

# Columbus' Mysterious Origins

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The Golden Age of Spain, during which the Jews enjoyed religious freedoms which enabled them to flourish culturally, spiritually and financially, gradually came to a crushing and catastrophic end in 1492. On March 31 of that year, the Edict of Expulsion (also called the Alhambra Decree) was signed, requiring every Jew in Spain to choose between conversion to Christianity and expulsion. Jews who chose the latter would have to leave their possessions behind. Approximately 150,000 Jews left Spain, many initially settling in nearby Portugal. But following the expulsion from Portugal, many Jews fled to the Ottoman Empire. Sephardic Jewry found itself scattered throughout the world, and began working to rebuild their life and culture in their new lands of residence.

The deadline for the Jews' departure from Spain was August 3, 1492, which of course was, Tisha Be'av (the

fast day commemorating the destruction of both Temples). Before midnight of that day, Christopher Columbus and his crew boarded their vessels, and they set sail before sunrise. What was the purpose of his voyage, and was it only a coincidence that he set sail the very day by which Spanish Jews had to leave their homes?

Certainly, Columbus was not the only voyager of his time in search of new territory. Many imperialistic countries were constantly looking to establish new colonies in areas rich with natural resources and strategically situated along important travel routes. Successful explorers were rewarded with fame and fortune, a motivation that many scholars attribute to Christopher Columbus.

But the timing of his voyage, as well as the involvement of many Jews in this endeavor, may point to a much different purpose that this expedition was intended to serve.

## Who was Christopher Columbus?

Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) was a Portuguese navigator, colonizer and explorer whose voyages across the Atlantic Ocean led to general awareness of the American continents in the Western Hemisphere.

The name Christopher Columbus is the Anglicization of the Latin Christophorus Columbus. The original name in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Genoese was Christoffa Corombo. The name is rendered in modern Italian as Cristoforo Colombo, in Portuguese as Cristovao Colombo (formerly Christovam Colom), and in Spanish as Cristobal Colon. Columbus' father was Domenico Colombo, a middle-class wool weaver, who later

also had a cheese stand where Christopher worked, both in Genoa and Savona. His mother was Susanna Fontanarossa.

In 1485, Columbus presented his plans for a trans-Atlantic expedition to John II, King of Portugal. The king submitted the proposal to his experts, who rejected it. After persistent lobbying and two years of negotiations with the Spanish government, Columbus finally received approval from Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.

Columbus had already secured about half the financing from private, Jewish Italian investors, and the Spanish kingdom supplied the rest. Columbus was to be made "Admiral of the Seas" and would receive a portion of the profits.

## Columbus' Jewish Connections

Columbus had several significant Jewish affiliations. At one point he moved to Salamanca, where he enlisted the support of Diego De Deza, a powerful bishop who was the personal tutor of Prince Juan, heir to the Spanish throne. Diego was also a *converso* (a hidden Jew). He introduced Columbus to the Jewish astronomer Abraham Zacuto, whose tables and almanac would assist Columbus on his voyages.

Furthermore, Queen Isabel's hesitancy to approve Columbus' voyage led to the intervention of a group of eight influential Jews and *conversos*. Interestingly enough, all eight had a relative who was killed

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for performing Jewish rituals, and two of them had personally suffered the “Sanbenito.”<sup>11</sup> They all saw the Inquisition coming, and some scholars believe that their offer to finance Columbus’ project stemmed from the hope of finding a new home where

they could settle to escape Christian persecution.

Furthermore, Columbus was heavily influenced by Jewish texts and customs, and often quoted prominent rabbis in his writings, speeches and conversations. In a letter to the King and Queen in 1501, he wrote, “I maintained relations and have spoken with Jewish and other men of science.”

He would often compare himself to King David and Moses, and even claimed to be a relative of King David. In many of his penned letters, his sentences and statements seem to be taken directly from Tanach, especially from Isaiah and Ezekiel.

In 1499, the secretary of the King discussed a letter which Columbus wrote to his brother containing some “unknown characters” and a unique triangular signature which resembled inscriptions found on gravestones of ancient Jewish graves in Spain. While it had been assumed that Columbus knew only Spanish, these letters suggested some degree of familiarity with Hebrew.

Even more strikingly, thirteen letters written by Columbus to his son, Diego, from November 12, 1504 to February 24, 1505 have been preserved. On twelve of them, the two characters “bet” and “heh” appear in the top left corner as a monogram in cursive script. These are the initials of the phrase “Baruch Hashem” or “Be’ezrat Hashem” which observant Jews have for centuries customarily added to their letters.

Columbus also used uniquely Jewish dates and phrases. Instead

of referring to the “destruction” or “fall of Jerusalem,” he spoke of “the destruction of the second house.” He also employed the Hebrew reckoning of 68 AD instead of 70 AD. A marginal note dated 1481 is immediately given its Hebrew equivalent of 5241.

