

## ***Converso* Refugee Travel in the Treatises of Saul Levi Mortera (c. 1590-1660)**

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### **1. Introduction**

Medieval travel typically involved religious pilgrimage, and guidebooks to shrines and literary narratives are the major sources of information on medieval travel experiences. Improvements to land and water transportation contributed to a “proliferation of movement” through Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when depictions of travel by non-pilgrims to places other than religious shrines became commonplace in diaries and almanacs (Williamson Ambrose, 425). Included among this European “proliferation of movement” were tens of thousands of *conversos*, that is, descendants of Spanish and Portuguese forced converts from Judaism to Catholicism. Although baptized Catholics, these *conversos* practiced Jewish traditions in secret (crypto-Judaism) to avoid imprisonment or execution by the Inquisition, and some chose to seek refuge in tolerant lands. Amsterdam became an attractive destination for refugee *conversos* after the signing in 1579 of the Union of Utrecht, which proclaimed that, in the newly united northern provinces of the Netherlands, “each person shall remain free in his religion and that no one shall be investigated or persecuted because of his religion” (Union of Utrecht, section XIII). Motivated by this tolerance, several *converso* families settled in Amsterdam during the 1590s. The community grew and formed the Beth Jacob synagogue in 1603, although it lacked a spiritual leader who could instruct them in Jewish practices.

This religious indoctrination would occur under the auspices of Saul Levi Mortera (sometimes spelled Morteira), a Jew of German (non-*converso*) origins who became Beth Jacob’s rabbi in 1619. When Amsterdam’s three congregations merged to form the Talmud Torah synagogue in 1639, Mortera was named chief rabbi, a position that he held until his death in 1660. A number of Mortera’s congregants were reluctant to replace their individualized and Catholicized crypto-Jewish practices with the obligation to follow communal norms policed by the rabbinate. In his role as spiritual leader, Mortera oversaw a program of rejudaization to persuade his congregants to observe rabbinic norms. In a wider context, Mortera endeavored to reach *conversos* throughout Europe. To achieve these goals, Mortera taught classes on rabbinic Judaism and composed polemical works to encourage *conversos* abroad to escape to Amsterdam and be rejudaized.

### **2. Mortera’s Refugee Path to Amsterdam**

Mortera was born in the 1590s to a family of German origin in the Venetian ghetto, where his maternal grandfather, Judah Katzenellenbogen (b. 1521-d. 1597), served as chief rabbi. Mortera followed in his grandfather’s footsteps and his rise to the position of chief rabbi in Amsterdam involved an experience that united his congregants, namely, flight to escape religious persecution. Mortera began on this path after he met his patron, Elijah Montalto (b. 1567-d. 1616), a Portuguese physician who was himself a *converso* refugee. In the early 1600s, Montalto fled from Lisbon to Leghorn, Paris, Pisa and Venice in search of “the religious freedom that he craved” (Cooperman, 473). After arriving in Venice around 1610, Montalto quickly developed a friendship with Mortera.

In 1612, Montalto was named a royal physician at the Parisian court, where Mortera served as Montalto’s spiritual advisor amidst growing anti-Semitism. Although Jews were permitted to

reside in the territories of Alsace-Lorraine, French intolerance surfaced in the form of a royal edict issued in 1615 that prohibited contact between Christians and Jews. When Montalto died in 1616, Jewish burials were prohibited in France, and Mortera accompanied his body for burial at the closest Jewish cemetery, which was located 10 km from Amsterdam.

### 3. Parallels between Maimonides and Mortera involving Flight from Persecution

By the time he arrived in Amsterdam, Mortera had acquired an international renown that was recognized in a French decree from 1617, in which Mortera is identified as a Jew who is “cognoist pour en sçavoir” (known for his wisdom).<sup>1</sup> Mortera was undoubtedly well versed in rabbinic doctrines concerning a particular form of travel, namely, flight from religious persecution. One such doctrine traces its origins to the onset of anti-Jewish sentiment in southern Spain after its conquest by the Almohads in 1146. In contrast to Almoravid rulers who permitted Christians and Jews to live within their realms, the Almohads mandated conversion to Islam under pain of death or exile. While many Jews fled, many Jews chose conversion, an act that was condemned in a rabbinic responsum enlisting as an apostate “any Jew who publicly uttered the Moslem confession, although secretly performing all of Jewish precepts,” and which declared that “the only course for a steadfast Jew was not to submit to compulsion in any form but accept martyrdom” (Stitskin, 104).

