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Save the date: The 2nd Conference of Jewish Communities in Latin America will take place from Thursday, November 16 to Sunday, November 19, 2006 in Punta del Este, Uruguay.

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A Conference That Celebrates Life

By Hilda ten Brink

A few days ago, Maria Elena Moel, coordinator of the Conference in Guadalajara wrote to tell us what it meant for her community to receive us. They tell us that they have great satisfaction in having completed the commitment of the Hebrew Community of Guadalajara of giving us a little of their country to take with us not only in our luggage, but mainly in our hearts...They definitely fulfilled this goal; we brought a little of Mexico to our homes. Maria Elena also tells us that they did not expect what they now understand: and that is that the host community receives more than it gives.

In Costa Rica we are now preparing to follow Guadalajara. Congregation B'nei Israel will be the host for the 10th UJCL Encounter and the 6th Youth Encounter. From the 25th to the 28th of January, 2007 we have an engagement in San José, Costa Rica and we are putting all of our determination so that these first ten years of our existence as a Union be celebrated with all the affection and intensity it deserves. This will be the third UJCL conference in Costa Rica. I was involved in the two previous ones and you may think that with the accumulated experiences the process would be easier. In certain aspects it is, but since year after year we improved the conferences with respect to format and content; we are now faced with the challenge of not lowering the very high level at which the previous ones have placed us.

We created an Organizing Committee of 12 people committed to giving the best of themselves so that we may be successful. I believe that you know the majority of them: our Rabbis Daniela and Rami, Marvin and Rosario Sossin, David Feingold, Natalia Yechivi, Jody Bonilla, Carmen Goldner, Florencia Gelman, Inés Baum, Norma de Matheu, and myself. Our first assignments have been to choose the hotels for the adults and the youths and to make an outline of what we would like to see in the program.

Costa Rica has been converted into such an important tourist destination that in two of the hotels that we visited there was already no space for next January. We found sufficient rooms for the adults at the Hotel Barceló San José Palacio where we held our two previous conferences. We already signed the contract with them and this guarantees us the space. In the near future Florencia, who is in charge of communications, will send you the address of the website of the hotel so that those who are not familiar with it will be able to see it.

With the youths, we still have not signed a contract, but we have almost secured an apartment/hotel near the Synagogue and the San José Palacio. As an anecdote I will tell you that we almost had an apartment/hotel, but the administration of the location pulled back citing that we had given the incorrect date for the reservations, which is not true. We believe that they panicked at the thought of having so many youths and instead of using their right to accept those whom they wish, acting with little reliability placed the blame on us. I hope that this will be one of the few upsetting experiences that we have in this Encounter. Norma de Matheu has assumed the responsibility of organizing, with our Rabbis, everything related to the youths, with the goal that they learn, have fun, and want to continue attending future conferences.

The group in charge of the Conference program has yet to define the theme. We have an interesting proposal: The *Kehilah* As the Center of Jewish Life.

We would like to invite the different communities that comprise the UJCL to share successful programs they have carried out in their congregations. It would be very advantageous to learn of what has already been tried and tested in the communities. Through workshops where these programs are explained and we are shown how to implement them, we could enjoy the possibility of adapting these projects according to the reality of each

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congregation. If we learn from errors and solutions that have been tried out in communities, then they will also be valuable to us. In terms of guest speakers, we have various suggestions that we will later share with you.

The work we have ahead of us is intense, but we assume it with gladness. Year after year the ties of respect and friendship which we have forged among the members of our affiliated communities have tightened. When we were in Panama for the inauguration of the beautiful Synagogue of Congregation Kol Shearith Israel and we saw the procession of the *Torot* going toward their new dwelling, we felt that these *Torot* were a part of us and we rejoiced with the achievements of our sister congregation. Were it not for the UJCL and its conferences we would never have known so many Jews in our region. The UJCL has widened our horizons and has truly given much to us. We now have friends, family in many places and our children, from their youth, are integrating into an authentic *Am Israel* that transcends our borders. That is to receive much.

(The original version of this article can be found in the Spanish Edition of Mifgash)

Vashti and Esther: two heroines from the *Megillah* of Esther

Rabbi Daniela Szuster

Congregation B'nei Israel, Costa Rica

In the story of the *Megillah* of Esther, two women appear on the scene, Vashti and Esther. Two women who decided to confront the injustices that life had placed in their paths. Tradition has focused more on the character of Esther than on that of Vashti, but you cannot deny that both women leave us with a very important lesson, beginning with their attitudes.

Very little is told to us about Vashti. We know that she was queen, the wife of Ahasuerus and that one day he asked her to present herself with her crown, showing her beauty in front of the ministers and representatives from other towns at the banquet that had been organized. Vashti refused to appear, Ahasuerus got angry, and threw her out of the palace. Vashti, being very audacious, defended her dignity avoiding transforming herself into an erotic object, thus ceasing to be a human being. Vashti surely knew her rebellion and disobedience would provoke harsh consequences but considered her dignity more valuable.

