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Manifestations of Crypto-Judaism in the American Southwest

Schulamith C. Halevy

לא ראינו אינה ראיה

["we didn't see" is not evidence]

— Mishna

It is more than ten years since the re-appearance of reports of crypto-Judaism in the American Southwest (Santos 1983:327-333; Nidel 1984:249-262). These were preceded by indications of the survival of an awareness of Jewish descent among some Mexicans (Marcuson 1923:431-432; Beller 1969:274-279; Marcus 1970:35-84; Prinz 1973:193-194) and were followed by many anecdotal stories about individual Hispanics in local and national media.[1] In addition, rabbis in New Mexico have over the past fifty years been approached by numerous Spanish-speaking men and women who said they had reason to suspect they are descendents of Sephardim (personal communications with I. H. Celnik, P. J. Citrin, L. Gottlieb, and N. Ward, 1994-1996). In particular, David D. Shor, who served Congregation Albert of Albuquerque as its rabbi for three decades, beginning in 1948, has had several dozen local people relate to him in private that they were Jews (personal communication, Jan. 1996). These people (whom Shor assured did not have to be Jewish in order to be saved) usually described traditions transmitted by the female elders in their family. Jesuit Father Thomas Steele of Albuquerque also acknowledges the existence of crypto-Jews in the area (personal communication, Jan. 1996).

These claims of crypto-Judaism have emerged against a backdrop of similar phenomena throughout the Latin world. In Portugal, in 1807, twenty thousand people identified themselves as Jews to the invading French (Shlouchz 1932:85-86); in 1903, M. Cardoso de Bethencourt published a second-hand account of contemporary secret Jews (Wolf 1926:531-534); earlier this century the Jewish press reported the discovery in 1917 of several villages of crypto-Jews by Samuel Schwarz in the mountains of Portugal (Schwarz 1925; Jewish Chronicle, Feb. 13, 1925); this was followed by a re-emergence under the leadership of Captain Barros Basto in Portugal (Slouschz 1932:111-121; de Barros Basto 1946); Schwarz and later Nahum Slouschz collected and published the

prayers and customs of the secret Jews in Belmonte and its environs (Slouschz 1932); just a few years ago a considerable fraction of the formerly secret Jews in Belmonte publicly re-embraced normative Judaism (The Reporter, Winter 1995; Jewish Chronicle, Oct. 27, 1995). In 1919 a group of Sabbath-keeping Chilean descendents of Conversos approached the South American Zionist Congress (Landman 1941:154-155). In Spain, rabbis and Israeli consular officials reported numerous inquiries, dating back to the 1950s (personal communications, Aug. 1995), as did Assumpcio Hosta i Rebes, director of the Centro Bonastruc ça Porta in Girona (personal communication, Aug. 1995). There was a recent group conversion of people who identify as Jews in Barcelona by Rabbi Mariner (Jewish Chronicle, Oct. 27, 1995; Nov. 24, 1995);[2] the Israeli Rabbinate is in the process of establishing a rabbinic court to process Orthodox conversions in Spain. Prominent Jews, Israeli officials, and journalists in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, and Peru have described encounters with remnants of a lost Sephardic Diaspora (Beller 1969:273-274; Prinz 1973:3-5; Hatzofe, Apr. 1, 1991; K. Teltsch, personal communication, Nov. 1992; M. Arbel, personal communication, Nov. 1995). In Brazil, the struggle of such people for acceptance is evident in many letters to the Israeli Embassy (S. Bloomfield-Ramagem, personal communication, Nov. 1995) and to scholars (A. Novinsky, personal communication, May 1996).

The presence all over the Spanish New World of descendents of peninsular Jews who had been forcibly converted to Catholicism—referred to as anusim in the Hebrew literature[3]—is well-documented (Medina, 1887; 1890; Lea 1908; Lewin 1939; 1987; Marcus 1951:19-20; 1970:35-84; Wiznitzer 1960; 1961:168-214; 1961a:268; Greenleaf 1961: 89-99; 1985; Izecksohn 1967; Liebman 1970; 1975; 1982; Novinsky 1972; Roth 1974:271-295; Gojman de Backal 1987:19-29; Cohan 1992; and others). As is well-known, the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions attempted over the centuries to ferret out any secret keepers of the Jewish faith within their reach. Church officials often complained that Mexico is inundated with Jews (Liebman 1970:42,47,185). The Mexican Inquisition, in its zeal to rid the Spanish colony of all remnants of Judaism among these people and in its avarice for their possessions (Marcus 1970:1399) was established in 1571. The first Mexican auto da fe was held in 1526 and the last in 1815. The Inquisition was abolished with Mexico's independence in 1821, at which time the last person imprisoned for judaizing was released. We thus have documentary evidence for the secret preservation of Judaism in Mexico until the end of the eighteenth century.[4]

Despite persistent reports that some descendents of the forced converts preserved

their Jewish identity as well as various Jewish practices, the notion that crypto-Judaism survived in parts of New Spain until the twentieth century has recently been questioned (Neulander 1994:64-67; 1995). The main challenge is the argument that people who come forward today more likely derived any apparent Jewish practices from fundamentalist Christians who observe various biblical laws and/or are motivated by a desire to climb the social ladder.

