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Sefarad, the Spanish Jerusalem

When the Jews, crushed and subdued, were driven out of Spain in 1492, they had been living there for over a millennium, the greatest, most affluent and most civilized Jewish community in the world, and certainly the proudest. The Spanish Expulsion was their direst national calamity in fourteen centuries, comparable in popular memory only to the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. It was the summer of 1492, the same year Columbus landed in what today we call America; his vessels were actually preparing to leave for the west-bound voyage to India as the last ships carrying Jewish exiles were sailing out of the same port, to no less unknown destinations. The modern era in Western history began with a massive, state-organized destruction of Jewish life on a scale unknown to the “dark” Middle Ages.

Famous dates, such as 1492, are signposts for more complex events. Their dry numerals are loaded with passionate human quality, and almost always conceal a longer story. In sailing out to sea, the exiles’ memories were often heavier than their baggage: images of families split, homes abandoned, property hastily sold for almost no price at all, projects, designs, personal dreams destroyed in the ebb, ongoing life abruptly shattered. Beyond these recent personal memories, a veil of more distant, perhaps partly mythical reminiscences compounded the agony. What these exiles were leaving was not a foreign country but literally their fatherland, the land where their fathers’ fathers were born and—so they felt and remembered—had lived since time immemorial. Many Jews had come to see Sefarad—Hebrew for Spain—as their other Zion, a temporary new Jerusalem where God granted them relative repose in waiting for the Messiah. Now, instead of the Messiah, the grand inquisitor Torquemada was shattering their identity, and the Spanish crown was celebrating the end of the Reconquista (the Christian recapture of Spain) by forcing the Jews to renounce either their religion or their country.

Early Jewish Settlement in Iberia

Like most beginnings, the dawn of Jewish Spain is shredded in legend. In the Middle Ages, when Spain became the leading center of the Jewish Diaspora, it

endowed itself with a mythological ancestry going back to the biblical Adoniram, King Solomon's tax-controller and emissary to the west, whose tomb was still shown in Spain. Still later, Jewish converts to Christianity used a similar story to disclaim responsibility for Jesus's death, because, they argued, their ancestors were already living in Spain when Jesus was crucified.

Legend apart, Jews could have lived in Spain since the early Christian era and possibly earlier. In the first millennium B.C., the Phoenician ships going to Spain from Carthage and Lebanon may have included Jews as well;¹ and the remote *Tarshish*, which fired traders' imagination in biblical times, is sometimes identified as the city of Tartessus in southwestern Spain, on the edge of the then-known world.² Later, a large Jewish Diaspora stretched around the Mediterranean in Roman times, from Mesopotamia through Asia Minor to Greece, Sicily, Italy, Egypt, and North Africa, brushing the southern shores of France and plausibly also Spain; and, following the two devastations of Judea by the Romans (A.D. 70 and 135), new waves of Jewish exiles were heading westward, sometimes as far as they could reach.

Solid records, however, exist (for now) only from around A.D. 300. A little before that date, the infant Annia Salomonula died at the age of one year, four months, and one day—too young to know she was Jewish, and unaware that her tombstone would make her the first recorded Jew in Spain.³ In symbolic anticipation of the future, the first paper document mentioning Jews in Spain is an anti-Jewish decree passed in A.D. 308 by a council of bishops. Among other things, it prohibited all Christians from dining with Jews or marrying them. Especially, a rabbi should never be invited to celebrate the first harvest (originally a Jewish holiday) because his presence might usurp the Catholic priest's power of benediction. Clearly, the young Catholic Church in Spain was still fighting against the shadows of its Jewish beginnings and, in order to stress its separate identity, had taken an offensive stance against the Jews.

The Catholic missionaries knew of course—if only dimly, with self-repressive unease—that the message they were transmitting to the pagans was originally drawn from Judaism. But that made them even more uneasy and often more furious. Now that the Jews' election and divine mission were superseded by Christ's church, how could the Jews persist in claiming they alone were God's chosen people? That made Jews worse than pagans. Pagans were frequently crude and rough; yet spiritually, toward the Cross, they were remarkably passive, even submissive. Jews were politically docile, but spiritually a provocation.

Anything inexplicable, when strong passions are at stake, is likely to be vilified as diabolical by its opponents, especially if secretly, unconsciously, it aspires to greatness. Most Christians could not fathom the Jews' stubborn stand, which they found to be wildly incomprehensible; and since they did not admit any

spirituality or divine grace in the Jews' persistence, they tended to associate it with the Devil.

The Jews, on their part, experienced their persistence as a sign of valor. To them, the unbounded fidelity they showed to God's original message bore witness that God had willed their sacrifice and maintained his covenant with them despite their sins and suffering.

To prove the Jews wrong, the church had two alternatives. It could debunk the Jews' testimony by the sword and forced conversions; or it could try reversing the *meaning* of their testimony, by permitting the Jews to maintain their identity in a humiliated form. The Jews' debasement would make their persistence look like a curse, and testify that God had forsaken them because they had rejected his Son.

A famous advocate of forced conversion was Bishop Severus of Minorca. In A.D. 418, he organized a debate between Christians and Jews, which drove the mob to burn down the Jewish synagogue, and 540 Jews were terrorized into accepting Christianity. Triumphant, Severus propagated his exploits in a letter to all Christendom, exhorting Christians everywhere to force the Jews to convert.⁴ Severus's tract made it into the corpus of church fathers, though not into church doctrine. Jews, the church eventually decided, must be persuaded rather than coerced to see the Christian light. Meanwhile, they should be both debased and tolerated.

With noticeable exceptions, the latter approach was to become the official church doctrine. But that took several centuries of strife and irresolution. In the early years of European Catholicism, the doctrine concerning Jews was still equivocal and unsettled. Time and again Jews were compelled to accept Christianity by legal decrees or brute force, not only in Spain but also in Burgundy, Paris, Languedoc, and other places in today's France. Yet France was later to change track,⁵ whereas in Spain forced conversions recurred over large spans of time and nearly became a hallmark of Spanish history.

The Visigoth Pendulum

Temporary relief came to Iberian Jews—if eight decades can count as “temporary”—from those who later became their worst enemies.

In 416 Spain fell to the Visigoths, a Germanic warrior people who adopted the Arian form of Christianity. Arians (from Arius of Alexandria, their founding theologian) opposed the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity and Rome fiercely denounced them as heretics. The Visigoths used to keep to themselves in the lands they have invaded. In Spain they had for three generations kept their separate

German laws, dress, and customs. To balance off the indigenous Catholic population, the Visigoth invaders protected the legal status of the Jews.

In King Alaric II's legal code of 506, the Jews, although restricted, were treated with "astonishing liberality," says a historian of Visigoth Spain.⁶

Matters were radically reversed in 589, when King Reccared abolished Arianism and launched Visigoth Spain on the road that made it a militant Catholic state, seeking unity through religious uniformity.

The conversion to Catholicism signaled the end of the Visigoths' peregrinations, which had taken them from Scandinavia to Iberia, fighting and looting their way through many countries. Spain was journey's end, the edge not only of Europe, but of the world, from which there was nowhere else to go but inward.

In 589, when, after a century, this recognition finally matured in the Visigoths' mind, they were ready to assimilate into the local Roman culture and religion. Along with the Arian religion they abolished the dual legal system for Goths and Romans, and eventually abandoned their Gothic dress, linguistic habits, burial customs, artistic forms, and tastes, down to the typical insignia on their belts.

