

Obscure Practices among New World Anusim

Schulamith C. Halevy
Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies
618 South Michigan Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60605
U.S.A

Nachum Dershowitz
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Urbana, Illinois 61801
U.S.A.

Many Jews of Spain and Portugal who were forced to convert to Christianity—called *anusim* in Hebrew—and their descendents settled in the Americas.¹ From Inquisition dossiers we know that some maintained selected Jewish practices, such as circumcision, ritual slaughter, avoiding pork, and lighting Sabbath candles, while living outwardly as Christians in the New World.² These secret Jews were presumed to have assimilated over time into the larger Hispanic communities. Wiznitzer writes: “By the end of the seventeenth [!] century the whole crypto-Jewish community in Mexico had been destroyed.”³ Liebman considers the underground Jewish community to have disappeared in the eighteenth century.⁴ No Jews came forward with the abolishment of the Inquisition in 1821. In 1925, an American Jewish

¹H. C. Lea, *The Inquisition in the Spanish Dependencies*, Macmillan: New York, 1908; C. Roth, *History of the Marranos*, 2nd ed., Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia, 1941; A. Wiznitzer, *Jews in Colonial Brazil*, Columbia University Press: Morningside Heights, NY, 1960; Wiznitzer, “Crypto-Jews in Mexico during the Sixteenth Century,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 51(3), 1961, pp. 168-214; Wiznitzer, “Crypto-Jews in Mexico during the Seventeenth Century,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 51(4), 1961, p. 268; R. E. Greenleaf, *The Mexican Inquisition of the Sixteenth Century*, University of New Mexico Press: Albuquerque, 1969; S. B. Liebman, *The Jews in New Spain: Faith, Flame and the Inquisition*, University of Miami Press: Coral Gables, FL, 1970; Liebman, *The Inquisition and the Jews in the New World*, University of Miami Press: Coral Gables, FL, 1975; Liebman, *New World Jewry, 1493-1825: Requiem for the Forgotten*, Ktav Publishing House: New York, 1982; B. Lewin, *Los Criptojudios: Un Fenomeno Religioso y Social*, Editorial Milá : Buenos Aires, 1987.

²See, for example, Liebman, *New World Jewry*, pp. 100-130.

³“Crypto-Jews in Mexico during the Seventeenth Century,” p. 268.

⁴*New Spain*, p. 303.

newspaper wrote: “It is another inexplicable phenomenon that, soon after religious liberty and tolerance were established in Spain, Portugal and Spanish America, they disappeared as if by magic. They have become absorbed by the respective population, and only a very small number of them returned to Judaism in Brazil, Mexico and Central America, where they still practice today”.⁵

There have been, however, sporadic reports of secret Jews in Latin America,⁶ culminating in their “discovery” in the Southwest United States, published by Richard Santos in 1983.⁷ In reality, descendents of anusim are not limited to the Southwest, nor did they all get there via Mexico. They are also likely to have arrived from Cuba, the Caribbean, South America, or Iberia. Indeed, wherever there are people of Spanish or Portuguese descent, there still are families aware of their Jewish heritage and practicing Jewish customs.⁸ The better known practices include: avoiding pork, some form of circumcision, and fasting around the time of Yom Kippur—all of which can be perceived as literal application of biblical laws.

¹In this paper, we identify specifically *rabbinic* practises among anusim. The most well-reported non-biblical crypto-Jewish practice is, Friday night candle-lighting. But there are many others, including: separating meat and milk, ritual slaughter, salting meat, and burying the dead in linen shrouds. Such customs are especially significant as they could not have been derived from a reading of the Bible and were not shared by non-Jews. Consequently, they bear strong evidence of Jewish origin. We have, furthermore, found surprisingly widespread evidence of relatively obscure practices of rabbinic Judaism, practices unknown to the vast majority of Western Jews, including: fasting on Mondays and Thursdays as penance, orienting beds north-south, sweeping towards the center of the room, and burning nail clippings. Rabbinic practices serve as

⁵*The Sentinel*, July 31, 1925.

⁶See, for example, the *Proceedings of Thirty-Fourth Annual Convention of the Central Conference of American Rabbis*, vol. 33, June 1923, pp. 431-432; and J. Beller, *Jews in Latin America*, Jonathan David: New York, 1969.

