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Campaign launched for Tegegne's transplant in Israel

By Janice Arnold

Canadian Jewish News

June 23, 2005

An Israeli hospital has agreed to perform a life-saving kidney transplant for Baruch Tegegne of Montreal using an organ donated – free of charge – by an Indian man. That's the good news. The bad news is that \$120,000 (US) must be raised to cover the total costs, says Simcha Jacobovici, the Toronto-based filmmaker who has been advocating on behalf of Tegegne, an Ethiopian Jew. The hospital, Rambam Medical Centre in Haifa, has agreed in writing to do the surgery for a fee of \$70,000, which Jacobovici calls "very discounted... It normally charges \$100,000. That's because of Baruch's role in helping Ethiopian Jewry." However, when travel costs, dialysis for Tegegne, and accommodations, care and other expenses are factored in, at least another \$50,000 is needed, Jacobovici said.

In March, the Royal Victoria Hospital (RVH) said it would not do the transplant for Tegegne, 61, because the prospective live donor is not related to him, and is, in fact, a stranger. There is no way of verifying whether or not payment would change hands, and buying and selling organs is illegal in Canada. Thirty-year-old Shree Dhar said he will accept no compensation for the donation, other than covering his expenses and the time he loses from making a living. The RVH said it has never performed a transplant using an "altruistic" donation and, moreover, it has concerns because Dhar was found through the Internet and is from a Third World country. Jacobovici has been unable so far to find another Canadian hospital willing to do the transplant. He found Dhar by placing an ad on Tegegne's behalf on www.matchingdonors.com, a site that matches persons willing to give an organ without personal benefit to those in need.

Tegegne, who is hailed as a hero of the rescue of Ethiopian Jewry, has advanced kidney disease as a complication of diabetes. He

has been on the RVH's kidney transplant waiting list for a year and undergoes dialysis four times a week at the Jewish General Hospital. Jacobovici believes Quebec medicare should at least pay for Tegegne's post-operative care on the grounds that he was forced to go elsewhere for a procedure not available here. Although Tegegne has Israeli citizenship, he is not eligible for the national health program because he has not been paying into it, Jacobovici said.

A number of American hospitals are also willing to do the transplant using Dhar's kidney, but they asked from \$200,000 to \$300,000 for the operation alone, Jacobovici said. Having the operation in Israel is preferable, in any case, because Tegegne has a support system of friends and family there. "Time is of the essence," he stressed. "I'm very worried about him. He has better weeks and worse weeks, but this campaign has given him hope. He feels he's not alone."

Rambam, founded in 1938 as a British military hospital, is one of Israel's five major hospitals. Today it is a teaching hospital affiliated with the Technion, and treats many non-Israelis including thousands of citizens of southern Lebanon and United Nations peacekeeping forces. The Toronto-based Canadian Friends of Rambam Medical Centre has set up a fund specifically to collect donations to enable Tegegne to have the transplant, and tax receipts will be issued, Jacobovici said.

The Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel has so far raised \$20,000, Jacobovici said, which is remarkable given they are generally "low on the economic totem pole." Another \$20,000 approximately, has been pledged in the United States through the Sha'arei Dayah Foundation of St. Paul, Minn., much of it coming from those who are aware of Tegegne's role in the Ethiopian Jewish struggle. The foundation has created a website (www.TransplantNow.org) to publicize Tegegne's plight. His dramatic story was told in Jacobovici's 1983 documentary *Falasha: Exile of the Black Jews*.

Tegegne is credited with rescuing hundreds of his fellow Ethiopian Jews from famine and in their flight to Israel. In the 1950s, Tegegne was brought to Israel as a child by the government, and educated at the Mizrachi AMIT schools. He returned to Ethiopia as a young adult to work among his people. This activism got him in trouble with the authorities and, in 1974, he escaped the country by walking across Sudan, eventually returning to Israel. Tegegne later was involved in the covert Operation Moses in 1984, when thousands of Ethiopian Jews were airlifted from Sudan. In 1979, he married a Montreal woman he met in Israel, and moved to this city, although he has spent many of the intervening years in Israel.

Jacobovici said Tegegne's legal challenge against the RVH is still being pursued, and expects it to go to court "in the next few weeks." In March, Tegegne's lawyer Michael Bergman, launched what he called a precedent-setting action against the RVH, which is part of the McGill University Health Centre. In a letter to RVH director-general Dr. Timothy Meagher, Bergman argued that the hospital's refusal of the transplant endangers Tegegne's life and, thereby, his rights under the Canadian and Quebec charters, as well as the Canada Health Act, Quebec health-care legislation and the medical profession's Hippocratic oath. Since then, Bergman has received written confirmation from the RVH that it will not perform the transplant because it would violate the medical profession's code of ethics concerning organ transplants. But Bergman rejects this as "absurd and completely without merit because no money is exchanging hands... It's the ultimate charitable act." Bergman maintains that the code referred to has no statutory or regulatory weight. Jacobovici said that, in addition to pressing for Tegegne's rights, it is hoped a court will clarify whether hospitals can arbitrarily refuse a donor simply because they are not a relative, are from another country, or were found through the Internet.

For information on the Tegegne fund of the Canadian Friends of Rambam Medical Centre, call Nicole at 416-504-6662, ext. 229, or e-mail: naustin@apltd.ca.

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UJC moves to raise \$160 million for Falash Mura and Jews in FSU

By Rachel Pomerance
JTA Email Edition
June 7, 2005

The Jewish federation system has launched a major fund-raising campaign to assist the Jews of Ethiopia and the former Soviet Union. At a meeting Sunday in New York, the board of trustees of the United Jewish Communities, the umbrella group for the North American federation system, approved a motion to raise \$160 million for two initiatives. Criticisms and doubts were raised about the proposal, but the final vote was unanimous. Most of the money, \$100 million, will go toward expediting aliyah and absorption in Israel of some 20,000 Falash Mura, Ethiopian Jews whose ancestors converted to Christianity, and for the integration of Ethiopians already in Israel. The funds will be raised in three to five years.

The remaining \$60 million, to be raised within three years, will go to help Jews in the former Soviet Union through identity-building programs for youth and caring for the elderly poor. The campaign comes as Israel prepares to double the monthly rate of Falash Mura immigration, from 300 to 600. Transportation, initial education and welfare costs will run to some \$23 million over three years, and will be managed by the UJC's overseas partners, the Jewish Agency for Israel and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. About \$40 million will go toward absorbing the Falash Mura, and \$37 million to integrate Ethiopians in Israel through

improved education.

The Ethiopian initiative was framed as the completion of previous mass immigrations from Ethiopia, namely Operation Moses in 1984-85 and Operation Solomon in 1991. "Fourteen years ago, I was privileged to stand on the airport tarmac in Israel and be an eyewitness to a miracle and welcome more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews rescued in Operation Solomon," said Susan Stern, chairwoman of the board of directors of UJA-Federation of New York and outgoing chair of the UJC National Women's Philanthropy. "What an extraordinary experience that was, seeing the great pride of the Jewish community and feeling the great hope of that day. We have accomplished much since then, but we have not yet completed the promise." The new campaign was met with praise but also some consternation at the UJC's board meeting Sunday, as the group became momentarily gridlocked over whether to place binding terms on the proposal, requiring federations to allocate a fair share of funds based on the overall funds each federation raises. Binding language ultimately was left out of the resolution, but the debate underscored the urgency of effectively funding Falash Mura aliyah. Shortly after the initiative was raised, Batia Eyob, executive director of the Israel Association for Ethiopian Jews, sent an angry letter to UJC officials, claiming the association wasn't consulted about the project. "You know very well how hard we all have worked to have the Ethiopian community be seen as part of the solution and not only the problem. You can, then, understand why we are so alarmed about this Ethiopian Initiative' carried out by one of our partners excluding us," she wrote. Ethiopian-Israeli representatives in Israel "provided a portrait of the community that is not made of misery and despair but of strength and success. This effort of ensuring to have a balanced portrayal of the Ethiopian community in Israel, which we believe is extremely crucial in any campaign, does not seem to be conveyed in the initial material presented to us by UJC's Ethiopian Initiative" she wrote.