Before attempting to settle this question, a definition of "crypto-Judaism" is in order. There is no doubt that descendents of New Christians populated the Southwest (e.g., Chávez 1974:35); naturally, many New Christians assimilated and intermarried with Old Christians and Amerindians. The question that needs to be answered is whether a secret subculture of Jewish origin existed in the Southwest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More precisely, we want to know if some families of Jewish extraction maintained a separate identity which they attempted to preserve or, alternatively, whether some families, knowingly or unknowingly, transmitted a cluster of specifically Jewish practices.

If some New Mexicans were told that they are different from others, it could be that the family considered itself Old Christian nobility or descendent from Old World conquistadors. To demonstrate Jewish origin would require finding known Jews in the family's genealogy and ascertaining that their ancestors were primarily endogamous. Such a research endeavor is being attempted (Hordes 1993:137-138).

In my work I look, instead, for family customs that can only be reasonably explained as of Jewish origin. If such customs are combined with a sense of separate cultural identity, then that could buttress a claim of Sephardic descent. I looked for practices that were traceable either to rabbinic law or Sephardic custom, and which are not shared by other Catholics. To this end, Biblical practices are of less significance on their own, since they could be attributed to fundamentalist Christian sects that were active in the area (McCombs 1925:129-139,154). Practices that appear as evidence of judaizing in Edicts of Faith and Inquisition dossiers—especially those from Mexico—were considered important indicators. Other potential sources of cultural evidence, including language, prayers, folktales, and songs, deserve further examination.

Over the past three years, I have personally spoken with well over two hundred Hispanics who know or suspect Jewish origin. These people, from Spain, Portugal, Madeira, the Azores, Mallorca, all over the United States, Puerto Rico, Canada, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Uruguay, Honduras, Guatemala, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Costa Rica and the Philippines, can be roughly divided into three groups: (a)

those who were told that they were Jews and instructed to follow particular customs; (b) those who were told that they are special in certain ways ("not really Spanish," "not really Catholic," "do not trust the priest") and therefore must observe the ancient custom ("we follow our own ways") which generally consists of a "clean" diet, Sabbath observance, and special burial practices; and (c) those who were told nothing explicit, not told why they do things differently, but over time become aware of being different by means of subtle and indirect messages, and comparing their family customs with others. Ostensibly Catholic parents tell their children that santos and the Trinity are nonsense. Other examples from the Southwest include comments like "Never give money to the Church," "What we do at home is none of the priest's business." Children are commonly taught that eating meat with milk is bad for the stomach (Southwest and elsewhere). It is "bad luck" to count stars (South America); counting stars could make warts or lesions grow from your fingers (Central & South America).[5] There are some who were told by older relatives that they were Jews, but are unaware of Jewish practices, because their parents abandoned most everything; the same is true of those who only find out at an elder's deathbed.

In general, people approached me with specific questions about particular practices they suspected may be of Jewish origin or contacted me to request resource material. My familiarity with Sephardic Jewish practices, current and past, and my willingness to investigate new information were critical for people who had no access to traditional Jewish sources. Questions I have been asked range from: "Is it a Jewish practice to have your slave dig a hole in the ground, then bury him with your treasures to guard them?" (South America) to "Is there a Jewish source for covering mirrors/ spilling out the water in the house where a person dies? For putting stones on graves?" (Southwest and Cuba). Occasionally people come with nothing more than subliminal hints, a knowledge that they are different (for instance, they did not marry everyone or lived in strange isolation), but nothing tangible to point at, and they need guiding questions. I would, for example, ask such people about their diet: What kind of fish do they eat? Did they hunt? Were particular foods eaten, such as morcilla (a popular blood sausage)? When was pork eaten? I would ask how the animals were killed, whether anything was said before killing the animal, what—if anything—was done with the knife before or after the killing, what was done with the animal after killing, were all the parts eaten. Customs related to death and burial are often the last to go, but are rarely a subject of interest among the young. I would ask what they remember of the death of grandparents; what they did in the house, with the corpse, what prayers, if any,

and what mourning customs they remember. The judicial use of questions about specifics is discussed in (Vansina 1965:29-30; Wilkie 1973: 52-53).

As a result of discussions with people hailing from the Southwest, I have identified a number of Jewish rabbinic practices that clearly distinguish their practitioners from members of any Christian sect. The most commonly reported crypto-Jewish practice is, of course, lighting candles on Friday night, which is Mishnaic. Some others include ritual slaughter, salting meat, separating meat and milk, burning a small portion of the dough (hafrashat hallah), and burying the dead in linen shrouds.

