

Be'chol Lashon Update September 2006

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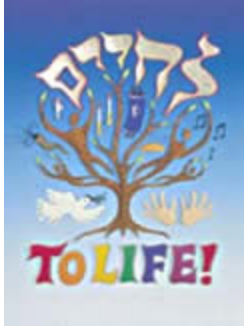
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UPCOMING EVENTS

SAN FRANCISCO

To Life! A Jewish Cultural Street Festival

Palo Alto, California
September 17, 2006
11-6pm



Be'chol Lashon is delighted to join the 7th annual
To Life! A Jewish Cultural Street Festival in Palo Alto.

Come help raise awareness about the diversity of the Jewish people by joining us at our Be'chol Lashon Information & Crafts Booths.

To Life! Details

What: The annual To Life! A Jewish Cultural Street Festival will showcase fine art, traditional Jewish music, dance, and foods through a day-long celebration. Currently celebrating its 7th successful year, the To Life! Festival is the largest Jewish event in Northern California, attracting over 10,000 attendees from all over the Bay Area each year.

When: Sunday, September 17, 2006 from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Where: California Avenue at El Camino Real in Palo Alto, California—35 miles south of San Francisco and 14 miles north of San Jose

Who: All are welcome at this fun-for-the-whole family event.
Admission is free!

For more information:

<http://www.paloaltojcc.org/tolife/>


Volunteer

Interested in volunteering at Be'chol Lashon events?
Contact our Volunteer Coordinator, Esther Fishman:
Esther@JewishResearch.org or 415.386.2604

Rock 'n' Rebuild: An Intimate Acoustic Performance with Aviv Geffen


September 14, JCC, San Francisco

September 17, College of San Mateo Theatre, San Mateo




Rock 'n' Rebuild

An Intimate Acoustic Performance



All net proceeds dedicated
to rebuilding Northern Israel


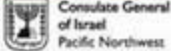




Israel Emergency Campaign
Benefit Concerts with:

Aviv Geffen

אביב גפן

<p>Thursday, Sept. 14, 2006 at 8:00p.m. JCC of San Francisco 3200 California St., San Francisco</p> <p>Tickets: \$50, \$75* and \$125** \$30 for students with student I.D. <small>* Includes an After Party. ** Includes VIP Reception & an After Party.</small></p> <p>Info: www.israelcentersf.org Tickets at JCC Box Office: (415) 292-1233</p>	<p>Sunday, Sept. 17, 2006 at 8:00p.m. College of San Mateo Theatre 1700 West Hillsdale Blvd., San Mateo</p> <p>Tickets: \$50, \$75 \$30 for students with student I.D.</p> <p>Info: www.yendor.com/yadbeyad or call (408) 530-8243</p>
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also co-sponsored by the Young Adult Division and the Russian Division of JCF

NEW YORK

Indian Jewish Community of New York Announces: Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur Services

The Indian Jewish Community will be conducting the High Holiday Services for the twelfth consecutive year in 2006 as per the Bene Israel liturgy. The services will be held at:

The Village Temple
33E, 12TH Street
New York, NY 10003

The schedule will be as follows:

Rosh Hashana Eve, Friday, September 22RD, 7 pm
Rosh Hashana Day, Saturday, September 23RD, 8 am

Yom Kippur Eve (Kol Nidre), Sunday, October 1ST, 6:15 pm
Yom Kippur Day, Monday, October 2ND, 7.30 am

The services are free. However, donations are welcome.

For more information, please contact: Romiel Daniel at jewsofindia@yahoo.com

BE'CHOL LASHON UPDATES

Ethiopian Jews' Panel Touches Questions of Race, Religion

By Rachel Sarah, August 4 2006, j. Weekly



"If you're presented with choices, such as being both black and Jewish, then who are you?"

This question, posed by Scott Rubin, was at the heart of the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival's panel discussion on Saturday, July 29 at Berkeley's Roda Theatre. Rubin, a senior research associate at the Institute for Jewish & Community Research, was moderating a panel discussion on race, adoption and Jewish identity.

The discussion — sponsored by Be'chol Lashon, a program of the Institute for Jewish & Community Research, which seeks to grow and strengthen the Jewish people through racial, ethnic and cultural inclusiveness — followed the screening of "Sisai," a documentary about a young man's journey from his adopted home and family in Israel to locate his long-lost father in their native Ethiopia.

"The lesson that I learned from this experience is that you should not have secrets in your family," Sisai Bayo, the star of the film who was in Berkeley for the screening, told the packed audience. "Make sure that your children know everything. Don't hide anything from them."

"Sisai," which was the winner of top documentary honors at last year's Jerusalem International Film Festival, is a portrait of immigrants caught between two worlds. When Bayo wants to get married, he and his fiancée can't find a rabbi who will marry two Ethiopian Jews. Later, when he wants to tell his birth father about getting married under the chuppah, he realizes there's no word for chuppah in Ethiopian.

Ethiopian Israeli filmmaker David Gavro, Bayo's older brother — who said that "the script came to me as I was filming" — took the film to Ethiopia last year, and Bayo's birth father came to the screening.

Audience members had many questions for the brothers about the present day relationship they have with Bayo's Christian birth father in Ethiopia. Bayo said that he has tried to stay in touch with his father, but due to the unreliable postal system in Ethiopia, few of his letters have reached his father. However, his father's letters have arrived safely in Israel.

There are 100,000 Ethiopian Jews in Israel and more than 100,000 remaining in Ethiopia, according to Rubin. Out of a U.S. Jewish population of 6 million, 7.3 percent (435,000) are African American, Asian, Latino, Native American, mixed-race, or some race other than white, according to the Institute for Jewish & Community Research's book "In Every Tongue: The Ethnic and Racial Diversity of the Jewish People."

"Most of the diverse Jews we have spoken with express a strong sense of unity, of joy in being both black and Jewish, Asian and Jewish, and so on," Rubin said. "They find points in common among their various heritages, with each reinforcing the other. It's a natural fit, since the Jewish people were born at the intersection of Africa, Asia and Europe."

Ethiopian Israeli Sirak M. Sabahat, who stars in the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival film "Live and Become" and was also on the panel, recalled the first moment that he saw Israeli Jews. "When we first arrived in Israel, we were in shock when we saw white Jews," Sabahat said. "We thought they had a skin problem."

"This film asks each of us to wonder about the power of our origins," said Rubin, who shared with the audience that he's the father of two adopted children, an African American son and a Latina daughter. "Some diverse Jews, however, find themselves at the very least having to consider how their racial or ethnic identity integrates with their Jewish identity," Rubin added. "Often these questions are coming from external pressures rather than an internal sense of misalignment. The larger black community may wonder how someone who is African American can also be Jewish, and the Jewish community may question the legitimacy of a non-white Jew, often as a result of ignorance but not malice or racism."

Asked what was the most important thing that happened to him as a result of being in the film, Sisai Bayo, now a charming, 23-year-old, soccer-playing father, said, "That I became a celebrity." The audience exploded in laughter. "You cannot forget where you come from," Sabahat added. "Our hearts will always be in Jerusalem, but how can we forget the house where we were born?"

Indian Jewish Congregation Takes Part in Israeli Day Parade for the First Time



The Indian Jewish Congregation of USA, participated for the first time in the Israel Day parade held on June 4th 2006 to show it's solidarity with the state of Israel and other Jewish communities all over the world.

The IJC of USA last year collected funds so that it could send two Sifrei Torah to the Beth El Synagogue in Panvel, Mumbai. This synagogue had lost all its six Sifrei Torah in the heavy rains of 2005. This was greatly appreciated by the community in India. This has given an impetus to do more for the community in India as well as to further increase its activities in the USA itself. Religious services for the High Holy Days Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur have been conducted for the Indian Jewish Community for the past 11 years.

The participation of the Indian Jewish Community in the Israeli Day Parade has helped in increasing the awareness among the American Jewish communities to the fact that there are other Jewish communities across the globe with a common history but with different traditions, all finally leading to a common tie, Judaism and its practices.

The IJC IN New York will aspire to increase its religious and social activities in the USA to ensure continuity of tradition and build a well knit community to keep alive our Indian heritage and our Indian Jewish Heritage.

Sincere thanks to the Indian Consulate , the India Tourism office for their support and Bension Reuben and Nathaniel Benjamin of Top Notch Moving &Storage for the beautifully designed T-shirts for all the participants.

For further information visit the IJC of USA website at www.jewsofindia.org

Not Even War Can Stop SF Attendees of WorldPride in Jerusalem **By Dan Pine, July 28 2006, j. weekly**



The Hezbollah rockets raining down on Israel have also indirectly rained on the parade — the WorldPride gay rights parade, originally set for Aug. 10 in Jerusalem. Because local police officials could not guarantee the safety of marchers, WorldPride organizers delayed the parade indefinitely, along with a planned Tel Aviv beach party (although other WorldPride events will go on as scheduled).

“It’s important for us to hold the march under safe and peaceful circumstances, and obviously, at this time, due to the political circumstances in the region, that is not the case,” said Hagai El-Ad, executive director of Jerusalem Open House, is a community center for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people that is organizing the weeklong WorldPride 2006 event.

While the parade and party are on hold, about 40 other gay pride events, including a gay film festival, health day and interfaith conference, will still be held starting Aug. 6. The march will be rescheduled once the fighting stops. And local Jewish trips to WorldPride are still on, though with events shifting so rapidly, anything could change.

At Congregation Sha’ar Zahav, a long-planned trip to Israel and WorldPride departs Sunday, July 30, though with fewer on the plane than initially signed up. About a dozen people have dropped out so far. “I cannot get what I want out of the trip any longer,” says congregant Michael Bettinger. “I wanted to be able to study Torah, in the broadest sense of the word, in the land of our spiritual and biological ancestors. To do this, I would need a certain internal state of peace and calm.”

“There are still quite a few people hanging in,” says Sha’ar Zahav Rabbi Camille Angel. “They feel it’s important that we stand with Israel and show our solidarity.” One of those is Mark Lipschutz. “The existence of Israel is a miracle in itself,” he says, “and I wish to support Israel during this time of difficulty. There’s always a risk being in Israel, but after much thought and prayer I feel the risk is somewhat minimal.”

Angel says that three other synagogues from other parts of the country that were to travel with Sha’ar Zahav have canceled their trips. The Jewish Community Relations Council’s trip was still on as of press time on Wednesday, though 11 of the original 28 participants have dropped out. Says JCRC executive director Rabbi Doug Kahn, “We’ve been operating continually on the premise we would be going, but we’re still assessing whether the goals of the trip can be realized.”

