



Gratz Insider, September 2013 - Story Continuation

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Gratz Professor Miriam Feinberg Takes Her Love of Teaching to Uganda

With her kind eyes, engaging voice and infectious enthusiasm, Miriam Feinberg is someone who seems to have been born to teach. In addition to her innate qualities, she has a doctorate in Early Childhood Education and a master's in Judaic Studies, as well as years of experience educating teachers, working in program accreditation and writing educational materials. In 2007, she brought her well-honed skills to Gratz, where she has taught online education courses to graduate and undergraduate students throughout the United States, and even as far away as Sweden and Mexico.

For years, however, Feinberg has managed to extend the geographic reach of her teaching across the world - without the Internet. She has worked as an educational consultant in schools in Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Thailand through UNICEF and Save the Children, and in a school in India through the American Jewish World Service. This summer, her teaching brought her to Uganda, where she traveled under the auspices of Kulanu, an organization that assists small Jewish communities in remote geographic areas and helps them to connect with Jews in other parts of the world.

For almost a month, Feinberg and her husband, Mordy, lived in the rural village of Nabugoye, Uganda, with members of a close-knit Jewish community called the Abayudaya ("people of Judah"). The presence of these people devoutly practicing Judaism in distant African villages is as surprising as their history. After Christianity came to Uganda in the 19th century, splinter religious groups later emerged. The Abayudaya community was established by a storied Ugandan leader, Semei Kakungulu (1869-1928), who over time adopted the teachings of the Old Testament. Kakungulu furthered his knowledge of Jewish practices and beliefs under the tutelage of a Jewish merchant.

Under Kakungulu's leadership, as many as a couple thousand Ugandans accepted Judaism and joined the Abayudaya community. Despite challenges in the decades that followed, this community managed to survive, though in smaller numbers. Then, in the 1970's, Idi Amin came to power in Uganda. Amin persecuted the adherents of

Judaism, causing the conversion of many Abayudaya to Christianity or Islam. Despite efforts to rebuild after the 1979 ouster of Amin, the Abayudaya population, which is spread across six villages, is not nearly as large as it once was.

Nevertheless, it was a vibrant and dedicated community that Feinberg and her husband experienced during their stay in Nabugoye. The couple lived in a lively guesthouse, where a woman named Rachel prepared home-cooked kosher meals for them daily. They marveled at what Feinberg describes as “the deeply religious and spiritual quality of this community.” And they experienced the sheer joy of the Friday night service, where they were “drawn to the harmonious sounds of African music mixed with traditional prayer tunes.”

They also studied several times a week with the rabbi in the village, an African from the Bantu Tribe, whom Feinberg describes as a wonderful Talmud teacher. Rabbi Gershom is an ordained Conservative rabbi, who received his training from the American Jewish University in Los Angeles. His brother J.J. (Joab Jonadav) is the cantor, and all members of the community have Biblical or Modern Hebrew names.

One particularly interesting aspect of studying with the Abayudaya, explains Feinberg, is that “these are people who don’t share a common history with me; they have a different frame of reference. They think of Rwanda the way I think of the Holocaust. It was very different to be with Jews whose historical frame of reference is different from mine.”

The life style distinctions were rather stark as well. Each day, as Feinberg and her husband walked the unpaved path to the school where she taught, they passed free-roaming livestock, simple homes without electricity or indoor plumbing, and adults and children who greeted them warmly, with toddlers coming up to shake their hands.

At school, Feinberg focused on curriculum development with the teachers, taught lessons to some of the students and helped two teenage girls lead a Shabbat service for the children. Her husband, Mordy, tutored students privately in Hebrew, trope and *brachot*, and worked with several students in preparing for their b’nai mitzvah.

The weeks that Feinberg and her husband spent living within the warm and loving Abayudaya community passed quickly. In assessing this extraordinary experience, Feinberg says, “I gained an appreciation of the richness and variety of Jewish life available. I also saw how resilient and tenacious people can be if they want something enough. These people learned how to live rich and meaningful Jewish lives, even during the horrific time of Idi Amin.”

Miriam Feinberg plans to teach a Gratz online course in early childhood education

this spring. For more information, contact Deborah Aron, director of online and distance learning, at daron@gratz.edu or 215-635-7300, ext. 115.