Less typical and more interesting Sephardic traditions are to be found as well. Consider the custom of sweeping the floor to the middle of the room. I first learned of it when a woman from Texas who believes herself to be of the anusim was visiting my home and helping clean for Shabbat. She was sweeping the living room and when I looked at her she asked me not to mind her piling dirt in the middle, because "it is just the way we do things." Soon after, I found a reference (Assaf 1943:152) to a description from the early 1700s of this manner of sweeping as a specifically Iberian Jewish custom (Moshe Hagiz, Mishnat Hakhamim, 32b-33a). I then asked all my Hispanic contacts who suspected Jewish ancestry how they swept the floor; the results were at times hilarious, but consistent. I would ask, "How do you sweep the floor?" and be asked in return, "What do you mean?" I would ask, "Where do you gather the dirt? Do you sweep it out the back, out the front, to the corner, to the middle, to the doorway?" Sometimes I would be told, "I vacuum," in which case I would then ask, "What about your mother?" With the one exception of someone who swept out the back door, all New World informants who suspected Jewish descent reported that they or their mothers always swept to the middle of the room. None knew of any connection this custom had with Judaism though several knew that it was considered important in their homes, or that others swept the dirt out the door. This long-forgotten Jewish custom, of obscure origin, appears in Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition records (Glazer 1956:353-354; D. Gitlitz, personal communication, 1995) and literature (de Melo 1721:273). Since other Hispanics do not share this peculiar way of sweeping, finding a family in which this custom still prevails (and I have located dozens in the Southwest alone) can be indicative of Iberian Jewish origin, at least along the maternal line.

I also found that some Latin-Americans burn their nail trimmings and hair clippings, that some older folk were in the habit of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, and that all beds in a house were often aligned with the headboard facing north or south. Rabbinic sources mention the burning of nails (a Babylonian superstition), but

not of hair (B. T. Moed Katan 18a), however hair is listed in Mexican Edicts of Faith as a Jewish practice requiring those who know anyone observing them to denounce them to the Inquisition authorities (Adler 1904:23; Liebman 1970:96-99). When I first asked someone if they did anything with their nail clippings, the reaction was an embarrassed astonishment at my being able to guess at such things: "How did you know? My Dad used to burn them and also hair clippings" (Southwest). Answers included "We buried them" (Cuba, Guatemala, Colombia), "We wrapped them before discarding" (Southwest, Mexico, Cuba, and Brazil), or, "My mother asked us to collect all hair and nail clippings to be buried with us eventually" (Northern Mexico and Central America). Burning or burying nail clippings is virtually unheard of among Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews today. Fasting on Mondays and Thursdays as penance appears in medieval Jewish sources (Jacob b. Asher, Tur Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayim 134; Responsa Levi ibn Haviv 79); though preference for those days is shared by Moslems, it appears in the edicts as a symptom of Judaism (Liebman 1970:96), and was part of the observances of Uriel da Costa (see Faur 1992:123-125). On the other hand, the positioning of beds, which is Talmudic (B.T. Berakhot 5b), does not appear to have caught the attention of Inquisition authorities. Some of the relationships between rabbinic Judaism and practices of anusim, past and present, are described in two recent articles (Halevy 1995:85-102; Halevy and Dershowitz 1996).

It is common knowledge that many Hispanics of New Mexico and parts of Texas and Colorado consider themselves to be "Spanish", hold themselves aloof from Mexican newcomers, and resist inclusion under the rubrics, "Mexican," "Mestizo," or "Chicano" (González 1967:81; Santos 1997). Indeed, the origins of many New Mexico families date back to colonial times (Chávez 1954). Their distinctive dialect, folklore and customs have been the subject of many a book (e.g., Edmonson 1957), as has the Penitente brotherhood (e.g., Woodward 1935; Henderson 1937; Weigle 1970). "In New Mexico..., doubtless because of the isolation of the people, the old medieval life of Spain has remained largely unchanged down until recent years" (McCombs 1925:49). A Jewish contribution to the local culture is often taken for granted (e.g., Tate 1968:34; Ortega 1994:xv). Customs that are too prevalent in the region, though they may suggest Jewish origin, were not used as indicators. These include: paucity of hunting (Edmonson 1957:48), burial within one day of death (Lucero-White 1947:16), covering mirrors in the house of the deceased (Lucero-White 1947:16; Campa 1979:196), one year of mourning (Lucero-White 1947:16; Edmonson 1957:35), and placing stones on the

roadside or gravesite during a funeral (Rael 1951:18).

