

Between the seventeenth of Tammuz, this past Tuesday and the 9th of Av, July 20th, we Jews focus our attention on the destruction of the two Temples in Jerusalem one in 586 BCE and the other in 70 CE. The fact that we survived these last 2000 years in the diaspora is a miracle; without a land, a government and consistent anti-semitism.

There's another connection to the 9th of Av that is equally miraculous and is still continuing to evolve.

The 9th of Av is also associated with the Spanish Inquisition in 1492 when the Spanish government began to kill Conversos those Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity but were secretly following Judaism in private. Those Jews who refused to convert were exiled and many of those who did convert ended up being killed because they were accused of still practicing Judaism.

A piece of this story is seldom even talked about. This is what happened to the Jews of Mallorca an island just to the East of Spain.

It is thought that the Jews first came to Mallorca in the 5th century CE. In the beginning of the 14th century, anti-Jewish actions became institutionalized. Riots against Jews, blood-libels, Jewish property including synagogues seized. In 1391 when anti-Jewish pogroms swept across Spain, the rioting reached Mallorca. Entire communities were killed while others were forcibly converted.

Even though they were practicing Catholics, these converts were never accepted by the native Mallorcans and were labeled Xuetas, related to the Catalan word for pig. The legal restrictions against the Xuetas lasted for hundreds of years, only being lifted in 1931. Many of these conversos are now fully integrated into mainstream Catholic society. Some people with certain last names like Aguilo, Cortes, Segura and Pico, still face ostracism. Two men with those surnames have come back to fully practicing Judaism, each one in a very different way.

Nicolau Aguilo discovered he was a Xueta one afternoon riding in the car with his mother. Expecting his mother to laugh along with him, he jeeringly referred to someone as a Xueta. Instead of laughing she shocked him by saying he too was a Xueta.

He was then faced with a painful choice. Should he completely abandon his Jewish roots or embrace them? His decision to embrace them led him to conversion in Israel and becoming Rabbi Nissan Ben-Avraham in the Shilo settlement in Israel. His father accepted Ben-Avraham's choice only when his grandchildren were born.

Miguel Segura is another man who decided to take on the religion of his ancestors. He does describe this process as conversion rather than he returned to his original religion. He says it was like lifting a great weight from his shoulders. It gave him a great inner joy.

A Spanish and Portuguese Orthodox Synagogue in Manhattan, Shearith Israel converted Segura in December 2009 after he had gone through seven years of study. It took such a long time because some Jews worried about

converted those people who had been practicing Catholicism for so many years.

Both Segura and Ben-Avraham are very aware that about 20,000 existing Xuetas might just disappear into Catholicism within one or two generations if they are not encouraged to recapture their roots. Both men want Jewish authorities to make things easier for the descendents of Mallorcan Jews to convert back to their religion. Many of these men and women are halakhically Jewish because since 1391 they were allowed to marry only within 15 families all known to be Xuetas.

Just as the Xuetas in Mallorca have been discriminated against, so have we as Jews wherever we have lived outside the land of Israel. And we who were born Jewish, sometimes have judgments about those people who have chosen to join the Jewish people. We even have judgments about Jews based on who is most strict or lenient in their observances.

Let's remember during this time when we are commemorating the destruction of our Temples and the oppression that's been experienced by Jews throughout the millenia, to open our hearts and minds to all Jews because we are all part of the same people.

Shabbat Shalom.