A reply to this responsum, the “Letter of Apostasy” (or “Iggereth ha-Shemad”), was composed by Maimonides around 1160.<sup>2</sup> Writing from the Maghreb after he and his family had escaped Almohad persecution in Córdoba, Maimonides takes issue with the responsum and proclaims that Jews can remain within the faith after being forcibly converted to Islam by “practicing the six hundred and thirteen [Jewish] precepts in secret” (trans. by Stitskin, 107). Maimonides then expands his definition of what constitutes sincere Judaism among forced converts: “Notwithstanding the fact that we may be forced to commit many serious transgressions such as the desecration of some crucial laws of the Sabbath, this should not preclude the possibility of observing less significant laws, such as carrying forbidden articles on the Sabbath” (trans. by Stitskin, 108). Maimonides’ classification as sincere Jews of converts who fail to secretly observe all the Jewish precepts invites parallels to the skeletal form of Judaism practiced by crypto-Jewish *conversos* and it is logical to speculate that Mortera would have looked to the “Letter of Apostasy” for insight into how to approach the spirituality of his congregants.

One topic discussed by Maimonides in which Mortera may have found inspiration is the importance for converts of committing themselves to the practice of Judaism after fleeing from intolerance. In this spirit, Maimonides advises forced converts to seek refuge in lands where they can practice Judaism openly: “the crucial advice I wish to give to those and to those I admire and to those who seek my opinion is to leave those places of hostility and go to a location where one could fulfill the Law without compulsion and fear” (trans. by Stitskin, 108). Moreover, Maimonides obligates converts as well as Jews to join “Jewish communities [...] that are] superior [...] in the promotion of good deeds, well established customs and strict observance of the *mitzvot*” (trans. by Stitskin, 108). Further on, Maimonides establishes that it is incumbent on converts and Jews “to make every effort, no matter at what peril, to leave a hostile, non-Jewish place where religious practices cannot be observed properly and move to a more favorable location” (trans. by Stitskin, 109).

<sup>1</sup> A partial transcription of the decree can be found in Mortera (1988, xliii).

<sup>2</sup> The final sections of the “Letter of Apostasy” have been translated into English by Stitskin (107-11).

Mortera knew well the work of Maimonides, whom he often quoted “approvingly in his sermons” (Saperstein, 212), and Maimonides’ call for converts and Jews to seek refuge in tolerant lands finds parallels in Mortera’s works. Around 1640, Mortera composed *Preguntas que hizo un clérigo de Ruan de Francia a las quales respondió el exelente, y eminentíssimo señor hakham Saul Levy Mortera* (Questions by a Christian cleric from Rouen, France, and Answers by the Excellent and Eminent Rabbi Saul Levi Mortera).<sup>3</sup> In *Preguntas*, Mortera responds to 23 questions concerning Jewish doctrines posed by an unidentified cleric from Rouen, France. Rouen was one of several French cities that possessed a community of crypto-Jewish *conversos*, and in his responses Mortera functions as an apologist for rabbinic Judaism to answer the cleric and also to spread his message of rejudaization.<sup>4</sup>