Federation leaders say the plan to expedite Falash Mura immigration has been public for a long time. The resolution states that UJC's executive committee, a body of lay leaders, will develop a campaign plan. But some community leaders raised concerns about separating the initiative from the annual federation campaign. "How is this going to resonate with the donors?" asked Etta Zimmerman, general campaign chair for the Jewish Federation of South Palm Beach County, Fla. She told the board that the campaign sends a mixed message to donors, who assume such services already are addressed through the annual campaign. "It shows the failure of what ONAD was meant to do," Gary Weinstein, executive vice president of the Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas, told JTA. Weinstein was referring to UJC's Overseas Needs Assessment and Distribution committee, which is being revamped due to complaints that the committee was plagued by politics and red tape. "ONAD was meant to prioritize overseas needs for us." Combining both initiatives into one campaign could confuse donors, Weinstein said. While the Ethiopian issue may motivate donors, additional funding for identity building in the former Soviet Union will compete with fund-raising efforts for local identity-building programs, he said. "If they want to be successful, I think they are going to have to prioritize these appeals and have different strategies for us," Weinstein said. "You put it all together, the three appeals are going to be diluted." But many are optimistic. "I don't think this is any more complicated or difficult than any other challenge that the federation system has met," said Andy Groveman, a member UJC's board of trustees from Memphis who also chairs the Jewish Agency's finance and administration committee. "In the end, we all came together, voted and recognized that there was an unmet need and responsibility that we're all going to step up to the plate and try to meet." Stephen Hoffman, president of the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland and former CEO of the UJC, agrees. "We have a great historic opportunity to participate in this next stage of bringing the Ethiopian Jewish community home, as well as providing some really essential extra help in the former Soviet Union, and I'm pretty confident that people will rally to this," he said.

Hoffman was involved in the creation of the Ethiopian National Project, a UJC initiative begun five years ago in partnership with the Jewish Agency, JDC and Ethiopian Israelis, to help integrate Ethiopian Jews in Israel. According to Hoffman, that project was stymied by technical challenges and then was overwhelmed by the need to respond to the Palestinian intifada, which began in late 2000. By contrast, the newest initiative "has a historical turning point. It is the doubling of the flow of people from Ethiopia, so there's a very clear marker. If UJC does what it should, which is to rapidly develop an approach that communities can adapt for their own responses to this challenge, this call for action, I think we have a very good chance of succeeding," he said.

Israel Bar Association promotes hiring Ethiopian law students

Israeli Press Office

Ha'aretz

June 5, 2005

The Israel Bar Association recently called on its members to hire law students of Ethiopian origin. This is the first initiative by a private body to assist Israelis of Ethiopian origin to enter a profession considered prestigious and desirable... The glass ceiling will only be broken if employers take the initiative. The private sector has room for more initiatives like that of the Bar Association. There should be affirmative action programs in the public sector; a cabinet decision in this spirit was taken as far back as the late '90s, but it has not been properly implemented. Affirmative action can help the Ethiopian community overcome the disadvantages it starts out with and make it possible for its members to reach key positions in Israeli society. Affirmative action will help defuse the social time bomb.

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Book Review: Americans Seek Connection to God Without Religion

PRWeb Press Release Newswire

June 15, 2005

www.godwithoutreligion.com

Sankara Saranam's book is about establishing a personal relationship with God, unhindered by dogma, creed, or ritual. The ultimate goal is to spread peace and understanding.

Is religion gaining ground in America, or are people simply looking harder for answers? Religion and spirituality books are selling strongly, while the number of Americans not identified with a religion is rising. It appears that more and more people are seeking God on their own rather than through established belief systems. The groundbreaking book "God Without Religion: Questioning Centuries of Accepted Truths" by Sankara Saranam shows seekers how to develop a direct understanding of God, unhindered by dogma, creed or ritual. At last week's BookExpo America in New York City, religion titles dominated, continuing the growth trend that showed a 17 percent gain in religious book sales in 2004 to reach a staggering \$3.8 billion. On the other hand, according to a survey by the Institute for Jewish and Community Research in San Francisco, the number of Americans with no organized religious affiliation has doubled over the last decade. In fact, 16 percent of the population—more than 47,000,000 Americans—has no religious affiliation at all. What lies behind the seeming dichotomy that religion titles are booming while increasing numbers of people renounce organized religion? It appears many Americans are searching for a meaningful spirituality. While organized religions continue to make headlines—the Pope counseling "fear of God," fights for "divinely sanctioned" territory in the Middle East, debates about teaching "intelligent design" as an alternative to evolution, and religious groups resisting potentially lifesaving stem-cell research—a new book, "God Without Religion: Questioning Centuries of Accepted Truths" by Sankara Saranam proposes a personal connection to God free of religious teachings. "God Without Religion" quietly advocates a spiritual discipline of looking within to develop an expansive sense of self that can identify with increasing numbers of people, no matter what their beliefs—ultimately spreading peace and understanding worldwide. Though not yet officially released, "God Without Religion," with a foreword by non-violence activist Arun Gandhi, has already racked up significant sales on Amazon.com, on June 7, hitting number 65 out of the site's top 100 religion and spirituality bestsellers. In "God Without Religion," Saranam, founder of The Pranayama Institute, scholar, teacher, musician, and son of Iraqi Jews, explains why people, dissatisfied and disillusioned, are turning away in droves from organized religion, no longer willing to accept any kind of "faith" that is based on an "us vs. them" mentality. The dramatic shift in the population toward both New Age based spirituality as well as the Pentecostal wing of Christianity (cited as "the world's fastest-growing religion" by Laurie Goodstein in The New York Times, January 9, 2005), would indicate that many people are seeking a more expansive relationship with God. Indeed, as Deepak Chopra is quoted as saying in Time magazine (January 24, 2005), "Religion has become divisive, quarrelsome, and idiotic." It seems more and more Americans agree and are beginning to search for God on their own.

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Jews in danger of becoming 'The Amish of the 22nd century'

By Lawrence Epstein

Thursday June 23, 2005

Jerusalem Post

It is ironic that, amid the diaspora's population crisis and Israel's demographic concerns, confusion and malaise have settled over conversion efforts at just the time they might be most successful. Last month, a Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute study reported that the Jewish population was the oldest in the world. This was particularly true in the diaspora. In 2004, 18 percent of diaspora Jews and 11.5 percent of Israeli Jews were over 65. The Jewish average of 16 percent over 65 compares to the overall world population of 7 percent over 65. The primary reasons for this imbalance are clear to anyone who has observed Jewish life over the past 50 years. The diaspora has had a negative population growth. According to the National Jewish Population Survey 2000-2001, American Jewish women aged 40-44 — that is, at the end of their childbearing years — have an average of 1.8 children, while 2.1 children constitutes the replacement level. The NJPS concluded that the American Jewish population had declined by 5 percent over the previous decade so that Jews made up only 2 percent of the American population.

Continuing high rates of intermarriage and assimilation greatly exacerbate the problem. According to the NJPS, for example, the intermarriage rate has remained at about 47 percent and two-thirds of the children of such marriages are not raised to be Jewish. There are still large numbers of committed American Jews. The problem is not that American Jewry will disappear but that it will cease to have sufficient political, economic and cultural influence over the wider American community. This would have a disastrous effect on, for example, lobbying efforts on behalf of Israel and other American Jewish concerns and on maintaining large communal institutions and cultural activities. American Jewry is in danger of becoming a small, quaint community admired by the wider

population for its unusual customs and its tenacity — the Amish of the 22nd century. The situation in Israel is not as dire. But continuing high non-Jewish birthrates, an unpredictable future for aliyah and the influx of Arabs who have entered and remain in Israel illegally (100,000 over the last 10 years alone) make an increase in the Jewish population vital for Israel's security, and perhaps its survival.

