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The Jews of the Maghreb and Sepharad: A Case Study of Inter-Communal Cultural Relations Through the Ages

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Sepharad and Ma‘arav

Ḥaketía, the Judeo-Spanish of the Moroccan Sephardim, serves as an eloquent illustration of the close relationship between Morocco and Sepharad. The Jews of Morocco and Spain have always possessed very close contacts throughout the ages, from the Visigothic period up until post-Expulsion times. The geographic proximity of the two lands made a reciprocity both natural and inevitable. This essay examines the mutual influences between the Jews on the two sides of the straits that separate Europe and Africa – the Christian and the Muslim worlds.

During the Visigothic persecutions, many Jews from the Iberian peninsula fled to Morocco.[1] The evidence indicates that some of these refugees returned to Spain with the Arab conquerors, some even serving as advisors, scouts, or guides to the Muslim forces that conquered the peninsula.[2] It is no coincidence that the Arab conquerors of Visigothic Spain left many cities in the hands of the local Jews, a fact to which Arab

1 On Visigothic Spain and the Jews in general, see J. Juster, "The Legal Condition of the Jews under the Visigothic Kings", *Israel Law Review*, XI (1976), pp. 259-287, 391-414, 563-590; B.S. Bachrach, *Early Medieval Jewish Policy in Western Europe,* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1977; L. García Iglesias, *Los judíos en la España antigua,* Ediciones Cristiandad, Madrid 1978; A. M. Rabello, *The Jews in Visigothic Spain in the Light of the Legislation,* Zalman Shazar Centre, Jerusalem 1983 (Hebrew).

2 See E. Ashtor, *The Jews of Moslem Spain,* Varda Books, Philadelphia 1973, Vol. I, pp. 3-42, and particularly pp. 29-32; H. Z. (J. W.) Hirschberg, *A History of the Jews in North Africa,* Brill, Leiden 1974, pp. 57-58.

chroniclers testify.[3] When the 125-year period of persecution came to an end, the new Muslim regime in Spain attracted Jewish immigrants. Among these were first and foremost Jews from Morocco. Moroccan Jews continued to immigrate to the Iberian peninsula even following the tragic end of the Jewish communities in Al-Andalus under the repressive policy pursued by the Almohads, who occupied Muslim Spain in 1148. Jews in Morocco, too, suffered as the Almohads took control of different cities in the country.[4] Abraham ibn Ezra enumerated the Moroccan communities that were hit by the Almohads alongside those of Al-Andalus. From his elegy we understand that the Moroccan communities destroyed were all centres of learning. The communities that were badly hit were Sijilmasa, Marakesh, Fez, Tlemcen, Ceuta, Meknes, and Der'a.[5] Many Jews were killed, while others were forced to convert to Islam. These crypto-Jews gradually returned to Judaism as the Almohadic regime softened its policy and local conditions improved. Many, however, would eventually depart for the east or to the Hispanic kingdoms.

During the *Reconquista*, the monarchs of the Christian Hispanic kingdoms welcomed Jewish settlers from North Africa in general and from Morocco in particular. In the case of the Crown of Aragon, the sources clearly indicate the hospitable policy followed by Jaime I and Pedro III vis-à-vis Jewish immigrants from North Africa. In June 1247, following his conquests of the Balearic Islands in 1229 and the Kingdom of Valencia in 1239-1245, King Jaime I of Catalonia-Aragon issued an edict of safe-conduct to Jews willing to settle in the territories of the Crown of Aragon. The edict was proffered in particular to the Moroccan Jews Salomon Benammar and Isaac ben

3 R. Dozy, *Recherches sur l'histoire et la littérature de l'Espagne pendant le moyen âge,* Gallimard, Paris 1881, Vol. I, pp. 49, 52. Norman Roth's criticism of historians who, in his opinion, have exaggerated the role played by the Jews in the Arab conquest of Spain in no way refutes the present argument that the Jews of Visigothic Spain welcomed and assisted the conquerors: see N. Roth, "The Jews and the Muslim Conquest of Spain", *Jewish Social Studies*, XXXVIII (1976), pp. 145-158. See also L.J. Simon, "Jews, Visigoths, and the Muslim Conquest of Spain", *UCLA Historical Journal*, IV (1983), pp. 5-33.

4 See D. Corcos, "The Attitude of the Almohads towards the Jews", *Zion*, XXXII (1967), pp. 137-160 (Hebrew).

5 The elegy was also published in Y.M. Toledano, *Ner HaMa'arav,* Sifria HaSepharadit, Jerusalem 1911, pp. 51-53 (Hebrew); see also D. Kahana, *R. Abraham ibn Ezra*, Aḥiasaf, Warsaw 1894, Vol. I, pp. 140-143 (Hebrew); I. Davidson, *Thesaurus of Medieval Hebrew Poetry*, Ktav, New York 1924 [repr. 1970], Vol. I, pp. 61-62, No. 1301.

Salomon and their families – a group of over twenty persons in total.[6] Jews from the Crown of Aragon – particularly from Majorca – were heavily involved in commercial activities and diplomatic missions in North Africa, including Morocco.[7]

In this essay, we shall discuss two aspects of the cultural interchange between the Jews of the Maghreb and the Jews of Sepharad. These two facets relate to influences in contrary directions – the first that of Maghrebi Jews on Sepharad and the second of Sephardi Jews on the Maghreb. While the latter is far better documented, the present article in fact owing its origins to a workshop dedicated to this subject, the former is less known and at times almost completely ignored. I will refer first to the second aspect – chronologically later – leaving the earlier aspect to the final section.

