



## Announcing the 2005 Mitzvah Tour to Uganda — See p. 3

### A Purim To Remember

By Rabbi Joseph H. Prouser

When I was first in the Abayudaya community as a member of the Bet Din in 2002, I saw very little of it. My visit then was primarily business: the Bet Din met in official session from morning to night in the main synagogue. We worked until dark and left soon thereafter. I did not even see the high school complex, just a few hundred yards away. When I returned to Uganda this year to officiate at Purim services and to lead the Megillah reading, I enjoyed both a memorable holiday celebration and far greater freedom to tour the community and visit personally with its members.



The joy attending my return to Uganda was multiplied exponentially as I was accompanied by my wife Ora and our three children: Shira, 17; Eitan, 15; and Ayal, 11 – all first time visitors to the community. We each read sections of the Megillah... and the Abayudaya, as is traditional, enthusiastically drowned out the name of Haman, albeit in a distinctively African style. Synagogue benches were beaten with sticks and rocks, accompanied by drums and abundant screaming and shrieking. The commercial groggers we brought along as gifts were deployed for the morning reading and seemed a far less effective means of expression. Artist Gary Rosenthal, who sponsored the Purim trip, sent along beautiful painted glass groggers, which were gratefully received and put to use in the spirit of *hiddur mitzvah*, adding beauty to Jewish observance – a principle to which Rosenthal is famously devoted. Other holiday accoutrements prepared for our Ugandan Purim were Hebrew-Luganda Megillah books, replete with introduction, blessings, and illustrations. Carrying these volumes through Entebbe Airport on our way to the Abayudaya was a moment of historic irony and spiritual uplift.

While both evening and morning Megillah readings were joyful, spirited events – and I experienced considerable paternal pride at my children's skilled reading of the scroll (at night, by flashlight!) in the Ugandan setting – the Abayudaya seemed to focus on one Prouser in particular. Our youngest, Ayal, age 11, chanted the final chapter of the Megillah in a strong voice, with clear Hebrew, and reflecting the special musical traditions associated with those verses. He presented the clown costume he wore for the service to one of his many new friends among the Abayudaya children. Young people and community elders alike marveled at the skill and confidence of so young a Megillah reader... and vowed to train Abayudaya children to take similar roles in next year's Festival celebration.

Ayal's siblings made their own impression on the Abayudaya.

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### Seder Under the (Jewish) Stars

By Rabbi David Kuperman

"*Brukhim ha'Ba'im! Brukhot ha'Ba'ot!* Blessings upon you who have come!"

"For me, too, being here is a very powerful blessing, an opportunity to make a bridge with my brothers and sisters from whom I have been estranged by ignorance, by silence, and by the deception, manipulation, and force of those who would wish us to forget who we are. But we will not forget!"

With these words, and others explaining the context and meaning of the evening, I opened this past April the first-ever seder of the expatriate Tutsi community in Belgium and nearby Western Europe. They were translated into French by the seder's organizer, my co-leader. Yochanan Bwejeri, who remembers celebrating Pesakh with his family as a child in Burundi. Professor Bwejeri is the founder and director of the Havila Institute, an organization that, for the past seven years, against extraordinary social and political resistance, has sought to restore, re-invigorate, and re-assert the Jewishness of the Tutsi people. Havila aims to preserve their right to live as Jews, and simply to be alive, in the Great Lakes region of central Africa at the source of the White Nile (the biblical River Pishon), which encompasses Burundi,

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### Experiencing Jewish History In Portugal

By Karen Primack

Special opportunities abound on *Saudades* conference-tours in Jewish Portugal. One could try to make such a trip on one's own, and one would probably be able to find *most* of the sites and *some* of the people that make Portugal such a unique place to experience Jewish – and Crypto-Jewish – history. But one would miss a tremendous amount.

