

**“How can you celebrate Shabbat without a Torah?
How can you celebrate Yom Kippur? A Torah can
change a community, not just in Nicaragua.”**

— Byron Najman,
a Nicaraguan living in Austin

Austinite recalls growing up in Nicaragua without Torah

By **Tonyia Cone**

Special to The Jewish Outlook

Although Austinite Byron Najman estimates that nearly 90 percent of Nicaraguan Jews live in Managua, Nicaragua, only about 20 families, or 60 Jews, live in the entire Central American nation. With so few Jews, no rabbis and, until recently, no Torah, he said, his parents and brother are the only observant Jews in the country.

“They have Shabbat dinner every Friday,” Najman said. “Whoever shows up at their house can have a kosher meal. Every Jew that goes there finds out about their house.”

His family moved to Nicaragua from Eastern Europe in the 1920s, mostly left in 1979 when their property was confiscated by the Sandinistas after a revolution, and then returned 12 years later after the Sandinistas lost power in the 1990 election. When some of the family members moved back to Managua in the 1990s, their property was returned, in a dilapidated state, by the government.

CAME TO AUSTIN IN 1977

Najman, owner of On Time Silver, a small jewelry company, moved to Austin in 1977 to attend the University of Texas. He visits his family in Managua every year or two.

A rabbi flies into Managua from Costa Rica for Purim and Pesach, Najman said.

“One seder had 40 people,” he said, noting, “For a country with so few Jews, that is a success.”

To observe other holidays, Nicaraguan Jews have traveled to Costa Rica, Miami and Mexico, but it is difficult because of the cost of travel. Organizations from other places, such as Chabad in Long Island, N.Y., and Costa Rica, have also helped the community by sending matzah and kosher food. Najman said his family eats a lot of canned goods and fish and stores kosher meat — bought while visiting Miami or Costa Rica — in a large freezer in order to follow Jewish dietary laws.

After one of the family’s visitors returned to New York and told her friend that the community did not have a Torah, Najman said, Chana Sorhagen wanted to do something special for her birthday that would make a difference in the world, so she donated money for the Torah. Najman’s brother flew to Brooklyn to retrieve it.

ENCOURAGING OBSERVANCE

Byron Najman, who attends Chabad and describes himself as fairly observant, said

he believes the presence of the Torah will encourage more Jews in Managua to be observant and attend Jewish celebrations.

“They can celebrate the High Holidays. They can have Shabbat and read the Torah. Otherwise, they have no celebration. How can you celebrate Shabbat without a Torah? How can you celebrate Yom Kippur?” he asked.

“A Torah can change a community, not just in Nicaragua.”

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