

✎ INTRODUCTION ✎

“THE SPANISH MIRACLE—”

three words were all it took S. D. Goitein, the great historian of medieval Mediterranean society, to sum up the phenomenon that was the Golden Age of Hebrew poetry in Iberia. The emergence in the tenth century of this vibrant Hebrew literature seemed miraculous to Goitein, as it has to so many others who have come to know it well, because the poetry appeared virtually full-blown, at the far western edge of the medieval Jewish world, after more than a millennium of almost exclusively liturgical and ingrown poetic activity in the language. Suddenly, for the first time since the apocryphal Book of Ben Sira, Hebrew poets were writing with tremendous power about a wide range of subjects, including wine, war, friendship, erotic longing, wisdom, fate, grief, and both metaphysical and religious mystery. They did so in a variety of sophisticated modes, taken over for the most part from the by-then well-established tradition of Arabic verse, onto which they grafted a biblical vocabulary and a potent Hebraic mythopoetic vision.¹

The best of that radically new secular and religious verse produced in Muslim Andalusia and Christian Spain ranks with the finest poetry of the European Middle Ages—or, for that matter, of any medieval era. Embodying an extraordinary sensuality and an intense faith that reflected contemporary understanding of the created world and its order, this curiously alloyed poetry confronts the twenty-first-century reader with a worldview and aesthetic that in many respects defy modern oppositional notions of self and other, East and West, Arab and Christian and Jew, as it flies in the face of our received sense of what Hebrew has done and can do, and even what Jewishness means.² At the same time, its densely woven brocade, deriving as it does from the charged culture of Spanish *convivencia*, or coexistence, can speak with startling directness to us today, when identities are increasingly compounded and borders easily crossed. For in opening their lives to the entire expanse of Greco-Arabic and Hebrew learning, the dictionally pure Jewish poets of Cordoba, Granada, and Saragossa carried out an act of profound, if paradoxical, cultural redemption. As they translated both the essence of their knowledge and the effects of Arabic poetry into an innovative Hebrew verse—and in the process risked loss of linguistic and religious self to immersion in the foreign—the Hebrew poets of Spain found,

or founded, one of the most powerful languages of Jewish expression postbiblical literature has known.³

A PARADISE GROVE

The trail of that hybrid verse leads back to the middle of the tenth century, when a young Moroccan poet with the Berber name of Dunash Ben Labrat arrived in Cordoba. Dunash had made his way to Iberia from Baghdad, where he was studying with the greatest Jewish figure of his day, Sa'adia Ben Yosef al-Fayyumi. From Sa'adia, who was the *gaon*, or head, of the Babylonian Jewish academy of Sura from 928 to 942, Dunash had absorbed a keen appreciation of Arabic and its notion of *fasaaha* (elegance, clarity, or purity), as well as its importance for the understanding of Hebrew—and especially Hebrew Scripture. Armed with that passion and the learning it led to, Dunash was importing to Spain a trunkful of new poetic strategies that would—whether he meant them to or not—soon change the face of Hebrew literature. While the process of that change remains obscure, the city of Cordoba clearly lay at its heart.

In wandering westward Dunash was trading one metropolis for another. Over the course of nearly two centuries Abbasid Baghdad had come to be considered the most spectacular city in the world. There, in a cultural vortex of extraordinary force, men of letters took in through translation the vast intellectual treasures of Greek and Persian antiquity, along with those of India (and perhaps China). Arabic literature flourished, as major poets refined their verse with a complex array of formal and thematic modes. By the mid-tenth century, Cordoba under the blue-eyed Umayyad caliph of Spanish-Basque descent, 'Abd al-Rahmaan III (r. 912–61), was in many ways a Western version of the Round City of Peace on the Tigris, and a rival in splendor to Constantinople. It too was a city of great sophistication and diversity: Jews, Muslims, and Christians contributed to its prosperity, and ethnic division between and within these communities was—for a time—held at bay. Centralized administration constructed on Abbasid, Byzantine, and Persian models was improved—with, for instance, a well-maintained and policed network of roads and regular postal service (using carrier pigeons) linking the seat of the government and the provinces. The economy thrived, as the so-called Green Revolution of Muslim Spain increased cultivation of the land. Advanced irrigation techniques brought from the east led Arab chroniclers of the day to describe the elaborate systems of canals and the thousands of

water wheels that dotted the landscape. A near-alphabet of crops were imported, including apricots, artichokes, bananas, carrots, eggplants, figs, hard wheat, lemons, oranges, parsnips, peaches, pomegranates, rice, saffron, spinach, sugarcane, and watermelon—our words for which derive, in many cases, from the Arabic: *naranj*, *ruzz*, *za'afraan*, *sukkar*, *sabaanakh*.⁴

Commerce boomed, and al-Andalus became known for the goods it produced. Paper, wool, silk, cotton (*qutn*), linen fabrics, and much more were exported—Goitein called medieval Mediterranean trade in textiles the equivalent of the twentieth-century steel industry or stock market⁵—along with agricultural products and slaves. Imports included aromatic wood and spices from India and China; slaves from France and northern Europe; horses from North Africa and the Arabian peninsula; marble from Greece, Syria, Italy, and the Maghreb; singing girls and volumes of songs from Iraq; books and manuscripts from Cairo and Alexandria; and carpets from Persia.⁶

