

# RABBI DON ISAAC ABARBANEL & THE SPANISH EXPULSION

Yehuda Azoulay

After living on the Iberian peninsula for centuries, 1391 marked the beginning of a mass scale of forced conversions to Christianity. The Spanish Inquisition, a religious committee established in 1478 by the Catholic monarchs King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile, Spain was convened to guarantee the orthodoxy of the new Jewish converts to Christianity. The word “Inquisition” literally means “detailed or relentless questioning” and refers to the tactic employed by the Spanish priests, who relentlessly questioned and tortured those convicted of disloyalty to Christianity, in an effort to have them confess.

The primary objective of the Inquisition was to expel the Jews from Spain. Tomas de Torquemada, who led the Inquisition, believed that as long as the Jews remained in Spain, they would influence the tens of thousands of recent Jewish converts to Christianity and persuade them to continue practicing Judaism. King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella initially rejected Torquemada’s demand that the Jews be expelled, until January 1492, when the Spanish Army defeated Muslim forces in Granada, thereby restoring the whole of Spain to Christian rule. On March 30 of that year, the king and queen issued the expulsion decree, ordering that it be carried out precisely four months thereafter. The short time frame meant that the Jews would have to sell their homes and business at outrageously low prices, which obviously served the interest of the rest of the population. Capitalizing on the Jews’ distress, Spanish priests throughout this period actively encouraged Jews to convert to Christianity.

While it is commonly believed that the Inquisition took place only in 1492, the brutality actually began around 1480, and persecution of all sorts continued for approximately fifty years.

Tens of thousands of Jewish refugees died while trying to reach

safety. In some instances, Spanish ship captains charged Jewish passengers exorbitant sums, and then threw them overboard in the middle of the ocean. Additionally, in the final days before the expulsion, rumors spread throughout Spain that the fleeing refugees had swallowed gold and diamonds, and many Jews were knifed to death by brigands hoping to find treasures in their stomachs.

*Facing the threat of death, the Jewish leadership was afraid to intervene and protest the persecution. The most notable exception was Rabbi Don Yizhak Abarbanel (5197/5268 – 1437/1508), a well-connected public figure who used his political prestige to help alleviate the suffering of Spanish Jewry.*

## A RABBI IN THE PORTUGUESE GOVERNMENT

Rabbi Don Yizhak was born into a wealthy and learned family in Lisbon, Portugal in the year 5197/1437. His family traced its roots to David Hamelech, and consisted of a distinguished lineage that consisted of many Torah scholars, successful businessmen, political figures and Jewish communal leaders. Rabbi Don Yizhak inherited all the talents and qualities of his illustrious ancestors, emerging as a towering Torah scholar and a wealthy, influential leader and public figure.

His father, Rabbi Yehuda, served as minister of the Portuguese National Treasury under King Alfonso V. Rabbi Don Yizhak received a comprehensive Torah education, and took a great interest in languages and philosophy. Later, he followed in his father’s footsteps and joined the service of the king as treasurer.

As a government figure, Rabbi Don Yizhak exerted great influence upon Jews everywhere. In

the year 1471, King Alfonso captured the town of Arzilla, Morocco,



R' Don Yizhak Abarbanel



R' Don Yizhak Abarbanel Sefer “Mayani Yeshua”

and two hundred and fifty Moroccan Jews were among the captives. Rabbi Don Yizhak appointed twelve representatives to gather funds to ransom the Jewish captives, and he himself made the largest donation. After the Jews were ransomed, Rabbi Don Yizhak supported them entirely from his own wealth for approximately two years, until they learned the new language & could earn their own livelihood.

## A NEW JEWISH LEADER ARRIVES IN SPAIN

When Alfonso V died, and his son John XI succeeded him to the throne of Portugal, Rabbi Don Yizhak's life took an abrupt, drastic change. King John began a policy aimed at eliminating the nobility, especially the ministers who had served under his father. Rabbi Don Yizhak learned that the king had beheaded several of the highest ranking officials, and that he was slated to share a similar fate. The rabbi immediately fled to Toledo, Spain, where his family had once lived. Accompanied by his wife and two children, Rabbi Don Yizhak arrived in Toledo nearly penniless, as King John had confiscated all his wealth.