We have more information about Esther given that she is one of the central characters of the story. We know that she was an orphan, that her uncle Mordechai watched over her, and that she was chosen to be Queen and wife of Ahasuerus. The *Megillah* gives us a detailed accounting of the

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strategy that Esther used to save her people. She did not directly confront Ahasuerus because perhaps she thought that this way she would fail; on the other hand, she intelligently mapped out a plan to achieve her objective. Esther did not display such audaciousness or independence as Vashti; she appeared to comply with the submissiveness and requisites required of her, but in her way was very valiant and intelligent. She was successful in saving her people.

The *Megillah* of Esther presents us with two types of people, appearing to be opposites but in reality, it is my understanding, they are two ways to react heroically in different situations of injustice in life. There are moments when it is necessary to respond, not to be quiet, defending our rights and independence as human beings. At other times yelling a lot can be counterproductive and it is preferable to act but without much scandal, to win the fight against the injustices that happen to us.

Vashti and Esther, two models, two lessons for our own lives.

(The original version of this article can be found in the Spanish Edition of Mitgash)

CONGRESO JUDÍO LATINOAMERICANO WORLD JEWISH CONGRESS LATIN AMERICAN BRANCH

FRIDAY, MARCH 17 WILL MARK THE 14TH. ANNIVERSARY OF THE UNPUNISHED ATTACK THAT DEMOLISHED THE EMBASSY OF ISRAEL IN BUENOS AIRES

Buenos Aires (CJL-OJI) Dr. Mariano Feldman, director of the Legal Assistance Department of DAIA¹ writes:

On March 17, 1992 at 14:50 a covered F-100 1985 model Ford pick-up, loaded with approximately 110 kilos of a mixture of Pentrita and TNT, that was driven by a suicide bomber, was detonated in front of the Israeli Embassy, located in the corner of Arroyo and Suipacha streets.

A great part of recent Argentine history can begin to be told as of that date.

The attack on the Embassy uncovered for the first time the inefficiency and the lack of interest of the State to investigate these events and, above all, its impotency to avoid that they be repeated.

We have said many times that the lack of investigation of the first attack was, mostly, one of the main reasons for the choice of the AMIA-DAIA site as a new homicidal target.

Each anniversary of the attack on the Embassy is as painful as on the day it took place. As of that moment we become aware of the inefficiency and disinterest of the Argentine State to give its people the justice it has been claiming for during 14 years and above all things, to give it to the families that were destroyed.

(source: "DAIA in brief" -"DAIA en breve")

(Footnotes)

¹ *Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas*: the umbrella organization that represents the Argentine Jewish community.

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I Can Still Feel it

by Rafael Eldad, Ambassador of Israel to Argentina

This Friday we will commemorate the 14th. anniversary of the attack on the Embassy of Israel in Buenos Aires. For days after the tragedy the ruins would not cease to emanate the pestilence of destruction. The stench of death and desolation would not leave me for months. In fact, I can still feel it.

The bomb exploded while I was on my way from the AMIA headquarters back to the Embassy, where I was working as cultural attaché. I had gone there to introduce the Israeli envoy that was returning from Madrid, from the attempts to get the Middle East peace process back on track.

When I arrived, desperate, to Arroyo St., I met my wife who, together with others, was suffering from the anxiety and panic generated by the unknown. She did not know I was not in the building and supposed that I was buried under the rubble. But at that precise moment the happiness that should have been felt at our encounter lacked meaning. I climbed the mountain formed by the remains of masonry and furniture and I started to try helping, with the intention to rescue the people still alive. However, it was in vain.

The first thing that had to be done was to evaluate the general situation and start looking for all the staff. We needed to have a registry of their whereabouts. We needed to know who had been able to survive and the names of the hospitals where the wounded had been taken.

The following weeks were the hardest moments of my life. I had to notify my friend and then consul Dany Karmón, who had been admitted to a hospital, that his wife had died. To the parents of David Ben Rafael, who had arrived from the States, I had to tell that their son, who was an advisor, had not survived; and I accompanied the parents of my secretary, Marcela Droblas, who lost her life under the remains of the Embassy.

Several months had to go by before I became really aware of the magnitude of the tragedy.

First the shock and the astonishment, and then the solidarity and the reactions of the whole Argentine society were impressive. I will never forget the images of the concentration of tens of thousands of Argentines on that Thursday, March 19, to reject terrorism and to pay tribute to the victims and survivors. Those expressions of solidarity and affection continue to this day.

