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Be'chol Lashon Newsletter • May 2007

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The Be'chol Lashon newsletter contains items of interest from worldwide Jewish communities. It serves to further educate isolated Jewish individuals and communities about the policies and practices of the mainstream Jewish community and to educate Jews in the mainstream about others with whom they may not be familiar.

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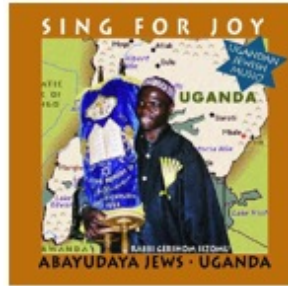
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ABAYUDAYA COMMUNITY UPDATES



Rabbi Gershom Sizomu Releases new CD, Sing for Joy

Music has long been a motivating force for religion in Africa and has been critical to the survival of the Abayudaya community. After dictator Iddi Amin Dada's ban on Judaism in the 1970s, Abayudaya community leaders used music to attract people back to Judaism. Inspired by the success of local Christian missionaries, this strategy successfully compelled many youth to return to the almost extinct Abayudaya community. The community has borrowed and adapted to forge a new, distinctly Jewish music.

All proceeds from this CD contribute to the health and well being of the Abayudaya and surrounding multi-faith communities.

To download the music digitally, please visit iTunes. Order a copy of the new Sing for Joy CD at cdbaby.com or amazon.com.

Water, The Gift of Life



The Abayudaya Jewish Community of Uganda is one of the many Jewish communities around the world in partnership with Be'chol Lashon. At the request of the Abayudaya leadership, Be'chol Lashon works with the community to build infrastructure, including providing medical care to all residents of their sub-county: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim.

All funds raised for the Abayudaya Health Plan have been matched dollar-for-dollar by a challenge grant, as will all the additional donations. This inspirational project is becoming a reality through your generosity.

To donate now, [click here](#).



Well Report

The water from the borehole was tested by the Ugandan water authority for quality and reliability. We are delighted to announce that the water has received an excellent report.

Israel Siriri, the community engineer, has started laying the pipes to transport the water from the well to Nabagoye Hill, the site of the health clinic. He has also applied for a city electric line to run to the well site to power the electric pump. The local government will issue the permit within the next few weeks.

Before First Aid Room Renovation **First Aid Room**



During First Aid Room Renovation

While the Medical Clinic is being built, an already existing room is being refurbished to serve as a first aid room to provide emergency care and preventative education for HIV and Malaria.

The plastering of the first aid room is now complete and a new ceiling and front door have been installed. The construction team is putting on the finishing touches, by installing the dispensing window and new doorframes, including mosquito screens. Additionally, the screens are being ordered for each of the homes to protect against mosquitoes.



Dr. Samson Wamani is purchasing medical supplies and he has approached the Mbale district director of health services to donate vaccines to augment the first aid room. The Abayudaya Health Committee is interviewing potential applicants to fill the positions of day and evening staff nurses.

EVENTS & COMMUNITY UPDATES

Be'chol Lashon Celebrates at Israel in the Gardens

June 3, 2007, 10am-3pm
Yerba Buena Gardens, San Francisco



Celebrate Jewish Diversity at Northern California's largest Jewish festival, Israel in the Gardens! More than 15,000 people unite once a year to rejoice and commemorate Israel's independence.

Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, spiritual leader of the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda will feature music from his new CD, *Sing for Joy*. Plus! Drum Circle & Crafts at the Be'chol Lashon Tent. Free Event. For more information go to IsraelintheGardens.org.

Rabbi Gershom Sizomu Featured in the j.

Dan Pine, May 25 2007, j. Weekly

At this year's Israel in the Gardens, a Jewish percussionist from Uganda will lead a parade of Israel supporters around the Gardens. All the way around. "Walk a Mile for Israel," which circumnavigates Yerba Buena Gardens, is but one part of the entertainment on tap at the Bay Area's annual love-in for the Jewish state.

Donny Inbar, the director of culture and events for the Israel Center, is helping to assemble the entertainment lineup, and he promises a day of nonstop fun. "It's the most incredible thing that the entire Jewish community unites once a year, celebrating Israel," he says. "It's our Cinco de Mayo." In addition to headliner/Israeli superstar Rita, several other bands, choruses and folk dance ensembles will take the main stage. Throw in the Israeli film festival, a theater festival and annual fashion show, and Israel in the Gardens is the entertainment bargain of the year. Remember, it's free.

On the main stage, the [Mah Tov](#) Band will perform, warming up the crowd before Rita. Congregation Beth Am Rabbi Josh Zweiback, Steve Brodsky and Ken Chasen round out the line-up and, although their music has a distinctly Jewish accent, these guys can rock.

Mah Tov may be homegrown, but Tzofim is straight out of Israel. Founded in 1919, Tzofim was the first Zionist youth movement in Israel and the first egalitarian scouting movement in the world, with boys and girls participating on an equal basis. Today there are more than 300,000 Tzofim graduates, and a few of them will be in San Francisco to sing at Israel in the Gardens.

The fashion show has become one of the most popular events. Mix top Israeli designers with local Jewish "celebrity" models, and you've got a runaway runway on your hands. This year, it's all about the kids. Children and teens are the focus for this year's fashions, with designers Zuzikim and Fox putting together exciting collections for the smarter, younger set.

If Israeli folk dancing is your thing, you can't get much better than Moshany, a South Bay dance teacher with a huge following. How huge? "Moshany has a group of 100 to 200 dancers in Sunnyvale," says Inbar, many of whom will perform at the event.

Also high-stepping will be a group of Russian folk dancers — samovars not included. As for the Israel in the Gardens film festival, this year organizers scored a coup: their first Oscar winner. "[West Bank Story](#)," the comic musical that won this year's Academy Award for Best Live

Action Short, will run at the Metreon next door. Other films include a string of animated shorts made by students from Israel's famed Bezalel Academy.

If flesh-and-blood actors are more to your liking, Israel in the Gardens offers a theater festival this year. "Missing Kissinger," a one-man show based on Etgar Keret's short stories, won first prize at Israel's Teatroneto Festival and the Peak of the Fringe prize at the [Edinburgh Festival](#). It comes to the Gardens starring Uri Hochman, a member of the Habima Israeli National Theater.

Also set for the stage, Moran Barbivay-Maruani starring in "[My Grandmother](#)," which explores Jewish-Moroccan family life.

And for those wishing to entertain themselves, there's the aforementioned "Walk a Mile for Israel," a fundraising event, emphasizing "green" Israel whose proceeds go to an environmental project in northern Israel. Families and students representing Jewish day schools, congregational schools, JCC's and synagogues are expected to fall in. Participants can sign up at www.israelinthegardens.org.

The walk starts at 10 a.m. at Yerba Buena Gardens' Howard Street entrance. Gershom Sizomu, from Uganda's Abayudaya Jewish community, will lead the procession all around the perimeter of the Gardens. Sizomu is the rabbi in his community and is being sponsored by Be'chol Lashon, a Bay Area organization that supports Jewish diversity, to attend the University of Judaism, where he is a fourth-year rabbinic student.

And if all that isn't enough, there's always the default activity that makes Israel in the Gardens such a distinctive, heady experience: Jewish people-watching.

Jewish Multiracial Network Hosts Annual Retreat for Diverse Families

June 1-3, 2007

Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center, Falls Village, CT.



Be'chol Lashon is providing funds to staff the youth and music programs, as well as adult workshops at the 2007 Jewish Multiracial Network Summer Family Retreat from June 1-3rd, at the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center, Falls Village, CT. At the request of Shahanna McKinney-Baldon, we are supporting the work of Daniel Banks, Ph.D. and Adam McKinney, Co-Founders of DNA WORKS, who are consulting with JMN. [More information about the retreat.](#)

The Jews of India: An Introduction to Film, Food, Music and Henna!

June 18, 2007, pm

JCC Manhattan, New York

334 Amsterdam Ave, at 76th Street



Romiel Daniel, president of the Indian Jewish Community of the USA will talk about the long, proud history of Jews in various regions of India. A buffet dinner, including a variety of vegetarian Indian delicacies and Indian music will follow. You can even have you hands and feet adorned with henna!

\$20 for members of the Indian Jewish Congregation of the UCA and JCC members; \$25 for non-members. For more infomraiton call 646-505-5708 or go to www.jccmanhattan.org.

Rabbi Joshua Salter spoke at Tikvah Israel Congregation



We were honored, on March 24, to welcome to Tikvat Israel Rabbi Joshua Salter, Associate Rabbi at Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago. Rabbi Salter is a June 2005 graduate of the Israelite Rabbinical Academy, based in New York City. In addition to his service at Beth Shalom, Rabbi Salter is employed with Chicago's Southwest Organizing Project, helping to galvanize the Southwest Chicago community neighborhood residents, clergy, and businesses against violence and crime and their far-reaching consequences. He is also involved in youth ministry, prison ministry, and community liaison work.

