

# *The K.F. Stone Weekly*

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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## THINKING CAN BE NOTHING SHORT OF MIRACULOUS

*I don't know about you, but I'm suffering from a bit of partisan political fatigue. There's a lot of sound and fury out there signifying God knows what. And so, taking a bit of a breather, this week I present a story from another era known for its . . . well, debates and unreasonableness. For decades, I have been collecting, translating, telling and rewriting tales, fables and legends from a lot of different sources. This week, a tale with an ending that will demand the use of a bit of grey matter. To the best of my knowledge, this tale - which definitely carries a message for moderns - is historically accurate . . .*

Once upon a time, during the Spanish Inquisition, it was the custom of the king to hold debates between learned rabbis and bishops of the Catholic Church. The purpose of these debates - known as disputations - was for the bishops of the church to prove that



Judaism was and is an inferior, unworthy religion. Further, the king would command (under pain of death) that all the Jews of wherever the disputation was being held, must, under penalty of death, attend.

In this way, the king reasoned, the entire Jewish community would see that one religion - Catholicism - was superior to the other. He believed that seeing this, the Jews would either willingly change religions or die. And in either case, so the

king reasoned, he and his church would turn out the winner.

Turns out that the bishops would always best the rabbis in debate - even if the rabbis were smarter or more learned. How could this be? Simple. The king guaranteed the

outcome by threatening the rabbis with agonizing, tortuous death should they actually win! In other words, the rabbis would always enter the disputation knowing even before a single word had been uttered, a single question posed, what the outcome would be: lose or be killed.

Once, the king brought his traveling disputation to the great city of Seville, where an enormous number of Jews lived. On the day of the disputation, all the Jews of Seville, as commanded, gathered in the great synagogue. What made this disputation different was that the king himself was in attendance, along with a select group of his closest friends – Spanish lords and ladies. Moments before the disputation began, the rabbi of Seville was told that should he win the debate, he would die an agonizing, tortuous death. Hearing this, the rabbi determined that in order to be true to God, his religion, his fellow Jews and himself, he had to win the disputation.

And so the debate began. For each negative point the bishop raised about the Jewish faith, the rabbi had a brilliant answer. For every question the rabbi raised about the bishop's faith, the bishop had no response.

"It is not that one religion is better than the other," the rabbi said. "Rather, Judaism is perfect for Jews, and Catholicism is perfect for Catholics." "Furthermore," the rabbi said, turning his back on the bishop and looking directly at the king, "No one has the right to command another person to adopt a particular religion or way of life. This is a matter between God and the individual."

In the end, everyone assembled in the great synagogue – including the king and all his noble friends – knew that the rabbi had come out on top. The king was beside himself with anger – both at his bishop for losing the disputation, and the rabbi, for making a fool out of both his bishop and, so he thought, his religion.

Arising from his place of honor in the front row, the king bellowed: "Because of the grave insult you have given here today, I command that you, rabbi, and all the Jews of Seville, be put to death!"

The rabbi was shocked at the king's decree. Summoning his courage, he faced the king and said, "Your majesty, while I can perhaps understand your anger against me, I cannot fathom what you have against all these innocent men, women and children. If it be your will that I should die, so be it. I don't like that decree – in fact I loathe it – but I will nonetheless accept it. But for the love of God I beg you to spare the lives of the rest; to do otherwise would be both unjust and unfitting, coming as it does from a king of your stature and grandeur."

Continuing to fume the king pondered the rabbi's plea. While he pondered, all his noble friends looked his way, awaiting their royal patron's decision. After what

seemed an eternity (at least to the rabbi and the assembled Jews), the king announced, "I have made a decision. Whether you all shall live or all shall die is up to you and you alone, dear r!"

"What do you mean?" the rabbi asked.

"Simply stated," the king replied, "I shall take two pieces of parchment. On one, I shall write 'you all shall live.' On the other, I shall write 'you all shall die.' I will then fold and place both pieces in a small box. You will then select one. Whatever piece you select will determine your fate. Either you all shall live or you all shall die." The assembled Jews were dumbfounded; the noblemen merely amused. For them, the king's ploy was like a pleasant game.

