

Seder with Uganda's Jews, the Abayudaya

The first I heard of Uganda's Jews was in the research for the music exhibition I curated in 2004. Their liturgy, available on CD, mixes Ashkenazi chant and melodies, contemporary American Jewish music, styles influenced by Christian churches in Uganda and Kenya and styles of East African popular music. Then recently I received an article from **Adam Williams**, who had just participated in a Seder with this fascinating Jewish community. *Anna Epstein, Editor*

In the remote hills of eastern Uganda live the Abayudaya (meaning 'the people of Judaea'), Africans who are practising Jews. These 800 Bantu people living in villages surrounding Mbale in Eastern Uganda converted to Judaism eighty years ago, and lead a life devoted to traditional Jewish practices. They attend services in their small, usually mud-walled, straw-roofed synagogues, observe the Sabbath, celebrate Jewish holidays, keep kosher and pray in Hebrew.

My wife Genevieve and I arrived in Mbale for Passover. A local taxi driver drove us into the surrounding hills. It was almost surreal to see African men in kippot¹, sitting in front of the blue and white painted Shalom Shop adorned with a Hebrew sign. The children from the community 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 started preparing for the first Seder.

The acting Rabbi (while the official Rabbi was in USA being officially ordained), took us on a walk around his community. The Abayudaya have stunning views to the west over Mbale and its lush green surrounds, while behind them to the east stands spectacular Mount Elgon and its national park which separates Uganda from Kenya.

The central administration of the Abayudaya has received some funding from the Diaspora that has been used for building and maintaining the synagogue, improving the school and the community library, and more recently the construction of a guesthouse for paying visitors. Compared with other communities of subsistence farmers, this one appeared

to have better infrastructure. Their thirst for knowledge seems to have given them an advantage over their neighbours.

The other visitors in the guesthouse were also Jewish, from various countries, and had all come to experience an Abayudayan Seder.

The sun set on the distant horizon in a gorgeous display of oranges and crimsons as the entire community made their way to the synagogue for the Havdalah² service. Prayers were said in Hebrew, a Havdalah candle was lit and the spice box passed around the congregation for everyone to inhale the odours.

This 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 encyclopaedias on world history and Judaism. The young men from the community 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 whom at least half were small children. This age distribution is not uncommon in Uganda, where 50% of the country's population is under fifteen.

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 guests had brought boxes of matzah³ and this was divided into bite-size pieces so that every member of the community could have a piece to go with their scoop of charoset⁴.

A group of young African girls sitting across from me on the other side of the long table spontaneously burst into song. They happily sang together 'Day Dayenu⁵, Day Dayenu, Day Dayenu, Dayenu...'. The Rabbi quietly shushed them, asking them to save it for later! It was clear however that the rabbi was very proud of the girls with their urge to sing Hebrew songs.

There were bitter herbs in abundance but there was very little kosher wine. Only two bottles were to be shared amongst the entire community. The Abayudaya generally only drink to mark special occasions – such as this one. So that everyone could share the wine, it was mixed with a locally brewed alcohol made from fermenting bananas.

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

A group of thirty or so children gathered at one end of the table to sing the Ma-nishtanah⁶, the tune identical to the one I grew up with in Leeds.

I think the Afikomen⁷ was hidden but by the time the meal had been eaten and the plates cleared away, most of the children were asleep and the adults had drunk so much banana alcohol that they didn't have the energy to go looking for it!

The ten plagues and the dipping of the little fingers into our cups was carried out amid great excitement. The elders sat at the back, allowing the children to be more involved. The elders are all in their sixties and, over time, have seen their community shrink

from 3000 to fewer than 300. They were gladdened by the enthusiasm of the children over Jewish traditions.

The atmosphere was wonderful. Due to the strict Jewish observance the preparation of the food did not begin until after Shabbat was over. 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, in Hebrew and accompanied by an African drum. Still the meal was nowhere to be seen, and the Abayudaya sang the songs over again. There was not a complaint to be heard and everyone joined in the singing.

When the food finally came many of the children were asleep and were woken by their mothers so not to miss a meal. The food was no different from 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.

During the meal I sat next to 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 all stays with the main community and very little of it reaches the other communities. While this central community has a brick synagogue, a school, many books and even a guesthouse, his community, called *Namatumba*, has a mud hut with no windows that they use for their synagogue. They can only dream of building a school and are still hoping for the day when a member of their



Preparation of the Passover meal

community can find the funds to attend university. They were hoping to raise some funds to improve their village by selling kippot that the women make. He asked me if I could ask the people in my country if they could buy some kippot from them. He had a plastic bag with him containing thirty handmade kippot that he pleaded with me to take to make some money to give back to his community. I agreed to try and sell them and asked 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 rich and rewarding experience.

¹ skullcaps

² ritual marking the end of Sabbath and the beginning of the weekdays

³ flat bread

⁴ sweet, pebbly mixture representing the mortar used by the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, but also the sweetness of liberation

⁵ Passover song "It would have been enough."

⁶ four questions, recited toward the beginning of the Passover Seder, usually by children

⁷ a piece of matzah hidden and used in a game

Originally from Melbourne, I went to Uganda as a backpacker in 1998, and moved there in 2003. I met Genevieve (daughter of Joyce & Bernie Marks) not long after, and we married in 2007. We are directing a community development program that supports around 10,000 people with education, agriculture and health programs through an eco-tourism retreat on an island on Lake Bunyonyi.

If anyone is interested in purchasing a yarmulke from the Namatumba community then please contact me. I will ensure that 100% of the proceeds reaches the community and is used in effective ways. If you are interested in bulk orders, then I am in regular contact with Aharon and he assures me that the women of the community would be more than happy to make as many as would be required. My email is willyontour@hotmail.com

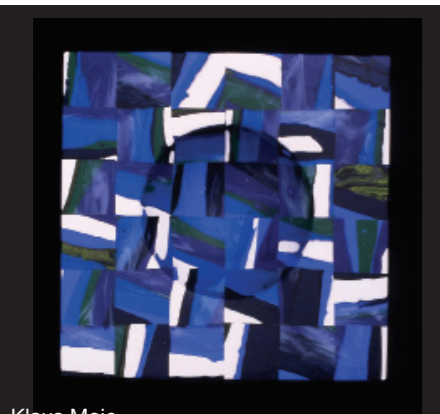
Adam Williams



Matthew Curtis
Incalmo Bowl – Round Cherry/Aqua, 2008,
blown plate glass bowl, 21 x 54cm



Ann Robinson
Pod (Fuscina Pink) & Te Rito Pod (Citrine),
2008, kiln cast crystal, 24 x 35.5 x 24;
28.5 x 35 x 24 cm



Klaus Moje
Blue Squares #2, kilnformed mosaic glass,
30.5 x 30.5 x 5.5 cm

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