

CHAPTER 3 THE OLDER JEWRIES OF THE SOUTH

CHRISTIAN SPAIN

The history of the Iberian peninsula and its Jews was similar to that of the Italian peninsula. In both peninsulas, western Christendom bordered its Muslim neighbors, and parts of both peninsulas were conquered by those neighbors. Prior to being reconquered by the Christians, the Jews of Sicily, southern Italy, and Spain lived under Muslim rule and were deeply affected by it. Once under Christian rule, the Jews could continue aspects of their prior life under Islam. Both in Sicily, southern Italy, and Spain, the Jews played a role in transferring classical and Islamic thought into western Christendom. And in both Italy and Spain, the Jews were stimulated in their intellectual and spiritual creativity by their encounters with these different civilizations and cultures.

While there were some similarities between the Iberian and Italian peninsula, the differences were much greater. The Iberian peninsula was almost completely under Muslim rule for nearly 500 years. The centuries' long struggle between medieval Christian Spain and its Muslim enemies had an important impact on Christian Spanish governance and culture: medieval Christian Spain ended up with large Muslim and Jewish minorities. Although the small Christian kingdoms in the north of the Iberian peninsula received considerable assistance (and therefore influence) from foreign forces in recapturing Spanish land, medieval Christian Spain was still able to create and sustain large and effective political units. The Spanish rulers were able to maintain their independence and avoid conquest by others, as happened in Italy.

All these specific features of Iberian history played an important part in the development of the Jews in the area. First, they had lived in a medieval Islamic society, during which many aspects of Islamic culture were absorbed into the Iberian Jewish culture. Then, the needs of a Christian expansionist society gave the Jewish community opportunities, but the aggressiveness of Christian society once it had become the majority impacted them negatively. This unique situation allowed the Jews to stay within the Iberian Peninsula longer than in other advanced monarchies of Latin Christendom; they were expelled from Iberia centuries later than from England and France. In other words, if you were a Jew in Medieval Europe, the Iberian Peninsula was the best place to be for the longest time. Because of how different the Iberian Jewish experience was from other Jewish communities, there evolved an entirely unique branch of the Jewish people, called Sephardic Judaism. The Sephardic community's sense of uniqueness lasted past the end of Iberian Jewry, even up to this day.

Like in southern France and on the Italian peninsula, Jewish communities in Spain had been around since Roman times. Records indicate that the Jews before 1000 AD went through both periods of peace and of violence. Though there are few sources that show what Jewish life was like under Visigothic Christian rule between 500 and 700 A.D, it seems that the Jewish community was not only large, but also economically and politically powerful. In the seventh century, the Visigoth rulers converted from Arian to Catholic Christianity and subsequently became less tolerant towards the Jews. As the Muslims advanced in North Africa, Spain's authorities seem to have imposed some level of forced

conversion on its Jews. Not surprisingly, this led to issues of backsliding (converts reverting to Judaism) and Judaizing (new Christians practicing Jewish traditions within the Christian community). The combination of all this (which would repeat itself in the late 14th and in the 15th century), led to some level of expulsion of the Jewish community, however clearly not of the entire Jewish community.

Jews that remained under the Visigoth Christian rule in Spain were not bothered by the Muslim conquest of Spain in the beginning of the 8th century. Christian legend throughout the Middle Ages claimed that the Jews had conspired with the Muslims and in fact had brought them to Spain. Yet modern research suggests otherwise, namely that disloyal Christians had invited the Muslims to intervene. The Jews seem to have distanced themselves from the conflict between the Christians and the Muslims. Careful minority communities usually do not take sides when the ruling majority is under threat, at least until the outcome of the struggle is clear. Although the Jews were not responsible for the Muslim invasion of Spain, once Muslims had secured their victory, the Jews were quite willing to work with the new establishment.

The period of Muslim rule created a Jewish community in Spain that was different from those in other parts of Europe. For instance, the Jewish community in Spain grew significantly larger than anywhere else in Europe. Throughout the Muslim world there were very few limitations to Jewish economic life. Jews were involved in almost all economic sectors except for agriculture, which never became a serious Jewish occupation. Jews made up both the wealthiest and the poorest members of society. In Muslim Spain, especially Jewish physicians could become successful and influential. Muslim authorities saw the useful role that Jews could play in politics and therefore often employed Jewish administrators, even though this contradicted Islamic law. Jewish courtiers were given access to non-Jewish court life. As a result, they could play important roles as negotiators between the Jews and the Muslim authorities. They also became sponsors of Jewish scholars and artists.

Arabic was both the commonly spoken and written language, and Jews participated well in the intellectual life of the majority. Jews also became active in developing areas such as science, philosophy, and secular poetry. These new cultural interests also influenced traditional Jewish fields such as Talmudic and biblical study. The idea of a Golden Age of Jewish prosperity and culture in Muslim Spain has been an important concept within Jewish history ever since.

There were signs of Jewish intellectual creativity on the Iberian Peninsula even prior to the year 1000. Ḥasdai ibn Shaprūt was the first major figure we know of in Muslim Spain. Ḥasdai was a respected physician who used his language skills to study classical medicine. Ḥasdai made a name for himself by serving the court of the Muslim rulers and by strongly supporting Jewish culture.

