



KULANU

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Cameroon's Beth Yeshourun Community Welcomes First Jewish Visitors

By Rabbis Bonita and Gerald Sussman
and Serge Etele

Introduction by Judy Manelis

On March 28, 2010, Kulanu president Harriet Bograd received an email from a small community in Cameroon asking for Kulanu's help in normalizing its Jewish practice and helping its members convert to Judaism. The message detailed some of the group's religious observances, including Purim, Passover and Shabbat, and expressed hope that Kulanu would respond to its overture. A spate of surprising and exciting correspondence followed in which Serge Etele, the leader of the community, completed Kulanu's Community Information Form detailing the history of his community, its introduction to and interest in Judaism, a description of current Jewish religious practice, the Jewish learning activities/resources being used and his interaction

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Page from
Barcelona
Haggada,
Cordoba,
Spain, 14th
century.

INQUISITION DESCENDANTS FACE CHALLENGES ON JOURNEY OF RETURN TO JUDAISM

By Andrée Aelion Brooks

Introduction by Judy Manelis

For most Americans, the names King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain conjure up romantic images of Christopher Columbus setting sail in 1492 on his voyage of discovery. But to Jews, the names Ferdinand and Isabella are synonymous with the Jewish expulsion from Spain and the initiation of the Spanish Inquisition, marking the end of more than 1500 years of Jewish life on Spanish soil.

The resultant exile of the Jews of Spain* (and later from Portugal) and the conversion of those who chose to remain, produced a tragedy of unimaginable proportions, which has impacted Jewish history over centuries and is still with us today.

* In 1492, Jews in Spain were given the choice of conversion to Catholicism or exile.

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The Renaissance of the B'nai Anousim (Crypto-Jews)

by Michael Freund
Chairman, Shavei Israel

Spain



Earlier this year, a momentous event took place in the history of Iberian Jewry. For the first time since the Spanish Inquisition, a descendant

of forcibly converted Jews returned to Spain to conduct outreach work among his fellow B'nai Anousim (Crypto-Jews*).

Rabbi Nissan Ben-Avraham, who grew up on the island of Palma de Majorca, was dispatched to the area by Shavei Israel, the organization that I chair, with the express aim of strengthening the bonds between the Jewish people and our brethren the B'nai Anousim. Since his arrival in the region, Rabbi Ben-Avraham has been paying regular visits to Barcelona, Alicante, Seville and Palma, where he has organized a variety of Jewish educational, social and cultural activities, which have drawn many B'nai Anousim closer to their roots.

Rabbi Ben-Avraham's activities in Spain mark the latest step on his personal journey of return.

For Rabbi Ben-Avraham, his outreach activities in Spain mark the latest step in his personal journey of return to the faith of his ancestors. Rabbi Ben-Avraham, who only learned of his Jewish ancestry as a child, when his mother told him about his heritage in an off-handed way, left Palma de Majorca at the age of 21 and moved to Israel. Here, he returned to Judaism, and later completed his studies and received rabbinical ordination. His story underscores the exciting phenomenon that is taking place today all across the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking world.

**B'nai Anousim are the descendants of forced converts from Judaism to Catholicism in 15th Century Spain and Portugal. They are also called Marranos, New Christians, Conversos or Crypto-Jews. On the Island of Majorca, they are called Chuetas. Marranos and Chuetas are Spanish terms of derision and are often translated as "pigs."*



Anousin in a village outside Recife, Brazil, blowing the shofar at home. Photo by Michael Freund.

It might sound fanciful, or even far-fetched, but it is a fact that more than five hundred years after Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella sought to erase all vestiges of Jewish life on the Iberian Peninsula, a growing number of their victims' descendants are now emerging from the shadows, seeking to reclaim their heritage. The B'nai Anousim, Hebrew for those who were coerced, do not merely inhabit the pages of dusty old history books. They are a living, breathing phenomenon...men and women from all economic, social and cultural walks of life who are eager to forge anew their links with the Jewish people. And I believe we owe it to them as well as to their ancestors to extend a hand and to welcome them home.

They do not simply inhabit the pages of dusty old history books.

Think about it: for centuries, their forbears lived outwardly as Catholics under the watchful eyes of the Inquisition, attending mass and feigning piety in an attempt to ward off those who would persecute them. But behind closed doors, many clung tenaciously to the faith of their ancestors, preserving the flame of Judaism and passing it on to future generations.

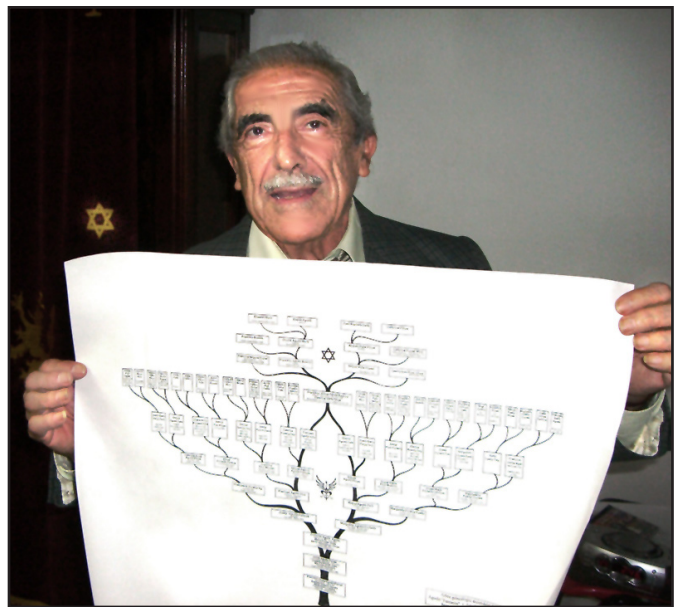
Over the past decade, I have seen this remarkable phenomenon firsthand, as I have met and worked with B'nai Anousim in Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Peru, Colom-

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bia, Ecuador and the southwestern United States. I have heard their stories, studied their history, and devoted myself to assisting them, as they undertake their remarkable voyage back to the Jewish people. In addition to Rabbi Ben-Avraham, Shavei Israel (Hebrew for those who return to Israel) also has a full-time emissary, Rabbi Elisha Salas, serving in northern Portugal, which historically had a large concentration of B'nai Anousim. And in Jerusalem, we operate Machon Miriam, a Spanish and Portuguese-language educational institute, where hundreds of B'nai Anousim have successfully prepared for their return to Judaism and the Jewish people.

Assisting the B'nai Anousim is a challenge of national proportions.

But the issue of assisting the B'nai Anousim is a challenge of national proportions, and it cannot and must not be the province of any one organization or institution. This is a matter that touches on Jewish history and Jewish destiny, and it is the Jewish people as a



Anousin in Spain, with the family tree.
Photo by Michael Freund.

whole that must embrace the B'nai Anousim and welcome them back into our midst.

Needless to say, the challenges often faced by B'nai Anousim can be daunting. Some communities slam the door in their faces, while others question their sincerity or cast doubt on their motivation. This often leads to a great deal of justifiable frustration and angst for many B'nai Anousim, who cannot understand why some of their fellow Jews would put obstacles in their path.

It is therefore incumbent upon all of us to do what we can to change this situation, through educating the Jewish public and decision-makers about the renaissance of the B'nai Anousim. There are a variety of means through which this can be accomplished, from organizing lectures to arranging events at local synagogues and community centers.

Gather material on the Internet, send it to your rabbi, and suggest it as a sermon topic. Write to Jewish organizations and leaders and press them to put the B'nai Anousim issue on the agenda of world Jewry. Correcting an injustice five centuries old will take time and much patience and fortitude will be necessary. But with persistence and determination, we can right the historical wrong that was inflicted on the B'nai Anousim and their ancestors, and at last bring their long and painful journey to an end.

Michael Freund is the founder and chairman of Shavei Israel (www.shavei.org), a Jerusalem-based group that, like Kulanu, assists "lost Jews" seeking to return to the Jewish people.



Two Portuguese Anousim under the Hupa (marriage canopy) in Jerusalem. Photo by Michael Freund.

INQUISITION DESCENDANTS, INTRODUCTION, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

So strong was the bond of Spanish Jews to their adopted country that centuries later, even in the United States, many Jews responded to the question, "where are you from?" with the answer "Spain." It didn't matter than 500 plus years had passed and that families had settled, moved and settled again in other lands (Italy, Morocco, Holland, Turkey, Greece, Brazil, Mexico, United States...) so powerful was their historic memory and the pain of their loss.

Among those who stayed behind, many professed allegiance to the Catholic Church while attempting to practice Judaism in secret. Some of these individuals, Crypto-Jews, were successful and eventually were able to reassert their Jewish faith. Others who tried to maintain their faith in secret, and even some who had converted in good faith, were hounded by the minions of Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor, resulting in endless persecution in Spain as well as in countries under

Many who tried to maintain their faith in secret were hounded by the minions of Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor

Spanish domination. In fact, the dates of the Inquisition remain startling to this day: 1478-1834. Yes, you read right, more than 350 years.

The Crypto-Jews kept a low profile and often moved from place to place, one step ahead of the Inquisitor's reach. Others were caught up in a web of accusations of heresy and "Judaizing" and were punished, often

tortured, banished again and/or burned publicly in *autos-da-fé*.

