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Youth Is Served for an Aging Congregation

By Jennifer Medina

New York Times April 22, 2005

The fate of the Lincoln Park Jewish Center might have been easily predicted. Members of the congregation were aging and membership was steadily declining. There was no sign of a revival. **Rabbi Rigoberto Emanuel Viñas** might have seemed an unlikely savior. The differences between the rabbi and the synagogue's members were plenty. He was Orthodox, they were not. At 34, he was young enough to be their son. His Cuban family traced their roots to Spain, while the American-born congregants were almost all descendants of Eastern Europeans. But in the two years since Rabbi Viñas began leading the Lincoln Park synagogue, more than 30 families have joined. People who have been members for decades use words like inspired and invigorated when they talk about the changes. The newcomers also speak of the dynamic atmosphere, then go on to cite the ways the congregation has made them feel welcome.

Sometimes, Rabbi Viñas hears hints of the excitement. He does not hide his pleasure. "This is exactly what I want," he said one evening last week, as members chatted after a Torah study class. "I see it as an experimental laboratory for everybody." Rabbi Viñas makes it clear that he does not want to simply increase the numbers at Lincoln Park. That surely is every clergy member's goal. His intention is more ambitious and fraught with some risk. What he is trying to do, he said, is widen his congregation's spiritual tent to include a broader spectrum of Jews. "It is still difficult for many people to recognize how diverse the Jewish community actually is," he said. "Now it's time to come to grips with that and show how it can work."

And at Lincoln Park it is working. About half the congregation's newest families are Latino, and the synagogue's roster is now sprinkled with surnames like Arriaga, Fonseca, Marcano and Rodriguez. Rabbi Viñas is motivated in his task by his experiences as a Latino Jew and the many occasions in which, he said, people have been shocked to meet a Cuban rabbi. As one response to the inevitable "how can that be?" questions, Rabbi Viñas patiently explains that over the years he has met hundreds of Latino Jews in the New York area. The Lincoln Park shul now runs advertisements in Spanish-language newspapers, including one of the largest in the region, *El Diario*. On Sunday evenings, Rabbi Viñas teaches a class in Spanish on the weekly Torah reading. This weekend, he will conduct one Passover Seder in English and another in Spanish.

Carmen-Maria Rodriguez, who is called Esther by her Jewish friends, lives on Staten Island, but is considering renting an apartment in Yonkers to be closer to Rabbi Viñas. Since she does not drive on the Sabbath, she will often stay with friends from the congregation who live close to the center. "When we sit around the table eating, it's like this representation of families from all over

the world," she said. Like Rabbi Viñas, Ms. Rodriguez, 50, is the child of Cuban exiles who immigrated to the United States in the 1960's. "It's like any observant Jewish community," she said, "but with a little flair."

The personal histories of the new Latino members are varied. Some are the children of Holocaust survivors who settled in Buenos Aires. Some are New York City-bred Puerto Ricans who married Jewish sweethearts. Others, like Ms. Rodriguez, believe their ancestors were among the Jews who were forced centuries ago to convert to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition. They are known as anusim, a Hebrew term that refers to Jews who forcibly converted. Rabbi Viñas welcomes them, too. Over the last decade, Rabbi Viñas has performed dozens of "ceremonies of return" for people who grew up in Roman Catholic homes watching their grandmothers perform rituals they believed were strange family customs, such as lighting candles on Friday nights. Rabbi Viñas's efforts to reach out to anusim makes him somewhat of a maverick. "It's certainly not something that people would say is a priority," said Steven Bayne, the national director of contemporary Jewish life at the American Jewish Committee in New York. "We are focusing on retaining the people we already have, not churching the unchurched."

Historically, Jewish religious authorities considered converts to Judaism to be on a "higher spiritual level" than those who were born Jewish. In practice today, however, converts are often met with skepticism, if not hostility, said Marc D. Angel, the senior rabbi at Congregation Shearith Israel on the Upper West Side, who has written a book on the history of conversion that is to be published later this year. "There is a whole long history of persecution, so there are questions as to why someone would choose to be part of the community," Rabbi Angel said. "Since the rules of Judaism are so complicated, people really have to want to go that distance." For the graying veterans at Lincoln Park, which has about 120 families, the new blood is welcome. Many of them know that Rabbi Viñas has helped many people convert, but no one bothers to make the distinction about individual worshippers.

Mollie Katz, 82, started worshiping at Lincoln Park when she moved to Yonkers with her young children more than 40 years ago. She attends Rabbi Viñas's English-language Torah class, and she is fiercely proud of the synagogue's history. "Everyone here has blended in perfectly with each other," Mrs. Katz said. "I imagine that if we were overwhelmed, you'd have people commenting, 'All he is bringing in are Spanish people.' But we have children again. We have energy again." Initially, Mrs. Katz said, there were rumors that Rabbi Viñas would change the congregation's longstanding customs to reflect his own practices rooted in the Sephardic traditions of North Africa and Spain. But Rabbi Viñas made it a point to stipulate in his contract that he had no plans to alter the way the synagogue sees itself - as an Eastern European Ashkenazic shul. "I am very happy honoring what they built," he said. The congregation, which had been Conservative, had no problem accepting an Orthodox rabbi.

Rabbi Viñas is also happy to challenge the perception some Jews might have of an Orthodox rabbi. It is not unusual for him to warmly embrace a congregant he is close to or to pepper his comments with "oye," rather than "oy vey." Rabbi Viñas continues his outreach work because he believes there are many people, including Latinos, who are looking for new religious homes. "If they come here, I want to be able to say, 'This is a house of God and you are welcome to explore it,'" he said. "I want to show that the people who haven't been included are people who can build and maintain an Orthodox community."

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Philosophy's Gordon Takes Race Study to New Level

By Barbara Baals

March 31, 2005

Temple Times (online edition)

www.temple.edu/temple_times/3-31-05/gordon.html

Lewis Gordon could have spent his entire career in academia basking in his phenomenal success at Brown University, where, in a scant three years, he built the school's Africana studies department into the top-ranked program in the nation for Africana thought, black intellectual history and Caribbean thought. But Temple University offered something he couldn't get at Brown or Yale, Harvard or Princeton, Columbia or Cornell. "What Temple ultimately offered was Temple," Gordon, the Laura H. Carnell Professor of Philosophy, who joined Temple's faculty last fall, said matter-of-factly.

"At Brown, I was building Africana studies," continued Gordon, who joined Brown from Purdue University in 1996 and, in quick measure, transformed an existing program in Afro-American studies into a department of Africana studies with a stellar international reputation. "I did well. But I concluded there was a limit to what I could do there." Gordon wanted to teach at a school where he could enhance and build programs of study, where he could mentor top students, where he could explore issues that nourished his interests and his scholarly work. As an urban public institution, Temple offers more students "willing to take intellectual risks" and students quite unlike others he's taught — but not unlike himself, said Gordon, who grew up in the Bronx and actually didn't initially plan on going to college. "If I had gone from Ivy to Ivy, I would remain in schools that are very small and risk-averse," said Gordon, internationally known for his work in Africana philosophy, theories on race and racism, social and political philosophy and philosophy of religion.

"It's very important to build up public institutions," he continued. "It's a unique opportunity we have in North Philadelphia. Some of the

issues I'm particularly concerned with are happening right here. I wanted to teach philosophy in a program that was in the process of building, where there's an opportunity to do something new. "Temple reminds me a lot of universities I've seen in South Africa and Australia. Our students are not looking for rich, cherry wood walls. They're focusing on the content of learning." One of five new faculty members to join the philosophy department since last fall, Gordon got right to work at Temple, founding the Institute for the Study of Race and Social Thought and the Center for Afro-Jewish Studies in the College of Liberal Arts.