There is a solution to the Jewish demographic crisis, but it is not among the ones normally cited. Pronatalism (encouraging Jewish births) has never proved successful in any democracy. Day-school education, Jewish camping and preschool Jewish education are wonderful. But they are expensive and do not attract an enormous segment of the Jewish population. Indeed, if we were able to stop all intermarriages tomorrow, the Jewish birthrate and proportion of elderly would mean continuing decreases in the American Jewish population.

The solution that can work is encouraging people to embrace Judaism. There are literally millions of people with Jewish ancestors, people whose ancestors were forced to convert out of Judaism, or who assimilated. Additionally, there are many people who are loosely attached to the Jewish community through a romantic partner, parent or other family member. Some even consider themselves Jewish, though no formal Jewish religious group would accept such a claim. There are also those not currently attached to Jewish life who are on a religious quest and who would be attracted to Judaism's ethical monotheism. It might surprise some in the Jewish community, but the Jewish emphasis on faith, family and a close community, Judaism's moral ideals, its unparalleled heritage, and its appealing traditions are attractive to many who were raised without religious traditions.

Judaism is not competing with Christianity or Islam, but with spiritual emptiness. This moment when Jews need to confront demographic problems also turns out to be a time of tremendous receptivity by these potential converts. Many people feel the modern world to be morally chaotic, confusing and overwhelming. It is no surprise that religious revival is taking place all over the world. People once happy with materialist philosophies and ways of life are looking for more. In America, where choice is prized, enormous numbers of people change their religions during their lives. They are actively seeking what Judaism can offer.

But Judaism is not offering itself very well. Potential converts are discouraged by our inability to define common standards for conversion. It is not easy for people considering Judaism to hear they will be accepted by some Jews as authentic, but not by others. Many traditional Jews resent Christian efforts to convert them and so are reluctant to revive what had been a thriving Jewish enterprise at least until the fourth century CE. Underlying all this is that modern Jews have lost their communal mission to be a light unto the nations, offering — but not mandating — Judaism to those who freely wish to join the Jewish people on its historic spiritual journey. All this has resulted in virtually no organized effort or funding to reach out to potential converts. There are some hopeful signs of the recognition of a demographic crisis. Philanthropist Michael Steinhardt has donated \$12 million to start the Steinhardt Social Research Institute, due to open at Brandeis University in September. The Jewish Agency's new Jewish People Policy Planning Institute also analyzes population data and considers its policy implications. As crucial as it is to recognize and better measure the problem, we should not delay when we already have one clear solution to the crisis.

What is needed is a single worldwide organization or department that has the sole mandate of increasing the Jewish population through welcoming converts. This organization would have much work to do. Such an organization might, for example, survey all current conversion programs, test them for effectiveness, define the most effective or develop new ones, and fund efforts to replicate successful programs. It could seek, train and place rabbis whose principal task is to welcome converts. It could work with the appropriate religious authorities to develop joint conversion programs in Israel and the diaspora so that converts are welcome by all. And it could make the incredible Jewish tradition of welcoming converts more widely known among Jews. It could, in short, develop an authentically Jewish response to a significant Jewish crisis.

Lawrence Epstein is author of *"Conversion to Judaism: A Guidebook."*

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We need converts

Jerusalem Post.com
Opinion
June 10, 2005

It is rare that a distinguished group of leaders gathers to think about the Jewish future, rarer still when they come up with an idea that is as simple and constructive as it is radical. This constellation of events seems to have taken place recently at the Wye Plantation in suburban Maryland, where the Jewish People Policy Planning Institute held a conference on "Alternate Futures for the Jewish People."

The conference, which included Jewish university presidents, authors, current and former ministers, rabbis, social scientists and prominent philanthropists, considered two scenarios. In the first, dubbed a "realistic nightmare," the world Jewish population drops to 10 million by 2025, six million of whom live in Israel. In Israel itself, Jewish identity is waning as our society chooses "normalcy," but

Israel's position in the Middle East is precarious; anti-Semitism is growing globally.

The second scenario for 2025, called a "realistic vision," has 18 million Jews in the world, two-thirds of whom live in Israel. Jewish identity is on the rise in the Jewish state, along with the economy and regional security.

Israel is an increasingly attractive model for Jews and the world, and Jewish political strength and social influence is growing, as are the Jewish people as a whole. Anti-Semitism is on the wane, both because Jews are less convenient targets and because of democracy's advance and defeats for radical Islamist regimes and movements.

Such thought experiments are useful to concentrate the mind. The credibility of both possibilities, as divergent as they are, cannot be denied, even if the likelihood of either the worst or best case scenarios coming about may be low. More often in the real world, events do not all break in the same direction. Indeed an important component of these scenarios—the success of the global war against militant Islam—is not within the Jewish people's sole ability to determine.

So the contribution of the conference was not simply in presenting these scenarios, but the twin ideas they spawned—one conventional, the other much less so. The first, in the words of the conference's closing statement, was that "the Jewish People lacks spiritual leadership capable of formulating new inspirational content for Jewish identity that will inspire, provide meaning, and gain relevance, particularly for the Jewish majority which is not Orthodox, and for the younger generation".

We did not need this collection of great minds to tell us that Jewish education in concentrated forms, such as day schools, summer camps, and travel to and study in Israel, is critical for the rejuvenation of Jewish identity and purpose. We as a people know that, yet we also know that our vast financial and human resources as a people—perhaps the greatest of any era in history—are not being directed in an urgent and concentrated way to act on what we know. Still, it needs to be said again, while we wait for Jewish leaders, inside and out of the Jewish establishment, in Israel and the Diaspora, to assign to the Jewish future the sense of urgency that the struggles to create Israel and save Soviet Jewry once generated.

What was more striking was the second recommendation: "The Jewish people must welcome those that feel part of it and choose to become partners with its history, fate and future. Obstacles that prevent the many who wish to join the Jewish people from doing so must be removed. Major initiatives are needed to integrate the mixed families from around the world, as well as those coming from the former Soviet Union whose Judaism is currently under question." In short, to stop shrinking, we must grow. And to grow we must stop making it so difficult for non-Jews, whether they are already part of Jewish families, have Jewish ancestors, or just want to be Jews, to fully and formally join the Jewish people.

Those who think this is not a Jewish approach should think again. It is no coincidence that we read the Book of Ruth, the paradigmatic story of conversion on Shavuot, when Jews commemorate receiving the Torah at Sinai. Shunning converts is not just un-Jewish. On the level of the Jewish people, it is suicide.

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Memorable Sephardic cantors put on remarkable concert at home of Cantor Louis Danto's Ashkenazi musical library

By Rick Kardonne

Jewish Tribune

Sent by www.sefaradrecords.com

6.24.05

Perhaps one of the best Jewish music events anywhere in the Diaspora during the 2004-05 Season was the Sons of Sepharad concert last week at Beth Emeth Bais Yehuda Synagogue. The concert, featuring some of the world's greatest Sephardic cantors, took place in the home of Toronto's most scholarly headquarters of Ashkenazi music and poetry: the Cantor Louis Danto Musical Library, which contains authentic sheet music and poetry from more than 500 years of Yiddish culture.

Cantor Marshall Loomis, president of the Toronto Council of Chazanim, formally dedicated the Cantor Louis Danto Library with a cheque from the council presented to Louis Danto, the great European-trained bel canto tenor who was also one of the world's foremost Jewish musicologists and who served Beth Emeth Bais Yehuda for nearly 30 years. Danto's successor is Moroccan-born cantor Aaron Bensoussan, who has performed all over the world, including Carnegie Hall in New York, the Mann Auditorium in Tel Aviv and the Jerusalem Theatre. Bensoussan assembled a team of five world-class Sephardic cantors and musicians to present a concert, which thrilled a capacity audience. The star performers included Greek-born cantor Alberto Mizrahi, currently at Chicago's Anshe Emeth Synagogue; Casablanca-born cantor Gerard Edery, who has performed everywhere from Morocco to Vilna to New York's Lincoln Center; George Mgrdichian, who has been credited with taking the Oud (a Mideastern mandolin, but with a sharper sound) from the cabaret to the concert stage; French-born Emmanuel Mann, one of Israel's top bass players and one of the best jazz bassists anywhere; and drum virtuoso Rex Benincasa.

