



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

KULANU

“All of Us”



History in the Making!

Pope Francis, with his interpreter, discusses the digitization of the Inquisition archives with Genie Milgrom (Kulanu’s Director of Anusim Communities), her husband Michael, and members of the European Jewish Community Centre of Brussels. See story page 2.

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A Visit with Pope Francis

Genie Milgrom Visits Pope to Discuss Inquisition Records Being Digitized

Photos courtesy of official Vatican photographers

Genie Milgrom, a writer, researcher, and Kulanu's Director of Anusim Communities, met with Pope Francis in his private library at Vatican City in June. The private audience was planned by Rabbi Avi and Nehama Tawil, leaders of the European Jewish Community Centre (EJCC) in Brussels. Genie was accompanied by her husband Michael Milgrom and several members of the EJCC.

For over 8 years, Milgrom has been working tirelessly to have the Inquisition Judgements, known as Procesos, digitized so as to be able to follow the Pre-Inquisition genealogies of the Bnei Anousim, or descendants of the Crypto Jews, as well as the Sefardim who left Spain at the Expulsion in 1492. Inside each Proceso, there are clear genealogies given by those arrested for practicing Judaism underground, the reason being that the Inquisitors could follow the genealogies and arrest the extended families.

There are many historians who concur that the approximate number of Jews present in Spain before 1492 was approximately 300,000 but there is no exact and accurate number that historians can offer us. Of those, the consensus

Breaking News! *Between the Stone and the Flower: The Duality of the Conversos*, a film documenting Genie's journey in search of her Jewish roots back to 1391 and Pre-Inquisition times, will be released in late September and has already been submitted to Jewish Film Festivals for 2024 in the United States and Europe. The lineage Genie discovered covers Spain, Portugal, Canary Islands, France, Cartagena, Costa Rica, Cuba, and Key West, Florida. View the trailer here: bit.ly/ConversosTrailer.

seems to be that 100,000 left in 1492 for the Ottoman Empire and other lands, 100,000 stayed behind and went underground to practice their religion while pretending to be Catholic, and 100,000 assimilated and were lost to the Jewish people.

Genie Milgrom belongs to the group whose family stayed and went underground in 1391, and for centuries pretended to be Catholic. Milgrom returned to the Jewish people and was able to follow her own lineage via the Inquisition Procesos, finally finding an unbroken maternal line going back 22 grandmothers in a row. This took her over 12 years and it was no easy task, yet she clearly understood that unless these Inquisition records were digitized and shared on the internet, the work and cost would be prohibitive for most people. She began her mission for the mass global digitalization of these Procesos.

During her audience with the Pope, she was able to clearly explain to him the historical significance of the digitization, as well as the present struggles in each country. The Pope was enthusiastic to help and assigned a Papal emissary to work hand-in-hand with her to obtain positive results. This is a truly significant and historical moment of regaining the identities of those whose lineage was lost during the Spanish-Portuguese Inquisition. *



Genie Milgrom meets Pope Francis at the Vatican

Ohr Torah: A Growing Jewish Community in Nigeria

Written by and photos by Yosef Zurishaddi Shmuel of the Ohr Torah community.

Ohr Torah Synagogue was founded by Elder Shmuel and his family in 1996, after they embraced Judaism following the visit of Nabi Moshe from the USA to Nigeria in the 1990s. At the time, there was no synagogue in their location, so they gathered in a school hall with a few other families for Shabbat and yom tov. Over time, more families joined and the community grew to include over 500 Torah students and members.

Despite facing numerous challenges, including the high cost of Jewish materials and the difficulty of acquiring land, the community persevered. They enrolled in Hebrew classes, acquired a Torah and siddur, and began conducting Shabbat and festival services in Hebrew. They built their own synagogue and study center, Tzion Kids Academy (now Bonita International Academy), and established outgrowths in other states, all with the aim of spreading knowledge of their Jewish heritage.

The community has encountered social and economic difficulties, particularly due to the separatist movement in Nigeria, which have affected travel and transportation, businesses, and the economy. Members who lived far away from the community could not attend daily and weekly functions, so the synagogue/community spread out to different locations and villages. Despite these obstacles, Ohr Torah continues to thrive.



Bar mitzvah Avraham Eynioma Shmuel and parents in Aba, Abia, Nigeria, 2021.

Presently, the synagogue is made up of 217 adults (including widows and widowers), 25 young adults, and 85 children, all of whom are from the Igbo tribe. There is also a school with 30 children and six grades, but many children



Ohr Torah community members rejoiced in May 2023 upon receiving mezuzot for the community through Kulanu's partnership with MyZuzah.

are unable to attend due to a lack of proper structures (such as dormitories) and transportation (such as school buses). The community holds daily, Shabbat, and yom tov services in the synagogue, using ArtScroll sefer sidurim, one Chumash, and one Etz Hayim Torah and Commentary.

The community is not without its challenges, however. They need tefillin and taleisim for the men, and there is no restaurant where they can obtain kosher meals. Those who live within the community prepare kosher meals. The community does not have a mikvah. Despite these challenges, the community remains steadfast in their faith and continues to grow.

In Ohr Torah, the members include woodworkers, tailors, teachers, welders, shoemakers, bag makers, petty traders, automobile mechanics, and more. They have a local kitchen where they prepare festive meals and have even started producing their own kosher wine. It is a community that exemplifies perseverance and dedication to their faith, even in the face of adversity.

Ohr Torah may not have the resources of larger Jewish communities, but what they lack in resources, they make up for in their commitment and passion. Their story is a testament to the power of faith and community and serves as an inspiration to Jews everywhere. *

Stumbling upon Judaism in Ethiopia

Written by and photos courtesy of Gabe Douek

Gabe Douek is an award-winning digital media executive, avid world traveler, and Jewish activist in training. In his travels across 50 American states and to more than 90 countries, Gabe seeks to bring awareness and acceptance of all people and cultures to both the communities he visits and back to his home community of San Diego.

Ethiopia had been on my bucket list for quite a while. I travel the world to gain experience. I appreciate learning about new cultures, walking in new environments, stepping outside of my comfort zone, and most importantly, meeting people who open my mind with their stories.

