

Call of the wild

For almost 200 years, Jews have been making inroads – for business or prayer – into one of the remotest corners of the world: the Amazon rainforest. Today, many are also involved in protecting this unique place. Alan Grabinsky reports

In the mid-1800s, Moyses and Abraham Pinto, two poor Moroccan Jewish brothers from Tangier, tried their luck and set off first to Lisbon in Portugal and then to Brazil with nothing but a suitcase.

Once in Brazil, they battled yellow fever and wild animals in the Amazon jungle. They traded imported goods up and down the rivers with indigenous tribes, sometimes spending months alone in canoes. They eventually set up their business in Iquito, a city in Peru deep inside the jungle, which was thriving thanks to the large number of rubber trees in the region.

The valuable resource, obtained from the sap of the trees, was used to make tyres, bands and elastics for all sorts of industries and became more critical with the invention of the automobile. It was a rough business in a lawless ‘wild west’ land. The businessmen profited off the backs of indigenous peoples, who were forced to produce a certain quota of rubber for fear of violent retribution, as documented by the Nobel Laureate Mario Vargas Llosa in his book *The Dream of the Celt*.

Although he doesn’t speak about the condition of the indigenous people, Moyses’ memoirs, passed on to the family, capture some of the renegade and entrepreneurial spirit of the times. He formed part of a large wave of Moroccan Jews who, alongside some Europeans, chased fortune deep in the Amazon. They were the first Jews to travel deep into

the Brazilian, Peruvian and Colombian rainforest. Their descendants lived in the remote Amazon and then in the region’s major cities, such as Manaus and Belém.

The Pintos were lucky and eventually returned to Tangier, where they became part of the Moroccan elite. But they kept their family business in the Amazon. Moyses’ great-grand-niece, Donna Pinto-Gray, published his memoirs online in the early 2000s, which led to a reunion of the scattered Pinto family in Toledo, their original hometown.

Today there is still a Jewish presence in the rain forest. Manaus, the biggest city in the Amazon, is home to a world-class opera house, built during the heyday of the rubber boom. It also has a synagogue used by descendants of the Moroccan Jews and by a second wave of Jews who arrived from Venezuela in the 1950s. The city’s Jewish community is 1,000-strong, according to Rabbi Arieh Raichman, an American who established a Chabad house (a centre for the Hasidic Lubavitch movement) there in 2009.

When I visited Manaus with my family in the early 2000s, I was struck by the presence of giant, neon-lit menorahs and stars of David hanging in front of massive churches. Raichman had a similar experience: “When I moved here I saw Jewish symbols everywhere. You see people with kipot and tzitzit [kippahs and

prayer shawls] and I thought everyone is Jewish here.”

The signs we had both noted had been erected by the city’s Evangelical Christians, a growing spiritual force in rural South America and prominent backers of the former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. The kipot and tzitzit are increasingly worn by the Evangelicals, who maintain a friendly, albeit controversial, relationship

with Jews and the State of Israel, stemming from their messianic belief that the gathering of all Jews in their homeland will hasten the end of time.

So what is it like living in the middle of a rainforest? “The most popular place in Manaus is the shopping mall because of its air conditioning. During the dry season, from June to December, the weather can be unbearable. There are few sidewalks as it is often too hot to walk anywhere. The only good thing about the heat is that it is too hot for mosquitos. In the rainy season, the rains cool the city but there is flooding from the rivers, which we suffer from at Chabad House,” says Raichman.

And there are other hazards. “At night, bats constantly fly between the mango trees. If they make their home in your roof, you can hear them running around. Small caimans (alligator-like animals) occasionally come up out of the water into the city and there are parrots and different

exotic birds flying around. If you drive out of Manaus for 10 minutes you’ll see snakes and monkeys – the monkeys also hang out in the forested parts of the city and are unfortunately sometimes hit by cars.”

But the location makes for distinctive ways of celebrating festivals. “Much of the food is regional, from the fish to the juices. We often serve pirarucu, the largest fresh water fish in the world. It is a big hit with visitors,” says Raichman, who has kosher meat delivered from another rainforest city, Belém (a two-hour flight away), where his father-in-law is a shochet (someone certified to perform kosher slaughter). It can take

over a month for kosher food to be delivered from São Paulo. “Matzot and Pesach goodies often arrive the day before and, sometimes, during Pesach.” The place is also a magnet for Israeli backpackers, who visit after doing military service, as well as older Israelis on tours of South America, cruise ships and groups who come for the fishing.

Raichman says the community is well integrated into the city. “People work as lawyers, doctors and in business. Unfortunately we also have some unemployment but the rest of the community helps provide medication and assistance to those in need. The only industry that has remained from the time of the rubber business is the exportation of Brazilian nuts, with one Jewish family running one of the largest exportations of Brazilian nuts in the world.”

