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At far left, Nefesh Mountain performs on stage at Sababa. Above and at left, members of the audience dance and look on as The Mac-cabeats perform. Sababa is a Modern Hebrew word for 'cool.'

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



Bas Rozendaal and Annette Morón live in Amsterdam, but Rozendaal converted to Judaism with the guidance of rabbis at Congregation B'nai Amoona.

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 eventual-

ly 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.

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B'nai Amoona: Love and Judaism inspire long-distance conversion

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Louis, then we might have had some concerns," said Krublitz. "But because they were willing to come here and take in the final culmination of the conversion with us, that 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 Foreign Affairs and moved to Amsterdam. About two weeks later, she started perusing Tinder, the dating app, and matched with Rozendaal.

"I liked her smile 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 America was a reason to contact her."

"And for me, it was just the general vibe; he looked really relaxed, confident, and I thought, 'Let's see.'" Morón said.

On their third date, Morón, who was raised in a family that kept kosher in the home and celebrated Shabbat each week, 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,'" Morón, 28, recalled.

Rozendaal, who attended a Protestant elementary school, said he was "immediately very open-minded."

In May 2017, the couple visited Morón's parents in Curaçao for the first time and had a Friday night Shabbat dinner. He started learning more about Jewish customs.

"The feeling I got from sitting at the table on a Friday evening, the whole family aspect, I really liked it," Rozendaal said.

As they became more serious, Rozendaal started thinking about how, if they got married, their children would be raised Jewish. He also realized he "would want to be a part of their lives as much as I can."

Rozendaal told Morón he wanted to convert. But they were not yet engaged.

"For me it was very important to show that I am not doing this just for Annette or her family; I'm also doing this for myself. But of course, it's all sort of intertwined," he said.

A somewhat unorthodox conversion, done conservatively

In leading B'nai Amoona trips to Israel, Rose had gotten to know Danny Ehrlich, a tour guide who had also served as cantor on the High Holidays in Curaçao. Ehrlich connected Rose with Morón's parents, who asked if he could assist in the conversion process for Rozendaal.

Rose recalls having a "wonderful con-



Bas Rozendaal (right) was joined by his future fiancée, Annette Morón, and her parents for his conversion to Judaism in St. Louis.



B'nai Amoona Rabbis Carnie Shalom Rose (far left) and Orrin Krublitz.

versation" with the family and telling them "no problem."

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 teleconference at 9 p.m. Sundays, Dutch time, halfway 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 Krublitz and others speak but only participated via messages on WhatsApp. He would ask questions during class and also speak with Krublitz 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 there 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."

The Rabbinical Assembly, the international association of Conservative rabbis, discourages "long-distance sponsorship" except "in the most unusual of circumstances." These include the conversion "of an individual living in a remote area, far removed from Jewish life and the regular presence of a rabbi," the organization said in a statement.

"The act of sponsorship by definition involves assisting and actually witnessing the religious growth of an individual as he or she 'becomes integrated within the community and increasingly embraces personal practice of Judaism. When utilized to the virtual exclusion of regular interaction within a community itself, telephone and e-mail contact are palpably inadequate to the task of meaningful sponsorship,'" the statement continued.

A conversion well-traveled

Juan Mejia, a Conservative rabbi, has used online learning to help communities in Latin America convert to Judaism. He told the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) in 2017 that there is "a big stigma attached" to such a process and that he only does the actual conversion ceremonies in person — similar to the B'nai Amoona rabbis.

Rabbis at other St. Louis Conservative and Reform synagogues told the *Jewish Light* that they had not participated in such conversions.

Rose points to the class and study Rozendaal committed to and his participation in the Jewish community in the Netherlands.

"It's not simple to find a warm and welcoming congregation," Rose said. "Our synagogues in America do a wonderful service by being open and welcoming and inviting, and it's so very different than in other parts

of the world, as opposed to here, where they were met with such warmth."

