



(Uriel Messa)

**A perfect vacation home  
in Herzliya Pituah**

24  
**HOMES**

16 **TRAVEL**

**Witnessing Jewish life  
in Africa**

28 **FIRST PERSON**

**Rejecting apartheid in  
Jerusalem**

29 **SHORT STORY**

**Two dance partners discover it  
really takes two to tango**

30 **FOOD**

**The new strategy to eating  
healthy**

## Two Israelis travel to Africa to witness its many connections to Israel and Judaism – and find them in the oddest of places

• **ARI Z. ZIVOTOFSKY and ARI GREENSPAN**

**W**hen a person thinks of deepest, darkest Africa, with gorillas in the mist and baboons howling from the treetops, Uganda may come to mind. When one ponders the locations of vibrant Jewish communities, Uganda does not even make the list. Yet this equatorial African country has a century of connections with the Jewish people.

We decided to travel there with the main purpose of visiting the “Orthodox” branch of the Abayudaya, a tribe of Africans who accepted Judaism upon themselves in 1919. However, along the way we sought out other Jewish connections and history in this primitive and destitute African nation.

Our point of entry was the country’s main airport: Entebbe. We were met there by a kippa-wearing young Ugandan named Enosh Keki Mainah, the spiritual leader of the aspiring Jewish residents of the “Orthodox” village of Putti. Before heading out for the supposed four-hour drive to Mbale, the city near Putti where we would be staying, we took him on an unexpected adventure with us.

### Escape from Entebbe: Part 2

For most Jews, Entebbe is associated with the famous IDF rescue of Jewish hostages on July 4, 1976, when our special forces, including the assault unit commanded by Lt.-Col. Yonatan Netanyahu, made military history with the miraculous operation.

Anybody old enough to remember it can surely recall where they were on that day. On June 27, an Air France plane originating in Israel was hijacked shortly after taking off from Athens en route to Paris. It was diverted to Entebbe via Libya. There, the Jewish and Israeli passengers were separated from the others, who were then released. The Air France captain refused to leave; shockingly he was later disciplined for his courage. Once it was on the ground in Entebbe, 20 km. from the capital city of Kampala, dictator Idi Amin Dada offered his support and help to the captors.

Idi Amin was a megalomaniac who dressed himself up like a caricature of a dictator, awarding himself titles and ranks; his uniform was covered in medals of his own invention. The IDF rolled a Mercedes similar to Idi Amin’s, as well as soldiers, doctors, and equipment, onto four C-130 Hercules airplanes. They flew low over the Red Sea to avoid enemy detection and came in at night over Lake Victoria. There were several objectives in the raid: first and foremost, to get the hostages out safely from the main terminal building; second, to knock out the Ugandan military personnel and the hostage-takers, most of whom were in and around the main control tower; and finally the destruction of the Ugandan air force and its Russian planes and radar installations. Miraculously, the operation succeeded.

We were headed to Entebbe and wanted to see what was left of the battle site, as well as to recite a memorial prayer for those who fell during the raid, including Netanyahu. We stopped at the main



WITH THE brides and grooms at their Jewish-style wedding in Mbale.

(Courtesy)

# A Jewish adventure in Africa

police station in charge of security for both the country's international airport and the air force base where the raid took place, and were dismissed. The cop sitting out front told us we were "too small [unimportant] to give you permission to enter the base," and as if to underscore how significant the security was, he continued with an exaggeration: "The president of the country needs to know the name of every person entering the base."

Not to be dissuaded, we drove over to the base and went to the first gate we saw. Two guards were there, holding their AK-47 rifles loosely on their shoulders. We explained that we wanted to say a prayer in Netanyahu's memory and see this

important historical site. Like all other Ugandans we encountered, they knew of the raid and remembered it positively, as it was the first crack in Idi Amin's rule.

They asked if we had weapons; we showed them that we did not. They answered us in Swahili, but the rough translation in Yiddish might have been "*drei mi nisht kain kup*" – don't bug us any more. They handed us security passes in exchange for our passports, which they dumped in a cardboard box under a tree, and before we knew it we were strolling down the runway of a Ugandan air force base, passing UN planes, fighters and helicopters.