Power was maintained by an enormous army and fleet (the latter, it's said, the largest in the world at its time)—manned by a mix of Arabs, Berbers, Christians, and foreign mercenaries or purchased Slavs—and the kingdom was gradually enlarged. Arms factories near Cordoba reportedly produced some one thousand bows and twenty thousand arrows a month, and fortresses sprang up across the landscape as revenues from the new conquests filled the treasury.⁷

Above all, Andalusian culture flourished, having come a long way from the pioneer coarseness of the soldiers who had settled the peninsula in the early eighth century, when Taariq Ibn Ziyaad crossed the straits and landed at the rock he called Jabal al-Taariq (Taariq's mountain), the collapsed Romanized form of which yields our Gibraltar.⁸ Two hundred years of Muslim rule, beginning with the stabilizing reign of 'Abd al-Rahmaan I (r. 756–88), had seen Spain develop from a provincial outpost at the ends of the empire to a major Mediterranean power.⁹ The learned and pious 'Abd al-Rahmaan II (r. 822–52) established a brilliant formal court on the eastern caliphal model, expanded the city's great mosque, and built many smaller mosques, palaces, baths, roads, bridges, and gardens. He also began developing Cordoba's library, which in time would become the largest by far in medieval Europe. (Under 'Abd al-Rahmaan III's son and successor, al-Hakam II [r. 961–76], it held some 400,000 volumes.) Book buyers were sent to all ends of the Islamic empire, and back in Cordoba a team of calligraphers was maintained for “the rapid multiplication of new acquisitions.” Smaller private and public libraries were common, and the bibliomaniacal capital hosted a huge book market,

which employed some seventy copyists for the Quran alone—including many women. Women also worked as librarians, teachers, doctors, and lawyers. The new urban wonder acted as a magnet for poets and musicians in particular, the most prominent of whom was the Persian musician Ziryaab, who—legend has it—had fallen out of favor at the ninth-century Abbasid court and decided to try his luck in the West. With him Ziryaab brought the refinements of cosmopolitan Baghdad, including new hairstyles (showing the neck), seasonal wardrobes, the use of toothpaste and deodorants, orchestrated multi-course meals (at which asparagus was served), and, more to the point, his prodigious knowledge of music, poetry, art, and science.¹⁰ Arabic itself spread slowly but with remarkable effect, and by the mid-tenth century Jews, Christians, North-African Berber Muslims, and Christian converts were competing with the Arabs themselves for mastery of that most beautiful of languages, which became both the lingua franca of al-Andalus and the currency of high culture.¹¹ Under the leadership of ‘Abd al-Rahmaan III, who saw his kingdom’s diversity as its strength and managed to unite the disparate communities of al-Andalus, Cordoba’s population swelled, with immigrants streaming to the clean, well-lit streets of the city that one Christian poet described as “the ornament of the world.”¹²

While the Umayyad capital resembled Baghdad in almost every respect, Jewish society in al-Andalus had begun to take on a different cast from that of the socially conservative world of Babylonian Jewry.¹³ Oppressed for well over a century by the Visigothic rulers of Hispania, Jews had welcomed the Muslim invaders as saviors and no doubt proved valuable allies to the conquering foreigners, who knew neither the lay nor the language of the land. Arabic sources confirm this cooperation and note that Jews were often settled in conquered towns and entrusted with their garrisons, as the Muslim army advanced. While there were still hardships to bear, life in eighth-century Muslim Spain offered Jews opportunities they could not have dreamed of under the Visigoths.¹⁴ As people of the book (*ahl al-kitaab*), Jews—like Christians—were accorded *dhimmi*, or protected, status. Enforcement of the regulations governing *dhimmis*, which varied throughout the Muslim world, were for the first several centuries relaxed in Spain, and the rate of Jewish conversion seems to have been quite low. Little by little Jews adopted Arab ways of dressing and speaking—as well as of shopping, eating, reading, singing, composing music, and writing—and they were allowed to practice an array of occupations.¹⁵ They farmed and owned land, managed vineyards, olive groves, and workshops, and

eventually worked in medicine, textile production, trade, and even in government service. Synagogues were built and communities prospered, and Spanish Jewry enjoyed a kind of limited autonomy within the Muslim emirate. It wasn't long before North African Jews who had fled the Visigoths began returning to their homes.¹⁶

By the time Dunash arrived in Cordoba, Jewish intellectual life in the city was also stirring. The driving force behind that awakening was a gifted Jewish physician, Hasdai Ibn Shaprut (c. 910–75), who is the first Spanish Jew to be mentioned by name in the Arab records of the day.¹⁷ Born to a wealthy family that had moved to Cordoba from Jaén, on the eastern coast of Spain, Hasdai demonstrated a talent for languages, early on learning Arabic, Latin, and Romance (proto-Spanish), as well as Hebrew and Aramaic. His passion, however, was medicine, and while still a young man he acquired a measure of fame as a Cordovan physician. When, around 940, he announced that he had succeeded in compounding *theriaca*, a Roman miracle drug whose formula had been lost for centuries, he was summoned to an audience with the caliph and added to the ranks of his court physicians. Hasdai continued to impress 'Abd al-Rahmaan III with both his knowledge and his way with people, and soon he was appointed to the shipping division of the customs bureau, where he supervised the collection of duties from ships entering and leaving Andalusia's busy ports.¹⁸ From time to time the caliph also consulted Hasdai about diplomatic affairs, taking advantage of his linguistic range and his tact, and the Jewish physician helped receive delegations from the German emperor Otto I and Ordoño III, king of León, with whom he negotiated a peace treaty and whose heir (Sancho) he successfully treated for obesity.¹⁹

