

A New Lease on Life

The Jews of Lisbon are experiencing a reinvigoration, and are even cautiously optimistic about the future.

By Hillel Kuttler

Taking pen and paper in hand, Samuel Levy, 75, draws vertical lines, tracing his roots for 14 generations. Levy's tree shows his father Salamao as the first member of his family to be born in Portugal since Meir Halevi in 1465. In the centuries that followed King Manuel I's edict in 1496 to expel the Jews, the Halevis/Levys settled in Morocco and then in Gibraltar. In the 1800s, some family members returned to Lisbon, but the females continued traveling to Gibraltar to give birth, that way assuring British citizenship for their children. Even then, only the Lisbon residents' status as foreigners allowed the clan to practice Judaism in Portugal.

We finish sipping our tea, leave the café and cross the capital's busy Rue Alexandre Herculano and into Shaare Tikva Synagogue. Levy is a regular congregant, and this Friday evening he is observing Salomao's *yahrzeit*.

The Levy line in Portugal is nearing an end. A retired businessman, Levy has no children.

My connection to Portugal begins and ends with my grandparents, who retired to the Lisbon suburb of Cascais in the 1960s. My grandfather, Ted Unterman — born in Toronto and a lawyer in New Jersey — died at 92 last Yom Kippur, joining my grandmother Rozzie in eternal rest in Lisbon's Cemiterio Judaico. This trip with my mother to clean out her parents' apartment represents, probably, the last of my four visits to Portugal.

As Levy leads Maariv prayers for the 21 men and nine women in attendance, I stand at my grandfather's seat in the second row and wonder how many of the 350 polished-wood seats in the triple-tiered structure were occupied on a typical Shabbat when Shaare Tikva opened in 1904; Salomao was just 30 years old then. The nameplates affixed to the seats mark the rich history here: Cassuto, Hayat, Bensimon, Ruah, Amram, Araujo, Ayash, Assor, Kolinski, Lustigman, Steinhardt.

Portuguese Jewry has always been in a tenuous state even when the religion could be practiced freely. Levy says that he never experienced anti-Semitism, but that he was also the only Jew among his 500 fellow students at university. Jews as a community escaped deportation during the Holocaust, although a plaque in the synagogue's courtyard memorializes individuals whom the Nazis killed. The country long enjoyed close relations with the PLO, which put Portuguese Jews on the defensive. Only with last year's centennial celebration of the synagogue's construction did Jews deign to paint the shul's name, in Hebrew, on a white wall fronting Rue Herculano; until 1910, non-Catholic houses of worship could not open onto a street, so Shaare Tikva is set back 50 feet and runs diagonally behind two private buildings.

Back in 1904, Salomao Levy also helped organize the community's charitable works and hired a *shochet* to slaughter kosher meat. From the 1920s to the 1940s, Portuguese Jews integrated and cared for immigrants from Brazil, Morocco, Russia and Germany, many of whom used Lisbon as a way-station to America, Mexico and Palestine.

Approximately 1,200 Jews live in Portugal today, including in the towns of Porto, Belmonte and Portimao. In Lisbon, few



OUT OF THE PAST

members of the 600-person Jewish community live near the downtown synagogue anymore, and Levy acknowledges the steep drop in attendance at services over the decades. But Lisbon's Jewish community is experiencing what some see as a reinvigoration, and possibly even a revival.

Nowadays, in fact, "every third [non-Jewish] person I meet says he's proud of his Jewish heritage," says Shaare Tikva's Rabbi Boaz Pash.

Unlike Eastern European communities in the early 1990s, Lisbon Jewry's recent upturn is not synagogue-centered — and that's purposeful. The model was failing, residents say, and community



This Portuguese postage stamp commemorates the hundredth anniversary of Shaare Tikva Synagogue

leaders decided to gamble on a new approach. Rather than focus outreach efforts on adults, attention turned to the children.

