

The sifrei torah in the aron kodesh in Lisbon



*There are no five-star, kosher l'Pesach hotels in Belmonte, Portugal, and spending Pesach there isn't the stuff luxury getaways are made of, especially when you have to shecht your own sheep. But for Ari Greenspan and his family, spending last Pesach in this little Portuguese village and making the Seder for a 500-year-old community of Anusim, forced converts of the Inquisition, it was an experience not to be missed for all the luxury in the world*

#### Ari Greenspan and Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Belmonte is a small medieval village in the north of Portugal near the Spanish border. Quaint cobblestone streets and ancient houses abut the mostly destroyed thirteenth-century castle, and — just as they did 500 years ago — the crypto-Jews of the Inquisition still live here.

Crypto-Judaism is the secret adherence to Judaism while publicly professing to be of another faith (Greek *kryptos*, hidden). Crypto-Jew is also used to describe one who maintains some Jewish traditions of his ancestors, while publicly adhering to other faiths, most commonly Catholicism. It was here that the Greenspan family spent last Pesach to help this small but astounding community celebrate the Yom Tov in a befitting manner.

**The Creation of Portugal's Crypto-Jews** In 1492 the Jews of Spain were given the option of converting to Christianity or being expelled from the country. Many fled, and close to 100,000

made their way across the border to Portugal, where King João (John) II welcomed the influx of brains and capital. The welcome, however, was short lived.

The hospitable John II was soon succeeded by his first cousin and brother-in-law, Manuel I, under whom conditions initially remained good — until Manuel expressed a desire to marry Princess Isabella of Spain. His future in-laws, the Spanish monarchs King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, imposed a condition on the proposed marriage: rid Portugal of its Jews. Manuel agreed, and on December 5, 1496, five days after the marriage agreement was signed, he issued a decree giving Portugal's Jews eleven months to leave the country.

But when the deadline arrived, Manuel closed the gates. No Jews were permitted to leave, and all but the few who were martyred were forcibly baptized.

In 1579, after a long negotiation, Portugal obtained from the Vatican the right to create its own Inquisition, which was even more oppressive than the Spanish one. Unlike in Spain where the Anusim were the “weaker” layer of Jewish society, not willing to hazard

**COMING OUT OF HIDING**

# In Portugal

A community with a mysterious history, sheltered in the quaint village of Belmonte. Ornate Torah scrolls in a Lisbon shul and the old typewriter of a legendary army captain provided the backdrop for a primitive-style matzoh baking effort, preceding a Pesach Seder with the crypto-Jews





Captain Barros Basto, the dynamic military officer who embraced Judaism

Behind the double wall, the priest in charge of the renovations found a deep, arched niche cut into the stone. It was clearly an *aron kodesh*



Touching the past. A Megillas Esther manuscript that Captain Barros Basto received as a gift

the dangers of expulsion, Portugal's Anusim included all Jews, and thus for a long time, they heroically fought the imposition of Christianity and the suppression of their Judaism.

Over the centuries almost all the crypto-Jews lost their identity as Jews. Some, even today, know they come from Jewish stock but view themselves as Catholic. A very small group rigidly kept what they could remember, secretly meeting and passing on to their children whatever they knew. Like a long game of telephone, things got mixed up and forgotten, but the basic message of an oppressed nation commanded by Hashem to keep His Torah remained. A few traditions were passed down over the centuries, although oftentimes those traditions ended up being nothing more than the lighting of two candles on Friday night or washing hands in the morning, with no knowledge of the reason why.

**The Rediscovery of Portugal's Jews** The amazing story of the reemergence of Portugal's crypto-Jews in the 1920s was brought about by a Polish-Jewish mining engineer and a Portuguese army officer. In 1917, Samuel Schwartz was brought over from Poland by the Portuguese government to help develop the lead mines in the north of the country. He and his party arrived in the village of Belmonte and were told, "If you want coffee in the morning, do not buy it from those Jewish pigs." Schwartz was electrified. As far as anybody knew, there were no Jews left in Portugal. They had all disappeared over the centuries. He immediately went to meet the Anusim.

