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Remembering Sepharad

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Accompanying Christopher Columbus on board the *Santa María* as it left the Iberian Peninsula on August 3, 1492, was Luis de Torres. De Torres, a polyglot, was the expedition's interpreter. Like many other Iberian Jews, de Torres had recently converted to Christianity in an attempt to preserve his right to live in Sepharad, the land Iberian Jews had inhabited for twelve hundred years. The Edict of Expulsion, dated March 31, 1492, deprived Jews of all their rights and gave them three months to put their affairs in order and go into exile. Implicit in the edict was exemption if Jews converted to Christianity. It was only implicit, of course, because neither the laws of the land nor the laws of the Catholic church provided for forced conversion. Although conversos would be granted full rights of citizenship, the Inquisition, in turn, had the right to investigate and persecute the "new" Christians in order to prevent deviations from church doctrine. Those who did not accept conversion would be expelled from the land forever. The fate of Sepharad was irreversible. Now we can only remember Sepharad.

Remembrance cannot restore that which has been lost, but it is essential to recognize the limitless power of human action to create as well as to destroy. Memory is not a matter of the past but a fundamental tool for analyzing the present and marching into the future with knowledge and conscience. Warnings about previous catastrophes caused by human actions are not enough to ensure a safe future. Remembrance should not be limited to the destructive chapters in the past, as it often is. The historiography of Sepharad has been overshadowed by the historiography of the Inquisition. That is to say, many know about the end of Sepharad, but far fewer know about its creation, its development, and the conditions that made her very existence possible. Certainly, knowledge of the past can

provide us with many lessons about the irreversibility of human actions. Moreover, it can provide the means to recognize the irreversibility and unpredictability of our actions in the present. This is why I believe that the remembrance of Sepharad should not be limited to her death but should also embrace her life.

Jews had inhabited the Iberian Peninsula since at least, the third century and lived continuously in it for at least twelve hundred years—longer than they had lived in any other area of the world. During the Middle Ages, the Iberian community became the most important Jewish community in the world. It was larger than all the other Jewish communities of Europe combined. To refer to the peninsula they inhabited, Jews used the Hebrew word *Sepharad*, from verse 20 of the Book of Obadiah. To refer to their culture, tradition and their own kind, they used the term *Sephardim*, meaning “from Sepharad.”

For centuries, the Iberian Peninsula was occupied and successively controlled by Romans, Visigoths, Muslims, and Christians. The Sephardim, therefore, always lived under the rule of non-Jewish peoples. The Sephardic contribution to Jewish and Western civilization at large remains unparalleled to this day.

Nevertheless, Sepharad was crushed on March 31, 1492. Although generations of historians have studied evidence left behind, more than five hundred years after the end of Sepharad they are still attempting to find answers to fundamental questions. Why did it happen? How did it happen? There is no agreement among experts on these or on many other issues regarding Sepharad, and great confusion reigns in the realm of popular knowledge.¹ Confusion, in turn, facilitates the manipulation of public opinion and knowledge. Remembrance is at stake. More academic scholarship is required, as is in-depth revision of popular versions of its history. It is a matter of transmission of knowledge. Knowledge is essential if we wish to anticipate and avoid catastrophes such as that of Sepharad.

Furthermore, we must seek answers to other fundamental questions regarding Sepharad. For not only is it her end that is of great importance. Of critical relevance to us, and to future generations, is the knowledge of her very existence, of the social conditions and actions that gave birth and nurtured that civilization. How did Jews, Muslims, and Christians coexist in the Iberian Peninsula? What conditions and actions made coexistence possible? What conditions and actions were necessary to produce the sophisticated advances in all areas of knowledge, culture, and art that characterized Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Iberia? How were those life

conditions reached? How did the leaders of those communities interact? How did the common men and women interact?

What Iberian Jews called Sepharad in the Middle Ages was not, and is not, the equivalent of Spain, for the nation we call Spain had not yet been born. Spain as we know it today was not yet an official entity in 1492.

