



## A Spring Break Mitzvah with the Huánuco Jewish Community

*By Rabbi Peter Tarlow*

*(In September 2007, Rabbi Peter Tarlow, director of Texas A&M University Hillel, received an early morning call asking him if he would be willing to help people convert and establish a Jewish community in Peru. Because Tarlow is fluent in Spanish and has worked with Jewish communities around South America, he agreed to a site visit in December which if successful would become a Hillel adventure in March. The site visit proved to be a success; it was clear that all medical and security precautions were in place, and that the visit would be of great benefit to both the local Jewish community and to the Hillel students. In March of 2008, Rabbi Tarlow took five of his Hillel students, three men and two women, to Huánuco to help establish this community.)*

Three separate groups of people compose the nascent Jewish community of Huánuco, Peru. Some of its members are descended from Jews who came to the Peruvian highlands in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century illegally. (The government did not permit Jews to

live in these parts of Peru in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and registered all births as Catholics.) Due to their small numbers and pressure from the government, the general population soon absorbed these people and the 19<sup>th</sup> century community ceased to function.



*US students with conversion candidates*

Descendants from the Inquisition compose the second group. These people, like all Crypto-Jews, maintained some form of emotional ties to Judaism, but often knew little of their ancestral faith. People who had become disillusioned with their former faith and had discovered the joys of being Jewish comprise the third group. All three groups came together and sought a way to reestablish a Liberal Jewish community and to reenter Jewish life as “reformatives” Jews.

### **The Aggies Arrive**

After my December visit, I asked students if they would accompany me to Peru. To avoid any bureaucratic problems the students and I decided to self-finance the journey through personal contributions and

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## RABBI GERSHOM SIZOMU

### **An Historic Evening**

*By Rabbi Scott Glass*

*(Rabbi Scott Glass, who had participated in the Beit Din in Uganda in 2002, had this to say to his congregation when he returned home to Ithaca, NY, from the ordination.)*

Ordination, in general, is a moving occasion. Especially for a rabbi, to witness such a ceremony and, in ways to re-live one's own, is very emotional, very meaningful. But to witness what amounted to the formal recognition of a community, to see almost a century of striving and struggle, oppression and persecution, ridicule and denial end in that one moment was glorious. To see history being made was wonderful. And to see the various threads that make up this beautiful tapestry that is the story of the last 15 years' journey come together was amazing.

There were very few people at the pre-ordination dinner whom I knew. Among them were Aaron Kintu Moses and JJ Keki, who had come in from Uganda for the occasion. Of course, there was also Gershom's immediate family--his wife Tzipporah, his son Igaal, his daughters Dafna and Naavah. They told me how much it meant to them that I was there. Could they possibly know how much it meant to me?

But as I said, there were all of these other strands coming together--so many people who had a hand in the discovery, recognition and development of the Abayudaya, many of whom had never met one another. My colleague, Howard Gorin, who organized the first Beit

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### **An Event To Remember**

*By Harriet Bograd*

*(On May 19, 2008, the first black African rabbi graduated from an American seminary. Gershom Sizomu, spiritual leader of the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda for decades, was ordained a Conservative rabbi by the American Jewish University's Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. The author attended the ceremony.)*

Gershom confided to me that the moment Rabbi Richard P. Camas recommended him for ordination, and the moment that the rabbinic Beit Din took out the Torahs and blessed the new rabbis were really spiritual moments to him.

Gershom's proud wife, Tzipporah, was so elated when she saw the hundreds of people standing up and cheering for him, she said she lost herself and was blowing kisses to people all over the sanctuary (at Temple Sinai). But Gershom said he didn't see any of this because his eyes were closed and he felt like he was seeing heaven.

Matt Meyer, who first “discovered” the Abayudaya in the early 1990s and brought them to world attention, felt that Gershom was already a rabbi before he ever came to the U.S. But Gershom was very moved that this ordination was a ceremony that had been used since the times of the Talmud, and this connected him to all these generations. And the certificate he received said he was a “rabbi and teacher in Israel.” I commented that before, he was a rabbi in Uganda, but now he is a rabbi for the whole world.

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# Suriname (cont.)

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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 Ashkenazic 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 *Aron 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 Talmud 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 Eco-tourism 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.)*

# Huánuco Jews (cont.)

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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 "Huanaca 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 [Hillel@tamuhillel.org](mailto:Hillel@tamuhillel.org)