

Devoured by Wild Animals

Trauma and post-traumatic stress in the children of São Tomé

*Of any of this we cannot
be sure. Nor can we
understand the extremes
of guilt and rage
undergone by the children
in their first years after
capture and conversion.
The legend of the reptiles
that devoured many
belongs to the chroniclers
and eulogizers of their fate,
and is based on rumours
of the lizards that once
were present. Images
of these monsters would
meld with the mythical
beasts of Hebrew tradition
in the imaginations
of distraught parents,
angry Jewish leaders,
and later writers seeking
to comprehend
the enormity of the crime
committed against the
Jews through this violence
against innocent children.*

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In 1493, a year after the expulsion of Jews from the Catholic Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, the poorest and probably the most devout of the Sephardim who crossed over into Portugal were dealt another terrible blow. Unable to pay the transit tax imposed by the crown for the privilege of staying temporarily in the realm, these distressed families were made slaves of the king and scattered around the country. Then even worse happened: in order to secure the new island colony of São Tomé – which had been uninhabited when discovered a few years earlier, but proved difficult to settle because of the steamy, disease-ridden climate – the king assigned to the two captains put in charge of developing sugar plantations to rival those of Madeira the children of those Jewish families. The idea was to separate the boys and girls from their parents, forcibly baptize them, and ship them to São Tomé, off the western coast of Africa near Angola and Congo, and allow them to grow up immune to the difficult heat and swampy conditions on the island – and to provide the core of an intelligent European population, albeit, in the first instance, an enslaved one.¹

¹See my earlier essays for more background and secondary studies in the subject: Norman Simms, "Up from the Footnotes: The History of the Children of São Tomé" *The Journal of Unconventional History* 9:3 (1998) 41-58; "Using Psychohistory and the History of Mentalities to Understand the Un(der)recorded Past" in *Actas del II Congreso Internacional: Historia a Debate, celebrado en Santiago de Compostela los días 14-18 julio de 1999* (Santiago de Compostela: Historia a Debate,

What were the psychodynamics of such a stressful event both for the traumatized children experiencing this abuse and for the subsequent generations, including those Jews who were the result of increasing intermarriage with slaves and black freemen on the island? Under those circumstances, could the collective identity of a small traumatized group—there were originally about two thousand children and it is estimated that almost three-quarters of them perished en route or in the first few weeks of arrival on São Tomé—could be sustained, not only for the next ten to twenty years, not even for the next thirty or forty, but through all the generations that were born to these original settlers down to the end of the sixteenth century and perhaps beyond? Above all, in the picture that will emerge from our study of the Children of São Tomé, we find confirmation of the psychohistorical “fascination with childhood as an image of the inner self.”² In particular, here, the image of the reptiles, crocodiles, or other serpentine monsters who supposedly devoured most of the two thousand Jewish children exiled to *Los Islas Perdidas* (The Islands of the Lost) in 1493.³ It is my contention that this image complex, mentioned by the adult authors who wrote about what happened to these children over the next generation, were drawing upon a fund of traditional lore that was not explicitly available to the children, since most would have been too young to have studied the rabbinical texts or to have had the skills to draw the sophisticated inferences from those commentaries. Nevertheless, these images would have been embedded in their consciousness in the languages they were taught, Hebrew and Aramaic for the older children who begun their schooling, Castilian and Portuguese for those much younger—for these two languages as mother tongues for the children would have been close to the Ladino or Judeo-Iberian later used by Sephardic exiles in their dispersion. As Jewish languages, they would contain verbal rhythms that could trigger affective states and emotional reminiscences at virtually a somatic level that we can assume would continue to be present in the next several generations, since they would be continuously reinforced by the abuses of slavery, isolation and negative stereotypes preached on the island and harangued in political debates.

And yet these images and associated intellectual or religious concepts could only be explicit in the formal complaints and laments of the adults mourning the loss of these Jewish children. The absence of any documentation for what the children and their descendants felt and thought during the period from 1493 to the mid-seventeenth century is therefore not a great obstacle. The gap is made up by the record of behaviour etched into the state and ecclesiastical records of São Tomé.⁴ It is also, in its fullest, a dynamic memory of trauma that integrates with subsequent inter-mixture of African memories when these children, grown to maturity, marry with black slaves from the

2000) pp. 277-286; “A Psychogeographical Lament for the Jewish Children of São Tomé” *Clio’s Psyche* 7:4 (2001) 182-184; repr. in Liba and Simms, *Jewish Child Slaves in São Tomé* (2003), pp. 170-176; “Moving Through Time and Space: Memories, Midrash and Trauma” *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 16 (2002) 223-237; “Bishop Lobo’s Nightmare” *Sefarad: The Sephardic Newsletter* (23 September 2003) 12:8, part 4 (Sea12.8.4) pp. 1-13; ed. with Moshe Liba, *Jewish Child Slaves in São Tomé*. Wellington: New Zealand Jewish Chronicle Publications, 2003. 242pp.; «Marranism Reconsidered as Duplicity, Creativity, and Lost Innocence,» *RuBriCa* 13 (2004) 67-117.

² B.K. France, Review of Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930* in *Journal of Psychohistory* 26:2 (1998) 627.

³ Moche Liba, “São Tomé, 1493: Segunda escalvitud judía”, *Boletín de Historia y Antigüedades* (Bogotá) 82:791 (1995) 1127-1136.

