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## THE JEWS OF ECUADOR TODAY: ESTABLISHED AND EMERGING COMMUNITIES

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### **Abstract**

*This paper presents a contemporary analysis of Jewish communities in Ecuador, situating historic communities within their own internal development in the country since the mid-twentieth century, as European Jews fled anti-Semitism on the Continent, finding refuge in this South American country. The paper examines the modern history of the Jewish communities by considering the population groups that make up each community: (1) descendants of Ashkenazi immigrants from the 1940s-1950s; (2) limited Sephardic immigrants from the Middle East; (3) Israeli expats; (4) American Jewish expats, and; (5) Ecuadorian converts to Judaism who either claim Sephardic descent or not. Sephardic descent is claimed by converts as descendants of the Bnei Anusim (Heb. "forced ones"), Sephardic Jews who forcibly converted to Catholicism by the Spanish Inquisition, but who allegedly maintained Jewish practice in secret. Jewish communities in Ecuador are divided between these groups with Ashkenazi and Sephardi immigrants living near the country's two oldest synagogues in Quito and Guayaquil. Israelis tend to live along the coast, but can be found throughout the country and American expats tend to live in Cuenca, where there is no official synagogue, but an informal community exists. Jewish converts have been rejected by older synagogues and have started their own communities in Quito, Guayaquil, and elsewhere throughout the country.*

**Keywords:** Ecuador, Judaism, emerging communities, Bnei Anusim

### INTRODUCTION

Much of the scholarly literature on the topic of Ecuador's Jewish community is outdated or unavailable in English. It does not account for recent phenomena of the conversion of Ecuadorians to Judaism, nor the presence of American lifestyle migrants in the past two decades (Hayes 2018). The various strands of current Ecuadorian Judaism include religious vs. cultural Jewish identities, socioeconomic class differentiation between born Jews and Jewish converts, as well as the emergence of denominational identities and intercultural relationships between Ecuadorian Jews and American expatriates (expats) and Israeli visitors. The community is composed of several groups: (1) Ashkenazi immigrants who arrived in the country, mostly due to the tragedy of the Holocaust; (2) a limited Sephardi immigration from the Middle East; (3) modern Israeli travelers and immigrants; (4) a resurgence of the descendants of crypto-Jews, who were forcibly converted to Catholicism in the 15th century and onward, and; (5) American Jewish retiree expats. Together these groups constitute the Jews of Ecuador, even if they do not necessarily interact with, or even recognize, the Jewishness of each other, particularly an issue for the descendants of crypto-Jews. Ecuadorian Jews share important characteristics with other Latin American Jewish communities but the community,



but is also distinct in its own way. For instance, in contrast to other communities that were founded in the latter part of the 19th century, it is a relatively new community founded in the late 1930s (Darvish-Lecker and Don 1990). Ecuador's Jewish community is tiny in comparison to the overall population, constituting only 0.0001% of the population. Nevertheless, it is a community of individuals which has had a significant impact on Ecuadorian society, not only in academics, but in industry and science.

### **The History and Geography of Jewish Populations in Ecuador**

The modern, majority Ashkenazi communities in Ecuador began as a result of refugees fleeing the horrors of the Nazi regime in Germany and other European countries (Darvish-Lecker and Don 1990). As Jewish refugees fled Europe, the majority went to Palestine or the United States, while a small number arrived in Ecuador. At that time, and even today, Ecuador was a largely unknown country to the world's Jewish population though there had been some discussion of relocating Jews to Ecuador and other Latin American countries. Other countries, such as Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, Peru, Honduras, Mexico, Uruguay, and Brazil were also open to European migration, particularly hoping that European migration would improve their agricultural production. Ecuador was no exception and vigorously promoted the idea of agricultural settlement by Jewish refugees and other European immigrants, even though this project failed in the end. Arriving in the port of Salinas, Jewish refugees spread to the Andes regions, particularly Quito. They also migrated to Ambato, Cuenca, and Riobamba, but no formal communities were established there. Jews in Ecuador, and all Latin American countries, often had a difficult process of adjustment as Latin American nationalists often opposed immigrants and anti-Semitic views were commonly held among the population (Elkin 2014).

The Jewish Community of Ecuador (JCE) was founded in 1938 under the name "Asociación de Beneficencia Israelita de Quito" by Julio Rosenstock, an Austrian Jewish engineer who arrived in Ecuador in 1914 to participate in the construction of a railway there. He briefly returned to Austria as consul of Ecuador but in 1934, but with the rise of the Nazism, returned to Ecuador and founded the association with other refugees arriving from Germany, Austria, Italy, Poland and Czechoslovakia. The transition from life in Germany to life in Ecuador was drastic for these early refugees and likely led to their decision to resettle in other parts of the globe after some time in Ecuador.

The Jews who arrived in Ecuador were academics, learned persons, well-respected in Germany. For them it was a great shock, how can it be that Germany, who loved me, I was a professor in the University, and today they are sending me to a gas chamber? It was a psychological shock more than anything else: How? What happened? What did we do? What was our error? Besides leaving Germany, those that arrived in Ecuador had to work in agriculture because Ecuador opened its doors for those who wanted to work in agriculture. So, someone who was an engineer, lawyer, arrived and had to take care of cows. They were never very religious, either in Germany or Ecuador.

The particular history of the Ecuadorian Ashkenazim has produced a unique identity, according to Rabbi Max Godet, a former rabbi in Quito and now Chief Rabbi in Uruguay, as he explains:

The Ecuadorian Jew is secular, he is very patriotic and he has a very strong Jewish identity, that is not lost. But his identity is not based on Zionism or religion, it is based on history. Here the CJE is very connected to history. Every child can be asked about his grandparents, great-grandparents and they will tell you the details. The fact that I am Jewish, the fact that my grandparents lived through the Holocaust, this is my Jewish identity... Something very particular about this community, a Jewish identity not based on Zionism or religion.