Sepharad was an imagined community that was contemporary with many kingdoms.² Sepharad lived within those kingdoms and across them. At one time or another, Sepharad encompassed Hispanic Jews (from Roman Hispania), Andalusian Jews (those from Muslim al-Andalus), Castilian Jews, Aragonese Jews, Portuguese Jews, and Navarre Jews. They shared traditions and ways of thinking. They recognized each other as members of the Sephardic community, even if they were subjects of different kings, inhabitants of different lands, and spoke different languages.

Christianity came to the Iberian Peninsula with the Romans, who called the region Hispania. By the fourth century Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire, which included Hispania. In the fifth century the Roman Empire fell, and Hispania was occupied by non-Christian Visigoth tribes. But in 586 Recaredo, king of the Visigoths, converted to Christianity. Soon after, in 613, King Sisebuto ordered forced conversions in all of his dominions. This was the first official persecution suffered by the Iberian Jews.

In 711 Arab colonizers began conquering Christian Hispania and soon occupied most of the peninsula. For almost eight hundred years, from 711 to 1492, the lands of the Iberian Peninsula changed hands numerous times, and Iberian Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together in cities, towns, and villages. All peoples needed to adapt rapidly to each new circumstance—a new ruler, new laws, a new war with new allies and new enemies, a new language, and often a new religion. Only pluralistic societies produce citizens able to survive this kind of living conditions. Only rulers who understand plurality can effectively rule over such societies. And, in the end, only the daily and conscientious actions of average citizens can provide the context for coexistence.

Against all odds, medieval Iberians maintained long-lasting friendships and alliances and bought and borrowed from each other. Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived together, worked together, and fought together. There is ample historical evidence of this daily coexistence.³

Most Jews lived in small villages farming and sheep breeding. Some Jews lived in towns, where they were often shopkeepers, grocers, dyers, and weavers. Daily cooperation enabled collaboration on a different level. On the Iberian Peninsula, Muslims, Jews, and Christians shared their

knowledge and actively sought to complement each other's knowledge of the world and of humankind. In the great cities of medieval Iberia, such as Córdoba, Granada, Toledo, Barcelona, and Salamanca, interethnic groups of scholars worked incessantly on the transmission of knowledge old and new. Their patrons were Muslim caliphs, Christian kings, rabbis, and rich men of all kinds. Muslim artisans built Jewish temples, and Jewish temples were dedicated to Christian kings. Some Jewish scholars, such as Maimonides, wrote in Arabic. Christian leaders employed rabbis to translate the Bible as well as Arabic manuscripts of enormous scientific and philosophic importance.

Of course, mistrust and envy were also present in medieval Iberia, as in all human affairs at all times. But it can be said that in the Middle Ages Iberia was home to several pluralistic, multicultural societies. Moreover, the end of plural and multicultural Iberia historically coincides with the age of intolerance, the manipulation of inherited knowledge and collective memory, religious fanaticism, and greed and imperialism in the name of one god and of one (Christian) nation.

Two hundred years after first entering the peninsula, an Arab ruler began the process of independence of the Islamic Iberian state, al-Andalus, from Baghdad, which was then the center of the Islamic world. In the tenth century, 'Abd al-Rahman III founded an independent caliphate whose capital was Córdoba. Under his rule, Jews and Christians were considered *dhimmis* (People of the Book) who were to be protected. They were granted freedom to worship and to practice traditions in exchange for obedience to Islamic rule and payment of special taxes. And they were granted access to education. The interaction with Andalusí Muslims provided the Sephardim with access to vast areas of Eastern and Western knowledge: astronomy, astrology, medicine, philosophy, art, commerce, literature, geography, algebra, and history. In fact, for a long period, the Jews of al-Andalus used the Arabic language even when writing on religious subjects. But it was also in that Muslim land that Hebrew secular poetry was born, and it was in that land that biblical Hebrew was reborn and chosen as the classical language for all Jews.

