

A LATIN LOVE FOR ISRAEL

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For years they lit candles in secret, carefully avoided attending church, and hid their Bibles. Now, they have decided to come out into the open. Thousands of descendants of Anousim (known as “Marranos”) are seeking to return to Judaism. But along the way it has become clear that even after the Inquisition, they now face a new foe: some Jews are placing obstacles in their path.

This year, Antonio Lopez (age 41) once again celebrated the Passover Seder in his home in Toledo, Spain, all by himself, almost in complete secrecy. For three years already, Lopez, a descendant of Bnei Anousim (Hebrew for “those who were coerced” – the term is preferred by many over the derogatory word “Marrano”) has been in the process of returning to Judaism, but he still keeps it a secret from his parents. “I don’t have the courage to tell them”, he admits. “From my standpoint, it means returning and digging up a painful family history. My family is very important to me, and I am not sure if G-d would want me to take this step of telling them. It would cause them a lot of suffering”.

Lopez works in Spain’s Central Bank as an expert in identifying and uncovering counterfeit money. His role is to assist the police in uncovering sophisticated mafia counterfeiting networks operating in Europe. The knitted white yarmulke that he wears on his head and the Tzitzit (ritual fringes) that hang down his elegant pants appear almost like an outfit that is required for his job. But Lopez treats the process of embracing Judaism with complete seriousness. Recently, he even made an appointment with a doctor in order to undergo ritual circumcision.

In the past few years, a real phenomenon has become manifest. Thousands of Spaniards, Portuguese and Brazilians who view themselves as Bnei Anousim are awakening and seeking to return to the Jewish fold. Many of them lived for generations upon generations as secret Jews. Many families customarily lit Sabbath candles behind closed windows. Inside their homes they would refrain from eating pork and they would even salt their meat to dry out and remove the blood. They did everything in order to avoid going to church. There were those that kept a copy of the Tanach (Bible) or a Talit (prayer shawl) in a hidden corner, while others fasted on Yom Kippur. They observed Jewish customs and passed them down from father to son and from mother to daughter. They did not always understand the meaning of these customs, but they observed them diligently. And now, they are starting to come out of the closet.

The Story Behind the Name

In order to understand this phenomenon one must go back in history to the year 1391. Much to the Catholic Church’s chagrin, the Jewish community of Spain had flourished in the Middle Ages. Then, throughout Spain, pogroms erupted against the Jews and the Church tried to compel them to convert to Catholicism. The persecution reached its peak with the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 when the Jews were given two options: to convert or to leave.

Some 100 to 200 thousand Jews fled from Spain to Portugal where they were forced to pay a ransom in order to preserve their Jewishness, but in the end even this did not help them. The Spanish monarchs consented that the Portuguese king could marry their daughter on condition that he would cleanse his country of Jews. In the year 1497 the king of Portugal called for all the Jews to come to the port of Lisbon, ostensibly to expel them. But a trap awaited them: priests forcibly baptized them and converted them. “This was a religious and social trauma” says Michael Freund, the founder and Chairman of the Shavei Israel organization. “Some chose suicide and death for their families instead”.

As a result of the forced conversion, according to various estimates some 20 to 30 percent of Portugal's population is now descended from Jews. The Shavei Israel organization, which works to strengthen the relationship among the State of Israel, Diaspora Jewry and descendants of Jews around the world, is assisting the Bnei Anousim to return to Judaism. In the past five years, working in coordination with Israel's Chief Rabbinate, the organization has helped more than 600 people from across the Spanish and Portuguese-speaking world to return.

The organization reports an ongoing surge in the number of those approaching them for help. Shavei Israel Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum has two main explanations for this recent awakening: the decline in the power of the Church, as well as the widespread use of the internet, which enables people to search for material on Judaism without anyone knowing about it. "We already see the existence of internet chat rooms and forums for Anousim", he says.