An experience like this, to which unfortunately was added, two years later, the destruction of the AMIA, left a very deep wound in me. I question myself even today: why so much cruelty towards institutions whose only goal is to bring people closer together and to create greater understanding?

Fourteen years since that tragedy have gone by, and I have more questions than answers. I keep seeing the faces of my friends in my memories and I miss more every time the warmth and camaraderie that prevailed in that house.

A year and a half ago I returned to Argentina, this time as ambassador, with the illusion of returning to Israel the splendor of the representation that lived in 910 Arroyo St.

(source: Perfil/Jewish News Agency)

(The original version of this article can be found in the Spanish Edition of Mifgash)

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REPORT ON THE CONSECRATION OF THE NEW SYNAGOGUE OF CONGREGATION KOL SHEARITH ISRAEL (Panamá)

This past Wednesday, the 15th of March, in the presence of the President of the Nation and national, religious, and community authorities the Consecration Ceremony of the new synagogue of Congregation Kol Shearith Israel of Panama took place. One of the most significant aspects of the ceremony of consecration was the presence of our friends from the UJCL communities, who came especially to accompany us on this important occasion: Martha Lichtenstein, from Aruba, Jean Claude Kahn, Roberto Ponsa and Richard Stanley from El Salvador, Cheryle Tacher, from Puerto Rico, Marvin and Rosario Sossin, Hilda ten Brink, Paul and Sonia Ziegler, and Florencia Gelman from Costa Rica.

Jack Davidson, president of the UJCL, who was unable to attend, sent a letter of congratulation. Furthermore, Lic. Alejandro Kladniew, director of the Joint Latin American office and Lic. Enrique Burbinski, director of the HIAS Latin American office also attended the event.

The central moment of the Ceremony that was directed by the rabbi of KSI, Gustavo Kraselnik, was the procession with the Torah scrolls led by Mr. Alberto Motta Cardoze, honorary president of KSI and sponsor of the construction project.

In his words, the rabbi emphasized the centrality of the synagogue in Jewish life and the passion and dedication that the Congregation put into this undertaking. Milton Cohen Henriquez Sasso, president of KSI expressed that this ceremony was a celebration of the freedom of worship that exists in Panama and emphasized the contribution that the members of KSI made in the development of the country since before its founding until today. Finally, the President of the Republic, Martín Torrijos Espino, articulated his desire that this new synagogue be a true house of prayer, a house of study, and a house of meeting that expresses the spirit of commitment to the values that have always characterized Kol Shearith Israel.

After the ceremony, the Board of KSI invited the overseas visitors to a dinner where our friends gave us beautiful gifts, testimony of a feeling of friendship that has grown at the same rhythm than the UJCL.



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Sermon by Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik at the Consecration of the New Synagogue of Congregation Kol Shearith Israel (Panama)

ZE HAYOM ASA ADONAI NAGILA VENISMECHA BO: Proclaims the psalmist (118:24), “This is the day that G-d has made, let us exult and rejoice on it.”

How anxiously we have awaited this day. With how much contained fervor we have dreamed of and fantasized about this ceremony. How much emotion arouses this day, how many sensations take refuge in our hearts.

In a few brief moments, the sacred scrolls of the Torah will be placed in this enclosure and by way of this symbolic act our new synagogue, Congregation Kol Shearith Israel, the voice of the remnant of Israel, will be consecrated.

It is the presence of the *Sefer Torah*, a handwritten parchment that contains the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses that transforms an ordinary physical space into a *Beit Haknesset*, a synagogue. The *Aron Hakodesh*, the Sacred Ark where the Torah scrolls are deposited occupies the central place in the synagogue.

After the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, in the 1st Century of the Common Era and until today, Judaism became Torah-centered, that is to say that it placed the Torah in the heart of Jewish life and the synagogue was transformed into the central institution of Judaism developing in its bosom the three functions that will permit the maintenance and the development of the Jewish experience in a collective framework.

Thus, to the irreplaceable home experience; the synagogue contributed a social, spiritual and educational dimension, establishing itself as *Beit T'filah*, House of Prayer, *Beit Midrash*, House of Study, and *Beit Haknesset*, House of Meeting or Assembly, which is the real meaning of the word Synagogue.

And today, as we inaugurate this new synagogue, we offer a prayer, accompanied by a wish. May God bless us so that we will be able to make this synagogue a place of committed study, of fervent prayer, and of true encounter.

ZE HAYOM ASA ADONAI NAGILA VENISMECHA BO: Proclaims the psalmist, “This is the day that G-d has made, let us exult and rejoice on it.”

