

ABSTRACTS

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Baths and Synagogues: Material Evidence of Crypto-Jewish Life in Colonial Mexico City

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The history of Crypto-Jews, or Jews in colonial New Spain, has been reconstructed through the work of scholars in disciplines such as history, anthropology, and literary studies. However, relatively little attention has been paid to the material evidence of this community, particularly in the historic center of Mexico City. By combining archaeological data with trials from the Inquisition, it is possible to reassess key aspects of Jewish life, especially religious practice.

This paper examines a group of archaeological remains—including a water tank, ceramic vessels, and oil lamps—and interprets them alongside documentary evidence for Jewish meeting places. By placing these objects within a Jewish cultural and religious context, the study explores how material culture can illuminate the everyday life and religious practices of Crypto-Jewish communities in colonial Mexico.

The paper focuses on archaeological rescue excavations carried out at 16 de Septiembre No. 16, Isabel la Católica No. 25, and República de Uruguay No. 54, together with selected Inquisition trial records preserved in Mexico's Archivo General de la Nación (AGN).

Diego Martínez Serrano has a Bachelor's in Ethnohistory, a master's, and a Ph.D. in Archaeology from the Anthropology and History National School in Mexico. His central topic of study is the Historical Archaeology of Jewish communities in Mexico from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Now working on a postdoctoral research project in the Archaeological Lab of the Postgraduate program.

Pamphlets and Periodicals Published by A. C. Barros Basto for the Crypto-Jewish Communities of Northern Portugal

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A century ago, Captain Artur Carlos de Barros Basto revitalized the crypto-Jewish community in Northern Portugal, which had remained in hiding in Porto, Belmonte, and area villages decades after the end of the Inquisition. He raised funds to build a fabulous synagogue in Porto and visited crypto-Jewish enclaves throughout the region. Basto published a series of pamphlets and the periodical *Ha-Lapid* in an effort to bring these crypto-Jewish communities closer to mainstream Jewish practices. Hebrew prayers for holidays and daily life were translated into Portuguese by Basto, along with details of laws and customs. While these pamphlets are quite rare, a (nearly) complete collection will be presented, with a telling of the journey to acquire them. *Ha-Lapid* published similar educational pieces on practices and articles on the worldwide Jewish community of that time and historically. Basto collected the cultic prayers from the crypto-Jewish communities of Northern Portugal, publishing 80+ works in *Ha-Lapid*. Together these create a remarkable view into a largely hidden crypto-Jewish community and its practices a century after the Inquisition ended that can be compared to prayers from recent collections and remnants from the Early Modern period.

Mark A. Schneegurt is an author, educator, scientist, and entrepreneur. His books range from scholarly works on science, religion, and literature to popular books on The Beatles. He has authored 100+ publications and has made 250+ public presentations of his works. Recipient of awards for teaching and research, Dr. Schneegurt holds degrees from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and Brown University, with professional appointments at Purdue University, University of Notre Dame, and currently at Wichita State University in Biology and in History.

The Philosephardic Movement and the Reconnection of the Sephardic and Hispanic Worlds: 1869–2026

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This presentation examines the historical development of the Spanish Philosephardic movement from the nineteenth century to the present day and its contribution to the progressive reconnection between Spain, the wider Hispanic world, and Sephardic communities across the globe.

Beginning with the constitutional transformation of Spain in 1869 and the emergence of modern Spanish Philosephardism, we will explore the decisive role of Senator Ángel Pulido and other intellectual, political, and diplomatic figures who promoted the rediscovery of Sephardic Jews as descendants of a shared Spanish cultural and historical heritage.

The presentation will trace the evolution of this movement through different political periods—from the early twentieth century and the Primo de Rivera era to Franco’s Spain, the democratic transition, King Juan Carlos I, and King Felipe VI—culminating in the Spanish citizenship legislation for Sephardic descendants, particularly Law 12/2015.

Finally, we will consider contemporary initiatives aimed at strengthening cultural, academic, legal, and institutional cooperation among Spain, Hispanic societies, and Sephardic communities, presenting Sephardic heritage as a living bridge between these historically connected worlds.

César David Ciriano Vela and Magda Moreno Ciriano are attorneys and researchers based in Spain, specializing in Spanish nationality law and Sephardic citizenship.

