

## **Revealed: Dr. Ariel Hessayon, Part II**

**[Richard Stone]** Welcome to Flames of Freedom Revealed, brought to you by Lance Toland 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 that they'd even be allowed to come ashore.

Today, on Flames of Freedom Revealed, we will continue our conversation with Dr. Ariel Hession. an early modern historian who is a faculty member at Goldsmiths, University of London. He has written extensively on a variety of topics, including anti-scripturalism, anti-trinitarianism, anti-clericalism, book burning, heresy, crypto Jews, Judaizing, and religious radicalism.

His work is based on extensive research and often draws upon many archival discoveries. So things began to change politically and we make our way into the mid 1600s. Cromwell takes, uh, comes to power and there seems to be a shift of attitude and perhaps a kind of a groundswell of interest in bringing Jews back.

And yet there were many countervailing perspectives about that. There were a number of conspiracy theories still prevalent. The Jews were drinking the blood of Christians are making their matzah out of the blood of Christians. And or that the Jews were going to come and convert Christians. Tell us a little bit about the political and social climate at that time and what led to Cromwell entertaining this notion and what had shifted.

**[Hessayon]** That it became a value or interest to him. Of course. I mean, I think these are great questions. So to answer that, I'll give you an historian's answer, which is that I think we need to look at long term and short term causes that crucial long term cause is the reformation, which is not an event, but a process.

The 16<sup>th</sup>-century information that I mentioned earlier in England, which began during the reign of Henry VIII, was implemented, particularly by Thomas

Cromwell. And off the back of it, there was a more radical Reformation still, so not the Reformation of Martin Luther and subsequently of Jean Calvin, but of more radical groups such as Anabaptists in particular, but also spiritualists .

In England, not so much anti-Trinitarians. Now, why am I talking about this? Because the Reformation left in its wake a completely different view of Christianity. It's a view that is not centered upon the Pope or the pronouncements of councils in Rome. It's not based upon tradition.

It's instead the ethos of sola scriptura, salvation by a faith alone, and particularly centering knowledge of salvation on the Bible. Christians, the Bible is a holy text, but it is not just a New Testament, but in their view, an Old Testament as well, superseded by the New. So, the Protestants have increased Biblicism, they have a greater familiarity with texts that are, of course, sacred in Judaism.

The Hebrew Bible. So attitudes to Jews begin to change because of this textual familiarity. The Bible is also translated for the first time in print into the vernacular during this period. There had been manuscript translations circulated before. So that, with the growth of literacy, spreads knowledge.

And in particular, there becomes a core of what are called derogatory Puritans, more extreme, hot Protestants, hot Gospellers, extreme forms of Protestantism. Which are very biblicist in character, often satirized in, by contemporary playwrights. We've talked about Fitch in particular, I'm thinking of Ben Johnson, a contemporary of Shakespeare's.

And these people believe that they have a much closer relationship with God, and they are a world within a world, they are their own elect community of saints living amongst the profane. And Cromwell comes from this community of Puritan and Puritanism, and it's also because of this force that it generates an interest in the Hebrew language.

And so there are a number of Christian scholars who are familiar with Hebrew. So that's one context. The second context is that there is in 1641, there is a major rebellion in the kingdom of Ireland that leads to a massacre of Protestant settlers by native Catholics. And this is one of the major events that precipitates the outbreak of the English Civil War.

So the debate around the readmission of Jews in England during Cromwell's protectorship is set against the backdrop of there having been a civil war in England between. Roughly speaking, the Royalists and the Parliamentarians

between the supporters of the Crown and the supporters of Parliament, with the parliamentary side being victorious.

And the parliamentary side being populated largely by Puritans. So you have what many historians would call an English Revolution, where the party that has come into power, their vanguard is heavily Puritan, with particular ideas about Jews and about Hebrew. And then you factor in another aspect, which might well, maybe it's not difficult for modern audiences to envisage anymore, which is the belief in an imminent apocalypse.

