



"All of Us" Kulanu

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



Shabbat eve in India's Bene Ephraim community located in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. Go to the story on page 13 to see the challah being made!

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30 Years of Kulanu!

From our earliest days as Amishav USA to today as Kulanu (read the back page for more details), we've continued to publish articles and share information about Jewish life around the world. Here we've included snippets of some articles from over the years; there are links after each snippet, and you can explore ALL our previous magazines and newsletters here: <https://kulanu.org/magazines>.

From Winter 1994-95

COMING OUT OF THE MARRANO CLOSET

By Brian P. Haran

I was terrified at the thought of going before a Bet Din,...rabbis who would question my Jewishness, my sincerity ...things that touch very close to home! Little did I know ... that one of my "inquisitors," Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn of Kulanu, would have more than a passing interest in my story and the story of my family.

When I was about 12, my father told me that we were really a Jewish family. I then realized that ... we were somehow special...

*To continue reading, see page 1:
<https://bit.ly/Kulanu1994Winter>*

From Winter 1995

JEWS HAVE BEEN IN CHINA A LONG, LONG TIME

By Karen Primack

Scholars are divided in their opinions about when the first Jews came to China. Some think they came in biblical times, and even theorize about one of the Ten Lost Tribes settling between Tibet and Sichuan.

...There is unanimous agreement that Jews have been in China at least since the 6th century. One of the earliest pieces of evidence is an 8th century letter written in Persian Hebrew by a Jewish merchant in China, probably a trader on the Silk Road...

*To continue reading, see page 1:
<https://bit.ly/Kulanu1995Winter>*

From Summer 1999

SCIENCE TIES THE LEMBA CLOSER TO MAINSTREAM JEWS

By Max Amichai Heppner

Several recent discoveries have put the spotlight on the Lemba, or Balemba, a Bantu-speaking people of southern Africa, who call themselves Jewish. They believe they are a lost tribe of Jews who emigrated to Yemen some 2,500 years ago and then followed a star down the east coast of Africa, finally settling in what is today Zimbabwe and South Africa. An estimated 50,000 to 70,000 Lemba now live in the two countries.

...their oral history seems to date their departure from Israel to the period after the destruction of the Northern kingdom by Tigath-Pilesher in 723 BCE ... the Lemba and the mainstream Jewish population have a parallel history in that both arose from the tribe of Judah, as it was constituted following the construction of the second Temple in the time of Darius. Conversely, the Lemba are not descended from one of the 10 "lost tribes" of the Northern kingdom.

...the Lemba practice circumcision, keep one day a week holy, and avoid eating pork or pig-like animals, such as the hippopotamus. Their concept of the Divine, method of burying their dead, blessing the New Moon, and other practices also are quite like those of Jews...

*To continue reading, see page 1:
<https://bit.ly/Kulanu1999Summer>*

From Winter 2000

FROM THE ROAD IN MANIPUR

By Bryan Schwartz

I am having one of the most amazing times of my life here in Manipur, India, visiting the Bnei Menashe. I will send you a full report of the visit and my suggestions after I have left and have better internet access and time to reflect upon my overwhelming experiences.

For the time being, let me say that the Bnei Menashe are among the warmest, most hospitable, most beautiful groups of humans beings I have ever met, and that the earnestness of their Jewish practice is only exceeded by the depth of their Jewish spirit.

Sandy Carter, a Canadian photographer, and I have visited perhaps a dozen synagogues in villages scattered across Manipur, and have been welcomed into families' homes and hearts. I only hope that our writing can in some way return the love that they have shown us, making the world more aware of their commitment and their condition. Kulanu has made a real difference here, and the deep respect for Kulanu and in particular Dr. Zeller, is truly impressive. Kulanu has much to be proud of in Manipur.

That said, this is a very needy community. I will detail the community's needs in greater depth later...

*To continue reading, see page 1:
<https://bit.ly/Kulanu2000Winter>*

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The graphic below shows part of our very first Kulanu newsletter, explaining the name change and mission. See the back page for an Amishav USA newsletter graphic. View the entire Kulanu issue here: <https://bit.ly/Kulanu1994Spring>.

Kulanu

"all of us"



Helping Lost Jewish Communities

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Silver Spring, MD 20910
301-681-5679 (tel. and fax)

Vol. 1, No. 1

Spring 1994

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Welcome to Kulanu!

By Jack Zeller

We have changed our name from Amishav USA to Kulanu ("all of us"). A name change is not something taken lightly. It reflects who we are and whom we would like to serve and what we want to accomplish. Kulanu will gain support from American Jews of varied backgrounds and practices who are inspired by the challenge that Rabbi Avichail has laid before us: To extend a hand of friendship to those around the globe who are of Jewish origin and to help those who wish to return to Judaism.

Initially we accepted the name of Amishav USA as an outgrowth of the Israeli organization Amishav, but we need a name that reflects our American agenda and diverse membership and our interest in working with varied groups of people — without diluting the intentions or programs of Amishav in Israel. Kulanu will support the agenda of Amishav in Israel as well as the needs of others who are sincere in their quest for information about Judaism.

In any transition there are opportunities for misinterpretation. Permit me to dispel them. There is no breach in our support for Amishav in Israel. For ex-

ample, we feel a responsibility for the Shinlung and want to share the excitement of their journey. We will continue to support Amishav's educational and research agenda and we continue to regard Rabbi Avichail as our founder. But we also believe that some who seek to return to Judaism may not be on the road to a connection to "traditional" Judaism. We think they deserve support as well.

Kulanu has been founded and we have applied for tax-exempt status. All dues and contributions will be tax-deductible. Your current and previous gifts to Amishav USA have all been forwarded to Amishav in Israel and everyone who joined Amishav USA will be given a one-year complimentary membership in Kulanu.

We all believe that this name change reflects an expansion of who we are, our goals, and the challenges before us. Through Kulanu "all of us" will unite to help lost Jews return.

Jewish Descendants of Conquistadores?

By Joe Hantman

Fourteen ninety-two marks the year of expulsion from Spain and the beginning of the Sephardic Diaspora. However, for 100 years before and for many hundreds of years after that date Jews who had been forced into Catholicism continued to live secret Jewish lives. They were the Marranos who were hounded, sought out and frequently put to death by the Inquisition.

Many Marranos fled to Holland, Turkey and other countries where they resumed their identity as Jews. Others, ostensibly as Catholics, joined Spanish explorers and colonizers in various colonies around the world. Some ultimately found refuge in Dutch and British colonies in the Caribbean where they resumed Jewish identity; their synagogues and burial grounds remain today in such places as Barbados, Curacao and the Virgin Islands.