The Invisible Return: Modern Anusim, Microaggressions, and the Barriers to American Jewish Integration

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This paper examines the contemporary experiences of modern *Anusim* (descendants of Jews forced to conceal their identity) attempting to reintegrate into mainstream American Jewish life. This study will address the impact of religious discrimination and exclusion based on deeply personal accounts, articles and anecdotes that highlight how people from this background deal with having a dual identity. First, returnees not only navigate acute familial anti-Semitism and alienation from their biological families but social exclusion from mainstream Jewish communities. Second, if they attempt to participate in conservative or reform synagogues, they face widespread "gatekeeping" and cultural microaggressions. Because American Jewish culture is predominantly Ashkenazi-centric, the unique Sephardic heritage and physical diversity of modern Anusim are frequently met with skepticism, invalidating interrogations, and systemic isolation. Furthermore, mainstream Jewish institutions fail to provide tailored educational, financial, or psychological resources for returnees. If pursuing orthodox options modern day Benei Anusim experience rigid halakhic conversion processes that can inadvertently erase their ancestors' historical trauma and add more challenges to their plight. This paper argues that without intentional institutional reform, active cultural humility training, and targeted integration resources, the American Jewish establishment implicitly continues the work of historical forced assimilation not to Judaism but to an American version of this faith which culturally insular at best and xenophobic at worst.

Chaplain David Gonzalez Guajardo has a Master of Science in Jewish Studies from Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago. He has equivalency for a Masters of Divinity from the Association of Professional Chaplains and is now Board Certified. He has presented his research projects at the Texas New Mexico Hospice Annual Conference, the 20th and 35th Annual Conferences of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies and recently joined the Board of the SCJS. He has also presented at the 39th and 40th Annual Texas Hispanic Genealogical and Historical Conference, and the Texas A & M Sephardic Heritage Conference.

The Ben-Zvi Research Fellowship: Global Field Investigations into Crypto-Jewish Communities

Rabbi David A. Kunin, DD, Panel Organizer
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Rabbi, Congregation Beth David, Saratoga, CA; Research Fellow, Ben-Zvi Research Institute

This 90-minute organized panel brings together current and recent Ben-Zvi Research Fellows to present original field research on crypto-Jewish and related hidden or converso identities across four countries: Indonesia, Ecuador, Italy, and Brazil. Each fellow's presentation draws on original fieldwork, archival research, and/or community engagement conducted through the Ben-Zvi Fellowship. The panel opens with a short overview of the Fellowship itself — its history, mission, and role in supporting emerging scholarship on crypto-Jewish communities worldwide — followed by four regional case studies. The panel will close with time for cross-regional discussion and audience Q&A, highlighting comparative themes such as ritual survival, communal memory, identity concealment and disclosure, and methodological approaches to researching hidden Jewish heritage.

Rabbi David A. Kunin, DD, is Rabbi of Congregation Beth David (Saratoga, CA), Mentoring Rabbi of the United Indonesian Jewish Communities, and a 2025 Research Fellow of the Ben-Zvi Institute, in which capacity he coordinates the Ben-Zvi Research Fellows presenting on this panel. His forthcoming monograph, *We Are Indonesian Jews: Unity and Diversity among Indonesia's Jewish Tribes*, is the first book-length study of Indonesia's emerging Jewish communities.

This panel includes presentations by Malka Shabtay, David A. Kunin, Gabriel Gualán Maldonado, and Juliana de Albuquerque, with their abstracts presented on the following pages.

Fellowship Overview: The Ben-Zvi Research Fellowship: Supporting Emerging Scholarship on Crypto-Jewish Communities

Dr. Malka Shabtay
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Alongside established and recognized Jewish communities, there have always been groups with affinities to Israel and the Jewish People — some that departed from the Jewish People, willingly or forcibly, and others that have sought to join it. Izhak Ben-Zvi, Israel's second president, studied these groups and was in contact with several, yet research on them has remained minimal and reliable information sparse. To address this gap, the Center for Study of the Dispersed of Israel was established in 2024 within the Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East, at Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi in Jerusalem. In 2025 the Center offered up to ten research scholarships to scholars holding advanced degrees in history, anthropology, sociology, or comparative religion, each mapping the groups and communities with affinity to the Jewish people within a single country — their geographical distribution, characteristics, and communal life — through field visits, conversations with community members, and the secondary literature. Fellows complete their studies within a year, supported by a preparatory workshop and the Center's academic advisor, and present their findings at Yad Ben-Zvi. This overview introduces the Fellowship's founding, mission, and scope, and frames the four field reports that follow.

