

REVEALED: Dr. Jessica Roitman, Part I

[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 in mind?

Today on Flames of Freedom Revealed, we're talking with Dr. Jessica Roitman, a professor of Jewish studies at the Varia Universiteit Amsterdam. She is a historian of early modern and modern Jewish history, and her research focuses on Jews and Jewish communities in the Dutch Caribbean. Dr. Roitman is interested in issues of race, ethnicity, minoritization, slavery, and colonialism, and has published extensively on Caribbean history, marronage, enslavement, and Jews and colonialism.

Dr. Roitman, welcome to Flames of Freedom Revealed. Thank you. I'm really happy to be here talking to you today. Well, we're happy to have you because I think you're going to bring a dimension of a story that is missing and that for our listeners will hopefully be quite educational. So 1492 occurs and the king and queen of Spain expel hundreds of thousands of Jews from Spain and some go to Portugal.

Many disperse and some end up in the Turkish, uh, capital and around the perimeter of Mediterranean, but many end up going to Amsterdam. Help us understand the historical context for that and what was occurring at that time.

[Roitman] Sure. And I should say that. 1492 is of course, pivotal. Those of us who grew up originally in the US know it as the year that Columbus set sail.

We shouldn't forget that the King and Queen of Spain also expelled the remaining Muslim population from Spain as well. Um, but it's almost 150 years until the first Jews actually make it to Amsterdam. Um, the first people that we would call that, that eventually claim reclaimed their Judaism in Amsterdam aren't there till really the very late 16th century.

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1597. So it takes a while for these people, generations after this expulsion, to get to Amsterdam. First, as you said, a lot of the Jews who are [00:03:00] expelled go to the Ottoman Empire, where they're allowed to practice as Jews. They settle in all the domains of the Ottoman Empire until the mid-20th century. There is a very big Sephardic population in Morocco and other places.

Still a small Sephardic Jewish population in Turkey, for instance. But indeed, most of the Jews, people who wanted to remain practicing Jews went next door to Portugal. It made sense. Language is similar. You can walk there, take boats there. Um, a lot of people already had family, friends, business relations there, but this respite was pretty short lived.

Uh, in 1497, the King of Portugal wanted his. Son to marry the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella and the very Catholic King and Queen of Spain said, yeah, not happening until you get rid of all those Jews in your country. We kicked them out where we're not having anything to do with them. Of course, the language was, it was a bit different.

I'm paraphrasing here, but the King of Portugal was, was actually pretty clever, and he didn't want to get rid of the Jews. He viewed them as an asset for all sorts of reasons. I can go into Jews became more involved in commerce and then overseas trade. They were shut out of a lot of the traditional professions.

In the Iberian peninsula, they, uh, weren't allowed to join guilds. So that pushed them into a more mercantile professions. And the King of Portugal said, no, I don't want to lose him. So he declared really almost exactly one day to the next that all the Jews in his kingdom were now Christians. And. So the very few Jews who, uh, keep in mind all this trauma of having left Spain only a few years before, some Jews didn't, then did still leave and went mostly again to the Ottoman Empire.

The vast majority of Jews stayed. They thought, I mean, who knows what they thought. We don't have a lot of records of what people were actually thinking. We can reconstruct that most of them thought it would be short lived. They, there was no inquisition at the time. We can. Deduced that they probably thought, okay, well, this isn't really affecting us.

So we can just be called Christians by the King and these people, but we keep doing whatever we want. And in fact, that's more or less the way it worked for a long time until 1536. So keep in mind, again, this is 40 plus years, at least a generation, generation and a half after. This sort of de facto conversion.

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And that's when an inquisition was set up in Portugal. But until then, there had been actually a lot of intermarriage between Christians, people who became known as old Christians, people whose families had been Christians before that and so called new Christians. So new Christians were like the name says, Christians that the Jews that were new to the faith.

And you can see that in the documents. They're called Cristãos Novos in Portuguese, New Christians. And so then that became a basically a stigmatized class. So even though they were officially Christians, and therefore could participate in all these parts of social life, Commercial life that Jews hadn't been able to participate in that there began to be this stigmatization of people who are new Christians.

Eventually, as I said, an inquisition was set up and then persecution of people who had new Christian blood started to begin. And it really ramps up by the end of the 16th century. And that's when you have groups of these new Christians who start coming to Amsterdam. Now, some come directly from Portugal.

