

# T'shuva

A Story of Renewal and Return to Judaism

by ANA KURLAND  
as told to JUDY PRIVEN

## *The Anusim: The Forced*

Ana Kurland's story begins in the 15th century, when the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions forced all Jews in the Iberian Peninsula to leave or convert to Catholicism. Rather than leave or give up their faith, many families converted, while still practicing some form of Judaism in secret.<sup>1</sup>

Almost from the start, the Anusim who were forced to convert looked upon the New World as a haven from persecution. However, when they and their descendants fled to the New World, the Inquisition followed, establishing the *auto-da-fé* in the Spanish and Portuguese colonies of South and Central America, as well as in today's Florida and American Southwest. Today, more than 500 years after the expulsion, many Christian families throughout the United States are discovering that the ancient customs they practice, the family stories they tell, or the names they pass on to their children may be signs of their Jewish past.

This story explains how one descendant's search for her family's past brought her back to Judaism and how she has turned her *t'shuva*, or spiritual renewal, into a quest for helping others reconcile their own beliefs with those of their ancestors.

— Judy Priven

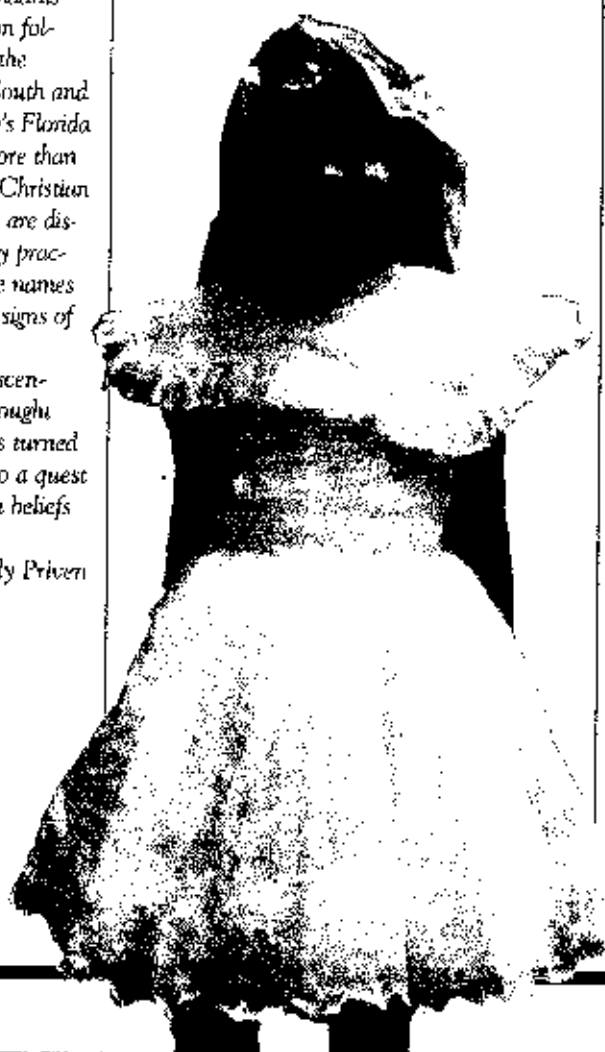
## *St. Manuel's Day*

I'd like to believe that I was born with the distant memory of my ancestors' faith, that the moment I was born, I was fated to shed my Catholic veneer and reclaim the Judaism of my past. I was born and baptized 45 years ago in Puerto Rico, the daughter of Francisco García de Quevedo and Ana González. All the women in my family are named Ana — including me, my mother, my grandmoth-

er, my aunt, my sisters and my eight or nine cousins. All the men have the same middle name — Manuel, the name of my maternal grandfather. The custom of giving all of us children the same name was just one of the many odd things about my family.

Once, when I was very young, I was told that my family came from Jewish Spaniards, but I forgot this seemingly irrelevant information almost the second I heard it. Even so, I began asking questions at an early age. Outwardly, my parents were Catholic like those around them. Yet I wondered why we did not have any crucifixes or pictures of the saints and the Virgin throughout the house, as all my friends did. I wondered why, except for baptisms and weddings, we never went to church — even on Easter and Christmas. Or why we had our big celebration on the New Year, rather than the 25th of December, as everyone else did. "The New Year is St. Manuel's Day, your grandfather's Saints' Day," my mother told me. Her explanation seemed to make sense. For a while.

