
Be'chol Lashon (In Every Tongue)

**We are different cultures, languages and colors,
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A Program of the Institute for Jewish & Community www.JewishResearch.org

Be'chol Lashon Update 10/12/04

Featured Articles:

Time for a New God

I-Pride Conference, Expo & Gala Celebration

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American Jewish World Service Sudan Update

'African-American' Becomes a Term for Debate

Alice's Literary Wonderland

Time for a New God

Saturday, October 16th

9:00-10:30pm

Orinda Film Festival

Library Theater

24 Orinda Way Orinda, CA

Rabbi Irwin Kula, President of The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, is featured in a new documentary film, "*Time for a New God*." This is a short documentary featuring Rabbi Kula that looks at our ideas of spirituality. The film, set at the Coney Island amusement park against the backdrop of sea and sky, creates a dialogue between contemporary image and Jewish thought and wisdom.

I-Pride Conference, Expo & Gala Celebration

October 15 –16, 2004

Courtyard Marriott, Emeryville, CA.

Join us as we honor our past, look toward the future, & celebrate I-Pride, the oldest multiracial organization in the U.S. This unique forum will bring together more than 100 educators and social services professionals to learn and network around the issues of education, families and parenting, public policy and society, as these issues relate to multi-ethnic populations.

Welcome Reception & Expo - Friday, October 15 – 6:00-8:30pm

Conference & Expo - Saturday, October 16 – 7:30am – 5:00pm

I-Pride Anniversary Gala Celebration - Saturday, October 16 - 6:45 - 10:00pm

Conference Tracks Include:

Education Issues & Trends

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Parenting/Family Issues & Trends

Public Policy Issues & Trends

Societal Issues & Trends

Train the Trainer Master Class

Merritt College units, Continuing Education Credit 7 professional growth hours are available to conference attendees. A variety of sponsorship levels are available for business and nonprofit organizations. View the entire conference program & register online at www.I-Pride.org

A Shabbat Dinner at the Manhattan JCC!

Friday/October 29th, 2004

Come enjoy good food and good company! We will contemplate tradition and community as we shed the stress of the week and welcome Shabbat. This is a unique event, bringing together individuals who have varied histories and experiences in the Jewish community. The evening's program will involve study, discussion, song, and savory dishes from various cuisines.

Hosted by the JCC of Manhattan, 334 Amsterdam Avenue @ 76th Street

6:00-6:45 pm Candle-lighting and study

7:00-8:30 pm Dinner, singing and discussion

This event is sponsored by various organizations including: Swirl - for the mixed community, JFREJ -Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, BINA (Beta Israel of North America) - comprised of and for Ethiopian Jews, JCC (Jewish Community Center of Manhattan), Kulanu - an organization dedicated to finding dispersed Jewish communities, Ayecha - provides support, information and resources for Jews of Color, American Sephardi Federation

Eye on Future, French Group Works for Jewish Refugees from Arab Lands

By Philip Carmel

JTA Email Edition

Friday, September 24, 2004

When the International Court of Justice ruled in July that Israel's West Bank security barrier was illegal, Yves-Victor Kamami learned a valuable lesson. "The lesson of the security barrier is that everything is now an issue for the courts," Kamami told JTA in an interview. "There will come a point when the permanent borders of Israel are settled and then the world will move on to the issue of the refugees. We have to be ready for that." A former president of Bnai Brith France and an executive member of the CRIF umbrella organization of French Jews, Kamami recently set up the International Federation of Jewish Refugees From Muslim-Arab Countries. The organization aims to raise international awareness about the hundreds of thousands of Jews who left Arab countries from 1948 onwards following the creation of the State of Israel. It will do so by collecting eyewitness accounts of Jewish life in these countries from emigres. "It's getting on now for 60 years," Kamami said. "Many of those who were forced out are

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already dead and if we don't make an inventory soon, this will be lost in the trash can of history."

Some 900,000 Jews left Arab countries after 1948 and more than 600,000 went to Israel. They and their descendants now make up around half of Israel's Jewish population. There were various reasons for the vast exodus of Sephardic Jews. Some were entranced by the birth of the Jewish state and quit their homelands for Zionist ideals. Others saw their futures compromised in the newly independent North African states because of the association of Jewish communities with former Colonial powers. Still others, facing government-sponsored anti-Jewish riots in countries such as Iraq and Egypt, were forced out and should be categorized as refugees, Kamami said. All, though, faced a pervasive climate of hostility in which attacks against the Jewish community were liable to break out at any time and where Jews -- and Christians -- were second-class citizens. Today, fewer than 8,000 Jews remain in Arab countries; some states, such as Libya, were totally emptied of their Jewish populations. Kamami accepts that his project to gather testimony from those who left Arab countries is not the first -- nor indeed, the only -- attempt to undertake such a task.

The World Organization of Jews From Arab Countries was set up in 1975 to address the issue of Sephardic refugees but has since suffered severe funding difficulties and has been largely moribund in recent years. Attempts by JTA to contact the organization both in the U.S. and Israel were unsuccessful and the group does not run a Web site. Nevertheless, two U.S.-based organizations -- Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, and Justice for Jews From Arab Countries -- are both very active. Following a campaign by the latter group, the issue was forced onto the U.S. political agenda earlier this year with the tabling of twin resolutions in the Senate and House of Representatives calling on President Bush to ensure that "any explicit reference to the required resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue is matched by a similar explicit reference to the resolution of the issue of Jewish refugees from Arab countries." Israel also got in on the idea a few years ago when it announced that it was partnering with the American Sephardi Foundation on a project to preserve and collect 10,000 claims from previous compensation initiatives that had been abandoned. Kamami, though, says what has been missing until now has been the existence of a francophone group because "most Jews who left Arab lands -- whether they came to France, Israel, the U.S. or Canada -- spoke French. "It's also much more logical for international bodies such as the U.N. Having a Web site in English or Hebrew is not as effective and running it from the U.S. falls into the problem here of a latent anti-Americanism," he said. Some emigre organizations in France are less keen, however, on such a campaign, convinced that claiming reparations from former countries will damage future contacts with their places of birth.

