

Across the Borderline with Rabbi Stephen Leon

by Geoffrey Clarfield (August 2015)

There's a place where I've been told

Every street is paved with gold

And its just

Just across

The borderline

Across the Borderline

As sung by Willy Nelson

In The Crypt of Ferdinand and Isabella

In 1492, the army of Ferdinand and Isabella, Catholic Kings of a united Christian Spain, defeated the Sultanate of Granada, ending a 700-year Muslim presence in the Spanish peninsula.

I recently visited the tomb of Ferdinand and Isabella on a sunny but cold, February morning. The tomb is located in old Granada, just near the Cathedral, which was built on the site of the mosque that these monarchs had torn down. One has to pay an entrance fee to visit the tomb. There you are told, in the stern and commanding manner of the guardians of the shrine, that you are not allowed to photograph anything, anywhere.

When you enter the site, in addition to religious paintings, and elaborate works of silver and gold that commemorate the dead king and queen, there is a small stone staircase that allows you to descend into their crypt. Below ground level, you can gaze upon the coffins that contain the remains of two people who changed the world, for it was their looted Moorish gold

and Jewish silver that helped to finance the journeys of Christopher Columbus, who discovered the New World in 1492.

✖ I have visited many churches, cathedrals and historical sites in southern Spain, including the enchanted Moorish ruins of the Alhambra. I was taken aback at the austere mood verging on hostility that permeated this final resting place of Ferdinand and Isabella. If the 19th century American writer, Washington Irving, had still felt the spirit of the pleasure-loving Sultans and their Jewish poets and advisors, in the ruins of the Alhambra Palace, just down the road, was it not equally possible that I had picked up on the authentic, hostile and intolerant spirit of these dead monarchs, whose shrine is the still object of religious pilgrimage for so many Spanish Catholics, and who were patrons of the Spanish Inquisition?

During that same year of 1492, Ferdinand and Isabella commanded that the remaining Jews of Spain either convert to Christianity or, choose exile. It is thought that one to three hundred thousand Spanish Jews chose exile. In the process, they lost most of their property, money and belongings. On the way out, thousands died, were killed or were enslaved by pirates. Columbus had been an eyewitness to the siege of Granada and later wrote approvingly of the conquest and the expulsion of the Jews.

... and I saw the Moorish king come out of the gates of the city and kiss the royal hands of Your Highnesses . . . and Your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians . . . took thought to send me, Christopher Columbus, to the said parts of India, to see those princes and peoples and lands ... having driven out all the Jews from your realms and lordships in the same month of January...

Thus began the second chapter of the Jews of Spain, who from then on became known as the Sephardim, from the Hebrew word for Sepharad, Spain.

The Second Exile



The Jews who left Spain in 1492, suffered a second exile. The first was from their ancestral home in the land of Israel, in remembrance of which once a year, on the 9th of the lunar month of Av, they lamented the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans. But this latest expulsion was considered a second exile, for the Jews of Spain had lived in Spain for over two thousand years.

They had mastered both the culture of their Islamic and Christian rulers. They were

multilingual and knew Hebrew, Arabic and Spanish. By the 15th century their daily language and folklore were expressed in both Spanish and Hebrew. Through a complex process of forced conversion and subsequent return to the Jewish faith when conditions became safe again, many Jews had been exposed to European Renaissance thought and the world view that had moved out of 15th century Italy which built on their familiarity with Plato and Aristotle and, that had informed their culture under their medieval Spanish Muslim rulers. The Inquisition had disproportionately targeted these Jews. Having having forced so many Jews to accept Christianity on pain of death or expulsion, many Jews went "underground." In public these Jews appeared Christian and in private they practiced Judaism. And so, wherever they went, the Sephardim became social and cultural "aristocrats" in exile.

Many of them moved to North Africa and the Ottoman Empire. Because of their knowledge of languages and trade, and their vast network of shipping contacts in both the Islamic and Christian worlds, they became successful traders and middlemen. Soon, Protestant countries such as Holland allowed them to live there and practice Judaism freely.

Amsterdam soon became a world centre of Jewish learning. With the arrival of the printing press, it also became one of the great publishing centres for Jewish Europe and the Orient. Among the most influential of the Sephardim of Amsterdam was the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, whose writings and correspondence did much to provide the philosophical framework for the subsequent rise of the English speaking democracies, with their notions of individual liberty and freedom of conscience.

