OKLAHOMA CITY MAN’S FAITH JOURNEY BROUGHT SURPRISES

RELIGION RAISED CATHOLIC, HE DREAMED OF BEING A MONK, BUT HE NOW IS A RABBI

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A funny thing happened on the way to the monastery...

Juan Mejía, of Oklahoma City, once dreamed of becoming a Roman Catholic monk, but a life-changing discovery that began with a joke set him on a different path. Mejía said he was 15 when he attended a family Christmas gathering in his native Bogotá, Colombia. A relative made an off-color remark, an anti-Semitic joke actually, that made his paternal grandfather very upset.

Someone at the gathering urged the older man to explain why he was so upset, and his answer took everybody by surprise: The family descended from Jews.

Mejía said he listened as his grandfather told them that his own grandfather was Jewish, and the family’s ancestors were forced to convert to Catholicism during the Spanish Inquisition.

Raised in the Roman Catholic faith, his heart leaning toward becoming a monk one day, Mejía was intrigued by his grandfather’s words. His only knowledge of Judaism had come from the Christian bible up to that point. Suddenly, some of the practices of many older men in the family began to make sense, Mejía said.

“I wouldn’t say it was an earth-shattering moment...

Rabbi Juan Mejía, of Oklahoma City, holds a Torah scroll in the youth room at Emanuel Synagogue.

PHOTO BY PAUL G. SOUTHERLAND, THE OKLAHOMAN

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WHO IS A JEW?

Counting Jews requires decisions about who is being counted, a direct function of who is defined as a Jew. Biology, self-identity, or behavior.

Biological Jews are individuals with a Jewish parent versus those Jews who practice Judaism, with or without having a Jewish mother or father. According to Reform Judaism and the patrilineal descent of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a Jewish father can define a Jew. According to Orthodox and Conservative Judaism and the tradition of hundreds of years, only a Jewish mother defines a Jew. Demographic surveys usually do not ask about grandparents, although Israel’s law of return includes grandparent lineage.

Self-identity is how individuals think of who they are. Some people think of themselves as Jews regardless of their parents’ religion. They may have Jewish heritage or Jewish peer groups.

Behavior is what people do. Behavioral Jews practice Judaism and live as Jews, with or without biological origins. This includes people who go to synagogue weekly, observe kosher, and otherwise meet tests of behavioral Judaism. If their parents were not Jewish or they did not formally convert to Judaism, they are usually excluded in counts.

HOW MANY JEWS ARE IN THE WORLD TODAY?

Scholars have only a rough idea about how many Jews are in the world today. Current sources report between 13.5 million and 15.5 million a variance of about 15 percent, as defined within very limited boundaries. The real number is probably much higher. Both locating Jews and convincing them to reveal their religious identity complicates and compromises Bethel Lashon’s ability to estimate the number of Jews. These factors result in undercounting, if Bethel Lashon considers all the issues that plague counting the Jewish populations around the world, the organization’s leaders believe they are probably missing millions of Jews in their official counts.

SOURCE: BETHAL LASHON
Faith: Knowledge of ancestry changed course of life

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Knowledge of ancestry changed course of life

Another significant part of the conversion ceremony was the prayer for people who may have wished to convert to Judaism or move to Israel for other reasons. These people were surprised by the sense of belonging that came with the conversion.

"Many people waited for this opportunity and they didn't think they could," Melo said. "I think that the idea of being in a familiar environment, being with people who have been disconnected from Judaism, and those who have no family history but who have a deep desire to reconnect with their roots."