

# Sephardic Farewell

*Ancestors*

by

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*To the memory of my parents,  
Albert and Sultana Hobesh, whose Sephardic  
roots I honor.*

*To my wife Anita, without whose support  
this work would still be a figment of my vivid  
imagination.*



*I am indebted to the many scholars and historians whose works I relied upon to transform historical facts into historical fiction.*



# Prologue

*The emigration of Jews to Spain began around the sixth century B.C.E., following the destruction of the first temple by the Babylonians. They came as refugees or slaves, torn from the land of their forefathers. Suffering hardships, persecution, and conversionary pressures. Yet they survived the Roman, Visigoth, and Byzantine Empires.*

*A larger exodus occurred after the destruction of the second temple, around 70 CE, during the rule of King Herod. At this time the Roman Empire was the predominant power in the world, and although it was the Romans who destroyed the second temple, King Herod's policies and politics brought infamy to himself and catastrophe to the Jewish people he ruled.*

*Again, the Jews were forced to leave their homeland, to settle into many lands foreign to their way of life. These "scattered seeds" or the Diaspora, formed communities in France, Germany, Eastern Europe and Spain. Eastern European Jews or "Ashkenazim," differed from Spanish Jews in the foods that they eat, some customs, but mainly in the languages spoken. "Ladino" a Judeo-Spanish, is the spoken language of Sephardic Jews. Whereas "Yiddish" a Judeo-German is the spoken language of the Ashkenazim.*

*The Jews of Spain are known as Sephardim—Sefarad being the Hebrew word for the Iberian Peninsula—assimilated into the life and culture of Muslim, then Catholic Spain, over a span of five hundred years. Known as the Golden Age of Spain, the Sephardim lived many years in Muslim, then Catholic Spain. Some good and happy, others sad and full of misfortune.*

*At the close of the fifteenth century, almost all of the Iberian Peninsula was under the control of Christian Kings. As a consequence, past tolerance of other religions became reprehensible to the papal authorities. The burden of possible persecution, forced conversions, the pressures of the Church, and economic reasons caused some non-Catholics to give up their beliefs entirely. Others to seemingly convert to Catholicism, to live as Christians in their everyday lives, continuing to practice their true faith secretly. Those who did not convert endured much suffering. Jewish converts, “Conversos” or “Marranos” as these “New Christians” were called, became the primary objective of the Inquisition.*

*During the massacre, which occurred in 1391, close to thirty thousand Jews were killed throughout Spain by roving mobs who were incited by the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.*

*In 1478 as the last stronghold of Muslim resistance in Granada was about to fall, the Inquisition was renewed. It was to become a crusade against heresy and a means of political persecution within the Christian community.*

*Then in 1492, two events occurred that would change Spanish Jewry forever, the first was the Expulsion Edict. It ordered all Jews to convert to Catholicism or leave the country and take nothing of value with them. Spain under Ferdinand and Isabella would no longer tolerate non-Christians, or pseudo-Christians.*

*All ties to Spain were cut for anyone not professing the Christian faith.*

*The second event was approval of Columbus’s final appeal to Isabella and Ferdinand for funds to begin his search for a westward route to Asia.*



SEPHARDIC FAREWELL

*This is a tale of two families, the Ben-Halavis leaving their world and comforts behind in order to justify their beliefs, and the San Miguels, fully assimilating into a Spanish Christian world, securing the benefits of professing the proper convictions.*

*For both families the edict would evoke sadness, hope, and despair. For both, the decisions—the leaving of one, and the lingering of the other—would sorely test their faith in the religion of their choice.*



# Chapter 1

*“In the same month in which their Majesties issued the edict that all Jews should be driven out of the kingdom and its territories; in the same month they gave me the order to undertake with sufficient men my expedition of discovery to the Indies.” —Christopher Columbus*

**Seville, April 1492**

David Ben Isaac Halavi

*Today begins the test of our strength, and the start of our agony, David Ben-Halavi thought as he labored in the tiny room that housed the print press. We are to be punished again for our beliefs and our faith. The Expulsion Edict issued by the King and Queen proclaims “convert...leave España with nothing, give up your Jewish faith and you will be allowed to remain.”*

*Last year my beloved Rachel taken from us. She suffered so.*

*Now this terrible news. The strength of my beliefs is waning, and again we will be rigorously tested. Surely the agony begins, as it did with my forefathers, with the need to make a new life in some foreign land.*

David Ben-Halavi pondered the affect of the edict. It would effectively end their lives in Spain. Where would they go? How would they live? What would they do with the press, the type?

Could they possibly move it? So many questions, so few answers.

