

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

[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.

I want to welcome you back to part three of our conversation with Dr. Eliezer Papo. 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 Gaon Center for Ladino Culture and is the Chief Editor of El Presente, Journal for Sephardic Studies.

We hope you find Dr. Papo's extensive knowledge of the world of Sephardic Jewish culture and conversos enriching and illuminating. So, Dr. Papo, we concluded the last episode discussing the distinctions between Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jewish traditions. This highlights an exciting development in our story of Samuel and Rebecca Nunes, formerly known in Portugal as Diogo and Gracia Nunes.

We have two noteworthy things that transpired in our story. One is an Ashkenazi family from Prussia has immigrated to England to escape from mandates by the Prussian king who made it very difficult for Jews to earn a living. They came to England and were welcomed into Bevis Mark Synagogue, a Sephardic synagogue, one which traditionally serves Spanish and Portuguese Jews.

Dr. Papo, please speak a little bit about what would have happened there, because they could have just as easily gone to the Ashkenazi synagogue that was not far from Bevis Marks, but chose not to. The other piece that I'd love for you to address is that Gracia Nunes, who adopted the name Rebecca, had great

expectations coming to England with dreams of reverting to Judaism, but confronts a reality that isn't nearly as welcoming as she expected.

[Dr. Papo] First of all, I'll share an anecdote without touching upon any names, but when I was in Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue in Manhattan, there was one of the old timers with the very posh Spanish and Portuguese second name, and we are leaving the Azarat Gevarim, the main hall of the synagogue, and at the same time, The ladies are coming down from the female balcony.

The wife of one of the prominent members of the community, an Ashkenazi who was only recently admitted to the community, very influential guy, his wife is coming down, and she extends her hand to this SMP old timer, and she says, Shabbos! Right? Shabbos. She doesn't say Shabbat Shalom, and she doesn't say Moadim L'Simcha even though we are, uh, in Shabbat in the middle of Sukkot.

She says, "Shabbos," you know, in Yiddish, and he says, "Merry Christmas," and I'm like, what the heck? So she leaves, obviously offended, and I turn to him and I say, what was this all about? And he says, "if it's other religions. I have slight preference for Roman Catholicism." If you research a certain community and you want to talk about it, then you need to present it the way it really is.

So, back to your question, Sephardim and Ashkenazim. I'll give you a beautiful example, one of those that I like the most. There is this baron. In other words, aristocrat, Diego de Aguilar, which re embraces Judaism, and he moves to Austro Hungarian Empire. And over there, he finds that there are many cities with great commercial life with no Jews allowed to live there. And he confronts the authorities and they say these cities are forbidden for the Jews. And he says, Ottoman Jews are not necessarily only Jewish; they are Ottoman citizens, so you cannot prevent them because you have special bilateral agreements with Turkey that All the rights that are given to Austro-Hungarian merchants in Turkey will be given to Ottoman merchants in Austro Hungarian Empire.

So he brings in the Sephardic communities and he establishes them in all those cities where the Jews were not allowed to come. Then Ashkenazim are turning to him and say, well, you know, up to the north, there are cities where Jews are not allowed. Can't you help us? And she says, Oh, piece of cake. I can help you obtain Ottoman citizenship.

And then even though you were born there, and your grandparents were born there, and your great grandparents were born there, your country will need to see you as foreigners. And as such, you will have more rights than as Jews who

were born there. So he helps them. This Sephardic Jew, who happens also to be a Christian aristocrat, Baron Diego de Aguilar, he helps the Ashkenazim establish communities in places where Jews were not allowed to live.

He lives in one of those communities. Now the Ashkenazi approach to them. You would say that the Ashkenazim would kiss his hands, if not his feet. But you have one Ashkenazi rabbi writing to another rabbi where they don't even recognize him to be a born Jew. They see him as a convert to Judaism. So one Ashkenazi rabbi is writing to another Ashkenazi rabbi, and he says, Oh, if not for the help of this great convert to Judaism, we wouldn't even be allowed to settle here.

So they don't recognize him as a born Jew. Now, you would think he has inhibitions or complexes towards them. No. He's writing to London. Once his kids reached marriageable age, he's writing to London and he says, Please arrange for me moving to London because my kids have reached marriageable age and as everybody knows, there are no Jews in these parts and I want them to marry two Jews.