Rufina Bernardetti Silva Mausenbaum, founder of the *Saudades* org web site and *Saudades-Sefarad* forum for descendants of Iberian *Anousim* (forced converts) like herself, organized the first conference-tour two years ago. The second conference-tour was held this April, initiated by Rufina (who accompanied us) and led by Mariana Sande e Castro, a Portuguese descendant of *Anousim*. Each trip was jointly sponsored by *Saudades*, Kulanu, and Root & Branch Association. Future conference-tours are being planned.

There were 20 of us on the 2004 tour, hailing from Israel, Brazil, South Africa, Cuba, and the US. The Portuguese cities and towns we visited included Lisbon, Sintra, Évora, Castelo de Vide, Ammaia, Marvão, Valencia de Alcántara (in Spain), Fundão, Covilhã, Belmonte, Guarda, Trancoso, Porto, and Tomar. We rode in a large air-conditioned bus and used travel time to hear lectures, watch video documentaries, and hear our fellow travelers' personal stories (some of which were amazing). Appearing on the tour program were local

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# Purim To Remember (cont.)

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Shira, as is her wont, quickly attracted a following of young children, many from among the student body of the Hadassah Infant School. Eitan made many close friends among the Abayudaya youth and teenage crowd, including Yitzchak, the community's 15-year-old Shochet (ritual slaughterer), who prepared a goat and chicken for our consumption – a true Purim feast, marking the significance of our visit and the holiday we had come to celebrate. Ora, an accomplished Professor of Bible and Dean of the Academy for Jewish Religion, impressed villagers when she delivered a Dvar Torah and taught the weekly women's Torah study group.

The Purim afternoon talent contest and "shpiel" were a highlight of our stay. Abayudaya youth presented a recreation of the story of Purim from the Book of Esther – absolutely remarkable for its richness and accuracy of detail, and spectacular in the distinctively African portrayal of Biblical characters, heroes and villains.

An unexpected moment of inspiration came as we traveled to visit the village of Namatumba, an outlying Abayudaya enclave. Our driver and cherished friend, J.J. Keki, was unsure of the route. When we reached a very isolated, rural expanse, to our dismay, he simply rolled down the car window and asked repeatedly for directions: "Do you know where the local Jewish community is? Do you know where the synagogue is?" We were a bit intimidated, so freely identifying ourselves as Jews in a Third World, heavily Muslim area, but the questions were always politely answered. Finally, we asked the assistance of a couple who provided accurate directions – a happy surprise!! Much more surprising was the question they asked us: "The Abayudaya – we know them. How can we join that community? We want to become Jews!" J.J. wisely advised them to anticipate a long and demanding conversion process that would have to be discussed with the local religious leader.

It was a great joy and privilege to celebrate Purim with the Abayudaya community. Like the Jews in the days of Esther and Mordecai, the Abayudaya have endured the attacks of tyrants and the attempts of dictators to destroy Jews and Judaism. Like the Jews in the days of Esther and Mordecai, the Abayudaya have been blessed with courageous leaders of true vision, who guided their community through the most difficult and trying times to safeguard the Jewish future. Like the Jews in the days of Esther and Mordecai, the Abayudaya represent a truly miraculous event in the history of the Jewish People, deserving of celebration and thanksgiving by fellow Jews around the world.

The Book of Esther records that many individuals among the nations in the vast empire ruled by Ahasuerus and Esther chose to become Jews as they witnessed the miraculous history of the Jewish People unfold. As a community of very special spiritual gifts and principle, the Abayudaya chose Judaism generations ago, and reaffirmed that loving loyalty in more recent days. Purim, the most joyful of Jewish holidays, thus has a special resonance in the Abayudaya community.

