

30 The Fate of the Exiles

SOLOMON IBN VERGA

The Fifty-Second

I heard tell from aged exiles of Spain that a certain ship was struck with plague and that the ship's owner cast the passengers off onto uninhabited terrain. Most died there of hunger; only a few found the strength to proceed on foot in search of civilization.

Now among these was a certain Jew who struggled on with his wife and two sons. The wife, whose feet were untried, fainted and perished, leaving her husband, who was carrying the boys. He and his sons also fainted from hunger; when he awoke he found the two dead. In agony, he rose to his feet and cried, "Master of the Universe! You go to great lengths to force me to desert my faith. Know for a certainty that in the face of the dwellers of heaven, a Jew I am and a Jew I shall remain; all that You have brought upon me or will bring upon me shall be of no avail!" Then he gathered dirt and grasses, covered the boys, and went off in search of a settlement.

The group of Jews did not stand about waiting to die; but each one was so enmeshed in his own soul's sorrow that he gave no heed to his fellow.

The Fifty-Third

Those who went to Fez suffered His judgments, be He blessed, particularly keen hunger. Denied entry to the cities by their inhabitants, who feared that food prices would soar, they pitched their tents in the fields and there sought out wild plants, praying that they might find some—for drought had destroyed all the vegetation, leaving only roots. Many died in the field with none to bury them, so weakened were the survivors by hunger. On the Sabbath day they would forage only with their mouths, taking comfort in the fact that they plucked nothing with their hands.

Something unheard-of took place there: an Arab came along, saw a beautiful Jewish girl, possessed her in the sight of her mother and father and went his way. Some half an hour later he returned, spear in hand, and ran her through the belly. "Monster!" they called out. "Why have you done this?" He answered that he feared lest the girl might have become impregnated and that the child would have been raised in the Jewish faith. Oh, hear and see: has ever the like been seen or heard of in the whole world!?

There, too, a poor woman saw her son faint away. Having no means of subsistence and seeing that his death was certain, she lifted a stone and hurled it upon his head, and the boy died. Then she struck herself until she, too, expired.

The Fifty-Fourth

When the Jews were in the field near Fez, so intense was the famine in the land that a Jew would go to the city and sell his child into slavery for a loaf of bread. The king of Fez, however, was a just and kind king: at the famine's end he

proclaimed that anyone who had bought a Jewish youth for bread had to release him to his father and mother.

The Fifty-Fifth

At another location near Fez there was a large vessel owned by the heathen, and the youths, Jewish youths, would approach that spot, called Saleh, to scavenge sustenance from the sea. Now the owner of the vessel met them on the seashore and gave each one of them a piece of bread. Seeing bread, the youths were overjoyed and brought the news to their fellows. On the day following this report, about one hundred and fifty youths arrived at the seashore. The shipowner told them to come on board and eat bread to their fill; but when they boarded he lifted anchor and sailed off with them all. Now when news of this reached the Hebrew camp, and particularly when the women heard it, they rushed to the shore and screamed, but there was none to save them. And there the mothers of those youths raised a din of shouting and weeping such as had never been heard before. And that cruel man set aside the brightest and handsomest of those youths and made a present of them to the country's rulers; the rest he sold in a foreign land.

The Fifty-Sixth

Exiled from Spain, some boats reached Italian territory, where the famine was also great. The plague was widespread on board ship and the poor people did not know what to do; finally they disembarked. The townspeople, however, barred their entry, so they journeyed on to the district of Genoa where they were allowed to enter the city even though the famine was strong there as well. The young men, however, unable to endure further privation, would go to the house of idolatrous worship to change their faith in order to receive a bit of bread. Many of the uncircumcised circulated in the marketplace, crucifixes in one hand and a morsel of bread in the other, saying to the young men of Israel, "Only bow to this—and have bread!" In this way many converted and were swallowed up amongst the nations.

