

# 1 Jewish Spain on the Eve of the Expulsion

*From within the system, only differences are perceived; from without, the antagonists all seem alike. From inside, sameness is not visible; from outside, differences cannot be seen.<sup>1</sup>*

## I. Jewish Andalusia and Catalonia: Two Forms of Religious Devotion

In a letter written in 1422 by Moses Arragel, the first translator of the Pentateuch into Spanish, to Don Luis de Guzmán, gave the following description of Jewish spiritual and intellectual life:

The Jews of Castile in the past prospered and were the crown and garland of all the Jewish Diaspora, in children, wealth, science, and magnanimity; this was in harmony with the nature of the king, his qualities, and the kingdoms under his rule in the glorious and splendid Castile; [they] linger today, as a consequence of the tender age in which they were orphaned—in addition to all the disturbances [that they suffered]—in the opposite situation: we are in anguish and dearth. Our best and wisest children have left us. Nothing remains from our science... and at the riverbed whose waters once carried ships, there cannot be found today even small brooks. Thus our science has vanished.<sup>2</sup>

As a consequence of the destruction of the Jewish communities in Moorish Spain in the twelfth century by Muslim fanatics from North Africa (the Almoravides and Almohades), the Jewish intelligentsia left the Iberian peninsula. The resulting vacuum was filled by the Jewish communities in Castile. According to Jewish tradition, the great Talmudic Academy of Lucena, the most glorious of the golden age of Sepharad, had been transplanted to Toledo under the

direction of the son and nephew of R. Joseph ibn Megas (1077–1141).<sup>3</sup> Toledo became the cultural center for both Jewish and Christian humanists and scientists, continuing the intellectual tradition of Moorish Spain. From that city came the first translations into Hebrew and Latin of the great monuments of Moorish culture.<sup>4</sup> There Hebrew and Christian scholars worked hand in hand for the transmission to Christian Europe of the great classics of Islamic philosophical and scientific thought.

The anti-Maimonidean movement (1180–1240), culminating in the famous ban proclaimed in Barcelona on July 26, 1305,<sup>5</sup> represents a clash between two modes of religious thinking: one developed in Moorish Spain and the other in Christendom. The Maimonidean tradition was developed in the pluralistic society of Andalusia. The anti-Maimonidean movement emerged in the authoritarian societies of France and Christian Spain. Their major conflict pertained to the ultimate ground of religion: for Andalusian Jewry it was the Law, for the anti-Maimonideans it was zeal and religious fervor. (This controversy was analogous but not identical to the conflict between *Mitnagedim* and *Ḥasidim* among Ashkenazim in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries).

An essential element of Jewish Andalusian tradition was the belief that God must be worshiped, exclusively, according to the terms of the *berit* (Sinaitic covenant). The scriptural prohibition of *'aboda zara* (alien cult) includes not only idolatry but even worshiping God with an "alien cult"—cults or rituals not included in the covenant. From this perspective, it is irrelevant whether God is worshiped with images or with an unprescribed cult.<sup>6</sup> It was axiomatic for Andalusian Jewry that all the commandments of the Law are regulated by precise legislation—not by pious impulse or religious zeal. This principle was best formulated by R. Judah ha-Levi (ca. 1075–1141). The commandments (*mišvot*) of the Law "have exactly known definitions" (*ḥudud mustaqqaṣa'at fi-l-'ilim*), functioning as the ultimate categories of Judaism.<sup>7</sup> For the Jews, religion consists in executing the divine will "according to its definitions and stipulations."<sup>8</sup> The Tora is "definite" (*mazbuta*), that is, determined by precise legal definitions.<sup>9</sup> These definitions, rather than "intuition and personal sagacity" (*'l-ḏḥauq w'l-tu'aqqul*),<sup>10</sup> determine the religious duties of Israel.<sup>11</sup>

An important corollary of this system is the exclusion of *ijtihad*, "personal endeavor," implying both intellectual diligence and religious fervor, as an authoritative source of religious duties.<sup>12</sup> A major objective of the *Kuzari*, Judah ha-Levi's philosophical work—and one of the great intellectual monuments of the Spanish golden age—was the repudiation of the authority of *ijtihad*. A pagan king, acting as one

of the protagonists of the book, is introduced as a man who was very "diligent" (*yujtahad*) in his religion. An angel reveals to him that although his intentions are good, his actions are not—implying, thereby, that he would not be saved.<sup>13</sup> The golden calf (Ex 32:1–8) was a sin not because Israel worshiped *another* God, but because it worshiped God according to *ijtihad*.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of this doctrine was not to exclude fervor from Jewish worship, but to limit its application to the authority of the Law.<sup>15</sup> From this perspective, the principal difference between Judaism and all other religious systems concerns the place and function of *ijtihad*: whereas Judaism is grounded on a bilateral covenant, formulated in the Law revealed at Sinai (personal endeavor having a strictly subordinate function), all other religions are grounded on *ijtihad*. Indeed, were one to accept personal endeavor as a spiritual criterion, there would be no distinction between heathenism, magic, and any religious creed.<sup>16</sup>

The religious systems and ideals of Andalusian Jewry found their highest expression in the writings of Maimonides (1135–1204). The precise perimeters and legal definitions of the Law were formulated in the *Mishne Tora*: the first and last code comprising the entire Jewish legal system. The *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides' classic work on Jewish esoteric thinking, traces the perimeter of the purely personal and individualistic aspects of human relations with God: it concerns the esoteric side of *ijtihad*.

