

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JEWISH LIFE IN SPAIN

WHAT'S THE BIG IDEA?

Jewish Culture and Thought

For hundreds of years, the Jewish community in Spain was among the most cultured, literate, and cosmopolitan in the world. In an era when cooperation between different religious groups was unthinkable in most parts of the globe, Jews, along with their Muslim, Christian, and pagan neighbors, cooperated in multiple areas of business and scholarship to their—and the world's—great benefit. As this era of cooperation and tolerance in Spain came to an end with the advent of forced conversions and expulsion, the Sephardic refugees brought the knowledge gained over the previous centuries with them to their new communities in Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and the New World.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Overview: The Golden Age of Spain and Its Decline

One of the names that has stuck to the medieval period—usually unfairly—is that of the Dark Ages, which implies a time when life was grim and people were at best illiterate and at worst barbarian. In Spain, this characterization couldn't be further from the truth.

Jews had lived in Spain since at least the third century CE (and possibly before), at which point they turn up in the writings of the fledgling Catholic Church. At the Council of Elvira, held around the year 300 near Granada in southern Spain, Christians are admonished “not to suffer the fruits, which they receive from God

with the giving of thanks, to be blessed by the Jews.” From this text, we can clearly see that Jews were not only integrated into the community along with their Christian (and, most likely, pagan) neighbors, but that these neighbors believed that their blessings held power and were desirable for a good harvest.¹

From these beginnings, Jews continued to live (although less happily) under the subsequent Visigothic rulers. Germanic conquerors of Spain in the late sixth century, the Visigoths converted to Christianity and often persecuted the Jews under their control, at times engaging in a policy of forced conversion, until the Muslim conquest in the early eighth century.

The Muslim general Tarik ibn Ziyad, successful in his conversion of the North African pagans to Islam, entered Spain from the south and defeated the Visigoths in the year 711. The policy of the Muslim conquerors was to allow Jews living in the conquered territories to fortify the towns under their control. In Spain, this new leadership role, combined with the departure of the Visigoths (including many landowners who abandoned their holdings), made for a hospitable environment not only for the Jews who had continued to live in Spain (some in secret) but for those who returned from

¹ Jacob Rader Marcus, ed., *The Jew in the Medieval World, A Source Book: 315–1791* (Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1990), p. 101. Marcus notes, “Some farmers evidently valued the blessing of the Jews more than that of their own Christian priests.”

exile elsewhere in Europe. The Golden Age of Spain had begun.

The Muslim victors referred to the land they had conquered as *al-Andalus*, the Arabic derivative of the Spanish *Andalusia*, which refers in general to the part of the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule from 711 until 1492. Like Egyptian rule thousands of years before, early Muslim rule was divided into dynasties. The Umayyad dynasty was founded in the year 755 by Abd al-Rahman. The Umayyads were tolerant toward Jews, and they encouraged the participation by Arabs and Jews in the sciences, literature, and trade. In the year 929, a descendant of this ruler, Prince Abd al-Rahman III, established an independent caliphate in Spain, and during his reign the Jewish community began to flourish even more.

In the capital city of Cordoba, these rulers were so hospitable that Jews came from all over the world to engage in commerce and Jewish learning there as well as in much of the Iberian peninsula then under Muslim control. During this period the academies of Babylonia were in decline, and new centers of learning in Europe, including Spain, filled that void for the world's Jewish scholars.

Jewish intellectuals also came to learn the disciplines of medicine, geography and cartography from Arab scientists and mathematicians living in this open and cosmopolitan area. This wonderful state of affairs continued into the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and for hundreds of years Spain was on the cutting edge of all types of learning for Jews and Arabs alike.

By the eleventh century, the Umayyad dynasty began to decline and Muslim Spain was divided into smaller principalities. With

this decentralization, Jews moved throughout Spain, and became in many places part of the ruling class.

Founding academies of Talmudic learning, functioning as tax farmers² and as landlords for Arab landowners, and pursuing all manner of intellectual interests including philosophy, medicine, and poetry, Jews had risen to the pinnacle of life in medieval Spain. However, this decentralization also made it more difficult for the Muslim rulers to defend Spain against both Christian invaders and rival Muslim factions, such as the Almoravids and the Almohads. The Almoravids, a fundamentalist and intolerant Muslim sect from North Africa, invaded southern Spain in 1094. Sixty-eight years later, they were followed by the Almohads, a fanatical Berber sect from the mountains of Morocco who by the year 1172 had conquered most of Islamic Spain. Unlike the more tolerant Umayyads, the Almohads forced all Jews and Christians under their control to convert to Islam, or else face exile or execution. As a result, many Jews fled over the border to northern Spain, much of which had begun to fall under the control of the Christian conquerors moving south.