One of my informants was Berta Covos, born and raised in a small farming town, San Elizario, Texas, formerly part of New Mexico. We met in November 1992, and had many lengthy conversations between November 1993 and August 1994. Our conversations covered everything. Her questions were sincere; she never assumed anything of her childhood practices was Jewish and always tried to check things out. She looked for what seemed to distinguish her from others and tried to identify the source, even after she had been told that she was a Jew by her mother. Though scrupulously honest, she did not tell everyone everything. She confided in me more as more trust was earned. Berta herself met a tragic death in September 1994. I have since confirmed virtually all the details of her story in discussions with her living relatives.

Berta's family was nominally Roman Catholic, but seldom went to church. Life in their hometown has been described by her aunt, Amelia Skaggs (Skaggs and Skaggs 1994). As a child, the standard explanation had been that their unusual ways were the ways of the nobility. As an adult, Berta confronted her mother who admitted that she had been told at the age of five of her Jewish identity, while being raised by her aunt who taught her their ways. Berta's cousin, Anne Enriquez, was raised by her grandmother, the same woman who raised Berta's mother. Anne was told continuously by her grandmother about their being Jewish—in both English and Spanish. However, Anne, after moving away, was no longer exposed to family rituals, since her mother did not care to preserve them. Thus, she knew all along that she was Jewish, unlike Berta, but remembers virtually nothing of the practices that were connected to this. Berta was raised steeped in the traditions, without ever having been given an explanation, and had to investigate and challenge her mother for answers before she uncovered their meaning.

Berta's great-aunt Augustine had said that she had "her own" religion; her uncle had told her he considered himself a Jew; another aunt married an Israeli Jew; a cousin married a Jewish woman; another cousin adopted a Jewish child and raised her as a Jew; and another cousin acknowledged being a Jew. Berta, who was married to a Polish non-Jew, wanted to join the Jewish community, but never converted.

In 1993, Berta spoke at a meeting of the Society of Crypto-Judaic Studies. There she described her family's customs in the following words:

> My mother ... is one of those that have retained the costumas antiguas ... My mother abhorred pork, and we did not call it carne de puerco, we called it carne de marrano.... When I asked her why she called it by that name, she answered... "porque me da asco," "I am repulsed by it." ...She would examine the meat, and

> [reject it] if there was something imperfect about it. We didn't eat meat often, it was considered bad to eat too much meat in our house. My family ate a lot of legumes and vegetables, fresh fruit and very little meat, but carne de puerco was certainly, in the Garcia line, ... definitely not "kosher."... We didn't eat eggs with blood spots in them, and I would ask my mother, "Why can't we just take a little spoon and get the little blood spot out and eat it?; the rest of the egg seems fine," but she said, "No; that's a bad egg."...
>
> My mother used to tell me that I should not ever marry into a family that had imperfections...
>
> We avoided going to funerals, but if it was necessary to go, because we had to pay respects to somebody that was very dear to us or close to us, I remember my mother's instructions about how I was not to approach the casket, how I was not to get close to the body. When I came home I had to take off my clothes—she would put them in a separate bag; they had to be washed separately—and we had to take a total bath. It was a complete bath; we did not just wash our hands.
>
> My family has an obsession with dividing the unclean with the clean. If the unclean touches the clean, then it is contaminated; it is not longer clean. The table for instance was regarded as a holy place. You had to have respect for the table because you honored God there. We never placed telephone books or newspapers on the table because that's where we honored God....
>
> We were not religious, but my mother would always say before we went to school: "Don't covet! Don't steal! Don't lie!" It was like going down the Ten Commandments, as though it was very important to her. As I was going off to school she would say, "If you want anything, come ask me for it." It was considered low class to ask someone for something. If somebody had some candy, you never went over... and said, "May I have some?"; it was considered low class in our family.
>
> She was very careful, we had a rule about everything, and yet we were a very well-educated family. But we did have a lot of superstitions.... A cock's crow in the predawn hours, that was considered a bad omen....
>
> My ... cousin ... admitted to her grandmother's lighting candles on Friday night.

In further conversations with Berta, I learned more about her family: The "clean" diet (la dieta) of Berta's family excluded rabbit and game; shellfish and shrimp were never eaten. They ate chickens that were killed by her aunt's cousin who wrung their necks, then chopped the head off, hung it to drain all the blood, then covered the blood with dirt. The meat was then soaked in hot water. She said everybody in town did it

that way. When red meat was eaten, it was inspected for imperfections, soaked, salted and then soaked again in warm water. All fat was removed and discarded. Her mother and aunt referred to those who made morcilla (blood sausage) and pig feet as "gross." Mixing meat and milk was said to cause stomach ache. When Berta's mother was placed in a nursing home, she refused to eat virtually anything, but offered the staff no explanation. It was only after Berta outlined the rules: no pork, no dairy pudding at the end of meals with meat, and so on, and the staff decided to serve her a kosher diet, that she began to take her meals. Berta "sterilized" her kitchen all the time: she had two sinks; one for clean things and one for unclean things that others brought into the house. If clean was touched by unclean, it became contaminated. She boiled dishes between meals and washed her hands before and after meals.

