

Be'chol Lashon Update February 2007

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Y-Love & Felonious Perform

February 24, 8pm, Bruno's, San Francisco



Art and Activism: Hip Hop Artists Felonious and Y-Love at Bruno's. Join members of Felonious and Y-Love for a pre-show discussion, focusing on the power of art and activism followed by a live performance.

Bruno's, 2389 Mission Street, San Francisco, CA 94110

Mixed and...Jewish

February 25, 3pm, Jewish Community High School of the Bay, San Francisco



Swirl and Be'chol Lashon present the panel, Mixed and Jewish. The panel will explore the intersections of race, ethnicity, and religion, through the stories of Jewish individuals of mixed heritage.

Please RSVP to Esther@JewishResearch.org

For more information, go to <http://www.jewishresearch.org/events/swirl2007.gif>

Ethiopian Cooking Class

February 25, 3-5pm, Sheba Piano Lounge, San Francisco



Join San Francisco's eminent Ethiopian chef Netsanet Alemayehu at her recently opened Sheba Piano Lounge for a tantalizing hands-on cooking class featuring classic Ethiopian dishes. The afternoon concludes with piano music and Sheba's famous pomegranate martinis.

For more information, go to http://www.jccsf.org/content_main.aspx?catid=448#1650

Pact, Children's Groups for Adopted Children School-age and Up

March 1, 4-5:15pm, Community School, Oakland

Children will be given an opportunity to explore their feelings about adoption in a safe and nurturing setting. Parents will have the opportunity to get feedback and education on how to address whiter children's issues in developmentally appropriate ways.

For more information, go to [http:// www.pactadopt.org/events/](http://www.pactadopt.org/events/)

JCC Maccabi Games Tryouts

March 4, Various Times, JCCSF

Join nearly 5,000 Jewish athletes competing in the summer of 2007 at the annual JCC Maccabi Games. The Games consist of athletic competition, social events and a day devoted to social action, providing a unique experience for Jewish teens to unite with teens from all over the world.

For more information, go to http://www.jccsf.org/content_main.aspx?catid=91

LOS ANGELES

Purim in 18 Languages: A Celebration of Diversity

March 3rd, 6-10pm, Beth Chayim Chadashim, Los Angeles

Be'chol Lashon and Beth Chayim Chadashim present Purim at BCC, the first gay and lesbian synagogue in the United States. Children of all ages are welcome to create masks and noise-makers before Havdalah. Hear the Megillah read in multiple languages representing our multicultural & diverse Jewish world.

For more information go to <http://www.jewishresearch.org/events/purim2007.jpg>

CURRENT NEWS

Temple Professor Works to Create Center on Afro-Jewish History

By Rachel Silverman, Jan 25, 2007, Jewish Exponent



Dr. Lewis Gordon has only been teaching at Temple University since 2004, but he's already made a name for himself on campus. That's because Gordon, 44, a professor of religion, philosophy and Judaic studies, is building up scholarship in an area few have explored: Afro-Jewish studies. A black Jew himself, Gordon is working to create a clearinghouse for research on black Jews in the Diaspora, called the Center for Afro-Jewish Studies.

Already, the center -- which is supported by Gordon's discretionary funds as an endowed professor -- has presented research at a major Jewish-studies conference, amassed two graduate fellows, printed several editions of a community newsletter, created an undergraduate course on Afro-Judaism and drafted an impressive list of future projects.

Among them are a Torah commentary for African Jews, a demographic study of Philadelphia's black Jewish community, an investigation into Afro-Jewish music, and -- eventually -- archaeological digs in Africa.

In an interview at his office last Friday afternoon, Gordon -- who answered the door with a hearty "Shabbat Shalom" -- said that many of these projects are a long way off, and acknowledged that his skeletal staff would need outside experts if they wished to achieve their goals. But he said he hoped that by acting as a go-between for various interdisciplinary scholars, he and the center could produce "reliable, informed, rigorous discussions" on the history, religious practices, political challenges and intragroup diversity of black Jews.

Gordon -- whose mother is a Jamaican Jew with blood from Ireland and Israel, and whose father is not Jewish but of Afro-Chinese descent -- said that the center is meant to offer a tonic to how "ignorant many people are worldwide about Jews period, including black Jews."

In fact, Gordon said the very term "black Jews" shows ignorance -- it's an "external designation" attempting to infuse racial elements onto a people who otherwise refer to themselves culturally (as Jews, Hebrews or Israelites). "Do you call yourself a 'white Jew'?" asked Gordon. He said that this question gets to the heart of issues of authenticity surrounding black Jews.

The center, said Gordon, will base its research on those blacks who self-identify as Jewish. "We are not in the business of defining who Jews are," he explained. "They practice a Jewish way of life because they love it. We're just trying to represent it."

'Groundbreaking' Initiative

Laura Levitt, Temple University's director of Jewish studies and an associate professor of religion, hailed Gordon's center as a "groundbreaking" initiative that represents "the new Jewish cultural studies." According to Levitt, this new strain of research concerns itself with modern-day sensibilities about gender, sexuality, race and globalism, among other topics. "It's a very inviting space for Afro-Jewish studies," she said.

And at Temple, which boasts strong gender and secular studies components, Gordon's work fits right in. Said Levitt: "From the get-go, we embraced him in Jewish studies. We're very much committed to thinking about Jewish diversity." The program is also being constructed on a culturally diverse campus: According to statistics from 2006, Temple's student body is 15 percent African-American and 56 percent white.

Levitt said that given the tensions surrounding the black Jewish relationship since its heights during the civil-rights era, the center brings the promise of, if not reconciliation, at least dialogue. "It's a way," she stated, "of thinking more creatively across difference."

Study: Adoptive Parents Get High Marks

By David Crary, Feb 12, 2007, AP

Adoptive parents invest more time and financial resources in their children than biological parents, according to a new national study challenging arguments that have been used to oppose same-sex marriage and gay adoption.

The study, published in the new issue of the American Sociological Review, found that couples who adopt spend more money on their children and invest more time on such activities as reading to them, eating together and talking with them about their problems. "One of the reasons adoptive parents invest more is that they really want children, and they go to extraordinary means to have them," Indiana University sociologist Brian Powell, one of the study's three co-authors, said in a telephone interview Monday.

"Adoptive parents face a culture where, to many other people, adoption is not real parenthood," Powell said. "What they're trying to do is compensate. ... They recognize the barriers they face, and it sets the stage for them to be better parents."

Powell and his colleagues examined data from 13,000 households with first-graders in the family. The data was part of a detailed survey called the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and other agencies.

The researchers said 161 families in the survey were headed by two adoptive parents, and they rated better overall than families with biological parents on an array of criteria _ including helping with homework, parental involvement in school, exposure to cultural activities and family attendance at religious services. The only category in which adoptive parents fared worse was the frequency of talking with parents of other children.

The researchers noted that adoptive couples, in general, were older and wealthier than biological parents, but said the adoptive parents still had an advantage, albeit smaller, when the data was reanalyzed to account for income inequality. In particular, the researchers said, adoptive parents had a pronounced edge over single-parent and stepparent families.

The researchers said their findings call into question the long-standing argument that children are best off with their biological parents. Such arguments were included in state Supreme Court rulings last year in New York and Washington that upheld laws against same-sex marriage.

The researchers said gay and lesbian parents may react to discrimination by taking extra, compensatory steps to promote their children's welfare. "Ironically, the same social context that creates struggles for these alternative families may also set the stage for them to excel in some measures of parenting," the study concluded.

An opponent of same-sex marriage, Peter Sprigg of the conservative Family Research Council, noted that the study focused on male/female adoptive couples, not on same-sex couples, and he questioned whether it shed any new light on adoptive parenting by gays. Sprigg, the research council's vice president for policy, said he warmly supports adoption, but believes it is best undertaken by married, heterosexual couples.

