



JEWISH CORE IN ISLAND LORE



MADAGASCAR, BEST KNOWN FOR LEMURS, CHAMELEONS, RAIN FORESTS, AND THE BAOBAB TREE, IS ALSO, ACCORDING TO ISLAND LEGEND, ONE OF THE POINTS OF SETTLEMENT OF THE TEN LOST TRIBES. LAST SUMMER, OVER A HUNDRED MEN, WOMEN, AND CHILDREN, DISILLUSIONED WITH THEIR CHRISTIAN TEACHINGS, DECIDED TO CONVERT AND RECONNECT WITH ANCESTRAL TRADITION. WE HAD TO SEE IT FOR OURSELVES

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
Ari Greenspan and Ari Z. Zivotofsky

We have seen some surprising things in our years of halachic adventuring, but never had we expected to meet up with a group of Jewish converts on an island in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Yet when we arrived in Madagascar, a large

island 700 miles from the African coast of Mozambique (you might know it from the Risk game board), we discovered that not only had the group we met undergone a conversion process over this past summer, but that many of the island's inhabitants claim to have their roots in the Ten Lost Tribes. Naturally, we wanted to see for ourselves.

This large and distant island, best known for lemurs, chameleons, rain forests, and the famous baobab tree, is the fourth largest island in the world, almost three times the size of Great Britain. Although it has a population of over 22 million, it is a poor and poorly managed country — but due to its remoteness, it's the only place in the world that lemurs — a cute primate and a distant relative of the monkey — roam freely. There are close to 100 species of lemurs roaming around the country in their natural habitat, but we only had time to see them in a zoo in the capital. Still, we got the full experience, as the little creatures slobbered all over us after the zoo keepers smeared our palms with honey.

Lemurs are certainly fascinating, but we came to investigate Jews. Over the years we have written in these pages about numerous groups we've visited who want

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to or have converted, in some form or another, to Judaism. There's the formerly Christian community of Erode, India who now pray in the Zion Torah center, and the Abuyadaya, a group of Ugandans whose chief accepted Judaism on himself and his tribe 100 years ago and who have since undergone Conservative conversion. In Columbia, South America, there are several shuls of truly *frum* converts, and there are synagogues in Nigeria belonging to the Ibo tribe who claim Jewish descent. In Zimbabwe, the Lemba are practicing Jewish traditions, as are communities in the Ivory Coast and the Cameroons. This phenomenon raises fascinating questions about motivations for conversion and the definition of what a Jewish *kehillah* really is.

Many of these communities have the Christian missionaries to thank for the ultimate move towards Judaism, and Madagascar is no different. One of the lasting legacies of the European

occupation is that more than 50 percent of Malagasies (natives of Madagascar) self-define as Christian. But a number of individuals in the capital city of Antananarivo, after intense study and thought, decided that the true path to G-d was only through Torah and Judaism; others were convinced they had Jewish roots, evidenced by such long-time island practices as near universal circumcision and a widespread avoidance of pork. Back in 1658, Étienne de Flacourt, a French governor of Madagascar, asserted that the locals were descendant from Jews, partly based on the practice of circumcision. Others believe that Portuguese *anusim* settled on the island, and we heard rumors about ancient tombstones with Hebrew writing, although we did not personally see any of them.

Making Radio Waves As residents of Antananarivo began to explore Judaism around five years ago, several

communal leaders emerged: One of them is Andrianarisao Asarery, known today as Ashrey Dayves, a former Protestant pastor and singer who's also a pastry chef with a popular television cooking show and a radio broadcast. He transformed his formerly Christian radio show into an hour of Judaism and Israeli pop music. He says that his grandfather and great-grandfather had claimed to be Jewish.