This unique cultural Ashkenazi identity is strong in Ecuador and manifests itself in interesting ways, most notably in how the community responds to issues of assimilation. Rafael Kaufmann, a member of the community, explains how they deal with intermarriages and particularly the children of those marriages:

Our intention is to try to maintain everyone united, maintaining the religion. In those cases where the children are not Jewish according to halacha (Jewish law), because the mother is not Jewish, either by birth or conversion, our mission is that, at least, those children will be ambassadors of our religion and when they hear people speaking about Judaism they will respond and speak well of us.



A unique aspect of the Ecuadorian Ashkenazi Jewish Community is that it straddles the line between Orthodoxy and assimilation and has adopted a posture of openness in its community, even in cases where Jewish identity was lost according to Orthodox standards.

Sephardic immigration to Latin America followed a different path. Because the regions of the Middle East, particularly the Ottoman Empire, had been considerably more open to Jews than Europe, emigration usually occurred for economic reasons. A majority of emigrants went to Palestine (later Israel) while many wealthier Sephardim, more likely to be French-speaking, immigrated to France. Others however, including lower class Sephardim who spoke Ladino, left states such as Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Libya, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq seeking Spanish-speaking countries for a better chance of integration as well as the looser immigration rules in Latin American countries. The nature of various Latin American countries complicated their integration, however, so that Jews in Mexico, Ecuador and Peru maintained a distinct culture due to a less tolerant host culture, whereas Jews in Argentina, Uruguay, Cuba and Brazil integrated more easily socially. Not many Sephardim immigrated to Ecuador though, and similar to those elsewhere, it has gradually lost its immigrants to other countries as they continued to seek better economic opportunities (Toktaş and Kılınç 2018). However, immigration in recent years, particularly from Israel, has increased the number of Sephardic Jews in Ecuador.

The population of the Jewish community in Ecuador peaked in the 1950s with around 4,000 individuals. Losses in population were initially sustained by further European immigration (Darvish-Lecker and Don 1990). Since the community's height in 1950, the population has continuously declined, as members have moved to the United States and Israel, leaving a small nucleus of Jews in Ecuador's capital, Quito, and the city of Guayaquil, the largest cities in Ecuador. These two cities host the majority of synagogues and other community institutions in the country. The *World Jewish Population* survey estimates the population of Jews in Ecuador in 2018 with a core group of 600 and a maximum expanded group of around 1,200 (Dashefsky et al. 2018), with the vast majority of Jews living in Quito. Figure 1 shows a map of Ecuador to situate the communities of Quito, Guayaquil and Cuenca for the reader.

**Figure 1.** Map of Ecuador







The Ecuadorian state, serving as a host to a variety of religious groups and sects, guarantees freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religious grounds. Religious groups must be registered to obtain legal status in the country. Public schools may not instruct in religion but private schools may be established to teach religious doctrine. Several religious groups have expressed concerns about the registration process, regulations vis-a-vis private educational institutions, and customs regulations affecting the importation of kosher and halal food products (International Religious Freedom Report for 2018). However, the current president, Lenin Moreno, celebrated the 80th year of the Jewish community in October 2017 and established interfaith working groups. However, religious groups note that societal tolerance does not match the existing legal framework for pluralism.

The story above presents a historical sketch of the established Orthodox communities in Quito and Guayaquil, the only communities counted in official surveys. However, the story of Ecuador's *emerging communities* adds further depth to the picture of Jewish life in the country. In Guayaquil, in addition to the Orthodox synagogue, there have been Masorti and Reform synagogues all of which are new to the city in the past decade or so. While the international Reform and Conservative movements do not have any officially affiliated communities in Ecuador, some of the emerging groups claim these identities for themselves. In this sense, Ecuador has all of the ingredients of modern Jewish life: cultural Judaism in Quito, and denominationalism in Guayaquil with Reform, Masorti, and varying shades of Orthodoxy, including Chabad whose focus is on outreach to non-observant Jews (Telushkin 1991). Unlike in America, where the non-Orthodox denominations are part of the "establishment" in Jewish life, in Ecuador, they are connected with emerging communities. This is illustrated by the work of a Reform rabbi in performing conversions of Ecuadorians to Judaism. Conversion to Judaism is most prevalent among the *Bnei Anusim*, which in Hebrew refers to "children of the forced [ones]", referring to the forcible conversion of Jews to Catholicism in medieval Spain, who often maintained a clandestine practice of Judaism referred to by scholars as *crypto-Judaism* (Kunin 2009). These crypto-Jews spread throughout Spanish territories and their descendants have become aware of their heritage and have sought conversion.

Conversion to Judaism in Latin America is subject to a number of unique complications as a result of an "eternal" ban against conversion imposed on the Syrian Orthodox community in 1927. This decree seems to have resulted from a number of insincere conversions resulting from interfaith relationships between Jewish men and non-Jewish women and was intended to limit the number of cases of intermarriage in the community. The decree reads, " ... It is forbidden to accept converts in Argentina forever... If they desire they can go to Jerusalem, perhaps they will accept him. (Diber Shaul – Yoreh Deah Siman 3)". This decree was only applied to Argentina but, due to later decisions by the State of Israel to not accept Orthodox conversions performed in Latin American countries and the practicality of assembling Orthodox batei din (religious courts), it is common practice *not* to perform conversions in Ecuador. However, the Orthodox rabbis of the country help arrange for conversions to take place in the United States and conduct education for conversion candidates in their communities.

The dynamic of established communities versus emerging challengers defines the culture of Ecuadorian Jewry, as alternative communities are being established to parallel the established communities in Guayaquil and Quito. Added to this story is the amorphous and, often times, transnational community of American expats in Cuenca, Ecuador's third largest city, with a growing (but difficult to establish) number of Jews who have an unofficial "Jewish Community of Cuenca" group that meets for religious and secular celebrations around Jewish holidays and other social events. If we take into consideration the emerging story, we can see much more room for hope in the continuing longevity of Ecuadorian Jews.

Most emerging communities in Ecuador lay some claim to Jewish ancestry as *Bnei Anusim*, the descendants of Jews forcibly converted to Christianity in the Spanish Inquisition. Let us now explore the story of these Jews and their connection to Ecuador and its modern Jewish communities.

