

The Sepharad

Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that the conquests of Nebuchadnezzar reached as far as the Iberian Peninsula¹, while the bible tells us that King Solomon sent a fleet to Tarshish², which some historians believe refers to the Iberian Peninsula. It's no wonder then that some modern historians believe that the earliest Jewish settlements in that region were inhabited by people banished there by the Babylonian king. If these claims are true then Jews arrived concurrently with the waves of Greek merchants sweeping across the Mediterranean three centuries after the first Phoenicians, and settled among the Iberians and Celts already living in the region since prehistoric times.

The term *Sepharad* was first used in Jewish tradition in the book of Obadiah and referred to the "exile of Jerusalem that was in Sepharad"³. While it can't be certain where Obadiah believed Sepharad to be, Targum Jonathan (roughly: Jonathan's Explanation) of Obadiah, written by a student of Hillel in the 2nd century, translates "Sepharad" to "Espamia", and places it in the Iberian Peninsula.

Eventually the Jews of Iberian peninsula came to refer to themselves as Sephardim. Jewish merchants did in fact follow the expansion of Phoenician and Syrian trading colonies all along the Mediterranean. The ships brought wares from the East and left settlers, including Jewish settlers in their wake. Archaeological records show that after Rome's suppression of the Jewish Revolt in 135, Jews fanned out in great numbers to Italy and Spain in the north and the African coast to the south. They left behind ruins of synagogues, burial caverns and tombstones with inscriptions in Hebrew, Latin and Greek⁴. In Spain, the record shows that Jews did not live as isolated families but as organized communities. While these communities were cohesive and remained connected to classic Judaism, evidence of acculturation is strongly indicated by things distinctly Jewish as funerary inscriptions written only in Latin and yet decorated with traditional Jewish symbols. This exchange of culture went both ways in that the Jewish concept of monotheism was spread with relative ease. These people adopted some Jewish practices and it set the stage for the very successful Christian evangelizing to follow.

Spain was one of the wealthiest provinces of the Roman Empire. Its rich soil and moderate climate made it into important granary for Rome. Wheat, rye and barley are but a few of the exports from the Iberian Peninsula⁵. Other commerce included livestock, silver, copper and tin⁶. The great

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* - Chapter 11

² 1 Kings 10:22

³ New Revised Standard

⁴ History of the Jews in Spain

Origins and History of Sephardic Jewry -

<http://kehillatisrael.net/docs/learning/sephardim.html>

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hispania>

⁶ The Vegetation of the Iberian Peninsula, Volume 2

Roman highway and communication network facilitated the exchange of information among such widely dispersed people as the Jews. So long as Rome was tolerant and prosperous, Jewish life flourished. And so it did for several hundred years.

Deterioration of ancient Jewish life in Spain began in the fourth century with the decline of the Roman Empire and the adoption of Christianity as the state religion. Christianity defined itself as the successor to Judaism and if monotheism in some way appealed to the pagan population of new Christian Spain, ecclesiastical legislation would make certain that they chose Christianity... conversion to Judaism became a capital crime!

This was not the first time that ancient Jews had been the subject of ecclesiastical councils. The ecclesiastical laws that came from the Council of Elvira, in 309CE, stated that Catholics cannot marry Jews or heretics⁷; a farmer must not ask a Jew to bless his crop⁸; a Catholic must not eat a meal with Jews⁹; adultery with Jews and heretics is forbidden¹⁰.

The ecclesiastic laws of the Elvira Council were needed, it is thought, because Jews and Jewish culture was quite influential in the new Holy Roman Empire even though Jews made up only 10% of the total population of the Empire.

The re-interpretation of the Old Testament to prove Christian election and Jewish obsolescence had begun. That the Jews "refused" to understand the scriptures properly became the party line so to speak. What they couldn't change was the fact that whatever its interpretation, it was that very scripture that linked them. What then to do with the bearers of the old tradition so that they don't pose a threat to the new faith? They would be preserved because their veneration for the Old Testament bore witness to the re-interpreted truth of Christianity, but they would be tolerated only minimally. Their lowly state would provide visible proof of their rejection by God and would demonstrate what would befall those who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah. This denigrating of the Jews would serve another purpose. It would also enhance the self-esteem of Christians.

The first forced conversion of Jews in Spain did not occur during Roman rule as many tend to believe. In the fifth century Germanic tribes including the Vandals overran Spain and the Visigoths found themselves ruling 8 million Latin speaking Catholics and Jews. It was the Jews who became the mediators between the foreign elite and the indigenous majority. For 200 years the life Jews in Visigothic Spain is very obscure. We know from the Councils of Toledo late in the sixth and seventh centuries that Jews were forbidden from owning slaves. That Jews would ever be able to exercise any authority over a Christian was proscribed and just to make sure that it never occurred, Jews were forced to accept baptism or be given 100 lashes, banished and relieved of all property. Pope Gregory condemned these forced conversions but not for humanitarian reasons. He thought that forced conversions could never produce true believers.

