

Columbus & the Jews

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A CENTURY ago, on October 12, 1892, the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's landing in the New World was celebrated with great fanfare all across the United States. New York, where the most memorable commemoration took place, staged a five-day city-wide extravaganza that drew a million visitors and filled the streets with parades, festivals, and tributes. On Columbus Day itself, businesses closed down and an 84-foot monument of the great explorer was added to Central Park.*

Jews participated actively in the 1892 gala. On the Sabbath that marked the beginning of the festivities in New York, special services were held in the major synagogues and temples. The city's chief rabbi, Jacob Joseph, published a special prayer for the occasion, its flowery Hebrew text expressing gratitude to God not only for Columbus, "the first man in the New World," but also for the two Jews who, according to the prayer, had accompanied him on his voyage. The prayer also paid tribute to America's subsequent role as a refuge for persecuted Jews, highlighted the nation's traditions of religious freedom and equality, praised George Washington, and closed with a blessing for President Benjamin Harrison and his government.

The chief rabbi's prayer, which was printed in both Hebrew and English translation in the *New York Herald*, embodied three themes that would prove central to American Jewish thinking about Columbus. First, by pointing to the Jews who supposedly traveled with him, the prayer served to legitimate the Jewish presence in the New World. Second, it associated Columbus with the freedoms that were so centrally important to American Jews. Finally, the prayer used Columbus as a vehicle for expressing Jewish patriotism, as well as allegiance to the values America stood for.

Actually, the most significant American Jewish contribution to the national celebration of 1892 received only modest recognition at the time—although in the years ahead it would be remembered while everything else was forgotten. This was the scholarly research of Rabbi Meyer (Mo-

ritz) Kayserling, written up in several articles in 1892 and then two years later as a book. Kayserling (1829-1905), the rabbi of Budapest, had studied with the great German historian Leopold Ranke and had written prolifically in many areas of Jewish history, specializing in Spanish and Portuguese Jewry and the Marranos. In 1891, he was commissioned by the American Jewish merchant Lazarus Straus and his diplomat son Oscar Solomon Straus to prepare a scholarly volume demonstrating the extent to which Jews shared in Columbus's enterprise. The result was *Christopher Columbus and the Participation of the Jews in the Spanish and Portuguese Discoveries*.

Oscar Straus's interest in demonstrating the compatibility of Americanism and Judaism was of long standing; he himself had published a volume in 1885 that purported to show "the influence of the Hebrew Commonwealth upon the Origin of Republican Government in the United States." His argument, drawing heavily on Puritan sources, was the by-now familiar one that (in a phrase attributed to the British historian W.E.H. Lecky) "Hebrew mortar cemented the foundations of American democracy." Something of the same spiritual quest seems to have sparked Straus's interest in making known the participation of Jews in Columbus's discovery.

The Great Mariner had evolved in the American mind into the embodiment of the national ideal, a symbol of American achievement, progress, and goodness. By associating themselves with him, Jews would symbolically take on these same virtues, yoking together their Americanism and their Judaism and demonstrating the historical indispensability of Jews to the American enterprise. More immediately, Straus believed, as he admitted in a private letter to Kayserling, that if it could be historically proved that Jews had taken an active part in the discovery of America, "this fact would be an answer for all time to come to anti-Semitic tendencies in this country."

This last was a most remarkable and revealing assumption. Although they rarely spoke of the problem in public, domestic anti-Semitism was already of substantial concern to American Jewish leaders. Conditions had been deteriorating

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* America's embrace of Columbus is described in a new book by Claudia L. Bushman, *America Discovers Columbus* (University Press of New England).

for American Jews since the 1870's, and the Straus family had itself been the victim of social discrimination. In one memorable incident, several members of the family were refused admission by a hotel in Lakewood, N.J.; in response, Oscar's brother, Nathan Straus (the owner of the R.H. Macy department store), purchased land nearby and built a hotel which he opened to Jews and Gentiles alike. These sorts of personal encounters likely underlay Straus's strenuous lifelong efforts to polish the image of American Jews so that they might be better respected.

Beyond this, the letter to Kayserling reveals a common 19th-century belief that through their own positive actions, and especially by spreading correct information about themselves, American Jews could stamp out anti-Semitism. If only the record could be set straight, Straus and many of his generation believed, prejudice against Jews would disappear. All that Jewish scholars like Kayserling had to do was come up with the right facts, and publicize them.

