

# Doctor Moi

A conversation with David Silverstein, personal physician to former Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi, who died last month

by Geoffrey Clarfield



On Feb. 4, 2020, former Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi [died](#) at the Nairobi Hospital. Moi was one of the most outspoken supporters of the State of Israel among African leaders, and his doctor for more than 42 years was David Silverstein—an American Jew.

Although President Moi was “officially” born in 1924, [evidence suggests](#) he was more than 100 years old when he died. Kenyan newspapers were at first full of hyperbolic praise for the man who had led Kenya for 24 years during most of its one-party period, and later served two terms as the elected president of a newly formed multiparty democracy.

Then they and the foreign press began publishing articles portraying Moi as just one of many of the authoritarian leaders who presided over African countries since the wave of

independence in the early 1960s, and who allowed corruption to flourish at the highest levels, such as in the tragicomic multimillion dollar [Goldenberg Scandal](#). (Did Goldenberg exist? He never came to services at the Nairobi Synagogue as I lived there at the time.)

The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. Every leader of a newly independent sub-Saharan Africa state has enriched his or her family, lineage, clan, and tribe at the public's expense. Moi was—and today's democratically elected Kenyan government continues to be—wracked by corruption. His two-decade dictatorial reign grew out of suppressing opposition into a single-party state. In addition, as early as 1993, Human Rights Watch suggested that members of the Kenyan government under Moi were provoking ethnic violence for political gain, with clashes leaving at least 1,500 people dead and 300,000 displaced at the time. Abandoned by the west as a player in the Cold War, he left office in 2002, against his will.

Still, Moi's dignified state funeral was televised nationally—I watched most of it on TV as I was visiting Nairobi that day. The service was held at the former president's home in Kabarak in the Rift Valley province, which lies in the tribal homeland of his Nilotic-speaking ancestors—the Kalenjin, who came down to Kenya centuries ago from their original homeland in the Sudan. Moi was a devout evangelical Protestant and so it comes as no surprise that the first part of the funeral was made up of longish religious sermons delivered by various bishops of the Africa Inland Church, whose schools and seminaries Moi had attended, and from whom he received his faith. Then, a silver-haired American Jewish doctor was given the opportunity to speak to the assembled masses.

David Silverstein, a cardiologist, addressed the mourners. His speech was the shortest of the many speakers that included current Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta. Silverstein had been

Moi's personal physician for more than 40 years. He knew Moi very well. The audience laughed a number of times and gave him two hearty rounds of applause. The gist of Silverstein's speech was that the Moi he knew intimately was a straight-talking, polite, religious man; a devout Christian, an ally of the West, and a staunch supporter of the State of Israel. After he spoke, Silverstein put on an embroidered Bukharan-style yarmulke and sang the Jewish prayer for the dead, *El Malei Rachamim*, in Hebrew and then translated it into English for the audience. This has never happened at the funeral of any other African leader.

I spoke to Silverstein and asked him about Kenya's special relationship with the Jewish people and Israel at his country house in rural Naivasha, overlooking a lake of the same name, surrounded by tropical birds and inhabited by families of hippos who often graze on his front lawn during the night. This is what he said:

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**Geoffrey Clarfield: What was Kenya's relationship to Europeans during the colonial period—let us say from 1900 until its independence in December 1963?**

**David Silverstein:** The British ended up occupying and colonizing Kenya in an almost haphazard manner. Their initial interest in this part of the world peaked in the late 19th century, when their explorers were searching for the source of the Nile River. These largely male explorers were the celebrities of their time and in their writings, the British public learned about the East African slave trade, which the British eventually suppressed. It had been run by the Omani Arab sultans of Zanzibar and once defeated, they were left a 10-mile corridor on the coast. This allowed Christian missionaries to convert the tribes of the interior to Christianity. By the time of independence in 1964, most Kenyans were devout Christians and spoke Swahili as a second,

regional and national language. A few Jews came to Kenya during this time.

### **What was the initial colonial attitude towards Jews coming to East Africa?**

Kenya included much of the territory which was referred to as the Ugandan solution—first suggested by Joseph Chamberlain, the minister of foreign affairs for the British government at the time, and that was raised at the sixth Zionist Congress at Basel on Aug. 26, 1903. Theodor Herzl himself supported the plan as a refuge for persecuted Eastern European Jews. This area would have included much of the Rift Valley of today's Kenya and part of Uganda.

The early English settlers of what is now Kenya were dead set against the plan. The British tolerated Jews as a minority among the "Kenya pioneers" of the colonial period, but did not want a colony where there would be a significant number of Jews. The British in Kenya had an almost caste-like understanding of what colonial Kenya should be—British and European white men at the top of society, a few Jews on the margins, Western missionaries anywhere they could set up a school and clinic, a middle class of Indian businessmen, and a tribal peasantry who were to be forced to labor for the British on their farms and tea and coffee estates for less than adequate wages.

### **What did the Jews of Kenya do and who were they?**

The first Jews were largely of Eastern European origin, some who came through South Africa. Most became businessmen and middlemen of various sorts, like hoteliers, but some were also ranchers and farmers, and included a few doctors and lawyers. Although they were never fully accepted by the British and excluded from their private golf and social clubs until 1954, they married among each other, worked hard, abided by the law, fought for the British in two world wars, and built three

synagogues. They also fought very hard to help bring to Kenya 1,000 German Jewish refugees who were fleeing the Nazis during the late 1930s. The Jews of colonial Kenya comprised a recognized religious and ethnic community, and made significant contributions to the wider society.

