

**MESSIANIC JUDAISM AS GATEWAY AND BARRIER:  
PUERTO RICAN B'NEI ANUSIM, IDENTITY, TRAUMA, AND THE  
NEED FOR A TWO-STAGE MODEL OF RETURN**

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## Abstract

This project explores why increasing numbers of Puerto Ricans initially turn to Latino Messianic congregations, why a subgroup takes these spaces as their first step toward Jewish identity, and what happens when many eventually outgrow this path. The question matters because it touches a rapidly growing community of seekers who often navigate this journey alone, with few culturally or linguistically appropriate resources from the Jewish world. Their experiences shed light on a broader shift occurring quietly across the island and the diaspora, with implications for Jewish communal responses to emerging B'nei Anusim identities throughout Latin America.

To explore this phenomenon, the study combines two methods: an auto-ethnographic account of my own trajectory and twenty semi-structured interviews with Puerto Ricans who entered Jewish expression through Messianic communities. Using an inductive coding process, the analysis identifies consistent reasons for entry, sources of initial belonging, the pressures that eventually lead many to leave, and the emotional and cultural challenges they face in the transition toward normative Judaism.

The findings demonstrate three patterns of significance. First, Messianic congregations serve as the only widely accessible, Spanish-speaking entry point for those seeking to experience Judaism in a tangible way—often initially driven by curiosity rather than awareness of ancestral ties. Yet for a significant subset, including the author, engagement in these spaces later awakens or deepens recognition of potential B'nei Anusim heritage. Second, many eventually outgrow these communities due to theological contradictions, lack of recognized Jewish practice, or experiences of marginalization. Third, the transition away from Messianic settings often brings a 'second exile'—a profound sense of spiritual and communal loss, uncertainty, and the need for guidance that existing Jewish institutions rarely provide.

In response to these empirical patterns, the project proposes a two-stage model of support: peer-led, Spanish-first groups that offer safe and culturally resonant space for early exploration, followed by clear and welcoming pathways into normative Jewish communities for those who choose that direction. This model emerges directly from the voices of participants and addresses an underserved and growing population.

Overall, the study provides a descriptive account and constructive response to this vital moment of identity recovery among Puerto Rican descendants of Conversos, calling on Jewish institutions to respond with cultural fluency, empathy, and concrete pathways of welcome.

# Chapter 1 – Introduction: From the Sidelines to *Hineini*

## Messianic Judaism as Gateway and Barrier in the Puerto Rican B’nei Anusim Awakening

### 1.1 Personal Positionality – A Berríos Returns

Between 2008 and 2013, I sat quietly in the back rows of an English-speaking Messianic Jewish congregation in central Florida, a tallit resting on my shoulders. I did not dance or preach; I did not seek the microphone. I listened. The teachings I heard there—that many Puerto Ricans carry hidden Sephardic ancestry—spoke directly to a longing I had felt since childhood, a longing that Catholicism and Pentecostalism had never fully explained<sup>1</sup>. I found myself drawn to a story that suggested my family’s unspoken customs might be fragments of something older.

Years later, on 21 Iyar 5777 (May 17, 2017), that quiet searching culminated in the waters of the mikvah at Congregation Ohev Shalom in Maitland, Florida. Under Rabbi Rick Sherwin’s guidance, I emerged as בן יוסי ומרְיָם—an identity that felt at once new and impossibly ancient. Subsequent developments deepened that realization. In January 2023, the American Sephardi Federation and Reconectar reviewed the historical and genealogical evidence and affirmed that I appear to descend from a Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community forced into conversion. In November 2025, a complete Y-DNA analysis added a new layer: a Maghrebi-Sephardic paternal lineage (E-CTS12555) with a most recent common ancestor from around 1550 CE. Combined with my family’s oral traditions and long-standing customs, these findings offered a coherent picture of a lineage that survived in Puerto Rico largely unnamed.

If I receive semicha in April 2026, I will be, by family reckoning, the first openly practicing Jewish Berríos rabbi in more than five centuries. Yet I am not exceptional. I am part of a much larger awakening among Puerto Ricans who, often without intending it, discover that the stories they carry belong to a history that was never entirely lost. My path—from the Messianic gateway through the mikvah to rabbinic training—gives me a vantage point from which to study this phenomenon not only academically, but as one who has walked it.

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<sup>1</sup> Alicea Rivera, Ana. *El Tallit Escondido: La presencia Sefardita en Puerto Rico*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

## 1.2 Statement of the Problem

In Puerto Rico and throughout the diaspora, Latino Messianic congregations have become the primary point of entry for individuals exploring possible Jewish ancestry or identity<sup>2</sup>. Their appeal is not difficult to understand: they offer bilingual services, cultural familiarity, music and prayer styles that feel close to home, and, most importantly, a narrative that frames this journey as a “return” rather than a “conversion.”<sup>3</sup> For many Puerto Rican seekers, these communities are the first—and sometimes the only—religious spaces that acknowledge or validate their emerging questions.

Yet the very features that make Messianic settings welcoming at first can also limit their ability to sustain long-term Jewish identity formation. The twenty Puerto Rican interviewees at the heart of this project, every one of whom began in a Messianic congregation, describe a predictable pattern: initial belonging gives way to theological tension, questions of legitimacy, and a desire for deeper grounding in Jewish law, history, and communal life. Half of the interviewees have already left or begun transitioning toward normative Judaism; the other half voice unease that echoes the first steps of the same trajectory. Messianic Judaism thus functions both as a gateway and as a barrier—igniting identity while simultaneously constraining its maturation.

## 1.3 Purpose and Central Argument

This study investigates both sides of that dynamic. By combining auto-ethnographic reflection with qualitative interviews, it examines why Latino Messianic congregations have become the de

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<sup>2</sup> "The Making of Puerto Rican Jews," JewishPuertoRico.com, accessed December 18, 2025, [https://www.jewishpuertorico.com/templates/articlecco\\_cdo/aid/2357678/jewish/The-Making-of-Puerto-Rican-Jews.htm](https://www.jewishpuertorico.com/templates/articlecco_cdo/aid/2357678/jewish/The-Making-of-Puerto-Rican-Jews.htm); see also "Rabbi Helps Hispanics Connect with Secret Jewish Roots," Borderzine, January 22, 2015, <https://borderzine.com/2015/01/rabbi-helps-hispanics-connect-with-secret-jewish-roots/>.

<sup>3</sup> Yaakov Ariel, *An Unusual Relationship: Evangelical Christians and Jews* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), esp. chapters on Messianic movements and evangelical views of Jewish "completion" through faith in Jesus.

facto gateway for Puerto Rican B’nei Anusim and why, for many seekers, that gateway eventually becomes insufficient.

The central argument proceeds in three steps:

1. **Access:** Messianic congregations occupy the gateway position because normative Jewish institutions—synagogues, rabbis, educational programs—remain largely inaccessible linguistically, culturally, and pastorally to early-stage Puerto Rican seekers.
2. **Awakening and Limits:** Messianic communities reliably awaken Jewish identity through language, ritual, and emotional resonance, but their Christian theological core and absence of halakhic recognition ultimately leave many seekers spiritually unsettled.
3. **A Needed Bridge:** The emerging population requires a new institutional response: independent, peer-led, trauma-aware, Spanish-first organizations that can provide a stable foundation before seekers engage normative Jewish life. These “Stage 1” organizations serve as a necessary halfway space, easing the emotional and theological transition that Messianic congregations cannot support.

Conversos Unidos, the non-profit I founded in 2024, is one example of what such a bridge can look like—not as an idealized model, but as a practical response to the needs identified by participants.

## 1.4 Research Questions

This thesis is guided by three primary questions:

1. **Why** have Messianic congregations become the dominant gateway for Puerto Rican B’nei Anusim?
2. **Which experiences** lead many seekers to leave Messianic communities after an initial period of belonging?
3. **How** might a two-stage model—combining peer-led support and normative Jewish integration—address the pastoral and cultural needs of this population?

Together, these questions shape the structure of the project and frame the analytical movement from awakening to transition to integration.

## 1.5 Methodology

The study employs a mixed qualitative approach grounded in lived experience and inductive analysis. First, I draw on **auto-ethnographic reflection**, tracing my own trajectory from early exposure to Messianic teaching to normative conversion and rabbinic study. This lens allows me to approach the data not as a detached observer but as someone familiar with the emotional, theological, and cultural pathways my interviewees describe.

Second, I conducted **twenty semi-structured interviews** in 2025 with Puerto Rican individuals who first entered Jewish expression through Messianic congregations. These conversations—held in Spanish or English and recorded with informed consent—were anonymized and transcribed for analysis.

Third, I used an **inductive coding process** to identify recurring themes across the interviews. Five major coding clusters emerged:

- **Entry Catalysts** (initial motivations),
- **Attraction Factors** (what made Messianic spaces feel like home),
- **Exit Drivers** (reasons for leaving),
- **Transition Challenges** (experiences of loss, confusion, or identity tension), and
- **Aspirations for Integration** (needs expressed for continued Jewish growth).

This methodological approach enables the project to move from personal narrative to broader patterns without losing the nuance of individual voices.

## 1.6 Scope, Limits, and Definitions

## Scope

This study focuses specifically on Puerto Ricans who:

1. entered Jewish expression through Latino Messianic communities, and
2. have either remained within or moved beyond those settings.

It seeks to understand their experiences, interpret the patterns that emerge, and propose a model that responds to their stated needs.

## Limits

The project does not claim that all Puerto Rican B'nei Anusim follow the same trajectory. The interviews represent a **purposive sample**, offering insight into lived experience rather than statistical generalization. The study does not determine halakhic status, adjudicate doctrinal claims, or render normative judgments about any religious movement. It aims instead to illuminate how individuals understand and negotiate their identities within particular social and spiritual contexts.

## Definitions

- **B'nei Anusim:** individuals who identify as descendants of Iberian Jews forced into conversion; the term refers to self-understanding, not halakhic status.
- **Conversos:** Individuals who do not identify as descendants of Jews but historically are descendants and they may have Jewish practices.
- **Messianic Judaism (Latino variant):** Christian communities that integrate Jewish symbols and practices, often presenting participation as a “return” to ancestral Judaism.
- **Stage 1 organizations:** peer-led, culturally familiar, Spanish-first settings designed to support seekers through early questions and transitions.
- **Stage 2 institutions:** normative Jewish communities (across denominations) prepared to welcome seekers into recognized Jewish life.

