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Be'chol Lashon Newsletter • March 2007

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The Be'chol Lashon newsletter contains items of interest from worldwide Jewish communities. It serves to further educate isolated Jewish individuals and communities about the policies and practices of the mainstream Jewish community and to educate Jews in the mainstream about others with whom they may not be familiar.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

San Francisco Bay Area

11th Annual Freedom Seder

March 27, 6:30pm

JCC in San Francisco, CA



Celebrate at the Be'chol Lashon table! Come represent Be'chol Lashon and educate the Jewish community about about the ethnic and racial diversity of the Jewish people. Participants are encouraged to contribute reflections about their personal experiences.

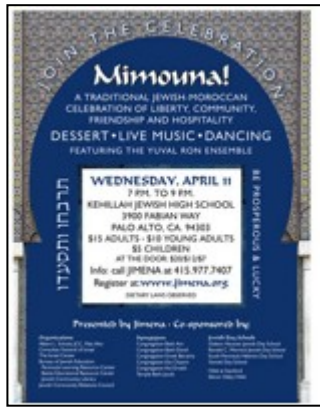
Led by Rabbi Yoel Kahn, Director, Taube Center for Jewish Life, JCCSF with participation from Bay are faith and ethnic communities.

\$20 in advance for full kosher meal. Half price for children under 12. RSVP to Esther Fishman, Esther@JewishResearch.org

JIMENA's Mimouna Celebration

April 11, 7-9pm

Kehilla Jewish High School: 3900 Fabian Way in Palo Alto, CA



Be'chol Lashon, JIMENA and other Bay Area partners co-present, Mimouna.

The word Mimouna in Hebrew is linked to "emuna", faith. In Arabic, it means good fortune. This joyuous holiday celebration, is rich in Jewish Moroccan symbolism and customs.

Dessert, live music and dancing, featuring the Yuval Ron Ensemble.

\$15 Adults, \$10 Young Adults, \$5 Children. For Tickets call JIMENA at (415) 977-7407

Migvanim: Celebrating the Spectrum of the Jewish People

A Training Series on Diversity in Jewish Education

April 18, 6pm

Temple Sinai: 2808 Summit Street in Oakland, CA

Exploring Gender: Roles, Identity and Gender Expression What does gender mean? How is gender identity formed? How does the Jewish community with its traditional gender roles create space for children to be who they are. All Jewish teachers and professionals are invited.

Dinner and workshop are free.

Please RSVP to Brunetta@oaklandsinai.org

COMMUNITY EVENTS

Mazel Tov to **Rabbi Baruch Yehudah and Nesicha**, who were blessed last month with a healthy baby boy named **Achil-Kichaiyah Yehudah**. Achil was 7 pounds 6 ounces and 21 inches of joy.

How to Build a Tabernacle

Dvar Torah by Rabbi Capers Shmuel Funnye



This week's parshah, Terumah, which means; uplifting or that which is lifted up, gives a description of the building of the Mishkan (dwelling) or Mikdash (sanctuary) or simply Tabernacle, in the wilderness of the children of Israel. Was Hashem homeless or did the Israelites need a physical place to assist in their idea of a place to meet Hashem? What do the people with willing hearts lift up? I understand that the text is not only speaking about the fifteen different articles that the children of Israel offered for the building of the Mishkan, the Ark and all the Vessels pertaining to it. I believe that through our prayers that we lift up our articles of faith, when we turn to Hashem with our whole being.

I believe that uplifting must come primarily from our hearts. The Torah portion goes to great length to describe what the Israelites were to bring for the construction of the Mikdash, the tabernacle. The gifts that the people brought for the construction were to be the best that the children of Israel had to offer, because only the best could go into this edifice dedicated to Hashem. Today, although we do have the Mikdash or the great Knesset Ha-gadol, we do have our modern day Knesset- katan, in the presence of our synagogues, temples and shuls. What is it that we are to bring to our buildings today as Israelites/Jews? How can we bring pure gold, silver and copper? Is it possible for us today to bring pure olive oil, and if we could bring the pure olive oil, would the vessels that we burn the oil in be worthy of Hashem? What about the aromatic incense that the priest burned in the Tabernacle, can we reproduce those beautiful scents of days gone by. I think not. What then you might posit, is the meaning of this portion to us today, living in the twenty-first century?

One rabbi has said that the Gold is the Soul, the Silver the Body and the Copper the Voice. I believe that what we read about the Mishkan and what went into the construction of the same can be applied to our lives today. In other words, are we bringing Hashem our best as individual Jews? Do we bring to our Shabbat services the gold of our souls, the silver of our bodies and the copper of our voices? Do we worship Hashem truly with all of heart, soul and our strength? Do we make certain that the copper that we bring is of the purest form, of our minds, which we express through the words of our lips? Moreover, what are we burning, or better yet, do we burn, with the fire of love of Torah, devotion to Hashem and true sincerity in the worship of the Mighty One of Israel? Might I suggest that we must also bring a true love for our fellow Jew, as well as an open heart and open arms to those who are seeking a greater understanding of Judaism. Is the Shabbat real to us or is it merely something that we participate in because, that is what Jews are supposed to do?

Hashem gave every Jew all of the material that we could ever need for the construction of that great inner Sanctuary that dwells in the Heart, Soul, Body and Mind of every Jew. All that left for us to do then, is to put these articles of faith together and make Terumah that is an Uplifting of our Beings to Hashem. Then and only then will the vessels of our bodies be fit for Hashem to dwell in us.

Indian Jewish Congregation of USA Launches It's First Newsletter



For updates from Romiel Daniel, President of the Indian Jewish Congregation of USA, upcoming events in New York, news, and recipes, sign up for the newsletter.

[Read it here](#) [PDF]

President's Message

The Indian Jewish Congregation of USA is embarking on something new, the starting of a newsletter in the month of Shevat, the eleventh month of the civil year on the Hebrew calendar and the fifth month of the ecclesiastical year. It is a winter month of 30 days. It was on the first of Shevat of the year 2488 from creation, Moses convened the Jewish people and began the 37 day "review of the Torah" contained in the Book of Deuteronomy (Devarim), which he concluded on the day of his passing on Adar 7 of that year.

The later sages have, therefore, said that the first of Shevat is comparable to the day of the giving of the Torah. On that day they began to receive the Book of Deuteronomy from G-d, through Moses. These 37 days are especially suited for renewed inspiration in the study of Torah and the doing of Mitzvot. Tu B'Shevat, the 15th day of the Jewish month of Shevat, is a holiday also known as the New Year for Trees. This year it will be on February 3rd. Judaism has several different "new years." Tu B'Shevat is the New Year for the purpose of calculating the age of trees for tithing. Lev19:23-25 states that fruit from trees may not be eaten during the first three years. The fourth years' fruit is for G-d, and after that, you can eat the fruit. Tu B'Shevat is not mentioned in the Torah. Only in the Mishnah is it mentioned as a dispute between the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai where Rabbi Hillel said the proper date for the holiday was the 15th of Shevat whereas Rabbi Shammai said it should be the First of Shevat. We follow Rabbi Hillel.

There are a few customs or observances related to this day. One custom is to eat a new fruit on this day. Some people plant trees on this day.

In India, the tradition was for every Bene Israel household to perform the Eliyahoo Hannabi ceremony. For those who wanted to have a community Eliyahoo Hannabi, a special trip was made to Khandala, near Alibag in the Konkan district to perform the Eliyahoo Hannabi ceremony at the rock where supposedly the track marks of Eliyahoo Hannabi's chariot can be seen. This was the time when he ascended to heaven in a chariot of fire. This day was thus called the Eliyahoo Hannabi cha Oorus. Some synagogues had a communal Eliyahoo Hannabi.

There is a story in the Talmud of an old person, Honi, who was observed planting a carob tree. When asked if he really expected to live long enough to consume the fruits of his labor, he replied: "I was born into a world flourishing with ready pleasures. My ancestors planted for me, and now I plant for my children..."

CURRENT NEWS

Yemen Government Relocates 45 Jews due to Religious Persecution

By Yoav Stern, February 27, 2007, Haaretz.com



Forty-five Jews in Yemen were transported on Sunday to the state capital of Sanaa after they were harassed by neighbors in their native town of Saada. The families traveled on a special flight arranged by the President of Yemen, Ali Abudullah Saleh.

The families were resettled in government apartments within walking distance from one other. The security situation in Sanaa is calmer than in Saada, where the Jews were under constant threat from radical elements.

In a telephone conversation with friends in Israel, some of the Yemenite Jews said that they receive a stipend from the government. They also said they have no interest in immigrating to Israel at the present time, and that they hope their situation will improve now that they have been settled in Sanaa.

There are several hundred Jews left in Yemen. Many of those living in Saada have received death threats in recent months from neighboring supporters of the deceased Shi'ite-Zeidi opposition leader, cleric Hussein Badr Eddin al-Houti. However, some of the Jews say that their persecutors were affiliated with al-Qaida, a Sunni organization.