Fleeing the Inquisition. A lot of them had been, as I said, merchants. So they were already overseas at the time. Spain and Portugal are, are it's called the so called age of exploration. They're really taking the lead in what we now call colonizing, um, the coast of Africa, going to India, sailing around the world, but especially the Americas.

So a lot of these new Christians in Portugal were very involved in overseas trade because they could that was where they were allowed They're very involved in Brazil the Americas Some of them settle in the Americas. There's some very well known cases where they Try to practice Judaism in the Americas because it's further away from the Inquisition, then you get the Inquisition set up in Peru and Mexico City.

So there are some who are coming fleeing directly from Portugal. A lot are coming. From overseas places from Brazil, at least the first settlers, and they're doing that in some cases because they're fleeing religious persecution. In other cases, they're doing it because Amsterdam's emerging as the trade entre port, the trade center of Europe. And as I said, these people have been very involved in the colonial trade. Some of them had already been in Antwerp. That was then under the control of the Spanish Portuguese. For all sorts of reasons, wars going on between Spain and what becomes the Dutch Republic. They start leaving Antwerp.

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Antwerp loses. It's functioned as this trade center and they moved to Amsterdam. And this is where the story really gets interesting, because I keep talking about these dates because I'm a historian, but it's not to be boring. It's because by the time these first people arrived, late 16th, early 17th century, their families haven't been allowed to practice Judaism openly for 125 years.

And this is where also this mystery that fascinates me and fascinates historians really comes up because, you know, a lot of these people probably were, you know, Believing Catholics, you think if you've had to suppress your own faith, your own ethnicity for 125 years, how much of it do you really even still know?

You know, how much do you feel any affiliation with it, association with it? But at least a few of these new Christian Portuguese merchants who are now in Amsterdam, start practicing Judaism, they start setting up small synagogues, mostly in people's houses. There were three already by 1610, very small, but then more of these people start arriving.

They send for a rabbi. So it's a really interesting story of why and how. Do they want to still be Jews after all this time? And also, you know, questions of how to be a Jew when you haven't been raised as a Jew, when what you know from Judaism is either from the Inquisition, or what sort of secret things your family's traditions may have passed on.

And there's all sorts of interesting discussions of that with what they call crypto Judaism, so hidden Judaism. So, but you don't know how to be a Jew. A Jew, really. You don't know what it is to keep kosher, other than maybe, um, that you've been taught from your family traditions not to eat pork, or not to eat shrimp, or that, you know, you take a bath on Fridays.

So it's really interesting how these, these traditions start to, to then coalesce and how this group of people learn to be Jews. And once it becomes. Clear through these networks, the word of mouth that in Amsterdam, you can be a Jew, that in Amsterdam, it's actually easier to, at the time, the 17th century, it's easier to be a Jew than a Catholic, um, in this new Protestant Republic, more and more people, new Christians start coming into Amsterdam.

And again, some of these are people who are actively fleeing the Inquisition who've been arrested by the Inquisition and who get away and other people, you know, we don't know, we don't know if it's because they really want to be Jews or, hey, there's good trade opportunities there or both. So, these people, none of them knew Hebrew, right?

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Very very few, especially of these initial settlers. No, because, you know, you weren't allowed to be, after 1536, to be reading Hebrew texts, so anything you learned or had was very much hidden. Yeah, so it's remarkable that they somehow had enough to be able to even to start a synagogue. And the prayer books, were they in Spanish?

Or were they in Hebrew? It's really interesting. This community keeps writing a little bit in Spanish, mostly in Portuguese. The, for instance, communities minutes stay in a lot in Portuguese, again, sometimes in Spanish until the 19th century, but the initial, yes. So they really have to import rabbis. from elsewhere.

Uh, they get rabbis from Venice. They get rabbis actually from Emden, an Ashkenazi rabbi, who is a awarded, interesting aside, the honor of being buried in the Sephardic cemetery because he did so much for the community. Usually the Ashkenazi had to be buried elsewhere. So initially a lot is in Spanish or in Portuguese.

And then as more people come in, um, Especially again, from Italy, from North Africa, also Ashkenazi, they start to implement more or institute more Hebrew, but yeah, it's this whole, especially the first two decades, this process of what some scholars have called re-Judaizing.

