

Rosh Hashana Reflections

Amy Greenwald

September, 2002

L'Shana Tova. My name is Amy Greenwald. My husband, Justin Boyan, and I are new members of Kahal Braira. We are also newlyweds. Jared eloquently spoke to you about many milestones in his life. I am going share with you but one—my honeymoon.

I spend time every August reflecting on my past year's successes and failures, and making resolutions for the new year. This year, I did that reflecting in East Africa, where Justin and I traveled for our honeymoon. We visited Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania.

Nairobi, the capital of Kenya, and Dar es Salam, the capital of Tanzania, are notorious for the US embassy bombings in 1998, two of Osama bin Laden's targets. Uganda is notorious for Idi Amin's reign of terror. So when we announced our intent to *honeymoon* in East Africa, our friends and family looked at us a little funny. Why in the world we would plan to vacation in a place plagued by tribal wars, poverty, and disease? And if we were determined to go, why now, at such a fragile time in world history? Justin's company lawyer even went so far as to advise us to write a will before our trip.

We were inspired to go to East Africa by a dear friend of mine, Dr. Michael Brown, who is a specialist in infectious diseases. Mike is presently living in Uganda where he is caring for AIDS victims and researching alternative AIDS treatments. But even with friends in Entebbe, we were anxious about the trip. We did not believe ourselves to be invulnerable to terrorism, particularly as we planned to visit Bwindi impenetrable forest, home of the mountain gorillas, and the site, in 1999, of a deadly massacre of British and American tourists by Rwandan rebels who entered Uganda via the Congo.

But when I emailed Mike expressing our reservations, he, who was born in South Africa, and bred in London, replied, and I quote, "You Americans are so divorced from reality!" With that, we couldn't not go! So, eager to have that "black hole" in our worldview filled with lively, colorful images, off we went.

During our travels, I read three books, all set in Africa: *The Last King of Scotland*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, and *North of South*. I would like to share with you the three rather different perspectives on African race relations presented in these books, interspersed with my own personal experiences.

The first book, *The Last King of Scotland*, is a novel written by Giles Foden, a Brit who lived in Africa from the age of 5 until 25. It is Idi Amin who proclaims himself *The Last King of Scotland*. General Amin believes he is destined to free the Scottish people from English imperialists, just as he “freed” the Ugandan people. In fact, Idi Amin authorized the murder of no fewer than 100,000, but perhaps as many as 500,000, Ugandan people before he was overthrown.

The narrator of this book is a fictional character called Dr. Nicholas Garrigan. He is a Scotsman and Idi Amin’s personal doctor. Dr. Garrigan finds himself in this awkward position shortly after treating the General for a sprained wrist along the road to Mbarara where he slaughtered a cow with his red Maserati. Idi Amin chooses as his personal physician a white man.

In this book, one of the messages seems to be that whites are revered by black Africans.

Shortly after Amin takes power, Dr. Garrigan is reprimanded by his black friend Waziri for going to hear Idi Amin speak. Waziri says, “You shouldn’t have gone. You’re just giving him credence. If whites turn up, they will all think he is even better than they already think him.” Later in the story, Idi Amin forces the Scotsman to witness the torture and death of Waziri.

Often during our travels we felt revered by Africans. Children, in particular, seemed delighted by our presence. As our car approached, they’d come running to the side of the road waving and shouting “How are you?” Sometimes I felt like the Queen as I waved back.

But other times, we received dark and disdainful stares. Not all Africans revere mzungus—white people. One day we walked to a fishing village near Entebbe. As we strolled through the marketplace, all the villagers stared long and hard at us mzungus. Their eyes asked: Why were we there? What did we want? What did we not already have?

This sentiment is more in tune with that which is expressed in *The Poisonwood Bible*, by Barbara Kingsolver. This novel is set in the Congo in the late 1950’s, early 1960’s—the time of Congolese so-called independence. Kingsolver’s black characters do not revere whites. On the contrary, they view whites as oppressors.

Not only does Kingsolver oppose the whites’ agenda in the Congo, she mocks their arrogance and deems their know-how useless.

In her story, Father Price from Bethlehem, Georgia, is determined to plant a demonstration garden from which to supply food and seed to the

villagers of Kilanga. But on the contrary, Mama Tataba advises *him*, “You got to be make hills.” Believing himself to be the wiser, Father Price dismisses her words.