⁷R. G. Santos, “Chicanos of Jewish descent in Texas,” *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 15(4), July 1983, pp. 327ff.; see also D. S. Nidel, “Modern descendents of conversos in New Mexico,” *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly* 16(3), Apr. 1984, pp. 249ff. For a partial listing of media reports, see S. C. Halevy, “Anusim in North America: The Ingathering,” *Tradition* 30(1), 1995, p. 99.

⁸For a list of some customs, see F. Hernández, “The Secret Jews of the Southwest”, in: M. A. Cohen and A. J. Peck, *Sephardim in the Americas*, American Jewish Archives: Tuscaloosa, AL, 1993.

compelling evidence of an unbroken Jewish tradition among New World descendents of the victims of Iberian religious persecution.

The traditions we report were gleaned from conversations with about one hundred anusim of the New World. These people originated in Mexico, the American Southwest, Puerto Rico, Brazil, Columbia, Cuba, Honduras, and Guatemala. Of course, not all anusim practiced all the traditions we describe.

A minority of the people we spoke with were told explicitly by a parent or grandparent that they were Jews. In several cases, it was a grandmother who passed on the family traditions to one elect granddaughter of her choice whom she raised herself. Some knew the Jewish origin of their customs, but most transmitted them unknowingly. For many who discover their Jewish roots only as an adult, the realization can be unsettling.

Candle-lighting on Fridays (generally in a non-public room) has always been widespread among crypto-Jews. The house is cleaned and clothes changed for Shabbat. Some children are not allowed by their parents to do anything Friday night (“not even wash one’s hair”). Observing the Sabbath on Saturday is, of course, biblical, but lighting candles is Mishnaic.⁹ “Women die during childbirth on account of three transgressions, for not being careful... with the lighting of the [Sabbath] candle.”

Some observed a Yom Kippur fast. Some celebrate a non-Christian spring holiday in lieu of Passover (sometimes called *Transito*) with special holiday foods, or build huts in the autumn around the time of Succoth. Except for some who light eight candles for Christmas, these holidays are biblical in origin. It was common to fast three days in honor of the Fast of Esther. Anusim in the New World may also venerate non-canonical saints, with celebrations for Santa Esterika (Saint Esther), Santo Moises, etc.

Many elder women and men fast on Mondays and Thursdays as penance. This custom appears in Jacob ben Asher’s authoritative code, the *Arba’ah Turim*,¹⁰ and as penance in the responsa literature just after the Expulsion.¹¹ It appears in the *Travelogue* of David haReuveni,¹²

⁹*Shabbat* 2:6.

¹⁰*Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayim* 134.

¹¹*Responsa Levi ibn Haviv* 79.

as well as in Inquisitional edicts¹³ and in many a confession in Inquisitorial torture chambers. These fasts continued until recently in Portugal.¹⁴ Moslems also prefer Monday and Thursday, but Catholics prefer Wednesday and Friday.

There are still said to be secret synagogues, secret prayer rooms in the homes of elder relatives, and secret prayer groups. The rare few possess *talit* and *tefillin*, mezuzot, *Tanakh*, *siddurim*, or other Jewish ceremonial and decorative objects, presumably obtained from Jewish stores or merchants. Prayers with *la Presencia* (the Shekhinah) are fairly common. Some women possess kabbalistic knowledge and practices. They had a tradition of seventy-three names of God (not seventy or seventy-two, as in other traditions), as did Portuguese anusim and as is found in *Midrash Kohen*.¹⁵

Children were enjoined to only marry “one of us”, often expressed as *los nuestros* (or *muestros*), and to follow the ancient customs, *costuma d'antigua*, including the “special diet”. Another key word is “clean”: “You should only marry the *clean* ones”.

Some anusim are virtually vegetarian; many avoid red meat in general, substituting chicken; others ritually slaughter beef, mutton, goats. Pork was shunned (“pork is *unclean*”) and typically called *carne de marrano*. The observance of such laws of *kashrut* was commonly referred to as *la dieta*. Rabbit and game, shellfish and shrimp were never eaten by anusim who kept to “the diet”. Many children were prohibited from eating food prepared by anyone but their mother or maternal grandmother.

Separating meat from milk is common: mixing meat and milk was said to cause a stomach ache. Many wait between eating meat and drinking milk; some even bleach or boil dishes between meals. Some wash hands before and after eating (occasionally using a cup). Washing hands before and after meals and separating meat and milk are rabbinic.¹⁶

¹²Ed. Kahane, pp. 72-74; see Asaf, pp. 154-155.

