Another Trip Through Time — a sermon for Rosh Hashanah, 5785

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Shana tova. I pause at this innocent greeting, which most of us took for granted until recently. I confess to a certain trepidation, as I do not know whether the coming year will be a good year, a bad year, an okay year, or the kind of year that is beyond what we can imagine. Who, on last Rosh Hashanah, could have predicted what the coming year would have brought?

I take pleasure in the vocation of a historian, who can fly like a bird way above the vicissitudes of the current happenings on earth, and see things from a wider perspective. A year ago, I took you through the events and developments of the Jewish community of Spain, of which we caught glimpses from our travels in Spain and Portugal that summer. Our retrospective ended with the year 1492, a year which was both a disaster (on account of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain) and a new beginning (because of Columbus’s discovery of America, with the help of a Jewish navigator and several other Jewish crew members).

In 1492, only the negative prospect was visible for the Jewish people. The glorious thousand-year Spanish episode in Jewish history had come to an end. The next years only made things worse. The majority of Jews of Spain moved to Portugal, which still accepted practicing Jews. But King Manuel of Portugal, who had no personal animosity against Jews, wanted to marry his daughter to the son of Ferdinand and Isabella. The price they demanded was: make Portugal purely Christian. Most of the Jews who had just changed places had not even the option of leaving Portugal: they were forced to convert and remain in Portugal. It appeared that this, the largest Jewish community in the world, was going to be lost to Judaism forever. It was an existential challenge to the very existence of the Jewish people.

But Jews don’t take defeat lying down. Over the next century, despite all the roadblocks in their way, a considerable number of the Sephardic Jews of Spain and Portugal, even after forced conversion to Christianity, managed to maneuver their way into lands of new opportunities. This past August, Margie and I were able to follow the bread crumbs of some of their travels on our cruise from Venice to Croatia to Corfu and Athens, visiting six of their synagogues along the way. In particular, we followed the path of the grand Jewish lady of that period Doña Gracia Mendes Nasi. I will tell you her story now, because though on one level she was exceptional, in other ways she was representative of the path of thousands of Jews who followed her path or parallel and similar paths. What started out as the extinction of a whole large branch of Jewry ended up with the transplantation of thousands of Jews to new shores, founding new communities and revitalizing old communities wherever they migrated.

Doña Gracia’s story started out in Portugal, where she was born in 1510 and given the name Beatrice de Luna. She was the daughter of the Nasi family of Jewish conversos, and at age 18 she married another converso, Francisco Mendes Benveniste, who was in the gem trading business in Lisbon. Francisco’s brother Diogo opened a branch of the business in Antwerp, Belgium, which was ruled by Spain but which possessed no Inquisition. Diogo was one of a sizable number of conversos who made this move to escape persecution. When Francisco died prematurely, Beatrice joined her brother-in-law in Antwerp and helped manage the family business there. As Antwerp was still a very Christian country, these crypto-Jewish merchants had to keep up their appearances of Christian practice very carefully. But the Mendes family became extremely wealthy, and their business opened branches all across Europe. They also diversified from gem trading to banking, and were thus able to move considerable funds from one country to another by letters of credit. When Diogo died in Antwerp, Beatrice (a.k.a. Doña Gracia) and her then-marriageable daughter felt insecure in Belgium, so they moved first to Lyons in southern France, then to Venice. Meanwhile, Beatrice’s nephew João maintained the business in northern Europe. Now, Venice was in a unique position in those days. Though a Christian republic, they asserted their independence and wouldn’t take orders from the Pope. Doña Gracia was starting to come a little out of the closet. But as events unfolded, an offended family member tattled on her. The Christian authorities arrested her and put a lien on her property. In stepped her nephew João, who at that time was in France but had strong influence with the Sultan of Turkey. The Sultan made an ultimatum to the Venetians: release Doña Gracia and restore her property, or Turkey will cut Venice out of its trade market in spices and other Eastern goods. The Venetians complied with the Sultan’s request. Doña Gracia settled next in Ferrara, which was even more tolerant of Jews than Venice; then she continued her trek to Dubrovnik, maybe also to Corfu, and finally to Constantinople, where she fully reclaimed her Jewishness and her preferred name of Doña Gracia Nasi. (We visited the synagogues in Dubrovnik and Corfu where she might have prayed.) In the remaining years of her life she was a leader of Jewish life in the Ottoman empire, and she exerted her wealth and influence to save thousands of fellow-conversos from the clutches of the Inquisition.

The odyssey of Doña Gracia Mendes is just one of many threads of the history of that time that added up to a mass migration and coming-back to Judaism of thousands of Jews who a century ago seemed all but lost to Jewish history. These returnees built up a network of thriving Jewish centers extending through the whole eastern Mediterranean, especially the Balkans, where Ladino was their common language. Jewish scholarship and printing presses flourished as well. The kabbalistic centers in Salonika, Smyrna, and Safed were one spinoff of this movement.) Elsewhere, other refugees of the Spanish-Portuguese community established the Jewish communities of the Netherlands and England, and started the Jewish communities in Brazil, Mexico, the Caribbean, and New Amsterdam (later to become New York).

In our trip to Venice and Croatia, we saw a succession of charming towns whose buildings and ports dated back to the Renaissance period. Several of these towns had Jewish quarters that dated back to the same period. It was easy for us to imagine how the Jews of the sixteenth century settled in these milieus, building up Jewish neighborhoods while participating in the bustling international trade that fostered the prosperity of the whole population, and keeping Judaism alive.

To return to my theme and put this all in perspective: the Sephardic Jewish communities after the expulsion and forced conversions in Spain and Portugal faced an existential crisis. If they had just submitted to the pressures of the Catholic rulers and the Inquisition, it could have spelled the extinction of the whole community as Jews. But they persisted in their Jewish loyalty, despite the obstacles. They built up their material strength while keeping the thread of spiritual loyalty to Judaism alive. They seized whatever opportunities presented to them to extricate themselves from their predicament, even at great risk. Eventually they prevailed, and built Jewish communities in the old world and the new world. They laid the foundations for the growth of those communities even to our own day.

Whatever existential crises we face today, we can take courage from the example of the Sephardic Jewish communities of the post-expulsion period. We cannot at this time predict what form our response will take, or what the ultimate outcome will be. But if we can find the resilience in ourselves that our ancestors exhibited, we will come through these crises intact and build a future that we can be proud of.

עם ישראל חי. The Jewish people lives.

Synagogues in:

Venice – Ashkenazic & Sephardic synagogues in the Jewish Quarter

Athens – Etz Hayim (Romaniyot)

Athens – Beit Shalom (Sephardic)

Athens — Patras: artifacts from Patras synagogue are in Jewish Museum of Greece in Athens; community was ancient

Mykonos – we did not see the Delos synagogue, 2nd century

Santorini – no synagogue

Corfu – Scuola Grecia (we visited)

Dubrovnik synagogue (Sephardic) — established 1352, legal since 1408, legal settlement since 1546

Because of the pagan associations of Athens, after the destruction of the ancient synagogue in the Agora in the 5th century, Jews chose not to continue to settle there until the 19th century, at which time a new synagogue was built.

Legend has it that the first Jews settled in Ioannina as early as the reign of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC, or after the destruction of the Second Temple in the first century AD. However, the first written sources documenting the presence of Jews in the city date back to the 14th century.