⁴ The closest we come to such documentation appears in a dream credited to Bishop Lobo in the mid-seventeenth century. See my article in Note 1.

nearby African mainland and produce new generations of mixed-blood or *mestizo* children. In other words, when we talk about a continuous somatic memory of Jewishness, we are not talking about that kind of persistence of explicit Jewish ritual or liturgy, in however an attenuated form, that Seibert rejects as impossible – which would be, in any case, a false back formation from vague analogies or later nineteenth-century Jewish migrations to São Tomé.⁵

But this dynamic picture is not merely an exemplary case study of this psychohistorical problem, which projects outward into political events the inner turmoil of the traumatically disturbed individuals, returning humiliation, violence, fear and anxiety to the pages of recorded history.⁶ On the one hand, this psychohistorical study can be seen as a variation of what Nathan Wachtel saw in Latin American survivals among Crypto-Jews and Marranos of what he calls *la foi du souvenir*,⁷ the faith in a shared memory of suffering – suffering in physical terms from the persecutions of the Inquisition and also in more psychological terms of the suffering experienced by families and personalities torn apart by the constant need to be alert to imminent danger and the inability to trust one's closest and dearest relatives, not to mention distrust in one's own capacity to sustain the combined onslaught. Unlike the study conducted by Wachtel, however, we do not have (nearly) direct documentation by the original traumatized group (e.g., letters, journals, and religious writings by Crypto-Jews collected by the Inquisition as evidence) or by their persecutors (e.g., Inquisition records of charges, confessions, and condemnations). Instead, our approach, given the oblique evidence of historical behaviour – subsequently measured against the external evidence of Jewish memorial and satiric writings from Italy and other parts of the Sephardic diaspora – is very close to an applied instance of the kind of rabbinic textual model of a *marshal*, as Daniel Boyarin describes it.⁸

Rather than demythologizing a biblical passage, as the processes of Christian allegorization or secular ironization or antiquarianism do, the *midrash*, a rabbinic form of poetic enhancement of a text to restore it to its “proper” contexts in real history, as *mashal*, the interpretation through example, instance, or continuous narrative, “reverses all of these processes” by filling the gaps in the text with a reanimated discourse, a metaphoric language that becomes myth. Indeed, one can set out schematically an approach based on the kabbalistic notion of *PaRDeS*, a word related to “paradise,” but used as an anagram for this four-fold process of interpretation:

- *Pa* = *Peshat*. Not so much the literal or historical meaning of Christian exegetes, the *peshat* is “simple” in the sense of being a conventional or received interpretation of a text. This reading may be taken at face value or have an alternative (counter-textual) understanding imposed “as though” there.
- *R* = *Remez*. Here an analogy is sought or created for the base text, so that it is recontextualized in such a way as to provide a setting, motivation, or effect oth-

⁵ Gerhard Seibert, “Há vestígios dos meninos judeus na cultura santomense?” in Liba and Simms, *Jewish Child Slaves*, pp. 41-58.

⁶ Jean M. Goodwin, “Editor’s Introduction” to *Rediscovering Childhood Trauma: Historical Casebook and Clinical Applications*, ed. Jean M. Goodwin (London and Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1993) p. 4.

⁷ Nathan Wachtel, *La foi su souvenir: labyrinthes marranes* (Paris : Seuil/La Librairie du XXI^e siècle, 2001).

⁸ Daniel Boyarin, “The Sea Resists: Midrash and the (Psycho) Dynamics of Intertextuality” *Poetics Today* 10:4 (1989) 661-677.

erwise either unavailable or improbably, illogically, or doctrinally present in an unacceptable way. It is a form of recontextualization and sometimes of reconstruction of the original passage.

- *De = Derash*. While this is *midrash* proper, in the sense of providing a homiletic or moralized interpretation, it may be a creative enhancement, in which new characters, objects, events, speeches, and so on are read into the original text; or a parallel or overlapping *mashol* or parable, riddle or exemplary tale established as an optic by which the original is to be seen and unpacked.
- *S = Sod*. This is the secret, concealed, and disguised correlative of the original text. In a sense, it is the consequence of reading the letters of the words in the passage as numbers (*gematria*) and then finding equivalents in other words and phrases to substitute for the normal grammatical sense; or the recombining of letters and words to create new syntactic and lexical configurations; or the valencing of normally non-propositional elements of the text, such as repetitions of words and phrases, odd spellings and grammatical markers, and even the size and shape of letters in the manuscript. For that reason, paradoxically, it is the “literal” mode of interpretation since it grants to the very written form of the passage and its oral status (its “rhetoric”) substantiality and meaning normally lost when a text is rewritten, recopied, or translated from one language to another.

Although Boyarin calls this kind of midrashic reading mythic, it is not myth in the modern sense of a false tale, but myth as an informing meaning-producing set of characters, actions, and emotional experiences.⁹

In fact, such mythical thinking that substantiates behaviours recorded in archival texts – and as texts – allows us to see both what happened in history and how the Children of São Tomé memorialized their experiences in various ways. Richards and Goodwin suggest, in their reading of classical versions of the Electra myth and contemporary child abuse cases:

Uncertainty and conflicting desires are to be expected and can be seen as part of the human development allowing for diversity, complexity, and change by a dialectical process incorporating all alternatives and opposites.¹⁰

In the historical instance we are to study, the gaps are manifest in the virtual disappearance of the Children of São Tomé from all official Portuguese and Church documents, except under the ambiguous and even dubious designation of “New Christians”. To fill those gaps, the data we recover from history comes obliquely, often by analogies to similar trauma in the past and in the present, and by reshaping the insights of clinical psychology and psychiatry from individual cases to collective, long-term phenomena. In normal, conservative terms – both for the historian and the psychologist – this procedure is at best merely speculative, but at worst distortive. Not only the procedure, but the content of the insights which are projected back into history from contemporary discussions of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders, the factors of child abuse, neglect, abandonment, infanticide, and so on, all of which can appear only

⁹ Boyarin, “The Sea Resists” 669.

¹⁰ Robbins, “Oedipus” p. 24.

through the mythical optic of the psychohistorical *mashal*. Yet as Boyarin explains in terms of the rabbinical operation, “The mashal...serves as an aid in the interpretation of the ‘dangerous’ material by containing it within safe limits...”¹¹ Or in more contemporary terms: “Victims may displace their anger onto their current sexual partners or display antisocial behaviours in the form of child neglect, physical abuse of their children, arrests and violence related to substance abuse...”¹²

More to the point of the psychohistorical approach developed in this study, Boyarin says:

I have interpreted the midrashic text as bringing to consciousness, as it were, repressed elements of cultural; history which are scattered throughout the biblical text. Both the repression and its interpretation belong to a kind of psychic repression within the collective (that is, social-ideological) consciousness of the people. By putting it in these terms, I have signalled a kind of homology that I see between psychic and political repression and return of the repressed.¹³

This homology of the psychic and the political must be understood in a psychohistorical sense as concerned with group-fantasies which are subject to multigenerational “contagiousness” since, as the slave-society and the mestizo population of São Tomé takes shape in the years immediately following the events of 1493, there is a double process of transgression on the prior personality-structures of the Children occurring: on the one hand, their Jewishness is suppressed and distorted into New Christian identities, overlaid by a São Toméan mixed-race and mixed-culture consciousness, and this is marked by an ability to dissociate from cruelty and “share [d] sado-masochistic fantasies”,¹⁴ the pains inflicted on others, including one’s own children, of the traumas that occurred in Lisbon at the start of the cycle of abuse; and second, more unconsciously, dropped into the codes of dream, myth, and festival masquerades, the original Jewish identity – its personality-structure, sense of morality, and cognitive faculty – is similarly passed on from generation to generation.

