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CATHOLIC JEWS?

By University theology professor
Matthew Warshawsky, who is absorbed
by how religions grow and morph.

For as long as he could remember, Simón de León always felt a vague but nagging sense of difference from most other children in Mexico City. It was the 1640s, and he had lived all 15 years of his life in the capital of the sprawling viceroyalty of New Spain. The family went to Mass, but never with much enthusiasm. In a place where everyone cooked with lard and ate pork, his family rarely did either. His parents and other elders fasted often, sometimes every Monday and Thursday, and for several days in summer, fall, and winter. On Friday evenings his mother, Isabel Núñez, assiduously swept the house, set out clean linens, drew the curtains facing the street and lit two candles in her bedroom, and along with his father, Duarte de León Jaramillo, mumbled prayers that at times sounded incomprehensible to Simón. Strangest of all were the surreptitious nocturnal gatherings of other "Portuguese" people in his parents' storeroom. The adults never invited Simón to these meetings, for good reason. While trying to espy one such clandestine gathering, what he saw through a sliver of light between a curtain and the window frame made Simón recoil in shock: first Duarte beat a crucifix with a belt and then his uncle, Simón Montero, pronounced insults against certain saints and even the Holy Family.

One afternoon when Simón returned home from his apprenticeship as a tailor, his mother escorted him into that same storeroom and, surrounded by boxes of dried fish, revealed a liberating but potentially fatal secret: she and the rest of Simón's family were secret Jews, who despite their baptism believed that adherence to the "Law of Moses" would ensure their salvation. But Simón must never discuss this matter with anyone, particularly his two younger siblings or other children. Doing so could ensnare the entire family in the clutches of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, whose principal function at this time still consisted in investigating, correcting, and if necessary, punishing the real or suspected

Jewish heresies of "New Christians," or Catholics of Jewish ancestry. To make her point clearer, Isabel described to Simón the travails of her own mother, who more than 40 years previously was "reconciled" to the Church at a public sentencing called an *auto de fe* (act of faith).

Often called Sephardim, from a reference to the Iberian Peninsula as *Sefarad* in the book of Obadiah, Jews had lived and prospered in Spain for at least a millennium and a half, until their expulsion or conversion during the last decade of the 1400s. While Columbus set sail for what he thought were the Indies in 1492, those Jews who would not forsake their ancestral religion undertook a journey of similar peril, to points near (Portugal) and far (Italy, the Ottoman Empire). A few short years later, the exiles who had taken refuge in Portugal found themselves arbitrarily baptized en masse. Significantly, however, the Portuguese Inquisition did not start functioning until 40 years later, allowing two generations of the converts, or *conversos*, to cultivate the seeds of crypto-Judaism without fear of punishment. At a time when many people rarely traveled far from the town of their birth, these Portuguese, as they came to be called, demonstrated a remarkable geographic mobility: a family might count members in Amsterdam, Venice, Madrid, Salonica, Istanbul, Lima, Mexico City, or Recife, and individuals might have lived in several of these places themselves.

Parallel with this geographic mobility was a spiritual one. Depending on place of residence, the same person might, at various times, have practiced Catholicism, Judaism, or, as in the case of Simón's family, crypto-Judaism, that is, Catholic rites publicly and Jewish ones in the home. Regardless of religion, to be Portuguese was to belong to "those of the Nation" (*os da nação*), an invisible but potent bond that glued together Portuguese Sephardim all over the world during the 1600s.

Taking advantage of this newly conferred ethnicity, many Portuguese New Christians immigrated to the Americas, hopeful of reinventing themselves. Some thought distance from Spain or Portugal would enable them to live as Jews. Others came to make their fortune, perhaps trading in slaves, silver, sugar, and other commodities. Whatever their reasons, Iberian crypto-Jews lived a bifurcated

existence, often hidden in plain sight.

Could Simón de León and his family reinvent themselves in this great land of possibility? The answer is ambiguous at best. When not working as a merchant, Duarte turned his belt against his six children, beating into their holy bodies the command to follow what he called "the good and true law" of Judaism and disparage that of the Church. This unprecedented violence, spoke of the tortured desperation of one secret Jew in an era devoid of spiritual freedom. Soon thereafter, the Inquisition unleashed its "Great Conspiracy" trials on the crypto-Jewish community of Mexico City, the largest prosecution of *conversos* in the 350-year history of the tribunal in Latin America, and one motivated as much by politics and economics as by religion. Schooled by abuse at the hands of their father, Simón and his siblings must have testified against Duarte as much for fear of him as for the frightful apparatus of the Inquisition. Duarte and Simón Montero were burned at the stake, Isabel barely avoided such a fate, and all the children received lighter sentences.

Yet although the Inquisition endeavored to erase the memory of families like that of Simón de León, their legacy survives amongst small groups of Hispanic Catholics scattered throughout the American Southwest. For several decades now, these individuals, some of whose ancestors arrived with the earliest European settlers, have stepped forward to describe or ask why their families practice rites that suggest a Jewish past.

They share stories, both lived and heard, of clandestinely washing infants after baptism, avoiding the consumption of meat and dairy products together, marrying within families of similar background, and washing and wrapping their dead in a shroud before burial. Recently, support for the preservation of this formerly unacknowledged legacy has come from a most unlikely source: the Spanish government presently is debating a grant of citizenship to the descendants of Sephardim expelled in 1492. Such an attempt to right one of the country's most tragic decisions, while magnanimous and important, will only be complete, however, if also extended to the descendants of *Moriscos*, the Christianized Muslims expelled from Spain in the 1600s.