Rabbi Salter spoke during our Seudah Shlishit about his spiritual journey, his experiences in the Chicago Israelite Community, and his personal history, which includes 15 years as a banker at Chase Manhattan. The talk was well-attended, and we hope that this will inspire a continued dialogue between those of us in the "traditional" Jewish community, and that of the Black Jewish communities of the United States. Rabbi Salter invited anyone interested in learning more, to visit their community and join in their worship, either in Chicago, or in Philadelphia.

CURRENT NEWS

Is There Disdain for Evangelicals in the Classroom?

By Alan Cooperman, May 5, 2007, WashingtonPost.com



Frank G. Kauffman was teaching a course in social work at Missouri State University in 2005 when he gave an assignment that sparked a lawsuit and nearly destroyed his academic career.

He asked his students to write letters urging state legislators to support adoptions by same-sex couples. Emily Brooker, then a junior majoring in social work, objected that the assignment violated her Christian beliefs. When she refused to sign her letter, she was hauled before a faculty panel on a charge of discriminating against gays.

The case has fueled accusations by conservative groups that secular university faculties are dominated by liberals who treat conservative students, particularly evangelical Christians, with intellectual condescension or worse.

"On many campuses, if you're an evangelical Christian, you're going to have to go through classes in which you're told that much of what you believe religiously is not just wrong, but worthy of mockery," said David French, a lawyer with the Alliance Defense Fund, which sued Missouri State on Brooker's behalf.

Such accusations have been leveled for years at the Ivy League and other elite private universities. But they are gaining new attention from politicians and educators because of the Brooker case, which took place at a public school in the Bible Belt, and because of two recent, nationwide surveys of professors' views on religion.

The first, by sociologists Neil Gross of Harvard and Solon Simmons of George Mason University, found that college professors are less religious than the general public but are far from the godless horde that is sometimes imagined. Even at the country's 50 top research universities, a minority of the faculty is atheist or agnostic, Gross and Simmons found.

The other survey, by the San Francisco-based Institute for Jewish and Community Research, confirmed those findings but also found what the institute's director and chief pollster, Gary A. Tobin, called an "explosive" statistic: 53 percent of its sample of 1,200 college and university faculty members said they have "unfavorable" feelings toward evangelical Christians.

Tobin asked professors at all kinds of colleges -- public and private, secular and religious, two-year and four-year -- to rate their feelings toward various religious groups, from very warm or favorable to

very cool or unfavorable. He said he designed the question primarily to gauge anti-Semitism but found that professors expressed positive feelings toward Jews, Buddhists, Roman Catholics and most other religious groups.

The only groups that elicited highly negative responses were evangelical Christians and Mormons.

"When we ask questions like this, we're asking the respondent to say how they feel about an entire group of people, and whatever image they have of that entire group comes through," Tobin said. "There is no question this is revealing bias and prejudice."

Cary Nelson, president of the American Association of University Professors, disagreed. What the poll reflects, he said, is "a political and cultural resistance, not a form of religious bias."

Nelson, a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, said the unfavorable feelings toward evangelical Christians probably have two causes: "the particular kind of Republican Party activism that some evangelicals have engaged in over the years, as well as what faculty perceive as the opposition to scientific objectivity among some evangelicals."

William B. Harvey, vice president for diversity and equity at the University of Virginia, said that even if the survey has correctly identified a "latent sentiment" among professors, "I don't know that it is fair to make the leap . . . that this is manifested in some bias in the classroom."

Before he moved to U-Va. in 2005, Harvey spent five years working on diversity issues at the American Council on Education, which represents more than 1,600 university presidents in Washington. In that time, he said, he did not come across a single serious incident in which a professor discriminated against an evangelical Christian student.

"The campus is a microcosm of the larger society. Of course we have intolerant people. Of course it happens on occasion," he said. "But there is no evidence this is a major problem."

Tobin, the pollster, acknowledged that his survey did not measure how professors act, only how they feel. But he said the levels of disapproval are high enough to raise questions about how evangelical Christians are treated.

"If a majority of faculty said they did not feel warmly about Muslims or Jews or Latinos or African Americans, there would be an outcry. No one would attempt to justify or explain those feelings. No one would say, 'The reason they feel this way is because they don't like the politics of blacks or the politics of Jews.' That would be unthinkable," Tobin said.

At Missouri State, the issue continues to boil, two years later. The university quickly settled Brooker's lawsuit by removing the discrimination charge from her record and paying for her to go to graduate school. The university president also called for an independent investigation by two outside scholars, the deans of social work at Indiana University and the University of Tennessee.

In a scathing report in March, they wrote that many students and faculty members at Missouri State's School of Social Work "stated a fear of voicing differing opinions," particularly about spiritual matters. They found such a "toxic" climate of intellectual "bullying" that they suggested shutting down the social work school and restarting it with a new faculty.

Provost Belinda R. McCarthy said that closing the 250-student school is unlikely but that religious liberty "is something we take very, very seriously."

Last month the Missouri House of Representatives passed the Emily Brooker Intellectual Diversity Act, which would require the state's public colleges to report regularly on how they protect students from "viewpoint discrimination." Proponents hope other states will adopt similar measures, while Nelson, of the American Association of University Professors, called the bill "one of the worst pieces of higher-education legislation in a century."

Meanwhile, the professor who assigned the letters and the student who refused to sign hers insist that they have been misunderstood.

Brooker, now a social worker for the Missouri Department of Social Services' Children's Division, said she always treats gay clients with respect.

Kauffman, who stepped down as director of Missouri State's master of social work program, said he

has been "vilified around the world" as anti-religious, when in fact he is a former assistant pastor and youth minister in the Assemblies of God, a Missouri-based Pentecostal denomination.

He said that all the students in his class voted to accept the letter-writing assignment as a lesson in political advocacy and that, contrary to the allegations in Brooker's lawsuit, he did not require them to sign or send their letters to state legislators.

"In the classroom I give equal time to everybody's views -- always have and always will," Kauffman said.

Building Community Through Anne Frank

By Florencia Arbiser, May 2007, JTA.org



Sara Reales admits she wasn't sure how visitors to an exhibit on Anne Frank would react to having security and police cadets as guides. After all, noted Reales, a 20-year-old from the outskirts of Buenos Aires, police had caused great suffering in Argentine history, and still are sometimes implicated in abuses.

"I saw people's faces when they saw us at the exhibition -- they were disoriented," said Reales, one of 28 cadets who served as guides to an exhibit titled "Anne Frank: A History for Today" in the main hall of the AMIA Jewish center, the capital's central Jewish institution. "But we explained it was a specific program, and they let us lead them through the World War II and Argentine dictatorship government histories."

The cadets from the Air and Port Security Police, Argentine Federal Police, Naval Command and National Gendarmerie also guided visitors through an exhibit titled "From Dictatorship to Democracy: The Validity of Human Rights 1976-2006." With Argentina trying to build confidence in its security forces, the program was part of the Police Training in Public Security and Human Rights Project being carried out by the National Interior Security Council. The Anne Frank exhibit, which drew hundreds of visitors over 10 days in April, was developed by the council and the Anne Frank Foundation.

The guides -- most of whom had little or no previous contact with Jews or Judaism, knew nothing of Anne Frank and were visiting a Jewish institution for the first time -- trained for three days for their roles, watching videos and attending lessons on Nazi history. They also received visits from two Holocaust survivors, as well as the father of a victim in the 1994 terrorist bombing of the AMIA center. The blast killed 85 people and wounded 300. The case has not been solved. "I became emotional when I heard the Holocaust survivors and AMIA bombing victim's father," Reales, a third-year Naval Command student, told JTA.

Hector Shalom, the Anne Frank Foundation's local representative, said he saw some of the trainees crying. "It was very educational for them," he said.

Violence and anti-Semitism plagued the Argentine security forces during the last military dictatorship, from March 1976 to December 1983. Security forces abducted and tortured thousands of people, with some 30,000 people "disappearing." Some managed to return alive from the ordeal but many were never seen again, while other bodies came back as corpses.

Jews who were kidnapped were subjected to even greater torture than other Argentines because of their religion. Some 1,900 Jews, about 6.3 percent of the country's Jewish population, are believed to have "disappeared" under the dictatorship.

Even with the return of democracy, violence has continued.

The nongovernmental Center for Legal and Social Studies (www.cels.org.ar) said that from 1996 to 2005, 2,585 people died in Buenos Aires and its outskirts in violence perpetrated by police and security officials. The dead included 640 police or security officers. Police officers from Buenos

Aires Province were charged with abetting the AMIA bombing, but were acquitted in a trial that was seen as political and biased. Discrimination against Jews in the security forces remains today, Hector Masquelet, executive secretary of the National Internal Security Council, told JTA. "It's quite a big transformation to have police security forces working with human-rights organizations to eliminate prejudice," Shalom said.

