

FOCUS: The African Connection

Brewing Up Peace

Wishing “to be a peacemaker,” J.J. Keki realized that his Jewish, Christian, and Muslim neighbors in Uganda had one thing in common: coffee farming.

BY CAROLYN SLUTSKY

Joav Jonadav “J.J.” Keki was visiting New York City from Uganda on September 11, 2001 and decided to go to the top of the World Trade Center to take in the view. But at the last minute he opted to skip the trip to the towers...and thus his life was saved.

After the close call, Keki realized that a major cause of the destruction of the Twin Towers was religious prejudice. He began to ponder what he could do “to be a peacemaker.” Thinking about his own community in the eastern Ugandan city of Mbale, he realized that his Jewish, Christian, and Muslim neighbors had one thing in common: coffee farming. For Keki, religious diversity was not something to fear, but rather something to embrace. “Let not differences cause war,” he says. “Let our differences cause friendship.”

Uganda is one of the most coffee-dependent nations in the world, with coffee sales accounting for up to 60 percent of export revenues. Approximately half of Ugandan families are coffee farmers, most selling their crop at prices vastly below market rate to local middlemen.

Upon his return to Uganda, where he is a leader of the Abayudaya (Luganda

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for “People of Judah”) Jewish community, Keki canvassed his neighbors, asking them to join him in a novel idea:



The Delicious Peace Collective meets with Ben Corey-Moran of Thanksgiving Coffee Company (bending over table), Mbale, Uganda. J.J. Keki, seated, is wearing a grey shirt, his head covered with a blue and white *kipah*.

a coffee cooperative they would call Mirembe Kawomera (Delicious Peace). Local farmers of different faiths would work together farming the coffee beans, and sell their products through a fair trade distributor in the United States.

When Margaret Bunihizi, a Catholic and a leader among the women in Mbale, first heard about Keki’s plan, she figured it was a “Jewish project.” But upon learning of the collective’s interfaith dimension, “Mama”—as Bunihizi is called by the Mbale women—convinced her friends to participate. “It was hard to bring in the Catholics,” she says, “but J.J. said ‘to join hands, as we hadn’t before.’”

Sinina Namudosi, 21, a Muslim

woman member of the cooperative, says her family has known Keki since before her birth. Although they considered the Kekis friends, she says, “a Muslim wouldn’t share problems with a Christian or Jew.” That’s changed because of Delicious Peace, she explains. People of different faiths began learning about each other’s worship practices and respecting each other’s differences.



In 2004, with help from Kulanu, an American organization dedicated to assisting lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people, Delicious Peace secured fair trade certification.

Finding a U.S. distributor was more difficult—they were rejected 50 times (partly because they had no means to provide coffee samples to potential buyers). Finally, the Thanksgiving Coffee Company, a Jewish family-run business in California whose motto is “Not Just A Cup But A Just Cup,” agreed “on faith” to become the cooperative’s sole roaster and U.S. distributor.



Judaism has a particularly interesting history in Uganda. It started in 1919 with Semei Kakungulu, a Ugandan military leader who was originally converted to Christianity by the colonial British but