In this spirit, Mortera crafts his response to question 21—“Can those Jews still be saved who have not been circumcised nor observed the law in the lands where it was not permitted, and who have sincerely practiced Christianity, worshipping idols, attending mass, and publicly denying the Judaism they kept in their hearts?”<sup>5</sup>—to encourage *converso* refugee flight in terms that recall Maimonides. Mortera replies that there are two groups of uncircumcised Jews, or potential refugee *conversos*, to whom his answer applies. Mortera’s second group includes *conversos* such as those of Rouen, to whom “departure is not prohibited.”<sup>6</sup> These *conversos*, as Mortera declares, “can freely go with no impediment to wherever they want.”<sup>7</sup> Although they are able to go to places such as Amsterdam where they can practice Judaism openly, Mortera condemns these *conversos* for not fleeing and for choosing wealth over faith: “These people are completely detested by the Lord, and their souls are lost because they are truly worshippers of gold.”<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, Mortera expresses greater hope for refugee travel among members of the first group, which includes *conversos* who reside

in the Kingdoms where not only is it forbidden to observe the law, but it is also forbidden to leave. These are guilty before God of not trying to leave for free ports, even by risking their lives. For God expressly commands us, as it is written [in Deuteronomy 6:5]: “and thou shalt love Jehovah thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” From this we see that we must leave all things in order to love God.<sup>9</sup>

In making a clear allusion to *conversos* in Spain and Portugal by speaking to *conversos* “in the Kingdoms” where Judaism is prohibited, Mortera finds a biblical justification for flight from

<sup>3</sup> All translations into English from Mortera’s Spanish and Portuguese polemical works are my own.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the crypto-Jewish community of Rouen, see Wilke.

<sup>5</sup> “Si se pueden salvar los judíos que no se circuncidan, ni guardan la Ley en las tierras donde no se les permite, haziendo antes contra ella, y contra sus conçencias, confesando en todo el xptianismo, adorando ymágenes, oyendo missas, y negando ser judíos siéndolo en su corazón” (Mortera, *Preguntas*, 104v-105r). I have added modern diacritical marks to all Spanish and Portuguese quotations from Mortera’s works.

<sup>6</sup> “no se les impide la salida” (Mortera, *Preguntas*, 105v).

<sup>7</sup> “y libremente sin ningún impedimiento, pueden, y a dónde mejor les paresca” (Mortera, *Preguntas*, 105v).

<sup>8</sup> “y estos tales son totalmente abominados del Señor, y aparejados para perdición por que son verdaderamente adoradores del oro” (Mortera, *Preguntas*, 105v).

<sup>9</sup> “en los Reynos donde no solamente se le impide la observación de la Ley, más aún se les çierran los puertos, impidiéndoles la salida, estos tales, son culpados delante del Señor, pues no procuran, aun que con riesgo de su vida, salir a puertos libres, porque expresamente manda el Señor: ‘y amarás al Señor tu Dios, con todo tu corazón, con toda tu alma y con todo tu haver,’ donde se ve que todas las cosas devemos de dexar por el amor Divino” (Mortera, *Preguntas*, 105r).

persecution. Moreover, his conclusion that *conversos* “must leave all things in order to love God” at the risk of life itself, to reach “free ports,” echoes the instructions by Maimonides for Jews “to make every effort, no matter at what peril, to leave a hostile, non-Jewish place where religious practices cannot be observed properly and move to a more favorable location.”

#### 4. A Fictional Depiction of *Converso* Refugee Travel

Around 1650, Mortera composed a fictional dialog to motivate *conversos* to make such a move to Amsterdam, *Obstáculos y oposiciones contra la religión xptiana en Ámsterdam*, which has been translated into English as *Arguments against the Christian Religion in Amsterdam*. The dialog in *Obstáculos* takes place in 1616 between two refugee *conversos* as they travel in western France along the Loire River from Orléans to the port city of Nantes. The two *conversos* have a fortuitous encounter the night before their river boat voyage at a *posada* in the French city Orléans. One *converso*, called “friend,” was born in either Portugal or Spain before fleeing to Amsterdam, where he lives openly as a Jew and to where he is returning via Orléans. The other *converso*, called “pilgrim,” was born in Portugal, where he was raised a Catholic and to where he is returning after a sojourn in Rome.

The friend invites the pilgrim to sleep on an extra bed in his room at the *posada*. As he explains to the friend in their shared room, the pilgrim needs transportation to Portugal, where he is returning after spending four years in Rome attempting to enter the Jesuit order. While in Rome, the pilgrim witnesses *converso* refugee travel through the Mediterranean, which he relates to the friend:

“I’m impressed,” replied the pilgrim, “by the fact that there are so many [*conversos*] in these lands. When I was in Rome I saw many go to Venice and Turkey with their families, and others went to the lands of the Great Duke [the Italian Duchy of Modena and Reggio]. All of these places are crowded with them. I don’t know how they wander in strange and difficult-to-reach lands where there are no people like our Nation, and I want to know why this occurs.”

