The Jew in Medieval Iberia

1100-1500

Jews in Space and Time

THE JEW IN MEDIEVAL IBERIA

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Hispano-Jewish Society: An Introduction

Jonathan Ray

The rich history of Iberian Jewry has been a powerful muse for scholars of Jewish and medieval studies for over a century. For many, the subject conjures up images of a Golden Age of Jewish civilization characterized by great material success and an outpouring of religious and intellectual works. For others, this alluring image of Jewish achievement is juxtaposed with, and often overshadowed by, a much darker legacy of marginalization and persecution that culminated in the eventual expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492. *The Jew in Medieval Iberia* attempts to embrace this complexity and present a portrait of Jewish life in Christian Iberia that emphasizes both the internal diversity of this community and the variety of ways it interacted with its host society. During the high and late Middle Ages, Iberian Jews fulfilled a number of distinct roles, acting as economic catalysts, diplomats, physicians and transmitters of culture. At the same time, the propagation of Jewish intellectual culture advanced along a variety of different pathways. In the hands of rabbis and Jewish courtiers, this intellectual culture also became linked to the general identity and the social and political fortunes of the average Jew. The essays collected in this volume introduce readers to some of the leading figures and social groups of Hispano-Jewish society, and explore the way in which they responded to the opportunities and challenges of their times.

Historical Overview

In many ways, Jewish life in medieval Iberia was characterized by patterns that were established prior to their settlement in Christian "Spain." Jews had formed an important segment of Iberian society since Roman times, but were subject to erratic and often coercive policies under Visigothic rule. During the period of Muslim dominance in the Peninsula (eighth-eleventh centuries), the Jews created a society whose general prosperity and depth and range of intellectual culture rivaled that of any time or place in Jewish history. Andalusi-Jewish merchants formed part of the trade networks that traversed the medieval Mediterranean, and continued to thrive even after the collapse of Umayyad Córdoba in the early eleventh century. As the Caliphate gave way to independent city-states known as *taifas*, the proliferation of princely courts expanded opportunities for Jewish advisors, tax collectors and other civil servants. These and other wealthy Jews were patrons of religious and literary creativity. Andalusi academies (*yeshivot*) became major centers for exegetical study and the codification of Jewish law. Jewish poets wrote songs of praise for God and Zion, even as they extolled the worldly pleasures of al-Andalus. The general affluence and intellectual dynamism of Jewish life in Muslim Iberia succeeded in attracting Jewish settlers, students and merchants from throughout the medieval Jewish world.[1]

The twelfth century brought with it a protracted period of instability and persecution under the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties that succeeded in driving the majority of Jews out of al-Andalus. Yet, just as Jews were being pushed out of Muslim Iberia, they were simultaneously being pulled into the lands controlled by Christian lords. Between the conquest of Toledo in 1085 to the fall of Seville in 1248, the balance of power in the Peninsula permanently shifted to the Christian kingdoms of Portugal, Castile-Leon and the Crown of Aragon. The dynamic frontier society created by the steady expansion of Christian power in the Peninsula was one in which the Jews would once again thrive as artisans, merchants and

[1] Raymond Scheindlin, "Merchants and Intellectuals, Rabbis and Poets: Judeo-Arabic Culture in the Golden Age of Islam," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History,* ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken, 2002), 313-86.

courtiers. The Arabized Jews came to settle among a native Jewish population that had inhabited the Christian cities of the north for centuries. Together they formed communities that were highly prized by Christian lords as catalysts for economic development, and which were granted a host of privileges in order to secure their permanent settlement in the towns or cities that had recently come under Christian rule.

The relocation of the vast majority of Iberian Jews from Muslim to Christian territories also brought them more firmly within the cultural orbit of medieval Europe. This turn toward Christian Europe resulted in more intimate contact with the Jewish centers of Provence, northern France and the Rhine Valley. During the later Middle Ages, the Jewish communities of Christian Iberia became the site of an important fusion of Andalusi and northern European intellectual traditions. During the twelfth century, Andalusi-born scholars and translators settled north of the Pyrenees, introducing Greco-Arabic science and philosophy to new audiences of Christian and Jewish intellectuals. In the thirteenth century, this earlier wave of refugees was followed by Jewish students from Christian Iberia who traveled northward to study at Ashkenazi *yeshivot*, and who returned home with new insights into Jewish texts. Finally, when political instability wracked the Jewish communities of France and Germany, the flow of Jewish scholars and ideas came full circle. As the Jews were expelled from one region after another, leading Ashkenazi scholars found safe haven among the Jews of Iberia, bringing with them the abundance of their legal and exegetical traditions.[2]

These contacts helped to usher in a new period of mystical speculation throughout Iberia, with distinct centers in northern Castile and Catalonia. The popularity of kabbalah formed part of an expanded curriculum for Hispano-Jewish intellectuals, together with the study of Hebrew grammar, legal codes, and the various fields of science and philosophy.

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[2] Avraham Grossman, "Relations between Spanish and Ashkenazi Jewry in the Middle Ages," in *Moreshet Sepharad: The Sephardi Legacy*, ed. Haim Beinart, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), 1:220-39; and Ephraim Kanarfogel, "Between Ashkenaz and Sepharad: Tosafist Teachings in the Talmudic Commentaries of Ritva," in *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis*, ed. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010), 237-73.

This amalgamation of religious and intellectual traditions was often contentious. In addition to engaging Christian scholars through public disputations and polemical treatises, leading rabbinic authorities and intellectuals also participated in heated debates among themselves over a wide range of topics. Factions formed among the Jewish intelligentsia that championed various philosophical, legal or mystical schools of thought. In promoting their own methodology for the interpretation of sacred texts, these factions came to challenge the veracity and even the very permissibility of other approaches. Impassioned disputes between Jewish intellectuals raged across northern Iberia and Provence over which of these subjects deserved greater attention, and which posed threats to proper religious observance. Some rabbis went so far as to lobby for the institution of bans against the study of kabbalah or philosophy. Yet despite the intensity of these quarrels, no one faction emerged victorious. Throughout the Middle Ages, and indeed long afterward, the heterogeneity of Hispano-Jewish intellectual culture remained one of its enduring hallmarks.[3]

The relationship between Iberian Jews and the surrounding Christian society was equally varied. Throughout the Middle Ages, the negative images of the Jews as religious outsiders and unwanted economic competitors were mitigated by a number of factors. From the point of view of religion, Jews were seen as guardians of the "Old Law," a fact that brought them a measure of respect among Christian theologians and stimulated hope for their conversion.[4] Economically, the association of Jews with banking and trade led Europe's barons and bishops to prize them as economic catalysts and valuable civil servants. Indeed, in most of medieval Europe, Jewish settlements were the result of efforts on the part of Christian lords to attract Jews as a means to stimulate trade. In addition to these factors, the daily contact between Christians and Jews that took place in towns

[3] Idit Dobbs Weinstein, "The Maimonidean Controversy," in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1997), 331-49; and Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[4] Jeremy Cohen, *Living letters of the Law: Ideas of the Jew in Medieval Christianity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999).

and cities all over Iberia also helped to foster amicable ties between members of the two groups.[5]

Religious and social animosities challenged these interfaith relationships. Persistent theological opposition to the practice of lending money at interest generally, and the outright prohibition of such activity among Christians, cast such financial activity in a negative light. The figure of the Jewish money lender was lampooned in Spanish literary and artistic classics such as the epic poem *El Cantar de Mio Cid*, and the great compendium of illustrated songs the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*.[6] Nonetheless, such efforts to disparage both the general practice of money lending and Jewish association with it in particular did little to decrease Christian society's dependence upon such transactions. By the twelfth century, credit had already become firmly established within European economy, and was an essential feature of urban life.[7]

Indeed, it was Hispano-Christian society's steady acceptance of banking, not its demonization, that had the greatest impact on the Jews. As elsewhere in medieval Europe, the expansion of Christian involvement in banking and commerce together with the formation of organized artisan guilds led to decreased dependence upon the Jews, and eventually to their exclusion from these activities in many cities.

The growth of towns in Christian Iberia produced an increasingly large and active cohort of Christian merchants, bankers and artisans. As these groups developed, they viewed the Jews as unwanted competitors, and sought to exclude them from various sectors of the economy. The Jews fought back against this economic marginalization as best they could, petitioning the crown for defense of their rights, and making accommodations with their Christian

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[5] Jonathan Ray, "Jew in the Text: What Christian Charters Tell us about Medieval Jewish Society," *Medieval Encounters* 16 (2010): 243-67.

[6] Dwayne E. Carpenter, "The Portrayal of the Jew in Alfonso the Learned's 'Cantigas de Santa Maria,'" in *In Iberia and Beyond,* ed. Bernard Dov Cooperman (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 15-42; and Louise Mirrer, "Representing "Other" Men: Muslims, Jews and Masculine Ideals in Medieval Castilian Epic and Ballad," in *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages,* ed. Clare A. Lees (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 169-86.

[7] Kenneth R. Stow, "Papal and Royal Attitudes toward Jewish Lending in the 13th century," *AJS Review* 6 (1981): 161-84.

neighbors whenever possible. Jews remained active in banking and commerce, lending money and acting as investors or silent partners with Christians involved in long-distance trade. However, as Christian influence in these areas continued to grow over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the economic balance of power shifted decisively away from the Jews.

During the period of Jewish resettlement in Christian lands (roughly the eleventh to thirteenth centuries), life in the Iberian Peninsula had been dominated by warfare between Muslim and Christian lords. During this period of nearly constant religious and political conflict, the region's Jews benefited from their position as non-combatants. They played the role of economic and cultural intermediaries between Muslim and Christian society and held positions as diplomats, translators, and trusted advisors. However, after the mid-thirteenth century, a series of transformations within Hispano-Christian society came to have a deleterious effect on the status of Iberian Jewry.

