

# The Shabbos Project in Latin America

• By SIMON APFEL

Special to The Jerusalem Post

With only five weeks to go until the big Shabbat of October 24/25, we bring you a round-up of Shabbos Project activities taking place across Latin America, with stopovers in Uruguay, Mexico, Argentina, Panama and Brazil.

## Panama

The Jewish community in Panama is an altogether extraordinary one. The community currently numbers around 8,000. While relatively small by diaspora standards, Jewish immigration to the country has tripled over the past two decades. Remarkably, Panama is the only country besides Israel to have had two Jewish presidents in the twentieth century (Max Shalom Delvalle in 1969, and Eric Delvalle Maduro from 1987-1988). Perhaps even more remarkably, a reported 85 percent of Jewish households in Panama keep kosher (there are 17 kosher restaurants in the country), and around 60% of the community observes Shabbat in some manner.

That said, this apparent "captive market" hasn't stopped Daniella Lowinger, Shabbos Project lead coordinator in Panama, from waking up everyday at 5:00 am as she goes about the business of ensuring the project hits home – and hits homes – in Panama every bit as forcefully as it did in South Africa last year.

Lowinger is among the 1,400-odd global partners involved in the international Shabbos Project. Panama City, where she is based, is one of around 250 participating cities.

"The Shabbos Project is one of the most exciting initiatives I've ever heard of – it's the spark that's going to light up Jewish communities around the world," she says. "Just like the Shammash candle in the menorah (the most prominent candle in the Chanukah Menorah) lights up all the others, the South African Jewish community (where the Shabbos Project was created by the country's Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein last year) is lighting up the rest of the Jewish world."

Lowinger first heard about the initiative from Rabbi Aaron Laine – Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazi com-

for those that do observe Shabbat, maybe they've started to take it for granted, maybe there are some things that can be done better."

As word-of-mouth spreads across Panama City, the country's Shabbos Project organisers have launched a bumper sticker drive and t-shirt campaign to further fuel this awareness, while the Maccabi youth movement has launched their own publicity campaign – a school competition to reward the best Shabbos Project amateur video.

One of the most compelling aspects of the Shabbos Project is the unity factor. This has certainly been in evidence in Panama, where Jews from all walks of life and all levels of observance, have already pledged to "Keep it Together", and where the Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities are coordinating a number of joint events to celebrate the Shabbos Project.

"The Shabbos Project is going to be a special, historic, occasion for our community," says Arman. "With everything that's going on in the world, this is the opportunity to connect as a people over something other than anti-Semitism and a state of war – something more positive and life-affirming. The Shabbos Project is an opportunity to experience a taste of true spiritual bliss."

## Rio De Janeiro

The Jewish community of Rio de Janeiro is the second-biggest in Brazil, after São Paulo. Rio Grande do Sul is the other major Jewish population center. According to a recent census, Brazil's 107,000 Jewish citizens make it the ninth-largest diaspora population, behind Germany and ahead of Australia.

The Rio de Janeiro community is an especially vibrant one, with a network of close to 100 Jewish institutions, including 20 synagogues, five Jewish day schools, and various other cultural, educational and welfare organizations.

The majority of Rio's Jewish population of 35,000 resides in the central neighborhoods of Copacabana, Ipanema, Botafogo and Leblon. Earlier this year, the city inducted its first ever eruv (a virtual enclosure that enables carrying over Shabbat), encompassing Copaca-



TEAMS BRACE for The Shabbos Project's October 24/25 weekend in Buenos Aires, Panama (below left) and Rio (below right). (Courtesy Johannesburg head office/The Shabbos Project)

the homes of hundreds of families; and Havdalah Concerts will be held across the city to bring proceedings to a close. Meanwhile, the team are still scouting out a venue for the Challah Bake, and are looking at clubs, parks and city beaches.

"So far, we have been overwhelmed by the support for the Shabbos Project – from young and old, observant and traditional, reform and conservative," says Cohen. "Our counterparts running the Shabbos Project in São Paulo have met with a similar response."

He sees this as an opportunity "to create something special".

"I think many people have the wrong idea about Shabbat. They see it as restrictive, prohibitive. This is a chance for our entire community to experience, in full, the gift of Shabbat – in all its warmth and joy and serenity."

and enthusiasm. The feeling of communal unity is growing and is a topic of discussion. The Shabbos Project has already been a success, simply in bringing individuals and organizations closer to each other."

All of the country's synagogues will be participating in the Shabbos Project, with many of the programmes driven by the very active and well-attended youth movements in Uruguay.

Plans are starting to take shape. The Challah Bake is being run at a local Jewish school, with the benefit of kosher ovens in close proximity. Beit Chabad of Uruguay are taking the lead on the initiative, having had experience in producing hundreds of Challot for the community on a weekly basis. The Havdalah Concert is expected to be the best-attended event, with final negotiations underway to secure the services of a well-known Jewish band.