One day, I decided to find out more about St. Manuel. Trying to be a good Catholic, I searched for his name in a Saints' Day book from Catholic school. Although I searched for quite awhile, I couldn't find anything about St. Manuel's Day or even St. Manuel himself. That's how I learned that St. Manuel did not even exist according to traditional Catholics. So I went to my Tia Patria (Aunt Patria). "The New Year is the day of Jesus' circumcision," she whispered, and then, embarrassed, as if she had said too much, she walked away. I was six or



Ana Kurland at her communion.

Photos, courtesy of Ana Kurland

*Our New Year's Day, or St. Manuel's Day, was a mixture of Hebrew and Catholic ideas. It was really the anniversary of Jesus' birth.*

Ana and Brian Kurland at their wedding.

seven at the time, and even though I looked up the word "circumcision" in the dictionary, I was still puzzled. Apparently, my family had secrets they didn't want me to understand.

By the time I was 12 years old, I had what I later called my crisis of faith. I decided that I didn't believe any of the religious doctrines from school; therefore, I was no longer a Catholic.

But I still believed in God, so I began searching for the religion that seemed right for me. I read books about every other religion I could find — Buddhism, Hinduism, even Zoroastrianism. Each time I read, though, I found something that bothered me, something that wasn't right.

The last religion I studied was Judaism, and Judaism was different. As soon as I started reading about its holy books, its beliefs, I knew I had found what I needed. Maybe it's because Jews believe in a single God, instead of a trinity, and, unless you are Orthodox, you can define that God as you want. Or maybe because deep, deep down, I remembered that once, in another age, our family had been Jewish. I just don't know.

When I went to my aunt again, she told me that, yes, we had come from a Spanish Jewish family, but that our ancestors had converted and were "sincere" Catholics after a few generations. Now my parents' attitude toward the church began to make more sense. I began looking into my family roots and, at the same time, reading all I could about Jewish customs.

Several times I read how sometimes the descendants of the Conversos often incorporated both Jewish and Catholic concepts into the same ritual or holiday — for example, how they ate an unleavened soda cracker called pan de semana (literally translated as Semitic bread) for Easter or fasted in honor of "St. Esther" on Purim. Suddenly, I remembered my aunt's embarrassed explanation about St. Manuel's Day, and I understood: Our New Year's Day was a mixture of Hebrew and Catholic ideas. St. Manuel's Day, or New Year's, was really the anniversary of Jesus' birth.

### *T'shuva*

After graduation from high school, I became a full-time student at George Washington University in Washington, D.C., then worked at odd jobs to support myself. Even though I attended a Conservative synagogue a few times, I really didn't feel Jewish until the first time I went to a seder, at a friend's house. I can't explain it, but as soon as the seder began, as soon as they began the rituals of hiding the afikomen and dipping into the wine for each of the 10 plagues, a familiar feeling began tugging at my memory, as though somehow I had performed these rituals many times before, a long time ago. "I really belong here," I said to myself. "This is my home."

Now I believe that at least two of my grandparents, on my mother's side, were B'nai Anusim. Most descendants trace their lineage through their surnames, or family names.<sup>1</sup> For me, the key was the my

great-grandmother's first and last name — Ana Moreno. For many years, the name Moreno was popular among the Anusim, especially teachers, because of its dual meaning: "moreno," or "dark," in Spanish and "morenu," or "our teacher," in Hebrew. Probably, I thought, one of the women in our family had been a teacher.

Even more interesting was the name "Ana," which was not just my first name and the name of all my cousins, but also the first name of my mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and great-great grandmother. Many hidden Jews used to give all the women in a family the same name in order to fool the Inquisition when it came knocking on the door. With pride, I imagined the officials greeting my ancestral great-great-grandmother with the dreaded pronouncement: "We're here to arrest Ana Moreno." "Which one?" she would say sweetly, pointing to her daughters. "There are four of us." Baffled, the officials would leave without making an arrest.

So here I was, at the age of 32, a baptized Catholic and yet the descendant of at least four Jewish women through my mother's line. I was already living as a Jew, staying away from shellfish and pork and separating meat and milk. I was dating Jewish guys, all my friends were Jewish, and I was taking classes with Rabbi Halpern of Shaare Tefila in Silver Spring, Maryland. Even after 12 years of study, I wanted to learn everything I could about the Bible, Israeli history, the Jewish holidays and customs. Since Judaism traditionally has defined a Jew through the bloodline of the mother, I probably could have considered myself Jewish without making a formal conversion.

