
The other 1492: Jews and Muslims in Columbus's Spain

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The Edict of Expulsion issued by Ferdinand and Isabella on March 31, 1492, had the Jews quitting Spain on the last day of July of the same year. All Don Isaac Abravanel could do for his people was secure them a two-day stay of execution. Abravanel, one of the great figures of Iberian Jewry, had given Ferdinand and Isabella eight years of service: he had organized the chaotic finances of Castile and Aragon and helped the sovereigns in their final push against the Muslim stronghold of Granada. The work of the Reconquista against Muslim Spain completed, Don Isaac was suddenly thrown into the supreme challenge of his life.

Fragments survive of Abravanel's futile pleas to the Spanish sovereigns. There is the narrative by Don Isaac himself recorded in exile: "Thrice on my knees I besought the King. 'Regard us, O king, use not thy subjects so cruelly.' But as the adder closes its ear with dust against the voice of the charmer, so the King hardened his heart against entreaties of his supplicants."

Ferdinand and Isabella offered Don Isaac the chance to stay in Spain with his wealth and position intact—the edict had prohibited the Jews from taking any

gold, coins, or silver with them. In return, he would of course have to undergo baptism and conversion. Abravanel chose dispossession and exile. There were lands where the life of the faith could be lived—the Italian city-states, Portugal, the Netherlands, the Muslim domains of the Ottoman Sultan, the Barbary states of Tunis, Algiers, and Tripoli, and there was a haven in Egypt.

Thanks to the two-day extension secured by Abravanel the last ships that took the Jews to these lands left Spain on the second of August. "This fleet of woe and misery," says one chronicler, "was to sail parallel to a fleet of high promise." Christopher Columbus's fleet was ready for sea on the second of August: the men received their communion at the Church of St. George in Palos on that day. The Captain General set sail in the early hours of the third day of August.

Months earlier there had been another departure: Boabdil, the last Muslim king of Granada, took to the road. History and grief and yearning have touched and ennobled that story. On the last ridge, overlooking Granada, the storytellers say, Boabdil paused to catch a final glimpse of his realm. The ridge came to be known as El Ultimo Sospiro del Moro, the

Moor's last sigh. Boabdil's unsentimental mother is said to have taunted him during his moment of grief. "You should weep like a woman for the land you could not defend like a man." In truth, there was not much that Boabdil could have done. Granada was living on borrowed time. Boabdil cut the best possible deal with the Spanish: an estate for himself, a pledge of safety for the people of his city, safe passage for those who could not bear to live under Christian rule. The victors made another promise: Muslims who stayed behind were not to be molested; their religious rights were to be honored. That pledge would be violated. The remaining Muslims would face, a decade hence, the same choice offered the Jews: conversion or exile. A century later the Moriscos—the Moorish converts to Christianity—were also expelled.

Men invent and reinvent the past. In the legend of Moorish Spain, the Jews of Toledo opened the gates of the city to the Muslim conquerors when they came in 711. They were eager to welcome the Muslim armies that had overrun the Visigothic kingdom. The legend is groundless. In the war between the Goths and the Muslim armies, the Jews were,

for the most part, quiet spectators. To be sure, they were glad to see the defeat of the Goths. The same must have been true of the Ibero-Roman natives of the peninsula. The Goths had been severe rulers. They had not allowed the Jews to sing their Psalms, to celebrate Passover, to testify in court against Christians, or to observe their dietary laws. Forced baptisms of Jews was a recurring phenomenon under Visigothic rule. Centuries later Montesquieu was to observe that “all the laws of the Inquisition had been part of the Visigothic code” that regulated the conduct of the Jews in seventh-century Spain.

It was a polyglot world that the Muslims came to rule in the Iberian peninsula. There were Arabs, Berbers, Jews, and blacks, Muslims of native Spanish stock, native Christians. Islam was overextended in Spain; it thus made its accommodation with its habitat, ruled with a light touch. At its zenith in the tenth and eleventh centuries, it was to fashion a society of tranquillity and brilliance. Its cities thrived. Cordoba’s population approximated a quarter million people; it was unmatched by any European city of the time. Its only rivals were the cities of Baghdad and Constantinople. The economy of Muslim Spain boomed, tied as it was to the larger Muslim economy. The Jews came into their own during these two centuries of prosperity. Literacy spread; Jewish academies opened in Cordoba, Granada, Toledo, Barcelona. Hispano-Arabic culture thrived in the cities of the south. A rich body of Judeo-Arabic philosophy was to become the distinctive gift of this age. Spanish Jewry declared its intellectual independence from the religious authority of the Iraqi academies that had been pre-eminent down through the ages. The Arabs had prided themselves on their poetry and literature; the Jews were to run a close race.