'Abd al-Rahmaan III also appointed Hasdai to the position of *nasi*, or head of Andalusian Jewry, over which he had supreme authority. As *nasi* Hasdai engaged in foreign Jewish affairs, writing to Helena, the wife of the Byzantine emperor, asking her to protect the Byzantine Jewish community from persecution. He maintained ties with the communities of Palestine and Babylonia and sought out contact with the Khazars—the independent kingdom of Jewish converts on the plains between the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus Mountains—at one stage exchanging letters with the Khazar king. As his position in the caliph's court solidified, he began to sponsor a court of his own, which he developed along the Muslim model. He supported Jewish intellectuals in a number of fields, from religious studies to science and literature. He commissioned the copying and import of books, encouraged the immigration of scholars to

al-Andalus, and, over a period of some fifty years, catalyzed Spain's development as a center of Jewish culture—no longer reliant on the eastern academies.²⁰

Like the Arab Andalusian courts of the time, Hasdai's had its poet.²¹ Menahem Ben Saruq was born—probably around the turn of the millennium—to a Tortosan family of modest means and came as a young man to Cordoba, which had much more to offer an aspiring intellectual than did the remote northeastern town of his birth.²² He was supported in the capital by Hasdai's father, Yitzhaq, while he pursued philological studies and served as the aristocratic family's house poet, composing verse to mark special occasions. In time he returned to his home in the north, where he set himself up in business, but after Hasdai's appointment to 'Abd al-Rahmaan's service, the *nasi* wrote to Menahem and asked him to return to Cordoba and take up a position as his Hebrew secretary. It was, in fact, Menahem who wrote to Byzantium in 948, and to the Khazar king several years later, on which occasion he described al-Andalus:

The country in which we dwell is called in the sacred tongue Sefarad,²³ but in the language of the Arabs . . . al-Andalus. The land is fat, and rivers and springs and quarried cisterns abound. Wheat and corn cover the fields, the yield of which is great. And pleasant groves and gardens of various sorts are found. All kinds of fruit trees flourish, and trees on whose leaves the silk worms feed, and silkworms we have aplenty. On our hills and in our forests the crimson worm is gathered. Saffron covers our slopes and mountains. Veins of silver and gold can be found . . . and from our mountains copper is mined, and iron and tin and lead, along with sulfur, marble, porphyry and crystal . . . for which merchants come from all corners of the land. And from every region and the distant islands of the sea, traders stream to it, from Egypt and the adjacent countries, bringing perfumes and spices, and precious gems.²⁴

The letter was prefaced by an impressive quasi-martial panegyric with messianic overtones.²⁵ We also know that Menahem composed poems in praise of Hasdai and others, and on the death of both of Hasdai's parents—though these did little to win the affection of his patron, who seems at best to have tolerated his poet and scribe, and failed to provide him with the sort of remuneration he had promised.

The recent discovery and publication of several other poems by Menahem has helped scholars adjust the creation-ex-nihilo version of the story of Hebrew poetry in Spain and draw a far more nuanced, if no less mar-

velous, picture of the cultural scene just prior to the start of the Golden Age, for they confirm that Menahem had absorbed at least some of the secular elements of the Arabic literary culture that surrounded him. Although he continued to compose in the Eastern style that had dominated Hebrew poetry for the preceding several centuries in Palestine and Babylonia—a style which is Jewish through and through and admits no taint of the foreign to the verse itself—the secular social setting for the poetry of the future had in fact already begun to evolve.²⁶ Moreover, we now know that Menahem also wrote liturgical verse (in a still more-antiquated Eastern style), and one leading scholar has suggested that such sacred verse must have been written by Spanish-Hebrew poets for at least part of the two hundred and fifty years of Muslim rule in Spain preceding the generation of Hasdai.²⁷

While he was serving as court poet and penning poems for various occasions, Menahem was working toward the completion of his major scholarly work, a Hebrew dictionary based on contemporary understanding of the system of Hebrew roots. Whether a product of his own initiative or one commissioned by Ibn Shaprut, the dictionary is an indication of the interest Jewish intellectuals in Spain were beginning to take in the study of Hebrew (and of the integral link between that study and poetry). In this too they were no doubt influenced by the Arab scholars around them—who, like their Baghdadi peers, placed supreme value on a detailed knowledge of language and its workings. As with his poetry, the substance of Menahem's philological investigations bore no *direct* trace of Arabic influence; on ideological grounds he refused to make use of what he considered degrading comparisons to the cognate Arabic, despite the fact that he spoke the language. As a result, his dictionary was—as Dunash saw it—ill informed, and the definitions he offers there of scriptural vocabulary are often problematic. Attacks, needless to say, followed.²⁸

But Menahem's troubles were just beginning. While we have little in the way of reliable evidence concerning what sounds like a series of shady affairs, scholars speculate that Menahem's enemies went to Hasdai with accusations of the poet's disloyalty (possibly charging him with the heresy of Karaism, which denied the authority of the entire rabbinic tradition). Hasdai wasted no time in having Menahem stripped and beaten—on the Sabbath, no less—as his house was razed before him, and he was thrown into jail. Wounded and indignant, Menahem wrote to Hasdai, again prefacing his message with a poem of praise and then issuing a long, desperate cry composed in a cadenced and semirhymed biblical style.²⁹

Is it you for whom I long?
 You for whom I shed my tears?
You for whom my soul pours out,
 to whom my heart submits?
I weep for the violence done [to] me—
 for my sentence the tears stream down,
and for this perversion of justice my bones give way.³⁰

