

## **Sefarad**

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From its linguistic origins as a Biblical land of great wealth across the sea, to its more recent nostalgic imaginary as a lost Golden Age of Mediterranean Jewish culture, *Sefarad* has always been as much an idea as a physical place, a lens through which Iberian Jews have interpreted their world, first in al-Andalus, then in Christian Iberia, and later in the Sephardic communities they established around the world following their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula at the turn of the sixteenth century.

The idea of Sefarad<sup>1</sup> was a product of the culture of al-Andalus, or Arab Islamicate Spain. During this period of Muslim sovereignty, Andalusí Jewish communities enjoyed the rights of *dhimmi*, subject religious minorities, to practice their religion and organize the affairs of their communities. This institutional autonomy allowed Andalusí Sepharadim to develop a uniquely Iberian culture within Andalusí society, one shaped by Islamicate and Rabbinic habits of thought but also by Hispano-Romance vernacular culture. As Iberia transitioned to Christian rule, Sepharadim found opportunity as mediators for Christian monarchs ruling an Islamicate society. Once most Muslim elites had left the Iberian Peninsula, the Sepharadim became the interpreters of the Andalusí intellectual legacy, which they disseminated in their writings, their religious practice, and their artistic production. This activity not only fueled the transmission of Andalusí Greco-Roman science to the Latin West, but also (in Hebrew translations) to the wider non-Arab Jewish world.

After suffering a century of violent persecution and increasing pressure to convert to Catholicism, the Sepharadim were expelled from the Peninsula at the turn of the sixteenth century. Finding themselves in a diasporic network in communities across the Americas, Europe, Africa, and Asia, the Sepharadim continued developing their Peninsular religious and vernacular cultural practices, including speaking their own dialects of Castilian that continued to evolve over time in both written and spoken forms. In modernity, the idea of Sefarad continues to inspire a variety of historical and cultural visions of what Iberian Jewish life has been, and what it might be in the future. Over the course of this essay I will describe this trajectory of the production of the idea of Sefarad, demonstrating how Iberian Jews constructed Sefarad in their cultural production.

In al-Andalus, as we will see, al-Andalus and Sefarad were practically synonyms. The minority status granted Jews by the doctrine of *dhimma* created a stable space in which Andalusí Jews were able to govern the affairs of their communities, and participate fully in civic and intellectual life (Brann 2000). However, at times they also suffered violent persecution,

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<sup>1</sup> A note on terminology: *Sefarad* refers to the Iberian Peninsula. The adjectival form is *Sefardi*, *Sefaradim* in Hebrew; I will use the Anglicized forms Sephardic, Sepharadim (elsewhere you may see Sephardim for the plural, which is an Anglicized version of the Ashkenazi Hebrew pronunciation). In Arabic, the Iberian Peninsula is al-Andalus; I use the Anglicized version of the Arabic adjectival forms Andalusí, Andalusis, which should not be confused with Spanish Andalus, Andaluces or English Andalusian, Andalusians, both of which refer to modern Andalucía in Southern Spain. I will refer to the dialect of Spanish spoken by Sepharadim (known variously as Ladino, Judeo-Spanish, etc. as Sephardic Spanish). A *converso* is a Jew or descendent of Jews who has converted to Christianity.

especially in moments of political instability. The rising strength of the northern Christian kingdoms in the eleventh century prompted stricter interpretation and more rigorous enforcement of *dhimmi* laws that made life more difficult for Jewish and Christian Andalusis (García-Sanjuán 2008).

Andalusi Jews were regular fixtures at court, and cities such as Granada had Jewish populations that were wealthy and influential. In one famous case, the Andalusi Jew Samuel Hanagid Naghrela commanded the Granadan army. This was unprecedented in the Arab world and unthinkable in the Latin West. During this period, Jews were so numerous and influential in Granada that Arabic sources refer to that city as *Gharnata al-Yahud* ('Granada of the Jews') (Gonzalo Maeso 1990). Sefaradim were also key to the economic success of al-Andalus. For example, part of the Taifa Kingdom of Denia's commercial success was due to its Jewish merchants, who were able to leverage their broad and complex Mediterranean networks (Bruce 2017).

The famed economic and cultural florescence of al-Andalus in its heyday was a favorite subject of Andalusi writers of all religions, who creating a legend of al-Andalus as a place of exceptional cultural production, far from the historical cultural centers of the East, Egypt, and North Africa. It was, in the Andalusi literary imagination, a place of vast natural resources and trade wealth that attracted the best and brightest, and also (due to its far-flung location) the most intrepid of the Arab world. It was also home to a kind of cultural openness that extended to Jews and Christians, who despite their official status as second class citizens, were often able to participate fully in the secular poetic and intellectual culture of the Muslim elites (Brann 2000).

Around the year 1200 CE, the Seville-based Muslim poet Ismail ibn Muhammad al-Shaqundi (b. 1231) proudly declared: "I praise God that I was born in al-Andalus and that he has given me the good fortune to be one of her sons.... To exalt North Africa over al-Andalus is to prefer left to right, or to say the night is lighter than the day. Ridiculous!" (1934, 42). Jewish Andalusi writers followed suit. Judah al-Harizi (Toledo 1165 - Damascus 1225), writing in Hebrew, described his homeland as "a delight to the eyes. Her light was as the sun in the midst of heaven. The Perfume of her dust was as myrrh to the nostrils and the taste of her delicious fruits was as honey to the palate" (al-Harizi 1965, 2: 297-298, 1952, 345).

