

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED ABOUT SECRET JUDAISM FROM THE NO-LONGER SO-SECRET JEWS OF NORTHERN MEXICO AND FROM A SHORT VISIT TO PORTUGAL

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Resumen

Me he estado reuniendo en línea con *anusim* (descendientes de criptojudíos de la Península Ibérica) de la alta sociedad de Monterrey, México y sus alrededores. Me quede ahí varias veces, y doy clases ya por varios años a través de *zoom*. Nos sentimos muy cerca. Cuando iba a dar una presentación en España, muchos de ellos viajaron al congreso. Así que nuestro contacto duró mucho tiempo y es profundo. Estas diez familias no emparentadas remontan su ascendencia a los fundadores de Nuevo León y sus mayores les habían dicho que eran judíos. Se pusieron en contacto conmigo después de leer mi disertación, se dieron cuenta de que mantenían muchas prácticas judías y me pidieron que les enseñara el judaísmo normativo. Como les expliqué cada norma desde los orígenes bíblicos, pasando por el desarrollo rabínico, hasta la práctica en España y en tiempos de la Inquisición, surgieron recuerdos sobre tradiciones ancestrales de sus familias, antes secretamente judías. Resultó que todos los hombres están circuncidados, incluido el sacerdote. Compartían oraciones familiares secretas y privadas, carentes de contenido cristiano. Dejan *peah* en sus campos para los pobres. Observan la *shmita*, sabiendo que no se aplica fuera de Israel. Como muchos *anusim*, sus jardines tenían delante higueras, limoneros y granados. Pero los *etroguim* detrás de sus casas son una novedad.

Palabras clave: *anusim*, cripto-judaísmo, Monterrey, Belmonte, Tomar, *etrog*, año sabático.

Keywords: Anusim, Crypto-Judaism, Monterrey, Belmonte, Tomar, *etrog*, sabbatical year

Introduction

Since November 2020, I have been meeting weekly, as an online teacher, with a group of anusim (that is, descendants of the forced converts of the Iberian Peninsula) harking from the upper-class society of Monterrey, Mexico and its environs. They all trace their ancestry to the Spanish founders of the settlement of the large land grant of El Nuevo Reino de León in New Spain, and were all told—one way or another—by a family elder that they are Jews. Most of these individuals have known me for several years now, after my stays in Nuevo León on research trips. Many have traveled long distances with me; others I actually stayed with.

Some members of this group have asked to return to normative Judaism. They listen regularly to the lessons in Judaism of Rabbi Ben-Dahan of Spain. But the local synagogue, Centro Israelita de Monterrey, has systematically rejected converts of any sort. More recently, as their membership dwindles, they have become increasingly open to my friends.

After several of my Northern Mexican acquaintances read through my doctoral dissertation,¹ which I had uploaded onto my website for all to have access to,² they contacted me, saying: Okay, now we know that we are Jews, teach us how to be better Jews, and if the Jews accept us, fine; if not, God will accept us.

What they realized from reading my dissertation is that most of their families had been observing laws specific to medieval Spanish Jewry, throughout the Inquisitorial times and the years that passed since,

1 Schulamith C. Halevy, “Descendants of the Anusim (Crypto-Jews) in Contemporary Mexico”, Ph.D. thesis, Department of Jewish History, Hebrew University, Jerusalem 2008.

2 <<http://anusim.org/AnusimMexico.pdf>> (accessed 3/1/2025).

continually down until today.³ Their families were practicing secret Jews from the days of the Spanish Inquisition until modern times in Mexico!⁴

Because my teaching style was such that I explained each religious precept, starting from its biblical origins, via its rabbinic development, to its practice in Spain, and then during the time of the Inquisition, memories of home practices came up that would not otherwise have surfaced. In this way, I learned much from the participants about the age-old traditions of their secret-Jewish families.

