

The Tears of Maimonides

By Carlos Bueno Torres, Cordova, Spain

It was four in the afternoon on a Friday in December when the doorbell of my house rang, interrupting my tranquil coffee and cigar which I was savoring in front of the gleaming light of my computer screen. It was my neighbor, Antonia, a kind, noble and wise older woman who had watched me grow up playing in the doorway of my home and with whom my family maintained a close relationship.

"How are you doing, Antonita?"

"Hi, Majo. I wonder if you could do me a favor. My husband's friends, a married couple from the United States is visiting and we have a problem. Tomorrow morning we both have to work and they would like to see Cordoba. Could you please show them the town, the "mezquita", the Jewish neighborhood? You know what to show them since you know so much about local history. Could you do that for us, please?"

"Of course, Antonita. Don't worry about it. Tell me what time you'd like us to get together and I'll give them a good tour."

I was happy to accept because if there's anything I really love to do, it's show Cordoba to people new to it. I love describing the pomp and splendor of our city and providing an education about its history to people who are interested. It was a pleasant surprise to me to find that the couple I would be guiding was Jewish, but even more than that, that they were Sephardic Jews.

Antonita began to tell me a little about the couple. They were descendents of the Jews who were expelled from Spain in the "glorious year 1492" by the majestic Catholic rulers who wished, on behalf of the church, to glorify the queen, "Isabel the Catholic" in this manner. The Jewish couple, or more appropriately, the Spanish Jewish couple were returning to Spain as they had left it in the fifteenth century, on their own, with a simple love of the beautiful country they once called their motherland, the country settled by the Jews during the reign of King Salomon when the seagoing Phoenician vessels carrying the early Jews had landed in what was then known as Tarsus to establish a new Jerusalem. The couple were simply returning to their earlier homeland.

Antonia invited me to dinner at her home that night both in appreciation for my willingness to serve as a guide and also to give me a chance to meet the couple and learn more about their family history. After accepting the invitation to dinner, Antonia went back home to prepare and I continued working on the computer. I glanced at the clock and realized I had one hour left before I had to go to class. Antonia's brief description of the history of the Sephardic Jews in Spain had sparked an immediate interest and curiosity and I decided to research the subject on the internet during the time I had left. I printed the word "Sepharad" in a search engine and began reading articles about the

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Jewish expulsion and the edict of expulsion. I realized as I read that this couple were neither simply foreigners or Jews but were rather legitimate citizens of Spain whose ancestors had been exiled simply because they were of the Jewish faith.

After going to class I went out for a while and didn't think much about the research or the evening to come. After I got home, however, I went to the sink to wash my face, looked in the mirror and gazed at my reflection. Then I climbed the steps to the front door of my neighbors house and knocked....

"Hi Carlos, we were expecting you a little bit later. How was class?"

As I passed into the living room I saw a meal laid out on the dining room table the likes of which I was not familiar with. The meal began with a prayer by the older Jewish man in a language which had not been used in Spain for more than five hundred years - Hebrew. The man prayed over a beautiful table lit with candles in the tradition of the Jewish Sabbath - Shabbat.

"Today is the first Sabbath we celebrate here after more than five hundred years of exile." Said the Jew. After saying the prayer, he turned his face toward me and smiled. Then he came over to me and greeted me with a hearty "Shalom!" which means peace in Hebrew. He reached out his hand to me and said, "My name is Haim Levi, how are you."

I responded with a tentative, trembling Hebrew, "Shalom Senor Haim, my name is Carlos Bueno."

"Bueno?" (Which means good in English) he asked. "Are you really Bueno?" he asked with the humor which is usually inspired by my name.

"Well, I think it's probably only my name that is truly good!" I answered with my stock answer and big smile.

Senor Haim, an older Rabbi, short, with graying beard, which he stroked occasionally had an expression of keen wisdom and kindness. He spoke Spanish with an accent from Colombia, South America where he had been born. His wife, Rachel, did not speak Spanish as fluently as he but the Spanish she spoke had vestiges of the medieval dialect, ladino, spoken by those who had been exiled from Spain in the fifteenth century - a dialect which is still lovingly preserved and spoken by Spanish Jews in Greece and Turkey.

Rachel, with a beautiful smile, sang ladino songs in ladino. She had black hair and beautiful light green eyes. Before we began to eat, the Rabbi blessed the meal in Hebrew, broke the bread and sprinkled salt on it. Then we all had a glass of wine and began the meal.

