

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING*Whose Golden Age? Some Thoughts on Jewish-Christian Relations in Medieval Iberia*

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So much of our understanding of Jewish life in the Middle Ages is bound up with our own hopes and fears regarding religious interaction. In Spain, where the medieval period is still regarded as the crucible of modern Spanish society, a longstanding debate continues to rage over the contributions of Jews and Muslims during this formative period.¹ Some have argued that their language and culture is essentially foreign and inimical to the inherently Roman-Catholic spirit of Spanish society. Those who follow this argument have generally seen the religious and political unification of Catholic Spain that took place at the close of the Middle Ages as marking the realization of the nation's destiny. Against this view, others have countered that it was precisely in the medieval period, in which Christians, Muslims, and Jews came together to form a dynamic society fueled by cross-cultural interaction, that the true Spanish character was forged. This faction sees the fall of Muslim Granada and the subsequent expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492 as a regrettable collapse of a Golden Age of Spanish society, and the first step on the long road to cultural decline. Every key political issue that has arisen in Spain over the last hundred years, from the Civil War and the long tenure of Francisco Franco to the present debate over North African immigration, has been read against this highly charged discourse regarding the nature of the country's national heritage.

Nor are the Spaniards alone in their continued engagement with these questions. The meaning of Spain's unique cultural legacy has also been one of the most contested topics within the field of Jewish Studies. For the German-Jewish historians of the nineteenth century, the material and scholarly success achieved by the Jews of medieval Spain represented the golden mean of religious devotion and social integration. Almost immediately, however, Judaica scholars began to modify this image of inter-religious cooperation in medieval Spain. They argued that Jewish life in Muslim al-Andalus might represent a Golden Age of intellectual productivity and acculturation, but the subsequent period under Hispano-Christian rule was one of deteriorating status for the Jews. Yitzhak Baer, perhaps the most influential historian of Spanish Jewry of the twentieth century, took this revision of the Golden age paradigm one step further by comparing the Jewish experience in Christian Iberia unfavorably with that of Jewish society in the rest of medieval Latin Europe.² If Jewish life under Hispano-Christian rule was far less golden than that of their

¹ Henri Lapeyre, "Deux interprétations de l'histoire d'Espagne: Américo Castro et Claudio Sánchez-Albornoz," *Annales E.S.C.* 20 (1965): 1015-37; Thomas Glick, *Islamic and Christian Spain in the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1976), 6-13; and Maria Rosa Menocal "Visions of al-Andalus," in *The Literature of al-Andalus*, ed. Maria Rosa Menocal and Raymond P. Scheindlin and Michael Sells (New York, 2000), 1-24.

² Recent studies have come to challenge this dichotomy. See for instance the collected essays in *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Michael A. Signer and John Van Engen (Notre Dame, IN, 2001); Ivan Marcus "A Jewish-Christian Symbiosis: The Culture of Early Ashkenaz," in *Cultures of the Jews*, ed. David Biale (New York, 2002), 449-516; and Jonathan Elukin, *Living Together Living Apart: Rethinking Jewish-Christian Relations in*

Andalusi predecessors, Baer argues that its members were also far less pious and less dedicated to the particularities of Jewish tradition than their contemporaries in northern European, or Ashkenazi, society. The portrait of the Jewish experience in medieval Spain that juxtaposed the Jews' "Golden Age" in al-Andalus with their oppression and cultural stagnation under Christian rule became one of the foundational paradigms in the field of Jewish Studies. Indeed, it retains much of its influence today despite repeated criticism and modification.³

This brief historiographic overview suggests that any effort to recover the true nature of Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Iberia must address at least two essential problems. The first, and perhaps most salient, problem that presents itself is how to interpret the seemingly contradictory evidence that suggests both inter-religious symbiosis as well as antagonism between these two communities? The second issue I would like to consider here is one that has received far less attention, but that may offer a more fruitful way of thinking about Jewish-Christian interaction in this and other eras. Namely, is it profitable, or even accurate, to speak of religious interaction between Jews and Christians in such sweeping terms?

Evidence of a Golden Age

If we are to define a Golden Age of Jewish-Christian interaction as a period of amicable relations, prosperity and mutual creativity, then there is certainly enough evidence to support its application to medieval Spain during the high and late Middle Ages. Recent studies have begun to challenge the popular notion that the final centuries of Jewish life in Christian Iberia were marked by inexorable and inevitable decline.⁴ Jewish political status, economic diversity, and general affluence during most of this period was comparable to that which they had enjoyed in al-Andalus, and scholarship on Jewish literary activity in Christian Spain has emphasized both a continuation and expansion of intellectual categories developed under Muslim rule.⁵

Perhaps the most striking example of interfaith cooperation in Christian Iberia is the collaborative effort to study and translate the vast collection of scientific works from Arabic into Latin, Hebrew, and various Romance languages that took place over the course of the high Middle Ages. During this period, Jewish translators played an integral role in the transmission of Greco-Arabic philosophical, medical, and astronomical texts into the kingdoms of Christian Iberia and beyond. Abraham bar Hiyya (d. ca. 1136), Abraham ibn Ezra (d. 1167) and Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, d. 1204), all of who emigrated from Iberia during the tumultuous twelfth century, acted as vehicles for the dissemination of a scientific knowledge into Christian Europe.⁶ Succeeding generations of Jewish scholars did not need to flee the peninsula in order for their translations and commentaries to reach their Christian counterparts. As the kings of Castile-León, Portugal, and the Crown of Aragon expanded their domains southward, they displayed a keen interest in the acquisition of knowledge as well as territory. These monarchs, together with a host of other

the Middle Ages (Princeton, 2007). Other scholars remain unconvinced by this revisionist approach. See David Berger, "A Generation of Scholarship of Jewish-Christian Interaction in the Medieval World," *Tradition* 38 (2004): 4-14; and David Nirenberg's review of *Living Together Living Apart* in *The New Republic*, February 13, 2008, 46-50.

