

CHAPTER 3 THE OLDER JEWRIES OF THE SOUTH

INTRODUCTION

The study of the Jews of medieval times in the western Christian world needs to begin with the older Jewish communities of the south. By the year 1000, Jewish settlements were found throughout the northern region of the Mediterranean Sea; they were well organized but not necessarily big. These communities were able to trace their origins way back into antiquity. Given that the Roman rule extended into the eastern Mediterranean basin and that Judea was captured toward the end of the first pre-Christian millennium- it made sense for Jews to move westward across the southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean. They did just that and established Jewish communities that would last into the Middle Ages and in some cases even into modern days as well.

The Jews of southern France will be discussed first and were less exposed to the attacks of external forces. Being part of a broad Mediterranean culture, southern France was from the beginning of our period through the end fully within the Christian domain. Next, we will discuss the Iberian Peninsula – which at the beginning of our period was largely under Muslim rule. Our period is basically characterized by the Christian conquest and the integration of the areas into the western Christian world. Lastly, the Italian peninsula, which did not move towards a unified society, unlike southern France and Spain. The story of the Italian peninsula is the most confusing one of the western Christian world.

SOUTHERN FRANCE

In modern times, one generally associates southern France with the northern parts of France, finding a common culture, and a shared political system and language. Before the thirteenth century, people would disagree and associate southern France with the northern part of the Iberian peninsula in the west, and with the Italian peninsula in the east where they would find cultural and linguistic similarities. Benjamin of Tudela traveled through these areas, leaving Tudela (Spain) around 1160 and returning in 1172. He visited and wrote about the Jewish communities there. In those days, he was able to communicate with the people he met, and the areas he visited were all associated with each other culturally. On the other hand, if someone were to travel, Narbonne in the south to Paris in the north, they would be unable to understand the language spoken in Paris.

Around the year 1000, southern France was divided among small, independently states. Since the area was not under Muslim control for long, there was no reconquering activity – like in Spain – that led to large and powerful political units. Also, there was no need for Christian armies to invade from the north, like in Italy. However, a number of newly evolving Christian monarchies threatened the independence of these mini-states and were interested in annexing the area. Eventually, during the thirteenth century, southern France fell into the hands of the Capetian Kings of the north, which laid the foundations from the French state as we know it.

Just as in Italy and Spain, Jews settled in southern France on the Mediterranean shores under Roman rule. The lack of Jewish texts and artwork from these communities suggest a limited Jewish population and little spiritual activity. Moses ha-Darshan of Narbonne of the eleventh century was one figure within this setting who focused on *midrashim* (extra-biblical stories). His collection of Jewish writings did not show influence from the outside world, unlike writings from Italy and Spain.

Following Benjamin of Tudela's journey from Spain to Italy through eight cities in southern France teaches us about the Jewish demography of the area. All Jewish settlements were located close to the Mediterranean coastline. Furthermore, most of the cities were located in Languedoc, which had the most creative Jewish communities in southern France, until it was conquered by the Capetian dynasty in the mid-1200s. Eventually, in 1306, the Jews were expelled from Languedoc and after that time, only few Jews remained in small settlements throughout the area.

On his journey, Benjamin noticed different things about the Jewish communities that he visited. He describes that of the eight communities in southern France, the largest consisted of three hundred Jews, which was like the communities he knew in northern Spain. Even though he does not tell us what the Jews there did for a living, we get the sense that these towns were centers of trade and that the Jews in it led reasonably comfortable lives. Jews seemed to have been involved in different trades and businesses, the money lending business came about later after the Church forbade interest taken by Christians.

What most impressed Benjamin in the Jewish communities of southern France was the high level of talmudic studies, with great teachers and Talmud academies attracting students from far and wide. He was also impressed with the level of charity provided by the wealthier Jews.

"From Montpellier it is about four parasangs (14 miles) to Lunel, where there is a congregation of Jews who study the Torah day and night. (...) Rabbi Asher the recluse dwells apart from the world and pores over his books, day and night, fasting periodically and abstaining entirely from meat. He is a great student of the Talmud. At Lunel, there also lives (...) Rabbi Judah the physician ibn Tibbon the Sepharadi. The students who come from distant lands to learn Torah are taught, boarded, lodged, and clothed by the congregation, so long as they attend the house of study. The community includes wise, understanding, and saintly men of great benevolence, who lend a helping hand to all their brethren both far and near."

Benjamin's description of the Talmud academies of southern France is accurate. During the twelfth century, southern France produced outstanding rabbinical scholars that studied the Talmud, wrote commentaries on it, developed Jewish law by addressing issues that went on in their environment, and organized the existing materials in systematic handbooks. Names such as Rabbi Abraham ben Isaac of Lunel, Rabbi Zerahiah ben Isaac ha-Levi of Lunel, Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquières and Rabbi Jonathan of Lunel, each hold a prominent place in the history of medieval rabbinic learning.