Paradise Lost: The Reconquista and the Jewish Community

By the twelfth century, Christian armies were moving through Europe to reconquer areas lost to the Muslims over the previous four hundred years. The *Reconquista*, or Christian reconquest of Spain and the Middle East, took another four hundred years, and the fortunes of Spain's Jews began to decline—at first slowly, and then sharply.

² Tax farmers collected taxes on behalf of the government; if they collected more than what was due, they were permitted to keep the rest. Such a position was given to government officials and other privileged individuals throughout the Middle Ages and was considered to be a perk.

For a time, things were still good for the Jews of Spain. The Christian rulers tolerated the Jewish community, mostly because of its economic and political value. As part of the ruling class, and the emerging middle class, Jews fulfilled an important function in society, paying taxes and sometimes filling administrative roles in local government. The Jews, as a class, were considered to “belong” to the king and were often given special charters granting them protected status, prohibiting Christians from persecuting them, permitting them freedom of movement, allowing them their own law courts, and the like. The Jewish community in Spain also had a remarkable degree of both integration into the general community and independence within it. Creating their own enclaves, called *aljamas*, the Jews collected their own taxes, ran their own law courts, and in general operated in an independent manner as long as the ruler tolerated this status quo.

However, by the thirteenth century a stronger anti-Jewish feeling arose among many in Spain, and for the first time this sentiment was matched by the religious and political leadership. The Golden Age had come to an end.

Diplomats, Poets, Philosophers, and Rabbis: Luminaries of the Golden Age

Primarily during the ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, many influential individuals rose to prominence, giving the Jewish community of Spain the cultural and religious prominence that led to the designation of this period as the Golden Age. Characterized by their deep learning, openness to a multitude of ideas—both Jewish and secular, and prominence on the international scene, several of these men helped to shape the Golden Age. Their ideas and written works remain influential

even today. In the previous chapter we discussed the life and career of Moses Maimonides, perhaps the most famous of the luminaries to originate in medieval Spain. However, there are many others, and a few are highlighted here.

Hasdai ibn Shaprut (905–975)

Hasdai ibn Shaprut bears a remarkable resemblance to the great Moses Maimonides, who lived two hundred years later. Court physician and adviser to Abd al-Rahman III and his successor, al-Hakam II, Hasdai was called upon not only for his medical knowledge but as a diplomat often trusted with sensitive political negotiations. The Jewish community bestowed upon him the title *nasi*, or prince, as befitted his role as the leading Jewish courtier in the land. Ibn Shaprut, after hearing about the existence of a Jewish kingdom in Khazaria (in the Caucasus Mountains; see chapter 17 for more information), sent emissaries to the king of the Khazars and initiated correspondence with the Khazar king Joseph in Hebrew. Iberian Jews were fascinated with Khazaria, the only independent Jewish kingdom in the world at the time, and Sephardic diplomats were in a position to find out more about them and report back to their coreligionists.

Ibn Shaprut was also a patron of the arts and sciences and employed a personal secretary, Menaḥem ben Saruq, who was himself a poet, linguist, and the author of the first Hebrew dictionary.³ Ibn Shaprut also influenced other poets, including Dunash ibn Labrat, a North African who pioneered the composition of Hebrew poetry using Arabic meter, which became the standard for medieval Spanish poetry.

³ Norman A. Stillman, *Jews of Arab Lands*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979, p. 55.

Under his leadership, the Jewish community of Spain finally made a clean break from the authority of the Babylonian academies, establishing a yeshiva in Cordoba and gaining prominence as an independent entity.

Shmuel Ha-Nagid (993–1056)

With the decentralization of Spain into smaller principalities in the eleventh century, the Jewish community became fragmented as well. The rulers of these various smaller kingdoms were referred to as the “Party Kings,”⁴ designated thus because of their different allegiances, such as Berber, Slav, and so forth but also a useful moniker because of the wonderful cultural atmosphere they propagated. Under these rulers, Andalusian civilization flourished and Jews participated fully in both its culture and in Spanish political life, and Shmuel (Samuel) Ha-Nagid (the leader, or prince) was a wonderful representative.