At first they could not believe he was Jewish. They had lived a simple, uneducated, and isolated life and did not even know there were other Jews in the world. The traditions among the Anusim were strictly kept, not by the men but by the women. They knew no Hebrew and all of their tefillos, of which there were many and mostly based on our texts, were in Portuguese. Finally, the old matriarch of the family was brought forward, and Schwartz said

Kriyas Shema for her, in Hebrew. When she heard Hashem's name, she turned to the people and said, "He is one of ours."

This event and Schwartz's subsequent research into the *minhagim* of this community opened a short chapter of an active movement of "coming out of the closet," heralded by Schwartz but spearheaded by Captain Artur Carlos de Barros Basto.

**The Portuguese Captain** Captain Barros Basto was a dynamic, educated, high-ranking officer in the Portuguese army. He was also a descendant of Anusim. When he was moved by his heritage, he quietly went to Morocco to learn Torah, have a bris, and convert halachically to remove any doubts about his Jewishness.

Barros Basto then returned to his native city of Porto, the second largest city in Portugal and the nearest city to Belmonte, and began teaching the Jews there about their heritage. When the army got wind of his behavior he was court-martialed and became a sort of Portuguese Alfred Dreyfus.

He was quite an amazing man. He started a yeshivah in Porto, built a spectacular shul, and compiled an impressive

Jewish library. We spent two nights in the rabbi's quarters on the top floor of the ninety-year-old building. In the middle of the night, I crept downstairs and spent an hour in his office and the yeshivah rooms, which are now a museum. When I looked lovingly at his books, I found a printed Tanach from the 1500s. As the new representative of the emerging Jewish community, Barros Basto had communications with leaders of Jewish communities around the world. He even printed a local Jewish newspaper, *HaLapid* (The Torch), which covered Jewish news and information about the holidays and customs of our people.

**Many Meetings** A few years ago the two of us — and the swordfish and kosher locusts we were bringing — visited Portugal on the way to a kashrus conference in the US. We decided to spend twenty-four hours with the young rabbi then

living in Porto, and for about eighteen of those hours, we met with Anusim.

For example, a Catholic priest who has Anusim roots came to the shul to speak to us and related how he tells his congregation about the closeness he feels to the Jews. He encouraged his entire congregation of several hundred to fast that year on Yom Kippur as a means of identifying with Judaism. No longer young, he felt comfortable telling us that he is convinced that his was a family of Anusim and that, as was done by many such families, they gave one of their sons (him) to the Church to prove their loyalty. That night, we were taken to a house on the old street of the Jewish Ghetto that was owned by the church. It was undergoing renovations to become a seniors' home, and a double wall had been discovered. What was unusual about this room was that it had an entrance as well as an unexpected back door. Behind the double wall, the priest in charge of the renovations found a deep, arched niche cut into the stone. It was clearly an *aron kodesh*. There we were, late at night, in a house with no electricity that had held a small synagogue in the one room that afforded a quick getaway via its extra door.

I could not help but wonder about the last time davening was held in this room. Were people being rounded up outside? Did the owner of the house and children survive with their Yiddishkeit intact and make their way to Holland or the Americas? History does not supply that answer.

Earlier that evening the community president, a young professor of psychology, had arranged for a group of thirty people, mostly professionals, to come and hear the *shiurim* we were giving. The day before we arrived, two young teenage boys had been circumcised. In their honor, the rabbi made a toast and announced that because of them there was now a minyan of circumcised Jewish males in Porto for the first time in recent memory. The rabbi proudly introduced us to an old woman who was "the granddaughter of Captain Barros Basto, the founder and father of the entire *teshuvah* movement." Until that point we had never heard of Captain Barros Basto. If we hadn't come to Porto, we probably never would have. Why we had to hear of him is because of the next stop on our travels.