Kayserling certainly fulfilled his part of the bargain. His well-documented study explored a hitherto-unknown web of ties between Columbus and Jews or recent forced converts from Judaism (*conversos*), stretching from those who supplied him with maps, astronomical tables, and nautical instruments, to those who championed his cause before the Spanish crown, to those who, like the convert Luis de Santangel, actually supported Columbus's journey financially. The volume also listed four men "of Jewish stock" as having accompanied Columbus to the New World (actually, only one of them—the interpreter Luis de Torres, who had converted to Christianity not long before—was of certain Jewish descent).

Most important of all, Kayserling showed that Columbus's reward was paid out of funds expropriated from Jews being expelled from Spain in 1492, and that the same source—not the Queen's jewels, as popular myth had it, but her Jews—would defray the costs of his second voyage as well. Finally, Kayserling traced the spread of *conversos* to the New World, the persecutions they faced at the hands of the Inquisition, and the (inevitable) happy end: "The New World . . . was not merely a land rich in gold and silver mines, but also the land where the light of freedom first shone upon the adherents of Judaism."

Kayserling's book was published in German, English, and Hebrew, and its conclusions attracted wide notice. While his researches had no discernible effect on the incidence of American anti-Semitism, they did influence most subsequent biographers of Columbus.

Naturally the book earned its warmest reception in Jewish circles. Thus, during the 1905 celebrations of the 250th anniversary of Jewish settlement in the United States it was cited repeatedly to prove that "the Jew has played an honorable and not undistinguished part in the history and development of the Western conti-

nent," and that "we, whose ancestors bore their share in the mission of Columbus, . . . may well reckon ourselves as the first of Americans, bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of Columbia."

According to the scholar Joseph Jacobs (writing in 1910), the significance of Kayserling's book could "scarcely be overrated," suggesting as it did "the existence of a Jewish element in America from its very originings [*sic*]." On Columbus Day 1918, Rabbi Joseph Stolz of Chicago cited Kayserling yet again: "Even though there was a time when . . . Palestine harbored no Hebrews, there never was a time when white people were on American soil in anticipation of the Jews."

In short, Kayserling's research validated the sense of American Jews that they had sunk deep roots in the country and had contributed mightily to its growth and welfare. In an era when most American Jews were newcomers, and when even those born in America felt threatened both by anti-Semitism and by restrictions on further Jewish immigration, this reading of the nation's past could not have been more welcome.

2.

NOTHING in Meyer Kayserling's book so much as hinted at the idea that Columbus himself might have been a Jew. To the contrary, Kayserling criticized Columbus for his religious fanaticism and for his *lack* of sympathy toward Jews who were, after all, being expelled from Spain at the very moment he was setting out to sea. Nor, so far as I can tell, did anyone else in 1892 suggest that Columbus was anything other than what he claimed to be—namely, a religious Catholic and a native of Genoa.

The idea that Columbus was a Jew arose instead in non-Jewish circles in Spain. The man who first promoted it was an aristocratic scholar named Don Garcia de la Riega, and his evidence consisted of documents (now believed to have been largely forged) which he claimed to have found in Pontevedra in Galicia. These contained the names of members of the Colón family, whom he associated with Columbus, and of the Fontorossa family, whom he associated with Columbus's wife and whose ancestors turned out to be Jewish. From these rather meager shards, de la Riega fashioned a highly original theory purporting to solve the many mysteries connected with Columbus's name, background, and life by arguing that Columbus was really a secret Jew who had been born in Spain, not Genoa, and who had spent a lifetime concealing his identity.

De la Riega's theory had important political implications, for if he was correct, Spain and not Italy could claim the honor of having Columbus as a native son. Perhaps, too, there was some hope that the "discovery" might lead to an improvement in Spanish-American relations, damaged lately in the Spanish-American War. Whatever the case, Hispanophiles rushed to spread the good

news that Columbus was in fact a Spaniard by birth.

The theory that Columbus was not only a Spaniard but a closet Jew peaked during the 1930's, an era when (perhaps only coincidentally) the "Jewish question" was very much on the public mind. A whole range of proofs was put forward, a few based on written evidence, most totally circumstantial, and some unabashedly racial. While it is impossible to review all of the evidence here, it breaks down as follows:

First, there was the issue of Columbus's name, or names. "Colón" was a name held by many Jewish families, and among Italian Jews (as the historian Cecil Roth pointed out) the shift back and forth from "Colón" to "Colombo"—a shift Columbus himself seems to have made several times—was "not only possible but invariable." Yet there were also non-Jews by these names both in Spain and in Italy, so this evidence alone could not be considered conclusive.

