
Be'chol Lashon (In Every Tongue)

**We are different cultures, languages and colors,
yet we share Israel, Hebrew and Torah**

A Program of the Institute for Jewish & Community www.JewishResearch.org

Be'chol Lashon Update 12/16/04

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Israel wins Two of the top Three awards for Technology Innovation in 2004 from the Wall Street Journal

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Bring the Falash Mura Home to Israel

Israeli Government to High Court: Only Orthodox Conversions Count

Israel wins Two of the top Three awards for Technology Innovation in 2004

Wall Street Journal

The winners of The Wall Street Journal's 2004 Technology Innovation Awards competition have been announced. Innovators world-wide were considered.

The Gold award went to Sun Microsystems Inc of California for a wireless approach to chip design.

The Silver award went to Given Imaging Ltd of Yoqneam, Israel for 'PillCam', a tiny camera that patients swallow so that doctors can see their digestive tract.

The Bronze award went to InSightec Image Guided Treatment Ltd. of Tirat Carmel, Israel for 'ExAblate 2000', a nonsurgical way to destroy tumors by focusing ultrasound waves on them.

Professor Xu Xin's Lecture Tour 2005

January/ February

Professor Xu Xin will be lecturing throughout the U.S. in January and February, 2005. Following is the schedule for his first stop in the Chicago Metropolitan Area.

Saturday, January 8: "Lunch and Learn"

Noon Time

B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim,

901 Milwaukee Avenue, Glenview (847-729-7575)

Israel through Chinese Eyes: A special account of changes in the relations between China and Israel and the development of a new Chinese attitude towards Israel since 1949.

Tuesday, January 11

10:00am

Oakton Community College, Ray Hartstein

Campus, 7791 Lincoln Ave., Skokie (847-635-1415)

The Jews of China: from Ancient to Modern Times

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Friday night, January 14

7:30 pm

Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation,
303 Dodge Ave, Evanston (847) 328-7678

Traveling Down The Silk Road Towards Judaic Studies: A personal account of how a Chinese professor became the leading scholar of Judaism in his country.

Following Chicago, as of 11/16/04 and subject to change:

Jan. 17 New York until Feb. 3, with visits to Montclair State University, Yeshiva University, and additional educational institutions.

Feb. 4 Possible lecture at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania

Feb. 5-8 Guest of Berman Center for Jewish Studies at Lehigh Univ.

Feb. 9-13 Guest of Baltimore Hebrew University.

Feb. 14-20 Visiting Scholar at UC Berkeley

Won Ton or Kreplach? How We Raise Children in Our Chinese-Jewish Family

By Jack Botwinik

InterfaithFamily.com

I always knew my Oriental wife was Jewish; after all, she grew up eating Chinese food! I grew up in a Jewish neighbourhood of Montreal. My mother is Sephardic Italian and my father is a Holocaust survivor from Poland. I speak Italian with my mother and Yiddish with my father and siblings. My wife, Belinda Cheung, was born and raised in Hong Kong and came to Canada when she was 17. I married Belinda in 1999. Our marriage has been working wonderfully well. Despite our cultural differences, our worldviews and approaches to life are remarkably identical. We are busy raising our two young children, and our lives are meaningful and fulfilling.

Picture frames reflecting both Chinese and Jewish influences adorn our home. We are keen on learning about each other's culture. We make a point to learn each other's languages through tapes and books. Although we are both fully fluent in English, my wife chooses to speak Cantonese to our children, and I speak Yiddish. Between us, we converse in English. Our children identify with their Yiddish and Chinese names, in addition to their English names. Our elder son, Asher (age 3), seems to handle the different languages well. We make an effort to be consistent in our use of languages with our children. We expose them to both Chinese and Jewish games, as well as Chinese, Yiddish, Hebrew and English books, songs and videos.

With an Italian mother and a Chinese wife, I am likely one of the most well-fed guys on earth! On Sabbath, my wife often makes "Chinese cholent," which I thoroughly enjoy. She shops for Chinese mushrooms, lotus seeds, ginseng and various kinds of Chinese fruits and vegetables in Chinatown. I take pleasure in preparing Italian dishes, and we both like Ashkenazi Jewish cuisine. One time, my mother-in-law assisted with cooking, and we all had an authentic Chinese meal on Friday night. It was a delightful evening and a pleasant cultural shock to my parents. Using chopsticks is still a challenge for me, but it only makes life more interesting! I am fascinated with Chinese history, language and culture. Belinda's roots are almost as important to me as my own. I am constantly looking for ways to infuse more Chinese culture into our lives. Even my favourite ties display ancient Chinese scripts and I often wear them on Sabbath. The Chinese and the Jews have a lot in common in their ethical teachings.

We keep a kosher diet and celebrate all Jewish holidays, including the holy Sabbath. We are grateful that my parents, my Chinese in-laws, as well as our secular relatives and friends, are respectful of our Jewish observances. My brother-in-law, who is Protestant, had joined us on several occasions and experienced Sabbath and Sukkot (Festival of Booths), and even had a

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taste of matzah on Passover. We give lai-si (red packets containing money, decorated with characters and drawings symbolizing luck and wealth) to our children on Chinese New Year. We may catch a dragon boat race during the Dragon Boat Festival, or play with Chinese lanterns around the August Moon Festival. When we are sick, we seek medical treatment and advice from both Chinese and Western doctors. Last year I had the opportunity to meet many of my wife's relatives and childhood friends in Hong Kong, as well as to visit her schools and converse with her former teachers. Belinda also enjoyed meeting my aunts and cousins in Rome. These experiences are very special and memorable to us.

While we cherish both backgrounds, when we have to choose between them Jewish holidays and observances take precedence over Chinese holidays and customs. Belinda finds Judaism meaningful and she has learned to love it more than Chinese traditions. Judaism is central to us, and it helps imbue our lives with meaning and direction..

How did we get to this arrangement? From the moment we began dating, we enthusiastically explored each other's cultures through visiting many ethnic establishments and participating in various cultural activities. Our goal was to broaden our horizons and to take the best of both worlds. However, as my parents were vehemently opposed to my dating Belinda because my religion prohibits intermarriage, we delved deeper into Judaism while also examining other religions. We read voraciously on different spiritualities. We attended Chinese churches, Buddhist and Taoist temples; took part in Jews for Jesus, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox Jewish synagogues and events; visited a Sikh Gurdwara, a Muslim mosque; and toured Israel for a month. It was a long but worthwhile journey. Through it all, we inspired each other in our spiritual growth, and helped shape each other's outlook on life. Belinda eventually converted to Judaism after more than four years of exploring and learning. She genuinely loves Judaism. An important reason that my wife and I have adjusted to each other so well is that we had developed a common vision for ourselves *before* we got married.