Clashes between government forces and al-Houti's supporters have escalated over the last few days.

Iranian Jew Elected Beverly Hills Mayor

By Tom Tugend, March 13, 2007, Jerusalem Post



After a cliffhanger vote count, Jimmy Jamshid Delshad will claim two titles at his March 27 inauguration - mayor of Beverly Hills and top Iranian-born public official in the United States. The milestone is being celebrated not only by Delshad's compatriots in the golden ghetto of Beverly Hills, but also by the extended Iranian-Jewish community of 30,000 in the Los Angeles area.

On March 10, the day after the results became clear, Delshad marked his victory by attending services at three synagogues to thank congregants for their support. The first stop was Sinai Temple, where he cut his political teeth as president of the prestigious Conservative and traditionally Ashkenazi congregation from 1999 to 2001.

Although the election in the independent municipality was held March 6, the results weren't clear until three days later following a partial count of absentee and provisional ballots. Final figures are not expected to be certified until March 16.

Beverly Hills is governed by a five-person City Council that annually rotates the job of mayor among its members in order of seniority. Delshad, 66, was initially elected as a city councilman in 2003. This year he served as vice mayor. In this election, voters had to choose from among six candidates - half of them Iranian Jews - to fill two council seats. Delshad was assured of the mayor's post if he placed first or second.

When polls closed March 6 he was in second place, ahead of incumbent Mayor Steve Webb by a mere seven votes out of some 10,000 cast. With 892 absentee and provisional ballots still uncounted, the outcome remained uncertain. But by Friday evening, with two-thirds of the absentee votes counted, Delshad had widened his margin over Webb to 86 votes. At that point Webb conceded.

"I feel blessed to have been chosen by the people of Beverly Hills," Delshad told JTA in a phone interview. "As a Jewish youngster in Iran, I was a second-class citizen and kept running into closed doors. Through my example, I hope to open doors in America for other people like me."

The English-language Tehran Times, published in the Iranian capital, reported the election as a straight news story. Delshad said he had received congratulatory e-mails from some Muslims in Iran, especially from former neighbors in his native city of Shiraz.

Beverly Hills, known for its luxurious homes and celebrity residents, was an early destination for wealthy Iranian emigres after the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Some 8,000 residents of Iranian birth or descent, primarily Jewish, now live there among a population of 35,000, according to Delshad.

However, global and Middle Eastern issues played no part in the election campaign, with Delshad and other candidates running on such local preoccupations as traffic tie-ups, water conservation and bringing advanced computer technology to city government. Like previous immigrant groups, the Iranian newcomers were met with some suspicion and incomprehension after their arrival, and not all frictions have been resolved.

Veteran residents frequently complain about Iranians who buy large, handsome homes only to tear them down and replace them with huge "Persian palaces" to accommodate their extended families. Another flash point came during the election when ballot forms for the first time were printed in Farsi, in addition to English and Spanish. The city clerk's office was deluged with complaints, with one resident sneering that the new ballot "looks like a menu from a Persian restaurant with an English translation."

In both the housing and ballot controversies, Delshad played his characteristic role as mediator, trying to explain the viewpoints of the Anglo and Iranian communities to each other. Delshad has come by his American success story the old-fashioned way - by initiative, enterprise and hard work.

One of three brothers, Delshad left Iran as a 16-year-old in 1956, more than two decades before the shah's downfall. He lived in Israel for 18 months, returned to Iran, then departed his native land for good in 1959 to settle in the United States. After working for some time in a small Minnesota town "where there were hardly any Jewish girls to date," he and his brothers bought a car and drove west, with no final destination in mind.

The trip ended with Delshad's enrollment at a Los Angeles-area college, where he earned an electrical engineering degree. To put themselves through college, the brothers formed The Delshad Trio, with Jimmy playing the santur, a dulcimer-like Persian stringed instrument.

The trio played at bar mitzvahs and weddings, performing "Israeli music with a Persian touch," said Delshad, who still plays for recreation. After graduating, Delshad joined a fledgling computer firm. Then he formed his own company specializing in computer hardware for backup systems. He sold the company when he was elected president of Sinai Temple in 1999.

When his civic duties allow, Delshad does consulting work for high-tech firms and has established an import company for food packaging materials. Delshad and his wife, who was born in Kfar Vitkin while her American parents were staying in Israel, have a son and daughter, both graduates of Jewish day schools and now in college. "Being Jewish is part and parcel of my life," he said.

Ladino Class at Penn Tries to Resuscitate Dormant Language

By Rachel Silverman, February 1, 2007, Jewish Exponent

It sounds like Spanish at first, but listen harder. The six students in Daisy Braverman's class are speaking a mostly dormant language — Ladino.

Invented by Jews in Spain, the idiom — also known as Judeo-Spanish — infused Hebrew elements into Castilian Spanish. Like Yiddish, Ladino provided Jews a vocabulary for daily usage outside of Hebrew, which was reserved for the synagogue. And, also like Yiddish, Ladino was originally written in the Hebrew alphabet.

After Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, Ladino continued to evolve, soaking up linguistic influences from the countries — Greece, Turkey and other Mediterranean nations — where Sephardim settled.

At its height, Ladino could be heard throughout the Sephardic world. Today, however, the chatter is much quieter. In fact, Braverman's class — held on Wednesday afternoons at the University of Pennsylvania — offers a rare opportunity to hear Ladino in the flesh.

For Braverman, who grew up speaking Ladino in Turkey, and who also knows English, Turkish, Spanish, French, Italian and some German — the class is part of a lifelong quest to preserve the tongue. Among other things, Braverman, a New York City resident, has helped translate plays into Ladino, sung with a Judeo-Spanish music troupe and taught the language at Congregation Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue in New York.

Now a visiting professor at Penn, Braverman says her main goal is to enable students to converse in Judeo-Spanish. But she's not deluding herself; she readily admits that Ladino's prognosis is poor. "I think that the only way the language can live as, you know, a true language, is if one teaches it to one's children — and that's really not happening," said Braverman, who has not taught her own son the language. "I regretfully have to concede that if it's not being used as a maternal language, then it has no chance of surviving."

She said that its demise, in part, remains a casualty of the Holocaust, as the Nazis decimated large communities of Sephardim in Greece and Rhodes. But it's also a product of assimilation, she said. When Spanish Jews first settled in the Ottoman Empire, they tended to settle in enclaves, according to Braverman. In this way, they maintained separate institutions and preserved traditions. "And that was the way the language survived," she said.

With the dissolution of the empire and birth of individual nation states like Bulgaria and Romania, however, Jews began to assimilate; they moved into new neighborhoods, and started learning the language of their host countries, explained the professor. Now, Braverman said that Ladino lives only among a minority of elderly Sephardic Jews, and in small pockets in Israel and Turkey.

College senior Eitan Danon's family is one of those vestiges. His grandmother and father are native Ladino speakers. In fact, Danon said that he's spent three years petitioning Penn to host a Ladino scholar. "I'm very glad my hard work has paid off," said the student. "It's fun to be taking a class for credit about my ancestors."

Kirchner Promotes Chavez Meeting

By Staff Writer, February 22, 2007, JTA

Argentina's president said he wants to mend relations between Venezuela's president and its Jewish community. During a visit to Venezuela, Nestor Kirchner met Tuesday with Confederation of Israeli Venezuelan Association and World Jewish Congress leaders at the Puerto Ordaz presidential residency.

Kirchner's desire "to facilitate a future meeting with Hugo Chavez and the Venezuelan Jews was very much appreciated by the community," WJC representative Claudio Epelman told JTA. Kirchner recently told the DAIA Argentine Jewish umbrella group that he had appointed personnel to encourage Chavez to foster a more positive relationship with the 15,000-strong local Jewish community.

The community sees Chavez as promoting anti-Semitic attitudes, a view enforced by the president's close relationship with Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who openly denies the Holocaust and has called for Israel's destructions. Iranian officials are also wanted in the 1994 terrorist attack on the AMIA Jewish Center in Buenos Aires, which killed 85 people.

French Jews Flock to Area

By Alfonso Chardy, March 11, 2007, MiamiHerald.com



Rod Kukurudz decided to uproot his family from a comfortable life in France to Surfside when his then 16-year-old daughter, Audrey, came home one night in 2005 — upset and fearful. "Dad," she told him, "now even if it's hot I have to wear a scarf to hide my Star of David," while riding the Paris Metro.

French Jews living in South Florida told The Miami Herald that hostility from Islamic militants in France after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States spurred them to leave. Departures surged after last year's abduction and death of Ilan Halimi in France. The 23-year-old Halimi, a French Jew of Moroccan parents, was kidnapped Jan. 21, 2006, by a gang of youths calling themselves the ``Barbarians."

"The atmosphere created by that episode, plus other incidents and the general hostility of Muslims in France toward Jews, is what's behind my decision to leave," said Kukurudz, who now lives with his wife and their three daughters, including Audrey, in Surfside.