Berta explained that her extreme concerns over the unclean did not mean that she was always perfectly neat, just very careful about those things and she catalogued other people by standards of a certain cleanliness. A friend who touched her finger to her nose, didn't wash her hands before eating, and didn't return borrowed things, was "low class" on each count. Even her pre-teen daughter was careful about these things, and once chided her for not remembering some washing. Berta's grandfather, considered an "untouchable," was said to have isolated himself in a special room with a "big black book," the family believed to be a Bible. They observed the Yom Kippur fast, as well as the Fast of Esther. Passover was called Transito.

When in mourning, mirrors were covered, the family stayed at home and sat on the floor for a week, and mourned for another year, by dressing black, not listening to music, and avoiding festivities, such as weddings.

On one occasion, as a child, Berta stuck her tongue out at the priest as they were leaving church. Her aunt chastised her with, "Don't dear; this we only do at home."

Most of the practices Berta knew to recount at the Society meeting were of Biblical origin, the most obvious exception being the candle lighting on Friday nights (Mishna Shabbat 2:6-7). Other rabbinic practices turned up later in conversation. Pork is mentioned as a forbidden animal in the Bible, as is the injunction on drinking blood. Hogs are termed marrano in New Mexico (Chávez 1974:146). Draining and covering the blood are biblical, as is discarding the fat. Discarding eggs with blood spots is rabbinic (Joseph Caro, Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 66:3), as are soaking, salting and scalding (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Forbidden Foods 6:10). The scalding step is today practiced only by some Yemenites and by secret Jews the world over (in Portugal, Brazil,

Honduras, Mexico, and the Southwest).

Avoiding contact with the dead and washing body and garments following contact with death, as Berta said, appear to be Levitical, but the separation of clean and unclean in the house (which extended to keeping a separate set of dishes under the sink for unclean guests) included the rabbinic separation of meat and milk (Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 88:1, 93:1).

The Fast of Esther is a rabbinic custom (Mishneh Torah, Fast Days 5:5), though fasting for three days before Purim is in imitation of Esther, as told in the Scroll of Esther. Passover and Yom Kippur are Biblical. Unfortunately the details of holiday rituals were not covered in our conversations.

The mourning practices are a blend of Biblical and rabbinic, as well as some aspects specific to anusim. Covering mirrors is popular in New Mexico, commonly practiced by Jews, but is not uniquely Jewish, and is not mentioned in the Edicts. Sitting on the floor in mourning is rabbinic, as are staying home for a week, and avoiding music and festivities for a year (Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 387:1, 391:2, 393:2). Dressing in black for a year is rare in Judaism, though practiced by some Moroccan Jews; in some Christian countries, widows often remain in black for the rest of their lives. Excessive ablutions have an echo in many Inquisition dossiers from Mexico City.

Mocking the priest behind his back, and similar deprecations of the Church, its teachings, and teachers, appear to be widespread methods of planting hints in the children of anusim worldwide.[6]

In a report on the initiation of a research project on remnants of a Sephardic legacy in the Southwest (Hordes 1993:137-138), seven practices suggestive of crypto-Judaism were listed: Friday-night candle-lighting, refraining from eating pork, observing a Saturday Sabbath, covering mirrors during mourning, circumcision, playing with a four-sided top, and leaving pebbles on graves. Of these, Sabbath observance, circumcision, and refraining from pork are of Biblical origin and, though they are mentioned in Inquisition edicts and dossiers as Jewish practices, could also be attributed to more recent fundamentalist Christian influence in the area. Lighting candles on Friday evening is rabbinic, appears frequently in Inquisition records, is symptomatic of crypto-Judaism in Portugal today, and is the most commonly cited indication of Jewish heritage. As already mentioned, covering mirrors and leaving pebbles are well-known in New Mexico, as well as among Jews, do not appear to be mentioned in Inquisition records, and are not uniquely Jewish. Tops are extremely popular in Portugal, where

they are made traditionally of wood and are in no way unique to New Christians, and, though popular among Jews on Hannukah, are not of Jewish origin.

In a note in this journal (Neulander 1994:64-67), the existence of crypto-Judaism in the Southwest was questioned. Claiming that of Hordes' seven practices the four-sided top is the ethnic marker "that seemed most compelling," the author goes on to demonstrate the unlikelihood of its being associated with Judaism among Hispanics in New Mexico. Having set up and torn down a straw-man, in the form of the obviously weakest indication, the teetotum dreydl, the author jumps to the unfounded conclusion that crypto-Jews of the Southwest are "an imagined community." The prima facie strongest indication of those Hordes listed, namely candle-lighting,[7] is unaddressed in that note, as are the many other biblical, rabbinic and obscure Jewish practices we listed above. Such customs as we have described bear strong evidence of Jewish origin. The more obscure the practice, the more firmly it attests to the existence of a crypto-Judaic subculture. Many would not even be recognized by Jews or Gentiles today as Jewish, and there would have been no impetus for any non-Jew to adopt them. These rabbinic and medieval customs could not have been derived from a reading of the Bible and are not shared by non-Jews, nor could they have been learned from Jews in the region. Though it is known that people learned from the Edicts themselves how to act Jewish, it would greatly challenge one's credulity to imagine that it was masochistic Old Christians who did so and were later tried for such practices, rather than secretly devoted Jews. Accordingly, the practices uncovered in this research are best explained as the product of an unbroken tradition harking back to the Iberian Peninsula.

