The story of the Iberian Crypto-Jews
Part 5: Modern Iberian Jews and Crypto Jews

Eric Aizenstros

A quick note on the Torah Portion

- This week, a double portion: Acharei Mot/Kedoshim
- Readings:
  - Leviticus 16:1-20:27
  - Ezekiel 22:1-19
  - Matthew 15:10-20

A quick note on the Torah Portion

- This week, a double portion: Acharei Mot/Kedoshim
- In a nutshell:
    - The deaths of Aaron's sons, warnings about approaching the Presence of G-d when not called for. Also not offering sacrifices anywhere other than the place G-d will chose.
    - Various laws regarding the Day of Atonement.
    - Laws regarding Kashrut (not eating bloods) and sexual relations.
    - Laws regarding sanctity of life: charity, honesty, sexual morality, honouring parents.
    - The New Testament teaching relates Jesus' teaching regarding what comes out as being able to defile a person, not what goes in.

The Story So Far

- Our first week, we reviewed the possibilities for the origins of the Sepharadim.

- Our second week, we reviewed the "Golden Age" of Sephardic Jewry.

- Our third week, we reviewed the decline of Sephardic Jewry until the expulsion in 1492.

- Last week, we reviewed the story of the Crypto-Jews up until the 18th century in Iberia and Latin America.

- This week, we will review modern Jewish and Crypto-Jewish history in these places.

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.

Crypto-Judaism in the 18th century

- Virtually dead in most places.

- Otherwise heavily suppressed and underground.

- Mainly individuals or small families in isolated areas.

- High syncretic, mostly vestigial customs.

- New Christians started to mostly resemble Old Christians

- However, hope was on the way.

Portugal

- By 1768, New Christians were no longer monitored.

- Inquisition officially ended in 1821.

- By this time, most (but not all) New Christians had assimilated.

- Jews slowly trickled into Portugal throughout the 19th century and early 20th century, but quite slow. Mostly from Britain and Morocco.

- Portugal played a role in sheltering Ashkenazi Jews fleeing Holocaust.

- Today, only about 1,000 Jews officially in Portugal, mostly around Lisbon.

Spain

- Crypto-Judaism completely suppressed.

- Inquisition ended 1834.

- Jews were officially allowed to practice Judaism privately but not publicly (still technically illegal) from 1868.

- Jews flocked to Spain during World War Two during the Holocaust.

- Judaism not officially allowed to practice Judaism openly until 1968, when Alhambra Decree rescinded.

- Today, 13,000-50,000 Jews in Spain, mostly from last few decades.

Argentina

- Not many Crypto-Jews ever made it to Argentina.

- Late 19th century, thousands of Ashkenazi Jews fled persecution in Eastern Europe and arrived in Argentina.

- By 1920, 150,000 Jews in Argentina.

- Since mid 20th century, many challenges for community:
    - Safe haven for Nazis.
    - Worsening economic and political situation.
    - Increasing antisemitism, multiple violent terrorist attacks on Jewish institutions.
    - Despite this, about 200,000 Jews today and perhaps up to 500,000 including all those with recent Jewish ancestry.

Brazil

- Throughout 19th century, Ashkenazi Jews settled along the coast, and Moroccan Jews went to the interior.

- Mixed Sephardic and Ashkenazi immigration in 20th century.

- Many German Jews fled there in 1930s, then antisemitic governments halted Jewish immigration during war.

- Community has been very successful and peaceful since World War Two, with 120,000 affiliated Jews today.

- Also a hotbed of modern Crypto-Jewish revival.

Mexico

- Inquisition ended in 1820.

- Very few openly practicing Jews in Mexico throughout 19th century.

- Some Russian Jews came in 1880s, and many Jews from Ottoman Empire in Early 20th century.

- Also Ashkenazi Jews, who tried to go to America, ended up staying.

- Recent decades, problems with violence and drug-related crime.

- About 50,000 affiliated Jews today.

- Also a hotbed for Crypto-Jewish revival.

Chile

- Not many Crypto-Jews in colonial era, but some ?New Christian conquistadors.

- Mainly mixed immigration in 19th and early 20th centuries.

- A Chilean diplomat, Samuel del Campo, used his position in Chilean Embassy in Romania to save 1,200 Jews during Holocaust.

- Today, 18,000 Jews, mostly around Santiago.

Crypto Jewish revival - Brazil

- After the Dutch left in 1654, most Crypto-Jews eventually assimilated.

- However, some went to the interior where it was easier to hide.

- While there was no official persecution in 19th-20th centuries, they were socially ostracised (and not that well hidden).