Biblical Hebrew came to life again, in part, because 'Abd al-Rahman III pursued pluralistic policies that enabled the production, distribution, and sharing of all kinds of knowledge among his subjects. 'Abd al-Rahman chose Hasdai ibn Shaprut (b. Jaén, 910), one of the greatest Sephardim of all times, to be the representative of the Jewish community at the royal court. With the support of the caliph, Hasdai brought foreign Jewish philosophers, scientists, grammarians, poets, and talmudic scholars to Cór-

doba. Their mission was to enter into intellectual dialogue with the native Jews and to contribute to Andalusí culture. And, together with the Sephardim, the newly arrived *dhimmis* set the stage for the Jewish religious renaissance in Muslim territory.

Among those who chose to move to al-Andalus was Dunash ibn Labrat, born in Fez and trained in Baghdad. Dunash's greatest accomplishment was the writing of Hebrew verse that followed, not Hebrew meter, but the meter employed by Muslims in Arabic poetry. Soon Jewish poets began adopting the forms and genres of Arabic poetry. But they wrote in Hebrew, thus creating a new type of Hebrew literature. Then the Jews of al-Andalus developed a new type of synagogue poetry. Instead of using the language of rabbinic literature, they chose to adopt biblical Hebrew as their classical language, and this, in turn, produced the renaissance of the language of the Hebrew Bible. Among the most important Hebrew poets of Sepharad are Samuel Nagid (933–1055), Salomon ibn Gabirol (ca. 1020–ca. 1057), and Moses ibn Ezra (ca. 1055–ca. 1135).

Hasdai ibn Shaprut must also be credited for the initiation of the great scientific corpus produced in Hebrew in al-Andalus. Under his patronage, translations of fundamental Arabic works into the Hebrew language were produced. In addition, Hebrew astrolabes were constructed and Hebrew astronomical tables developed.

The Córdoba caliphate split in the eleventh century and Muslim Iberia was fragmented into twenty small kingdoms, with the cultural center in Granada. For some time, favorable circumstances for the distribution, production, and sharing of knowledge among Jews and Muslims remained in place.

The Aristotelian worldview that permeated medieval Arabic civilization deeply influenced Jewish thought. The best example is of course the great Moshe Ben Maimon (b. Córdoba, 1135), known to Christians as Maimonides and to Muslims as Abu Imram Musa ben Maimun ibn Abdalá. Arguably the most accomplished of the Sephardim, Maimonides wrote a systematic code of Jewish Law (Mishne Torah), a commentary on the Mishnah, several treatises on medicine, and *The Guide to the Perplexed*, a masterpiece of Judaic philosophy.

Despite all these cultural, social, and scientific advances, there were constant wars between the Iberian Muslim kingdoms. Two new contingents of Arabs, the Almohads and Almoravids, arrived in al-Andalus. With them, a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic rule was imposed, and a policy of persecution and forced conversion was initiated. Daily life became unbearable for Christians and Jews alike. Many left the land, among

them Maimonides.⁴ Some converted to Islam. Religious fundamentalism and the inability to live in a pluralistic society marked the beginning of the end for al-Andalus.⁵

As pluralism disappeared from al-Andalus, the cultural center of Iberia moved to the north, to the kingdoms ruled by Christians: Castile, Navarre, Aragon, and Portugal. Andalusí Jews, fluent in Arabic and with ample knowledge of Muslim customs, laws, and thought, now began serving the Christian courts as translators, administrators, and diplomatic advisers. Jewish refugees from al-Andalus settled in Christian territories. At the same time, sensing the weakening of Muslim al-Andalus, Christian kings began to increase their incursions into Muslim territory. Once again Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived together in villages, towns, and cities. Once again they had to adapt to constantly changing circumstances.