In one case at least, the double-transgression would become manifest in a sudden but brief disclosure on the night of 26 October 1621 when Bishop Pedro da Cunha Lobo sees something so frightening and disturbing outside his window that he immediately sets sails back to Portugal: the vision of all the horrid images of the Judaism he has come to the island to extirpate. I have shown¹⁵ that this nightmare was perceived by the Bishop in the forms developed by inquisitorial paranoia at such an extreme that he was unable to remain on São Tomé at the risk of his sanity, but that for the performers of this processional ritual the discursive elements have the chaotic nature of magic which Marcel Mauss speaks of,¹⁶ built up out of shared memories of the confrontation be-

¹¹ Boyarin, “The Sea resists” 670.

¹² Jeffrey Richards and Jean M. Goodwin, “Electra: Revenge Fantasies and Homicide in Child Abuse Victims” in Goodwin, *Rediscovering Childhood Trauma*, p. 28.

¹³ Boyarin, “The Sea Resists” 674.

¹⁴ Richards and Goodwin, “Electra” p. 32.

¹⁵ Norman Simms, “Bishop Lobo’s Dream” *Sefarad*, see note 1.

¹⁶ Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972m[1950])p. 58.

tween Judaism and Christianity, and then of São Tomé *metizo* culture and the grotesqueries of African festivities. For the participants, no matter how misunderstood and confused the ritual, the performance serves a healing purpose, both illusionary and hallucinatory – and ambivalently historical, so that at the same time as it re-invokes the anger, fear, and traumatizing pains of the original series of events which created the group personality of the Children of São Tomé, it also splits off the worst of the poisonous miasma to an otherwise non-existent scapegoat who is sacrificed during the frenzied ceremony.¹⁷

There is also a second kind of situation in which we can find the compulsive unbinding of the knots of trauma when the descendants of the Children of São Tomé leave the island for a new life in Brazil. In this second journey, at once a dreaming back to reality and a metaphoric healing of the original suffering,¹⁸ instead of being registered in the dream of an ecclesiastical figure sent to investigate the presence of judaizers on the island and hence, as we have suggested, acting as a distorted image on the screen of his mind of images floating inchoately in various actions and rumours both of what the New Christian descendants of the Children of São Tomé may have felt about themselves and how they were thought of by others on the island. But this second kind of phenomenon inscribed into the voyages to Brazil and their sequel in the history of how those people behaved in the Latin American colony – particularly during the period of Dutch rule in the region of Recife and Pernambuco – involves a different set of imagery more associated with the crowded ships, the disease and abuse during the voyage to Africa, and the subsequent organization of an exodus of plantation owners and sugar manufactures in the final years of the sixteenth century.¹⁹

By orthodox historical principles of evidence and interpretation, there is not enough data to understand the nature of the problem of how the Jewish Children of São Tomé could have retained a relatively coherent identity so as to emerge in the middle of the seventeenth century in Brazil as returning Jews (*baal teshuvim*) or at least accused Judaizers (*judaizantes*) more than a hundred years after the original trauma in Lisbon. Psychohistory, however, does have an approach that can work with fragmented, incomplete, and gapped materials to form a tentative picture of what happened, a working hypothesis that can help researchers formulate new questions to ask of the archival evidence. Extrapolating from the cases of individuals to that of groups, extending the investigation from the life of one person to that of several generations, and shifting the focus from the classical myth-cycle associated with Oedipus to the history of the Children of São Tomé, we need to take to heart the words of Kenneth X. Robbins: “Confusion and contradiction should be accepted as inevitable in explanations of conflictual or traumatic situations.”²⁰

Therefore, we need to call on contexts and analogies; that is, to see the treatment of these children in the light of similar events occurring in the same period from the late fifteenth to the late sixteenth century and something even less conventional, to use

¹⁷ Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, p. 66.

¹⁸ Norman Simms, “A Psychogeographical Lament for the Jewish Children of São Tomé” *Clio’s Psyche*, see Note 1.

¹⁹ Norman Simms, “Being Crypto-Jewish in Colonial Brazil (1500-1822): Brushing History Against the Grain,” Parts I and II, *Australian Journal of Religious History*, forthcoming.

²⁰ Kenneth X. Robbins, “Oedipus: Uncovering Intergenerational Cycles of Violence” in Goodwin, *Rediscovering Childhood Trauma*, p. 21.

the insights of modern psychohistorians and psychiatrists to track the symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome. It is only by understanding that trauma experienced on a massive collective scale such as this could create the psychological and physiological conditions in which the emotional and intellectual characteristics we see as marking off São Tomé as a unique Portuguese topical slave-society begin to make sense. It makes a kind of midrashic sense but it does not form logically-coherent narratives, since, as Robbins points out, “If no major elements of the story are suppressed, repressed, dissociated, or discarded in a reductionistic manner, coherence and clarity may be attained at the cost of psychic and objective reality.”²¹

