

Introduction

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF AFFINITIES

af·fin·i·ty, *noun*

I. (a) sympathy marked by community of interest: kinship; (b) **i.** an attraction to or liking for something; **ii.** an attractive force between substances or particles that causes them to enter into and remain in chemical combination

II. (a) likeness based on relationship or causal connection, analogy; (b) a relation between biological groups involving resemblance in structural plan and indicating a common origin¹

PARTIAL RELATIONS

On a sunny Sunday morning in August, Ricardo Carvalho, a thirty-five-year-old shipping clerk from a nondescript northern Portuguese suburb, checks his watch and quickly drinks the last of his espresso. Gesturing for me to follow, he walks briskly across the café esplanade to the sidewalk and pauses for me to catch up, then resumes his story as we hurry to meet the tour bus. He is telling me about having dinner with an American rabbi a few months ago, another in a string of stories he's shared about encounters with Jews visiting from abroad. They come to him through word of mouth, or via his website, or by happenstance, in person, when he and they both happen to attend Shabbat (Sabbath) services at the grand twentieth-century synagogue in Porto, Portugal's second-largest city. He takes visitors on walking tours of Porto's medieval Jewish quarter and recounts eight centuries of Portuguese Jewish history, asking nothing in exchange but their time; for Ricardo, the opportunity to meet and perhaps befriend these foreigners is an end in itself. Whether an independent tourist couple, a Jewish heritage tour group, a rabbi, a historian passing through, or outreach activists seeking "lost" or

“hidden” Jews of Portuguese origin, the specifics are less important to him than the simple fact that they are Jews—and that they invariably seem as interested in him as he is in them.

On this particular morning it is a group of twenty Italians, all retirees, midway through a package tour of “Jewish Portugal.” He has agreed to meet them at the synagogue and lead a short walking tour. As with previous visitors, he will not volunteer that he works as a shipping clerk, nor will they ask his profession; with his wire-rimmed glasses, intellectual bearing, and facility in several languages, tourists invariably take him for an academic or a white-collar professional. In fact he easily could be an academic, given the many years he’s spent studying Jewish and European history, linguistics, and religion on his own. But in the Portugal of his youth, a working-class child like Ricardo had few opportunities to become a scholar, just as today, on this sunny morning in 2004, there are few avenues for him to join Portugal’s tiny, tight-knit Jewish community. Despite his public activism to raise awareness of Portugal’s medieval Jewish heritage, his explanation that he has Jewish ancestry, and his attendance at the Porto synagogue off and on for nearly a decade, most Portuguese Jews do not consider him a Jew at all.

When we arrive at the synagogue’s austere iron gates the tour bus has not yet arrived. Waiting, I turn to take in the imposing four-story building. Even after seeing it so many times, I am struck anew by its vast facade and still more by its remarkable history. The largest synagogue in the Iberian Peninsula, it contains not only a spacious, intricately tiled Moorish-style sanctuary, but also classrooms, a library, meeting hall, full kitchen, dining room, ritual bath (Heb., *mikvah*), and lodgings for a rabbi and a caretaker. For most of its existence, however, the opulent building has stood empty; the *mikvah* lay in disrepair for decades, and until quite recently no religious leader had ever lived in the rabbi’s quarters. Five hundred years have passed since Porto’s Jewish population was large enough to warrant such a building. Instead, as Ricardo explains during his walking tours, it is the physical expression of a dream: that one day the descendants of Portugal’s “lost” Jews would return en masse to their ancestral faith, a Jewish community rising phoenix-like from the Inquisition’s long cold ashes.

When the synagogue was first being built, in the 1920s, that hope had a certain logic. In 1910 a Jewish traveler stumbled upon a village of *marranos* (Pt.; secret Jews) in the country’s mountainous interior. These were the remnant of Portugal’s once-substantial Jewish population, forcibly converted en

masse to Catholicism in the fifteenth century and hounded continuously by the Inquisition for more than two hundred years thereafter. Over the centuries they developed a clandestine Judaism, living outwardly as Catholics while transmitting fragmentary rituals from one generation to the next. The great synagogue, its construction underwritten with donations from Jews abroad, was intended as a beacon to the thousands of *marranos* rumored still to be hiding throughout Portugal's northern provinces (Mea and Steinhardt 1997). But the hoped-for return never came. For years the doors opened only rarely, primarily for cultural events, the key held in private hands. In the 1980s a small group of expatriates from Israel, the United States, England, and France restored and rededicated the building in collaboration with a few Portuguese citizens whose Jewish grandparents had immigrated from Eastern Europe early in the century.