We are now connected to a Torah-observant community where people are accepting of us and our Asian-looking Jewish children. We were forewarned by the rabbinical court which presided over my wife's conversion that there would always be some Jews who, out of ignorance of Judaism, look down at converts and their children as being "not really" Jewish. Thank God, we have not experienced this kind of debasement. We hope that as our children grow up, they will question, investigate and renew their commitment to our Jewish heritage, and also respect and honor their Chinese roots. That they will carry their Jewishness into their own relationships and raise their children with healthy and life-affirming values and practices.

Jack Botwinik is the author of [Chicken Soup with Chopsticks](#), an intriguing work that deals with the struggles of interdating from a first-hand perspective. Visit www.PaperSpider.net to read more. He works for the Correctional Service of Canada. Jack's experiences dealing with destitute and under-privileged people, coupled with his re-examination of his religious heritage, have significantly altered his outlook on life.

Proud "Jewpanese" Americans

By Paul Golin

InterfaithFamily.com

"Prediction is very difficult," the great physicist Niels Bohr once remarked, "especially about the future!" We can't predict our future. All we can do is make happy plans and try our best to see them to fruition. My own happy plans include marrying my fiancée Yurika and, eventually, raising children who will successfully balance their mother's Japanese heritage with their father's Jewish religion and Jewish-American heritage. Can it be done? It's not impossible, and in fact a growing

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number of families balance this kind of multiculturalism every day. But knowing about the larger trend and actually accomplishing it on an individual level are two different things.

I've laid out the challenges in front of me like a shopping list, perhaps with a more acute clarity thanks to my work at the Jewish Outreach Institute (www.joi.org), an organization dedicated to lowering barriers into the Jewish community for intermarried families. (Yes, kind of like that classic TV commercial, "I'm not only the [assistant executive director], I'm also a client!") While our focus at JOI is on intermarried families raising Jewish children, our work has inevitably led to the realization that a more inclusive Jewish community speaks to many different groups of people, including Jews of color, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) Jews, and unaffiliated single Jews as well. All of these people can unite around the idea that the Jewish community is healthier when it's more diverse.

Through my job I've been able to hear from hundreds of diverse Jewish families, and in learning of their struggles I can anticipate some of the challenges that await my own future family. And I can anticipate some of the triumphs as well. One of the most profound moments of my work came on a site visit to a JOI-sponsored program in the San Francisco area called "Mosaic Camp: a Jewish Weekend for Multiracial Families" www.tawonga.org/wf_mosaic.html. I spent the weekend secluded in beautiful campgrounds right outside Yosemite National Park, talking, singing, playing and praying (and of course eating) with several dozen wonderful children and their parents. Many of the kids were adopted from Asian and Latin American countries, some were born to interracial couples and Jews of color, but all were fully-identifying Jews thrilled to be surrounded by other multiracial kids when the rest of the year they're in the tiny minority of their Jewish schools and synagogues.

Celebrating that Shabbat morning with multiracial Jewish children outside in the woods, singing Hebrew songs on log benches under a canopy of leaves, I couldn't help but picture my own children there one day, participating in that or a similar program. It was a tremendous feeling of hopefulness. It was living, breathing proof that Judaism is not a race or color, but a peoplehood defined by the people themselves. I also couldn't help but think of all the naysayers in the organized Jewish community who only see Mosaic Camp as the rare exception to the rule rather than as a piece of the blueprint for the future of Judaism in America.

It's not easy, that's for sure. Every family at that camp can attest to struggles around race and identity that an all-white, all-Jewish household may not experience. But it's up to the Jewish community to help alleviate those struggles, in the name of shalom bayit (the Jewish value of "peace in the home"), rather than exacerbate the struggles with negativity or worse, racism and exclusion. The weekend at Mosaic Camp also served as a reminder of one of the primary challenges for my own relationship: the Shabbat morning service was the first I'd attended in years, maybe a decade. Like many (perhaps most) Jews, I don't connect to my heritage through the religious aspects of Judaism. That makes it extremely difficult to explain to Yurika why I'm so adamant about raising Jewish kids, having them become Bar or Bat Mitzvah, and having her help me do it!

Similar to cultural Jews, the Japanese are some of the least religious people on the planet. They appreciate the trappings of religion, in their proper place and time. There's an expression that "the Japanese are Shinto when they're born, Christian when they marry, and Buddhist when they die," because they use different religious services for each of those lifecycle events! Yurika's own total lack of religion is both an advantage and disadvantage. On the one hand, there will be no competing religion besides Judaism in our household. On the other hand, she has no common point-of-reference--the way, say, a lapsed Catholic might--as she begins to learn about the Jewish religion. And she is beginning to learn.

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Upon our engagement, we made a deal that I would learn to speak Japanese if she would take an Introduction to Judaism course. Let's just say that neither of us is yet excelling in our respective undertakings, but at least we've made the commitment, and we understand it may take a lifetime of study together. My challenge and goal is to spark a Jewish identity in her. I've been to Japan three times, love the Japanese people, and feel some kind of connection to them even though I know I'll never be "Japanese." Yurika could actually become "Jewish," but right now she feels no connection to the Jewish people. We're talking about visiting Israel as one possible spark. She's enjoyed Friday-night services at a few synagogues--that's another possible spark. And she's interested in finding additional sparks. I anticipate that having children will speed the process on both our parts.

Those children have a busy schedule ahead of them, even though they're years away from being born. First, they'll learn Japanese as they're learning to speak English, then they'll go to a JCC preschool for their preliminary Jewish education. Right now we live within walking distance of perhaps the only institution in the world where they can do both under the same roof: the Sol Goldman YMHA in Manhattan runs classes for Japanese children to learn Japanese (nothing Jewish involved) and also hosts a more traditional JCC preschool. That's because our neighborhood, the East Village, is the "Little Tokyo" of New York, home to thousands of Japanese ex-pats and a great place for a "Jewpanese" couple like ourselves to live. Within a two-block radius of our apartment, Yurika can shop in no less than three different Japanese supermarkets and eat in countless authentic Japanese restaurants, while I can nosh at the word-famous Second Avenue Deli and browse at the Strand, an amazing used bookstore (which I somehow consider a Jewish activity!). Unfortunately, I've seen walk-in closets larger than our studio apartment, so having kids here will be a major challenge. We're painfully aware of the larger spaces--but more-limited lifestyle choices--available if and when we move to a suburban neighborhood.

I describe Yurika and myself as "Jewpanese" because our identity as a couple is inextricably intertwined between Jewish and Japanese culture. Our children will be even more "Jewpanese" because the combination will live inside of each of them. It's a relatively new identity, of course, shared by only a handful of people globally. But if what I've seen through my work is any indication, my kids won't feel a great internal conflict about who they are. Rather, any conflict might come in their interaction with the external world. For example, to the Japanese they will always be *gaijin*, foreigners, even if we raise them in Tokyo instead of New York. And segments of the American Jewish community will also be quick to disown them because Yurika isn't (yet) Jewish. This won't discourage me from raising them Jewish, of course, though I've seen how it can discourage others.