During the eleventh and into the twelfth century, Spanish Jewry produced an abundance of cultural geniuses. The cultural creativity of that period was enabled by the disintegration of the Muslim Caliphate into a large number of smaller states. An example of such an outstanding cultural figure was Samuel ibn Nagrela. Ibn Nagrela was a young Jew from a poor background that lived during the eleventh century. Despite his background, he was able to find a place in the court of Granada, become a high

official of that city-state and even command its army, while mastering the complexities of the Talmud and on top of all that compose some of the most beautiful poetry in the Hebrew Language.

The growing self-confidence of western Christendom brought about a new militant attitude toward the outside world, especially toward the Muslims. Throughout Iberian and Italian lands, Muslims were being pushed back by native Christians, assisted by Christian warriors from elsewhere, mostly from France. On the Iberian peninsula, the reconquest was hard and took a long time. There, in Spain, is where the battle against Islam started, lasted the longest, and had the greatest impact on Christian society and its minority communities.

This process of the Christian reconquering of Iberia started in the mid-11th century. During its first stage, anti-Muslim attitudes were also aimed at Jews. In a letter by Pope Alexander II, he praised the bishops of Spain for protecting Jews from violent Christians warriors.

“We are pleased with the report that you have protected the Jews living among you, lest they be slain by those who set out to war against the Saracens in Spain. These warriors, moved surely by blind anger, wished to bring about the slaughter of those whom divine charity had predestined for salvation. In the same manner, Saint Gregory also admonished those who agitated for annihilating them [the Jews], indicating that it is impious to wish to annihilate those who are protected by the mercy of God, so that – with homeland and liberty lost, in everlasting penitence, damned by the guilt of their ancestors for spilling the blood of the Savior – they live dispersed throughout the various areas of the world. The situation of the Jews is surely different from that of the Saracens. Against the latter, who persecute Christians and drive them out of their cities and homes, one may properly fight; the former, however, are prepared to live in servitude.”

The Jews of Spain were obviously threatened by violence due to the Christian warriors’ anti-Muslim ideology. However, the bishops of Spain, like Pope Alexander, protected the Jews for theological reasons. They followed the Augustinian mindset which requires that Jews be saved for two reasons: they have been designated for salvation by God and they are a living example of human sin and divine punishment. The Pope added another reason why the Jews should not be killed: the Muslims should be fought because they persecute Christians. The Jews, in contrast, live in servitude and should therefore be saved.

Although the soldiers from northern Europe did not differentiate between the traditional Jewish enemy and the contemporary Muslim one, the Spanish kings leading the battle could easily tell them apart. The Christian rulers needed the Jews who were living in newly conquered areas to help maintain order and civilization after the fighting ended, similar to what took place in the eighth century during the Muslim conquest of the Iberian peninsula, when the victorious Muslims needed their new subjects to cooperate in order to preserve the level of civilization that had existed before. In the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, the subject population in Spain was mostly Muslim with a significant Jewish minority. The Christian rulers obviously felt that they could rely on the Jews more easily than on the Muslims. The Jewish community supported the new Christian authorities and received valuable protection and privileges in return.

In 1115, King Alfonso I of Aragon conquered the town of Tudela, the future hometown of the traveler Benjamin. The king made the following special conditions for the Jews of Tudela:

- 1) All those who had left Tudela could return to live in it with all their possessions and goods.
- 2) They could remain securely in their homes and shall not be forced to lodge a Christian or a Moor in their homes.
- 3) They must pay their taxes in one term every year.
- 4) They may use their own code of law in all their legal cases.
- 5) No one may go against these provisions.

In 1149 when the count of Barcelona, Raymond Berenguer IV, conquered Tortosa, he even offered the Jews an entire neighborhood with the promise that, if more Jews would come to settle, he would accommodate them too. This fits with an important development during the mid-twelfth century: Jews were moving from Muslim territories into Christian lands where they were often welcomed.

So far, we have seen how Jews became residents of Christian lands as Christian forces conquered the areas where those Jews lived. We also observed that, early on after these regions fell in the hands of Christian rulers, Jews cooperated with the Christian authorities, to the benefit of both. However, the reconquest by the Christians did not always go smoothly. Initially, in the late 11th century and the early 12th century, Christian armies were able to take advantage of the militarily weak and divided Muslim city-states (the Taifas). But after this initial Christian advance, Islamic Spain was strengthened by reinforcements from North Africa, first the Almoravids, and later the Almohads. Especially the Almohads were vigorous and fanatical fighters. They were able to stop the Christian advancement towards the south during the second half of the 12th century. At the same time, these new Muslim rulers introduced oppressive laws that damaged the balance between Muslims and Jews that had existed before. Even though the available sources do not give a complete picture, non-Muslims were forced to convert to Islam, a decree that deeply unsettled the Jews of Islamic Spain.

Influential Jewish thinkers of mid-12th century Muslim Spain – where the most important Jewish intellectual and spiritual centers of the Iberian peninsula still were – believed that Jewish life in Spain was coming to an end. The 12th century Jewish historian and philosopher Abraham ibn Daud wrote a moving historical record *Sefer ha-Kabbalah* (The Book of Tradition). It contains a defense of rabbinic tradition as well as a historical account in which Ibn Daud mourned for Spanish Jewry which he believed had reached its final days. Hundreds of years of flourishing Jewish life were – so he believed – coming to a close. Even though Ibn Daud reassured his fellow Jews that God provided new centers of Jewish learning for the future, he nonetheless mourned the demise of a great Jewish center in Spain.

