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## ANUSIM IN NORTH AMERICA: THE INGATHERING

“And the pig,” that is Edom. . . .

Not only does she not nurture the righteous, but she kills them.

—*Leviticus Rabba*

There have been widespread reports in recent years of descendants of the forced converts of Spain and Portugal who have surfaced in various parts of North America.<sup>1</sup> The past two years have witnessed a dramatic increase in the degree of recognition these lost brethren have received from Orthodox Judaism.<sup>2</sup> Many of these *anusim* (“coerced ones”) have made attempts to rejoin Jewish communities, with varying degrees of success. But a better understanding of their history is now paving the way, both here and in Israel, toward a general procedure for those seeking to rejoin normative Judaism that would ease the burden of proof and distinguish them from *gerim*.

In this article, I explore the historical background and some features of this extraordinary Jewish group and attempt to place these individuals in the context of rabbinical writings regarding *anusim* on the Continent.

### BACKGROUND

As is well known, in 1492 Spain expelled all 300,000 Jews who had not abjured their faith.<sup>3</sup> About half the refugees crossed into Portugal. Five years later, Portugal forcibly converted all Jews and ultimately prohibited their emigration. Significant numbers of Spanish Jews who converted to Catholicism under duress between the pogroms of 1391 and the expulsion of 1492 and of those later converted in Portugal maintained Jewish practices in secret, while outwardly acting as devout Christians. These people were pejoratively called *marranos*, “swine.” Earlier forced conversions to Islam under the Almohads had resulted in underground observance of Judaism, as described in Maimonides’ famous *Epistle of Martyrdom* (*Iggerret haShemad*). It was, therefore, natural for similar survival

measures to be utilized after the Christian Reconquest of Moorish Spain.

Whenever possible, Jews escaped Portugal. Having to exit by sea, they went to various destinations in Europe and North Africa, as well as the New World. Widespread disease, enslavement, and volatile political situations added to the dangers facing these refugees.

In most places in the New World, Judaism was illegal. Only in the mid-sixteenth hundreds did Jews begin to settle there openly (though some are known to have arrived by 1502). R. Isaac Aboab came to Brazil in 1641 to lead the congregation in Recife, largely comprised of *anusim* who, under Dutch rule, returned to open Judaism. When, soon after, the Dutch capitulated to Portugal, some of these Jews reached New Amsterdam, where they established Congregation Shearith Israel.

Wherever they ended up, these Sephardim considered themselves to be the true "Spaniards," often preserving the language and customs of their Iberian forebears.

#### ANUSIM IN THE NEW WORLD

Only with perfect hindsight can one say which destination was the safest. Going to the colonies was not unreasonable in light of the global situation of the sixteenth century. The inquisitorial tribunal had not yet been set up, and local authorities were not very active in ferreting out secret Jews and sending them back for trial. Later, when the Mexican Inquisition was established (in 1571), Jews went deeper into the frontiers to escape detection, thus arriving (among other places) in New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Arizona and California of today. In the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, over a hundred people were martyred at the stake for their Judaism;<sup>4</sup> hundreds if not thousands of others were tortured, buried alive, lashed, imprisoned, exiled, publicly shamed, or burned in effigy (having died in jail or escaped). The total number of *anusim* and their descendents who eventually came to the New World remains unknown, but estimates continue to grow.<sup>5</sup>

Nuevo Reino de Leon, possibly the largest tract of land granted anyone by Spain, stretches from eastern Mexico through the Southwest of the U.S. It was the only grant that came without the requirement to prove *limpieza de sangre*—"pure Christian blood." While the whole New World was filled with secret Jews who forged documents in order to get permission to come to New Spain, Nuevo Leon was particularly heavily settled by *anusim*. The recipient of this 1579 grant and its governor, the New Christian Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, died in the Inquisition jails, accused not of "judaizing" (practicing Judaism), but of

failing to denounce his relatives for that “offense.” All his nieces and a nephew were eventually martyred, as well.

