

Cantors visit Spain to learn about Jewish life

By Aaron Ginsburg
Advocate correspondent
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NEWTON - For David and Ilene Beckman, of Newton, a trip to Spain was not on the radar screen. But, when the opportunity arose to accompany their Chazan Elias Rosemberg of Temple Emanuel in Newton on the Cantors Assembly Mission to Spain, they jumped at the opportunity.

They viewed it as a chance to learn about Spain then and now from a Jewish perspective without rose colored glasses. David and Ilene prepared by studying with David Arel, who teaches a course titled, "The Intertwined Destiny of Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Medieval Spain."

The trip included Conservative Cantors from across the country accompanied by a few of their friends and congregants. Cantor Steven Dress from Temple Israel in Sharon was the only other Cantor from New England on the trip.

The Cantors Assembly's previous missions were to Germany and Poland. For the group, it was a chance to explore the places and the culture of the Jews of Sepharad. Since Cantor Rosemberg grew up in Argentina, thirty percent of the Jews are of Sephardic origin and the culture is Spanish, the trip was a must.

For both David and Ilene Beckman, what made the trip so special was the beauty, the music, and the art of Spain, contrasted with the reality of the Jewish experiences in the past and Jewish life in the Spain of today.

"The magnificent voices of sixty cantors brought a level of spirit and emotion that made this a truly unique and deeply meaningful experience. The Palau de Musica in Barcelona was the magnificent setting for a showcase of Ladino music that delivered both haunting beauty and hand-clapping joy. This concert, and similar ones in Madrid and Seville, also welcomed members of the local community," Ilene Beckman said.

Elias Rosemberg, who also went on the trip, said learning about the culture was the best part of the trip.

"The interaction with my temple members and the colleagues was wonderful. I had the honor of singing in a concert at Palau de Musica Catalana in Barcelona in a concert



Elias Rosemberg singing with Luis Cattan

of all Sephardic music," Rosemberg said. "On one hand, the Architecture, the food and the great feeling of 250 Jews traveling together in song and prayers was contrasted by learning about the horrible times of what it meant being Jewish during the Inquisition. What is more discouraging is that there are no signs ... " of "... the current. population being sorry or feeling guilty about that horrible period."

For the others, the singing was also a highlight of the trip.

"The President of the Cantors Assembly, Alberto Mizrahi, singing Ani Maamin in the Synagogue in Toledo and all of us, 250 people, singing Hatikvah in the Plaza de Toros in Seville," Chazan Elias Rosemberg said that was his highlight of the trip.

The current Jewish community is small in Spain. The Beckmans learned that it takes tremendous effort for the Jewish community to educate their children, obtain kosher food, and maintain community and synagogue life.

"We were inspired by their dedication and also sobering mindful of how we take our own easy access to all things Jewish for granted." David Beckman said.

A conservative rabbi in Madrid told them that community is not growing. He also pointed out that the Spanish Government's decision to grant citizenship to descendants of Sephardim was difficult to take advantage of.

"Ultimately, this journey was personally uplifting. as we recognized that while Spain was once the epicenter of Jewish life, its demise only continued to mean that we made our home elsewhere and thrived anew. Isn't this just so much of our peoples' story," David Beckman said.