Before the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, Jewish life under the Visigothic kings was more difficult. The Jewish communities of the Visigothic period were besieged and suffered steady persecution. In 613 King Sisebut ordered the forcible conversion of all Jews in the kingdom. This anti-Jewish sentiment may have been fueled by Eastern Marian treatises translated from Syriac such as that of Nicholas of Antioch, circulating in Latin translations in the West (Roth 1994, 7–20). Their lot was not unlike that of other Jewish communities living in what had been the Latin Roman world. They left little in the way of documentation and are practically ignored by contemporary Jewish sources in the Arab world.

The legend of the Jews opening the city doors of Toledo for the Muslim invaders in 711 might be just that, but it speaks to the poor treatment Jews suffered under Visigothic rule. Life as a *dhimmi* in al-Andalus was, by modern standards, no picnic: there was the poll tax or *jizya* to be paid, certain social and economic restrictions to be respected (at least on the surface), and in times of economic crisis and political turmoil, Andalusi Jews were as vulnerable as any other minority. However, the Islamic legal framework provided a stable space for Judaism to coexist and thrive, albeit under Islamic hegemony. The model was not unlike that practiced by Rome, Persia, and Byzantium in managing relations with its many ethnic and religious minority populations (M. R. Cohen 1994, 55).

The protected status of Jews in Andalusī society created opportunity for the idea and the reality of Sefarad to grow and establish itself: its geographic and, to a certain extent, cultural distinction from the rest of the Muslim world provided it with a geographic basis for its distinct cultural identity: it was the only part of the Muslim world, except perhaps Muslim-ruled Sicily, with a significant Latin Christian population.

Sephardic intellectuals were also Andalusī intellectuals, in the sense that they participated fully in the intellectual life of the dominant culture (Brann 2000). Even those moments in which Sephardic intellectuals famously participated in the projects of kings such as Alfonso X, they were more like guest workers than citizens of the majoritarian intellectual republic. Andalusī Sepharadim, however, were trained in classical Arabic, and some were familiar with the Qur'an and its commentaries, as well as the poetic canon and other forms of learned discourse. The equivalent in Latin Christendom would be if they had received a scholastic education and a university course of study in the liberal arts, which practically no Jew would accomplish in thirteenth-century Castile or Aragon. They typically wrote on secular subjects in Arabic, and in some cases they wrote on Jewish subjects in Arabic as well: though the canonical version of *Guide for the Perplexed* for modern Maimonides scholars is the twelfth-century Hebrew translation of Joseph ibn Tibbon, Maimonides wrote *Dalalat al-ha'irin* in Judeo-Arabic, or Arabic written in Hebrew characters, just as Romance-speaking Iberian Jews would later come to write Ibero-Romance dialects in Hebrew script. Even in the thirteenth century, in a Toledo that had been ruled by Christian monarchs for over a century, a Sephardic intellectual such as Jacob ben Elazar wrote a treatise on Hebrew grammar, the *Kitab al-Kamil*, in Arabic (Ben Elazar 1977).

Andalusī Jews' access to the culture of the dominant elites led to an important innovation in Hebrew literature: the adaptation of Arabic poetics to the Biblical Hebrew language and the birth of a new kind of poetry (Brann 1991, 20–24). Hebrew poets learned in Arabic and expert in Hebrew Bible began to refashion the Hebrew of the Bible in the image of Arabic, using it to express the images and conceits of Classical Arabic poetry, adapting the Hebrew to the meters of Classical Arabic, and forging a new poetics for Jews to write poetry not only in the synagogue but also in the wine party, the social gathering, and even the battlefield. Hebrew grammarians who were expert in Arabic philology likewise wrote treatises dedicated to systematizing and classifying the Hebrew language, laying the groundwork for the language's revivification in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sáenz-Badillos and Targarona Borrás 1988). In this sense it is probably useful to think of the new Hebrew poetics as a product of Andalusī culture, for it was only through Arabic philology and Classical Arabic poetics that it was able to develop.

It is hard to overstate the importance of Arabic learning for the Sephardic intellectual legacy. In terms of the poetry, Arabic provided Iberian Jewish poets with the poetic building blocks that made it possible for them to express themselves in the poetic idiom of the day, but in their own Biblical Hebrew. It allowed them—in their collective imagination—to elevate Hebrew to the level of sophistication enjoyed by Arabic, the dominant official language of the society in which they lived (Sáenz-Badillos 1993, 220–45).