According to Elias Lipiner, in his review of the events leading up to the mass forced conversion of Jews in Portugal in 1497, on the order of King Dom João these approximately two thousand young children “were seized and sent to settle the inhospitable island of São Tomé, where they were educated in the Catholic religion. According to the chroniclers, many of these children were devoured by wild animals.”²² In his notes, Lipiner cites for these two assertions – the education of the Jewish children and their being devoured by wild animals – one Portuguese, Rui de Pina’s *Chronica d’elrey D. João II*, and two Jewish sources, Immanuel Aboab’s *Nomologia o Discursos Legales* (Amsterdam 1629) and Samuel Usque’s *Consolação ás tribulações de Israel* (Ferrara 1553).²³ On the face of it, there are two different kinds of historical discourses here, one, the official Christian chronicler making an attempt to rationalize the abusive treatment of the Jewish children by claiming they were handled as such minor converts normally were in Portugal, i.e., fostered to families or monasteries for religious instruction and upbringing. However, there is no documentary evidence to back up such positive treatment of these child slaves sold to the Portuguese captains who were attempting to establish São Tomé as a viable economic venture.²⁴ On the other, the face less easy to pinpoint in a normal historical approach, there is a mythic account of the terrible loss to the Jewish community of so many children to the brutality and cruelty of kidnapping, isolation, and exploitation, the devouring by wild animals standing metonymically for other forms of death, such as disease, overwork, and beatings by task-masters. These midrashic sources – poetic, mythic, allegorical, etc. – focus on the most dramatic of images of what actually happened to these young victims. These dramatic images serve as triggers to emotional states by releasing suppressed memories, somatic tensions in the very muscles, as it were, of the bodies in question. These are chemical (hormonal) changes in the physiology of the persons involved and can be traced in the bizarre behaviours and attitudes they display, although, of course, we can neither measure them with scientific accuracy nor interpret private and confessional statements. They are also midrashic triggers that pull together disparate image-complexes, break open words and phrases locked into conventional iconographic models, and reconfigure new imagery by radical reading-in.²⁵ What is dredged up and put together by these individ-

²¹ Robbins, “Oedipus” p. 23.

²² Elias Lipiner, *Two Portuguese Exiles in Castile: Dom David Negro and Dom Isaac Abravanel* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1970), p. 22.

²³ Lipiner, *Two Portuguese Exiles*, p. 22, n. 26.

²⁴ That they were slaves is proved by the testament of Alvaro de Caminha which grants them manumission upon his death on 24 April 1499; see João Martins da Silva Marques, “Descobrimientos portugueses: Documentos para a sua historia”, N. 331, 1499 Abril 24, in Liba and Simms, *Jewish Child Slaves*, pp. 212-218.

²⁵ On “reading-in,” see David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinical Exegesis* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 6-8.

ual experiences are deep memories of national exile and cultural alienation. It is often rationalized that the reptiles stand for malaria in the swamps of the island, and that both Usque and Aboab are being poetic in their laments for the large number of children who died so young after their hazardous voyage to Africa.²⁶

Unlike the other *Judeus do desterro de Portugal*, Jews of the Portuguese Exile, who finally could escape the Lands of Idolatry and the jurisdiction of the Inquisitions in Spain and Portugal, to return to their true identities. For some Crypto-Jews and Marranos hiding in the New World, there would also be a return much later when the laws and customs distinguishing between Old and New Christians were abolished. In contradistinction, it seems the fate of these Children of São Tomé was to assimilate into the colonial history of the Portuguese (and when that was occluded by dynastic politics, the Spanish) Empire, not even recognized or recalled as anything other than the *mestizo* population they had blended into. The name New Christian seems to last longer than the facts on the ground, insofar as this phrase had more of a pejorative quality than an actual racial or theological one. Through such an apparent assimilation, the previously Jewish group becomes complicit in the cruelties of the slave society, but also retains its Jewishness at a deep, unconscious level, not through any genetic or racial means; but with a horrible irony, through the repeated acts of cruelty that are passed down from father to son, mother to daughter. "Unconsciously," Richards and Goodwin tell us, "the vengeful person attempts to conceal a damaged ego that resulted from being hurt and traumatized in childhood."²⁷ The archives of São Tomé indicate that this was an unusually obstreperous, rebellious, and recalcitrant colony, in which there was constant resistance to officials from the metropolis seeking to impose order or to monitor events on the island. The climate, too, ensured that most new arrivals did not survive more than their first few weeks, so that crown and ecclesiastical agents were reluctant to take up their posts, often operating *in absentia* from offices in Lisbon. Given its unusual character and geography, São Tomé was considered part of the New World and ruled by the Council of the Indies. Above all it was considered inhospitable, dangerous, and cruel. It behaved like an abused child. In psychological terms, vengeance is a way to undo and deny the damage, to express the anger, and to persuade oneself that one need never fear deprivation or humiliation again.

The Original Trauma

Before we look further at the question of how the Jewish identity of this community was preserved in unconsciously embedded mythic imagery, a story which is complicated by the mixing of races, religions, and cultural backgrounds, let us go back to the moment of original trauma, when the two thousand Jewish children were taken from their parents in Lisbon and then after a pro forma conversion at baptismal fonts temporarily set up along the harbour, shipped off to São Tomé as slaves. It has been suggested that most of the children under the age of three were not sent to the island but given out to foster parents or monastic houses to be raised as good Catholics. But this suggestion, like that which sees some of the boys and girls left off on the Canary Islands en route to São Tomé, cannot be backed up. It is wishful thinking. Denial. The

²⁶ Liba, "São Tomé, 1493".

²⁷ Richards and Goodwin, "Electra" p. 35.

working assumption will be that all two thousand children, from the age of about two to fourteen, were cramped on to a few small and foetid ships – impossible as that may seem to be to anyone imagining events from a modern liberal position and trying to measure space on the ships available to the Portuguese captains for this enterprise – and set sail for Africa, arriving with already a goodly number of the children dead or dying from disease, starvation, or abuse by sailors, whores, beggars, criminals, or clerics on board. What is harder to believe, in the light of the conditions prevailing in Iberia at the end of the fifteenth century, is any compassion for these frightened and traumatized Jewish children.

