

# An Extra Prayer for Zapata

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (November 2023)



*Moroccan Market*, Theo van Rysselberghe, 1887

*I'd rather die on my feet, than live on my knees.*—Emiliano Zapata

**The usual routine:** A walk down the mountain with my Moroccan security guard (I now know that his first name is Lahcen). Prayers at the Nahon synagogue. An extended dinner with the other nine members of my prayer group. Good Moroccan food washed down by good Kosher wine from Israel. Good conversation.

We were talking about a growing phenomenon in the Jewish

diaspora, the slow and steady return to the Jewish faith of Spanish speaking citizens of Spain and Latin America, many of whom had discovered that their families, usually on the mother's side, had maintained Jewish customs from the time that their ancestors had been forced to convert to Catholicism on pain of loss of property, or death by being burnt at the stake.

Ozziel was in good form, so when the conversation died down he said, "Let me tell you the story of Solomon Alkalai, for it touches on this matter but in an unusual way." He picked up his glass of green Moroccan tea in one hand, played with his walking stick in the other hand, and began this tale.

"Solomon was born in Tangier in 1895. Europeans and European influence were beginning to affect the city, and our community looked forward to a time when Islamic law would no longer relegate us to second class citizens, as our community was often the object of pogroms carried out by the Muslim society around us, which itself was often in chaos, since the history of Moroccan politics is one of a long term, pendulum-like struggle between the Arabs of the plains and the Berbers of the mountains. Solomon's father was a wine merchant. Today, we would call him "lower middle class." For he did not own his own property, but did have enough income to find tutors to teach his children, both male and female: French, English and the basics of science. As Tangier was under Spanish influence at that time, and we spoke the Moroccan Jewish Spanish dialect of Haketia, the official, Spanish, language came naturally.

"Solomon took to math like a fish to water. When still a teenager, he was apprenticed to a Spanish accountant who worked for the wealthy Spaniards who had made Tangier their secondary residence, where they could enjoy a higher standard of living than in semi-impoverished Spain, where

the economy was in an eternal downturn and the cost of living was rising.

“Young Solomon got on well with his Spanish employers. They were intrigued by his Sephardic ancestry, for he knew that his family had come from Cordoba in the fifteenth century. His sisters were well known in the community for singing Romanceros, in late medieval Spanish. These were songs whose lyrics went back to pre-expulsion Spain. They had survived only in the traditions of Jews who had been expelled from Spain and were becoming of interest to Spanish scholars who viewed them as artifacts of a Spanish oral tradition that provided a poetic glimpse into the folk world of Cervantes.

“Some of these Spanish elites in Tangier owned estates in the Yucatan. They were often absentee landlords of large estates that had been carved out of that flat but fertile land by the Conquistadores. When he was barely nineteen Solomon [was sent to work as an accountant on one of these large estates near Merida. Before WWI, and during the late 19th century, they grew henequen, which was used for all and any kind of rope.

“These estates were worked by Mayan peasants who were treated worse than European medieval serfs. They worked hard and lived in fear of their Spanish and Mexican masters. They were never paid enough to save anything. They did not own the land that had been taken from them by their Spanish-speaking masters. They barely spoke Spanish themselves, and lived in a mystical world that worshipped the old Mayan Gods dressed in Catholic clothing.

“They revolted during the 19th century. We call these revolts the caste wars. The syncretistic religion of the Mayans was instrumental in these revolts, as their inspiration came not from the Catholic Saints or Jesus, but believe it or not, from “talking crosses” that to my mind

bore a strong resemblance to the ancient Shamanism so common to all American Indians, including the pre-conquest Mayans. There was always unrest among the workers, so they were often beaten and whipped.

"Solomon was a young man at the time, and Mexico was exploding into revolution, yet again. We must remember that many of the followers of Zapata were southern Mayans who were simply fed up with being persecuted and exploited. Moving about Mexico, they discovered that they were part of a larger country, that there were other tribes besides the Mayan, that the mixed Spanish-Indian mestizos of the upper classes were often sympathetic to their plight, and that there were a small number of Israelites living freely in Mexico city whom they had heard about from their Catholic priests. As they had been taught that these people are Christ killers, this was just one more part of their cognitive dissonance in response to their growing realization that the world was more varied than they had been taught.

"Solomon soon discovered that there were fifteen other Sephardic Jews living and working in and around Merida. He learned that they would adjust their holiday schedule so that Easter week corresponded with or overlapped with Passover, when they would celebrate the Exodus from Egypt together, by reading the Haggadah, the Passover liturgical book and guide.

