

The Puerto Rico Benei Sephardim - One Man's Journey

Shalom! I am Dr. Amauri Antonio Arroyo Ríos Torres Colón, and I was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico. I retired from the University of Florida where I was a Professor of Robotics, Artificial Intelligence and Computer Engineering. Thirty-one years ago, I started *Kehilat Kol Simcha* in Gainesville Florida during Sukkot 1992, where I am currently serving as Senior Rabbi. I am also the SE Regional Director for the Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations, affectionally called the UMJC. Thirty-one years ago, while being interviewed and courted to become a member of the IAMCS by the then president of the MJAA and the Rabbi of *Beth Israel* in Tampa, FL, he stopped in the middle of the interview and said: *“Did you know that you are B’nei Sephardim? All your surnames appear in the list of Sephardic surnames in my book.”* No! Never in my life had I even imagined having such background! This started my journey...

According to many Internet sources, *Jewish immigration to Puerto Rico* began in the 15th century with the arrival of the *anusim* (variously called *Secret Jews*, *Crypto-Jews*, *Conversos*, or *Marranos*) who accompanied Cristobal Colón (Christopher Columbus) on his second voyage. An open Jewish community did not flourish in the colony because Judaism was prohibited by the Spanish Inquisition. However, many migrated to mountainous parts of the island, far from the central power of San Juan, and continued to self-identify as Jews and practice Crypto-Judaism...



Starting on November 1, 1993, I began to do extensive research about this newly discovered background. In December 1993 my sister presented our family a Family Tree dating to the 1500's, her five-year research project (coincidence of course). I also did DNA testing and obtained Coat of Arms information for the Arroyo's from Portugal.

My mother and father were both born in Lares, Puerto Rico. Lares is a remote town which was only accessible after some 330 curves on roads built by the Spaniards located in the western end of La Cordillera Central which is PR's largest mountain range.



Lares is considered the birthplace of the Puerto Rican Independence movement. Frustrated by the lack of political, religious, and economic freedom, and enraged by the continuing repression on the island, Puerto Rico's pro-independence movement staged an armed rebellion in 1868. Known as the *Grito de Lares* (the *Cry of Lares*), the rebellion broke out on September 23, 1868. It was planned by a group led by Dr. Ramón Emeterio Betances and Segundo Ruiz Belvis, who on January 6, 1868, founded the *Comité Revolucionario de Puerto Rico* (Revolutionary Committee of Puerto Rico) from their exile in the Dominican Republic. Betances authored several *proclamas*, or statements, attacking the exploitation of the Puerto Ricans by the Spanish colonial system and called for immediate insurrection. The *proclamas* soon circulated throughout the island as local dissident groups began organizing. Secret cells of the Revolutionary Committee were established involving members from all sectors of society, including landowners, merchants, professionals, peasants, and slaves. They agreed to strike first at the

town of Lares on September 23. In less than a month the insurrection was squashed by the Spanish militia. On November 17, a military court imposed the death penalty for treason and sedition on all prisoners. Nevertheless, in an effort to ameliorate the tense atmosphere on the island, the incoming governor, José Laureano Sanz, dictated a general amnesty early in 1869 and all prisoners were released. When we visited Lares in 1994, my father's youngest brother, who at the time was the Principal of the Lares High School, shared that the secretary and treasurer of the Betances Committee were Jews and that part of the goals of the movement was religious freedom for all, and in particular, PR Jews.

My father and mother were both born in Lares (another coincidence, right?) and all their last names are all included in the official list of Sephardic names displaced by the Inquisition released by Spain. We came to the Messianic Movement in October 1993 as committed sojourners, but from that time until today the *B'nei Sephardim* cause has been at the forefront of our journey.

Like most of you in this audience, our experience in this journey has been difficult and has been tested. Both our families did not like or accept this newly found information and for a period of three to four years set us out to pasture. My mother forbade me to speak about this ever in her presence. Our visits we often met with hostility and there was always pork in the food we were served. We kept our silence in this matter and eventually all the hostility disappeared. Things were not that agreeable in the then Messianic Movement we were attempting to be part of. Many of our peers considered us Jewish wannabees and illegitimate. The doors closed quickly, and we were left to learn about our Jewishness from participating in the Hillel at the University of Florida. Fortunately, Adonai gave us grace with that community, and not only did we learn Israeli Dance, Hebrew, and Israeli cuisine but over time our constant willingness to serve (in whatever project Hillel needed), caused them to rely on our family for every community activity they did until 1998. We also attended every Jewish Community High Holiday Service held at the University Auditorium in the University of Florida Campus always arriving early and being the last to leave. We integrated fully into the Jewish Community being accepted as Messianic Jews because of our attitude, love, and deep respect for everything Jewish. I took two-and-a-half years of Hebrew, a course in Biblical Hebrew and another course in modern Jewish Culture all at UF. In 1997 I was included in the Jewish Community panel (with all the Gainesville Rabbis) for the all-night Shavuot Torah Study.

In conclusion, here are some golden nuggets of wisdom we have learned on this journey. Firstly, when *Yeshua* said: *"³⁵By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"* (*John 13:15*) He gave us the key to Jewish Evangelism, if you love unconditionally the Jewish People you come in contact with they will (after testing your love) open their hearts to you and love and accept you as *"one of their own"*. After discovering your Jewish Ancestry, you need education in all things Jewish. Being Jewish is more than a belief set – it is a lifestyle. Sojourners fully lived and integrated into normative Jewish life in the TNK, and it is no different for us. Take it slow and do not be in a hurry to wear Jewish garb. This is especially true in those elements that have established rules. It is OK to say *teach me* or *please forgive my ignorance* if you discover (or they tell you) that you are doing something unacceptable. The Internet is replete with information about everything in Jewish culture. Check it out! Everything in Jewish life, religion and culture has its beginning in the TNK, but today's Judaism is based mostly in the Teachings of the Rabbis. As such, you will have to decide for yourself what and how much of that culture is appropriate for you and your family. I suggest that everything in the TNK supersedes modern teaching, and there is always room for patience and a good attitude. In the final analysis, the MOST important thing is your sincerity and heart. *Adonai* tests and tries your heart, so let your heart guide your journey.

Epilogue: In these last 29 years I have strived for the New World Sephardim with little or no success in obtaining any attention to the plight of *B'nei Sephardim* to return to their Jewish Heritage. The *Prophetic Return* of the Jewish People is *INCOMPLETE* until all of the *B'nei Sephardim* are also brought in. I have great news! Today this process begins, and you are a part of this history-making event! *Shabbat Shalom!*