[**Stone**] Hmm. Re Judaizing. How interesting. And, and it seems that the Amsterdam community was a dynamic place socially, economically, and that it somehow was a fertile bed. For them to take root there and to thrive.

[**Roitman**] Yeah, it's a very dynamic place anyway. It's becoming, as I said, the center of global trade. What's now a global trade. The Dutch have just basically won out against the Habsburg empire.

So they're now a Protestant Republic. There's lots of tales of Dutch tolerance. It's argued back and forth, but certainly within limits, you can. Practice your own religion. Um, as I said, in some ways, it's easier to be a Jew in this Protestant Republic than it is to be Catholic. Keep in mind that the Dutch had been fighting against the Catholic Habsburg empire, so actually Catholics have to have what they call Schouwkerke, so hidden churches at the time.

So everyone knows it's a typically Dutch solution to things. Everyone knows that the Catholics are there. You can be a Catholic, you just can't have a big church. And that caused some tension in the later part of the 16th century when

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the Jewish community, the Sephardic community, builds what's now still standing, the Shenoa, the huge Portuguese synagogue.

And it's big. And it's in the center of town. It becomes a tourist attraction. It still is to this day. And, and Catholics were pretty bitter about it. How come these Jews can have this massive place of worship and we have to hide out? Um, so it's, it's a dynamic place. It's tolerant within certain limits for sure.

Uh, you can be a Jew openly. Can't try to convert people to Judaism and you always see people who are kind of carried away and want to convert to Judaism, but it is a dynamic place. Now that dynamism has downsides, especially for the Jewish community. We start getting conflicts within the community as more and more Jews come in.

Uh, you also start to get Ashkenazim coming in. In the 17th century, it's still pretty small. By the beginning of the 18th century, they outnumber the Sephardim so that there can be tensions within this Jewish community as well, but there's lots of economic opportunities. There's a vibrant printing, publishing business going on, you start getting the first Hebrew books being published.

You alluded to Manasseh ben Israel earlier, who helped with the so called readmission of Jews to England in 1656. He was best known, certainly at the time, not as a rabbi, but as a publisher of Hebrew books. Amsterdam becomes the center of the Hebrew Book publishing trade. So there's a lot going on intellectually.

A lot of people may have heard of Spinoza, Baruch Spinoza, one of the foremost philosophers. Um, he's kicked out of the Jewish community, uh, for heresy, a band that still Remains officially to this day. So there's dynamism, there's conflicts, there's intellectual ferment, there's theological ferment. The first Jewish yeshiva, the Etz Chaim Jewish school is set up.

Manasseh ben Israel teaches there actually. Spinoza went to school there as well. So you have a lot going on and Amsterdam, at least at this period, 17th century, The center of Jewish life in basically Western Europe.

[Stone] For our listeners, some of whom are not Jewish, they may not know the distinction between Ashkenazi and Sephardic and may be perplexed by the fact that even within the Jewish community, there could be such tensions and divides. Could you help elucidate that for them?

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[Roitman] Absolutely. Well, if you're Jewish, you've heard this. If you're not Jewish, maybe it comes as a surprise, but there's a saying, two Jews, three synagogues, and that illustrates that there can be a lot of tension, conflict, congregations breaking off, although I think that happens a lot in religious communities of all sorts, not just Jews, but there's really three main categories of Jews.

Jews, and that's referring to place of origin and tradition. Of course, it's disputed and there's all sorts of subcategories, but to simplify Sephardim are Jews from Iberia, Spain and Portugal. Uh, Ashkenazim, Ashkenazi Jews, the im is the plural in Hebrew, are from central and eastern Europe. And Mizrahi Jews are from, it's a broad category from North Africa, the Middle East, and it's become a sort of all encompassing term to refer to all these sort of other groupings of Jews.

Now, keep in mind that there's a lot of, I mentioned them, Sephardim who left Spain and Portugal and went to the Ottoman Empire in North Africa. So they became a subcategory within these other Jews who already lived there. But those are the broad categories. And of course, you know. That there's some things bringing them all together, belief, use of Hebrew ritual, all sorts of things, but there's difference in ritual customs, et cetera.

So at the time in Amsterdam, the Sephardim, they viewed themselves as basically superior. They'd set up the community. Initially, the first few Jews from Eastern and Central Europe who came, Ashkenazi Jews, didn't have their own houses of worship, so they worshipped with a Sephardim. Pretty soon after that, they started setting up their own synagogues.