Second, Columbus employed a most unusual, mystical signature, in the form of a triangle:

.S.
.S. A .S.
X M Y
Xpo FERENS

According to the American Jewish numismatist and antiquarian, Maurice David, these letters decoded into "an abbreviation of the 'last confession' of the Jews and also a substitute for the Kaddish." This claim has been widely (and properly) dismissed as utterly unverifiable, but the encoded signature has heightened the aura of mystery surrounding Columbus and helps to explain why the theory of his *converso* origins continues to elicit support today.

Third, Columbus placed a cryptic monogram at the top left corner of most of his intimate letters. Could this be, as Maurice David suggested, "nothing more nor less than an old Hebrew greeting," an abbreviation of *baruch hashem*, blessed be the Lord? Many readers (myself among them) cannot see it, but once again the mystery cries out for explanation.

Fourth, Columbus's written prose sets a considerable puzzle: if the explorer was born in Genoa, why was his Italian so poor and his Castilian so good? Salvador de Madariaga, the great Spanish biographer of Columbus and perhaps the most important proponent of the theory that he was of Jewish descent, hypothesized that Columbus's parents were Spanish Jews who had departed for Genoa in the face of persecution and then "remained faithful to the language of their country of origin." More recent studies, however, propose an alternative hypothesis: that Columbus learned his Spanish in Portugal where he was married, and that his poor Italian may be explained by the fact that in Genoa, Italian was then only a literary language, whereas Columbus would have spoken the local dialect.

Fifth, there is a small bundle of purely circumstantial evidence. *Item*: like many Spanish *conversos*, Columbus and his family were highly secretive and took great pains to conceal their background—suggesting that they had something to hide. *Item*: the family's occupation, weaving, was frequently associated with Jews. *Item*: Columbus himself fraternized with Jews, had some knowledge of Jewish mystical sources, occasionally linked his experiences to events in ancient Jewish history, and even left a small legacy to a Jew.

Yet none of this by itself proves anything, and some of it may be better explained by the explorer's apocalyptic view of history and particularly by his sense of himself as a divine messenger, the Christbearer (Christopher) of a new age. It may even be that he envisaged an important role for Jews in God's divine plan and so both embraced the remnants of Israel and sought to convert them. But this too is speculative.

I HAVE left until last the so-called "racial" proofs of Columbus's Jewishness, for they stand in a class by themselves. Here, for example, is Jacob Wasserman in his biography, *Columbus: Don Quixote of the Seas*:

A certain soft-heartedness in Columbus is a Jewish trait, in the best and the worst sense of that adjective: Jewish, too, is his unmistakable inclination to find a sentimental solution for practical problems: Jewish, likewise, is his characteristic timidity in the face of far-reaching responsibilities—a timidity that springs from age-long fear of the irrevocable and of what has been decided from above. But what is *not* Jewish is his striking want of intelligence and practical capacity, and above all, that form of Don-Quixotry that consists in subjecting the mind to the dream of a perverted reality—a trait completely foreign to the Jewish character.

The eminent Spanish historian, Salvador de Madariaga, went even farther—indeed, alarmingly so. Noting, for example, that Columbus evinced a keen attraction for gems and gold, he writes:

The Jews have always experienced a curious fascination for gold and precious stones, forms of nature which, quite apart from their commercial value, are in deep harmony with the soul of Israel.

Madariaga also found evidence of Columbus's Jewishness in his "contractual sense, that attitude which sees every event in life as a transaction and expects and demands a definite *quid* for every *quo*." Of Columbus's illicit relationship with Beatrice Enriquez, the mother of his illegitimate child and, in Madariaga's view, herself a secret Jew, the historian has this to say:

The sexual morality of the Jews was of course different from that of the Christians . . . in those days a Christian young woman who gave

herself without marriage was almost certainly a good-for-nothing, [whereas] a Jewish girl who gave herself without marriage might very possibly be a thoroughly decent soul.

