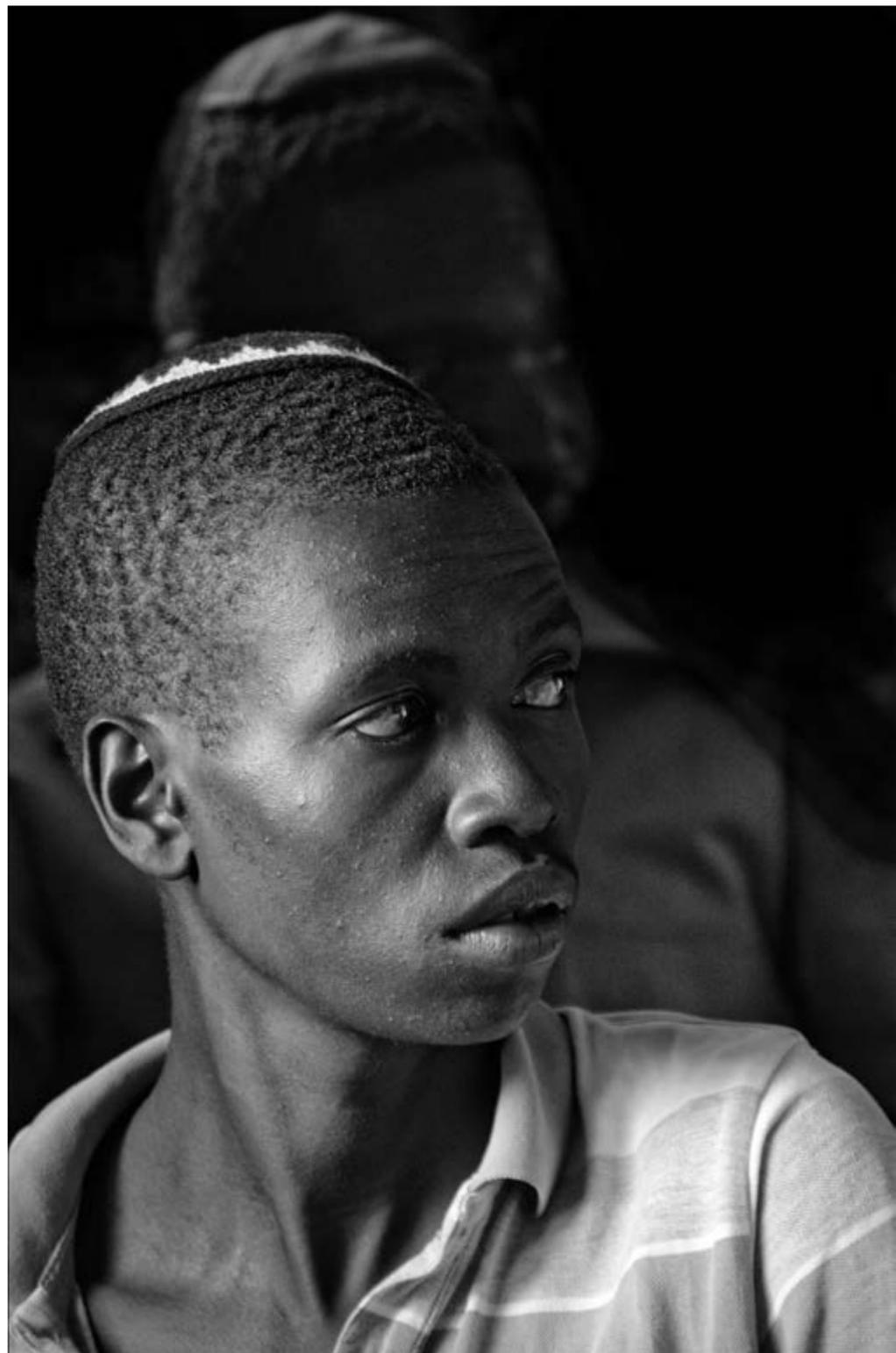
*Sh’vat, 5777*



*A granddaughter of Semei Kakungulu wearing a traditional Ugandan dress  
June 2011*

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*At minha prayers  
Putti, June 2016*

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*Shira and Enosh's wedding in the Putti synagogue  
January 2013*

## PROLOGUE

It is close to six years since I first met the Abayudaya. In many ways the ramifications of this experience have changed who I am and what I believe to be important, in directions I could not have previously imagined. This book is my attempt to explain the phenomenon by inviting you to accompany me on my spiritual journey with my African friends.

The Abayudaya are descendants of followers of one man, a leader with great vision. Nearly a century ago, he discovered Judaism in a Jewish wilderness, attaching himself to the God of Israel or as he expressed it, to the Old Testament, viz the Torah way of life. He initially developed his biblical understanding into a practice and ritual, in complete Jewish isolation. Only later did he encounter *real* Jews, who helped him further his comprehension of traditional Jewish practice.

In this volume I narrate the evolution of the Abayudayas' religious experience from its starting point in 1919. I acquaint the reader with their history and spiritual growth, leading ultimately to their orthodox conversion.

Many aspects of early Abayudaya history have, in less than a century, taken on the form of legend. Even where records exist, it is difficult to determine where lies the truth, in part given the nature of successive British colonial administrations, whose bureaucrats were often more interested in furthering private agenda than in recording history. Added to this, the oppressive reign of Idi Amin in the seventies caused much to be destroyed, lost and forgotten. As such, any narrative cannot be an exact history. In order to relate the Abayudaya story as fully as possible, I sometimes recount the same event or information more than once, each version based on different sources, unable to know with certainty exactly what transpired. I articulate my personal understanding of the events in which I was involved; the opinions expressed herein are mine alone and do not reflect the views of the any of the other people with whom I have been involved in this project.

With the aid of graphic photography, coupled with an understanding of history and yearnings, I present here my African Jewish encounters.



## A WORD ABOUT MY PHOTOGRAPHY

I am an artistic narrative photographer (see my earlier book, *Actualities in Black and Orange*, 2005) and have been photographing for over forty years. My focus is on exhibiting real people in their home environment rather than in a studio, listening to them and reflecting their lives and desires. I aspire for photographs that are empowering representations of the subjects themselves, unaccompanied by my interference, all the time remaining faithful to my artistic aspirations.

The present project details the Abayudayas' path to achieving its one hundred year dream of being an integral part of the Jewish people.

Expressing myself via the still image allows me to freeze an instant, preserving for eternity a fleeting moment, which sometimes may only have been perceptible to my camera and not noticed by a present observer.

As photographs can easily be taken out of context, I include extensive captions throughout this book in order to preserve the original backdrop without introducing my bias.

As this project has developed over time, so too has my photography. Though not always the case, today I largely work in monochrome unless I feel colour itself is integral to the subject of the photograph.

In recent times I have been strongly influenced by students of Ansel Adams. Through them I have learnt how to see light and more importantly how to visualise at the time I stand opposite my subjects, what it is that I desire the viewer to see, feel and experience in my work. Thus this book represents various photographic styles, my thinking and technique at the time the photographs were shot and processed over a six year period.



David Musasula in the Putti Synagogue  
June, 2016

## CHAPTER 1 HOW IT ALL STARTED

For many years I have had an interest in the “Lost Tribes of Israel”. In the early eighties, while studying at the *Mercaz haRav* yeshiva in Yerushalayim, I eagerly read Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail’s newly released work on the Pathans, or Pashtun peoples. Rabbi Avichail and some other authorities, as well as a portion of the tribesmen themselves, claim these tribes are descendants of some of the ten Lost Tribes. At that time I accepted the *evidence*, and daily, subconsciously, awaited the arrival of our lost brethren. And not long after, the Ethiopians Jews, a claimed Lost Tribe, did indeed commence their return. After two and a half millennia, our dispersed tribes were coming home. Or so I thought.

I did not actively pursue this interest, until one Friday morning in June 2011. In the locker room of our local swimming pool, Rabbi Riskin mentioned that he would shortly be journeying to meet a “Lost Tribe” sojourning in Africa. This rekindled my imagination. Could there really be Jews sitting and learning bible, or even talmud, in the shady tranquility of the African grasslands, disconnected from mainstream Judaism by two thousand seven hundred years?

Coupled with a search for new photographic horizons and a forever preparedness to take on a new adventure, visiting East Africa fascinated me

– especially given the potential to meet and photograph a *real* Lost Tribe. I hastened to ask the Rabbi if I could join him.

The Rabbi did not know much about the group we would soon visit. His interest was sparked by Dr Ari Greenspan, a dentist and *halakhic adventurer*, a searcher of lost Jews, an Efrat resident. Rabbi Riskin agreed to travel to Africa to meet this tribe, to assess who they were, and to see for himself what was their relationship to Judaism.

The tribe is called the Abayudaya. I found time for a quick Internet search before we left, not gleaning much information. I did learn however that the Abayudaya were not a *Lost Tribe*, nor even a tribe, but more soon on whom they are.

Six days later, with a *shabbath* and *shavuoth* intervening, I was sitting on an overnight flight with four compatriots from Ben Gurion International, bound for Nairobi via Addis Ababa.



Rabbi Riskin outside the Gush Etzion swimming pool, talmud in one hand, swimming bag in the other  
November 2016

### Rabbi Riskin

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin is the chief rabbi of my hometown, Efrat, and one of my important Torah teachers. His contribution to Israel and world Jewry over the course of five decades has been instrumental in shaping today’s Modern Orthodox

society, in Israel and across the globe. He has a very busy schedule, including extensive travel, teaching and meeting many groups, Jews and non-Jews, at home and around the world. He has many students who hold rabbinic positions in far-flung locations, maintaining contact with them as well as visiting them. Included in his many interests, is his activism to make conversion to Judaism easier and more user-friendly, all within the strict realm of the *halakha*.



View of the street below the Addis Ababa Synagogue  
June 2011

## CHAPTER 2 ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA

Though our Addis transit stop is short, we have sufficient time to gain a general feel of the city and to visit its solitary small synagogue.

It's still dark as we climb into our awaiting jeep at Addis Ababa Bole Airport. The tropical sun is rising somewhere over the not too distant Indian Ocean, but here it is a cool 11° C; Addis sits 2,355 metres above sea-level. Driving through the semi-darkness, along quiet, almost deserted streets, I am conscious of a slow ripple along the footpaths. The street people, block after block, are stirring from their slumber.

A new African day is dawning.



Ari Greenspan and Ari Zivotofsky at the Succat  
Rahamim Yemenite Synagogue in Addis Ababa  
June 2011

The very small synagogue is up one flight of stairs, off a courtyard dotted with various workshops. Perhaps at some point in the past the synagogue occupied a larger portion of the building. It had been established by a group of Yemenite Jews who came to live in Addis in the 1920's.

The synagogue houses an interesting artefact. A *sefer torah*, reputedly over 400 years old, written on brown-orange deer skin parchment once common in Persia. From my scribal experience, I expected the vellum to be far softer; perhaps it hardens with age, or perhaps it is in fact a different animal's hide. Besides its vintage and colour, this scroll exhibits customs in writing style not used by Jewish communities today. They are however mentioned by the Rambam. Some of these characteristics are also found in scrolls from other far-flung locations.

The purpose of our visit to this synagogue was to view this scroll. As a scribe, a *sofer*, it is strange that I had to come to Africa to view these features for the first time.

This revelation was but the beginning of my exposure to the breadth and majesty of *halakha*, aspects of which I had not yet encountered in my years of study.



Ari Greenspan  
and our host,  
Menashe Levi,  
viewing the  
Sefer Torah  
June 2011

One unique feature in this Torah occurs in some, though not all, of the letter *peh*, פ. In our scrolls, and also largely in this Sefer, *peh* is written with a negative *beth*, ב, inside. Here a number of the *pehs* are written

as a spiral. [See Rambam *Laws of Tefilin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah*, 7:8]

There are two types of *parsha*, paragraph breaks, used in all Torah scrolls, open and closed. In our scrolls, both *Ashkenazi* (European tradition) and *S'fardi* (eastern tradition), an open paragraph appears as empty space on the remainder of a line, the new paragraph beginning on the next; a closed paragraph is a blank space of at least nine small characters in the middle of a line, the new paragraph continuing on the same line. In the Addis Torah, if the width of the remaining space before the end of the line in an open paragraph is narrower than nine letters, a blank line is added between sections. [Ibid 8:1] Also unlike today's custom, here the space between closed paragraphs may also cross onto a new line, the second line indented.



Sunrise on a new smoggy Addis morning  
January 2013



The synagogue is located in a street called Beni Sefer, in Hebrew the Sons of the Book  
June 2011



Addis street scene  
January 2013



Unloading at one of Addis's wholesale fruit and vegetable markets, near to the synagogue  
January 2013



Local Addis cafe  
January 2013



Windows of the hidden room under the synagogue  
January 2013

Under the synagogue is a small, dungeon-like room. Here former Israeli prime minister, Yitzhak Shamir, was hidden following his escape from a British P.O.W. camp in Eritrea in 1947. He was at the time the leader of the *Lohamei Herut Israel*, "Fighters for the Freedom of Israel", also known by its Hebrew acronym *Lehi*, and also as the Stern Gang after its founder's *nom de guerre*, Yair Stern.

A seventeenth century Torah from ancient Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, located in the British museum since 1852, exhibits a different custom for open and closed paragraphs, *parshioth*. For open paragraphs, the remainder of the line is empty, and the next line starts with an indent. The closed paragraphs are open to the end of the line much like our open paragraphs. Also in this Chinese Torah, the font uses neither one nor three pronged crowns.

The *Keter Aram Tzova*, also known as the Aleppo Codex, displays similar paragraph formatting to the Addis Torah.

Seven letters in our *Sefrei Torah* are adorned with a flowery three-pronged crown, *tagim*; some other letters with one prong. The *sefer torah* we viewed in Addis was written using the former crowns but not the latter. While this does not effect the kosher status of the Torah, it was interesting to see, as again all of our 'modern' *sifrei torah* universally are written using both types of adornment.



Zebra in Nairobi National Park  
June 2011



### CHAPTER 3 NAIROBI, KENYA

We land at Nairobi's Jomo Kenyatta Airport early Friday afternoon. Here, though I don't know it yet, I will spend an *interesting* shabbath.

Though I had come on this trip *for the ride*, it was here in Nairobi that I would receive my introduction to a concept yet unknown to me, to a world of people independently discovering the God of Israel, the God of the Jews and Judaism, in an apparent Jewish void. The experience here would overturn my worldview and have a profound effect on my understanding of the true role of Israel in the world. Even on my return to Israel, I would not immediately comprehend how large an occurrence this was.

#### THE SYNAGOGUE

The Nairobi synagogue celebrated its centenary in 2012, a year after our visit. The first Jews arrived here escaping east European pogroms and later in the wake of the European Holocaust. Descendants of the original immigrants still live here. Newer members of today's congregation include former Israelis, who have resided in Kenya for over thirty years, seeking business opportunities and economic benefits. Jewish expatriates from various countries round off the congregation.

One of the ex-pats is Dr David Silverstein, active in the local Jewish community over many years and also personal physician to a former Kenyan president. We meet him on arriving at our hotel where he relates to us the general situation of the community and the synagogue.

Services are held on a regular basis only on Friday nights and shabbath mornings. Unfortunately, at least at the time of our visit, the congregation did not employ an official clergyman. A young rabbi from New York, who had a few years earlier fallen in love with Africa, and Kenya specifically, visits from time to time, assuming the rabbinic mantle when present. However there is no formal arrangement between him and the congregation. He happened in Nairobi the shabbath of our visit. Unfortunately an arrangement was never formalised and his visits ended soon afterwards. [During 2016, a rabbi was finally appointed.]



We were picked up at the airport by James, Dr Silverstein's driver. Rabbi Riskin was so impressed that James also sported a tie that he asked me to photograph them together.  
June 2011



Rabbi Riskin listening to the Africans speaking about their Jewish practice  
June 2011

The first thing I notice on entering the largely empty synagogue on Friday afternoon is a number of local Kenyans, dispersed on various pews, all towards the back of the hall. I learnt that some of these people, women and men, had been coming here to pray for as many as seventeen years; all of them for at least ten. Each has independently found their way here; most are only acquainted as a result of their common synagogue attendance. To meet them was the reason for Rabbi Riskin's Nairobi detour. While I became aware of this attendance earlier in the afternoon, encountering it had a deep effect on me. Was this a unique Kenyan experience?

Local African synagogue attendees meeting with us at the Silverstein residence on Sunday morning June 2011



The senior member of the African community is Wanjiku Ngugi, a grandmother who was the first African to attend services here. A single mother and very determined personality, she brought up her children on her own. She is one of the first to arrive

at the synagogue for each service and she navigates her way around the prayer book better than most.

Synagogue dynamics are always complex, though it is not overly clear to me why. Perhaps it is the nature of Jews to have a fondness for an ideological spar, a residue of the great study halls of our past. This small congregation is divided between those who favour the locals attending services and other communal activities (hopefully leading to conversion) and those who barely tolerate their synagogue presence, with no desire to add these folk to their number.

Rabbi Riskin had come here to explain, especially to the latter group, the importance of embracing these people specifically, and the seriousness of accepting *halakhic* converts in general; and most importantly, the need for peace, *shalom*, within the congregation. Despite his best efforts, I felt his attempt was futile, each side applying his words to strengthen already entrenched positions.

I've gotten ahead of myself, though I will state at this point that there was one person in that audience who took to heart the concept being espoused.

Until this encounter, I would have described myself as a typical *Ashkenazi* bigot. My parents' and rabbis' generation in Europe were convinced that even the *S'fardim*, Jews of western Asian and north African descent, let alone converts, were somewhat inferior, second class Jews. I doubt my forebears ever met a *S'fardi* Jew and I am sure very few, if any, converts. Conversion was a rare occurrence in Catholic Europe. Could it also be that following so many years of being the downtrodden of the Continent, our Jews too needed someone to aggrieve? No, I think that European pre-war anti-semitism included a strong revulsion to conversion, and though things started to change after the emancipation, not accepting converts became an integral part of Judaism itself.

By intergenerational osmosis, I too adopted my antecedents' unaccepting attitude. Converts were driven by ulterior motives – I always bore suspicions re their sincerity and justified my stance on what I thought was sound *halakha*. I was convinced the few converts I had met did not fit into the European Jewish communities with which I was familiar, the only Judaism I experienced and understood in my youth.

#### JUDAISM A MISSIONARY RELIGION?

All this melted away in Nairobi. At a general meeting of synagogue members following shabbath, Rabbi Riskin shared his vision, based on the Rambam, that one of the tasks of the [Jewish] Messiah was to "return the world to the true religion". This does not refer to the seven noahide commandments – Maimonides teaches these elsewhere in his work – but to "Torah Judaism".

The Rabbi explained that Judaism is a missionary religion, not in the fibre of the Christian missionaries, who had passed through Africa and other parts of the world in years gone by, and were still active in places, including Israel. Rather, he explained, we Jews possess a truth that we are duty-bound to share with all humanity. Abraham is our role model. Ultimately all mankind must be convinced of this truth, but by example and teaching, certainly not by the threats and violence used by other religions. The words of the prophets express this concept throughout the bible.

We were forced to terminate our missionary activities 1,900 years ago by the Hadrianic decrees, issued in the wake of our defeat in the Bar-Kokhva revolt in 135 C.E. These, amongst other anti-Jewish sanctions, forbade, at pain of death, preaching to gentiles and converting them. Judaism became, and remained for many centuries, very insular and parochial.

As the Roman Empire transformed into the Roman church, these decrees and persecutions continued, right into the twentieth century. Thankfully, today we are once again free to preach our message and to freely accept sincere converts. Sadly, many of our leaders,



Rabbi Riskin and Dr Silverstein listening to the Africans June 2011



On our way home via Nairobi, Ari offered to slaughter quail for the local community. As they do not have a shohet, they import all their meat. The quail farm we visited is in the yard of a house in a very fancy Nairobi gated community. The husband of the owner is a divinity professor. Suddenly, on realising that Rabbi Riskin was a rabbi, he presented himself on his knees, requesting a blessing. And no, I don't believe that, at least at this point in time, he was looking to become Jewish. June 2011



Lion in Nairobi National Park  
June 2011

mostly in Israel – religious and secular – continue the old diaspora mentality, fearing and rejecting converts.

#### MINI SAFARI

On Sunday morning Rabbi Riskin, his grandson Eden, who joined his grandfather on this trip as a *bar-mitzva* present, and I managed to squeeze in a few hours of safari. Nairobi National Park is just to the south of Nairobi city, separated by an electrified fence; you turn off one of the city's main roads and quite suddenly find yourself at the park entrance.

Elephant orphanage, Nairobi  
June 2011



It was a nice break between the intense meeting the previous evening and the meetings we would have later on in the day. I had spent a few days at a game reserve in South Africa some months earlier and I looked forward to again viewing African animals from up close in their natural habitat. The Rabbi had never experienced this type of adventure – he enjoyed it immensely. We saw a full gamut of animals: lion, giraffe, zebra, elephant, colourful birds....

The Rabbi got such a thrill out of this visit that, on our return home through Nairobi, he insisted we visit the elephant orphanage and the giraffe sanctuary. In the orphanage we met many young elephants whose mothers' had been killed by ivory poachers. These elephants are too young to fend for themselves and are brought to the orphanage by park rangers, if they find them in time. After reaching about seven years of age, they are reintroduced into the wild.

Listening to Rabbi Riskin  
June 2011



#### MEETING THE AFRICANS OUTSIDE THE SYNAGOGUE

On Sunday morning we meet the *African* synagogue attendees at the Silverstein residence. Rabbi Riskin meets each individually to assess their readiness for conversion. While he and our hosts are with them, I sit with the others, fielding very interesting questions on the full gamut of Judaism: *halakha*, history and philosophy. It was an intense, exhausting and exhilarating intellectual experience for me.

After the individual meetings, the Rabbi addresses the whole group and fields their questions. He tells them that he is very impressed with them, blesses them to continue on their chosen path, though conversion is not yet on the agenda.

#### A WORLDWIDE CONCEPT

In our times we are experiencing something very interesting, in multiple locations worldwide and not just here in Nairobi. Gentiles are pre-empting our missionary action, forcing our reluctant hand. People are discovering Judaism in apparent vacuums, discovering the true God and His Torah of their own volition. At a conference at the Van Leer Institute in Yerushalayim in November 2014 entitled *Converts, Returnees, and Adherents*, Prof. Tudor Parfitt, who studies what he refers to as *Jews on the periphery*, made the claim that there may be more *wannabe Jews* in the world today than there are *Jews by descent*, from established *Ashkenazi, S'fardi* and *Yemenite* stock.

This process has been blossoming over the last twenty years in Nairobi, and it emerged in Uganda nearly one hundred years ago, under the leadership of a mighty warrior named Semei Kakungulu.

And to assess the practice and sincerity of Kakungulu's heirs, the *Abayudaya*, we were in Africa. Here my *weltanschauung* was being turned on its head.



Wanjiku and her daughter Winnie asking questions from Rabbi Riskin  
June 2011



Edén Riskin, wearing an *Abayudaya kipa*, slaughtering quail in Nairobi  
June 2011



*These gentlemen await on the Kenyan side of the international boundary. For a small fee they will help you and your vehicle cross the border into Uganda.*

*As you approach the frontier you see a queue of lorries about four kilometres long. It takes the trucks a couple of days to make the crossing. Understandably most of the drivers look bored; some wash down the cabins of their vehicles.*

*Private vehicles go straight to the front of the line. But you still need the services of these facilitators.*

*Note the fellow on the right who will exchange currencies for you.*

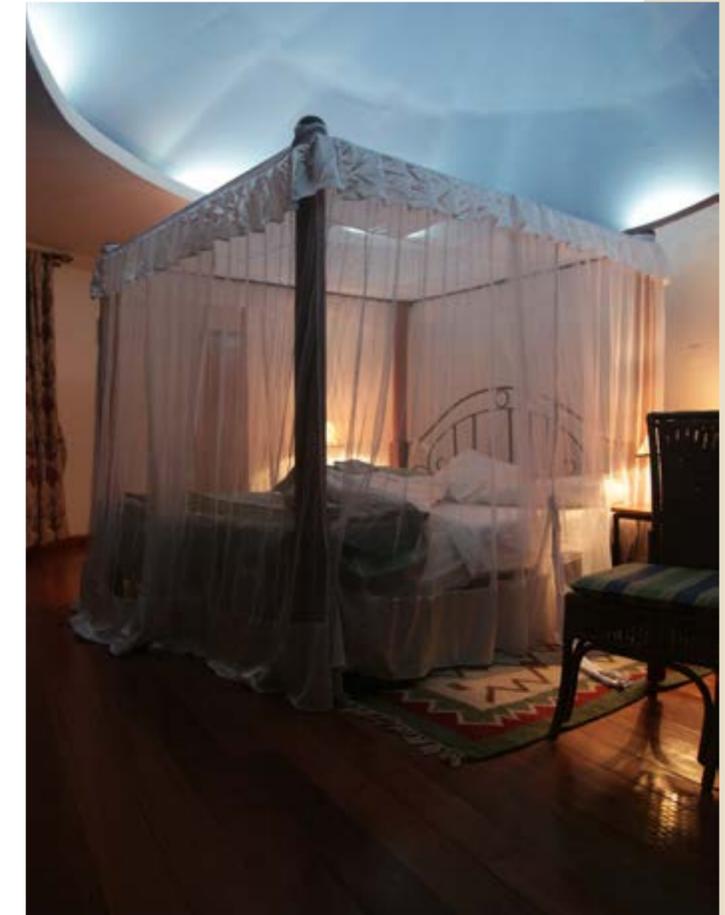
*June 2011*

## CHAPTER 4 CROSSING INTO UGANDA

On Sunday afternoon we fly from Nairobi to Eldoret, a mountain city in western Kenya, a little north of Lake Victoria. We arrive just after sunset into a torrent of tropical rain. We are in the centre of the region offered to Herzl by Chamberlain in 1903 under the so-called “Uganda Plan” to settle European Jews in East Africa. This is a beautiful and lush region, and though smack on the equator, has very pleasant weather, with unvaried temperatures all year round, night-time dropping to 13°, rising to around 27° during the day. Close to two hundred thousand people live in the city.

