

The Jews in the Medieval Arabic-Speaking World

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Until the mid-twentieth century, approximately one million Jews lived in the Arabic-speaking countries extending from Iraq in the East to Morocco in the West. Today barely four thousand remain, and over half of these are in a single country – Morocco. Another thousand are in Tunisia, and a few hundred are scattered in Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. Many of these Jewish communities had an historical presence that dated back to Antiquity, before most of these countries were in fact Arab. In the Arabian Peninsula itself, Jews were there many centuries before the birth of Islam.

During the Middle Ages, the overwhelming majority of world Jewry lived in the Muslim world, which stretched from Spain and Morocco in the West to the borders of India and China in the East. It was there that many aspects of Judaism as a religious civilization – liturgy, law, and theology – were formulated, codified, and disseminated throughout the Diaspora. Under the Judeo-Arabic symbiosis, Jewish philosophy was created, and Jews took part in the economic and intellectual life of the medieval Islamic *oikoumene* (or *ecumene*) on a scale unprecedented until the modern era. Hebrew language and literature underwent its most important revival since the biblical period and prior to the Haskalah (Jewish Enlightenment) and the emergence of Modern Hebrew. In medieval north Africa and Islamic Spain, the sciences of Hebrew grammar, lexicography, and the great tradition of Sephardi Hebrew poetry using rhymes and meters adapted from Arabic prosody were created. It was also in the medieval Arab-speaking world that Karaism, the most important sectarian movement since Late Antiquity, appeared. Despite its relatively small number of adherents, the Karaite movement had a profound impact as a catalyst upon majoritarian Rabbanite Judaism.

Today, in the twenty-first century, most of the Jews who emigrated from the Arab lands now reside in the State of Israel where they and their descendants

constitute nearly half of its Jewish population. After Israel, the largest number settled in France, which had been the colonial power in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Syria, and which had played a primary modernizing role for Jews in other major Arab countries as well, such as Egypt and Iraq, through the influence of the Alliance Israélite Universelle educational network. The rest of the émigrés and their posterity are scattered in various Western European countries, the Americas, and Australia.

The history of Jews in the Arabic-speaking world is, in a very real sense, primarily the history of the Jews under Islamic rule from the birth of the last of the three great monotheistic faiths in the seventh century all the way to modern times.

Jews in Arabia at the Dawn of Islam

Although all the attempts by scholars, such as Reinhart Dozy, D. S. Margoliouth, Charles Torrey, and Yisra'el Ben Ze'ev, to reconstruct the history of the Jews of Arabia prior to the founding of Islam have been sheer speculation, it seems clear that there had been a Jewish presence in Yemen since biblical times and in the oasis communities of the Hijaz since the late Second Temple period. By the time Muhammad was born, around 571 CE, Jews constituted a familiar and well-integrated element in the population, speaking Arabic, organized into clans and tribes, and sharing in the rugged social ethos of *muruwwa* (manly virtues), celebrated by the poets of the period, including Jewish ones such as al-Samaw'al Ibn 'Adiya' (fl. mid-sixth century). The mainly pagan Arab society was aware of distinctive Jewish religious practices and probably unconsciously absorbed some Jewish (and Christian) religious and ethical notions and midrashic lore which appear in the Qur'an and early Muslim traditions. In Yemen, Jewish influence was so great that, for a short time, the royal house of the Himyarite Kingdom converted to Judaism under Yusuf Dhu Nuwas, who reigned around 517–525.

Muhammad, a merchant from Mecca, was one of those Arabs who were influenced by Jews and Christians, most likely other merchants who acted as amateur missionaries. Hearing them preach about one God, moral conduct, a sacred revealed book, and an approaching Last Judgment, all made even more powerful with picturesque homiletic tales of the prophets of old, he came to the profound conclusion that the one true God had revealed His message to different peoples at different times in their own language, and he wondered why his people had been left in darkness. His question was answered one night when, in a vision, the angel Gabriel appeared and revealed what was to be the first of the many revelations that came to comprise the Qur'an, the Muslim scripture. Many of the revelations that followed mentioned the Children of Israel and the Christians as confirming the divine message that he was now receiving. He was probably encouraged by Jews and Christians who came through Mecca on business or who

attended nearby markets and fairs. But, in 622, when Muhammad had to leave his native town due to intense opposition from its pagan elite and move to the oasis community of Medina some 250 miles to the north, he encountered opposition from the established Jewish community there, and, to his chagrin, rather than confirming the truth of his revelations, the local Jews contradicted what he claimed and ridiculed what appeared to them to be egregious errors in his versions of biblical and midrashic lore. Since he knew with the conviction of a true believer that his revelations were true, he came to the conclusion that although the Jews, as People of the Book (Ar. *ahl al-kitab*) were originally vouchsafed a genuine divine message, that it had been corrupted over time, and the belief that Jews (and also the Christians) had tampered with (Ar. *tahrif*), made substitutions (Ar. *tabdil*), and altered (Ar. *taghyir*) their Scriptures became an article of later Islamic dogma. He may already have heard the Christian accusation that the Jews had corrupted the biblical Hebrew text. This belief may also have been fostered by his first Jewish convert to Islam, ‘Abd Allah Ibn Salam, who like many medieval Jewish apostates in both the Muslim and Christian worlds proved his zeal for his new religion by “exposing” the falsehoods of his former brethren, who concealed those scriptural passages that prophesied the coming of Muhammad or Jesus, as the case might be.