Then there's Petuela (Andre Jacque



1. Over a hundred Malagasies underwent a conversion procedure, each one fluently versed in prayer and *leining*. We were amazed by how proficient one can become from study through modern technology

2. Ari G. gets a kiss from a lemur, Madagascar's monkey-like mascot

3. We thought we'd get trampled in the crush to greet former president Marc Ravalomanana on his newest campaign trail, but he held back the crowd to tell us how much he loves Israel

4. Touvyia has learned an impeccable Sephardi *nusach*, using it as the daily *chazzan* of the shul he created in his home

Rabisisoa), a computer programmer who conducts Hebrew language lessons and religious radio broadcasts, and Touvyia (Ferdinand Jean Andriatovomanana), a self-taught *chazzan* who sports *peyos* and whose Sephardi *nusach* is impeccable.

The move toward conversion was spearheaded by Ashrey, who functions as president of the Jewish Community of Madagascar, which is also known as Sefarad Madagascar. Ashrey thought conversions would bring legitimacy to the group as well as greater ties to world Jewry and a strengthening of their own commitment,

After several years of study, the group eventually made contact with Kulanu, a New York-based, non-denominational group that works with isolated and emerging Jewish communities. The organization assisted them in furthering their education and arranged for an Orthodox *beis din* to convert over 100 of them. (The Israeli Chief Rabbinate does not recognize these conversions, one reason being that it only accepts conversions done

within a normative community where the potential convert has lived in a Jewish community for at least a year.) While the bulk of the group is in the capital, they are in contact with individuals in more isolated parts of the island as well. Ashrey regularly sends them videos to study, and although there's no accountability on YouTube, it's another place to learn lots of practicalities of Judaism — that's where they learned how to tie tzitzis. One member of the group is a late-night television talk show host with a large following who proudly broadcasts his Jewish connection on his Facebook page. When we were there they did a special show about Judaism.

Royal Welcome In the early centuries, the island of Madagascar served as an important transoceanic trading hub connecting ports of the Indian Ocean, and in the 18th century, the island gained prominence among pirates and trans-Atlantic slave traders. Owing to its massive size, until about 200 years ago different sections were ruled by an assortment of

local rulers. Beginning in the early 19th century, the island was united as the Kingdom of Madagascar, until 1897 when France made it a colony, from which it gained independence in 1960. Today Malagasy is spoken by almost everyone and many of the more educated also speak French. Unfortunately, not many locals speak English, so setting up our visit — in French translation — was a bit of a challenge.

We arrived in Antananarivo, also known by its nickname Tana, disembarked from the plane, and walked across the runway into a small airport with third-world reception capability. Rather than parallel processing visas, after paying the requisite \$30, each person handed his passport to one official who passed it around to a sequence of five officers until the passport was finally returned. We were on the lookout for the people who would be picking us up — we thought they might be holding a sign with our names, but as we rolled our luggage out the doors we were surprised to see a man in a black hat and *kapote*, and another with

MONEY TALKS

One of the most humbling aspects of the trip was to discover just how worthless Ari and Ari are. Well, not exactly. But we discovered that the Madagascar currency, called the “Ariary,” is worth so little that for a dollar you get over 3,000 of them. As the currency bears our name, we were curious as to its origin. Owen Griffiths, our Jewish friend from nearby Mauritius, explained that toward the second half of the 17th century pieces of silver were introduced in sufficient quantities to Madagascar that they could be used as money. At first the Spanish piastres (or Reales) were the most common, having been used by Arab traders who called this coin the ‘riyal’ or ‘rial’. The term quickly became A’rial in Malagasy which in time became ‘Ariary’.



peyos and holding a big “Shalom” banner. Our greeting committee was Petuela and Touvyia. As we climbed into the car, we noticed an Israeli flag dangling from the front mirror.

The long ride to our hotel on the crowded, traffic-clogged, insufficient roadways passed flooded rice paddies, some green with rice plants and others muddy with a thick clay-like earth. And we nearly jumped up as we passed the local, unusual looking bovine with a large hump on its neck that’s used to pull the plows — it was a zebu! We remembered the great debate between the Chazon Ish and Chief Rabbi Herzog regarding the kashrus of exotic animals when the Jews of France wanted to arrange the import of meat to the newly founded State of Israel. And what did they want to bring? The zebu from Madagascar, which we were seeing in all these rice fields.