I can't predict how my kids will turn out. Parenthood is uncharted territory for all who undertake it. If they're anything like the kids I met at the Mosaic Camp weekend it would certainly be a blessing. Their religion will be 100 percent Jewish and their culture will be half Jewish, half Japanese...and 100 percent American! As for *their* children being Jewish, if the community hasn't found a way to attract and welcome in the growing diversity of our people by the time I have grandkids, it won't much matter anyway, will it?

Paul Golin is assistant executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute. His pre-launch website Jewpanese.com (www.Jewpanese.com) will serve as an Internet community for Jewish-Japanese couples and their children.

Bene Israel Jews from India: Images in Art from Siona Benjamin

**Moment Magazine
December 2004**

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Momentmag.com

On pages 44-46 of the December issue of Moment Magazine, artwork by Siona Benjamin, a Bene Israel Jew of India, is on display. Siona remembers the imagery of her childhood synagogue: "the oil lamps, the velvet-and-silver-covered Torahs, a chair left vacant for the prophet Elijah." Her ornate art mingles her Jewish upbringing with fragments of the cultures that surround her: Hinduism, Islam, Catholicism, Zoroastrianism and, since becoming a U.S. citizen, mainstream America.

Jewish Stories for a Lost Tribe of Israel

Arutz-7 Israel National News

Friday, December 17, 2004 / 5 Tevet 5765

www.israelnationalnews.com/news.php3?id=73757

For the first time, members of a Lost Tribe of Israel in northeastern India will be able to read about great Jewish figures from the Talmud in their native tongue. The Shavei Israel organization, a Jerusalem-based group which assists "lost Jews" seeking to return to the Jewish people, has just published a collection of stories about Jewish sages in the Mizo language, which is spoken by the Bnei Menashe in the Indian state of Mizoram.

The Bnei Menashe claim descent from the lost tribe of Manasseh, who were exiled from the Land of Israel by the Assyrians over 2,700 years ago. Some 800 Bnei Menashe have made aliyah to Israel in recent years, and another 7,000 are still in India.

The book, called Juda Thawnthu (Jewish stories) was compiled by Bnei Menashe scholar Allenby Sela, who serves as principal of the Shavei Israel Hebrew Center in Mizoram's capital, Aizawl. It contains dozens of stories highlighting ancient Jewish personalities such as Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, with an emphasis on the importance of being charitable, loving one's fellow Jew and having faith in G-d. "The publication of this book is part of our ongoing efforts to reach out to the Bnei Menashe and assist them with their return to the Jewish people," said Shavei Israel's Chairman, Michael Freund. "Stories are among the most powerful of educational tools, as they have the ability to reach different people regardless of their age or level of knowledge. We hope that the Bnei Menashe will draw strength from these stories about our people's greatest figures, and that they will gain a deeper understanding of Jewish history and its significance," he said.

Through its team of emissaries, Shavei Israel operates two Jewish educational centers in India for the Bnei Menashe, where they study Hebrew and Jewish tradition and learn about life in Israel. www.shavei.org

A Rabbi in Tijuana?

By Vince Beiser

L.A. Times

December 12, 2004

<http://www.latimes.com/features/religion/la-tm-rabbi50dec12,0,1009638.story>

Carlos Samuel Salas' long journey took him back to his surprising spiritual roots. He has quietly built a flourishing Jewish congregation of converted Catholics. Sure, he went from being a barefoot shepherd in Mexico to a wealthy businessman in Los Angeles. And yes, it's true that he spent time along the way with Che and Fidel during the Cuban revolution. He also was ordained as a Methodist minister, but later converted to Judaism. But what Carlos Samuel Salas really wants to talk about is the thriving little congregation of Mexican Jews that he has brought into

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being in Tijuana—almost all of them Catholics converted under his tutelage. "I think that I am fulfilling a commandment every time I teach," says Salas in his accented but near-perfect English. "We have almost 100 members now. The congregation is flourishing."

At 71, Salas is a stocky, handsome man, elegant in a 1940s way. He favors dark tailored suits, sports an impeccably trimmed Clark Gable mustache and combs his graying but still abundant hair smartly back. He steps up to the bimah to preside over a recent Saturday morning service with the easy smile and inviting charisma of a posh nightclub bandleader. The Congregación Hebrea de Baja California sits in a modest residential neighborhood of Tijuana, miles from the tourist discos and tequila bars of the border zone and even further from them in temperament. The worshippers—mostly middle-class men and women in their 30s and 40s, along with a handful of children—kiss the mezuzah on the sanctuary's door frame as they enter, bidding each other a friendly "Shabbat shalom." Most have brought their own yarmulkes and prayer shawls. Per orthodox tradition, the 35-odd men and women sit on separate sides of the low-ceilinged, brightly lighted room, which is decorated with pink Spanish tiles, menorahs, Stars of David and the flags of Israel and Mexico. Salas leads them through a two-hour service, the roomful of former Catholics chanting the Hebrew prayers with impressive fluency.

Judaism does not encourage proselytizing, and converts make up only a tiny percentage of Jews worldwide. Congregación Hebrea's very existence is testimony not only to Salas' dedication, but also to his formidable powers of salesmanship. He never misses a chance to plug the synagogue, its programs and plans. Before answering a single question for this story, he burst into an excited spiel about the rabbinical school he plans to open early next year, for which he has persuaded a synagogue in San Diego to donate about 2,000 books. He clearly believes deeply in the faith he's promoting—after all, he's been doing it for 35 years without pay. Salas was born near the central Mexican town of Fresnillo, the youngest of eight children in a family so poor that at age 5 he had to work tending sheep. He was 9 by the time he went to school for the first time, but worked extra hours to catch up. At 18, he joined a brother in Buffalo, N.Y., where he was employed in a steel plant. Two years later, he was drafted into the Army and sent first to Korea, then Alaska.

This is where Judaism came in, or perhaps *back* is more appropriate. As a child, Salas had seen his grandmother and mother light candles every Friday night and recite strange prayers over them. "I'd ask them why, but they'd say, 'Never mind, it's just a tradition, and it's dangerous to ask too much about it,'" he says. In the Army, Salas met some Jewish soldiers, and in talking with them discovered that his mother's mysterious rites were actually Jewish rituals. Her family, he now believes, were descendants of what are known as Marranos—Jews who had been forced to convert to Catholicism under the Spanish Inquisition, but had secretly held on to and passed down Jewish practices. Salas was intrigued; he had never been too crazy about Catholicism anyway. "As a kid I saw people being forced to make contributions to the Church, even if they were very poor," he says. "The priest in my neighborhood lived in the best house, had the best clothes. I always thought that wasn't right." Back in Buffalo after his discharge, he says he wanted to learn more about his mixed religious heritage, but there were no local Jewish seminaries. So he enrolled in a Protestant Methodist seminary, which taught both Old and New Testament theology, and eventually received ordination. He also planted a foot firmly in the secular world of business, opening a small hotel as well as a Spanish-language newspaper.