³ Ismar Schorsch, "The Myth of Sephardic Supremacy," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 34 (1989): 47-66; and David N. Myers, *Re-inventing the Jewish Past: European Jewish Intellectuals and the Zionist Return to History* (New York, 1995), 109-128.

⁴ Eleazar Gutwirth, "Towards Expulsion: 1391-1492," in *Spain and the Jews*, ed. Elie Kedourie (London, 1992), 51-73; and Mark D. Meyerson, *A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton, 2004).

⁵ Jonathan Decker, "Literatures of Medieval Sepharad," in *Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry: From the Golden Age of Spain to Modern Times*, ed. Zion Zohar (New York, 2005), 77-100, esp. 86-92.

⁶ Although Maimonides settled in Egypt, his work reached Europe via the translations of the Provençal Jew, Samuel ben Judah ibn Tibbon of Lunel, whose family was also of Andalusi origin.

nobles, bishops, abbots and leaders of Military Orders sought access to the intellectual riches of the Muslim cities that began to pass under Christian rule. They commissioned Latin and Romance translations of Arabic works from any scholars familiar with both languages. The Jewish contribution to this process of intellectual and cultural transmission reached its zenith in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries with the so-called School of Translators of Toledo. This popular term actually represents a wide variety of projects supported by diverse patrons including Toledo's archbishop Rodrigo Jimenez de Rada (1170-1247) and King Alfonso X of Castile (r. 1252-1284). The *Alfonsine Tables*, a set of astronomical calculations produced by a joint effort of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars, was emblematic of this vast enterprise. Jewish translators were also active in the Crown of Aragon, where they rendered Arabic medical treatises into Latin and Catalan.⁷ This collaborative effort of translation and cultural transmission had a transformative effect on the understanding of the sciences in northern Iberia and throughout Christian Europe.⁸ The translation movement also brought Jewish texts to the attention of a new, Christian readership. By the fifteenth century, vernacular translations of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* and Judah Ha-Levi's *Book of the Kuzari* made these landmarks of Jewish scholarship available to their Christian counterparts.⁹ Finally, Jews also made more direct contributions to the advancement of Christian knowledge as teachers and royal advisors. Abraham Zacuto taught astronomy at Christian universities in Castile and Aragon before serving as royal astronomer to João II of Portugal (r. 1481-1495). Abraham Crescas and his son, Judah, were mapmakers from Mallorca who flourished in the latter half of the fourteenth century, producing charts for the Aragonese and French royal courts. Their world maps represent a landmark of cartography and a major contribution to the Age of Discovery. Their fame was such that Prince Henry, the Navigator, asked Abraham to help train Portuguese sea captains.¹⁰

Jewish participation in Hispano-Christian society went far beyond these sorts of intellectual pursuits. Jewish translators also helped to negotiate the formal transfer of power when Muslim cities fell to Christian forces, and played an active role in the administration of the newly conquered territories. Indeed, the Jews' position within Iberian society was also shaped by the unique cultural composition of the region. In Iberia, where medieval life was defined by centuries of warfare between Christian and Muslim forces, the Jews represented a group that threatened neither Christian nor Muslim sovereignty and whose ability to act as diplomatic and mercantile go-betweens helped to establish their position as a valued, and thus protected, minority under both Muslim and Christian rule. As they transitioned from al-Andalus to the Christian kingdoms of the north, the upper echelons of Jewish society maintained their positions as royal physicians, diplomats, tax collectors and scribes.¹¹ Jews of lesser standing became equally integrated into the

⁷ Yom Tov Assis, "The Jewish Physician in Medieval Spain," in *Medicine and Medical Ethics in Medieval and Early Modern Spain*, ed. Samuel S. Kottke and Luis García Ballester (Jerusalem, 1996), 33-49, at 37. Translations into Hebrew also made these works available to European Jewish readers who were not familiar with Arabic.

⁸ David Romano, "El papel judío en la transmisión de cultura," *Hispania Sacra* 60 (1988): 955-978; and Shlomo Sela, "Contactos científicos entre judíos y cristianos en el siglo XII: el caso de 'Libro de las tablas astronómicas: de Abraham Ibn Ezra en su versión latina y hebrea,'" *Miscelánea de estudios árabes y hebraicos* 45 (1996): 185-222.

⁹ For Hispano-Jewish scholars and their interest in Christian literature during the 14th and 15th centuries, see Gutwirth, "Towards Expulsion," 60, Benjamin Gampel, "Letter to a Wayward Teacher," for Ha-Levi's exposure to Christian esoteric literature.

