

## Cervantes and His Crypto-Jewish Roots

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### Abstract:

This article deals with the Jewish side of the Quijote (Don Quixote) and how Cervantes may have been a crypto-Jew. The paper then uses Cervantes's work to demonstrate his insights into the Jewish Crypto-Jewish Diaspora. Finally this paper is a paper about what is history and questions if moderns can ever truly understand the lives and circumstances in which the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula were forced to live

### Keywords

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Each year as we celebrate the springtime holiday of Purim we mark our liberation from the archetypical anti-Semite, Haman. In the Book of Esther, Haman like the Inquisitors, tried to destroy the Jewish people. Purim is about the miracle of salvation against the forces of tyranny. Passover reminds us of when the impossible occurred and Israel was liberated from Egypt. The holiday teaches that while our birth may be a mere accident of biology; faith and love and determination can produce miracles resulting in freedom and human dignity.

Just a few years ago we celebrated the publication of the four millionth copy of the world's first major novel, and perhaps the apex of Crypto-Jewish writing, *El Quijote*, or as it is know in English translation, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*. Just like the Crypto-Jewish word out of which it may have been born. Don Quixote and its author, Miguel Cervantes, are enigmas to many scholars. Despite the fact that the book's leitmotif seems simplistic, like in so much of the onion-like nature of the Crypto-Jewish experience, as we unravel it we discover meanings in meanings and ideas embedded in its ideas. Perhaps with the exception of the Bible, no book has ever had as many tomes dedicated to understanding its mysteries.

Cervantes was a contemporary of Shakespeare. His life, like that of Shakespeare's reflects a period of great artistic endeavors occurring after a period of national trauma.

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To study both men's lives is to understand the theoretical aspects found in William Strauss and Neil Howe's seminal book on generational history, *The Fourth Turning*. Just as we continue to wonder about the Jewish aspects of William Shakespeare's literary work, so too do we wonder about the Crypto-Jewish meanings or symbolisms within the work of Miguel de Cervantes.

Certainly, Cervantes left us many a clue. For example, Prof. Jean Canavaggio, Director Casa de Velázquez, in Madrid writes: "Miguel de Cervantes, born in Alcalá de Henares in 1547, was the son of a surgeon who presented himself as a nobleman, although Cervantes's mother seems to have been a descendant of Jewish converts to Christianity" ([http://www.csdl.tamu.edu/cervantes/biography/new\\_english\\_cerv\\_bio.html](http://www.csdl.tamu.edu/cervantes/biography/new_english_cerv_bio.html): March 10, 2009)

With a great deal of scholarship pointing to Cervantes' Portuguese Jewish origins, researchers begin to seek Jewish roots in *Don Quixote* itself. In 1966, for example, Dominique Aubier published her seminal work *Don Quichotte, Prophète d'Israël* and later translated into Spanish under the title of *Don Quijote, Profeta y Cabalista*. Aubier points to the following as proof of Don Quixote being a crypto-Jewish roman à clef:

1. The entire book is about books, and the Jews were known as "Am Ha'Sefer," the people of the book
2. Name changes found upon developing a new insight were profoundly Jewish and of course are reminiscent of the Patriarchal names changes found in Genesis. Thus, the reader of Don Quixote cannot help but connect the book's multiple name changes with the name changes so common in the Biblical text.
3. The name Quixote itself may have Jewish roots. Qeshot means "truth" in Aramaic and may be related to the Hebrew root for Holiness (Q-d-sh) while the "ote" ending in Spanish often refers to something that is pejorative or comical. Qeshot is a term used in the Kabbalah of the Iberian Peninsula and therefore would have been known.
4. Does Duclinea's hometown of Toboso represent the Hebrew words Tov-Sod or the Secret held by those who are good?
5. Is Sancho Panza (the symbol of the Old Christian masses) nothing more than a

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play-on-words; sancho being close to chancho (pig) and panza reminding us of panzón (potbellied)?