The Sephardi Impact on Maghrebi Jewry

The influence exerted on Moroccan Jewry by the Sephardi refugees of 1492 needs little elaboration. The topic has been extensively researched, the impact the Sephardi refugees exercised on Jewish life in the Maghreb having been examined from various perspectives. Following the massacres of 1391, Jewish refugees from the Iberian Peninsula established themselves in what is today known as Algeria.[8] The early Sephardim who settled in North Africa included such great rabbinic authorities as R. Yitzḥaq ben Sheshet Perfet, one of the most outstanding rabbinic authorities to flee the Iberian Peninsula and find refuge in North Africa.[9] In addition to his rabbinic training, Perfet was also a physician. Perfet's colleague, Shim'on ben Tzemaḥ Duran,

6 The full text was published by J.V. Villanueva, *Viaje literario a las iglesias de España*, Imprenta de Fortanet, Madrid 1852, Vol. 22, p. 327. The document was reprinted in A. Pons, *Los judíos del reino de Mallorca,* Miguel Font, Madrid 1858, Vol. II, p. 203. A French summary is found in J. Régné, *History of the Jews in Aragon,* Y. Assis (ed.), Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1978, No. 36. For summaries in other languages see, Régné, ibid*,* pp. 7, 723.

7 See Hirschberg, *A History of the Jews* (above note 2), Vol. 1, pp. 81-378; Y. Assis, "Jewish Diplomats from Aragon in Muslim Lands (1213-1327)", *Sefunot*, III [18] (1985), pp. 11-34 (Hebrew).

8 See Hirschberg, *A History of the Jews* (above note 2)*,* Vol. 1, pp. 384-388.

9 On the Sephardi Jews who settled in North Africa and R. Simon Duran and the Ribash, see I. Epstein, *The Responsa of Rabbi Simon ben Zemah Duran as a Source of the History of the Jews in North Africa,* K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, London 1930 [repr. Ktav, New York 1968], pp. 14-43.

was originally from Majorca, and when he settled in Algiers he joined R. Yitzḥaq ben Sheshet Perfet as a leader of the city's community.[10] The whole Duran family made a deep impact on Jewish life in North Africa. Another halakhic authority who settled in the region was R. Ephraim Alnaqawe, who first went to Marrakesh but finally settled in Agadir near Tlemcen. Alnaqawe was likewise an expert in both Torah and medicine. In reward for his service as physician to the ruler and his family he asked permission for the Jews to form a community in Tlemcen. His influence on the development of Jewish life in Tlemcen is reflected in the large synagogue he built, which remained the symbol of Jewish tradition for centuries. His flight from Spain to Tlemcen became a legend, subsequently turning Tlemcen into an important destination for pilgrims.[11]

The settlement of the refugees of 1391 in North Africa was neither easy nor simple. Many were attacked by local peasants and some were forced to return to the Iberian Peninsula. Shlomo ibn Verga's *Shevet Yehudah* gives vivid testimony to the suffering they endured, in terms that well reflect the reality in North Africa.

> In the year 5150 … there were general persecutions in large parts of Sepharad … A few of the Jews abandoned their religion because of the great calamities and terror … All of these *anusim* were determined to find a way to save their souls and so chose exile, wandering from one nation to another in the lands of their enemies until they could find a safe haven … Those who went to the lands of the Berbers [lit.: the Arabs], however, experienced horrors that no book can describe, as they themselves wrote to their relatives who remained in their land [i.e., Sepharad – the Crowns of Castile and Aragon].[12]

It is noteworthy that while the Sephardi refugees of 1391 all settled in territories east of Morocco, those of 1492 found refuge in Morocco. The divergence may be traced to the political circumstances prevailing in North Africa in these respective periods.

10 See A. Herschman, *Rabbi Yishak bar Sheshet (HaRiBaSh),* Mossad HaRav Kook, Jerusalem 1956, pp. 29-42 (Hebrew); original English version: A. Herschman, *Rabbi Isaac bar Sheshet Perfet and his Times,* Jewish Theological Seminary, New York 1943, Chapters 5 and 6.

11 S. Slymovics, "The Pilgrimage of Rabbi Ephraim Al-Naqawa, Tlemcen, Algeria", *Jewish Folklore and Ethnology Review*, XV (1993), pp. 84-88.

12 Shlomo ibn Verga, *Sefer Shevet Yehudah,* A. Shoḥat (ed.), Mossad Bialik, Jerusalem 1947, pp. 71-72 ["The Twenty Seventh Persecution"] (Hebrew).

I would like to note two points here before turning to the Sephardi influence in Morocco. Firstly, in comparison to Portugal and the Ottoman Empire the number of Sephardi refugees in Morocco was relatively small, the political circumstances being far from ideal for their settlement in the country. Secondly, many Sephardi refugees arrived in Morocco and, due to the serious difficulties they encountered there, subsequently left to find a safe haven elsewhere. Even those who did not remain in Morocco and continued their wandering eastwards left an impact behind them, however. Among the scholars who departed were Abraham Zaquto, Ya'aqov Berav, David ibn Abi Zimra, and Yehudah Ḥayyat. R. Ya'aqov Berav was only eighteen years old when he became the leader of a community of 5,000 families in Fez, where he lived in misery and poverty before he left the town for good.[13] The country was in political chaos, torn by two competing regimes, the Wattasid sultans and the Sharifites, while most of the ports were in Portuguese hands.