Whereas Hasdai ordered the physical attack, the assault on Menahem's intellectual work was led by Dunash, who wrote a detailed and condescending corrective to the lexicon, based, among other things, on his knowledge of Arabic and Aramaic philology.³¹ This too Dunash had absorbed from Sa'adia Gaon in Baghdad. A prolific writer who "transformed almost beyond recognition the intellectual and literary agendas of the cultural elite associated with the Geonic academies,"³² the Egyptian-born Sa'adia had mastered an impressive range of disciplines that reflected the prevalent intellectual trends in both Jewish religious culture and the wider world of cosmopolitan Baghdad. It was Sa'adia who, having looked outward to Arab culture and learning and seen what the Judaism of his day was lacking, set about filling the gaps he perceived and composing everything from a dictionary for liturgical poets to biblical commentary, linguistic tracts, a prayer book, and a systematic study of theology and philosophy (*The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*) which, after several hundred pages treating creation, doubt, God, the afterlife, and more, includes modern-sounding chapters on money, children, eroticism, eating and drinking, and the satisfaction of the thirst for revenge. Writing for the most part in Judeo-Arabic—a middle register of Arabic written in Hebrew letters—so that his young Jewish contemporaries would understand him, Sa'adia also translated parts of the Bible into Arabic and composed a number of works intended to serve as models of elegant Hebrew prose. He was familiar with Greek philosophy and wrote a good deal of meditative or polemical religious poetry in the contemporary Eastern style, though here too his independent and combative spirit resulted in a breakthrough to a new kind of verse, which the later Spanish poets admired for its clarity.³³

In critical respects, then, Dunash was Sa'adia's student. In addition to his openness to Arabic and fondness for comparative philology, Dunash absorbed his teacher's desire to further the cause of Hebrew letters, the central expression of which, in Sa'adia's view, was devotional poetry.³⁴ In the introduction to his poet's dictionary, Sa'adia lamented the fact that the Jews in exile had forsaken the holy tongue:

At this our heart is appalled . . . for the sacred speech which is our redoubt has been removed from our mouths, . . . its figures are like a sealed book. . . . It would be proper for us and all the people of our God to study and understand and investigate it always, we and our children, our women and our servants; let it not depart from our mouths, for through it we will fathom the laws of our Rock's teaching and Torah, which are our lives. . . . And so [I have] written this book. . . . and they will use it to fashion literary works of various sorts, and to prepare every manner of poetry and prose, which the players and singers of songs perform, accompanied by musical instruments; and the people of God will speak in it when they come in and when they go out, and in all walks of life and work, and in their bedrooms and to their children; it will not depart from . . . their hearts.³⁵

When, still in his twenties, Dunash arrived in Cordoba—perhaps at the invitation of Hasdai—this was the cultural mission he envisioned. Like Sa'adia facing the Jews of Babylonia, he was appalled at the level of intellectual life he found before him.³⁶ He mocked Menahem's insular thinking and introduced the Cordovan Jewish community of letters both to his far more scientific philology and, more important, to the contents of his cultural trunk, which held the seemingly innocuous method he had devised to adapt the quantitative meters of Arabic poetry to Hebrew.

"Let Scripture be your Eden," he wrote, in one of those borrowed measures, "and the Arabs' books your paradise grove."

HALL OF MIRRORS

And so it is that we enter the hall of mirrors at the heart of this literature, where we find the first native-born Spanish-Hebrew poet (Menahem) writing in the derivative Eastern style, while the first poet in Iberia to compose according to what we *now* identify as the "Spanish" Hebrew style in fact smuggled his innovations in from afar—and wasn't Spanish at all. To this disorientation we can add the fructifying conjunction of circumstances that brought this situation about: an ideologically conservative but culturally assimilationist society (tenth-century Spanish Jewry) encountering the assimilationist ideology of a culturally conservative society (Babylonia in the time of Sa'adia Gaon).³⁷

The technical aspects of Dunash's metrical adaptation are not easily unpacked in English, but the gist of his accomplishment is that, in imposing the quantitative meters of a highly developed literature onto an

emerging poetry, he did for Hebrew—some would say did *to* Hebrew—what other writers who borrowed from Arabic did for Persian and Turkish, and what the Roman poets who borrowed from Greek did for Latin. The adaptation of the Arabic quantitative meters, based on distinctions between the length of vowels, endowed Hebrew for the first time with precise (if not entirely organic) criteria for measuring the pace and weave of the line, which in turn intensified the focus on the language itself and its lyric properties. Particularly when the poetry was sung or recited to musical accompaniment, as often seems to have been the case when it was performed in public, the patterns, symmetries, and series of rhythmic and aural expectations that the new meters established allowed the Arabized-accent of their Hebrew to sound like the flowing Arabic poetry that the Jewish poets admired so. Metrics aside, Dunash's prosodic revolution brought with it into Hebrew the entire history of the verse that prosody served; that is, it set before the next generations of Hebrew poets, who prized Arabic poetry and looked to it for metrical models, a fresh and vastly broadened notion of both the possible and the beautiful in poetry. In addition to emphasizing the purity and clarity of scriptural diction (*fasaaha*),³⁸ it made everything—from the structure and imagistic content of the line to its music and rhyme to the texture and spiritual heart of (Spanish)Hebrew poetry—different in Dunash's wake.³⁹

