

## Columbus and the Synagogue – any resemblance?

The discovery on October 12, 1492, of the New World was, perhaps, the greatest single geographical achievement of Europe, as Columbus – perhaps the greatest naval navigator that ever lived – blazed open a new pathway from the Old World to the New and changed life forever on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean by discovering new lands that were unknown to Europe. As he set to sail in early August 1492 the Spanish crown promised to make him viceroy (governor) of any new lands he might acquire. And they offered him 10 percent of all the wealth that he would bring to Spain. Still, despite his incredible success on his first expedition Columbus' hopes of finding "great mines of gold and other metals" failed to materialize, and he would soon meet disfavor by the Crown and other nemeses.

Failure to deliver what he had promised to Ferdinand and Isabella and reports of chaotic conditions in the colonies led to the downfall of Columbus. Upon arriving back in Spain in 1500, Columbus was arrested for mismanagement; accused of barbaric acts and murder, and he lost all his acquired assets and titles. Sick, disappointed, and ignored, and **disappointed that he had not found a new route to the Far East** he died in Spain in 1506.

In retrospect, what does Columbus have to do with the synagogue, not only ours but many a synagogue worldwide? On the High Holy Days our synagogue reaches a crescendo with a full capacity; many children skip school to attend services alongside the adults who do not go to work in order to “work” for God through intensive, if not uncharacteristically longer-than-the-standard services beautified by the trained and inspiring voice of a cantor (hazan), and co-led by many of our enthusiastic members, especially (for us this year) young teenagers, and “assistant” shofar blowers accompanied by “underage” fellow blasters (as we witnessed to our delight especially at the conclusion of Yom Kippur)...

It was hard for the many who attended and participated in this climactic season of the synagogue not to feel a true spiritual uplifting and entertain hopes for new and brighter altitudes awaiting us and the synagogue in this New Year. Yet, prior experience with the “revolving door syndrome” (*in* on Rosh Hashanah, *out* on Yom Kippur) might suggest otherwise. We recall what happened to Columbus and how he fell off so quickly from the glory of the promise that he represented **before and right after his first discovery to the failures and disgrace that followed when his bosses, the King and Queen of Spain, lost interest in his service to them.** The Talmud calls such a phenomenon a fall “From a high roof to a deep pit”...

In this New Year with our recommitments and refreshed resolve to reach new personal and communal spiritual and religious heights, let us use our observance of Columbus Day (Oct. 8) to try and spare our synagogue (and its various activities ) from the like of the fall from grace as experienced in the life of **Christopher Columbus...**

A postscript (or the story behind the story):

Contrary to the belief that he sought personal wealth and advancement, Columbus' true motivation for his historic voyages was his foremost dream to find a western route to the Orient not *only* to obtain vast sums of gold for the Spanish Crown but *primarily* to help fund a new crusade to **wrest** Jerusalem from the Ottoman Muslims—a goal that sustained him until the day he died -- in order to re-open Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem that was closed off after the new occupiers of Jerusalem barred Christians from reaching the Holy City. May we too be reminded of Jerusalem – even on Columbus Day as well -- and re-fuel our (dormant?) desire to (re)visit Jerusalem D.C. (David's Capital), in fulfillment of **what we proclaimed** at the closing of Yom Kippur: *La-shanah ha-ba-ah birushalaim*, Next Year in Jerusalem.