Another conservative analyst, psychologist Bill Maier of Focus on the Family, said the authors of the new study seemed to be pursuing a political agenda in support of gay marriage. "Put simply, gay adoption creates families that are motherless or fatherless by design, permanently depriving children of either a mother or a father," Maier said.

Adam Pertman, executive director of the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, welcomed the study's findings, but cautioned against possibly exaggerated interpretations of it. "It's an affirmation that there are all sorts of families that are good for kids," he said. "Adoptive parents aren't less good or better. They just bring different benefits to the table. In terms of how families are formed, it should be a level playing field."

The study was funded by the National Science Foundation, the Spencer Foundation and the American Educational Research Association. Powell's co-authors were Laura Hamilton, a doctoral student at Indiana University, and Simon Cheng, a sociology professor at the University of Connecticut.

The study: <http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/Feb07ASRAoption.pdf>.

Brazil's Leader: Holocaust Must Never Be Denied

By Associated Press, Feb 3, 2007, Haaretz.com



Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva joined Jewish leaders to mark the 62nd anniversary of the liberation of Nazi death camps, saying the Holocaust must never be denied and urging the world to prevent it from ever happening again. "In the 21st century we cannot accept the denial of the Holocaust as a historical fact...nor can we accept those who deny that six million Jews were massacred," Silva told some 500 people at the Sao Paulo Jewish Congregation's synagogue on Friday.

"Each time we pay homage to the victims of the Holocaust, we strengthen those forces that will prevent that same horror from repeating itself," he said after praising the United Nation's General Assembly for last week's approval of a resolution condemning the denial of the Holocaust. Silva's remarks came at a ceremony held to commemorate the January 27, 1945 liberation and to mark the second International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

He did not specifically mention Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but the congregation's chief rabbi, Henry Sobel, said the Brazilian president's presence at Friday's event represented a repudiation of Ahmadinejad's insistence that the Holocaust was a myth. Sobel also said he was concerned by what he called growing anti-Semitism in Venezuela. "President Hugo Chavez's rhetoric is anti-Semitic and he is a close ally of the president of Iran, and both of them share a profound hatred of Israel," Sobel said.

Chavez has cultivated friendly ties with Ahmadinejad and last year called Israeli attacks in Lebanon during a conflict with Hezbollah militants a new Holocaust. He has made other remarks criticized by some Jewish groups as anti-Semitic, though he said his comments were misinterpreted.

At about 130,000 strong, Brazil's Jewish community is the second-largest in South America after Argentina, which is home to an estimated 200,000 Jews.

IDENTITY

Black and Jewish

By Eric Fingerhut, Jan 10, 2007, Washington Jewish Week



Ronni Davis calls himself "BAJ" black and Jewish. Asked with which group he feels more of an affinity, he points out that 99 percent of his friends are Jewish. But he never forgets he's black. If he does, "the police always remind me," said the Silver Spring resident.

On the other hand, Shellyiah Iyomahan, who also lives in Silver Spring, says she has had a number of experiences in which it is fellow Jews who have not allowed her to forget her skin color. Entering a synagogue can sometimes lead to questions such as "Are you lost?" or directions to the church across the street, says Iyomahan, the daughter of parents from Trinidad and Tobago. She was raised as a Sabbatarian one who worships the Sabbath on Saturday before discovering she was halachically Jewish. "I'm a Jew, with a bloodline just like you, coming here to learn, and you assume things because of my skin color," she said. At times like those, she thinks, "how far we have not come."

But while Davis, Iyomahan and others who are members of both minority groups all report some combination of strange looks, overheard derogatory remarks or some sort of prejudice from Jews, blacks and others, they also are all devoted Jews who have found a place in the community and are eager to talk about their lives as members of the tribe.

Rachel Birtha Eitches says the typical reaction to her conversion to Judaism more than 20 years ago was "You have enough trouble as an African American, why would you want that double as a Jewish American?" The McLean resident recalls that one rabbi didn't want to be involved at all, she said, because he thought "I didn't have a good future" as a black Jew.

But "I was not put off by that," she said, believing that being a part of two minority groups "adds strength." She also recalls times, particularly in her first years as a Jew, when she would be at a Jewish event and hear someone murmur the word "schvartze," and the "occasionally awkward questions like 'Did you convert or were you born this way?'" a query that she said her husband, who is white and Jewish born, often steps in to handle.

But Eitches describes herself as "one of these glass-is-half-full people." She thinks that when people "get to know me, things will be all right with us." She noted that most Jews eventually "figure it out and proceed ... normally," realizing that "if I weren't Jewish, I wouldn't be here."

Davis also has lived through similar incidents and has a similar attitude. "It doesn't really upset me," he said. "Life is too short to get bent out of shape," he said, adding that "once things come out in the wash" people understand.

"You have to have a thick skin," Iyomahan said, noting that when she first visits a new synagogue, she usually leaves her children, 10 and 5, at home so they won't be upset. After bouncing around congregations, she recently found a synagogue, the Conservative Ohr Kodesh Congregation in Chevy Chase, where she feels supported and welcomed.

On the other hand, Carolivia Herron said she doesn't notice the reaction of others to her double-minority status. "I don't really feel it ... I'm so weird to start with, I'd stick out no matter what group I was in," said Herron, an author and educator who lives in the District. "I can see people do a double take," she said, and "I act like I don't see them and go right on talking [and] continue being who I am."

But Davis, a member of Tifereth Israel Congregation in the District along with Herron, said he has felt a chill on occasion from the black community because of his religion.

An accountant/auditor, he said that "working class" members of the black community simply "preach to me" about their love for Jesus and want to "save my soul" an attitude that Iyomahan also has experienced.

But Davis said it is the "more educated" members of the black community who seem to "have more of a beef with the Jewish community" and have made comments about how Jews "keep all the money for themselves" or control the financial world. At a previous job, he said, other African Americans didn't socialize with him after learning of his conversion.

When he was younger, Davis really didn't understand why Jews talked about anti-Semitism. From his experiences in the church, he saw that "the Bible speaks very highly of [Jews]" and "all the promises and all the blessings recited in the Scriptures are recited to Jews." Then he converted and ended up stationed with the military in the Middle East. "I'd never seen such hatred," he said, recalling how his tallit was confiscated passing through customs in Bahrain.

Davis, 50, says he is so happy and proud about being Jewish emphasizing in a conversation the importance that Judaism places on education and community that he doesn't usually bring it up with those he doesn't know, recalling a quote that advised "if you show all your wealth, you will be robbed."

"The best way to keep something so precious is to only share it with those who really appreciate it," he said.

Davis is the son of a nondenominational Christian minister; of all his family members, it was his father who was the most supportive.

Both sides of his family had Jewish ancestry, and some Jewish tradition had stayed with them throughout the generations. For instance, Davis remembered the "spring cleaning" every year when they would burn the chametz. His father also always made sure they observed the fast of the firstborn the day before Pesach.

Furthermore, Davis always had tons of questions about what he learned in "Bible college" as a teen, and his father would provide him with Jewish texts, from Maimonides to Rashi, to further his knowledge. As an adult, he gravitated toward Judaism, and "the more I learned, the more I got involved in the Jewish community."

Davis often meets other black Jews on blind dates, but asked if it matters to him that a woman be both black and Jewish, he said that Judaism is paramount.

Iyomahan, a special education teacher in the Montgomery County Public Schools, also grew up with Jewish traditions, like Saturday being a "special day" and kashering meat, but didn't know she was Jewish until researching her background and discovering she was of Jewish heritage.

Other black Jews came to their conversion after becoming disenchanted with the faith into which they were born.

Herron, 59, was raised a Baptist, but decided about 20 years ago that she didn't belong in that church anymore and began to study Judaism.