But “when the rainy season fell on us in Kilanga, it fell like a plague. We were warned to expect rain in October, but at the close of July—surprising no one in Kilanga but ourselves—the serene heavens began to dump buckets...The torrent swamped the flat bed and the seeds rushed out like runaway boats.”

The third book I read, *North of South*, by Shiva Naipaul, brother of V.S. Naipaul, brings to the fore a third race, Indians, or Asians as they are referred to by the East Africans. This book is a travelogue of a trip to Kenya and Tanzania in the 1970’s. The Naipauls, who are of Indian descent, were born and raised in Trinidad.

In Kenya, an old Gujerati merchant says to the author, “The people who went out to the West Indies mixed up. Here we did not do that. We kept to ourselves. We held aloof.” The author writes, “The Indian in East Africa brought India with him and kept it inviolate...In East Africa as in India, a [Sikh] is a [Sikh] before he is anything else.”

Like the Jews who did not fully integrate themselves into eastern European societies in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, and like the Jews who refused to convert in Spain and Portugal in the late 1400’s, the Asians in Uganda were expelled en masse by Idi Amin in 1972. Also like the Jews, who were often merchants and bankers, many Asians were wealthy shopkeepers; their expulsion precipitated an economic crisis.

From Uganda, we traveled through Kenya to the Zanzibar archipelago, off the coast of mainland Tanzania. Having successfully tracked the chimps and the gorillas, we were now ready for a peaceful week at the beach. But Zanzibar is over 90% Muslim. So while our bodies rested, our minds struggled with our very presence as *mzungus* in a Swahili land.

In Zanzibar, we ventured to a far corner of the island called Matemwe, where there is nothing but a village and a bungalow colony. (The village was founded by six Zanzibari families, who moved there during the time of the Sultans to escape the Arab slave trade.) The setting is glorious—our bungalow rested on coral at the waters edge, so that at high tide the ocean crashed into the coral wall just below our veranda. About a quarter mile offshore, there is a deserted island called Mnemba, and beyond Mnemba,

the Indian ocean stretches all the way to Indonesia. I reminded Justin that I had read that Mnemba is one of Bill Gates' favorite getaways. Justin cried, "But I came here to get away from Bill Gates!"

During our stay at Matemwe Bungalows, we went for several walks along the beach. On one occasion, we walked towards the village. During this walk, we were approached by a group of 8 or 10 children, aged about 8 or 10 years. I was collecting shells, so the children bent down and started collecting shells too. One child held out a shell in one hand, and a coin in his other hand, essentially asking us to purchase his shell from him. We refused. (The resort at Matemwe built and continues to fund the school, and the proprietors ask their guests not to reward local touts.) But these children were persistent. They continued to hassle us for what seemed like 5, or even, 10 minutes. Ultimately, we were forced to abandon our walk. As we turned away, the children began yelling. We could not understand their Swahili taunts, but some of their words echoed loud and clear: "Osama, Osama, Osama bin Laden."

Two days later, on the deserted island of Chumbe—not Bill Gates' getaway, but rather one of the premier ecological resorts in the world—we could not help but feel guilty for enjoying the deserted nature of the island.

On our last night, we returned to the main island—to Stone Town, the urban center. There, we observed a male of about eighteen years wearing a T-shirt depicting the Twin Towers and an airplane flying directly into them.

Rosh Hashana is a time of reflection, renewal, and reconciliation. But how can we reconcile with people like Osama bin Laden and his followers? We cannot rely on our administration's foreign policy to resolve our debacles. Remember it was Clinton who bombed the pharmaceutical factory in the Sudan. One way, I believe, to begin the reconciliation process, is to visit places like East Africa so that we can interact with the people and personalize the abstract viewpoints on all sides.

I leave you now with one interesting bit of trivia. In 1903, Theodore Herzl, leader of the Zionist movement, was offered Uganda—rather than Israel—where land is relatively plentiful, as a safe-haven for Jews. We joked about it as we traveled: would Hagadahs be rewritten, "L'shana Habaa-h B'Kampala?" But we also dreamed about it. No Hitler. No Idi Amin. And how spiritual it would be to cohabitate with the mountain gorillas.