One group accompanied the Spanish Conquistadores who conquered Mexico in 1521. Here the

(cont., p. 8)

From Fall 2002

THE JEWS OF TIMBUKTU

by Irwin Berg

In 1996 a book was published in Mali which surprised all but a knowledgeable few. It was *Les Juifs y Tombouctou* (*The Jews of Timbuktu*) by Ismael Diadie Haidara. The book describes the history of Jews in the Western Soudan (i.e. Mauritania, Mali, Niger and northern Nigeria) going back to a time before the arrival of Islam in the area. It then made its most provocative announcement: there are

Moslems living in Timbuktu and in nearby villages who have preserved the knowledge that they are descended from Jews. In 1993 these descendants had formed an organization, "Zakhor," whose announced goals were to: establish contact with the world Jewish community; learn Hebrew; safeguard the Jewish socio-cultural patrimony of Timbuktu by collecting the oral and written histories of their Jewish ancestors; and to preserve the cemeteries of their ancestors...

To continue reading, see page 3: <https://bit.ly/Kulanu2002Fall>

Between the Stone and the Flower: The Duality of Conversos The Documentary

By Genie Milgrom

I was born in Havana, Cuba, into a Roman Catholic family from Spain. The family had been in Cuba for one generation when the island was taken over by Fidel Castro's revolution, which is when we moved to Miami. I was four years old.

In Miami, I was placed in Catholic schools from nursery school through university level; I always felt uncomfortable with my religion but powerless to make changes as a child.

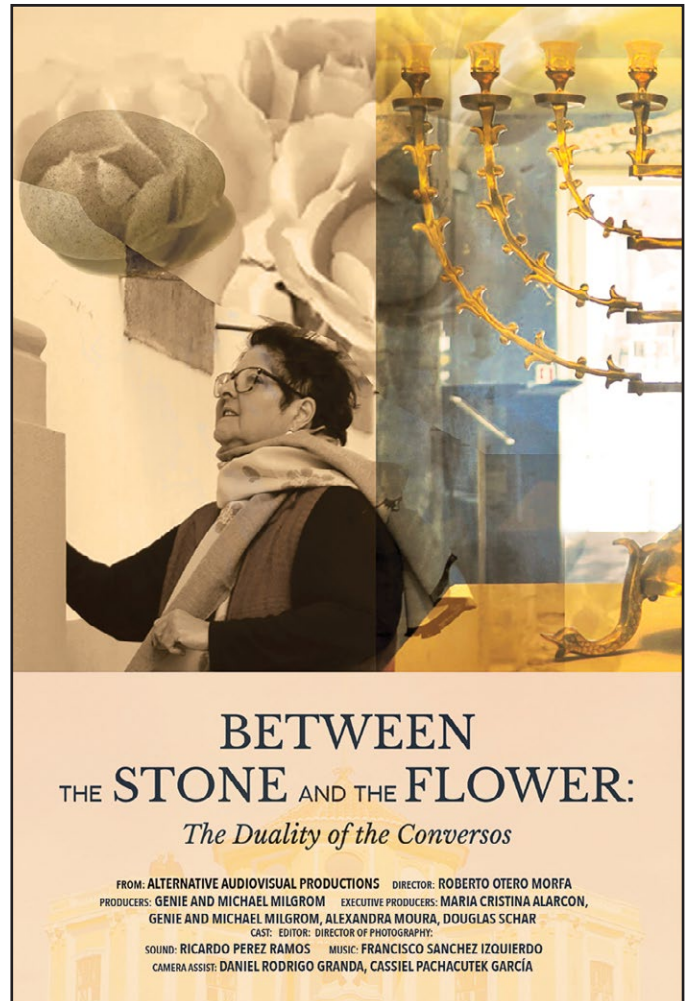
Through many clues and objects that had been left to me by my maternal Spanish grandmother, I eventually awakened to the fact that perhaps my family had been Spanish Jews before the Inquisition. This launched a decades-long search for Jewish ancestry. Through my research, I was able to find an unbroken maternal lineage going back to 1405, to the Pre-Inquisition Iberian Peninsula and 22 grandmothers in a row, with many relatives burned alive in the Inquisitions of several countries.

Eventually, I understood that Judaism and being Jewish were exactly what my soul had yearned for throughout my life. I converted in a lengthy process and chose Orthodox Judaism for my path. I was 29 years old, divorced, and had two children who did not go through the conversion process. My happiness knew no bounds once I had become part of the Jewish people.

Subsequently, I wrote several published books on the topic (*My 15 Grandmothers*, *How I Found My 15 Grandmothers*, *Pyre to Fire*, and *Recipes of My 15 Grandmothers*) that were my way of educating the world that descendants of the Inquisition Jews were still around and had hidden their identities for over 500 years.

In this vein of education, the idea to make the documentary *Between the Stone and the Flower* was born.

After finding the perfect director — Roberto Otero — and his team, we based the movie on *My 15 Grandmothers* (my first book), and began



filming, documenting from my early childhood in Cuba through the struggles with my identity in Miami, as well as the real and palpable issues that arose due to my return to Judaism. My children, parents, and other family members were trying to understand the Jewish person I had become. The film depicts the real challenges that unfolded in my life at the time and I cannot help but cry every time I see it as the memories of the difficulties flood back to me.

We set out for three weeks with the filmmaking crew, driving through Spain and Portugal in a van complete with the latest cameras and drones to track the full diaspora that my family had followed. We filmed in the Inquisition cells that still exist in Portugal, as well as in the open yards

continued on next page

The Stone and the Flower: *continued from previous page*

where my family had been burned alive for being Jews, and we traced their movements for the film.

Sometimes we followed the physical locations, at other times we had to locate their route via the Inquisition and ancient documents in archives, and we relied heavily on the historians of the region for information.

The most poignant moments took place in Fermoselle, the village of my ancestors in western Spain, which has not changed in hundreds of years. My family lived there for 600 years and just walking in their footsteps was a great emotional experience.

Fermoselle is full of marks that indicate the presence of a past Jewish community here, including medieval mikvahs that were found underground in a dizzying maze of tunnels that are still present and are shown in the movie.