When traveling to a country with a Jewish history, I like to explore that as well, as it always helps me to enhance my Jewish identity. I had been aware that Ethiopia contains a rich Jewish history and have known some Ethiopian Jews throughout my life who have migrated to Israel and other countries, but I was not aware of the communities that still practice there today. As I began my journey to Addis Ababa in March 2023, I sat on my first flight from San Diego to JFK alongside my fiancé Marissa, wondering if there was a way to reach out to remaining members of the Jewish community in Addis. I discovered the Kulanu website and decided to email Molly Levine, Kulanu's executive director,

to see if she could put me in touch with anyone there. I explained that my goal was to learn about the community, meet the members, and assist in any way that I could during my short time in Ethiopia. It turned out to be a very good hunch, as Molly connected me with Abere who is one of the leaders of the existing Jewish community in Addis.

I began to exchange texts with Abere, who seemed quite eager to meet and show me around his community. I asked if there was anything I could bring from the USA that would be of assistance to the community, as I had a layover of several hours in New York. He asked if I could bring a couple of bottles of kosher wine so that his community could properly observe the upcoming holiday of Passover. I had to find a way to accommodate this request, as it did not feel right to turn it down — it felt like an amazing opportunity to help. I scoured the airport duty-free shops with no luck and even went into the El Al airline lounge, but they would not sell me unopened bottles of kosher wine. I finally used the Instacart app and rush-ordered some wine from a nearby liquor store to be delivered to the departure terminal at JFK airport, not knowing if it would arrive in time or even if it would arrive at all, given the delivery instructions. I exited the airport and met the driver, packed the wine in what was previously my carry-on luggage, and checked it through. I made it back through security in time to make my flight with a feeling of immense joy.

When I arrived in Addis, I resumed my text conversation with Abere and planned to meet with him the next morning. Abere arrived at our hotel and gave me a big hug as if we were old friends. I handed him a bag that contained three bottles of kosher wine. His excitement was unforgettable. He then accompanied Marissa and me to his neighborhood of Kechene, about 30 minutes from our hotel. He explained in halting but manageable English that he wanted to show



The pottery factory in Addis Ababa created by the government to help the Jewish community survive.

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us where his community lives and works, a suggestion we accepted with great enthusiasm. He explained that his community was very poor and that the women work in a pottery factory and the men work in a textile factory. Our first stop was the pottery factory, which was in a very rough part of town. We walked through the grounds where more than 100 women and girls were working hard to create beautiful dishes, decorations, and other items for locals and tourists to purchase. As we walked through the factory workshop, what stood out the most was how warm and welcoming everyone was. We were greeted with a smile by each of the workers who looked up from their stations as we walked by. Abere explained that the factory was created by the government to help the Jewish community survive in an environment where, due to religious discrimination, finding work would have been very difficult. The community members are relegated to selling their products to middlemen who then sell them to customers in markets and shops and make most of the profit from the artisans' skilled labor. The Jews are not able to open their own shops or sell in markets, as they are seen as second-class citizens, and are looked down upon simply because of their religion.

After purchasing some pieces to take home with us, the next stop was the textile factory where we saw several men from the Jewish community making scarves worn by many in the region, using large, handmade machines. Hours of painstaking work went into

making each scarf that would ultimately be sold for a couple of dollars.

Over lunch, Abere explained more about the history of the Jewish people in Ethiopia as well as the present situation. He explained how the Jews arrived initially from nearby Yemen and how most from the Gondar region in the north have since immigrated to Israel. Some of the Gondar community went to Addis to help build the city and escape persecution. Of those who stayed, all reside in the Kechene neighborhood and practice Judaism mostly in secret. He explained that displaying items or symbols related to Judaism outside of their neighborhood is not safe. In a city that is split between Muslims and Christians, they are seen as inferior residents. Abere wore tzitzit under his shirt and said he would not feel safe wearing a kippah on his head. As we finished lunch, Abere asked if we would join him and his community for Shabbat, an invitation which we gladly accepted. I handed Abere a donation for his community and we went back to our hotel to prepare for a Shabbat that I will remember for the rest of my life.

When we arrived back in Kechene on Friday night, Abere guided us to the first of two synagogues in the town. It was in the process of being cleansed for Passover. When he told us that it was the larger of the two synagogues, I was a bit shocked — it was a very small room, about the size of a small bedroom by American standards. We then proceeded to his synagogue where the congregants were seated and praying loudly. I did not recognize what they were saying as they were chanting in Amharic, the most prominent local language of Ethiopia. After being handed a prayer book that was in both Hebrew and Amharic, I realized they were reciting *Shir HaShirim*, the Song of Songs, which is traditional in Sephardic communities on Friday evenings.

In that very small room, even smaller than the first synagogue I visited, a group of about 15 men, women, and children were focused, concentrated,



Brit Olam Beta Israel Ethiopian Jewish Community's synagogue in Addis Ababa

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Ethiopia: continued from previous page

and engaged in prayer in a way that I do not typically witness in an American synagogue. The group was led by a community member as there is no rabbi in the community. With no Hebrew education, the community is self-led. Most are not able to read or speak Hebrew very well. The vast majority of prayers are read and sung in Amharic with some Hebrew sprinkled in (often the first sentence of the prayer). Every word is read or sung out loud with great energy and focus. When we got to *Lecha Dodi* (the Friday night song chanted in unison by the congregation to welcome Shabbat), I was finally able to join as they sang the entire prayer in Hebrew. It was with an energy that I have never experienced before. The entire room sang together loudly, exhibiting an undeniable spiritual connection. Even the young children were able to join in, singing the tune and some of the words, making it clear that this weekly tradition was regularly attended by the entire group.

As we finished the service, everyone gave each other huge hugs and said *Shabbat Shalom* in a way that made clear how much joy was in everyone's heart. The community leader then asked me to sit in the front of the room. I was taken aback to realize that they had planned an entire ceremony welcoming us to their community. I was asked to stand before the community to introduce myself and say a few words.

The community members told me how much joy it brought them that we had made the effort to

be there, and how much our donation meant to them. The donation was one that would barely be noticed in an American synagogue, but it clearly made a tremendous impact on the community of Kechene.

Afterward, everyone proceeded to the house next door. This house is similar in size to the small synagogue and is where the entire congregation stays on Shabbat so that they do not have to commute back to their respective homes via car. We all sat in a circle and sang *Shalom Aleichem* and blessed the wine and challah. The challah was a large flat fluffy bread, similar to focaccia, made by a member of the community. Some of the women then left for a nearby home to prepare the meal, which was a traditional Ethiopian stew served on *injera* (the local sour flatbread) on a large platter placed before each family to share. We shared some stories with those with whom we were able to communicate, played with the children, and took in the love that this community showed us. We left to go back to our hotel after giving our final hugs and hearing once again how happy they all were for us to have joined them.