But not to be dreaded, but to be welcomed. That is something that I think most people would probably find difficult to comprehend. Because for the people who believe they are saved, it is something to look forward to. And there are various dates that are fixed for when this apocalypse might happen. based usually upon various numerical calculations and interpretations of prophecy.

One of the favored dates is 1650, and later after our period, most famously 1666, because you've got the thousand years. And you've got the 666 from the number of the beast in the book of Revelation, but specifically the year in which Jews are tacitly allowed to live in England, 1656, is a year that is predicted as the year of the apocalypse.

I can give you quickly why the workings of that, which is that according to biblical chronology, if you take all the ages and of the deaths of the patriarchs, you're able to calculate famously, I'm not saying it's correct, but by Archbishop James Usher, that the world began in 4004 BC. It then lasts for 1,656 years before its destruction by water, which is the flood.

Because Christ is the second Adam, then the world would be destroyed by fire 1,656 years after his incarnation. So people believe the world is going to end in 1,656. And there's a crucial passage in the New Testament that is interpreted to suggest that the end of the world cannot happen until the Jews have converted to Christianity.

And what better way to convert them to them, to ensure that they can come to England. So you have the opportunity to do so. Gosh, and all of this, there's such a confluence of all of these issues.

[Stone] Yeah. Fascinating. And you're finding that, you know, there's a contemporary version of that happening right now. With exactly who are sending money to support settlers. And the West Bank, so that Israel can take over all of that area, so that the Second Coming can happen, in which case Jesus

will return, and of course the Jews will all be consumed in fire if they don't convert. Great irony of the whole thing. Exactly.

**[Hessayon]** Yeah. There is a quick, just so the listeners are aware, there's a quick subdivision of that. The other factors are probably economic as well. So there's also an argument of more benefit, which I could talk about, but to my mind, the dominant argument is the religious one, which I've given, but there is also.

A sense in which it might be financially beneficial for the country, but that leads to huge opposition from the vested mercantile interests already present because they fear the competition, right? Yeah. And so they know the Jews have strong economic networks and would they be cut out or shut out?

**[Stone]** Exactly. There's the, you know, there's a concept that you see emerging, especially with the inquisition, the notion of Judah Ising, and it was referred to more of new Christians who were But there is a different version of that that seems to have emerged among Protestant sects in which they were adopting Jewish practices. Do I have that correct?

**[Hessayon]** You have that absolutely correct, yes. And this is the original topic of research when I first began doctoral study too many years ago now. I've been fascinated by it. You see it particularly in England amongst Protestants exactly right. To a lesser extent in the United Provinces, there's seven provinces that break away during the Dutch Revolt and then eventually managed, um, in 1648 declare independence from Spain.

And to a tiny extent also amongst communities in Transylvania and in Hungary, but again, Protestant communities. So what is it we're talking about? We're talking about the, I talked earlier about Puritans who are characterized as being sort of excessively precise in their religious observance, often accused of hypocrisy.

And that Puritanism. gives birth to an even more extreme form of religious practice, where people have various religious experiences in which they believe. that they are called by God and have some form of actual role in the coming apocalyptic divine drama usually as prophets or as visionaries or inspect the most spectacular case which is also my favorite of a man who believes he's the high priest of the Jews and circumcises himself in preparation and you do have Scattered instances of this familiarity with Hebrew and some of this you may be aware of Seventh-day Adventists?

Sure. So their roots come to this, from this period, because there are groups of Christians who believe that the Sabbath should be celebrated not on the Sunday, but on the Saturday. And many of them also adopt Jewish dietary practices, so they begin to avoid eating pork, obviously, various types of shellfish, and so I would hardly say it was widespread.

But it generates quite a lot of evidence and some fascinating evidence for it. And it's again, one of those things happening in the background during the readmission of actual Jews. And there are people who did convert to Judaism and then settled in Amsterdam and had families and all the rest of it.

**[Stone]** It's interesting because did this also set up a tension because of fear? That more Christians might be adopting Judaism and that those who are, especially the church would not have been happy about that.

**[Hessayon]** Absolutely, right. With regard to the Judaizers, there are various blasphemy acts in England in 1648, which is exceptionally harsh and a slightly more moderate version.