Throughout our memorable stay, Abayudaya leaders repeatedly thanked us and paid tribute to us for coming to visit them as a family. "Rabbi Prouser," they said time and again, "you are not the first member of the Bet Din to return to us... but you are the first rabbi ever to visit the Abayudaya community together with his whole family. This shows how much you love us and it teaches us to love our families, to love ourselves, and to love our friends." The Abayudaya have a clear understanding that the Jewish home and the Jewish family constitute a sacred sanctuary. Visiting them as a family was naturally understood as an indication of our esteem for the holiness they have achieved; a sign of our love for their Jewish community and its individual members and families. The tears we all shed at our departure were sufficient evidence of the sincerity of these sentiments.

During our Purim visit, my family struggled to learn a few phrases in Luganda; my struggle continues. Among the verses of the Megillah I mastered was Esther 8:16 – "Awo Abayudaaya ne baba n'omusana n'essanyu, n'okujaguza n'ekitiibwa" – Like the Jews in the

days of Esther and Mordecai, may the Abayudaya – and their fellow Jews inspired by their example – continue to enjoy "light and joy, happiness and honor."

## Lemba in Soweto (cont)

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he said he was going to start reading the stories of his Jewish people--they weren't that complex or hard to understand. "I want to know what it means to be Jewish," he said, with great sincerity.

Because of a paucity of identifiable Jewish practices, books and historical documents (their tradition is oral), many white, mainstream Jews refused to accept that the 12 clans of the Lemba are Jews. But recent DNA testing has confirmed not only Semitic and Middle Eastern heritage in the general Lemba population, but the presence of the Cohen or priestly gene in more than 50 per cent of the men of the Buba clan. This still isn't acceptable to most rabbis. Some reject the DNA tests and say they don't prove conclusively that the Lemba are Jews. They argue that if the Lemba were raised as Christians and they aren't actively practicing the Jewish religion, they aren't Jews and they have to convert to be accepted.

A few days later, at the Holiday Inn hotel in Sandton where I was staying, I nursed a pot of tea and spoke with Rudo Mathivha, the 43-year-old daughter of the recently-deceased and much-venerated Lemba leader Professor Matshaya Mathivha. Rudo had the benefit of a lot of instruction and education from her father and relatives in Limpopo. Not only is she the head of pediatric intensive care at one of Johannesburg's biggest hospitals, but she is also an avid student of Judaism.

Rudo said that the Lemba elders used to speak of a book of laws that was lost a long time ago, so the laws and traditions were passed on orally. "I always knew I was Jewish," said Rudo. "We had special dietary laws--our meat had to be slaughtered in a particular way and the blood was drained, circumcision was a very important occasion, we had a Sabbath that began on Friday evening with prayers. After the prayers, someone walked around with a clay pitcher and a bowl and we washed with clean water that was poured over our hands. Then we used a clean towel to dry our hands."

She said the Lemba Jewish religion was "very patriarchal, also patrilineal, and men could not convert in." Women who converted and married Lemba had to be instructed in dietary laws and they had to learn Lemba ways.

Rudo began to reminisce about her childhood. "On Pesach," she began, "we slaughtered a lamb, ate a flat, dry bread and greens that were slightly bitter. We told the story of the slavery in Egypt very quickly, and then we told our oral history, from Sena on down. My father could recite the generations back to Seremane, which probably means Solomon."

When I asked Rudo how she felt about the rejection of the Lemba as Jews, she knit her brows and her jaw tightened. "When we went to the Board of Deputies in Johannesburg, they said our story is all fabrication. The men agreed to be tested [DNA], but then the Board said we're not *halacha* enough and have to convert back to Judaism. They resent that we had to be baptized to go to school, and we learned about Christ, who I still consider to be a great teacher. There has been no acceptance by the Orthodox, until now. But it's their problem. It doesn't change who I am and who I know I am."

"Rudo," I asked her, "what is the Lemba name for God?"

"Mwari," she answered.

I went to an Internet cafe and wrote an e-mail to Benyamim Tsedaka, a Samaritan scholar who speaks ancient Hebrew, Aramaic, modern Hebrew and English. I asked him if the word "mwari" meant anything to him. His answer was startling.

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