This is also malaria country. Here all the hotel bedrooms come equipped with mosquito nets. It's strange the first time, but you get used to it.

The next morning we set off by road towards the Ugandan frontier. We had intended to leave much earlier, even a couple of hours before 6:30 a.m. sunrise – here at zero latitude the sun rises and sets at the same time every day of the year – but our driver's employer does not allow his cars to be driven on the highways in the dark. On encountering the potholes around which we had to manoeuvre, we understood why. Some of the holes were so large and deep, that our driver, Boniface, had to move onto the opposite shoulder to avoid them.



*Malaria country – hotel rooms come equipped with mosquito nets  
Eldoret, June 2011*



*This little guy is a Ugandan national, but I caught him here on the Kenyan side of the frontier. The border is demarcated along a narrow stream, a small bridge spanning it. I'm told that the Ugandan farmers allow their flock to roam freely every morning to graze. Some, like this goat, nonchalantly cross over the frontier, help themselves to the Kenyan food chain, returning home each evening. No passport, no border facilitators, no money changers.*

*Uganda is a landlocked country, the closest port to Kampala being Mombasa about 1,100 kilometres away on the Kenyan coast. Hence the massive quantity of trucks passing daily via this crossing.*  
June 2011



*On the road to Mbale – a well stocked vegetable stall, a scene very typical to much of sub-Saharan Africa*  
June 2011

Traversing the Kenyan side of the border took us close on an hour, shortened by a *bribe* (in the official form of a fine for a non-existent problem with our Kenyan registered jeep). It at least gave us the opportunity to pray, five white people in a dark sea wrapping straps on their arms and heads.

On the Ugandan side, frontier formalities were completed within ten minutes.

From the border on to Mbale, Uganda, a large country town with a population of around eighty thousand. The town is surrounded by many villages, each inhabited largely by subsistence farmers, some of who additionally grow a hectare or two of coffee, Uganda's major export.

Enosh, our Abayudaya contact, is waiting for us at our Mbale hotel. He's keen to get moving.

Quickly dropping off our luggage, we continue our drive to the town of Putti, our main destination, the home of the *orthodox* Abayudaya people.



*Enosh awaiting our arrival at our hotel. My first meeting with him.*  
June 2011



*The Kenyan side of the international frontier*  
June 2011



Solomon Bwete,  
Kakungulu's nephew  
Putti, June 2011

## CHAPTER 5 WHO ARE THE ABAYUDAYA?

### A BRIEF HISTORY

The name Abayudaya in Luganda, the language of the Buganda kingdom, means the “People of Judah”, analogous to the Children of Israel. The Abayudaya make no claim of descent from any Israelite tribe, currently extant or lost, nor are they genetically, historically or culturally connected to ethnic Jews of any shade. Though lacking historical precedent, the community is devout in its Jewish practice. How did this come about?

The Buganda dominion, stretching westward from the Victoria Nile, was the largest of the four kingdoms occupying the area that today is Uganda. The kingdom was incorporated into the British East Africa Protectorate in 1894, remaining such until Ugandan independence in 1962. The Bugandan hereditary monarchy was a strong regime, the history of their royal family stretching back to the thirteenth century. Their kings, in Lugandan *kabaka*, cleverly shared rule with local clan leaders, allowing for centuries of stable governance. Today there is still a Bugandan *kabaka*, though this is purely a ceremonial post.

Semei Lwakirenzi Kakungulu was born in 1869. At that time, his father was one of the clan chiefs. Young

Semei was sent to the king's court where, amongst other things, he learnt to hunt, especially elephant, the popular pastime of the *kabaka*. Kakungulu was a very accurate marksman. Here he also honed other military skills.

The *kabaka* strove to expand his kingdom by conquering neighbours' territory. He assumed that he could count on the services of Her Majesty's Government to further this goal. He was unable to discern the true design of the colonials. Kakungulu also only realised this when it was too late.

During the 1880's Kakungulu was converted to Christianity by a British Protestant missionary, who taught him to read the bible in Luganda or Swahili. [Differing versions – in order to provide the locals with easy access to the bible, the missionaries translated it into some one hundred African languages.]

Later Kakungulu was conscripted to aid the British take over areas of [today's] Uganda outside Buganda. With 5,000 men under his command, he conquered territories in the north and east on behalf of the Crown, believing that in return for his services, he would be appointed *kabaka* of these vanquished

The Talmud in two places (*Shabath* 68a, *Yevamoth* 47a) expresses opinions that it is possible to convert to Judaism in the absence of any Jews, all on one's own. The elements of conversion into Judaism are the acceptance of the God-given commandments as understood by the rabbis of the generations, circumcision (for males) and immersing in a *mikve*, ritually pure water, all of which Kakungulu and his followers performed. According to these Talmudic texts, perhaps Kakungulu's conversions were indeed valid orthodox conversions!? But I must add that this opinion, though unrefuted in the Talmud, is not accepted *halakha*.

An interesting point re circumcision: the Jewish people have a unique form which sets it apart, I believe, from the millions who traditionally practice the rite worldwide. There are two elements to a kosher *brith*: the first, removal of the foreskin which must result in bleeding; the second, tearing of the revealed membrane. If the original Abayudaya

territories. Consequently, following his conquests, Kakungulu invested his own money into building cities, towns, roads, embankments and bridges and otherwise building up and improving the eastern region under his control. All his visitors were impressed by his considerable military and civilian achievements. He far exceeded British expectations; to them this was worrisome and alarming. By 1902 he controlled almost 10,000 square miles in north eastern Uganda, east of the Victoria Nile. The British did not fulfill the perceived agreement; they may have been politically concerned about his non-royal descent. Or more likely the British were very good at using local talent to achieve their colonial goals, though preferring their own bureaucrats running the show day-today, augmented with some handpicked Africans. This allowed them to extract the maximum out of the colonies. To them this was just good business.

Kakungulu was informed that the promise to appoint him *kabaka*, though admittedly clearly having been made by a very high-ranking British official, was without the knowledge of that official's seniors.

In 1913, after having been governor the Busoga since 1906, the British demoted Kakungulu to merely mayor of Mbale, the administrative town of the region, a town he himself had built. They additionally granted him personally some twenty square miles of land.

Sorely betrayed, realising that the dream for which he had worked and sacrificed all these years, to be installed as ruler over eastern Uganda, could not now come to fruition, in 1917 he resigned from British Government service.

Ruins of Kakungulu's palatial residence  
Gangama  
June 2011



He retired to the countryside outside Mbale, to a beautiful area around Gangama, on the western foothills of Mount Elgon. Here he built a palatial residence, the ruins of which are still visible today.

## RELIGIOUS QUEST

Around 1913 Kakungulu joined the Malakite or Bamalaki Movement (officially *The Society of the One Omnipotent God*), a new homegrown Ugandan religion. It was started by Malaki Musajakawa and brought together aspects of Christianity, Judaism and Christian Science. The British administration viewed it as a cult. Their practice allowed for polygyny and rejected idol worship; they did not eat pork and they called for the Sabbath to be observed on Saturday. Their request for the authorities to recognise Saturday as an official day of rest brought the Bamalaki into a head-on conflict with the British, who could not tolerate an additional non-workday.

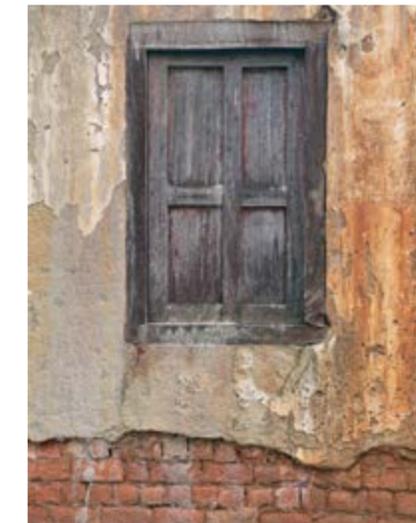
The Malakite Church was anti-colonialist and anti-western, rejecting, amongst other things, western medicine. Many members of this Church were from Kakungulu's Buganda kingdom. They believed that the use of medicine and inoculations was contrary to the teachings of the Hebrew Bible, what the missionaries called the Old Testament, misinterpreting Jeremiah 46:11, "... in vain do you use many medicines; there

is no cure for you" to apply to physical rather than to spiritual ailments. They believed that faith in God was the ultimate healing. "If God could save a man from a lions' den, then surely He can cure any disease." This is not as strange a dilemma as it may seem and is discussed in the Talmud (e.g. *Baba Kama* 85). There the right of a doctor to heal a patient is derived from the use of the infinite absolute, a grammatical structure intensifying a verb by repeating it in two forms, *verapo yerape* (Ex 21). There may also have been a confusion in their minds re the Church's ban of witch doctors; they could not clearly differentiate between the two types of *doctors*.

The Malakites spread throughout Uganda, their number reaching over 100,000 members by 1921.

Kakungulu's affiliation with the Malakites further distanced him from the British – and the reaction was reciprocal.

In line with the Bugandan practice of not mutilating their bodies, including any form of piercing, the Malakites outright rejected circumcision. This was one of the elements on which Kakungulu eventually broke with them. In this aspect, the Buganda are different to many other Bantu tribes in Equatorial Africa, who have always carried out traditional circumcision rites.



circumciser, *mohel*, learnt from Africans, he would only be careful to fully perform the former action. It is possible to also remove the membrane with the initial cut and this does not invalidate the *brith*. However Jewish *mohalim* are careful to circumcise in two discrete actions.

A third action required for *mohalim* is sucking the blood to ensure a flow. Today this is generally done with a glass pipette. According to the Rambam this is for health reasons. The Abayudaya do not seem to be aware of this requirement. The lack of this action however does not invalidate a *brith*.

I was keen to interview one of the current Abayudaya circumcisers to see what he practised. I asked him to describe how he carried out his work. His answer was a perfect score! I'm fairly certain their original circumcisions were not carried out in this way. I conclude that it was only when Kakungulu eventually met *real* Jews, tearing the membrane was added to the many things he continuously learnt.

As with Kakungulu's prayers, a large section of our Jewish liturgy is also direct quotations of biblical passages. Many of our blessings use the phraseology of biblical texts.

Similarly many Samaritan prayers are based on verses from the Torah. Traditionally the *Beta Yisrael* Ethiopians pray mainly from the Book of Psalms and the Thanksgiving Scroll (*Hodayot*).

In his retirement, Kakungulu began to seriously read and meditate on the bible. He discovered many contradictions in the texts, between the so-called New and Old Testaments, and also within sections of the New. He chided the missionaries, claiming that they were misinterpreting the bible. Amongst many criticisms, he faulted them for observing the sabbath on the first day of the week, for eating foods forbidden by the bible and for not circumcising. He presented proofs from New Testament accounts of Jesus to show that Saturday was the real day of rest. For example Jesus was buried on Friday and his mother and disciples did not visit his grave the following day, it being the sabbath, only visiting his tomb on Sunday.

Eventually Kakungulu became convinced that only the Hebrew Bible, and especially the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, the Torah, were the true word of God. He rejected the remainder.

He was especially impressed by the verses at the beginning of chapter 56 of Isaiah,

“So says the Lord, ‘Keep justice and do righteousness, for My salvation is near, and My favour is to be revealed. Happy is the man that does this, and the son of man that holds by it; **who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it**, and keeps his hand from doing any evil.’ Neither let the stranger, who has joined himself to the Lord, say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from His people’ ... Also **the foreigners, who join themselves to the Lord, to minister unto Him and to love the name of the Lord, to be His servants, every one that keeps the sabbath from profaning it, and holds fast by My covenant**”. [The word for covenant used here is *brith* which also means circumcision.] “I will bring them to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer; their burnt-offerings and their sacrifices shall be accepted on My altar ....”

### TAKING ON JUDAISM

Informing his Christian and Moslem neighbours that he was rejecting the New Testament and from now only accepting the Old, Kakungulu was told that the Jews were the only people who believed thus. He responded, “So I am a Jew!”, having previously been unaware of the term.

He sent his brother to learn circumcision from one of the local tribes, the Bagishu, who until today circumcise their children at the age of fifteen. He immediately had himself circumcised as well as his firstborn son, Yuda. Many followed his example. He circumcised his second son, Nimrod, on the eighth day following his birth, as he did for the next sons, Yuda Makabee, Avraham (Ibulaim) Ndaula and Israel.

Given the Buganda rejection of body mutilation, his decision to circumcise all males required substantial resolve. In the nineteenth century, the Moslems had trouble bringing the Buganda into their faith, as they too require circumcision as a prerequisite. The Moslems eventually accepted the Bugandan royal family as Moslems without circumcision. So strong was Kakungulu’s Jewish faith, rather his faith in the bible being the true word of God, that he was prepared to go against so strongly ingrained a practice.

Kakungulu’s followers began observing the shabath on the seventh day. An increasing number of people followed his actions and moved to live within his proximity. After all, he was the owner of the land in the region. By most reports, Kakungulu’s *conversion* took place in 1919.

We cannot be certain how Kakungulu and his followers “observed the sabbath” with only a translated written [Christian] bible as their source. There are many aspects of *halakha* at which he could have only guessed. We must assume that he practiced a form of Judaism similar to the Karaites, the Jewish sect which rejects rabbinic interpretations in texts such as the Talmud, in favour of a literal understanding of the scriptures. For example the Torah tells us that one must refrain from using light in our residences on the sabbath – did Kakungulu understand this referred to creating a new light as opposed to using existing light, the understanding of the Karaites, Samaritans and the Ethiopian *Beta Yisrael*; that Passover is celebrated annually in the “month of the spring” – when is that when you are located near the equator where the only seasons are wet and dry? However to sing Kakungulu’s praise, whenever he learnt any rabbinic Jewish customs,

he immediately incorporated them into his practice. Somehow with only the translated bible as his guide, Kakungulu instructed his followers on how to be Jewish. In 1922, he wrote for his community a ninety page guidebook of rules, *halakhoth*, on Jewish observance. He included therein prayers based on biblical verses. I do not believe a copy of this document survives.

One of Kakungulu’s problems was that the missionaries’ bibles came as an inclusive single volume. He tore off the section he believed to be the New Testament. However he was unable to differentiate exactly where the Old ended and the New started. As a result, he initially maintained a belief in Jesus and some of the passages used in prayer were taken from the New Testament. The order of the books in the Christian Old Testament differs from that in the Hebrew Bible. (Interestingly the Talmud and the Rambam have a different order again.)

Kakungulu dressed in a style that he imagined to be Jewish, based on pictures he had seen in assorted missionary bibles. He stood very tall and erect, a man with great presence, extremely charismatic. He was the type of man to whom many people could easily be attracted, and many were, though his religion was foreign to Uganda. Churchmen tried in vain to convince him and his followers that only Christianity could lead to real salvation.

Kakungulu set up a *yeshiva* to teach his knowledge of Judaism to his people. He combined religious and political leadership. In 1922 he built his first synagogue in the town of Nabugoye, walking distance from his home.

Following shabath prayers, Kakungulu would provide lunch for all the attendees. These numbered up to 1,500 on any one occasion.

In addition to teaching Jewish practice, Kakungulu fought against the traditional idolatry of Uganda. A common practice involves tree worship, similar to the biblical Canaanites’ *asheira*. Calling on satanic forces, sometimes via departed ancestors, animal sacrifices

are prepared. This takes place in the vicinity of a large *holy* tree. In a world in flux, a living tree, rooted firmly into the ground, standing tall and erect, spanning hundreds of years, perhaps provides psychologically needed stability.

### YOSEF

In 1926, in what I consider akin to a mystical visit from the fabled Elijah the prophet, whom the Talmud relates teaches Torah face-to-face to worthy sages throughout the generations, a man known only as “Yosef” suddenly appears on the scene.

(This date is according to Arye Oded, one of the first Israelis/ Jews to meet and document the Abayudaya, from the early sixties. I have been told that Yosef arrived earlier. This seems feasible to me as Kakungulu died not long after 1926 and before his demise he met and was influenced by other Jews passing through Uganda. However I think it would have had to been after 1922 when he produced his instruction book.)

One day while Yosef was sitting in a Kampala courthouse, Kakungulu entered the room, arriving there for a lawsuit concerning land ownership. The latter’s aura shone so powerfully, that Yosef enquired about the visitor. On being informed that he was “a Jew from Mbale”, an amazed Yosef was intrigued enough to request an introduction. He quickly realised that Kakungulu’s community needed to learn much in order to practice Judaism fully. Kakungulu invited Yosef to his house in order to be taught by him.

Fascinated by the circumstance before him, Yosef stayed with Kakungulu for some six months, teaching him and his followers many aspects of rabbinic Judaism including the workings of the Jewish calendar, festival laws and customs, an introduction to *kashruth* including *sh’hita*, ritual slaughter, and teaching them Hebrew both for prayers and Torah reading. From this point on, the Abayudaya only ate meat slaughtered within the community.

Yosef explained that Jesus was not the messiah and delineated the Hebrew Bible within the missionaries’ bible, as accepted by the Jewish world.

In addition to Kakungulu, all Ugandan clergy, Christian and Moslem, to this day, continue an anti-pagan struggle, especially syncretism, the attempt to amalgamate opposing religious practices. For example, following her reelection to parliament in April 2016, the incumbent speaker (since June 2011) Rebecca Kadaga, went to her relatives’ tombs for a religious observance. She dismissed all criticism, saying she just wanted her departed relatives to know of her success. Church of Uganda Archbishop, Stanley Ntagali, responded, “We value our ancestors because we are connected to them. But, we must always trust only in God. We **no longer** need to go through the spirits . . .” [emphasis mine].

There are some interesting anomalies in the Abayudaya naming conventions. The Abayudaya largely read the bible in Luganda. While the sixteenth century King James translation of the Old Testament was written using the Hebrew Bible as its source, names continued to follow Ancient Greek spelling and pronunciation, e.g. J instead of Y, B instead of V. Greek names may have been further adjusted in the missionaries’ African translations. *A propos*, given that numerous translations that were written by non-native speakers, I often wonder how accurate are the translations, let alone the transliterations.

While the Greek alphabet has only twenty-four letters/sounds, including consonants and vowels –



Kakungulu's grave in a small private mausoleum next to his house in Gangama.

The inscription on the grave reads:

Semei Lwakirezi Kakungulu

A Victorious General and  
Saza Chief in Buganda  
Administrator of Eastern  
Province 1899 - 1905  
President of Busoga 1906 - 1913  
Died 24 - 11 - 1928

June 2011

Kakungulu divorced his wife, “whose marriage was not in accordance with Jewish Laws”. She was a Protestant and refused his requests to become Jewish.

Yosef well understood that the community's future lay with the many youngsters who came to synagogue services. He encouraged Kakungulu to introduce a *bar-mitzva* type ceremony.

Before leaving, Yosef presented Kakungulu with a number of Jewish prayerbooks and a large Hebrew/English Old Testament. Now Kakungulu was certain where the Hebrew [Jewish] bible ended.

As any young man whom Kakungulu taught became proficient in prayers and reading the Torah, he would be sent to one of the local villages to set up a synagogue and become its spiritual guide. His followers would no longer all need to come to Nabugoye each shabbath. Seven such synagogues helped spread Kakungulu's teachings.

Kakungulu paid the salaries of these teachers. One of the young students was Samson Mugombe, who was only nineteen years old at the time of his mentor's demise.

Subsequent to Yosef's visit, Kakungulu met at least two more Jews working in Uganda. From them he furthered his knowledge of practical Judaism.

Semei Kakungulu died of tetanus in November 1928 (the British records show he died of pneumonia, but I understand that is how most people with fatal diseases finally succumb). One of the Malakite customs he never rejected was his aversion to medicine, neither for himself nor for his animals. Though everyone links his death to his rejection of medicine, I'm not certain how possible was treating this disease at that time – a tetanus vaccine was only developed in 1924 and a cure is still not available today.

## POST KAKUNGULU

Though never achieving his aspiration to rule over the eastern and north-eastern areas of Uganda, the area known as Bukedi, Kakungulu's descendants refer to him as the king of Bukedi, and his grave lists him, amongst other titles, as President of Busoga.

Immediately following Kakungulu's demise the first demographic tragedy hit the Abayudaya. There was a division amongst his followers, some still wishing to retain a belief in Jesus in their core faith. There were many external pressures for this. Neighbouring Christians teased and abused the *new* Jews for associating themselves with the *Jesus-killers*. Without the charismatic Kakungulu to lead and defend them, many were lost.

After a few years the leadership role of those who remained faithful to Kakungulu's faith passed to Samson Mugombe. I was told this was in 1935; Arye Oded, who met and corresponded with Mugombe first while in Kampala in the sixties, and later as Israel's ambassador to Kenya in the nineties, writes that this occurred in 1944.

While he was not of the calibre of his tutor, Mugombe was a capable leader. He introduced the custom of marriage solely within the Abayudaya group, personally ensuring that his daughters, Deborah, Rachel, Naomi and Tamar all married men from within the community. This decree was accepted very seriously, to the extent that when one of Mugombe's own granddaughters married a Christian man, she was rejected by the community and her young son

was brought up within the community by a maternal uncle and other relatives, with almost no contact between mother and son.

Mugombe instituted that members only be given biblical names. This naming tradition is still largely observed today with only some *Jewish* variations such as Tarphon, the name of one of the rabbis in the “*hagada*” (*Mishna*) or *Tsiyon* – Zion – in honour of their yearning for *Yerushalayim*.

By the early sixties the community had grown to about three thousand members, living in eight villages stretching along the foothills of Mount Elgon. At around that time Mugombe contacted the Israeli embassy in Kampala, hoping that some Abayudaya members would be sent to Israel to study the Torah in depth. Sadly his attempts to connect to Israel and world Jewry did not occur for many years. Some of his correspondence remains.

While today there are many groups around the world who wish to connect, or in some cases claiming to reconnect, to the Jewish world, in the early part of the twentieth century this phenomenon did not yet exist outside of the Abayudaya and the Ethiopians; hence they were treated with suspicion.

A second demographic tragedy struck the Abayudaya during the rule of Idi Amin, following his rise to power in a military coup in 1971. The years of his control decimated the community, his human rights abuses leaving open wounds lasting until today. Following Israel's successful raid at Entebbe airport in July, 1976, freeing Israeli hostages from an hijacked Air France airliner, Amin banned all Saturday sabbath keepers. As was Amin's custom, he had to blame someone other than himself for his failures. Those outlawed included Seventh Day Adventists, the Malakites, Christian Scientists and of course the Jews, the Abayudaya.

The above is the version I heard from some of the Abayudaya themselves. Oded relates that for the first year of his regime, Amin continued strong contacts with Israel, anticipating continuing support and

aid. When this did not materialise, he turned to Arab states, principally Libya's Kadaffi for support. This was forthcoming on condition that he broke diplomatic relations with Israel, which he did in 1972, and that he encourage Islam amongst his populace. It is not clear to me if the persecution of the Abayudaya started with the break in diplomatic relations or after the Entebbe rescue. I may hazard to guess that it started in 1972, but worsened in 1976. Either way, perceiving the Abayudaya as the *Jews* of Uganda – there were no other Jews in his realm – Amin introduced harsh decrees against any religious practice that was construed even similar to Judaism. He closed all the synagogues, filling them with goats, banning Jewish prayer outright, burning whatever Jewish books onto which his agents could lay their hands. Possession of texts written in Hebrew or about Judaism became illegal. Members of the community were forcibly converted to Islam or Christianity in the face of threatened gaol and even execution.

Anyone who continued to pray and practice Judaism did so at great personal risk, and only in absolute solitude, going out at night into fields sometimes populated by dangerous animals, into dark caves, deep inside banana plantations and other cloistered locations to pray. Stories abound of the Abayudayas' sanctification of God's Name by continuing to observe the Torah in the face of anti-Jewish witch-hunts and pogroms, reminiscent of eastern Europe decades before. Some Abayudaya went into exile, principally to Tanzania, to escape the persecution.