Several interviews with not only the historians of Sephardic and Cuban history, but with those of Iberian history, rabbis in Israel, and many other colleagues in this area of study, are included in



Genie is looking through to exhibits on the other side at Casa De Sefarad in Cordoba, Spain.

the film. Also included in the film are interviews with my family members, and testimonies of some people who have worked directly with me on their lineages.

Our visit to El Salvador and Guatemala highlighted the emerging

communities and their synagogues. Most of all, in several interviews we witnessed the pulsing heart of the people seeking to return to Judaism.

My work with Kulanu is also showcased in the movie. This was very important to me as Kulanu's director of Anusim in Latin America; I see and feel the struggle that most of the Bnei Anusim have in their own families as they return to the Jewish people and continue to deal with the dualities in their families. The American Sephardi Federation and Kulanu held a special New York City premiere of the film on July 1st at the Sephardic Jewish Film Festival in New York's Center for Jewish History.

Since its premiere in January 2024, *Between the Stone and the Flower* has been screened in over a dozen locations from Miami to Sacramento to Boston, as well as in Mexico, Uruguay, and the European Parliament in Brussels, and has won several awards. In June, the film premiered in Israel at the ANU Museum of the Jewish People. We intend to continue showing with the Jewish Film Festivals in the United States and abroad. All in all, the movie brings awareness to this slice of Jewish history that is generally forgotten and rarely studied.

I am proud of the effect this film has had on those who have returned or are seeking to return to Judaism, and all Jews no matter their ethnicity, as well as its popularity among those with a thirst to learn.

More information, as well as the trailer, may be found at www.geniemilgrom.com/movie. This is a not-to-be-missed documentary. *

Upcoming Screenings

Sept. 10, 2024:

Panama City, Panama

Sept. 12, 2024:

*San Antonio Jewish
Film Festival*

Sept. 24, 2024:

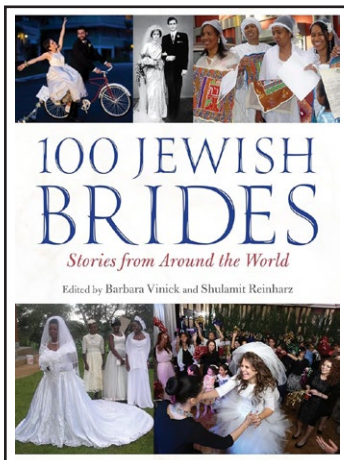
Madrid, Spain Premiere

Nov. 14, 2024: *Buenos Aires*

And more coming soon!

Book Review: 100 Jewish Brides

100 Jewish Brides: Stories from Around the World edited by Barbara Vinick and Shulamit Reinharz
(Article originally appeared in the *Jewish Journal of Greater Boston*, Feb 15, 2024, by Shelley Sackett)



In Costa Rica, where it is customary to hand-deliver wedding invitations, most of San Jose's Jewish community was invited to Karen and Michael Bourne's 2003 wedding. Over 350 attended.

In Nicaragua, Veronica and Kurt Preiss married three times: first in a civil ceremony, second

in a Jewish ceremony not recognized by religious law, and third in conjunction with a conversion organized by Kulanu ("all of us" in Hebrew), an organization that supports isolated, returning, and emerging Jewish communities all over the world.

Diana and Lev Pershtein-Lapkis were married by a Reform rabbi in Latvia because traditional Orthodox and Conservative branches of Judaism don't consider her to be Jewish.

Hédi and Michael Fried survived Auschwitz and, despite all odds and an 18-year age difference, married in 1947 in Sweden.



Dafna applies henna to the women's palms in a Yemeni ceremony in Israel.

And in Egypt, Esther and Léon Abécassis, the Chief Rabbi of Alexandria, and their witnesses had to sign a "single status affidavit" (proof of celibacy) before their wedding at the Great Synagogue of Alexandria in 1934.

These are but five of the 100 stories in co-editors (from the Boston area) Barbara Vinick and Shulamit Reinharz's *100 Jewish Brides: Stories from Around the World*. Released on Feb. 6, 2024, the book features the first-hand stories of Jewish weddings from six continents that span more than a century.

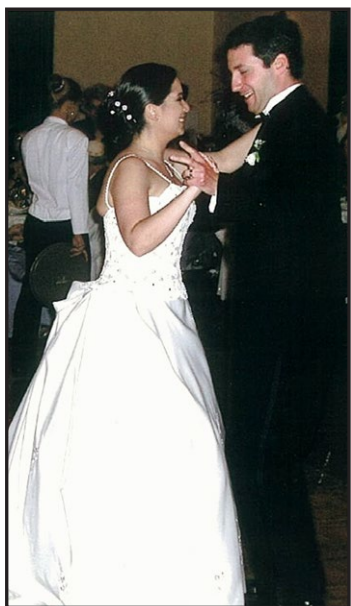
Written by brides, their relatives, clergy, and friends, this collection of personal stories from around the world offers readers a peek through the keyhole at the surprising variety of ways in which the Jewish wedding process can unfold, from the first meeting to the wedding ceremony and beyond.

100 Brides is the third cultural project celebrating Jewish womanhood that Vinick and Reinharz have co-edited. *Esther's Legacy: Celebrating Purim around the World* (2002) examined how Queen Esther's courage in saving the Jews is observed in different communities. *Today I Am a Woman: Stories of Bat Mitzvah around the World* (2012) looked at the wide range of ways in which a Jewish girl's coming of age is marked.



The rabbi in Latvia hands Diana and Lev the ketubah.

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In Costa Rica, Karen and Michael's first dance as a married couple

With *100 Brides*, the co-editors turned their attention to Jewish weddings from the bride's point of view in an effort to learn about how Jewish life was and is actually lived throughout the world. What they discovered was that although Jewish weddings may differ in detail depending on the era and international community, they share many commonalities too.

They found that some features of Jewish weddings — the *ketubah* (Jewish marriage contract), *chuppah* (wedding canopy), wine, rings, and breaking of the glass — are almost universal. Others, such as a henna ceremony where groups of women apply temporary tattoos on the bride, are unique to *Mizrahi* (Sephardic Jews from the Middle East and North Africa), Indian, and Pakistani weddings.

“Every religious community develops a culture over time,” Reinharz told the *Journal*. Even though Judaism has central texts which define “this is the way we do things,” everything has changed in the modern era where individualism prevails and the bride and her partner can decide how they want to structure their ceremony.

As a longtime board member and the current secretary of Kulanu, Vinick has had access to and knowledge about many far-flung and little known communities. She was part of the Kulanu group that traveled to Madagascar with a *bet din* (rabbinic court of three rabbis) to convert more than 100 people to Judaism. There, she attended the post-conversion remarriages of 12 couples, including Ahava, one of the brides whose story is in the book.

