



Kulanu
- Across the Globe -

This D'Var Torah was written by Bonita Sussman, Kulanu's First Vice-President. She first gave this D'Var Torah at Kulanu's 25th-anniversary celebration at Ohev Sholom, The National Synagogue in Washington DC on February 16. She has beautifully adapted it to go along with this week's Torah portion.

Nigeria, Indonesia, Uganda, Brazil, Gabon, Italy, Madagascar, the Ivory Coast, Cameroon. What do they have in common? Believe it or not, they are far-flung places with communities large and small where people live full Jewish lives, celebrate Shabbat and holidays, study Torah, and yearn to contribute and belong to the Jewish world. This weekend we are celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of Kulanu ("All of Us" in Hebrew), a group whose mission is to support returning, emerging, and isolated Jewish communities, including these, around the globe.

We chose this weekend as an appropriate one to highlight Kulanu's work, in part because the weekly Torah portion is Vayera. This includes the story of how Abraham and Sarah welcomed strangers into their tent. Because of their hospitality and acceptance of these strangers, G-d promised that they would have a son and their descendants would form the Jewish people. This resonates with Kulanu's goal to welcome strangers into the tent of Judaism, a tent that encompasses the world.

Who are these people who want to be recognized and accepted as Jews? Their communities fall roughly into three categories -- returning, emerging, and isolated.

Those who believe that they are returning to Judaism say proudly, "Did you know that we are descendents of one of the Lost Tribes of the Bible?" Or sometimes, "Did you know that we are descendents of ancient Israelites?" The Igbo of Nigeria point to words in their language similar to Hebrew, their common practice of circumcision, similar rituals of family purity, kosher slaughtering practice, endogamous marriages, and blessing of the new moon. Many do not and never ate pork. Of 30 million Igbos, only a comparatively small number have joined indigenous synagogues and participate as practicing Jews, but as one Igbo non-Jewish expat told one of our board members, "Everyone knows that the Igbos have Jewish ancestors." The Igbo have more than 70 active synagogues in Nigeria today, and the number is growing.

In India, in the province of Andhra Pradesh, the Bene Ephraim community takes its name from the tribe of Ephraim. As they are lower-caste and poor, they have struggled to observe Jewish mitzvot, including those associated with Shabbat, but have persevered with help from Kulanu. In 2007, Kulanu vice-president Bonita Sussman and her husband Rabbi Gerald Sussman were welcomed enthusiastically by the community, who were eager to learn more about Judaism, including how to bake matzot. That same globe-trotting couple has inspired and taught other Jewish communities around the world, including a group in the Ivory Coast who call themselves Danites from the tribe of Dan.

Another "returning" category of Jews are the *anousim* ("forced ones" in Hebrew), also called Crypto-Jews, *conversos* in Spanish, and Marranos. Forced to adopt Christianity in the face of the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal in the fifteenth century, they spread around the world in fear of being discovered. With family stories of their forebears lighting candles in a closet on Friday nights and not eating tortillas the week around Easter, they often have Jewish Hispanic



surnames. Kulanu frequently hears from individuals who have seen results of genetic testing and want advice about rejoining their ancestral origins. At conferences of Crypto-Jews, Kulanu hears statements like “I knew I was Jewish, I felt it in my heart. I was different from the others around me. I am learning to be who I really am.” Through the years, Kulanu has been involved with communities of Crypto-Jews throughout Latin America - in Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Mexico - who have not been accepted by mainstream established Jewish communities and are deeply saddened by it. Kulanu board member Genie Milgrom is a well-known spokesperson worldwide for these communities. Rabbi Barbara Aiello, a Kulanu vice-president and the first female rabbi in Italy, has established a synagogue in Calabria in southern Italy, the first in 500 years, that includes many anousim among its members.

Who are the emerging Jewish communities? These are communities who have left other faiths to join the Jewish people. They do not claim Jewish origin; Judaism speaks to their hearts. One example is the Jewish community of Cameroon, who live in a rural village an hour and a half away from the capital of Yaounde. They lack steady electricity, chop wood to cook, and for "running" water rely on women who run with heavy water jugs on their heads. The Cameroonians moved from evangelical Christianity to Judaism after reading Hebrew Scriptures. Their leaders are self-taught from the internet. They practice rabbinic Judaism, praying and singing their Shabbat services in Hebrew and French from siddurim donated by Kulanu.