The result of these catastrophic events was a loss of thousands of Jews. But if one were to multiply that number to adjust for 500 plus years, the extent of the tragedy becomes clear. In some families, Judaism died early. In others, it became unexplained customs passed down through the centuries, such as lighting candles on Friday evenings, salting meat to remove the blood, an avoidance of pork, etc. But in most cases, even these customs eventually disappeared, leaving no trace of Judaism behind.

Many want to return to the faith of their ancestors.

Before I visited Spain some years ago, a friend said, "Look closely at the faces of the people there and you will see Semitic features. Everyone in Spain has some Jewish blood." I thought the statement was a bit unrealistic. But this summer, while on vacation in the Berkshires of Western Massachusetts, I met a Spanish artist who expressed remorse and shame over the Spanish Inquisition in her country's past, and told me that many Spaniards indeed have Jewish blood, a fact that has also been confirmed by DNA studies. "You can see it in their faces," she confirmed.

With this history as backdrop, it is indeed miraculous that today, more than 500 years after the expulsion, and long after the last Jew was burned at the stake, there are individuals, and even small, isolated communities, that believe they have a Jewish heritage and want to return to the faith of their ancestors. In some cases, individuals have gone to Spanish archives, Inquisition records and ancient Jewish towns and villages seeking and often finding evidence of their family's past. The joy of discovery often leads to an intense desire to understand their Jewish heritage and a yearning to return to the Jewish people. What, if any, is the responsibility of the mainstream Jewish community to these individuals who have only recently discovered their link to a long lost Jewish past, and who want to return to the faith of their ancestors? In the following article, author Andrée Aelion Brooks discusses some of the problems facing the B'nai Anousim as they follow a journey of the heart determined to reclaim the heritage wrested from them by force hundreds of years ago.



"Two old priests showing the application of torture under the supervision of the Inquisition." 1700 plate.

INQUISITION DESCENDANTS FACE CHALLENGES ON THEIR JOURNEY OF RETURN TO JUDAISM

by Andrée Aelion Brooks

In July, I was asked to be the keynote speaker at the 7th annual B'nai Anousim Conference in El Paso, Texas. In addition to addressing conference participants, I was able to sit in on several sessions and experience the frustration as well as the hopefulness of some of the 70 men and women in attendance. At one session, a petite woman sitting in the back of the meeting hall raised her hand to make a comment. When the speaker called on her, she spoke with considerable emotion. "All I hear from B'nai Anousim are stories of rejection," she said, "when they reach out to Jewish congregations in Latin America and in many parts of the United States. If not outright rejection, then, at least, a cool reception."

*"All I hear from B'nai Anousim
are stories of rejection."*

Though many American Jewish leaders would say this statement represents an extreme view, an exaggeration, and is far more representative of congregations south of the border than in the United States, its prevalence cannot be disputed. According to both the Anousim themselves as well as rabbis and scholars working in the field, it is sufficiently commonplace that it colors the thinking of Anousim who are contemplating return.

The disappointment and frustration the woman described is not new, according to Rabbi Juan Mejia, who was born in Columbia and now lives in Oklahoma City. Rabbi Mejia said he has witnessed it countless times. In his view, the response may be partly racial – as many of those seeking to join the Jewish community (in South America) are of mixed race or dark skinned as compared to the existing members of local congregations – and partly financial, though conference participants claimed that the Anousim are not as indigent or uneducated as popular myth would suggest.

In Latin America, numbers also play a role. Those who consider themselves of *Sephardic* (Spanish) origin vastly outnumber those Jews of East European or *Ashkenazi* origin who have settled in South America and who today make-up most of the Jewish congregations in that region.

If those Ashkenazi Jews are afraid of being outnumbered, it is not without justification, though there is



Woodcut from Spain, c. 1474, showing Alfonso de Espina, harbinger of the Spanish Inquisition. Behind him, Jews are shown blindfolded because "they do not see the truth." *Encyclopedia Judaica*.

irony to this idea. Historians such as David Gitlitz, a retired professor at the University of Rhode Island and author of *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews*, have estimated that 20 to 25 percent of the original settlers who built the New World colonies

*Some 500 years after the Inquisition,
the number of B'nai Anousim is staggering.*

were Anousim from Spain and Portugal. According to this view, many of those settlers were fleeing the Inquisition. In truth, it was they who arrived on America's shores first. But it is now the Ashkenazi tradition that is dominant.

It is also true that today, some 500 plus years after the Inquisition, the number of B'nai Anousim is staggering, even if only a fraction are aware – or care about – their Jewish ancestry and a return to the Jewish world.

Consider the math for Brazil alone. Among almost two hundred million citizens of Brazil today, at least 40 percent, or 80 million, are deemed of Portuguese origin. Of these, at least one quarter, or 20 million, may have Jewish ancestors, according to Jacques Cukierkorn, the Brazilian-born rabbi at the New Reform Temple of Kansas City.

Rabbi Cukierkorn first ran the numbers in 1994 while completing a master's thesis on the "hidden" Jews of Brazil as part of his rabbinic studies. "If ten percent or fewer seek out their Jewish heritage, it still works out to almost two million people," he concluded. Further, if only a fraction of the thousands in neighboring countries and the rest of the world – especially Italy and Spain – are added in, the total could equal or top 13 to 16 million Jews in the world today. While these figures are staggering, no one is predicting the return to Judaism of most of these individuals. For many it is simply wishful thinking.

Seth Ward, lecturer in Islamic and Judaic Studies, Program in Religious Studies at the University of Wyo-

ming, and a scholar of Crypto-Jewish life, estimates that some 10,000 have probably already returned to some form of open Jewish observance in the past decade or so.

Thus, despite the discouraging reception on the part of the mainstream Jewish community, progress has been made. Last December, at the urging of Kulanu board member Rabbi Stephen Leon, spiritual leader of B'nai Zion (Sons of Zion) Congregation of El Paso, Texas, and one of the early organizers of the Anousim Conference, the United Synagogue for Conservative Judaism passed a unanimous resolution calling upon its 700 member congregations to commemorate the forced conversion of Spanish Jews in the 15th century on the Jewish fast day of *Tisha B'av* (ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av). The focus, the resolution said, should be on educating members about the history of the Spanish Inquisition, the expulsion of the Jews and the forced conversion of those remaining, so that they might better understand the Anousim experience and be more sensitive to those who seek to return to Judaism.

What could be equally helpful, say other observers, would be a similar resolution passed by the Reform

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EXCERPTS FROM THE ALHAMBRA DECREE OF 1492 EXPELLING THE JEWS OF SPAIN AFTER 16 CENTURIES IN THAT COUNTRY.



"Therefore, with the council and advice of the eminent men and cavaliers of our reign, and of other persons of knowledge and conscience of our Supreme Council, after much deliberation, it is agreed and resolved that all Jews and Jewesses be ordered to leave our kingdoms, and that they never be allowed to return.

And we further order in this edict that all Jews and Jewesses of whatever age that reside in our domain and territories, that they leave with their sons and daughters, their servants and relatives, large and small, of whatever age, by the end of July of this year, and that they dare not return to our lands, nor so much as to take a step on them nor trespass upon them in any other manner whatsoever. Any Jew who does not comply with this edict and is to be found in our kingdom and domains, or who returns to the kingdom in any manner, will incur punishment by death and confiscation of all his belongings."

For the complete text of the Expulsion order as well as a dramatic and thrilling rendering of the response made by Isaac Abrabanel (Abravanel), a leader of the Jewish community, to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, look up: http://home.earthlink.net/~bnahman/Alhambra_Decree_Abrabanel's_Answer.htm.

Abravanel's response can also be found at: http://www.jrbooksonline.com/edict_resp_by_isaac_abravanel.htm.

Movement, which estimates its individual membership at slightly more than one million. “Such a resolution on a movement-wide basis would do a lot,” said Antonia Martinez, a lawyer in Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y. Martinez received her formal certificate of return in June, 2008, and belongs to a Reform congregation, Temple Israel of Northern Westchester. It could make congregations more pro-active, so that local B’nai Anousim would seek out congregations that are welcoming, which in itself could encourage more individuals to come forward.