Professor Yosef Ferrao Filipe (age 48) is an excellent example of the revival taking place among the Bnei Anousim. Filipe, a psychologist from the city of Porto in northern Portugal, remembers how they would observe customs in his home whose meaning they did not completely understand, such as lighting candles on Friday before sundown.

"When we were children they forbade us from counting stars, because if you did that, they would know you were Jewish," Filipe says. "They warned us that if we counted stars, warts would appear on our fingers. My mother and grandmother would not sweep the house from the inside toward the outside, but rather from the outside in, because Anousim feared that they would instinctively stretch out their hand to kiss the Mezuzah even if there wasn't one on the doorpost, and then they would be identified as Jews. During my childhood I was required to go to church or else I could not finish the year in the Catholic school I attended, but my family did not allow me to go. The priest would call my father and he would somehow avoid it. The children in the class sensed that something was different about me, and they would cover for me and tell the priest that I had come to prayers."

The turning point in Filipe's life came 22 years ago, when he studied at university in Paris and attended a synagogue for the first time in his life. "I will never forget that visit for the rest of my days. For the first time in my life I welcomed in the Sabbath. I felt as if I had known it my entire life, as if it were a part of me. There was a familiarity about the words of the songs and of the Kiddush (a prayer recited by Jews on the Sabbath). I felt as if I were reborn."

Since that visit, Filipe began to draw closer to religion and to become interested in conversion. His conversion process was very complex and lasted for more than 20 years, since there was no Jewish community at that time in the city in which he lived. But thanks to Shavei Israel he was able to complete the process successfully. Two years ago, together with a group of 15 other Bnei Anousim, he came from Porto to the Israeli Chief Rabbinate's conversion court in Jerusalem, where they were all officially recognized as Jews. His wife and young son completed the process along with him.

According to Filipe, if one were to open a phonebook today in Portugal, he would discover that 30% of the family names are typical Bnei Anousim names. As part of the effort to observe Judaism in secret, the Anousim would choose unique names, such as those of fruits like a pear or pomegranate, first names which later became family names - such as Filipe, or names of materials or professions. "The Catholics demanded that the Anousim change their names and so they looked for a new name that would preserve part of their Jewish identity", recounts Filipe.

In many cases, it was only in their final moments that parents would reveal the secret of their identity to their children. So it was in the case of Rafael Valenzuela (age 48), an employee at a human resources company in Madrid. Before her death, his mother called him over and told him “We come from a Jewish family, descendants of the Toledano family from Cordoba.” His mother’s words shocked him, and as a result of that conversation he initiated a process of conversion and also underwent ritual circumcision. His Christian friends, he says, became accustomed over time to his new faith. The main problem today, according to him, is that public opinion in Spain is hostile to Israel. “I think that we, the Anousim, can assist Israel in this area”, says Valenzuela.

Michael Freund thinks that the Israeli government is neglecting the Bnei Anousim and does not appreciate how helpful they could be in areas such as hasbara (public relations). “We are talking about thousands of people that could be excellent ambassadors for Israel around the world, and yet the State is completely ignoring them. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs should establish a special department to strengthen relations with the Anousim. The Jewish people and the State of Israel have a moral and historical responsibility towards these people. They are our flesh and blood. Through no fault of their own, their ancestors were taken from us, and in spite of all this they managed to preserve their Jewish identity over the centuries. The time has come for us to extend a hand to them, embrace them, and facilitate their return home”.

The way home is not always easy. In order to convert, Israeli authorities require the Bnei Anousim to live in a Jewish community for a full year. Then, at the end of the year, they come to Israel and go before a rabbinical court for conversion. Along the way, they must undergo ritual circumcision. Many Jewish communities slam the door in their faces and regard them with suspicion.