From the perspective of the Andalusian tradition, the anti-Maimonidean movement sweeping European Jewry represented Christian thought patterns and feelings. *Ijtihad* in the form of pious impulse and religious zeal, rather than precise legal definitions of the Law, is the determining factor of this type of devotion. Again, from this perspective, the anti-Maimonideans were repudiating the tradition and values of old Sepharad, and deauthorizing the Law (= the *Mishne Tora*).<sup>17</sup> The roots of the Maimonidean controversy will become evident upon examining the antirationalistic movements ravaging Christendom at the time.

## II. Jewish Antirationalism and Semantic Assimilation

Aristotelian rationalism and speculative theology reached France from Muslim Spain. It provoked strong opposition. The roots of antirationalism were deeply entrenched in the institutional values of France. Although there were men of the stature of William of Conches (ca. 1090–ca. 1160) and Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–1274), favoring this type of speculation, it generated strong opposition at the end of the

twelfth century and throughout the thirteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who has rightly been described as the “great detective of heresy,”<sup>19</sup> best exemplifies the orthodox position. In the year 1140 he conveyed a synod at Sens to examine the doctrines of Peter Abelard (1079–1142)—one of the great religious minds of the Middle Ages. Bernard charged Abelard with the crime of discussing the foundations of faith by the ordinary means of human reason.<sup>20</sup> The persecution of heretics, and the atmosphere of suspicion that beset the study of philosophy and rationalistic theology, were symptomatic of the time and culture.<sup>21</sup> Opposition to rationalism was not uniform. Some only opposed certain philosophical works, such as Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. For instance, Aquinas’s *Summa* was considered dangerous, because it also examined arguments that were against the faith. In the year 1215 Robert of Courzon (ca. 1158/60–1219) permitted the study of Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Logic*, but prohibited the study of Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, as well as the works of David of Dinant (d. after 1206), and the *Summa*. In April 1231 Pope Gregory IX addressed a bull to the teachers and students of Paris forbidding the study of natural philosophy until these works would be properly examined and corrected.<sup>22</sup>

Within the context of the time, the Maimonidean controversy and the opposition to rationalistic theology represented a Jewish absorption of Christian thought patterns: it had its roots in the Christian tradition exemplified by Bernard of Clairvaux, rather than in the Talmud. To Jews in Christian society, the appeal of this ideology rested in the fact that they could voice their religion through the pathos and ideals of the host culture.

The most important mind to emerge from Christian Spain, and the champion of the new form of Jewish orthodoxy, was the saintly R. Moses ben Nahman (1194–1270). He was the great advocate of mysticism and one of the most intelligent censors of philosophical speculation. First, he no longer recognized the Law as the sole constitutive of humankind’s relation with God. In his commentary to the Pentateuch he advanced the thesis that one “can be depraved within the mandate of the Law.” Therefore, to “be holy” (Lv 19:2) does not mean only to be punctilious in the observance of the Law as defined by halakha (rabbinic jurisprudence). There is a higher criterion, “such as abstention from the pollution (*ha-tum’a*) that although it was not forbidden to us by the Law” is essential, in his mind, to attain perfection.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the way to perfection transcends the commandments of the Law. An important element of his doctrine is that the rabbis do not have a mandate from the Law to legislate. He explicitly rejected Maimonides’ position that rabbinic authority to legislate is biblical.<sup>24</sup>

It should be noted that R. Moses ben Naḥman was also rejecting Judah ha-Levi's position on *ijtihad*. Since the rabbis' authority to institute religious obligations was not stipulated by the Law, it follows that there is a source, independent of the Law, determining human duty toward God.<sup>25</sup> Translated into Judah ha-Levi's terminology, this doctrine stipulates that *ijtihad*, in the form of personal analysis and intuition, is a valid means to determine humankind's duty to God. Consistent with this position R. Moses ben Naḥman maintained that whatever was deduced by personal intuition and analysis (= *ijtihad*) equals what is explicitly ordered by the Law. Therefore, he rejected Maimonides' position that what is *deduced* from the Law is not identical to Law itself.<sup>26</sup> Implicit in this position is a repudiation of Judah ha-Levi's concept of "alien cult." This will become obvious upon considering that he had also rejected Maimonides' position that the Jewish prayer (*'amida*) is a biblical commandment.<sup>27</sup> Since the prayers are not part of the Sinaitic pact, and since rabbinic authority is not biblical, it follows that prayers are a purely human institution—a form of Jewish *ijtihad*, not unlike any other form of religious cult.

Assimilation to a Christian environment affected thought patterns and feelings, and the manner in which Jewish values were processed and validated. Semantic assimilation touched the most basic of Jewish beliefs: monotheism. The following three examples illustrate how, within their semantic context, the Jewish idea of pure monotheism was no longer operative.