Linda Jimenez Glassman writing in the April 25, 2008 edition of EJP or *European Jewish Press* notes that major historians such as Abraham Haim believe Cervantes to have been a “converso”. Among these claims are the fact that Cervantes (just as in the case of Christopher Columbus) may have had forged birth records, and just as in the case of Columbus’s writings, there are numerous references to Jewish and Kabbalistic traditions that would have been impossible for a non-Jew to know. Here are just a few of the clues to the Jewish origins in Don Quixote according to Haim

In the beginning of the book we are told in Chapter IX that Cervantes walking through the streets of the now defunct Jewish-Arab quarter of Toledo comes across manuscripts in a strange script. At first he believes these to be written in Arabic but then comes to realize that they are written in a “clearer and older language.” Certainly any Crypto-Jew or even Spaniard would have connected this “older language” with Hebrew.

Haim also points to the references by Don Quixote to his diet. He tells us that he ate “duelos y quebrantos.” While this term refers to a meal still eaten in parts of the Spanish speaking world and means “eggs and bits of grain” (sort of the “matzah brie” of Ashkanazic Jews) it literally means “suffering and brokenness.” Oddly enough, we are told that Don Quixote eats this meal on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. Did Cervantes choose this meal for Don Quixote as a symbol of the suffering of Crypto-Jews?

Note also the use of the “Festival of Tents.” Cervantes tells us that “families from the town would build a cabin and young women would come out of the woods and invite our protagonists to join them as guests.” It is hard to miss the connection here between the Jewish holiday of “booths” (tents?) and the festival about which Cervantes writes. Those who speak both Hebrew and Spanish will immediately recognize the fact that the Spanish word for guest “huésped” may also well be related to the word used for Succoth guests “Ushpizim”.

Within the pages of Don Quixote we also find the familiar issue of book burnings. It is no secret that the books burned by the Inquisition were Jewish books. Haim notes that the real clue is found when Sancho Panza, now the “governor of the island of Barataria” in solving a dispute between two townsmen cites almost verbatim a page of Talmud and then is hailed as a new king Solomon.

Of course, we may never know the truth about Don Quixote or Miguel de Cervantes' life. Like so much of Crypto-Jewish scholarship it is veiled in mystery. Any scholarly review of the literature or documents surrounding Crypto-Jewish life soon leads to the rapid realization that in a historical study as complicated as that of the Crypto-Jewish experience we are dealing with the phenomenon of the Russian doll or what many in the Jewish world would call a Purim Schpil. That is to say that within each kernel of truth there lays another. Documents often lead to dead ends and just as in Don Quixote the scholar may soon wonder if he or she is not going mad.

Crypto-Jewish history, like so much of history itself, is a journey down multi-layered paths with each one leading to a previous unknown path. To make matters even more complicated, just as in Don Quixote, we may never know when we are chasing truth and when we are merely running after windmills and merely fooling ourselves by turning prostitutes into fair damsels.

History is about the way we organize our looking back. The assumptions behind the way that we choose to organize the facts of history may be as important as how we decide what is history or the way in which we present it. Do we choose to see history as a series of random acts? Is history merely actions that occurred once and like the butterfly soon disappear never to occur again? Is history cyclical and as such it repeats itself in never ending cycles? Are events more reminiscent of the butterfly of quantum physics in which even the singular action of the flapping of its wings impacts the entire universe? Is history linear, starting at point "A" and moving toward its final conclusion? Much of Western history, from Hegel to Marx, from Church history to Francis Fukuyama, follows this assumption. It is noteworthy that Fukuyama titled his seminal work, *The End of History and the Last Man?* In writing of linear history Strauss notes that all linear historians follow the following basic formula and states: "all human history is akin to a ski jump: After crouching dumbly for millennia, mankind is just now taking off on its glorious final flight" (Strauss: 12). Certainly, the Inquisitors held this view of the "final flight." From the Inquisitors' perspective they were saving the world, moving on toward the end of history by what Christian theologians call "replacement theology". They would have agreed with John Nisbett who in his book *Megatrends* writes: "trends like horses are easier to ride in the direction they are already going" (Nisbitt, 1982. p. 9). Thus, we can imagine that from the perspective of the Inquisitors they were merely riding a horse in the direction toward which it was already traveling. For them, Judaism was what was;