As I sat in the hotel that night, I replayed the experience in my mind and tried to dissect the reasons why it was so impactful. I think that one thing that stood out to me was just how appreciative and happy the community was that we were there. It was not just the donation, as there was no pressure to donate anything. It was clear that there was immense value in our presence. Thinking about that some more, it became clear that this community needed validation from other Jews and the world at large. This community has been hiding for so long, working so hard just to survive and practice their religion. To be able to be with them for a Shabbat, to pray together, and to sit and talk with them, was meaningful and made them feel seen.

I will not soon forget my experience in Addis Ababa. I plan to stay in touch with Abere and the community in the years to come. ✱



Gabe Douek (right), Marissa Wolf, and Tegegnwerk Teshome at the textile factory in Addis Ababa in which several members of the Jewish community work

Kulanu Notes

Finding Judaism Across Africa and Central America: Intersections with Sephardi and Mizrahi Cultures



Kulanu, ASF (American Sephardi Federation) Institute of Jewish Experience, and Genie Milgrom hosted this day-long conference at the Center for Jewish History in New York City on Sunday, March 12, 2023. There was an impressive lineup of speakers that shared their unique perspectives on the topic, including Professor Tudor Parfitt of Florida International University; Bonita Nathan Sussman of Kulanu; Dr. Drora Arussy of ASF; Rabbi Sjimon den Hollander of Hunter College in New York (originally from the Netherlands); Jator Abido from Nigeria;

Asher Cornejo from El Salvador; Professor Shalva Weil of Hebrew University; Rabbi Gerald Sussman; Yehuda Firmin from Cote d'Ivoire; Yehudah Peres Kohalani from Tanzania; Professor Marla Brettschneider of the University of New Hampshire; Joseph Lovett, film producer; and Patricio Serna, film producer from Mexico. The in-person and Zoom audience was able to engage in thoughtful discussions with the panelists.

Latin American Jewish Alliance Formed

The Latin American Jewish Alliance (LAJA) was formed in April during a historic meeting with returning and emerging communities in Central America. The emerging community of Beit Shemaya ve Abtalion in Armenia, El Salvador hosted this historic event. Also present were leaders of two other communities in El Salvador; leaders from Guatemala City, Guatemala; Oaxaca, Mexico; and Siguatepeque, Honduras. Genie Milgrom conducted the meeting and assisted with the creation of the mission for LAJA.



OLAM: Focal Point 2023



On May 8, Executive Director Molly Levine represented Kulanu at the international conference of OLAM, a network of 65+ Jewish and Israeli organizations working in global service, humanitarian aid, and international development. This year's conference, *Focal Point 2023: Journey to Impact*, featured the OLAM showcase presentation, Jewish Communal Engagement, which featured Molly sharing about the Sub-Saharan

African Jewish Alliance conference held in Cote D'Ivoire in December 2022 (see the article on page 20 to learn more about that conference).

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Donor Engagement Zooms

Kulanu wants to hear from you! We are conducting Zoom conversations with donors to discuss our current projects and plans for the future. Recently, we presented a Zoom program about the deaf education program in Uganda (see photo of some students). You can view the recording of it here: kulanu.org/recorded-sessions.

We look forward to you joining us online soon.



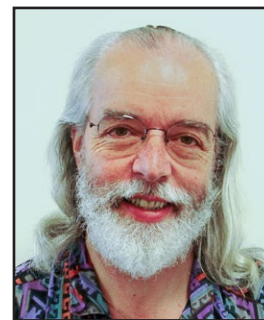
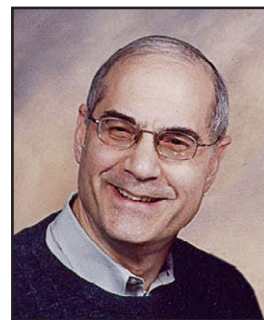
Zimbabwe Site Agriculture Visits



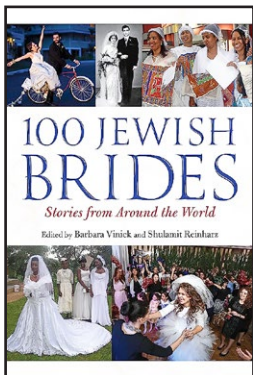
Molly Levine, our executive director, traveled to Zimbabwe to visit the ongoing agricultural projects in Zimbabwe. As the country is suffering from food insecurity, five Lemba villages are working on irrigation projects which include boreholes to create drought-resistant farming practices. The projects are being supported by Mark Gelfand and the community members are each putting in their own volunteer efforts to ensure success. At each village, the Kulanu team was met by an enthusiastic group of villagers ready to work. The women pictured here are part of the community project and will work on the farm as the land is prepared. You can see a slideshow here: <https://bit.ly/ZimSlideshow>

Kulanu Welcomes Two New Board Members

We are excited to announce that Kulanu's board has two new additions: Rabbi Michael Chernick and Clive Lawton. These individuals bring a wealth of experience and expertise, and we are confident that they will help steer our organization towards continued growth and success. Rabbi Chernick was a professor at Hebrew Union College and has been championing the Abayudaya for years. Mr. Lawton is one of the founders of Limmud and currently serves as the chief executive director of the Commonwealth Jewish Council. We look forward to their contributions.



New Book: 100 Jewish Brides: Stories from Around the World



Kulanu's long-time secretary, Barbara Vinick, has edited a new book, *100 Jewish Brides: Stories from Around the World*, to be published by Indiana University Press in February 2024. The book features stories from 84 different countries and many brides who come from Kulanu communities.

You can pre-order the book here: <https://amzn.to/43wkFzt>. *

Building an Inclusive and Egalitarian Judaism in Guatemala

An Interview with Rebeca Orantes

By Dr. Mili Leitner Cohen

Mili Leitner Cohen is Kulanu's Digital Strategy and Content Consultant and previously served as Communications Director from 2015-2018. She holds a Ph.D. in Music (anthropology of Jewish liturgy) from the University of Chicago and currently works as a technical writer and editor. Originally from the UK, Mili has been living in Jerusalem since 2017 with her husband and two young children.

Rebeca Orantes possesses wisdom and passion beyond her years. A rabbinical student at Hebrew Union College, she hails from Guatemala's Adat Israel Synagogue. I had the opportunity to interview Rebeca in the summer of 2022, and we discussed topics including Jewish identity, Ladino songs, youth education, the Reform movement, Kulanu, and that quintessentially Jewish topic: food. Here are some highlights from our conversation.

