

A Review of 'The Abayudaya: Judaism Emerging'

by Ardie Goldman (April 2018)



The
Abayudaya:
Judaism
Emerging
A Spiritual Journey into Africa
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A Spiritual Journey into Africa

by Menachem Kuchar

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In June 2011, Menachem Kuchar, an artistic photographer who lives in Efrat, found himself sitting on a plane on his way to Addis Ababa. Final destination: a village named Putti in rural Uganda. This impromptu trip was the initiative of dentist Dr. Ari Greenspan, also of Efrat who, together with Dr. Ari Zivotovsky of Beit Shemesh, head of the Ocular Motor and Visual Perception Laboratory Lab at Bar-Ilan University, had over many years visited “lost” Jewish communities. Their quests had long intrigued chief Efrat rabbi Shlomo Riskin who cleared time in his busy schedule to join them on their latest venture. Riskin asked Kuchar, whom he knew also held an interest in these communities, to accompany the group.

The result of this and two subsequent trips by Kuchar and others is his recently self-published photo-essay *The Abayudaya: Judaism Emerging, a Spiritual Journey into Africa*. It is a stunning production on many levels. Kuchar (an acquaintance of this writer) is an accomplished creative photographer who has exhibited in New York, Jerusalem, Warsaw, Gush Etzion and Efrat. The book consists of no less than 300 captivating photos, about half color, half black and white, spread amidst 142 pages. They accompany an extensive narrative that takes the reader on an odyssey through time, space and across cultures.



Abayudaya means “People of Judah,” in Luganda, the language of the Buganda kingdom that is a part of modern Uganda. Today numbering some 2,000, the Abayudaya live near Mbale in eastern Uganda. Kuchar recounts in detail the history of the Abayudaya from their founding in 1919 by a single convert, Semei Kakungulu, “a leader with a great vision” (who) discovered Judaism in a Jewish wilderness, attaching himself to the God of Israel or as he expressed it, to the Old Testament.”

Not unlike Abraham, the first Hebrew, Kakungulu’s adopted lifestyle began to attract others. Within two generations, by the 1960s, the Abayudaya community had grown to some 3,000.

Tragically, their numbers were soon decimated. Through most of the next decade, the Abayudaya experienced persecution, as Jews, under the despotic rule of Idi Amin Dada who seized power in a military coup in 1971. The community was ravaged and its population so depleted such that by 1979, when Amin was overthrown and forced to flee the country, there remained

only some 300 Abayudaya. From 1986 the Abayudaya community began to replenish its ranks and continues to grow. "Today," reports Kuchar, the racial makeup of the Abayudaya is shifting, with people from other Ugandan tribes joining."

In recent years a number of disparate communities from far-flung parts of the world claiming Israelite ancestry have sought recognition as Jews and in some cases to also reunite with the Jewish people in the State of Israel. Their efforts have been supported largely by three organizations, the New York-based *Kulanu* ("All of Us"), San Francisco's *Be'chol Lashon* ("In Every Tongue"), and the Israel-based *Shavei Yisrael* ("Returnees to Israel"). The former two bring to their work a pluralistic view of Judaism while the latter adheres to an Orthodox Jewish perspective. The list of countries in which these organizations are active is staggering and their activities have changed the lives of many thousands. To the extent that there is some basis to a community's Hebraic ancestral claims it may be viewed as a "re-emerging" Jewish community, returning remnants whose ancestors ages ago were separated from the body of Israel through war and conquest. From one generation to the next, over the centuries, these communities passed on a number of recognizable Jewish practices, i.e., lighting candles at dusk on Friday evening or fasting for one full day in the fall. In the language of the Hebrew Bible, their re-emergence may be said to represent *kibbutz galiyot*, the "regrouping" or "returning of the exiles."

Distinct from these are "emerging" communities like the Abayudaya who have voluntarily embraced Judaism without making claim to a Jewish past. The difference between the two is more than semantic as "re-emerging" communities like the Beta Yisrael of Ethiopia already consider themselves Jews. The

dispute that erupted in the State of Israel over their provenance offended many. In contrast, the Abayudaya willingly accepted the need for formal conversion.

Laying the groundwork for conversion was the primary objective of the Israeli delegation, but conversion according to *halacha*, or Orthodox Jewish law. Whereas the Putti Abayudaya had chosen to undergo an Orthodox conversion, other Abayudaya in the neighboring town of Nabugoye had earlier been converted by a non-Orthodox delegation. Gershom, the head of the Nabugoye Abayudaya, was offered the opportunity by Rabbi Riskin to “upgrade” to Orthodoxy, along with his entire community, an offer he declined.

