



KULANU

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Italian Jewish Diversity: Ruth's Cup at the Seder Table

By Rabbi Barbara Aiello

photos by Rabbi Barbara Aiello

Here in southern Italy, in the "toe" of the Italian "boot," our Passover table features symbolic foods and ancient ritual practices that, to our Ashkenazi brothers and sisters, seem different from what so many Jews are used to. A cucumber slice serves as the "zeroah" or the "arm of God," while pieces of celery dipped in vinegar replace the usual parsley and salt water. And what can be said for the long-stemmed green onions used to whack each other on the wrist as we simulate the whips of the slave masters during the singing of "Dayenu?"

Here at Sinagoga Ner Tamid del Sud ("The Eternal Light of the South") in the tiny village of Serrastretta in the Calabrian hills, our members and friends are "B'nei Anusim," descendants of Italian Jews forced into Christian conversion during Inquisition times. All that we offer, including our Passover seder, is a monument to Jewish diversity--which this year included a new tradition straight from America-- Ruth's Cup.

Developed by Rabbi Heidi Hoover, a Jew by choice, Ruth's Cup includes a ritual to honor Jewish diversity that was more than appropriate for our southern Italian seder gathering.

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Long stemmed green onions used at the B'nei Anusim/southern Italian Passover table. Holding the onion end, attendees whack the person next to them while singing Dayenu!

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Ruth's Cup: *continued from previous page*

Our synagogue, now in its eleventh year, is devoted to extending the hand of Jewish welcome to southern Italians whose traditions were ripped from their families when the long arm of Grand Inquisitor Torquemada reached from Spain and Portugal into Sicily and Calabria. As our members first discover and then embrace their Jewish roots, they find a Jewish community that applauds and appreciates their unique Jewish journey. Services and festival events are modern and inclusive with interfaith families and gay and lesbian families and their children fully participating--as they did during this year's "seder di Pesach," complete with Ruth's Cup and ritual.

Placed in the middle of the table, our Ruth's Cup was handcrafted from the wood of local chestnut trees and adorned with etchings of sheaves of grain to honor Ruth's labor in the fields. Translated into Italian, Rabbi Hoover's words touched our hearts:

"Many Jews assume that 'real Jews' look a certain way and have one path to Judaism-- being born Jewish. When confronted with Jews who don't fit these stereotypes, even well-meaning Jews may treat them as less Jewish. Jews of color, and/or those who have converted to Judaism (and B'nei Anusim who are now cautiously returning) find that other Jews can be insensitive to our differences."

At our seder table, just before Elijah's Cup, we designated Lidia to lift Ruth's Cup as we recited Rabbi Hoover's blessing: "We lift this cup of wine for Ruth, the first Jew by choice, and we open the door to signify our welcome of Ruth and... all those who become part of our people, part of our diversity."

As we sipped our homemade wine, Lidia said, "It has been a difficult journey, especially when some feel that because I am 'Bat Anusim,' I am not an authentic Jew. Sometimes it hurts my heart because the more I learn about Judaism the more I realize how much I have lost. But tonight I am happy. Ruth's cup tells me I belong!"

For us in Italy's most isolated region, we work at uncovering hidden Jewish traditions--practices,



Traditional Italian Seder Plate with Sephardi candelabra to kindle light for Yom Tov. In Italy, three candles are used. The middle candle serves as the "shamus" to light the other two.

foods, Ladino words and phrases, ritual items and music--so that the joy of Judaism is available to everyone and anyone in our B'nei Anusim community. Thanks to Ruth's Cup, we now have another beautiful tradition which celebrates Jewish diversity that enhances us all.

*Rabbi Barbara Aiello is Italy's first and only woman rabbi. She is a Kulanu board member and founder of the B'nei Anusim movement in Southern Italy. A complete description of Rabbi Heidi Hoover's "Ruth's Cup" is available from www.globaljews.org. **

“Daneel Schaechter:

A Ray of Light to Emerging Jewish Communities”

By Stewart Ain (36 Under 36, *The New York Jewish Week*, May 25, 2017)

jewishweek.timesofisrael.com/daneel-schaechter



Daneel Schaechter’s day job is developing international strategy for Indeed.com, an employment-related search engine with job listings worldwide. But he said his true “passion” is working in Latin America with groups of people who want to practice Judaism.

For nearly eight years, Schaechter, of Manhattan, has been a volunteer with Kulanu, a New York-based nonprofit that works to support emerging Jewish communities around the world.

“I deal with Latin America and get one or two requests from groups in Brazil or other Latin American countries every month that say they believe they are Marranos,” he said, referring to Jews who, because of persecution, had to convert to Christianity but secretly continued to practice Judaism.

In addition, he said, Kulanu is contacted by people who wish to practice Judaism and who complain that “the Jewish community is not welcoming.”

To assist these communities, Schaechter said Kulanu has sent Jewish resources and Jewish teachers — this summer Kulanu is sending a Brazilian rabbinic student from the

California-based Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies — to teach a few emerging Brazilian communities more about Judaism and “work to network them to the mainstream Jewish communities.”

“My current focus is on Brazil, where I spent a year on a Fulbright,” Schaechter said.

Kulanu provides the communities with prayer books and Torah scrolls. Volunteers teach them about Judaism and the Hebrew language, and help lead their prayer services. Schaechter has personally worked with more than a dozen communities. Most recently, he has begun working with other Jewish international organizations such as the WUPJ and Masorti Olami to connect them with emerging Reform and Conservative Jewish communities throughout Latin America.

“There are at least 100 communities in Latin America that are emerging Jewish communities,” Schaechter said. “They consist of at least 5,000 to 10,000 people who have never had an opportunity to be converted [to Judaism]. Some have 75 to 100 members and others consist of four or five families.”

World traveler: Schaechter loves backpacking in foreign countries and volunteering in under-privileged schools. *

Mazel Tov!