#### THE HISTORY OF *BNEI ANUSIM* AND CRYPTO-JEWISH POPULATIONS IN ECUADOR

Spain was an important religious and cultural center for medieval Jewry as it housed religious scholars and poets rivalling Babylonia, the traditional center of Jewish learning at the time, where the Talmud, one of the core texts of rabbinic Judaism was compiled and diffused throughout the world. The academies of medieval Spain eventually outpaced the Babylonians and became the major center of Jewish learning in the world until the



Reconquest of the Peninsula by the Christian Spaniards, producing many of Judaism's greatest thinkers, including Moses Maimonides, among countless others.

Tradition has asserted that the Jewish presence in Iberia (Spain and Portugal) was ancient. These assertions were essential to the Jews' defense against the courts of the Inquisition and therefore might be exaggerated, though archeological evidence confirms a Jewish presence as early as the 1st or 2nd century CE. Additionally documents were found in Babylonia that commented on the prosperity of Spanish Jewry in 953 CE and which allegedly had been so since the destruction of the first Temple in Jerusalem in 587 BCE. The Jewish community in Hispania, as the Romans called Iberia, was fairly large with established communities in many of the cities of the Roman province. However, the situation of the Jews would change as Hispania was invaded by the Visigoths, Vandals, and other Germanic tribes in 416 CE. At first, there was not any drastic change, as the Visigoths espoused Arian Christianity, a heterodox system of belief, and did not initially pay much attention to the Jews in their kingdom. However, the Visigoth conversion to Catholicism in or around 589 CE under King Reccared I resulted in a markedly different approach to the Jews in Hispania. This is where we begin to see the idea of forced conversions, in addition to increasingly stricter regulations vis-a-vis Jewish worship and practice. The legacy of the Visigoths and their approach to the Jews after converting to Catholicism will become an essential ingredient in understanding the renaissance of Jewish life in Ecuador in the past few years, because it established a pattern of forced conversions to Catholicism and secret practice of Judaism among families which has been passed down through generations and has allowed modern descendants to rediscover Jewish ancestry and heritage.

In 711, the Iberian Peninsula was conquered by Moors from North Africa, which fundamentally altered the culture of Iberia, particularly for the Jews. While things were certainly not perfect for Jews under Muslim rule, the circumstances of the Muslims' attitudes towards the Jews allowed for Jewish life to develop in a way which was not possible under Christian rule. The tide began to change in Spain as Christian Spaniards began to reconquer the Iberian Peninsula from Muslim rule, starting in the 12th century and onwards. Christian kingdoms were subsequently re-established and regained power from formerly Muslim rulers.

Spanish Jewry split into two separate histories with the reconquest of the Peninsula by Christian rulers, who were zealous Catholics eager to rid Spain of non-Christian influence. The infamous Expulsion Act of 1492, promulgated on 31 March, 1492 presented Spanish Jews with the option to convert or leave the country within 90 days. Many Jews chose to convert to Catholicism. While many were sincere conversions, others were insincere, either by individuals who wanted the possibility of socioeconomic advancement in a Christian society, or those who were religiously Jewish but converted to save their lives. While the coercive nature of the conversionary impulse among medieval Spanish Christians did produce some fervent missionaries among Jewish converts, it also produced new Christians who only had a surface-level attachment to Christianity and maintained a private observance of Judaism at home. This became known as *crypto-Judaism* (Kunin 2009). Jewish converts to Christianity were subject to investigation by Inquisition authorities for practicing Judaism.

Many other Jews chose to leave, and the mass exodus on 31 March, 1492 created what we now know as Sephardic Judaism, taking the name *Sefaradí*, from *Sefarad*, the Hebrew name for Spain. These Jews spread throughout the world and created a large diaspora of communities, spanning from Portugal (which only lasted a few years, due to the influence of the Inquisition), to Palestine, Morocco, Egypt, Syria, Italy, Yemen, the Netherlands, England, and the United States. The US's oldest synagogue, Shearith Israel, in New York City, was founded by Western Sephardim, also known as Spanish and Portuguese Jews who had arrived from Western Europe. Spanish and Portuguese Jews also established important communities in the American Colonies in Newport, Rhode Island, Charleston, South Carolina, and Montreal, as well as in European capitals, such as London and Amsterdam.

Crypto-Jews or *conversos* ("converts") often settled in the New World. Throughout the colonial period in various South American cities, *conversos* settled and practiced trades of different types, even though they did not receive a warm welcome in all cases. There were *conversos* who settled in the Spanish colonies which maintained Crypto-Jewish practices for some time though they eventually assimilated into mainstream Spanish society and became as Catholic as other Spanish colonists. Other *conversos* arrived in Jewish communities in Italy or the Netherlands and *returned* to Judaism. In modern times, individuals have become aware of their ancestry as Crypto-Jews through an analysis of family customs that many have linked to crypto-Judaism (Kunin 2009).

Many researchers have set out to discover where *conversos* settled in the world, particularly in the New World, to ascertain if there is any Jewish influence in a particular region. Ricardo Ordóñez has produced a work exploring Sephardic Jewish influence in Loja, Ecuador, in his book titled, *La herencia sefardita en la provincia de Loja*