The king then called for two pieces of parchment, a quill and a small bottle of ink. Once provided, the king proceeded to write – first on the one and then on the other. While he was so doing, the rabbi stared intently at the king's hand. Being a very learned man the rabbi could tell what the king was writing merely by watching the movement of the quill. A cold shiver went up the rabbi's spine when he realized that the king had written 'You all shall die' on both pieces of parchment! The king then placed the two pieces in a small box, which he then gave to a servant, who in turn held it out to the rabbi.

"Now choose rabbi!" the king said in a loud, threatening voice. The rabbi stood still, not moving a muscle.

'We have a grave problem here,' the rabbi thought to himself. 'It does not matter which piece of parchment I select. We all shall die. And to make matters worse, I cannot tell everyone what I know the king has done, because that would cause him even further anger. And who knows? Perhaps then he would not merely kill all of us; perhaps he would make matters worse by resorting to slow, painful torture. No, I must not make him out to be a liar in front of all his friends.'

"WELL?" the king shouted. His voice boomed like a clap of thunder throughout the synagogue.

"One moment, my lord," the rabbi said in a clear steady voice. "I am thinking."

"And what is there to think about?" the king asked.

"What is there to think about?" the rabbi asked. "Well, I am contemplating all of God's great gifts to man. If I am to meet my death – along with those of my family, friends and congregants, I want to leave this world in contemplation of the Holy One Praised Be He. Is that too much to ask?"

"I'm not asking you to run across the Pyrenees on your knees," the king taunted, "Merely to select one of two pieces of parchment. Be on with it."

The rabbi continued standing still. In his mind, he was going through the various prayers of praise that he had known since his extreme youth. Not only was he stalling for time – hoping for an answer that would stay the hand of fate – he was, as he said, honestly contemplating the glory of God. When he came to the pray: "Praised be you O Lord our God, ruler of the universe, who has given to the rooster the wisdom to discern between day and night," the rabbi knew he had found a way out of his horrible dilemma. . . .

'Thank you dear God for giving us a mind with which to think,' the rabbi said under his breath. 'It is incredible what the mind can do, given the necessity,' he thought. He then proceeded with great confidence. Placing his hand in the box, he selected one piece of parchment. But before the king could say a word, the rabbi put the parchment in his mouth and swallowed it.

"What in the world did you do that for?" the king asked, astonishment in his voice.

"Oh let us just say that I've always wanted to know what parchment tastes like," the rabbi responded. "Besides, what does it really matter in terms of our ultimate sentence of life or death? Obviously whichever parchment I have selected and swallowed, will become known to everyone once you read the parchment that remains. If the parchment in the box says 'You all shall live,' then I have obviously selected its opposite. But if the remaining parchment says 'You all shall die,' then everyone will know that I selected the piece that spares our lives." Saying these words, the rabbi stared intently at the king. He knew that the king would never reveal his treachery in front of all his friends – namely, that he had written 'You all shall die' on both pieces of parchment.

"If it please my lord the king," the rabbi said, "Please read to us what is on the remaining piece of parchment. In that way, we shall all know our fate." Because of the manner in which the rabbi spoke, all the Jews of Seville understood that somehow, a miracle had just been performed before their very eyes.

Looking at the rabbi with eyes like daggers, the king mechanically put his hand into the box, took out the piece of parchment, and handed it to his servant.

"READ!" the king trumpeted. He continued looking at the rabbi, but now his stare began to change from one of anger to one of grudging respect. The king knew that this rabbi was truly wise, and that his God had performed a miracle on behalf of all the Jews of Seville.

"You all shall die!" the servant read aloud. With those words, a feeling of relief and thankfulness went up from all the assembled Jews.

"So be it," the king said in a much softer voice. "The rabbi has done very well - very well indeed - and I am a man of my word." With that, the king and all his assembled friends got up to leave. Looking at the rabbi one last time, the king showed the bearded leader the slightest hint of a smile. He then nodded his head slightly to the rabbi and turned to leave the synagogue.

For generations to come, the Jews of Seville told the story of the great miracle performed that day. What no one ever knew, however, was that the miracle was really no miracle at all - just the result of a good mind doing some good quick thinking.

Yes, thinking can be nothing short of miraculous.

Makes one wish that more people in the public eye would try it . . . at least once.

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