"Solomon could see that the Mexican elite were behaving the way the ancient Egyptians had treated the Jews, so he sympathized with the Mayans. As he was young and virile, and had not yet internalized the dichotomy between the peaceful Moroccan Jew and the violent and warlike Moroccan Muslim that was so much part of Morocco at the time, he dreamed of glory, valor and justice. So, he joined Zapata's rebels. He called himself Solomon Merida, in honor of his adopted town. Not surprisingly, after Zapata sized him up,

he made him his accountant.

"Solomon spent the next few years riding trains and on horseback. He saw massacres, rape on both sides, the despoiling of farms and villages and the chaos that was so much part of the Mexican revolution. He learnt how to ride like a cowboy and shoot like a soldier. He sent his family letters from the front, a few of which remain in the archives of the synagogue here. I have brought one, perhaps the most revealing one, to read to you tonight. Here is an excerpt.

*'Dearest Mother and Father:*

*I have joined the rebels. The government of the country and my employees are as corrupt as Pharoah was during the time of Moses. I know that you would have counseled me that the fights among the Christians are not our fights, but somehow, I feel that may no longer be the case. Is it possible, that if Jews choose the right side in these fights, then that winning side may look more favorably upon the Jewish people as a whole?*

*Would it not be possible that our communities, who may soon live in the land of Israel, under the British, once they defeat the Turks, may gain the respect and admiration of the British, in the hope of a reconstituted homeland? I believe in Mr. Balfour and his declaration. Is it not possible that a new, just and equitable government of Mexico may vote for such a thing in the League of Nations that the Americans are always talking about?*

*The revolution here is bloody. It is often hard to know who the good guys are and who are the bad guys. I am not sure at times, myself, for when I have to work with the quartermasters and account for the food and*

livestock taken from the poorest of the poor by Zapata's forces, I wonder whether this is not a sign of a bad future for this country. Yet, I have been an eyewitness of the beatings and exploitation of the Mayans on the plantations where I worked, which is probably worse than their treatment by Zapata's henchmen. Peasants or "campesinos," as they are called here, are a suspicious lot. Most of them cannot read and write. They believe in the saints of the Catholic faith, more than they believe in Jesus and mother Mary, more than both put together, and they fear witches, enchantments and a whole range of things that our own communities back home believed in before we began to study the science and philosophy of the Europeans, whose secularism seems to be some kind of revolt against their own Christian traditions. Understandably, our people do not write about this in the European press. Not in our interest. I did discuss this with father before I left Tangier.

I do have news, of a sort, and I hope you will not be angry with me. I am about to be married. The woman is a Mayan. She heard a sermon by one of the Catholic brothers about Pharoah and the Israelites during Easter week, which made her curious. She is one of Zapata's female soldiers and good with a gun. She had somehow managed to learn to read and write Spanish, and one day asked me for the loan of my Spanish Old Testament. I lent it to her and when she was finished reading it, she exclaimed, "So you are a direct descendant of Moses the liberator? He is just like Zapata!" I laughed and said, "Not exactly."

We have spent much time together, under fire, and I have told her all and everything I know about our community and traditions and also some of the secular history of the Jewish people that I have read in

*French. It was as if we were made for each other and one day she simply took me in her arms and said, "God has sent you to me and I will be your Jewish wife." We are set to be married in six months in Merida. There is a Sephardic rabbi who visits here from Cuba and he will be doing her conversion and the ceremony. I have begun to teach her Hebrew.*

*Your loving son,  
Solomon'"*

We were silent. I broke the silence and asked, "So what happened next?" Ozziel smiled and said, "Well, they lived happily ever after." He continued, "They survived the Mexican revolution and came back to Tangier in the 1920s. By that time the Europeans ruled our city, and the Jews were finally free to live where they want, study what they want and open businesses. Solomon became quite well off. He exported Moroccan olives to Mexico and Latin America. In our community, he became known as the olive king. His wife, Angelina, gave him two fine looking boys and two girls whose strikingly good looks found them loving and well-endowed husbands. One couple moved to mandated Palestine, and their grandchildren continue to send us money for the upkeep of this synagogue. Sadly, Angelina died in the 1960s, and Solomon died shortly thereafter. I knew him well, for he was an active member of the Synagogue until his death." He continued:

"There is a twist to this tale however. If you look closely at our library shelves [in the Synagogue you will see the collected works of the British scholar of the Mayan and Aztec Indians, Lord Kingsborough.

