The Abayudaya Jewish Community of Uganda

By Spencer Leland, World Jewish Relief's Livelihoods and MEL Programme Manager

I've had the opportunity to visit many of our programmes around the world and especially those in eastern Africa. I recently returned from one such trip, where I spent time with one of the communities we are supporting to develop sustainable livelihoods: the Abayudaya Jewish community of eastern Uganda. After helping to set up a local organisation in 2018 – Jewish Response Uganda (JRU) – we have been working with the community ever since.

Every time I visit Uganda, I'm struck by two things. Foremost, I'm filled with admiration for the community's commitment to the Jewish faith. Over the past two years, I've observed the construction of a local Mikveh and, more recently, a stunning new synagogue. I've also had the good fortune to attend Friday Shabbat at the home of JRU's director, which was replete with challah, delicious home-cooked food, and the wonder that came from hearing the Kiddush in a darkened room before the shared meal.

Second, is the stubborn poverty that still exists in the Abayudaya community. Despite practising Judaism for over 100 years, the Abayudaya only became known by the wider Jewish community over the last 25 years. This exposure was shortly followed by an influx of donations, primarily focused on material assistance, infrastructure, and religious instruction. However, the community remained largely impoverished due to a lack of structure and accountability to these donations.

Once we began delivering our livelihood programme to the Abayudaya community in 2018, we knew it was essential to focus on economic empowerment. Simply put, we wanted to embody the core Jewish value of Tzedakah, enabling those in the community to have autonomy over their own lives and futures.

To achieve this goal, we drew upon the experience and expertise developed through our work in Rwanda, which focuses on profitable agriculture as a viable

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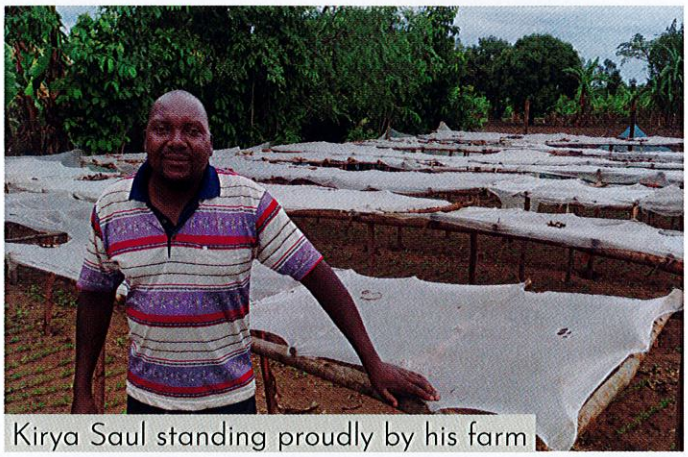
and sustainable livelihood. Instead of exclusively farming the low-profit staple crops such as maize and beans, participants are introduced to farming highly profitable crops such as green peppers, tomatoes, and watermelons. While these high-profit crops require more care and attention, when farmed properly, they provide a consistent source of income.

Critically, we don't just provide seeds to participants and send them on their way. Rather, we provide holistic support that creates a clear pathway to financial independence and personal empowerment. We work with participants for three full farming seasons, and each farmer is visited at least once every week by an agricultural trainer who helps them learn to farm the more complicated crops. By graduation, they have developed the skills to farm effectively standing on their own two feet.



Kirya Saul standing proudly by his farm

During my time at World Jewish Relief, I've had the good fortune of meeting and speaking with countless participants at their fields and homes, as well as in training sessions held at JRU's offices. At these meetings, I have witnessed first-hand the impact of our programme on the lives of participants. One such participant is a man named Kirya Saul. Since joining and graduating from the project, he has successfully launched himself into profitable agriculture. He even scaled up his farming to a point where he now farms multiple acres every season - and his expansive fields of green peppers are truly a sight to behold!

There is palpable excitement and pride in the voice of Kirya Saul and participants like him that is immediately recognisable. Most inspiring of all is that the change that participants experience is not a result of being told they are "great" or have "untapped potential". Rather, it has come from within themselves, and from a newfound belief in what they are capable of achieving and overcoming.