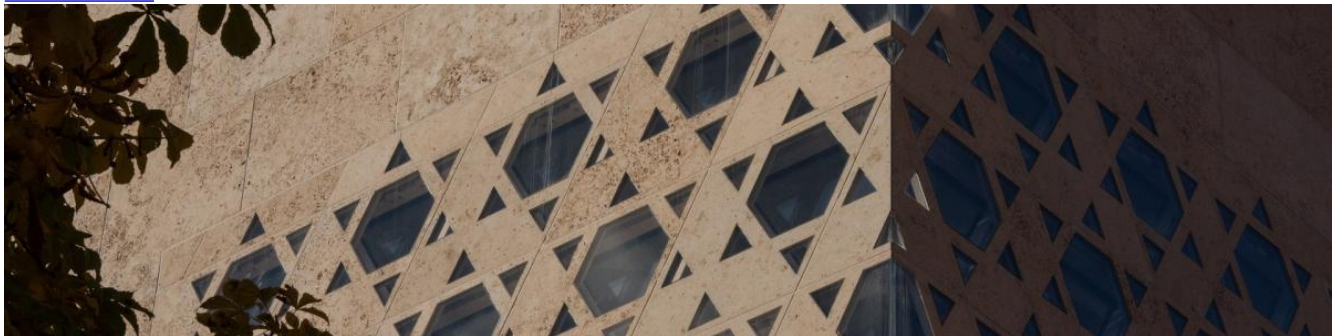


# **Welcoming a Chueta back to his Jewishness**

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During the middle ages, Jews lived in the island of Mallorca (Majorca) as in many other parts of Spain. With the vicious anti-Jewish persecutions of 1391 and shortly thereafter, open Jewish life came to an end in Mallorca. Those Jews who remained were forced to accept Catholicism.

In spite of their having converted to Catholicism, these "new Christians" were subject to ongoing humiliations. The "old Christians" referred to them with the pejorative term "Chuetas". The Chuetas were disdained because of their Jewish blood. No matter that they were now Catholics, the Chuetas were assumed to maintain Judaism in private; the old Christians shunned them, and certainly did not want to marry them.

During the late 17th century, the Inquisition tortured, murdered and plundered the property of hundreds of Chuetas. During the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, Chuetas continued to suffer periodic outbursts of hatred and violence against them from their Christian neighbors.

While many Mallorcans of Jewish ancestry did eventually find ways to marry into old Christian families, fifteen Chueta families retained their "Jewishness" and married only within their own group. It is estimated that there may be 15-20,000 Chuetas in present-day Mallorca, with many of them stemming from these 15 families.

Some months ago, I received an email from my friend, Michael Freund, head of Shavei Yisrael. Shavei Yisrael is an organization that seeks to find "lost Jews" and bring them back to Judaism and re-connect them with the land and State of Israel. Among the groups that Shavei Yisrael has been interested in are the Chuetas. Indeed, Shavei Yisrael has brought a group of Chuetas to visit Israel and to renew

their ties to their ancestral faith and people.

Michael told me of a Chueta gentleman who was making public his Jewishness, and was inspiring other Chuetas to come out openly as Jews. He has published books in Spanish about the Chueta experience, and has lectured widely in the Spanish-speaking world. His message: we are Jews; we want to come back to our people; we want to reclaim the Jewish heritage that was robbed from us by a fanatical Church. We have suffered abuse and humiliation for centuries because of our Jewish blood. We are proud of our Jewish blood. We want to live in freedom and dignity as Jews.

This gentleman, now in his 60s, is named Miquel Segura. Segura is one of the 15 families that retained their separateness from the old Christian society. Miguel's mother's maiden name was Aguilo--also a name of one of the 15 families. He meticulously researched his family tree (which includes an ancestor murdered by the Inquisition in the late 1600s), and it is clear that he is, in fact, of pure Jewish descent.

Michael Freund told me that Miquel Segura wants some formal recognition that he is Jewish. He wants the Jewish community to accept him--and other Chuetas with similar genealogical evidence--as a Jew. It would seem that the Jewish community, led by its rabbis, would rush to embrace Miquel and those Chuetas who wish to return to the faith and people of Israel. Yet, while some have indeed shown warmth and happiness, it seems that many have been suspicious, skeptical, unwelcoming. Do we really want to embrace people who have lived as Catholics for the past 5 centuries, and accept them as fellow Jews?

My response to Michael was: based on the information given to me, Miquel Segura is Jewish according to halakha. He does not need to convert, because he is already Jewish, and he can prove it with his family tree. Michael agreed with me, but said Miquel needs something more than a simple affirmation of his Jewishness. I suggested (and Michael cleared this with a rabbinic authority in Israel with whom he works) that Miquel Segura come to New York, to my synagogue--the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City--which was founded in 1654 by Jews whose ancestors had lived for a period as crypto-Jews in Spain and Portugal. Let him come to this, the oldest Jewish congregation in North America, whose founders well understood the ordeals of crypto-Judaism and the fear of the Inquisition.

On December 17, 2009, Miquel Segura came to Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of New York City. Michael Freund flew in from Israel to be

with us. I invited a member of our congregation, Bentsi Cohen, to join us as well, since he is fluent in Spanish and could help us if we had problems communicating. Following morning prayer services, the four of us--along with Miquel's wife and several friends--walked to the Mikvah on West 74th Street. Miquel immersed in the Mikvah--not as an act of conversion, and not in the presence of a beth din--but as an act of purification. It was a symbolic rebirth into the faith and peoplehood of Israel. We gave him a certificate with his Hebrew name, and welcomed him back to his ancestral people.

All of us felt that this was a sacred moment. Here was a Jew returning to his Jewishness, after generations of his ancestors had been forced to live outside of Judaism; after generations of humiliations and tortures and indignities. Here was a Jew coming home, proudly, defiantly, faithfully. It was as though the voices of all his ancestors were with us at the Mikvah that morning; we could almost feel their presence and hear their words of congratulations.

We could imagine the dismay of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella; we could sense the bitter frustration of the Inquisitors and haters and persecutors. They did not win. They did not crush the Jewish soul or spirit. After 500 years, Miquel Segura was living proof that Judaism has overcome its oppressors, that Judaism cannot be crushed out, that the people of Israel and the God of Israel live.

The ceremony of return for Miquel Segura took place on Hanukkah--a holiday celebrating the power of the Jewish spirit, when God gave victory to the few over the many. It was also Rosh Hodesh, the beginning of a new month. Rosh Hodesh symbolizes renewal and hope.

Miquel Sequra still has a long road in front of him to win full acceptance as a Jew within the Jewish community at large. He still has much work to do to bring his fellow Chuetas back to Judaism and the Jewish people. But Hanukkah is a celebration of a miracle and Rosh Hodesh is a reminder of renewal...and the day will come, speedily and soon, when all the lost Jews of the world will find their way back to the God of Israel, the Torah of Israel, the people of Israel, the land of Israel.