Mazel Tov to Kulanu’s Latin American Coordinator and member of our board, Daneel Schaechter, and Beatriz Frenkel from Brazil (both pictured to the right), who have just announced their engagement as this magazine is going to press! We at Kulanu are so very excited for them both!

photo credit: Lior Melnick Photography



Todah Rabah from Abuja, Nigeria

Editor's Note: Between November 2016 and February 2017, Kulanu donated \$1266 for a laptop, some computer accessories, and a year's internet service for Tikvat Israel Synagogue in Abuja, Nigeria. Sarapage Podolsky (Kulanu's technology director), David Tobis (our Abuja coordinator), and Harriet Bograd (Kulanu's president) worked together with community leaders to plan what was needed. The community managed to build a small building to house their new internet cafe and found another desktop computer and printer to add to the setup. Here is the thank-you letter from Sar Habakkuk Nwafor, leader of the synagogue.



Hello and Shalom!

With much gratitude and appreciation, we are happy to announce that our synagogue is now fully connected with fast internet wireless service. It's my pleasure to be writing this first email right from the Tikvat Israel Cafe.



It was something that we've dreamed for a very long time, to be able to help out the younger children here who are the future of Judaism in Nigeria, by giving them a great opportunity to learn the new skills of the computer, and of course, using the advantage of available Hebrew language teaching software to provide an easier and fun way to understand and learn the Hebrew tongue.



The delay we experienced with respect to the budget execution was due to the construction of a permanent structure to house the Tikvat Israel Cafe, inside the synagogue compound. It has not been pretty easy, to raise the structure, due to the current economic situation in Nigeria. However, I am grateful to Hashem that we have achieved this milestone.

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Tikvak Israel Café, Nigeria: con't from previous page

Everybody back here is happy, and the rest of the synagogue members will now join in the excitement when they come to worship in the synagogue this coming Shabbath. Now, we have just a laptop and a desktop in the cafe, and a couple of other accessories. At least, it's a good start.

I'd like to use this opportunity to thank Kulanu and the president of Kulanu, Harriet Bograd, and David Tobis, the Nigerian Representative, for the support, concern, and encouragement so far shown to us.

We are forever grateful, and will continue to support the expansion of the Judaism network in Nigeria.

Attached below are pictures showing the stages of the construction of our synagogue cafe.

Long live Harriet Bograd

Long live David Tobis

Regards,

Sar Habakkuk,

Tikvat Isreal Synagogue

No. 35 Byazhin South, behind police station, off Isapa crescent

Kubwa, Abuja *



The photos on this page show the building and completion of the Tikvat Israel Cafe as well as the community enjoying accessing the internet. All photos by Sar Habakkuk.



Visiting Noah's Children in Vizag, India

by Meylekh Viswanath
photos by Meylekh Viswanath

Editor's Note: Meylekh (PV) Viswanath is an Indian Jew who lives in Teaneck, New Jersey and teaches Finance at Pace University in New York City. He is currently on sabbatical in India, where--in addition to a project on tribal livelihoods in Odisha state in Eastern India--he has also made time to visit the Bene Israel community in Mumbai for Passover as well as attend a Bnei Ephraim community wedding in Andhra Pradesh in South India. He is also working on a project to use economic analysis to understand early medieval Buddhist monastic practices.

In this article, Meylekh Viswanath presents a picture of his encounter with a Noahide community in India. Noahidism is a growing world-wide phenomenon in which its adherents are usually of Christian background and they try to take on the role that Biblical and Rabbinic Judaism assign to gentiles. They consider themselves in relationship with the God of Israel through the seven laws specified in the covenant between Noah, representing all humanity, and the God of Israel.

Getting to Visakhapatnam, or Vizag

Just before the end of the 2016 secular year as I was preparing to leave for Israel en route to India, I got an unexpected message from the rabbi of our local synagogue. He was forwarding to me a message that he'd got from a rabbinic bulletin board, posted by a Rabbi Shlomo Grafstein. The gist of the message was that Rabbi Grafstein had just spent a few days teaching a congregation of Bnei Noah, that they were very dedicated and needed authentic translations of Tanakh, the Jewish bible. I wrote back to my rabbi, agreeing to take a copy of the Artsroll translation which was the only thing that I could find at short notice. I had been given the mailing address for the leader of the congregation, Ravi Obadiah, but no email address or phone number. However, I wrote Rabbi Grafstein and was able to get Ravi's email contact information. After a few weeks in India, when I had settled my immediate affairs in order, I thought to contact Ravi. I sent him an email and the very next day, I received a

phone message from him inviting me to visit them.

I did know of the existence of Judaizing communities in Andhra Pradesh (an Indian state immediately south of Odisha, where I am currently conducting research on market access and tribal poverty), groups that call themselves Bnei Ephraim, and I had even heard of a Bnei Noah community from my good friend from Mumbai's Bene Israel community, Sharon Garsulkar, but I knew next to nothing about them. All I knew about Bnei Noah was what I had read in the Talmud, but of modern Noahide groups, I knew next to nothing. I wasn't even sure how I would communicate with them, given that I spoke no Telugu, which is the local language in Andhra Pradesh, and I wasn't sure whether the Bnei Noah spoke any Hindi or



The author, Meylekh, speaking on Friday night at a Bnei Noah Sabbath ceremony

English. During my initial conversation, though, I discovered that Ravi's family actually came from Tamil Nadu. This meant that there would be at least one person with whom I could speak in an Indian language, Tamil.

We decided that I would go to Visakhapatnam, a middling city with a population of more than 2 million souls, located on the eastern coast of India, about 500 miles southwest of Kolkata, and about the same distance northeast of Chennai. From Bhubaneswar, I would take a train on a Thursday evening, towards the end of the month of Tevet, arriving after 10pm in Visakhapatnam or Vizag, as it is also known.