"It's very important for research institutions to have research institutes," he said, noting that Temple is one of the few schools in the nation that has had a longstanding "studies in race" requirement for all students. "Temple has an interesting cadre of professors studying race issues, and there should be a place for reflection on this field of inquiry. "The institute can transform the way we talk about race and social thought, not just in America, but worldwide," continued Gordon, adding that the institute will allow scholars from across disciplines to integrate their work, raising scholarship to a higher level of thought and discussion. "The people in the social sciences should be talking with those in the humanities and in the life sciences. I want this to be the premier institute for study in this area." In addition to connecting Temple scholars, the institute also will work to bring some of the world's top philosophers and thinkers to the University. On April 7 and 8, the institute will host "Recent Africana Philosophy in Three Movements," a conference co-sponsored by the Society of Fellows in the Humanities, the Office of the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the Office of the Provost, and the philosophy department.

"We're inviting three influential scholars, Howard McGary, Nkiru Nzegwu and Paget Henry — and their critics — to go at it," Gordon said. "I don't believe in following the traditional conference pattern. I wanted to have a conference where academics can actually do their stuff. Conferences shouldn't just look nice and attract a large crowd. They should be intense exchanges of ideas. "We'll get to see a wide range of philosophers and thinkers in related areas. And we're hoping to make this an annual or biennial event to profile the major contributions and to raise the bar of discussion in this area of [Africana philosophy] research."

Gordon, who just co-organized a symposium on the intersection of race and sexuality and is planning a fall conference focusing on black civil society and American political life, is equally busy with the Center for Afro-Jewish Studies. Already, the center has hosted a meeting focusing on fiscal responsibility in nonprofit Jewish organizations of color and hosted documentary filmmakers for a segment on Jewish diversity in Philadelphia. "Temple is the only place in the world with a research facility looking at the intersection of African-American and Jewish diasporas," Gordon said. "We wanted to start something very, very new that's both provocative and informative, something that will engage scholars in a high-powered way."

A Temple faculty member for less than a year, Gordon already knows joining the University was the right move for him. He affirms it every day in the classroom, he said. "At Temple, I'm finding a mixture of students who are really independent, thinking people. I see genuine thinking going on. "When I was at Brown, I kept hearing about how great the students were, and that was, for the most part, true about some of them," continued Gordon, who is teaching a seminar this semester on Jean-Paul Sartre that coincides with the 100th anniversary of the philosopher's birth. "But if my first year here is an indication, I've thus far at Temple encountered some of the best students in my career. "Their level of smartness is equivalent to the students I taught at Brown, Purdue, and Yale. But they're more individualistic, more creative. They also have more chutzpah. They're students with a great sense of humor and yet with wonderful humility. They don't presume the world is for them. It's refreshing and rewarding. They're some of the most gifted people I've ever met. "I'm having a ball with them."

Gordon relishes the thought of working with Temple students to help them influence and change the face of the discipline of philosophy. "I always think very, very big," he said. "There has been a serious decline in the number of doctoral students of color in philosophy and in white students who want to do creative work outside of the more dominant conception of the field. When I decided to come to Temple, it struck me that we need to create a place where really creative, risk-taking people have a place in which to grow. "This is a new philosophy department, based on genuinely radical, genuinely critical thinking," he added. "The error is to look at the discipline in a traditional way. We're creating a situation where there are genuine alternatives and where we have people who put knowledge forward."

Onion-lashing Seder with the last Jew in Afghanistan

By Orly Halpern
Jerusalem Post Online
April 26, 2005

Zawlan Simantov is accustomed to having strangers bang on his door on Jewish holidays. For the 45-year-old Afghan, whose Hebrew name is Zevulun, hosting guests on such occasions was not only a good deed, it was his opportunity to fulfill the role of the leader of the Jewish community of Afghanistan, of which he happens to be the only member. There had been one other member, with whom Simantov fought bitterly; he died two months ago. On the second night of Pessah I found Simantov. He opened the door, asking me if I was Jewish and demanding to know why I had not been there for the first night, as if he knew me and had been expecting me. "Come," he said brusquely, before I could answer. I followed him obediently into a courtyard and up a flight of stairs whose balustrade was designed in the shape of Jewish stars painted light blue. I was about to begin the weirdest Jewish experience of my life.

There, on the upper balcony, Simantov, dressed in a traditional knee-length kurta and wearing a kippa, poured "kosher water" over my hands and shooed me into a room decorated only with a small Afghan flag and a Muslim calendar with pictures of Daoud Khan, the former prime minister who overthrew the monarchy in 1973 and led the country until his assassination by Afghan communists in 1978. On the floor, Shaygol, a young Afghan Muslim who works for Simantov, arranged plates of food on a flowered bedsheet spread on the Persian-carpet-covered floor. This was the Seder table and I was the only guest.

I sat on a thin cot along the wall while Simantov sat on a chair in the corner reciting his evening prayers. It was hard for me to follow. In one corner of the room, a TV set placed on its upside-down cardboard box was blaring a Hindu flick. Outside, the muezzin of a nearby mosque had just begun to call Muslims to prayer. Maybe it was just because I could not understand the language he prayed in. In the middle of the prayer, he shouted for Shaygol to do something or another. Finally, he finished (so did the muezzin, but the Hindu flick continued) and we began the Seder. It was a painful process.

First, he ceremoniously unwrapped two Haggadot from a pink plastic bag. Then he stared a long time alternately at the plates of food and at the page in the Haggada that described where each item should be placed. The bowl of sweet, dark-colored haroset was in the place of the maror, the bitter herbs. The parsley was mixed with cilantro. The radishes were too far to the side. I told him and he grudgingly agreed to make some changes. He opened a box of matzot and took out three. They were sent to him from America, he said. The box said they were made in Israel and had the seal of the rabbi of Givatayim. It was a long circuitous route, but miraculously the matzot had arrived whole. It took him almost as long to decide whether to break the middle one then or later. He decided to break it, and then stuck it all into a pillow cover-shaped cloth covered with Afghani embroidery.

Simantov's gruff manner was disconcerting at first. I was not sure whether to put it down to cultural differences, language barriers or character. But throughout the evening a few things would help relieve my nerves. One of them was the wine, a dark, sweet liquid kept in a Stolichnaya Vodka bottle. "Kosher," he said. He had made it himself, he said, from black grapes. He poured the powerful serum into three china tea cups. Shaygol sat across from us, waiting on us hand and foot and watching the Hindu flick. Occasionally he sent me devilish grins when Simantov wasn't looking. The 19-year-old Muslim with Asian-slanted eyes was not the least perturbed by Simantov's gruff manner, nor by his role of helper for the Jewish holiday. He appeared familiar with the traditions and had prepared all the food himself, including the haroset, which was delicious. Simantov said Shaygol's parents took care of Kabul's Jewish cemetery. "Come on," said Simantov, as he got up to do the ritual washing of the hands. Shaygol poured the water.

The Seder was interspersed with talk. At the beginning of the evening I had told him that I interviewed Massouda Jalal, the minister of women's affairs, earlier that day, and that she was very keen to meet him. Somewhere between the second and third glasses of wine he suddenly asked me, "Massouda Jalal wants to meet me? Sure?" Indeed she did. She said she had read in a book about Afghan ethnicities that the Jewish Afghans were the smallest group. I told her that there was only one left and I had yet to find him. She asked me to have him call her secretary if I did.

Simantov's cellphone rang, too. For about five minutes after eating the bitter herbs with the haroset he spoke to a friend from Herat who had called to wish him a happy Pessah. The Muslim Afghan had traveled with Simantov to foreign countries for business. Nowadays business is "no good," said Simantov. Ever since the Taliban left and President Karzai came, there has been no business, he said. Then he read the part of the Haggada that in Simantov's case was not particularly truthful. "At present we celebrate here, but next year we hope to be in the Land of Israel. This year we are servants here, but next year we hope to be free men in the Land of Israel."