Vanessa Elmaleh is among a growing number of South Florida immigration attorneys helping French Jews secure U.S. visas — but not necessarily asylum. "Asking for asylum can be risky," said Elmaleh, a French Jew herself. "If they deny your petition, they can deport you."

Immigration court figures show a slight uptick in the number of asylum applications from French nationals starting in 2003 — but those figures do not specify whether applicants were French Jews. South Florida immigration attorneys say the majority of French Jews are arriving on immigrant, investor and business visas.

Kukurudz, for example, obtained an investor visa with Elmaleh's help and now runs Citizen Events, organizing events for companies and organizations. Pascal Cohen left his family behind in France and arrived in Aventura a few weeks ago on a business visa to open a South Florida subsidiary of a high-end chocolate brand called Cote de France. His wife and two young daughters plan to leave France and join him later this year.

There are no official U.S. government figures on the number of French Jews here, but officials in U.S. Jewish organizations said it could be anywhere from 2,000 to 4,000 in South Florida — mostly Miami-Dade. "I would say they're in the thousands now," said Mendy Levy, a rabbi at The Shul synagogue in Surfside.

"There is no question of an increase in the number of French Jews in South Florida, and there's an expectation that that rate of increase will accelerate," said Jacob Solomon, executive vice president of the Greater Miami Jewish Federation. "French Jews see the handwriting on the wall and say, 'We're not going to wait until it's too late.'" "None of the French Jews interviewed was attacked in France, but all expressed fears the Halimi incident was a preview of more militant violence to come.

The latest State Department human rights report, issued last week, cited more anti-Semitic incidents in France during the first nine months of 2006 than during the same period in 2005 — but fewer than in the first nine months of 2004. French officials have condemned attacks on members of the Jewish community. "France is not an anti-Semitic country," Philippe Vinogradoff, France's consul general in Miami, told The Miami Herald on Thursday. "France is doing a lot of efforts in its jurisdiction, in its education system, to eradicate definitively any trace of anti-Semitism."

France's Jewish population has been variously estimated at between 500,000 and 700,000 and its Muslim population at five million to six million. But French Jews here say the community has been depleted by frequent departures, the majority to Israel. Jewish Agency figures show that almost 14,000 French Jews have resettled in Israel since 2001.

Vinogradoff said 12,000 French nationals are registered with his consulate, which covers Florida, the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and some Caribbean countries. Vinogradoff said it's impossible to tell how many are French Jews because the consulate is prohibited by French law from asking about religion or national origin. He noted that while the French expatriate community here has been growing steadily, there has been no sharp hike in numbers in the past five years. But Elmaleh, who specializes in French Jewish immigration, said figures are much higher than those officially acknowledged — with perhaps more than 50,000 French Jews moving or actively planning to move to Israel and more than 10,000 in South Florida.

Portions of some neighborhoods in north Miami-Dade have turned into pockets of French Jewish culture — particularly in Surfside, Bal Harbour and Aventura where synagogues have seen significant additions of French Jews to congregations and new businesses cater to an expanding French-speaking clientele. "I have seen an increase in my practice relating to wealthy French nationals who are also Jewish, exploring options to use the United States as a safe haven, anticipating problems relating to their Jewish heritage," Linda Osberg-Braun said. Other immigration attorneys like Roger Bernstein and David Berger also said they see more French Jewish clients.

In their hearts, many of the French Jews arriving in South Florida feel they are refugees, and there's a movement to press the U.S. government for such status. A group has posted a petition on the Internet — www.petitiononline.com/ID22206/petition.html — urging the U.S. Congress to approve a refugee program for French Jews.

Both Cohen and Kukurudz miss life in France, but they have no regrets about leaving. They did it for their children. "So they can have a future," Cohen said.

IDENTITY

Gali Girls Line of Dolls Celebrates Jewish History, Values

By Sally Kalson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Taking its cue from the wildly successful American Girl dolls and novels, a small company in New Jersey has been carving out its own niche — character dolls representing Jewish girls from different countries and centuries.

Gali Girls began in 2004 as one woman's quest to supplant the provocative messages of Barbies and Bratz with contemporary dolls that elevate traditional Jewish values such as modesty, kindness, charity and respect. "I'd noticed the growing popularity of dolls that equated femininity with girls taking their clothes off," said Gali Girls founder Aliza Stein of Teaneck, N.J. "I thought, 'How much better if we had a doll that represented something positive.' I have a Jewish background, so I relied on that to develop the idea."

One year after launching the product, she decided to add a line of historical dolls. "Jewish history is very rich," she said. "There's so much that can create a connection between contemporary girls and their heritage, so many stories and eras from which to choose. So this was the next logical step.

"Certainly we noted that it was a successful concept for American Girl, and we figured the formula could succeed for us." There are three historical dolls so far. Each comes with period clothing and a novella about the character's life and adventures. The books are well written by Robin K. Levinson, an author and journalist who did all the research and used the stories to reveal little-known chapters of the Jewish Diaspora. The books are nicely illustrated by Drusilla Kehl.

The characters are Reyna Li, who lives in the Chinese Israelite community of Kaifeng in 1175; Shoshana Levy, whose family is forced to leave Brazil and winds up in 1662 Nieuw Amsterdam, where she becomes part of the first Jewish community in North America and makes friends with a Lenape Indian girl; and Miriam Bloom, who flees the Russian pogroms in 1914 and lands at Ellis Island.

Now, in addition to the historical and modern dolls offered with brown, blond or red hair, Gali Girls has added a dark-skinned model to represent girls of Sephardic descent. These are the Jews whose Spanish and Portuguese ancestors were expelled from Spain in the late 1400s. They subsequently settled throughout the Turkish empire, Balkans, North Africa, Italy, Middle East and beyond.

Each doll comes with matching Star of David bracelets for girl and doll and a wooden toy Sabbath kit with candlesticks, bread and wine. The price tag for the historical package is \$90; contemporary dolls are \$65. Ms. Stein said the company has sold about 2,000 dolls, mostly through its Web site, www.galigirls.com. The dolls also are used as fund-raisers for Jewish organizations.

Other characters are in the works. Ms. Stein said she hopes to add girls from Spain during the Inquisition, Israel during the War of Independence, and Ethiopia during the Israeli airlift. The dolls are similar to the American Girl line — 18 inches high with a soft body — and each one comes with an English and a Hebrew name. The customer base, Ms. Stein said, includes a mix of orthodox, conservative and reform families. "The dolls are Jewish but nondenominational," she said.

"They represent girls across the Jewish spectrum."

As for the company's name, Ms. Stein said she wanted something in Hebrew. "Gali means wavy, which is not related per se, but we thought it was catchy."

Journey From a Chinese Orphanage to a Jewish Rite of Passage

By Andy Newman, March 8, 2007, NYTimes.com



Of the 613 laws in the Torah, the one that appears most often is the directive to welcome strangers. The girl once known as Fu Qian has been thinking about that a lot lately. Three weeks ago, she stood at the altar of her synagogue on the Upper West Side and gave a speech about it.

Fu Qian, renamed Cecelia Nealon-Shapiro at 3 months, was one of the first Chinese children — most of them girls — taken in by American families after China opened its doors to international adoption in the early 1990s. Now, at 13, she is one of the first to complete the rite of passage into Jewish womanhood known as bat mitzvah.

She will not be the last. Across the country, many Jewish girls like her will be studying their Torah portions, struggling to master the plaintive singsong of Hebrew liturgy and trying to decide whether to wear Ann Taylor or a traditional Chinese outfit to the after-party.

There are plenty of American Jews, of course, who do not "look Jewish." And grappling with identity is something all adopted children do, not just Chinese Jews. But seldom is the juxtaposition of homeland and new home, of faith and background, so stark. And nothing brings out the contrasts like a bat mitzvah, as formal a declaration of identity as any 13-year-old can be called upon to make. The contradictions show up in ways both playful — yin-and-yang yarmulkes, kiddush cups disguised as papier-mâché dragons, kosher lo mein and veal ribs at the buffet — and profound.

Yet for Cece, as everyone calls Cecelia, and for many of the girls like her, the odd thing about the whole experience is that it's not much odder than it is for any 13-year-old. "I knew that when I came to this age I was going to have to do it, so it was sort of natural," she said a few days before the ceremony at Congregation Rodeph Sholom, a Reform synagogue on West 83rd Street where she has been a familiar face since her days in the Little Twos program. Besides, she said with a shrug, "Most of my Chinese friends are Jewish."

As Zoe Kress, an adoptee in Mt. Laurel, N.J., said about her approaching bat mitzvah: "Being Chinese and Jewish is normal for me. Thinking about being Chinese and Jewish is a little strange."

Olivia Rauss, a girl in Massachusetts who celebrated her bat mitzvah last fall on a day when the Jewish harvest festival of Sukkot coincided with the Chinese autumn moon festival, said she saw no tension between the two facets of her identity either. "Judaism is a religion, Chinese is my heritage and somewhat my culture, and I'm looking at them in a different way," she said. "I don't feel like they conflict with each other at all."