- 3 See Chapter 4 of Halevy (note 1) for a description of Mexican crypto-Jewish practices.
- 4 For the history of the horrors of the Mexican Inquisition, see Seymour B. Liebman, *The Jews of New Spain*, Coral Gables 1970. For reports of post-Inquisition secret Judaism in Mexican territories, see Martin Zielonka, "A Spanish-American Jewish Periodical", *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 23 (1915): 129-135; Vito Alessio Robles, "La Juderia de Monterrey", in *Bosquejos históricos*, México 1938, pp. 94-107; Martin Zielonka, "Francisco Rivas", *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 35 (1939): 219-225; Eugenio del Hoyo, *Historia del Nuevo Reino de León (1571-1723)*, México 1972, p. 268; Richard G. Santos, "Chicanos of Jewish Descent in Texas", *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 15/4 (1983): 327-333; Ricardo Elizondo Elizondo, *Los sefarditas en Nuevo León: reminiscencias en el folklore*, Monterrey 1987; Stanley M. Hordes, "Report: 'The Sephardic legacy in the Southwest: The Crypto-Jews of New Mexico', Historical Research Project Sponsored by the Latin American Institute, University of New Mexico", *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 15/2 (1993): 137-138; Schulamith C. Halevy, "Manifestations of Crypto-Judaism in the American Southwest", *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review* 18/1-2 (1996): 68-76; Frances Hernández, "The Secret Jews of the Southwest", in M. A. Cohen & A. J. Peck (eds.), *Sephardim in the Americas*, Tuscaloosa AL 1993, pp. 411-454; Sch. C. Halevy, "Anusim in North America: The Ingathering", *Tradition* 30/1 (1995): 85-102; Sonia Bloomfield Ramagen, "The Seridó: Refuge of the Anussim?", in H. Brodsky (ed.), *Land and Community*, Bethesda MD 1997, pp. 399-411; Sch. C. Halevy & Nachum Dershowitz, "Prácticas Ocultas de los 'Anusim' del Nuevo Mundo", in J. B. Liwerant & A. G. de Backal (eds.), *Encuentro y Alteridad: Vida y cultura judía en América Latina*, México 1999, pp. 35-46; Sch. C. Halevy, "Jewish Practices among Contemporary Anusim", *Shofar* 18/1 (1999): 80-99; Richard G. Santos, *Silent Heritage*, San Antonio TX 2000; David Raphael, *The Conquistadores and Crypto-Jews of Monterrey*, Valley Village CA 2001; Sch. C. Halevy, "Somos católicos querida: pero nuestro corazón es judío, Lo que los padres cripto-judíos dicen y sus hijos entienden", *Humanitas* 30 (2003): 909-934; Stanley M. Hordes, *To the End of the Earth*, New York 2005.

We started to meet every Sunday on Zoom. The group chose a name and emblem for themselves and arranged a meeting place where they get together for religious and social events. They have been meeting regularly amongst themselves. They maintain a list of internet classes that they attend, including Hebrew, and carefully-chosen charities to which they donate, including Jewish charities. Of the family traditions that came up in our discussions, two stand out: letting the fields lie fallow every seventh year and growing *etrog* (citron) trees.

If until now I was the champion of dwelling on rabbinic practices as they had been preserved among the *anusim*, which helped demonstrate that their crypto-Judaism originated in pre-Expulsion Iberia, in what I present here we will discover mainly non-traditional observances that were also kept by the *anusim*, and about which I was unaware until these classes took place.

Background or Establishing Jewish Heritage

Let me begin by saying that I found it astonishing that, in this small group of representatives of ten relatively unrelated families from northeast Mexico, I encountered the full panoply of Jewish praxis that I knew from previous research throughout the whole region. Despite its decline, circumcision remains common among them. They knew from childhood that they do not frequent church because they were Jews,⁵ and that they will be married into families that are like them subject to approval of the family elders. They were confined to eating at home or at select other families. They avoided mixing dairy with meat (or with fish, as was customary in medieval Spain⁶) in the same meal because it is (quote) “very bad for the stomach.” In most cases, pork, which was considered “dirty” and very unhealthy, was only eaten on rare, public occasions.

5 Save one of my students who is of Jewish origin and yet serves as a priest. I have interviewed several informants in similar situations over the years.

6 See *Beit Yosef*, Yoreh De’ha 87:5.

In the older generation, rabbit was not eaten, nor was seafood or fish without scales, described as fish “with skin.” All of them discarded eggs with blood spots in them. Most knew of ritual kosher slaughter (*shechita*) from their elders and were told it is the “humane way” practiced by those with their heritage. The animal was made to face east, as was done in Spain, where Jews slaughtered also for Muslims.⁷ They also porged the sciatic nerve (*nikkur*),⁸ and removed the suet,⁹ and were told that the meat is better that way (as a matter of fact, the meat is spoiled thereby). Although meat is still treated in this manner on private farms, today it is more and more difficult for city folk to obtain such meat, so my group members unabashedly go into the kosher *carnicería* (butcher shop), and pass kosher lists among themselves. They clean on Fridays, sweep to the center of the room (a Jewish custom harking back to Spain and Portugal),¹⁰ light Shabbat candles, and have a festive family Friday night dinner. Most fasted on Yom Kippur and on the Fast of Esther. Some remembered *cabañuelitos* (booths) in the autumn. In some families, *matzah* was known as *pan ácimo*¹¹ and was eaten on Passover. Most light Hanukkah candles nowadays, but invariably in the home far from any window. Many of the women immersed ritually regularly several days after the cessation of their periods and forty to sixty days after childbirth.¹² They (in other words, their parents) washed their dead and dressed them in *mortajas*, *takhrikhim* (traditional burial shrouds).¹³ Women started preparing finely embroidered white linen burial shrouds at the age of 50.