In the New World, many Sephardim who had fled Spain practiced Judaism secretly, while professing Catholicism in public, in order to avoid the Inquisition overseas, whose officers practiced torture, confiscation of property and death by burning at the stake. Eventually, a small group of Sephardim escaped to Dutch New York where they became the nucleus of what later became American Jewry. Their brave merchants, supported George Washington against the mad tyrant King George the III, and helped the patriots gain their independence.

During the 19th century, Spain lost its empire. At the same time, Spanish society entered a short-lived liberal phase. No longer was Spain thought of as the religious leader of a Catholic Empire, but as a late modernizer that wanted to join democratizing, secular Western Europe. Soon, its intellectuals and artists began to widen the definition of what is Spain and who is Spanish. That is when they "discovered" the Sephardim.

Their first fascination was with the fact that the Sephardim spoke a medieval form of Spanish and retained many ancient Spanish ballads in oral tradition, from the time of Cervantes. Then

historians and architects began to “rediscover” the physical remains of the Jews of Spain. These men and women began to uncover Synagogues and houses that had been seized after the conquest, some of which had been turned into churches and convents. Today in Spain, one can visit “restored Jewish quarters” in many Spanish cities, and visit restored Synagogues, all of which have become museums.

The Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire were among the early Zionists. Many of them migrated to the British Mandate of Palestine in the early 20th century, in the hope of reconstituting a third Jewish commonwealth and putting an end to their dual exile. And so their manuscripts, history, folklore, customs and music began to be studied by what later became Israeli scholars, many of them of Sephardic descent.

The Sephardim of Israel and the Jews from Islamic lands now constitute the demographic majority in Israel. They have regained their past cultural confidence and their children now intermarry with any of the other Jewish communities there, contributing to the growing multi cultural Jewish identity of contemporary Israel. Their customs, music and cuisine are the envy of many.

The Rediscovery of the Marranos or the Anusim



During the 19th and 20th centuries, while the Spanish were rediscovering the Sephardim, the Jewish people and the scholars of Israel were rediscovering the full range and complexity of the Jewish experience. As the history and culture of the Sephardim came to light, the darker side of their history began emerge into the light of historical scrutiny. As knowledge of the Sephardim entered the public domain of articles, books, films and data bases, many Catholics in the Spanish and Portuguese speaking world, including Spanish speaking Americans in the southwest of the United States, began to discover that many of their family customs had Jewish origins, suggesting that their ancestors had been forcibly converted to Christianity.

These customs include the avoidance of pork, not working on Saturday, avoiding mirrors during the mourning period after death and, lighting candles on Friday evening, as well as keeping hidden Jewish ritual objects like menorahs, which were passed down the generations. With the rise of Israel and the dispersal of Sephardic studies research some of these descendants of Jews, discovered their Jewish origins. This has often triggered personal spiritual crises.

Most of these domestic customs were hidden from the church and the local priesthood. They have

only seen the light of day with the rise of secular trends during the 20th century. This is correlated with the ongoing post Holocaust theological crisis of Christianity, which has yet to reconcile its near universal passivity during the Holocaust, against its more than 2,000 year old claim to theological and moral superiority over the Jewish faith.

Today, the established Jewish communities of South America still feel uncomfortable welcoming these potential returnees to Judaism, for fear of bringing on the wrath of the Catholic Church, who have always been on guard against “Judaizers” in their midst (formerly a crime punishable by death in most Catholic countries), and who have always tried to reserve for themselves the right to act as religious missionaries in the countries where they form a demographic majority.

But, as more and more South American Catholics embrace evangelical Protestantism, they have read the Old and New Testaments, without priestly intervention. Many of them who realize that they have a Jewish origin, have become bold enough to explore the possibility of a return to their ancestral faith. Knowing this, we should not be surprised that something unusual has been happening in a Conservative synagogue on the border of Mexico, in the Texan town of El Paso.



Rabbi Stephen Leon

If you go on the Internet and visit the site of the Bnai Zion synagogue in El Paso, Texas you will read about Rabbi Stephen Leon:

Rabbi Stephen A. Leon was born in Brooklyn, New York. He graduated from Colombia University and the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, receiving his ordination from the Academy for Jewish Religion. Rabbi Leon was the dean of the Academy for Jewish Religion from 1974 through 1986. He also was an instructor in Homiletics, Practical Rabbinics, and Cantillations. At the same time Rabbi Leon served as the rabbi of Elmwood Park Jewish Center in Elmwood Park, New Jersey from 1971 through 1986. Rabbi Leon also served as the president of the Bergen County Board of Rabbis for a two year tenure. Rabbi Leon was also on the Board of Directors of the Bergen County Jewish Federation. For over the past 20 years, from 1986 to the present, Rabbi Leon has been the spiritual leader of Congregation B’nai Zion in El Paso, Texas.

