

Religious Renaissance in

ARGENTINA

By Steve Lipman

In the Old Country he was known as Bernash.

He grew up in a Chassidic home in Transylvania, was a teen when the Nazis came to Romania, survived Auschwitz, and emigrated after World War II to Argentina.

In his new country he became Bernardo, leaving behind his Jewish name and most trappings of Yiddishkeit.

He was no longer shomer Shabbat. He had last laid tefillin in 1943. He had questions—Why had most of his family perished in the Holocaust? Where was God?—that the rabbis couldn't answer.

Then, three years ago, his import business went bankrupt. He had more time for his spiritual search.

One morning two years ago he made the blessings over tefillin, a borrowed pair, for the first time in nearly a half century. He hasn't stopped since then. And every day he davens Shacharit at the Orthodox shul a few blocks from his apartment in Buenos Aires.

After *Minchah* last year at Sucath David, the largest Sephardic synagogue in Buenos Aires, a congregant approached Rabbi Abraham Serruya. Could they speak in private?

Rabbi Serruya, spiritual leader of Sucath David, and the congregant, a businessman in his 30s, sat down in the rabbi's office. The young man, like

Mr. Lipman is a staff writer at The Jewish Week.

many workers in Argentina during a decade of rising inflation and unemployment, had lost his job. He had no income and was running out of hope. He and his wife had three children, and he wanted to know if he could stop having more. He was asking Rabbi Serruya for permission to practice birth control.

"You have the *mitzvah* of *peru urevu*," the congregant told the rabbi. "Now it's very hard" to support a family.

Rabbi Serruya, sitting today with

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another visitor in his office, says he listened sympathetically to the young man. But the rabbi's answer was no. "You can only stop" [having children] if there is a health problem."

"I gave him *musar* [a talk on ethics] to strengthen himself," Rabbi Serruya says.

The congregant accepted Rabbi Serruya's *pesak* (halachic decision).

But, during a time of a continuing economic crisis in Argentina, there are

other heart-wrenching, life-and-death questions from members of the country's Orthodox community for Rabbi Serruya and other Orthodox leaders.

"A lot of questions," says Rabbi Serruya, a native of Brazil. "There are a lot of people asking, 'What is happening to us? Why? What should we do? Should we stay here?'"

Argentina's economic problems, which began in the 1990s with government corruption and disastrous policies, escalated last December when the linkage of the peso to the American dollar was halted, bringing instant inflation, five changes of government in two weeks, street riots and looting. Hundreds of thousands of people in Argentina's middle class became instantly unemployed, and the country's 200,000-member Jewish community, overwhelmingly middle class, was disproportionately affected. According to most estimates, a quarter of Argentine Jewry now lives below the poverty level, dependent for food and rent on the largesse of family and the aid of overseas Jewish organizations.

For many Jewish adults, a network of Jewish-financed soup kitchens around the capital and outlying cities provides their only meal of the day; for many Jewish children, it's lunch at day school. Elderly Jews sit outside kosher grocery stores and restaurants, their hands stretched out for *tzedakah*. Every community leader has a tragic story—no, several—to share about

amcha facing ruin.

For the Orthodox community, which constitutes about 10 to 15 percent of the total Jewish population, the crisis represents a test of communal resources and individual *emunah*.

So far, say Argentina's Orthodox leaders, the community is passing the test.

Observance of *mitzvot* not only has not slackened, but has increased, the leaders say. Attendance at weekday and Shabbat services is up. *Emunah* remains strong. Bernardo is not alone.

"It's a revival," says Rabbi Mendel Gorowitz, a Brooklyn-born day school teacher and businessman. "The main reason is the economic downturn. It strengthens *emunah*."

Though the economic crisis has brought the closing of several Jewish community institutions and the mergers of others, those that serve the Orthodox community—the kosher bakeries, the kosher McDonald's in the Abasto shopping mall, the growing *kollel*—seem as vibrant as ever.

This, despite dwindling or missing salaries, and reduced budgets caused by decreased synagogue membership and day school enrollment.

A resident of Buenos Aires for eight years, Rabbi Gorowitz tells about "a big *ba'al teshuvah* movement" during a period of economic uncertainty. He tells about kosher meat going on sale at major supermarkets to meet the increased demand, about rising enrollment at day schools, about more women going to the *mikveh*, about Shabbat *minyanim* at once-secular Jewish country clubs, about *mezuzot* appearing on the door posts of summer homes owned by apparently non-observant Jews.

The headline-making crisis in December was only the most-visible sign of an ongoing, depressed economy, Rabbi Gorowitz says. "For us this wasn't a crash—not a big change. Economically, the problems in Argentina have been dragging on for three, four years."

And they have caused a renaissance in the Orthodox community. "People

who had a very stable life...realized that they're dependent on the *Eybeshter* [God]," Rabbi Gorowitz says. "It's like 9-11," the return to religion and to *menschlichkeit* observed among many Americans after the terrorist attack on the United States last year, he says. "Here, people started that a long time ago—it's lasted seven, eight years."