Following the death of Carvajal in the Inquisition cells, his lieutenant governor, Gaspar Castaño de Sosa, along with some 170 colonists (no priest among them!), left on an uncharted, unauthorized expedition to the north, reaching into today’s New Mexico. De Sosa, against whom there were allegations of judaizing, and his whole party were arrested for this illegal expedition. De Sosa himself was exiled for treason, but many of the members of his group later returned to New Mexico in 1598 with Juan de Onãte. The names of a number of fugitives burned in effigy in Mexico City *autos da fe* match those of these settlers in New Mexico.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it was the more devoutly Jewish who are the ancestors of the *anusim* of today’s Southwest, as well as of those in the southern periphery of the colonies.

Luis de Carvajal the younger, the governor’s nephew and a fervent religious Jew who was tortured and burned at the stake, said that were it not for the coercion of the Inquisition, the Christians in the New World could be counted on the fingers of one’s hand.<sup>7</sup> While this must be considered an exaggeration, a high number claim is strengthened by the assertion that in the mid-sixteenth century, there were more secret Jews than Catholics in Mexico City,<sup>8</sup> and by the fact that the appellation “Portuguese” became synonymous with “Jew.”<sup>9</sup>

In 1642, the discovery of a synagogue in Mexico city led to renewed vigor on the part of the Inquisition. Tomas Treviño de Sombronte (b. 1592, Spain) was the leader of one of the three large secret Jewish communities of his time in the Mexico City area. He was burned alive, refusing the last minute pretense at Christianity and the garotte. He became a legend and the subject of ballads. Details of the religious observances in his family include circumcision, prayers, fasts, careful observance of the dietary laws, the Sabbath and ritual purity, and feeding the poor, as well as knowledge of Hebrew. The Inquisition records in his case refer to *tefillin*, Jewish burial rites, the rabbinic preference for marital relations on Friday evening, and the *farda*—charity collected in the New World for Jewish communities abroad.<sup>10</sup>

Historically, the *anusim* of the New World maintained contact with Jewish communities in Italy, the Netherlands, Turkey and Israel. They considered themselves, and were considered by the Jewish communities around the world, as Jews. Families from the Americas married their daughters to learned Jewish men from the Old World. Jewish emissaries, such as Ruy Diaz Nieto,<sup>11</sup> came to these secret New World communities, teachers were imported, and money collections were

made for *pidyon shevuyim* from Turkey and for the community in *Erets Yisrael*. This continued until the 1800s, when the decline of the Sephardi community in Europe and the loss of profitability of trade left these people completely isolated.<sup>12</sup>

The last person to be tried and sentenced to burn at the stake was an elderly, circumcised Franciscan monk accused of being a Jew and of helping hide others. He was scheduled to die in 1795, but after begging and promising to repent, he was thrown into the secret cells, where he remained until liberated at about a hundred years of age in the Mexican Revolution of 1821. The last person known to have been executed by the Inquisition was Father Jose Maria Hidalgo y Costill (the “Mexican George Washington”). He was accused of both Lutheranism and Judaism, among other charges, and was handed over to the army to be shot in 1811.

*Anusim* continued to maintain a loosely organized, private, family-based religion. However, the annexation of New Mexico by the U.S. in 1848 brought with it new difficulties. The local clergy, who had often been from among the *anusim*, were replaced by French Catholic clerics from New Orleans who did not countenance local customs; water rights and private land belonging to *anusim* were usurped.<sup>13</sup> The relative religious privacy was invaded, and people had to move about more in search of sustenance. The breakdown of family units, the language barrier between grandparents and grandchildren, and exposure to modern Western culture have led to recent breaks in the line of transmission. On the other hand, exposure to the outside world is largely responsible for the recognition among some that their family’s religious practices are not really Catholic.

With the abolition of the Inquisition at the time of the revolution, all remaining Jews were presumed to have assimilated into the larger Hispanic communities.<sup>14</sup> There were, however, sporadic reports of secret Jews in Mexico,<sup>15</sup> preceding their “discovery” in the Southwest, first reported in 1987.<sup>16</sup> In reality, descendents of *anusim* are not limited today to the Southwest, nor did they all come via Mexico. They are also likely to have arrived here from Cuba, South America, the Carribean, or Iberia. Indeed, wherever there are Latinos, there still are families who are aware of their Jewish heritage.

The widespread presence of *anusim* who maintain a Jewish identity or vestiges of Jewish practices flies in the face of the Church and of those who contend that there were no secret Jews to speak of. The inquisitors surely were often motivated by racism and avarice, but that does not mean the phenomenon was imaginary.

