A Spring Break Mitzvah with the Huánuco Jewish Community

By Rabbi Peter Tarlow

(Continued on page 9)

Rabbi Gershom Sizomu

An Historic Evening

By Rabbi Scott Glass

(Continued on page 8)
Suriname (cont.)

(Continued from page 6)

years in the desert after the exodus from Egypt and the days of the Marranos, whose ancestors during the Spanish Inquisition were forced to convert to Christianity but who secretly continued to practice their Judaism. Since practicing Judaism was punishable by death, they met in cellars with sand covering the floor to muffle their sounds. The sand was probably added after the Sephardic synagogue merged with the Ashkenazi Neve Shalom.

A few years ago the community changed from Orthodox to Liberal. However, as a result of the lack of financial resources, the community cannot afford a rabbi, which is so desperately needed. As a result, conversions cannot take place for members with a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother. The **Ar on Kodesh** (Ark) is full of beautiful Torahs hundreds of years old. Only two are used, as the others need repairs that the community can’t afford.

The community faces several other challenges. The **chazan** (cantor) who runs the services is self-taught; the youth do not have the opportunity to interact with other South American Jewish kids; the mikveh is in need of repairs; and gravestones need to be cleaned. Services are held one week on Friday night and the next week on Saturday morning.

After weeks of hard work in the 1990s, the jungle in the Jodensavanne was cleared. About 450 graves were uncovered and the ruins of the synagogue have been preserved. With the help of the Suriname Government, it is now possible to reach the Jodensavanne by car and ferry boat. Thanks to these initiatives, one of the oldest historic monuments in Suriname and South America has been preserved for future generations.

I left this wonderful community with the wish that I could find a volunteer organization that would be able to help in providing basic religious services to isolated Jewish communities such as Neve Shalom. A few weeks later I was introduced to Kulanu and the response was above and beyond my initial expectations. Sarah Goldenstein, a University of North Carolina at Asheville student, had recently arrived in Suriname for six weeks to provide the community with Jewish education. This initiative is due to the generosity of Kulanu.

Immediately Sarah began an extremely busy program of Hebrew and Judaic lessons for adults, children ages 6 to 13, and children ages 3 to 5. For the children, the lessons included learning the alphabet and Hebrew reading, stories from the Tanach, Hebrew singing, dancing, and arts and crafts such as making challah covers and Kiddush cups. The adults’ classes were focused on basic Hebrew reading, writing, and comprehension for one group and conversational Hebrew for another group. On the weekends Sarah organized activities such as Tal-mud study, Jewish history, learning Hebrew while baking cakes, Hebrew/Jewish lessons at the zoo, and nature lessons. For such a small community that does not have a rabbi or an educator, Sarah’s energy and enthusiasm were an amazingly positive experience. Unfortunately, by the end of June, Sarah headed to Brazil as an exchange student at Pontifical Catholic University of Paraná. Sarah deserves our gratitude for her great work. We hope that there will be a continuation of the educational program begun by Sarah.

Currently Suriname is not a popular tourist destination; in my opinion, it is one of the best kept secrets. The potential for Ecotourism is unlimited, with the undisturbed dense tropical rainforest, rivers and waterfalls, rare species such as the blue poison dart frog, and many birds and flowers unique to this part of the world. It is just a question of time before small cruise ships will start visiting, resorts will be developed, and tourism will become the major industry of Suriname. That will help the country’s economy and hopefully will end the isolation of this unique but forgotten Jewish community.

*(The next newsletter will feature a dispatch from Shai Fierst, a Jewish Peace Corps Volunteer in the Suriname rainforest.)*

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Huánuco Jews (cont.)

(Continued from page 1)

private donations. The Huánuco soon-to-be-community provided additional support, which demonstrated a commitment on their part.

Due to funding necessities, only five of the eight students who applied to go on the journey were able to accompany me. These five students studied the history of Peruvian Jewish life and the culture of Peru prior to going. During the Texas A&M University Spring Break of 2008 these students set out for Peru via Panama. After landing in Lima and being met by numerous members of the about-to-be-born Jewish community, the “Aggies” (students at Texas A&M are called “Aggies”) went to the northern city of Trujillo, where they visited the remote pre-Inca ruins of Chan-chan and the “Huanaque de Luna” archeological site. After a 23-hour trip from Trujillo to Huánuco, the Aggies arrived at their final destination. Accompanied by a doctor, the Hillel students and I crossed some of the highest points on earth, reaching an altitude of almost 5,000 meters during our journey from Trujillo to Huánuco.

The area’s major rain storms and mud slides helped our group to decide that each perspective “convert” or “reentry candidate” would be examined by an Aggie beit din and then, once the weather cleared, would go to mountains for the mikveh ceremony. All the male candidates had already undergone circumcision and were aware that they would have to undergo the ceremony of **tipat dam**.

The beit din interview was rigorous and lasted the entire day. In fact the beit din asked four perspective converts to continue to study for another year. Each member of the 5-person Beit Din, in succession, questioned the candidate, testing the person’s knowledge of Jewish holidays and understanding of Jewish theology, from kashrut to Zionism. I translated all questions and answers.

The next day the rain cleared and the entire group traveled for over an hour on mud roads to a secluded spot in the Andes where they built a mikveh and permitted each person to undergo the immersion ceremony in the cold Andean waters. The **tipat dam** was done on the day of the mikveh, by a doctor along with me and witnessed by Jewish male A&M students.

After the mikveh, the Hillel students witnessed a formal conversion and/or reentry ceremony and heard a testimony from each of the 12 new members of the Peruvian branch of the people of Israel.

Although some of the students did not speak Spanish, they were still able to feel the depth of emotion expressed. Friday provided still another emotional experience, the formal acceptance by the Peruvian government of the Huánuco Jewish community and its inscription in the national records. That afternoon the two Aggie female students worked with the Huánuco women in the preparation of challah, and all prepared to greet the first legal Sabbath to be held in that part of Peru.

At Erev Shabbat services all present could feel history in the making. One young man had traveled 12 days through the jungle to become part of the Jewish community. Another person traveled over 14 hours of rough mountain and jungle terrain to reunite with the people whom he now called his. This was also a lesson on the concept of the oneness and unity of the Jewish people. Although many of the students did not understand the Spanish portion of the services or my sermons, all could follow the Hebrew parts and realized that wherever there is Hebrew spoken and Jews who care, then they too are at home. After spending a wonderful Sabbath with their new co-religionists and friends, the Texas A&M Hillel group left Peru on Sunday morning, March 16, and arrived back in college that night.

I will return to Peru on a yearly basis. If I can obtain sufficient funding, I hope to bring at least ten students with me next year. If you are interested in sponsoring a student for the 2009 Peru mitzvah trip please contact Rabbi Peter Tarlow at Texas A&M Hillel, 800 George Bush Dr., College Station, Texas, 77840, USA or via email at Hil-lel@tamuhillel.org