

The roots and the reality of a Jewish Wedding and Baby naming in Trujillo, Peru

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About ten years ago due to tremendous interest in the area of crypto-Judaism and anusim history and culture, we founded in College Station a center for crypto Jewish studies. At the time I was the rabbi at Texas A&M Hillel and was able to use the Hillel facilities as a meeting place for people interested in returning to Judaism. About four years ago, we merged with a pro-Israel Latino group to form the Center for Latino-Jewish Relations. The CLJR has a number of goals, but the main goal is to bring Latinos and Jews together to aid each other's communities and to find common ground between the two groups. We accomplish these goals through a number of ways. These include: (1) working with local Jewish communities in Peru and Bolivia, (2) organizing cultural conferences throughout Texas (3) supporting sister organizations such as Rabbi Steve Leon's Anusim center, and (4) working on an academic and cultural scale to expose Latino leaders to Israel and Jewish leaders to Mexico. These apolitical fact-finding trips allow leaders from each group to understand the needs and aspirations of the other group and create an atmosphere of intercultural cooperation.

To understand a part of what we accomplish this article focuses in on our work in South America. In another article I will focus on out taking leaders of the Latino community to Israel.

For the last ten years the CLJR has been working with a congregation in Huánuco, Peru. We are also working with congregations in Mexicali, Mexico and in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

Some facts about Jewish life in Huánuco:

The Huánuco congregation is composed of people who have come to Judaism through three separate streams. The first stream is composed of people who are, or who believe they are, anusim (XV century forced converts to Catholicism who somehow managed to maintain some connection to their Jewish heritage or roots), These people believe that they have Jewish roots going back to the expulsion from Spain. Many of these people can provide a litany of "proofs" concerning the fact that their families saw themselves as "hidden Jews". In many cases,

anusim (crypto-Jews or in Spanish Conversos) resent the concept of re-conversion as they see their baptism as illegal and argue for ceremonies of return or reunification rather than conversion. The second stream is composed of people not of Sephardic origin. These are people whose families meandered up the Amazon River traveling the thousands of miles from Brazil to Peru. Most of those in the “second stream: come from families whose ancestors arrived in Peru during the first half of the 19th century. Many quickly lost their Jewish identity and simply faded into the Peruvian landscape. Others held onto their identity for a longer period of time, but as non-Catholic weddings were illegal over the course of time, people lost their Jewish heritage. Those in the second group tend to be Ashkenazi in origin. However as their forbearers, mainly men, tended to assimilate with the local indigenous populations, they are a “mestizo” population with some Jewish collective memory. The third stream has no Jewish blood origins. This stream is composed of people who have studied religion and found their path to G’d through Judaism. In some cases their personal journey have been spiritual marathons; some have had the support of family and friends and other have had their families place numerous obstacles in their path. Most, but not all, of these people tend to be young, well educated and both thoughtful and questioning. Many are highly mobile. Being part of the Peru’s better-educated citizens, urban in nature, and upwardly mobile, they tend to seek opportunities wherever they may be found. .

Due to this intra-Peruvian mobility the Huánaco congregation has demographic ebbs and flows. There are those who were born in Huánaco and intend to live their lives there. There are others, however who have left Huánaco or those who come and go to other parts of the country either to seek better economic or job related opportunities, to attend classes or to seek advanced degrees.

Without realizing it, these new Huánaco Jews have created what we may call “the Huánaco” Diaspora.” These people often end up in remote locations where there is no organized Jewish community. Perhaps for those reasons, or that they have a sentimental attachment to Huánaco, these “children of Huánaco” tend to migrate back to Huánaco for Jewish religious needs and holidays. As such visits to Huánaco have become more of a pilgrimage rather than journeys.

The Huánaco Diaspora

One of the areas within what I call the Huánaco Diaspora is the city of Trujillo in northwestern Peru. Trujillo is a large city, with a population of somewhere between 650,00 and 750,000

people. Due to the fact that the city is located on the Pacific coast of Peru and influenced by the Humboldt Current, Trujillo has a “humid-desert climate”. It is hot, sandy and at the same time humid. For all intensive purposes there is no organized Jewish community in Trujillo. There are, however a number of medical students, who under the auspices of the Huánuco Jewish community (itself composed of converts) converted to Judaism. A teacher, also a medical student, from Huánuco, prepared the Trujillo students and then after circumcision was performed, an isolated location along the Pacific coast line was found to be the perfect place for a mikveh and people from other parts of Peru joined me in the creation of a beit-din. About two years ago, approximately 7 medical students converted to Judaism. Being isolated they have maintained their ties to Judaism through the Huánuco community. In the last year Trujillo’s population has increased as other potential Jews have also come into the community and the community “discovered” other Jews who were unaware that a community was forming.

This information serves as the background information for a wedding and baby naming that I performed in Trujillo, Peru for José Luna y Vhania Rojas at the end of August 2016. Not surprising, the couple met during their conversion studies. The bride is a physician and the groom is a journalist. Both are from non-Jewish families, one family being highly supportive and the other family much less so. Certainly conversion and entrance into Jewish life in a remote part of the world is not easy and one can understand a family’s misgivings. On the other hand, to choose to be Jewish in such a remote area of the world and without a Jewish community to fall back on, is a true symbol of the couple’s commitment. Nothing about this wedding was easy. It should not come as a surprise that the wedding location, a restaurant with grounds for a chupah, had no idea how to conduct a Jewish wedding. All materials had to be brought to Trujillo, from a tallit used as the cover of the chupah to the Ktuvah. The fact that there were no back-ups meant that the margin of error was zero. Everything was either done correctly or not done. We also questioned at first if we would be able to find two “edim” or witness for the wedding. As luck would have edim G’d provided and we not only had two edim but an actual minyan. Most of the guests had never attended or seen a Jewish wedding. The fact that this was a first Jewish wedding meant that such a wedding was not only a new experience for the guests but also for the bride and the groom and, of course, their families. I wondered how people would react, especially when we consider European anti-Semitism. Much to my delight the guests were not only excited about the fact that their city now had had a Jewish wedding, but many of the guests began to tell me of their potential links to Judaism. This link may even extend to José’s father who tells me that he is the grandson of Sephardim from Panama and the

Antilles. For others, this was a fiddler-on-the-roof experience. As the sounds of Hava Nagilah wafted through the air, I could not help but think of the ironies of Jewish history. Here in this remote corner of the world, and far from the centers of Jewish life, this wedding represented not only the union of two people in love but also the first flowering of a nascent Jewish community. My hopes were not in vain. This public wedding acted as the catalyst to permit hidden Jews, unattached Jews and potential Jews to emerge. On Friday night August 26 we conducted a Kabbalat Shabbat service. I wondered who, if anyone, would show up. The time was set for 6:30 and almost no one was there, but in typical Latin American style by 8:00 pm we had some twenty souls welcoming the Sabbath bride. There is now talk of establishing a permanent minyan in Trujillo. Love has a way of making deserts bloom even in the most remote corners of the world.

I am now back in Texas but expect to return to Huánuco in February of 2017. Slowly but surely the seeds planted some ten years ago are now blooming with weddings and children and the reblossoming of Jewish life five centuries after the Inquisition believed that it had put an end to Jewish life. To paraphrase Joseph's question to his brothers about their father Jacob: Od Avinu chai (Does our father still live?)? With Rafael Nissim's baby naming, possibly the first Jewish baby in Trujillo, we can say: Od amenu chai/Our people still lives and with G'd's help will grow in one of the most remote parts of the world.,