If that was a major self-sacrifice for the Goths, then its pains may explain the fire with which they started persecuting the Jews. Demanding the same permutation and sacrifice from all others, including the Jews, they turned Visigoth Spain into a militant Catholic state based on a bizarre mixture of politics and religion that the Christian West had hardly ever seen. The council of bishops and the provincial synods became a state institution working to create a single nation under the Catholic faith. Political unity, the Visigoth rulers now felt, was to be attained through Catholic conformity and imposed by a central state organ.

The Jews were ready victims of the Visigoths' fresh Catholic energies. Reccared, Sisebut, Sisenant, Chintila, Recceswinth, Wamba, Egica, and Roderic—all are names of Visigoth kings who, successively, declared war on the Jews' existence in their land. Details are as dismal as they are monotonous to repeat; they are recorded in successive decrees, canons, preambles, and resolutions passed against the Jews for over a century (589–694).⁷ Official royal documents now referred to Jews as *plague* and *leprosy*. Some measures against them were harsher than others, and all were even more severe on paper than in real life. As usual, bribes, inefficient government, and complex commercial interests of their persecutors were the Jews' natural allies in the Middle Ages. Occasionally the pendulum swung back and there was a short reprieve when a more secular-minded ruler took office, such as Swinthila in the 620s, or Chindaswinth in the 640s. But the general trend was ominous.

The First Conversos

One set of rules put the Jews' economic existence in jeopardy by barring them from owning Christian slaves, or hiring Christian labor. If, to maintain his labor force, a Jewish master persuaded his slave to become Jewish and even be circumcised, the master would be put to death and his property confiscated. But should the dead Jew's son accept Catholicism (and thus, we may add, nullify his father's sacrifice), he could retrieve part of his inheritance and slaves. A crude decree, joining the stick to a bitter carrot—and still producing meager results from the king's standpoint. So in 613, hoping to solve the Jewish problem in a single stroke, Sisebut ordered all Jews to become Catholics or leave his realm.

King Sisebut was unaware of the historical precedent he was setting. Nor did he have sufficient means to enforce his sweeping decree. So, rather than putting an end to the problem, Sisebut started a new one. With him, Jewish *Conversos* (forced converts) make their first collective entry onto the Spanish stage.

Sisebut's decree was revoked twenty years later. But now a new group was living alongside the overt Jews—Christians who went to Mass but kept Jewish rites at home, read the Talmud, and abstained from pork and other foods prohibited to the Jews.

How were they to be treated? It took some time and several bishopric councils before a doctrine could take shape. In essence, it drew a rigid distinction between ordinary Jews and baptized Jews. Ordinary Jews, though Christ's opponents, owed him no allegiance; they could practice their rites in private while keeping a low profile. Yet baptized Jews were full-fledged Christians; by practicing Judaism in secret they became rebels and renegades, desecrating the sacrament of baptism and cheating not only the king, but Christ himself.

That was a tragic pit, a one-way street with no U-turn allowed. At its background, rigorously interpreted, was the Catholic view that sacraments are objective metaphysical powers, independent of the individual's feeling and intention. Hence, baptism is binding and irreversible even when performed against a person's will.

In a pathetic manifesto to King Recceswinth, the baptized Jews confessed that for a long time they were unable to believe in Christ and the Trinity; but henceforth, they promised, they would accept the Savior with a pure and sincere heart. They vowed to sever all ties with the "abominable sect of unbaptized Jews," to scrupulously observe the Catholic holidays and never again keep the Jewish Sabbath or Passover. They also vowed to eat nonkosher food, but begged for the king's understanding if, "because of natural revulsion," there was one

single item they could not eat—pork. To prove their sincerity, they humbly promised to eat everything else cooked in the same pot as pork.

This remarkable document, a study in forced self-humiliation, highlights the double hypocrisy that was imposed upon the Jewish converts. The paradoxes and disguise in this letter make it sound like a political ritual, a game of gestures. How can one sincerely promise to change one's inner belief? (And how "natural" is a revulsion from which no Christian suffers but all Jews do?) It seems the converts' vows were seemingly not meant to be taken too seriously, except perhaps as a statement of political submission.⁸

Ethnic and Religious Jews

By speaking of "Jews whether baptized or unbaptized," Recceswinth's legislation made a significant distinction—between the converts' religion and their ethnic definition. The converts themselves used that distinction in referring to their group. Thus, in promising to keep away from "the sect of unbaptized Jews," they imply there is also a sect of *baptized* Jews—their own. And in their vehement manifesto of Christian devotion, they call themselves "Hebrew citizens of Toledo."

So Visigoth Spain upheld the notion of a Jewish or Hebrew people—an ethnic group distinct from the Jewish religion. These terms should not be understood in quite the same way they are used today because of their different ideological context. The Visigoth view had Pauline origins; in addition, it mixed, so it seems, the idea of a natural *tribe* with that of a supernatural *people of God*. Though the Jews were believed to have been deserted by God, their former divine election still clung to them in a negative mode, the mode of *not anymore*, of *having been superseded*—a metaphysical cadaver and dead religious shell which, as such, retained a supernatural significance, now turned partly diabolical.

Jews have long seen themselves and been seen by others as a people, a separate ethnic group. The religion they had been given (or gave themselves) through Moses was so revolutionary that it took many centuries of inner strife before they were able to fully accept it themselves. When finally they did, they injected their sense of religious mission, of Covenant and Election, into that which made them a separate people, so that the nation and its religion became intertwined.

That bond was reinforced in the Diaspora, when the Jewish state no longer existed and Jews had to contend with the Christian challenge. Pauline Christianity contested that bond, however. After Jesus had failed to reform the Jewish religion from within, Paul carried his message outside the Jewish people. He created a universal (catholic) religion open to all the nations, and called

upon his fellow Hebrews to join it. Most of the Jews declined; indeed, it was in confrontation with the Pauline challenge—and in defense of their exclusive Election—that Diaspora Jews fused religion and people into one.

Spain's Visigoth rulers considered St. Paul's call still effective; and by putting coercive force behind it, they made many Jews succumb to the Cross. Did these converts cease thereby to be Jews, or Hebrews? Certainly not, was the Visigoth answer; saying otherwise would admit the Jewish rabbis' standpoint. Jews can relinquish their religious error, yet remain ethnically what they had been before⁹—Hebrews, or Jews.

The Persecution Heightens

In the last decades of Visigoth reign (about 681–711) both baptized and non-baptized Jews went through their most ferocious period. In 681 a new king, Erwig, outlawed Jewish rites for both groups. Observing a Jewish holiday was to be punished by flogging, yanking the culprit's hair, confiscation of property, and exile. In a crude, physical eye-for-an-eye, a woman's nose was to be cut off if she circumcised her son. Then Egica, the next king, prohibited all commerce between Jews and Christians, thus breaking the Jews' international trade. By then Muslim power was building up in North Africa, and the king suspected that Jews were favoring the buildup. Claiming he had conclusive proof of Jewish treason, Egica proposed to the council of bishops that the Jews be either freed "from their paternal error" or "cut off by the scythe of justice," a formula smacking of massacre.¹⁰ The council resisted the latter extravagance, but made all Jews slaves of the Crown. They were absolutely to stop practicing Judaism. All Jewish children were to be taken away from their parents at the age of seven and given to Christian families to raise—a decree, on paper, of pharaonic magnitude.