So he helped the Ashkenazim were Jewish enough. for him to help them, but they were certainly not Jewish enough for him to marry off his children to them. The relations were highly complicated. I'll give you another example. It's Chag Lapinto. Okay. He reads what Voltaire had to say about the Jews in his encyclopedia.

There are three Jews, and Voltaire comes with this antisemitic article full of prejudices, how Jews are unassimilable because they are marginalized and they live the life of dogs. And, uh, they don't have any national pride and there is no even basic human pride. And then it's ha pinto. Writes to Voltaire in a, what today we would call an open letter.

And he says, Oh, you have obviously never visited the Spanish and Portuguese synagogues in London and Amsterdam. Because if you were to visit them, you would see how dignified and dignifying they are. And there is no more splendid and illustrious house of worship. then Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of Amsterdam or London.

You must have been writing about Ashkenazim, but you should know that they are the way they are because you treat them the way you treat them. Right? So, we see limited Jewish solidarity because he doesn't say these things are interesting. So he says no. It's situational and they developed into what they developed because you treat them the way you treat them.

But he certainly wants the distinction between the Sephardim who are proud of their Judaism and, uh, you know, who are wise and learned and well socialized in their societies and recognized as men of honor. Basically, they have this, uh, just like Herzl many years later. The Amsterdam and the London Sephardim, they have this gentleman fix idea.

So it's all about being a gentleman. Now, being a gentleman doesn't really chase you as issue-centred Judaism until you come to Spanish and Portuguese Judaism. And then the way they look at the Torah is in a very chivalry way. So it's refreshing. It's Incredibly different and there is plenty We should learn from them on positive terms to emulate and imitate and then there are things that we certainly shouldn't But it's an interesting community with rich life and it's different than anything anybody knows So in 18th century England the Scheftels show up at Beavis Mark Synagogue escaping from Prussia You Without hesitation, they're brought into the fold with no questions asked.

And that's because they are coming for pressure. And that's because they already dress as gentlemen and act as gentlemen. And they, they don't have snorers. And as I said, it's all about being a gentleman. So if you keep your word, if you keep your word of honor, then the community can also, uh, how do you call it in English?

Vote for you, right? If the community cannot vote for you, they cannot even allow you to become a member because becoming a member, you can actually, print out a visit card. Once you are recognized as a member, you can add it to your CV. You can say a member of the Spanish and Portuguese community. It's a social upgrading.

It's like being allowed to the gentlemen club. And there's a term for this, Yichas.

[Richard Stone] How would you explain that to our audience?

[Dr. Papo] Well, Yichas is basically a biological social background. In other words, coming from a line of rabbis. and intellectuals. So it's not only biological and it's, it's also social. It's not only social, it's also biological. It's coming from a line, but it's not coming from any line, just like racism. It's coming from a line of scholars. It's coming from a line of intellectuals. It's coming from a line of people who led Torah centric lives. And it's not necessarily Practice-oriented, rather it's knowledge-oriented.

[Richard Stone] So when you say it's basically about how knowledgeable your grandparents were. Interesting. Interesting. So let's, let's, uh, let's, uh, shift a

little and talk about gender and women and what the world of women was like, especially. The Converso women who show up on the shores of England, um, without any real knowledge of Judaism and suddenly confront, uh, a world that is in many respects quite foreign to them.

[Dr. Papo] Yes. So first of all, if you read classic NIC literature and then you read Medieval Jewish literature, you always find a lot of prejudices towards women. Now, you need to be a male in order not to teach women anything and then to be appealed by the fact that they don't know anything. They don't know anything because you are not teaching them anything.

To us today, it's a very obvious equation. Have you tried to teach them and they would forget? No, you didn't. Have you tried to teach them and they said, We don't want to? No! How come you keep discovering time after time that women don't know anything after actually establishing the system in which they are not told anything?

Now, when I mean not told anything, first of all there is the language barrier. Judaism is told in Hebrew. Right? Judaism is taught in Hebrew, full stop. It's taught in Hebrew even today, with this huge supremacy of English language and so on. But if you go to a serious yeshiva in New York, it's in Hebrew.

The book is in Hebrew. It doesn't help. Nobody's learning Talmud in English translation. Now, the ladies were not given basic course in Hebrew. So the knowledge was inaccessible to them. And the guys kept saying, these ladies don't know anything. You know, never thinking of the fact, well, they are not the total language in which the knowledge is given.

Now what happens is by bad faith or bad luck of the conversos, nobody got any knowledge. Everything was democratized. The main difference between males and females was removed because converso males knew nothing and converso females knew nothing. So it's, you know, Right? So it's a win situation or lose situation.