7 For an example of facing east in Inquisitorial times, see Liebman (n. 4), p. 245.

8 This is a biblical practice mentioned already in Genesis after the fight Jacob had with the “man”.

9 Also biblical, but the *anusim* took it to an extreme, removing all layers of fat from the animal.

10 Moshe Hagiz, *Mishnat Hakhamim*, Chernovitz 1863/4, pp. 32ff.

11 Reported to me by a member of the Montemayor Treviño family.

12 For example, I was told by a lady that in her childhood village in Nuevo León, populated by secret Jews, all homes have water cisterns on the roof that caught rainwater and in which women immersed.

13 White burial shrouds were recognized by the Inquisition as Jewish and advertised by it on bulls posted on church doors, yet it is still seen until the previous generation. See the edict translated in Liebman (see note 4), p. 97.

I have learned much from the participants of our study group about the traditions of their secret-Jewish families. They taught me new, secret prayers and told me how they preserved traditions. Some of their family practices, however, were very new to me.

Sabbatical Year

This all began one day as I was actually telling my class—as a curiosity—about a man from the *anusim* whom I knew from the state of Michoacán, who kept the biblical rule of *shmitta*, leaving the fields fallow every seventh year, which by Jewish law pertains to Israel alone, and has no known counterpart outside of the region of the Holy Land.¹⁴ Suddenly everyone started chiming in: “Me, too”, “We, too,” one after the other. I was astonished and wanted to know why they were following this. At first, they just said it was for the land’s health, though they also practiced crop rotation like everyone else.¹⁵ But then, why in the same year as Jews do it in Israel? Some emotions started to run. In identification with the Holy Land, said one in a follow-up conversation. One woman said it had to do with a prophecy that this would help speed up the final redemption. Another spoke of *caridad*, charity. It was from the Hebrew Bible, she assured me. In that she was not wrong.

I could not make much sense of it. I had considered the story from Michoacán to be an oddity owing to Michoacán’s distance from known concentrations of secret Jews.¹⁶ I asked if they were aware that this biblical commandment only pertains to Israel. Everyone knew. Why then?, I asked. Their implication that they had always kept it did not hold water since Spanish Jewry shows no trace of such a custom in any of the rabbinic literature or poetry. I still have no clue when and how they succeeded in

14 Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:1-22; Leviticus 26:33-35; Deuteronomy 31:10-13.

15 For traditional schemes, see D. C. L. Kass & E. Somarriba, “Traditional fallows in Latin America”, *Agroforestry Systems* 47 (1999): 13–36. A seven-year cycle is not among them.

16 Halevy (see note 1), p. 156.

finding out which year is the sabbatical in Israel. No mention of this practice appears in historic nor in contemporary texts I have ever encountered, but they are completely certain. Other than following the Bible per se for some mystical reason, it is hard to explain this apparently widespread custom. Yet, I cannot ignore it in light of the fact that many noble families¹⁷ consistently practice *shmitta* until today. These *anusim* appear to express a devotion of a kind we did not previously know among *anusim* in Mexico. Many also left fruit on the trees in their orchards during the sabbatical year. One family picked the fruit, packed them in bags and gave them away in the street and market place, saying they harvested too much.

And then one woman said that they also left *peah*!¹⁸ They did not reap the corners of their fields! It was for the poor, she said. She was correct, of course. And how would the poor know it was for them?, I asked. She said, she only had to tell one poor lady whom she saw near the field that they leave it for the needy. After that, they came to every harvest, quietly and politely, and left the field in the exact shape as the rest that was harvested. Interestingly, all four corners were left, not just one. As it seems, this is how they understood the biblical text. Unlike leaving the land fallow every seventh year, which is not mandated outside Israel, leaving a corner of the field for the poor is in accordance with *halakha* (Jewish law), though widely disregarded.¹⁹

Etrog

The *etrog* (*citron medica*), one of the four species used on the holiday of Tabernacles,²⁰ came up in our discussions around the High Holy Days in

17 Families that can demonstrate ancestry to the initial families of the *conquistadores* and are wealthy are deemed “noble” by the populace.