Muhammad’s change of attitude toward the Jews is reflected in the qur’anic verses revealed to him in Medina. Jews are associated with interconfessional strife and rivalry (Sura II:113). They believe that they alone are beloved of God (Sura V:18), and only they will achieve salvation (Sura II:111). They “pervert words from their meanings” (Sura IV: 44), and because of their disobedience to God and their many transgressions, “wretchedness and baseness were stamped upon them, and they were visited with wrath from Allah” (Sura II: 61).

In 624, after a victory against the pagans of Mecca, Muhammad found cause to expel the Banu Qaynuqa’, one of the three Jewish tribes in Medina. The following year, after a Muslim defeat at the hands of the Meccans, he accused the Jewish Banu Nadir of plotting against him and evicted them as well, confiscating their lands, and distributing them among his followers who had joined him from Mecca. In 627, he moved against the remaining Jewish tribe, the Banu Qurayza, accusing them of having sided with his enemies. This time he put all of the men to the sword – some six to nine hundred of them – and sold their women and children into slavery. The following year his forces advanced against the prosperous Jewish oasis of Khaybar 95 miles to the north, which had taken in the exiled Banu Nadir. After a fierce resistance the Khaybaris surrendered on terms. They agreed to pay the Umma, the Muslim community, half their annual date harvest in return for their personal safety and their right to retain their homes and property. Similar arrangements were concluded with the Jews of other oasis communities as well. The notion that the People of the Book should be fought until they paid tribute to the Umma received divine sanction in 630 when Muhammad received the qur’anic verse:

Fight against those to whom the Scriptures were given, who believe not in Allah nor in the Last Day, who forbid not what Allah and His apostle have forbidden, and follow not the true faith, until they pay tribute out of hand and are humbled. (Sura XI: 29)

During the last year of his life, when all of Arabia paid allegiance to him, Muhammad collected tribute (Ar. *jizya*) from the Jews and Christians in Yemen and communities along the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. This set the precedent for the practice that was followed in the coming decades when the Arabs poured out of Arabia and conquered a great empire inhabited by Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. Indeed the payment of a tributary tax to the Islamic state by its non-Muslim subjects became an institutionalized practice down to the nineteenth (and in some places, the twentieth) century.

Jews in the Arab Empire

The year after Muhammad's death in 632, Arab armies inspired by zeal for their new faith and a desire for booty invaded the neighboring territories of the Byzantine and Persian empires. Within less than two decades they had wrested Palestine, Syria, and Egypt from the Byzantines and Iraq and Iran from the Persians. In the Byzantine provinces, local Jews and Monophysite Christians viewed the Arabs as liberators from the persecutions of Emperor Heraclius and the Greek Orthodox Church. The Jews and Nestorians of the Persian Empire, which had been wracked by internal strife, also apparently welcomed the invaders. When the Muslims invaded Spain in 711, the Jews, who had been suffering persecution at the hands of the Visigoth rulers, joined forces with the Muslims and helped them to secure the conquered cities by manning garrisons.

The Muslim conquests fostered a powerful wave of messianic expectations among Jews in the seventh and eighth centuries. Apocalyptic works such as *Sefer Eliyahu* (The Book of Elijah), *Nistarot shel Rabbi Shim'on Bar Yohay* (Secrets of R. Simeon Bar Yohay), and *Tefillat Rabbi Shim'on Bar Yohay* (Simeon Bar Yohay's Prayer) are among the few writings by Jews at this time. In these midrashim, the Arab conquests are viewed as a divine visitation upon the Jews' persecutors. In *Nistarot shel Rabbi Shim'on Bar Yohay*, the angel Metatron tells Bar Yohay not to fear because "the Holy One blessed be He, has only brought the Kingdom of Ishmael in order to save you from this wicked one."

The Muslim Arabs found themselves ruling over a vast empire inhabited by Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews. Falling back upon the precedent established by Muhammad in Arabia, they did not force their new subjects to convert to Islam since they were People of the Book. As long as they surrendered, accepted the suzerainty of the Umma, paid tribute – eventually regularized as a poll tax (*jizya*)

and land tax (*kharaḥ*) – and comported themselves with the demeanor of humbled subjects, they were entitled to be protégés (Ar. *ahl al-dhimma*) or dhimmis. As dhimmis, they were guaranteed protection of their lives and property, were permitted freedom of economic endeavor, freedom of worship within discreet boundaries, and were entitled to a great degree of autonomy in their internal communal affairs under their own religious and temporal authorities who were themselves recognized by the Islamic state. These were no minor concessions by medieval standards and gave rise to Islam's reputation for tolerance in later Jewish historiography.

The regulations governing the legal and social status of tolerated non-Muslims evolved over time and came to be stipulated in a document known as the Pact of 'Umar. It was a theoretical treaty between the dhimmi communities and Umma and was probably based in part on the surrender agreement between the second caliph 'Umar I (r. 634–644) and the Greek Patriarch of Jerusalem, Sophronios, in 639. The detailed version of the Pact in Islamic law books probably dates from nearly a century later during the caliphate of 'Umar II (r. 717–720). In addition to the canonical taxes, dhimmis were to comport themselves with humility in accordance with the qur'anic injunction. They were to give way before Muslims, rise in their presence, and never raise their hands against them. They were forbidden to bear arms, ride horses, and use regular saddles on their mounts. They were not to dress like Muslims or cut their hair like them. In the century immediately following the Islamic conquest, this stipulation on clothing merely meant the maintenance of the status quo, but with the evolution of a general Islamic fashion throughout the caliphate, the concept of differentiation (Ar. *ghiyar*) between Muslims and non-Muslims required the latter to wear identifying badges, usually a patch of cloth or specially dyed outer garments.