Dr. Malka Shabtay is an applied anthropologist (PhD, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev) who has worked for more than four decades with the Ethiopian Jewish community in Israel and, more recently, in Ethiopia, including the Beta Israel of North Shewa. The author of numerous books and an ethnographic filmmaker — her films include *Nafkot – Yearning* (2022) and *Muito Amor: Jews and Judaism in Amazonia* (2023) — she has taught at Israeli academic institutions including the Ruppin Academic Center, and is engaged with emerging Jewish communities worldwide, among them the Lemba of Zimbabwe and the Abayudaya of Uganda.

Presentation: Indonesia

From Kisar to Ambon: Converso Traditions and Emerging Jewish Identity in Indonesia's Maluku Islands

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The Maluku Islands hold the strongest claims to Portuguese converso ancestry among Indonesia's emerging Jewish communities. The Ambon and Seram communities of the United Indonesian Jewish Communities (UIJC) ground their identity in oral traditions of New Christian settlers, in family practices interpreted as Jewish survivals — pork abstinence, a flatbread called the “bread of affliction,” Saturday observance — and in Portuguese surnames correlated with New Christian usage in Brazilian Inquisition records. Community tradition traces these families through Kisar Island, where an ancestor is said to have prayed in a six-sided structure, the Tutuara, to a God whose name could not be pronounced. This presentation draws on a decade of fieldwork (2015–2026) conducted in the dual role of rabbi and researcher, including a 2026 visit to Kisar Island itself — the first primary-source research at the origin point of these traditions. It assesses what the historical record does and does not establish about converso settlement in the Spice Islands, documents the Maluku communities' present religious life, and reports whether the island's traditions are independently attested beyond the single-family line that carried them to Ambon.

Rabbi David A. Kunin, DD, is Rabbi of Congregation Beth David (Saratoga, CA), Mentoring Rabbi of the United Indonesian Jewish Communities, and a 2025 Ben-Zvi Research Fellow. He has conducted seven fieldwork visits to Indonesia's Jewish communities since 2015, including 2026 fieldwork on Kisar Island and in the Maluku archipelago, and is the author of the forthcoming monograph *We Are Indonesian Jews: Unity and Diversity among Indonesia's Jewish Tribes*.

Presentation: Ecuador

Hidden Heritage in Southern Ecuador: The Crypto-Jewish Legacy of Loja

Gabriel Gualán Maldonado
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The province of Loja, in southern Ecuador, has long been associated with the presence of Iberian conversos who settled in this frontier region during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Regional historians have documented evidence of New Christian migration, while local families preserve oral traditions, surnames, domestic customs, and religious practices that many interpret as possible survivals of Crypto-Jewish heritage. Despite these historical references, southern Ecuador has received limited scholarly attention within the broader field of Crypto-Jewish studies.

This presentation is based on the Centro Cultural para la Historia Sefardí data, combining archival research, oral history interviews, genealogical documentation, ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and community surveys. It examines both the historical evidence of converso settlement and the ways in which descendants today reinterpret family memory and inherited traditions in the reconstruction of Jewish identity. The study also explores the role of local educational and cultural initiatives in preserving Sephardic heritage and fostering historical awareness.

By integrating historical sources with contemporary ethnographic research, the Loja case contributes a new perspective to the study of Crypto-Jewish memory, identity reconstruction, and community formation in Latin America.

Gabriel Gualán Maldonado is president of the Centro Cultural para la Historia Sefardí in Loja, Ecuador, and a researcher specializing in the history and contemporary identity of descendants of Iberian conversos in southern Ecuador. His work combines archival research, ethnography, oral history, genealogy, and community engagement to document Crypto-Jewish memory and Sephardic heritage. He is currently pursuing a master's degree in Jewish education at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, at the same time he is developing ethnographic research regarding the Anusim of Southern Ecuador for Ben Zvi Institute.

Presentation: Brazil

Shifting perceptions of Jewish identity within groups of the Brazilian population with ties to the Jewish people.

