

JERUSALEM LETTER

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs

No. 295 22 Sivan 5754 / 1 June 1994

THE DOUBLE QUINCENTENARY: JEWISH THEMES IN THE 1492-1992 COMMEMORATIONS

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Was Columbus Jewish? / The "Lost Jews" of the Southwest / Ashkenazim Learn about Sephardim / How Many Jews were Expelled from Spain? / Jews and Native Americans / A New Anti-Semitic Slander: Jews and the Slave Trade

Several hundred activities took place worldwide in 1992 commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Iberian expansion into the New World and the simultaneous expulsion of the Jews from Spain — a "double quincentenary." Together, they established a negative perspective on the events of 1492 that presaged later condemnation by partisans of Native Americans, Blacks, and the environment.

Was Columbus Jewish?

Judging by responses in the U.S. mass media, introduction of the theme of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain added dimension and depth to public understanding of this historic period, although, as one would expect, the more romantic aspects of the theme prevailed over scholarly ones. Two issues emerged most frequently when "Jews" were mentioned in the same breath as "discovery." The first was speculation concerning the possible Jewish ancestry of Christopher Columbus. Dozens of history buffs emerged from obscurity, promising that they could prove Columbus' Jewish ancestry if only they could get funding for their investiga-

tion, and one benighted capitalist proposed to mount an exhibition on the theme. Their shared assumption was that resolving this riddle was, or should be, the primary purpose of a Jewish educational enterprise during the quincentenary year. Several historians worked at unravelling the evidence for a more or less popular readership during this period, hoping to make a dent in the mentality of those who equate the suspected existence of a *converso* ancestor in someone's family tree with irrevocable attachment to the Jewish people on the part of their descendants unto the tenth generation. As the attacks against Columbus-the-enslaver, Columbus-the-initiator-of-genocide, Columbus-the-devastator-of-nature, increased over the course of the year, efforts by well-intentioned Jews and judeophiles to award Jewish ancestry posthumously to Columbus tapered off. But will we ever hear the last of Luis de Torres, the *converso* who served as Columbus' interpreter on his first voyage and who for purposes of Jewish chauvinism was gratuitously "converted" back to Judaism?

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ISSN: 0334-4096.

The Jerusalem Letter is a periodic report intended to objectively clarify and analyze issues of Jewish and Israeli public policy.

The "Lost Jews" of the Southwest

The other popular topic for Jewish quincentenarians became "the lost Jews of the American Southwest." The survival of descendants of *conversos* who settled Spanish America's northern frontier and who retain vestiges of a Jewish heritage, rumored for years, has now to be taken seriously due to research by qualified scholars. These ambiguous communities are valid subjects of research, and it is unfortunate that funding has never been sufficient to encourage more of it. Into the funding gap rushed numerous enthusiasts wielding ethnic and religious axes with articles for the popular press that repeated one another without adding to our store of knowledge, but that had the cumulative effect of mystifying the survival of Judaism. The only ones who noted that the individuals in question — like the unfortunates who were penanced by the Inquisition — are actually Catholic, were Sephardic philanthropists who declined to fund the research on that account.

Ashkenazim Learn about Sephardim

Among the accomplishments of the year may be counted the publication of a number of scholarly books and articles viewing 1492 from a Jewish perspective. Some of these filled historical lacunae, while others poured old wine into new bottles. New editions of classic works were published, while elegant (and expensive) facsimiles of ancient texts were reproduced. Most of this scholarship came from scholars who are themselves products of the Ashkenazi tradition.

Novelists and story-tellers found the theme of 1492 irresistible, and a whole new genre of the Jewish picaresque came into existence. Several children's books of varying quality were published and a start was made toward filling the gap in instructional materials. Most journals with a Jewish readership published special issues commemorating the quincentenary, among which the outstanding contribution is the Summer 1992 issue of *American Jewish Archives*.

The cumulative impact of these events and publications was to bring to public attention the fact that the age of European expansion involved a great deal more than the remarkable feat of one inspired mariner, a fact reinforced by the claims of scholars engaged in studies of other ethnic groups, as well as public interest groups such as the Greens. 1492 can never again be understood — or taught — in the superficial terms that prevailed in schools and the mass media prior to 1992.

The scope and brilliance of medieval Sephardi life came to be publicly acknowledged as part of the world's cultural patrimony, owing to countless performances of poetry and music from the Sephardic reper-

toire, demonstrations of Sephardic cuisine, and exhibits and conferences centered on Sephardic life and literature. Understandably, complex historical issues, hotly discussed at scholarly conferences, failed to pass the perceptual threshold of the general public. These include the exclusion of Jews from the New World, the contemporary legacy of that exclusion, and the ambiguity of the Judeo-*converso* presence there. No echo of the problematic situation of New Christians, discussed in such detail within academia, seems to have percolated through to the public. Fascination with the phenomenon of crypto-Jewishness appeared to crowd out both an examination of the lives of overt Jews, i.e., Sephardim who retained their Jewish identity, and New Christians who truly accepted their new faith.