Certain provisions of the Pact of 'Umar such as quartering Muslim soldiers, providing military intelligence, and not harboring spies were enforced only in the early years of Arab military occupation and eventually fell into desuetude. Other stipulations, such as the ban on building dhimmi houses higher than Muslim homes, must have been added later when Muslims and non-Muslims lived side by side in the same towns. In the early years of the conquests, the Arabs settled mainly in their own encampments, separate from the native population centers. These camp towns eventually attracted dhimmis who came to provide goods and services to the conquerors and developed into new urban centers.

On the whole, Jews adapted well to the new order psychologically and economically. They had for a half a millennium already been a subject people, and their sages had given them a conception of Jewishness that was independent of land and sovereignty. The final redemption of the Jewish people would come in God's own time. The Islamic taxes upon dhimmis were no more, and perhaps even less, onerous than those under the Byzantines and Sassanians. Unlike the Christian world, Muslims held commerce in the highest respect since the founder of Islam was himself a merchant, and non-Muslims were not restricted in their occupations.

Again in contradistinction to Christendom, there were skilled Jewish artisans and craftsmen in the Islamic world from medieval to modern times. The harshest financial burdens fell upon the peasantry, and during the first century and a half of Islamic rule, Jews in the great population centers such as Bavel/Iraq completed the transition that had already begun in Talmudic times from an agrarian to a cosmopolitan way of life. The details of this process of transformation are not at all clear since, as noted above, there are very few written Jewish sources from this period, and Arab historians, who were writing in the century that followed, made only brief passing references to their non-Muslim subjects.

In addition to urbanization, Jews also underwent a process of Arabization. Arabic became the lingua franca of the caliphate and took the place of Aramaic and Greek which had served as the international languages of culture and administration throughout much of the Middle East and North Africa in previous centuries, only now across an even wider geographical expanse extending from Spain to the borders of India and China. By the tenth century, Arabic became not only the Jews' spoken vernacular, but their primary written language as well. Judeo-Arabic (Arabic in Hebrew characters) was used for everything from day-to-day correspondence to religious queries and Responsa, documents, biblical exegesis and other textual commentaries, philosophy and theology, and works on Hebrew grammar and lexicography. Only poetry was written almost exclusively in Hebrew, for reasons that will be made clear below.

The adoption of Arabic by most Jews was facilitated by several factors. Not least among these is the linguistic proximity of Arabic to Hebrew and Aramaic, all of which belong to the same Semitic language family. But there was also a psychological factor which probably facilitated the transition. Islam, like Judaism, is a strictly monotheistic, religious civilization that eschews religious iconography. Like Judaism, it is based upon an all-encompassing divine law, known as "The Path" (Ar. *shari'a*; Hebrew *halakha*) that is in part written and in part oral. Furthermore, Islam did not have the deep-seated theological hostility toward Judaism that Christianity did, and, in marked contrast to Christendom, Jews were not the only subjects who did not belong to the dominant faith, but shared their infidel status with the far more numerous Christians and Zoroastrians. Lastly, medieval Islamic civilization had a secular aspect in the domains of the arts, music, commerce, science, and philosophy, and even administration that was absent from the clerical and feudal world of Latin Christian Europe.

Jewish Communal Organization in the Abbasid Caliphate

Very little is known about Jewish communal organization and governance during the first century of Muslim rule. By the late ninth century, a clear picture begins to emerge.

A new dynasty, the Abbasids, had taken over the caliphate in 750. Its center of gravity was in Iraq, rather than Syria, where the previous Umayyad rulers had been based. In 762, the second Abbasid caliph al-Mansur founded the new capital of Baghdad which soon became the great cosmopolitan cultural as well as political center of the empire. This was to have profound consequences for the Jews of the Islamic world. Iraq was the Arabic name for the land still called by Jews Babylonia (Hebrew *Bavel*), and Baghdad was near the site of ancient Babylon. It had been for centuries been the premier center of world Jewry. Two great seats of Jewish learning, the ancient academies, or yeshivot, of Sura and Pumbeditha, headed by the geonim (sing. *gaon*), were located there. The geonim were not only the directors of these institutions, but their chief scholars and ultimate arbiters of Jewish law. Their title was in fact an abbreviation for Resh Metivat Ge'on Ya'aqov (Head of the Academy of the Pride of Jacob). It was in these institutions that the Babylonian Talmud was redacted and eventually spread throughout the world to become the constitutional framework of Jewish life. Babylonian Jewry also boasted having at its head a putative descendant of the last king of Judah, who bore the title of exilarch (Aramaic *resh galuta*). Prior to the Arab conquest, he had served as the governor of the Jews in the Sassanian Empire. Following the conquest, he was accorded official recognition by the Muslim authorities, who similarly recognized the catholicos as head of the Nestorian Christian community. With rise of the Abbasids, the exilarch was accorded considerable dignity at the caliphal court. The reason for this was twofold. The exilarch was a descendant of King David, whom Islam reveres as a prophet, and the new dynasty prided itself in its own descent from the Prophet Muhammad's uncle. Though primarily a figurehead, the exilarch held a unique status as a Jewish prince who was shown respect by Gentiles. He was thus a source of great self-esteem for all Jews and a living proof of Jacob's prophecy that "the scepter shall not depart from Judah" (Genesis 49:10). The Spanish traveler Benjamin of Tudela, who visited Baghdad in the second half of the twelfth century, describes with obvious pride and no little hyperbole the caliph's reception of the exilarch Daniel ben Hisday at court.

