

Flames of Freedom REVEALED – Dr. Eliezer Papo, Part II

[Richard Stone] Welcome to Flames of Freedom Revealed, brought to you by Lance Tolan Entertainment. I'm Richard Stone, your host and co-creator of the historical drama Flames of Freedom. In these bonus episodes accompanying our dramatic stories, we explore the historical roots of the Jewish quest for liberty with world-renowned scholars, authors, and historians.

We'll delve into the background of the characters in our story who were escaping from the cruel inequities of the Portuguese Inquisition, murderous pogroms in Eastern Europe, and virulent anti-Semitism. Why were they willing to risk their lives to sail across the Atlantic Ocean to settle in the untamed wilderness of the new American colony of Georgia, founded by James Oglethorpe, but with no assurances of survival?

That they'd even be allowed to come ashore. Welcome back to Flames of Freedom Revealed. Our guest today is Dr. Eliezer Pappo, who is Senior Lecturer of Hebrew Literature at Ben Gurion University of the Negev in Be'er Sheva, Israel. He serves as Chairman of the Moshe David Gayan Center for Ladino Culture and is the Chief Editor of *El Presente*, Journal for Sephardic Studies.

In the previous segment of our interview with Dr. Papo, we explored several issues related to the world of the Jews of Sefirot and the many who converted and remained living in Spain and Portugal as conversos, or as they were referred to at the time, new Christians. We concluded with an exploration of identity.

And how the Jews of Spain had actually resided there long before Christianity came to the peninsula, yet the Jews never claimed Spain as their own. In this second part of a three-part interview, Dr. Papo continues to explore the world of Sephardic Jewish culture and the conversos, how Jewish, Spanish, and Portuguese cultures impacted each other, and how Judaism, as practiced by conversos in secret, was deeply affected by generations of living outwardly as Catholics.

We pick up the conversation as Dr. Papo explains the history of the Jews and Catholics in Spain.

[Dr. Papo] The overwhelming majority of Catholics in Spain was not bothered by the fact that the country was Catholic. The same way the overwhelming majority of Israeli Jews are not bothered with the fact that the country is Jewish.

This is a democratic country, so if we ever wanted to have a civil marriage here, we would have it.

It's that we don't want it. And why? Because we actually do want the Rabbinate to be free. To control who is getting married with whom. We don't say it out loudly, but that's overwhelming majority of people are happy about the fact that if you really want to marry out, you need to do it in a difficult way.

It's not easy, but you just don't go to the city hall and marry whomever you want. So there was a single group in Spain and Portugal that was bothered by the fact that these countries were Catholic. And these were the Jews who were taken from their Judaism by force. And they were never allowed to really assimilate.

How come they were never allowed to really assimilate? Only a few years after the forceful conversion of 1492, Spain passes the laws of pureza de sangre, the purity of blood. And it turns to be that. Even if you are now full-fledged Christian that believes in everything that the Christian is supposed to believe and does everything that the Christian is supposed to do, but you happen to have Jewish parents, you cannot obtain certain positions in Spanish society.

So you cannot attend university, you cannot teach at university, you cannot be this, you cannot be that. So these people were not allowed to really assimilate and they were not allowed to stay Jewish. So they said, "What's the problem of our life? The fact that the church and state are not separated. Well, let's get done with it."

Let's separate the church and the these are the first people who had this idea. So, much before Spinoza, you have this idea of secular God. Which the state laws should be based on his will, but he's not denominational God and so on. Much before Spinoza developed that idea, rabbis like Salomone Benverga, himself expelled from Spain in 1492, he wrote the book called *Shevet Yehuda*.

He wrote the book *The Scepter of Judah*. And the time allows us, I could share a beautiful story from that book. A philosopher comes to the king and he says, those Jews, they are refugees amongst us, so they should be modest. But they're haughty. In our own country, they hate us. And if they see Christian from far away, they say, may you die.

Once he approaches them, they say, "How are you doing? But as soon as he leaves, they say, "May the fate of the Paro, king of Egypt, fall on you." And then the king says to the philosopher, "How do you know this?" And he says,

“Well, one of them who converted told me.” And the king says, “Well, if he already changed his fate, he might be changing the effects also.”

