



A JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF AFRICA

ONE RABBI'S VISIT WITH THE ABAYUDAYA OF EASTERN UGANDA



RABBI SHIMSHON NADEL

When not travelling to Jewish communities in the far-flung corners of the world, Shimshon HaKohen Nadel lives and teaches in Jerusalem, where he serves as rabbi of Har Nof's Kehilat Zichron Yosef.



I first learned about the Jews of Uganda almost 20 years ago. An aspiring musician interested in the roots of all sorts of Jewish folk music, I stumbled on some of their recordings. (Later, a CD of their music, released in 2003, was nominated for 'Best Traditional World Music album' at the 47th Grammy Awards.) To my ears, their music was original and exotic, yet familiar. Tefillot and Jewish texts set to East African musical motifs, harmonies and rhythms. Hebrew, Luganda, and Lugwere were sewn and sung together seamlessly. I was instantly smitten. I fell in love with their music and their story. And I began to research this community's fascinating history.

The journey of Uganda's Jews to Judaism began 100 years ago. Semei Lwakireenzi 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, Yosef, 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 (lit. 'Children of Judah').

A century later, their descendants, numbering around 2,500, are still practicing Judaism and living in 8 villages outside the city of Mbale in Eastern Uganda, near the border with Kenya. Today the community boasts several Jewish primary schools and a Jewish High School, named for Kakungulu.

Over the past two decades, many members of the Abayudaya subsequently converted to Conservative Judaism. But one group, practicing



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Orthodox Judaism, wanted an Orthodox conversion. After a number of visits by rabbis from Israel, in 2016 a Beit Din was convened and Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael converted to Orthodox Judaism.

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 their music. He connected me with members of Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael. I began communicating with them online, even teaching Torah and answering their halachik inquiries. They invited me to spend a week in their community and teach. But I ended up learning much more than I could ever teach.

Having recently moved from the nearby village of Putti, Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael makes its home today in Nasenyi, a small rural village just outside Mbale. In Nasenyi there is no electricity, no running water or

really any infrastructure. Just fields, dirt roads, and simple one-room homes made from brick or mud huts 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. For the first time in my life I really understood the Mishnah, “Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot” (Avot 4:1).

The trek to Nasenyi was not easy. But it was worth it. It involved doctors visits, immunizations, antimalarials, flights through Africa, and the long 7+ 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. As today it serves as a military airport, 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 stop, we can 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 meaningful for me. Ever since I was a child I have been captivated by the courage, heroism, and sheer brilliance of Operation Thunderbolt/



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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 herself and protect her citizens - even on foreign soil. It's no wonder that this mission is the subject of at least six feature films, and countless documentaries.

As we passed the Old Terminal, we said a little prayer for Yoni Netanyahu, brother of Prime Minister Bibi 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. During the 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 their connection to Judaism.

An hour drive from Entebbe and we reached the capital city, Kampala. 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.

Kampala is also home to a Chabad House. Yes, there is even a Chabad in Uganda! Rabbi Moshe Raskin, together with his wife Yocheved, nourish the hungry bodies and souls



of Israeli backpackers, tourists, and businesspeople passing through. They supplied me with food for the week (and probably enough food for two-weeks!).

Heading East to 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. Like the river, history here runs deeper than I thought I knew.

Finally we arrived in Nasenyi. I spent time getting to know the members of the community, and was impressed by the community'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 which begin our daily morning prayers, Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael actually sings them every single day!

I gave classes, teaching about Shabbat, Tefillah, and Israel, and was inspired by their 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 berachot 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, tzitzit, siddurim and the and Jewish books I brought with me, gifts from members of my synagogue in Jerusalem. I explained how the tefillin and tzitzit represent our deep bond with Hashem, 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 their community and mine in Jerusalem.

Having recently moved to Nasenyi, Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael prays in a makeshift synagogue and has plans to build a permanent Beit Kneset. They are also going through agricultural training so they can develop the plot of land next to the synagogue, and sell its produce commercially to support the community.

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 greater 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 Hashem with a passion and a joy that is unrivaled.

I arrived curious, and left inspired. My life forever changed.

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