While no statistics are kept on the number of Chinese children adopted by Jewish families, over all, there were about 1,300 Chinese children adopted into American families from 1991 to 1994, another 17,000 in the second half of the '90s, and 44,000 since then, according to the State Department.

Cece was born on Jan. 29, 1994, in Jiangxi Province in southeastern China. She was abandoned to an orphanage because of China's one-child rule, and adopted by a lesbian couple, Mary Nealon and Vivian Shapiro. (The couple later adopted another Chinese girl, Gabie, now 5.) Cece has been drawing double-takes for a while, like when she used to ride on Ms. Shapiro's lap on a packed crosstown bus and would burst into the Passover standard "Dayenu."

Ms. Shapiro, an advertising buyer, was brought up by atheistic Jews; Ms. Nealon, a school nurse, was raised a Roman Catholic. But after they met, they were drawn to Judaism and decided to give Cece a relatively traditional upbringing. "That was my hope when I started her in day school," Ms. Nealon said, "that when she got up on the bimah" — the lectern where the bat mitzvah girl reads from the Torah — "she would feel like she had the right to be there."

The countdown to the big day was the typical blur of lessons and studying, sit-downs with cantors and tutors, caterers and party planners. There was a thick dossier of Jewish history to master — history that Cece confessed did not feel like

hers. "I just really try to learn it," she said. "I don't try to think of whose history it is."

And, of course, there was shopping to be done. "In my fantasy," Ms. Nealon said, "we'd take her to Chinatown and have this incredibly beautiful Westernized Chinese dress made." But Ms. Shapiro said: "She wanted no part of it. For her, this has nothing to do with being Chinese."

Cece set her cantor's reading of her Torah portion to "repeat" on her iPod. She met with the head rabbi at Rodeph Sholom, Robert N. Levine, an affable, animated man with an office full of books and baseball memorabilia. "So, Cece," Rabbi Levine said, "what do you connect to most about your Judaism?" Cece had transformed into the archetypal opaque teenager. "I think I like the holidays, and, um, yeah," she said, looking down.

The rabbi asked her to recite for him. She did. "I love it," Rabbi Levine said. "You have a beautiful voice. Your Hebrew is perfect. The only thing I need you to do, Cece, is project. Just give me a 'Baruch' like you're singing in the shower."

"Baruch," Cece said, a bit louder.

On Feb. 17, nearly 200 of Cece's friends and relatives filed into the vast Romanesque sanctuary of Rodeph Sholom. A box of commemorative yarmulkes with the yin-and-yang pattern sat by the door. Six alumnae of Cece's orphanage — they call themselves the Fu sisters — had flown in from all over the country.

To the side of the altar, on a red throne, sat Cece, resplendent in a long black patterned dress with a scoop neck. Ms. Shapiro laid a prayer shawl over Cece's shoulders, a symbolic transfer of power. Cece and the other bat mitzvah girl that day, Sadie Friedman, lifted their voices and let loose a Hebrew welcome song that Cece had sung with the synagogue choir from the time she was 7.

Rabbi Levine preached from the day's reading: " 'Let the stranger in your midst be to you as the native, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.' " Cece and Sadie approached the ark, the enclosure, flanked with marble columns and topped by carved lions, where the Torah scrolls are kept. The cantor, Rebecca Garfein, handed them the oversize scrolls, dressed in maroon and gold fabric. The girls held them like bagpipes.

Cece laid her scroll on the bimah and read in Hebrew, in a loud, clear voice, from Chapter 21 of Exodus, a compendium of commandments on the treatment of servants and slaves. Then she moved to her English speech. "This long journey to becoming a bat mitzvah today has provided me with so many ways of learning," she said. "The part that will always stay closest to me is the importance of caring for strangers. Just like Jews were once strangers in the land of Egypt, we have all been, or will be strangers at some point in our lives." Cece finished, touched the fringe of her shawl to the Torah and kissed it. She returned to her throne and sat down, cheeks red, looking exhausted and relieved.

That night — the eve of the Chinese year of the pig, as fate would have it — Cece and her guests reconvened at the Faculty House at Columbia University. The outer room was set up like a casino, with Cece-backed playing cards and Cece-faced play money. Inside, the music throbbed, the D.J. yelled, the fog machine billowed. Cece and her friends traded their shoes for white socks and pogoed across the floor.

After dinner — kosher Chinese for the kids, steak for the adults — the D.J. cranked up "Hava Nagila." Cece, in a chair in the middle of the dance floor, was lifted up, up, up until she bumped her head on the Chinese umbrellas hanging off the chandelier. Then she was back on the floor, dancing with her mothers and little sister and singing along with the recording: "Hava neranena, venis'mecha," or: Let us sing and be glad.

For Kids of Intermarriage, Choices Are Complex

By Sue Fishkoff, March 8, 2007, JTA



Robin Margolis was in her 30s when she found out her late mother was Jewish. It was 1984 and she was cleaning out her mother's closet when she found a bag of old documents. The woman she knew as Marie Margolis was born Marie Levine.

The revelation, though sudden, was somehow comforting. "I'd been drifting toward Judaism for years," Margolis says. "I had Jewish friends, dated Jewish men, even thought about conversion. When I found out I already belonged, it felt natural."

Today Margolis belongs to a Jewish Renewal congregation in the Washington area and advises synagogues on how to reach out to the adult children of intermarried parents. But she also runs The Half-Jewish Network, [www.half-jewish.net] an online support group for anyone with a Jewish parent, whether they identify as Jewish, Christian or something else. "I don't push anything," she says. "All I can do is offer them warmth and welcome."

Margolis' story, though extreme, illustrates the emotional complexity of growing up with parents from different religious backgrounds. Even those raised unequivocally as Jews have an entire side of their family that is not Jewish.

And while in past generations they may have been cut off from that other half, in today's more tolerant world it's likely they share holiday traditions, family lore and ethnic cuisine with their non-Jewish relatives.

Margolis, 56, is from a generation in which interfaith marriage was rare and the Jewish side often got lost. She says today's young adults from intermarried homes, who have grown up in an era of outreach and welcome, don't understand what she and her peers went through. "These Gen-Xers were raised as Jews in the '80s," she says. "They look down at us older ones who weren't raised Jewish, who identify as 'half.' But as they get older they'll learn there's another side of themselves that needs to be cherished and respected. And it won't make them any less Jewish."

Joelle Berman, a 23-year-old Bostonian with a Sicilian Catholic mother and Jewish father, says she grew up with Jewish religion and Italian culture. Berman says she has "a strong sense" of her Italian background, but considers herself Jewish and even works as a Jewish professional.

Even conversion doesn't erase family ties. "Of course I'm Jewish, I made a legal conversion, but that doesn't undo that other part of my life," says Laurel Snyder, 33, of Atlanta, editor of "Half Life," a collection of essays by writers from intermarried homes. "There's a big difference between walking away from Jesus and walking away from your grandmother."

Snyder says the "half-Jewish" moniker used by Margolis and some other activists "is a tricky word," but it expresses the duality many people feel. "Of course halachically there's no such thing," Snyder says, "but that doesn't matter."

Jewish outreach to intermarried families, no matter the denomination, is predicated on the hope that the children will be raised as Jews. Experts stress the importance of giving such children a good Jewish education, as research shows that this makes them much likelier to become committed Jewish adults. But it's no guarantee. Children ultimately choose their own path, despite their parents' carefully laid plans. Siblings from one family, raised the same way by intermarried parents, sometimes make different religious choices.

Margolis' three younger brothers are all "sincere, committed Christians" following the Protestant faith in which they were raised. One is even a minister. None chose her Jewish path. Margolis suggests a "family Jew" resides in every intermarried family, one child who is innately drawn to the Jewish side.

Researcher Pearl Beck, who conducted a 2005 study for the Jewish Outreach Institute [www.joi.org/flare] of young adults from intermarried homes, says she came across anecdotal evidence of siblings making different religious choices but doesn't know how widespread it is. Siblings that Beck interviewed for her study attributed their different choices to "different personality characteristics," she adds.

Jill and Tom Docking of Wichita, Kan., raised their children, Brian and Margery, as Jews, sending them to Hebrew school and Jewish summer camp. "I had a much more dominant relationship with my religion," says Jill, noting she was the only one of her 24 Jewish cousins to "marry out."

Tom, the son of the former Gov. Robert Docking, was less tied to his Christianity, though the family always puts up a Christmas tree. When Brian became a bar mitzvah, the Dockings pulled 8-year-old Margery out of Hebrew school after what Jill calls an unfortunate encounter with a visiting rabbi who spoke sharply about the dangers of intermarriage. "Tom said, 'If this is what they're getting at temple, I don't want them there,'" Jill recalls.

Brian had never cared for religious school, but when Margery was 13, she asked to go back. Tom agreed willingly, and Margery had to work on her Hebrew with a private tutor. A year and a half later, she celebrated her bat mitzvah at Masada in Israel.