edited by Javier Loidi

⁷ Council of Elvira Canon 16

⁸ Council of Elvira Canon 49

⁹ Council of Elvira Canon 50

¹⁰ Council of Elvira Canon 78

He was correct because by the eighth Council of Toledo the terms baptized Jew and non-baptized Jew entered the lexicon as did the concept of Old and New Christian. Reference to Jews as a "contagious pestilence", a "plague of Jews" and the need to rise up against the "leprosy of Jewish corruption" were products of the 12th Council of Toledo and may have been further exacerbated by the news that in the wars between the Byzantium and Persian Empires the Jews had sided with the Persians against Christian Byzantium. During the rule of particularly harsh kings, Jews would flee to Morocco or France and when the king was finally deposed they would return. King Erwig in about 685 mandated that all business transactions between Christians and Jews begin with the Lord's Prayer and the consumption of a dish of pork. Jews were forced to attend the lectures and sermons of the bishops and those bishops who did not comply fully were denounced.

Persecution of the Jews in Spain under the Visigoths reached a fevered pitch when famine, plagues and court intrigue and conspiracy strangled commerce, destroyed the infrastructure and decimated the population. An atmosphere of hysteria reigned supreme and the Jews were targeted for retribution. They were pushed to the very brink of open revolt but informers thwarted the attempt and prompted the latest Council of Toledo to declare that all business transactions between Christians and Jews begin with the Lord's Prayer and the consumption of a dish of pork.

The foundation for the particularly cruel forms of anti-semitism that would follow in later centuries had been laid. The long march towards the Inquisition had begun. But in Spain, it would be interrupted by 800 years of Muslim rule and the Golden Age of Jewish life.

The Muslim conquest of Spain has been depicted by historians as an accident or afterthought to the conquest of Morocco. More accurately, it was still another victory in the process of Islamic expansion. As people arrived in Morocco with stories of chaos and discontent, an Arab general named Tariq ibn Ziyad sent a small reconnaissance party of 400 troops to survey the situation. His small band found themselves welcomed as liberators by the warring princes, tired city dwellers and persecuted Jews. In 711 a larger invading force arrived and resistance quickly collapsed. Within four years almost all of Spain had capitulated, as did Sicily. The westward expansion of Islam would not be stopped until 732, by France and Burgundian forces in the Battle of Tours.

The events of the jihad were detailed in chronicles with surprising accuracy in that they documented both victories and setbacks. Upon reaching a city, the invading force usually found the gates unguarded and the city almost deserted. Few but the Jews remained and the invaders would frequently leave the almost vacant city in the hands of Jewish patrols.

The invading forces were not one homogeneous people. They were North African Berbers, Syrians, Egyptians, Yemenites, and they occupied a country of Spanish Christians and Jews. While the Caliph in Damascus was the leader of the Islamic world, his reach fell short in Spain. The diversity, both cultural and linguistic, accounts for both the instability of Muslim Spain and its intellectual ferment.

Jews, who had fled the later decades of Visigothic persecution returned on the heels of the Islamic conquerors. Word soon spread of the vastly improved position of Jews in Spain and this

set off a wave of immigration to the newly pacified country. Succeeding waves of Jewish immigration would transform Spain, within 300 years, replacing Babylon as the spiritual center of Jewish thought. The place of Jews and Christians in Muslim society was subject interpretation and re-interpretation over the years but both had the special designation as *al djimma*, protected people. Possessors of Scripture who did not believe in Allah were to be opposed until they surrender, according to Classic Islamic theory. Upon surrender, the payment of a tribute was required as one of several obligatory signs of subjugation. The Islamic scholar, Abu Yusuf, reasoned in his treatise called the Book of Taxes, that once the tribute or tax is collected, there is no further claim nor obligation. Having paid the tribute they must not be harmed and their property rights respected. They must also be permitted to worship in their own tradition. But fiscal exploitation was not the only measure of subjugation. The *dhimmis* (*jimmahs*) were to be differentiated from Muslims with "marks of recognition". Clothes of special color, distinctive and sometimes ludicrous footwear and headgear were just a few. Limitations on the size and building of new churches and synagogues and a ban against conspicuous worship rounded out the collection of restrictions known as the *Pact of Umar*. Arab pragmatism and rapid conquest usually meant that, in Muslim Spain at least, these restrictions were followed intermittently. That would inspire increased optimism and immigration but the Pact of Umar was always looming over the horizon.

Compared to Visigothic Spain, liberal applications of the Pact of Umar were a relative cake walk for the Sephardim and the knowledge of this held out great promise for Jewish settlement. Further, the warring between Muslim factions from Africa, Syria and Egypt left many administrative tasks to Christians and Jews. By 715, all of Spain had come under control of the Muslims.

In 752 or 753, a coup d'état (Abassid) forced the last Umayyad Caliph (Sunni) in Damascus, Marwan II from power, and the caliphate was moved to Baghdad (Shia). The lone survivor of the ensuing massacre of the ruling family managed to escape to Spain where in 756 he was able to re-establish an Umayyad emirate (Sunni) in Cordoba. It was he, and his successors, who established a strong army and bureaucracy, and began pacifying the divided country. The desire to equal the splendor of their rivals in Baghdad would ensure that the Byzantine learned traditions of statecraft, social life, art and architecture would continue to flower as would new forms of cultural expression.