Simon Atias, the president of the Paris-based Organization of Jews Originating from Morocco, strongly disagreed with the notion that the term "refugees" could be ascribed to Jews who left Morocco. "That's much more applicable to people who were forced out of Iraq and Egypt," he told JTA, presumably because Jew faced less hostility in Morocco than elsewhere in the Arab world. However, he, too, noted that after a long period during which there was little activity in campaigning for Sephardic Jews, there had been a

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sudden upsurge of interest in recent years. "There was something in Israel, but they really didn't do anything until negotiations with the Palestinians started," he said. That's true for Kamami, too -- as he readily admits. "The new trend is victimology. We need to show the trauma and the climate of physical attacks on Jews which is what forced them to leave," he said. Kamami believes the issue of the dispersal of Jews from Arab countries has been ignored for so long because the Jewish world was largely uninterested in hearing about their plight. "Historians were occupied with the Shoah, which was obviously the major disaster to befall the Jewish people," he said, adding, "So no one wanted to hear others speaking about losing their property or their money. They didn't have the right to talk about it. Some feel they still haven't. They were ashamed. What was their experience compared to the Shoah?"

Half a century later, he said, times have changed. The issue of the Palestinian refugees will soon become a major issue for debate and Israel will need to be armed to confront it, Kamami believes. In fact, rather than talk of refugees, Kamami prefers to refer to what he calls "an exchange of populations." "Seven hundred thousand Palestinians left or were forced out in 1948 and that's less than the Jews who were forced out of Arab lands," he said. "We can talk of a population change like between Germany and Czechoslovakia after the war or between Hindus and Muslims" following the end of British rule in India. Nevertheless, he says, such a narrative was initially an uncomfortable one for the fledgling State of Israel. "Israel didn't want to make a big deal out of it at the outset. That was for a positive reason, since we were creating a new nation and the idea that these Jews had been chased from the Diaspora rather than having made a clear Zionist choice to come to Israel was not acceptable. This narrative is good for our Zionist egos but it is not the reality," he said. That said -- and despite the deliberate analogy with the issue of Palestinian refugees -- Kamami points out an intrinsic difference between the two cases. "Those that arrived in the refugee camps in Israel, the ma'abarot, didn't stay there," he said. "They chose to integrate into their new countries. They helped to build Israel. And those who went to the U.S., Canada and France renewed the Sephardi Diaspora."

Out of Africa

By Kelly Hartog

Jerusalem Post

September 29, 2004

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1096430699220>

A small community in Uganda claiming to be Jewish fights for legitimacy

Perched atop Mulholland Drive in stately Bel Air sits the University of Judaism. Tucked away in one of the campus's modest apartments resides 35-year-old Gershom Sizomu, his wife Tzipporah, and their children, Igaal, 10, and Dafna, 8. From their hilltop vantage point, the Sizomus have a breathtaking view of the Los Angeles landscape. Yet it's a long, long, way from home - Nabugoye Hill in Uganda. Inside the Sizomus' apartment there are telephones (which ring incessantly), a fancy I-mac computer and an ever-growing library of Jewish texts.

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But back home in Nabugoye Hill, there is no running water and no electricity. And while the Nabugoye Hill high school teaches students how to use a computer keyboard, it's taught via a diagram.

But what Nabugoye Hill lacks in modern conveniences, it more than makes up for in tradition, practice and devotion to Jewish life. Twelve months ago, Sizomu and his family packed their bags to move to California to take up a scholarship at the University of Judaism, where he is studying to receive his smicha (rabbinic ordination), funded by The Institute for Jewish and Community Research in San Francisco.

Up until then, Sizomu was busy as the spiritual leader of the Abayudaya Jewish community in Uganda, a group of some 600 people which has been practicing Judaism for over 80 years.

The community was founded in 1919 when Semei Kakungulu, a military leader who had assisted the British in colonizing Uganda, rebelled against the Christian missionaries and declared that after careful consideration of both the New and Old Testaments, he believed in the Old Testament. And so, at the age of 59, he stated in Lugandan (the official Ugandan language), "From this day onwards, we are Jews (Abayudaya)." Semei Kakungulu then went on to circumcise himself and all the male members of his community, practice kashrut, keep Shabbat and live their lives according to the only Jewish laws they knew - those of the Old Testament. By 1920, some 3,000 males had been circumcised and by 1926, the Abayudaya community counted 8,000 men, women and children among its people. It was in the same year that a trader from Jerusalem - known only as Joseph - stumbled across the Abayudaya and stayed for six months, donating a Hebrew/English Bible and teaching them Hebrew.

When Semei Kakungulu died in 1928, Sizomu's grandfather, Samson, took over the role of spiritual leader. The mantle was then passed onto Sizomu's father - Yonadav, and eventually Sizomu himself, when his father passed away in 1995. When Kakungulu died, "the missionaries used it as an opportunity to encroach on the community's youth," says Sizomu. "The missionaries owned the schools, and if anyone wanted an education, they had to convert to Christianity." Consequently, over the next three decades, many of the Abayudaya converted. By 1960, there were only 1,000 Abayudaya left.

Yet throughout the 1960s, "Rabbi" Samson forged strong connections with the Israeli Embassy in Kampala. The former secretary at the embassy was Aryeh Oded - now a professor at Hebrew University. At the time, Oded made frequent visits to the Abayudaya community, assisting them in acquiring siddurim, tanachim and Hebrew language teaching texts. However, the fledgling ties were quickly cut off when Idi Amin came to power in 1971. All Israelis were expelled and all religious practices were outlawed.