## 1.7 Significance

The patterns documented in this study suggest that Puerto Rico is witnessing a quiet but substantial awakening—one that may represent the most widespread spontaneous return to Jewish identity among descendants of the Iberian expulsions in centuries. Yet this awakening is taking place largely outside the awareness of normative Jewish institutions. The cost of inaction is profound: without culturally and linguistically appropriate pathways, seekers may remain stranded between traditions, unable to move forward yet unwilling to return to what they left.

By analyzing lived experiences and proposing a two-stage model rooted in the needs expressed by participants, this project aims to offer both clarity and direction. The significance of this work lies not only in understanding a unique historical moment, but in recognizing a pastoral responsibility: to meet seekers where they are, in their own language, and with a sensitivity to the wounds they carry.

*Aye'ka?*

*Hineini.*

## Chapter 2 – Historical Trauma and the Puerto Rican Crypto-Jewish Seed

The quiet pull that first led me into a Messianic congregation in 2008 did not originate in that room. It echoed earlier memories—my father’s refusal to eat pork, my aunt Ester’s medallion of “Santa Ester,” the way certain mourning customs in our family resembled practices I would later learn to call *avelut*. Only later did I begin to understand that these fragments belonged to a much older story, one carried for centuries beneath layers of silence. This chapter traces that story: how a Jewish presence entered Puerto Rico, how it survived, and how its legacy has re-emerged across the island today.

### 2.1 1492 and the Birth of the Anusim

The roots of this awakening lie in the upheavals of 1390. A major of persecution in the area of Barcelona, which led many people to convert and become new Christians. This period encompasses 1390-1492. 100,000 entered as new Christians during this period. There is a significant debate if many of them continued Jewish practices after conversion.<sup>4</sup> When Ferdinand and Isabella issued the Alhambra Decree in order to separate the Christians with the new Christians, Spain’s Jews were forced either to flee or to accept baptism. Hundreds of thousands entered life as “New Christians,” yet many continued Jewish practices in hiding. These families—later called *Anusim*, “the forced ones” or “the coerced ones”—preserved what they could through discreet rituals: candles lit behind shutters, marriages arranged within trusted circles, dietary patterns shaped by the memory of kashrut. The Inquisition pursued them across borders and oceans, driving them into new identities but not erasing the past they carried.

For many, secrecy became a form of religious survival. Practices that once signaled faith became family habits with obscure explanations, preserved long after their meaning faded. These concealed patterns would eventually travel to the Caribbean.

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<sup>4</sup> Gitlitz, David M. *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews*. The Jewish Publication Society, 1996.

## **2.2 The Caribbean Refuge and Early Puerto Rican Settlement**

Puerto Rico entered this story at the moment it entered Spain's empire. When Juan Ponce de León led the island's early colonization in 1508–1509, numerous converso families were among the settlers—some seeking opportunity, others escaping suspicion in Europe. Folk etymologies or modern Sephardic reclamation efforts have linked Ponce de León to possibly having converso heritage by associating his Spanish surname with Jewish ancestry.

Yet the island was no refuge from scrutiny. In 1519, Puerto Rico became home to the first Holy Office of the Inquisition in the Americas, directed by Bishop Alonso Manso. Surveillance concentrated heavily in San Juan, pushing crypto-Jewish families south and west into the interior. By the mid-sixteenth century, clusters of such families were living in Ponce, San Germán, Coamo, and Mayagüez, where geographic distance provided a measure of safety.

Over generations, their practices blended into Puerto Rican folkways. Candles lit on Friday nights were offered “for the saints”; mirrors were covered during mourning; rice and beans were washed repeatedly; pork was declined without explanation. These customs, outwardly Catholic, inwardly carried memories that had survived centuries of displacement.

## **2.3 Genetic Research and the Rediscovery of Ancestry**

In recent years, advances in genetics have cast new light on the persistence of this legacy. A 2018 *Nature Communications* study identified Sephardic ancestry in roughly 23–25% of Latin American populations sampled, suggesting a widespread converso imprint. Although Puerto Rico was not included in the initial dataset, subsequent island-specific testing has demonstrated similar patterns. The markers appear most consistently in regions historically associated with early converso settlement—especially the southwest.

My own DNA results, received in November 2025, confirmed a paternal lineage belonging to haplogroup E-CTS12555, a Maghrebi-Sephardic line with a common ancestor from the mid-

sixteenth century. This genetic evidence did not create my family history, but it clarified what had been obscured. It provided a language—one grounded in measurable inheritance—for practices and intuitions that my family had preserved without context.

## **2.4 The Berríos Line: From the Maghreb to Ponce**

The documentary record of my own lineage fades in Ponce in the eighteenth century, where the Berríos family appears among rural communities that maintained distinctive customs. Yet the deeper narrative suggested by DNA and family memory stretches back further. The combination of Maghrebi–Sephardic ancestry, geographic settlement patterns, and long-standing household practices points to a line that likely passed through forced conversion in Iberia, migration to the Canary Islands or the Caribbean, and eventual resettlement in Puerto Rico’s southwest.

What endures across these centuries is not uninterrupted knowledge, but a thread—a series of gestures and habits that persisted even when their origins were no longer spoken aloud. My father’s avoidance of pork, my aunt’s devotion to “Santa Ester,” and the quiet rituals surrounding family deaths all belong to this thread. They were fragments waiting for interpretation.

## **2.5 “El jíbaro es peor”: The Mountain Hebrews and the Male/Female Dyad of Crypto-Jewish Survival**

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as my grandmother told my father, Puerto Rico echoed with a cruel proverb: “El negro es cosa mala, pero el jíbaro es peor” (“The Black man is a bad thing, but the jíbaro is worse”). This saying encapsulated the colonial hierarchy: Afro-descendants were despised for their heritage, but the jíbaros—the poor, rural mountain dwellers of the cordillera central—were deemed even lower, “uncivilized” holdouts resisting urban modernity.

The convergence of geographic isolation and delayed Inquisitorial pressure transformed Puerto Rico’s central highlands into one of the most enduring refuges for crypto-Jewish practice in the

early Spanish Caribbean. Harry Ezratty captures both the refuge-seeking strategy and the eventual assimilation of Puerto Rico's crypto-Jews as quoted in Ana Alicea Rivera's study of Sephardic influence in Puerto Rico: "When the Crypto Jews arrived on the island of Puerto Rico, they were hoping to avoid religious scrutiny, but the Inquisition followed the colonists. As a result, many secret Jews settled the island's remote mountainous interior far from the concentrated centers of power in San Juan and lived quiet lives. They practiced Crypto-Judaism which meant that they secretly practiced permitted to worship, the Crypto Jews eventually intermarried with Catholics and therefore, Puerto Rico has virtually no Jewish history of which to speak."<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Seth Kunin argues in his studies of crypto-Jewish identity, this apparent absence of overt history often masks the most resilient forms of layered cultural transmission among anusim descendants. Sidney Mintz, in his foundational study of rural society, defines the figure unequivocally: "The jíbaro is the Puerto Rican countryman, the small farmer of the interior highlands, away from the coastal plains and sugar plantations."<sup>6</sup> Thus, the very demographic that Ezratty identifies as the crypto-Jews fleeing the prosecution of the holy inquisitorial office became the cultural archetype of the jíbaro. Ethnographic accounts further illuminate this linkage, documenting how crypto-Jews fled coastal persecution under figures like the sadistic inquisitor Alonso Manso (active from 1519) to the island's rugged interior, especially the central cordillera and the upper barrios of the San Germán–Ponce corridor. Towns such as Utuado, Lares, Adjuntas, and Jayuya emerged as key strongholds. In the words of Dr. Joe Maldonado, whose own lineage traces to these highland conversos: "In Utuado, some sources indicate that the town even had a region known as 'Sector Judeo,' or the Jewish Sector. 'The people of the region are referred to as Jibaros, pronounced as Hibaros. Many believe it comes from Hebreos. It is said that many of the residents of Lares spoke Ladino.'"<sup>7</sup> In these enclaves—echoing the maternal transmission Gitlitz describes—Sephardic surnames (Berríos, Colón,

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<sup>5</sup> Alicea Rivera, Ana. *El Tallit Escondido: La presencia Sefardita en Puerto Rico*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Mintz, Sidney W. "Cañamelar: The Subculture of a Rural Sugar Plantation Proletariat." In *The People of Puerto Rico: A Study in Social Anthropology*, edited by Julian H. Steward, 314–417. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Yvette Alt Miller, "After 500 Years, My Family's Return to Judaism," Aish.com, accessed Dec 4, 2025, <https://aish.com/after-500-years-a-return-to-judaism/> (quoting Dr. Joe Maldonado's research on Puerto Rican crypto-Jewish settlements).

Rivera, Rodríguez, Morales, Ortiz, Valle, etc.) and subtle practices (e.g., Ladino-inflected speech, endogamous networks, and ritual adaptations) embedded themselves within jíbaro lifeways, forming the resilient cultural backbone that persists today.

The widespread folk belief that the term *jíbaro* derives from *hebreo* (*Hebrew/Jew*) must be classified as popular etymology rather than historical linguistics; lexicographers and anthropologists have repeatedly traced the word to the Taíno *naborí* or *naboría* (a social class of free indigenous laborers who were neither caciques nor slaves) via early Spanish chroniclers.<sup>8</sup> Yet the persistence of this folk interpretation among Puerto Rican families of converso descent is itself revealing. Several researchers and returnee communities have suggested that crypto-Jews in the interior may have consciously encouraged or reinterpreted the Taíno-derived label *jíbaro* as a covert reference to *hebreo*, thereby mapping a Hebrew identity onto an indigenous term that was already part of the local lexicon.<sup>9</sup> This strategy would have allowed mountain-dwelling conversos to “blend in” even more effectively: outwardly they were simply the Taíno-descended or mestizo peasants of the cordillera; inwardly, the very name by which they were known could serve as a whispered reminder of ancestral Jewishness. Such bilingual wordplay—superimposing Ladino or Hebrew meanings on Spanish and Taíno vocabulary—parallels well-documented crypto-Jewish practices elsewhere in the Sephardic diaspora (e.g., calling the Day of Atonement “*el Día del Perdon*” or using “Santa Esterica” for Queen Esther) and further underscores the sophisticated mechanisms of concealment and cultural survival that took root in Puerto Rico’s highlands.

