

## In the Genes

It was a conference on human genetics that brought me to Porto, the hilly town on Portugal's Northern Atlantic coast that gives its name to the sweet fortified Port wine. As I soon found out, there was more going on in the way of genetics in Porto than the conference proceedings.

On the first morning of Rosh Hashana, I made my way to the single synagogue that appears on the city's tourist map. Like most Jewish institutions around the world these days, the Kadoorie Synagogue is easy to spot from a distance — it's the building that is surrounded by heavily armed police. My *kippa* was enough to get me past the two cops holding machine guns at the entrance and the congregation member in a dark suit who stood behind them.

I walked through a spacious courtyard, passed through a wood-paneled foyer, and was mesmerized as I entered the sanctuary. The interior, with its art-deco look is stunning. Under a large cupola and many arches, the walls feature blue *azulejos*, the tiles for which Portugal is famous, and gold tiles in arabesque patterns. Above the ark, the three-story high wall is adorned with a single ornament — a large, eye-catching Star of David.

I also was struck by the cathedral-like acoustics. The volume of the melodic Sephardi prayers that I heard as I entered the sanctuary suggested that hundreds were present, but, in fact, most of the seats were empty, with just a small group of 15 men downstairs and about five women seated in the balcony above.

Much of the service mystified me, with most of the traditional rituals omitted. There was, for example, no reading of the Torah and no rendition of the Kaddish mourning prayer. Instead, congregants either read the prayers to themselves or sang together with the rabbi. It was as though there weren't enough Jews present to constitute a minyan.

Afterwards, I got the explanation from the Italian-born rabbi, a recent arrival sent

by an Orthodox Israeli organization called Amishav. All of those present, he explained, were the descendants of Portuguese *conversos*, Jews forcibly converted to Christianity during the Inquisition who had secretly continued to practice Jewish rituals in their homes. In recent years, a small group of *conversos* had discovered their roots, and were being converted by the rabbi back to Judaism. "But because they haven't completed the conversion process, we still have to pray as though there isn't a minyan," he pointed out. From the Orthodox Jewish point of view, only the rabbi and I were considered to be Jews.

The rabbi also explained why the synagogue was so breathtakingly well-preserved. It had been built in the 1930s, during a brief period when a group of *conversos* decided to come out of the closet and practice Judaism openly. Led by the legendary Captain Arturo Carlos de Barros Basto (a.k.a. Abraham Israel Ben-Rosh), an effort was made to bring what was estimated to be at the time about 10,000 *conversos* in Northern Portugal back to Judaism. Barros Basto traveled tirelessly across Europe trying to raise funds and recruit rabbis from Jewish communities. When there was a backlash, from the Church, the government and the general population, the *conversos* went underground again. For more than 50 years, the synagogue was closed. Then, in 2005, the Amishav group began to work with the community.

Even today, the rabbi continued, Porto's *conversos* remain discreet. At home, they continue to carry out rituals that have been handed down through generations, baking challah on Fridays and eating matza during Pesah, but they are still reluctant to identify as Jews

in public. It's a slow process, said the rabbi.

Back at the conference, esteemed geneticists were presenting papers that explore how information passed down in families can stay below the surface for several generations before reappearing and being expressed. It sounded familiar. But

such information, I realized, doesn't have to be in the DNA.

Bernard Dichek

## Taking It Lying Down

It's 3:30 in the afternoon, and I'm headed to the parking lot at the Shukanyon, a drab white building that briefly housed a market that was meant to compete

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with the Mahane Yehuda shuk up the street. As I make my way

through the near deserted main floors, I spot a steady flow of people entering a white door marked with bright-blue Russian lettering. Peeking inside, I am surprised to find an immense room filled with mostly elderly people, who look like Russian immigrants and working-class Sephardim.

On one side of the room, some 30 men and women seated on numbered chairs listen to a lecture in Russian-accented Hebrew, delivered by a young woman whom I later identify as Hanna. On the other side, a similar number lie quietly on rows of beds, clutching what seem to be small green pillows. Some are curled into a fetal position; others are on their backs. Each bed is connected by an electrical cord to a panel. My first thought is that I've stumbled onto the set of a sci-fi movie scene about electrical androids being recharged.

But there are no cameras, and what's actually happening is part of a sales campaign by the Israeli distributor of thermal massage beds made by a South Korean firm, Ceragem. The beds, which utilize a combination of chiropractic, acupuncture and Eastern medical principles, are sold via some 500 retail outlets in 22 countries.

Out of curiosity, I take a seat, No. 24. No. 25, a bearded Orthodox man in his late 60s, explains the ropes. "If you sit through the 40-minute lecture, you get to lie on a bed for 40 minutes and get a free massage." What's the point of it, I ask. "They want you to buy a bed! But you don't have