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I arrived in Vizag station, where I was met by Obadiah and another member of his congregation who bundled us into an autorickshaw, and off we sped to his house in a part of old Vizag. He made sure that I was not hungry, gave me some water to drink and we settled down to exchange information and chat. Vizag being on the coast and hence hot and humid, we also turned on the fan (it was about 87°F in the middle of the night). Little did I know that we would be chatting until 3:45 in the morning! About 5 hours of intense conversation! We started off with some uncertain exchange of information, uncertain mostly on my part because I had no inkling of what this Bnei Noah community did or believed in. But Obadiah had no hesitation and plunged into conversation, listening to my story about my own personal history, providing some details about his congregation and then into a headlong discussion about Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Bnei Noah and other faith groups.

Who are Bnei Noah?

While the Jewish Bible says nothing about Bnei Noah, there is some discussion about the

toshav ha-arets. These were non-idolatrous non-Israelite inhabitants of the land of Israel who had some rights in spite of not being Jews and therefore not keeping all the commandments required of the Israelites; for example, there were cities of refuge available to the *toshav*, as well, in case he should commit unintentional murder. Most of the normative discussion in the Bible, though, is for Jews and how they should relate



Ravi Obadiah introducing Meylekh to the Bnei Noah congregation on Friday night

to the *toshav*: whether they are allowed to take interest on loans to the *toshav*, whether they are required to support indigent *toshavim*, whether they can give them non-kosher meat to eat and so on. The Talmud does discuss the existence of certain laws that apply to all non-Jews (the commandments to the children of Noah). There is also a limited discussion there as to how these commandments are to be interpreted. In particular, there is discussion as to whether the details of the commandments are the same for Jews as for non-Jews. However, it is very difficult to lay out a full code of law based on this sparse discussion. Jewish organizations, such as the World Noahide Center and the World Noahide Community, however, by equating the obligations for Jews and non-Jews, are able to use Jewish sources to create a detailed set of study materials. For example, the Beth El Noahide Center meets on Skype every week with a rabbi in Jerusalem to study the Rambam's text called "Shmoneh Perakim" or "The Eight Chapters (on Ethics)" which the Rambam wrote as an introduction to



Street outside the Bnei Noah prayer hall in Vizag, India

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Pirkei Avot, "The Ethics of the Fathers," to guide Jews to improve themselves. In any case, this was the variety of Noahidism that Ravi practiced.

Hazon Ovadya – the Vision of Ravi Obadiah

Obadiah's story was fascinating. He was born into a middle class family in Visakhapatnam with a background of mixed Roman Catholic and Hindu traditions – his mother was born Roman Catholic and his father had converted to Catholicism from Hinduism – but mostly attended a Catholic church. After obtaining a degree in Computer Science, he got a good job and was headed for a successful, if unremarkable, career when a motorcycle accident at the age of 22 got him thinking about the purpose of life. He started reading the Bible for inspiration and started questioning what he was doing. Soon after this time, the entire family, under the leadership of Obadiah's father, moved away from Catholicism in more charismatic directions which involved prayer healing. They started praying regularly at home as a family and eventually became the nucleus of an evangelical church called Bethel Holy Church, which met in their house. Obadiah's father underwent pastoral training and became the head of a congregation initially of about twenty individuals but which soon ballooned to a hundred members. At the age of twenty-nine, Obadiah became a full-time evangelical charismatic minister. After his father's passing away when he was 33 years old, Obadiah took over the church and dedicated his life full-time to his new vocation. Many people were attracted to Obadiah's vision of the Bible as the source of advice about how to live one's life, not simply

on moral matters, but even on a more mundane everyday basis. Many of his congregants were Roman Catholics who wanted a closer, more personal relationship with God. Obadiah, himself, through his dedication and earnestness, proved to be a good leader of his flock.

As an example of Obadiah's desire to take the Bible at its word, he read verses such as Joshua 1:8 and decided that Bible study had to be a full-time endeavor. As it says there: "This book of the Torah shall not leave your mouth; you

shall meditate therein day and night, in order that you observe to do all that is written in it, for then will you succeed in all your ways and then will you prosper." Obadiah himself cites the verse in Deuteronomy 4:6, which already even then was leading him to a Jewish understanding of the Bible: "And you shall keep [them] and do [them], for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the peoples, who will hear all these statutes and say, "Only this great nation is a wise and understanding people."



Ravi Obadiah, leader of the Bnei Noah group, praying on Sunday morning in the sanctuary

He started a full-time Bible school for children who would dedicate themselves to become the pious of the nations. Over time, through his studying and his teaching, he became convinced of the falsity of Christian beliefs. Ultimately, in 2012, he decided to leave the Christian faith. About a score of his congregation stayed with him, many of them women; amongst them was his own family, including his siblings. After another year of searching, he came to know of the seven commandments given to the nations of the world and of the Noahide movement. Bethel Holy Church became Bethel Synagogue. Around this time, he got in touch with the Brit Olam–Noahide World Center through Skype and received initial

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help and direction, which affirmed his determination to model his congregation as a group of the “pious of the nations.” Eventually, Obadiah contacted Rabbi Moshe Weiner, the author of “The Divine Code,” a book which gives detailed instructions based on certain Jewish understandings of what is required of non-Jews, according to the Talmud. This gave the fledgling group a basis for how to conduct their daily life. (Rabbi Weiner also gives the group monthly classes on Skype.) Further contact with Rabbi Moshe Perets, a Chabad rabbi who operates through the World Noahide Community, provided them with regular online courses. Meanwhile, another group of Telugu speakers from Guntur, about 250 miles to the southwest, had already decided that they



Entrance to Bethel Synagogue, the Bnei Noah prayer hall



At Ravi Obadiah's mother's birthday celebration on Friday night

wanted to be full-fledged Jews. Some of them also believed they were descendants of the lost tribe of Ephraim and started calling themselves Bnei Ephraim. Yehoshua Yacobi, the son of one of the founders of the Bnei Ephraim community, made aliyah and started living as a converted Rabbinic Jew. He has been helpful in arranging for additional Skype classes with Rabbi Yaron Gilor, and providing translation from Hebrew into Telugu, since not all of the Bethel Noahide community, particularly the children, are able to understand English well. What is amazing, though, is that there are now about ten young children ranging in age from five to sixteen, including Obadiah's own children, who spend their entire week pursuing study of the Bible and other texts, such as Rabbi Weiner's book and the Rambam's Shmonah Perakim or “Eight Chapters on Ethics.” While they do study other subjects such as English, arithmetic and science, these

are secondary to their Torah studies.

