

# Medina & Halacha

Exploring the Jewish State  
through the lens of Jewish Law

By Rabbi Shimshon HaKohen Nadel

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## My Visit with the Abayudaya of Uganda

This Month I had the good fortune to spend a week with the Jews of Uganda. I was invited to teach Torah and speak about Israel, but I ended up learning much more than I could ever teach.

I first learned about the Jews of Uganda almost 20 years ago. A lover of all types of Jewish music, I stumbled on some of their recordings. (Later, a CD of their music released in 2003 would be nominated for 'Best Traditional World Music album' at the 47th Grammy Awards.) To my ears their music was original and exotic, yet familiar. Jewish texts and Tefillot set to East African musical motifs, harmonies and rhythms. I fell in love. And I began to research the community's fascinating history.

Last year, Moshe, a student of mine originally from Uganda currently living with his family in New Jersey, came to Jerusalem to study in yeshiva. I surprised him with my knowledge of his community's history and their music. He connected me with members of Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael, and

they invited me to spend time with them.

The journey of Uganda's Jews to Judaism began 100 years ago. Semei Kakungulu (1869-1928), a charismatic tribal leader, warlord and statesman was converted to Christianity by British missionaries and given an area in Eastern Uganda to govern and establish British rule. After studying the Bible, he found the truth in the Five Books of Moses. According to one legend, a Jew doing business in Uganda taught him about Judaism. With time, Kakungulu became disillusioned with both the British and their religion. In 1919, in an act of both political and spiritual rebellion, he converted himself, his family, and his tribe to Judaism, founding the Abayudaya ('Sons of Judah') in Uganda.

One hundred years later, their descendants, numbering around 2,500, are still practicing Judaism and living in 8 villages outside the city of Mbale in Eastern Uganda, near the border with Kenya. Today the community boasts several



Jewish primary schools and a Jewish High School, named for Kakungulu.

Most of the Abayudaya underwent a Conservative conversion between 2002 and 2011.

One community, Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael began practicing Orthodox Judaism and wanted to undergo an Orthodox conversion. In 2016, Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, together with a group of rabbis from Israel, convened an Orthodox Beit Din and Kahal Kadosh She'erit Yisrael converted to Orthodox Judaism. The community, consisting of about 250 souls, recently moved from the the village of Putti to nearby Nasenyi, where they hosted me.

In Nasenyi there is no electricity, no running water, no sewers, or really any infrastructure. Just fields, dirt roads, and simple one-room homes made from brick or mud huts with thatched roofs. Calves, goats, and chickens roam the landscape, as do barefooted children carrying jerrycans filled with water, drawn from the well. In the air is a stillness. A calm. A simple beauty. To some Westerners, the village and its residents might appear to be lacking. But the people who live here are some of the happiest, most content people I have ever met. You can see it on their faces and in their eyes.

The trek to Nasenyi was not easy. But it was worth it. It involved doctors visits, immunizations, antimalarials, flights through Africa, and the long 7+ hour drive through the Ugandan countryside from Entebbe to Mbale.

Leaving Entebbe Airport, we passed the Old Terminal where one of Israel's boldest operations on foreign soil took place. Signs along the roadway warn drivers that this site is protected by Uganda's Special Forces Command and photography is strictly prohibited. My driver warned me that if we stop, we can be detained and my camera confiscated - or worse. (Having spent part of the previous day visiting a Jewish inmate in an Ethiopian prison, I had no desire to see the inside of a Ugandan prison.)

**to be continued**