By the 10th century, Cordoba was a capital unequalled in splendor by those in the west or the Islamic east. An Islamic legend has Allah creating the world, and the Spanish province of Andalusia asking for five things: clear skies, a sea well stocked with fish, trees laden with every imaginable fruit, beautiful women and a just government. Allah agreed to all but the last, having decided that if all were granted, Andalusia would rival Paradise. In a city of perhaps 200,000 people, Cordoba boasted 3,000 public baths, paved and illuminated streets, indoor plumbing in the more luxurious homes and hundreds of villas along the river landscaped with tropical trees, fountains and waterfalls, ceramic tiled basins and reflective pools. Cordoba had 28 suburban centers each with thriving markets. Cultural life was enriched by 70 libraries, schools of architecture and those specifically for the translation of classic works into Arabic. During this time profitable new crops were introduced into the economy including citrus fruits, bananas, figs, cinnamon and almonds. The introduction of cotton, silk, flax and wool produced the cash needed to satisfy the growing

demand for conspicuous consumption.

International trade was the avenue by which many Jewish families acquired significant prestige in Muslim Spain but it should be noted that a large and influential merchant class was rising throughout the Middle East at this time. It is neither rare nor surprising, therefore, for Jews to travel great distances. Maimonides, a later Jewish scholar from Spain remarked rather casually in a responsum, a written reply by a rabbi or Talmudic scholar to an inquiry on some matter of Jewish law, that the Jews were regular passengers on boats commuting between Seville and Alexandria. Business partnerships and formal friendships between Jewish, Muslim and Christian families indicate a peaceful and profitable coexistence between these groups at this time.

The rhythm of a Jewish community was determined by the religious calendar but it was also shaped by arrival and departure of the itinerant merchants. The arrival of the representatives of a large trading firm like the Maghrebis or the Radhanites would mark full attendance and full coffers for the local synagogue. Upon their departure a contemporary wrote, "the synagogue is desolate, for the Maghrebis have left."

Some of these trading companies acquired huge monopolies due to factors specific to medieval Jewry. Muslims were excluded from European markets and Christians were barred from Islamic waters. Only Jews could travel freely as commercial agents in both realms. And Jews were assured hospitality among other Jews living all along the trade routes.

The Golden Age can be traced in parallel to the life of Hasdai ibn Shaprut a prominent figure in public life who lived from 915-970.

Ibn Shaprut was the son of a wealthy, pious and philanthropic family and was educated, as was the custom of wealthy families, by private tutors. In addition to his Jewish studies, he studied languages including Latin and the Romance languages, with Christian clergy. It was his discovery of antidotes for poisons that gained him the attention of Rahman III and his courtiers. Apparently poison was the modus operandi of conspirators and pretenders. He was admitted to the council of doctors who served the court. Physicians were often appointed to administrative posts and in that fashion, Shaprut began his political career. He began in the area of customs revenues, quickly made a mark for himself and enjoyed the gratitude of the caliph. Rahman III appointed Shaprut head of the Jewish community, a position known as nagid, prince, and soon he would entrust him with sensitive diplomatic negotiations on behalf of the caliph. Because Muslim rulers sometimes had to make alliances with Christian kings, they would usually employ Jews because they didn't want to provoke a suspicious Muslim community or risk Christian conspiracy. The Jews posed no political threat.

Shaprut was able to benefit from a diplomatic mission that would have far ranging impact on the science of medicine in Spain and ultimately Europe. The mission was one between none other than Constantine VII, emperor of Byzantium, and Rahman III. It seems that both rulers had great interest in the arts and sciences and both men were also unaffected by the traditional inhibitions that kept Christendom and Islam apart. More importantly, they both held rivalries with the caliph of Baghdad.

They needed someone who could translate and conduct the delicate conversations

between the two powers in this era of warring faiths. Ibn Shaprut rose from relative obscurity to a position of prominence in the negotiations between Spain and Byzantium. During an exchange of gifts from the Emperor to the Caliph, a gift of a rare first century Greek manuscript on pharmacology posed a problem. The book was not unknown in Spain, it's just that the translation that the physicians of Spain had been working with was so seriously flawed that it was practically useless. Physicians from Spain had to travel to Baghdad to receive the training that the book incorporated. Here was an original version in the original language...but no one at court could translate Greek. The Emperor sent for a monk learned in Greek and Latin to translate the work into Latin. Shaprut then translated the Latin into Arabic. Because he was successful, Spanish physicians were no longer dependent on Baghdad for their training. They had become an independent scientific learning center and Hasdai's reputation grew, not for the translation alone, but for the furthering of Spain's autonomy.

About his homeland, Shaprut wrote:

"The land is rich, abounding in rivers, springs and aqueducts; a land of corn, oil, wine, fruit and all manner of delicacies; it has pleasure-gardens and orchards, fruit trees of every kind including the trees with the leaves that the silkworm feeds on..."

Shaprut goes on to tell us about the annual revenue of the kingdom, an area in which he may have had specific knowledge:

"His (kings) yearly revenue is about 100,000 gold pieces, the greater part of which is derived from merchants who come from various countries and islands."