"Our community was handed two options," says Sizomu. "Convert to Christianity or face death if you practice Judaism." Many converted, and the remaining practicing Abayudaya were forced to go underground. In 1980, a year after Amin was overthrown, an unofficial house-to-house census was undertaken, which found there were only 300 identified practicing Jews left in the community. "Had Amin continued for another 10

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years, Judaism in Uganda may have collapsed completely," says Sizomu. Today, though, the Abayudaya community numbers 600 and if Sizomu has it his way, it will grow. It's part of the reason why he organized for a Conservative beit din (religious court) to come to Nabugoye Hill in February 2002 and officially convert some 400 Abayudaya members.

Sizomu's eyes light up as he talks about his ultimate vision for his community, and why the conversion ceremony was so important. "I have a big dream," he says. "I don't want us to be a small community. I want Judaism to have a very big place in Africa. There are many tribes in Africa which have connections with Judaism. If I get support, I'm going to make sure those people become observant Jews."

Rabbi Howard Gorin of the Tikvat Israel Synagogue in Rockville, Maryland, put together the beit din after members of an organization devoted to helping lost and dispersed Jewish communities called Kulanu asked him to perform the ceremony. Gorin met with Sizomu and his brother JJ Keki, who were studying for six months at Hebrew Union College in New York, and read several articles by people who had visited the community in a book edited by Karen Primack entitled *Jews in Places You Never Thought Of*. Gorin says he was convinced the Abayudaya were "an authentic Jewish community."

Knowing he was going into "unchartered territory," Gorin says he chose the three other beit din members very carefully. The first was Israeli Rabbi Andrew Sacks, "because I know he has an adventuresome spirit and he's also a mohel." While the Abayudaya were all circumcised, part of the conversion process would require a hatafat dam ceremony, in which a drop of blood is symbolically taken. The other two rabbis were Rabbi Scott Glass of Ithica, New York and Rabbi Joseph Prauser of the Jewish Center on Long Island and a member of the Rabbinic Assembly Committee on Jewish Laws and Standards. Several articles were written in the Jewish press about the community's conversion, but most focused more on whether the community could be officially recognized by Israel, given that the conversion was not an Orthodox one.

Gorin scoffs at the question. "Those who focus on this are missing the point," he says. "These people have been faithfully practicing Judaism begun by one guy who read the Bible and said 'This is what our religion should be,' without ever having met a practicing Jew. That's why," he continues, "we didn't like to use the word 'conversion' seeing the ceremony more of an affirmation because the word 'convert' implies a change of religious identity. "All of us [rabbis] went over there with varying degrees of skepticism but were immediately won over by this strong, dynamic, Jewish community. They need to be embraced," he continues, "not as exotic individuals in a strange location, or as a footnote, a curiosity in Jewish history, but fully part of the fabric of modern Jewish life, part of Am Yisrael."

One person who can vouch for the Abayudaya's commitment is Chaya Weinstein, a 46-year-old occupational therapist who spent nine months living and working with the Abayudaya community in 2002. Traveling to Uganda as part of a self-funded volunteer program called *Visions in Action*, Weinstein was determined to check out the Abayudaya and first made her way up to Nabugoye Hill for Simhat Torah in 2002. "I was so overcome with emotion," she recalls. "It was so moving. I had no idea what to expect.

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Rabbi Sizomu picked me up and I thought he would be white," she recalls, laughing. "He took me to the main synagogue and I met his wife Tzipporah and had this amazing Simhat Torah experience. The men and women were dancing separately with the Torah around lighted candles. There was genuine faith and joy in their celebrations, and before I knew it I was asking Rabbi Sizomu if he needed assistance."

During her nine-month stay with the Abayudaya, Chaya, who was raised in a Conservative home, taught basic Hebrew, Jewish liturgy and Jewish history. "The education system there is all about teaching by rote," she says, "so I introduced craft projects, singing, Kabbalat Shabbat services. And they were so hungry to learn. They had such pride in being Jewish." Another person who was moved to help the community is Debra Gonsler Vinik, a New York-based documentary filmmaker who, together with her husband, traveled to Uganda to film the Abayudaya conversion ceremony. The result is a film called *Moving Heaven and Earth*, which is currently making the rounds at various film festivals. "When you see the place," she says, "well... it makes any other discussions of poverty seem ridiculous. I mean, we knew the conditions were bad before we went, but we weren't prepared for people sweeping the dirt to make the dirt look nicer."

Of the community's five synagogues, there is only one, she says, that is in "reasonable condition." "It has no windows and no light. When we were there we hooked up lights from our car battery to light the Havdala service," says Vinik. Yet despite the harsh conditions, Vinik says the trip was a transformative experience for her and her husband. "These people were so joyous, in their love and commitment to Judaism, and being involved in this conversion process. They are so cut off from the world Jewish community. Yet their joy was palpable. Especially when it came to the conversion." The banner on the poster for her film reads: "Fourteen million Christians, 4 million Muslims, 400 Jews."

Sizomu says it's always dangerous being a Jew in Uganda. Aside from the constant pressure by the country to convert people to Christianity, the increase in terror attacks around the world has left the community a little on edge. "We have a fence around some of our synagogues now," he says. "We never used to. We have learned to be suspicious and to make sure we try and screen people who come into our community - especially those who come claiming to be guests." It's important for him that the Jewish world knows, recognizes and accepts the Abayudaya. "I want people to know that we are Jewish and feel very connected to the land of Israel. Israel should open her gates to us, because we have no other destination, should we need to leave here one day," says Sizomu. "And if Jews want to come to Uganda then they will know they can come here, to us, and have a welcoming community."

Born to lead

Born in 1969, one of nine children (only six of whom are still alive today), Gershom Sizomu spent his formative years under the brutal regime of Idi Amin. "We were not allowed to pray, to go near our synagogues, not even walk by them," he recalls. "The synagogues were left to collapse, others were confiscated and used by the local government for offices and stores. I remember once the [corrugated iron] roof of one of

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our synagogues was blown off in a storm, and several people went out at night to gather the sheets." The unlucky culprits were caught and imprisoned. They weren't killed but they were tortured. "They died later, though," says Sizomu, "as a result of their treatment in prison." By far his most harrowing memory is that of his father being arrested for building a succa in the backyard.