These new elements of the Hebrew literary imagination precipitated around Hasdai's court, and they were developed further in the following generation in a poetry that was often supported by other Jewish patrons. The Jewish version of the aristocratic "court setting" proved to be controversial throughout the history of the poetry, and it has been central to its interpretation—with later medieval and modern readers alike both under- and overestimating its importance for the verse itself.⁴⁰

No matter how one views it, the social setting of Andalusian Hebrew poetry often involved a discrete world with its own rhetorical and social codes. It was alien to what had been and would in modern times become mainstream Judaism, just as it is—in some respects—strange to modern literary sensibilities. Play, for instance, even beyond the lightest verse, was undoubtedly a part of the setting—though judging from the best poems and prose works of the period, that play seems to have involved less diversion and frippery than an examination of the dynamics of rhetoric and human creation, or re-creation, what T. S. Eliot meant when he said that poetry is "superior amusement."⁴¹ It is true that in seeking the support of a patron and all the perks that arrangement entailed, poets wrote numerous

lines for the usual courtly reasons: to please a friend, to make sure one's bread got buttered, to exercise one's gift, to get out a message, to bask in the limelight, and so on. "Poetry of the social lie," Kenneth Rexroth called it, in relation to the verse of medieval China. But work of this sort is rarely a poet's finest, and bodies of poetry are best judged by their exceptional rather than most "conventional" or "representative" products. The Hebrew poets' highest ideal, their notion of the good, and by extension, the good life, hardly constituted a literary country club of witty repartee, or the Andalusian equivalent of afternoon couplets, tea, and croquet. It called for *otium* (leisure) as opposed to *negotium* (absence of leisure), at the heart of which lay the artist's perennial quest for freedom, freedom *from* the business of earning a living and *for* a "relaxation" of mind into a critical, nourishing entanglement of words and the world. It involved formidable scholarship, a considerable range of affective and intellectual experience, and a demanding, self-conscious, sophisticated art.

The great figures of the Spanish-Hebrew literary renaissance were, in short, neither crumpet-munching literati in tights nor rhyme-happy rabbis with time on their hands. They were men of great learning, fierce ambition, and complex talent and spirit. They were devout, but in a manner that translates poorly into our own assumptions of faith,⁴² and they were driven by conflicting motives, at once broad-minded and defensive. Openness to the foreign, the new, and the beautiful we have already touched on. But text after text, and subtext after subtext, tell us that the Hebrew poets were spurred on as well by a pride that drove them to show that Hebrew could do what Arabic could—and sometimes do it better—even as the innate superiority of the Arabic poetic tradition was acknowledged. It is the complexity of their response to that challenge that, in many ways, lends the Hebrew verse its depth and power.⁴³

Dunash's revolution of metrical method and diction was, in other words, a revolution of sensibility, and it had its detractors. Menahem's students engaged in a fierce polemic with students of Dunash, and the immigrant from Baghdad was accused of desecrating the holy tongue and inviting national catastrophe. (Some two centuries later, one of the period's greatest poets—Yehuda HaLevi—would return to the essence of this early debate.)⁴⁴ Nonetheless, Dunash's innovative ways quickly caught on, and they were employed and developed (albeit with far-reaching changes) for the next five centuries in Spain, tentatively in caliphal Cordoba, and then, as the caliphate dissolved, in fully realized fashion within the context of the Renaissance-like city states of the Muslim Ta'ifa kingdoms, which sprang up throughout al-Andalus, ushering in

a period of great creativity in Hebrew and Arabic alike.⁴⁵ (It also took hold, at the same time, in the East, and soon thereafter in North Africa and Italy, and to a certain extent even in Ashkenaz.) This and the period that followed gave us the four giants of Hebrew verse in Spain: Shmu'el HaNagid, Shelomo Ibn Gabirol, Moshe Ibn Ezra, and Yehuda HaLevi.⁴⁶

In 1090, both the Islamic and Hebrew courtier cultures of the Ta'ifa states were disrupted by the invasion of the Almoravids, members of a strict and reformist North African Berber movement, and these were followed some fifty years later by a second and still less tolerant group of North African reformers, the Almohads. Measures imposed by these two groups in succession would eventually bring about the destruction of Andalusian Jewry. Facing crisis and, in time, threats of forced conversion or death, the Hebrew poets, and with them Hebrew culture itself, survived by migrating: some of the poets went south to the cities of North Africa, but most moved into the expanding areas of the Christian *reconquista* and what is now known as Provence, which at the time constituted a northern extension of Aragon and for all practical purposes was part of the same culture that prevailed in Sefarad.⁴⁷ Avraham Ibn Ezra—a fifth major poet, and one who straddles both periods—would wander to Italy, northern France, and even England, where he disseminated both sacred and secular elements of his Arabized learning. In Toledo, Barcelona, Gerona, and Saragossa, in Bezier, Narbonne, and Perpignan, Jewish writers and scholars became the bearers of the Andalusian cultural legacy for Christians as well, often taking an active part in the translation from Arabic into Latin of philosophical, theological, scientific, and medical texts.⁴⁸ And as was the case in tenth- and eleventh-century Muslim Spain—where the small Jewish minority could be trusted more than the ethnic rivals to a given ruling power—at times they served in official capacities. In the cultural sphere, new forms of writing became dominant, especially the rhymed-prose narrative, or *maqama* (also adapted from the Arabic), and telling changes were rung on the now classical Andalusian genres.