Even without additional sexual abuse, the trauma that occurred would have thrown the identity of these children into turmoil. In that act, these children, once the beloved sons and daughters of some of the most religious Sephardic Jews, became changelings and bastards since the legitimacy of their birth and relationship to their families was denied under rabbinic law;²⁸ at best, they could be considered orphans or foundlings who were then adopted by the Portuguese captains who took over control of their lives and subjected them to the harshness of forced labour and exile. In Jewish terms, each of the children under the age of thirteen for boys and twelve for girls would be considered an *asufi*, that is, a “foundling about whom one cannot know whether he or she is a bastard or not,”²⁹ since they were below the age of moral consent to what was happening to them, and yet were removed from the Jewish community and to all intents and purposes grew up without benefit of a Jewish education or supporting *halakhic* (rabbinical legal) society in which to perform the *mitzvot* (commandments, positive and negative). It is likely that, for at least a while, the older children in the group of survivors from the original two thousand, would have passed on their knowledge of Judaism and, more unconsciously, their own parents’ and community’s attitudes towards children and childrearing. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us, even at times of crisis like that of the persecutions of post-1390 Iberia, Jews placed education at the top of their priorities. He cites, for example, a decree announced at Vallodolid in 1432 in support of public education:

We also ordain that every [Jewish] community of 15 householders [or more] shall be obliged to maintain a qualified elementary teacher to instruct their children in Scripture. They shall provide him with sufficient income for a living in accordance with the number of his dependents. The parents shall be obliged to send their children to that teacher, and each shall pay him in accordance with his means. If this revenue from the parents should prove inadequate, the community shall be obliged to supplement it with an amount necessary for his livelihood in accordance with the time and place.³⁰

Jewish children at this time would begin elementary instruction at age three, including girls, and by the time they were nine or ten they would be proficient in the basics of reading in biblical, Talmudic and liturgical Hebrew. Though girls might drop out of the *cheder* (the first grades) at that time, they would nevertheless continue being

²⁸ Marc Shell, *The End of Kinship: “Measure for Measure”, Incest and Ideal of Universal Siblinghood* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988) p. 7.

²⁹ Shell, *The End of Kinship*, p. 204, n. 2.

³⁰ Joseph Sacks, “Education, Education, Education” *Covenant and Conversation* (26 August 2005), reprinted in *Sephardic Heritage Update* (21 September 2005) 2.

instructed by their mothers in the laws of *kashrut* (dietary rules), hygiene, home remedies, and, of course, prayers and rituals associated with home and *mikvah* (bathing). The age of discretion was normally twelve for girls and thirteen for boys, but many children would be considered competent at an earlier age, and therefore be prepared to guide their younger siblings and relatives into greater knowledge of Jewish Law and history. For those who had become formally *bar mitzvahed* (hence liable for the performance of the moral laws) they could at first be counted by the rabbis as *anusim*, that is, forced converts, who would be expected to return to Judaism as soon as the danger which threatened their lives had passed.

They were not considered *meshulim*, voluntary converts or renegades, since they were below the age of responsibility and clearly had no choice in the matter. However, the longer they remained outside of Jewish law and custom, the longer they were separated from rabbinic education and parental guidance, and the longer they lived their lives at least nominally as New Christians, the more their status as Jews would be unclear and filled with anxiety-causing confusions. In Jewish law, the children would have to be considered *mamzerim*, bastards, and thus ineligible for marriage to a professing Jewish bride or groom. Given, further, that all Jews caught up in the programme of forced conversions in Portugal between 1493 and 1497 included these children's parents, once they were isolated on São Tomé they could not claim family ties within a Jewish community. There is no record of any secret delegations sent to investigate their status on behalf of their parents or rabbinic authorities.³¹

In relation to the Portuguese crown, the children were ambiguously placed between captives and slaves. Since they had come with their parents from Castile in 1492 and were allowed under sufferance to remain in Portugal as transients for several months and then, because their families could not pay the necessary transit fees, they along with the adults were declared slaves of the crown. It was under this pretext that they were a short while later removed from the arms of their fathers and mothers, forcibly baptized, and sent to São Tomé. But given into the control of the Captains of the island, they could also be considered captives of the state, as later documents seem to imply. Their freedom of movement and commercial activity was restricted to the island itself. There is no indication that any of these New Christians sought to leave with various Dutch, French, or English raiders or slave-traders.

Ironically, from the start, the plan to ship over Jewish children to São Tomé was undertaken, as Garfield reports, because they would be a "people who could lend some stability to the society."³² Once baptized, they were to be transported to the island where "they would provide an immediate younger generation and possibly some social stability in a society that would otherwise consist of only the dregs of Lisbon".³³

Contrary to the evidence I have found elsewhere, Garfield writes that

The children so taken, mostly between two and ten years old, were not physically mistreated (according to Portuguese accounts) and given suitable in-

³¹There are some hints that among the friars, monks and priests sent to São Tomé there were Crypto-Jews, just as there were in any comparable population of religious officials in Portugal, Spain or their overseas territories; but again no indication of any meaningful contact between such *judaizantes* and the children.

³²Garfield, *A History of São Tomé*, p. 14.

³³Garfield, *A History of São Tomé*, p. 15.

struction in the new faith, were given to families, or at least to a man and woman who were to live together, and were sent with the rest of the colonists to the island.³⁴

But such official Portuguese accounts must be regarded with suspicion since there was a need to censor out and repress memories of how horrible the episode was, even for those living in an age when genuine sympathy for children or Jews or heretics was rare, to put it mildly. Nevertheless some of the contemporary reports of the forcible removal of the children from their parents include descriptions of great confusion, of some parents either slaying their children and then committing suicide themselves, or killing themselves once it was clear the children were to be separated. It is furthermore difficult to imagine such an event without cruelty and violence on the part of the soldiers and clergy involved.

One account of the forced conversion of 1493 reported by Frederick David Mocatta (1828-1905) can begin to give us a more realistic picture of what went on.³⁵ As a preliminary, to set the scene, there was the Expulsion from Spain in 1492, which was set in the mythical context of an epidemic, typically credited to the demonic work of Jews:

Unfortunately at the time of the expulsion the plague was raging in Castile, and the fugitives brought with them the disease, propagating it wherever they went, and not unnaturally causing their advent to be viewed with loathing and horror. This circumstance induced King John to hasten their departure from Portugal...