¹³Liebman, *New Spain*, p. 96.

¹⁴N. Slouschz, *Ha-Anusim be-Portugal*, Dvir: Tel-Aviv, 1932, pp. 71-73 (in Hebrew).

¹⁵For Portugal, see Slouschz, p. 167. Slouschz was unaware of the midrashic source for the number 73, which appears in J. D. Eisenstein, *Ozar Midrashim*, New York, 1915, p. 253. We are grateful to Moshe Idel for his help in identifying this source.

¹⁶Washing hands appears in *Sifra* to Lev. 15:11 and the use of a utensil in *Mishna Yadaim* 1:2. Separating meat and milk is in *Hulin* 8:12.

A rare few drink only "clean", kosher wine (wine that has not been touched by a Gentile). Joseph Caro, a Spanish exile living in Safed, writes in his authoritative *Shulhan Arukh*:¹⁷

A Jew who transgressed out of fear for his life is a full-fledged Jew; his slaughtered [animals] are permissible and he does not cause wine he touches to become prohibited. An apostate who in one city [professes] belief in idolatry in front of idolaters and in another city enters the house of a Jew and says that he is a Jew does not make wine [prohibited]. One can trust the ritual slaughter of the *anusim* who remained in their land, if they act properly in private and have not the opportunity to escape to a place where they can worship God, and they do not cause wine to become prohibited by their touch.

Some swung a fowl to daze it before slaughtering; some wrung the necks of the chicken to decapitate them; others chopped the head off. Typically a formulaic apology was made to the animal before it was killed with special knives, tested on the finger tip and nail or on a strand of hair. The fowl was always hung to drain all the blood; usually the blood was covered with dirt. The meat was then soaked in hot water and salted to remove remaining blood. Red meat was inspected for imperfections, soaked, salted and then soaked again in warm water; all fat was removed and discarded. Sometimes porging the sciatic nerve was also practiced; we have also heard of people simply avoiding the hind quarters of the animal.

It is virtually unheard of today for a ritual slaughterer to test the knife for nicks on the skin of the fingertip, rather than just on the fingernail, though it is specified in the Talmud and the codes:¹⁸ "Rabbi Papa ruled: [the knife] must be examined with the flesh of the finger and with the fingernail."

Porging, removing the fat layers and covering the blood are biblical; salting, soaking, and scalding meat in hot water are all rabbinic. The Babylonian Talmud states:¹⁹ "Meat cannot be rid of its blood unless it is thoroughly salted and thoroughly rinsed". Scalding is required by Maimonides:²⁰

¹⁷*Yoreh Deah* 119:9-12.

¹⁸*B.T. Hullin* 17b, See also *Arba'ah Turim* and *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah* 18:19. Hayyim b. Moses ibn Attar is one of the earliest rabbis to discuss the prevailing laxity in his *Pri Toar* (Amsterdam, 1742) on *Yoreh Deah, ad loc.* The Edict of Faith of 1639 (Liebman, *New Spain*, p. 96) mentions the use of the nail only.

¹⁹*Babylonian Talmud (B.T.) Hullin* 103a.

²⁰*Mishneh Torah, The Book of Holiness, "Forbidden Foods"* 6:10 (trans. by L. I. Rabinowitz and P. Grossman, Yale Judaica Press: New Haven, 1965).

How should one proceed? First, he should rinse the meat, and then salt it thoroughly and leave it in the salt for the time it takes to walk a mile. He should then rinse it well again until the water is entirely clear, and immediately thereafter cast it into boiling—not tepid—water, so that it would become bleached, and no more blood would emerge.

This stringency is recommended by Caro.²¹ Today, only some Yemenite Jews continue the ancient practice of scalding meat after salting and before cooking, yet many anusim all around the globe seem to have preserved the practice till today.

Blood was carefully avoided, even to the point of throwing out eggs with blood spots. Those who made *morcilla* (blood sausage) and pig feet were referred to as "gross". Not drinking blood is biblical, but its extension to blood spots in eggs is rabbinic:²² "The fine of spirit eat unfertilized eggs. If a drop is found on it, one discards the blood and eats the rest.... If it is found on the yolk, even the whole egg is prohibited."