On April 30, the cadets received diplomas for their efforts as guides. "This was a very symbolic event," Masquelet said at the ceremony. "We live with a contradiction: People want more police, but also look down on them." At the ceremony, AMIA President Luis Grynwald stressed "the importance of study and education for these cadets, who might be heads of their forces in 20 years."

Reales was among the cadets with no previous connection to Jews. "It was the first time I was in touch with Judaism and with Jewish people. I felt it's really a strong community," she said. Reales' family and friends came to AMIA from her neighborhood -- more than 100 miles away -- to see the Anne Frank exhibition. "All my schoolmates are asking if the exhibition is going on next year because they want to be guides too," she said.

As for the Argentine police forces, she said, "We need to show a change, so society can start to trust us."

Israeli at the Helm of Massive Food Relief Operation in the Congo

By David Brinn, March 25, 2007, Israel21C



It seemed like Aya Shneerson was on the fast track to journalistic success. The Haifa-raised Israeli had finished a degree in journalism from Georgia Tech - where her father, a professor at the Technion, was taking part in a professors exchange program - and had joined the CNN team in Atlanta working on the international desk.

But a fortuitous journey to Sudan sent her down an entirely different career path. Today, as head of the UN's World Food Program in the war-torn Congo, her work has helped to save countless lives in the country's remote villages.

"Returning to Israel after deciding to leave CNN in 1998, I started to focus on still photography and for my first story, I went to south Sudan on my own," Shneerson recounted to ISRAEL21c while on a brief vacation back home in Haifa. "Representatives from the World Food Program hosted me there, and I camped with them in the field."

The WFP is a United Nations humanitarian agency focusing on food relief, distribution, and insecurity. Founded in 1963 as a three-year experimental program, the need was found to be so immense that it was soon turned into a permanent agency. Today, it distributes food to 97 million of the poorest people in the world

"The WFP people in Sudan said they were looking for a spokesperson and that I should apply. I thought it would be exciting to stay there for a while and do a photo essay, so I applied and was immediately hired," Shneerson told ISRAEL21c.

For the next few years, Shneerson journeyed for the WFP to Sierra Leone, Burundi and Liberia, before arriving in the Congo, where she's now head of the World Food Program provincial office

"Our main mission is to give food aid - and when we talk about food aid, we're talking tons - up to 5,000 a month. We don't just come in and open a soup kitchen and provide food for a day," she said. "It's a massive amount of food we're talking about - we give food to last a month based on kilo calories per person - it's not one meal at a time."

And more than any other country she worked in, the Congo was in dire need of that food and aid. From 1997 to 1999, three outbreaks of civil conflict led to large-scale looting and killings, which displaced over 800,000 people and provoked an alarming deterioration of the living conditions of the Congolese people. A 2002 stabilization process was jeopardized by a resumption of the fighting between rebel groups and government forces in the southern region of the country, which continues sporadically until today.

"Congo is still suffering from a prolonged war, created mostly by the people themselves. If a village gets attacked, the villagers tend to run away into the jungle, or another village. This creates a big food shortage, and it's our mission to alleviate that shortage caused by the displacement," said Shneerson.

Just last year, some 50,000 families fled their homes in the east's North Kivu province due to fighting between the army and rebel militias, she said.

When she's not out in the field supervising the food distribution, an average day at the office for Shneerson involves computer work, emails, and managing five offices with over 120 staff people.

"It's a massive logistic operation getting trucks to move food from the warehouses, loading, unloading. Everything has to be inspected, signed, approved - there's a lot of movement and coordination with other agencies and with peace keeping missions," she said.

In addition to immediate food relief, the WFP also provides long-term recovery programs which potentially will help the population in the Congo become more self-sufficient, Shneerson explained.

"We run school feeding programs - in food insecure rural areas, we encourage kids to go to school by providing food incentives there. We also work with malnourished families in programs with other NGOs, supporting both the children and parents, trying to get them back on their feet," she said.

For Shneerson, working with the WFP in the Congo has been a life-changing experience which has taught her many lessons about getting along in the world. She says it's not a job for everybody.

"You have to erase everything you considered to be behavioral norms, and you have to be able to live among extreme poverty. And in order to be able to continue to function, you can't get overwhelmed by everything," she said.

"And you have to handle being alone - there's not the entertainment leisure time you'd expect in a normal situation. You can spend days away in the jungle, and when you come back, there's not very much to do. So you have to learn to focus on the work."

Coming from Israel has proved advantageous for Shneerson among the local population, she said.

"The native people know I'm from Israel, and to them it's a positive element because of the religious context. The majority of the people are Christian, and they have a lot of respect and feel close to Israel, which they studied in church," she said.

Ironically, Shneerson finds her Arab UN colleagues to be the ones she has the most affinity for, and vice versa.

"I find that my closest colleagues are the Arab ones - culturally we're the most similar, especially the Sudanese. We're both warm cultures, family-oriented."

Shneerson's uncertain how long she can continue at such an intense position in such a volatile country. But she says she still receives immense satisfaction from it, even though the criteria has changed over the years.

"I used to say that if you save just one person, it's worth it - now I'm not so sure.

The change you enact is going to be small, your small little part. You can't save the world, but you can save something on a given day. It can be overwhelming though and you can get depressed," she said.

"I know I can't stay in countries like this forever," she concluded, adding with a laugh, "My mom would be happy if I ended up back in Israel."

IDENTITY

613 Words: Not Everything is Black & White

By Melissa Fay Greene, January/February 2007, American Jewish Life Magazine



In Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, November 2001, I showed up at the gates of the compound of the Beta Israel people (disparagingly known as falashas), the Ethiopian Jews.

Arriving there on Shabbat by taxi rather than on foot was not wise, but I'd known no one to ask for Shabbat hospitality and my hotel was far away. It was my first trip to Ethiopia. I was reporting for the New York Times Magazine on the state of Africa's millions of orphaned children; and I was meeting five-year-old Helen, whom my family was adopting.

On Friday morning, I'd taken Helen shopping for shul clothes. The little girl (who'd lost her father at age two, and her mother earlier that year) took instant possession of the shop, as if this were not the first time in her life she'd stepped foot inside a store. She whirled about, making selections, sending salespeople scurrying, until I realized she'd chosen a wedding gown, a man's bicycle, a hunting rifle, and a pair of red plastic sandals. I said yes to the sandals, then steered her away from weaponry and vehicles. She picked out a navy-blue wool dress ornamented with embroidered sheep.

She wore her dress and sandals on Saturday, as young men from the Jewish compound blocked our path and looked through the car windows at us. The driver exited to explain that I was an American Jew hoping to attend services. Arguments followed, while more guards jockeyed around for a closer look. I rolled down the window to greet them in Hebrew. I displayed my Chai necklace, but they turned away.

The driver returned to say I could not be admitted as the young men did not believe me to be Jewish. If I had a letter from my rabbi or from the Israeli embassy in Ethiopia, OK, but they couldn't accept my word, as I absolutely did not look Jewish.

In America, I absolutely do look Jewish. This I know from the frequency from which I've been asked, all my life, by non-Jews, "Are you from New York?" (I'm from Georgia.) Or, more vaguely, especially in the rural South, "Where y'all from?" Or from the rapidity with which other Jews knowingly insert a Yiddish word into conversation after introductions.

In Ethiopia, Helen (who was not born Jewish) looks Jewish. In Israel, Helen looks Jewish. But, in America, Helen's the one who does not look Jewish. She has borne this bravely.

She panicked at her conversion, afraid to emerge unclothed from the dressing room for the mikvah. "But I'm already Jewish!" she cried. "My mother was Jewish!"

"How do you know?" my husband and I called through the door.

"Because we always celebrated Chanukah!"

"OK, Helen, hang on, let us ask the rabbi," we said.

The rabbi laughed merrily. "She picked the wrong holiday!" he said. "Ethiopian Jewry is older than Chanukah. If she'd said Sukkot, we'd have had something to talk about."

"Helen, get out here!" we called, and she did.

She's been trusting us ever since. She believes us that not all Jews are white people.

Helen is an excellent Hebrew student and prays beautifully. She's an expert maker of charoset and matzah balls. She loves I. B. Singer's children stories and she was a gorgeous Queen of Sheba in our local Purim parade. She helps me make Shabbat every Friday night; she practices Anim

Zemirot over the phone with her college brother. She goes to Jewish sleep-away camp every summer and comes home brimming with Zionist fervor and new best friends.

Our Jewish community has accepted our daughter absolutely. So have they accepted adopted children from China, Guatemala, Honduras, and Eastern Europe. So have they accepted African American congregants.

We plan for Helen to study in Israel as our older children have studied. It will be obvious to everyone there, as it is obvious to us and to our extended family: this is what a Jewish child looks like.