“You don’t know the cause,” responded the friend.

“I’ve always wanted to know it,” he replied.<sup>10</sup>

The friend answers by explaining to the pilgrim why he has seen so many *conversos* in Rome, that is, because they are refugees just like the two protagonists:

The cause is that in Spain and Portugal there is a fury that is so cruel, tyrannical, impious, and unjust that it makes our motherland into a stepmother for us, so that far-off lands become our motherlands. This harsh, bloodthirsty, and corrupt fury is the Inquisition, which is the cause of all the wrongs you’ve seen and heard. It is forever robbing some and condemning others to death. It claims estates, lives, honors and one’s human condition, and it forces people to find new places to live in freedom.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> “admirado estoy bolvió el Peregrino de los muchos que ay en estas partes, y en quanto estube en Roma, vide que pasaran muchos a Veneçia, y Turquía con sus familias, y a tierras del Gran Duque, y en todas ay muchedumbre dellos, y no sé cómo en tierras ajenas con trabajosa peregrinación, no haviendo en ellas otra Nación como la nuestra andan por ella tan esparzidos; Y dezeo saber la cauza; No la sabéis, respondió el amigo. Antes y agora lo he dezeado, respondió” (Mortera, *Obstáculos*, 1v-2r).

<sup>11</sup> “que es la cauza que en España, y Portugal ay vna fiera tan cruel y injusta, tirana, y sin piedad que haze que sea la que llamamos Patria, madrastra, de suerte que quedan las tierras ajenas Madre piadosa, y esta es aquella que

During the boat trip along the Loire River, the friend promotes the merits of rabbinic Judaism over Christianity to convince the pilgrim to undergo rejudaization in Amsterdam. In a manner that recalls the obligation placed by Maimonides on forced converts living under Almohad rule, Mortera asserts in *Obstáculos* that it is the duty of *conversos* in inquisitorial Spain and Portugal to escape to Amsterdam and become practicing Jews:

Man is free, and he should act freely, carefully, and attentively in important cases like salvation should be. He should speculate and be knowledgeable, especially when in free lands, on the chance that he might follow good and comply with it. And if he were to find something that better leads him there, he should embrace it.<sup>12</sup>

The friend couches his appeal to the pilgrim in terms that evoke crypto-Jewish spirituality. In particular, the friend refers to “salvation,” which was an important component of crypto-Judaism, as Gitlitz explains: “[the] conflation of the Jewish idea of righteousness through obedience to the Law and the Christian idea of salvation through belief is the single most powerful example of syncretism in the crypto-Jewish religion” (111). Similarly, Fisher writes that the primacy lent to salvation by *conversos* derives from their “experiences as Christians in Spain and Portugal” (87). As I have written elsewhere, while it is a Christian concept:

Personal salvation is understood in *Arguments* as a goal achieved by being Jewish, a doctrine expressed by the friend that does not contradict halachic Judaism but that shifts the spiritual focus from actions performed on earth to the potential reward achieved after death [...] Judaism is thus ultimately portrayed by the friend as the “true path of salvation” [which] speaks to what Morteira hoped he might be able to accomplish when he came into contact with Catholicized crypto-Jewish spirituality. (Kaplan, 41)

Mortera depicts personal salvation as a spiritual state that the pilgrim cannot attain while living in a place where the Inquisition prevents him from studying Jewish doctrines: “It can’t be a good thing to forbid anyone from seeing and reading the word of God. It’s against His will and against His commandments [...] This is what they do in Spain.”<sup>13</sup>

