



Miracle in Orlando

By Michael Freund

(This article appeared in the *Jerusalem Post* of August 7, 2002)

Sporting a black velvet yarmulke which he instinctively adjusts from time to time, Joseph Mont can barely conceal the emotion in his voice when he says that he wants to reclaim his long-lost Jewish heritage.

Sitting in a kosher restaurant in Orlando, Florida, the bearded and bespectacled Mont could easily be mistaken for a rabbi, as he passionately addresses issues of theology and philosophy. Quoting from an extensive range of ancient and modern sources, he insists that "the Torah is God's truth," and that his sole aim in life is to live as a Jew in accordance with Judaism's dictates.

Who would have guessed that just a year ago the Cuban-born Mont was head of a Christian missionary group aimed at persuading Spanish-speaking residents of northern Florida to believe in Jesus?

But now, driven by his conviction regarding the truth of Judaism, as well as his own extraordinary personal story, Mont is at the forefront of a nascent spiritual revolution, one which the Jewish world would do well to cultivate, rather than ignore.

Like the majority of his 40 followers, Mont is descended from

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Jewish Studies Comes to Portugal

Participants in a conference-tour to Jewish Portugal last June heard a lecture by Professor Maria Antonieta Garcia in which she announced the establishment of a new Jewish Studies program at the University of Beira Interior in Covilhã. The tour, led by Rufina Bernardetti Mausenbaum, was sponsored by Kulanu, Saudades, and Root&Branch.

According to the university's recent official announcement, the program, dedicated to the study of Judaism, is under the direction of Maria Antonieta Garcia, who has published many books in this area. The announcement acknowledges, "The presence in Portugal of the Judaic community assumed a very important role in the economic, social and political history of this country. In Beira Interior that presence still exists nowadays through the community of Belmonte, a village in the center of Portugal, situated in Beira Interior. This community continues to practice the Judaic tradi-

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95 More Bnei Menashe Arrive in Israel

A group of 95 members of the Bnei Menashe, a group in north-eastern India claiming descent from the lost tribe of Manasseh, arrived in Israel in August. They are making aliya under the auspices of Amishav. (Amishav was founded in Jerusalem by Rabbi Eliyahu Avichail in the early 1990s to assist descendants of Jews seeking to return to Judaism and other would-be converts.)

According to Amishav director and *Jerusalem Post* columnist Michael Freund, who visited the community in India earlier this year, this group is the largest number of Bnei Menashe to make aliya at one time. Over the past eight years, about 700 Bnei Menashe have settled in Israel.

"The Bnei Menashe are deeply attached to Israel, and they were not deterred in any way by the security situation here," Freund said.



Arrival in Israel. Photo by Michael Freund

"They are impassioned in their Zionism and deeply committed to Judaism, and we need to bring more of them here. They are a blessing for

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KULANU ("ALL OF US") is a tax-exempt organization of Jews of varied backgrounds and practices dedicated to finding lost and dispersed remnants of the Jewish people and assisting those who wish to (re)join the Jewish community. Kulanu is undertaking a variety of activities worldwide on behalf of these dispersed groups, including research, contacts, education, conversion when requested, and relocation to Israel if desired.

THE JEWS OF TIMBUKTU

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(Some names in this article were changed to protect the individuals)

In 1996 a book was published in Mali which surprised all but a knowledgeable few. It was *Les Juifs y Tombouctou* (The Jews of Timbuktu) by Ismael Diadie Haidara. The book describes the history of Jews in the Western Soudan (i.e. Mauritania, Mali, Niger and northern Nigeria) going back to a time before the arrival of Islam in the area. It then made its most provocative announcement: there are Moslems living in Timbuktu and in nearby villages who have preserved the knowledge that they are descended from Jews. In 1993 these descendants had formed an organization, "Zakhor," whose announced goals were to: establish contact with the world Jewish community; learn Hebrew; safeguard the Jewish socio-cultural patrimony of Timbuktu by collecting the oral and written histories of their Jewish ancestors; and to preserve the cemeteries of their ancestors

With the publication of the book, Zakhor became a widely discussed phenomenon. Information about the organization was printed in two Malian newspapers. The Ministry of Culture, believing that the organization would result in good publicity for the Malian government and perhaps in foreign investment, gave an award to Haidara. References to Zakhor began to appear in diverse publications and books referring to them as the "Secret Jews of Timbuktu" as though these Moslems were "Marranos" (Moslems in public but Jews in the privacy of their homes), whereas they are actually observing Moslems.

Historically, the Sahara Desert has been the divider separating the Berbers and Arabs in the north from the Manding, the Soudanic and the Votaic peoples in the south. In between there existed small nomadic groups such as the Tuaregs and Maures who maintained their independence from both groups because of the harsh conditions in which they lived and their usefulness in the trans-Saharan trade.

By the beginning of the Christian era, two circumstances made trans-Saharan trade profitable. At about this time, camels were introduced to the Sahara, making it possible to carry heavy loads in areas where there was little water. The second circumstance was the discovery of gold in West Africa in a region now in the eastern parts of Senegal and Guinea and the western part of Mali. Gold was carried in great quantities across the desert to North Africa, where it formed the basis of the Roman and later Arabic monetary systems.

We cannot be certain when Jews first traveled across or around the Sahara. We know that at the beginning of the Common Era, a large Jewish community existed in Alexandria, Egypt, and in the Roman province of Cyrene (Libya). In 115 CE, the Jews of North Africa rebelled, and the Roman Emperor, Trajan, put down the rebellion so ruthlessly that these communities scarcely existed thereafter. It would not be surprising if some of these Jews fled southward into or around the Sahara, where Rome did not exercise control.

Furthermore, after the Visigoths of Spain converted to Catholicism, they became very hostile toward the large Jewish settlement there. In 616 CE, King Sisebot ordered the baptism of all Jews in his domain under the penalty of expulsion with the loss of all property. Many fled

Spain for North Africa.

In 640 CE, the Arabs invaded North Africa. For 50 years they engaged in warfare with Jewish Berbers, ruled by a Jewish Queen whose name was Kahina Dehiah Bint Thabitah ibn Tifan, but more popularly known as El Kahina. In 693 CE, El Kahina was captured by the Arabs and beheaded. Most of the Berbers then converted to Islam, including El Kahina's son. Those who remained Jews became *dhimmi*s, or subject people, and supported themselves by being itinerant traders and artisans. It is possible that after the defeat of El Kahina, many Jews escaped into and across the Sahara to the cities and towns with which they had traded for generations.

A Jewish presence is known to have existed in the headwaters of the Nile several hundred years BCE. Before its conversion to Christianity, Ethiopia had a Jewish queen. Jewish traders from the Arabian peninsula traded along the entire length of the east coast of Africa before and after the advent of Islam. With the movement between East and West Africa, and between North and sub-Saharan Africa, it would not be surprising if in Roman Times Jews were present in the Western Soudan.

Shortly before the year 700 CE, the Songhai people left their home along the headwaters of the Nile and arrived at their present location in Mali where the Niger River takes a 90 degree turn from east to south, finding Jews living in the area. The historical support for this assertion comes from Al-Idrisi and Ibn Kaldun, Arab historians who wrote in the 12th and 13th centuries. Some modern historians believe that the Za Dynasty of the Songhai was already Jewish before the Songhai arrived at the Niger River.

If Jews reached the Niger River before 700 CE, they arrived before Moslem traders, who reached Western Soudan about 800 CE. In the year 1010, the 15th Za prince, ZaKassi, converted to Islam, as did the rulers of the Ghana Empire who controlled the gold fields of Bambauk and Bure (in western Mali and eastern Senegal). But the conversions were

tactical and for purposes of trade with the Arabs, and no pressure was exerted upon the local population to follow suit. Jews from North Africa continued to trade across the Sahara and to settle in the newly formed city of Timbuktu and in the nearby villages. Among those who arrived in the middle of the 15th century were members of the Kehath (or Kati) family, who descend from Ismael Alyahudi of Southern Morocco. Ismael Alyahudi was the grandfather of Alfa Mahmud Kati (Al-Kati), the author of *Tarikh al-Fettash*, a history which records the 15th century Jewish presence near Lake Fati, 20 miles west of Timbuktu.

In 1493 the Songhai king, Mohammad Toure Askia, decreed that all Jews must convert to Islam or leave his kingdom. Among those who converted were members of the Kehath family from whom the historian Al-Kati is descended. By this time, Timbuktu had become the center of the trans-Sahara trade. With trade came artisans, merchants, weavers and scholarship. The West African Sankore University at Timbuktu, with its large Islamic library, was already famous throughout the Moslem world when Askia issued his decree which doomed any Jewish future south of the Sahara.

In 1591, the Moors from Morocco invaded the Songhai Empire conquering Timbuktu. Even before 1591, Timbuktu was in a decline because of the southward creep of the Sahara. Today, seas of sand completely surround the city. More importantly, the Moors surrounded



Descendants of Jews near Timbuktu.
Photo by Josh Klein

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M E X I C O

The Jews of Mexico:

EMERGENCE, SUBMERGENCE, AND RESURGENCE

Written by Dr. Benjamin Laureano Luna, 1975, and updated for Kulanu (Translated by Max Amichai Heppner)

(Translator's Note: At the moment, there is a resurgence of interest in Judaism in Mexico, especially among descendants of Jews forced to convert to Christianity more than 500 years ago. Dr. Benjamin Laurano is a leader of one of those resurgent communities. His family was and is one of the fiercest and most intransigent among those who resisted the Inquisition in Spain and the Spanish colonies.

