

INTRODUCTION

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Every family has its myths.

Stories passed from grandparent to grandchild, from generation to generation. Grainy photographs are exhumed from some forgotten long ago, pointed to with shaking fingers as if they, alone, are enough to prove the veracity of the teller and the told.

My family is no different. The story you are about to read is based on one that I uncovered, hidden in the shadows of my familial lore. It leads from me backward, into the obscurity of the 19th and 18th centuries (where memories grow dim and photos scarce) and from there, into medieval times, and the realm of ancestral myth. I cannot vouch for its veracity. But nor can I assure that it is the completely fictional invention of minds grown too dim to separate fact from fantasy.

My family name on my Father's Mother's side is Dworin—a name you will get to know well through the following tale. The first Dworins came to the United States from a *shtetl*—or little Jewish village—in Russia called *Mugalov Diberny*, a place now erased from maps and forgotten by history. They arrived in the United States in the late 19th century and promptly settled into their new life, with hundreds of thousands of other new Jewish Americans.

Like all new American families, they told tales from the old country. In the telling of their story, however, there were always lowered voices and furtive glances, even when surrounded by extended family at the Passover table.

The whispers spoke of creaking wooden doors and guttering candles. Footsteps on cobbled stones leading to secret knocks on *mosque* gates. Hushed passwords exchanged in the dead of night. Meetings with religious leaders from another creed: Imams, Sufis and hidden Muslim saints.

When I got older, I too heard the stories. A tale emerged, seen as if through a fog, something looming but indistinct. Over the years, the murmurs coalesced into an account of our family's true purpose: *our* work. Or obligation. Or curse.

Stories have sifted down through time of midnight meetings in hidden corners in Russia, Poland, far eastern Germany and other cold and distant places, far from the halls of European academe, but central to Jewish learning. And harbored in all of these northern locales were Jews speaking a hybrid language involving some, or much Spanish, and with their own vague family memories of a Sephardic past.

Sephardic Jews were those who lived in Spain and were evicted in 1492, by King Ferdinand. Their families often lived together in exile, and spoke “Ladino,” a Spanish-Jewish language that even today is articulated by a few with Iberian heritage in Turkey, Morocco and Israel.

I myself conversed with another Sephardic Jew who still spoke this medieval language—with myself speaking modern Spanish and he in Ladino. The languages were close enough for us to converse freely. It was with the Chief Rabbi of Turkey, during a meeting with him in October 2010. I cannot get into the circumstances of our meeting or the specifics of what was said, but suffice it to say that we were able to converse across the centuries, using the Spanish language that each of us spoke in our own manner.

On my Mother’s side of the family, stories were told as well. As I learned much later, this made perfect sense, as one of the basic rules of this tale was that all members of a chosen family involved in this Covenant would be able to trace their family lines back to a specific time and place: a small town named *Cáceres* in western Spain, in the late 15th century.

My Mother told how her Grandmother would assure that she (and all of her kin) were descended from the great Eagle of the Synagogue, Moses Maimonides. This can be verified in print, as it is a family anecdote that the publisher of my first book, (*Shalom/Salaam: A Story of a Mystical Fraternity*, Fons Vitae, Louisville, KY, 2010), a non-fiction exploration of the interrelationship of medieval Jewish and Islamic mysticism, included in the publication. She assured that family memories of specific lineage are correct more often than one might think. You can find the reference to this pedigree on page 62 of that book.

The great Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides (d. 1204 C.E.) also happens to be at the center of this hidden tale. A man deeply committed to understanding Islam, which profoundly influenced his Jewish spiritual thought, Maimonides actually converted to that religion for nearly a decade in the middle of his life (according to Joel Kraemer in *Maimonides: The Life and World of One of Civilization’s Greatest Minds*, Doubleday Religion, 2010).

And according to the whispers around my family's Passover table, it was Moses Maimonides who discovered a spiritual deficit between Jews and Muslims, dating to the Biblical story of Isaac and Ishmael (Genesis 21). It was he who set in motion the events that would heal this ancient Abrahamic breach, and lead to a new era of peace between Jews and Muslims.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. This story must unfold in its own time.

There will undoubtedly be those in my family who will gasp, certain that by unveiling this tale to the general public, I am putting the age-old Covenant in danger. Nothing threatens a covenant more than its disclosure, they will assure.

Additionally, there are those still alive who might be implicated in the tale, and consider this unveiling as a threat to their persons.

I have made certain to hide their identity well, however, and changed just enough of the specifics of this tale so that any attempt to trace the story from this book into the world will be fruitless.

Lastly, and though there are those who would disagree, I am convinced that this Covenant is complete. While the current situation in the Middle East would belie this belief, when spiritual energy acts on the world of being and striving, sometimes its effects are difficult to perceive, or a long-time in becoming. And as this Covenant is, I consider, fulfilled, it can no longer be put in jeopardy by its revelation.

The time has now come to disclose it to the world.