The friend explains that, just as the pilgrim has seen among *converso* refugees in Italy, the practice of Judaism is only possible outside of Spain: “Think about this: today, as always, the world is full of people who observe the Law and live and act according to it, and there are many great men of wisdom who teach it. They can be found in Rome, as you’ve seen, as well as in Venice, all of Italy, and throughout the world as well.”<sup>14</sup> The pilgrim is then encouraged not to return and to instead seek refuge in a tolerant place: “And only the sinful land of Spain lacks this

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llamamos Ynquisición, fierro inhumano, y riguroso, y injusto juicio, y ella es cauza de todos estos errores que havéis visto y ohido, pues ella de continuo está robando los vnos, y afrentando, y matando los otros, quita haziendas, vidas, honras, y naturaleza, y haze buscar nuevos mundos adonde puedan bivir; y tener libertad” (Mortera, *Obstáculos*, 2r).

<sup>12</sup> “el hombre es libre, y como tale en cazo tan importante como es de la salvación deve ser muy cuydadoso, y solícito, deve especular, y saber, y más quando se halla en tierras libres, por si hallare que siga lo bueno, confórmase en ello, y si biere otra coza que mejor le encamine abrazarlo” (Mortera, *Obstáculos*, 5v).

<sup>13</sup> “no puede ser bueno que la palabra Divina del Señor, no la dexten veer y leer a todos es mucho contra su voluntad, y contra sus mandamientos [...] esto es lo que hazen en España” (Mortera, *Obstáculos*, 10r).

<sup>14</sup> “juzgar tal, que el mundo está oy lleno de gente que la guardan, y biven en ella, y siempre vivieron, y la profesan, y ay muchos y grandes sabios que la enseñan, y allá los ay en Roma, adonde los avréis visot, y en Veneçia, y toda Ytalia, y finalmente en todo el mundo” (Mortera, *Obstáculos*, 10v-11r).

good thing, which is why it should be destroyed and made to compensate the Lord for the innocent blood it has shed. Consider how, in other kingdoms, and in parts of the north, they read our sacred books because these are free lands.”<sup>15</sup> As the voyage concludes, it is evident that the friend has not persuaded the pilgrim that he is obligated to flee and “live in freedom.” Although he accepts that the friend has enlightened him spiritually, the pilgrim rejects an invitation to accompany the friend to Amsterdam and continues on his way to Portugal.

Mortera’s fictional depiction of the pilgrim’s decision to return to Portugal can be considered to be a case of failed rejudaization, which is known to have occurred on occasion among newly arrived *converso* refugees to Amsterdam. One such refugee *converso* was João de Aguilá, who claimed in a Portuguese inquisitorial deposition that his rejudaization ended after he disagreed with Mortera on a biblical interpretation (Graizbord, 91-92) The story of the pilgrim in *Obstáculos* finds parallels with another of Mortera’s historical failures at rejudaizing a *converso* refugee in Amsterdam. The episode is depicted in an inquisitorial document from 1635 that contains the report of a deposition given before the Inquisition in Madrid by a *converso* named Esteban de Ares de Fonseca.<sup>16</sup> Fonseca reveals in his deposition that he left the Portuguese city of Coimbra at around fifteen years old after studying Latin with the Jesuits, which recalls the time spent by the pilgrim in *Obstáculos* as a teenager studying Latin with the Jesuits in Évora. In around 1625, Fonseca arrived in the French city of Bayonne, where he resisted attempts to persuade him to embrace Judaism by other *conversos*, who ultimately sent him to Amsterdam to be rejudaized under Mortera’s supervision. Mortera also failed, and after six months Fonseca was excommunicated in Amsterdam by a rabbinic tribunal overseen by Mortera before returning to Spain. It is interesting that Fonseca’s story and the story of the pilgrim in *Obstáculos* involve failed attempts at rejudaization in France, where crypto-Judaism was widespread and “a semi-clandestine practice, which was publicly manifest in certain signs that attentive observers knew how to read” (Wilke, 125). The reluctance of the pilgrim in *Obstáculos* to be rejudaized, as well as the *conversos* in *Preguntas* whose “souls are lost because they are truly worshippers of gold,” reflect Mortera’s preoccupation with the tenacity of crypto-Judaism among French *conversos*.