As for delaying the parade, most people headed for WorldPride understand the organizers’ rationale. “There’s a sense of relief in terms of the timing,” says Kahn. “I’m glad to see the event will be scheduled at another time, but before the current security concerns arose, there was concern about counterprotests during WorldPride.”

Adds Angel, “I appreciate that they are cautious about the need to have security. The police recognize that they don’t have enough forces to adequately protect us. But canceling everything would absolutely send the wrong message. No matter how many people postpone the trip, there will still be a conference.”

Brenda Gazzar of JTA contributed to this report.

CURRENT NEWS

Breaking Through Adoption's Racial Barriers

By Lynette Clemetson and Ron Nixon, August 17 2006, NY Times



Nick Mebruer and daughter Maggie. A judge at first blocked the Mebruers' effort to adopt a black child

When Martina Brockway and Mike Timble, a white couple in Chicago, decided to adopt a child, Ms. Brockway went to an adoption agency presentation at a black church to make it clear they wanted an African-American baby.

Their biological daughter, Rumeur, 3, is accumulating black dolls in preparation for her new brother or sister. Black-themed children's books like "Please, Baby, Please" by the filmmaker Spike Lee and his wife, Tonya Lewis Lee, share shelf space with Elmo and Dr. Seuss.

But the couple's decision provoked some uneasy responses. One of Mr. Timble's white friends asked, "Aren't there any white kids available?" Ms. Brockway's black friends were supportive. "But," she said, "I also sensed that there was maybe something they weren't saying." Mr. Timble cut in. "Like maybe they were thinking, 'What do these people think they are doing?'"

Ms. Brockway and Mr. Timble are among a growing number of white couples pushing past longtime cultural resistance to adopt black children. In 2004, 26 percent of black children adopted from foster care, about 4,200, were adopted transracially, nearly all by whites. That is up from roughly 14 percent, or 2,200, in 1998, according to a New York Times analysis of data from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect at [Cornell University](#) and from the [Department of Health and Human Services](#). "It is a significant increase," said Rita Simon, a sociologist at American University, who has written several books on transracial adoption. "It is getting easier, bureaucratically and socially. With so many people going overseas, people are also increasingly saying, 'Wait a minute, there are children here who need to be adopted, too.'"

The 2000 census — the first in which information on adoptions was collected — showed that just over 16,000 white households included adopted black children. Adoption experts say there has been a notable increase since 2000. The reasons for the increase are varied. The Multiethnic Placement Act and its amendments prohibited federally financed agencies from denying adoption based on race. The foster care system has sharply changed in recent years and now includes financial incentives for finding more adoptive families.

The combination of legal changes and greater embracing of multicultural families — Americans have adopted more than 200,000 children from overseas in the past 15 years — have lessened resistance from both blacks and whites. The long wait for white children and the high costs of international adoptions — typically \$15,000 to \$35,000 — also play a role.

And agencies are offering courses to help adoptive parents enter the process with more cultural openness and awareness.

Ms. Brockway and Mr. Timble decided to adopt after a physically and emotionally wrenching first pregnancy — their daughter was delivered at 25 weeks. They did not want to deal with the long wait for a white infant, and adopting from overseas did not appeal to them. "Some people see Asian or other ethnicities as closer to white, more acceptable, easier," said Ms. Brockway, a teacher. "That's just not us. We feel like we have the open arms and minds to be a good match to an African-American child."

In practice, however, decisions about adoption placements are still influenced by racial considerations, many families say. Since 1994, white prospective parents have filed, and largely won, more than two dozen discrimination lawsuits, according to state and federal court records. Many more disputes have been settled in arbitration. The loaded jumble of viewpoints and anxieties related to transracial adoptions of black children are complex and often contradictory.

Rhetoric around the issue has softened considerably since the National Association of Black Social Workers, in 1972, likened whites adopting black children to "cultural genocide." The group removed the genocide reference from its policy statement in 1994, but it still recommends same-race placements. And organizations like the Child Welfare League have argued in recent years that while race need not be the primary consideration in placements, it should not be disregarded.

Many blacks still worry that white families cannot equip black children to navigate the country's complicated racial landscape. "Adoption, like everything else in this country, gets filtered through the lens of race," said Joseph Crumbley, a black social worker in Philadelphia and a consultant on transracial adoptions. "For blacks, it is about how comfortable can whites be in dealing with the issue of race when their race is in conflict with the race of the child."

At the same time, some blacks view international adoptions by whites as a slight to black children in need of permanent and stable homes. "I can't help but wonder why Angelina and Brad can't adopt an African-American baby here with so many in need,"

said Ishia Granger, 36, a black friend of Ms. Brockway.

More than 45,000 black children were waiting to be adopted from foster care in 2004. There are no reliable national figures for private adoptions. Advocates of black adoption criticize adoption agencies as not doing enough to recruit black families. But one strategy agencies use, in part, to recruit black families — reducing fees for African-American adoptions — seems to some critics like a literal devaluing of black children. And while current adoption laws impose penalties on federally financed agencies that discriminate, there are no penalties for failure to identify black adoptive families.

Both black and white families, at times, feel discriminated against. Charlene White, a black adoptive mother in Richmond, Va., said that when she and her husband, Malachi, began the process in 1997, a counselor asked them about drug and criminal records — questions a white couple they knew who were also adopting were not asked.

“It was definitely because we were black,” Ms. White said.

A white judge initially denied Nick and Emily Mebruer’s petition to adopt a black child, ruling that the Mebruers, a white couple who live in rural Lebanon, Mo., were “uniquely unqualified” to parent a black child because of their limited interaction with black people and culture. The ruling was overturned, and their daughter, Maggie, is now 3. “We felt like it was an indictment of us and our entire community,” said Mrs. Mebruer, a family doctor, as Maggie played with a black doll in the center of the living room and danced to the Australian children’s group the Wiggles. “It was assuming that we didn’t have the desire or the capacity to learn.” The Mebruers did not explicitly set out to adopt a black child. But when the Kansas City office of [Catholic Charities](#) called one spring afternoon to say that an infant was available and that they needed the couple’s decision within hours, the race of the child, Mr. Mebruer said, was secondary.

White families adopting black children are increasingly learning that the “love is enough” approach to adoption that families bring to the process is often met with skepticism.

Psychologists, researchers and adoptees themselves say many children adopted transracially in past decades suffered from philosophies focused on assimilation, with little or no acknowledgment of racial and cultural conflict.

Robert O’Connor, 39, who was raised by a white family in Rush City, Minn., recalled his struggles growing up in a small town with few other blacks. Throughout his youth, he said, he felt awkward around other blacks. He did not understand black trends in fashion or music or little things like playing the dozens, the oral tradition of dueling insults. “I always felt like I had this ‘A’ on my forehead, this adoptee, that people could see from a far distance that I was different,” said Mr. O’Connor, who now researches transracial adoptions as assistant professor of social work at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul.

Today, some agencies are working to avoid mistakes of the past. Ms. Brockway and Mr. Timble are adopting through the Cradle, a Chicago agency that gives transracial adoptive parents extensive counseling as well as a course on “conspicuous families.” One exercise meant to assess parents’ comfort level in confronting racial issues lists a roster of stereotypes including, “lazy,” “passive” and “athletic,” and asks parents to assign them to the race or ethnic group to which they are often applied.

Judy Stigger, a counselor at the Cradle and herself a white adoptive mother of two black children, now adults, makes the issues tangible to prospective parents by relating personal stories. She tells about the time when her son, then a teenager, reached into her purse at a McDonald’s and a clerk called security; and the time when her daughter began crying while looking through congratulatory cards sent by family and friends when they took her home.

“Was I supposed to have been white?” her daughter, then in the third grade, asked. Ms. Stigger had never noticed that the children on all of the cards were white. “It’s about getting people to realize that they should not be thinking about being, as one 8-year-old put it to me, ‘a white family with a weird child,’ but a multiracial family,” Ms. Stigger said. “The way most white people use the term ‘colorblind’ is just silly. We want to create color aware families, not colorblind families.”

Ms. Brockway worked for years in predominantly black schools and now tutors children in foster care. Mr. Timble, who owns a promotional printing business, has a cousin who has adopted four black children. They live in an ethnically diverse section of northwest Chicago.

But after working through the adoption process, Ms. Brockway said, they are considering moving to a neighborhood with more black professionals and finding a more diverse church.

For some adopting families, public reaction defies assumptions. Katherine and Ryan Liebl were dining recently in the Oak Park neighborhood of Chicago, where they live, when a black family asked them where they had adopted their son, Matthew, now 8 months old.

They responded that he was from Chicago and steeled for disapproval. Instead, they said, the family cheered: “Yeah, domestic baby. Good for you!”

The Liebls, who adopted through the Cradle, were chosen by black birth parents from profiles submitted by black and white adoptive families. The same birth parents had previously chosen a black couple, Dana and Drayden Hilliard, to adopt two older children. So the Liebls' son Matthew has two biological siblings being raised by a black family in a nearby suburb.

The two families have become friends and are raising the children as siblings, getting them together about once a month.

The Hilliards said they were surprised that the birth mother chose a white family. "But wherever a child can find love, black, white or purple, that is all right with me," said Ms. Hilliard, 39, a program analyst. "I do feel that if parents adopt transracially they owe it to their child to keep them connected with their heritage. But we are happy to be a resource for that."

The two families do not know for sure what attracted the birth mother to them, but they said worldliness seemed to have trumped race. The birth mother commented to each that their expressed love for travel would offer her children a chance to explore the world that she never had.

"We feel like we struck gold," said Mr. Liebl, 31, a lawyer. "Matthew has these siblings that he will know and this level of contact between us that is authentic and not forced."

In the personal letters that the Cradle requires adoptive parents to submit to birth parents, those adopting transracially are asked to include examples of how they would bring diversity to a child's life. Ms. Brockway said it had been a difficult exercise. She wants to include pictures with black friends, but not too many. She wants to write about her black students, Mike's black relatives and co-workers, their activities in black communities — but not too much. "I don't want to appear over the top, trying too hard, like we think we're cool because we have black friends," she said. "And who is to say what any birth mother will think is important or how any one views or defines diversity and culture. These things are different for everyone."

Sabrina I. Pacifici contributed additional reporting.

Iranian Jews in US Grapple with Crisis

By Nahal Toosi, August 7 2006, The Associated Press

Eighty-year-old Manoochehr Omidvar -- a serene presence if there ever was one -- has witnessed many things, but these are especially strange and troubling times for him and other Iranian Jews living in America. Israel is fighting in Lebanon against the Iranian-backed extremist group **Hezbollah**. And Iran's president, **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**, has called the Holocaust a myth, refused to abandon his country's nuclear development activities, and said the main solution for the tensions in the Mideast is Israel's obliteration.