*How will Benjamin and Joshua react? How can I explain to them that I cannot accept this Christian religion? I cannot live as anything but a Jew. Conversion for me, my family is unthinkable!*

*The news comes so soon after our mother's death, has it been just a year since she left us? My heart is heavy, Rachel, I miss you so, life without you has been heartbreaking. May you rest in peace.*

*I must hurry in order to meet with the other congregants at the Cal—synagogue. The meeting is to be held very soon, to discuss what can be done about the edict.*

*The synagogue has always been a refuge. It fills me with hope, peace, and sometimes understanding. Isaac Abravanel, the Grandee, was to meet with the King. Perhaps he has been successful and will be able to propose some kind of solution. A delay of the edict, maybe it can even be annulled.*

\* \* \*

Benjamin Ben-Halavi was angry. The focus of his anger was the man standing at the *bema*—the synagogue podium.

Father Manuel was addressing Benjamin, as well as the other congregants; his speech was intended to offer some solace and advice regarding the Expulsion Edict. It degenerated, like it usually did, into a bitter diatribe of the Jews. Who in their stubborn refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah had brought all this misfortune on themselves.

Benjamin felt the blood rising in his veins. Sought to keep his temper in check. The priest would enjoy someone from the synagogue disputing or attacking him. Then he would have an excuse for doing what he really wanted. Converting or punishing all of the Jews in Seville.

Waving to his father as he entered the synagogue, Benjamin experienced a great sadness. His father shuffled towards his seat instead of walking. *How this man has suffered*, Benjamin thought. Losing his wife and their mother last year was a terrible blow to him. *Now this new misery being inflicted on all of us.*

David Ben-Halavi reached the bench that Benjamin was sitting at and sat down next to him, uttering a huge sigh as he did so.

"Have you seen Joshua?" he whispered.

Embarrassed at his father's mention of Joshua or his whereabouts, Benjamin quickly answered, "Only for a short while at the river."

"Was he planning to join us here at the synagogue?"

"I am not sure, he mentioned something about speaking to some sailors who were planning to sail with the Italian, Colon."

"Why!" his father hoarsely whispered. "Why would he choose not to be with his family at this time?"

Benjamin could only shrug, dismayed at his father's emotional outburst. Benjamin never quite understood his younger brother's reasons for doing what he did.

Father Manuel ended his address with a loud admonition.

"Conversion is the only solution available that will allow the Jews to remain in the country." Rabbi Hachham rose, and thanked the priest for his wise counsel. Agreeing that it would certainly be given serious consideration. Father Manuel, as he turned to leave, shouted in his loudest voice.

"All conversions not taken in the true spirit of the Lord will be severely punished." He then stepped down from the bema and left the synagogue. As soon as the priest left, Rabbi Hachham began to address the congregation.

"Contrary to the counsel given by Father Manuel, neither conversion, nor the secret practice of the religion is the answer. Our only refuge is to leave *España*, and make new lives for ourselves elsewhere. Someplace that will allow us to practice our religion as the Lord has commanded us to."

The problem was where, how, and what property they would be allowed to take with them? The rabbi asked *Isaac Abravanel*, one of the King's leading tax advisors, to tell of his struggle to intercede with his Majesties. To provide any counsel he thought would be helpful for all of the Jews of Seville.

Isaac Abravanel arose, majestic in bearing, one of the true Grandees of Spain. As he approached the bema, he looked around the synagogue and slowly began to speak.

"I pleaded with the King and Queen, to no avail. Then I asked the King: 'Why are you doing this to your Servants? Take all of our gold, silver, all that the Children of Israel possess. We willingly give our wealth to you. But let us remain in *España*, the land of our birth, as your loyal subjects, and as—Jews.' However, he remained deaf to my appeals, his heart was hardened. I implored the Queen, who was standing by the King's side, but she as well would not listen to my pleas."

Isaac Abravanel began to sob, but with a great effort brought himself under control and continued.

"Spain is the land of my birth, my home. But it will be closed to those of us who wish to remain here as Jews. I have struggled long and hard to find an adequate solution to this terrible choice we must all make. My family is urging me to remain."

Again he began to sob, paused and began again.

"So it is with a sad and heavy heart that I have decided—to convert and stay."

With those words he broke down completely, turned and quickly left the synagogue.

The rabbi, although shocked beyond belief, tried to quiet the ensuing bedlam which followed *Señor Abravanel's* remarks.

"Please, please let us all calm down. We have lost one of our most illustrious spokesmen, it is a fact we cannot change. He has made his choice; I pray to *Adonai* that he does not suffer for it."

Close to breaking down himself, the rabbi again asked the congregants to be seated. Sensing that the shock of the ensuing events would not allow any realistic discussion. The rabbi called

for another meeting in two days, prior to Shabbat—the Sabbath.

