

Coming home

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In a prefab structure at a school in the West Bank settlement of Alon Shvut, a few dozen people are sitting and singing a popular Hasidic song: "The whole world is a very narrow bridge and the main thing is not to be afraid." They are singing with feeling, even though most of them don't understand a word of the song. As is the custom in religious schools, the class is divided into a men's section and a women's section. The women are wearing hats and the men's heads are covered by knitted skullcaps. The men and women alike have distinct South American Indian features and are dark-skinned.

Batya Mendel, who until two months ago was a Peruvian citizen whose first name was Blanca, analyzes the situation with surprising passion and self-confidence: "Yasser Arafat isn't even a Palestinian and he has no rights to the Land of Israel because he wasn't born in the Land of Israel. This land was promised eternally by God only to those who were born here. Just because I was born in Peru and don't have Jewish roots makes no difference, because the Book of Zephania states that those who want to believe in the Holy One and be believing Jews — only they have rights to the Land of Israel. Maybe, when the Messiah comes and all the Palestinians are converted to Judaism and believe in God with complete faith, only then will we allow them to live in the Land of Israel."

Almost unnoticed, a new branch of Jews is springing up in the settlements, Jews who are connected to Israel and all things Israeli by a very narrow bridge indeed. They have yet to visit Tel Aviv or Haifa, and they have never even heard of Degania, the very first kibbutz, or its neighbor, Kinneret. Miki Kratsman, the photographer, and I had the privilege of being the first secular Jews they ever met. Nevertheless, they feel as deeply rooted and authentic as that composer of quintessentially Israeli songs, Naomi Shemer. They are fired with a historic sense of their right to this land, as though they were the Zinati family from Peki'in, the ancient Jewish town in Galilee.

"We are of Indian origin," says Nachshon Ben-Haim, formerly Pedro Mendosa, "but in Peru, in the Andes, there is no Indian culture left. Everyone has become Christian, and before we became Jews, we also were Christians who went to church."

The miracle of the creation of this community of new Jews has to be chalked up wholly and exclusively to the credit — or debit — of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. Two months ago, at the order of the Ashkenazi chief rabbi, Israel Meir Lau, a delegation of rabbis traveled to Peru.

During their two weeks in the country, they converted 90 people to Judaism, most of them of Indian origin.

"We found a small river between Trujillo and Cajamarca and everyone immersed in it. We took the people from Lima to be immersed in the ocean and then we also had to remarry them all in a Jewish ceremony according to the halakha [Jewish religious law]," says Rabbi Eliyahu Birnbaum, a judge in the conversion court and a member of the delegation.

The rabbis converted only those who said they were willing to immigrate to Israel immediately.

"We laid down that condition because in the remote areas where they live, there is no possibility of keeping kosher and it was important for us to ensure that they would live in a Jewish environment. In fact, there was no need for the condition because they were in any case imbued with a love of the Land of Israel in a way that is hard to describe," explains Rabbi David Mamo, the deputy president of the Conversion Court.

Birnbaum adds: "Because we saw their enthusiasm for the Land of Israel, we understood that conversion was part of a complete process including aliyah [immigration to Israel], so we told them: Just as you live in a community here, you should join a community in Israel, too. Rabbi Mamo and I both live in Gush Etzion [a bloc of settlements south of Bethlehem] and we believe that when it comes to community-oriented settlements, there are none that can compare with Alon Shvut and Karmeit Zzur [both in Gush Etzion], which said they would be willing to absorb the new immigrants."

Mamo notes that his settlement, Neveh Daniel, also in Gush Etzion, "would have been happy to receive such a distinguished reinforcement, but we are unable to provide complete housing and absorption — and you have to understand what absorption means in Karmeit Zzur and Alon Shvut. Words cannot describe the warm personal attitude toward each new immigrant, the care and the concern for all their physical and spiritual needs, and, of course, the ulpan [intensive Hebrew course] and the organized social activity. It is the best community integration program that we know of."

The Columbus factor

The 90 new immigrants, comprising 18 families, were taken straight from the airport to the two settlements. Leah Golan, director of the Jewish Agency department that is responsible for immigration from all Western countries (apart from those in the former Communist Bloc), says, "we as the Jewish Agency bring to Israel anyone who has been defined as being entitled to aliyah — that is, anyone who has been recognized as a Jew by the Chief Rabbinate or the Interior Ministry."

Adds Golan: "Generally, the potential immigrants are in touch with our aliyah emissaries and are given very reliable information about housing, employment and education possibilities in Israel.