**A Mix Up in the London Archives** Having finished our trip to Porto, we hopped on a plane to London, where we'd have less than twenty-four hours to scour the archives of the London Beis Din. Our goal there was clear. We wanted to see their kashrus and *shechitah* records to evaluate different traditions about various birds and fish, particularly the swordfish.

Here's how archives generally work. You find the file you want to look at on a list and write down its folder number and box number. Somebody goes to the basement storerooms, and the box is brought up, the particular folder is removed, and you sign for what you take. You are allowed to look at it with only a pencil and a paper on the table so no damage can occur. It's quite exciting. Sometimes you can find a treasure that hasn't been touched for more than a century.







The ancient traditions live on. Dr. Ari Greenspan bakes matzoh on erev Pesach in Belmonte on an ancient oven used by generations of crypto-Jews

The Anusim would have had to be exceedingly careful about baking matzos in days of old.

They were certainly watched by the Church

We'd requested a file on fish, and by mistake we were given the minutes of the Spanish Portuguese synagogue in London. Imagine our frustration, as we had no time to waste before we had to catch our flight to the US. But the Hand of Hashem was clearly at work.

I flipped open the folder and saw a letter to Captain Barros Basto, encouraging him in his work. I then saw letters typed on the same typewriter I'd seen in Barros's library in the shul in Porto during the middle of the night, signed by the very Captain whose granddaughter I'd taught Torah less than twenty-four hours earlier.

Barros Basto described touring the northern countryside on horseback with a doctor to perform brissim. He visited a house and had ten men daven Maariv with him — the first such minyan in that area in hundreds of years. Needles to say, Ari and I were dumbstruck to be holding these letters in our hands.

Captain Barros Basto described his long arduous trips on horseback, in 1927, up into the mountains to find the Jews. In his words, these Jews were hesitant to come out into the open as they were "incredibly afraid." He described how "the difficulties



To teach the new generations. A classroom in the first yeshivah Porto had seen in close to 500 years. The yeshivah, built in the 1920s, was the brainchild of Captain Barros Basto

Some traditions withstood centuries of secrecy. Ari Greenspan prepares to *shecht* a sheep for the community needs. The locals insisted on cutting out certain sections in an effort to remove the sciatic nerve



are enormous.... the difficulties in communication, ignorance, the ancestral fear inherited from the times of the Inquisition, which is now stupid but still must be reckoned with. On Monday evening, the seventeenth, I read the *Arvit* [Maariv] prayer in the house of Ollivier Neves in a room full of these neo-Jews and crypto-Jews.... During the prayer, I gave some religious explanation. Those present were highly pleased.... The elderly women wept with joy."

**The Pesach of the Anusim** I accepted the job of spending Pesach in Belmonte with great excitement, arriving a few days before the holiday because I needed to *shecht* lots of sheep for the community and *kasher* the kitchen for the communal Seder we ran for them.

Centuries of clandestine living creates a culture of secrecy. Belmonte's crypto-Jews are very hesitant to really let people see what they do. However, living with them for two weeks and reading the Torah, and answering questions opened a window into their lives for me. Most researchers are nonreligious historians who won't notice things that we do.

For example, I *shechted* about thirty sheep for Pesach, with two old men from the community helping me. There are halachos that pertain to "*basar sh'nisalem min ha'ayin*," kosher meat that has been out of sight of *frum* Jews, which might have been switched with nonkosher meat. However, if *simanim*, certain marks, are made on the meat so it can be identified, it may be eaten if it's been out of sight. Therefore, I marked all the meat that we butchered, lest it leave my sight. Then I noticed that the two old men were also making unusual cuts on the hind legs of the animals. Only later, when I got to know them well and they grew comfortable with me, did they tell me that it was their way of removing the *gid hanashe*, the sciatic nerve that may not be eaten. It certainly was not kosher by our standards, but it was quite unbelievable to me that these simple, uneducated farmers knew exactly what to cut and why they did it — that they had been carrying out this tradition from their fathers for the last five centuries.