The Fifty-Seventh

Some of the Jews who had come to Genoa, seeing that the famine was intense there, left on foot for Rome. The Jews of Rome, however, gathered to confer as to what action to take to prevent the entry of strangers into their midst who would damage their livelihoods. At once they collected a thousand florins to give the Pope as a gift that he might not welcome them into his domain. Now when this was all related to the Pope, he said, "Here is something new to me! I have heard tell that Jews normally pity one another; and look—these people act cruelly! Therefore I decree that they, too, shall be banished: no longer shall they dwell in my domain." The Jews of Rome had to collect two thousand additional gold florins as a gift to the Pope to let them be—and to let the foreigners enter the city. Then the poor exiles ate of the good of the land.

2 acts of Christian kindness

The Fifty-Eighth

The owner of one vessel bearing refugees from the Spanish expulsion intended to kill his passengers in order to rob them of their possessions. Now a just and kind merchant was on board, who said, "It would be a grave sin to shed the blood of innocents." That cursed man answered, "I come but to take vengeance for the blood of Jesus that they spilled!" The merchant replied, "He forgave the shedding of His blood in order to save mankind; shall you not offer forgiveness? My advice is to cast them off onto one of the islands: if they die, they die; but let not your hand be upon them." So that cruel man arose, stripped them naked and cast them off near a desolate promontory visited by no man.

Now all the poor, wretched castaways did not stir for very shame, for they were naked; only at night did they walk about in the dark. They drew water from the rocky crevices by the shore—sweet water—and drank it; and so three days passed. At the close of the third day they said to one another, "Let us climb this promontory for a view: perhaps we shall see a city or village and live!" With great difficulty they clambered to the top of that huge rock to seek rescue, but found a pride of lions, who leapt upon them. One man was torn apart; others cast themselves off the rock and were crushed. The poor Jews, hoping for rescue, plunged into the sea to escape the lions; and after the beasts returned to their lairs, swam back to shore and so survived for five days.

On the sixth day they sighted an approaching ship. The people on board, seeing human beings in the distance, were amazed, for they knew that the site was uninhabited and unsuitable for taking rest. The shipowner sent a man ashore to learn what had happened and the Jews told him the evil that had been done them. Moved, the captain had them brought aboard. Then he seized an old sail and ripped it into pieces, giving everyone a portion to cover his private parts; but to the women he gave whole garments in view of the requirements of modesty. Next he gave food and drink to all. Now when he came to a place inhabited by Jews he disembarked his poor passengers, who quickly sent a messenger to their fellow Jews, thinking that the man wanted to sell them. Soon the heads of the Jewish community boarded the vessel, only to be told, "I did not take these paupers captive by the sword in order to have them ransomed. Pay me what I have spent; that will be more than enough." That they did and made him a gift as well. Then the Jews stepped free, and they gave them clothing and drink, as befits the children of Israel.

So long as these poor people lived they prayed to God to lengthen the days of that shipowner and give him his due reward.

31 The Lisbon Massacre of 1506

SOLOMON IBN VERGA

The Fifty-Ninth

What can we say, what utter, to portray the savage decrees of Lisbon, the worst of which was the banishment of the youths to uninhabited, lost sea isles they called *Islas Perdidas*.⁹ How the women wept and wailed when they were taken off

⁹In 1493 Joao II deported Portuguese Jewish children to the island of Saint Thomas.

M/F

self-blame

An apparent allusion to the massacre both within Lisbon and in the surrounding countryside.

Hebrew: *Anusim*.

In addition to the Black Death.

I.e., the Dominicans. The Dominican convent in Lisbon.

The death toll was probably in excess of 1,000.

by royal decree and put on board the boats: he who saw it never had witnessed moaning, grief and evil in his life! Pity or comforter was there none, nor any advocate.

Now one woman had six children taken from her. When she heard that the king was going out to his house of prayer she went out to meet him and fell at his horse's feet, pleading that she be allowed to keep her littlest boy—but he would not hear, commanding his servants, "Get her away from me!" She, however, stubbornly persisted and the servants chastised her. Then the king said, "Let her be: she's like a bitch robbed of her pups!"