I would hesitate to call it moderate in 1650. The difference between the ultra harsh and the more moderate is that the. Ultra Harsh ironically adopts biblical injunctions, particularly from Leviticus, and punishes blasphemy by death. And the more moderate version punishes it by six months imprisonment.

Nobody's executed in England for blasphemy, I should add, at this point, the last person had been in 1612, is that the state has the capacity to punish these people and imprison them for their views, although oftentimes they actually are reluctant to use the full force of the law, and much prefer imprisonment and other forms of silencing, but not the full length of imprisonment.

And that tension that you mentioned is certainly present because when the Jews Rabbi Manasseh Ben Israel, who comes on a mission to seek permission for Jews to settle in England in the autumn of 1655, and his proposals are debated at Whitehall in December of that year. One of the preconditions that the ruling body, the council estate, give is that there should be no proselytizing, there should be no attempt to convert Jews to Christianity because of the fears that you outline.

And there are all sorts of restrictions. For example, no ability to publish about Judaism or Jewish texts in English, but it's very cleverly worded because it means you could carry on publishing the Bible or the Talmud in Hebrew, for example. It's interesting.

[Stone] There were some conversos, as you mentioned, who were living there, and one of them was Antonio Rodriguez Rove. And tell us a little bit, cause he seemed to have played a role in bringing to a head the issue of the knitting Jews into England. Can you tell us a little more about him?

[Hessayon] Of course, yes. So the background, as I noted, is that Manasseh Ben Israel, a rabbi from Amsterdam, had come to England in autumn 1655.

One thing I should add is that, again, people may be unaware, is that the year, not the legal year, but the religious year and the year in many other respects, 1st of January in this period, but on the 25th of March. Nine months. before the 25th of December. So the year begins on the moment of the conception of Christ, and then the incarnation, obviously, nine months later.

And that's important because the 25th of March, 1656, is the first day of the year in which it was believed that the Jews would be converted. So you have the background of Manasseh coming to plead, and then you have another wider context, which is that Following peace between England and, the English had gone to war several times during the Cromwellian period, and they had gone to war most recently against the Dutch, primarily over economic causes, and after there had been a peace treaty signed between the Dutch, there are debates at very high level as to who English should declare war against next.

And on the one side is France and on the other side is Spain. And essentially they decide to go to war against Spain and they launch an ill fated attack on Spanish possessions in the West Indies. Particularly the island of Hispaniola, which is now a combination of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. They end up in the end capturing Jamaica.

The central context here is that England is now at war with Spain. And so there are crypto Jews living in England who claim Outwardly to be Spanish nationals and because they are Spanish nationals at a time of war and therefore enemy combatants, their property and goods can be seized. Yes. So legal accusations are brought against Antonio Rodriguez Robles, who's a wealthy merchant of Duke's Place, which is in the east end of London, just by the wall.

As a Spanish national, so his defense is, I'm not a Spanish national, I'm a Jew. So, as a Jew, his goods are not going to be liable for confiscation. And then he claims that he's not actually from Spain, but he's born in Portugal. And then fled from Spain with his family, where the Inquisition murders his father, tortures and cripples his mother.

So that's how that case comes to the fore. And what's fascinating about it is that as a defense, a man feels comfortable that he will get better treatment by claiming to be a Jew than he would to be a Spaniard.

**[Stone]** And he is exonerated because of his Jewish identity, correct?

**[Hessayon]** Exactly. Exactly. And but there are legal ramifications to this.

And what happens is, is that the prominent members of the Jewish community, which are this present moment secret in London, come out into the open. And then they panic, they petition Cromwell for permission to practice Judaism openly, because they've judged that the climate is right for what we would today call religious toleration, because What Manasseh Ben Israel had attempted during the Whitehall conference was never actually formally ratified.

They had considered all the plans and they sat on it, but this actually gives Cromwell and his counsellors the perfect opportunity to allow Jews to be in England publicly without officially doing anything.