Simantov is no servant; nor is he eager to go to Israel. His last visit was in 1998, he said, and he's not rushing back. Afghanistan is his home. But the strangest part of the evening was when we sang "Dayenu." As Simantov finished reciting the first sentence and said the word dayenu, he grabbed a long green onion from the plate and with a quick move lashed me on my shoulder. Shocked, I froze. After the second line, he lashed me again. By the third line I got the idea and grabbed myself an onion. He became quiet when I started singing the fourth line loudly. He knew what was coming. "'Dayenu!' I said with a smack across his shoulder. I continued loudly with the fifth and sixth lines, each time lashing him with the long green onion. By the seventh or eighth line he joined in and we whipped each other till the end of the song. Afterwards I asked, "Afghan?" referring to the unusual custom. "No," said Simantov pointing to the prayer book as if it were written somewhere that we should beat each other with green onions. I looked at Shaygol, who had watched the whole scene with a big grin, and wagged my finger. We all burst out laughing. It was truly a unique Seder.

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Ethiopian Jews in New York Share their Ancient Tradition

By Loolwa Khazzoom
JTA email Edition
April 21, 2005

— For thousands of years, when storks flew overhead on their way back from Israel, Ethiopian Jews would turn their faces toward the

sky and chant, 'Shmella, shmella, agarachin Yerusalem behena' Amharic for 'Stork, stork, how is our country Jerusalem doing'? Today the stork is the symbol for Chassida-Shmella, an organization of Ethiopian Jews in New York eager to educate Americans about the heritage of this ancient Jewish community. "It's about time that we as Ethiopians organize ourselves, to talk about our culture and religion," said Gary Zvadia, the group's vice president. "Most of the Jewish community doesn't know us as friends. They represent us without knowing who we are." As a result, he said, Ethiopian Jews are misunderstood throughout the world. Chassida-Shmella leaders seek to set the record straight — especially in New York, where some 250 Ethiopian Jews live. Next up on the agenda is a Passover program that includes a recitation of the Haggadah in Gaez — the prayer language of Ethiopian Jews — and kosher-for-Passover Ethiopian food.

Chassida-Shmella hosted its kickoff program last November in celebration of the 20th anniversary of the airlift to Israel called Operation Moses. Through the leadership of New York City Council member Alan Gershom, the city co-sponsored the program, which included a theatrical production about the Ethiopian Jews' journey through Sudan in 1984. Several New York television stations covered the program, and there was standing room only at City Hall, which seats 500 people — reportedly making it the largest turnout to date at that location. The group's second event also broke a record. An Ethiopian Shabbat dinner in late February drew 120 people. That was twice as large as the biggest previous dinner held at Makor, a Jewish community center in Manhattan that caters to young Jewish adults. The crowd included Jews of many ethnic backgrounds. "We're constantly trying to expand the community of Makor, to open up and show there are lots of Jewish communities to explore and connect with in the city," said Baht Weiss, Makor's rabbinic intern, who was the event's co-coordinator. "It was a mixed crowd, which is exactly what I want," agreed Chassida-Shmella's president, Bizu Riki Mullu. "I don't want it to just be Ethiopians or just American Jews. I want Ethiopian Jews connected to American Jews." Kosher Ethiopian food was served. For many of those at the dinner, it was their first exposure to the Kiddush and Hamotzi recited in Gaez.

Another highlight was a presentation by three young Ethiopian-Israeli lawyers, co-sponsored by Israel at Heart, which brought the three on an American speaking tour. One of the tour's goals, Israel at Heart founder Joey Low said, was to "let American Jewish audiences realize that the Ethiopians who have come to Israel have a lot to offer the country. If we put the investment that we should into the community, there are tremendous dividends. They can be a tremendous asset to the country, representing Israel," he said. "They have grown as a community; they are getting education; they are changing the way they are viewed as Ethiopians," agreed Weiss. "It's really nice for people to see that, not to have these negative stereotypes from the past about what it means to be an Ethiopian Jew."

But not everyone felt comfortable with the presentation. Tedros Bicha, a founding member of Chassida-Shmella, felt the presentation overemphasized the lawyers' professional status. "It's problematic to say that because there are Ethiopian lawyers, we suddenly have something to offer the Israeli and American Jewish communities — as if we had nothing to offer before," he said. "That attitude demonstrates a lack of education about, an ignorance of, Ethiopian Jewish history and culture." Many Ethiopians at the Shabbat dinner seem to agree with Bicha. "Israelis make no effort to know Ethiopians," said Yossi Tagania, an Israeli Defense Forces officer visiting New York for two months. "They are prejudiced that Ethiopians came from villages and were farmers. They think Ethiopians came from undeveloped countries." "The perception that the community comes from a primitive background blinds many Israelis to Ethiopian Jews' 3,000-year heritage," Tagania said. "I'm not blaming anyone for this situation," Bicha said. "Non-Ethiopians need to make an effort to learn about our heritage, and we need to make an effort to teach about it in schools and other institutions." That, he said, was the impetus for starting Chassida-Shmella. Chassida-Shmella leaders are looking forward to the Passover event, seeing it as another opportunity to teach about the community's traditions. "I find the Ethiopian heritage absolutely beautiful," Mullu said. "We shouldn't try to be who we are not, but we also should be part of other communities. We should accept everyone, and they should accept us. It doesn't matter what color you are. There is only one God and one Torah."

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Kosher Gospel Rocks the House at Seder Celebrating Jewish Diversity

By Chanan Tigay
JTA email Edition
April 14, 2005

"Fifty years ago, Joshua Nelson's grandmother would not have walked up to a synagogue in her New Jersey neighborhood, entered and prayed. That's because she was black," Nelson says — and black Jews didn't generally pray at shuls dominated by white, Eastern European Jews. "It was unheard of, Nelson says. "A lot of the Jersey people went to New York for shul. The black Jewish community, although it was small, they tended to worship with other black Jews." Fast forward half a century. Today Nelson, a 28-year-old musical virtuoso who says his family's been Jewish for centuries, teaches in the Hebrew school at Temple Sharey Tefilo-Israel in South Orange, N.J. — a Reform congregation — and spends the high holidays davening in one of the Garden State's Orthodox shuls.

In his spare time, he tours synagogues, JCCs and the occasional church performing his unique brand of soul music. He calls it

kosher gospel — it's a rollicking hybrid of church tunes, Motown and Jewish-themed lyrics. His muscular voice, commanding stage presence and flamboyant performance garb have won him plaudits from Jewish leaders to such black luminaries as Maya Angelou and Oprah Winfrey, on whose show he performed his energetic 'Elijah Rock' last October. With Passover approaching, Nelson says his family's journey feels especially poignant. The Haggadah's injunction instructing Jews to feel as if they themselves were freed from bondage, he says, hits home when you're from a long line of black Jews. "For some people, slavery happened thousands of years ago. But just 140 years ago, there was slavery in America," he says, waiting backstage before a performance Tuesday night at a 'Liberation Seder' at the JCC of Manhattan. "For some people, religion is myth and fable, but for us, observing Passover is about slaves being freed. It's reality."

"When we celebrate Passover," he adds, "we REALLY celebrate Passover." Nelson is one of a growing number of Jews of color in the United States. The San Francisco-based Institute for Jewish Community Research estimates that there are about 400,000 such Jews in the United States today, including converts, those adopted by Jews, the children of interracial couples and the descendants of Jews of color. Still, many of these Jews say that despite some improvements, fitting into the American Jewish community remains a challenge. "People were kind, but there definitely was a feeling of dissonance around race," says Yavilah McCoy, an African American Jew who studied in a yeshiva in the Borough Park neighborhood of Brooklyn, known for its large population of fervently Orthodox Jews. "I didn't see people of color as Jews in the way I was being taught," she continues. "I didn't feel that people of color had a place in the Jewish community."