MLC: Rebeca, you're making history in rabbinical school right now as the first Guatemalan and Latin American woman to be on the path to Reform ordination. How did you start on this groundbreaking journey?

RO: I am the daughter of the founders of my community, Adat Israel, so by default, this led me to be highly involved in the process of community-building. I really like being Jewish, and I really like music. When I was about 14 years old, these three things clicked together and I started leading services, drawing me closer to

Judaism. Growing up, it was already clear to me that I had to play a big role in Jewish leadership, but I was terrified; I didn't know how it would look or what it meant for me. I had this quest going on, trying to figure out my own Jewish expression, something we all go through at some point in our lives: what does it mean to be Jewish?

MLC: What inspired you to enroll in rabbinical school?

I wrestled a lot with the idea of becoming a rabbi before going down this path. I believed I had to, but I wasn't so sure about it. I had the chance to go to Brandeis Collegiate Institute (BCI) in Los Angeles, California when I was nineteen. Kulanu sponsored that trip, and it's when everything changed for me. BCI is art-oriented; it's about being artistic, using meditation, and self-expression to explore Judaism's biggest questions. The people that I met at BCI were so inspiring and kind, and there was this huge sense of *chesed* (lovingkindness) coming from everybody. They embraced me with my doubts and my confusion (after all, growing up as a Guatemalan Jew in a small Jewish community comes with many social challenges). Once I could lay everything out on the table in this way — my doubts, confusion, questions, even anger — then I could see my path forward more clearly. I realized that pursuing Judaism professionally by becoming a rabbi was the right decision for me. I needed and wanted to pursue this. I wanted to serve, inspire, and guide, to offer people some tools to navigate life, just as those were offered to me by others in times of struggle.

I applied for rabbinical school when I was twenty, but I then thought it was too soon. I decided to put the idea on hold and focus on getting my bachelor's degree in 3D Animation. I thought that perhaps I could re-apply in ten years or so; I convinced myself that it doesn't have to be now.



Rebecca Leyning (chanting) Torah at the WUPJ Connections conference in Israel, May 2023. Photo by Noah Knijff.

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Rebeca Orantes: *continued from previous page*

Three years later, I was selected to participate in a special Union of Reform Judaism (URJ) fellowship for young Reform Jewish leaders who are trying to make a difference in their communities. The program is still running and it's called The Roswell Klal Yisrael Fellowship. We had people from Ukraine, Germany, Poland, Israel, and Argentina who were (and still are) so committed to enriching and improving our movement. They inspired me, and there I was thinking, "Oh my God, I know what I should be doing! I have this call that has been pursuing me for years. Why would I wait longer?" So I applied to rabbinical school again. I was finally ready and was accepted by Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Los Angeles.

MLC: Once ordained, what do you envision your rabbinate encompassing?

RO: This is something I am still trying to define for myself. I would love to have a clear answer, but as time passes, I am starting to notice that I am called to serve our people in so many ways and places.

My intention has always been to help my Guatemalan community and the colorful Latin American region. Nevertheless, the more I grow and learn, the more I realize my work is naturally transcending beyond frontiers, pulpits, and languages. I think I am just waiting for the remaining pieces of the puzzle to come together



Families celebrate Hanukkah in Guatemala, December 2022. Photo by Alvaro Orantes.

to have a definite answer to this question (if that ever happens!). It seems like life has something different in store for me than what I envisioned at the beginning of my rabbinic journey.

It's something that evokes mixed feelings in me, but I am also happy and excited to see what I can do next.

MLC: Your synagogue, Adat Israel, is part of the story of Latin American liberal Judaism. Can you share something about what makes your synagogue uniquely Guatemalan?

RO: Adat Israel has made a lot of effort to combine its Jewish identity with its Guatemalan background. Our Sefer Torah is a good example. Our Torah cover was made with Guatemalan fabric. And the *aron kodesh* (the ark where the Sefer Torah is kept) has jade inlays. Jade is a local stone that was highly valued by the Mayans back in the pre-Columbian era. So jade is strongly related to Guatemala as a country.

On the bimah, we have two flags: the flag of Israel because we're Zionists, and the flag of Guatemala. On Purim, we have a tradition going back ten years or more of eating Guatemalan foods, including tamales, right after the Megillah reading.

MLC: Would you say there is anything Guatemalan about your services?

RO: I don't think there's anything "particularly" Guatemalan in our services; our *minchag* (tradition) consists of a mix of Ashkenazi Reform *nusach* (melodies and chantings) with a Latin (perhaps even Iberian) beat to them.

We do incorporate Ladino songs into services now and then. Ladino is very similar to Spanish. So when we find Jewish songs, or poems that come from a Jewish source, composed in a language that can be understood by us, it's really exciting and there's an instant connection. Most members of our community don't speak Hebrew. Some of us can read it. So, of course, we want

Rebeca Orantes: *continued from previous page*

to embrace Ladino songs, try to sing them, and incorporate them into our identity. It's an understandable thing to do.

MLC: Adat Israel has been Guatemala's only Reform synagogue for over twenty years now. In what ways are the synagogue's affiliations with the World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) and Unión Judía Reformista de América Latina (UJR-AmLat: Union for Reform Judaism of Latin America) important, and how is Reform thought expressed at Adat Israel?

RO: Being part of the WUPJ and the UJR-AmLat has been key for the development of Adat Israel. There is a sense of comfort and belonging that these two institutions offer. The fact that we can say we are part of this movement, engage in conversations across countries, host services online for other synagogues in the region, and add our voice to the international dialogue gives us a purpose beyond just taking care of what is happening locally; it reminds us that we also have a responsibility with the other communities in the continent and worldwide; we must do our part and continue our work, not just for our own benefit, but for everyone's benefit.

I think more broadly — although this isn't exclusive to Reform Judaism — that an important emphasis of the Reform movement is inclusivity.



Yom Kippur closing service with Rebeca (left of Rabbi Michael Lotker in the center), Guatemala, October 2019. Photo by Alvaro Orantes.

We really try to create an inclusive environment at shul. We try to welcome everyone no matter what their background is. Everyone can participate and become a leader. Every single member of the community has a role to play, whether that's leading services, helping with holidays and festivities, cooking and creating menus for community meals, taking care of the children, or whatever skill they might bring. There are people who are up on the bimah in charge of liturgy and services, people who are in charge of raising funds for special initiatives and even just paying rent. Everyone is active, everyone has a role, everyone is so knowledgeable in their own way, and everyone is taken into consideration. There is no hierarchy. We have a president and a board, but those people are totally accessible and without egos. We're very self-reliant as a community. It's something quite special about us.