The Children of Noah

In addition to these young children who have never had a secular education at all, there are some older youths, some of whom started with a secular education and are now pursuing a Noahide education exclusively. One of these, a very sharp and intelligent young man, is Yedidiah. Yedidiah is Ravi Obadiah's sister's son. Obadiah's sister is a high school teacher who teaches primarily geography in the secular school system; she is a very lettered person and who speaks fluent English. Yedidiah gets instruction from his mother on secular subjects, but spends his entire time studying Torah with Obadiah. He, too, speaks fluent English, but one casualty of this focus on Torah is that he does not have a good understanding of written Telugu (his everyday language, living in the Telugu speaking state of

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Andhra Pradesh) and Tamil (his mother tongue). But this is not seen by him or by Obadiah as a sacrifice, no more than do the the Chareidim in Lakewood, NJ, or Borough Park, Brooklyn, with their children's education. On the other hand, Yedidyah (and many of the other children) can quote fluently from the Bible, is learning to leyn from the Torah using an Ashkenazic trope, can blow the shofar, and is very knowledgeable on prescribed Noahide subjects. I took a Shabbos afternoon walk with Yedidyah and found him to be a very smart, personable, healthy-- and in no way deprived-- teenager. Since he is Obadiah's nephew, he also speaks Tamil, his mother tongue. This allowed me to converse with him intimately. Of course, he is only sixteen years old and like all Indian sixteen year olds, accepts what he has been taught, and what he has been taught is the superiority of Judaism. This, then, is the path that he is following and that he seems quite content to follow. There is an effort to enroll him in a yeshiva, such as Ohr Somayach, where he can study Hebrew, the Bible and anything else that a Bnei Noah is allowed to study, with perhaps the strong possibility that he can formally convert once he is more knowledgeable. I have no doubt that if he is given the opportunity to learn, he will ultimately convert and will, ultimately, become a steadfast and observant Jew. For now, though, he is in Vizag and the path ahead is not so clear. Ohr Somayach may or may not materialize.

While Yedidyah, having been brought up under his uncle's tutelage and not having known anything other than a philo-Judaic Christianity followed by an anti-Christian Noahidism, didn't have any doubts about the validity of his path in life, the same was not true of many of the older youths and adults. I am not suggesting that they necessarily questioned the Noahide approach to the Word of God for a non-Jew. However, what certainly characterized many of them was a willingness to ask questions, a critical approach to what I presented them with. Of course, this may have been because the Judaism I showed them was a non-triumphal, non-millenarian,

universalistic Judaism that didn't rule out the validity of other ways to God. This was in contrast to what they had been taught, and they kept asking questions trying to reconcile the two approaches or, perhaps, to find the flaw in my thinking--perhaps the one unacceptable assumption that led me to my conclusions. Either way, it was a pleasure speaking to this group of people. I had, somehow, expected an acquiescent group of listeners and even started my talk on Friday night emphasizing the importance of asking questions. It turned out there was no need for me to have made this point. They were quite willing to ask questions and not hesitant at all.



The Bnei Noah enclosure's terrace, where Friday night services are held

There were two boys in particular who stood out. One was Balu, a young man of about 24, from a Hindu background, not quite Noahide, who came to attend services to figure out what the truth was, where he stood, etcetera. The other was Karthik, a 30-year old, born and brought up in the Hindu faith, but having attended tuition classes given by Ravi Obadiah since the age of six. Karthik is quite close to Ravi and has followed him in his path through Christianity to Noahidism. In spite of his mother's objections to his divergent path, he is steadfast in his devotion to Obadiah. Both Balu and Karthik peppered me with questions when I gave my talk on Friday night about my personal faith journey, but from different points of view. Balu, still in search mode, wanted to know how I

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had made my decision and, furthermore, having made my decision, how could I still insist on the validity of the road that I had chosen not to travel. The notion of several compatible truths was very difficult for him to accept, even though it is a very Hindu concept. The Rigveda, probably the most ancient Hindu text, says: *Let noble thoughts come to us from all sides* (1.89.1). But Balu was clearly not comfortable with whatever version of Hinduism he had been brought up with, which may well also have been as insistent on its version of the truth (pace the Rigveda), and so he was not about to buy my message. He must have asked me the same question in a variety of ways about six or seven times until I eventually joked that I now had proof that I was not good at explanations.

Karthik, on the other hand, also asked questions, but his questions were more directed towards understanding my approach to see how he could integrate it with what he already knew and what he already believed. Not necessarily accepting it wholesale, but not necessarily rejecting it, either. Karthik's approach was a lot closer to that of Ravi Obadiah, though Obadiah clearly was making up his own mind--an independent thinker--while Karthik was more of a follower.

Not Quite Preaching to the Choir

My own stay in Vizag was filled with interesting activities. At the top, of course, was my conversations with Obadiah that continued throughout the weekend (from Thursday night to Sunday noon). Obadiah's relatively conservative approach to Judaism (and hence to the Bible) leads him to believe that all ways of worshipping God, other than the World Noahide Community's understanding of the commandments of a Ben Noah, are unacceptable and forbidden paths for a non-Jew. My approach is much more accepting of other religions, based on my conviction that God could not have abandoned all of non-Jewish humanity for so many thousands of years until a certain group of Jews brought God's Judaism-inflected commandments to them. Certainly,

the approach of the Meiri, a 13th century Jewish scholar and rabbi who emphasized immorality and lawlessness as the defining characteristics of *avodah zarah* (forbidden worship), is a lot more convincing to me as an expression of a compassionate God. As such, I argued for ways of understanding Christian practices and Hindu practices, but Obadiah certainly didn't always agree with me. Notwithstanding our disagreements, though, we had many exciting conversations throughout the week. What was clear to me, though, was Obadiah's deep affection and care for his congregation, particularly the children, and his desire to bring those who were ready for it to a complete transition to Judaism.