But in Peru, we do not have an emissary: There is only a small Jewish community of about 3,000 people there, so we only have an office in Lima that is staffed by a local woman. Therefore, the Jewish Agency was not involved in any way in the decision about where these new immigrants would live or what kind of work they would do. All the decisions on those subjects were apparently made by the rabbis."

Theoretically, the new Jews had the option of joining the Jewish community in Peru, but that was ruled out.

"How can I put it without hurting anyone?" Birnbaum says. "The community in Lima consists of a certain socioeconomic class and did not want them because they are from a lower level. There was a kind of agreement that if they were converted, they would not join the Lima community, so there was no choice but to lay down the condition that they immigrate to Israel."

The new Jews have not encountered similar difficulties in the settlements, where they have been integrated smoothly. "Now, thank God, we live where the patriarch, Abraham, the No. 1 Jew, roamed," says Ephraim Perez, who until two weeks ago, in Trujillo, Peru, was still known as Nilo.

It turns out that Peru also had an ancient Jewish forefather of its own: "It is known that Christopher Columbus was a Jew," Mandel relates. "And since he was in Peru, many Jews have been born there."

Columbus was Jewish?

Mandel: "They always say that about him in Peru, and he visited many places in Peru and left Jewish blood everywhere. There are also a lot of Christian sects that obey the commandments since then. When we were Christians, we also observed all kinds of commandments, such as Pascha [sic] and Shavuot."

So, in fact, you are of Jewish origin?

"No. In Peru everyone is a mixture of natives and all kinds of conquerors, but there was a great deal of Jewish influence through the Marranos [Jews living during the Spanish Inquisition who secretly kept their faith despite converting to Christianity] and through Columbus. When we were still Christians and went to the church we observed some commandments such as Shabbat and holidays."

Rabbis Mamo and Birnbaum, along with officials of the settlements, refer to the 90 new Jews as the "Third Aliyah." The term, explains Yeshaya Kasdu, the coordinator of the group of new immigrants at Karmeit Zzur, refers to the fact that "in 1990, there was the First Aliyah of Jewish converts from Peru, then in 1991 came the Second Aliyah, and now we have the Third Aliyah." [He is invoking the terminology for the waves of new immigrants who came to Palestine in the early 20th century.]

The circumstances in which the First Aliyah from Peru was engendered are quite amazing. The leader of the surprising conversion and immigration movement from Peru was then known as Sigundo Villanueva; today he has the name of Zerubavel Zidkiya. He is still considered the leader of the new Jews, though most of them have never met him. He and his wife and six of their children, all of whom have families, live in the settlement of Tapuah; two of their children live in Jerusalem. One daughter, Yocheved, lives in the city's ultra-Orthodox Mea She'arim neighborhood, and her brother, Yeshaya Zidkiya, is studying in a yeshiva of newly religious Jews.

Zerubavel Zidkiya's brother, Mordechai Meir (formerly Elvaro Villanueva), and his children also live in Tapuah. Zidkiya's daughter, Hava Peretz, explains that her father does not want to be interviewed "because he is old and sick and doesn't want to spout nonsense." Mordechai Meir, the brother, agreed to be interviewed for this article, but his wife, who has been in the country for 12 years, but can barely speak a coherent sentence in Hebrew, grabbed the receiver from him and shouted, "You not come here, you who say in paper things not good. We are Jews like you, go from here."

When we arrived at their house we were firmly ejected by their son, a young, robust lad. So we had to make do with what we heard from Hava Peretz, who after inviting us to her home in Tapuah, supposedly in order to take us to meet her parents, told us unequivocally that her father had gone to Jerusalem that morning, while her mother, of whom we just managed to catch a glimpse, "has just gone to Petah Tikva with the rest of the family in order to buy a small cupboard."

The residents of Tapuah, by the way, showed no interest in receiving the new group from Peru. Their experience with the former group was not very good, we were told by the secretary, Daniel Shukrun. They have remained a very closed group, he says, a community within a community.

The road to Judaism

"The Tribes of Israel," a book by Rabbi Eliahu Avihayil, tells the story of "The Children of Moses in Peru." Even Avihayil, who finds Jewish communities under every bush in his relentless search for the lost tribes of Israel, does not claim that the new Jews from Peru are of Jewish seed. Still, he notes: "Offspring of Marranos used to live in and around Cajamarca, and to this day, there is a tradition in the town of Celendin that they came with the Portuguese to the region and it is possible that someone in the group may have Jewish roots."

