

ADAM EXPERIENCES SEDER NIGHT WITH A DIFFERENCE IN UGANDA

Four glasses of fermented banana 'wine'

IN 1919, a Christian Ugandan military leader called Semei Kakungulu, upon further study of the Bible, came to believe the customs and laws in the Old Testament were quite true.

When he was told that it is the Jews that observe such laws he exclaimed: "Then we will be Jewish."

Kakungulu declared his entire tribe to be Jewish and circumcised his sons and himself.

In the early 1920s a foreign Jew who stayed with them for six months visited the community. He taught them about the festivals, calendar, laws of kashrut and was instrumental in the establishment of a school with the purpose of passing on Jewish knowledge and teaching skills.

These people became known as the Abayudaya (People of Judea) and isolated themselves to escape persecution.

Almost 90 per cent of the population converted to either Christianity or Islam during the Idi Amin era but approximately 300 members remained committed to Judaism and worshipped in secret.

Today there are almost 800 Jews of the Abayudaya, divided into six smaller communities spread across 100 miles in the hills overlooking Mbale.

Genevieve and I arrived in Mbale and a local taxi driver drove us out of town along dirt roads into the surrounding hills. It was almost surreal to see African men, their heads covered in kippot, sitting around in front of the blue and white painted 'Shalom Shop', adorned with a Hebrew sign.

The children from the community, rather than the usual African welcome of running up to us shouting "Hi muzungu, Hi muzungu" (white man), came up to us shouting "Shabbat Shalom, Shabbat Shalom".

It was a Saturday and there were still a few hours of Shabbat remaining before the community would start preparing for the first seder.

I asked if I could take some photos but the men requested that I waited for the third star to become visible before using my camera. I was more than happy to respect their wishes.

The community leader, who was acting rabbi while the official rabbi was in America being officially ordained, greeted us shortly after we arrived and took us on a walk

IN the remote hills of eastern Uganda, in the shadow of the Mount Elgon live a small community of Africans who are also practising Jews known as The Abayudaya. ADAM WILLIAMS, 32, of Leeds is in Uganda with his wife Genevieve, volunteering in Kampala. The couple joined the community for their seder. Adam has lived in Israel, Australia and Africa. Following a six-hour bus ride to join the festivities, here is his story about the community and its history

around his community.

The site where the Abayudaya live is absolutely stunning. They have views to the west over Mbale and its lush green surrounds while behind them to the east stands the spectacular Mount Elgon and its national park which separates Uganda from Kenya.

The community from which the rabbi is based is the central administration of the Abayudaya.

Over time they have received some funding from the Diaspora which has been used for various initiatives including building and maintaining the synagogue, improving the school and the community library and more recently the community has built a guesthouse for paying visitors.

It didn't escape my attention that this community, compared with other communities of subsistence farmers, appeared to have better infrastructure.

Elders at the back so kids were involved

We were proudly shown the inside of the guesthouse where a handful of other *muzungus* was gathered, all waiting for Shabbat to end.

All of the other visitors were also Jewish, from various countries and had all come to experience an Abayudayan seder.

The sun set on the distant horizon in a stunning display of oranges and crimsons as the entire community made its way to the synagogue for the havdallah service.

The community synagogue is one large rectangular room built from red brick with glass windows. It has bookcases all the way along both sides, crammed with books and encyclopedias on world history and Judaism.

The young men from the com-

munity carried in tables, which they arranged in a line down the middle of the room.

With the women and girls on one side of the tables and the men and boys on the other the rabbi began explaining the schedule for the evening to the community.

There were at least 200 people in the room of which at least half were small children. This age distribution is not uncommon in Uganda with 60 per cent of the country's population being under 15.

My family seder usually has around 20 people present. I'm not sure the women in my family would cope with having to make charoseth for 200 people but the Abayudaya women did an incredible job of preparing not only the charoseth but also egg and salt water, and maror for everyone.

While the rabbi had the seder plate on the table in front of him, vast quantities of the traditional items were carried into the room in large plastic buckets and huge cooking pots.

Some of the other overseas guests brought boxes of matzo, a gesture which the community was exceptionally grateful and excited about. This was meticulously divided into small bite size chunks so that every single member of the community could have a piece to go with their scoop of charoseth.

A group of young African girls sitting across from me on the other side of the long table spontaneously burst out into song.

They all happily sang together. The rabbi quietly shushed them, asking them to save it for later.

It was clear that the rabbi was very proud of the girls with their urge to sing Hebrew songs. For me, it was just incredible to see young black Africans singing songs that I have always associated with people from my own culture.