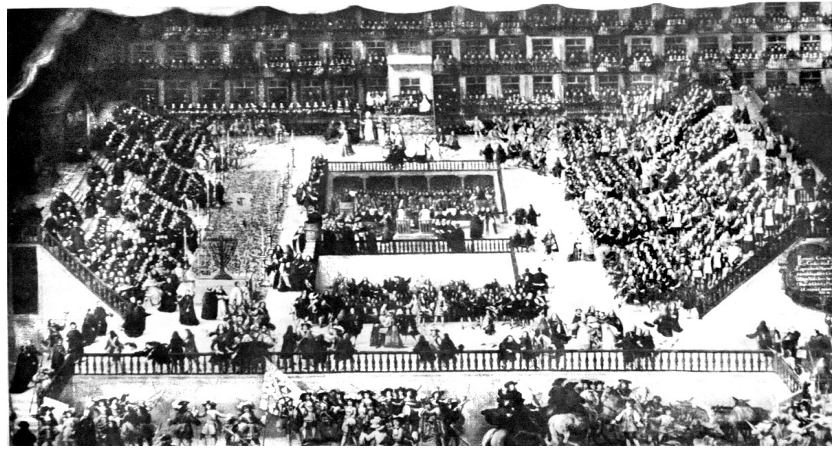
Like others in her situation, Martinez, whose family originally came from the Dominican Republic, was willing to take classes on Judaism, undergo testing of her Jewish knowledge and immersion in a *mikveh* (ritual bath) that is demanded by Jewish law of all converts to Judaism. And the B’nai Anousim are considered converts, since they are no longer Jewish according to Jewish law or *Halachah* (Jewish law). However, Martinez bristles at the notion that she could have been handed a certificate that used the term ‘conversion’ rather than ‘return.’ This is one

“I find the word ‘conversion’ to be repugnant... My ancestors were Jews.”

of many examples cited by B’nai Anousim to show the lack of welcome on the part of the Jewish community. “I find the word ‘conversion’ to be repugnant,” said Martinez. “Judaism was my lineage. This is where I came from. My ancestors were Jews.” But rather than dwell on the seeming unfairness of it all, the experience is turning her into an activist – an unintended result of that perceived insensitivity, though she has found her own congregation to be very welcoming.

Martinez has joined her temple’s adult education committee and is involved in bringing in speakers on the subject of the Anousim, both from an historical and a contemporary perspective. She has begun accepting public speaking invitations herself, talking about her own experiences and providing a personal perspective to the topic.

Exploring ways to make the process warmer and more convivial has become a popular topic of discussion among the B’nai Anousim. There is the increasing belief that in the end they themselves will have to bring those recommendations to the table, rather than expect outsiders to do so.



“Auto da fé,” painting by F. Rizi of the ceremonial sentencing of heretics in Madrid on June 30, 1680, in honor of Charles II and his bride. 1683. Prado Museum.

Ideas being tossed around include creating a specially-designed visit to Israel under the umbrella of Taglit-Birthright Israel, for the children of the incoming B’nai Anousim; incorporating Sephardic songs and prayers into the liturgy of Ashkenazi synagogues to lessen the impact of the Ashkenazi overlay to much of North American synagogue practice; creating mentoring programs that would match B’nai Anousim who have returned with those who are facing the seemingly daunting process before they can be officially accepted; modifying the conversion curriculum from a generic approach to one that speaks more directly to B’nai Anousim, their history and customs.

Further suggestions include creating partnerships between North American congregations and the nascent congregations made up of B’nai Anousim in Latin America, so that youth programs that regularly send their young people abroad on volunteer missions could help B’nai Anousim in other countries – while at the same time familiarizing those young people with a Jewish culture far removed from their own.

Another way to achieve credibility and respect may come out of an educational institute and museum now under development by Rabbi Leon. Rabbi Leon is working with Sonya Loya from nearby Rudoso, New Mexico, a leader among the B’nai Anousim, to provide a safe harbor where B’nai Anousim can gather and learn in a spirit of shared support, with programs tailored specifically to their needs. The museum would introduce visitors to their heritage and the history that goes with it. While there are many Holocaust museums around the country, there has never been one devoted to the Anousim. And this could help increase awareness, which the B’nai Anousim believe is sorely needed.

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But first, funds for the venture need to be raised and backers identified.

But will these newcomers maintain their identity as Jews? The issue of retention poses a major challenge. On a recent visit to Portugal this writer was able to personally observe the outcome of large-scale and well-meaning attempts by the Jewish establishment worldwide, first in the 1920's and later in the 1970's and 80's, to bring the B'nai Anousim who had remained in Portugal back into the Jewish fold. Not all were successful.

*We need to be sensitive to the fact
that it can be a lonely and
painful journey back.*

For some, it eventually became more comfortable to return to their former lives, the comfort of a close family life and the celebration of their original Catholic festivals with their Catholic relatives, rather than live a Jewish life after so many generations. Others were able to embrace their heritage, rejoice in the process and begin the long journey of adapting to life within the Jewish world.

It is clear we need to be sensitive to the fact that it can be a lonely and painful journey back, not necessarily shared by other members of an immediate or extended family. Magnificent synagogues in places like Porto and Belmonte, endowed at great expense by philanthropists of the Jewish world, could be encouraged to create special programs that address such needs, once they are better understood.

"Mistakes were made," argues Professor Yom Tov Assis, professor of medieval history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, specializing in the Sephardic Diaspora, who led my tour. Some early rabbis who went to Belmonte, he said, gave them the idea that to really become Jewish they should put aside the prayers that they had clung to over the past 500 years and instead use the modern prayer book. "It was a psychological blow," he said. "You can't tell them that what they held as holy and Jewish is meaningless."

Much more thought, therefore, should go into preparing these people for the psychological impact of a conflicted identity, its potential clash with a Catholic upbringing, and possible alienation from family members, as part of the process of return itself; rather than wonder, only later on, why they might have been lost.

Finally, the B'nai Anousim themselves need to stop behaving like victims, says Juan Mejia, the rabbi from Columbia. They should start realizing that "they have something to contribute to the Jewish world – their heritage, their enthusiasm, their commitment." They should look upon themselves as a resource that can revitalize congregations. And, where feasible, they should consider working independently. "Do your own thing," he says. "Develop your own congregations. The Jewish world will follow."

Andrée Aelion Brooks can be reached at:
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Jewish Cemeteries of Jamaica Documenting Jewish Settlement Over 300 Years

By Ainsley Henriques

Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition arrived in Jamaica in the late 17th and early 18th century via Istanbul, Belgrade, Amsterdam, London and other lands. They were seeking both religious freedom and economic opportunities. As residents of a new country, they built homes, started businesses and prospered. Eventually, they bought land for cemeteries to bury their dead. At the turn of the 20th century there were 21 Jewish cemeteries in Jamaica. Today, that number has been reduced to 13. The others were impossible to maintain and were sold. The jewel among these cemeteries is the Hunt's Bay cemetery with graves and inscribed tombstones dating from the 1670s.

The Caribbean Volunteers Expedition, headed by Anne Hirsch and Rachel Frankel, have worked with members of the Jamaican Jewish Congregation on Hunt's Bay and other Jewish cemeteries to document and catalogue graves that can be identified. The next opportunity to volunteer for this project is January 23-29, 2011.

Those interested can contact:
RachelArch@aol.com.

“Past, Present & Future Identities of B’nai Anousim”

Theme of 7th Annual El Paso Conference

by Sonya Loya

It is hard to believe that this summer marked the seventh annual Sephardic Anousim Conference. The four-day event, organized by Rabbi Stephen Leon, rabbi of B’nai Zion Synagogue and myself, began on Friday, July 16 and ended Monday, July 19. As in previous years, the conference provided participants with an opportunity for networking and the chance to meet other descendants of Crypto-Jews, many of whom are engaged in the same journey of discovery and a return to Judaism.

For many attendees, the sessions provided an in-depth learning experience about DNA testing, genealogy searches, the complexities of Sephardic Jewish history and the response of artists/Anousim to the challenges of the search for self. For others, it provided the occasion to explore the reasons why they want to “return” and what they hope to find or achieve from a formal return to Judaism. I believe both attendees and speakers were enriched by the dialogue and gained new perspectives about their journey. It will be good to see the fruit that was seeded at this year’s conference.

The enthusiastic evaluations I received after the conference confirmed the importance of continuing this special event and made all our efforts worthwhile. I would like to quote just two of them, which I believe capture the essence of the conference and its importance to Anousim who were in attendance.

Eric Tamez, a surgical nurse from Texas, wrote: “It’s the best gift I could have given myself. I came away from the conference a better person for attending. Besides the great speakers and information...the sense of community and friendship was healing for me. I made so many friends...”

And from Dan Grife, an artist from New Mexico: “What I found...was a community of fellow travelers. I have been doing this alone for a long time and I cannot overstate the impact that seeing, speaking, eating, laughing and praying with other Anousim has had on my life and, I am sure, my work as well...”

When I look back over the last seven conferences, it is clear that every year brings gifts of life and renewal. Last year’s conference led to many formal returns through

conversion. It will be amazing to see what comes from this year and when our 8th Annual Sephardic Anousim Conference is held in Jerusalem in 2011.

Play Reading of “Parted Waters” Captures Anousim Experience



Sonya Loya

Photo by Dan Knapp.

One of the highlights of the Anousim conference was the stage reading of a play by New Mexico playwright Robert Benjamin, entitled “Parted Waters,” about three generations of an Hispanic family of Anousim grappling with their secret heritage. The play, commissioned in 2008 by Janet Arnold, producing director of the Arizona Jewish Theater Company, captures the conflicts inherent in the Anousim experience and the continued threat of assimilation and loss of

Jewish descendants, many of whom have maintained a secret Jewish identity even 500 years after the Spanish Inquisition.

The play focuses on Reynaldo, the 70 year old grandfather and family patriarch, who still holds on to remnants of his Jewish heritage while outwardly practicing Catholicism just as his ancestors have done for centuries; his son Javier, who knows the family secret but rejects any identification with Crypto-Judaism and embraces total assimilation into mainstream American culture and his Catholic faith; and grandson Miguel, who has not been told the family secret. What happens when Miguel learns the truth and the family must deal openly with the “family secret” is the heart of the play.

