

## Past & Present Reflections of the Sephardic Experience in the Caribbean

Jônatas Chimen Dias DaSilva-Benayon  
University of Wisconsin Madison  
Florida International University

By 1391 the beginning of the conclusion of Jewish history in the Iberian Peninsula had been announced. The territory formerly known as *Al Andalus*, or “Our Andalusia”, would no longer extend its hospitality to the thousands of *Sephardim* who for millenia called it home. Towards such intent, the Church embarked on a rampage of *autos-da-fé*, producing tremendous public spectacles where the only options given to the Hebrews were the baptismal waters or the burning stakes. By 1492, the infamous *Alhambra Decree* (Edict of Expulsion) had finally culminated in Spain (Fuentes 103), and by 1497, a similar suit followed the Jews of Portugal, bringing to an end organized Jewish life in the Peninsula. The word “organized” however, is of extreme importance in this context. For as history has shown, underground Jewish life survived in the Peninsula well past the XV Century, moving into the New World with the discovery campaigns, and reaching us today in sporadic areas of the former Spanish and Portuguese colonies. And so, this brings the main subject of this article; the journey of these post-expulsion *Sephardim* who drifted between secrecy and openly Jewish lives. Within their Diaspora, special attention shall be given to those *Sephardim* who found their way to the Caribbean, where many eventually thrived under the tolerant domains of the Dutch, while others succumbed for centuries under the auspices of the Spanish and Portuguese, whose reigns the Inquisition dominated.

As a starting point, it is important to note that among the new-Christians (also known as *conversos*) there were different adherence levels to the Christian faith. Historians David Gitlitz and Jose Faur point out such distinctions, listing among them: “true converts who became faithful to Christianity; partial converts who vacillated between Judaism and Christianity or attempted a syncretic accommodation of the two religions;[and] crypto-Jewish converts who, to the extent possible, remained

faithful to Judaism, (...)” (Jacobs 4). The Holy Office of the Inquisition was mostly concerned with new-Christians who practiced Judaism in secrecy. Congruently, this article shall focus on them.

Stopping the *conversos* from escaping the Peninsula were a series of racial laws, and since they were suspects of “impureza de sangre” (Fuentes 104), their prospects were slim. Nonetheless, already anticipating this obstacle, new-Christians were sure to secure their way out. Historian Cecil Roth, author of *Spanish Inquisition*, expounds more on their participation in the colonization of the New World, showing that; “Luis de Santangel,(...) actually provided the money for it,(...) Luis de Torres, baptized the day before they set sail (...), Bernal, the ship's physician, (...) had not long before figured at an *auto* on a charge of Judaizing. (...), and there were even *marrano* [a derogatory, antisemitic term] *conquistadores* in the little band which followed Cortes to Mexico” (208). Jacobs also points out the widespread migration of new-Christians to the Americas: “(...) In addition to Peru and New Spain, areas of Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay were settled by crypto-Jewish converts (...)” (8). And Harry A. Ezratty, focuses in great detail on the journey of the *Sephardim* to the islands, mentioning that “Inquisition records reveal that secret Jews were discovered and tried in Hispaniola, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Trinidad and Jamaica,” (8). Exactly how the *Sephardim* were able to organize and rebuild community life during a time of extreme Catholic constabulary is a matter that has puzzled historians for centuries. It can be argued however, that a weakening of Spain's Armada coupled with the rise of other European economic powers, provided the right environment for their up-rise in the Caribbean. This scenario, and more, shall be discussed in the following paragraphs.

When it comes to Spain's withholding of power in the Caribbean, it is important to note that, contrary to common notion, the islands encompass vast geographical distances. This perhaps explains how extraordinarily challenging it must have been for the *Mater Patriae* to protect the area from invaders, as it abridges “(...) the core islands usually referred to as the Antilles, starting with Cuba and running east to the Virgin Islands, and then South to Trinidad, and extending back west to include the Dutch Islands, and then South to Trinidad, and extending back west to include the Dutch islands of

Bonaire, Curaçao, and Aruba. The region also includes the Caribbean periphery, which consists of the mainland countries which border on the Caribbean Sea, such as Venezuela, Colombia, and the Central American states” (Goldish 9).

In addition to guarding difficulties, it is safe to assume that colonizing such territories entailed an expenditure that Spain could hardly afford, specially since its Armada became highly depleted by storms and attacks. Ezratti points out that this scenario that would bring the downfall of Spain's monopoly in the region, and that “Spain would never again regain its strength and position as Europe's most powerful force in the Caribbean” (8).

On the side lines was Holland, eager to establish a presence in the Caribbean, and careless about restrictions on *conversos* who wished to re-assume their Mosaic faith. And so; “In 1624, the Dutch captured Brazil's capital, Bahia, from Portugal with an invasion force that included several dozen declared Jews. (...) Under Dutch protection, a Jewish community thrived there for twenty four years” (Kritzler 7). Kritzler also describes how England partook in the colonizing of the islands; “Jamaica's Portugals sent a note to Cromwell's agent: Jamaica could be conquered with little resistance, and they pledged their assistance. The following year, a Jew from Nevis led thirty-six English ships into the harbor. And two local Jews negotiated and signed the peace treaty surrendering the island to England. The treaty exiled the Spanish, and Cromwell invite Jamaica's Portugals to stay openly as Jews” (9). It was this way that the Caribbean became divided among a number of European rising powers, and from there on, a new apogee of the *Sephardim* had begun.

The entrepreneurial spirit of Holland and England quickly took advantage of the *Sephardim's* knowledge of trade, maritime navigation, and linguistics. The Spanish-Portuguese Israelites readily joined on the ventures of the Dutch West India Trading Company, which due to its wealth, had a direct effect on the rebuilding of their religious communities; “with the Dutch West India Trading Company in 1630, (...) Recife's Jews [northeast Brazil]engaged in sugar cultivation, finance, export and slave trade. They opened a synagogue, Tzur Israel (Rock of Israel). They opened a religious school and by

1642 brought a rabbi from Amsterdam. Isaac Aboab de Fonseca, together with a *hazzan* Moses Rafael de Aguilar (...)" (Ezratti 13). With the *Sephardim* as partners in trade, the West India Trading Company would acquire extraordinary benefits, since these *Homens de Negócio* (Businessmen) "formed a global tribe of inside traders, bonded by heritage, language, and a hatred for Spain" (Kritzler 5). As for their business niche, maritime piracy was the chosen path, for it was a "lucrative area of commerce in which these Jewish merchants specialized. (...)" (5), and it must be said, that this type of business was not seen as dishonorable, for as Kritzler indicates, "it was the normal business of every nation to license mercenaries to seize and rob enemy ships and share the proceeds. The only difference with the Jews was they did not have to license their freebooters" (6).

Thus, as Luso-Hispanic Jews enjoyed relative freedom and an increase in capital, organized communities sprouted throughout the Caribbean. Their communities could be found on the islands of "Barbados, Nevis, Jamaica, St. Eustatius, and the Danish Virgin Islands" (Goldish 11). However, as Goldish highlights, the conversos in "(...) Cuba, Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean Periphery (...) (11)" were still under the thumbs of the Inquisition, and "the only way the *Sephardim* could [live] in pre-independence Latin America was as non-practicing Jews, as hidden Jews or at their peril" (11).

Nevertheless, the *Sephardic* presence was always a constant in Cuba, and the Church seemed to have been aware of this fact, as "In 1508, the bishop of Cuba reported, "practically every ship [arriving in Havana] is filled with Hebrews and New Christians" (Kritzler 47). Drifting between the legality and illegality of their trade and religious statuses, new-Christians would establish their presence in territories where Judaism was accepted, while resorting to their Christian *persona* when in Catholic lands; "one illegal trader was the pirate known as Motta, the Portuguese, whose Jewish descendants are prominent today in Jamaica and Panama. The governor charged that Motta and his partner Abraham, "a Fleming", regularly called on Jamaica from a base in Cuba (...)" (161). Kritzler also speaks on the Ysassu family, who "dominated the Cabildo, and held powerful positions in Puerto Rico and Cuba"

(176).

On the Island of Curaçao, the *Sephardim* started arriving in the 1650's. They were mostly Portuguese Jews who found their way to Holland, and then through the trade routes established “a community on the island which they called Mikve Israel – Hope of Israel” (Goldish 5). A little earlier on their journey, they passed by the Dutch occupied territory of Pernambuco, Brazil, but “when Holland surrendered these Brazilian territories back to Portugal in 1654, most of the practicing Jews, fearing religious persecution, decided to leave Brazil” (5). This community grew deep roots in Curaçao, and by “1789 the number of Jews on the island had grown to almost 1,500, which represented 38% of the white population” (7).

As for the Island of Jamaica, the genesis of the *Sephardim* can be traced to 1534, “a year when disparate events came together in ways that broke with the past and shifted the century forward to new beginnings” (Ezratti 48), for it was within this sporadic moment of tolerance that “the most Catholic Defender of the True Faith, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, authorized the first documented Jewish settlement in the New World (...)” (48). Ezratti speaks of at least three resulting communities; the first being the synagogue *Neveh Shalom*, which was constructed in 1704, *Beth Yankakob*, built in 1844, where the Periera Mendeses family “were to enrich American Jewry with their presence” (148), and lastly, *Shaare Shalom*, built in 1885, and still active today (147).

Worthy mentioning, is the way that many *Sephardim* efficiently integrated their extended communities; which was by joining the Fraternal Order of Free & Accepted Masons. For the brotherhood could offer them two elements of great importance; an environment of tolerance and equality among Jews and non-Jews, and an ever-growing global network. Goldish expresses amazement when analyzing the depth of this relationship; “A fascinating and unexpected factor appears over and over again in the *Sephardic* immigrant stories presented in this book [*Once Jews – Stories of the Caribbean Sephardim*]. All the men and most of their male descendants were members of the Freemasonry movement. (...)” (238). The author then expounds on the extent of Freemason Jews in

the Caribbean, saying that in Curaçao, “the *Sephardim* were the co-founders of both the Igualdad lodge in 1855 and the Acacia lodge in 1874. (...)” (238), and that “in St. Thomas, (...) the Harmonic Lodge was an important element in the life of most of the *Sephardim*” (238). As for Santo Domingo, Goldish adds that “they became quite active in the Masonic Movement” (131), and that in Barranquilla, the “organization served as an important unifying element among the foreigners” (176), adding that “later in the nineteenth century (...) three of the five leaders of the lodge, Cortissoz, Alvares Correa, and Rois Mendez, were Sephardic Jews (176). It is thus quite evident that the Fraternity provided the *Sephardim* a fresh environment, where they were able to experience greater tolerance, explore intellectuality, and even harbor a sense of brotherhood, something the extended community had not offered them for centuries.

However to their demise, the magnificent *Sephardic* rebirth that once occurred in the Caribbean eventually became only chapters of a nostalgic history. Ezratty explores the current condition of such communities, delivering the following panorama: In Surinam, the synagogue *Beracha Ve Shalom*, “the oldest continuous Jewish community in the New World,” was built in 1685, and it is now only fragments “beneath a heavy tropical jungle” (139), there is also *Tzedek v Shalom*, in Paramaribo, built in 1736, which after a declining existence, “the Jewish Museum in Israel negotiated with the government of Surinam for the entire contents of the synagogue [in 1999]” (139), at Nevis, there are the remnants of an unknown synagogue built in 1684, and “the building is currently used by the Nevis government as an oil storage facility” (140), in St. Eustatius, there remains fragments of the synagogue *Honen Dalim*, built in 1734, where the “island's government does its best to maintain the structure” (141). One also finds an unnamed synagogue in Sint Marthen, which is believed to have been built around 1783, but today “all that remains are part of a brick wall” (142). And as for the communities of St. Croix, Aruba, and Nassau, only graves are the reminders of their original *Sephardim*.

Nonetheless, some active communities can still claim descent from the old *Sephardim*, such as: *Neve Shalom*, built in Paramaribo in 1734, which is still in use today, as in 1992 its representative Rene

Fernandes “planned an ambitious ceremony on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Spanish Expulsion” (140). There is also *Nidhe Israel*, in Barbados, which was built in 1833, reconsecrated in 1987, and still remains “open for Jewish prayers” (144). And in St. Thomas (U.S. Virgin Islands), a community thrives since 1833; as *Beracha V'Shalom* still “offers service to an established congregation” (145).

Besides the communities above mentioned, the only other group that could claim a direct connection to those ancient Hebrews of Spain and Portugal are the *Bene Anusim* (Hebrew for “children of the forced ones”), as isolated pockets have been discovered in different parts of the Peninsula and Latin America. This scattered community still persists in living in a covert condition, and this aspect has become essential to the survival of their vestigial Judaism. Researcher Jacobs goes further into this matter, saying that “one of the most intriguing aspects of modern crypto-Judaism is the survival of a culture of secrecy that is evident in the patterns of silence and disclosure that characterized twentieth-century families with crypto-Jewish ancestors” (21). As for the reason for such secrecy nowadays, Jacobs explains that old fears are renewed by modern antisemitic events, exemplifying that; “(...) the memory of the Inquisition stands alongside the specter of the Holocaust” (27). Jacobs further expounds on the struggle of modern *Bene Anusim* when attempting to recover their Sephardic roots: “(...) Hoping to find their Jewishness in the remnants of Inquisitional Jewish history, the descendants are engaged in a struggle for ethnic recovery that illuminates the difficulties and emotional strains characterizing ethnic revivalism in postgenocide societies” (149).

Nevertheless, for the past few decades an awakening has been occurring within the crypto-Jewish community, as individuals embark on a journey to rebuild their *Sephardic* roots. Yirmiyahu Yovel retells the history of Portuguese World War I hero, Captain Arthur de Barros Basto, who “in 1923 (...) founded an open Jewish community in his hometown of Oporto” (379). The writer further describes how “with help from *Sephardic* groups abroad he launched a propaganda campaign that made him known in Portugal as the “Apostle of the *Marranos*” (379). However, for not listening to his crypto-Jewish instincts, soon enough “Barros Basto was defamed [and] banished from the army”

(379). His efforts nonetheless, were not in vain, as it propelled others in assisting the Portuguese crypto-Jewish community to openly return to Judaism. Although many opposed the abandoning of their hidden-Jewish *Modus Vivendi*, “by the mid-1990s, an official Jewish congregation had been set up (...), and foreign rabbis were coming intermittently to Belmonte to instruct, supervise, perform Orthodox rites, and start implanting Jewish law (*halacha*)” (386). Ever since this Portuguese revival took place, there seems to be an increase of individuals and communities wishing to openly assume their Judaism, and more current cases are discussed on Dr. Abraham Lavender's *Journal of Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian Crypto Jews*. Some of the cases mentioned on Volume 2 (Spring 2010) of the journal are: The fieldwork of Professor Seth Dunkin, who after struggling with trust issues, was able to locate and interview modern crypto-Jews in Puerto Rico (13), Anita Novinsky's visit to the backlands of Brazil in 1987, where she points out that “forty of the most traditional families of the state of Rio Grande do Norte voluntarily reconverted to Judaism after having being living as ostensible Christians for nearly three centuries (...)” (112), and the return of 61 *Bene Anusim* to rabbinical Judaism in 2009, which occurred in the city of Porto Seguro, Brazil (119).

And so, these are the impending questions: What exactly did the Decrees of Expulsion and forced conversions of the XV Century achieve? Was Spanish-Portuguese Judaism truly decimated by the persecutions that lasted several centuries? Evidence shows that during times of extreme intolerance, ethnicity and religion assume more fluid forms, guaranteeing at least partially, the survival of a culture or a group. The case of the *Sephardic* settlers of the Dutch Caribbean shows that, once a safe environment is provided, such groups usually shed their masks, rebuild their identities, and once again thrive in the open. As for those Jews under Spanish and Portuguese rule, who officially endured the Inquisition until the 1800's, their journey has been more arduous. Notwithstanding, hope still remains with the modern revival of the *Bene Anusim*, and as it has been shown, the XXI Century might bring yet another unexpected chapter to the saga of the *Sephardim*.

Works Cited:

“El Espejo Enterrado”. Carlos Fuentes. 1992

“Hidden Heritage”: THE LEGACY OF THE CRYPTO-JEWS. Janet Liebman Jacobs. 2002

“The Spanish Inquisition”. Cecil Roth. 1996

“500 years in the Jewish Caribbean”: THE SPANISH & PORTUGUESE JEWS IN THE WEST INDIES. Harry A. Ezratty. Revised Edition 2002

“Jewish Pirates of the Caribben”. Edward Kritzler. 2008

“Once Jews”: STORIES OF THE CARIBBEAN SEPHARDIM. Josette Capriles Goldish. 2009

“The Other Within”: THE MARRANOS. Yirmiyahu Yovel. 2009

“Journal of Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian Crypto Jews”: PAST AND PRESENT EFFECTS OF THE INQUISITION. Abraham Lavender, Dolores Sloan. Spring 2010