Years of danger, betrayal and exploitation have bred mistrust even within families, making it difficult for *anusim* who are investigating their roots to unravel the facts. *Anusim* often don't know what to ask, don't know what in their mixed upbringing is Jewish. Even abstinence from pork and the lighting of Friday night candles, let alone more esoteric practises, are not always recognized as Jewish.

### ANUSIM IN THE RESPONSA

Before delving into the exact nature of secret Judaism in New Spain, we should briefly examine how the Jewish community has responded to *anusim* over the centuries.

Discussions of the many legal ramifications of apostasy, religious coercion and secret observance are scattered throughout rabbinic literature. Responsa on this subject provide the reader not only with halakhic decisions, but also with theological discourse on what constitutes apostasy in times of religious oppression. We also find historical details of day-to-day problems facing communities and families ravaged by persecution and conversion.<sup>17</sup> Questions include, for example: May *anusim* be called to the Torah, open the Ark, or be given other communal honors before being circumcised? Is the wine of Crypto-Jews to be treated as kosher? Are contracts of crypto-Jews binding?<sup>18</sup> What conversion procedure, if any, is a descendant of forced converts to undergo when he or she re-enters the Jewish community? What value do commandments observed by *anusim* have? What procedures are appropriate for repentance? The most frequent issue dealt with was *agunot*, women who could not remarry because their husbands stayed behind or who were childless widows whose levir (*yavam*) was still among the *anusim*. Potential implications of decisions on these issues often led to heated debates within the various Sephardic communities in exile.<sup>19</sup>

R. Isaac b. Sheshet Perfet (d. 1408) wrote that *anusim*, while still in their land of oppression, "require interrogation by a scholar to determine if they are practicing properly in private and have no opportunity to escape."<sup>20</sup>

In the sixteenth century, R. Binyamin b. Matityahu of Greece ruled invalid the marriage of an *anusa* who left Spain without her husband, since the witnesses to the (church) wedding were invalid. He severely castigates the couple on the grounds that they were apostates who chose not to leave.<sup>21</sup> In another responsum, however, he calls for the excommunication of anyone who calls *anusim* who have returned, apostates. In the face of the evil decree, imposing Christianity on all,

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They stood up to sanctify God's name. . . . Some were killed, others were slaughtered, others drowned. Still others had the [baptismal] waters forcibly sprinkled on them, and they escape from there and come under the *Shekhina's* wings. Shall we remind them of their being coerced? Why, most of Israel were forced there against their will.<sup>22</sup>

Even their ancestors' sins may not be mentioned. He expresses his fear that the *anusim* who are not yet back—and whom he is clearly expecting and hoping to see return—would be discouraged by the disparaging remarks they hear. He says, "If we do not punish those who remind them of their former apostasy, then you will put a stumbling block in their way for the future, for they will be reluctant to return."

Another approach to descendants of *anusim* compares them to "babes in captivity"—"*ke-tinok she-nishba ben ha-goyim*," hence, not responsible for transgressions. For instance, R. Eliyahu b. Hayyim (Constantinople, 1530-1610) would treat as an apostate only one who "did not act according to the custom of *anusim*, but added to his transgression and abandoned much."<sup>23</sup>

The role of women as teachers and upholders of the faith, and their bravery when called to *kiddush HaShem* were universally recognized.<sup>24</sup> For example, R. Yom-Tov b. Moshe Zahalon (1559-1638) noted: "The pious Portuguese women, in whose heart the Law of Israel is planted, it is they who teach the men and bring them close to the Law of Israel, as we have heard and seen."<sup>25</sup> "The righteous elderly women of Portugal, about whose piety we have been told, from whom the Torah and Judaism go forth, they are the ones who have brought the sons of Israel under the wings of the *Shekhina*."<sup>26</sup>

Saadia b. Maimun ibn Danan (late fifteenth century), in a moving responsum on the *anusim*, writes:

The seed of the apostate is [considered] coerced... and the descendants of *anusim* are coerced, as well. . . . There is a great distinction between apostates and *anusim* who were forced to be separated from the [Jewish] community and subscribe to that nonsense with their mouths and lips, because of the drawn sword, the arched bow and the burden of war. They do not imagine this nor does their heart so think, for the one God and His love are in their hearts, many observing commandments in hiding, endangering themselves. Even the wicked among them who tend toward apostasy think nothing of that nonsense, their hearts unable to believe it has any validity. They are isolated by the Gentiles, who call them "Jews," and hate them and curse them all day long because of their inclination to Jewish teachings. How many of

them sanctified God's name in public and gave their lives? . . . There is reward . . . for those who put themselves at risk to observe some of the commandments more than the reward of Jews who have no fear or danger . . . and God does not indict over coercion. . . . Maimonides wrote on this matter in his *Iggeret haShemad*; no one can add to the supports he adduced and to his clear arguments. . . . After the destruction of the second Temple, the Romans, Christians and Ishmaelites decreed and destroyed several communities from the Community of Israel, but afterwards most of these communities returned to Judaism after many generations. . . . There were those who fled in the first generation from one kingdom to the other—from the Ishmaelite to the Christian and from the Christian to the Ishmaelite—and many remained in the place of *shemad*, and preserved what they could of God's commandments in secrecy. . . . In conclusion, there is no sage from among the sages of Israel who calls the generations of *shemad* complete Gentiles, or totally wicked, for their transgression was against their will. . . . This would discourage the descendents of those coerced by decrees and troubles to cleave to the portion of God and attach [themselves] to His people so that they be absorbed by the nations . . . and their memory will be lost.

R. Solomon b. Shimon Duran composed a special prayer for returning *anusim* in the fifteenth century:<sup>27</sup>

Our God and God of our fathers, bring success to Your servant—and bestow Your grace upon him. Just as You have moved his heart to return in complete repentance before You, so may You plant in his heart love and fear of You. Open his heart to Your Torah and guide him in the path of Your commandments that he may find grace in Your eyes. So may it be, and let us say Amen.

After some time, the subject of forced converts ceased to surface, and nothing appears from the mid-seventeen hundreds until early this century.

### ANUSIM TODAY

There are today predominantly *anusim* villages in Neuvo Leon, Mexico (around Monterey, in particular), as well as Santa Fe, New Mexico and its environs, and in the vicinity of the Rio Grande. There are typically Jewish family names, such as Duran, Lopez, Amado, Rael (from Israel), for which Inquisition records are a good, though incomplete, guide.<sup>28</sup>

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*Anusim* are often given biblical first names, like Esther, Jaccobo, Israel, and Adonai.<sup>29</sup>

In what follows, I describe some of what I have learned from conversations with about forty *anusim* of the New World:

A minority were told explicitly of their Jewishness by a parent. Frequently, a grandmother passed on the family secrets to one elect granddaughter of her choice (whom she sometimes raised herself), thereby preserving matrilineage. Many are told just that they are not really Mexican, but, rather, belong to the Spanish nobility. There may also be a family sense of having been betrayed by Spain. They are enjoined to only marry *los muestros*, “one of us,” and to follow the ancient customs, *costuma d’antigua*, including *la dieta*—the special diet. Another key word is “clean,” as in, “You should only marry the clean ones.” There can be familial tension over marrying an outsider. Some speak an old Castilian dialect and are ridiculed by their teachers for not knowing “proper” Spanish.<sup>30</sup> (People in New Mexico sent children to Mexico to learn to speak “correctly.”)

There are still secret synagogues, secret prayer rooms in the homes of elder relatives, and secret prayer groups. Sayings include: “*YHWH es mi dio*” (“Hashem is my God”), and “*El Sabado es el dia de la gloria*” (“the Sabbath is the day of glory”), referring to Saturday. A few possess *talit* and *tefillin*, *mezuzot*, *Tanakh*, *siddurim*, or other Jewish objects, presumably bought from Jewish stores or merchants. Most avoid church; their own churches are often without icons. An implicit mistrust of the Church is often transmitted subliminally to children.

Some regions had a travelling *mohel* who preformed circumcisions. Others consecrated baby boys on the eighth day, avoiding circumcision because that could bind the child to the Law of Moses. Interestingly, this mistaken belief (derived from the New Testament<sup>31</sup>) is recorded by R. Sh. Aboab.<sup>32</sup>

Candle-lighting on Fridays is widespread among crypto-Jews. They clean house and change clothes for Shabbat. Some are not allowed by their parents to do anything Friday night, not even wash their hair. Yom Kippur is called *El Dia Grande*.<sup>33</sup> It was common to fast three days for *Taanit Esther*. Many celebrate a non-Christian spring holiday in lieu of Passover. *Anusim* venerate “Jewish saints” with celebrations: Santa Esterika (Saint Esther), Santo Moises, etc. Some light eight candles for Christmas.