Of course, I had emphasized to Obadiah that I was not a rabbi, but, in spite of that, he had asked me to give several talks; I ended up giving one talk for about an hour and a half on Friday night, another on Shabbos day for about two hours and a third one Sunday morning for about twenty minutes. Since Obadiah had to translate for me, everything took twice as long. Also, Obadiah did not simply translate, but rather since he knew how to speak to his congregation, he would paraphrase what I said, add examples and illustrations--in short, provide a midrash rather than a targum. Sometimes it felt like he was adding so much commentary that the point of my original words were lost; since I know other South Indian languages, I was able to (rather dimly) grasp the gist of Obadiah's words, even if I couldn't speak in Telugu. At such times, I would restate my views and sometimes Ravi would modify his words. Most likely, though, Obadiah's additions clarified rather than changed my meaning, but I was eager for a more direct connection with the audience rather than the limited one I could have through my meturgaman (translator). Following my talks, particularly the ones on Shabbos, there was a question and answer session. On Friday night, I spoke about my own spiritual journey, and there were some particularly intense exchanges of questions, answers and challenges, once again on issues of the validity of alternative ways to God. As an Indian, and a South Indian

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to boot, I think I was able to connect to them at a level that may have been missing in their interactions with American and Israeli rabbis--even if my message wasn't necessarily entirely consistent with their beliefs. In any case, I did represent for them an alternate model of an Orthodox Jew!

On Shabbos morning, I was asked to speak on Pirkei Avos, and I chose to speak on Mishna 15 in Chapter 1: *"Shammai said: Make your Torah study fixed (keva), say little and do (aseh) much, and receive everyone with a cheerful countenance."* However, rather than use the English translation, I worked with the Hebrew text and used the different ways in which the Hebrew words for fixed and do could be interpreted to try to give them a feel for how dependent the Hebrew text is on interpretation, and specifically, interpretations that differ from standard ones that are reflected in standard English translations (let alone Telugu translations that are very likely based on Christian understandings of the text). Before I left on Sunday, I was asked to speak again to the children who had gathered for their weekly Skype instruction from Rabbi Gilor, and I spoke to them briefly. Ravi saw something significant in my choice of the Pirkei Avos text because he had been emphasizing regular Torah study to his congregation, and Rabbi Sheldon Grafstein, apparently, had also spoken on this theme. In my own talk on Friday night, when asked about how the community arrived at answers to questions regarding halakhic practice, I had mentioned the concept referred to in the Babylonian Talmud (Pesachim 66b), in regard to Jews: "Even if they are not prophets, they are [nevertheless] the children of prophets." Obadiah felt that this was certainly true and appreciated my own lay remarks to the community.

A Brief Taste of Kahuna!

On Friday night, in addition to my talk, there was a momentous event. A couple of days after Obadiah and I had agreed on my visit to Vizag, he asked me if I would name a baby girl that had been born about three weeks previously.

Although I was conscious of the honor that was being done me and the weightiness of what I was being asked to do, I did not feel that I could disagree. (In a way, I felt like a Cohen who unexpectedly visits an out-of-the-way Jewish community and is asked to do a *pidyon-haben*, the redemption of firstborn Jewish children!).

I asked for details about the child, the names of the parents, the siblings (she was a first-born), and anything that would allow me to choose an appropriate name. I was only asked for a name from Tanakh. Ultimately, partially based on the mother's name (Shanti, meaning peace in Sanskrit), I chose the name Shelomit, which also comes from Shalom, meaning peace. Shelomit is also the name of the daughter of Zerubavel, the son of Shealtiel, who is descended from King David through King Solomon, and thus an auspicious name. Zerubavel, further, was instrumental in the rebuilding of the second Temple. The parents and the grandmother, who was also there, were very happy with the name and appreciated my explanations.



Santhi and Ajay, parents of the newborn baby, Shelomit

Not knowing what would be a proper ritual for a Bnei Noah baby-naming, but nevertheless feeling the need for some formality, I modified the blessing that is given in the synagogue when a baby girl is named. There was a real feeling of solemnity in the atmosphere at this time and

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I could see the broad smiles on the faces of the parents. I discovered later that there had been some recent problems in the lives of the family, partly related to the fact that the mother was much more committed to the Noahide way of life than the father. They felt that the name of their new daughter was a harbinger of peace and good fortune for their family.

From Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai back to Rabbi Ishmael

Every moment of my stay with Ravi, both before Shabbat, during Shabbat and after Shabbat, he demonstrated his allegiance to Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in his machloket with Rabbi Ishmael as to whether one should devote oneself to Torah study the whole time. Now at the end of my stay, I felt that I was going back to the world of Rabbi

Ishmael, whom I follow along with Abbaye in the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Berachot, 35b).



Ajay, proud father of his newborn daughter, Shelomit

As an example of how Obadiah personified Torah learning even when he was not actually studying religious texts, let me give some examples of how he attended to me during my stay. As a result of this attention, during my entire time in Vizag, I felt very honored and appreciated for what I was accepted as bringing to the Bnei Noah community, a sense of a connection with the word of God. Obadiah and the members

of the community were ready to help me with anything I needed. For example, on Friday night, Obadiah wanted me to be able to do Kiddush over grape juice, even though I am not normally able to do so on most Shabbosim in India, since kosher grape juice is not available. However, Obadiah brought me grapes and a thoroughly cleaned mixing machine. I explained to Obadiah that he could not handle the grape juice at any stage in the crushing process, and not even the mixing machine, once the grapes had been crushed. Obadiah was very careful about all of this. Then, after Shabbos, he asked me what I needed for Havdalah and was very meticulous in getting everything done correctly. Another example of the respect that was given to me was the request by the two daughters of Obadiah, who came to me on Sunday morning and asked me to give them a blessing.