As the fighting in Lebanon continues, Iranian American Jews are watching the news closely and worrying about relatives in both Israel and Iran. But when it comes to their loyalty or identity, they say there is no conflict, just complexity. One recent day, in a small white house that felt more like a sauna, Omidvar drank a glass of hot Iranian tea and glanced at a Hebrew-language newspaper. Nearby, copy machines spat out the latest issue of *Payam*, a weekly Persian-language magazine he edits. Female Israeli soldiers appeared on the cover, with the headline "Women at War."

Omidvar lauds the Jewish state, saying, "History has shown us that nowhere in the world do Jews have security besides Israel." Still, he longs to see his homeland once more. "I love Iran," he said. "If the regime changes, two weeks later, I'd go back." Make no mistake -- by and large, Iranian American Jews are fervent supporters of Israel. The community, an estimated 60,000 to 80,000 strong, has raised millions for the country it considers a spiritual homeland. They have no sympathy for Hezbollah.

As for Iran, that is a more complex subject. Iranian Jews may disdain Iran's hardline rulers, but there is much respect and affection for Iran the country and the culture, especially among the elder generation. "I miss Iran," said Nasser Rahmani, 64, who left the country almost 20 years ago. "I miss the dust and the water."

Next to Los Angeles, the New York area is home to the second-biggest group of Iranian American Jews, about 10,000 people, community leaders said. More than half live in Great Neck and nearby villages.

The first Iranian Jews in Great Neck arrived several decades ago, community leaders said, but the influx grew dramatically after the 1979 Iranian revolution brought to power an Islamic regime. Except for the occasional Persian-language store sign, though, there are few signs of the Iranian Jewish presence in Great Neck. The Iranian Jews in town are very affluent and tight-knit -- some say insular -- with their own synagogues and organizations.

Parents try to transmit their ethnic as well as religious traditions to children, even if it is just through Persian cooking or music. It is not unusual to see Iranian Jews in a rally supporting Israel, which is home to some 200,000 Jews of Iranian descent. At the same time, they may root for Iran in the World Cup.

"We're Jews, but we're Iranian," said Houman Sarshar, a scholar who has written extensively about the community. "Everybody wants their children to speak Persian. Everybody's always reminding each other that they're Iranian. They want their children to marry Iranian Jews."

Iranian American Jews often note that before 1979, Jews lived relatively freely in Iran and the country had good relations with Israel. They point to 2,700 years of Jewish presence in the Persian land, predating Islam. They also note that at least 25,000 Jews still live in Iran, and that as a religious group, they are technically protected by the country's constitution.

"The position we take is that we support what the majority of the Iranian people want for that country, which in essence translates into the ability of the majority to speak their mind -- a democracy," said Sam Kermanian, secretary general of the Los Angeles-based Iranian American Jewish Federation, which also has a New York counterpart.

Raymond Iryami, a lawyer from Great Neck who serves on the board of the New York federation, said that although Iranian Jews keep both Israel and Iran at the forefront of their identities, the younger generation in particular considers itself very much American, taking an active role in professional and political circles.

Iranian Jews in the U.S. tend to approach the pro-Israeli cause more quietly than other groups, keeping in mind the safety of the Jews in Iran. The money raised goes to Israel for humanitarian purposes, community leaders said. In the past, when Iran has suffered from earthquakes, the community also raised money to help people there.

Nahid Rahimian, 36, left Iran almost four years ago and is now in Great Neck. She said the Jewish community in Iran is allowed to worship freely, "but you could only go so far."

She dreams constantly about Iran but is getting used to life in America. For her, that includes helping Omidvar prepare Payam for his 1,000-plus subscribers. And it means wondering when the latest Middle East crisis will end. At the end of the day, everyone just wants peace, she said. What if the battle escalates, transforming itself from Israel versus Hezbollah to Israel versus Iran? Some Iranian Jews refuse to entertain the hypothetical, saying it is too far-fetched. Others, apparently having heard this question before, pose one in return: "How can one choose between their mother and their father?"

AIDS Meeting Spotlight on Circumcision Despite Promising Research, it may be "Trouble" to Adopt **By Sabin Russell, August 16 2006, SF Gate**



At a conference often dominated by high-tech research from the world's most sophisticated labs, a medical practice dating back to biblical times is emerging as potentially the most powerful weapon available to curtail the modern scourge of AIDS.

Male circumcision — the surgical removal of the foreskin from the penis — has been shown in at least one major clinical trial in Africa to reduce the chance of female-to-male transmission of HIV by 60 percent, and policymakers and leaders as prominent as Bill Gates and Bill Clinton have begun to consider ways to vastly expand the practice in regions of the world hardest hit by AIDS.

"If research shows it saves lives, we have to be prepared to deal with it," Clinton said to a packed hall of over 6,000 delegates at the 16th International AIDS Conference in Toronto, and to thousands of others who filled overflow rooms to watch him on video screens.

Clinton noted that definitive proof that circumcision works is still pending, but he said that if researchers give the procedure the

green light, ways must be found to assure that it can be offered in "safe, rapid and comprehensive ways." And he conceded that, because the decision to circumcise is often deeply rooted in cultural traditions, it is bound to be controversial. "Frankly, it's going to be a lot of trouble to get it done," he said.

At a session devoted to circumcision research, scientists reported that, if the 60 percent protective rate holds up, programs to offer safe circumcision in Africa could save thousands of lives and would be extremely cost-effective.

Although dozens of studies since the 1980s have shown that circumcised men in Africa and India appeared to have substantially lower HIV infection rates, agencies such as the World Health Organization and UNAIDS have refused to endorse the procedure until three large-scale, carefully controlled experiments combined prove that it works.

Last year, the first of the three studies found that the protective effect was about 60 percent -- and possibly as high as 76 percent — in a group of South African men who were circumcised.

On Tuesday, Walter Reed Army Medical Center researcher Douglas Shaffer reported on a smaller study comparing infection rates of circumcised and uncircumcised men in rural Kenya, and found a 69 percent protective effect. Two remaining large-scale trials are expected to be completed next year in Kenya and Uganda. Results of the Ugandan study are expected in July, the Kenyan study in September.

In the meantime, the startlingly good results of the South African study are prompting researchers to contemplate just how to roll out a campaign to encourage circumcision — and to keep the potentially dangerous procedure safe. Professor James McIntyre of the University of the Witwatersrand in Soweto, South Africa, said hospitals are already reporting an increase in men seeking circumcision on their own.

However, the sensitivities surrounding the operation — which some view as sexual mutilation, others as emblematic of cultural identity — have made major payers such as private foundations and government agencies reluctant to promote it without ironclad scientific proof it is safe and lowers overall HIV risk. As a consequence, McIntyre said, a potentially lifesaving intervention is being held to an unreasonably high standard.

If, for example, a vaginal gel, or microbicide, were found to protect 60 percent of the women using it, "we'd be out promoting it," he said. "I should think we should at least be planning how to do a scale-up (of circumcision)."

In Tuesday's session, UCSF researcher James Kahn reported that adult circumcisions could be provided for about \$55 per man, and that based on the South African study findings, that investment could save as much as \$2,400 in future medical costs for every infection averted.

"As male circumcision is scaled up, it's an important opportunity to study economics as well as effectiveness," said Kahn.

Another study by Yale University researchers projected that a program that increased adult male circumcision rates in Soweto by 10 percent each year for five years could save 32,000 lives in that city over 20 years — 52,000 if that rate were doubled to 20 percent. Yale researcher Kyeen Mesesan told delegates that male circumcision "can confer substantial health benefits" and that programs offering even a modest expansion of the procedure should be "implemented immediately."

French researcher Dr. Bertrand Auvert, who conducted the South African study, separately reported last month in the journal PLoS Medicine, that widespread adoption of circumcision in sub-Saharan Africa could save 3 million lives over 20 years.

At the conference, Auvert said in an interview that "people are reluctant to promote 'low technology' " such as circumcision, and are enamored instead with high-tech treatments. Although he is frustrated that policymakers haven't moved more quickly to promote circumcision since his study came out, Auvert acknowledged that there are challenges ahead. The surgery in the study was performed by doctors, but Africa faces an acute shortage of physicians. "A health priority is to find a simple, fast way for this to be done by nurses," he said.

IDENTITY

The Woman who Gave me my Strength
By Mariane Pearl, August 2006, Glamour



Pearl's mom, Marita Van Neyenhoff, at a Cuban party in Paris

When my mother died of cancer a few years ago, she left me a beautiful silver ashtray and a red notebook in which she'd written her final request in just a few words—that she be returned to Cuba, where she was born. I brought her ashes there, and ran down a hill spreading them into the warm Caribbean air. "I don't know what is expecting me back home," she had written. "It might be as simple as a street, a child or a tree, but I know it will make me happy." That little note was just one of the many ways my mother showed optimism in the face of the unknown.

People sometimes ask where I get the strength to hold on to my dreams and ideals, or simply to nurture hope. I tell them we are all born with courage—what matters is what you use this courage for. My mother, who overcame her own personal tragedy, taught me that one person can change her fate, no matter what the odds. The day I spread her ashes, I wrote her legacy down. Again, it was no more than a few words: "Don't you dare live without faith." For my mom, it was her faith in the power of life that got her through some of her darkest moments.

My mother's story began in a tiny emerald-green house in a poor neighborhood on the outskirts of Havana. She grew up with a father who was a handsome mix of Cuban and Chinese, and who, one day, decided to stop talking altogether, although he wasn't mute. Her mother, meanwhile, was a hard-core gossip who spent the entire day with rollers in her hair and loved nothing more than makeup, clothes and sexy jokes. My own mom's dream, she said to me once, was to marry a man who would take her around the world, to raise his children and to be the ground beneath his feet. Indeed, she and her cousins loved to spend time in hotels looking at foreigners—a rather scarce commodity at that time in Cuba—and she met my father in the lobby of the Habana Libre. He was sitting in the lounge, sipping a glass of the local rum and reading a book. With his green eyes and curly chestnut hair, he looked like the leftist European intellectual that he was. The son of a Dutch diamond dealer, he traveled the world to witness the process of potential revolutions, and when Fidel Castro took over Cuba, he was one of the first foreigners to offer his help. He was also a man who suffered from deep depression.