R. Moses ben Naḥman was not only a stern critic of Andalusian rationalism, but also an ardent believer in "the science of necromancy" (*ḥokhmat ha-negromansia*)—that is, "black magic."<sup>28</sup> In a pivotal passage, he ascertained that the reason for discarding rationalism was the empirical evidence furnished by black magic. In his commentary to the Pentateuch, on Leviticus 16:8, he explained that in the sacrifice to Azazel offered on the day of Atonement, the Jews furnish "a bribe (*shohad*)" to propitiate Satan.<sup>29</sup>

Before proceeding with the examination of this passage, it is important to note that although demonology is essential to the Christian Scripture and faith,<sup>30</sup> it never played a principal role in Jewish theology. For Maimonides or Judah ha-Levi there can be no "evil being" autonomous of God; there cannot be any need to propitiate or worship anyone but God. Surprisingly, R. Moses ben Naḥman did not base his interpretation on a specific Jewish source, but on "pragmatic" and "scientific" grounds. He became convinced of the futility of rationalism on the basis of the evidence provided by "the science of necromancy" (*ḥokhmat ha-negromansia*). Referring to Maimonides who maintained that sorcery and witchcraft "are lies and falsehood,"<sup>31</sup> as

"those who pretend to be wise, and emulate the Greek (i. e., Aristotle)," he wrote:

This would be known with spirits through the science of necromancy (*ḥokhmat ha-negromansia*), and it also could be known to the minds through the clues of the Tora, to those who understand their secrets. And I cannot explain [further], because we would have to shut up the mouth of those who pretend to be wise about nature, emulating the Greek [i. e., Aristotle], who rejected everything that he could not perceive with the senses. And haughtily he and his evil disciples thought that everything that he did not grasp with his reason is untrue.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, antirationalism was not the affirmation of Jewish authority against non-Jewish culture, as modern historians insist, but of one cultural pattern against another.

Semantic assimilation touched the vocabulary of some of the greatest minds of the time. R. Solomon ibn Adret (ca. 1235–ca. 1310), who pronounced the ban against the Maimonideans in Barcelona, was the most respected authority of his time. In a *responsum* in which he defended "the true mystical traditions which are in the hands of the sages of Israel" (i. e., his contemporaries in the regions of Catalonia, Gerona, and France), he quoted approvingly a trinitarian doctrine coming from some Ashkenazic mystical circle. This doctrine intended to elucidate "the mystery" (*ha-sod*) of the prayer addressing God as "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"—rather than "the God of heavens and earth." It centered on the three Hebrew letters B-R-K, making the word *BaRuKh* (blessed). These letters could be switched and read *RoKheB* (mounted), *BeKHoR* (firstborn), and *KeRuB* (cherub). According to this doctrine, *RoKheB* stands for God, "Provident and Savior" (*Mashgiaḥ wu-Maṣṣil*). *BeKHoR* stands for God's dominion and greatness. *KeRuB* symbolizes the intellect to which one ought to cleave. All these three are one: *BaRuKh*.<sup>33</sup> There is no doubt whatsoever that R. Solomon ibn Adret—one of the most saintly and learned figures of his time—did not intend to support the Christian mystery of the "holy Trinity." Nonetheless, whatever this doctrine meant, it would have been impossible, within the semantic context of the time, not to associate the *RoKheB* with the "Father," the *BeKHoR* with the "Son," and the *KeRuB* with the "Holy Ghost": all three being one in *BaRuKh*. The designation *Bekhor*, "firstborn" of God, is a christological expression.<sup>34</sup>

Significantly, by the time of ibn Adret, Jewish apostates had already claimed that the above-mentioned prayer contained the "mys-



tery" of Christian Trinity.<sup>35</sup> There also circulated in Spain works from Ashkenazic mystical circles, professing that the Trinity represents the most absolute form of monotheism. This notion was used by Christians in their polemics against Jews. R. Solomon ibn Verga (d. ca. 1520) put the following argument in the mouth of a Christian trying to convince a Jew of the validity of the Trinity:

The Trinity is not polytheism but simple monotheism to those who understand. And I saw three great men from the Ashkenazic sages and I learned from them in the books of mysticism, and I saw how from there it becomes evident how the Trinity is monotheism. And according to these words I asked them [the Jews]: Who are then better, you or your forefathers?<sup>36</sup>

Jewish apostates continued to interpret this prayer as a manifesto of the "mystery" (*ha-sod*) of the Christian Trinity till the end of the fifteenth century in Spain, and outside Spain through the seventeenth century.<sup>37</sup>

Another illustration is provided by R. Baḥye bar Asher (13th century), one of the finest exegetes of the time, and a disciple of ibn Adret in esoteric lore. Commenting on Lv 23:18, he explained that in one case "the sacrifice was to the Shekhina (divine presence)," whereas in the other case "the sacrifice was to the great Name (i. e., God) Himself."<sup>38</sup>