This feeling of isolation, says Gary Tobin, director of the research institute, flies in the face of centuries of Jewish history. "Jews are the most racially and ethnically diverse people in the history of the world," he says. "The notion that Jews are white is a recent phenomenon, post-World War II." Indeed, Tobin adds, "The majority of the Jewish community in the history of the world originated out of the Middle East and the Arab world." He cites Jewish communities that have immigrated to the United States from Latin America, Iran, Iraq and Syria. If you add all the Asian, Latino, black, mixed-race and Sephardi Jews in America together, he says, they make up about 20 percent of the U.S. Jewish community.

This might surprise many Americans. "Most people think Jews are white," Nelson says. "I have friends that are Iranian Jews who go through the same thing. You get tired of people saying, 'How'd you become Jewish?'" It's a problem, Tobin says, that Jews would do well to overcome. "I think it's really important that the Jewish community embrace diversity," Tobin says. "African American Jews are the best bridge builders to the African American community. Latino Jews are the best bridge builders to the Latino community. Arab Jews are the best bridge builders to the Arab community."

Tobin's institute runs Be'chol Lashon, a program that assists Jews of color like Gershom Sizomu, spiritual leader of Uganda's Jewish community, who is now studying for rabbinic ordination at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles, a Conservative seminary; Rabbi Capers Funnye, the senior rabbi at the Beth Shalom B'nai Zaken Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation in Chicago; and Rabbi Manny Vinas, a Cuban Jew who works on issues relating to the B'nei Anusim, whose Jewish ancestors were forced to convert to Christianity.

The Liberation Seder was imbued with the music and liturgies of several ethnicities. The Four Questions were asked in both Ladino, a Spanish-Hebrew fusion, and Judeo-Arabic; Nelson rocked the house with several spirited gospel numbers, and Yoel Ben-Simhon, an Israeli of Moroccan descent, added a tinge of Middle Eastern musical flavor with his Sultana Trio. McCoy, who studied in the Brooklyn yeshiva, is the founder and director of Ayecha, a New York-based group that offers resources on Jewish diversity to the Jewish community and provides advocacy and support for Jews of color. Ayecha joined forces with the JCC of Manhattan to organize the seder, which drew about 150 people — and drew a link between racism and anti-Semitism. "Anti-Semitism is the oldest form of racism," McCoy said during the portion of the seder where a matzah is broken in half. "Anti-Semitism and racism have a lot in common, and when you look at your two matzahs, I want you to think of the two scourges as two sides of the same matzah."

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Channeling and Updating Bubbe, Cook Recreates Passover Memories

By Linda Morel
JTA email Edition
March 31, 2005

The first time Tina Wasserman prepared gefilte fish for Passover, it smelled up her whole house. The fish was past its prime, but it wasn't spoiled, so "it didn't make my family sick," she says. But still, the experience was so horrifying that she didn't attempt to prepare gefilte fish again for many years. Wasserman, who is Reform Judaism Magazine's food columnist, has learned a thing or two about gefilte fish since then. First, you must buy fresh fish. Now that seafood is so popular, that's much easier to do now than it was in the 1970s, when Wasserman started out. And she's discovered that there's no need to boil fish patties for three hours, as old-fashioned recipes instructed. In fact, Wasserman suggests cooking gefilte fish for a mere 25 minutes. As she talks about gefilte fish, Wasserman laughs. She knows that the thought of cooking it makes some people gag. But that's the result of commonly held misconceptions, she believes, and lists those incorrect ideas: The house smells for days. Fish heads are scary. Scales stick to fish. The jarred kind tastes better. "Well, I can't help you if you prefer the jarred variety, but I can resolve the other issues," she says. Fresh

fish isn't stinky at all, Wasserman says. Instead, it smells like the sea. Nonetheless, she suggests making the poaching liquid in advance, to lessen the time you and your kitchen are exposed to the scent of fish. Moreover, "if you don't like the jelly with the fish, then you can skip the whole head and skin process," she adds. And if you ask the store to fillet the fish, you won't have to deal with the scales.

Wasserman, who earned a master's degree in food and fashion merchandising from New York University, has been a cooking teacher for 33 years. She taught first in her native New York, and for the past 25 years she's taught in Dallas, where she lives. When she teaches, she says, she tries to think of everything that can go wrong and offers her students tips on avoiding those pitfalls, along with faster alternative preparation methods and substitute ingredients. "When it comes to gefilte fish, you can take my basic recipe and use fish that's indigenous to your part of the country," says Wasserman. In Texas, people add snapper because it's not bony and tastes good. Though sea bass is gelatinous, its flavor is delicate and slightly sweet. Ocean trout also adds interesting nuances. She presents much of this wisdom on her Web site, Cookingandmore.com.

Wasserman tries to rekindle peoples' traditions without assaulting their memories. "I can't tell someone, OK, you recall a dish's flavor this way, but I can guarantee it wasn't that way," she says. One thing she can know for sure is that your bubbe's gefilte fish tasted fresher than fish from a jar. "From the time I was 12, I knew I wanted to teach cooking," says Wasserman, who got her start teaching at the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan when she was in her mid-20s. Back then, someone suggested that Wasserman start Passover workshops. "Why on earth in New York do you need classes on Passover cooking?" Wasserman remembers thinking. "But much to my surprise, students came." And they're still coming. Until then she had not realized how many people have lost their family recipes for such popular holiday foods as matzah balls and tzimmes. One of Wasserman's abiding passions is finding recipes of memory, the foods people grew up on and now no longer know how to make. "One reason why I enjoy writing for Reform Judaism Magazine is that it gives me the opportunity to study old recipes and cookbooks," she says.

She seeks to rescue recipes from the dustbin of history. She's particularly interested in recipes from places with small or dwindling Jewish populations. This is how she found the **Garosa-Charoset, a Sephardi recipe from Curacao**. Not only does she love teaching it to students, she serves at her own seders. This charoset, made of a medley of dried fruits, nuts and orange juice, exudes a zesty tropical taste. "Throughout the centuries, Jews have moved across the globe, spreading their food habits with them," says Wasserman, and she sees it as her job to help keep those cultures alive. For example, by featuring Syrian spiced meat with eggplant and prunes on her Web site, Wasserman is keeping a part of that culture vibrant. The divinely piquant recipe is an excellent choice for Passover because it can be prepared ahead of time and re-heated. "This dish stays well for a number of days in the refrigerator, and its flavor continues to get better each day," she says.

For complete article: www.jta.org/page_view_story.asp?intarticleid=15289&intcategoryid=5

BE'CHOL LASHON NOTE: We highly recommend the following recipe for Charoset from Curacao!

GAROSA CHAROSET FROM CURACAO

2 ounces pitted dates, preferably Medjool
2 ounces pitted prunes
2 ounces dark raisins
2 ounces dried figs
2 cups unsalted peanuts
1/2 cup cashew nuts
Grated zest from 1 medium-sized lemon
1/2 cup dark brown sugar
2 tablespoons honey
2 teaspoons cinnamon, plus additional for coating
1-2 tablespoons sweet Passover wine
1 tablespoon orange juice
1 teaspoon lemon juice

Combine dates, prunes, raisins, figs, peanuts and cashews in a food processor work bowl. Pulse on and off until the contents are fairly small. (NOTE: Ashkenazi Jews customarily do not eat legumes, which include peanuts, on Passover.) Add the zest and remaining ingredients. Continue to process until mixture is moist and relatively smooth and firm. With palms, roll mixture into one-inch balls. Sprinkle some cinnamon on a small plate. Roll each ball in cinnamon to coat well. Place in one layer on a flat plate, until ready to serve. Refrigerate if making in advance.