Egica's ruling is the first major occasion proclaiming the principle of *servitus iudaeorum*—that Jews were the king's slaves. Egica had meant it literally; the Jews were to be actual slaves, suffering affliction and calamity. Yet, ironically, when this principle later became fundamental in Christian Europe, it produced benign consequences for the Jews. As the king's property they were under his protection. No one else could enslave or possess the Jews. Nor were they to be killed or plundered by hostile barons or city councils. On the other hand, unlike real serfs, Jews enjoyed the freedom to move, resettle, engage in trade, and acquire various privileges. The actual meaning of their "serfdom" was economic: the crown reserved for itself the right to bleed the Jews financially. As a result, the Jews' nominal serfdom became one of their assets, a status definition under which their existence was made possible in later Christian Europe.

The Muslims Are Coming

In late April 711, Arab and Berber warriors led by Tarik Bin Ziad crossed the narrow straits separating Africa from Europe and landed on the cliff now called Gibraltar (Jabl a Tarik, or Tarik's mountain). That was a crucial moment in western history: Islam's first major assault against Europe, ushering in more than seven centuries of Muslim dominion in Spain.¹¹

Tarik defeated and killed Roderic, the last Visigoth king, and started heading for Toledo, the glittering prize of his invasion. But his blitzkrieg was too daring to succeed without local help. With an army of only twelve thousand, Tarik needed allies to cover his rear and hold the captured cities for him. These allies he found among a disgruntled Visigoth faction, local Ibero-Roman peasants resenting their Gothic overlords, and the Jews.

Almost everywhere, Jews welcomed Tarik as liberator. In Cordova, Malaga, and later in Toledo, Jews organized in a local militia to guard the captured cities for him, thus freeing Tarik's warriors to resume active combat. While Arab chroniclers praised the Jews' role in the invasion, Christian sources, of course, condemned it. The Jews themselves chose to define their friends and foes according to how they treated them. How could they feel allegiance to a Christian kingdom that had for a whole century tried to eradicate them? But the tale of "Jewish treason" established itself in Christian memory and, eight centuries later, when the Christians had reconquered Spain, it was revived as an excuse for harassing not so much the Jews, but, especially, the Marranos.

For the next two decades the Muslims continued their thrust into Europe. Periodically they crossed the Pyrenees, marched up the Rhône valley, and, finally, launched the deep incursion into southeastern France, which Carl Martel, the great Hammer, broke at the gates of Poitiers in 732. Thereby Martel reversed a tide of conquests that had begun in the Arabian desert a century earlier, and went down in European memory as the savior of Christendom.

Thus the Jews, with no global design, were assisting the Muslims during their greatest challenge to Europe. At the same time, again unknowingly, the Jews started their own, slow ascent to one of the high points in their social and cultural history.

Migrations followed the sword into Spain. First from North Africa, then from almost everywhere in the Muslim empire came Arabs, Berbers, Syrians, Yemenites, Slavs, and also Jews. Spain was a new world to them, luring with promises—of loot and adventure for some, of new beginnings for others. For men from the Sahara and the Atlas ridges, Spain had the legendary attraction that urban civilizations exercise on more nomadic people. Poor Muslims from

other regions were eager to join the privileged ruling caste. And, like immigrants everywhere, many were trying to leave behind them adversaries, debtors, tyrannical fathers, painful memories, or sheer bad luck.

Jews were swept along with these tides. Now that the Muslim empire was stretching from western India to the Atlantic Ocean, most of the Jews in the world were living for the first time under a single Muslim empire and dominant culture. (Ashkenazi Jews, or their forebears, barely existed).¹² Jewish Spain, freed of Visigoth harassment, was part of the alluring western land; and now, through the empire's system of commerce, communication, and law, Spain was linked to the Jewish communities in the east, including the great scholarly center in Babylon (Mesopotamia, today's Iraq). As a result, not only was Jewish Spain revived demographically but, for several centuries, it became a preferred destination for Jews on the verge of moving, as Jews often are.

These demographic changes assumed their true dimension under the Ummayyad dynasty which ruled Spain for two and a half centuries, almost until the end of the first millennium. During all that time the Jews suffered no official persecution, a rare phenomenon in the history of the Jewish Diaspora. Social harassment, which did exist, was counterbalanced by the central government's favors. The Ummayyad rulers used to rely on non-Arabs as their closest aids. The Arabs were in frequent revolt against the prince and in rivalry with each other, whereas Christians and, especially, Jews were too weak to be ambitious; relying on their service as councillors, financial directors, and the like was part of a wider policy that led Abd-a-Rahman I, the founder of the dynasty, to fill his army with Berbers, import Slav warriors from the Balkans, and use black Africans as his bodyguard.

No less significant was the shifting Jewish image in Ummayyad mythology. In one of the dynasty's founding legends, a clairvoyant Jew saves the life of the young Abd-a-Rahman I by foretelling the rise of the dynasty and providing a ground for its legitimacy: quite a change from the Jews' diabolical image under the late Visigoths!

Still, all was not roses for the Jews. The Ummayyad also consolidated the inferior legal status of Jews and Christians in Muslim society, as laid down by the Prophet Muhammad and later modified by his Sunni descendents. Though Muhammad included some abusive language against the Jews in the Qur'an (because the Jewish tribes in Arabia refused to admit him as *rasul-Allah*, God's messenger), he recognized Moses and Jesus as true prophets and set the ground for the doctrine of the *dhimmi*. According to that patronizing-tolerant doctrine, Christians and Jews, though infidels, are "peoples of the book" who deserve Muslim protection, as long as they are politically submissive and prove it by paying a poll tax.

The “infidel tax” made toleration profitable to the Muslim establishment at a time when its missionary ardor was receding before the practical needs of government. The state needed money, and the advocates of toleration praised their policy as being both theologically correct and financially advantageous, a kind of self-rewarding virtue. Others, the more purist or bigoted crusaders, pressed for the Islamization of all the conquered peoples, but they were a minority. The Muslim government needed infidels. “One believer more was one poll-payer less.”¹³ The official doctrine, in any case, was against forced conversions: the sword had to be used to expand Muslim government, but belief in Allah and Muhammad must be voluntary.¹⁴

The result was a mixed one. In the following centuries, driven by fear, greed, social pressure, economic anxiety, and also by the desire to conform, to join the ruling caste, or simply to avoid the infidel tax, mass Islamization of the Iberian population actually took place. At first moving in low gear, the process seems to have attained a swirling acceleration by the end of the millennium.¹⁵ At the height of Ummayyad rule the New Muslim population was estimated at over five million,¹⁶ mostly former Catholics, and also a certain number of Jews.

A word of caution is needed here. *Islamization* has two senses in our story, a religious sense and a broader cultural one. Many Christians and Jews who resisted Islam as a religion nevertheless accepted the culture, language, and tastes of the Muslim elite. Another ambivalent term, *Arabization*, must also be taken in a wide cultural sense rather than in a purely ethnic one. Ethnic Arabs remained a minority in Spain.¹⁷ Yet most other groups assimilated into the manners, language, dress, food, fashion, craftsmanship, artistic design, and even body language of the ruling Arab civilization, as imported from Baghdad, Damascus, and North Africa. The educated class, including Christians and Jews, was versed in Arab poetry and literary associations.

The Arabization of Christians and Jews was facilitated by the many secular aspects of Arab culture. Although Islam links religion to the state, it can leave a wide range of cultural concerns relatively free of religion, as it did during the Arab golden age. Art, poetry, science, linguistics, music, manners, and craftsmanship were high concerns of the Arab educated class in which Jews or Catholics could participate without compromising their own religious affiliation. This relative secularization of wide areas of life, so obnoxious to Islamic fundamentalists today, existed in Islam’s golden age and must have been partly responsible for it.

