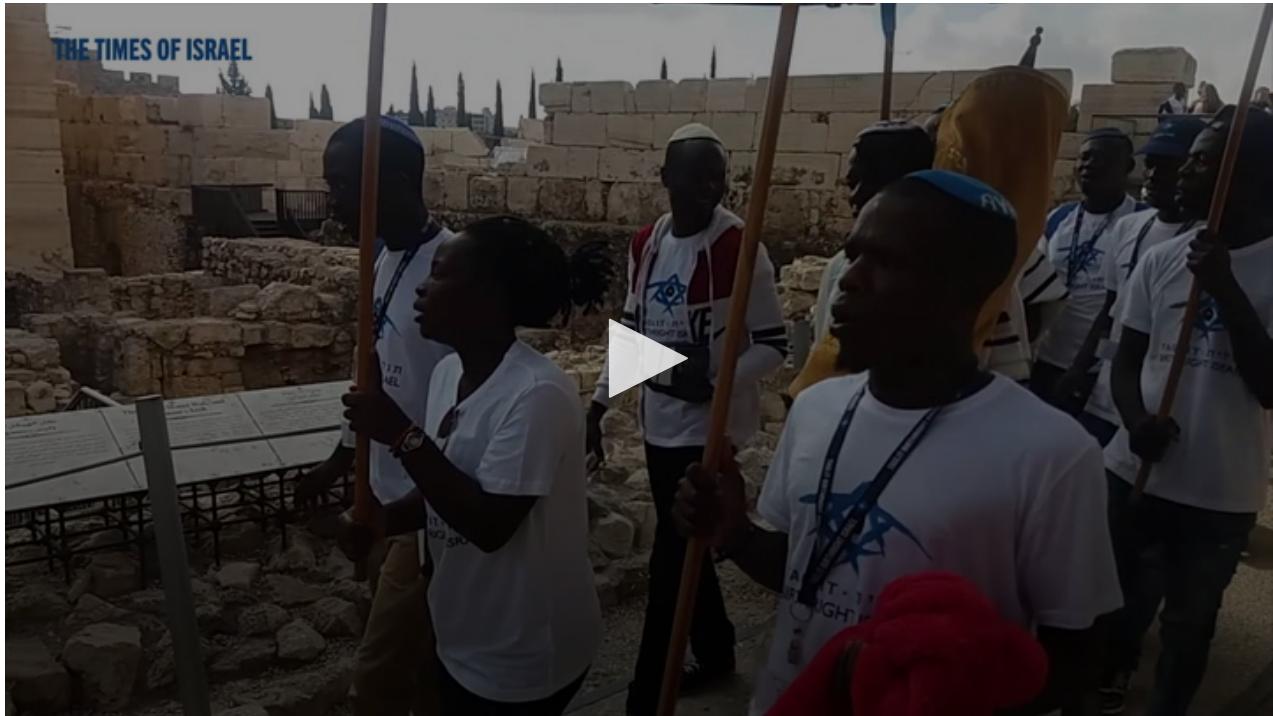


 / A HOLY MILESTONE FOR THE AFRICAN COMMUNITY

Abayudaya youth on first Israel trip welcome new Torah scroll at Western Wall

Ugandan Jews on trailblazing Birthright visit fulfill a dream of dancing their way into Jerusalem, after fears that Masorti-converted group would be denied entry prove groundless

By **YAAKOV SCHWARTZ** | 28 August 2018, 6:41 am



Singing and dancing through the gates of Jerusalem's Old City to the sound of beating drums, a group of 36 young Ugandan Jews welcomed a new Torah scroll to the Western Wall's egalitarian Ezraot Israel pavilion on Monday, in their latest unprecedented experience since arriving in Israel last week.

The vast majority of the group, who come from the Abayudaya community in Mbale in eastern Uganda, had never set foot in the Holy Land prior to touching down at Ben-Gurion on August 21. Their visit is the first ever Taglit Birthright trip from Uganda.

The trip was coordinated with the help of MAROM, which stands for Mercaz Ruchani u'Masorti, or the Center for Spiritual and Masorti Judaism — a Conservative movement organization open to young adults ages 18- 35. The trip participants are aged 18-26.

Rather than publicize the journey — a milestone for the Abayudaya community — a unique set of challenges caused trip leaders to maintain a large degree of secrecy during preparations for the trip over the last year, right up until the group's departure from Uganda.



Abayudaya youth on an unprecedented Birthright trip to Israel head to the Western Wall on August 27, 2018 (Screenshot)

The Abayudaya have been adhering to Judaism for a century. They observe the Sabbath — the Jewish day of rest — and practice ritual circumcision. Their worship combines traditional Hebrew liturgy with African melodies, and they profess to have a deep connection to Israel and fellow Jewish people.

Most underwent official conversion by Conservative rabbis between 2002 and 2008.