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Catholicism was what was to be. Thus, any interference in the trends of history was doomed to be stamped out or simply would not be. Indeed, the jump from linear history to totalitarianism is not far. The very fact that this conference is taking place stands then as testimony to the fact that history may well not be either linear or unidirectional. Perhaps we shall never know if the Inquisitional authorities had a sense of linear history or if they sought the destruction of Judaism on the Iberian Peninsula for political, religious, or economic reasons. On still another level we may ask ourselves to what point or to which extent the multi-directional history of Crypto-Judaism is itself a sort of tragic parody of the totality of Judaism's history. What a study of Crypto-Jewish history teaches us is that while good history is seasonal its outcomes are never foreordained.

This conference is an attempt to fill in some of these outstanding lacunae. But perhaps before we go forward in history, it behooves us to set the stage by reminding ourselves of what occurred prior to the Inquisition and why the Spanish and Portuguese models are so important not only in Jewish history but also as an example of minority life within a "tolerant" society that turns intolerant. For many of us the use of term "tolerance" with Spain may seem to be an oxymoron. And if Spain was intolerant, Portugal was even worse. How many of us have forgotten that Spanish refugees in Portugal returned to Spain to avoid the horrors of the Portuguese inquisition? While pre-14<sup>th</sup> century Spain and Portugal certainly had their share of anti-Semitism and bigotry they also had its share of enlightenment and freedom. It is true that Spain is the land of the evil kings, Isabela and Fernando, the land of the Inquisition and of Torquemada, but it is also the land of the "época de Oro,/the Golden Age," a place that produced Hebrew grammar and poetry, great Jewish philosophers and perhaps even the world's greatest novel, Don Quixote. It is true that the actions of Portugal's kings Manuel and João III set the precedents for Hitler's Nuremberg laws, but Portugal also had people such as Isaac Abravanel whose family fled Spain in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century and found a safe haven in Portugal.

The Iberian Peninsula's golden age however may have been a golden age as defined by 19<sup>th</sup> century German historians. It was a time, perhaps similar to our own. Certainly the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries were a period of great Jewish academic achievement. Did this academic achievement come with the heavy price of rationality over spirituality, science over feelings? Again the answer may never be known, but what is known is that Spanish and Portuguese Jewish culture had both its high points and its low points. In

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comparison with Northern European culture, Jewry on the Iberian Peninsula was more sophisticated and better educated in what today we would call “secular culture.” Perhaps no better example of this exists than in A.B. Yehosua’s work *Ma’sa el Tom Ha’Elef* (translated from the Hebrew as: *A Journey to the End of the Millennium*). The work describes a Jewish family from the Sephardic world that must travel to the Ashkanz (the lands of the Rhine River) and the horrors that they experienced at viewing the primitive nature of Northern European Jewry. On the other hand, the events of the 1391 pogroms ending in mass conversions may well be an indication that while Spanish Jewry had produced great academic achievements, it may have failed to produce the ideological *raison d’être* that would permit it to survive once toleration turned to hostility. Yitzhak Baer writes of the 1391 pogroms, “So strong a center of Jewish influence as Seville was bound to become a center of anti-Jewishness and the starting point for the persecution of Jews in general in the year 1391” (Baer: 312, Vol. 1)

Spanish tolerance then mixed with intolerance may have been the reason for the undoing of Spanish Jewry and it was that same phenomenon that touched Portuguese Jews. It is incumbent on us to remember that while the great majority of Spanish Jewry, once forced to convert, desired to shed their Judaism and if not wholeheartedly then at least superficially embraced the majority cultural/religious façade, Portuguese Jewry tended to stay loyal to Judaism. While both Catholic and Jewish historians, each for their own purposes may have exaggerated the numbers and depth of Jewishness among the “nuevos cristianos,” in reality most “nuevos cristianos” adapted to their new culture. Most people lived with the reality of the situation and soon sank into the abyss of history. Nevertheless, the fact remains clear that at least some Jews remained loyal to Judaism. This point becomes clear when we consider that the remaining Jews of Spain were given the choice of expulsion or conversion, and while thousands did flee, most stayed. As we now know of those who remained loyal to Judaism, the unlucky ones fled to neighboring Portugal and the luckier ones to Turkey and North Africa. It is from Portugal that many of our “crypto Jews” were able to make their way to New Spain, including the states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, Coahuila, Texas, what is today New Mexico and parts of Arizona and perhaps California.