The importance of Arabic learning to the Jewish Iberian identity continued well into the period of Christian political domination. On the one hand, their knowledge of Arabic gave Jewish elites a significant competitive advantage under Christian rule: they were able to navigate the largely Arabophone social worlds, bureaucracies and institutions of the cities Christians conquered from Muslim rulers. They were also famously involved in the project of translating Arabic learning first into Latin under Archbishop Raymond of Toledo in the early twelfth

century) and later into Castilian under Alfonso X of Castile-León in the late thirteenth. Arabic continued to be an important language of study for Sepharadim well into the fourteenth century (Pearce 2017), and continued to be used as a signal of cultural prestige in Sephardic architectural arts. The remains of a fourteenth-century synagogue in Molina (Guadalajara) was decorated with plaster carvings in the Andalusí style and a bit of Arabic script as well. This and other such findings support the idea that Castilian Jewish communities continued to value Arabic as intellectually (if only symbolically) valuable after centuries of Christian rule (Arenas Esteban and Castaño González 2010).

Just as Rabbinic Judaism is built upon an idea of a place, so the idea of Sefarad is very much a place that exists outside of time, and therefore resists the kind of periodization toward which literary scholars and historians incline. Because it is constituted by an elite that was not sharply divided between Muslim- and Christian-ruled Iberia, we can observe more cultural continuity between Sefarad under Muslim rule and Sefarad under Christian rule than we can in, for example, the courtly culture of Toledo under Yahya II al-Qadir (r. 1081-1085) and Alfonso VI of Castile and Leon (r. 1065-1109) who conquered that city in 1085.

Sefarad was (and is) an idea produced by real people who lived in real circumstances that we are able to know to some extent from the record that has come to us. My comments here will center less on the historical record of Jewish life in the Iberian Peninsula<sup>2</sup> and more on the representations Iberian Jews created of their experience and the ways in which they understood the world around them and their place in it.

The word “Sefarad” is of biblical origin, but its association with the Iberian Peninsula is fairly arbitrary. In Ovadiah (1:20) we read: “the captives of Jerusalem, that are in Sefarad, shall possess the cities of the South.” While the location is historically uncertain but may refer to Lyria in Asia Minor, in Jewish tradition Sefarad has been associated with the Iberian Peninsula since the Roman Period (Gerber 1992, x). For a long time, it is practically synonymous with al-Andalus, the Arabic name for the Iberian Peninsula or at least those parts of it under Muslim rule.

Where does the idea of Sefarad reside? Jewish historical and cultural consciousness resides not in the court (because there is no Jewish court), but in the rabbinate, which is a kind of metaphorical court. Once the Israelites had no king, the symbolic site of power shifted from court to rabbinate. Rabbinic discourse was in part an extended allegory of the activities of the Kohanim (priestly caste, descendants of Aaron) and the Levites (assistants to the priests, descendants of Levi, son of Jacob) in the Hebrew Kingdoms: sacrifices became prayers, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> Just as Muslim and Christian Iberian court historians were developing chronicles of the great deeds of their employers and their employers’ predecessors, Iberian rabbis likewise curated the memory of the community’s leadership by writing genealogies of rabbis leading from Moses to the current leadership. Abraham ibn Daud (ca. 1110-ca. 1180), writing in Seville, explains how the most influential rabbis in the region concentrated in Sefarad:

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<sup>2</sup> For histories of Jews in Iberia, see Baer (1992); Ashtor (1973); Roth (1994); Gerber (1992); Ray (2012); Zohar (2005). On Jewish chronicles and proto-historiography in the middle ages see Ben-Shalom (2016).

<sup>3</sup> According to Joel Kraemer, the Mishna, a late antique commentary on the Hebrew bible, “rebuilds the temple in words” (Kraemer 2015, 24). Jacob Neusner writes that throughout all of *halakha* or Jewish law, “a double metaphor pertains, the metaphor of god’s activity in creation, the metaphor of the priests’ and Levites’ activity in the tabernacle” (Neusner 1999, 154).

The generation of these three men, R. Hananel, R. Nissim, and R. Samuel ha-Levi the Nagid, was the first generation of the rabbinate. The mastery of the Talmud now rested [exclusively] in [Sefarad]<sup>4</sup> where there flourished five rabbis all of whom were named Isaac. Two of them were natives of [Sefarad]; a third came from a neighboring area; while the remaining two migrated from abroad (Ibn Daud 1969, 58; 78).

This “first generation of the rabbinate” means that Sefarad was now home to the most authoritative Rabbis of the region, making it effectively the capital of the Jewish diaspora. Just as Rome was home to the leadership of the Catholic world but also looked East to Jerusalem, or Baghdad was home to the Abbasid Caliphate but looked East toward Mecca, Sefarad was home (according to Ibn Daud) to the spiritual leadership of the Jewish diaspora, even as the community looked East to Jerusalem in anticipation of an eventual messianic redemption.