"He only survived because we paid a bribe of five goats to the officials who arrested him. After that incident, we made sure to pray in secret. And my father used to recite a prayer that went 'Oh Lord help us get rid of Idi Amin.'" Those prayers were answered in 1979, shortly before Pessah, when Amin was overthrown and the new government permitted freedom of worship. "I remember the first thing we did once Amin was gone, was to celebrate - not Shabbat - but Pessah. We celebrated real freedom that year." Despite the fears, and dangers, Sizomu says he feels he was destined to follow in his father's footsteps. "My father was a mohel," he explains. "And one day, when I was about seven, I was playing circumcision games with my friends," he states, without batting an eyelid.

"I had a blunt knife - my non-Jewish friends in the neighborhood weren't circumcised - and I decided I was going to circumcise one of them. I landed up giving him a nasty bruise and he ran away screaming. At that point, I think my father realized I was interested in what he did."

Sizomu says he can't remember a time when he wasn't trying to imitate his father - whether it was reading prayers, studying Torah, or practicing mohel techniques on his unsuspecting friends. "But by the time I had my bar mitzva, I led the whole service. Everyone was impressed and thought that I could be the next leader, and inside, I felt I could be too." Nor has he regretted his lifestyle choice for one moment.

"It has been very good for me," he says, "seeing everybody comes to me for spiritual guidance. I conduct lifestyle events, funerals, weddings, bar mitzvas, circumcisions (properly!). "I feel good getting involved in such activities, especially compared to other young people who get involved in businesses which [are basically] stealing." He points out that most businesses in Africa involve a great deal of smuggling. "I prefer to do spiritual work," he demurs. Ever cognizant of his potential role as spiritual leader, in 1994 - a year before his father died - Sizomu met Tziporah at the local Jewish youth movement. "We married that same year," he recalls. "I was going to be the next leader of the community and I didn't want to run around." In that same year, Sizomu decided to return to high school. "I'd dropped out to do spiritual work in the community, but I realized that now that I was going to get married and start a family, I needed to get an education and get a job."

After graduating high school, Sizomu earned a degree in education, history and economics at college. He returned to Nabugoye Hill and established the Semei Kakungulu high school. Now, having handed the spiritual reins over to one of his brothers, Sizomu will spend the next four years out of his community - three more in Los Angeles and one year in Jerusalem. But, he says, it will be worth it when he finally returns. He also hopes that one day his son, Igaal, will follow in his footsteps. "Both my children have a wonderful opportunity to learn Hebrew and Judaism here. I am building a

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great Jewish library for Igaal - and by the time I finish my five years here I will have an entire set of the Talmud and the Mishnayot," he states proudly.

Presbyterians Stand by Divestment Despite Dialogue with Incensed Jews

By Uriel Heilman

JTA Email Edition

Wednesday, September 29, 2004

Not long ago, the Presbyterian Church USA managed to do something most Jewish organizations can only dream of: It generated Jewish unity. Jewish groups were outraged when the organization passed a resolution over the summer calling for divesting from companies that do business in or with Israel. The group is sticking to its position after meeting here Tuesday with Jewish religious leaders and organizational officials, who aired their sentiments face to face with the Presbyterians for the first time since the decision in July. As the Jews expressed unanimous, vehement opposition to the move, church officials said they were eager to "dialogue" with the Jews on the issue and expressed regret that the discussion had not taken place earlier. But they also insisted that the church, representing 3 million-plus members, would not back away from the decision, which passed by a 431-62 vote at the group's General Assembly. "We're looking forward to this being the first of a number of meetings," Rick Ufford-Chase, moderator of the General Assembly, said at a news conference following Tuesday's meeting in New York.

"It's clear to us this conversation should have taken place some time ago." Rabbi Paul Menitoff, executive vice president of the Reform movement's Central Conference of American Rabbis, told JTA after the meeting that fundamental differences remained. "There's a natural divide in terms of perspectives. We see things through radically different lenses," he said. "We put on the table very clearly our concerns." The bulk of the meeting was devoted to the issue of divestiture, participants said, with the Jews arguing that the decision was patently unfair and the Presbyterians arguing that it is meant to promote peace in the region. The Presbyterian Church USA has about \$7 billion in assets, most of it earmarked for pensions. Church officials could not say how much of their assets are invested in companies that do business in Israel. "The conversations crossed each other," David Elcott, U.S. interreligious affairs director for the American Jewish Committee, told JTA. "The Jewish community vented all of the arguments in support of the State of Israel and explained the failures of the Palestinians. The Presbyterians spoke of the powerlessness of the Palestinians and the power of Israel over the Palestinians."

No accord was reached, except to step up dialogue efforts. While this hardly is the first conflict between Jews and Presbyterians, even on issues relating to Israel, the decision to divest from Israeli companies or companies doing business in Israel touched a particularly raw nerve among Jews. It could do serious damage to Jewish-Christian relations, some observers said. It could also have a domino effect on other churches considering similar moves, resulting in substantial economic hardship to Israel. Already,

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there are signals that the Anglican Church could be next; the Anglican Peace and Justice Network last week issued a report that alarmed Jewish officials in its placement of the lion's share of the blame for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Israel. "If the Presbyterians go ahead with any kind of divestment, the Anglicans are not far behind," said A. James Rudin, senior interreligious adviser at the AJCommittee. "They already are showing interest in it.

There could be other church bodies that want to follow it, and it can spread." Rabbi Eric Yoffie, president of the Union for Reform Judaism, which hosted Tuesday's meeting, said, "The Jewish community is deeply disturbed about this." He said his group already has reached out to the Anglican Church but has not yet received a substantial response. The July resolution at the Presbyterian General Assembly was substantially different than past Presbyterian resolutions perceived by Jews as hostile to Israel, Rudin said. "Up to now it's been: Cut off aid, Israel should stop building settlements -- it's verbal. This is the first one that I know of that a resolution coming out of a church body has talked about divestment. We're talking about money," he said. "This one's really got teeth. It has a chilling effect," Rudin added. It represents "a real threat to the economic life and security of Israel."