“Parted Waters” is a play about identity as it impacts the Anousim experience. It shows how secrets beget more secrets. How do we know who we really are? Who determines who we are? What happens when we discover that our whole world and identity is not what we thought? What happens when the prejudice we have for others is suddenly a prejudice towards our own identity and is part of our own story? How do we live with secrets and what happens to our worldview and self identify when we embrace the journey to recover our lost heritage?

According to Loya, the presentation elicited strong responses from conference attendees, as many participants saw their own stories on stage. The play, which had its premier in Phoenix, Arizona in March, 2009, had also been performed in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico, prior to its reading in El Paso. In each venue, audiences responded both to the Crypto-Jewish story line of the play as well as to the universality of the play’s themes of identity and secrecy. JM

President's Message

Dear Friends,

This is the second issue of our newly designed newsletter. Thank you to all those Kulanu supporters who were kind enough to write or call us expressing your excitement and enthusiasm over our new look and expanded coverage. We appreciate the feedback.

Our last issue covered many topics, but focused primarily on Jewish communities in Africa. In particular, we reported on the Abuyadaya of Uganda, the fact-finding mission of several board members to Ethiopia and the Lemba of Zimbabwe and South Africa. In this issue we turn our attention to a major issue of our time...that of the B'nai Anousim (also known as Conversos, Marranos, Secret Jews and Crypto-Jews), the descendants of the Jews in Spain and Portugal who were forced to convert to Catholicism as a result of the Alhambra Edict of 1492 by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, unleashing the Spanish Inquisition and the Edict of Expulsion of 1496 in Portugal. We are thrilled to have articles by award winning journalist Andrée Aelion Brooks, Shavei Israel founder and chairman Michael Freund and former Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis.

In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest by B'nai Anousim in their ancestry and ancient faith. Many want to learn about their Jewish heritage and/or return to the Jewish community. Sadly, many synagogues and communities are not welcoming. It is our hope that this issue of our newsletter will open up a dialogue in Jewish communities and synagogues around the country and abroad and will challenge Kulanu readers to think about what steps they can take in their own communities to ensure B'nai Anousim receive a warm welcome.

This issue also features an article about Kulanu's joyous encounter with the Beth Yeshourun Congregation in Cameroon. This community has been practicing Judaism for twelve years, teaching themselves how to be

observant Jews via the Internet and from correspondence with helpful rabbis. When Kulanu's volunteers, Rabbis Gerald and Bonita Sussman, heard about this community, whose members had never met a Jew in person, they immediately planned a visit. It gives me great pride, as Kulanu's president, to introduce this special community in Cameroon to the worldwide Jewish community. Don't miss the album of videos and photos about Cameroon at:

<http://kulanu.phanfare.com>

As you know, Kulanu relies on your support to be able to continue this work. Please use the enclosed envelope to send us your donation, or donate online at <http://kulanu.org/donate>.

Harriet Bograd, *President*

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Kulanu ("All of Us") is a tax-exempt organization of Jews of varied backgrounds and practices, which works with isolated and emerging Jewish communities around the globe, supporting them through networking, education, economic development projects, volunteer assignments, research, and publications about their histories and traditions.

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Publications and Releases of Note

by Mort Simon

These Are My Names, a 30-minute documentary film by Ruth Mason, focusing on the naming practices of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, was released in March, 2010. The film juxtaposes interviews with Ethiopian Jews and shots of their homeland. The film premiered at the Jewish Eye International Film Festival in Ashkelon on October 18. A 30-second trailer can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=10EtCJ4kpK8>.

The Longing: The Forgotten Jews of South America, an award winning film by Gabriela Bohm, was released in January, 2007. The film follows a group of descendants of Spanish Crypto-Jews on their dogged and difficult journey of return to Judaism and explores the theme of cultural identity and acceptance. For information, see www.bohmproductions.com. [Although the release of this film was in 2007, the focus is of interest in this issue as the content focuses on Anousim (Crypto-Jews).]

The Jews of Pakistan - A Forgotten Heritage, a book by Yoel Moses Reuben, was published in January, 2010 by the Bene Israel Heritage Museum & Genealogical Center in New Delhi, India. The book describes the rich and unique heritage of the Jewish community of Pakistan.

"After 500 Years, A Return To Judaism," a thoughtful and informative article by Sandee Brawarsky, was published in *The Jewish Week*, 12/22/2009. When prejudice and discrimination backfire to produce a positive thing, it is a *mitzvah* (commandment/good deed), maybe even grist for a Hollywood playwright. The Jews of Majorca, Spain, who were forcibly converted to Catholicism, were not accepted by their Christian neighbors as real Catholics. They were called *Chuetas*, an offensive term in Spanish often translated as "pig." Since other Christians wouldn't marry Chuetas, the Chuetas remained a separate and enclosed community for centuries. Neither have they been welcomed or counted as part of the *minyan* (ten men needed for communal prayer) in a modern *shul* (synagogue) established by English and German Jews who settled in Palma. However, Rabbi Moshe Isserles (16th century), also known as the Rama, stated in an opinion that when a person wishes to return to Judaism, he needs to go to the *mikveh* (ritual bath) for purification. No *Bet Din* (Jewish court of law) is required, as at a conversion.

In the article, Brawarsky tells the story of Miquel Segura and his journey of return to Judaism. Through his genealogical research, Segura discovers that his family has married only other Chuetas for generations. As a result, he was still a Jew. "Mazel Tov, Miguel," or as he is known in Hebrew, "Mazel Tov, Michael ben Khayyam!" (*Mazel Tov* in Hebrew means congratulations.) See http://www.thejewishweek.com/features/after_500_years_return_judaism.

"Ethiopian Jewry gets its first Haggada" by Ruth Eglash, was published in *The Jewish Post*, March 12, 2010. Most if not all *Hagaddot* (Passover story in the plural) previously published in Amharic (the language of Ethiopia) were intent upon teaching Ethiopians how to celebrate the holiday of Passover according to the Talmudic traditions. As the Ethiopian community was cut off from the mainstream Jewish community for many centuries, they developed their own special customs and rituals. This new Haggada, translated from Amharic to Hebrew, tries to teach Israelis about the traditions and customs unique to Ethiopian Jewry. The Haggada was written by Ethiopian-Jewish history expert Rabbi Menachem Waldman, who told Eglash, "They (Ethiopians) celebrate *Pesach* (holiday of Passover) in their own way. It's different from the way we celebrate it, but it is still *Pesach*." See <http://www.jpost.com/JewishWorld/JewishNews/Article.aspx?id=170816>.

"Still Jewish After All These Years" by Ariela Bankier, published in *Haaretz.com*, Sunday, April 11, 2010, is a thorough and interesting account of the revival of Jewish identity in Sicily and southern Italy. The article is divided into three parts: "Catholics with Jewish Roots," "Old Fears" and "No Proof." Among the principals are Italian-American rabbis who have returned to Italy to facilitate the process. Reform Rabbi Barbara Aiello, who comes from a family of Crypto-Jews, says, "I never pressure anyone to renounce the Catholic religion, I just tell them that it's good to know who you are and where you come from." <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1160478.html>

Physician and Orthodox rabbi Stefano Di Mauro, an American of Sicilian descent, has returned to Sicily and opened a center for Jewish studies and conversion in Siracusa (Syracuse). Di Mauro says dozens of people attend his classes at the center and most believe they are descended from Jewish families who lived on the island. In addition to the religious activity provided by Di Mauro, there has recently been a cultural awakening on the island that includes attempts to expose to the wider public the Jewish history that was erased. Jewish festivals, exhibitions and archaeological sites have drawn a large number of visitors. See <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1160478.html>.

Dr. Jacob De Castro Sarmento, a biography, by Fernanda Guimaraes and Antonio Andrade, deals with the history of the Crypto-Jewish experience of Portugal. The book, published as part of the *Sefarad* (Spanish) collection of Novavega Publishers in June, is under the direction of Jorge Martins, author of the recent three-volume history, *The Jews of Portugal*. According to the publisher, an adaptation of the book will soon be available in English. Michael Alpert, president of the Jewish Historical Society of England, will write the preface. See "Book Launch in Braganza-Jacob de Castro Sarmento" on 2010/06/16, www.ladina.blogspot.com.

Cameroon's Beth Yeshourun Community Welcomes First Jewish Visitors

by Rabbis Bonita and Gerald Sussman and Serge Etele



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with several rabbis in the worldwide Jewish community. The community called itself Beth Yeshourun (House of the Righteous).

According to Serge, the Beth Yeshourun Jewish community of Cameroon evolved from a 1,000 strong Evangelical Christian group some 12 years ago. After studying the life of Jesus, a small number of adherents (today numbering about 60) decided that they no longer wanted to practice Christianity and turned instead to Judaism, embracing "Old Testament" practices. As in the case of Uganda's Abuyadaya Jewish community in 1919, those embracing Judaism had never met any Jews and had no in-person guidance or mentoring in developing their Jewish identity.