Arabization among the Christians produced a phenomenon known as *Mozarabs*, meaning *Arabizers*; and the spectacle arose in Spain of Arabic-speaking Christians, dressed and moving like Arabs, going to church to confess or listen to a Christmas Mass; then, in the marketplace, in private homes

and gardens, or in a secular party, negotiating like the rest of the population, reciting poems and songs in Arabic or debating a point of Arabic grammar. A similar phenomenon existed among the Jews, although there was no special term to denote it. In the end, Spanish Jews had become so widely Arabized in the cultural sense that Arab historians today have a point when they list Abu Imran Musa, better known as Maimonides, the celebrated Jewish philosopher and rabbi, among the figures of the Arab golden age in Spain.

The Cordova Caliphate

The tenth century saw the pinnacle of Muslim power and civilization in Spain. Under Abd-a-Rahman III, the Ummayyad state became a powerful caliphate, challenging the supremacy of eastern Islam and the power of both Christian empires, the Latin and the Byzantine. Abd-a-Rahman III was a sophisticated, strong-willed autocrat, tolerant in religious matters and dexterous in balancing off friends, foes, and especially minorities. From his sparkling capital city of Cordova,¹⁸ where visitors today can still admire the forest of arches in the Grand Mosque, he ruled for a remarkable half-century (912–961) and gave *al-Andalus* (Muslim Spain) political stability, effective administration, economic prosperity, international prestige, military might, and cultural glamour.

“Never before was Cordova so prosperous, al-Andalus so rich, and the state so triumphant,” raves a modern Arab historian.¹⁹ He also extols Cordova as “the most cultured city in Europe”²⁰—not an unlikely praise since Christian Europe at that time was lagging behind the Muslim world in culture and urbanism. The Ummayyads were avid patrons of arts and learning. They attracted poets, philologists, musicians, architects, calligraphers, and men of learning; and encouraged the ruling elite and social aspirants to follow their example. They founded a university and dozens of schools, commissioned the writing of books, and built a splendid royal library.

Language, in particular, was an overriding passion in al-Andalus—language in all its modes and forms. Poetry was part of the ruling elite’s daily life. Ranging from the crude to the exquisite, from inflated images to subtle combinations of word and sensibility, Arab (and soon after, Hebrew) poets were writing about everything under and above the sun—friendship, ambition, love, the tribulations of personal fate, and the delights of sex and the table no less than metaphysics and the exalted states of religious faith. Poetry—or at least, rhyming—was also a means of daily communication, used for writing letters, transmitting hidden messages, praising, aggrandizing, suggesting, equivocating, and sometimes conspiring and spreading libel. It was an instrument of life and

death. Poetry was life, and life itself was lived through images, metaphor, meter, and rhyme.

Not surprisingly, the tenth century was a high point for Spanish Jews, as well. Arabized Jews and Mozarab Christians were not only tolerated, but given high roles in running the state. The Caliphs, tolerant by temper and education, mistrusted the powerful Arab factions and preferred relying on members of the politically powerless *dhimmi*. If ever the myth of “Spain of the three religions” came close to reality, it was not under the Cross, but under the Ummayyad Crescent (and its heirs in the twelfth century). The Jews, subdued and heavily taxed, but protected by the caliph’s policy of treating minorities, were free to exercise their religion and obey their autonomous law. They could own land, work in most professions, mingle with non-Jews and emigrate at will—though very few had that will: Rather, Jews in great numbers were streaming into al-Andalus throughout the tenth century. The few who left went mostly to the Christian north—León, Old Castile, and Navarre—where Jews, now grudgingly tolerated, followed the Mozarab merchants to set up their own trading bases and thereby set the groundwork for the future Jewish communities in Christian Spain. As the numbers and prosperity of Andalusian Jews were growing, their self-assurance and cultural identity became more pronounced, both in relation to non-Jews and to the older Jewish centers abroad.

Like most Muslim lands, al-Andalus was a highly urbanized society. At a time when major Frankish cities like Aix-la-Chapelle, Charlemagne’s capital, had only a few thousand inhabitants, Muslim cities such as Baghdad, Samarkand, and Damascus counted several hundred thousand, and Cordova could have neared half a million. Smaller urban centers included Seville, Granada, Malaga, Saragossa, and Toledo. The immense size of the Muslim world (*dar al Islam*)—from India to Spain and from Samarkand to Mozambique—provided a quasi-uniform system of language, law, and monetary exchange. This facilitated international trade. The golden *dinar* was accepted everywhere, and money orders (called *suftadja*) were also sometimes trusted.²¹ Protected by the caliph’s power, the Muslims built a merchant marine that crisscrossed the Mediterranean (mostly along the coasts, since even the caliph could not shield them from storms). The Muslims used Jews and Mozarabs to trade with the Christian countries and relied on venture merchants—in many cases, Jews again—to trade with India, China, central Asia, and the faraway regions of dar al Islam. Traders usually preferred the smoother sea routes to cumbersome caravans—and Jews preferred them even more because ships, unlike camels, were not obliged to stop for the Sabbath.

A steady flow of money streamed into the caliph’s vaults as a result of the economic prosperity: the annual royal income, mostly from duties and customs

on trade, averaged one hundred thousand gold bars. The figure was given by Hisdai ibn Shaprut, the caliph's Jewish doctor and political favorite who was in a position to know, because he was also the royal commissioner of customs, and a chief adviser and diplomat for the caliph.

The Jewish “Caliph”

The senior Jew in the caliphate, Hisdai ibn Shaprut, climbed to power on the only effective, yet always fragile, ladder available in a system of personal government—the caliph's favor and trust. The brilliant and ambitious young doctor had become a polished courtier and politician who looked after his master's two most precious assets—his body and his treasury. Abd-a-Rahman III was too prudent to officially appoint a Jew as his minister of finance, and too clever not to use Hisdai's services in that capacity as a matter of fact, so he made him commissioner of customs—the main source of royal income²¹—and appointed no one above him. Hisdai was also involved in delicate foreign missions. He had to be on his guard incessantly, catering to his master's every wish and whim (though Abd-a-Rahman III, on the whole, was not a whimsical ruler), and warding off the envy and intrigue of rival dignitaries who often used Hisdai's Judaism as their target. “The prophet by whose virtue alone you are respected,” a resentful theologian once shot at the caliph in public, “is called a liar by this Jew.”²³

Hisdai's Jewish profile was indeed high. The caliph made him preside over all the Jewish communities in al-Andalus. The Jews called him *nassi* (chief, prince), though in some respects he was a semblance of “caliph” to them, providing the Jews with protection, access to power, deals, and appointments, and accepting their ceaseless respect and flattery, some of it, of course, in verse. Just as the Ummayyad caliphate challenged the supremacy of Baghdad, so Hisdai strove to free Jewish al-Andalus from the preponderance of Jewish Mesopotamia (Babylon). He was an Ummayyad courtier to the bone, deeply versed in Arabic ways and, following the example of his caliph, he too was trying to attract poets, linguists, and scientists to Cordova—to work as Jews and extensively use the Hebrew language, which had to be resuscitated and fitted for secular use. His own elegant home served as meeting place for intellectuals and scientists in fields such as astronomy, mathematics, and medicine, whose work he commissioned and helped publish. And his emissaries went everywhere in the Jewish Diaspora to collect books and persuade literary and rabbinical figures to come to Cordova.