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Abstract: This research develops my previous study, conducted between 2022 and 2024, on shifting perceptions of Jewish identity among members of the *bnei anussim* community at Sinagoga Israelita do Recife (SIR), Pernambuco. It expands this investigation to *bnei anussim* communities across northeastern Brazil, focusing primarily on Pernambuco and Paraíba. Through questionnaires and qualitative interviews, the research will map these communities and compare how their members understand, articulate, and publicly negotiate their Jewish identities. Particular attention is given to their experiences of acceptance or rejection by established Jewish communities and institutions, their relationships with previous religious affiliations and extended family networks, and the effects of conversion on individual and collective identity. The project also examines the consequences of the 2017 mass conversion of *bnei anussim* in Paraíba, particularly the impact of its lack of recognition by Israeli and local Jewish authorities. Interviews with activists, researchers, and academics will provide additional historical and regional context. By combining comparative fieldwork with quantitative and qualitative methods, this study seeks to illuminate the formation, negotiation, and transformation of *bnei anussim* Jewish identity in specific areas of northeastern Brazil.

Juliana de Albuquerque is a philosopher and academic researcher at University College Cork, Ireland. Her research focuses on Jewish identity, memory, and belonging, particularly on how Jewish identities are constructed and negotiated across different historical, cultural, and social contexts.

The Chocolate Diaspora: Sephardic Jews and the Journey of Cacao

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This paper explores the multifaceted role of cacao and chocolate in the lives of Sephardic crypto-Jews across the Atlantic world between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Drawing upon inquisitorial records, commercial documents, and culinary sources from New Spain, the Caribbean, and southwestern France, it examines how cacao became intertwined with both the economic networks and the clandestine religious practices of converso communities. While chocolate was widely consumed throughout colonial society, crypto-Jews adapted it to the specific conditions of religious secrecy. In New Spain, chocolate functioned as a discreet ritual substitute in Jewish observance, appearing in practices surrounding Yom Kippur, Shabbat, mourning customs, and communal gatherings. Simultaneously, Sephardic merchants played a significant role in the expansion of transatlantic cacao trade, linking production centers in the Americas with commercial hubs such as Veracruz, Amsterdam, Martinique, and Bayonne. By tracing the circulation of cacao through Sephardic diasporic networks, this study reveals how a New World commodity became both a vehicle of cultural continuity and an instrument of economic mobility. It argues that the history of chocolate offers a unique lens through which to examine crypto-Jewish resilience, adaptation, and identity formation in the early modern Atlantic world.

Hélène Jawhara Piñer holds a doctoral degree in Medieval History and the History of Food and teaches at the University of Bordeaux. She has lectured at prestigious universities such as Yale, UPenn, and Bar-Ilan. She was awarded the David Gitlitz Emerging Scholar Prize of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies in 2021 and is the author of three award-winning books: *Sephardi: Cooking the History*; *Jews, Food and Spain*; and *Matzah and Flour*.

Reading Between the Lines, Speaking into the Silences: Doctor John de Sequeyra and Being Jewish in Eighteenth-Century Virginia

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This paper will explore the gaps in the archival record of the life of John de Sequeyra, the only known Jewish resident of eighteenth-century Williamsburg, Virginia. Descended from a family of Portuguese crypto-Jews, de Sequeyra lived in Williamsburg from 1745 until his death in 1795, becoming a prominent doctor and member of society but leaving behind little information about his private life, faith, and experience. As such, this paper will read around and into the silences pervading the narrative of his life. Through the lens of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's notion of silencing, it will highlight the need to foreground John de Sequeyra as a narrator in the production of his own story, whose choices and strategies shaped the contours of his presence—and absence—in the historical record. To fill in the gaps, this paper will draw on evidence reflecting broader negative perceptions of Jews in eighteenth-century Virginia, analyzing prejudiced coverage of Jews from this period in Virginian newspapers. Through this analysis, it will explore how such prejudice may have shaped John de Sequeyra's experience in Virginia, how he may have shaped himself in response, and how these choices could have worked to produce and embed silences in the archive.

Leah Stein is an Anthropology PhD student at William & Mary, focusing on the historical archaeology of the Sephardic diaspora. She holds a BA in Archaeology and Anthropology from the University of Oxford, and an MA in Anthropology from William & Mary. Her master's thesis explored the documentary record of Jewish life in eighteenth-century Williamsburg, Virginia.