The observance of *kashrut* was commonly referred to as *la dieta*. Some avoid red meat in general; others ritually slaughter beef, mutton, goats and chicken (with special knives, tested on hair or nails), covering

the blood, salting to remove blood, removing the sciatic nerve, separating meat from milk, and avoiding pork (often deemed “unclean” or called *marrano*) and seafood. Some wash hands before and after eating, wait between meat and milk (bleaching or boiling dishes between meals), avoid blood (throwing out eggs with bloodspots), and drink only “clean” kosher wine.<sup>34</sup> Many children were prohibited to eat food prepared by anyone but their mother or maternal grandmother. These customs and others are scattered among *anusim*, and are not equally known or observed by all.

The critical role of women in the survival of Judaism in secret, throughout the long history and wide geography of secret Judaism, cannot be overstated. They nobly carried the burden of adaptation, preservation and transmission of their faith, at immense risk to their lives. Many were burned at the stake for being “rabbis” and “dogmatizers.” The female leaders of the *anusim* communities composed and transmitted rituals and liturgy for Jewish and crypto-Jewish holidays (the Fast of Esther was extremely important and solemn) and for life-cycle events. They were referred to as *sacerdotisas* or *guadalupitas*(!), and were regularly turned to for decisions on all religious matters. They also served as medicine women (*curanderas*), employing herbs, amulets and incantations in their healing and midwifery, for which reason some were accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake. Some women preserved, practised and transmitted kabbalistic traditions, elements of which appear in the Spanish-language prayers they composed. Only among *anusim* were women the caretakers of this esoteric wisdom.

The transmission of tradition as well as family genealogy was most often entrusted to women. A feature of the *anusim* is that many did not bear the name of either of their parents, and that names were frequently changed, making the task of reconstructing a genealogy in most cases impossible.<sup>35</sup> Women taught *Tanakh* and ruled on ritual questions. They took care of the purification and burial rituals of the dead, both male and female. *Anusim* buried within one day, used burial shrouds, covered mirrors and had water spigots in cemeteries. They rent garments in mourning, mourned seven days, then one year. Some avoided contact with the dead whenever possible. There are tombstones in hidden cemeteries bearing Hebrew names and Jewish symbols.<sup>36</sup>

Some women also preserve kabbalistic knowledge and practices. Prayers with *la Presencia* (the *Shekhina*) are indicative. They had a tradition of seventy-three names of God (not seventy or seventy-two, as in other traditions), as did the Portuguese *anusim*,<sup>37</sup> and as is found in an early midrashic source.<sup>38</sup>

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The customs among *anusim* first reported by modern scholars and the media were mostly of biblical origin, leading to skepticism on the part of cultural anthropologists and rabbis alike, since many fundamentalist churches tend to promote similar observances. This argument does not, however, take into account the fact that such practices were proof of judaizing in the eyes of the Tribunal, thus exposing those observing them to danger. Many *anusim* joined non-Catholic denominations in order to get their hands on the Torah—which was not available to Catholic laity—and in order to be somewhat less scrutinized by the Church. Furthermore, lighting candles on Friday night, ritual slaughter, and various degrees of dietary observances that could not have been deduced from the Torah, confirm their unbroken connection with Jewish teachings.

Moreover, among *anusim* living in Mexico and in former Mexican provinces now part of the U.S., I have found surprisingly widespread evidence of relatively obscure practices of rabbinic Judaism, including fasting on Mondays and Thursdays as penance,<sup>39</sup> sweeping floors towards the center of the room (originally out of respect for the *mezuzah*),<sup>40</sup> and orienting beds north-south.<sup>41</sup> These are still followed today by people who often have no awareness of their religious significance, but who continue to follow them as the ancient custom.

