

Yizkor: The Last Jew Standing

Category: Holidays, Yom Kippur

The last Jew in Spain was a 15-year-old boy who lived a lonely existence wandering the country hoping to avoid capture and forced conversion. This story never happened — it's historical fiction. But why is it so compelling, and what should be our response?

The Last Jew in Spain

Recently, several people mentioned to me that they read “The Last Jew,” a book about the final Jew living in post-expulsion Spain and his attempts to remain a Jew. It’s obviously a novel.

Until some five hundred years ago, Spain boasted a tremendous Jewish community of hundreds of thousands of Jews. Many of the most famous Jewish scholars and rabbis — like the Rambam and Ramban — hailed from that community.

Although most people are familiar with the expulsion of 1492, the *tzures* for Spanish Jewry really began a century earlier, in 1391, when Catholic mobs descended on the Jewish communities and forced Jews to choose between death and conversion. Many Jews couldn’t withstand the pressure and converted to Christianity.

These Jews weren’t automatically welcomed into Christian society. They were nicknamed, “the new Christians”; as opposed to old Christians, the newly converted Jews were suspect of being unfaithful to their new religion and were surreptitiously followed to test their allegiance.

A century later, the official excuse for the final expulsion was that the (open) Jews were encouraging the “new Christians” to return to Judaism. It’s very likely that the claim was true. Although these individuals had converted to a new faith, they still had close family connections with many Jews. Imagine if one of them was invited to a funeral and kaddish was recited; it would be very possible for one of them to be inspired to do something Jewish.

Therefore, the Christians felt that to ensure that the new Christians were protected from their bad influences, the only option was to expel the Jews from the country.

Led by Don Yitzchak Abarbanel, the finance-minister of Spain, three hundred thousand Jews left the country on Tisha B'av 1492. With Torah scrolls in their hands, they set out for the unknown. Many of them drowned at sea; they underwent horrific tragedies before some of them managed to reach a safe haven.

There were many hundred of thousands that didn't withstand the test and converted to Christianity — at least outwardly, while attempting to live secret lives as Jews. But ultimately, it proved too difficult. As Mark Twain said, whatever Jews do — they do better than everyone else. If a Jew is a doctor, he's a better doctor than the other. If a Jew is a banker, he's a better banker than the other. Here too, the new Christians slowly acclimated to their new lives, and over time, they became true practicing Christians — more devout than the others. Many of them even became priests, and slowly, the church was infiltrated by a new class of devout and brilliant "new Christians."

Obviously, this didn't sit well with the old Christians, and they tried to keep the Jews out of the good positions. The easiest way to get rid of an annoying new Christian was to plant some matzah in his house on Passover and inform the inquisition that he was a hidden Jew. They would immediately dispatch a search crew, find the contraband, and arrest the hidden Jew. Then, the necessary confession would be procured through torture, and they would sentence him to death.

These Jews, who went to their death for their Judaism, would realize that in the end, their conversion did nothing to protect them from their Jewish fate. Therefore, they would go to their execution with the words of *Aleinu L'shabeach*. It's a prayer that first thanks G-d for giving us the opportunity to worship Him instead of foreign deities, and then expresses the hope that all people of the world will ultimately recognize the one true Creator. According to some opinions, we conclude every service with this song specifically because it was the prayer with which so many Jews sanctified G-d's name in the final moments of their lives.

This novel, "The Last Jew," is a story about a young 15-year-old who remains

alone after his father and brother are murdered. He misses his opportunity to leave the country, but he doesn't want to convert either. Thus, he wanders through the country hiding his identity, hoping nobody will identify him as a Jew and give him up to the inquisition. He wanders from place to place and from job to job, and every time he thinks his cover is blown, he escapes.

At the end, he finds a girl from a family of Marranos, and after marrying her, together they establish a home and create a secret location in their barn where they hide their Jewish treasures — their Shabbat candlesticks and silver kiddush cup. Friday night, the wife lit the candles and they recited the only Jewish prayer they remembered: Shema Yisrael.

That's more or less the story, as I heard it from those who read it. If not, I apologize.

Why did I hear about it? People told me that they felt connected to the story of one solitary Jew who refuses to give up on his Jewish identity even when he thinks he is the last Jew standing.

A Preemptive Strike

The Talmud tells a story about Rabbi Chanina and Rabbi Chiya. They were both among the greatest rabbis in the land of Israel. Rabbi Chanina was a Kohen and also a doctor, while Rabbi Chiya was a newcomer; he was born and bred in Babylonia and immigrated to Israel later in life. For whatever reason, Babylonians weren't well loved in the land of Israel.

Either way, the Talmud says that when those two rabbis would argue in their studies, Rabbi Chanina would tell Rabbi Chiya, "You argue with me!? If the Torah will ever be forgotten, I will be able to reconstitute it with the power of my logic." In other words, he was so brilliant that he would be able to reconjure all the Torah's laws through his intellectual powers.

But Rabbi Chiya would answer him, "You argue with me!? I ensured that Torah should not be forgotten in the first place!" As the Talmud relates, Rabbi Chiya personally took care to strengthen Jewish education. He planted flax, sewed nets, captured deer, fed their meat to orphans and made parchments from their skin, and wrote on them the five books of the Torah. He would go from city to city and

teach the five books to five different children, instructing them to share their knowledge with the others. He did the same with the six books of the Mishnah. Thereby, he saved the Torah from being forgotten.

In the argument between these two great Torah leaders, we see two approaches. Rabbi Chanina sat in his yeshiva and relied on his brilliance to preserve Jewish wisdom. If Judaism would be forgotten, he would reconstitute it from memory. Rabbi Chiya, the new immigrant from Babylonia, said that a preemptive strike was necessary; it was vital to ensure that the Torah not be forgotten in the first place.

This story came to mind when I heard about this novel.

It's encouraging to hear a story of the last Jew fighting to preserve his Jewish identity, and his wife reciting the last Jewish prayer that she remembers. But the Rebbe's mission was to ensure that never, and I mean never, will there be a last Jew. He sent messengers to every corner of the world to ensure that the Torah would not be forgotten in the first place; to ensure that no Jew would feel like "The Last Jew."

Our job in this generation is to ensure that nobody in our family reaches the point where they are the last Jew, remembering one final prayer of Shema Yisrael.

We are unbelievably lucky to live in a country which allows and encourages Jewish practice. We live in an unprecedented time, in which there is not a single Jewish community that is forced to live undercover.

It's a miracle that we don't pay attention to. Until 30 years ago, Jewish practice was outlawed in half of the world — in the entire communist bloc and more. Today we live in a world that respects Judaism; even Iran has a thriving Jewish community.

In Spain of 1492, Jewish life was dependent on permission from others. But in the United States of 2021, it all depends on us.

Today, as we recite the Yizkor prayer, we promise our parents that our children won't be "The Last Jew." At this moment, we each declare that my child will be "The First Jew" — the Abraham of the next generation, who will embrace his heritage and carry it proudly.