



# Return to Centro Histórico: A Mexican Jew Looks for His Roots

*Ilan Stavans*

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## **Return to Centro Histórico: A Mexican Jew Looks for His Roots** Ilan Stavans

After a stirring e-mail exchange with his father, awardwinning essayist and cultural commentator Ilan Stavans decided to do something bizarre: revisit his hometown, Mexico City, accompanied by a tourist guide. But rather than seeking his roots in the neighborhood where he grew up, he headed to the Centro Histórico, the downtown area at the heart of the world's largest metropolis. It was there that conversos, the hidden Jews escaping the might of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, were burned at the stake. And, centuries later, it was the same section where Jewish immigrants, both Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim and Sephardim from the Ottoman Empire, made their homes as peddlers. In a sense, Centro Histórico is to Mexico what the Lower East Side is to the United States: a platform for reinventing one's self in the New World.

With the same linguistic verve and insight that has made him one of the most distinguished voices in American literature today, Ilan Stavans invites readers along for a personal journey that is not only his own, but that of an entire culture. In *Return to Centro Histórico* he makes it possible to understand the intimate role that Jews have played in the development of Hispanic civilization.

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