Though the King may have thought he was generous in supplying ship passage to those who could afford it, the realities were not so liberal:

...but such was the temper of captains and sailors they subjected the Jews to the hardest possible conditions; they plundered them of their goods and valuables even to their very clothes, and landed them naked and bare of everything on barren points of the African coast, leaving them to die of starvation or to be sold into slavery to the Moors. Nor was this all...

And here we come to the specific incident in 1493 that sets off the traumatic history of the Children of São Tomé:

...the King wrested from their parents all children between the ages of three and ten of these Jewish immigrants who from poverty or otherwise had omitted to pay the capitation-tax on entering, or who were forced to remain in Portugal, and had them transported to the newly discovered island of St. Thomas, which then swarmed with alligators and other beasts of prey, to be brought up as Christians.³⁶

A clearer picture of what happened in the mass conversion of Jews in 1497, which also used children to blackmail their parents into baptism, may correct the softened

³⁴Garfield, *A History of São Tomé*, pp. 15-16.

³⁵Frederick David Mocatta, *The Jews of Spain and Portugal and the Inquisition*, trans., David Bartin (New York: Cooper Square, 1973 [1933]; original Spanish, ed. 1877.

³⁶Mocatta, *The Jews of Spain and Portugal*, p. 50.

version Garfield gives above. This account will also set off by contrast the particular cruelties the children suffered. For in 1497, as at other times, the King decided.

That all the children under fourteen of those who had chosen exile [in Portugal] rather than conversion [in Spain] should be forcibly taken from their parents, and being distributed through the whole country, should be handed over to persons, who should bring them up in the Christian faith. This barbarous edict was to be carried out at the approaching Feast of Passover, which all Jews celebrate together in family groups.³⁷

Of course, Passover or *Pesach* celebrates the liberation of the Children of Israel from Egyptian slavery, collectively and as though each individual in each generation had participated, so that the King's orders here, as so often with persecutors of the Jews, deliberately turned the action into a counter-mythical trauma, thus inventing a new midrashic dimension to the original mythical text.

And how did the Jews respond to this general order, being given some warning, unlike the parents and children caught up five years before? According to Mocatta,

The state of desperation and agony into which the Jews were plunged is hardly to be imagined. Multitudes of children were hidden away by their parents, and many were concealed by the more merciful among the Christians, but all these were diligently sought out, dragged forth, and forced to the font. While many instances occurred in which maddened fathers and mothers first destroyed their offspring with their own hands, and then committed suicide.³⁸

When this first wave of terror against 20,000 Jews was accomplished, the Portuguese government decided on a further action:

A fresh edict now went forth that all children between fourteen and twenty should also be taken from their parents and baptized, and multitudes were dragged forcibly by their hair and by their arms into the churches, and compelled to receive the waters of baptism, together with new names, being afterwards given over to those who undertook to instruct them in the Catholic faith. Next the parents themselves were seized, and were offered to have their children restored to them, if they would consent to be converted; in case of their refusal, they were to be placed in confinement for three days without food or drink... Resistance was, however, not to be tolerated, and it was therefore decreed that the same fate was to be meted out to the adults and to the aged, as already been the portion of the younger members of the race of Israel.³⁹

Elsewhere in Portugal, the remaining Jews, learning what had happened in Lisbon, sought "in self-inflicted death the only refuge from apostasy, and thus, nominally, was Judaism extinguished in Portugal..."⁴⁰

We can only assume that the scenes in 1493 were as horrendous as those four years

³⁷ Mocatta, *The Jews of Spain and Portugal*, p. 51.

³⁸ Mocatta, *The Jews of Spain and Portugal*, p. 54.

³⁹ Mocatta, *The Jews of Spain and Portugal*, pp. 54-55.

⁴⁰ Mocatta, *The Jews of Spain and Portugal*, p. 56.

later, if not more so because this involved the children of the parents who had come from Spain just a few months earlier and had been subject to humiliations and enslavement on top of all the trauma already experienced in Castile during the period leading up to the Expulsion. Contrary to what Garfield infers from the evidence, any teaching of the catechism in Portugal before departure would have only been perfunctory and carried out in the midst of panic, fear and confusion. The families or men and women with whom the children were to “live together” seem none other than the convicted felons, prostitutes, and riffraff swept off the streets for the transportation to São Tomé; they were hardly settled families, and most unlikely pious or educated individuals. These so-called “colonists” were slaves and soldiers, not voluntary settlers eager to start a new life. They would have been cruel and superstitious and products themselves of abusive and neglected childhoods—not good parenting material by any means.

The role of the Catholic Church in all this is also ambiguous, if not equivocal, since the ecclesiastical control usually given to such Jewish child-converts was inoperative or merely nominal on the island. As we indicated, there is no evidence that the newly converted children were fostered out to respectable Catholic families or sent to monasteries or convents for care and education. From the mass conversion of all Jews in Portugal in 1496—both the small local communities and the recent refugees from Castile—to the middle of the next century, there was no Inquisition established in the realm, and former Jews were tacitly allowed to live as Crypto-Jews. On several occasions, the crown also permitted emigration; but more often forbade New Christians to depart. As *conversos*, however forcefully this identity was imposed, these traumatized children would be considered to be part of the spiritual family of Christ. Two obstacles to this family feeling were at work in the Iberian world, perhaps less strongly at first in Portugal than in Spain. On the one hand, at a psychological level, there was no reinforcement of the children’s membership in the Christian community’ emotionally and intellectually, they were not permitted to feel at one with their co-religionists. Though baptized in Lisbon before they were exiled, in São Tomé they were not instructed in their new faith and had little opportunity to view their new Christian brothers and sisters as other than the transported criminals, prostitutes and other *degradados* who were shipped out with them to settle the new African colony.⁴¹ On the other hand, there is that persistent optimistic argument that the children were each assigned a curate when they arrived on São Tomé and that church schools were established to train the youngsters in their new religion.⁴²

The argument against this has to do, on the one hand, with the notorious failure of the first generations of clerics sent to the island to focus on the establishment of a functioning ecclesiastical structure; the priests and friars were charged many times with neglecting pastoral duties and engaging in the slave trade, if not actually spending more time in the Congo and elsewhere on the African continent than on São Tomé. Because of this neglect and abuse, the children would long for parental care and love, for a mother’s warmth, a father’s guidance, but they had been traumatized by the voyage out, the diseases that killed their siblings, relatives and friends in great numbers, by

⁴¹ John Rove, “Commentary Preface” to Robert Garfield, *A History of São Tomé Island, 1470-1685: The Key to Guínea* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992) p. v.