The question of conversion is always difficult. Some descendants of Conversos

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want to be accepted as Jewish, even without converting. But to me, a conversion was important, because one of my ancestors had made a change, and I needed to undo that change. Yet, I felt the time wasn't right. Eventually, Rabbi Halpern wanted to know why I didn't convert. "I still don't know everything," I explained. "You can never know everything," was the reply.

I was thinking about Rabbi Halpern's words one day, riding home from work on the bus. When I got off, I saw a rainbow, and I remembered that the rainbow was a sign from God in the biblical story of Noah. It was then, for the first time, that I felt the souls of my ancestors crying out to me — not for revenge, but for renewal or return. It was time to convert.

### **"Don't Tell Anyone"**

Unfortunately, for B'nai Anusim, an aura of fear and secrecy still surrounds the recognition of Jewish ancestry, especially since the Holocaust and the reemergence of so much recent anti-Semitism. When I discovered Judaism, I vowed to teach others who, like me, had been ignorant of their Jewish heritage. Since then, I have been working for the Library of Congress, first in the Hispanic section, where I was able to recommend books and articles on the Anusim, and now in the serials section, where I catalog Spanish, English, Ladino and some Portuguese and Italian magazines and journals. I am currently being trained to catalog Hebrew materials as well.

Six and a half years ago, I started a web site called "B'nai Anusim" for those who may be descended from Spanish or Portuguese Jews. Now, I run several web sites, which attract people from all over the world.<sup>3</sup> Most of the those who come

to the site have never realized that the family habits they thought were

so "odd" are really a form of hidden Jewish life. Likewise, many also thought that they were the only ones to hear their parents whisper, "Don't tell anyone, but we are Jewish." Now they know they are not alone.

The ancient rabbis said that someone who saves a single soul saves the world. Now I want to save other souls who have been lost to the Jewish world because their ancestors were forced to convert. I want to give them a chance to learn about their family history and culture, as I did. My purpose is not necessarily to re-convert but to help the B'nai Anusim trace their lineage and understand some of the customs passed on from generation to generation. Guiding them through their family history and culture is wonderful enough. And when someone decides to reclaim the ancient faith of their family, as I did, my heart fills up with joy. This is the quest that has now become my hobby, my work, the soul of my life. It is my redemption for my ancestors.

At this time, no one else in Ana's family is a "returned" Jew. Yet, to date, over 600 people have registered as members of Ana's B'nai Anusim list. Several have formally converted back to the faith of their ancestors, while a few have maintained their Catholic rituals and faith, along with the customs they now know have Jewish origins. The majority now identify themselves as Jews, although many have not formally converted. All have gained a greater understanding of Judaism and the part that their family played in its history. ■



**Ana with her mother, Ana González, and Aunt Mito, left, on New Year's Eve, 1968.**

<sup>3</sup> Throughout Jewish history, the converted Spanish Jews and their families have been known as Marranos, a derogatory Spanish word for "swine"; Crypto or Hidden Jews; or simply Conversos. Ana herself uses the Hebrew term "Anusim," meaning "the forced," for the converted Jews themselves and "B'nai Anusim" for their descendants.

<sup>4</sup> One accurate source of information is the annals of the Inquisition itself, which lists the names of its victims and also describes the customs for which they were brought to the auto-da-fé. In some ways, the record keepers of the auto-da-fé were like the Nazis, who also kept detailed records of their mass murders.

<sup>5</sup> Ana's sites for Spanish speakers include B'nai Anusim, a membership list; Apellidos Sepharditas (Sephardic surnames), which focuses on genealogy; and Anusim-Tshuvah for those who want to convert. To subscribe, you must receive an invitation from Ana (akur@yahoo.com) and become a member of the appropriate yahoo group.

Ana Kurland and her husband, Brian, attend a Conservative synagogue in Rockville, Md. In addition to her work at the Library of Congress, Ana loves to cook. She has contributed several recipes to an international cookbook being developed by the Library of Congress Cooking Club.

Judy Priven is a freelance writer currently working on a book based on the memoirs of Jewish immigrants to the U.S. within the last 75 years. She is also the publisher of Hello! America, Inc., which specializes in information about international relocation.