Dr. Laureano's history traces the ancestry of Jews in Spain back to the time of Abraham and covers Jewish-Christian relations from the time of Jesus. However, the central message of his historical essay shows that the Sephardic community successfully resisted centuries-long persecution by the Inquisition and meticulously maintained its heritage underground against terrific odds. His work stands up solidly against allegations that the Mestizo Jewish community has no true Jewish antecedents and instead derives from Protestant conversions in the 19th century.

Dr. Laureano's own family history is interwoven with this general historical review, showing the remarkable lineage of leadership that extends to the present generation. He is not only a vibrant religious leader, but a respected journalist and a leading member of the Mexico City liberal intelligentsia. The following excerpts show some of Dr. Laureano's main points.)

Early Jewish Traders and Later Refugee Settlers

When the Jewish people first settled the Land of Israel, it didn't take long for them to join their new neighbors—Phoenicians, Philistines, and Syrians—in the sea trade along the shores of the Mediterranean. Jewish traders followed the established pattern of setting up bases in distant harbors, which grew into expatriate colonies, especially in Spain. Records from the 10th century BCE, the time of King Solomon, already describe several Jewish seafarers' outposts in "Sefarad," which we know today as Spain. It is known that King Solomon himself visited there.

Jewish colonists in Spain had their numbers greatly expanded in 70 CE, when a Roman occupation army extinguished the last Jewish self-government in Israel and destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. Most of the Jewish people were deported from Israel, and many of them went to Spain.

About 120 CE, Emperor Hadrian of Rome cast out another 50,000 Jewish families and had them transported to Spain. The number of synagogues in Sefarad grew considerably, which brought on more anti-Jewish legislation. For example, between 612 and 620 CE, the Romans ordered 90,000 Jews to be forcibly baptized, and those who rebelled against this edict were tortured and had their goods confiscated. Jewish children were forcibly separated from their parents and educated in convents.

The Twelfth Council, called by the Catholics in 681 CE (Continued on page 6)

Learning from Rabbi Samuel Lerer

LIGHTING NEW CANDLES FOR THE ANOUSIM

By Max Amichai Heppner

Common wisdom holds that there is no irreplaceable person. This common wisdom is hard to dispute because the encroachment of old age inevitably dims humanity's greatest lights. Replacing them is a formidable challenge.

One of these great lights is Rabbi Samuel Lerer, and our challenge is to light new candles to shine upon his work. I will only briefly restate how and where Rabbi Lerer has spread his light. His past work has been ably documented by such varied publications as the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Jerusalem Report* (see the references at the end).

Like many great lights, Rabbi Lerer didn't know what he was getting himself into when his curiosity first led him to the field he has dominated for nearly 35 years. He was dragged into it merely by accepting a conventional pulpit with the Beth Israel congregation in Mexico City. This is a Conservative group with a strong core of foreign, mostly Anglo, membership. The congregation fits easily into the Jewish scene of Mexico City, which boasts nine other synagogues. Together, they serve the Mexican Jewish community as its epicenter, since most of the 50,000 Mexican Jews live in the capital.

Rabbi Lerer's curiosity was piqued early in his tenure in Mexico by reports that in the hinterland, a nascent Jewish community was struggling to exist and had been for a number of decades. This community seems to spring from a Jewish fire that had been assumed extinguished centuries ago. We're speaking of the "Marranos," Iberian Jews (from Spain and Portugal), forced by the onset of the Inquisition in 1492 to give up their Jewish faith.

The sad fate of the Marranos has long been mourned in Jewish circles. However, the fact that Marrano-Jewish customs were maintained underground for more than half a millennium, right into modern times, was a big surprise for the Jewish mainstream.

It now seems that former Jews, outside of the sight of their neighbors, maintained what Jewish customs they could throughout the Hispanic world for more than half a millennium. One story goes that they got their name Marranos ("pigs" in old Spanish) by a subterfuge used to maintain the spirit of Jewish dietary laws. They made a show of eating pork in full view of old-school Catholics to affirm their Catholic bona-fides; once safely out of sight of prying eyes, they deliberately threw up the pork meal.

One nascent community Rabbi Lerer found is located less than a two-hour drive from Mexico City, in Venta Prieta, a settlement that has been absorbed over time into the larger nearby town of Pachuca in the State of Hidalgo. The Jewish community there dates its above-ground current from the early 1930s, fed by the wellspring of its founders, the brothers Tellez. Before they made their remarkable decision to become openly Jewish, the brothers were unremarkable citizens of Venta Prieta. They became activated when they discovered, relatively late in life, that they were offspring of Marranos. By the time Rabbi Lerer heard about them, their efforts had resulted in a congregation of



Rabbi Samuel and Marguerite Lerer

KULANU BRIEFS

Want To Go To Uganda?

Rabbi Howard Gorin is planning future trips with other rabbis to visit the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda, with dates to be determined. The purpose of the trips would be conversion and teaching. If you are a layperson interested in joining such a trip (you must pay your own way!) and would like to be contacted once information is available, please notify Karen Primack at <Primack@starpower.net> or 301-565-3094.



Rabbi Gorin at the Beit Din in Uganda, 2002

Catholics Will No Longer Target Jews for Conversion

"Campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church," according to Cardinal William Keeler, of the U.S. Bishops' Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs Committee. This Committee and the National Council of Synagogues were partners in an interfaith project called "Reflections on Covenant and Mission." Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal, executive director of the NCS, said, "We believe we are partners in bringing blessings to all humankind for this is God's will."

A new translation of a passage in the Christian Bible made this step possible. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commands his followers to make "disciples of all nations." In the Greek original of this text, the word *ethne* is used for what became "nations" in English. But *ethne* is the cognate of the Hebrew *goyim*, meaning nations other than Israel.

Jewish participants noted that although Christians and Jews understand the messianic hope differently, "we share the belief in an unredeemed world that longs for repair."

Although some other Christian sects agree with the new Catholic position, the most populous Protestant groups still consider conversion of Jews a religious obligation.

Mathivha Invited to Israel

Professor M. E. R. Mathivha, president of the Lemba Cultural Association in South Africa, has been invited by Root &

Branch Association to give a talk in Jerusalem. We believe this is the first invitation a Lemba has received to speak in Eretz Yisrael.

DaCosta Ready To Lecture

Yaffah Batya DaCosta, Kulanu's Jewish/Christian Affairs coordinator, has prepared a lecture about Crypto-Jewish returnees to Judaism to take on the road. The lecture includes a short history of the "Iberian Holocaust"; the exile of Crypto-Jews into the Western world; the process that is now available for returnees; her own personal story of her return; biblical references to return; the Orlando, Florida, community of returnees; and outreach to the Crypto-Jewish community in the Americas. Interested synagogues and other organizations are invited to contact her at yafbatya@hotmail.com or 800-883-6586. A modest fee is charged.

National Public Radio Discusses Peruvian Immigrants

National Public Radio carried a feature in September on the immigration of 84 Peruvian Jews to Israel with Linda Gradstein reporting on Morning Edition. In the feature, a representative from Peace Now charged that the group was converted "almost overnight" and allowed to immigrate as a strategy to populate the West Bank with Jewish settlers. In response, Rabbi David Mamo noted that the Peruvians had been practicing Orthodox Judaism for 15 years, and that "only in the two settlements of Alon Shvut and Karmeit Tzur were they willing to invest the time and money to welcome the Peruvians."

Exponential Growth

Kulanu's web site became operational on June 17, 1996. By the end of 1999, there were over 25,000 visits to the site. During the year 2000 and 2001, there were over 40,000 more visitors, and during the first eight months of 2002, another 20,000 visitors came to view our web pages. What's all the excitement about? Check out <www.kulanu.org> and find out! And please submit items of interest to <Kulanu@ubmail.ubalt.edu>. As always, kudos go to Dave Turetsky, our webmaster *par excellence!*

Sending Books to the Bnei Menashe

The Bnei Menashe request that donors send books to a central location in Manipur, where they are divided among the 30 or so communities. Please send all books to:

Lemuel Henkhogin Haokip/Secretary of the BMC/
Amishav House/Jail Road/ Old Lambulane/Imphal, Manipur
795001 India.

Our contact for the Bnei Menashe, Stevy Epstein, advises: "If you are sending siddurim please keep in mind that the preference is becoming very strong for *Nusach* Sefardim. Not the Sefard vs. Ashkenaz *nusach* but the *Nusach* of Sefardim in Israel. They are gravitating to this community so would prefer their *Nusach*. Also, because they need to convert when they get to Israel, we have been asked to send them Orthodox books. If

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you have any questions please e-mail me at camera@thebigdipper.net or call me at (416) 638-2475."

