

# Our Sephardic Heritage

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Ohev Yisrael's published vision is that it is a Messianic Jewish Congregation that seeks to provide a congregational home for Jewish believers in Yeshua, and for believing Gentiles called to serve Yeshua within the Messianic Jewish Community.

The Jewish cultural expression of our congregation is mainly *Ashkenaz* – that is, culture derived from Jews who lived in the region along the Rhine that is now Germany. *Ashkenaz* is also the predominant culture of American Jewry, but God has blessed this congregation with a goodly number of members from another culture, Hispanics, some who have only recently discovered that they are Jews, and these folks' historic Jewish culture is not *Ashkenaz*, but *Sephardi*. You don't generally find this kind of discovery – that you are a Jew – among the *Ashkenazim* because their history does not include a period where they hid their Jewish identity for self-preservation, a fact that sadly made it easy for Hitler to target them for the Holocaust. But many of the Sephardim of Spain and Portugal did hide their identities, and often so deeply, that even today, some six hundred years later, many Hispanics the world over are discovering that they are Jews.

I do not think it is coincidental that some of these Hispanics have found their way to Ohev Yisrael and so, this being a New Year, I have felt moved to do a new thing in this Shabbat service, and that is to briefly highlight the Sephardic Jewish culture, and the culture of our Hispanic members whom God has brought to us. So, as a way to begin and to set a mood, I have asked our sister Sylvia and her musical entourage to lead us in several songs sung in both Hebrew and Spanish, so: *Démosle la bienvenida a Sylvia, Leslie, Miguel y Norma*.

<Songs are sung>

*Muchas gracias*. Now that we are warmed up to Hispanic Jewish culture with music, let's backtrack and get a brief but hopefully clear understanding of a segment of Sephardic Jewish history, and the meaning of several words that we have probably already heard and used.

Jewish History centers, of course, in the Jewish homeland in and around *Yerushelayim*, the former location of both Holy Temples. When the Jews were expelled from there shortly after 70 AD, and even before that, they spread to many parts of the land continent, tending to move according to where they were more tolerated or, more often, less persecuted. This led to a very complicated pattern of migration. A large number of Jews ended up on the Iberian Peninsula in what is now Spain and Portugal, and a smaller but significant number settled in a region along the Rhine River called *Ashkenaz*, which may broadly be said to be modern Germany. These *Ashkenazim* eventually migrated and populated Eastern Europe so today, *Ashkenazim* are considered any Jews whose Jewish cultural expression derives from Germany, regardless of where they actually live or have lived.

The other large group of Jews, the ones who lived on the Iberian Peninsula, we call *Sephardim*, a term derived from "*Sepharad*," a biblical location. *Sephardi* Jewish cultural expression developed somewhat differently from that of the *Ashkenazim* – particularly in regard to food, in

*minhagim* (Jewish customs), and in language. Both considered Hebrew to be their *Torah* language, but they pronounced Hebrew words somewhat differently. Also, their everyday spoken languages were the languages of their respective countries and, among themselves, they developed two distinctive dialectic languages – *Yiddish* among the *Ashkenazim*, and *Ladino* among the *Sephardim*.

I am going to come back to Spain and Portugal in a minute, but I want to explore further the term “*Sephardic*” by jumping now to modern Israel, where Jews from all over the world converged years later. By modern times, some of the Jews that had escaped the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions by fleeing to middle Eastern and African countries, made *aliyah* to Israel where they became known as *Mizrachi* Jews or *Mizrachim* – Easterners. Although some of their customs and ways had changed from Spanish *Sephardic* customs over their years of exile, their customs were still closer to *Sephardic* customs than to *Ashkenazic* ones, and so, in Israel, the term “*Sephardi*” has come to be commonly used for any Jew who is not an *Ashkenazi*, and those two terms – “*Ashkenazi*” and “*Sephardi*” – are the ones that are generally used among Jews in the United States.

Now back to Spain. “*In fourteen hundred ninety two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.*” That was pretty significant for the future of the Americas but that very year marked the beginning of one of the darkest periods in Jewish history. Much earlier, the Jews had been rescued by the Islamic conquest of Spain and thrived intellectually and financially under their Moslem “hosts. This was called the “Golden Age of Sephardic Judaism,” most associated with the reign of Abd al-Rahman III (882-942). The decline of the “Golden Age” began when Islamic fundamentalists from North Africa came into Spain and took control away from some of the more moderate Moslems. Sound familiar? The fundamentalist Moslems then threatened the Jews with conversion or death. Also sound familiar? Anyway, many who were threatened fled elsewhere in Spain, some to Christian-controlled areas, ironically to be given sanctuary for this brief time by the very Christians who had persecuted them earlier. One of the families who fled was the family of Maimonides, one of history’s most prominent Jewish theological writers. Eventually, there was a re-conquest of Spain by the Christians, and although things were fairly good for the Jews for awhile they eventually turned sour, and in 1492, the Jews were ordered to either convert to Christianity or leave Spain. Many Jews migrated from Spain to Portugal until a similar edict was proclaimed in Portugal in 1497.

