A Short, Simple History of the Spanish Inquisition

Every American child knows about King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella – they are the monarchs who backed Christopher Columbus in his discovery of America. However, here are a few things that most people don't know about them.

The marriage of Ferdinand V from Aragon, and Isabella I from Castile, in 1469 unified Spain, into a mighty kingdom. Isabella was a "fervent" Christian and, in 1478, she asked the Pope for permission to set up an Inquisition to weed out heresy in the Christian world. The Pope obliged, and Ferdinand and Isabella followed that up with a royal decree on September 27, 1480.

In 1483 when Tomas de Torquemada, a Spanish Dominican monk, was appointed Grand Inquisitor the Inquisition got its bloody reputation. Jewish converses would be arrested and accused of not being true Christians. They didn't even know who was accusing them; evidence would be presented against them in secret. Then they would be tortured until they confessed to being heretics. Then, once they confessed, they would be killed.

Shortly after 1492 Ferdinand and Isabella, decided to throw all the Jews out of Spain. This time, they were targeting Jews who had never converted. The main reason was to keep Jews from re-Judaizing the converses. Another factor that certainly played a big role was that Jewish money was now needed to rebuild the kingdom after the costly war against the Muslims. Rather than slowly squeezing the money out of the Jews through taxation, it was easier to expel them all at once and confiscate the wealth and property they would leave behind.

The Jews tried to get the edict reversed, of course. The key player in the drama was Don Isaac Abravanel – who was a great Torah scholar and rabbi. He was one of the great Jewish personalities of this period of time, and had served as the treasurer of Spain, thus being the most powerful Jew in Spain. He tried very hard to rescind the expulsion order, at one point offering the monarchs 300,000 ducats for a reprieve.

He actually almost succeeded in getting the monarchs to rescind the edict, but his near-success only ignited the ire of the Grand Inquisitor Tomas de Torquemada.

According to the legend, Torquemada – who had an enormous amount of influence over the Queen Isabella, being her confessor – walked in while Abravanel was pleading his cause. Incensed, he threw the cross at the Queen, hitting her in the head and yelled: "Judas sold his master (Jesus) for 30 pieces of silver. Now you would sell him anew!"
And so Don Isaac Abravanel lost. But he was so important to the monarchs that they gave him a special dispensation to stay; they even agreed that another nine Jews could stay with him so he could pray with a minyan. He refused. In fact, he became the leader of the Jews of Spain as they went into exile.

The six months between the issuing of the edict and the actual expulsion were catastrophic for the Jewish community. Having lived in Spain for centuries they were now being told that they all had leave! Where would they go? To add insult to injury, they had to liquidate all their assets but could not take most of their wealth with them. They were forced to sell a massive amount of real state, personal goods and other valuables at a fraction of their actual worth. In short, most of the Jews lost virtually everything.

Now, on what day was the Jewish community sent into exile? August 2, 1492. (the original date was July 31st, but Torquemada extended it by a few days.) This day just happened to be the 9th of Av, the same date as the destruction of the first and second Temple in Jerusalem (and many other disasters as we have already seen). On that day the Jews of Spain (some 150,000 – 200,000 people) were forced to abandon their vast possessions and leave. The remainder (around 60,000 though it’s unknown exactly how many) stayed, agreeing to convert.

Christopher Columbus

The day after the expulsion, August 3, 1492, Christopher Columbus left on his famed voyage of discovery. His diary begins:

In the same month in which their Majesties issued the edict that all Jews should be driven out of the kingdom and its territories, in the same month, they gave me the order to undertake with sufficient men my expedition of discovery of the Indies.

Many people like to speculate that Columbus was of Jewish ancestry, and there is a good case for it.

- When he wrote, Columbus made funny little marks on the page that resembled the markings that religious Jews put on top of the written page even to this day – an abbreviation of besiyata d’ishmaya, which means "with God's help" in Aramaic.
- He talked a great deal about Zion in his writings. In his crew, he had five known Jews, including his doctor, navigator, and translator. Columbus hired the translator, Louis de Torres, because he spoke Hebrew.
• Furthermore, there's no question that Columbus's voyage to America was spiritually linked to the expulsion. Just as one of the greatest Jewish communities of Medieval Europe is being destroyed, God was opening up the doors of what is going to eventually become the greatest Diaspora refuge for Jews in history – America.
• Columbus's voyage was not financed by Isabella selling her jewels as is often stated. The major financiers were two court officials – both Jewish converses – Louis de Santangel, chancellor of the royal household, and Gabriel Sanchez, treasurer of Aragon.

The first letter Columbus sent back from the New World was not to Ferdinand and Isabella, but to Santangel and Sanchez thanking them for their support and telling them what he found.

A Blessing

While Columbus was off discovering America, what was happening to the Jews newly thrown out of Spain?

Most made their way across the border to Portugal, but their stay there was short-lived. Five years later, Portugal offered them the same choice as Spain: "convert, leave or die." (Although rather than actually expel them - which would have caused him a massive loss of valuable Jews - the King of Portugal first abducted and forcibly baptized all Jewish children and then orchestrated a mass, forced conversion of virtually the entire Jewish population. He then forbade these "New Christians" from emigrating.)

Thousands of Jews who fled Spain went to Turkey, which historically has been very nice to the Jews. Opening his doors to them, the Sultan of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, Bayezid II, declared: "They tell me that Ferdinand of Spain is a wise man but he is a fool. For he takes his treasure and sends it all to me."

How did the movement of the Jews affect these countries? Spain, which having discovered and colonized the new World should have been the wealthiest of countries, was bankrupt within one hundred years of the expulsion. Turkey, on the other hand, prospered. The Ottoman Empire became one of the greatest powers in the world. The next two sultans, Selim I and Suleiman I, expanded the empire as far as Vienna, Austria.

(Incidentally, it was Suleiman – known as "Suleiman the Magnificent" – who, in 1536, re-built the walls of Jerusalem – the same walls that stand today and define the Old City.)

If we recall the lesson of Part 4, God had given Abraham and his descendants a special blessing:
"I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you, and through you, will be blessed all the families of the earth." (Genesis 12:3)

God said to Abraham that he and his descendants – the Jews – would be under God's protection. The nations and peoples who would be good to the Jews will do well. Empires and peoples that would be bad to the Jews will do poorly.

Throughout history you can chart the rise and fall of many of the countries and empires of the Middle East and West by how they treated the Jewish people.