Bene Israel Music

A newly released CD, produced by the Feher Jewish Music Center of Beth Hatefutsoth (Israel's Museum of the Jewish Diaspora), features 14 songs of the Bene Israel, recorded in Bombay in 1996. Titled "Eliyahoo Hanabee—Musical Tradition of the Bene Israel of Bombay," it can be ordered online at <http://www.bh.org.il>.

Mazal Tov!

To **Yoni Gorin** on the occasion of his bar mitzvah in August.
To **Stevy Epstein** and his wife **Alison** on the birth of their daughter, **Maayan Chana**, in August.
To Abayudaya chairman **Israel Siriri** and **Tehirah** on the birth of their daughter, **Namuyonjo Yehudit**, in August, just after Havdalah.
To **David and Cynthia London** on the arrival of **Lily Tzu London**, born in August.
To **Harriet Bograd** and **Ken Klein** on their 25th wedding anniversary.

Refuah Shleyma

We wish a speedy recovery to **Rebecca Kaplan**.

Todah Rabah!

To **Judy Neri** for her careful translations.
To **Rabbi Jeffrey Summit**, who collected \$2100 for three Abayudaya students to attend universities.
To these donors of more than \$1000: **Lois Levy; Jack & Diane Zeller**
To these donors of \$250-\$500: **Irwin & Elaine Berg, Susan Romer & Don Ungar; Xu Xin; Temple Beth-El Discretionary Fund; Sheckman Family Mitzvah Fund**
To these donors of \$150-\$200: **Howard Rosenbloom; Harold Alderman; Marjorie Hoffman/Leonard Rosenfield** in honor of **Rabbi Glass; Stephen Wise Free Synagogue - 4th Grade; Vicky Levey Goldstein** in honor of the Bergs' anniversary; **Ann Metlay**
And to these members of the \$100 club: **I. Michael Goodman; Dr. Samuel Levenson** (& for Temple B'Nai Israel); **Howard & Michele Sumka; Ronnie Suzanne and Arno Polin Williams**
To these purchasers of at least a dozen challah covers from Sefwi Wiawso, Ghana: **Wendy Light, Don Morris**

Kulanu Tzedakah Opportunities

Kulanu is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization. This is our last newsletter before the close of calendar year 2002. It has been a tough year financially, both for Americans and for our needy communities abroad. If you have funds to give, you may earmark your donations for the following funds. Unrestricted gifts will be used where needed.

Kulanu Unrestricted Fund

Abayudaya Fund

Orphans Education (Lorna Margolis Fund)
Semei Kakungulu High School
Hadassah Infant School
General

Jewish Community of Ghana Fund

Bnei Menashe Fund

China Projects Fund

Ethiopian Jewry Fund

Lemba Fund

General Anousim Fund

Brazilian Anousim Fund

Mexican Anousim Fund

**PLEASE NOTIFY US OF A
CHANGE OF ADDRESS. IT IS
VERY EXPENSIVE FOR
KULANU TO FIND OUT
THROUGH THE POST OFFICE!!**

Resurgence in Mexico (cont.)

(Continued from page 3)

attempted to completely root out Jewish practices, with severe punishments for Jewish converts to Catholicism who secretly practiced the Law of Moses. The term “Marranos” for Crypto-Jews dates from that time.

A turnabout occurred in 701 CE, when the Eighteenth Council of Toledo revoked all anti-Jewish legislation, allowing a rebirth of Jewish culture in Spain. Jews once again freely studied the Talmud.

Living conditions for Jews in Spain improved even more when Moorish Arabs vanquished the Christian Visigoths, leading to a broad area of cooperation between Jews and Arabs. Jews became active in key fields, such as medicine, mathematics, philosophy, politics, and commerce.

Toward 900 CE, Christianity again expanded into Spain, even though the Moorish Arabs tried valiantly to maintain their hold. The victorious Church issued new anti-Jewish rules, layering society in a way that put Christians on top, Moors in the middle, and Jews at the bottom. This gave rise to apologetic responses by highly regarded Jews, especially disavowing their alleged responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Don Isaac Abravanel, for example, pointed out that his ancestors had arrived in Seville during the time of the Second Temple, some 457 years before Christ, putting them far away from that scene.

Nonetheless, the Christians continued enforcing their anti-Jewish statutes, which, among other restrictions, prohibited Jews from holding office and from constructing new synagogues. The pressure was so great that some Jews decided to convert to Catholicism to save themselves, and, again, many of them continued practicing their Judaism in secret, resurrecting the term “Marranos.”

Expulsion of the Jews from Spain

Bad as they were, conditions for Jews worsened during the reign of Ferdinand and Isabel, the “Catholic royals,” who were fervent in their belief that Jews in the land contaminated the purity of Christian faith. They segregated Jews in designated neighborhoods and asked Pope Sixto IV to issue a Papal Bull to introduce the Inquisition into Spain. It took effect on Jan. 2, 1481.

In response, many Sephardic Jews left immediately, dispersing all over Europe. The process caused great hardship, leading to the death of thousands upon thousands of unprotected refugees traveling on unfamiliar roads. Survivors reached Holland, Turkey, the Balkans, Greece and other places where, until today, many of their descendants continue to speak the 16th century Spanish Jewish dialect called Ladino.

Those who decided to stay in Spain had to adopt Christianity, but many took their Judaic practices underground. The Tribunal of the Inquisition immediately began hunting out these Crypto-Jews, giving them a quick trial that invariably ended in conviction, and burning them at the stake.

Despite hope for relief from the Inquisition in the new Spanish territories conquered by Columbus and his successor in the Americas, the king ordered that “in these communities, there are not to dwell any . . . Jews, Moors, or sinners.” This edict was strengthened by the Royal Decree of Emperor Charles V, issued September 15, 1522, and authorized by the pope, ordering that even Jews who had recently converted were banned from the “Indies.”

The Jews tried to evade the Inquisition by moving away from Mexico City, for example to land that now is in the State of Michoacan. They started agricultural enterprises there, producing the famous Cotija cheese. But even to this distant place the Inquisition extended itself, and its actions against Jews there are very well documented. Nonetheless, more and more Jews who had been hiding in Spain came to Mexico, thinking it might be safer for them there.

Human traffickers made their appearance and secretly took Jews to the New World. An underground “bridge” was established from Spain to the Canary Islands and from there to the Caribbean Islands and the American continent. Ironically, the Inquisition also aided in the transfer of Jews to the New World by sentencing them to serve in galleys. Some who survived the arduous passage were able to jump ship.

Indian-Jewish Collaboration

After the Conquest, the Spanish falsified the history of the Aztecs and other natives of Mexico. Spanish authorities denigrated the native religion by calling it “polytheistic.” In fact, the Aztecs believed in an invisible god called “Ipalmemhuani,” who also was worshipped by earlier peoples, such as the Toltecs.

Many Aztec beliefs and customs paralleled those of the Jews, which explains why this indigenous people easily accepted conversion to Judaism. This philo-Semitism provided a circle of protection for Sephardic Jews, and even went so far as conversion of the Indians to Judaism. The natives realized that this was a way to fight back against the hated oppressors—the Catholic colonizers. These had branded Indian serfs in the face with hot irons and forced them to work in mines with so little food that they practically starved.

The authorities were aware of the collusion between Jews and natives. Their records show, for example, that a Juan de Baeza (also known as Juan de Baca) was prosecuted by the Inquisition in 1540 for circumcising Indian friends with his fingernails for lack of proper instruments. A copy of the charge sheet still exists.

Jews and the Struggle for Independence

Throughout the history of Mexico, persecution of Crypto-Jews continued, but a ray of hope appeared when, after the French Revolution of 1789, French agents started arriving in Mexico, preaching the principles of liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Of course, the Inquisition went after them, but Masonic lodges were organized to protect them, and for that reason many Jews joined the Masons.

The Jewish-Masonic alliance influenced major policy. The Masonic leadership issued a proclamation in 1833 establishing freedom of opinion and press; abolishing the prerogatives of the clerics and the military; closing the convents; establishing civil marriage; founding public schooling, abolishing capital punishment; protecting Mexican territoriality; and opening the ranks of the Masons to women.

The political changes favored Mestizo Jews, and they started to escape the oppressive life in the mines. For example, families like the Tellez and the Bolanos settled in Venta Prieta near Pachuca in the State of Hidalgo, forming the core of later resurgence of Judaic interest. Talented leaders arose to help the process. They included Baltazar Laureano Ramirez y Moyar, and Ana Escobedo de Luna. (Translator's note: they are presumed ancestors of Dr. Laureano and his wife, who belonged to a Luna family).

Articles about the mysterious Jews of Mexico then started appearing in popular magazines. They covered the Jewish Mestizo community in Venta Prieta and also described the synagogue on Caruso Street No. 254 in the Vallejo District of Mexico City. That's how people learned about the circumstances that had circumscribed the life of Jews during the Mexican colonial period and how they struggled to survive, leading to a Jewish resurgence in present-day Mexico.



NEW CANDLES FOR THE ANOUSIM (cont.)

(Continued from page 3)

some 130 souls, mostly relatives of the founders and their spouses.