It was through his journalistic work that he found himself literally camping out with Che Guevara and Fidel Castro in the 1950s, writing a series of articles for a New York newspaper about the Cuban revolution. "I'm no socialist, but I have great admiration for Castro," he says now. "If you could have seen the poverty in Cuba before Castro, you would have cried." Salas moved to Los Angeles in 1960, where he got into the wholesale jewelry business and pursued his interest in his Jewish roots by enrolling in courses at the University of Judaism in Bel-Air. This ultimately led to his conversion in 1967. "I became convinced that I couldn't believe in Jesus, or Buddha, or

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anyone but the God of Abraham," he says. "I guess I had it in my blood."

In the years that followed, compelled to "properly instruct" his own people about his newfound faith and buoyed by the proceeds from his lucrative jewelry business, Salas founded his synagogue in Tijuana. At first, he advertised it as a place that offered free Bible classes. Although there are Jewish communities in Mexico City and a few of the nation's other urban centers, the deeply Catholic country has not been especially hospitable to Jews. As a Spanish colony, Mexico had its own inquisition beginning in the late 16th century that burned Jews at the stake. The image of Jews as world-controlling Christ-killers still holds considerable sway. "People used to break our windows morning, noon and night," recalls Salas cheerfully. The synagogue is now surrounded by a high gray wall. Nonetheless, curious locals started coming, drawn by Salas' growing reputation as a spiritual teacher. Although he's not officially ordained as a rabbi, his congregants often address him by using the title, in the broad historical sense of a scholar and teacher of Jewish law. By 1984, nearly two dozen had become sufficiently learned in the ways of Judaism that a tribunal of rabbis from California arrived to formally convert them. Many more have since been converted at the University of Judaism.

Rafael Gamliel Hernandez, for instance, a dignified-looking man in his 40s with a full black beard, was sent to a Catholic seminary as a child. "The fathers told me I'd never be a priest, because I was always questioning things," he says. So he left and studied other religions until he heard about Salas' congregation. "When I came to study Judaism here, I thought, 'This is the real God,' " he says. He converted after three years—and one by one, so have his father, wife, three sisters and all of their children. This story especially pleases Salas, whose three marriages have produced a sizable family of his own—including several sons active in his congregation. None of his family members keep their faith hidden the way his mother did. "My children and children's children now wear the Star of David. They are open, proud to be Jews," he says. "I used to dream about this."

Broward County sees a growing wave of Hispanic Jews

By Daniel Shoer-Roth

El Nuevo Herald

Wednesday, September 11, 2002

As Jews throughout the world recently celebrated the start of 5763, congregants at dozens of synagogues in Broward County noticed a change in their millenary culture: The prayers in Hebrew spoken by some of the congregants had a strong Spanish accent, while others addressed the Maker directly in Spanish. Launching a demographic change in Broward's Jewish population, the third largest in the United States, a growing wave of Hispanic Jews from Miami-Dade, as well as other families that have just arrived from Latin America, are settling in Broward County. Jewish demographers and academicians project that Broward will become a sort of Jerusalem for Latin American Jews in the coming years.

With the growth of the Jewish community in Broward during the past decade, believed to number 270,000 members, and, more recently, the drastic growth of the non-Jewish Hispanic population in that county, Latin Jews are following the migratory trend of the two minorities they represent. Although Miami has become the favorite destination in the United States for Hispanic Jews, and is now home to most of them, hundreds of Jewish families that arrive in South Florida fleeing from economic, political and safety problems in their homelands are choosing Broward as their new home because, they say, of the county's better housing, greater job opportunities and better education for their children.

"They see Broward as a community with opportunities, with a Jewish infrastructure, where they

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can maintain their identity and have their own religious institutions," said Henry Green, a professor of religion at the University of Miami. The changes in an area that until recently was predominantly white non-Hispanic are becoming evident. The United Jewish Community of Broward last year created a Latin Council to look after the new immigrants, especially Argentine families that arrived with scant economic resources. At B'nai Aviv, a synagogue in Weston, a prayer sheet was printed in Spanish for the current holidays. It is estimated that 25 percent of the attendees will be Hispanic. In community schools, most of the new teachers of Judaic studies are Argentine.

An annual event called Frijoles Con Kugel was recently held for the third time as a way to bring together Broward's Hispanic Jews and raise funds. Presented to the rhythm of salsa, merengue and cumbia, the evening's show included an Israeli singer and a mariachi group. "We have realized that much of the future of Broward's Jewish community depends on this new Hispanic Jewish population," said Rabbi Allan Tufts of Temple Beth-El in Hollywood. "I believe that in the next decade some of the most prominent Jewish families here will be of Latin American origin." A study conducted in the mid-1990s by demographer Ira Sheskin of UM revealed that 5,300 Hispanic Jews lived in Broward. Although no other survey has been conducted since then, Gary Siepser, president of United Community, estimates that that number has doubled. Other, less conservative analysts say it has trebled.

The families generally are young parents looking for suburban tranquillity, greater personal safety and better schools in an environment where they can practice their religion and interact with others who share their culture, without the social pressures of a centralized community, said Francis Ghitis, a Peruvian-born family therapist who has lived in Broward for the past 10 years. Among the cities preferred by Hispanic Jews are Weston, Coral Springs, Plantation and Hollywood, which also have recorded a major increase in the population of white non-Hispanic Jews, who have migrated north from Miami-Dade. The current Jewish population in Dade numbers 133,000. "We Latin Jews tend to come together because we feel a need for an element of belonging," said Marisa Aleksander, 34, an Argentine lawyer who moved to Weston with her family one year ago.

Miami-Dade already has received a great amount of immigrants. We're looking for new places where we'll have space to offer our experience. Our arrival in opening a new era."

Brazil's Anousim Get a Rabbi

Israel National News

Monday, November 29, 2004

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/news.php3?id=72772>

For the first time, an Israeli organization has dispatched a rabbi to northern Brazil to do outreach work among the numerous Bnai Anousim (descendants of Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition) living in the region. Rabbi Avraham Amitai, a graduate of Israeli rabbinical seminaries who is fluent in Hebrew, English and Portuguese, was sent recently to serve as a full-time emissary in the Brazilian cities of Recife and Fortaleza by the Jerusalem-based Shavei Israel (organization formerly known as Amishav). At the request of Brazil's governing Jewish Federation, Rabbi Amitai will act as the rabbi of the small Jewish community in each locale, while also seeking to facilitate the return of the Bnai Anousim in the area.

We have been considering the possibility of sending a rabbi to Brazil for quite some time, said Shavei Israel Chairman and Arutz-7 columnist Michael Freund. The area around Recife in northeastern Brazil is said by historians to contain one of the largest concentrations of Bnai

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Anousim in the world, so when Brazil's Jewish Federation approached us about the need for a rabbi to serve in the area, we knew this was an opportunity that could not be missed.