The story of the rebirth of hundreds of Indians as Jews imbued with a belief in Greater Israel thus begins with a revelation. According to Peretz, her grandfather by chance came into the possession of "the book of the Old Testament. He said — Aha, very interesting, there is also an Old Testament, not only a New Testament. When my father, Sigundo, was 15 years old, he gave him the book to read."

Until then, the brothers Sigundo and Alvero were practicing Christians. "My father read the book and he right away liked it very much," Peretz continues. "Then my father and my mother got married and my father persuaded her that they should keep Shabbat and she agreed."

The Villanueva family lived in Cajamarca, a city of more than 100,000 inhabitants, located 600 kilometers northwest of Lima and perched about 2,700 meters high in the foothills of the Andes. It was here that the last of the Inca sovereigns was executed by the Spanish conqueror Francisco Pizarro, in 1533.

"My father was born in Celendin and only afterward his family moved to Cajamarca. In Celendin there was a group of people who believed they were descendants of the Marranos. They also have a god called Adomolen, which is like Adon Olam [master of the universe, one of the designations of God in Hebrew]."

So your father is a descendant of the Marranos?

Peretz: "No, I don't think so. But I think influences of Jews came through the Marranos, because there is no god called Adomolen anywhere else in Peru. It is a special god of people who were close to the Marranos."

In Cajamarca, the first-born of the Villanueva family, Sigundo, started to read the Bible in earnest and to observe the Sabbath. His brother, Alvero, followed in his footsteps. At a certain stage, the two decided that they had no choice but to leave the church and become Shabbat-observing evangelists.

"They went through all kinds of spiritual journeys," Rabbi Birnbaum says. "That is what characterized the whole group of the First Aliyah from Peru. Sigundo Villanueva, who is a very charismatic individual, apparently swept everyone with him, and contrary to the postmodernist search today, in which people look for meaning and how to realize the `I,' they sought the truth, which is a type of quest that is very much out of fashion nowadays. You could call it an ancient search in a modern world. They sacrificed the `I' in order to search for the truth, and in their search, they went through all kinds of religions and sects, all in the wake of Sigundo-Zerubavel, until they arrived at Judaism together with him."

School on Shabbat

"The Tribes of Israel" relates that in 1954, the whole group (which, in addition to the families of the Villanueva brothers, also included local people — about 50 in all) joined a community of vegetarians in Cajamarca. Being vegetarian enabled them to keep kosher.

"My father was a carpenter and my mother was a housewife," Hava Peretz continues. "When I

was a little girl, we suddenly started to keep the Sabbath. My brothers and sisters and I all went to a Christian school and we suffered a lot there because all the exams were on Shabbat and my parents wouldn't let us go to school on Shabbat. So we kept getting failing grades, and we failed in all our subjects and all the teachers hated us.

"Father kept having to transfer us to worse schools, until finally we went to the school of the poorest people in Cajamarca, because that was the only school where the principal agreed to let us take exams on weekdays. That is why we wanted to come to the Land of Israel since we were little. Father would read to us from the Old Testament and we grew up on stories from the Land of Israel, so in the end, when we finally immigrated and we came to [the settlement of] Elon Moreh, we felt we had come home because these were the stories we were raised on."

In 1961, the Villanueva brothers decided to leave the evangelical church and establish an autonomous community. Many students joined Sigundo's group, and in 1967, by now numbering about 200 people, they decided to leave Cajamarca and build their own neighborhood outside the city. They made contact with Rabbi Abraham Ben Hamo, then the Sephardi rabbi of Lima, and he sent them books on Judaism. The leaders of the group then decided that the males had to be circumcised and eventually found a Jewish physician, Dr. Reuven Cogan, who, in 1971, agreed to perform the mass ceremony. However, serious arguments broke out over this issue. About half the men in the group refused to undergo the ritual and left with their families. As a result, the "kibbutz" outside Cajamarca broke up and its members moved to Cajamarca, Trujillo and Lima.

Not long afterward, Sigundo's whole family moved to Trujillo, a city also located in northwest Peru (current population: about 650,000), "so that we would be able to keep up our lives in an organized group and not mix in with others, because we were like a commune," Peretz explains.

"We went about eight kilometers out of the city and at a place called El Milagro, in a desert, we built our community. There was no water and no electricity. We did everything slowly, by ourselves. Then my father also built a synagogue — not alone, everyone helped him — and we started to go to the synagogue. My father taught there and afterward also my little brother, Yehesha."