At that meeting, discussion of other alternatives and options open to the congregation would take place.

\* \* \*

Benjamin and his father left the synagogue together, both silent and lost in their own thoughts. Not daring to give voice to what they were thinking. Although they knew deep in their hearts—there was only one choice open to them.

The air fresh and clean on a beautiful spring day, they walked towards the Juderia. The Jewish section of the city where their home was located. Coming upon Joshua who was walking in the same direction, Benjamin called out to him. Seeing his father and brother, Joshua stopped and waited for them to catch up with him. Approaching Joshua, his father began to berate him for not being at the synagogue. But stopped in mid-sentence, instead, gently inquiring where Joshua had been. Joshua glanced at his brother who gave him a piercing look, and stammered.

“Just at the wharf talking to some of the sailors and fisherman.”

Benjamin, becoming agitated, sharply said, “Let’s not discuss this here, wait until we are at home.” David looked at both of his sons, and just shook his head.

As they continued on their way, they passed the small shops and businesses that made up the Juderia’s commercial section.

Food stands selling a myriad of vegetables, fruits, olives, cheeses and nuts. Various kinds of foods could be seen in all directions. Fish, eggs, meat prepared and koshered was available from many stands.

David Ben Isaac stopped to talk with a number of the tradesman, responding with the same answer to the repeated question. “*Que paso en el Cal?*—What happened at the synagogue?”

David’s typical answer was.

“We are having another meeting in two days, before Shabbat, join us if you can.”

The shock of Isaac Abravanel’s announcement precluded David from relating the events in anything more than this simple statement.

Benjamin and Joshua walked slowly to allow their father a chance to catch his breath. After a short while they reached their home. Located on a narrow tree lined street called *Calle de los Judios*. The sweet fragrance of the lemon trees, which lined the street, elicited memories of happier times, and at the same time sadness in having to leave.

The small Ben-Halavi house consisted of a large entry courtyard, tile roof and two small floors each containing sleeping and cooking facilities. Chamber pots provided bath and sanitary facilities.

The courtyard bordered the property of the San Miguel family, who were influential Christians, rumored to be *Conversos*.

The second floor of the Ben-Halavi home contained the print shop and a small room leased to a widow, a good friend of Rachel’s, Señora Bejar, who since Rachel’s death had become a second mother to all the Ben-Halavi men.

Entering their home, they washed up, as Ben-Halavi began preparing their midday meal. Since the death of his wife David assumed the responsibility of meal preparation. His sons, the responsibility of keeping the house in order.

Both tasks required the frequent attention of Señora Bejar. She routinely checked to see that the house had not burned down, and that the laundry was properly done.

Ben-Halavi continued to slice some cucumbers and tomatoes, while Benjamin prepared the cheese and olives. Joshua placed some dishes on the table along with the wine and bread.

Before they could sit down to their meal there was a knock on the door. Entering, Señora Bejar apologized for just bursting in.

“*Que paso en el Cal?* What happened at the synagogue?”



Greeting her, Ben-Halavi helped her to a chair. Began to explain. Stopped, asked if she would care to join them in their meal. Señora Bejar answered, "No, no thank you, I have already eaten. But, Señor, I heard that the Grandees were unsuccessful in their appeals to their Majesties. That the edict will be enforced in four months. That even the Grandees from Barcelona were unsuccessful."

David took a deep breath and calmly began to explain about Señor Abravanel, even though the turmoil raged within him.

"Most important, Señora, you must calm yourself. What you heard is true, and now we must all begin to prepare for the long journey out of *España*. The same way our ancestors did during the Exodus from Egypt. Leaving our homes, and our memories behind us."

Pausing to break some bread, he passed some to his sons, and began the prayers over the wine and bread. Reciting the prayers calmed him, and he bid his sons to begin their meal.

Turning to Señora Bejar, he continued, "Let me explain as clearly as I can what our choices are: leave and find new homes in some other lands, or stay and become Christians. Those who accept conversion and remain will be lost to our faith. Others will convert, but secretly continue to practice the religion.

"These Conversos will bring the wrath of the Church down upon themselves, I intend to leave. My hope is that my sons will come with me, but they are old enough to decide for themselves."

Señora Bejar, looking forlorn, softly asked, "Where can we go, what about our property?"

Before Ben-Halavi could answer, Benjamin spoke up. "The King of Portugal has said he would allow us to enter his country, but going to Portugal would risk a second expulsion, since the King of Portugal blindly follows Ferdinand and Isabella. As for trying to sell our property, the Christians will just wait until there is no time left and offer us nothing for it, probably just taking it after we are gone."

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