In 2012, Moshe and Tarphon, two young Putti men came for a year of Jewish study at *Yeshivat Machanayim*, a seminary in Efrat, one of Ohr Torah Stone’s educational institutions founded by Rabbi Riskin. The climax of their Israel visit was their formal conversion to Judaism that took place at an outdoor spring, or *mikve*. This highly emotional event is dramatically captured in the photographs taken by Kuchar.

Further conversions in the Putti community mikve and two local weddings are the focus of Kuchar’s return to the Abayudaya community at the end of 2012. Photographs of Ruth and Tarphon’s traditional Jewish marriage ceremony and feast, attended by the entire community, are among the most vivid and colorful in the book. During this second visit, Rabbi Riskin exhorted the yet-to-be converted majority of the community to diligently study the tenets of Judaism while awaiting formal incorporation into the House of Israel. Some, we read, were growing impatient with the wait.

Their impatience is only resolved in June 2016 when the Israelis return for their third call on the community. By that time just nine Orthodox conversions had been carried out and the purpose of this visit was to expedite the process. But this mission is nearly called off at the last minute. In the interim the Putti community had experienced a division of leadership and control over outside donations; there were now two seriously feuding factions. Rabbi Riskin initially refused to proceed with the visit and the conversion process until this rift was healed and peace, shalom, which he told the Putti is also one of the names of God, returned to the community.

The reader feels the tension in the final chapter that recounts this five-day visit. The conversions, beginning on June 1st, were carried out in groups. The process entailed hours of interviews and oral examinations by a *beit din*, a panel of three rabbinic judges; a *tefillin* workshop for the men; *hatafat dam brit*, the drawing of a drop of blood from already circumcised males; immersion in the *mikve*, first for the women, then for the men, and even a simple "re-marriage" ceremony for the newly reconstituted Jewish couples, all this under a hot June African sun. But by Sunday, June 5th, this marathon task was completed.

From his description it appears that Kuchar's first visit had a greater emotional impact upon him than his subsequent trips. Of his initial experience he exults, "I am euphoric. Something electrifying is in the air . . . I desire to savor the moment." "I had reached a true spiritual high." Although there is much joy surrounding the wedding of Ruth and Tarphon and satisfaction in the success of the many conversions, these

being the key events of his second and third visits, a similar elation is missing. This is most evident during his third trip when local politics intervene, threatening the work at hand. Spirituality, it seems, is overshadowed by reality.

The single political episode aside, one's impression of the Abayudaya is of an authentically spiritual people. Kuchar takes note of the "locals praying with such sincerity that it embarrasses me to think of home, and of other, western, Ashkenazi diaspora synagogues I have visited."

The book's captivating photographs compliment its narrative, yet they can easily stand on their own. They capture not only exotic sights of African village life but also the panoply of African colors and light. In contrast to this beauty, however, many photos reveal the still primitive lifestyle and devastating poverty of the rural towns and villages.

One middle chapter unexplainably wanders from the book's main topic. Its photographs and narrative are dedicated to other emerging and re-emerging Jewish communities in Africa and Asia that the author has visited. These include Kaifeng, China, the Igbo of Nigeria, the Bnei Yeshurun, Baleng and Bassa of Cameroon, and the Lemba of Southern Africa. Here also is the small Samaritan community living on Mt. Gerizim in central Israel, although they are not recognized as Jews.

Some of the book's odd-numbered pages include a right-margin sidebar that offers random edifying and esoteric morsels of information related to the images or to the main text on that page, for example, various anomalies in Abayudaya naming

conventions or Baleng worship and burial rites.

The inclusion of a map or maps in the book would facilitate a better understanding of the region's geography. The reader would also have been better served by an index, given the length and detail of the narrative.

In his prologue to this volume Rabbi Riskin calls to mind the opinion of Rabbi Moses Maimonides, the *Rambam*, Judaism's illustrious 12th century legalist-theologian-physician-philosopher, who understands the task of the Jewish messiah as returning the world to the true religion. The story of the Putti Abayudaya, along with other re-emerging and emerging Jewish communities, appears to lend credence to this view. And it is a story, says Riskin, whose "final chapters have yet to be written."

Ardie Geldman is a writer and public speaker who lives in Efrat, Israel. His articles on Jewish life and Israel and book reviews have appeared in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, the *Journal of Jewish Communal Studies*, the *Jerusalem Post* and *The Times of Israel*. He is currently working on "Counter Tourism," a program to respond to pro-Palestinian protest tourism. His website is www.iTalkIsrael.com.

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