Perhaps the most significant development was the suspension of Christian participation in the so-called *Reconquista* by the end of the thirteenth century. As royal energies shifted from conquest of the Peninsula's remaining Muslim territory to political, social and economic consolidation of lands already won, Christian society began to evolve from one organized for war to one characterized by an interest in commerce, legal administration, and the establishment of artisans' guilds. These developments dramatically reduced Christian society's need for the Jews. At the same time, the Jews' special status as a royally protected minority whose taxes benefited the crown rather than the local municipalities or the Church began to foster popular resentment among the other sectors of Christian society. This negative association between the Jews and the crown was further exacerbated by the latter's growing power. Over the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Church, the nobility and the towns of the Spanish kingdoms all began to chafe under the expanding authority of the various peninsular monarchies. As resentment of this political centralization of power increased, one of the easiest ways to lash out against it was to attack the status of the protected minorities: Jews and Muslims.

In the domain of religion, the spirit of reform that began to sweep through Hispano-Christian society during the thirteenth century[8] also had a critical impact on the Jews in their midst. Missionary efforts to enhance Christian religious devotion and practice also led to an associated interest in converting the Peninsula's Jewish and Muslim communities. Jews were subjected to sermons by Christian preachers and forced to participate in public disputations. Christian interest in religious reform and the concerted push to convert the Jews galvanized the religious leadership within Iberia's Jewish *aljamas*. As rabbinical authorities became increasingly concerned with the corrosive effects of this new missionary activity, they too took up the question of reform. Perennial themes of Jewish moralists and religious leaders, such as the irreverent attitudes of Jewish courtiers, the study of "foreign" (non-rabbinic) literature among Jewish intellectuals, and the general question of popular piety and religious observance, now garnered new attention. The intensification of Jewish spirituality also found expression in various confraternal organizations. Groups of Jews came together to form private fellowships (*havurot*) or *Talmud Torah* societies that engaged in pious acts ranging from extraordinary sessions of prayer and penitence to providing for the education and material wellbeing of the Jewish poor.[9]

As threats to Jewish status and security developed along a number of fronts, the Jews became increasingly dependent upon the efficacy of royal protection. The deterioration of both the will and the ability of the various peninsular monarchs to defend their Jewish subjects was, perhaps, the most troubling change that took place during the fourteenth century. To be sure, the actual implementation of anti-Jewish policies was erratic. Most kings continued to show little interest in enforcing regulations such as the prohibition of Jews from serving as courtiers and the requirement that they wear a distinguishing mark on their outer garments. Nonetheless, their recognition of

[8] Jonathan Ray, *The Sephardic Frontier: The Reconquista and the Jewish Community in Medieval Iberia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

[9] Yom Tov Assis, "Welfare and Mutual Aid in Spanish-Jewish Communities," in *Moreshet Sepharad: The Sephardi Legacy,* ed. Haim Beinart, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), 1:318-45; and Judah Galinsky, "Jewish Charitable Bequests and the Hekdesh Trust in Thirteenth-Century Spain," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35 (2004): 423-40.

the popular and ecclesiastical hostility toward the Jews represented an ominous development. Where the kings of Castile and Aragon had previously been staunch defenders of Jewish rights, those who came to power in the mid- to late fourteenth century began to show an increased willingness to curtail Jewish rights in order to mollify their critics and win popular support. With the outbreak of Civil War in Castile in the 1360s, Count Henry de Trastamara played on popular animosity against the Jews to help win support for his bid for the throne. Once in power, the newly crowned Henry II quickly reverted to the longstanding policy of using Jews as royal advisors and administrators.

This cynical manipulation of anti-Jewish sentiment also characterized the career of the influential cleric from Seville, Ferrant Martinez, who used his sermons to incite mobs to attack and forcibly convert Jews. The crown, the nobility and the Church all officially censured such attacks, but proved relatively powerless to prevent them. In the Crown of Aragon, the itinerant Dominican preacher Vicente Ferrer represented a very different approach to the new Christian mission to the Jews. Ferrer was genuinely motivated by theological concerns, and his successful conversion of prominent rabbis such as Solomon Halevi and Joshua Halorki suggest a more intellectual methodology than that of his Castilian counterpart. In any event, both tactics proved disastrous for Iberian Jewry.[10]

The combination of political opportunism and popular religious zeal came to a head in the spring and summer of 1391, setting off a wave of destruction and conversion that swept across much of the Peninsula. The mass conversions prompted by these riots devastated many of the Jewish communities, and were followed by decades of continued missionary fervor. Although the ecclesiastical intention of converting the remainder of Iberian Jewry was never fully realized, the creation of a *converso* society succeeded in adding yet another dimension to the complex framework of the Hispano-Jewish community during its final century on Iberian soil.

Medieval rabbinic authorities were fairly uniform in their categorization of the conversos as "*anusim*" or "forced converts,"

[10] Benjamin R. Gampel, "A Letter to a Wayward Teacher: Transformation of Sephardic Culture in Christian Iberia," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History,* ed. David Biale (New York: Schocken, 2002), 389-447.

and thus still Jews.[11] However, popular Jewish opinion with regard to the conversos was far more complex. While many Jews showed deep sympathy for the plight of the conversos, others questioned their allegiance to Judaism, even accusing the converts and their offspring of being opportunists who readily embraced the social and economic benefits of Christian identity. The disparity in Jewish attitudes regarding converso society was often bound up with the particulars of each situation. Family ties, personal misfortunes, and petty-jealousies determined how Jews thought about their former coreligionists as much as did the pronouncements of their rabbinic leaders.

Among the conversos, too, there existed a variety of responses to their sudden change in religious status. Many came to accommodate themselves to their new religion, a trend that increased among later generations that had no personal memory of professing Judaism. Some conversos even emerged as leading Christian theologians. Others remained steadfast to their ancestral religion, and maintained close ties to their Jewish friends and relatives who aided them in their secret efforts to observe a form of "crypto-Judaism."

By the late fifteenth century, the uncertainty over their religious allegiances was sufficiently widespread and enduring that it prompted King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella to search for a permanent solution. After years of attempting to enforce the separation of the Jewish and converso communities and quiet rumors of crypto-Judaism among the latter, the Catholic Monarchs established a new office of the Inquisition under their direct control in order to ascertain the true religious character of the new Christians. This kingdom-wide Castilian Inquisition (later to be known as the Spanish Inquisition) began to operate in 1480, and soon reported back to the crown that the single greatest impediment to the true Christianization of the conversos was their ongoing relationship with their Jewish neighbors. The crown ordered the expulsion of the Jews from the province of Andalucía in 1483, and from Zaragoza and Albarracín in 1486. Neither proved effective, but the monarchs remained committed to resolving the problem of converso religiosity

[11] Benzion Netanyahu, *The Marranos of Spain: From the Late 14th to the Early 16th Century, According to Contemporary Hebrew Sources* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 5-76.

through the physical removal of the Jews. This policy culminated in the expulsion of all Jews from Spanish territories in 1492.[12]

The Diversity of Hispano-Jewish Society

The preceding narrative is offered as a basic description of Jewish history in medieval Iberia. However, while the triumphs and tragedies of Hispano-Jewish civilization were undeniably significant, it would be misleading to imagine this society as a collection of pious intellectuals and unfortunate victims. Indeed, both the outstanding cultural achievements of Iberian Jewry and their eventual social and economic marginalization threaten to overshadow the community's remarkable diversity. Any attempt at understanding the way in which the Jews experienced life in medieval Iberia must take into consideration the multifaceted nature of Jewish society.

For medieval Jews, daily life was shaped by personal wealth, power, gender, profession, and geographical location as well as by their religious traditions. The highly localized character of Hispano-Jewish society reflected the general structure of medieval Iberia. Between 1000 and 1500, the borders of Christian Iberia were in a state of flux as Christian princes battled Muslim armies and each other. The region of Murcia passed between the crowns of Castile and Aragon, while Mallorca and Provence moved between Aragon and independence. A politically unified Spain did not begin to coalesce until the very end of the Middle Ages, and even then there existed little in the way of a national culture or ideology. Indeed, despite the best efforts of Iberian monarchs to centralize political authority in their realms, regional political and cultural identities remained strong throughout the Middle Ages. This regionalism also colored the attitudes and identities of Iberian Jews.