There were many other Jewish thinkers who agreed with Abraham ibn Daud's conclusion that Jewish life in Spain was collapsing. The famous poet and philosopher Judah ha-Levi saw the Jewish community as being stuck between the two evils of Christian and Muslim control. He argued that the solution was to return to the Holy Land. His so-called "Zionide" poetry became part of an influential trend within Jewish medieval poetry and thought.

Others agreed with Judah ha-Levi that life for Jews in Spain untenable, but chose a less ideological solution. Numerous Jewish families decided to leave the peninsula. One such family was that of Moses ben Maimon which, after a brief stay in the Holy Land, settled in Egypt where “Maimonides” became a physician, community leader, and massively influential philosopher and Torah scholar. Others, such as the Ibn Tibbon and Qimḥi families, moved closer by into Christian areas like southern France, thereby enriching those Jewish communities previously existing in those areas.

However, many Spanish Jews viewed the situation in less drastic terms than Ibn Daud or HaLevi who predicted that Jewish life in Spain was coming to an end. Some believed that they could patiently wait out the persecution in Islamic Spain and didn’t need to relocate elsewhere. Others again saw Christian Spain as an exciting possibility, as they foresaw that the future of the Iberian peninsula would ultimately lay in the hands of the Christians. They were aware of the aggressive approach of the Christian kingdoms, but they were convinced that the Christian conquerors – after they took control – would need assistance from within the conquered population and would turn to the Jews for talented and trustworthy people that might provide support. They were right, and the Christian conquerors’ support of the Jewish subjects and the can be seen reflected in the above-mentioned charters for Jewish communities in Tudela and Tortosa.

As the Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula picked up again during the early thirteenth century, the Jews whose homes had already been taken over by the Christian armies found themselves more and more comfortable under Christian rule. In addition, many Jews moved voluntarily into the expanding Christian areas. Even Jews who chose to stay within Muslim territories were prepared to cooperate with the Christian forces once their home territories went over into Christian hands.

Cooperation between the Jews of Spain and the increasingly powerful Christian authorities enabled Jewish life to thrive across most of Spain while the Christian territory on the peninsula continued to grow. Jewish economic and cultural well-being was so evident that it led many modern scholars of medieval Spanish Jewry to speak of a second "golden age" in Iberia. According to these observers, the prior golden age under Muslim rule – during the eleventh and early twelfth centuries – was followed by a thirteenth-century repetition under Christian rule. The splendor of this second golden age is seen in terms of Jewish economic and political power, the ongoing role of Jewish advisors in the royal courts of Christian Spain, and the flourishing of spiritual and cultural creativity across the peninsula.

Economically, Jews held on to their prior activities under Muslim rule. Especially prominent were the wealthy Jewish families that continued to serve the ruling class, which was now no longer Muslim but Christian instead. The one clear innovation during the thirteenth century was the introduction into Spain of the new Jewish specialization in moneylending. Once again, the needs of a rapidly developing society combined with the intense opposition of the Church towards Christians lending money opened an important new area of the economy to Jewish entrepreneurs. As already noted, moneylending has never been a popular profession, and in the various areas of medieval western Christendom the new Jewish specialty was fostered by the ruling class and despised by many others.

For the Jews, cooperation with the new Christian authorities was vital for a flourishing Jewish life. However, the acceptance of Jews was resented by certain groups of Christians. The Spanish aristocracy, which owed its power to a strong bond with the kings, did not like the Jews to get too close to the royal courts. Meetings of the Spanish nobility often turned into anti-Jewish rabble-rousing. At the same time, people in the cities saw Jews as economic competition. As a result, anti-Jewish feelings were harbored both among aristocrats and among city people who went through hard times and had to resort to Jewish moneylenders.

Perhaps the Roman Catholic Church was the most negative aspect of Spain at the time. The Church was uncomfortable with the Jews and their economic power. As Jews worked in important positions alongside kings and queens, they were envied by the Roman Catholic Church. Popes and other Church leaders complained about Jews being the king and queen's advisors. The Catholic Church insisted on segregating the Jews from the Christian population. In addition, as knowledge of the rabbinic literature increased during the mid-1200s, the Church became concerned with supposed Jewish blasphemy in those texts. As a result, it called for censorship of rabbinic texts such as the Talmud. This resulted in tension between the Church on the one hand, and the state (which often tried to protect the Jew's position) on the other. Christian rulers tried to appease the pressure from the Church authorities while at the same time utilizing the resources that the Jews provided.

In thirteenth century Spain, an innovative trend emerged of Christians trying to convert Jews. Proselytizing had always been a Christian value but was strengthened by the growth of universities in Europe where intellectuals harmonized Christian teachings with philosophy. Initially, during the eleventh century, Christianity had focused on expansion by the sword. Gradually, however, the approach shifted towards expansion through persuasion. Christians became convinced that they would be able to win over the Muslims through argumentation. Increasing knowledge of the non-Christian world led to massive translation projects of Muslims religious texts, with the goal to better understand Muslim thought and to engage the world of Islam.

