

Rosh Hashanah in Nairobi

BY MYRNA SEIDMAN

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“Spend the holidays in Nairobi” was the advice I received last year when a friend learned that my work would keep me in East Africa over Rosh Hashanah. The idea was appealing, but how would I arrange it, where would I stay, and most importantly, how would I celebrate the holiday?

Arranging it proved easier than I could have imagined. A phone call to the Adas Israel library in Washington gave me the name and address of the Nairobi synagogue, as well as a connection to Nairobi. Within hours I spoke with a Dr. David Silverstein, who invited me to spend the holidays with him. Not only did David prove to be an exceedingly gracious host, but through him I met the “balabatim” of the Nairobi Jewish community.

The 300 members of the community were present for the Erev Rosh Hashanah service. The attractive contemporary building which houses the Nairobi Hebrew Congregation was filled. The service, a traditional Orthodox one completely in Hebrew, was led by a *Baal Kria* who had come from Jews College in England for the holidays, and there was very little congregational participation. Surprisingly, even though the service was Ashkenazic, very few of the melodies were familiar to me, and I did miss the congregational participation and singing which is such a meaningful part of the holiday service.

In the courtyard, following the service, Hebrew predominated as the lingua franca of the New Year greetings. Israelis are the largest group in the community. They have an “ambassador” in Kenya, though he does not have official status; an officer from Mossad oversees security. The Israelis in Kenya are transient.

Charles Szelpak, the president of the congregation for ten years, was planning to step down at the end of the year, and the congregation was preparing for the transition. Charles, the owner/manager of several hotels in Kenya, resides on the

grounds of the Fairview Hotel, which is set amidst beautiful gardens in the heart of the city. He conducts the synagogue's business from his office in the Fairview, and he serves as ritual leader, personnel director, as well as president. Since the synagogue does not have staff, a small group of people keep it running.

As head of the congregation, Charles provides the community with leadership, organization and administration. His 82-year-old mother Rachel, is its heart and soul. She is a business woman, hotel manager, grand dame, hostess and mother figure. Rachel Szelpak has truly earned the title "momma" which both her friends and the Kenyan staff at the hotel call her. In fact, within a few hours of meeting her it was inconceivable that I could call her anything else.

Rachel and her husband fled Poland in 1938 for South Africa. Within a short time, they moved to what was then the colony of British East Africa. There they found refuge, made their home and raised their family. Charles, however, is the only one of Rachel's three children who has remained in Kenya.

Accounts of scattered families are heard frequently. Parents who have made their life in Kenya watch their children grow up and leave. The replenishment of the community will not come primarily from its children. It comes in part from outsiders, including Americans.

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the Garden of Eden."***

David Silverstein, my host, came to Nairobi slightly more than 10 years ago to lecture at the University. He stayed on, attracted by the beauty of Kenya and the way of life which is possible in few places in the world. David is head of the intensive care unit of Nairobi General Hospital, and is the personal physician of the President of Kenya, President Daniel Arap Moi. He accompanies Moi on state visits and official travel, and his relationship with the president of the country also helps him serve the Jewish community; a role Jewish physicians have played throughout history.

David is a traditional Jew who keeps his house kosher by serving only vegetarian. Obtaining the services of a *shochet* is difficult, though sometimes kosher meat is brought in from Israel. He lives in one of Nairobi's beautiful suburbs, which is only 20 minutes from downtown, and less than a 10-minute drive to the hospital. His home is set amidst a beautiful English garden with the flora and fauna of tropical Kenya, and one awakens each morning believing for a moment that this is the Garden of Eden.

David, like many of the white in Kenya, enjoys the good life. Yet when the sun sets the security grills are drawn across the windows and doors, and an interior security system is set in place for the upstairs bedrooms. These are necessary precautions taken by the privileged whites living amongst a rapidly increasing, poorly educated, under-employed black population which has in recent years grown bolder in their attacks against persons and property.

It was the first Sabbath of the New Year, and after services we went to "momma's" house for dinner. The table was beautifully set; the meal served by the hotel staff was delicious and abundant, and Charles and "momma" were surrounded by their old and new friends. We exchanged small talk and family stories; told Jewish jokes, and toasted each other for a sweet new year, and a year of health, shalom and *parnassa*. I sat amidst my new found friends that Rosh Hashanah and silently added my wish that this small and fragile Jewish community on the continent of Africa would continue to sustain itself among the people of Israel.

Myrna Seidman of Chevy Chase has been in East Africa recently working on a family health project in Somalia.