It would seem that foreign trade was so prevalent that it succeeded in keeping the taxes on the local population small and manageable.

In a sort of Pax Islamica, political barriers were not barriers to trade and relative economic unity prevailed throughout the Islamic world. Not surprisingly, travel literature including maps increased during this period greatly expanding the available knowledge of routes and remote areas of the explored world. As Muslims left Spain to study with famous scholars in North Africa, Cairo and Persia, Sephardic scholars travelled to the Jewish intellectual centers like those Yeshivot on the Tunisian coast and in Baghdad where the Babylonian Talmud, the Bavli, was written. Shaprut would continue to be entrusted with challenging diplomatic missions and soon he would be able to claim his standing in the Jewish community among the likes of Joseph, Daniel and Esther, all of whom worked in foreign courts for the welfare of their fellow Jews.

When Jews in parts of southern Italy were threatened with religious persecution and their books confiscated and teachers arrested, Hasdai Nasi received the caliph's permission to use a diplomatic envoy to deliver a strongly worded letter to Empress Helena. He reminded her that his Islamic monarch was quite tolerant of the numerous Christians in Spain. He also undertook the defense of Jews in Toulouse when they were forced to offer thirty pounds of wax for church candles and deliver it on Easter Eve, a requirement that was clearly provocative. In addition, as each Jew made his offering the Bishop would respond with a resounding slap. It was ibn Shaprut's correspondence with the Khazars that gave him a permanent place in the historical heart of Jews.

The Khazars were a nomadic Turkish tribe who wandered for centuries in Central Asia where Byzantium and Islamic borders meet. They had given refuge to Jews on numerous occasions and in the 8th century, after being pressed by both superpowers, Byzantium and Islam, to convert, they converted to Judaism. By the ninth century the territory of the Khazars, or Khazaria, covered much of Russia. When rumors of a Jewish kingdom filtered back to Spain Shaprut decided to send an emissary to find out for himself. Although he was not able to secure travel through the waterways of Byzantium, he did confirm its existence from a Khazar Jew in Constantinople. Shaprut then sent a letter of introduction to King Joseph of the Khazars and in reply the ruler explained in great detail the disputations between Muslim, Christian and Jew that led to the nation's adoption of Judaism. In subsequent correspondence Shaprut confessed to the Khazar king:

"We have been cast down from our glory and have nothing to reply when they say daily to us, 'Every other people has its kingdom, but of yours there is no memorial on earth.'"

But now,

"Blessed be the Lord of Israel, who has not left us without a kinsman as defender nor suffered the tribes of Israel to be without an independent kingdom."

In his community in Andalusia, Shaprut cultivated Jewish scholarship and leadership. He sponsored rabbis and scholars to the Talmudic Yeshivot in Baghdad, and when the Talmudic academy at Sura was closed temporarily, he procured its library and brought it to Cordoba. Once news of the intellectual ferment going on in Cordoba began to spread, scholars from North Africa and Egypt followed. Spain had become a center of Jewish intellectual scholarship thanks in large part to Shaprut. The Sephardim would now exercise the same autonomy over their Jewish scholarship as the court physicians did over their medical scholarship upon the translation of their medical manuscripts, also thanks to Hasdai ibn Shaprut, Hasdai ha Nagid, Hasdai the Prince.

Jewish multilingualism further facilitated the expansion of trade. Because of their complex history Jewish traders were able to converse in Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Greek as well as the languages of the Franks, the Andalusians and the Slavs. Hebrew¹¹ of course, was the lingua franca of these Jewish traders and the Jewish communities they visited. They might be returning to Spain with letters or responsa from the rabbinic scholars of Baghdad or Palestine, and upon their return the Sephardic community would gather for a public reading.

Cordoba was the center of Andalusian government and it was, for a while, to become the center of Sephardic Jewish life as well. But prior to Cordoba, Lucena had been the Jewish intellectual center and the first to correspond with the academies in Baghdad.

By the tenth century, Andalusia's prosperity had generally reached the Jewish and Christian

¹¹ <http://en.hebrew-academy.org.il/hebrew-language/medieval-hebrew/>

middle classes as evidenced by dowry lists that have survived in the *Geniza*, an upper room repository of an old synagogue in Cairo. Preserved for centuries were letters of correspondence, scholarly dissertations and religious tracts from throughout the Jewish diaspora although mainly from Sephardic sources.

Sephardic assimilation into Spanish society took many forms. Jews worked as vintners, farmers, traders as we have discussed, members of the royal court, physicians, scientists, textile workers; but a much more important role was that of cultural intermediary. Jews were well equipped to arbitrate between competing Christian kingdoms and likewise between Muslim caliphates. Likewise, they could maneuver the mutually exclusive and hostile worlds of Christianity and Islam because they had lived in the very heartland of both worlds. One such person was a Jewish entertainer from Baghdad named Ziryab¹². He had been invited to Cordoba to introduce cultural innovations learned in the east, to the court. He established a music conservatory for the youth of court introducing new musical instruments and teaching music to the most talented women of the harem. His cultural innovations included reforms in etiquette; he insisted on using tablecloths and cutlery and established glass factories to produce the fine crystal goblets that were soon to become famous beyond Spain. He introduced perfumes, cosmetics and toothpaste, and set the fashion in hairstyles and wardrobe. It was through Ziryab that protocol and custom in Cordoba rivaled that of the Caliphate in Baghdad.