As we ate, between smiles and kind glances, we reconciled the Spain of the Jews and the Spain of the Christians. The next morning, after eating breakfast again with Antonia, the

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Rabbi, Rachel and I hailed a taxi to rediscover the medieval town of Cordoba where the Jews had lived so many centuries before. As the guide, I decided to begin the tour at the entrance to Almodovar. We stopped at the archway to admire the beautiful roman mural. After taking photographs we passed through the portals to the remains of the beautiful medieval town. We passed shops listening to the murmurs of the shoppers and saw the beautiful white walls and balconies, and taverns onto a street named "Jews".

As we walked down the street, the Rabbi passed his hands over the walls and windows and with shining eyes full of sadness and emotion said, "My ancestors passed this way along this street, these streets...." I put my hand on his shoulder and together we walked. We came to the doorway of a house and looked through to the courtyard where the Arabs had designed patios with gardens reminiscent of their vision of paradise. The Rabbi took the hand of his wife and smiled with emotion at the gardens as they passed through the magical streets of the ancient and immortal "Sefarad", home of the Spanish Jews. I could see that they were immensely satisfied and pleased as they meticulously observed all the details of their surroundings and that their spirits were lifted by the experience.

At last we arrived at the synagogue crossing into the outer doorway. Before going into the inner door and entering the synagogue, the Rabbi kissed the mezuzah with his fingers, the ancient symbol of obedience and reverence to the precepts of God. Passing into the synagogue, the Rabbi opened his arms, circling the inner space and began to cry. He smiled at me and asked for a moment to pray to the God of Abraham in this place of worship which was built by the Arab artisans for the Jewish community in the year 1315. The Rabbi faced in the direction of Jerusalem, in front of the area where the scrolls of the Torah were kept, and began to recite a prayer in Hebrew, interrupted by his own and his wife's weeping .

I must admit that I am one of those who do not believe in God but rather believe in my friends, in luck and in the basic realities of this life. But that day, as I was swept away by the emotion, pain, and happiness before me, I turned my attention to God, took my head in my hands and asked forgiveness of God and gave thanks to the God of Abraham. After praying, the Rabbi embraced me and thanked me for my help. We embraced and I felt completely reconciled as brothers and Spaniards together.

We took pictures, laughed, cried and returned again to the bright light outside the Jewish neighborhood of Cordoba. We walked a few feet where we encountered another Jewess seated in the Plaza of Tiberius meditating on Moses law, and on the reconciliation of faith and reason. She was gazing at the statue of the immortal Jewish philosopher, Rabbi Moses Ben Maimonides, also known as Rambam, and considered by the Jewish community as the second Moses.

An official city guide who was showing the statue of Maimonides dressed in traditional Arab garb to a group of tourists said in a loud voice, "Moses Ben Maimon, Maimonides, doctor, mathematician, astronomer, philosopher," The Rabbi smiled listening to the homage paid by the guide to this great Jewish thinker. Maimonides had translated the works of Aristotle and Plato and influenced the works of Saint Thomas Aquinas, the

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renowned philosopher who strove to harmonize faith and reason. Maimonides, who was born in Cordoba, wrote in both Hebrew and Latin, and after his exile to Egypt due to religious fanaticism, served as the medical doctor in the court of Saladin and served as the principal Rabbi in the city of Cairo. This year was the 800th anniversary of his death. His remains can be found in Israel by the shores of Lake Tiberius.

The official guide moved on with his tourists, nodded with respect to the Rabbi and said "Shalom". We approached the statue. The Rabbi placed his hand on Maimonides knee and I placed my hand on the Rabbi's shoulder as he began to speak in Hebrew. Then he touched the book, probably the Talmud, which was held in Maimonides hand, and began to tell me about the legacy of this great figure and the time in Spain when the Spanish culture was much more Jewish and Arabic in its traditions than Christian.

The Rabbi, looking into the eyes of the statue in a way which reflected a desire to pierce the stone and be again in communication with the flesh and blood person who once walked these same streets said, "Maestro, here I am after five hundred years in the land of my forefathers, in the land of your forefathers. I have returned to our second Jerusalem. I have returned to Sefarad, the most beautiful place on earth where again I can pray under the heavens of Spain to the God of Abraham."

We took our leave of the statue as if we were actually departing from a living being and as we left the plaza I thought I saw a tear falling from the cheek of the statue of the wise old Cordoban. Many times since then, as I pass by the plaza and the statue I am filled with wonderful memories of that day and again I imagine that I see the tears of the great and wise Jewish Master, Maimonides.