As I left on Sunday morning to catch my train back to Bhubaneswar, I left behind me a group of about twenty young individuals of all ages learning the Rambam's ethical strictures from an Ashkenazi Israeli Chabad rabbi on Skype, with rapt attention, knowing that they were privy to the Word of God, though in slightly foreign garb. I couldn't help thinking that this was an extraordinary demonstration of *emunah*, faith, in Hashem and I truly felt blessed having been part of it for a weekend. *



Obadiah leading a prayer at his mother's birthday celebration.

Women cover their upper body and hair entirely for prayer services on Friday and Saturday, but not usually at other times. Boys dress in black and white on Fridays and Saturdays.

High Holidays in Suriname, South America

By Jacob Steinberg of Neve Shalom Synagogue, Suriname, South America

Photos by Donna Eckie, Kim Jungermann, Jennifer Wong Swie Samthe

To read the complete newsletter or to learn more about Suriname's Jewish community, go here: www.kulanu.org/suriname/.

We are grateful that Rabbi Shimon Moch again led our High Holidays in 2016. Rabbi Shimon is a long time friend of our community, since the days when he was the rabbi of the Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas in the U.S. Virgin Islands. We had a lovely Hakafot ceremony in Simchat Torah and Sukkot was celebrated in our beautiful Sukkah, attached to the synagogue.

We also celebrated Hanukkah with our tradition of lighting the candles every night in many Menorahs.

Unfortunately, this year Purim fell on a long weekend holiday in Suriname and we had to cancel our traditional community Purim party as many young families were out of town. Visiting Suriname in the last few months, we were blessed with the visits of Chai members and ex-members of the community who emigrated over the years to Israel.

Pearl Lipton and Henry Silver from Toronto, Canada had a wonderful visit in Paramaribo, the Jewish Savannah (Jodensavanne) and in

Kabalebo, a small resort deep in the Surinamese jungle; Sharon Valpoort from Amsterdam, Holland and her two young daughters Hava and Sarai are visiting her family.

Baruch Lionarons from Jerusalem, Israel was also visiting his family



Hanukkah tradition of lighting the candles every night in many menorahs

and friends in Suriname. Baruch, an economist, made Aliya to Israel over 30 years ago and lives with his wife and three daughters and son in Jerusalem. Baruch was kind enough to put into writing a summary of his visit. You can read the complete text of that summary (and the complete newsletter) here:

kulanu.org/suriname/chai_news_201704.pdf.



from mapsopensource.com

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The 2016 Hanukkah celebration



Juliette Emanuels (above), who lives in Jerusalem, Israel with her three daughters and their families, decided to celebrate her 90th birthday among her family and friends who still live in Suriname. She boarded the plane from Tel Aviv to Amsterdam and then to Paramaribo all by herself and is currently having a wonderful time. She'll be back in Israel for Passover. We wish Juliette many more years of good health and happiness! *



The 2016 Sukkot service at the Neve Shalom synagogue, Paramaribo, Suriname

Kulanu Notes

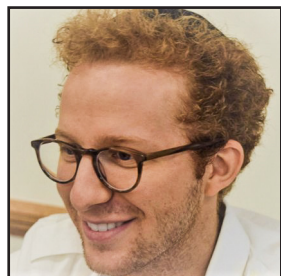
New Board Member: Dr. Ari Greenspan



Kulanu is happy to announce that Dr. Ari Greenspan has joined our Board of Directors. Dr. Greenspan is a U.S. trained dentist with a practice in Jerusalem. He is a mohel (does circumcisions), a shochet (certified and licensed to perform ritual slaughter), and a sofer (scribe). Ari has worked for more than 20 years collecting Jewish traditions and customs from far-flung Jewish communities. He has lectured around the world for dental groups and for many synagogues and Jewish schools. He is a frequent contributor to Mishpacha Magazine. Ari lives in Efrat, Israel with his wife, Shari, and their three children. He will be Kulanu's new regional coordinator for Nigeria.

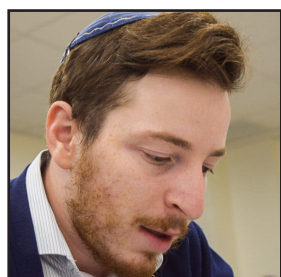
Global Teaching Fellows

This summer, Kulanu is sending five highly talented rabbinical students to five isolated and emerging Jewish communities around the world which seek to deepen their Jewish literacy. These communities have few educational resources and are so excited to host and learn from their volunteer rabbinical students for a month this summer. The communities and their fellows are listed below.



Loren Berman
(Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, N.Y.C.): Ghana

Natan Freller (Zeigler
School of Rabbinical
Studies at American Jewish
University, L.A.): Brazil



Eliyahu Freedman
(Yeshivat Chovevei Torah,
N.Y.C.): Cote d'Ivoire

Miriam Liebman (Jewish
Theological Seminary,
N.Y.C.): Uganda



Margo Hughes Robinson
(Jewish Theological Seminary,
N.Y.C.): Guatemala



Our partners in this program include:



Miller Introduction to
Judaism Program
OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

Notes, continued

Remy Ilona: Graduation Reception



On Saturday, May 6th, Kulanu celebrated Remy Ilona's graduation from Florida International University with a dessert reception at Temple Emanuel in Miami Beach. Remy spent the last two years studying with Professor Tudor Parfitt at FIU. He recently completed his master's degree in Religious Studies with a special focus on Global Jewish Studies.

