

Revealed: Dr. Ariel Hessayon, Part I

[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're talking with Dr. Ariel Hessayon, an early modern historian who's a faculty member at Goldsmiths, University of London. He's 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. We pick up the conversation as Dr. Hessayon discusses the increasing number of pogroms directed against the Jews before their expulsion from England in 1290. In this first part of a two-part interview, Dr. Hessayon traces the history of the Jews in England up to and after their expulsion and details the events that led to their absence from England for over 350 years.

[Dr. Hessayon] First, at 1189 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Jews are feared of witchcraft and there is a riot, some Jews are murdered, forcible baptism, possible rapes, looting, burning, also massacre of Jews, particularly for soldiers in the reign of Richard during the Third Crusade. The most famous is at Clifford's Tower in York, where maybe 150 or so Jews are murdered during that pogrom.

And then also local expulsions, so not just the national expulsion, which everybody will be familiar with in 1290, but a whole series of expulsions in the course of the 13th century, less than Newcastle, etc. So one of the things I would also say that is perhaps not familiar to people listening is that Jewish prosperity often seems tied to periods of political stability and periods of instability often leads to persecution as one might expect.

So in the reign of Henry II, for example, there seems to be better treatment and with various factions fighting for control of the crown, wars between the monarch and the barons. And he's a great deal [00:03:00] of stability all the way through to a man who has a university named after him in the Midlands, uh, Simon de Montfort at Leicester, who's known as the, in one form of mythologies, as the architect of the first parliament and consequently the mother of parliaments in England then and Britain now.

But also a man responsible for perpetrating a huge massacre. of Jews during these Baronia wars against the crown in 1265, for example. So we have to be conscious, I think, of all of these multiple contexts that are happening over a very large timeframe.

[Richard Stone] There's a whole complex of things happening. And you said that it was driven a lot by decrees from the Pope that seemed to have then filtered into local politics.

[Dr. Hessayon] Yeah, well, not one, but a series of popes. Yes. Yeah. Now there was a mass immigration of Jews from England before 1290 and there were forced conversions or voluntary conversions that were occurring then? There were forced conversions and voluntary conversions. You're quite right about the distinction, Richard.

The forced conversions happen in instances of riots against Jews in particular, for example, the coronation of Richard I, where the alternative to forced conversion is murder, or in the case of women, rape. Voluntary conversion happens for a number of factors. Obviously enough, there is the sense in Christian sources of triumphalism, that Jews have finally seen the light and turned to Christ.

But much of it is actually, from what we know, and we have to remember, we know a lot less about this period than we do of some other periods. There are also personal motivations to desire for economic gain, social acceptance, assimilation, and the like. And it's hardly particular to England, one would think, in Iberia, in what becomes Spain, in particular with the emergence of the new Christians as a force.

So there are both, shall we say, push and pull factors determining conversion. And with regards to the various papacy's, one of the things I've not yet mentioned is the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which is when Jews are forced to identify themselves by a mark on their clothing. In this case, the two

tables of the Ten Commandments, the laws in a saffron colored shape sewn into the fabric of their garment.

And of course, with the modern 20th century connotations of that marking, that shows a more than 730 year history, well, 725 year history of that.

[Richard Stone] So this was the beginning of that?

[Dr. Hessayon] Essentially, yes. I mean, if you look 13th, 14th, 15th century in England and elsewhere, I'm thinking in Venice in particular, uh, The type of communities that were forced to wear distinguishing marks on their clothing, besides Jews, were prostitutes, by and large.

Even today, one knows the idea of a red light district, but this originates from a sort of color coding of occupation and, in a sense, being an outsider status. Other people that would be outside the community, not so much in England, but elsewhere. But in England too, it would be the diseased, lepers, the ill, almshouses.

So there's that sense of exclusion, which again, might help explain the pull factors for some to assimilate and convert.

[Richard Stone] You mentioned earlier in the beginning about the Clifford Tower Massacre in York. Tell us a little more about that event because it seems like it was a seminal event, but not alone in its horror.

[Dr. Hessayon] Uh huh. Hardly alone. It's been some while since I visited the Tower. I just want to emphasize for listeners in North America, the Tower still stands and can be still visited in the city of York in the North of England. And it happened in 1190. The king at the time is Richard I. And Richard is known in popular culture as the Crusading King, the man who went on the Third Crusade, is tied into popular legends of Robin Hood as the king who will return to make right the abuses of the kingdom during his absence by his brother John.