A soldier and politician, a master poet and Talmudic scholar, Shmuel Ha-Nagid’s influence reverberated through the upper crust of Jewish society and filtered through to Jews worldwide as well as to Arabic poets and scholars. Ha-Nagid was appointed as the vizier of Badis, the Berber ruler of Granada in 1038. As the commander of Granada’s military, his army defeated Seville’s army over the course of a series of campaigns spanning eighteen years. In an era when both Jews and Arabs in Spain prided themselves on their purity of language and expression, Ha-Nagid’s poetry outshone that of most of his generation. Weaving secular themes such as war and wine with praise of Torah and expressions borrowed from Scripture, his poems still resonate today,

⁴ Ibid.

with titles such as “The Poet’s Boast,” “In the Ruined Citadel,” and “Wine.” Of course beautiful poetry loses something in translation, but here are two fine examples:

“Take Heart”

In times of sorrow, take heart, even
Though you stand at death’s door: the
Candle flares up before it dies, and
Wounded lions roar.⁵

“The Jasmine”

Look at the jasmine, whose branches,
Leaves, and stems are green as chrysolite,
Whose flowers are white as rock crystal,
Whose tendrils are red as carnelian—
Like a white-faced youth
Whose hands are shedding the blood of
Innocent men.⁶

Yehudah Ha-Levi (c. 1070–1141)

Even today, the words of Yehudah Ha-Levi resonate for Zionists everywhere the world over. A physician, poet, essayist, philosopher, and historian, Yehudah Ha-Levi (Judah the Levite) lived during a period when the fortunes of Spain’s Jews were changing dramatically year by year. During Ha-Levi’s teenage years, the fanatical Almoravids were invading southern Spain, while Christian armies sought to conquer northern Spain, in proximity to Ha-Levi’s hometown of Tudela. Although as a young man Ha-Levi followed the popular sentiment that Jews were completely at home in Spain, evidence of a shift in thought can be seen in his later writings.

⁵ T. Carmi, ed. and trans., *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, NY: Penguin Books, 1981, p. 296. This wonderful volume contains many hundreds of examples of Hebrew poetry with English translations.

⁶ Ibid.

In Ha-Levi's important work, *The Kuzari*, the author uses fiction as a method to share his philosophical approach to Judaism. In the story, a Muslim, a Christian, and a Jew present arguments extolling each religion to the pagan king of the Khazars. After hearing them, the king eventually converts to Judaism. Ha-Levi thus uses the story as a vehicle to explain the benefits of each, while extolling the values of Judaism above all. In his work, Ha-Levi introduces the idea that the Jews do God's work on earth by bringing humanity and enlightenment to all. However, the most advantageous place to do God's work, according to Ha-Levi, is in the Land of Israel.

Ha-Levi's poetry collection entitled *Songs of Zion* praises the Holy Land and its beauty, often utilizing verses from Scripture, and expressing the conviction that only in Eretz Yisrael can the Jews truly be at home, free from persecution. In what is perhaps his most famous poem, "My Heart Is in the East," Ha-Levi writes:

"My heart is in the East and I am at the Edge of the West. Then how can I taste What I eat, how can I enjoy it? How Can I fulfill my vows⁷ and pledges While Zion is in the domain of Edom,⁸ And I am in the bonds of Arabia? It Would be easy for me to leave behind All the good things of Spain; it would Be glorious to see the dust of the Ruined Shrine."⁹

Eventually, in keeping with his own Zionist convictions, Ha-Levi left Spain, bound for Eretz Yisrael. Most sources state that by 1141 he had made it at least to Egypt, and some say all the way to

⁷ Ha-Levi had by this time made a vow to leave Spain for Eretz Yisrael.

⁸ *Edom*, which means "Rome" in Hebrew, is a traditional Jewish name for Christian lands.

⁹ T. Carmi, ed. and trans., *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, NY: Penguin Books, 1981, p. 347.

Israel before dying either en route, or once he arrived there. A famous story has Ha-Levi arriving in Jerusalem and kneeling to kiss its stones, only to be trampled to death by a passing horseman. In any case, by the time Ha-Levi made good on his vows and undertook his journey, life for Andalusian Jewry had changed forever.

Nahmanides (c. 1194–1270)

By the thirteenth century, Jews made up approximately 3 percent of the total population of Spain.¹⁰ Although Andalusian Jews continued to be represented in financial and political positions of influence all over the land, a conflict was brewing among the highest echelon of leaders. The rulers—the dukes and kings who governed the various principalities in Spain—saw the advantage of having talented Jews in their employ.