Inevitably, the Jewish community too became a target of missionizing activity. Even though the Jews were less of an enemy than the Muslims in terms of numbers and resources, they represented the oldest group that had resisted Christianity. Indeed, they were the first to reject Jesus and his teachings. The Jews, who seemed to be in the best position to acknowledge the Christian truth, had however never accepted it, which seemed like a threat. If with the new ways of engaging non-Christians (empowered by philosophical arguments and knowledge of the other's religion), the long resistant Jew could finally be persuaded, that would be a very important achievement!

Even though these feelings were shared by Christians all over the western Christian world, it was on the Iberian peninsula that the military and intellectual confrontation with the Muslim world was most intense. In fact, the prolonged military conflict with the forces of Islam also strengthened the determination towards an intellectual confrontation (including with Judaism). It makes sense that the earliest Jewish polemical writings were composed in Christian Spain and in adjacent southern France.

The *Milhamot ha-Shem (The Wars of the Lord)* by Jacob ben Reuben is an extremely interesting, early Spanish work. In this work, the author describes himself as a refugee. In his place of shelter, according to his report, Jacob befriended an important clergyman who taught him philosophy and theology. At a certain point, the Christian urged Jacob to leave his religion. When the friendly relationship turned into missionary pressure, Jacob decided to write a manual for Jews who are confronted with Christian arguments. In *Milhamot ha-Shem*, Jacob describes a lively and detailed back-and-forth of argumentation. As is to be expected, the Jewish arguments prevail. Towards the end of the book, Jacob moves to directly attack passages in the Gospel of Matthew. The implied background of this work is one of close relations between Jews and Christians and of growing knowledge of the others' religion.

A certain level of success of these Christian efforts is shown by proof that a number of Jewish converts to Christianity in the 13th century were people of central importance in the Jewish communities. Some of these converts joined the missionizers and shared their intimate knowledge about Jewish religion traditions, sensibilities, and vulnerabilities. By the middle decades of the 13th century, pressure on both Muslims and Jews to convert to Christianity had evolved from an informal pressure (such as described in the *Milhamot haShem*) to an organized and well-financed campaign. Conversionist sermons were held and the authorities were enlisted to ensure the presence of Muslims and Jews. Since Christian Spain in this period held a large population of Muslims and Jews, it became the center of this organized campaign. A strong effort was also made to find new arguments that could persuade both these groups. An important condition for finding such arguments was Christian knowledge of the Muslim and Jewish beliefs and concepts. Institutions were established for studying Arabic and Hebrew so that Christian scholars could explore the holy books of Islam and Judaism. Learned converts from Judaism played a vital role in providing such knowledge of Jewish traditions and writings.

We already saw the missionizing contest organized in Barcelona, in 1263, by the Dominicans, supervised by King James of Aragon. Even though both sides claimed to have won the debate, none of the parties felt that their triumph was conclusive. Rabbi Moses ben Nahman undertook a counteroffensive against Christian missionizing efforts. Friar Raymond Martin wrote his sizable book "*Pugio Fidei*" with arguments to prove Christianity superior over Judaism.

A few decades after the Barcelona disputation, an even more prominent Jew turned Christian promoter. Abner of Burgos had been a respected Jewish leader, well-trained in Jewish learning including philosophy and mysticism. Jews who had doubts about their religion would write him and ask for advice and reassurance. What they did not know was that Abner was tormented with doubts himself. Christians had increasingly emphasized the notion of historical fate. This meant that the growing prosperity of the Christian world was the result of God's chosenness while the suffering of the Jews resulted from their being rejected. This notion seemed to have particularly affected Abner. In the early fourteenth century, Abner embraced Christianity and adopted the name Alfonso of Valladolid. Like Friar Paul, Alfonso tried to persuade other Jews to adopt Christianity as well. While Friar Paul had mostly promoted Christianity orally, through sermons and disputations, Alfonso wrote compositions in Hebrew, using Jewish learning and rabbinic-style arguments to convert Jews. Yitzhak Bear, the great historian of

medieval Iberian Jewry, considered Abner/Alfonso the most serious proselytizer the Jews of Spain ever encountered.

The Christian Church went all out in its attacks, and some of the most brilliant Spanish Jews devoted themselves to defend their religion. We already saw Rabbi Moses ben Nahman at the Barcelona disputation, one of the most distinguished and innovative Jewish scholars. After his debate with Friar Paul, Rabbi Moses used his literary skills and scholarship writing works to strengthen the Jewish faith against Christian attacks. Jewish scholars from the late twelfth century on regularly produced anti-Christian polemical writings to help the Jews keep the faith under Christian pressure. Especially the writings of Abner/Alfonso caused an outpouring of Jewish responses.

While much of Jewish intellectual energy was put into this, there was much more going on besides defending Judaism against missionizing pressure. As we saw before, there is a notion that the 13th century was a second golden age for the Jews of Iberia. One of the things that needed to be done was to adjust to new language circumstances. We saw that the Jews of Spain under Muslim rule used Arabic both as their spoken and written language. This had meant easy access to the literature of the Muslim majority and rich Jewish literary activity in Judeo-Arabic. The transition to Christian rule brought some important cultural changes. Since the Jews stopped using the Arabic language in their day-to-day life, they lost access to the Arabic literature which had enriched the Jewish culture during the first golden age as well as to the Jewish literature that had been written in Judeo-Arabic. In Christian Spain, the everyday language for the Jews became the local Iberian dialect (forms of Spanish and Portuguese). The literary language of the Iberian Christians was Latin, a language largely inaccessible to the Jews of Spain. It was Hebrew, then, that became the Jews' literary language. As a result of this shift, the Jewish literature that had been written in the Judeo-Arabic world had to be translated into Hebrew. Secondly, medieval Hebrew had to be adapted to become the commonly used literary language of the Jews. Both of these tasks were successfully accomplished.