The quincentenary stimulated contemporary Sephardim to reconsider their history and their own relationship to it, although, interestingly, little new scholarship was produced by Sephardim except in the field of music. Conferences, exhibitions, costumed dance and song offered opportunity for audiences to relive the Spanish past without necessarily engaging with it intellectually. With their ethnic identity bound up in the rejection by their beloved homeland, Sephardic opinion divided on whether to accept the overtures for reconciliation extended by the present government of Spain or to retaliate against those who rejected them by rejecting their twentieth-century heirs. While some cooperated with Spanish programs such as Sepharad 92, others refused even to participate in a ceremony at which a Spanish representative was present.

Sephardim whose origins lay in the Balkans were impelled by the quincentenary into a year of grief for their ancestral communities which had survived the expulsion from Spain but were destroyed 450 years later in the Holocaust. These communities were particularly hard hit by memories of destruction and the existential issue of their own personal survival.

Sephardic culture became more accessible to Ashkenazim during the quincentenary year. The resultant quickening of interest (even if only in the introduction of Sephardic foods to the Ashkenazic dinner table) implies potential for breaking down the communications barrier that historically has divided the two communities from one another. This process has scarcely begun, and will require the goodwill of all partners if it is to be brought to fruition. One influential Sephardic rabbi queried about the matter insisted that nothing was accomplished along these lines during the quincentennial year. His view may stem at least in part from the acerbic rivalry between Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities that characterized commemora-

tive activities in his own city. It remains to be seen whether the Sephardi awakening will lead to rapprochement with Ashkenazim or, to the contrary, stiffen the cultural barriers between them.

One quarter in which there appears to be the beginning of a Sephardi renaissance is religious practice, with the founding of new congregations based on Sephardic ritual. Will the revival of unique Sephardi religious observance, with its concomitant shift of Sephardim out of historically Ashkenazic congregations into newly formed Sephardic ones, facilitate or obstruct closer relations between the two groups? The answer to this question is tied to the question of whether Sephardim will remain fixated on past traumas or will rise to the challenge of creativity in the twenty-first century. It also depends on the willingness and the ability of Ashkenazim to view the Jewish world in more ample terms, beyond the bounds of *yiddishkeit*.

For the predominantly Ashkenazic American Jews, Jewish history until now has meant primarily East European Jewish history. The preeminent "fact" they may "know" about Sephardim is their victimization by the Inquisition and subsequent expulsion from Spain. The quincentenary year made a start at remedying misconceptions concerning this period, for example, by clarifying the jurisdiction of the Inquisition. Some ancestral myths and prejudices were challenged, starting with the notion that all converts remained Jews at heart, the same assumption the Inquisitors made. A mark of progress in revising traditional ideas was the perceived change in vocabulary from "marrano," with its echoes of martyrdom, to the neutral "converso," allowing space for true Christian converts and for the ambiguous identity that is still visible in the American Southwest.

The impact of the Sephardic "coming out" seems to have been negligible among Catholic Hispanics. Anecdotes from the American Southwest indicate that families of *converso* descent hesitate to reveal their origins to their neighbors for fear of social ostracism. Hispanic Americans did not respond in noticeable numbers to events that were perceived as Jewish, not Hispanic; for many, the concept "Hispanic" does not include a Jewish component.

One dimension of Jewish quincentenary history did not receive much attention, probably because it received so much during the 400th anniversary year. Nineteenth-century American Jewry was eager to show that their ancestors had participated in the making of the New World, and considerable research was carried out on the people whom Boleslao Lewin was later to call the "Yiddishe derobberer." That theme moderated in 1992, probably because all the "robbers" with *converso*

ancestry had already been identified, and also because of enhanced awareness of the Native American experience of the conquest.

How Many Jews were Expelled from Spain?

Re-evaluation of the Jewish dimension of the events of 1492 actually began in 1965 with the publication of Henry Kamen's *Inquisition and Society in Spain in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson). Subsequently, Kamen renewed his challenge to traditional interpretations of the expulsion in a 1988 article in which he argued that the purpose of the edict of March 31, 1492, was conversion, not expulsion; that closer to 40,000-50,000 Jews were expelled (a figure he later lowered to 30,000) rather than the traditional estimate of 150,000-200,000 or more espoused by other historians; and that the economic impact of the departure of the Jews from Spain was negligible because this population had already been despoiled: the earlier departure of the wealthier *conversos* was far more damaging to Spain's economy.

Although the 1988 article created a stir among Jewish scholars, it surfaced to public attention four years later, during the quincentenary year. Both traditional and revisionist views were presented at conferences and in publications by highly-credentialed scholars. For some auditors, revised views of the expulsion from Spain evoked Holocaust revisionism: the downward revision of figures seemed to imply that "things were not so bad for the Jews, after all." That the issue cannot be dismissed but requires serious academic attention is attested by the decision of the late noted historian Elie Kedourie to publish an essay by Kamen side by side with one by Haim Beinart, who maintains the traditional view of the decree as an order of expulsion issued by the Crown for economic and religious reasons and resulting in catastrophe for both the Jews and for Spain. In his introduction to the recently-published *Spain and the Jews: The Sephardi Experience 1492 and After*, Kedourie noted mildly that the Spanish monarchs had two motives, conversion and expulsion, but he made no serious attempt to reconcile the two schools of thought.