In (Levi 1993:138-139), a Hispanic congregation in Texas, the Iglesia de Dios Israelita, with Jewish holidays and biblical dietary laws is described. This group is not representative of Southwest anusim, but is connected, as pointed out by the author, to a Christian church by the same name in Mexico. Earlier this century a group of Mexican members from Venta Prieta claimed they were of Jewish origin (American Friends 1944).[8] Many of them have since moved to Israel. Patai (1983:447-492) believed that the origin of this Venta Prieta community was in the same church. Patai did not, however, rule out the possibility that some congregants were crypto-Jews:

> The very fact that in 1889 Francisco Rivas openly declared himself a Jew, and found it possible to publish a paper intended for Jews only, proves that in those days there were Jews in Mexico who considered themselves natives of the country and believed that they were the descendants of Spanish Marranos who had lived in

> Mexico for centuries and escaped, almost miraculously, the clutches of the Inquisition. It is, therefore not at all impossible that at least part of the present-day Jewish Indians of Mexico, who likewise consider themselves descendants of Spanish Marranos, are actually of the descent they claim to be. (1983: 459)

Pointing out that the possibility is bolstered by the fact that some of the members openly admitted to having converted, he wrote (1983:472): "The fact that some members of the Venta Prieta community did not conceal that they were proselytes converted to Judaism, or half-converted to it, seemed to substantiate the claim of those who asseverated their Jewish descent."

He also remained open to the possibility that crypto-Jews were here using the Adventists to their ends: "It is, of course, equally possible that Brother Delgado misled either the Jewish Indians or the Seventh Day Adventists as to his true convictions" (1983:461).

Ultimately, the fact that three young Venta Prietans accepted Patai's advice to convert was taken by him as proof positive that they could not have truly believed they were Jews:

> I replied that, feeling as Jewish as they did, it would be only logical for them to undergo an official conversion ceremony... I added `You want to reach a goal that is one kilometer away. You have already gone 999 meters, so you might as well go the last meter' ... [In their accepting my advice] I was struck by the ironic nature of the sacrifice required on the part of these Venta Prietans as the price of their acceptance into the Jewish fold: the expression of their readiness... was the strongest indication of their non-Jewish origin, and the tacit admission of this long-denied fact. (1983:491-492)

On the other hand, I know of many anusim from the Old World, as well as the New, who were absolutely certain that they were Jews, yet yielded to demands for conversion, in order to rejoin a Jewish community, some even to three conversions, as they moved from one denomination to another (many with no intentions of emigrating to Israel). I have watched people agonizing over this very problem time and again. Some yield and others do not; but what separates them is not their self perception vis-a-vis their own Judaism.

Recently, Neulander (1995) attributed claims of crypto-Judaism in the Southwest to proselytizing activity of the Church of God (Seventh Day), the Seventh Day Adventists, and other fundamentalist denominations. Her thesis does nothing to explain any of the rabbinic practices we have repeatedly found in families asserting Jewish descent. Nor

does it explain why these people do not abstain from wine or tobacco. The alternative scenario, whereby interest in the Seventh-Day sects arose, at least to some extent, from a desire to get closer to Judaism without actually risking a crossover, remains considerably more likely. This is exactly the explanation given me by the son of an Adventist from Recife who was told of his Jewish descent and whose family maintains some Jewish practices. People who secretly rested and worshipped on Saturday would provide a fertile ground for Seventh-Day missionary activities. It has also been suggested (T. Atencio, unpublished) that a catalyst for Protestant inroads in New Mexico was provided by anusim who were eager to be permitted access to the Old Testament.[9] These explanations are eminently more plausible than the notion that some Church of God members simply forgot who they were in the course of a few decades. How does one explain why octogenarians (like Berta's mother who was born in 1903) said they were told they were Jewish in their childhood by members of the prior generation and kept strictly to Jewish practices? Another example: A Seventh-Day Adventist from Puerto-Rico informs me that his grandmother made him wash his hands before and after meals by filling a cup with water and then pouring it over his hands (cf. Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayim 159:1). He had to carry it to school and use it there, but was very embarrassed, since no one else in his Seventh-Day Adventist school did likewise. A member of a group of Seventh-Day Adventist pilgrims on their way to the Holy Land from Central America told me that their diet included clean meat, salting meat to remove blood, and no mixing of meat and milk. These are not typical Seventh-Day Adventists.