Today tourists are surprised to learn that the synagogue's leadership consists largely of foreigners like themselves. In fact, Ricardo emphasizes, few who attend Shabbat services have roots deeper than one or two generations in Portuguese soil, if that. Beyond the two or three Catholic-born Portuguese women who converted to Judaism when they married congregants, the only ethnic Portuguese to be found within the synagogue's walls are Ricardo and others who, like him, describe themselves as *marranos* or *b'nei anussins* (Heb.-Pt.; children of the coerced)—descendants of the forced converts of long ago.²

Both in Porto and in Lisbon, the nation's capital, over the past few decades dozens of people have come forward and identified themselves as ancestral Jews. Reaction from the Portuguese Jewish community has been at best indifferent: they dismiss the newcomers as non-Jews, not least because neither distant ancestry nor a desire to be Jewish automatically makes one a Jew according to Jewish law. In accompanying several Jewish heritage tour groups through Portugal, on the other hand, I have noted that Jews from abroad tend to view self-titled Marranos in a far more sympathetic light. This August morning marks the first Jewish tour group I will experience from the Marranos' perspective. Standing next to Ricardo, I wonder what the tourists will make of my being there.

Before I can ask what I should do when they arrive, we are joined by Miguel Santos, Ricardo's good friend and fellow Marrano. Just then the bus rounds the corner and pulls to the curb, stopping directly in front of us. The doors open. Italian retirees spill down the steps, one after another. They await no formal introduction, reaching out to clasp hands with each of us in turn, moving

briskly as if along a receiving line. “Shalom!” they cry, using the universally recognized Hebrew greeting and looking directly into our eyes. “Shalom! Shalom!” Pointing to the chest, they offer their names: “Giuseppe! Shalom!” Ricardo and Miguel readily answer in kind, having done this before: “Shalom! Ricardo!” “Shalom! Miguel!” I try to follow suit, but with so many outstretched hands and exuberant faces coming at me at once I have difficulty focusing. “Shalom! Naomi!” I announce heartily to no one in particular, shaking hands with one tourist while smiling at another. “Shalom!”

The Italian guide leads his charges into the synagogue for a presentation and tour by a Jewish community representative, this time a Canadian expatriate. Next will come Ricardo’s walking tour through the old Jewish quarter. Catching my breath, I realize that I have not retained a single name: I recall a blur of eager faces, broad smiles, clasped hands, effusive goodwill, and no real communication at all. In an earlier stage of my research I arrived at these same gates alongside similar package tourists, accompanying them through Portugal from site to site, community to community. Then, as today, participants were clearly as excited to meet local people as they were to tour the synagogue, and it had been relatively easy to remember the names and faces of the one or two people greeting us at each stop. But from the other side, the encounter is nothing short of overwhelming and, truth be told, a bit disconcerting. I am uncomfortably aware that our visitors have no way of knowing that I am neither Portuguese nor a member of Porto’s Jewish community. All they’ve learned is my name.

Inside, we listen as the community representative outlines the synagogue’s history. As soon as he mentions the early twentieth-century discovery of surviving Marranos and their significance to the building, the tourists are visibly more attentive. A clamor of questions: they want to know how many Marranos there were, how they found safe harbor, what their rituals were like, where they’ve gone, whether their descendants still identify as Jews. At this, Ricardo steps forward and clears his throat. “There are still Marranos in Portugal,” he says. “But we’re not all rural villagers.” Their guide translates and the tourists look at Ricardo in wonder. A Marrano, a secret Jew, the Inquisition’s surviving remnant, here, in front of them! But the community representative ignores the interruption and continues his presentation. As soon as we are back outside, the tourists bombard Ricardo with questions, crowding around to hear him. An elegantly dressed woman takes his hand and holds it tightly, listening intently; an elderly man claps him on the back, grinning. They ask his family surnames. Several announce that their own

ancestors escaped from Portugal centuries earlier, fleeing the Inquisition. They are thrilled to meet someone here who might be kin.

For Ricardo and Miguel, the tourists offer an encounter with kinship of a different order. For most of their visitors, the word *Marrano* conjures images of families: families practicing secret rituals together, marrying only among other Marrano families, passing their identity and practices from mother to daughter across the centuries. But at the turn of the twenty-first century, those who identify as Marranos in urban Portugal are typically the only ones in their natal family to pursue a connection with Judaism, and most began to do so only in young adulthood. Though many heard as children that they had Jewish ancestors on one side or the other, they were taught no secret prayers growing up, nor was there an emphasis on socializing with other families of the same background. They do not know their Jewish ancestors' names, nor even the approximate location of the last practicing Jew on the family tree. Nonetheless, most associate their Jewishness with kinship: at this moment in history, August 2004, they understand descent—genealogical lineage—to be the primary element binding them to the Jewish people, for whom they feel a great affinity in the abstract but with whom they have few opportunities for direct interaction. Thus to be greeted warmly by visiting Jews is, for Portugal's urban Marranos, to reconnect by proxy with their broken lineage and to experience belonging—however fleetingly—among their own lost tribe.

. . .