I Met Children Who Only Wanted to Live

By Idan Raichel, April 15 2007, YNet



RWANDA - Three months ago, I was asked if I would like to join a group traveling to Ethiopia and Rwanda. When asked to travel to Ethiopia, I go. I'm even willing to join a group that supports elephants. It took me a while to realize that the group consisted of doctors who travel around the world to treat children suffering from heart ailments.

Naturally I was a bit cynical: Who are you? Great heroes trying to save the world? "Come and see the department at the Wolfson Medical Center," they told me.

I decided to go there one morning. I saw things I couldn't believe existed only ten minutes away from my home. Students from all over the world take care of Palestinian and Jordanian children, children from Zanzibar, Vietnam and Ethiopia -all of them suffering from heart diseases and laying in one department full of tubes.

Less than a year ago I performed in Ethiopia in a series of very moving concerts which were also documented by Tomer Hyman. I never imagined that I would return within a year, but then one night my partner Amber and I once again boarded an Ethiopian Airlines flight to Addis Ababa along with the group of doctors.

Addis, a poor and harsh city

At dawn we landed in Addis, a poor and harsh city. We immediately caught the soldier's attention. Ethiopia is not a democratic country and the military treats the media with suspicion. As far as they are concerned, cameras and television equipment are forbidden.

I decided to go and talk to one of the soldiers who was paying a lot of attention to one of the big camera lenses we had brought with us. I spoke to him about music, about Mahmud Achmed, a great Ethiopian singer who we both admire and with who I had appeared in London the previous year. Suddenly he softened up and let us in.

We made a quick stop at the hotel and then went straight to the hospital. The group consisted of Simon Fisher - the Managing Director of the organization "Save A Child's Heart" (SACH), Dr. Akiva Tamir (who we call Aki) - the Chief Pediatric Cardiologist in the Wolfson Medical Center and his wife Mirna, Head Nurse Nava Gershon, Amber and myself.

When we arrived at the hospital, there were already 40 children waiting for us. I thought to myself that if they had been waiting at such an early hour; they must have arrived during the night.

Only hope in outside help

The parents' eyes focused on Aki. Each child was just one of out of millions of citizens who can only find hope in outside help. There was great despair in their eyes, but also the hope that maybe they would be chosen this time. It was a very difficult sight. Only three or four children would fly back to Israel with us. The rest would stay behind and there's no way to help them. I don't know how Aki copes.

I looked at the children and the families. People fighting to stay alive. I thought that a child is a child anywhere in the world and a mother is a mother anywhere in the world and how could it be that there is only one cardiologist in all of Ethiopia and even he has no resources?

In Africa, in a place where patients sit and wait for doctors to come from Israel, the bubble of Tel-Aviv suddenly seemed so distant. After two hours, Amber and I returned to the hotel. Aki stayed at the hospital and took care of children all day.

We left to tour the surrounding villages, places where I had visited less than a year earlier with members of [my group] the Idan Raichel Project. The people in Addis Ababa do not smile, but in the villages they do. They are extremely poor; sometimes they walk for four or five hours a day to draw water and to toil the land, but this is the only way of life they know.

Only the bare necessities

This lack of knowledge is good for them. Their way of life seems really difficult to us. Through western eyes they seem unfortunate with no resources at all. But in those villages people sit in huts, there is no cafe close by, children play outside and the stillness makes one think.

In Ethiopia one can eat and drink and raise children, and everything there is very basic - that's how it can be summed up. We are the ones living on the edge thinking how great it is. In our world, children aged 12 can't manage without their cell phones. It's not that they are spoiled and pampered, they've just become used to it and that's all they know. In the villages of Ethiopia, life is very different.

In the silence I thought of music, about Mahmud Achmed and his calming melodies. I found a special instrument called a "melodika" and I tried to find myself a quiet place to play. Suddenly I thought of my apartment on King George Street, about my performance in Tel Aviv on Thursday, about my friends who are now recording in Harlem and how life throws us from one place to another, I thought about our world.

Police escort

In the evening we returned to the hotel to rest a little and later went out to a local pub. There weren't many people there, only four employees who play, sing and serve coffee. When we left it was really late and we walked for 20 minutes back to the hotel.

Suddenly we found ourselves in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Addis, surrounded by people. We were happy to see a policeman who, for a few coins, escorted us back to the hotel. The police also have to make a living somehow.

On Tuesday morning I went to the local radio station to be interviewed. In Ethiopia there is one radio station and one television station and all air time is owned by the government. A broadcaster who wants a program has to buy air time from the government. He himself sells the advertising time.

I had met the broadcaster who interviewed me the previous year. Each week he buys eight hours of air time and his program is very popular. In the middle of the interview there was a power cut. It happens a lot there. We sat and waited, the broadcast was prerecorded anyway.

Relations between Ethiopia and Israel are very good. They know that there is a large Ethiopian community in the country and that some have become very successful. There are not many great cultural figures from Ethiopia, mostly sportsmen. Every achievement is a source of great pride for them.

I tell the interviewer in English, for those listeners who understand the aims of SACH. It's true that each time only a few children are saved, but the important goal is to build a framework in which children can be treated in Ethiopia.

After the interview we went back to the hospital to meet other people - young people in their twenties who were already operated on as children and who returned to the hospital to volunteer. It's moving to hear that some of them have become medical students. Nava, the head nurse, recognized some of them and was excited to meet them again.

Two kinds of Israeli ambassadors

When I travel the world, I meet two kinds of Israeli ambassadors; the diplomats and statesmen - who serve the state - and cultural ambassadors, the doctor and the scientist - who make contact with the people themselves. I think of those people who were in my position in the past: Chaim Topol, Shoshanna Damari, Achinoam Nini and Ivri Leder. It's a great privilege.

The children are not interested in countries and borders. They want to be healthy. They don't understand the language; they are not even aware that they have serious heart problems. They don't care that we're from Israel.

I sat and waited with the children in the queue to see the doctor; I took out my melodika and began to play. I taught them to play and they got excited when they succeeded. All the differences disappeared. The differences between the countries and the language. Children are children.

They laughed at the way I look, about me being white, about my dreadlocks and how I can't pronounce their names in the right accent. They pulled at the pockets of my trousers and I saw their parents watching out the corner of my eye, it's moving.

Maybe in a few years they will be told that a doctor from Israel traveled around the world instead of working from nine to five, and because of him they are alive. At the moment it doesn't interest them. A child only wants his heart to work properly so that he can run about freely.

That evening we flew to Rwanda. We are all excited because it was the first time the group traveled to Rwanda. More than 10 years have passed since the genocide there and rehabilitation is not yet complete.

Like an artist without a pencil

Dr. Joseph Mucumbitsi waited for us. His story is amazing. After 18 years in Brussels, after gaining a world-wide reputation as one of the world's best medical experts, he decided to come home, to his people, to his country, to take care of them after the massacre. His frustration is enormous.

Aki says that all of his diagnoses are accurate, but that's all he can do - diagnose. Like an artist without a pencil. He has no resources to treat the children. He is so helpless; he is trying to establish a center to treat children. Without outside support he will not be able to get out of this cycle. The villagers don't cooperate. Most of them are afraid that they cannot afford medical treatment at hospitals, so they just don't come.

Dr. Mucumbitsi asked for SACH to come - so they came, with their medical equipment. Suddenly there's a sense of a humanitarian mission, the meaning of the mitzvah "to save a life is to save an entire world." In a few months, in Kigali (the capital of Rwanda - the city we visited), SACH will set up a center. Even the Health Minister of Rwanda came to give his blessing.

We didn't waste any time. This month some children will already be flown to Israel for medical treatment. I asked myself how I could help, how I could raise public awareness, how I could recruit volunteers and donations.

The next day I walked around. Addis Ababa is brown and dusty, but Kigali felt like the Africa you see in the movies. Kigali is a colorful and lively flourishing town. It looks like a market with all the colorful clothes and beautiful objects. No one has heard of the Idan Raichel Project there.

I got the chance to observe their culture. It is so open and impulsive. Life is generally modest. They save everything for special moments and then it all becomes relaxed and exciting.

We didn't have a lot of time. After only a day and a half we were already on a connecting flight to Ethiopia, where the three children chosen to come back with us to Israel were waiting. Yisuv, a small sweet girl captured my heart.

She has something cheeky in her eyes; you can see that she's no sucker. Here she is at five years of age, without her parents, flying to another country for surgery and she knows exactly where the surgery will be. She explained to the nurse in Amharic about the heart area and about the surgery. I looked at her and thought to myself; when did we lose our naivety? The only thing that matters to Yisuv is to be healthy and to go back home, to Mommy.

Tomorrow Yisuv will be five years old. She'll celebrate her fifth birthday at the SACH hostel. The operation which was supposed to take place the day before was delayed a little because she had a cold. I went to the Wolfson Medical Center to visit her. Sometimes you write a song and it has such power.