In a way, the Jews of thirteenth-century Spain were still strengthened by their legendary success of Islamic Spain. At the same time, they were stimulated by the vibrant culture of western Christendom. These two stimuli resulted in heightened Jewish creativity in different areas. Talmudic and biblical studies were still the central focus of Jewish studies, and important commentaries on both Bible and Talmud were produced. We already saw Rabbi Moses ben Nahman who represented the Jewish community during the 1263 Barcelona disputation. As mentioned earlier, Nahmanides followed up with a series of writings to instill the notion that the Jewish reading of Scripture was accurate, that Jewish moral standards were far superior from Christian morals, and that the suffering of Jews by no means indicated Divine rejection. Nahmanides was also a major commentator of Talmud and Bible. His comments on the Talmud were the beginning of a new era in Spanish Jewish Talmud study. His commentary on the Pentateuch has been studied in Jewish schools from the thirteenth until the present day. Both commentaries show the author's expertise on prior Jewish sources and his erudite literary style. The same beautiful style in Nahmanides' account of the Barcelona disputation is found in his biblical commentary.

Interest in philosophy was a major Jewish legacy inherited from Islamic Spain. However, during the Middle Ages, occupying oneself with philosophy was controversial in all three monotheistic communities. Many believed that philosophic thought, which came to the West from the Greeks, was incompatible with religious truths and could lead believers astray, or at least it would dilute the Islamic, Christian and Jewish doctrines. Defenders of philosophy, of course, believed that philosophical and religious truths were necessarily compatible as they both had the same ultimate source: God. At the same time, a religious tradition that does not wrestle with philosophical questions is in danger of becoming outdated and of losing followers.

For many medieval Jews, the study of philosophy was inseparable from one central figure: Rabbi Moses ben Maimon. "Maimonides" grew up within the Jewish culture of Islamic Spain and later relocated to Egypt. Within a few decades after his death, Maimonides writings had already sparked serious controversy which initially started in the towns of southern France. Soon, the dispute spread to the Jewish communities of Spain where pro- and anti-Maimonidean parties developed. Interestingly, here too, Rabbi Moses ben Nahman played a decisive role. He took on a moderate position, acknowledging the validity as well as the dangers of a philosophic study. To maximize its gains while minimizing the dangers, he set limitations on the study of philosophy.

The commitment to the study of philosophy implies that some Jews were not satisfied anymore with the received religious traditions and were now looking for different avenues to satisfy their religious commitments. Besides philosophy, another path that was taken during the late 12th and into the 13th century was mystical speculation. This mystical speculation constituted an effort to recognize the deeper truths hidden behind what one sees on the surface of existence as well as of Scripture. While mythical inclinations are clear in the literature of the Jews from biblical times down through the Middle Ages and beyond, in our period, these inclinations intensified and slowly turned into movements.

The first signs of this new mystical inclination emerged in southern France toward the end of the 12th century. As seen before, the general culture of religious searching in southern France made the area an appropriate venue for the new Jewish mysticism. Quickly, the interest found a home in Catalonia as well, then spread westward towards Castile. It is striking how quickly this new impulse matured. By the end of the 13th century, the new inclination had produced the great classic of Jewish mystical literature, the *Zohar (The Book of Illumination)*. Written purposely in archaic Aramaic, it presents itself as the work of a great second-century rabbi of Roman Palestine, the book reflects the teachings of Spanish kabbalists who sought to uncover the secrets that lie hidden behind the surface of reality.

The Christian environment is certainly relevant for this new Jewish mysticism. While philosophy tends to stress the distance between humans and God, one major concern of mysticism is how to narrow this distance. For the Jews of thirteenth-century Spain, this issue was especially disturbing. The traditional Christian emphasis on different divine forces (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) as well as on the

intercessory role of Mary, raised problems for Jews. On the one hand, Jewish polemicists were eager to attack beliefs in multiple forces within the divine. But at the same time, some Jews certainly were attracted to the idea of a responsive God as well as to a feminine (motherly) force. The new Jewish mystical movements developed a complex idea of God, consisting of ten "*sefirot*" or interacting divine forces. The interaction between God and humans now became deeper and more intimate, which thereby offered an answer to Christianity. At the same time however, Jewish mystics portrayed Christianity as a distorted view of the Divine and of the relationship between God and humankind.

Spanish Jews lived under Muslim rule during the first "Golden Age," which came to an end when Christians reconquered parts of Muslim Spain, while the remaining regions fell to the rule of the Almoravides and the Almohades. The second "Golden Age" took place under Christian rule and ended during the fourteenth century, a period marked by demographic and economic disasters that affected all of Europe, exacerbated by the bubonic plague. The Jews of Spain suffered from this crisis both in direct and indirect ways. In a direct way – just like other communities – they suffered from the plague physically as well as from the economic and political decline. Indirectly, they suffered additionally from Christian allegations that they had created the plague out of anti-Christian hostility.