⁴² Liba, “São Tomé, 1493”.

the unfamiliarity of the language and culture into which they were placed as slaves and captives. Here is where we put together two kinds of discourse: first, the record of violent, cruel and rebellious behaviour assigned to the colony as a whole at a time when its character was still shaped by the founding arrival of the Jewish children; and second, the modern findings of clinical and field psychologists concerning the causes and consequences of childhood trauma. The results of our investigations are paradoxical. We find the story of these exiled and enslaved children extremely bleak and see no evidence of anything but cruelty and violence, with the only inferences being a breakdown or complete loss of traditional Jewish ethics and morality. Yet all this negativity notwithstanding, there remains the probability that at the time of Dutch rule in Brazil in the mid-seventeenth century, another generation after the New Christian descendants of the Children of São Tomé, that they were among those who returned to Judaism.

How could this have come about? The few clerics who survived the journey to the island and the unhealthy climate seem to have been no better morally, and were more concerned with private slave-trading deals on the mainland than with pastoral care amongst their congregation. It took at least twenty-five years for the first bishop to be persuaded to take up residence on the island.⁴³ The personality of these clerics also fits in the pattern of sexual molesters, sadists, and other deviants likely to exacerbate the already psychotic behaviour of the founding members of São Tomé society. Meanwhile, in addition to the malaria endemic to the tropical island, it is likely that the first great plague of syphilis which “swept over Europe in 1494-95”⁴⁴ made its way to São Tomé. These phenomena become the monsters in a collective memory of those Jews who learned about what had happened to these children either directly from the parents and other relatives on the docks in Lisbon in 1493 or subsequently from New Christian visitors to the island – merchants, ecclesiastics, and government officials.

Something else must have happened in addition to the breakdown of Jewish cultural identity and loss of conscious connections to the traditional past of their families, if those repressed and concealed images we see in the writings of Jewish memorialists trying to integrate the tragedy of the children into their apocalyptic and messianic vision of Sephardic history were to surface eventually. If the boys and girls did not receive attention from the Catholic clergy meant to nurture and educate, the counterforce would have had to come from the *degradados*, male and female. These rejects of Portuguese society, rounded up from the streets of Lisbon, were the kind of people, with prior criminal records and clear signs of violent behaviour, were, however, most likely to engage in extreme sadistic abuse.⁴⁵ Any positive attention would have run against the grain of their anti-Jewish prejudices and their own abused backgrounds, and would likely have articulated itself, if at all, in sporadic acts of sentimentality rather than organized or institutionalized nurturance. The closest scenario may be found in the folds of Fernando de Rojas’ *La Celestina*.⁴⁶ The author, a New Christian from Puebla de Montalbán, the so-called “city of Jews,” was one of the first generation of *conversos*,

⁴³ Rove, “Commentary Preface” p. v.

⁴⁴ Shell, *The End of Kinship*, p. 32.

⁴⁵ Jean M. Goodwin, “Human Vectors of Trauma: Illustrations for the Marquis de Sade” in Goodwin, *Recovering Childhood Trauma*, p. 104.

⁴⁶ José Faur, *In the Shadow of History: Jews and Conversos at the Dawn of Modernity* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992) Chapter 5 “Alone in ‘The Valley of Tears’: The Case of Fernando de Rojas”, pp. 71-86.

and in his novelistic drama, he sublimates his feelings of the transformations in his own life and those of his family and neighbours.⁴⁷ The play presents a witty, rough, comically realistic version of Spanish life in an unnamed Spanish city that is pervaded by the spirit of Crypto-Jewish sentiments, fears, anxieties, longings, and self-hatred. The procurer of the title, as well as the street people, pimps, servants, and middle-class dupes, all seem to show a strange kind of love that José Faur describes as demonic.

This love, grounded on the dark side of humanity, has transformed the world into something demonic and ghoulish...

This is certainly what the Jewish children sent into exile and slavery must have felt.

All but the youngest of these children would have begun their Jewish education before they were taken from their parents, as this was initiated at home at the age of three; and some indeed would have passed by the time they were five or six into intensive studies under their father or a *moreh* (teacher) in Hebrew language, exegesis of Torah and Talmud, and other “modern” subjects which were part of Sephardic Jewish culture. The oldest boys approaching or already at the age of *bar-mitzvah* at thirteen also would have participated in the rituals of synagogue, and some may have been apprenticed to various commercial trades or professions, such as medicine and law, or what their parents could have provided of these training processes in the crisis of the Expulsion and its immediate aftermath. The girls certainly would have received some instruction in domestic rituals and activities associated with cooking, house-keeping, and clothing manufacture, and some also would have helped out with family businesses, insofar as any of this were possible during those difficult months prior to their forced conversion. Certainly any of the male children over the age of five would have been able to read and write in Hebrew, as well as in Castilian or Portuguese.

They were doubly traumatized by what had occurred – frightened, angry, confused, distraught with grief – by the way they were manhandled by the Portuguese soldiers and priests and by the distraught crying and actions of their parents. In some instances, children who had been formally betrothed as infants were hastily given a rabbinical blessing equivalent under the circumstances to marriage. In other cases, small children would have been put under the care of adolescents from other families or neighbours. Aboard the crowded, smelly, disease-prone ships, it is likely that boys and girls banded together and tried to protect one another. Perhaps for the six hundred supposed survivors arriving in São Tomé it was possible to establish an *ad hoc* educational routine, rudimentary as it must have been, if not some kind of maintenance of covert Jewish ritual life. Obviously, it was extremely unlikely that they would have been allowed to bring any Hebrew books or ritual objects (such as *tallisim*, *tfillin*, or *mezuzahs*) with them, though they would no doubt have already picked up from their parents some of the essentials of crypto-Judaism which marked Marrano society in Spain since the late fourteenth century and became stronger towards the close of the next century. As children often do, of course, they may very well have been used to play-acting some of the rituals performed by their parents, and they may also have made small replicas of cult objects to use in their games, picking any materials available and creating Torah scrolls, wine cups, Sabbath candle holders and so forth in ways

⁴⁷ Faur, *In the Shadow of History*, p. 72.

that would not be recognizable to grown-up eyes, particularly the kind of adults they were in contact with on the island..