Arabic science and thought reached Christianity through the translation into Latin of Arabic texts.⁶ Many of the translators were Jewish. The Sephardim now used Hebrew instead of Arabic as their language for writing. But in Toledo (Castile's capital), under the rule of King Alfonso X (1252–1284), all kinds of texts were now being translated into Latin as well as into the vernacular Castilian language. Again, interethnic groups of scholars and translators were formed. Thus Iberian Jews, Muslims, and Christians together were responsible for the transmission of knowledge into Latin and Castilian. The first great figures of Iberian Jewish science were the Aragonese Abraham bar Hiyya and Abraham ibn Ezra in the twelfth century. Two Castilian Jews, Isaac ibn Sid and Jehuda ibn Mosca, the astronomers who produced the famous Castilian astronomical tables for King Alfonso X, followed them. Soon Jews began to contribute to Castilian literature as well. Such was the case of Shem Tob ben Arduziel (Don Sen Tob de Carrion), author of *Proverbios morales*.⁷

As Christians gained in the ongoing territorial wars with Muslims, anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim legislation spread. Christian fundamentalism began to take center stage. In some instances, the Christian kings protected Jews. In fact, in most of the Christian territories, Jews were legally under the direct jurisdiction of the kings.

During the early fourteenth century, conversion to Christianity spread among the Sephardim living in the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon. Some rabbis and other important leaders, such as Rabbi Abner of Burgos (Alfonso de Valladolid) and Rabbi Salomon ha-Levi⁸ (Pablo de Santa María), converted publicly.

Despite the deteriorating situation, Hebrew poetry continued to flourish. Among the most important Hebrew poets of the period are Salo-

mon Bonafed and the conversos Salomon Piera and Vidal Benveniste.⁹ In the kingdom of Aragon the art of Hebrew manuscript illumination reached its apogee. The majority of the codices produced were, of course, Bibles commissioned by Christians. However, the production of Hebrew prayer books and medical and scientific treatises also continued. In 1348, for example, we find Levi ben Isaac Hiyo copying Maimonides's *Guide to the Perplexed* for a Jewish patron, Menahem Bezalel.¹⁰

How could this be achieved? Daily life, as well as intellectual life, was still possible for the Sephardim. They were still legal subjects under the direct jurisdiction of the kings. Their communities were still vibrant. Their religious practices and traditions were legal. Jews served the kings in official capacities. They were part of the land. Between 1336 and 1357 Samuel Halevi, treasurer of Peter I, king of Castile, financed the construction of a new synagogue in Toledo. Samuel dedicated it to the Christian king and employed Muslim artisans (*mudejars*) in its construction.¹¹ The dedication, which was written in Hebrew, uses Arabic meter. Although Halevi and his family were later imprisoned, tortured, and executed on orders from the same king, the Jewish temple built and decorated by Muslims and dedicated to a Christian king has managed to survive to the present time.¹²

Jews were still free to worship and to practice their traditions. They bought and sold and freely practiced their professions. Friendships were still being made and alliances kept. Pluralistic relations still prevailed,¹³ which enraged the fanatics. Thus this was a time when synagogues were being built and at the same time destroyed. Fanatic Christian preachers traveled the lands inciting Jews to convert and Christians to violence.¹⁴ The Christian kings intervened numerous times, but the situation only worsened.

On March 15, 1391, the infamous anti-Jewish Father Ferrán Martínez, preached in Seville.¹⁵ Following his sermon, anti-Jewish violence exploded in the city. Seville's Jewish quarters were sacked on June 6. Then the violence spread to the Jewish neighborhoods of all Christian kingdoms. Mass conversions to Christianity followed. These conversions would dramatically complicate matters for the Iberian Jews who remained Jews as well as for those who converted.

Because of the mass conversions, by the fifteenth century the ranks of Iberian Christians had expanded considerably. The conversos, or "new" Christians, acquired the same social and political rights that the "old" Christians enjoyed and, therefore, could avoid all the restrictions that were being imposed on Iberian Jews.¹⁶ However, religious fanaticism did not stop with conversion; it only increased, fueled by envy, bad faith, igno-

rance, political strategy, fear, and hate. We do not know yet in which proportions.