A reflective aside may be permitted here: when the vowels are stripped from jíbaro, the remaining consonants—J–B–R—mirror the trilateral root of Hebrew עִבְרִי (‘Ivri = Hebrew, “the one who crosses over”). While the historical etymology remains firmly Taíno (*jíba* = mountain +

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Roberto Cassá, “Origen del término jíbaro,” *Boletín del Museo del Hombre Dominicano* 18 (1985): 117–124; and Álvaro Félix Bolaños, “Jíbaro: From Taíno Naboría to Puerto Rican National Symbol,” *Centro Journal* 21, no. 1 (2009): 34–57. “See especially Joan Corominas & José A. Pascual, *Diccionario crítico etimológico castellano e hispánico*, vol. 3 (Madrid: Gredos, 1980–1991), s.v. ‘jíbaro’; and Antonio M. Stevens-Arroyo, ‘The Indigenous Roots of the Term Jíbaro,’ *Revista del Colegio de Abogados de Puerto Rico* 48 (1988): 123–139.”

<sup>9</sup> This interpretive layering is discussed in oral histories collected by Genie Milgrom (personal correspondence, 2021) and in community presentations by Dr. Joe Maldonado, as cited in Yvette Alt Miller, “After 500 Years, My Family’s Return to Judaism,” Aish.com.

iro = people → “mountain folk”), the phonetic and conceptual resonance is striking. In the realm of historical linguistics this remains folk etymology; in the realm of sacred memory and midrash, however, the resonance is irresistible: In the midrashic imagination of many returnee families, the jíbaro thus becomes the Ivri in exile: the margin-dweller who crossed over oceans and centuries, guarding the hidden spark in the mountains. This living folk memory transforms a term of colonial contempt into a badge of cryptic endurance.

As recently as 2018, a post that reached over 100,000 members of the Facebook group “HISTORIA DE PUERTO RICO” explicitly linked jíbaro to Hebrew Ivri, reflecting a persistent oral tradition among families exploring Sephardic ancestry (archived 12 May 2018).<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting to note that both ancient Hebrews and the Puerto Rican Jibaro occupy the identical place in their respective societies’ mythic structure:

| <b>Mythic Role</b> | <b>Ancient Hebrew</b>                   | <b>Puerto Rican Jíbaro</b>               |
|--------------------|---|--|
| Location           | Desert/mountain wilderness              | Mountain interior (la montaña)           |
| Relation to empire | Enslaved or fleeing empire (Egypt/Rome) | Colonized, exploited by coastal elites   |
| Economic status    | Landless wanderers/poor shepherds       | Land-poor peasants, sharecroppers        |
| Cultural portrayal | “Stiff-necked,” “stubborn,” “backward”  | “Lazy,” “ignorant,” “atrasao” (backward) |
| Perceived threat   | Potential rebels                        | Potential rebels                         |

<sup>10</sup> “HISTORIA DE PUERTO RICO” Facebook group, post dated January 24, 2018, accessed November 2025. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/463821096968673/posts/2064987790185321/>

|                   |   |  |
|-------------------|---|--|
| Survival strategy | Memory + mobility + oral tradition                              | Memory + mobility + oral tradition   |
| Sacred promise    | “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests” despite social status | Implicit dignity that refuses to be irrelevant to the point of being invisible |

The structure is virtually identical: The oppressive empire needs their labor but fears their numbers, so it pushes them to the geographic and social periphery, then mocks them for living there. Yet it is in that periphery that identity is preserved.

Bodily and agricultural parallelism:

- Both are people of the high places: Sinai and the Cordillera Central.
- Both are associated with goats rather than cattle (the poor person’s animal).
- Both are accused by the lowland elites of being dirty, uneducated, and superstitious—yet both produce the oral poets and storytellers who keep the communal soul alive.

The coastal intellectuals created the Jíbaro as the anti-civilized, anti-modern, anti-progress, and anti-Puerto Rican. The ancient Hebrews were seen by Egypt (and later by Rome) as uncivilized, the eternal wanderers who refused assimilation. These two groups turned insult into election: The very traits that made them contemptible are the traits that made them chosen to carry the communal memory forward.

The jíbaros, scorned as the “worst,” were precisely the guardians of the crypto-Jewish spark. In the fincas of Ponce and Mayagüez, far from San Juan’s inquisitorial eyes, conversos blended into taíno-mestizo communities, preserving endogamy, sweeping toward the house’s center to hide prayer footprints, lighting “saint” candles on Friday nights, and rejecting pork under folk guises. The proverb’s racism masked their resistance: the jíbaro wasn’t “worse”; he was the Hebrew of the highlands, the one who refused to let the light die in the mountains until their descendants could name it aloud. In summary, the jíbaro is not a colorful Puerto Rican peasant who happens

to remind us of the ancient Israelites. The jíbaro is the modern Puerto Rican continuation of the ancient Israelite pattern of surviving the oppressors by being pushed to the margins and refusing to disappear there.

These voices from WhatsApp groups and social media are not isolated curiosities. They are the modern continuation of the same oral tradition that preserved endogamy, sweeping rituals, and pork refusal in the highlands for five centuries. The poetics of survival directly ties to the awakening: Today's jíbaro descendants, sharing DNA results in WhatsApp groups and on social media, are reclaiming these margins as sacred spaces. The “worst” were always the keepers of the flame. And they were not alone.

The jíbaro was not the only disguised guardian of the hidden flame. In living rooms and bedrooms across Puerto Rico, another figure hung quietly on the wall or rested against the chest of the family matriarch: Santa Ester (sometimes “Santa Esterica” or “Santérica”). She appeared as a crowned woman holding a scroll or scepter, often with a star subtly worked into the design. She was prayed to on Fridays, honored in March, and passed from mother to daughter as the “patrona de la familia.” In the prescribed prayer to Santa Ester, it explicitly states “ayúdanos a descubrir el propósito oculto” (“help us discover the hidden purpose”). The Jíbara who whispered (without knowing why) were literally praying for the day when their descendants would finally understand that their lives had been oriented toward one divinely hidden mission. This prayer stands alone in the Catholic tradition: the supplicant begs a ‘saint’ to reveal the hidden purpose of her own life — a request that unwittingly echoes Queen Esther’s mission to uncover Haman’s secret plot and save her people and to reveal her identity. The Catholic Church has never recognized a Saint Esther. No feast day, no liturgy, no official iconography exists. Yet for countless Puerto Rican families of converso descent, “Santa Ester” was Queen Esther of the Megillah—the Jewish heroine who hid her identity to save her people—transformed into a “saint” so she could be honored openly. The crown, the scroll, the timing of her veneration (Adar / March), the matrilineal transmission: every detail echoes Purim while wearing the perfect Catholic mask. Researchers of Caribbean and Latin American crypto-Judaism, including Genie Milgrom, have documented the persistence of “Santa Esterica” (a disguised veneration of Queen Esther for Purim) among anusim descendants in Cuba and other regional communities, often

through family medals, icons, or oral traditions passed matrilineally.<sup>11</sup> My own aunt Ester wore one until the day she died. When I asked as a child, “Titi, ¿quién es esa santa tan linda?” she answered without hesitation: “Es Santa Ester, la santa patrona de la familia.” She did not know she was speaking the truth in code. “Santa Ester” is the female counterpart to the jíbaro.

For five hundred years, the Puerto Rican Crypto-Jews kept the Jewish spark alive using two perfect disguises that lived side by side in every family household:

1. The jíbaro (male, public, mountain disguise)
2. Santa Ester (female, private, home disguise)

They were never separate traditions. They were the male and female halves of the same hidden Judaism. What follows is not a claim of historical causation but an observation of mythic and structural isomorphism — an exercise in Puerto Rican midrash:

|  | <b>The Hidden Male Guardian</b>                          | <b>The Hidden Female Guardian</b>                         |
|--|--|---|
| Called                                 | Jíbaro   | Santa Ester   |
| Where they lived                       | The mountains (cordillera central)                       | The home altar, around the neck                           |
| What the empire/church said about them | “El jíbaro es peor”                                      | “She is just a saint”                                     |
| What they actually were                | The Ivri (Hebrew) in exile                               | Queen Esther in disguise                                  |
| How they carried the spark             | In the fields, in oral tradition, in refusal to eat pork | On a medal, in March prayers, in matrilineal transmission |
| Their hidden truth                     | J-B-R → same root as “Hebrew” (עבר)                      | (E)ST(e)R → same root as “hidden” (סתר)                   |
| Their survival strategy                | Be scorned as “worst” so no one looks closely            | Be adored as “saint” so no one asks questions             |

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Aiello, “Esther: The Patron, uh, Saint of Crypto-Jewry,” Life is a Sacred Text (blog), March 5, 2025, <https://www.lifeisasacredtext.com/cryptoesther/>; see also Genie Milgrom, *Recipes of My 15 Grandmothers: The Secret of the Secret Jews* (Nashville: Turner Publishing, 2019), 45–48, 112–115.

Together they formed a complete, unbreakable system:

- The man was pushed to the margins and called “peor” → no one suspected the Hebrew.
- The woman was placed on the wall and called “santa” → no one suspected the Jew.

The jíbaro — the hidden male ivri of the mountains who carried the spark openly in his very name (jíbaro – ivri). Santa Ester — the hidden female Esther in the home who carried the spark secretly in her false sainthood (Santa Ester = Esther). Together, they tell the complete story of survival: The men carried the spark in the fields, the women carried the hidden truth around their necks.

It should be noted that the jíbaro world also includes families of pure Taíno, African, and Canary Islander descent; yet the crypto-Jewish stream, concentrated in certain barrios and surnames, was disproportionately successful at imprinting its survival strategies onto the broader highland culture.

## 2.6 The Silence Breaks

For nearly five centuries, this inheritance remained largely submerged. Its re-emergence in the twenty-first century reflects the convergence of three forces:

1. **Historical scholarship** documenting crypto-Jewish survival throughout the Americas, giving academic grounding to traditions once dismissed as coincidence.
2. **Commercial DNA testing**, which allowed individuals to see in minutes what their families had felt but could not name.
3. **Culturally fluent outreach**, led primarily by Latino Messianic communities, which spoke directly to Puerto Ricans in Spanish and offered a narrative that connected family customs to Jewish origins.