"Let me read you a short article about him:

*'Antiquities of Mexico* is a compilation of facsimile reproductions of Meso-American literature, including Maya codices, Mixtec codices, and Aztec codices, as well as historical accounts, and explorers' descriptions of archaeological ruins. It was assembled and published by Edward King, Lord Kingsborough, in the early decades of the 19th century. While much of the material pertains to pre-Columbian cultures, there are also documents relevant to studies of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. *Antiquities of Mexico* was produced to make copies of rare manuscripts, that are in private European collections, available for study by scholars. The work consists of nine volumes, each published in a large elephant folio format. It was originally planned as ten, but Lord Kingsborough died before the work could be fully completed.

Kingsborough commissioned the Italian landscape painter, Agostino Aglio, to furnish reproduction drawings and lithographs of the Mesoamerican artworks and codices used to illustrate the volumes. Born in Cremona and resident in London since 1803, Aglio had previously illustrated antiquities of Ancient Egypt and Magna Græcia on behalf of the English architect, William Wilkins. Aglio spent the better part of six years travelling to the libraries and museums of Europe to examine and draw all of the "Ancient Mexican" documents, artefacts and manuscripts known to be in European collections of the time. Many of the facsimiles of codices are hand-colored.'

"What the article does not say is that Kingsborough was motivated to spend his personal fortune on these exquisite books because he believed that the Indians of the Americas,

and especially the Mayans and Aztecs, were descended from the lost tribes of Israel. He died in debtor's prison because of his investment in these works, a year before he would have inherited an estate that would have put him in the top 5% of wealthy Brits from the 18th century.

"The thing is that Solomon's boss had a copy of *Antiquities of Mexico* in his personal library. Before fleeing his estate during the revolution, Solomon had borrowed these books, and left them in his cottage. Because of his Zapatista sympathies, the local Mayan left them alone. When he returned to Tangier in the 1920s he brought these books with him and deposited them in our synagogue library.

"When Angelina was on her death bed, she called the Rabbi to confess. I know what you will be thinking, that this is quite a Catholic way of going about dying, but old habits die hard. She told the Rabbi that whenever she had doubts about leaving the Catholic religion, she would lose herself in Kingsborough's books, imbibing the antiquities of her own people, which were not taught in the few schools that existed in Mexico at the time. Apparently, her last words were, "I married Solomon because I knew that my ancestors were descended from his ancestors. How they were separated I do not know, but I do know that the Messiah who will return to this earth will speak both Mayan and Hebrew.

"If you go to the cemetery of Tangier, you will see her tombstone. In Hebrew letters above her name, date of birth and date of death, it is written, "Viva Zapata."

After hearing this story I felt that we needed to honor Angelina's memory, and that of Zapata, for Ozziel had told me that Angelina had mentioned that Zapata never said a bad word about Jewish people. The next Sunday we went to the cemetery to say Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, over Angeline's

grave.

I said an extra prayer for Zapata.

## **Afterword**

Think of the Jewish community of Tangier as an extension, or better yet, a marginal survival of the once thriving Spanish Jewry of the middle ages, and you will get an idea of how their world view is both international and Hispanic. Tangier's Jews have been and still are wired into the Spanish Speaking world, just as Canadians are to the Anglosphere. And so, as servants or employees of the Spaniards who eventually occupied Northern Morocco and established their own short-lived protectorate there, Tangier Sephardim could migrate and work anywhere in the Hispanic world, including in the Spanish possessions in South America. So they were not immune to the struggles for freedom that periodically engulfed Central and South America during the early 20th century.

Sadly most of these experiments failed. The late, great Mexican poet, essayist and diplomat, Octavio Paz, explained much of why things went wrong with these revolutions made in the name of the Enlightenment. He explains that no matter how hard they tried, the new leaders would eventually adopt the same hierarchy and brutal methods of wealth extraction practiced by the previous elites, and lived lives of luxury similar to those of the elites they displaced.

The Sephardic communities who live in today's Mexico, for example, although they hold passports and are considered Mexican citizens, have many of the same attitudes of the Sephardim of Morocco. They never know when the elites and the regime may turn against them, or against their proxy, the State of Israel, and so they have been, for the most part, skeptical about the likes of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara or the more recent Zapatistas, led by Commander Zero, an academic

pretending to be a revolutionary.

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