Eitches, in her 50s and an editor at the Voice of America, grew up a Baptist in Philadelphia, but realized that the religion wasn't for her and never was baptized. Searching for a spiritual home, "Judaism won me over," she said, because of its "great deal of respect for ancient cultures" and the "kind of principles tied up with Judaism," such as its "commitment to make the world better."

"It all fit together for me," said Eitches, who belongs to the Conservative Adas Israel Congregation in the District, adding that she also liked the music. Eitches said her father was concerned that she would lose her connection to the church, which is the center of the educational, political and social life of African Americans in a way that the synagogue isn't for most Jews. But she and her husband, Edward, have raised their four children with an appreciation for both parts of their background.

Ironically, she noted, she is the more "religious one" in the family, and much more concerned about getting the children to Jewish activities, while he has long had an interest in African culture and always looking for opportunities to educate them in that area. "The children have had double doses of both cultures ... [and] they seem to like it and identify with it," she said.

Eitches said she appreciates the many joint church-synagogue programs celebrating Martin Luther King Jr. at this time of year, even though the relationship blacks and Jews forged during the civil rights era is "more complicated now."

"I'm glad those kinds of bridges still exist," she said. "Worship is a powerful force." And she said the annual King weekend programming that Adas holds in conjunction with a church is particularly special because her daughters are members of the youth choir. "To have my daughters singing in a black church brings everything together, the roots and the tree," she said.

Others say they also look at their dual identity as indivisible.

"The way my parents raised me, I can't separate" the two, Lyomahan said. "I am what I am because of what I am."

Asked whether her Jewish or black identity takes precedence, Herron responds, "I feel 100 percent both." With such a background, though, she does question why the leaders of the black and Jewish communities have never come to people like her for advice when there are disputes. "So many people talk [about blacks and Jews] based on separation" and are "not looking at ways we are similar."

"People who live everyday [in both worlds] may be able to give you insight," she said.

Converting, on Their Own Terms

By Carolyn Slutsky, Feb 2, 2007, The Jewish Week



After dating a Jewish man for nine years, Linette Padron decided it was time to make a change. Born Catholic and raised in a strong Dominican and Italian family, Padron had learned a lot about Judaism from her partner, but it was only after they stopped dating that she thought seriously about converting to the religion.

Converting for marriage felt wrong, she says, but Judaism had seeped into her consciousness, and she decided to continue her explorations on her own. "I started to question my history and beliefs, started looking around for the right answers," says Padron, 29, of her process. "When I reached the beliefs and traditions I had grown to know for the past nine years, it began to seem like the place for me to be."

With increasing rates of intermarriage, it has become more common for people to convert to Judaism to marry a Jewish spouse or raise Jewish children. But Padron is one of a growing number of people studying Judaism formally, experiencing different services and rabbis and planning to convert not out of marriage plans but simply because a personal journey has brought them to embrace Jewish faith and practice.

Although exact numbers are hard to come by, area rabbis confirm the trend, which comes at a time when both the Reform and Conservative movements are more actively reaching out to interfaith families in the hope that the non-Jewish spouse will eventually convert.

Rabbi Ephraim Buchwald works with Jews by choice through the National Jewish Outreach Project, and says in addition to those people converting and marrying Jews, he sees many turning to Judaism for the sake of Judaism. "I think there's a trend of very spiritual and intelligent non-Jews who for one reason or another have explored other faiths and decided to come to Judaism," he says.

Tara Fersko, another Jew by choice, says she never experienced the right religious fit until she found Judaism. Raised by a Catholic father and Congregationalist Protestant mother, she found herself disagreeing with the Catholic Church's teachings, and in college explored Unitarianism, a faith she says encourages people to experience and celebrate everything. In that process she learned more about Judaism, and realized, "Judaism most closely matched what I believed internally."

Fersko was 24 and single when she began a Derekh Torah class at the 92nd Street Y, a program that covers the basics of Judaism in 30 weeks, including Jewish holidays and lifecycle events, Torah, the Holocaust, Shabbat, kosher laws, ethics and Zionism. The class is primarily attended by couples with one Jewish and one non-Jewish partner who is thinking about conversion, but Leana Morritt, director of Jewish outreach at the Y, who oversees the classes, says there are almost always single people looking to convert on their own.

"It's not just a neck-up experience," says Morritt, "people are actively questioning the why and how, where they fit in [Judaism] and where it fits in them."

For Fersko, the class and the mentoring she found at area synagogues helped cement her Jewish commitment, and she says she began to understand more of the reasons behind Jewish practice, like why to stand or bow during a service, than friends who had been Jewish all their lives. She started keeping kosher, flirted with keeping Shabbat and slowly built herself a Conservative Jewish life, converting within the traditional rituals of mikveh and bet din.

Today, at 34, Fersko has a Jewish husband (who she says has become more observant under her influence), a son and a daughter who attends kindergarten at a Conservative day school. The family lives in Washington Heights. "I don't like being called a convert," she says, "because I converted and conversion was my process. But I think of myself as a Jew."

For people newer to the process, the logistics of conversion can be daunting. Amanda Melpolder is currently in a Derekh Torah class and says that, despite "shul-shopping" at various minyans throughout New York, she hasn't yet found the right person or place to cement her decision to convert.

Melpolder, 28, was raised in a strict Christian home; two sisters are missionaries and her mother is studying to be a Lutheran pastor. Religion was important in her family but she found she didn't believe as her family did. Working in politics, she was inspired by the lifestyle and attitudes of her Jewish colleagues and bosses and is now certain Judaism is her path.

"I think converting within a relationship is a very valid way to do it," says Melpolder, who ended a relationship with an Orthodox Jew in part because his parents did not support her Jewish journey. "It's the shorter answer to a lot of people," but not, she acknowledges, an option for everyone.

For many who come from other faiths one of the more challenging pieces of embracing Judaism has been their family's understanding and acceptance. Melpolder says her Christian mother had trouble understanding that Judaism was more than just the Old Testament, but that now they have good conversations about what each is learning in her religious pursuits. Fersko said her parents have been extremely supportive of her decision, preparing kosher food when she visits and wrapping her children's presents in neutral, rather than Christmas, paper.

Morritt says many non-Jews who are exploring Judaism do so because of a Jewish person, like Melpolder's coworkers, who influenced them in their religious or cultural upbringing, someone who planted a seed that they want to grow.

"People are drawn to the openness to questioning that makes sense in a way that perhaps their faith traditions of origin never did to them," says Morritt of the people who take the Derekh Torah class and ultimately seek to convert to Judaism. "There's this thread that's intangible and their heart calls them."

Rabbi Allen Schwartz of Congregation Ohab Zedek, an Orthodox rabbi, actively helps people convert to Judaism, providing them with an intensive course of study. He says most people who come to him have already explored the less rigorous options of Reform or Conservative conversions, but want a halachic conversion recognized by all Jewish bodies. "Conversion isn't just an

election," says Rabbi Schwartz. "You become part of a family." He says that follow-up is one of the greatest challenges with people who have converted outside a couple, making sure the person has a place to have Shabbat and holiday meals, and a comfortable community in which to pray. "I don't go out proselytizing but once they express such a desire to get here, it's a mitzvah to work with them," says Rabbi Schwartz.

Kathryn Kahn, director of outreach and membership for the Union of Reform Judaism, agrees. "Very often the person who comes on their own, unless they have a Jewish support system, we need to make sure our congregational communities are the support system for these people, that they find mentors and teachers who will walk with them on their journey as they make Jewish choices."

For other people, converting to Judaism simply formalizes a process they have been engaged with for life. Sarah Zarrow, 24, was raised Jewishly by a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother, attending Hebrew school classes until 12th grade and becoming a bat mitzvah. She says she was always involved and interested in Jewish life, finding herself drawn to Orthodoxy for years before realizing that by those standards she was not, in fact, Jewish.

After exploring her options she began to study Maimonides with Rabbi Jeremy Kalmanofsky at Congregation Anshe Chesed on the Upper West Side, as well as engaging in tzedakah projects, until she felt ready to formally convert.

