

Rabbi Lewis' Message for March 2008

One of my favorite trick questions to ask my 6th and 7th graders is, "What happened in 1492?" Someone always responds in rhyme, "Columbus sailed the ocean blue." Then I ask them what else happened of historical significance in 1492. The answer I am looking for is one they don't know but is important for them to learn.

In 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella expelled all Jews from Spain. Hundreds of thousands of Jews dispersed, some to Portugal where they would be expelled a few years later, some to Italy, Turkey, France, North Africa - wherever they could find a place to go. The reason for the expulsion was nominally because they were Jews and not Catholics but actually because Ferdinand and Isabella wanted to confiscate all the Jewish financial assets. Don Yitzhak Abravanel pleaded the cause of his fellow Jews with Ferdinand and Isabella, offering a sizable financial incentive, but the offer was rejected by Torquemada, himself of Jewish ancestry.

Never did I imagine that one day, I would stand in the Alhambra in Granada, in the very place where Ferdinand and Isabella issued that fateful decree (and where they also met with Columbus to plan his venture to the New World). Last week, as I stood within the walls of the palace trying to imagine the scene, I could feel the desperation of Abravanel (I once lived on Rehov Abravanel in Jerusalem) and those Jewish families whose fate hinged on the cruelty of Torquemada. I tried to imagine the immensity of that trauma.

The Jewish experience in Spain had been different from the Jewish experience in Eastern Europe. Jews had been in Spain since the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. Jews had experienced a true Golden Age in Spain, an age in which Jewish poets, philosophers, writers, doctors, states people and thinkers had flourished in every level of society. In the Middle Ages, half of the world Jewish community lived in Spain. Spain itself had the largest Jewish community in Europe.

Then came the 1300s when the Jewish community became vulnerable and the Inquisition took root. Some Jews converted, at least on the surface; some of those secret Jews (known as conversos or marranos) were burned alive. Now suddenly, hundreds of thousands of Jews were uprooted from a land that had been home for many centuries. It wasn't until 1869 that Jews began to return to Seville after a new constitution proclaimed religious liberty. It wasn't until 1927 that Spain offered citizenship to all Sephardic Jews. Franco undid all this. It wasn't until 1992 that King Juan Carlos I cancelled the Edict of Expulsion from 1492.

Never had I imagined that one day, I would walk the streets of Cordoba, home of Maimonides (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon). I wrote my rabbinic thesis on "Maimonides

on Liturgy and Prayer." He was one of the greatest scholars and thinkers Judaism ever produced, leading to the expression, "From Moses to Moses, there was no one like Moses." Maimonides fled to Egypt from Cordoba in 1146 when the Almohades conquered the city. He continued to practice medicine, write rabbinic Responsa, and advise the caliph. Despite what life dealt him, he not only survived but thrived. And that is what the Jewish people did, despite the enormity of tragedies like the expulsion from Spain.

Traveling always reminds me of how limited we Americans are by our borders and by our own perspective. Traveling makes me feel that the world has gotten smaller. It hasn't, of course, at least not geographically. But we can go to places we never thought we would visit. We can see how interdependent we are, how what happens in one part of the world has impact on the rest of the world. If we thought of the world as a small place, if we treated the world as if it were our backyard, we might treat each other differently. May the memory of the expulsion in 1492 lead us to work against similar destructions.

Rabbi Ellen Lewis