18 Leviticus 19: 9-10. It is obligatory outside of Israel, too (B. Talmud, Hulin 137b).

19 Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, “Gifts to the Poor” 1, 14.

20 See *Mishnah Sukkah* 3:1, which specifies that the species to be waved to and fro by everyone on this holiday are the citron/etrog, palm frond, myrtle branches, and willow branches.

the autumn. I showed my class several *etrogim*:

When I showed them a Yemenite one that I had on hand, they jumped, saying they had the same fruit in their backyard. Theirs indeed do look like the Yemenite *etrogim*, inside as well, with the very thick peel, and the dry center full of seeds. But they do not last from year to year on the tree, as do the Yemenite *etrogim* in Israel, and are not exactly the same cultivar. I was assured by them that many other *anusim* had this citron tree in their backyard. Whatever for?²¹

Here is an example of a Mexican *etrog*, sent to me by someone living in San Pedro de Garza Garcia:

Many others also had the same fruit in their backyards. As it turned out, surprisingly, *etrog* trees are not uncommon among *anusim* in the region, and while all *anusim* I met declared that their gardens had to have a lemon, a pomegranate and usually a fig in the front yard,²² in the back, as it turns out, they grew *etrog* as well. But the presence of the *etrog* had never before been reported to me.

While I had heard elsewhere about *cabañuelitos*²³ in the fields around Succoth time (Tabernacles),²⁴ the four species had never come up before. I was shown myrtle growing, but no one had any idea what was to be done with them vis-à-vis anything Jewish. When I asked about palm trees, I never got a clear answer. But then suddenly, I was told that in the *haciendas* the kitchen was detached and covered with palm leaves. If this tree had a use, and I cannot see how it did not, it was too long a time ago for anyone to remember. Nobody could tell me what the palm trees were for. No memory whatsoever. And, of course, parading around with the four species would have been a great danger in Inquisitorial times.

21 David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit*, Philadelphia 1996, p. 373, found nothing about the four species used on Succoth in the records. Nevertheless, there is little question that these were planted for good reason.

22 This they claimed is an ancient tradition, which helped them recognize members of the group without strangers noticing.

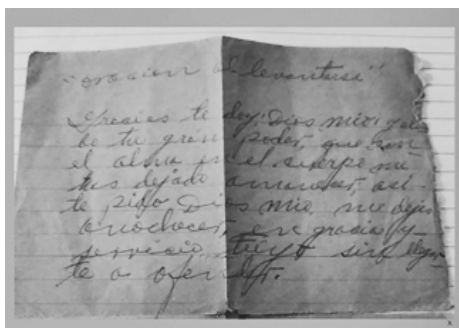
23 Halevy (n. 1), p. 109.

24 Ibid.

But the trees are growing in the backyard of many homes. Do they express a longing of sorts? A memory cherished and by now forgotten? Not much save for confiture is extracted from the tree.

Prayers

I was given home prayers by members of the group. Here is a simple one without any Christian characteristics to it:



Gracias te doy mi Dios mío,
y alabo tu gran poder,
que con el alma en el cuerpo
me has dejado amanecer,
así te pido Dios mío me dejes anochecer,
en gracia y servicio tuyo,
sin llegarte a ofender.

Christian characteristics to it:

It comes from the grandfather of Monica Montemayor Treviño, a fearless woman who came to terms with her Judaism long ago, and some years ago, with a friend, built a public memorial for the Carvajal family (founders of the Spanish colony of Nuevo León) at an art fair, using Hebrew letters as best as she could. It actually made it to the *Obispado* (bishopric palace), and was displayed there for a while. (The installation included a *menorah* where candles were lit regularly and stones were offered for individuals to place on top of the “graves”!)



Here the grandfather (on the left) shows me his whetting stone for sharpening his slaughtering knife, taken out of the safe and unwrapped for me:

Shofar



Monica's father showed me a *shofar* (horn, usually from a ram, blown during Rosh Hashanah services) that he had made from the horn of a bull:

He had taken it seriously, and took the family to the ranch in the fall to listen to him blow it. He blew several different sounds. (He also blew it for them at other times during the year.) Before his passing, he ceremoniously gave it to his eldest grandson. But alas, he knew nothing about the fact that the bull is the one explicitly-excluded animal for the making of a kosher *shofar*.²⁵

The Canaries

A fascinating fact surfaced during my research. Family after family were telling me that their ancestors boarded the ship to New Spain, Mexico at the Canary Islands, not at the boat's port of origin, Sevilla.