MLC: What's next for Guatemalan Jewry?

RO: We are really working to build our educational opportunities. While I'm in town, I'm in charge of adult education and offering study sessions. For the children, we've been in touch with the Progressive Youth Zionist movement (both Netzer and TaMaR International). We've been creating dialogue with them and working hard to start Netzer and TaMaR in Guatemala. It's a gradual process, but we're really committed to creating more support for our children even though we don't have a huge number of kids. One of our members who is a teen herself has been teaching the children Hebrew while we participate in adult education classes. She creates games and activities, and during COVID she gathered everyone on Zoom to do activities based on *parashat hashavua* (the weekly Torah portion). It's a vibrant education scene, with a lot of momentum and growth potential.

I am so excited to see all the things I will be able to do for my Guatemalan community and world Jewry once I get my *smicha* (ordination)! *

In Esther's Name – the Ukrainian Refugee Project

How South Italy's Emerging Jewish Community Brought 6 Mothers, their 11 Children, and 1 Grandmother to Safety and Peace

by Rabbi Barbara Aiello of Serrastretta, Italy, vice president of Kulanu

Photos courtesy of In Esther's Name

Sinagoga Ner Tamid del Sud is Southern Italy's first active synagogue in Italy's Calabria region in 500 years — since Inquisition times. We dedicated our sanctuary in 2006 and expanded our entire synagogue in 2014. We are a pluralistic community, open and welcoming to Jews of all backgrounds which is why our affiliation as a member of Reconstructing Judaism, the central organization of the Reconstructionist movement, is an important alliance for us. In fact, our synagogue is one of only three RJ communities in all of Europe.

When Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, several of our members approached me. They were concerned and felt that, just as Kulanu has helped us, we should reach out to Jewish refugee agencies and offer to help. This we did and our refugee rescue project, "In Esther's Name," was born.

And now, fourteen months since the Russian invasion, we thank donors around the world for their generosity that has been life-sustaining for eighteen Ukrainian mothers and their children.

There is a small but determined committee of seven that has worked to bring suffering Ukrainian women and children — Jewish, Christian, and secular — to the safety and peace

of our mountain village. Integral among this committee are two courageous women, both mothers, living here in Serrastretta in south Italy: Magda M. and Lidia C. They both know about desperate situations. Magda was born in Poznan, Poland to a Jewish family that hid their identity from Nazi persecutors. Lidia has Jewish roots that extend back to the Inquisition and the forced conversions in Spain that led her ancestors to observe Jewish rituals in secret.

I serve as the rabbi to this small Reconstructionist congregation, Ner Tamid del Sud (*The Eternal Light of the South*). My 17 years in the "toe" of the Italian "boot" have given me the opportunity to experience firsthand the strength of the Calabrian people, including the *b'nei anusim* (Calabrians with Crypto-Jewish background), and how that strength of character and determination translates into direct help to those in need.

In Southern Italy, we have a saying, *sega la segatura*, which means "saw the sawdust," implying that talking about a problem suffices for taking action. For us Calabrians, *sega la segatura* doesn't apply. From this common sense approach to difficulty, In Esther's Name took action to help others.

Luisa, one of our first members to return to her Jewish roots, says it well: "We don't call it Purim. Here in the mountains, it is called the Feast of Esther. We fast and pray that we will have the emotional strength to take action to help others."

This is exactly what our project, In Esther's Name, has done. The result: seven families have found safety and peace in our mountain village.

"We combined our strengths," says Carolina, whose committee was tasked with finding housing for the families. Carolina and her



Refugee families' first stop in their new home: a welcome lunch as guests of a local restaurant! From left, Rabbi Barbara Aiello, Hannah with daughter Miraslava, Ola with her mother Olena and brother, Miroslav.

continued on next page

In Esther's Name: *continued from previous page*

husband are expert woodworkers. They create custom furniture, mostly reproducing antique styles.

"We see the interior of houses every day," says Carolina, who applied her expertise to make individual living arrangements for our refugees, and negotiated a modest rental amount which we paid to the landlords from funds we raised.

Based in our synagogue, In Esther's Name gathered local volunteers, both Jews and Christians, to make the program work. There were travel arrangements to make for our refugees, some of whom arrived by air, others by train or "Pullman." There were Covid tests to obtain, European Union refugee documents to complete, along with school registrations and class placements to manage.

Thanks to Magda, and expert teachers Giusy and Gessica, an Italian culture and language program for the children got off the ground in record time. Donated funds provided the material for this program, including items such as colored pens and pencils, paints, paper, notebooks, and easy-reading books in Italian (and sometimes



Natasha (right), mother of baby Daniel and Anastasia, upon their arrival in Calabria following a harrowing journey that took them through three countries and several refugee camps.

translated into Ukrainian). On Ukrainian Independence Day, we celebrated with gelato and a welcome cake.

What did our refugees bring with them? These brave mothers arrived with their precious children, birth certificates rescued from

the rubble of what had been their homes, and small backpacks with a change of clothes, a few diapers for their babies, and a trove of memories that graphically demonstrate the terror and danger they faced.

Amazingly, the funds we raised and subsequent funds spent here in our village brought economic benefit to our town. Donated funds paid the modest rent to local residents who offered one of the many empty but available houses (so characteristic of Southern Italy's population difficulties).

Donations were used to pay all the food costs for seven adults and eleven children, along with a stipend for Italian language teachers and to purchase supplies for the local women who taught our Ukrainian mothers "la cucina italiana," how to cook basic Italian meals.

Donated funds paid for new clothes as the children grew out of shirts, pants, shoes, and jackets; collection boxes placed throughout the village helped to defray the cost of school supplies.

Hannah and her nine-year-old daughter Mira recalled the horror of the war in Ukraine:

We run from Kyiv to a cottage in the forest. It has only one room with no heat, water, or electricity. This is our stove which was the only warm place in the house. See the bread? We dried the bread on the stove to have something to eat. We went into the woods and collected wood for the stove. We brought water from melting snow. We covered the windows with dark fabric so the planes would not see the house. So they would not shoot at us. We thank you, our synagogue, for helping us.

Antonio, nine years old, was born here in our town. His mother Magda is the granddaughter of Polish Jews who hid their identity during the Holocaust. Magda speaks Italian, English, and Polish and has been a fabulous help in creating *tranquilita* (tranquility) for our refugee families.