Even the impact of 1391 and the conversionary pressure that came in its wake varied significantly from one region to another. In Catalonia, the Jewish population was decimated, while the Jewish communities of other regions, such as the Kingdom of Portugal,

[12] For a concise overview of the Jews' final century in Spain, see Eleazar Gutwirth, "Towards Expulsion: 1391-1492," in *Spain and the Jews: The Sephardi Experience, 1492 and After,* ed. Elie Kedourie (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 51-73.

emerged intact. In cities such as Valencia, Toledo, and Seville, the riots created a complex situation in which significant numbers of Jews and conversos were left to share the same neighborhoods. The mixed legacy of 1391 also meant that the triangular relationship between Jews, conversos, and "Old" Christians would continue to follow different paths over the course of the fifteenth century. The anti-converso legislation and popular violence that took place in Toledo in 1449 strongly linked the Jews to the deteriorating position of the New Christians, while in other towns the three groups established a working relationship that functioned to their mutual benefit.[13]

Within a given city, the daily experience of different sectors of Jewish society differed from one another. The independent municipal *aljama*, which was the standard structure of Jewish political organization in medieval Iberia, was essentially a loose association of extended families, intellectual circles and other social groups. Internal divisions posed perennial challenges to Jewish communal authority that were as great as or greater than those from the external Christian world. Religious identity distinguished Jews from their Christian and Muslim neighbors, but fell short of producing a truly unified community. For most Jews, respect for the Jewish legal traditions and for the authorities responsible for their implementation remained strong. However, such respect did not preclude them from bending Jewish law and challenging or ignoring communal authorities when it suited them to do so. The ability of prominent Jews to circumvent their communal councils through direct appeals to the crown had a particularly destabilizing effect. Moreover, the special rights and privileges granted to well-connected merchants and courtiers often came at the expense of other sectors of Jewish society. Success in obtaining royal exemptions from taxes transferred the tax burden to other members of the community. Similarly, the increased centralization of royal power in the various peninsular kingdoms might have strengthened the position of Jewish courtiers, but the latter often used their newfound power

[13] See the contrasting situation in Castile and Valencia in Angus MacKay, "Popular Movements and Pogroms in Fifteenth-Century Castile," *Past and Present* 55 (1972): 33-67; and Mark D. Meyerson, *A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), chapter 6.

to undermine the governing councils of local Jewish *aljamas*. In turn, the leaders of these communities fiercely defended their right to religious and political autonomy, but were frequently unable to exercise control over their communities without the support or intervention of Christian authorities.[14]

The Jew in Medieval Iberia examines the composition and contributions of Hispano-Jewish society through a collection of studies of the various roles played by different sectors of the Jewish community. In so doing, it endeavors to provide a fresh look at the ways in which medieval Jews conceived of themselves and their communities, as well as their relationship to the surrounding society. The essays presented here offer an important corrective to a once dominant view that portrayed Jewish life in Christian Spain as a period of steady cultural decline, and underscore the remarkable resilience of Iberian Jews. They transcend older stereotypes of Christian persecution and Jewish piety to reveal complex and vibrant Jewish communities of merchants and scholars, townsmen and -women, cultural intermediaries and guardians of religious tradition. The portrait that is painted by these collected studies is offered as a learned and wide-ranging introduction to Jewish life in Christian Iberia.

While the participation of medieval Jews in fields such as medicine, philosophy, and commerce is generally recognized as an important feature of medieval society, it is far less common to consider Jewish physicians, intellectuals and merchants of medieval Iberia as distinct social types. The essays by Yom Tov Assis, Gregory Milton and Maud Kozodoy help to contextualize the function of Jewish merchants, financiers and physicians within both Jewish and general medieval society. These authors look at the way in which the experience of these groups differed from others within the Jewish community, as well as the way in which their activities shaped the relationship between Jewish and Christian society.

In addition to these more familiar figures, the medieval Jewish community also included groups that have heretofore commanded relatively little scholarly attention. The chapters by Renée Levine Melammed and Vivian Mann discuss the experience of two

[14] Ray, *Sephardic Frontier,* chapters 5-6.

segments of Hispano-Jewish society: Jewish women and artists, whose contributions to the representation and practice of Judaism greatly amplify our notion of Jewish-Christian relations in the Middle Ages. Levine Melammed's study argues that the experience of Jewish women was not always the same as that of Jewish men, and reminds us that gender is as important a category as profession or religious school of thought to understanding the course of Jewish history in medieval Iberia. Far from being the passive-but-pious two-dimensional figures that we encounter in more traditional histories of medieval Jewish life, women in Hispano-Jewish and converso communities were often skillful, independent-minded Jews who were actively engaged in a broad range of social and economic activities, as well as in the propagation of Judaism.

Leadership of this multifaceted Jewish community required talents that were equally wide-ranging and diverse. Jewish courtiers and rabbis were figures who straddled the divide between social and intellectual history. They could be venal and excessively combative, yet as communal leaders they often succeeded in rising to meet the social and intellectual challenges of the day, especially in the tumultuous period after 1391. They sought to hold together an assortment of competing Jewish factions and ideologies, while at the same time responding to the shifting demands of Christian political and religious culture. Jonathan Decter, Eric Lawee and Ram Ben Shalom offer three different takes on the nature of Jewish communal leadership in Medieval Iberia. Each of their studies shows that the course of Hispano-Jewish history was often determined by the efforts and personal characteristics of particular individuals. Their essays also emphasize the multifaceted nature of the Hispano-Jewish religious landscape, complicating the notion of Sephardic Judaism. Hartley Lachter's discussion of Castilian Jews as keepers of a secret esoteric tradition provides further evidence of the breadth and complexity of Judaism in Christian Iberia.

Many of these essays also demonstrate the interrelation between Jewish intellectual and social life. The role of the Jew as cultural intermediary is a central theme of Mariano Gomez-Aranda's study of Jewish scientists and philosophers and Jane Gerber's chapter on the Samuel Halevi synagogue in Toledo. Both authors, along with

several others in this volume, highlight the continued importance of Andalusi intellectual traditions to the social and cultural identity of the Jews in Christian lands. They also note that the persistence of certain elements of the Andalusi intellectual curriculum was as controversial as it was enduring, a theme of Hispano-Jewish society that is taken up by Esperanza Alfonso in the book's final essay. Alfonso's analysis of a single rabbinic commentary reveals that the heirs to the cultural legacy of Iberian Jewry continued to fight among themselves for the recognition of their own particular version of this legacy. Her essay takes our narrative past the great expulsion of 1492, and regards the history of Iberian Jewry from the vantage point of the Sephardic Diaspora. In it, she demonstrates how Jewish scholars continued to promote certain aspects of the region's intellectual heritage as more authentic and correct. In so doing, they often emphasized the importance of their own familial and scholarly genealogies. Members of these great clans saw themselves as the protectors of particular cultural traditions as much as they did defenders of the Jewish heritage, broadly construed.

In sum, the following essays identify the major trends and defining characteristics of Hispano-Jewish life. They shed new light on the place of the Jew in medieval Iberian history, illuminating the contributions of both the famous and the anonymous. They suggest the need to consider Jewish society from a variety of different vantage points in order to better understand it. Furthermore, they assert the importance of this society to the development of both medieval and Jewish history. Rather than view the Jews of Christian Spain merely as tragic figures, victims of a persecuting society and intellectually inferior to their Andalusi predecessors, they present them as part of a vital nexus in the long continuum of Jewish history. The culture produced by these Jews combined and amplified the intellectual heritages of Andalusi and Franco-German Jewry, and became the bedrock of post-expulsion Sephardic religious life.

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Before Caliphs and Kings: Jewish Courtiers in Medieval Iberia

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Jewish men were a common presence in the courts of medieval Iberian rulers, from the times of the caliphs at Córdoba down through the era of the Catholic Monarchs who expelled the Jews. For the founders of the academic field of Jewish studies in nineteenth-century Germany, Iberian court Jews were a subject of fascination, for their existence seemed to augur the Jewish entry into European history and to validate the aspirations of an emancipation-oriented Jewry. Heinrich Graetz, a nineteenth-century pioneer in the field of Jewish history, described Hasdai ibn Shaprut, the first Jewish courtier of note in al-Andalus, as:

> quite modern in his character, entirely different from the type of his predecessors. His easy, pliant, and genial nature was free both from the heaviness of the Orientals and the gloomy earnestness of the Jews. His actions and expressions make us look upon him as a European, and through him, so to speak, Jewish history receives a European character.[1]

For this seminal figure of Jewish historical studies, the Arabic-speaking Jewish courtier was neither Arab nor (typically) Jewish but

[1] Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day,* partially translated by Bella Löwy (London: David Nutt, 1892), 3:220-21.

was most essentially *European*, an identity that would have been entirely foreign to Ibn Shaprut and that would not emerge in earnest for centuries. At the same time, Graetz did not view Ibn Shaprut's aspiration for power in opportunistic terms but rather cast the leader as one who safeguarded the needs of his community, "[Ibn Shaprut] inspired a favorable opinion of his co-religionists amongst the Andalusian Moslems, and was able, through his personal intercourse with the Caliphs, to shield them from misrepresentation."[2]

A fuller treatment of court Jews (though not dealing with medieval Iberia for the most part) was undertaken in the twentieth century by Selma Stern, whose book *The Court Jew* (1950) became a classic.[3] For Stern, the Jews who inhabited the halls of kings were the "forerunners of the emancipation;" the court Jew "attempted to achieve a synthesis between the two worlds [i.e., Jewish and gentile] without surrendering his identity."[4] Stern's book was sharply critiqued by the German-Jewish political theorist Hannah Arendt, who attributed to Stern's study "remnants of apologetics" and described Stern as being "haunted by the question of collective Jewish responsibility for certain activities of court Jews, which have turned out to be so obviously destructive to the general population."[5] Arendt was writing soon after the Holocaust and judged pre-modern court Jews not as harbingers of the Emancipation but rather as "dictators in their communities" who foreshadowed those Jews who were appointed by the Nazis to control the ghetto populations. She was troubled by the faith Jews had historically invested in what has been termed the "myth of the royal alliance"—the belief that a tacit reciprocal contract existed by which Jews who committed their loyalty to rulers would enjoy protection and favor.[6]

[2] Graetz, *History of the Jews,* 3:222.

[3] Selma Stern, *The Court Jew: A Contribution to the History of the Period of Absolutism in Central Europe,* trans. Ralph Weiman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1950). The book was first written in German, though the earliest published version was this English translation.

[4] Marina Sassenberg, "The Face of Janus: The Historian Selma Stern (1890-1981) and Her Portrait of the Court Jew," *European Judaism* 33 (2000): 72-79, here 73-74.

[5] The review appeared in *Jewish Social Studies* 14 (1957): 176-8.