One year Jonadab Keki, one of the original young Kakungulu appointees and a spiritual leader at the time, built a *suka*. In order to hide its religious purpose, he brought some of his animals into it, explaining that he had built a shelter for them. He was arrested. Only after a big bribe – five goats – was paid to the police was he released, with a stern warning to discontinue his practice.

These reactions in the face of adversity demonstrate the seriousness with which these people took their Jewish faith and practice. One should not assume that those who “converted” away had a weaker conviction

English has many more, especially if you number diphthongs – Hebrew has about 39 independent articulations. So some letters had to fall by the way in transliterating. The bible's *Avraham* becomes Abraham, *Yo'av* Joab, *Yits'hak* Isaac etc. The latter is interesting as the Hebrew letter, *tsadi*, צ, has no Greek or English equivalent. The King James translators usually use a ‘z’, (or ‘s’) which they also use for *zayin*, ז – confusing!

We met a young lady who told us her name is Chezia, which I understood to begin with a guttural *heth*, ה. “That's a nice name – from where is it [in the bible]?” Her father answered, making me feel a little ignorant, “It's one of the names of Job's (*Iyov*) daughters”. Well I must admit that *Iyov* is not one of the books of the bible that most of us study intensely, though an in-depth study of it is certainly on my bucket list. But the name did not ring a bell at all. I knew that at the very end of the book, *Iyov* has three daughters; I thought that perhaps this name was a reference to *Iyov*'s original daughters – but no names are mentioned in this context.

Then it dawned on me. קציעה, *Ketsia*, was *Iyov*'s second of three post trauma daughters. King James writes this as Kezia. Either in the secondary translation, or as a result of mistaken grammar, a new name was born.

What does *Ketsia* mean? It is one of the eleven spices of the *ketoreth*, the incense holy offered daily in the Temple in Yerushalayim. But no-one today is exactly sure what it is. It is usually translated

– the pressure was insurmountable. As we shall see, later on many did return, and of those who didn't, their children and grandchildren are today still rejoining their community.

#### POST AMIN

Amin was finally deposed by Ugandan rebels supported by Tanzanian fighters. His final defeat and flight, first to his sponsor in Libya and later on to Saudi Arabia, occurred on the day before *pesah* (11th April), 1979. On hearing the news, Jonadab Keki said that that night at the *seder*, they would drink five cups of [banana] wine instead of the traditional four, the additional cup to celebrate the downfall of their own African tyrant. They saw this liberation akin to that of the Children of Israel from Pharaoh.

Sadly however, by this time only about 300 remained faithful to their Judaism. Though Idi Dada was gone, and the new government declared freedom of religion, it still took a number of years of political turmoil until the Abayudaya felt safe to come out into the open again. Uganda returned to some stability in 1986 when Yoweri Museveni came to power. From this point in time, the community gradually regenerated, and is still doing so today. But the sailing was not all smooth.

In 1988 a group of young Abayudaya, faithful to their Judaism, came together under the leadership of Jonadab Joab (J J) Keki, Jonadab Keki's son, to reclaim Nabugoye, land confiscated by Amin, to form what they called a *kibbutz*, modelled on the concept of an Israeli collective. By day the members would go to school, six kilometres away to study secular topics, and at night and on weekends they studied Judaism. They engaged in agriculture and building, including the production of mud bricks, the principal building block in the region. They rebuilt Kakungulu's Moses Synagogue.

Unfortunately their agricultural attempt failed, due to outside interference, largely in the form of attacks by police-backed local gunmen. One shabbath a number

of youth were arrested. A similar event happened on *sukoth* in 1989; young men sleeping outdoors in their *sukoth* were arrested. As a result of their inability to unimpededly grow their own food, they disbanded the *kibbutz*. But they did regain a foothold, with its synagogue, on the hill.

Samson Mugombe, now aging, worried about the community's continued leadership. He wanted Isaac Kakungulu, Semei's grandson, to take on the mantle. However Isaac declined, saying that he was very busy in his law practice. He helped the community wherever he could.

In the end, as Yosef had advised Kakungulu some sixty years earlier, the new leadership sprang up from the younger generation.

#### MEETING THE OUTSIDE WORLD

During the nineties, the Abayudaya started to receive visitors from outside Africa, including orthodox, Conservative and reform rabbis. Other than demonstrate that they were now somewhat known outside of Uganda, these encounters did not lead to anything concrete.

The Abayudaya made contact with an organisation called Kulanu, Hebrew for "All of Us". Kulanu grew out of *Amishav USA*, American supporters of Rav Avichail's search for the Lost Tribes. For various reasons, Avichail and these American supporters parted company at the official level, though personally they remained close. This separation resulted in the establishment of the new organisation, under the leadership of Dr Jack Zeller. Kulanu describes itself on its website as "... works globally to help dispersed remnants of the Jewish people". The new organisation allowed Zeller and his colleagues to undertake projects outside of Rav Avichail's field of interest, including assisting the return of descendants of *anusim*, hidden or underground Jews, offspring of Iberian Jews converted to Christianity, now living in worldwide localities in Europe and in former Iberian colonies.

The Abayudaya always saw themselves as orthodox – Kakungulu and Mugombe didn't know another Judaism – something which I think was true to the best of their ability given their limited practical Jewish knowledge. Though Kulanu did send an orthodox rabbi, who spent some months with the community, no orthodox body was prepared to undertake a mass conversion of the community. As such Zeller arrived at the realisation that orthodoxy was not going to provide a viable solution to allow the Abayudaya to finally join the Jewish nation. He sought other avenues, though not all his Kulanu friends agreed with him. Zeller spoke to his own Conservative synagogue rabbi, Howard Gorin, for advice. In response Gorin organised a *beth din* to travel to Uganda. Kulanu distances itself from dictating a specific stream of

Judaism; rather they respond to each community's individual aspirations. In this case many believed that, having come thus far after many years of Jewish practice, Gorin's Conservative solution would achieve a desired result.

The Abayudaya, largely on the advice of their then leader, J J Keki, accepted the suggestion to follow this course. Apart from now making them a part of the global Jewish spectrum, the Conservative conversion opened the door to support by Conservative communities in America. While I believe they could still have retained their previous *orthodox* practice, even as Conservatives, such as separate seating at synagogue services, something they had done since Kakungulu's time, they began to adopt Conservative



J J Keki's orthodox wedding to his wife, Miriam, following their orthodox conversion. Note as they did not have a ring for the ceremony, we took the mishna literally and used money! June 2016

as cassia, a plant with an aromatic bark, somewhat similar to cinnamon, though cinnamon itself is one of the eleven. However cassia is merely an English loan-word from the Hebrew, so that's not too helpful in identifying exactly which plant is *ketsia*.

In a totally different context, *ketsia* also refers to figs put out to dry in the sun.

Either way, it has a strong connection to Israeli religious practice and agriculture, and I think it is a delightful name.

Such mistranslations are not a uniquely African theme. I received a message in French from a man signing his name as *Chimchon*. I later realised that this is the name in the bible pronounced *Shimshon* (Samson in English). It is the French transliteration. No one alphabet contains sufficient characters to cover all vocalisations.



Boys praying in Putti synagogue  
January 2013

custom. Kakungulu's original *mikve* had been restored in the nineties during a visit by an orthodox rabbi. However this new Conservative community only used it for the initial conversions and have let it fall back into disuse.

One member of the community, Gershom Sizomu (J J's younger half brother) was sent to the United States to study rabbinics. The school he attended offers a rabbinic programme, described as "history-makers and serving as pioneers in the Conservative Jewish community ... a full-fledged five-year rabbinical school that values rigorous scholarship, embraces the splendours of spirituality, and provides students with vast opportunities to grow intellectually and spiritually".

Gershom is a charismatic personality and certainly exhibits true leadership characteristics. He was the first Abayudaya to graduate university. Though spending five years studying in the U.S., returning with the title of rabbi, in my humble opinion, he does not appear to possess a great knowledge of Jewish law, *halakha* nor of daily Jewish practice. But he leads a community far flung from any other, with at that stage, very little connection to any other in the world. In recent years this has started to change.

To facilitate the conversions, five members of the Conservative clergy, under Gorin's leadership, visited in 2002 and again in 2004.

This led to an unfortunate turn of events, as the community became unnecessarily divided. Some members protested that they had not remained

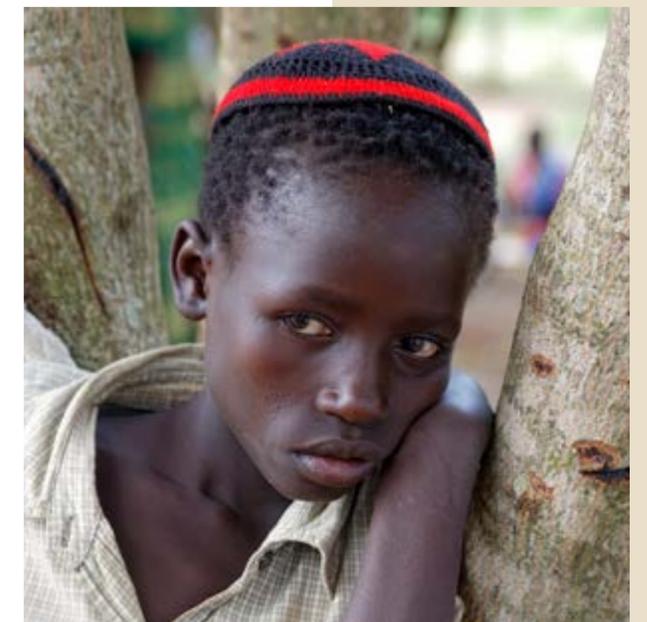
faithful to Kakungulu's teachings for over eighty years in order to become *not* universally accepted Jews, not Jews in Kakungulu's [orthodox] tradition. In 2003, led by Enosh Keki Mainah (a nephew of Keki and Sizomu), these Abayudaya separated themselves from the other communities. They moved to a corner of a town called Putti, where a tiny Abayudaya outpost, possessing a mini synagogue, had lived since the time of Kakungulu. Enosh and his entourage were welcomed as their arrival gave this community reinforcement in numbers and brought in young people.

The time we first visited them in 2011, the Putti Abayudaya were practicing orthodox Judaism as fully as they could, retaining their great ambition, holding out for orthodox conversion. I wanted to believe that our visit was not giving them false hope, but I was not certain.

This community refers to itself as *She'erit Yisrael*, the "remnants of [Ugandan] Israelites".



Portrait  
Putti, January 2013



Portrait  
Putti, January 2013

Noteworthy re the brutality of the Amin regime, David Owen revealed after Amin's death that when he was the British Foreign Secretary, he had proposed having Amin assassinated. He defended his position, arguing, "I'm not ashamed of considering it, because his regime goes down in the scale of Pol Pot [the brutal Cambodian communist leader of the Khmer Rouge, under whose rule many millions of Cambodians were murdered] as one of the worst of all African regimes".

Ironically Uganda was a member of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights between 1977-1979.



Setting up the syngogue for minha at our first meeting with the Abayudaya  
June 2011

## CHAPTER 6 MY FIRST VISIT TO PUTTI

### THE ROAD TO PUTTI

We were here in this region of eastern Uganda following up on a visit a few months earlier by Ari Greenspan, who is leading our present odyssey. While spending some time in Nairobi earlier in the year carrying out ritual slaughter for the Jewish community which has no resident *shohet* – Ari travels the world on his *sh'hita* knife – he heard about the Abayudaya. The adventurer in him sent him off to Putti. On his return home, he acquainted Rabbi Riskin with “an interesting tribe, observing the Torah in the Ugandan jungle”. He specifically mentioned a young man, Moshe Madoi, who told Ari on film that, while he was studying business, he always dreamt of being a rabbi. Moshe is Enosh Keki's younger brother.

Enosh Keki was waiting for us when we finally arrived at the Mount Elgon Hotel on the eastern outskirts of Mbale. Enosh was eager to get moving. We were late and his people keenly awaited our arrival. We unload our suitcases into our rooms and are quickly back in the jeep, Enosh in tow.

Our ride to Putti takes forty minutes, along thoroughfares whose condition only worsen the



The Putti well.

Women chatting and lining up with their twenty litre jerrycans in which they transport, usually on their heads, water to their homes



June 2011



Mbale street leading to the clock tower  
June 2016

further we drive. We circumnavigate the Mbale clock tower – it seems every roundabout in Uganda has a clock pillar, usually in its centre, occasionally on one of the approach islands – leaving the town in the opposite direction we had entered. Our road passes through maize, banana and plantain plantations, dotted with small villages of wigwams and mud houses, passing noticeably thin grazing cows. The countryside is very green, very peaceful. Roadsides, as seem to be the case all over sub-Saharan Africa, are dotted with hastily constructed stalls, selling fruit, vegetables, cellular airtime, bed and door frames, mahogany coffins and everything in between. Bicycles pass us carrying huge loads: cassava, charcoal, plantain branches, beds, paying passengers – anything requiring moving.

The only diversion from this pastoral scene is the multi-storied Moslem college, just off the main road. This is the main campus of the Islamic University in Uganda. Moslems number about ten percent of the overall population, the remainder belonging to one of many Christian denominations. The government makes huge efforts to keep fundamentalism out of the mosques. This concern spills over into other religions.



Minha in Putti  
June 2011



Not enough room inside ...  
June 2011

Eventually we take a left turn off the paved “highway”, onto a dirt road, into a forgotten world, without water, gas, electricity or telephone lines. Many bumpy kilometres later, we arrive to Putti.

Putti is a town of over twenty thousand residents, largely Christians and Moslems. Abayudaya activity centres in one corner of the town.

I quickly alight from our car to acclimatise, camera in hand. The houses surrounding the synagogue are constructed of locally produced mud bricks or wattle and daub, with corrugated iron or thatched roofs. Glass is not discernible in any window, though there are shutters. The only semblance of modernity is that well water is now brought to the surface via a solar powered pump donated by an Israeli organisation, *Innovation: Africa*. Neighbouring villages we pass still use manual pumps, pumping continuously all day, from dawn to dusk. Village women – it seems so since biblical times – gather by the well to meet and chat; but more importantly, to fill their, typically twenty litre, containers to take home, customarily on their heads (with maybe an additional smaller container or two in their hands).

#### ARRIVING IN PUTTI

Our arrival causes a buzz in this quarter of town. Everyone comes out to view the five honoured guests

from Israel. They decide we should all adjourn to the little central synagogue for *minha*, afternoon prayers. This is a great honour, but at the same time presents us with a dilemma. We are only five “real” Jews here – I mean this as an *halakhic* statement, not as a racial slur – so in essence we cannot have a *kosher minyan*. Our rabbi tries to grapple with the difficulty. “Ari, perhaps you lead the *davening*, the prayer service.”

“How does that help?”, I note. “He can say neither *kadish* nor *k’dusha* nor the repetition prayer, as these all require a *minyan*, quorum of ten Jewish men. Anyway”, I continue, “we’re here to learn about their Jewishness, to see what they know and practice. Let’s ask them to appoint someone to lead the prayers and we’ll just tag along.”

Rabbi Riskin relays my suggestion to the community. “Would one of you like to lead the service?”, at which point all eyes turn to Moshe, a bright eyed young man standing nearby; the same Moshe whom Ari had interviewed those few months earlier, the Moshe who dreams of becoming a rabbi.

The synagogue is housed in a single-roomed, thatched-roofed building. There is an entrance at the rear of the building, another on the left side, close to the north facing-front wall, the direction of Yerushalayim. At the centre of this wall, up two steps, is the *aron kodesh*, the special cupboard in which the Torah scroll

English is Uganda’s official language. Many tribal languages, not all based on Bantu dialects, are spoken in different regions of Uganda but English is supposedly *common* to everyone (as in India). Schoolchildren learn only in English until sixth grade. While English allows people from various parts of the country to communicate, most people’s English is not proficient. The Abayudaya’s language is Kigwere, a Bantu language related to Luganda.

I was later told that many of the older people never learnt English, nor even attended school. At certain periods in their history, the Abayudaya did not send their children to school as most educational institutions were run by the Churches or under strong Christian influence. Parents feared this would turn their offspring away from Judaism. These fears were well founded in practice, including with one of Kakungulu’s children who became a Christian as a result of influences in his church school. Thus many of the older Abayudaya received no formal education at all. It was



Ladies in the Putti synagogue  
June 2011





Enosh translates Solomon's narrative  
June 2011



Rabbi Riskin addressing the congregation  
June 2011

is traditionally stored. It is decorated with ten hand painted, dark brown Hebrew letters, *aleph* to *hey* on right side of the cupboard's double doors, *vav* to *yod* on the left, just like in many synagogues around the world, symbolising the Ten Commandments. To the left of the *aron*, the words of the verse *sh'ma yisrael*, "Hear Oh Israel" are painted in bright blue on the greying white wall. The left side of the room, slightly elevated, is the women's section. In the centre of the synagogue is another, small raised concrete slab on which sits the reader's table, the *bima*. A new, much larger synagogue is under construction close by. But it stands half built, the donor having passed away, with no alternate finance yet found.

Moshe dons a *talith* as he ascends the little *bima*. Men, women and children all take their places in the sanctuary. Moshe opens by reciting the first verse of *ashrei* [Psalm 145] in perfect Hebrew, in a slightly melancholy, minor tone. The entire assembly enthusiastically respond with the following verse, *ashrei ha'am sh'kakha lo*. Moshe continues the next verse with a slight crescendo.

I am euphoric. Something electrifying is in the air. Here I am, in the middle of "deep dark Africa", not a white man in sight, locals praying with such sincerity that it embarrasses me to think of home, and of other, western, *ashkenazi* diaspora synagogues I have visited. I push these thoughts out of my mind. I desire to savour the moment.

The prayers continue, alternating between Moshe and the congregation crammed into this small synagogue. Moshe becomes more and more elated as we continue chanting the alternate verses. Some people are holding prayer books, others seem to know the words by heart. Others stand in quiet meditation.

We reach the *amida*, the silent prayer. The room falls totally hush, tranquil, very still. The dropping proverbial pin is audible. I am spiritually elsewhere, deep in a slow long prayer. The reader's repetition is met with the appropriate responses by the entire congregation, in complete unison.

Eventually the prayers end with a resplendent rendition of *aleinu*, everyone together, singing, out loud.

Towards the end of the service I look towards Rabbi Riskin. He looks back at me. Our eyes connect. We both communicate with the same non-verbal expression, "I've prayed in many places around the world, but I do not recall many times reaching such a spiritual level, here, deep in Africa".

### MEETING THE COMMUNITY

The community are keen to meet us, for us to get to know them. Enosh and Uri, seemingly the leaders of the community, come before the assembled congregation. Uri is a grandson of Samsom Mugombe, Enosh of Jonadab Keki. Enosh is the main teacher, signing his emails Ribbi Enosh and Uri is a mohel. Also Uri and Enosh are brothers-in-law – yes there are close familial relationships within the Abayudaya family, as a result of Mugombe's intra-marriage policy.

Enosh introduces our Rabbi, as "this is Rabbi Riskin, whose lessons on the weekly Torah portion I have been learning with you". We did not know it, but Enosh had been downloading and teaching these each week.

Enosh and Uri introduce us to the Abayudaya in general, and then to their key members. They speak in Kigwere for the locals, English for us.

Quietly listening to the presentation, the people's love of Judaism exudes in the words, the voices and the eyes of all present, young and old. It is discernible to any visitor that their Jewishness is integral and intrinsic to their existence.

They understand that the true manifestation of Judaism is in the land of Israel, something that many *real* Jews in our generation have yet to comprehend. These folk seek spiritual, not material, elevation. This has been the Abayudaya mindset since 1919, far predating the establishment of an independent Jewish nation, and well before its entry into the affluent first world.



only after independence in 1962 that the school system became pluralistic and independent of the churches.

It must be noted, though they are not proficient in English, most of the Abayudaya speak between four and seven languages; one friend told me he speaks *about* twenty languages! He switches between them with ease.



Interestingly, a *putto* [in Italian] is the representation of a small child, often portrayed innocently naked. The image is heavily used in Renaissance art. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco shows many of these figures dispersed amongst the various panels.

The plural of *putto* is "putti".





Solomon Bwete, "... and he will look you in the eye and he will treat you as his equal"  
June 2011

Moshe envelops the Rabbi in a huge hug, Uri Katula and Solomon Bwete looking on  
June 2011



Kakungulu's 92 year old nephew, Solomon Bwete, is present. He was obviously very excited by Rabbi Riskin's visit, in a way more than most. I think he may have been the first Abayudaya baby to be circumcised at eight days.

Solomon narrates the history of the community including his uncle's and his father's involvement, how his father was the first *mohel*.

He details his experiences during the Amin persecutions, how he and a mere handful of others remained faithful to their Judaism, continuing to practice in secret; how sadly a majority of the three thousand strong Abayudaya succumbed to the unbearable pressure, converting to escape persecution; how difficult was survival in these circumstances; how most of those who left did not return to Judaism, but how thankfully their children and grandchildren are rejoining the community. He is very hopeful for the future.

Solomon relates how his illustrious uncle once told to him, back during British colonial rule, "You might think that you are just another black child somewhere in Africa; but you should know that one day a rabbi will come from far away, and he will look you in the eye, and he will treat you as his equal".

Finally Rabbi Riskin addresses the congregation. The assembly sits on every word, often applauding before hearing the translation. The Rabbi praises their determination and their perseverance – and their obvious sincerity. He promises to help them find a solution to their conversion woes.

Rabbi Riskin then calls upon Moshe. He offers a flabbergasted young man a full scholarship to come to Israel to learn in his yeshiva in Efrat.

Moshe envelops the Rabbi in a hug of elation, smiling from ear to ear. Moshe's rabbinic dreams are coming to fruition. Everyone shares in Moshe's joy.

A children's choir, led by Moshe, sings a selection of unique African-Jewish music. The Abayudaya are very musical, composing, singing and performing. Their music is strongly rhythmic; their instrument of choice is the guitar. Some of the little boys dance unrestrainedly to the beat.

I brought lollipops from Israel and hand them out to the children after the performance. These candies are a big hit.

We did not think to look inside the *aron kodesh*, but I subsequently learnt that it contained a paper Torah, the type our children carry on *Simhath Torah*. It was sent to them by a yeshiva student, who visited eight years earlier. Not long after our visit, we heard about a visiting Dallas-based surgeon, who volunteers



Lollipops and chickens  
June 2011





Moshe and the childrens' choir  
June 2011

annually, operating on needy Ugandan children. After a number of visits, he happened on the Putti congregation where he “was saddened to see them take out the paper Torah to read”. He decided to procure a “real Torah” for them. Which, with the assistance of some friends, he did.

Members of the Putti community generally do not eat meat, not because they are [like me] vegetarians by choice, but rather because they do not know the laws and practice of *sh'hita*, Jewish ritual slaughter. Ari offers his services as *shohet*. The locals are enamoured by the overtire, but regrettably inform us that they cannot afford to purchase live chickens. They are subsistence farmers, largely eating what they grow, trading very little. We give them money to buy ten chickens, a feast in their world. After twenty minutes the chickens arrive – tied in pairs by their legs, each duo slung over the handlebars of the delivery boy's bicycle.

Overall Rabbi Riskin is euphoric, deciding on the spur of the moment to return the next day for the morning services. After these prayers, the Rabbi invites another young man, Tarphon Kamy, to join Moshe at the yeshiva. Tarphon is a great-grandson of Mugombe and Uri's nephew. Moshe also tells me he is Tarphon's *uncle*. This was my first encounter with the strange use of familial terms in Uganda. Uncle can mean a distant relative; grandfather can be an aunt's husband if he is an older gentleman; children often

have different surnames to their fathers, and brothers can adopt the surname of either grandfather, or take on a completely new name, or some combination of the above, seemingly without restriction. Recently the government decided to curtail this custom, though I understand so far with minimal success.

The Putti Abayudaya hold prayer services every morning and evening. There are only two pairs of *tefilin* for all of them. They share them around. Even after an orthodox conversion, a lot still will need to be done for these wonderful people. Rabbi Riskin, in his state of elation, is not oblivious to this.

We end our visit to Putti. I am enchanted. We still have a long day ahead of us. The “Conservative” Abayudaya in Nabugoye are expecting us. We do not know what to expect there ... and Enosh is keen, along the way, to take us to visit the ruins of Kakungulu's residence, and his nearby final resting place. It is customary, here as in many places in Africa, for one to be buried adjacent to his home rather than in a fixed cemetery.

Leaving Putti we are convinced of the Putti Abayudaya's sincerity and commitment to Judaism. After all, to test this Rabbi Riskin came all this way from Israel.

I may have visited a town called Putti, but, I think to myself, I have visited the personification of the *putti*.