### 5. The Talmud and Mortera’s “sea of dangers”

In spite of the unwillingness of *conversos* such as Fonseca and Aguilá to embrace Judaism, Mortera’s insistence that *conversos* flee to Amsterdam and undergo rejudaization lasted throughout his lifetime, as he demonstrates in his last work, *Tratado da verdade da lei de Moisés* (Treatise on the Truth of the Law of Moses). *Tratado*, which Mortera completed in Portuguese shortly before his death in 1660, was quickly translated into Spanish as *Providencia de Dios con Israel* (Providence of God with Israel). *Providencia* was never printed but circulated widely, and some thirty copies were made in the eight decades after it was completed. The number of copies made of *Providencia* attests to the continued popularity of Mortera’s rejudaization campaign after his death.

In *Tratado*, Mortera employs biblical exegesis involving travel to encourage rejudaization, as evident, for example, in chapter ten: “Demonstrates that, just as God parted the sea in order to free His people from the clutches of their enemies, so He continues to do so frequently today when

<sup>15</sup> “y sólo España carese deste bien por sus pecados, porque ha de ser detruída, y ha de pagar al Señor del mundo La sangre ynocente que en él tiene derramado; Conçidrad cómo en los demás Reynos, y partes del Norte, por ser libres, y leers en ellos nuestros libros Sagrados” (Mortera, *Obstáculos*, 11r).

<sup>16</sup> This document is transcribed by Julio Caro Baroja (3: 332-36).

he parts the sea of dangers with extraordinary works to free them.”<sup>17</sup> On several occasions in this chapter, Mortera compares the parting of the Red Sea in Exodus 14 with the seventeenth-century “sea of dangers” to establish a rabbinic justification for *converso* flight from Spain and Portugal.

According to the Talmud, Old Testament passages indicating that the Jews will not return to Egypt reveal that their departure left Egypt “like an abyss in the sea without fish” (Berakhot, 9b:5), or devoid of all spirituality.<sup>18</sup> While Egypt lost its spirituality, the Jews maintained their spirituality after the Exodus due to their faith in God, and the Talmud goes on to explain that this faith will continue to guide them while enduring “the enslavement of the kingdoms in the future” (Berakhot, 9b:6). Mortera employs this Talmudic interpretation of the escape of the biblical Jews from the hardships of Egyptian servitude as a backdrop for persuading *conversos* that divine providence will guide their escape from the yoke of the Inquisition:

Let us consider in detail the very severe obstacles in the kingdoms of Spain that prohibit any member of the Jewish nation from leaving those lands and the great difficulties faced by those who try to escape—the ship boarding, the scrutiny of travelers along the routes—in sum, the great energy that the Inquisition dedicates to this.<sup>19</sup>

Mortera underscores here one of the perils of flight by boat, namely, the risk of being boarded and brought back to Iberia to face trial by the Inquisition. This risk is explained in John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* (or *Actes and Monuments*), which was published in 1563 to expose Catholic persecution of Protestants. Foxe dedicates book XI, section 1 of *Book of Martyrs* to “The Spanish Armada,” which was at its zenith during Foxe’s time and which would continue to patrol the Mediterranean and the northern and western Atlantic for centuries. Foxe provides a “list of the different articles taken on board the Spanish ships, designed for the tormenting of the protestants,” which includes items such as “common soldiers’ pikes, eighteen feet long,” a “Spanish poll-axe, used in boarding of ships,” and “Thumb-screws, of which there were several chests full on board the Spanish fleet” (510-511).

Notwithstanding “the very severe obstacles” and “great difficulties” faced by *converso* refugees, Mortera declares in chapter ten of *Tratado* that their destiny will be the same as the Jews who fled from Egypt:

One will ponder how divine providence parts the sea for them and frees hundreds of souls from the hands of these Egyptians who pursue them. The consequence of this continues to be seen well in so many illustrious communities formed by the descendants of those who were freed: Constantinople, Salonika, Cairo, Jerusalem, Safed, many parts of Turkey, many

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<sup>17</sup> “Mostra que assim como Senhor fendeo o mar a Seu pouo para os livrar de seus enemigos, assim oje fende muitas ueses o mar dos perigos com obras protentosas para os liurar” (Mortera, *Tratado*, 61).