The discovery of such rabbinic observances among *anusim* is a very strong argument for a surviving Jewish heritage, since such observances indicate a historic link to the ancestral faith. These customs are especially significant, as they could not have been derived from a reading of the Torah and are not shared by non-Jews. These customs are so rarely known today that it is inconceivable that other Jews could have in recent centuries taught them to *anusim*. Consequently, they bear strong evidence of Jewish origin. Most also lie mainly in the domain of women, the primary preservers of Jewish traditions among *anusim*.

## THE FUTURE

When *anusim* first came to the New World, there was not yet an inquisitorial tribunal. These people hoped to practise their Judaism with more freedom and autonomy than in Europe. When the Christian inquisitorial monster followed, they sought ways to escape. Some entered the clergy and monastic orders; some became nominal “Lutherans” because Lutherans were not bothered as much by the tribunal. Under this guise they continued to observe every commandment they could, preserved many Jewish practices, and had access to more

sacred books. People entered the Christian clergy in order to be the confessors of their co-religionists, thus protecting them from being denounced. Not only was Catholic laity denied access to the “Old Testament,” but the incredibly comprehensive Church ban in the New World on virtually all books served as strong incentive for Jews to send their children to study for the clergy. There are many cases of judaizers from the ranks of clergy and monastic orders in the *autos da fe*. (Incidentally, being scholarly was itself an indication of Judaism worthy of the Tribunal’s investigation!)

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, sporadic information about people in Mexico descended from *anusim* continued to trickle out, but received little attention. New Ashkenazic Jewish communities in areas inhabited by *anusim* did not acknowledge their existence. The only hope left for these people was in Heaven; in this land the doors seemed closed.

Seymour Liebman, the historian of the Jewish presence in New Spain, had reason to suspect the existence of crypto-Judaic communities in Mexico, but upon inquiry was told (by *anusim*!) that no Jewish traces were left in the area. Together with R. Shlomo Goren, chief rabbi of Israel, he visited Venta Prieta, where there was a Mexican-Indian group claiming descent from the Carvajals.<sup>42</sup> Goren determined that the group was not of predominantly Jewish descent and the Israeli rabbinates therefore required of them full conversion.<sup>43</sup> Many did convert and moved to Israel.<sup>44</sup>

The emerging *anusim* typically search for many years and wait until they are fairly certain before they approach an acquaintance or rabbi.<sup>45</sup> They know they may be jeopardizing their relationships with their family, friends, co-workers, as well as their jobs, and they justly fear the lack of welcome on the part of the Jewish communities they may seek to join. No social or material gain accrues to these people. To the Jewish community, they remain Latinos, while to the Latino community, they become *Judios*. They come humble, often bearing a great burden of guilt and shame for the sins of their ancestors. What happens to the *anusim* who are now charting their way back is carefully watched by many more who are waiting in the wings. They are test cases—pioneers and leaders of the next generation.

Bertha, of blessed memory, discovered she was a Jew because her Gentile husband kept insisting she must be (judging from her abhorrence of pork, and other fetishes with “clean” and “unclean”), and—after a geneological investigation—confronted her mother, who then admitted to her that they were Jews and that she had been taught

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Judaism by the aunts who had raised her in Texas. Her children now suffer from anti-Semitism and confusion. Before her recent death, she spoke (to a mainly Jewish audience) at a meeting of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies:<sup>46</sup>

I need to say that you have the right to hate us; you have the right to feel anger towards us—because we chose the easy way out. . . . [They] chose the easy way out. They might have preserved some things that they could not do away with, but I think that they preferred survival, and I do believe they compromised. And I apologize for it. I feel hurt when I think Jews died in the concentration camps, and we did not take notice of it, that we as a people could not have taken notice.

Another *anusim* said at the same occasion:<sup>47</sup> “Please remember that we have a lot of pain inside us which we have to deal with. . . . [T]his one soul still feels the pain, the burden of apostasy of our ancestors over a six-hundred year period.”

Now that more is understood about the historical context, the matrilineal transmission, and rabbinic observances of *anusim*, the road back, for those who wish it, is being paved. The revelations regarding the *anusim* in the New World have led to discussions and correspondence within the Ashkenazic and Sephardic rabbinate. Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik<sup>48</sup> writes:

I am taking the liberty to write about the people in the Americas who claim to be descendants of the marranos of Spain and Portugal.

They must be treated like full Jews in every way (counted for a *minyan*, given *aliyot*, etc.).