Despite their limited number and the hardships they encountered, the Sephardi Jews who settled in Morocco should be considered as constituting a great blessing to Maghrebi Jewry. Since the Almohadic persecutions, the Jews of the Maghreb had suffered from an unstable government and inconsistent attitudes. Communities that were major centres of Jewish life lost their preeminence. This was particularly the case with regard to Fez, which had been the most important Jewish community and a place of scholarship. The arrival of the Sephardim injected new, fresh blood, bringing about a revival of Jewish culture.[14]

Three political forces in Morocco played a central role in affecting the destiny of the Sephardi refugees. The settlers encountered great hardships, records of some of the severe tragedies they experienced having survived. Much of the suffering has gone unrecognized, however, for few of the refugees were scholars and left no records of their tragic experiences. While the King of Fez was particularly praised for his benevolent attitude towards the refugees, he was the exception rather than the rule. In many places, the rulers and local population alike were hostile to the newcomers. The piteous conditions in which the Sephardi settlers lived when they first arrived drove many to despair. The accounts of such writers as R. Abraham Torrutiel and R. Yehudah ben Ya'aqov Ḥayyat lead us to wonder how the refugees survived and subsequently flourished.

13 Toledano, *Ner Ha-Ma'arav* (above note 5), p. 78.

14 See ibid, pp. 70-71.

R. Abraham Torrutiel was a young boy when he was forced to leave Castile and settle in Fez. In the appendix he wrote to Abraham ibn Daud's *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah*, he narrates the history of his people until his own days. The most important part of his account relates to his personal experience and his description of the life of the Sephardi immigrants who settled in Fez. His eyewitness account is a very valuable source. It describes the terrible conditions in which the immigrants lived. Some were extremely poor, many were ill, others suffered from a disease apparently brought from Castile. Eight months after Abraham's family settled in Fez, a large fire broke out in the town, which added much to the Jews' suffering and insecurity. The refugees were particularly persecuted by the Portuguese authorities who controlled the coastal cities.[15]

R. Yehudah ben Ya'aqov Ḥayyat was one of those Jews who found refuge in Portugal, where the conditions of the Jews were also desperate. He arrived in Morocco in 1493 as part of a group of 250 Jews expelled from Portugal, being the victim of a libel by a Muslim from Granada who claimed that Yehudah had expressed joy over the victory of the Christian monarchs who conquered Granada in 1492 and advised the Jews to make fun of the Muslim prophet. He was beaten and seriously injured and then thrown into a dank, dark prison and condemned to be stoned – unless he converted to Islam. For forty days he remained in isolation in a dark cell, with hardly any food or water. When he was redeemed by the Jews for a large sum, R. Yehudah Ḥayyat repaid them by making them a gift of around two hundred of the books in his possession. He subsequently moved to Fez, where he and other refugees ate the grass in the fields. Every day, he would work himself to death for a slice of bread that even a dog would sniff at. In the autumn of 1494, he experienced the harsh conditions of Fez in cold and hunger. Most of the refugees lived in the open air, digging ditches to find some warmth. Rabbi Ḥayyat arrived in Fez in 1493, remained for around a year, and finally left for Italy in 1494 in order to escape starvation.[16]

15 This appendix was published by A.E. Harkavy in the Hebrew translation of Graetz's *History of the Jews* by S.P. Rabinovitz as "Hadashim Gam Yeshanim": see H. Graetz and S. P. Rabinovitz, *History of the Jews*, Schuldberg & co., Warsaw 1898, Vol. VI, Appendix, pp. 21-22 (Hebrew).

16 See the introduction in Yehuda Ḥayyat, *Commentary on Sefer Ma'arekhet HaElohut*, Meir Ben Efraim and Ya'aqov Ben Naftali, Mantoba 1557 (Hebrew), Toledano, *Ner Ha-Ma'arav* (above note 5), pp. 78-79.

Although Fez attracted many Sephardi refugees, many were unable to cope with the difficult conditions prevailing there. Another important personality who stayed for a while and was then forced to leave was Rabbi David ben Shlomo ibn Abi Zimra, whose family was originally from Zamora. David was a young boy of ten when his rich and well-established family left for Morocco. While Rabbi David ibn Abi Zimra, left for Eretz Israel, many members of his family remained in Morocco.[17]

While most of the refugees from Castile and Portugal settled in cities on the coast and in the large cities inland, some found a home in villages. In many of the places where they settled, the Sephardi refugees found Maghrebi Jews who had been living there for centuries. These Jews had their own customs and traditions, liturgy, and halakhic orientation. The meeting between the Sephardim and the Maghrebi Jews (the so-called *toshavim*) was not simple or straightforward – as is typically true whenever immigrant Jews settle in already-existing communities. In the case of the Sephardi refugees, the difficulties were even greater, since they arrived in the belief that they were the bearers of a Jewish culture superior to the local one. Furthermore, in some places the number of the refugees was sufficiently large to cause concern and even fear amongst the local community.