This is a the description of a very learned Jewish man, a pillar of the community who has maintained his faith in a country that has a 76% intermarriage rate and, where the average

American Jew may not have even read the Bible once, nor be acquainted with the history and culture of the Jewish people.

In addition to his erudition, Leon has been challenged by his maker to provide the gateway for the return to Judaism of a growing number of former Jews in Northern Mexico and the southwest, a betwixt and between ethnic group, who the Inquisition once called pigs, or "Marranos" and which Hebrew speakers call the B'nai Anusim, those who have been spiritually raped by the Inquisition of their ancestral faith.

For those readers unfamiliar with the beliefs and practices of the Spanish Inquisition in Spain and Latin America, I would recommend the reading of one or two books on the subject. It is a history of religious persecution, theological cruelty, physical torture, secret trials, seizure of property and, a near continuous narrative of the torture and death of completely innocent people.

Across the Borderline

I met Rabbi Leon recently at a hotel in downtown Toronto, while winter still had its grip upon us. He was invited to speak at the Darchei Noam synagogue here about his work on what can only be called, the voluntary repatriation of Jewish families whose ancestors had been forced to convert to Catholicism under threat of death, and who now risk family and fortune in the modern world, by considering a return to Judaism.

This "mission" of Rabbi Leon was not something that came upon him early in life. It happened in his forties. He is now in his early seventies and he has been "at it" for about thirty years. His demeanor is calm and friendly. He speaks with the slight hint of a Brooklyn accent, despite his years of Ivy League study in New York City's religious and educational institutions.

He told me, "One part of the story has to do with my name. Although when I grew up we thought of ourselves as typical Ashkenazic American Jews, we knew there was some family tradition, that because of our name, Leon, a classic Spanish Jewish name, we had some Sephardic ancestors. But I did not give it much thought during my younger years."

"Just over thirty years ago I was about to sign a new contract in New Jersey when I got contacted by the search committee from the Conservative Synagogue in El Paso Texas, just on and over the border from Mexico. They were looking for a new Rabbi, why I do not know. They told me that they had interviewed a number of candidates. One of my congregants from New Jersey had moved there, and recommended that I be considered for the position."

"After their phone interview they asked me, 'Would you like to come out for a weekend?' I agreed to come. At that time, I knew almost nothing about El Paso other than it is on the border with Mexico. I did remember the Marty Robbins song about the town. And so, I went down there for the weekend. After my weekend, they offered me the job of Rabbi to the congregation."

"It was not a simple thing to move from the northeast to the border of Mexico. One of our three daughters, who was fifteen at the time, was at the Solomon Schechter high school. At the same time, I was still Dean of the Academy for Jewish Religion, an eclectic institution dedicated to the study of all aspects of Jews and Judaism. Louis Newman founded it in 1956, and I was still actively teaching there. I was also in charge of educating future Rabbis. And so I commuted to El Paso until I could find someone to take over this school."

"During my first day on the job in El Paso, a guy from Juarez Mexico, just over the border called me saying, 'Rabbino, I need to come and see you.' He told me that he is a Catholic and his grandmother had recently passed away. He said, 'When she was alive, every Friday night she would take me into a dark room in the house, light the candles, and say a prayer in a language I did not understand. I finally asked my mother about it. She told me that these customs no longer interest her. So, a number of family members asked me to consult a local priest.'"

When he did so, the priest told him, "There are hundreds of women in Juarez lighting candles Friday night, but out of respect for your late grandmother, you should probably see a Rabbi to talk about this.' I asked the priest, "Are there any Rabbis in Juarez?" "No" he said, "but there are across the borderline in El Paso."

Rabbi Leon recounts, "He arrived at my synagogue and we had a long conversation. Finally I told him that, 'Lighting candles on a Friday nights is a Jewish custom.' When I said that, he looked as if he was about to faint, as it dawned on him that he may be a descendant of Spanish Jews. As we talked it became clear that on his paternal grandfather's side, his ancestors had come to Mexico from Spain. They had kept the memory of the ancestral homeland and religion alive. Their secret identity as Jews was also kept alive by the female descendants of his father's line, which explains why his grandmother lit candles and why his mother, who does not share the same lineage, was disinterested in his grandmother's residual Jewish customs, as she had no real Jewish roots."