Remy, a lawyer from Abuja, Nigeria, has served as Kulanu's liaison to Nigeria since 2004. With Kulanu's support, he has researched and published books about his Nigerian Jewish community, the Igbos. **Mazel Tov, Remy!**



Remy celebrating Havdalah with Kulanu board members and supporters at the reception in his honor



Kulanu and friends honoring Remy on graduating with a master's degree

Speaking Events

Kulanu's Vice President, **Bonita Nathan Sussman**, was invited to speak as part of a panel discussion at the African Studies Association conference in Washington, D.C. last November. The A.S.A. has recently acknowledged Judaizing in Africa as a serious academic pursuit. Included in the panel discussion were Nathan Devir (University of Utah, and Chair, Kulanu Academic Cohort), Marla Brettschneider (University of New Hampshire), and Bill Miles (Northeastern University). Bonita also gave a speech at the same conference on the much-debated discussion amongst re-emerging Jews: "To Convert or not to Convert, That is the Question."



Board member **Barbara Vinick** was a guest speaker in January 2017 for the Northern New England Hadassah installation celebration, held at Brandeis University. Her presentation, entitled "Lost and Found: The Jews of Madagascar," focused on the Jewish community of Madagascar and included Barbara's own photos of her time there. She gave another presentation about Madagascar at the Manchester, Connecticut Hadassah donor event on May 9th.

Board member **Daneel Schachter** gave a speech in December 2016 at Toronto's Darchei Noam Synagogue on the topic "Emerging Jewish Communities in Brazil and Elsewhere in Latin America." Daneel was invited to speak on behalf of the Jewish Diversity Committee and shared some of his unique experiences visiting countries in Latin America and the emerging Jewish communities there. *



Community Seders in Zimbabwe

From the Harare Lemba Newsletter, Volume 3, May 25th, 2017. Available in its entirety here: kulanu.org/lemba/hlsnewsletter2017-5.pdf.

Pesach I Mberengwa

By Hilary Zhou

For the past 5 years, starting in 2012, the Lemba Jews in Zimbabwe have been celebrating Pesach as a community in the form of giant community seders. The first ever seder for us as Lemba Jews was celebrated in Mapakomhere in Masvingo province of Zimbabwe in 2012, when Kulanu's regional coordinator Sandy Leeder came and organized a community seder for the Lemba Jews of that rural community. In many ways that seder marked the beginning of the Lemba's journey towards reintegrating with mainstream Judaism. Ever since then we have introduced the seder to the Harare Lemba Synagogue (a community of Lemba who live in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe), and this year we added Mberengwa, bringing the number of community seders in the country to 3.

"The first ever seder for us as Lemba Jews was celebrated in ... 2012."

Bringing the seder to Mberengwa was long overdue; as a district that boasts the largest Lemba population in Zimbabwe it is only fitting that Mberengwa has its own seder. Despite having the largest Lemba population, Mberengwa also has a substantive Lemba traditional chief and it is the hub of Lemba culture and traditions, and for those reasons bringing the seder to this community was logical. For many years, the people of Mberengwa have been patiently waiting for the seder and modern Judaism to be introduced to their district and this year they were able to see that dream come true.

The intensive education that I received through the Kulanu-sponsored Harare Lemba synagogue education programs, including learning with teachers like Guershon and other visiting teachers, did not only give me a deep understanding of what this holiday was about, but also prepared me to lead the first ever seder in my home district of Mberengwa. Leading the Harare Lemba synagogue seder last year also helped a lot in preparing me for this great day.



Map from: ontheworldmap.com

The venue for the Mberengwa seder was at Chegato Primary School, a school that is close to a Lemba village called Masarira. Masarira village consists of about 200 households mainly of the Madi clan, while there are also the Sadiki, Hamis, Mani, and Sarif clans in the village; it is located a few kilometers from the Dumbwi Mountain where the ngoma lungundu used to be housed. The village has a population of about 5000, but currently only about 2000 due to the rural-urban migration when people move to cities in search of jobs and sources of living.

We started preparing for the seder early Monday morning, lighting fires for cooking and roasting meat. Our shochet, Vupamwe Zhou, 15 years old, is an apprentice and will one day replace the village shochet. He acted as the village shochet, meeting the daily slaughtering requirements and slaughtering the sheep for the Pesach seder. Vupamwe was selected to be the village shochet because he has never set his foot outside the district, which means he is believed to have never eaten non-Lemba kosher food and is also believed to have never eaten from a non-Lemba household. According to Lemba traditions, for one to be a shochet they must be known to have adhered to Lemba dietary laws all their life.

continued on next page

Zimbabwe: *continued from previous page*

After the skinning and burning of the hides and chametz, it was time to set the seder tables at the school dining hall.

“Please tell our dear brothers and sisters who have made this possible to send us rabbis to teach us.”

Sheron, my wife, took this opportunity to teach and share her knowledge with the ladies about how to set the Ke’ara (seder plate). She had lettuce and ginger for maror; charoset which she prepared with apples, cinnamon, raisins, nuts and red wine; karpas; a boiled potato; Z’roa, the roasted lamb and goat bones; and beitzah, a hardboiled egg, which completed the seder plate. A bottle of wine, a cup of salt water, matzot, and translated copies of the Haggadah completed the set for each table. One of the elderly ladies, Mrs. Makuvaza, who was helping with the dining hall preparations, was very happy about what she called the greatest reunion: “What we want now is to continue to learn, and our great wish now is to have services. Please tell our dear brothers and sisters who have made this possible to send us rabbis to teach us.” Hopefully with enough learning I will be able to take up the role of leading services for the village.

As we waited for the lighting of the candles and the shehecheyanu, since it was a first for most people, I took the time to give a brief background of the seder and the story of the Exodus and its meaning and why we eat and drink wine and tell the story of the Exodus. I also took the time to teach about chametz and the dietary requirements for Passover, and how different traditions have different dietary observances, which brought us to a discussion on which tradition we were supposed to follow for Pesach: the Ashkenazi or the Sephardic traditions. The decision will be made by the Halacha committee sometime this year. I also took time to explain how this, our first seder in Mberengwa, was a significant one since it symbolized our coming back to mainstream Judaism.