The exilarch served as an advisor for Jewish affairs at the caliphal court and probably also acted as an intercessor for his community, but his importance was mainly symbolic. It was the geonim who, as the interpreters of the Babylonian Talmud, occupied the highest rank of leadership among the Jews throughout the Islamic world. The authority of the geonim was based on their claim to be the sole possessors of the living, authoritative tradition of the oral Torah that went back to the rabbinic sages, the men of the Great Assembly, and ultimately back to Moses at Sinai. The exilarchs may have been royal figureheads, but, for most Jews, it was the geonim who "reigned" (Hebrew *malekhu*). Their legal decisions frequently bore the admonition: "This is the Halakah, and there is no moving from it." These legal decisions usually were issued in the form of responsa (Hebrew *teshuvot*) to queries (Hebrew *she'elot*) on law, ritual, and textual exegesis sent together with donations by the Jewish communities of the wider Islamic Diaspora. The flow of correspondence back and forth was facilitated by a network of representatives of the yeshivot

in the major Jewish population centers. Because the Responsa of the geonim were binding legal precedents, they were often recopied and collected along the way to their final destination. The representatives were themselves frequently alumni of the yeshivot or their descendants, as for example, the Ibn 'Awkals in Fustat (Old Cairo) or the Ibn Shahins in Qayrawan (Tunisia).

In addition to the two Babylonian academies, there was a third yeshiva in the Land of Israel. This Tiberian academy considered itself a direct continuation of the ancient Sanhedrin. In the mid-tenth century, it relocated to Jerusalem. This yeshiva propagated the so-called Jerusalem Talmud, which never came to have the universal authority of the Babylonian Talmud and eventually was regarded as an ancillary legal source. The Palestinian rite had been dominant in the provinces of the Byzantine Empire. However, with the freedom of movement that took place in the centuries following the Muslim conquest, in most major towns and cities in the Islamic Mediterranean lands, there were to be found two congregations – Babylonian and Palestinian. Despite their differences in points of law and custom, they all recognized each other's orthodoxy.

By the twelfth century, the Babylonian rite with local variations became dominant throughout the entire Jewish world. This was primarily due to the activism, creativity, and intellectual prowess of the Babylonian geonim of the ninth through eleventh centuries. Rav Amram Gaon in the second half of the ninth century and Sa'adya Gaon in the first half of the tenth produced the comprehensive first prayer books which went a long way to standardizing the liturgy and general ritual practice. Sa'adya's prayer book was particular masterpiece which in addition to the prayers provided the worshiper with a complete introduction to the subject of liturgy, as well as helpful notes to the service and to individual prayers. All of this explanatory matter was in Judeo-Arabic to make it easily understandable to the layman.

Sectarian and Freethinking Challenge

Not all Jews accepted the authority of the geonim and the Talmudic form of Judaism. The most serious challenge came from the Karaite schism. This "protestant" movement denied the authenticity of the rabbinic oral tradition and accepted only the Bible as the basis for Jewish law. The name of the sect, which in Hebrew is Kara'im, seems to mean "Bible readers," although it might also be a translation of the Arabic term *da'i*, which means "one who calls to the true faith" (i.e., a missionary). The origins of the movement are attributed to the ascetic Anan ben David, in the second half of the eighth century, who wrote a legal code in Aramaic entitled *The Book of Commandments (Sefer ha-Mitzvot)*. Anan's legal interpretations are consistently harsher and more restrictive than normative rabbinic tradition. And his biblical literalism and his asceticism have parallels with the sects of the Second Temple period such as the Sadducees and the Essenes. However, it is

not clear whether there is any direct connection to these earlier groups or to their possible remnants that may still have existed in his time.

Full-blown Karaism came into being in the ninth and early tenth century under the leadership of men like Benjamin al-Nehawandi, who was second in later Karaite tradition only to Anan, and Daniel al-Qumisi. Both Benjamin and Daniel left a lasting influence on the movement's theology and exegetic methodology, and both appear to have been influenced by the Muslim Mu'tazilite rational theologians. Benjamin wrote two important legal works in Hebrew, a book of commandments and a book of laws (*Sefer ha-Dinim*). Daniel placed a high priority on settlement in the Holy Land, which he himself did, and issued a passionate call for his brethren in the Diaspora to join him in lamenting the destruction of the Temple and petitioning God for its restoration.

Because Karaism focused upon reading and interpreting the Biblical text, its scholars in the tenth and eleventh centuries were pioneers in the fields of Hebrew grammar and lexicography. These included Salmon ben Jeroham, Japheth ben Eli, Jeshua ben Judah, David ben Abraham al-Fasi, and Jacob al-Qirqisani. The latter produced a great Judeo-Arabic encyclopedia in 937, *The Book of Lights and Watch-towers* (*Kitab al-Anwar wal-Maraqib*) which includes law, theology, exegesis, and many other topics. It is also our primary source on Jewish sectarianism from early Islamic times to his own day.

The Karaite scholars appear to have been the first Jewish theologians since Hellenistic times to put the tools of Greek philosophy in the service of religion. They did so at a time of great intellectual ferment when the classics of Greek thought were being translated into Arabic and adopted by Muslim rationalist theologians, and they addressed many of the same issues as the latter, such as anthropomorphism, theodicy, free will, the nature of the soul, and the conflict of science and scripture.