So the philosopher says to the king, “Oh, go and invite one of them and ask them which religion is better. And you will see that these refugees believe that their religion is better than ours.” So the king asked for Rabbi Shanji to come. And Rabbi Shanji comes and the king asked him which religion is better.

And listen to this, this is beautiful. And the rabbi says, “Well. I was a slave in Egypt, and God took me out of slavery, and he brought me to the land of Israel. So, for me, Judaism is obviously better. With no Judaism, I would be a slave in Egypt still. And you are the mighty king of this huge country. So obviously, God loves you on the basis of what you are doing. So, for you, Christianity is better. So, the king says, “I didn't ask you which religion is better subjectively. I asked you which religion is better objectively.” So, then the rabbi says, “Give me three days to think about this.” So, the king allows him three days retreat, the rabbi goes home, and he thinks and thinks and thinks, and then he comes, and his face is pale, like as if it was the Shabbat.

And the king says, “What's wrong?” And he says, “Oh, don't even ask. We had this jewelry guy in the community, and he left. And nobody knows where he is. But before he left, he gave to one of his sons a diamond, and to another of his sons, he gave him a ruby. And now those kids ask me whether they should each keep their own stone, their own gemstone, or they should rather sell them both and put the money on the table and then split them in two.

So, the king says, “Oh, interesting. What did you tell them?” He says, “Well, I told them your father probably knew you better than I do. So, if he gave you the diamond, just keep your diamond. He gave you the ruby, just keep your ruby.” And the king says, “Well, that's exactly what I would tell them.” And the rabbi says to the king, “Oh, why aren't your ears listening to what your mouth is saying? Because the Almighty God had two sons, Jacob and Esau. And to one he gave Torah, and to the other he gave the New Testament. Now you are asking me if each of them is better?” Okay? So basically the rabbi is saying, you know, there is no answer to the question of which religion is objectively better. Religion is a subjective thing.

And then the king says a beautiful sentence. The king says, “Oh, now I see. The Jews don't see the truth the way we see the truth, because if they saw the truth the way we see the truth, they will follow the truth the way we follow the truth. So, I understand now,” says the king, “that whatever brings people, persecute

other people because of their religion, is not based on proofs, but rather, on their subjective love to their own religion.”

Okay, so you see, this is actually the nucleus. And he has few more stories like that. This rabbi, who was the rabbi of the Conversos. That's a beautiful thing. What does that mean? Rabbi of the conversos. He's Jewish. He never converted. He's full trained rabbi, but he's serving the Converso community. So, so the Converso rabbi, the rabbi for the Conversos, he's actually writing the book, which contains few stories with what I see as a nucleus of the future idea of separation between state and church.

Rabbi Ibn Verga is saying, the state shouldn't interfere. The state should collect money for electricity and the state should apply the criminal law and religious preferences should be left. He is not into individual rights. The concept was not invented yet. He is into collective rights. So each collective has the right to pick its own religion and the state shouldn't interfere.

That's converso. That's a situational philosophy. We doubt their specific situation. They would never come up with this idea. You need to be a Converso to be bothered with the fact that your state is Catholic. If you are a Jew, you are not. If you are a Catholic, you are not. Only if you are a Conversop, you are bothered.

[Richard Stone] Dr. Papo, you've just given us a wonderful insight into how the notions of the separation of church and state arose in the body politics of the early United States. It's amazing to trace this powerful idea back to the early evolution of Judaism as it was tempered by the forces of Catholicism. I'd like to ask you to turn your attention now to the many people in Portugal who were Conversos, escaped, and made their way to England, as in our story in *Flames of Freedom*.

The history of the Jews in England also is an interesting one because we know the Jews had been expelled there in 1290 and only in 1656 were allowed back into England. This was just 60 years before our story begins with the arrival of Dr. Diogo Nunes Ribeiro and his family, relatives and friends, who escaped from Lisbon and arrived in London in 1726.

Please elaborate on what the world of the Conversos was like when the pivotal families in our story arrived on the shores of England early in the 18th century, and by what means did refugee Jews at this time and place endeavor to find their identity?