We ambled to the old control tower on

the far end of the base, which is still pockmarked with bullet holes. At the base of the tower is a memorial plaque dedicated in 2005 by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. In a 2008 meeting with the Netanyahu family in Jerusalem, Museveni announced that he would be converting the tower into a museum. As of our visit, nothing had been done toward that goal, and even access to the site was difficult.

Just before Dr. Ethan Schuman, who was traveling with us from St. Louis, began the "*El Malei Rahamim*" prayer, a motorcycle with two large men approached us, and they asked what the



**THE OLD** control tower is still pockmarked with bullet holes. At the base, is a memorial plaque dedicated in 2005 by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. (Courtesy)

The Abayudaya are now on the Jewish map as never before... They are well aware that they are from non-Jewish roots, but seem sincere in their desire to live Jewish lives

heck we were doing. We explained, and the two security men stood at attention and even answered "Amen." We then entered the tower with their escort, and they photographed us with the Ugandan air force base sprawled below us.

As we exited, a second, more serious security detail appeared and thoroughly questioned us. We explained the story, presented our passes and told them we were done; we started leaving as they continued to schmooze among themselves. As we retreated down the runway, however, a large C-130 transport plane caught our eyes. The IDF had swooped down 35 years ago using these planes. We couldn't resist the urge, so we talked our way onto the plane and even got permission from the crew chief to go up to the cockpit.

That was when the trouble began. The security men were back, this time with weapons, and we were herded off to the police station. Our passports were confiscated, mug shots were taken, statements were transcribed, and we sat for three nervous hours while our future was decided. Uganda's finest seemed somewhat perplexed about these three middle-aged, educated Westerners who had wandered onto their air force base. After the interrogations though, it was clear that they had fumbled the ball. All we had done was ask permission to enter a restricted area – and received it.

During the questioning, we explained that we were religious Jews and even pulled out our *tzitzit* to show them we were wearing religious garments. When the head policeman delivered the verdict, he was like the good cop-bad cop routine all rolled into one. First, he glared at us and made us squirm in silence for 30 seconds. Next he told us that we had done something very wrong – we had "taken advantage of two soldiers who had probably not eaten all day!" – and said that next time they would "shoot us like they did to Yonatan Netanyahu." But finally he cracked a thin smile and said that our stories showed we meant no harm and that we were "not criminals."

Although we knew we had done nothing wrong, when we left the country two days later, we wondered if we would be arrested again. We realized that the central police station for the country's only international airport did not have even one computer in it and that they'd had to copy our passport details by hand, so the chances of trouble were slim – but we were still glad to get out safely, and when we landed in Kenya, we were happy to be back in "civilization" once again.

### Trip to Mbale

The trip to Mbale, the city closest to our destination, was well over four hours, closer to seven, and gave us great exposure to the country. We traveled east toward Kenya, along the main Kampala-Mombasa road, the route on which the majority of land-locked Uganda's imports travel. It was a narrow, poorly maintained two-lane road with traffic to rival any city in the world. During the ride, we passed through a forest inhabited by monkeys and over one of the two principal sources of the Nile. We also made a quick stop when we passed a van carrying a kippa-wearing, Hebrew-speaking Abayudaya youth, whom we were to get to know better the next day in the village.

For us, perhaps one of the most significant sites we passed was the railway tracks. In the last decade of the 19th century, Great Britain controlled what were then called Uganda and the East Africa Protectorate. In order to develop them, it constructed the Uganda railway linking the coast at Mombasa with Lake Victoria. Also known as the Lunatic Express, it was famous for Masai attacks, man-eating lions, and political controversy. It was probably this route that gave the erroneous name to one of the early Zionists' most famous controversies.

Development of the east Africa region

was stagnant due to a lack of European settlers. In April 1903, Joseph Chamberlain, then colonial secretary, proposed to Theodor Herzl that part of that region, the Uasin Gishu plateau, be given to the Zionists as a Jewish homeland, and this became known as the "Uganda Plan." On August 23, 1903, Herzl stunned the 592 delegates of the Sixth Zionist Congress by presenting them with this plan as an "emergency measure" to save Jewish lives threatened by violent Russian anti-Semitism. It was clear to all that the Zionists preferred the Land of Israel, and a great debate took place on whether to accept the Uganda Plan as a temporary solution.