Benjamin was very much aware of the rabbinic culture of the 12th century Jewish communities of Southern France. However, he was yet to discover the more creative developments of these Jewish communities. Southern France as a whole, was a well-known center for intellectuality and spirituality, and this goes for the Christians as well as for the Jews. The Jews of Southern France were very much involved in spiritual and intellectual activities. The root of this creativity stemmed from the nearby Mediterranean and Muslim worlds. The Jews of Southern France were also taken by the Mediterranean ways because of the great amount of freedom they had. However, especially in the western areas, such as Languedoc, this freedom may have overstepped its boundaries of what was normally accepted. Heretical movements sprang up among the non-Jewish population that embraced a type of dualism. However, this widespread spiritual creativity also impacted the Jewish communities in Southern France of this period.

We do not know how Benjamin made his way into the various Jewish communities he visited throughout southern France, and how he met the leaders that he mentions. Interestingly, in the city of Narbonne, he notes four influential Jewish leaders. In another city, Lunel, he names ten. While the people he mentions are important, it is striking that Benjamin does not mention the Kimhi family of Narbonne. These were very important academics who specialized in grammar, translation, and the Bible and who defended Judaism and Jewish interpretations. Also, Judah Ibn Tibbon is the very last one he mentions by name, which does not reflect his importance. Judah Ibn Tibbon was a Jewish physician and translator who came from a highly regarded family. Both the Kimhi family and the Ibn Tibbon family consisted of important intellectuals whose legacies would last for many generations to come. It seems fair to say that their importance overshadowed the other individuals that Benjamin chose to write about.

Benjamin mentions Judah Ibn Tibbon as being a physician and a refugee from Iberia. He was, however, much more. After having moved from Spain to southern France, Judah Ibn Tibbon had become aware of the demand for his impressive linguistic skills and the necessity for a translation project. In his desire to make the wealth of Jewish culture that had evolved under Spanish Muslim rule available to the Jewish communities in southern France, he led the way in translating Judeo-Arabic classics into Hebrew. After him, his son Samuel continued the project, as did Samuel's son-in-law Jacob Anatoli. The Ibn Tibbons would become the most important family to pass on the cultural heritage of Al-Andalus.

Samuel ibn Tibbon translated many different works, but his most important translation was of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*. Through this translation, Samuel took the philosophic scholarship that was created in the Muslim world and introduced it to the Jews of southern France. Samuel saw the *Guide* as key to the development of philosophical thought in his new homeland. He himself also contributed to this philosophical development by authoring several original works. However, many sensed in these philosophical works the dangers that are presented by philosophic speculation.

Another family that fled from Muslim Spain to Christian southern France was the Kimhi family. Joseph Kimhi, the head of the family, was a translator, skilled in foreign languages, explainer and

interpreter of the Bible and one of the earliest Jews that participated in theological debates with Christians. Joseph Kimhi used his skills to counter the dominant Christian religion, leading to the first Jewish polemical text composed in western Christendom, the *Sefer ha-Berit*, "Book of the Covenant". *Sefer ha-Berit* is written as a dialogue between a Christian and a Jew. This made-up debate is won by the Jews because of his philosophical arguments, his careful reading of the biblical texts and the higher moral standards of the Jewish community.

Like the ibn Tibbons, the Kimhi family also had biblical scholarship running through the generations. Joseph Kimhi had two talented sons of which the younger, David, would become one of the leading biblical scholars of medieval Jewry. His commentaries display the same beliefs and opinions of his father: textual and grammatical accuracy, the realization that the Hebrew Bible was a source of Christian-Jewish conflict, and deep rationalism. Naturally, David Kimhi would strongly advocate for the rationalist, pro-Maimonidean camp during the controversies that broke out in southern France over Maimonides' writing.

The dynamic spiritual atmosphere in southern France also produced innovation in the area of mysticism. As we saw before, many Christians of southern France were looking for a purer form of Christianity. Seeing the power and wealth within the Roman Catholic Church, these people searched for a deeper religious truth behind the shallowness of the organized Church. Some of these new spiritual movements were successfully integrated by the Church. Others were seen as heretics; rebels against the true faith who followed wrong beliefs or practices. These were challenged with theological arguments or brought to the inquisitional courts. Southern France was seen as an especially dangerous place where heresy grew out of control. The authorities were asked to intervene, and this resulted in suppression and persecution of these new movements. It is not surprising that in this explosive environment new forms of Jewish mysticism developed as well.