May God see and judge the oppression of the children of Israel!

A few hold that this is the reason for that decree: the expelled Jews of Spain promised the king a certain sum for permission to enter his kingdom; in the end, many did not make good, and this was the evil and bitter result.

Now some of those youths died on the boats from change of climate and diet; others, upon landing on the islands, were devoured by reptiles in the lakes and on the seashore. In the course of time it happened that a young man married his sister: some were aware of this and others not. One of their number returned home and wed his mother.

The Sixtieth

The edict of slaughter in Lisbon I was outside the city. When I returned, days later, I was told, "Not all mirrors are alike:" but truly what all suffered equally is this—the bitterest and most evil of fates. And now I shall set down what that old man told me.

On the first night of Passover Christians found Marranos⁹ seated with matzoth and bitter herbs before them, according to the law of the Passover. They were brought before the king, who commanded that they be incarcerated until they should be tried. Now at that time there was a drought and famine in the land.¹⁰ The Christians gathered and said, "Why has God treated us and our lands so—surely because of the guilt of these Jews!" Now when the preaching order of the *Predicadores*⁹ heard this claim, they contrived to seek a ruse to help the Christians. One of their number rose in the church⁹ and preached a stinging sermon against the seed of Israel. And devise a ruse they did: they fashioned a hollow icon, its case made of glass with an opening in the rear: inserting a lit candle, they said that fire sprang forth from the icon—whereat the people fell on their faces, crying "See this great miracle! This teaches us that God had condemned all the seed of the Jews to fire!" Now one Marrano happened there; not having heard these remarks, he naively observed, "A pity the miracle is not of water, rather than fire for it's water we need with this drought!" The Christians, hot for evil, rose and declared, "Look! He mocks us!" Immediately they took him out and killed him. His brother, hearing of this, came to the spot and cried, "Alas, my brother—who killed you?" At that a swordsman arose, cut off his head and flung it onto his brother's corpse. Following this all the priests arose, took wooden crosses of Jesus the Nazarene, proceeded to the city square and announced, "Anyone who kills a Jew shall receive one hundred days of atonement in the world to come!" At that a mob formed, armed with swords, and in three days killed three thousand souls dragging them and pushing them into the street and burning them. A few fetus

The New Christian Joao Rodrigues, who collected taxes and customs duties for the king. His death did not signal the end of the massacre.

Dom Manuel.
Hebrew: Hasid.

Actually, he did not return at all.

Isa. 1:26.

Ezra 4:12, 16;
Both names refer to Jerusalem.

32 The Inquisition

SOLOMON IBN VERGA

The Sixty-First

I have heard tell that a few persons in Spain fabricated a tale—that they had found a murdered boy in the home of a Jew, gashed over the heart; they claimed that his heart had been removed for ritual purpose. Don Solomon ha-Levi, a sage and a kabbalist, came and placed a (Divine) name under the boy's tongue. The lad awoke and told who it was who had killed him and had taken out his heart in order to calumniate the poor Jews.

I have not seen this story in writing; I only heard it.

The Sixty-Second

In the great city of Seville lived Rabbi Judah Ibn Verga of blessed memory.² When the Inquisition arrived there the local residents declared that whoever wished to know which Marranos secretly practiced Judaism should arrest Rabbi Judah Ibn Verga, for he determined all matter of Jewish practice. Before he ap-

were tossed from windows to waiting spears below where the fetuses would jump a number of yards. And there were other barbarities and atrocities that it is not seemly to report.

A few opined that all the hatred of the Christians stemmed from their hatred of one Jew named Mascarenhas, an arrogant tax collector who lorded it over them and promulgated many regulations to their hurt. This theory is strengthened by the fact that as soon as Mascarenhas was found, the killing came to an end.³ No blame can be laid to the judges of Lisbon for this affair, nor to its leaders and rulers, for this action was taken in the face of their opposition: they came out to save the Jews, but could not do so in the face of the mob, who moved to lay hands on them as well. Indeed, they had to flee to save their lives.