[6] This is only hinted at in the review of Stern. For the phrase "dictators in their communities," see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), ix and elsewhere. See also the discussion in the review essay by Elliot Horowitz, "The Court Jews and the Jewish Question," *Jewish History* 12 (1998): 113-36. For the "myth of the royal alliance," see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *The Lisbon Massacre of 1506 and the Royal Image in the* Shebet Yehudah (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1976).

To ask whether the Jews of the medieval Iberian courts were the predecessors either of prominent Jewish citizens of modern states or sinister accomplices of the Nazis is, of course, not fair. The question is not a simple "either/or," nor is it the only one we might ask about these figures, who cannot be collapsed into a single category or be understood apart from their immediate contexts.[7] Why should we hold Jewish courtiers to a higher standard of ethical conduct than Muslim or Christian courtiers in their respective kingdoms? Like most figures of power in a variety of political structures, Jewish courtiers in medieval Iberia felt pressure from rulers and from the ruled, and struck (different) balances between bolstering their own positions and securing the interests of those beneath them. And like other political figures, they had their share of triumphs, foibles, moral shortcomings, and scandals.

The question I wish to address in this essay deals less with the courtiers' loyalty to their coreligionists—though data will be reviewed on this question as well—than with the function(s) Jewish courtiers held for the non-Jewish rulers they served. This question will be pursued with an eye directed toward local and changing Iberian contexts. To understand the place of Jewish courtiers in medieval Iberia, it is perhaps best to take a broad view of the subject, looking at Muslim and Christian contexts from the tenth through the fifteenth centuries, though a singular vector of continuity should not be presumed. Thus the essay will focus on three individuals from different moments in Iberian history: 1) Hasdai ibn Shaprut (ca. 915-970), who served the Caliph 'Abd al-Rahmān III during the period of Umayyad rule in al-Andalus; 2) Abraham ibn al-Fakhār (d. ca. 1239), who served Alfonso VIII of Castile at the height of the so-called Reconquista; and 3) Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508), who was born in

[7] This question has been foremost in much scholarly literature concerning Iberian court Jews. In addition to the sources above in note 6, see Haim Beinart, "*Demutah shel ha-hazranut ha-yehudit bi-Sefarad*," in *Qevusot 'elit ve-shikhvot manhigot be-toledot Yisra'el u-ve-toledot ha-'amim* (Jerusalem: Ha-hevrah ha-historit ha-Yisra'elit, 1966), 55-71. Some other questions are posed by David Wasserstein regarding the social roles of Jewish elites in al-Andalus, particularly their connections with Muslim elites, etc.; Wasserstein is rather pessimistic about answering these questions, given the paucity of sources. Still, the questions are valuable. See David Wasserstein, "Jewish Elites in al-Andalus," in *The Jews of Medieval Islam: Community, Society, and Identity*, ed. Daniel Frank (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 101-10, here 103.

Portugal, where he served King Afonso V before fleeing to Castile, where he became a significant figure at the court of Ferdinand and Isabella during the final decade leading up to the Expulsion of 1492 (after which he settled in Naples and later Venice, where he died). Each figure will be contextualized within his historical moment, and other courtier personalities will be discussed as well. This structure will not only show the high visibility of Jews within the courts of Muslim and Christian rulers but also highlight continuities and discontinuities in their functions as well as the extent and limit of their authority and influence.

At the Court of ʻAbd al-Rahman III: Hasdai Ibn Shaprut in al-Andalus[8]

The rise of Jewish courtiers in Islamic Iberia must be seen as part of a broader phenomenon within the Islamic world. Before Hasdai ibn Shaprut rose to power in Umayyad al-Andalus, Joseph Ben Pinhas and Aaron Ben Amram were powerful bankers in ʻAbbasid Baghdad.[9] Contemporary with Ibn Shaprut was Jacob ibn Qillis, who held powerful positions at Fatimid outposts and ultimately converted to Islam, which enhanced his power further still.[10] Despite theoretical restrictions in Islamic legal literature limiting Jews and Christians from wielding power over Muslims, and protestations from jurists that such restrictions were not being followed, caliphs of various dynasties found it advantageous to employ religious minorities within their ranks, most often as bankers, physicians, and astronomers/astrologers, more rarely as diplomats, scribes (*kātibs*) and viziers (*wazīrs*). Partly a result of the relative tolerance Islam extended toward non-Muslim minorities, the position of *dhimma* courtiers should also be viewed as a strategic means of cultivating

[8] The biographical sketch is based on a judicious reading of the chapter on Ibn Shaprut in Eliahu Ashtor, *The Jews of Moslem Spain* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1992), 1:155-227, and a revisiting of many of the sources therein. See also other sources below.

[9] Walter Fischel, *Jews in the Economic and Political Life of Mediaeval Islam* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1937).

[10] Mark Cohen and Sasson Somekh, "In the Court of Ya'qūb Ibn Killis: A Fragment from the Cairo Genizah," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 80 (1990): 283-314.

and securing the loyalty of minority communities and their (sometimes wealthy) leaders, an interest that had to be balanced with preserving the Islamic character of the state.

It is generally unclear what enabled particular Jews access to Muslim courts. Some hailed from prominent families, though courtier positions only seldom passed from father to son. Many held simultaneous positions as heads of Jewish communities, though it is difficult to tell whether this was the cause or the effect of their prominence at court. Some possessed resources or specific skills (in medicine, finance, or epistle writing), and we might presume that Jewish diplomats possessed the skills for which diplomats are traditionally known— cultural adaptability, social grace, and eloquence. But again, it is generally unclear how these skills translated into actual positions.

It is thus not surprising that a cloud of fog surrounds the rise to prominence of Hasdai ibn Shaprut, the aforementioned courtier romanticized by Graetz and whose mystique has been recalled in publications down to the present.[11] Ibn Shaprut served ʻAbd al-Rahmān III (891-961), the first Umayyad ruler to declare himself Caliph, thereby challenging the legitimacy of the ʻAbbasid empire whose capital was Baghdad. ʻAbd al-Rahmān's royal entourage included a mixture of Andalusi ethnic (Arab, Berber, Hispano-Muslim) and religious (Muslim, Christian, Jewish) groups as well as non-Andalusi Muslims, and had a bureaucratic structure that was likely designed to create unity out of the cacophony of political, ethnic, religious, and ideological divisions that had generated conflict on the Peninsula.

[11] As late as the 1960s, in Israel rather than Europe, Ibn Shaprut was the subject of significant romanticization. Ashtor wrote regarding Ibn Shaprut (*The Jews of Moslem Spain,* 159), "In the 940s there rose into the ascendant in the skies of Andalusia the star of a court Jew." On the question of the balance of Ibn Shaprut's self-interest versus his imperative to protect his fellow Jews, Ashtor was mixed. At one point (160), he wrote, "He was not concerned about the welfare of the masses, but rather sought for himself happiness, success, and wealth. Hasdai believed in himself, in his ability, and in his future." Elsewhere (183), he wrote, "No matter how wrapped up he was in the governmental affairs of the kingdom of ʻAbdarrahmān III, Hasdai Ibn Shaprut never forgot his origin. On the contrary, he endeavored with all his power to exploit the opportunities given him to do good for his people wherever they were…. Hasdai—and other Jewish courtiers who came later resembled him in this respect—did not sever himself from his people but was always with them, at least in spirit." Ibn Shaprut continues to be the subject of many articles, particularly in European languages.

The prestigious position afforded non-Muslims in the Umayyad government proved to be a source of both strength and weakness, since it procured the loyalty of minority religious communities even as it fomented opposition among some Muslims, the judicial class in particular.

As far as can be discerned, Ibn Shaprut was never granted an official title such as *wazīr* (vizier) or *kātib* (scribe) within ʻAbd al-Rahmān's court.[12] It is generally presumed that his entre into court life was possible due to his knowledge of pharmacology and medicine, though this is not certain. Ibn Shaprut is credited by the Muslim historian of medicine Ibn Abi Uṣaybiʻa with rediscovering the correct blend of herbs for theriaca, an elixir whose precise compound had proved elusive since the days of the ancient Romans. Ibn Shaprut was already well-established at court when he collaborated on the translation from Greek into Arabic of the pharmacological treatise *De Materia Medica* by Dioscorides, which had been sent as a gift to ʻAbd al-Rahmān by the emperor of Byzantium, a kingdom with which the Caliph pursued an alliance to secure his position against the Fatimids, a Shiʻīte dynasty that was gaining power in the Maghrib (and that would ultimately conquer Egypt). Sāʻid al-Andalusī included an entry on Ibn Shaprut in his history of science organized according to the contributions of various nations, the final chapter dealing with the "Children of Israel:" "[Ibn Shaprut] was skilled in the practice of medicine, very learned in the legal science of the Jews,[13] and he was the first to open up for those of them who were in al-Andalus their legal and historical and other sciences."[14]

[12] Jacob Mann refers to him as a "treasurer" because he was able to alleviate the Jews' burdensome taxes. Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies in Jewish History and Literature* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1931-35), 1:4. This need not make him a treasurer, per se. Ashtor also calls him a "director of customs."

[13] It is striking that Ibn Shaprut's "expertise" in Jewish law is noted mainly by Muslim authors and that a work such as Abraham Ibn Daud's *Book of Tradition,* which does not fail to recount figures' knowledge of Jewish law, makes no such assertion in the case of Ibn Shaprut. Nor does Moses Ibn Ezra's Judeo-Arabic *Book of Conversations and Discussions*, which only specifies that Hasdai was a patron of Jewish legal scholars and others. *The Book of Tradition* says relatively little about Hasdai in general, probably in order to make the appearance of Samuel ha-Nagid, a new social type, all the more dramatic. See Gerson D. Cohen, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah: The Book of Tradition by Abraham Ibn Daud* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967), 271-72. See also note 18 below.