The relations between the Maghrebi and Sephardi Jews in Morocco were strained and at times antagonistic. In Fez, where many of the Sephardi refugees, including rabbis and scholars, found it impossible to remain because of the terrible conditions, the Maghrebi leaders were more successful in resisting the Sephardi influence. The departure of so many Sephardi scholars to the east made their struggle against Sephardi hegemony easier. The leaders of the *toshavim* questioned the refugees' legitimacy and identity as Jews. In a question sent to R. Shim'on Duran in Algiers, R. Busti – the spiritual leader of the Maghrebi Jews in Fez – and his colleagues inquired about people coming from "Catalonia, Castile, and Portugal who want to convert and join God's people, each claiming that he is a Cohen … while their father was uncircumcised and Christian and their mother was without a ketubbah and a proper wedding, careless in the laws of purity [lit.: seven clean (days)], and who were conceived when their mother was *niddah* [menstruating] and were born from the uncircumcised …"

R. Shim'on Duran was very critical of the Maghrebi Jewish attitude towards such crypto-Jews who returned to Judaism, considering their concept of the *conversos'*

17 Toledano, *Ner Ha-Ma'arav* (above note 5), p. 79.

return to Judaism to be invalid. The *toshavim* rabbis were also severely rebuked by a rabbi originating from the Iberian peninsula, whose understanding of the problem seemed to be far more sympathetic and realistic. These responses indicate that the Maghrebi Jews of Fez were not happy with presence of Sephardi Jews in their midst and that the rivalry between the two communities was very bitter.[18]

Ultimately, large parts of Moroccan Jewry became predominantly Sephardi, Sephardi liturgy, traditions, customs, halakhah, and language coming to prevail over the local community's practices. Entire communities turned Sephardi. The process was neither short nor simple. In some cases the clash was very serious and led to external – Gentile – interference. The best-known crisis between the Sephardi and Maghrebi Jews occurred over the process of *sheḥitah.* This conflict lasted for many years and led to the intervention of the Muslim authorities in a halakhic conflict. The dispute, relating to the animal's lungs, broke out in several countries where the Sephardi refugees settled. Bitter and antagonistic, it ended with the Sephardi settlers gaining the upper hand in the various communities.

R. Ḥaim Gaguine, the leader of the Maghrebi camp in this conflict, was originally from Fez. When he was a child he moved to Castile to study under R. Yoseph ʻUzziel, one of the great Castilian scholars. During the expulsion, R. Gaguine returned to Fez to become the spiritual leader of the Maghrebi Jews. His studies and experience in Castile had prepared him to feel the equal of any Sephardi scholar, and it was he who dared to challenge the Sephardi claim to superiority in matters of halakhah and Torah. In the conflict over *kashrut* which took place during 1526-1531, R. Gaguine acted as the main spokesman for the *toshavim.* Following the conflict, he wrote a book presenting his arguments.[19] He sent this treatise to many communities to strengthen them in their opposition to the attempts of Sephardi Jews to impose their halakhah and customs on the local Jewish communities.

The influence of the Sephardi refugees was also considerable in the field of Kabbalah. Kabbalistic study in Morocco predated the arrival of the Sephardi mystics.[20] An important centre of Kabbalah existed in Darʻa both prior and subsequent

18 Shimʻon Duran, *Yakhin u-Boʻaz,* Makhom HaKtav, Jerusalem 1992, II, No. 3.

19 Ḥaim Gaguine, *ʻEtz Ḥaim*, M. ʻAmar (ed.), Bar Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan 1987 (Hebrew). On R. Ḥaim Gaguine and the conflict, see the Introduction, pp. 11-30; Gaguine's own account is found in Chapter I, pp. 67-72; see also J.S. Gerber, *Jewish Society in Fez, 1450-1700: Studies in Communal and Economic Life*, Brill, Leiden 1980, pp. 113-120.

20 See M. Ḥallamish, "The Kabbalah in Morocco: An Attempt at its Classification", I. Bezalel (ed.), *Paʻamei Maʻarav*: *Etudes judéo-maghrébines*, Ben-Zvi Institute, Jerusalem 1983, pp. 209-210 (Hebrew).

to the Expulsion. According to Moshe Cordovero, it was from Dar'a that a complete version of the Zohar spread and reached R. Moshe de Leon and R. Yitzḥaq of Acre.[21] The latter lived in Morocco, where he could have received information about the "rediscovery" of the Zohar in the thirteenth century in Dar'a. Various sources indicate that Dar'a was an important centre of Kabbalah from the thirteenth through to the sixteenth century. Although the area never attracted Sephardi settlers and the Jews there continued to uphold their ancient local traditions, the Sephardi Kabbalists exercised an immense influence on the study of this field elsewhere in Morocco.[22] Among those who contributed to the spread of the Kabbalah in Morocco we can name R. Abraham Saba, whose commentary on the Torah *Tzror ha-Mor* – which he rewrote from memory during his ten-year stay in Fez since his books had been lost in Portugal – contains a mystical interpretation according to the method of the Zohar parallel to the ordinary sense. In his commentary on the weekly portion "Va-etḥanan", he mentions the sermons he preached in all the synagogues of Fez – sermons which were undoubtedly instrumental in spreading his kabbalistic views.[23] His commentary on the Ten Sefirot was also written in Morocco and sent to R. 'Alal ben Alḥaikh, a scholar resident in Tlemcen.[24] In Tlemcen we find another Sephardi mystic, R. Yoseph ben Moshe Alashkar. Another leading Sephardi scholar who had a profound impact on the spread and development of the Kabbalah in Morocco was R. Shim'on ibn Lavi, the author of *'Al Adne Paz,* a commentary on the Zohar.[25] He was either a baby when he came from Castile or was born in Morocco to a family of refugees.

