

# THE JEWS IN SPAIN

## An Introduction



History has a strange way of telescoping itself in the popular mind. Since it is all about 'the past', the time period of that past becomes as remote – or as near – as yesterday. Rooted as human perception is in the finite world of the here and now, distinctions between centuries tend to blur, and hundreds of years merge dimly together until what they have achieved is merely a vague impression.

What is loosely designated the 'Golden Age' of Jewish creativity in Spain lasted for eight hundred years. This is a short enough period viewed in the context of recorded Jewish history which stretches over five millennia. But the period is not short when it is viewed in the context of recorded Western history. The whole of modern English literature, for example, has unfolded itself over little more than six centuries. Jewish culture in Spain lasted two centuries longer than that, yet people generally tend to think of Muslim and Christian rule in Spain as being co-extensive, and Shmuel Ha-Nagid, Yehuda Halevi and Rabbi Joseph Caro as contemporaries. For this reason we open this special issue commemorating *Sepharad* 92 with a brief, and necessarily superficial, overview of those eight centuries.

Following the collapse of the western Roman empire in the fifth century CE, Spain was conquered by the Visigoths who converted to Christianity. By the turn of the sixth century, they attempted to unite the country they ruled under the new religion they had embraced, and the forced conversion of Jews, who had lived in the country from at least the first century, became part of state policy. The Jewish response – to convert publicly and to practise Judaism in secret – was the first manifestation of their typical defence against religious persecution in Spain which was to resurface some 750 years later.

As rulers, the Visigoths were neither united nor effective, so that when the Caliph of Damascus was invited to intervene in Spain, his troops were welcomed by both the local aristocracy and the Jews. Between 711 and 718 the invaders brought the whole Iberian Peninsula under their control.

The new Muslim rulers used little propaganda and no force to obtain religious conversions. Indeed, the Arab leaders, who in the preceding half century had already occupied many lands with large

Christian populations, were specifically tolerant of 'Peoples of the Book' – Jews and Christians whose revealed religion and holy books were respected as precursors of the final revelation which Muslims believed had been made by Allah to his Prophet Muhammad. Both religious groups were classified as *ahl-al-dhimma*, the people of protection, which was granted on the payment of fixed taxes. Within this framework, by which the superiority of Islam was acknowledged, Jews and Christians were treated as separate communities with considerable internal autonomy.

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### THE ISLAMIC COURT

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Spain formed part of the great united Umayyad caliphate (660-750) until it was rent asunder in 750 when the Abbasids overthrew Umayyad rule in Damascus, and moved the capital of the Islamic empire to Baghdad. An able young Umayyad prince, who escaped the slaughter of his family in Damascus, arrived in Spain with a few close advisers in 756, and through an offer of virtual independence for Spain from the new Abbasid caliph, established the emirate of Córdoba under the name of Abd-al-Rahman I. The dynasty and its central administration which he set up was to function for the next two and a half centuries. As far as possible, he followed a policy of tolerance towards all ethnic and religious groups, developing at the same time a strong army and economic independence from Damascus. From the time of his conquest until almost the end of the eighth century, independent Christian Spain was confined to two small kingdoms in the north, Asturias and Navarre.

The Islamic court encouraged and patronised poets and philosophers, writers and scientists. Jews rose to elevated positions in the administration of





Spain at the beginning of the ninth century

the state. Successive emirs made important government appointments strictly on merit, choosing administrators for their learning, ability and integrity. While succession to the emirate, by contrast with other high offices, was hereditary, the emir tried to arrange for the succession of his ablest – not necessarily his eldest – son.

The limits on Islamic control of Spain became very clear during the ninth century. The emir Abd-al-Rahman III (912-961) spent the first twenty years of his reign putting down persistent revolts. When he announced his full independence from Baghdad by assuming the title of caliph in 929, he was at least partly motivated by the need to give his Hispano-Muslim subjects some sense of independent national identity. Córdoba's domination of the Peninsula rested on her flourishing economy, the diplomatic skills of her caliphs, and her great reputation in all branches of learning, particularly medicine. In the tenth century princes and wealthy men came from all parts of western Europe to be treated by Córdoba's physicians, and the work of these physicians was one of the glories of the caliphate.