The crisis of 1348-1349 was for the Jews of Iberia a prelude of a far greater tragedy. Starting in the late 1370s, a preacher named Ferrand Martinez set up the people against the Jews. He described the supposed wickedness of the Jews in explosive hate speech and called for anti-Jewish actions that went much further than what the Church would allow. As the result of the recent death of the king of Castile and a very young successor, the government was extremely weak which allowed for a breakdown of law and order. The storm broke out in Seville, in June of 1391. The Jewish neighborhood was destroyed, the synagogue was turned into a church, many Jews were killed, and other had agreed to be baptized and had thereby saved their lives. Soon, the attacks spread from Seville to Aragon. The royal authorities tried hard to stop the anti-Jewish agitation and violence, but without success.

When the summer of 1391 was over, the Jewish communities of Castile and Aragon lay in shambles. Jewish quarters had disappeared, synagogues were gone, thousands of Jews were killed, and many more had converted to Christianity to remain alive. The conversions of 1391 constituted the largest loss by the Jewish communities in medieval western Christendom ever. The remaining Jews were left in shock and desperately tried to find an explanation for how this could have happened. Many Spanish Jews explained that the tragedy was related to an ongoing cultural dispute within Judaism (namely that of philosophy versus tradition). The main cause for so many Jews to give up their faith under pressure was the study and embrace of philosophy. Philosophic teaching had weakened the faith of the Jews in Spain and had made them vulnerable to the enticement of Christianity (or so it was popularly believed). A number of historians who observed the contrast with the events in the Rhineland during the First Crusade (1096) confirmed this allegation. The Jews of the Rhineland who were not corrupted by philosophy had responded to their attackers with a massive outburst of martyrdom, while the Jews of Spain, weakened by their flirtation with philosophy, broke down in the face of the violence of 1391.

These explanations for the conversions of 1391 are overly simplistic. The differences between the events of 1096 and 1391 are far more than just the influence of philosophy. The two Jewish communities were radically different. The 1096 Rhineland Jews were a relatively new and small community that was socially rather isolated from its environment. On the other hand, the Spanish Jews of 1391 were a well-established and large community, reasonably well-integrated in the world around them. Moreover, the two attacks were quite different. The assault on the Rhineland Jews was an outgrowth of religious excitement among Christians who expected a messianic millennium. The attack was in the name of the Christian faith, and the response was to resist in the name of Judaism. To die for the Jewish faith was a spiritual victory. However, for the Spanish Jews in 1391, the attacks resulted from social, economic and ethnical resentment. Becoming a martyr in such cases made not much sense. Finally, the study of philosophy may have weakened the commitment to Judaism to some extent, but a century-and-a-half of intense Christian missionizing did much more in undermining that commitment. The Christians had emphasized that proof of Christianity's truth was found in it being prosperous and successful, and on the other hand, in Jewish suffering. The disaster of 1391 added power to that claim. Jews, dumbfounded by this tragedy, had to grapple with the interpretation that Christians attached to it.

The conversions of 1391 left both the Jews and the Christians with serious problems. Naturally, the losses, both through death and – especially – through conversion, brought about a state of despair among the surviving Spanish Jews. In addition, the conversions provided a new argument for Christian missionaries who could now use the many converts as an argument: Who would seriously claim that all these converts, many of whom had been respected members of the Jewish community, had sinned? Was it not more likely that those who remained Jewish were mistaken instead? With so many converts around, conversion had gained respectability.

The Church was aware of the disastrous situation within the Jewish community and put even more pressure on the Jews. In 1431, the Church organized another disputation in Tortosa. Here too, the Christian spokesman was a former Jew named Joshua ha-Lorki who had adopted the name Hieronymus of Sancta Fide. Hieronymus was more educated in Judaism than Friar Paul had been in the thirteenth century, even though his way of argumentation started exactly in the same way. Hieronymus' strategy was to demonstrate that the rabbinic sources acknowledged that the Messiah had already come. Looking at history and at the world at large, this could only mean that Jesus was the promised Messiah. The disputation of Tortosa was much longer, much more closely monitored, and was far more successful than the one in Barcelona. As a result, a sizeable number of Jews converted to Christianity.

Remarkably, the Jewish communities of Spain were able to rebuild themselves. While some had disappeared forever, many were slowly rebuilt over the course of the 15th century. The leaders of the Jewish communities all joined forces to analyze and correct all the circumstances that had led the disaster and that could be improved. They limited extravagant Jewish behavior that could cause Christian envy and hostility, the community tax, which might have fed Jewish resentment, was restructured, and the Jewish school system, key to the continuation of Jewish identity, was reformed. The achievements were impressive, and the Jewish community leaders received support from their traditional allies, the monarchs of Aragon and Castile. Despite all the difficulties, during the 15th century, there were – once again – functioning Jewish communities throughout Spain.