¹⁰ On Zacuto see Victor Crespo, "Abraão Zacuto e a ciência náutica dos descobrimentos portugueses," in *Diáspora e expansão: os judeus e os descobrimentos portugueses*, ed. António Manuel Hespanha (Lisbon, 1997), 119-128; Bernard Goldstein, "Abraham Zacut and the Medieval Hebrew Astronomical Tradition," *Journal of the History of Astronomy* 29 (1998), 177-186. On Crescas see Meyer Kayserling, *Christopher Columbus and the Participation of the Jews in the Spanish and Portuguese Discoveries*, (Albuquerque, 2002 [1894]), 4-9.

¹¹ David Romano, "Judíos escribanos y trujamanes de árabe en la Corona de Aragón (reinados de Jaime 1 a Jaime 2)," *Sefarad* 38 (1978): 71-105.

fabric of urban society as artisans and merchants who formed a variety of social and economic contacts with their Christian and Muslim neighbors.

The result of this acculturation of Jews at all levels of society was that their language, material, culture, and general worldview became shaped by the cultural milieu of Hispano-Christian society as it was by Jewish customs and traditions. The "Hispanicity" of the Jews of medieval Iberia stands as a sharp rejoinder to those who would limit the Golden Age of Iberian Jewry to the period under Muslim rule. Alongside those modern scholars who find fault with the rather simplistic comparison of Jewish life in Muslim and Christian Spain, there exists a living tradition within the Jewish world that also challenges the negative image of the Jewish experience in Christian Iberia. The Jews of North African and the Middle Eastern heritage, many of whom trace their ancestry back to medieval Spain, proudly refer to themselves as Sephardim, a Hebrew term that continues to associate them with Spain.¹² For these Sephardic Jews, their cultural identity has been tied to the language and culture of Christian Iberia more than that of Muslim al-Andalus. Indeed, for centuries after 1492, Spanish and Portuguese travelers to North Africa or the Levant would return with tales of encounters with Jews who still spoke a form of medieval Castilian, and who spoke longingly of their ancestral homes in Spain and Portugal.¹³

An Ambiguous Relationship

Yet, it is not possible to give a true assessment of religious interaction during this period by merely cataloging Jewish achievements or evidence of Jewish-Christian cooperation. One might note, for instance, that Alfonso X of Castile, the same king who fostered the process of inter-religious translations, also produced a number of other works that offer a much more complex image of Jewish-Christian relations. The *Book of Chess and Games*, and the *Songs of Holy Mary*, both of which are intellectual landmarks of Alfonso's brilliant court, contain beautiful illustrations of daily life that depict members of Castile's three religious communities interacting peacefully with one another. However, these same works also contain images that openly denigrate Jews and Judaism.¹⁴ Similar evidence of Christian ambivalence toward the Jews is reflected in the great Castilian legal code, *Las Siete Partidas*, a work that would become one of Alfonso's most influential projects. The *Siete Partidas* demonstrates the crown's dedication to preserving Roman law, including the classification of Castilian Jewry as a legal and protected minority group. Yet Alfonso's code also underscores the increasingly precarious nature of Jewish life at a time when the spirit of Christian reform began to sweep across Iberia. Thus while the king forbids Christian desecration of synagogues, since these are places "where the name of

¹² The biblical term "Sepharad," which became associated with the Iberian Peninsula among medieval Jews, continues to be used in modern Hebrew to refer to the Spanish state.

¹³ Fr. Pantaleão de Aveiro, *Itinerario da Terra Sancta e suas Particularidades*, ed. Antonio Baião (Coimbra, 1927), 284-86; Mercedes García Arenal and Gerald Albert Wieggers, *A Man of Three Worlds: Samuel Pallache, A Moroccan Jew in Catholic and Protestant Europe* (Baltimore, 2003), 39-52; Henry Kamen, "The Mediterranean and the Expulsion of the Spanish Jews in 1492," *Past and Present* 119 (1988): 30-55, at 55; G. H. Tucker, "To Louvain and Antwerp, and Beyond: The Contrasting Itineraries of Diogo Pires (Didacus Pyrrhus Lusitanus, 1517-99) and João Rodrigues de Castelo Branco (Amatus Lusitanus, 1511-68)," in *The Expulsion of the Jews and Their Emigration to the Southern Low Countries (15th-16th C.)*, ed. Luc Dequeker and Werner Verbeke (Leuven, 1998), 98; and Eliyahu Ashtor, *Toldot ha-Yehudim be-Mitsrayim ve-Suryah*, 3 vols. (1944-1970), vol. 2, 530.

¹⁴ Olivia Remie Constable, "Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile: The *Libro de ajedrez* of Alfonso X el Sabio," *Speculum* 82 (2007): 301-347; John E. Keller and Annette Grant Cash, *Daily Life Depicted in the Cantigas de Santa Maria* (Lexington, KY, 1998); and Vikki Hatton and Angus Mackay, "Anti-Semitism in the Cantigas de Santa Maria," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 60 (1983): 189-199.