That day at the Habana Libre, my dad invited my mom and her cousins to the hotel bar, with its bamboo walls and mahogany tables. At the end of the evening, he bought two roses. He ceremoniously offered one to each of the cousins to placate them, then turned to my mom to kiss her. "I looked into this man's eyes," she told me later, "and I realized he was going to die early."

But she married the romantic rebel anyway. In 1965, Castro's revolution was growing increasingly radical, and my parents knew that it would only get worse. They left Havana on a boat to Holland. But when my mother arrived in Rotterdam, she didn't receive a very warm welcome. No one talked to her, and she couldn't understand the European aloofness. She had come from a place where everyone commented on everything—from your smile to the sensuality of your walk—and where total strangers called you *mi amor*. My mom found out that there was a small community of Cuban expatriates living in Paris, so our family packed up and moved there. But finally having friends didn't help much, as my mother's early premonition about her husband turned out to be true: My father was suicidal. My mom tried to paste him together with her own enthusiasm for life, but to no avail.

I have often tried to imagine what she must have felt like with a psychologically damaged husband and two small children in a foreign country, and nowhere to go back to, since Cuba had been swallowed by the ego of its alleged savior. But the more my father became obsessed with death, the more my mother grew obsessed with life. As my mom found herself losing her husband, she threw all her energy into making sure my brother, Satchi, and I would embrace life.

Due to my dad's illness, our family's financial situation grew precarious. Yet somehow, my mom managed to take care of my brother and me without letting on that circumstances were dire, even if that led to some rather unorthodox ways of providing for her children.

I remember sitting with her one day in the tiny, bare-walled back office of our supermarket in Paris. She had a spaced-out look on her face as she waited for the security guard to stop scolding us for being thieves. On the table in front of us lay the bloody and absurd object of our crime: two huge rib-eye steaks neatly wrapped in cellophane paper; we had slipped them into my mother's

bag. As the security guard rambled on, I knew my mom was thinking of her own mother, recalling the time when she had taken my grandmother, who was visiting Paris from Cuba for the first time, to this same market only a few months earlier. My grandmother had stood in the meat aisle, tears rolling down her sun-wrinkled face, admiring the veal cutlets and pork chops lined up before her eyes. She was so poor, she had actually forgotten what meat smelled like.

In the end, the security guard gave us the steaks. It was one of my first lessons in how utterly determined my mom was to fend off misery. It was that determination that led her to have a very deep, lonely and controversial conversation with my father. On a gray Parisian morning after sending us to school, she sat at my dad's bedside in the room that had become a forbidden territory for us kids, a cave full of scattered newspapers, scribbled notes and cigarette butts. She told him he had to decide to live or to die, and that she would support his decision either way. "I will hold your hand if you want to live; I will hold your hand if you want to die," she said. My father chose to die—alone—and took his own life soon after, when the rest of us were visiting Marseille. I was nine, and my brother, 11. Nowadays, my father probably would have been diagnosed with acute bipolar disorder, and he might have prolonged his life with modern medication. At the time, there were not many options.

After his death, my mom embraced life even more passionately, for herself and her family. She became a surrogate mother to friends, and she made people smile when they had forgotten how. Once, when an acquaintance was bedridden, she introduced him to someone from his village in South Africa; they talked of exotic names and places, and I'll never forget the ecstatic smile on the sick man's face. She decided to create her own Cuban enclave in Paris, announcing that she would host Cuban-style parties from noon to midnight, with live music, food and drinks. The admission fee was just a few dollars, and everyone was welcome: children, the elderly, the shy, those who couldn't dance. In a few months, the parties, known as Guateque, became so popular that she started holding them every other Sunday in giant deserted warehouses and garages. Despite her success, my mom refused to raise the price or make a profit; her parties were from the heart.

I went to all those gatherings, and I had never seen so many people so happy. Elegant old couples would start the Guateque by twirling around the makeshift dance floor. Toddlers ran rampant. Sexy young women would heat up the crowd, couples would form, and by five o'clock in the afternoon, there would be anywhere from 500 to 800 guests. My mother watched over everyone, beaming with satisfaction. Wearing a turban and a brightly colored dress, she looked like a down-to-earth queen, an aristocrat of the people.

I would stand by the bar and watch her, marveling at her patience in dealing with people's petty demands and emotional outbursts. She embraced strangers, and she taught people who had never danced before to dance. She accomplished something unusual in life—she forced a tragedy to retreat. Our memories of the dark times with our dad faded as she created happiness around us.

But the most important lesson of all came on the day that she died, in 1999. My brother and I stood together by her hospital bed. I loved her so fiercely that when she took her last breath, I felt like I myself was swept from the ground, observing from above the sight of my children holding my hands, my daughter bending over to kiss my lips. For that split second before I came back to myself, I felt an enormous sense of pride. I could see things through my mother's eyes—I could see that whatever awaited the two children below, they would be fine. They hadn't had a perfect life, but they would make it because they had been taught all they needed to know about courage and hope. They had become people with undefeatable faith.

Today, as a mother myself, I cannot attempt to provide a perfect life for my four-year-old son, Adam. All I want is to inspire him. I try my best to embrace the little everyday battles, as well as the overwhelming challenge of raising him without his father, to display faith and courage and to pass these ideals on to him. And I always feel my mother's cosmic smile when my son and I, for no reason at all, feel an urge to play Cuban music and dance.

British for 350 years

By Ashley Perry, June 11 2006, EJ Press

People often ask me where my family is from, I reply Britain and they invariably ask me where my grand-parents came from and I reply again Britain. Sometimes they will ask where my great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents came from and the reply is still Britain.

This answer is usually met with incredulity as most assume that Anglo-Jewry is in the main no more than two or three generations long and has its origins in Eastern Europe. When I tell these same people that I am in fact 17th generation British, I am met with disbelieving and astonished looks.

The fact is my family has been in Britain for 350 years and unlike most of Anglo-Jewry today, we are Sephardim (Jews of Spanish and Portuguese ancestry). My ancestors were admitted to England shortly after the English Civil War when the Lord Protector

Oliver Cromwell having won a raging battle against the Monarchists needed financiers to reinvigorate the war-torn English economy.

Rabbi Menassah Ben Israel of the Amsterdam community petitioned Cromwell to readmit Jews to a land which had not officially seen a Jew in over 360 years. Cromwell accepted the petition but not after a much heated exchange with those who sought to prevent Jews from being readmitted.

The first Jewish community in Britain for centuries consisted of no more than a handful of families who arrived from the thriving Sephardic Jewish community in Amsterdam to try their luck in London. After a few more years and the addition of new families, the first Synagogue was built, namely Bevis Marks, which still stands, although sadly under-used, in the City of London.

Britishness and being Jewish

My rich Sephardic-Anglo background with its honorary titles and coats-of-arms leaves me somewhat divided. While on the one hand I am proud of what British Jewry has achieved, on the other I am saddened by what being British has made the Jews.

"Britishness" is a hotly debated subject in those Isles today; many are asking what British means and how does one attain this appellation. As opposed to some other parts of the world, it is not done to apply an adjective to your nationality. You can not be "African-British" or "Asian-British." It is far more simple than that, you are either British or you are not.

Unlike most other minorities, Jews can hide all elements of their heritage and become "British". This has led to a quandary for many Jews, especially in this generation. Jews no longer want to be outsiders in any way and with help from a certain amount of antipathy have morphed into the British cultural and social landscape with few if any discernible characteristics.

British Jews unlike their American counterparts have anglicised their names and their customs. My father and grand-father both felt it was necessary to change their name from the foreign sounding 'Pereira-Perez' to Perry as they went off to fight "Johnny-Foreigner" in the two world wars. Anglo-Jewry has literally had to take it's Kippa off its head, as Chief Rabbi Sacks suggested due to security concerns a few years ago.

Clash of civilizations?

I have my own personal opinions as to why British mistrust and suspicion of the Jews is so different and perhaps at a higher social level than most other forms of world-wide anti-Semitism. The British consider themselves the height of civilization, the founder of democracy and the force that brought culture to much of the world. However, there is one people that has lived with the British for many years which reminds them that their 'civilisation' is relatively new.

A good example of this was a retort by Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli to an anti-Semitic remark aimed at him in the House of Commons, "when the right honorable gentlemen's ancestors were savages on an unknown Island, mine were priests in the Temple of Solomon," Disraeli responded.

I do believe that this rankles the British upper and literary social set, which finds its manifestations in the so-called "chattering classes." A few years ago Penelope Wyatt reported in the Spectator Magazine the remark of a peer in her upper-middle class social milieu, "Thank God, we can once again say what we want about the Jews."

While most in most western countries, anti-Semitism is usually the bastion of the underprivileged and those from the lower-socioeconomic classes, in Britain its strongest protagonists are to be found at the opposite end of the social spectrum.

As Anglo-Jewry celebrates 350 years since its re-admittance, I look back on my own familial Anglo-Jewish narrative with a mixture of pride, interest and a heavy dose of consternation. Anglo-Jewry faces an uncertain future as it struggles for its own self-identity. As for me I have made my choice. At least from my side of the family there will not be an 18th generation British as I have returned to Israel where my roots extend many times those of my sojourn in the British Isles.

From Tehran to Tinseltown

By Robert Kantor, July 2006, World Jewish Digest



Bahar Soomekh is not easily deterred. Case in point? Earning a role in the controversial Oscar-winner *Crash*. Longing to play the part of Dorri—the daughter of Iranian immigrants struggling to assimilate to life in America—Soomekh took matters into her own hands when a former agent failed to land her an audition.

"One day I get a phone call from a girl who wanted me to teach her Farsi for a film that she was auditioning for," the 31-year-old Iranian Jewish actress told *World Jewish Digest* in a phone interview from her hotel room in Toronto, where she is currently filming the third installment in the *Saw* franchise. "She said it was for a film called *Crash*. I was like there is no way I am teaching you Farsi for a film that I am destined to do. I have to do this film, this is my part—Dorri is me!"

Like Dorri, Soomekh is the daughter of Persian parents who brought their oldworld ways to their new life in America. Born in Tehran, Bahar ("springtime" in Farsi) and her sister Saba ("a light, springtime breeze") were young girls in the early 80's when their parents fled the Iranian revolution and moved them to Minneapolis, Chicago and San Francisco, before finally settling the family in Los Angeles. There the Soomekhs created a manufacturing business and sent their girls to Conservative Jewish day school at Sinai Akiba Academy, where they learned English, Hebrew and Talmud. For Bahar, whose parents worked often and hard, her teachers also became mentors.