[14] Translated in an article by David Wasserstein, "The Muslims and the Golden Age of the Jews in al-Andalus," *Israel Oriental Studies* 17 (1997): 179-96; here 189.

Relative to the attention given Ibn Shaprut by Muslim authors on the history of science, Muslim sources are relatively reticent about his diplomatic activities, perhaps because the presence of the Jew at court roused some consternation. Over a century after Ibn Shaprut's death, the renowned philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes) was able to cite a verse that had been uttered by a jurist in order to persuade 'Abd al-Rahmān to turn against "Hasdai the Jew:" "Regarding the prophet, for whose sake alone you are honored, this [Jew] says that he is a liar."[15] Still, Ibn Shaprut's role in at least two diplomatic missions can be reconstructed with some accuracy. He worked toward defusing a sensitive situation involving a missive sent to 'Abd al-Rahmān by the German King Otto I (r. 936 - 973) that contained deprecations against Islam. Ibn Shaprut worked closely with Otto's envoy, the monk Johannes of Gorze, who led the mission to Córdoba and in whose biography the events are recorded.[16]

The second instance of Ibn Shaprut's diplomacy requires some background. When King Ordoño III of the Hispano-Christian kingdom of Leon died in 956, he was succeeded by his half-brother Sancho I, son of the princess of Navarre and the grandson of Queen Toda. After a period of truce, Sancho renewed attacks against al-Andalus, which led to a Muslim counterattack. Meanwhile, the nobles of Leon conspired against Sancho and forced his dethronement in 958, rousing the ire of Sancho's progenitors in Navarre, especially Queen Toda. 'Abd al-Rahmān seized this opportunity to build an alliance with Leon and brought Sancho and Queen Toda to Córdoba, where they were received amid much pomp. The spectacle signaled the Christian monarchs' reliance upon the Caliph and the latter's power and grandeur. The Muslim and Christian rulers plotted a simultaneous attack on Castile and Leon and succeeded in reinstating Sancho, who remained indebted to 'Abd al-Rahmān III. According to a Hebrew poem by Dunash ibn Labrat, it was Hasdai ibn Shaprut who lured Sancho and Toda to Córdoba "with the strength of his wisdom and the might of his cunning, his many devices and smooth

[15] S.M. Stern, "*Shetei yedi'ot hadashot 'al Hasdai Ibn Shaprut*," *Zion* 11 (1946): 141-46; here 141. Ibn Rushd cited the verse in his commentary on Aristotle's poetics. The same verse is cited in another work in connection with a Christian courtier.

[16] Ashtor, *The Jews of Moslem Spain,* 169-76.

speech."[17] We do not know of Ibn Shaprut's involvement from any source apart from this poem. Even if his role were fairly minor, it was sufficiently important for the Hebrew poet to lavish praise upon him.

It is interesting to note that Ibn Shaprut's diplomatic missions were to Christian kingdoms only. Perhaps the Caliph's sending a Jew was a way of signaling to the Christian monarch that the Umayyad Caliphate exercised a policy of tolerance toward religious minorities. Employing a Jewish emissary in a dispute with another Muslim dynasty may have conveyed that the Caliph was taking the matter lightly or could have exposed the Caliph to charges of illegitimacy for veering from a strict application of Islamic law.

Ibn Shaprut enjoyed prestige among Jews as a leader beyond the borders of al-Andalus within the Mediterranean more broadly. Although there is a tendency to view Ibn Shaprut as the initiator of an independent Andalusi Jewry that paralleled the emergence of 'Abd al-Rahmān III's breakaway Caliphate, the title by which he is referred to in the aforementioned poem by Dunash Ibn Labrat is *Rosh Kallah;* this title could only be bestowed by a Gaon (dean of the academy in Baghdad) and speaks to Ibn Shaprut's place within the Iraqi academy's hierarchy.[18] He corresponded with Jews in southern France, Sicily, Palestine, and Iraq, petitioned the rulers of Byzantium for the betterment of its Jewish populace, and, most famously, sent an epistle to King Joseph of Khazaria, a Jewish kingdom near the Caspian Sea that captured the imagination of Andalusi Jewry and many others for centuries to come.[19]

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[17] Hebrew text in Jefim Schirmann, *Ha-shirah ha-'ivrit bi-sefarad u-ve-provans* (Tel Aviv: Dvir; Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1954-60), 1:38 (ll. 49-50).

[18] The title was often given to individuals who were particularly learned in Jewish law, though it was also bestowed upon certain powerful figures. In later works produced by Iberian authors, Ibn Shaprut was referred to by the title *Nasi,* "prince," but not by the title *Rosh Kallah.* The omission of the latter might reflect a tendency to recast the figure as the progenitor of the Andalusi social and intellectual revolution, which would necessarily require downplaying his lesser role within the Babylonian hierarchy.

[19] Ashtor cites the various sources, but see especially those in Jacob Mann, *Texts and Studies,* 1:3-33. For the letter from Sicily, see Alexander Scheiber and Zvi Malachi, "Letter from Sicily to Ḥasdai Ibn Shaprut," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 41/42 (1973-1974): 207-218. The letter to the king of Khazaria is available in English: Franz Kobler, *A Treasury of Jewish Letters: Letters from the Famous and the Humble* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1953), 97-99.

Ibn Shaprut must have been fully conversant in the cultural and political idiom of the Caliphal court and it seems that he recreated courtly practices on a smaller scale within Jewish circles. Just as the Caliph patronized Muslim learning and surrounded himself with scholars, scribes, and eulogizing poets, so Ibn Shaprut sponsored Jewish learning, maintained scribes for Hebrew correspondence, and received the praise of Hebrew poets. Over a century after his death, Ibn Shaprut's activities were remembered by Moses ibn Ezra when recounting the literary history of the Jews of al-Andalus:

> .... In [Ibn Shaprut's] days, men of the highest rank competed to make known the knowledge with which God had entrusted them and the learning He had bestowed upon them. They composed lofty works and assembled eminent collections. They roused his [Ibn Shaprut's] emotions with their wondrous poems and marvelous eloquent orations. Therefore their status was elevated with him and he awarded them the utmost of their requests and the extreme of their desires.[20]

Ibn Shaprut lent particular support to two competing grammarian-poets: Menahem Ben Saruq, a native of al-Andalus who penned poems and Hebrew epistles for Ibn Shaprut as well as an early dictionary of biblical Hebrew; and Dunash Ibn Labrat, a Maghrib-born, Baghdad-educated émigré who wrote a treatise exposing the deficiencies of Menahem's dictionary and who introduced a synthetic innovation into Hebrew poetry so that it could adopt the meter of Arabic poetry.[21] Both poets wrote panegyrics for Ibn Shaprut that recall the social function of the Arabic court panegyric: to express or negotiate the bond between poet and patron and to create a legitimizing image of the leader for public consumption.

Romanticization aside, the career of Ibn Shaprut in many ways foreshadowed (but did not necessarily cause) the careers of other Jews who attained stations in Andalusi Muslim courts. Jacob ibn Jau was appointed by the Umayyad Caliph Hishām II (976-1009) over

[20] Moses Ibn Ezra, *Kitāb al-muḥāḍara wa'l-mudhākara,* ed. A.S. Halkin (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1975), 56.

[21] Just as Dunash was more open to Arabization in Hebrew verse, his approach to Hebrew grammar was likewise open to close comparison with Arabic (and Aramaic) cognates whereas Menahem's approach to lexicography was contextual only. Their students also carried on the grammatical debates they initiated.

the Jews of his region "to adjudicate their litigations … to appoint over them whomsoever he wished and to extract from them any tax or payment to which they might be subject."[22] We also know of several Jewish courtiers during the period of the Muslim Taifa (Party) kings (1031-1090), after the Umayyad Caliphate collapsed and al-Andalus was divided into numerous warring states. It is likely that the multiplicity of states and the existence of parallel bureaucratic structures created broader opportunities for talented men of the religious minorities. It is also possible that Taifa kings believed that appointing Jewish courtiers might attract the loyalty of Jews living under rival Muslim dynasties. Isaac ibn Albalia, who authored a commentary on difficult passages of the Talmud, a work on the Jewish calendar, and Hebrew poetry, was appointed as an astrologer in the court of al-Muʿtamid ibn ʿAbbād (1040-95) of Seville. Abraham ibn al-Muhājir, learned in Talmud and astronomy and a patron of the Hebrew poet Moses ibn Ezra, also served al-Muʿtamid and was given the title *wazīr*.

Jewish *wazīrs* are also known from Almeria and Saragossa during the Taifa period. Yet no Jewish figure of the Taifa period was as illustrious as one of the earliest, Ismaʿīl ibn Naghrīla (a.k.a. Samuel ibn Naghrela, or Samuel ha-Nagid, 993-1055/56), who rose to fame as an Arabic court scribe (*kātib*) under the Zirids of Granada and also earned the title *wazīr*. Although we must read with a grain of salt the account of Ibn Naghrila's meteoric ascent as described by the Jewish chronicler Abraham ibn Daud—according to which the Jew kept himself in modest circumstances until his scribal brilliance was almost accidentally discovered by an associate of the Zirid court—attestations by Muslim biographers of his mastery of Arabic epistle writing, down to the details of particular Muslim formulations, should be taken as accurate.[23] Like Ibn Shaprut, he assumed the leadership of the Jewish community, lent support to Jewish intellectuals, and was lauded by Hebrew poets. Yet unlike Ibn Shaprut, he was a master of Hebrew poetic composition in his own right and also authored a work on Jewish law. Some of his verse comprises

[22] Cohen, *Book of Tradition,* 69, according to which Ibn Jau was also imprisoned when he failed to produce expected funds.