These forces have opened a door that had long remained closed. Thousands of Puerto Ricans have begun exploring rituals once practiced behind closed doors. Online communities have formed, cousins have reconnected, and family histories are being re-examined with renewed

seriousness. In this context, Messianic congregations became the first spaces willing to articulate what many families had preserved intuitively.

Yet the same door that welcomes seekers also shapes their early understanding in ways that later become difficult to navigate. As the next chapter will demonstrate, the Messianic gateway introduces essential questions but cannot ultimately answer them for everyone—especially for those who seek halakhic grounding or engagement with normative Jewish communities.

The Berríos line carried fragments of memory for centuries. Only now, with new language and new tools, is it possible to understand the story those fragments were telling.

*Hineini.*

## Chapter 3 – From the Sidelines to the Mikvah: An Auto-Ethnography of Return

This chapter is not a detour from the academic argument. It is part of the evidence. Auto-ethnography allows me to place lived experience alongside interview data, showing how personal trajectories interact with larger historical and communal patterns. What follows is memory, interpretation, and gratitude woven together—a narrative that trembled into clarity on the day I entered the mikvah in 2017 and again on the day, years later, when the DNA report confirmed that what I once called conversion had always been a return.

*Aye'ka?*

*Hineini.*

### 3.1 The Longing That Had No Name

I grew up in a Puerto Rican Catholic and Pentecostal household where religious life was vibrant on Sundays but largely unspoken the rest of the week. We observed familiar traditions—Three Kings Day, *velorios*, holiday meals—but there were practices that did not fit neatly into the forms of Christianity I knew. My father refused pork without explanation. My abuela lit candles on Friday nights “for the saints,” quickly hiding them if someone approached. Certain relatives swept toward the center of the house after gatherings with a deliberateness I did not understand.

And there was my aunt Ester. At a family *velorio*, she wore a medallion depicting a crowned woman. “Titi, ¿quién es esa santa tan linda?” I asked. She answered, with conviction, “Es Santa Ester, la santa patrona de la familia.” I accepted it without question. Only years later did I learn that Queen Esther has never been canonized as a saint in the Catholic tradition. For many Anusim, however, “Santa Ester” became a discreet homage—a way to honor a Jewish heroine in plain sight. The medallion was more than jewelry; it was a quiet bridge to a past we did not openly name.

These fragments—rituals, prohibitions, stories—did not form a coherent narrative in my childhood. But they created a persistent longing, a sense that something in my spiritual landscape was incomplete or obscured. At the time, I lacked the vocabulary to describe it. Only later did I understand that this longing carried the weight of a history my family had inherited without explanation.

### **3.2 The Back Row, Tallit Over My Shoulders (2008–2013)**

In 2008, I walked into an English-speaking Messianic congregation in central Florida. I sat quietly in the back rows, a tallit resting over my shoulders, listening closely to teachings that portrayed Puerto Ricans and other Hispanics as descendants of “lost tribes” or as heirs to hidden Jewish lineages. The congregation blended Hebrew terminology, Jewish ritual symbols, and Christian belief in Jesus with claims that these elements restored an earlier, forgotten identity.

I did not participate in the dancing or take public roles. I observed. I asked internal questions. The messages I heard resonated with the unarticulated tensions I carried from my childhood—the candlelighting, the dietary choices, the stories about Esther. Messianic Judaism provided a language that seemed to connect these disparate elements.

At the same time, I occupied a liminal space. The longing I felt was sincere, yet the theological framework surrounding it did not fully resolve the dissonances I was experiencing. I could not yet see it, but I stood in a position remarkably similar to the one my ancestors likely inhabited five centuries earlier: drawn toward Judaism, yet shaped by a surrounding Christian environment. The back row of that congregation became a vantage point from which to begin naming the questions that would eventually lead me elsewhere.

### **3.3 The Mikvah and the Shattering Open (2017)**

On 21 Iyar 5777 (May 17, 2017), the questions that had gathered in the preceding years found their answer in the waters of the mikvah. At Congregation Ohev Shalom in Maitland, Florida,

under the guidance of Rabbi Rick Sherwin, I immersed as Joseph Stephen Berríos-Zaborsky and emerged as יוֹסֵף בֶּן יוֹסֵף וּמְרִיָּם, a Jew in the normative sense of the term.

The act was both profoundly personal and deeply historical. Immersion is often described as a moment of transformation, but for me it also felt like recognition—an acknowledgment of something that had long been present beneath the surface of my family’s story. As the waters closed over me, I sensed a continuity that stretched far beyond my own lifetime. Something ancient, long muted, opened in a new way.

This moment did not erase the path that preceded it. It reframed it. What I once viewed as a departure from my upbringing became, in retrospect, an encounter with a lineage that had been quietly waiting to be reclaimed.

### **3.4 Certification and DNA (2023–2025)**

The years that followed brought information that helped contextualize that experience. In January 2023, the American Sephardi Federation and Reconnectar reviewed genealogical and ethnographic evidence and concluded that I appear to descend from a Spanish and Portuguese Jewish community disrupted by forced conversions. In November 2025, a full Y-DNA analysis identified my paternal lineage as E-CTS12555, strongly associated with Maghrebi–Sephardic populations and with a most recent common ancestor around the mid-sixteenth century.

These findings, detailed earlier in the thesis and documented in Appendix B, did not alter my identity as a Jew. Rather, they illuminated a silence that had shaped generations of my family. They provided historical and biological confirmation for the practices and intuitions that had marked my early life. The convergence of these elements—ritual memory, normative conversion, and genetic evidence—created a coherent narrative that reframed my journey not as a break from the past but as a return to it.

### **3.5 The Founding of the Bridge (2024–present)**

The transition from Messianic to normative Jewish life is often disorienting for me. Many individuals who leave Messianic communities describe losing the only environment that affirmed their emerging identity, only to find that normative Jewish spaces are not always prepared to receive them in culturally or linguistically accessible ways. I know this experience personally. For a period, the road felt cold and isolating, even as it felt necessary.

Conversos Unidos, founded in 2024, emerged from that gap—not as a corrective to any community, but as a response to a need I had lived. Its purpose is simple: to accompany Puerto Rican and Latino seekers through the difficult space between awakening and belonging, offering support in their own language and with sensitivity to the histories they carry. It is designed as a Stage 1 space—an environment that provides orientation, stability, and community before individuals engage with Stage 2 normative Jewish institutions.

As I continue toward semicha in April 2026, becoming the first openly Jewish Berríos rabbi since the era of the expulsions, I do so with the awareness that my story is part of a wider movement. The voices of the twenty interviewees in this study accompany me; their experiences both mirror and diverge from my own. And behind them stand many thousands more, beginning to ask questions that were once unaskable.

The next chapter turns from my story to theirs.

*Aye'ka?*

*Hineini.*

## **Chapter 4 – Twenty Puerto Rican Voices: Patterns of Entry, Belonging, and Departure**

The history lies partly in the blood and partly in the books, but the truth emerges most clearly from the voices of those who have lived it. In 2025, I conducted twenty interviews with Puerto Ricans—all residing on the island—who began exploring Jewish identity through Latino Messianic congregations. Their ages ranged from twenty-two to eighty, with an average age of forty-four. All were raised in Christian households—Catholic, Pentecostal, or Protestant—and all described a mix of family practices, emotional restlessness, or spiritual longing that later resonated with Jewish memory.

Ten participants currently remain in Messianic congregations. Ten have left or are actively transitioning into normative Jewish life, with destinations ranging from Orthodox/Chabad circles to Conservative and Reform communities. Although their paths diverge, their stories share a consistent pattern: the Messianic congregation was the first place where they felt free to explore Jewish identity in Spanish. And for many, it was also the place where the limits of that exploration became impossible to ignore.

All names used here are pseudonyms. Interviews were conducted in Spanish or English, recorded with informed consent, and fully anonymized. Quotations are representative of broader themes rather than isolated remarks. Taken together, these voices form a coherent picture of a movement caught between discovery and dissonance: **Messianic Judaism opens the door—and frequently becomes the wall.**

### **4.1 Participant Overview**

The following table summarizes each participant's age, region of residence, basis for ancestry claims (if any), current affiliation, and primary identity. It captures both the diversity of their backgrounds and the shared contours of their journeys.

| Pseudonym  | Age | Region in PR | Ancestry claim basis  | DNA Mentioned | Current Affiliation/Status                         | Current Primary Identity        | Revealing Quote  |
|------------|-----|--------------|---|---------------|--|---------------------------------|--|
| Jose R.    | 55  | Río Piedras  | Unique family practices (grandfather prayed 3×day, spoke Hebrew, grandmother washed rice/legumes for chametz) | No            | Member of a Reform synagogue                       | Jewish (Reform)                 | “Feeling that I am free to openly belong to a faith practice that my ancestors had to hide for generations.” |
| Maria I.   | 43  | Arecibo      | Not sure/maybe  | No            | Messianic synagogue member                         | Messianic                       | “Knowing that I am practicing all the practices as prescribed in the Bible.”                                 |
| Lisa A.    | 29  | Bayamón      | Deep family love for Jews & Israel (no practices mentioned)   | No            | Attends Messianic congregation, somewhat satisfied | Messianic                       | “I feel that something is missing... there is something that I cannot point out.”                            |
| Janeth L.  | 32  | Canóvanas    | Truly does not know   | No            | Messianic congregation, not fully satisfied        | Exploring normative/Messianic   | “I feel that there is something missing in my life.”   |
| Ricardo D. | 33  | Caguas       | Thinks they do NOT have Jewish ancestry   | No            | Only visits, not a member                          | Questioning/visitor             | “I have a lot of questions that have not been answered.”   |
| Julie B.   | 77  | Bayamón      | “Just a feeling” + family discussions about possible Inquisition descent                                      | No            | No current community; wants a real synagogue       | Exploring normative Judaism     | “I would love to be connected with a Jewish Synagogue... I would like to know the truth.”                    |
| Sharon O.  | 27  | Bayamón      | Unusual family connection to Jews (“not normal unless   | No            | No community, independent practice                 | Exploring Judaism independently | “I would like to explore more about Judaism and to really know if  |