Surprisingly one of the blocs of support Herzl had at the congress was the religious Zionist Mizrahi movement under the leadership of Rabbi Isaac Jacob Reines. It has been suggested that the religious Zionists understood that for them, there was no fear of forgetting Jerusalem even if they found a temporary refuge in east Africa. Not all religious Zionists supported the plan; Rabbi Yitzchak Nissenbaum, known as the "traveling Zionist preacher," and Rabbi Meir Berlin both opposed it. Ultimately shelved, the Uganda Plan was one of many resettlement plans outside the Holy Land that never happened.

Although we were in Uganda, we were not traversing territory that nearly became the Zionist state. Much confusion continues to surround the proposal, including over the identity of the region the Zionists were offered. Uganda and the British East Africa Protectorate, known as Kenya since the 1920s, were both under control of the British Foreign Office, but the land offered to Herzl was entirely within the latter region. One possible origin of the confusion is the connection between the plan and the Uganda railway, which at the time was also totally in Kenya but may have lent its name to the proposal.

When we passed the tracks of the Uganda railway, it triggered discussion of the plan and the awful situation the eastern European Jews faced at that time, as well as of the modern State of Israel's success.

We arrived in Mbale, not far from the Kenyan border, late at night – primarily due to the unexpected delay in the police station – and checked into a hotel, looking forward to resting before a busy day with the Abayudaya. Before falling asleep, however, there was one precaution we had to take: setting up the mosquito nets. Despite having received a Yellow Fever vaccination and being on anti-malarial drugs, we had to be extra careful of these mosquito borne diseases. Although we'd brought nets from Israel, it seems all hotels provide them. At the time, the CDC was reporting on a particularly virulent Yellow Fever outbreak in Uganda that had claimed more than 50 lives, and as Enosh later told us, nearly everyone in the village gets malaria.

### The Abayudaya

The exact story of how and why the Abayudaya decided to become Jewish is lost in the limitations of an oral tradition, but the story seems to be a 20th-century



**SINGING AND dancing, in classical African tune and rhythm, to Psalm 53 in Hebrew and their native language.** (Courtesy)

version of the Khazars. The hero of the story and the founder of the Abayudaya was Semei Kakungulu (1869-1928), a warrior and statesman of the powerful Baganda tribe. For many years, he had British support and assisted them by subduing other tribes. In the 1880s, he was converted to Christianity by a Protestant missionary who taught him how to read the Bible in Swahili.

In 1913 he became a Malakite Christian, a group that included some Jewish aspects. The British started limiting his sphere of influence such that in 1917, he moved to the area of Mbale in the western foothills of Mount Elgon. It was there in 1919 that he started his own religious group. The dramatic version of the story says he eventually realized the fallacies in Christianity, tore out the second half of their Bible, and adopted Judaism for himself and his followers, who initially numbered over 3,000.

In 1922 he published a 90-page book of rules and prayers for his community that still showed some Christian influence, and he does not appear to have actually been in contact with any Jews until 1925, at which time several European Jews employed by the British chanced upon his group. He further refined his practices to conform to normative Jewish practices and abolished the last vestiges of Chris-

tianity, such as baptism. By the time he died in 1928, his followers had been circumcised and were attempting to keep Shabbat and kashrut and pray in Hebrew. Kakungulu is buried a short distance from the main Abayudaya synagogue.

Contact with Judaism was always limited, because there were never many Jews in Uganda. When Jews first visited Uganda is open to debate. We know that by the 1860s, British explorers went inland looking for the source of the Nile, finding one of the two branches in Uganda. By the early 20th century, we know of at least two Jews working for the British and a religious Jewish trader by the name of Yosef, who was there and did make contact with the Abayudaya.

In the 1930s and '40s, a small community of European Jews developed. At 3 Kyadondo Road in Kampala, the Masur family held davening in their house. There was never a shul or rabbi, but it seems that there may have been a small Jewish cemetery. The British governor of Uganda was the Jewish Sir Andrew Cohen, and by the 1950s there was a community of about 20 families. We found records in the Nairobi Hebrew Congregation that the small Ugandan community ordered their *matzot* from Nairobi yearly.

During these years, the main Jewish

contacts with the Abayudaya were Victor Franco, an electrical engineer living in Kamapala, and Maurice Levitan, a Jewish trader. By the 1960s, a small Israeli contingent was building houses, roads and even parts of the Entebbe Airport.