**[Stone]** Yeah, so Cromwell, Cromwell dies before there is any actual formalization of Jews being allowed to be in England, correct?

**[Hessayon]** Correct. There is, as to a huge number of people, it doesn't actually happen, it doesn't happen. It's what we would call a not, it's de facto rather than de jure, it's tacit rather than legally official.

**[Stone]** Right, and yet historically he's often credited with being the one who allowed the Jews to formally return to England.

**[Hessayon]** Precisely, what is actual policy is that he can turn a blind eye to them coming and provided that they don't disturb the peace, provided that they worship in private, then that's what happens. So what the gains that they make are as individuals rather than as communities through acts of naturalization, which are crucial because until they're naturalized, I could get into the technicalities of denazization and endenazization, but I want to keep it simple.

The book. The point in the law is that once these, what we would today call naturalization happens, they can begin to purchase property and they have inheritance rights and with the ability to purchase property, you can purchase with leases, you can purchase houses, you can build to convert, have synagogues in the back of a house.

You can purchase land for a cemetery so you can begin to maintain Jewish life. Even if there are certain prohibitions upon your economic activity and, you know, high tariffs. So, Cromwell is absolutely credited with allowing Jews to return to England. And a lot of that is to do with late 19th, early 20th century Jewish history.

And the, the manufacturer and construction of Jewish history to fit a particular narrative of Jewish history and Jewish life in England over the 250 year period from 1656 to 1906 if I, if my master's right?

**[Stone]** Mm-Hmm. . So that's all going on. But he should certainly been given credit because had there been a less benign protector. There may have been no tacit agreement. And things would have turned out differently.

**[Hessayon]** Exactly. Now King, he dies, Cromwell dies. And finally, it's comes to King Charles, the second to make a decision.

**[Stone]** Yes. And he, he apparently does formalize it. Correct?

**[Hessayon]** No, he doesn't either.

**[Stone]** Okay. Okay. Then I had that wrong.

**[Hessayon]** That's the thing. No, no, nobody formalized it. No one ever formalized it. Really? Uh, not in the 17th century. No. Oh my gosh. So, during this time, there was still persecution of Jews happening in England. There were book burnings, apparently, and other events. Yes, yes. So, essentially, the Jews have shifted from Cromwell's personal protection to the Crown's personal protection.

So, they're vulnerable to expulsion in the reign of Charles II because there is nothing formal allowing them to come. So it's only in retrospect that we think they're admitted and that Jews have a history in England since 1656 and secretly before, but this is what's often forgotten, their fate is incredibly uncertain in the early years of Charles the second.

And one of the things that happens are attempts to extort money from them because of that vulnerability. But the other thing that needs to be borne in mind is that oddly enough, Because there is nothing formal about their admission and acceptance, it actually makes Charles II's decision making much easier.



Don't forget that this is a man who returns to England in May 1660, the restoration of the monarchy. He posthumously has Cromwell beheaded and the head is put on a spike. So they have to exhume his body? Yeah, they exhume it. They hand drawn and quartered, then they put his head on the spike and the head blows off.

Also the judge at the King's trial. But the idea is, is that many of the prime architects of, if not Jewish, of tacit Jewish readmission are associated with the regime that killed his father. So he's in the position where if he acknowledges what would have been a formal acceptance, he would be also acknowledging formal acceptance.

The role of his predecessors, whereas everything that happens in that 11-year period between the execution of his father and his own reign, is expunged from the records as much as possible through the posthumous execution, through the redating of all various legal acts. No law is recognized because it can't be because as far as they're concerned, it's a usurpation.

**[Stone]** Yeah, it was illegitimate really.

**[Hessayon]** Precisely. So because there is nothing formal or legal, it's not Then the Jews position, ironically, is actually better because there's nothing about Jews to repeal.

**[Stone]** My gosh. And if there had been something formal, it could have been repealed. Exactly. Interesting. What a turn of events.

We've got about 10 minutes left or so. Tell us about the great trappener of England. Which is a fascinating story. And maybe we can end on that story because it's, it's a complicated story.