So, what to do? Some Jews fled to other parts of Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, and even to the New World, and some converted to Christianity and stayed. The general term used by Christians for those who converted was “*conversos*,” meaning “converted,” or “*Cristianos nuevos*” meaning “New Christians.” Some of the “*conversos*” did so with permanent intent, and these were called “*meshumadim*” or “traitors” by the Jews that fled. But there were a significant number of *conversos* who feigned being Christian outwardly, while practicing Judaism in their homes secretly. It was known by many Christians that this was happening, but they had difficulty stopping it because they lacked proof. So they called those who they suspected of subverting their Christian conversion “*marranos*,” meaning “swine,” after the common practice of Jews proving their Christian conversion by publically eating pork. “*Marrano*” was not a complementary term at the time, but it became a badge of honor for Jews

to be called that over the centuries. Also, the Jews who left Spain and Portugal rather than convert, did not consider the *Marranos* heretics, but only those who converted willfully.

A story is told of a Christian priest being asked one Sabbath how he was so sure that there were *Marranos* in his town. He took the one who asked to the top of his church's steeple and said: "Look down there. Every house that does not have smoke coming from its chimney today belongs to a *Marrano*."

Of the Sephardic Jews who made it to the Americas, some managed to practice Judaism openly, but the Spanish Inquisition followed them to the Spanish colonies, and they found that they had to hide their Jewish identity and practices in the New World as well. Those who continued to practice Judaism in secret became known as "Crypto-Jews" or "secret Jews," and many Hispanics today are discovering their Crypto-Jewish roots in Southwest United States, Mexico, and other places in Latin America.

We are privileged to have some second generation out-of-the-closet Crypto-Jews in our midst in Ohev, so let's welcome one of them now, Karicia Corum, formally Karicia Escobedo, to tell us her family's story.

<Karicia tells her family's story>

*Muchas gracias* Karicia.

We have only heard Karicia's story, but there are others among us as well that are equally inspiring and amazing. There is a tendency for us – not only us, but many Jews in the United States – to be narrowly provincial in our concept of what constitutes Jewishness, because most of us who are Jews in this country come from an *Ashkenaz* background that is characterized by *Yiddishkeit*. But Judaism is worldwide and quite diverse, and while the *Ashkenazim* are solidly in the majority, more and more *Sephardim* are surfacing – especially from the Spanish-speaking countries in this hemisphere.

Now all this is very exciting – especially for those among us who discover Jewish family roots or even an unbroken chain of Jewish identity. But there is a caution that I must give you about this, and that is to not allow slight evidence combined with enthusiasm, to cause you to claim that you are Jewish if the evidence does not fully support it. A good reason for not doing so is that God needs Messianic Gentiles – *K'rovei Yisrael* as much as He needs Messianic Jews. If you claim a new Jewish identity, you are giving up another that is equally as valuable.

While most of Ohev Yisrael's worship liturgy is *Ashkenaz*, there are two distinctly *Sephardic* things about it. First, we use the *Sephardic Kaddish* prayer because it has a Messianic inclusion that is lacking in the *Ashkenaz* version. Second, we pronounce Hebrew the way the *Sephardim* do – not the way *Ashkenazim* do. For example, we say *Shabbat*, not *Shabbaus*, and we say *adonai*, not *adonau*. We also have a Hispanic *chavurah* that explores *Sephardic* Jewish traditions, and we pray the *Bir'kat HaMazon* at our *onegs* in Spanish as well as in Hebrew and English. We are indeed a unique Jewish congregation in that way, and I think God would have

us continue to learn and perhaps on occasion to adopt some Sephardic *minhagim* or customs as a supplement to our mainly Ashkenaz *minhagim*.

Finally, here is a real eye-opener for ME. I began this message by reminding us of Ohev Yisrael's vision statement – to be “a Messianic Jewish Congregation that seeks to provide a congregational home for Jewish believers in Yeshua, and for believing Gentiles called to serve Yeshua within the Messianic Jewish Community.” Until now, I have only been thinking of this vision as connected to outreaching to Jews in the Jewish Community who do not know Yeshua. That certainly remains our main thrust, but I have recently come to see significant outreach opportunity to Jews who are not in any Jewish Community because they don't yet know that they are Jews. As God reveals their identity to these hidden Jews, mainly Sephardim, many will already know Yeshua or will at least profess to know Him because they will have been “Christianized.” But they will need a Messianic Jewish congregational home in which to learn *Torah* and to get their biblical doctrines straightened out, and that congregational home could very well be us.

So let's now end with a traditional song proclaiming Jewish unity, *Hiney MaTov*, and let's sing it in both Hebrew and Spanish.