Until that time, Jewish culture was doubly limited in Spain: it was restricted to legal-religious matters, and it lacked full authority even in them. All important

questions had to be referred to Babylon, where the main version of the Talmud had been created²⁴ and where subsequent rabbinical masters, called *geonim*, continued to exercise worldwide authority for several centuries. Jewish Spain did not have such prominent Talmudists; but perhaps the real reason for its dependency was lack of status and recognition rather than of scholarship. That was what Hisdai set forth to change. He knew that Babylon was already in decline, while the younger, vibrant Jewish Spain was rapidly growing in wealth and prestige.

Like any new institution of power—or declaration of independence—this one had its founding myth. One day, we are told,²⁵ Rabbi Moshe ben Hanoch, an eminent Italian Talmudist, was sailing with his wife and son when Andalusian ships attacked their ship. Rabbi Moshe's wife drowned herself to avoid being raped and he and the boy were taken prisoner and brought to Cordova, where the local Jews ransomed them. At first Rabbi Moshe lived anonymously until one day he heard the local chief rabbi, Nathan, stumbling before a problem in Jewish law. Modestly, Moshe produced the answer, and Nathan instantly recognized the stranger as his superior. Rabbi Moshe was appointed (presumably by Hisdai) chief Talmudic judge and teacher for al-Andalus—to the great satisfaction of the caliph, who was delighted “that the Jews of his domain no longer had need of the people of Babylonia.”²⁶ The quotation sounds authentic, but the rest of the story has the fancy ring of a minimessianic legend: the redeemer's sudden emergence, his suffering and early loneliness, then his disclosure and immediate recognition. It is more likely (and prosaic) to suppose that the eminent Rabbi Moshe came to Cordova of his own will (perhaps he was en route when the incident occurred), knowing that Talmudic studies were already quite developed in Spain and its Jewish community was on the rise.²⁷ But that makes a weaker founding myth: a miraculous *deus ex machina* captivates the imagination far more than the banality of organic growth.

Thus two processes were taking place under Hisdai: Jewish Spain was being recognized as an independent Talmudic power, and it was linking into the secular (Arab and Arabized Greek) culture of the age. Jewish culture expanded beyond rabbinical studies to embrace poetry, art, and science—and it did so creatively, not by simple imitation but often by Hebraizing that culture, that is, investing it with different linguistic sensibilities and cultural associations.

Without relinquishing their covenant with their fathers' transcendent God, Spanish Jews discovered the earthbound joys he made available to men and women who take interest in his creation and are open to the pleasures of the intellect, language, the imagination, and not least (though within reason), the senses. Here was a permanent feature of the Spanish-Jewish “golden age” which started under the Umayyads and outlived them by far. Adding the fact that Jews outside the cities lived on the land and closer to its products, we get a life

experience of Sephardi Jews which is significantly different from that of most of the Ashkenazim, and is quite unlike the common image of the Diaspora Jew whose material life revolves mostly on commerce and finance and whose spirit is almost exclusively invested in religious practice and rabbinical studies.

Fragility and Dreams of Power

Hisdai's fragile but steady position in court, and his fulfilling life, anticipated and symbolized the Sephardi golden age in general, which was similarly long and, on balance, a fortunate existence, at times even glorious, yet precarious at bottom, built on moving waters rather than stable ground, but, nevertheless, rolling fairly smoothly with the waves.

Hisdai keenly felt the deficiencies of Jewish power in the Diaspora. No other Jew in the middle ages was as influential as Hisdai—that is, as prominent in a major world power—yet no other knew better than he how contingent and precarious it all was. The Mozarabs could look to the strong Christian states around them; Jews had only other Jews to rely upon, all equally outside the pale of real power. Hisdai intervened on behalf of oppressed Jewish communities abroad, corresponded, made inquiries, and kept abreast of the Jewish situation in many lands. But what really flared his imagination were reports about a remote Jewish kingdom beyond the Ararat and the Caucasus—the Khazars, a Turkish warrior tribe whose elite had accepted some diluted form of Judaism and maintained it until the tenth century.

In an engaging Hebrew letter he sent through various intermediaries to Joseph, the Khazar king, Hisdai described the glory of the Cordova caliphate, its economy, its politics, and his own high position, and made innumerable inquiries about the legendary Jewish kingdom: How does its government work? Who are its tributaries? Do the Khazars fight on the Sabbath? And do they possess a calculation of the end of days, when the Messiah will come? Hisdai assured the king—sincerely? rhetorically?—that he was ready to “renounce my honor and give up my greatness” and cross half the world in order to watch an independent Jewish monarch and observe the refuge he can provide “for the survivors of Israel.” Such words could only be written by a Jew who knew his greatness to be borrowed and who felt that however much the Jews are integrated in the host society—himself being a prime example—they remain uneasy guests whose yearning tells them they lack something essential both in their country and beyond its horizons.

If Hisdai ever received an answer, it was lost. The so-called reply that has been circulating for the last millennium is probably a fake.²⁸ But even if King

Joseph had invited Hisdai to come, there was not much time left for the dream: in 965, shortly before Hisdai's death, the Khazar kingdom was overrun and destroyed by the Russians.²⁹ And, as human affairs are volatile, the Caliphate of Cordova itself did not survive beyond the year 1009 and two more caliphs. The new millennium saw its irreversible collapse.

Splinter and Flourish: The “Petty Kingdoms”

The last two caliphs were as different as can be. Hakkam II was, like his father, a mature politician educated to rule, and a true scholar and bibliophile. His death in 976 left the most powerful kingdom in Europe to Hisham II, a boy of 12 who grew to become merely a shadow ruler. Real power was held by his first minister, the famous al-Mansur, remembered by Christians as the fearful Almanzor, who periodically plundered the Christian kingdoms and carried away their church bells as tokens of their humiliation. Al-Mansur used to collect dust from his numerous military campaigns, and willed that it be buried in his grave. When his wish was fulfilled in 1002, he could not know that the caliphate was also buried with him.

Seven years later, al-Mansur's son and successor perished in obscure circumstances which led to a long period of chaos and civil wars. The caliphate, it turned out, was not a stable institution commanding universal allegiance, but a mosaic of self-centered groups and ethnic elites, held together by the ruler's personal power and skill. Now Arabs, Berbers, and “Slavs” (European Muslims) were in deadly conflict over the spoils of a kingdom they were jointly destroying. Within twenty-two years, nine different caliphs, three of whom held the office more than once, were successively crowned and dethroned. Meanwhile Cordova was sacked, the countryside depleted, people lost their livelihood and security, and atrocities were committed everywhere: a doleful story reminding us that politics, and political history, are often more important in determining other dimensions of human life than today's historiography is ready to admit.

In 1031 the long-defunct caliphate was officially pronounced dead. Al-Andalus was splintered into petty kingdoms dominated by warring ethnic factions (Arab-Andalusians in Seville, Berbers in Granada, Slavs in Valencia and Almería, and so on). The divided Muslim states lost their strategic hegemony on the peninsula and now had to pay tribute to some Christian kingdom—a reversal of roles that started the Reconquista, the slow rolling back of Christian power southward that was to last for another two centuries.

The breakdown of the caliphate was also a consolidation—of a new status quo. A new peninsular order emerged which enabled the still-vigorous Anda-

lusian civilization to express its creative energies in accordance with the new conditions. As in fifteenth-century Italy, political fragmentation and a measure of habitual violence, contingent but contained, proved to be compatible with economic recovery and cultural stir and flourish.

The title of caliph connotes the Prophet's vicar, and the old caliphate had a religious significance underneath its worldly culture. Not so the splinter rulers, who had no other mission than their own gain and glory. Most of them were this-worldly oriented, "not deeply attached to the Islamic religion, but . . . chiefly interested in poetry, belles letters and the arts generally."³⁰ The breakdown of central power allowed art and learning to proliferate as many petty rulers tried to imitate the Ummayad splendor in their own courts, and Jewish magnates followed their example.

