



Conversion Rate

The land of Eretz Yisrael has made a huge impact even on non-Jews. There are non-Jews who were inspired to convert to Judaism during their visit to the Holy Land. And then there are those who converted and felt that their place is in the Land of Israel and eventually moved there. Let's discuss some of these people but first let's begin with this.

The Chassam Sofer among others (see the Agudas Azov in his Haggada, p. 14b, s.v. *asher*) tells us that when the non-Jews were offered the Torah, they refused to accept it (see Devarim 33:2, Rashi). Nevertheless, although the nation as a whole refused to accept it, there were individuals who did want to accept it. The souls of these people are the souls of those in each generation who come to convert to Judaism.

The following are some fascinating accounts of converts in recent history. Donato Manduzio (1885–1948), from San Nicandro, Italy, was a farmer's son who had never set foot in a school. During World War One, he was drafted into the army and wounded, and then hospitalized in a military hospital. In the bed adjacent to him lay a wounded man who taught him to read and write, and so he began to read books. When he returned to San Nicandro, he read much Italian literature. On a night in 1930, he had what he refers to as a "divine revelation" which spurred him to study the Old Testament. He concluded that Judaism is the true religion. He then began observing Shabbos and gradually other mitzvos. More and more of his neighbors joined him in his spiritual quest, and he established the San Nicandro Jewish community, which at its height numbered 80 people.

When he learned that there were thousands of Jews living in Rome, Milan, and Florence, he was stunned because he was convinced that the people of Israel he had read about in the Old Testament were

extinct. He then sent them letters. After a lengthy exchange of correspondence, where among his requests was to have recordings (through a gramophone) of all the songs sung in the Temple because he wanted to sing them that way, the Jewish community of Rome concluded that the San Nicandro community was serious and worthy of being converted.

The Chief Rabbi of Rome dispatched a messenger to visit these people. On that visit, the village's first shul was dedicated and the community received *talleisim*, a menorah and several other religious articles. Despite the rise of fascism and hatred towards Jews at that time, they adopted a Jewish lifestyle with courage and determination and did not give up even after Mussolini (fascist dictator of Italy from 1925 to 1945) decreed the racial laws against the Jews in 1938. The racial laws against the Jews of Italy were not applied against Manduzio and his followers, due to their Italian Catholic origin, despite their insistence on telling Italian fascist policemen and later the German Nazi soldiers who entered the village that they were Jews. Luckily, no one believed them.

In October 1943, after Allied forces had invaded Italy, members of the Jewish Brigade passed through the village, with Stars of David emblazoned on their jeeps. The Jewish soldiers were astonished to meet Jewish farmers in the remote village. For Donato and his followers, it was their first encounter with real, live Jews. Members of the Jewish Brigade urged the people of San Nicandro to immigrate to Israel, telling them that a Jew's place is in the Land of Israel. In 1946, the rabbinate in Rome converted the community. In the years 1947–1949, 74 members of the San Nicandro community immigrated to Israel on ships. They settled in three communities: Ashkelon, Bat Yam and Tzefas. A few months prior to the establishment of the State of Israel, Manduzio passed away and was

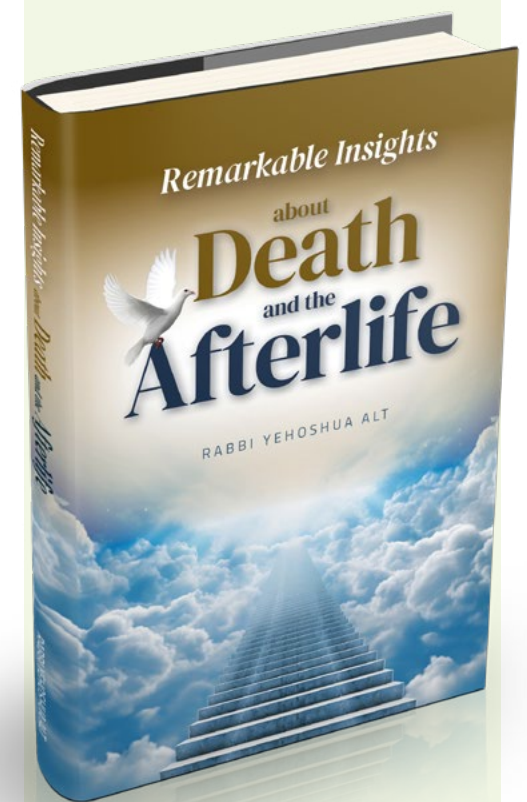
buried in the Jewish section of the small cemetery in San Nicandro. On his grave is a Star of David and the inscription: "Here is buried he who lived under the delusion of worshipping foreign gods until 1930, but on August 11 of that year, by Divine inspiration, called himself Levi, proclaimed the unity of God and the observance of the Shabbos."

In 2021, it was estimated that there were at least 60 communities with between 10,000 and 15,000 members in various stages of conversion, from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua to Costa Rica, El Salvador, Venezuela, Brazil, Chile and Bolivia. In Colombia alone, there are some 30 convert communities that have cropped up around the country, although most of them are not halachically Jewish.

There are many converts to Orthodox Judaism in Bello, Columbia. How did this come about? A minister of an Evangelical church visited Israel in 1998 and again in 2003 and felt a pull to Judaism. He returned to the city of Bello and told his people that he plans to convert to Judaism. Not only did he convert but 150 families joined him!

Abraham Setsuzau Kotsuji (1899–1973) of Japan was the son of a Shinto priest who descended from a long line of Shinto priests. During the Holocaust, he helped Jewish refugees escape the Nazis, arranging for them to stay first in Kobe and later in Japanese-occupied Shanghai. He also fought against Nazi-inspired anti-Jewish propaganda. He traveled to Yerushalayim to convert to Judaism in 1959 after converting to Christianity from Shinto in his youth. It was there, at age sixty, that he had a *bris milah* and took the name Abraham. In his autobiographical book "From Tokyo to Jerusalem," he explained that he was never satisfied with his conversion to Christianity, ultimately finding spiritual satisfaction in Judaism. He also wrote a Japanese-Hebrew dictionary. He passed away in Japan, but his burial took place in Yerushalayim.

RABBI YEHOShUA ALT



The newly released book "Remarkable Insights about Death and the Afterlife" is now available (as a paperback, hardcover and digitized version) for purchase and delivery on Amazon at <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0CNNDCMNC> or by sending an email to yalt3285@gmail.com. This extensive and thought-provoking book addresses these questions and many more, providing transformative insights. With a collection comprising over 70 meticulously crafted essays, it eloquently articulates the Torah's viewpoint regarding death and the afterlife. This work stands as an invaluable resource, facilitating readers in acquiring a deeper comprehension of this vital subject. It makes a great gift for friends, relatives, business associates and learning partners. Purchase it at <https://amzn.to/3eyh5xP>.

Some of the questions discussed in this book are the following.

- What is the ultimate way to elevate the soul of one's parents?
- How does the death process rectify a person's soul?
- What profound life lessons can we learn from gravestones?
- In what ways can the concept of reincarnation help us better understand life?
- What is the idea behind davening at gravesites?
- What will happen at the Resurrection of the Dead?

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