

WANING OF THE GOLDEN AGE OF SPAIN

12th CENTURY

The cultural life of Spanish Jewry reached its peak from the years 900-1200. It was at this time that Spanish Jewry began to produce remarkable and outstanding poets, philosophers, halachists, historians, grammarians, and moralists. Muslim scholars versed in poetry and grammar exerted great influence on Arabic-speaking Jews, greatly influencing their literary output. They also provided Jewish scholars with a great deal of important philosophic source material. The 10th-11th centuries produced such scholars, poets, and leaders as Shmuel HaNagid, Shlomo ibn Gabirol, and R. Yitzchak Alfasi, known as the Rif.

In general Moslem Spain provided a safe haven for the Jews who resided there. Even the beginning of the Christian Reconquest in 1085 did not significantly shake the equanimity of the Jews of central and southern Spain. The Moslems acted toward the Jews with a great measure of tolerance. While there were occasional attacks upon the Jews in various locations, they were usually short-lived and were restricted to specific towns or locales. Jewish noblemen, financiers, physicians, and counselors still remained the fixtures at the royal courts where they had served under the earlier Moslem rulers for centuries. Despite the initial shock over the successful Christian invasion and conquest of the north, life in Moslem Spain soon stabilized, and the Jewish population remained strong spiritually and materially. Sephardic Jewry in the 1100's still basked in the warm glow of the Golden Age.

The Abbasid Caliphate gradually foundered and fell due to Berber discontent. The armies that had conquered Spain originally had been composed mainly of Berber tribesmen, but after the conquest the Berbers were thrust to the background. The power and spoils were grabbed by the Arab aristocracy. This discontent festered until it found the Abbasid Caliphate weak enough to be toppled. In 1012 the Berbers revolted,

conquered Cordoba and massacred half of its inhabitants. The Spanish caliphate of Andalusia disintegrated and was replaced by twenty-three small city-states. In 1066 the rebellious Arabs and Berbers of Granada united, rebelled against the ruling King Habbus, and, in the process, massacred 4000 of the city's Jews who were perceived as being loyal to the king.

Soon after, in 1086, the Almoravids, a Berber dynasty who had seized power in Morocco, crossed the Mediterranean and conquered all of Moslem Spain. A period of open enmity and fierce persecution of the Jews soon followed. The Emir Yousuf, although not strictly religious himself, was persuaded to offer the Jews of his realm the choice between conversion to Islam or exile. An enormous bribe ultimately convinced him to change his stance. Eventually Jewish life settled down, and Jews reverted to their previous high standard of living. But the Jews had to continuously pay huge bribes to the Almoravids to maintain their safe status. Even with that, frequent individual outbursts of persecution and violence against the Jews continued, and a gradual movement of Jews from southern Moslem Spain to northern Christian Spain began to occur. The Almoravids remained in power until 1149, when they in turn were defeated by the Almohads, another Moorish dynasty. They, too, were fanatically dedicated to the propagation of Islam, and Jews again were given the option to choose between conversion and emigration. Many Jews fled. Others outwardly accepted the Moslem religion while secretly adhering to their faith. This sorry state continued for close to a century, while the power of the Almohads gradually waned. Thus the Golden Age of Spain for Spanish Jewry came to its inglorious end.

Golden Age for Torah

Throughout the waning years of the Golden Age, Torah scholarship continued to flourish. Great schools of learning continued to transmit the legacy of the Geonim of Babylonia to later generations. The greatest man of learning in Jewish Spain at the beginning of the 12th century was R. Yosef Levi ibn Migash (1077-1141). He was a brilliant child prodigy and

traveled to Lucena when he was but twelve years old to study under R. Yitzchak Alfasi. He remained under the Rif's tutelage for fourteen years until the Rif's death in 1103. So great was R. Yitzchak's opinion of the young Rabbi Yosef that he appointed him to be his successor as head of his yeshiva, rather than his own son.

Under the leadership of Ibn Migash, the yeshiva of Lucena grew and attracted hundreds of brilliant students. Foremost among them was R. Maimon ben Yosef (1092-1168), the father of the Rambam. R. Yosef HaLevi's great output of Talmudic writings, especially his commentaries on Bava Basra and Shavuos, plus his interpretations of the great Talmudic tradition, have been preserved in the works of his students and his students' students. He was the undisputed teacher of that great generation which marked the zenith of the Sephardic Golden Age. It was his Torah greatness which propelled Spanish Jewry to even greater accomplishments. The continuing creativity and vitality which took place between the 12th and 14th centuries can be traced to the intensification of Torah study and the Talmudic tradition inspired by the teachings of Ibn Migash.

Rabbi Moshe Ibn Ezra (1070-1140)

One of the most famous Jews of Spain whose creativity and genius has spanned the centuries is R. Moshe Ibn Ezra. Ibn Ezra was a contemporary of R. Yosef ibn Migash and of R. Yehuda HaLevi. In the events of his life one can see mirrored the darkening clouds of change that would eventually end the Golden Age and disperse Spanish Jewry for ever after. The shadows and problems of both his and R. Yehuda HaLevi's lives were truly representative of the difficulties and volatility soon to overwhelm the Jews of Spain.