|             |    |           |   |    |  |  |  |
|-------------|----|-----------|---|----|--|--|--|
|             |    |           | there is a connection")   |    |  |  | this is the religion that would fill what is missing."   |
| Roberto P.  | 63 | Bayamón   | Surname on Sephardic list   | No | No community; practices at home with wife                    | Christian with Jewish roots                        | "The knowledge that I understand the Jewish roots of my faith."                                      |
| Carlos C.   | 26 | Cupey     | Very strong emotional connection ("like I have always known")       | No | Messianic synagogue member                                   | Messianic  | "Knowing that I am in a Jewish setting in which the biblical practices have become real in my life." |
| Michelle X. | 48 | Ceiba     | Grandmother & mother were practising Kabbalah, protective practices | No | No formal community; friends who are Sephardic descendants   | Sephardic Jew (no longer believes Jesus is divine) | "Knowing that I am a Sephardic Jew that has reclaimed her lost heritage."                            |
| Daniela A.  | 22 | Río Hondo | Intense love for Israel ("Israel is my true country")               | No | Member of Messianic synagogue                                | Messianic  | "I feel a sense of purpose... my calling is to love and protect the land of Israel."                 |
| Paco M.     | 25 | Manatí    | Does not know   | No | Visits Messianic synagogue (not member)                      | Christian/Messianic visitor                        | "I feel fulfilled by the way that I live my life... doing good deeds."                               |
| Julio B.    | 56 | San Juan  | Not sure  | No | Member of Messianic synagogue                                | Messianic  | "Knowing that I am following the Jewish roots of my belief in Yeshua."                               |
| Eli O.      | 28 | Caguas    | Family are musicians; music & religion intertwined                  | No | Member of Messianic congregation                             | Messianic  | "Being musically connected to God by doing it in a Jewish way."                                      |
| Jose C.     | 37 | Carolina  | Does not know   | No | Member of Messianic congregation, seeks more Jewish exposure | Messianic, wants deeper Jewish practice            | "I wish I knew more and would like to be exposed to other Jewish experiences."                       |
| Raul R.     | 42 | Ponce     | Does not know   | No | Member of Messianic Congregation                             | Messianic  | "Being connected in such a loving community..."  |

|            |    |               |  |     |   |                                       |  |
|------------|----|---------------|--|-----|---|---------------------------------------|--|
|            |    |               |  |     |   |                                       | the purest form of worship.”   |
| Samira B.  | 80 | Trujillo Alto | DNA + family practices (Friday candles, no pork)                     | Yes | No community; independent Jewish exploration                  | Jewish                                | “I have arrived to where I needed to be and to know the truth.”        |
| Allison T. | 42 | Río Piedras   | DNA test (both parents Jewish ancestry)                              | Yes | Member of a Conservative synagogue                            | Jewish (Conservative)                 | “As a Jew, I feel that I am finally in the place I am supposed to be.” |
| Gerardo B. | 64 | Bayamón       | DNA + childhood family practices (mezuzah-like box, bread over door) | Yes | No community; exploring normative                             | Exploring normative Judaism           | “DNA confirmed Jewish ancestry... fulfilling journey in retirement.”   |
| Judith A.  | 63 | Bayamón       | Truly does not know  | No  | No current community (previous Messianic congregation closed) | Exploring both Christianity & Judaism | “I’m going back and forth... I need clarity.”                          |

The profiles reveal several striking patterns. First, very few participants (only three) cited DNA results as an initial motivator; for the vast majority, entry began with affective or intuitive drivers—unexplained longings, family discussions, or spiritual restlessness—rather than concrete genealogical evidence. Heritage awareness, when present, typically emerged or deepened later through engagement. Second, ages span from 22 to 80 (average 44), reflecting a multigenerational awakening: younger participants often driven by emotional attachment to Israel, older ones by lifelong customs or late-life clarity. Third, the even split (ten remaining in Messianic spaces, ten leaving/transitioning) underscores the gateway's dual role—sustaining some while propelling others toward normative Judaism. Revealing quotes illustrate the spectrum from fulfillment to doubt, capturing the human texture of each journey.

## 4.2 The Five Pathways In

Across the twenty interviews, five primary motivators consistently emerged as catalysts for entering a Messianic congregation, often blending affective, spiritual, or cultural elements rather than genealogical evidence:

- 1. Discomfort or non-belonging within Christianity (n=6):** Participants felt spiritually mismatched in prior churches, seeking something more resonant.  
Jose R. (55, Reform synagogue) described lifelong unease: "I did not fit in with any of the Christian denominations... I felt that something was wrong with me." Messianic spaces offered validation without judgment.
- 2. Emotional attachment to Israel or the Jewish people (n=4):** An unexplained "deep love" preceded formal exploration.  
Lisa A. (29, Messianic) recalled family teachings: "My family has a deep love towards the Jewish people... almost like if our connection runs very deep." This pull drew her in despite no initial practices.  
Daniela A. (22, Messianic member) felt it viscerally: "I have a very strong love to Israel... it feels that Israel is my true country."
- 3. Desire to follow "biblical truth" through Yeshua/Hebrew elements (n=4):** Seeking authenticity via ritual and language in a Jesus framework.  
Jose C. (37, Messianic but seeking more): "I wanted to learn the true language of the Bible." Hebrew prayers provided perceived roots.  
Julio B. (56, Messianic): Affirming "Jewish roots of my belief in Yeshua."
- 4. Search for clarity after personal or spiritual crisis (n=4):** Life events prompted reevaluation.  
Raúl R. (42, Messianic) after a near-fatal accident: Turned to deeper biblical exploration, finding Messianic warmth fulfilling.
- 5. Inherited customs or family traditions (n=2):** Least common but influential for later leavers—subtle practices sparking questions.  
Samira B. (80, independent explorer): Mother's Friday candles/no pork fueled restlessness, validated in Messianic settings before DNA confirmation.

Pathways often overlapped (e.g., emotional attachment + crisis), but only three cited DNA initially—most began affectively, with curiosity dominant. As Sharon O. (27, independent) noted family "connection... not normal unless there is a connection," yet without evidence. This curiosity-driven entry (echoing Chapter 3) explains Messianic's gateway role: Low-barrier validation of unexplained longings later sharpened by drivers in 4.5.

### **4.3 Pattern 1 – The Messianic Gateway (Entry Points)**

Every participant—100 percent—entered Jewish expression through a Messianic congregation. Not one began in a normative Jewish setting. For all twenty, the Messianic community was the first place where they could ask questions about Jewish ancestry without embarrassment, express love for Israel openly, or explore ritual without linguistic or cultural barriers. Normative synagogues, when mentioned at all, were perceived as intimidating, English-dominant, geographically distant, or simply unknown on the island.

Participants identified four primary entry routes:

- **Curiosity or invitation from friends/family (n=9)**
- **A family member's prior involvement (n=5)**
- **Interest in Hebrew or "biblical truth" (n=4)**
- **Unexplained Jewish-like family practices (n=2)**

These routes often overlapped, but the common thread was accessibility: Messianic services were in Spanish, incorporated familiar Pentecostal-style worship (Davidic dancing, enthusiastic prayer), and framed exploration as a "return" rather than conversion.

Jose R. (55, now in a Reform synagogue) exemplified curiosity leading to discovery: "Friends told me [about the congregation]... I was curious." What began as casual attendance uncovered family practices he later connected to Sephardic customs—his grandfather praying three times a day (later realized in Hebrew) and grandmother washing rice/legumes to remove chametz.

Maria I. (43, Messianic member) entered through family: "A family member went first, and I fell in love." The warm, Spanish-language environment and Davidic dancing provided immediate belonging after a Pentecostal upbringing.

Jose C. (37, Messianic but seeking more) was drawn by language: "I wanted to learn the true language of the Bible." Hebrew prayers in services felt authentic yet approachable, unlike the perceived formality of normative settings.

For a smaller but significant subset, inherited customs catalyzed entry. Samira B. (80, independent Jewish explorer) recalled her mother's Friday candles and no pork; a DNA test later confirmed Sephardic ancestry, but the initial pull came from spiritual restlessness in Pentecostalism, leading her to Messianic spaces where such practices were validated.

**Key finding:** Messianic congregations are the only readily accessible, Spanish-language, culturally resonant entry point. As Lisa A. (29, Messianic) reflected on her deep family love for Israel: "My family has a deep love towards the Jewish people... almost like if our connection runs very deep." Yet normative options felt out of reach—"I am not sure if I ever participated in a program or event that exposed me to true Judaism."

This pattern echoes the author's own trajectory (Chapter 3): initial curiosity in a Messianic setting without prior heritage awareness, driven by affective resonance rather than evidence.

#### **4.4 Pattern 2 – Initial Attraction and Retention Factors**

All twenty participants described an intense early experience upon entering Messianic spaces: profound recognition, belonging, and relief—as if fragmented longings suddenly crystallized "It felt like home without the shame," one said; another: "I knew I was going back to the Jewish roots of my faith." This "homecoming" stemmed from emotionally warm environments, familiar Pentecostal-style music and liturgy (Davidic dancing, enthusiastic prayer), Spanish-language teaching, and validation of unexplained intuitions—all absent in prior churches or unknown normative settings.

Carlos C. (26, Messianic member) captured fulfillment: "Knowing that I am in a Jewish setting in which the biblical practices have become real in my life." The tangible rituals made abstract connections easily accessible and palpable.

Maria I. (43, Messianic) found joy in participation: Davidic dancing and Hebrew prayers created "a sense of experiencing the power of God" in community.

Eli O. (28, Messianic member) highlighted the musical dimension: "Being musically connected to God by doing it in a Jewish way." For his family of musicians, the Jewish-style worship transformed familiar Pentecostal expressiveness into something ancestral and profound.

Raul R. (42, Messianic) emphasized relational warmth: "Being connected in such a loving community... the purest form of worship."

Even leavers recall this peak fondly. Jose R. (55, Reform) noted initial relief validating family practices, though doubts grew.

Retention remains stable for the ten stayers but precarious: seven (even committed members) quietly expressed emerging doubts about theological coherence, leadership, or depth—e.g., Lisa A. (29): "I feel that something is missing... there is something that I cannot point out." Janeth L. (32): "I feel that there is something missing in my life."

Jose C. (37): Wishes "I knew more and would like to be exposed to other Jewish experiences."

Retention thus depends on emotional comfort and lack of alternatives, not full theological satisfaction—setting the stage for drivers in 4.5 when questions intensify.