But in relation to the tower, we only have chronicle sources on the whole for this, but it seems quite clear that those who had been summoned to go on crusade decided to begin their crusade against non-Christians in their own city, rather than waiting to get to what was then Palestine. And we have very brief accounts in the chronicles, uh, without scruple of any Christian conscience, is what one chronicler would say.

Modern estimates put it about 150 Jews killed possibly the entire or the majority of the Jewish community in New York and they sought refuge in the tower. So seminal moment quite possibly though not an isolated incident and certainly there are other famous cases. Following that, one thing we haven't discussed yet is the accusations of ritual murder, which England has the distinction of, as far as I'm aware, of being the first place in Europe where accusations of ritual murder begin.

Many people are familiar with the case, for example, of Simon of Trent, but the case of Hugh of Lincoln in 1255 is much earlier. And this resulted in the execution of 19 Jews, and we have other examples as well. William of Norwich, for example, in Easter 1144, the earliest that we're aware of. But the Hugh of Lincoln is particularly noteworthy a little bit later.

As far as I know, there is a chapel to him in Lincoln Cathedral, and he's commemorated in the cathedral up until some point in the 20th century, you'd have to check the exact details, for an alleged murder by Jews.

[Richard Stone] So he was crucified, is that correct?

[Dr. Hessayon] Yes. Allegedly crucified. Okay. Yes, I mean, what we think happened is that he went missing and that the Jews were blamed and then local interests used it as an opportunity to seize the Jews wealth through a malicious accusation.

And then the, the thing about the crucifixion is obviously because the Jews and dominant Christian ideology, particularly Franciscan and Dominican preaching is associating the Jews as Christ killers. So the same fate of an innocent male child is that of Christ and the association of blood. In continental trials as well, but also in [the English, the idea that the blood would then be mixed in with the matzah so that the Pesach or Passover becomes an inversion of the Last Supper because of its use of the blood.

[Richard Stone] So all of this seemed to be culminating into the final decree by Edward I in 1290. What were the circumstances politically that led to that final decree to expel the Jews from England in 1290?

[Ariel Hessayon] It's a good question. I mean, I couldn't give you a definitive answer because I don't think any modern scholar would agree.

But we know what contemporaries suggested, and we know what modern scholarship thinks. So I'll just go through the possibilities. So one is literally the

politics of the household, that this may have been a decision by the Queen Mother. It could, on the other hand, have been advice from the King's Council, or it may have originated from perennial complaints in Parliament, which is still a fairly new institution.

The motive is usually associated with money, that the Jews are legally the king's property. And so any debts that are due [00:10:00] to the Jews are payable to the king instead. So in a sense, by expelling them, it's an asset stripping.

Alternatively, it's been maintained that Jews were actually banned from lending money at interest usury 15 years before in 1275, and their wealth as a community declined, so they're actually less useful to the crown as a resource.

And the other thing is, we tend to privilege the date in retrospect, because we have to remember if we look across the water, across the English Channel, that Jews had been expelled, for example, in France, in 1182, and then allowed to return. Edward himself had expelled Jews from Gascony. That there may not have been the intention of a permanent arrangement.

It could have been a, in my opinion, possibly a quick financial move. And then maybe they considered that they might have the opportunity in future to readmit dues when it was financially opportune to do so. But of course, that wasn't going to be the case legally for centuries.

[Richard Stone] Right. Now, there were many Jewish converts to Christianity and there was a house for converts in London.

[Dr. Ariel Hessayon] Correct.

[Richard Stone] Tell us about what, what are the dates around that and what was that all about in terms of they were still, even though they were converted, they, they, they were a special case of sorts.

[Dr. Ariel Hessayon] Absolutely. So the house itself is given a Latin title, the Domus Conversorum, uh, the house for converted Jews.

And it's worth bearing in mind that there was more than one house. We have illustrations, for example, of the property in Oxford. The one in London no longer survives as far as I know, but the site became the site of the, ironically, the public record office. And then I think was subsequently bought by King's College London and is now on Chancery Lane.

The Domus, or the House for Jewish Converts, essentially provided shelter and food and a little bit of financial security for Jews willing to convert who'd been subjected to aggressive Franciscan and Dominican preaching. And we're very fortunate in that we have exceptionally good records for this house of who has admitted, how much money is spent on their food and their lodging, sometimes their heating, which don't forget fuel bills have been, so this is a topical point also here in England at present.