(Sephardic Heritage in the Loja Province). Ordóñez explores the tradition that associates Loja as a place of refuge for Peninsular Jews since times past, with traditions of clandestine synagogues and the Sephardic origin of its earliest Spanish settlers. He shows the Sephardic connection and history tied to the city of Loja, in the southern part of Ecuador, and also presents a linguistic case that ties the unique lexical traits of Lojano Spanish with the type of Judeo-Spanish that might have been spoken by the earlier Sephardic settlers in Loja. He also describes traditional practices by Lojanos (people from Loja) that are allegedly derived from crypto-Judaic practices of the *conversos*. For example, the custom of cleaning the house every Friday to celebrate a “feast” with only a pair of candles to the “invisible God” and without the typical religious Catholic altar with Saints and images of Christ. There were reports of some people having the custom of having a *mezuzah* on the door of their house without explicating the rationale or reason for having such a religious item in their possession. This attempt to link distinct cultural practices to Sephardic ancestry has been confirmed, with considerable debate, by genetic research (Velez et al. 2011). At some point, the Ecuadorian *converso* community disintegrated and ceased to exist in any meaningful sense. However, other studies of *converso* communities in New Mexico reveal certain traits similar to Ordóñez’s claims about Loja. Kunin (2009) notes four Crypto-Jewish or *converso* identities: (1) strong *converso* identity; (2) weak *converso* identity; (3) Christian identity with *converso* elements; (4) Christian identity without *converso* elements (p. 115). Crypto-Jewish identity is tied to self-identification, genealogy, practice and belief. The practices are varied but similar to what Ordóñez documents in Loja. In Ecuador, the renaissance of *converso* identity is new and seems to be of the strong variety. Particularly of interest is the keeping of records, of which Ordóñez references and presents in his book that present lists of names and surnames of Spanish and Portuguese *conversos* from the colonial period together with the traditions mentioned above. What this history provides is a *link* to a Jewish past, which many spiritual seekers in Ecuador and in all of Latin America hold onto as they adopt new religious practices. It is also important to note that Ecuadorian Jewry does not have a large Sephardic *immigrant* population, in the way that Syrian and other Middle Eastern Jewish communities became important in other Latin American countries (Elkin 2014; Sandberg 1917). The *return* of the descendants of Sephardim in Ecuador to Judaism is both unique as well as similar to their experiences in other countries.

We shall see how this story has played out in modern Ecuadorian Jewish life in the next section, as we examine currently existing communities and how they came into being. The story of the *Bnei Anusim* is crucial to the development of alternative communities in Ecuador. What is important is that this story has taken hold among the current practitioners of Judaism in Ecuador, particularly the new converts to Judaism who make up the bulk of congregants in emerging communities. The development of this identity has not been addressed by scholarly inquiry (to the author’s knowledge) but seems to have developed over the past twenty years with the establishment of new congregations, many of whom have a clearly *Anusim* identity.

After having briefly outlined the origin of the Ashkenazi established communities and the origins of the emerging communities in Ecuador, I now wish to offer a survey of the existing Jewish communities in Ecuador. These profiles are based on interviews with community members, investigating websites and social media profiles of communities, and relying on secondary sources to understand the history and current situation of each community. We will explore these communities by dividing them into different categories, which I have called “established” and “emerging” communities, as well as “cultural organizations”, even though these names might not necessarily be the best names to describe these communities. The intent is to describe the origin as well as the status and impact of each community on the larger Jewish community of each self-identified portion.

## EXISTING JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN ECUADOR

The nomenclature of “established” vs. “emerging” communities are used to classify Ecuadorian Jewish communities. This terminology was used by informants interviewed for this study. “Established” synagogues or communities refer to those of the European immigration in the early 20th century and are regarded as the official Jewish communities of the country. “Emerging” synagogues are those that descend from other groups, most notably those claiming Sephardic heritage as *Bnei Anusim* and other Ecuadorianas pursuing conversion to Judaism outside of the established communities. I also include a category of “Cultural Organizations” to describe (mostly) non-religious Jews, particularly the Cuenca expat community, which is an informal organization that hosts both religious and non-religious events and consists of recent immigration of American expats, who have retired in Cuenca.



Information about each group was assembled through interviews with communal leaders. Table 1 shows the number of communities in Ecuador broken down by the aforementioned categories.

The majority of Jewish life in Ecuador is Orthodox or Orthodox-leaning for a variety of reasons and it seems that the non-Orthodox streams of Jewish life have not had continued success in organizing themselves. The one Reform community is currently inactive but plans to reopen.

**Table 1.** Organized religious communities in Ecuador

Denominational identity	Number of associated communities
Established Orthodox communities	2
Chabad Houses	2
Reform communities	1
Conservative communities	2
Emerging Orthodox communities	3
Total	10

### Established Synagogues

#### *Jewish Community of Ecuador (JCE)*

The Comunidad Judía de Ecuador (CJE) in Quito is a fully functioning community with a synagogue that has daily prayers, adult education programs, Shabbat services, and lodging for Shabbat visitors. It was historically known for its organizational network, described by Beno Weiser, a prominent Ecuadorian Jew as, “the most attractive and best organized [community] in South America” (1947, p. 536). In fact, the entire Jewish community in Ecuador is largely synonymous with Quito as historical immigrants to Ecuador arrived in Guayaquil on the Pacific coast but tended to migrate to Quito (Darvish-Lecker and Don 1990), often leaving behind rural settlements necessary to obtain visas but who lacked economic and educational opportunities for their children (Simos and Kohls 1975).

CJE has been served by several rabbis throughout its existence. Its first permanent rabbi, Leon Albin, was raised in the community, after his parents immigrated to Ecuador in the 1930s. He served the community intermittently between 1972-1995, after having studied in Israel for his *semikhah*. He continues to live in Quito and operates an independent *shechita* operation, providing kosher chicken to several families in Quito. After Leon’s retirement, there were no permanent rabbis until Rabbi Alejandro Mlynski arrived in 2003. He was affiliated with the Conservative Movement in Latin America and served in Quito until 2013. He was succeeded by Rabbi Max Godet, a Brazilian Jew from 2015-2018, who later became the Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. The current rabbi, Nir Koren, has served the community since Max Godet’s departure.