Rabbi Lerer found that their knowledge of Judaism stemmed from old traditions, new books, and an occasional visitor from the mainstream Jewish community. However, both Rabbi Lerer and the community leaders realized they needed more to become full Jews in the eyes of the world. The Venta Prieta Anousim badly needed a leader who could bring them closer to the Jewish mainstream, and Rabbi Lerer became that leader. ("Anousim" is Hebrew for "The Forced Ones," a term currently preferred over "Marranos.")

"This was work that came from my heart," Rabbi Lerer said, "It was all volunteer." He spoke with me the day before Rosh HaShana 5763, in a hotel room in Mexico City. He had retired to San Antonio, Texas, in 1999, and returned to Mexico to help lead the holiday services at his old Beth Israel congregation. His visit back to Mexico was filled with nostalgia and emotion. I was lucky to have him squeeze me in for a talk between taking care of old business and celebrating the New Year with his friends in town.

Rabbi Lerer even today is a man of strong constitution, despite being in his 80s and having suffered several bouts with accidents and illness. At the end of our interview, his wife, Marguerite, practically had to tear photo albums out of our hands, so the rabbi would stop reminiscing and go for the siesta he needed before his extensive evening schedule began.

The photos show a powerfully built man of great determination who was animated by the deep love of the whom he had mentored. He earned that love as he instructed them and ultimately converted them formally to Judaism. It was confirmed as, over the years, he married young couples, and then circumcised and bar mitzvahed their children. How many? Although each conversion class that Rabbi Lerer led made a page for his scrapbook, even he has lost count. The number is reliably estimated at well over 3,000 Jewish souls plus their offspring. The returning Jews may well number close to 5,000 today, or about ten percent of the overall Jewish population of Mexico.

"It's just the tip of the iceberg," Rabbi Lerer said to me. "Just realize how many Jews there were in Spain and consider the natural population increase since the start of the Spanish Empire in the 1500s. You're forced to conclude that there must be millions in the Hispanic world who must be conscious on some level of their Jewish ancestry. Many of them would want to learn about that background if they had the chance."

"Too bad life is so short," Rabbi Lerer pined. "I think our efforts just about hit the critical point where the ball could really start to roll when I realized that I had to retire. A few more years, and who knows what we might have been able to accomplish?"

Well, to tell the truth, Rabbi Lerer has accomplished an incredible amount. Five congregations of ex-Marranos are functioning and growing in various areas of Mexico. The one perhaps closest to his heart is Kehila Beth Shmuel Simja Lerer in Veracruz, obviously named after its great patron and supporter. Excitedly, Rabbi Lerer spoke of planning to go there one more time to marry off two young disciples this December. May God give him the strength to make this pilgrimage to his past.

However, we had to keep coming back from reminiscing about the past to the main purpose of my interview with Rabbi Lerer, which was, "What about the future?" What can we do when a great light needs to withdraw from the scene? I was pursuing this conundrum in my position as a vice-president of Kulanu. We fully join Rabbi Lerer in the quest to reunite world Jewry with its Marrano past.

The future isn't rosy, I found. Actively reaching out to the nascent returnees isn't generally admired or even appreciated in Mexico. The mainstream Mexican Jewish community has a history of keeping to itself. Its relations with the outside world are centered on

carefully monitoring and balancing its stance in relation to the monolithic majority of Catholic Mexico. Converting nominal Catholics to Judaism is not regarded as a way to keep up this balanced relationship, even if it is agreed that, way back, they had Jewish ancestors. Only Rabbi Lerer had the strength and respect to buck convention and devise and maintain a system for converting would-be Jews from *Anous* stock.

Our musings about "what next" first focused on rabbinic assets that might be available. Rabbi Lerer listed the merits of a few rabbis in the United States who have the connections to Mexico and the know-how to follow up on his conversion program. The job remains to find and empower these rabbis to take on this job. Rabbi Lerer thought that this is one thing Kulanu can do. We noted his leads. They are possibilities, not sure things.

"However, keep in mind that rabbinic work with the Anusim doesn't have to look overwhelming," Rabbi Lerer said. "The leaders in my communities are motivated and capable, and they can do a lot for themselves."

Rabbi Lerer explained: "I left them my system and a study guide that leads potential converts through the main points of Judaism. It covers Jewish history, customs, religious practices, and Hebrew. They have to be able to follow and even lead parts of a standard Jewish service. Then there is a 220-part final test they have to pass before I would approve conversion.

"I have counseled the leadership on how to prepare for a conversion ceremony. If a mohel is needed for ritual circumcision, that's also arranged, certainly in Veracruz. There's a doctor in the community who learned the medical skills in college. I instructed her in the Jewish ritual for a normative circumcision. She's on call.

"So, basically, everything is set for a rabbi who will come in and convene a Beth Din for the conversion. One rabbi is enough. Leaders of the community can make up the other two of the minimum-size standard Beth Din. In fact, community leaders could theoretically make up the entire Beth Din, but Jewish custom has required that there be a rabbi. We have to find the rabbi that will do it."

Next, we explored identifying contact persons who can form a network of support for the nascent communities. Fortunately, Kulanu isn't entirely new to the scene. One respected past activist is Richard Kulick, who wrote the chapter on Mexico for Kulanu's flagship publication, *Jews in Places You Never Thought Of*. Clearly, these contacts have to be renewed. Rabbi Lerer could give me names for the network, but that's only the easy part of the job!

When you come to an *Anous* community like Venta Prieta, as I did a couple of years ago, you can expect a cordial welcome and open hospitality. But you can't expect to be entrusted with the intricacies and needs of the community in a single visit. That's true even if you come well introduced, as I did, in the company of the then-president of Beth Israel, Peter Koenigsberger.

Rabbi Lerer gave me an upbeat letter of introduction, but even so, the process isn't going to be easy. However, Jews in unlikely places depend on help from unlikely places. I trust that Kulanu is up to lighting new candles to find new supporters so that the great light of Rabbi Lerer can continue to shine on the Mexican *Anous* communities. If you want to be one of these new candles, you can contact me at heppnershanamax@aol.com.

References:

- (1) "The New Jews of Mexico" by Yigal Schleifer, *The Jerusalem Report*, Oct. 10, 2000.
- (2) "Texas Rabbi Claims Mexico Is Playing Host to a Lost Tribe" by Joel Millman, *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2000.

LETTERS TO KULANU

Telugu-Speaking Jews

I have not been involved in collecting DNA from the Bnei Menashe, although I believe colleagues in Israel are conducting genetic research on them.

However, I did collect from the Telugu-speaking community in Guntur Province, India, and the results, as the *Times of India* article indicated, were neutral. They were not negative -- they were neutral. That is, no particular markers linking them to any of the populations for which markers are known were found.

The research in no way invalidates the Telugu-speaking community's claims to be viewed as Jews. During my recent research visit, I was impressed by the sincerity and devotion of this community, which maintains a synagogue in a large, very poor village which has two mosques, a thousand Hindu temples, and several dozen churches. Whereas the churches are beneficiaries of help from abroad -- particularly from Europe and the USA -- the synagogue is not. I receive almost daily pleas from the community -- not for money, but for my help in acquiring rabbinic instruction for their teachers.

In my view these people are as 'Jewish' as their cousins in Manipur, yet strangely they are ignored.

Tudor Parfitt

London, England

(Editor's note: The community can be contacted at: Bene Jacob Jewish Community, c/o Sadok Yacobi sadokjacobi@usa.net, Kothareddipalem, PO Chebrole 522212, Guntur Dt. A.P., India.)

A Café in Tel-Aviv

One day I was sitting in a café in Tel-Aviv just watching the people pass by and was astounded by the variety that could be seen. I then realized that I was seeing "kibbutz gallioth," the ingathering of the exiles, and that every "edah" community contributed to the return.

The Mountain Jews (usually described as Russian Jews) established *Hashomer*, the cavalry that guarded the early settlements and became the nucleus of the IDF. They had experience with horses. The Yemenites contributed their crafts, arts, and dances (Israeli culture is basically Yemenite culture). The Ethiopians a quietude and dignity, the Germans their scientific knowledge, the Moroccans their style and flair.

At that moment I was awed by the beauty of the Jewish people and the sense of a mosaic falling in place. I knew that we each, individually and as part of a group, have a role to play in the final redemption.

Anne Herschman

Brooklyn, NY

The Sound of the Shofar in South Africa

Shana Tova to Klal Israel. Sadiki blew the shofar and everyone heard it at Sweetwaters. What a wonderful occasion it was! Very moving. And as usual rain and thunder came descending on us. . Maybe I am getting too mystical? The theme was: We adore YHWH, the author of the Torah. The youth outnumbered us. Yes there is movement and it is evident to the sound of *Shana Tova* reverberating all over our still-to-be-finished synagogue.

We hope the Hanukkah can be organised early. .May Hashem show us humility, honesty, integrity, and obedience in the next 10 days before the highest of the holiest days.

Gedzu Mathivah

Sweetwaters, South Africa

medi342@medi.co.za

Jews by Choice

I wanted to make everyone aware of an article in the *Atlanta Jewish Times* about Brad Pilcher, who was the editor of a Georgia college newspaper. He took a trip to Israel provided by the government for college editors, and after resisting attempts by Muslim students to print degrading articles about Israel, he converted and is now heading efforts on college campuses in support of Israel. His is exactly the kind of story the Jewish community needs to hear about -- how Jews by Choice work to help the community.