The Karaites were not the only Jews to challenge mainstream rabbinical Judaism. In the mid-ninth century, a Jewish freethinker named Hiwi al-Balkhi, who, like his freethinking counterparts among Muslims, called into question the validity of Scripture itself, wrote a book, no longer extant, containing two hundred critiques of the inconsistencies, irrationality, gross injustices, and offenses against common sense in the Bible.

The challenges posed by the Karaites, Jewish freethinkers, and Muslim polemicists who were quick to take up the arguments of these critics against mainstream Judaism provided the impetus for a creative response from the rabbinical Jewish leaders that ensured the ultimate triumph of their brand of Judaism.

Sa'adya Gaon and the Triumph of Rabbinic Judaism

The first figure to take up the cudgel in defense of traditional rabbinic Judaism was Sa'adya Gaon (882–942). While still in his early twenties, even before he became

the head of the Sura academy, he wrote a devastating critique of Karaism, entitled *The Book of Response against Anan* (*Kitab al-Radd 'ala 'Anan*). Sa'adya met the challenges raised by the Karaites, freethinkers like Hiwi, and the Muslim polemicists, by co-opting many of their dialectic techniques and arguments, and he did so in Arabic, in order to reach the educated layman. He produced the first prayer book with instructions and explanations in Arabic. He also composed the first systematic theology of Judaism, *The Book of Doctrines and Beliefs* (*Kitab al-Amanat wal-I'tiqadat*) which came to be known throughout the European Jewish world in its Hebrew translation as *Sefer ha-Emunot ve-De'ot*. Sa'adya also took on the challenges posed by Karaite scriptural exegesis by providing mainstream Jews with the same kinds of tools. He produced pioneering studies in Hebrew grammar and redacted a Hebrew–Arabic dictionary, the *Sefer ha-Agron*. He translated the Bible into Arabic, which he complemented with a rational, philologically grounded commentary. In addition to his *Responsa*, he wrote the first books devoted to discrete topics of Jewish law. His impact was so enormous that the later Andalusian exegete, Abraham ibn Ezra, dubbed him “the first spokesman in every instance,” and Maimonides, the supreme intellectual figure of all postbiblical Judaism, paid him the compliment, “Were it not for Sa'adya, the Torah might well have disappeared from within Israel.”

The Babylonian academies continued to have vigorous intellectual leadership over the next few generations following Sa'adya. Samuel ben Hophni (d. 1013), for example, who also served as gaon of Sura, produced some 65 Judeo-Arabic works on biblical exegesis, Talmud Halakah, and philosophy. Sherira Gaon (d. 1006) composed his famous Epistle on the history of the Babylonian yeshivot together with a chronology of the geonim. It also deals with the oral and written redaction of the Talmud, and it remains to this day one of the most important works of medieval Jewish historiography. Sherira's son and successor Hay Gaon, like Sa'adya and Ben Hophni wrote legal treatises in Judeo-Arabic and wrote a Hebrew–Arabic dictionary, *Kitab al-Hawi* (*The Comprehensive Book*).

Although the intellectual leadership of the Babylonian academies went into decline during the eleventh century, concomitant with the political decline of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, the triumph of rabbinical Judaism and the Talmud as its constitutional framework was by this time assured.

The Rise of Other Centers

Just as the caliphate had been undergoing a process of decentralization, which had begun in the late eighth century, the Jewish communities of the Islamic world also began to form semi-autonomous units, some of which became vibrant, creative centers of Jewish cultural life in the Babylonian tradition. We know a great deal about these communities both from the literary output of their scholars and literati

and from the enormous documentation of the so-called Cairo Geniza, a unique cache of manuscripts from the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo). What made this geniza different from all others is the sheer quantity of papers and parchments – some 250,000 items deposited over a millennium – and the fact that they included not merely the usual discarded religious texts, but every conceivable sort of secular writing – personal and official correspondence, communal and business records, court proceedings, and legal documents. The Cairo Geniza documents provide a detailed picture of Jewish life throughout the Islamic world, particularly within the new centers, and it sheds light on the relations between them.

Three principal Jewish communities had come into prominence by the tenth century – Ifriqiya (more or less synonymous with modern Tunisia), al-Andalus (Islamic Iberia), and Egypt. Each of these provinces had large Jewish populations and had been governed by autonomous or semi-autonomous rulers for well before the tenth century.

Ifriqiya

Ifriqiya was the first of these new centers to flourish. The heterodox Fatimids established a Shi‘ite countercaliphate there in 909, expanding almost immediately east and west. The Fatimids treated their dhimmi subjects with greater tolerance and leniency than was prescribed in orthodox Sunni Islam. They did not impose the canonical discriminatory tariffs and sumptuary laws for non-Muslims, and they had even fewer qualms about employing infidels in their civil service. They encouraged commerce and made Ifriqiya “the hub of the Mediterranean.” Jewish merchants became actively involved in the bustling trade that eventually extended from Iberia to India. Qayrawan, the leading metropolis of Ifriqiya and all North Africa, was not only a great Jewish commercial center, but throughout much of the tenth and eleventh centuries was the premier religious and intellectual Jewish center outside of Baghdad. The Sages of Qayrawan were singled out in Hebrew literature for their religious and secular scholarship. In the latter category, the most outstanding was the Neoplatonic philosopher and physician Isaac Israeli (d. 950). His Arabic works were studied in Hebrew and Latin translations for centuries in medieval and Renaissance Europe. His disciple Dunash ben Tamim (d. c. 960), in addition to being a philosopher and physician, wrote works on Hebrew grammar and philology and authored a commentary on the popular mystical treatise *The Book of Creation* (*Sefer ha-Yetzira*).