CJE also has a kosher kitchen serving kosher food daily as well as preparing frozen meals for travel and delivery to observant travelers or guests. Max Godet, rabbi of CJE from 2015 until 2018, informed me of the situation concerning kosher food in Ecuador at that time. His comments centered on the situation in Quito, where there are supermarkets that sell kosher products, including kosher meat and poultry, as well as Ashkenazi staples, such as gefilte fish and other such imported products. There are many certified kosher national products to be found in a majority of supermarkets in Ecuador including local cheeses, various brands of bread, yogurt, fruit juices, milk, cream cheese and other staples. Rabbi Nir Koren informed me that the options available for kosher consumers has increased since Rabbi Godet’s departure. The community had been more Conservative in its religious orientation



but Rabbis Godet and Koren have introduced many initiatives to increase Orthodox observance in the community. Rabbi Nir Koren had previously served communities in Mexico and Colombia. He embarked on a journey to increase Orthodox observance in Quito with initiatives such as teaching Jewish law and having daily prayer services in the homes of members and starting a youth movement. Simos and Kohls (1975) describe the religious life of the Quito community:

Religious practices of the majority of Quito Jews was roughly similar to what it had been in German-speaking countries of origin. Religious leadership went by default to the Eastern European Orthodox minority, with the majority complaining but failing to provide leadership. Most of the people did not attend religious services at all or were, at best, "three-day Jews," i.e., attending services on the High Holidays only. Most families celebrated Passover and Chanukah. Six families still kept the dietary laws. Despite lax religious observance, all parents were united in opposing intermarriage, and the feeling of Jewish identity was strong (p. 210).

The Quito community is often described as having a strong *cultural* Jewish identity, as mentioned in the introductory section of this paper. The opposition to intermarriage is due to social factors, rather than strictly religious opposition, although the patriarchal orientation of Ecuadorian society can facilitate intermarriage because children typically identify with the religion of their father in the broader society. Often, an intermarriage involves downward class mobility, affecting a family's economic standing, due to the racialized socioeconomic hierarchy in Ecuador and broader Latin American culture, associating whiteness with higher socioeconomic status (Hayes 2018; Simos and Kohls 1975).

The CJE has a school called *Unidad Educativa Albert Einstein*, which is located in Quito. It is fully bilingual in English and Spanish, with a third language requirement of Hebrew or French. The linguistic preference of the community historically was strongly European and German and Yiddish were maintained for some time after the arrival of the first immigrants (Simos and Kohls 1975). The school is a secular institution which has both non-Jewish and Jewish students. It is founded upon Jewish cultural values and the intent, which results from the unique identity of the CJE, is to use Jewish culture to enrich a secular education. The school was founded by members of the CJE in 1973 to provide a place of academic excellence which would also teach Jewish culture, the Hebrew language, and the history of Israel from a secular point of view. The school chose to name itself after Albert Einstein because is viewed him as an example of the type of cultural synthesis sought out by the Quito community, by maintaining Jewish identity in difficult circumstances, while representing global citizenship and a concern for the wellbeing of the planet.

The social status of the Jews of Quito is between middle-class and affluent. Simos and Kohls' (1975) study of this community revealed that a majority was successful from an economic standpoint and able to afford medical care in the United States or elsewhere, as well as to send children to private school in Quito or abroad. Members of the community were able to afford higher-priced imported goods and household attendants. Their study also revealed some of the social habits of the community, which were strongly attached to the religious and cultural institutions mentioned above. However, some members had begun to move in non-Jewish social groups, due to business contacts or intermarriage of their children or grandchildren. The Jewish community (at the time of their study) was not well-integrated into Ecuadorian upper class life, since it did not accept Jews as social equals. Children of Jewish Ecuadorians were expected to eventually leave Ecuador, for to a variety of reasons. Other social issues faced by the community relate to the relations between the German and the Eastern European Jews in Quito, whose religious behavior and culture differs markedly. There has been conflict between "intermarried" families of Germans to Eastern Europeans, particularly among older generations. The potential conflict around these issues is no longer an issue in the community. However, the socioeconomic status of the community is still much the same and the problems with intermarriage and emigration are of continued concern for the community.

### *The Sephardic Synagogue of Quito*

Besides the Jewish Community of Ecuador in Quito, there is another synagogue, The Sephardic Cultural Center, or as it is colloquially known, The Sephardic Synagogue of Quito, which formed in the 2010s in the Kennedy neighborhood of Quito. It is a space for Sephardic Judaism in Quito. It generally follows the *Yerushalmi nusach*, popular among Sephardic Jews in Israel and the United States but follows some Moroccan and Spanish-Portuguese customs. It is led by Yosef Franco, who is the rabbi of the community and received *semikhah* from Yeshiva Pirchei-Shoshanim. The legal name, "Sephardic Cultural Center" was chosen because the community is much more than a



synagogue; it is also a bookstore and Judaica shop. They have access to a kosher *mikvah* and are supplied with kosher meat from the Quito community. They have worked with outside organizations, such as Kulanu, receiving their volunteers in the past. Before the community was officially established, Rabbi Franco worked with a few students and there were no formal services, only informal gatherings. Gradually the community had added prayer services daily before the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlike all other communities, the synagogue did not disclose information on its membership but reports around 40 people, who join their Zoom classes. They also work with both potential conversion candidates, who complete a year-long course-of-study and must live within walking distance of the synagogue and begin with a course on the Seven Noahide Laws. Some candidates pursue full conversion, while others remain connected to the community as Noahides, non-Jews who observe the ethical teachings of Judaism. They hold two weekly classes on Tuesdays and Wednesdays with invited rabbis from Mexico, Panama, Argentina and other countries, who teach on various topics. On Sundays, they also hold a class on halakhah. In January, they are holding Hebrew classes for beginners to learn reading and writing skills in Hebrew.

### *Chabad of Quito*

A Chabad House was established in Quito by Rabbi Tomer Rotem in 2004 but has become less active. As is characteristic of Chabad, Rabbi Rotem and his wife, Rivka Rotem, are active in reaching out to Ecuador's Jewish community, together with other rabbis, particularly Uriel Tawil of Guayaquil. As with other Chabad communities around the globe, Rabbi Rotem has been active in promoting religious observance in Ecuador, for example by distributing *shmurah matzah* and organizing seders during Passover, as well as other outreach efforts to Ecuadorian Jews. The impact of Chabad is felt by American expats in Cuenca (and elsewhere) who rely on Chabad rabbis for important ritual items and for the delivery of matzah on Passover.

### *Comunidad Judía de Guayaquil / Jewish Community of Guayaquil*

Rabbi Uriel Tawil led Chabad of Guayaquil from 2011-2017; he is also involved in creating kashrut certification in Ecuador. It is now led by Mandy Fried, another Chabad rabbi who arrived in 2018, Guayaquil having had no permanent rabbi before Uriel Tawil. This community was founded in 1940, before Jews began to move to the Sierra region in Quito, and was traditional in style with a membership of around 80 people. It maintains a website under the name "Comunidad Judía de Guayaquil" (Jewish Community of Guayaquil), containing information about the history of the community, its upcoming events, and other important information for members and travelers alike. The community maintains Orthodox services, with separate seating for men and women, as well as maintaining other aspects of the community according to Jewish law. However, the personal practice of the members varies between different levels of observance. The community hosted rabbinical students, who came to lead the holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in the fall, Hanukkah in the winter, and Passover in the spring and other events, from 1990 until Rabbi Uriel Tawil arrived in 2011. Rabbi Tawil increased the number of services and programs and advocated for a more Orthodox observance in the community. Inter-marriage is present in the community, as well, with many members being defined as patrilineally Jewish. The rabbis of the community arrange to study with these individuals to prepare them for conversion, although the conversion ceremony itself occurs in the United States. Alfredo Czarninski Sidermann (1916-2003) acquired a visa to travel to Ecuador around 1936 after travelling to Costa Rica with a friend. He founded the supermarket chain, *Mi Comisariato* under a different name in 1958. His family has been central to the Jewish Community of Guayaquil and was involved in its founding. His son, Johnny Czarninski, is the current president of the community.

In 2015, an Israeli resident of Guayaquil opened a kosher restaurant, called Kosher Pita Grill, which serves mostly Israeli food, including falafel, shawarma, kebabs, schnitzel, and other dishes. The opening of the restaurant contributed to the expansion of the kosher infrastructure for the observant community in Ecuador along with more access to kosher food in supermarkets, and solidified Chabad's presence as a source of kosher food, which has expanded under the leadership of Rabbi Tawil, who noted an increase of kosher meat and other products being sold in the past five years. This expanding access to kosher food was also highlighted by the opening of a kosher certifying agency in Guayaquil, which has connections to US certifying agencies such as the Orthodox Union. The agency certifies a number of national products, with a particular emphasis on exported products. In addition to the kosher restaurant, the Guayaquil community also opened a mikvah with separate facilities for men and women,



built under the supervision of Rabbi Uri Taweil and Rabbi Yirmiyahu Katz, who is involved in the construction of mikvahs worldwide.

The community has an ambivalent relationship with developing emerging communities. The Guayaquil community has had negative experiences with these individuals and does communicate with them. The emerging communities express a negative attitude as well, feeling that they are excluded from the community. There is a conflict of ideologies among the emerging groups in Guayaquil, leading to disagreements between the JCG and other communities. Although, the disparity between the JCG and others in Guayaquil can also be attributed to differences in ideology with regard to practicing Judaism. Another potential source of disagreement is that many in the emerging communities have a desire to make aliyah and not to build a presence in Ecuador, which might not be appreciated by Ecuador's synagogues.

#### *Chabad of Montañita*

Chabad of Montañita was established by a group of Israeli *mochileros* who decided to stay in Ecuador. At its height, there were around 30-40, mostly Israelis, who were affiliated. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic, this community has disbanded. There was discussion of services and other signs of congregational life in Montañita in an expat discussion forum. The community also seems to have expanded beyond its original Israeli nucleus to include some American Ashkenazi expats.

### **Emerging Communities**

#### *Congregación Judía Reformista Beit Chadash (Chadash in English Transliteration)*

The story of *Beit Chadash* (New House) is intrinsically tied to the story of the *Bnei Anusim* explored above. Dr. Carl Hauer-Simmonds, a descendant of Ecuador's established Orthodox community in Guayaquil began to work with Ecuadorian *Bnei Anusim* because he saw that the traditional community was closed off to converts without an Orthodox conversion, a change that occurred after the community hired Uriel Tawil, an Orthodox rabbi. Deciding it was necessary to establish a new congregation that would be open to *Bnei Anusim*, and which reflected the vision of the community towards the *Bnei Anusim*, he contacted Rabbi Terry Bookman, who had expressed support for *Bnei Anusim* and had offered his personal support in bringing back *Anusim* to Judaism. Rabbi Bookman, the former rabbi at Temple Beth Am in Miami, suggested the name *Beit Chadash* and the community was born on July 1, 2010.

The congregation was founded on July 1st, 2010, and, at first, it was unaffiliated with any worldwide Jewish movements. However, it identified as progressive in its outlook by accepting women as active members of the congregation, accepting patrilineal Jews, among other characteristically progressive policies. At first, there were few who joined *Beit Chadash*, yet, with the passing of the years it has grown tremendously to include 140 members. The congregation began without a building but now has a permanent home, represented physically in its dedicated space for services and other community activities, and institutionally, since it has joined the World Union for Progressive Judaism. *Beit Chadash* facilitated the conversion of its 140 members. It was also instrumental in helping convert around 800 other *Bnei Anusim* to Judaism, who were formerly members of Christians congregations. Many of these individuals also became involved in other emerging communities after receiving conversion from Rabbi Terry Bookman. It also seems that many of these congregations have ceased to operate in the past few years.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has hit all emerging communities hard. *Beit Chadash* has been affected especially as it has been forced to cease operations since the onset of the pandemic, which has made it difficult to meet for services and other events. Additionally, Dr. Carl Hauer-Simmonds unfortunately passed away in 2020.

#### *Beit Toldot*

Beit Toldot (House of Generations) is a community which has operated since 2015, after its founder, Mr. Yosef Toledo, discovered his own Jewish roots via the Spanish Inquisition and Crypto-Judaism. He travelled to Colombia to learn from a rabbi associated with the organization, Shavei Israel, an Israeli organization that seeks to bring back *Bnei Anusim* and typically encourages *aliyah*, immigration to Israel. A small community gathered around Toledo who organized their conversion in Barranquilla, Colombia in 2018. He began to work with Chaya Castillo, Shavei Israel's representative in Latin America, to build this community.



Beit Toldot consists of around 10 families or around 50 people and is supervised by Rabbi Shimon Yehoshua, Shavei's emissary in Colombia. Mr. Toledo prioritizes finding conversions that are acceptable to the State of Israel both to facilitate *aliyah* and to ensure that Judaism in Ecuador conforms to Orthodox standards. The community continues to grow and he works with small groups to form communities in other parts of the country. Although the group is small, it is very active holding daily as well as Shabbat and holiday prayer services, as well as Torah study and celebrations.

#### *Nachale Emuna*

Nachale Emuna was a community that existed after a group of rabbis came to convert a group of *Bnei Anusim* to Judaism several years ago. This group was advised by Rabbi Joseph Kolakowski and Rabbi Moshe Otero but has since ceased operation. Many former members have joined other communities, such as El Elohai Israel or the Chabad of Guayaquil. The community was affiliated with Los Caminos de Israel, an outreach effort that seeks to bring back *Bnei Anusim* to Judaism and offers online classes on YouTube.

#### *El Elohei Israel - Comunidad Judía Anusim (The God of Israel - Jewish Bnei Anusim Community)*

This community was formed in 2005 and obtained legal status in 2007. It was founded by a group of *Bnei Anusim* with the specific goal of being a Sephardic congregation. Its leader is Mr. Nery Montiel who had a powerful experience of divine calling to return to his roots in Judaism after learning that his family had roots in Spain and other parts of the Middle East. This is another example of an emerging congregation which is very active and engaged with practicing Jewish law and devotion. Around 80 people regularly attend Shabbat services. Mr. Montiel and their website reveal that they offer many weekly activities, including full day Shabbat and holiday services, as well as several weekday prayer services on Sundays, Mondays, and Thursdays for Shacharit, or the morning prayers. There are also opportunities for learning throughout the week, with weekly *parashah* classes on Wednesdays, Fridays, and on Shabbat. Additionally they offer courses in learning Hebrew, Sephardic Jewish living, Jewish cooking, courses to understand *taharat hamishpacha* and classes for children. In a similar way to Beit Toldot, El Elohei Israel is working with other small groups throughout the country who want to convert to Judaism and establish their own communities.

#### *Congregación Ovadia Yosef*

Mr. Israel Villacis started this community in 2011. They began in the Reform Movement and were converted by Rabbi Terry Bookman, becoming Orthodox in 2015. They began working with the Diaspora Yeshiva Toras Yisrael in Jerusalem. Mr. Villacis studied there and received *semikhah*; he is the current rabbi of the community. The community was large at first and subsequently lost members upon transitioning to Orthodoxy. It now has around 80 members, according to Mr. Villacis. Unlike other groups, this community does not claim Sephardic heritage as *Bnei Anusim* but is made up of spiritual seekers who came to love Judaism and its unique practices. They describe themselves as Sephardic Haredi and follow the Sephardic ritual in synagogues.

#### *Jewish Association of Guayaquil*

This community was the result of two projects. The first project was called the Shtibel of Guayaquil, which was a small group of people learning with an Ecuadorian, a lawyer in Guayaquil, who identifies with Conservative Judaism. This first iteration of the project was more oriented towards Orthodox Judaism at first, but tried to create a Conservative community with the help of Rabbi Juan Mejía, a Colombian who converted to Judaism and was ordained as a rabbi in the United States. He helped the community learn about Judaism and advised them on how to affiliate. That project did not come to fruition, due to financial issues. This group fragmented but some stayed with him and continued learning. This group met an American Jew, who also had a small group interested in forming a community. These two groups formed the Jewish Association of Guayaquil. This group describes itself as a right-wing Conservative synagogue, meaning it is traditional in style but does not require all of the strictures of Orthodox Judaism. The community consists of around 25-30 members.

#### *Other Emerging Communities*

There are small groups that want to form new communities in Cuenca, Ambato and Loja. In Ambato, there is a community forming around an individual named Renán Muñoz, which is affiliated with Mr. Yosef Toledo's group, *Beit Toldot*, in Guayaquil and Shavei Israel in Colombia. However, I was not able to organize an interview with Mr. Muñoz. Mr. Renán Muñoz has completed his conversion and is involved with teaching Judaism to other new groups.





There is another initiative of Beit Toldot of Guayaquil in the city of Cuenca, called *Comunidad Chadash Chai Torah Emet* (New Life Torah of Truth - CCTE), which is working closely with Mr. Yosef Toledo in Guayaquil, who has a dream of opening at least one Shavei Israel community in each province of the country. CCTE is working on establishing their community in Cuenca under the leadership of Eliezer Sánchez who works with Yosef Toledo and Shavei Israel to establish the community. Another former Messianic group, *Raíces.Congregación* (Roots.Congregation), under Mr. Gonzalo Calle, has also started to learn with Shavei Israel. Groups in Cuenca and Loja have been working with Mr. Nery Montiel to organize new emerging communities there under his supervision. There is reportedly a community in the Province of El Oro called *Beit Aharon* (The House of Aaron) but I was unable to establish contact with anyone from that group to know if it is still in operation.

## **Cultural Organizations**

### *Jewish Community in Cuenca, Ecuador*

As with most Ecuadorian Jewish organizations, this group is relatively new and is tied to other processes of migration, mostly relating to the economic situation in the United States. The financial position of people entering retirement in the United States in the past decade has been such that a small subsection of retirees has sought to live as expats around the globe, increasingly in Latin America. Ecuador is a frequent destination of retiree expats due to the desirable climate, affordable prices, and its use of the American dollar, which provides economic stability and the lack of any need to convert a lifetime's worth of savings into a potentially volatile foreign currency (Hayes 2014a; 2014b). Official estimates of the actual number of Americans living in Ecuador are unreliable but many estimates arrive at a number around 8,000 while acknowledging that the actual number could fluctuate in either direction (INEC 2010). Additionally, many residents are temporary residents who either spend part of the year in the United States, or in other countries, or who move to Ecuador for a number of years before relocating elsewhere.