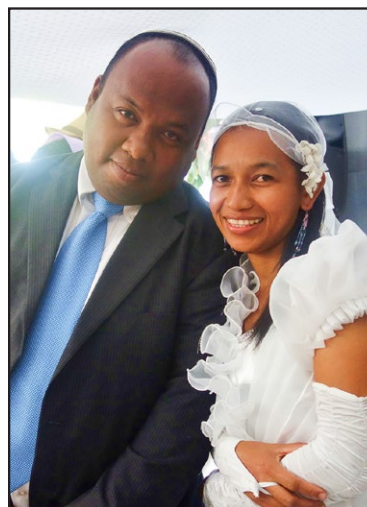
As engaging as these short narratives from different countries are, the last chapters give the book more heft, delving into the meatier, more macro-issues of arranged and forced marriages, intermarriage and interethnic Jewish marriage, and contemporary marriage issues in Israel. “One of my passions in life is using a sociological framework to understand things better,” Reinharz explained. “The Israel stories in particular are very important.”

She hopes readers will realize that there are alternatives to what they assume a Jewish wedding should look like. In America, for example, a particular emphasis has evolved to give the bride as much of a voice as the groom. “If I had had this book when I got married in 1967, I would have added all sorts of things that were not available at the time,” she said.

Reinharz and Vinick, who both have doctorates in sociology, have been friends for decades. In 1997, Reinharz founded the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute (HBI), a research center whose purpose

is to develop new ideas about Jews and gender worldwide. Her HBI and Vinick's Kulanu connections created a large network of Jewish scholars, rabbis, and activists from across the globe for the co-editors to plumb.

Both acknowledge that their biggest challenge was not accumulating stories, but rather figuring out how to



Ahava and Eli under the chuppah in Madagascar

organize them into a coherent narrative. They toyed with the ideas of time period or geography, but ultimately settled on the stages of marriages.

Vinick hopes the book might inspire readers to write the story of their own wedding. “These are really mini-autobiographies and biographies,” she said. “A marriage is a good place to start.” *

Volunteer Spotlight: Mark Gelfand

Mark Gelfand from Massachusetts USA has been dedicated to improving food security in Africa since his first trip to Ethiopia in 2006. We are excited to share this interview with our readers, highlighting Mark's commitment to these communities, his involvement with Kulanu, and the inspiration behind his work.



Kulanu: What initially inspired you to get involved in supporting initiatives for food security in Jewish African communities?

Mark: I grew up with a strong interest in science, engineering, and automation, which became my hobby and career. Separately, my parents felt strongly that I attend Hebrew school, so I became interested in the worldwide history of Judaism as well. After a family visit to Israel in 2003, my technical and historical interests became welded together. Later, I visited the Yemin Orde Youth Village (YOYV) in Israel, which served at-risk student residents from all over the world. Because



The administrative and STEM center building at the AMC Farm in Uganda under construction, October 2023. Photo by Molly Levine

I felt that technical education should be accessible to any student, no matter their background, I built a science center at the village in 2003.

While the YOYV students greatly appreciated the chemistry and physics labs, they were especially focused on winning the Israeli national high school

robotics contest. To help them achieve that, we added a robot-building capacity to the Science Center, even though the competition would be difficult.

After a few years of competing, YOYV's Ethiopian-heritage students did win Israel's national robotics competition! That happy win intrigued me enough to visit their former homeland in Ethiopia in 2006, looking for problems that I might be able to help solve.

Challenges in Ethiopia included inaccessible technical education, sparse job possibilities, and inefficient food production — all interesting to my engineer inner self. Not knowing which challenge I should focus on, I decided to simultaneously work on all three and see if I could make a dent in at least one of them.

While occupied with those challenges, I heard stories of isolated African Jewish communities, especially their common concern about unstable food sources. As my engineering and farming projects were then already reaching across Africa, it seemed relevant to learn more about the African Jewish communities.

K: What specific projects or initiatives are you currently funding to address food insecurity in these communities?

Mark: Education, jobs, food, and community concerns are intertwined in Africa. But Africa is a huge continent of many nations, nationalities, climates, resources, governments, and peoples; therefore, no single solution is applicable everywhere.

As a technical person, I was drawn into agro-tech projects (farming supported by modern accessible machinery). The farm outputs have since become world-class commodities suitable for export, bringing in hard currency that directly sustains the expanding network of technical education centers (STEM Centers: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) across Ethiopia,

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and now the entire Sub-Saharan region. In turn, that farming and industry experience encouraged me to help create community farms in Jewish communities. Among the early farms was a small-scale pilot poultry project in the Abayudaya Jewish community farms in eastern Uganda, which in 2021 became my first project in that country.

[Editor's note: For more information about Mark's chicken farm from 2021, visit: <https://bit.ly/JewishChickenFarm>.]

As the Abayudaya farming project was developing in Uganda, I learned of the unique needs of the Lemba community farms in Zimbabwe. Knowing that I'd need a partner to share the increasing workload, in 2021 I contacted Kulanu to help me keep a watchful eye on the many parts of the Lemba projects in Zimbabwe.

Both the Abayudaya and Lemba projects were expanding and overwhelming. (In fact, the projects have become so large that we're currently looking for guidance from medical professionals on how to equip medical clinics that are being constructed.) But how could I help the other deserving Jewish communities struggling to survive in eight more African countries?



A maize field just outside the perimeter of the Beth Ha'arachman community; this is a temporary extension of the Shehecheyanu farm program in Southern Nigeria. Photo courtesy of Avraham ben Avraham

The answer (which Kulanu and I arrived at together) is known as the *Kulanu-Gelfand Food Security Project*. The idea is that Jewish communities that are members of the *Sub-Saharan Africa Jewish Alliance* (SAJA) will request a grant for a modest amount of funds while explaining the specific ways the funds will be spent as their agriculture projects are implemented.

Kulanu-Gelfand Food Security Project grants have successfully been completed in Cameroon, as well as in Nigeria (twice) with one more in progress now. More projects in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Uganda, and Tanzania have been funded; all are overseen by Kulanu.

K: Can you highlight any success stories or notable outcomes from the projects you've funded thus far?