Often (and somewhat misleadingly) characterized as “epigonic,” this second major period in fact included numerous significant figures, among them Yehuda Alharizi, Todros Abulafia, Shelomo DePiera, and Vidal Benveniste. While it is true that the sublime quality and overall achievements of the major poets produced by Muslim Spain are not approached by the poets that follow, the Hebrew poetry written in Christian Spain surprises again and again with its lively concretion and variety. Rather than dismissing this period as a falling off, or a ghostly recollection of an increasingly distant age of grace, one might see it—as poet and scholar Dan Pagis

did—as a discrete period characterized by unique emphases, marked changes in literary taste, and a wider variety of literary centers. Extending from the mid-twelfth century into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the poetry of that second period constituted a response to the new social circumstances facing the poets: Jewish patrons emerged around the secular courts of Christian kings; class conflict broke out within the Jewish community; knowledge of Arabic declined precipitously; the literature of Christian lands (troubadour poetry, fables, heroic legends, and more) began to exert an influence on the previously Arabized Hebrew; and new spiritual and philosophical trends came to bear on the poetry, including the rise of the Qabbala and controversies surrounding Maimonides' philosophy and the teaching of secular subjects. Throughout this period, Spain's Jewish communities also faced increasing discrimination leading up to and following the catastrophic events of 1391⁴⁹ and the Disputation at Tortosa some twenty-two years later.⁵⁰

At least in part, the poetry of both periods was preserved in handwritten manuscripts that were rendered on demand for patrons or friends. At times a complete collection of a poet's work (his *diwan*) was prepared, but more often than not individual poems were copied out or smaller compilations were assembled. All of these circulated in literary communities throughout Spain and North Africa, reaching other parts of Europe, Palestine, Babylonia, and Yemen.⁵¹ Trials notwithstanding, the tradition itself would be sustained up until the Expulsion, and then live on in transformed fashion in the countries of the Sephardic diaspora. While much was lost, in a few happy and, once again, miraculous instances, items were rediscovered during the modern era, and to this day new finds continue to emerge.⁵²

TRANSLATION AND TRACE OF THAT POWER

Translators throughout the Middle Ages, as we've seen, played a vital part in the emergence of medieval Arabic and Hebrew literature, beginning with the incorporation through translation of large parts of the body of Greek learning into Arabic in eighth- and ninth-century Baghdad, then moving on to Dunash's "deep translation" of Arabic literary traditions into Hebrew. The subsequent evolution of Hebrew writing in Muslim Spain, Christian Spain, and Provence continued that work of cultural transmission, extending the legacy of Arabo-Hebrew learning through Latin and the Romance vernacular, as Hebrew poets translated individual

works of belletristic and philosophical prose and, to a lesser extent, poetry from Arabic.⁵³ The methods they took up are instructive.

One classic instance of contrasting medieval approaches to translation involves two contemporary Hebrew versions of Maimonides' philosophical masterwork, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, which, like most prose by Jewish intellectuals in twelfth-century al-Andalus and North Africa, was originally written in Judeo-Arabic. Shortly after Maimonides completed the *Guide*, his student Shmu'el Ibn Tibbon, a member of the famous family of Hebrew translators,⁵⁴ embarked on its translation into Hebrew. He completed his work two weeks before his teacher's death in 1204. Ibn Tibbon's translation was well received (and approved by Maimonides), but Yehuda Alharizi, one of the outstanding poets of the post-Andalusian era, set out to produce another version of this enormous work at the request of patrons in Provence, who—like Alharizi—felt that Ibn Tibbon's translation wasn't sufficiently clear.⁵⁵ What would turn into a lifelong translation competition between Ibn Tibbon and Alharizi highlighted the familiar opposition between surface fidelity and essential accuracy. The far more learned and thorough Ibn Tibbon was credited with being closer to the Arabic, while the literary Alharizi won out on the level of style and overall equivalence. In a foreword to another work of his—a translation of Maimonides' commentary to the Mishna—Alharizi is explicit about his method: "I translate in most places word by word; but first and foremost, I strive for the meaning of what I've heard." That is, while he tries as much as possible to be literal and precise, he wants above all to convey the fundamental sense of what he is translating, and to do so in compelling fashion. Scholars note that his method is indeed eclectic, and varies within a given work.⁵⁶

This eclecticism of Alharizi's is even more conspicuous in his translation of one of the major works of Arabic literature, al-Hariiri's collection of *maqamas*. Taking on a challenge as daunting as any that might face a translator, Alharizi allows himself a considerable measure of freedom with the surface of the text.⁵⁷ Assimilating the work into a Hebrew cultural context, he Hebraicizes, for instance, the names of many characters and places, Judaizes the cultural setting, and often substitutes passages from the Bible for what had been quotations from the Quran. In the rhymed prose he sometimes changes the order of passages and omits phrases, while in the poetry that appears in the flow of the narrative he tends to be freer still—even as he maintains the original meter and rhyme (or something very much like them). At times, however, Alharizi allows the Arabic itself to show through and he translates "word for word." The

result is a work that is daring and absorbing and has long been considered a masterpiece of Hebrew literature in translation.

Like Alharizi in his foreword to Maimonides' commentary on the Mishna, Moshe Ibn Ezra, one of the major poets of the Golden Age, is also clear about what he considers to be the proper way to translate the texts of his day. In his *Book of Discussion and Remembrance* he writes (in Judeo-Arabic): "And if you plan to bring a matter from Arabic into Hebrew, grasp the spirit and intention of the work, but do not transpose it word for word, for not all languages are alike. . . . And if it doesn't turn out as you'd hoped, rid yourself of it entirely, for sometimes silence is better than speech, and the speaker who pleases will please with his silence too, though the opposite is not true."⁵⁸ Elsewhere in the same book he emphasizes the primacy of hearing among the senses and the importance of the musical and aural aspects of poetry.⁵⁹ The Hebrew poets' translations from Arabic verse testify to their respect for all of the foregoing principles.

