



History of the Inquisition: Jews in Spain & Portugal 2011-10-24

Digging into one of the darkest periods of Jewish history sheds light on secret Jewish roots

Early history :

The precise origins of the Jewish communities of the Iberian Peninsula are unclear. There is inconclusive evidence of a Jewish presence on the Iberian Peninsula dating from pre-Roman times. More substantial references date from the Roman period. It is thought that substantial Jewish immigration probably occurred during the Roman period of Hispania, that began with the Roman landing at Empuries in 218 BC and ended with the Roman conquest of the Iberian Peninsula by Caesar Augustus in 17 BC.

Exactly how soon after this time Jews made their way onto the scene in this context is a matter of speculation. It is likely that they went there under the Romans as free men to take advantage of its rich resources. In any case, these Jews were joined by some 80,000 Jews sent into exile from Palestine and carried off to Hispania after the defeat of Judea in 70 AD. These Jews and their descendants are known as "Sephardim" from the word "Sefarad", which in modern Hebrew means Spain.

Visigoths & Muslim Spain

In the first centuries of the Common Era, the Sephardim in Spain faced the same living conditions and problems which faced the general population. There is much evidence of Jewish communities distributed throughout the country ruled by Christian barbarians, where they celebrated their own Sabbaths and festivals, circumcised their male children, performed marriages according to Jewish custom, strictly observed the dietetic laws, and even occasionally converted heathen slaves to Judaism. During the war with the Romans, which lasted seventy-two years (409-481), the Visigoths did not pay much heed to the Jews, and they hence suffered only from the inflictions of the devastating war. However, when King Reccared I converted to Christianity in 586 the Jews appeared as a great obstacle to religious unity of the kingdom and religious hatred toward the Jews raised its ugly head with the promulgation of a series of laws against the practice of Judaism.

These laws were taken even further by Sisebut (612-620) who forced the Jews to convert to Catholicism or be punished with a hundred blows, be banished from the country and

deprived of their possessions. Sisebut's successors continued his anti-Jewish policies. The object was to maintain Jews within the Christian entity until they would lose their religious and cultural identity.

The Visigoth nightmare which had lasted over a century would end with the swift Muslim invasion in 711. The Jews were welcomed and an age of peace and prosperity seemed to begin. The Arabs treated the Jews better than the Christians had, but the situation was far from ideal as they were heavily taxed for the privilege of being allowed to reside among the Muslims. However, in the 10th century when Abd-al-Rahman III decided to place Jews such as Rabbi Chassedia Ibn Chaprut, a physician and diplomat, into positions of trust, a Golden Age really did begin for the Jews in Spain. Jewish life was strengthened by this tolerant and progressive environment which lasted to varying degrees for the 400 years of Arab rule. This was to change dramatically with the onset of the Reconquest.

The Reconquest (1212-1492) & Jews in the Royal Courts (1148-1492)

By the end of the 11th century, the Christian Reconquest had accelerated and it continued to intensify during the next two centuries. The Catholic kings exploited the Jews, using their money to finance the wars. The Jews in Spain were Spaniards, both with regard to their customs and their language. Sephardim opened new paths within Judaism in the areas of philosophy and mysticism. They made important contributions not only in interpretation of the holy texts but in law, cartography, navigation, astrology, medicine and mathematics. They owned real estate, and they cultivated their land with their own hands; they filled public offices, and on account of their industry they became wealthy, while their knowledge and ability won them respect and influence. But this prosperity roused the jealousy of the people and provoked the hatred of the clergy; from the 13th century onwards a real anti-Jewish campaign was instigated and led by the Church.

The Crusaders began the "holy war" in Toledo (1212) by robbing and killing the Jews. Under Ferdinand III the clergy's endeavors directed against the Jews became more and more pronounced. Spanish Jews of both sexes were compelled to distinguish themselves from Christians by wearing a yellow badge on their clothing, a practice later adapted by the Nazis in Germany. The papal bull issued by Pope Innocent IV in April, 1250, forbid Jews from building a new synagogue without special permission, they were not allowed to associate with Christians, live under the same roof with them, eat and drink with them, or use the same bath; neither might a Christian partake of wine which had been prepared by a Jew. The Jews were not allowed to employ Christian nurses or servants, and Christians might use only medicines which had been prepared by competent Christian apothecaries.

There were some 120 Jewish communities in Christian Spain around 1300, with somewhere around half a million or more Jews, mostly in Castille. Catalonia, Aragon, and Valencia were more sparsely inhabited by Jews. At about this time the position of the Jews became extremely precarious throughout Spain as anti-Semitism increased. Dispersed

pogroms and massacres as well as the poverty to which they had been reduced led large numbers of Jews to submit to baptism in order to escape death.

Pogroms & Forced Conversions (1391-1506)

Passionate sermons delivered all over Spain by Archdeacon Fernand Martinez were the source of mass riots against the Jews in 1391. These culminated in bloody pogroms in Seville where hundreds of Jews were killed, as well as in other cities, such as Cordoba, Valencia and Barcelona. Desperate Jews fearing for their lives approached the Church asking to be baptized in Castile and Aragon, while others escaped the kingdom. After the persecutions of 1391 there were in Aragon and Castile thousands of converts ("Conversos"), or Neo-Christians. Though some converted by choice, most of these Conversos, also referred to as Marranos by the Spaniards (a derogatory term for converts meaning pigs in Spanish), conducted themselves as Christians to the outside world while secretly continuing to practice the tenets of the Jewish faith within the confines of their homes.

On account of their talent and wealth, and through intermarriage with noble families, the Conversos gained considerable influence and filled important government offices; some even received titles of nobility. By the mid-15th century, hatred toward the New Christians exceeded that toward the professed Jews. The nobles of Spain found that they had only increased their difficulties by urging the conversion of the Jews, who remained as much a close society in the new faith as they had been in the old.