The concert featured four original liturgical compositions by Bensoussan, including the exciting Yibane Hamikidash whose patriotic text reads: "We shall rebuild the Temple in the city of Zion to fulfill our dream. We will sing a new song and with the song, shall arise the Temple." Also memorable was Bensoussan's Sim Shalom near the end of the concert, which began with a five-part unaccompanied vocal slow beginning before entering a major-key fast segment. Not all of the selections were religious. Much to the concert's credit, several classic songs from the golden age of Spanish Jewry were featured. These are love songs with often sophisticated themes such as one of the most famous Sephardic romantic ballads: the bittersweet Adio Querida, performed by Ederly Mizrahi, early in the concert, performed Yo M'emamori D'un Aire, a slow ballad contrasting night-moonlight with daytime love. The songs, many of them 800 years old, blend major- and minor-key moods with frequently original harmonies, which sound uniquely beautiful today.

There were fast instrumental selections such as the Turkish dance, which combined various Mideastern Jewish motifs with jazz bass lines and drum solos. Frequently, the entire capacity audience clapped along and sang the prayers, which were made even more contemporary by both Benincasa's exciting drum backups and Bensoussan's exuberance in arousing the audience to participate.

Special praise is due to concert committee chairman Marty Wolfe who was publicly acclaimed for putting together this concert, which combined a scholarly selection of Sephardic religious and secular-romantic classic songs with a joyous performance, which frequently evoked standing ovations. Truly a memorable evening.

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Documentary Looks at Brazilians Rediscovering their Jewish Roots

By Michael Kepp
JTA Email Edition
May 25, 2005

A new Brazilian documentary film tells the story of Catholics in the country's northeast who practice some Jewish traditions — whether or not they know it. Those customs were handed down to them by their ancestors, Portuguese Jews who were forced by a 1497 royal edict, and the Inquisition that followed, to convert to Catholicism, and who later fled the land of their birth. The film is "The Star Hidden in the Backlands," and the star in question is the Star of David. The first group of Portuguese Jews arrived in Brazil around 1500, with the first wave of colonizers, but even in the New World they had to keep their ancestry secret. The Inquisition, which lasted for 300 years, followed them to Brazil: Many secret Jews were sent back to Lisbon for trial.

Elaine Eiger, a Jewish photographer, and Luize Valente, a journalist, are the film's co-directors. The two interviewed the descendants of these "New Christians," mostly in small towns in Brazil's three northeastern states. Some of the people they interviewed know about their Jewish roots and some do not; some have returned to Judaism and others have not. All of them talk about the customs and rituals that link them to the first Jews who came to Brazil. Death-related rituals are the most widespread. They include washing a dead body and cutting the nails; wrapping it in a white linen shroud and burying it without a casket; discarding water left in jugs and washbowls during the preburial mourning period; and putting stones on graves.

Other customs include not eating pork, circumcising baby boys, praying during the first day of a new moon, and sweeping house dust out the back door instead of the front — an act thought to bring bad luck. Some of the New Christians' descendants perform the rituals and customs of their Jewish ancestors, but don't know that those ancestors weren't Catholic. Dona Cabocla, 74, is a devout Catholic from a small town in northern Rio Grande do Norte state. Her walls are covered with pictures of Catholic saints. She won't be buried in a casket, she said in an onscreen interview, because "we are for the earth to eat." Other descendants of New Christians, particularly those who live in cities, are more aware of their Jewish roots. Joao Medeiros, 70, a retired civil engineer from the northeastern city of Natal, was raised as a Catholic; his parents made him keep his Jewish ancestry secret. Medeiros told JTA that was because of "the social pressure to conform, or be considered community outcasts."

Nevertheless, Medeiros became a practicing Jew when he was 40. He doesn't eat pork, lights Sabbath candles and celebrates Jewish holidays with other descendants of New Christians who have returned to Judaism. The documentary includes scenes of Medeiros' wife, Marlene, and their 12-year-old granddaughter lighting Shabbat candles. "I have refused to convert to Judaism — something Brazilian rabbis insist upon — because I am already Jewish," Medeiros told JTA. "And I have helped create a religious community in Natal that is keeping our Jewish traditions alive." The documentary also includes an interview with University of Sao Paulo historian Anita Novinsky, who used historical records to estimate that 30 percent of the Portuguese who came to Brazil with the first wave of colonists were New Christians. Some 120,000 Jews now live in Brazil, and it's likely that a far greater number of Brazilians have Jewish ancestors.

The film's second half traces the trip taken by Dr. Luciano Oliveira, 27, from the northeastern city of Campina Grande. The descendant of New Christians, Oliveira got in touch with relatives who grew up with customs similar to those practiced in his home. Oliveira, once a practicing Catholic, returned to Judaism at 17 when he underwent circumcision. The film also traces Oliveira's

journey to Sao Paulo as he searches for an Orthodox rabbi to advise New Catholics about how to get official recognition of their return to Judaism. He's looking for such affirmation both from the local Orthodox rabbinate and the rabbinic establishment in Israel. Like Medeiros, Oliveira refuses to convert to Judaism, saying that he already is a Jew.

In on-camera encounters, the rabbis tell Oliveira that to be recognized as a Jew under Jewish law, he must provide proof that his mother was Jewish and obtain the consent of Israeli rabbinate. "The Sao Paulo rabbis I met created lots of obstacles for my being officially recognized as a Jew because they don't want to — or have the power to — go against the Israeli rabbinate," Oliveira told JTA. "Still I have returned to my religion in my heart, and now I have a connection with God as Jews see him."

That connection, he said, "is direct, intimate and not intermediated." Sao Paulo Rabbi Samy Pinto, who took part in one of those filmed encounters, told JTA, "As a rabbi, I don't consider Luciano Oliveira Jewish because he hasn't complied with the requirement of Jewish law." The film will not be screened commercially in Brazil, but in late April it was shown in a Jewish cultural center in Sao Paulo. It will be shown in cultural centers in northwestern cities and at the Jewish film festival in Sao Paulo in August.

The filmmakers hope the movie will be shown in San Francisco's Jewish film festival this summer as well. "We want as many people to see the film as possible because it presents a part of Jewish history in Brazil that a large part of the public is completely unaware of," Eiger said.

Featured Articles List

Moves on files, 1938 ruling show that Argentina is confronting past

By Joe Goldman
Jewish Telegraphic Agency
June 19, 2005

BUENOS AIRES — The recent decision by the Argentine government to repeal a controversial 1938 Foreign Ministry resolution was the latest of a number of moves aimed at reviewing the country's anti-Semitic past, policies that have pleasantly surprised Jewish leaders and historians. President Nestor Kirchner changed the venue of the signing of the order to repeal the 1938 resolution, Directive 11, to the government house and personally attended the ceremony, demonstrating the importance he has placed on righting past wrongs. Directive 11 was an internal memorandum sent to all Argentine diplomatic delegations in 1938 stipulating that they "deny visas, even tourist visas or safe conduct passes, to all persons who are deemed to have abandoned their country of origin as an undesirable or expelled person, whatever the motive of that expulsion." The obvious reference was to Jews fleeing Nazi atrocities in Europe.

Last month the Kirchner government ordered the removal of a plaque in the Foreign Ministry commemorating 12 diplomats who allegedly saved Jews during World War II. When evidence showed that one of the diplomats honored actually had refused entry visas or passports to approximately 100 Argentine Jews living in Greece, Poland and Italy — who were then sent to death camps — the government immediately removed the plaque. In the weeks after Kirchner took power in May 2003, the immigration service opened its files to historians and researchers seeking information on the entry of war criminals, files closed to the public for more than a half-century. Recently, the Interior Ministry also agreed to a special request by Diana Wang of the Argentine Children of the Shoah Association to change immigration records in which Wang and her family had to lie and say they were Catholics to enter Argentina after the war. Their immigration forms now will show their religion as Jewish, and others who suffered similar humiliations will be able to change their records, according to Interior Minister Anibal Fernandez.