Jews and Native Americans

The relationship between Jews and Native Americans also came in for consideration during the quincentenary year through the revisiting of the Jewish Indian theory. The notion that the Americans descended from the lost tribes of Israel was current in the first years of contact between Europe and the Americas because of complex theological issues and inadequate

knowledge of Western Hemisphere geography. It was subjected to analysis by Menasseh ben Israel, the seventeenth-century Amsterdam rabbi and *baal t'shuvah* whose enigmatic book, *La esperanza de Israel* or *Mikveh Israel*, has become the subject of a growing scholarly literature. In 1992, Menasseh emerged as a sort of media star alongside Carlos Fuentes.

In fact, there was a relationship between Jews and Indians, derived not from common ancestry, as Catholic missionaries and Protestant evangelicals proposed, but from faulty European perceptions of the "other." The same racist premises that underlay Spanish policy toward New Christians who had formerly been Jews controlled Spanish policy toward New Christians who had formerly been pagans. The fact that Spanish missionaries in the Americas lumped Jews and Indians together as cannibals and idol worshippers reinforced popular fear of judaizing New Christians and validated the Inquisition's strenuous efforts to rid the New World of them. The doctrine of Jewish racial inferiority that rationalized the exclusion of New Christians from positions of honor was reactivated and reinterpreted so as to exclude mestizos (offspring of Spanish and Native American parents) from clerical and government positions. In 1992, as Jews backed away from the identification with the Spanish/Portuguese conquerors which was so popular a theme one hundred years earlier, the perception was renewed that Jews and Native Americans had a shared history, not because of their innate qualities or their culture, but because the conquerors treated them in similar ways.

A New Anti-Semitic Slander: Jews and the Slave Trade

The third "historians' war" is just beginning, and we shall undoubtedly hear a great deal more about it. In 1991, the Nation of Islam published *The Secret Relationship between Blacks and Jews*, vol. I. Among the book's allegations: the Jews were expelled from Spain for having enslaved Christian Spaniards; Jews, operating from their base on the island of Sao Tome, organized the trans-Atlantic trade in African slaves; Jewish international bankers financed the slave trade and enriched themselves by trafficking in black flesh, etc. The book is freighted with footnotes giving it a scholarly appearance, citing the work of Itzhak Baer, Cecil Roth, Meyer Kayserling, Gerson Cohen, Solomon Grayzel, Henry Feingold, Judith Elkin, Robert Cohen, Arnold Wiznitzer, Arthur Herzberg, et al. The citations are either taken out of context or distorted in other ways that have been only partly documented in a pamphlet issued by the Simon Wiesenthal Foundation. Their cumulative impact is to make it appear that

Jewish historians agree that Jews were the principal promoters and beneficiaries of black slavery.

All the traditional leitmotifs of anti-Jewish propaganda are professionally packaged in this book. The actions of individual Jewish slave traders are spun into a global Jewish conspiracy to subjugate Blacks; the role of European governments in licensing the slave trade, of Arab slavers in collecting Black "merchandise" across Africa for sale at Atlantic ports, and of the Catholic Church in condoning slavery, are all omitted in favor of identifying Jews as the guilty party. The objectivity of Jewish scholars in researching and reporting activities that, in the light of twentieth-century morality, are not regarded as ethical, is turned into damaging accusations against an entire people, without reference to the context in which these actions took place. The scholarly appearance of the book adds to its academic cachet, and its circulation poses an especially insidious problem on college campuses. In terms of its capacity for lasting damage, this book is on a par with *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

The activities of the quincentenary year established links between past and present racism without moving us closer to understanding its psychology. Did the Spanish/Portuguese exclusion of Jews from the New World bequeath to contemporary Latin Americans a legacy of intolerance toward Jews which cannot be overcome by the pockets of goodwill that unquestionably also exist? Or is racism an innate quality of all peoples, finding its current manifestation in tracts such as the one by the Nation of Islam? The historians' war over interpreting the motivation, the dimensions, and the consequences of the expulsion produced new insights, but it is still unknown where lies the closer approximation to the truth. Even the consequences of a revived Sephardi self-awareness remain to be played out. The double quincentenary clarified some issues, reopened others thought to have been long settled, and loosed a number of ideas that will have a major impact on the relations between Sephardim and Ashkenazim, and between Jews and the other "races" that took part in the events of 1492.

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Judith Laikin Elkin was project director of "Jews and the Encounter with the New World, 1492/1992," a series of conferences held at the University of Michigan under the sponsorship of the National Endowment for the Humanities. This article is based on a paper delivered at the Seventh International Research Conference of the Latin American Jewish Studies Association, held in Philadelphia on 6-7 November 1993.