

THE WRITER teaches a class on Jewish law to members of the community.



## One rabbi's African adventure

### A life-changing visit to a Jewish community in eastern Uganda

• Text and photos: SHIMSHON HAKOHEN NADEL

Nasenyi is a small, rural village outside the city of Mbale in eastern Uganda, not far from the Kenyan border. There is no electricity, running water, sewers or really any infrastructure, just fields, dirt roads and simple, one-room homes made from brick or mud with thatched roofs. Calves, goats and chickens roam the landscape, as do barefooted children carrying jerrycans filled with water drawn from the well. In the air is a stillness, a calm, a simple beauty.

To some Westerners, the village and its residents might appear to be lacking, but the people who live here are some of the happiest, most content people I have ever met. You can see it on their faces and in their eyes.

Nasenyi is home to Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael, an Orthodox Jewish community of approximately 250 souls. Earlier this month, I had the good fortune to spend a week with the community. I was invited to teach Torah and speak about Israel, but I ended up learning much more than I could ever teach.

THE JOURNEY of Uganda's Jews to Judaism began 100 years ago. Semei Kakungulu (1869-1928), a charismatic tribal leader, warlord and statesman, was converted to Christianity by British missionaries and given an area in eastern Uganda to govern and establish British rule. After studying the Bible, he found the truth in

the Five Books of Moses. According to one tradition, he may also have learned about Judaism from a Jewish traveler doing business in Uganda. With time, Kakungulu became disillusioned with both the British and their religion. In 1919, in an act of both political and spiritual rebellion, he converted himself, his family and his tribe to Judaism, founding the Abayudaya (Children of Judah) in Uganda.

A century later, their descendants, numbering around 2,500, are still practicing Judaism and living in eight villages outside of Mbale. Today the community boasts several Jewish primary schools and a Jewish high school, named for Kakungulu.

Most of the Abayudaya underwent a Conservative conversion between 2002 and 2011.

In 2016, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, together with a group of rabbis from Israel, convened an Orthodox *beit din* and Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael converted to Orthodox Judaism. The community recently moved from the village of Putti to nearby Nasenyi, where they host-

I first learned about the Abayudaya almost 20 years ago. An aspiring musician and amateur ethnomusicologist interested in the roots of Jewish folk music, I stumbled on some of their recordings. (Later, a CD of their music released in 2003 would be nominated for Best Traditional World Music Album at the 47th Grammy Awards.) To my ears their music was original and exotic, yet familiar: Jewish texts and prayers set to East African musical motifs, harmonies and rhythms. I fell in love, and I began to research the community's fascinating history.

Last year, Moshe, a student of mine originally from Uganda currently living with his family in New Jersey,

came to Jerusalem to study in yeshiva. I surprised him with my knowledge of his community's history and its music. He connected me with members of Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael, and they invited me to spend time in their community.

THE TREK to Nasenyi was not easy, but it was worth it. It involved doctor visits, immunizations, antimalar-



UNDER BLUE skies in the village of Nasenyi.



CHILDREN ON their way home from school in Nasenyi.

ials, flights through Africa, and the long, seven-hour drive through the Ugandan countryside from Entebbe to Mbale.

Leaving Entebbe Airport, we passed the old terminal, where one of Israel's boldest operations on foreign soil took place – the rescue by IDF commandos of hostages after a hijacking in 1976. Signs along the roadway warn drivers that this site is protected by Uganda's Special Forces Command and photography is strictly prohibited. My driver warned me that if we stopped, we could be detained and my camera confiscated – or worse. (Having spent part of the previous day visiting a Jewish inmate in an Ethiopian prison, I had no desire to see the inside of a Ugandan prison.)

Seeing the old terminal was emotional. Ever since I was a child, I have been captivated by the courage, heroism and sheer brilliance of Operation Thunderbolt/

Jonathan. It is a story that is seared into our collective memory as Jews, and resonates with anyone who believes in Israel's right to defend itself and protect its citizens – even on foreign soil. It's no coincidence that this mission is the subject of at least six feature films and countless documentaries.