There are a number of ways you can help:

(1) Please visit www.Becomingajew.org and join our Ambassadors for Judaism club.

(2) The number of requests for conversion information from people who have a Jewish ancestry is enormous. I am trying to build up the section about Crypto Jews, Marranos and Anusim on Becomingajew.org. Please visit the website and under the section title Beginnings scroll to the title Crypto Jews. If you can provide information that might be listed, please let me know.

(3) We are going to put Six Steps to Conversion in Spanish on the website. Jacques Cukierkorn put it together and his book about conversion in Spanish needs to be promoted. There are huge numbers of people in the Spanish community who would return to their Jewish roots if there was support and guidance.

(4) I am always looking for foreign rabbis to help converts.

The Gesher Support Foundation is an Orthodox group headed by Rabbi Meir Fund which helps converts all over the world. Please encourage the Orthodox community to reach out to converts. They would be inundated with requests.

Barbara Shair <shairsware@aol.com>

New City, NY

Jewish Studies Seminar in New Zealand

This is a very preliminary notice concerning the eleventh biennial Waikato Jewish Studies Seminar for 21-24 August 2003. Fuller details will be announced in the next few months, but now we just want to start to alert overseas scholars and artists, so that they and we can plan out the general outlines of the Seminar.

We also know that people in Europe, North and South America, Israel and Australia often need a very long lead-in time to arrange for a trip to New Zealand, and also like, when possible, to link it to a tour of New Zealand and other parts of the South Pacific, so that we would like to get our dates set soon and begin to issue formal invitations to those who need such documents in order to apply for time off, financial subventions and other arrangements. We will be able to help out a little with some hospitality available from members of the Waikato Jewish Association, and pointers towards local travel agents for planning any longer stays.

The WJSS will fall into three main areas, and you are invited to indicate which you are most interested in-and you can decide on more than one, of course.

1. Academic and Scholarly Papers. We have no set topic but would like to see more emphasis on Sephardic and Oriental culture for a change, as well as papers that deal with Jews outside the English-speaking world, especially Latin America.

2. Artistic and Cultural Performances. We hope there will be concerts, exhibits, readings, performances, workshops and other aspects of Jewish creativity.

3. Local Topics and Discussions. Unfortunately, we must continue to deal with Holocaust Denial in the universities, anti-Israeli propaganda in the media, and, now as well, life after the closure of the

LETTERS (cont.)

Bnei Menashe (cont.)

Israeli Embassy in Wellington. As always, we seek helpful advice on providing a Jewish atmosphere and education in a community which is very small and isolated.

Please contact us as soon as possible with suggestions, comments and indications of intention to participate. We will soon be able to provide further details on the venue, accommodation, meals, and other business matters.

*Dr Norman Simms, coordinator
Waikato Jewish Studies Seminar
Post Office Box 1198
Hamilton New Zealand
nsimms@waikato.ac.nz*

Our Fan Club

I want to take this opportunity to tell you how much I enjoy reading the "KULANU." It's exciting, stimulating, energizing, extremely interesting, and a source of great joy. (*Nachess*) Above all, it inspires me to be active and to activate others.

*Yaakov Gladstone
New York, NY*

(Continued from page 1)
the country."

During the next year, the arrivals will study Hebrew and Judaism before undergoing formal conversion by the Chief Rabbinate to remove any doubt regarding their status, Freund said. The immigrants, depending on their age and desires, have then attended regular Israeli schools, gone into the Army, or gotten jobs. Fifteen or 20 have finished their service in the IDF and many others are still serving. Many are in college studying science, computers or early childhood education. Many have married and have had children. Those who have met the Bnei Menashe in Israel have been inspired by their dedication to Israel and the progress they have made. The new *olim* come as tourists since they will not have been converted. This means that Amishav will have to pay for their plane tickets, for their education in Judaism and Hebrew after their arrival, and for their living expenses until they can be converted and can find jobs. An airplane ticket from India for one adult costs \$800. Each of the two teachers of Judaism costs \$1000 a month.

"To help Rabbi Avichail carry out this extremely important work, I hope that Kulanu supporters will be interested in choosing a specific piece of this overall effort, such as bringing one or two Bnei Menashe to Israel or paying for a teacher for a month. I can hardly think of a greater mitzvah," said Bruce Terris, treasurer of Amishav USA.

Great Strides in Ghana

By Harriet Bograd

The Jewish community in Sefwi Wiawso, Ghana has attracted a lot of interest in recent months. We now have 53 members of the Sefwi Wiawso Support Group (a Yahoo! Group). At least 13 of us have actually visited Sefwi Wiawso, and five more are planning visits this fall and winter. We can be a powerful resource for supporting the Jewish community in Sefwi Wiawso. Those interested in joining this group should contact me at hbograd@compuserve.com.

We have been selling West African style challah covers from this community for less than a year, and they have already become quite popular. A shipment of 31 challah covers arrived from Ghana on the day my husband and I were celebrating our 25th wedding anniversary. We had a big picnic with many relatives and friends, and I was so happy to be able to show everyone the newest product. It was as though some members of the Sefwi Wiawso community were with us at the picnic. Each batch we receive is more beautiful than the ones before!

We have raised over \$6000 for the community through these sales. The community has used some of the proceeds to purchase a sewing machine that does embroidery, and they also paid for shipping for my old but high-quality sewing machine. (They received my machine in early June, even though I shipped it in early December!) They also arranged for Badu (also known as Ben), an experienced tailor, to go to the town of Kumasi for several months for training in how to do the elaborate machine embroidery on the challah covers. The newest covers have wonderful labels on the back, which say: "House of Israel/Sefwi Wiawso/Ghana."

I want to say a special thank you to Tamar Kemp, who has been doing such a great job developing the www.Kulanuboutique.com Web site. If you haven't already visited this site, I suggest that you do so - both to see our challah covers, and to see the wonderful products from other communities.

The community and I have also done a lot of work together in learning about quality control - the community keeps improving on the shapes of the embroidered Hebrew letters, the quality of the fabrics

used, and the care with which they make sure that each challah cover is in perfect condition before it is shipped. They have been wonderfully open and responsive when I send feedback about problems.

If you want to order any of these, they are \$25 each, plus \$4 for the first item and \$2 each additional for shipping and handling. If you buy a dozen, they are \$20 each and \$11 for shipping for the whole batch. If you have bought a dozen in the past, you may continue to buy at \$20 each to replenish your stock. Orders can be placed at www.kulanuboutique.com or by contacting me directly at hbograd@compuserve.com or 212 877 8082.

The community in Sefwi Wiawso is expecting a number of visitors in the coming months. Mike Gershowitz will visit in October, and Daniel Yamshon in January. Rachel and Ed Eitches will be in Ghana in October 6-26 with a group called Friendship Force, and their tour will end in Kumasi. They hope to be able to either visit Sefwi Wiawso on their own or meet Sefwi Wiawso community representatives in Kumasi. Chip Carter, President Jimmy Carter's son, will be with the group.

Rabbi Barbara Aiello and her husband, Murray Rudnick, are working on fundraising in their community in Florida so that they can go to Sefwi Wiawso in December. I am hoping that Murray Rudnick, a professional photographer, will also be able to share information and resources with the photographers in Sefwi Wiawso. Barbara has many years of experience as a teacher before she became a rabbi, and she would love to work with the people in the community who teach the children Jewish Studies, helping them with teaching methods and curriculum.

Kulanu is still trying to help the community find teachers with skills in Hebrew and Torah study to teach in Sefwi Wiawso for a month or more. If we find the right person(s), Kulanu will donate \$500 toward travel expenses.

I have sent the community an outline of questions for them to answer to report on how they are doing with the community, the synagogue, and the economic development project. If any visitor is interested in spending some time helping with this reporting, I'd be glad to

(Continued on page 11)

Two Books on Identity and Oral Tradition

By Anne Herschman

Hillel Halkin, *Across the Sabbath River* (Houghton Mifflin, 2002)
N. Brent Kennedy, *The Melungeons, Resurrection of a Proud People* (Mercer University Press, 1997)

I came across some information about the Melungeons on the Kulanu website which piqued my interest. Kennedy's book is a good introduction to this fascinating group. According to Kennedy, the Melungeons have an oral tradition that they are the descendents of pre-English, Spanish settlers in the south east who were settled in a series of forts by a Portuguese officer named Jao Pardo. (Pardo is a Sephardic Jewish name). Among these "Portuguese" were also Jewish and Moslem (Berber) *conversos*. These were later joined by a group of Turkish sailors dropped off by Sir Francis Drake, and perhaps the survivors of the lost colony of Roanoke. These groups eventually intermarried with the local Indians and a new people was formed.

As more Anglo-Scotch settlers moved into their lands, the Melungeons were driven out and pushed into the mountains where their isolation made their lives more difficult but also protected their unique culture.

