



"All of Us" Kulanu

Supporting Isolated, Emerging, and Returning Jewish Communities around the Globe



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***¡Feliz Janucá!
Happy Hanukkah!***

*From all of us at Kulanu
AND from our Spanish-
speaking partner
community in El Salvador.*

*Photo by Kimberly Dueñas,
December 2012.*



Happy 30th Anniversary, Kulanu!

By Bonita Nathan Sussman, President of Kulanu; photos from Kulanu's archives

Remember the slogan “You’ve come a long way, baby?” Well, Kulanu has certainly come a long way since its inception!

During my nearly twenty years of volunteer service to Kulanu, I have witnessed the organization evolve from a small, boutique nonprofit into a key international player by supporting the development of Jewish communities in more than thirty-three countries around the globe. Kulanu is now highly regarded worldwide and is sought after as a partner by other global community organizations.

Kulanu — meaning “all of us” in Hebrew — has become a hopeful, encouraging, friendly, and welcoming voice that validates the Jewish journeys of so many people across many continents. Kulanu plays a vital role in strengthening Jewish identity and helping communities find their place in Jewish history.

Whether in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, Asia, or Europe, Kulanu encourages Jewish development by sending Torah scrolls, siddurim, machzorim, mezuzot, and other books of Jewish learning. We help build synagogues and *mikvaot* (ritual baths), pay teachers’ salaries and students’

school tuition. We send rabbis to various partner communities, offer Torah study in the USA or Israel, and, when requested, support and assist with conversion if possible. Kulanu provides funding for High Holiday meals and Passover seders. Kulanu’s technology fund pays for mobile phones, laptops, internet and wi-fi service, and sometimes solar panels.

Kulanu promotes our partner communities through publications, webinars, our website, and social media. We connect these communities to

both religious and economic resources and to each other. We helped organize the Sub-Saharan Jewish Alliance (SAJA) which has representatives from ten Sub-Saharan African communities that advocate for themselves, and we assisted in forming the Latin American Jewish Alliance (LAJA) which currently has representatives from four countries, with other Latin communities wanting to join. Kulanu helps sponsor conferences in these regions.

Kulanu has raised awareness about our work through radio and international news



Bonita and Rabbi Gerald Sussman, SAJA conference in Cote d'Ivoire, 2022



Jack and Diane Zeller, two of Kulanu's founders, in Jerusalem, 2017



Bonita Nathan Sussman on the back of a motorcycle in Cameroon, 2010

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Happy Anniversary, Kulanu: continued from previous page

outlets, being mentioned in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Times of Israel*, *Jerusalem Post*, *Hadassah Magazine*, and *National Public Radio*.

Staff and volunteers of Kulanu collaborate with documentarians, even appearing in documentaries, and we work with television programs and networks to highlight our mission. We share our experiences with academics whose findings are published in books and academic journals, and we collaborate with rabbis across all denominations.

In the United States, Kulanu has held programs at the Center for Jewish History through the American Sephardi Federation, a major center of Jewish learning in New York City, as well as at the Center for Global Studies at Florida

International University. We have also presented programs at Brandeis, Harvard, the University of Pennsylvania, various JCCs, synagogues, and Federations. Kulanu has hosted events in Israel and works to gain acceptance for communities in Africa, Latin America, and other regions, including many crypto-Jewish communities.

Kulanu informs the Jewish world of its rich diversity. Members of our partner communities are the voices of Jewish affinity, of philosemitism, of Zionism, and of the future of Judaism.

We want to thank and honor the founders who had the vision to grow the Jewish people — our first president, Jack Zeller, and founders Karen and Aron Primack and Bob and Jeri Lande, and the hundreds of volunteers and donors worldwide who have supported Kulanu's vision and mission. Special words of thanks and praise go to the late Harriet Bograd, z"l, who served as Kulanu's treasurer and then president between 2002 and 2022 and who brilliantly laid the foundation for Kulanu's expansion. Finally, we express our gratitude to the Kulanu Board of Directors who are a living testimony to Jewish unity in all its diversity.

Happy Birthday, Kulanu! *



Studying in Brazil, 2017



Jonatas Chimen, Kulanu's Artist-Scholar in Residence and a Bnei Anusim, discussing his famous tent creation, "In Thy Tent I Dwell," about Jewish identity, immigration, and exile, at a Kulanu event in 2018 (<https://kulanu.org/jonatas-chimen-speaking-tour>)



Seder in Tanzania, 2021

Kulanu Opened My Eyes, Mind, and Heart

By Judi Kloper, Kulanu board member and magazine editor

As we celebrate Kulanu turning 30 years old, I've been browsing through all our online magazines and newsletters going back to 1994 (www.kulanu.org/magazines). What a legacy Kulanu has built! I've only been part of this amazing organization for ten years, and I can honestly say it's greatly impacted my life in various ways!