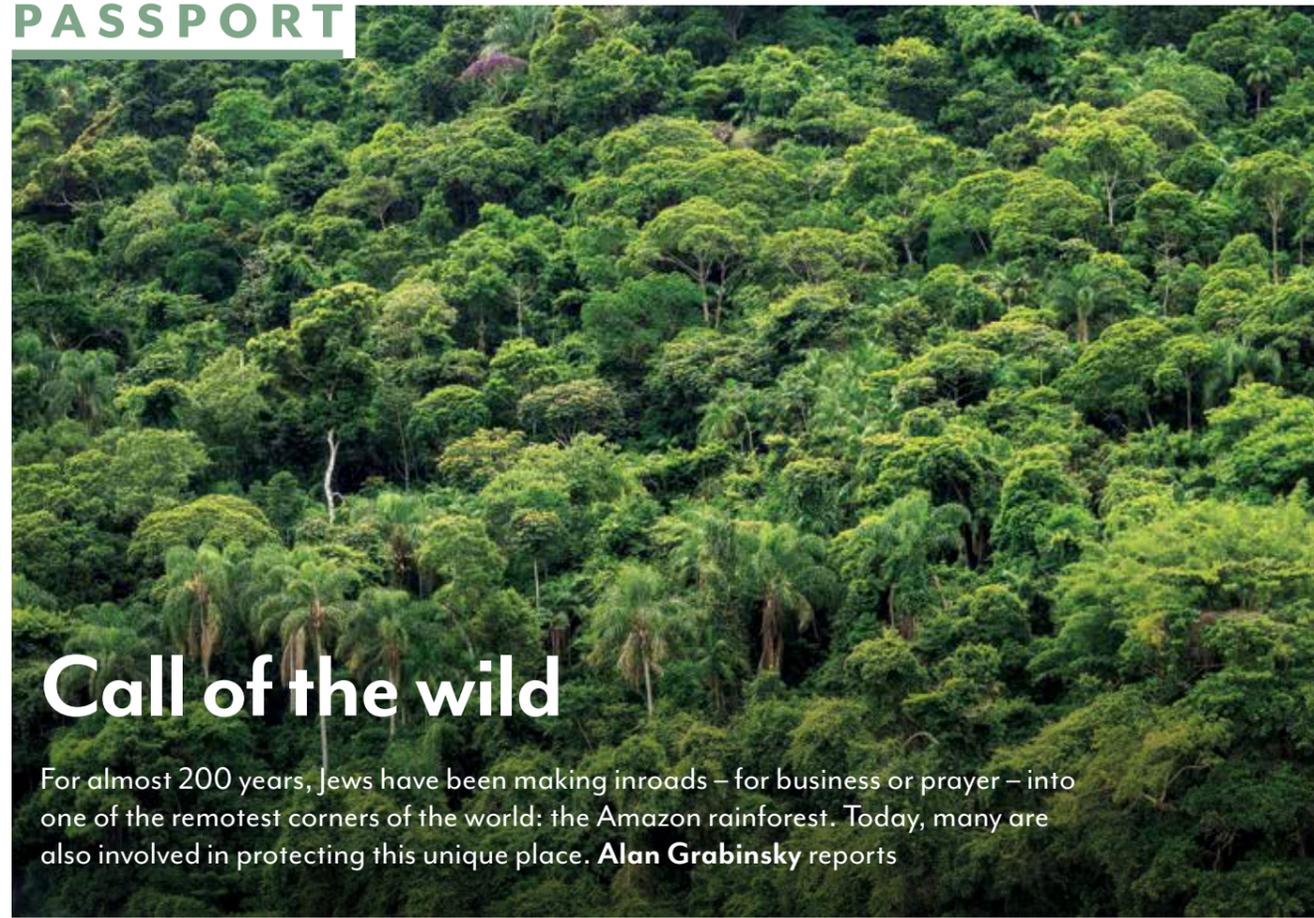
Despite this isolation, he says the city’s Jewish community, the *Comite Israelita do Amazonas*, have done an “amazing job” of taking care of the local cemeteries and continuing to keep the faith going. “Around 50 years ago everybody lived in one neighbourhood, but today it has spread as the city has grown. We hold Shabbat services twice a month, and classes throughout the week, as well as a Sunday school. My oldest child is 13 and I hope he will go to the States soon to study in a yeshivah. That is the hardest challenge: to provide children

with a good Jewish education without the social life they might have elsewhere. Manaus is very, very far away,” he says, sounding exhausted.

But remoteness is relative, especially in the Amazon: seven million square kilometres of jungle traversing nine nations, whose carbon-capturing capacity is lauded by ecologists worldwide as a bulwark against climate change. Illegal mining, deforestation and the expropriation of indigenous lands boomed during Bolsonaro’s tenure: the ex-president saw the jungle as a resource to be exploited and capitalised, regardless of the local or global outcry.

Many Jews work as environmentalists to protect the jungle, according to Nurit Bensusan, a biologist who works with a Brazilian NGO, *Instituto Socioambiental*, one of the largest environmental agencies in the country. The organisation works to defend the original Amazonian tribes of the rainforest and to maintain their ancient knowledge, which is so important for ecological conservation.

Bensusan is the daughter of Sephardi Jews who fled Turkey in the 1920s to escape the difficult economic situation and increasing Jewish persecution. She was born and raised in the capital, Brasilia, and her father worked as a lawyer for the government. When she was growing up, there were only 300 Jews in the city, although she thinks that number is now closer to 500. Her family were proud to be Jewish but were not religious.



Clockwise from top left: The Amazon rainforest in Brazil; the Anijar family in Belém, Pará, 1930; ruins of a synagogue in Cameté, Pará; caimans by a pond; Rabbi Arieh Raichman in Manaus; Amazon fishermen, the Levy Brothers, Maues, 1983



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