Now, next level. They were all supposed to act as good Catholics. Now, in Catholicism, there is clergy, and then there is common folk. But there is no difference between male common folk and female common folk, as far as the liturgy is concerned. Why? Because the main text is produced by the clergy. By the priest and then the commoners are answering, you know, with our father who art in heaven or amen, amen, kirie eleison, kirie eleison, and so on.

So, the law is saying for male and female, for female and male, they know those few sentences in Latin and ladies participated. Now, interestingly, once those ladies returned to Judaism, they don't agree anymore, that the liturgy is a male thing. So, I'll give you one example that I like the most. If you go to Izmir, Izmir is the city in Turkey, and there is plenty of preserved synagogues over there, some of them from 16th and 17th century, some of them later, but you come to a Portuguese synagogue, and the first thing you see is they have huge Huge balcony for ladies.

Then you go to other Sephardic synagogues in Izmir. Some of them don't have place for ladies at all. Some of them have a very small one. Why? Because traditional Sephardic ladies didn't really attend synagogue a lot. And very few women, uh, elderly women, rabbinic widows and such, uh, would attend the service.

The rest, usually, Sephardic women had no place. too many kids to take care about, because the man with older sons would go to the synagogue. And the lady would stay home with three, four, five, six underage kids. And that was the traditional Society with traditional, uh, roles, the same way the woman was giving birth for both of them, the children were considered his also.

So she was cooking for both of them and she was giving birth for both of them. He was providing food for both of them and he was praying for both of them. So she didn't have to pray. She didn't even know how to. She didn't know any Hebrew. Even when it comes to the pseudo liturgical, in other words, home rituals, mostly the woman would only say Amen.

The man would say the Barachah, and she would say Amen. And only when it was really required by the law, like for example, the story of Passover. So the Jewish halakhah, the Jewish religious law, asks for everyone present to understand So when Haggadah is read, it's not only read in Hebrew. Why? Because in Haggadah we are not actually talking to God.

When we are asking things from God, we do it in Hebrew. That's a proper language. But in Passover, we are telling ourselves the story of our identity. So that's why Agadah is always translated. So you say it in Hebrew and English, in Hebrew and French, in Hebrew and Spanish, in Hebrew and Arabic. So Sephardic woman, would follow the seder because the Haggadah would be told also in Okay, now what happens is, after two, four, six, eight generations of being Christian, these ladies were attending church, their mothers attended church, their grandmothers attended church.

Not necessarily out of conviction, but at least they did. So they were used to being part of the service. And now all of a sudden, they rejoin the fold, whether in the Ottoman Empire in 16th century, or in Amsterdam, in London, and so on, mostly in 17th century and later centuries. And now they are expected to disappear from religious life.

And they say, we? Never. So they would go to the synagogue. Obviously they were not allowed to sit together with their husbands. They would be in the balcony. But if you saw the balcony in Max Pervis, or if you saw the balcony in Shavit Israel in Manhattan, you saw that this is the synagogue, and then the balcony is all around it.

So actually there are almost as many places in the balcony as in the synagogue. If you go to the synagogue, to a normal Sephardic synagogue or to a normal Ashkenazi synagogue. Many a time, as there would be a mechitzah, and the Zerath Nashim would be the fourth or the fifth part of the synagogue behind the mechitzah, right?

And if there was a balcony, it would be the balcony across the Arona Kodesh, across the Echad, but only they have the U shaped balcony. The balcony, which actually covers the entire synagogue. Why? Because so many ladies attended. That's one thing special about them. Second thing special about them would be the fact that so many ladies attended so many times, they needed to keep them involved.

or at least to keep them informed. So in many Spanish and Portuguese synagogues, they would have Hazan de las Mujeres, which means the lady's Hazan. Now it's not a Galitharian society. It's not the Galitharian club. The Spanish and Portuguese synagogue is a gentleman club. So nobody stops the male service in order to have females have their own service.

No, but in a low voice. He explains to them what's going on. He says, now they are reading. Now they are reading the weekly reading of Torah. And he talks about this and that. And he would say this in Spanish so that all of them could understand. And then many parts of the liturgy would be translated, when I say many, it's not half of it, certainly not.

Let's say, On high holidays, maybe two to three percent of it were translated. Still, this was helpful, because then ladies would understand. And then these pieces which were translated in such a way that males would say them in Spanish, in the lower temple. So you have upper house and lower house. So in

the lower house, the man would sing in Spanish, and then the woman in the upper house would understand it, and they were carefully distributed.