In the 1990s, when Kulanu was first born as Amishav (See page 2 of our previous issue www.bit.ly/Kulanu2024Summer), I had never heard of either organization. However, I was traveling often to India where, among other things, I sought out Jewish communities. Then, in 2014, when searching the internet for Jewish organizations that worked in India though not necessarily with Jews, one click led to another and another, and a few hours later I was reading someone's blog about volunteering with Kulanu's partner community in Northeast India, the Bene Menashe; at that moment I emailed the address listed, expressing an interest in volunteering there. Harriet Bograd, z"l, who at that time was Kulanu's president, called me within an hour and asked me to consider volunteering in another part of India with a lesser-known community. As it turned out, it was located very close to where

I'd been volunteering for several years. Just a few months later, I was landing in Southern India to spend four months living in a village as part of the Bene Ephraim emerging Jewish community, and while there, a few months later in 2015, Harriet sent me an email and asked me to consider joining Kulanu's board of directors. I'm more of a "yes" person than a "no" person, so I agreed. The next thing I knew, upon returning home that summer, Harriet asked me to edit the magazine, something I had absolutely no experience with. With some trepidation, I responded with a yes.

Until I became a part of Kulanu, I knew very little about Jews in other parts of the world. To say that Kulanu opened my eyes, my mind, and my heart would be an understatement. My Judaism came to life — and while it was and still is an honor to teach Jewish customs, prayers, and songs to these emerging and returning Jewish communities (in parts of India and in Nicaragua), those same communities have continued welcoming me with open arms and hearts and have taught me about finding joy in these customs as well as in theirs, in prayers that are infused or melded with their traditions, and songs that have the same Hebrew words but melodies from their own cultures.

Editing Kulanu Magazine for the past nine years has provided me with opportunities to meet in person, over Zoom, and through email and WhatsApp so many people from around the globe — people who've been volunteering with Kulanu in different capacities and those who live in one of our partner communities in more than 33 countries. What a richly diverse Jewish family we are!

Join us as we seek to create an inclusive Jewish world. See our website for how to get involved, including volunteering in various ways and places, doing a mitzvah project, becoming an intern, hosting an event, and more: kulanu.org/get-involved. Kulanu wants you!!

May Kulanu — All of Us — continue to thrive for another 120 years — and longer! *



In 2014-2015, Judi Kloper (center) spent a few months as a Kulanu volunteer living with the Bene Ephraim community in Andhra Pradesh, India, an experience that impacted her life. She continues to visit this community nearly every year.

Celebrating 30 Years of Kulanu!

Written by Rebecca Sealfon, photos from Kulanu's archives

Rebecca Sealfon was raised as a Conservative Jew and is a member of West End Synagogue, a Reconstructionist congregation in New York City. A graduate of Princeton University's Creative Writing program, she has been published in the New York Daily News, Smithsonian magazine, and The Daily Beast. Rebecca is also a professional software engineer and instructor and was named one of the top 50 female all-around software developers in New York City by RecruitLoop. She divides her time between New York City and Monmouth County, NJ.

Kulanu is a crucial organization for world Jewry. In its thirty years of operations, it has provided numerous isolated, emerging, and returning Jewish communities — all over the globe — with essential Jewish knowledge and invaluable resources to practice Judaism. Focusing on offering Jewish resources to existing communities, Kulanu has made Judaism accessible and welcoming. At long last, thousands of people from many cultures can reconnect with their Jewish heritage or connect with their chosen faith and act upon their feelings of being Jewish. Kulanu has enabled Jewish life to thrive from rural Ghana to Guatemala City, Guatemala — far outside the major Jewish population centers.

It is relatively easy to be Jewish when around many other Jews. Hence, today's Jews are concentrated in a few densely populated areas

such as Israel, New York, Los Angeles, Miami, Chicago, Paris, and other metropolitan areas. These places offer a wide array of Jewish resources and a rich, diverse Jewish life. Jews are also in places one might not expect. Throughout the world, during many historical periods, groups became isolated and disconnected from the other Jewish communities. Some remained aware of their Jewish roots, preserving varying amounts of their traditions.

While Judaism has a single set of scriptures and a more or less unified rabbinic commentary, the individual diasporic Jewish communities were largely independent of one another. This has changed in the past century. The modern State of Israel, the Jewish homeland where Jews can immigrate to and be granted citizenship, brought Jews from many parts of the world together in one place. Modern telecommunication technologies allow Jews to rapidly communicate with one another regardless of where in the world they may be. These developments have connected the world's Jews under a more unified umbrella.

By the 1970s, Jews from all over Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa had come to Israel. The Israeli Chief Rabbinate periodically received letters from other unconnected Jewish communities, passing them on to Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail.