This was a world in flux, an ideal setting for a community of outsiders. There was room for talent; it was easy for Jews to find their way into all walks of public life. “No office, except that of the ruler, seemed to be out of the reach of a talented and ambitious Jew,” Norman Stillman writes in his historical survey, *The Jews in Arab Lands*. Success at court was not without its hazards though. It

called forth its steady companion—the wrath of the crowd. A Jew by the name of Samuel ben Naghrela was the ruler’s minister in the Berber kingdom of Granada until his death in 1056. Ten years later his son, Joseph, was crucified by a mob on the city’s main gate in an anti-Jewish riot. The father had risen on his own: he knew the hazards of success. The son had taken success for granted. He was, says one chronicle, “proud to his own hurt and the Berber princes were jealous of him.” This riot was the first massacre of Jews in Muslim Spain. The date was December 30, 1066. About 1,500 families perished in that riot.

No measure of cultural brilliance would compensate for the political fragility of the edifice. A Muslim poet of Granada may have intuited the weakness underneath the cultural glitter when he wrote that he had “the fault of rising in the West.” The Muslims had conquered the plains and the Mediterranean coast. The mountains in the north, the poorer regions of old Castile, were in Christian hands. This set the stage for a bloody and long struggle.

Trouble came to paradise as the eleventh century drew to a close. The Jews were caught between the pressures of the Reconquista and a Muslim society awakening to a new sense of vulnerability—and intolerance. Moses Ben Maimon, better known as Maimonides (1131–1204), the great figure of medieval Jewish life, quit his native birthplace in Cordoba and sought shelter in Cairo. (Maimonides became a luminary in the life of Cairo; he rose to become the physician of Saladin.) A yearning for Zion, for life in the land of Israel, was to find its way into the poetry of the time. The “Golden Age” of the Jews of Muslim Spain had drawn to a close. Small messianic Jewish movements made their appearance—an expression of the malaise of the Jews as the Andalusian cocoon was to be torn asunder.

Little was to remain of the Moorish realms in the peninsula. Toledo had been lost in 1085; Cordoba itself in 1236, Valencia in 1238, Seville two years later. By 1264 all that remained were Granada and its surroundings. That Muslim foothold was spared because the warring kingdoms to its north—Castile, Aragon,

Navarre, Portugal—had been busy with their own feuds. Reconquista remained in abeyance, while Granada became a veritable protectorate of Castile. The loss of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 would help focus the attention of Christendom on Granada. Granada would now become a matter of faith rather than realpolitik. The unification of Castile and Aragon under Ferdinand and Isabella sealed Granada’s fate.

III.

Hope had deluded the Jews in the domains of Ferdinand and Isabella. The Crown, traditionally the protector of the Jews against the Church and townsmen, would be more audacious now. The Jews would be dispossessed and fed to the mob in the service of royal absolutism.

Pick up the trail a good century before the Inquisition and Edict of Expulsion: over the course of that pivotal century the place of the Jews in Spain had become untenable. The Jews farmed the taxes of the state; they were the ideal scapegoat for all the disgruntled. The mob and the priests who led the mob in intermittent outbursts against the Jews saw a Jewish conspiracy behind every cruel turn of fate. Jewish physicians were carrying poison under their fingernails, Jewish sorcerers were everywhere, a Jewish cabal was out to undo Christianity.

The Jewish world was hit with great ferocity in a wave of massacres that took place in 1391. The troubles began in Seville and spread to Cordoba, Valencia, and Barcelona. Before the great terror subsided, some 25,000 may have been killed. A new law was passed in 1412: the so-called “Ordinance on the Enclosure of the Jews and Moors” at Valladolid. The Jews were now to wear a distinctive yellow garment; Jews and Moors were banned from serving as spice dealers, tax farmers, moneylenders, physicians, or surgeons; they were to live in separate enclosures locked and guarded at night. A massive wave of conversion was to take place in 1412–15.