God is praised," he also lends credence to the rumors of Jewish blood libel that had begun to spread throughout his kingdom.¹⁵

Alfonso's response to accusations that Jews sacrificed Christian children on Good Friday in a reenactment of the crucifixion reflects an effort to safeguard Jewish rights, but also signals the increased need for such protection. Indeed, as the Christian wars of conquest gave way to a long period of political consolidation during the late thirteenth century, an atmosphere of popular religious zeal and missionary activity began to set in throughout Christian Iberia. Alfonso's father-in-law, Jaume I of Aragon (r. 1231-1276), spent most of his long reign waging war against his Muslim rivals. But his military successes and the steady rise of missionary activity among the new Dominican order led the crusading king known as *el Conqueridor* (the Conqueror) to redirect some of his prodigious energies from his Muslim enemies to his Jewish subjects. In 1263, Jaume famously presided over a great public disputation over rabbinic theology in Barcelona, and actively supported Christian missionaries in their attempts to preach to and convert the Jews throughout the later part of his reign.¹⁶

Royal recognition of ecclesiastical and popular anti-Judaism, whether tacit or active, continued throughout the fourteenth century. During the Castilian Civil War of the 1360s, the rebellious Enrique de Trastámara (r. 1369-79) fanned the flames of Christian disaffection with the Jews as a means of garnering political support. During his attempt to seize the throne from his half-brother, Pedro I (r. 1350-1369), Enrique depicted the king as unfit due to his excessive dependence upon Jewish and Muslim advisors, and promised to oust the infidels from the royal court if he were to be made king. Enrique's persistent demonization of the Jews incited popular riots against the Jews of Toledo (1355) and Valladolid (1366). However, after finally ascending the throne in 1369, Enrique quickly reverted to the standard policy of utilizing Jewish courtiers and civil servants to administer the kingdom.

Such tensions ran both ways across the religious divide. Jewish scholars were openly hostile to Christianity even as they displayed a significant level of acculturation to Christian society. Indeed, perhaps the most notable Jewish composition in medieval Catalan, *Refutation of Christian Dogmas*, was a polemical work by Hasdai Crescas (d. 1410), one of the leading lights of Catalan and Aragonese Jewish society during the height of Christian missionary activity in the late fourteenth century.¹⁷ Similarly, Samuel Usque's sixteenth-century *Consolation for the Tribulation of Israel* is at once a landmark of Portuguese prose and a passionate appeal to his fellow Conversos to flee Spain and Portugal in order to revert to Judaism.¹⁸

¹⁵ Dwayne Carpenter, *Alfonso X and the Jews: An Edition and Commentary on Siete Partidas 7.24 "de los judíos"* (Berkeley, 1986); and Robert I. Burns, "Jews and Moors in the "Siete Partidas" of Alfonso X the Learned: A Background Perspective," in *Medieval Spain – Culture, Conflict and Coexistence*, ed. Roger Collins and Anthony Goodman (New York, 2002), 46-62. The situation was much the same in the Kingdom of Portugal, where the crown generally sought to protect Jewish status, but often had to acquiesce to the demands of the other estates that their rights be restricted. Maria José Ferro Tavares, *Os Judeus em Portugal no século XV*, 2 vols. (Lisbon, 1982-84), vol. 1, 215-225.

¹⁶ Robert Chazan, "The Barcelona 'disputation' of 1263," *Speculum* 52 (1977): 824-842; and Robert Chazan, *Daggers of Faith: Thirteenth-Century Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response* (Berkeley, 1989). On Jaume's declaration regarding forced sermons, see Solomon Grayzel, *The Church and the Jews in the XIIIth Century* (New York, 1966), 254-256. The Franciscan order was also active in the mission to the Jews. See Jill R. Webster, "Conversion and Coexistence: The Franciscan Mission in the Crown of Aragon," *Iberia and the Mediterranean World of the Middle Ages II*, ed. Paul E. Chevedden et al. (Leiden, 1996), 163-177.

¹⁷ Hasdai Crescas, *Refutation of Christian Principles*, ed. and trans. Daniel J. Lasker (Albany, 1992).

¹⁸ See Yosef Yerushalmi' introductory essay "A Jewish Classic in the Portuguese Language," in *Consolacão as Tribulações de Israel*, ed. Jose V. de Pinta Martins (Lisbon, 1989), 15-123.

The ambivalent nature of this cross-cultural exchange can also be seen in the new intellectual circles dedicated to the study of mystical traditions, or *kabbalah*, which began to emerge in both Castile and the Crown of Aragon toward the end of the thirteenth century. This increased interest in the esoteric nature of Judaism opened up a new point of contact between Jewish and Christian intellectuals who had already found a connection through the study of Greco-Arabic science and philosophy. Christian theologians ranging from Raymond Lull in thirteenth-century Cataluña to Alfonso de la Torre in fifteenth-century Castile demonstrated an awareness and profound engagement with Jewish mystical texts and ideals.¹⁹

However, as with so many of these inter-faith associations, the diffusion of mystical thought among Jewish and Christian intellectuals cannot merely be interpreted as evidence of religious symbiosis. For Iberian Jews, religious interaction with Christians could not only lead to an appreciation of Christian learning, but also conversion. Solomon ha-Levi was a leading rabbinic authority in fourteenth-century Castile, before his encounter with an esoteric Christian text led him to convert to Christianity, and assume a new identity as Pablo de Santa María.²⁰ He was soon followed by his pupil, Joshua ha-Lorki, who adopted the name Geronimo de Santa Fé, and embarked upon a career as a Dominican friar, polemicizing against Judaism. For many Jewish witnesses to these and similar events, the familiarity of Christian society that arose from its proximity and general openness was, perhaps, even more threatening than Christian enmity and exclusion.