What's interesting with the Sephardim in Amsterdam is that if you married an Ashkenazi Jew, You got kicked out of the congregation. They really wanted to keep the group separately. The brilliant scholar Joseph Kaplan called it Bom Judismo, and that's in Portuguese, good Judaism. And that was the concern of the Sephardim in Amsterdam, is very much with outward appearance, how the community is perceived.

They don't want to be perceived as associated too closely with these poor, because most of the Ashkenazi Jews who are coming in are poor. They don't want to be associated with them. They really profile themselves as erudite, uh, people, highly educated people, because keep in mind, a lot of them, um, have been raised in this Iberian culture.

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So they know Cervantes, they know what's called golden age in Spain and Portugal, poetry, um, music, so that they don't want to be associated with these poor Uh, Ashkenazi Jews. They call them Polakos, uh, Polaks, um, and it's very much a derogatory term. So there's tensions are, are very much there, not only in Amsterdam, but they get transported to the colonies as well.

[Stone] So you mentioned also, uh, Baruch Spinoza, who is, uh, many would read me, any of who's read, been a philosophy student probably has read Spinoza. So people may not be familiar with the idea that there's actually excommunication within the Jewish faith. And so Spinoza crossed a line with the rabbinate in Amsterdam. What was that line and what caused this rupture?

[Roitman] Well, you know, of course, historians, we have to keep ourselves employed so we can argue about stuff all the time. The expert on this, he was just here in Amsterdam last week for a conference on rabbis in Amsterdam. Steve Nadler, um, has written a lot about it.

Um, basically, he was perceived as questioning, The existence of God or the necessity of God and that crossed a line for the rabbinate. Now, of course, a lot of other things are playing into this. Um, I just mentioned this real concern the Sephardi community had with public image and they may have been very much concerned with how Spinoza, who was starting to get a following, how, uh, that would look.

From outside, they're very concerned. And you still see this with Jewish communities today, I think concern, you know, that, that feeling of insecurity and we're here on sufferance. So we have to make sure we're, we're good Jews. That's where Kaplan's phrase comes out. So it could really be that they were less concerned about Spinoza's theology per se, and more concerned about the image, um, that that might threaten the community.

If they're seen as a heretical community. Um, because indeed Amsterdam and the Dutch Republic is very reformed Protestant, so quite Calvinist Protestant at the time. Um, but this is a community that's also, I talked about there being new Jews and re Judaization, they're very concerned with community control because they have these, all these people who, as I said, haven't been Jews.

Um, they don't really know what it is to be Jewish. They're used to being able to kind of do their own thing and keep in mind how many of these people have been involved in overseas trades, so sort of out in these places doing their own thing. And the rabbinate in Amsterdam, especially in this period, is very

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concerned, as I said, with asserting community control of this sort of restless group of people who aren't used to being controlled.

You know, if you're being raised as a Catholic, yeah, I mean. The priest may tell you to do some stuff, but otherwise you do your own thing. So it is also the case that the rabbinate maybe wanted to make an example of Spinoza. So like, here's what happens if you step too far out of line. I mean, excommunication, at least in Sephardi communities exists, but there's different degrees.

Like a lot of the people records I look at are people who are it's called herim, like excommunicated, but it's for a day. It's banned for a day. Or if you're a Jewish man, you're banned from being called to read the Torah, which is part of Jewish ritual as a punishment, or, you know, you're not allowed to come into the synagogue for a couple of weeks or something like that, but what happened with Spinoza is that's it permanently.

And as an interesting aside, a couple of years ago, a filmmaker wanted, came from America to make a film, a documentary about Spinoza. And he wanted to film in the Portuguese synagogue and he was not allowed initially because Spinoza was still banned. No, this caused a great outcry. It got international attention and he was eventually allowed to film, but it just shows that, you know, officially once you're excommunicated, you're excommunicated centuries later, you're still excommunicated and Spinoza was excommunicated, um, he was supported by, by Christian followers, but no, officially his, um, family was not able to have any more, anything to do with him.

No one was allowed to talk to him. That, that was it. And you. Keep in mind at the time in the 17th century, that's an even bigger deal than it would be today. Because, basically, you depend on support from your family, from your religious community, and being completely shut out of that was a huge thing, not only emotionally, we guess, but also economically.