The Shabbos Project organizing team are currently in the process of organizing community-wide Shabbat meals and other activities taking place over Shabbat. Although these activities will be centered in Montevideo, the team is also hoping to reach smaller communities in Punta del Este and Paysandú.

According to Spitz, there is already a lot of excitement around the Shabbos Project.

"Even if only one new person, or one new family, gets a taste of what Shabbat is, it will be a success. But the way things are going, we are hopeful of reaching large numbers of people."

Matching the public mood, celebrity endorsements have been coming in thick and fast, with Bernardo Gitman, a well-known news anchor, and various other politicians and media personalities getting behind the initiative.

"The impact this one Shabbat can have could be extraordinary," says Spitz. "It can bring an awareness about Shabbat to a population that while not strictly observant, are interested enough to want to experience this for themselves. It can also help forge unity in our community, reaching across traditional divides and creating connections between people of different persuasions and backgrounds who otherwise wouldn't necessarily meet or get to know each other."

## Buenos Aires

Argentina is home to approximately 200,000 Jews – the largest Jewish community in Latin America, and seventh-largest in the world. The vast majority of the country's Jews reside in Buenos Aires, which has around 65 synagogues and innumerable communal bodies and kosher establishments (including the only kosher McDonalds outside of Israel).

In recent years, Jewish life in the city has enjoyed a rebirth, as Judaism has gone from being simply a cultural curiosity to occupying a central place in the hearts and minds and daily lives of many of its Jewish inhabitants.

Perhaps unique in the diaspora, Argentina's government has recognized a number of Jewish

are high as momentum builds, and we will seek to leverage on this with a renewed marketing campaign during the Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur period. Our goal is to ensure every single Jew in Argentina is aware of the Shabbos Project."

For Oppenheimer, the stakes couldn't be higher.

"Here we have an initiative that is quite simple, yet can help achieve something that has eluded the Jewish world for so long," he says. "The Shabbos Project offers alienated and/or unaffiliated Jews a uniquely Jewish spiritual experience pretty much everyone can embrace (Shabbat), and at the same time, gives Jews concerned about Jewish identity and Jewish unity a common cause to work together on."

## Mexico City

Mexico City, the world's largest metropolis, is home to around 90% of Mexico's 45,000 Jews. Small Jewish communities can also be found in Guadalajara, Monterrey, Tijuana, Cancun and San Miguel.

Mexico is also home to thousands of Conversos – alleged descendants of Jews who were forcibly converted during the Inquisition, and who nevertheless attempted to retain various Jewish traditions (lighting candles, separating meat and milk, not working over Shabbat). Many prominent Mexicans have claimed Converso roots, including Presidents Porfirio Diaz, Francisco Madero and Jose Lopez Portillo, and renowned artist Diego Rivera.

Mexico City has dozens of synagogues, several kosher restaurants and 12 Jewish day schools. It is estimated that 95 percent of Jewish families in Mexico City belong to a synagogue and almost all Jewish children attend a Jewish school. Mexico has, according to some, the lowest rate of assimilation in the diaspora.

Shabbos Project activities in Mexico City are being overseen by Abdo Chacalo, a garment trader, and father and grandfather of five. His team comprises around 60 passionate volunteers of all ages and backgrounds, who meet four or five times a week. The team have run their own advertising campaign – specifically geared to different sectors of the diverse and colourful Mexico City Jewish community – and have been relentless in contacting, and setting up meetings with the city's array of schools, shuls, community leaders and communal bodies.

Their efforts are beginning to bear fruit. More than 1500 women are expected at the Challah Bake. On the Shabbat itself, there are a number of hotels in the city that will be running Shabbatonim, while synagogues will be offering various special services, learning programmes and fun activities. Thousands of families will be inviting new guests into their homes for Shabbat meals. Arrangements for the Havdalah Concert, meanwhile, are still being finalized, but vast crowds are anticipated.

"Almost all people who hear about the Shabbos Project love the idea," says Chacalo. "I general, I believe the Shabbos Project can be the beginning of a newfound tolerance between Jewish people with different ways of thinking – not just here in Mexico, but across the Jewish world."

Other Latin American countries taking part in the international Shabbos Project include Venezu-



munity in Panama. She recounts that "seeing the videos was an inspiration" – that "if they could do it in South Africa, we could definitely do it in Panama."

Already, the major communal organizations, synagogues and schools have been informed and have jumped on board.

Rebecca Arman, a volunteer who has been translating some of the educational material into Spanish, says that when she tells her friends about the idea – whether they're observant or not – "you see a twinkle in their eyes". Arman, who has often thought of doing so, will be keeping the Shabbat of 24/25 October together with her kids.

