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FEATURES

Author revives classic Jewish tales

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Festival’s cool debut

On Sunday, thousands attended the Sababa Festival of Jewish Arts and Culture, held on the campus of Washington University. The outdoor festival, held by Jewish Federation of St. Louis and the Jewish Community Center, featured Jewish artists, music, food and booths staffed by Jewish groups. Find an extensive photo gallery from Sababa online at stljewishlight.com/multimedia and read an editorial about it on Page 12.

ALL PHOTOS: BILL MOTCHAN

Love and Judaism inspire long-distance conversion

BY ERIC BERGER
STAFF WRITER

Bas Rozendaal had to be deliberate as he dipped into the mikvah, a ritual bath used for conversions to Judaism and other religious practices.

At 6-foot-2, he had to fully immerse himself three times without touching the floor or the sides of the shallow pool, located on the Millstone campus in Creve Coeur.

“It was quite a challenge because I’m a tall guy,” said Rozendaal, a program manager at an educational training company.

“To be completely submerged, you have to sort of get yourself into a fetus position and then just sink a little bit, without touching the bottom.”

While that required some finesse, it also involved less discomfort than other parts of the conversion process for Rozendaal. A circumcision at age 30. A pin to the penis, as part of a hatafat dam, a ritual drawing of the blood. A nine-hour flight from his home in Amsterdam to Chicago. A five-and-a-half-hour drive to St. Louis.

That last part could have been avoided, but Rozendaal could not find a Jewish community or rabbi that he felt entirely comfortable with in his home country of the Netherlands, he and his fiancé, Annette Morón, said.

Instead, through a friend of Morón’s parents, they found Rabbi Carnie Rose of Congregation B’nai Amoona.

And so began, a year ago, a conversion that was unusual not only in the distance that Rozendaal was willing to travel, but also in the fact that Rose and Orrin Krublit, an assistant rabbi at the Conservative synagogue, guided him through the process.

Not all rabbis will work with prospective converts remotely — even if they eventually meet in person.

“I think if they had not come to us and done the lifecycle rituals, the rituals that make the conversion efficacious, in St. Louis and at a newsstand near you. Read it online. Mailed to your home. Delivered to your office. Get it. Read it. Share it.”

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Louis, then we might have had some concerns," said Kroblit. "But because they were willing to come here and take in the final culmination of the conversion with us, it sort of alleviated any concerns we may have had."

Originally from Curaçao, the Dutch Caribbean island, Morón in August 2016 accepted a job with the Dutch Ministry of Caribbean island, Morón in August 2016 accepted a job with the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs and moved to Amsterdam. After two weeks later, she started persuing Timber, the dating app, and matched with Rozendaal.

"I liked her on her profile picture," Rozendaal said. "In the background, I saw the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, so for me it was her smile and also the picture in Amsterdam was familiar for me."

"And for me, it was just the general vibe, he looked really relaxed, confident, and I thought, "Let's see!" Morón, who was raised in a family that kept kosher in the United States, told Rozendaal about her religious background.

"I said, 'I want to be very open and honest with you. I'm Jewish, and it's a very important part of my life, and I want you to know that if you continue to date me, that's going to be the case," Morón said.

On their third date, Morón, who was raised in a family that kept kosher in the United States, told Rozendaal about her religious background.

"I said, 'I want to be very open and honest with you. I'm Jewish, and it's a very important part of my life, and I want you to know that if you continue to date me, that's going to be the case," Morón said.

In May 2017, the couple visited Morón's parents in Curaçao for the first time and had a Friday night Shabbat dinner. The family welcomed them "like the Conversion process is going.

But Rozendaal recalls Rose asking him four times over the phone, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Unlike some other faiths, Judaism does not seek to convert people to the religion. Jewish tradition also instructs a rabbi to turn away an interested convert three times before agreeing to do the conversion.

Rozendaal started remotely taking an Introduction to Judaism class via teleconferencing at 9 a.m. Sundays, Dutch time, half-way through the 20-week class. "I had a lot of reading to catch up on," Rozendaal said.

From the classes, Rozendaal gathered that in Judaism "you shouldn't follow everything as it's written down exactly but also see things as metaphors and try to live by the general ideas and not so much the strict laws."

During classes, Rozendaal could see and hear Krublit and others speak but participate via messages on WhatsApp. He would ask questions during class and also speak with Krublit outside of class.

Still, sometimes the internet connection would freeze. Had he been able to participate in person, Rozendaal said, "the connection with other students would be better."

There were different people in each with different ideas, backgrounds. It would also be nice for me to have a conversation with other people and see how their [conversion] process is going."