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In Esther's Name:, continued from previous page

Antonio accompanied his mother to each refugee event and in three weeks' time he came to know Miroslav, the seven-year-old son of Olena, one of the arrivals.

For the first three days, Miroslav did not speak. Not one word. Traumatized by what he had seen and heard in their escape from Kyiv to Warsaw, his first utterance as his mother took a seat in our local restaurant was a piercing scream. "Mama! Mama! NO." Miroslav was adamant that his mother should not sit near a window. Through our interpreter, we learned why. Little Miroslav was terrified that "A bomb will come to break the window. The glass will fly and cut you to pieces."

Antonio, a youngster himself, knew just what to do. Taking Miroslav by the hand, Antonio used gestures to convince Miroslav that they could play a card game together, and somehow — with neither child knowing the other's language — they began to play.

Two weeks later, the Italian boy and the boy from war-torn Ukraine continued to spend time together. When I asked Antonio how it was going, Antonio flashed a big smile and said, "Miro e' il mio migliore amico," Miro is my best friend. Throughout the school year, Antonio and Miro



Lidia Cosentino (bat anusim and co-chair of In Esther's Name) is congratulated by Mayor Muraca of the village of Serrastretta. Mayor Muraca organized a "Mayor for a Day" event to welcome the refugee children and to learn more about Ukrainian culture from the children themselves.

were inseparable, and although the family returned to Ukraine, they stay in touch via email and WhatsApp. As the future unfolded and the war dragged on longer than ever expected, our mothers and children faced profound choices.

With their husbands unable to leave Ukraine, would these



Hannah and Olena, along with their children, escaped the invading Russian army, and fled into the forest where they found a shed with this ancient stove inside. On their trek the heavy snowfall dampened their bread, but this stove warmed not only the bread but the refugees as well.

women and children return, perhaps to a neighboring country such as Poland, or a safer city within Ukraine? Would the mothers and children remain here in our village?

Each family had a life-changing choice to make. Although it was our hope that some of our families would remain, most moved on to a bigger Italian city, and some returned to Ukraine. In fact, Caterina, mother of three young daughters, returned

to Kyiv where her husband, an Orthodox priest, serves a very needy senior citizen community there.

Vira is one of our Ukrainian mothers who, with her son, Platon, remained with us for one year. Her husband was permitted an exit from Ukraine to work remotely here in Italy. Finally, after much stress and many setbacks, we were able to bring Vira's mother (Platon's grandmother) from danger in Crimea to the safety of our village.

As Pesach arrived, our Ukrainian Jewish mothers were thrilled to have a "real seder," something that life in the former Soviet Union often prohibited and about which few Jews from there understood. Anastasia, Polina, and Sofia joined the synagogue seder, complete with their own Ukrainian-style seder plate.

Thanks to an interfaith group of seven dedicated women, In Esther's Name allowed us to combine skill with compassion and determination. We demonstrated that, like the biblical Queen Esther, one person can indeed make a world of difference. *

Thank You, Donors

Donations listed below were received between May 1, 2022 and April 30, 2023. Please contact us at <https://kulanu.org/contact> if we have missed your name or contribution and we will list you in a future magazine. Thank you!

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Planning and Planting for the Future of Kulanu

By Lili Kaufmann, Kulanu treasurer

Since its founding in 1994, Kulanu has helped emerging Jewish communities around the world to grow and become stronger. Thanks to our wonderful donors, Kulanu has expanded its outreach and the ability to help many more communities. Now, as we look towards the future, we know we need a solid financial foundation to ensure Kulanu remains strong for the next generation. We are developing an endowment fund that will receive donations and bequests separate from operating funds and will grow through reinvestment of the gains. Initially, all funds and dividends will be rolled over for continued growth and managed in a separate investment fund in order to grow the principal. Gifts and bequests can be made at any time to the fund, and your Letter of Intent/Commitment will enable us to plan for our financial future and be assured that Kulanu will continue to thrive.

Harriet Bograd Endowment Fund

Last year, Harriet Bograd, z”l, Kulanu’s late president, and I had several Zoom meetings with Arlene Schiff of the Grinspoon Foundation. This foundation is the leader of the “Life and Legacy Challenge,” a program of endowment funds in Jewish communities around the country. Although Kulanu was not eligible to be included in its program, Arlene gave us advice and guidance to help Kulanu establish its own

endowment fund so that Kulanu can continue its important work. Harriet understood that our own donors want Kulanu to continue to thrive as we help our partner communities, and that our donors would step up if asked.

Harriet immediately led the way with her own endowment commitment. Our board followed her lead with their own letters of commitment. Sadly, Kulanu became the recipient of Harriet’s gift far sooner than planned. We have now renamed the fund in her honor and memory.

What You Can Do

Please review and complete the Letter of Intent/Commitment included in this magazine. By submitting the form to Kulanu, you are committing to provide for Kulanu’s ongoing sustainability. There are many options you can choose to fulfill your commitment. In the upcoming months, I will directly contact many of our donors to discuss and finalize their commitments to Kulanu. Thank you for your past support and I look forward to speaking to you soon. *



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HARRIET BOGRAD KULANU LEGACY FUND

PLANNING AND PLANTING FOR THE FUTURE

The Talmud says, "As my ancestors planted for me, so do I plant for those who will come after me."

Commit to helping secure the future of Kulanu and global Jewish communities by completing this form.

Letter of Intent **Form**



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Please mail form to: Kulanu Inc. 82 Nassau Street #443 New York, NY 10038 USA
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Out of (Jewish) Africa

The Sub-Saharan African Jewish Alliance is born!

Written by and photos by Avraham Ben Avraham, Côte d'Ivoire

What, in your opinion, distinguishes a Shabbat service and makes it such a memorable occasion? Every Shabbat is, of course, unique and wonderful on its own. However, when many people from various backgrounds travel across ten African countries to come together for the first time to observe Shabbat, it not only becomes historic but also a day of immeasurable joy, with a clear message to take home about a united Black African Jewry.

The timing was perfect. There was no better moment to revel in unbridled joy than on the Shabbat preceding Hanukkah. As the *Shacharit* (morning prayer) began, worshippers represented their respective countries by moving from one cantor to the next in the prescribed order of prayers. Inside the hall were roughly 70 persons, including members of the Kol Yehudah Synagogue, the host venue in Abidjan, capital of the West African nation of Côte d'Ivoire (the Ivory Coast), overseen by Prof. Yehudah Firman.