*Rabbi Don Yizhak quietly obtained a position with a Jewish banking firm, which afforded him the time and peace of mind to pursue his studies and compose his works. Soon afterward, he entered the service of the Kingdom of Castile, the rulers of the Iberian Peninsula at that time.*

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain recognized Rabbi Don Yizhak's unmatched knowledge and skills in finance. The same year when the notorious Torquemada became head of the Inquisition in Spain, Rabbi Don Yizhak was appointed royal treasurer – just two years before the expulsion of the Jews from Spain!

Together with his friend, the influential Don Abraham Senior of Segovia, he undertook the responsibilities of farming state revenues and supplying provisions for the royal army. His successful management of these affairs earned him the trust and admiration of Queen Isabella.

In the late 1400's, the Spanish authorities considered expelling the Jews a number of times. Rabbi Don Yizhak spent huge sums from his personal fortunes to bribe the Spanish monarchy into permitting the Jews to remain in Spain. When the expulsion decree was finally issued in 1492, ordering all Jews to either convert or leave the country, Rabbi Don Yizhak worked tirelessly to avert the catastrophe. He appealed to the king and queen to reconsider, and even offered an enormous sum of 30,000 ducats to the king's treasury. But Ferdinand and Isabella ignored his pleas and declined his

offer of money.

And so, in spite of Rabbi Don Yizhak's efforts, the expulsion took place on the ninth of Av, 5252 /July 30, 1492. He did manage however to have the expulsion delayed by two days, affording the refugees a bit of extra time to complete the sales of their assets before leaving Spain.

## A RAY OF LIGHT IN THE DARKEST MOMENT

Rabbi Don Yizhak was pained by the tragedy, and felt a keen sense of mission, realizing that Hashem put him in a position to help his fellow Jews. After his efforts to avoid the expulsion did not succeed, he turned his attention to promoting and reinforcing the Messianic belief among Jews, which would provide a glimmer of hope and strengthen their resolve in the face of religious persecution. He composed several important works challenging the beliefs of Christianity and elucidating the Jewish Messianic concept. Among his books are *Maayan HaYeshuah* (Wellsprings of Salvation), *Yeshuot Meshicho* (The Salvation of His Anointed One) and *Mashmia Yeshua* (Proclaiming Salvation).

After the expulsion, Rabbi Don Yizhak moved to Monopoli in Northern Africa, and eight years later he settled in Venice. The government officials eventually invited him to the council of state, and Rabbi Don Yizhak became one of the leading statesmen of the Republic. He remained in the service of the Venetian government until his passing in the year 5268/1508, at the age of seventy one. The leading officials of Venice attended his funeral, and he was laid to rest in Padua, however the exact location of his grave is unknown.

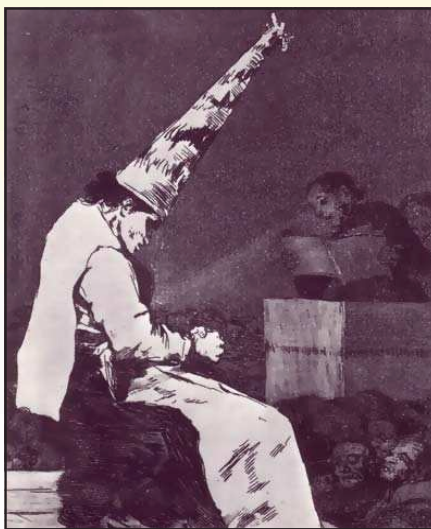
*The Spanish Expulsion ranks among the worst tragedies in Jewish history. Appropriately enough, it occurred on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av – the same day as the destruction of the first and second Temples. Just as the Temple's destruction marked the end of a glorious period of service of Hashem, the expulsion from Spain similarly brought a tragic end to a magnificent "Golden Age" of Torah scholarship and observance in Spain. Rabbi Don Yizhak, who was among the greatest and last Torah personalities of that glorious era, was unable to prevent the catastrophe, but most certainly succeeded in shining a ray of light – the light of faith and hope – amid the darkness and despair of the Inquisition. When the Jewish people were desperate for a courageous leader to lift them from the depths of sorrow and crisis, Hashem ensured that they would have such a leader – a man of stature, leadership and unbridled devotion to Gd and His people.*



The Edict. Source: The Nahum Goldman Museum of the Jewish Diaspora, Israel



The Abarbanel family coat of arms



A Converso being condemned by the Spanish Inquisition & wearing duns cap as a sign of embarrassment.