Throughout Jewish history, we can see attempts to find a deeper, mystical meaning behind the universe and the Torah. By the late 12th century, mystical writings were spreading, but it was still limited and on a small scale. Southern France became the first place where this tradition started to expand. The first important work that launched this movement was *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the 'Book of Brilliance' which claims to be written in the time of the Mishna. The book has an unorganized structure and its origins are unknown. However, it seems to be not much older than the late-12th or early-13th-century. It contains the basic themes that would be developed in the following century, such as a gradual emanation of the unknowable Divinity into ten *sefirot*, and the interactions between these ten emanations and humanity.

These mystical speculations are often seen as an alternative to philosophical speculation, which was under heavy fire in southern France at the time. However, both the mystics and the philosophers tried to discover the deeper truths and meanings hidden underneath the surface of what we can sense. Nonetheless, despite this common goal, philosophical and mystical thinkers have some crucial differences; most notably in their outlook on rituals. By explaining rituals rationally, philosophical approaches could theoretically make rituals unnecessary, whereas in a mystical approach, rituals are the key to divine-human interaction.

In such a vibrant place as southern France (at the time), where people could explore new intellectual and spiritual expressions, it is no surprise that tensions occurred. Disagreements arose about which expressions were allowed and forbidden, which approaches were acceptable within the tradition and which weren't. This happened first within the Christian community and soon enough also among the Jews. The hot topic of debate for Jews became philosophy. In the 1230s, a 'traditionalist' leader in the town of Montpellier attacked the 'philosophizers' and banned the study of philosophy. The pro-philosophy group counter-attacked and both parties sent people to other Jewish communities to persuade them to their side.

Jews had limited means in managing these new spiritual and intellectual developments. Much less so the Roman Catholic Church. The new developments were supported by two circumstances: Influence from Muslim and Mediterranean culture, and toleration by the local rulers. The first strategy used by the Church was to counter outside intellectual and spiritual influence. For this reason, it set up the Dominican Order that actively battled against heretical thought through counter arguments and through providing a more noble image of Catholicism that was less shallow: pious and poor. This had some success, but many believed that the progress against heretical movements was too slow. More drastic measures were necessary.

During this period, the inquisition, a tribunal established by the church, became very powerful. They tried to identify individuals whose beliefs or practices were not in accordance with the Church, and to convince them of their error. If the individual could not be convinced of what the Church thought was correct, they would be prosecuted. The inquisition could only be successful if the secular authorities collaborated. However, the barons of southern France were not very cooperative.

During the early decades of the thirteenth century, Pope Innocent III was determined to fight back against the threats of Christianity: from the outside there was the threat from the Muslims who had conquered large areas of Christian land, and from the inside there was the threat of heresy that undermined the teachings of the Church. Innocent III now applied the concept of crusading to physically fighting all enemies of the Church, both external (the Muslim enemies) and internal (the heretics). He called for a crusade against the rulers of Languedoc who had tolerated the heretics, and for replacing them with more loyal rulers.

Several powerful rulers responded to the Pope's call, hoping to add the Languedoc territories to their kingdoms. The Crown of Aragon, which ruled over the Iberian peninsula, first seemed like the most favorable candidate and was culturally close to Languedoc. However, the Capetians, the rulers of the north, were the victorious ones. These northern kings had already begun to impose extremely negative policies on their own northern Jewish population. Their rule would turn out detrimental to the Jews of Languedoc as well.

The writings of Rabbi Meir bar Simon of Narbonne, an important Talmudic scholar, moderate Maimonidean and a critic of the new type of mysticism, give us an impression of the tensions that were going on because of Capetian rule. In his days, proselytizing and missionizing was turning into an organized and aggressive endeavor. Rabbi Meir polemicized against it, both in writings and sermons. We

have a paraphrase of his counter-sermon delivered by him in the synagogue of Narbonne after the community had been forced to listen to a missionizing speech by a Dominican preacher. A collection of his writings, *Milhemet Mizvah*, gives us an understanding of the mid-thirteenth century Cristian efforts to convert the Jewish people as well as the Jews' response to Christian missionizing.

Rabbi Meir's work is also helpful in identifying the changes that took place in the Languedoc under its new, northern rulers. First, we see signs of warm relations between the Jews and the southern French authorities. For example, we see the archbishop of Narbonne, Guillaume de Broue, arguing why the Jews should not take interest from Christians like him. It is prohibited by Jewish law to charge interest from your brother but allows it from a stranger, and the bishop argued that he had been more than a brother to them, protecting them many times against the northern (Capetian) rulers. Rabbi Meir doesn't object to this reasoning and defends taking interest from Christians based on entirely different reasons. At the same time, Rabbi Meir's describing how Guillaume de Broue argues against interest does shed light on the increasing anti-interest attitude of the Church.