Abd-al-Rahman's son and successor, Al-Hakam (961-976) continued his father's policies. He was himself less forceful, more intellectual and religious, having a personal library of nearly half a million books and spending lavishly to extend the Great Mosque of Córdoba which had been erected by Abd-al-Rahman I in 785. His death in 976 caused a grave political crisis, since his only surviving son was a sickly boy of eleven whose claims to the throne were supported by the ambitions of the late

caliph's mint-master, Al-Mansur, 'the victorious one' as he subsequently called himself. He became virtual dictator of Spain for the next twenty years, ruling Córdoba from 981 until his death in 1002. When Al-Mansur died, the caliphate disintegrated rapidly and Christian Spain began to forge a military power of its own and develop its own political and social institutions.

In 1085 the Christians, under the command of King Alfonso VI who had united the kingdoms of Leon and Castile, wrested control of Toledo from the Muslims. The Muslim princes of Andalusia, feeling unable to contain Alfonso militarily, appealed for help to the Almoravids, a fanatical Berber tribe who ruled North Africa. The Almoravids introduced a rule harshly intolerant of the Jewish and Christian minorities, but they rapidly softened under the influence of the sophisticated civilisation they had subjugated, and by 1147 they themselves had been swept from power both in North Africa and in Spain by the Almohads, an even more fanatical Muslim tribe originating in the Atlas mountains. These new conquerors recognised the spiritual supremacy of Baghdad and introduced reforms which persecuted the local Muslim community as much as the Christians and the Jews; as a result there was a large exodus of Jews from the Muslim south to the Christian north of Spain.

During the twelfth century their new Christian rulers valued and protected the middle-class functions performed by both Jews and Muslims. Wealthy Andalusian Jews, whose services were doubly valuable to the kings because of their knowledge of Arabic and of Islamic politics, were



frequently exempted from the legal jurisdiction and the collective tax responsibilities of the local governing authorities.

### NEW CHRISTIAN RULERS

Alfonso X, who was the first sovereign to rule a Castile which stretched from the Cantabrian ports to the tip of Andalusia, liked to style himself the 'King of the Three Religions'. His father-in-law, James I of Aragon, was equally solicitous for the welfare of all his subjects, and their successors generally followed a similar policy. This was a matter of both personal enlightenment and political necessity. The Jews were the natural intermediaries between Muslim and Christian Spain since the educated among them often spoke both Arabic and Castilian, and many Jews had family connections in both parts of Spain. Certain elements in the Church, and the fervour generated by the Crusades, always constituted a latent threat of persecution. But in the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Jews were not subjected to legal disabilities in Christian Spain.

During the thirteenth century contradictory currents prevailed. On the one hand the majority of ordinary Jews continued the artisan and agricultural functions which had long been characteristic of them. They also participated in the reconquest of Andalusia, and were rewarded with land and houses, just as were Christian participants. But the Albigensian crusade in France, and the rise of the mendicant orders, produced a new wave of hostility within the Church itself. Toleration, however, was both traditional and necessary for the Spanish sovereigns, and they continued on the whole to protect established Jewish communities.

Perhaps the most valued field of Jewish service to Christian sovereigns and lords was finance. The kings, having nothing resembling a bureau of internal revenue, depended upon tax farming – the practice of contracting with an individual who would collect taxes on behalf of the king, and receive an agreed commission payment for such service. Many of the tax-farmers were Jewish, because Christians did not offer themselves as candidates for this dangerous and unpopular occupation.

Besides their important economic functions, the Jews at the court of Alfonso X played a central role in the development of Spanish literary and intellectual life. They offered to Castile and Aragon the entire heritage of Islamic and Hebrew culture as it had flourished in Andalusia from the ninth to the twelfth centuries. Their knowledge of Arabic and Hebrew made them eager collaborators of a sovereign enthusiastic to make learned work available to his people in their own language. Jewish scholars, compilers, and editors translated into Castilian the

major astronomical, mathematical, botanical, medical and philosophical works of the Arab world. The famous Alphonsine Tables were the work of two Jewish astronomers, who dedicated their book to the king. Castilian became, through the collaboration of Alfonso X and the Jews of his court, the natural vehicle for a high intellectual culture.