Fear of mixed marriage

The breakup of the community outside Cajamarca also generated a leadership struggle between the Villanueva brothers. In July 1987, David Lis an engineer from Rishon Letzion who spent a long time in Peru, sent a letter to Rabbi Avihayil's Amishav Society requesting assistance so that the members of the group could be formally converted to Judaism and immigrate to Israel. The rabbis in Lima, Ben Hamo and his Ashkenazi counterpart, Yaakov Kraus, made a similar recommendation to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. At the end of 1989, with the consent of the chief rabbi, Mordechai Eliyahu, a delegation that included Rabbi Avihayil and Rabbi Mordechai Uriya, the president of the Haifa Rabbinical Court, traveled to Peru. There they co-opted Rabbi

Kraus and established a conversion court that converted 58 people from Trujillo and Lima.

"On the 23rd day of the month of Menachem Av 5749 [August 24, 1989], the Children of Moses immersed themselves according to Jewish law in the Mocha River. Then weddings were held, according to halakha, for all those who were previously married, with great festivity. The conversion in Lima of the Alvero, Villanueva and Selirose families was completed on the 28th day of the month of Menachem Av on the shore of Lima."

Immediately afterward, they immigrated to Israel and settled at Elon Moreh. Rabbi Uriya was asked to assist, as he had previously been an emissary in Latin America for a few years.

"The chief rabbis asked me to join Rabbi Avihayil, as I speak Spanish," he explains, "and I did go with him. At first I was astonished to see Indians, real Indians, who wanted to convert to Judaism, but then I saw that they were strong in their faith and that they observe the commandments. They are very simple but good-hearted people with a powerful spirit, and after examining the matter we decided to convert them. However, we did not convert all of them, only those we saw as serious and who said they were willing to 'go up' [immigrate] to the Land of Israel."

How did they come to Judaism?

Uriya: "The Indians are Christians, and in Christianity there are sects who observe Shabbat and keep kosher. So these people reached the conclusion that as long as they were already observing Shabbat and keeping kosher, they might as well be Jews."

But why make their conversion conditional on their immigrating to Israel? After all, aren't there many people who become Jews but do not move to Israel?

"The condition was because of the agreement that was reached with rabbis of the previous generation, according to which it is forbidden to convert people who intend to remain in Peru. I think that what underlies that regulation is fear of mixed marriage."

Who decided that they would go to settlements in the territories?

"That I really do not know. It may have been due to considerations of where they could be best integrated and that the settlements agreed to receive them."

Improvised Torahs

When Hava Peretz and her husband arrived in Israel, they already had a nine-month-old son. Hava, who studied production engineering in Peru, now works as substitute metapelet (caregiver for small children). Her husband found work in the West Bank industrial zone of Barkan, which

was why the family moved to Tapuah eight years ago.

Before you came to Israel, were you told that you would be going to a settlement and that there is a dispute over the settlements in Israel?

Peretz: "No, we were not told. We believed there was unity in the nation and we believe there will one day be unity."

And when you decided to move to Tapuah, weren't you put off by the fact that it is considered an extremist settlement, a bastion of Kahanism - followers of Rabbi Meir Kahane?

"There may be two or three Kahanist families here, but the rest are completely regular. We are not in contact with the Kahanist families, but we love all the people in Israel, as long as they are Jews — Haredim [ultra-Orthodox], national-religious and secular — I love them all if they are Jews."

A year after the arrival of the "First Aliyah," a second group of about the same size came to Elon Moreh. In the intervening years, the community has grown to about 250 as a result of natural population increase. Rabbi Uriya, who took part in the first two rabbinical delegations to Peru, was also a member of this year's delegation.

"There were people whom we didn't convert 10 or 12 years ago, and in the meantime, new people joined, so there was a group of more than 200 people in Peru who wanted to be converted. They contacted the chief rabbis, Rabbi Lau and Rabbi Bakshi Doron, and asked them to send a delegation of the conversion court," he says.

"The rabbis asked Rabbis Birnbaum and Mamo and myself to investigate. We went there and we found people who have been observing the commandments and studying Judaism for years."

Who taught them Judaism?

Uriya: "First, there were still people there whom we did not agree to convert, and they were teaching, and they also have books, and I imagine that they consult with all kinds of people." Rabbi Birnbaum notes that in the years since the First Aliyah, the Chabad movement made contact with the community that remained in Peru.