A later Sephardic chronicler, Abraham Zacuto (1452- ca. 1515), in his own history of the Rabbinate *Sefer Yuhasin* (‘Book of Lineages’) explains how the last Rabbis of the Babylonian Gaonim (leaders of the most authoritative rabbinic academies in what is now Iraq) escaped persecution to Spain. This mirrors the claims of the Caliph Abd al-Rahman III establishing Cordoba as the seat of his new Caliphate rivaling the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad:

In the days of Eldad the Danite, the head of the Academy in Matha Mehasia was R. Samuel ha-Cohen Gaon son of Hophni, father-in-law of R. Hai. He, too, wrote many books. He passed away during R. Hai’s reign four years before the death of R. Hai. However, the members of R. Hai’s Academy appointed Hezekiah, the grandson of David. B. Zakkai as Exilarch and he took the place of R. Hai the Gaon, obm. The informers denounced him to the king. He was apprehended and arrested, put into irons, his property was confiscated, and his two sons fled to [Sefarad] to R. Joseph ha-Levi the Nagid son of R. Samuel Ibn al-Nagrela the Nagid. R. Joseph loved Hezekiah the Head of the Academy and they remained together until the persecution in Granada, when this Nagid was killed. One of Hezekiah’s sons fled to Saragossa, where he married and had children. Afterwards his descendents moved to the land of Edom [Christian-ruled Iberia]. One of them was R. Hiyya ibn al-Daudi, who died in Castile in 4514 [1154]. After him, not a single person known to be of the house of David remained in [Sefarad]. After Hezekiah, the Exilarch and the Head of the Academy, the five academies of the Gaons ceased to exist. (Zacuto 2005, 515)

Jewish Iberian writers thus referred to Sefarad mostly in terms of a religious and social community, but occasionally (and usually in Arabic) in terms of a place, with a specific landscape, agricultural personality, and climate, but even then as a place where great rabbis and poets lived. Writers often described Sefarad in positive comparison to other places and historical moments, at times when their poetic canvas broadened to include the wider Mediterranean or Jewish world. One of the earliest testimonies of this discourse is a poem, one of two extant by

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<sup>4</sup> Translators into English often render the Hebrew word “Sefarad” as “Spain.” Throughout this essay I have emended it to “Sefarad” in order to underscore how authors construct the idea of Sefarad (which is quite different from our idea of ‘Spain’), indicating the change by putting the word in brackets.

Iberian Jewish women written in Hebrew,<sup>5</sup> by the wife of the tenth-century Jewish notable and poet Dunash ibn Labrat, in which she bids her husband farewell as he embarks on a long and dangerous journey away from Sefarad:

Will her love remember his graceful doe,  
Her only son in her arms as he parted?  
On her left hand he placed a ring from his right,  
On his wrist she placed her bracelet.  
As a keepsake she took his mantle from him,  
And he in turn took hers from her.  
Would he settle, now, in the land of [Sefarad],  
If its prince gave him half the kingdom?<sup>6</sup>

According to tradition, the source of Sefarad's prestige was not only the richness of its geography and natural resources, but the superior cultural legacy of the Jews who settled there. In the following century, the poet Moses ibn Ezra, in his treatise on Hebrew poetry *Kitab al-Muhadara wal-mudhakara* ('The Book of Discussion and Conversation'), builds on the Biblical tradition that the courtiers and priests who lived in Jerusalem emigrated to Sefarad in order to emphasize the superior heritage and cultural legacy of the Sefaradim in the contexts of the broader Jewish world:

As the Book narrates: 'And the exiles of this army of the Children of Israel are from the land of the Canaanites to Tsarfath (France), and the exiles from Jerusalem that are in Sefarad.' The people migrated to Tsarfath, and to Sefarad, called *al-Andalus* in the language of the Arabs, after the name of a man named *Andalisan*,<sup>7</sup> in the time of the ancient king Isaac. In the language of the Christians *Isfaniyaa* [i.e., 'Hispania'], also after the name of a man who was its ruler under Roman rule, before the Goths, whose name was Isfan. His capital was in *Isfuliyya*, named after either the former or the latter. And the ancients called it *Isfamwa*.'" (Ibn Ezra 1982, 2: 66-67, Arabic 1: 53-55)

Poets also lauded Sefarad as a home to brilliant poets who excelled in both Hebrew and Arabic, reinforcing the idea of Sefarad as a prestigious place with an unparalleled cultural legacy. In the thirteenth century, the poet Judah al-Harizi, an accomplished translator of Arabic into Hebrew and author of the rhyming prose *maqama* (collection of tales written in rhyming prose) *Tahkemoni*, explained how the poets of Sefarad were uniquely gifted in the practice of *bida* (technical innovation in poetry):

'They are talking about the heroes of poetry who flourished in [Sefarad], and the vigor of their rhetoric both in meter and rhymed prose. All of them agreed, decided, and were unanimous in the opinion that there are no poems comparable

<sup>5</sup> On the deafening silence of women writers in the medieval Hebrew archive, see Rosen (2003).

<sup>6</sup> See also the prose translation of S.J. Pearce that accompanies her economic/material analysis of the bracelet motif (Pearce 2014, 149).