Rabbi Meir is not very positive about the new Capetian rulers. In fact, one of Rabbi Meir's writings is a letter to none other than King Louis IX of France. The letter is written respectfully but still accuses the king of not demonstrating true religiosity by establishing unfair and immoral anti-interest laws. Even though Rabbi Meir's protest did not have any impact, it still shows us the hardships of southern-French Jews during this painful transition.

King Louis of France attempted to subjugate Jews in the south – an area he had just conquered – to the same discriminatory laws that had become increasingly prevalent in the north. King Louis enacted multiple anti-Jewish laws but was not completely successful in his endeavor as often local rulers, such as in Narbonne, kept policies in place that were favorable to Jews and that had been in existence prior to Louis' monarchy. As a result, Jews fled to Narbonne to escape the harsh laws of the new monarchy. However, Jews in southern France inevitably encountered the same hardships Jews encountered in the north.

Eventually, King Louis banished the Jews from southern France in 1306; a 'solution' that had first been introduced by King Edward I of England. Vibrant and once thriving Jewish communities such as Languedoc were destroyed, thereby ending one of the few 'golden ages' in Jewish history.

Because the Capatians did not rule over all southern France, Jews could still live rather comfortably in some of its areas. In the County of Provence for instance, Jewish life survived for a few hundred years with times of great cultural flourishing until around 1500. By the end of the fifteenth century, however, the circumstances of Jewish life in Provence began to suffer tremendously. Anti-Jewish riots started to occur from the 1470s onward. When the County of Provence was added to the rest of the French Kingdom in 1481, first some smaller areas in Provence ordered the Jews to leave. Eventually, in 1500 and 1501, Jews from the entire Provence were expelled. Surprisingly, a majority of Provencal Jews decided to convert to Catholicism, rather than be exiled.

A second option for the Jews who were expelled from Languedoc in 1306 was to move westward to the Iberian territories of Navarre, Aragon, and Majorca. Some could even stay on the French side of Pyrenees, in territories ruled by one of the Spanish kingdoms. The County of Rousillon, for example, already home to a Jewish community, became a refuge for Jews expelled by Phillip IV. Jews continued to thrive in Rousillon until the end of the fifteenth century, when the Crown of Aragon banished its Jews as well.

Following the expulsion of Jews by King Phillip IV in 1306, some Jews fled to areas within the South of France where Jews were still tolerated. Jewish communities east and west of Languedoc continued to thrive and produced some very important religious leaders. One of them, Rabbi Menahem ben Solomon Meiri of Perignan, was born before the expulsion. His many different genres reflect the prior diversity of southern-French Jewry. His most important work, "*Bet ha-Beḥirah*", was a Talmud commentary focused on the literal meaning of the Talmud and on its implications for Jewish practice. It greatly contributed to medieval rabbinic literature.

Like the Meiri, a younger scholar by the name of Levi ben Gerson of Orange (a town east of Languedoc that was still hospitable to Jews), wrote important commentaries on the Hebrew Bible during that same period. These commentaries follow the tradition of literal and philosophical interpretation also employed by David Kimhi. Also known as Gersonides, Levi produced philosophical and scientific writings as well, covering a large spectrum of areas like mathematics, geometry, trigonometry, and astronomy. His major philosophical work, *Sefer Milḥamot Adonai* (The Book of the Wars of the Lord), is one of the most important medieval works on Jewish philosophy.

By the end of the Middle Ages, almost no Jewish life was left in the south of France, except some very small areas. The absorption of southern France into the Capetian kingdom destroyed the existence of a separate southern-French culture and identity, both for Jews and non-Jews. In addition, because of there being so few Jews left and them often being displaced, little remained of what was once a flourishing and dynamic Jewish community.

Medieval Spanish Jewry was large and strong enough to survive the expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula and to continue its heritage in other places. The fact that Jews are often mistakenly separated into merely two cultures, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, is proof of the resilience of medieval Iberian Judaism. On the other hand, Italian Jewry, though much smaller, was able to continue in Italy uninterrupted until the present day. Of the three branches of Judaism in southern Europe, the Jews of southern France were the least fortunate. Their tradition was not able to continue in the region (like the Italian Jews), nor did it have the strength to survive somewhere else (like the Iberians). For this reason, it has not been studied much. This is regrettable because the Jewish community of medieval southern France had a very special tradition and history. Many new innovative movements that would influence western Christendom first started in the south of France and affected both Christians and Jews. What happened in the Jewish community then-and-there is therefore highly significant.