



## **In 1492 Columbus was a Jew?**

*This article appeared in Jewish Voice Today, July/August 2005 Issue*

In recent years, some intriguing new facts have come to light with regards to Christopher Columbus and his first voyage: tantalizing tales with claims of his Jewish descent, as well as claims that 90% or more of his crew were made up of Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition. Recent studies report documents that reveal that Columbus was actually expecting to find the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Although all claims cannot be verified beyond doubt due to inadequate documentation, this subject is just too fascinating to pass up.

This article contains years of research done by the late Rabbi Judea Miller, Newton Frohlich, and Dr. Joseph Adler, as compiled by Rick Chaimberlin of Petah Tikvah Ministries.

On August 2, 1492, (Tisha b'Av, the 9<sup>th</sup> day of Av) more than 300,000 Jews were expelled from Spain, and on August 3, the next day, Columbus set sail for the west, taking a group of Jews with him.



Spain and Portugal had an enormous Jewish population – ten percent of the total population. But life was precarious. Under the Inquisitions, in order to maintain their professions as doctors, lawyers, etc., they had to convert to Roman Catholicism and renounce Judaism. If found practicing the ancient Biblical faith, they would face torture and death. Yet, many did secretly maintain their Jewish identity and beliefs, but even the true converts, “New Christians,” were resented by the “Old Christians,” therefore, many families eventually hid their Jewish identities. Today most historians recognize that Columbus was not born in Genoa, Italy, as formerly believed. A number of authorities now recognize that Columbus (Cristóbal Colón – a common name among Jews that had converted to the Catholic Church) was born in the Spanish city of Pontevedra of Jewish parents who were forced to convert. Many students of Columbus believe that his religious behavior exhibited elements typical of the Marranos of that period. The “Old Christians” used the term Marranos (which is a derogatory term meaning pig) to describe Jews who outwardly practiced Christianity, but privately continued to practice what they considered Judaism – Old Testament Feasts and observances. Here, Chaimberlin brings in an interesting consideration. Through the Ages, a remnant of Believers have remained, and occasionally have been written about, that identify with the First Century Believers – Jews and Gentiles (Christians) worshipping Yeshua in a very Hebraic context. Epiphanius, writing in 400 CE, castigates this sect of Believers, calling them heretics for “Making use not only the New Testament, but also use in a way the Old Testament of the Jews; for they do not forbid the books of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings . . . they differ from the Jews because they believe in Christ, and from the Christians in that they are to this bound to the Jewish rites, such as circumcision, the Sabbath and other ceremonies.” This would have strictly been the dogma in Columbus’ time, yet he freely made very Jewish references in his writings, and was aware of the Jewish observances. We have no empirical evidence on this, but it is interesting to ponder, and certainly, he was a very unique man of faith in his time. Nearly all of the important people in his personal life were Jews, from his wife to his doctor.

Gentile Catholics of that time would not go to Jewish doctors or intermarry with Jews. Columbus' interpreter, Luis de Torres, was Jewish, but had converted shortly before the expedition. We know for certain that two other Jews helped: Abraham Zacuto and Joseph Vecinho provided technical expertise that helped Columbus navigate the "Ocean Sea."

Columbus was also a devoted student of Scripture, spending hours in Bible study. This was not common among the Catholics of that era. Gentiles outside the clergy were generally illiterate, whereas Jews learned to read at a young age and were often proficient in more than one language. Columbus was fluent in Latin and literate in Hebrew. Letters that Columbus wrote to his son Diego, have survived to this day. In the upper left corner are the Hebrew letters *bet* and *hay*, written in Columbus' own hand. This is still used today by Jews, meaning "B'ezrat HaShem." ("With the help of His Name." [God])



It is now believed that Columbus, having failed in his attempt to use his influence to reverse the expulsion edict, was now assisting a Jewish exodus and hoped to find a safe haven for his kinsmen. Columbus mentions the "Exodus of the Jews" in his diary and expresses his sadness. He also connected the date of the expulsion with *Tisha' b'Av* – "the saddest day in the Jewish calendar." This is the date when both Temples in Jerusalem were destroyed. Columbus also mentioned in his diary that he first sighted land on "Hoshannah Rabbah, during the Feast of

Sukkot" (Tabernacles). In the margins of Columbus' diary are many references exhibiting a very unusual knowledge of Scripture, both Old and New Testament, as well as Judaism.

The common belief has been that Queen Isabella pawned her jewels to finance Columbus' voyage to the New World. In attempting to correct this fantasy, some have remarked, "In actuality, Queen Isabella pawned her JEWS and enriched her crown with confiscated estates of hundreds of thousands." It is certain that at least the majority of the funding for the voyage came from Luis de Santangel, a Marrano (or a Jew that had been forced to convert, but continued secretly in his Jewish faith). He was a wealthy and powerful merchant and was the royal financial advisor. Columbus' first letter about his discoveries, complete with maps and illustrations, was sent to Santangel.

Although we have no way to know if Columbus was a "secret Jew," in his heart and practice his Jewish heritage is clear, and he continued to be connected to other Jews in every facet of his life. His voyages, funded largely by a Jewish financier, opened up the sailing routes to the New World, making the founding of America possible. Perhaps this is why God has called America to be a friend and protector to Israel, and a safe place for Jewish People to live and practice their faith in peace.