[Dr. Papo] First of all, we need to understand that who left Spain in 1492 and who were fully Jewish, In 1492, they didn't have a problem with leaving for a Muslim country like the Ottoman Empire.

However, though, the Jews who stayed in Spain and later stayed in Portugal, within few decades and certainly, uh, within few centuries, they internalized the Christian prejudices towards the Muslim East. For overwhelming majority of them, going to the East was not an option anymore. What was the option? If you go to a Catholic country, Catholicism is international, and the church law, the canonic law, applies wherever there is a Christian ruler, wherever there is a Christian church, and the Catholic church is centralized.

They couldn't leave for a Catholic country, mostly. Why? Because in Catholic country, if they were to re embrace Judaism openly, they would be persecuted as Judaizers. Why? Because they were Christians at a certain point. [00:12:00] And now, like in Italy, in certain city kingdoms, if conversos would bring enough money, then nobody was really into what religion they are practicing.

But this wasn't a solution for all of them. They were a huge community. So not all of them could move to small Italian cities. It wasn't an option. So what happens is, they cannot move to Catholic countries. They don't feel like moving to Muslim countries. And then the reform of Christianity and the establishment of Protestant countries opens a new door for them.

In England, it was worse to be Catholic than to be Jew who returned to Judaism. Because a Jew who returned to Judaism from Catholicism was not necessarily totally satanic. But the Pope was considered to be Satan by most of the Protestant denominations in those times. One of the papal titles is Vicarius Filii Dei, the Vicar of the Son of God.

And then V, is 5, I is 1, C is 100. So, according to protestant mathematics, it adds up to 666. So, the Pope is 666. He is actually the Satan. He is the Antichrist. Now, if you are Jewish, you are allowed to move to England once the Jews were allowed to re enter. Or to enter again, then if you are a Catholic, you are not allowed, but if you are a Catholic who wants to return to Judaism, then you are allowed.

And this applies not only to England, it also applies to Holland. The Jews were actually accepted because Judaism was lesser evil, as far as Protestant countries were concerned, than Catholicism. That's one aspect of it. The other aspect, and that's interesting thing, the authenticity and the search for authenticity.

So it's interesting to start checking when does this start? Who were the first people who felt unauthentic? Where did they go for something more authentic? And then, you know, you will discover all these, uh, Ottomanophiles like Lord Byron and this fascination of the West with the East. But you will never find an Eastern person going to the West because he felt unauthentic in the East.

And he's going to the West to find authenticity. No, many Easterners are going to the West. And this is happening in front of our eyes right now with everybody from Syria coming and the people from Iraq going to Germany and to Western Europe and to England, America, and so on. But they don't go to look for authenticity.

They go to look for better, uh, higher standard of life, better living conditions, bigger personal freedoms, especially sexual freedoms, and so on. If anybody goes any place to look for authenticity, these are the Westerners going to the East looking for authenticity, looking for yoga. I cannot help myself but think that one of the first Westerners to feel an authentic were the conversos.

And they had many reasons to feel unauthentic because they were actually forced into another religion. So they knew that somehow they were violated, but they couldn't take the virus out of their system. So they felt contaminated to the extent that they cannot restore the system to its original settings.

Now, why is all of this important? Because these people, who from certain century on, are not really leaving for the Ottoman Empire because they can't live there. The temperature is complicated, and the climate is [00:16:00] complicated, and there's plenty of viruses, and hygienic conditions are not extremely welcoming, and so on.

But however though, once they establish their own communities, they bring the rabbis from the east. Why? Because those rabbis, with their Sephardic Ottoman Oriental attire, and with their Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew, they sound like Jews. Authentic. So you see that in 16th century and 17th century, the people in Amsterdam and the people in London are bringing rabbis, are usually, especially in Amsterdam, they are bringing rabbis from Salonika.

Why? Because their local rabbi wouldn't be authentic. He's just like one of us and we are not authentic, so he wouldn't be authentic. So that's another aspect typical of these people. So you could say, First of all, if you see how they called their own communities, you know, the Upper West Side, Manhattan, there is a Spanish Portuguese community, which is actually the second reincarnation of that community.