Mark: The Abayudaya Men's Club (AMC) Farm in Uganda has largely eradicated hunger in most of the Abayudaya communities, and has created 60 self-sustaining jobs. Our tractor fleet of two tractors and tractor maintenance training have helped both the Abayudaya community and the surrounding non-Jewish communities. Our accumulated heavy construction equipment also serves as a rental business that supports the farm. We expect that another one hundred jobs will be created to operate our modern broiler chicken facility of the AMC Farm, especially as our large feed mill begins production. The AMC Farm administration building, which we share with Livingstone University next door, has four floors and is large enough to hold a *STEMpower STEM Center* (*STEM Center* is a nonprofit specialized learning facility that offers hands-on engineering lab experience). The lab equipment is being installed literally today as I write this. Because the AMC Farm impacts so many people in numerous communities of differing religions and cultures, the tensions between various communities have drastically diminished. In sum, our original projects have scaled up so many times

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that the Ugandan government proudly considers the Abayudaya farms to be the most modern in the country, and these farms serve as a model for the country!

Across water-challenged Zimbabwe, seven Harare Lemba Synagogue farms now farm year-round, instead of only after the once-a-year rainy season. The farms now produce more food than our communities need, so the excess is being sold at the markets and generating income for each community. Side businesses of honey and specialty crops add to the communities' ability to self-sustain. Our construction equipment is now being used to build a community center in Bedza; this center will include a synagogue, medical clinic, and yes, another STEmpower STEM Center. Again, tensions have eased with non-Jewish neighboring communities because everybody benefits from our projects.

K: What long-term goals do you hope to achieve through your philanthropic efforts in this area?

Mark: I hope for Jewish communities across Africa to become completely self-supporting and no longer dependent on other Jews, except for

serious innovative investment. Visionary financial investment is needed most, not hand-outs. The expertise needed to complete projects is already on the ground there.

From my perspective, SAJA has done a great job of linking isolated communities together to the point where they are no longer isolated. Moreover, I hope that the positive initiatives will continue to unite all people of Sub-Saharan Africa into a cohesive bloc.

K: Lastly, what message would you like to convey to others who may be interested in supporting similar causes or getting involved in philanthropy to address food security issues?

Mark: It is indeed possible to set an improbable goal and then achieve that goal. We've proven that many times. I suggest that an inquisitive Jewish family work with Kulanu to identify a matching Jewish African community. The family can help the Jewish community to achieve some control over their food supply. Each community has its own needs. You as a family will have a front-row seat to the project, from start to finish. We've taken away all the "heavy lifting" associated with initiating a project 8,000 miles from the USA. This process will have a profound effect on your children and the young adults in your family, such that they can withstand any negativism that will be directed at them, such as those amplified after the tragedy of October 7th.

Note from Kulanu: We want to thank Mark for his commitment and dedication to Jewish communities across Africa. It is a pleasure to work with him and see his vision of increasing food security improve the lives of those in the most vulnerable communities.

*If you are inspired and interested in learning more about creating a specific fund at Kulanu to support Jewish communities, please reach out to our executive director, Molly Levine, at molly@kulanu.org. Thanks! **



Members of the Beth Ha'arachman community evaluate a fish pond pilot test as part of the Shehecheyanu Food Support agricultural project in Akwaibom State, Southern Nigeria. Photo courtesy of Avraham Ben Avraham

Walk With Me! A Few Steps Through Time in Italy

Written by and photos provided by Judi Kloper, Kulanu Magazine Editor and board member

In February, I spent ten days exploring Calabria, the “toe of the boot” in Italy’s southern region. Not only was I overwhelmed by the beauty of this area and of its people’s hospitality (and delicious food), but I also was very fortunate that Rabbi Barbara of Sinagoga Ner Tamid Del Sud in Serrastretta led me and my friend on a mini-tour of this region. I now feel an attachment to Italy and its Sephardic community and hope others will have an opportunity to visit and feel the connection as well.



My visit to Calabria in Italy's deep south brought me to Kulanu Board member, Rabbi Barbara Aiello.



We began our walking tour of Lamezia Terme and its historic center, Nicastro, where Judaism thrived for centuries.



We saw decorative wrought iron balconies — a craft brought to Italy by Spanish Jews.



King Frederick II, a friend to local Jews, welcomed us to Timpone, the Jewish Quarter.



The King's castle offered protection to the families of this ancient Jewish community.



The archway marks the entrance to Timpone where Jews lived and worked since the 1500s.



Archway plaque reads: “In this neighborhood there once was a hard working, industrious Jewish community from the 13th through the 16th centuries”

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Originally a synagogue, the building became a church during Inquisition times. But vestiges of Judaism remain; note the window.



Later we traveled mountain roads to Sinagoga Ner Tamid del Sud, a Kulanu community. Inside we found a small Jewish museum with a fabulous collection of Chanukiyot.



The ark holds a Torah scroll, hand written in Italy in 1783.



The sanctuary is intimate and inviting, complete with handmade caned chairs and benches arranged Sefardi style.



I had the opportunity to read from the Torah scroll. It was my Italian Bat Mitzvah!!!



It was a beautiful visit to the "toe" of the Italian "boot," where I learned about an ancient crypto-Jewish presence in Calabria.

*Rabbi Barbara Aiello offers a mini, two, or three day tour to explore the hidden Jewish history of Calabria in Southern Italy. The tour includes a visit to the Old Jewish Quarter of Nicastro, Calabria's first synagogue (Ner Tamid del Sud) in 500 years since Inquisition times, meeting with local B'nei Anusim, and a visit to the Ferramonti Concentration Camp where Italian soldiers and local villagers saved the lives of 4,000 Jews. For more information, contact Rabbi Barbara through her website: rabbibarbara.com. **

India Calling!

Written by and photos provided by Judi Kloper, Kulanu Magazine Editor and board member

My previous visit to India's Bene Ephraim community was drastically shortened, due to the pandemic, to just a few hours in March 2020 before I had to fly home, so it was with excitement that I finally was able to visit this past March for five days. I was welcomed by Yacob Jacobi and was thrilled to meet his wife Anusha, whom he married a couple of years ago, and catch up with the rest of his family and members of their

small community in a village located in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. Together we celebrated Shabbat evening and morning as well as Havdallah, and I met some new members of the community who were interested in learning more about Judaism. What follows are some photos of my most recent visit. If readers would like to learn more about volunteering in this community, please contact Kulanu.



The Bene Ephraim Synagogue, written in Hebrew, English, and the local language of Telegu



Inside the one room synagogue



Reading from the Torah



Services (It was very hot and the fans are not enough to cool the room off!)



