

The story of the Iberian Crypto- Jews

Part 3: The Journey to Alhambra

Eric Aizenstros

The Story So Far

- Our first week, we reviewed the possibilities for the origins of the Sepharadim.
- Last week, we reviewed the “Golden Age” of Sephardic Jewry.
- This week, we are going to review the rest of Sephardic Jewish history until the Expulsion in 1492.
- This will be the last presentation on Jewish life in Iberia prior to the expulsion.

A side note

My presentations will not contain references to aid with aesthetics, but I will make a written account available at some stage. It will be my telling of the story, but in more detail than covered in the presentations and will contain references.

An important note

- While in exile, the Jews were destined to endure an uncertain existence. Even while enjoying some success, overall the experience would be harsh.
 - “Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude; she dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress.”
(Lamentations 1:3)

An important note

- This situation would not completely resolve until the Messiah comes.
 - “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit...He will raise a signal for the nations and will assemble the banished of Israel and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.” (Isaiah 11: 1,12)

Spain At The End of The Golden Age

- The decline didn't come all at once, but slowly over a few centuries.
- The 1200s were definitely either the last century of the Golden Age or the first of the decline.
- Even as the Reconquista saw Spain return to mostly Christian territory in the 1200s, relative multiculturalism persisted—"Convivencia."
- We will review major events which either hallmarked or precipitated the decline.

The 1263 Disputation of Barcelona

- On the surface, Disputations were fair, religious debates, intended to flesh out differences in doctrine for better learning and growing in faith.
- In reality, they were political tools used to pressure conversions and intimidate the Jewish population.
- Until the 13th century, Jews had been relatively spared from these terrible events, but were becoming increasingly popular in Spain, as it was seen as an important political and clerical goal to “get” conversions.

The 1263 Disputation of Barcelona

- In this “debate” the Ramban was compelled to debate a Jewish convert to Christianity, Pablo Christiani. It was overseen by the King of Aragon, James I.
- The Ramban was given freedom of speech, and his responses greatly impressed The King.
- However, when the Ramban attempted to publish a written account, he was exiled, a growing sign of the eroding of the tolerance for Jews in Spain.

The Summer of 1391

- Proceeded by decades of rising anti-Jewish sentiment in Spain, fed by preaching from mostly lay-clergy.
- One particular preacher, Ferrand Martinez was especially vicious. Unfortunately, he was also very popular with the common people.
- June-September 1391 were terrible months for the Jewish community. Perhaps 50,000 Jews were killed and many communities vanished forever.

The Summer of 1391

- Perhaps 150,000 Jews converted to Christianity at this time, about half of Spain's Jews!
- These were mostly forced (anusim-forced ones). Hence many of them still attempted to practice Judaism. Our first significant population of hidden or "Crypto" Jews.
- Jewish leaders attempted to consolidate and revitalise the community after these events, such as Hasdai Crescas. They attempted to bring Crypto Jews back into the fold and even supported their observance of Judaism while officially being Christians.

The Summer of 1391

- This novel approach could have been for these reasons:
 - Converted Jews outnumbered non-converted Jews.
 - Family ties were often stronger than religious ties.
 - Crypto-Jews were ostracised from wider society, forcing them to associate with Jews, and making assimilation difficult.
 - Maimonides' approach.
- However, the Church saw these conversions as valid, even if they didn't approve of the violence. Hence any practice of Judaism by these converts, was considered heresy.

The Disputation of Tortosa 1413-14

- Another disputation, also initiated by a Jewish convert, Geronimo de Santa Fe.
- Compared to the 1263 Barcelona Disputation, conditions for the Jews were far worse.
- The Church openly admitted their bias, as the antipope exclaims:
 - “You, scholars of the Jews, should know that I have not come here, and I have not sent for you, in order to prove which of our two religions is true, for it is a known thing with me that my religion and faith is true, and that your Torah was once true but has been abolished. You have only come because Geronimo has said that he will prove from the Talmud of your Rabbis, who knew more than you do, that the Messiah has come.”

The Disputation of Tortosa 1413-14

- The Jewish scholars were weakened in resolve and endurance.
- The Christian arguments were sophisticated.
- The whole event was accompanied by pomp and flair, with audiences perhaps in the thousands.
- Jews were worried about violence and were being harassed constantly.
- Hence the Jewish response was seen as rather weak, even being criticised by their co-religionists.