Sevilla held control over all departing boats. The Inquisition made thorough lists, and although Luis de Carvajal y de la Cueva, the new governor of El Nuevo de León, had a relatively free hand from King Felipe Segundo (the Second), embarking in the Canaries presumably lowered the risk of being caught, as information was sent back for matching to the lists in Sevilla. They also disembarked at Tampico, where there was no Inquisitorial presence, rather than at the main port of Veracruz. Thus, many *anusim* arrived with Carvajal to his new territory.²⁶ Carvajal died in 1591 in the cells of the Inquisition for failing to denounce his entire family for Judaizing. But he himself was said to have been a model Catholic.²⁷

25 Mishna, Rosh Hashanah 3:2.

26 Eugenio del Hoyo, *Historia del Nuevo Reino de León (1571-1723)*, Mexico City 1972.

27 One generation later we find another Carvajal, the famous Abraham Israel (Antonio Fernandez), born 1590. This Antonio de Carvajal headed for England from the Canaries with a boatful of *anusim* and was allowed in on the grounds of their being Jews. This group founded the first synagogue in England since the expulsion of Jews in 1290. No family connection between the two Carvajals has been ascertained, however.

Portugal

The primary purpose of my visit to Portugal in the summer of 2022 was to meet with a 102 year-old matriarch from Tomar, with whom I fell in love immediately. She was already a centenarian when I was headed for a half-year sabbatical in Portugal two years prior, but the coronavirus pandemic forced us to rush home from the Netherlands, where I had been engaged in other research. She showed me her Sabbath lamp, which she lit every Friday evening: This type of lamp is not unique, but is hardly used anymore because it requires oil.

The general word for oil lamps is *quinaqua*, after the Frenchman who invented the glass “hurricane” cover for burning lamps. The name spread to encompass all oil lamps, including this kind without any cover. All the same it goes under the same name. This lady also had two small antique lamps with linen wicks that she attached to her *quinaqua* on Fridays, and which, when on my first visit, when I was too reticent to take photos, she lit. She said she did that every Friday eve. But when she demonstrated to me how she constructed the lamp on my second visit, she completely ignored those little lamps, and just told me that the Sabbath candles went into two of the regular receptacles of the lantern, not in the little ones as she had shown me on my previous visit. I should have insisted, but since to retrieve them she would have had to walk down the stairs backwards on account of her age, and I was afraid for her wellbeing, I did not dare push further.

This old lady from Tomar told me about the customs there, and also about the foods eaten after the Yom Kippur fast. The community gathered for Kippur in one member’s home. Men in one room and women in another. Wall hangings were covered. They said their prayers with great devotion, five times (like the five silent prayers in the Yom Kippur synagogue service), which only left about two hours of rest. The prayers said by men and by women were different. Children fasted too. She was not sure from what age. After the sighting of the first star, they broke their fast in a communal meal, eating not very much. The break-fast meal included small fried fish *fritatas*: These were served along with white beans and rice with chickpeas. Nothing more.

In Belmonte, things were different, from what I was told. Each family fasted at home. Customs varied. In one home they covered the mirrors, another covered the pictures—“to have a white wall” but left the mirror, and a third did not do anything at all. The foods to break the fast were however similar.

What is most interesting is the fact that fasts were for them more significant than holidays. In Belmonte, there is a fast day before Passover of the magnitude of Yom Kippur. In addition to the Fast of Esther, I was told of another fast “in March.” Fasting is a long-standing practice among *anusim*; we know from Inquisitorial times that Monday and Thursday fasts were common.²⁸ But in Belmonte they told me that in general they preface their holy days with fasts.

Conclusion

We have learned about the surprising practices among the *anusim* in Mexico. They observe the sabbatical year in their fields, apparently for a mystical or devotional reason. Until now, I had not realized how prevalent this practice was. We found *etrog* trees in the backyards of many Nuevo León residents, despite the fact that they knew nothing of the four species used during the Tabernacles festivities. We saw a non-*halakhic shofar* that was very meaningful to its maker. And we encountered original secret Jewish prayers. In Portugal, we learned much about the old Day of Judgement customs in Tomar, including the break-fast foods. And we saw an exquisite Shabbat candle lighting set as well. A nice harvest—forgive the pun.

All this tells us that secret Judaism runs even deeper than we thought, that the heart, not just tradition, guides these dear people.

28 Gitlitz (n. 20), p. 396.