Freund noted that Portuguese crypto-Jews arrived in Recife in the 16th century, and there were known to be as many as 10 secret synagogues operating in the area. By the 1590s, the Inquisition began to operate in Recife, and many secret Jews were sent back to Lisbon, Portugal where they were burned at the stake for their beliefs, he said. Nonetheless, countless others continued to preserve their Judaism in secret, passing it on down through the generations until today.

In addition to Brazil, Shavei Israel currently has emissaries in Spain and Portugal working to facilitate the return of the Bnai Anousim to the Jewish people. It also operates Machon Miriam, a Spanish-language conversion institute in Jerusalem under the auspices of Israel's Chief Rabbinate, where many Anousim complete their formal process of return.

DNA Clears the Fog Over Latino Links to Judaism in New Mexico

By David Kelly

LA Times

December 6, 2004

Sent by Davi Cheng

Tests confirm what tradition and whispers have alluded to -- a Sephardic community often unbeknownst to many of its members. As a boy, Father William Sanchez sensed he was different. His Catholic family spun tops on Christmas, shunned pork and whispered of a past in medieval Spain. If anyone knew the secret, they weren't telling, and Sanchez stopped asking. Then three years ago, after watching a program on genealogy, Sanchez sent for a DNA kit that could help track a person's background through genetic footprinting. He soon got a call from Bennett Greenspan, owner of the Houston-based testing company. "He said, 'Did you know you were Jewish?' " Sanchez, 53, recalled. "He told me I was a Cohanim, a member of the priestly class descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses." With the revelation that Sanchez was almost certainly one of New Mexico's hidden or crypto-Jews, his family traditions made sense to him.

He launched a DNA project to test his relatives, along with some of the parishioners at Albuquerque's St. Edwin's Church, where he works. As word got out, others in the community began contacting him. So Sanchez expanded the effort to include Latinos throughout the state. Of the 78 people tested, 30 are positive for the marker of the Cohanim, whose genetic line remains strong because they rarely married non-Jews throughout a history spanning up to 4,000 years.

Michael Hammer, a research professor at the University of Arizona and an expert on Jewish genetics, said that fewer than 1% of non-Jews possessed this marker. That fact — along with the traditions in many of these families — makes it likely that they are Jewish, he said. "It makes their stories more consistent and believable," Hammer said.

It also explained practices that had baffled many folks here for years: the special knives used to butcher sheep in line with Jewish kosher tradition, the refusal to work on Saturdays to honor the Sabbath, the menorahs that had been hidden away. In some families, isolated rituals are all that remain of a once-vibrant religious tradition diluted by time and fears of persecution. Norbert Sanchez, 66, recalled the "service of lights" on Friday nights in his hometown of Jareles, N.M., where some families would dine by candlelight. "We always thought there was a Jewish background in our family, but we didn't know for sure," he said. "When I found out, it was like coming home for me."

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In 1492, Jews in Spain were given the choice of conversion to Catholicism or expulsion. Many fled, but others faked conversions while practicing their faith in secret. These crypto-Jews were hounded throughout the Spanish Inquisition. "In the 1530s and 1540s, you began to see converted Jews coming to Mexico City, where some converted back to Judaism," said Moshe Lazar, a professor of comparative literature at USC and an expert on Sephardic Jews, or those from Spain and Portugal. "The women preserved their tradition. They taught their daughters the religion. People began rediscovering their Jewishness, but remained Catholics."

But in 1571, the Inquisition came to Mexico. Authorities were given lists to help identify crypto-Jews, Lazar said. People who didn't eat pork, knelt imperfectly in church, rubbed water quickly off newly baptized babies or didn't work on Saturday were suspect. If arrested, they were sometimes burned at the stake. Many fled to what is now northern New Mexico, and remained secretive even after the U.S. gained control of the area in 1848. "Still, no one would come out and say: 'I am a Jew.' That didn't happen until the 1970s," said Stanley Hordes, a professor at the Latin American and Iberian Institute of the University of New Mexico who is writing a book on crypto-Jews. "The first few generations kept the secret because of danger of physical harm, and later they kept it because that was just what they did. The \$64,000 question is: Why the secrecy today? Why are people keeping this information from their kids and grandkids?" Some haven't.

"I found out when I was 13," said Keith Chaves, 47, an engineer in Albuquerque. "My great-grandmother told me that we were *Sepharditos*." The family matriarch was a repository of knowledge — and the keeper of secrets. "She kept a kosher knife rolled up in a piece of leather that she would only use for killing," Chaves said. "And she would kill the animal by cutting its throat in one motion. She abhorred the ways others killed animals." Born a Catholic, Chaves now attends an Orthodox synagogue in Albuquerque. He has made four documentaries on crypto-Jews and is working on a movie about his family history. "When I found out about my roots, I went to the library and my world opened up. I started peeling what turned out to be a 500-year-old onion," he said. "I have reclaimed my life. I live a Jewish life now. I think my great-grandmother told me because she expected me to do something fruitful with the information." Others have sought the truth on their own.

Elisea Garcia was raised by a strong-willed grandmother with strange habits. "We would have a big dinner on Friday night with candles," said Garcia, 66, who is awaiting the results of a DNA test done on her son to see if he has the Cohanim marker, which is found only in the Y chromosome. "She would butcher the animals then examine them inside out for any sign of impurity. On Saturday we weren't even allowed to wash our hair." When her grandmother died, Garcia found a silver menorah hidden in her room. "I'm a curious person, but my uncle told me not to dig into things because they weren't important," she said. Garcia, a Catholic, attends both synagogue and church. "It makes me aware of the whole concept of God," she said.

Greenspan, whose Family Tree DNA does the testing for Sanchez's project, said there had been a surge of interest in genealogy among Latinos looking for Jewish connections. "We believe a fairly high percentage of first families [arriving] in New Mexico were nominally Catholic, but their secret religion was Judaism," he said. "We are finding between 10% and 15% of men living in New Mexico or south Texas or northern Mexico have a Y chromosome that tracks back to the Middle East." They are not all Cohanim, and there's a slight chance some could be of African Muslim descent. But Greenspan said the DNA of the men is typical of Jews from the eastern Mediterranean.

Test participants scrape cells from the inside of their cheeks and mail samples to Greenspan, who has them analyzed by researchers at the University of Arizona. The process takes about a month, with costs ranging from \$100 to \$350 depending on the detail requested. Women, who do not possess the Y chromosome, must have a male relative take the test in order to participate.