If the specter of conversion cast a shadow over Jewish-Christian relations throughout medieval Europe, the unprecedented events of 1391 made its impact in Christian Iberia particularly acute. It was during the spring and summer of that year that the mounting Christian resentment of Jewish status and wealth together with a parallel rise in popular religious fervor came to a head. A series of violent attacks against the Jews erupted throughout the Peninsula, resulting in the destruction of much of Iberian Jewry through killing and forced conversion to Christianity.

The problems posed by the rise of Converso society are intricately linked to the crown's decision to expel the Jews in 1492. The mass conversions of 1391 were followed by decades of heightened missionary activity aimed at converting Iberia's remaining Jewish population. When these efforts proved unsuccessful, the impetus of Christian society turned toward enforcing the social separation of these New Christians and their former coreligionists. During the latter half of the fifteenth century, royal and municipal authorities took a number of steps to segregate members of

¹⁹ The literature on Spanish kabbalah is extensive. For a general introduction to the subject, see Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York, 1978); Arthur Green, "The Zohar: Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Spain," in *Introduction to the Medieval Mystics of Europe*, ed. Paul Szarmach (Albany, NY 1984), 97-134; and Moshe Idel, "Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah in Spain," in *Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewry*, ed. Zion Zohar (New York, 2005), 120-142. On Spanish Christianity and kabbalah, see Gil Anidjar, "Jewish Mysticism Alterable and Unalterable: On 'Orienting' Kabbalah Studies and the 'Zohar of Christian Spain,'" *Jewish Social Studies* 3 (1996): 89-157; and Moshe Idel, "Reflections on Kabbalah in Spain and Christian Kabbalah," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 2 (1999): 3-15. On Lull, see Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago, 1966), 189-200; and Roberto J. González-Casanovas, "Ramon Lull's Rhetorical Ambivalence towards the Jews: Utopia and Polemic in Medieval Iberian Missionary Discourse," in *"Encuentros" and "desencuentros,"* ed. Carlos Carrete Parrondo (Tel Aviv, 2000), 381-412; and on de la Torre, see Luis M. Girón-Negrón, *Alfonso de la Torre's Visión Deleytable: Philosophical Rationalism and the Religious Imagination in 15th-Century Spain* (Boston, 2001).

²⁰ José Faur, "A Crisis of Categories: Kabbalah and the Rise of Apostasy in Spain," in *The Jews of Spain and the Expulsion of 1492*, ed. Moshe Lazar and Stephen Haliczer (Lancaster, CA, 1997), 41-63; Moshe Lazar, "Alfonso de Valladolid's 'Mostrador de justicia': A Polemic Debate between Abner's Old and New Self," in *Judaísmo hispano I*, ed. Elena Romero (Madrid, 2002), 121-134. On the conversion of Shlomo ha-Levi see Benjamin R. Gampel, "A Letter to a Wayward Teacher: The Transformation of Sephardic Culture in Christian Iberia," in *Cultures of the Jews: A New History*, ed. David Biale (New York, 2002), 389-447.

the two religions including an expulsion of the Jews from the Castilian province of Andalusia in 1483.²¹ Such efforts were never fully successful. The new triangular relationship between Jews, Conversos, and the so-called "Old" Christians retained many of the same complexities and contradictions that had defined inter-faith relations in Iberia for centuries.

In the first generation after 1391, kinship ties between Jews and New Christians remained a potent force shaping social interaction. These bonds of family and friendship often hopelessly blurred the boundaries between religious communities. The official position of the Church was that the converts and their descendants were Christians, while rabbinic authorities still considered them to be Jewish, arguing that their conversions were forced and thus invalid. The attitudes of average Christians and Jews filled a wide spectrum between these two positions. In certain parts of the peninsula, popular Jewish sympathy for the plight of the Conversos began to fade as the fifteenth century progressed. Regardless of the official position of their rabbis, many found the Jewishness of those who had been raised as Catholics to be suspect. Elsewhere, leading Jewish families considered it to be advantageous to retain strong ties to the Conversos, despite condemnation from many Old Christians.²²

Many Christians also rejected the official stance of their religious officials with regard to the Conversos, insisting that baptism failed to remove the essential cultural characteristics their Jewish ancestry. In Toledo, riots against the Conversos were accompanied by a demand that members of the town council and other important institutions prove the purity of their Christian blood going back several generations. In spite of such accusations of the unalterable nature of Jewish blood, many Conversos were dedicated to their new faith and argued passionately for their full acceptance into Christian society. In his *Defensorium unitatis christianae*, the Castilian churchman Alonso de Cartagena argued against the logic that lay behind recent purity-of-blood statutes as being fundamentally anti-Christian and heretical. Ironically, by embracing Christian doctrine in its purist form, converts such as de Cartagena, only succeeded in marking themselves as distinct from the Christian masses who took religion to be socially, not theologically, constructed.²³

The advent of Converso society in the century between 1391 and 1492 stands as perhaps the greatest example of the inherent complications of trying to measure relations between Christians and Jews in medieval Iberia. Can we view the persistence of close bonds between many Conversos and Jews as evidence of inter-faith symbiosis? Or does the inability of the Conversos to fully integrate into Christian society highlight a fundamental cultural rift between Jews and Christians that even baptism could not overcome?