This is a book about the desire for belonging, about identifying with a particular social category and having that claim to affiliation denied. It is about the ways that cultural logics of kinship inform imaginings of self in relation to others, individually and collectively, both back in time and across vast distances, and the ways those same logics work in practice to render some people strangers and others, kin. I open with the encounter between Ricardo, a would-be Jew-by-descent denied Jewish belonging in his local context, and the Italian Jewish tourists, who readily embraced him as a Marrano and potential kinsman, because it highlights how fleeting interactions in distinct social spaces allow different expressions of self, and hence different experiences of belonging or exclusion, to come to the fore. These expressions of self are not random. As I show in the chapters that follow, understandings of oneself and of one's place in different social worlds are culturally patterned

and contextually contingent. The defining criteria of Jewishness have always varied widely across cultural contexts, over time, and from one social sphere to another (Cohen 1999; Herskovits 1927); small wonder, then, that “marginal” groups like Ricardo and his counterparts, who understand themselves to be Jewish according to criteria that are to them entirely reasonable, often find that recognition as Jews by others is far from guaranteed.

The warmth and fascination the Italian tourists showed Ricardo and Miguel did not arise from nowhere. They, like so many other Jewish visitors, arrived fully aware of Portugal’s dramatic history of secret Judaism, and that history engendered feelings of affinity for all Marranos they encountered during their tour, rural and urban. Indeed, *affinity* was a term I heard over and over throughout my research, in conversations both in English and in Portuguese. As we will see, in Portugal and around the world people from a wide range of backgrounds articulated feelings of connection, resonance, likeness, sympathy, shared essence, and even direct ancestral linkage with the hidden Jews of Portugal’s past and their descendants in the present. In Portugal, those who called themselves Marranos also expressed such affinities for Jews in the abstract, for the ancestral population from whom they felt their connection had been severed, and, ultimately, for a small number of individual visitors who returned repeatedly to teach and guide them. The assumption, nature, and consequence of these diverse forms of affinity comprise my central theme.

Ricardo and Miguel, like a great many other participants in my research, were members of organizations created by and for people who believed they had “lost” Portuguese Jewish roots, as well as individuals merely interested in learning about the country’s Jewish history. Dismissed by the mainstream Jewish communities and lacking access to educational materials, communal support, and even basic knowledge of Judaism, members of these organizations turned to each other, the internet, and foreign Jewish travelers for information and encouragement. By the early 2000s they were regularly hosting tour groups and international Jewish outreach workers, who traveled to Portugal in hopes of bringing the country’s storied Marranos back to the Jewish world at large. My own work in Portugal began in 2002, just as interaction with foreign Jews was rapidly increasing, and continued during eighteen months of intensive fieldwork in Lisbon and Porto (from 2004 to 2006), followed by return visits in 2007 and 2008.

The events recounted in this book took place largely within Portugal, but their imaginative and interpersonal context often reached far beyond its

borders. This is a study of global interconnection, not only to the degree that the infrastructure and cultural flows of globalization enable the kinds of imaginings and interactions I explore in the pages that follow, but equally in subjective perceptions of *being connected* to others, both far back in time and widely around the globe. The question of identity, too, is woven throughout this work. From an anthropological perspective, identities are neither fixed nor inherent, but are created and reproduced continuously through social practice and in interaction with others (Holland et al. 1998; Pieterse 2007). While urban Marranos understood themselves to descend from hidden Jews and consciously adopted a set of practices and attitudes they felt were appropriate to that self-designation, their overt exclusion from Portuguese Jewish life, knowledge, and religious practice continuously challenged it. As Ricardo's story shows us, however, Jewish visitors from abroad provided an alternative social space in which to express their evolving sense of self. Viewed simultaneously against the backdrop of Portuguese understandings of identity and ancestry and in light of models of Jewish peoplehood invoked by tourists and other foreign interlocutors, the urban Marranos' constructions of self reveal the dense entanglement of kinship categories with the dynamics of identification and belonging across local, national, and global spheres of encounter.

My analysis proceeds through a series of turning points in the Portuguese Marrano movement, each providing a context for considering a distinct set of theoretical issues regarding identity, the self, social practice, tourism and cross-cultural communication, and (global) kinship. Taken together, they offer a narrative account of the movement itself, beginning with the earliest history of Portuguese hidden Jews through to the consolidation of urban Marrano identity in the 1990s and 2000s, proceeding to analysis of the continual influence of visitors from abroad, and concluding with discussion of the formal "return" of a group of Marranos to their ancestral faith before a London rabbinic court in 2006. Throughout, Jews from other countries—in the abstract, in imaginings sourced from popular media, in face-to-face interaction, and in direct communication online or by telephone—will prove central to Marranos' shifting understanding of themselves ancestrally and in relation to the Jewish world and, above all, to their experiences of kinship or estrangement.

This, then, is a book for anyone interested in the nature of identity and belonging in an era of globalization; in the malleability of social categories, whether chosen or ascribed; in the ways that cultural logics of kinship, prior