Now the king of Portugal,⁴ a just and kind⁵ king, was not in the city at this time. When he heard what had happened he wept and shouted, and returned to the city at once.⁶ Uncovering through investigation the priests' plot, he would have torn down the church whence the evil issued, but his ministers would not allow it. Then he meant to execute all the murderers, but the advisers showed him his crown law, whereby any offense committed by more than fifty people cannot be punished by death: only the instigators could be held accountable. Thereat the king commanded that the priests be arrested and ordered that they be burnt. Now, of old, Lisbon had been known as "the faithful city,"⁷ but the king commanded that for three years it be called "the rebellious city."⁸

self-blame

peared before the Inquisition the rabbi, of blessed memory, knew precisely what he had to do. He set three pairs of doves in the window: the first were plucked and slaughtered, and he wrote on their necks, "These shall be the Marranos who shall leave last"; the second were plucked but not slaughtered, and he said, "These shall be the middle group"; the rest he left alive with their feathers upon them and wrote, "These will be first (to leave)." They, however, did not pay him any mind and suffered what they suffered. And many of the Marranos he passed through fire, so that the heavenly decree would be effectuated thereby. He then fled to Lisbon, where he was tortured mercilessly to disclose who practiced Judaism in secret. He, of blessed memory, withstood the trial and died of his tortures in prison. May the merit of all the martyrs ever stand with us!

33 The Causes of Persecution

SOLOMON IBN VERGA

- no meggizah is
custodiation

Sixty-Third

Solomon declared, One is stunned, pondering these awesome tribulations, and asks, "Why is this great wrath? He has not done the like to any nation"—be they ever so more sin-laden than the Jews! All these and like questions are answered by a single verse from Scripture: "You alone have I known (from all the nations), oh children of Israel; therefore I visit all your sins upon you."¹ In addition there are seven things that brought about what we have endured. The first is the sins of our fathers, as our sages of blessed memory have revealed, saying, "But when I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins."² "Now there is no accounting,"³ etc. And the author of Lamentations declared, "Our fathers sinned and are not and we bear their iniquities."⁴ The second reason is that when (our) merit is not great, the Exile continues of its own momentum, due to hatred of our religion as well as the ruler's urge to force them that enter the world to accept his faith and religion. As our sages of blessed memory have said, "Why was that mountain called Sinai? Because thence hatred (*sin'ah*) descended upon the world!"⁵ And how much more so is this the case when our faith prohibits eating and drinking with them, which draws hearts together, as our sages of blessed memory have said, "Great is imbibement, which brings together them distant from one another."⁶ And they have commented on "for you have done it."⁷ The third reason is the killing of Jesus the Nazarene. Not for naught did Moses say, "Lo, if we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes shall they not stone us?"⁸ The fourth: there are three great objects of envy and passion—religion, women and wealth; and in the case of Israel and the nations, all three obtain. In Spain they (the Jews) began to cast eyes on the women of the land, so accustomed were they to do so. Some of them even gave themselves dispensation, asserting

Amos 3:2.

Exod. 32:34.

B. Sanhedrin

102a: "No

retribution

whatsoever comes

upon the world

which does not

contain a slight

fraction of the

golden calf."

Lam. 5:7.

B. Shabbat 89a.

B. Sanhedrin

103b.

Lam. 1:21 and

Lam. Rabbah

1:56.

Exod. 8:22.

miracle
tale

This quasi-magical
ritual probably
occurred around
1481.

Thirty-nine lashes administered for transgressing a negative commandment. See B. Sanhedrin 81a.

A tosafist (talmudic commentator) and author of Sefer Mitzvot Hagadol. Zeph. 3:13.