All the more astonishing is the story of how community leaders educated themselves about Jewish religious laws and customs with the help of the Internet, downloading prayers, music, theological and historical information, anything that would inform their religious knowledge and practice. Eventually, again through the Internet, Serge managed to contact rabbis in England, France and one in the United States to pursue the community's desire to become Jews and to explore conversion.

Serge discovered Kulanu while researching Judaism on the Internet. "I chose to write to Kulanu," he said, "because I read in the goals that Kulanu helps isolated Jewish communities. And we were an isolated community practicing Judaism." He was particularly excited about Kulanu's relationship with the Abuyadaya in Uganda and was convinced that Kulanu would be able to help his community end its isolation and join the mainstream. In his Community Information Form, Serge asked for a rabbi/teacher to visit Cameroon and help his community develop its Jewish practice. Rabbis Bonita and Gerald Sussman of Staten Island, devoted Kulanu volunteers and fluent in both French and Hebrew, answered the call. This summer, on July 21, the Sussmans arrived in Cameroon for two weeks

of teaching. Below are some of the impressions and experiences that Bonita, Gerald and Serge shared with Kulanu after the visit. JM

SUSSMANS: Before leaving for Cameroon, we decided to take with us cans of tuna and sardines just in case *kashrut* (Jewish dietary laws) was a problem during our visit. To our surprise, there was no problem. Community members reassured us that they used their pots only for vegetables and fish, and where that was not the case, new pots were purchased to make sure *kashrut* would be adequate for our needs. The community's deep knowledge and practice of Jewish dietary laws was but the first of many extraordinary observations we made during our two weeks in Cameroon. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

We were met at the airport at 5 AM on July 21st by our soon to be new family, the Beth Yeshourun Jewish community of Cameroon, and taken to our hotel where we crashed for about six hours.

SERGE: We were more than 10 people at the Yaounde* airport when the Sussmans arrived. All the people in the community were really happy to welcome them and they, in turn, were happy to find so many people waiting for them. We took them to their hotel to get some rest and in the afternoon they were invited for a meal prepared for them by the community. We were so eager to hear from them that we spent many hours after the meal just asking them questions.

SUSSMANS: Serge, the head of the community, picked us up for dinner and delivered us to the home of a community member. We had a great feast. Our meal consisted of fried fish, lettuce, tomato, avocado salad, spinach salad, plantain and some funny-sounding staple, now known to us as *baton de munyiac* (cassava). Our hosts served wine. Although kosher by conservative movement standards, we chose to drink beer instead. We noted that our community hosts all washed

**Yaounde is the capital of Cameroon.*



Little girl at Passover seder.
Photo by Serge Etele.

their hands before eating and did *mayim achronim* (final washing) afterward using a large pitcher and bin both times. From that first night, the community was eager to ask us questions on Judaism, ritual, theology, and customs. We were amazed at their level of knowledge and the thoughtfulness and depth of their questions. They were so into theology and the reasons for things and expressed a deep desire to know how to perfect their practice.

SERGE: The next day, the Sussmans visited both the American and Israeli Embassies to announce their presence, and afterwards, we traveled to our community of SAA. Currently, the spiritual center of the community is located in the village of SAA with additional members residing in Cameroon's capital city of Yaounde and in Douala, the economic center of the country. Members gather in SAA for Shabbat and holidays. It is about one and a half hours traveling.

The welcome ceremony was very solemn with traditional music and dance and a child giving them a bouquet of flowers. They were really moved by the reception and joy that people had to see them. After this there was a speech of welcome made by the leader of the community, who I am. The Sussmans also presented the gifts they brought to the community: *tefillin* (phylacteries), a *shofar* (ram's horn), a *siddur* (prayer book), three *mezuzot* (prayer for door posts), sets of Talmud, a book of *Mishna*, a manual of Jewish religious rituals, ceremonies and customs called *Hamadrikh* (Hebrew for the counselor), the *Megilla* (scroll) of Purim, books and tools for learning the *Aleph Beth* (ABC), books on Jewish history, clothes to cover the *matzah* (unleavened bread), and *challah* (Sabbath bread) and chocolate sweets for the children, etc. After the gifts presentation, people could ask their questions and the Sussmans spent lots of time doing that.

SUSSMANS: Our welcome was truly special. Throughout our stay, the hospitality in the community was amazing. We told them it was like our father Abraham who was known for his hospitality. Just as Abraham opened his home to all travelers, they had welcomed us with graciousness and warmth. This elicited elation and applause. In his welcome speech, Serge

quoted Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935), the first Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel (prior to statehood). We were duly impressed.

SERGE: In SAA the Sussmans were offered home hospitality in my father's house that also serves as the synagogue. My father is called *Moreh* (teacher) Nahman and he is the spiritual head of the community.

SUSSMANS: Our accommodations in SAA were very comfortable. They gave us our own key to the out-house and a private room with a very comfortable bed and mosquito net. (Bonita: That was a relief. I had not been able to get a Yellow Fever vaccination before the trip due to a pre-existing condition, and I had been particularly concerned about the mosquitoes we might find there. Actually we did not encounter any mosquitoes at all, probably because we hit a cool spell.)

After spending some time in India with the Bene Ephraim Teluga Jewish community, we were eager to see what life was like in Cameroon. We found the homes very nice and spacious; however, there was no running water or indoor plumbing. And little electricity. Women spent the day caring for babies, cooking and doing laundry by hand. Community members appeared to be very educated and spoke several languages, so communication was easy.

That was in SAA. In the capital city of Yaounde, indoor plumbing and electricity were available.

Life in SAA is full of togetherness and everyone helps raise the children and cooks, which was of particular interest. One peels the garlic and the other takes away the peel. (Bonita: I have a garlic ginger recipe for fish which I hope to make now that I am home.) Food is plentiful and everyone eats together.

There were definitely some differences with our experiences in India. In Cameroon, as in India, the streets



Hand-washing at Passover seder. Photo by Serge Etele.



Making challah. Photo by Sussmans.

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are often unpaved with open sewers exposed. However, in India the stench was unavoidable. In Cameroon, there was no stench from the sewers. There the unpaved streets are made of dirt and things become grimy from the dirt that is kicked up from the moving vehicles.

SERGE: Besides the trips to the embassies and a little sightseeing, the stay was made up mostly of Shabbat preparation and observance and studies. We learned a lot.

SUSSMANS: From day one, members of the community were eager to ask us questions on many subjects and to take advantage of our presence. One night we had a discussion on Jews in Africa and the problems they face. One girl asked our advice about a problem she was facing. In Cameroon there are arranged marriages and her parents threatened to disown her if she married a Jewish man. Others talked of Christians trying to convert them all the time. We told them this is a problem for all Jews. Another question was how to keep kosher at a family event with non-Jewish relatives when food is not kosher. When you do not travel on the Sabbath, what do you do when a family member has died and is not Jewish and the funeral is held on the Sabbath?

One of our gifts for the community was a *shofar* (ram's horn) that is blown on *Rosh Hashanah*, at the end of *Yom Kippur*, and during the entire month of *Elul* at the end of the morning service. (Jerry talking: I taught them how to blow the *shofar* (Ashkenazi style) and within 20 minutes, members of the community began to blow it correctly. They were so excited that this year they could finally "do it right" and hear the *shofar* as Jews do around the world.)

SERGE: For Shabbat, we traveled about an hour and a half to SAA.

SUSSMANS: Shabbat was an uplifting and unique experience. Friday morning the women baked challah from scratch. (Bonita: I actually sifted the flour for the first time. It came out perfectly.) The Friday

night service was emotionally laden for us and we will never forget it. We experienced a traditional service complete with *L'cha Dodi* (Sabbath prayer of welcome) and a version of *Yigdal* (closing hymn at the end of the Friday night service) that was sung according to the western tradition that they learned on line. The service was half Hebrew (pronounced perfectly) and half French. They prayed using a *Nusach Sefarad* (the traditional intonation and melody of Sephardic Jews, which differs slightly from the Ashkenazic Jewish tradition). Many community members can read Hebrew, and for those who cannot, everything was in transliteration. *Moreh Nachman*, Serge's father, led the service and both men and women joined in and took turns leading the prayers. They sang *Mizmor L'David* (a psalm of David) that was also pretty sensational. The community spent most of Shabbat praying.



Rabbi Gerald Sussman teaches a class, while "Rabbanit" Bonita Sussman receives cornbraids for Shabbat. Photos by Serge Etele.



The questions they asked on Shabbat demonstrated the depth of thought and practice. If you are sick, do you have to stand for the *Amidah* (silent devotional prayer)? How do you pray *Mincha* (afternoon prayer), if you are traveling? Can couples live together before marriage? What do you wear when you are in mourning? How many wives are allowed? (This is part of the culture.) How do you resolve conflict if you have more than one wife? How do you slaughter a chicken or cow to ensure it is kosher? They expressed many concerns about magic and superstition and how it affects or doesn't affect them since it is also part of the culture there. They want their worship and service to be exact. We told them that their Friday night service was so complete that it would fit in any *shul* (synagogue) in the world. Everyone knew the words of the Friday night service by heart, even the children.