<sup>7</sup> The etymology of al-Andalus is from the Arab historian Ali 'Izz al-Din Ibn al-Athir (1160-1233) (Ibn al-Athir 1965, 4: 556-57).

in strength to the poems of Solomon, the small (Ibn Gabirol). Nor in depth comparable to the poems of (Samuel) Hanagid. Nor are there poems comparable in sweetness and smoothness to those of (Joseph b.) Hisdai. (al-Harizi 1965, 74, 1952, 41–42)

In this passage, al-Harizi not only claims the poetic supremacy of the poets of Sefarad; he also stresses that what distinguishes Andalusī Hebrew poetic culture was its diversity, as each poet forged a path of innovation that would distinguish him among the rest. We learn from him that it is not enough to speak of a single Andalusī Hebrew poetics, but rather that it is the variety and originality of the Andalusī Hebrew poets that earns them their fame within the broader Jewish world.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the undeniable importance of Arabic poetics to Sephardic Hebrew poetry, a number of authors wrote on the superiority of Hebrew over Arabic as a poetic language, a concept that became known as *'ibraniyya* (Ar., literally 'Hebrew-ism') This debate, which perhaps mirrored the debate in the Muslim world over the intrinsic superiority of Arabic (*'arabiyya* ('Arabic-ism'), was a bit of a straw man argument: by the thirteenth century in Christian-ruled Iberia, while Arabic was undeniably an important language of scholarship for Jewish intellectuals, it had all but ceased to be a productive poetic language. Sephardic poets at this time wrote verse almost exclusively in Hebrew, and only occasionally in Arabic and, as we will see, in Ibero-Romance as well.

Nevertheless, Moshe ibn Ezra's assertion that Hebrew's excellence was owed to Arabic (Ibn Ezra 1982, 1: 23-43; 2: 31-50) continued the *'arabiyya* debate, and later poets took up the challenge, championing Hebrew's supremacy over Arabic. One of the best-known proponents of *'ibraniyya* or Hebrew supremacy was Judah al-Harizi, whose preface to the *Tahkemoni* contains a graphic account of Hebrew's degradation, and a rally for its defense. In a rhyming prose peppered with biblical quotations, he claims that the Jewish communities have abandoned Hebrew in favor of Arabic:

They have enslaved the tongue of the Israelites to the tongue of Kedar [Arabic] and they said: 'Come and let us sell her to the Ishmaelites.' And they said to her: 'bow down, that we may go over.' And they took her and cast her into the pit until she perished among them. And the tongue of Kedar blackened her, and like a lion, tore her. An evil beast devoured her. All of them spurned the Hebrew tongue and made love to the tongue of Hagar [Arabic]. They embraced the bosom of an alien. They desired the wife of a stranger. They kissed her bosom, for stolen waters were sweet to them. Their hearts were seduced when they saw how excellent was the poetry that Hagar, Sarrai's [Sarah's] Egyptian handmaiden had borne. And Sarai was barren! (al-Harizi 1965, 32, 1952, 9–10)

Al-Harizi's contemporary Jacob ben Elazar, an accomplished Arabist and author of a book of tales in Hebrew, writes along similar lines in explaining the justification for his book:

The reason for this book of tales, and the composition therein of my words, is because the learned amongst the Arabs were troubling the Holy Tongue, who nonetheless boasted against it in their insolence, saying: 'It should be fitting to write in our language every tale!'

They were challenging our language, saying, ‘We will prevail!’ ...  
 Whereupon I began to compose, saying:  
 You would mock me, saying ‘Is not the Holy Tongue crude?’  
 But no! She is a giant who silences all others,  
 Run to her and do not falter,  
 Whether elegy or invective, saw or anecdote. (Ben Elazar 1992, 14–15)

The irony of these challenges to the supremacy of Arabic was that even by the time of Ben Elazar, the threat of Arabic as a serious competitor to Hebrew was fast waning. According to Ross Brann, “Hebrew had essentially supplanted [Arabic] it as the language of scientific, philosophical, and religious discourse. For Hebrew literature in the post-Andalusian age it was a battle against the ghost of Arabic language, poetry, and culture and not against its looming presence” (Brann 1991, 123). Hebrew, for now, had effectively won the battle against Arabic, a battle made all the easier in the transition to Christian rule. Despite the important Arabic-to-Latin and Arabic-to-Castilian translation projects directed by Archbishop Raymond of Toledo (twelfth century) and Alfonso X of Castile-Leon (thirteenth century), Latin, and eventually Ibero-Romance, were the languages of court and of the Church, and this was the new reality in which the increasing majority of Iberian Jews (and a growing number of Iberian *conversos*) lived.

Nonetheless, Arabic continued to be an important language of learning and prestige model of poetics and style for generations of Jews living in Christian Iberia and Southern France (Pearce 2017). Sephardic Jews in this regard served a very important role in European intellectual history: they were the gatekeepers of Arabic learning in both the Hebrew and Latin spheres, and were largely responsible for the transmission of an important body of learning begun with Aristotle, expanded and nuanced by Muslim scientists such as Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) that set Western Latin Christendom on fire and gave some Sephardic scholars a significant advantage as intellectual brokers. Andalusian converts to Christianity such as Petrus Alfonsi translated and taught the Andalusian curriculum to eager students in Paris and London (Tolan 1993). Abraham ibn Ezra, who continued to live as a Jew, followed a similar trajectory, and traveled throughout Western Europe teaching Andalusian science in Jewish communities. His translations of Arabic scientific works forged a new Hebrew scientific vocabulary and helped to develop Hebrew as a language of secular learning (Sela 2003, 94–123).

While literary Arabic passed into the realm of the arcane arts in Christian Iberia, Ibero-Romance became ascendant as a language of court and of learning, even if in al-Andalus many spoke Romance but did not write or compose in it. In fact, many Andalusians spoke dialects of Romance.