**The Matzoh of the Anusim** What really excited me was the opportunity to see their closely kept, secret matzoh-baking process. Ari Zivotofsky and I had heard about it and had even seen a black-and-white photo of how it was done. While talking with them before I arrived, they claimed that nobody does it any more,

I noticed that the two old men were also making unusual cuts on the hind legs of the animals. Only later, when I got to know them well and they grew comfortable with me, did they tell me that it was their way of removing the *gid hanashe*

but I didn't believe that either and came prepared with my own *shmurah* flour from Israel.

The Anusim would have had to be exceedingly careful about baking matzos in days of old. They were certainly watched by the Church on Erev Pesach and on the first day of Pesach, and as a result, they never ate matzoh on the first day. When the inquisitors saw that nobody had baked matzoh, they usually left town. That is why they ate their matzoh only on the Second Day of the *chag*. They could not bake in a regular oven as it was not kosher, so they used little terracotta pots to make the fire and, so as not to arouse suspicion that they had bought new utensils, heated up old red roof tiles and baked the matzos on them. Nobody would even show me their ovens due to their obsession with secrecy. Finally, sitting in the town square next to eighty-five-year-old Aleppio and speaking to him in my broken Spanish, I convinced him to let me use his ancient oven for my own matzoh baking. And there, on the patio of the shul, overlooking a magnificent valley, we baked *matzos mitzvah* in the way this community had done it for over 500 years. The women preparing the food for the Seder heard about what I was doing and came up and started mumbling their memorized tefillos, crying at the sight of the matzos baking.

**The Seder** The Seder was held in the social hall of the shul. Kosher food such as matzos, wine, fish, etc., was brought in from France. I worked hard at *kashering* the shul's kitchen and pots after we had salted all the meat and removed the *gid hanashe* and *cheilev* from the hindquarters. Three families got together and made some vegetable side dishes and a big hearty lamb stew.

About fifty of us sat down after Maariv for the Seder, and across the table from me sat an old couple. The woman was close to ninety, bent over, and wearing glasses that made her eyes look huge. She limped and needed two crutches to hobble around. I explained in a mixture of English and Spanish, which was translated to Portuguese,

that we had a very unique Seder planned. We would be eating four types of matzoh. First, there was the machine matzoh from France. Then I explained to them that I had baked my own *shmurah matzoh* in my oven at home, which I proudly told them I have done for many years. Then the *matzos mitzvah*, baked in their traditional manner on Erev Pesach here in Belmonte, something they have not done for maybe twenty-five years