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We then had a Shabbat meal and sang *zmirot* (songs). The food we ate was whole fish, rice and plantains with lots of vegetables. The songs were a mixture. Many of them were original to the community. Others were from the Internet such as *Yerushalayim Shel Zahav* (Jerusalem of Gold). The services reminded us of Chassidim *davening* (praying) because they pray with such enthusiasm and *kavanah* (intent). (Bonita: The members of the community called me *Rabbanit* (rabbi's wife) and for Shabbat they made me cornbraids; they looked great. They said I looked like the Queen of Sheba.)

Morning services begin every day at 6:15 AM, even on Shabbat. Everyone says *Shabbat Shalom* (a peaceful Sabbath). At the end of Shabbat, they make a grand *Havdalah* (service marking the end of the Sabbath and the beginning of the new week) with songs and according to *Havdalah* ritual. Frankly, they were surprised to hear that in the United States there are Jews who do not practice anything, since they cherish the rituals and their lives are dedicated to perfecting their practice.

SERGE: We don't eat forbidden foods and try to respect the *kashering* process (making kosher) when cooking meat. We respect the interdiction of eating meat with milk. We make three daily prayers. Most of us know these prayers by heart. We say *Schema Israel* (Hear O'Israel, a seminal prayer of the Jewish faith) in French, the *Amidah* in Hebrew... We don't marry non-Jews.

One community member composes songs in Hebrew, with text he finds in Jewish books. We organize two weekly sessions of *Talmud Torah* (Hebrew study) using teachings from Jewish websites. We only marry those people who are willing to follow the Jewish faith.

SUSSMANS: We had read all that Serge had written in his Community Form for Kulanu, but we never expected to see the level and depth of Jewish practice that we found there. There was more practice, more knowledge than we could have imagined. Their practice is more developed and concerned with detail than most Jews we meet in America. They constantly wanted to know what the "standard practice for Jews" was. We had a strong sense that we were not "their rabbis" or there to "correct their practices" but were there to open doors for them and encourage religious development in any way they saw fit and desired. We tried to bring to them a wide range of Jewish practice without creat-

ing bias towards any one form of Judaism. We tried to explain to them that the practice of Judaism varies throughout the world from very liberal forms to very strict ones and it was their choice to develop their Judaism within their own context and needs.

We tried to explain that the practice of Judaism in New York differs from the practice of Judaism in India, Europe and Israel and often has to do with cultural contexts and history. And their prayer book...it was a self-made *Siddur* (prayer book) with 150 pages in an Orthodox form, which they had compiled from the internet. Their service was Artscroll-like* in format, meaning it went through pages and pages of texts

systematically in French and Hebrew using a traditional liturgy.

SERGE: We have been praying to *Hashem* (God) for years so that other Jews would notice us and *voila'* (French for "there it is"). It is proof that God answered our prayers. Thanks to God, that you (Sussmans) are here to help us and our isolation is being broken.

SUSSMANS: (Shabbat Study) Gerry talking: On the first Shabbat, I gave a class on *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (the abridged version of the *Shulchan Aruch*, a seminal work of Judaism) because we thought it was relevant. The passage dealt

with waking up early to serve the will of the creator, things which they were doing already and we thought relevant. On the second Shabbat, I taught in French about *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year), *Yom Kippur* (Holiday of Atonement) and *Elul* (the Hebrew month before the High Holidays during which the focus is spiritual preparation). It was somewhat of a review for them, but I felt the holidays were coming and it was important. Again we answered many questions. This time they asked about *Nida* (laws of ritual purity) and building a *mikvah* (ritual bath). They asked about what would be proper when there is a Christian funeral and it takes place on Shabbat. They asked about a *Seudah Havraah* (the last meal before a fast) by name and asked if was "standard practice" to put ashes on the egg

*Artscroll is a well known publisher of Orthodox Jewish prayer books and other Jewish texts.



Carved wooden object representing a lamed, with embedded watch. Made by Mama Nazer as a gift for the Sussmans. Photo by Serge Etele.

at the *Seudah Havraah* on *Yom Kippur* like you would do on *Erev Tisha B'av* (night before holiday of Ninth of Av commemorating the destruction of the two temples in Jerusalem).

At the end of the second Shabbat, we put up a *mezuzah* and they recited *Shecheyanu* (the blessing over a special deed done for the first time) and spoke about how grateful they were to finally have been noticed by other Jews.

SERGE: The Sussmans wanted to introduce us to the representatives of Israel at the Embassy and made an appointment and took several leaders of the community with them, including me. It was the first time we were there. It turned out to be meaningful for everyone.

SUSSMANS: On our first trip to the Embassy the day after we arrived in Cameroon, we met with the person in charge of security for the Embassy. His name was Ron Raz. Ron was surprised to meet New York Jews who spoke Hebrew. It was Ron Raz who arranged for our second meeting with Alon Melchior, deputy chief at the Embassy. The ambassador himself was not in the country at the time. Ron gave us a pin that had the Israel and Cameroon flags on it intertwined in friendship.

We were able to introduce Alon to members of the Beth Yeshouroun community. He was cordial and welcoming and asked them all sorts of questions regarding what it was like to be a Jew in Cameroon, what brought them to Judaism from Christianity, their theology and how their families and others in their town regard them.

We asked the embassy for books, a *lulav* (palms) and *etrog* (citron), both used for the holiday of *Succot*, and *matzot* (unleavened bread eaten during Passover). He said it was not the role of the Embassy to provide these items, but he might be able to connect the community with those who do. He did give Serge, his wife, father and David (the community's cantor) some books on Israel in French.

During the meeting, we learned that Israel provides ag-

ricultural assistance on irrigation to Cameroon and recently sent doctors to perform cataract surgery. There are also cultural programs such as a film festival, a modern dance program and an upcoming jazz festival. Alon gave David the name of the organizer of this festival.

While we were meeting with Alon, someone named Shmuel called from Israel and Alon told us it was a Jewish convert from Ghana who had made *aliyah* (immigrated to Israel) and now works for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

SERGE: It was difficult to part from the Sussmans. The last Thursday before leaving, they were offered a concert by the community. It was our way of telling them goodbye. And we gave them gifts. We were happy to have them among us.

After Shabbat we left SAA for Yaounde so that they would have some time to rest be-

fore their flight. We were eight people accompanying them to the airport and the separation was moving. They seemed very happy by their stay in our community. We thanked God who permitted us to live during these great moments. We are considering our future now with more hope. We want to raise money to build a synagogue and to send me for rabbinic studies. I also want to thank Kulanu again for this and may *Hashem* (God) bless your work and your persons.

SUSSMANS: Yes, the parting was very moving. And our trip to this small Jewish community in the Cameroon was an amazing experience. Our sense of responsibility for this unique community has been strong since our return from such an adventure. There are pictures and films to share, music to "get out," money to raise, teachings to be had and, of course, discussions about conversion. There are many doors that need to be opened for them to enter the worldwide Jewish community as active participants. We hope that with the help of Kulanu and many others the doors will open.



Woman and children in front of synagogue.
Boy in background is playing the shofar.
Photo by Sussmans.

Salonika, the Holocaust, and a Memorial Day Weekend in Greece

by Michael Dukakis

Most students of Jewish history probably know that Salonika, or Thessaloniki, as the Greeks call it, was a center of Jewish life and culture for hundreds of years. But some may not know the origin of the Jewish groups that made their home there and that, over the centuries, Jews settled in villages and towns throughout Greece.

The most well-known of these groups was composed of Spanish Jews, expelled from Spain in 1492 during the Spanish Inquisition, who found refuge in the Ottoman Empire. Although many of those fleeing persecution settled in Istanbul, which continues to have a thriving Jewish community today, thousands more settled in the northern Greek city of Salonika, which rapidly became its own vibrant center of Jewish life. There they were protected by the leaders of the Ottoman Empire, who controlled northern Greece at that time.

After experiencing a peaceful and relatively tolerant existence in Salonika for hundreds of years, the Jewish community of Salonika was understandably concerned when Greece, which declared its independence from the Ottomans in 1821, began to advance on Salonika and defeated the Turks there in 1912. Happily, their fears were unrealized. Once Greece took control of the area, relationships between the Jewish and Greek communities were relatively good, although Greece, like most European nations, had its share of anti-Semitism.

In addition to Salonika, there were active Jewish communities in many other Greek cities and towns. In my mother's home city of Larissa in central Greece, for example, there were hundreds of Jewish families. In fact, the Cohen family occupied the other half of my mother's house until she and her family emigrated to the U.S. in 1913. And in Ioannina, the capital of the northwestern province of Epiros, which was the birthplace of my maternal grandparents, there has been a Jewish community since Roman times. In fact, we Greeks call them Romaniotes. They do not speak Ladino, like Jews of Spanish ancestry, and they have their own unique customs. When my wife Kitty and I were in Greece in August of 2009, we visited the synagogue in Ioannina and met with representatives of the community. Sadly, a strong and prosperous Jewish community of some

3000 in 1940 (pre-Holocaust) now numbers a mere sixty.