Yield: 3 dozen balls (or more) /p>

Featured Articles List

Bnei Menashe Find Home Over Green Line

By Mati Wagner
Jerusalem Post
April 6, 2005

"The redemption of Bnei Menashe is just a part of the larger process of the redemption of the entire Jewish people," Rabbi Yehuda Gin of Kiryat Arba said Tuesday. Gin, probably the first Bnei Menashe to become a rabbi, was reacting to Sephardi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar's decision on Friday to allow the mass conversion, according to Orthodox Jewish criteria, of a group of 6,000 to 7,000 Indians who are thought to be the descendants of the lost tribe of Menashe. Gin provides spiritual leadership to the 90-family Bnei Menashe community in Kiryat Arba, the largest in Israel. The second largest is 50 families in Gush Katif. In all, there are about 800 Bnei Menashe here; the vast majority live beyond the Green Line.

"We came to Kiryat Arba, near the Machpela Cave where the patriarchs are buried, to return to our roots," said Gin, who is a student of Rabbi Dov Lior of Kiryat Arba. "We did not come to Israel in search of material well-being. "In places like Gush Katif, Ofra and Beit El, where the Bnei Menashe have settled, we feel we are strengthening the Jewish people in Israel. We are not here to make trouble, we're here to contribute." But Bnei Menashe's decidedly right-wing affiliation and pro-settlement leanings have stoked opposition on the Left. "Over the years, one of the problems with convincing the Israeli government to bring Bnei Menashe to Israel has been the conception among left-leaning politicians that Bnei Menashe are simply fodder for the territories," said Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews (IFCJ), a coalition of evangelical Christians that provides millions of dollars in financial support to Israel.

For more than two years, the immigration of Bnei Menashe was frozen by former interior minister Avraham Poraz, who opposed their settling in the territories. Before Poraz's decision, there was a monthly flow of 80 Bnei Menashe, who were then converted here. Even if Interior Minister Ophir Paz-Pines continues Poraz's policy, it will be impossible to do since Amar's decision means that arriving Bnei Menashe will already have been converted under the auspices of the Chief Rabbinate. However, Michael Freund, president of Shavei Israel, an organization that has been instrumental in bringing Bnei Menashe to Israel, said there was never an intention to direct members of the community specifically to the territories. "We tried to get them settled in Mitzpe Ramon and Dimona," he said. "We turned to the religious kibbutzim in the Galilee. But every single place inside the Green Line refused for economic reasons."

Freund explained that before Amar's decision to begin converting Bnei Menashe before they came, individuals would arrive as visitors, devoid of rights to state aid. Only after they had completed a one-year conversion course did they become eligible for aid as new immigrants. Eckstein said that the IFCJ would help finance some of the tens of millions of dollars needed to educate and convert the Bnei Menashe, bring them to Israel and find them housing and employment. Eckstein admitted that the IFCJ's evangelical donors saw the bringing of Bnei Menashe as another step toward the Christian view of final redemption, which sees the ingathering of Jewish exiles as a precursor to the second coming of Jesus. "But the ingathering of the exiles is not just a Christian concept, it is a Jewish one, and if evangelical groups can help us realize it, I see nothing wrong," he said.

Eliahu Avihayil, who heads Ami Shav, has been hunting the 10 lost tribes for the last 45 years. He said he broke with Freund's Shavei Israel in part over the issue of receiving funds from Christians. He admitted that bringing Bnei Menashe to Israel was a fulfillment of prophecies in Isaiah 11 and Ezekiel 37, among other places in the Bible. Avihayil also quoted rabbinic sources that state that the first of the tribes to be ingathered would be Menashe. "But all the great rabbis agree that the final redemption is not in our hands to bring about," he said. Some of the ancient Jewish traditions preserved by Bnei Menashe for more than 2,000 years include circumcision by flint knife, purification of lepers with spring water and a bird sacrifice, the use of a kind of tallit with azure-colored [tehelet] fringes, and traditional songs that mention holy places in Israel. Bnei Menashe also have their own version of a Pessah sacrifice and bread without yeast.

However, Bnei Menashe only started actively practicing Judaism in recent decades. An aide to Amar said that a special rabbinic court would be established in the next few months that would travel to India periodically to convert Bnei Menashe, who are concentrated in two Indian regions – Mizoram and Manipur. A mikve is being built and educators who will prepare the Bnei Menashe for conversion will travel to India to set up courses. "The chief rabbi's actions down here in the material world awaken the celestial world to push forward with redemption," said Gin. Tzvi Khaute, 31, a community coordinator at Shavei Israel and a Bnei Menashe, called Amar's decision an incredible breakthrough.

"It is a fulfillment of a dream after so many years of suffering in the Diaspora," he said. "Physically, we have been in exile for so long, but our hearts were always in Zion." He said that many could not control their emotions upon hearing of the decision. "People cried not just from the eyes. It came from the heart, from the innermost part of the being," he said.

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After Years of Improvisation, Jews in Costa Rica are Now Turning Kosher

By Brian Harris
JTA email Edition

April 21, 2005

The eating habits of Costa Rica's estimated 2,500 Orthodox Jews are changing. Jews are increasingly eating kosher food in what may be the most significant sign of a revival of tradition to hit the community since it began in the 1930s. With this month's expected opening of the country's first kosher deli, and predictions of a record demand for kosher products for Passover, rabbis here say that Costa Rica's Jews no longer can point to the unavailability of kosher products as an excuse. In fact, more of the country's households now keep kosher than ever before. "Food is an important part of Jewish life," said Rabbi Gershon Miletski, who is Orthodox. For six years, he's been head rabbi of the Israeli-Zionist Center.

In the past, he says, 90 percent of the space in the suitcases he and his wife would bring back from their frequent trips to Israel would be filled with food. Now, though, local supermarkets carry a wide variety of kosher products, including meat and poultry slaughtered under his supervision. The number of families keeping kosher remains modest — perhaps 200 households — and many family members sometimes break the rules when they eat out. It is believed about 100 head of kosher cattle are consumed monthly. That's just half the amount of kosher beef eaten each week in neighboring Panama. But just 15 years ago, except for items ordered for Passover, virtually none of the country's 2,500 Orthodox Jews kept kosher at all. When a Chabad Lubavich emissary, Rabbi Hersh Spalter, came to this tropical Central American country from the United States in 1987, he found keeping kosher to be a serious test of his patience and taste buds.

"Fifteen years ago the only kosher product available was Wesson oil. Then came Pringles potato chips," he says, rolling his eyes. "I should know. I looked everywhere." After a shipment of beef was held up in customs for almost five months reducing Spalter and his family to an almost entirely vegetable diet he realized something would have to be done about the situation. Many local Jews credit Spalter with the community's renewed interest in kashrut. He started slaughtering chickens according to the laws of kashrut, and he began to import kosher food for local distribution.

"The shechitah 'ritual slaughter' that Chabad has maintained in a constant and consistent manner has been very helpful," said Dr. German Fainzilber, whose large family keeps kosher. Now Spalter and Miletski both offer their own brands of meat and chicken. It's frozen — the demand is not high enough for it to be available fresh — and it costs up to 50 percent more than fresh, nonkosher meat and poultry. With encouragement from Spalter, newly arrived Montreal transplant Jeremy Zibell, 25, is opening a New York-style kosher deli this month, complete with pickles, corned beef, pastrami and real rye bread. It will all be homemade, and most ingredients will be domestic. "A friend of mine came back from Costa Rica, and he was telling me that there was nothing, not much happening as far as Jewish food, deli food," Zibell says. "So I decided to come down. I really enjoy making food and I thought there might be an opportunity. I liked it here, I liked the weather — I decided I was going to open a deli."

Zibell assumes that most of his customers will not be Jewish; instead, he thinks, they will be American expatriates and Costa Ricans who have traveled abroad. That's the profile of most of the customers at the kosher market owned by Gil Aharoni, an Israeli, and his family. Aharoni's crowded 'Little Israel' mini-market and 'Pita Rica' bakery have been open for almost a decade. The stores are the country's most reliable source for kosher food and Judaica; most of its gentile customers come to buy instant falafel mixes, sweets, salads and dips. Neither Zibell nor Aharoni had any background in the kosher food business when each fell in love with the tropics and decided to stay.