While the Jews of Spain faced difficult obstacles before 1391, the problems created by these massive conversions were just as much a challenge for the Christians. Despite the successful conversion of Jews, the reality of large-scale conversion led to many difficulties. At one level the problems were social. The Christians of Spain suddenly had to deal with a new Christian population, people who had always been Jewish and had now suddenly become part of the Christian community. Social acceptance of these newcomers was far from easy. In many cases, they lived in the same neighborhoods they had previously lived in as Jews and worked in the same trades. They often still had their social and family connections within the now-converted (Jewish) population. Thus, the "Old Christians" sometimes found it hard to change their attitudes towards their "New Christian" neighbors. Moreover, in some instances the newly converted quickly moved into economic and political positions that had not been open to them before. This evoked the same animosity as occurs in other situations when newcomers enter formerly closed markets as competitors. Many Spanish Old Christians avoided contact with the newly christianized.

These new terms 'Old Christians' and 'New Christians' made no sense in theory as the newly converted were theoretically fully Christian. Nonetheless, this terminology did emerge and soon acquired a racist connotation. Spaniards started to embrace notions of blood purity which meant coming from a long family line of Christians. By the middle of the 15th century, a separate 'New Christian' population had class had emerged and began to receive the same kind of hatred that had previously been directed at the Jews, even including widespread incidents of violence.

Besides the problem of social integration there were also religious issues. The first was determining whether the conversions were valid of those who had been made to embrace Christianity by force. Since Christianity had traditionally prohibited forced conversion and had promised Jews that they would not be forced to convert, many of those who had accepted baptism had assumed that their conversion was meaningless and that they could go back to Judaism after things returned to normal. However, the teachings of the Catholic Church on forced conversion had become more complicated. The Church now distinguished between two levels of coercion: There was absolute force, where the person had no alternative but to convert, and there was conditional force, where the person's will could still be used to some extent. Conversion under absolute force was meaningless and invalid, but this was a case of conditional force as the Jews still had a choice between baptism or death. Since the converts had willingly made a choice, this kind of conversion was even though prohibited nonetheless valid. Therefore, the conversion that Jews underwent in 1391, although viewed as bad and forbidden, were valid and could not be reversed.

The converts of 1391 consisted several sub-groups. For some, the violence had been the last straw that pushed them into the Christian camp. These converts had decided to become part of Christianity. At the same time, there were Jews who had intended to stay Jewish and who had assumed that their conversion would be invalid. Because of this, they were trapped in a Christian identity that they had not wanted. Finally, there was also a group of Jews who, did no longer believe in the Jewish religion and therefore could not bring themselves to die for it. At the same time, such skeptics were also unlikely to accept the teachings of Christianity as they had been disbelievers from the beginning. Integrating the first group would be hard, merely because of their numbers. But the second and third

groups would bring extreme difficulty for those who wanted to turn the new converts into true Christians.

Within the Spanish Church, different options were suggested as to what was the best way to deal with the large and problematic group of the new converters. One group within the Spanish Church recommended loving acceptance, careful instruction, and patience. This part of the Church argued for a long-term solution to the problem of the converts, acknowledging that changing one's religious identity is a complex process. Another group within the Church saw the problem in a more straightforward manner. No matter the circumstances, Christians who failed in their obligations, either in belief or in practice, could not be tolerated. These Christians were simply breaking the law; in the language of the Church, they were heretics. The crime of heresy had long been viewed as a threat to the Church and to Christian society. To effectively deal with this crime, effective methods that had been available must be used. The most important instrument against heresy was the inquisition.

The word inquisition has frightening associations. In the Middle Ages, the inquisition was a religious, "ecclesiastical" court (which means, run by the Church) that had a unique set of judiciary tools to eradicate heresy. Such special courts had become prominent in the twelfth century with the outbreak of heresy in southern France. Because heresy was viewed as extremely dangerous, in order to eradicate it, the inquisitorial courts were allowed to use torture to obtain evidence and to hide the identity of those who reported suspected heretics. In the fifteenth century, these procedures had become a prominent part of the inquisition. Also, the special mission of the inquisitorial courts (identifying and destroying heresy) gave them a position of extraordinary power.

In every place where the inquisitorial court started their process, they first allowed those guilty of heresy to come forward and confess. A series of punishment would then follow, but most importantly, the court was able to gather information from the confessor about others who were doing the same. As a result, not only were they able to capture the person who confessed, they also gathered records of information about additional people who were involved in heretic activity.

After this initial phase, the court would urge all the people to report any evidence of heresy. This evidence was carefully recorded, and the names of the witnesses were kept secret. Of course, such protection of identity may have encouraged false testimonies, but the punishment for false information was severe. Historians still debate to what extent false information was given to the inquisition. The accused heretics were interrogated and often tortured. Historians also have different opinions about the extent to which false confessions were given. The goal of all this was confession on the part of the heretics and their return to the accepted teachings of the Church. Those who were believed guilty of heresy but who were unwilling to confess were considered the most dangerous and were burned to death in public ceremonies called auto-da-fé (meaning, act of faith) to instill fear and discipline among the population.

In fifteenth-century Spain, the vast majority of heretics were accused of 'judaizing', which means returning to their former Jewish roots, practices, and beliefs. As we saw before, there were some New Christians who had been forced into Christianity. Others had been non-believing Jews who

turned into non-believing Christians. And some of those who had fully embraced their new Christian identity were disappointed by the unwelcoming attitude of their Christian neighbors. Therefore, backsliding into Jewish practices and beliefs was certainly a reality. However, how widespread this 'judaizing' phenomenon in reality was, is again a matter of dispute.