Five years ago, I lay on a mattress in the basement of my parents' house. I was grumpy, I had just broken up with a girlfriend and I wrote on a piece of paper: "Come, give me a hand and we'll go." This week I returned from Ethiopia and I gave a hand to Yisuv, so that she will come and also begin

to walk.

Not the Face in the Mirror

By Brad Pilcher, January/February 2007, American Jewish Life Magazine



When I first met with my rabbi to begin a course of study towards conversion, one of the books he slipped into my hands was Lovesong by Julius Lester. The son of a black Methodist minister, Lester would come of age in the South before the Civil Rights movement, but he would also begin a long journey from his family's piano (on which he would play Kol Nidrei) to a Jewish conversion in the early 1980s. I remember reading Lester's journey as I proceeded with my own. Indeed, I have re-read it many times over the course of my walk in the Jewish faith. More than any other, this was the book that shepherded me towards the covenant, and I always felt it was ironic that the story of a black man my father's age would touch me more than those of other white converts.

When we conceived of doing an entire issue focusing on black Jews it seemed obvious that I should seek to include Julius Lester in that conversation. Over the course of a few weeks, I sent along questions and he passed back answers. I realize now that I began the interview focusing on Lester as an overtly black Jew with those two identities balancing against each other. Once again, it was his thoughtful words that helped guide me to a better understanding. I now see him as a man who "encompasses multitudes," not just black or Jewish, but this and much more. Lester refers to individuals as "one syllable in God's infinite vocabulary." It is a lesson that, as one who lived through the Civil Rights movement and a Jewish convert, he is uniquely qualified to teach.

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Q: First, I wanted to start (where else) on page 1 of your book, Lovesong. You talk about finding "the name by which God knows you" so that "you will know who you are." You go through "Father, Writer, Teacher" until you finally uncover your Hebrew name, and you present it as a sort of unifying force between your true self and your various identities. I was surprised when you wrote, "I am no longer deceived by the black face which stares at me from the mirror. I am a Jew." I was wondering if you could talk about that deception. It seems like a particularly harsh word.

A: Yes, I was aware when I wrote that sentence that it sounded harsh. I tried to soften it but there was no other way to express it. We generally tend to identify ourselves with what we see in the mirror — race and gender, principally. But these were determined by the "accident" of sperm integrating with egg. Why then do we put so much value on those aspects of ourselves over which we have no control? I've always been reluctant to say to somebody, "You have beautiful eyes." The person did nothing to acquire such eyes, and yet, people on the receiving end of such a compliment invariably smile, grin, are very pleased, and say thank you. What I do say is, "I like your eyes," and such a comment creates a relationship between me and that person. We live in a society in which incredible value is placed on genetic "gifts". We identify ourselves on the basis of these genetic "gifts". "I'm black. I'm white. I'm Asian." So, the sentence was designed to shock the reader. I would like the reader to look in the mirror and see that his or her identity is not bound to the face that stares back.

One of the comments I have gotten from born Jews, which I never found funny, was "Gee, you don't look Jewish." As if how I look reveals anything about me.

But there is a reality to that face that stares back at me from the mirror. That face represents my social identity, but my social identity is not my soul's identity. Which is not to say that social identity and the soul's identity cannot be one. The social and soul identities of Chasidic Jews are obvious with their way of dressing. Blacks who change their names to African ones and wear African-style clothing are making their social and soul identities one.

So I am not criticizing a union of social and soul identity. And, if I wore a kippah in public I would change, or at least modify, my social identity. But I find having a social identity — or at least identifying with that social identity — limits my capacity for spiritual growth. And I hasten to add, this is not to imply that those who do identify with their social identities are limiting their capacity to grow spiritually. That is not necessarily so.

Q: I want to sort of continue with the subject of your social and soul identities. About growing up in the South and facing racism you wrote, "I chose invisibility and walked as if I did not occupy my body... Nothing could mitigate the ontological terror of

nonexistence, the unending trauma of being damned in the flesh." I'd be curious to hear how those wounds of your social identity were addressed by the rise of your soul identity as a Jew.

A: Because the "invisibility" had to do with social identity, becoming Jewish could not change that unless I wore a kippah publicly which I do not. The "invisibility" was a child's response, which is not to denigrate it in any way. I grew up, the Civil Rights movement happened and I was part of it and becoming a fairly well-known published writer all combined in different ways to "mitigate the ontological terror of non-existence."

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Lester was involved in a controversial clash between the United Federation of Teachers and local school board leaders in New York City that led to a strike by UFT members. The strike was inflamed into a black-Jewish dispute when leaders of the UFT began employing racially charged language and leveling veiled accusations of anti-Semitism. As the host of a local radio show on WBAI, Lester had a teacher on his program and encouraged him to read several poems written by students. One of them was patently anti-Semitic and brought a massive backlash against Lester himself. The Jewish Defense League protested outside the radio station and demanded his ouster. He wrote about the incident extensively in the book, and I decided to ask him about the controversy.

Q: There is a passage where you write, "They needed to know that if they wanted blacks to care about Jewish suffering, they had to care about black suffering. As crude and obscene as the poem was, I heard in it an excruciating paroxysm of pain. It was the pain expressed as anger at Jews, many of whom found identity by borrowing suffering from the Holocaust while remaining blithely blind to the suffering of black people around them..." That's a stinging, though not altogether inaccurate, indictment of the Jewish community. I'm curious what your perspective is some four decades after the fact.

A: Being Jewish now I have more knowledge of the differences between various groups of Jews which makes the answer to your question more complicated. Also, the only Jews I had contact with at the time of the radio show were those in the greater metropolitan New York area. I'm not sure one should generalize about Jews based solely on what takes place in New York. Also, in the late sixties, books and films about the Holocaust were just beginning to occupy more of a place in the consciousness of American Jews. Now the Holocaust is a more integral part of the Jewish psyche. Many American Jews have been responsive to appeals for aid to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the sufferings of Somalis, and the like. What I said in 1969 would not be an entirely accurate description of American Jews today.

However, in one regard, my words then might still contain a truth. In 1991, I went to Israel for the first time. As I walked around Jerusalem, I saw Arabs being stopped by Israeli soldiers and being asked for identity cards and being searched. I saw Arabs driving out of Jerusalem each evening in old, dusty cars that reminded me of blacks in the South in the forties and fifties going home after a day of laboring for white people. I found myself identifying with both Israelis and Arabs. I had been stopped on the street by white policemen and had to justify my presence in a certain neighborhood. In the Arabs I certainly saw the blacks of the rural South of the 1940s and 1950s. And, on the other hand, I understood and empathized with the Israeli need for security. It would have been irresponsible if Israeli soldiers had not stopped Arabs and searched them. The only response that seemed appropriate to me was not to choose one side over the other but to hold within me, in equal measure, the pain of Israelis and Arabs.

When I returned and gave a talk about my trip and ended by saying essentially what I wrote above, I was verbally attacked by some Jews. It seemed to me then, and seems to me now, that holding the pain of my enemy close to my heart does not stop me from defending my life. Holding the pain of my enemy close to my heart helps me preserve my humanity. In the Torah we are told to not wrong or oppress the stranger, because we know what it is like to be a stranger. That admonition is repeated more than 20 times. To dehumanize the enemy is to dehumanize ourselves. Until Arabs and Jews regard as sacred the pain of the other, there will be no peace.

Q: I wanted to ask what your opinion is on the state of black-Jewish relations today. The passage, "if they wanted blacks to care about Jewish suffering, they had to care about black suffering" seemed to just entirely embody the impasse between America's blacks and Jews.

A: I have no idea what the state of black-Jewish relations are today, or rather, I don't think they exist. In the many years I traveled around the country speaking about these relations, I found that younger generations of blacks had no idea what I was talking about. To them, Jews were white people, and young blacks did not understand why they were supposed to have some affinity with Jews. Black-Jewish relations are of significance to those of my generation; to younger blacks, they don't matter.

I would add, in the many talks I gave on this issue, I always made a point of telling Jewish groups that instead of focusing on black-Jewish relations, Jews should be working to establish coalitions with Hispanics who were on their way to displacing blacks from their status as our country's largest racial minority. And I would say the same things to blacks. Well, that day has arrived, and we are beginning to see tensions between blacks and Hispanics.

Q: The New York Post ran an article about the incident in 1969, and it quoted you as saying, "The sad thing to me is that I feel the UFT is responsible for quite a bit of the feeling that exists among young blacks now in terms of Jews," Lester said. He said the teachers' union had adopted a position that anyone who opposed them was anti-Semitic." It paraphrases you at the end, so I don't know exactly what you said, but I'm interested in your thoughts today on the issue of anti-Semitism as a response to criticism in the Jewish community.

A: In general, the Jewish response to criticism is nuanced. There is a difference between someone being critical of Israel's actions and criticizing Israel's existence. I think Jews know the difference and respond accordingly. Indeed, if there were Arabs who were as openly critical of Hamas or Hezbollah as there are Jews who are critical of Jewish fanatics, the situation in the Middle East might be different.