The Sages of Qayrawan’s religious prominence rested upon the two academies that were established in the late tenth century. One was founded by Jacob ibn Shahin (d. 1006/7) and the other by Hushiel ben Elhanan (d. early eleventh century). Both men were succeeded by their sons, Nissim ben Jacob and Elhanan ben Hushiel. Rabbenu Nissim was arguably the greatest of the Sages of Qayrawan.

He was the author of an important commentary on the Talmud and an enduring classic of Jewish literature, the entertaining and didactic *Book of Comfort*. Rav Hananel (known by the acronym RaH) wrote a commentary on the entire Babylonian Talmud which enjoyed wide circulation throughout Europe in the Middle Ages; excerpts of it are still preserved in the standard printed editions of the Talmud.

The Jews of Ifriqiya possessed a strong, hierarchal communal organization on the Babylonian model. The Baghdadi scholar Nathan ha-Bavli, who moved to Qayrawan sometime after 950, wrote an account of Baghdadi Jewry at the request of the local Jews, perhaps as a template of self-government to be emulated. In place of the exilarch, the recognized head of the Jewish community before the rulers was some distinguished personage who also served in the court in some capacity. Originally called Head of the Congregations (Rosh ha-Kehillot), as of 1015 he came to bear the illustrious title of Nagid, or Prince of the Diaspora. Although the Jews of Ifriqiya had their own institutions of higher learning and a Jewish representative at court, they continued to maintain close ties with the gaonic academies in Baghdad, sending contributions and exchanging correspondence. This, however, was not the case in the other new center of Jewish life that emerged during the same period in the breakaway caliphate established by the Umayyads in Iberia.

Al-Andalus (Sepharad)

Like Ifriqiya, the Jewish community in the Islamic Iberia, called al-Andalus in Arabic and Sepharad in Hebrew, became a prominent center of Jewish life and culture in the tenth century. The culture that evolved there was so unique that it came to be recalled in later Jewish collective memory and historiography as a “Golden Age” both for its intellectual and artistic creativity and for the high degree of Jewish acculturation and integration into the broader society, including political life.

The sudden flowering of Andalusian Jewry was in part a concomitant of the establishment of an independent Caliphate of Cordoba by the Umayyad emir ‘Abd al-Rahman III in 929 and the power, ambition, and influence of his Jewish courtier Hasday ibn Shaprut (d. 975). Hasday served ‘Abd al-Rahman and his successor al-Hakam II (r. 961–976) as physician, advisor, and diplomat, and because of his status at the caliphal court, Hasday was recognized as the nasi, or titular head of the Jewish community of the country. Hasday used his position to make al-Andalus a major center of Jewish life and culture. Under his leadership, Andalusian Jewry made a decisive break from the authority of the Babylonian yeshivot. The twelfth-century historian Abraham ibn Da’ud in his *Sefer ha-Qabbala* (The Book of Tradition) attributes this secession to the fortuitous arrival in Cordoba of the Italian scholar Moses ben Hanokh in 972 as the prisoner of Spanish pirates. Moses ben Hanokh established his own yeshiva in the capital and came to be recognized as Rav Rosh (chief scholar) throughout the caliphate. But it is clear, from both Jewish and Muslim

sources, that the moving force behind this independent policy was Hasday himself, who made a concerted effort to bring Jewish scholars and books from abroad.

Furthermore, Hasday was the progenitor of a new Jewish courtly culture, modeled upon that of the Islamic ruling elite. He patronized Jewish scholars and men of letters and hosted wine parties and literary gatherings (known as *moshavim* in Hebrew and *majalis* in Arabic) in his home, during which poets recited their latest compositions and scholars debated subjects ranging from biblical exegesis to Hebrew grammar. The major debates at Hasday's salon were those between the poets Menahem Ibn Saruq and Dunash Ben Labrat. Menahem was Hasday's personal secretary. In addition to being a poet, he was a philologist and author of the first Hebrew-Hebrew dictionary, known as *Ha-Mahberet*. Dunash, who had come from north Africa seeking Hasday's patronage, pioneered what became the standard for medieval Andalusian and later Sephardi poetry – the use of rhymes and meter in the Arabic style. He also introduced secular themes from Arabic poetry such as the celebration of nature, wine, and profane love, in addition to the traditionally Jewish liturgical ones.

Andalusian Jewry remained under the secular leadership of a nasi and the religious leadership of a rav rosh until the dissolution of the Umayyad caliphate in 1009, then al-Andalus broke up into numerous principalities known as the Taifa kingdoms. They were ruled by dynasties of different ethnicities – Arab, Berber, Slav, and native Islamized Iberians. Andalusian Jewry was now fragmented, and there was a good deal of movement from place to place. However, the very fragmentation of the country provided Jews with an unprecedented opportunity for government service, and there arose a conscious class of Jewish courtiers who served in positions well beyond those of the usual petty bureaucrats, court physicians, and purveyors who could be found in other Islamic countries of the period. They included administrators and royal advisors of high rank such as Abraham ibn Muhajir (d. c. 1100) in Seville and Yekuthiel ibn Hasan in Saragossa, who was assassinated in 1039 and mourned by the young poet Solomon ibn Gabirol in a famous lament that opens with the verse “Yekuthiel's days have come to an end/A sign the Heavens were created to pass away.”