Baptism bought time for those who chose it. But now a new crisis threatened. Where they had been a people apart, the sin of the Jews was separation. Now it

was their assimilation that agitated their enemies. The Grand Inquisitor doing his work in the 1480s would claim that he was hunting crypto-Jews among the conversos. We know better now, thanks to the able work of the Israeli historian Benzion Netanyahu. In a book titled *The Marranos of Spain* Netanyahu turns the story inside out. Conversion had worked, it had depleted the Jewish world and increased the self-confidence of the conversos. They were no longer a minority who had gone astray; they now outnumbered the Jews of the realm.

Mobility denied the Jews was now theirs. They flocked into professions from which they had been excluded: the law, the army, the universities, the church. One rabbi, Solomon Levi, christened as Paul de Santa Maria, rose to become bishop of Burgos. The Talmudist Joshua Halorqi left Judaism for the Church, took the name Jeronimo de Santa Fe, and became a zealous advocate of his new faith. By 1480 half the important offices in the court of Aragon were occupied by conversos or their children. The great energy of the conversos rankled the Jews, increasing numbers of whom dispensed with the cherished notion that the conversos were *anusim* (forced ones) who were destined to return to the faith. More important, though, it galvanized the forces that sought the eradication of the Jewish presence in Spain. If the Jews had slipped through the gate as converts, they had to be banished and destroyed. The line had to be redrawn. Tomas de Torquemada, the priest who was the evil genius of the Inquisition, knew where he was heading. The conversos and those who remained true to the Jewish faith may have taken two separate paths. In one swift, terrible decade, Torquemada would bring them together. The Inquisition in 1481 against the conversos, the Edict of Expulsion in 1492.

IV.

A tale of dubious authenticity has the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid II (1481–1512) wondering about Ferdinand and about the folly of his expulsion of the Jews: “Do they call this Ferdinand a wise prince who impoverishes his kingdom and thereby enriches mine?” The tale

aside, the lands of Islam provided safe havens for the Jews. The gates of many Muslim realms were opened before the Sephardim. The new lands were eager to accommodate them, as they brought with them new skills in the making of weaponry and gunpowder, in printing and medicine. They knew the languages of Europe. In the great struggle of the age between Islam and Christendom the Jews found a reprieve. For the rulers of the Ottoman Empire the Jews were ideal subjects.

By the standards of Europe in the High Middle Ages, the world of Islam was, on the whole, a tolerant world. It was not an “interfaith utopia” (to borrow the words of the distinguished historian of Islam Bernard Lewis). The life the Jews led was circumscribed. It was a life without illusions. There was a clear division of labor; political power, careers in the bureaucracy and the military were off limits. There was a body of discriminatory law: houses of worship could not be built higher than mosques; Jews and Christians were often required to wear distinctive garb. They could not bear arms or ride horses. They had to pay higher taxes than those paid by Muslims.

And some Muslim realms were harder than others. Morocco stood out in the degradation it heaped upon the Jews. Here Islam was frontier Islam, embittered by wars against Portugal and Spain. The Jews were the only non-Muslim community in Morocco. The limits imposed upon them—enclosed ghettos that functioned like the *Juderias* of Aragon and Castile—recalled the degradations of Europe. The Jews of Morocco lived at the mercy of the elements. It was feast or famine. Merciful sultans alternated with cruel ones. What the sultans gave, the preachers and the crowd frequently took away. The protection the rulers offered in this wild and anarchic realm could never withstand what one historian described as the three miseries of Morocco: plague, famine, and civil war.

It was easier in other Muslim lands. The private domain Islamic rule conceded, the freedom from forced conversions must have seemed particularly generous when compared with what prevailed in medieval Europe. A Jew writing to his co-religionists in Europe

described Turkey as a land where “every man may dwell at peace under his own vine and fig tree.” The Jews were a people on the run. The tolerance in the new surroundings seemed wondrous. A converso who made a new life in Turkey and returned to the faith spoke of Turkey in nearly messianic terms, described it as “a broad expansive sea which our Lord has opened with the rod of his mercy. Here the gates of liberty are wide open for you that you may fully practice your Judaism.”