The problem is that non-Jews think they understand anti-Semitism, and all too often they don't. And when Jews tell them that something they said was anti-Semitic, they accuse us of trying to stifle criticism.

I've always found it interesting that the people who listened to my radio show after the poem was read, who listened to the numerous phone calls I took, who listened to me engage listeners in difficult conversations about racism and anti-Semitism, understood what I was doing, and none of them accused me of being anti-Semitic. It was the people who read about my show in the New York Times who accused me of being an anti-Semite. The UFT used the poem incident and me for their own political ends.

Can Jews be manipulated around the issue of anti-Semitism? Yes. Are there Jews who find their Jewish identity in fighting against anti-Semitism, real and imagined? Yes. And the same can be said of blacks in relationship to racism.

Q: This answer raises another question, because it poses the dilemma of how to move beyond this cycle of recrimination. If it is true that non-Jews cannot understand anti-Semitism fully and perhaps that non-blacks cannot understand the suffering of blacks, then how do we manage to have a dialogue?

A: I don't accept the premise that seems to be conventional wisdom these days that only blacks can understand the black experience, women their experience, Native Americans their experience, and on and on. One of the lovely, very touching experiences of the early sixties was young whites and young blacks meeting for the first time, curious as to what it was like to be the other, and each eager to show the other what their lives were like.

However, I want to go a step farther. Even if people from different ethnicities/races/genders cannot understand each other, nothing keeps them from respecting each other and accepting each other. One of my former wives said to me once, "I don't understand you." I looked at her and said, "I don't understand myself. Why do you think you should be able to? Do you have to understand me to love me?"

One of the failures of modern living is the failure to use our imaginations. And it does not require much effort to imagine what it must feel like to hurt. But instead of using our imaginations, instead of putting ourselves inside someone else's experience, we argue with that person about his or her experience. We do not want to make the effort to listen to someone talk about his or her experience without arguing with that person. The key to any kind of dialogue is not talking but listening, listening not only with one's ears but with one's heart.

Acts of compassion bring more people together and are more lasting than understanding, and listening with one's heart is an act of compassion.

Q: One of the interesting things you mentioned when you wrote about the incident is how "my strongest supporters during these weeks are also Jews" and "Ironically, I [did] not receive one expression of support from blacks." I know this is a bit of a general way to ask the question, but I was wondering if you could just talk about that imbalance of support.

A: In 1969, there was more space in the Jewish community for different ideas, even opposing ideas. That was much less true of blacks in 1969. The tolerance for varying ideas that existed in the black community in the early and mid-sixties was waning by the end of the decade as black nationalism became the abiding ideology. By 1969 many blacks did not consider me "black" because I was not a nationalist. Black is a political definition, not a racial designation, and so, after I converted, there were many blacks who told me that I was no longer black, that a person could not be black and Jewish. That attitude has waned considerably in the past ten years, and now I find many more blacks who are curious about Judaism, blacks who are interested in conversion seeking me out, and just blacks who tell me they are happy I found a spiritual home.

An observation: As you can imagine, I get asked a lot about the poem incident. I never get asked about the essay I wrote in 1979 when Andrew Young was forced to resign as U.N. ambassador because he held a secret meeting with the PLO, which was against U.S. foreign policy. Blacks attacked Jews for being racist and being responsible for Young's dismissal. I wrote an essay accusing blacks of anti-Semitism and caught hell from blacks, had my life threatened, etc. And yet, I have no doubt that

in my obituary there will be a mention of the anti-Semitic poem incident and not what I wrote in 1979. What no one seems to grasp is that the two are the same for me in that in 1969 I thought Jews were being racist and said so. In 1979 I thought blacks were being racist and said so. In my mind these controversies were never about black-Jewish relations; they were about being true to myself and speaking out against racism. "You shall not wrong or oppress the stranger, because you were strangers in Egypt." I didn't know that verse in 1969 or 1979, but I knew what it was like to be oppressed, to be a stranger in my own land. That was what motivated me in 1969 and what motivated me in 1979. People have said that during that ten year period I changed. I didn't. The Julius Lester of WBAI in 1969 was the Julius Lester in 1979 who wrote "The Uses of Suffering" in the Village Voice.

Q: I was going to ask you to compare the black and Jewish responses to your essay in 1979 with the responses to the poem incident in 1969, but it occurs to me after your answer to this last question that it is probably the wrong question. Your answers seem to indicate that you see your life less about being an African American or being a Jew and more about being Julius Lester, who is both African American and a Jew. I admit, I didn't expect that.

A: Since the sixties, we are living in an era in which collective identity is increasingly substituted for personal identity. Thus, "black" ceases to be a racial identification and becomes a political definition, which has enabled some blacks to say that I am not black. Which is absurd, but not if blackness is a political definition. I get asked by Jews if I feel "more Jewish than black, or vice-versa," which is also an absurdity. People seem to expect that because I am black and Jewish, I live in a state of angst. I don't. My father raised me with a strong sense of myself as an individual, and admonished me many times not to follow "the crowd," to be "your own person." That made sense to me, and it is how I have lived. I have many identities, as we all do. I am Julius Lester and, since Whitman said it better than anyone, "I encompass multitudes," and I do not choose to make one paramount at the expense of the others. If I were to choose to make one of my collective identities, either black or Jewish, primary and suppress all else that I am, I would be guilty of denying the marvelous and ultimate mystery which a life is. And if I turn away from the mystery that I am, I cannot see the marvelous mystery that you are. Thus, I will relate to you as if your entire being is expressed by your collective identity — black, Jew, Christian, Muslim — and deny that you as an individual are sacred, one syllable in God's infinite vocabulary.

COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD

Conversion Offers a Lifeline for Dwindling Communities

By Brian Harris, May 15, 2007, j. Weekly

As more of these communities — some with as few as 20 members and located in isolated Jewish outposts such as El Salvador and the Bahamas — are able to hire full-time rabbis, the conversion issue is a growing one that impacts the communities' survival. With the exception of Orthodox communities in Panama and Costa Rica, all the countries in the region face serious questions on how to maintain Jewish identity as members migrate out of the region or marry non-Jews. "Obviously, with a small congregation, we don't want to marry close relatives," said Ainsley Henriques, honorary secretary of Jamaica's United Congregation of Israelites.

Henriques' "Conservative but liberal" congregation, the only one on the island, boasts some 200 members, most of them born Jews. Like all 12 members of the Union of Jewish Congregations of Latin America and the Caribbean, an umbrella group of non-Orthodox communities scattered throughout Central America and the Caribbean, the Jamaican congregation welcomes converted members without hesitation.

Members agree that the influx of newcomers is the engine keeping Judaism alive in many communities. In El Salvador, two of the five members of the Conservative community who attend daily Torah readings are converts, said community president Ricardo Freund.

In Costa Rica, the smaller Reform congregation B'nei Israel is made up of many so-called "mixed marriages," and many members are converts. In Aruba, four new members were admitted to the community last year, all converts with no marriage ties to Jews.

Along with their greater numbers, the converts add a religious spark in their communities, said Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik of Panama's Reform Kol Shearith Israel Congregation, and formerly the rabbi in El Salvador.

Conversion "is perhaps the most complicated, difficult issue our congregations can face," Kraselnik said at the Costa Rica meeting. "When I was growing up, seeing a mixed couple was a tragedy. In Latin America, being a Jew is not just a religious experience."

Many of the region's Jews, even those in the majority Orthodox communities in Panama and Costa Rica, live in what he terms a "Jewish comfort zone" of limited adherence to Jewish principles. Outside of the two countries with a large Orthodox presence, few homes are kosher, and the parking lot of the Orthodox shul in Costa Rica regularly fills up for Sabbath services. However, converts sometimes adhere to the religious law with greater fervor than members who are born Jewish, perhaps to "prove" their authenticity as Jews. "For the average Jew, this is a direct threat," Kraselnik said. "This threat is met with a conscious or subconscious reaction directed at the convert."

For Costa Rican convert Gonzalo Vega, the process meant a series of hardships even after the conversion process ended. "I did some window shopping of religions, even for a while becoming a Hari Krishna, to my mother's horror," Vega said. His spiritual wanderings ended 15 years ago when he converted and entered B'nei Israel, even though the conversion wasn't recognized by Costa Rica's Orthodox shul. "Getting into Jewish life is not necessarily easy," Vega said. "When I began the conversion process people were very welcoming. After I converted, people said, 'Now practice Judaism.'" Vega feels accepted in his Reform congregation, but notes that by converting "in a country like this, one becomes a minority within a minority" — separating himself from the mainstream Catholic religion, yet having his Judaism rejected by most Costa Rican Jews.

One problem Kraselnik faces is that, as the Catholic Church's influence has receded, evangelical Christianity has moved in. As a result, many Christians want to turn to Judaism in hopes of "salvation." That's one reason Orthodox rabbinical orders in Panama and Costa Rica are so cool to the issue. "I have a responsibility to the community," Kraselnik said. "We have a large number of people that come looking for conversion with the wrong set of parameters."