"I thought the day would come, I'd dunk, and I wouldn't feel anything," says Zarrow of her anticipation of the mikveh ritual that she undertook last month. "But I also knew somewhere that it wasn't like an exam, that it was more of a beginning than an ending."

"But the mikveh was really cool. I was terrified that I'd do something wrong and that I'd nullify things, even if no one knew I did something wrong. It felt really good and when I came out and said the Shema, I started to cry."

Zarrow doesn't feel her life will change drastically, as she has long been Sabbath-observant and involved in the Jewish community, but she feels her conversion is a gift to her future Jewish self, giving her options and a solid connection to her long-held faith. "Our Jewish history is replete with those who have joined us through conversion," says Kahn of the Union of Reform Judaism, citing Ruth, as many others do, as a prime example of a positive Jewish convert role model. "By following the mitzvah, we've reaped blessing."

Once her conversion is complete, Linette Padron, who is currently in the Y's Derekh class, says she would "love to meet someone, get married, have a family, everything a nice Jewish girl wants." But for now, she is happy to have found a place in her chosen religion, and to have the freedom to keep exploring. "Once you've made the decision you belong," she says, "everything else falls into place."

Bond of Friendship

By David Danieli, Jan 30, 2007, HindustanTimes.com

On January 29, 1992, Israel established diplomatic relations with India. This week marks the 15th anniversary of this historic milestone in Israel's journey to build close associations with the peoples of Asia — a vision of the founders of the State of Israel. Israel attaches great importance to its relationship with India and is pursuing them with a view to cementing long-term cooperation in every sphere.

Over the past 15 years, a great deal has been achieved through dialogue and common action. As democratic countries since their inception, both nations share the values of freedom and democracy. Both countries gained their independence during the same period and embarked on a course of nation-building to advance the well-being of their respective citizens and to build modern democratic States.

The potential of deepening Indo-Israel bilateral relations is vast, considering our respective young and talented societies, common values and knowledge-based economies. Growing business activities, technological exchanges, cultural and artistic interactions, tourism and people-to-people contacts, all assure us continued growth of our relationship.

Israelis visit India in large numbers to experience its culture, history, spirituality and diversity and to enjoy its landscape. Their interest is also reflected in the large number of students of Indian studies in Israel. In part, it comes against the backdrop of the rich history of Indian Jews, who have lived in India for 2,000 years as an integral part of India's ethnic and religious mosaic. The nearly 70,000-strong Indian-origin Jewish community in Israel is contributing greatly to the society and State of Israel.

India is one of Israel's important trading partners, with two-way civilian trade crossing the \$ 2.7 billion mark for 2006, with strong

growing performance of the hi-tech sector. We, in Israel, are confident that in the coming years, this will be accompanied by further technological cooperation integrating the relative advantages of both sides into mutual business and investment. The rapid growth of the Indian economy, the focus on developmental projects, infrastructure and knowledge-based industries and India's emergence as an R&D hub, all bring considerable potential for further cooperation. Our collaboration in science and technology focuses on joint research projects and exchange of researchers. Agriculture, bio-technology, information technologies and telecom are among the fields of joint research.

The government and the people of Israel cherish their relations with India and are committed to nurture them.

JEWISH COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD

In Cuba, Finding a Tiny Corner of Jewish Life

By Caren Osten Gerszberg, Feb 4, 2007, NY Times



couldn't help joining in.

Claudia Barliya, a 6-year-old Cuban-Jewish girl, stood on a cobblestone street in Trinidad, a small centuries-old city on the south coast of Cuba. A donkey carrying an old man passed behind her; a group of 30 Jewish-Americans, including this reporter, stood before her. The girl had asked if she could perform a song for the group, which was on a humanitarian mission with the Westchester Jewish Center of Mamaroneck, N. Y. She now had their full attention. When her song rang out — not in Spanish, but in the Hebrew words of “Yerushalayim Shel Zahav,” or “Jerusalem of Gold” — the group

Claudia is one of about 1,500 Jews who live in Cuba; 1,100 reside in Havana, and the remaining 400 are spread among the provinces. There is no rabbi living on the island, and there is only one kosher butcher. This small Jewish presence is in stark contrast to the bustling community that existed before Fidel Castro came to power in 1959. In those days, there were 15,000 Jews and five synagogues in Havana alone. Still, Jews in modern-day Cuba manage to keep their culture and traditions alive.

As Maritza Corrales, a Cuban historian who lives in Havana and the author of “The Chosen Island: Jews in Cuba,” remarked, “To be Cuban and Jewish is to be twice survivors.”

Visits by groups like the Westchester Jewish Center, one of many United States Jewish entities that organize occasional humanitarian or religious trips to Cuba, are one of the ways that Jews in Cuba nurture their communities. Although the focus of these trips allows American travelers to bypass United States restrictions on tourism to Cuba, they require a full schedule of religious and humanitarian activities that often include donations of medications, clothing and religious objects needed for prayer.

On a weeklong trip in November, the group traveled around the island by bus, accompanied by two English-speaking guides who were well versed in Jewish-Cuban history and culture. When the visitors from Westchester entered Adath Israel, Cuba's only Orthodox synagogue — and one of three active synagogues in Havana — the feeling of connection between the Cubans and the Americans was palpable. The words, the songs, were all the same. In the sanctuary, a large wooden bimah, or podium, housed the Torahs behind a red velvet curtain, and a glass wall separated the men from the women.

After the service, a 17-year-old college student serenaded the Americans with his violin, playing traditional pieces like “Hava Nagila.” The musician could have been a college student from anywhere in the United States, with his facial stubble, sneakers and low-slung jeans. The difference is that this young man is not allowed to leave his country, not even to visit his parents, who are government engineers working abroad.

Elsewhere in Havana, there is the Sephardic Hebrew Center of Cuba, and the Conservative Beth Shalom synagogue, largest of the three synagogues, with more than 500 members. Beth Shalom houses a Jewish community center, known as El Patronato, a library and a pharmacy, which distributes medication — most of which comes as donations from Jewish groups visiting from the United States — throughout the island to Jews and non-Jews.

After Mr. Castro took power and nationalized private business and property, 90 percent of the Jewish population, many of them business owners, fled the island, and the remaining 10 percent were largely not observant. There were so few Jewish people coming to pray that the Cuban minyan was born, counting each Torah as a qualifying member to make prayer possible (a minyan normally requires 10 Jewish adults).

The Jewish presence continued to fade for years, and it was not until 1992, after the fall of the Soviet Union, that Cuba changed its constitution, allowing for religious freedom. The Jewish community began to rebuild. Rabbis from Chile, Argentina, Panama and Mexico came to teach the remaining Cuban Jews how to pray and lead services, and Jewish organizations in Canada began

sending kosher food for Passover.

The synagogues welcomed the Jews who came to pick up the food, and encouraged them to come back for Shabbat and various holiday celebrations. Within 10 years, a growing number of activities were established, including the Sunday school at the Patronato, where children ages 6 through 14 learn Jewish culture and tradition. It started with 10 children and now has nearly 70. There is also a Jewish women's group with 150 participants, meeting once every six weeks to help with women's issues like domestic violence and how to keep a Jewish home. Jewish life is not as organized outside Havana, where the Jewish population is much smaller. For instance, only 27 practicing Jews live in Cienfuegos, a picturesque city on a bay. There is no synagogue to pray in. Instead, the Jewish community of Cienfuegos gathers each Friday night for Shabbat services in the front room of Rebecca Langus's second-floor apartment.

Ms. Langus, the 43-year-old leader of the community, who lives with her husband and two sons, has adorned the walls of her small home with Jewish art, the bookcases with Jewish prayer books and the shelves with an array of Jewish paraphernalia.