The Catholic clergy, however, believed that elevating Jews to high positions in which they came in contact with Christians was deleterious to the morality of their flock. With increased influence of the clergy over the Christian populace, their anti-Semitism became contagious. By the middle of the thirteenth century, both the clergy and the rulers had become more openly hostile toward Andalusian Jewry.

The leader of the Spanish Jewish community at the time was Rabbi Moses ben Nahman, or Nahmanides, also known as the Ramban (the acronym of his name). Nahmanides headed a yeshiva in Gerona, in northeast Spain. Like other luminaries before him, Nahmanides was a philosopher and physician in addition to being a scholar and community leader. His commentaries on the Torah and Talmud are still considered fundamental to an

¹⁰ Naomi Pasachoff and Robert J. Littman, *Jewish History in 100 Nutshells*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995, p. 134.

understanding of the sacred text, as are his writings on Jewish law and on Jewish mysticism, or kabbalah (from the Hebrew word meaning “tradition”). In this position, it was only natural that when the Church sought learned Jews to debate Christian clergy in theological matters, they sought out a strong leader such as Nahmanides.

In 1263, following several decades in which Jews (and Muslims) were encouraged to convert to Christianity, the Church began a policy of instituting forced sermons, in which Jews were required to listen to hours-long messages extolling the values of Christianity and demeaning those of Judaism. Soon after, the Catholic Church called for a debate in which Nahmanides would defend Judaism against the arguments of the Church, represented by a Jewish convert to Catholicism named Pablo Christiani (Paul the Christian) and backed by none other than King James I of Aragon.

For four days in July of that year, the debate raged on in the Spanish port city of Barcelona. Nahmanides was at a disadvantage, having been warned not to say anything negative about the Church, although King James I had assured him complete freedom of speech. In spite of these impediments, after a few days, Nahmanides seemed to be winning the debate. At this point, accounts differ. The Christian sources say that the debate ended because Nahmanides ran away from the city, while Jewish sources say that he stayed in Barcelona, was allowed to respond to a sermon by the king in his synagogue, and received a monetary sum for his participation in the debate. Whatever the true outcome of the disputation, Nahmanides did in fact leave Spain for the Land of Israel, where he

arrived in 1267 and spent the final three years of his life.

The Jews of Spain, having begun their downward spiral, continued failing fast. Pablo Christiani, by most accounts the loser of the debate, convinced Pope Clement IV to censor and burn Jewish books—including the Talmud and Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* law code—because he perceived them to say negative things about Jesus.¹¹ In fact, Christiani took his case all the way to Paris, persuading King Louis IX to institute the Jewish badge,¹² a measure that monarchs all over Europe began to emulate.

By the fourteenth century, anti-Semitism was widespread throughout Spain and France, where the Inquisition had been established a century earlier. Letters written by King Peter IV of Aragon called for a halt to the violence inflicted by the Christian populace against the Jews in the wake of the devastating bubonic plague, which killed one-third of Europe’s people between 1348 and 1349, and for which the Jews generally were blamed.¹³ And then, in 1391, outright disaster struck the Jews of Spain.

A Century of Decline: From 1391 to 1492

In 1391, the archbishop of Spain died and his right-hand man began to advocate an *increase* in violence against Jews. On June 4, 1391, the Christian populace of Seville, near the southern tip of Spain, rioted, murdering Jewish men, burning down the Jewish quarter, and selling many of the women and children into slavery. As the violence spread to other cities throughout Spain, the authorities were silent, which

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 135–136.

¹² Robert Chazan, *Church, State and Jew in the Middle Ages*, New York: Behrman House, 1980, p. 261. For a portion of the text containing both the Christian and Jewish reports of the Disputation, see pp. 265–276.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–131.

served to encourage the mobs. As Jews by the thousands sought to avoid death by converting to Christianity, others chose martyrdom rather than conversion, and those who could flee the country did so. By September, up to 100,000 Jews had converted to Christianity and as many as 50,000 Jews had been murdered.¹⁴

Laws restricting all aspects of Jewish life followed the riots. Echoing the persecution of Jews throughout the ages from the time of the Maccabees, Jews were banned from holding public office, studying Talmud, increasing the size of their synagogues, or withholding inheritances from children who converted to Catholicism. Forced sermons continued, and Jews were prohibited from marrying Christians (and vice versa).