What made some people cling to their Judaism while the great majority of people were prepared to assimilate out of Jewish history? Did they remain loyal, although underground for political or economic reasons? Were they Jewish by choice or was their Judaism imposed on them? Were the crypto-Jews representatives or a specific class of

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people or did they manifest dysfunctional or abnormal behavior? While it does appear that ideological commitment forms the most important aspect of group loyalty, there are simply too many gaps in our knowledge to be able to develop more than a mezzo-level theory. What we do know is that as people become more acculturated, old models tend to die and the task of maintaining separate subcultures becomes ever harder.

To what extent does the Sephardic pre-1391 pogrom period parallel the course of Jewish history in the New World? The comparisons are striking. As in Spain, American Jewry lives in an academic golden age. While the threat of both assimilation and anti-Semitism is an always present danger, most Jews would argue that assimilation is the greater of the two threats. In a like manner, American Jews, just as Spanish Jews, are well versed in the secular culture, but are far less well educated in Jewish philosophy, law and thought. Just as in Spain, American Jews have pride themselves on their relationships with their non-Jewish fellow citizens, and just as in Spain the vast majority of American Jews while not assimilated are well acculturated into the larger society. Certainly, not all the parallels hold. Unlike Spain, the US is a multi-cultural society and we may hope that the periods of religious bigotry are well behind us. Or are they? The Inquisition became the basis for Nazi jurisprudence and only 60 years after Europe's holocaust, British school children believe Auschwitz to have been a beer. Perhaps it is unfair to ask if American Jewry will also face a modern Inquisition, but it may not be unfair to ask if faced with death or expulsion versus loyalty to Judaism, how many would choose Judaism?

Hopefully, we will never have to face these challenges or know the answers to these questions. Today and tomorrow we will learn a great deal about the life of those who chose in one way or the other to remain loyal to their Jewish beliefs. Their message of group loyalty rings out across the centuries and into our own. This conference is to honor not merely their memories or even their lives, but our lives and culture, for on some level each of us is a Crypto-Jew, each of us hides something from the others in society and each of us has a story to tell.

If history is cyclical then the Crypto-Jewish phenomenon is typical of a post-crisis event. Judaism enjoyed the Spring and Summer of its cultural life from the 10<sup>th</sup> to perhaps the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. With the onset of the pogroms of 1391 Judaism entered the fall and then with the Inquisition its winter. It is this cultural winter when the world is bleak that Cervantes wrote about the madness not only of the Iberian Peninsula but also of the

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belief that time is linear.

Don Quixote teaches us that historical winters never last forever. These winters of history are followed by springs of rebirth; the depressions of despair give birth to the post crises of hope. Perhaps that idea is best exemplified by the fact that today there is a renaissance of interest in Portuguese and Spanish Jewry, new conferences are occurring and new centers for the study of the Crypt-Jewish around the world are being established.

For out of the ashes of the Inquisition's fires, new hope has been born and new Jewish communities have been founded on the ashes of the old. What we are studying is not merely the dead hand of history but a renewal of life.

Surely Kohlet, Ecclesiastes, was correct when he wrote: L'col zman v'et l'col chafetz tachat ha'shemesh: Et laledet v'et lamut, et lata'at v'et lakor n'tuah/To every thing there is a season and a time to every purpose under heaven, a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up. Jewish history, and indeed this conference on the history of the Crypto-Jew teaches us that after the winter, comes the spring, and out of death can emerge hope and new life.