The Disputation of Tortosa 1413-14

- The main legacy was a devastating drop in morale.
- Violence was not a key feature, but harassment and intimidation were.
- High profile conversions took place, including one of the main Jewish speakers-Don Vidal Benveniste.
- These circumstances drove the Jewish community to despair. Perhaps tens of thousands converted.

Changing Priorities For the Monarchy

- When the Reconquista was in doubt, tolerance towards minorities was required.
- As the 15th century advanced, homogeneity was considered more important.
- The Monarchy felt they had to “protect” their new converts. They attempted to distance them from the unconverted Jewish population and attempted to weaken the resolve of the Jewish population to resist.

Changing Priorities For the Monarchy

- Jews led increasingly pressured and restricted lives in the 15th century in Spain.
 - Were mostly restricted to living in Jewish districts-Juderias.
 - Were restricted in their occupations, being barred from some types of business and some professions-medicine for example.
 - Had to wear identifying clothing.
 - Had to adhere to a curfew.
 - Conversos were forced to attend Church and hear sermons to consolidate their faith in Christianity.
 - Conversos were officially not allowed to associate with other Jews

The Inquisition

- However, these measures were not very successful in isolating Conversos from the Jewish population.
- Hence the Monarchy asked for permission to investigate heresy, an inquisition.
- The Spanish Inquisition was established in 1478 (and would last until 1834).
- It's stated goal would be to "correct heresy," and hence consolidate homogeneity of faith in Spain.

The Inquisition

- Theoretically, the inquisitors would enter a place considered a hotbed for heresy and read an Edict of Grace.
- This allowed heretics to come forward, admit their guilt, and repent.
- Punishments were harsher if someone was found to be a heretic after the Edict of Grace expired.
- The Inquisition mostly relied on local volunteers to help find heretics.
- The accused were allowed to cite who their enemies were, and any testimony given by these was cancelled.

The Inquisition

- In reality, the Inquisition was used as a political tool as much as a religious tool.
- Heretics were held in prison sometimes for years, while a verdict was being reached.
- Humiliation, torture and abuse were features of the process.
- Conversos were disproportionately targeted.
- An atmosphere of great fear and mistrust developed.
- However, it only had jurisdiction over Conversos, not Jews.

The Inquisition



The Inquisition



The Role of the Church

- The Church is rightly criticised for this event.
- However, the number of deaths is probably exaggerated.
- Spectrums of observance was not an idea known in this era.
- Heresy was seen as a threat to society, not only a spiritual sin.
- The Church at times tried to reduce the “excesses” of the Inquisition.

“The Final Straw”

- Despite all these measures, Crypto-Judaism continued to thrive.
- The Grand Inquisitor, Tomas de Torquemada, felt the only way to finally achieve victory was to expel the Jews.
- After the final defeat of the Moors at Grenada in early 1492, Jews were now seen as expendable and the Monarchy was convinced that expelling the Jews was the only way to truly ensure unity and peace.

The Alhambra Decree

- Also known as the Edict of Expulsion, signed into law on 31st March 1492. Named after Alhambra, which was located in Grenada, where the Muslims were finally defeated.
- It accuses Jews of conspiring to corrupt the faith of Conversos and hence being a threat in Spain.
- It gives them 4 months to either convert, leave or face execution.
- The last day was the 31st July 1492, Tisha B'Av of that year.
- (The Muslims were also eventually expelled).

The Alhambra Decree

- The Jewish leaders led one final resistance, pleading with the Monarchy, even organising a large bribe.
- However, it was to no avail and the Edict stood.
- After perhaps 2,000 years of a Jewish presence in Iberia, it was officially liquidated.
- However, Jewish practice did not die in Spain, Portugal or their territories. From now on in this series, we will be dedicated mostly to the journey of the Crypto-Jews.

A Challenge

- Whatever the intentions of the Church, G-d's name was taken in vain and defiled by the events of the Inquisition.
- Since then, many Jews think of Christians as their mortal enemies, largely as a result of Church sanctioned events like this.
- They should be lessons for all of us.
- The Third Commandment “do not take the Lord's name in vain,” is pertinent here.

A Challenge

- Anything we do in His name affects His reputation.
- Jesus said in Matthew 5:16, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” Hence doing evil will cause those to curse G-d.
- G-d’s reputation is important to Him, even relenting on punishment to preserve it.
 - “But I withdrew My hand and acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out.” (Ezekiel 20:22)

שַׁבַּת שְׁלוֹמ

SHABBAT SHALOM!



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