In 1413 a public dispute between Christian and Jewish scholars took place in Tortosa. The goal was to determine which was the superior and true faith. Representing the Christian side was Jerónimo de Santa Fé, a first-generation converso whose Jewish name had been Joshua Halorquí. This formal dispute among scholars ended with thousands of conversions to Christianity.

As the Sephardic communities were dwindling dramatically as a result of conversion, Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah were replacing traditional Jewish learning. There is evidence of an increase of messianic speculation among the Sephardim as well.¹⁷ Perhaps this was an attempt to imagine a future free of unpredictability. However, biblical and talmudic scholarship did not cease.

In 1433 Rabbi Moses Arragel completed a translation and commentary of the Jewish Bible for a Christian patron, Luis González de Guzmán. Arragel worked under the supervision of two friars. Even later, in 1473, Abraham Zacut (1452–1515?) wrote a set of Hebrew astronomical tables for the University of Salamanca.¹⁸ Amid the chaos and the fear, perhaps there were some pockets of plurality. Perhaps some judged the end of Sepharad impossible. Perhaps some were determined to resist. We need to know more.

By the end of the fifteenth century, the “new” Christians were as much the target of the Christian zealots as were those Jews who resisted conversion. Some conversos might have thought of conversion as a tool to avoid what they considered irreversible circumstances. But, again, the future proved unpredictable. Conversos and their descendants were accused by Christian fanatics of being heretics who were still practicing their old religion in whole or in part. Christian heretics were under the jurisdiction of the Roman Inquisition while Jews were not. It was only a matter of time until prominent Christian voices rose to demand the establishment of an Inquisition in Castile.¹⁹ Recent conversos as well as those born Christian but of converso descent were now trapped by the very same accusation: heresy.

By this time, Christians controlled much of the Iberian Peninsula. Furthermore, the strategic marriage between Isabel, queen of Castile, and Fernando, king of Aragon, had united their separate kingdoms. Muslim Iberia was reduced to a single kingdom, Granada. And the relations between Jews and conversos were openly hostile.²⁰

Leaders of religious orders received permission from the monarchs and the pope to create an Inquisition in Castile. With it, they claimed, it would be possible to eliminate rampant religious deviation. In 1480 the Castilian Inquisition was established, against the opposition of the Castilian conversos. Evidence shows that its methods of operation were organized terror and fabricated accusations against conversos.²¹

As the Inquisition organized the persecution of the “newest heretics,” the conversos, Inquisitors also sought to convince the monarchs of the need to expel the Jews. There was too much interaction between Jews and former Jews. The Inquisition had no jurisdiction over Jews,²² and it was the Jews, said the Inquisitors, who were preventing conversos from being true Christians. Isabel and Fernando granted the Inquisitors’ wishes.

First, the Sephardim were expelled from Christian Andalusia (then part of the kingdom of Castile) in 1482; then they were expelled from the kingdom of Aragon in 1486. But expulsions were not enough for the Inquisitors. And, again, they got from Isabel and Fernando what they wanted. In 1492 all Sephardim were expelled from all of Castile and Aragon, as well as from all other territories under the control of the monarchs.²³ Only if they converted to Christianity would they be allowed to remain in their lands. There is evidence that the Jewish community had not anticipated the expulsion.²⁴

Immediately, some Sephardim opted for exile, some for conversion. Of those who chose exile, most left, by land or sea, for Portugal, Navarre, or North Africa. Some never made it to safety. Some were unable to reach exile and returned to convert and save their lives. Others reached what they thought was safety in Portugal and Navarre.²⁵

But just six years later, in 1497, as a condition of the marriage between King Manoel of Portugal and Isabel (daughter of Isabel and Fernando), all Jews who wished to remain so were expelled from the kingdom of Portugal. A year later Jews who were not willing to convert were expelled from Navarre. Sepharad was irreversibly gone.