And we have about 80 Jewish converts, or more than 80 in 1290, the year of the expulsion. Still over 50 by the early 14th century. And the last known Jewish convert who'd been an inhabitant of England before the expulsion doesn't die until 1356. So 66 years later. So, and this is a woman. So if she was eight, nine, 10 years old, you could see that she might've spent her entire life lodged in this house.

And we have converts that live in, in these houses that go all the way through to the 16th century to the reign of Henry VIII, we still have two or three Jews living there. Obviously, these would be not Jews descended from those who'd been expelled, but Jews who would have come to England and then converted.

[Richard Stone] So what's interesting is between 1290 and 1656, when the Jews notionally were allowed back into England, there were Jews who were coming into England and living in certain circumstances. Tell us a little bit about that and how did they navigate the issue of their identity?

[Dr. Ariel Hessayon] Sure. I mean, that's a good question. I mean, the first thing that I want to emphasize is that these are all fascinating cases and they're really interesting and a few of them have been explored in great depth. But what they are not as indicative of any sense of mass migration, any sense of large numbers, especially if one compares it with the very large number of Jews in Iberia, or even in what is today Poland, for example, so let alone the Ottoman Empire.

In terms of motivation, there seems to be different types. Some are scholars, some are merchants, some are certainly physicians, and some are soldiers. Those, those are the main types. And in some cases, the merchants or physicians are just intending to visit. But sometimes, particularly the soldiers, there are incentives for converting.

And we have some good examples, particularly in the chronicles for this. And most famously, a physician who comes to, in the reign of, um, it would be Henry IV, while Dick Whittington, which is a famous character in English

legend, but was actually also, as Richard Whittington, one of the mayors of London. So we, we have.

A handful for, for these reasons. And we, we do have, I mean, I'm just looking at some of the public records in Latin, they are actually officially acknowledged as being Jews. So even though Jews had been expelled, there is an ability to allow them on English soil, at least temporarily.

[Richard Stone] Yeah. So the enforcement of that was variable at best.

[Dr. Ariel Hessayon] Yeah. Yes, exactly. I mean, the main concern here, and this we'll see when we get to the 17th century, is it's one thing to privately practice religion and customs, and it's another to publicly seek to convert people away from Christianity or to preach. Or in any way to disturb the peace or the status quo.

[Richard Stone] So, there's that little sense of turning a blind eye to it out of necessity and of our interests. And one of the things in some of my reading of one of your articles, in the 1500s, there was kind of an underground established with the spice trade as the hover, it reminds me of the underground here in America to get slaves from the South or the North. And so many of these conversos who were new Christians were being smuggled to Antwerp and some ended up in England. Can you tell us a little more about that?

[Dr. Ariel Hessayon] Of course. Yes. Yes. So. I think the other underground that you mentioned is a very good analogy with the smuggling of slaves. So the brief context of that is for people who are unaware is that the largest expulsion of Jews in Europe at this time had just happened, namely the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in the various regions of what is now Spain, particularly Castile and then Aragon in 1492. And then from Portugal in 1497, and the implementation of the Inquisition in the Iberian Peninsula. Now, it's worth bearing in mind that Jews who were expelled from Spain and then Portugal often went to, say, North Africa or the Ottoman Empire. And they could do so as Jews, they could leave the country, but it was in a terribly harsh times, carrying all their possessions, whatever they could carry, their money, subject to banditry, uncertain food resources.

So quite a few took the decision, strategically, to convert to Christianity. The Inquisition could not act against Jews, but if one remained a Jew, then one was subject to persecution as a Jew. But if they converted to Christianity, they could be accused of heresy, of the idea of reverting to Judaism and Jewish practices, even though they were outwardly converts.

In terms of the original question, the background is, is that many of them are essentially practicing some form of Judaism, or suspected of practicing some form of Judaism, and are fleeing the Inquisition, which is in Iberia, and is extended to the Spanish Netherlands briefly, which is under the dominion of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.

And because of the trading connections between, Antwerp is one of the most important trading networks in Northern Europe at this time. Because of the trading networks with, between Antwerp and London and some of the other major English ports, particularly Southampton, where the goods go, oftentimes Jews would come briefly to England on those trading networks.

And with the Reformation, with Henry VIII's break from Rome, there is no danger from the Inquisition on English soil. It's a safe haven. It's a safe haven. Yeah, of sorts, of sorts, of sorts, of sorts, of sorts.

[Richard Stone] How interesting. So you write about Dr. Hector Nunez, who was a new Christian, Portuguese-born, but he ended up in England and became a fellow of the College of Physicians and the Royal College of Surgeons. Tell us a little bit about his story because I found that very fascinating.