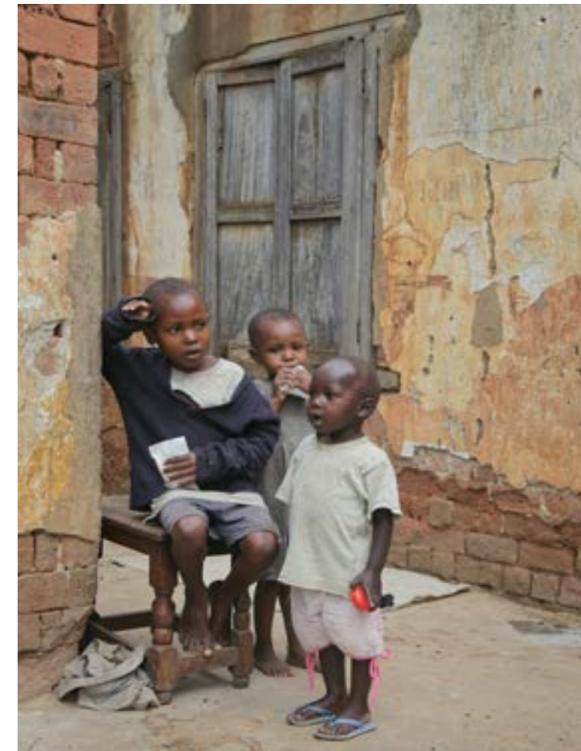


*A lady and children outside Kukungulu's house  
June 2011*

PILGRIMAGE TO GANGAMA,  
HOME OF ABAYUDAYA FOUNDER,  
SEMEI KAKUNGULU

After our inspiring visit to Putti, we return to our car, heading back down the dirt road to the main highway. We retrace our route, turning right onto the sealed road towards Mbale. A couple of miles on, we make a left turn onto another dirt road. The road is narrow and up a steep incline. It is full of ruts and troughs, its condition and angle worsening as we rise. Progress is slow. I am surprised our driver does not complain about driving on this quality of road. He just keeps moving ahead, slowly up the mountain, trying his best to navigate around and between the deepest holes.

Eventually we reach at a clearing, a relatively flat area, the land surrounding the ruins of Semei Kakungulu's spacious home. We are at the high point on the hillock, the extinct volcano of Mount Elgon rising steeply to over 4,000 metres in the background. A few lambs graze around the entrance to the house. A not happy looking lady sits on the porch of the ruins,



*Kakungulu's granddaughter  
June 2011*

*The green magen david painted on Kukungulu's tomb  
June 2011*





View from Nabugoye  
June 2011

five children of various ages surrounding her. She may be the caretaker's wife. Enosh speaks to her but it is not clear to me what she has told him. Her feet are bare, her garb implying intense poverty. The children are either barefoot or wear thongs far too big for their feet. Their clothes are neat, but far from new.

A man is lying on the ground on a slight slope to the left of the building. He does not move the whole time we are here – perhaps half an hour. I assume he is the caretaker and hopefully he was just napping.

The house was built of mud bricks which were cement rendered. Large swabs of cement have fallen from the outside walls, and much of the roof has caved in. Weather-worn shutters adorn the windows. All of them are closed, so I could not tell if they ever contained glass. The house is large though I would not call it palatial. I do not know when it was last inhabited.

Kakungulu's grave is housed in a small building slightly below the main house, off to the right. Indicating his warrior status, a spear stands at the foot of the grave. A green *magen david* is painted at



The Moses Synagogue, Nabugoye – inside shown to the right  
A new, bigger synagogue was built in 2016  
June 2011



the foot of the grave, completing the picture of the man buried here.

This *magen david* was drawn by Enosh and his uncle Seth (Gershom's brother) in 1995 after they learnt that a Kulanu delegation, on its first visit to the Abayudaya, would visit Kakungulu's home and grave. I asked Enosh why they thought to do this. He responded, "We felt it necessary to draw the *magen david* on his grave because we knew that this is one of the greatest Jewish symbols. We had seen it in many Jewish books." They were attempting to show that they were indeed connected to world Jewry. I doubt it was necessary.

On exiting the tomb, returning back towards the house, we are greeted by an unexpected visitor, a lady, attired in traditional Ugandan dress. Unlike the first lady at the house, this guest is clean and impeccably clothed. She wears a gold chain around her neck, her posture is erect. She is obviously of good grooming. Enosh tells us that she is a granddaughter of Kakungulu, but she does not consider herself Jewish. I do not know from where she has appeared as no houses are visible in the immediate vicinity.

#### VISIT TO NABUGOYE

Back in the car again, we continue along the ridge towards the village on Nabugoye Hill, the site of Kakungulu's first synagogue. The road, also unpaved, is in better condition than our route up to Gangama. Being flat, it has suffered less erosion. Most of the



Shalom Shopping Centre  
June 2011



The Semei Kakungulu High School, Nabugoye  
June 2011



Love in Nabugoye  
June 2011



Boy at the entrance to his mud brick home. Notice the pile of bricks outside the house ready for use.  
June 2011



A man sitting in the entrance of his Nabugoye wigwam. Note the election posters, including one of Gershom Sizomu. June 2011

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin meeting Rabbi Gershom Sizomu in Nabugoye June 2011



Abayudaya villages are located along this stretch of road, with the exception of Putti and Magada, the latter some seventy kilometres away in the Namutumba District. The people in Magada, though part of the Ugandan “Jewish” people, originate from a different tribe to most of the Abayudaya. There is a synagogue in Magada. We did not visit there. Today the racial makeup of the Abayudaya is shifting, with people from other Ugandan tribes joining.

About two hundred “Jews” live in Nabugoye. As in Putti, the town is large and many non-Jews live here. The town is open at both ends and people pass through, generally on foot, on the dirt track which doubles as the “main road”.

Gershom Sizomu lives here. He recently returned from the U.S. A beguiling leader, Gershom has succeeded in bringing his people many services not readily available to the surrounding population. In Nabugoye there are a primary and high school, a medical clinic and surprisingly, a guest house with all the *modern* features a westerner would expect in his lodgings, though not yet found in the homes of the townspeople: running water, flush toilets, electricity and glass windows. The schools and clinic are open equally to Gershom’s non-Jewish neighbours. In the school, Jewish subjects are optional for non-Jewish students, the Jewish children staying on for some additional hours to study religious and Hebrew material.

In the 2011 national elections, Gershom stood as a candidate for the local constituency. He did not win this rural seat, but came within a thousand votes of the ruling party’s incumbent. Vote rigging has been implied, but Gershom did not challenge the result – I don’t image it would have helped. Moving around the region we see some of his election posters, still stuck to walls and doors. He appears proudly wearing his big smile and a big crocheted *kipa*. Because of his contribution to the general community, he is well respected by the Christian and Moslem populace, enjoying good relationships with all his neighbours. In subsequent elections in 2016 Gershom was elected as an opposition party member.

Enosh introduces our party to his uncle. The first place that Gershom shows us is the Moses Synagogue. Prayer meetings take place here on Monday and Thursday mornings and on Shabath. He tells us that two hundred people, men and women, attend services each Sabbath.

He shows us other sections of the village. Rabbi Riskin wants to meet with Gershom privately. That’s my signal for a walk around the town. I am keen to photograph here. The sun was commencing its daily descent to its nightly repose, providing me the warmest light of the day, the photographer’s golden hour. I know I have to move quickly to capture village life on film – well, on digital sensor.

My walk is very rewarding. I speak, largely in sign language, to a number of people and observe their way of life. Most houses are built of wattle and daub, sometimes with a mud brick annex. Farm animals, sheep, goats and lean cows, are visible in public areas, something we did not see in Putti. While the residences here too are not connected to the electricity grid, nor are there window panes in the residences, the public buildings, the shul, the high school and the medical clinic, have electricity and glass windows. The *Shalom Shopping Centre* even has a satellite dish and Internet connection. As they were already closed for the day, I cannot inform you what they sell. I suspect there is a generator in the village which provides some power. I’m not sure which of the subjects of my photographs are Abayudaya, though I am keen to portray the village life of which the Abayudaya are a part.

After an hour meandering around the village, I return to where I left Rabbi Riskin. The day was ending and Enosh still wanted us to visit the grave of Samsom Mugombe in his nearby hometown of Namanyonyi. People there are also keen to meet Rabbi Riskin. Our Kenyan driver will soon, justifiably, start becoming nervous about driving on the dark, potholed roads. Overall though he seems to be enjoying this visit; it seems as educational an experience for him as for us. He sits in on some of the talks.



These scenes portray something typical to the third world, people making gravel by hammering rocks.

Both the man and the woman are sitting in yards adjacent to their Nabugoye houses, labouriously breaking down their piles of stones.

June 2011



In and around Nabugoye  
June 2011



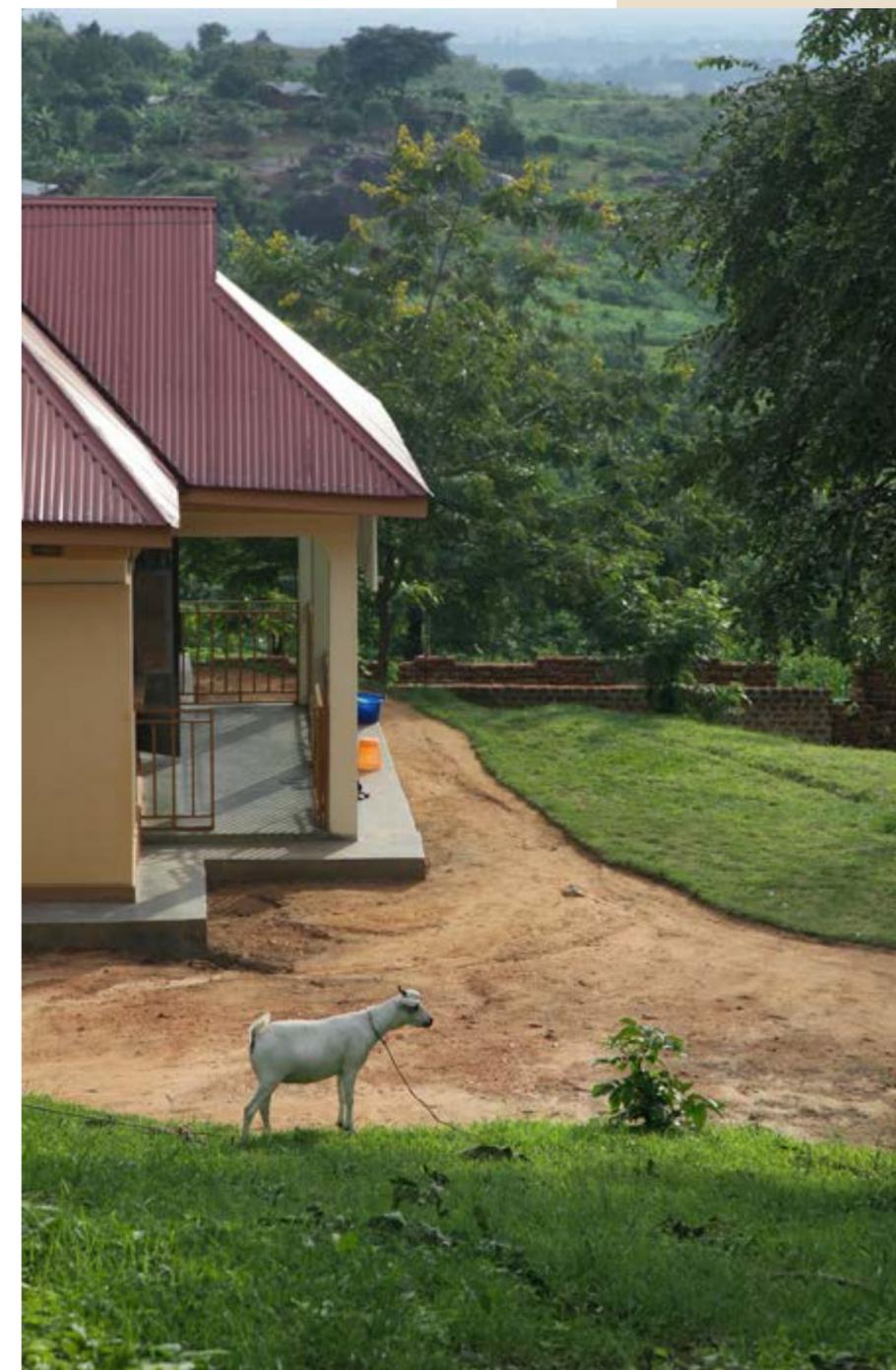
Ari again offers his services as a *shohet*. The people here, or so they tell us, do carry out Jewish slaughter. Ari suggests they bring out their *sh'hita* knife, in line with a venerable Jewish custom, for the visiting Rabbi Riskin to inspect. The locals present a huge knife, almost a machete, dents along the full length of the blade, each notch adding a new *halakhic* complication. Ari suggests that they reserve this knife for after slaughter butchering, as he can see no way of making it “kosher”. Our Rabbi concurs.

As Ari sharpens his relatively small knife on a stone he carries for the purpose – *sh'hita* knives must be very sharp and have no nicks, so continuously require checking and resharpening – a goat is brought into the clearing selected for the procedure. Ari is ready to start, pedagogically explaining everything he is doing as he proceeds. A man suddenly runs in from outside the gathered circle, ties a rope around the goat's neck and drags it offstage. What just happened?! Perhaps the people were not that hungry after all? No, it seems that either the goat's owner had second thoughts, not desiring his goat to yet meet its Maker, or no-one had bothered asking his permission to eat his animal.

Soon a replacement arrives. Ari picks up his explanation as he works, including how to check the post-mortem kosher status of an animal. He pulls out the lungs, explaining the various lobes for potential *halakhic* pitfalls. It is a valuable lesson for the locals.

I meet a *white* person in the village. He tells me he has been here for a few months, assisting and learning from Rabbi Gershom. He is staying at the guest house where he is served “good western food”. He will shortly be returning to the States. He graduated from university last year, but has not yet decided what he'll be doing next. After his experience here, he tells me he is considering studying to become a Conservative rabbi.

It appears that Gershom is running his own outreach program, both in Uganda and in other African countries. My new friend tells me that groups interested in Judaism have visited from faraway Ghana and other countries. It was not clear from the conversation whether Gershom was performing



The guesthouse, Nabugoye  
June 2011

Games and toys I have seen  
in other third world countries  
June 2011



conversions himself. [I subsequently learnt that Gershom does carry out conversions. As even Conservatives use a *beth din* of three rabbis, it is unclear to me with whom Gershom joins. Converts immerse in a nearby river as due to a drowning in the *mikve*, Gershom prefers not to repair Kakungulu's old ritual bath. They have no other use for it.]

Once again I saw and learnt a lot on this visit. However I noticed feeling much more an observer here than in Putti where I had reached a true spiritual high. I wondered why.

The people I meet in Nabugoye are nice enough, certainly on a one-on-one basis as nice as the people in Putti. But I could not reach the high I had felt earlier in the day. Perhaps I was spiritually burnt out after Putti – after all how high can one fly and for how long? And from Putti the visit to the home and grave of the Abayudaya founder, Semei Kakungulu, profoundly affected me. This man's achievements in discovering and spreading Judaism in Uganda are astounding, the first I believe to undertake such an enterprise since the king of the Khazars over a thousand years earlier.

I think the fact that in Putti we met people in the synagogue doing *something Jewish*, viz in prayer, and also that we met them as a group, may have been a contributing elements to my excitement. Here in Nabugoye, we met Gershom, who showed us an empty synagogue, and an empty high school, leaving occupying these spaces to our imagination, simulating the shabbath crowds and filled classrooms. This of course was not his fault – we arrived late in the day. All the people I spoke to here, and I spoke to quite a few, were to me individuals – there was no obvious communal glue. And I suspect, regretfully, the fact that they were officially "Conservative Jews" had an adverse effect on my traditional upbringing



and background. I am who I am, though I strive to improve myself.

Rabbi Riskin once declared me a reactionary, a badge I wear with pride.

We return to the car, continuing further along the road on which we had arrived. The sun is executing its final descent and the photographer in me wonders whether I have finished for the day. Rabbi Riskin reports some aspects on his meeting with Gershom. He offered him to come to Israel for a few months on a study tour, to become acquainted with Torah Judaism. He tried to explain that with all the good he has done for his people, and with all his good intentions, he was putting them in a difficult position vis-à-vis their recognition as Jews were they to come to Israel or to other communities in the Jewish diaspora. Perhaps this is the reason that living in Israel does not feature at the forefront of these people's agenda the way it does in Putti. Gershom is a good listener but

I expect it would be difficult for him to replace his current backers were he or his people to now opt for orthodoxy. His main supporters, I believe, are Kulanu, Be'chol Lashon and individual Conservative temples.

On our drive towards Namanyonyi, we pass a small group, principally of white people, walking towards

Nabugoye. An older couple is in the lead, a strange sight given our geography. We stop our car along side the pair and say hello. They look as surprised as we do to meet white people out here and even seem a little indignant that we were questioning them – which we were not. We were just curious. Without exchanging words, I suppose they correctly

translated our looks as, “what’s a nice white couple doing walking down a country lane in the middle of Africa?” The remainder of their group soon catches up. Gershom’s wife is leading them. She has just taken some American visitors to visit the primary school located along this route and they were returning to the guesthouse.

### VISIT TO NAMANYONYI

We are met in the Namanyonyi synagogue by local Jewish villagers. We pay our respects at Samson Mugombe’s grave which is beside the synagogue, near to where he had lived since Kakungulu sent him here to establish the Jewish community during the twenties.

The light is now very low, the sun has already set. Here, close to the equator, twilight is very short. I manage a few photographs of the commercial and residential areas of Namanyonyi and of course of some children.

I note some houses here have working electric light bulbs. Electricity wires pass overhead through the town, but most villagers cannot afford the grid connection fees.

Namanyonyi’s commercial area comprises a few sparsely stocked shops and a police station. Again I don’t know which of the people I meet and photograph are “Jewish”. I suspect some of the houses in the vicinity of the synagogue belong to Abayudaya, but not the shops.



Namanyonyi grocery store  
June 2011



The epitaph reads:  
Chief Rabbi  
Samuson Mugombe  
Born 1/1/1909 Died 16/7/2002  
June 2011



Namanyonyi synagogue  
June 2011



A shop in Namanyonyi. The man pictured is not Abayudaya.  
June 2011



Namanyonyi children posing for my camera  
June 2011



## BACK TO MBALE

We spend only ten minutes in Namanyonyi. It's almost dark as we drive off. Fortunately we do not have to return the way we came, down that very rough hill road from Gangama. It does not take long to cut back to the pocked main road. Boniface manages the maze on the *highway* without dropping us into the deep.

Back to Mbale, we visit the shopping area, stopping at a supermarket which, while better stocked than the shops in Namanyonyi, was far from that to which we are accustomed. Of course we did not find anything with a certified kosher status and thus did not purchase anything.

There was far more available in the way of fruit and vegetables at the street stalls. I buy a kilo of passionfruit for about 80 cents, an enormous jackfruit for a similar price. I had never seen one of these before, though they are common in South-East Asia where I have visited numerously. I think it must be the largest fruit in the world. It has an interesting, very fruity flavour, reminiscent of a spoonful of tropical fruit salad. I have subsequently eaten jackfruit in Thailand.

I must note a common thread which I witnessed throughout this day in the various Abayudaya localities, viz the abject poverty. And on subsequent visits, I will see worse conditions, even within Mbale city. It's not only their simple housing, old basic furniture, shortage of clothes, the nonavailability of fresh running water or grid electricity. These people often suffer from maladies such as malaria, typhoid, trachoma, various parasites and other preventable and curable diseases. Often their access to treatment is blocked by their inability to pay, or worse by their impotence in obtaining necessary medicines once their ailment is diagnosed. While education is free for primary school (only for up to four children per family), not all children go because they cannot afford to buy books and other requirements.

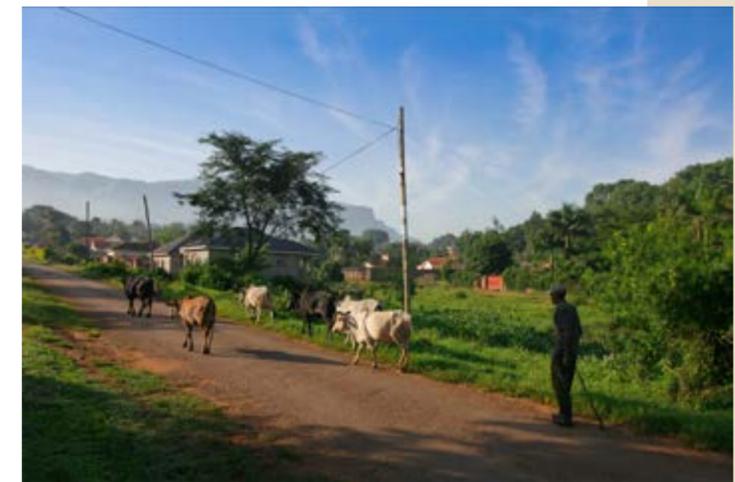
While walking down the street on my own the next morning in Mbale, a motor bike stops beside me. The driver looks at me. I look back, not understanding what he wants. Admittedly I am a little afraid, but I stand still, looking back at him. Then suddenly he drives off without a word spoken. It is only a few minutes later, when I see another, similar bike that I comprehend. This is a motor bike taxi service, called *boda boda* by the locals. No-one knows the source of this name, but it could be onomatopoeia for the sound of the engine, or pidgen for "border, border", which the drivers would shout, as one can easily cross over the border on a bike as opposed to a car.

I start noticing a lot of them, people going to work, kids to school. The seat is elongated and two adults sit behind the driver, sometimes with a child as well squashed in front of the driver.

As I continue my stroll, a man riding a bicycle pulls up beside me, a similar look on his face to that of motor bike rider. This time I'm a little wiser, but I had not imagined a bicycle *boda boda*. Then I notice his strange saddle. It comprises two parts, one on which the rider sits and a second behind and slightly lower for the passenger.

As in Asia, women generally ride side-saddle, I assume for reasons of modesty, but it certainly seems dangerous, especially on the sharp curves.

Another interesting sight, which I also noted in Nairobi and which may be symptomatic to the third world, is animals grazing along streets of fancy suburbs.



## LEAVING UGANDA

My first visit to the Abayudaya is over. Though short, we've seen much and learnt a lot. We have witnessed how Judaism can spring up and survive in a vacuum. Where from here?

We drive out of Mbale. After travelling for about an hour, we notice activity by the side of the road. We ask Boniface what is happening. He explains it is the weekly farmers' market, something still common in this part of the world of largely subsistence farming. We ask him to stop to allow us to have a look.

We walk around the market for a while, first seeing things you would expect like fruit, vegetables and clothing. But also ingredients for traditional medicines including various dried herbs, horns, lizards, tails and other, to me, *unidentifiable* objects.



Market Day  
June 2011

Our frontier crossing out of Uganda is quick. Surprisingly the formalities take but a few minutes, and on this side, no bribes. Even on the Kenyan side, things go fairly smoothly – and this time, cheaply.

The return trip brings us back for another night in Eldoret. While British Colonial Secretary Chamberlain's plan to settle European Jews in this area did not come to fruition, reportedly some Jews did settle independently in this lush farming region. No Jews remain today, but did they leave graves? In the morning we visit a large local cemetery in the hope of finding something of a past Jewish presence. While reading headstones in old burial grounds is always an interesting experience, teaching something of a community's past, we do not find suggestion of anything Jewish.

## THE NAIROBI PUTTI CONNECTION

While we did not know it at the time of our visit, there was already a connection between the people we had met in Nairobi two days earlier and the Putti Abayudaya. Prior to Ari Greenspan making his way to Putti on hearing of the *orthodox* Abayudaya, another religious Jewish traveller from New York, a rabbinic student, Sjimon René den Hollander, had already visited. In 2003 he learnt about the *breakaway* group from the late Dr Shmuel Wapnick, a Kulanu activist and friend of Rav Avichail. Sjimon decided to throw his support behind this community and soon after visited. He spent a few days there, learning about their way of life and teaching them aspects of Torah Judaism. He came away with an idea to set up an organisation to aid Putti Jews. On his return home, he sent them a paper Sefer Torah to replace their photocopied pages.

Enosh, as well as J J and Gershom, variously visited the Nairobi synagogue in the nineties in order to learn how to organise Jewish synagogue services. Enosh "studied with a rabbi" while he was there. He also met Wanjiku and other Africans who by then were already attending synagogue services.

In 2005 Enosh introduced Sjimon to Wanjiku. He felt that as both groups were working for a common goal, Sjimon may consider also helping the Nairobians. As there was no accepting community in Nairobi from whom the *Shabbath Shul* visitors could learn about Judaism, some felt that by sending their children to the Abayudaya schools in Nabugoye and by living in Putti, they could experience Jewish life and receive a Jewish education. Sjimon was pleased to facilitate this.