We eventually arrived in the center of this poor and dirty city to our two-star hotel, but received a ten-star welcome from the Jews. When they converted, they

stopped eating meat because no kosher meat is available on the island. They were desperate to learn how to slaughter chickens and prepare a knife that was proper for *shechitah*. When they heard we were coming they begged us to teach them and to bring knives and stones, which we did.

The next morning we davened in the home of Touvyia, who has turned one room in his house into a shul and another into a *beis medrash*/meeting room. This allowed us our first peek into their Jewish lives. They picked us up early in an old beat-up VW bus, but halfway there the middle seat collapsed and slid back on the backseat passengers. Then it wouldn’t start again. Par for the course in Tana. We eventually arrived at the house — and the place looked like any other shul: men in tefillin and talleisim and a full (and long) Shacharis service. Beautiful kabbalistic, hand-written artwork done by Touvyia adorns the walls. We were admittedly taken aback by Touvyia’s reading out loud of every word in the siddur in a perfect

Hebrew with a Sephardic melody and *nusach*. In fact, unlike other such groups we’ve seen, here every person has been taught to read Hebrew. We pulled over a shy six-year-old who was wearing handmade tzitzis and asked him to show us what he knew — an impressive achievement for people living on an island literally in the middle of nowhere as far as other mainstream Jewish contact is concerned.

Finding Their Way Shabbos presented us with the opportunity to see how the community spends the holy day. They have no formal shul and instead rent a multi-purpose room in a local university (which is also used by a local band), and have arranged the chairs to face north, as they are almost due south of the Land of Israel. A table with a white tablecloth adorned with Shabbos candles and a Chanukah menorah served as the prayer table for the *chazzan*. About 80 people came for both Friday night and Shabbos morning, the men and women sitting on opposite sides of the *mechitzah*. Several of the men had *peyos* and many had tzitzis hanging out.

We led Kabbalas Shabbos, giving them a chance to hear our mainstream tunes. And although there was no Torah available on Shabbos morning and they read from a Chumash, everyone who was called for an “aliyah” read their section themselves, with the correct *leining trop*. The very fact that they can read Hebrew fluently is amazing, and to be able to *lein* the *parshah* properly was, in our opinion, exceptional.

The community has no kosher wine, so that was among the items we brought. In addition, we brought along *esrogim* to plant the seeds, Havdalah candles, two sets of *shechitah* knives and stones, *milah* equipment for a planned bris (that never happened), two shofros, *seforim* in French, and 100 benchers with French translation and transliteration. While most Jews can’t imagine being without Kiddush wine, Chazal could, and thus



ASHREY REGULARLY SENDS THEM VIDEOS TO STUDY, AND ALTHOUGH THERE'S NO ACCOUNTABILITY ON-LINE, IT'S ANOTHER PLACE TO LEARN LOTS OF PRACTICALITIES OF JUDAISM — THAT'S WHERE THEY LEARNED HOW TO TIE TZITZIS

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There are all types of professionals within the Antananarivo community, from professors to journalists to media stars — and even a kollel student

the halachah that in the absence of wine, Kiddush should be made on the challah, and this is what Petuela regularly did for the entire community. We, however, went back to our hotel and enjoyed a glorious meal of canned salmon, some amazing Hungarian salami, olives, and salad.

While the community’s devotion and *emunah* was clear, so was their lack of perspective and understanding of Jewish tradition. We have coined a phrase for these groups — YouTube Judaism. Thirsting for knowledge yet with no teachers, they have availed themselves of modern technology as a means of learning. Almost everything is available nowadays to learn online. Want to learn how to tie tzitzis, *lein* the *parshah*, study philosophy or take challah from bread? Just do a search and somebody has surely made a video. It is truly remarkable how much they have learned this way, but learning Yiddishkeit in a vacuum has its limits.



