

A Jewish Journey in Spain
Shabbat Vayigash 5780

January 3, 2020

Rabbi Barry H. Block

Robert and Daniel, knowing well how to push my buttons, will occasionally cite a portion of the family's heritage by asking rhetorically, "We're German, right?" To which I offer the expected response: "No, we're Jewish."

I don't know how long my ancestors lived in Germany. Perhaps they came from elsewhere a few generations back. I wouldn't be surprised if the family has lived in the southern United States longer than any ever resided in Germany. The appellation "wandering Jew" is real. Our people immigrated from one place to another, across the centuries, in search of a better life. Sometimes, they were escaping violent antisemitism. On other occasions, such as when relatively prosperous German Jews came to the United States in the mid-1800s, they were seeking opportunity.

Last week, Robert, Daniel, and I traveled to Spain, in part to experience a contemporary culture that is new to us; but even more, to explore our own people's history in a land where our ancestors enjoyed some of their greatest fortunes as well as some of their most extreme degradations.

We have all heard the term, "The Spanish Inquisition." Many are also familiar with "The Golden Age of Jews in Spain." Understanding these two phenomena of our history helps us to analyze the current position of Jews in America and around the world.

But since it's Shabbat, let's start with the Torah portion. Joseph is the Prime Minister of Egypt, second only to the king. Among the supplicants who come before him are his brothers, though his identity is at first unknown to them. Joseph does provide food for his brothers and for his father back at home in Canaan. In this week's passage, the brothers are at last reunited in love. Jacob and the brothers will move to Egypt to join Joseph.

Centuries later, in Spain, the favor of rulers—usually Muslim, but occasionally Christian—would put a few Jewish leaders in positions analogous to Joseph's. Jews served as Prime Minister and in other distinguished roles, beginning under the Umayyad sultans who conquered Spain in the year 711. Like Joseph for

Pharaoh before them, Jewish leaders served their Muslim and Christian rulers with diplomatic and administrative skill.

Like that initial Pharaoh, the Umayyads were good to the Jews, as they were to the Christians. Perhaps Umayyad tolerance was based on their own history. They Umayyads had ruled Muslim Syria, until rivals murdered all but one member of the royal family, who escaped all the way to Spain. Not having been tolerated by foes among their own people, perhaps the Umayyads learned a lesson analogous to that of Torah, caring for foreigners, having themselves been made into strangers in their own land.

In Spain, Muslims were not always good to the Jews, and Christians were not always bad. The Umayyad dynasty didn't last. They were conquered by Christians from the north and North African Muslims from the south. The Almohads, Muslims from North Africa, were not tolerant like the Umayyads. Maimonides' family, for example, escaped Almohad oppression by migrating to Egypt. One of the last great strongholds of Jewish life in Spain was in Toledo, under Christian rule, where Jews were valued for several centuries just as they had been under the Umayyads. However, that golden age ended abruptly, in Toledo in central Spain as in Cordoba in the south, with horrific pogroms in the early 1390s, a century before the expulsion and Inquisition.

The year 1492, of course, was fateful for the Jews of Spain. Grenada, in the southeast, the last Muslim holding in Spain, was conquered by the Catholic monarchs, Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand. Robert, Daniel, and I paid a solemn visit to the room in the Alhambra, the Sultan's royal palace occupied by the Catholic monarchs, where Isabella and Ferdinand issued the edict of expulsion of the Jews on March 31, 1492. All Jews would have to leave Spain or convert to Catholicism in four months' time, by July 31, 1492.

The expulsion was cataclysmic for the Jews of Spain, forced to choose between their homes and their faith. With the distance of centuries, though, we may celebrate our people's resilience. Jews who left Spain brought with them the talents and skills honed across centuries of relative prosperity. Jewish art and culture, Hebrew poetry, and the codification of Jewish law exploded across the Mediterranean world, including in the Land of Israel, in the 16th century.

The Inquisition, though, did not begin and end with the expulsion. For over three centuries, Jews who had at least outwardly converted to Catholicism were hunted down, suspected of being insincere, and persecuted. Like their Nazi

successors, the Inquisitors defined Jews as a racial group, suspecting so-called “new Christians” of heresy if even one of their great-great grandparents had been Jewish. One denunciation, often by a person who coveted the property of a “new Christian,” would lead to a show trial with a certain verdict of burning at the stake. More than a few Jews fled Spain in the 17th century, long after Ferdinand and Isabella were dead. They chose destinations like The Netherlands, England, and even the New World. While few Spanish Jews went to Germany or Eastern Europe, some did—and surely, across the centuries, their descendants migrated south from Holland and England, north from Italy and Greece. Who’s to say that my own ancestors, and the ancestors of many who think of themselves as Ashkenazic Jews, did not include Jews who had come from Spain?

And Jews were not the only victims off the Inquisition. Muslims, too, were targeted, as were homosexuals and political dissidents. The parallels to the Nazis are more profound and sweeping than I had expected, though I should not have been surprised. We all know that antisemitism is rife among white supremacists, and that antisemites are often also racists. Remember the “very fine people” who chanted “Jews will not replace us” in Charlottesville two and a half years ago?

In this week’s Torah portion, Joseph reunites with his long-lost brothers, and they become one people yet again. The Haftarah, from the Prophet Ezekiel, predicts that the divided kingdoms of Judea and Israel will again be one people.

Our Jewish people in the State of Israel have united across the last seventy-plus years as one nation: Jews whose ancestors came from Poland marry those descended from Moroccan Jews and interact with Jews from Ethiopia. Yes, class differences and even racial strife continue, but all within one Jewish people. A version of Ezekiel’s prophesy would seem to be fulfilled in spirit.

Here in the United States, we Reform Jews often see ourselves as having little in common with ultra-Orthodox Jews who live, dress, and practice Judaism very differently. Recent weeks, though, have brought heightened awareness of a lethal wave of antisemitism striking at ultra-Orthodox Jews and those who live and work among them in the New York area. Appropriately, we react viscerally: These are our people under attack, for no reason other than that they are Jews.

These times have also raised the eternal question: What is a Jew? The answer is clear, both as we examine our history and as we contemplate our present: Jews are bound by faith and by fate—that is, by religion, yes, and also by peoplehood, what other people call “nationality.” Like our ancestors living under

the Umayyads, American Jews may be boundlessly grateful that we live in a land where we enjoy freedom as well as access to prosperity. We are American Jews, sharing much in common with one another and with our neighbors—be they African American, Mexican American, Irish American, or of any other national origin.

Let us ever celebrate our bonds with our fellow Americans, and also with every Jew, whatever each individual's practice and celebrating a variety of ancestries, real and perceived—from Germany as from Spain; from Africa, Asia, or Latin America as from European the Middle East; “born” Jewish or having become a Jew as quickly as one could. Then, may we come together as one family, like Joseph and his brothers, fulfilling the prophesy of old.

Amen.