Some Mexicans and New Mexicans call themselves sefarditos (personal communications).[10] The term marrano is also used by some crypto-Jews in New Mexico to refer to themselves locally (T. Atencio, personal communication, Jan. 1996). These usages are not explainable by the Church of God theory. Likewise, when a New Mexican woman tells her daughter on her death-bed, "If you want to find out the truth about us, go to the synagogue," one is hard put to attribute that to Adventist influence.

Neulander (personal communication, Dec. 1995) stated that she left out persons without claim of Judaism in their background from her investigation. It is, however, not uncommon for parents to raise children to carefully observe the family traditions, but never mention that they are Jews, although they may later divulge their origins to some of their children or to others. Ignoring such people demonstrates ignorance of the selective transmission in secret traditions, as well as the need for patience to build trust. Most secret Jews will not admit any connection to Judaism; the few who do usually wait until they feel safe with an outsider. Berta made a trip to northern Mexico and returned

with the addresses of many people who requested information regarding anusim. One of the stories she came back with took place at an inn. Berta was having coffee and saw a woman sitting not far with a hexagram on her necklace. When Berta looked again, the six-pointed star was gone. Approaching the lady, Berta asked if she hadn't seen a Jewish star a moment before, to which the woman responded, "you noticed!" and explained that she realized she was descended from Jews and when she found that necklace with two dancing figures that could look like a Jewish star she bought it and was using it to identify herself to those who were sensitive.

The fact that many New Mexicans claim origin from "pure blooded" conquistadors, whether or not their ancestors intermarried with the local Native American population, is well-known (Campa 1946:13; González 1967:75). Mythologizing illustrious ancestry is not a new phenomenon (Chávez 1954:xv-xvi; Lesser 1995). Being descended of a Jew, however, never carried prestige in Mexico or in the Southwest, not among hidalgos and not among mestizos. Even if we do grant that a person might lay claim to Jewish heritage for ulterior motives, stretching that to claim actual observance by such impostors of Jewish practices long abandoned by most American Jews borders on the ridiculous.

The pride in separateness among secret Jews transcends personal wealth or official class. When a stranger or newcomer's credentials are requested, what is expected is not title or occupation, but ties with the right family. An outsider will have great difficulty in getting inside information or access to other members of the group. The sense of apartness that many anusim feel could be well summed up by the words of an elderly Texan, "nuestro comportamiento nos denuncio" ("our demeanor denounces us"). The first person plural implies identification with a group; the term denuncio indicates that detection is seen as dangerous, though it was said with pride. The term los nuestros (or muestros), as contrasted with los otros, is typical. As in Portugal, Brazil and other enclaves, anusim identify other anusim from their area through orally transmitted genealogies, and anusim from other areas by their religious behavior, personal style and veiled questions understood by anusim, but not by Christians.[11] This fragile subculture has survived against all odds, both culturally and religiously, but at great cost to its membership. It is threatened by modernity, mobility and publicity, but the exposure to the outside world has at times brought awareness to the uninformed among its members.

Despite the media hoopla in New Mexico, crypto-Judaism there, as elsewhere, remains a secret subculture: Thomas Chávez, director of the New Mexico State Museum,

says that the publicity is a “form of cultural disruption” to the social equilibrium in the New Mexican community (personal communication, Feb. 1996). This no doubt has become a problem, especially in the smaller rural villages where almost everyone is related to everyone else (Edmonson 1959:13-14). Identifying an individual can upset a whole community whose life continues to revolve around the Catholic Church, ministered by a non-local priest. For this reason, perhaps, New Mexicans living in the city or outside the state are less reluctant to discuss their origins. Local scholars also feel that, although a reality, the secret Jewish presence has been blown out of proportion by scholars and journalists alike.[12] Many complained about being categorized by others as Jews over their objections.

Several New Mexicans expressed satisfaction with the assertion (Neulander 1995) that the field is becoming too contaminated for the ethnologist. Many have bragged about having duped intruding researchers with false tales. Indeed, it has become a local sport of sorts to fool the “Yankee”/“Gringo” anthropologists and folklorists who come to them with much to take and nothing to offer in return. “Actually, the social scientists, the folklorists, and the writers emerge as anomalous and unsettling. Are they voyeurs only? Gossips? Dupes? Desecraters? Participant-observers? What kinds of understandings do they seek? How do the finally express their comprehension? To whom? And why?” (Weigle 1981:227). One said to me regarding a graduate student investigating crypto-Judaism in the area: “The lady has no clue; she charges into New Mexico and expects people to share with her what they are reluctant to discuss with family.” The question remaining is not whether there is a crypto-Jewish presence in the Southwest, but why they still hide the fact from most outsiders, and the lack of sensitivity on the part of outsiders is, at least in part, the answer.