[23] For the story of his rise, see Cohen, *The Book of Tradition*, 71-73.

aphorisms regarding courtly conduct and reflects familiarity with Arabic "Mirrors for Princes" literature.

According to his own Hebrew poetry, Ibn Naghrīla served in many battles on behalf of the Zirid state against its Andalusi rivals. He consistently presents his military involvement as benefitting the Jewish people broadly, though this seems difficult to accept since Jewish populations also resided within the rival states, whose kings also maintained Jewish courtiers. Contemporary Jewish critiques of Ibn Naghrīla's role are hinted at even within his own poetry, in which he defends himself against one who "quarrels with me for associating with kings."[24] After Ibn Naghrīla's death, he was succeeded in his capacities within the court and the Jewish community by his son Joseph. According to Jewish and Muslim sources, Joseph failed to conduct himself with modesty, precipitating an attack against him and the Jewish community of Granada during which some four thousand Jews, including Joseph, were massacred.[25]

Even beyond Jews who held actual administrative posts, there emerged in al-Andalus an intellectual elite of Jewish men who pursued mastery of Jewish and Arabic subjects, who authored works that synthesized these areas of knowledge, and who cultivated a lifestyle modeled after that of the Muslim elite. They, along with courtiers proper, have been referred to with different emphases on their intellectual and social roles as "courtier rabbis," "Arabized Jews," and "Jewish elites."[26] Their values are captured most richly in the hundreds of poems they wrote for one another. These poems idealize a life of wealth and sophistication, of social wine drinking in palatine-garden settings, of nature's revival in springtime, of friendship and

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[24] Schirmann, *Ha-shirah ha-'ivrit,* 1:109 [31], l. 7.

[25] Ibn Naghrīla, and all that he signified, was discussed for centuries after his death in Muslim works of literary history, historical chronicle, heresiography, and polemical literature. The representations range from admiring portrayals of an intelligent and well-integrated courtier to rancorous denouncements of a seditious heretic who ridiculed Islamic tenets. Further, see Ross Brann, *Power in the Portrayal: Representations of Jews and Muslims in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century Islamic Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[26] Cohen, *The Book of Tradition,* 269-76; Wasserstein, "Jewish Elites in al-Andalus"; Ross Brann, "The Arabized Jews," in *The Literature of al-Andalus*, ed. María Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin, and Michael Sells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 435-54.

sexual passion.[27] Although it is, of course, difficult to reconstruct the full reality of their world from poetic sources, their courtly predilections were sufficiently concrete, at least, to merit contemporary critique.[28]

In the Court of Alfonso VIII: Abraham Ibn al-Fakhār in Castile[29]

To Abraham ibn Daud, writing from Christian Toledo in 1161 after being displaced from Córdoba by the Almohad invasion (1147), the hopes of restoring the Jewish glory of the Andalusi Jewish past on Christian soil seemed quite reasonable, even destined. According to his Hebrew *Book of Tradition*, God caused King Alfonso the *Emperador* to appoint Judah ibn Ezra—a descendant of "the leaders of Granada, holders of high office and men of power"—ruler over Calatrava, a city of refuge for the exiles, "and to place all royal provisions in his charge."[30] Ibn Daud's text creates the impression of continuity between the Jewish courtiers of al-Andalus and the recent courtiers of Castile such that the switch from serving Muslims to Christians was almost immaterial.

Although it seems unlikely that the Christian rulers of Castile were concerned with the precise lineage of potential Jewish appointees, the intellectual, administrative, and cultural knowledge possessed by Jews in cities such as Toledo—still highly Arabized at least through the thirteenth century—made them of particular value during the age of Christian territorial expansion and consolidation of royal power. As Yosef Kaplan points out, "The conquering kings

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[27] Joseph Weiss, "*Tarbut hasranit ve-shirah hasranit*." *World Congress of Jewish Studies* 1 (1947): 396-402.

[28] Bezalel Safran, "Bahya Ibn Paquda's Attitude Toward the Courtier Class," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 154-96.

[29] The information on al-Fakhār is based on my forthcoming article, "May God Curse Them Both: Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Fakhār al-Yahūdi Between Castile and the Maghrib," in *Beyond Religious Borders: Interaction and Intellectual Exchange in the Medieval Islamic World,* ed. David M. Freidenreich and Miriam Goldstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, forthcoming in 2012). See this article for detailed bibliographic information.

[30] Cohen, *The Book of Tradition,* 97.

found the Jews necessary and useful in consolidating their regimes, in establishing administrative infrastructure, for colonization following the expansion of their borders, and for the development of commerce in newly conquered urban centers."[31] Jonathan Ray has demonstrated that Jewish courtiers played key functions in establishing Castilian settlements along the Christian-Muslim frontier, where Jewish tax collectors and advisors were granted lands, including one area collectively known as the "Village of the Jews," which was distinct from the communal property set aside for the local Jewish *aljamas* (municipal corporate bodies).[32] Finally, Castilian kings, most famously Alfonso X (r. 1252-1284), sometimes employed Jews within their courts to collaborate on intellectual projects such as translations and Castilian synthetic works. These factors, along with legislation restricting the placement of Jews in administrative offices promulgated by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), might explain why the Jewish courtier phenomenon was so common in Christian Iberia but relatively rare elsewhere in medieval Christendom.[33]

The status of Jewish courtiers could rouse the resentment of Christians and Jews alike. As in the Muslim environment, Christian rulers had to balance their alliance with the Jews with other state interests, such as retaining the support of the Christian nobility. In the Crown of Aragon under Pedro III (c. 1239-85), for example, the Christian nobility refused to send forces during the king's campaign against the French unless he dismissed his Jewish officials. The king partially capitulated and promised that no Jew would be appointed to the position of *baile* (bailiff), though he did retain Jews in the areas of medicine and finance.[34] Many Jews served as tax farmers (*almoxarifes*), not exactly the most popular office amongst taxpayers, whether Christian or Jewish. The second half of the thirteenth century also witnessed the emergence of the office of "Crown Rabbi,"

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[31] Yosef Kaplan, "Court Jews before the 'Hofjuden'," *From Court Jews to the Rothschilds: Art, Patronage, and Power, 1600-1800*, ed. Vivian B. Mann and Richard I. Cohen (New York: Jewish Museum, 1996), 11-25; here 15.

[32] Jonathan Ray, *The Sephardic Frontier: The Reconquista and the Jewish Community in Medieval Iberia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 20 and elsewhere.

[33] For a few examples of Jewish courtiers in Christendom outside of Iberia, see Yosef Kaplan, "Court Jews before the 'Hofjuden'," 15.

[34] Yom Tov Assis, *The Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), 13-15.

an appointed judicial (and often tax farming) position within the Jewish community that allowed Christian rulers to extend their influence into the individual Jewish communities, or *aljamas*, an administrative development consistent with broader bureaucratic reforms of the period. Sometimes appointed for their political connections rather than their accomplishments in Jewish legal thought, Crown Rabbis could find their appointments sharply contested by the *aljamas*.[35] Struggles between the Jewish courtier class and the lower classes of Jewish society are well documented in Aragon. While the community often benefited from the courtiers' access to court, the special privileges bestowed upon them by the Crown widened the gap between the powerful families of the oligarchic establishment and the poor.[36] Critiques of the courtier class often took aim at their sumptuous lifestyle, the reality of which is attested to (in Castile) in the poetry of Todros Halevi Abulafia, a courtier in the orbit of Alfonso X.[37] Similarly, there existed perennial tensions among the elite clans of Jewish Iberia over which family would enjoy royal favor and the associated wealth and prestige it brought.

Most of the career of Abraham al-Fakhār was spent in the service of King Alfonso VIII of Castile, who supported other Jewish courtiers including the *almoxarife* (tax farmer) Joseph ibn Shoshan, whose possession of a royally granted estate and various privileges are attested to in notarial records. Alfonso's reign from 1158 until 1214 was as monumental as it was long. He was king during a crucial

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[35] Jonathan Ray, "Royal Authority and the Jewish Community: the Crown Rabbi in Medieval Spain and Portugal," in *Jewish Religious Leadership: Image and Reality,* ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2004), 1:307-31.

[36] Bernard Septimus notes the rise of an anti-aristocratic class that characterized the ruling elite in Catalonia as lax in religious observance, corrupt in leadership, and immoral in sexual behavior. From the aristocratic camp, we hear voices of rebuke directed toward "slaves who have revolted against their kings and rebelled against their masters." Bernard Septimus, "Piety and Power in Thirteenth-Century Catalonia." *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* vol. 1, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 197-230. See also Jonathan Decter, *Iberian Jewish Literature: Between al-Andalus and Christian Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), chapter six.

[37] Aviva Doron, *Meshorer be-hasar ha-melekh: Todros Halevi Abulafiah, shirah 'ivrit bi-sefarad ha-nosrit* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1989). In the fourteenth century, Menahem Ben Zerah composed the Hebrew *Provisions for the Road* as a legal guide especially for "those who walk in the court of the king" since they often failed to follow Jewish law properly (concerning such subjects as prayer, blessings, prohibited foods, observing the Sabbath, relations with women, etc.). See Beinart, "*Demutah shel ha-hazranut ha-yehudit bi-Sefarad*," 65.

period of the Reconquista when the balance of power tipped in favor of Castile and against the Muslim Almohad dynasty that ruled in North Africa and al-Andalus. Both at times of Castile's strength and weakness, al-Fakhār served as a diplomat on behalf of Castile. He was of particular value in this role because of his deep knowledge of the Arabic language and culture despite his loyalty to his Christian sovereign.