Preparing to put on the tallis before chanting the blessings

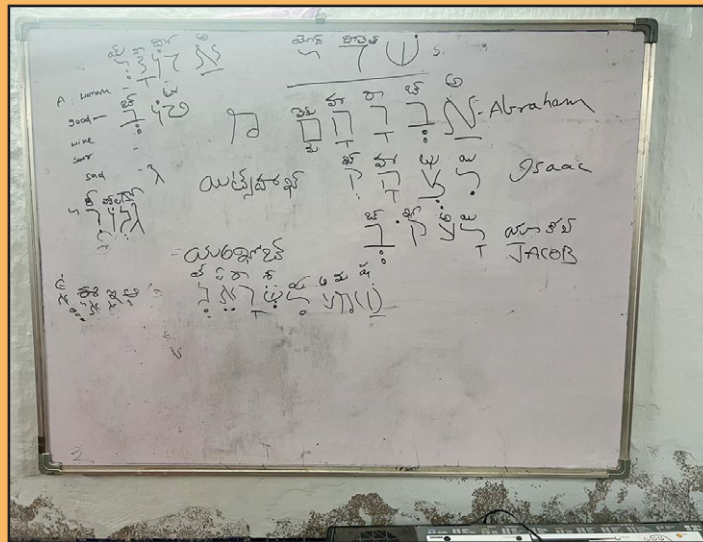


Offering a blessing

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Sadok and Miryam, Beulah (in back), neighbor, Judi, Anusha, and Yacob out front



Anusha has been learning Hebrew via YouTube videos. She's been practicing writing on the dry-erase board.



Anusha preparing challah dough and glazing the challah with egg yolks. See cover photo for the finished product!



Washing dishes



Judi with Rishan Yonathan and Ryan, Beulah's sons

View out the car window, not far from village of Kottyreddypalem, home to Bene Ephraim



Anusha at Havdallah

*

Book Review: *Shalome Rides a Royal Elephant*

A Children's Book Written and Illustrated by Jael Silliman. Reviewed by Judi Kloper



Judi (author of this book review) visiting with Jael (the book's author) in Kolkata

This past February, I traveled to Kolkata, West Bengal, India, home to the Baghdadi Jewish community, where I met up with Jael Silliman, an author, scholar, and women's rights activist who was born and grew up in what was then known as Calcutta.

Jael has written numerous books and articles about the history of the Calcutta Jews, and while Jael, her mom, and I ate a delicious lunch at her home, she presented me with a copy of her first children's book, *Shalome Rides a Royal Elephant*. Jael shared that this is a story based on the diary (written between 1784 and 1836) of her great-great-great-great-grandfather, Shalome Obadiah ha Cohen, the founder of the Jewish community in Calcutta. Basically, it is historical fiction. Jael explained that Shalome knew a lot about astronomy, philosophy, and the Jewish religion. Along with Baghdadi Jewish traders from across the Middle East who followed him to India, he built synagogues, schools, and hospitals, and set up important businesses in Calcutta.

Shalome was born in 1762 in Aleppo, Syria and traveled to Surat, India in 1792 via Baghdad and Basra. He eventually met and married Najima, and they had nine children. He traveled to various regions of India; eventually, in 1798, he and his family settled in Calcutta since it was at the time the capital of British-ruled India and there was a port where the Ganges River meets the Bay of Bengal, which was integral to his business and included trading in silks, cloth from Dacca (now known as Dhaka, Bangladesh), indigo, and precious jewels.

The story is narrated by Shalome's friend, Chanchal, an exceptionally intelligent and curious monkey who loves to dance. Chanchal met

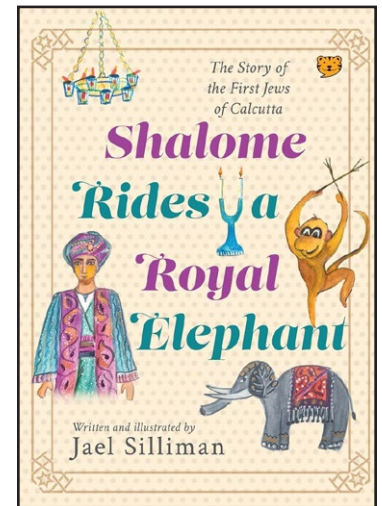
Shalome in Surat and traveled with him to Calcutta. Jael tells the story of how they spent a year at the palace of the *nawab* (viceroy or deputy governor under the former Mogul empire in India) in the northern Indian city of Lucknow, where Shalome served as the "court jeweler," and eventually as the *nawab's* advisor. It

is here where Shalome rode a royal elephant and eventually returned to Calcutta as royalty, escorted by soldiers, servants, and *palanquins* (open chairs or beds used to transport people and carried by at least two people).

This story provides the reader with opportunities to imagine what life was like within the Baghdadi Jewish community of India in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This endearing and fun tale is also about how India's Jews have been an integral part of this country, living together peacefully with those of various other religious communities, and serving as philanthropists in the communities they have lived in. As Shalome, at the end of his life, told Chantal, "It is the good deeds you do, and the money you give to those in need, which are most important." That is an essential part of the legacy of Shalome Obadiah ha Cohen of Calcutta.

Though this is a book that children will enjoy, particularly because of its numerous endearing illustrations by the author herself, adults will enjoy this historically accurate story of India's Baghdadi Jewish community and its founder's relevance to the growth of Calcutta.

The book is available on Amazon.com: <https://bit.ly/ShalomeBook> ✱



Kulanu Notes

Zoom Review

This year Kulanu has continued hosting exciting speakers online through our Online Speaker Series. Presentations have covered a range of topics including the Igbos of Nigeria, our deaf education program in Uganda, and a special behind-the-scenes session about the Abayudaya concert (pictured). To view recordings of these sessions, please visit kulanu.org/recorded-sessions.



Grants Awarded



Kulanu awards grants to our partner communities around the globe to ensure they receive the specific support they need. In 2024, the diverse range of projects so far has included synagogue repair, school funding, rabbi stays, nutrition programs, solar power, a mikvah, latrines (pictured), computer technology, and more. Jewish communities in Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Indonesia, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Cuba, and India are benefiting from this additional support.