Yoash Mayende and Rachman Nachman (from Uganda) with Harriet Bograd; Yoash was on his way to at Camp Eisenberg (New York), and Rachman was on his way to Brandeis Collegiate Initiative in Los Angeles, Summer 2015.



Kulanu's 2009 board retreat — Back: Jacob Steinberg, Aron Primack, Harriet Bograd, z"l, Judy Manelis, Barbara Vinick, Andria Spindel; Seated: Karen Primack, Jack Zeller

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In 1975, Rabbi Avichail founded Kulanu's predecessor organization, *Amishav*, to investigate this correspondence and help these Jews.

Amishav Welcomed Returning and Emerging Jews

Amishav was wildly successful. It gathered many loose Jewish threads, weaving them back into the Jewish tapestry. It brought in the Bnei Menashe of Northeast India, Kaifeng Jews of China, and crypto-Jews and their descendants who had been forcibly converted to Catholicism during the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions. Founders of the American branch, Diane and Jack Zeller, had been active in rescuing the Ethiopian Jewish community from famine and persecution and transporting them to Israel between the late 1970s and early 1990s. They shared Rabbi Avichail's interest in connecting with more isolated Jewish communities.

While the Israeli Chief Rabbinate is Orthodox, the American branch of Amishav was supported largely by Jews of other denominations. To remain denominationally pluralistic (diverse), Amishav's American branch spun off from its parent organization in 1994, adopting the name *Kulanu* (meaning "all of us" in Hebrew). Rabbi Avichail asked Jack Zeller to take the helm of this new group. Kulanu continues to be pluralistic,

encouraging communities in a variety of Jewish denominations. While the majority of Kulanu's communities prefer more traditional branches, Guatemala City's *Adat Israel* is Reform, and Calabria, Italy's *Sinagoga Ner Tamid del Sud* is Reconstructionist.

Kulanu's Beginning Serving Neglected or Forgotten Communities

Kulanu serves Jewish communities that mainstream Ashkenazi, Sephardic, and Mizrahi Jewry may neglect or dismiss, perhaps even disputing their Jewishness. Kulanu takes groups' claims of a Jewish connection as legitimating their Jewish peoplehood, supporting them in their journey toward more normative Jewish practices. Working with Jews in more than thirty-three countries, Kulanu is quite far-reaching. It is also one of the few, if not the only, outside Jewish organizations for many, if not most, of these Jews. However, its evolution was gradual.

In the beginning, Kulanu was comprised of just a few people meeting in a living room. At the heart of the effort were the Zellers, as well as cancer researchers and former Peace Corps volunteers Karen and Aron Primack. The internet had not yet taken off, so publicity — including for the communities that were contacting them — was essentially through word of mouth.



Kulanu's long-time board member, treasurer, and dedicated volunteer, Sandy Leeder, z"l, in Cote d'Ivoire, 2017 (Go here for more about Sandy Leeder's amazing life's work: <https://kulanu.org/sandy-leeder>).



High Holidays in Guatemala, 2020

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Kulanu's first project independent of Amishav was helping the Abayudaya of Uganda. In 1995, Kulanu organized the first mainstream Jewish delegation to the Abayudaya. They encountered a Jewish community enthusiastic to practice traditional Judaism. "In Jewish observances there is civilization," said Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, the leader of the Abayudaya's rituals. "If you practice Judaism you become civilized," he explained. Today, Kulanu continues to work with the Abayudaya, supporting Jewish primary schools that now have over 250 students.

Leadership and Volunteers Have a Huge Impact

As the internet took off, Kulanu grew and built a presence there. It became a more structured, professional organization under the leadership of the late Harriet Bograd, who joined Kulanu in the early 2000s. When Bonita Sussman and Rabbi Gerald Sussman joined in the late 2000s, Kulanu began to soar. The Sussmans served as dedicated regional coordinators, enabling Kulanu to serve any community that wanted to work with them.

Kulanu's volunteers speak a variety of languages, allowing the organization to work with groups around the world. Some volunteers are returning Jews and converts themselves. Kulanu provides much to its Jewish communities, including online and in-person Jewish instruction in a variety of topics and levels; Jewish ritual objects; and support for building Jewish facilities (i.e.,

synagogues, Jewish schools). It supports the communities along their own paths toward their own goals, rather than pushing a specific course of action such as aliyah to Israel or a specific denomination of Judaism.

Kulanu's offerings are not limited to Jewish resources. Kulanu also provides technology and helps its communities to become economically sustainable. To Ghana's Sefwi Wiawso community, it gave 22 smartphones. For the Lemba Jewish community of Zimbabwe, it may even have saved people's lives.