Now, Wasserman was an identifying Jew and Madariaga was something of a philo-Semite, yet they—and many others who have labeled Columbus a Jew—consciously or unconsciously promote the myth that Jews differ radically in their personal characteristics, their values, and their mores from those among whom they live, and that they are unable, no matter how hard they try, fully to conceal their origins. The thinly veiled message here is one, ironically, that anti-Semites have propounded for centuries: that no matter what loyalties a Jew may proclaim, and regardless of whether (like Columbus) he publicly and privately professes his devotion to the Church, he remains both at heart and in behavior a child of Israel. Many an innocent Spaniard was targeted by the Inquisition on precisely these grounds.

It is, moreover, but one small step from this fantasy of an inherent Jewishness to an even more dangerous corollary: that Jews, operating illicitly and sometimes under the guise of another faith, are engaged in a gigantic conspiracy for their own benefit. Simon Wiesenthal, the great Nazi-hunter whose familiarity with anti-Semitic canards is beyond question, has unfortunately fallen into this very trap in his version of the Columbus story, *Sails of Hope*. According to Wiesenthal, Columbus embarked on his first voyage westward for a secret purpose: to discover the lands settled and ruled by the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel so that they might serve as a refuge for Jews being expelled from Spain. (That the American Indians were themselves the descendants of the Lost Ten Tribes was once a staple myth not only among Jews but among many Christians as well.)

On the surface this theory seems to clear up several mysteries: why Columbus maintained so many Jewish contacts, why Jews and *conversos* supported his enterprise financially, and why he brought along a Hebrew-speaking interpreter. Like all conspiracy theories, however, it ignores both simpler alternative explanations and a mass of inconvenient evidence, including, in this case, the explorer's own writings that detail his materialistic and millenarian hopes as well as his obvious intention to exploit his discoveries for the benefit of Spain.

In addition, the Wiesenthal theory requires an immense leap of faith, since there is no evidence from any source that Spanish Jews wanted to secure a refuge with the Lost Ten Tribes in "Asia"; it was far easier to go underground or to move to Portugal or Turkey. All that Wiesenthal does, in the end, is to encourage an idea that in other circumstances he would be the first to refute: the idea that Jews are disloyal, conniving, and, notwithstanding any patriotic claims they might make, out only to help their own.

To their credit, most Jewish scholars have

greeted the theory of Columbus's Jewish origins with considerable skepticism. One important exception, however, was the late Cecil Roth. Influenced both by Madariaga and by his own study of the Marranos, Roth defended the theory of Columbus's Jewish origins and even hinted that he could identify his real Jewish name.

Yet once the Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison, in his magisterial 1942 biography of Columbus, derided the idea mercilessly, its last vestiges of scholarly support crumbled. Even Roth, in an article written just before his death in 1970, came close to retracting:

The mystery regarding Columbus's origins is largely the outcome of his own mendacity, and as a result it is equally impossible to exclude or to confirm the hypothesis that he was descended from a Jewish or ex-Jewish family.

As for the major Jewish encyclopedias and the surveys of American Jewish history, none accepts the claim of Jewish origins at face value.

3.

This year, the 500th anniversary of Columbus's voyage, has, naturally, led to a flurry of new articles on the question of his Jewishness, but with a revealing contemporary twist. Thus, in "Was the Discoverer of America Jewish?," a writer in *Moment* magazine reminds his readers that Columbus's discovery was "disastrous" for the native American population, leading to millions of deaths, and that, in addition, the explorer introduced into the New World the scourge of slavery. "Do we really want to claim Columbus?," *Moment's* editors ask. And Judith Laikin Elkin, writing in *Hadassah*, has made a similar point:

The search for Jewish ancestry for Columbus is particularly untimely now, when Native Americans are drawing our attention to the genocide that paved the way for the creation of our New World.

To the question, "Columbus: Was He or Wasn't He?," she responds: "Who cares?"

There is, however, at least one good reason to care about the century-long obsession with Columbus's putative Jewish past and his indubitable Jewish associations, and that is for whatever clues it may provide to the way American Jews think about themselves. For it is a remarkable fact that among America's ethnic and religious groups only one, the Jews, has linked itself to so many of the nation's founding myths. These myths—the Indians were the Lost Ten Tribes; the Puritans were "Hebraic" to the core; Columbus was aided by Jews and may even have been one himself—have precious little to do with the real history and significance of the Indians, the Puritans, or Columbus. But they do speak volumes about American Jews, their loyalties, and their insecurities.