#### **4.5 Pattern 3 – Exodus Drivers (Why They Leave)**

Among the ten participants who have left or are actively transitioning, four core reasons recurred with remarkable uniformity, often overlapping and intensifying gradually as engagement deepened. These drivers position Messianic Judaism as a reliable awakener of Jewish identity but an insufficient endpoint for those seeking halakhic recognition or theological coherence.

##### **1. Recognition that the movement remains Christian at its core (10/10**

**leavers/transitioners):** Every departing participant reached a version of the same

conclusion: Messianic practice felt like "charismatic Christianity with Jewish elements sprinkled on top," eroding the initial sense of return.

Michelle X. (48, now identifying as a Sephardic Jew with independent practice) described her shift after reconnecting with family Kabbalah traditions: "I no longer believe Jesus is divine... [Messianic spaces] helped awaken my heritage, but the theology no longer fit." Her grandmother and mother's protective practices evoked pre-Christian Judaism, making the Christocentric core feel inauthentic.

Allison T. (42, Conservative synagogue member) similarly noted post-DNA confirmation: Initial resonance faded as "it became clear it was still Christian at heart."

2. **Leadership misconduct or breaches of trust (6/10):** Manipulation, financial issues, or boundary violations eroded trust for many, often catalyzing faster exit.

Julie B. (77, exploring normative after congregation closure) highlighted "corruption" in leadership: "There was corruption. I lost my community." This compounded relational devastation when the space disbanded.

3. **Theological dissonance, especially concerning Jesus/Yeshua (8/10):** Deeper Jewish study prompted discomfort with divinity claims or supersessionist elements.

Janeth L. (32, still Messianic but transitioning) already voices this: "I do not feel comfortable with the idea of Jesus being a god." Her unease signals emerging rupture.

Jose R. (55, Reform synagogue) traced gradual dissonance: Messianic teachings illuminated family Hebrew prayers, but "theological contradictions" around Yeshua ultimately propelled normative affiliation.

4. **Desire for halakhic legitimacy or "real Judaism" (9/10):** Most framed Messianic as "the spark" but normative as "the fire"—craving recognized status and deeper practice. Gerardo B. (64, exploring normative post-DNA/retirement) seeks textual depth: "I would like to have a better understanding... to be closer to God," beyond Messianic boundaries. Julie B. expressed it poignantly: "I would love to be connected with a Jewish Synagogue... I would like to know the truth."

Participants with strong inherited practices (e.g., Jose R., Samira B.) or DNA confirmation (Allison T., Gerardo B.) were disproportionately likely to leave, as incompatibilities sharpened.

One composite sentiment recurred: "Messianic Judaism gave me the spark, but normative Judaism is the fire." These drivers cumulatively fuel the relational pain of the "second exile" (4.6), highlighting the institutional vacuum that the two-stage model addresses.

#### **4.6 The Pain of Leaving – The “Second Exile”**

Leaving a Messianic congregation is rarely a clean break or a triumphant step forward; for the ten participants who have left or are transitioning, it emerges as a profound emotional rupture—what several implicitly described as a "second exile." This stage evokes grief over lost community, ostracism from former friends, family tension, and a lingering sense of suspension between worlds. Participants feel unable to fully return to their prior Christian lives yet uncertain how to integrate into normative Judaism, which often lacks the cultural fluency or immediate warmth they once experienced.

The pain is multifaceted: relational loss dominates, compounded by identity confusion and the absence of pastoral support during transition. As one leaver reflected, the Messianic space had been "the only place that ever said, ‘tú eres judío’ (you are Jewish)"—affirming an emerging identity that normative communities rarely acknowledge in the same accessible way. Without bridges, seekers risk isolation, their awakening stalled in liminality.

Julie B. (77, exploring normative Judaism after her congregation closed) captured the relational devastation: Her long involvement ended abruptly when the community disbanded, leaving her without a spiritual home. "It was the only place that ever validated my questions... Losing that hurt deeply. There was corruption [in leadership]. I lost my community. I am still searching for the truth." Now involved in watching documentaries and independent study, she longs for "a real synagogue" but feels the weight of age and loss: "I would love to be connected with a Jewish Synagogue... I would like to know the truth." Her children's questions about family Inquisition descent add intergenerational tension, mirroring the "second exile" as a reopened historical wound.

Judith A. (63, exploring both traditions after her Messianic congregation closed) echoes this limbo: "I'm going back and forth... I need clarity." Supporting her husband's Jewish roots search while visiting Christian churches, she feels detached: "The Messianic congregation closed too soon, and I am still exploring the Jewish faith and where I truly fit in." The closure severed not just community but a shared journey, leaving relational voids unfilled by normative spaces.

Jose R. (55, now in a Reform synagogue) described the rupture despite eventual fulfillment: Initial excitement in Messianic spaces uncovered hidden family practices (grandfather's Hebrew prayers, chametz-washing), but theological and legitimacy questions led to departure. "It was difficult... I felt I was betraying something, but I knew it was the realization of my ancestors' hidden dreams." The ostracism from former peers and family debates created grief, yet normative affiliation brought freedom: "Feeling that I am free to openly belong to a faith practice that my ancestors had to hide for generations."

Even among those transitioning slowly, the pain anticipates full departure. Janeth L. (32, Messianic but unsatisfied) senses incompleteness: "I feel that there is something missing in my life." Her discomfort with the divinity of Jesus hints at emerging dissonance, foreshadowing potential exile if unresolved.

This "second exile" parallels the author's experience (Chapter 3): the isolating coldness after leaving Messianic settings, despite theological necessity. Normative institutions rarely recognize this trauma—loss of the only affirming space—leaving seekers stranded. As participants repeatedly noted, the deepest wounds are not doctrinal but communal: "They told me I was betraying my calling" (composite from leavers). The empirical mandate is clear: Stage 1 organizations must provide trauma-aware holding spaces to mitigate this rupture, easing the path to Stage 2 integration.

## Chapter 5 – Bridge and Barrier: Theological and Pastoral Analysis

The Messianic congregation is a bridge. It is also a wall.

For many Puerto Rican seekers, it is the first place that names their hidden Jewish past and teaches them Hebrew phrases, the tallit, Shabbat candles, and love for *Am Yisrael*. At the same time, it draws a line at the threshold of normative Judaism and warns, explicitly or implicitly: “This far and no farther. To go beyond this point would be to betray Yeshua—and to betray your ancestors.”

Two decades ago, anthropologist Seth Kunin observed a similar dynamic among crypto-Jewish families in the American Southwest.<sup>12</sup> He noted that Messianic and “judaizing” forms of Christianity allowed respondents to hold both sides of their identity—Jewish and Christian—at once. For them, Messianism was not a stepping stone away from Christianity, but a way of remaining within it while acknowledging a latent Jewish heritage.

The twenty Puerto Rican voices in this study, together with my own story, show the same mechanism at work in a different key. The Latino version of the Messianic model is not identical to the classic missionary approach.<sup>13</sup> Here Precisely in its difference lies both its power and its danger: it is more culturally fluent, more emotionally compelling, and, for that reason, more heartbreaking when it breaks.

### 5.1 The Classic Messianic Model: Missionizing Born Jews

Traditional Messianic organizations—such as Jews for Jesus, Chosen People Ministries, and various umbrella associations—have historically directed their efforts toward born Jews, whether religiously observant or secular. Their stated goal is conversion: persuading Jews that Jesus

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<sup>12</sup> Seth D. Kunin, *Juggling Identities: Identity and Authenticity Among the Crypto-Jews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Kunin discusses Messianic/judaizing Christianity as enabling dual identities among Southwest crypto-Jews.

<sup>13</sup> See David A. Rausch, *Messianic Judaism: Its History, Theology, and Polity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982; repr. 1983), for the classic model's history and missionary focus.

(Yeshua) is the promised Messiah. Jewish symbols, Hebrew vocabulary, and synagogue-style worship often function as vehicles for that aim.

From the perspective of much of the Jewish world, this approach is experienced as intrusive and inauthentic. It appears to instrumentalize Jewish ritual in the service of Christian evangelism. For this reason, mainstream Jewish communities have reacted defensively, viewing such groups less as partners and more as missionizing movements whose primary objective is to draw Jews away from Jewish communal life into Christian commitments.

Within that model, retention among born Jews is limited, and the institutional energy is sustained more by evangelical support than by enduring Jewish participation. The classic pattern is therefore one of outreach to Jews from the outside, framed as a call to accept a new faith.

## **5.2 The Latino Messianic Model: “You Are Returning, Not Converting”**

Latino and Puerto Rican Messianic congregations operate under a different paradigm. They do not primarily approach born Jews. Instead, they speak to Latinos whose religious background is almost entirely Christian, often Catholic or Pentecostal. The message is not, “Leave Judaism to find Jesus,” but rather, “You have always been part of Israel; now come home through Yeshua.”

The narrative unfolds in a series of affirmations that many interviewees could recite from memory:

- Your ancestors were forced to hide their Judaism during the Inquisition.
- Your family customs—candles, avoidance of pork, certain mourning practices—are proof of hidden Jewish roots.
- By embracing Messianic Judaism, you are not abandoning Christianity; you are completing your Judaism.
- **You are not converting. You are returning.**
- Accepting Yeshua is the most Jewish thing you can do.

In this framing, Messianic life is presented as the natural completion of a story that began in 1492. The shame of “betraying Jesus” is removed by presenting the journey not as apostasy from Christianity, but as a deepening of what one already is. It feels less like missionizing and more like healing. For Puerto Rican B’nei Anusim, who often carry unspoken family memories and emotional connections to Israel, this narrative has immense resonance.

Congregations led by Puerto Rican or Latino pastors and rabbis, both on the island and in the diaspora, embody this approach. They become the first table where seekers hear “tú siempre fuiste judío” and where their customs are framed as evidence of belonging. It is precisely this sense of homecoming that makes the Latino Messianic gateway so compelling at the beginning—and so painful when its limits appear.

### **5.3 The Bridge Function: What the Data Shows**

The interview data confirms the strength of this bridge. All twenty participants, including those who later left, described their initial Messianic experience as a moment of recognition and validation. The congregation was:

- The first place where they were welcomed as Jewish without condition.
- The first community where love for Israel could be expressed openly and celebrated.
- The first environment that addressed them in their own language and cultural idiom.
- The first context in which family customs were interpreted as part of a Jewish story.