The Sephardi refugees were strikingly successful in overcoming the early problems of their integration, rapidly reconstituting their communities, reestablishing their institutions, reviving their Sephardi Hebrew and Jewish culture, and reasserting their pride in their identity. The Sephardi refugees and their descendants created their own

21 See Cordovero's commentary on the Zohar, *Or Yaqar* in *Tiqune Zohar*, Aḥuzat Israel, Jerusalem 1983, II:104 (Hebrew).

22 Toledano, *Ner Ha-Ma'arav* (above note 5), p. 109. The centre at Dar'a is fully treated in R. Elior, "The Kabbalists of Dr'aa", *Pe'amim*, XXIV (1985), pp. 36-73 (Hebrew).

23 See Z. Buaron, *The Expulsions from Spain and Portugal as Reflected in Rabbi Saba's Commentaries (1474-1516),* Lifshitz College, Jerusalem 1993 (Hebrew).

24 G. Scholem, "Index to Commentaries on the Ten Sefirot", *Kiryat Sefer [Kirjath Sepher]*, X (1934), p. 504 (Hebrew).

25 See B. Huss, *'Al Adne Paz, The Kabbalah of Rabbi Shim'on Ibn Lavi,* Magnes Press, Jerusalem 2000, pp. 1-9 (Hebrew).

separate communities and institutions and were known as "The Holy Communities of the Refugees from Castile" in contrast to "The Holy Communities of the *Toshavim*".[26] Fez became the centre of the Sephardi Jews in Morocco. The *taqanot* or ordinances the Sephardi rabbis issued in Fez regulated family and communal life, as well as matters of inheritance, on the basis of Sephardi tradition. These *taqanot* or ordinances, which were registered in the community's book of Fez in the *Sefer ha-Taqanot*, indicate how eager Sephardi scholars were to preserve the customs and traditions they had practised in Castile.[27]

The Sephardim remained separate from the local Jews, who refused to give up their discrete identity. The segregation was reflected in the terminology used to denote the "other". The local Jews or *toshavim* called the Sephardi Jews *rumi* or *'ajami* – a Persian term used by the Arabs to denote foreigners. Paradoxically, the Sephardim, the newcomers, called the *toshavim* (the locals) *forasteros* (foreigners). The Sephardim developed their own Judeo-Castilian – Ḥaketía – which created a further barrier between them and the local Maghrebi Jews.[28] The sound of Romance was heard in the streets, in the synagogues, and in homes. Romance languages from Iberia – particularly the Castilian which was to develop into Ḥaketía – were predominant wherever Sephardi Jews settled in substantial numbers. The family names of many Sephardi Jews in Morocco bore – and still bear – witness to their Iberian origins.[29] Despite the survival of local Maghrebi Jewish communities and customs until modern times, it can be safely assumed that the Sephardi refugees and their descendants in Morocco turned the country into a major centre of Sephardi Judaism.

26 On the *toshavim* and *megorashim* in Fez, see Gerber, *Jewish Society in Fez* (above note 19), pp. 43-51.

27 A.I. Laredo, "Las taqanot de los expulsados de Castilla en Marruecos y su régimen matrimonial y sucesoral", *Sepharad*, VIII (1948), pp. 245-276.

28 On Judeo-Castilian or Ḥaketía in Morocco, see A. Castro, "La lengua española de Marruecos", *Revista Hispano-Africana*, I, No. 5 (1922) [repub. in *Raíces*, LIX (2004), pp. 63-65]; J. Benoliel, "Endecha de los judíos españoles de Tánger", *Revista de Archivos, Bibliotecas y Museos*, IX (1905), pp. 128-133; idem, "Dialecto judeo-hispano-marroqui o hakitia", *Boletín de la Real Academia Española*, XIII (1926), pp. 209-233, 342-363, 507-538; XIV (1927), pp. 137-168, 196-234, 357-373, 566-580; XV (1928), pp. 47-61, 188-223; XXXII (1952), pp. 255-289.