A common theme in Southwestern folktales (e.g., Rael 1977:351-355; 534-542) is the hero/heroine helping some animals along the way. In return, he/she is given the privilege of taking on the animal’s form, thus averting death, and going on to win the treasure or princess, as the case may be. The moral, that only by treating those perceived to be different with respect and compassion can one gain the insight and privilege to represent them, should not be lost on the aspiring ethnologist.

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Notes

1. Media stories include: Avotaynu, July 1985; National Catholic Reporter, Feb. 20, 1987; National Public Radio, 1988; Avotaynu, Winter 1989; El Paso Times, Mar. 5, 1990; The New York Times, Nov. 11, 1990; Lillith, Winter 1991; Time Magazine, Mar. 4, 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; The New York Times, Nov. 29, 1992; New York Newsday, Nov. 29, 1992; National Public Radio, Dec. 1992; La Life, Dec. 19, 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; Sephardic House Newsletter, Winter 1994; Nuestra Carta, Apr./May 1994; The Jerusalem Post, Aug. 19, 1994; The Sentinel, Mar. 16, 1995; National Public Radio, Apr. 1995; The Forward, Apr. 21, 1995; Hadassah Magazine, May 1995; Aurora, Oct. 6, 1995; The Dallas Morning News, Feb. 12, 1996; Expulsion and Memory, 1996 (film); JUF News, Apr. 1996; Chicago Tribune, May 28, 1996. A discussion of the evidence is in (Tobias 1990:7-21,194-196).
2. “Finally, after 500 years, I am a Jew,” said one middle-aged woman after the conclusion of the ceremony. This according to Rev. Dollinger, who in the same letter to the editor confessed that in his eight-eight years nothing has ever moved him as much as this event.
3. Barros Basto also deemed anusim to be the appropriate term for modern-day crypto-Jews (Slouschz 1932:143).
4. While the ulterior motives of the Inquisition have been demonstrated (e.g., Netanyahu 1973), the inference that the charges were fabricated and that all who cared about their origins had fled to countries where they could practice Judaism in the open, remains the sentiment of a small minority (Rivkin 1957:183-203; Netanyahu 1973; Roth 1995; cf. Cohen 1967:178-184).
5. The appearance of three stars signals the end of the Sabbath, as well as the end of Monday and Thursday fasts; not counting stars is common among anusim, has survived in Spanish-Portuguese Jewish families to this day, and is recorded in the Edicts of Faith.
6. The same story of a converso mocking his priest appeares in the Portuguese inquisition records (Anita Novinsky, personal communication, May 1996) and in Turkish Ladino tales collected in (Koen-Sarano 1986:266-267). There is also a New Mexican tale of a Jew outwitting a priest (National Public Radio, 1988; Rael 1977:562-563).
7. A self-help group in Spain advertised in a Northern Spain newspaper, asking to be

contacted by people who remember their grandmother lighting candles on Friday nights and not eating pork. This resulted in several of the conversions in Spain in 1995.

8. "Prof. Francisco Rivas is a descendant of a Marano Jew. He was born in Campechy... in 1850. He is probably the last surviving member of a colony of Marano Jews that lived in Yucatan.... This man speaks Hebrew" (Marcuson 1923:431). For more on Rivas, see (Zielonka 1915:129-135; 1939:219-225).

9. Eagerness among Mexican-Americans to obtain copies of the Bible is frequently noted by Protestant missionaries (e.g., Rankin, 1875:42; McLean and Williams 1916:43-44; Brackenridge and García-Treto 1987:3,35-36).

10. This is true in other places as well. At the Chicago O'Hare Airport International exit (May 1994) I witnessed the following: An airport employee marched out with an elegantly clad woman, announcing that he had found a relative, since their surnames were the same. An interpreter began speaking to her in Spanish, then asked her if she is a sefardita. The arriving woman said yes. Then the interpreter (wearing a cross) identified herself as belonging to the same group and told the gentleman that the arriving lady could not be his relative.

11. A typical ritual of identification of a prospective bride or groom's family not from the area can begin with questions such as: "Would you like to join us for a barbeque Sunday morning, unless of course you go to church?" If the answer is "We are not regular church goers," the next question might mention key foods such as pork, which could invite the response, "We are allergic to pork," or "We find pork unhealthy," etc. If at the end of this minuet the inquiring family is not satisfied, the meeting may be called off. (I have been given such descriptions by several persons from the Southwest.)

12. According to Robert Torrez, current New Mexico State Historian, "Crypto-Judaism is exaggerated [by the media]; much ado about little" (personal communication, Feb. 1996).

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Schulamith C. Halevy holds a Masters degree in history from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She teaches at the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies in Chicago, Illinois, is editing an issue of Shofar on Sephardim in the New World, and is currently writing a book on the anusim.