On the cover of the program you have in your hands, the same verse appears as was placed on the invitations to this ceremony: *VE ASU LI MIKDASH VESHACHANTI BETOCHAM*, “Build me a sanctuary and I will live among you.” (Exodus 25:8)

Already the *Midrash*, the rabbinic interpretation, pays attention to the fact that the biblical verse does not say “Build me a sanctuary and I will live in it”, but rather it says “I will live among you.” And the commentators (Rabbi Moshe Alshech, XVI Century) explain: To teach us that each person should build a Sanctuary in his own heart, then, and only then, God will live among you.

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And the *Rebbe* of Kotzk, one of the greatest luminaries of Chassidism once asked: “Where does G-d live?” And he responded: “In all places where they allow him to enter.”

With this same spirit, Jewish tradition teaches that the synagogue is not the house of God rather it is the house of the Congregation. Our challenge is to succeed in having God present among us.

And if I were able to synthesize my yearning for this new synagogue, I would tell you that I hope that here we will be able to study, pray, and share together the most important moments of our lives. It will depend on us and our actions, to achieve that the Presence of God be always with us.

Today, we commit to searching for His inspiration, we fervently wish to perceive His Transcendence.

ZE HAYOM ASA ADONAI NAGILA VENISMECHA BO: Proclaims the psalmist, “This is the day that G-d has made, let us exult and rejoice on it.”

And the Presence of God is also manifested by means of the Torah scrolls. The sacred scrolls that contain the eternal message of the Revelation that occurred at the foot of Mt. Sinai, seven weeks after the exodus from Egypt. And it is precisely in the public reading of the Torah that takes place in the synagogue that we attempt to relive that transcendental experience. The ritual tries to recreate this unique, intimate encounter between the Divine and the human whose testimony and legacy is the text of the Torah.

Week after week we repeat this custom and we go on in an organized and established manner in the reading of the Torah, until on the celebration of *Simchat Torah* that falls in October, we reach its culmination and then a marvelous thing occurs. Immediately after reading the ending, we return to the beginning and we begin anew its reading and its study.

In that continuous sequence, in that permanent exercise of analyzing and understanding the Torah, lies the key to the success of Jewish survival. *Afoch ba vaafoch ba de kulei ba*, turn it and turn it for all is in it affirms a Talmudic scholar. (*Pirkei Avot* 5:25)

And in this constant study, represented by the reading of the ending followed by the beginning of the Torah underlies an allegorical concept of depth and admirable beauty that summarizes the spirit of this day and also of this synagogue.

The Torah ends with the word **Israel** and begins with the word **Bereshit**, in the beginning, and if in this practice of linking we join the final letter of the Torah, the letter *lamed*, equivalent to the letter ‘l’ in English with the first letter of the Torah the letter *Bet*, of *Bereshit*, equivalent to the letter ‘B’ in English the word *Lev* is formed. *Lev* means **heart**.

And it is that heart that sprouts from the reading and rereading of the Sacred text, the inspirational force from which Jewish life is built, and it is that passion that is fed in the Torah that gives us the strength to face with integrity the challenges presented to us, and it is that heartbeat that generates the vital energy that feeds our commitment to those ideals and values of our Tradition.

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And if we have arrived at this Consecration Ceremony of our new synagogue and community center it is precisely because we have given our heart.

We made this dream a reality because we found in our honorary president, Mr. Alberto Motta a man who gave his heart to lead this collective effort.

We succeeded in building this community home because we relied on an extraordinary group of leaders who gave their hearts and passion in addition to their time and energy.

We were able to raise these walls thanks to the contributions of our members who gave their hearts and enthusiasm to construct this building and at the same time build an intense community life in its bosom.

Yes, in each brick of this synagogues lies our heart.

On account of this, as said by the psalmist: "*ZE HAYOM ASA ADONAI NAGILA VENISMECHA BO*"; "THIS IS THE DAY THAT GOD HAS MADE, LET US EXULT AND REJOICE ON IT."

With happiness, rejoicing, emotion, and with a profound sentiment to be writing history, today it is the Congregation Kol Shearith Israel that, in a symbolic way and within the framework of this ceremony comes to give its heart.

And we give our heart as a congregation to proclaim our inescapable commitment to our rich history and its legacy.

We give our heart as a congregation to affirm our conviction to work for a community whose present guarantees the continuity of new generations.

On this night, we give our heart as a congregation to reaffirm our love for our homeland, Panama, this country, synonymous with blessings, to whose development our members decidedly contributed and contribute.

Today we also give our heart as a congregation to express our loyalty to Torah and to the message of the prophets, proud to be part of the Jewish people and establishing a bond of affection and solidarity with the State of Israel.

And we give our heart as a congregation on this night to welcome each and every person who has joined us and honor us with their presence. This synagogue is open to all, making a reality the words of the prophet Isaiah (56:7): "My house shall be a house of prayer for all nations."