Today Margery identifies as Jewish. Brian, 27, is more equivocal. "If people ask, I say I was raised Jewish and I leave it at

that," he says. But Brian says he has a "Jewish sense of humor" and is culturally Jewish. "I love matzah ball soup," he says.

For many children of intermarried parents, choosing a religion can smack of favoring one parent over the other, with attendant feelings of guilt, anger and abandonment. That's particularly true, and hurtful, when parents divorce. "Religion becomes a battleground at a time when everything else is a battleground, and the kid has to pay," says Snyder, who says she has met hundreds of adult children of intermarriage in her professional career. "The Jewish parent going through a breakup becomes much more emphatic that their child should be raised Jewish," she says. If the kids are lucky, circumstances help make that choice for them.

Marty Wasserman converted to Judaism after her divorce two decades ago in Santa Fe, N.M., and began raising her two children, Max and Meredith Murray, as Jews. Max, now 26, dropped out of Hebrew school after a year, saying he didn't bond with the other kids. He ended up spending most of his teenage years with his Catholic father. He attended a Catholic high school, chose Catholic University and today considers himself Catholic. Meredith, now 24, stayed with her mother and flourished in Hebrew school, where she made her closest friends. She celebrated her bat mitzvah in Israel.

Like her brother, Meredith went to Catholic high school, but unlike Max she always felt Jewish. She stood back when the other students took Communion or intoned Christian prayers, even when it embarrassed her to be singled out.

Meredith, like her mother, identifies today as Jewish. "Honestly, it's a Mom-Dad thing," Max says. "I had more allegiance to Dad's side of the family. And I think it was also a young adolescent boy not wanting to do what his mother wanted."

But there was also something inside each sibling that resonated to a different spiritual message. "I'd go to synagogue with Mom and try to be respectful, but I didn't feel this is who I am," Max explains. "In Catholic Mass, I felt I can associate with this better."

Some intermarried couples are unable to choose between their religions, particularly when both spouses observe their own traditions. In many homes the mother's religion wins, as more often the woman sets a family's religious tone. Some couples choose a third option, raising the children Unitarian or Quaker. Some split the difference.

Samantha Facciolo, 23, was raised Jewish by her Jewish mother, while her younger brother was raised Catholic by their father. The parents made that decision as each child was born. All four lived together, celebrating each other's holidays at family get-togethers, but splitting up for religious practice. "It was pretty clear-cut," Facciolo says. "I went to synagogue with Mom, he went to church with Dad. He was baptized and had First Communion. I had a baby naming and bat mitzvah." The siblings retained the identities their parents gave them: Facciolo was active in her college Hillel and is now a Legacy Heritage Fellow with the Israel on Campus Coalition in Washington. "I don't question the choices they made," she says.

COMMUNITES AROUND THE WORLD

Mazel Tov: Mass Jewish Wedding in Havana

By Anthony Boadle, January 22, 2007, Reuters



Salomon Mitrani sat through his wedding ceremony. After all, at 84 years old he finds it hard to stand. By Cuban law, he has been married to his wife, Pilar, for 55 years, and they have eight grandchildren. But, in a ceremony last week, he was finally getting married under a Chuppah canopy according to Jewish custom.

It was no ordinary ceremony. Twenty other couples of all ages took their marriage vows in a ritual officiated by three visiting Argentine rabbis. The grooms smashed their wine glasses underfoot as a cantor sang age-old blessings in Hebrew.

It was the largest wedding members of Cuba's depleted Jewish community can remember and a sign of a revival of Judaism in a country where there has been no resident rabbi since an exodus of Jews fleeing President Fidel Castro's communist government in the early 1960s. "I've always felt Jewish. I went to fight for Israel's independence in 1948," said Mitrani, a painter and sculptor whose parents, Sephardic Jews, immigrated to Cuba in 1913 from Turkey.

The mass nuptials at the restored conservative Beth Shalom synagogue, the largest of three in Havana, were preceded by

70 conversions, including whole families, dozens of young Cubans, and Mitrani's wife Pilar, 75. "I wanted to have a Jewish family like my forefathers. The family is vital to maintain our customs and perpetuate the values of the Torah," said Alberto Behar, a computer analyst like his wife Caridad Morales, who converted for the wedding.

Cuba has a mix of Sephardic Jews, who came mainly from Turkey and the Balkans before World War One, and Ashkenazic Jews who escaped turmoil in Eastern Europe, mostly Poland and Russia. As many as 25,000 refugees from Nazi persecution arrived from Austria, Germany, France and Belgium in the 1930s en route to the United States. Refused entry due to US immigration quotas, they landed in what became known as "Hotel Cuba."

EXODUS

When Castro took power in 1959, there was a flourishing and prosperous Jewish community of 15,000 in Cuba. Within a few years, as the new government nationalized businesses and steered Cuba toward communism, 90 percent of them left for southern Florida, Mexico, Venezuela and Israel.

Cuba became an atheist state and the synagogues emptied. Congregations fell below the quorum for prayer ceremonies as Jews that stayed assimilated into the new status quo, stopped teaching their children Hebrew and lost their customs. Years of isolation followed. Castro broke off diplomatic ties with Israel in 1974 following the Yom Kippur war. "They were difficult years, but Jews are used to being persistent in the face of adversity," said Simon Goldsztein, a 69-year-old groom wearing a Tallit prayer shawl. "That has been our history."

Things changed after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991 and Cuba struggled to survive a severe economic crisis. Cuba became a secular state and allowed religious worship even by card-carrying Communist Party members. Impoverished Cuban Jews began to receive aid from abroad, especially the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, which has helped rebuild a community of 1,500 people.

Community leaders say their numbers have doubled, but many young Cuban Jews have immigrated to Israel. "People have left for different reasons, but there has been a constant renewal. This is a crucial moment in our revival," said Annette Eli, a young architect.

Kenneth Cohen, a rabbi who visited Cuba in January with a group of students from American University in Washington, was impressed by the commitment of young Cuban Jews. During his visit, he noted that a group of men in their 20s had recently been circumcised. "That is a big commitment," he said. Cohen went to isolated communities in provincial towns that needed more help from abroad. In Sancti Spiritus, a town with a distinctly Catholic name, he was told he was the second rabbi to visit in 50 years. "Seeing these communities of only 18 people struggling to hold on, with a matron teaching little kids how to read Hebrew, almost moved me to tears," he said.

One problem with being Jewish in Cuba is coping with the local cuisine, which is based almost entirely on pork. But the community now has its own kosher butcher shop, to the relief of many. "We try to avoid pork. When we can't, we just eat less, so it doesn't become our diet," said Behar.

Thirst for Judaism Binds Group Together Across Border

By Roberto Loiederman, March 16, 2007, JewishJournal.com



We were near the desert, somewhere past the Salton Sea, when Daniel (Dany) Mehlman, a 48-year-old Conservative rabbi, summed up the situation. "OK," he said, "we're going to rendezvous with a man I've never met, go with him to a Mexican city I've never been to, then spend the weekend with people I don't know." "Sounds perfect," I said.

In El Centro, a California town about 100 miles east of San Diego, we met Jose Orozco — smiling, middle-aged, wearing a kippah. We followed him across the international border to Mexicali. At a modest house in a residential area, Alfredo and Lupe Medrano came out, greeted us warmly and introduced us to their children and grandchildren, as well as to relatives and friends who come to the home every Friday night to celebrate Shabbat.

By sundown, the living room overflowed with several generations, from babies in arms to those older than 80, and everything in between. There were at least a dozen in their teens and 20s. Kippot were distributed to the men, candles were lit, small plastic cups filled with wine, prayers recited. The brachot were led by Orozco and Lupe Medrano, as well as

by Lupe's daughter, Naara, and her friend, Nancy Fajardo. During the Hamotzi, everyone either touched the braided, homemade challah or someone nearby, so that all were connected.

Mehlman had gone to the Mexicali home because this community wants Spanish-speaking rabbis to visit them and give them guidance. Through a series of connections, Orozco learned about Mehlman, who's Argentine-born and has sponsored many conversions, and invited him for the weekend.

Mehlman teaches at New Community Jewish High School in West Hills and at the University of Judaism in Bel Air, in addition to being the spiritual leader at K'hilat Ha'Aloneem in Ojai and part-time rabbi at Beth Shalom of Whittier.

When Mehlman told me he was going to visit a group of Mexicans practicing Judaism on their own — no rabbi, no shul — it sounded fascinating; I asked if I could come along. I wondered what had led these people — born into Catholic families — to follow Judaism. More than that, I wanted to see Judaism through their eyes. What do they feel when they say the prayers? What is the source of their faith?

This was not the first time I'd asked these questions. During the High Holidays, I had attended services at Beth Shalom, where a vibrant group of Latino converts has revitalized that shul. I'd seen their dedication and commitment. But the Whittier group lives in Los Angeles, where it's not hard to practice Judaism. The people in Mexicali, on the other hand, risked alienating themselves from their families and their society. Why?

