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THE INQUISITION IN MEXICO

Dr. Yitzchok Levine

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For centuries Mexico was inhabited by a number of different Indian races. There were many native cultures in Mexico, but only six are considered to be the most influential. The Olmecs, the Teotihuacans, the Toltecs, the Mayans, the Zapotec/Mixtec, and the Aztecs each developed during a different epoch of the history of ancient Mexico.

Historians date the beginning of the Colonial Period of Mexico from August 18, 1521, when a Spanish force, commanded by Hernando Cortéz, conquered the city of Tenochtitlán (later called Mexico City), the capital of the Aztec empire. Mexico did not get its independence until 1821 and during its colonial period was known as New Spain.

Cortéz and his *conquistadores* (conquerors) found Mexico to be rich in precious metals with vast expanses of arable land. In addition, the native population provided a ready source of slave labor. The possibilities for enrichment seemed almost limitless, and soon many enterprising adventurers were attracted to New Spain.

Included among these entrepreneurs were a number of "New Christians" (Marranos, *anusim*), those Jews from Spain or their ancestors who had accepted baptism in order to remain there at the time of the expulsion in 1492. Others had fled from Spain to Portugal in 1492, only to be forcibly converted to Christianity in 1497.

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Some of these New Christians did become observant and devout Catholics. A considerable number, however, remained underground Jews for centuries. Outwardly they appeared to live as Catholics while they continued to practice Jewish rites and ceremonies in secret. Such Jews were mercilessly persecuted by the Inquisition in both Spain and Portugal for the "crime" of Judaizing.

Therefore, it wasn't just economic opportunities that attracted the *anusim* to Mexico. At least as important was the hope that in the New World they would be far from the suspicious

eyes of the Inquisition, thus enabling them to secretly practice the religion of their ancestors without interference from their Christian neighbors. History shows they were sadly mistaken; the Inquisition would soon follow them to New Spain.

Initially the Inquisition in Mexico functioned in a primitive manner. The bishops in their respective dioceses were made agents of the Spanish Inquisition and were given inquisitorial powers. On July 22, 1517, Don Fr. Francisco de Cisneros, archbishop of Toledo and general inquisitor of Spain, issued an order empowering all bishops in New Spain to investigate, imprison, prosecute, and punish heretics.

Power was also given to the bishops to release to the secular authorities for capital punishment anyone convicted of Judaizing. (The Catholic Church did not actually execute those it convicted of crimes - carrying out a death sentence was left to the secular government authorities.)

In 1571 these primitive inquisitional tribunals were replaced. Philip II, king of Spain, gave the general inquisitor of Spain, Don Diego de Espinosa, the authority to appoint Dr. Pedro Moya de Contreras as inquisitor for New Spain. Assuming his new duties shortly after his arrival in Mexico on September 12, 1571, he set about making the entire population of the colony aware that the Inquisition was in full force. On November 4, 1571, an impressive ceremony in the Cathedral of Mexico City was held in the presence of the entire population of the city.

Everyone twelve years of age and older had been summoned the day before by town criers to assist in inaugurating the founding of a Holy Office in New Spain. All those present were required to agree under oath that they would not tolerate heretics. They had to swear they would denounce to the Holy Office anyone suspected of heresy. Further, they were to help

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persecute them as "wolves and rabid dogs." Any individual failing to do this would himself suffer major excommunication.

An Edict of Grace was proclaimed, admonishing those who were practicing Jewish rites and ceremonies to denounce themselves within six days. Those who did were assured that they would be treated with mercy.

The Edict of Grace of November 4, 1571, ushered in a reign of terror and panic. Within six months, the Holy Office was busy investigating over 400 denunciations. As was often the case, most were without foundation; nonetheless, 127 persons were arrested. Preparations were soon made for the first *auto-da-fé*.

Interestingly, Judaizers were not the main concern of the Mexican Holy Office. During the nearly 300 years from the conquest of Mexico to its independence from Spain, Judaizers represented only about 16 percent of all the individuals tried by the Inquisition there. There was not a single Judaizer among the victims of the first three *autos-da-fé*.

The procedures employed at inquisitional "trials" are described in many publications dealing with the Spanish Inquisition. People were not told what their "crimes" were or who had accused them. Instead, they were first asked to confess their "sins." If there was no confession or if the sins mentioned were not sufficient for a tribunal, then methods of torture were employed.

The severity of the torture was increased until the tribunal got the confessions it sought. Only a few were able to resist this barbarous treatment. In Mexico, the methods of torture used were somewhat milder than those used in Spain.

The property of those convicted of heresy was confiscated and turned over to the Church. This alone was sufficient motivation to bring charges against innocent people. Ostensibly, however, the main objective of the inquisitors was to get the accused to repent and return to the Catholic Church. In this way the soul of the heretic would be "saved" during his or her lifetime and for all eternity.

Given the barbarous torture utilized by the inquisitors, it is not surprising that the great majority of accused Judaizers in Mexico (as elsewhere) eventually declared their repentance and begged for mercy. They were then condemned to appear at an *auto-da-fé* in order to abjure their heretical errors publicly and to hear the recitation of their sentence. The sentences ranged from loss of one's possessions through confiscation, to prison terms, to expulsion from Mexico to Spain. It was not uncommon for public lashing to be added to this list.

Those condemned Judaizers who had been reconciled to Catholicism were known as *reconciliados*. Those who were to be expelled were required to return to Spain at their own expenses. This was almost impossible, given that all their money and property had been confiscated as a result of the verdict imposed upon them. Most of those who could not pay for their trip to Spain managed to remain in Mexico illegally. After some time it was not unusual for these wretched individuals to find themselves again in trouble with the Holy Office.

The *autos-da-fé* were celebrated in Mexico with extraordinary splendor. They served as great spectacles through which the Holy Office impressed the populace and satisfied its penchant for cruelty. *Autos-da-fé* often were held in the largest public square in Mexico City, where large platforms were erected for public viewing.

The great majority of those to be released to the secular authorities for capital punishment appeared in the procession of the *auto-da-fé* with a cross in their hands. This they kissed publicly, and then recited a Catholic prayer. The reason was that one who did this was first strangled by garrotes before his corpse was burned.

There were, among the condemned, heroes and martyrs who refused to give in. They chose to be burnt alive and have their deaths serve as a *kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of God's name).

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