Among those speaking at the June 8 ceremony at the government house was Beatriz Gurevich, a historian who discovered a copy of Directive 11 in old file boxes at the Argentine embassy in Stockholm in 1998. "It's rare that one can see the fruits of one's work in such tangible ways," Gurevich said, referring to the repeal of the order. She also complimented the government "because it is not easy to look back into the past. It requires moral courage." At the time of her research in Sweden, Gurevich was working for CEANA, the Foreign Ministry commission created in 1997 under then-President Carlos Menem and charged with clearing up Argentina's Nazi past. While Gurevich understood the importance of finding a copy of Directive 11, the CEANA authorities immediately ordered the document to be archived and not included in their report. Gurevich resigned from CEANA over that and other examples of what she considered attempts to muddy the waters rather than clear up Argentine policies toward the Nazis and Jewish immigration.

Although the document was not published in CEANA reports, journalist Uki Goni made use of it in his book, "The Real Odessa." Goni also spoke at the government house ceremony and said for him it was historical and personal vindication. "In application of this inhuman order, my grandfather," an Argentine diplomat, "denied visas to Jews fleeing the Holocaust," Goni said. "This was a state secret that became a family secret and that turned me into an involuntary custodian of an abhorrent fact that until now did not appear in Argentina's history books."

Argentine authorities "said that anti-Semitism didn't exist, that we were fighting against windmills," said Baruj Tenenbaum, president of the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation, which — along with the Simon Wiesenthal Center — has fought for years to repeal

Directive 11. Tenenbaum said it's now clear that Argentina was filled with Nazi sympathizers during World War II.

Foreign Minister Rafael Bielsa referred to the long battle to find and repeal Directive 11. He apologized for not having signed the decree a year earlier, saying ministry officials couldn't locate the original order because it was hidden in another file. He complimented the talent, investigative skills and tenacity of Gurevich and Goni. Fernandez, the interior minister, said no government but Kirchner's had taken the step of revealing to the public the wrongs committed in Argentina during the war. "Historically, we had people telling us that there was no evidence that Nazis entered Argentina," Fernandez said. "Well, we opened the immigration service files last year, and now no one can doubt that Nazi war criminals entered here. Like it or not, that is now a documented historical fact."

Featured Articles List

At OSCE meeting, Spain Stresses the Positive, Glosses over Negative

By Jerome Socolovsky
JTA email Edition
June 9, 2005

It was the whitewashed walls and narrow alleyways of the Jewish Quarter abutting the magnificent eighth-century mosque held up by more than 850 marble columns — that produced the Jewish sages Maimonides and Judah Halevy. It's also this sun-baked Spanish city on the shimmering Guadalquivir River that claims the great Muslim and Christian philosophers Averroes and Seneca as native sons. But centuries later, it was also on these cobblestoned streets that Jews were hunted down and burned at the stake by Christian mobs in an orgy of violence brought on by rabidly anti-Semitic preachers. After previous meetings in Vienna and Berlin, Cordoba was chosen by the 55-nation Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe as the place to discuss anti-Semitism.

The Spanish hosts hoped the Conference on anti-Semitism and Other Forms of Intolerance would provide an example of how members of different faiths and cultures once were able to live together in peace. But that's not the whole story. "They took the good part of the history," said Eli Cohen, a Spanish law student at a university in Malaga. "They chose the time when three cultures lived together. After the Reconquista, and the Catholic monarchs, it was another story." Indeed, the nationwide religious cleansing carried out during the reconquest of Spain from Moorish rule led by the Catholic monarchs King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, has been the crucible of modern Spanish identity. For centuries, Spanish children have learned about Ferdinand and Isabella much the way American children learn about George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

Much has changed, especially in the past 30 years, since Spain's transition to democracy. Schoolteachers no longer tell pupils that the Jews were Christ-killers. But anti-Semitic stereotypes persist: A recent Anti-Defamation League survey on attitudes toward Jews in 12 European countries found that 54 percent of Spaniards believe "Jews have too much power in international financial markets," and 51 percent believe Jews are more loyal to Israel than to Spain. Victor Harel, Israel's ambassador to Spain, pointed out in an essay for the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* the litany of anti-Semitic acts registered in Spain last year: A Holocaust memorial in Barcelona desecrated twice, Nazi symbols and an anti-Semitic slogan held up at a Madrid soccer match, the statue of medieval financier Samuel Halevi in Toledo vandalized and burned, elderly Jews in Melilla attacked, a Barcelona education manual that called Israel's security fence the wall of shame, and a publicity campaign personally backed by the mayor of the town of Oleiros that called Israel's leaders the new Nazis."

Indeed, Spain's government, particularly the Socialist Party of Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, has been widely criticized in Jewish and Israeli circles for its perceived bias against Israel. That tempered the goodwill from this year's annual OSCE meeting on anti-Semitism. "I think it's good, but the first thing the government should do, before holding a conference here, before inviting the World Jewish Congress to dinner, is to be impartial in the conflict, so that there would be no questions in the first place," said Cohen, the Spanish student, referring to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Harel, the Israeli ambassador, noted that Zapatero recently visited the Mauthausen concentration camp and instituted a national Holocaust Memory Day on Jan. 27, the day of the liberation of Auschwitz.

He also noted that the Madrid regional legislature has started holding annual Holocaust remembrance ceremonies. These initiatives, Harel said, "deserve praise and recognition." Rabbi Israel Singer, chairman of the World Jewish Congress, said Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos should be credited for stopping other European politicians who wanted to downgrade the profile of the OSCE conference. But, he noted, Moratinos wasn't motivated purely by altruism. "Moratinos spoiled their plan because he had his own reasons for doing so," Singer said. "He had a rotten record in Israel, from the time that he was in charge of foreign affairs at the European Union. He had a rotten country's record in the way that the Socialists behave towards Israel, and he figured this is his big opportunity." "How are we going to tell Mr. Moratinos you can't be good on anti-Semitism?" Ben Cohen, the ADL's European affairs director, said Spain's initiatives to discuss European anti-Semitism should reach back further.

He says Cordoba is a good example of how Spaniards are "rejoicing and celebrating their Jewish past," but they need to reflect on the atrocities committed by their forebears. Spain still has no major memorial to the Inquisition or the expulsion of Jews from Spain.

"Walking around Cordoba here, you'll see a statue of Maimonides, you'll see a café named after Judah Halevy, you'll see a shop where you can buy CD's of Ladino music," he said. "But if the average tourist asks, Well, what happened to these people? Where did they go? How come they're not here anymore?' you won't find an answer in the streets of this city, because there's no memorial here." Some Spanish leaders have starting taking another look at the country's own history, and the OSCE conference gave them a venue to do so in public.

One of them is Manuel Chavez Gonzalez, a key Socialist Party figure. He is the president of Andalusia, the southern region named after the historic Islamic caliphate of Al-Andalus, which includes Cordoba, Granada and Seville. On the eve of the Cordoba meeting, Chavez addressed a forum in Seville organized by the Fundacion Tres Culturas, or Three Cultures Foundation. "It was in this land of Andalusia" that "different cultural influences converged, which enabled a powerful synthesis of wisdom," Chavez said. "It was here that the ancient knowledge was translated and transmitted to medieval Europe." He adds: "But Andalusia also saw, after the conquest of Granada and the unification of the peninsula under a single Christian monarchy, the expulsion of the Jews in 1492," and of Muslims who remained in the south in 1609. "Two great tragedies, and two great historical injustices," he said. "This is also Spain, and this is also Andalusia."