Anusim buried their dead within one day, used white linen burial shrouds. The shrouds were often called just *lino*, or included the term *muerte*, especially in Portuguese speaking countries. They covered mirrors in the home of the deceased, and had water spigots in cemeteries. Burial was entrusted to women. Mourners rended their garments, sat on the floor and mourned seven days, then abstained from festivities (including music) for one year.²³ Except perhaps for immediate burial and rending of garments, which are biblical, the burial customs are of Talmudic or later origin.²⁴ Draping mirrors is common in places like New Mexico²⁵ and is not

²¹*Bet Yosef on Arba'ah Turim, Yoreh Deah 69.*

²²*B.T. Hulin 64b.*

²³Quick burial and one year of mourning were common practice in rural New Mexico; see A. Lucero-White, *Los Hispanos*, Sage Books: Denver, 1947 (reprinted in *Hispano Culture of New Mexico*, Arno Press: New York, 1976, p. 16) and M. S. Edmonson, *Los Manitos: A Study of Institutional Values*, 1957 (self-published), p. 35.

²⁴For plain linen shrouds, see *B. T. Moed Katan 27b* ("Previously, funerals were more costly to the relatives than the death, so much so that the relatives would leave the corpse and run, until Rabbi Gamliel came and humbled himself and was buried in linen garments, and the populace became accustomed to do likewise"), and *Yoreh Deah 352:1-2*; for spilling water, see *Kol-Bo*, fol. 86 (to call attention to the death or, as "some say, the reason is because the Angel of Death throws a drop of the blood of death into the water") and *Yoreh Deah 339:5* ("It is customary to pour out all drawn water from the vicinity of the corpse"); for washing hands upon leaving the cemetery, see *Kol-Bo, loc. cit.*, and *Responsa Isaac Aboab 7*. Halakah demands burial on the actual day of death barring extenuating circumstances; anusim usually bury the next morning.

²⁵Lucero-White, p. 18.

uniquely Jewish.²⁶

Some regions had a travelling expert who performed circumcisions, while, in some cases, grandmothers are said to have circumcised their own grandsons. Others consecrated baby boys on the eighth day, avoiding circumcision because that could “bind the child to the Law of Moses”, which the child would be hard-put observing fully. Interestingly, this mistaken belief (derived from the Paul’s Letter to the Galicians²⁷) is recorded in the seventeenth-century memoirs of Samuel Aboab.²⁸

Some women abstained from conjugal relations and Church-going for forty days after parturition (as part of *la dieta de cuarenta dias*).²⁹ This interpretation of Leviticus 12:4 was the subject of dispute among medieval rabbis. Maimonides writes:³⁰

There is a custom which prevails in some places and which is mentioned in the responsa of some of the Geonim, whereby a woman who has given birth to a male child may not have intercourse until the expiration of forty days, and in the case of a female child eighty days, even if she has had a flow for seven days only. This ... is not a well-founded custom, but the result of an erroneous decision in these responsa. It is a custom in the manner of the *Minim* [heretics] which is prevalent in these localities, and the inhabitants thereof had learned it from the Sadducees [Karaites].

Most anusim sweep floors towards the center of the room. This very matrilineal practice is described as something the Portuguese still give their lives for by Moshe Hagiz two hundred years after the Expulsion.³¹

²⁶J. T. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, part II, vol. 3, pp. 94-5, Macmillan, 1935.

²⁷2:3-9.

²⁸*Sefer ha-Zikhronot*, Prague, circa 1640, fol. 75b, cited in S. Asaf, *Beaholei Yaakov*, Mossad Harav Kook: Jerusalem, 1943, p. 152.

²⁹This, too, appears in the Edict as a sign of secret Judaism (Liebman, *New Spain*, p. 97) and was widespread in New Mexico (Edmonson, p. 24). T. Atencio speaks of other aspects of the same diet in “Resolana: A Chicano Pathway to Knowledge”, Third Annual Ernesto Galarza Commemorative Lecture, Stanford Center for Chicano Research, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 1988.

³⁰*Mishneh Torah, The Book of Holiness*, “Forbidden Intercourse”, 11:15 (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1965).

³¹*Mishmat Hakhamim*, 1732/3 (pp. 32b-33a, Chernovitz edition, 1863/4) [our translation].