And we came to give our heart as a congregation to decidedly demonstrate our will to work jointly, in a climate of respect and brotherliness, with the entire Panamanian Jewish Community, with our brothers and sisters of other religions, and with all the men and women of good will to bring to life the proclamation that is the foundation of the Tradition of the Jewish People: *LETAKEN OLAM BEMALCHUT SHADDAI*, to make the world a better place under the reign of God.

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ZE HAYOM ASA ADONAI NAGILA VENISMECHA BO. LET US EXULT AND REJOICE ON IT.

To make of this new synagogue a *Beit T'filah*, a house of prayer, a *Beit Midrash*, a house of study, and a *Beit Hakneset*, a house of meeting; this is our test, our challenge.

With happiness and joy, it is time to open our hearts to express our gratefulness to G-d.

BARUCH ATA ADONAI, ELOHEYNU MELECH HAOLAM SHEHECHEYANU VEKIMANU VEHIGIANU LAZMAN HAZE

Blessed are you *Adonai*, G-d, our King of the Universe, who has granted us life, sustained us, and enabled us to live this moment.

(The original version of this article can be found in the Spanish Edition of Mifgash)



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A New Vista and Old Journey *By Marvin Sossin (UJCL Honorary President)*

The modern world opens all of us to the opportunity of being anywhere in the world in less than 24 hours. When we read Breisheet as children, and how God made the world in 6 days, we could only imagine the marvels God created. In those days, travel was a 4-hour excursion to the beach. Panama? Almost unheard of; a place for mosquitos, extreme heat and yellow fever.

What a marvel indeed, that so many of us from many parts of the world were there to share in the great mitzvah of inaugurating the new Sinagogue of Congregation Kol Shearith. This is a Reform community, albeit with a Masorti Conservative Rabbi, of 180 families, over 700 Jews, who started 130 years ago. Ten years ago, it was a dwindling community, and there was pessimism for the future among the members. Today, it is a growing and vibrant congregation with plans for substantial growth and additional options for the Jewish community.

It is a sprawling, beautifully designed building that covers a hectare of land and has a view of the Pacific Ocean and all of the city. The main chapel has seating for over 500 and this evening it was a full house. There are four large schoolrooms, a meeting room for the Board of Directors, and space for all the functions and offices that are necessary. The architecture was designed by Ricardo Holtzer, who has designed four other synagogues in Panama. Ricardo is known for his brilliant career and is one of the truly great Jewish figures in Latin America. The land was donated by the Motta family. Alberto Motta, the patriarch of the family was there and played an important role in the service. The Motta family has always been generous with their time and money and have collaborated in many Jewish projects in Panama.

The sloping floors, which banked towards the Bimah, allowed for a panoramic view of the chapel. One could see the representatives of other faiths and recognize them immediately by their headgear and clothes. There were people of Christian and Islamic faiths present. The honored guests on the Bimah included Rabbi Gustavo Kraselnik, Milton Henriquez, President of K.S.I., Menashe Bar On, the Ambassador of Israel, Alberto Motta, and Martin Torrijos, President of Panama.

The gathering took place on Wed., March 15th at 7.00 p.m. There were visitors from Argentina, Aruba, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Colombia and other countries. Organizations such as Joint, B'nai Brith and UJCL were represented.

The ceremony consisted of a special service in which everyone could and did participate, and congratulatory (and blessedly short and meaningful) messages from the luminaries whose names are mentioned above. The unquestionable highlight of the evening was the Procession of the Torahs. There was an entourage of 5 Torahs under specially designed Chupas which were brought into the Chapel, carried in the arms of leading members, and placed in the new Ark. The music and the mood and the act itself, led by those who have provided so much dedication to the community, brought tears to the eyes of many. The voice of the Cantor matched the inspirational spiritual feelings in which we all shared.

The ceremony lasted about 2 hours. Afterward, a group of the out-of-towners were invited by the congregation to a dinner at Club Union. A number of plaques and mementos were presented to Julieta Maduro, Vice President of the community. It was a memorable evening.

All of us who came felt an inner sense of contentment. It was a trip for many of us, and we took time from our schedules and money from our belts so we could be there and share with our cousins in Panama the pride and fulfillment they felt. The synagogue is an achievement, and the congregation should feel proud. We would travel to the ends of the earth to participate in such a glowing and spiritually uplifting event.

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Around the Communities

ARUBA: BETH ISRAEL SYNAGOGUE

Everybody dressed up for the Purim celebration. We had cheerleaders, navigants, captains, convicts and so much more. We read from the Megillah in English and Hebrew. Almost everyone got a turn to read.

After the service we gathered together in the social hall for some snacks, (*hamantaschen*) and fun and games. We were divided into groups and we had to answer all kinds of questions about the story of Purim. Nobody really won but we had fun playing the game.