Eldoret Cemetery  
June 2011



*Yisrael Amir and Belshazar putting up a mezuzah on the prayer house in Douala, Cameroon  
February 2014*

## CHAPTER 7 OTHER EMERGING COMMUNITIES IN AFRICA AND ASIA

On our return to Israel, after analysing our experience, Rabbi Riskin encouraged me to find out more by identifying and contacting other groups around the world who may also be learning and practicing Judaism.



### KAIFENG, CHINA

My first contact was with the Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, from where seven young men were at that time studying towards conversion at Rabbi Riskin's yeshiva in Efrat. Eventually, after an unnecessarily arduous experience with the Israeli chief rabbinate, they achieved their dream, leading to enlistment in the Israeli army.

The Kaifeng community are remnants of Jews, most likely Persian, who arrived in China probably during



*Nanjiaojing Hutong,  
Those Who Teach the  
Torah Lane South.*

*Another street in the area is called "Those who do not eat the sinew", a reference to Jews not eating the sciatic nerve (gid hanashe in Hebrew) of an animal.*

*July 2012*



A street dumpling cook in Kaifeng  
July 2012

the eighth century, it seems as both traders and security personnel on the Silk Road. Their arrival was welcomed by the then emperor and their presence was supported by subsequent regimes. They lived as eight clans, some receiving their surnames from the emperors.

Kaifeng was a major Chinese centre, capital city to seven dynasties. The Jewish community was very developed, centred around a magnificent synagogue, sketches of which have been preserved for us by a Catholic priest who, in the sixteenth century, was astonished to meet a practicing Chinese Jewish community. He sent his drawings back to the Vatican. He also verified that the Kaifeng Torah scrolls were written using the authentic Masoretic text.

The community over many centuries included rabbis, teachers, scribes, ritual slaughterers and kosher butchers. Sadly since the passing of the last serving Rabbi in the 1860's, the community quickly assimilated. Mao's cultural revolution forced the community's remnants to destroy its irreplaceable records and family trees, spanning centuries. Coupled with the Chinese custom of not marrying within clans, the Kaifeng Jews have largely been marrying Han Chinese women, continuing to dilute their Jewishness with each subsequent generation.

The community was known in Chinese as the "People who did not eat the sinew", referring to the biblical prohibition against eating the sciatic nerve of the hindquarters of kosher animals.

However this stubborn and proud Chinese Jewish community refuses to disappear, despite years of provincial, though at the time of my visit, not central, government anti-semitism. Over the last twenty years a miraculous interest and revival abounds within the community's remnants. I visited in 2012, though I have had little follow-up. Today some fifteen Kaifeng descendants live in Israel, all having undergone Chief Rabbinate conversion with the support of *Shavei Yisrael*, an organisation which aims "to help descendants of Jews reconnect with the people and State of Israel". It is important to note the veracity of the Kaifeng Jewish community is uncontested, and they are undisputed descendants of the real Jews, not claimants of Lost Tribe status (although this too has been asserted, a claim which seems far-fetched to me. See Avigdor Shachan).

During 2016 the central government took new moves to curtail the activities of this community, for some reason fearing them as "enemies of the Communist state".



A stone monument commemorating the campus of the Kaifeng synagogues, all built on this same location over the course of the community's lengthy history. A general hospital now sits at the site. Apparently there is a well in the hospital grounds with Hebrew written on it – could this have been the mikve? As the area was closed for renovations when I was there, the guards refused me entry on grounds of my personal safety, though I could not see any work being carried out.

The monument and all signs of the former Jewish community, including objects inside people's houses – books on Jewish subjects, prayerbooks, mezuzoth – were in 2016 removed during a government crackdown on minorities, regrettably including the Kaifeng Jews. For this reason I have not included here any photographs of my friends. Even while I was in Kaifeng in 2012, meeting with members of the community, I was aware of being watched.

July 2012

## THE IGBO OF NIGERIA

I contacted an outspoken member of the Igbo (or Ibo or Biafrans), a Nigerian tribe claiming Israelite descent. My contact has been researching the Igbo-Israelite connection for a number of years, based largely on similarity of customs, traditions and linguistics. Today the Igbo number some forty million, of whom two million live in the United States, descendants of slaves kidnapped from western Africa. While they have some academic supporters, I find their claims tenuous at best and tend to agree with Prof. William Miles, that the Igbo, whom he calls Jubos, are "probably the world's first Internet Jews". I too do not find presented evidence, by them or their supporters in academia, convincing. Their earliest recorded Jewish claim originates in the writings of an emancipated slave who returned to Africa from London, where, at a guess, he served as a slave of a Jewish family. He did not return to Igboland, but to Sierra Leone, a country set up by the British in West Africa as a return point for emancipated slaves, and for freed occupants of slave ships bound for the New World – of course all this only occurred after Britain outlawed slavery. The ex-slaves could not return home because no-one knew where geographically that was.

Today the Igbo go as far as to claim that the sixties Nigerian civil war to prevent the formation of a new Biafran breakaway state, resulting in the death of about two million Igbo civilians from starvation and disease, was an anti-semitic action. However during the war there was a deafening silence re this assertion, or of any claim that Jews were dying there. During British colonial rule the Igbo were a politically fragmented group with no central religious affiliation.

I maintain contact with some Igbo individuals, but admittedly on a back burner. Today there are a number of communities around Nigeria practicing Judaism, some orthodox. Most do not seem to be connected to my original correspondent. The majority of Igbo seems satisfied to continue their Christian practice. I occasionally receive letters from Nigeria asking for a *talith* or *tefilin*. Sadly, as Nigeria is the source of many mail scams, I tread carefully on these requests. I did consider visiting there. Howard Gorin, the rabbi who

lead the Abayudaya Conservative conversions, has visited Nigerian communities a number of times. His message to them is similar to mine, namely it is their current Jewish practice that is important, not DNA.

## THE BNEI YESHUROUN OF CAMEROON

I made contact with a man in Cameroon, whose community practices orthodox Judaism. Calling themselves the *Bnei Yeshurun*, their story bears a similarity to that of the Abayudaya, though more recent. In the early 1990s, a group of Catholics living in the large country town of Sa'a, became disillusioned with the Church and its teachings. They turned instead to evangelical Protestantism.

Protestants are encouraged to, and indeed love to, read the bible, something still frowned upon by the Catholic hierarchy. These new Protestants began asking basic questions, to most of which they were unable to find satisfactory answers. These included, as did Kakungulu's enquiries, detecting contradictions within the New Testament, between the Old and the New, and also inconsistencies with the historic record. Their unanswerable queries led to a three-way split amongst the frustrated membership. One group chose to end their experiment and return to the safety-net of

Downtown Sa'a, Cameroon  
July 2012



the Church; a second decided to continue to grapple with their questions as Protestants; the third, led by Nachman Etele, decided that only Judaism possessed answers to their search.

Already at that time, Nachman's son, Serge, now Yisrael Amir, was quite *au fait* with the Internet. Living in a country with no Jews, he scoured the Web for information on how to practice Judaism. His achievements are nothing short of astonishing. When

I visited the community in 2014, I found a small but thriving Jewish community, with a superlative knowledge of Judaism, with a *sidur*, prayer book, produced by Amir in Hebrew, with French translation and French accented transliteration.

Kulanu has provided support for the community. In fact it was Amir who first introduced me to Kulanu.

Amir has visited the yeshiva in Efrat to study Judaism

more intensely. We hope he will achieve rabbinic ordination.

Another episode in the story of emerging African Judaism has also surfaced in Gabon, the country neighbouring Cameroon to the south. Here too a group of people seems to have discovered Judaism in a vacuum. After some time trying to be Jewish, they heard of the Cameroon experiment and made contact with Amir. He is helping them to better understand Jewish practice. When Pascal, the leader of the community heard that I was visiting, he made the over four hour drive to Yaoundé to meet me. Today there are six functioning Jewish centres in Gabon.

Both the Cameroon and Gabon communities have embarked on reaching out to the majority Christian population in the form of Noahidism. I was privileged to spend time with one such group in Yaoundé, answering many of their questions. The meeting was scheduled to last an hour. However as soon as we started, the first monsoon of the year hit the region. For someone who has never been caught up in these tropical rains, it is quite an experience. Drops the size of ping-pong balls falling everywhere. It is difficult to walk outside, and so nobody wanted to leave. Eventually after three very interesting hours we decided there was no choice but to brave the storm.

#### THE BALENG AND BASSA OF CAMEROON

While in Cameroon I also met leaders of two local tribes, the Baleng and the Bassa, each claiming descent from the Children of Israel.

The Baleng claim to have left Palestine *sic* as a result of religious persecution following the seventh century Moslem conquest. This places their existence in Israel well after the destruction of the Second Temple by some six hundred years. It also implies that they are from the remnants of Yehuda who remained in Israel after much of the Jewish population had already moved on, largely to Europe.

From Israel the tribe moved south to Egypt, continuing on to Sudan. As they progressed on their

A member of the Bnei Yeshuroun Sa'a, February 2014



Pascal visiting from Gabon with Amir in Sa'a February 2014



Affixing a mezuzah to the house in Douala used by the community for prayer and study February 2014



The Bnei Yeshuroun community in Douala February 2014



Nachman Etele  
February 2014



Fredrique Ndawo, now called Yirmiyahu,  
a Bassa chief and priest who has joined  
the Bnei Yeshuroun community as part of  
his return to his Israelite roots  
February 2014



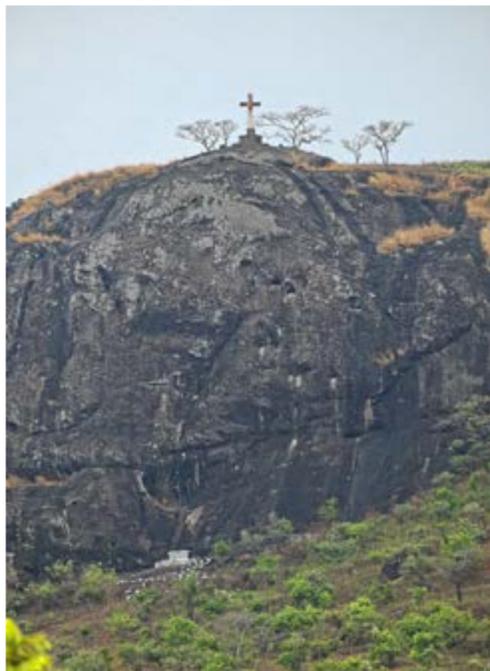
Mr Song, a Bassa chief who accompanied  
us on our visit to the black mountain,  
pictured on the right, speaking to the Bati  
guard of the holy black mountain  
February 2014



Amir's son, Eliezer  
February 2014



Entrance to the Baleng chief's compound  
February 2014



The Bassa holy black mountain. There is a cross  
on the top because the Bati are now Catholics.  
February 2014

journey, at each location to which they arrived, they met more Moslems from whom they repeatedly fled. At some point they turned westward, travelling as far as Cameroon. As by this time there was already a Moslem king in Nigeria to the east, they ended their journey here, not continuing further west.

They left Israel as a group of tribes, and remain in these same tribal groupings today, all living in one region of the country.

Upon their arrival to Cameroon, the tribes conquered the indigenous population, subjugating them to slavery. The tribal leaders told me that today they continue to subjugate them, though no longer as slaves; I assume that is now illegal.

Later in our conversation they made a claim to have left Palestine around 3,000 years ago, contradicting their earlier statement regarding the

Moslem period. Though I fail to see how they can reconcile this contradiction, I did not raise it.

The Baleng's recorded history as a tribe in Cameroon, appears only to have started in 1545 with the appointment of their first chief. They displayed to me a list of the names of their past chiefs and the years in which they ruled. This leaves a gap of some 700-800 years in their history since leaving Palestine. They did not indicate how long their journey from Israel to Cameroon took.

While the Baleng's case for Jewish descent is, in my opinion, weak, they do practice some customs that could be understood as having Jewish/Israelite roots. Others of their customs could not have Jewish roots. For example their calendar is based on an eight day week while almost the entire world uses the less functional, though biblically based, seven day week.

The Bassa claim to have originally been an integral part of the twelve tribes of the Children of Israel during their lengthy Egyptian sojourn. When Moses led the people out of Egypt, not all the Israelites left with him to go up to Israel. Many, for economic or personal reasons, were perfectly content to remain where they had now lived for generations. One of

their number was even an army general. The political climate however changed radically when news of Pharaoh's dramatic defeat at the Red Sea reached back to Egypt. These remaining Children of Israel now feared, for very good reason, that on his return home Pharaoh would launch strong and violent racial attacks of retribution against them. To escape this persecution, the remaining Israelites, under the leadership of the Israelite general, *Melek*, now also fled Egypt, following the course of the Nile into sub-Saharan Africa, probably as far as today's South Sudan.

On their southward journey, the people noticed a mountainous black rock on the plain in the distance. As the rock appeared intriguing, they made their way towards it, however never quite managing to reach it. It continually moved away from them to the west. A prophet amongst them prophesied that *Elolom*, the Bassa name for God, to whom they refer as the "God of the Creation", wanted them to follow this rock to its final resting spot. This would be the site of their new homeland, their promised land.

The journey ended abruptly when the rock came crashing out of the sky onto the savanna below, forming a new mountain. It squashed the indigenous population living beneath its trajectory. Save one man

and one woman, all were killed. The descendants of this couple are the Bati tribe. The Bassa put the Bati into servitude (seems quite common in Africa) their task being the care and maintenance of the Bassa holy site, the black mountain and its surrounding area. In all their history, some 3,500 years, the Bati never grew beyond a few hundred souls; today they number a mere one hundred. And they continue to fulfill their caretaker role for the Bassa.

The Bassa have an impressive array of customs which could have an Israelite/Jewish basis. In November 2015 I presented a paper in Paris to the International Society for the Study of African Jewry (I.S.S.A.J.) outlining Bassa rites and their similarity to Jewish customs.



The Baleng holy tree. While the Baleng believe in an omnipresent god whom they call Shi, they perform sacrifices, usually goats, next to this large tree. The animals are brought in the baskets visible in the photograph.

The Baleng bury in graves, though after some time, the corpse is exhumed and then the head is separated. The body is reburied in its grave,

and the head is buried inside the deceased's house. On its way to the house it is brought to the sacrificial site in the black bowl visible in the photograph.  
February 2014

## THE LEMBA OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

I contacted the leader of the Lemba community in Harare, Zimbabwe, Modreck Maeresera. The Lemba have mixed claims, which vary from leaving Israel 130 years before the destruction of the second Temple to departing Yemen in the fourteenth century. Of course a combination of these extremes is possible, namely they are incorporating Yemenite Jewish history into their own tradition, and the former narrative then could apply to both histories. Some Yemenites also claim their forefathers left Yerushalayim 130 years before the destruction of the Temple though there is no agreement on when they first arrived in Yemen.

Most versions of the Lemba tradition teach that a handful of, stated as four or seven, men – devoid of women – arrived in southern Africa by boat. Thus *halakhically*, already the second generation were no longer Jewish, unless you want to assume this handful converted their women.

An interesting curio is that the CMH, the Cohen Modal Haplotype, the so-called Aaron gene, is found in fifty percent of the Buba clan, the clan of the Lemba leaders or priests. While one cannot dispute the existence of the gene amongst the tribe, there are

alternative scenarios to explain the phenomenon. I discuss this in depth in a paper on the Lemba claim.

It is also possible that the Lemba originate from Moslems, not Jews. Many of their claimed *Jewish* traditions are common to both religions, not surprising since over seventy percent of Islam has a Jewish base. Some of these ingredients include circumcision, ritual slaughter and a sabbath rest day. The Lemba circumcise at age approximately eight years, which places them more in line with Moslem practice, not Jewish at eight **days**. They have sociological reasons to explain this anomaly.

Like the Igbo, a vast majority of Lemba are currently content continuing life as Moslems and Christians.

Modreck has spent time with us at the yeshiva in Efrat. Kulanu is a supporter of the Zimbabwean Lemba.

Prof Tudor Parfitt connected me with a South African Lemba, originally from Limpopo near the Zimbabwe border, named Manasseh Selamolela. He too spent time with us at the yeshiva after which he was converted in Efrat.

I believe that, lacking an obviously ulterior motive, the reason that brings someone to yearn to become close and to accept the God of Abraham and his commandments is unimportant. Examples of such motives include wanting to marry a Jewish person or an eagerness to live in first world Israel as an escape from third world poverty. I am pleased to assist people with a sincere inspiration towards conversion. Some conversion candidates may claim descent from a lost Israelite tribe or from Spanish Jews; others may hear a recurring voice sending them to join the Jewish people. As a general statement, these may be acceptable.



*As Modreck Maeresera from the Zimbabwe Lemba community is a farmer, I took him to visit the cowsheds at nearby Kibbutz Rosh Tzurim April 2016*

## THE SAMARITANS

The Samaritans (*Shomronim* in Hebrew) are a religion seemingly related to Judaism. Today they number about eight hundred souls living in Israel. Their practice is heavily based on their version of the written Torah. They reject our rabbinic understandings though they do have their own, unwritten, oral tradition with which they interpret the Torah.

We and the Samaritans have divergent versions of their origins. According to the biblical account, enhanced by the Talmud, the Samaritans are people who were brought by the Assyrians from countries to the north of Israel in order to replace the vanquished and subsequently expelled northern Israelite tribes. Population exchange was the Assyrian method of controlling conquered territory, making the new residents totally dependent on them. (This Israelite expulsion is the source of the Ten Lost Tribes narrative.) As a result of an event that occurred not long after their arrival into vacated Samaria, site of the Israelite kingdom, the newcomers adopted Judaism. The Rabbis argued for centuries whether the conversion was based on coercion or free will. During the Talmudic era, they eventually declared the Samaritans to be non-Jews in every respect. I believe the reason presented was based on hearsay, but that the Rabbis desired to make the separation.

On the other hand, the Samaritans claim they are true members of the tribes of Israel who left Egypt with Moses. They split with the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin following the death of Eli the priest around the year 1,050 BCE.

Unlike the Jews, they continue to use ancient Hebrew script in their Torah scrolls. Their text varies in many places from the masoretic text, some differences having profound theological reverberations, principally that the site of the Temple, the holy mountain, is not Zion in Yerushalayim, but Mount G'rizim in the Shomron.

Some Samaritans have told me that they long for the day when they can reunite with us, their brethren. But one can hear between the lines that would involve us accepting their version of the Torah.



*Reciting the hagada, based on Torah verses, during the pascal sacrifice on Mount G'rizim. Note the skewered pascal lambs in the background. April 2010*



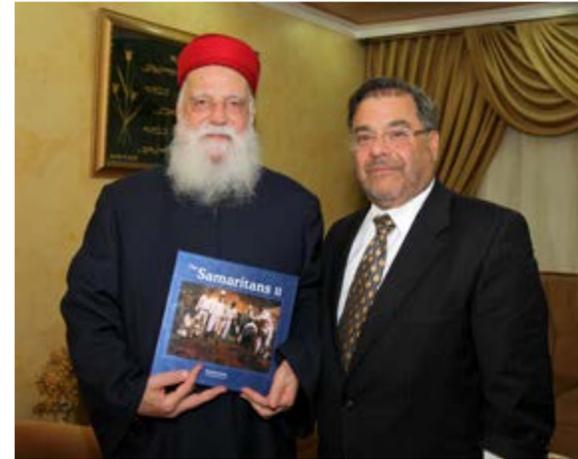
*The ceiling of Yosef Cohen's Suka, Kiryat Luza, Mount G'rizim. Note the etrog in the centre. The Shomronim also understand the Torah's "etz pri hadar" to be the etrog, but do not require it to be shaken as we do. October 2010*



After slaughtering their pascal lambs, the Samaritans, much in accordance with rabbinic custom, skewer the lambs on long staves. These are then placed into cooking pits which already contain red hot coal embers from logs they started burning during the afternoon. Once the staves have been lowered into the pits, they are covered with a mud laden lid in order to retain heat. At that point they saw off the protruding wood. The lambs are then left to cook for a number of hours, to be removed and eaten at midnight.  
April 2016



Shavuoth in the Samaritan synagogue on Har G'rizim where they read the torah throughout the night. The light fixture in the top left was a gift from Yasser Arafat.  
June 2014



Rabbi Riskin meeting the Samaritan high priest at his home in Kiryat Luza where he presented him with a copy of one of my books about the Samaritans  
March 2014

The altar on which portions of the pascal lamb are burnt  
June 2014



On each of the pilgrimage festivals the Samaritans visit their holy sites on the top of Mount G'rizim. They read the torah throughout the night. About an hour before sunrise, they climb to the top of the mountain where they pray at each of their six holy locations. The above photograph was taken on Shavuoth. It was the first time in over 400 years that they took out two Torah scrolls. They told me that they now felt more comfortable about the future of their community as their population was increasing. At that point they were almost 800; 100 years earlier they numbered less than 150.  
June 2014

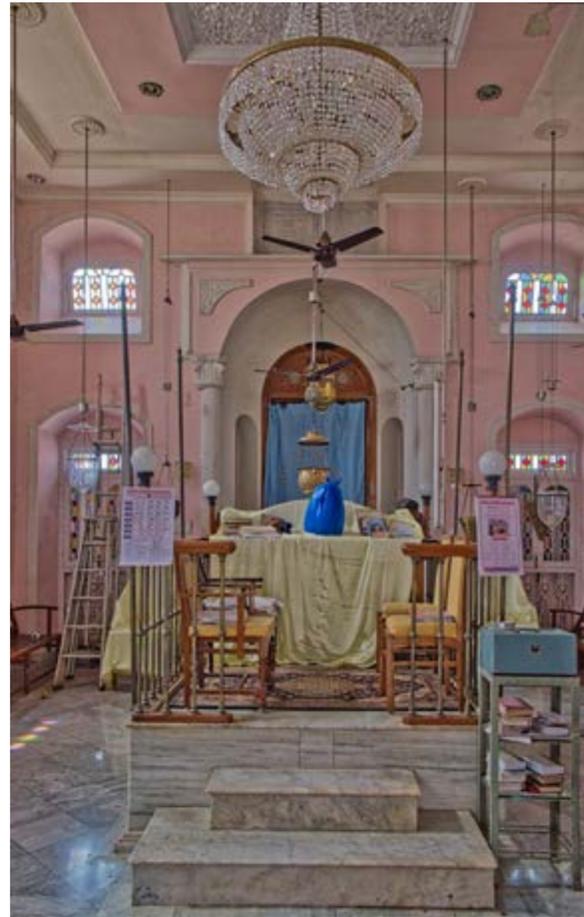


INDIA

In India I met with two groups, the Pashtun (also known by the Hindi pronunciation as Pathans), originally from Afghanistan, and the *Bene Israel* of Maharashtra whose origin is unknown. Both groups claim that they are somehow descended from Israel.

The Pashtun, who are today Sunni Moslem, were the subject of Rav Avichail's original lost Israelite tribes inquiry. While a vast majority of the over forty million Pashtun live in Afghanistan and Pakistan, a large number moved into India a couple of hundred years ago. A major claim to their Israeliteness includes similarity in their tribal names to that of the Israelites. Their customs include wearing four cornered garments (without *tsitsith*), lighting candles on Friday evenings, breaking a glass at weddings, sporting beards and side-locks, customs that were introduced into Judaism in times far more recent than the epoch of the expulsion of the tribes.

Research suggests that the *Bene Israel* display a genetic mix which includes a Middle Eastern link. The CMH cohen gene has been found in samples taken from members of the community. This would indicate that there were Jews in their ancestry. They assert that the Indian caste system has kept them racially pure. However as they preferred to live in Moslem rather than vegetarian Hindu neighbourhoods because they too ate meat, their caste claim may not be too strong.



Magen Avoth Bene Israel Synagogue, Alibaug, India  
November 2014

Their narrative is that seven men and seven women survived the sinking of the ship in which they were escaping Roman or Greek (in the time of the Macabees) persecution. They claim that their cemetery in Alibaud, on the Konkan coast south of Mumbai, contains the mass grave of bodies that were subsequently washed ashore.

Today, following a struggle for rabbinic recognition, the *Bene Israel* are fully integrated into Israeli society and identified by religious and secular authorities as Jews. However this concession came only in 1964 and after a struggle which included the Jewish Agency returning 337 people to India in 1951. Eventually most returned to Israel where today the majority reside.

A small community still lives in India, residing mainly in Mumbai and Pune where they have synagogues. They also maintain a [much underused] synagogue in Alibaud, the town in which they first dwelt.