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Since discovering his past, Father Sanchez — who wears a Star of David around his neck — has traveled throughout the state giving talks on the history and genealogy of New Mexico. He also runs the Nuevo Mexico DNA Project and website that tells how people can take part. Sanchez describes his Jewish history as "a beautiful thing" complementing, not conflicting with, his priestly life. "I have always known I was Jewish; I can't explain it, but it was woven into who I was," he said. After Mass one recent morning, a group of parishioners filed out of St. Edwin's. None had a problem with their priest's dueling religious traditions. "He has taken us back to our roots," Robert Montoya said. And Theresa Villagas smiled. "We are all children of God," she said. "I think this just adds richness to our lives."

Long Spiritual Journey Comes Home

Black family's choice of Beth Am synagogue is matter of faith

By Stephanie Shapiro

Baltimore Sun

December 5, 2004

Once, Desiree Robinson heard only her own voice as she recited Hebrew prayers at home. Now that she is a member of Beth Am synagogue, "I hear the whole congregation as I'm going through the prayer," she says. Even when by herself, "I'm not a lone voice anymore." After 15 years of searching for a spiritual home, Desiree and Phillip Robinson found Beth Am not far from their West Baltimore residence. During an August service, a day after converting to Judaism, the couple and their four sons were called to the Torah at the synagogue's lectern for an aliyah, or ritual blessing. At the same service, Robinson family members affirmed their Hebrew names. "It was a very, very moving moment," says Jon Konheim, Beth Am's rabbi.

This week, in concurrence with Hanukkah, Beth Am launches a year-long celebration of its 30th anniversary with a festive Friday night service and shabbat dinner. For the Robinsons, Beth Am's anniversary is occasion for deepening their sense of place. For all Beth Am members, it is a moment to reflect on their reverence for both tradition and progressive social thought. By nature, the Robinsons and the Beth Am congregation have sought possibilities beyond clear-cut paths and easy decisions. Perhaps that's why the family and the synagogue found each other. "Es beshet," Konheim says in Yiddish. "It's fate." Throughout the Jewish diaspora, it is not unusual to encounter black Jews. But in Baltimore, a city with a history of racial division, it is unusual to encounter an African-American family within a white, Jewish congregation. But the Robinsons have always felt more at home in a synagogue than a church, as did their mothers, who both observe Jewish traditions.

Phillip Robinson's mother "grew impatient" with her Baptist teachings and launched her own journey for a spiritual home, he says. As a child, "I began to go along and search with her ... the more I began to go with her, her search became mine. It became personal," says Robinson, the 34-year-old manager of an East Baltimore lighting company. About five years ago, Desiree Robinson, now 36, received from her grandmother photographs of ancestors standing outside a synagogue in New York City early in the 20th century. At the time, her grandmother told her, "Dee, you are not doing anything new. ... You are pursuing the calling of your blood." Like the Robinsons, Beth Am also has a history of going its own way. At a time when churches and synagogues were moving from the city, Beth Am stayed in Reservoir Hill. The synagogue was formed from the remnants of Chizuk Amuno, a previous congregation. Chizuk Amuno moved to Baltimore County in 1962, leaving behind a few members who chose to stay in the Eutaw Place synagogue. In 1974, those members bought the building, formed a new congregation and renamed it Beth Am, which means "house of the people." Beth Am remained unaffiliated until three years ago, when it joined the Conservative movement.

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"Beth Am appeals to people who march to the beat of a different drummer," says Miriam Tillman, president of the synagogue's congregation. "They listen to their own hearts and feelings as regards Judaism," she says. Beth Am is "a home for a certain type of person who tends to think independently." The Robinsons fit right in, Tillman says. "They're very passionate and they're very involved and integrated into the life of the synagogue. ... When they come to chapel services, they fill an entire pew. They embraced us and we embraced them." The family's search brought them to Beth Am through an acquaintance who attends the synagogue, says Desiree Robinson, who works as a program coordinator at the Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute & Cultural Center. There, as they listened to Konheim's provocative sermons, the congregation's spirited discussions of Torah readings and Cantor Ira Greenstein's sonorous voice, they discovered the one, burnished "truth" they had spent years searching for. "Everyone has to decide where their journey leads to," Phillip Robinson says. "I personally believe there's only one truth. I'm not one who believes all paths lead to the same place."

Judaism is a faith that welcomes theological argument. Still, Konheim says that the Robinsons' belief in one truth is not at odds with their faith's built-in tolerance for debate. Konheim shares their view in that he finds a "resonance in the Jewish tradition that speaks to me in a way nothing else does." While the Robinsons may "proclaim a single truth" on a theological level, they are "as accepting of all their friends and neighbors as they could possibly be on a social level," Konheim says. "For me, that works: they're not out to bring anyone else in; they're out to be the best Jews they can be." Well before their conversion, the Robinsons were familiar with Jewish tradition. When Phillip Robinson announced to his children that the family would convert and join Beth Am, they said, "I thought we were already Jews," he notes in an essay outlining his decision. "My response was, 'No, we just practice a Jewish life style,'" Robinson writes. It is rare for an entire family to enter a new faith together, as did Desiree, Phillip, Byron, 15, Yosiah, 12, Yeriah, 10, and Tobiah, 8.

Byron, for example, as a "mature young man of 14, had the option of saying, 'Thank you, Mom, thank you, Dad, but I'm not going to join you,'" says Beth Am member Joel A. Alter, a rabbi and director of Judaic studies at Shoshanna S. Cardin Jewish Community High School on Park Heights Avenue. Byron, whose last name is Powell, phoned Alter earlier in the year and asked, "OK, why should I convert?" Alter says. "He was doing due diligence. He wanted to exercise his right to think it through." Byron now attends Shoshanna S. Cardin high school, and his brothers, who are currently home schooled, may follow. The family's unanimous action is particularly touching, Alter says. "You often find in liberal America today that one's religious identity is a commodity to be chosen that is no different in practice from clothing or the kind of house you live in or the kind of car you drive." In this case, the Robinsons made a measured decision that will have a profound effect on their lives, he says. Byron's conversion, for example, "is significant in terms of who he will date and marry," Alter says. "Certainly in a community like Baltimore, where racial and religious identification is very important, that's a big step this kid is taking." If there was any surprise among Beth Am members when the Robinsons first arrived at the synagogue, it quickly dissolved into a warm welcome for a family now deeply involved in the life of the congregation. "It was definitely beshert," Desiree Robinson says. "It was where we were supposed to be."

Ethiopian Jew Shares Music and Heritage in America

By Oksana Dragan

VOANews.com

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<http://www.voanews.com/english/AmericanLife/2004-11-05-voa69.cfm>

America is rightly known as a diverse nation, a place where millions of individuals with far-ranging

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backgrounds and unique talents contribute to a colorful American mosaic. Today on New American Voices you'll meet a man who adds his own distinctive saga to this mosaic – Ethiopian musician Alula Johannes Tzadik. Alula Tzadik, a dreadlocked, ebony-skinned Ethiopian Jew in his late thirties, says his music is an expression of the many disparate strands of his life. His songs are in Hebrew, in Amharic or in English with an underpinning of Ethiopian, Latin and German musical influences, and overlaid by American hip-hop and reggae.