The point of Tuesday's meeting was not necessarily to get the church to reverse its decision -- Jewish officials said that clearly was unrealistic -- but to sensitize church officials to the issue. "We asked for the meeting," said Rabbi Joel Meyers, executive vice president of the Conservative movement's Rabbinical Assembly. "They jumped at it because I think that underneath there really is a genuine feeling to be closer to the Jewish people for a dialogue." Elcott said the church was caught off guard by the angry Jewish response to the decision. "I think that there was a naivete in the resolution," he said. "It was easier for them to pass a resolution because they didn't think it would have any negative impact on the Jewish community. They were surprised by the response." Rev. Clifton Kirkpatrick, stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church, acknowledged as much. "We want to be much more intentional about consulting one another," he said of the church's dialogue with the Jewish community on this issue.

Kirkpatrick stressed that the General Assembly vote did not mandate divestiture as a first step, but as a last resort after other attempts to change Israeli policy vis-a-vis the Palestinians have been exhausted. The church committee that will examine the divestiture option has not yet had its first meeting. It is scheduled for November, and may involve discussions on divesting from the Caterpillar company, whose bulldozers are used in the demolition of Palestinian homes, church officials said. Kirkpatrick cautioned that the church would not take steps to reverse a decision that was taken by the group, the ninth-largest Christian denomination in America. "I don't think these decisions should be changed," Kirkpatrick said. "But going forward should be shaped by a conversation with the Jewish community."

Gay Rabbi in New York Gives Sermon on Rosh Hashanah - Synagogue Loosing Support

JTA Email Edition

Wednesday, September 29, 2004

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A synagogue in New York City is losing support from its umbrella organization because it invited a gay rabbi to give a sermon during Rosh Hashanah, according to reports. The Union for Traditional Judaism is pulling its support from the Montauk Minyan, which featured Orthodox Rabbi Steve Greenberg as one of its speakers during the holiday, the New York Jewish Week reported. A spokesman for the small congregation says Greenberg did not address gay or lesbian issues during his talk. But the union says homosexual behavior is incompatible with Jewish law.

American Jewish World Service Sudan Update **Thursday, September 4, 2004**

Thanks to your efforts, the United States government last week succeeded in pushing the United Nations Security Council to adopt a resolution demanding the end of the violence in Darfur. Continued pressure is needed to force United Nations action. We must now remind our members of Congress to champion increased humanitarian aid for Darfur and to support expanded peacekeeping efforts in the region. Click here <<http://action.ajws.org/ctt.asp?u=3374949&l=57786>> to make your voice heard.

Thank you to all who have supported our emergency appeal for Sudan - in the past month we have raised another \$100,000, bringing our total to nearly \$250,000 (please click here <<http://action.ajws.org/ctt.asp?u=3374949&l=57787>> if you would like to support our relief efforts).

'African-American' Becomes a Term for Debate

By Rachel L. Swarns

New York Times

August 29, 2004, Sunday

For a moment, the Ethiopian-born activist seemed to melt into the crowd, blending into the sea of black professors, health experts and community leaders considering how to educate blacks about the dangers of prostate cancer. But when he piped up to suggest focusing some attention on African immigrants, the dividing lines were promptly and pointedly drawn. The focus of the campaign, the activist, Abdulaziz Kamus, was told, would be strictly on African-Americans. "I said, 'But I am African and I am an American citizen; am I not African-American?'" said Mr. Kamus, who is an advocate for African immigrants here, recalling his sense of bewilderment. "They said 'No, no, no, not you.'"

"The census is claiming me as an African-American," said Mr. Kamus, 47, who has lived in this country for 20 years. "If I walk down the streets, white people see me as an African-American. Yet African-Americans are saying, 'You are not one of us.' So I ask myself, in this country, how do I define myself?" That prickly question is increasingly being raised as the growing number of foreign-born blacks in this Washington suburb and elsewhere inspires a quiet debate over who can claim the term "African-American," which has rapidly replaced "black" in much of the nation's political and cultural discourse.

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In the 1990's, the number of blacks with recent roots in sub-Saharan Africa nearly tripled while the number of blacks with origins in the Caribbean grew by more than 60 percent, according to demographers at the State University of New York at Albany. By 2000, foreign-born blacks constituted 30 percent of the blacks in New York City, 28 percent of the blacks in Boston and about a quarter here in Montgomery County, Md., an analysis of census data conducted at Queens College shows. In recent years, black immigrants and their children have become more visible in universities, the workplace and in politics, with Colin L. Powell, the son of Jamaican immigrants, serving as secretary of state, and Barack Obama, born to a Kenyan father and an American mother, leading the polls in the race for a United States Senate seat in Illinois and emerging as a rising star in the Democratic Party.

The demographic shifts, which gained strength in the 1960's after changes in federal immigration law led to increased migration from Africa and Latin America, have been accompanied in some places by fears that newcomers might eclipse native-born blacks. And they have touched off delicate musings about ethnic labels, identity and the often unspoken differences among people who share the same skin color. This month, the debate spilled into public view when Alan Keyes, the black Republican challenger for the Senate seat in Illinois, questioned whether Mr. Obama, the keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention, should claim an African-American identity.

"Barack Obama claims an African-American heritage," Mr. Keyes said on the ABC program "This Week" with George Stephanopoulos. "Barack Obama and I have the same race -- that is, physical characteristics. We are not from the same heritage."