The three authorities just mentioned were saintly figures and above suspicion. Nonetheless, whatever theological subtleties they intended, their doctrines appear to confirm—within the semantic context of Christian society—that something other than God could be the object of worship. This notion appeared to be further promoted by those mystical circles that directed their prayers not to God, but "sometimes to one mystical sphere (*sefira*) and at other time to another mystical sphere (*sefira*), according to the theme of the prayer." Indeed, as a Maimonidean noted, "[Whereas] the Christians believe in the Trinity, the mystics believe in the Ten (*sefirot*)." Concerned with the possible misinterpretation of these mystical doctrines, R. Nissim Gerondi (ca. 1310–ca. 1375), one of the most illustrious talmudists of that period and a great admirer of R. Moses ben Naḥman, confided to one of his disciples, "the Ramban [= R. Moses ben Naḥman] became very excessively committed to believing in the topics of *that* [italics added] mysticism."<sup>39</sup>

### III. The Rabbinic Clergy in Toledo

The earliest criticism against Maimonides in Spain came from Toledo, the most enlightened city in Christian Spain. It was initiated by R. Meir Abul'afya (ca. 1170–1244), one of the spiritual leaders of the community. His opposition was not ideological. As we learn from Sheshet ha-Nasi, R. Abul'afya was moved by personal and professional reasons. Previously, the rabbis in Toledo had refused to teach the Talmud, or even the *Halakhot*—R. Isaac Alfasi's legal compendium—to the community.<sup>40</sup> Thus, no one except for the rabbinic clergy had access to the legal sources. With the publication of Maimonides' *Mishne Tora*, the general public, for the first time in history, had direct access to a code of law. Fearing that their authority would be challenged, the rabbinic clergy attacked it. As is clear from the testimony of Sheshet, R. Abul'afya and a circle of colleagues were deeply concerned about the challenge that such a work could make to their authority. Referring to R. Meir Abul'afya, Sheshet wrote:

When I was in Castile, after the *Mishne Tora* had reached them, I heard one of the judges—I do not want to mention his name—mumble, "What does this [person] know that we don't [already] know? And since in [this code] he does not bring proofs from the words of the talmudic sages, who would heed him."<sup>41</sup> It is much better to study the Talmud and [R. Isaac Alfasi's] *Halakhot*. And why should we bother with his books and words?" And I countered him, together with his mentors, and showed him his fault. And never again did he speak about it in my presence. And since that moment, I knew his belief and ideas.

And behold, "It came upon him what he feared most" (cf. Job 3:25). Because before the *Mishne Tora* had arrived in the lands of Castile, the study of the *Halakhot*, not to mention the Talmud, was unknown to the people, "As wisdom is arrogance for the wicked" (Prv 24:7).<sup>42</sup> And that judge would render judgments on his own, according to his whim. And nobody could challenge him, because they did not know what the law was, and all were dependent on him. And when the [people] saw the fourteen sections of the *Mishne Tora*, and it was examined by those knowing Hebrew, and they began to appreciate its beauty in the arrangement of the commandments, and the ethics and sciences included in the *Book of Knowledge* [the first section of the *Mishne Tora*], their eyes opened. And all were determined to make copies for themselves, and it was much praised and loved. Old and young, whoever could read, got together to study its laws



and understand its judgments. And behold, today there are many who understand its words. [Therefore] when there is a litigation between two parties and the judge pronounces a verdict, they examine its words [of the *Mishne Tora*]. "And to God the word of the two [litigants] come" ( cf. Ex 22:8).

Upon seeing this the above-mentioned judges, of whom this conceited idiot, speaking arrogantly, is one of them, their envy grew, and their anger kindled, and tried to allure those who supported the "Law of Moses, the Light of the West" [i. e., Maimonides's *Mishne Tora*] beaming light upon all Israel, to depart from their right path. They are now further sinning, telling the ignoramuses [slanders about Maimonides], like what that idiot had written in his book.<sup>43</sup> And many more things were [later added to the slander] in order that they should obey him and not depart from his words.<sup>44</sup>

Basically, Abul'afya was an honorable, decent man. As Sheshet had said, his motivations were personal, not ideological. He had written his criticism in his youth, and probably, as Sheshet hinted, he had been prodded "by his mentors"—older members of the rabbinic establishment. As he matured, Abul'afya realized his error. In 1204, when he received the news of Maimonides's death, he recanted his criticism. In what amounted to a public apology, he wrote an elegy, lamenting the passing of the great master.<sup>45</sup> He used such expressions as "cry for the prince of ethics who had been removed!" (l.11), "he was as the soul, and we the body!" (l.14). Concerning the *Mishne Tora*, he exclaimed: "Awake! Look at the sages of the time, beating together like beggars on the doors of your learning" (l.20). He also made reference to Maimonides' famous philosophical work. "In the *Guide for the Perplexed*, the swords of the minds that are in darkness glow like lightning flashes" (l.22),<sup>46</sup> "in its [words] those who went astray learn intelligence, and those who are idle in the fear of their Maker gain strength" (l.25). Referring to the public who used his book to protect itself from the unscrupulous clergy, he said: "To whom shall they now run for help, and upon whom could they now rely after you?" "They will never remove from themselves the yoke of your mourning!" (ll.28–29). He was contrite, and begged for forgiveness: "If like a sparrow I could fly to his grave, my eyes would summon tears. I would irrigate with my tears his dust, as the streams of his writings had irrigated my heart" (ll.33–34). He concluded: "Peace shall hover over your flesh, as in yourself peace and justice had always embraced" (l.58).