It was within this nurturing environment that Bahar got the itch to act. "It was always something I wanted to do," she says. "Everyone I grew up with was [the child of] a struggling actor. It was almost like I was rebelling if I didn't act." While Bahar did a lot of theater work as a kid, a career in acting was not something her traditional parents supported—at least not initially. Like many immigrant parents, Soomekh's mother and father preferred that she pursue a profession in which her next paycheck was guaranteed.

And so, for a while, Soomekh stayed on the straight and narrow. She believed that her theater experience wouldn't get her anywhere in a movieand- television town like Los Angeles, and she refused to move away from her family to pursue her stage dreams.

Instead, Soomekh graduated from Beverly Hills High School in 1993 and went on to earn a degree in environmental studies from the University of California at Santa Barbara. After college, she spent time backpacking through Europe, and upon her return to L. A., took a job in sales to pay off the debt from her trip.

But while she thrived professionally, working her way up the corporate ladder to a managerial position, Soomekh longed to return to acting, her real passion. She enrolled in night classes, where she worked on her acting skills until the early hours of the morning. When she finally decided to quit her day job—a decision she calls "the scariest thing" she's ever done—it was only a couple of months until she found Dorri.

"So I find out that this girl, the one who was asking me to teach her Farsi, was going to get offered the part," Soomekh says, the intensity in her voice all but giving away her palpably ambitious heart. "I flipped out. I called everyone I knew in the industry, and I had a cousin at a big agency who said, 'Don't worry, I'll call and get you an audition ...' So I went into the audition and gave them my heart, my soul—I gave everything I had. And then I walked out and went in my car and sobbed for an hour ... I was so emotionally involved in this character, and I was so sad that they were giving the part to somebody else."

Two days later, though, Soomekh got the call that she had booked the role. Since then she has earned a number of coveted credentials, including a scene alongside Tom Cruise in the recently released *Mission: Impossible III* (still in theaters), a spot in the director's cut of *Syriana* (set for release later this year) and a place in People magazine's recent "100 Most Beautiful" issue. Soomekh has also made episodic appearances on *Without a Trace*, *JAG* and *24*.

Still, it's her upcoming role in *Saw III*, set for release around Halloween, that makes Soomekh realize she is closer than ever to achieving celebrity status. Before *Crash*, most of Soomekh's work was on TV, where she was frustrated to find herself constantly typecast as an Arab woman.

"A lot of the stuff I had gotten was the husband blowing himself up and the devastation of the wife in understanding why her husband did it," Soomekh says, recalling the frequent auditions she spent bawling her eyes out for casting directors. "But I knew it

was a stepping stone in building my resume. And luckily, after Crash, I don't have to do that anymore. In Saw, my ethnicity is not a factor, not even a discussion—I'm just a woman."

Soomekh's background does, however, factor into her personal life. Extremely proud of her Jewish heritage, she married avid surfer and fellow member of the tribe, Clayton, in 2001. "Marriage is difficult enough and then once you have a family, if you have people from significantly different belief systems and backgrounds, it's even harder ... We really dove down deep to figure out our values and how we wanted to manifest that in our home."

Soomekh and her husband celebrate Shabbat every Friday night with her extended family, attend synagogue frequently and celebrate as many Jewish holidays as her hectic schedule will allow. But it is the Jewish teaching of *tikkun olam*—healing the world—that most guides Soomekh's life. She firmly believes that all people, not only Jews, have an obligation to contribute what they can toward making this world a better place, and she does her part by working for environmental and children's causes.

"I have the ability to use my name and be involved with such phenomenal organizations like the Green Cross ... and the Rainforest Action Network (RAN), which was an organization I started raising money for when I was a kid, and then here I am coming back and I'm working with them now," Soomekh says. "But also a huge issue for me has become limb deficiency for kids around the world. Kids that are neglected because of some sort of disability—you see that a lot in China and you see that in Africa—I think that's a very important thing."

Soomekh spends her few spare moments relaxing at the beach with her husband, getting in the playtime she considers essential. Despite the distractions of Hollywood and her blossoming film career, she remains both rooted and worldly, seamlessly flowing between topics personal and political, yet always managing to find her way home again.

"When I was on the red carpet at the Academy Awards, at one point I said to Isaac Mizrahi that I'm Persian," she recalls saying to the fashiondesigner-turned-Oscar-correspondent, who is also Jewish. "Just because I'm in Hollywood doesn't mean that I forget that I'm Persian or that I'm Jewish. Judaism is not only my religion—it's my identity."

JEWISH COMMUNITIES AROUND THE WORLD

The Man who Couldn't be Buried, and Other Stories of Brazil's Jews By Bill Hinchberger, July 21 2006, JTA



The man who couldn't be buried: It may sound like the title of a Hollywood horror film, but this tale is true.

In the 1840s, Benjamin Benatar founded the first bar in Vassouras, a little town about 75 miles outside of Rio de Janeiro that today has a population of 33,206.

Born in Gibraltar, Benatar introduced billiards to the town and organized dances. Never much for calling attention to his religious heritage amid all the revelry, Benatar must have felt a twinge of faith on his death bed in 1859: He would be buried a Jew, he demanded.

Benatar's final request threw Vassouras into a tizzy. There was only one cemetery, and it was reserved for Roman Catholics. Finally, perhaps in the interest of public health, officials at the town's only hospital, the Catholic Santa Casa, allowed Benatar to be buried on its grounds.

Revealing anecdotes like that one pepper "Jews in Brazil: Inquisition, Immigration and Identity," a book recently released in Portuguese by Brazilian publisher Civilizacao Brasileira. With contributions from more than a dozen leading scholars, the volume represents one of the first efforts to provide a comprehensive overview of Jewish history in South America's largest country.

"Jews in Brazil" is divided into two sections. One covers the colonial period, with an emphasis on the Portuguese Inquisition and its effect on the lives of Jews and anusim, or forced converts. The other focuses on contemporary Brazil, examining waves of immigration in the 19th and mid-20th centuries - notably from Europe, Morocco and Egypt - and the recent history of Jews in the country.

Editor Keila Grinberg is a history professor at the University of Rio de Janeiro and the Institute of Humanities of Candido Mendes University. The book grew out of her experience teaching an adult-education class on Jewish history in Brazil in 2000 as part of the country's commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Portuguese landing on the coast of South America. "I tried to find a book like this to use in the course, but there wasn't one," she recalled.

Brazilian academia lacks a tradition of ethnic studies akin to that in the United States and some other parts of the world. Few universities offer specialized programs in Jewish Studies, though in 2002 the University of Sao Paulo, or USP, inaugurated a Center for the Study of Intolerance, which includes anti-Semitism as part of a broader research agenda.

Grinberg called upon leading scholars of Jewish-Brazilian history to contribute. USP's Bruno Feitler analyzed the 1630-1654 Dutch occupation of northeastern Brazil. That was a relatively advantageous time and place for Jews and anusim, and it brought the founding of the first synagogue of the Americas, Kahal Zur Israel, in the city of Recife.

Many Jews of Portuguese heritage left their exile in Amsterdam and relocated to Brazil during this period, Jaqueline Hermann of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro noted in another chapter. She cited evidence suggesting that Jews comprised nearly half the population of Recife at the time.

USP's Anita Novinsky wrote about the role of anusim in the 18th-century gold rush in Minas Gerais and about the persecution many of them faced from the Portuguese Inquisition. She relates how the anusim used their national and international connections to circumvent efforts by the Portuguese crown to restrict access to the mining regions.

Grinberg tells of Jewish-Moroccan immigrants in the 19th century who located, like some of her own ancestors, in the Amazon, many to take advantage of the rubber boom. The Amazon also provides the setting for a strange example of Brazilian religious syncretism, the case of the Santo Rabbi.

A rabbi from Jerusalem died of malaria while visiting the Amazonian city of Manaus in 1910, and was buried separately in the Catholic cemetery. Locals began to attribute miracles to the rabbi's spirit, and his tomb became a destination of pilgrimage by devout Catholics.

The book also tackles a simmering academic debate over the importance of anti-Semitism in the government of Getulio Vargas, a Brazilian strongman akin to his better-known Argentinean contemporary Juan Peron.

Vargas ruled Brazil before and during World War II with a fascist-inspired set of policies called the Estado Novo, or New State. The regime flirted with the Axis before finally joining the Allies near the end of the war.

Before the war began, Brazil's Foreign Ministry issued a secret order to its embassies directing them to deny visas to individuals of "Semitic origins."

Yet during this same period, legal migration of European Jews to Brazil skyrocketed. In the year following the secret decree, more Jews entered the country legally than in any year in the previous two decades. New immigrants flooded Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana, for instance, earning that neighborhood the derisive nickname of "Copacabanavitch."

Some scholars argue that the anti-Semitism of the Vargas regime was soft-core and contradictory. Others continue to highlight its discriminatory aspects. "Jews in Brazil" allows proponents of both views to state their cases.

"I tried to provide space to everyone," Grinberg said.

There are as yet no plans to translate the book, but not for lack of interest by the editor.

"I would very much like to do something in English - either to have this book translated or to write a new manuscript for a foreign

audience," Grinberg said.

How far to go for Kosher Pastrami? Finally a Palatable Answer in Prague

By Dina Spritzer, August 6 2006, JTA



Dini Barash, Rabbi Manis Barash and restaurant regular Jakov Feldman sit outside the Shelanu Cafe & Deli in Prague.

A beefy tourist approaches the counter and, with a distinctive outer-borough New York accent, brusquely interrogates a modest rabbi's wife. "Hey, I heard this is the only place in Prague where you can get pastrami. True or false?" he asked, clearly intending to act on an ancient urge known to many as "deli desire." Dini Barash briefly hesitates, then replies with her big and disarming white-toothed smile, "Pastrami we have. And you can even get corned beef." Awed at his discovery, the traveler shouts with glee to his companions loitering outside, "Guys, this is the place!"

And in march two more men. "Maybe you got a knish?" queries one of her new patrons, an African American. This enthusiasm is becoming commonplace at Prague's first kosher deli, opened a month ago by the city's Chabad rabbi, Manis Barash, and his wife, Dini. Shelanu Cafe & Deli, in the heart of the Jewish Quarter, is one of a tiny number of kosher restaurants in the country.

A casual cafe, it has broader appeal than King Solomon's, a kosher place where the food is excellent but higher prices and a more formal setting limit its range of clientele. So far, Barash says, Shelanu — "Ours" in Hebrew — has been frequented by transplanted and visiting Israelis and Americans, Japanese groups and French Jews desperate for kosher food. There is almost no place in the country to eat kosher, even though it is estimated that hundreds of thousands of Jewish tourists come to Prague each year to see some of the most beautiful synagogues in Europe.