29 See D. Corcos, "Reflexions sur l'onomastique judéo-nord-africaine", *Folklore Research Centre Studies*, I (1970), pp. 1-27 [= D. Corcos, *Studies in the History of the Jews of Morocco,* Rubin Mass, Jerusalem 1976, pp. 131-157]; idem, "Quelques aspects de la

Many New Christians from Portugal escaped to Morocco, where they were integrated into the Sephardi community and from time to time added new blood to the Sephardi communities. A number of Sephardi Jews served as diplomats, interpreters, and agents in the service of Spain, Portugal, or Morocco. It is noteworthy that the Portugal that dealt so harshly with the Jews who were forcibly converted in 1497 and was later to persecute and prosecute those who returned to Judaism or who continued to practice Jewish traditions in secret found no problem in employing those who escaped from Portugal and openly professed Judaism. The influence of these diplomats was immense, frequently being instrumental in improving the status of their Jewish brethren. Important wealthy Sephardi families played a major role in the country, some being sent as Moroccan ambassadors to Portugal.[30]

Maghrebi Roots in Sephardi Culture

Let us go now go back more than five centuries prior to the arrival of the Sephardi refugees, to the Morocco of the ninth and tenth centuries. The Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries radically changed the Jewish world and the course of Jewish history. By the beginning of the eighth century, the vast majority of the Jewish people were living under Islam, and very soon after the conquests most Jews had adopted the Arabic language. Eventually, this meeting of the Jewish people with the world of Islam brought about a synthesis of Judaism with Greco-Arabic culture.[31] This was initiated by Sa'adiah Gaon[32] and continued in Sepharad for a period of two centuries, in a flourishing Hebrew culture known as "The Golden Age".

I would like to propose that while Jewish historiography has rightly emphasised the great cultural, religious, linguistic, and literary achievements of the Sephardi "Golden

société juive dans le vieux Maroc, les prénoms des Juifs marocains", *Folklore Research Centre Studies*, III (1972), pp. 143-229.

30 Hirschberg, *A History of the Jews* (above note 2), Vol. I, pp. 410-36. For Sephardi Jewish diplomats and agents from Morocco in the seventeenth century, see ibid, Vol. II, pp. 210-235.

31 On Judeo-Arabic culture, see A.S. Halkin, "The Judeo-Islamic Age", L. Schwarz (ed.), *Great Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People,* Modern Library, New York 1956, pp. 215-263.

32 On Sa'adiah Gaon's leading role in absorbing Greco-Arabic culture, see E. Fleischer, "Reflections on the Character of Hebrew Poetry in Spain", *Pe'amim*, II (1979), pp. 15-20 (Hebrew).

Age", it has almost totally ignored the role played by scholars of the Maghreb in laying the foundations of Sephardi culture. It is striking that some relatively simple facts have not been adduced in order to draw what should appear to be obvious conclusions concerning the contribution of Moroccan Jewish scholarship to the "Golden Age" of Sepharad.[33]

Although Spain possesses a place of distinction in promoting the study of the Hebrew language, a simple examination of the facts demonstrates that the study of the Hebrew language in Spain was initiated by Hebrew scholars who originated from Morocco or had studied there. Dunash ben Labrat Halevi, so intimately related to Sepharad as a grammarian and poet in the tenth century, was educated in Fez.[34] Dunash came to Spain at the invitation of Ḥasdai ibn Shaprut, who was determined to create a centre of Jewish learning there. R. Yehudah Ḥayyuj, also known as Abu Zekharya Yaḥya ben David al-Fasi, who was the first person to suggest the trilateral root of Hebrew words and to compile a Hebrew grammar, was also from Fez. Yehudah Ḥayyuj was the teacher of Yonah ibn Janaḥ, a preeminent Hebrew grammarian.[35] David ben Abraham al-Fasi wrote a Hebrew dictionary called *Kitab Jami‘ al-Alfaz*.[36]

33 On the "Golden Age" of the Jews of Muslim Spain, see the articles of S. Morag, "The Jewish Communities of Spain and the Living Traditions of the Hebrew Language", U. Simon, "The Spanish School of Biblical Interpretation", and A. Mirsky, "Hebrew Literary Creation", H. Beinart (ed.), *The Sephardi Legacy,* Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1992, Vol. I, pp. 103-114, 115-136, and 147-187 respectively.

34 E. Fleischer, "On Dunash ben Labrat, his Wife and Son", *Jerusalem Papers on Hebrew Literature*, V (1984), pp. 169-202; A. Sáenz-Badillos, "Early Hebraists in Spain: Menahem ben Saruq and Dunash ben Labrat", M. Sæbo (ed.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, Vol. I, 2 (2000), pp. 96-109; idem, "Menahem and Dunash in Search of the Foundations of Hebrew Language", *Studia Orientalia*, XCV (2003), pp. 177-190.

35 A. Dotan, "Linguistics and Comparative Linguistics in the Middle Ages: An Analysis of One Verbal Pattern in Judah Ḥayyuj's Grammar", *Te‘udah*, IX (1995), pp. 117-130 (Hebrew); N. Bassal, "Syntax in Yehudah Ḥayyuj's *Kitab an-Nutaf* as an Arabic-Hebrew Cultural Encounter", *Ben ‘Ever le-‘Arav*, Afikim, Tel Aviv 1998, pp. 95-111 (Hebrew); A. Maman, "The Flourishing Era of Jewish Exegesis in Spain: The Linguistic School – Judah Hayyuj, Jonah ibn Janah, Moses ibn Chiquitilla and Judah ibn Bal‘am", Sæbo, *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament*, (above note 34), Vol. I, 2 (2000), pp. 261-268.

