



## The Dawn of the Sephardic Revival:

### The Birth of the International Federation of Messianic Jews

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By Rabbi Haim Levi

#### **Prologue**

In order to understand the significance of today's Sephardic revival, one must understand ancient history and the unfulfilled prophecy of Obadiah. The history of Spanish Jews, also referred to as Sephardic Jews or Sephardim, has its genesis in Israel during the year 2935 (according to the Jewish calendar) or 826 BC when King Solomon sent a large group of Israelites (my ancestors) to the land of Tarshish (c.f. I Kings 10:22). Tarshish is the ancient biblical name for the nation that we now know as Spain and which had become known to Jews as *Sepharad* in Hebrew. The Jewish presence in Spain spans more than thirty centuries. For example, according to some ancient Spanish historians, even the tomb of Solomon's famous General Adoniram was located in Murviedo, Spain.

In the year 6460 (or AD 700), Spain was invaded by Muslims (also known as the Moors). Spain then became a Sephardic-Muslim ruled nation. This Muslim rule had spanned some 700 years until the Muslims were driven out of the Iberian Peninsula by the military forces of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. Shortly thereafter, the Catholic Church received authority from the Vatican in Rome to establish the office of the "Holy Inquisition" in an effort to force all Jews to convert to Catholicism. When this governmental policy did not effectuate Jewish conversions to Catholicism, tens of thousands of Spanish Jews in Barcelona, Toledo, and in many towns and villages across Spain were burned at the stake, tortured, killed, or expelled from Spain.

After Jews had been living in Spain for more than 2500 years, my Jewish ancestors were expelled from Spanish soil (and their second Jewish homeland "*Eretz Yisrael be Sefarad*") on the 9th day of the Hebrew month of *Av* 1492 (4690). Five years later in 1497 (4695), Portugal expelled the remainder of the Jewish brethren living in that land. The name *Sefarad* comes from the Hebrew root word *sefer*, which means book. The term was used in the Iberian Peninsula and is also derived from the Hebrew root word *Ivrit*, which means Hebrew. There are many other examples of Sephardic names still found in the Spanish culture. For example, the current Spanish city named Toledo means *generation* in Hebrew.

#### **My wife's Sephardic roots**

My wife's Spanish Jewish relatives, the Sottos, Levys, Carios, and the Saltiels, were forced to move from Barcelona, Spain as a result of the expulsion edict of King Ferdinand in 1492. My wife's ancestors then settled in the city of Salonika, Greece Her family lived in Greece until 1940, when General Kurt Waldheim of the German army commanded all Jews in Greece to be deported to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland. Approximately 90% of all Sephardic Jews living in the Balkan nations were horrifically turned into ashes by the Nazi regime and its collaborators during the Second World War. Rachele's only relatives that survived the Nazi concentration camps were her mother, Lucia Levy, who died later in the

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United States; her uncle, Chaim Levy, who eventually died in Tel Aviv, Israel as a result of the harsh treatment and injuries received at the hands of the British. (He was captured trying to escape to Israel during World War II, and then sent to the refugee camps in Cyprus administered by British troops.) Rachele's father, Eliezer, now lives in Atlanta and her uncle, Isaac Sotto, now resides in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Rachele grew up attending Or Ve Shalom, which is a Sephardic Orthodox synagogue in Atlanta, Georgia, and her first rabbi was Joseph Cohen. To this day, after 21 years of marriage, we always attend Shabbat at Or Ve Shalom when we're in Atlanta and are warmly greeted by the many friends we have made through the years.

### **My family's Sephardic roots**

The story of my family's Sephardic Jewish roots begins in Medellin, Colombia where a colony of Sephardic Jews from Spain, Holland, and Portugal settled in the late 1500s. My father and grandmother, may they rest in peace, are the ones who constantly reminded me of my Sephardic and Levitical Jewish heritage. My immediate ancestors came from either Portugal or from Toledo, Granada, and Cordova, Spain. My family tree surnames are Cano (Cohen) Leiva, Acevedo, Lopez de Mesa, Cardona, and Alvarez.