Once King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella married, uniting their territories to comprise almost all of the Iberian Peninsula, the situation only worsened. Jewish communities that had been independent entities for centuries lost the right to manage their own affairs, including the right to have their own law courts, collect their own taxes, and more. Some Jews were forcibly removed from their homes and transferred to ghettos, and others were forced to wear clothing and badges identifying them as Jews.¹⁵ The institution of the Inquisition in Spain created a climate of secrecy and fear that, along with further discriminatory laws and restrictions, resulted ultimately in the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

¹⁴ Naomi Pasachoff and Robert J. Littman, *Jewish History in 100 Nutshells*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995, pp. 145–146.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The Converso Question: Forced Conversions, Marranos, and Limpieza de Sangre
Imagine 100,000 Jews converting to Catholicism within a period of three months. This situation faced Church officials throughout Spain in 1391: What to do with all the new converts?

Once an individual converted to Christianity, he or she was not only responsible to observe all of the ritual laws and sacraments of Catholicism (the breaking of which could compromise one's ability to enter Heaven), but fell under the jurisdiction of the Inquisition (see below). This observance necessitated religious education for all converts, which most did not receive, having converted quickly and under duress. However, any baptism—done under pain of death or not—was still binding, regardless of whether the postulant knew anything about how to observe his or her new religion.

Compounding this problem were the laws of *limpeza de sangre*, or “purity of blood.” Once a Jew was baptized, theoretically anyway, he or she was once again eligible to live in any town, work in any job, or marry any person of his or her choosing. Church officials and ordinary Christians alike became suspicious of *nuevos Christianos* (new Christians) and so sought out ways to identify them and bar them from holding public office or joining guilds; these endeavors set up competition between new and old Christians that the latter sought to eliminate. (Modern economic ideas regarding the value of competition in the marketplace had not yet been accepted; a person who set up a competing business interest—especially if that person had been a Jew—was viewed as stealing from others rather than increasing the value of their work or product.) At the same time as barriers were put in place to prohibit new

Christians from advancing in business or society, new derogatory labels such as “Marrano” (swine) were used to label and stigmatize the *conversos* (converts), and of course to identify them as such.

Some converts to Catholicism were sincere in their new faith. From a religious standpoint, some new believers—many encouraged by their Christian neighbors and the Catholic clergy—thought that the ills befalling the Jewish community were proof that God had abandoned the Jewish people and that Christianity was the true religion. However, sincere converts were lumped together with *anussim* (pronounced “ah-new-sim,” and meaning those who were forced to convert) under the shadow of suspicion that fell over all new Christians. Once identified as “other,” the Inquisition often took over.

The Inquisition

As mentioned above, the first Inquisition was inaugurated in France in the thirteenth century. The Inquisition in Spain began in 1478, when Tomas de Torquemada, Queen Isabella’s personal confessor, was appointed Grand Inquisitor. The purpose of the Inquisition, an official department of the Catholic Church, was to ensure that Catholics were not only practicing their religion in the purest way possible, but that converts to Catholicism were neither backsliding into their former religion nor pulling others in that direction. The main currency of the Inquisition was fear, and the second was money.

While converts—both sincere and insincere—were those most likely to experience fear in trying their best to appear as perfect Christians, many around them were encouraged to report their neighbors to the Inquisition as backsliding. Entire lists of behavior were

distributed to Catholics, encouraging them to spy on their neighbors and report if they, for example, washed their clothing or bathed on Fridays (the implication being that they were getting ready for Shabbat), professed an aversion to pork (practically the Spanish national food), or in any way appeared secretive in their behavior.

Once the Inquisition became suspicious of an individual or his or her family, action was often swift and serious. Those accused of heresy, a crime punishable by a torturous death, were arrested, thrown in prison, and their belongings confiscated. Many of these belongings—particularly jewelry and money—were kept by the office of the Inquisition, and used by the Church. Some of the money was given by the Church to the Spanish monarchs of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and was used to finance explorations to the New World.¹⁶

Regardless of whether the suspect was found guilty or not, these possessions were rarely, if ever, returned to the individual or the family. Rather, more money was often given as bribes to the Inquisition with the hope, usually futile, of releasing the suspect. Instead, family members frequently came under suspicion as well, often while the suspect was being tortured in a variety of ways in order to solicit information about other “heretics.” Punishments for those accused of various levels of apostasy covered a wide range of penalties. Those not sentenced to death might be forced to wear a bright red or yellow garment festooned with crosses, devils, and flames, called a *sanbenito*, while being paraded through the town to catcalls, flinging garbage, and worse. Those whose crimes warranted death

¹⁶ Sue Parker Gerson, *The Financial Structure of the Spanish Inquisition*, unpublished research paper, State University of New York at Binghamton, 1986.

were often consigned to be burned at the stake (public burnings were called *autos-da-fé*, or “acts of faith”), in view of their family and friends who were watched to make sure they did not appear sympathetic to the doomed one.