Jewish Iberian sources in Hebrew mention and make use of Ibero-Romance beginning in at least the eleventh century. Most Hispanists are familiar with the Romance *kharjat* (Sp. *jarchas*), the final couplets of Arabic and Hebrew strophic poems or *muwashshahat* (Ar., literally, ‘Belt- or girdle-poems’) written in vernacular Arabic or Andalusian Romance (Armistead 2005; Heijkoop and Zwartjes 2004; Rosen 2000; Zwartjes 1998). Contemporary evidence suggests that these were not, as some have suggested, mere Jewish and Muslim appropriation of the ‘quaint songs of the Christians,’ but rather reflect actual language use of Muslim and Jewish Andalusians. Moses ibn Ezra recounts a time in Granada when he met with a well-known Muslim scholar who challenged Ibn Ezra to recite the ten commandments in Arabic (instead of Biblical Hebrew). Ibn Ezra responded by asking the scholar to recite the *fatiha* (the first sura of the Qur’an) in Andalusian Romance, a “language that he spoke and knew quite well” (Ibn Ezra 1982,



2: 49; Arabic 1: 42). A number of Andalusí Hebrew poets write *zajals* and *muwashshahas* with concluding verses in Andalusí Romance, which suggests that some Jews were at least proficient in Romance. Maimonides (aka Musa ibn Maimun, ca. 1136-1204), who lived in Cordova until his early teens, gives us a rare (if indirect) glimpse of the Romance poetry of Andalusí Jews. In his discussion of appropriate and inappropriate uses of language, he describes a poetic gathering in which participants recite poems in Arabic, Hebrew, and “another language” (Tobi 2010, 431), which in al-Andalus in the twelfth century can only be Andalusí Romance (Monroe 1988).

Other accounts of Jews speaking Romance come in the form of laments over the sorry state of Hebrew learning in Christian Iberia, especially by Andalusí Jews looking down their noses on their northern neighbors. When the intolerant Almoravids took Granada in 1090, the poet Moshe ibn Ezra went into exile in Castile, where he was dismayed by the poor level of Hebrew among Castilian Jews, whom he described as “stammerers and unintelligible.” His contemporary Solomon ibn Gabirol, similarly exiled to Zaragoza, complained that half of the community there spoke Arabic and the other half Aragonese, but none was competent in Hebrew (Brann 1991, 61).

Under Christian rule the Jewish communities of Iberia became more isolated from the culture of the Islamic world, both socially and intellectually, but not entirely. The Jewish communities of Christian Iberia were a kind of proto colonial elite, serving the Christian kings as valuable cultural mediators and translators (Ray 2006). Jewish notables such as Samuel Halevi followed trends in Christian nobility in projecting an image of class power, proximity to the King, lineage, funereal pomp, charitable foundations. Just as the nobility over the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries changed in nature (urban, newer, less established bloodlines, salaried positions at court), so too did Jewish notables respond to this change in creating their public image (Múñoz Garrido 2016). Halevi’s famous *Sinagoga del Tránsito* in Toledo is perhaps the best-known example, as it prominently features the coat of arms of Castile and Leon accompanied by a Hebrew inscription (Múñoz Garrido 2010, 139).

Emigration to and immigration from Muslim countries continued during this period (Judah Halevi, for example, migrated from Tudela in Navarra to Granada after corresponding with the poet Moshe ibn Ezra), and the increasingly Hispanized Sephardic Jews maintained familial and commercial ties with Jewish communities around the Mediterranean (Goitein 1967).

Over the course of the fourteenth century, a rising tide of anti-Judaism in Christian Iberia made life increasingly difficult for Jews, who were subjected to increasingly aggressive campaigns of proselytization. They were made to attend sermons by and participate in religious disputations with Christian Friars, mostly Dominicans. In 1391 a wave of popular anti-Judaic violence swept across Castile and Aragon. Thousands of Jews died, and many converted or fled the realm. Sephardic poets wrote elegies for the dead and mourned the golden age of Sefarad in Biblical language used to lament the destruction of the Temple (van Bekkum 2001). The massive conversions that took place during this period created a large class of *conversos* or New Christians, and a class of *conversos* or New Christians who were technically Christian but whose spiritual beliefs and practices varied wildly and produced some very innovative hybrid forms (Meyerson 2010). The elites among these *conversos*, joining those who converted in the wake of 1391 and largely free of the social restrictions Jews experienced in Christian society, entered the Church, the royal administration, and other sectors of public life closed to them as Jews and soon became a very powerful elite who attracted no little resentment and suspicion from their fellow Old Christians.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For an overview of Sephardi/converso history, see Gerber; Díaz Mas; Benbassa and Rodrigue; Roth; Zohar.

The converso phenomenon divided families and put further stress on Iberian Jewish communities. Nonetheless, despite the devastation and despair that followed in the wake of the 1391 riots, there were examples of Jewish communities that flourished and scholars who produced important poetry and works of rabbinic thought. During the course of the fifteenth century, for example, the Jewish community of Morvedre (Valencia) underwent what Marc Meyerson has called an economic and cultural “renaissance,” and the poetic circle of Zaragoza produced some of the most beautiful Hebrew poetry written on the Iberian Peninsula (Targarona Borrás 2002). Similarly, Eric Lawee writes that after 1391 rabbinic thought went through a “a slow but steady recovery of learning... and the production of novel achievements in various disciplines and genres by an impressive cadre of diverse thinkers and writers” (Lawee 2012, 352) writers” (Lawee 2012, 352). To wit, all four Biblical commentaries that are still included in the standard edition of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, are written by Sephardic scholars after 1391 (Lawee 2012, 361).