The Sephardim in Colombia went through many years of persecution after the Inquisition was established in the City of Cartagena in the 1600s. Such a place of torture and suffering is today known as the Museum of the Holy Inquisition. Many of my ancestors lost their lives in its devilish, dark chambers. My own grandfather, Jose Cano, died when he was pushed from a 4th story building. My father, Martin Acevedo, lost his life when he refused forced baptism. My uncle, Joaquin Acevedo, died somewhere in the mountains.

I left for the USA as a very young man in 1944. I knew no one but I trusted my God to help me and He has indeed. The Bible tells us that the Levitical anointing given to my tribe by Moses on orders from the Lord can never be abolished.

I know who I am, and I know His calling upon me has been of old.

### **DNA testing confirms it**

Recently, as a matter of interest, I had genetic testing which resulted in a determination that I am indeed a Cohen (a member of the Levite tribe). This finding indicates that in spite of 3,500 years of genetic mutations, I am related to both Aaron and Moses.

### **From generation to generation**

In my family, we all spoke Castilian Spanish, Ladino (or Judeo-Español), Italian, Portuguese, English, as well as French. As a general rule, these are the languages spoken by most of the western European Sephardim. We all knew we were living in the era of the dispersion of the Sephardim, which is alternatively referred to in Hebrew as the "*galut be toh galut*" (*galut entre galut* in Ladino) or the "dispersion in the midst of a dispersion." These phrases are used to describe the dispersion of Jews from ancient Israel to the land of Tarshish (i.e. Spain or Sefarad)

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as ordered by King Solomon initially and then the second dispersion that occurred from Sepharad some 2,500 years later after the Spanish expulsion of 1492.

I spent many years with my maternal grandmother, Amalia, the one who took very special care to teach me the history of the Jewish people. Every day I would go into her bedroom to see “la llave de la casa en España.” This term means “the key to the home in Spain.” In reality, this key was in fact a very large iron key taken from the family home in Toledo, Spain. My brother Leon, who now lives in Albany, New York, is the family member who is now the keeper this key. My grandmother, Amalia, died in Medellin, Colombia at age of 111 years.

Many years later, the Lord united me to a wonderful, Sephardic, Ladino-speaking wife, Rachelle Sotto, who was born in Salonika, Greece. As a general rule, Ladino is the language we still use at home.

### **An Orthodox Jew meets Messiah**

Years later after studying engineering, I became a *talmid* of Rabbi Aryeh Jacobs, in Queens, New York. In 1974, I received my *shemichah* (ordination) in Jerusalem. At the end of the ceremony, the attending rabbi (a talmid of Rabbi Yaakov Getz, who is the rabbi of the Temple mount in Jerusalem) said these words to me, “Return to *artzot habrit* (the United States), for HaShem will be using you.” A year later while I was in the United States, I met with the Person of the Messiah, *Yeshua HaMashiach ADONAI* (Jesus the Messiah).

Initially, I was fearful of placing my faith in the Messiah and even believing Yeshua was indeed the Messiah. I feared the direct adverse personal consequences that I would suffer from my family and friends if I came to a faith in Yeshua as the Messiah. How could I, an Orthodox Jew, believe that Yeshua (the Hebrew name for Jesus) was the Messiah? After all, I was even vice-president of the Sarasota, Florida B’nai Brit chapter! At first during my encounter with the Messiah, I refused to listen to His words. After 9 hours of struggling and fighting with Him and the sound of a hurricane swirling in my solitary Sarasota apartment, I realized that I was almost physically blind. God and His truth overwhelmed me. Finally, I surrendered to His call and said, “Yes, yes, I know who You are, and I will follow You.”

