

# Panel 14: From Expulsion to Citizenship

## "From Exile to Belonging"

In 1492, the Jews of Spain were expelled by royal decree. In 1497, Jews in Portugal, many of whom had recently fled from Spain, were forcibly converted to Christianity. These events reshaped Jewish history across the early modern world. Sephardic Jews dispersed across North Africa, Italy, the Ottoman Empire, Amsterdam, London, the Caribbean, and the Americas, building new communities in the aftermath of violence and loss. Across the Sephardic world, Jewish life endured through exile, secrecy, migration, memory, and adaptation. The history traced by this exhibition concludes with the recognition that the same communities shaped by expulsion became, over generations, among the architects of a republic premised on the principle that rights belong to citizens by law rather than by royal grace.

The expulsion from Spain was not only a moment of physical displacement; it became a constitutive historical memory that shaped Sephardic identity for centuries. Sephardic Jews carried with them the languages, customs, religious traditions, family networks, and memories of Iberia wherever they settled. In the Ottoman Empire, many found new opportunities to rebuild communal life; in North Africa, Italy, and Atlantic port cities, Sephardic families created networks of trade, learning, and religious continuity. The diaspora became both a response to persecution and a source of remarkable resilience. Exile scattered communities, but it also connected them across continents, creating the Atlantic infrastructure of trust and exchange that would prove significant in later centuries. The forced conversions in Portugal added another layer to this history. Many Portuguese Jews became New Christians under compulsion, a designation that subjected them to surveillance, discrimination, and the ongoing threat of Inquisitorial investigation. Some descendants of these converso families eventually returned openly to Judaism in places such as Amsterdam, Livorno, London, and the Caribbean. These communities developed sophisticated understandings of Jewish identity and civic survival, shaped by generations of navigating between public conformity and private faith.

By the time Sephardic Jews and their descendants entered North America, they carried this long history of displacement and rebuilding. Their presence in colonial and early republican America was small in number but historically significant. Sephardic Jews helped establish some

of the earliest Jewish communities in North America, participated in commerce, built synagogues, supported communal institutions, and gradually entered civic life. Their story challenges the assumption that early American history unfolded within a culturally or religiously homogeneous society. From the founding period onward, America was shaped by migrants, religious minorities, and communities whose histories extended far beyond the Atlantic coast. The contrast between expulsion and citizenship is central to understanding the Sephardic American experience. In Spain, Jews had been expelled by royal decree. In Portugal, they had been forced into religious conformity under pain of death. In the United States, a different political order slowly emerged, one grounded in constitutional law and the principle that religious identity should not determine civic rights. The federal Constitution's prohibition on religious tests for office and the First Amendment's protection of free exercise of religion represented a fundamental departure from the European traditions within which Sephardic history had been formed. This transformation was genuinely meaningful for Jewish Americans, even as it coexisted with persistent social prejudice and ongoing struggles for full equality.

The exhibition's many figures, among them Gershom Mendes Seixas, Francis Salvador, Haym Salomon, David Levy Yulee, Benjamin Cardozo, and Emma Lazarus, each represent different dimensions of the journey from expulsion to citizenship. They were merchants, soldiers, financiers, congregational leaders, jurists, politicians, and poets whose contributions were made in commercial houses and courtrooms, in synagogues and legislative chambers, and in the pages of published poetry. Together, they demonstrate that a community formed by exile could become, over generations, a community that helped shape the legal, cultural, and moral character of the republic that offered them refuge. The Ladino phrase *\*Del esilio al sivdadano\** (from exile to citizen) captures the essential movement of this history, and *\*La paz viene kon la justicia\** (peace comes with justice) reminds us that genuine belonging requires more than tolerance. It requires rights, dignity, and equal protection under law.