The Bene Israel cemetery, Alibaug, India, where those who drowned in the shipwreck are buried  
November 2014



Bene Israel Synagogues, left Magen Avoth in Alibaug, right Magen David in Mumbai  
November 2014



The rock outside Alibaud from where the Bene Israel believe Elijah the prophet made his heavenly ascent. The dent was made by the chariot wheel. There are also two hoof indentations in the rock left by Elijah's horses on their ascent.  
November 2014



*Tarphon and Moshe in our suka  
October 2012*

## CHAPTER 8 MOSHE AND TARPHEON ARRIVE IN ISRAEL

### ISRAEL EXPERIENCE

In line with his promise to bring two young men to his yeshiva in Efrat, Rabbi Riskin applied for one year student visas. This was more complicated than he anticipated. Having dealt with American and European students in the past, he was in for a rude shock when it came to visas for Africans. While the bureaucratic reluctance may partially be a result of the then wave of Sudanese and Eritreans illegally entering Israel in droves via the porous Egyptian frontier, creating an embarrassing political problem, we felt that there was [at least a tinge of] a racist agenda at the Interior Ministry. The latter is solely responsible for permission to stay in Israel for anything longer than a standard three month tourist visa which is issued by most Israeli consulates.

Citizens of many countries are entitled to a “Visa on Arrival” to Israel. I think the only sub-Saharan country with which Israel has such an arrangement is South Africa. (I note that some African countries I have visited allow me to obtain a visa on arrival on my Israeli passport, others not.) Other Africans need to apply at the nearest Israeli diplomatic mission – often not in their country of residence as is the case with Uganda and Zimbabwe – with an invitation from



*The first day –  
Tarphon and  
Moshe arrive to  
the yeshiva  
January 2012*



It may look like Tarphon is praying at the Kotel, but he is at the southern wall of the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hevron October 2012



an Israeli and a guarantee that the inviter will look after all the invitees' expenses while in Israel, and most importantly, ensure the tourist does not work and leaves before the expiry of the visa.



Sampling local delicacies – I bumped into Moshe and Tarphon at a shwarma joint on King George Street, downtown Yerushalayim April 2012

Procuring visas for Moshe and Tarphon took many months of correspondence, face-to-face meetings at the Interior Ministry and finally the posting of a 60,000 shekel bond. Eventually when it did happen, even after approval, our two students had to wait in Nairobi for weeks until their passports were stamped by our Kenyan mission.

Eventually, in February 2012, our intrepid travellers arrived. They immediately immersed themselves in study, but they also immersed themselves into Israeli life. For rural Ugandans, Israel can be a culture shock. While our yeshiva is set in the countryside, surrounded by vineyards, orchards and vegetable plots, our agriculture is different; as are our diets and lifestyles. Overnight our young men became pizza connoisseurs, sampling the baked delicacy everywhere they went. Humus became another favourite.

Spending shabbath with families was also an eye-opener. In traditional Uganda, the men of the village eat together, and the women and children separately. The men never get up from their repast, being continuously served by the women and children. It of course goes without saying that food preparation is entirely in the female realm. Our visitors liked it that families ate together, and that men helped at the table and in the kitchen. Moshe and Tarphon promised themselves that they would introduce this to shabbath in Putti. I do not think they have been too successful, but a switch had been thrown, at least in their minds. They also told us that they learnt as much about being Jewish by visiting families here as they learnt in the yeshiva classrooms.

In addition to studying many Jewish related topics, mainly *halakha*, Jewish law and practice, Moshe and Tarphon learnt to perform *sh'hita*. Slaughtering fowl is an order of magnitude easier than cows or even the smaller goats. Given that the Putti community is unlikely to be in a financial situation to afford a whole cow, and also given the short time the boys were in Israel, it was decided to teach them chicken *sh'hita* only. They learnt the relevant *halakhoth*, as well as the technical aspects especially how to ensure a perfectly sharp knife.

A local filmmaker decides to make a movie about the Abayudaya's road to Judaism. He records our boys arriving at the airport, and then coming into the yeshiva. He also shoots them at various activities during the year. It's the start of a documentary film.

Following a lifetime of Jewish practice and now months of full time yeshiva study, Rabbi Riskin decided it would be most appropriate to convert Tarphon and Moshe in time for the new year.



Moshe and Tarphon at the grave marker of our father Ya'akov, Ma'arath haMakhpela, the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hevron October 2012



The large aron kodesh in the centre of Ma'arath haMakhpela October 2012



Tarphon and Moshe at the graves of Ruth and Yishai near the original biblical site of Hevron October 2012

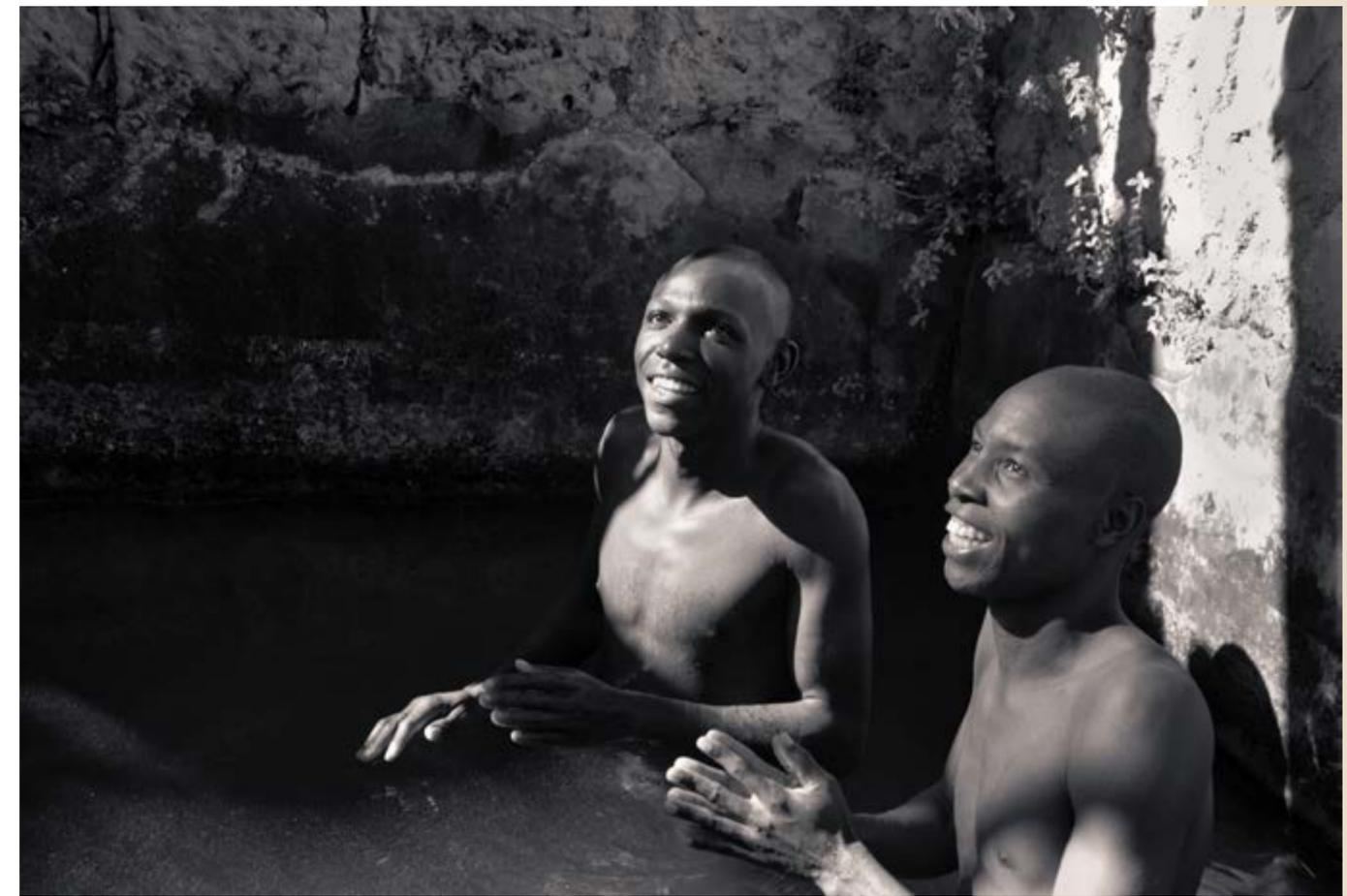
## CONVERSION

Every year, on the eve of *Rosh haShana* and *Yom Kipur*, a group of us, including Rabbi Riskin, in accordance with custom, immerse in one of the many natural springs flowing in our area. We invited Moshe and Tarphon to join us at the spring and there carry out their conversions. This was a very moving experience for all of us, the young men standing in the *mikve*, the pool into which flow the “living waters” of the spring, the *beth din* standing on the edge. The Rabbi asked each of them a number of questions about their Jewishness, their commitment, testing their overall Jewish religious knowledge. The *halakha* is that a convert must be informed of some of the “difficult commandments and some of the easy commandments”, and then he or she immerses.

As the Abayudaya have, since 1919, been circumcised at eight days, there is no necessity, nor possibility for circumcision. However it is necessary to facilitate the *brith*, covenant, with blood, by pricking the place of the circumcision, *hatafath dam brith*. This too was carried out in the presence of the *beth din* before they entered the *mikve*.



Rabbi Riskin, in the role of cohen, blessing the boys after their conversion  
Erev Rosh haShana, September 2012



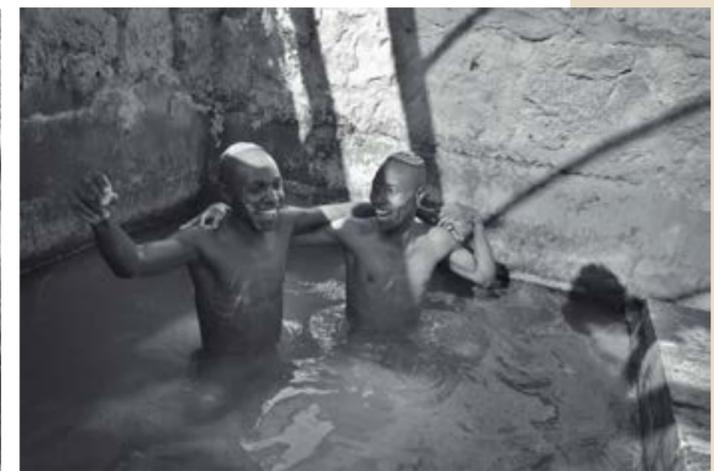
Moshe and Tarphon listening to the beth din who are standing on the side of the mikve  
September 2012



Moshe and Tarphon in the mikve at Ein Levana, in Gush Etzion  
September 2012



Moshe answering Rabbi Riskin's questions in the mikve  
September 2012



Tarphon and Moshe break into spontaneous dance in the mikve following their conversion  
September 2012



Putti alphabet wall  
January 2013

## CHAPTER 9 SECOND VISIT TO PUTTI

### WEDDINGS

Not long after Moshe and Tarphon's return home in November 2012, we received news that Tarphon and his Nairobi childhood sweetheart, Ruthy, intended to wed. She had for a while lived in Putti and gone to school with the Abayudaya. We all felt that we wanted to be there for this joyous event. At a minimum we

would need to come with a *beth din*, as Ruthy needed to be converted.

In preparation for our visit, we instructed the community how to build a *mikve*, both for conversions and for general use by Abayudaya

A natural spring  
feeds water into  
the mikve  
January 2013

A jubilant Rabbi Riskin on his way to view the new mikve,  
followed by most of Putti  
January 2013



women. The community acquired a small parcel of land amongst agricultural estates, a short distance from Putti. A natural spring flows from this holding. Its waters are diverted into a small tiled pool where immersion takes place. The pool is surrounded by mud brick walls, no roof. A bamboo partition around the entrance affords an additional level of privacy. The *mikve* was largely paid for by my wife, Jill, and Ros Eisen, an English friend of the Abayudaya, who was also in Uganda for the wedding.

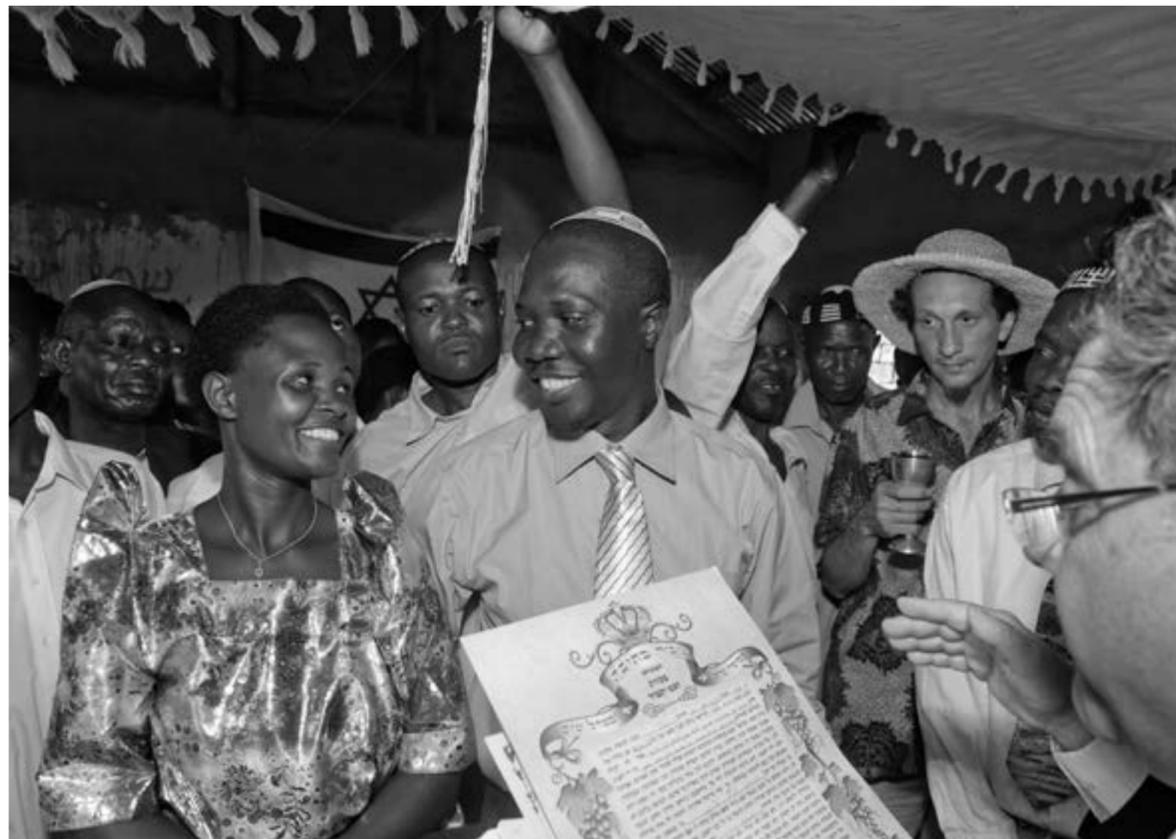
The first time I travelled to Uganda Jill was happy for me to travel with the boys. Now, after being an active partner in my African experience, including hosting the Africans studying at the yeshiva, she also wanted to participate. Though not the reason for her joining us, it proved very important to have a religious woman as part of our delegation. There are questions,

especially relating to family purity which women prefer to discuss with another woman. In addition Jill was able to be in the *mikve* for the immersion of babies as well as for older women who needed assistance. I wish to point out here, that while the *beth din* must witness the immersion of all converts, the women were fully clothed in loose apparel.

An addition to our 2011 group were Rabbi Eliyahu Birenbaum, who is involved with far-flung Jewish communities around the world and with their conversion, and Rabbi Menachem Weinberg who taught Moshe and Tarphon during their yeshiva stay.

In Putti we meet a Canadian filmmaker named Tamás Wormser. We are a little suspicious of him, as his story and what he was filming do not seem to gel with what was going on, namely the conversions and the weddings.

Was it just a coincidence we were all here at the same time? Tamás told us he was producing a film on Abayudaya music, but he filmed many things not connected to music, things that we would not want shown on television. For example, donors dressing down local people concerning a chicken coop which the donors had purchased but felt had been managed inappropriately. To me this scene smacked of classical colonialism and racism, Europeans knowing better than the locals on how to operate in their own environment, how a donor without local knowledge may cause more damage than good.



Rabbi Riskin reading Shira and Enosh's ketuba. Tamás is on the right holding the cup of wine.  
January 2013

Our suspicion of Tamás could have been avoided. I only much later learnt that Tamás had spoken to a member of our group outlining his programme. Unfortunately that information did not filter down. Tamás later told me that on realising that he was filming controversy, he stopped his cameras.

Tamás's film, *The Wandering Muse*, is a story about Jewish music, largely by musicians on the fringe of the Jewish world. One of the featured musicians is our Enosh Keki. Based on this visit, footage and the connections he built up with the Abayudaya, Tamás decided to produce a film about the Abayudaya's move to orthodox Judaism, a theme I suppose similar to the subject of this book.

He and I have since become best of friends ;-)

#### IN THE SYNAGOGUE

Our first stop in Putti, after our arrival, is the synagogue for morning prayers. We bring with us a supply of *talitot* and pairs of *tefilin*.

One of the changes I note since our previous visit is that the Putti Abayudaya now pray from *Ashkenazi* prayer books and not *S'fardi*.

As it is Monday we read from the Torah, another change from our previous visit. Then they read from a paper *sefer torah*, but now they had a real torah written on parchment. The *aron kodesh*, with the tens letters written down the sides, had also been removed, replaced by a big, sealable box. This was to protect the scroll as there is a problem of rats in the village. Some *tefilin* had been destroyed during the previous year, eaten by the rats.

The other changes I noticed are structural to the synagogue building. The back door no longer existed and the beautiful thatched roof had been replaced by a far more sturdy and waterproof one of corrugated iron.



The Torah being carried via the women's section to the bima for the morning reading  
January 2013



Elisha Higenyi adjusting his tefilin  
January 2013



## CONVERSIONS

On our first day in Putti we drive out to see the *mikve*. It is about ten minutes walk away from the closest point we could park our car. Rabbi Riskin is in a triumphant mood – the *mikve* was really beautiful, beyond our expectations.

Before any marriages could be consecrated, the *beth din* will have to convert Ruthy, Enosh, Shira and their children in the new *mikve*. Ruthy's grandmother, Wanjiku, whom we know from our Kenya visit, was present for the wedding. She had spent three months in Efrat during the previous year, receiving medical treatment which saved her eyesight. She too would be converted at this juncture.

The next morning we return for the conversions.

Wanjiku's conversion was particularly moving. Wheelchair bound following a recent stroke, Wanjiku had to be helped into the water. After she was dry and dressed, Rabbi Riskin, as he always does as a *cohen*, a priest, blessed her. He asked whether she wanted to take on a new, Hebrew name. She responded in the affirmative, but when the Rabbi asked



*Jill helping Shira and Enosh's son, J J, into the mikve. His trust was shaken when she put him under the water.  
January 2013*



*Mama Emunah, Wanjiku, after she emerged from the mikve, receiving the cohen's blessing and her new name. Her son Rickson, Ruthy's father, and Ari Greenspan look on.  
January 2013*



*Enosh cleaning nailpolish off his daughter, Miriam, so she could enter the mikve without anything intervening between her and the water  
January 2013*



her what name she desired, she said, “I don’t know ... Rabbi, you choose for me”. The Rabbi thought for a moment, and responded, “I think you should be called *Emuna*, meaning faith, as ever since you started on your path to Judaism, you continually had

faith that you would arrive at this day”. She modestly responded, “Thank you Rabbi”. At that point there was not a dry eye in the place, out there amongst the grazing cows, the maize, cassava and plantain. The only audible sound, the gurgling spring.



Jill and Eden Riskin trying to hand out slapsticks, stickers and lollipops in an orderly fashion to some very excited children  
January 2013

## PUTTI GENERAL MEETING

We return to Putti after the *mikve* session. We hold a town hall meeting of the community to discuss, amongst other things, further education and more conversions. Rabbi Riskin felt it was still too early to convert more people. He wanted the community to prove itself, to itself as well as to us, even though these were the people who ten years earlier had rejected the Conservative conversions as “not the real thing!”

The Rabbi told the assembly that it was important for them to study and apply this knowledge to their Jewish practice, to strengthen their active application of Jewish traditions. He asked them all to practice Judaism fully, those already converted together with those who had not yet converted. That they should see themselves on an active path to conversion, and that this practice was an essential part of the journey. We encouraged the use by everyone of the *talitoh* and *tefilin* which we brought from Israel for the community’s use in prayer. Of course they will need to share as there were not enough for everyone.

The Rabbi stressed the importance of study as a way to achieve practical Judaism, and mentioned that he himself, and all of us from Israel, were in constant study of our sources.

J J Keki commented on Rabbi Riskin’s statement, “Since you say that you are continually studying in parallel to practicing Judaism, and you suggest in



Uri Katula asking a question at the town hall meeting  
January 2013



J J Keki questioning Rabbi Riskin about studying and delaying conversion  
January 2013



Participants at the own hall meeting  
January 2013

essence that we must do the same thing, and that you are Jewish, why can't we also be Jewish!"

It was, in my opinion, a trump card, to which the Rabbi did not respond, I felt with a little difficulty and perhaps a heavy heart.

To me, J J's statement was much more significant than his words. Here was the man, the leader of the Abayudaya in 2001, who, on behalf of all the Abayudaya, actively preferred Conservatism over Orthodoxy [Torah Judaism], now stating publicly and unabashedly in the presence of many of his fellows that he wanted to be a Torah-observant Jew, in effect a total about-face from his previous stance.

On that day Rabbi Riskin stood by his posture that it was still too early. As we shall see, J J would eventually have his day.

### NAMANYONYI

After her conversion, the bride was driven to Mbale to prepare herself for the wedding. While waiting for her return to Putti, we paid a short visit to Namanyonyi to see how the community there was faring since our first visit. As there is interest in orthodoxy amongst some members of that community, some of the Namanyonyi Abayudaya were keen to speak with us. We met in their shul. As yet we continue to talk.

We also dropped into Nabugoye before returning to Putti.

### SHIRA AND ENOSH'S WEDDING

Before the main affair, Ruthy and Tarphon's wedding ceremony and celebration, we held a small ceremony for Shira and Enosh, who, as they were now *officially* Jewish, required a Jewish wedding – surrounded by their four children. As we did not want to take away from the prime attraction, we performed a quiet ceremony in the synagogue, crowded with Abayudaya, visitors and well-wishers.

The bride, wearing a traditional Ugandan dress, under the hupa  
January 2013



High Street, Namanyonyi. I think Chagall might have enjoyed this scene.  
January 2013



Happy boy in Namanyonyi  
January 2013



Muzei Solomon attended the weddings  
January 2013



Muzei Solomon and Rabbi Riskin were equally excited to meet once again. A prophesy twice fulfilled?  
January 2013

Checking raw rice for insects  
January 2013



Cooking for the festive meal  
January 2013



Lunch in Putti – rice  
served on banana  
leaf table cloths.  
The custom here is to  
eat in groups: men  
together, women,  
girls, boys.  
January 2013



Minha at the Namanyonyi synagogue  
January 2013

### RUTHY AND TARPON'S WEDDING

People had started to arrive for Rothy and Tarphon's celebration the previous afternoon, camping out overnight in the open area near the synagogue. They arrived via many modes of transport: by private cars – not too many – by taxi – a few – but mostly by *boda boda* motorcycle taxis carrying two or three passengers.

Many guests walked for more than a day from distant villages. Fifteen flew in from outside of Africa: Israel, Canada, England and the U.S. Included were two people whose organisations, *Pearl Children* and *Putti Village Assistance Organisation* had been working with the community, already providing various forms of assistance for a few years. Though no-one said anything, I believe one of these underwrote the entire cost of the event including the wedding dresses.

In all, over a thousand people are assembled, many sitting on chairs which miraculously appeared overnight. This was quite something for a community with but a few chairs – they generally eat their meals sitting outside on the ground.

Tables are set, ladies cook from the crack of dawn, huge pots, cauldrons, pans, sit on open wood fires.

A sound system is set up, an achievement for a community whose only electricity source is six solar panels, each powering a single light globe into the dark nights, and, perhaps more importantly, points to charge mobile phones. Uganda – like much of rural Africa – has catapulted in a single jump, from communicating via beating drums to smart phones, leapfrogging the communications technology with which we in the West are familiar since Bell's great revolution.

Things were a little delayed but finally the great moment arrives. Tarphon, accompanied by his best friend and best man, Moshe, cut through a ribbon under a floral archway, and enter into the central area, around which the crowd, including many children, are now seated. Both men are dressed in suits and ties, very spruce. An uninformed observer could be excused asking which was the groom.



I think no children went to school – nor adults to work – the entire time we spend in Putti. The atmosphere is continuously festive.

In the foreground, children playing football; in the background, the chicken coop discussion, with donors, locals and film crew.

January 2013



Steaming hot rice  
January 2013

Two people with microphones coordinate the proceedings, one speaking to the the crowd in English, the second in native Kigwere. There are jokes, music, speeches. Rabbi Riskin addresses the crowd. Rabbi Gershom, who had not visited Putti in a while, also speaks.

The bride arrives, the couple stand under the *hupa* wedding canopy, Rabbi Riskin performs the ceremony, the Israelis are honoured with being witnesses and reciting the *sheva b'rakhoth*, the seven blessings which complete a wedding ceremony.