So three years ago, the community's board hired Marcos Prist from Sao Paulo, Brazil, as a youth director. Eighty youngsters soon registered for the youth club he established, Dor Chadash (New Generation). Every Sunday, sports- and Judaic-oriented activities are held for various age groups of the children on the grounds of the community-owned Maccabi Country Club in the suburb of Sintra.

"Instead of making people come to the synagogue, we brought the synagogue to the people," says community board member Jose Ruah, an information-technology specialist at Lisbon's British Hospital who is a fifth-generation Portuguese Jew. "It required an open mind. There was nothing to offer the adults in the synagogue, so we decided to get to the kids. If you get to the kids, you

get to the mother, then the father, then the grandfather. This was a strategic shift."

Last year, weary of the instability of having three rabbis come and go after longtime spiritual leader Abraham Assor's death in 1993, the board hired Pash, an energetic fellow with a long, black beard, who was raised in Jerusalem's Old City. Pash, now 38, made an immediate impression as much through his method as his knowledge, says Ruah.

Ruah recalls the weekend Pash was brought to Lisbon to audition. "He gave us not the answers we wanted to hear, but the right answers," says Ruah. "I took Boaz to a party at which kids were dancing on motzi Shabbat. I got to his hotel to pick him up, and he was in jeans and a sweatshirt. It made a very good impression, that he was not staying dressed in his suit to see the kids. ... He speaks the language that people can understand. A teacher has to reach his students."

Pash's delivery is vibrant and he meets the community on its level. He hosts regular, weeknight lectures at area hotels, frequently employing slide shows on such topics as Kabbalah. Some gatherings draw 150 people.

Levy, Ruah and Pash agree that education is key to maintaining Jewish identity in Lisbon. Pash takes it a step further, stating that many positive Jewish experiences contribute toward an effective education. "The word *chinuch* [Hebrew for "education"] is a small word, but it includes so many aspects: youth activities, [outreach to] college students, adult education and a thousand other things," he says, smoking a cigarette in the synagogue's auxiliary chapel on a Sunday morning last autumn.

"The community is faced with several difficulties: because of its size, the lack of anti-Semitism, the lack of educational facilities. If there's no organized Jewish education, there's no continuity. There's no easy way. Everyone in their own way, at every age, has the obligation and right to observe Judaism. The question is the tactics."

Pash credits Lisbon's Jews with moving to address the community's stagnation by hiring the young foreigners. Little by little, symbols of religious observance


are turning up in town. A huge supermarket downtown carries many kosher products, including wine produced in the north and several cuts of meat. Pash contracts with a nonkosher bakery a 20-minute walk from the synagogue to prepare kosher challah for Shabbat and holidays; he supervises the entire process. Kosher olive oil, cheese and wine is produced for export. A female choir was formed. Children go to a Jewish camp. A mikvah is being constructed, and a library is planned.

Even the purchase last summer of a property adjacent to the cemetery is viewed as a good indicator of growth. As I lingered in the cemetery after my grandfather's burial, one of his acquaintances told me, with some excitement, that the acquisition "will give us space to bury for the next 100 years."

As assimilation has thinned the community, newcomers from South America, Europe and Israel are gradually replenishing it. Their ignorance of Portuguese traditions helped spur Lisbon Jewry to rebuild, because the community saw that it would fade within a short time, Ruah explains.

He adds after a moment: "The situation today is a bit of everything: resuscitation, intervention, preventive medicine. Unless you do preventive medicine, you get death."

Levy is cautiously optimistic for the future. "We had a period of time when people were apart, when children were spending time with their Catholic friends," he says. "Now they are [spending time] together. The community gives more opportunities for Jews to get together with other Jews, which is very important."

Asked what his ancestors would think about the new life being breathed into Lisbon Jewry today, Levy says, "Who could imagine, after the Inquisition, that Jewish life would be back 500 years later? [My relatives] probably thought that they would stay in Morocco many generations. I think that the community will always work to keep Jewish life going. It is my hope, not my prediction. My hope is that the community will survive." 

Hillel Kuttler last wrote for *Inside* about an Israeli rabbi's fight for gay rights.