From Crypto-Jew to Jewish Pioneer: Dr. Samuel Nunes and the Founding of Jewish Savannah

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For centuries following the expulsions and forced conversions of Iberian Jewry in the 1490s, conversos lived between public Catholicism and the clandestine preservation of Jewish identity. Their migrations profoundly transformed Jewish life far beyond Spain and Portugal. Although Jews had been officially expelled from England in 1290, Iberian crypto-Jews later established a quiet presence there; by the 1650s, Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel's appeal to Oliver Cromwell helped usher in the reestablishment of an openly practicing Jewish community. In the 1720s, England became a refuge for Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribeiro, a Portuguese physician and crypto-Jew imprisoned by the Inquisition. After fleeing to London with his family, Nunes joined forty other Jews aboard the *William and Sarah* for the new colony of Georgia in 1733. Their arrival presented General James Oglethorpe and Georgia's Trustees with fundamental questions concerning the legal and religious status of Jews. Less than a decade later, the imminent threat of Spanish invasion confronted these former Portuguese New Christians with the possibility of once again falling within reach of the fires of the Inquisition. Through Nunes and his family, this presentation traces an extraordinary transformation from crypto-Jewish survival under persecution to open Jewish life in the early American South.

Dr. Isaac Amon is a Lecturer in Law at Washington University School of Law in St. Louis, where he teaches *Law and the Holocaust*. He is also Executive Director and Scholar-in-Chief of the Sinai Legal Association for Memory & Modernity (SLAMM), a nonprofit institute dedicated to the study of law, history, and the global Jewish experience, with a particular focus on antisemitism, the Inquisition, and the Holocaust. He is a former Legal Fellow at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague and an ISIS war-crimes investigator. His scholarship explores the dual role of law as an instrument of persecution and a means of pursuing justice, accountability, and memory. He also serves on the Board of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies. A frequent speaker across the United States, Canada, and Europe, he is a descendant of Jews who fled the Iberian Peninsula for the Ottoman Empire in 1492.

A Rooster's Double Meaning: Symbolism, Persistence, and Converso Concealment

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This presentation examines a handmade rooster textile created by a great-great maternal aunt between 1898 and the early twentieth century. This textile, passed down within a South Texas family, is presented as a window into how objects can carry hidden religious and cultural meaning across generations.

The textile is interpreted alongside behavioral practices maintained within the maternal line, some of which are documented in Inquisition records from Aragon and colonial Mexico. Together, these elements suggest a tradition of converso concealment: the practice among Jews who converted to Christianity under duress of embedding traces of Jewish identity into everyday objects and rituals.

This presentation posits that the symbolic ambiguity characteristic of converso objects is not a failure of evidence but a deliberate and historically meaningful feature of converso material culture. These were objects designed to carry a hidden meaning within the Sephardic family while presenting a different meaning to the Catholic world outside.

Ricardo Villarreal De Silva received his Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin. He's a Professor of Marketing at the University of San Francisco's School of Management. He's an expert in multicultural marketing, consumer happiness, and the application of sophisticated statistical approaches to understanding media behavior, advertising, and e-retailing.

Crypto-Jewish Presence in the Pajeú and Seridó Hinterlands: A Comparative Analysis of Incidence, Family Signatures, and Genetic Heritage with Emphasis on Floresta do Navio, Betânia, Itacuruba, Carnaubeira da Penha, Carqueja, and Airi

Dr. Cicero Adson de Souza Ferraz and
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This article presents a multidisciplinary analysis—historical, genealogical, anthropological, ethnographic, cultural, and genetic—of the presence of Sephardic New Christians (crypto-Jews) in the hinterlands of Northeastern Brazil, focusing on a comparative study of the Pajeú region (Pernambuco) and the Seridó region (Rio Grande do Norte and Paraíba). The central hypothesis argues that crypto-Jewish influence in Pajeú was comparable to that observed in Seridó, with particularly strong documentary, genealogical, and cultural evidence concentrated in the former settlement of Floresta do Navio (present-day Floresta) and its surrounding territories. This heritage is especially evident among lineages such as Souza Ferraz, Gomes de Sá, Ferreira de Araújo, Oliveira, Albuquerque, Cavalcante, Branco de Araújo, and Trezena. The study integrates historical records, kinship networks, oral testimonies, ethnographic observations, and genetic data. Evidence includes post-1497 migration patterns, possible links between Moyses Franco Branco and the Jewish community of Kahal Zur Israel, endogamous family structures, the preservation of Sephardic-derived customs, and field research conducted by Nathan Wachtel in 2002. Genetic findings reveal markers consistent with Sephardic and Middle Eastern/North African ancestry, including the Y-DNA haplogroup G-P303 and shared IBD segments with certified Sephardic populations. The results identify Floresta and its historical offshoots as a significant center of crypto-Jewish heritage preservation in the Brazilian Northeast.