Kyra Pieters (15 years old)

BAHAMAS:

For the first time in some years, our Congregation celebrated Purim.

We had a Potluck Dinner & Reading of the Megillah, at which we were joined by a group from the Central Florida Hillel, led by Sam Kauffman, and Josh Katz.

It was the first time the members had met for many months, and, most took the opportunity to enjoy each others' company, even more than the sumptuous meal they had provided.

Sam Kauffman, and his group read portions of the Megillah, in Hebrew, and in English, with the appropriate cheers at the mention of the names of Mordecai, and Queen Esther, and, the requisite jeers, and boos at the mention of Haman. Josh Katz, in his horse costume, was led around the room to the great amusement of the many children in attendance.

For a small Congregation, there were more than 50 in attendance.

We had a wonderful time, and we all agreed that we would repeat the experience, next year, with costumes.

CURACAO: MIKVE ISRAEL

The BBYO organized a fair for the children of both congregations. We had games, food and a costume parade. It was a great success, because all the children, as well as the adults, had a great time.

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COSTA RICA: B'NEI ISRAEL

By Florencia Gelman

Just like Mordechai and Esther instructed our ancestors to fast and to later celebrate, so did they educate their children to continue the tradition, transmitting the history from generation to generation, from community to community, from country to country, such as the edicts of those times arrived in 127 provinces in Persia. This is how *Purim* is celebrated in each Jewish community to remember and celebrate the victory of the Jews over plans of the wicked Haman.

In what has already become a custom in Congregation B'nei Israel, the Lev Family opened the doors of their residence so that together we could celebrate *Purim* making use of our imagination, creativity, and enthusiasm. In the gardens there was a mixture of the laughter and running around of the children, the colored costumes, the music, and naturally, the odor of the roasted meat, an almost sacred tradition in our community!

The afternoon began with the youngest members of the congregation playing the role of leaders, presenting a play. With their beautiful and innocent voices they told the story of Queen Esther, Mordechai, King Ahasuerus, and the wicked Haman. I have to say that it made me laugh bursts of laughter hearing my five-year-old son in the role of Ahasuerus saying that he needed a wife to share his life!

The party continued with the costume parade and the distribution of prizes to the winners. Among the children, the winners were the gypsy and the Power Ranger, and among the adults, the most masculine version of Queen Esther ever seen won defeating the beautiful *Shabbat* bride in a very hard-fought contest!

After the meal, the *rikudim* group invited all the participants to dance the traditional songs and dances of our people.

On Monday, the *Megillah* was read in the synagogue. With the "Tourist" Rabbi and the "Clown" Rabbi we enjoyed the reading immensely. On the awaited booping for each mention of the name of Haman, we added whistles for the beautiful Esther, applause for the valiant Mordechai, and a "Daah!" for the obtuse Ahasuerus.

This is how we celebrate *Purim*, happy to honor those who knew what to do in difficult moments so that our people would be able to survive.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF EL SALVADOR

By Rabbi pablo Berman

"Vayakel Moshe", begins the Torah portion on this *Shabbat*, and Moses gathered the people. Continuing with the same line of thought we read the *Megillah* of Esther on *Purim*, "*ve hayehudim asher beshushan nikalu*" the Jews of Shushan met, and made "*yom mishte ve simcha*" a day of

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feasting and merriment. Last Saturday, the city of Shushan was moved to El Salvador, and we were all part of this fantasy where we transformed our *Kehilah* into the city of Shushan and had without a doubt “yom mishte vesimcha”, a day of feasting and much merriment.

From the entrance one could see “Welcome to Shushan” with images of all the *Purim* characters: Esther, Mordechai, Ahasuerus, Vashti, and naturally, the most wicked of the wicked: Haman. Upon entering, before stepping onto the Persian rug and the white looms of the Orient, you could observe a landscape full of light and color. Each one of the booths had its particularity, its personal touch that each of the families gave it. On the left “Queen Esther’s Jewels” attended by Snow White (she forgot the Dwarfs), where each person could assemble their own piece of jewelry, and imagine being just a little the queen of the palace. To continue, Exotic Dreams, a center for predicting, Tarot, braids, and special face painting. Adults and children, showed their hands so that a family of very experienced gypsies could predict the future of the entire community.