Pork has a habit of making its way into many Czech meals, further complicating things for even the moderately observant. "We were so happy to find this place," said Eyan Katsav, 32, a tourist from Ashdod, Israel. Biting into a Rochester, Shelanu's pastrami sandwich, he added, "For three days I didn't really eat anything. It's very weird that nobody thought of having a cheap kosher cafe before," he said.

On Shelanu's business cards, the name of the restaurant is prefaced with "Chabad's," pointing out the cafe's links to the Orthodox movement famous for welcoming strangers. The 35-year-old rabbi hopes Shelanu will serve as a hub for Jewish activity. He and his wife are considering offering cultural events there. "Not everyone can meet and socialize in shul. Maybe some tourists can come here, meet other Jews, meet the rabbi, and yes, they might then come to Chabad for a service. Why not?" Barash says. He noted that his fellow Chabad rabbis had opened up eateries in Venice and Athens. "It's like having an unofficial JCC," said Barash, well aware that no such gathering place exists in Prague.

An earlier attempt by the rabbi to reach out to tourists by leading services at Prague's Old-New Synagogue put him at odds with a large segment of Prague's Jewish community. The community's then-chairman fired the country's chief rabbi, a Czech native, and installed the New York-born Barash, outraging some Czech Jews who feared a Chabad takeover of their community. The present community leadership, which took over last November, helped to oust Barash from that post.

The rabbi has insisted that his opponents were needlessly fear-mongering, besides which, a rabbinical court in Israel said his appointment was legitimate. But as he tries to put these disputes in the past, Barash is cheerful, teasing a secular customer that she has made a big mistake eating meat with her milkshake, until she realizes that her beverage is made from soy.

Barash said the cafe is the realization of a dream he has had since coming to Prague in the summer of 1996. "He always wanted a place where he could have a pastrami sandwich. Manis joked that it was either open a deli or move back to Brooklyn," said the 31-year old Dini Barash. Shelanu's chef is a Moroccan Jew who worked for many years at a kosher restaurant in Casablanca. The cafe menus, sitting next to prayer books, are in English and Hebrew, but have not yet been translated into Czech.

There are about 1,500 to 3,000 Czech Jews in the capital. Very few keep kosher. "We don't really get Czech customers," said one

of the wait staff, an Israeli. Prices range from approximately \$7 to \$9; the huge deli meals cost about twice what Czechs expect to pay for a sandwich. The meats and various condiments are by necessity imported from Vienna, a challenge to Shelanu's bottom line.

Barash says he eventually wants to attract locals, perhaps with lunch specials. "But right now as we are in the early stages and still getting things to run smoothly, I am not sure they would enjoy coming here when there is a group of Israeli tourists," he said, making a subtle reference to Israelis' reputation for unruly behavior when impatient.

At least one semi-local Jew frequents Shelanu. Jakov Feldman, a native of what was then Czechoslovakia who survived the Shoah, returns to Prague each year for his brother's Yartzheit. He offers free history lessons in the cafe by telling his life story upon request.

Another regular, an American student with New York University's summer semester in Prague, gave his Coney Island smoked beef sandwich "two thumbs up." The student, Andrew Scheer of Woodmere, N.Y., says he doesn't keep kosher in the United States. "But I try in Prague to show economic support for a place like this, which needs every Jew to help it thrive."

The Lost Jews

By Irin Carmon, May 31 2006, The Jerusalem Post



Moroccan-born Isaac Essoudry has become a controversial guide to a particular segment of Marranos.

Odmarr Braga knows who he is. "I'm the generation of the desert," he says. "I'm not in Egypt, but I'm not in the Promised Land." He has more than the biblical exodus in mind. Braga, 53, claims he is descended from Dutch Sephardic Jews who sailed to religious freedom in northeastern Brazil around 400 years ago.

He is a Marrano, a Jew whose family converted to Christianity to escape persecution but then continued to secretly practice Judaism. And for Marranos like Braga, or *bnei anousim*, there have been many Egypts.

There are the dry, unforgiving stretches in the interior, where so many Jews fled after the Portuguese reclaimed the Brazilian state of Pernambuco for Inquisition-style suppression. There are the tiny villages where, for over three centuries, Marranos silently maintained a version of Jewish tradition. The transitional desert is where some Marranos who have abandoned the isolation of their childhoods to seek opportunity - and sometimes their Jewish roots - find themselves now.

Marrano lawyer Ricardo Trigueiro, 38, uses a similar metaphor to describe discovering Judaism: "Imagine a person in the desert, very thirsty, finding water at last," he says.

Suspended between the hermetic Marrano heartland and the mainstream Jewish communities of the coast, some northeast Brazilian Marranos are even looking towards the very same Promised Land Moses had in mind. But for now they have Recife, Brazil's fourth-largest city, home to the first synagogue in the Americas and close to the northeastern states where many Brazilian Marranos are concentrated.

A year and a half ago, Shavei Israel, a Jerusalem-based organization that reaches out to lost Jews, recognized it as the natural staging ground for their Brazilian outreach when they endowed the community with its very own rabbi. "I view our efforts as an attempt to right the historical injustice that was perpetrated on Spanish and Portuguese Jewry by the Inquisition centuries ago," said Michael Freund, Shavei Israel's president. "We have an opportunity to restore some of their descendants to the Jewish people."

In an often fractious community, this is by no means simple; those who call themselves Marranos in Recife are sharply divided. Behind the sectarian squabbling are other, thornier questions: Now that people who practiced Jewish traditions without ever

hearing the word "Judaism" have been invited into synagogues, what place do they have inside them? Who is counted as a Marrano and who is not? And, perhaps most importantly, who gets to decide?

One Shabbat evening in the twilight of the Brazilian summer highlighted two very different observances. In the city's historic quarter, the much-publicized 2001 restoration of the Kahal Zur Israel synagogue, originally built by Dutch Jews in 1636, had come to fruition: the recreated sanctuary of beautiful hardwood floors and exposed brick walls was hosting a Shabbat service.

Some worshipers were Marranos from the interior who had formally converted, "hai" necklaces dangling around their necks; others owed their presence in Brazil to immigration from Eastern Europe a century ago. Presiding over it all was Avraham Amitai, the rabbi co-sponsored by Shavei Israel, who had pushed to revive the sanctuary's use shortly after arriving.

In the slightly fraying middle-class neighborhood of Boa Vista, a ground floor apartment hosted a humbler - though possibly more impassioned - service directed by Isaac Essoudry. This controversial, Moroccan-born Jew has become a guru of sorts to a particular segment of Marranos, as well as to a smattering of Jews and assorted hopefuls. Plastic chairs and an Israeli flag were the only accessories, and action centered around a single rectangular table. With a small-scale fervor akin to the "home churches" of the American evangelical tradition, attendants clutched their prayer books and sang with gusto.

Despite the contrasts, both services represent the face of the Marrano "return" to Judaism.

"I never had any doubt, and I never felt strange at synagogue," says Heloisa Fonseca-Santos, a 52-year-old Marrana who attends services at Kahal Zur. "I know that I'm a Jew. There is simply no way to think otherwise."

The facade of Kahal Zur bears a cornerstone reminding passerby that from 1636 to 1654, it was known as Rua Dos Judeus (Street of the Jews). That was when Dutch Sephardim joined a community of Portuguese crypto-Jews, who hoped the Inquisition that had forced their conversion might weaken in the colonies. But when the Portuguese prevailed in 1654, the Jews faced a ruling power that would ultimately keep the Inquisition going for two more centuries, and the street was renamed Rua Bom Jesus (Street of Good Jesus), as it has been called ever since.

Some Jews fled to the Caribbean and, it is believed, to the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, where they were America's first Jews. Other Jews went inland, where they established the quiet, mystical outposts that in recent years have stunned observers with their present-day preservation of Jewish traditions. "I think most people don't realize that the bnei anousim aren't something taken out of the pages of the history books," Freund says. "They are living and breathing human beings, and they are still among us, wanting to reconnect with us."

Even the academic establishment was long unaware of their existence. "This is a chapter of Jewish history that has mostly been forgotten," says Anita Novinsky, a professor at the University of S o Paulo and the self-styled grande dame of the nascent field of the Brazilian crypto-Jewry.

Though secret Jewish traditions were discovered in Portugal as early as 1925, she says, it was thought that Brazil's bnei anousim had either escaped or assimilated. "In the '60s, we didn't know there were still Marranos in Brazil. We simply didn't know they existed," admits Novinsky. She herself says she only discovered their survival in her own country when a letter arrived from a so-called "Jewish priest," an ordained Catholic cleric who calls himself a "Diaspora Jew," apparently without incurring the wrath of the church brass. About two decades ago, he invited her to visit his remote northeastern parish, which he claimed was entirely Jewish.

This Priest is one character featured in a dazzling recent documentary, *A Estrela Oculta do Sert o* (The Hidden Star of the Backlands), by Elaine Eiger and Luize Valente. It's a rare window into a world where women light candles on Friday nights without knowing why, where the dead are buried sans casket after secretive rituals and where pork is inexplicably taboo.

Marranos had maintained these traditions in part by practicing endogamy, the intermarriage of close relations. "It was an isolated family nucleus, with a lot of intermarriage," recalls Tony Rabelo Pereira, 34, who was raised in one such enclave in the state of Para ba, 500 km. from the coast. Like most Marranos interviewed, his parents were cousins, though his wife Claudia is a Marrana from a different region.

Where Marranos did interact with conventional Catholics, their differences did not go unnoticed. "The neighbors said we had dealings with the devil and didn't have Christ in our hearts," says Fonseca-Santos. Marrano children who asked their parents why they were different were often told that was just the way it was.

Many have found these discoveries inspiring. "Seeing what has survived, you cannot believe that the Jews can be abolished in the world," states Novinsky, who has since actively compiled archives and overseen academic work on contemporary as well as historical crypto-Jews.

Though modernity has begun to chip away at their seclusion, Brazil's massive size and underdevelopment ensures that its arrival is slow. Still, between communication and migration, one of the world's fundamental mysteries is under serious threat.

Not all Marranos want to be Jewish per se; in fact, Novinsky thinks a majority will continue living "a double life." Still, filmmaker Eiger remembers what happened when she and Valente first dug into the Jewish roots of their country. "Something emerged that we weren't prepared for," Eiger says, "and that was that the Marranos wanted to be recognized as Jews."