"My ancestors toiled in slavery in this country," Mr. Keyes said. "My consciousness, who I am as a person, has been shaped by my struggle, deeply emotional and deeply painful, with the reality of that heritage." Some black Americans argue that black immigrants, like Mr. Kamus, and the children of immigrants, like Mr. Obama and Mr. Powell, are most certainly African-American. (Mr. Obama and Mr. Powell often use that term when describing themselves.) Yet some immigrants and their children prefer to be called African or Nigerian-American or Jamaican-American, depending on their countries of origin. Other people prefer the term black, which seems to include everyone, regardless of nationality. Mr. Keyes's comments reflect the views of a number of black Americans, including those who challenged Mr. Kamus at the meeting on prostate cancer earlier this year. Many argued that the term African-American should refer to the descendents of slaves brought to the United States centuries ago, not to newcomers who have not inherited the legacy of bondage, segregation and legal discrimination.

Bobby Austin, an administrator at the University of the District of Columbia who attended the meeting in Washington, said he understood why some blacks were offended when Mr. Kamus claimed an African-American identity. Dr. Austin said some people feared that black immigrants and their children would snatch up the hard-won opportunities made possible by the civil rights movement. Several studies suggest that black immigrants and their children are already achieving at higher levels than native-born blacks. A study based on 2000 census data conducted by John R. Logan and Glenn Deane at SUNY Albany found that African immigrants typically had more

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education and higher median incomes than did native-born blacks.

And earlier this year, officials at Harvard pointed out that the majority of their black students -- perhaps as many two-thirds -- were African and Caribbean immigrants or their children, or to a lesser extent, children of biracial couples. Sociologists say foreign-born blacks from majority-black countries are less psychologically handicapped by the stigma of race. Many arrive with higher levels of education and professional experience. And sociologists say they often encounter less discrimination. "We've suffered so much that we're a bit weary and immigration seems like one more hurdle we will have to climb," said Dr. Austin, 59, who traces his ancestors back to slavery. "People are asking: 'Will I have to climb over these immigrants to get to my dream? Will my children have to climb?'

"These are very aggressive people who are coming here," said Dr. Austin, who is calling for a frank dialogue between native-born and foreign-born blacks. "I don't berate immigrants for that; they have given up a lot to get here. But we're going to be in competition with them. We have to be honest about it. That is one of the dividing lines."

Mr. Obama says such arguments do not reflect the views of black Americans who have joined forces over the years with Africans and people from the Caribbean to fight colonialism and poverty. He says black descendants of slaves share more similarities than differences with black immigrants and their children. He says his grandfather worked as a servant in Kenya and was described as a "house boy" by whites even when he was a middle-aged man.

"Some of the patterns of struggle and degradation that blacks here in the United States experienced aren't that different from the colonial experience in the Caribbean or the African continent," Mr. Obama said in an interview. "For me the term African-American really does fit," said Mr. Obama, 43. "I'm African, I trace half of my heritage to Africa directly and I'm American."

Shifting ethnic labels have long inspired fierce debates and discussions among blacks in this country, reflecting changes in socioeconomic circumstances, political strategies and evolving views of identity since Africans were first brought here as slaves. The term "African" was used sporadically during the 17th and 18th centuries, said Michael Thornton, a professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Wisconsin who has studied the issue. In the 1800's, "colored" started gaining popularity because it was viewed as more inclusive, referring to those of mixed-race as well as full African heritage, Mr. Thornton found.

Often several terms were in use simultaneously. In the 1890 census, for instance, blacks were asked to choose among four ethnic labels: black, mulatto, quadroon and octoroon, depending upon the degree of white blood in their ancestry. And in the 20th century, many black Americans shifted from colored to Negro to black and, most recently, to African-American, sometimes within one generation. "I've had to check several different boxes in my lifetime," said Donna Brazile, 44, Al Gore's campaign manager in the 2000 presidential race. "In my birth certificate I'm identified as a Negro. Then I was black. Now I readily check African-American. I have a group of friends and

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we call ourselves the colored girls sometimes, to remind ourselves that we ain't too far from that, either."

The term African-American has crept steadily into the nation's vocabulary since 1988, when the Rev. Jesse Jackson held a news conference to urge Americans to use it to refer to blacks. "It puts us in our proper historical context," Mr. Jackson said then, adding in a recent interview that he still favored the term. "Every ethnic group in this country has a reference to some land base, some historical cultural base. African-Americans have hit that level of cultural maturity." Since 1989, the number of blacks using the term has steadily increased, polls show. In a survey that year conducted by ABC and The Washington Post, 66 percent said they preferred the term black, 22 preferred African-American, 10 percent liked both terms and 2 percent had no opinion.

In 2000, the Census Bureau for the first time allowed respondents to check a box that carried the heading African-American next to the term black. In 2003, a poll by the same news organizations found that 48 percent of blacks preferred the term African-American, 35 percent favored black and 17 percent liked both terms. The term has become such a fixture in the political lexicon that many white politicians, including President Bush and Senator John Kerry, his Democratic rival, favor it in their political speeches these days. In fact, Mr. Kerry's wife, Teresa Heinz Kerry, who is white, has referred to herself on occasion as an African-American. She was born to Portuguese parents in Mozambique.

Many whites use the term for all blacks. But among blacks there is much less agreement, particularly in places like Silver Spring where Africans, Haitians and Dominicans mingle in the town's coffee shops, nightclubs and beauty salons, or in neighboring Washington, where the City Council voted this year to include the Ethiopian language Amharic as an official language to accommodate the growing Ethiopian community. Even adherents of African-American acknowledge that shifting demographics have made the term's meaning more ambiguous. "It's a comfortable term for me personally and for people like me who are of African descent and have been in this nation for a long time," said Michael Lomax, the president of the United Negro College Fund, which raises money for 38 historically black colleges. "But it gets more confusing when you recognize that this nation is full of all kinds of people of African descent."

"It's a much richer and more complex variety than when we started asserting that we were African-American," said Mr. Lomax, who argues that recent black immigrants from the Caribbean and elsewhere should feel free to use the term. Foreign-born blacks are also divided. Angelique Shofar, the Liberian-born host of a weekly radio program in Washington called "Africa Meets Africa," prefers to call herself an African, even though she has lived in the United States for 28 of her 39 years.

Phillip J. Brutus, the first Haitian-born state legislator in Florida, favors the term black because it includes foreign-born immigrants and black Americans. Mr. Brutus lives in Miami, where more than a third of the blacks are foreign born. "African-American has become the politically correct term to use, but I still say black," Mr. Brutus said. "I say I'm black and American. That's what's most accurate. I think, by and large, black is more

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encompassing." Here in Silver Spring, Mr. Kamus is still searching for the right label. He says he would like to be described simply as a universal man, but he knows that the United States, like many countries, has a long history of categorizing its people. And he would like to find a way of stitching his twin identities -- one Ethiopian, one American -- into a whole.

With that in mind, Mr. Kamus and some of his Ethiopian-born friends plan to sit down next month with Dr. Austin and Dr. Austin's American-born friends over a meal of savory meats and Ethiopian bread. They want to start a dialogue about their similarities, their differences and issues of identity at a time of demographic change. "We are in a critical stage of defining ourselves, who we are as Americans," Mr. Kamus said of African immigrants and their children here. "But one thing is clear. We are here and we are not going home. This is our home now. That is the reality."

Alice's Literary Wonderland

Walker, at 60, is Still Independent and Defiant, but More Fulfilled

Joshunda Sanders

San Francisco Chronicle

Sunday, September 26, 2004

The front yard of Alice Walker's house in the Berkeley hills is a wonderland. Buddhist statues, yellow roses and trees lead to a virtual gateway to her front door: a spider web that's been intact so long, visitors duck beneath it to spare the spider's life. Anywhere else, the thing would be carelessly swept aside. When Walker is not at her Mendocino County home, she tends to her plentiful garden here. Her Labrador, Marley, stretches out on the kitchen floor of her private oasis -- a combination fortress and retreat -- while she enjoys her solitude hanging in a hammock, gazing at her collard greens and tomatoes.

It sounds like a perfect life. But Walker's apparent peace comes just after an exhausting book tour for her latest novel, "Now Is the Time to Open Your Heart," the story of a woman awakening to the mystical powers of aging, and just before two milestones for the 60-year-old author and activist. Last week, a Broadway-bound \$10 million musical adaptation of "The Color Purple" opened in Atlanta after several years in the making. And this week, "Alice Walker: A Life," her first full-length biography, written by Oakland author and journalist Evelyn C. White, will be published. The meticulous and thorough overview of Walker's career is nearly 500 pages and took a decade to complete. What all that means for Walker is that "there's no hammock in sight for another month, at least," as she put it, plopping down on her couch, legs folded.

She lets out a half-weary laugh, but she then sighs with a bright smile. Walker does not look like the same woman who, just a few years ago, said she had plans to stop writing. Alice's mother, Minnie Lou Walker, used to tell the story of how her youngest daughter in a family of eight started her writing career. When Alice disappeared, a relative could usually find her writing somewhere with a twig in the dirt. "Writing for me -- if there are past lives, and why shouldn't there be -- is what I came in doing," Walker said, her silver dreads barely obscuring long, beaded earrings. "The movement with the stick is really

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just the primordial movement of the artist. Instinctive. That's really why so many kids are artists before it's trained out of them. You're taking your stick and transforming the universe before someone says, 'What are you doing? You're making a mess.' "

She continued writing as she went to Spelman College, transferred to Sarah Lawrence and later married Mel Leventhal, a civil rights lawyer, while they were active in the movement. They had a daughter, Rebecca, who is now 34, lives in the Bay Area and is an author herself. As Walker juggled her writing career with activism and motherhood, she also maintained an independent streak. She redefined feminism as womanism, a term meant to include women of color and men in the feminist paradigm. Walker was also an avid environmentalist and anti-war activist. She was arrested for blocking railroads where arms were being transported through Port Chicago (now Concord Naval Station), for protesting against apartheid in South Africa and just last year, for protesting outside of the White House with Code Pink, a local organization led by Global Exchange's Medea Benjamin. "That was a good moment," she said, smiling. "Actually, it was a great moment. I have to say there's nothing quite like it ... as gestures go. Shows that you are serious."

Walker began publishing widely in the 1970s. She wrote two ground-breaking short-story collections exploring everything from pornography to music in the lives of black women. She published a collection of poetry, "Once, " and two novels. For a time, she was an editor at Ms. magazine.

Walker was well on her way to becoming one of the most celebrated writers of the 20th century, even before she wrote "The Color Purple," the epistolary novel that changed her life. Her third novel won the American Book Award and the first Pulitzer Prize awarded to a black woman. She makes all of these worlds seem as if they fit seamlessly together. Yet Walker has been the target of many barbs. "Alice is invested in the light, in illumination, and is infinitely curious about the world; she is an explorer on many levels," said biographer White. "And explorers and trailblazers are often misunderstood and criticized."

This may be what Walker meant when she wrote about honoring the difficult. Much of her life, the respect and admiration of many have been coupled with personal wounds and the angry criticisms of some. Her first physical scar came at the hands of an older brother. During a game of cowboys and Indians, she was shot in the right eye with a BB gun and partially blinded. The injury allowed her to go to college with a scholarship for the disabled. Though "The Color Purple" not only won prizes but was made into a film by Steven Spielberg in 1985, the accolades were offset by controversy. A woman in Oakland wanted the book banned. Prominent African Americans derided Walker for what some considered a negative depiction of black men.

Walker's take on that particular criticism is: "All of my work affirms men; to say the truth about a situation doesn't mean you're not affirming human beings. How can it be that I just don't love black men? That criticism is not about what I think about black men. It's about what black men think of themselves." But Oakland novelist Ishmael Reed called the novel "a sentinel book, exposing the depth and hatred of black men in this country. ...

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White feminists and white men took the fictional character Mr. ____ and used him to represent all black men, something they would never do with a book written by a white." Reed was considered by many to be one of the most vocal opponents to "The Color Purple."

In a recent interview, he maintained, as he did then, that white middle-class feminists were using Walker's work to take out their frustrations on black men. Moreover, "anyone who says I was the leading critic of 'The Color Purple' is just illiterate and insane," says Reed, adding that he purchased 20 copies of Walker's novel "Temple of My Familiar" and believes that she is a gifted writer. "That's just outsiders and the media trying to start a fight between black men and black women."

But resistance to Walker's writing and activism has not been limited to "The Color Purple." Her work agitating against the practice of female genital mutilation -- cutting off girls' external genitals without anesthetic, performed on 140 million girls around the world -- through her books and a documentary, "Warrior Marks," has not met with universal praise. Some African women, for instance, have accused her of disrespecting the sanctity of their customs, sometimes deriding her as a "cultural imperialist." Walker is not swayed by these indictments. "One day in Africa, the Middle East, Malaysia and wherever people do cutting, people will just think it's absurd. They'll think, 'Why would we want to do that?' And it was wonderful to be a part of the wave that became visible in saying, 'This is crazy. This is suicidal.' So much of it is just ignorance."

And although many consider Walker to be a literary goddess, to others she is one of those bra-burning zealots. The most discussed aspect of her career after the "Color Purple" has been what some see as her New Age persona, a "latter-day hippie," as one writer put it, and there's been an increasingly hostile reception to her later work. "She's written good stuff and she's written trash, like most writers," Reed said. Walker does not respond to criticism or reviews publicly. Still, one has to wonder: What does she make of people who expect every book to be like the soul-stirring journey of Celie and Nettie? And what of the latest caustic reviews, among them one claiming that she's crawled into some strange rabbit hole?

Her response: She doesn't write for critics. The Pulitzer is in a box somewhere. With or without one, she is content to have done her life's work. "I think of what I do as medicine ... and you can only heal from the medicine that you trust. And if (people) don't trust it, they should not go anywhere near it. What I've noticed is that sometimes people just need time. For instance, when 'The Color Purple' came out ... there were all these people (against it.) Ten years later, so many people could see that it was medicine. So I'm not in a hurry for people to get the medicine. I have fulfilled my function. The joy was in the creation. It's not so much in the prescribing, (it's) to say I made this with the help of angels, and ancestors and devas and ... I give it you, knowing that the medicine is very good ..." she said, closing her eyes.

She paused, then raised her voice a bit and said, "Then some people will say, 'I don't care how good it is,'" she says, bursting into laughter. "And then I say, 'OK. Good luck.'" As she speaks, the scar in her eye that partially blinded her looks like a turquoise

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crescent moon floating beneath her pupil; a painful memory made beautiful by time. It is hard to believe that Alice Walker is 60. Whatever her silver locks tell of her age, her serene features negate. She likes to laugh and sigh like a teenager in love, and when she gets out to her garden to check on her strawberries, Walker is not a fastidious woman in a big hat and bunched-up gloves; she's a child in shorts and a black T-shirt eating the red berries right off the stem, bunching lavender in her hands as she sticks her face in it.

Could that spontaneous joy be reason to quit writing? So she could see more of her garden? "I actually didn't stop writing," she said. "I stopped writing and thinking about publishing. I looked back and realized that I've been writing for a long time. I just thought, I can give this life over to (biographer) Evelyn and then emerge into a different way. And I really have." Well, she had. Then, in 1996, a producer named Scott Sanders showed up asking her if he could turn "The Color Purple" into a musical. From the moment Sanders read the novel, he said, "I thought the piece sang, that it had music in its soul." That was nice and all, but Walker was tired of "The Color Purple." "I needed a little peace from it, actually," she said. "I wasn't so interested in having another production in my lifetime."

So began Sanders' journey to turn the novel into a musical. Part of his mission included sending Walker around Manhattan in a yacht with a small group of celebrities, including Diana Ross and her daughters and Ashford and Simpson. He gave her a list of his "references," celebrities like Bette Midler, Whoopi Goldberg and Shirley MacLaine. He promised the author he'd do her story justice. Eventually, she agreed. Wasn't she worried about the controversy that had come with "The Color Purple's" success 20 years ago?

"By now, I've gotten pretty unworried about turmoil," she said. "Look at the world. There's enough turmoil that any little turmoil that happens to me is, at least, bearable. It might hurt but ... so does dropping bombs on people. So does starving Haitians. I think I've suffered more from that than I've ever suffered from anything." The musical's book has been written by another Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Marsha Norman, the playwright of "Night, Mother." The songwriters and musical directors include pop writers and Broadway veterans, and the musical is opening 70 miles from Walker's hometown through Oct. 17 before it goes to Broadway next fall.

"She is a goddess," Sanders said from his office in Jersey City, N.J., just after receiving news that he'd won an Emmy for a television special he did called "Elaine Stritch: At Liberty." "I believe everything she writes comes from her soul. ... I feel honored to know her and to have the privilege to take her brilliant work and characters and bring it to a different medium." So far, it appears that the musical will be a success: The seven days of previews were nearly sold out by the Friday before it opened. Even in the middle of Hurricane Ivan weather, celebrities swarmed to the opening, and the musical's remaining dates are doing well at the box office. One early review called it "a mixture of marvelous moments and rough edges."

For Walker, it was another opportunity to see the power of resiliency through the lives of

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Celie, Shug, Harpo and Nettie. Twenty-two years after she had written their stories of resilience in honor of her mother, Walker saw her homecoming to the musical's opening as an affirmation of her lasting legacy as a Southern writer often considered in the company of writers like William Faulkner. "I helped change the South into a place where any black person (could prosper), and that's very important because we have missed the sun," Walker said of her career. "It is really fulfilling to think that you can give someone back their homeland."