Zimbabwe as an Example of Kulanu's Impact

With climate change impacting much of the world, Zimbabwe's recent droughts have become longer and the rainy seasons less reliable. The World Food Programme has reported on large-scale hunger in the country. Beginning in 2016, Kulanu sponsored public works projects — the first new infrastructure in the Lemba villages since 1988 — to protect the Lemba, their livestock, and their crops from the effects of drought.

Initially, Kulanu funded a reservoir near the village of Bedza to provide drinking water for cattle. Bedza, where the primarily Harare-based Lemba community grows its crops, is part of a larger network of seven villages, with 5,000 people in total. The villagers also include Christians, Muslims, practitioners of traditional



Hanukkah in Mexico, 1996. (See story here: kulanu.org/communities/mexico/journey-of-renewal.) Photo provided by Nancy Shneiderman.



Hanukkah in Suriname, 2014

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African religions, and not only ethnic Lemba but ethnic Shona, the majority group in Zimbabwe.

The Lemba could have built a fence around the reservoir to protect the water from the others. However, Modreck Maeresera, the Lemba community leader, saw an opportunity. “What we needed to do was create a bond between the different villages,” he said. As a people, the Lemba had long lived as a minority among other groups, reliant on building good relations with their neighbors. In that time, they had learned to share their skills, such as metalworking and cloth-making, to encourage friendships across cultures. And now, with the money for building the reservoir, Maeresera and others established a committee to allocate tasks. They would construct the reservoir together, sharing the water between all seven villages.

The first topic the committee discussed was respecting others’ religions. Muslims would be exempted from work on Fridays, Jews on Saturdays, and Christians on Sundays. The Lemba, the only group that would not eat from others’ dishes, provided the food and utensils. As a result, all the local religious and cultural groups could be accommodated. With these issues resolved, the people grouped themselves into different work teams made up of individuals from multiple villages and cultures. A team of men

was responsible for gathering building materials such as sand and stones, and another team of men was responsible for excavating the site. Women were responsible for cooking, fetching water, and cleaning the construction area. Maeresera’s brother George, a trained engineer, provided his expertise.

The first round of construction started in 2017 and was finished in early 2018. The villages are still together and in contact, and their project has even inspired a neighboring Shona village to apply for its own government funding for its own reservoir. “That’s the biggest impact that we had,” Maeresera said, “bringing all these different people from different backgrounds to find a common solution to a common problem.” The Kulanu donors, encouraged by the joint activities, sent the Lemba even more money for more construction. Thanks to the Rosenblum Family Foundation, which provided a total of \$35,000 for reservoirs, the water would not be depleted but would be recycled.

The Lemba’s funding proposals focus on what they need to become self-sustaining so they are not constantly asking their donors for more resources. Hence, they request funds for construction equipment rather than, for example, direct food aid. Initially, their construction led to a water surplus, with water even spilling out of



Meeting with Bedza Lemba community members on top of the mountain by the water tank in Zimbabwe, 2023



Sukkot in Pakistan, 2019

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the overflowing reservoir. When drought came in late 2018, the Lemba were already partly prepared. Kulanu had sponsored the digging of two boreholes, irrigating a total of two hectares. A third borehole that was dug came out dry. Still, the Lemba could survive through the first year of drought.

In the second year, the drought continued and they faced another shortage. That year, 2019, they used the donor money to feed their poor, widows, orphans, and elderly instead of building planned infrastructure. Like Jewish tradition, Lemba tradition calls on the community to care for the needy. “The Lemba taught us what it means to be a light unto the nations,” said Jack Zeller, who works closely with the Lemba on the water project. “We are so committed to planning and to agreements, that we don’t have room for real, unexpected, unscheduled events. We have learned to schedule ourselves out of that type of experience.” The Lemba, however, were able to save their entire community with this reallocation of funds. Every person survived. And although many cows miscarried their calves, most of the livestock made it through (see article on page 16 <https://bit.ly/Kulanu2021Winter>).



Kulanu’s “volunteer extraordinaire” Lucy Steinitz in Uganda, 2000 (see <https://bit.ly/Kulanu2017Fall> for an article Lucy wrote on page 6 and her “Volunteer Spotlight” on page 10)

Subsequent projects included installing irrigation and running water in the villages. With funds from Mark Gelfand (see article on page 8 <https://bit.ly/Kulanu2024Summer>), these water facilities are being built, with many villages already receiving the water. When drought came again this year, the Lemba were prepared.