SINCE THEIR dramatic start, the Abayudaya have had ups and downs. The death of the charismatic and driven Kakungulu was one factor that led to a sharp decrease in their numbers. Another was the active work of missionaries who refused to admit anyone who did not convert to Christianity into their schools. Those who continued to observe Judaism became even more strengthened in their commitment to the Torah. During the '50s and '60s they had limited but regular contact with Jews – mostly Israelis, of whom there was a large number in Uganda. They provided some Hebrew texts and contact with the outside world.

During the brutal regime of Idi Amin (1971-1979), Israelis were expelled and Judaism was outlawed. The Abayudaya saw a large drop in their numbers, although some truly risked their lives to maintain their Judaism. Enosh shared stories of his father and uncle risking snake and wild animal attacks, as well as exposure by informers, while praying hidden by the African brush. Enosh's



great uncle was arrested for building a *succa* and was released only after the family paid the arresting officer a bribe of five goats.

Following Amin's exile, the 500 remaining members renewed their commitment and reestablished contact with outside Jews. During this extended period, the Abayudaya technically remained non-Jews. Unlike other groups that claim descent from one of the 10 lost tribes, the Abayudaya never made such claims. They knew they originated as non-Jews and that there had never been a formal conversion.

In the 1990s, several US groups took an interest in the Abayudaya, and in 2002 four Conservative rabbis participated in a week-long mission, converting several hundred people. In addition, Enosh's uncle Gershom Sizomu, after earning a BA from the Islamic University in Uganda, went to the US and received ordination from the Conservative Ziegler School in 2008, then returned to his village to function as a religious leader and teacher.

Of course, there's another sure sign of the Abayudaya's Jewishness: They now have a shul they go to and one they don't. Ever since the Conservative mission, two villages of Abayudaya refused those conversions and have been holding

out for a halachic one that will be recognized by the State of Israel. Enosh is the driving force in one of those villages, Putti, and that was our destination.

On the way, however, we made a brief detour to visit Kakungulu's 94-year-old nephew and hear his memories of his famous uncle and the early years of practicing Judaism. Born in 1916, he beat the odds of Uganda's 57-year life expectancy. Living in a small mud hut with his two wives, he vigorously defended the tribe's acceptance of Judaism and differences from their neighbors. He got angry when we asked if they ate meat and milk together. "Of course not!" was his reply.

When we thought to ask him if he had anything from the "old days," he thought for a minute and came out of the house with an old black-and-white picture of his uncle the king, and an old book. We looked at the cover, and in worn out Hebrew letters we saw the title: *Reishit Da'at*, a Hebrew alphabet teacher printed by the Hebrew Publishing Company of New York in the early 20th century. It was astounding to be sitting near his mud hut, bereft of almost any possessions, and holding a Hebrew book printed in New York. The community's history and interest in Judaism could not be denied.

WE THEN headed off to Putti. Schuman explained afterward how to get there: "Drive half an hour from Mbale, make a left, and then go 3,000 years back in time."

It's difficult to describe the village; in most regards, it's straight out of Bible times. However, Western man has been there and left a scattered impact. None of the villages has electricity or running water, but neither do they get water from streams or hand-dug wells. As we passed by, we saw women gathered around hand-pumped wells. In Putti, though, there is a solar-powered pump that brings the water up and sends it to one of two spigots, where women line up to fill up their jerry cans with the precious and increasingly scarce water. Enosh has a laptop with e-mail, via which he communicated with us prior to our arrival. Putti also has several projects funded by overseas Jewish communities, such as a poultry project in which they raise chickens, and a *halla* project.

Our arrival in the community understandably generated considerable excitement, mostly because they viewed it as an opportunity to further their knowledge about Halacha and move closer to eventual conversion. Amid some interesting conversation, we immediately got to work teaching. One young, shy fellow by the name of Moshe talked with us while

**PUTTI VILLAGE.** Drive half an hour from Mbale, make a left, and then go 3,000 years back in time. (Courtesy)



WITH KAKUNGULU'S 94-year-old nephew.

(Courtesy)

'Of course, there's another sure sign of the Abayudaya's Jewishness: They now have a shul they go to and one they don't'

standing in a field of crops. When we asked him what he was studying in university, he said business: "My hope is to be an Orthodox rabbi and a businessman."