Inevitably Castilian was adapted by the Jews for their own cultural use. They added to the spoken Castilian tongue words and syntactical permutations which Judaised it, insisting, for example, on writing Castilian – as they had written Arabic earlier – in the characters of the Hebrew alphabet. This Judeo-Castilian dialect of Spanish, known as Ladino, became part of the cultural baggage of Sephardi Jews. Changes in that dialect reflect Jewish values. Thus in Ladino, in order to spiritualise the material, some words which are masculine in Spanish became feminine in Ladino: *la honor* (honour), *la alma* (the soul). Some words imported from Hebrew into Ladino change their meaning: *metziut*, which means 'reality' in Hebrew, means 'contentment' in Ladino; *oseh shalom*, which means 'makes peace' in Hebrew, means 'retreat' in Ladino. Some Hebrew words, without which no Jewish vocabulary in any language is complete, have been given a Spanish form in Ladino: *desmazalado* means 'unlucky', *mazalado* means 'lucky': both words obviously derive from *mazal*, 'luck'. Thus *sekanozo*, 'dangerous', comes from the Hebrew *sakanah*, 'danger' and *secheludo*, 'intelligent' from *sechel*, 'intelligence'. At the same time as the Jews made available to their Christian overlords translations of major works of scholarship in Castilian, they made available to their own people a great variety of both sacred and secular texts in Ladino.

The earliest Ladino writings were translations of the Bible; other religious works were adaptations of books originally written in Hebrew like Bahya ibn Pakuda's *Hovot Ha-levavot* and Joseph Caro's *Shulchan Arukh*. A popular literary form peculiar to Ladino is the *Romancero*, folk ballads set to music, originally transmitted orally, and only recently transcribed.

### THE GROWTH OF JEW-HATRED

The most determined enemies of both Jews and Muslims were the new mendicant orders. In the 1240s Jews and Muslims were ordered by the crown of Aragon to attend the sermons of the Dominicans and Franciscans. Public disputations were organised, in which rabbis were forced to debate with friars. Many of these, such as the four-day disputation in Barcelona in 1267, had to be adjourned, despite royal patronage, because of threats of mob violence against rabbis who defended their faith too success-





Disputation with the Jews, who are drawn in caricature  
(From a 13th-century manuscript)

fully. Dominican scholars with some knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic also censored available editions of the Talmud. The Church continuously pressed the *Cortes* (parliament) to pass laws restricting Jewish activities and demanding distinctive Jewish dress.

Probably the largest single factor in the rapid growth of Jew-hatred was the ravages of the Black Death. Up to half of the population of western Europe died of this variety of bubonic plague, which spread rapidly over the Continent in 1348. The sheer massiveness of such mortality entailed a complete breakdown of established authority, and its cause and spread was widely attributed to the Jews.

In 1378 Ferrant Martinez, archdeacon of Ecija, began to preach violent sermons against the Jews. In 1390 Martinez called for the razing of all the synagogues in Seville, and urged the peasants to expel the Jews from their villages. On 4 June the Jewish quarter was sacked. Some hundreds of Jews were murdered outright, thousands were forcibly converted to Christianity, and a large number of women and children were sold to Muslim slave traders. Similar attacks and forced conversions were visited on the Jews throughout both Castile and Aragon.

One of the converts, a native of Burgos, was the scion of an old and wealthy tax-farming family. In 1391 Solomon Halevi was baptised under the name Paul of Santa Maria, after which he began to preach savage anti-Jewish sermons. In 1415 he became bishop of Burgos and a powerful persecutor of the Jews, co-operating actively in the efforts of Vincent Ferrer to eliminate the Jewish communities of Castile.

Ferrer toured the cities of Castile, exhorting the Jews voluntarily to convert. At the same time, he and his peasant followers terrorised them by

forcibly entering their synagogues and by evicting them from their homes. He urged on the Crown a new set of restrictive laws which were duly enacted: Jews were forbidden to serve as tax-farmers or other government officials; communities which had escaped destruction in 1391 lost their traditional independent municipal status. Presumably for these endeavours, Vincent Ferrer was declared a saint after his death.