²¹ Angus MacKay, "Popular Movements and Pogroms in Fifteenth-Century Castile," *Past and Present* 55 (1972): 33-67. There was also an expulsion of the Jews from the Castilian town of Valmaseda in 1486, and planned expulsions from Saragossa and Albarracín that do not appear to have been carried out. Haim Beinart, "The Expulsion of the Jews from Valmaseda" (Hebrew), *Zion* 46 (1981): 39-51.

²² In Segovia and Avila, for instance, a new set of Jewish families came to power in the third quarter of the fifteenth century that came to dominate Castilian Jewry under Enrique IV (r. 1454-74). These Jews had continued to associate closely with their Converso neighbors. Javier Castaño, "Social Networks in a Castilian Aljama and the Court Jews in the Fifteenth Century: A Preliminary Survey (Madrid 1440-1475)," *En la España Medieval* 20 (1997): 379-392, at 381.

²³ Bruce Rosenstock, "Alonso de Cartagena: Nation, Miscegenation, and the Jew in Late-Medieval Castile," in *Turn it Again: Jewish Medieval Studies and Literary Theory*, ed. Sheila Delany (Eugene, OR, 2007), 172-189; and Alisa Meyuhás Ginio, "La opción desaprovechada: Alonso de Cartagena y su obra "Defensorium unitatis christianae," in *Movimientos migratorios y expulsiones en la diáspora occidental* (Pamplona, 2000), 79-94.

Whose Golden Age?

How, then are we to evaluate a relationship that was so indelibly marked by both cooperation *and* conflict? Modern defenders of the idea of a Jewish Golden Age in Christian Iberia argue that episodes of inter-religious strife during this period are the exceptions that prove the rule, while detractors point to a steady decline in Jewish status under Christian rule that was punctuated by wide-scale massacres and forced conversions in 1391, and the eventual expulsion of Spanish Jewry in 1492. It is my suggestion that the nature of Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Iberia revolves around an even more fundamental question than which of these two opposing tendencies represented the norm. Namely, was religious identity the only, or even the primary factor that shaped the relationship between members of different religious communities? The closer we look at inter-faith relations during this period, the more it becomes apparent that the categories of "Jewish" and "Christian" applied very differently depending on a number of factors. To be sure, religious identity remained the principle means for social organization for both Christian and Jewish leaders throughout the Middle Ages, and beyond. In reality, however, neither culture operated monolithically. Not only did the general relationship between these two cultures wax and wane from the eleventh through the fifteenth century, but it also varied significantly according to region and city, as well as to the wealth, profession, and social standing of the individuals involved.

The varying experiences of Iberian Jewish communities during the tragic events of 1391 offer clear illustration of the highly contextualized nature of Jewish-Christian relations. Both the forced conversions and the reactions to the communities of New Christians that developed throughout the peninsula in subsequent decades followed very different trajectories based on region and city. For instance, the impact of the attacks was much greater among the Jewries of Cataluña and Andalusia than in Aragon and Old Castile, and the Jews living in the Kingdom of Portugal remained unscathed.²⁴ Similarly, attacks against the Conversos such as those that took place in Toledo in 1449 were highly contextualized phenomena that did not have parallels or direct repercussions in other locales.²⁵ Even within the same city, the way in which different elements within Jewish society interacted with their Christian neighbors was rarely uniform. In our effort to gauge the general prosperity or mutual benefit of Jewish-Christian relations, we fail to ask whether or not what was good for a religious community as a whole was also beneficial for its individual members. Indeed, there seems to be little reason to accept the idea that there was a common experience of the individual and the group. The conditions that helped Judaism and the Jewish community to flourish in Christian Iberia were not always the same as those that benefited the average Jew. Similarly, the regulations and exemptions that profited the Jewish merchant were rarely to the advantage of the Jewish poor.

Jewish integration into Christian society can be heralded as proof of an inter-faith Golden Age, and yet it also brought with it a host of other problems that underscore how differently groups of Jews and Christians might experience cross-cultural interaction. Royal grants that protected Jewish rights or exempted them from onerous laws or taxes might be viewed as evidence of mutual benefit. Indeed, as serfs of the royal chamber, Jewish profit simultaneously aided the crown. Yet, such ostensibly reciprocal benefits were not universally advantageous. Favorable treatment of the Jews either came at the expense of Christian subjects, as in the case of royal support for

²⁴ Juan Blázquez Miguel, *Inquisición y cryptojudaísmo* (Madrid, 1988), 50-54; and Emilio Mitre Fernández, *Los judíos de Castilla en tiempos de Enrique III: El pogrom de 1391* (Madrid, 1994), 27. Even within the same general region, the Jewish communities suffered very different fates during 1391, as was the case in the Castilian cities of Avila and Burgos. Teofilo F. Ruiz, *Spain's Centuries of Crisis: 1300-1474* (Oxford, 2007), 140-142.

²⁵ MacKay, "Popular Movements and Pogroms."