It was difficult to pinpoint the climax of the service, which eventually devolved into a musical prayer davening, as enthusiasm and Shabbat fervor swept over the congregation. On innumerable occasions, the men and women



Torah service during morning Shacharit at Kol Yehudah Synagogue, Abidjan

would leave their seats and form two big dance circles.

When it was time for the *dvar Torah*, rabbis from Israel, the United States, and Kenya honored the congregation

with their wise words. Other speakers included Shoshana Nambi, originally from Uganda and currently a rabbinical student in New York. *Va'yetze*, the Torah portion of the week, began with Jacob's dream, which is somewhat analogous to the shared expectation of everyone who converged in Cote d'Ivoire with the dream of recreating the legacy of Jews residing in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Earlier in the week, the visiting participants from several African nations gathered to interact with and learn from renowned Jewish educators. The day started at Kol Yehudah Synagogue with a Shacharit prayer followed by classes, a lunch break, more teaching sessions, *Maariv* (the evening prayer), and dinner. Despite being from southern, eastern, or western Africa, the participants were united by a great love for HaShem, Judaism, the State of Israel, and the Jewish people rather than by this obvious diversity.

Prior to their arrival at the guest house on the campus of Université de l'Alliance Chrétienne in Abidjan, the majority of them had never met. The delegation from Nigeria arrived first, followed by two other participants, Elysha and Petuela, who traveled from the island of Madagascar with two stops at Addis Ababa and the Togo airport, where they met with another team of Nigerian Jews en route to the conference.

"I am overjoyed right now," said Elysha. "I assumed Petuela and I were the only Jews at the airport. I had no idea we weren't alone." She couldn't hide her excitement at meeting six Nigerian Jews for the first time. Also in attendance from Nigeria was the indomitable Ima (Mother) Liz Ben, who, with her husband Paniel, founded a synagogue in Ogidi.

The New York-based Jewish nonprofit organization Kulanu put a lot of work into organizing and putting resources together to gather Jewish

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SAJA: *continued from previous page*

leaders from ten African countries to be a part of this historic encounter. Kulanu had been preparing for this event since 2019. At the beginning of 2020, everything appeared to be in place, but the COVID-19 epidemic put the entire plan on pause.

During the following two years, Harriet Bograd, z”l, president of Kulanu at the time, did not let go of this ambition. However, she died before the rescheduled date of the Pan-African meeting. Her remarkable leadership as president enabled Kulanu to expand its charitable work for returning, isolated and emerging Jewish communities in 33 countries. In honor of her memory, and Kulanu’s commitment to offer the African Jewish community a voice in the global Jewish community, the six day conference finally began the week before Hanukkah on December 13, 2022.

“One of my favorite parts of the conference was Rabbi Dr. Ari Greenspan’s talk about his travels to Jewish communities in small, isolated areas of Asia and the Middle East,” commented Shmuel Okeke enthusiastically. A *hazan* (cantor) from the Tikvat Yisrael community synagogue in the Nigerian capital of Abuja, Okeke went on to say that he was excited to meet people from so many different places and communities in Africa.

During one of the interactive sessions, Ima Hadassah Anyanwu, who runs a Jewish

elementary and high school in Eastern Nigeria, spoke with joy. “I had never before been on an airplane, but Kulanu paid for me to come here, and my brother, Avraham, and my son put my name on the list of people who were coming.”

Rabbi Dr. Ari Greenspan, Rabbi Ari Zivotofsky, and Rabbi Eliyahu Binbaum shared their experiences with Jewish communities around the world in an evening presentation class, using films and slide shows. Greenspan, who served as conference chairman, collaborated with Kulanu’s executive director Molly Levine for months to organize the event.

The conference featured a variety of activities, one of the most prominent of which was shechita training, with an emphasis on the kosher slaughter of chickens. Shechita knife preparation, demonstration, and practice, as well as koshering of slaughtered animals, were addressed in the course. Rabbis Zivotofsky and Netanel Kasovitz joined Greenspan in training the Africans on how to sharpen and prepare their shechita knives, as well as guiding them as they slaughtered the birds in turn. They had been introduced to the laws of shechita in an online session two months prior, and then completed the practical “class” in Abidjan.

One of the most significant outcomes of the conference was the establishment of a coalition to provide African Jews with a voice in the Jewish communities of Israel, the US, and the rest of the world: the Sub-Saharan African Jewish Alliance (SAJA).

The goal of SAJA is to unite Jewish leaders from across the continent to discuss issues that affect all Jews in Africa, find solutions to those issues together, build lasting relationships with one another, and advocate for the rights of Jews in the media and in government.

“Now we have a platform we can call our own — an independent African Jewish organization — which I believe can be used to find solutions to some of the problems we face as African Jews,”



On the final day of the SAJA conference, a Mincha prayer session was held at a corner of the Golf Hotels.

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said Benjamin Mongi, a lawyer from Arusha in Tanzania.

A governing board consisting of a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer was chosen to manage the alliance until elections could be held six months later. Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Madagascar, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe each submitted one representative to the board of directors. In addition, working groups were established to serve as the core of the alliance and drive the full operational effectiveness of SAJA.

A trend of returning and re-emerging Jewish communities observing Shabbat and Jewish holidays and adhering to kashrut has been on the rise for several decades. The majority of these people have been victims of colonialization and Christianization that was imposed upon them, which altered the Jewish trajectory of their forebears. However, as a result of a current awakening and deeper attention being paid to history and the Bible, thousands of people are returning and embracing rabbinical Judaism as the correct path to reclaiming their lost ancestral heritage.

In Nigeria, the Igbo people consider themselves to be descendants of the tribes of Gad and Ephraim. Formerly isolated Lemba Jews in Zimbabwe are believed to be descended from

Jews who settled in Africa after migrating from the Arabian Peninsula.

“About a hundred years ago, the whole land of Sefwi was ruled by a Jewish king, and nobody worked or went to the river on Shabbat,” said Michael Owusu Ansah, secretary of Tifereth Yisrael Synagogue in Sefwi Wiawso, northwest Ghana.

He pointed to a Christian church that was built by European colonists. “It’s easy to see that the missionaries built a church quarter near the old palace of Sefwi Wiawso and were able to have an effect on the royal kingship. This was how Sefwi land lost its Jewishness.”

A small percentage of Africans have adopted Judaism as a method to connect with God and relate with their fellow human beings, despite the fact that the bulk of the continent still adheres to Christianity, the religion that colonialists brought with them when they ruled and controlled it for decades.

