

Bible and the Headlines: Columbus Day

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Every national holiday is accompanied by corresponding headlines. Columbus Day, also known as Native Peoples Day, due to its contested narrative, tends to attract stories that dispute conventional wisdom. This year's commemoration produced stories that contained an interesting twist on a 500-year-old piece of history.

On October 13th the New York Times reported, "Christopher Columbus Was Secretly Jewish." The article describes a documentary just released in Spain which asserted Columbus' DNA points to non-Italian forbears. The lead researcher declared, "Both in the 'Y' chromosome and in the mitochondrial chromosome . . . there are traits compatible with Jewish origins." The team believed Columbus' ancestors were Jewish silk merchants from Valencia, but because of the Spanish royal family's persecution of Jews, Columbus kept his faith concealed.

Across the pond, the Times headline of October 14th was, "Christopher Columbus Is Evil Now — So Suddenly He's Jewish." The op-ed notes the 500-year adulation of Columbus has recently turned to scorn. The writer renders a contemporary description of the explorer, "A greedy, ambitious, murderous racist colonial bastard. And then yesterday, finally, he became a Jew." The piece ends with the author asking his (apparently non-Jewish) readers, "Which other formerly revered figures who have gone a bit sour for you are you going to tell us were Hebrew fifth columnists all along?"

On October 1st, Mexico installed its first woman President, Claudia Sheinbaum. It is no secret that President Sheinbaum is Jewish, and thus is a first for Mexico in this category too. None of us will be alive in 500 years to see how President Sheinbaum's reputation will weather the vicissitudes of public opinion, but the October 13th Reuter's article, "Columbus Holiday in Latin America Revives Centuries-Old Historical Debate" reveals President Sheinbaum's verdict on Christopher Columbus. The article notes, "In 2020 when she was Mexico City mayor, Sheinbaum ordered the removal of a statue of Columbus that had adorned the capital's most prominent avenue since 1877." As mayor, Ms. Sheinbaum petitioned the king of Spain to apologize for Spain's legacy in the Americas.

Some of the elements in this week's headlines are found in the book of Esther. There is someone who travelled in royal circles with a hidden Jewish identity: Esther was a Jewish girl who was instructed never reveal her religion to the court (Est 2:10 & 2:20). There is rampant antisemitism: The top advisor to the king wants to annihilate all the kingdom's Jewish subjects (Est 3:6). There is a time when it was not safe to be Jewish: The king signed a law that set the day when all Jews in the kingdom would be slaughtered (Est 3:13). And while there is not a Jewish woman as President, there is a Jewish queen who saved her people (Est 8:5-8).

Christopher Columbus' legacy is still in flux. Not everyone is convinced he is either a hero or a villain. The announcement of his Jewish ancestry is also not accepted in all quarters. In another 500 years his achievements and his DNA might be too distant to remember. The same cannot be said for Esther. Her heroics happened over 2,500 years ago. Not only is she honored in the pages of the Bible, but also in the annual Jewish holiday Purim. After all this time, it is safe to say her legacy is secure.