Tsimmes and Prayers

About 50 Bnei Anousim recently gathered for the first educational seminar of its kind, which was organized by Shavei Israel in the Costa del Sol region of southern Spain, at the country’s first kosher hotel. On Friday night they lit candles together, ate cholent and tsimmes (two traditional Sabbath foods) danced and sang “Am Yisrael Chai” (the nation of Israel lives) and “Od Avinu Chai” (our Father still lives) and they prayed with fervor just like yeshiva students. “Look at how they are praying”, Freund said with emotion, “Look at their devotion, at their sincerity. This is a genuine manifestation that comes from within, from their Jewish heart and soul”.

Among those participating in the seminar was Paulo Vitorino (age 40), a father of six children and a businessman from Lisbon. During the Sabbath, Vitorino displayed impressive cantorial talents. He knows all of the prayers and Sephardic melodies by heart. “I heard the prayers on CDs and that is how I learned,” he says. “We are Jews in the home and Christians on the street, and these double lives helped to maintain our identity. People married the children of Anousim families in order to remain within the Jewish people. My wife is also a daughter of Anousim from Belmonte. We lived for hundreds of years like a secret sect.”

Vitorino is angry at the Jewish communities and at the religious establishment, which imposes many difficulties upon them. “They are like a new Inquisition. For four years I tried to attend synagogue but was not allowed to enter. With all due respect, I am not a heretic. I am a Portuguese Jew. How dare they tell me I am not a descendant of Abraham? For 500 years we maintained a Jewish lifestyle at home. The secret passed from father to son.”

Yara Dotera (age 34), an artist and website designer, was born in Lisbon and lives in Barcelona. In her family, too, the secret of their Jewishness was passed down across the generations. “Unlike our neighbors, in our house we never ate pork” she relates. “Our mother would explain to us that it was not healthy. In our city, there was a tradition that once a year the townspeople would go out to the town square and burn a doll to symbolize the burning of the Jews. My mother would not let us go out and take part and we never understood why. Instead, we would close the shutters and wait for the event to be over. Only in recent years did I begin to make a connection between these events”.

After a close friend of hers underwent conversion, Dotera decided to draw closer to Judaism. “I don’t think about conversion because my husband is Catholic and wants no part of it”, she says, “but when I have children I will raise them with a Jewish identity”.

At least half of the participants in the seminar observe the Sabbath and keep the Jewish dietary laws. They came via the method of “one friend brings another”. “I tell them that they are part of the Jewish family and that their present situation is only because of a historical accident”, says Rabbi Birnbaum. “Currently, hundreds and thousands are coming out of the closet and are declaring in a loud voice, ‘I am from the Bnei Anousim. I want to return to the Jewish fold.’ And they don’t merely say it, but they are willing to take significant steps, such as undergoing ritual circumcision. I believe that this phenomenon will continue to grow”.

At a corner table sits the Perez family from the city of Saragosa. Rafael, the father, Pilar Deito, the mother, and their two children – 16 year-old Daniel and 15-year old Bracha. “Twenty years ago I decided to say goodbye to the Catholic Church and to return to Judaism”, says the father. “I approached the synagogues and Jewish communities throughout Spain, but they closed the door on me everywhere. But I did not give up. At age 26 I underwent circumcision.”

Pilar Deito is also from a family of Anousim that still lives in their original house dating back to the time of the expulsion from Spain. In the doorway of the entrance, the original hole from the Mezuzah is visible. Shavei Israel is trying to figure out a way to help the Perez family to convert, because there is no Jewish community in their area. Rafael is concerned that his children will one day marry non-Jews and then assimilate. Today he works at an internet startup company which also assists with Israel’s public relations efforts in Spain. He follows events in Israel, just like any warm-hearted Jew.

In his summation at the close of the seminar, an impassioned Michael Freund told the participants, “We want to do justice and to right the historical wrong that was done to your ancestors 500 years ago. It won’t happen from today to tomorrow. It is a slow process and there are many obstacles along the way but we are moving forward. We will continue with our efforts and we will not desert you, the Anousim. We will not desist until the day comes and you can all return to the Jewish people”.