### **The first Sephardic Messianic Jewish congregation is formed**

In 1978, with the vision of bringing together Sephardim from all over the world to worship Messiah Yeshua and to teach about Him in organized Sephardic Messianic Jewish congregations and an international federation of Messianic Sephardim burning in my heart, I organized Beth Israel Messianic Fellowship, Inc. Beth Israel was the first Sephardic Messianic ministry organized in Tampa, Florida. The vision the Lord gave me was to facilitate a Messianic Sephardic revival worldwide, to help the Sephardim to return to the faith of our fathers.

### **Support arrives**

Throughout the early years of attempting to ignite an organized Sephardic revival, I have been blessed with much support from all over the world from individuals who believed in the vision. Faithful visionaries of the Sephardic revival have been our good friends and sons in the faith, Victor Faur, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Eliezer Bograd, Caracas, Venezuela; Rodolfo Olivares, El

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Salvador; Dr. Claude Bitoun, Nice, France; and Dennis Bakon, Dennis Richards, Robert Gorelik, George Quinn. and Jonathan Settel USA. Later came others like, Gary Fernandez, Sanford, FL, Roberto Cardona, Kissimmee, FL, Tom Phipps, FL, William Ferrer, Miami, Carlos Rodriguez, Miami, FL, Reinaldo Tangarife, Medellin, Colombia, Cesar Urrego, Bogota, Colombia, Miguel Raudales, Honduras, and Ricardo Guevara Melo, Cali, Colombia.

In October of 1994, I was invited to be the keynote speaker at the Higuera International Conference in San Jose, Costa Rica. The first night of our arrival in Costa Rica, while I was studying my Bible, I heard the following words of the Holy Spirit, “Open the book of Obadiah and teach it to them tomorrow.” In Obadiah 1:20 I read the words, “The captivity of Jerusalem which is in Sefarad, will inhabit the cities of the Negev.”

### **My ‘orders’ from the Lord**

Instantly I realized that I had finally I received the meaning of the prophetic words the rabbi had given me in Jerusalem some 30 years before. My “orders” had finally arrived. It was the beginning of the Sephardic revival! Immediately, I read the scriptures from Obadiah to Rachelle and she also knew it. The time had arrived, and it was now. What a coincidence that only a month before my wife and I received an invitation from Shelly, our cousin in the Tel Aviv area, to participate in a family gathering planned for the family. After our arrival, they all surprised us with a trip to the Negev. The confirmation was made clear and it was time to move.

Later in Jerusalem, I met at the Kotel (the Wall) with one of my former *talmidim*, Rabbi N. K., now an Orthodox rabbi from the Shomrom (Samaria). Together we prayed to HaShem for the success of this Sephardic ministry. Thus the International Federation of Messianic Jews (IFMJ) was then formed and taken from Jerusalem to the Sephardic world.

### **Our first conferences held**

The IFMJ’s first two Sephardic conferences were held in the Laredo, Texas, civic center in the summers of 1996-1997 (5756-5757). Some of the attendees were people who had never heard much about Marranos or Ladino, much less about Crypto Jews. Some of the first Sephardim to attend were registered for a 3-day yeshiva class in Judaism 101 and also featured:

1. Concert singer Jonathan Settel, a friend of many years, offered to be the first Sephardic cantor.
2. Dr. Claude Bitoun, my dear Sephardic adopted son from France, and Orthodox Jew who naturally knew about our Ladino language.
3. George Quinn Cano, the rabbi of Beth Israel of El Paso, Texas.
4. Art Levy from New Jersey.
5. Pastor Del Sanchez from the Assembly of God Church in San Antonio, Texas.
6. Toni Garcia from Barcelona, Spain attended the Yeshiva course.

### **The future**

We are the Sephardim of ancient times. We are not nor have ever been connected to any church denomination and we do not adopt any of their holidays. We are bound to obey and to give honor to God’s Holy Torah. Interestingly, we have been experiencing a surge in those seeking to

participate in Messianic Sephardic congregations. We are contacted regularly from those interested in their Jewish ancestry. We welcome you to contact us.

*Mazal bueno* to everyone. *Mazal bueno* a todos.

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