As we passed the old terminal, I said a little prayer for Yoni Netanyahu, brother of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who made the ultimate sacrifice, giving his life in order to save Jewish lives while leading this daring operation.

The old terminal also serves as a reminder of Idi Amin and his cruel reign over Uganda. Under his regime, Judaism was outlawed and synagogues destroyed. At the time, the Abayudaya went underground and practiced their religion in secret. This is a community that has struggled and sacrificed to preserve its connection to Judaism.

In Kampala, we met with members of Marom, a Jewish student group that services the needs of the members of the Abayudaya living and studying in the country's capital. We also stopped at Chabad (yes, there is even a Chabad in Uganda!), where Rabbi Moshe Raskin and his wife, Yocheved, nourish the hungry bodies and souls of Israeli backpackers, tourists and businesspeople passing through.

In Jinja, we crossed over the Nile River. Having always associated the Nile with biblical Egypt, I was surprised to learn that one of its main tributaries, the White Nile, originates in Uganda, flowing north.

Finally, we arrived in Nasenyi. I spent time getting to know the members of the community, and was impressed by the synagogue's leadership and organization, despite not having a rabbi. We prayed together, sang together and studied together. Their weekday prayers would put most synagogues to shame. While most of us rush through *Pesukei D'Zimra*, the verses of song and praise to God which begin our daily morning prayers, Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael actually sings them every single day!

I gave classes, teaching about Shabbat, prayer and Israel, and was inspired by the community members' passion. They hung on every word and drank it up with thirst. This community has a deep love for the Torah of Israel, the people of Israel, and the Land of Israel.

I taught and sang with the children of the community, whose bright smiles are a bright hope for the future. I visited the Hadassah Primary School, where students taught me some of their songs, and I taught them some of my own. The children appreciated the

Israeli snack foods like Bamba and Bissli and the chocolate wafers I brought with me. Teaching them to make blessings was just a ruse to be able to share with them a taste of Israel.

Members of the community also deeply appreciated the tefillin, tallitot and Jewish books I brought with me, gifts from members of my synagogue in Jerusalem. I explained that the tefillin and tallitot represent our deep bond with God and serve as a constant reminder of that intimate relationship. My hope is that they will also serve as a reminder of the deep bond between our communities.

Having recently moved from Putti to Nasenyi, Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael prays in a makeshift synagogue and has plans to build a permanent house of worship. Members are also undergoing agricultural training, so they can develop the plot of land next to the synagogue and sell its produce commercially to support the community.

UPON MY return to Israel, a story about the Abayudaya was making headlines. A member of the Conservative Abayudaya community was denied a student visa to study in Israel. The Orthodox community, too, has faced similar challenges. A student of mine from Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael was accepted to a Jerusalem yeshiva and granted a full scholarship, but sadly was unable to attend, as the State of Israel did not grant him a visa.

When I met with Gershom Sizomu, rabbi of the Conservative community and member of Uganda's parliament, we discussed the many challenges the Abayudaya face. It was inspiring to see how the different communities work together in harmony, to achieve common goals – something many of our Jewish communities can learn from.

Following a Birthright trip to Israel in August, the Abayudaya are getting more and more media attention, in Israel and abroad. Currently, they are looking for recognition from the State of Israel, and seeking greater acceptance in the Jewish world.

In the meantime, they continue to pray and study and serve God with a passion and a joy that are unrivaled. ■

Those interested in helping to support the community should contact the Putti Village Assistance Organization, [www.puttivillage.org](http://www.puttivillage.org)

The writer lives and teaches in Jerusalem, where he serves as rabbi of Har Nof's Kehilat Zichron Yosef.



JONATHAN LALI, a village resident, in front of his parents' home.



PRAYING WITH members of Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael.