Feast of Freedom
An Abayudaya Haggadah Supplement
In the 100th year of the Jewish people of Uganda, called Abayudaya, the Cantors Assembly ventured on a mission there to build a sacred bridge of peoplehood and to explore the unique aspects and commonalities of our musical heritages. Additionally, several cantors also visited the emerging Abayudaya community in Kenya. Our purpose was to not only visit but to come back and tell their story through music and spoken word. We pondered, “How could that be most effectively done?”

It dawned on us that when the Jewish people tell our story every year on Passover, we read from the Haggadah. Haggadah literally means “the telling.” It tells of our journeys, our struggles, and our ultimate redemption through the words of Torah. What a perfect vehicle for telling the story of the Abayudaya.

The Ugandan Abayudaya Jews’ founding father was the warrior leader Semei Kakungulu. In 1919, after being approached by Christian missionaries, he fervently chose to refute their attempts to bring him into the fold of their faith, instead embracing Judaism as his chosen religion. Like the biblical Abraham, Kakungulu converted to a monotheistic life, desiring to follow, in his words, “the one true God.”

The group flourished without much outside influence for decades. In 1971, the despot Idi Amin took over Uganda and forbade any religious practice other than Islam. Having blossomed into a community of 3,000 souls, the Abayudaya dwindled significantly during this period. Amin was overthrown in 1979, on the eve of Passover. After eight years of practicing Judaism in secret, the Abayudaya could then openly celebrate a literal “feast of freedom” in their communities. Today, the Abayudaya are about 2,000 strong and flourishing in Judaic knowledge, with synagogues and schools in multiple villages.

This Haggadah celebrates the history and growth of the Abayudaya, filled with splashes of spiritual color of this flourishing Jewish culture, while noting the immense conviction which it took for our brothers and sisters in Uganda to survive.

This preview is just a sample of much more to come. It is but one section of the Haggadah, meant to enhance the experience of Jewish families at their Pesach Sedarim. The intention of the Cantors Assembly is to provide a more elaborate supplement, I’shana habah, in the year to come, which will be available in book form, as well as available online, along with links offering the breadth of some glorious Abayudaya music.
What does the word “enough” mean?

Who can think of ample when one searches for essential? How can one be sated when one’s stomach yearns for a morsel of food, a fresh drink of water? How can one be truly free when one’s mind seeks quality education or opportunity for self-sufficiency?

These are some answers from the Abayudaya community, who are in need of so many of life’s conveniences and even access to some essential elements of life. Listen to this recording of the familiar melody, sung by teens and young adults.

If God had brought us out of Egypt...

“Dayenu can be made possible with God. God is not physical. We should all clean our soul so God can sit there. Prepare our minds for this. We should give Tzedakah and devote ourselves to Shabbat and Kashrut, in this way we purify the Temple that God shall dwell in.” Eliyahu Miyamba, spiritual leader of Namanyoni

“The thing that would make me happiest (my Dayenu) would be to be one of the Hazzan for my community.” Elana Nantabo, prayer leader in Nabugoye and high school student

“If we could go forward (from being isolated and unable to flourish and grow) in numbers and in participation so we don’t forget from where we came and then could move forward and be strong.” Dafnah Sizomu, prayer leader, university student, and daughter of Chief Rabbi of Uganda

Despite isolation from the world Jewish community, religious persecution during the reign of Idi Amin, and the challenges that they continue to face as a minority religion, the Abayudaya have remained deeply faithful and committed to Judaism.
If God had supplied our needs in the desert...

The Ababyudaya face great need in their day-to-day lives. When individuals are asked their goals for overcoming such struggles, their answers are always community-focused, with the hope of striving to better the lives of all.

“People use whatever education they have to start their own lives outside of their professions so they can do some business here and there and that would require some kind of a better system where people can have access to free credit with free interest so that they have the leverage to start their own lives. That will be my Dayenu.” Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, Chief Rabbi of Uganda and spiritual leader of Nabugoye

“My Dayneu would be for long life... and money. To get money means I can help people in the world just as God can help. I can do Hesed for people, which is what God wants for us to do. If Hashem can give us happiness with whatever we have, Dayenu.” Abraham, Eliyahu, and Yosef, elders in Ol Kalou, Kenya

“If we see a success, which may not seem like a big one, we still express gratitude. These things are like if a student graduated school, if a couple finds a partner in our community to marry, if someone gets a political post in government, when we finish building a synagogue, and when there is a baby born.” Esau Wamini, university student and leader of Jewish Community of Marom-Uganda in Kampala

“Even when we want all the things we dream of, without Judaism, there is no other dream possible... And how that can be done is to take some of our leaders to learn more and educate us in Jewish schools and let them come back here to teach the community, or send retired rabbis and cantors to teach us here.” Allan Zilaba, spiritual leader of Nasenyi and President of Abayudaya Men’s Club in Uganda, affiliated with Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs (FJMC)

I am so worried, our Conservative Judaism is in danger, because there are a lot of attractive flowers that are coming [here to lure us away from it]. And you know, we are African bees. Move the flower and you go to the other flower. That is not good. So we fear. Our Dayenu must be to protect the Conservative Judaism, strengthen it, train people, make them love it more.” Saul Kirya, Chairman of the Board of Directors for the 8 Abayudaya communities

“For the school we need better buildings, fencing to keep kids in and strangers out, a school bus, more land to plant our own agricultural crops, water tanks, solar unit for power, and an on-site medical unit. There is [so much need that there is] no on Dayenu at this time.” Aaron Kintu Moses, Head of School at Hadassah Primary School
If God had fed us manna...

“If God had fed us manna…” Yosef, spiritual leader of Kehillat Israel in Ol Kalou, Kenya

“One big Dayenu would be to see more capital coming to us to help with start-ups. We need a bank to offer interest free loans. This would allow us to begin a small business, grow it, hire employees and become self-sufficient. Individual gifts are not sustainable.” Samson Nderitu, youth leader and aspiring rabbinic student

“Although we are eating a lot on Passover, water and food are not obvious [are not always a given].” Rabbi Gershom Sizomu

Food insecurity is a major issue in Uganda, which is primarily an agrarian society. Additionally, many families and schools do not have access to safe and clean water for drinking or bathing.

If God had given us the Torah...

“A Torah would be most important for us, because the Torah gives you everything you want and through being together with God you have everything.” Shadrach Mugoya Levi, spiritual leader of Namatumba

“May I suggest three Dayenu answers? Education. The resources to build a synagogue. And that we can be sure to safeguard our identity as Jews here in Kenya and not need to explain who we are.” Yehuda Kimani, managing director Kehillat Israel in Ol Kalou, Kenya

“If we had a synagogue, it would be the most and also a Torah scroll… that could be for us Dayenu. There are those things in life you wish you could have, and without them you are not complete. For us without a synagogue and without a Torah, we are not complete. We admire other people who have fulfilled this dream for their community… even more than electricity, which can only light up a room.” Miriam, Naomi, Ruth, Sarah, villagers in Ol Kalou, Kenya

Although the international Jewish community has provided support to the Abayudaya, not every village has enough ritual objects. There is a continued shortage of siddurim and humashim, sifrei Torah, Kosher wine, matzah for Passover, and other items for Jewish learning and practice.
The Abayudaya, like Jews in the diaspora, yearn to be connected to Israel, but visiting there is extremely challenging. Although several community members have been able to study in Israel, others have had educational visas denied or delayed. In 2018, about 40 young Abayudaya were able to participate in a Taglit-Birthright Israel trip.

“I wish to go, but if it is refused, I don’t want to force it... I can make my own Israel right here. We are in Israel already. If in Israel we shall visit more people, but in Uganda here I can be at home. If they don’t love me, allow me to go there, I can’t. I don’t want to believe that I’m going to Israel until it might be a truth.” J.J. Keki, spiritual leader of Putti

On our birthright trip, all people that we met in different places were so welcoming to us, not as tourists, but as a family of Jews from different mothers and fathers. It was excitement.” Yonatan Katz Lukato, Administrator of Jewish Community of Marom-Uganda in Kampala

“First and foremost it was a blessing to be married here in Israel. We felt at home and welcomed. In order to keep the strong relation between Abayudaya and Jewish communities in Israel, we made a decision to be married here.” Asiimwe Rabbin and Rivkah Rivbin, married in the first Abayudaya wedding performed Israel on January 4, 2020

“For me [going on Birthright to Israel] meant I have fulfilled one of the dreams of visiting our land. It meant the world to me. It’s the best thing that has happened to me in life. As Abayudaya, I was proud to represent my community in Israel.” Yonit Nagudi, artisan and university student in Kampala
The Four Questions

We are pleased to share a field recording of the Four Questions, sung in Luganda by Abayudaya teens and young adults at the Stern Synagogue in Nabugoye, after Havdalah on Saturday, February 2, 2019. Luganda is the Bantu language of the Baganda ethnic group in the African Great Lakes region, spoken by more than eight million people in central Uganda.

Lwakyi ekyiro kyino kyanjawulo kubiro ebilala byonna?

Mubiro ebilala byonna tulya emigati emizimbulukuse oba egitali mizimbulukuse; mukyiro kyino tulya emigati egitali mizimbulukuse zokka.

Mubiro ebilala byonna tulya enva zonna zonna; mukyiro kyino tulya enva ezikawa zokka.

Mubiro ebilala byonna tulya enva zonna zonna; mukyiro kyino tulya enva ezikawa zokka.

Mubiro ebilala byonna tetukoza omulundi nogumu; mukyiro kyino tukoza emirundi ebiri.

Mubiro ebilala byonna tulya tutudde oba nga tweganzise; mukyiro kyino tulya tweganzise.

Listen to these youth sing the familiar melody in their native language. Discuss at your seder table how different and alike we are as am ehad lev ehad [one people with one heart].
While the Cantors Assembly delegation was visiting the various communities of Abayudaya, we had the opportunity to hear the different communities sing. The singing of the Jews of Uganda both unites them and allows each of the different synagogues to express their own unique voices. Psalm singing in Luganda, the Bantu language spoken in the African Great Lakes region, is the core repertoire of the Abayudaya liturgy. With this preview release of the Abayudaya Haggadah, you can listen to studio recordings made while in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. Perhaps the most musically evocative text in the Book of Psalms, Psalm 150 calls for the praise of God through instruments, voices, and the body, and closes with the beautiful invitation, “Let everything that has breath praise God.” Traditionally, this Psalm has been sung by Abayudaya communities in Luganda, with the final verse in Hebrew. The Cantors Assembly delegation heard it performed joyously in during Rosh Hodesh services in the main Stern Synagogue at Nabugoye Hill; by a choir of mostly women accompanied by tambourine and Ngoma drum in the village of Nasenyi; by Jewish, Christian, and Muslim children at the Hadassah Primary School; and unaccompanied under the trees, outside of the roofless synagogue in Nalubembe.

In this recording, you will hear Rabbi Gershom Sizomu, the Chief Rabbi of Uganda and spiritual leader of Nabugoye, lead the singing. He sings in Hebrew, a reminder to us that the Abayudaya have embraced their place as proud members of the world Jewish community. Yet, the rendition is distinctly Ugandan, with the improvised invitations from Rabbi Sizomu and the accompanying young singers, of calling for everything that has obulumu (life), omubiri (body), amaso (eyes/sight), esanyu (happiness), amazi (water), and others, to praise God. In practice, these “invitations,” as Rabbi Sizomu describes them, might change day-to-day, based on the feelings of the prayer leader, a particularly fitting representation of how the Abayudaya place such great value all blessings.

Also on this recording are Abayadaya members Elana Nantabo (a regular prayer leader), and Tishiri Katrina (an aspiring singer), and local musicians Rachel Namaganda and SanCee. Hazzanim Michael Stein (violin), Jeremy Stein (flute), and Michael Weis (voice) contributed to this Ugandan-American fusion.

Psalm 150

Let every voice praise God.

Participants in the 2019 Cantors Assembly Abayudaya Solidarity Mission

Jerry Berkowitz, Jack Chomsky, Susan Gellman, Jesse Holzer, David Lipp, Pamela Schiffer, Amanda Ruppenthal Stein, Jeremy Stein, Michael Stein, Steven Stoehr, Michael Weis

All proceeds from the Abayudaya Haggadah Supplement will directly benefit the Abayudaya through a fund established by the Cantors Assembly. Donations can be made at anytime.

For more information about the work of the Cantors Assembly or to learn more about the 2019 Abayudaya Solidarity Mission, please email haggadah@cantors.org or contact: