TRAGEDY AND TRANSCENDENCE: THE MEANING OF 1492 FOR JEWISH HISTORY[1]

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PART I: *TRAGEDY*

This year we commemorate the five hundredth anniversary of a tragic expulsion. Our history is replete with tragic moments, but this moment is of enormous significance for Jewish as well as for Christian and Moslem history. For Jews, 1492 constituted the abrupt end of an extraordinary cultural experience, a formative and repercussive period in the life of our people affecting every area of its civilization: Halakha, philosophy, kabbalah, poetry, ethical literature, messianism, political thought, and more.[2] A world of enormous vitality and effervesence, a world, both in its high and low points, that can teach us a great deal about the nature of our faith and community, about our interaction with others, in short, about ourselves.

If we were to attempt to reconstruct some essential trait of medieval Hispanic culture, the following exotic cluster of images might offer a beginning: "Romanesque churches and the splendid Gothic cathedral in Burgos, the picturesque medieval synagogues of Toledo, the cool silence of the great mosque in Cordova and the majesty of the Alhambra in Granada."[3] Medieval Spain, especially in the twelfth century, represented a society of uneasy coexistence suggested by the magic word *convivencia*. Even the Christian *reconquista*, beginning in 1285 with the taking of Toledo, did not fully erode the part myth, part reality of a mutual tolerance between the three faith communities—Christian, Moslem, and Jew—even as late as the thirteenth and into the fourteenth centuries, when all but Granada had been overrun by Christian armies. In the tenth century, it was possible for Bahya ibn Pakuda, a Jew and al-Ghazzali, a Moslem, to both copy a work on divine creation from a Christian theologian for use by their own co-religionists.[4] In the twelfth century, the ecumenical school of translators in Christian Toledo rendered into Latin the great Arabic and Hebrew treatises on philosophy, medicine, mathematics, and alchemy.[5] And well into the thirteenth century, a Catalan philosopher Ramon Lull could still compose a dialogue in Arabic in which the three characters were a Christian, a Moor, and a Jew.[6]

To be sure, there had always been community tensions in so divided a society. At the end of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the invading Almohades and Almoravides persecuted Christians and Jews alike and destroyed their houses of worship. But the Jews fled to Christian territory and under the tolerant eye of Christian rulers, continued to prosper in their new surroundings. In the commercial sphere, few barriers separated merchants of the three communities; continuous daily contacts inevitably fostered tolerable relations despite occasional religious tensions. While the

Jewish situation worsened to the North, leading to the expulsions of England and France, the *convivencia* seemed to hold out a while longer. There were occasional setbacks, like the unpleasant disputation of Barcelona in 1263,[7] but the latter left little physical impact on Jewish life in Spain. Jews continued to live in a separate quarter or *aljama*, with their own officials and taxes, under the direct protection of the crown. They worked as tax-gatherers, fiscal officials, petty merchants and craftsmen, and physicians. Even during the assaults of the black plague, Jews of Castille and Aragon were generally spared.

All this came to an end in June, 1391. During a hot summer made worse by economic distress and by religious fanaticism, urban mobs rioted, directing their anger against privileged classes and against the Jews. In Seville, hundreds of Jews were murdered and the *aljama* was destroyed. Within days the riots spread across the peninsula. In Valencia, some two hundred and fifty were murdered; in Barcelona, some four hundred, including the son of Hasdai Crescas. All the major *aljamas* throughout Spain were not spared during these disastrous months.[8]

1391, referred to in contemporaneous Hebrew sources as *Gezerot Kanah* [The Divine Decrees of 1391], was unique not merely as a catastrophic pogrom, but because of the response it engendered. Beginning in its aftermath, hundreds and then thousands of Jews deserted their ancestral faith to seek a new life in the Church. While individual Jews had converted to Christianity in the past, this mass phenomenon was unprecedented in Jewish history. The Conversos assumed that their "liberation" from Judaism would offer them new economic, social, and political opportunities. Some even hoped for a spiritual rejuvenation. For those Jews who remained behind, the Converso problem left them emotionally demoralized, physically vulnerable, and spiritually broken.[9]

In 1412, new Antisemitic legislation was instigated by two former Jews, Vincent Ferrar and Pablo de Santa Maria. This was soon followed by the infamous Disputation of Tortosa lasting for almost a two-year period [1413–14], propelled by another former Jew, Joshua ha-Lorki, who took the Christian name, Jeronimo de Sante Fe. The disputation succeeded in exacerbating the Jewish predicament even more, engendering an even greater flood of conversions.[10]

As Spanish Christians continued to pressure their beleagered Jewish communities throughout the century, the Jewish problem was usually linked to the Conversos, the latter ironically still living in proximity to their former co-religionists. With the union of Aragon and Castille under Ferdinand and Isabella in 1474, the monarchs were forced to contend with even more expressions of mounting Antisemitism. Municipal legislation to separate Jews from Christians was seemingly the most effective answer in handling the Jew-Converso problem. By the 1480s, the Inquisition, the culmination of this process, was firmly established, followed by a policy of partial expulsion of the Jews: From Andalucia in 1483; from Seville in 1484; and from Saragossa in 1486. When local expulsions had failed to stem the heresies of conversions, the Crown eventually decided on the most drastic measure of all—total expulsion.[11]

The expulsion of Hispanic Jewry was unprecedented in European history. Prior to 1492, only tiny Jewish minorities had been expelled from England, France, and elsewhere. In Spain, a significant and prosperous part of society was removed while new converts were undermined, harrassed, or murdered. Moreover, *convivencia* was displaced by *limpieza de sangre* [the purity of blood], the cruel policy of separating and degrading those with Jewish or Moslem blood coursing through their veins. As early as the riots of Toledo in 1449, a new racial bigotry based on blood emerged in the Iberian peninsula, the real beginning of racial Antisemitism in Europe.[12] The fall of the last stronghold of the Moslems in Granada in January 1492 undoubtedly encouraged this attitude. On March 31, the two monarchs visiting the city issued the infamous edict giving the Jews of Castille and Aragon until July 31 to convert or leave the country. They justified their act by "the great harm suffered by Christians [Conversos] from the contact, intercourse, and communication which they have with the Jews, who always attempt in various ways to seduce faithful Christians from our holy Catholic faith."[13] Despite the valiant efforts of Don Isaac Abravanel and other Jewish leaders, the decree was carried out as it had been stipulated. The estimates of emigrés vary from 70,000–180,000. Some assume the expulsion was motivated by greed but the Crown apparently did not profit. But Spain lost—turning its back on the pluralistic society of the past, cutting off an entire community that had been an integral part of its society, and intensifying the Converso problem without solving it.

For Jews, the disastrous impact of the expulsion was both physical and spiritual. Most fled to Portugal where they were expelled five years later or forcibly converted. Emigrés faced painful challenges in leaving Spain and in the dislocation that followed. But beyond the immediate suffering was a larger significance: a culmination of Jewish expulsions, the liquidation of Western European Jewry, the demise of its heartland, despite the longevity of Jewish residence, with the emergence of new virulent forms of Antisemitism. The expulsion also triggered a major demographic shift, a dramatic relocation and reconstitution of Jewish life in North Africa, Italy, Turkey, and later in Amsterdam, London, and the Americas while, at about the same time, the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe were gradually emerging. The expulsion was also part of a radical metamorphosis of European society as a whole: the expansion of the inhabitable world, the Columbus discoveries, as well as an intellectual and religious revolution in the form of the Renaissance, Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the critical discovery of the printing press, the disintegration of the Church and the new challenges to its political and spiritual hegemony. In short, 1492 signaled, in a manner unparalleled in Western history, a major and lasting restructuring of European society politically, economically, and culturally.

PART II: *TRANSCENDENCE*

It surely is an irony that we often recognize our faith when it is challenged most profoundly. As in the past, during moments of communal tragedy, the ideological leadership of Spanish Jewry was compelled to ask

the following questions: "Why do we suffer? What is the reason for the intolerable position of the Jewish people? In what way are we truly chosen? Where was God who could have intervened to prevent the catastrophe but seemingly did nothing?"

Within the arsenal of theological answers of a well-tested people, two stand out for special mention, both ultimately based on the notion of covenantal theology articulated in the Bible and in Rabbinic literature. In the liturgy of the additional service for the holidays, the phrase: "*Mipne Hata'ainu Galinu Me-Arzeinu*" [Because of our sins, we were exiled from our land] constitutes a striking encapsulation of a dominant theme in classical Jewish writing. We ourselves are responsible for our own horrific condition of exile. We suffer the burden of our ancestor's sins as well as our own, and only through divine intervention will we be rescued from the painful condition we must courageously bear and overcome.[15]

This first explanation is often accompanied by a second theme of similar import. Articulated first by Job and his comforters and later through the philosophic language of Moses Maimonides, this position underscored the finitude of human knowledge, the incapacity of mere mortals to understand fully the ways of God. We can only assume that they are just and trust in His ultimate beneficence.[16] The generation of Spanish Jews pondered the same question from the perspective of their own situation and similar answers were forthcoming.

Already in the aftermath of 1391, Solomon Alami (c. 1370–1420) in his *Iggeret Musar* and some 80 years later, Yitschak Arama (c. 1420–1494) in his *Hazut Kashah*, among many others, understood the tragedy as suffering for the sins of Spanish Jewry. Both lamented the erosion of Jewish practices, the social disintegration of the community, the split between philosophers and the common people, a polarization between rich and poor, a rabbinic establishment who ignored the needs of its constiuency, the tide of conversions, and more. So Alami concludes: "The right way is to listen to the teachings of the prophets and of the sages of old; to advance humility, loving-kindness, and virtue; to love Israel and its Torah . . . if people could be taught to restrain their desires, to be content, and to trust in divine providence, then our good would increase with the good of men . . . I do not despair of the future of Israel, which one day will recognize its failings and receive forgiveness."[17]

A variety of Jewish thinkers assumed that the tragedy foreshadowed the imminent coming of the Messiah. Jewish messianic passions were clearly triggered by 1492 but also by larger and deeper apocalyptic tendencies within the Christian world.[18] The best example of intense messianic speculation was that of Don Isaac Abravanel (1437–1508), the Jewish statesman, financial advisor and philosopher. Abravanel composed a trilogy of messianic reflections prognosticating the coming of the Messiah in 1503. His was a natural extension of the traditional solution of theodicy: the Jewish people, he proposed, had entered the age of the *chevlei mashiach* [the pangs of the messiah], the lowest point of their suffering, to be followed by the age of the Messiah soon to follow, an epoch characterized, in Abravanel's own words,

by "Revenge upon our enemies, the redemption of Israel, and the resurrrection of the dead."[19]

By the middle of the sixteenth century, several Jewish thinkers, some of them exiles, reflected on the meaning of 1492 from a broader perspective, seeing 1492 not as an isolated event but within the context of the historical past as well as the messianic future. By viewing this tragedy from the perspective of past events, a divine pattern might emerge, history could comfort and console, and the imminent rewards God had in store would become more visible.[20] Writing many years after the event in the safe haven of Ferrara, Italy, the Converso Samuel Usque (16th Century) composed a pastoral dialogue between three imaginary shepherds: Ycabo, Zicareo, and Numeo on the meaning of present realities in light of past sufferings. Writing in Portuguese to a Converso readership in a form not only reminiscent of the book of Job but also of contemporary Portuguese and Italian authors, Usque maintained that "for troubled spirits the recollection of past misfortunes will somewhat diminish the suffering from present ones."[21] Moreover, present realities and future possibilities, especially messianic ones, will become discernable. Like Abravanel, Usque could point out signs of the redemption soon to come: the benefits the dispersion of exiles now offered in Ferrara and elsewhere in Italy, in the Ottoman empire, and even in a revived community in the land of Israel.

More analytical than his fellow Converso was Solomon ibn Verga (second half fifteenth–first half sixteenth century) in his Hebrew *Shevet Yehudah*. The critical seventh dialogue of the work records an imagined conversation between a fictional Spanish king, Alphonso, and his royal advisor, Thomas. The conversion focuses on the central question of Jewish existence in the post-expulsion era: the reason why Jews suffer. Through the mouth of Thomas, Ibn Verga departs from conventional theological response to offer sociological and psychological perspectives based on naturalistic causation [*hasibah hativit*]. Jews are hated, Ibn Verga claimed, because the masses and the clergy hate them; because the latter are jealous of them and jealousy leads to hate; because they are conspicuous consumers; and because of their usury. They refuse to eat and drink at Christian tables and thus snub Christians, even the king himself. And because they rely excessively on God's protecting hand, they have hardly mastered the art of war. Echoing some of the same self-criticism we have earlier seen in Alami and Arama, often presented in a mocking and exaggerated manner, Ibn Verga seems on the verge of offering a real plan of action, a new blueprint of Jewish-Christian relations, a program for improving Jewish social behavior, a plea for tolerance among the three major religions, and even suggesting, no matter how faintly, that Jews should learn better to defend themselves. Yet, in the final analysis, no plan actually emerges; in fact he eventually falls back on traditional pieties and the image of the restored Temple.[22] And he has his own blind spots as well. Unwilling to accept the fact that kings might mistreat their Jewish subjects, he exonerates the crown [at least Ferdinand] for the expulsion from Spain and the massacre of Conversos in Lisbon in 1506.[23]

In the end, Usque's and Ibn Verga's ruminations had limited impact among a Hebrew readership and an even smaller one reading in Portuguese. How then did the generation of exiles and those who followed them ultimately grapple with the tragedy of expulsion, with the pain of relocation, and with the ultimate realization that the Messiah would not make his immediate appearance? For the late Gershom Scholem, the response ultimately came in the form of the Lurianic kabbalah, a powerful myth of cosmic crisis and repair tinged with messianic fervor that powerfully captured the imagination of those Jews living in the post-expulsion world.[24] In recent years, Moshe Idel and others have challenged Scholem's grandiose reconstruction, claiming that the ideology of the mystics of Safed in the second half of the 16th century was neither original nor a direct response to 1492 nor even messianic.[25] And in many ways, Sholem's understanding requires significant modification. But let us avoid the scholarly argument to address the larger human and Jewish question at hand. Whether or not the mystics of Safed were directly thinking about the expulsion per se, their theological and social impulses certainly responded in some way to the crisis of human and Jewish society in the 16th century. Their mystical probings elicited a renewed engagement with the social world in which they lived. They, and not God, were the ultimate insurers of their future; they were charged with gathering the divine sparks, of rescuing the *shechinah* from exile, of restoring the divine harmony by restructuring both their social and religious lives. Whether or not they mentioned the expulsion, they had clearly found a formula for Jewish survival in a world in chaos and crisis.

PART 3: *EPILOGUE*

The historian in me has concluded his brief overview, but the rabbi in me is tempted to go on for just a moment more. It is not sufficient to leave our story in the 16th century without reflecting on our present condition, a world we have inherited some fifty years after the most brutal catastrophe of Jewish experience. Like the mystics of Safed, we do not mention the Holocaust every time we perform Jewish acts or think Jewish thoughts, but somehow it remains in the center of our memory, it goads us to think and to act.

Let me close with a rabbinic homily rather than with the tools of historical scholarship. And since what I now offer is a kind of midrash, our rabbis tell us: "*Ain meshivim al ha-Midrash*"—do not analyze it too closely, only imbibe its spiritual message.

How far off the mark would I be to compare the responses to the tragedy of 1492 with those of 1944. My comparison does not suggest that the latter event is comparable to the former in its magnitude of suffering and devastation. I only wish to compare broadly the types of responses to each trauma. In 1492 the responses ranged from the traditional-messianic [Arama, Abavanel]; to the rational analytic [Ibn Verga]; and to the reaffirmation of social activism and reform colored with mystical spirituality [Luria]. Among those who have reflected on the meaning of our recent tragedy, we might also locate the same, albeit not exact, spectrum from the traditional [the

Satmir rabbi, for example]; to the analytic-rational Richard Rubenstein [who claimed defiantly that a belief in God and the the notion of the chosen people were no longer possible in a post-Holocaust age]; to Emil Fackenheim's re-affirmation of faith after Auschwitz [claiming that Jewish hope was predicated on a 614th commandment of affirming life, of not going mad].

We live in a world where human experience is often cruel and painful, where people suffer and die every day, where the very quality of our lives and those of our children is constantly called into question, where the very existence of our own Jewish community both in Israel and here remains as fragile as ever. We have achieved a distance of five hundred years from our ancestors who sadly exited Spain by the summer of 1492. But have we learned any better how to cope with our own tragedies, both collective and individual, than they did? Ultimately, we have no better recourse than them in believing that by gathering the divine sparks, by grasping for the good in every nook and corner of creation, by affirming life and its bounties, they would ultimately be redeemed from evil. And in our own way and in our own symbolic language, is that not for us as well our still fervent hope?

NOTES

1. This paper was originally presented in Granada, Spain on March 31, 1992 as part of the program of the CCAR mission commemorating the five hundredth anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Since it was not conceived as an academic talk, but as a popular one, even partially a sermon, I have annotated it only lightly. The talk was structured in three parts: a. An overview of Jewish history in Spain until the expulsion, with a particular emphasis on Christian Spain; b. A discussion of several Jewish thinkers of the generation of 1492 who tried to understand the meaning of this communal tragedy; c. A kind of personal midrash on the historical past: my modest attempt to understand 1492 from the perspective of 1992.
2. The two classical and still standard treatments of Jewish life under Moslem and Christian Spain are E. Ashtor, *The Jews of Moslem Spain*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1973–84) and Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1961–66). Since the appearance of Baer's work, much additional scholarship has appeared. See the Spanish translation of Baer (Madrid, 1981) for a bibliography of more recent research compiled by the translator, J. L. Lacave. A useful up-to-date anthology of recent scholarly work on Spanish Jewish history is H. Beinart, ed., *Moreshet Sefarad* (Jerusalem, 1992).
3. H. Kamen, *Inquisition and Society in Spain in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (London, 1985), p. 1.
4. See D.Z. Baneth, "The Common Theological Source of Bahya ibn Pakuda and Ghazzali (Hebrew)," *Magnes Anniversary Volume* (Jerusalem, 1938), pp. 23–30; H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Some Religious Aspects of Islam* (Leiden, 1981), pp. 75–76.
5. See, for example, J.L. Teicher, "The Latin-Hebrew School of Translators in Spain in the Twelfth Century," *Homenaje a J.M. Millas Vallicrosa*, 2 vols. (Barcelona, 1956) 2:403ff., and most recently, N. Roth, "Jewish Collaborators in Alphonso's Scientific Works," in R.I. Burns, ed., *Emperor of Culture* (Philadelphia, 1990), pp. 59–71.
6. A. Bonner, ed. and trans., *Selected Works of Ramon Lull (1232–1316)*, 2 vols., (Princeton, 1985), I:91–304

7. The most recent treatment of the subject is that of R. Chazan, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and its Aftermath* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1992).
8. Besides the standard treatment in Baer, II, 95–169, see P. Wolff, "The 1391 Progrom in Spain: Social Crisis or Not?," *Past and Present* 50 (1967): 4–18. Crescas' account of 1391 is translated by F. Kobler in *Letters of Jews Through the Ages*, 2 vols. (New York, 1952), I:272–75.
9. The Converso problem has engendered an enormous bibliography and a heated debate among historians. Some recent overviews of the literature include: A. Dominguez Ortiz, "Historical Research on Spanish Conversos in the Last Fifteen Years," in M.P. Hornik, ed., *Collected Studies in Honour of Americo Castro's Eightieth Year* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 63–82, 317–334; G. Nahon, "Les marranes espagnoles et portugais et les communautés juives: Issues du marranisme dans l'historiographie récente (1960–1975)," *Revue des études juives* 136 (1977) 297–367; Y. Kaplan, "The Problem of Anusim and 'New Christians' in Historical Research of the Last Generation (Hebrew), *Iyyunim Be-Historiah*, eds. M. Zimmerman, M. Stern, and Y. Salmon (Jerusalem, 1988), pp. 117–44.
10. See Baer, II, 170–243.
11. On the background leading to the expulsion, two interesting interpretations are S. H. Haliczer, "The Castilian Urban Patriciate and the Jewish Expulsions of 1480–92," *American Historical Review* 78 (1973):35–58; M. Kriegel,"La prise d'une décision: l'expulsion des juifs d'Espagne en 1492," *Revue Historique* 260 (1978): 49–90.
12. The standard work on the policy of blood purity is A. Sicroff, *Les controverses des statuts de pureté de sang en Espagne du XVe au XVIIe siècle* (Paris, 1960). See also the provocative essay of M. Shell, "Marranos (Pigs), or from Coexistence to Toleration," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991): 306–35.
13. The decree is found in English in E. H. Lindo, *The History of the Jews of Spain and Portugal* (New York, 1970, reprinted from first ed. of 1848), pp. 277–80.
14. See the essay by Kriegel in note 11.
15. See, for example, H.H. Ben Sasson, "Galut" in *Encyclopedia Judaica* 7 (Jerusalem, 1971), pp. 275–94; Y. Baer, *Galut* (New York, 1947).
16. See, for example, J. Laks, "The Enigma of Job: Maimonides and the Moderns," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1964) 345–64; L. Kravitz, "Maimonides and Job: An Inquiry as to the Method of the Moreh," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 38(1967): 149–58.
17. Translated in N. N. Glatzer, *The Judaic Tradition* (Boston, 1969), p. 403.
18. See D. Ruderman, "Hope Against Hope: Jewish and Christian Messianic Expectations in the Late Middle Ages," *Exile and Diaspora: Studies in the History of the Jewish People Presented to Professor Haim Beinart*, eds. A. Mirsky, A. Grossman, and Y. Kaplan (Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 185–202 [Reprinted in D. Ruderman, ed., *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy* (New York, 1992), pp. 299–323.]
19. Quoted in B. Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher* (Philadelphia, 1953), p. 226.
20. See Y.H. Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, 1982), chap. 3.
21. See M. Cohen, trans., *Samuel Usque's Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* (Philadelphia, 1965), p. 38.
22. The critical edition of the *Shevet Yehudah* is that of A. Shohet and Y. Baer (Jerusalem, 1947). A small selection is translated in M. Meyer, ed., *Ideas of Jewish History* (New York, 1974), pp. 110–14. On the contemporary relevance of this work, see the interesting discussion in J. Faur, *In the Shadow of History: Jews and Conversos at the Dawn of Modernity* (Albany, 1992), chap. 9.

23. See Y. H. Yerushalmi, *The Lisbon Massacre of 1506 and the Royal Image in the Shevet Yehudah*, Hebrew Union College Annual Supplements, No. 1 (Cincinnati, 1976).
24. See, for example, G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1961), pp. 244–86.
25. See, for example, M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 256–67; idem, "Particularism and Universalism in Kabbalah, 1480–1650," in Ruderman, *Essential Papers*, pp. 324–44.