Featured Articles List

Direct line to Portugal

By Irit Rosenblum

Sent By: M. Gail Gutierrez-McDermid

June 2, 2005

The Hebrew inscription "Shaarei Tikvah (Gates of Hope) Synagogue" is etched into a white gate on Rua Alexandre Herculano in Lisbon. There is nothing else about the nondescript gate to indicate that Jewish prayer services regularly take place inside. In the early 20th century, a group of visitors invited by the Portuguese Ministry of Tourism was told, less than a century after the official end of the Inquisition in Portugal in 1821, that it was forbidden to build a synagogue whose facade faces the street. Like any other visitor to Portugal, the Israeli tourist encounters stunning vistas, castles, palaces and sad fado folksongs. But reverberating in the background is the expulsion of the Jews, the Inquisition and the crypto-Jews who covertly observed Jewish commandments. Portuguese sources put the late-15th century Jewish population at approximately 30,000 - about 3 percent of the total population at the time. When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, Portugal's King Joao II permitted the entry into the country of 50,000-70,000 Jews. But in 1497, these tens of thousands of Jews were sentenced to expulsion and forced conversion. Today, the number of Jews in Portugal is estimated at a thousand or so.

26,000 Shabbats in hiding

In 1917, Polish engineer Samuel Schwartz discovered the Jewish community of Belmonte, a small village in the Serra da Estrela region of northern Portugal. It is the only Jewish community in Portugal that survived the Inquisition as an organized community. Its members have exclusively married one another for hundreds of years. A sign hanging in the local synagogue tells the incredible story of the community, who lived in hiding for 500 years, until they emerged from the shadows and returned to the open practice of Judaism in 1992. The sign reads: "Here in the houses of the village, they clandestinely observed the commandments of Judaism for 500 years, from 1492 until 1992. They passed down the tradition orally, from one generation to the next, secretly observed the Sabbath, and observed Sundays for the sake of their neighbors, careful not to be tripped up between the customs of Judaism and of Christianity for fear of falling into the hands of the Inquisition and its dungeons.

"They recited the blessings on challah and wine, murmuring words from the prayers in the dark, preserving their Judaism deep in their souls. Here the Jewish soul was not lost, here the Jewish soul remained forever. And from out of the past will spring the future. From the darkness of the Middle Ages to the light of the synagogue and the spiritual center." Belmonte today has about 2,000 residents, 200 of whom are Jews. Its location 15 kilometers from the Spanish border made it a place of asylum for expelled Spanish Jews, and also for Portuguese Jews, over whom hovered the fear of Christianity. The mountainous region is still isolated, and not particularly developed. Jewish-American journalist Alan Tigay, who visited Belmonte a few years ago, quoted a local Jew he met: "The Jews here had a flame that never went out," he wrote. A fire burned in the hearts of the Jews here that was never extinguished."

A flame in more than one sense: Tigay's host showed him a candeia, a tin lamp that burns olive oil, employing a long linen wick. The candeias illuminated the homes of Belmonte's Jews for 26,000 secret Shabbatot. The beginnings of the community's return to the open practice of Judaism first took root when Portugal became a democracy in 1974. At the time, members of the community asked the Jewish community of Lisbon to help them organize community life and refresh their knowledge of the commandments. But it was not until 1990 that a rabbi arrived in the town to convert the surviving 180 crypto-Jews; one of the newly circumcised Jews was 79 years old at the time. In the years since, several Jewish weddings and circumcisions (of infants) have taken place in Belmonte.

The cornerstone of the Belmonte synagogue was laid in 1297, before the Spanish expulsion. But today's synagogue, Beit Elijah, was built only 15 years ago. Our group met two shy, reserved Jews in the synagogue, both wearing baseball caps. They said that the community lacks the funds to pay a full-time rabbi, and that they therefore shared the rabbi of the Jewish community of Porto, Rabbi

Elisha Salas. New initiatives include a museum of Belmonte's Jewish history that opened last month and the production of kosher olive oil and wine. The owner of the winery, Roy Moreira, who is not Jewish, says that Portugal is now open to Jews. "Belmonte is a place where Judaism is not only history, but an existing fact," he says, and adds that about 600,000 liters of the kosher wine they produce is exported to Jews in Europe and the U.S.

Interested parties may contact the Jews of Belmonte (which is twinned with Safed) by sending an email in English to the head of the Belmonte tourism bureau at tourism.estrela@mail.telepac.pt.

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Book: *A Jewish Wedding in Mogador: The Illuminated Ketuba from Mogador* by Knafo, Asher and David Bensoussan

Bimat Kedem, 2004
Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture
www.sephardicstudies.org

For many years, Asher Knafo and David Bensoussan have collected Ketubot that were illustrated in Mogador (now called Essaouira), Morocco. Mogador Jews had a rich tradition of illuminated Ketubot, the Jewish Wedding contracts, that is still alive in our days. The book includes articles on: Ketuba art in the Jewish world in general and in Mogador in particular; the history of the Mogador Jewish community; and on traditional wedding customs. The first chapter of the book is dedicated to a poem written by Asher Knafo describing the old wedding customs preserved in Mogador, from the couple's first encounter, their engagement, the "henna" ceremony, the wedding and ending with the numerous festivities following the marriage. The chapter dealing with Ketubot includes the history of the illuminated Ketuba in Mogador, along with biographies of the most famous illustrators who passed the art of illumination on to their descendants.

Then comes the beautiful collection of 83 ketubot with explanations in three languages; Hebrew, French and English. The oldest ketuba dates from 1789 and the most recent is from 2003. The alphabetical index includes the wedding year and all the names mentioned in each ketuba: the names of the bride and groom, their fathers, grandfathers, great grandfathers and sometimes, even their great-great grandfathers and their great-great-great grandfathers, the witnesses, the ketuba designers, the scribes, the rabbis and the persons who bear out the signatures, resulting in a total of more than 600 indexed names.

The book can be ordered through one of its authors - Asher Knafo at: knafoasher@hotmail.com

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In Curacao, dwindling community maintains oldest synagogue in west

By Larry Luxner
JTA email Edition
June 8, 2005

Some people insist that the sand on the floor symbolizes the 40 years the Jewish people spent wandering the Sinai Desert after their expulsion from Egypt. Others say the tradition dates from the Inquisition, when synagogues in Spain and Portugal were covered with sand to muffle the footsteps of Jews worshipping in secret. Rene Maduro, 65, offers yet another explanation: "God says unto Abraham, I will multiply your seed as the sands of the seashore." Abraham laughs, but 99 years and nine months later, Isaac shows up." Regardless of the reason, the sand has helped make Mikve Israel Synagogue the No. 1 tourist attraction in Curacao, the largest and most populous of the five Dutch Caribbean islands that comprise the Netherlands Antilles.

Tourists pay \$3 each to enter the synagogue, located in the heart of Willemstad, Curacao's colonial capital. Mikve Israel welcomed between 15,000 and 20,000 visitors last year, many of them cruise-ship passengers in port for the day. "The first thing they ask is why there's sand on the floor," said Maduro, past president of the congregation and a noted authority on Curacao's Jewish history. "If you look at the way this synagogue is set up, it's like the desert. You've got the tabernacle in the middle, where the tablets were kept, and the tribes of Israel around the sides to protect it." The sand itself traditionally is imported from Suriname or Guyana, though years ago it was mixed with sand from Israel. Maduro says the sand must come from riverbeds and not the seashore; otherwise its salt content would destroy the synagogue's expensive mahogany furniture. According to Maduro, the island's first Jew was Samuel Coheno, who came to Curacao in 1634 with Admiral Johann van Walbeek, leader of the conquering Dutch fleet.

Mikve Israel was established in 1651 as a Sephardi Portuguese congregation, and the current building was inaugurated in 1732. Services have been held there ever since, making it the oldest synagogue in continuous use in the Western Hemisphere. "Usually, we get 20 or 25 people for Shabbat services", Maduro said. "But if there's a ship in port that stays until 11 p.m., we could get up to 100 tourists for Shabbat." Mikve Israel employs a full-time American rabbi, Gerald Zelermyer. Services are conducted in English and Hebrew, though "aliyot" to the Torah are done in Portuguese, as is the prayer for Holland's royal family. Even more unusual is the Yom Kippur tradition of reading the story of Jonah and the whale not in Hebrew but in Papiamentu, the local dialect.

