

In Uganda, a new synagogue for remote Jewish community

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [October 12, 2016](#) issue

They are unlike any other group of Jews in the world, and they are growing in what may seem an unlikely place: a remote collection of villages in eastern Uganda.

The Abayudaya (which means “people of Judah” in Luganda, the group’s language) live in a country where Jews represent less than one one-hundredth of 1 percent of the population and where Judaism was banned in the 1970s under Hitler-admiring dictator Idi Amin. Now, they are opening a new, larger synagogue September 16.

The Stern Synagogue is named after Southern Californian philanthropists Ralph Stern, who was born in South Africa, and his wife, Sue Stern. The building, which they helped finance, will serve the 2,000 or so Abayudaya, who have grown since they numbered about 300 under Amin’s persecution. Its 7,000 square feet include a main sanctuary, an ancillary prayer room, and a mikvah, a Jewish ritual bath.

The Abayudaya had once been much larger, about 8,000 strong, said Diane Tobin, the director of Be’chol Lashon, a San Francisco-based nonprofit whose name means “in all tongues” in Hebrew and which advocates for Jews of color worldwide. Tobin first became aware of the Abayudaya in 2002, as she was seeking out far-flung communities.

The Abayudaya’s rabbi, Gershom Sizomu, was eager to connect and asked for help combating malaria among his people. Be’chol Lashon sent mosquito nets, built a medical clinic, and financed the digging of clean water wells. Then it financed Sizomu’s five years at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies at American Jewish University in Los Angeles.

“He is one of the more compelling, courageous people that I have met,” said Tobin of the Ugandan rabbi.

Sizomu has encouraged his followers to battle both prejudice and poverty in a region that is mostly Muslim and a country that is mostly Christian. In February, he became the only Jew to win a seat in Uganda’s parliament.

“We don’t ask for a lot,” Sizomu told *Newsweek* this spring. “Political influence is good for our survival. I can use this position to advocate for my people.”

Also on behalf of his people, Sizomu appealed to the Jewish Agency for Israel, an organization that helps bring immigrants to the Jewish state. The agency this year formally recognized the Abayudaya as Jews, which will raise their profile among Jews worldwide and allow Israel to accept them as migrants under its Law of Return, which gives any Jew worldwide refuge in Israel.

But Tobin said that she expects most of the Abayudaya to stay in their Ugandan homeland.

They are unusual among African Jews in that they are neither European in origin—as are most of South Africa’s Jewish population—or among the “lost tribes” of Israel, as most of Ethiopia’s Jews consider themselves.

The Abayudaya, rather, are relatively recent converts. British missionaries converted their forebears to Christianity in the late 19th century. At the beginning of the 20th century their leader announced that he accepted the Torah but not Christian teaching.

“They are Judaism’s newest community,” Tobin said. —Religion News Service

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