During this period, Jewish sources on Jewish use of the vernacular vary from silent to negative. Though by the sixteenth century we have numerous rabbinic responsa (official decisions written in reply to a question on a point of Jewish law) written partially in Judeo-Spanish (Benaim 2012), Peninsular Jews left very little in the way of written Romance. Until the fifteenth century, the only (surviving) significant work in a Peninsular vernacular by a Jewish author is the *Proverbios morales* of Shem Tov ben Isaac Arduziel of Carrión (ca. 1335). However, during this period we do see an increasing use of the vernacular within the Jewish communities for paraliturgical and administrative purposes (such as the community ordinances or *takkanot* of Valladolid), if not for *belles lettres* (Abrahams 1981, 261; Moreno Koch 1987). There are scattered examples. In the fifteenth century, Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet reports that in Aragon some congregations recited vernacular translations of the Book of Esther on the festival of Purim for those who did not understand Hebrew (Isaac ben Sheshet Perfet 1967, 2: 551, sec. 388). We have a single responsum from the Cairo Geniza written in Judeo-Spanish (Hebrew characters), by Rabbi Isaac Campantón of Zamora and dated to the second half of the fifteenth century (Arad and Glick 2013). It is believed that rabbis gave sermons in the Iberian vernaculars (Gross 1995, 63 n 36), and we have only a single ketubah (wedding contract) written in Catalan (Majorca 1327) instead of the traditional Aramaic text (Lacave 2002, 21–22 and 203–4). While it is clear that Iberian Jews spoke and wrote in Romance languages, they certainly did not celebrate it when they imagined the cultural life of Sefarad in writing. In fact, the more assimilated Iberian Jews became to the Romance vernacular culture of their Christian neighbors, the more the Rabbis protested, as we are about to see.

Increasing conversion to Christianity and Hispanization over the course of the fourteenth century had its reaction in Hebrew literary practice as a form of cultural resistance (Targarona Borrás 2002, 263), a stance that recalls the thirteenth-century rallying cries to shore up Hebrew learning in the face of the hegemony of Arabic as an intellectual language. The poets of the ‘Zaragoza circle’ led the charge in championing a conservative poetic style that harkened to the Andalusí golden age as a bulwark against social and religious change. In this environment, writing in Romance was associated with conversion to Christianity and contributing to the downfall of the Jewish community. At the turn of the fifteenth century, the poet Solomon Da Piera writes to Astruc Rimokh, chastising him for writing poetry in Aragonese:

the language of the Torah alone gives forth poems;  
It rectifies the babbling of those of barbarous tongue

I have been given the laws of poetry; what do I care for  
 the language of Yael or the dialect of the chief of Qenaz?  
 The Hebrew language is my intimate, what do I care for  
 the language of the Arameans or the musings of Ashkenaz?  
 I shall anoint the Holy Tongue as my priest!  
 What could I possibly care for the babble of the rabble?  
 (De Piera 1941, 89; Targarona Borrás 2002, 263; Wacks 2015, 131)

The darkening cloud of persecution and Inquisition that characterized fifteenth-century Jewish life in the Iberian Peninsula led famously to their expulsion from Spain and its territories in 1492. Thousands fled to Portugal only to be forcibly converted in 1497. The Spanish Inquisition, established in 1478, violently policed the boundaries of religious identity, and brutally punished those *conversos* who chose to continue practicing Judaism or Islam. Despite this looming threat, there is ample evidence that many did just so. Sources indicate evidence of a thriving crypto-Judaism well into the seventeenth century and beyond, which begs the question of whether converso cultural life might also fall under the rubric of Sefarad as an idea.

The literary response to the destruction of organized Jewish life on the Iberian Peninsula was dramatic. As with the violent pogroms of 1391, poets wrote elegies (Heb. *kinot*) to commemorate the destruction of their communities, and historians such as Solomon ibn Verga documented (or perhaps ‘dramatized’ is more accurate) the events leading up to and following the expulsion, framing the unprecedented disaster in prophetic terms as punishment for a historic failure to keep God’s commandments and for the errors of cultural assimilation and conversion to Christianity (Baer 1947, 64).

After the expulsion of Jews from Spain and Portugal, there were officially no practicing, unbaptized Jews on the Peninsula; nonetheless the idea of Sefarad thrived in the Sephardic imaginary. In their new homes in Tetouan, Izmir, Salonica, and elsewhere, Sephardim continued to speak their language, primarily medieval Castilian, which came to dominate and assimilate the other Ibero-Romance dialects spoken by the exiles, who came from all areas of the Peninsula (Attig 2012, 836; Bunis 1992; Rodrigue Schwarzwald 1999).