### **How did the Jewish community respond to Kenya's independence and majority black rule in the early 1960s?**

Most of the refugees who had come during the '30s were fearful of majority rule, having witnessed firsthand the violence during the Mau Mau Rebellion and similar uprisings in other parts of Africa. Some left for Europe and Israel and some stayed; some became citizens; and some, those who held British passports, often remained working residents. Many befriended and were befriended by the newly created African elites, who have ruled the country ever since. Some of them went into business with African partners. Many of the new African leaders had gone to university, knew about the Holocaust, and supported the State of Israel, which had gained independence from the British, just like most English-speaking African countries.

### **How did Kenya's relationship to the State of Israel play out over time?**

Kenya and many other sub-Saharan African countries believed and hoped for some sort of African unity during the early years of independence. As many of the North African countries were Arab, Muslim, and members of the Arab League, the sub-Saharan African countries distinguished themselves from their northern "nonaligned" allies by having robust relations with the State of Israel. Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir promoted this initiative from the Israeli side. Israel had much of the expertise that developing African countries wanted and needed at the time. Israel was out to make allies and things went well until 1973, when the Arab League and OPEC raised their oil prices. They promised the Africans that if they broke

diplomatic relations with Israel, they would get cheap oil. The African countries broke their diplomatic relationships with Israel, in Kenya's case under duress, and then did not get the promised cheap oil. The rise in oil prices caused much suffering across sub-Saharan Africa.

**I understand that Kenya was essential to the 1976 rescue at Entebbe—when future Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu lost his older brother Yonatan to the terrorists who had hijacked an Air France airliner in Uganda with the support of the dictator Idi Amin Dada. What can you tell me about that?**

Idi Amin was a horrible tyrant and the Kenyan leaders knew this. Charles Njonjo was President Kenyatta's right hand man at the time. He was educated in a missionary milieu as Moi was, became a lawyer in England, married the European daughter of an Irish Protestant missionary, and was a sophisticated well-informed man of the world who knew his history. He was (and still is) pro-Israel and personally facilitated the logistics of the Israeli flights through Kenya that made the operation possible. Njonjo has been my patient and close friend for decades.

**Did Moi follow in the footsteps of Kenyatta?**

Yes, very much. In fact, the slogan "Nyayo," which Moi chose as his political brand, means and meant that he was following in the footsteps of Kenyatta and his political allies. For example, Moi managed to restore official diplomatic relations with the State of Israel before the Oslo Accords and before Israel established embassies once again with the non-Arab League Muslim world. Moi was particularly wary of the money, the radical preachers, and the mosques that the Libyans and Iranians were pouring into Kenya. He feared that would give a reason for local Muslims to engage in acts of terror. He was right. In 1998, local members of al-Qaida bombed the U.S. Embassy in downtown Nairobi, killing 213 people with an estimated 4,000 wounded. Moi called in the Israelis, who

brought in search and rescue teams and a portable field hospital to help the victims. I was on call at the Nairobi Hospital at the time and helped treat the victims. The Israelis were celebrated in the local newspapers and magazines.

Moi went the extra nine yards. I accompanied him once on a state visit to Iran. The Iranians knew I was American and Jewish but notwithstanding, Moi raised the issue of the MIA Israeli pilot Ron Arad, whose plane went down among the Lebanese Arab Shia allies of the Iranians [in 1986]. He got nowhere, but that was a brave thing to do.

### **Did Moi ever visit Israel?**

Many times, and I usually went with him. Once, at my suggestion, was for the 30-day anniversary of the death of the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Moi was the only international leader to go specifically to join that family ceremony. He also went to Israel a number of times for minor and major medical treatments and as a visitor. While there, he went to the museums, Yad Vashem, the holy sites, met with senior politicians, walked the streets of Jerusalem, and celebrated Shabbat dinners with friends in Jerusalem. On one occasion he was invited to address the Knesset. He knew that Jews were not just another variety of "white Europeans." He knew that the Jewish people had suffered as much as Africans; with the Holocaust, perhaps even more. It showed in his foreign policy and he encouraged Israeli expertise in the development of Kenya.

### **What is one key sustainable aspect of Moi's relationship with the Jewish community of Kenya and the State of Israel?**

Although the Jewish community is the smallest religious group in the country, we are regularly invited to international and interfaith celebrations. As periodic head of the Jewish community, I have often spoken on Holocaust Memorial Day at

the U.N. headquarters in Nairobi, and my speeches have often been less than polite, forcefully reminding diplomats and religious leaders that it is easy to suppress the memory of the Holocaust. Then there is the rise of radical Islam in the region. The Israelis have convened a Rift Valley security conference with the leaders of Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, and Ethiopia to coordinate the fight against al-Shabab, al-Qaida, and others that destabilize the development of the region. This cooperation is ongoing

### **What is it like to be a Jew in Kenya?**

I am a public figure who is known to be a practicing American Jew, a leader of my congregation, and a friend of the Israelis and Israeli Embassy here in Kenya. I find that most Kenyans are more pro-Israel than the average European. Even many among the various Kenyan Muslim communities are sympathetic to Israel in a way that cannot be imagined anywhere else. Many Kenyan Muslims have gone to Israel for agricultural training. We are a small community, we always have been and there are now literate Kenyans, whose knowledge of the Bible and ability to read Hebrew is so profound that many of them come to services at our synagogue. Many American Jews today are losing their faith and Jewish identity, but here in Kenya, our community may be further enriched by a new stream of people who want to join the Jewish faith.

We are not a missionary religion, but perhaps our example attracts those who admire Judaism's rich and intellectually challenging spiritual path. I am proud and happy to be a Jew in Kenya, as well as an American and Kenyan citizen. I am honored and respected as the head of the Jewish community. The Kenyans are a special nation and Moi's attitude towards the Jewish people and the State of Israel is widely shared.

**Have you considered writing your autobiography and sharing more of the details of your 46 years in Kenya?**



Yes. I am working on it. The minute it gets published I will let you know.

First published in