And Rozendaal was willing to go through all the parts of the conversion process. He underwent the circumcision with a doctor in the Netherlands. He missed the next week of work and then had more than six weeks of recovery.

After arriving in St. Louis Aug. 30, they attended Shabbat morning services at B'nai Amoona the next day. Finally meeting the B'nai Amoona rabbis and attending the service, Rozendaal said, "was a great experience. It was the first time I had been to an American synagogue, and there was a bat mitzvah happening. I had never experienced a bat mitzvah before, so it was all new."

The next day, the couple and Morón's parents, who had flown in from Curaçao, met Krublitz for coffee and discussed the final steps.

"It was so great to see them in person. I was used to seeing them on a 5-inch screen, so they were a lot bigger in real life. But it was just very sweet to be able to hug them and greet them and welcome them to St. Louis," the rabbi said.

Despite the fact that Rozendaal had the circumcision, a rabbi still had to witness the drawing of the blood. So on Sept. 4, the Dutch couple, Krublitz, and a urologist met at the congregation for the *hatafat dam*. Rozendaal had been worried that the body part would not be fully recovered from the first procedure, but fortunately, it had healed, he said. (Krublitz only had to see the blood on a piece of gauze.)

And then came the final step: the immersion in the mikvah.

"The imagery behind immersion in a mikvah is as though you're being reborn, with time in the mikvah being thought of as a symbolic womb," Krublitz explained. And in order to facilitate that transformation, Jewish law "requires that a person be 100 percent surrounded by the living waters, *mayim chayim*."

Once Rozendaal had figured out how to properly immerse himself three times in the ritual bath, in the presence of rabbis, he emerged from the water and was "really shaking and really relieved and happy that it was finished," he recalled.

"You were beaming," Morón said. From St. Louis, they traveled to Chicago, and Rozendaal asked Morón to marry him at Millennium Park.

The two plan to marry in August 2019 in Curaçao, at a synagogue that was consecrated in 1732 and is the oldest continuously operating synagogue in the Western Hemisphere, according to the congregation. Suffice it to say, it will be a Jewish wedding.

Schmooze: Exhibit includes photographs of Jewish immigrant life

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1926, the exhibit also features a historic work by Augustus Frederick Sherman, who documented new arrivals while working as a clerk at the Ellis Island immigration station from 1892 to 1925.

Other memorable photographs include Orkin's touching 1951 portrait of three Jewish teenage refugees who are fleeing to Israel from Iraq, and a photograph by Bob Gruen of John Lennon posing in front of the Statue of Liberty in 1972. More recent images include a 2005 print by Dulce Pinzón that shows a young man, Noe Reyes from the Mexican state of Puebla, dressed in a Superman costume, riding a bike. Reyes works as a delivery person in Brooklyn and sends \$500 home to his family each week.

Issues relating to immigration are front and center in today's world, from the recent travel ban to the border wall to the uncertainty of the DREAMers. Today's refugee crisis is documented in a haunting photograph by Alex Majoli of African refugees trying to reach Greece. These and



FAR LEFT: Lewis Hine's image, 'Jewish Grandmother, Ellis Island,' 1926.

LEFT: Ruth Orkin's photo, 'Jewish Teenage Refugees from Iraq - Landing at Lydda Airport, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1951.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE HOWARD GREENBERG GALLERY, NEW YORK.

many more works by important photographers tell the story of the lives of immigrants throughout the world.

The exhibition runs through Jan. 12. At 6 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 20, Olivia Lahs-Gonzales, Director of the Sheldon Art

Galleries, will speak on selected works in the exhibit. Admission to that is free as well, though reservations are suggested. Contact Paula Lincoln at 314-533-9900 x37 or plincoln@TheSheldon.org.

The Sheldon is located at 3648

Washington Blvd. in Grand Center. Gallery hours are noon – 8 p.m. Tuesdays; noon – 5 p.m. Wednesdays – Fridays; 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. Saturdays, and one hour prior to Sheldon performances and during intermission.