



Was Columbus Jewish?

The clues from the life of one of the world's greatest explorers, and a Sukkot lesson of appreciation..

The Big Discovery

So, was Christopher Columbus, the famous Italian sailor who discovered America for the Spanish crown, actually Jewish?

Columbus has gone down in history as the man who “discovered America” in 1492. Sure, some historians argue that other civilizations may have reached America before him, but he’s the one who gets all the glory—and people have been wondering about his origins for over 500 years. Even during his lifetime, rumors were floating around that he might be “a member of the tribe.” Over the centuries, both Jewish and non-Jewish scholars have presented various pieces of evidence to back up the idea that Columbus was indeed Jewish.

Now this week, 518 years after his death, Spanish researchers claim to have found scientific proof that Columbus belonged to “the chosen people.” A documentary aired called *Columbus DNA: His true Origin* which reveals that DNA testing showed he had genetic traits that are common in Jewish populations. While they couldn’t pinpoint exactly where Columbus was from geographically, they did confirm that he hailed from Western Europe.

The DNA samples were taken from remains buried in Seville, Spain, where Columbus is believed to be laid to rest. The researcher Miguel Lorente said that they have DNA from Columbus—very partial, but enough—and they also have DNA from his son Hernando. He added that both the Y-chromosome (which is passed down by the father) and the mitochondrial DNA (passed down by the mother) of Hernando show traits consistent with Jewish ancestry. And after 22 years of complicated research, they are nearly convinced that the results are accurate.

For centuries, Columbus's origins have been shrouded in mystery. Historian Charles Alperin, writing in 1980, wondered whether Columbus was ashamed of his "lowly origins" or whether, due to the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsion of Jews, he hid his Jewish heritage out of fear for his life. Why was Columbus keeping the big secret?

The Man Who "Discovered" America

The Jewish identity of Columbus is easy to imagine when you think about the broader context of the times.

1492 wasn't just notable for Columbus—it was notable for the Jewish people too. Right before Columbus set sail, King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile signed a decree expelling Jews from Spain. Imagine the irony: the man who brought eternal fame to Spain was, according to new genetic research, likely a member of the very same Jewish people that Spain had just kicked out!

Apparently, there were Jews aboard Columbus's famous voyage as well. The Rebbe once mentioned (Hisvaaduyos 5784 v.4 p. 2190) that students of Rabbi Avraham Zacuto from Spain helped Columbus with the navigation and calculations for the trip. And here's something you might not know: while the popular narrative credits Spain's royal coffers, wealthy Jews—including the well-known Spanish treasurer, Don Isaac Abravanel, a major Jewish commentator, were actually the main financial backers of Columbus's first expedition.

There seems to be a Jewish detail in the date of his voyage as well. He set sail in the early morning hours of August 3, 1492. The day before was Tisha B'Av, the Jewish day of mourning for the destruction of the Temples, and on that very day, Spain expelled its Jews. Could we suggest that Columbus delayed his voyage by a single day, because starting a major project on Tisha B'Av is considered bad luck in Jewish tradition?

Columbus was not only born Jewish, but to a certain degree, he lived it too.

His letters are another clue. He frequently quoted the Torah, drawing parallels between himself and biblical figures. In one letter, he likened his journey to King David's rise from shepherd to king in Jerusalem, thanking G-d for making his name known across the world. During one of his voyages, he described how his crew was startled by a massive wave that seemed to come out of nowhere, so impressive that "it was like the parting of the Red Sea during the Exodus."

In yet another letter, Columbus describes a time when he was gravely ill, burning with fever. Suddenly, he heard a voice reminding him that if G-d could perform miracles like giving Abraham and Sarah a child in their old age, then surely He could heal him too...

And here is something that might clear all doubt: In his will, Columbus made a point to dedicate 10% of his wealth to charity. Now, plenty of people—Jewish or not—give to charity, whether it's to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, or even provide dignified burials. These are universal acts of kindness. But Columbus had something very specific in mind—something uniquely Jewish.

Columbus directed his charity to what Jews call *Hachnasat Kallah*—helping poor brides get married. In Western cultures, marriage isn't usually seen as something the community has to help with financially. If you want to get married, great! But you're expected to cover the costs yourself. In Jewish tradition, however, it's different. The *halacha* (Jewish law) states that helping poor brides marry is one of the greatest forms of charity, even above other charitable acts.

The *Shulchan Aruch* (Code of Jewish Law) specifically says that if charitable funds are available, they should first be used to help poor brides; there is no greater charity. That's why, even today, in every Jewish community, there are special funds set aside just for this purpose—to help young women in need pay for their wedding, furnish their house and buy houseware.. And that's exactly what Columbus wanted to support in his will.

And if that wasn't enough—he even left money to a Jew living at the entrance of the Jewish ghetto in Lisbon.

Baruch Hashem

Columbus certainly had a lot to say, and his many letters contain even more Jewish clues.

In one of his handwritten notes, he calculated the age of the world according to the Torah, specifically mentioning that this was the Jewish way of reckoning the world's creation. His form calculation was very Jewish too! First, he counted from Adam to Abraham (from the creation of the world until the first Jew). Then he moved on from Abraham to the destruction of the Second Temple, and finally, from the destruction to his own time. Only a Jewish mind would break it down like that.

And here's the cherry on top: in 1894, the Italian government

published 15 volumes of documents related to Columbus's life, including 13 letters he wrote to his son. Out of those, 12 had the B"H , meaning "Thank G-d") in the top corner just as Jews have done throughout the ages..

As we celebrate the holiday of Sukkot, there's something about those two little letters, "ב"ה," that feels especially fitting. The holidays, especially Sukkot, are all about reminding us to say "Thank G-d" more often. Why do we sit in the sukkah? To remember that G-d sheltered our ancestors when they left Egypt (Vayikra 23:43). Only when we sit out there, feeling the chill of the wind, do we really appreciate the kindness that G-d showed us for 40 years in the desert.

The real purpose of the holidays is to help us take that feeling with us into everyday life, to remember that we depend entirely on G-d's kindness. So, when the winter winds start blowing and you're cozy inside, it'll remind you that even the comfort of a warm home is a blessing from above. And then, it won't just be about writing "B"H" at the top of the page—it'll be about living it every moment.