It is now believed that Brazil has the world's largest concentration of Marranos, estimated to be a hundred thousand or more. Amitai's arrival as emissary marked a historical acknowledgment of their presence, and represented a prong in the overall strategy of Shavei Israel honed among Marranos in Spain and Portugal. "The rabbi serves the local Jewish community and then uses that as a base from which to do outreach work with bnei anousim," explains Freund.

Amitai, a lanky Bnei Brak native of 31, was trained at the modern Orthodox Machon Amiel in Jerusalem, which nurtured in him a particular interest in reaching out to far-flung communities. Years before moving here with his Argentine-born wife and their two young children, he did a brief stint in Rio de Janeiro. "When I got here, all I knew was the Carnival," he jokes.

The rare moment of flippancy belies the seriousness with which Amitai has taken his role in the community. Juggling roles as rabbi to a shrinking Jewish community, emissary to long-remote Marranos and teacher at the struggling Jewish school can make life hectic. Our conversations often take place as he races to fulfill one responsibility or another, be it inspecting the new kosher bakery he established at the school or setting up for the Shabbat services.

He has his work cut out for him. Among an estimated 400 Jewish families in Recife, or about 1,500 people, Amitai estimates that 90 percent of the younger generation marries non-Jews. The Jewish school of about 100 students that houses his office is chronically cash-strapped.

His support of a formal Marrano "return" to Judaism, should they wish to undertake one, is firm. "Of course, from an objective perspective, there are still things that need to be proven," he admits. "But we certainly do not regard them in the same way as a non-Jew who comes and wants to understand Judaism." They are, he adds, "a part of our people that we had previously lost."

Amitai's presence has undoubtedly helped establish their legitimacy among a sometimes hesitant mainstream community. Freund noted the gesture's "great symbolic value to the bnei anousim themselves. For the first time, a Jewish organization was actively reaching out to them and sending personnel to their locales in order to help them."

With an eye to the sensitivity of the situation, Amitai has established a center in a nearby apartment where Marranos can comfortably congregate. "I'm not just the rabbi of the Jews," he declares. "I'm the rabbi of the community."

In the summer bake of Recife, Isaac Essoudry, 70, deigns to put on a shirt at the arrival of a visitor, but his effort dissipates after one button.

Life carried him from Casablanca to the Israeli army in the 1950s. Finding kibbutz life less than his forte, Essoudry says, he worked on a German boat in the early '60s until landing in the Amazonian city of Bel m, with its established Moroccan Jewish community.

The semi-retired Essoudry deals in Judaica, some of which he makes himself in a back room here; on Sundays, he sets up a stand to sell his wares in front of Kahal Zur. In the dusty, sparsely furnished front room of his studio, Portuguese, Hebrew, English and French are mixed with equal ease.

Across a tiled path slowly being conquered by weeds lies the apartment-cum-synagogue he leads, used for services and twice-weekly Hebrew and Judaism classes. Essoudry bought both apartments as an investment in 1975.

Saying he moonlighted as a self-taught Jewish scholar, Essoudry began attending services in Recife at the synagogue on Martins Junior Street, built by Ashkenazi Jews in 1926.

Heloisa Fonseca-Santos was probably the first Marrana to show up there. "When I was 21 years old, my mother came to me and said we are descendants of Jews," she recalls in a story she has told many times before; Recife's Marranos are used to explaining themselves. "I had thought that what had gone on in my house was normal for everyone. I began to search. I found a citizen on the street in the center of Recife whom I recognized as perhaps being Jewish and asked him where I could go."

He sent her to the synagogue on Martins Junior Street, where a Russian rabbi opened the door. "I said, 'My mother told me that

we are descendants of the Jews.' He said, 'What is the name of your mother?' I said, 'Yona Castro de Fonseca.' He said, 'Isaac Castro was a Jew denounced by the Inquisition, and the first rabbi of the Americas was called Isaac Aboab de Fonseca.'"

But the Marranos faced uncertain acceptance by the community. "In the original days, when the Marranos would show up, particularly for High Holy Days, the Ashkenazim would keep them out," says James Ross, a professor at Northeastern University who visited in 2000 to research a book. "Essoudry refused in the early days to instruct them. He told them at first that if they wanted to learn they had to convert. They just kept showing up. They're persistent folks."

Whatever some Marranos think of Essoudry now, his eventual role in welcoming the first group is undisputed. "Twenty years ago, Isaac opened the doors of the synagogue to the Marranos," says Odmar Braga, who walked in those doors until he began distancing himself from Essoudry. Other Marranos followed, desperate for answers about where their heritage could lead them. "What I learn from the books, I teach," Essoudry explains. "Everyone knows who I am and wants to learn from me - not Hebrew. Judaism. What I know, I give to them."

Around that time, a schism developed between Essoudry and some Marranos for reasons few will discuss. Braga and Fonseca-Santos were among those to leave Essoudry; today, both actively work with Amitai. Essoudry clearly resents Amitai's presence. "He doesn't know how to speak to the Marranos," he complains. "He's learning, but it's difficult for him. He doesn't have experience."

As for himself and the Marranos, Essoudry claims, "I know them. I know their language, I think what they think and know what they want. I learned, day by day, working with them."

Allies of the rabbi allege that Essoudry has allowed frauds into his circle, including evangelicals posing as Marranos but secretly intending on proselytizing Christianity.

"We may have been Catholic in the past, but we were only Catholic on the outside and Jewish on the inside. They're Jewish on the outside, but inside, they're evangelicals," remarks Braga.

In a country where miscegenation trumps cultural separateness and few know their exact lineage, Braga believes the popularity of Eiger and Valente's film has also inadvertently encouraged poseurs who are simply searching for roots. "Lots of people saw the film and said, 'I'm Jewish too!'" he explains. "And then they went to study with Isaac." Fonseca-Santos calls them "birds - people who have already flown to everything, evangelical Christianity, Islam, Candomblé. It's as if Judaism was a novelty for them."

Often called upon to defend their own Jewish roots, longtime members of the Marrano community are particularly indignant when it comes to authenticity, partly because of the uncertainty that comes with defining whose arcane traditions point to Jewish heritage. "How do you define, after 500 years, who is a ben anous and who is not?" Freund points out, acknowledging the difficulty of establishing each individual's legitimacy, a task delegated to Amitai. "We look for people who might not just have biological background but also on top of that have sense of Jewish identity."

Ironically, most of the Marranos currently practicing mainstream Judaism are far more observant than Recife's Ashkenazi community, a fact not lost on Freund. "The Marranos bring with them a real deep and sincere commitment to being Jewish, and that's something that unfortunately many Jews have lost," he comments.

Essoudry says that under his watch, some 15 Marranos have undergone "liberal" conversions with visiting rabbis - including, over a decade ago, Trigueiro and Fonseca-Santos - and he says he hopes five of his "very good students" will follow shortly.

His longtime student Josenildo "Menahem" Domingos is one of a few Marranos who say they are alienated by Amitai's Orthodox affiliation. Of course, few would accuse Essoudry of hewing too closely to the Halacha he teaches; he drives on the Sabbath, says he has three grown children with a non-Jewish woman and freely admits that he does not keep kosher. "It's impossible in Brazil," Essoudry says flatly.

Later, Domingos agrees. "In the interior, it's easier to isolate yourself," says Domingos. "They're more zealous. They live more among their family and don't have contact with strangers. They grow what they eat and kill beasts they have raised. Daughters don't do anything without speaking to their fathers first. How are we supposed to do that here?"

Trigueiro, part of the original group that attended Martins Junior, indicates several times that Amitai does not accept Marranos as real Jews, though he is reluctant to discuss it. But when asked whether he was nervous about first "coming out" as a Jew to his Christian friends, Domingos is frank. "I was more afraid of telling the Jewish community than the Christian one. I was afraid of telling another Jew that I was Jewish and to be doubted or rejected."

Did that happen? He pauses. "I don't remember."

With groups preparing for conversion or return ceremonies, Recife's Marranos find themselves at a crossroads. Many Marranos returning to Judaism have long seen no reason to convert. Some, like Trigueiro and Rabelo, already underwent conservative conversion long before Amitai's arrival, partly in order to send their children to Jewish schools.

Others, like Braga, have long rejected anything labeled conversion. "We preferred not to deny our origin," he says. "I am already a Jew. Why do you have to say that I'm not a Jew in order to be converted? The liberals treat us as if we're not Jews already." He reverts to a favorite phrase of his: "Can one turn water into water?" Braga does, however, accept the concept of the "return" ceremony that will be the culmination of Amitai's instruction, because it recognizes previous Jewish roots. Rabelo and Fonseca-Santos are also set to perform it, even though they have already converted.

Despite the divisions among them, nearly all of the Marranos connecting with mainstream Judaism speak fervently about making aliya, and some are already making concrete plans for it - provided they are recognized by Israel as Jews. A few Brazilian Marranos are already studying at Israeli yeshivot or doing other short-term programs, and Shavei Israel runs an absorption program for their Spanish and Portuguese counterparts. But the official rabbinical position on the Marrano return remains unclear. Freund points out that return ceremonies were performed for bnei anousim arriving in Holland's Jewish community from the Iberian peninsula.

"One of the issues we have brought to the chief rabbinate is, is there any way to restore the use of a return ceremony nowadays, in the 21st century?" Nonetheless, Freund acknowledges that "with the passage of so much time, with the wanderings around the globe, it's obviously much more difficult now to determine questions of genealogy than it was in Amsterdam in the 16th century."

Shavei Israel says they hope for a rabbinical ruling similar to those issued concerning the Jews in Ethiopia and India, which Freund determines "could be revolutionary" and "prove to really give this issue the push that it needs." For his part, Domingos is learning Hebrew both with Essoudry and at home, and is making inquiries to see if his specialized training in paper manufacturing might be useful to Israel. Beyond concerns that his Conservative conversion be recognized, there is the small problem of his devoutly Catholic wife. "She knows she's Jewish but she doesn't want to leave Catholicism," he explains. "She doesn't want to go to Israel, but she knows I'm going." Once his plans are set, Domingos says, he wants to take their two sons as well, whether or not his wife agrees.

A soft-spoken man who hails from a city called Nazar da Mata (Nazareth of the rainforest), Domingos's eyes fill with tears at the mention of Israel. He sighs. "I know it's a problem, but I don't want to die here," he says. He knows full well that Moses was led out of the desert but did not quite reach the promised land, but his mind is made up: "I want to die in Israel."

ARTS & CULTURE

Debut Puts Ethiopian-Israeli Filmmaker on the Map By Michael Fox, July 26 2006, j. Weekly



When newly minted Israeli film school grad David Gavro decided to make a documentary, he had only one goal in mind — to visit the land of his birth for the first time in 20 years.