I have heard that it was an ancient custom in Spain to take care not to sweep a room from inside out. Rather, they began from the door and swept the dirt inwards out of respect for the *mezuzah*. For this reason, one of the accusations hurled at anusim by the inquisitorial priests in Portugal today, so as to incriminate them, is that there is testimony that they sweep the house from the entrance inwards. May God avenge the blood of his servants who sanctify his name at all times and in all places.

This custom—which appears not to be mentioned elsewhere in Jewish literature—is confirmed by Portuguese Inquisition records.³² In an eighteenth century literary work, we are told that “the Jews sweep toward the inside of the house so that they shall not, as they say, throw out their possessions...”³³

The Talmud states that “one who buries his nail trimmings is righteous; one who burns them is saintly; while one who throws them out is wicked—since a pregnant woman may miscarry as a result”.³⁴ This, too, appears in the edicts. Many anusim today do in fact burn their nails and hair trimmings; others wrap them carefully before discarding.

Anusim often orient all beds in the house between north and south. This practice is of Talmudic origin:³⁵ “Abba Benjamin says: All my life I exerted myself over two things... that my bed should be placed between north and south. Rabbi Isaac said, whoever places his bed between north and south has male offspring... Rabbi Nahman ben Yosef said, nor does his wife miscarry.” While Ashkenazic sources restricted its applicability and some kabbalists interpreted the *Zohar* as mandating an east-west orientation, Sephardim have taken care to have the headboard facing north or south.³⁶ We have, however, not found any reference to the arrangement of beds in

³²E. Glazer, “Invitation to Intolerance”, *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 1956, pp. 353-354. In Spain a woman was reported to have swept her house on Fridays in this manner (F. Sierro Malmierca, *Judios, Moriscos e Inquisicion en Ciudad Rodrigo*, Diputacion de Salamanca: Salamanca, 1990, p. 177; we are grateful to D. Gitlitz for this reference). Another case is mentioned in Yerushalmi, *From Spanish Court to Italian Ghetto: Isaac Cardoso: A Study in Seventeenth-Century Marranism and Jewish Apologetics*, Columbia University Press: New York, 1971, p. 37.

³³Dom Francisco Manoel de Melo, *Apologos Dialogaes* (Lisbon, 1721), p. 273, cited in Glazer, *op. cit.*

³⁴*B. T. Moed Katan* 18a and parallels. This superstition is not recorded in any of the major codes.

³⁵*B. T. Berakhot* 5b.

³⁶The orientation of beds is required by the Sephardic codes: Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, The Book of Temple Service*, “The Temple”, 7:9 (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1957); *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 3:6. It is explained by Maimonides as stemming from respect for the Temple site in Jerusalem.

Inquisition records, though it appears to be fairly common until today among anusim who usually have no awareness of its religious significance, yet continue to follow the ancient custom.

As mentioned above, most members of crypto-Judaic families are unaware of their connection to Judaism. Hence, their discovery of a secret Jewish tradition within the family can be unsettling and sometimes traumatic. Christian schooling, wherein Jews are still portrayed as villains and god-killers, can make the discovery of even partial Jewish heritage seem like a shameful stain. For those who wish to publicly acknowledge the Jewish elements in their background, family ties, jobs and friends are often jeopardized, while for those seeking to rejoin normative Judaism, finding an accepting and understanding Jewish community, let alone competent guidance in sorting out the Jewish aspects from the Christian in one's upbringing, may prove impossible. Let us, by way of example, relate the story of one woman of the anusim—the late artist and genealogist—Berta Covos.³⁷

Berta was born and raised as a Roman Catholic in a small farming town, San Elizario, Texas.³⁸ Her family seldom went to Church. She began to investigate her connection to Judaism as a result of having been accused of being Jewish by her Gentile husband when she called pork unclean and refused to let it into her house. An investigation into her genealogy confirmed family ties to Jewish names and Inquisition records, and led her to attempt to make new sense out of old customs she was raised on. As a child, the standard explanation had been that their ways were the ways of the nobility. Eventually Berta confronted her mother, who first responded with: “Why do you ask?”, but later admitted that she had been told at the age of five of her Jewish identity by her aunts who were raising her.³⁹

Berta's grandfather, a wealthy and powerful man who was considered “untouchable” (and whose grave had the biggest stone in the cemetery), had a prayer room in his house, wherein he regularly isolated himself. Four people told Berta that he used to carry a big black book that

³⁷Conversations with S. C. Halevy between November 1993 and September 1994.

