Thoughts on Judeo-Spanish Civilization

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I can still hear the voices of my grandparents, parents and elder relatives speaking and singing in Judeo-Spanish. Although they have passed away years ago, I still feel their presence especially on Shabbat and holidays and at family celebrations.

I grew up in Seattle among Jews who had come from Turkey and the Island of Rhodes and whose mother-tongue was Judeo-Spanish. It did not occur to me to ask: why were people from Turkey and Rhodes speaking a Hispanic language? Why did they carry themselves with such self-respect and pride, even though many of them were simple laborers with modest formal education? What was the link between my relatives and medieval Sephardic Jewry in the Iberian Peninsula? What was the nature of the Judeo-Spanish civilization of the past centuries that produced the worldview and practices that imbued the lives of the elders of my family?

As I grew older, it began to dawn on me that my generation is the last to have lived among people who spoke Judeo-Spanish as their mother tongue, and whose lives were thoroughly shaped by Judeo-Spanish civilization. The language and many of the cultural characteristics are coming to the end of their historical lives. The new generations no longer speak Judeo-Spanish as their native language, and do not live in a communal context that is conducive to maintaining the language and traditions.

And yet, the voices of our elders stay with us and want to be heard. They-and their ancestors going back 500 years and more-were part of a vital, thriving and powerful Sephardic civilization that spanned the Ottoman Empire and stretched into Europe and the New World. This civilization produced great sages, poets, writers, journalists, dramatists, intellectuals; it fostered a lively, optimistic folk culture. Judeo-Spanish civilization is a treasure not just for members of our group, but for the entire Jewish people. But so little scholarly attention has been given to Jews of the Judeo-Spanish tradition, to trying to understand who they were, what they felt and believed.

It is not possible to bring Judeo-Spanish civilization back to life. Yes, there is a resurgence of interest in Ladino folk songs; there are Ladino chat rooms on the internet; there is more scholarly attention being given to the language and literature of the Sephardim of the Ottoman Empire. Yet, none of these things can restore the old civilization as a natural, living communal organism.

If I still hear the voices of my ancestors, the echo of those voices will diminish with each passing generation-as children and grandchildren will not have had the direct experience and interaction with these ancestors. But their story is not over; it is only transitioning into a new phase.

Judeo-Spanish civilization has fostered significant ideas and values. Our task is to study that civilization as deeply as we can, and to draw out and transmit that which is meaningful to us and future generations. Some of the lasting teachings relate to personal pride and self-respect; humor; a natural, healthy view of religion and our relationship with God; optimism; aesthetics and proper comportment; love of life.

In my book, "Foundations of Sephardic Spirituality: The Inner Life of Jews of the Ottoman Empire", I present a study of Judeo-Spanish civilization-providing historical context, but focusing on the inner life of our people-the ideas, values and traditions that shaped generations of Sephardic Jews-and that can still help shape future generations of our people. I call my book "a nostalgic history", since it is written not as a scholarly outsider, but as one who is himself a product of the Judeo-Spanish tradition.

My grandfather, Marco Romey, used to say-based on a kabbalistic teaching-that each person was put on earth to accomplish a unique mission. I think this is true not just for individuals, but for civilizations. The Judeo-Spanish era thrived for five centuries and has now entered its historical sunset. Yet, its mission is far from over. As we study and ponder the manifold aspects of Judeo-Spanish civilization,

we will find that it has much to teach us-and much to give to future generations. The voices of our ancestors are not silenced, and will not be silenced.

We can get a glimpse of a people's values through their everyday proverbs. Here's a small sampling of Judeo-Spanish proverbs, originally collected by my Uncle Dave Romey in the 1950s among the Sephardim of Seattle.

Self-worth, Self-reliance

El rey es kon la gente—The king is with the people-- true nobility is characterized by closeness to the people, not haughty aloofness

En lo ke estamos bendigamos—We bless God for what we have—enjoy what you have, don't be greedy or jealous

No es este banko, otro mas alto—If not this bench, another one even higher—don't be frustrated by failure; next time you'll do even better.

Poko ke sea mio ke sea—Let it be little but let it be mine.

Un dia en la siya del rey es un dia— One day on the throne of the king is one day. All people are essentially equal.

Good Manners, Concern for the Feelings of Others

Un bukado un dukado—One mouthful is worth one ducat—a nice compliment to someone who has served you tasty food

El harto no cree al hambierto—The one who is sated does not believe the one who is hungry—have empathy for the less fortunate

Va ande te yaman y no ande te keren—

Go where you are invited, not where (you think) you are wanted…don't impose yourself on others.

Observations on Human Nature

Muncha miel bulanea—Too much honey nauseates. People who try too hard to be sweet…are repulsive.

El prove piedre tiempo en kontando la rikeza del rico—

The poor man wastes time counting the wealth of the rich.

Una piedresika ke no pensas rompe la kavesa—

A tiny pebble which you don’t think about-- can break your head. Pay attention to seemingly small dangers

De los ocho fina los ochenta—From eight to eighty—one’s character doesn’t change from childhood through old age.

Humorous Witticisms

Kuando te yaman azno, mira si tienes kola—

When they call you a jackass, look to see if you have a tail. Perhaps there’s truth when people criticize you.

Fuyi del prexil me kresio en la nariz—

I ran from the parsley, it grew on my nose!—you try to get away from someone or some problem, and all of a sudden you confront it in spite of your efforts to escape.

- Min HaMuvhar
- Rabbi Marc D. Angel