Although I was aware of the sorry state of race relations in the US, I was not aware of the deep-seated, petty and cruel *de jure* segregation that was applied to so many Southeastern groups which did not fit neatly into a racial category. For example, the Melungeons were forced to choose a classification of either Indian or Black without having the option of defining themselves. They called themselves "Portuguese" which is a term that many Jewish *conversos* used after the Inquisition and Expulsion. They were shunned, not permitted to attend schools, driven from their farmlands and subjected to what the author calls "bureaucratic genocide." (Incidentally, this was also done to the Kurds who lived in the former Soviet Union. There was no ethnic category for Kurds in the Soviet bureaucracy, so therefore the estimated two million Kurds in the FSU did not "exist.")

Kennedy gives a short history of his own family and his gradual appreciation of his heritage. Although there is a definite Jewish element among the Melungeons (including the ancestors of Elvis Presley's mother), Kennedy only deals with this peripherally. I tend to look at things from a Jewish angle and give things a slightly different interpretation than Kennedy. For example, he states that metal working was a Berber craft; however, it was also a Jewish craft; many of the Sephardim, as well as modern-day Yemenite Jews, are famous for their metal work.

He also mentions the Melungeons' aversion to giving census information. He explains this as a way to avoid a cruel bureaucracy. Indeed, many Eastern European Jews also did not participate in census taking to protect their boys from forced conscription. However, the Jews' aversion to census or "counting" goes back to biblical times when, after the Exodus, against God's command, the Jews carried out a census and they were punished for it by a plague that took many lives. This aversion is very deep seated and many religious Jews will not even celebrate birthdays or anniversaries because it requires "counting."

For many years the oral history and traditions of the Melungeons was dismissed. It was not until recently that DNA testing confirmed what their physical appearance and oral traditions asserted. This is something we should keep in mind when we come across groups that claim Jewish ancestry. Oral traditions must be respected. (Why would anyone want to make this up?) Although no written records

were kept as to who was a member of the Kohen caste, recent research on the Kohanic gene shows the oral tradition was fairly accurate. This was also borne out by Tudor Parfitt and his work with the Lemba.

The same respect should be paid to the oral traditions of the Bnei Menashe. Hillel Halkin, at the beginning of his book *Across the Sabbath River*, is very skeptical about the Bnei Menashe claims of Jewish descent. However, certain vestigial customs, literary traditions and linguistic elements in their language convinced him that there was indeed some link between them and ancient Israel. The book reads like a combination of a travelogue and mystery. I don't want to give away Halkin's conclusion and reasoning process. Read the book and enjoy! Despite skepticism that several reviewers have voiced about Halkin's linguistic credentials, I believe that his reasoning is sound and that he gives due consideration to linguistic patterns and drift.

Both books make a case for respecting a people's oral tradition and history and show how linguistic analysis can be used to reveal clues to a group's history and character. Both books are worth reading for their sensitive and humane description of peoples trying to find their authentic identities.

(The reviewer, a Jewish history buff, is an ESL [English as a Second Language] teacher for early childhood in New York City.)

Jewish Studies In Portugal (cont.)

(Continued from page 1)

tions and they have also a synagogue - Bet Eliahou - as a place of devotion."

The program's areas of investigation will include Iberian Jewish history of the Middle Ages, the Inquisition, the Diaspora, the interchange between Spain and Portugal, and contemporary Judaism. It will also delve into Jewish thought, the Holocaust, Bible exegesis, and the Hebraic language.

It expects to interact with departments in the disciplines of science, history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, literature, linguistics, art, and religion. It plans to hold scientific meetings, establish contacts with national and international centers of learning, create a periodical publication, and publish academic studies.

Mausenbaum hopes to include a series of lectures or a two-day course at the Beira University in her next conference-tour to Portugal. "For me, on a personal level, witnessing the acceptance and acknowledgement of the Jewish influence on Portuguese history and culture is a dream come true," she said.

Although dates for upcoming conference-tours have not been set, inquiries may be directed to Mausenbaum at Rufina@saudades.org.

PUBLICATIONS OF NOTE

A Jewish Guidebook in Spanish

HaMadrij: Guía de los valores y prácticas del judaísmo moderno (*HaMadrij: Guide to the Values and Practices of Modern Judaism*) is a new book by **Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn** published by the European Association of Jewish Studies. Running 256 pages in paperback, *HaMadrij* was written for Spanish-speaking readers interested in returning to Judaism as well as potential Jews by Choice.

The publisher notes that most books on Judaism in Spanish tend to focus on a very specific and limited pool of readers (very specific topics for Jews who are well versed in Jewish studies), and also tend to be written from a very narrow perspective, whichever it may be (Orthodox, non-Orthodox, etc.), instead of giving a comprehensive overview of Judaism, seen from different angles. Although authored by a Reform rabbi, the book offers explanations from all different points of view, inviting readers to draw their own conclusions and to choose the Jewish path which is most appropriate to them.

The publisher has short chapters and highlighted texts in the margins to make the book user-friendly.

Subjects covered include history (general history, Iberian Jewry, contemporary approaches to Judaism), beliefs (basic beliefs and how they vary, views on God), and an introduction to the main texts: Tanakh, Talmud, Midrash, etc.), the concept of time (life-cycle, the Jewish year, Shabbat), conversion information (the process, advice, testimonies), and transliterated prayers designed for Spanish-speakers. The appendix section includes more specific information about Reform Judaism, the basic differences between Christianity and Judaism, transliterated blessings, and Jewish demography. An extensive bilingual glossary is also included.

HaMadrij is available for sale directly from the author (tel.1-913-485-7809, fax 1-816-523-2454, rabbi94@hotmail.com). It will also be available online at major Internet bookstores soon.

Dedicated Peruvians

Moshe Cotel's letter, entitled "Genuine Jews," appeared in the *Jerusalem Report* of September 9. Commenting on the conversion and aliyah of 83 Peruvians, he wrote, "These Incas have been practicing Judaism for more than two decades under conditions of tremendous stress and great deprivation. Their love of our religion is beyond question, and they have much to offer world Judaism with their dedication and commitment."

Ghana (cont.)

(Continued from page 9)

share my outline of questions.

I brought back four hours of videotape from our trip to Sefwi Wiawso. If this could be edited into a 20-30 minute tape, it would be useful in soliciting support for the community and for Kulanu. If you have any ideas about a volunteer editor, please let me know. I can be contacted at hbograd@compuserve.com or (212) 877-8082.

For more information about the Sefwi Wiawso Jewish community, please scroll down to the Ghana area on Kulanu's Web site, <www.kulanu.org>. You might enjoy looking at the photo album of my family's trip to Ghana, labeled "Sefwi Wiawso Photo Album."

Anthology in Judeo-Spanish

"*En tierras ajenas yo me vo murir*" ("In Alien Lands I Will Die") is an all-Ladino anthology of legends, short stories, poetry, memoirs and a children's story. Illustrated with 300 drawings and featuring 36 contributors from around the world (including five Americans), it is published by Isis Press of Istanbul and distributed in the United States by MEBS/Evergreen Books of Los Angeles. "With the book I wanted to demonstrate that, although the literature in Judeo-Spanish is not abundant these days, the language occupies a special place in our hearts," said the editor, **Gad Nassi**, via e-mail from Jerusalem. "I hope this work will motivate many more Sephardim to write in this language," he added. To order, see <http://www.missouri.edu/~rd4b9/livro.htm>

New Thinking about Columbus

The Real Colon by **Alfredo F. de Mello** argues that Christopher Columbus was not Italian in origin and that he intentionally led the Spaniards West instead of East. According to Rufina Mausenbaum, "This is a terrific read – almost like a novel as the author makes Columbus come alive as a person."

Racism Charged

An article in *The Forward* on August 23 by **Alana Newhouse**, "Rabbi Charges Kibbutzim with Racism," affects the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda. Rabbi Andrew Sacks has been rebuffed in his efforts to place two Abayudaya, religious young men, in Orthodox kibbutzim in Israel for study. The two were denied access to the classes because they are black and were converted to Judaism by Conservative rabbis, according to Sacks, who was a participant in the beit din that converted 300 Abayudaya to Judaism in February. Sacks said the Orthodox kibbutzim seemed willing to deal with the problems posed by either a Conservative convert or a non-white, but not by someone who is both. "Did we not create a Jewish state in order to gather in all the Jews of the world?" asked Sacks

Everything You Wanted To Know about the Expulsion

The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain, by **Haim Beinart**, has just been translated from the Hebrew into English by **Jeffrey M. Green**. The author, who spent decades in the Spanish archives, discusses the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain in minute detail. Individual chapters address the political background for the expulsion; the edict text; problems faced by deportees, such as liquidating property, settlement of debts; the logistics surrounding the actual departure; Jews prosecuted for smuggling contraband out of the kingdoms; Jews who returned after the expulsion; and descriptions of the expulsion by contemporaries. The detail in this 591-page tome is admirable – 34 pages just on the liquidation of synagogues. Cost: \$85.

Bnei Menashe Coverage

The August-September *Hadassah Magazine* carried a photo-essay by **Sandy Carter and Bryan Schwartz**. Entitled "The New (Jewish) Frontier," it included nine color photos of the Bnei Menashe.