Members of the Ugandan-Jewish Abayudaya community in Israel on a Birthright trip organized by MAROM participate in a ceremony celebrating the dedication of a new Torah scroll at the Western Wall's egalitarian Ezrat Israel pavilion, August 27, 2018. (Courtesy MAROM)

But Israel's Interior Ministry refuses to accept the Abayudaya as Jewish for the purposes of immigration, and has rejected dozens of visa applications by members of the community seeking to study in Israel.

Trip leaders and Taglit Birthright spokespeople refused multiple requests for comment by The Times of Israel leading up to the trip, due to fears that any publicity could cause the entire party to be refused entry at Ben-Gurion.

In the end, the Interior Ministry did not interfere, and a video of the young members of the Abayudaya dancing into the arrivals terminal at Ben-Gurion Airport last week had garnered 88,000 views at time of writing.

Posted by MAROM

A Birthright spokesperson told The Times of Israel on Monday that the participants have all been “very moved by every moment and place they visit during the tour.”

Documented on the [MAROM Facebook page](#) are visits to various spots in the country’s north, from Kibbutz Beit Alfa to Mount Arbel, where the group enjoyed a view of the Sea of Galilee and the surrounding region, as well as the city of Safed.

The group danced yet again as they entered Jerusalem for the first time on Friday, and spent Shabbat in the Holy City before marking the day’s end with a Havdalah service.

Posted by MAROM

On Sunday, participants visited the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial museum. It was an eye-opening experience for many of the young Abayudaya, whose community has, in its short lifespan, endured its share of adversity — withstanding persecution under Ugandan leader Idi Amin in the 1970s, as well as an aggressive conversion campaign by Christian missionaries.

Meanwhile, the 2,000-strong Abayudaya community continues to battle for recognition in what they identify as their Jewish homeland.

In June, Israel’s Interior Ministry refused to recognize Yosef Kibita, a member of the Abayudaya community staying at a Conservative-affiliated kibbutz in southern Israel, as Jewish for the purposes of immigration. The ministry said that its decision [reflected](#) not only upon Kibita, but on the rest of the Abayudaya, as well.

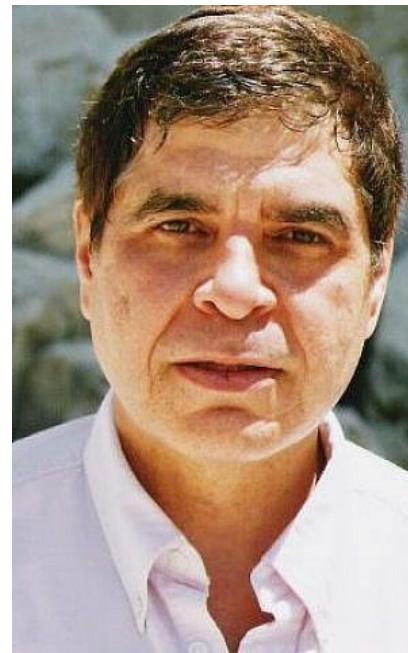
Rabbi Andrew Sacks, the director of the Conservative Movement’s Rabbinical Assembly in Israel who also oversaw Abayudaya conversions and circumcisions in 2002, told The Times of Israel last week that the decision was a result of a biased system.

“There’s clearly a pattern of discrimination here,” Sacks said. “Some might say that there’s a racial component, but that’s difficult to prove. But despite the Supreme Court ruling that local communities can handle their own

conversions, the Interior Ministry is constantly searching for barriers and technicalities leading to the rejection of conversions by legitimate batei din [rabbinical courts] from our movement — particularly in developing countries where their skin is not white.”

As of now, Yosef is still petitioning to be recognized as Jewish by the state, and the High Court has issued a [temporary injunction](#) against deporting Yosef, whose visa has since expired. The government was given until July 29 to respond to Yosef’s appeal, but that date came and went, and they eventually filed for an extension until after the High Holidays, though a specific date has yet to be set.

Though Israel’s ultra-Orthodox Chief Rabbinate and the Interior Ministry do not recognize the Conservative-led conversions of the Abayudaya, the Jewish Agency for Israel — a para-statal entity that was instrumental in Israel’s founding and development, and the largest Jewish nonprofit organization in the world — has recently unconditionally recognized the Abayudaya as Jewish.



The Masorti movement's Rabbi Andrew Sacks regularly consults and visits 'emerging' Jewish communities around the globe. (Facebook)



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Since 1948, the Jewish Agency has helped 3 million new arrivals immigrate to Israel, providing housing and other key resources in absorption centers throughout the country.

During the celebration honoring the introduction of the new Torah scroll to the Ezrat Israel pavilion, Masorti leaders danced together with the Abayudaya youth. The timing of the Torah’s arrival in Israel, a MAROM spokesperson noted, was extraordinary, as it coincided with the Ugandan community’s trailblazing Birthright trip.

Following the procession, the Abayudaya participated in the egalitarian morning prayer, as well as the introduction and first reading of the Torah scroll.



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#MaromUganda Taglit-Birthright Israel@ the Western Wall. #Firsttime #AbayudayaInIsrael Israel Experience

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