"Who came back?" he asks—"a lot of young people."

Go to synagogue, go to *shiurim*, and you see young faces, college age. Go to the packed *batei midrash* in the capital's Jewish neighborhoods, and you see clean-shaven *bochurim*. Go to the kosher restaurants, and you see couples pushing baby carriages.

This is part of a national phenomenon. A recent cover story, "The Boom in Faith," in Argentina's *3 Puntos* [3 Points] newsmagazine documented a growing sense of religion in the coun-

try's largely Catholic but secular population. Eighty-three percent of Argentines now describe themselves as believers, according to a Gallup poll cited in the story.

"The successive economic crises that have immersed the majority of the population in anguish near desperation have generated a slow but firm religious rebirth," *3 Puntos* reported. "In the Jewish community it is not known how many...members are religious, although DAIA [the political arm of Argentine Jewry] estimates an upsurge in interest, especially among young people."

"It's definitely rising," Rabbi Gorowitz says.

"About 90 percent of the people who come to *shul* today are *ba'alei teshuvah*," says Rabbi Daniel Oppenheimer of Achdut Israel, Buenos Aires' major Ashkenazic congregation.



Photos: Steve Lipman



Above: Empty Buenos Aires restaurant during lunch hour. Above left: Argentine Jewish woman affected by economic crisis. Left: JDC food voucher Argentine Jews cash in at local groceries.

Although 80 percent of Argentine Jewry has Ashkenazic roots, descendants of immigrants who fled persecution in Europe from the late 19th to the mid 20th century, the figures are reversed in Argentina's *frum* community: about 80 to 85 percent are Sephardic, mostly members of families who came from Syria some 80 years ago. The other Orthodox are a mixture of *Chassidim* (there is an extensive Lubavitch network and a small Satmar *kehillah*), some black hat *Litvaks* (they go to Israel or the US for their post-high school learning), and a decreasing number of Mizrachi/Modern Orthodox (Rabbi Oppenheimer, following the "*Torah im Derech Eretz*" philosophy of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, caters to this crowd).

"All my people went to Israel," Rabbi Oppenheimer says. "The 'professional' Modern Orthodox," the college-educated doctors and lawyers so common in many Western countries, "you find very few of these here."

While most *aliyah* from Western countries comes from Religious Zionist circles, the majority of the estimated 10,000 to 12,000 Argentine Jews who will immigrate to Israel in the next few years are secular.

The Ashkenazic-Sephardic imbalance in Argentina's Orthodox community, Rabbi Oppenheimer says, traces back to the country's original immigrants. Most of the Ashkenazic newcomers, from Eastern and Western Europe, had secular-often-Bundist backgrounds, and established primarily secular institutions in their adopted land. The *Sephardim*, however, were more traditional if not strictly *shomer mitzvot*, and kept their traditions. Sephardic rabbis in Argentina commanded more respect than their Ashkenazic counterparts in their respective communities.

"They [the *Sephardim*] had rabbis who set the principles straight," Rabbi Oppenheimer says.

Argentine Jewry has a definite Sephardic flavor, from the *nusach* [text of prayer] in synagogues to the cuisine

in kosher restaurants and the Syrian disinclination to accept converts.

Sometimes independently, sometimes in tandem with Argentina's organized Jewish community and The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the Israel-based Jewish Agency, the Orthodox synagogues in Buenos Aires have instituted a series of programs in recent years to meet their members' unique needs, from subsidizing kosher food and helping to find employment, to giving lectures on *bitachon* and arranging for people with spare time to tutor younger students.

The rabbis spend much of their time fundraising, often in the States, for the community's rising needs.

And they answer the questions, often from congregants who hang around after *davening*.

"Lately a lot of the *she'eilot* [questions] have to do with monetary issues—'If I owe money, can I pay it back in pesos or in dollars?'" Rabbi Gorowitz says. And there are many questions about emigration.



Requests for *kullot*, for permission to adopt more lenient, less expensive standards of *kashrut* or other practices?

Almost none, the rabbis say. The only "concession" came during Pesach. The price of handmade *shemurah matzah* was prohibitive. "Now they buy the regular"—machine-made, *kosher l'Pesach matzah*, Rabbi Serruya says.

With imported kosher foods economically out of reach for most Argentine Jews, a growing variety of locally produced items, including a new line of domestic kosher wines, is appearing on grocery shelves.

Rabbi Oppenheimer, who studied in Israel and succeeded his father as *rav* at Achdut Israel in 1981, says he will remain in Argentina to answer the questions. "My *bris* was in this *shul*."

Rabbi Serruya is staying too. "It's my spiritual responsibility."

A daughter was born a few months ago to the wife of the unemployed businessman who had asked the rabbi for permission to practice birth control. The baby naming took place in Sucath David.

The businessman stood on the *bimah*, smiling, and thanked Rabbi Serruya for the addition to his family. JA

Left: Rabbi Mendel Gorowitz . Below: One of the Ashkenazic minyanim in Buenos Aires.