Kraselnik also warns that converted Jews do not have the shared historical experience of their natural-born colleagues. Because converts lack ties to Jewish history and culture, B'nei Israel offers classes that touch on Jewish issues as weighty as the Holocaust and culturally important as how to make chicken soup, said Jody Steiger, who runs the course.

In Aruba, where the island's 30 Jewish families have been able to hire a full-time rabbi for their Beth Israel Synagogue, the community's survival appears linked to conversion. "We welcome anyone who wants to embrace Judaism," community member Martha Liechtenstein said. "If they are sincere, they can enrich us. It's not that we go out to recruit; we're not missionaries."

Kraselnik said the communities need to determine the proper ratio of converts in their congregations. Too many could "take over" a community and cause it to lose direction, while too few could lead to its eventual demise if community members marry non-Jews and drift from the faith.

Conversion in the region has strong backing globally. Rabbi Uri Regev, president of the World Union of Progressive Judaism, as the international Reform movement is known, advises imperiled communities to "open wide gates" to Jews by choice. "No one can refer to the future of these Jewish communities without addressing the issue of converting family members," he said.

"Who is a Jew?" in Nicaragua

By Brian Harris, May 6, 2007, JTA.org



Bitter divisions over who is a Jew threaten to split Nicaragua's tiny Jewish community. At an April 30 assembly to elect a new board of directors, relations between the 50 Jews in the country deteriorated after two people whom some consider non-Jews were elected to the board. The assembly decided to allow anyone who "feels Jewish in their heart" to be a member of the community, even if they don't have maternal links to Judaism and haven't converted.

The move outraged some in the community, such as outgoing president Rafael Lipshitz, and left them weighing whether to form a splinter community. No decision has been made, Lipshitz told JTA. "I personally do not share this decision," he said. "I am not (being) religious, I am being realistic, but

I am very clear about my roots."

Lipshitz' predecessor, Lubavitch-follower Max Najman -- who heads one of two Orthodox households in the country -- approved of the new board and the more open membership policy. "If in Israel they have not been able to define who is a Jew, we should not try to here," he told JTA by phone. "This is not as serious as some would think."

At least one of the new board members whose participation sparked objections has a Jewish father, but only began participating in Jewish activities recently.

The new board is expected to make a final decision about whether to build a synagogue in the country and will manage foreign financial donations for the community. The previous treasurer, Elena Petaky, objects to the new board and said she worries about how funds will be managed in the future.

The internal conflict comes as the community is returning to levels it hasn't enjoyed since the late 1970s. After the country's synagogue burned in 1978 and the left-wing Sandinistas took power in 1979, Nicaragua's entire Jewish community headed into exile, with families returning only after the Sandinistas were voted out in 1990. The community's Torah remains in Costa Rica.

Despite their minuscule numbers and diverse theological orientations -- from secular to strictly Orthodox -- the community has begun to rally in recent years both as a social organization and for religious activities, including seders and Shabbat dinners. However, with its members scattered about the country, it still has trouble forming minyans.

The community does maintain the Jewish section of the cemetery in Managua, the capital, and has been holding some events in a member's house in Nindiri, a town some 12 miles outside Managua and equidistant from the three main towns where members live.

Under Chavez's Rule, Venezuela's Jews Fear for Future

By Hal Weitzman, March 16, 2007, Forward.com



The floor of the small synagogue in the center of Coro, the oldest Jewish house of prayer in Venezuela, is covered in a thick layer of sand intended to recall the Children of Israel's time in the Sinai Desert. It is also, however, a symbol of the transience of Jewish settlement in South America.

Jewish settlers arrived in Coro, a small town in western Venezuela that was the county's first capital, from Curacao in 1827. In 1855, nearly the entire community left after a mob ransacked Jewish homes and shops.

Venezuelan Jews say that was the last time anti-Semitism flared up in the country. But in the past few years a community that had considered itself among the most well-established in South America has lost up to one-fifth of its members, prompted by an increasingly hostile environment under the government of President Hugo Chavez, a radical leftist who has been in power since 1999.

Accurate figures are hard to come by, but estimates suggest the community now numbers between 15,000 and 20,000. The vast majority of them are based in the capital, with small communities in the cities of Valencia and Maracaibo, and on the Caribbean island of Margarita.

The quality of life keeps most from leaving. The community is mostly middle and upper class, and while it has suffered from living under a regime whose president routinely accuses the wealthy of undermining his "21st century socialist revolution," the government's policy platform also allows business opportunities.

"When you have a president who's massively expanding public spending, there's a lot of money to be made," said a Jewish businessman who asked not to be named. "A lot of Jews are involved in construction, which is booming, what with the government building more schools, hospitals, housing and roads."

Another economic reason not to leave: The Chavez government introduced foreign exchange controls in 2003, making it difficult for Venezuelans to take their wealth out of the country.

Another attraction is the strength and cohesion of the community. Given its small size, the Jewish infrastructure in Caracas is impressive: There are five synagogues, and the community carries out its own kosher slaughter. The centerpiece is the Club Hebraica, a large complex in Los Chorros, an upmarket residential neighborhood in the eastern part of the city.

The Hebraica comprises a well-equipped Jewish school and a sports and social club with a large swimming pool; tennis, basketball and squash courts; soccer pitches; and even a bowling alley.

"If you're not involved in politics, you don't really feel the regime," said Rabbi Pynchas Brener, head of the Ashkenazi community. Nevertheless, Venezuelan Jews feel a tangible discomfort.

"We've never had anti-Semitism here in Caracas, so this situation is something new," community member Moises Nessim said. "I would say there is worry and concern, but not yet fear — more uncertainty about what's going to happen."

Although Chavez — a former army officer and coup leader known for his fiery anti-American rhetoric — has never been much favored by Venezuelan Jews, relations between his government and the community started to deteriorate in earnest in 2004.

In November of that year the Club Hebraica was raided by police under a search warrant issued by a local pro-Chavez judge. The warrant, which came after the murder of public prosecutor Danilo Anderson, suggested that the Hebraica was being used to store weapons. That accusation apparently sprung from rumors that Anderson had been killed with equipment from Israel's Mossad spy agency. After searching the school and the club, police left empty-handed. Incredulous that authorities might think the Jewish community was storing weapons in its school, some observers concluded that the raid really was intended to intimidate the community. "Chavez must have known about" the raid, one community member said.

The situation deteriorated further a month later, when Chavez said in a speech that "the descendants of those who killed Christ" and "the descendants of the same ones that kicked Bolivar out of here" had "taken possession of all the wealth in the world." Though the Christ-killer comment clearly appeared anti-Semitic, some commentators said Chavez actually was referring to global capitalism. Indeed, when Jewish leaders soon afterward met with the president at Miraflores Palace, his official residence, he assured them that he had not been referring to the Jewish community.

That meeting in January 2006 brokered an uneasy peace, but the official reaction to Israel's war with Hezbollah in Lebanon last year unleashed what Freddy Pressner, head of CAIV, the Jewish community's umbrella organization, calls "an explosion of anti-Semitism in Venezuela."

Chavez repeatedly compared Israel's behavior to that of the Nazis, a stance that locals say encouraged a wave of similar slanders. Sammy Eppel, a Jewish journalist in Caracas, catalogued a host of violently anti-Israel and anti-Semitic writing and cartoons in the local government and pro-government media.

A cartoon that ran last year in Diario VEA, a state-owned newspaper, depicted Hitler saying, "How they've learned from me, these Israelis!"

The Ministry of Information last year organized a demonstration outside the main Sephardi synagogue in Caracas, an act that Pressner called "insensitive and imprudent." After the demonstration, the wall outside the synagogue was daubed with "Jews, killers — leave" and "Zionist baby-killers." At other times, graffiti has appeared there with slogans such as "Jews go home" and "Here are the murderers of the Palestinians."

Another concern is over Chavez's increasingly close economic and political ties to Iran. As the world has condemned Tehran's nuclear ambitions, Venezuela has emerged as one of Iran's few solid allies in the world. At the same time, Chavez effectively cut all diplomatic ties with Israel last year by withdrawing his charge d'affaires. He had recalled his ambassador three years earlier.

Nevertheless, most Jews in Caracas do not feel that anti-Israel sentiment will provoke physical attacks. A more immediate concern is over the government's plans for education. Chavez's stated aim is to spread "21st century socialist values" via the school system — and to extend this through private schools as well. While it's not clear how this would work, many Jews find the proposal troubling.

"Their education plan is a big worry," said Guillermo Schmidmajer, whose daughter teaches Hebrew at the Jewish school. "Chavez is putting his brother in charge of education reform, and he might base it on the model in Cuba, where he was a student."