The mass conversion among Jews at the end of the fourteenth century produced an entirely new social group, the so-called *conversos* or 'New' Christians, who changed their faith either from self-interest or fear. But mass conversion did not eliminate the ethnic prejudices of the 'Old' Christians of Castile, and it split the Jewish community into two mutually fearful camps. The Jewish establishment had always opposed intermarriage. Now they increasingly employed informers to trace the lineage, the social and business connections of their fellow Jews. At the same time some *conversos* became zealous persecutors of their former co-religionists, while others hoped that rational considerations would allow them to play a constructive intermediary role. From 1391 onwards, the decimated Jewish communities and the new caste of *conversos* lived between opportunism and terror.

From the twelfth century, popular superstition had presented the Jews as a social and physical danger. But at least Jews were known, they lived in recognisable communities, they were forced to wear distinguishing marks and dress. When they became *conversos*, or, as the populace called them, *marranos* – a term of abuse derived from the Spanish word for 'swine' – they became a hidden danger. As Jews they suffered from severe legal disabilities; as *conversos* they had the same economic rights, in theory, as other Christians. A *marrano* was thus much more unpopular than a practising Jew because he was an interloper.

The rabbis warned what would happen. Rabbi Yizhak Arama told converts: 'You will find no rest among the Gentiles, and your life will hang in the balance'. Of the *anusim* or forced converts he prophesied: 'One-third burnt by fire, one-third flying hither to hide, and those who remain in deadly fear.'

This pessimistic view was soon confirmed by events. A Spanish Jew found he could not evade Jew-hatred by converting. If he moved to another town, as many did, his Christianity became even more suspect. In fifteenth-century Spain, a Jew could not be persecuted on religious grounds because he was born a Jew, or his parents were; it had to be shown that he was still practising Judaism secretly in some form. In the 1440s the first anti-*conversos* riots broke out in Toledo. The state was terrified of riots which it could neither prevent nor adequately punish, so it sought to remove the cause





## The thirteenth-century Reconquest

by attacking the *conversos*. One Franciscan fanatic, Alfonso de Espina, a *converso* himself, compiled a volume listing, among other things, twenty-five 'transgressions' by which treacherous *conversos* could be identified. Alfonso advocated isolation and segregation: Church and State alike should combine to search out and destroy those among the *conversos* who, by practising Judaism, were legally heretics.

## FERDINAND AND ISABELLA

When in 1469 Isabella of Castile married her cousin Ferdinand of Aragon, the two kingdoms, which had been ruled separately for the previous five centuries, and which had been torn by civil war for much of the fifteenth century, were united. Ferdinand held full authority in Aragon, and the two were co-sovereigns in Castile.

Ferdinand and Isabella were both persons of outstanding intelligence. Ferdinand was crafty, cool and courageous. Neither sentimental nor idealistic, he interested himself actively in economic and financial regulations. Isabella had broader interests, but she was a religious bigot, and shared the prejudices of her 'Old' Christian subjects against Jews, *conversos* and Muslims. Once she had ensured royal control of the nobility, and had public opinion grateful for the achievement of law and order, she was determined to complete the territorial reconquest of Spain and to rid both kingdoms of heretics and Jews. The final war against Granada occupied the decade between 1481 and 1491. Her most serious logistical problem was how to pay the wages of the Spanish troops, and how to meet the costs of

road and bridge building and siege warfare. She found the perfect instrument for both her financial needs and her religious preoccupations in building up an institution which was destined to play an immense role in the Hispanic world for three centuries to come: the Spanish Inquisition.

The state adopted Alfonso de Espina's anti-Jewish programme. Segregation was decreed by the Cortes at Toledo in 1480. The first inquisitors, including the vicar-general of the Dominicans, were appointed and began work in January 1481. The first *auto da fé* took place in Seville in February 1481, and altogether some two thousand *converso* 'heretics' were burned during the 1480s. From February 1483 the entire organisation was put under central control, with a Dominican prior, Tomás de Torquemada, at its head. In less than twelve years the Inquisition condemned about thirteen thousand *conversos*, men and women, for the secret practice of Judaism. Arrests were made in secret. Families were warned to say nothing, and a suspect's property was immediately sequestered to pay the costs of both the Inquisition and the Granadan war. Victims were urged to make full confessions of their own Judaising activities, and to name all their acquaintances who might have engaged in similar acts. The completeness of the main confession was tested by torture, names of hostile witnesses were kept secret, and there was no right of cross-examination. The evidence of relatives was used against the defendant, but could not be cited on his behalf. Jews, Muslims and personal servants could not testify to the suspect's innocence. The royal inquisition was almost a state within a state.