This question was on my mind as I watched the three women — one middle-aged, two in their 20s — cover their heads, close their eyes, wave their hands and say the brachot. Afterward, Mehlman led the kabbalat Shabbat service. Some could read Hebrew, others knew the prayers by heart. All sang niggunim.

The feeling was warm and affable, even joyous — a large extended family welcoming Shabbat. When the service was over, Mehlman asked that each person say a few words about the path that led him or her to Judaism and to this home. Dr. Mario Espinoza, a Mexicali obstetrician-gynecologist, spoke about his certainty that he's descended from Jews forcibly converted to Christianity centuries ago. He used the Hebrew word *anusim* (constrained people or forcibly converted) rather than *Marranos*, which means "swine."

For Mexicans who trace their lineage to *anusim*, the Inquisition is not ancient history. It continued in Latin America, including Mexico, from the 1500s until the 1800s. During that period, those whose ancestors had been forced to convert from Judaism to Christianity were harassed, tortured and sometimes killed if they were discovered to have continued Jewish practices, which is why those practices continued in secret, if at all.

Espinoza commented that he has learned to read and speak Hebrew, and he brought with him several siddurim in Hebrew and Spanish. He and his wife, Lucia, who made the challah, are raising their four children as Jews. Orozco said he grew up in Mexico and lives in El Centro, where he works for a social welfare agency. Recently converted to Judaism, he goes across the border regularly to spend Shabbat with the Medrano family and friends.

He said he's been drawn to Judaism since childhood. "When I was little," Orozco said, "I'd listen to Jewish music, to Israeli music, and be deeply affected by it. I felt that this was the music of my heart, of my soul. I remember, as a child looking at photos of the Western Wall and crying."

Several offered anecdotes that indicated that they, like Mario Espinoza, had ancestors who had carried on Jewish customs. Lucia Espinoza mentioned a grandmother who lit candles on Friday night. Lupe Medrano said that when she looked through her late grandfather's effects, she found a tallit hidden in a box.

This visceral certainty about their Jewish roots may or may not be backed by hard evidence, but it's what they feel, in blood and bone, fueled by family traditions — a feeling made all the stronger by the empathetic bond they have with those who, over the centuries, were unjustly coerced into professing a faith that was not theirs.

More than one person said that being at the Medrano house on Friday nights is like "coming home." By being together on Shabbat, by performing Jewish rituals and saying the prayers, they're confirming their deepest-held sense of who they are. They've looked into themselves — and at their family history — and have returned to their true nature, which had been overlaid with alien rituals and faiths for hundreds of years.

A few at the gathering were born Jewish. Michael Schorr, in his 70s, said that he was a child when his family left Poland before World War II. He was brought up in Argentina, has lived in Israel and now teaches engineering at a university in Mexicali.

"I'm not Orthodox, Conservative or Reform," Schorr said. "I'm Jewish." Schorr paused, obviously moved: "I can't tell you how wonderful it is for me to be here, to celebrate Shabbat here. This group has welcomed me into their lives, and I feel that I've been adopted by them, that I have a new family now, a new set of children and grandchildren." Schorr fought back tears and several people touched him warmly.

After everyone had spoken, all 35 of us put our arms around each other and sang "Hineh Ma Tov Uma Na'im." How good and pleasant it is to dwell with kinsmen in harmony.

In a room brimming with conversation and laughter, with toddlers running between legs and babies being passed from one set of arms to another, Schorr pondered why Judaism, Christianity and Islam all came out of the desert. "The desert is a place of vistas that appear seamless and infinite," he said. "No beginning and no end. That's why it has given rise to thoughts of oneness: of a single, holy, omnipotent spirit."

On Saturday morning at the Medrano house, it was a quieter gathering, about a dozen people, including several who had not been there the night before. After the service, Mehlman asked if there were questions. Several wanted to know about the brit milah (circumcision ceremony). A month earlier, a Spanish-speaking Reform rabbi, Jacques Cukierkorn — whose congregation is in Kansas — had been in Mexicali and had told this group that as far as he's concerned, the brit milah is not a requirement for conversion.

Mehlman — perhaps feeling that this was a touchy subject for a group embarking on what will be a long process — opted for an amusing story. "On Argentine TV," he said, "there used to be a comedy show called, 'Don Jacobo,' about a Jewish family in Buenos Aires. Well, Jacobo's daughter is engaged to a man who isn't Jewish and isn't circumcised.

And every week, there's a running gag. Whenever Don Jacobo gets together with his future son-in-law, he always winks and asks him, 'Come on, are you sure you don't want to make that ... small sacrifice?'"

The Mexicali group laughed. At the same time, Mehlman was careful not to mislead or misinform. "Look," he said, "maybe there's been some confusion about this in the past, and it's true that some Reform rabbis have said that the brit milah is optional. But nowadays, at least where I live, all groups agree that conversion for men should involve ... that small sacrifice. However, now is not the time to deal with this issue. We can talk about it in the future."

Mario Espinoza asked about what happens at the beit din (rabbinical court). "Both men and women go before a group of three rabbis. One of them is your sponsoring rabbi," Mehlman said. "You answer some questions about Judaism, but it doesn't take place until you're ready. It's a friendly situation, you'll see. They'll behave reasonably and with heart."

Espinoza wondered about the mikvah. "Yes, men and women both go through the ritual bath," Mehlman said. "You go in and out of the water quickly, three times, then say the Shema. It's a meaningful step."

Espinoza said it was his understanding that conversions done by Conservative or Reform rabbis were not accepted in Israel. Mehlman explained that this had changed. The Israeli Supreme Court ruled that if someone has gone through any kind of Jewish conversion anywhere in the world, that person can enter Israel as a Jew. "There are some issues, like marriage, still controlled by the Orthodox rabbinate, but I don't want to get into bureaucratic controversies now," he said.

They talked about taking a trip to Israel as a group. Mehlman proposed the fall of 2008 and said he would go with them and make it a Jewish pilgrimage, a spiritual quest in the Holy Land. A couple of the younger people also mentioned aliyah. Since these people live a pleasant life, it was clear that for them, aliyah would not be undertaken as an escape from economic or political oppression — as has happened with others who have immigrated to Israel — but rather as a positive return to their heritage, taken away generations ago.

Espinoza again signaled that there was another issue on his mind. Every time he spoke, he prefaced what he had to say with a polite apology: "I mean no disrespect ..." or "Pardon me for asking ...," followed by yet another question. "Pardon the question," Espinoza said, "but if someone were to be converted in Mexico, would he be accepted as a Jew in the U.S.?"

"Of course," Mehlman said. "Certainly." From Espinoza's questions — and the apologies that prefaced them — it was clear that he felt intimidated, frustrated, even slightly angry, about a conversion process that seemed like an obstacle course or the initiation rites of an exclusive fraternity.

But there was something else. Clearly, some in this group were concerned about what would happen after conversion. Even if they satisfied all these seemingly rigorous demands, would they then be recognized as Jews by other Jews? Most

of all, would they be accepted as Jews by other Mexican Jews?

The short answer is: not likely. The group that has coalesced around the Medrano home is not the only one like it in Mexico. Far from it. The Web site of Beth Hatefutsoth, the Israel Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv, lists a number of communities of "native Mexican Jews" — located in various parts of Mexico — who trace their origins to anousim.

How many descendants of anousim are there? "It's hard to figure out exactly," said Rabbi Stephen Leon of Congregation B'nai Zion in El Paso, just across the border from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. "I'd only be guessing, but I'd say the number is very large. I have personally ministered to 40 such families. In the 20 years I've been here, not a week goes by that I don't meet someone who tells me about childhood memories of crypto-Jewish practices."

The Diaspora Museum Web site points out that even after converting to Judaism, "native Mexican Jews" have not been accepted by "traditional Mexican Jews," nearly all of whom are Orthodox and descended from those who immigrated to Mexico from Europe and the Middle East in the early 1900s.

Mehlman tried to put that rejection into perspective. "That's the way it is," he said. "Jews from Germany reject those from Russia. Jews from Syria reject those from Turkey. Those from Aleppo reject those from Damascus. And those from one part of Aleppo reject those from another part of Aleppo. But you can't let that discourage you."

Espinoza, though, could not quite let go of his concerns. "I've studied Hebrew and I've immersed myself in Judaism," Espinoza said. "I have books, and I've read them over and over ... but I feel that I haven't gotten very far in my knowledge."

Mehlman nodded, smiled ruefully — a Jewish gesture, as if carrying the weight of history. "None of us have gotten very far," he said. "None of us. Halacha is a process, a road. True, conversion isn't that simple. But maybe when it's over, one appreciates it more. And it will happen. In the end, those of you who want to be Jews will become Jews. Like Herzl said, 'If you wish it, it will not be a legend.'"