A temperate mood presided in the dining hall as everyone listened while we discussed the Pesach seder and its traditions. “We need books and tallit so that we can read and learn Jewish law and practices, since we had lost our books long ago. Please thank everyone who made this possible for us; this is indeed a dawn of a new era in our lives,” said Mr. Zvoushe Zhou.

After the candle lighting, it was time to begin the seder service, which we began with the reciting of the Kiddush and the drinking of the first of the 4 cups of wine. There was a bit of pushing and shoving as all our junior guests jostled to be the one to ask the four questions. We eventually settled to have 4 kids to ask a question each, from four of the five clans present, and this gave an amicable ending to the jostling. Due to the enthusiasm from the kids, for the afikoman search we decided to have only the girls participate as only the boys had participated in the asking of the four questions. The ultimate prize of a bar of chocolate went to Elsinah Ngavi while all the other children also received sweets as a compliment for their participation.

“Please thank everyone who made this possible for us; this is indeed a dawn of a new era in our lives.”

We recited the Birkat Hamazon, then the Nirtzah, and finally it was time to say our goodbyes. It was a wonderful night of eating, song, and dance. About 70 women, men and children gathered to celebrate Pesach in Masarira village. Their ages varied from a year old to 80 years. Finally the modern seder was introduced to the Lemba Jews in Mberengwa. Hopefully soon we will have services and eventually build a synagogue for the community one day.

I would like to thank everyone who made this special night possible, Kulanu and its donors for the donation that made this event a resounding success, and Natasha Simcha Butchart for sourcing the matzot. *

Volunteer Spotlight: Ed Rensin

Editor's Note: Each issue will focus on a volunteer or volunteers who make a difference in the communities we serve. In this issue, Ed Rensin from New York shares with readers why he has chosen to help Kulanu in its mission to serve Jewish communities around the world.



Rachman Nachman (left) and Ed Rensin (right) with Ugandan friends

Were someone to have asked me ten or fifteen years ago about my plans for the impending retirement years, engaging with and helping support African Jewish communities undoubtedly would never have entered into consideration. How time, circumstances, and Kulanu have opened up a new world for me!

In the late 1990s I found myself singing intermittently in a local temple choir when, arriving early for a rehearsal one evening, I perused a bulletin board in the lobby on which was posted a flyer with information about a Moses Synagogue in Mbale, Uganda. I tried to obtain further information from the contact person listed on the poster, but was unsuccessful on at least two tries. Then, several years later, I serendipitously met and became very friendly with a Ugandan couple living in New York. She, Juliana, a home health nurse who lovingly cared for my aged mother for two years, and her husband, “Father” Joel, a local Episcopal pastor, hailed from, of all places, Mbale, where they still maintain a home housing a large extended family. As a member of the clergy active both in New York and Uganda, Father Joel knew of the Abayudaya community and on my first journey to their country in 2008 we visited Moses Synagogue and were fortunate enough to be welcomed by Rabbi Gershom

and several other officials. After touring the Abayudaya complex at Nabugoye just outside Mbale, I offered to provide a scholarship for a student at Semei Kakungulu High School. Rabbi Gershom told me to contact Kulanu to make the donation, and so began my relationship with this amazing organization.

Since then I have become more and more active as a Kulanu volunteer, most often being called upon to chauffeur visiting international speakers to and from their lectures and to serve as a tour guide. I have hosted numerous visitors from Africa, Asia, and Central America, and have maintained close and lasting friendships with many of these wonderful people. Among the countless fascinating experiences I have had since “discovering” Kulanu, perhaps the most significant were: attending the beit din of two young initiates from emerging Jewish communities in India and Nicaragua, assisting and participating with a young Muyudaya musician living in New York with his “gigs,” and helping another Muyudaya in Uganda to open and run a school in his impoverished community.

Although Kulanu serves Jewish communities throughout the world, my focus has remained on the Abayudaya. Since 2008, I have visited Uganda once or twice each year and always receive a genuinely warm welcome from my friends there. For me, personal contact is much more meaningful than simply seeing the scenery from the window of a tour bus. Each time I go to Uganda, I feel more and more at home. There is always someone to visit who is eager to offer hospitality, some new project to see and discuss, and, yes, some new problems and troubles to help overcome.

I am eternally grateful to Kulanu and to those people this organization supports for enhancing my perception of Judaism. Before my Kulanu days, I more or less took my Judaism for granted, perhaps paying it little more than occasional lip service, but now it plays a much more significant and meaningful role in my life. *

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Kulanu ("All of Us") is a tax-exempt organization of Jews of varied backgrounds and practices, which works with isolated and emerging Jewish communities around the globe, supporting them through networking, education, economic development projects, volunteer assignments, research, and publications about their histories and traditions.

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KULANU

*Supporting Isolated and
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around the Globe*

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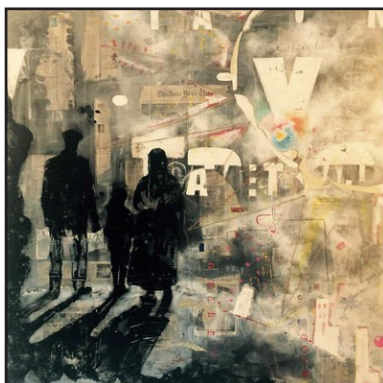
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Meet Jonatas Chimen, who will be collaborating with Kulanu to speak at events across North America from October to June. Jonatas is a Brazilian-American Jewish artist who expresses his experiences and identity as a member of the B'nei

Anousim community through his art. Jonatas' family come from the Crypto-Jewish tradition in Spain/Portugal, and he is descended from victims of the Inquisition who were forced to convert from Judaism to Christianity.



For more information on the speaking tour, please visit bit.ly/speakingtour17-18.