Jewish debt collection, or else provoked jealous anger among other the king's rivals: the barons, the church, and the municipalities. The notion of mutual benefit thus quickly proves to be a mirage. Upon close inspection, the neat categories of Christian and Jew reveal a kaleidoscope of distinct subsets of social and religious communities brought together in rapidly shifting patterns. The tax exemption that benefited a particular Jewish merchant simultaneously enraged his Christian and Jewish competitors, and alarmed his local Jewish communal council that depended on such funds. The prosperity and royal protection enjoyed by the wealthier members of Hispano-Jewish society allowed them to enjoy the trappings of power including luxurious clothing, horses, coaches, and Muslim slaves. Yet this affluence also brought condemnations from Jewish moralists who saw such ostentation as both impious and provocative to the Christian nobility.²⁶ These rabbis were not merely condemning Jewish vanity and flamboyance. They were acutely aware that royal favor was a double-edged sword. For all Jews, communities and individuals alike, the vertical ties to royal and episcopal courts that guaranteed their protection usually came at the expense of horizontal ties with their Christian neighbors.

Even positive relations among Jewish and Christian townsmen were not without their drawbacks. For Jewish leaders worried about the religious integrity of their communities, the problems born of cooperation and proximity were, perhaps, even more daunting than open hostility. Greater familiarity with the religion of the "other" fostered increased polemical attacks on the part of Christian mendicants who endeavored to use Jewish texts to buttress their arguments. It also led to sporadic voluntary conversions on the part of some Jews. The total number of these voluntary conversions remained modest, at least prior to 1391. Nonetheless, the culture of fear that these conversions induced among the rest of Jewish society, as well as the corresponding zeal they engendered among Christian missionaries, was significant indeed.

Our search for evidence of a Golden Age in Jewish-Christian relations cannot exclude the many non-religious factors that determined the structure of medieval society. Christians and Jews alike were also subject to social and political forces that transcended religion. One of the central features of medieval government was the ability of those in power to play one group against another in order to expand their own authority. The crown, the aristocracy, the towns, and the Church were constantly pitted against one another, to say nothing of divisions within these groups, or between different Iberian kingdoms. Thus, the debate over Jewish rights and privileges often became a means by which the towns or the nobility could attack royal sovereignty.²⁷ Iberian kings in turn regarded the Jews as part of the royal treasure, regardless of where they dwelt, and demanded that their taxes belonged to the crown, rather than to local lords or municipalities. To imagine Christian Spain as a world divided by faith is to ignore the intrinsically combative and dissonant nature of medieval society in general. Popular anti-Judaism and outbreaks of Christian violence were, indeed, part and parcel of Jewish life under medieval Christian rule. However, deep-seated tensions and regular outbreaks of violence defined the relationship between peasants and lords, Church and crown, and upper and lower clergy as much as they did between Christian and Jew.²⁸

²⁶ Jonathan Ray, "Beyond Tolerance and Persecution: Reassessing our Approach to Medieval *Convivencia*," *Jewish Social Studies* 11 (2005): 1-18.

²⁷ Jonathan Ray, *The Sephardic Frontier: The Reconquista and the Jewish Community in Medieval Iberia* (Ithaca, NY, 2006), 76-88. For Portugal, see Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, *Chanc. de D. Dinis*, liv. III, fol. 104v; published in Maria José Pimenta Ferro, *Os Judeus em Portugal no século XIV* (Lisbon, 1970), document no. 10.

²⁸ The question of inter-religious violence in medieval Iberia has garnered a great deal of attention. See David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence* (Princeton, 1996); *A Great Effusion of Blood?: Interpreting Medieval Violence*, ed. Mark D. Meyerson, Daniel Thiery and Oren Falk (Toronto, 2004); *Religious Violence Between Christians and Jews: Medieval Roots Modern Perspectives*, ed. Anna Sapir Abulafia (New York, 2002); and J. N. Hillgarth, *The Mirror of Spain, 1500-1700: The Formation of a Myth* (Ann Arbor, 2000).

And Hispano-Jewish society was equally susceptible to internal tensions and factionalism. The religious reform movements that arose in Christian society during the later Middle Ages also had their parallels within the Jewish world. The litany of Jewish complaints about rabbinic vanity, corruption, and lust for social status echo similar criticisms of Christian clergy. At the same time, Jewish authors also exhibited a general disdain for Jewish artisans and manual laborers, especially those who exhibit pretensions of authority.²⁹ It might be said that one of the few overarching characteristics of Jewish society that was shared by communities in all the peninsular kingdoms was the inherently combative relationship between the local Jewish communal council and the Jews they sought to govern. Much like their Christian counterparts, medieval Jews demonstrated a willingness to adhere to religious law and respect religious authority as long as their compliance did not present any personal obstacle. Once it did, they displayed an equal willingness to circumvent their communal authorities. Spain's royal and municipal archives are filled with records of Jewish councils pleading for assistance with rebellious individuals, and with petitions by individual Jews seeking Christian protection from abuses of their own officials. In addition to the clashes between Jews and their local authorities, conflicts also arose between feuding clans who sought power and influence within their community. As a result, we see a number of instances in which Jews joined forces with Christian business partners, Christian lords, and even with gangs of Christian thugs in order to outmaneuver and intimidate members of their own faith.³⁰ This complex web of relationships raises serious questions about our ability to characterize medieval religious communities with great precision, or to speak convincingly about a Golden Age of Jewish-Christian relations.