It is likely that between four thousand and eight thousand Jews (and a smaller number of *Moriscos*, or Muslim converts to Catholicism) were burnt alive during Torquemada’s tenure as Grand Inquisitor. The Inquisition continued in Spain for hundreds of years and was instituted in those countries in the New World where Spain established a colonial foothold, ending finally in 1834.

The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain

During the course of the late Middle Ages, beginning with England in 1290, many European countries had forced their Jewish residents to leave, often with few possessions and little or no actual money. In fact, Spain was one of the last countries in Europe to exile its Jews, in the year 1492. It was a shock because for so many centuries, Spain was known as a bastion of tolerance and coexistence. So why, after all that time, did King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella expel the Jews of Spain?

Some clues may be found in the Edict of Expulsion itself. Addressed to the nobility as well as to every Jewish community of the land, the document provides a description of the state of affairs between Jews and Christians in fifteenth-century Spain. The monarchs write that they have watched with dismay as Christians, many of them converts from Judaism, have been swayed by the Jews with whom they have contact—whether business associates, neighbors, or relatives—into “Judaizing” behavior, including:

“achieving that the Christians and their children be circumcised, and giving them books from which they may read their prayers and declaring to them the fasts that they must keep, and joining with them to read and teach them the history of their law, indicating to them the festivals before they occur . . . carrying to them and giving to them from their houses unleavened bread and meats ritually slaughtered, instructing them about the things from which they must refrain . . . and persuading them as much as they can to hold and observe the law of Moses, convincing them that there is no other law or truth except for that one.”

The edict goes on to lament that although the purpose of the Inquisition was to eliminate such behaviors among Christians, the Jews with whom they are in contact persist in convincing them otherwise. The monarchs, therefore

“having taken deliberation about this matter, resolve to order the said Jews and Jewesses of our kingdoms to depart and never to return or come back.”

After placing the Jews under royal protection, Ferdinand and Isabella granted them until the end of July 1492 (four months, as the edict was dated March 31) to dispose of their possessions, including the ability to export them out of the country, except for “gold or silver or coined money or other things prohibited by the laws of our kingdoms.” The edict was to take effect on July 31, 1492—the ninth of Av on the Jewish calendar.¹⁷

¹⁷ Because the secular calendar was in flux between the Julian and Gregorian calendars in the fifteenth century, it’s not really possible to pin down the exact Hebrew date of the expulsion (and, the Jews were given a grace period of probably up until August 3 to leave for good). The actual date of expulsion was, however, almost

According to their own words, Ferdinand and Isabella wished to rid Spain of Jews because they were influencing Christians to become Jewish. Why would so many Christians want to become Jewish, especially in the climate that surrounded them in fifteenth-century Spain? The answer seems obvious: because they were really hidden Jews.

With the capture of Granada on January 8, 1492, Spain was entirely under Christian control, and Ferdinand and Isabella wanted to homogenize their population. The Crown and the Church treated these *conversos* as heretics, because they had been baptized as Christians. However, in their hearts and in their behaviors, which they tried and too often failed to hide, many were Jews. Religious Catholics committed to the spiritual purity of their nation and its Christian population, the monarchs felt that with the expulsion of Spain's Jews, their problem would be solved. And so, on July 31, 1492, Spain became officially free of Jews.

A Hebrew account of the exile notes that between 50,000 and 53,000 Jewish families were expelled on that day, leaving cattle, stores, property, houses and vineyards—some of which had been in their families' possessions for centuries. Academies of Jewish learning were abandoned as rabbis fled with their congregants.¹⁸ And while diplomats such as Don Isaac Abravanel, a biblical commentator, historian and council to the monarchy, tried to have the edict overturned by

certainly during the three weeks preceding the commemoration of Tisha B'Av, and is often memorialized on the precise date.