The Golden Age could not have happened without the involvement of outstanding Jews in government and its bureaucracy. They made the ground fertile for the cultural explosion that was to follow. But the Golden Age of Jewish life was more than politics and administration. It was art and science, culture and philosophy.

The Jewish courtiers shared a cultural orientation and political ethos with the ruling Muslims. Their secular education was exceedingly broad and included astronomy, astrology, geometry, optics, calligraphy, rhetoric and language. When one went to see a court physician they would be talking to a poet, philosopher, linguist as well as a physician. And yet, Jewish sons were still expected to complete rigorous training in the Hebraic tradition, including Bible and Midrash, Hebrew language studies, Talmud and commentaries. A distinctively Sephardic characteristic was the ability to blend these separate academic traditions with sophistication and eloquence.

To some extent, the history of the Jews in Muslim Spain is indeed a history of huge personalities who charismatically dominated the Jewish communities while negotiating themselves into Gentile society. These individuals integrated Jewish traditions with Arabic and Islamic culture to create a new Jewish dynamic. Jewish people would not again experience such a synthesis of Judaic culture and thought until the modern era.

Granada's large and dynamic Jewish population prompted one 10th century Arab historian to call it "Granada of the Jews."

Life in the royal court was sometimes quite treacherous. Prestige had its price. Harems were large and each wife pressed the claims of her son. Each rival advisor had opportunity to fan the

¹² Gerber, Jane - Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience

flames of discontentment among competing wives, princes and slaves, and there were times quite often when the Jewish physician or translator would become enmeshed. Samuel ibn Nagrela was briefly imprisoned in 1020 as a result of political intrigue, yet he managed to attain the highest political position in Granada, that of vizier, based on his talents and great wealth in the world of finance, his gift as a writer and, not least, by backing a successful contender for the throne. His son, Joseph ibn Nagrela, succeeded his father to office at the age of 21. Joseph lived lavishly, and in 1066, the local Muslim population accused him of using his office to benefit Jewish friends. The Muslim population rose in revolt, and on December 30, 1066, Nagrela was assassinated and his body displayed on the city's main gate¹³. The next day would begin the massacre of Granada's Jews that would end with the deaths of perhaps hundreds of the city's Jewish population. The stakes were high in the world of political intrigue: a life of privilege or violent death, imprisonment or great fortune. The advent of the Golden Age brought with it many risks and made great fortunes.

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Arab society has a special attachment to its language: poetry in particular is held in high esteem. In Andalusia, perfection of Arabic grammar and refinement of diction and expression was a prerequisite for public service and rapid advancement. Nuance in speech and expression were prized and Muslim society as a whole exhibited a passion for eloquence. It's no wonder then that Jewish language skills, long developed in Torah, Midrash and Talmudic circles, would flourish in such an environment. Jews learned Arab rhetoric and to a large degree, adopted the language as their own. Until the 12th century, Sephardic treatises on philosophy and science were written in Arabic as were some profoundly Jewish texts. Jewish poets also used this time to explore the nuances of Hebrew and in the process developed breakthroughs in Hebrew poetic form. Distinctly Arabic rhyme and meter were introduced into Hebrew and the tools for a creative linguistic revolution were forged. Up to this point Hebrew poetry, as in the Bible, had no meter or rhyme. The use of metaphors and parallelism conveyed poetic effect. Poets of the Golden Era used their new tools to create lavish works for secular and liturgical purposes.

Although these innovations were purely products of the court classes, Muslim society in

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_ibn_Naghrillah

Spain had progressed at least to the point of "trickle down" culture. As Gerber describes it, "soon a person walking the streets of Seville or Granada could delight to the sounds of a strumming lute accompanying a Hebrew song, possibly mixed with the muffled laughter of an inebriated group of nocturnal revelers.¹⁴" In the courtyards, on the river banks or beside a bubbling fountain, Sephardic men would be reciting prose or singing songs of the vagaries of friendship, the beauty of women, the idleness of youth and the continuing exile of the Jews.

PLAY MUSIC !!!!!!!

READ POETRY !!!!!!!

My friend, tell me,
When shall I pour you my wine?
The cry of the cock woke me.
And sleep has deserted my eyes.

Come out and see the morning light
Like a scarlet thread in the East.
Make haste, give me a cup,
Before the dawn starts to rise.

Of spiced pomegranate juice,
From the perfumed hand of a girl,
Who will sing songs. My soul
Revives and then dies.

Samuel ibn Nagrela
10th century

When a gray hair appeared all on its own
Upon my head, I cut it down.
"You are the victor now," it said,
"But what will you do, once my banners are spread?"

Samuel ibn Gabirol

¹⁴ Gerber, Jane - Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience

10th century

The night the girl gazelle displayed to me
Her cheek - the sun - beneath its veil of hair
Red as a ruby, and beneath, a brow
Of moistened marble (color wondrous fair!)
I fancied the sun, which rising reddens
Clouds of morning with its crimson.