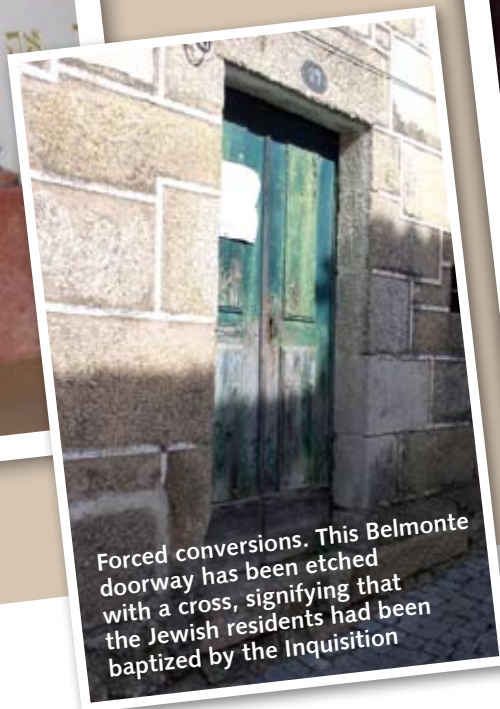


A copy of the Lapid Jewish newspaper, fruit of the indefatigable captain's pen

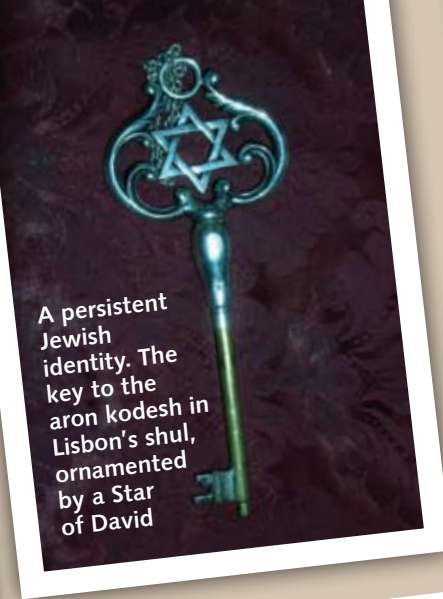




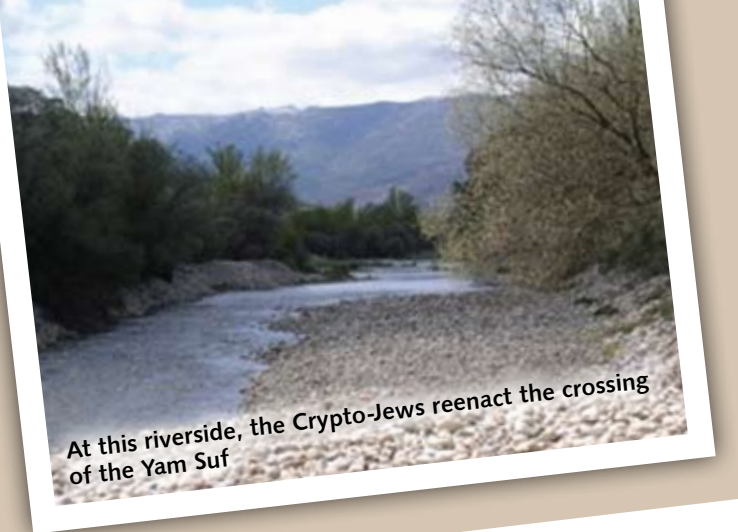
Unusual alliance. From right to left: Ari Greenspan, a local Catholic priest sympathetic to Judaism who asks his congregants to fast on Yom Kippur, Rabbi Elisha Salas, and Dr. Ari Zivotofsky



Forced conversions. This Belmonte doorway has been etched with a cross, signifying that the Jewish residents had been baptized by the Inquisition



A persistent Jewish identity. The key to the aron kodesh in Lisbon's shul, ornamented by a Star of David



At this riverside, the Crypto-Jews reenact the crossing of the Yam Suf

## Every year, they reenact the Kriyas Yam Suf, the Splitting of the Red Sea and crossing of the Bnei Yisrael. Nobody, however, wanted to show me the ceremony

now. There was a murmur of excitement among the older people. Finally I lifted up a large handmade Israeli *shmurah matzoh* and said, “Here we have a matzoh I brought from the Holy Land,” and before I knew what had happened, the old frail lady sitting opposite me jumped up, threw her arms up in the air, and yelled out, “Gracias a Di-s, gracias a Di-s!” which means “Thank You, G-d, Thank You, G-d!” Talk about a way to start Kadesh and the Seder.

**The Crossing of the River** On Chol HaMoed, I was invited with my family to join the entire community on a picnic. I thought that it was so nice that they all get together and enjoy a barbeque together near a river. But, as it turns out, nothing here is quite as it seems.

As I explained, the entire religious experience of the Anusim is cloaked in secrecy. It turns out that this picnic was a tradition of hundreds of years. They all went to the park to pray out of sight of the townspeople. More interestingly, they also reenact the Kriyas Yam Suf, the Splitting of the Red Sea and crossing of the Bnei Yisrael.

Nobody, however, wanted to show me the ceremony. I cajoled two old men to walk down to the river with me, but as we approached the shore, they got cold feet and wouldn't show it to me. I tried to explain to them I was their rabbi, not somebody who wanted to hurt them, but rather someone who wanted to help them save their traditions from dying out.