Sephardic intellectuals such as Moses Almosnino and others in the sixteenth century, and those working in Italy and Amsterdam in the seventeenth, engaged in their own interpretation of Hispanic culture outside the borders of the Empire (Wacks 2015, 191–96; Borovaya 2017). Sephardim continued to sing the songs and tell the stories they had told in Spain, in a dialect of medieval Castilian to which the exiled speakers of other Ibero-Romance dialects such as Galician and Catalan eventually assimilated. Sephardic Spanish continued to be an important vehicle for the cultural life of the Sephardic diaspora until modernity, and as is well known, researchers in the twentieth century were still able to collect a tremendous amount of traditional material, some of it medieval, in Sephardic communities ranging from the Balkans to Los Angeles (Díaz Mas 2007, 72–150).

Over the centuries, Sephardic voices have expressed a mixture of bitterness and nostalgia for Sefarad. On the one hand, the trauma of Inquisition, persecution and expulsion (as well as the prohibition in Spain itself of practicing Judaism that was in force until the 1960s) made it less likely that Sephardim would actually seek to return to their ancestral homeland. On the other, many Sephardim kept alive the *idea* of Sefarad and the *idea* of an eventual return, perhaps modeled on the idea of a messianic redemption from diaspora from the Biblical homeland Zion that historically gave structure to Jewish ideas about history and time. Sephardic families often

kept keys that they believed were taken from their homes in Spain and passed them down for generations, more as a praxis of nostalgia than in hopes of an eventual return (Lévy and Olazabal 2014). The Spanish state has only recently joined in this nostalgia. In the early twentieth century, Spanish senator Ángel Pulido organized a campaign to reunite the Sephardim (and particularly those strategically located in North Africa and the Balkans) with their homeland (Alpert 2005; Bel Bravo 1993). Some Spanish officials saw in the Sephardim a latent corps of colonial administrators for Spanish Imperial designs in Africa, and cultural ambassadors of Spain in the Balkans and elsewhere (Rohr 2011). Franco's experiments with religious liberties in the 1960s and the cancellation of the Edict of Expulsion by King Juan Carlos in 1991 (Sloan 2009, 188) and offer of Spanish citizenship in 2015 (Emerguí 2014) did not yield a massive wave of 'repatriation' but speaks to a softening of Spanish policy toward Sephardim in the wake of the transition to democracy and the religious freedom promised by the Constitution of 1978 after Franco's death (Avni 1982, 201–14).

Today, there is a great deal of interest in Sefarad both among Sephardim as well as non-Sephardic Jews and non-Jews living in countries with historical ties to Sephardim and their descendants. Official Spanish and Israeli philosephardisms coincide with a revival of interest in Sephardic culture in among American Ashkenazi Jews (spurred by the rising importance of Latino culture in the US). In particular there is a great deal of interest in Sephardic music and food, and a booming Jewish tourism business in Spain and Portugal (Flesler and Pérez Melgosa 2008, 2010).

At the same time, Sephardic Spanish is simultaneously becoming extinct as a natural, vernacular language (Harris 1994) and experiencing a renaissance in poetry and music (Balbuena 2016). It continues to be the focus of academic study in the US, Europe, and Israel, where the Israeli government has established the Autoridad Nacional del Ladino (National Authority for Ladino) in 1997 with the goal of preserving and promoting the use and study of Sephardic Spanish. Most recently, the Real Academia Española is creating an Israeli Academy of the Spanish language formed of academic experts in Sephardic Spanish (Morales and Pita 2018).

Because the idea of Sefarad had always been constructed as a cultural and aesthetic ideal and not only as a specific historical moment, its post-Expulsion transformation into a diasporic imaginary (modeled in some ways after the common Jewish diasporic imaginary of the biblical Zion) has been able to thrive despite, and in some ways because of the fact that Sephardim have not lived openly in Spain or Portugal for hundreds of years. The idea of Sefarad continues to transform and thrive today both in Spain and elsewhere. The very recent revitalization of Jewish life in Spain is the latest chapter in this process, as nascent Jewish communities in cities such as Seville and Oviedo join the more established ones in Madrid and Barcelona. Though many of these new Spanish Jews come from other traditions, their communities are forging a neo-Sephardic culture that draws on historic Sephardic rite and tradition. In parallel to this process, Spanish and foreign academics continue to curate the intellectual and artistic legacies of Sefarad, providing us with an increasingly rich and nuanced understanding of the idea of Sefarad. The study of Sefarad as an idea or field of cultural practice has much to offer and enrich Medieval Iberian studies. More than just the study of a 'minority culture' that thrived within Andalusi or Christian societies, it is a different lens through which to view the world: if Hispanism sees the medieval Iberian world through Castilian, Christian eyes, and takes as its center the courts of the kings of Castile-Leon, the study of texts and cultural practices of Jewish Iberians see the world through two lenses: the Jewish and the Sephardic. It is a sort of double consciousness (Du Bois 1989, 3) by which Sephardim see themselves both as Jews constituted within a Jewish symbolic

order, and on the other hand see themselves reflected as *dhimmi* or Jewish subjects of Muslim or Christian majoritarian cultures. This cosmovision is significantly different from the Christological world order that characterized Christian sources and provides a very different lens through which to read Iberian literature and culture.

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