

CONTEMPORARY JUDAISM AND ITS EMERGENT ETHNIC DIVERSITY

One world ends and a new one bursts into being at a spot just three degrees south of the equator. To reach this portal that will lead us from the world of modernity into the jungle of mystery we travel to Iquitos, Peru. It is there that the Amazon River begins its extraordinary two thousand mile journey, winding its way through nine countries until it empties into the Atlantic at Belem, Brazil. Complicit in the magic that is the Amazon River is the rainforest through which it twists and turns.

The Amazon rainforest is a universe of life unique unto itself. Covering 2.5 million square miles, it produces 20% of the earth's oxygen. One-third of the world's species of birds live there. One-half of the ten million species of plants, animals, and insects are in the Amazon rainforest. Dwelling among its vast expanse are over two hundred ethnic groups. One-hundred seventy different languages are spoken under the canopy of this forest. And deep within its folds are believed to be fifty tribes who to this day have never had contact with the outside world.

The Amazon rainforest at once gives forth life to an abundance of creation and simultaneously withholds many of its secrets behind the veil of its foliage and through the circuitry of its waterways. While in recent times, the direction of human exploration in this area has generally been from the outside in, in search of natural resources and medicinal plants, there is one group that has been seeking to emerge out of this dense enclosure into the light of day: a community of a couple of hundred people seeking to be part of the Jewish world.

Iquitos, reflecting the insularity that is the Amazon, remains a city that cannot be reached by road, only by boat or plane. Established initially in the 1750s as a Jesuit mission, Iquitos grew at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the booming rubber

industry. It was during this time that Jews from Morocco, Gibraltar, and Malta settled there and even deeper in the jungle, in search of riches and adventure.

When the rubber trade collapsed, the Jewish community dwindled. A small handful stayed on. The men married indigenous women and raised families. For most of the twentieth century, these families, isolated on the jungle's edge in a Catholic society and without rabbis or a synagogue, had only the vaguest notion of what it meant to be Jewish. Shunned by members of the Jewish community in Lima, who had difficulty accepting as Jews a people who looked more like indigenous Indians than their own European or Middle Eastern brethren, the Iquitos community struggled on their own to observe Jewish rituals and holidays. They observed Shabbat and the High Holy Days at the homes of elders. They conducted services in Hebrew they learned from cassette tapes. They maintained their cemetery and buried their dead there.

Finally, a few years ago, the Iquitos community persuaded a rabbi in Lima to oversee mass, formal conversions. As a consequence, most of the Iquitos Jews have by now made aliyah to Israel. As a result of their tenacious attachment to Judaism and their insistence on being embraced as Jews, out of the enshrouding seclusion of a jungle emerged a proud community eager to attach its own destiny to that of the broader Jewish world.

Iquitos, Peru is not the only source for a story about an isolated community pursuing an embrace of Judaism. Often these communities have persevered surrounded by hostile neighbors. And all too frequently they have been ignored or, worse, rejected by the larger Jewish world. One of the most remarkable of these stories has taken place in the East African nation of Uganda.

As part of its colonial strategy at the end of the nineteenth century, Great Britain persuaded a great Muganda warrior, Semei Kakungulu, to rule as its representative territories that he conquered. Kakungulu was converted to Christianity by British missionaries. However, as he deepened his study of the Bible, he came to conclude that

Judaism represented the truest form of monotheism. In 1919 he proclaimed himself an adherent of Judaism and with a small group of followers created the community of Abayudaya, “the people of Judah.” Completely isolated from the outside Jewish world, the only Judaism Kakungulu knew about was that described in the Bible. In the 1920’s the Abayudaya community was visited from the outside world by a Jew known only by the name Yosef, who introduced some rabbinic practices, including the laws of kashrut and how to observe the festivals and High Holy Days.

The community of Abayudaya dwindled after Kakungulu’s death in 1938. And the situation became even more dire during the reign of dictator Idi Amin, who outlawed Jewish rituals and destroyed synagogues. Some 80-90% of the Abayudaya community converted either to Christianity or Islam in the face of religious persecutions and lack of contact with the outside Jewish world. A core group of about 300 remained committed to Judaism and continued worshipping in secret, fearful that they would be discovered by their neighbors and reported to the authorities.

In the 1980s a few dozen young men and women came out of hiding and began a revival movement. They rebuilt their synagogue and dared to once again study Torah in public and celebrate Jewish holidays. Over the past twenty years the Abayudaya community has grown from 300 to over 800 people living in several villages across eastern Uganda and centered now around five synagogues.

To overcome their isolation from the larger Jewish world several hundred members of the Abayudaya community have undergone formal conversion in the past few years. In 2003 Gershom Sizomu, grandson of one of the community’s spiritual leaders, received a scholarship to attend the University of Judaism rabbinic school in Los Angeles.

Ana and I were fortunate enough to meet Gershom and his wonderful family at that time. She and Gershom’s wife, Tziporah, were in the same Hebrew class at the University of Judaism. We became friends and had the pleasure of inviting them to our home in

Marina del Rey and watched with delight as their two young children Igaal and Dafna experienced the ocean for the first time in their lives.

Gershom and Tziporah also introduced us to the unique and joyful musical tradition of the Abayudaya community. It is a sacred blending of the rhythms and harmonies of Africa with the songs of Jewish celebration and traditional Hebrew prayer. There is rich choral singing, traditional drumming, and, in the earliest recordings made in their village, one can even hear the occasional goat and cricket joining in. To hear their music is to hear the joyous sound of the sacred revival of a people who have journeyed for more than two times forty years, from 1919 to the present, to proclaim their arrival at a place of confirmed Jewish identity.