The circles that prodded the young Abul'afya persisted in their

opposition. His brother Joseph was active in the anti-Maimonidean camp, and managed to have the famous R. David Qamḥi (ca. 1160–ca. 1235), who had come to Toledo to rally the pro-Maimonidean forces, expelled from the city.<sup>47</sup>

The new religious ideology sweeping from the north soon found a home in Castile. About the year 1240, the saintly R. Jonah Gerondi (ca. 1200–1263) was invited to Toledo. He was an outstanding preacher and a staunch spokesman for the new religious ideology. In his youth he had been one of the main instigators for the ban against Maimonides and the burning of the *Guide for the Perplexed* in Montpellier, in December 1232. According to some of his contemporaries, he was one of those denouncing the *Guide* to the ecclesiastical authorities. In his zeal for the new ideology, he did not shrink from informing the church on another Jew.<sup>48</sup> He remained in Toledo until his death, preaching and instilling in the new generation the values and ethical principles of the new ideology.<sup>49</sup>

Less than fifty years after his death, in 1305, the year in which the ban against the Maimonideans was pronounced in Barcelona, the anti-Maimonidean forces achieved an overwhelming and conclusive victory. R. Asher (ca. 1250–1321) was installed as the spiritual leader of the community in Toledo. He was the most distinguished legal mind to emerge from medieval Germany, and a strong opponent of the Andalusian school. His ministry determined, once and for all, the future development of Iberian history, for both Jews and Christians. In spite of the clergy's attempt to protect their interest, Toledo had been the heir of Andalusian intellectual tradition, and the leader of Jewish humanism and rationalism in Christian Spain. The installation of R. Asher marked the end of this tradition. He strongly opposed secular studies and speculative thought, and worked tirelessly to undermine the cultural legacy shared by Muslims, Jews, and Christians during the golden age of Sepharad. In particular, he was the sworn foe of those scholars and thinkers who represented the educational values and traditions of old Sepharad. Convinced that he was the only representative of God and the Law of Moses, he was authoritarian and doctrinaire, tolerating little dissent even from respected colleagues: differing with him was an act of apostasy.<sup>50</sup> He dismissed the judicial authorities preceding him in Toledo, on the grounds that these judges acted "by the authority of the king" (*be-koah ha-melekh*)—that is, they lacked divine authority and legitimacy as he did.<sup>51</sup> The testimony of the community's notaries and scribes he regarded as suspect, since they do their work "to increase their profit." Alluding to the rabbinic authorities of Andalusia, who maintained that it was possible to combine the study of the Tora and

philosophy, he declared that whoever had studied science and philosophy:

would never be able to escape from it, and to bring into his heart the science of the Law, because he would not be able to recant from the natural science to which he was accustomed, because his heart will always be attracted to it. Therefore, he would never be able to grasp the wisdom of the Law, which are the paths of life, because his heart will always be with the science of nature, and he would want to compare these two sciences, and to bring proofs from one to the other. And consequently he would twist the law, because they are mutually exclusive and are not compatible with one another.<sup>52</sup>

The impact of his ministry on the educated public of Sepharad could hardly be overstated.

#### IV. The Decline of Scholarship

An important element imported by the sages of Catalonia and Gerona from talmudic circles in France was a special type of casuistry and dialectics, known by the Hebrew term *pilpul*. Whereas in the traditional talmudic academies of Sepharad the focus of study was the interpretation of the text in its literary context, the *pilpul* methodology switched the emphasis to dialectics and casuistry.<sup>53</sup> With the ministry of R. Asher, this trend passed to, and was further developed in, Castile. With this aim in mind, he redacted a new version of glosses to the Talmud (*Tosafot ha-Rosh*) that became the staple of all rabbinic studies in Castile.<sup>54</sup> This methodology continued to thrive until the end of the Jewish presence in Spain, totally dominating rabbinic studies.<sup>55</sup>

As mentioned earlier, by 1422 Moises Arragel had sadly admitted, "Thus, our science has vanished."<sup>56</sup> The same view was offered by R. Solomon Al'ami (ca. 1370–1420), a strong foe of philosophy and secular studies.<sup>57</sup> He described rabbinic studies:

Some of our later sages lost their way in the desert, they erred in the evident, because they hated one another, they were jealous, and they sold their Law for gifts. Their only objective was to be meticulous in its reading, and to expand their novelties, decisions, and commentaries. Their study is in the Talmud and the composition of different works, which can neither help nor re-

deem, because on every minute detail of the law there are different positions and opinions. They discarded the modesty of its [the Law's] righteousness, its temperance and holiness: what one exposes, the other obscures; what one permits, the other forbids. Through their controversy, the one Law is made as two Laws. They knit [their views] on a spider's web, embarrassing themselves and exposing their baseness: their eyes are shut [and they] cannot see, their hearts cannot understand. They showed favor in [their judgment of] the Law and did not tell the people their abomination. Because the Lord had poured over them a spirit of dumbness and shut their eyes. And this was the cause for diminishing the dignity of the Law in the eyes of all who see it and hear of it.<sup>58</sup>