The story Alula Tzadik tells of his early life is both sad and complex. His mother, an Ethiopian Jew, was thirteen when she was raped by one of the Ethiopian teachers in the Christian school she attended. The child grew up in a Catholic orphanage in Ethiopia, not aware of his Jewish heritage but living with its stigma, made aware by the other kids and some of the elders that he was somehow inferior. In his teens he went to live with his father, a prominent personage in Addis Ababa with a passion for all things Lutheran. Later he managed to find his mother, who taught him Hebrew songs and prayers and reconnected him with his Jewish roots. His musical career started, oddly enough, when he was sent by his father to Germany to study medicine.

"I was playing as a student in clubs, you know, with acoustic guitar, singing, and a gentleman said, 'Hey, I like your music, I'd like to produce a record.' So the record came out, and he said, 'Now the record is selling well, you have to travel, you have to promote the record.'" So I interrupted my medical studies, and since then I went professionally into music."

The big hit which made Mr. Tzadik a star was the song "Sentayahu", which he wrote in honor of the name his mother had given him before his birth, and the name he himself gave to his newborn son. Alula Tzadik returned to Ethiopia in the mid-eighties as an extremely popular singer – like an Ethiopian Michael Jackson, he says. But he fell afoul of the government of President Mengistu Haile-Mariam when he refused to join the Communist party, as all prominent performers were required to do for propaganda purposes. Mr. Tzadik spent two years in prison. When the Mengistu government fell in 1991, he sought asylum in the United States.

Alula Tzadik says his transition to life in this country was quite easy. The day after he arrived in the United States, he was playing guitar and singing with a band in an Ethiopian club in Washington, D.C. While he says he had no trouble fitting into American society as a Jew, it was a little different for him as an African. "As a Jew, actually not, because you know nobody could see my faith, but everybody could see my face. So you know, -- sure, in America there's this black and white thing, you have to accept that, there's a differentiation. But with faith, though, nobody could see what I am, so I had no problem." His faith is an essential part of Alula Tzadik's life in this country, inextricably interwoven with his calling as a musician.

"I often go to synagogue, in fact I'm a member of two synagogues in Los Angeles, where I live, and I'm assistant cantor of the synagogues. And sometimes I get invited to different synagogues as a cantor, as a singer, as a speaker, and I travel to many parts of the United States talking about my experiences as a Jew in Ethiopia, as a Jew in Germany, as a Jew in America." One aspect of Mr. Tzadik's commitment as a Jew in America, he says, is using his music in the service of the community. He does a monthly "mitzvah", or good deed, performing his music for people in old age homes, for recovering alcoholics, jailed inmates. He devotes time to entertaining and teaching young kids who find themselves in jail for one reason or another.

"In fact, I made a CD with the juveniles in Los Angeles, you know the youngest is 9 years old, the oldest 14. They were rapping on it, I told them, 'Do what you think you can do. Tell about yourself, why you're here, anything you want.' And one of the guys said, it was really sad, 'I miss my mother. And I don't see any bird around, we're always put into the cell and I see only gray. I miss the birds.'" His faith is one of the reasons he devotes his time and talent to helping the community, Alula Tzadik says – but it's not the only one.

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Alula Tzadik plays his kitar in front of the U.S. Capitol "There are many reasons. One of them is – I grew up in such a very hard life. But God blessed me with what I have, so I have to give something back, as well. And I'm happy to be in this country, you know. So what America gave me, I have to give it to others. It's thankfulness for America, also."

Bring the Falash Mura Home to Israel

By Michael Freund

The Jerusalem Post

December 1, 2004

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=101830894029&p=1006953079865>

So what do Israel's Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Canada's Minister of Justice, two US Congressmen, the Chairman of the Jewish Agency and the head of the Reform movement all share in common? Over the past year, each has expressed support for expediting the aliyah of the remaining 20,000 Falash Mura to Israel. Descendants of Ethiopian Jews converted to Christianity, many against their will, the Falash Mura now wish to rejoin the Jewish people. With such an impressive constellation of figures offering their encouragement, and with the Ethiopian authorities themselves not raising objections, what then could possibly be standing in the way of fulfilling this historic and Zionist mission? Why, the Israeli government, of course!

Sure, a steady flow of Falash Mura are allowed to make aliyah each month, in accordance with the February 16, 2003 cabinet decision to bring the community to Israel. But despite pleas from the Jewish Agency, the Knesset Aliyah and Absorption Committee and American Jewish leaders, the government has steadfastly refused to increase the number being allowed to come here on an annual basis. And so, this past Monday, Ethiopian Jewry activists found themselves in the halls of Israel's Supreme Court, essentially trying to force the government to live up to its own decision and speed up the Falash Mura aliyah.

Earlier this year, in February 2004, a committee headed by Interior Minister Avraham Poraz chose to impose a quota on Falash Mura immigration, setting the limit at approximately 300 per month. As a result, according to Ministry of Absorption figures, just 370 Ethiopians arrived in August, 309 in September and only 197 in October. With some 20,000 still in the aliyah pipeline, that means it will take at least another 6 to 7 years for the remainder of Ethiopian Jewry to be brought home to Israel. Hence, families will continue to be divided, and potential immigrants, whom everyone agrees have the right to come here and will eventually be brought, might have to wait until 2010 or later to be reunited with their loved ones. This simply makes no sense, even in the bizarre bureaucratic world in which we live.

If the government has committed itself to bringing the Falash Mura here, and both the Chief Rabbinate and the Jewish Agency are supportive of the move, then why on earth should thousands of immigrants have to wait until the next decade to come? And if Israel is truly looking to attract more immigrants to its shores, as the Prime Minister repeatedly states, then why are quotas being imposed on Ethiopian immigration? On the surface, the government claims the reason is purely financial. On various occasions, both Poraz and Absorption Minister Tzippi Livni have asserted that it costs approximately \$100,000 on average to absorb each Falash Mura immigrant. Hence, they argue, to bring in more than the allotted number of 300 Ethiopians per month would mean additional expenditures, money the government says it simply doesn't have. Hogwash.

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To begin with, it is not entirely clear how Poraz and Livni came up with the magic number of \$100,000 per immigrant, but even if it is true, do we really want to start attaching a price tag to new immigrants? Is that what Zionism is all about? Moreover, as any first-year economics student knows, mass immigration, generally serves as an engine of economic growth, one that spurs expansion across a wide range of fields and industries. So Poraz and Livni need not worry, as the country's investment in additional new immigrants will eventually pay off. Ironically enough, on the same day that the government was pleading poverty before the Supreme Court, a couple of blocks away over at the Knesset, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was busy promising hundreds of millions of shekels to two political parties to elicit their support in the vote on the state budget.