¹⁸ Robert Chazan, *Church, State and Jew in the Middle Ages*, New York: Behrman House, 1980, p. 261. For a portion of the text containing both the Christian and Jewish reports of the Disputation, pp. 319–322.

offering arguments and bribes, nothing worked.

Many of the exiled went to Islamic countries in North Africa and the Ottoman Empire, and others went north and east to the more tolerant countries of Holland and Italy. Others went west to Portugal, but were disappointed when there, too, they were expelled in 1497. Some, it is speculated, joined Columbus's voyage to the New World, which left Spain on the same day as the Edict of Expulsion went into effect. Still more converted and remained in Spain and Portugal as hidden Jews; according to one source, after the emancipation of Portugal's Jews in 1910, hidden Jews in Spain and Portugal began practicing Judaism openly once again, for the first time in centuries.

The expulsion of the Jews of Spain closes a chapter in Jewish history, not only in the Iberian Peninsula but for all of Jewry. Many historians, Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi in particular, mark the Spanish Expulsion as a watershed between the medieval and modern periods in Jewish history. Others believe that the practices employed by the Catholic monarchs and the Inquisition constituted the first systematic example of government-sponsored violent anti-Semitism and were studied and employed by the Nazis in the "final solution" five hundred years later.

Our attention now turns to the Jewish communities that survived and flourished in the Ottoman Empire, Eastern Europe, and the New World.

CONNECTING TO OUR TRADITION

The sage Ben Zoma states in *Pirkei Avot* (4:1): "Who is wise? [The one] who learns from every person." The Golden Age of Spain embodied such tolerance and cooperation between Muslims, Jews, and

Christians. This spirit of collaboration and open-mindedness led to unparalleled advances in science, medicine, literature, and philosophy, not to mention advances within the scholarly circles of each group’s faith tradition.

DID YOU KNOW?

- One of the reasons many historians speculate that Columbus might have been Jewish is that it’s almost too much of a coincidence that his voyage left the same day as the Edict of Expulsion took effect.
- In fact, there is no direct evidence that Columbus himself was Jewish (although, like many in Spain and Italy, where he was from, lots of people—especially those connected to the sciences and wealthy patrons—had Jewish ancestors). However, there is evidence that *conversos* helped to finance the voyage and numbered among his crew. Columbus also hired an interpreter who spoke Hebrew, in order to converse with the natives whom Columbus expected to find in India, where he thought he was headed, and whom he believed to be a remnant of the ten lost tribes.

IMPORTANT TERMS

Sephardic	<i>nasi</i>
<i>Auto-da-fé</i>	<i>The Kuzari</i>
Converso	Disputation
<i>Marrano</i>	<i>Nuevos Christianos</i>
<i>Morisco</i>	<i>Sanbenito</i>
Visigoths	Forced sermon
Golden Age of Spain	<i>Limpieza de sangre</i>
Umayyads	Inquisition
Almoravids	Edict of Expulsion
Almohads	“judaizing”
<i>aljama</i>	

Names, Places, and Events

Council of Elvira	Moses ben Naḥman (Naḥmanides)
Andalusia	Gerona
Al-Andalus	Aragon
Abd al-Rahman	Pablo Christiani
Prince Abd al-Rahman III	King James I
Reconquista	King Ferdinand
Hasdai ibn Shaprut	Queen Isabella
Shmuel Ha-Nagid	Tomas de Torquemada
Party Kings	Seville
Yehudah Ha-Levi	Christopher Columbus
Granada	Granada
Tudela	
Cordoba	
Castile	

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Spain, the Jewish community was faced with a familiar dilemma: Should they convert, leave their homes for an unknown future in a distant land, or submit to a martyr’s death? Unlike their counterparts in earlier centuries in Central Europe, very few Sephardic Jews chose death over conversion, opting instead to convert outwardly but remain Jewish inwardly. Discuss the pros and cons of choosing false conversion over leaving Spain. What do you think motivated each group of Jews to act as they did? What would you have done?
- In 1263, Rabbi Moses ben Naḥman (Naḥmanides) engaged in a public debate with Pablo Cristiani over the validity of Judaism, and won. Today, groups such as Jews for Jesus (Messianic Jews) often try to engage Jews in discussions with a similar purpose: discrediting Jewish thought and winning converts to their side. Engage the class (high school and older students) in a discussion of strategies for managing an encounter with missionaries, such as those that one might encounter on college campuses. In

a synagogue setting, it is highly recommended that you involve the students' rabbi in this discussion. Discuss approaches including close reading of biblical passages and polite disengagement (walking away), among others.