<sup>18</sup> The Old Testament passages in question are the following: “And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of Jehovah, which he will work for you to-day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to-day, ye shall see them again no more forever” (Exodus 14:13); “Only he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he may multiply horses; forasmuch as Jehovah hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way” (Deuteronomy 17:16); “And Jehovah will bring thee into Egypt again with ships, by the way whereof I said unto thee, Thou shalt see it no more again: and there ye shall sell yourselves unto your enemies for bondmen and for bondwomen, and no man shall buy you” (Deuteronomy 28:68).

<sup>19</sup> “Examinase taõ bem ecsactamente as grandes vigias que ha nos reynos de Espanha sobre o naõ consentir sahir nihum da nasaõ judaica de dittos reinos, as grandes penas aos trangressores, as uisitas nos nauios, as guardas pellos caminhos, j em soma as crueis rigors que nisso usa a sanguinaria Inquisiçaõ” (Mortera, *Tratado*, 71).

others in Corfu, Leghorn, Tunisia, Algeria, many parts of the Barbary Coast, Venice, Hamburg and, finally, in Amsterdam, and a little while later in America, Barbados and other lands where individual Jews are scattered, for whom God, in different and marvelous ways, parted the sea of dangers, and the Jewish people escaped from their pursuers.<sup>20</sup>

Just as God parted the Red Sea for the biblical Jews in Exodus 14, “divine providence parts the sea for” *conversos* who have established communities in safe havens after escaping the “hands of these Egyptians,” which is an allusion to inquisitorial Spain and Portugal.

Mortera depicts one such journey in chapter eleven of *Tratado* (“Presents three marvelous cases from our times, which centered on the soul, life and personal property and by which God manifests the unique care by which he treats his people”<sup>21</sup>), which involved a community of *conversos* living in the Brazilian region of Pernambuco while it was occupied by the Dutch during the 1630s and 1640s. As Mortera explains, after Pernambuco was reconquered by the Portuguese in 1654, these *conversos* were given “passage to Holland.”<sup>22</sup> While in route to Holland, they experienced “great risks” that are not identified by Mortera:

More than six hundred of our people who were there were given passage to Holland. Since they lacked Dutch ships they gave them Portuguese ones, and they left in sixteen ships, many of them being beautiful ones, so that all could arrive safely by divine grace and providence. However, during the journey they took great risks [...] and before the *conversos* could be handed over to the Inquisition, God provided a French boat, which carried them away and brought them safely to Florida and then to New Netherland, from where they came in peace to Holland.<sup>23</sup>

Further on, Mortera reveals a comprehensive knowledge of the matter when he declares that it “would require a very long story to narrate in detail what happened to each individual on this sea voyage.”<sup>24</sup> The episode was perhaps revealed to Mortera by one of the *conversos* who underwent rejudaization under his supervision, and it is logical to speculate that Mortera included it in chapter eleven of *Tratado* as an example of the divine providence (“God provided a French boat”) that would lead *conversos* toward rejudaization in Amsterdam.

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<sup>20</sup> “pondera a prouidenza do Senhor, como lhe fende o mar e liura a tantos centenares de almas de maõ destes persiguidores egipcianos. Bem o pode ver em tantas e tantas ilustres congregas que destes libertados se formaraõ em Costantnopolis, em Saloniqui, no Gran Cajero e Jerusalem, em Safet e em outras muitas partes da Turquia, outras muitas em Curfo, em Liorne, em Tunes, em Argel e em muitos lugares de Berberia, em Veneza, em Amburgo e finalmente em Amstradama, e de poco tempo para qua na America, em Barbados e outras partes, todas congregas compostas de particulares a quem Deos com diferentes modos de protentos fendeo o mar dos perigos e escapou de maõ dos seus persiguidores” (Mortera, *Tratado*, 71).

<sup>21</sup> “Nota tres protentodos casos de nosos tempos que tocuaõ a alma, uida e fasenda, pellos quais manifestamente mostrou Deos o particular cuidado que tem com Seu povo” (Mortera, *Tratado*, 73).