Alfonso VIII's rule coincided with that of the most powerful Almohad caliphs, all of whom proved formidable military opponents. The early years of Alfonso's reign were marked by disorder and the loss of territory to neighboring kingdoms, both Almohad and Christian. In particular, the Battle of Alarcos (known as al-Arak in Arabic sources) in 1195 is recalled as a crushing defeat for Alfonso at the hands of the Almohads. However, in 1212, near the end of his reign, Alfonso attained victory at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa (known in Arabic as al-'Iqāb), which forever shifted the balance of Muslim/Christian power in Iberia. Al-Nāsir, the last of the great Almohad caliphs, was squarely defeated and died one year later; he was succeeded by the youth Abū Ya'qūb Yūsuf al-Mustansir (1213-1224), who was compelled to sign truces with Castile (and Aragon). Alfonso died in 1214, leaving the crown to his young son Enrique I.

Al-Fakhār was active as a diplomat at both the nadir and the apogee of Alfonso's power. According to the Muslim historian Ibn 'Idhārī (d. c. 1295), al-Fakhār first came to Marrakech as a diplomat in 1203, eight years after Alfonso's defeat at Alarcos, when Alfonso sent him to negotiate the deferment of paying tribute and a new truce. This was followed by several years of peace between Muslims and Christians. We next hear of al-Fakhār in 1214, two years after Alfonso's victory at Las Navas de Tolosa and after the death of al-Nāsir when al-Mustansir became Caliph. Sent by Alfonso, al-Fakhār traveled to Marrakech to begin negotiations for a definitive peace between Castile and the Almohads; Alfonso died on October 6, 1214 without seeing the truce completed, though al-Fakhār continued the negotiation after his death under the direction of Doña Berenguela, guardian of the minor Enrique I.

In many ways, al-Fakhār's intellectual values, which were essential to his place in the Jewish community and at court, represented a

continuation of those possessed by the Arabized Jews of al-Andalus. Al-Fakhār was learned in several areas, knew multiple languages, composed (Arabic) poetry, and was able to assume different modes of cultural discourse. He spoke Arabic in Marrakech (and probably in Toledo as well), undoubtedly spoke Castilian in the court of Alfonso VIII, and had a command of Hebrew that allowed at least for the appreciation of Hebrew literary works. A number of al-Fakhār's Arabic poems have been preserved by Muslim anthologists. Such Arabic literary collections, along with some historical accounts, relate the most detailed records of al-Fakhār's activities, particularly in al-Andalus and the Maghrib.

Ibn Sa'īd al-Maghribī (1213-86) relates in his biographical dictionary of Arabic poets that he met al-Fakhār personally. He describes the Jew as a "doctor" who "was prevalent in Toledo and became an emissary from its Christian King Alfonso (Adhfunsh) to the nation of the Banū 'Abd al-Ma'amūn at the court of Marrakech. My father described him as a master of poetry, learning in ancient sciences and logic." Gaining elevated status within Alfonso's court was also expected to earn al-Fakhār respect in Muslim circles, as evidenced by an anecdote recounted by a Muslim anthologist in which al-Fakhār upbraids (in verse) a Muslim who failed to treat him with the dignity befitting a royal appointee.[38]

As a diplomat to the Maghrib, al-Fakhār relied upon his knowledge of Arabic and Islamic culture in order to navigate the world of the Almohad court. According to one anecdote, al-Fakhār was sent to Marrakech, to the court of al-Mustansir, on a diplomatic mission during the period of Almohad decline. As was common in Muslim courts, the Caliph was kept fairly inaccessible, such that one would have to pass through various sections of the palace and numerous guards before being granted audience. The story is related in al-Fakhār's voice:

> They brought me into the garden of the Caliph al-Mustansir, which I found to be of the utmost beauty as though it were Paradise. By its gate I saw a guard of the utmost hideousness. When the vizier asked me about my state of delight, I said, "I saw Paradise though I heard that Paradise would have Ridwān by its gate but by this gate is Mālik.

[38] See my "May God Curse Them Both," appendix.

> He laughed and informed the Caliph of what occurred. [The Caliph] said to [the vizier], "Tell him that we did this by design. Were Ridwan the guard by the gate, we would fear that he would turn away [the visitor] from [the garden] and say to him, 'You are not in the right place.' But since it is Mālik, he ushers [the visitor] into [the garden] since he does not realize what is behind him and imagines that it is Gehennum. [Al-Fakhār] said, "When the vizier informed me of this I said to him, 'God knows best how to carry out his mission.'"

According to Qur'ān 43:77, Mālik is the gatekeeper of Gehennum (Hell), while Islamic tradition associates Ridwan with Paradise. Hence al-Fakhār's joke that gained the attention of the Caliph was grounded in learning that was specifically Muslim. Indeed, when al-Fakhār responded at the end, "God knows best how to carry out his mission," he was quoting the Qur'an (6:124). Undoubtedly, being versed in Islamic culture was of great advantage for gaining access to and negotiating with Muslim figures of power. Al-Fakhār's quick and witty tongue might have lightened the mood of this encounter, whose political background likely disposed the Caliph negatively toward the diplomat. Such were the qualities that made al-Fakhār of value to the Castilian state.

Interestingly, al-Fakhār also evoked the Qur'ān when praising his Christian patron Alfonso VIII. He wrote in a couplet:

> The court of Alfonso is a wife still in her succulent days,
> Take off your shoes in honor of its soil for it is holy.

The Arabic phrasing of the second line closely mimics Qur'ān 20:11-12, which recounts Moses' appearance before the Burning Bush. The reference has the effect of likening appearing in Alfonso's court with holding audience before God Himself in a moment charged with religious significance. The effect is not lost in translation for a Christian or Jewish audience since the verse still evokes the biblical scene of Moses at the Burning Bush (Exod. 3:5), where he is also told to remove his shoes. Thus the verse evokes a point of overlap between Jewish/Christian and Muslim scriptures and resonates within multiple literary and cultural worlds. We do not know whether this couplet was recited in Toledo before Alfonso directly or whether it was used by al-Fakhār to spread an image of his king in

the Arabic speaking world only. Either way, it is clear that Arabic panegyric enjoyed some function within the machinery of the Castilian state much as it did within Islamic political culture. It is possible that Alfonso VIII fashioned himself as a political leader after the image of the very caliphs with whom he competed.[39] The prominence of Jewish courtiers with literary skills continued in Castile through the fourteenth century with Santob de Carrión (a.k.a., Shem Tov ibn Ardutiel), who dedicated his *Proverbios Morales* (Moral Proverbs) to King Pedro IV, whom he also served as treasurer. [40]

Not surprisingly, al-Fakhār's activities within the Jewish community are best preserved in Hebrew sources, in which he appears as a diplomat, a learned leader, and a tax collector. He served as a patron for Hebrew writers such as Judah ibn Shabbetai, who dedicated his *Gift of Judah the Misogynist* to al-Fakhār and featured the patron as a character within the text. Ibn Shabbetai writes in his praise, noting his eminent position among Muslims and Christians:

> The Lord established him to determine justice for his people. He bears sovereignty upon his shoulder. Whose greatness can compare with his? Tongues fail to declare his praise. Because of him lands are elevated even above the skies! Of him the prophets spoke. For his sake all creation was made. Muslim kings purify themselves in the waters of his wisdom, and Christian chiefs wage war at his command: 'They set out at his word and at his word they return' (Numbers 27:21). Before him they are dumbfounded and upon them falls his dread for they behold things never told before. He is the "father of many nations" (Genesis 17:4) and the master of Torah.[41]

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[39] Maribel Fierro, "Alfonso the Wise: The Last Almohad Caliph?" *Medieval Encounters* 15 (2009): 175-198 argues that the more famous Alfonso X fashioned himself according to the typology of the Almohad Caliphs (though she does not deal with panegyric specifically). Earlier, in Norman Sicily, Arabic panegyrics were composed in honor of Roger II (1130-54).

[40] In the work, the poet lavishes praise upon the king and defends the work's value despite its "lowly" origin: "For being born on the thorn bush, the rose is certainly not worth less, nor is good wine if taken from the lesser branches of the vine... nor are good proverbs [of less value] if spoken by a Jew." *The Moral Proverbs of Santob de Carrión: Jewish Wisdom in Christian Spain*, trans. T.A. Perry (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 19-20 (ll. 169-89). Santob also authored works in Hebrew.

[41] For a partial English translation of the narrative by Raymond Scheindlin, see "The Misogynist," in *Rabbinic Fantasies,* ed. David Stern and Mark Jay Mirsky (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 269-94. The translation here is my own.

The phrase "father of many nations" evokes al-Fakhār's namesake, the biblical Abraham, yet here the moniker refers to the diplomat's status among contemporary religious communities. The passage from Numbers is also apposite in that it makes reference to the biblical Joshua, Moses' successor, precisely at the moment of his being invested with Moses' authority. Hence al-Fakhār is presented as a legitimate heir to Moses' leadership (though the troops referred to here seem to be Christian rather than Israelite). Here we have another parallel with the Jewish court culture of al-Andalus: al-Fakhār served (and praised) his monarch and in turn was praised by Hebrew authors who portrayed their patron as a ruler.