Costa Rica's kosher wine distributor, on the other hand, is local, and depends on local Jews. Pilar Lizama, whose family sells kosher wines imported from Chile, said that most of the 400 cases sold last year went to local Jewish families. However, most of that wine was destined for weddings and other social events. Despite a free trade agreement with Chile that helps boost wine consumption, Costa Rica is still a country where wine sales lag behind those of beer and hard alcohol.

Miletski estimates that the extra annual cost of maintaining a kosher household in Costa Rica is equal to two round-trip plane tickets to Miami, the most popular vacation destination for Costa Ricans. Many families have decided that the cost is easy enough to absorb. Both the rabbis and the merchants expect that Costa Rica's kosher market will continue to expand. Hoping to get in on the lucrative kosher event-catering business, several high-end hotels have set up kosher kitchens. A free-trade agreement between Costa Rica and the United States is awaiting legislative approval, so many exporters are seeking seals of approval from Miletski and Spalter. Aharoni's family offers an online catering service for visiting tourists who want to maintain kashrut while visiting the country's jungles and rain forests. And a newly opened resort on the Pacific Coast, about four hours by car from the nearest synagogue, has set aside a kosher kitchen for its guests.

. Is Aunt Melanie Jewish? Is Ga-ga (her grandmother) Jewish? Podell asked, "Do you think Jake is Jewish?" With an exasperated eye-roll, Alexandra replied, "Of course he's Jewish! He looks Jewish!" Jake is the family poodle.

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After 500 Years: Kosher Portuguese Olive Oil

www.israelnationalnews.com

Apr 26, 2005 / 17 Nisan 5765

For the first time since expelling its Jews in the 15th century, Portugal has once again begun producing kosher olive oil under strict rabbinical supervision. The product, which is being marketed under the name Ribeiro Sanches Kosher, is manufactured by Penazeites, one of the country's most important manufacturers of olive oil, in the central Portuguese town of Penamacor. The oil bears a "triangle-K" kosher symbol and is under the supervision of Rabbi Elisha Salas, an emissary of the Jerusalem-based Shavei Israel organization, who serves as rabbi of the Jewish community of Oporto, Portugal's second-largest city. The olive oil is also certified kosher for Passover. "It was an honor for us to be able to make kosher olive oil for Jews in Portugal and abroad for the first time in 500 years," said Joao Manuel Rodrigues, Penazeites' commercial director. "In the past, our town was home to a large Jewish population, so we thought it only fitting that we undertake this project, which in some small way closes a historical circle."

Most of Portugal's Jews were either expelled or forced to convert en masse to Catholicism in 1497 after King Manuel I launched a brutal campaign to purge his realm of any Jewish presence. Nonetheless, many continued to practice Judaism covertly, while living outwardly as Catholics. At the time of the decree, Jews constituted nearly 20% of the population, such that many Portuguese today are believed to have at least some Jewish ancestry. "My name is Mendes, which traditionally was a Portuguese Jewish name – so maybe my ancestors were Jewish?" said Carlos Mendes, a communications consultant for the company. "The renewal of kosher olive oil production in Portugal is a sign that Jewish culture can once again flourish here." As a gesture of reconciliation, the design of the olive oil's label bears the motto, "For the return of the Jewish people", and even includes a quote from Tractate Menachot (53b) of the Talmud: "Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Why is Israel compared to an olive tree? Because just as the leaves of an olive tree do not fall off in either summer or winter, so too the Jewish people shall not be cast off."

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Two Can Tango: Arabs and Jews Play Argentina's Music Together

By Larry Luxner
JTA email Edition
April 10, 2005

Anibal Jaule, a well-known tango singer, has performed throughout his native Argentina and as far away as the United Arab Emirates. But the 54-year-old baritone, whose ancestors came from Lebanon, never imagined that one day he'd sing in a synagogue. Along with three other Argentine musicians of Arab descent and seven Jewish musicians, Jaule forms the nucleus of Salam-Shalom, the world's first Arab-Jewish tango orchestra. The idea is simple: to promote peace and understanding between Arabs and Jews through tango, Argentina's beloved national music. Naming the orchestra Salam-Shalom "peace in Arabic and Hebrew" was the brainchild of Segismundo Holzman, a concert promoter and lifelong tanguero who last year established an all-Jewish tango orchestra called Inspiracion. "I have very good friends of Arab origin," Holzman said. "In this country, Arabs and Jews have had good relations for many years, so I thought, why not have an orchestra that adapts both Arab and Jewish music to the tango?"

Holzman registered the name Salam-Shalom in June 2003 and quickly won the sponsorship of both the Centro Islamico de la Republica Argentina, the country's leading Muslim entity, and AMIA, Argentina's largest Jewish organization. After a year of preparation, the orchestra held its first concert in November 2004 at the Salon Dorado de la Legislatura de Buenos Aires, an official government reception hall. Two weeks later, the local Jewish community inaugurated a new shul in the Buenos Aires suburb of Belgrano, and Salam-Shalom was there for the occasion. "Never before had Arab musicians performed in a synagogue in Argentina," Holzman said. Salam-Shalom's next concert was set for this week in front of 800 people at the Teatro General San Martin in downtown Buenos Aires.

Omar Ahmed Abboud, secretary of the Centro Islamico, says these kinds of events help dispel the notion that Arabs and Jews cannot live together peacefully. "We're in favor of any cultural initiative whose principal objective is to create a climate of peace," Abboud told JTA. "We have very good relations with the Jews, and we have some common elements, the first being that we are all Argentines. Even the terrorist attack against AMIA headquarters," the main Buenos Aires Jewish institution, which was bombed in July 1994, "did not affect relations between the Arabs and Jews." Lior Hayat, cultural and press attache at the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, said the Israeli government enthusiastically supports the idea of a Jewish-Arab tango orchestra.

"Our point of view is that the Middle East conflict shouldn't be exported all over the world," Hayat said. "The idea is that these are Jews and Arabs in Argentina; they are not Israelis and Palestinians. They can cooperate together; they can play music together." He added, however, that Salam-Shalom obviously has political connotations, since "you cannot bring together a Jew and an Arab and not make it a political issue." Roughly 900,000 of Argentina's 36 million inhabitants trace their origins to the Arab world. Slightly less than half are Muslim; the rest are Christian. There are about 250,000 Argentines of Jewish origin.

Abboud, whose family emigrated from Lebanon in 1930, considers a prominent Argentine rabbi, Daniel Goldman, as a "very intimate friend." The men have collaborated on ecumenical projects, the most recent being a Buenos Aires conference on the teachings of the

13th-century rabbi and philosopher Moses Maimonides. whose Arabic name was Abdalla Abu Imram ibn-Maimun and who is known in the Jewish world as the Rambam.

Last year, the Centro Islamico presented Argentine-Israeli pianist Daniel Barenboim its highest honor. Abboud said Barenboim, music director of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and conductor of the Staatskapelle Berlin, was selected for his efforts "together with the late Palestinian intellectual and anti-Israel activist Edward Said" in favor of peace and dialogue in the Middle East. The Arab-Israeli conflict is a world apart from the poor Buenos Aires neighborhood of La Boca, where tango music was born out of the grinding poverty of the late 19th century. Melancholy yet passionate, tango was performed mainly by Italian immigrants equipped with nothing more than their violins, their voices and the bandoneon, a specialized type of accordion that is essential to any tango orchestra. Tango was popularized by the legendary Carlos Gardel, who in 1917 recorded his first tango song on the Odeon record label, which was owned by Romanian Jewish immigrant Max Glucksmann.

