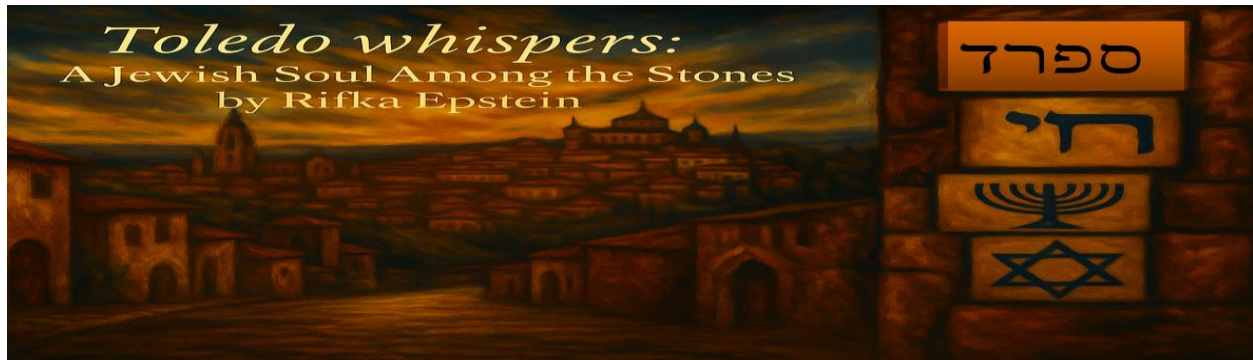




Toledo at sunset — in the spirit of El Greco, who made this city his home and muse and the echoes of Sefarad, where the stones still speak of faith, art, and endurance.

One Friday, several summers ago, just an hour and a half before Shabbat, I returned from Toledo — a city that enchanted me and reminded me deeply of Jerusalem.

Toledo: A city of history, where it seemed that every stone could speak, whispering stories of centuries that unfolded on its hilltop streets as the Tagus River bowed at its feet.

During the day, I attended a course on Judeo-Spanish — and what better place to study the language of the Sephardim than in the birthplace of the first poet to write in Spanish: Rabbi Yehuda Halevi.

“In a place of La Mancha, whose name I do not wish to remember...”

So begins *Don Quixote*. But why does Cervantes not wish to remember La Mancha? Perhaps because it was here — in La Mancha — that the first tribunal of the Inquisition was established.

Toledo is a magnificent city, a living witness to three cultures: Christian, Muslim, and Jewish. Some call it *“The Jerusalem of the West.”*

Indeed, much like the Old City of Jerusalem, Toledo is encircled by walls, and within them lies its historic heart.

Even its divisions echo Jerusalem’s “quarters.” The Jewish section is marked with ceramic tiles bearing Hebrew words — ספרד (Sefarad), חי (Chai, life) — and symbols like a Menorah or a David’s star, silent reminders of the Jewish presence that once flourished there.

In this *rova yehudi* — the Jewish quarter — there once stood eight synagogues: Onda, Sofer, Los Golondrinos, Samuel HaLevi’s (known as *El Tránsito*), the Old Synagogue, and Santa María la Blanca.

Only the last two remain, the others lost to time — destroyed, or perhaps still buried beneath the city, waiting to be found.

Both *El Tránsito* and *Santa María la Blanca* went through painful metamorphoses — from synagogue to church, and from church to museum — their stones holding layers of memory like folded prayers.

A Toledo legend tells that beneath one of the houses in the former Jewish quarter lies a hidden synagogue, a secret level waiting to be discovered. Perhaps, one day, it will be found — and will once again become a house of prayer.

There is so much more I could write about my experience in Toledo, but for now, I will end with the words people often use when parting from this city — words that bridge faiths and centuries:

“Peace be upon you,”
“Salam Aleikum,”
and “Shalom Aleichem.”

Because, after all, they all mean the same:

May peace be upon you.

And before saying *Shalom Aleichem*, I find myself thinking of another who found peace and inspiration in Toledo — **El Greco**, the painter whose vision still colors its skies.

He lived in Toledo for most of his adult life. Born in Crete (then part of the Republic of Venice), trained in Italy, and eventually settling in Toledo around 1577, El Greco made the city his home, his inspiration, and the setting for many of his masterpieces. That is why the **El Greco Museum** stands there today — in a restored 16th-century house in the old Jewish quarter, not far from the **Synagogue of El Tránsito**. Many believe he lived and painted nearby, surrounded by the same golden light and echoing stones that still whisper stories of faith and memory...

Fondly, until next time,

Rifka