Cicero Adson de Souza Ferraz - My education, with a Bachelor's degree in Law, in the area of Human Sciences, stemmed from the professional practice of my Geography and History teacher, and from my father, a merchant and rancher, who always said, "This is our relative." Among so many strange customs, I practically began this research at the age of 13 in the rural area bathed by the Riacho do Navio, a tributary of the Pajeú River, until my youth at the Martins de Junior Synagogue, Recife, Pernambuco, Brazil, the Rebbe Ya'akov Rabbi Meir Synagogue in Manaus, Amazonas, Brazil, and finally, 12 years ago, in Beer Sheva, Israel, where my children grew up, with close contact with Dr. Salomão Buzaglo, a great friend, and with the research done with Professor Iam Marcus Santos, which was fundamental.

Iam Marcos Mathias dos Santos - Graduated in Chemistry from the Paulistana State Technical School and currently pursuing a degree in Biomedical Sciences, he has devoted the past six years to the systematic study of documentary genealogical research. Throughout this period, he has continuously expanded his expertise in genetic analysis and data integration for hereditary and anthropological investigations. He is the author of several scholarly articles, including studies on Crypto-Judaism co-authored with Dr. Cicero Adson de Souza Ferraz, focusing on the socio-cultural history of the Pajeú region in Pernambuco and the Cariri region in Paraíba. He is an active member of the Pajeú Historical and Geographical Institute (IHGP).

Chala Jews: The Untold Story of the Jews of Bukhara Who Converted Publicly and Kept Judaism Alive at Home

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What happens when a Jewish community is forced to conceal its identity in public but refuses to surrender it at home?

This presentation explores the largely untold story of the Chala Jews of Bukhara. Beginning in the eighteenth century, waves of forced conversion compelled members of the Bukharian Jewish community to live publicly as Muslims while continuing to observe Jewish traditions in secret. Behind closed doors, families preserved elements of Shabbat, kashrut, prayer, circumcision, marriage customs, and Jewish memory, often at extraordinary personal risk.

Drawing upon historical accounts, communal narratives, and family traditions, this presentation examines how the Chala developed a complex dual identity and how their descendants navigated questions of belonging after restrictions eased. Their experience challenges conventional ideas about conversion, religious identity, and communal boundaries.

The story of the Chala Jews is not only one of persecution. It is also a story of spiritual resistance, resilience, and the power of the Jewish home. By bringing this history into the broader Jewish narrative, this session will illuminate how a little-known Central Asian Jewish community protected its identity across generations and demonstrate that Jewish survival has often depended upon courage practiced quietly behind closed doors.

Manashe Khaimov is the founder and CEO of SAMi, the Sephardic American Mizrahi Initiative, and an Adjunct Professor at Queens College, where he teaches Bukharian and Central Asian Jewish history. Born in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, he is a Jewish educator and community leader dedicated to preserving and elevating Sephardic and Mizrahi history, culture, and identity. He is also a recipient of the Covenant Foundation's Pomegranate Prize.

Hidden in Plain Sight: Jíbaro Identity as Crypto-Jewish Concealment Strategy in Puerto Rico

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This paper examines how Puerto Rican Jíbaro identity functioned as a sophisticated concealment strategy for crypto-Jews (conversos) during the colonial period and beyond. Descended from Sephardic Jews who arrived in the Spanish Caribbean under the shadow of the Spanish Inquisition, many conversos in Puerto Rico adopted and adapted the Jíbaro persona — the archetypal rural peasant of the highlands — to mask their Jewish practices while maintaining essential elements of their ancestral faith and culture.

Drawing on historical records, oral traditions, and cultural analysis, the study argues that the Jíbaro lifestyle (nomadic cattle herding, subsistence farming, and distinctive folk customs) provided both geographic isolation and a socially acceptable “Christian” image. This allowed crypto-Jewish families to observe core rituals discreetly, transmit knowledge across generations, and contribute to the formation of Puerto Rican national identity. The Jíbaro thus represents a unique Caribbean expression of crypto-Judaism, blending survival tactics with cultural hybridity. This research illuminates understudied mechanisms of Jewish continuity in the Spanish Caribbean and offers new insights into B’nei Anusim identity formation.

Joseph S. Berríos, Ph.D., is a rabbinical student at the Academy for Jewish Religion, expecting to receive rabbinic ordination in April 2027. He serves as a volunteer chaplain at the Orlando VA healthcare System and is the founder of Conversos Unidos, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting B’nei Anusim reconnection with their Jewish heritage. His research focuses on crypto-Jewish history and identity formation in Puerto Rico.