So actually, you wouldn't have half an hour of service without a passage in Spanish. Usually, these were the dramatic passages. The passage which is read when you open the Arona Kodesh to take out the scroll, and so on. To make a long story short, they never agreed to go back to anonymity of their homes.

They claimed part of the synagogue for their own. This part of the synagogue, however, in a patriarchal society was not on equal foot. So it's not that you have the right part of the synagogue for males and the left for females. No, the entire synagogue below and the balcony is for women, but Spanish and Portuguese balcony is huge one because there are many women.

It's all relative, but compared to other communities, many parts are translated into Spanish, mostly on behalf of the woman so that they can understand what's going on. So these conversos who arrive in England have to have a desire to revert to Judaism. It's difficult. It's challenging for many of them.

What was it like for them? Many often, as you explained earlier in one of your earlier talks, had ambivalence about it. Because their identities were so much tied with being Catholic, and they found Judaism to be somewhat onerous to learn and to embrace. Tell us a little bit about that, if you would. First of all, it's much more illustrative in Amsterdam, because in Amsterdam you have these huge excommunications, like Spinoza, or you have people like Uriel da Costa.

So, to make a long story short, whatever goes for Amsterdam goes for London also. But it just happens that in Amsterdam we had few scandals which help us understand better what was going on in all of these communities. One of the biggest problems for the returnees to Judaism was not the written Torah.

Why? Because they were knowledgeable about the written Torah. Any Catholic had access to Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim, to Tanakh, to Hebrew Bible, translated into Spanish. And people fascinated. With the Judaism and their Jewish roots, certainly read back and forth the Spanish translation of Hebrew Bible. So, nothing biblical could really astonish them.

However though, overwhelming majority of returnees to Judaism were shocked with the extent of influence of oral Torah in Jewish life. That's a concept they never heard of before in Spain and Portugal. And now they are coming and they say, Oh, I know Torah. I never read it in Hebrew. I read it in Spanish, but who cares?

It's the same Torah. And then we keep telling them, Oh no, but that's in oral Torah. Oh no, but that's in oral Torah. Oh no, but that's in oral Torah. And they say, what the heck is oral Torah? So many of them didn't believe a thing of And how do we know? First of all, we see Spanish and Portuguese rabbis are publishing the book about oral Torah, like Rabbi David Neto from London, or Rabbi Tzaka Buhav, and they are all striving.

Now, this is interesting. Their people are not atheists. It's not that they don't believe in God. Their people are not agnostic. It's not that they don't believe in the possibility of divine knowledge being communicated to men. So [00:24:00] they are not atheist, they are not agnostic, they are anti-oral law. What the rabbis need to do is something that Ashkenazi rabbis never have to do, that general Sephardic rabbis never have to do.

Why? Because Ashkenazim, if there are problems with the Ashkenazi community, that's a few atheists, or a few agnostics. But there are no people, until the reform of Judaism and everything, but that's much later. But there are no people in the 16th century, 17th century, 18th century, Jews who want to be part of Judaism, but don't believe in oral Torah.

That's typical only of Spanish and Portuguese Jews. So what was their problem? They never heard of it, they don't believe it. They believe in God, they believe that God gave us Torah, they believe in written Torah, they come to Amsterdam and somebody tells them you can't do this in Shabbat. They say, how do you know?

And they, it's oral Torah. And they say, oral what? From the methodology of the rabbis, we know exactly where the problem lies. The rabbis don't need to convince them there is God. Everybody knows there is. The rabbis don't need to convince them God gave us Torah. Everybody knows that. They need to bring proofs from written Torah.

That written Torah cannot be understood without oral Torah. And this is the task of Spanish and Portuguese rabbis. And also, just to be intellectually honest, this becomes an issue in Italy also. So we have an Italian rabbi called Ribbi,

It's one of the intellectually most puzzling books. It's called Kola Sahal. So he brings the questions and these questions would be typical of, first of all, of conversos, but they might be also typical of a Renaissance Italian Jew. who is now all of the sudden more educated and so on. And then he brings the answers, but his answers are highly negligible, while his questions are great.

So you can't not ask yourself whether this rabbi himself had major reservations concerning the oral Torah, because you see beautiful questions with average answers. Now, just to illustrate that we are speaking good. of a kind of a person that you could expect such methodology from him. He was asked whether a Jew is allowed to to play cards on the holidays of Sukkot.