R. Moshe ibn Ezra (1070-1140) lived a most turbulent and difficult life. Although born into one of Spain's wealthiest and most prominent families, due to a dispute with one of his brothers, he was forced to leave his native Granada and sojourn first in Portugal, and then in Seville. From there he

went to northern Christian Spain, but soon found himself in trouble with the local duke for reasons unknown to us. He was arrested and imprisoned, but because of his stature in the Jewish community, he was soon ransomed and released. Married and with children, he was always monetarily poor and left without a permanent base. But his Torah knowledge and soaring spirit, coupled with his poetic talent, produced a wealth of inspiration. His Selichot are included in the Sephardic liturgy for the High Holy Days. His Kinnos are also well-known, especially his poetic eulogy for the Rif which was inscribed on the Rif's tombstone. R. Moshe was also a distinguished philosopher and linguist who specialized in the Hebrew language. In his later years he composed Shirat Yisroel, which discusses the development of Hebrew poetry in Spain. He analyzes the different styles and meters, and gives his critical assessment of the various poets and their works. He was also a distinguished Talmudist, and his advice and decisions on halachic matters and questions were widely accepted and sought after. He also wrote a brilliant philosophic treatise discussing G-d's relationship to the universe, man, and the Jewish people. His scholarship was so well known that Christian and Moslem scholars often consulted him in matters of philosophy. On numerous occasions he even engaged in debate and disputation with these scholars defending the beliefs and tenets of Judaism against their criticism and ridicule. He thus became the defender of his people and the prototype of the Sephardic scholars of the Golden Age.

Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi (1080-1145)

If R. Moses Ibn Ezra was representative of the intellectual mind of the Sephardic Golden Age, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi was its soul. In fact, no Jew of the Middle Ages so captured the essence of Jewish belief, hope, and purpose as did R. Yehuda HaLevi. He was a colleague of R. Yosef ibn Migash in Talmud, and was also a friend and student of R. Moses ibn Ezra. It was from the latter that he learned the arts of language, poetry, and song, as well as the wisdom of philosophy. In all of these subjects, the younger student surpassed the older master.

R. Yehuda HaLevi is considered to be the poet laureate of Israel, as well as the defender of the faith of the Torah and the tradition of Israel. He is also the inspired dreamer of the redemption of the Jewish people and their return to Zion. A physician by profession, his true vocation was teaching Torah and inspiring faith. He composed lofty Hebrew poetry and liturgical poems. The Sabbath song (Yom Shabason), and the kinnah for Tisha B'Av (Zion Hallo Tishali), are typical of his genre. His older colleague, R. Moshe ibn Ezra, had the greatest praise for the younger man and invited him to leave his birthplace of Toledo and settle in his own hometown of Granada. There he came in contact with many members of the nobility who came to admire his wisdom and breadth of knowledge. While R. Yehuda HaLevi is considered one of the greatest Hebrew-Spanish poets, in later years he regretted having written the secular poetry of his youth. Hundreds of his works have survived to this very day. His words of beauty express the innermost emotions and longings of Israel in exile, struggling to survive, and her hope to somehow yet prosper and fulfill her prophetic mission.

R. Yehuda HaLevi's greatest contribution to Torah knowledge was his philosophic work, The Kuzari. The 7th century conversion of the Khazar tribe to Judaism served as the backdrop for a symbolic debate between representatives of the world's three monotheistic religions, each supporting the tenets of his faith. R. Yehudah Halevi, through the words of the Jewish representative, builds the case for the revelation of the Torah and the traditions of Israel. The Khazar king becomes convinced of the authenticity of Judaism, and then he and his entire kingdom embrace this true religion. R. Yehuda HaLevi based most of his arguments on tradition, history, world events, and intuitive human knowledge and sensitivity. This classic work includes discussions on the oral tradition, reward and punishment, refutation of the Karaite heresy, and even astronomy. Originally written in Arabic, the Kuzari was later translated into Hebrew, and eventually into other languages as well.

In 1138, Moslem persecution of their Jewish neighbors forced R. Yehuda Halevi to flee southern Spain to find refuge in the Christian north. There he lived in various places until, late in life, in 1141, he decided to

leave for Eretz Yisroel. On board the ship taking him to Alexandria, Egypt, he composed a series of poems, Shirei HaYam in which he expressed his faith in G-d, his longing for Zion, and his wonder at the beauty and terror of the sea. In Alexandria he was warmly welcomed by the local Jewish community, whose leaders implored him to remain and settle. But after a short stay in Egypt, Rabbi Yehuda HaLevy boarded a ship heading for Jaffa and his lifelong goal of Zion. Tradition has it that he finally reached Jerusalem where he fell to the ground in a state of ecstasy. As he was kissing the soil of the Holy City, an Arab horseman rode by and trampled him to death.