Emerging Leaders and Alliances Contribute to Jewish World

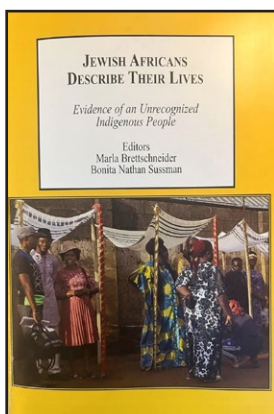
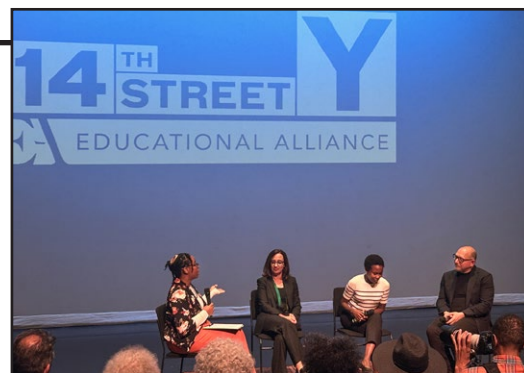
Modreck Maeresera is one of the many emerging Jewish leaders Kulanu has trained and mentored. But mentoring and support are not all. Kulanu also works on coordinating these leaders to help build a brighter future for the Jewish world. In December 2022, Kulanu organized the first Sub-Saharan African Jewish Conference, in which the Sub-Saharan African Jewish Alliance (SAJA) was formed. The conference and association included Jews and Jewish leaders from all over sub-Saharan Africa, including many communities Kulanu works with. Maeresera was elected the first president of the SAJA. Additionally, In April 2023, Kulanu, led by Genie Milgrom and Bonita Nathan Sussman, supported the formation of the Latin American Jewish Alliance (LAJA) with its first conference held in El Salvador that included representatives from Jewish communities in El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Guatemala. Its goal is to include communities from Mexico to Brazil.

The conference and so many other Kulanu activities are firsts in history. Many of the groups Kulanu serves have been isolated from other Jews for a long time, some for thousands of years. Others are brand new to Judaism. As Rabbi Gerald Sussman wrote, “It was a time to break isolation and most importantly to organize.” This is only the beginning of these groups’ stories as communities that are now connected to the rest of the Jewish world. Their impact on Jewish life, going forward, may very well be transformative, and Kulanu is here to serve these communities as they become part of the greater Jewish world. ✱

Kulanu Notes

Kulanu Events in the Big Apple

We recently hosted several inspiring events in New York City highlighting Kulanu's mission of supporting isolated, emerging, and returning Jewish communities worldwide. At the 14th Street Y (pictured), attendees explored the story of Uganda's Abayudaya Jewish community through a gallery exhibit, conversations, and short films-in-progress celebrating the Abayudaya's dedication to Jewish traditions. More screenings of *Between the Flower and the Stone* in Brooklyn and Manhattan captivated audiences with Genie Milgrom's journey of reconnecting with her Jewish roots after 600 years, tracing her ancestry back to the Spanish Inquisition. At Limmud's LearningFest 2024, Molly Levine shared Kulanu's global impact in her talk, *A Global Jewish Tapestry: Weaving Connections Through Kulanu*, showcasing stories from communities in Latin America, Africa, and Asia while encouraging participants to join Kulanu in strengthening Jewish connections worldwide.

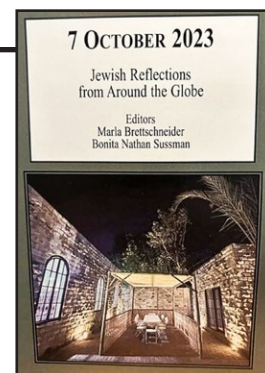


Kulanu Gathering and Book Launch in Israel

This past November, a Kulanu Gathering and Book Launch was hosted by Shalva Weil in Jerusalem. Over 20 attendees joined to connect and celebrate a special occasion with Bonita Nathan Sussman, Kulanu's president. This event marked the Israeli launch of two books co-edited by Kulanu President Sussman and Professor Marla Brettschneider: *Jewish Africans Describe Their Lives* (pictured <https://amzn.to/4eDoUic>) and *7 October 2023, Jewish Reflections Across the Globe* (pictured below <https://bit.ly/7October2023Book>), both published by Edwin Mellen Press. The invitation reached friends across Israel, inviting them to join this unique opportunity to meet Bonita, engage with her latest works, and learn more about Kulanu.

Reflecting Together: October 7 Commemoration

On Monday, October 7, 2024, Kulanu hosted a meaningful online gathering to reflect, remember, and connect through the book *7 October 2023: Jewish Reflections from Around the Globe* (pictured). Editors Bonita Nathan Sussman and Marla Brettschneider shared insights from their publication, joined by international contributors who shared their powerful reflections. The session concluded with an engaging open discussion, bringing voices from around the world together in a shared conversation.