In 1412 a decree was issued forcing the Jews to live in an enclosed ghetto, the Juderias, along with further restrictions aimed to humiliate and impoverish them. The persecution of the Jews was now pursued systematically in the hope of mass-conversions.

Between 1412 and 1414 the Jewish communities in Spain underwent a new ordeal. A group of Rabbis was called to the city of Tortosa to debate matters of religion and theology with Christians. The Jewish delegation headed by Nachmanides arrived to the meeting only to discover that their contenders were apostate Jews. In this famous disputation the apostate Pablo de Santa Maria was soundly defeated, but the Franciscans published false reports of the disputation to win more converts. Nachmanides, who had been protected from heresy laws during the disputations, was coerced to publish his refutations in public. He was forced into exile rather than be burned as a heretic. After this debate the animosity between Jews and Christians further intensified, as witnessed by the Toledo pogrom against New Christians in 1467.

Inquisition and Expulsion in Spain & Portugal :

The frustration of the Church reached a peak with the ascent of Ferdinand and Isabella to

the throne. Despite a century of hostilities against the Spanish Conversos accused of heresy, they maintained the same practices, undermining the so-called purity of the Catholic faith. As soon as the Catholic monarchs ascended their thrones, steps were taken to segregate the Jews both from the "Conversos" and from their fellow countrymen. 1480 saw the establishment of the Inquisition in Spain, the original object of which was to deal with the crypto-Jews and which was expanded in 1492 ordering all Jews and Muslims to either convert or emigrate.

With the establishment of the Edict of Expulsion of 1492, the Spanish Jews found themselves facing the dilemma of whether or not to remain in Spain. To remain in Spain meant the Jew would have to deny his beliefs and traditions, convert to Christianity and submit to the supervision of the Spanish Monarchy; to do otherwise would result in torture and possibly death. Being suspected of continuing to practice Judaism put one at risk of denunciation and trial, severe torture and, ultimately, burning at the stake in what is known as an " auto-da-fe ". More than 13,000 Conversos were put on trial in the first 12 years of the Spanish Inquisition under the Grand Inquisitor, Tomas de Torquemada .

Their only remaining option was to leave home with only those few personal belongings they could carry, as The Edict of Expulsion also carried with it the appropriation and seizure by the monarchy of all earthly properties belonging to the Jew.

With the expulsion decrees, the Spanish Jews sought tolerant countries where they could maintain their identity. Many chose the seemingly easy route to Portugal where the language was similar, although this choice was problematic in other aspects: Portugal was a Catholic country, the royal houses were related, and from Portugal there were no remaining escape routes by land, while the few existing seaports were closely watched. Other Spanish Jews chose to wander to North Africa where they would be far from Christian rule, as these countries were Islamic. From North Africa they sometimes continued to cities in the Ottoman Empire and then to the rest of Europe.

Indeed, those who had opted for Portugal did not have to wait very long before the Portuguese crown followed the Spanish example and launched its own decree of "baptism or expulsion". In 1497, under the pressure of the newly born Spanish State , the Church and the Christian population , King Manuel I of Portugal decreed that all Jews had to convert to Christianity or leave the country. Once again the Jews found themselves at the mercy of rape, plunder and murder without any escape route. The result was a forced mass conversion.

Hard times followed for the Portuguese Jews, with the massacre of 5000 people in Lisbon in 1506, the forced deportation to Sao Tome and Principe (where there is still a Jewish presence today), and culminating in the establishment of the Portuguese Inquisition in 1536. As in Spain, the Portuguese Inquisition was subject to the authority of the King. It was headed by a Grand Inquisitor, always from within the royal family. There were Courts of the Inquisition in Lisbon, Porto, Coimbra, and E vora. It held its first auto-da-fé in Portugal in 1540.

Inquisition in the New World :

While expulsion was taking place the expansion and colonization of the New World was also occurring. Some Sephardic Jews took advantage of this and tried to escape the horrors of the Inquisition by fleeing to the coasts of the American continent. Many of those who embarked with Christopher Columbus on his voyages were really Jewish "Marranos", or crypto-Jews who took the opportunity to leave Spain. In actuality, it was the Spanish Catholic religious authorities who described the new Jewish converts as "Marranos" effectively classifying their newly converted "Christian brothers" as pigs.

The Sephardic Jews found themselves dispersed, wandering to the remotest parts of the planet only to have the horrors of the Spanish Holy Inquisition visited upon them again and again.

The long arm of the Holy Office extended its intransigent persecution to The New World, fired by Torquemada's organizational and administrative abilities and his zeal for the preservation of the faith. Branches of the Inquisition were established throughout Spanish America, with the first auto de fé in Mexico held in October 1528. Two formal Dominican tribunals were established in 1569, one for New Spain (Mexico) and one for Peru. The Mexican branch had authority over the population of Mexico, Guatemala, New Galicia, and the Philippines. The tribunal at Cartagena was established in 1610 with jurisdiction over a vast area, including Cartagena, Panama, Santa Marta, Puerto Rico, Popayan, Venezuela, and Santiago de Cuba. The Portuguese Inquisition expanded its scope of operations to Portugal's colonial possessions, including Brazil, Cape Verde, and Goa, where it continued investigating and trying cases based on supposed breaches of orthodox Roman Catholicism until 1821.

There was a marked change in the Holy Office's attitude toward the Jews after 1665, and a decrease in the severity of punishments meted out to Jewish heretics, although the Inquisition in Spain continued until the late 18th century and was not officially abolished until 1834, during the reign of Isabella II .