Only when one of these *anusim* wishes to marry a Jew, must he or she undergo full conversion. That is, he or she must undergo immersion in a *mikve* (without the blessing) and full acceptance of mitzvot or commitment to the Torah. A man, if he is uncircumcised, must in addition undergo circumcision; if he is already circumcised, then he has to undergo *hatafat dam brit*.

Rabbi Soloveichik’s letter spares these people their “last inquisition.” It facilitates the extension of *hessed* and support to *anusim* on the part of halakhic Jewry, and assures that their complete return is done thoroughly, but within the compassionate embrace of the Jewish community. (It moreover prevents the untimely conversion of those who ultimately find they cannot bear the yoke of mitzvot and end up retreat-

ing.) For many *anusim*, conversion is the easier road to travel; digging incessantly into their ashen past can prove to be too much for some, and most do not object to the formality of a conversion which does not present itself as attempted rejection. *Anusim* today, like those in the time of R. Jacob Berav who desired absolution by receiving lashes,<sup>49</sup> often express a need for a formal act to undo or atone for the “apostasy” of their ancestors.

Not all *anusim* will return. Today, families no longer live together, grandparents and grandchildren often do not speak the same language, and intermarriages in the past fifty years or so have blurred things completely for many. Some leaders of *anusim* communities here, who know that they are underground Jews, may prefer not to make any changes for fear of losing many of their own to Christianity along the way. They know that many of their congregants will find themselves unable to separate from their historic way of life. *Anusim* who made their return to Judaism public have been subjected to hate-mail, harassment by Christian missionaries (particularly Jews for Jesus and Mormons), and mistrust on the Jewish side. Having lived closely with Catholics, they know how Jews are thought of among the Gentiles. The Jewish community must learn to stretch out its arms to embrace them and to overcome all prejudice against them.

## PORTUGAL AND BACK

Twenty thousand people identifying themselves as Jews cheered the French revolutionary army when it entered northern Portugal in 1807, but were ignored. Between 1808 and 1834, pogroms were carried out against these “New Christians.” Rabbi Israel Halevi, Chief Rabbi of France, reported that a learned man from among the *anusim* tried in vain in 1903 to get Jewish officials’ attention to the plight of his people.<sup>50</sup>

In 1917, an engineer, Samuel Schwartz, “discovered” crypto-Jews in Belmonte. After others investigated the communities in Belmonte and elsewhere in Portugal, the issue of acceptance resurfaced, and was dealt with by the rabbinate in Israel, Morocco and Great Britain.<sup>51</sup>

In 1929, the Council of Sages of Agudath Israel all agreed that the *anusim* of Spain and Portugal of today should be welcomed as Jews “with open arms, so as to bring them back beneath the wings of the *Shekhina*.”<sup>52</sup> R. Jacob Meir, chief Sephardi rabbi of Jerusalem, wrote to Lisbon that the *anusim* are Jews and should be buried in a section of the synagogue’s cemetery.<sup>53</sup> R. Jacob Niv concluded that there is no problem marrying *anusim* who undergo conversion.<sup>54</sup>

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If they convert, they may marry within Israel, but not with a *kohen*, since there is a possibility she is a proselyte. Since the *anusim* are not treated as Gentiles, any one of them who comes to convert need not undergo investigation—as must other proselytes—whether they come out of love of the religion or for some other reason; rather all who come to convert are converted so that they return to their Source, even if they come with ulterior motives.

In 1929, R. Dr. David de Sola Pool, his wife Tamar, and their family were the first Americans to visit the new community. They brought with them an old *sefer Torah*, believed to have reached the New World with *anusim*, as a gift to the synagogue being dedicated in Oporto. His congregation, Shearith Israel of New York, continued to support the Portuguese community for many years.<sup>55</sup> The chief rabbis of Palestine and Britain, R. Zvi Judah haKohen Kook and Rev. Joseph Hertz, were also among the supporters of the new congregation.<sup>56</sup> Had Dr. Pool known of the *anusim* so close to his home, no doubt he would have extended them his welcome and support.