Beside touring the synagogue itself, visitors also usually stop by the adjacent Jewish Museum, run by curator Myrna Moreno. Artifacts include a royal edict issued in 1750 by the Prince of Orange-Nassau, ordering an end to the dispute between Neve Shalom of Otrabanda and Mikve Israel of Punta. Jews have lived in Curacao for more than 350 years, but the community's peak seems to have been around 1800, when more than 2,000 Jews lived on the island. Some of them were slaveowners who ran large sugar plantations. "The Sephardim have been here as long as anybody else, if not longer," Maduro said. "There's nothing left of the Indian population, so what's left are the Sephardim, the white Protestants and the descendants of the slaves. We are so ingrained in this community that even black politicians cannot imagine Curacao without its Jews."

Established as an Orthodox congregation, Mikve Israel began changing in the 1860s, when community leaders installed a pipe organ to embellish religious services. But certain conditions were imposed: The organ could not be played on Shabbat, the congregation could not employ a Jewish organist and even the boy who pumped the bellows couldn't be Jewish either. The congregation gradually relaxed the rules to the point where the organ was eventually played on Shabbat, and even on Yom Kippur. During World War II, Jews came from Europe and the Dutch government put them in camps in Bonaire, because they didn't know which of them were real Jews and which could have been spies, Maduro said. The community got a temporary boost in 1964 with the arrival of 600 or so Cuban Jews fleeing communism.

"Curacao was their back door to get out of Cuba," recalled Maduro, who was involved in the secret B'nai B'rith operation. "KLM had a once-a-week flight from Havana to Curacao. We arranged for them to get Dutch landing rights, so they stayed here for about six months, depending on how fast they could get visas to continue. They ended up all over the world, but mainly in Venezuela, Colombia and Panama." Today, Curacao's Jewish community is split between two congregations. The one with which Maduro is affiliated, the Sephardic shul, is officially known as United Netherlands-Portuguese Congregation Mikve Israel-Emmanuel. The Ashkenazi shul, Congregation Sha'are Zedek, is a 20-minute drive from downtown Willemstad. The island's Jewish population has dwindled to 450, nearly all of them affiliated with one congregation or the other. The two congregations hold separate services, though they celebrate Chanukah, Purim and Israeli Independence Day together.

"Several of our members have left us buildings that produce income, so we get a monthly stipend from that," said Maduro, who served as president of the congregation for 18 years. "However, this is nowhere near what we need, so we need help from outside." Historically, Curacao's prosperity has rested on its shipping business and the sprawling Shell Oil refinery, which was built in 1916 and refines oil from nearby Venezuela for export to the United States. Unfortunately, the Jewish cemetery is downwind from the refinery, and the fumes — when mixed with rainfall — have corroded the tombstones to the point where only 100 of the cemetery's 5,000 or so Hebrew and Portuguese tombstones are still legible. Among those buried in Curacao's Jewish cemetery, consecrated in 1658, are the sister of Joseph Touro, a philanthropist who established the Touro Synagogue in Newport, R.I. Also buried there are the sisters of Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza.

It's unlikely that Curacao's Jews will ever regain their past glory, with a rich and influential community numbering in the thousands: The birth rate is too low and Jewish children generally are sent abroad to study, and many of them don't come back. On the other hand, Maduro — who has a daughter living in Holland and a son in Curacao — said intermarriage won't wipe out the Jews here. "Today, even with mixed marriages, both partners come to the synagogue and the children are usually brought up Jewish," he said. "It's not much of an issue for us."

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Abdulaziz Mulogala: We have been taking care of this [Jewish] cemetery for over 100 years

By Orly Halpern
Jerusalem Post
Jun. 9, 2005

Abdulaziz Mulogala walks sure-footed on the dirt between the Jewish graves as he points to the carved Hebrew letters on the stones. A religious Muslim, he has walked these paths a hundred thousand times before. It was here he was born, here he played as a child, here his father was killed and here he and his wife raised their seven children. Mulogala is the caretaker for the Jewish cemetery of Herat, the western-most city of Afghanistan and the once vibrant center of Afghanistan's Jewish community. His father did the job before him, as did his father before him. "We have been taking care of this cemetery for over 100 years," said the 45-year-old Mulogala, who wears a torn cotton turban and an unkempt beard. And for the last 25 years he has received no wages.

The cemetery is located a few kilometers north of the city down a bumpy dirt road, past rows of narrow, one-story mud-brick warehouses filled with large, net sacks of onions and potatoes. On the right side of the road is Herat's Muslim cemetery. It is strewn with gravestones, old and new, broken and whole. Rising gracefully from its center and high above the broken graves is Gazargah, the immense 15th-century shrine to the 11th-century, Herat-born Sufi Muslim poet and philosopher, Khwaja Abdullah Ansari. The recently restored building, decorated with turquoise and aqua colored tiles, lends some dignity to the dismal graveyard, which still has the carcass of a Soviet tank in its midst. It also makes a good landmark to find the Jewish cemetery, which is on the left side of the dirt road, almost directly opposite the mausoleum. Unlike the neighboring open Muslim cemetery, the soccer field-sized Jewish one is hard to identify because there is no sign marking the site and a two-meter high mud-brick wall surrounds it. The wall was built eight years ago, during the Taliban, with money from abroad, ostensibly from Jews. But the Taliban didn't bother the cemetery, said Mulogala. It was the war with the Russians that destroyed most of the graves.

Inside the graveyard, dispersed among the weeds, are approximately 300 to 400 gravestones, some half-buried in the ground. Many more have been destroyed. Most of the damage was done long ago, when the mujahideen – fighters for Islam – launched a US-backed jihad on the Soviets, who invaded and occupied Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989. The two neighboring cemeteries became the front for terrible battles. In an irony of history, the Muslim fighters hid among the Jewish graves while the Soviets – whose ideological forefather, Karl Marx, was a Jew – stationed themselves in the Muslim cemetery, from where they could hit the mujahideen. "The mujahideen were here shooting RPGs at the Soviets, who were over there," said Mulogala, pointing past the wall to the Muslim cemetery. His father was killed one day in the crossfire, and the job was passed to him. The graves closest to the wall near the road are nothing but rubble. But many of those further away are still whole and the Hebrew words "Nitmana Poh" (Was Buried Here) can be seen on the top of the gravestones followed by the names of the deceased.

But the cemetery was not the only place important to the Jews of Herat that was affected by the fighting. The city's Bazaar Iraq neighborhood, the center of Herati Jewish life, was in the area hit hardest by the fighting. Those violent clashes were the final straw for the last remaining Jews of Herat. Today, the former Jewish neighborhood remains one of the most colorful and bustling areas of the city. Its single main street is a busy, dusty thoroughfare filled with shoppers and craftsmen, rickshaws and motorcycles, Japanese vans and horse-pulled carts. It is lined with rug, tailor, and metalwork shops, whose owners turn down their radios at the sound of the call to prayer and close their shops on Fridays.

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<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1118283815076>

First Bnei Menashe Community Center in Israel Opens

Israel National News

June 10, 2005

Sent by Michael Freund

A community center intended specifically for Bnei Menashe immigrants has been formally inaugurated in Kiryat Arba. The center is the first of its kind in Israel. Offering an array of classes, lectures and other activities for the Bnei Menashe community, the community center is a joint project of the Kiryat Arba Local Council and Shavei Israel (www.shavei.org), a Jerusalem-based group that assists "lost Jews" seeking to return to the Jewish people. Speaking at the dedication ceremony, Shavei Israel Chairman Michael Freund stressed that "the goal of establishing this center is to strengthen the Bnei Menashe community and to provide a place where young people, the elderly and people of all ages can receive educational, cultural and religious enrichment."