36 S. L. Skoss (ed.), *The Hebrew-Arabic Dictionary of the Bible: Known as Kitab Jami‘ al-Alfaz (Agron) of David Ben Abraham al-Fasi the Karaite (tenth century),* Yale University

The three grammarians who left Fez all received their Hebrew education there. One of the most important Hebrew linguists, whose comparative studies constitute the first of their kind, was Yehudah ben Quraysh al-Taherti. Al-Taherti was the first linguist to pay heed to the relations and similarities between the Semitic languages – Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic. Although he was born in Taharat, he spent a good part of his life in Fez. His well-known work on the importance of the reading of the Aramaic translation of the Torah as prescribed by the rabbis was actually sent as an epistle – called the "Rasalah"– to the Jews of Fez who had stopped reading the Aramaic, in order to persuade them to revert to the ancient custom. It is interesting that Yehudah endeavoured to demonstrate how useful Aramaic – as well as Arabic – could be for a better understanding of the Hebrew text. Equally intriguing is the answer of the Jews of Fez, who claimed that they had ceased reading the Aramaic text because they fully understood the Hebrew.[37] It appears obvious that Hebrew grammar in Spain owed much to Moroccan Hebrew grammarians and poets.

Research in Talmudic studies acknowledges that the greatest scholar in early Sepharad was R. Yitzḥaq ben Ya'aqov ha-Kohen Alfasi, who transformed the yeshivah of Lucena into a highly-distinguished centre of talmudic scholarship. Alongside R. Moshe ben Ḥanokh, Alfasi should be considered the founder of talmudic learning in Sepharad. His work *Halakhot* or *Talmud Qatan* is undoubtedly one of the masterpieces of Jewish culture and jurisprudence – one of the most influential works produced in the Middle Ages, in fact. R. Yitzḥaq Alfasi was born Qal'at Bani Ḥammad in 1013 and died in Lucena in 1103. He spent all his life in Fez, however, where he studied and taught. When he fled to Spain in 1088, he was seventy-five years old. He brought to Lucena the talmudic erudition which he had acquired and developed in Fez. Many

Press, New Haven 1836, Introduction; S. Abramson, "On the Expansion of the *Piyut*: The Words of the *Paytan* according to the Karaite David Alfasi", *Sinai*, LXXXIII (1978), pp. 89-91 (Hebrew); 'A. Watad, "The 'Tafkim' and the 'Akhtasar' in David ben Abraham's Linguistic Teaching", Bentolila Yaakov (ed.) *Hadassah Shy Jubilee Book: Research Papers on Hebrew Linguistics and Jewish Languages*, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Beersheva 1998, pp. 61-80 (Hebrew).

37 W.J. van Bekkum, "The 'Risala' of Yehuda ibn Quraysh and its Place in Hebrew Linguistics", *Historiographia Linguistica*, VIII, 2/3 (1981), pp. 307-327; J. Fellman, "The First Comparative Hamito-Semitist [Ibn Quraysh]", *Linguistics*, CCV (1978), pp. 63-64.

of his responsa, most of which were written in Arabic, were composed in Fez.[38] His opus magnum*, Sefer ha-Halakhot*, was written in Fez and his influence reached deep into communities beyond the Pyrenees.[39] Once again, we see how a great scholar often identified with Sepharad was in reality the product of Morocco, coming to Spain when he was already an outstanding scholar. Alfasi also greatly contributed to the prestige and standing of the yeshiva where such scholars as R. Yoseph ibn Megash and R. Maimon, Maimonides' father, studied.

Joseph ibn Plat, most certainly from Fez, was another talmudic scholar who moved to Spain and then to Provence, in the twelfth century. He was most probably one of the victims of the Almohadic persecutions in Al-Andalus who found refuge in Provence. Ibn Plat exerted a great influence in Spain, and most of all in Provence. Among the scholars whom he influenced should be mentioned R. Abraham ben Yitzḥaq of Narbonne and R. Zeraḥyah HaLevi. Joseph ibn Plat was also in contact with R. Abraham ben David of Posquières, while R. Asher of Lunel, author of *Sefer Ha-Minhagot,* was personally in touch with him and directly quotes his works.[40]

The most interesting story regards the settlement of the Maimonides family in Fez. The Almohads who came to the aid of their Muslim brethren in Al-Andalus against the advancing Christian forces in the Iberian Peninsula remained there and began imposing their strict puritan Muslim regime on the local populace, persecuting Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike. The Almohads destroyed Jewish life in Al-Andalus. Many Jews were killed, others were forcibly converted to Islam, some were sold as slaves, and many fled to the north, to the Hispanic kingdoms, to Provence, and

38 D.Z. Rotstien, "The Responsa of the Rif, Published for the First Time from Ms. Oxford Ms. Heb. D, Vol. 32, The Source and its Translation", *Or HaMizraḥ*, XX (1971), pp. 175-198; I. Frantzos, "Studies in the Responsa of R. Isaac Alfasi", *Sinai*, XCV (1984), pp. 240-248; C (1987), pp. 642-660 (Hebrew).

39 I.M. Ta-Shm'a, "The Acceptance of the Rif's Books, the R"H and *Halakhot Gedolot,* in France and Germany in the 11th-12th Centuries", *Kiryat Sefer*, LV (1980), pp. 191-201 (hebrew); A. Grossman, "From Andalusia to Europe: The Attitude of German and French Scholars in the 12th-13th Centuries to the Halakhic Works of the Rif and Maimonides", *Pe'amim*, LXXX (1999), pp. 14-32 (Hebrew).