Moishe, our driver. The hotel might have been two-star, but the warm welcome was a ten

For example, the davening that morning, in which all of Korbanos were recited out loud, took hours, the *shaliach tzibbur* having learned from a Sephardic pronunciation video. One man came to us and asked to mark off in his siddur what was critical to say and what not. It seems that his four-hour daily Shacharis was too much for him.

But we also noticed a certain lack of perspective in terms of halachic behaviors and what was perceived as being central to everyday Jewish life. For some reason they deem Kabbalah as being a central facet of their lives and their religion, and were astounded that we couldn’t answer their questions about that esoteric study. Throughout the course of our stay we were (thankfully) peppered with questions whenever they saw us: in shul, at lectures, sitting in the hotel or driving in the car. They had scraps of paper or notebooks with questions at the ready, and their commitment to Jewish principles was truly impressive. Ashrey,



The “high priest” seemed to be praying for the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash, but we were hard-pressed to believe his “prophecies” were part of an ancient connection to the Jewish People

the TV chef, told us how he turned down a very lucrative job working in a five-star hotel because he assumed he was not permitted to handle pork.

We asked the group what led them to Judaism, and one man responded that he had studied classical philosophies and found them wanting. We wanted to know if he’d read the Google version, but his modest admission was a surprise — he had been a professor of philosophy and was now a judge.

For most of our trip, a woman named Elysha Netsarh, a plant chemistry researcher at the university, was our translator. She speaks perfect Malagasy, French, English and Japanese, and is now, of course, learning Hebrew, using her language skills to prepare a Hebrew-Malagasy siddur and translation of the Torah.

There are all types of professionals within this diverse community. And of course, as in any *kehillah*, there is also the “kollel student.” We asked a very sincere-

looking young man in his 20s what he does and he said he studies Torah all day long. We said to him, “You will be a *rosh yeshivah* one day,” and in all seriousness he responded, “*im yirtzeh Hashem*.”

When we discussed what changes the community felt after undergoing their conversion ceremony, one of the interesting responses was that now that they consider themselves full-fledged Jews, they are more comfortable using *shem Hashem* in their *brachos* and in davening.

We were impressed with this thinking crowd who obviously has a desire to grow and do things right. For example, during our lecture on the significance and halachos of Yom Kippur, when we opened the floor for questions, the first question they asked was that if one of the five *inuyim* is a prohibition of washing, what do we do about *negel vasser*?

Priestly Blessings Madagascar is rife with myths regarding the distant history of the island’s inhabitants. At one point, Ashrey told us about a village that is inhabited by descendants of Kohanim who never converted to Christianity and still carry out sacrifices. He told us he’s convinced that those villagers were from Israelite origin and had Jewish roots and Jewish traditions. Travel takes many hours due to the lack of paved roads, and we arranged to head out at five thirty in the morning to go investigate for ourselves. Located in the Ambohimiadana region, it took us over three and a half hours of off-roading to reach the village of Mananjara, and the traveling gave us some insight into how agrarian, rural, and poor the country is. As the world’s ninth poorest country with a per capita GDP of a mere 972 USD, most people live on \$2 a day. Due to a particularly bad harvest, there is actually

starvation in the south of the country. About an hour into our trip to visit the priestly village, we passed a significant site — the lake that was used as a *mikveh* for all of the community’s conversions. We continued on to the village, which has no running water or electricity (there is a shared, dirty outhouse at the edge of the village). Upon arrival we were told that the religious spokesman was not yet back from the market. Weekly market day is Wednesday, and so — never ones to miss a cultural opportunity — we headed to the market, too. This must be what the Talmudic era markets looked like, with stalls selling all manner of produce and handicrafts; the stall with many exposed wires and lots of power strips where villagers pay a few cents to charge their cell phones is a 21st century addition. The crowd was thick and we soon found out that this was no ordinary market day

— the former president of the country was there on a campaign stop. Born to a farming family, Marc Ravalomanana had made his fortune with a dairy conglomerate and then other businesses, and was subsequently elected mayor of Tana, and eventually was president of the country from 2002-2009. His term ended with what the west called a *coup d'état* when he fled to South Africa and the new government sentenced him in abstentia to hard labor for life. He eventually negotiated for his return, but was placed under house arrest for six months. He has begun his reelection campaign, although the election is more than a year away.