The translator of medieval Hebrew poetry into twenty-first-century English would do well to keep these examples in mind as he walks into the thicket of difficulties awaiting him, for it is thick indeed. To begin with, he has to somehow account for all of the elements Dunash brought over and adapted from Arabic: rhetorical figuration, biblical echoing, the nature of convention and identity in the work, the poems' musical and formal dimensions, and much more. He should be familiar with the history of interpretation in this field and know how the poems have been understood or not. He should have in mind the history of English translation from Hebrew and other languages and the options that tradition offers, as he gauges his own historical moment and its distance from medieval Spain. And he must be aware of the unconscious elements in his reading; that is, he has to consider the dynamics of orientalism in his work, and in the work on which he relies.

Not all of his solutions will be, or need be, audible to all readers at all times in a one-to-one fashion. With regard to ornament and form, for example, the effect of a single end rhyme (for up to 149 lines) in the original would be hilarious in English (it has been tried), and many of the puns and homonyms are not transferable, and so one has to come up with quieter and relocated acoustic effects in building up the poem's compositional fabric. In the history of translation from Greek, quantitative meters have proven impossible to carry with any substantial success into English, or at best irrelevant to the English (why hamburgers look and

taste the way they do in Bolivia is how essayist and translator Eliot Weinberger sums up the whole effort of mirroring the formal strategies of a poem in another language);⁶⁰ so one has to determine which effects of the Hebrew quantity one wants to bring over and how best to go about that. And here there might be multiple solutions.

And what about biblical quotation in the work (*shibbutz*) and allusion? Which Bible should one use? Tyndale, Coverdale, the King James? The Revised Standard Version? The old or new Jewish Publication Society version? The tension between revealed Scripture and contemporary verse that so satisfied the medieval audience may go either totally unrecognized by an English-speaking reader or, worse, might have just the opposite effect of the original: it might put one off, bar entry into the world of the poem. Integral as the biblical element is to the underlying texture of the Hebrew, it is remarkable how much power and pleasure the poems can afford their scripturally challenged audiences today. All this should tell the translator something about how best to embed the classical element in contemporary lines.

Convention, too, is a factor, and the translator must ask how elements of a given medieval trope might be transplanted without any gross transmogrification of sense. To take but one of the period's prominent conventions: what is one to do with the object of erotic desire, which in much medieval Arabic and Hebrew poetry is represented by a figure drawn from both the Arabic tradition and the Song of Songs, and variously referred to as a "fawn," "doe," "deer," and so on? We meet him (or her) often, and the innocent reader might well be perplexed by the fact that, for some five hundred years, all the Hebrew poets seem to be writing about the same good-looking young thing they saw at the same party where they drank the same wine in the same garden beneath the same moon and had more or less the same thoughts about how they would like to get to know this one ubiquitous gazelle. Yet, while all the gazelles seem to be the same, the poems they prompt do not, and the translator needs to attend to distinctions of timbre from poet to poet and poem to poem.⁶¹ And what is he to make of the phenomenon itself—intensely sensuous and often homoerotic poems being written by learned and pious Jews? Furthermore, the medieval poets themselves apologize, in places, for the "obscenity" of their work, and some seek to explain it away as allegory or exercise (a keeping up with the literary Joneses). A few modern scholars have accepted these explanations at face value, and interpretations of the work vary widely, presenting it as everything from puff and fluff to sublime idealization and on to faithful depiction of a

charged air that just might point toward penetration. Here, as elsewhere, the responsible poet-translator will have to descend into the bathyscaphe of scholarship and then make his way back to the surface of the poem as he seeks to fathom the sexual mores of a society far from his own in mindset and time.⁶² Having made his descent and reemerged safely, and factored in competing perspectives, which tack will he follow?

By and large, previous English translations of Hebrew Andalusian poetry have taken up one of four approaches:

Following out a perceived, if schematic, parallel between medieval Andalusian Hebrew verse and Elizabethan or Metaphysical poetry, some translators have tried to translate into a “reconstructed” sixteenth- or seventeenth-century idiom. Behind this analogy, from which the worst versions of this poetry tend to emerge, there is an implicit assumption that Christian England is in some respect equivalent to Judeo-Muslim Spain, and, by extension, that our hearing ersatz Elizabethan verse in Baltimore today is parallel to eleventh-century Arabic-speaking Jews hearing masterful eleventh-century Hebrew verse written by a classicizing avant-garde in Berber Granada. While there are obvious points of correspondence in this analogy—which then has to be calculated along a sliding scale of the poetry’s development over five hundred years—the equation is impossible to make with any certainty or control, and the result of this approach is, almost always, lifeless period pieces in verse: a wax-museum-like school of translation.