A Mitigated Peak

The eleventh century is often seen as the first peak of the Jewish golden age, but this is true only in regard to culture. The economic picture was more uneven. Many Jews had their land depleted or their trade disrupted by the wars, and for the first time there was a significant Jewish emigration to the Christian north.³¹ On the other hand, the petty rulers were more comfortable than the Ummayads had been about non-Muslims serving in high places. If, seventy years before, Hisdai ibn Shaprut could not be officially appointed finance minister in Cordova, now the Jew, Ismail ibn Nagrila—known to Jews as Shmuel HaNagid (the Governor, or Chieftain)³²—was officially chief minister in Granada, and other Jews were serving in high places elsewhere. As at no other time before late modernity, people in Spain were judged by their utility, sometimes even their merit, rather than by their race or religion. Tolerance, though not a moral command, was a utilitarian precept and inbred mentality, which may be the reason it worked (more or less).

The petty kingdoms proved beneficial to Arabic culture and even more so to Jewish culture. Hebrew became the dominant language in Jewish poetry; Talmudic studies rose to prominence; and, as if to counterbalance them, philosophy made a serious start in Jewish Spain. Poems in Hebrew were being written everywhere, and countless new phrases, idioms, declensions and inflections were invented in the process, some ingenious, others rather wooden (because they imitated Arabic forms much too mechanically). An unlikely topic provoking strong feelings was, of all things, Hebrew grammar. This seemingly dry subject was given a systematic basis (by Joseph Hayuj and, especially, by Jonah ibn Jinah); and, together with progress in Hebrew semantics, this enabled

scholars to take a fresh look at biblical texts and debate no less an issue than the true meaning of God's word. The study of language thus became as crucial and sensitive among the Jews as it was among the Arabs, and in some respects prefigured the work of European humanists of the sixteenth century. When Ibn Jinah published his monumental works on grammar (using Hayuj, but also severely criticizing him), the polemics were such that Ibn Nagrila/HaNagid himself, the most prominent Jew of the century, was prompted to personally write a rebuttal. At stake were such matters as irregular three-letter radicals, not so exciting in themselves but relevant to reading the Bible—and to the future of scholarly reputations.

Ibn Nagrila/HaNagid, held the highest office that any Spanish Jew ever attained; in addition he was an important scholar in his time, and a major name in Hebrew poetry of any time. Officially, as first wazir of Granada, his position was higher than Hisdai ibn Shaprut's, yet his overall power was far more provincial and restricted since he served solely in the small state of Granada, enmeshed in local politics and intrigue. A man of amazing capabilities, Ibn Nagrila's most important talent consisted in knowing how to use his other talents politically; that is, how to translate them into instruments of power.

The list of countless plots, machinations, and wars in which Ibn Nagrila/HaNagid was involved is too long to recount. No less extensive was his literary production: three books of poems, many of which still make captivating reading today, a dictionary of biblical terms, and essays on Hebrew grammar and Talmudic issues (he was also chief rabbi of Granada and a former disciple of Rabbi Hanoah). His most daring work was a polemical analysis of the contradictions in the Qur'an, to which the Muslim scholar Ibn Hazm responded by exposing the contradictions in the Bible. Both scholars were basically right, and jointly, if inadvertently, produced a foundation for canonical criticism (biblical and Qur'anic). The striking thing about their polemic was its very existence. A Jew running a Muslim state was quite enough; that he should be allowed to openly criticize its religion was inordinately tolerant even for that period. (Think of the fierce Islamist reactions today to any slight criticism of the Qur'an.) The Islamic backlash that was soon to occur had some real grievances with which to fuel its zeal.

Jewish historians, dazzled by HaNagid's fascinating personage, saw him as embodying the Jewish golden age in Spain. Yet his political eminence was, in the end, an episode based on personalities, and it ended in disaster. Upon his death his son Yehoseph was made wazir and rabbi, but, lacking his father's skills, he finally succumbed to his enemies. Disgraced, he escaped the palace disguised as a black African but was exposed and butchered instantly. After his death, a pogrom and massacre raged in Granada's Jewish neighborhoods, fueled by

resentment against both Ibn Nagrilas. This final catastrophe is no less telling than the Nagid's earlier glory. It is only by insisting on *both* its ends—and its essentially personal nature—that the Ibn Nagrila/HaNagid saga can be significant of the Jewish situation in that inconstant age, golden as it may have been.

Ibn Gabirol or Avicebron?

Towering above all other writers was Shlomo ibn Gabirol, a melancholic, sometimes bitter poetical prodigy who was equally at home in earthly affairs and muddles and in the lofty spheres of divine emanations. No one in Spain could write Hebrew poetry more smoothly, and everyone, including Ibn Gabirol himself, knew it. His sense of metaphysical nullity and poetic superiority—of being insignificant in the universe, yet deserving preeminence among men—produced a fascinating contrast. An orphaned child, lonely, sickly, unattractive to women, and practically without family, he was often as arrogant as only a self-conscious genius can be in the company of social superiors he considers to be his intellectual inferiors. His talent was overflowing. In a lifespan shorter than Mozart's, he produced every kind of work, from custom flattery and birthday verses written for money, to deeply lyrical poems, personal revelations, metaphysical poetry, songs, prayers, riddles, moral admonitions, poems depicting natural landscapes and complex human moods and desires, or remonstrating against the “vacuity of the world” (this-worldly affairs). His masterpiece was *Keter Malkhut* (Kingdom's Crown),³³ a poetic-philosophical penetration into God's mysteries and the act of creation. The rabbis found this work so essentially Jewish that they incorporated parts of it into the prayer book; yet Ibn Gabirol's purely philosophical treatise on comparable topics—his Neoplatonic treatise, *Source of Life* (known as *fons vitae* to centuries of Latin readers), written in Arabic, was so devoid of Jewish content that until the nineteenth century it had been attributed to an obscure Muslim author named Avicebron.³⁴ This duality between Ibn Gabirol's philosophical and Jewish identity recurs in other Hispano-Jewish intellectuals (for example, Maimonides); and, in different ways, we shall meet it again among Converso intellectuals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (and still differently, among modern Jews today).

The Crescent Darkens

The regime of the petty states came to an end in the last decade of the eleventh century, prey to its endemic weakness and two crusading movements. On both

sides of the Christian-Muslim divide, holy war was in the air. An army of Christian crusaders was soon to march into the Holy Land and capture Jerusalem from the Muslims, and in Iberia, fifteen years earlier, the Christian north led by Alfonso VI of Castile had already mounted an offensive. Clearly, the Christians were the vital force in Spain now, fresher, rougher, more determined, and less affected by doubt or spoiled by self-indulgence than their Muslim adversaries.

When Toledo, the ancient Iberian capital, fell to Alfonso in 1085, a high point was reached in the Reconquest. The victorious Christians felt they had come half way to their Jerusalem. The Muslim rulers faced a harsh dilemma: either succumb to the Christian onslaught, or summon help from the sturdier, more fanatical Berber warriors of the Moroccan desert, who might save Andalusia but spell the doom of its way of life. Either way, as al-Mu'tamid, the poet-prince of Seville, knew when he made his fateful decision to call in the Berber armies, life would no longer be the same.