In-Kind Donations Arrive in Cameroon

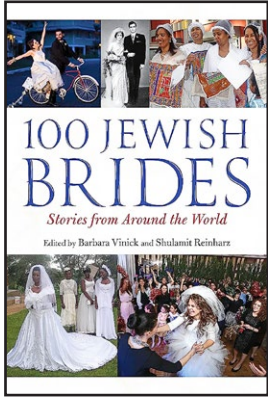
Kulanu's mission is to support Jewish communities worldwide and sometimes that means shipping a box of taleisim, tefillin, prayer books, and other ritual items across the globe — such as from New York to Cameroon (pictured). We wanted to share this thank you video from the Jewish community in Cameroon that we received today! <https://bit.ly/CameroonThanks>

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Online Speaker Series with Rabbi David Kunin and Barbara Vinick

Kulanu recently hosted two engaging online programs that highlighted the rich diversity of Jewish life around the world. In one session, Rabbi David Kunin of California presented his short film, *We Are Indonesian Jews*, offering a glimpse into the unique and vibrant Jewish communities of Indonesia. Rabbi Kunin shared insights into their history and traditions, and attendees had the chance to deepen their understanding of Jewish life in this part of Southeast Asia.



Another session featured Kulanu board member and author Barbara Vinick, who shared stories from her book, *100 Jewish Brides: Stories from Around the World* (pictured). Through an illuminating slideshow and engaging discussion, Vinick offered a captivating look at Jewish wedding traditions across cultures. These programs provided an inspiring opportunity to learn about the global Jewish tapestry and connect with the stories that make it so diverse.

High Holiday Matching Gift Campaign a Success

Thanks to the remarkable generosity of our supporters, Kulanu's High Holiday Matching Gift Campaign exceeded its \$10,000 goal, raising \$10,459! This milestone reflects the power of collective giving and the shared commitment to enriching Jewish culture and supporting diverse, resilient communities worldwide. Your contributions made the High Holidays and Sukkot more joyous and meaningful, connecting isolated, emerging, and returning Jewish communities in celebration of tradition and unity. This year Kulanu gave out High Holiday grants to 28 communities across the globe. From a beautiful sukkah in Kenya (pictured) to celebrations across the globe, your support brought light and connection to Jewish life. Thank you for making this possible!



Grants Awarded to Communities Across the Globe

Kulanu is proud to announce the impact of recent grants awarded to Jewish communities around the world. In Uganda, a technology grant was given to the Abayudaya community's sewing training program, expanding on earlier support that provided sewing machines by now funding new computers. This will enable students to enhance their selling capabilities and learn vital accounting skills to sustain their income through sewing.



In Nigeria, we provided a grant to fund the installation of solar panels and a battery system at the synagogue in Aba (lighting pictured). The solar panels provide power for both the synagogue and school, as well as a water pump for the community's borehole. The Aba community sent a heartfelt thank-you video, expressing their gratitude for this transformative gift. These projects reflect Kulanu's ongoing commitment to empowering Jewish communities worldwide, thanks to the generosity of its supporters.

Here is a short thank you video from Nigeria:
www.bit.ly/NigeriaThanks. *

What is Kulanu's Purpose?

To Provide a Warm Welcome to Anyone Who Sincerely Wants to (Re)join the Jewish People

Condensed from Kulanu Newsletter, Spring 1996

Written by Robert (Bob) Lande, photos from Kulanu's archives

Editor's note: Way back in 1996, when Kulanu was just two years old, one of Kulanu's founders, Robert (Bob) Lande, wrote this article that has been condensed for this magazine. Though it was written 28 years ago, much of what was discussed is still current today, and so much of what was once considered difficult is now happening more often, such as people being able to trace their roots to the Inquisition. Kulanu, thanks to generous donors, can help our communities survive and thrive. To read the whole article, see www.bit.ly/Kulanu1996Spring.

In some ways, it is easy to state the purpose of Kulanu. Our primary goal is to find lost and dispersed remnants of Jewish migrations and to help those who wish to rejoin the Jewish people. This is why Kulanu's motto is "Helping Lost Jewish Communities."

This simple motto, however, gives rise to many ambiguities, complexities, and questions. For example, how much do we have to know before we can conclude that a person might be a lost Jew or a part of a lost Jewish community? What kinds of help should Kulanu provide? How far should "helping" or even "welcoming" be taken? How do we know whether people who say they want to become Jewish are sincere? What if someone

with no proven Jewish roots sincerely wants to join the Jewish community? Are we missionaries?

Suppose We Are Unsure of Their Jewish Roots?

Kulanu has encountered many people whose Jewish roots are uncertain, and also communities and individuals without Jewish origins. So long as someone sincerely wants to become Jewish, we attempt to assist him or her in this quest.

This is in part because it is extraordinarily difficult to determine the historical accuracy of the stories we encounter. Two examples illustrate that it often is extremely difficult to determine whether someone actually has Jewish roots.