R. Joseph Jabes (d. 1507), an eyewitness of the expulsion, drew a similar picture. In the introduction to his work *Or ha-Ḥayyim* (Ferrara, 5314/1554), analyzing the causes of the expulsion, he reported how, in spite of the numerous talmudic academies in Castile, the results were disappointing because of the poor methodology:

Never before did Sepharad [i.e., Castile] have as many talmudic academies and students as during the time of the expulsion. The students, however, were divided into several groups. There were those who studied six or seven years among the great rabbis, sharpened their wits as a sharp sword, and then proceeded to study secular studies. . . . Others, after [completing the rabbinic training] would completely withdraw [from all type of studies] and busy themselves with the vanities of this world. There were others still who engaged professionally in the study of the Law, but their only interest was in casuistry (*pilpul*), to display their ingenuity, how they could [prove] with their casuistry (*pilpul*) the purity of a reptile. In this fashion they wasted all their days, never attaining the intent of the Law. One needs not mention that they never attained the ultimate goal, which is [proper] actions, but even knowledge of the laws needed in daily life.

By the beginning of the fifteenth century, a few generations after the introduction of the new religious outlook and methodology, most Jewish scholarship, with the exception of isolated pockets, was eradicated from the soil of Catalonia, Gerona, and Castile.

## V. Religious Fervor and the Displacement of Morality

The new religious outlook affected the moral behavior of spiritual leaders and the community. Bereft of their intellectual and spiritual legacy, the ethical life of the community dwindled. Whereas the rationalistic ethics of the old Sepharad had put special emphasis on morality and honorable behavior, the new religious outlook, in spiritual kinship with some pietistic circles in Germany,<sup>59</sup> switched the emphasis to religious fervor. Thus, there arose individuals known for their religious hypocrisy. R. Samuel ibn Zarza (14th century) reports that the people would refer to them as “pharisees”—in the pejorative sense of Christian scripture.<sup>60</sup> Ibn Zarza mentioned the special predilection of these individuals for sensual pleasure, wine in particular. At the same time, they would put on a show to display their religious fervor:

They show themselves to be like ministering angels, wrapped in their prayer shawls and their phylacteries—some would [even] wear two pairs of phylacteries—reciting the psalms in a loud voice. And when they come to the silent prayer (*amida*)... they shake their heads and bodies... and they prolong in supplications, and they answer amen... in a loud voice, and raise their eyes towards heaven. “But their hearts were not faithful with Him, and they were not steadfast with His covenant.” About such individuals it was said, “You [God] are near their mouths, but are far from their entrails, and they [tried to] entice Him with their words” (Jer 12:2). When someone entrusts them with some money, they covet it. When they have an occasion to sin, they do not refrain, but they execute it with their ten fingers. God save us from these pharisees who are destroying the world. And this is not enough for them, but they complain that [the people] do not honor them, and that God does not give them a good reward for their flattery. Referring to individuals such as these, King Jannaeus had told his wife: “Do not fear the pharisees or those who are not pharisees, but [fear] the hypocrites that behave like Zimri [i.e., depravedly] and they want to be rewarded as Pinehas [who behaved saintly].”<sup>61</sup>

Religious fervor displaced ethics and civil morality. R. Solomon ibn Verga, who understood better than anybody else the malice affecting the new Sepharad, put these words in the mouth of a Christian explaining to the king the suffering of the Jews. Reflecting a thesis developed by Judah ha-Levi,<sup>62</sup> he said:

My Lord should know that the sins between man and man are much more severe than those between man and God, because they concern the stability of the cities and world peace. And behold, the Christian is very careful of robbery, cheating, usury, and other analogous sins. But they are not observant of the [duties] between them and God. There are some gentiles who do not pray more than once a year. The opposite is with the Jew. Who among the Jews would skip even a single prayer? However, they are not observant of larceny, cheating, and robbery. Therefore, God who hates robbery, punished them, and their exile is prolonged and they have no Messiah, although the uneducated call him every Saturday night.<sup>63</sup>

A few generations earlier, R. Solomon Al'ami had called attention to the moral corruption of the Jewish courtiers and their lavish lifestyle.<sup>64</sup>

## VI. Usury: Intellectual and Socio-Political Implications

An important element penetrating the Iberian peninsula from France and Germany via Gerona and Catalonia was the practice of usury. It had catastrophic consequences. Jewish usury was one of the most prominent causes of blood libels and anti-Semitic feelings that eventually destroyed the communities of France and Germany. Popular opinion notwithstanding, Jewish law forbids lending money with interest to Christians, except under some strict circumstances. Jewish law stipulates that lending money to a gentile is forbidden to the common person except for small sums, "for subsistence" (*kede hayyav*) but not "for profit" (*kede le-harviah*). A scholar may lend with interest "for profit," but not to gain wealth (*le-ha'ashir*).<sup>65</sup> Accordingly, Jews in Moorish Spain and Muslim countries did not engage in money lending. But applying casuistry to the text of the Talmud, this prohibition was for all practical purposes abrogated. The religious authorities in Gerona and Catalonia permitted all Jews to engage in money lending. Indeed, the famous R. Asher had been a professional moneylender in his native Germany. Referring to this practice, R. Nissim Gerondi admitted, "I do not know what is the legal basis for our custom to lend them [the Christians] money with interest."<sup>66</sup>