Something which seemed an irrelevant, off-the-cuff comment at that point, was said during the ceremony, something which would have significance much later on – but a seed was sown. One of the donors casually remarked, "Look at Tarphon. I think he would make a wonderful leader."

A strange statement given that it was not relevant to anything happening at that moment.



Preparing rice in Putti for the wedding breakfast  
January 2013



The crowd patiently waiting for the wedding to commence  
January 2013



Children on the floor, adults on chairs behind  
January 2013

Sadly, early in the day, we were informed that the wedding meal, including massive quantities of meat, was not kosher. Neither Moshe nor Tarphon, the only trained local *shohatim*, could have prepared this quantity, especially in a locale lacking refrigeration.

It seems the slaughter was carried out by members of the Nabugoye community using a *panga*, an African tool



After a long wait, the hatan and his best man arrive  
January 2013



Cutting the ribbon to enter into the area of the wedding ceremony  
January 2013



The bride arrives amongst song and dance  
January 2013



resembling a machete, probably an instrument like that which we saw there on our first visit, an implement quite inappropriate for *sh'hita*. The local spiritual leader appoints *shohatim* and all the non-Putti Abayudaya communities eat their meat on the presumption that it is kosher. This includes larger animals, not just fowl. I do not know what training these slaughterers receive.

Of the thousand wedding guests, some four hundred were Abayudaya from outside Putti, a similar number were non-Jews.

Tarphon assured me that members of the Putti community knew not to eat the meat. In addition the pots, [1,000 porcelain] plates and sets of cutlery were from outside the community.

This episode served to underscore Rabbi Riskin's earlier posture that Putti was not yet ready for conversion. Our friends still needed to learn that orthodox Judaism is a one hundred percent commitment, not something that can be switched on and off as convenient, that the Torah applies equally to everyone and that one of the key tenets of Judaism is that each Jew must feel responsible for the actions of other Jews and the community, that any event held in Putti, for whatever guests, must always be at the orthodox standards to which Putti was striving.

The day following the wedding the overseas guests leave. Jill and I stay on to spend an additional day with our friends Moshe, Tarphon and Ruthy, driving around the scenic foothills of Mount Elgon.

Ruthy and Tarphon name their first child, a girl, *Shlomit*, in honour of Rabbi Riskin, whose first name is *Shlomo*.



*A hug from a grandmother – Emunah and Ruthy  
January 2013*



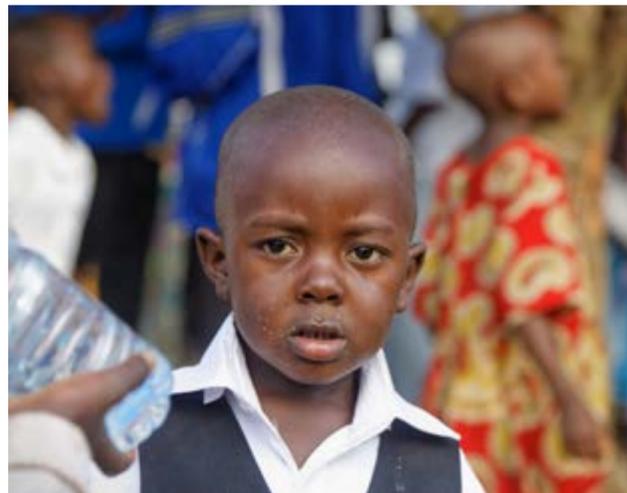


*Eliyahu Birenbaum reciting the first of the sheva b'rahoth  
January 2013*



*Witnesses at the hupa, Menachem Weinberg, left,  
with Sjimón René den Hollander  
January 2013*





*Lining up to congratulate the couple and present them with gifts.  
Then the food service commences.  
Everyone waits patiently and in an orderly fashion for both.  
No pushing and shoving or queue jumping.  
January 2013*



*Enosh arrives at Ben Gurion International Airport  
on his way to the yeshiva in Efrat  
March 2014*

## CHAPTER 10 BETWEEN VISITS

### ENOSH ARRIVES IN ISRAEL

While in Uganda the second time, Rabbi Riskin offered Enosh the opportunity to come to Israel to study with us. As Enosh was the founder and undisputed leader of the Putti community, as well as its spiritual head, we felt it was important for him to receive a serious yeshiva grounding.

As with our prior experience with Moshe and Tarphon, it took many months and a considerable effort to procure a one year student visa for Enosh. Again guarantees were required, including a substantial cash bond.

Enosh spent his time seriously studying many aspects of Judaism with a number of the yeshiva's rabbis. And, following Moshe and Tarphon's experience, he found that he was learning much from the many families he visited in Efrat and across Israel. As much of his Judaism was self-taught, this allowed him to gain a great understanding of Judaism as a lifestyle.

### RECOGNITION BY ISRAEL

During 2016, an Israeli newspapers reported that the Abayudaya community was now "officially recognised



*Three Jewish Africans*

*Amir and Enosh meet  
a soldier at the Cave of  
the Patriarchs in Hevron*

*June 2014*

as Jews" by the Jewish Agency for Israel. I am not certain what is the full impact of this statement partially because the newspaper's only source is a letter to the Conservative movement from the Agency.

I feel this is a step forward. But what is the value of this recognition? If it means that Israel, through whatever agency, will now provide assistance to the Abayudaya as it does in many diaspora communities, and not just in the third world, that is important and potentially substantial. But one must be careful to differentiate between the government of Israel, in this case the Interior Ministry, and the Jewish Agency.

The interpretation of the Law of Return, the law under which Jews can return home to Israel and be immediately awarded citizenship, is solely in the hands of the Interior Ministry. Their position needs to be forced by the Supreme Court as it was in forcing them to accept Conservative and Reform conversions carried out by established communities outside of Israel. A 2016 decision by the court specified that orthodox conversions carried out by *batei din* in Israel other than the chief rabbinate, must be recognised under the Law of Return.



Abe Reichman's tefilin class under the mango tree  
June 2016

## CHAPTER 11 A THIRD TRIP TO PUTTI

### AN AGENDA

Three years had passed since we last visited Putti, and over a year since Enosh's return home from yeshiva. While we were constantly in touch with our friends, including teaching regular *shiurim* (Torah lessons) over Skype, there was a need to make personal, physical contact. During our previous visit, we promised to return to carry out further conversions once people were truly engaged in Torah studies and had increased their Jewish practice.

I felt the time to visit again had arrived. The feedback from our *shiurim* was very positive but we needed to be there personally, to see the facts on the ground. Remote control experience is never a substitute.

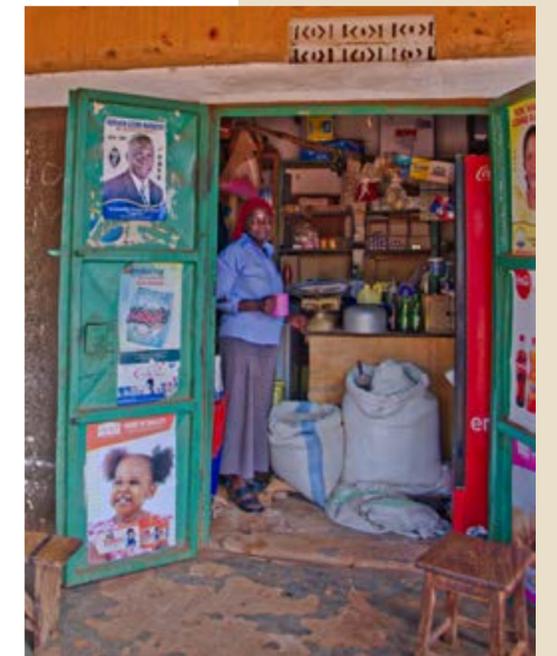
It was towards the end of 2015 when Rabbi Riskin agreed that he believed the time had indeed arrived. Once the decision was made, the complicating factor was when. I was well aware that taking the Rabbi out of his very busy schedule for even a few days would be a feat. Eventually I managed to squeeze six days from his secretary, from an initial offer of four.

I pushed for another day. I felt it would take a Herculean effort to complete everything we hoped to

achieve in this short time, which also included close to two days of travel.

On the other hand, once we made the decision, I was not certain that either Rabbi Riskin or I were sure exactly what we would be doing during the visit, nor by what measure we would evaluate its success. We had promised to return – that was a given – to perform further conversions, more than the nine orthodox Abayudaya conversions already carried out. We also wanted to spend time frontal teaching, and for the Skype teachers to meet their students in person, putting faces to the voices. Slowly an agenda evolved.

Six of us made the trip in June 2016: Rabbi Riskin, our two Skype educators, Rabbi Stuart Fischman and Rabbi Abe Reichman, both of who had studied with



Gershom's campaign poster for the 2016 elections still on a grocery shop, Mbale  
May 2016



Nesa  
May 2016



One happy family – a man with his wives and their children  
June 2016

our African students at the yeshiva in Efrat, Jill and yours truly. At the last moment, we were joined by my friend, Yonatan Segal, an adventurer who, in the nineties, visited the B'nei Menashe in India with Rav Avichail, and prior to that, Peruvian Andes Indians, many of who have since converted to Judaism and now live in Israel.

Given that conversion was the main thrust of our programme, we needed to set criteria for potential converts beforehand. Otherwise we would spend too much of too little precious time interviewing inappropriate candidates. We would only interview candidates who were already observing the shabath, were circumcised [due to hygiene issues, an adult

circumcision requires full surgery followed by a two week wait before immersion], ate only kosher food and families where the wife was attending the *mikve* as required by *halakha*. We would only convert couples, not one spouse in a marriage. Also all of a couple's children under twelve years old.

To facilitate conversions, we required a *beth din* (a three member Jewish court), both to witness the *hatafath dam brith*, (drawing of a drop of blood in lieu of circumcision for a previously circumcised male) and for the *mikve* immersion.

A question arose re polygyny – there are men in the Putti community with two wives (and more in

other Abayudaya villages). Polygyny was a given, no matter how much we *Ashkenazi*, western men and women, find the practice distasteful. Kakungulu and the Malakites before him, accepted the practice “just as Abraham [and many other men in the bible] had two wives”. Samson Mugombe, the longtime community leader, had four wives, and Jonadab Keki took one of Mugombe’s daughters, Debra, in addition to his first wife, Ketzia. Many community members, including today’s leaders and *mohalim*, are descendants of Mugombe and his households. As a consequence, Rabbi Riskin added the further criterion that both wives would have to be suitable to convert at the same time as the husband. There were to be no mixed marriages within a family, one wife Jewish and the second Christian or Moslem, the only other possibilities in Uganda.

The reader should not construe this position to indicate our acceptance or agreement of one man simultaneously having multiple wives. On numerous

occasions during our visit, Rabbi Riskin spoke of the undesirability of polygyny. However I felt that his words, at least to many male listeners, were falling on deaf ears. Such is the power of custom. In the early years of the State of Israel, which since day one has anti-polygamy laws, people arriving with more than one wife, for example from Yemen and Morocco, were allowed to remain in their existing family format.

Rav Ovadia Yosef, during the fifties, was sorely critical of *S’fardi* Chief Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim’s acceptance of the monogamy law, claiming that unlike the *Ashkenazim*, the *S’fardi* tradition always allowed multiple wives, something which he even considered desirable. He claimed Rabbi Nissim was kowtowing to the *Ashkenazi* establishment.



Peretz in Putti  
June 2016



As we arrived to Mbale a day before the rest of our group, Jill and I visited some of the beautiful local countryside. We had time to visit other Abayudaya communities.

Dina Shadrak in the synagogue in Nasenyi. There is a messianic temple nearby. It seems that the messianics are in competition for the souls of the Abayudaya, opening up in their traditional villages.

May 2016

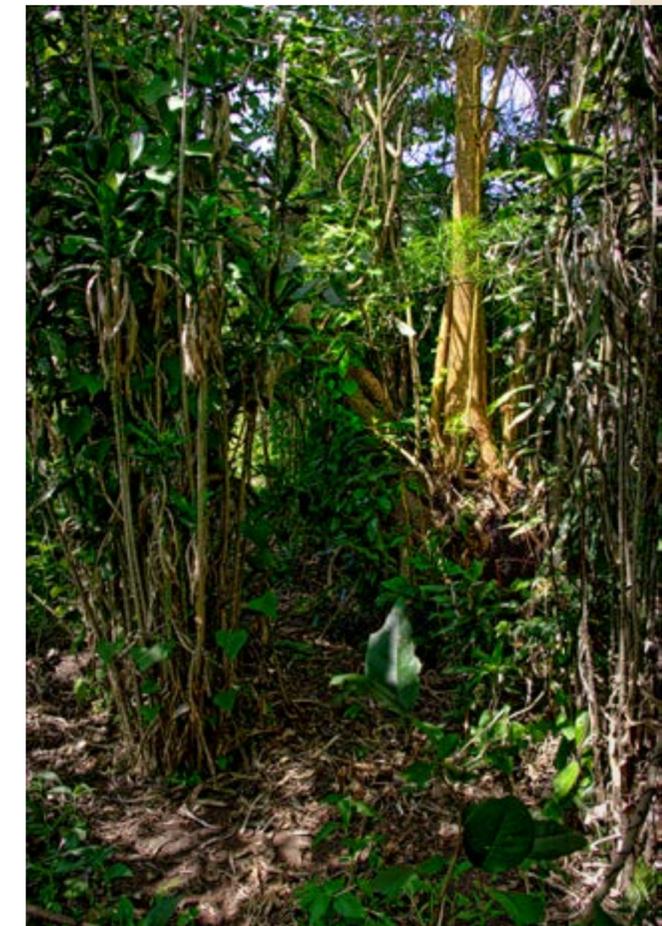
## COMMUNITY DISCORD

While preparing the groundwork for our visit, we faced a new problem, one of which I had an inkling, but whose scope I did not yet fully comprehend. A couple of colleagues, who aided in proofing the text of this book, preferred I not mention these events, citing possible negative reactions to our African friends, unfavorably reflecting our judgement in working with them and at worst, discouraging potential donors. However I desire to present a true record of what I experienced and observed, and not advance cardboard cutouts of perfect humanity. I touched earlier on the problem of Westerners assuming they have a superior knowledge, culture and lifestyle to our African friends. Nothing could be further from the truth. They live in developed cultures, with the same interpersonal relationships of love and hate, dispersing and gathering, dispute and peace as we do. Disagreements sometimes can run deeper than those involved ever intended, a difficult situation spiralling out of control.

Unfortunately when dealing with extreme poverty, the situation of our friends in Uganda, an injection of even small amounts of money can lead to deception. We need to remain vigilant of the potential pitfall of people expecting “We, the have-nots, await your, the haves, donations to arrive”. This dependency, coupled with a rural African non-understanding of financial accountability, has brought about internal friction. Sparring over funds, broadly meagre in Western terms, has ruptured many communities. The chasm is often fuelled by well meaning foreigners and aid workers with a genuine desire to assist, but a lack of comprehension that working in Africa, even in a pure enterprise, non-charity, scenario is very unlike doing business in New York, London or Yerushalayim.

Regrettably, Putti has not been immune. My initial reaction was that of sadness, but after the positive response to Rabbi Riskin’s intervention, I am proud, both of our efforts to broker peace and that of our African friends’ eventual reconciliation.

What happened within the idyllic community we left three years earlier? Towards the end of Enosh’s stay in Israel in 2014, a minor, non-violent putsch took place



There is in Putti an Abayudaya family, which, it seems, continues an *asheira*-like practice.

The head of this household knows that the practice does not fully gel with Judaism, but I suppose it is like an *each-way bet* at the horse races; he believes he is increasing his odds of reaching enlightenment.

Syncretism between old, what is euphemistically called *traditional* religions and the *newer* western practice is still common in Uganda and indeed much of sub-Saharan Africa.

This grove grows near to the family house. It consists of a large tree surrounded by small clumps of something similar to bamboo (cf the Baleng holy tree in Cameroon, page 65).

When the breakaway *orthodox* Abayudaya moved to Putti in 2003,

they chopped back these altar trees. However in the intervening years they have regrown. While the owner of the trees claims he no longer worships here, he has been seen tending to the area inside the circle of trees. He apparently carries out his ritual and sacrificial practices late at night, ironically reminiscent of the Abayudaya’s secret Jewish practice during Idi Amin’s rule.

In order to obscure the true purpose of this patch, he does not have little houses surrounding his tree as is common practice with

The donors believe they have introduced democracy to Putti, when in fact the result has been factionalism, perhaps the only democracy Ugandans know. Some



may say that discord is intrinsic to a democracy. To quote Winston Churchill in parliament in 1947, “Democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” Churchill may have just lost an election, but he retained his sense of humour.

An unnecessary rift developed in Putti between two groups, which I shall call A and B so as not to lay blame on individuals. The sad thing for me is that both groups are my friends, good friends. Before our trip, the two were not on speaking terms (publically – on a private, personal level I was told it was quite different) to the extent that a second synagogue opened in Putti after Group A took over the sole synagogue, ignoring Group B for any honours at services. Subsequently Group B was barred entry, the synagogue suddenly locked whenever deemed so by Group A.

Of course there followed the usual petty charges and counter charges, mudslinging from both sides, each justifying its position. On learning of this situation, Rabbi Riskin informed both groups that he would not visit in that prevailing atmosphere. To me, the root of the problem was that donor money was entrusted to only one side, and funding recipients, largely high school scholarships, were distributed almost exclusively to supporters of Group A.

Rabbi Riskin made it very clear to both groups that without peace within the one community, there can be no Judaism, that *shalom*, peace, is one of the names of God. He requested that everyone demonstrate good intentions. I was reminded of that Saturday night, five years earlier in Nairobi, when a part of the community wished to inhibit the entry of Africans to synagogue services. At that juncture too Rabbi Riskin emphasised *shalom* as a basic criterion for community development.

By this point in time, we had received two lists of conversion candidates considered by village leaders to fit Rabbi Riskin’s criteria. The community split



Entering Putti from the main dirt road. The first thing you see is the Yoni Netanyahu school and the health clinic which has a full time doctor and is well stocked with many medicines. June 2016

was emphasised by the fact that the lists contained a solitary common name.

We requested the groups show their good faith by declaring they each truly wanted peace, that they would make peace between themselves, and that before we arrived they would demonstrate this by all praying together in the original synagogue with everyone being treated equally.



The Putti laundry June 2016

#### WHERE AND WHAT IS PUTTI?

Strange as it may seem, five years since our first contact with the Abayudaya in Putti, this very basic question arose. In my mind the question became important as a result of the community discord.

What or where is Putti? Is there really such a setting, where a large number of [Torah practicing] Abayudaya dwell? Is it the synagogue around which



Communal cooking in the smoke-filled, unventilated kitchen June 2016

Ugandan altars of this type. Some of the sacrificial meat is placed into these small structures, the remainder eaten.

In their place our friend allegedly has special pots, which he keeps away from the trees, in the vicinity of his house. He only brings these out for his sacrifices.



Back in the Putti shul on our first day.

Rabbi Fischman in the synagogue during the cohen's priestly blessings.

June 2016



all communal activities take place? a physical site where two groups spar? and live? Or is Putti a mythical wonderland which is switched on and off when needed?

Geographically Putti is a country town of some 20,000 inhabitants and, given its agricultural nature, is spread over a large area. Most residents farm, largely subsistence. They live in family and clan units. The population of Putti is predominantly Christian, with a sizeable Moslem minority – and a few Jews, in fact a very few Jews. Perhaps five clans, fifteen nuclear families, who are spread out from near the shul to more than thirty minutes walk away.

So what is the Putti that we support? that donors assist? To me it is indeed a little mythological, like Abayudaya history itself. To Rabbi Riskin it is the people who pray on shabath in the Putti synagogue, irrespective of where they reside during the week. To some donors it is anyone whose name appears on a membership list!

We decided for our purposes to adopt Rabbi Riskin's definition though extend it, at least for now, to include anyone amongst the Abayudaya, and indeed any Ugandans, who wish to practice Torah Judaism in accordance with the *halakha*. This definition would allow J J Keki's large family to convert. They live an half hour drive from Putti and pray in their hometown of Nangolo, occasionally spending shabath in Putti.

That the Putti community was divided was more than just a minor irritation. The Rabbi more than once thought to change our travel plans if the groups did not tangibly move closer. Much correspondence traversed the ether. Some, inside and outside Uganda, wished to stall our visit. A little over a week before the trip, and just a couple of days before Jill and I were to leave for safari in Murchison Falls in western Uganda, the Rabbi phones to say the trip is off. In his opinion, the groups are too far apart, too intransigent.

"Rabbi, you can't do that at this late stage. We've prepared everything."

But Rabbi Riskin is unmoved. "No peace = no visit =



The central community area, the kitchen in the foreground June 2016



The tap connected to a solar cell which provides water for this part of Putti, provided by Innovation: Africa, an Israeli non-profit June 2016



*Morning prayers in Putti  
June 2016*

no conversions”, he says. For me it is a very frustrating conversation, and I argue with him, but in my heart I know he is making a strong point.

Then Jill took the phone and told him that he was being unfair to those not involved in the discord, and for whom we had built up an expectation of conversion and who continue to study and practice Judaism as we taught them. Plus our friends from Nairobi were preparing to come. The Putti situation had nothing to do with them.

The Rabbi could not disagree with her. He decided he would travel, but that we would not consider anyone directly involved in the continuing discord for conversion.

With that knowledge Jill and I boarded our flight to Kampala, though not entirely certain whether we would meet our colleagues a week later in Mbale.

We were in communication with both groups from the other side of Uganda. Our guide was an Abayudaya, Samson Shadrak, a grandson of Samson Mugombe. During our trip we had many discussions about the history of the Abayudaya, much of which is woven into my narrative in this book.

By week’s end both sides agreed to Rabbi Riskin’s request. The proof of peace would be everyone praying together and sharing functions in the one synagogue on shabbath. We received messages of *shabat shalom* from a few Putti friends, from both groups, all promising and looking forward to praying together and sharing shabbath meals. They also looked forward to the arrival of our delegation a few days hence. Indeed encouraging.

I switch on my computer after shabbath. Things are not right. A man accompanied by a young boy were pushed around while walking to shul on Friday afternoon by members of one family. Group A leaders, who were then supported by this family, were not involved in the matter, though by their own admission, they witnessed it. In their words, other



*Lining up outside the clinic for hatafath dam brith circumcision  
June 2016*

than to tell everyone to stop shoving, they walked on. Because of the Uganda police’s fear of religious fundamentalism – they saw this as an event connected to a synagogue – seven men, including group A leaders, were arrested that shabbath afternoon, released on bond on Monday afternoon. Jill and I arrived in Mbale just at that time.

Tarphon and Moshe both came to visit us at our hotel that evening. Though we spoke and emailed all the interim, we hadn’t seen either of them since Tarphon and Ruthy’s wedding. It was great to be with them again. As you can imagine, we had a lot on which to catch up.

While interviewing candidates, I was continually surprised how poor were most of the Ugandans’ English language skills.

The Abayudaya excuse of not wanting to send their children to school for fear of them becoming Christian has not been current for decades.

Classroom activity in Uganda is entirely in English until sixth grade. The C.I.A. reports that at the 2002 census, Uganda had a literacy rate of 66.8% (76.8% male and 57.7% female), but amongst the people I interviewed, many, most surprisingly children and young adults, could not answer my questions in English, some barely understanding them. (We had to resort to translators from amongst those who did speak good English, and many did.) While I believe my English to be quite comprehensible, even to non-Australians, I found that many had problems understanding my questions, largely on topics with which they were familiar, viz aspects of Judaism in which they were involved.

I even saw some official police documents, and was amazed at the bad spelling and grammatical mistakes on these official printed forms.



DAY ONE IN PUTTI  
WEDNESDAY 1ST JUNE

Rabbi Riskin had his work cut out for him from the moment he disembarked at Entebbe on Tuesday evening. Wednesday morning – a long session at our hotel, the Rabbi and I, and the faction heads, first individually and eventually together. My clock was ticking. From the start I did not believe we had enough time in Uganda to finish everything we had planned and now we were well behind the starting line. But Rabbi Riskin is brilliant, a true peacemaker. He well understood the goings-on, the *shenanigans*, and was able to walk a fine line between the factions, bringing them to an agreed peace.

It was already after 2 p.m. by the time Rabbi Riskin, Jill and I arrived in Putti. Thankfully our three colleagues had been there since morning prayers, matching faces and personalities to familiar Skype voices, and presenting “live” *shiurim*. This was important for breaking the ice, as it was for them their first visit to Putti.

After hellos and greetings, old friends, new friends, Rabbi Riskin commences meetings with candidates for conversion. The Nairobi delegation is due to arrive the next morning. Five of us sit opposite one family group at a time. As one would expect, the Rabbi does most of the talking, the rest of us make mental notes. The Rabbi tests knowledge and Jewish commitment, religious directions. Individual questions to the husband, the wife [wives], their children.