The August 9 *Jerusalem Post Magazine* cover story featured Hillel Halkin's new book, *Across the Sabbath River*. The coverage included a lengthy excerpt from the book and a portrait of Halkin written by Bret Stephens, as well as several large pictures.

Dona Gracia Nasi: The Woman Who Defied Kings

Andrée Aelion Brooks has had a new book published about the Jewish Renaissance heroine Dona Gracia Nasi. Just published by Paragon, *The Woman Who Defied Kings* is the first biography of Dona Gracia to be based upon unpublished 16th century documents. We'll have more about this book in the next newsletter.

Kaifeng Jewish Descendants Learn about Jewish Heritage at Nanjing Seminar

By Xu Xin

For the first time in recent -- or possibly even ancient -- times, 12 Jewish descendants from Kaifeng, the city which housed a thriving Jewish community 200 years ago, traveled to a distant city in order to attend a three-week workshop on Jewish history and culture. Their goal was Nanjing University, where they spent July 14--August 2, 2002, learning about the Jewish heritage and the Hebrew language long forgotten by their community.

Those serious descendants spent six hours daily in classrooms studying their history and culture, taking advantage of this unique opportunity to learn about their past. The 12 represent six different clans. (Traditionally, Jewish descendants from Kaifeng take one of seven clan names: Zhao, Ai, Shi, Li, Gao, Jin and Zhang.) The oldest, Zhao Meiling, 58, is a retired worker and daughter of Zhao Pingya, whose celebrated photo taken with American Jew David Brown in the 1930's is well known. The youngest, Zhao Hui, 12, is an elementary pupil whose mother, Gao Suyu, teaches in a high school. Moshe Zhang, who led the group, was as enthusiastic as his 17-year-old son.

The workshops were originally designed to train Chinese professors who lead courses in world history or western civilization. The goal was to present reliable, accurate, and concrete knowledge of Jewish history and culture through intensive study, facilitated by Jewish scholars from outside China. This, in the future, would enable local professors to incorporate information on Jewish history and culture into the scope of their courses, passing on the knowledge to their students.

The first two workshops of this kind, held by the Center at Nanjing University in the summers of 1997 and 1999, were so effective and useful that the third was added to meet the growing demand for such information.

While the workshop did not aim its subject matter at the Kaifeng Jewish descendants, the organizer offered them the opportunity to join the scholars in residence and benefit from their expertise.

Since the Kaifeng Jewish descendants are non-academic and do not have necessary English skills, special treatment was provided. The first week, when all lectures were delivered in Chinese, they joined the other 36 participants from Chinese colleges and universities. After this, they met in their own, separate classes where Ellen Heilman and Tamar Friedman, wives of two Jewish professors from the US and Israel and scholars in their own right, presented classes emphasizing Jewish customs, traditions and Hebrew.

The requirements for their classes were practical rather than academic. Therefore, Mrs. Heilman focused her teaching on Jewish holidays and rituals. When she taught about Passover, she emphasized how to have a seder at home. A Chinese version of the Passover Haggadah was specially prepared. Mrs. Friedman focused on spoken Hebrew, blessings and Jewish songs.

All three foreign experts, Professors Heilman and Friedman and Dr. Perednik, who were invited to conduct the workshops for the academic group, also presented pertinent lectures.

Bo Yang, a former MA student of mine, who will go to Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati to pursue his Ph.D., served as an interpreter to make sure that the Kaifeng Jewish descendants understood the special lectures intended for them.

Both Chinese professors, Xu Xiangqun from Beijing and myself, provided a general outline of Jewish history and culture.

In addition to the regular classes, the descendants were involved in cultural activities, including setting up Sabbath services, blowing the shofar, reading Hebrew, and singing. Over 20 Jewish artifacts which I collected were presented to the participants. These included a Torah scroll, Sabbath candlestick, tefillin, mezuzah, shofar, me-

gillah scroll, yarmalke, seder plate, spicebox, and yad. We wished to provide them with as much tangible and concrete knowledge of Jewish culture as possible.

Many had formerly had the opportunity to meet Jewish visitors in Kaifeng but lacked knowledge of their own history and customs when questioned. Now, following the seminar, they believe they will have much more to share with visitors.

"Hebrew language, Jewish rituals and Jewish songs we learn at this seminar will tie us closer to other Jews. We should be able to do something together next time we meet Jewish visitors in our city," commented Ai Xiuqin, daughter of Ai Fengming, who had been chosen as far back as in

1952 to represent the Kaifeng Jews in Beijing when the country celebrated National Day.

"We feel very lucky to become the first group to learn about our history and culture in such a systematic way. We hope more opportunities like this will be available to us and other Kaifeng Jewish descendants," others remarked.

During the seminar they received free copies of books dealing with Jewish history and culture, such as the Chinese edition of the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, *Anti-Semitism: How and Why* by Xu Xin, the Chinese version of *The Dent Atlas of Jewish History* by Martin Gilbert, *Cactus in the Desert-Sketch of the Jews* by Xu Xiangqun, and *Ahad Ha'am and Jewish Spirit* by Alfred Gottschalk. All are in Chinese!

Their learning obviously roused the interest of Chinese media. A reporter from *21st Century World Herald*, one of the most popular weekly papers in China, arrived in Nanjing to interview them and their instructors. As a result, three related articles appeared under the generally eye-catching title: "Will Chinese Jewish Descendants Immigrate to Israel in the August 5 issue. The Chinese television network also reported it.

The organizer covered all their expenses during the seminar including travel, accommodations and board. The generous sponsorship from institutions such as Kulanu, the Sino-Judaic Institute, and individuals such as Michael Freund made this unique, groundbreaking program possible.



David Turetsky (L), Kulanu's Webmaster, consults with Xu Xin on one of Xu's American lecture tours.

TIMBUKTU (cont.)

(Continued from page 2)

later the Spanish, Dutch, French and English established trading companies along the entire west coast of Africa, destroying the trade monopoly of the cities in the interior like Timbuktu.

What little remained of the caravan trade across the Sahara continued to involve Jews from North Africa until the lands south of the Sahara fell under the control of the colonial powers. Early in the 18th century an Islamicized Jewish trader from Morocco named El Hadj Abd-al Salaam al Kuhn (Cohen) arrived in Timbuktu. He died on July 17, 1766, in Tangassane, a nearby village where many of his descendants continue to live.

Sometime early in the 19th century, the Albana (or Habana) family came to Timbuktu and settled in Kirshamba, a nearby village. Ismael Haidara, one of the founders of Zakhor, is a descendant of the Albanas as well as of the Kati family, and many of his relatives still live in Kirshamba.

About 1865 Rabbi Mordechai AbuSerour, an ivory and ostrich feather trader, traveled from Morocco to Timbuktu. He found - or brought with him - enough Moroccan Jews to have a minyan, build a synagogue and establish a Jewish cemetery. The synagogue building still remains, although nothing about it would indicate that it served as a synagogue until at least 1902. The street of the synagogue was once known as Jew Street where many of the Jews of Timbuktu lived. The cemetery from Rabbi Serour's time is said to still exist. In 1881, Rabbi Serour published an article, "Les Daggatouns, Tribu d'Origine Juive demeurant dans le Desert de Sahara." In it, he identified a people whom he called the Daggatouns who were Moslem by faith but conscious of a Jewish origin.

After the decline of the Songhai Empire, a power vacuum existed in the Western Soudan, resulting in wars among several different Moslem brotherhoods, each more fanatic than the other. In this atmosphere whatever remained of Jewish life was destroyed. Only the memory remained. And as I was reminded several times during my visit to the villages of the Jewish descendants, ethnic identity is important in Africa. In a thousand years an African will not forget his roots. Everyone who has a Jewish ancestor knows about it, as does his neighbors, although none talk about it.

Ismael Haidara is a scholar, author of two books, including *Les Juifs y Tombouctou*. He lives in Timbuktu. The Haidara family came from Toledo, Spain. The family name had been Cota, a name which Ismael believes was common among Spanish Jews. In 1467, the Cota family was forced to convert to Catholicism as a result of pogroms against Jews. The family left soon after for Ceuta in Morocco. From there it went to Algeria, then Mauritania and then Timbuktu. Somewhere during this journey, the family converted to Islam and adopted the name Al-Kati.

When Ismael published his book about the Jews of Timbuktu, he came out of the closet. The disclosure created some friction with his neighbors in Timbuktu. Identity is less of a problem in the villages, where there are many Jewish descendants. But even in the villages, without a proper introduction, the descendants would not acknowledge their Jewish ancestry to a stranger even though it might be well known to others in the village.

My wife, Elaine, and I visited Timbuktu and the surrounding areas from February 25 to March 9, 2001.

(This article will be concluded in the next newsletter, with details of this unusual journey.)

A Crash Course on the Subbotniki

By Anne Herschman

The term Subbotniki means "Saturday People" and is used to describe Russian peasants who left the Russian Orthodox Church in the 16th Century and who started practicing Judaism. The term is also currently used in Russia to refer to Seventh Day Adventists who also observe the Sabbath as a day of rest.