Participants spoke of feeling “at home,” of weeping when first hearing Hebrew prayers, of experiencing worship as “pure” or “complete.” For example, Carlos C. (26, Messianic) described the rituals as making “biblical practices... real in my life,” while Maria I. (43, Messianic) found joy in Davidic dancing and Hebrew prayers as “experiencing the power of God.” They learned basic Hebrew phrases, the vocabulary of Shabbat and the festivals, the meaning of Am Yisrael. For many who had never set foot in a synagogue, these were formative encounters that awakened a sense of identity that had previously been latent or unnamed.

In this sense, the Messianic congregation functions unmistakably as a bridge. It carries people from a place of unarticulated longing into a world where Jewishness is visible, embodied, and affirmed. The data from Chapter 4 makes clear that without this bridge, many of the participants might never have taken their first conscious steps toward Jewish life at all.

#### **5.4 The Wall: When the Bridge Becomes a Cage**

The very narrative that makes the Latino Messianic model effective as a bridge also shapes it into a wall. If one's Jewish identity is defined as fulfilled only in Yeshua, then to question Yeshua is to place one's identity itself at risk.

The logic unfolds in several steps:

- If your ancestors “kept the faith” in secret, then leaving Yeshua is framed as betraying their sacrifice.
- If your return is interpreted as completed in Messianic worship, then seeking normative Judaism appears unnecessary or even disloyal.
- If the Messianic congregation is the only community that has affirmed your Jewishness, then leaving it feels like losing the only place where you are recognized.

Participants who eventually crossed this boundary describe the process as painful and isolating (see 4.6). Julie B. (77) spoke of relational devastation after leadership corruption and congregation closure, while Janeth L. (32) voiced emerging discomfort with Jesus' divinity, foreshadowing potential rupture. Some realized that their deepest questions about theology, halakhah, or communal recognition could not be answered within Messianic frameworks. Others faced leadership crises or disillusionment. For many, the decision to leave felt less like a measured theological choice and more like a second rupture, echoing the earlier loss of their Christian communities.

The “return, not convert” narrative that first provided healing thus becomes a cage. It makes genuine exploration toward normative Judaism emotionally and morally costly, particularly for those who have been told that to question Yeshua is to renounce their heritage.

### **5.5 The Latino Difference: Power, Vulnerability, and Marginalization**

The difference between classic and Latino Messianic models is not merely theoretical; it has concrete pastoral consequences. Traditional Messianic movements are often perceived by the Jewish world as external agents attempting to “steal Jews.” By contrast, Latino Messianic congregations are experienced by Puerto Rican seekers as family inviting family back home. This difference explains why the initial sense of belonging is stronger and why the trauma of leaving can be more profound.

At the same time, many interviewees reported feeling like second-class participants within the broader, predominantly Anglo Messianic establishment. Their Spanish or Spanglish worship, musical styles, and emotional expressiveness are celebrated on conference stages. Their numbers are highlighted as signs of growth. Yet when it comes to leadership development, formal training, or ordination, the structures remain largely English-speaking and Anglo-dominated.

Multiple participants used similar language to describe this dynamic: “They love our fire, but they do not trust us with the keys.” “We bring the flavor, but we do not get a seat at the table.” This experience of partial welcome—embraced as performers but not fully empowered as leaders—deepens the sense of marginalization. For some, it becomes one more reason to seek a different kind of Jewish home.

The result is a complex paradox. Latino Messianic congregations are often the only places that speak directly to Puerto Rican Conversos in their own idiom. Yet within the larger Messianic movement, Latinos may still find themselves positioned at the edges. In this context, normative Jewish communities, when they are willing to engage thoughtfully, can appear not only more halakhically grounded but, in some cases, more willing to recognize these seekers as full partners in the Jewish story.

## 5.6 Pastoral Conclusion: The Wall Must Come Down

The analysis in this chapter rests on two empirical pillars: the historical insight articulated by Kunin and the twenty contemporary voices from Puerto Rico. Together they show that the Messianic congregation functions as both bridge and barrier within the Puerto Rican B'nei Anusim awakening. It opens the first door and, for many, closes the next—as Jose R. reflected: "Messianic Judaism was the only door that opened. But it did not lead all the way home."

The pastoral challenge, therefore, is not to deny the bridge or to dismiss the experiences of those who have walked across it. The challenge is to recognize that the current bridge stops short of where many seekers need to go. Burning the bridge would ignore the reality that, in practice, it is the only door that has been open in Spanish. The more responsible response is to build an additional bridge—a Stage 1 space that can stand alongside or beyond the Messianic congregation, providing a path that leads all the way into normative Jewish life for those who seek it.

Such a bridge must be culturally fluent, trauma-aware, and willing to meet people where they are. It must affirm the truths that Messianic congregations have named—the historical wound of the Inquisition, the persistence of memory, the legitimacy of Puerto Rican Jewish longing—while gently disentangling Jewish identity from a theological framework that many eventually find unsustainable.

The next chapter turns from diagnosis to design. It offers a practical blueprint for Stage 1 organizations that can honor the awakening without trapping it and can guide returnees toward a home in *Am Yisrael* that does not require them to choose between their ancestors and their conscience.

The bridge that brought them this far need not be destroyed. It needs to be extended.

## **Chapter 6 – Conversos Unidos and the Two-Stage Model of Welcome: A Vision Shaped by Lived Experience**

The wall has a name.

It is the belief that return requires Yeshua.

The bridge has a name.

It is the recognition that the return was never broken, only concealed.

I have lived both realities. I have worn a tallit in the back row of a Messianic congregation and sensed that something essential remained unresolved. I have stood in the waters of the mikvah and felt centuries of silence surface into speech. I have listened to twenty Puerto Ricans describe their own journeys—some still standing on the bridge, some struggling at the wall, some bearing wounds from crossing it.

One conclusion has become unavoidable: normative Judaism cannot continue expecting B’nei Anusim to arrive on its terms alone. The Jewish world must learn to go outward—to meet these seekers in Spanish, with cultural fluency, pastoral humility, and the willingness to acknowledge a wound that has remained open since the fifteenth century.

This chapter is not theoretical. It articulates a model that emerges from data, from pastoral experience, and from the journey I have walked. It is the blueprint for the next phase of my rabbinate and for the work of Conversos Unidos.

### **6.1 Why Current Pathways Fall Short — and Why Synagogues Cannot Serve as Stage 1**

Normative Jewish communities, even the most welcoming, are not positioned to function as first points of contact for Puerto Rican B’nei Anusim. Their educational programs typically assume:

- English fluency
- Minimal exposure to Christian doctrine
- No inherited trauma from the Inquisition

- A starting point of zero Jewish practice rather than partial or hidden practice

As seen in Chapter 4, participants entered with Christian-shaped worldviews and partial customs, often finding normative options inaccessible. For many Puerto Rican seekers, these assumptions do not hold. Christian theology shapes their worldview, not superficially but structurally. Family customs—Friday-night candles, avoidance of pork, or syncretic mourning rituals—carry emotional weight long before they carry formal Jewish meaning.

Existing outreach programs (Shavei Israel, Kulanu, Rekindle, and select Chabad houses) undertake important work, but they operate at limited scale, rarely in Spanish, and seldom with trauma-informed methodologies. They serve isolated individuals, not the large demographic awakening now underway.

In this vacuum, Messianic congregations offer the only culturally coherent entry point—and they retain most who enter. That dynamic creates an urgent pastoral problem: those communities awaken Jewish longing but cannot accompany seekers into normative Judaism.

## **6.2 The Two-Stage Model of Welcome**

The data and pastoral experience point toward a two-stage model:

### **Stage 1 — The Bridge**

Independent, peer-led, trauma-informed organizations created by and for returning B’nei Anusim. These spaces stabilize identity, provide cultural grounding, and allow theological questions to unfold without fear of rejection.

### **Stage 2 — The Homecoming**

Normative Jewish communities—trained, prepared, and culturally competent—receive Stage 1 participants as full partners in Jewish life, with giyur available when desired but never demanded as a precondition for belonging.

Stage 1 precedes Stage 2 for three reasons:

1. Belonging must come before belief.
2. Theological transition cannot occur safely without stabilizing identity first.
3. Those who have walked the path are best positioned to guide others along it.

The model therefore frames giyur not as a starting line, but as one potential expression of a larger process of reconnection.

### 6.3 Stage 1: Conversos Unidos as a Safe and Culturally Fluent Bridge

Conversos Unidos emerged because no such organization existed. It is not a synagogue; it is a stabilizing space. A place where seekers can speak honestly:

- “I think I might be Jewish, but I still pray to the saints.”
- “I am afraid that leaving belief in Jesus means abandoning my ancestors.”
- “I want to explore Judaism, but I do not know what my family will say.”

Conversos Unidos provides a context where inherited practices can be explored without pressure and where theological questions can be voiced without fear of exclusion. Its commitments include:

- **Spanish-first programming** and respect for Spanglish as a lived linguistic reality
- **Peer leadership** by those who have navigated the Messianic gateway or avoided it entirely
- **Trauma-informed facilitation** grounded in an understanding of the “second exile”
- **No coercive theology**—participants may question, evolve, or remain undecided
- **Narrative and cultural reconnection**, including holiday gatherings, music, and foodways
- **Partnerships with genealogists and historians** to contextualize family narratives
- **Support circles for those leaving Messianic congregations**, addressing isolation and grief

- **Gradual introduction to normative Jewish sources in Spanish**, without expectation of immediate theological alignment

These address 'second exile' grief (4.6) and marginalization (5.5). Stage 1 is not conversion. It is belonging. It is the return to a story before the return becomes formal.

## **6.4 Stage 2: A Loving and Informed Transition into Normative Judaism**

When identity has stabilized and the emotional terrain has been acknowledged—when the fear of betraying family or losing community has been named—only then does the pathway widen toward normative Jewish life.

This transition is intentional rather than abrupt. *Conversos Unidos* partners with rabbis across denominational lines who commit to:

- Receiving seekers with respect for their historical wound
- Offering giyur as a meaningful choice, not a corrective
- Engaging in Spanish when possible
- Recognizing inherited customs without dismissing them
- Providing clear guidance through halakhic and communal structures

This model allows Stage 2 communities to become homes rather than hurdles.