The Jewishness of the Beta Israel of Ethiopia was doubted by many for decades. They were officially declared to be Jewish by the Israeli Chief Rabbinate only in the 1970s. Even today their origin is disputed. The Chief Rabbinate believes they descend from the Tribe of Dan, and the Beta Israel also believe they descend from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. And while many academic historians believe they descend from the Jews of Yemen, a few scholars believe they were medieval converts.

If the activists in the American Association for Ethiopian Jews had waited until the Jewish community came to a consensus about the true origin of the Ethiopian Jews, all the Beta Israel would still be waiting and suffering in Ethiopia.

Similar problems arise concerning people who believe they are descended from Jews who were forced to convert outwardly to Christianity 500 years ago. Few of them can trace their maternal line conclusively back to unquestioned Jews in the 1490s.

How many of us could do this? If we cannot meet this test, perhaps we should not be so strict with people who have an oral tradition that says they are of Jewish descent.



Bob Lande, author of this condensed article, pictured alongside Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail, founder of Amishav (from which Kulanu descended). Date unknown.

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One creative solution towards these issues was devised by a liberal rabbi in Brazil when a descendant of the *Marranos* [now considered a derogatory term referring to Jews who lived in the Iberian Peninsula during Inquisition times and who were forced or chose to convert to Christianity, yet continued to practice Judaism in secret; they are now referred to as crypto-Jews or Bnei Anusim] presented himself and asked to be considered a Jew. The rabbi devised and required a “reunification” ceremony rather than insisting upon a normal conversion. This enabled the individual to keep his pride and respect his family traditions, and also satisfied the rabbi’s desire for a *halachically* [according to Jewish law] acceptable ceremony.

Kulanu should learn from these examples . . . We must not simply reject individuals or groups with uncertain origins.

Still, there is a certain romance to assisting people who wish to return to their Jewish roots. If a Marrano’s ancestors have for 500 years stubbornly clung to some remnants of Judaism, perhaps out of a desire that their children’s children might one day be able to worship freely as Jews, it surely is wonderful, in fact a privilege, to play some small role in this miracle.

Picture a secret Jew lighting Sabbath candles in a special, non-public room with her daughter in the hopes that her daughter’s daughter can one day light the candles openly. Now, twenty generations later, their descendants want to worship openly as Jews. How can we not help them do so? We

can never erase the effects of the Inquisition from Jewish history. But we can at least help a few of its victims’ descendants validate their ancestors’ stubbornness.

Are We Missionaries?

The short answer is “no.” The longer answer must depend upon how this term is defined, but under any reasonable definition of the term, the answer is still “no.”

Judaism has generally resisted missionizing for many reasons, including the trouble we often would cause for ourselves if we engaged in missionizing. Since we oppose others who missionize among Jews, it also seems unfair or inappropriate for us to be doing this. Moreover, many of us have an image of a missionary as someone with a Christian Bible in one hand and a whip in the other. We know that historically many Jews and non-Jews were forced to adopt Christianity, Islam, and other religions, or were forced to convert if they wanted to become educated, to obtain various economic benefits, or just to fit better into the dominant culture. Naturally, we want nothing to do with conversions that are forced, induced, or, in effect, purchased.

Still, other missionaries proselytize to everyone. Although they don’t use coercion or economic inducements, they knock on doors and stop people on the street in an attempt to convince them to join their religion. Not only has Kulanu never done this — no Kulanu supporter has even proposed that we do this.

Kulanu has never done anything even remotely approaching any of this missionizing behavior. Every situation in which Kulanu has been involved has started with a group or an individual who has evidenced a strong interest in Judaism well before they had any contact with Kulanu. First, they decided they wanted to become Jewish; only then did Kulanu become involved.

Thus, our highest priority is and should remain “lost Jews.” The more sure we are that someone is a “lost Jew,” the more we should extend ourselves



Bob and Jeri Lande, two of the original Kulanu founders, with a member of the Shinlung (a/k/a Bnei Menashe) community from northeast India, 2004

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to welcome them to the Jewish people. The more evidence we have that they are in fact Jewish, the more we should do to help them in their journey back. But we should not turn any sincere person away. And, they must first express an interest in Judaism.

What Types of Assistance Should Kulanu Provide?

Sometimes Kulanu's priorities are set by individual donors. Often someone will send Kulanu a contribution with very specific instructions. Donors have specified, for example, that their contribution should only be used to help a *havurah* [small group of like-minded Jews who meet regularly for various reasons] of Mexican Marranos celebrate Passover, or only to purchase religious books for Shinlung/Menashe in India. In all of these cases, so long as the project falls within the general framework of Kulanu's mission, Kulanu simply respects the donors' wishes.

Most of our donations, however, are unrestricted. Kulanu must therefore decide in its organizational capacity upon priorities of at least two types. First, it must decide between different groups of deserving Jews and would-be Jews. Second, we must decide what specific kinds of assistance to provide to each group.