"Now, as you listen to this story you may assume that he started learning about Judaism and that like many others who have come to me from across the border, he is now a fully practicing Jew. That is not the case. For many B'nai Anusim, it is enough that they know who they are and

where they came from. Many of them are simply unwilling or unable, to make a break from their family and religion, for to become a Jew once again, means that you are no longer a Christian, do not go to Church, do not celebrate Christmas etc. In the case of this man, to this day, he shows up at my synagogue every Yom Kippur. Sometimes he makes eye contact with me and we acknowledge each other. Most other times, he bears silent witness to his Jewish ancestors who went underground in Mexico and the Southwest and maintained what little was left of their Jewish identity from the cruel representatives of the Spanish Inquisition.”

“On a regular day in El Paso a technician came to my house to fix my TV connection. He asked me, ‘Are you Jewish?’ I told him that I was and he smiled and said, ‘I am Jewish too!’ It turns out that a month earlier his grandmother had invited ten grandchildren to her house. She explained that she was getting older and she wanted to share something with her grandchildren. She then took out a box and in it were a Jewish star, a Kiddush cup, candles, a menorah and other Jewish religious artifacts. She told them, ‘These were handed down to me. I have never showed them to anyone. Now I am showing them to you. I want each one of you to take one of these objects, and in doing so I ask you to remember one thing, and one thing only-our family has Jewish roots!’”

“These are just two, out of hundreds of anecdotes. The longer I stayed in El Paso the more people came to me from both within Texas and across the border. These are the descendants of the secret Jews of the Inquisition, which only ended in Mexico just before the Civil War. I realized that I had to respond to all of this in a more meaningful way.”

“So, One Day before the sad holiday of Tisha B’av, I put an add in the paper inviting people to come to that service at which time I had invited a person of crypto-Jewish background to tell his story. Three hundred people showed up.”

Many of them are now studying Judaism and are considering returning to their ancestral faith. Understandably, this could and can only happen in America, whose constitution is based on the Old Testament and which still allows Jews to practice their religion with full freedom. I could tell you dozens of stories.”

“In the midst of what I realized was my unique mission in life I had a conversation with God. It was a numinous experience, which was unique, and I do not question its authenticity. I told him that we as the Jewish people are doing quite well...all of his promises to us have been fulfilled except one... we have made our mark...we are strong in Israel...we have made the world a better place...I told him that he had promised us that we would be as numerous as the sands of the seas...God said that he did not build the gas chambers. Evil people chose to do that and we

cannot bring back the six million...but there was a different genocide done in his name... that had forcibly converted, tortured and burnt thousands of Jews and converts without remorse... a small percentage died but most maintained their Judaism...and they must be redeemed. They have begun to return...."

"When I was doing my Bar Mitzvah nearly 60 years ago in Connecticut, it was on the holiday of Succoth but the English date was October 12th, Columbus Day. My Rabbi told me how lucky we are to be Jews in America. He also praised Christopher Columbus, who had opened up this country for the Spanish and then the English and to the many Jews who have come to these shores. He did not mention the Inquisition that Columbus knew about, or, the expulsion of the Jews of Spain carried out by his patrons, Ferdinand and Isabella."

"As I began to meet these surviving Jews of the Inquisition and help them return to Judaism, I remember conversations that I had had with my grandfather. It turns out that there is a family tradition that we have a Sephardic line, that we came from Leon in Spain, and that we were descendants of Moshe Leon, the man who wrote the greatest Jewish work of mysticism of Jewish Spain, the *Zohar*."

"The Zohar means 'splendor' and it refers to the brightness, the light of the Torah and the Jewish way of life. I feel that as my ancestors once fled the cruelty of the Inquisition and kept their Judaism secret, it was time to bring the light back to those who return, in the spirit of my ancestor from Spain, who was also a Rabbi, so many centuries ago across the Ocean. I realized that at some level, my family and I had survived the Inquisition. I am not alone. In the Spanish speaking world there are thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, and most likely millions of Spanish Jews, who if allowed to express their freedom of religion, could return to Judaism."

As I got ready to leave the lobby of the hotel where Rabbi Leon was staying he added,

"For years I have been fascinated by that same Jewish holiday of Tisha B'av which commemorates the destruction of the first Temple by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. and the second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E. I was even able to pass a resolution at the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism to make that occasion a time to learn about the Inquisition and the return of the B'nai Anusim to their Jewish roots. Most Jews don't know that that was also the day that Ferdinand and Isabella kicked the Jews out of Spain. In many ways we have been redeemed. We have now come full circle. We must never forget that fact. And there is much work to be done."

And with that, we shook hands, he smiled and I walked out of his hotel onto the snow-covered

street.

Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large.

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