The second common strategy entails taking one’s (often unconscious) cue from Edward FitzGerald’s *Ruba‘iyat* or Robert Browning’s “Rabbi Ben Ezra” (“Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be”) and translating into an ersatz Victorian poetic idiom. This is what we find in the old Jewish Publication Society versions of the 1920s and 30s, at the height of English and American literary modernism, and it is this approach that relegated the great Hebrew poets of medieval Spain to the ghetto of the Anglo- and American-Jewish prayerbooks, as one of English’s greatest ages of translation passed it by. FitzGerald’s “tessellated eclogue” (“I see how a very pretty Eclogue might be tessellated out of his scattered Quatrains,” he wrote, in a letter to Edward Byles Cowell, his younger friend and Persian teacher) or “fantasia” (the characterization by the recent and more hard-nosed Penguin translators of the *Ruba‘iyat*) is in fact the work of an extremely talented poet and reader of Persian.⁶³ And through its various editions and revisions, it well repays close study. But it is the “new world of feeling”⁶⁴ and the vision of the whole that were central to FitzGerald’s achievement; and, as Robert Lowell once put it, quoting a

high-school teacher of his, “One does not imitate Homer by rewriting the *Iliad*.”

Other translators, noting the level of difficulty involved, and taking for granted the separation of form and content one finds in medieval Arabic literary theory, choose to translate into plain prose. This is an understandable solution: the beginning of wisdom within translation is, one might argue, the fear of distortion, and form *can* be separated from content, at least superficially. But one must ask at what cost that separation will be brought about; for apart from the rarest of instances, translation into prose does nothing to further the cause of a poetry that so wholly relies on execution, or touch, for the creation of its effect (which is in turn a critical element of its deepest content and ethos). It does little more than establish the fact of the poetry’s imagistic existence. Reducing the work to a single dimension—either out of an honorable fear of misrepresentation or a cowardly abdication of interest and ambition—the gloss it offers is numb to the sense of the poem as a thing that is made.⁶⁵

And, lastly, there is the grab-bag category of None of the Above—the school of the schoolless—wherein the overriding principle is the search for a kind of Blakean vitality, with cues taken, on the one hand, from related arts or strong versions of related literatures and on the other, from a contemporary sense of linguistic force.⁶⁶ The principal aim of translation of this sort is the identification and re-creation of a compelling, authoritative presence, one that might draw the translator and then the reader (for the translator is always first a reader) into the culture in question. This method seeks out Pound’s “trace of that power which implies the man”⁶⁷—a music that possesses the reader for a spell and brings about the transformative illusion of literature, not the “accurate” representation of an irretrievable historical moment. The successful translation here entails a listening that allows the poems to be *heard*. It leads to the preservation of spirit rather than a pickling of form, as it takes up and makes use of the original’s energy. It focuses on the “pleasure” rather than the “problem” of translation, at times introducing into English new or even peculiar effects as an echo of the foreign, or employing effects available in English to bring out qualities achieved in the original language by different means. It calls for humility before both the artistry of the poets and the scholarship that allows us to read them—alongside a presumption that impels one to conjure their fictional doubles in English. In fact, behind translations of this sort one often senses, or should sense, the presence of a *dybbuk*-like force driving a necessary transfer on. To my mind the most interesting work in translation from both Arabic and Hebrew medieval

poetry falls (or will fall) into this large and infinitely renewable category, and this is the path I've chosen.⁶⁸

Theoretical considerations aside, my aim has been simple: I have worked to conduct what I perceive to be the poets' quality of emotion and movement of mind, as these are embodied in their lines. While, like Alharizi, I have sought to convey the essence of what I've heard—with an emphasis on that aural dimension—I have hewn to the phrase-by-phrase meaning of the poem and only on rare occasion added or deleted material.⁶⁹ With regard to prosody, I have made eclectic use of whatever tools English offers in order to construct these equivalent versions—that is, these versions of like (if not quite equal) valence and value. When the voice in the Hebrew is ambitious or subtle or aggrieved, or where the verse is particularly musical, inventive, or sublime, I have tried for a similar sense in the English. Above all, in approaching this work I have sought to recall that when the Jewish poets of Andalusia began turning to their Muslim (or Christian) counterparts for new poetic models, they were seeking to extend the range of their language, to renovate the weave of their poems, to equip themselves for their world.

What that world has to offer us today is a question readers will ask, and rightfully so. As the biographies of the poets that follow should make clear, Spanish *convivencia* wasn't all sweetness and light, an "interfaith utopia," or even "tolerant" as we think of that notion now.⁷⁰ For some, the elite nature of medieval literary society renders work of this sort irrelevant to twenty-first-century readers, and its poetry will seem hopelessly exotic. For others, the word *medieval* itself will be enough to drive them away (if the word *poetry* hasn't already). And for others still, the experience of Spanish Jews—like that of the Jews in Germany—is a lesson in the history of collective self-delusion, inevitably leading to conversion, Inquisition, expulsion, or worse.⁷¹ Those who hold to the latter view, in particular, may balk at my title and its provenance, or dismiss it as simply naive.⁷²

But for those who hold that all ages are contemporaneous (as Pound and, yes, the rabbis did);⁷³ for those who are drawn to a poetry produced by "a society where holy and profane merge into an indivisible and harmonious whole, where the borders between them essentially disappear";⁷⁴ for those who believe in the possibility of coexistence, however tenuous, between Arabs and Jews and the richness that entails; for those willing to recognize the fact that, in the eleventh century, non-Ashkenazi Jews constituted *ninety-seven* percent of world Jewry, and that

the Spanish-Jewish community prior to 1391 was the largest in Europe (and left Judaism a legacy that was long ago relegated to the margins of religion);⁷⁵ or simply for those who, as citizens and siblings, writers and spouses, parents, artists, workers, teachers, lovers, and readers, seek out wisdom or beauty wherever they can—medieval Spain stands at what is literally a crucial site “in the project of building human culture” and in realizing the dream of the poem.