Inquisitors were entitled to free lodging, were exempt from local taxes and from the jurisdiction of both secular and ecclesiastical courts. Their secrecy, their autonomy, their royal patronage and their appeal to the worst prejudices of the ignorant and superstitious, terrorised all those who could not be completely certain of their religious orthodoxy and their 'Old' Christian lineage.

For the leading inquisitors, many of whom, like Torquemada, were themselves *conversos*, it was the Jews as such, rather than the *conversos*, who were the great enemy, and Torquemada urged upon the Catholic sovereigns the necessity of exiling the Jews from their dominions. During the Granadan War these sovereigns had borrowed money from Jews and used Jewish tax-farmers; their restrictive decrees had been only half-heartedly applied in practice. It was therefore almost impossible for the Jews to believe, when Isabella signed the Decree offering conversion or expulsion, that the end had really come. They tried once more, as on past occasions, to substitute a money ransom for the stark choice. But the Queen insisted on literal application. She was perfectly well aware of the economic and social effects of her policies. Thus, answering criticisms of the Inquisition which had disturbed the pope himself, she wrote to her papal ambassador as follows:

I have caused great calamities and depopulated towns, lands, provinces, and kingdoms, but I have acted thus from love of Christ and His Holy Mother. Those are liars and calumniators who say I have done so for love of money, for I have never myself touched a *maravedi* from the confiscated goods of the dead. On the contrary I have employed the money in educating and giving marriage portions to the children of the condemned.

Isabella may well personally have been a racial and religious bigot. But one ruler's personal emotions alone could not account for a series of actions so significant as the establishment of the Holy Office and the expulsion of the Jews. Jew-hatred had been rising in Spain from the time of the Black Death. The events of the years between 1391 and 1416 had created the *converso* problem without 'solving' the Jewish question. Throughout the fifteenth century ordinary people in Castile had increasingly identified the Jews and the *conversos* with their own impoverishment, so that the expulsion of the Jews, with the insistence that they leave their valuables behind, seemed to them well justified ways of restoring to Castile what the Jews had robbed from her over centuries.

The emirs and caliphs of the ninth and tenth centuries, and the Christian kings of the thirteenth to the mid-fifteenth, had tried to establish pluralistic

régimes with three recognised religious communities owing loyalty to a single dynastic sovereign. But these efforts had collapsed in civil wars and in revolutions of rising expectations, both in eleventh-century Andalusia and in fifteenth-century Castile and Aragon. To the newly-united Catholic monarchs and their successors, therefore, it seemed that Spain could be governed peaceably only on the basis of religious unity, and this they were determined to enforce.

In 1492 Castile simultaneously completed the reconquest, expelled the Jews, and discovered America. She drastically contracted her economic and intellectual resources just at the moment when she was about to become a world power. She resolutely turned her back on the ideal of cultural pluralism at the very moment when she was about to extend her rule over native Americans of greatly varied cultures.

This introduction attempts to give some sense of that perspective which most of us, caught up in the pressures of today and the anxieties of tomorrow, have understandably lost. It tries to suggest – for it cannot do more – something of the vast social, political and religious upheavals which took place during eight centuries of Spanish history. And it hopes to provide a context in which each of the essays which follows may become readily accessible itself, and in which all may consequently illuminate one another. Each has been offered in tribute to an age which is etched on the creative consciousness not only of the Jewish people alone, but upon that of all humanity. To commemorate the pride in so great an achievement, and to inspire a generous spirit of reconciliation, all these essays were especially written.

The act of writing not only records – it requires. When Hasdai ibn Shaprut learned in tenth century Spain of the existence of a Jewish kingdom somewhere in distant lands beyond the Black Sea, he is reported to have written to its ruler in terms which expressed his yearning for confirmation of the national identity and pride of the Jewish people:

When we first heard the fame of my lord the King and the power of his dominions we lifted up our head, and our spirit revived. The kingdom of my lord furnished us with an answer to the taunt, 'Every other people has its kingdom, but of yours there is no memorial upon earth.'

Perhaps in this small collection of essays, in our changed and ever-changing times, we shall find a more lasting confirmation and a more permanent memorial to that pride and that imperishable identity. □

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