Emergencies and other timing issues and Kulanu supporters' ideas and energy often determine which of many worthy groups receive Kulanu's meager resources. A couple of months before

Passover, someone realizes that several groups that we are in contact with have no hagaddahs, so he suggests that Kulanu purchase and ship them immediately. Rabbi Avichail faxes us that a fund is needed to pay for emergency medical treatment for Shinlung immigrants. A visitor, Helio Corderio, head of a Brazilian Marrano network, visits Kulanu, tells of his group's outstanding work, and asks for money to publish a booklet in Portuguese that will answer many of the Marranos' questions. Often the financial decisions are easy to make.

The toughest decisions, however, probably arise because of the extreme poverty of some of the people that we are working with. A visitor to the Abayudaya (in Uganda) or the Telugu communities (in India), for example, inevitably feels compassion for these extremely poor people. Should Kulanu give aid that goes beyond religious material and instruction?

It is tempting to draw a firm line and say "no," we will pay only for religious material such as books and ritual items. But what if a poor person can't read Hebrew and wishes to learn? Surely Kulanu will pay for books, tapes, or lessons? Moreover, what if they cannot read at all? How can we expect illiterate Abayudaya, who cannot read English or any other language, to be fully Jewish?

As a practical matter it is extremely difficult for people to be Jewish if they are illiterate. For this reason, Kulanu has sometimes also included education as one of the types of assistance that it will provide. We have not, however, gone further. We have declined to do so for three excellent reasons.

First, Kulanu does not have enough money to provide even the barest form of religious assistance to those who request and need it. We have been forced to forego many worthwhile assistance projects of a purely religious nature due to our meager budget.

Second, we have no special expertise in economic development assistance. Sandal-making may or may not be a good business for the Telugu community to enter, but no Kulanu supporter



Members of the Beit Avraham community in Ethiopia, 2006

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has any special knowledge of the field. We should leave this to the Peace Corps and other specialists. Otherwise, we would usually waste our money.

Third, economic assistance would open Kulanu to . . . [rumors that Kulanu is paying people to become Jewish].

The first two reasons have, for now, prevented Kulanu from offering any economic development aid. If Kulanu ever obtained enough funding to contemplate economic assistance, I believe that we should resist the temptation to do so. If there appears to be widespread support within Kulanu for the contrary position, I suggest that we limit our aid to recipients who have sincerely been practicing as Jews for a very long time — perhaps at least ten years. This will help to blunt the argument that we may be “buying Jews.” *[Editor's note: Kulanu has, for several years since this article was written, provided assistance beyond religious needs and, in fact, has funded projects that help in many other ways including with our partner communities' health and educational needs and in ways that hopefully will lead to the communities' self-sufficiency.]*

Conclusions

We certainly should point out to potential converts the disadvantages of becoming Jewish, including potential antisemitism. And we should be grateful that our rabbis will only convert people they believe to be sincere, with a persistent, long-term interest in Judaism.

Kulanu's hope is that American Jews will ask why all of these people, from all over the world, want to join our religion, and will realize how wonderful our religion is. We pray that American Jews will look with amazement to these people who have stubbornly clung to their scraps of Judaism for centuries secretly, under great hardships. Perhaps they will be less likely to abandon such a wondrous religion. It is our fervent hope that when we warmly welcome those who would (re)join us as our brothers and sisters, we will be helping and renewing ourselves in many ways. *

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Kulanu (“All of Us”) is a tax-exempt organization of Jews of various backgrounds and practices that works with isolated, emerging, and returning Jewish communities around the globe, supporting them through networking, education, economic development projects, volunteer assignments, research, and publicity.

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Magazine Editor Judi Kloper

Editorial Team Barbara Vinick, Molly Levine,
Lisa Yagoda

Layout and Photography Editor Lisa Yagoda



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82 Nassau St., #443
New York, NY 10038
929-344-1645

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30 Years of Kulanu Communities



As we state on each issue's front cover, **Kulanu's primary mission is to support isolated, emerging, and developing Jewish communities worldwide.** We aim to create global networks for our partner communities and strive for their greater recognition by world Jewry.

Some partner communities are returning to their Jewish roots, such as the Bnei Anusim who can be found today in our partner communities across the Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian-speaking world. Other partner communities embraced Judaism in complete isolation. Some groups have developed a Jewish practice on their own, such as the Abayudaya in Uganda (who have been practicing Judaism for over a century). Additional groups believe they are a "lost tribe" of Israel, including groups in India and China.

Over Kulanu's 30 years of existence, we've connected with communities in more than 33 countries, pictured above. We invite you to learn about Kulanu's work with our partner communities and explore opportunities for all the ways you can make a difference in our Jewish world.