In some ways the Subbotniki are similar to the Molokans (Milk People) and Dukhobors (Spirit Wrestlers) who left the Orthodox Church at the same time. They were sent to the outskirts of the Russian empire as punishment, to avoid the spread of their ideas and to act as buffers on the border lands. They established agricultural communities and despite terrible persecution by the Czars and Stalin clung to their faith. During the second World War these communities extended shelter and help to European Jews fleeing the German advance. This in spite of their own meager resources. There were even Subbotniki Cossacks who often protected outlying Jewish communities from pogroms. Most of these disappeared before WW I.

During WWII, they extended shelter and help to European Jews fleeing the German advance.

It is estimated that there are now about 10,000 to 15,000 Subbotniki left in the Former Soviet Union. Most of them are elderly and they are unfortunately a dying breed. There is a community that lives in Yitav, the Jordan valley (Israel), which has about 30 families. This community was established 10 years ago.

Other groups who migrated to the Galilee at the turn of the century (including the family of Rafael Eitan, Israel's greatest soldier) have become integrated into the Jewish people. The new community in the Jordan rift is suffering terribly in the current violence and could use some support from the Israeli government and from Diaspora Jews.

Yoav Karmy, in his book *Highlanders: A Journey to the Caucasus in Quest of Memory*, describes his visits to several Subbotniki communities in the FSU. Their isolation and poverty is overwhelming and despite everything, these brave people cling to their beliefs. It is truly awe-inspiring that this group who chose Judaism, who suffered so much because of it, simply continue to live Jewish lives in such hostile environments.

The Subbotniki experience shows that communities of converts can be successfully integrated into the Jewish people and indeed have much to offer by their example of Jewish perseverance. We must do more to help those who have made aliyah and those who have remained behind.

I hope that the interest of some readers will be piqued and that some (perhaps Russian speaking) will undertake a more serious study. (This short article on the Subbotniki is based on a chapter in Yoav Karmy's book *Highlanders* and three short articles found in the Jerusalem Report of November 19, 2001 and August 21, 1997.)

HAPPY CHANUKAH!!!

See page 15 for all your holiday shopping!

www.kulanuboutique.com

MIRACLE IN ORLANDO (cont.)

(Continued from page 1)

Jews who were forcibly converted to Catholicism over five centuries ago, when Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella persecuted their Jewish citizens, converting some and expelling the rest in 1492.

They refer to themselves by the Hebrew term "*anusim*", which means "those who were coerced" into abandoning Judaism and adopting Christianity. Despite the passage of over five centuries, many have somehow managed to preserve the memory of their ancestral faith, which they now wish to reclaim as their own.

Iris, a member of Mont's group, vividly recalls how her mother would light candles on Friday evenings, keep separate sets of pots and pans for dairy and meat, as well as cover the mirrors in their house after a person had died. When Iris would question these practices, insisting on understanding the reason for them, her mother would say only that they were "old family customs," though she could neither explain nor rationalize them.

Micki, another of Mont's followers, recalls her uncles and aunts occasionally peppering their Spanish with unfamiliar words and phrases which she later learned were from Ladino, a Judeo-Spanish dialect. Micki's mother would make her clean the house thoroughly every Friday after school, insisting – without knowing precisely why – that it had to be completed before the onset of dark.

As incredible as these stories might sound, they are growing increasingly common throughout Spanish-speaking communities in the United States. As many immigrants to the U.S. from Cuba and Central and South America are exposed to Jews or Judaism for the first time, they suddenly discover the roots of their family's previously inexplicable practices.

If ever there was proof of the existence of a "*pintele Yid*", or a Jewish spark that survives throughout the centuries, it can be found in Orlando, among Joseph Mont and his congregants.

For Mont, the journey to Judaism began at the age of 12, when he sneaked into his grandfather's room and discovered an odd-looking candleabra that had been hidden away for safe-keeping. Years later, he learned that it was a menorah, and that it was a symbol of Jewish pride and survival.

On his deathbed, Mont's grandfather made him promise to leave Cuba and to "reunite yourself with your people." This sparked a long and often painful quest, one which led him to join a so-called Messianic Jewish group in Florida that preaches partial ritual observance together with a belief in Jesus. But the more he delved into the Bible, the more Mont felt uncomfortable with the contradictions that he found between the New Testament and the Torah.

In March of this year, after giving up his belief in Jesus and Christianity, Mont resigned his position as a preacher. Together with friends and followers who left the church with him, Mont formed Kehilat Beit Israel, the "Community of the House of Israel," with the goal of reaching out to other descendants of *anusim* who wish to return to Judaism (their address on the web is: www.gacetaanusim.com).

Working with an Orthodox rabbi in Atlanta, the members of the community have taken the first, tentative steps towards adopting Jewish study and practice, and they hope to one day to undergo formal conversion to Judaism.

Sadly, rather than being welcomed with open arms by the Jewish community, Mont and his followers have been met largely with suspicion and even scorn. Many Jews, it seems, have grown so cynical that they cannot fathom why anyone would want to voluntarily join the "tribe."

The time has come for that to change. We Jews need to be proud of who we are and of what we have given the world. We don't need to go out and proselytize, because Jewish law discourages such an approach. But when genuine and devoted souls such as Joseph Mont seek to become Jews, we need to do what we can to help them.

"I want to convert and join the Jewish people," one of Mont's followers told me, adding, "The Spanish Inquisition robbed my ancestors of

our faith, and now I want to take it back. I will do whatever it takes to become a Jew, because I want to serve *Hashem* and live according to His Torah," he said, his eyes welling up with tears.

Overwhelmed by his sincerity, I turned away for a moment, moved by his deep-seated faith and conviction. At a time when so many young Jews have abandoned Judaism, here before me stood a group of former churchgoers enthusiastically embracing the Jewish faith, lovingly fulfilling its commandments and affectionately imbibing its wisdom.

If only more Jews would learn from their example.

Anusim List Thrives

By Ana Kurland

I am maintaining a list for descendants of Spanish and Portuguese Jews (or any Jews worldwide) who were forced to convert in the 15th century, before or since. Since the words 'marrano' and 'converso' are controversial, *anusim* (Hebrew for 'the forced') is the list's name. Contributions are welcome in English, Spanish and Portuguese. People doing research on this subject are also welcome as long as they're respectful of those desiring anonymity. Those not wanting to return to Judaism, but eager to learn about their ancestors, are also welcome.

Anusim have an absolute freedom of religious choice. This list welcomes discussion concerning returning to any recognized branch of Judaism [Orthodox, Conservative, Reconstructionist, Reform and Renewal]. It declares unequivocally that belief in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah is totally incompatible with the Jewish religion. Jews for Jesus and similar organizations may include former Jews in their membership, but their belief in Jesus excludes them from the Jewish religion and they are in no way branches or fulfillments of it and those individuals, by their belief in Jesus, have further excluded themselves from the Jewish People. Abuse will not be tolerated.

Every question, no matter how simple, is to be answered politely. Questions that offend you should not be answered with abuse, but with explanation as to why that statement can be viewed as offensive. *Anusim* are struggling enough and it is to our advantage to stick together and learn from each other, not to fight among ourselves. People sending offensive messages will be removed from the list.

For more information, visit <http://members.tripod.com/~anak/anusim.htm>. To subscribe, write to anusim-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

The Kulanu Boutique

Also accessible online – with photos – at www.KulanuBoutique.com

Jews in Places You Never Thought Of, a 305-page hardback which includes descriptions of personal interactions with returning and emerging Jewish groups around the world; over 30 photographs. *Proceeds benefit Kulanu.*

Shalom Everybody Everywhere! acclaimed recording of the unique sounds of the Abayudaya Jews of Uganda. Hear traditional Jewish liturgy and new compositions set to African melodies and rhythms, sung in English, Hebrew, Luganda, and Swahili. *Proceeds benefit the Abayudaya.*

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Hand-crocheted Bnei Menashe Kippot (skullcap shape only), muted colors. *Proceeds benefit the Bnei Menashe.*

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International Jewish Genealogy Conference To Convene in Washington, DC

The 23rd annual International Conference on Jewish Genealogy, to be held in Washington in July 2003, will feature a panel on Crypto-Judaism as well as a talk on Crypto-Judaism and DNA. Some experts familiar to Kulanu readers — such as Jonina Duker and Stanley Hordes) — will participate.

The conference will be hosted by the Jewish Genealogy Society of Greater Washington, one of the oldest, largest and most proactive Jewish genealogical societies. Participants are expected to take advantage of Washington's vast collections, such as the National Archives, Library of Congress, Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. John W. Carlin, Archivist of the United States, will deliver the keynote address at the opening ceremony on July 20. The conference runs through July 25, 2003.

From Breakfast with the Experts, to highlighted evening lectures, the conference planners will be providing an exhausting 15-hour program during the Monday-Thursday portion of the conference. If the conference follows the pattern of previous ones, the opening day, Sunday, will offer a mere 12-hour program for the 1200-1500 attendees.

JGSGW plans to make the conference syllabus available on CD-ROM. The CD will also include the society's "Capital Collections", a resource manual that describes all Jewish-genealogically relevant records and repositories in the Washington area.

For further information, see <http://www.JewishGen.org/DC2003>.

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