

Knowing When to Leave

Shabbat Zachor 5785

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“Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!” That’s a line of comedy from a recurring segment of *Monty Python’s Flying Service*. Leaving aside the propriety of creating comedy out of a historic catastrophe for the Jewish people, the makers of *Monty Python* were comedians, not historians. In real life, the Inquisition should not have been so unexpected.

Two significant historical events emanated from the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, in 1492: The Catholic King and Queen, as they were called, Ferdinand and Isabella, dispatched Columbus to “sail the ocean blue;” and, on March 31, they issued an edict of expulsion, requiring that all Jews leave Spain by July 31 of that year.

While the expulsion order was new, the Inquisition began fourteen years earlier. A full century before 1492, Catholics in much of Spain murdered thousands of Jews and destroyed their property in the Massacre of 1391. Over the course of centuries, as Catholic monarchs conquered Muslim Spain, Jews were increasingly at risk of life and limb. During the century between the Massacre of 1391 and the expulsion of 1492, as many as a half million Jews converted to Catholicism to save their skins.

To be more precise, they converted to preserve their lives **without leaving Spain**. Some might have imagined that the persecutions would soon pass. They had been born into what we’ve come to know as the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, had become comfortable in that land, spoke the language, and knew the people. Perhaps they identified as Spaniards as much as they identified as Jews, which will sound familiar to us as American Jews.

Learning about the Inquisition as a young person, I came away with a misconception. The heroes, I thought, were *marranos*, a word that means “‘pig’, or, more often, ‘dirty person,’ according to *Merriam-Webster*, though that was not what I was taught. *Marranos*, I learned, never truly intended to convert to Catholicism, and they continued to practice Judaism secretly.

The more I’ve learned, though, the more I realized that the true Jewish heroes of the Inquisition were those who left everything they had known. The Ottoman Empire—Muslim, like Spain in the Golden Age—opened its arms to Jewish exiles, who settled in Ottoman lands across the Mediterranean world and in the Middle East, including the Land of Israel. Others sought refuge in newly

mercantile Holland, which eagerly received the influx of experienced merchants with far-flung connection to other Jews across Europe, the Near East, North Africa, and soon the Americas. Jewish life flourished everywhere Jews went after fleeing Spain and Portugal, which would soon also take up the fires of the Inquisition.

The biggest hole in my earlier education about the expulsion and Inquisition concerned the fate of *conversos*, as the Jews who converted to Catholicism called themselves. I was under the impression that they were faced with a purely religious persecution—that is, Jews were safe if they converted to Christianity, unlike the Nazis’ racial persecution. That misconception was laid to rest when I visited Spain in 2019. Any person with Jewish ancestry remained vulnerable to the Inquisition for decades, sometimes centuries, after 1492.

Generations after the expulsion, Catholic Spaniards would regularly denounce their Jewish neighbors or competitors in business to the Inquisition. You see, if a Catholic exposed that a person of Jewish extraction was still practicing Judaism, they would be rewarded. After the *converso* was executed, whether they confessed or were convicted, guilty or not, the Spaniard who accused them would receive their property. If the “offending” *converso* was your neighbor, you could expand your house! If he was your competitor in business, well, you get the picture.

Surviving *conversos* reemerged as Jews when they emigrated in the 1500s and 1600s. Many went to Great Britain and Amsterdam, but the first Jews to reach North America, my own first ancestors on these shores included, came from Portugal, where many Jews had escaped from Spain in 1492. The Inquisition came to Portugal, too, so *conversos* left as they saw that they could not live on the Iberian Peninsula as *conversos*. They went first to Recife, in Brazil, and to Curacao, off the coast of Venezuela, and ultimately to New Amsterdam, now New York, after Portugal captured those South American territories from the Netherlands. Now, rather than *conversos*, and certainly not *marranos*, they began to call themselves אנוסים (*anusim*), a Hebrew word meaning people who had converted under the thumb of an oppressor.

This Shabbat, immediately preceding Purim, is called *Shabbat Zachor*, the Shabbat of remembrance. By tradition, we read a passage from Deuteronomy in addition to the regular weekly reading from Leviticus. It begins, זכור את אשר עשה לך עמלק, *Zachor*, “**Remember** what Amalek did to you.” I daresay that most do **not** remember Amalek, said to have attacked the Israelites during their desert journey, striking them from behind when they were “famished and weary,” killing “all the stragglers” at the back of the pack.ⁱ

The reason for reading this passage this week is that Haman, Purim's villain, is said to be descended from Amalek. Specifically, Haman is called an "Agagite,"ⁱⁱ a descendant of Agag, a king in the ancestral line between Amalek and Haman, whom King Saul fails to kill at God's command. The apparently lesson is that Jews must wipe out our tormentors, or they will multiply. We forget the history of antisemitism at our peril.

I wonder if there isn't an additional lesson. Amalek murdered "the stragglers." They were weak and defenseless, the ones who moved slowly. Nobody, ever, should blame victims for their persecution and murder, and I will not do that tonight. Still, if the history of the expulsion and Inquisition is our guide, knowing when to leave, even a land that has been "golden" for the Jews, is essential to Jewish survival. Being the Jews at the back of the pack can be deadly.

Not long ago, a friend out of state shared with me letters that her family discovered in her grandparents' home after their deaths. My friends's grandparents had left Poland after seeing what Hitler was doing in Germany but before he invaded Poland. They had gone despite the pleadings of family members who urged them to stay, and before just about anybody was fleeing parts of Europe not formally in Hitler's grip. The letters include desperate pleas from my friends' great-grandparents, who had not wanted their son and daughter-in-law to leave. Now, with their lives were threatened, they begged their son to find a way for them to come to the United States, a wish on which he tragically had no way to deliver at that late date.

I pray that America will never become a place that Jewish people will need to flee. At the same time, make no mistake: persecution and mass murder have come to "golden" lands for Jews in the past, including both medieval Spain and twentieth century Germany. When the Vice President of the United States and the President's closest advisor, the richest man in the world, plead for the inclusion of a neo-Nazi party in Germany's ruling coalition in 2025, we have reason for concern.

We also have a magnificent blessing that medieval Spanish Jews did not have any more than my friend's great-grandparents did: the State of Israel, pledged to take in any Jew, from anywhere in the world, under threat or simply seeking to live among our people where we are sovereign. Now, more than ever, we have a stake in assuring a free, democratic, and Jewish State of Israel, which is why the World Zionist Congress election is so critical, not only for the welfare of our people in Israel but also for our own.

In a few days' time, we will celebrate Purim, reading a מגילה (*megillah*) that tells of a plot to murder every Jew in a kingdom that stretched from India to Ethiopia—that is, every Jew in the world at the time. That story ends happily, even as the story did for the descendants of Inquisition victims who reached American shores: ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששן ויקר, “The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor.”

May we know that joy on Purim, this year and long into the future.

Amen.

ⁱ Deuteronomy 25:17-18.

ⁱⁱ Ester 3:1.