"Shabbat is a great way to reconnect as families and friends and as a community. And it's about going back to our roots as the Jewish people. Many of us feel that if we don't go to work or drive around or shop or whatever on a Saturday, we'll miss out on something. Maybe this will help us realize that it's not so difficult after all."

Ronny Knoll-Nesher, another Shabbos Project volunteer in Panama, believes the initiative can be of great benefit to observant and non-observant alike. "People [who aren't Shabbos observant] see Shabbat as complex and inaccessible, and the Shabbos Project can help change that," he says. "And

bana and Ipanema, and utilizing the neighborhoods' celebrated topographic features including the mountains and famous seafont.

After coming across the Shabbos Project on social media, Rodrigo Cohen, a Financial Advisor, decided to head up the initiative in Rio.

First, he convened meetings with the city's Jewish communal leaders ("a very difficult task, but I know most of them and maybe they like me..."). A decision was made to pool efforts across traditional dividing lines, and the FIERJ (Israeli federation of Rio de Janeiro) were enlisted to oversee Shabbos Project activities in Rio.

"The FIERJ are a religiously neutral, non-denominational body, who are able to reach out to the entire community – observant, non-observant, non-orthodox, etc.," Cohen explains.

He has since put together a team of 20 volunteers, comprising successful professionals and prominent business executives, with additional guidance provided by a cross-section of the city's rabbinical leadership.

The team has been hard at work. Central communal Shabbat dinners are being planned in some of Rio's main suburbs; special family-oriented Shabbat services are to be held in the city's main synagogues; Shabbat lunches will be hosted in

## Uruguay

The Jewish community of Uruguay was established approximately 100 years ago by mostly European Jews of Ashkenazi descent. Their ranks were later bolstered by the arrival of a strong community of Sephardim from Izmir in Turkey, along with a number of Jews from Morocco. Currently, around 15,000 Jews live in Uruguay, with 95% residing in the capital, Montevideo.

The community is perhaps one of the most Zionist in the world, with a greater proportion of Uruguayan Jews currently living in Israel than in Uruguay itself. It is perhaps similar to the South African community (where the Shabbos Project was introduced) in that much of the Jewish population is staunchly traditional.

"We are a strong community in the sense that we unite for joys, for sorrows and in times of need," says Uruguay's Chief Rabbi Ben-Tzion Spitz, who is coordinating Shabbos Project activities in the country.

Spitz oversees a team of prominent lay and community leaders, each dedicated to various aspects of the Shabbos Project.

"We are personally calling each school, community and institution to get involved. In all cases there is a great deal of interest

holidays, and authorizes official vacation periods for Jewish citizens during Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and the first two and last two days of Passover.

Rabbi Daniel Oppenheimer is a prominent community leader in Buenos Aires. He heads up the flagship Achdus Yisroel synagogue, and oversees much of the city's kosher infrastructure.

Oppenheimer first heard about the Shabbos Project from a South African couple his family was hosting a few months ago. He was immediately taken by the idea. After convening a meeting with a couple of his colleagues, they assembled a group of around 20 volunteers to work on logistics and raising awareness of the Shabbos Project across the city. They also hired professional advertising creatives – including video producers and graphic designers – to craft the messages (banners, stickers, videos, etc.) needed to reach different demographics within the community.

The response, says Oppenheimer, has been electrifying.

"We have been inundated with calls and emails from people of all backgrounds and denominations looking for more info, and wanting to be involved. The Shabbos Project has clearly touched a nerve; its appeal is one that transcends the ways in which Jews traditionally self-identify."

The two main events bookending the Shabbat of 24/25 October are the Challah Bake and Havdalah Concert. Both are set to be big spectacles in Buenos Aires, with the former expected to attract 5000 women, and the latter perhaps double that. Fortunately, the Shabbos Project team have enjoyed great support from the local government authorities in Buenos Aires, who have helped them secure two beautiful city parks as venues and assisted with logistics around the events.

The Shabbos Project was officially launched last month at a high-profile ceremony attended by 150 people including Jewish community leaders, government officials, members of the press and various other interested parties.



"Since the event, three more cities in Argentina have begun coordinating their own Shabbos Project events," says Jacqueline Zeitoun Levi, who heads up the team of volunteers, and has been particularly instrumental in bringing on board Buenos Aires authorities. "Excitement levels

ela, Peru, Chile and Guatemala. The initiative is taking place in around 250 cities around the world over the Shabbat of Parshat Noach, on 24/25 October 2014. For more info, or to sign up, visit [www.theshabbosproject.org](http://www.theshabbosproject.org).

Josh Benjamin contributed to this report.