"When you are few, there is a responsibility to keep traditions," Ms. Langus said. "Educating the children is the only way to keep the community alive."

The 25-member Jewish community of Santa Clara, the capital city of the central Villa Clara province, has raised enough money to buy a house and convert it into a synagogue, but has yet to find the ideal property. For now, they take great pride in the somber Holocaust memorial, erected in 2003, in the local Jewish cemetery. It includes a stone from the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, and in front is a path made of stones from the Warsaw Ghetto.

Next to the memorial stands a menorah with a Star of David and branches for six candles, symbolizing the six million Jews who died in the Holocaust.

Although preserving Jewish culture has been an uphill struggle, leaders remain optimistic about the future. Even though Israel is the only country with which Cuba has cut off diplomatic relations, there is no evidence of anti-Semitism in Cuba. "I felt safer wearing my yarmulke in Cuba than I do wearing one in White Plains," said Jeffrey Segelman, the rabbi of the Westchester Jewish Center. And the island's Jewish presence remains solid.

"If you asked me 10 years ago when the community was dwindling, I may have said that the Jewish community wouldn't exist today," said Adela Dworin, president of the Jewish community in Cuba. "It won't be the same as 1959, but now at least we have people who are young, middle-aged and old."

Ms. Dworin had the opportunity to meet Mr. Castro in 1998, and asked him why he had never visited the Jewish community, to which he replied: "Because I was never invited." Ms. Dworin promptly invited him to the coming Hanukkah celebration at the Patronato. When Mr. Castro asked what Hanukkah was, Ms. Dworin explained that the holiday celebrates the "revolution" — a word Castro likes — of the Jewish people.

To her surprise, Mr. Castro showed up at the party of 200, sat next to her in the front row and addressed the congregation in a lengthy speech.

Joseph Levy, leader of the Sephardic temple, has a more somber outlook on Jewish life in Cuba. He emphasized how difficult it was to keep Jewish traditions alive, because without a rabbi, he said, "the Jewish community here is almost like living in a house without parents."

For the group from Westchester, one member's past was a snapshot of the Jewish experience in Cuba. Sandy Marantz, a psychotherapist at Beth Israel Hospital in Manhattan, was born in Cuba in 1959, and 12 days before the United States closed its borders to Cuban citizens in 1961, Ms. Marantz, then 19 months old, and her parents left for the United States.

After 45 years of wanting to visit her native country — her parents never wished to return — Ms. Marantz finally saw the hospital in which she was born, the apartment in Havana where she lived, the synagogue to which her parents belonged and the grave where her grandfather, whom she never met, is buried.

Going to Cuba, said Ms. Marantz, allowed her to "connect with my past" and "made me feel grateful to be a Jew."

Information about Jewish missions to Cuba is available from B'nai Brith (877-222-9590; www.jewishcuba.org/bnaibrith), the Cuba-America Jewish Mission (www.thecajm.org) and the Jewish Cuba Connection (www.jewban.org).

In Caribbean, Conversion Offers a Lifeline For Small Communities

By Brian Harris, Feb 4, 2007, JTA



Conversion is offering a way to keep Jewish life alive in the tiny Jewish communities of the Caribbean and Central America, though not without potential hazards. As more of these communities — some numbering as few as 20 members and located in isolated Jewish outposts such as El Salvador and Bahamas — are able to hire full-time rabbis, the conversion issue is a growing one that impacts the communities' survival.

With the exception of Orthodox communities in Panama and Costa Rica, all the countries in the region face serious questions on how to maintain Jewish identity as members migrate out of the region or marry non-Jews. "Obviously with a congregation that's small, part of the problem is we don't want to marry close relatives," Ainsley Henriques, honorary secretary of Jamaica's United Congregation of Israelites, told JTA.

Henriques' "Conservative but liberal" congregation, the only one on the island, boasts some 200 members, most of them born Jews. Like all 12 members of the Union of Jewish Congregations of Latin America and the Caribbean, an umbrella grouping of the non-Orthodox communities scattered about Central America and the Caribbean that met here recently, the Jamaican congregation welcomes converted members without hesitation. Members agree that the influx of new blood is the motor keeping Judaism alive in many communities. In El Salvador, two of the five members of the Conservative community that attend daily Torah readings are converts, community president Ricardo Freund said. In Costa Rica, the smaller Reform congregation B'nei Israel is made up of many so-called "mixed marriages," and many members are converts. In Aruba, four new members were admitted to the community last year, all of them converts with no marriage ties to Jews.

Along with providing increased numbers, the converts also add a religious spark in their communities, said Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik of Panama's Reform Kol Shearith Israel Congregation, and formerly the rabbi in El Salvador. Conversion "is perhaps the most complicated, most difficult issue our congregations can face," Kraselnik said at the Costa Rica meeting. "When I was growing up, seeing a mixed couple was a tragedy. In Latin America, being a Jew is not just a religious experience."

Many of the region's Jews, even those in the majority Orthodox communities in Panama and Costa Rica, live in what he terms a "Jewish comfort zone" of limited adherence to Jewish principles. Outside of the two countries with a large Orthodox presence, few homes are kosher, and the parking lot of the Orthodox shul in Costa Rica regularly fills up for Sabbath services. However, converts sometimes adhere to the religious law with greater fervor than members who are born Jewish, perhaps to "prove" their authenticity as Jews. "For the average Jew, this is a direct threat," Kraselnik said. "This threat is met with a conscious or subconscious reaction directed at the convert."

For Costa Rican convert Gonzalo Vega, the process meant a series of hardships even after the conversion process had ended. "I did some window shopping of religions, even for a while becoming a Hari Krishna, to my mother's horror," Vega said. His spiritual wanderings ended 15 years ago when he converted and entered B'nei Israel, even though the conversion wasn't recognized by Costa Rica's Orthodox shul. "Getting into Jewish life is not necessarily easy," Vega said. "When I began the conversion process people were very welcoming, but after I converted people said, 'now practice Judaism.'" Vega feels accepted in his Reform congregation, but notes that by converting "in a country like this, one becomes a minority within a minority" — separating himself from the mainstream Catholic religion, yet having his Judaism rejected by most Costa Rican Jews.

One problem Kraselnik faces is that with the growth of evangelical Christianity in the region as the Catholic Church's influence recedes, many Christians want to turn to Judaism in hopes of "salvation." That's one reason why the Orthodox rabbinical orders in Panama and Costa Rica have been so cool to the issue. Rabbis that do perform conversions say they reject more people than they convert. "I have a responsibility to the community," Kraselnik said. "We have a large number of people that come looking for conversion with the wrong set of parameters."

Kraselnik also warns that converted Jews do not have the shared historical experience of their natural-born colleagues. Lacking ties to Jewish history and culture, B'nei Israel offers classes to its converts that touch on Jewish issues as weighty as the Holocaust and as culturally important as how to make chicken soup, said Jody Steiger, who runs the course.

Even in the communities that welcome them, conversions have not always gone over well. In the Bahamas, conversions led some natural-born members to drift from the Nassau Jewish Congregation, which has just 20 members, said Janeen Issacs, the community's representative at the Costa Rica meeting and herself a convert. Inter-marriage is a given, since there are so few

Jews on the islands.

In Aruba, where the island's 30 Jewish families have been able to hire a full-time rabbi for their Beth Israel Synagogue, the community's survival appears linked to conversion. "We welcome anyone who wants to embrace Judaism," community member Martha Liechtenstein said. "I think if they're sincere, they can enrich us. It's not that we go out to recruit; we're not missionaries."

Kraselnik said the communities need to determine the proper ratio of converts in their congregations. Too many could "take over" a community and cause it to lose direction, while too few could lead to its eventual demise if community members marry non-Jews and drift from the faith.