Johannes Versoris, rector of the Sorbonne in 1458.

that this called only for the punishment of strokes.⁹ They did not realize, however, that fanatics would attack them⁹ on those grounds and that, for this behavior, tradition held them cut off from their people; and over and above all these sins—that if the woman were impregnated she would bear a devotee of idol worship. Envy of wealth: the Jews arrived with their trades and goods; and whenever one would be found stealing or thieving guilt would—typically—devolve upon them all, resulting in the desecration of God’s name: for they maintain that we have no religion. As Rabbi Moses of Coucy wrote,⁹ had our people been guilty only of this, it would have sufficed to prolong our exile; and we read in the prophets, “The remnant of Israel shall not commit iniquity nor speak falsely.”⁹ The fifth: the people’s habit of swearing falsely. Ibn Ezra wrote that this alone would have sufficed to prolong our exile. The sixth: the excessive pride of some few of our people who would have ruled over the resident heathens of the land like lords. And as regards pride, it happened that in the year of the expulsion, on the eve of the Day of Atonement, an argument erupted in the synagogue, with everyone seizing one of the brands that stood before the synagogue to strike his fellow. And many such (offenses) are ours. The Lord is just!

Now inasmuch as these accounts break the heart, I have seen fit to adduce here a heartening matter, namely, the glory of the Temple in its restoration, as I have found written by the great Versoris,⁹ who was turned to by the just and kind King Alfonso; I have translated it from Latin into our holy tongue.

ca. 1507

34 Know Judah and Israel

JUDAH BEN DAVID

Know, Judah and Israel, I am exceeding bitter;
Therefore I tremble for all my sins.

My heart revives within me when I hear weeping;
On seeing laughter I recoil, yes recoil.

Son, brother, sister, mother, all kin—
Weep you your families, gash you your flesh.

Good uncle, all men, all women, weep;
I, weeping, will make all men tremble, tremble.

Gone my song, gone my joy when I bring to my mind
Seville: it is lost, it is utterly lost.

Gone God’s congregation and students of the Law.

5

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I.e., they converted to Christianity. I.e., the New Testament has supplanted the Old. Lines 27–48 missing from all printed versions.

A veiled reference to the convert and Jew-baiter Geronimo. According to popular legend, the Messiah’s arrival was stopped at the last moment. Converted Jews are cut off from one another and from other Jews. Mourning for those who have been killed.

Rise then, oh Judah; Israel—mourn.

My soul shrinks away, is lost for the loss
Of all my congregations—destroyed, destroyed.

My knowledge is gone through that which Time brought;
I despise song’s notes and the whirl of the dance. 15

Gone salvation’s counsel from scholars’ mouths:
The foe butchered their finest like sheep and wild asses.

Gone is God’s pity, His mercies forgot;
Cruel now he seems; like my enemy. 20

Gone the patriarchs’ merit, no more to defend
Their descendants: their stock expires, cut off.

The chasteness of all Jewish women is gone:
They are fallen to foes’ hands and defiled, defiled.

Gone faith in my God when my people succumbed
To the ravager shouting, “Worship as I!”⁹ 25

Gone Sinai’s faith when the foe declares,
“It is perished, supplanted.”⁹ Ah, how they revel!

Gone the crown of all Aragon Jewries; as well,
Catalonia’s, subdued by the plundering foe. 30

Gone the bright crown of Castile and Leon;
My tears could fill vessels, weeping their woe.

Gone the hope in the coming of God’s Messiah,
Yinon son of David, the fair, the fair.

Salvation is gone from the Hebrew folk;
Griefs spring up fresh as a blazing fire. 35

Gone the home of the Mishnah and Talmud, reviled
In foes’ eyes: traitors betray it, betray!⁹

We will not hear the call of Elijah, God’s prophet:
Restrained in Heaven, he is told, “Stand fast!”⁹ 40

Gone the covenant given to Israel as witness
All the length of our exile. Rebel you no more!

Gone the glory of each soul born to the Jews
As companionship cedes to the wind and the road.⁹

Gone fathers’ joys seeing sons steeped in honor.
Fallen they see them—and weary of mourning.⁹ 45

Gone comfort from Judah: now, in his heart,
Despair deeply roots, yes, roots and blooms.

Gone is God’s rule over Jewry’s killers;

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