"Chabadniks first visited them 15 years ago, and the ties with Chabad were maintained over the years," Birnbaum says. "The Lubavitcher Rebbe of blessed memory also sent emissaries, but their process of study was mainly autodidactic."

Pointing to photographs of improvised Torahs fashioned by the group, he exclaims: "Isn't this beautiful and touching? Not only did they build synagogues for themselves, they also made

sacred utensils and asked a carpenter to build Torahs for them, which look like real Torahs, but in place of the scroll inside, they enlarged photocopies of the Bible and pasted them in, creating a kind of improvised scroll."

Rabbi Mamo says they also produced their own tefillin (phylacteries).

When the Messiah comes

Batya Mendel, whom Rabbis Birnbaum and Mamo say was the leading figure in the Lima community, decided, on the occasion of her immigration to Israel, to Hebraize not only her first name, but her surname as well: "I Hebraized my name to Mendel," she explains, "because every year in the 1990s, a rabbi named Miron Sover Mendel came to Peru at Passover and he would always spend a few days in Trujillo and a few days in Cajamarca and a few days in Lima, and teach us Judaism. He died about half a year ago, so when they asked me at the conversion about a name, I asked in his memory that my surname be changed to Mendel."

She and her husband and their three children joined the Lima community founded by Alvero Villanueva about 10 years ago. "But I also knew real Jews in Lima, such as Rabbi Kraus," she says.

What made you come to this settlement?

Mendel: "The Absorption Ministry told us to go here and thank God they sent us here. This is the land of the patriarch, Abraham, and the people here are very nice."

According to Ben-Haim, "the idea that there are Palestinians here at all is a lie. The Palestinian people never existed and only when the Jews leave their country, the Arabs come in and try to take over and prove they have a right here. But we cannot agree to that because the Lord gave the land to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob for all time, and all the Jews will be united and love the Lord with all their heart, and then all the problems will be solved."

What is the solution?

Mendel: "In Peru I thought that all the Jews in Israel were religiously observant. It was only when I came here that I heard that almost 30 percent of the Jews are not religious, and that broke my heart."

Is that what you were told — that the majority of the Jews in Israel are religious?

"Yes, the majority but not everyone. But if they all become fully religious and unite, the Messiah will come and the problems with the Palestinians will be solved because they will get out of here."

Mendel's eyes glitter as she talks about that future day: "It will be the most wonderful day in the world when all the Arabs will become Jews and observe the commandments and love the Lord and when the Messiah comes, there will be no one in the land of our fathers who does not love the Lord and Judaism with all their heart.

"It was a shock for me to discover that there are nonreligious Jews in Israel. You are blind and do not see the wellspring we have in our hands which is the Torah. Your mouths are sealed and you cannot drink from the well, and your eyes are blind and you do not see, and your ears are sealed and you do not want to hear. I pray to God that you will all become religious for the good of the state, because the Torah has preserved us as a people for all the years from the time of the patriarch, Abraham, and because of the Torah, we have a right to live here and the Arabs do not."

You only became a member of this nation a few months ago, and you have been in the country less than two months. Do you know that there are Arabs whose families have lived here for hundreds of years?

"But God said that whosoever becomes a Jew with a full heart and observes the commandments — only to a Jew like that will He give the land for generation unto generation."

Ben-Haim is not bothered by the fact that by being sent to a settlement, he has also been effectively recruited to a particular political group: "We knew we were coming to a place that is called 'territories' because people we know immigrated earlier and are living in the settlements in the territories. But I have no problem with that because I do not consider the territories to be occupied territories. You cannot conquer what has in any case belonged to you since the time of the patriarch, Abraham."

In Trujillo, he worked as a cab driver and in commerce. "Most of our people did work like that, so we would have time for our prayers and commandments and holidays," he explains.

Mendel and her husband also engaged in commerce. They are not bothered in the least by the employment situation in Israel. God will help them find work, Mendel says.

Ben-Haim says that after he finishes the Hebrew course, he may join the army, "because I wasn't in the army in Peru and that is something I lack, and also because I want to defend the country and if there is no choice, I will kill Arabs. But I am sure that Jews kill Arabs only for self-defense and justice, but Arabs do it because they like to kill."

He bases this belief on his scientific view of Judaism: "The Arab has the instinct of murder and killing, and Jews do not have that instinct - that is a genetic fact."

But if you were not born a Jew genetically, don't you have that instinct?

Ben-Haim: "Maybe it was there, but it makes no difference, because now we are all Jews."