Conversion in the region has strong backing globally. Rabbi Uri Regev, president of the World Union of Progressive Judaism, as the international Reform movement is known, told delegates at the Costa Rica meeting to "open wide gates" to Jews by choice. "No one can refer to the future of these Jewish communities without addressing the issue of converting family members," he told JTA. "I think these communities will have to accommodate family members that are not Jews and facilitate a Jewish upbringing of children, even if the spouse does not convert."

The Lost Tribe of New Mexico

By Elva K. Osterreich, Jan 10, 2007, Alamogordo Daily News



Visiting Tularosa from his home in Texas while taking a break from production of a documentary, Delfino Sanchez and his wife Helen took about 50 people on a journey of 3,000 years. On Sunday, at the Hidden Artists Gallery in Tularosa, Sanchez told his audience there could be 66 million Hispanic/Latino people with a family lineage in Israel. In short, their forefathers were Jews. "The majority of our people don't know who they are," Sanchez said.

The term Sanchez uses for these people is Sephardic Anusim. Sephardic refers to those whose ancestors were among the Jews expelled from the Iberian peninsula (Spain and Portugal) during the Spanish Inquisition. Anusim means to be coerced or pressured to convert from a Jewish to a Catholic way of life, Sanchez said.

"This is our calling, our passion," Sanchez said of his and Helen's explorations to discover and educate the Southwest. "This is a journey to identify millions of our people who were tucked away in the ashes of life," he said. "They are waking up to historic Jewish roots."

Ten years ago, Sanchez' father told him he had been adopted and his real parents had been Sephardic. Since then, he has been looking into his roots. Sanchez said many forefathers of modern Hispanics hid their Jewish identity so well for so long, they forgot what the secret was.

Sanchez then gave his listeners a history lesson beginning 1,000 BC, when the first waves of Jews migrated from Israel to the Spanish coast. In 70 AD, because of the Roman exile, the largest such migration took place. Spain was the home away from home for many Jews, Sanchez said. And then the golden age of Spain brought prosperity to everyone.

But when the Catholic church decided everyone had to convert, anti-Semitism began. It started with absurd laws and forced conversions. Jewish people were forced to wear clothing and hats identifying them as Jews, and they were forced to eat pork. The situation blew into the full Spanish Inquisition and, in 1492, culminated in a decree to expel all Jews from Spain.

"One day after the expulsion of the Jews, Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492," Sanchez said. He believes Christopher Columbus and many of his passengers were Sephardic. "Columbus' wife, mother and mother-in-law confessed to being Jews," Sanchez said.

Many Jews fled to Mexico when they were ejected from Spain, but the Inquisition followed them and persecuted Jews in Mexico for 300 years, beginning in 1524 and ending when Mexico won its independence from Spain on Sept. 16, 1820. Throughout that period, those suspected of being Jews were tortured, often to death.

Sanchez visited Mexico, documenting through photographs secret prisons used by the inquisition and, in Mexico City, the

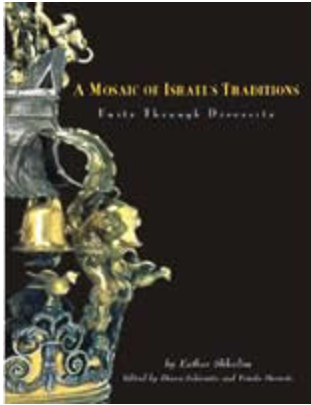
numerous devices used for torture. Many Jews who fled the devastation moved up through what is now New Mexico and southern Colorado, Sanchez said. "There is evidence of New Mexico having an Inquisition, too," he added.

Finally, Sanchez showed slides and talked about some of the evidence found here and there throughout the state. At San Felipe de Neri Church in Albuquerque, Sanchez found stars of David over the altar. On gravestones in forgotten graveyards, he found the first letters of the 10 commandments in ancient Hebrew, on others, stars of David and menorahs 9 the candelabras used by Jews during Hanukkah. Sephardic sacred objects even have been found in hidden niches behind the walls in old homes, he said.

BOOKS & FILM

A Mosaic of Israel's Traditions: Unity through Diversity

By Sharon Kanon, Feb 7, 2007, The Jewish Press



Book Review of: **A Mosaic of Israel's Traditions: Unity through Diversity**

By Esther Shkalim

Jews all over the world celebrate the Sabbath, holidays and festivals, fasts and feasts with unique customs that are rooted in an incredible variety of ethnic cultures. Many ritual practices have been enhanced with sometimes exotic but always meaningful customs, many drawn from local folklore.

A fascinating new book, *A Mosaic of Israel's Tradition: Unity Through Diversity*, by Iranian-born ethnologist Esther Shkalim, is an enjoyable ride through the rich cultural diversity of the Jewish people.

Shkalim moved to Israel with her family in 1958. An acclaimed poet, she earned a master's degree in Jewish Studies from Washington University in St. Louis and is a doctoral candidate at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

The book was the idea of Diana Schiowitz, who edited the volume along with Frieda Horwitz. "After moving to Israel in 1985 and settling in a mixed community, I was shocked to discover how little I knew about the practices of so many of my fellow Jews," said Schiowitz.

During the five years that Schiowitz served as chair of the Israel executive of the AMIT educational network in Israel (2000-2005), it was clear that its 16,000 students "represented probably all the ethnic groups in the country, and in their homes and those of their grandparents a vast array of Jewish traditions were being practiced. It seemed natural to put together a book highlighting many of them."

The students' anecdotes are the core of the book and reveal the impact of the local environment on the Jews: "Grandma said that in many places in Afghanistan it was customary to light Shabbatcandles with opium oil produced from the poppy plant because this oil was commonly available and inexpensive," related one student.

"My great grandfather says that in Afghanistan they did not use a Chanukah menorah at all," said another. "They didn't even know what it was! Instead, they took eight small plates made of silver or brass or clay, and arranged them in a row... The Jews of Afghanistan were mostly anusim, (forced converts to Islam, beginning in 1939)... [if] a non-Jew suddenly entered their home without warning... they could say they were needed for light."

"In Persian homes, it is the custom for women to light two Shabbat candles on one tray, and candles in memory of family members who have passed away on another," relates Shkalim. Between Kiddush (the blessing recited over a cup of wine) and the blessing over the bread, the Persians add a blessing over a fragrant fruit (like an etrog) or herb (basil or mint) and other fruits or vegetables. Sometimes they even say Kiddushover etrog liquor, which they make themselves.

Among the other communities represented in the book are Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern and Western Europe; Sephardi Jews, whose origins can be traced to Spain and Portugal; the Jews of Asia and North Africa, whose culture was shaped by extended contact with Islam; the Jews who wandered from Persia to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kirghizstan, Turkmenistan, Bukhara and Afghanistan, as well as the mountain Jews of Kavkaz, who lived in Dagestan and Azerbaijan.

In Tunisia and Morocco, it is customary for leftover afikoman (matzah which is hidden at the start of the Passover Seder) to be used as an amulet against the Evil Eye, or for a good livelihood. It is alleged to be especially good against dangers, particularly for calming a stormy sea. In Israel, a grandmother may well give it to her grandson when he commences his army service.

“The Jews of Yemen are distinct,” said Shkalim, “because although they speak Judeo-Arabic, they were relatively less affected by external influences. They thus succeeded in maintaining many customs whose sources are very ancient.”

Another rich source of material comes from the Ethiopian community in Israel. “The Jews of Ethiopia were generally isolated from other communities,” continued Shkalim. “In Ethiopia, candles were not lit for Shabbat because they took the prohibition against lighting fires on Shabbat as a general law.”

“In Ethiopia, we didn’t celebrate Chanukah,” one AMIT student related when asked about the holiday. Their arrival in Ethiopia can be traced from the exile of the 10 tribes, long before the Maccabean victory, and “Ethiopian Jews did not even know there was such a holiday, until emissaries from Israel came to Ethiopia and taught us.” Purim was limited to the Fast of Esther, the day before the Purim holiday.