It wasn't established there, but how it's called. She'erit Yisrael, the remnant of Israel. So there was this huge nation of Israel, they were decimated by the Catholic Church, and there was remnant of it. And that remnant felt more aristocratic than other Jews who were never decimated. So that's another aspect of it.

The Jews of London, the Jews of Amsterdam, they referred to their own communities as...Okay? And Hebrew, they've lost, and many of them never reacquired it. Spanish became the language of religion and Portuguese became the language of secular life. So if you see, for example, the community of London, the sermons are delivered in Spanish, but the community records are kept in Portuguese because for anything secular, it's Portuguese, and for anything sacred, it's Spanish.

So that's also another development. Typical for Spanish and Portuguese Jews. If we want to dwell for a moment on their relations with other Jewish communities, they looked to the Sephardim in the East as more authentic version of themselves. So the Sephardim who would come to an SMP, Spanish and Portuguese community, would be allowed to join and assimilated gladly and fastly.

However, though, when it comes to Ashkenazim, It wasn't so easy. The haughty or snobbish, you can call them snobbish, because certainly one aspect of their culture is snobbish. So, the snobbish S&P Jews would not allow any Ashkenazi Jew to their fold immediately. If you were a German Jew, you would usually be fast-track recognized as a full member of the community.

Why? Because according to their worldview, the Jews of Germany were dignified. They didn't spoke any Jewish jargon. They spoke a proper language, which is German. They were educated. They were gentlemen. And in Spanish and Portuguese community, one of the requirements for acquiring full membership is before becoming a member, you should become a nice Jewish gentleman.

So, I'll give you just one example because I love it. I was there in Sherit Israel, in a Spanish and Portuguese synagogue in Upper West Side Manhattan, for Sukkot, like a decade ago or something like that. And I knew where I was coming, so obviously, I came in a three-part suit, right? However, though, I had a kippah on my head.

So, the shamash of the community approaches me and he says, Professor, we would like to invite you for the third Aliyah. On Shabbat and on holiday, the

scroll of Torah is brought out of the Arona Kodesh, which Sefer Adim called Echal, and it's publicly read. And on Shabbat, you invite seven people to read.

So the first Aliyah is Kohen. The second Aliyah, Kohen, another person who has a second name, Kohen. Second Aliyah is always given to a person who has a second name, Levi. These two are, how do you call it, sold before the game. And then from third Aliyah on, You can sell the Aliyot, that's what Jews do, you sell the Aliyot, or you give them as a token of honor to distinguished guests which attend the synagogue on that Shabbat.

So I was approached by him and he says, we would like to honor you with the third Aliyah, but we do feel you might be a bit underdressed.

Okay, so, I look at myself, I'm not nude, and I'm not in shorts, and I'm wearing my shoes with my socks. I'm not an Israeli with the sunglasses on the top of my head, and I say, Is there any way you could help me fix that? And he says, if you would follow me. So, I follow him to a junk room, and he gives me a tie.

And kippah is not good enough, you need to have a hat. And if it's a half cylinder, it's even better. So, I picked a tie and I picked a half cylinder and I went inside and I was invited to the Torah. And then there is an Israeli sitting, you know, in the first next row and he turns to Gabbai in English and the Gabbai speaks to him back in Hebrew.

And he had the sunglasses on the top of his head and he was in shorts and he was in short sleeves. So after the Gabbai left, he turns to me and he says, how did he know I was Israeli? And I was like, no. So, I'm always saying the service in the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue is a beautiful combination of traditional Sephardic prayer and Freemason ritual.

So it's very ritualized and it's, uh, very dignifying. So when the people walk to the, uh, to bring out the scroll, you know, They don't go foot by foot. No, they make one step with their right leg. Then they bring their left leg to the right leg. Then they proceed with the right leg. So bringing out Sefer Torah is five minutes ritual.

[Richard Stone] Fascinating. Let's pause here and we'll continue this conversation in the third part of our interview with Dr. Papo.

Thank you for listening to Flames of Freedom Revealed, hosted by Richard Stone and produced and directed by Mark Simon. Our executive producer is Lance Tolan. Original music by Dave Wilson at Q Tone Productions. Special

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