When she visited a few years ago, Boni Sussman was stunned to see the leader's wife, Blanche Etele, baking challah for the community for Shabbat -- sifting, kneading, and braiding the dough, baking the challah in a Dutch-oven covered by red hot coals, and performing the little-known ritual of “mafrish challah.” Her husband, now called Rav Amir, has studied for rabbinic ordination at Ohr Torah Stone, a yeshiva in Israel. He is hoping to complete the course when more funding materializes and his visa application is re-approved.

Perhaps Kulanu's most celebrated and well-known community is the Abayudaya ("People of Judah" in the Luganda language) of Uganda. Founded 100 years ago when a local chief read the Old Testament and inspired thousands to practice a form of biblical Judaism, the community went underground to weather dictator Idi Amin's persecution of Jews. It may be a misnomer to call them "emerging," as they have thrived since 2002 when Kulanu sent a bet din of Conservative rabbis to formally convert several hundred people. In the years after, other conversions have followed, along with teachers and visitors from around the globe and lecture tours by community members organized by Kulanu. Residing in nine villages in eastern Uganda, they now number about 2,000. Kulanu helped to establish and continues to support an elementary school where Jewish, Muslim, and Christian students learn together peacefully. Their leader, Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, was recently elected to parliament.

Isolated communities are older established Jewish communities that are dwindling and need resources to maintain themselves. One example is Suriname, a former colony of the



Netherlands in South America. In existence for close to 400 years, the Jewish community of Suriname is the oldest in the Americas but is struggling, as young people leave to seek opportunities elsewhere. Several years ago, Kulanu helped to clear two cemeteries overrun by jungle where Jews had been buried for hundreds of years.

Research has found that the Lemba tribe of Zimbabwe and South Africa have the Cohen gene, a Jewish genetic marker, in the same proportion as the population of Israel. This lends credence to their oral history linking them to ancient Israelites. Kulanu supports a synagogue and community center in Harare, the capital of Zimbabwe. Kulanu's former president Jack Zeller and current board member Stuart (Sandy) Leeder lead Kulanu's work with this community. In recent years, Kulanu has donated funds for Passover seders there and at outlying villages and for Jewish learning, African-Jewish music, and agricultural and economic development. Lemba leader Modreck Maeresera was recently elected to Kulanu's board of directors.

Kulanu is often asked if people from their partner communities want to make Aliyah to Israel. While some individuals have dreamed of making Israel their home, most want to remain in their own countries. Many, who have not yet had the opportunity, yearn to formally convert to Judaism, as did several hundred recently in Nicaragua and Madagascar via bet dins organized by Kulanu. Kulanu validates their journey to Judaism and connects them to the mainstream Jewish world - and to each other - by linking them to Jewish resources, including rabbis and teachers, academics, travelers, journalists, and filmmakers. Through the generosity of Kulanu's donors, Kulanu's partner communities have prayerbooks, tefillin, tallises, and even Torah scrolls. In a different sphere, Kulanu has provided support with technology (computers, cell phones) and aided some economic development projects to address poverty and support continued growth.

Members of these isolated, emerging, and returning communities have overcome many obstacles in their journey towards Judaism, sometimes shunned by their families, suffering economic losses for not working on Shabbat, and enduring circumcision later in life. In general, they are strong supporters of Israel, seeing their journey to freedom of religion as parallel to the Jewish journey from the ashes of the Holocaust to the establishment of the state of Israel. Their *mesirat nefesh* (dedication and self-sacrifice) are inspirational.

While Judaism in the West has its struggles to survive, these groups are our promise for the future. They will bring us new leadership and contributions to the future of Judaism. These communities are the "pure oil" (of parasha Emor in Leviticus) that G-d demands to kindle the lamps continually. After the Holocaust and the decimation of Jewish communities in Arab lands, it is time to for us rebuild the Jewish people who will ensure the Jewish future.

Kulanu invites you to volunteer, travel, and contribute your time, talents and much-needed money to support this work. It is time to weave the many colors and textures that have blossomed worldwide into the fabric of a tent that covers the entire Jewish universe.