<sup>22</sup> “embarcasonis para Olanda” (Mortera, *Tratado*, 75).

<sup>23</sup> “Ihe deo embarcasonis para Olanda para mais de 600 pesoas que dos nossos la hauia, donde faltando embarcaõs olandesas lhe deo portuguesas, de modo que se embarcaraõ em 16 nauios, muitos delles uelhissimos, e todos por gracia e prouidenza deuina chegaraõ a saluamento. E com ser que pello caminho coreraõ grandes riscos [...] e leuando os judeos à Inquisiçaõ, antes de poder por em efeito seu maluado intento, lhe deparou o Senhor hun nauio franses que lhos tirou das maõs e os leuou a saluamento a Florida ou Niue Nederland, de donde uieraõ em pas a Olanda” (Mortera, *Tratado*, 75-77).

<sup>24</sup> “Larga e dilatada istoria requeria para relatar com particularidade o que contaõ cada qual do que succedeo na pasage deste mar” (Mortera, *Tratado*, 77).



## 6. Conclusions

Mortera incorporated depictions of *converso* refugee travel into his treatises to rejudaize congregants with whom he did not share a common heritage. However, since the time he first met Elijah Montalto, Mortera was well aware of physical and spiritual journeys that *conversos* would need to complete in order to become accepted into a community that was overseen by the rabbinate. The majority of Mortera's congregants did undergo rejudaization, although cases such as Fonseca and Aguila speak to a clash between crypto-Judaism and rabbinic Judaism. These cases may reflect the existence of resentment toward a non-*converso* spiritual leader whose primary role was insisting that his congregants forsake their long-held traditions and to encourage *conversos* abroad to do the same and travel to Amsterdam. For Mortera, *conversos* are obligated to flee in spite of any perils and in his polemical works refugee travel is a Machiavellian concept: whatever the risks, the end, undergoing rejudaization, justifies the means by which the voyage is accomplished.

*Converso* refugee travel was a topic that Mortera also discussed during his weekly sermons, which can be understood against the backdrop of his lifelong preoccupation with the theme of exile. Saperstein explains that exile is a "powerful presence" (Saperstein, 307) in Mortera's sermons, in which

occasionally Mortera emphasized the uniqueness of Amsterdam and highlighted the absence there of the oppressive conditions suffered by Jews in every other community throughout the world [...] The main thrust of his message—reiterated month after month and year after year—was to remind his listeners that they were living in a prolonged and bitter exile [...] and at the same time to reassure his listeners that this exile did not invalidate their relationship with God and to explain how God's providential protection continued even at the present time. (Saperstein, 307-08)

Some of the many examples of Mortera's message that "God's providential protection continued" in seventeenth-century Amsterdam are found in sermons he delivered in 1622, in which he interprets "the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt as a paradigm, type, or prefiguration of subsequent exiles" (Saperstein, 311). Mortera supports this interpretation in one sermon by proclaiming that references in Exodus 5:12 and 5:18 to the labor that the biblical Jews performed out of necessity in Egypt constitute "a prefiguration of the Jews at this time, who have to go out each morning, day after day, to gather stubble as they can find it" (trans. by Saperstein, 312).<sup>25</sup> Saperstein considers this proclamation to be a "reminder that many in the [Amsterdam] community did indeed suffer economic hardship" (312). The manner by which Mortera crafts this reminder is similar to the way he links the parting of the Red Sea to the seventeenth-century "sea of dangers" faced by *converso* refugees. In both cases, it is Mortera's connection between exegesis and contemporary events that establishes a continuity between biblical and early-modern divine providence. This is a technique demonstrated by Mortera on numerous occasions in his sermons and polemical works and is, perhaps, his greatest contribution to rabbinic scholarship.

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<sup>25</sup> The two verses in question are "So the people were scattered abroad throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw" (Exodus 5:12), and "Go therefore now, and work; for there shall no straw be given you, yet shall ye deliver the number of bricks" (Exodus 5:18).

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