Most of us think of the Holocaust as having affected primarily the Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, but in 1940, there were 100,000 Jews in Greece alone, about 65,000 of whom lived in Salonika. At that time, some 94 Jewish boys from the community attended Anatolia College, a prestigious secondary school with an American curriculum and instruction in English. Anatolia

Armenian students were forced to participate in death marches.

College had been founded in central Turkey by American Protestant missionaries in the mid nineteenth century. Many students from the Greek and Armenian communities in Turkey studied at Anatolia. Unfortunately, the Young Turks,* in their attempts to promote Turkish hegemony in the region, invaded the school in 1915 and seized the Armenian students, some of whom were forced to participate in death marches similar to those perpetrated by the Nazis against the Jews in World War II. Because of these tragic events, school administrators concluded they could no longer remain in Turkey and decided to relocate the school to Salonika. There, Anatolia College became a highly respected school to which Jewish and Greek Orthodox families sent their children. Then came World War II.

Greece waged a courageous battle against the Axis at the beginning of the war and, in fact, not only repelled but pushed the Italian army well back into Albania. Hitler, furious at Mussolini and forced to delay plans for the invasion of Russia, sent his armies into Greece. His massive forces, which invaded from the north, overwhelmed the country. Salonika was one of the first major Greek cities to fall to the Nazis. While

**The Young Turks was a group of xenophobic and exclusionary Turkish nationalists who are most often identified as those responsible for the mass deportations and systematic murder of the Armenian minority in Turkey.*



SALONICA, CONT. FROM PAGE 17

some of the Jews of central and southern Greece had a chance to seek refuge in the mountains or to be taken in by Christian families who protected them, the Jews of Salonika were much less fortunate. The community was decimated. As for the Jewish students at Anatolia? All 94 perished in the Holocaust, victims of hatred and persecution. The tragedy that struck Salonika was repeated throughout Greece for its Jewish citizens. In fact, when World War II was over, it was discovered that only a tiny fraction of the Jewish community in Greece had survived. Today there are only about 5,000 Jews in all of Greece, some two thousand of whom live in Salonika.

Over the years, my wife Kitty and I had discussed the possibility of establishing a memorial of some kind to the Jewish students at Anatolia College. Dick Jackson, the recently retired president of the school, had suggested the memorial to us during one of our visits to the

Only a tiny fraction of the Jewish community in Greece had survived.

school. He was anxious to create both a memorial to the students and to inaugurate a program of genocide studies at the College. As I teach at UCLA for three months each year (the rest of the year I am a professor at Northeastern University in Boston), we have the opportunity to participate in many events on both sides of the United States. One such occasion was the opening of the "Hidden Children of Greece" exhibit at the Sephardic Temple Tiferet on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, located near the university. The exhibit had been put together by the Jewish Museum in Athens and recounted the story of dozens of Jewish children who had been taken in by Orthodox Christian families and saved from the Nazis. Over 500 people attended the event, almost evenly split between Greeks and Jews. It was such a successful and meaningful evening that Kitty and I decided it might make sense the following year to have an evening featuring Greek, Jewish and Ladino music at the synagogue and to raise funds for the memorial at Anatolia College.

Kitty put together a program that included singer Craig Taubman of Friday Night Live; Alberto Mizrachi, the cantor at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago and himself a Greek Jew whose father was one of the few Greek



Michael and Kitty Dukakis
Anatolia College

Jonah more than matched that amount in euros. So on Memorial Day weekend this May, Kitty and I found ourselves on a plane to Salonika to participate in the dedication of a classroom and an amphitheater to the memory of both the 94 Jewish students who died in the Holocaust and the Armenian students in Turkey who were victims of the Armenian genocide.

Traveling to Greece and back over a long weekend isn't something I would recommend on a regular basis, but having been in Salonika with representatives of Anatolia College, leaders of both the Greek and Jewish communities, and students and faculty of the American College in Thessaloniki, now an important and integral part of Anatolia College, will be one of our very special memories.

Michael Dukakis is the former governor of Massachusetts and the 1988 Democratic candidate for the US Presidency.

PORTUGAL'S JEWISH MUSEUM

On a recent trip to Portugal, David and Sandi Gordon of Boston discovered a small but special museum dedicated to Portugal's Jewish community. The museum, which opened on April 11, 2009, is located in a former synagogue in the Judairia section of Castelo de Vide. The Gordons described two especially powerful exhibits. The walls of one room were covered with the names of Crypto-Jews who were forcibly taken to Evora and burned at the stake in 1666-1668. A second room had colorful door panels that could be opened. Inside were the names of Portuguese Jewish residents and the stories of their migration or forced transit. The museum does not have a Web site and the exhibits are in Portuguese. The Gordons were fortunate to visit when an English speaking guide was present at the site. If anyone has additional information about this museum, please let us know.

DESCENDANT OF KAIFENG JEWISH COMMUNITY TALKS OF HIS JEWISH HERITAGE AND IDENTITY

by Judy Manelis



Shi Lei holding model of historic Kaifeng Synagogue during his Montreal visit. The synagogue occupied the same site in Kaifeng for 800 years, through numerous repairs and replacements, until its final disintegration in 1850. Photo by Enid Bloch.

Last spring, Kulanu was privileged to host the speaking tour of Shi Lei, a descendant of the ancient Jewish community of Kaifeng, China. The tour, which zigzagged across the United States and into Canada, was a great success, and, in the end, 18 Jewish communities invited Shi Lei to visit and share with them his unique heritage and history. The idea of Chinese Jews is for many people an exotic and unimaginable pairing of cultures. But for others, my son included, there are many common values that make the two peoples a natural fit. My son who lived in Shanghai for six years was always quick to point out the importance of family ties, an appreciation of one's history and the fierce commitment to education and self betterment that both Jews and Chinese share. One should also mention that both peoples seem to possess an innate talent for and understanding of commerce and have a strong desire to succeed.

Even more important for Jews, however, has been the tolerance and respect the Chinese have always shown to Jews who managed to find their way to China seeking a safe harbor from persecution by other nations. Whether a thousand years ago in Kaifeng, the capital

of the Song Dynasty (called Dongjing at that time) or during the various migrations of the 19th and 20th century to Manchuria and Shanghai when Jews left Eastern and Western Europe seeking safety, they were welcomed by the Chinese rulers and allowed and even encouraged to remain. There were no enforced ghettos in China, no funny hats or badges to distinguish Jews from others or to show derision. There were no expulsions or forced conversions. There was no boat of refugees turned away from the shores of mainland China as the ship The St. Louis was turned back from the coast of the United States and forced to return to Nazi Germany, where the Holocaust was in full swing. Instead, in each instance and through many centuries, Jews were met with tolerance and acceptance, their talents admired and appreciated.

Where do Shi Lei and his family fit within this rich intercultural story? According to Shi Lei, his forebears were among the first wave of Jews seeking a safe haven approximately 1,000 years ago when Jews left Persia and traveled east along the Silk Road. At risk and at the mercy of anti-Jewish ethnic groups, these courageous

*Shi Lei's forebears sought safe haven
in Kaifeng 1000 years ago.*

and hardy folk, tired of the precariousness of their existence and looking for a peaceful and secure environment, braved the dangers and rigors of the road to reach China. Rumors of a vibrant and successful society in Kaifeng had reached them in Persia, and so they set out not knowing whether or not they would be allowed to settle and whether they would be welcomed by an unfamiliar people.

I had the distinct pleasure of hearing Shi Lei speak in two communities during his visit to the United States and to introduce him both times to enthusiastic audiences. The interview below took place just before he departed Massachusetts for Toronto, his next stop on the 18-city speaking tour.

JM: Shi Lei, How would you describe the Jewish community in Kaifeng in the early years of the 20th Century?



SL: Frankly, there was no longer a Jewish community by that time. Community members didn't know each other. There had been so much assimilation over the years; we no longer had a synagogue; we had no community organizations. By the beginning of the 20th century we were just individual families who shared a common heritage of long ago. Each family passed down word of its Jewish heritage from father to son. (In China, family identity and history is inherited through the male side of the family.) I think we all had pride in our individual and family Jewish identity, but that was all.

JM: If there were no community structures, how did the community evolve and come to share its common heritage?

SL: Bishop William Charles White came to China in the 1890's as a Christian missionary to preach and to convert the Chinese to Christianity. He spent over 40 years in the country, 25 of those years in Kaifeng. When he heard there were people of Jewish ancestry in Kaifeng, he organized a conference and invited them all to attend. I believe he thought that was a good way to get to know the community and maybe even convert them. But what happened was quite different. When everyone came together, they recognized their unique shared history and heritage and wanted to embrace it. Bishop White had done a very good things for us.

JM: Who in your family was the keeper of Jewish tradition?

SL: My grandfather was the person most knowledgeable about the history and identify of the community and of our family. He taught my father and my father taught me. When my grandfather died, there was an article about him in one of the English papers. The journalist said "the patriarch....of the Chinese Jewish community of Kaifeng has died."

JM: What about the rest of your family?

SL: According to Chinese custom, it is the male family member who carries the tradition. In spite of this custom, my mother and grandmother always felt they belonged to the Kaifeng Jewish community and celebrated our family's Jewish heritage.