³⁸Life in the town is described by relatives: A. M. Skaggs and S. R. Skaggs, *The Bells of San Eli*, Las Cruces, 1990 (self-published).

³⁹Berta's cousin who was raised in the same house confirms that she was constantly reminded (in Spanish and in English) by her grandmother—that is, by the same great aunt of Berta, who was the source of the family customs—that they were Jews.

looked like his Bible into there. Her grandmother had been a travelling *salmista* (psalm reader). Berta said that, in general, men and women prayed thrice daily.

Only after the quest and discovery could Berta place various biographical facts into their proper context. Now she understood what her great-aunt Augustine had meant when she said that she had “her own” religion. It now made sense that one aunt married an Israeli Jew, that a cousin married a Jewish woman, that another cousin adopted a Jewish child and is raising her as a Jew, taking her to Temple and wearing a Magen David. Indeed, her uncle eventually told her he considered himself a Jew, an aunt came to say “shalom” at her mother’s funeral, and yet another cousin acknowledged being a Jew and is married to another *amus*.

What Berta eventually came to identify as the Ten Commandments had often been repeated to her by her mother: as she left for school in the morning, when she went to sleep, and on countless other occasions. Most of all, the tenth commandment was emphasized. It would be terribly low class to ask a friend for some candy, for example. During World War II, her mother was constantly agitated and felt terribly helpless over what was happening to the Jews. She said all Germans were unclean. When Berta repeated this to her Polish-American husband who was then stationed in Germany, a huge domestic fight ensued.

Berta sterilized her kitchen all the time: she had two sinks, one for clean things and one for unclean things that others brought into the house. If clean was touched by unclean, it became contaminated. She boiled dishes between meals and washed her hands before and after meals. The dining table was considered an “altar”;⁴⁰ not even a newspaper could be placed on it.

Berta spoke of her origins at a meeting of the Society for Crypto-Judaic Studies:⁴¹

My husband...the things that I had to put him through: wash his hand for this, he had to wash his hand for that... Here he was, a member of an upper middle class family, and I thought they were very unclean, that they were uncultured compared to us. How can they call themselves Anglos, when they have put us down because we are Mexicans, and here I find them to be culturally inferior people! They were very well to do, but they were culturally inferior to us. Because how could his mother go and put her purse where she was going to later put the food. She would take the food. She had just touched money and she would go and put it in her mouth! ... Every time I kosher her kitchen... I would take the Lysol and I would clean the bathroom. I think that [anusim] can identify with what I am saying, that this has been preserved; that this is not a

⁴⁰Cf. *B.T. Hagigah* 27a: “When the Temple stood, the altar atoned for man; nowadays a person’s table atones.”

⁴¹The meeting was held in San Antonio, TX, in November 1993.

Catholic custom. Yes, there is this “mental illness” in my family, that we tend to overdo it, and I am like that too. If I feel that a place is unclean I won't eat there; I'll get up and walk out. If there is a restaurant where the people who serve the food handle the money, that's not a place to eat. We go to extremes.... It is hard to get away from how you were brought up; you just carry it though subconsciously. My daughter drives me crazy: "Wash your hands! You're going to eat without thanking the Lord for your food?! Without saying a blessing? That's like the heathen." Things like this ... are ingrained in you; ... you can't get away from.

The division between clean and unclean stretched to people as well:

I remember in my family we had a great deal of compassion, but even that compassion did not extend to mixing with other people. We divided the people from under classes to the clean and unclean. I always used to ask my mother: “Well, who are the clean people, who are the unclean?”, and she would say: “Those that have our ways are the clean people”. We shared customs.... The borders now are totally different than what it used to be. I see more of a mixing of the bloods than when I was growing up. We were much more careful to preserve the bloodline and the culture.

Berta's mother, when placed in a nursing home, refused to eat virtually anything, but offered the staff no explanation. It was only after Berta outlined the rules and the staff decided to serve her kosher food, that she began to take her meals. Berta chose to make her mother's funeral (some three years ago) as simple as possible, without Jewish symbols on the headstone. She found that several relatives were disappointed at the cremation and absence of Jewish grave markings. In the old family cemetery, there are five and six-pointed stars adjacent to the crosses, which they found significant. In general, her family avoided entering cemeteries, if at all possible. When they had to, they removed all their clothing upon returning home and bathed fully. They also avoided visiting hospitals. When they did, they were instructed to walk with their hands behind their backs, not touching anything. If they touched, they had to cleanse themselves.