ARTS & CULTURE

Dropped from Heaven: Bene Israel Through Sophie Judah's Eyes

The article found in the May Indian Jewish Congregation of USA newsletter, is adapted from Nextbook.org's "Out of India" by Amy Rosenberg and Amazon.com book review.



Sophie Judah was born in Jabalpur, a small town in the state of Madhya Pradesh in central India. She did not grow up very observant because of her father's profession — he was in the Army. The family moved around and very often they were the only Jewish family in town. Although her family was not very observant, they did keep kashrut.

While her dad worked on Saturdays and the children went to school, her mother lit the candles and did not sew or knit on Saturday.

The turning point of her involvement with Judaism and Jewish culture was when she was about 10, when she first became conscious of the Holocaust after reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*. According to Sophie, she felt that a part of her had been taken away, even though she never knew the Jews who were killed, and it was her duty to replace that part. After *Anne Frank*, she read *Exodus*, and then started searching for books on Jews and Judaism.

During her search, she found a lot of books about the Jews of Eastern Europe and America, as well as anthropological and historical literature about the Bene Israel. There were no books that documented the Bene Israel community from a more human perspective, which prompted Sophie to start working on her collection of short stories, *Dropped from Heaven*.

In her book, she describes a mythical village of Jwalanagar, where the Jewish traditions of the Bene Israel have survived for more than two thousand years. In "Hannah and Benjamin," the parents of a young woman are shocked when she defies their rejection of the man she wishes to marry — but no more shocked than the man himself.

In "Nathoo," a kindly Jewish soldier and his wife adopt a Hindu boy orphaned in the post-independence violence of 1947 — with disastrous results. In "Dropped from Heaven," a mother with three unmarried daughters at home and a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in her handbag springs into action when she hears that two single brothers are coming to town looking for brides. And in "Old Man Moses," a lonely and imperious old man is visited by his Israeli grandson and the young man's girlfriend, and finds that there is still a place in his heart for love.

Sophie immigrated to Israel in 1973, after her marriage. She currently lives in Israel with her husband and five children.

Turn Left at the End of the World, Cricket at the Movies

May Newsletter, Indian Congregation of USA



The rich history of cricket in the Negev desert has made its way to the big screen. "Turn left at the end of the world," directed by Avi Neshet, was released in Israel on June 26th 2004. The movie tells the story of the immigration to Israel of Jews from two distinct backgrounds in the 1960s, and their settlement in the Negev towns of Dimona and Yeruham. Indian Jews arrived looking for a better life in the West, only to find themselves in the desert. With their English Colonial hangover, and the French background of the Moroccan immigrants, there is an inevitable clash of cultures, made worse when a married Indian man falls in love with a young Moroccan girl. The story comes to a climax when it is heard that the English cricket team will be stopping in the Negev for a match, and the two groups have to work together to produce a team capable of taking on the powerful English team.

The Israel Cricket Association was proud to play a part in the production of the film. Local cricketers were provided to act in the staging of the game which takes place in the movie, the lead Israeli actors were introduced to and coached in the game so as to get a better understanding of the roles they had to play, and assistance was given with regards equipment and costumes for the cricket scenes. Avi Neshet, one of Israel's leading directors and responsible for hit films such as "The Troupe," "Dizingoff 99," and "Rage and Glory," recently returned to Israel after several years abroad during which he directed 14 movies in Hollywood, specifically to direct this movie. It features Parmeet Sethi, a leading Bollywood actor, as well as Aure Atika, a star French actress. Apart from Israel, the movie has also been released in France and India.

Cuban Salsa a Tuneful Mix with Klezmer

By Larry Luxner, March 30 2007, JTA



Klezmer music, rooted in the Jewish shtetls of 19th-century Eastern Europe, is making an unprecedented comeback. So is Cuban salsa, whose distinctive Afro-Caribbean rhythms are enjoying a wave of global popularity.

It was only a matter of time before some enterprising musician came along and combined the two. That would be Havana-born drummer Roberto Juan Rodriguez, founder of the five-piece jazz band Cuban Klezmer. "People ask me if I'm Jewish," said Rodriguez, 45, who lives in New York and disseminates his music through the Tzadik record label. "I say, 'No, but I'm getting closer.' "

In a way, Rodriguez is following in the footsteps of Chassidic singer Matisyahu, who achieved international fame by combining elements of Jewish music and reggae. Yet listening to Cuban Klezmer, it's often hard to tell whether you're hearing Cuban music, Jewish music — or something entirely new and different. "My father says this is music you've never heard before but you feel you have," Rodriguez explained. "There are the minor keys, the sadness in the melodies, the joyfulness of it."

The Washington Post gives the composer rave reviews. Richard Harrington, the newspaper's music critic, said Rodriguez's instrumental pieces "have plenty of festive rhythmic energy, but the Afro-Cuban element is somewhat downplayed. With rich, complex arrangements, the music has a stately, chamber music feel more reflective of the European-Cuban danzon and Spanish-Cuban guajira traditions."

Tom Hull of the Village Voice says Rodriguez's "synthesis of Jewish melody and Cuban percussion dreams of roots that never were, yet it is convincing enough that one can imagine generations of converts gathering in private to keep the ancient secrets of their culture alive."

Rodriguez, who was raised Catholic, left Cuba at age 9, by which time he was already playing violin, piano and trumpet. Escaping communism under Fidel Castro, his family fled to Mexico, later crossing the border into the United States and eventually settling in South Florida.

His father, trumpeter and bandleader Roberto Luis Rodriguez, had connections in Florida, Rodriguez said. "My father had a lot of Jewish friends in Cuba, so when we got to Miami, we parachuted right into the Jewish community," he said. "At the age of 11 I became a drummer, and I started to play at bar mitzvahs and Jewish weddings. In 1974 I began playing for the Miami Beach Yiddish Theater."

Rodriguez gave an interview in mid-February in Arlington before a concert that attracted some 400 fans. "I learned a lot about Jewish culture and history through the immigrants and Holocaust survivors that I met in Miami. It seeped into my DNA," said Rodriguez, who studied at Havana's Caturla Conservatory of Music and at the University of Miami. "It was a lesson that you don't get unless you're Jewish or you study Judaism. But it was through music that I became aware of Jewish culture."

Rodriguez's musician wife, Susie Ibarra, is a Philippine-born, Hebrew-speaking Catholic who was once married to an Israeli. Rodriguez doesn't speak Hebrew, but he peppers his speech with Yiddish expressions.

"These lights are so hot, I'm shvitzing already," he quipped to the delight of his apparently mostly Jewish audience in Arlington.

"It's not the Latin community but the Jewish community that's supporting me," he said in the interview.

Rodriguez's quintet, formed in 2000, includes two Israelis — clarinetist Gilad Harel and violinist Jonathan Keren — as well as New York's Rob Curto on accordion and Bernie Mimoso on bass. Rodriguez has worked with Ruben Blades, Paquito D'Rivera, Celia Cruz, Joe Jackson, Paul Simon, Julio Iglesias and the Miami Sound Machine, among others.

But it was the legendary Puerto Rican bandleader Tito Puente who encouraged Rodriguez to write his own music. Thanks to his friendship with composer and alto saxophonist John Zorn, whose Tzadik label specializes in "radical Jewish music," Rodriguez went on to produce three albums.

Rodriguez's first album, released in January 2002, was "El Danzon de Moises," or "The Dance of Moses." Its cover is emblazoned with the distinctive red, white and blue flag of Cuba, but with a Star of David where the regular star should be.

Rodriguez named his second album "Baila! Gitano Baila!" ("Dance, Gypsy, Dance!"), a celebration of the Jewish community of Cuba. "Cuban music has always been popular, and the Jews especially loved it. When I was a kid in Miami, my grandfather would take me to Wolfie's Deli on Collins Avenue, and we'd see the old Jews dancing the cha-cha and the rumba," he recalled. "It's in the gene pool. All you have to do is put on a record of old Cuban music and you'll get a Jewish couple in their 80s starting to dance."

Rodriguez noted a long tradition of Jewish musicians turning to Latin music. "Before Stan Getz was playing bossa nova, he played klezmer in the Catskills," he said. "Gershwin even went to Cuba. In Miami, I remember the Latin thing was Irving Fields and his 'Bagels and Bongos'."

Rodriguez's third CD — "Oy Vey Ole"—is a 2006 collaboration with Fields, now 91.

Rodriguez has played his fusion of klezmer and salsa in San Francisco, Toronto, New York and Washington. He's toured Europe and is supposed to play soon at the Barbican Theater in London. But the one place Rodriguez has never played is in his adopted city, Miami. "My music is too political. I'm already mixing Jewish and Cuban," he said. "We tried to put something together last year, but it fell apart."

Rodriguez has been back to Cuba only once since emigrating — in 1999, to visit his grandparents, who still live in the crumbling Havana suburb of Marianao. "That's one of my dreams, to play in Cuba, but not for any political reason," he said. "I would only play for the Jewish community there."



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