The attainment of rank and political power became an ideal of the Jewish upper-class ethos. No office save that of the ruler himself seemed out of the reach of talented and ambitious Jewish courtiers, and no Jew rose closer to the pinnacles of power than Samuel ibn Naghrela, who became the chief minister in the Zirid Berber kingdom of Granada and a commander of its army in the field. He was the paragon of the Jewish courtier class and was held up as such for generations to come. In addition to being a patron of the arts and of secular and religious scholarship, as befitted a powerful Jewish courtier, he was himself one of the great masters of medieval Hebrew poetry. More than 1700 poems are attributed to him. He was also a grammarian and an outstanding Talmudic scholar who wrote the first significant collection of civil jurisprudence compiled in al-Andalus, entitled *Grand Halakah (Hilkhata Gavrata)*. He may also have written an introduction to

the Talmud (*Mevo le-Talmud*), although the attribution of this work to him has been questioned.

Around 1027, Ibn Naghrela took on the princely title of nagid, and henceforth became known for later generations as Samuel ha-Nagid. Though praised by Ibn Da'ud for his humility, he exhibited all the hauteur of his class, and in a poetic meditation he boasts of being "the David of my generation." A sycophantic Muslim poet in his entourage went so far as to suggest in what must have seemed a blasphemous panegyric that his fellow Muslims should kiss the Jewish vizier's hands as they would the black stone of the Kaaba, since he is the dispenser of happiness and largesse. The great Muslim scholar 'Ali ibn Hazm accused him of having written a treatise criticizing the Qur'an. However, such an act would have been beyond hubris in medieval Muslim lands and is probably a reflection of Ibn Hazm's virulent anti-dhimmi animus. Ibn Hazm himself admits to not having seen the offensive polemic, but only the insufficient response of another Muslim scholar.

Traditionally minded Muslims found the entire notion of dhimmis, and even more particularly Jews, in positions of authority over believers in the Taifa kingdoms to be an affront. Ibn Hazm warns the princes to "get away from this filthy, stinking, dirty crew beset with Allah's anger and malediction." In the ten years following Samuel ha-Nagid's death in 1056, anti-Jewish sentiment built up to boiling point. Perhaps the most vitriolic piece of rabble-rousing propaganda was a vitriolic poem by Abu Ishaq al-Albiri, that circulated widely, which called for the overthrow of Samuel's son and successor Jehoseph ha-Nagid. In his screed, al-Albiri advises the Zirid king not only to rid himself of his Jewish vizier whom he describes as a fat black ram ready for slaughter, but all the Jews of Granada, comparing them to rats who "munch and crunch" upon the wealth of the kingdom. Finally, Jehoseph was assassinated in a popular uprising on the Sabbath eve of December 30, 1066. His body was crucified upon the city's main gate, and a mob sacked the Jewish quarter, slaughtering its inhabitants and razing it to the ground. Although the Jewish quarter was reestablished sometime later by survivors and newcomers, it was destroyed again in 1090 when Granada was sacked by the invading Almoravids from north Africa.

The century following the uprising against Jehoseph ha-Nagid marked a lengthy twilight period for Andalusian Jewry, and although the Jewish elite in most cities maintained their refined lifestyles, their position was steadily eroding. The pressure of the Reconquista hardened anti-dhimmi sentiment among Muslims. The zealous Berber Almoravids who had come into Iberia to save what remained of al-Andalus from the advancing Christians only sharpened the polarization, and there was a progressive decline of Jews in the civil service. The peripheral figures that did remain in government office had none of the authority or prestige of the Ibn Naghrelas and their ilk. But Islamic Spain itself no longer enjoyed the power it once had.

Jewish culture still flourished. The great North African scholar Isaac al-Fasi (known as Rif, 1013–1103), who wrote the Talmud digest, *Hilkhot Rabbati* (Great Book of Laws), took over the yeshiva of Isaac ibn Ghiyyath (1038–1089) in Lucena around 1089, and the school continued as the premier institution of Jewish studies

under al-Fasi's disciple and successor Joseph ibn Migash (1077–1141). Judah ha-Levi (c. 1075–1141) was recognized in his own lifetime as the supreme laureate of Sephardi Hebrew poetry. His contemporary, Moses ibn Ezra (d. after 1138), also one of the great poets of medieval Spain, composed the great history of Hebrew poetry in al-Andalus, *Kitab al-Muhadara wa 'l-Mudakara* (Book of Conversation and Discussion), in which he outlined the art of its prosody and rhetoric. When he went into exile in the less cultured Christian north after the Almoravid invasion, he complained in one poem that he felt “like a gentleman amongst savages/like a lion amongst apes and parrots.”

The anxieties of this twilight period kindled outbreaks of apocalyptic messianism. One such incident occurred in Cordoba sometime between 1110 and 1115 when a certain Ibn Arieh claimed to be the messiah. The rabbinic elite quickly stepped in and had him publicly flogged and excommunicated. Another wider outbreak of messianic expectation that overtook the Jewish communities in Spain and Morocco took place in 1130. Judah ha-Levi was among the disappointed enthusiasts when the year passed without the messiah's appearance. However, he recovered from his spiritual crisis with a new sense of religious certainty. He became an ardent proto-Zionist and composed a stirring cycle of poems voicing his yearning to return to the Land of Israel. He also composed at this time his philosophical dialogue, *The Kuzari*, which rejected the philosophical rationalism of the Andalusian Jewish elite and declared that all efforts to obtain rank and political power in the Diaspora were in vain and that a true Jewish life was possible only in Zion. Ha-Levi took his new convictions seriously and in the twilight of his life set out for the Holy Land, then under Crusader rule, where he died in July 1141.

