

Spaniards and Jews: detachment and engagement

Speech delivered at the US Embassy, in honor of Rabbi Laura Geller and her companions “In the footsteps of Maimonides: A trip to Spain, Morocco and Israel”

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Mr. Ambassador,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends,

Let me start just by telling you how much honored and thankful do I feel for your hospitality, Mr. Ambassador, and by this opportunity to address such a distinguished audience.

1.

You are in your way to follow the steps of Maimonides, a wise man and a practical man, able to heal the body and to guide the soul, willing to attend to the needs of his own community while addressing the plight of humankind, of all of us.

He left Cordoba early, only thirteen years old, but we imagine he kept some memories close to his heart, of the Spanish, or Al-Andalusian, physical and human landscape, of what may have been ‘home’ to him or his ancestors, a place for a fairly good experience of living together with people of other beliefs. Then, God’s hand guided him to other lands.

It’s quite logical, then, for you to start your journey around this place, in Spain.

Now, let me summarize what I’ll try to tell you in just a few minutes.

I’ll try to tell you that, while I feel deep respect and sympathy for your journey I also see your coming to Spain, as an Spaniard myself, as an opportunity for a sort of encounter. And that I feel personally touched as well as intrigued by the possibility that this encounter may take place on the basis of the commemoration of a parting of ways, of an exile.

2.

The hard truth is that Maimonides went away escaping from, say, the variant of Muslim fundamentalists of the time known, then, as Almohades. He left, but the majority of the Jewish community stayed around for another almost four centuries on both sides of the divide between Muslim and Christian lands. For all their troubles, the experience was good enough, satisfying enough for many Jews, dispersed here and there in what became increasingly a Christian world, of Castile and Aragon, so as to feel ‘at home’.

And then, after these centuries, came the cruel, merciless blow of the expulsion. In a short, heartless manner. Just four months were given to the exiles to reach other countries. The blow was done by an ecclesiastical, political and social, we would say today, “establishment”, with the complicity, acquiescence, open support of society at large. On top of that, the expulsion of those Jews that didn’t convert was followed by the watching over, harassment and in so many cases prosecution even of those who did convert, in the following centuries .

The Jewish community was wiped out of Spain. Period.

And we had to wait for almost three and a half centuries later to see a glimpse of a Spanish national reassessment of what had been done to the Jews; followed by a sort of minimal, intermittent attention to the matter, till today.

Yes, it is a *hard* truth — of what was done to the Jews and, by the way, what the Spaniards did to themselves. (But I’ll come to this later.)

Now, things have changed greatly in Spain in the last thirty years, and some significant efforts have been made to express regrets for what happened.

Lastly, at the time of the four centennial of the expulsion, in 1992, in a solemn discourse, the King Juan Carlos said something to the effect of explaining what happened as a result of a mistaken *raison d’état* in times of intolerance, and lancing an appeal for looking together to the future. He also mentioned the Jews parting had created an empty space in Spain, waiting to be filled again.

These were appropriate words, and said in the appropriate context of the *Beth Yaacov* synagogue of Madrid, before prominent people.

But I must add that, this statement, having been quite proper and necessary, is not enough. Or should we say, it’s only a beginning.

What has to follow, what’s needed is, I’d dare to say, a change of heart... of society at large. It does include repentance, inner conversion, together with actual deeds of course -- all of which may come only as the result of a deeper understanding of what is at stake.

3.

Now, at this point, allow me to tell you something from personal experience.

A very crucial, formative experience in my life has been going to the United States in the early seventies, when I went to Harvard and spent several years there. Not that I desire to burden you with personal remembrances -- I mention it because it touches on the point I want to make.

What impressed me most is that I found myself immersed in a loosely-knit community of fellow students and in time of fellow professors, searching for the truth, and rather uncompromising in getting at it. They played the game, smart but loyal. I felt part of a community of people who tended to be responsive to others' needs, but also taking responsibility for their own deeds. They were sharp to test my limits, and generous to allow me room to develop my capacities. Trusting but careful.

I try not to embellish my memories and don't know if things stay this way -- I assume they largely do. I just say to you what I experienced.

Time, so many historical incidents, emotional or political engagements, not to speak of an ocean in between: so many things are bound to take a toll on human friendships. But I remain faithful to those relationships, feel there is a bond between us for ever and, as of today, in fact, some of my very best friends come from 'that crowd'.

Now, this could have all been a "very American experience", and in fact it was. But, at the same time, it's a fact too that, to me, this was also, to a very significant extent, well, a very... "Jewish-American" experience.

The names of some of these friends come together in my souvenir like a quasi-religious recitative. (Peter and Sylvia, Suzanne and Carlos, Mike and Daniel, and so many others, and later, Tony and Alvin, and so many others.) Often in agreement, sometimes in disagreement, sometimes in very intense disagreement. Some pretty close, some close enough, some transient but hard to forget. Some living, some gone.

Many of those people were Jewish-Americans whose families had come from Eastern Europe, to the US, to New York, or to Argentine and then to the US — in the 1900s, or the 1910s, or the 1920s.

Now, *in retrospect*, I think that what I saw at close quarters, then and there, was something that had a meaning larger than that of a personal experience. And this is why I bring it to this discussion.