Ugandan Deaf Students' Field Trip

On January 29, 2024, a group from Mbale, including six deaf students, two parents, and three members of the Deaf Student Program team, embarked on a trip to Kyambogo University to explore its *Faculty of Special Needs and Rehabilitation* program. The journey, which began with breakfast at SIKIA restaurant (pictured) in Jinja City where deaf waitresses welcomed them, aimed to widen opportunities for deaf children. At Kyambogo University, the group focused on the faculty's efforts to train professionals in educating students with special needs, emphasizing skills such as braille, sign language, and mobility. They engaged with faculty members and learned about various support systems for students with disabilities. The trip also included a visit to the source of the Nile, adding an element of adventure. The experience underscored the importance of inclusivity and specialized training in empowering deaf individuals for independent living and community integration.



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Perfect Purim Timing in Indonesia

A donated Megillah arrived in Indonesia just in time for Purim after making its way from New Jersey. The community read the story of Esther from the scroll to celebrate the holiday, which made the special day all the more memorable. If you have a Megillah or any other ritual Jewish items to donate to any of our partner communities, please fill out the form at kulanu.org/in-kind-donations.



Largest Ever Passover Funding Distributed by Kulanu



This Passover, Kulanu provided community Passover grants to more than 30 communities in 13 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These grants were used to purchase supplies for community seders such as wine, matzah, and other necessary items. In addition, special funds were sent to Uganda so the Abayudaya could bake their own matzah in the commercial oven purchased last year. Twenty communities from across Uganda came together and enjoyed lively conversations and singing to celebrate the joyous occasion.

Kulanu Communities on the Big Screen

This past spring, Kulanu was featured in three films about different Jewish communities around the globe. Genie Milgrom's film, *Between the Stone and the Flower: The Duality of the Conversos*, chronicles Genie's remarkable odyssey as she embarks on a decades-long quest to uncover her Jewish lineage (article on page 4 of this magazine). *NAFKOT: Yearning*, by Dr. Malka Shabtay, explores the hidden Beta Israel Jewish community in Ethiopia. Finally, *KANKANTRI (The Silk Cotton Tree)*, an essay film — a combination art film and documentary — by Gabi Christa, showcases her journey to Suriname to research the dances of the African Diaspora. However, upon a visit to Suriname's Neveh Shalom Synagogue, Ms. Christa discovers her Jewish heritage. *



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Making the Jewish Tent a Little Wider

Written by and photos courtesy of Dani Rotstein

A content producer, entrepreneur, and storyteller, New Jersey native Dani Rotstein spent years traveling the world producing advertisements for large commercial firms. When he moved to the Spanish island of Majorca in 2014 to produce TV commercials, he didn't expect there to be much Jewish life there. His surprising discoveries led to his work on the documentary film Xueta Island: A Hidden History, for which he is not only a director, but also a subject. He became involved with the local Jewish community, founding Limud Mallorca as well as Jewish Majorca (a company that offers educational tours of Jewish heritage sites around the island). Dani is currently working on a documentary series about emerging Jewish communities throughout Latin America and is also building a Jewish Virtual Tour platform to increase awareness and connection among global Jewry.

The year was 2014. I had just moved to Palma de Mallorca in Spain to start a new job as a producer at a local film production company. I thought I was going to be the only Jewish person on the island.

I learned of a synagogue in Santa Catalina, a neighborhood just footsteps from where I rented an apartment. I walked in on Friday night to



Dani Rotstein filming with Marcos Gandelsman (one of the leaders of the Reform community in Recife, Brazil) for the new REEMERGE PROJECT docu-series

the sounds of Sephardic chanting. When we arrived at the *Barechu*, the *chazan* skipped it, implying that there wasn't a complete *minyan* (a quorum of ten men — or in some synagogues, men and women — over the age of 13 required for traditional Jewish public worship) that

evening. But I counted fourteen men in the men's section. Confused, I asked the person sitting next to me, "Why are we skipping this prayer when we obviously have a *minyan*?" to which he replied, "Some of these men are not Jewish. They are *Xueta*."

It was later explained that the term *Xueta* defines someone as a Catholic descendant of the Jewish *conversos* (Jews who publicly recanted their Jewish faith and adopted Christianity under the pressure of the Spanish Inquisition) from Mallorca, one of the four Balearic Islands belonging to Spain. They carry one of the fifteen infamous family last names that separates them from the rest of the island's local population. They have been practicing endogamy (marrying within their community) for centuries, not necessarily by choice. The rest of society would never marry someone with a *Xueta* last name lest it bring shame to their family; it is widely known that the *Xuetas* come from the Hebrews, the heretics of Iberia's oppressive Inquisitorial past.

Suddenly the Jewish history of Spain spoke to me in a deeply profound way like never before. No longer was it about lost synagogues, hidden *mikvaot* (Jewish ritual baths), or Jewish Quarter winding streets — relics from an ancient past. Now it was about people, people who could trace their family roots back to the old Jews of Mallorca's medieval times! I thought, "Why would people — those raised in a homogenous Catholic society — want to come to Friday night services AND not be counted in the *minyan*?" Searching for this answer took me on a life journey that I have never once regretted.

A few years later, my wife Carla and I formed a local chapter within the global organization called *Limud* (an international organization dedicated to sharing Jewish culture and celebrating Jewish diversity) and founded *Jewish Majorca*, a tour company offering Jewish heritage routes around all of Spain and Portugal. I would also eventually

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Jewish Tent: *continued from previous page*

produce and co-direct a documentary film entitled *Xueta Island*, which investigates the survival and revival of Jewish life on the island. Shortly thereafter, I heard rumors that Mallorca was not the only island experiencing an interest in people returning to their Jewish roots. I saw a news report from Colombia, South America, about a new phenomenon called *comunidades emergentes* (emerging communities) and was intrigued to explore more.

In 2022, thanks to a post-pandemic world that allowed me to work remotely, my wife Carla, our three-year-old son Oren, and I embarked on a South American Jewish Adventure — a SAJA as I like to call it. We started our journey in Quito, Ecuador. There we visited the house-museum of Trude Sojka, a Hungarian Holocaust refugee who built a secret room in her home should the Nazis come after her in Ecuador and she needed a place to hide. Now the room has been converted to a Holocaust memorial by her daughter and granddaughter and the house displays Trude's beautiful paintings and art.

We next found ourselves in the town of Baños looking for a place for Shabbat. We were told to contact Renan in Ambato who had recently opened up a synagogue as part of the newly emerging community there. We davened in the apartment-turned-synagogue and you could feel

the love and care that the community members had for their nascent *kehillah* (congregation). Renan invited us to Shabbat dinner in his home. He and his family did not grow up Jewish. They converted — or returned to Judaism — and it was beyond inspiring to see their love and connection to Judaism in a place where it is incredibly hard to maintain and sustain it. We want to share their story of hope with the rest of the world.