As we were talking, the granddaughter of one of the men walked by. She spoke English and funnily enough, I had a picture of her taken many years before when Ari and I had first visited. I asked her, within range of their hearing, if she had ever seen this ceremony and she said no. Only then did the two old men understand what I was driving at and agree to show us.

We went down to the river with another ten-year-old boy, where they ripped some branches off a tree and started to sing and whip the water, mimicking the story of Moshe Rabbeinu. Their song is sweet and like a fun kids' melody about Pharaoh in Egypt and how we went out with a Mighty Hand.

As they sang, they hopped back and forth from side to side by the water. I was struck by their excitement and my own, at the honor at being privy to this hidden secret ritual, a custom that helped nourish the souls of tens of generations of people who managed to hold onto a thread of Judaism despite horrendous suffering. I particularly felt a chill when I realized that the little cute ten-year-old was singing the song as well. He'd been taught the tune. And when later in the day I asked him to sing it again for me, he refused. It seemed to me that the genes of secrecy have been passed on as well.

On Shabbos Chol HaMoed, one of the men invited us to his house. Not really knowing how kosher his home was, I told him I'd come but wouldn't eat anything. We arrived to see a house that had

its own set of Pesach dishes, new pots and pans, and only food with a *hechsher* brought in from France. He took us into the kitchen, and we saw the traditional Anusim Shabbos oil lamps. They used to be lit in secret, often in cabinets on the wall. They are filled with olive oil and have a reflector so, to the casual observer, they look like a light for illumination. When I turned around I couldn't believe my eyes — on the other wall I saw a *Shas* and *Mishnah Berurah*. After they spread out a new cloth tablecloth and took out a plastic cup, we all crowded around the table, his married daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren. I made Kiddush and ate one of the French cookies, and then I asked him about the seforim. He explained he had gone to a Jewish bookstore in France, told the bookseller he was Jewish, and asked what books are important for a Jewish home to have. He left the store carrying the seforim I was looking at in shock.

I took down the *Mishnah Berurah*, and we learned a halachah together for Pesach. I then took down *Masechta Pesachim*, and we learned a *mishnah* together. Again I felt chills. We were in a house that was hundreds of years old. About four doors away, he had pointed to a cross cut into the stone to the left of the door. This was the mark made by the Inquisition when the Jews in the house converted, and it became a Christian dwelling. And here we were learning the Gemara. He saw how moved I was and offered me the *Shas* as a gift. I declined and explained to him that every Jewish town needs to have a *Mishnah Berurah* and a *Shas*. Before we left the city after Yom Tov, he asked me to send him two items from Israel: a washing cup and a Kiddush cup.

**Anusim Around the World** This story is far from over. As the Spanish and Portuguese conquered the New World in the sixteenth century, many crypto-Jews tried to find freedom in Brazil, Mexico, and the Caribbean Islands. Hardly a major discovery in the Americas was made without a crypto-Jew present. The sugar industry, more valuable than gold, was pioneered by Jews, as were the first Cuban cigars. That changed as the Inquisition became active in the New World as well.

There are graves in the Jewish cemetery in Jamaica that have a skull and crossbones on them; only now are we learning that pirate ships with names like the *Abraham* were piloted by Anusim seeking vengeance against the Spanish. Samuel Pallache was known as the “rabbi pirate,” and his father had been the *rav* of Cordova, Spain. Sinan, known as “The Great Jew,” worked from Algiers; his flag bore a six-pointed star and he is buried in the Jewish cemetery in Albania.

Just last month a group of descendants of Anusim in New Mexico had a bris as part of their conversion. There's no better “vengeance” than that.

The Anusim and their descendants are part of a sad but not forgotten portion of Jewish history. As we sit down to our Seder this year, let's understand the true blessings we enjoy in our lives: the liberty and freedom to do mitzvos that generations of our ancestors could only dream of. ■