Mehlman told the group that in the last few years he's been the sponsoring rabbi in nearly 60 conversions. "And all of those people," he said, "all of them, when the final step came, they all cried. For me, conversion is the essence of my connection to Judaism. Being in contact with those going through conversion, seeing their growing attachment to Judaism, makes me feel and understand all over again why I became a rabbi."

"This weekend together is our first step: getting to know each other," he said. "We don't have an exact roadmap for the future, but we know where we'll get to, eventually. When I came here, I didn't know what to expect," he continued. "But what did I find? A group of wonderful, warm human beings, several generations, all wanting to practice Judaism. I can't tell you how moving it's been for me to be here. To be received so warmly, with so much love."

There was a deep silence for a few seconds, then Espinoza said that he didn't mean to be disrespectful, but he had one more question. "Just one more," he said.

"I certainly hope not," Mehlman said. Everyone laughed. "What I mean is, don't ever stop asking questions. More and more questions. That's the nature of being Jewish."

So had I seen Judaism through the eyes of the Mexicali group? What struck me is how different Friday night was from Saturday. On Saturday, there was a smaller, more serious group, and they expressed their concerns, as well as their hopes for the future.

On Friday night, however, nearly all of them were there. When they lit candles and welcomed Shabbat, it was a celebration of the present: a group of people bonded together and to their faith. I envied what they have; not what they aspire to, but what they have now. I thought of what Michael Schorr had said about Middle Eastern deserts: how their seamless vistas, no beginning and no end, gave rise to thoughts of oneness. That may be, but Mexicali too is at the edge of a desert.

And where is the Holy Spirit, the sense of oneness, if not at a gathering of friends and relatives singing and praying and celebrating together?

The Mexicali community's Web site is <http://groups.msn.com/CentroCulturalHebreodeMexicali>; they can also be contacted at cchebreodemexicali@hotmail.com, which stands for Jewish Cultural Center of Mexicali.

Black Jews of Suriname focus of UA Town/Gown Lecture

By Luise Betterton, January 26, 2007, JewishTuscon.org



Historian Natalie Zemon Davis will explore the contributions of free black Jews to the former South American Dutch colony of Suriname next month in the annual Town/Gown Lecture, sponsored by the division of late and medieval Reformation studies at the University of Arizona. The lecture, "Philosophes, Jews, and Africans in Colonial Suriname," will focus on the history of David Cohen Nassy, a descendant of a 17th-century Portuguese-Jewish plantation family. It will be held Wednesday, Feb. 7, at 7 p.m. in the UA Aerospace and Mechanical Engineering Auditorium, located on Speedway and Mountain Avenue.

Nassy was a physician, naturalist, translator, scribe, man of letters, patriot and failed coffee-plantation owner in the last half of the 18th century. Davis' talk will examine Nassy's social and cultural connections with European and Dutch elites, and especially with the local communities of African maroons and slaves, and African and Indian healers.

Davis' research focuses on previously neglected sectors of society and employs nontraditional source materials (including bank documents and travel records) to shape our understanding of the past.

She is perhaps best known as the author of "The Return of Martin Guerre" (1983) and the French film of the same name, for which she served as historical consultant. Her publications include "Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision" (2000), and "Trickster Travels: A Muslim Between Worlds in Early Modern Times" (2006).

Davis has been elected a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a corresponding fellow of both The British Academy and the Royal Historical Society and membre d'honneur associée of the Académie des Sciences, Belles-Lettres et Arts de Lyon. She earned a doctorate from the University of Michigan in 1959 and has honorary degrees from 38 European, Canadian and American academic institutions. Her academic achievements have garnered l'Ordre des Palmes Académiques, the Arnold Toynbee Prize and the Aby Warburg Prize.

Co-sponsors of the lecture include the Association of Women Faculty, the Jewish Community Foundation of Southern Arizona, the Jewish Federation of Southern Arizona/Arizona Center for Judaic Studies Community Builders Fund, Dr. Morris H. Martin, Steven and Danielle Thu, the UA department of history, the UA Medieval, Renaissance and Reformation Committee and the UA Religious Studies Program.

ARTS + CULTURE

Hispanic Jewish Culture Explored in Film, on Stage, in Class

By Esther J. Cepeda, February 11, 2007, SunTimes.com



JBook Review of: **A Mosaic of Israel's Traditions: Unity through Diversity**
By Esther Shkalim

When most people think "Jewish culture," the word "Hispanic" probably doesn't spring to mind. But Judaism is the faith of nearly a million worshippers across Mexico and the rest of Latin America. And more references are cropping up in American pop culture.

Hispanic Jews' stories are being told in movies such as "My Mexican Shiva," a film in Spanish, Yiddish and Hebrew, and in plays such as Steppenwolf Theater's "Sonia Flew," about a Cuban immigrant raising two children with her Jewish husband in Minneapolis. Now, DePaul University is offering a class in Jewish Latin American culture.

Led by Achy Obejas, DePaul's new Sor Juana De La Cruz writer-in-residence, students are tracing the roots of Judaism in Hispanic culture, starting with the Spanish Jews who sailed to the Americas with Christopher Columbus in 1492 and covering Jews who settled in the Caribbean and South America and Hispanic Jews living biculturally today. They are studying historical tracts and a rich body of works by Jewish Latin American writers and filmmakers. Obejas, who was born in Cuba, has written books on the Cuban-Jewish experience. "The notion of the Jew in Latin America works really well as a metaphor for the public and private tensions of immigration and assimilation that play themselves out in the U. S. today," Obejas said. Of her own experience, Obejas said, "The congregation where I go, there are Guatemalan Jews,

Argentinian Jews. They're Latino, but, in the end, they're Jews."

Rabbi Michael Azose of the Sephardic congregation in Evanston, where Obejas worships, estimates there are perhaps 5,000 Hispanic Jews in the Chicago area, "but I believe there is no Hispanic or Latino that doesn't have some Jewish blood in them because [in Spain] so many intermarried with Christians." Tonie Jo-Na Poole, 27, an undergraduate anthropology major at DePaul, said she's taking Obejas' class in part because she has African-American, Hispanic and Jewish roots and, beyond that, sees cultural awareness as a key need in a global society. "We're all becoming TransAmerican," Poole said. "Look deep down, and you'll see we all have similar foundations."

The Daughter of Q

By Gerri Miller, January & February 2007, American Jewish Life Magazine



You may recognize Rashida Jones from her starring turn in NBC's *The Office* or her half a dozen other acting gigs in TV and movies, but it's the role she was born into- the biracial Jewish daughter of music mogul Quincy Jones- that made her famous.

She plays Karen Filipelli on NBC's *The Office*, but Rashida Jones hasn't an ounce of Italian in her. The daughter of *Mod Squad* beauty Peggy Lipton and composer/music mogul Quincy Jones, she's biracial and Jewish, a "double whammy" of a distinction that she has found challenging and liberating at different times in her life.

Growing up in progressive privilege in Los Angeles, Jones "didn't have much cognizance of the fact that I was different. My parents were kind of hippies and I went to a Montessori school [where] everyone had different religions and cultural backgrounds. I had Jewish friends, I had black friends, I had Asian friends. So it didn't really occur to me that it was odd in any way," she explains. "The differences, or the way people related to them, didn't really strike me until college."

Arriving at Harvard, she became aware of the effect her uniqueness had on people, as well as her status as a daughter of the famous. "College is a time when you're trying to individualize and distinguish yourself from others and create your own subculture, and that was hard for me because I wanted to be part of the black community. I was for a while," Jones recalls. "Then I had kind of an alienating experience. It wasn't really about being Jewish. It was more the way I looked. I was lighter and my hair was straighter and lighter. It was this tacit understanding that the lighter you are, the harder you have to try to be more committed to being black. That wasn't part of my constitution as a human being. For me it was just about what I identified with. I wasn't really in the practice of having to prove myself to anybody. I was definitely scared off because there were a couple of girls who didn't like me and made me work really hard for friendship. [But] it was good in a sense because with every step of alienation I realized that my identity is truly my own."

Ironically, Jones had "identified strongly with black culture" in high school and considered that criteria in her college choice, but in the end found her niche with Jewish friends. "Junior year, I started dating a guy who was Conservative and had an Orthodox brother and practiced more than I did, was more devout than I was," she explains. "We had a group of friends who were Jewish so I naturally gravitated towards that culturally and religiously, which was cool because I didn't have a bat mitzvah. I left Hebrew school when I was 10 because the girls were kind of snotty and I hadn't gone back to exploring it. Being biracial and Jewish, I'm kind of given permission to explore whatever culture goes along with that. If I were just black and not Jewish I wouldn't have had that entrée."

Jones, whose mother grew up in an observant home in Lawrence, New York, has fond memories of Jewish celebrations of her youth. "We always celebrated the High Holidays. I did fast in high school for Yom Kippur and attend services. We always went to seder for Passover. I really liked the cultural and the familial side of Judaism. It was always the most comfortable place for me, making time for family and community."