Despite its appeal, by the 1960s the tango seemed to be losing popularity as it lost ground to the Beatles and rock'n'roll. Tango came to be seen as the music of older people. Yet since the mid-1990s tango has enjoyed a comeback among Argentine youth. Clubs where tango orchestras perform have sprouted up throughout Buenos Aires, especially in the trendy neighborhood of San Telmo. There's even a Buenos Aires FM radio station, Radio Tango, that plays nothing but tango music. Holzman, 70, was born and raised in Zarate, a town in Buenos Aires Province. He now lives and works out of a cluttered Buenos Aires apartment just 10 blocks from where his hero Gardel grew up. "Since childhood I have been passionate about tango, and I have always been involved with Jewish organizations," he said. "I put two and two together and understood that the moment had finally come to form this orchestra. The Arabs received me very well. If they didn't, I wouldn't have continued with this idea."

Featured Articles List

Oy Vey, Soy Gay: Gay Jews in Argentina Form Support Groups

By Larry Luxner
JTA email Edition
April 3, 2005

— It's hard enough just to be Jewish in Argentina, a country where, by law, you must be married and Catholic to run for president. So imagine what it's like to grow up Jewish and gay, or Jewish and bisexual. Or Jewish and transgender, for that matter. "We're not rejected or expelled, but we're not fully accepted either," said German Vaisman, a 30-year-old gay man who founded the nonprofit organization Keshet Argentina last year. Keshet — the Hebrew word for rainbow — has around 120 members and is growing. "Our mission is to contribute to the development of cultural, political and social initiatives that deal with sexual diversity within Judaism," Vaisman said. "Our vision is to have a fully inclusive Jewish community of all GLBT Jews."

That's shorthand for 'gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender,' though 80 percent of Keshet's members are homosexual men. Most live in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area.

The group's unofficial slogan is 'Oy Vey, Soy Gay ,Oy Vey, I'm Gay.' Every week Vaisman e-mails a newsletter to Keshet members, and every two or three months they gather for potluck dinners that are tied into Kabbalat Shabbat, Passover, Sukkot or some other Jewish occasion. Keshet Argentina belongs to the California-based World Congress of GLBT Jews. The group has distributed 400 booklets in Spanish called 'Homosexuality and the Jewish Religion,' which discusses the biblical and Jewish-law implications of being gay. It also recently organized a Jewish GLBT film series in Buenos Aires, which drew more than 500 people.

The organization also plans joining the big international gay pride march planned for Jerusalem this August. Vaisman, who studied architecture and works in construction, became active in the gay movement after a fellowship with the Jewish Organizing Initiative in Boston. He considers himself a progressive Jew who just happens to be attracted to other men. "I was raised within the Jewish community and attended a Jewish day school," Vaisman said. "On Sundays I went to La Hebraica," a Jewish country club, with my parents. I don't remember being with non-Jews until I went to high school."

But it wasn't until he was 23 that Vaisman decided to be sincere about his sexual orientation. He began dating men. "I spent my whole life in a straight environment. I never heard anything about gay issues," he told JTA. "I had girlfriends, but my parents never pushed me to get married. My gayness just came out. I have three brothers and all of them accept it. It was hard for my parents, but they're finally accepting it too." Keshet isn't the only group of its type in Argentina. There's also Jag. The group's name is a pun, because Jag is both the Spanish of spelling the Hebrew word chag, or holiday, but also an acronym for 'Judío Argentino gay' — gay Argentine Jew. Jag is a social group, and Keshet is geared more toward education and political activism. Keshet operates on an annual budget of \$15,000 and has seven board members, two of whom are straight.

Buenos Aires recently became the first Latin American city to recognize domestic partnerships, which qualify gay and lesbian couples for Social Security and other benefits. Even so, Vaisman won't hold hands with another man in public for fear of being physically attacked. He noted that in Argentina the police routinely haul transvestites off to prison, where often they are murdered. "In Boston, I

was never afraid of someone approaching or saying something," he said. "That's one of my frustrations here, because I like to feel that sense of comfort in showing affection." Tali Jeifetz, 28, doesn't have that problem. An Argentine Israeli who has worked in the aliyah department of the Jewish Agency for the last three years, Jeifetz said she doesn't hide anything.

"In my personal life, everybody knows my girlfriend," she said. "At the beginning, it was difficult for my parents, but they're OK with it. On Pesach, I bring my girlfriend to the house for dinner, and my brother brings his girlfriend too." The petite woman, who has short brown hair and a big smile, said she never thought seriously about her lesbianism until college, when another girl kissed her for the first time. Jeifetz routinely refers to her partner, who's also Jewish, as her novia, or girlfriend, but she says her girlfriend's parents have no idea their daughter is a lesbian. "If I give a kiss to my novia, I'm not going to worry whether somebody is offended," she says cheerfully. "I consider myself very Jewish and very gay. I don't have any doubt about my sexuality. I love women." On the other hand, "besides being gay, other things interest me being Jewish, being a freelance journalist, music, history. I don't find many things in common with other gay people."

One reason Mauro Isaac Cabral, a transgendered Jew, is uncomfortable with the Jewish community is that a result of the terrorist attacks against Jewish Argentine institutions security is very tight. The ID cards of everyone going in or out of a Jewish building in Argentina is closely scrutinized. That, says the 33-year-old Cabral, prevents me from entering most buildings, because my name doesn't correspond to my gender. This situation is terrible for me."

Vaisman, who runs Keshet Argentina from a home office, said that Reconstructionist and Reform congregations have accepted his organization warmly, the Conservative movement has shown only lukewarm support and the Orthodox community has not given it any support at all. "A couple of our members tried to speak about Keshet with the Chasidim, and were told that it was OK as long as they were not openly gay in the yeshiva," he said. "It was like, Don't ask, don't tell." Vaisman dreams of having a family and even children one day, even though he's not dating anyone just now. "Maybe I'm doing all this stuff because I want to have a Jewish community that welcomes my kids,"he said. "A year ago, one rabbi told me that I wouldn't see many changes in my lifetime in Argentina. I think he was wrong."

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In a lonely Argentine town, ghosts of a proud Yiddish past

By Larry Luxner
March 30
JTA

MOISESVILLE, Argentina - At the end of a three-hour taxi ride west of the Argentine city of Santa Fe – along a lonely two-lane highway that passes a Wal-Mart, half a dozen meat-packing plants and miles and miles of flat, unchanging wilderness – sits the unlikely town of Moisesville. When Moisesville was founded in 1889, by a group of Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Eastern Europe, it seemed perfect. It was once the heart of a thriving Jewish gaucho culture that extended throughout the Argentine provinces of Santa Fe, Las Pampas, Entre Rios and Corrientes. Sofia de Gun, a 75-year-old widow known simply as "Do a Sofia," is old enough to remember Moisesville when it was still a thriving center of Yiddishkeit.

"This was the first Jewish settlement in Argentina," she said. "And the first group that came here was led by Rabbi Aaron Goldman. He said that like the Jews who made the exodus from Egypt, coming to Argentina was like Moses entering the Promised Land. That's why it was decided to name this place Kiryat Moshe. There was a Frenchman among them who translated it as Moises-Ville." That and other details of the town's history are chronicled in painstaking detail at the Rabbi Aaron H. Goldman Jewish Colonization Museum, housed in a downtown building constructed by the Brener family in 1911. For years, Jewish farmers worked the land, raised livestock and established agrarian cooperatives. At its peak, the shtetl supported four synagogues, a public library with 20,000 books and even a Yiddish theater that attracted such stars as Molly Picon from Europe. But life was hard, and young people lured by educational and business opportunities elsewhere, left Moisesville as fast as they could. Synagogues gradually lost members and the Yiddish theater eventually closed.

