

Conflict between brothers splits Uganda's thriving Abayudaya Jewish community

Gershom Sizomu is rabbi of the community of 2,000 people that belongs to the Conservative movement, while his brother has led a splinter group seeking to convert to Orthodox Judaism.

by [Tonny Onyulo](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue



Rabbi Gershom Sizomu leads music during a service at the Stern Synagogue of the Abayudaya, who practice Conservative Judaism, in Mbale, Uganda, in November 2018. Religion News Service photo by Tonny Onyulo.

A conflict between brothers is threatening to split the Abayudaya, or “the people of Judah,” in Mbale district, Uganda.

Supporters of Gershom Sizomu, rabbi of the community of 2,000 people practicing Conservative Judaism, are pitted against his half brother, Joab Jonadab Keki.

Keki, 59, has accused Sizomu, 49, of mismanagement of the community's funds and properties, including its synagogue, health clinic, school, the rabbi's house, and

another residence.

“My brother is a thief and corrupt,” Keki said. “He has stolen the properties of the community and assigned them to himself and his children. He has taken the health center and some properties meant to benefit the community. We will not accept our properties to be stolen by an individual.”

Keki asked a Ugandan court to remove Sizomu as rabbi. Sizomu and his supporters filed a counterclaim. A judge dismissed both and ordered the brothers to settle their differences out of court. But Keki planned to file anew.

Sizomu, who is also a member of parliament for part of the Mbale district, dismissed the allegations from Keki.

“He is a jealous brother,” Sizomu said. “My brother and his followers are misguided by the appetite for money.”

The Abayudaya date back to 1919, when the British tasked Semei Kakungulu with spreading Christianity in eastern Uganda. Instead, he favored the Hebrew Bible and founded a Jewish community. In the 1970s, the community dwindled to a few hundred members when Ugandan dictator Idi Amin outlawed it.

The Abayudaya practiced what they considered to be Orthodox Judaism, but without consistent support from other Jewish communities, until the early 2000s, when Conservative rabbis from the United States arrived in the region and founded the Stern Synagogue in the village of Nabugoye, where Sizomu is now presiding rabbi.

Be’chol Lashon, an American organization that raises awareness about and advocates for Jewish diversity, has worked with the Abayudaya since 2002. Be’chol Lashon strongly backs Sizomu, noting that the community operates as an official Ugandan nongovernmental organization, which means it is regulated to prevent corruption.

Sizomu completed his rabbinical studies at the Ziegler School, a Conservative seminary in Los Angeles. The Conservative movement referred all questions about the conflict to its international arm, Masorti Olami, which declined to comment.

The Israeli government does not recognize Abayudaya as Jews on the grounds that they didn’t convert under Orthodox rabbis.

Sizomu's cousin, Enosh Maniah, criticizes the shift toward the Conservative movement. Maniah, Keki, and others left the Conservative faction and opted instead to affiliate with Orthodoxy.

"I chose to be Orthodox because I want to be recognized by the state of Israel," Keki said. "I believe that my country is Israel."

(The state of Israel still might not recognize Keki's faction as Jews for the purposes of immigration. The official rabbinate is increasingly strict about such matters and has opted not to recognize conversions from even some Orthodox rabbis, in addition to rejecting those overseen by Conservative ones.)

In recent years Keki has won over a handful of Ugandan Jews; the Orthodox community of around 350 people lives in a nearby village.

"He wanted to convert everybody here to Orthodoxy," said Sizomu. "When I refused to allow him to do so, we became enemies. He has been going around telling lies to everyone he meets about me and the community."

Keki, who is the chair of the Council of Elders of the Jewish Community in Uganda, said Sizomu has allegedly pocketed funds sent to Uganda from Jews abroad, including the New York-based nonprofit Kulanu, which supports Jewish communities around the globe.

Harriet Bograd of Kulanu said the organization's donations go directly to each project. Neither Sizomu nor Keki has access to those funds, she said.

Kadambi Adudu, an official who represents the Ministry of Local Government in the region, said it had not received complaints on these matters from anyone other than Keki.

Conservative community members who congregate every Saturday in Nabugoye accused Keki of trying to divide the Abayudaya.

"We have been praying for peace for everyone, and looking to the north where Israel is," said Jacob Owani, 35, after a recent service. "We only have one spiritual leader. His name is Rabbi Sizomu. Anyone doing something [to him] is evil, only wanting to set up another system to be able to get away with corrupt deeds." —Religion News Service

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "People: Gershom Sizomu and Joab Jonadab Keki."