The discord that marked Jewish social interaction also resonated within the fields of Jewish theology, philosophy, and kabbalah. If we look only at Jewish-Christian relations in late medieval Iberia, it is easy to be struck by the increasingly combative nature of their intellectual exchanges.³¹ Yet the polemical relationship between Jews and Christians was often surpassed by the disputes among various Jewish factions. During the late Middle Ages, the longstanding attempt by Jewish intellectuals to reconcile reason and revelation—that is, the philosophical heritage of the Greeks and the dictates of their own sacred literature—erupted into two sprawling debates that engulfed Jewish scholars from Castile to Provence. Although the initial phases of this controversy eventually passed, the underlying tensions surrounding the place of non-Jewish texts within the normative curriculum of Jewish society was never fully resolved.³² Nor was the debate over foreign (non-Jewish) knowledge the only one that enflamed Jewish intellectuals and divided them into feuding camps. The rabbis and Jewish preachers of Christian Iberia debated frequently among themselves about the relative merits and dangers of studying the Talmud at the expense of other fields such as grammar, poetry, kabbalah, and even Bible.³³

²⁹ Eleazar Gutwirth, "Contempt for the Lower Orders in Fifteenth-Century Hispano-Jewish Thought," *Miscelánea de estudios árabes y hebraicos* 30 (1981): 83-98.

³⁰ See the Jewish ordinances (*takkanot*) of Valladolid of 1432 in Fritz Baer, *Die Juden im christlichen Spanien*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1936) vol. 2, 280-298, and in English in Louis Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1924), 364-5; and Shlomo ben Abraham ibn Adret, *Sheelot u-Teshuvot ha-Rashba* (Responsa) vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1997), no. 573.

³¹ See Ram Ben Shalom, "Between Official and Private Dispute: The Case of Christian Spain and Provence in the Late Middle Ages," *AJS Review* 27 (2003): 23-71.

³² These debates are collectively referred to as the Maimonidean Controversy. See Idit Dobbs Weinstein, "The Maimonidean Controversy," in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London, 1997), 331-349.

³³ Eleazar Gutwirth, "Conversions to Christianity amongst Spanish Jews: an Alternative Explanation," in *Shlomo Simonsohn Jubilee Volume*, ed. Daniel Carpi (Jerusalem, 1993), 97-121, at 113-114. For continued infighting among

This confrontational posture was a characteristic that the Jews who left Spain in 1492 carried with them into exile. One scholar challenged his detractors to “come out to the field and let us compete in our knowledge of the Bible, the Mishnah and the Talmud...and all of rabbinic literature...[and] in the practical and theoretical fields of science.” The combative tone is echoed by the great sixteenth-century philosopher, Judah Abravanel, who extolled his intellectual lineage in a famous poem, declaring:

Christian scholars are grasshoppers next to me.
I've seen their colleges – they've no one who can best me in the duel of words.
I beat down any man who stands against me,
crush and hush my opponent, prove him wrong.
Who but me could dare to tell the mysteries
of the Creation, of the Chariot, of its Rider?
My soul excels, surpasses all
of my contemporaries in this wretched age.³⁴

While it is common to view the confrontations between Jewish and Christian theologians within the context of religious interaction, these polemics and disputations also took place within a larger arena of scholarly debate that grouped disputants by intellectual fields as much as religion, and in which individuals sought personal honor and victory. It is important to view Jewish-Christian relations in medieval Iberia against this broader backdrop of intellectual factions and affinities.

The concept of mutually beneficial contact between Christians and Jews presupposes the existence of relatively uniform and cohesive religious communities defined by the broad categories of Judaism and Christianity. Such categories did exist, and remain useful, although not without certain limitations. If our goal is to commemorate the truly notable examples of religious cooperation, then we can, indeed, speak of a Golden Age in late-medieval Iberia. If however, we are searching for models of inter-faith symbiosis that can potentially inform our contemporary world, then the question is a great deal more complicated. In order to do so, we must recognize, even if only in passing, the obvious imbalance of power in this relationship. Medieval Jewish society in general never posed a serious threat to its Christian counterpart. Unlike the armed conflicts between Iberian Christians and their Muslim neighbors, mass violence between Christians and Jews was always unidirectional in favor the Christians. Moreover, Christians never lived under the fear that they would be forcibly converted, or that their children would be seduced into abandoning their faith by economic, social, and political opportunities that would be available to them should they adopt Judaism. In my brief overview, I have attempted to question the utility of the concept of a Golden Age of religious interaction in medieval Spain. I have suggested that we consider the nature of religious societies with greater nuance and an appreciation of how the various divisions within both Christian and Jewish society experienced this relationship. However, in order for us to truly understand the legacy of Christian-Jewish interaction in the Middle Ages, the inherent imbalance in this relationship cannot be ignored.

Jewish intellectuals in the sixteenth century, see Rachel Elijor, “Messianic Expectations and Spiritualization of Religious Life in the Sixteenth Century,” *Revue des Études Juives* 145 (1986): 35-49.

³⁴ Abravanel's poem is taken from an English translation by Raymond P. Scheindlin and published in *Medieval Iberia: Readings from Christian, Muslim and Jewish Sources*, ed. Olivia Remie Constable (Philadelphia, 1997), 362. For the preceding quote, see Joseph Hacker, “The Intellectual Activity of the Jews of the Ottoman Empire during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, MA, 1987), 120.