ACTIVITIES

Poetry Reading (E, S, A)

The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse contains not only information about a myriad of Hebrew poets of all backgrounds from across the centuries, but hundreds of examples of their poetry in Hebrew with English translation. Some of these poems are included in this chapter, but there are many more that are worthy to study, read, and recite. Divide your class into groups and assign one medieval Spanish poet to each group. Have them report on the life of that poet, and recite a selection of his work. You can also turn this activity into a garden party or a café complete with goodies (perhaps Spanish foods such as orange slices and lace cookies) and invite other classes or the students' families.

Jew versus Jew (S, A)

Jews in medieval Spain were faced with the decision of whether to convert to Catholicism and stay, or refuse conversion and flee. Divide the class into teams and stage a debate between a hidden Jew (often a false convert) and a Jew who moves to Turkey in order to practice his or her faith openly. Have the students help their teammates prepare arguments as to why their choice was the best one for them. Vote on who presented the better argument.

Time to Pack: The Edict of Expulsion (E, S)

Help younger students understand the Edict of Expulsion by acting it out. Discuss among students: If you had four

months to sell your property and pack only what you could carry but not any silver, gold, or money, what would you choose? How would you decide? Would you bring family items of sentimental value, practical items such as clothes and food, educational items such as books, or things that you could sell easily in order to recoup some of your money?

The Edict of Expulsion:

A Close Reading (S, A)

Print copies of the Edict of Expulsion from the Internet. Have students read the edict, and answer the following questions:

- Why did the monarchs want to expel the Jews?
- What behavior was considered “Jewish” in medieval Spain?
- What items were Jews allowed to export and/or bring with them, and what were they forbidden from bringing out of Spain?
- What did the expulsion do to Spain's economy? (For example, did it flood the market of certain precious items? Reduce the price of land and/or property?)
- How easy do you think it was for the Jews to recoup the value of their property when they had four months to sell it, and everyone knew it was “sell it or lose it”?
- What similarities do you think exist between the Spanish Jews and political refugees from other countries today?

TIMELINE (all dates are CE)

- c. 300 Council of Elvira
- 711 Muslims conquer Spain
- 755 Rise of the Umayyad dynasty; encourage tolerance and cultural advancement
- 905-975 Life of Hasdai ibn Shaprut

- 929 Independent caliphate established in Spain, with center in Cordoba; center of Jewish activity in Spain
- 993-1056 Life of Shmuel Ha-Nagid
- 1070-1141 Life of Yehudah Ha-Levi
- 1094 Invasion of the Almoravids; many Jews flee to Christian Spain
- 1147 Rise of the Almohads; many centers of Jewish life and culture in Spain are destroyed
- c. 1194-1270 Life of Moses ben Naḥman (Naḥmanides)
- 1391 Anti-Jewish riots and mass conversions of Jews to Christianity
- 1478 Establishment of Spanish Inquisition
- 1492 Fall of Muslim Granada; exile of the Jews from Spain; Columbus's voyage to the New World
- Chazan, Robert. *Church, State and Jew in the Middle Ages*. New York: Behrman House, 1980.
- Gilbert, Martin. *The Routledge Atlas of Jewish History*, 6th ed. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Lewy, Hans, ed. *Three Jewish Philosophers: Philo, Saadya Gaon, Jehuda Halevi*. New York: Macmillan, 1969.
- Marcus, Jacob Rader. *The Jew in the Medieval World, A Source Book: 315–1791*. Cincinnati, OH: Hebrew Union College Press, 1990.
- Pasachoff, Naomi, and Robert J. Littman. *Jewish History in 100 Nutshells*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1995.
- Sarna, Jonathan D., and Jonathan B. Krasner. *The History of the Jewish People: A Story of Tradition and Change*. Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 2006 (see especially chapters 8 and 9).
- Stillman, Norman A. *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979.
- Stow, Kenneth R. *Alienated Minority: The Jews of Medieval Latin Europe*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

RESOURCES

Books and Articles

- Baer, Yitzhak. *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971.
- Barnavi, Eli, ed. *Historical Atlas of the Jewish People: From the Time of the Patriarchs to the Present*. New York: Schocken Books, 1992.
- Carmi, T., ed. *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*. London, England: Penguin Books, 1981.

Internet

- Visit www.behrmanhouse.com/booklinks for links to Web sites that offer additional resources for this chapter.