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Growing Number Of Latin Americans Turning to Judaism

By Judith Fein / Published September 05, 2013 / Fox News Latino



Judaism Converts Find Acceptance In Mexico City

Known as *conversos*, or secret Jews, many Latin Americans have become Catholic in public while continuing their forbidden Jewish practices in private.

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They came to Mexico City from places as far flung as Colombia and Brazil. Some traveled from Guadalajara.

Among their numbers were an ex-Catholic priest and a former Christian educator. What they had in common was this: after going online and learning about Jacques Cukierkorn, a Brazilian-born rabbi who lives in Kansas City, they had either converted already or were ready to convert to Judaism.

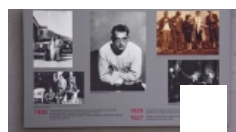
And they traveled to Mexico City to meet the rabbi themselves for a conference that included lectures, prayer services, mingling with Jews from the United States and Mexico, and the rituals and ceremony involved in formal conversion.

The phenomenon of Latin Americans converting to Judaism has exploded over the past few years – but one small Jewish synagogue is making it its mission to seek congregants in Latin America.

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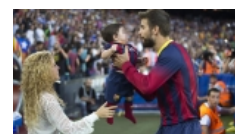
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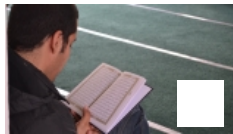
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Some of those who convert are descendants of Jewish ancestors who were forced to convert to Catholicism during the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal.

Known as *Conversos*, *Crypto Jews*, *Anusim*, *Marranos*, or secret Jews, they became Catholic in public but continued their forbidden Jewish practices in private. Others have no family histories, but they said they felt a pull to Judaism when they discovered, as adults, that Jesus was Jewish.

The path to Judaism has been fraught with difficulty for many, who claim they were abandoned or scorned by their church-going friends.

Some found Brit Braja, a congregation founded by Rabbi Cukierkorn, whose rabbinic thesis was on the subject of Anusim. Brit Braja focuses on encouraging Judaism among Latinos, both in the U.S. and Latin America.

"We focus on doing it in Spanish and Portuguese because so few resources are available in those languages," Cukierkorn said.

The rabbi conducts Sabbath services over the Internet so would-be converts can participate in the religion, even if they live in remote areas across the world.

Recently he visited Mexico to meet the converts. When he arrived in Mexico City, his suitcases were filled with prayer shawls, candelabra, skullcaps, prayer books, and boxed chicken soup provided by donors and the synagogue.

The members of Brit Braja went to the Museo Memoria y Tolerancia (which opened two years ago) to experience the exhibits dedicated to the Holocaust, racism, worldwide genocide and human rights.

At the museum, they learned about the three kinds of people in the world: the perpetrators, those who are indifferent, and those who are engaged. They spoke about the discrimination they felt – not because of the color of their skin or their socioeconomic status, but because of the religion they chose to practice.

One of the men who got married right before the conference began said his parents didn't attend because the ceremony was Jewish.

The conference included presentations about Torah; interpretation of Biblical stories; Kaballah (esoteric, mystical teachings); the middle class economic status of the Mexican Jewish mestizos; gay activism and the attitude of parents toward gay children.

Those who were ready for conversion had to go through a ritual purification by immersing themselves in water (called a *mikva*), a meeting with a *beit din* (three rabbis or knowledgeable people who ask questions), and, if they succeeded in meeting all the requirements, a ceremony where they were presented with an official certificate.

Tears trickled down many faces as the new Jews were officially welcomed into the fold.

Since he was ordained, Cukierkorn has performed close to 500 conversions in Latin America. He said 150 of those conversions were performed in the past two years.

He said membership continues to grow.

“Every year we reach more people, or rather they find us. We never push anything. In fact, we are selective,” he said. “We respond to a pent-up need that many have to learn about Judaism in those parts of the world.”

Judith Fein is an award-winning travel journalist and author of LIFE IS A TRIP: The Transformative Magic of Travel. She resides in Santa Fe.

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