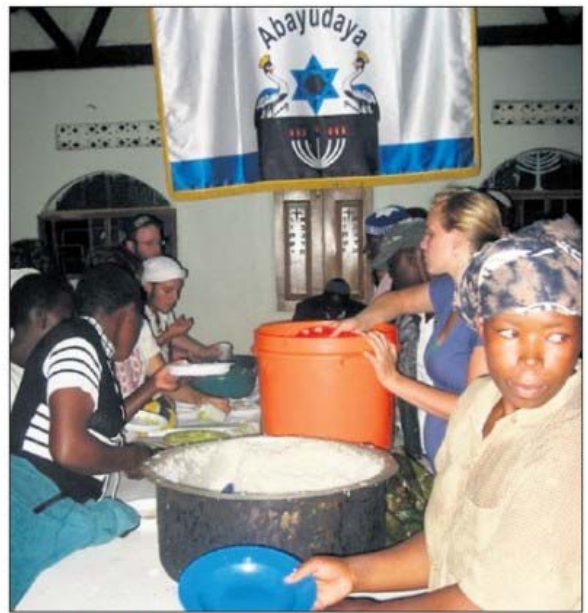
While we had bitter herbs in abundance there was very little kosher wine.

Only two bottles were to be shared between the entire community. Wine is not something that the Abayudaya have the privilege of being able to drink regularly and generally only to mark special occasions.

The first night of seder is certainly one of those moments. Not wanting anyone to miss out on sharing the wine it was mixed with a locally brewed alcohol, made from fermenting bananas, before being poured out into plastic cups.

While the rabbi addressed the community in English, the national language of Uganda, his young assistant translated everything he said into the local dialect to ensure that absolutely everyone could understand.

The principle of making sure that the story of the exodus from Egypt is passed onto the children



PREPARING FOR PESACH: Abayudaya women prepare for the seder

is not lost on the Abayudaya.

A group of 30 or so children gathered at one end of the table to sing *ma nishkana*. After the first question was asked so beautifully the entire community joined in with the remaining three questions.

The tune was identical to the one I grew up with in Leeds.

I think the afkoman was hidden but by the time the meal had been eaten and all the plates cleared away most of the children were asleep and the adults had drunk enough fermented banana alcohol that they didn't have the energy to go looking for it.

The 10 plagues and the dipping of the little fingers into our cups were carried out with incredible excitement by all. The elders in the community all sat at the back, allowing the children to be more involved.

The elders, all in their 60s, over time have seen the community shrink from 3,000 to less than 300. The smiling faces made it clear that they were very happy with the enthusiasm of the children when it came to Jewish traditions.

I usually find myself eagerly turning the pages of the haggadah hoping to hurry up time so the meal can be served.

On this occasion the joy and

Raising funds by selling yarmulkes

positivity in the room led me to hoping that the food was delayed just a while longer while I absorbed the atmosphere. It was wonderful.

We finally reached the page in the haggadah that the community had been given when it was time to serve the meal.

Due to the strict Jewish observance the preparation of the food did not begin until after Shabbat was out.

We had a good deal longer to wait before the Seder meal reached the table.

It didn't matter, the young boys and girls took it upon themselves to stand up and sing all the traditional seder songs.

One of the older boys had an African drum, which he beat with his hands in time with each song. Once all the seder songs had been sung, the meal was still nowhere to be seen, the Abayudaya sang the songs all over again.

There was not a complaint to be heard and everyone joined in the singing.

When the food finally came, many of children were asleep and were awoken by mothers so not to miss a meal. The food was no dif-

ferent to the usual Ugandan meals. The locals here eat the same food for breakfast, lunch and dinner, a combination of rice, plantain, potato, some greens and possibly some meat.

As the official rabbi was away there was no one present that could bless the chickens in order to make them kosher and therefore the meal we ate was strictly parev.

During the meal I sat next to a man named Aharon from one of the surrounding Jewish communities. Aharon had decided to have seder away from his family in the hope of speaking to someone like me.

He told me that although funding does come from the Diaspora, it stays with the main community and very little of it reaches the other communities.

Aharon told me that while this central community has a brick synagogue, school, many books and even a guesthouse, his community has a mud hut with no windows that they use for a synagogue.

Aharon also said that they can only dream of building a school and they are still hoping for the day when a member of their community can find the funds to attend university.

His community is called Namatumba and he told me that they were hoping to raise some funds to improve their village by selling kippot that the women make.

Aharon asked me if I could ask people in my country if they could buy some yarmulkes from them.

He had a plastic bag with him with 30 handmade kippot, which he pleaded with me to take and return with some money to give back to his community.

I agreed to try and sell them and asked him if the women of his community could make more if I did manage to sell them all. He told me that they could make many different designs, sizes and colours and gently pushed the plastic bag into my hands.

Religion is an important part of everyone's life in Uganda so it should have come as no surprise that this community was just as passionate about their religion as the Christian and Muslim communities around them.

I was, however, still taken aback by the passion and dedication of this remote Jewish community.

It was a wonderful experience. If anyone wishes to purchase a yarmulke from the Namatumba community email kippotforhope@gmail.com

I will ensure that all proceeds reach the community and is used in effective ways. I am in contact with Aharon and he assures me that the women of the community would be more than happy to make as many would be required.



PRAYERS: Abayudaya men are all set to begin the seder