With those same funds, estimated to be some 410 million shekels, the government could increase Ethiopian aliyah by more than third, helping to reunite friends and family that have been waiting for years to do so. The need to accelerate the Falash Mura aliyah is critical, as thousands of them are living in decrepit conditions. Just last month, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization said in a report that Ethiopia's overall food supply situation remains highly precarious with some eight million people currently dependent on food aid. Groups such as the Famine Early Warning System Network are sounding the alarm, saying that the number of Ethiopians requiring food aid could increase from the current 7.8 million to up to over 12 million in 2005 (Reuters, Nov. 4).

Now is not the time to quibble over how much it might cost to absorb the Falash Mura. The government, together with world Jewry, needs to speed up their aliyah and bring them home. It is not a lack of funds that is preventing this from happening, but a lack of will. The Falash Mura are our brothers and sisters, and they are calling out to us to return them to the fold. History is offering us an opportunity to restore these precious souls to the people of Israel. We must act now, and help them to complete their long journey home.

Israeli Government to High Court: Only Orthodox Conversions Count

By Dina Kraft

Jewish Telegraphic Agency. Visit www.jta.org.

November 22, 2004

Maya Gabai considers herself a Jew. Last week, the 25-year-old Romanian celebrated her conversion under the auspices of Israel's Conservative movement. But this week Gabai, who has lived in Israel for six years, was miffed by an Israeli government opinion submitted to the High Court maintaining that only conversions overseen by official, state-sanctioned, Orthodox rabbinical courts should be honored. "I am 100 percent a Jew," said Gabai, who married an Israeli man last year and plans to stay in Israel. "All this is about politics, not about what I feel." In the latest battle over conversion in Israel, the state opinion was submitted in response to an appeal by a group of 15 foreigners wishing to have their Conservative or Reform conversions in Israel recognized by the state.

But the state, wary of foreigners in Israel converting en masse for the citizenship benefits that follow, said Nov. 17 that they would not recognize what they termed "private conversions"-- conversions that are not overseen and approved by the Orthodox-run rabbinate. "The moment they convert everybody that comes, this contradicts the meaning of conversion because conversion should stem from a real desire to be a Jew, not a real desire to be an Israeli," said Yochie Gnessin, who is representing the state in the case. Gnessin said the government's position is intended to protect the integrity of Israel's Law of Return, which gives Jews the automatic right to Israeli citizenship.

Last week's government opinion was the latest salvo in a debate that has long roiled both Israel

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and the Diaspora. Non-Orthodox Jews, who represent the majority of Jews outside Israel, see the issue as a critical one in their efforts to gain acceptance by Israeli authorities. The Israeli courts have played an active role in the conversion controversy over the years. In 1989, the High Court ruled that Reform and Conservative conversions conducted overseas would be recognized in Israel. The High Court is expected to rule on the current case, which was filed in 1999, in the coming months. Reform and Conservative officials in Israel insist the move is just the latest government attempt to entrench the Orthodox monopoly on conversion.

Furthermore, they said the state is engaging in baseless scare tactics. There is no danger of their movements converting large numbers of foreign workers and tourists, they said, because both movements have pledged only to convert those who are legal residents of Israel and who have a genuine desire to become Jews and live their lives in Israel. "The state continues to pull out these excuses in order to keep up the Orthodox monopoly on conversions," said Nicole Maor, a lawyer at the Reform movement's Israel Action Center who is representing petitioners in the case. "These are just excuses to justify the desire, which the Supreme Court has said is illegal, to keep up the Orthodox monopoly." Rabbi Shlomo Amar, the Sephardi chief rabbi of Israel who is in charge of conversion in the country, told JTA he stood by the government opinion. He said that an Orthodox conversion is the only conversion considered valid according to halachah, or Jewish law. He said the Conservative and Reform movements do not do conversions according to halachah, "they do not know halachah, they themselves do not follow halachah."

"Conversion is not a contract for renting an apartment or starting a business," he said, adding that "conversion means accepting the mitzvot and it is important that a convert knows and observes them." In a highly unusual development, the state's opinion notes that Interior Minister Avraham Poraz has a dissenting opinion. Poraz, whose ministry oversees immigration, said he believes non-Orthodox conversions conducted in Israel should be recognized by the state. Poraz is concerned that the stringent conversion used by the Orthodox rabbinate seems to deter immigrants from the former Soviet Union who are not halachically Jewish from attempting to convert. As many as 300,000 of the nearly 1 million immigrants who came to Israel in the 1990s from the former Soviet Union pay taxes and serve in the army, but can't marry Jews in Israel or be buried in Jewish cemeteries.

"We think that many Jews in the world are Reform and Conservative and are no less Jewish than Orthodox Jews," Tibi Rabinovic, Poraz's chief of staff, told the JTA. "The government needs to take this into account." Poraz is a member of the secular Shinui Party, which had great success in the most recent elections, running on a platform advocating a separation of synagogue and state. Rabbi Ehud Bandel, president of the Conservative movement in Israel, said in response to the government filing: "I trust the court to reject this reply and declare that the Conservative and Reform conversions are equal to the Orthodox." Bandel suggested that the government was motivated by political considerations, trying to maintain the status quo on conversion because Prime Minister Ariel Sharon needs the support of the religious parties to maintain his shaky coalition.

The government's opinion marked "the latest episode on the 'Who is a Jew' controversy that for years dominated the agenda in Israel-Diaspora relations," Bandel said. "We were hoping that finally the state would realize that any discrimination against non-Orthodox streams is unacceptable and illegal." Orthodox authorities say Jewish law requires that converts undergo traditional ritual conversion and commit to adhering to all the precepts of Jewish law, or halachah. Non-Orthodox streams contend that these authorities inevitably interpret halachah strictly as Orthodox observance. Bandel said the state's opinion also takes advantage of the good will the Conservative and Reform movements tried to foster in 1998 when they agreed to the recommendations of a government commission on conversion, headed by then-Finance Minister Ya'acov Ne'eman. The recommendations included the establishment of a joint institute for

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conversion taught by a combination of Orthodox, Conservative and Reform rabbis.

The liberal streams agreed that those wishing to convert would then go to a Beit Din, or Jewish law court, for an Orthodox ceremony that would be universally recognized. Orthodox representatives did not sign on to the final recommendation, but the conversion institute has since been established, with branches across the country. Currently, it serves 2,500 students and is funded by the Jewish Agency for Israel and the government. In agreeing to the conversion institute, Bandel said the movements were not giving up on their struggle to have their own conversions recognized eventually.

Dina Kraft is JTA's news and features correspondent in Israel. Based in Tel Aviv, she covers a wide range of behind-the-headlines issues, including Israel-Diaspora affairs and economic and social trends. She comes to JTA from The Associated Press, where she worked for over six years, first in the Jerusalem bureau and then in the Johannesburg bureau covering southern Africa. She has reported from throughout Africa as well as Pakistan, Turkey and Jordan.