"I left Ethiopia when I was 6 years old," he relates from his home near Sderot, not far from the Negev. "I remember it only like a dream."

Gavro's project took him farther than he could have hoped. Not only did he make an unforgettable journey to his homeland to record his adopted brother Sisai's reunion with his father, but after he finished the film, Gavro was invited to return to Ethiopia to

show the acclaimed work in a festival.

The globe has gotten a lot smaller for Gavro — “Sisai” has shown at festivals in France, the Netherlands, Canada and the U.S. after nabbing the prize for best documentary at the Jerusalem International Film Festival.

In fact, the 28-year-old filmmaker was packing for a trip the following day to a festival in Greece while he carried on a long-distance phone interview on his cell phone.

“Sisai” has its West Coast premiere as part of the S.F. Jewish Film Festival’s spotlight on Ethiopian Jews and Jews of color. A panel discussion with Gavro will follow the San Francisco and Berkeley screenings.

The SFJFF lineup also features the three-hankie epic “Live and Become,” the fictional saga of a non-Jewish Ethiopian boy growing up in Israel after being rescued with 8,000 others as part of Operation Moses in 1984.

“Sisai” is an up close and touchingly personal portrait of an endearing young man figuring out a way to reconcile his past and his future. The lanky Sisai came to Israel from Ethiopia at a young age and gradually came to identify completely with his adopted country. That was also Gavro’s experience.

“I’m Israeli more than I’m Ethiopian,” Gavro says, “because I grew up in Israel and know only the culture of Israel.”

But his family retains some of its native customs, and his parents still have strong ties to Ethiopia. The plot thickens considerably when Gavro’s father returns from a visit and reports that he has unexpectedly located Sisai’s birth father.

Most moviegoers will be caught up in the narrative tension and emotional drama surrounding the reunion, but the heart of the film is in the details of everyday life that Gavro includes.

“When I did this film I saw a little story about my family, but this story is symbolic of Ethiopian Jews that come to Israel and change their culture,” Gavro explains. “When Ethiopian Jews saw it, they understood a lot of things that other Israelis did not. It was the first time that somebody inside this culture made a film about the culture.”

Consequently, it will be a landmark of sorts when “Sisai” airs on Israeli television. While the number of Ethiopian-Israeli Jews has swelled in the last two decades as children grew up, married and started their own families, they are still subject to racism and stereotyping.

For his part, Gavro was in and out of trouble with the police throughout his teens. Everything turned around when he enrolled in Sapir College and began studying film. Today he teaches courses at the college in Pro Tools, the preeminent sound-mixing software.

In other words, Gavro isn’t abandoning his roots, the unexpected success of “Sisai” notwithstanding. His next documentary is already in production. It’s about a group of mostly Ethiopian Israeli children in his town of Netivot who perform in a capoeira dance group.

“They have a lot of problems with their lives, but they want to create something,” Gavro says. “This is going to be a film about creation and identity.”

Breaking the Sound Barrier

By George Robinson, July 28 2006, The Jewish Week



The Hip HopHoodios have been embraced by the Jewish, Latino and hip hop communities.

The Hip Hop Hoodios have at least three distinct fan bases, and they seldom if ever intersect.

"Oh, it's three or four sometimes," admitted the band's co-founder Josh Norek in a telephone interview last week. "We're embraced in the Jewish community, but we're also accepted in the Latino and hip hop communities, too."

Those communities may not often come together, but they will have a rare opportunity to do so for free when the Hoodios give a concert in the courtyard of the Museo del Barrio as part of the Latin Alternative Music Conference on Aug. 3.

"It's a real honor for us," Norek said. "In my other life, I'm the publicist and attorney for a lot of major acts in the [Latin music] genre. The LAMC is the biggest event in the world for this kind of music."

If you ask Tomás Cookman what he does at the LAMC, he laughs and says: "I'm the guy who pays everything. It's my [butt] on the line."

In reality, Cookman founded and runs the conference, which means he is about as well plugged-in as anyone in the Latin music world, and he is an astute judge not only of musical talent but of his organization's role in the burgeoning Latin market in the U.S.

"The core of our event is the conference itself, the networking opportunities it presents," he says. "But when you have so many important journalists, musicians and management people together, what better way to celebrate than with concerts. And we always have free concerts."

Where do the Hip Hop Hoodios fit into this picture?

"They're a classic and relevant act," Cookman says without hesitation.

"They have a following among many different types of people and that's what we like about them," he adds, unwittingly echoing Norek's words.

"The Museo del Barrio had wanted a New York-based act to perform during the conference," Norek noted. "It's a point of pride for us that we've been accepted by both communities. It's important to bring people together."

Cookman is certain that the Hoodios are not the first predominantly (or totally) Jewish band to perform at the conference.

He observes, "Argentina has the fourth largest Jewish population in the world, so I'm sure we've had quite a few Jewish musicians play for us."

On the other hand, he readily admits, the Hoodios are certainly the most openly Jewish band they've engaged.

"They fly the flag quite high," he says. "When you have girls with bagels as bras, you are definitely making a statement. Seriously, though, they go beyond the Jewish sensibility and people get it." Which puts Norek in an interesting position as a human bridge between those diverse communities that make up the group's fan base.

"We've played shows to mostly Chicano audiences and people say, 'Wow, I never knew Jews were so cool,'" he said. "And I love to play a club like Makor where most of the audience has never heard of Molotov or the Orishas," two West Coast-based Latino hip hop groups.

Given his unusual perspective, to which contemporary Latino acts does Norek recommend Jewish listeners open their ears?

"Café Tacuba, an excellent group from Mexico. Beck had them opening for him on one of his tours. Los Amigos Invisibles, a Venezuelan funk party group, David Byrne discovered them. And the Nortec Collective, they're a Mexican electronica act."

And three Jewish acts Norek would like Latino listeners to hear?

"Well the obvious ones, from a hip hop perspective, would be the Beastie Boys, although they don't place much emphasis on their Jewishness," he replied. "Blood of Abraham aren't around anymore, but they were an enormous influence for me, seeing a Jewish act that was openly embraced by a mostly black audience. Seeing that, I felt comfortable doing what we do."

"As far as a more specifically Jewish cultural flavor, the Klezmatics would have to up there. Frank London has been something of

a mentor to us, and we love to play with him. And Paul Shapiro and his Midnight Minyan group, they're going to be playing with us on the 3rd."

Talking about London and Shapiro put Norek in mind of the Bay Area's famed Tower of Power horn section.

"Yeah, Frank and Paul and those guys, they're sort of our Jewish Tower of Power," he said with a laugh. "They're beyond hip."

And straight into hip hop.

New Kids on the Block

Roshini Sharma, August 17 2006, Jerusalem Post



The memorable characters from last season's Sippuray Sumsum, or Sesame Stories, have returned with a fresh cast of neighbors. Modeled after classic TV series Rehov Sumsum, Israel's version of Sesame Street, the show's season premiere is scheduled to air during Hanukka in December. Filming, however, began last week, with heavy fighting continuing to roil northern Israel and Lebanon. The timing, cast members said, couldn't have been more appropriate.

"We're living in an extreme period. We deal [on the show] with sensitive issues like tolerance, and we say our lines with warmth and caring for one another ... It's beyond politics," said actor Dror Keren, who's reprising his role this season as neighborhood resident Tzahi.

While lumbering purple porcupine Kippi Kipod, the Israeli equivalent of Big Bird, is no longer on the series, cast members now include actor Yousef "Joe" Sweid (HOT soap opera Ha'Alufa) and Shai Fredo. Returning cast members include Hend Ayoub and Keren, who on Tuesday was nominated for Israel's top film acting prize for his work in adult drama Aviva My Love. Guest appearances will also be made by Jewish actors Gila Almagor and Tal Berman, pop musician Margalit Tzanani and Israeli-Arab actress Amal Murkus.

On the second day of shooting, children in the studio's live audience could hardly contain their enthusiasm, giggling as a young woman walked by wearing a lavender muppet named Abigail on her shoulder. "What's so funny?" the muppet asked.

"This is my first performance, and I really love it ... I can really create a character and fly with it," said Shani Cohen, the actress who provides the voice of Abigail. With a background in theater, Cohen is among the newest additions to the cast, and said she was pleased to be filming a children's show as fighting continued in the North. "We enter a world of innocence where everyone helps each other. There's a war outside, and we've escaped into the solution," she said.

The organization behind the show, the Sesame Workshop, is a non-profit admirers call the world's largest promoter of children's education. Local versions of Sesame Street, produced with the support of the Sesame Workshop, are made around the world, with each program focusing on issues effecting children in that region. "The basic precepts of Sesame Street are shared around the world: social and emotional skills, sharing and cooperating, cognitive learning," said Danny Labin, a project manager and educational consultant with the Sesame Workshop. "In Israel, we focused on respect and understanding. The series introduces children to the concept of 'the Other,' who they may not meet in everyday life even though they may live across the street."

The Sesame Workshop has teamed up locally with Hop!, the children's channel, to develop the curriculum for its Israeli program. The series will be dubbed in Arabic, and this season's cast includes Ethiopian and Arab muppets.

Shai Fredo, who provides the voice for Ethiopian muppet character Malkamo, says he jumped at the opportunity to depict an

Ethiopian character in a positive light. "There aren't a lot of Ethiopians in the media, and most Ethiopian characters I've played have a lot of stereotypical problems," he said. "Here I'm just Malkamo ... a regular guy."

Like Dror, new cast member Yousef Sweid earned an Ophir Award nomination Tuesday, with the Christian Arab actor from Haifa recognized for his performance in this summer's decidedly adult-oriented *The Bubble*. On *Sippuray Sumsum*, Sweid provides the voice for Mahbub, a gifted muppet musician. The actor underwent a weeklong training for his new role under the guidance of veteran puppeteer Gil Ben-David, and says he's pleased about the inclusion of Mahbub on the show. "Many children are afraid of Arabic," he said, echoing Labin just a bit. "They see it as an enemy language. Mahbub is a funny character, and other [Hebrew-speaking] characters sing with him. They learn how to count in Arabic. From these small things, you get children to like 'the Other.'"

Inspired by the American version of *Sesame Street*, the series strives to keep young viewers' attention with a mix of live action sequences, animation and short educational segments. The show has changed over the years but is easily recognizable to anyone who watched it as a child. That, cast members say, was part of the attraction of appearing on the new season.

"It's kind of like coming back home. It's a real neighborhood of people who have a good dialogue and a common sense of humor," Keren said.

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