We thought that people were going to be trampled due to the pushing and shoving, but we soon found ourselves schmoozing with the former president. He told us that although he's never been to Israel, as a devout Christian he loves

MAN PLANS

That Madagascar is having a Jewish awakening is an ironic twist of fate, for nearly 80 years ago, in 1937, the government of Poland, with the agreement of France, contemplated deporting Polish Jews to Madagascar, and even sent a three-man Jewish delegation to evaluate the feasibility. These men returned discouraged by the malarial swamps and other difficulties and said that only a few thousand families could possibly be accommodated. But that didn't stop the Nazis from reevaluating the possibility of deporting four million Jews to Madagascar on board what the Nazis thought would be the defeated Royal navy. After Adolf Eichmann gave a detailed report on the Madagascar Project in 1940, the Third Reich officially adopted it, fully expecting the Allies to fail at landing in Europe and anticipating the collapse of England. The Nazis expected to confiscate all Jewish money and use it to pay the costs for shipping 1,000,000 people a year on the captured British supply ships. When the British captured Madagascar in 1942 the plan started to unravel and was ultimately scrapped and replaced with the notion of "evacuation to the East," which of course meant transport to death camps.

The only known Jewish grave on the island belongs to a Jewish soldier who fought in the British army. Originally South African, Captain Israel S. Genussow grew up in Palestine and was a student in England when he joined the war effort in the British army. He served in India, Kenya, and Madagascar, where he was killed on Tishah B'av in 1944 at age 28.

the country and that former president Shimon Peres was his "best" friend.

We returned to the village where the religious spokesman and the high priest awaited us. Like out of a cheap thriller, the high priest, wearing a red papery choir master's robe with wide, flowing sleeves, led us up to a dark attic containing nothing but a table, chairs and one little window. He opened the proceedings by acting as if he were going into a trance-like prayer and then recited a very long prayer in Malagasy. In the short translation that we later got, it seemed that he prayed for (among other things) the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash.

His brother, the PR man, next went into a long, long detailed recitation of their history that included many miracles, including miraculous victories over neighboring armies less than 100 years ago. Finally, after about 45

minutes — as we were about to doze off — we finally interrupted and told him we had to be leaving. Outside we were shown their new "museum" in which they have a large stone altar (no pictures allowed) and the new temple they are building. Every aspect of this planned seven-story building in a town in which nothing is above two stories is being revealed to them in prophecies. But what complicates matters is that different people are receiving different prophecies for different parts of the structure. It seems they are hoping to build a tourist site, sort of a local Disneyland, myth by myth. We wished them best of luck as we took our leave, quite convinced that in this village at least, nothing we saw indicates an ancient connection to the Jewish people.

Driving back to Antananarivo, we passed many rice fields and were told

how in many of the villages the elders separate a portion of the first fruits as an offering, a practice reminiscent of *bikkurim*. As we entered the city, Petuela pointed to some trees. "You see these trees? These are cedar trees. These are the trees our ancestors cut down and sent to Jerusalem when Solomon was building the Temple." According to their tradition, Madagascar is the biblical land of Ophir and provided wood for the gates of the Beis Hamikdash.

Whether or not the Malagasies are indeed of Jewish descent, if their ancestors were in fact seafaring members of the Ten Lost Tribes, or whether, as one descendant of the Merina monarchy of Madagascar proudly told JTA, up to 80 percent of Malagasies can claim Jewish roots, we certainly were moved by this group's devotion, *emunah*, and powerful desire to be part of Am Yisrael. ●