One of the first families we meet includes two wives, each wife surrounded by her children, the husband standing between the two. Not surprisingly it isn't easy for the women to express their true feelings in



Abe Reichman's tefilin class  
June 2016

this setting. In more informal venues some women open up. While in front of her husband a senior wife may confirm that she agreed to the second wife coming into the household, in private the story is very different. A lady could react by running away from home, but where is she to go? And then she would lose her children!

The essence of the problem of polygyny revealed.

The clock marches forwards. Soon we must break for *minha*. Five families interviewed.

From that point on we split into smaller interview groups, each of us individually meeting people and families.



A gentle hand for Humphrey of Nairobi into the water. Of course they let him go once he was submerged.  
June 2016



Abe Reichman in front of the class  
June 2016

DAY TWO  
THURSDAY 2ND JUNE

Thursday is largely devoted to interviews.

We start immediately after morning prayers. Most of us choose to interview outdoors – the buildings are stuffy, airless and poorly lit solely through windows – each finding a secluded shady spot out of earshot. I pick a nice big tree, with lots of branches, shade. I set a number of chairs opposite mine. As the sun moves across the sky, I appropriately shift the arrangement around the tree. It is very pleasant, a slight breeze blowing. I remove my hat, as the tree is shading me. By lunchtime, I am sunburnt. Even though I remain in shade, the sun is reflecting from every direction, always focussed at my face.

Abe holds a *tefilin* workshop: *halakha*, philosophy and practice. During the afternoon we perform *hatafath dam brith* on thus far successful candidates. Rabbi Dr Fischman brought needles and rubber gloves from Israel. He is assisted by a local Abayudaya medical student, David Musasula, and witnessed by a *beth din*.

On our way back to the hotel, already after dark, we visited Solomon Bwete's widow. Muzei Solomon passed away in August 2014 and his wife was keen for Rabbi Riskin to visit her home. Jill and I accompanied him. She is 88 years old and lives in extremely squalid conditions. Though her house, if you can call it that, is within Mbale city, it is a hovel located in a total slum area. The streets are unpaved, with huge ruts running along them. (I wondered what this was like during the wet season.) Our driver did his best to navigate them, but as he dropped us off back at the hotel I pointed out to him one of his tyres was very flat. It turned out that he had to repair two tyres before he picked us up the next morning!



Rabbi Riskin teaching the class about the importance of tefilin  
June 2016

The Bwete home is situated in a row of unrendered cinder block houses, roofed with corrugated iron, poorly insulated. It consists of two rooms, one inside the other. I understand that six people now live here, but there have been more in the past. There are no street lights outside. Inside there is a small, battery-powered bank of LED lights. There were a number of people in the room when we arrived thought was difficult to know who was there. We all sat on uncomfortable, straight old wooden furniture. Jill used the torch on her mobile phone to supplement the meagre lighting.

The old lady was very thankful that we came. She spoke about her plight, both her financial situation and her health. As sympathetic as we could be, there was little we could do to assist her.

This meeting was one of the junctures in my life that reinforced my belief that, as much as I may want to, I cannot single-handedly solve the problem of poverty in the world. But it begs a solution. I had already understood from my previous travels in the third world that my greatest contribution is to aid in fostering Jewish spirituality where it is required.

Notwithstanding, we of course left her a not insignificant cash gift.

As during our previous visit, people waited around Putti all day. No-one seemed to have to go to work, though some of the girls in the top photograph are wearing school uniform. Perhaps they had been to class during the morning.  
June 2016





*The adults are exuberant, the small children a little less so  
June 2016*



*Jill with Nesa in the mikve  
June 2016*

*Jill helping some ladies in  
the mikve. Below, before  
their immersion, they are  
declaring their allegiance  
to the precepts of the  
Torah and of the Rabbis of  
all generations.  
June 2016*



DAY THREE  
FRIDAY 3RD JUNE

The next day is Friday. A short day. Shabath starts at 6:25 p.m., but the *yekke* in me likes to make sure we are all well prepared, especially our food. I plan we should leave Putti by 3:30. Yonatan decides to spend shabath in the village.

Interview more families, some more circumcisions. Most importantly we start *mikve* immersions. We want, for the first time, for there to a kosher *minyán* in Putti on a shabath. But, for reasons of modesty, we start with the women.

After morning prayers and breakfast we head off to the *mikve*. As we have only two vehicles at our disposal, we send most women ahead on foot. Jill and the three Rabbis travel in the cars with some of the mothers and babies. The cars then do a couple of rounds, back and forth, ferrying people between Putti and the *mikve*.

Many people need to immerse. The African sun beats down, though the thermometer reading is not that high. However everything is outdoors, shadeless. As the wet season's rains are late this year, the spring flows languidly, the *mikve* waters could be cleaner.

To save time, many ladies enter the *mikve* together, all immersing in loose clothing. Each person receives individual attention, immersions are carried out in sequence, the *beth din* witnessing each. Some, particularly women, have trouble putting their faces under the water. Their friends gladly assist. The atmosphere is joyful, ebullient, euphoric. A long dream is actualising before our eyes.

Unlike the tree under which I sat interviewing the day before, here the only source of shade is the slowly disappearing shadow of the *mikve* wall. Between each

group, I crouch down into this umbra, drinking gallons of water. As usual, I am wearing my broad brimmed *Akubra*, Australian outback felt hat. This somewhat shades my face. Rabbi Riskin is burning up under his large *kipa*. I borrow, filmmaker Tamás's hat for him. It is quite dissimilar to that of any hassidic group I have previously encountered, not notably rabbinic, but more than adequately serves its purpose.

Now Tamás has to burn a little.

The last women emerge from the *mikve* and start their way back to Putti. The sun is high in sky. I surmise we are making good time. We had telephoned for the men to start arriving. We ensure they do not draw near until all the women leave.

Similar procedure for the men. A group in the water, verbal declaration of acceptance of the commandments, of both the Torah and of the rabbis of all generations. The men recite the blessing for their conversion immersion with uttermost gusto. The *beth din* recites the *brakha* for the children. The men scream *amen* at the top of their voices. There is excited tension in the air. An hundred year old aspiration is suddenly a reality. The Abayudaya, decades of suffering for their religion and their God, population swings, abject poverty, blatant anti-semitism – are now as Jewish as I.

We bless them, they bless us. We now share a collective future, possess a common vision, together visualise the same dreams.

Winnie, now Malka, Mama Emunah's daughter, from Nairobi  
June 2016



Rabbi Riskin  
wearing Tamás's  
hat at the mikve  
June 2016



A father immersing his son in the mikve. Excitement on everybody's faces.  
June 2016

On Friday afternoon the community celebrates the *brith* of a child born eight days earlier. As the Abayudaya have been doing for ninety-seven years, the child is circumcised. Uri, who learnt *mila* from his father, who learnt from his father, performs the *brith*. Jill and I leave the others behind to prepare for shabath in Mbale.

While Rabbi Riskin has an aversion to blood, he uncharacteristically made sure to stay close to the action. The cut is made with an unsterilised razor blade. The membrane is split as required. The judgment is that the *mohel* scored 10/10 *halakhically*. Technically and hygienically somewhat less. The baby is given the name *Tsiyon*, Zion, one of the names of Yerushalayim.

As the name is announced, the crowd breaks out in singing *hatikva*, Israel's national anthem. The baby is the first Abayudaya to be named *Tsiyon*. This name, common today in Israel, is not the name of a biblical personality. However it demonstrates the Abayudaya yearning for life in the Land of Israel.

In order to make things easier for the Jews of Putti, to allow them to carry items into the central courtyard and between the buildings, we construct an *eiruv*. Rabbi Fischman asked the residents to purchase the necessary supplies and started the work with them. However he had to leave before the work was complete. The good Rabbi was a little dubious of the results – until we returned on Sunday morning. On viewing the perfect, completed product, Rabbi Fischman's face lit up like a power station, his chest swollen with pride. His students had learnt their lesson well.

Day Four is shabath. Yonatan spends the day in Putti. The rest of us have, I feel, a well-earned rest day in Mbale.



Preparing for the mikve  
June 2016



The Torah does not allow objects to be carried on shabath from a private, closed domain, such as a house or synagogue, into a public domain, such as an unbounded courtyard or a street, and also not within a public domain itself.

In *halakha* certain spaces lie between closed private property and public holdings, being neither private nor fully closed off, but on the other hand not large enough to be considered a public domain. Such areas are known as a *karmelith*.

Carrying from a private or public domain into a *karmelith* is not permitted according to rabbinic law though it is by Torah law. In parallel to their extension of Torah law to treat a *karmelith* as a public domain, the same Rabbis also provided an accepted *loophole*, by building a structure or artifice to identify the *karmelith* as a closed domain. This structure, which delimits the *karmelith*, is called an *eiruv*.

In our case we built an *eiruv* consisting of poles cemented into the ground, joined together from above by wire, forming a structure shaped like a doorway.



DAY FIVE  
SUNDAY 5TH JUNE

Our last day in Putti. Today is *Yom Yerushalayim*, Jerusalem Day, the anniversary of the return of all of Yerushalayim to Jewish sovereignty during the 1967 Six Day War. We all pray together in the synagogue in the morning as usual, adding *halel*, psalms of praise for joyous occurrences. Rabbi Riskin explains the historic and religious significance of the day. These were new and important concepts to many.

Enosh composed a new song, music and lyrics, for the occasion. We end the service with the traditional “I believe” – *ani ma’amin* – prayer of the Rambam and Enosh’s music.

The Kenyans, all of who completed their conversion process on Friday, are leaving this morning. *Jewish* weddings are performed for them before their departure. More weddings later in the day for the Abayudaya. While we did bring plenty of wine from Israel, no-one thought about rings for the weddings. In essence, while marrying with a ring is the prevailing custom today, outside of the *kabala*, a ring has no particular significance other than its monetary value. The *mishna* at the beginning of tractate *Kidushin* teaches three acceptable methods of performing a Jewish marriage, one of which is “money”. This includes items that are the equivalent of money, namely any article with real value, of which a ring is but one example. Here we use cash itself.

Following morning synagogue services, there is more of everything of the previous days – we have no choice – we must wrap up today – until all suitable candidates have undergone all the requisite procedures. There is no tomorrow for this. Some want to eat breakfast first. No time, eat later, straight to the *mikve*, we ignore the hot sun.



Our last morning in Putti, Jerusalem Day.  
The writing on the wall says in Hebrew, “Putti Synagogue”.  
June 2016

Because we knew that our time on Friday would be limited, we had asked the people who live outside of Putti to only come today. Even without them, our workload today would not be light. Once again, women first. Their conversions completed, we continue with the men.

I feel the tension. It’s my personality type. I try to keep it to myself. I just keep the line moving as best I can.

Somehow, with Divine assistance, we manage to complete the conversions of everyone who has fulfilled the criteria. We explain to the others that it is not a failure, but an encouragement to continue to grow in their Judaism, that there will be more opportunities in the future.

A sad incident. We immerse the last men. It is already after three o’clock. We’ve been at the *mikve* now for five hours straight. Everyone has left. Rabbi Riskin and I are last, walking through the banana plantations to our car. Half way there we see a motor cycle speeding towards us. The driver halts in front of us and alights. “Rabbis”, he addresses us, “you have to convert me too”. What is your story? Where have you been? He is a member of the Ugandan armed forces, currently stationed in Kampala. He only now managed to get away, though he had tried to come earlier. He came home to Putti in order to convert. We felt terrible for him, but it just cannot happen like that. He was not interviewed, he did not have *hatafath dam brith*, there was no longer a *beth din* at the *mikve*. We are very apologetic. “We’ll be back in the near future”, we promise him. In tears the man disappears amongst the trees on his bike.





*Rabbi Riskin writing the K'tuba for Uri Katula and Zeridah Baluka, Rabbi Fischman and Elisha looking on June 2016*

## FAREWELL

The community wished to farewell us in an appropriate manner. The festive event was made even more so by the additional weddings which were performed.

Special food and drink were laid out for the combined events, including of course sweets for the children. The Abayudaya, as I have pointed out, love their music. We were treated to an amazing concert in which nearly everyone present actively participated. Newly composed and classical pieces were played and sung, spontaneous dance a part of the production.

As darkness descends we make our farewells to our new and old friends, to the community which we assisted in fulfilling a century old vision. I do not think the impact of our actions was lost on any of us.

## AFTERWORD

To be honest, at the time we left Uganda, I was not certain that the two groups truly believed peace was the overall and achievable virtue to the successful continuation of the community. So I was very pleased some time later to hear that peace had indeed been achieved. Adversaries were again friends, people were working and learning together.

According to those to whom I spoke, the key factor was Rabbi Riskin's continuous push for peace. This allowed the populace to comprehend that perhaps he really is correct and his advice is solid, that this is the only way to live together as a community.

Now that the air has been cleared, I am happy that they are moving forward in their Jewish practice and study.



*Uri betrothing his wife with cash during the marriage ceremony June 2016*



*Yonatan Segal at our last mincha prayers in Putti Jerusalem Day, June 2016*



*Dancing and singing, celebrating weddings and Jerusalem Day June 2016*



*Moshe Madoi Yashiira the first time we met him, in the Putti shul  
June 2011*

## EPILOGUE

### ASPIRATIONS

The Putti Abayudaya aim to be the best Torah Jews they possibly can. They have a strong desire to learn and to apply this learning to their daily lives. This is very much in line with Kakungulu's yearnings and practice, all the way back to 1919. The advantage today's Abayudaya possess, unlike their great leaders, Kakungulu and Mugombe, is that we have enabled them the opportunity to quench this thirst within a framework. Of course technology and cheaper, accessible travel is a big help.

Already during our first visit, before any conversions, the Putti Abayudaya clearly expressed their understanding that living in Israel is an integral element of fulfilling the Torah. This belief, to my mind, is divorced from a desire to come to a first world country as an escape from their African third or fourth world; historically their understanding of the centrality of Israel to Judaism goes back to well before Israel achieved first world status, and even before its existence as an independent nation. It is apparent to them that the true fulfillment of the Torah can only be in the land of Israel. In this, the Abayudaya demonstrate thinking that sadly is not comprehended by many practicing Jews who continue their diaspora sojourn as if there never were Jewish history, Jewish yearning, Jewish prayer, Israelite prophets. However, while the Abayudaya yearn to be in Zion, they are realistic enough to understand that this dream may only be achieved some time in the future. However when they daily pray to be in Yerushalayim, they clearly mean it.

I am not certain that the other Abayudaya communities, perhaps in line with their major external supporters, see the centrality of Israel in the same way. I could be, and I hope I am, incorrectly reading the situation.



Portrait  
Nabugoye, June 2011

## ASSESSMENT

The essence by which to gauge our visits I believe will be in the follow up, what happens in the future. We have much work ahead of us. More lessons via the Internet; spreading these to other Abayudaya villages, including the *Conservative* communities; bringing more young men to yeshiva and women to programmes in Israel; sending more people from Israel to spend time with the community.

I always have reservations. On this trip perhaps we could have done things differently, perhaps better. Did we do too much? too quickly?

All in all I believe we are on the right track. After ninety-eight years of longing to be part of the Torah practicing Jewish world, the Abayudaya today have not one, but two Torah communities, Putti and Nangolo. With the help of the Almighty, this will continue to grow. We are merely His earthly agents.

I wonder at times how events would have transpired if some things were done differently. A purely hypothetical question of course. In response to a lack of interest – an understatement – in the nineties by Orthodoxy in helping the Abayudaya reach their vision, some Kulanu' leaders turned to a Conservative rabbi for a solution. They realised that these conversions would only be recognised by the Conservative movement. The rest is history. However had the Conservatives not stepped in, had the community not accepted the Conservative solution, where would they be today? The Putti group broke with the main community on the issue of holding out for Orthodoxy, with the support of some Kulanu members; theirs is the main story of this book. Notwithstanding the non-orthodox conversions did plant the Abayudaya onto a corner of the world Jewish stage. This was not what I believe Kakungulu and Mugombe dreamt of. How would they have reacted? Mugombe, who was well into his nineties at the time of the conversions, turned down Conservative conversion for himself.

I believe this *original* dream of the founders is what drove the Putti group and continues to drive it today.

I must add that relations between Putti and the other communities are today totally normalised, with full cooperation between them on all levels.

May I and my colleagues merit God's blessing of strength to assist in "returning the world to the true religion".



Portrait  
Putti, January 2013

## AFTERWORD

I intended to complete this book relating the end of our visit. That rounded off our first five year partnership with the Abayudaya, culminating in what everyone had prayed and hoped would eventually occur during our first visit, namely the orthodox conversion of the Putti Abayudaya.

However, as Rabbi Riskin writes in his foreword, “the final chapters have yet to be written”. I want to continue here with a little of what has happened since our June departure. I prayed that I could finish this book with photographs of at least some Abayudaya arriving home as Israeli citizens. Alas that chapter will soon be written with the help of the Almighty.

Nahum Tuchman, who has studied with our African friends during their stays in the yeshiva, spent two weeks in Putti at the end of the summer of 2016. He plans to return later this year. Yonatan Segal returned to Putti to celebrate Rosh haShana. He was joined there by our neighbour, Netanel Dwolatsky. We have increased the *shiurim* we now provide via Skype, including to a group in Nabugoye.

There have been developments in the town itself, with an upgrading of their water system, the opening of the medical clinic with a full time doctor and a stock of medicine, and the installation of a computer classroom bringing Internet access to the village.

Enosh and Moshe returned to the yeshiva at the end of 2016 and are currently studying in the *s'mikha* programme, with the intent of receiving rabbinic ordination. Modreck and Amir will be returning very soon, and we hope to bring many more to Israel to study Judaism in depth.

I have been blessed to be a minute part of what I hope is the growing world-wide trend, Judaism emerging amongst the nations.



The women's section during mincha on our first visit to Putti  
June 2011

## GLOSSARY

**Akubra**  
a brand of Australian hat, mostly with a broad brim and made from rabbit felt

**aleinu**  
prayer that concludes all prayer services

**amida**  
the main prayer of every prayer service, on weekdays comprising 19 blessings, on *shabbath* 7

**ani ma'amin**  
literally "I believe"; thirteen principles of the Jewish faith as presented by the Rambam; it is customary to sing the twelfth principle on occasions such as *Yom Yerushalayim*; it was a recurring theme sung during the Holocaust; "I believe with a perfect faith that the *mashiah* will come – and even though he is taking his time I firmly believe each and every day that he will come"

**anusim**  
conversos, marranos, crypto-Jews: descendants of Iberia Jews who converted or were forced to convert to Christianity yet continued to practice Judaism in secret

**aron kodesh**  
literally the *holy cupboard*, the holy ark – the place the *sefer torah* is stored in a synagogue when it is not in use

**asheira**  
a form of idol worship, centred around a large tree; common in Canaan during the biblical period

**Ashkenazi, Ashkenazim pl**  
Jews of European tradition and/or descent

**ashrei**  
a prayer, Psalm 145 plus four additional verses, recited 3 times each day, twice during the morning service, and again to open the afternoon service

**B'nei Menashe**  
a tribe living in north-east India, claiming descent from the ancient Israelite tribe of *Menashe*

**bar-mitswa/bar-mitzva** for boys  
**bath-mitswa/bat-mitzva** for girls  
Jewish coming of age, the time from which a Jewish child must keep all the Torah commandments; age 12 for girls and 13 for boys

Cousins: Shifra and Liorit  
June, 2011



*beth din, batei din* pl  
Jewish court of law comprising at least three jurors;  
in addition to acting as a Jewish court, a *beth din*  
must be present for conversions to be valid

*bima*  
elevated position in a synagogue from where the  
Torah is read

*boda boda*  
East African term for motorcycle or bicycle taxis.  
The source of the name is unknown, but it may be  
onomatopoeia for the sound of the motorbike engine,  
or pidgen for “border, border”, which the drivers  
would shout, as one can quite easily cross borders on  
a bike.

*brakha*  
blessing, benediction

*brith, brith mila* or just *mila*  
circumcision; literally a covenant or pact between  
two parties, in this case between God and Israelite  
people

*cohen, cohanim* pl  
Jewish priest

*davening*  
Yiddish word for praying

*eiruv*  
an rabbinic artifice allowing carrying on shabath in  
areas otherwise prohibited by rabbinic law

*hagada*  
the story of the *pesah* exodus recited on the first night  
of the festival at the *seder* meal.

*halakha, halakhoth* pl, *halakhic* adj  
applied Jewish law

*halel*  
prayers of praise for joyous occurrences, including  
festivals and new month

*hatafath dam brith*  
the ceremony of drawing blood from the place of  
circumcision; replaces circumcision for men who are  
already circumcised when converting to Judaism

*hathan/chatan/hatan*  
Hebrew for bridegroom

*humash*  
a printed version of the Torah; the pentateuch

*hupa*  
a canopy under which a bride and groom stand  
during a wedding ceremony

*kabaka*  
Lugandan title for the King of Buganda

*kabala*  
esoteric understanding of the Torah

*kadish*  
a prayer which comes in a number of versions; too  
often associated with recital by an orphan, though it  
is recited at various points of the synagogue service,  
usually ending a section of prayer

*kala*  
Hebrew for bride

*k'dusha*  
prayer, sanctifying God, added in the communal  
repetition of the *amida*, morning and afternoon

*kibbutz*  
Israeli collective community, traditionally based on  
agriculture

*kipa*  
skullcap worn by Jewish men, especially during  
prayer

*kosher*  
fit according to Jewish law; often, though not  
exclusively, related to food



*Bene Israel wedding at the Magen David Synagogue,  
Mumbai, India  
November 2014*

*k'tuba*  
Jewish marriage contract

*magen david*  
star of David, literally David's shield

*mashiah*  
Jewish messiah

Masoretic text  
The accepted Hebrew text of the old testament

*mikve, mikwe, mikveh*  
a ritual bath for immersion, of either ground or rainwater gathered one place

*minha*  
afternoon prayer service

*minyan*  
a quorum of ten Jewish men required for communal activities such as prayer, weddings, etc

*mishna*  
the oral law, as compiled by Rabbi Yehuda the Prince in the late second century

*mohel*  
a person who performs Jewish circumcisions

*parsha, parshioth pl*  
a paragraph in the Torah, in two variations, closed and open

*peoth*  
side-locks, hair left long alongside the ear

*pesah/pesach*  
the passover festival

polygyny  
a form of polygamy, where one man is married to multiple, parallel wives

*Rambam*  
acronym for Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, a.k.a. Maimonides, a twelfth century sage and doctor, born in Spain, later living, writing and practicing medicine in Egypt

*rosh hashana*  
Jewish new year day, usually sometime in September. The previous day is called *erev rosh hashana*, literally the eve of the new year

*S'fardi, S'faradim pl*  
Jews of west Asian and north African origin

*seder*  
the festival meal and recitation of the story of the exodus from Egypt on the first night of passover

*sefer torah, sifrei torah pl*  
the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, handwritten on parchment

*sh'hita*  
the process of Jewish ritual slaughter

*sh'ma yisrael*  
pray taken from Deut 6: 4, the fundamental Jewish prayer, accepting the yoke of God and his commandments, recited morning and evening

*shabath*  
the sabbath, the seventh day of the week, a day of rest when no work is performed

*shabat shalom*  
sabbath greeting

*shalom*  
literally peace; used as a salutation

*shavuoth*  
the festival of receiving the Torah, seven weeks after *pesah*



Portrait  
Putti, January 2013

*sheva b'rakhoth*  
seven blessings recited at the conclusion of a Jewish wedding ceremony

*shiur, shiurim pl*  
lesson, study session

*shohet, shohatim pl*  
ritual slaughters – people who slaughter animals for food according to the [kosher] rules of Judaism

*shul*  
synagogue, from the German word for school

*sidur, sidurim pl*  
Jewish prayer book

*simhath torah*  
the day in the Jewish calendar, occurring at the end of *sukoth* – Tabernacles – on which the annual cycle of reading the Torah is completed and immediately restarted

*s'mikha*  
rabbinic ordination

*suka, sukoth pl*  
a booth in which Jews live during the *sukoth* festival

*sukoth*  
the festival of Tabernacles when Jews leave their houses to live in temporary booths

*talith, talitoth pl*  
a four cornered garment, worn by men during prayer, onto whose corners are added fringes, *tsitsith*, as specified in Numbers 15:37

*tefilin*  
phylacteries: two small leather boxes connected to leather straps, each containing parchments on which verses from the Torah are written; generally worn during morning prayers, one is wrapped around the arm, the second around the head

*tsitsith*  
Fringes or strings worn on the four corners of a garment such as a *talith*

*yekke*  
originally a Jew of German-speaking origin; carries a strong connotation of attention to detail and punctuality

*Yerushalayim*  
the Hebrew name for Jerusalem

*yeshiva*  
a school for studying Torah, Talmud, *halakha* and other Jewish sources

*yom kipur*  
a 24 hour fast day, known as the Day of Atonement, occurring a week after *rosh hashana*



*Morning prayers in the Putti Synagogue  
January 2013*