It seems to be an issue amongst the Sephardim and the Oriental Jews, playing cards on the day when Jews close their store, and then the first day is holiday, the last day is holiday, but in the middle of it You have days which are not really holiday, not really secular day. So you don't work, you are home, you play cards.

So just to give you an example of his personality, he is asked whether it's permissible to play cards. on holidays of Sukkot. And he says, by the law, it's forbidden, but I never found the strength to stop it. No, that's certainly not something you expect from a rabbi. I mean, that level of honesty, you don't expect, you expect rabbis to be paternalistic and to do what they are supposed to do and what they are supposed to say and so on.

So to wrap it up, their main challenge is oral Torah, and they don't believe it. So one of them in Amsterdam again, not in London, Uriel da Costa. He comes with his pamphlets against the Oral Law and Rabbinic Authority and then he's excommunicated and then he is asked if he wants to be readmitted to the fold.

He's supposed to lie on the threshold of the synagogue and everybody should step over him. The Rabbinic Court which made this decision believed he was egocentric. And too haughty and the best way for him to deal with his egocentrism is to be stepped over by everybody else. Also, it's interesting, these people are coming from Spain and from Portugal.

They are very vocal about their opinion. It's not that they come to Amsterdam, try to join the synagogue, then say, Oh, this is too demanding. And then they go and they join the British or the German gentleman club and forget about it. No, they are fighting, struggling, but they are very vocal. They are not erudite in Jewish law, but they are erudite in general knowledge, which makes it possible for them to write pamphlets, to write books, to say what they think.

And this is also new, because any place you could have a skeptic Jew, but only these skeptic Jews are publishing books about their skepticism. And their skepticism is usually limited to oral Torah, which they don't really believe in. If you could, say just a little bit about the difference or the notion of oral Torah and written Torah, because some of our audience may not know that distinction.

Okay, so the written Torah says you should love your God with all your heart, and all your might, and all your soul. And you should write down these words that I'm telling you today on your doorsteps, and you should make them a sign on your hand, and you should have them as a forehead on your front.

This is the written law. Now, you could interpret this to mean, to put them as a sign on your hand, that means you should act upon them. To put them as a diadem, as a front head on your fronts, okay, you should contemplate them, you should think them. No, the oral Torah says this means you should have a black box which contains a parchment on which these words are written.

And you should have them on your doorsteps. Doesn't mean, you know, your house should be a realm where these words are told and brought into life. No, you have to have a real parchment. on your door. So, mezuzah and tefillin. So I'm just giving an example. The written Torah are the slides that God showed Moses.

Oral Torah is the explanation that God gave Moses while showing him the slides. Present day Judaism is 50 50, written Torah and oral Torah. I'll give you one example. It's a joke, but jokes have this capacity of enlightening the space in such a way that with a few words you understand what's going on. So a secular Jew comes to a Hasidic Jew and he says, You know, Whatever.

You know, Shabbat, I go for it. Uh, Talmud, I go for it. But where did you come from with this idea of kippah? Where does this come from? And he says, what do you mean where does this come from? It's a literary biblical verse. And the secular guy says, biblical verse? There is no biblical verse that speaks about kippah.

And the Hasidic guy says, of course there is. So the guy says, what's the verse? And he says,

And Jacob went his way. So he says, it doesn't mention kippah, and the Hasid says, oh yeah, so he went without kippah. Okay, so basically written Torah is what's there in the text. Oral Torah is traditional way of reading the text. And Spanish and Portuguese Jews. Being tense, Catholic for 10 generations, they never heard of oral Torah, the concept was foreign to them, and they knew about Shabbat, they knew about Yom Kippur, but when they came to Amsterdam or to London and somebody told them how they are supposed to keep Shabbat, they were shocked!

It was too much! It was too ritualistic, it was too demanding, it was too imposing, and answer for everything was, it was too much! So that's one of the main problems they had with traditional Judaism.

[Richard Stone] Well, I think we'll wrap up with that. That's a beautiful story. Thank you again for your generous time, Dr. Papo. It's been enlightening, and I think our audience will walk away with a lot more questions than answers.

[Dr. Papo] And I would be happy with my lot if this is what we have achieved.

[Richard Stone] I think we have. Thank you again for your time.

Thank you for listening to Flames of Freedom Revealed, hosted by Richard Stone and produced and directed by Mark Simon.

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