Judah Halevi

11th century

Abraham ibn Ezra 11th century

*I have a cloak that is like a sieve to sift wheat or barley.
I spread it out like a tent in the dark of the night,
And the stars shine through it:
Through it I see the moon and the Pleiades, and Orion, flashing his light.
I am afraid of counting all its holes, which are shaped like the teeth of a saw. No thread can hope
to mend its gaps with warf and woof.
If a fly landed on it with its full weight, it would quickly regret its foolishness.
O God, give me a robe of glory in exchange –
This would be properly tailored!*

Judah Halevi 11th century

*My heart is in the East and I am at the edge of the West. Then how can I taste what I eat, how
can I enjoy it? How can I fulfill my vows and pledges?
While Zion is in the domain of Edom, and I am in the bonds of Arabia?
It would be easy for me to leave behind all the good things of Spain;
it would be glorious to see the dust of the ruined shrine.*

Jewish philosophy was equally influenced by its encounter with Islamic culture as was Hebrew poetry. The Muslim conquests were followed by an official program of translating Greek classics into Arabic. After resisting the intrusion of Greek philosophy and culture in its own domain

a thousand years earlier, these Jewish descendants embraced it in Sepharad as they adopted the Arabic language. By the 10th century, Jews and Muslims had begun the serious task of trying to reconcile their religion with the ancient philosophies of Aristotle and others.

As Jews reread the Bible in light of these new philosophic formulations, they began to question its textual contradictions as well as its anthropomorphic reference to God. References to his outstretched arm, his feet and even his apparent emotions such as anger and joy were questioned. They even tried to reconcile the apparent conflict between revelation and reason. Jews were puzzled by the challenges posed by the classic authors and, with their training in rabbinic tradition, began to develop a new Jewish philosophical literature.

Judah Halevi, the young poet caught between his love for Zion and his love of Spain, would in later life renounce verse with this warning: "Let not the wisdom of the Greeks beguile thee; it has flowers but no fruit." He came to his conclusions at the culmination of a long struggle in which he tried to support the primacy of Hebrew and of the Jews. He would later declare: "Greece has drowned me in mucky grease, Islam and its language have painted me dark, and Christendom has dissected and destroyed me." He would eventually leave Spain for Jerusalem.

Moses Maimonides lived at the end of the Golden Age, in the 12th century, a time of renewed persecution and uncertainty for the Jews. He gained recognition as a jurist, philosopher, community leader and physician. His intellectual and literary output constitutes one of the period's greatest achievements. His writings on Jewish Law mark a high point in the history of Jewish legal thought. Although his greatest works were written after leaving Spain, he is none-the-less, a son of Spain, a Sephard.

The small band of Christian principalities in the north of Spain had succeeded in regaining Toledo. They were eyeing Andalusia wantonly. A particularly fierce band of Islamic fundamentalists of the Shi'ite Sect had been successful in overthrowing the Umayyads from their base in Morocco. This was the world that Maimonides was born into. One of intense religious warfare and Jewish persecution. His family left Spain and settled in Fez, a choice that continues to puzzle historians. Fez was the heart of the new Almohade Empire and the presence of practicing Jews were not tolerated. It is thought that in these times of violent unrest, most Jews practiced an underground form of their faith while paying lip service to Islam. Jewish leaders urged their followers to stand firm against forced conversion and persecution. Maimonides urged them to adopt Islam and maintain crypto-Judaism, not to seek martyrdom unless forced to transgress the Jewish commandments in public. Jewish leaders were divided over Maimonides pronouncements but he was able to reason, using examples in scripture that many heretics and sinners were later rewarded by God for a single act of piety. How much greater the reward of Jews, he reasoned, "who despite the exigencies of forced conversion perform the commandments secretly." So successful was Maimonides reasoning that the Almohade ruler remarked, "If I knew for certain that they became faithful Muslims I would allow them to mix and intermarry; if I knew for certain that they were infidels, I would kill the men and hand their children and property over to Muslims."

In 1165 after renewed persecution had begun, Maimonides left Morocco for Palestine. Life was no better under the domination of the Crusaders and the family departed for Egypt. It was

here where he would impact Jewish thought and history through the ages, and here where he would die.

In his lifetime he would compose tracts on nutrition, drugs, poisons and antidotes, sex, hemorrhoids and asthma. His medical tracts were required reading in medical schools for centuries and in some schools his medical oath is still used. He would advocate moderation in food, drink and rest. "Eat what is easily digested, fowl rather than ox meat, beef rather than bull meat. He asked his readers to avoid large salted fish, old fermented cheese and refrain from drinking milk more than a day old. He also recommended a small amount of wine on a daily basis.

In addition to writing essays on astronomy and finance, Maimonides served as head of the Jewish community in Egypt. As a Jewish scholar, he would be called upon to answer the questions and allay the fears of a widespread and diverse people. To the Jews in Yemen, when increased persecution brought forth a messianic pretender, he needed to reaffirm their faith which had been weakened by the assertion of the supremacy of Islam, and neutralize the pretensions of the false messiah. He cited biblical proof texts to demolish Islamic claims of supremacy and maintained that the exact date of messianic redemption could not be ascertained but tradition in his family held the year to be in the significant future - the year 1216 to be precise. This successfully calmed the messianic fever and also consoled the suffering Jews.