He was right. The Berber armies were animated by a crusade of their own—the spirit of *Jihad* (holy war), whose target (like that of Muslim Jihadists today) was not only the infidel but lax Islam as well. They succeeded in stopping the Castilian onslaught, but also abolished the petty Muslim states (al-Mu'tamid was sent in chains to Morocco), and imposed a stern Islamic rule upon the country, shrinking tolerance to a receding minimum.

These Berbers belonged to the religious ascetics (*Murabitun*, Spanish Almoravides), a military brotherhood whose religion was more puritanical than learned; today they would pass as fundamentalists in the sense which combines zeal with the lack of religious sophistication. Through them, Muslim Spain is said to have become acutely conscious of its religious vocation;³⁵ yet in the six decades in which they ruled cultivated Andalusia, the Murabits submitted to a pattern known in other reformers: they had learned to appreciate some of the virtues and amenities—from poetry to wine shops—of the culture they had wished to subdue.

This provoked the wrath of a still more fanatical Berber movement, the Unitarians (*Al-Muwahiddun*, Almohades), who expelled the Murabits in 1149 and established a second, and harsher, Islamic regime. Their religion was more intellectual (also more dogmatic) than the Murabits'; among other things they fought against anthropomorphism, the contamination of God's abstract unity by human-like images. That made them fiercely opposed not only to Christianity, the religion of the man-God, but to most forms of popular religion, including those existing in Judaism and Islam itself. No wonder they became detached from the people, repressive and domineering—as fanatical establishments often do.

With them, the Spanish Crescent darkened for a whole century. Not that they did not build a magnificent mosque in Seville, their capital since 1170: its

tower, the splendid Giralda, still stands today. But prior to that they destroyed the city's synagogues and killed, exiled, or forcibly converted thousands of Jews and Christians, from Cordova and Almería to the island of Majorca (and also in North Africa).

"A cataclysm, alas, descended on Sefarad,"³⁶ lamented the Jewish poet and scholar Abraham ibn Ezra. Cordova lies in shambles, Granada's Jews have been expelled, in Malaga and Majorca people are starving, and in Jaén and Almería "not a single Jew is left." The Talmud is "lonely" for lack of learners, synagogues are turned into "places of idolatry" (mosques), and Jewish children are "given to a foreign religion."

Poetic Peregrinations: Yehuda Halevi, the Ibn Ezras

The Jews' situation in those turbulent days is well reflected in the peregrinations—geographic and mental—of a few major intellectuals.

Yehuda Halevi (*Abu l'Hassan*) is the most renowned poet of Jewish Spain. His life is reflected as a puzzle from his numerous (over 700) poems. Born around 1075, he was ten years old when the Castilians took Toledo and sixteen when the Murabits annexed Muslim Spain. His later life, several decades of it, was spent wandering between many cities, Muslim and Christian—not as a refugee but in ease and comfort, as becoming the well-off physician, writer, and part-merchant he was; which indicates that the drive for Yehuda Halevi's wanderings came from within himself. Spain, he felt, was a fatherland to the Jews, though nowhere in it was he quite at home. He likewise wandered between poetry and philosophy, frivolity and personal depth, mundanity and messianism, the love of women and young boys and the love of God.

A half millennium before Pascal, Halevi argued against "the God of the philosopher" (Aristotle) and for "the God of Abraham," who is not viewed just as a cosmic principle known to the intellect, but as Yahweh, the God of history and of Israel, whom the Jews know from the direct, even sensuous experience of Mount Sinai. Thus Halevi's theology, unlike Ibn Gabirol's, was distinctly Jewish.

One of Halevi's major stations was Christian-held Toledo, where a prosperous Jewish community existed, still Arabized but starting to adapt to Christian rule. Such reacculturation was now common in the peninsula as Jews and Mozarabs were emigrating to the north in order to share in its rising fortunes or escape Murabit pressure; meanwhile they acted as cultural agents who transmitted Muslim idioms, techniques, and lifestyles to the cruder Christian elite. Yet Abu l'Hassan/Halevi was too deeply Arabized to sustain this role. He felt doubly exiled in Castile: his cultural self remained in the Muslim south and his

religious heart was beating in the east (Jerusalem)—so he returned to wander between Muslim cities.

Then came a crisis. “Will you chase frivolity past your fiftieth year / when your days are counted and ready to disappear?” Thus Halevi admonished himself as he went through an inward-oriented conversion. In his fifties, then an old age, he set out for his farthest and loneliest journey—to Jerusalem, then held by the Christian crusaders. Jerusalem was the object of great messianic yearning in Halevi’s poems (“My heart is in the East while I am at the far end of the West”; “O Zion, ask how those imprisoned by you are doing!”), and in taking the road to Jerusalem Halevi seems to have performed a counter-crusade of his own, challenging both the Christians and the Muslims. Romantic legend has him killed incognito at the foot of the Wailing Wall, but legend is often more generous than life. Halevi, it seems, never made it past the Jewish community of Egypt, where he died.

The spirit of countercrusade is also embodied in the setting of the *Kuzari*, Halevi’s chief theoretical work, in which the king of the Khazars organizes a debate between a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian, and a rationalist philosopher in order to know which religion to adopt. That the Jew wins—not only a debate, but a kingdom—was not merely a theological point for Halevi: it alluded, perhaps as wish-fulfillment, to the more violent “debate” then raging between Muslim and Christian crusaders. The Jews were too powerless to even count as contenders in this debate—they only paid its price in suffering—yet they alone, the *Kuzari* argues, are the true bearers of God’s revelation; so all they can do is dream of power, either in the symbolic form of a return to Zion, or in the more worldly form of the Khazar kingdom, which still fired Halevi’s imagination as once it had Hisdai’s.

The Ibn Ezras

Another poetic wanderer symbolizing the age was Moshe ibn Ezra, Halevi’s elder friend, whose life was also divided in two, although in a different manner. Born to wealth and learning in flourishing Granada, he was singing of springtime gardens and the joys of wine and bisexual love (“caressing a beauty’s breasts nightly” and “sucking the lips of a young deer” [boy-lover]), and also of wisdom and life’s brevity, when the Murabit invasion shattered Jewish Granada and sent him wandering for the rest of his life in Christian Spain—bitter, resentful, unable (for some obscure reason) to return to Granada and refusing to acculturate in the north, where he felt “like a man in the company of savages / a lion among monkeys and parrots.”³⁷ In Jewish life he signifies the pain of

Spain's Muslim parts retreating before the Christian north—a kind of Jewish replica of the Reconquista.

Even more nomadic was his younger relative Abraham ibn Ezra, the most multifaceted Jew of his time—poet, mathematician, astronomer, penetrating biblical exegete and critic (the most audacious before Spinoza), and eternal pauper—who practically lived on the road. In 1140, the year Yehuda Halevi sailed to Egypt and seven years before the Al-Muwahiddun calamity, Ibn Ezra left Spain for good—in the other direction. He went to Rome, Pisa, Mantova, Narbonne, Bordeaux, Angers, Rouen, London, and other cities in Christian Europe—writing essays and poems, propagating Sephardi culture to local Jews, chasing his luck and rarely finding it. Yet he was hardly ever bitter, but maintained a splendid self-irony and comforted himself with the thought that he needed no external honors—no “place” in either the literal or the social sense—because “*I am the place and the place is with me.*” With a confidence untainted by arrogance, he assures himself that “My honor lies in the place I choose, however low it be.”³⁸ No one prior to the late European Renaissance had better expressed the sense of self of the person of excellence, replacing the outer insignia of honor with individual worth and merit.³⁹

It is quite remarkable to observe the creative height that, through such wandering intellectuals, the Arabized Jews of Spain attained in the period of their great political and demographic decline. Muslim culture (especially poetry) was already past its prime in the twelfth century, becoming routinized and repetitive;⁴⁰ but the Judeo-Arabic culture went through a period of fruition and propagation—a burst of flourishing on the brink of the precipice.