Sharing the Shabbat and holiday experience was typical in the close-knit Ethiopian communities. Meals were often eaten with neighbors “to make them more festive.” A communal bread ceremony was held after prayers every Shabbat morning, with the kes (rabbi or holy man) making a blessing over the bread that the women had made and then distributing it. The bread was called misvaot (similar to mitzvot – blessings). “My father says that he could always identify the pieces of bread baked by my grandmother because her bread was the tastiest,” said Shoshanna.

A whole chapter is devoted to the Sigd holiday, which is unique to the Ethiopian community and commemorates both the giving of the Torah and the communal gatherings held in Jerusalem in the days of the First Temple. Falling exactly 50 days after Yom Kippur, it was a day that involved trudging up to the top of a mountain – often carrying rocks as a sign of submission – and praying for forgiveness (sigd means “bowing down in prayer”). At the end of the day, “everyone would descend while singing and dancing, and go to the synagogue where they would partake in a festive meal...”

With the mass migration of the Ethiopian Jewish community to the Holy Land in the 1990s, celebration of the Sigd festival shifted to Jerusalem. Today, Ethiopian Jews from the Amhara region of Ethiopia hold their ceremonies at the Western Wall, while Jews from the Gondar region gather at the Sherover Promenade in Talpiot, which overlooks the Old City.

Shkalim also included traditional customs of the isru chag in her book, which is celebrated by various communities the day after Passover. “We try to hold onto the happy experience that has just ended,” said Shkalim. The Moroccan community calls this day Mimouna, the Kurdish community calls it Saharana and the Iranian community Ruz-e-Bagh.

Enhancing the rich anecdotal content of the book are over 200 outstanding illustrations, including paintings, photos of prized illustrated texts (such as the 13th century Worms Machzor – among the oldest known Ashkenazi prayer books), photographs and woodcuts.

A Mosaic of Israel’s Traditions is a treasure-trove of Jewish customs, “bringing a broad and colorful cultural tapestry from a multitude of Jewish communities,” writes Israel Prize winner Professor Rabbi Daniel Sperber in the foreword to the book. It has “enriched the individual heritage of each and every one of us...and enhanced our communal heritage...Hopefully, it will encourage all of us to search into our past, to question our parents, grandparent, uncles, and aunts and to discover their family practices and folkways.” (IPS)

My Mexican Shiva

By Ilan Stavans, Dec 29, 2006, Forward.com



In my view, complaints about a film misrepresenting the source on which it is based miss the point. Once a writer sells the material and agrees to no longer be involved, the product is beyond his domain. He might as well sit back and enjoy the show, just like any other spectator.

A few years ago, Alejandro Springall came to visit me at Amherst College. He dreamed of making a film about Mexican Jews and wanted me to write the story. I was intrigued by the invitation: I’m always in need of exploring with new forms; plus, I’m an unredeemed film buff. In fact, when I was an adolescent I seriously considered — as “seriously” as one does at that age — pursuing filmmaking as a career. Springall and I spent hours together at a Holiday Inn, including pulling an all-nighter, mainly

sharing our experiences of growing up in Mexico City, a megalopolis today of about 18 million people where Jews constitute less than 0.1% of the population. Yet the tightly knit, complex, entrepreneurial Jewish community has solid roots, as is evident in thriving neighborhoods such as Condesa, Polanco and Tecamachalco, and in institutions like the Kehila, the Yiddish and Hebrew day schools, the legendary sports center, mikvehs and cemeteries, and its various youth organizations. Its ancestry isn't exclusively Eastern European, though; there are a significant portion of members identifying themselves as Sephardic, with ancestry in Syria, Turkey and Lebanon. Some still speak Ladino.

I didn't know Springall before this, though I had admired his 1999 movie "Santitos." He isn't Jewish, but he told me about dating Jewish girls and feeling at home in their milieu. Should a movie come out from it, I remember telling myself during our tête-à-tête, it would have the perspective of an affectionate outsider, which is more than fitting, given that Mexican Jews in my view retain a sense of uniqueness that makes them stand apart. We signed an agreement, and months later I sent Springall the first draft of "Morirse está en hebreo," a 90-page-long novella that was eventually collected in my book "The Disappearance." Springall's film, also called in Spanish "Morirse está en hebreo" and titled in English "My Mexican Shiva," premieres at Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theater on January 10 as the opening entry of the New York Jewish Film Festival. Co-produced by John Sayles and with an original score by The Klezmatics, it has a cast of theater and soap opera actors that includes my father, Abraham Stavans. The film was shot in a Polanco apartment like the one in the story. (I visited the set and even had a cameo appearance.) It belongs to the growing shelf of south-of-the-border movies about Jewish topics, from "The Holy Office," about the 16th-century auto-da-fé of Luis de Carvajal the younger, to "The Lost Embrace," about Argentine-Jewish angst.

Aside from a brief opening and a funeral at the Ashkenazic panteón, the plot was Aristotelian in its structure. It's about the death of Moishe Tartakovsky, a patriarch in the Ashkenazic community. Unfolding in the background are the presidential elections of 2000 taking place, in which the ruling party, Partido Revolucionario Institucional, finally lost after holding on to power for 70-plus years. The candidate that replaced PRI ruler President Ernesto Zedillo wasn't from a left-wing party, like Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who, speaking for the Partido Revolucionario Democrático in the elections of 2006, claims that, despite his defeat, he is Mexico's rightful president. The winner in 2000 was Vicente Fox, a former Coca-Cola executive from the conservative Partido de Acción Nacional. The nation's democracy was still untested then. Maybe the word is immature.

Immature is how I've at times felt we Mexican Jews perceive ourselves. Antisemitism is always latent in Mexico. It has been supported by the Catholic Church and by certain extremist ideological factions since colonial times. But the Jewish community ignores it, preferring to look inward. It's just as well, since my intention in "Morirse está en hebreo" wasn't to dwell on the political sphere per se. Without ignoring the larger national scene, I wanted to write an intimate portrait, a chamber piece, concentrating on the domestic side of a single family; the Tartakovskys would serve as a microcosm of a Diaspora that happens to be my own.

What has made each chapter of the Jewish Diaspora, from the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem to the present, different? The fact that, like chameleons, we Jews "adapt and adopt," as a teacher of mine enjoyed saying; we assimilate to the environment by incorporating elements of that environment into our Weltanschauung. A seller of leather, Moishe Tartakovsky's personality is built around the dilemma of being a member of a small minority in a country monolithically Catholic. Why does he constantly feel like a traitor? Is Mexico his real home?

Since the 1970s, writers in Latin America have been pressured to conform to the magic realism made famous by Gabriel Garcia Márquez and others. While I've been interested in the style, I've resisted being enlisted into its ranks. It might be seen as ironic, then, that between the time I sent Springall the draft and its final publication, an uncle of mine, Abraham Slomianski, also a family patriarch, died exactly the same death I had imagined for Tartakovsky. Talk about literature as a way of life, or else about life as a way to literature.

In any case, before he died, Moishe's family — his two children, Bernardo (aka Berele) and Esther; his grandchildren, Nicolás, Ari and Galia; his close friends and associates; his school sweetheart; the shiksa who was his lover; the maid, et al. — approached him as the glue keeping everyone together, for better or worse. They saw him either as idol or as villain, received either his gifts or his scorn. But they hardly spent any time together as a family unless he was around. So with his death, they faced a challenge: What would keep them together now? And did they all see Moishe through the same lens? Was he a chameleon even among Jews? I wrote the novella in English with portions in Yiddish and Hebrew. The tone is humorous, although it isn't outright comedy.

Sadly, the political dimension was left out. The film isn't a reflection on the perils of young democracies and the role that minorities play in them. There are mariachis, paramedics and other supporting figures, but they are marginal. Springall also endorses the symbolic, a decision I applaud. Two bearded Hasids — played by a pair of excellent amateur actors — take the function of a Greek chorus, offering insight into the story through comments delivered in the Yiddish I grew up with (but with subtitles, of course). But his adaptation is less than subtle, emphasizing the role I barely insinuated for my characters.