Whereas the Jewish courtiers of al-Andalus have virtually always been evoked by modern scholars in a celebratory manner, the Jewish courtiers of Christian Iberia were judged with ambivalence by Yitzhak Baer, the towering twentieth-century scholar of the Jews in Christian Iberia. Baer saw the courtiers' situation as exceedingly fragile and subject to "the whims and vagaries of the king's mind," here referring to the reversal of fate for Jewish tax collectors under Alfonso X of Castile from favored employment to imprisonment.[42] More importantly, Baer took issue with the moral laxity and philosophical preoccupations of the courtiers themselves and denounced those who "attained political power and high office in the administration" and "did not hesitate to trample upon the vital interests of their coreligionists."[43] Baer was an émigré from Germany who published his masterpiece *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* (in Hebrew) in Jerusalem, 1945.[44] Like Hannah Arendt's perspective, Baer's was likely informed by the tragedy of the Holocaust and the complicit, even malevolent, role of Nazi Jewish appointees.[45] One focus of Baer's magnum opus was to determine why the Expulsion

[42] Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, trans. Louis Schiffman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1961-66), 1:129.

[43] *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain,* 1:241-2. Only a few courtiers merit praise in Baer's eyes, such as Todros Halevi Abulafia, about whom Baer notes, "as a mystic and an ascetic who practiced what he preached, he personified the very antithesis of the current tendency among Jewish courtiers to assimilate the ways of the Christian knighthood and the licentiousness of the royal court," 1:119. See also Elliot Horowitz, "The Court Jews and the Jewish Question," 116-18.

[44] After originally undertaking the project in German, Baer was convinced to publish in Hebrew as part as an expression of Zionism.

[45] Suggested also in Horowitz, "The Court Jews and the Jewish Question," 117.

occurred, and although blame was ultimately placed upon the Catholic Monarchs who issued the edict of Expulsion, an internal Jewish factor was identified in the decadence, intellectual pursuits, and moral turpitude of the courtier class.[46]

Toward the Expulsion: Isaac Abravanel at the Court of Ferdinand and Isabella

In hindsight, the period from 1391, when widespread attacks against Iberian Jewry left many dead and created a massive *converso* population, until the Expulsion of 1492 has seemed to some like an inexorable if not precipitous decline. Although the century was punctuated by numerous instances of restriction, exclusion, and even violence, one cannot allow the looming specter of the Expulsion to color the reading of earlier moments, even as late as the time just before the Expulsion.[47] Iberian Jewry, including its courtiers proximate to royalty, had little sense that expulsion was imminent.

In the century prior to the Expulsion, the place of the court Jew continued to be prominent even as Iberian society went through political and social transformations.[48] On the other hand, court Jews appear mostly as financiers and tax farmers (some of whom were also physicians) whereas astronomers, ambassadors, and advisors had become rare. Restricting Jewish functions at court was likely designed to appease a restless Christian nobility as it maneuvered to attain greater influence. We should not assign too much grandeur to the rank of tax farmer despite the fact that it was an extremely lucrative profession; such figures were often despised by Jews and

[46] See also the introductory essay by Benjamin Gampel to the reprint of the English edition, "Yitzhak Baer's *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain,*" xv-lvi.

[47] See also the introductory remarks by Mark D. Meyerson, *A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[48] The discussion below largely concerns Castile, where the courtier phenomenon was more common. On Aragon, see Yom Tov Assis, *The Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997); D. Romano, "Cortesanos judíos en la Corona de Aragón," *Destierros Aragoneses* 1 (1988): 25-37. The fifteenth century also saw the rise of *converso* courtiers, whose Christian status first afforded them mobility barred to Jews. *Converso* roles at court were ultimately restricted, however, and *conversos* were often suspected of religious recidivism.

Christians alike and occupied relatively low rank within what had become an extensive fiscal hierarchy.

The most prominent Jewish courtier in Castile during the first half of the fifteenth century was Abraham Benveniste (1406-54), a member of a well-established Sephardi family. He was appointed to a post in fiscal administration by a noble in the service of Juan I, worked as a tax farmer, and helped finance military campaigns. At the *aljamas'* request, he was appointed by the king to the position of "Crown Rabbi" with its dual functions in adjudication and the administration of taxes within the Jewish community. The enactments Benveniste supported within the Jewish community were directed toward tax equitability, communal reform, religious education, and the restriction of ostentatious dress and public behavior.[49] However, like many other rabbinic enactments, these do not seem to have been strictly enforced and thus reflect Benveniste's social ideals more than concrete social changes.

As the century progressed, circles of courtiers emerged in various centers, which need to be studied individually and on a local level. In Madrid, for example, during the period between 1450 and 1475, members of new families (including royal physicians) became the dominant voices within the *aljamas* and secured proximity with royalty. At one point in Madrid, the *aljamas* protested vociferously when a Christian was appointed to a post traditionally held by Jews, ultimately leading to the Christian's removal from office. The incident likely signifies a royal attempt to exert greater influence over the *aljamas* even as it demonstrates the *aljamas*' power to deflect encroachments upon its traditional authority.[50]

Abraham Señor, first documented in 1466 as a financier who loaned a significant sum to King Henry IV of Castile, emerged as a leading courtier during the second half of the fifteenth century. He attained positions in tax administration that were theoretically barred to Jews according to laws promulgated in 1465 in order to

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[49] Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain,* 2:259-70. See also the brief article by Zvi Avineri, "Abraham Benveniste," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 3:382.

[50] Javier Castaño, "Social Networks in a Castilian Jewish Aljama and the Court Jews in the Fifteenth Century: A Preliminary Survey (Madrid 1440-75)," *En la España medieval* 20 (1997): 379-92.

assuage an aggrieved nobility. Like many Jewish courtiers, he was granted tax exemptions and land. Señor seems to have had certain tensions with the *aljamas,* though, as Eleazar Gutwirth argues, these were "political, fiscal, socio-economic issues rather than religious controversies."[51] A sixteenth-century Hebrew chronicle credits Señor with a role in arranging the marriage between the Catholic Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, though this is likely apocryphal. Still, Señor clearly aligned himself with Isabella in her battle of succession against her niece Juana la Beltraneja, and his career continued to flourish in the united kingdom of Castile and Aragon, where he promoted the centralizing fiscal policies of the Crown. Señor has been remembered foremost in Jewish history for converting to Catholicism in 1492 rather than accepting the yoke of expulsion, though this fact should not overshadow the significance of his career as a courtier.

The figure with which we will conclude this essay, Don Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508), was atypical as a courtier with respect to origins, versatility, intellectual prowess, and ultimate fate.[52] He was not born in the kingdom of Castile from which he was ultimately expelled but rather hailed from Portugal (he did, however, derive from a prominent Castilian family). His grandfather served under Castilian kings and ultimately converted to Christianity, though Isaac's own father, Judah, remained within the Jewish fold and attained wealth as a merchant and tax farmer in Lisbon, where he financed Prince Fernando in an expedition against Tangier. Isaac was also atypical among fifteenth-century Jewish courtiers in that the prolific writings he composed (mostly but not exclusively after the Expulsion)—in the areas of biblical exegesis, dogma, polemics, and commentaries on Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed,* the Passover *Haggadah,* and the *Ethics of the Fathers*—merited his place as one of the foremost intellectuals of late medieval Judaism. His peregri-

[51] Eleazar Gutwirth, "Abraham Seneor: Social Tensions and the Court-Jew," *Michael* 11 (1989): 169-229; here 228.

[52] His name appears in many variant spellings in medieval documents, usually Abravanel or Abarbanel. The biographical information below is largely based on Elias Lipiner, *Two Portuguese Exiles in Castile: Dom David Negro and Dom Isaac Abravanel* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997); Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); and Benzion Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1953).

nations and exceptional status allow us to conclude this essay on a poignant (if somewhat dramatic) note.

Despite the relatively stable Jewish-Christian relations characteristic of Portugal during the fifteenth century, the young Isaac Abravanel would have been witness, in 1449, during the reign of King Afonso V, to anti-Jewish riots in Lisbon that began with a limited assault by some Christian hoodlums but spun into an attack on the Jewish quarter.[53] Still, Jewish power seems not to have been shaken, with numerous Jewish families maintaining close connections to royalty. As a merchant, Abravanel supplied fine cloth to the king and others and accumulated great wealth. In a fifteenth-century document, Abravanel figures prominently along with other Jews in a list of contributors for expenses toward the Portuguese war against Castile.[54] Already in the 1460s, Abravanel appears in royal records as holding special privileges, including the right to carry weapons, to stay in Christian inns, and exemption from wearing the "Jewish badge." In the 1470s, King Afonso granted Abravanel, in exchange for services he had rendered the court, the right to settle outside the Jewish quarter and "all the honors and liberties enjoyed by the Christians."[55]

Abravanel's special privileges and riches spawned the resentment of some Christian notables. Still, Abravanel was well connected to the Portuguese Christian nobility. As with his predecessor, al-Fakhār, it is likely that his knowledge of scripture and theology, in addition to his acumen in matters economic and financial, smoothed his interactions at court. A condolence letter sent to the count of Faro in Portuguese attests not only to the social bond that existed between the Jewish author and his Christian addressee but also to the intellectual ground they shared.[56] Abravanel also maintained ties with leading Jewish intellectuals outside of Portugal.

In 1481, João II succeeded Afonso as king and, in 1483, a warrant for Abravanel's arrest was issued on the charge of conspiring against the king in cahoots with the duke of Brangança (the duke was

[53] For the events, see Lipiner, *Two Portuguese Exiles,* 78.

[54] Lipiner, *Two Portuguese Exiles,* 49.

[55] Lipiner, *Two Portuguese Exiles,* 51.

[56] On the letter, see Eleazar Gutwirth, "*Hercules furens* and War: On Abravanel's Courtly Context," *Jewish History* 23 (2009): 293-312.