All these inquisitorial procedures only started in Spain in the 15th century. Most interesting are the "signs of heresy" that the inquisition looked for. Christians were encouraged to report their neighbors if they noticed certain things such as them cleaning up their homes on Friday afternoons, their chimneys not producing smoke on Saturdays, not eating certain foods, or not eating at all during a specific day in early fall. These behaviors were possible indications of them reverting to their previous Jewish behavior and needed to be reported to the court. Those who were brought to the court included a variety of suspects, including both commoners and people in high places in both worldly circles and within the Church. The special status of the inquisitorial courts made them immune to intervention from the authorities.

As the investigations carried out by the courts continued into the 1480s, there was increasing evidence of New Christians reverting to Jewish behavior. The fear emerged spread that the inquisitorial courts would never be able to control the crimes of heresy and contain the dangers that it posed to the Christian society. The notion was increasingly propagated that a major cause of the backsliding was the presence of the large Jewish population on the Iberian peninsula and the ongoing connections between the New Christians and their Jewish former friends and neighbors. The solution proposed for this heresy problem was to permanently eliminate all contact with the Jews through expulsion of the Jewish community, and then to relentlessly focus on purifying the New Christian community, now deprived of their immediate connections to Judaism.

The suggestion of expulsion is connected to some prior elements of reality and theory. In the seventh century, there had been an expulsion by the Visigoths of Jews from the Iberian peninsula, of which no specific details were known. More recently, the Jews had been expelled from England and France. The expulsion in England occurred in 1290, whereas the expulsions in France occurred once in 1306, and again at the end of the 14th century. These well-known precedents, along with many smaller and lesser-known ones, had not been whimsical decisions. The basis for the expulsions lay in the fundamental theory of the Church previously discussed: Jews were allowed a place in Christian society only if they did not bring harm to their Christian hosts. The expulsions that had happened in England and France was because of Jews' lending money against interest. This was considered harmful and incurable, and served as grounds for the expulsions. In 15th century Spain, people started to argue that Jews were harming Christian society through their very presence and their encouragement of backsliding among the New Christians. This harmful effect of Jewish presence was presented served as grounds for expulsion.

Of course, the Church needed to win the backing of the secular authorities to have the Jews expelled. As noted, the kings of Aragon and Castile had long engaged in complex balancing act: benefitting from the usefulness of the Jews and at the same time dealing with the pressures of the

Church, the resentments of the lower nobility, and the anti-Jewish attitude of the urban population. As the end of the 15th century approached, major developments of the royal scene took place. The first was the marriage in 1469 of Isabella, heiress to the crown of Castile, and Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Aragon. In 1474, the couple became rulers of Castile; In 1497, they attained power in Aragon. Isabella and Ferdinand were energetic and capable; they immediately started to reform the government in both Castile and Aragon. Being highly committed to the centralization of authority, a central goal was to allocate as much power as possible to the throne. Ferdinand and Isabella were at the same time committed to achieving uniformity on the peninsula and within Christian society. They were determined to uproot the last remnants of Muslim power on the peninsula, and in 1492, they were successful in doing so. They were also committed to destroying heresy within Christian society, and they became passionate supporters of the Spanish Inquisition. Eventually, they became convinced that the removal of Jews was essential to the destruction of heresy and necessary for creating a homogeneous orthodox Christian society in their realms. This conviction was realized in 1492, ending a long and esteemed history of the Jews on the Iberian peninsula.

The Jews expelled from Castile and Aragon had very few options. England and France were closed to them. Large numbers of Jews moved to Portugal, where they were initially welcome. However, the desire to establish a marriage alliance between Portugal and Castile-Aragon led to the Spanish demand for expulsion from Portugal as well. In 1497, the result was a bizarre situation: There was an order of expulsion from Portugal, but all possibilities to leave the country were blocked. This resulted in a de facto forced conversion of all Jews in Portugal.

Italy remained the only solution within for the western Christian world. But the possibilities there were slim, as we will see later. For most of those expelled from the Iberian Peninsula who were fortunate enough to get out, the most realistic option lay in the Turkish Empire which welcomed the forced Jewish émigrés. Old Jewish centers in the Middle East became home to the Iberian Jews who settled there with a sense of business, spiritual superiority, and pride in keeping their own (Spanish) language and culture. The extent to which the Sephardic element became dominant within among mixed Jewish population is reflected in the fact that these old Jewish communities eventually became known as Sephardic, largely erasing the older Jewish element within the area.

In 16th century Turkey, a descendant of the exiled Jews reflected on the origins of his community. Solomon ibn Verga tells that the roots of Spanish Jews went all the way back to the 6th century BCE, the time of the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians. According to Ibn Verga, the Babylonian king needed assistance and called upon the king of Spain. After he had conquered Jerusalem, the king of Babylonia offered his Spanish ally to pick the reward of his choice. The king of Spain chose the Jews of Jerusalem's finest neighborhood and took them back to the Iberian peninsula. As history, the story is absurd. But as a reflection of the Sephardic sense of belonging on the Iberian peninsula, it is precious, as it shows the Spanish-Jewish sense of aristocracy, of descent from the Jews of the noblest neighborhood of ancient Jerusalem, and their cultural superiority in their new surroundings.