Soon after, we traveled to Bello, a suburb of Medellín, Colombia, to meet Rabbi Elad Villegas and Rabbi Ezra Rodriguez. Rabbi Elad was an evangelical pastor of a megachurch of 3,000 people when he went to Israel on a Christian mission trip; it was after visiting the Holy Land that he decided to convert to Judaism. After sharing this decision with his congregation, around 600 people chose to join him on this new spiritual journey. They were met with resistance and challenges every step of the way but twenty years later they have built a vibrant community with a newly installed mikveh, and they are the leaders in the recently created kosher meat industry for the entire country of Colombia.

In Bogota, I was honored to spend Shabbat with the community of Beit Hillel. Rabbi Shimon and his community welcomed us with open arms,

unlike some other traditional and mainstream communities that put up many obstacles to our attending services due to security reasons. We visited their house which had been turned into a synagogue and study center. There were extra rooms upstairs for visitors coming from far



Dani and Vitor in Recife, Brazil. Vitor is now the shomer of Sinagoga Kahal Zur.

For more information and to learn about Dani's two film projects:

Xuetaislandthemovie.com

Reemergeproject.com

Trailer to documentary series project:

www.jewcer.org/project/reemergeproject

continued on next page

Jewish Tent: continued from previous page

away. We listened to a young 16-year-old boy, who had learned Hebrew less than two years prior, chant the Torah. The entire community — around 70 to 80 people — spent the entire Shabbat together, praying together, studying together, and eating together. I turned off my phone for 24 hours and from the hotel walked to the shul that a community member owned and who also invited members and visitors to stay free of charge. It was my first completely *shomer Shabbat* (observing the mitzvot associated with Shabbat), that I could remember. I reflected on the fact that it was those who did not grow up practicing Judaism that were now helping me observe my faith in a more *halachic* (according to Jewish religious laws) way.

Continuing our journey to learn more about the Bnei Anousim of Latin America, we arrived in Recife, Brazil. Here we found an Ashkenazi Reform community originally established by those who arrived in the early 1900s. I saw that they did not mix with the local group of self-identifying *Marranos* (even though I explained to them that today this word was considered a derogatory term for *Anousim* who were forced to convert and practiced Judaism in secret, they told me they preferred to be called this as a way of reclaiming this discriminatory word). Even among the Bnei Anousim there were separate groups, a humorous and bittersweet footnote of how Jewish this was, always sadly allowing personal disagreements to create rift and division.

On one Shabbat, the Reform community was not hosting Shabbat, nor was the Chabad for reasons due to the local leaders' travel plans. We had no one to spend Shabbat dinner with. We were invited by a local family of Bnei Anousim into their home to eat Shabbat dinner together, even though we had never spoken on the phone nor had we met in person before. In fact, it was only an hour before Shabbat when they learned that we were looking for a place for Shabbat dinner. All along our journey, I was continually impressed with the fact that it was those who had recently converted or returned to Judaism who were the first to open their doors and allow us the mitzvah of honoring Shabbat.



Dani with Odmar and Jefferson who are Bnei Anousim from Recife, Brazil



Celebrating Shabbat with Bereshit Olam, an emerging community located in Paulista, Brazil



Filming in a potential mikveh in Olinda, Brazil

continued on next page



Filming in Sinagoga Kahal Zur, Brazil

Growing up in New Jersey, I seemed to have taken observing Jewish holidays and rituals for granted. Seeing people so excited and grateful to be able to practice Judaism, many of whom believe that they are righting a historical wrong — a blessing that their very ancestors were not allowed to accomplish — is without a doubt connecting me even more to my Jewish identity. As the Limmud organization likes to say, “Wherever you are on your Jewish journey, we will take you one step forward.” Investigating, documenting, and then sharing our filmmaking with the world is definitely part of my Jewish journey, moving one step in the same direction. I believe that the Bnei Anousim and all Jews by choice are an integral part of the future of the Jewish people. As antisemitism and assimilation rise at exponential rates, it is more important than ever to connect and share these stories of *philosemitism* (defense, love, or admiration of Jews and Judaism) and reconnection. The flickering lights of the Jewish flames deeply embedded in so many souls of Latin America and around the world need our help reigniting and adding *leña al fuego* (“wood to the fire”). I am deeply grateful for the important work that Kulanu is doing and hope to add my *granito de arena* (“grain of sand”) with our filmmaking to help share their stories, and with them inspire more people towards hope and prosperity. *

Kulanu

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Kulanu (“All of Us”) is a tax-exempt organization of Jews of varied backgrounds and practices which 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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Helping Lost Jewish Communities Return

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What Is Amishav?

Amishav is an organization dedicated to finding lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people and to assisting those who wish to rejoin the Jewish community.

During the course of our history, large segments of the Jewish community were "lost" as a result of war, exile and forced conversions. The greater part of the Jewish people were "lost" in the eighth century B.C.E., when the ten northern Israelite tribes were conquered by Assyria and the captives were forcibly resettled. Today, these groups can be found in India, Burma, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and China.

This year Kulanu celebrates thirty years of supporting isolated, emerging, and returning Jewish communities worldwide! In 1994, **Amishav USA** spun off from the Israeli organization *Amishav*, which was founded in 1982 by Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail. (The complete Amishav USA newsletter — partially shown above — is at <https://bit.ly/Kulanu1993Winter>.) The mission of Amishav USA was to search the globe for the lost tribes of Israel. Later in 1994, we transitioned to **Kulanu**, with the mission of extending "a hand of friendship to those around the globe who are of Jewish origin and to help those who wish to return to Judaism."

See how we've grown!! From just three partner communities (in Brazil, Mexico, and northeast India) in 1994 to communities in at least 33 countries today, we are more

committed than ever to supporting those wishing to become part of the greater Jewish world and its history!

Kulanu's newsletter evolved into a magazine and continues to offer intriguing and engaging articles that broaden our readers' knowledge and desire to learn more about Jewish life in places one might have thought it never existed. We welcome readers' interest in learning more about our partner communities around the world and becoming part of this movement!

Watch for our next issue that will include an introspective history of Kulanu over the past three decades. We are so honored to be part of making Jewish history and we are grateful to Kulanu's donors and supporters for believing in us and our mission!

See page 2 for snippets of articles from our earlier publications and the inaugural Kulanu newsletter.