**[Hessayon]** Sure. I'm very happy to talk about this person. This person's called Thomas Violet, and I like talking about this because I worked on this a long time ago for an essay for what is called the Feshrift, which is a celebratory collection of essays for my former PhD supervisor.

So it was a, it's a way to thank him for all the support and mentorship over the years. And I picked a case study because it touched on many of the themes that he's interested in. So Thomas Violet is a London goldsmith, and what he would like to do is extort money from some Jewish merchants.

particularly in the trade of illicit foreign coinage. Now, context that we've spoken about, at this very moment in time, in the very early years of Charles II, so in 1660, there are about 200, maybe slightly less, Jews openly living in London, estimated population 375, 000. And Violet is a goldsmith, and he's made an entire career out of what we would today call blackmail and extortion.

So this is nothing new in targeting the Jewish community as such. His own origins are particularly interesting in that he's allegedly born at sea. He doesn't have purity of blood, not that it's as much of a thing in England as it is, say, in Spain, is that possibly the son of an Antwerp born musician. And maybe a North African woman.

He has a maternal grandfather from Luca in Tuscany, so he's somewhat on the periphery. He's not an insider. He's sort of on the edge of being an outsider. So one way to read his attack on the Jews is there's a way of trying to cement his insider credentials by attacking people who are no more clearly on the outside than he is.

Everybody agrees that he's extremely crafty. This is a period of Machiavellian political moments, by which I mean that everybody is skilled in dissimulation. They have outward and inward faces. And he attempts to extort money from the Jews, foreign coinage, as I said. Coin clipping, I should add, at this moment, not that the Jews are accused of it, at this particular instance, is a capital offence.

So it is a serious offence. And of course, he also wants to extort bribes from them, or else he'll try and petition for their expulsion from the kingdom. But what makes it all the more interesting is that he actually, having once attempted to commit suicide in his Succeeds in committing suicide when all his plans fall apart just two years later in April, 1662.

And I was fortunate enough in the National Archives, and one of the great finds in my career is I found his will, which he wrote in his own hand as he had poisoned, poisoned himself, and as he was dying, writing out his last words. Oh my gosh, what a find. So you can see the handwriting deteriorating as he's poisoned himself, probably with a combination of mercury or other fatal poisons.

And he's begging forgiveness from Jesus for all the sins that he'd committed throughout his terrible life. And of course, as a suicide, he should have been denied Christian burial. Yet he was given a burial, correct? Yes, correct. There's, uh, stories that, uh, he claimed that one Jew, Carbajal, or Kabbalah, told

him that Jews planned to advance Cromwell a million pounds to bring Jewish merchants into London, and...

**[Stone]** ...so he was somebody who trafficked in all kinds of rumormongering to extort money, essentially.

**[Hessayon]** Absolutely, yes. The one thing I haven't mentioned is his ideology of Jew hatred draws largely on the writings of a lawyer called William Prynne, who is prolific, most certainly, but extremely hostile to Jews and was one of the main voices of opposition against Jewish readmission. And so a lot of his arguments come from this very work, Prynne's short Gemara to the Jews.

**[Stone]** Well, this is a great place to put at least an ellipsis on our conversation. And Ariel, I'd love to thank you for taking some time to talk with us and for being on our podcast.

**[Hessayon]** Thank you very much for the kind opportunity. Uh, I've been **delighted to talk.**

**[Stone]** 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 Toland. Original music by Dave Wilson at Q Tone Productions. Special thanks to Rabbi Saul Rubin, whose assistance throughout the development of this series was invaluable.

And for their guidance and support of this project from its early inception, additional thanks to Rabbi Robert Haas of Congregation Mikvah Israel in Savannah, Georgia, Rabbi Rachel Bregman of Temple Beth Tefila in Brunswick, Georgia, Rabbi Shalom Morris of Beavis Mark Synagogue in London, England. and Lord Peter Levine of London City, England and the Jewish Heritage Alliance for their support.

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On behalf of our entire creative and production team, this is Richard Stone. Thank you for listening. Until next time.