The Jewish Community of Cuenca (JCoC) is a small subset of this overall American community in Cuenca. As such, it is composed of American retirees who have settled in Cuenca for some time. They bring an American cultural Judaism to their South American retirement living. This type of cultural affinity shapes the practice of the JCoC, which is an unofficial organization that organizes on Facebook, and does not think of itself as a synagogue or any other type of official Jewish organization. It meets informally at the homes of people who associated themselves with the group and hosts semi-religious celebrations of Jewish holidays, including a Rosh Hashanah potluck, Hanukkah party, and a Passover seder. It does not host prayer services, Torah study, or other markedly religious observances and it seems that the majority of Jews in Cuenca do not consider themselves to be observant. Chabad groups active in Ecuador perform outreach to members of this community.

### *Jews of Ecuador (Facebook group for descendants of Ashkenazi refugees in the 20th century)*

This cultural organization, like the Cuenca group, lacks officiality. It is an informal group for organizing and connecting with fellow Jews of a similar background, in this case, with some connection to Ecuador, even if currently not living there. Dr. Carl Hauer-Simmonds, president of Beit Jadash, describes the Jews of Ecuador community as such, "They are European Jews... that came to Ecuador fleeing the Holocaust and their descendants (including me). They came as children or were born in Ecuador, but just about all of them moved to the USA in 1945 where they live now. There is only a handful of them that remained in Ecuador or came back here after retirement." The Jews of Ecuador maintains a website that includes a number of important historical documents, photographs, videos, and links to the documentary *An Unknown Country* by the documentary filmmaker, Eva Zelig, about the experience of Ashkenazi Jews in Ecuador. Although the first Jewish immigration to Ecuador allowed for the establishment of its two most prominent synagogues, newer waves of immigration from Israel, Europe, and other Latin American countries will certainly bring about more changes within the communities.

## **HOW MANY JEWS ARE IN ECUADOR?**

The most reliable statistics on the number of Ecuadorian Jews, the *World Jewish Population* survey estimates the population to include a core group of 600 and a maximum expanded group of around 1,200 (Dashefsky et al. 2018). This includes individuals of Jewish descent who are not necessarily considered Jewish according to Jewish law, the vast majority living in Quito. From a sociological point of view, these estimates do not capture the full extent of individuals claiming Jewish identity in Ecuador and the data should be examined again to account for emerging communities and American Jewish expats. An updated population estimate is included below based on information



gathered from contacts within the communities. We also do not know the number of culturally Jewish descendants of Ashkenazi refugees in the 20th century who do not affiliate with synagogues or other organizations in Guayaquil and Quito, nor how many of those remain in Ecuador.

The population estimate above takes into account both a low or conservative count and a more inclusive count by factoring in considerations around the reported sizes of each community. A very conservative estimate of all communities would give a number of around 955 Jews in the country, whereas a more generous estimate could see that number as high as 1,030. Several of the figures for the communities include fluctuating numbers, particularly in Cuenca and in the Reform community, where retirees are sometimes only part-time residents or leave for other places. With regard to Beit Chadash, a large number of people were converted by Rabbi Terry Bookman but there is no reliable data as to how many of those people continue to practice Judaism or claim any Jewish identity. The estimated population size does not take into account issues of Jewish law and recognition of conversions, which would alter the numbers of Jews accepted as such by all communities. It also does not include the small groups of new emerging communities developing in Cuenca, Ambato and other places in the country.

**Table 2.** Population Estimate of Ecuadorian Jews

Community	Number of Members or Associated Individuals
Jewish Community of Quito	600
Chabad of Guayaquil	60-100
Chabad of Quito	10
Chabad of Montañita	No longer functioning
Beit Chadash	140-160
Beit Toldot	10
Nachacle Emuna	Not operating
El Elohai Israel	80
Jewish Association of Guayaquil	25-30
Jewish Community of Cuenca	30-40
Jews of Ecuador Facebook Group	589
Total	955-1030

## CONCLUSIONS

This essay serves as a brief introduction to the Jews of Ecuador, a fascinating community that blends into a tapestry of complex, and often contradictory identities, resulting from multiple streams of origin. First, it consists of an immigrant community of mostly Ashkenazim, who were able to escape the horror of the Holocaust and were able to find assylum in Ecuador in a difficult time as well as a small community of Sephardic immigrants from the Middle East. While most of these refugees eventually left to settle in other parts, a small minority decided to stay and call



Ecuador home. This group has persisted to this day and created a unique form of cultural Judaism that is both secular but equally anchored in tradition in a way that differs from other forms of cultural Judaism. Secondly, there are transient communities of American Jewish expats, mostly retirees, who stay for extended periods of time (even years) and Israeli tourists and *mochileros*. This aspect of Ecuadorian Jewry, particularly American expats, exists in a parallel world that does not intersect much with established or emerging communities. This is mostly due to geographical distance between communities and language barriers, as most either do not speak Spanish or have a lower proficiency in the language. Finally, an emerging community is being born of individuals, some of whom believe that they are descended from Sephardic Crypto-Jews from the times of the Inquisition, and others who are spiritual seekers that find meaning in Judaism. Many hundreds of Ecuadorians believe that they are descendants of Sephardic Jews forcibly converted to Catholicism many hundreds of years ago. Due to a variety of factors, there is not much interaction between these individuals and the country's official Jewish community. These communities have sought to find rabbis to teach them about Judaism and facilitate their conversions, even if this complicates their status as Jews in the country. Some Orthodox conversions are accepted by Orthodox rabbis in the country, whereas others are not. This results from different ideologies in the communities leading them to either accept or reject a conversion. However, each group will need to maintain its course to continue the Jewish communities of Ecuador and hopefully lead to a place of rapprochement among the groups in the future.

The Jews of Ecuador constitute a modern iteration of Judaism in the developing world but mirroring the complex issues facing other Jewish communities in developed and developing countries. Its strong cultural attachment to community and tradition and a common bond in surviving the Holocaust characterize one sector of the community, while at the same time, a passionate community of newcomers poses many challenges but also possibilities for growth in coming years and decades. The Jewish community's small size and multiple tendencies and identities make the study of Jews in Ecuador a study in changing community and identity formation as newer groups add their visions to the mixture.

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