Jewish centers of learning and commerce sprouted throughout the Muslim world. Salonika, conquered by the Turks early in the 1400s, was to become, for all practical purposes, a Jewish city. Jews became the city’s overwhelming majority. They dominated the life of the city until its loss to the Greeks in 1912. A substantial Jewish colony laid roots in Istanbul. The town of Safed, in Palestine, attracted Jewish textile makers and scholars, and became a famous center of learning. Close by there was a protected niche for the Jews in the life of Egypt. Baghdad’s Jewry was perhaps in a league by itself. It had its academies, a vigorous mercantile elite with far-flung commercial operations.

Then the world of the Jews of Islam closed up. It happened over a long period of time. The civilization of Islam itself went into eclipse, its Ottoman standard-bearers were overtaken by Europe in the seventeenth century. The Jews who had done well by civilization in the midst of a surge were to suffer its demise. Increasingly the Christian European powers set the terms of the traffic with Islamic lands. For intermediaries these European powers preferred the local Christian communities—Greeks, Armenians, Christian Arabs. And these local Christians were sworn enemies of the Jews, bent on cutting them out of international commerce and diplomacy. The knowledge—of foreign languages, of science and medicine—that Jews had brought with them from Europe had receded and been rendered obsolete. European missions were busy at work shoring up the skills and the privileges of the Christians of the “east.” On the defensive, the Islamic order itself was growing increasingly xenophobic and intolerant.

The submission to Europe had to be hidden under displays of chauvinism. The Jews of Islam headed into a long night. The center of the Jewish world had long shifted westward. Lewis sums up the closing of that Jewish world in the east in his book *The Jews of Islam*:

“The growing segregation, the dwindling tolerance, the diminished participation, the worsening poverty, both material and intellectual, of the Jewish communities under Muslim rule.”

From this long slumber the Jews of the east were awakened by a movement fashioned by their kinsmen in the west: modern Zionism. It came calling on them, summoned them to a new undertaking. The Jews of Islam had been spared both the gift of modern European history (the Enlightenment, the bourgeois age, the emancipation) and then the horrors visited on European Jewry. Zionism had been spun with European thread. But the Jews of the east took to it. To be sure, there were many who had wanted to sit out the fight between Arab and Jew in Palestine and to avert their gaze. Some of the leading figures of Egyptian Jewry the chief Rabbi Haim Nahum, the head of the community, a banker by the name of Joseph Aslan de Cattaoui Pasha whose family had presided over the community since the mid-nineteenth century—were men “devoted to king and

country” who had wanted nothing to do with Zionism. But the ground burned in Egypt. Fascist doctrines of nationalism and a new Islamic militancy were sweeping through the place. Palestine and the struggle between Arab and Jew were too close: the world of Egyptian Jewry couldn’t withstand all of this.

It was now past living those circumscribed lives. Modern nationalism—in its Arab and Jewish variants—blew away the world of the Arab Jews. The braver and younger souls among the Jews of Arab lands didn’t care to live the quiet and worried lives of their elders. When the first Arab-Israeli war of 1948–49 opened, there were some 800,000 Jews in the Arab world; some 6 percent of world Jewry. A decade or so later, Harat al Yahud (the Jewish quarter) in Muslim cities belonged to memory. The large Jewish communities in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, packed up and left. There was a new and altered geography of Jewish life; the center of gravity had shifted again, toward two poles: the New World and Israel.

Setting sail to the New World, Columbus had had little to say about that “parallel fleet of woe and misery” that carried the Jews out of Spain. He was careful to note, though, that he wanted the Jews excluded from the lands he

would discover and claim for Spain. Fate mocked him.

V.

It came to pass that in the midst of the retrospects and the celebration and the rampant revisionism of the quincennial of Columbus’s voyage of discovery, Arabs and Jews at an impasse came together in Madrid in October 1991. (Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel’s deputy foreign minister, went to Madrid; his father, the distinguished historian Benzion Netanyahu, had chronicled the heartbreak of the Jews of Spain and the shattering of their world.) It was a “good venue,” the innocent said of Madrid, the right place for Muslims and Jews to come together. Perhaps it was. The Spanish certainly thought so; the great irony would have been too much for them to ponder. Beyond the tumult of the conference and its utterances, those in the know, though, could have sworn that they could hear both the Moor’s last sigh and the parting words of hurt and pride of Don Isaac Abravanel, and that plea that fell on deaf ears.

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