Thirty-one years later, open Jewish life came to an abrupt end in most of al-Andalus, which came under the control of the fanatic, sectarian Almohads, who invaded from Morocco. The Almohads did not accept the Pact of 'Umar and the traditional Islamic notion of *dhimma*. Non-Muslims converted en masse. Those who could fled to the Christian kingdoms in the north, where they continued many aspects of Andalusian Jewish culture over succeeding generations and helped to transmit many masterpieces of Judeo-Arabic and Islamic scientific and philosophical culture in Hebrew and Latin translation to European Christendom and its Jewry. Some Andalusian Jews sought refuge in the more tolerant Islamic East, but most Jews in Spain and north Africa outwardly converted to Islam while practicing Judaism in secret. This was to be a forerunner of the later crypto-Jewish phenomenon in Christian Spain. The Maimonides family was among these crypto-Jews. Both Maimon ha-Dayyan and his son Moses tried to comfort the guilt-ridden converts and maintain their faith in clandestinely circulated pastoral letters, the *Epistle of Consolation (Iggeret ha-Nehama)* and the *Epistle on Forced Conversion (Iggeret ha-Shemad)*, and urged them if possible to escape to countries where they could return openly to Judaism, which they themselves eventually did in 1165, making their way first to Palestine and thence Egypt which was, as already noted, the other Jewish center that came into prominence as of the tenth century.

Egypt

Egyptian Jewry began to become important when the Fatimids moved in 971 from Ifriqiya into their newly founded capital of Cairo which they built alongside Fustat. Many north African Jews moved there along with them, and Egypt became the center of a thriving East–West commerce that extended from Iberia to India; it is clear from the Cairo Geniza documents that Jewish merchants played an active role in this international trade. In fact, Moses Maimonides' beloved younger brother, David, drowned in the Indian Ocean around 1176/7, forcing him to return to the practice of medicine to support himself and his brother's family. Maimonides served as court physician to the Qadi al-Fadil, the chief minister of the Ayyubid sultan Saladin, who supplanted the Fatimids in 1171. He became the Ra'is al-Yahud (Head of the Jews), also called nagid in Hebrew, and was succeeded in that office by his son Abraham and their direct descendants for the next three centuries. A prolific writer and the greatest legal and philosophical mind in postbiblical Jewish history, in Egypt Maimonides published, in addition to his scientific works, his philosophical chef d'oeuvre, the *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Dalalat al-Ha'irin*, known best by the title of its Hebrew translation *Moreh Nevukhim*) and his great legal code *Mishneh Torah*, his only work composed in Hebrew. He also produced an enormous corpus of over four hundred Responsa as chief Jewish legal authority in the country. Prior to Maimonides arrival in Egypt, the Jewish community had been noted for its financial importance, but not for its scholarship. It now became the leading intellectual center, rivaling Baghdad, arousing the ire of a number of Babylonian scholars, most notably the gaon Samuel ben 'Ali ibn al-Dastur, who wrote scathing critiques of Maimonides' works, and who in turn was dismissed by Maimonides as "a poor old man, truthfully an ignoramus in every respect." Maimonides' son Abraham spent much of his adult life defending his father's ideas.

Abraham Maimonides succeeded his father both as nagid and court physician as a youth of 17 or 18 in 1204. Like his father, he issued a substantial body of Responsa of which 130 have survived. An original thinker in his own right, he founded a pietist and mystic circle of followers who called themselves Hasidim, whose practices clearly influenced the Muslim Sufi mystics. His religious philosophy is set out in his magnum opus, *The Comprehensive Guide for the Servants of God* (Ar. *Kifayat al-'Abidin*). Abraham's descendants continued to write mystical treatises. However, Egypt no longer held its place as the intellectual center it had been under Moses and his son.

The Decline of the Later Middle Ages

The social, spiritual, and economic climate of Arabic-speaking lands of the Islamic world underwent a profound decline during the course of the thirteenth century.

The Reconquista, the Norman conquest of Sicily, two centuries of Crusader presence in the Levant, and the Mongol invasion which devastated Baghdad and brought an end to the Abbasid caliphate resulted in a more rigid and less tolerant Islam and a decline in the secular and humanistic tendencies of the earlier period. Jews, along with native Christians, became increasingly marginalized, living in overcrowded ghetto-like quarters, such as the Harat al-Yahud in many countries and the Mellah in Morocco. The discriminatory laws of *ghiyar* (differentiation) for non-Muslims were now rigorously enforced. In Mamluk Egypt, Jews had to wear yellow outer clothing and special neck chains when undressed in the public baths. In north Africa, where they were the only remaining dhimmis, they had to wear black or somber clothes in marked contrast to the white garments of Muslims, and, in Morocco, they had to walk barefoot through the streets of the imperial cities. Endemic disease and conversion also brought about a sharp demographic decline.

This state of affairs would only be reversed with the Ottoman conquest of much of the Middle East and part of north Africa between 1517 and 1535 and the influx of Sephardi exiles from Spain and Portugal, starting in 1492 and continuing throughout the sixteenth century as forced converts made their way into the Muslim world in order to return to the open practice of Judaism. The arrival of the Sephardim marked a veritable watershed in the history of the Jews of the Arabic-speaking and wider Muslim world, and infused new vitality – demographically, intellectually, and spiritually – into Islamicate Jewry, a culturally integral part of the Islamic world, yet not Muslim.

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