The third booth, a very good one I must say, “Put the Ear on Haman”, attended by its owners, a group of paramedics of pretty dubious medical experience, yet put the ear where it had to be placed. We have saved the image of this bearded and foolhardy Haman for our next auction. Going up to the ranch two more attractions, the fantastic “Mordechai Hayehudi’s Kitchen” attended by a lady cowboy whose knowledge in the art of making *Hamentashn*, that is to say *Oznei Haman* or Haman’s Ears, was amply demonstrated; the children kneaded, cooked, and naturally, ate the *oznei* Haman, made with their own hands. The game of “Hamanbowling” attracted many children, with plenty of desire to knock down the pins (*boliche*) especially designed for the occasion and with Haman’s face on the front, which brought more desire to knock them down with one ball. It was attended by a physician, also of dubious experience, and by a pregnant woman who could scarcely bend down to pick up the pins and place them again in position. “Throw at Haman” another of the attractions of the evening, was also a success with the little ones. Haman was the mark at which one had to throw the ball, attended by a pretty tropicalized Indian.

And now, the booth most visited by youths and adults, and without detracting from the other ones that were incredible, was “The Most Famous Juices of the Middle East” that for certain had no juice, on the contrary alcohol was the ingredient most obviously squeezed in this place, drinks such as “Haman’s Blood” and “Queen Esther’s Perfumes” told one everything he needed to know. The drinks were served by two well known rappers from the San Benito Colony. For me personally, the 7 Up was very good.

This is not all, the evening was excellently animated by two actors who received the public at the triumphal entrance to Shushan, a mime and a youth on stilts in a manner befitting of the best fairs and bazaars of all time, to later transform themselves into harlequins that went through the enormous garden entertaining the young and not so young.

The closing, a beautiful “storytelling” of *Purim* with puppets and actors, and the most waited for ending, “the most wicked piñata of all” a gigantic Haman piñata, brought especially from the Sahara desert, complete with candy and surprises, which was well hit, as it should be, by all of the

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children. Not lacking were the parades of children and adults, the election of our Queen Esther, her coronation and handing over of the sceptre. There were princesses, ballerinas, soccer players, referees, sports champions, photographers and war correspondents (who took the trouble to record the entire event), penguins, Spanish ladies, Hindus, harlequins, trees, drunkards, a very peculiar Chinese man, rockers and pop singers, multicolored wigs, clairvoyants, some Supermen and mini Supermen, and some Zorros, one pretty much grown, that looked more like Sargent García than Zorro even though he imagines himself to be Antonio Banderas.

Of course, the banquet: the best pizza, and sherbets of different flavors that no one said no to. And the best *Purim* music obviously. The secret of this soiree? The first word of the Torah of this *parasha*: "Vayakel".

To be re-united in Community, enjoying together in costume, laughing with one another, at ourselves. An excellent atmosphere, sharing a different kind of *Purim* festivity, where each detail was taken care of and reviewed and where without the help of each and every one of the families of Noar we would not have been able to do so. Remembering that day that converted sadness into happiness and as the *Megillah* says: *This is how these days should be recorded and celebrated by every generation, by every family in every country, and in every city. And these days of Purim will never stop being celebrated by the Jews and their memory should never be forgotten by their children.* Here in El Salvador, this is how we will continue doing it.

KOL SHEARITH ISRAEL (PANAMA)

In an enthusiastic and fun loving atmosphere, Congregation *Kol Shearith* Israel of Panama celebrated *Purim* with a reading of the *Megillah* of Esther and an enjoyable party organized by the youths of *Noar*.

More than 100 people, the majority in costumes, and especially the children, enjoyed the party that also included the presentation of "Karen and Fede" the *Rikudim* instructors who, aside from presenting choreography had all present up and dancing.

Beginning with *Purim*, and celebrating the week of *Chanukat Habait* (the inauguration of the new synagogue), the mezuzot were placed on the main doors of the new Community Center.

The party also included "open pizza and sodas" and was truly a success for the youths of *Noar*.

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ONLY IN ISRAEL

It is early afternoon on Friday. I'm waiting for a bus at an Egged stop, by myself, since the youth group I was with, from Argentina, has already returned home after a 3-week tour of the country. Feeling adventurous, and somehow familiar with the language and the people, I've decided to stay two weeks longer, on my own.

I'm headed for a friend's relative's home, to deliver something his family in Buenos Aires has sent along.

A lady has been looking persistently at me. Finally, she summons the courage to tell me: "You should not be alone in Israel, on the eve of Shabbat. This is your country, but you can get pretty homesick. My name is Rachel. Please accept my invitation to dinner at my home. We live humbly, but are always happy to share our Shabbat meal with a guest."

Since I am a typical all-knowing teenager I disregard my mother's voice in the back of my mind admonishing me never to accept invitations from strangers. There is a glimmer in the lady's eyes that radiates kindness. I feel her face is somehow familiar, so I thank Rachel, and off we go to her home in a Haifa suburb.

The table is carefully set, there are flowers on it, and enough food for ten Shabbat dinners. Conversation flows easily, considering I am speaking Hebrew, with some colorful Yiddish that I still remember from hearing my grandmother speak it.

After dinner, Rachel and her husband start to sing some Eastern European songs. There is one in particular that I recognize because my father used to hum it.