The chief rabbi of Tel-Aviv, R. Haim David Halevy, after describing his own many encounters with *anusim* in South America, wrote regarding hypothetical problems of marriage and divorce: “There is no concern regarding their return to Judaism. No doubt, should they desire to return to Judaism, a clear halakhic solution will be found to permit them [to marry other Jews].”<sup>57</sup> His article concludes by quoting the midrash:<sup>58</sup>

Rabbi Judah, the son of Rabbi Simon, said: The nations of the world will, in the future, bring presents to the King Messiah. . . . They will bring them themselves [the Jewish people] as presents. . . . Rabbi Aha said: They will be brought with honor . . . as they had honored [God’s] name in the world. . . . If they were forgotten and against their will became estranged, from them too I will take priests and Levites, from the Gentiles whom they are bringing.

The return of *anusim le-hek Am Yisrael* will signal the final victory of Judaism and its undying spirit over those who sought to vanquish it. It is the ultimate act of *kiddush shem shamayim ba-rabim*, and a tribute to the many who died on this altar.

May he who blessed our fathers,  
Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon,  
bless, preserve, guard, and assist all our brethren

imprisoned by the Inquisition.

May the King of kings bless them and make them worthy of His grace,  
and hearken to the voice of their supplication,  
and bring them forth from darkness to light.

May such be thy divine will! and let us say Amen.

— *Sephardic Prayer Book*

## NOTES

1. *The New York Times* (Nov. 11, 1990; Nov. 29, 1992); *Times Magazine* (Mar. 4, 1991); National Public Radio (1988; Dec. 1992; Apr. 1995). Other stories include *National Catholic Reporter* (Feb. 20, 1987); *El Paso Times* (Mar. 5, 1990); *Lillith* (Winter 1991); *Greater Phoenix Jewish News* (Mar. 8, 1991); *San Jose Mercury News* (May 11, 1991); *New Mexico Magazine* (June 1991); *Echoes of Sepharad* (Oct. 1991); *Jewish Monthly* (Oct. 1991); *Hadassah Magazine* (Jan. 1992); *D The Magazine of Dallas* (Jan. 1992); *Fort Worth Star Telegraph* (Apr. 5, 1992); *Quantum* (Summer 1992); *Melton J.* (Autumn 1992); *New York Newsday* (Nov. 29, 1992); *Miami Herald* (Dec. 21, 1992); *Forward* (Jan. 29, 1993); *Jerusalem Report* (Jan. 14, 1993); *Jewish Currents* (Feb. 1993); *Spirit* (Spring/Summer 1993); *Dallas Jewish Life* (June 1993); *El Palacio* (Summer 1993); *Southwest Jewish History* (Fall 1993); *The Sephardic House Newsletter* (Winter 1994).
2. There was an address on *anusim* in the Americas at the Midwest Sephardic Rabbinic Convention in Dec. 1993; in Spring 1994, R. Ahron Soloveichik wrote a responsum on their behalf (see below); the *halakhic* aspects of this matter were discussed by R. Daniel Raccah at the Conference of the Organization of the Sephardic Rabbinate in New York, attended by the *Rishon Le Zion*, Hakham Bakshi-Doron, in April 1994; a Leadership Conference for Descendants of New World *Anusim* took place in the Shehebar Center in Jerusalem, where the attendees also met with the *Rishon Le Zion* (*Jerusalem Post*, Aug. 19, 1994); and in May 1995, R. Marc Angel, leader of Congregation Shearith Israel, travelled to the Southwest to meet *anusim*.
3. This is the number given by Don Isaac Abravanel, introduction to *Ma'ayanai haYshua* (Commentary to *Daniel*). For an English translation, see I. W. Schwartz, *Memoirs of My People*, Jewish Publication Society, Phila., 1943, pp. 43-47.
4. M.A. Cohen, *The Martyr*, Jewish Publication Society; Phila., 1973, p. 272.
5. For the history of Jews in the Americas under the Inquisition, see S. B. Liebman, *The Jews in the Spain*, Univ. of Miami Press: Coral Gables, FL., 1970; A. Wiznitzer, "Crypto-Jews in Mexico during the Sixteenth Century," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 51(3), 1961, pp. 168-214; "Crypto-Jews in Mexico during the Seventeenth Century," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 51(4), 1961, pp. 222-268.
6. S. Hordes, "The Inquisition and the Crypto-Jewish Community in Colonial New Spain and New Mexico."

