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Jews from around Latin America find home in NYC

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Deborah Apeloig arrived at the Chelsea Synagogue in Manhattan for a recent Shabbat service, greeting other women with a kiss and taking a seat with them away from the men.

The rabbi welcomed them to the service in English and Spanish, before beginning prayers in Hebrew.

A year ago, Apeloig, the Venezuelan granddaughter of Polish Holocaust survivors, was searching for a place where she could connect more deeply with her religion and meet other Latin American Jews living in New York City.

"I missed having a synagogue where I could feel at home," said Apeloig, 26.

She had gone to several synagogues since coming to New York about two years ago, but none seemed as welcoming as those she had attended back in Venezuela.

Then she learned about the Jewish Latin Center, which had its first anniversary in August with a celebration for Shabbat, which marks the beginning of the day of rest for Jews before sunset on Friday and ends by sundown Saturday.

In September 2009, Rabbi Mendy Weitman, who was born in Brazil, decided to create the center as a space for the Latin Jewish community of New York to gather. It is temporarily being housed at

the Chelsea Synagogue while Weitman seeks a permanent home for it.

Other Latin American social Jewish networks already existed, but the rabbi's initiative added a spiritual touch. The center — which performs both religious and social activities — has about 700 members who said they have found a home there.

"I always felt we had a common problem, that people were looking for a synagogue, a community with Latin warmth and that they couldn't find it," said Weitman, who has been based in the U.S. for the last six years. "Latin American Jews come from countries with strong communities and want to be members of a community."

There are no official figures on the number of Latin American Jews in the United States. There are some 495,000 Jews living in Latin America, according to the Argentina-based Latin American Jewish Congress, with the largest Jewish communities in Argentina and Brazil.

Jews from Latin America first began arriving in what is today's New York City in 1654, when a group of 23 Sephardic Jews escaped from Portuguese rule in the Dutch colony of Recife in Brazil and came to New Amsterdam.

On a Friday in late August, the center organized a celebration with about 200 Latin American Jews.

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The night began with the traditional prayer that begins the Sabbath.

Rebeca Rubinstein, a Venezuelan Jew, lit a couple of candles in a ritual carried out by women only, marking the formal start of the Sabbath. Attendees followed the rabbi's prayers in the Siddur, the prayer book. For about an hour, men and women sat separated by bamboo screens, the men wearing yarmulkes and most women in elegant skirt suits.

After finishing the recitation, the screens were removed and men and women greeted each other warmly with hugs. Later they went into a room where a kosher meal was offered. It began with the ritual washing of hands and the blessing of the wine, Kiddush, and the passing around of braided bread known as challah.

Among the dishes offered were hummus, Israeli-style cucumber and tomato salad, matzo ball soup, fish, chicken and chocolate mousse for dessert. Between dishes, the attendees danced and sang songs in Hebrew like the popular "Hava Nagila." The celebration lasted until about midnight.

"The anchor is religion, but over time, we feel like we are part of a community," said Ariel Fischman, 31, Apeloig's husband and a Mexican of Russian and Polish Jewish ancestry, speaking in Spanish. "You can come to a party or to watch a soccer game and all these people that you didn't know before become your friends. ... We don't have to gather only for religious purposes."

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Online:

Jewish Latin Center: <http://www.jewishlatincenternyc.org/>

Latin American Jewish Congress: <http://www.congresojudio.org.ar/>