When I mention this to my hostess, she asks me where did my parents come from. I tell her my father's family came from Kishinov to Argentina, and she is delighted. "That's where we came from! she exclaims.

But, when I tell her my father's full name she pales, and is unable to speak.

"We are relatives", she finally blurts out. "Your father is a second cousin of mine. During the war my husband and I escaped to Russia, and there wandered from town to town, somehow surviving the carnage.

Unfortunately, when we returned to Kishinov, we discovered we had no family, and no home. We were unable to track down surviving relatives, and we decided, together with my mother, to go to what was then Palestine."

"But first, let me tell you how she and I finally reunited. Right after the war, when transportation was almost impossible to get, my husband and I were waiting for hours for a train that would take us back to our hometown. With nothing better to do, I decided to look at the passengers waiting to travel in the opposite direction at the other side of the station. I was mesmerized by a lady wearing a shawl that I knew well. My mother had crocheted it, it was full of colorful flowers, and I, as a child, loved to wrap myself in it for warmth.

My mother and I were separated when we escaped, and after several years I had given up all hope of finding her."

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“The lady wearing the shawl also looked at me, but it was hard to recognize her because she had lost so much weight. We screamed our names over the pandemonium at the train station, and you can well imagine how emotional our encounter was! “

I was on the verge of tears, and at a loss what to say next.

Rachel was a gracious lady, a perfect hostess and a beautiful human being, She wrote at the end of the evening a poignant letter in Russian to my father. It was the start of a long- lasting correspondence.

I returned to Argentina and never saw Rachel again but, even now, after so many years, I can conjure the light that her green eyes radiated, and the colorful shawl, a symbol of family ties that transcend time and adversity,

Its crocheted flowers proclaim the eternal bloom of our people and shelter me from the pain of separation when seemingly insurmountable challenges haunt me. They have become a reservoir of strength and courage to live meaningfully in a troubled world.

Martha E. Lichtenstein
March 2006

Masking the Message *Thoughts on Purim in Jerusalem by Haim Shalom,* *Education Director of Netzer Olami*

One of the messages of Purim is that of turning the tables – changing reality and turning it upside down. The story of Esther and Mordechai foiling the evil plan of Haman is reflected in our celebration of the Festival. In a number of ways the festival's celebration is about seeing what is hidden by reality and mixing things up. We are supposed to be so drunk that we cannot tell the difference between the name of Mordechai and that of Haman. While G-d is never mentioned in the megillah, the rabbinical interpretation of the story understands that this was G-d's greatest miracle on behalf of the Jewish people.

One of the many ways in which Purim is celebrated in Israel is by dressing up in costume. Thousands of shops spring up selling fancy dress costumes for kids (and adults). People can wear what they like for a day, and others will assume it is a costume, even if it is only bad taste. People get

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to hide their real selves for a day – we can disappear into a disguise, but why – what is this excuse for subterfuge all about? This particular year, it seems that Giraffes have become very popular with the children of Jerusalem. What is the significance of our children's desire to dress as a giraffe?



This theme of costume and disguise seems particularly relevant in a city like Jerusalem – for Jerusalem herself is really a city of disguise, a city which is hiding her face, wearing a mask, or a costume. She is a city who has many treasures hidden deep below the surface – this is true both in a physical sense and a metaphorical one. Physically, Jerusalem's many layers are hidden in the ground, waiting for archaeologists to discover them. But in another sense, Jerusalem's many layers are all on the surface, and yet one hides from the other.

Giraffes taking over Jerusalem!

To live in Jerusalem is to live on the edge between the modern world and the ancient world – between history and memory, between the past present and future. Just to walk from my home to my office, I walk past history in the making, history that was made long ago, and history yet to be made. Whether it is the two thousand year old tombs in the Yemin Moshe Park, or the two-day old extensions that have been added to the Security Fence, there is a sense of Jewish History unfolding around me.

Purim in Jerusalem is a double experience of hiding – one can hide oneself in costume, but one can also hide oneself in the thick layers of Jewish memory which envelope us as we walk down the street.

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A TRIBUTE TO CONGREGATION KOL SHEARITH ISRAEL (PANAMA)

By Cheryle Tacher

Ma tovu, ohalecha Yaacov, mishkenotecha Yisrael!

How lovely are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling-places, O Israel!

How lovely is your tent,
Kol Shearith Israel
Though way unlike that
Of Jacob's so very long ago
With its own magic, spirit, and warmth
A home for learning
A refuge for all who seek it
A place where comfort is the norm
And love and safety abound
Under the chuppah
The uniting of endless generations
Marks yet one more celebration
Of our right to continue
In the footsteps
Of our ancestors
Each time that much closer
To the fulfillment of our dreams.