When compared to some places in the Western world, where Judaism is on the decline, they are tenacious in their Jewish practice and dedication, despite living in an inhospitable environment and having minimal resources. However, even as others in the mainstream Jewish population continue to dispute and refuse to recognize Africans’ Jewishness, there are many Western Jews who have embraced them in their returning status and are willing to support them on the journey to rebuilding their Jewish communities.

Kulanu has provided unparalleled assistance to African Jews over the years, helping them with everything from education and communication to the construction of synagogues and mikva’ot (ritual baths), the development of agricultural projects, and the facilitation of Jewish marriages.

At the summit in Abidjan, Kulanu presented Ghana, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe each with a Torah scroll. Other donations included the distribution of siddurim, Hagaddot, tefilin,



A group photo taken at the Université de l'Alliance Chrétienne before the start of Shabbat, featuring Africans and Israelis dressed in their traditional attire. Photo by Jewish Nigeria Media Network.

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talitot, kippot, and Israeli flags to all countries in attendance. Participants were given the opportunity to hear from renowned Jewish intellectuals such as Clive Lawton, currently the CEO of the Commonwealth Jewish Council, who delivered lectures on the topic of building Jewish communities. In addition, Prof. Tudor Parfitt lectured on the growing interest in Judaism worldwide.

Rudy Rochman, another guest speaker, spoke after Rabbi Netanel's musical Havdalah at the close of Shabbat. Rochman gained international attention after being detained by Nigerian authorities together with his crew David Benyaym and Noam Leibman when a secessionist media organization altered the story of the We Were Never Lost filmmaker's journey to Igboland in July of 2021.

According to Rochman, the documentary's goal is to awaken today's Israelis to the fact that they are the last generation to be born without understanding who the tribes of Israel truly were all along. The enthusiastic young activist and social media influencer vowed to give the African Jewish community the voice it never had by telling their story to the rest of the world.

On the last day of the convention, a procession was organized at the Golf Hotel to dedicate the three Torahs scrolls provided by Kulanu. After the first Hanukkah candle was lit on the first night of the Festival of Lights, everyone enjoyed a farewell feast.

As the many participants took to the skies the next day, it was time to ponder what this historic gathering meant for African Jewry. Whatever happens next will be determined by their ability to organize and rebuild Jewish communities across Sub-Saharan Africa. SAJA is a pilot program at the moment, but if successful, it will play a pivotal role in helping the African Jewish community reposition itself and move closer to its ideal future. *

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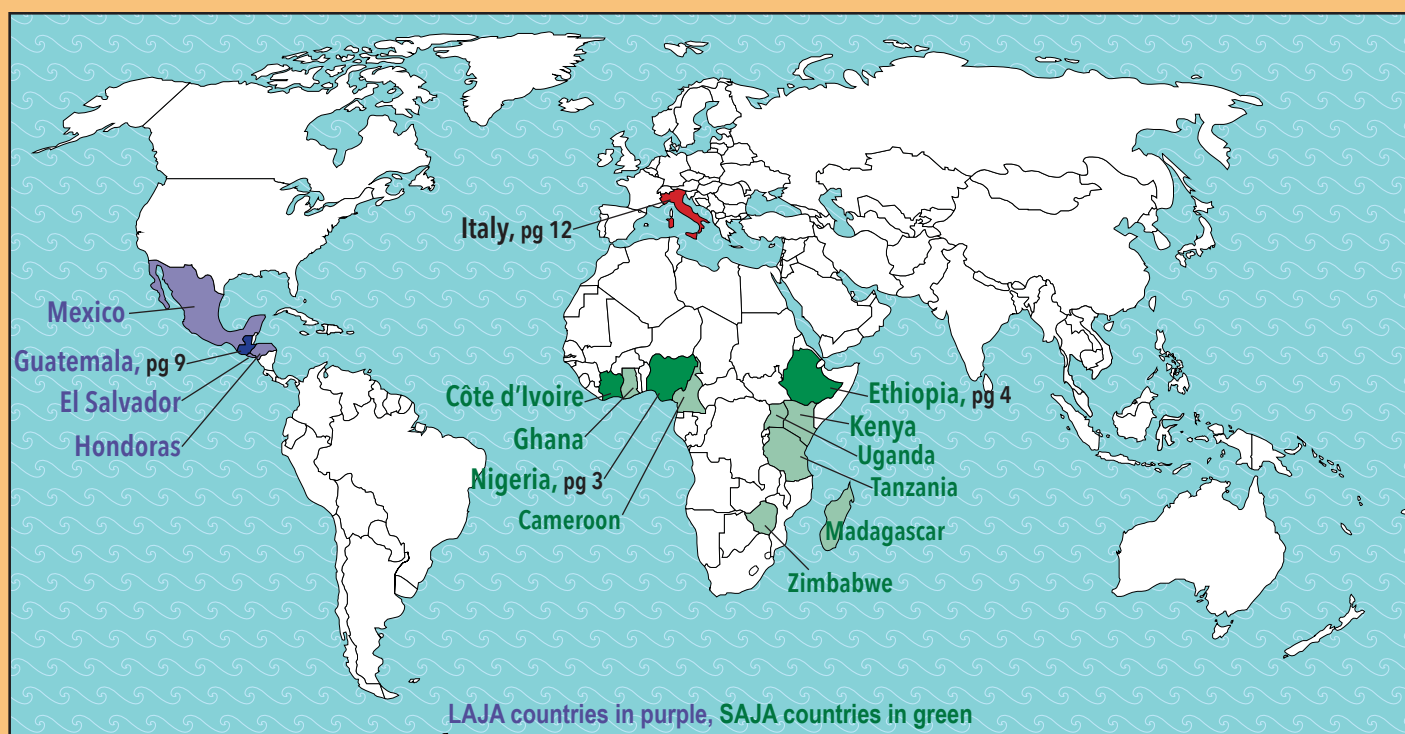
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Where in the World is Kulanu in this Issue

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



Kulanu is pleased to announce the formation of the **Latin American Jewish Alliance (LAJA)** in April 2023 and the **Sub-Saharan African Jewish Alliance (SAJA)** in December 2022 (see related stories on pages 7 and 20).

Jewish communities from countries that participated in the conferences where the alliances were launched are included on the map above. **LAJA countries** represented are El Salvador (where the conference was held), Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. **SAJA countries** represented are Côte D'Ivoire (where the conference was held), Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.