The first "workshop" we ran was a lesson in *shechita* (ritual slaughter). They brought out four chickens, and we came prepared with shechita knives and sharpening stones. There was first an explanation of what makes these knives special – no sharp point at the end, and a blade that is perfectly smooth and very sharp. It was explained that the knife must be examined before and after the slaughter, and this was all demonstrated; the *mitzva* of *kisui hadam*, covering the blood post-slaughter, was explained and performed, all with the appropriate blessing. The young men standing around were extremely interested and asked perceptive questions. For each blessing there was a loud, resounding repetition and amen.

The next station was the shul for a Jewish-style wedding. In Mbale, Enosh picked up five rings for the five couples who would be participating in the ceremony. Several of them, including Enosh, who has four young children, have been civilly married for many years. The weddings would be held in the small, lovingly cared-for shul that sits alongside the much larger, partially built brick walls of the future shul.

The Abayudaya knew the rudiments of a Jewish wedding, and we filled in the rest. They knew, for example, the centrality of the *kalla* (bride): The grooms came dressed as they had been all day, while the assembled waited for the women, who were at home getting dolled up in clothes fancier than we imagined existed in that part of the world.

It started with a blessing over the kosher wine we had brought from Israel. This was followed by Enosh reciting the *kiddushin* blessing and the transfer of the rings to the brides. The grooms then broke a glass to the singing of "*Im Eshka-haich Yerushalayim*" (If I forget thee, O Jerusalem).

The glass-breaking was important to them. We forget that it derives from the value that glass used to have and the financial pain it caused to break it. So it is with them. A Jew from the US had "given us money to buy a glass for the wedding," Enosh told us. We asked them if they had a customary wedding song, and in classical African tune and rhythm, they sang and danced to Psalm 53 in Hebrew and their native language.

Not knowing when the next Jewish visitors would appear, they felt a need to prepare for Pessah and asked for instructions in baking *matza*. We constructed a small brick oven – several bricks over a

small area in which wood could be burned – and explained the rudiments of *matza*-baking. They brought out some flour and mixed it with some water. Realizing the table was wet, we looked in vain for a table covering and had to settle for some clean banana leaves. Together we baked a few small *matzot* and left them with instructions on how to improve the setup and make their own.

The split between the Orthodox and Conservative in Uganda does not prevent cooperation and friendship between the two groups, and Enosh next escorted us to the community's main village, Nabugoya, where his uncle, Sizomu, lives and works as a rabbi.

UNFORTUNATELY FOR us, we did not get to meet Sizomu, who was out on the campaign trail. We were in the country two weeks before the elections, which take place once every five years and were scheduled for February 20. Everywhere we went, there were campaign stops with crowds gathered around candidates, listening to speeches. Posters were plastered on every surface, many of them for the incumbent president, Museveni, who has been in office since 1986.

Sizomu was running on the ticket of one of the opposition parties for one of the 332 seats in the National Assembly. We saw several of his posters, in which he clearly and proudly wore a kippa. (No surprise to anyone, the president won reelection and Sizomu lost to the candidate from the ruling NRM party.)

The religious atmosphere in the village was inspiring. The shul walls are lined with *siddurim* and *humashim*, and there are four Torah scrolls in the ark. There was a separate *beit midrash* that had an impressive library, including a complete Artscroll Talmud, and in the back was Sizomu's office – along with an unusual sight: a sink with running water and a flush toilet. We were impressed to see a *gemara* and *mikraot gedolot* (Torah book with major commentaries) on his desk.

There was also a Jewish high school, and of course the "shalom" grocery store. We then bumped into one of Sizomu's students, who made a positive impression on us, as did the pile of books in his small room, most of them Jewish in content.

The Abayudaya are now on the Jewish map as never before. There are organizations in the US and South Africa helping them both economically and spiritually. They are well aware that they are from non-Jewish roots, but seem sincere in their desire to live Jewish lives.

As we parted from the 94-year-old nephew of Kakungulu, he looked at us in contemplation and had us sit for a moment.

"I now know that the teachings of my uncle were correct," he said. "He told us that although you may be just a black man in Africa, time will come and white men from the Land of Israel will come and teach you the ways of Judaism." ■

Other adventures by Ari Zivotofsky and Ari Greenspan can be found at <http://halachicadventures.com>.