The center has already begun to host daily Hebrew language classes, as well as in other subjects such as arts and crafts and drawing. The opening ceremony was attended by Kiryat Arba mayor Tzvi Katzover and the town's rabbi, Dov Lior, as well as by dozens of local members of the community. A group of Bnei Menashe children put on a series of artistic and musical performances, and the audience also heard short speeches about the community's origins and practices back in India. Bnei Menashe claim descent from the tribe of Manasseh, one of the ten tribes exiled from the Land of Israel by the Assyrians over 2,700 years ago. They reside primarily in the two Indian states of Mizoram and Manipur, along the border with Burma and Bangladesh.

On March 30, Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Shlomo Amar, formally recognized the Bnei Menashe as "descendants of Israel", and promised to send a beit din (rabbinical court) to India to convert the remaining members of the community, thereby enabling them to move to Israel. In recent years, over 800 members of the community have made aliyah to Israel thanks largely to the efforts of Shavei Israel. Nearly 100 Bnei Menashe families have settled in Kiryat Arba.

The community center is called "Beit Miriam – the Shavei Israel Community Center", in memory of Freund's grandmother, Dr. Miriam Freund-Rosenthal, a lifelong Zionist who served as national president of Hadassah and was involved in bringing Moroccan Jewish youth to Israel in the 1950s.

Greek Jewish Community Opposes Neo-Nazi Conference

By Jpost Staff.com
Jerusalem Post
June 4, 2005

Greece's Jewish community is up at arms over an international neo-Nazi meeting scheduled to take place in September, and senior Jewish officials have called on the government to ban the meeting, scheduled to take place in the Peloponnese town of Meligala, reported Greece's Kathimerini newspaper. The Central Board of Jewish Communities in Greece, the mouthpiece of the Greek Jewish community, argued that the meeting could lead to dire consequences, including violent confrontations. Greece's Jews do not stand alone in opposing the conference – human rights groups and left-wing groups held a protest in Athens against the meeting. The location of the conference, Meligala, was the site of a 1944 massacre of nationalist resistance fighters and civilians.

For Linguistics Scholar in Taiwan, Yiddish is More than Just Shtick

By Dan Bloom
JTA email Edition
May 26, 2005

S.H. Chang is a Yiddish specialist at Wenzao Ursuline College of Languages in Taiwan. She may be one of a kind — after all, you don't find many Chinese academics in Taiwan studying and writing about Yiddish. A soft-spoken Taiwanese woman in her early 30s who has written about and researched the Yiddish language — she speaks it as well — Chang is one of the few Yiddish philologists in the Chinese-speaking world. She heads the department of German at Aiwan College in the subtropical, southern part of Taiwan, an island nation of 23 million Buddhists and Taoists. "When I set about learning Yiddish, I was merely opening up a new door for myself," the professor says.

With a doctorate from Germany's Trier University under her belt, Chang has gained world renown as an expert in German and Jewish literature, delivering academic papers around the world. In addition, she has become a Jewish historian for the Chinese and Taiwanese people, as well as a philologist of German and Yiddish. Chang admitted in a recent telephone interview with JTA that learning Yiddish did not come easily at first, though she said that the fact that the "language of Jewish exiles" contains around many German morphemes made it easier, since she already had mastered German as a university student in Taiwan and Europe. In addition, she speaks Chinese, Taiwanese and English. Chang plans to write a book for the reading public in Taiwan, explaining the nuances of Yiddishkeit and the history of the "Jewish Diaspora and the meaning of such words as kvell, chutzpah and nachas," she said.

A Cultural Exchange — of Vows: Couples of different ethnicities and faiths uphold wedding traditions by blending them

By Susan Carpenter
LA Times
June 23, 2005
Sent By Davi Cheng

When Ashokkumar Patel and Sirvart Kassabian entered the ballroom for their wedding reception this month, they followed the beat of their hearts — and two drummers. There was the barefoot and turbaned dholi, or traditional Indian drummer, who escorted them into the room. And there was the Armenian dance music, which drew both sides of the family onto the floor. While the Patel women swirled around in red, blue and orange saris, the Kassabians danced the night away in pink, red and black evening wear. Patel, 35, and Kassabian, 31, are now honeymooning in Italy, relaxing after months of high-stress wedding planning. They found that blending high-contrast cultures into an event that simultaneously reflected themselves and respected their families was no easy trick — but it's one in which a growing number of couples are engaged. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2002 Current Population Survey, 2.9% of the country's 58 million married couples are interracial (up from 1.8% in 1990 and 1.3% in 1980). In many instances, that translates into a confluence of traditions and styles.

Talk to area wedding planners and they'll tell you that the number of cross-cultural couples is on the rise. Randie Pellegrini, executive producer of Cordially Invited, a Beverly Hills event production firm, estimates that 80% of her client couples come from different cultural backgrounds; the couples represent different ethnicities or practice different faiths. "People want the big movie of the Prince Charming marrying his true love and [living] happily ever after. Sometimes it's just not in the same culture," said Pellegrini, who has

coordinated weddings for a wide variety of mixed-ethnicity couples, including Swedish-African American and Jewish-Japanese.

In urban areas such as Los Angeles, the trend is especially apparent. The percentage of U.S.-born interracial couples here is nearly triple the national average, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. Here, people from wildly diverse cultures to rub elbows everywhere, from the grocery store to the office, and, sometimes, fall in love and get married. These days, it isn't uncommon for weddings to be officiated by a priest and a rabbi. Receptions might include a mariachi band and a gospel choir. The banquet might offer sushi and hummus. "One of the huge trends we're seeing in weddings is this personalization factor. Couples are really trying to incorporate special details that mean a lot to them, and culture is one of the largest ways to personalize your day," said Kathleen Murray, weddings editor for the Knot magazine. "A marriage is combining two families, so it shows appreciation to their families and also honors where they came from."

That doesn't mean it's easy to do. Anyone who has planned a wedding knows how stressful it can be to coordinate the bridal party, attire, invitations, caterers, photographer, banquet hall, musicians, favors and everything else. Try combining Hawaiian and German traditions. Or Chinese and Irish.

For the Patels, the cultural nods began with a wedding invitation in Armenian, English and the Indian dialect Gujarati. It continued with a two-part, two-day wedding ceremony. The actual ceremony kicked off with an ancient Hindu beautification ritual at the Valley Temple in Northridge on a Friday and ended the following evening with an Orthodox Christian exchange of vows at Holy Martyrs Armenian Apostolic Church in Encino. Dinner was a mix of Indian cuisine and Middle Eastern fare, followed by music, which segued from Hindi to Arabic. "We wanted all our guests to know that [Sirvart] and I still love our cultures, but we love one another too," said Patel, who met Kassabian six years ago in medical school. "We don't want our families to think that we're going to forget about our culture.... We just want to reflect what we think about these things."

The rise in marriages between faiths and ethnicities goes hand in hand with various cultural phenomena, most notably the delay of first marriage. Today, the average age is 27 for men and 25 for women in the United States. In 1960, it was 23 and 20. That may not seem like a significant increase, but the implications are enormous. Instead of meeting and marrying someone from socio-economically defined neighborhoods or high schools under the watchful eyes of their parents, increasing numbers of young people go away to college, travel around the world, have jobs and live on their own before they are married, giving them more exposure to other cultures as well as personal and financial independence. "If you're living at home, it's hard to keep secret from your parents who your boyfriend is," said Michael Rosenfeld, assistant professor of sociology at Stanford University. "What's happened in the last 40 years in the U.S. is young adults have the opportunity to have social lives that their parents are unable to supervise. They're exposed to different people and have the opportunity to have a relationship with them without their parents immediately knowing about it."

Twentysomething brides and grooms are typically more accepting of interracial relationships than their parents. When the Pew Research Center in Washington began polling Americans about their attitudes toward interracial dating in 1987, only 48% of the public approved. By 2003, the most recent year the question was asked, acceptance had increased to 77%. The greatest acceptance was among the youngest polled: 91% of Generation Y participants said in 2003 they approved of interracial dating, compared with 85% of Gen Xers, 77% of boomers and 49% of the World War II generation.

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