I think I was drawn into a network of people whose intellectual and moral character had been shaped by particular historical experiences, as the result of which they were *used* to treat each other as autonomous and reasonable and yet, as limited and vulnerable people: people to give good advice to and care for. And for whom, the 'basics' of work, individual responsibility and community, commitment to truth and eagerness to live were like a family experience linked to an experience of survival.

They bore witness to a long chain of extended families that stood behind them. These extended families had helped each other as much as they could, sometimes under calamitous circumstances, learning to assess carefully the lights and shadows of power and wealth, both useful, both dangerous, both to be handled wisely. In time, the winds of history nobody could control brought them from, say, Odessa to New York and then to that small corner I found myself privileged enough to share with some of them, for some years.

By looking at them, and by extending my views to the larger picture of which they were a part, I could understand that the key, in this case for good scholarship, or, expanding our view, we could say, also for economic growth, lie there. Not in the grand rhetoric of investment, innovation, technology, institutionally driven incentives, plus political leadership or political will, etcetera, etcetera. But, rather, in the basic rules on the ground, and the virtues that follow: of ingenuity, hard work, human loyalty, service to others, realistic assessment of people, and so on.

4.

So, this is my argument.

The Spaniards' conversion of the heart I referred to, means for them, for us, to understand the lesson implicit in the moral tale of this Jewish experience.

Spain was wrong in expelling the Jews -- but not just because Spain adopted a mistaken *raison d'état* that put such a disproportionate premium of religious conformity, and as a result it lost a 'human capital' that might have been (how should I say?) 'invested', in building up a vibrant Spanish capitalism and a Spanish powerful nation-state, and in shoring up our ambitions for an empire, etcetera.

No, the 'wrong' run much deeper.

We were *morally* wrong and we lost the crucial contribution that a largely good, intelligent and morally virtuous, people could have made to a better, and more complex, society. People who, by the way, knew how to handle the economy of markets, or were attuned to handle it sensibly, and people who had put together what we might say was a vibrant segment of a civil society, at some carefully calibrated distance from political power.

We Spaniards sinned (sic), sinned, against reason and against compassion -- towards reasonable and vulnerable people, who were, according to *our own* strictures, images of God.

5.

You see, then, that when I say "detachment" and "engagement", I mean Spaniards should "engage" the Jews -- and also, exercise a certain "detachment" vis à vis... themselves.

This is the key, as I see it, to a fruitful encounter. At least, this is the condition we should fulfill, from this side of the fence.

So, it's not a matter of just offering an excuse and "looking to the future". It's a matter of dwelling on that experience -- and thus, of a change of the heart.

6.

Now, from this viewpoint, I'd rather be hopeful... but careful, regarding the probability today's Spaniards are prepared not merely to 'talk the talk', but to 'walk the walk'.

I said to you this plainly -- you know, we have to say the truth to each other...

You see, the Jewish community in Spain is small and discreet. It does not loom large in today's Spanish imagination. But stereotypes on the Jews are widespread. And were we to pass a judgement (I don't think we should 'in full', not yet) on these stereotypes, we might be disquieted.

Last year the Anti-Defamation League conducted a survey of European attitudes towards Jews in seven countries. "Do Jews have too much power in the business world?" In France, 33% said this was probably true; in Spain it was 56%. To other similar questions, Spanish reactions tended to be of a similar, negative kind. A 2008 Pew Survey also found 25% of Germans had a "very" or "somewhat" unfavorable opinion of Jews, but so had 46% of Spaniards.

Now, my reaction to these data would be twofold.

On the one hand, I'd be careful and watch out the evolution of these declared feelings. We know from experience, that, in this matter, verbal statements and stereotypes are always serious business.

On the other, I'd put them in context. And the first thing we notice, then, is that Spain is a country with a particularly adverse view of... Muslims too. The 2008 Pew Survey shows Spain has the most negative views on Muslims (52% of Spaniards hold negative views of Muslims, 38% of French did).

And second, we may find that Spain is, in European comparative terms, the country where, according to the same Survey, the statements against... the Christians (yes, Christians) are more widespread.

Come on! (you could say). Are we serious? Against Christians? Yes: 24% of Spaniards now rate Christians negatively (up from 10% in 2005).

Now, I don't want to overplay my hand, and take this paradox, of a significant minority of a largely Catholic country harboring adverse feelings to Christians, to the extreme.

It's an indication of a larger problem I shall not go into, here, of course.

But, put it simply, the problem is, Spain is, as of today, a rather unfocused and morally confused society, at least to a fairly significant extent (of course, it's not the only one...) -- and this confusion translates into a set of problems regarding its territorial unity, its system of education

as well as of research and innovation, its model of economic growth, its foreign policy, the quality of its public debate and, lastly, the sense Spain may have of its own history.

And, to make this last point clear. I don't see such general confusion as an attenuating circumstance for the hold that the negative stereotypes I mentioned before may have on the Spanish imagination. On the contrary, I see it as an aggravating circumstance.

7.

Maimonides offers us, today's Spaniards, some cues, a way to understand our situation, a guide to reach a certain measure of good sense.

He does so as fitting to a wise man -- who is fearful of God and stands in wonder to God's mercy, and sometimes to God's apparent harshness; and who protects less wise people with his knowledge and his compassion.

I hope, we, Spaniards, we'll learn from him.

I'm glad to greet you at the time you start your journey to follow his steps.

Thank you.

Victor Pérez-Díaz