Islam's Forced Converts

The times were bleak indeed. Together with the shattering of the Jews' political status by the Berber dynasties, their numbers were dropping through massive emigration to the Christian north and periodical conversions to Islam. Already the Murabits had tried to convert Jews; their relative success is recorded in Yehuda Halevi's sad lines about the “dove” (the Jewish people) whom “foreigners entice with other gods” while she “weeps in secret for the husband of her youth.”⁴¹ There is also a story about the Murabit conqueror of Spain who, in 1005, told the rabbis that the Prophet Muhammad had allowed their ancestors to wait for the Messiah for another five hundred years, after which the Jews had to accept Islam. As Muslim years are shorter than Jewish years (by seven months every nineteen years), the sultan proclaimed that Muhammad's extension was about to expire in two years!⁴² That the Jews, in the end, ransomed

themselves with money was a classic, if temporary, solution which proved far less effective under the later Al-Muwahiddun.

Historians debate whether the Al-Muwahiddun oppression of the Jews was planned or sporadic, permanent or intermittent;⁴³ but no one denies that under their rule, Spain humiliated its Jews and Mozarabs as never before. Brutal force was periodically used to convert Jews and Christians to Islam, sometimes en masse. Thus, under the darkened Crescent, Jewish forced converts (*anussim*) reappear on the Spanish scene for the first time since the Visigoth period. They were not the exclusive creation of Christian Spain, but were produced by Muslim Spain as well, and thereby became a recurrent phenomenon in Spanish history.⁴⁴

Many conversions were superficial. A convert's duty was to accept and regularly recite the Muslim credo ("There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger"), together with a few rudimentary prayers. Many converts used to mentally annul what their lips were uttering. Some were practicing Jewish rites in private, an offense that was severely punished—sometimes by death—when detected, though the law was loosely enforced. Still, caution was imperative: in Tunisia until the twentieth century there were Jewish families who refused to admit guests on holidays—contrary to Jewish tradition, but conforming to the rules of prudence eight centuries ago, in Tunisia as well as in Andalusia.

Some conversions were voluntary. A moving apology of such a convert is made in a poem by Yizhak ibn Ezra, Abraham's son. Yes, he says half-defiantly, I have sinned, but didn't all our great men sin too? Didn't Moses break God's tables? Didn't Judah fornicate with his daughter-in-law Tamar, Samson with Delilah, King David with Bath-Sheba? Myself, I have always refrained from eating nonkosher meat whilst I was a Muslim, and when my lips declared that the "lunatic" (Muhammad) was God's prophet, my heart always responded: "thou art lying!" At last I returned to the true God and now expect His pardon!⁴⁵

Ben Maimon and the Forced Converts

Again a wandering intellectual encapsulates the times. Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides, also known as Musa Ibn Maimun and Abu Imran Musa) was a young prodigy approaching his bar mitzvah in Cordova when the Al-Muwahiddun calamity sent him wandering in Andalusia with his rabbi-father and brother. Despite their itinerant life he continued with his superb education, covering the whole Bible and Talmud, much of rabbinical literature, and everything available in Greco-Arabic philosophy and science (including medicine, his later profession), together with philology and some poetry.⁴⁶ It was a typi-

cally Spanish combination of sacred and secular studies; but for Maimonides, at least in maturity, the secular itself acquired a sacred dimension: philosophy and natural science, he maintained, are not outside the religious domain; they have a profound religious significance in themselves, a significance so fundamental that the other elements of religion—prophecy, revelation, popular fables and myths, and the system of Jewish commands (*mitzvot*)—are ultimately grounded in these rational-philosophical foundations.

Around 1160 the Maimon family crossed the sea to Morocco—right into the lion's den, the center of the persecuting empire. Why they did so has not been explained. Either the capital city was more lenient than the province, or by then the Maimons themselves had nominally converted to Islam for appearance's sake (the evidence for that is strong but inconclusive).⁴⁷ In any case, some time later Maimonides wrote a manifesto on conversion in which he violently denounced a rabbi who had indiscriminately damned all converts, whatever their motives and circumstances. Applying his logical mind to this burning (and perhaps personal) question, Maimonides discerned several modalities and degrees of conversion, and ruled that a forced convert must “abandon everything he possesses and walk day and night until he finds a place where he can reconstitute his [Jewish] religion”;⁴⁸ meanwhile, he should keep a maximum of Jewish laws in secret.

The writer took his own advice. In 1165 the Maimon family crossed Al-Muwahiddun lines into Egypt and settled in Fustat (ancient Cairo). Moshe practiced medicine in the court of Salah-a-Din (“Saladin”) and eventually rose to chief rabbi and *nagid* (leader) of all Jewish communities in Egypt. Though his free time in Egypt was scarce,⁴⁹ his outstanding concentration and lightning-quick grasp, supported by a phenomenal memory, enabled him, despite other duties, to compose two very different works which, independent of each other, made him the greatest rabbi and legal authority ever to arise in the Diaspora, and the most significant Jewish philosopher before Spinoza.

It was of him that the epigram was made: “From Moses [the prophet] to Moses [Ben Maimon] there was no one like Moses.” In his *Mishne Torah* (literally: “Repetition of the Torah,” 1180) Ben Maimon offered, in fourteen tracts, the clearest, most comprehensive, topically organized systematization of all the rulings in Jewish law. The book was intended to put an end to the Talmudic spirit of perpetual exegesis and ratiocination about the law, and return the law to what it essentially was—a directive for action. This, in turn, was supposed to liberate the Jews' intellectual energies and redirect them to where they ought to be invested: the study of God and his creations—namely, rational metaphysics and natural science—which the prophets themselves, Maimonides claimed, have studied and allegorized in the bible's secret linguistic layer. This Maimonidean

revolution is announced and performed, half-covertly, in his philosophical opus, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (1190), which deliberately perplexed as many people as it has guided, because it is addressed to an enlightened minority and often uses equivocation and intentional contradictions to conceal its meaning from those whom Maimonides calls the “rabbinical multitude.”

Maimonides’ project was as daring as only an Arabized Hispano-Jewish elitist could conceive. But historically, it failed. The rabbinical multitude had the upper hand. For although the *Mishne Torah* had been accepted and eventually hailed as a major authority in Judaism, the *Guide*, its inseparable complement, was mistrusted from the start. It was even banned and burned at the heat of the conflict—and was shoved into that alcove of Jewish religious life where philosophy and rationalism have been struggling for their legitimate existence in face of the unflinching supremacy of legal Talmudic studies and periodic surges of mysticism. In the end, not only did the Talmud remain dominant in Jewish learning, but—supreme irony—the *Mishne Torah* itself has become the object of Talmud-like ratiocination and interminable exegesis.

Thus the connection closest to Maimonides’ heart—between his rabbinical and philosophical work—was broken. Beside being his personal setback, this was another failed attempt of Andalusian Jews to impress the rest of the Jewish world with the distinct combination of the secular and the sacred, however configured, which characterized their unique and multifarious culture.

However, within the peninsula this was still a valid and working combination; and now it was making its way toward the north, where Christian Spaniards were preparing for the decisive phase of the Reconquest, and where the hub of Jewish life was now shifting. The Jewish Star was parting way with the darkened Crescent and moving back toward the Cross.