Isolation, of course, was extreme for this group of exiles, and the lack of adult Jewish supervision meant that they grew up distinct from the almost-organized communities of Marranos that developed in Portugal itself after 1497, while at the same time the absence of sustained and organized Christian alternative prevented there emerging a *converso* society similar to that in other Spanish and Portuguese territories. Surrounded by – and in many ways – permeated by a community of ignorant and crude criminals and thugs who, as Rove says, were “mesmerized by their own internal quarrels and rivalries”,⁴⁸ the group of children generated a distinctive kind of social identity, one that foreshadows acutely the distraught features of a more modern anxiety-ridden secular age.

The degraded persons who showed them any kindness, perverted and sporadic as it may have been, were like Roja’s vindictive and conniving procuress Celestina, “the personification of treachery and deceit”, according to Faur. Nevertheless, as this historian of *Converso Culture* points out,

In Hebrew ‘olam, “world”, stands not only for the physical world created by God, but also for the artificial world created by humankind... The misery generated by love, however, is not purposeless. It serves the principle laid down by the Hebrew Scripture of a divine, individual providence, whereby God visits upon his children, whereby God visits upon the children the sin of the fathers (Ex 20:5).⁴⁹

For Jews, the evil in the world comes not from the perverse will of the enemies of God and His chosen people, but from God as a punishment of the Jewish people themselves. The more horrible the affliction, then, the more assured the victims are of God’s paternal love and concern for them. Moreover, in kabbalistic terms, such as became prevalent in the years leading up to the Exile from Spain in 1492, the dark or evil side of the world, the *sitra acha*, was itself not something in Manichean opposition to God and the Law, but the other side of the world of light and spirit, a place – and a process – in which the lost sparks of divinely created energy were hidden. Pleberio, father of the young noblewoman duped and destroyed by Celestina in her love affair, admits that “when he was young he had indulged in the demonic dance of love” and so acknowledges that his daughter’s death is attributable to his own sins. “I accuse the world,” he says, speaking of the institutions created by the other dark side of humanity, “because it created me within itself.”⁵⁰ In other words, when the Jewish children interacted with the *degradados*, they encountered those aspects of Jewish culture which had been absorbed by the common folk as part of their hatred of New Christians – whom they called Marranos, dirty little pigs – as well as the skittish, sentimental displays of love they occasionally felt for these lonely boys and girls. The youngsters would also have received the frightening mixture of abuse and love, neglect and care in a sense that fit within the very Jewish notion of how the world (*‘olam*) was at once the “good” creation of God and the “bad” receptacle for the fragments of the other side.

⁴⁸ Rove, “Commentary Preface” p. v.

⁴⁹ Faur, *In the Shadow of History*, p. 81.

⁵⁰ Cited in translation by Faur, *In the Shadow of History*, p. 81.

On the other hand, throughout the history of São Tomé these original founders/founding child-settlers were seen by their neighbors and the agents of Crown and Church as distinct and treated with suspicion as New Christians, not as ordinary Old Christians. As *conversos*, their tainted Jewish blood could never be eradicated and they therefore always posed a quasi-physiological threat to the community.⁵¹ In its most virulent form, this racial myth denied humanity to the *Marranos*.⁵² Though some of their descendants became wealthy and influential plantation-owners on the island, both the colonial government and the ecclesiastical leaders could at best offer them temporary tolerance. Thus, despite forced marriages to black slaves from the mainland and probable miscegenation amongst different elements of the European population, the Jewish children of São Tomé saw themselves and were considered to be a group apart.⁵³ Their sense of being New Christian descendants of Jewish founders could therefore, despite the *mestizo* quality of their race or ethnicity, be at once a source of pride and a stigma of shame.

Conclusion

Of any of this we cannot be sure. Nor can we understand the extremes of guilt and rage undergone by the children in their first years after capture and conversion. The legend of the reptiles that devoured many belongs to the chroniclers and eulogizers of their fate, and is based on rumours of the lizards that once were present – most likely salt-water crocodiles or *dongas*, now extinct. There were also poisonous snakes, some as long as two metres, which may still be found in São Tomé. Images of these monsters would meld with the mythical beasts of Hebrew tradition in the imaginations of distraught parents, angry Jewish leaders, and later writers seeking to comprehend the enormity of the crime committed against the Jews through this violence against innocent children. The medieval folklore of dragons and other fabulous creatures would also play their part in forming powerful mental pictures of the suffering of these children, the grief of their parents, and the loss and humiliation experienced by the Jewish community as a whole. Despite what Rabbi Sacks says about the inevitability of a radical and almost irreversible break between the generations should Jewish education cease and children grow up divorced from all contact with rabbinical community life,⁵⁴ our point is twofold about the break caused by the trauma of 1493 and its sequels on São Tomé. First, the lack of any meaningful alternative education in Catholicism given to the children before their departure from Lisbon or on their arrival on the island meant that efforts by older brothers and sisters to continue a form of Jewish education could ensure a basic continuity of identity. Second, the trauma itself would create the kinds of somatic memories that define Jewish experience, what Wachtel calls *la foi du souvenir*, which is, in this instance, on the surface manifest in all the deficits and dysfunctional behaviours and attitudes associated with abused and neglected child-victims in post traumatic stress syndrome, and, as evidenced by their supposed return to rabbinical orthodoxy a century and a half later in Dutch Brazil, in concealed and distorted memory-images of traditional Jewish suffering, persecution and exile.

⁵¹ On the racial myth of *sangre pura*, pure Christian blood, see Marc Shell, "Marranos (Pigs), or from Coexistence to toleration" *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1991), 311-212.

⁵² Shell "Marranos (Pigs)", 321.

⁵³ Garfield, *A History of São Tomé*, p. 16.

⁵⁴ Sacks, "Education, Education, Education" 3.