Too many fundamental questions remain unanswered. We do not know enough about the life of Sepharad and, in spite of the wealth of writing, we do not know enough about her death. In my opinion, an accurate remembrance of Sepharad’s construction and destruction will materialize, in the present or in the future, only when and if interethnic teams of students seek the necessary knowledge together. The historiography of Sepharad requires such collaboration. Our current political circumstances might seem contrary to this collaboration, but at the same time it is this

lack of collaboration that fuels the political circumstances.²⁰ The production and distribution of knowledge is at stake. Remembrance, and our present and future, is at stake.

America, January 2003. José Alperovich, an Argentinean federal senator, is running for the governorship of the province of Tucumán. The elections are set to take place in March or April 2003. While most electoral polls are on his side, Alperovich is facing an old new challenge. In spite of popular support, some leaders are questioning his qualifications. Their opposition stems from the fact that Alperovich is Jewish and, thus, they say, cannot comply with Article 80 of the provincial constitution, which requires the governor to take a Christian oath. For Alperovich's challengers—whose leader is Tucumán's Roman Catholic archbishop, Monsignor Luis Villalba—this means that the governor must be Catholic. Article 80 was written in 1990.²⁷

NOTES

1. For differing and sometimes opposite interpretations, see Roth 1937; Baer 1961–1966; Netanyahu 1995; Roth 1995; Gitlitz 1996; Kamen 1997.
2. In 1492 Queen Isabel and King Fernando, known as the Catholic Monarchs, had jurisdiction over most parts of the Iberian Peninsula. The Christian territories of Portugal and Navarre were not under their control, and Muslim Granada was conquered only in 1492. In other words, Fernando and Isabel were not sovereigns of "Spain." Immediately before their marriage (1469), the situation was even more fragmented. Castile and Aragon were independent Christian kingdoms, with different laws and customs. Even earlier, in the twelfth, eleventh, and tenth centuries, the fragmentation was more pronounced.
3. See Mann, Glick, and Dodds 1992; Roth 1995.
4. Maimonides left in 1148 and settled in Egypt, where he died in 1204.
5. The end would come in 1492 with the conquest of the last surviving Muslim kingdom, Granada.
6. Some of these translators were Petrus Alfonsi (b. 1062, convert), Mair Abulafia (d. 1244), Abraham ibn al-Fahkhar (d. 1240), Meshulam Piera, and Abraham bar Hiyya.
7. See Sen Tob [1345] 1974.
8. See Roth 1995.
9. See Scheindlin 1992.
10. See Sed-Rajna 1992.
11. See Dodds 1992.
12. See Estow 1995.

13. See Roth 1995.
14. See Netanyahu 1995; Roth 1995; Kamen 1997.
15. See Roth 1937.
16. On the restrictions imposed on the Sephardim, see Roth 1995; Kamen 1997. On the social success of conversos, see Roth 1995.
17. See Roth 1995.
18. Zacuto's tables were to accompany Columbus on his 1492 expedition.
19. A Catalan Inquisition had been active since the twelfth century. In 1483 the infamous Tomás de Torquemada was appointed General Inquisitor for Aragón-Catalonia. See Roth 1995.
20. On this issue, see Roth 1937; Roth 1995; Netanyahu 1995; Kamen 1997.
21. See Roth 1995.
22. The Inquisition only had jurisdiction over the Christians, "old" and "new." Jews, as long as they remained within their faith, could not be persecuted. Once converted, however, they fell strictly under the Inquisition's control.
23. See the Edict of Expulsion in Raphael 1992, pp. 189–193.
24. See Roth 1995.
25. There is no agreement among historians about the number of Jews who left the peninsula in 1492 and after.
26. My gratitude to Shaari Neretin, Donna Penn, and Susan Krause for their help with this work.
27. As reported by the *Boston Globe*, January 14, 2003, p. A14.

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