When she was 10, Jones attended a Passover seder at Beverly Hills' Chasen's restaurant. "I remember I found the afikomen and I got \$100, which at the time was a ridiculous amount of money. I was actually happier about the candy I got than the money," she laughs, noting that she traditionally celebrates the holiday with good family friends, the Ostins. "My memories of Jewish holidays were associated with them and have always had that positive aspect, very comforting," she notes.

While she sometimes regrets not having a bat mitzvah, it doesn't diminish her faith. "In this day and age, you can choose how you practice and what is your relationship with God. I feel pretty strongly about my connection, definitely through the Jewish traditions and the things that I learned dating the guy that I dated. My boyfriends tend to be Jewish and also

be practicing," she muses. "I don't see it as a necessity, but there's something about it that I connect with for whatever reason. I think it probably has a lot to do with my mom, the way I grew up, and the family friends that we had and the paradigm that I saw of family life and what I would want for myself, and that was all kind of interconnected."

These days Jones lives in New York and commutes to L.A. to work, and calls The Office "my favorite job that I've ever had." She once dated co-star John Krasinski, but insists that it was "pure coincidence" that she was cast as a love interest for him, though she knew that was the plot going in.

While her credits include TV dramas like *Wanted* and *Boston Public*, Jones enjoys and gravitates toward comedy and is proudest of her work on *The Office*, *Chappelle's Show*, and a guest spot on *Freaks & Geeks*, for which she's still recognized. She's currently spending time shooting two films in New York.

Constantly told she looks too light to play African American, and rarely cast in period pieces because, she explains, "people like me didn't exist," Jones admits it's "been a bit of an uphill battle to be somewhere in the middle." On the other hand, "it gives me a tiny bit more range, and because I don't look like one thing or fit into one thing, the people who do cast me understand me as an individual and what I have to offer as opposed to what I look like and how it fits into their mold," she says, noting that casting opportunities are slowly becoming more colorblind, and as society becomes more multi-cultural, Jones predicts, "More and more you will see people look like me, where you don't know what race they are, which is nice."

Otherwise, she enjoys being something of a chameleon. "I can immerse myself in the cultures and pick and choose what I want and then just be myself. I have all these different groups of friends. The nature of who I am and the fact that I am so many things allows me to float," explains Jones, who feels strongly connected to both her black and Jewish cultures.

"I have a great family," she says, "but because my grandparents passed away and my cousins live in Texas, the Jewish family element is harder to come by and I have to make more of an effort to keep in touch." More than anything, she notes, music is what bonds her to her black heritage. "The nice thing about my dad, his connection to music is, even after 50 years, a heart process for him and it's a really nice way for us to connect."

Jones, who has sung backup on several albums including Maroon 5's *Songs About Jane*, hopes to record an album at some point. "I can't ignore it. It's definitely a passion," she says of music. She became interested in performing at a young age. "I was a really precocious child and I did everything — music and acting — and I was a very good student. I went to college thinking I wanted to be a lawyer and then was very quickly disillusioned watching the O.J. Simpson trial. I started doing theater sophomore year. I realized that if it was something that I loved why should I treat it as an extra-curricular if I could actually excel at it? And I thought I would give it a shot."

Her parents were supportive, offering advice "both solicited and unsolicited but all incredibly helpful. My mom has pretty much helped me with every audition that I've ever had," Jones reflects. Taking the reins of her career, she recently produced the indie comedy *The Ten*, "loosely based on the Ten Commandments. I have a really tiny part," she notes.

Another venture is a clothing line called *Laloo*, so named for the way her goddaughter pronounces "I love you." Its launch this month will start on the Internet and in several boutiques with kits of three cotton shirts: tank top and short and long sleeve tees.

A believer in giving back to the community like her role model Oprah Winfrey, Jones devotes time to Peace Games, a charity that helps prevent violence by educating kids about resolving conflicts non-physically, starting in kindergarten. As for the notion she might inspire multi-cultural youth, "I never really see myself as a role model but if I can inspire anyone to feel better about themselves or move forward in their careers," she says, "I'm happy to do that."

Asked what else is on her to-do list, Jones, who keeps limber with Pilates, would "love to run a marathon at some point in my life." She also wants to have a family "some day soon," but she's happily unattached at the moment. "I spent so much of my life not being single that it's actually refreshing. I find the value in my life comes from my friends and family and I feel very at peace with myself," she reflects. "I'm not in a rush to get anywhere. That's good for me. I feel lucky that I've had the opportunities that I have and that I get to travel and work. I'm kind of going with the flow right now."

The Maestro

By E.B. Solomont, January & February 2007, American Jewish Life Magazine



Raymond Roker was holding court at an uber-trendy New York night club recently when it seemed like everyone wanted a piece of him. Friends, colleagues in the music business, me. Ostensibly, Roker — who publishes the progressive urban cultural magazine, URB — was in town for a music conference. In reality, he was doing what he does best: juggling.

To hear Roker tell it, he is a man of varying roles: editor, artist, designer, East Coaster, West Coaster, son, black man, and Jew. The latter may be the least obvious, and it certainly raises eyebrows when he tells acquaintances the nature of my visit to the Soho House in Manhattan's Meatpacking district. Those who stop by his table are a chic group, and Roker himself is dressed completely in black, with black plastic glasses and a small hoop earring. "I always have to tell somebody I'm Jewish," he says. At 38, and at the top of his game professionally, Roker is still identifying himself. But then he removes one of the many "hats" I've made him wear. "It's not about religion," he says. "It's about, this is my life story."

Roker's biography starts in 1968 in Nassau, although it really begins in New Orleans after he and his mother left his father when Raymond was three years old. In the 1970s, New Orleans was "the South," he says. From an early age, he was cognizant of race and the notable fact that he is black and his mother is white. Not only white (and of Portuguese descent), but also Jewish.

Turns out, New Orleans was more conducive to Roker's early affinity for Jewish communal life than it was to a biracial boy. He and his mother belonged to a synagogue, and at age 8, Raymond asked to go to Hebrew school. "I think I got bitten by curiosity, just being in that temple." With both a Christmas tree and Chanukah presents, his childhood was "very... American," he says.

By the same token, Roker recalls Mardi Gras parades where racial disparity seemed like the headlining act. "It was hard, my mom being white," he says. Not so much that she was and he wasn't, but "it was how we looked together," he says. "No one had seen a black kid with a white mom. In retrospect, Roker acknowledges the undue pressure felt by his single mother that likely added to the tension. "I realize it's hard for a single mom. Whether they know it or you know it, they're your dad, too," he says.

It's no surprise that by the time Raymond and his mother moved to Los Angeles some years later, Roker was hyper-sensitive to racism. For a myriad of reasons, they did not join another synagogue in California. Several of Roker's friends in high school were Jewish, but none wore it on their sleeve. "I don't look Jewish, I didn't feel Jewish. I didn't have a bar mitzvah, and people don't look at me as Jewish," Roker says. "I got tired of explaining who I was and why."

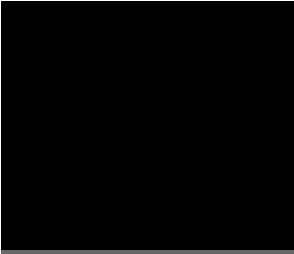
But Roker was discovering a new kind of religion: music. He listened to hip-hop, learned to spin and scratch records. In the late 1980s while visiting cousins on the East Coast, Roker came to New York, a city he says he crushed on before falling into a full-blown love affair with after September 11. "In a sense, I discovered club music, and house music, and the New York club scene and it spoke to me," ultimately prompting the launch of his magazine. "It was the real deal," Roker notes. "And I was like, this is how it's done."

With that in mind, Roker and a partner launched URB in May 1990 when Raymond was only 22. Previously, Roker did design work for music retailers. (Other "occupations" included graffiti artist and art store clerk.) At URB, it's hard to figure out exactly where Roker ends and the magazine begins. The heavy issue Roker hands to me features an article on Palestinian rappers in New York City, and an article titled "Shalom, Salaam, Word Up," about the language of hip-hop in the Middle East.

Roker says the magazine's editors try to push the needle. "Music is the soundtrack of people's lives," he says. "If you listen to what people say about music, that will tell you a lot about their worldview."

His own worldview is decidedly pragmatic, he says. "Politics is in my veins," he also says. As is social justice and morality. ("I still cry for what happened in Katrina," he says. Similarly, violence in Los Angeles pains him. "I'm angry at L.A. for not working that out," he says.) At this point, he acknowledges that those views are decidedly Jewish in nature, and it comes out that his childhood interest in Judaism has resurfaced. "I'm experiencing my culture again," he says.

In 2004, Roker was invited to join Reboot, a network of Jews whose salons foster discussion of Jewish identity. "I wear my background, my heritage with pride, but I don't go to temple," he says. "I still consider myself fairly estranged."



And yet, while Roker must introduce himself, explain himself, and identify himself, he is answering to himself, too. His religion, much like his life story, is a work in progress. He says, "You start to be who you are in spite of what people think you should be."

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