Berta, a vivacious positive and forthright person, eventually felt depressed and frustrated. She described her growing isolation as "going with scissors through [her] heart". Her husband constantly complained over the pork issue. He kept bringing recipes that included pork, and continually pressured her into accepting it. Her daughter began suffering discrimination on the part of friends and teachers, and she herself lost her position in the genealogical society in which she was active, and was rejected by many of her former friends. At the same time, she remained marginalized in a Jewish community that barely accepted her, having already been dismissed out of hand by another rabbi some years earlier. She carried the guilt of her forebears whom she

perceived to have “taken the easy way out” when given the choice between conversion and expulsion.

Berta expressed her feelings in these words:

I think that I need to say that you have the right to hate us. You have the right to feel an anger towards us, because we chose the easy way out. I'm not going to stand here and tell you that my family were crypto-Jews. I think that our keeping a lot of the Levitical law echoes a Judaic past—and in my family the observance of Levitical law seems to stand out—but you have to be logical, and in the Southwest the only religious institution that existed was the Catholic church, and for me it was very difficult to distinguish between Jewish customs and Catholic customs when I began to study them. Many of the priests were of Jewish decent. We did things unconsciously, without knowing why we did them. In studying the *hidalgo* class I would have to say that in this class I bet there were very few crypto-Jews. They were probably conversos. I say that from my heart; I believe that they were hypocrites.... I hesitate to openly say that I am a Jew; I have no right to claim to be a Jew.

On occasion, when the isolation became especially hard to bear, she expressed a desire to forget her new-found connection to Judaism, and she did cancel an appointment for an interview following the bombing in Buenos Aires and—in her words—“go into hiding”, but, on the other hand, she knew she could not stand by while Jews were still being persecuted, and felt that every time she tried to suppress her Jewish spirituality, God just thrust her back to Him. Berta yearned to go to Israel, and was broken-hearted when an opportunity arose, but her husband insisted that she may only go if and when he would be ready to go along. Berta was isolated spiritually; in one of our last conversations she said she felt she was “dying inside”.

Berta concluded her public talk with the following words:

I believe that our Jewish consciousness is in these things that we cannot forget; they will never come out of us. But like I said it isn't these things that may give me the right to claim that I am a Jew. It is a process and I know that if it is God's timing, and he wants to bring me back, He will bring me back. But I can say I love you; even though I can see in your faces the same pride, the same arrogance as in my family, I love you all.

Because anusim are unfamiliar with much of Judaism, because they have been raised with these practices from early childhood and find them completely natural, it usually takes them, like Berta, a very long time to sort out and separate the Christian from the Jewish, to get past the various explanations they heard as children—for actions done under the guise of the ancient custom or of superstition—and identify the true source. Transmission is often so subliminal that

some anusim are completely unaware of their Jewish ancestry, yet convert to Judaism for intangible reasons. Even after keeping kosher for years, they may fail to connect *kashrut* with such facts as their own family never having entered a neighborhood butcher shop, never having been served shellfish, never eating pork or game, avoiding blood and blood products that many others around them enjoyed.

Rabbinic observances among anusim today are a compelling testament to a surviving Jewish heritage. They could not have been derived from a reading of the Torah and are not shared by non-Jews. The more obscure practices could not even have been learned from other Jews. Those distinctly Jewish practices that were not proscribed in edicts (sweeping and orientation of beds) evidence direct cultural and religious inheritance. Furthermore, it would have been foolhardy for an “old” Christian or sincere convert to maintain any practice, however trivial, mentioned in an Edict of Faith. Only anusim with heroic interest in preserving their heritage would risk their well-being and that of their families for the sake of a forbidden tradition.

All the obscure practices mentioned here were known in Berta’s family, but she and her mother are no longer with us to shed more light on the customs they preserved. Information is becoming very scarce as the older generation is passing on, while at the same time more descendents of anusim are asking urgent questions. Much research remains to be done if we are to understand the whole picture of this unsung chapter of Jewish valor.

Berta's journey ended with her untimely passing. Even in her death she opened a door through which others continue to pass. We hope this paper will serve as a tribute to this noble and courageous woman.