- From the 1990s onwards, communities have attempted to come into the open. Since then, perhaps thousands of stories of preserved Crypto-Judaism, wishing to make contact with other Jews.

- Reactions have been complex.

Crypto Jews in the colonies - Mexico

- Despite persecution, Crypto-Judaism never really disappeared.

- People transmitted the knowledge even when practice was not possible.

- Much of Mexico was taken over by America in the 19th century.

- Communities in Northern Mexico and Southern USA practicing a complex mix of Crypto-Jewish practices.

- Many more are being encouraged to come into the open. DNA testing as well as certain teachers. Networks consisting of thousands.

Crypto Jews of Belmonte

- A Polish Jewish engineer, Samuel Schwarz, made contact with hundreds of previously undiscovered Crypto-Jews in 1917, in Belmonte, a small village in Northeast Portugal.

- They convincingly traced their heritage to the 13th century.

- They have survived with careful secrecy and endogamy.

- They celebrated three festivals a year, Passover, Fast of Esther, and Yom Kippur, as well as Shabbat, and kept some semblance of Kosher.

Crypto Jews of Belmonte

- Was a huge sensation in the Jewish world, but they initially wanted to remain isolated, and pushed back against attempts to integrate them.

- However, since the 1970s, they have been more eager to make contact with other Jewish communities.

- Today, the community of approx 300 has a synagogue, a rabbi, a kosher market, a museum and significant international support.

- Some in the community have enjoyed the re-integration and converted to Orthodox Judaism, the majority have not.

DNA evidence

- A 2015 study showed Belmonte Crypto-Jews shared most DNA with other Sephardic Jews, and even had less admixture with Europeans than other Sepharadim.

- Another study in 2017 showed that perhaps almost 25% of Latin Americans have significant Jewish ancestry (defined as >5% of DNA sequences).

- This has been a game changer. Many people who suspect Jewish roots are using DNA testing to validate inherited tales, or even their own unfounded feelings regarding their heritage.

- 150,000,000 Jews?

DNA evidence

- No, remember, Jewish identity is complex:

  - Having 5% DNA is not extremely convincing (though many people have more). That equates to one ancestor in last 20 generations (approx 500 years if average age of childbirth is 25 years old).

  - Jewish identity incorporates more than race. It includes faith, practice, culture and social constructs.

  - Most of these people do not identify with Jews or Judaism at all. If an Englishman has one Nigerian ancestor from 500 years ago, would that make him Nigerian?

  - What this does show is that Jews have had a significant impact in Latin America and despite the inquisitions, arrived there in significant numbers.

Handling new information in a healthy way

- It's only the minority, but some are delving deep into their Jewish roots.

- On one level, this can add great depth and grounding for the life of a born-again believer. We should be encouraging all believers to explore the Jewish roots of their faith, which is the shared spiritual heritage of all believers.

- Understanding where one comes from can add great meaning to life in other ways and help establish new connections.

- It brings family traditions and story "full circle."

Handling new information in a healthy way

But it can also be very harmful:

- Adults (more so than children) react to paradigm-shifts very badly.

- Some of this has promoted cultish behaviour ("we are the only true Jews").

- Sometimes this creates much pain and division amongst families, between those who want to find out more and those who don't.

- Mental health issues: personal confusion and insecurity about identity.

- It has led many born-again, Spirit-filled believers becoming angry at the Church and abandoning their life-giving faith, not necessarily just to convert to Judaism, but sometimes abandoning faith altogether.

Handling new information in a healthy way

ANY EXPLORATION INTO SUCH ISSUES SHOULD BE DONE WITH A SPIRIT-FILLED HEART, WITH OUR EYES SQUARLY UPON JESUS AND, IDEALLY, WITH EXPERT SPIRITUAL COUNSELLING (not only a genetic counsellor).

Handling new information in a healthy way

- I think the best way to ensure we handle this sort of information in a healthy way, is to meditate on the Bible's words regarding identity:
  - "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." (John 1:12)
  - "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." (1 Peter 2:9)
  - "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." (Colossians 3:1-2)

Handling new information in a healthy way

- I think the best way to ensure we handle this sort of information in a healthy way, is to meditate on the Bible's words regarding identity:
  - "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." (Matthew 10:37, maybe could be applied to loving heritage more than G-d as well?)
  - "Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Galatians 1:10)
  - "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

Link to studies

Belmonte Crypto Jews:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/272519153_Portuguese_crypto-Jews_The_genetic_heritage_of_a_complex_history

Latin America Jewish heritage:

https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10045516/1/PhD_thesis_JChacon_2017_Final.pdf