To those of us who have grown up identifying Judaism with certain shared cultural customs – the food we eat, music we readily identify as Jewish, a particular kind of humor, Yiddish phrases (even when we don't 100% understand them) – encountering others who physically look very different from us and whose ritual observances seem at least as influenced by their native environment in Africa or South America or Asia as they are by the Jewish traditions familiar to us can be quite startling, perhaps even unsettling. Yet such encounters hold out the promise for a profound rediscovery of our own Jewish identity. And the opportunities for such encounters with culturally and ethnically diverse Jewish communities seem to be growing as the globe is shrinking.

The oldest of these communities is the Bene Israel of India. The origins of this group are shrouded in mystery. Some scholars say they are descendants of those who fled from the Galilee in the second century B.C.E. to escape the persecutions of Antiochus, the same Greek-Syrian emperor who fought the Macabbees. The story told by the Bene Israel themselves is that they are descended from Jewish survivors (seven men and seven women) of a shipwreck off the Konkan coast of India. Isolated for centuries from the rest of the Jewish world, this small community forgot much of the Hebrew language, Jewish prayer, and ceremonies. They adopted the customs, dress and language of their Konkan neighbors. They did continue to practice circumcision, dietary laws, the recitation of the

Shema, and observance of the Sabbath. Because so many of them earned their living by pressing oil, the Bene Israel were known by their neighbors as the Shanwar Tells, “the Sabbath-observing oil pressers.”

At the end of the eighteenth century a Jew whose family had come from Egypt, David Rahabi, stumbled across the Bene Israel. Intrigued by evidence of what appeared to be some Jewish customs, Rahabi tested them by giving them a variety of fish to cook. They separated out those that had no fins or scales, saying that it was their tradition not to eat such fish. Convinced that these were indeed a long lost community of Jews, Rahabi conducted classes about Judaism and helped to train individuals to be prayer leaders. Yet acceptance by the world Jewish community remained difficult to obtain.

After immigrating to Israel in the early 1960’s, hundreds of the Bene Israel resorted to sit-down strikes to protest the failure of both the Orthodox rabbinate and the Israeli government to fully recognize their Jewish status. Prime Minister Eshkol finally intervened and issued a statement that the Israeli government regarded the community of Bene Israel as Jews in every respect. Today there are about 50,000 Bene Israel living in Israel and another 5,000 who continue to live in India. They have brought into the Jewish world unique rites and rituals developed over centuries of isolated living in India.

The people of Iquitos, of Abayudaya and the Bene Israel represent far more than mere cultural curiosities, exceptions to a more narrow palette describing who is a Jew. Resisting the hostility of neighbors, the allure of assimilation, the isolation from and sometimes even the rejection by much of the Jewish world, these tiny communities, ethnically different from the majority of the Jewish population, inspire us to appreciate what a precious treasure we possess: the opportunity to live life through the wisdom of Jewish spirituality, ethics, and study. This is a gift we should never take for granted.

As importantly, these communities reflect a significant trend in contemporary Judaism. The borders between different ethnic groups are collapsing. Through intermarriage, adoption, and conversion the Jewish world is becoming increasingly more multi-cultural.

This readiness to enter into the Jewish world is an indication that Judaism holds something of value to groups who until recently lived outside its gates. Some Jews fear this will result in the dilution of a Jewish culture. Others see the promise offered by an expanding Jewish community that embraces its differences: the Judaism of a global village versus that of a shtetl.

We have been through these debates before. They rage across the pages of the Bible. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah insist that only the most exclusive definition of who may be a member of the Jewish community can ensure its survival. The Book of Ruth responds vigorously: The admittance of foreigners into the community not only will not destroy it, it will be the source of its revival and redemption.

I invite you to join me this year as we encounter and learn about the emergent ethnic diversity of contemporary Judaism. Here are some of the highlights:

- On November 1 we will host as this year's Pilger speaker Rabbi Gershom Sizomu of the Abayudaya community. Together we will hear the music and the stories of this extraordinary community. In the morning Rabbi Sizomu will conduct a special program for our Torah Center students, and in the evening he will lead one open to the whole community.

- Later in the year we will watch and discuss the movie *The Fire Within*, a film about the quest of people in the Amazon Rainforest to be embraced as Jews.

- Also, this year we will screen the movie *Black Over White*. It is a documentary about the Israeli world music group the Idan Rachel Project, which consists primarily of Jews of Ethiopian or Yemenite descent. The film focuses on two members, who during a concert tour in Ethiopia, confront their conflicting identities of being Africans with black skin and Jewish Israelis whose language is Hebrew and not Amharic.

- In June we will have as our Lapid lecturer Rabbi Capers Funnye, rabbi of Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago, one of the largest primarily African-American synagogues in America. Rabbi Funnye gained significant attention this year as the cousin of Michelle Obama. His tale of merging African-American customs and musical traditions with Judaism is a fascinating one.

These culturally diverse Jewish communities are bold explorers in the increasingly borderless global world of the 21st century. They stand at the edge of what has been for many of us a comfortably mono-chromatic and relatively homogeneous Jewish plain of settlement. The adventure of shaping an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Judaism that welcomes a broad band of peoples within its spiritual home will surely reshape Jewish customs, cuisine, and music. Yet, such has been the adaptive capacity of the Jewish people before. Indeed, the wide embrace of a multi-ethnic Judaism may be seen as an affirmation of Jewish tradition in its proudest and most authentic sense.