Today, Moisesville is practically a ghost town. Occasionally, tour buses pass through, filled with Argentine Jewish tourists hoping to connect with their past. "We have 2,700 inhabitants, but only 10 percent of them are Jewish," laments Judy Blumenthal, a teacher in the town's only remaining Hebrew school. "At one time, in the 1940s, the population was 5,000, of whom 90 percent were Jewish. Many Argentines have roots here." Traditions die hard though, and even today Moisesville shuts down for two days of the year: July 9 – Argentina's independence day – and Yom Kippur. Jewish traditions are so strong here that Theodor Herzl, Golda Meir and Baron Maurice de Hirsch all have streets named after them. In fact, many older non-Jews still pepper their Spanish with words like schlep, shlemiel and even goyim; they grew up hearing those expressions all around them.

Around 2,000 to 2,500 people visit every year, said the museum's director, Eva Guelbert de Rosenthal. Its five permanent exhibition rooms contain such items as a porcelain Seder plate, a brass samovar from the 16th century, Russian passports issued to Jewish refugees in 1905, a Moisesville license plate from 1926, a metal coffee can from 1938 and a 50-kroner note from the Terezin

concentration camp. One of the most interesting artifacts is a copy of the 1888 deed showing how local businessman Pedro Palacios bought 100,000 hectares of land, then divided it into tracts and sold them off to the newly arrived Jews for 40 pesos per hectare.

In a nearby glass case, visitors can see household items brought by the Jewish refugees to Moisesville, including crystal bowls, an umbrella, silverware, mezuzot, prayer books and a spice box for havdalah. There are also many framed portraits, including one of Rosenthal's grandparents, Benzion and Jacinta Aronovich of Byelorussia. Besides the museum, other points of interest in Moisesville include the Banco Comercial Israelita; the town library, located across the street from Moisesville's sole Internet kiosk, and the Orthodox Jewish cemetery, which has nearly 2,500 tombstones. Interestingly, Moisesville's only church, Nuestra Senora de la Merced, was built with the help of de Hirsch's Jewish Colonization Association. And although this is often not the case in other parts of Argentina, here Jews and Christians seem to get along with each other. "We've never had any anti-Semitism," said Blumenthal, 45. "The gentiles don't discriminate against us. They invite us to their festivals and we invite them to ours."

Blumenthal, who has 35 children in her Hebrew classes, said that only one of Moisesville's synagogues, Baron Hirsch, is still in use. The others have fallen into disrepair. About 25 to 30 people come to Friday night and Saturday morning services, which are led by a local cantor, Luis Liebenbuk. "There's not much work here since the mayonnaise factory closed two years ago. But some young people are coming back to Moisesville because there's no work in the cities," said the teacher, who has a sister in Fairfax, Va. "We're hoping someone will invest in a hotel here." For now, the few tourists who straggle through Moisesville usually end up staying at the home of Do a Sofia, who lives next to the Brener shul on Calle San Martin. To supplement her monthly pension of 260 pesos, or about \$87, she rents out an extra room for 20 pesos a night, including complete breakfast and light afternoon snack. "Sometimes groups of American Jews come in a bus, spend a few hours and leave," she said. "But nobody's come here for the last four months."

Another elderly Jewish widow, Dora Berenstein, 74, lives in a corner house on Calle Estado de Israel with her two little dogs, Barbie and Leticia. She gets by on 60 pesos a month in food coupons, and 100 pesos a month from the rental of two small apartments behind her crumbling house, which she shared with her husband until his death five years ago. "I'm friendly with everyone in Moisesville, but the truth is, every day we are fewer," said Berenstein, who was married for 47 years. "Before, when my husband was alive, we talked about leaving. But now where would I go?"

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Israelis Introduce Touch-typing to Arab World

By David Brinn
Israel 21c
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Most people take touch-typing on their keyboards for granted. But for Arabic-speaking students, a differently configured keyboard with Arabic characters has meant that traditional methods to teach touch-typing weren't applicable. This has all changed since Israeli company Sight & Sound developed the world's first touch-typing course in Arabic. They've successfully tested the course in a pilot program in Israeli Arab schools and hope to market it soon to the rest of the Arab world. "Learning to touch type in Arabic is more complicated than in English or Hebrew - the touch typing machines and the computer keyboards are totally different and it can cause a lot of confusion," Sight & Sound CEO Elad Gross told ISRAEL21c. "Our Touch Typing Technology (TTT) has adapted the touch typing machines to the computer keyboards so what the students are learning is applicable right away."

"The course in Arabic was introduced about a year ago for the first time, A few months ago, together with the Israeli Education Ministry, we introduced a pilot program in about 12 schools in the Arab, Druze and Beduin sectors, and it's been very successful," Gross added. "The fact that the students can raise their heads, look to the left or right, and talk to people while they type accurately and quickly is remarkable to them." The El-Zahara school in Kfar Kassem, an Israeli Arab town in the north of the country, was chosen by the Ministry of Education to take part in a pilot program that taught the TTT system. "We chose 15 students from our 5th grade classes," the school's principal Safwat Taha said. "The criteria was not necessarily students with high grades, but students who were excelling in computers."

"They met twice a week for three weeks, and the results have been amazing. Sight & Sound's program has not only helped the students type at a much faster rate, it's gotten them to begin thinking about their future professions, and their study habits. Students came up to me and said they were so happy with their typing ability that they weren't going to use their pens anymore," Taha said. "They've also taken on the obligation to teach other students the techniques they learned." Josephine, an 18-year-old resident of Jaffa, learned the touch type on the TTT system when she was 16 and is now a vocal supporter of the method.

"It helped me a lot - I went from typing only about seven words a minute to over 30. I now use it in my work every day," she told ISRAEL21c. According to Sight & Sound's Gross, the TTT system works in a specific way. "In the first few lessons, like in any touch typing course, you learn how to place your hands and where to place your fingers on the letters. But that's not enough - any computer software can do this. The problem is after you place your fingers, you may start touch-typing, but pretty quickly you'll go back to your old way of using two fingers. "In the Sight and Sound technique, you also acquire speed and have to practice so that you type more

than 18 words per minute in order to pass the course - Of course some people can go up to as high as 60 or 80 words a minute. Our course is also quick - approximately 24 hours - and the recommendations are to do it between one and two weeks," he said.

The TTT program is based on a combination of sight, sound and rhythm. The keyboard is graphically displayed on the student's computer screen. The different keys are shown in various colors. The student receives instructions via his earphones. After a brief explanation the narrator commences with the first lesson. The narrator calls out the required letter to be typed, the called letter lights up on the colored keyboard shown on the screen, and the narrator then gives the instruction to strike the key. The student first sees, then hears and finally acts. All the natural reactions of the student are utilized, making the learning process effortless and ensuring that this process is not built on a system of boring practice and remembrance used by other methods. According to Gross, there are 52 teachers who have been trained by Sight & Sound to teach the TTT system in Israel.

Sight&Sound was founded in 1969 - providing touch-typing courses and other office courses. According to Gross, eight years ago, they branched out into four different companies. "In addition to Sight & Sound which deals mostly with computer training in addition to touch typing, we also run Axiom which works closely on courses with the Ministry of Education, Data Bank, we run a data preservation company, and we are the Israeli franchisees for the Princeton Review preparatory courses." But Gross is proudest of the TTT course in Arabic.

"In the US, touch typing courses in school are widespread, but here in Israel it isn't very common for kids - in the Jewish it's not so common, and in the Arab sector, even less so," he said. "We've met with the Education Ministry representatives lately to go over the pilot project. We gave them a report on its success, and now there's discussion about widening the program and spreading it throughout the country." Principal Taha is a strong advocate of that approach. "We hope the Education Ministry will adopt the TTT program and begin teaching it in our school and around the country," he said. But teaching TTT to Arabic speaking students in Israel is only the tip of the iceberg, according to Gross. Despite obstacles regarding Israeli companies doing business in the Arab world, Sight & Sound hopes to enter the wider Arabic-speaking market. "We're negotiating with a few big companies outside of Israel in an attempt to market the course in Arab-speaking countries. I'm confident it will happen in a few months," said Gross.

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