[Stone] Interesting. Interesting. So I know that many of the Jews who came, who were Conversos, and were in the merchant class, their identity was maintained in a fluid way. So they may have been Jewish while they were in Amsterdam, but traveling perhaps to Catholic countries to do trade, they perhaps assumed their old Catholic identity. Can you tell us a little more about that? Because that's such an interesting phenomena.

[Roitman] Yeah. I mean, it really is. A lot of them have aliases and you can even see that in the records. Some of the notarial records will have, you know,

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someone's Jewish name, but also then his alias or his Christian Catholic name, usually a very Hispanic sounding name.

So that was quite normal. And in the records that they're called the lands of idolatry. So it was even stated, you know, when you're traveling to the lands of an idolatry to use this or that name. Now, sometimes the rabbis try to stop that. They don't want people traveling there. They don't want people living as Christians, but ultimately the imperatives of especially trade networks tend to win out on that.

And this is a practical decision to assume these other names, be outwardly Christian, but it can also be more than just a practical decision. And that's where, as a historian, it gets frustrating that we know so little about what people's own personal motivations are. But again, you know, it's very much lauded historiography, like, yeah, these people and they kept their faith through centuries in secret.

And that's no doubt true. Especially for some people or families, but we have to keep in mind that the majority of people were just trying to live, trying to, to get along and may have had some family traditions that hearkened back to the family's Judaism. Maybe it wasn't a particularly felt, um, Lived reality for them.

So this is a group of people that, that does not just for practical reasons, but also often for probably personal reasons, have, have this very fluid identity, probably felt very comfortable being Catholic when they're in, you know, A Catholic country, um, but equally okay being Jewish when they're back in Amsterdam.

And, you know, we can think about how many Jews today are raised in, I was actually a pretty secular backgrounds or from mixed, uh, so called mixed marriages where one parent's Jewish, the other isn't. And maybe aren't particularly deeply involved in personally, or don't even know that much about either of the traditions in which they're growing up and sort of think, yeah, I kind of eat bagels and, you know, sometimes we light candles, but then sometimes we, you know, go to church at Christmas.

And that's the kind of analogy I use to say that it may seem strange. But a lot of us live that reality to this day. Yeah, we have, oh, we have a Christmas tree or we call it a Hanukkah bush. Right. Or exactly. Yeah, so it's not so indifferent to Jews living in a very Christian culture here, for example, in the United States. Absolutely. Absolutely. And you know, you get used to that. You start incorporating that a lot of the, the people that became a re-Judaized, well, Esther was a very common name for their daughters. And you see some of the very

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earliest people in Amsterdam still worship Queen Esther. And those of us who are Jewish are familiar with the Book of Esther and the Feast of Purim, the celebration of Purim.

But these were people who had grown up having the Virgin Mary as Catholics. So they're very used to having a female person, a female deity to worship. And so what they know a bit from the bits and pieces of the Jewish tradition that they knew was Esther. So they sort of transposed that. Catholic worship of the Virgin Mary on this one female character that they knew, Esther.

And of course, Esther's also, or the story of Esther is very popular with these conversos, these new Christians, these crypto Jews, because she lives secretly as a Jew. If you know the story of Esther and Purim, she lives secretly as a Jew. People don't know she's a Jew and then she ends up saving the Jewish people.

So it's a very popular story for a lot of reasons with this group. And there is the evil Haman who is an advisor to the king who wants to eradicate all the Jews. And she is able to turn the King's heart against Haman.

[Stone] And of course there is this sort of interesting, complicated part of that story is when Haman is arrested and I think killed, but the King gives the Jews the opportunity to seek revenge on all of those who were followers. And thousands of Haman's followers are slaughtered by the Jews. So that, that must be at the time that must've felt like a heroic kind of.

[Roitman] It's a very meaningful story for people who feel persecuted, who feel like they have to hide their identity. Um, Haman gets sort of trends posed upon the inquisition. So it's a meaningful and interesting story for them. And again, very interesting how many, Sephardic Jewish girls are named Esther at the time.

[Stone] Yeah. Fascinating. Let's put a pause on our discussion here. Join us for part two of the interview, where we'll focus on Jews growing role in trade in Europe and the Caribbean islands. 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 Haas of Congregation Mikva Israel in Savannah, Georgia, Rabbi Rachel Bregman of Temple Beth Tefila in Brunswick, Georgia, Rabbi Shalom Morris of Beavis

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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.