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164)

Another Torah giant of this time was R. Avraham Ibn Ezra. Born in Toledo, but raised in Cordoba, he studied under the disciples of Rabbi Yosef ibn Migash. Some say he was a distant relative of R. Moshe ibn Ezra. He was a precocious child and soon matured into not only a Torah scholar, but also an expert in many facets of the arts and sciences. Despite his extraordinary capabilities, he never succeeded in his various financial ventures, and he lived most of his life in poverty. He became a great friend of R. Yehuda HaLevi, and often quotes him in his commentary to Scripture. Ibn Ezra had an unfortunate married life; his wife died young and left him with a sole surviving young son. All his other children had died in infancy.

During the Almoravid uprising of 1135, R. Avraham went into exile with his brothers. After an arduous journey, he arrived in Rome, where he began to compose his Bible commentary, beginning with Ecclesiastes. During the next four years, he moved from place to place in Italy, devoting himself to Biblical exegesis, writing on the remaining books of the Tanach. During the course of his wanderings, his son Yitzchak departed for Baghdad, where after a time he converted to Islam. Subsequently, he repented and returned to Judaism. He later composed a poem in which he tried to vindicate himself, wherein he asserted that he never transgressed the Torah. Soon after R. Yitzchak died. When R. Avraham in Ezra became aware of these events, some three years later, he was stricken with

unending grief, and from that time on he was unable to settle in any permanent home.

From Italy he traveled to Provence, and then on to northern France. Wherever Ibn Ezra journeyed, he was enthusiastically received, and even Rabbeinu Tam, the great French Tosafist, accorded him great honor. In 1158 Ibn Ezra traveled to London where he composed several halachic works. In 1160 he found himself once again in Narbonne, Provence. He died several years later but his burial site remains unknown.

Ibn Ezra is best known for his commentary on Tanach, although he was also a great poet. His knowledge of philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and Hebrew language and grammar, is clearly evident in his commentary to the Bible. This commentary soon became a standard text in the traditional curriculum of Jewish studies. His original and sometimes unique approach to many Biblical problems and textual difficulties, stamped his work as innovative, challenging, and unusual. In later generations, it sometimes proved to be somewhat controversial. Ibn Ezra chose to interpret the Scriptures in their plainest meanings, not based on Aggadic elaboration. However, he scrupulously adhered to the views of the Sages of the Talmud. His sharp wit and keen understanding of human nature are apparent in the many proverbs and riddles he uses to make his point. Specially targeted are the various Karaite commentaries whom Ibn Ezra most vehemently attacks. Ibn Ezra's commentary soon became immensely popular, and many supercommentaries commented on his work.

While Ibn Ezra suffered a most unfortunate personal life, still he was able to construct a most lasting gift of lucid thought and abiding faith - a gift that made him one of the most illustrious rabbanim of Spanish Jewry.

The Almohads

The constant instability of the Moslem world, with its conflicting interpretations of Islam, inter-tribal intrigues, and its intensely competitive struggle with the Christian world, eventually spilled over into the Jewish

world. The Almohads, the fanatical Moorish tribesmen who overtook Moslem Spain in 1149, came to see themselves as the saviors of Islam from the now corrupt rule of the Almoravids. The Almohads violently wrested rule from the Almoravids and set about to create a pure and correct Islamic society. Their rigid religious attitude made them immune to the bribes which had corrupted the Almoravids and which had allowed Jewish life to continue unchanged during their reign. In this new fundamentalist, fanatic, and intolerant society, where all the words of the Koran were to be enforced literally, there was little room for a Jewish Golden Age. The stated and actual policy of the Almohads towards the Jews under their control was to terrorize them, and to ultimately offer them the unfortunate choice of either conversion to Islam, or else exile.

The Almohads continued to hold sway in Moslem Spain until the middle of the 13th century. Many Jews accepted Islam in a pro forma fashion, outwardly professing the Moslem faith while inwardly remaining loyal to the faith of their forefathers. Many Jews now left their centuries-old homes in Andalusia and settled in northern Spain, Provence, France, or Italy. Some Sephardic Jews even returned to Syria, Babylonia, Egypt, and Asia Minor. Though the civilization of Spanish Jewry would continue for another three centuries, it would now develop and grow only in northern Spain under Christian rule. The relationship of cooperation, tolerance, and enlightenment which had been the norm between the Moslem rulers of Spain and their Jewish subjects, now came to a dismal end.

The success of the Almohads also had important consequences for the Christian rulers of the north. The fanaticism and military prowess of the Almohads checked, albeit temporarily, the Christian reconquest of the south. The Christian rulers now looked upon the Jews as allies and assets, rather than as pariahs and liabilities. In an unlikely turn of events, Jewish life in northern Spain now enjoyed a temporary flourishing of scholarship, although it would gradually recede as the Christians began their own relentless onslaught to rid Spain of all Moslem influence.