Aside from religious considerations, what made Jewish money lending senseless was the fact that the profit gained invariably passed to the king. In fact, the real usurer was the king, not the Jew. For all practical purposes, the Jew was the agent of the monarch, absorbing the anger of the people. As noted by a keen historian:



Since the Jews were the “property” of the sovereigns, they could demand of them at any time the money that they needed. The monarchs, tolerant with [Jewish] usury, were in fact the “usurers” of the usurers, for the part which the royal treasury received from this activity. This profession created the hostility of the people, who were witnessing how their wealth was necessarily passing into the hands of the moneylenders, not knowing of the succulent benefit that the Crown was drawing from this; it [the Crown] was not, precisely, the one paying for the consequences of this aversion.<sup>67</sup>

There was something morbid, bordering on the suicidal, in Jewish money lending. It was a known fact, corroborated by countless massacres and libels, that all that was necessary to cancel a loan was to accuse the Jew of some anti-Christian activity. One of the most powerful motivations for the wave of pogroms, blood libel accusations, and other form of anti-Semitic activities in Germany, France as well as Spain, was Jewish money lending.<sup>68</sup> As noted by a modern historian:

Many times the attack against the Jews, apparently motivated by religious reasons or of another kind, were, as we shall see, promoted—or exploited—for canceling acknowledged debts.<sup>69</sup>

Hatred against Jews was inflamed by the fact that some of these moneylenders were flaunting their richness. Bereft of humanistic education and morality, these nouveau riche indulged in the type of lifestyle and behavior that the Christian populace perceived as inflammatory. They were particularly enraged to see some of the refugees, who only a short time ago had fled France and Germany in rags, were now leading a lifestyle fit for the nobility.<sup>70</sup> By the time of the Black Plague in 1348, popular anti-Semitism was so strong that many of the most important communities in Gerona, Catalonia, and Aragon were annihilated. Among them was the community of Barcelona, where forty-five years earlier the ban against the Maimonideans was declared. In 1391, less than fifty years later, there began a series of bloodbaths lasting until 1412. The carnage, receiving strong popular support, decimated most Jewish centers in Spain, from Seville and Córdoba in the south, to Gerona and Barcelona in the north. Many of these communities were simply annihilated. Some barely survived. Large contingents of Jews were forced to convert, or chose conversion, in order to escape certain death.<sup>71</sup>

## VII. The Consequences of an Ideology

A long chain of events, originating in the new ideology taking hold in Gerona and Catalonia, resulted in the rise of the *converso* phenomenon and the eventual expulsion of the Jews. Some of the mystical ideas newly introduced into Spanish soil appeared to have a special spiritual kinship with Christianity. At the same time, religious fervor and strong animosity against critical thought, raised as the banner of religiosity, served to confirm the basic thought patterns and feelings peculiar to the Christian clergy in Spain. Indeed, the whole legacy of the golden age, based on a careful balance of Jewish and secular studies, was repudiated by the new ideology. Regardless of their intent, the people perceived the new religious leadership as transmitting the idea that their entire legal and spiritual system of old Sephard, regarded as sacred and inviolable throughout the ages, was a sham.

The demoralizing effects of this notion on the general population cannot be overstated. It is important to know that the new rabbinic graduate, trained to teach this new ideology, was ill equipped to guide the people. In Sephardic tradition the rabbi was respected on account of the knowledge of Jewish law (*halakha*), not of casuistry (*pilpul*).<sup>72</sup> Therefore, the new rabbi could not assist the community even in areas pertaining to ritual and religious practice. Moreover, some of them, void of the traditional rationalistic ethics, were rude and arrogant. "Keep away from those corrupt [scholars]," warned R. Al'ami, "who convert the Law and the commandments into a crown for personal vainglory."<sup>73</sup> Finally, since the new rabbi lacked secular education, he was unable to support himself, and was economically beholden to the new leadership (see below). Thus, he could no longer speak up freely, and discharge the duties of his ministry.

There were also political and social repercussions. The main objective of the antirationalists was to dislodge the lay leadership. For centuries, Jewish leadership in Spain was in the hands of Jewish courtiers, steeped in Jewish scholarship and secular knowledge. These men were the ambassadors of goodwill in government circles and among the most powerful leaders of society. The relatively good situation of the Jewish communities in Christian Spain, up to the beginning of the fourteenth century, was due, in part, to the good offices of lay leaders. Because of their education and expertise, they knew how to promote the interest of the community, and cultivate the type of connections that could secure support for Jewish causes. Attack against secular knowledge and rationalism rendered this type of leadership illegitimate and unwanted. Thus, the rise of a new com-

munal leadership, which promoted hatred and ill feelings among the Christian population. Empty of the traditional ethics of old Sepharad, and with little education, the new leadership behaved arrogantly and irresponsibly toward the rabbis and their own people.<sup>74</sup> Their behavior was well described by R. Solomon Al'ami:

After them, most of the prominent men of the community, the aristocrats, the eminences, the leaders who stand in the kings' palaces and courts, practiced knavery. [At one time] God had mercy on them because He saw their anguish, and made their captors have pity on them. Kings enhanced them and elevated them, and put them in charge of the kingdom's affairs, and put the keys of their treasury in their hands. And all the members of the work place were directed by them. And they became arrogant with their power and wealth, and did not remember [their prior] anguish and meekness. "And Israel forgot his Maker" (cf. Dt 32:15) and built palaces. They purchased big and good horses for carriages, and dressed in garments of royalty to clothe and enwrap themselves in. Their wives and daughters dressed like princesses and gentlewomen. And they despised the Law, humility, and a working trade.<sup>75</sup>

Moral decay also affected their behavior within the community. Moved by jealousy and arrogance, these courtiers soon began to plot against each other, accusing one another to the king. They also oppressed the poorer elements of the community, shifting the burden of taxes on them.<sup>76</sup> Consequently, the position of the Jews was weakened:

Because of their evil behavior they made themselves odious in the sight of their enemies and foes. And they provoked them to humiliate them and bring their downfall. They were victorious, and expelled them from the courts of the kings and the nobility, in shame and humiliation. Since there was no remaining Jew who had access to the king, who could speak up on behalf of the people, the enemies [of Israel] were able to carry on their plans, to fabricate complaints, and to destroy the [Jewish] people.<sup>77</sup>

In their folly, these leaders imagined that on account of their wealth, they could address the Christian dignitaries as they addressed their own religious authorities. Hence, as ibn Verga pointed out, their diplomatic missions were doomed to failure. After telling a story showing the ineptitude of Jewish envoys, he wrote:

The envoys of our people, sent in mission to the kings of the world, should take a lesson from the preceding. Since they must be very careful with what they say, and should not think that they are in the presence of one of their rabbis who feeds on their bread—which, although a bread from heaven, is combined with the bread of sadness—as our elders taught, concerning a sage who takes benefits from an ignoramus.<sup>78</sup> And the familiarity with which the Jews treat their [spiritual] leaders, causes them to lose the path of ethics. And as we lost the true leader, we remain without guidance and mind, not to mention the crises and the exile, that had left us without a good trait. . . . Let me return to the subject at hand and say: the familiarity with which we treat our judges and rabbis causes our envoys to fail. . . . As the sage had said, a man should practice at home what he needs to do in the market; because if he is used to speak with a foul language and dishonorably, habit will induce him to behave in the same manner in the avenue of the city. . . . Above all, we must say, that sometimes [on account of his] little merits the envoy trips. . . but when the envoys have merits, God would put in their mouth what they are required to say. And it is not for nought that in the day of Atonement we implore: “Be with the mouth of [the envoys] of your people.”<sup>79</sup>

In conclusion. The events leading to the destruction of the Jewish communities were as follows:

1. The new ideology alienated the educated Jews and strengthened in the uneducated masses patterns of thought and feelings akin to those of Christian society. The consequence of this ideology is reflected in the fact that precisely in the regions of Catalonia and Gerona, where this ideology thrived, Jews assimilated more fully to Christianity than in anywhere else in Spain. From among the thousands of former Jews escaping the Iberian peninsula from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries to reembrace their former religion, there will not be found a single individual coming from these regions. The proportionally low number of *conversos* executed by the Inquisition in Catalonia for practicing Judaism has been noted. Between February 22, 1488, and March 1, 1492, only fourteen people were burnt in Catalonia and 166 were “reconciled” and condemned to prison.<sup>80</sup> From among the countless cases of *conversos* accused of practicing Judaism by the Inquisition in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there is not a single case from Catalonia. It is highly significant that women, who were not

exposed to the educational system, were those who more valiantly resisted Christianity.<sup>81</sup>

2. Opposition to rationalism canceled the traditional ethical education of old Sepharad. Pietism displaced morality.
3. The sanctioning of money lending promoted hatred among the Christian population, and an inept leadership, which fostered disunity in the community and enmity with the Christian population.
4. When crises erupted, the Jewish community lacked efficient envoys and leadership.
5. Facing death or conversion, many chose the latter.<sup>82</sup>
6. Deauthorizing the old Sephardic tradition had a double effect. It showed that an ancient and venerable tradition, transmitted for centuries by the most respected authorities, could be inauthentic. If those rabbis were illegitimate and wrong, what about the new ones? The effect that the deauthorization of the old Sephardic tradition had on the more stable elements of the community was alienation from the new establishment. Daunted by the new ideological trends and the intolerance of the new leadership, they were forced to remain at the perimeter of the community.

When crises arose, many failed. Erroneously, they thought that they would be better shielded from persecution and harassment in the Christian world.

Historians had labored diligently trying to determine the reasons for the conversions of the Jews in Spain. In view of the preceding, what is truly baffling, defying explanation, is the fact that in spite of the above, many chose to remain loyal to Judaism.

In the next chapter I will explore the Christian world forced upon the *conversos*.