His most enduring influence is in the field of Jewish law. His "13 Principles of Jewish faith" was important for its argument that the interpretation of Oral Law is a rational enterprise subject to specific rules. Maimonides greatest legal work was the "Mishnah Torah", an attempt to organize all of Jewish law into a single codex. Maimonides intended to provide a complete statement of the Oral Law, so that a person who mastered first the Written Torah and then the Mishnah Torah would be in no need of any other book. Systematic and eloquent, he included discussions of philosophical issues. Although such discussion was quite common in Sephardic circles, it had never been included in a text of Jewish law.

The symbiosis of classical thought and ancient Jewish traditions was his last major work, completed in 1190. In "Guide for the Perplexed" he makes his aim quite clear; to attempt to reconcile Biblical books of prophecy and revelation, with critical and rational thought. He explored the notion that the biblical material could be allegorical, and that the philosophies of Aristotle could prove the existence of God. He was also convinced that reason alone could not resolve the perplexity of the believer. He believed that every instance in the bible that repelled reason was, in fact, a figure of speech that could be translated into the language of reason and thus resolved. The knowledge of God was what ultimately mattered to Maimonides in "Perplexed..." That knowledge could be attained by the performance of Mitzvot, as well as by the understanding of things created. Knowledge of nature and the physical world was how Maimonides readers could know God. Maimonides died in Egypt on December 12, 1204. His body was taken to the lower Galilee and buried in Tiberias.

In Spain, the end was drawing near. The brutal Almohades couldn't stem the tide of Christian reconquest. In 1248 Seville fell to the forces of Ferdinand III and virtually completed the long centuries of Catholic reconquista. Only a small enclave at Granada was able to hold out until

1492. At first, the Sephardim were offered inducements to replace the fleeing Muslim population. They were given land grants, elective privileges and tax exemptions. The incentives also included charters granting the Jews the protection of the king. The Jews were given sweeping administrative powers in Valencia to facilitate the transition from Muslim to Christian rule. Other kingdoms in Spain offered similar incentives to stay. In Aragon, James I granted similar exemptions and protections to the Jews. But these weren't just humane actions by remorseful royals. It should be noted that about half of the revenue of every single one of the Iberian kingdoms was generated by Jews. These actions were a fiscal necessity. The pope had in 1215 declared that all Jews must wear distinguishing clothing and badges. The Spanish kings argued that enforcement of such ordinances would drive the Jews from Spain and they could hardly afford that.

During the reconquista new political climates were beginning to sweep the land. Municipalities were being given the rights to regulate their own finances, hold elections and administer justice. That put the protected Jews in a precarious position. If the Jews and their property were protected by the king, then the municipality would have no way to benefit from their financial gain. The Jews began to be associated with privilege and excesses. Armed conflicts continued and they also took their toll on the royal treasury. Taxes had to be raised and it was the Jews who the king appointed to do the collecting. Anti-monarch sentiment quickly became anti-Jewish action. Many fled but some tried to remain.

Moses ibn Ezra wrote:

"Throughout my life I have known success...But now the tears flow from my eyes as I seek to overcome my grief at my loneliness in my native land, without a companion at my side...and I see no man about me except my family and kin. I remain in here, a city of declining bustle and splendor, like a stranger in the land."

For those who remained, the supremacy of philosophical thought was replaced by voices of conservatism and orthodoxy. There were still some Jewish courtiers in reconquista Spain, the Catholic kings required their services, but the decline of the social position of the community cause a great rift between the classes. Sephardic society flourished when the middle class emulated the tastes and habits of the courtiers and reflected their values. That was no longer the case. The courtiers became cynical and self-serving and no longer saw themselves as defenders of the community. The focus shifts to the larger Jewish community and away from the courtier class, for it was through the streets of the cities in the homes and neighborhoods of Jewish masses that the road to exile would run.

In the summer of 1263, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides – also known as Ramban) was summoned to the court of King James I of Aragon. At the instigation of Pablo Christiani, a Dominican friar, the king was staging a religious debate; Nahmanides was to serve as the Jewish disputant for the following question; had the messianic mission been fulfilled with Jesus? Did the Talmud itself offer proof that Jesus was in fact the Messiah, and was the Messiah divine or human?

Christiani hoped to hasten the conversion of Spain's Jews by proving that Jesus was the

Messiah and the Jewish texts prove it. Nahmanides was then in his sixties and had played an active role in other ideological controversies including the debate within Jewish circles of the proper place of rationalism in Jewish life.

Since Nahman had a good personal relationship with the king, he had hoped that he could convince the king to protect him and his co-religionists against any negative reactions to his presentations. The king promised protection for the Jews and during the week of July 20, 1263, the two sides met.