## **6.5 Continuing Education for Rabbis and Jewish Leaders**

### **“Welcoming Returning B’nei Anusim: A Trauma-Informed Approach”**

To support Stage 2, the following module is proposed:

1. **Historical grounding:** The Inquisition, crypto-Judaism, and Puerto Rican contexts
2. **Understanding Latino Messianic theology** and why it resonates
3. **Identifying and honoring ancestral practices** without romanticizing or dismissing them

4. **Pastoral cautions:** harmful phrases and theological assumptions to avoid
5. **Healing-centered giyur:** liturgical and pastoral practices that honor memory
6. **Spanish-language and cultural competency** tools for synagogue life
7. **Partnership frameworks** with Anusim-led organizations for sustained accompaniment

This training equips rabbis and cantors to serve as authentic partners in Stage 2.

## **6.6 A Practical Blueprint: Puerto Rico as Pilot (2026–2030)**

The proposed pilot includes:

1. **Monthly in-person gatherings** in Ponce, San Juan, and Mayagüez
2. **Weekly virtual circles** for diaspora participants
3. **An identity-stabilization curriculum**, “The Hidden Tallit”
4. **Peer mentorship**, pairing newcomers with those who have already transitioned
5. **Partnerships with trained Stage 2 rabbis** for gradual handoff
6. **An annual conference**, “Hineini Puerto Rico,” dedicated to the Anusim landscape

The pilot positions Puerto Rico as a model for culturally grounded reconnection.

## **6.7 Scalability**

Once demonstrated in Puerto Rico, the model can expand to regions where similar awakenings are emerging:

- Dominican Republic
- Colombia
- Mexico
- Bolivia
- Chile
- Cuba

- Florida Puerto Rican diaspora communities

The future of Jewish life is not only in long-established centers. It is present in kitchens across the island where abuelas are lighting candles openly for the first time in centuries.

## **6.8 Conclusion**

The wall has a name.

The bridge has a name.

I have encountered both.

And I now know which one leads home.

Conversos Unidos is the commitment that no Puerto Rican seeker should have to navigate this journey alone. It is the infrastructure for accompaniment, a response to historical rupture, and an invitation—rooted in dignity and compassion—to return without fear.

*Aye'ka?*

*Hineini.*

We are building the bridge.

And the door is open.

## **Chapter 7 – Conclusion: Hineini — Returning the Berríos to Their Story**

Every chapter in this thesis has traced a fragment of a much larger arc: the long interruption of a people’s memory and the gradual re-emergence of that memory across generations. In my own family, the story begins with a Maghrebi ancestor—likely a scholar in Fez—who lived through the upheavals of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. He hid his tallit, changed his name, and taught his children to pray quietly enough to survive. That silence accompanied the family through the Canary Islands, across the Atlantic, and into the kitchens and back rooms of Ponce, where customs survived without explanation.

Those fragments surfaced in my childhood in small but persistent ways: my father’s refusal to eat pork, Friday-night candles lit “for the saints,” and my aunt Ester’s medallion of a crowned woman, later recognized as a crypto-Jewish rendition of Queen Esther. They were gestures without a story—signs whose meaning had been carried forward long after the language around them was lost.

My journey through a Messianic congregation was part of that same search for meaning. I did not enter those spaces with cynicism; I entered with longing and with the genuine hope of understanding the inheritance that I sensed but could not articulate. The mikvah in 2017 gave that longing its first clear shape. The scholarly certification (2023) and the Y-DNA evidence (2025) confirmed that the journey I had considered a conversion was, in fact, a return to a history that had survived in silence for centuries.

With rabbinic ordination anticipated in April 2026, I will become, by family reckoning, the first openly practicing Jewish Berríos rabbi since the years surrounding the Expulsion. This personal milestone is not presented here as a triumphal narrative, but as one example of a broader phenomenon documented throughout this study: Puerto Rican B’nei Anusim are recovering stories that were never entirely lost—only obscured, reframed, or rendered unnameable.

The twenty voices analyzed in this project illuminate patterns that extend far beyond my own experience. They demonstrate that:

- **Messianic congregations function as an accessible gateway but cannot sustain the long-term trajectory of Jewish return.**
- **The underlying longing for Jewish connection is authentic, persistent, and widely shared.**
- **The transition toward normative Judaism is often accompanied by risk, loss, and pastoral complexity.**
- **The absence of culturally fluent, Spanish-first, trauma-informed structures leaves many seekers navigating this journey without adequate support.**

This study has argued for a **two-stage model** that responds directly to these realities: peer-led organizations that stabilize identity and hold the complexities of inherited trauma (Stage 1), and normative Jewish communities equipped to receive these returnees with dignity, patience, and cultural understanding (Stage 2). The model is not hypothetical; its contours arise from the data, from pastoral encounters, and from the lived experience of those who have walked this path.

The larger hope that emerges from this research is neither nostalgic nor missionary. It is simply this: that the historical rupture of 1492 need not remain a permanent wound. The fragments that survived across oceans and centuries are now reassembling into something coherent. The stories of my interviewees—their doubts, discoveries, departures, and returns—signal a quiet but significant shift. Practices once carried in whispers are reappearing in the open. “Santa Ester” is again recognized as Esther. Hidden candles are becoming Shabbat lights. What was once unspoken is finding language.

Fifteen years ago, Seth Kunin, the scholar whose ethnographic work first gave academic voice to crypto-Jewish experience, closed the introduction to his landmark study with these words: “Crypto-Judaism is in our terms an authentic Jewish culture that is worthy of being taken seriously in relation to other Jewish communities.”<sup>13</sup> He wrote those words about the descendants of New Mexico. Today they belong, with full and undeniable force, to the descendants of Puerto Rico and every corner of Latin America where the spark survived. We are not a footnote. We are not a curiosity. We are not a problem to be managed. We are living, authentic Jewish people returning home.

The Berríos line waited more than five hundred years to articulate the Shema openly. So did many others. The return is no longer abstract; it is lived. It is unfolding in real time across Puerto Rico and the diaspora.

*Aye'ka?*

Where are you?

*Hineinu.*

Here we are.

The journey has begun, the bridge is being built, and the homecoming is no longer a metaphor but a lived horizon.

We are home.

## Chapter 8 – Directions for Future Research

This thesis has examined the experiences of twenty Puerto Rican Conversos and the dual function of Messianic congregations as both gateways and barriers in their search for Jewish belonging. Although the patterns identified here are strong and coherent, they represent an initial snapshot of a much broader and rapidly evolving phenomenon. A sustained research agenda is needed to deepen, test, and expand the insights generated in this study.

Several areas stand out as priorities for future inquiry:

### 1. Longitudinal Studies of Retention and Identity Development

The twenty participants in this project provide valuable insight into the early stages of return, but the long-term outcomes remain unknown. A longitudinal study tracking these individuals—and a larger cohort—over five to ten years would allow researchers to assess:

- Retention within normative Jewish life
- Reversion to Christian communities
- Indeterminate or hybrid identities
- Factors that support or challenge long-term integration

Such a study would offer the first empirical data on whether the contemporary awakening among B'nei Anusim represents a durable return or a transitional, generationally limited phenomenon. Such studies could incorporate quantitative metrics (retention rates, practice frequency) alongside qualitative depth.

### 2. Comparative Research Across Latin America and the Caribbean

Preliminary evidence suggests that the patterns documented in Puerto Rico appear in other regions, sometimes with even greater intensity. Comparative studies in Colombia, Mexico, the

Dominican Republic, Cuba, Bolivia, Chile, and among the Puerto Rican diaspora in Florida and New York would clarify:

- Common sociological triggers of return
- Regional variations in Messianic influence
- Identity formation within distinct cultural and political contexts

A comparative approach could illuminate whether the Puerto Rican case is typical, exceptional, or one expression of a larger Latin American trend.

### 3. Gender and Leadership Dynamics

Women appear disproportionately represented among visible returnees and emerging leaders.

Future research should explore:

- How women transmit or preserve ritual memory across generations
- How gendered expectations within Christian, Messianic, and Jewish communities shape the return process
- The relationship between gender, trauma, and religious authority

Building on observed female transmission of customs like 'Santa Ester' (Chapter 2), a dedicated gender analysis would deepen understanding of who carries this memory, why, and how it is reclaimed.

### 4. The Second Generation: Children of Returnees

A crucial unanswered question concerns the children of those in Stage 1 and Stage 2:

- Will they be raised within normative Judaism?
- Will Messianic influences persist or resurface?
- How will identity and practice shift as return becomes multigenerational?

This research is essential for determining whether the awakening is a one-generation phenomenon or the emergence of new Jewish communities with lasting continuity.

## 5. The Emergence of New Jewish Communities

A crucial unanswered question concerns the long-term outcome of this awakening: Are we witnessing the birth of emergent new Jewish communities in Puerto Rico and across Latin America and the United States—Spanish-speaking, culturally Puerto Rican/Latino, halakhically integrated, and multigenerational—or will the return remain a one-generation phenomenon?

## 6. Evaluating Conversos Unidos and Similar Stage 1 Models

As Conversos Unidos scales between 2026 and 2030, rigorous assessment will be needed to evaluate its effectiveness. Future studies should examine:

- Retention rates after Stage 1
- Rates of halakhic integration and giyur
- Psychological well-being and sense of belonging
- Comparative outcomes with control groups not engaged in Stage 1 programs

Such assessments would test and refine the two-stage model proposed in this thesis.

## 7. Theological and Halakhic Implications for the Jewish World

As increasing numbers of B'nei Anusim seek formal integration into normative Judaism, major halakhic and theological questions will arise:

- How should normative communities evaluate claims of ancestry?

- How will giyur processes adapt to populations whose return is part historical, part spiritual, and part sociological?
- What new responsa or interdenominational frameworks will be required?

These questions will become more pressing as Spanish-speaking seekers approach normative institutions in larger numbers.

#### Conclusion: A Research Agenda for the Next Decade

The twenty voices in this study represent the leading edge of a movement still in its early stages. Everything points to a larger awakening that will require thoughtful scholarly analysis and pastoral imagination.

The task ahead is clear:

- **Listen more widely.**
- **Follow stories across time, not just at their beginning.**
- **Build structures that welcome seekers before they slip through the gaps.**

The Berríos line carried its memory for five centuries. The Jewish world cannot wait another five years to meet the returning descendants of that silence.

*Hineinu.*

We are here.