[Dr. Ariel Hessayon] Absolutely. I mean, he's a fascinating character. So he's again from the Iberian Peninsula, in this case from Portugal, we think, and a new Christian, so outwardly Christian, but quite possibly privately Jewish. As you've noted, he has a medical background.

The College of Physicians is a very prestigious institution based in London. And he's obviously a surgeon in particular. Some of the physicians were members of this college were more theoretical rather than hands on, if I can put it that way, but what's most interesting about him is that he's quite clearly involved in spy networks using what are most likely crypto Jewish contacts abroad to double up as intelligence agencies with intelligence being smuggled in trading goods, particularly from Iberia, smuggled in wine, and various fruits.

And the political background is, if we recall that in 1588 there will be a Spanish Armada launched by King Philip II of Spain against Queen Elizabeth of England. So to negate or at least attempt to nullify the Spanish threat, the English crown is looking to forge alliances with powers that are, if not hostile to Spain, at least suspicious of Spanish. One of the major powers there of course is the Ottoman Empire.

And the French had done a very similar thing. They'd conducted all sorts of treaties with the Ottoman Empire as a counterweight to the Spanish ambition. So Nunez is being used diplomatically, probably has very good knowledge of languages, to secure an Anglo Ottoman alliance. And also There is the cause of a Portuguese pretender to the throne.

So Portugal has essentially been supplanted from its own monarchy by Spanish power. And there is an exiled Portuguese royal family who are trying to reclaim that throne at the same time. So that's the sort of contexts that are going on.

[Richard Stone] So he was an interesting player in world politics of sorts.

[Dr. Ariel Hessayon] Absolutely. Yes. I mean, it's almost like if, if you think of Star Wars, there's the top level story and he's one of the bottom players. Um, but, but you sort of seen the story for his eyes rather than for the eyes of the major players. So it's interesting in this era. Some of the greatest literature was being written by people like uh, Christopher Marlowe and Shakespeare.

And I think Marlowe wrote the Jew of Malta and obviously there's the Merchant of Venice, which most of us are familiar with these depictions of Jews were obviously not flattering. They were pretty derogatory.

[Richard Stone] Was this portrayal an attempt to essentially reflect the culture and how people thought about Jews or in some ways, did it magnify the hatred toward Jews?

[Dr. Ariel Hessayon] I mean, it's, it's a really good question because there are different aspects to this. The first thing we have to remember is that in terms of the performance of these plays in London in the very late 16th century, the audience themselves, unless they traveled abroad to say Venice, would not have seen an openly professing Jew.

They would have had no knowledge of what a Jewish person looked like, how they behaved. So there's that. So then the question becomes, are these typical portrayals of Jews at the time, or are they exaggerated portraits for theatrical dramatic effect? So the only way to evaluate that is by looking at how Jews are perceived and considered at that time.

And to my mind, there is exaggeration, but it's not that it's straying enormously from prevailing popular opinion. But that doesn't mean to say that there aren't, say, certain scholars who are incredibly well versed. Just as there are in this

period, in Hebrew, the knowledge of Hebrew is becoming much better known among scholars since the early 16th century, we'll return to that strand later on.

But as a, as a typical theatre going public, then yes, most certainly this would fit into the caricatures of their expectations, if not amongst scholarly expectations. And the second part of your question is also interesting, because It's almost like a, what is the response of the play going public to this?

Does it make things worse? And we don't actually have enough evidence for how theatergoers are reacting specifically to these plays at this particular moment. But if I had to speculate, I don't see how it could possibly do perceptions of Jews any favor. I know that there are very modern readings of the Merchants of Venice in particular that try and emphasize that Shylock is humanized, but anybody who knows the wider context of the 16th century No, he's not.

I mean, he, he escapes death, but his salvation is to be baptized. Right. Yeah. So it seems to play into a narrative that had been dominant there about Jews being converted and that that's their salvation. And then they become a good person again. Exactly. Whereas in the Jew of Malta. The main Jewish character is boiled to death in a cauldron, which is an image of hell.

So he's not converted. So he goes to hell and dies. Yeah. It's interesting because there were no Jews living there, but the stories we know have a way of taking on a certain kind of strength.

[Richard Stone] Let's put a pause on our discussion here. Join us for part two of the interview, where we'll explore the economic, social, and religious forces that led to Oliver Cromwell's readmitting Jews to England in 1656.

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