I have no regrets, though. It is at once exciting and strange to see my fictions transposed onto the big screen. Springall turns the material into comedy by stressing the exoticism that results from Jews and Mexicans seated together in shiva. To me there isn't much exoticism there, only a mundane relationship based on centuries of misunderstanding. Art is about letting loose, about

breaking boundaries, about usurping what isn't ours. In the novella "Morirse está en hebreo," I sought to exorcise some of the demons of my past, to place them in historical context. I visualized myself in Tartakovsky's shiva. What I mourned was the ambivalence of Mexican Jews during the PRI years. Springall reinterprets the material in an exaggerated manner, one suitable in cinematic terms.

This time around, I'm the outsider.

The Searchers

By Robin Cembalest, Jan 17, 2007, Nextbook.org



In *The Longing*, Gabriela Böhm documents the journeys of a group of South Americans, raised as Catholics, as they reconnect with tenuous Jewish roots. Two of Böhm's subjects are doctors in Ecuador; another is a professor of microbiology in Colombia; a fourth is a homemaker, also from Colombia, who travels 36 hours by bus with her daughter to Guayaquil, Ecuador. There, all the subjects converge to meet with a rabbi and undergo a ritual immersion and conversion. But, given their variously hidden histories, is the process actually one of reconversion? How will they sustain their faith in communities where they are minorities of one? Is this a heartwarming quest, or heartbreaking?

Interviewer: *The Longing* takes up the story of the crypto-Jews, or conversos, the remnants of Spanish Jewry who continued to practice in secret after they were forcibly converted to Catholicism. How did you get the idea to make this film?

Gabriela Böhm: When I was in New York University film school I heard an NPR show about the crypto-Jews of New Mexico. I went to Santa Fe, but the subject wasn't right for me at the time.

Instead, you made *Passages*, a very personal documentary about your own heritage.

*My parents are both Holocaust survivors from Eastern Europe: My mom was from Budapest, my father was from Stanislaw, which at the time was Transylvania. They ended up meeting in Israel, married in Italy, and emigrated to Argentina, where I was born. In *Passages*, I go back to my parents' places of birth and retrace their experiences. I was pregnant when I was making the film, so it's about how I transfer this to the next generation. After *Passages* the trigger that led me to *The Longing* was the sense of dual identity.*

The most famous example of a clandestine Jewish community that lived publicly as Catholics is the group in Belmonte, Portugal that was discovered about a century ago. Since then, many people have looked for other communities of hidden Jews in Iberia, South America, and elsewhere. Yet how many crypto-Jews have survived into the modern era, and exactly who decides what makes a crypto-Jew Jewish, remain matters of strong dispute.

When I started this, I was still trying to find a secret community. As I went along with the film I realized that that was very hard to find. In my opinion it doesn't necessarily exist any more. What we have are remnants of a past. Some of them with knowledge, some of them without.

The five people you profile live in isolated towns in Ecuador and Colombia, far from centers of Jewish culture. In some cases their parents told them the family had been Jewish. In others, it was an ineffable feeling, a sense that some Jewish fiber remained despite historical and cultural obstacles.

Some had histories of their own families. Some began research on the Internet because they felt something. Borys, a doctor from Babahoyo, Ecuador, believes he descends from Portuguese refugees. He can trace back his family history. Laily, a professor of microbiology, recalls her father telling her when she was 15 that her great-grandfather was a Portuguese emigrant of Sephardic

origin. She began searching for her family's history, and found out that her great-grandfather was a Portuguese Jew who arrived in Colombia through Venezuela and settled in the Guajira in the 1850s along with his brother and wife. Catholicism was very strong in Colombia till about 20 years ago. There was no freedom of religion and all children had to be baptized. From that point on the family lost all contact with Jewish ritual but never adopted mainstream Catholic behaviors. What was passed on were a few ethical principles and their Hebrew names.

Why do people search for another identity? Probably they feel something is missing, that something is not glued together well. Maybe that glue is Judaism.

I have memories of my own family, my own history. I connect to that. For these people, somewhere in them there is a smell or a touch or a long-distance memory that is triggering this connection back, this sense of belonging to something that was lost. I don't have hard evidence. I tried to stay away from the genetic evidence that some people go for. I don't believe in that, I believe there is something inexplicable, that doesn't have words. I think it's that sense that they are going back home.

The people in the film felt strongly enough about Judaism not only to research it but to track down and reach out to Jacques Cukierkorn, a Brazil-born rabbi with a congregation in Kansas City who, under the auspices of the organization Kulanu, has worked to identify, instruct, and sometimes convert lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people. And then in the course of your research, you tracked him down, too, and he led you to the subjects in the film.

He said, "I'm going down to Ecuador, I'm going to be converting these people—why don't you come?"

There came a point when you realized the film was not going to be as uplifting as you had originally thought, when you realized the Jewish community of Ecuador was literally not letting new converts in the door. What happened?

I was interviewing Eduardo Alvarado. His story was very powerful. He had all the elements to be accepted: He converted with Chabad in Massachusetts, had himself circumcised, made aliyah. But he was not allowed to be part of the community. There was something about his being let down that was so profound, so meaningful. At that moment I realized that there is another story here: What happens when the forces who are saying "no" are the Jews rather than the Catholic Church?

These people probably are far worse off in converting back. Not only are they alone in their struggle to go back to Judaism, they have no community to support them. Why would anyone want to do that if they didn't feel it was their true faith?

This type of story has also played out in Lima, Santa Fe, and other places where people, many with Indian or mestizo blood, have sought to rejoin what they consider their historical faith—only to find their motives questioned and their acceptance in the established Jewish community minimal at best. Yet you don't get into the question of whether the rejection has to do with the color of their skin. Why not?

I mention it in other ways. I talk about the distinction between Ashkenazi and Sephardi. I did not want to be judgmental and point the finger. I did not feel I could specifically say without evidence that it was the color of the skin. But I imply it. And Laily Saltarén, the professor from Colombia, doesn't look mestizo—she is white.

Their choice of researching Judaism on the Internet, be it Reform or Conservative, leaves a lot of questions in the minds of the community leaders—already defensive—toward anyone who wants to interfere with their status quo. The community's version of Judaism fills more than just a spiritual role. Kids and grown-ups meet at the "club" to pray and play. As a rabbi from Quito says, "all communities claim the rights to their own admission policy." In that atmosphere of people "alike" it is quite impossible to bring in the "different" and in this case it is probably masked by what they refer to as "not Kosher conversions"—in other words, Reform ones. Of course, that's nonsense since when they are faced with "kosher" ones they don't know what to do, like in the case of Eduardo Alvarado....

So add into that the color of their skin and their lack of disposable income. They never discuss the color of someone's skin and I think they would deny that accusation. But interestingly, the Jewish elite in these countries identify themselves culturally more with Spanish and Portuguese (and later Italian and Eastern European) settlers than with the native Indians.

Remember, also, the Jews have a lot invested in this small, insular community. They feel threatened. I understand because I come from an environment, Buenos Aires, that felt threatened.

Will you screen the film in South America?

At least in Colombia and Ecuador, probably in Argentina.

Do you think it could effect change?

It is about identity and the injustice of these people's experience. That is something everyone can relate to. They may have not been before, but now it's a sad sense of being a stranger in your own land. I have felt that way, even in Argentina.

But there are so many Jews there.

There are, but you are never safe. My family history is one of never being safe. That sense of always looking behind, figuring out how you can run away, it's always there. But we need to consider what the Jewish communities around the world are protecting—basically we're losing Jewish people all the time. In Ecuador, they're assimilating. There's not going to be a community there in a few years. Why not open up and expand—what's wrong with that idea?

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