JM: You have an illustrious heritage... I am wondering if at this point of your life, you find it a burden or a blessing... By burden, I mean do you feel you carry the history of your ancestors on your shoulders and feel obligated to perpetuate your history?

SL: It definitely is not a burden. I feel strongly about my Jewish identity. And very connected to it.

JM: I understand from your presentations that you spent some years studying Judaism in Israel? How did that come about?

SL: Rabbi Marvin Tokayer came to visit Kaifeng and met our family. As my father was the person most knowledgeable about our history, Rabbi Tokayer took a special interest in me and he arranged for me to go to Israel to study and learn about Judaism.

JM: How was your time in Israel? You were there four years between 2001 and 2004?

SL: I must say it was a bit of a culture shock. Israelis are very direct and Chinese people are not. They are very polite. I was also very interested to see the diversity in the country... Jews from so many different countries. Ethiopian, European, Yemenite, Russian, Indian... My Chinese background fit right in...

JM: Who else helped you when you were in Israel?

SL: Michael Freund, the founder and director of Shavei Israel, was very supportive. He is still very involved with our community and has been arranging for our young men and women to study in Israel. There are about 18 there now.

JM: I understand that you will be visiting Toronto. The museum there has many of the Jewish ritual objects from your community. How do you feel about that?

SL: I feel ashamed that the ritual objects are in a museum instead of in our community. But the people in the community were impoverished in those years, and in order to survive, they sold their books and Torahs to Christian missionaries who took them out of the country.

JM: Since Rabbi Tokayer and Michael Freund have taken an interest in your community, what is the community doing to reconnect with its Jewish past?

SL: Most of the descendants now are young, in their 20s or teens. They are learning about Jewish festivals and rituals. They are also learning English. If they want to go to study in Israel, they need to learn English. On Friday nights, we often meet in our community center/museum, which is my grandfather's old apartment. We usually have 20 to 30 people who come. We light the candles and recite some prayers. People are eager to learn more...

JM: How would you describe your own Jewish practice and identity now?

KAIFENG, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20

SL: I have a very strong cultural connection to my Jewish roots, but I'm not that traditional in my practice.

JM: Do you mix a great deal with people outside the community and how is that for you?

SL: I have many friends outside the community. They know I have a Jewish background and respect that. I am proud to share that knowledge with others. Kaifeng Jews are very proud of their heritage, as I am.

JM: How would you describe the Jewish needs of your community now?



Shi Lei studies artifacts from Kaifeng Synagogue during visit to Royal Ontario Museum. Andria Spindel stands in background. Photo by Enid Bloch.

SL: We could use a teacher to help the young master English in preparation for their studies to Israel. They need English to learn Jewish customs and practice there.

JM: One last question. What is there in Judaism that gives most meaning to your life?

SL: The laws and *mitzvot* (commandments) and the rich history that goes with them. In China, we also have laws, but many people do not know the strong history of our people and the meaning behind the Chinese laws. In Israel, they know and you can learn about them. When I had the opportunity to learn in Israel, it affected my thinking. And I felt close to the Jewish people. I developed a deeper understanding of my heritage and family history... In China, not so much is written down about our traditions. Things are handed down orally.

JM: Thank you so much for sharing your unique heritage with us. I look forward to seeing you on your next trip to the United States.



Stone bowl, gilt-lacquered wooden Torah case, and jade chime (used to call worshippers to services) from the Kaifeng Synagogue. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Photo by Enid Bloch.

VISITING THE ROM

by Enid Bloch

The morning after speaking to a standing-room only crowd of more than 300 at Toronto's Congregation Darchai Noam, Shi Lei could hardly wait to visit the Royal Ontario Museum. Andria Spindel, his Kulanu host in Toronto, and I planned to accompany him there. Shi Lei knew that the museum held ritual objects from the Kaifeng Jewish community's illustrious past. Many artifacts had been brought to Toronto by Bishop William Charles White, an Anglican missionary and scholar who spent a quarter century living next to Kaifeng's Jewish residents. Indeed, we were headed for the ROM's Bishop White Gallery.

I too had reason to be excited. In order to prepare a slide show to accompany Shi Lei's Kulanu speaking tour, I had spent several months reading everything I could find about Kaifeng's Jewish history, including White's own massive work, *Chinese Jews: A Compilation of Matters Relating to the Jews of K'ai-fêng fu*, first published in 1942 in two volumes.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 22

Shi Lei was ebullient as we entered the museum, but when we located the White Gallery his mood suddenly shifted to profound disappointment. For we were peering through a tall glass case, staring at a gilded wooden Torah holder from the Kaifeng synagogue, and the holder was *empty*. “Where is the Torah,” Shi Lei cried out, “the Torah of my ancestors?” His pain was palpable.

I didn’t realize Shi Lei expected the Torah to be there. From my reading, I knew White had been able to obtain only the wooden holder, not the Torah itself. Shi Lei was devastated, but when Andria told him a Kaifeng Torah did exist and could be seen in a London museum, he firmly declared, “I must go to London!” He wondered aloud if there were Kulanu members in London who might help him find the missing Torah.

We moved on to other glass cases and soon discovered evidence of the way Shi Lei’s Jewish ancestors might have reached Kaifeng. We had come across a number of pottery figurines with Middle Eastern features, depicting tradesmen journeying through China along the Silk Route. The little sculptures dated from the seventh to ninth centuries and were very realistic - indeed, they looked like our own relatives. Shi Lei was happy now, as we carefully studied the tradesmen and the camels accompanying them. His ancestors were here in the museum after all, if only figuratively, and he was able to honor them.



Pottery figurines with Middle Eastern features, made in China c. 600 CE, found along the Silk Route. Royal Ontario Museum. Photo by Enid Bloch.

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CONDOLENCES

We are sad to share news of the death of Lynne Elson of San Diego, CA, on May 28. She was a beloved friend of the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda and the Jews of Kaifeng, China, and had generously supported Kulanu programs over the years. Lynne first visited the Abayudaya in January, 2005, and then returned in July of that year, at age 85, to teach Hebrew for two weeks to the residents of the Jewish village of Apac in northern Uganda. We will sorely miss her. May her memory be for a blessing.



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HONOR AND REMEMBRANCE

Here are donations since last May in the names of those we wish to honor or remember. This is a new Kulanu listing, so please let us know if we have missed anyone, and we'll be sure to include that person in the next newsletter. Donors' names are printed in italics.

DONATIONS IN HONOR OF...

Amy Oestreicher:

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BACK BY POPULAR DEMAND! ***SHI LEI SPEAKING TOUR, WINTER, 2011***

Shi Lei, descendant of the ancient Jewish community of Kaifeng, China, will return to the United States February 7 to March 7, 2011, on a speaking tour. His successful visit last spring took him to 18 communities throughout the United States and Canada, where his presentation was received with enthusiasm and excitement. We need your help in identifying possible venues for Shi Lei's winter tour. For further information and to learn what your

group needs to do to host a visit, consult the Kulanu website at: www.kulanu.org.

For some historic background on the community, you can view "History of the Kaifeng Jewish Community," a beautiful and informative slide show prepared by Enid Bloch, Kulanu's layout and photography editor, at:

kulanu.phanfare.com

CONGRATULATIONS!

To Rabbi Stephen Leon and Rabbi Juan Mejia on the publication of their booklet, "Welcoming B'nai Anousim (descendants of Crypto-Jews) to Judaism and Memorializing the Spanish Inquisition as Part of *Tisha B'av* (Ninth day of the Hebrew month of Av) Observances." The text of the resolution on *Tisha B'Av* observance, authored and introduced by Rabbi Leon and passed by the United Synagogue of Conservative of Judaism (USCJ) at their national convention in December, 2009, is included. In addition, there are numerous program ideas utilizing poetry and music as well as a comprehensive listing of resources to assist congregations in the implementation of the resolution. The booklet is available on line at: juan@koltuvsefarad.com

To Rabbi Romiel Daniel on his ordination May 17 by the Vaad Harabanim (American Board of Rabbis).

To Sidney Davis on his Master of Arts in Jewish Studies from Boston's Hebrew College, in June. Sidney also received the Leo and Sadie Flux Prize for proficiency in Judaic Studies.

To Stephen Gomes, who was married on October 10 to Linda Powers Leviton. Our own Rabbi Haim Beliak did the honors.

To Ali and Rabbi Michael Ramberg on the birth of their daughter Tina Nontando. (Nontando is an African name meaning "will of God").

To Alex Armah of Sefwi Wiawso, who celebrated his adult Bar Mitzvah with the Abuyadaya community in Uganda on April 10. Alex has now completed nearly two years of study with Rabbi Gershom Sizomu.

To Dr. Navras Jaat Aafreedi on his promotion to Assistant Professor, Department of Social Sciences, School of Humanities & Social Sciences, Gautam Buddha University, India.

To the Jewish Community of Suriname on the 325th anniversary of the Bracha ve Shalom Synagogue (Blessing and Peace), built in 1685 in the Jodensavanne and the 175th anniversary of the Neve Shalom Synagogue (Oasis of Peace).

To Jonina Ducker who presented a paper at the International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies (IAJGS) in Los Angeles in July on the topic, "The Captives Return: Descendants of Forced Iberian Converts Find their Way Back to Judaism."