Christiani tried to use the Talmud as proof texts for the truth of Christianity. As Nahmanides expected, he used an obscure Talmudic text that stated that the Messiah was born on the day the Temple was destroyed. In dealing with this text, he was faced with a serious dilemma. If he were to deny the authoritative authenticity of the rabbinic text, he would be placed in an unfavorable light with the Jews and further demoralize them in the face of their foes. A denial might have even caused other rabbinic texts to be challenged and may have even put in jeopardy the entire messianic tradition of the Jews. Nahmanides solution was to dismiss the importance of the passage. He specifically argues that only the halakhah, the legal code of the Talmud was authoritative to the Jews. The text cited by Christiani was in the sermonic body of Talmud known as agadah. Further, even if it had been halakhah, it proved nothing since Jesus was long dead when the Temple was destroyed. Drawing such distinctions between halakhah and aggadah was an argument unknown outside the limited circle of learned Jews. The suggestion to the larger Jewish community that any part of the Talmud was not an authoritative guide could prove to be confusing and demoralizing. Despite his best efforts, Christiani couldn't successfully counter the arguments of Nahmanides and the Franciscans present asked that the debates be discontinued.

Nahmanides reflected a new intellectual reality in Spain. The traditions of northern Europe were becoming the predominant force in Jewish scholarship and strict Talmudic scholarship was replacing the unique blend of science, philosophy and rabbinic teachings.

By this time Spanish Jewish leaders were developing a new and profound interest in pietism and mysticism known as Kabbalah. Judaism was turning away from the dazzling and sophisticated merging of diverse disciplines. Judaism was turning inward. By 1305, the community leader of Barcelona, Solomon ibn Adret, issued a sweeping ban on the study of "Greek thought" and science, except medicine, by people under 25.

This turn inward was prompted by the unbearable conditions imposed on them by the Christian society. Church leaders wanted to convert them, but the townspeople and their pastors saw the Jews as diabolical figures. This depiction was spread in art, music, religious pageantry and in weekly sermons. Rumors spread by priests caused increased isolation and then Jews were attacked for their clannish demeanor. The popular imagination conjured up images of Jews as destroyers of Christianity, purveyors of evil, desecrators of Christian relics, sorcerers and even the incarnation of the devil. Jews were blamed for the Black Death and poisoning wells. They were accused of blood libels and host desecration. Nothing was above the belief of the gullible population of Europe.

Pogroms were a regular diet fed to the church leaders. Entire towns and communities were

eliminated and forced conversion was the rage.

By this time, Jews were of course disqualified from holding any office of court so it is no wonder that many in the courtier classes converted to Christianity. For a time, these conversos were held up as examples of the peace and rewards that can be obtained by conversion, not to mention the favor of God and king. But that didn't last long. Christians became angry because "former" Jews now held the reins of power. It was reasoned, and perhaps not completely wrong, that these conversos, these new Christians were not real Christians, and therefore couldn't be trusted. They didn't really adopt Christianity on their own. If there were never any pressure to find the true faith, these scoundrels would have remained Jews. They converted for the power and the status. According to that reasoning, so did the thousands of starving Jews and Muslims with the sword at their throat. It was this reasoning that ushered in the Inquisition.

The marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand finally united the kingdoms of Aragon and Castile. As individual monarchs, both regarded Jews as lawful subjects deserving of protection. It was rumored that Ferdinand was part Jewish. But upon uniting the kingdoms and being christened "the Catholic Monarchs," they became more susceptible to the pronouncements of the Pope. Isabella was concerned that new Christians holding positions of authority and power might secretly be practicing their ancient rites. A Dominican prior named Alonso de Hojeda successfully argued that only an Inquisition under royal control could adequately counter the threat. Therefore, in 1478, the couple asked for and received permission from Rome to act upon the prior's advice. In 1481, in Seville, a dramatic auto-de-fa initiated the inauspicious beginning of the Spanish Inquisition, with the burning at the stake of dozens of members of the most prominent Converso families. For those who converted to escape death and persecution, as well as those who converted to retain positions of power, the next decades proved horrific. By the end of the century 30,000 conversos were destroyed and another 100,000 were slightly less effected.

In 1482, in an attempt to separate practicing Jews from their Converso brethren, the Inquisition expelled Jews from Seville, Cordoba that once proud center of intellectual discourse, and Cadiz. In 1484 Saragossa and Teruel were added to the list.

At this time, Granada was still an Islamic kingdom. When the battle against the Muslim kingdom was rejoined, it wasn't long before the city fell. According to legend, in 1491, after securing safe passage for himself and leniency for his subjects, the king sighed as he left Granada while his mother railed that he was not man enough to defend the city.

It was around this time that a hideous blood libel accusation was trumped up against the Jews after lurid confessions extracted after vicious torture. A Converso named Benito Garcia was dragged before the Inquisition and charged with taking part in the crucifixion of a Christian child on the eve of Passover, not that a child had been missing in LaGuardia were the murder was said to take place. The incident had so shaken Queen Isabella that a 16th century historian later stated that the LaGuardia affair was one of the main factors that moved Ferdinand and Isabella to sign the expulsion decree. The other was the success of the partial expulsion a decade earlier. On August 2, 1492, the Sephardim were spending their last night on Spanish soil and in the port of Palos, three ships under the command of Christopher Columbus were undergoing final

preparations for their historic journey.