## Some circumstantial evidence that Christopher Columbus was Jewish

1. His last name, as presented at the Court of Ferdinand and Isabella, was “Colón,” a Jewish variation of the more common Spanish “Colom” or “Colombo.”
2. The official report of his first voyage to America to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella began with: “And thus, having expelled all the Jews from all your kingdoms and dominions...” A strange opening for someone that just returned from a remarkable voyage!
3. Columbus is said to have used a unique triangular signature resembling inscriptions found on gravestones of Jewish cemeteries in Spain and South France.
4. Columbus employed uniquely Jewish dates and phrases in his writings. Instead of referring to the “destruction” or “fall of Jerusalem,” he used the phrase “the destruction of the second house,” using the literal translation of the Hebrew “Bayit.”
5. Luis de Santangel, probably a converso, but certainly a recent convert to Christianity, loaned the crown 17,000 ducats to fund Columbus’ ships for the voyage in time to leave before August 2nd.
6. Perhaps most importantly, in the upper left corner of his letters to his son Diego are the Hebrew letters “bet and heh,” which stand for the Hebrew blessing “Be’ezrat Hashem – with Gd’s help.”

## What's the Evidence?

At first glance, it seems difficult to imagine that Columbus was Jewish. If he were known to be a Jew, he would not have received any support from Queen Isabelle and King Ferdinand. If he were known to be a *converso*, his fate might have been worse.

Nevertheless, the notion of Columbus having Jewish origins is documented not only by Jewish sources, but also by Spanish and Vatican historians. His family name was Columbo, the Italianized form of Colón, a name shared by Jews.<sup>2</sup> A baptized Jew named Colon was reported to have been put on trial in 1250 in Southern France for performing Jewish religious rites, and Rabbi Yosef Colon was among the leading rabbinical authorities of the fifteenth century.

## Is it possible that Columbus was a Jew disguised as a Christian?

A number of pieces of circumstantial evidence may indeed lead to such a conclusion. Columbus' crew included several Jews who had recently converted to Christianity, and a Jew named Luis de Santange, who exerted significant influence in the Spanish Court, provided financing for his voyage. Luis de Torres, Columbus' interpreter, was "converted" from Judaism shortly before the expedition, and was among the first men ashore when Columbus landed in Cuba on November 2, 1492.

Jane Frances Amler, a famous Christopher Columbus researcher, concluded that Columbus was a *converso*. She notes that even some converted Jews were forced to leave Spain because of ongoing persecution, and many *conversos* continued practicing Judaism in secret. Columbus thus perhaps sought a "New World" to serve as a new home for the exiled Jews.

Christopher Columbus passed away on May 20, 1506, at about the age of 55, in the Spanish city of Valladolid. According to Antonio Rodriguez Cuartero of the University of Granada's Department of Internal Medicine (in a study published in February 2007), Columbus died of a heart attack caused by Reiter's Syndrome (reactive arthritis). Columbus' tomb is in Seville Cathedral. The remains are borne by four statues of kings representing the Kingdoms of Castile, Leon, Aragon and Navarre.

If Columbus was, indeed, a Jew, this would explain his unrelenting Sources

1. August 2009 Interview with historian/film producer Simcha Jacobovici.

2. M. Kayserling, Christopher Columbus and the Participation of the Jews in the Spanish and Portuguese Discoveries; Salvador de Madariaga, Christopher Columbus Being the Life of the Very Magnificent Lord - don Cristobal Colon; Gianni Granzotto, Christopher Columbus; Simon Wiesenthal, Sails of Hope: The Secret Mission of Christopher Columbus; Dr. Cecil Roth, Who Was Columbus?; as published in Countdown Magazine, 9/90.

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persistence in embarking on his expedition. He first brought his plan to Portugal, and when it was turned down, he went to Spain. When he was initially rejected by the Spanish kingdom, he was ready to turn to their rivals in England or France. This suggests an ulterior motive, a secret goal, which he may have revealed to no one except a small number of *conversos* who helped him win the approval of the Spanish kingdom. Perhaps these *conversos* saw Columbus as the "Moses" of their time, laying the groundwork for a new, safe haven for the Jewish people.

Yehuda Azoulay is the author of *A Legacy of Leaders*, a groundbreaking English series containing biographies and stories of Sephardic *hachamim*.

## Endnotes

1. *Sanbenito* was a punishment where one was forced to appear publicly in a symbolically penitential garment and swear never to practice the Jewish faith again.

2. Some sources identify Columbus' family as Spaniards who lived in Italy but later returned to Spain, resuming their original family name of Colon.