40 I. Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières: A Twelfth Century Talmudist*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1962, pp. 17f; B.Z. Benedict, "On Scholars of Provence", *Kiryat Sefer*, XXVII (1951), pp. 397-398 (Hebrew) [= B.Z. Benedict, *The Torah Centre in Provence,* Mossad HaRav kook, Jerusalem 1985, pp. 57-58 (Hebrew)].

to the east. Surprisingly R. Maimon and his family, after wandering for more than a decade, reached Fez around 1160 and stayed there for several years.

This settlement in Fez has puzzled many historians. How could Maimonides' family have chosen to leave Cordoba for Fez, the centre of the Almohadic regime? Muslim historians, followed by several Jewish ones, have suggested that the family converted to Islam, enabling them to move to Fez without fear.[41] If this is the case, it is extremely surprising that Maimonides did not refer to his family's forcible conversion in any of his works dealing with this subject. Equally startling is his father's silence on the matter in his epistle *Igeret ha-Neḥamah*, written in Fez to encourage Jews who had been forcibly converted to Islam but secretly continued to observe Jewish customs to return to the fold – or, if they had already done so, to assure them that their "conversion" should no longer continue to disturb them.

Other historians reject such a theory of "conversion".[42] A few years ago, Prof. Ya'aqov Levinger of Tel Aviv University suggested that R. Maimon and his family pretended they were Muslims, compelling them to leave Cordova where people knew them but enabling them to eventually settle in Fez, supposedly as Muslims, where they were unknown. This explanation was so convincing and attractive that for years I quoted Prof. Levinger's explanation as the most likely solution to the puzzle.

The further I have researched the community of Fez in an attempt to analyze the possible roots of the Sephardi "Golden Age", however, the less convinced I have become of the truth of this explanation. It is clear to me that while the Almohads adopted a very harsh policy towards heresy and non-Muslims in Al-Andalus, in Morocco, where their regime was well established, they gradually relaxed their policy and permitted Jews to profess Judaism – alongside New Muslims who remained apart from the Muslim and Jewish communities. Once Morocco had fallen under their total control and they began their conquest of Al-Andalus, the Almohads, under 'Abd al-Mu'min, discontinued their oppressive policy vis-à-vis the Jews. 'Abd al-Mu'min, the successor of Muhammad ibn Tumart, founder of the Almohadic movement, was

41 Even some Jewish historians have accepted this explanation: see, for instance, H. Graetz and S. P. Rabinovitz, *History of the Jews* (above note 15), IV, p. 332 (Hebrew). Carmoly, Munk, Geiger, and Weiss also adopted this view: see M. Friedlander in the Introduction to Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed,* M. Friedlander (trans.), Routledge, London 1904[2], p. xviii.

42 These include Rapoport, Steinschneider, Zunz, and Dinur.

able to unite the whole of North Africa and establish Almohadic control in Al-Andalus before his death in 1163.

In the twelfth century, Fez once again became a centre of Jewish life and learning. It is for this reason that R. Maimon chose Fez as a haven in 1159 or 1160. While the yeshivot in Morocco suffered a certain decline as Sepharad began its rise to preeminence, the Almohadic persecutions led to a lot of suffering and forcible conversions wherever the Almohads ruled – as Abraham ibn Ezra's well-known lament reflects. Yet while the Andalusian communities lost all they had possessed, those of Morocco were able to gradually resuscitate Jewish life, including its scholarship.

The Jews of Fez became more and more involved in commerce. Maimonides refers to them as "the local ordinary traders throughout Morocco".[43] These Jewish traders were well suited for commerce between Morocco and Europe, bringing great financial benefits to the local government.

The Fez of the latter part of the twelfth century was a vigorous place. Moshe Dar'i, the messianic forerunner, resided in the city. According to Maimonides, his father tried very hard to dissuade people from following Dar'i: "My father and master, of blessed memory, endeavored to dissuade and discourage people from following him. However only a few were influenced by my father, while most, nay, nearly all, clung to R. Moses, of blessed memory."[44] Dar'i, originally from Dar'a, studied in Lucena under R. Yoseph ibn Megash, where R. Maimon made the former's aquaintance. The entire episode – which occurred in the 1220's, during the period when the Almohadic movement was emerging – ended in a fiasco and initiated a deterioration in the situation of the Jews in Fez. Although Ibn Ezra's lament makes it clear that many communities in Morocco suffered greatly under the early Almohads, this event demonstrates that the Jews of Fez were not a wretched and persecuted minority. A fragment of the elegy found in the Genizah also indicates that the community of Fez was an important Jewish centre of learning. Abraham ibn Ezra describes the community of Fez destroyed by the Almohads between 1138 and 1140 as "a city of

43 Maimonides uses the term *blad al-Agrab* to refer to Morocco: see *Responsa of Maimonides,* J. Blau (ed.), Mekitze Nirdamim, Jerusalem 1958, No. 143, p. 274.

44 *Moses Maimonides' Epistle to Yemen,* A. S. Halkin (ed.); B. Cohen (English translation), JPS, New York 1952, p. 98 (Arabic original); p. 99 (Hebrew translations) [abbreviated version]; p. 100 (Arabic original); p. 101 (Hebrew translation) [long version]; p. XIX (English translation).

scholars", a city of "commentators who understand the secrets of *Sifre* and *Sifra*", a "city of *ḥazzanim* who pray with a sweet voice".[45]

Maimonides' words in his *Kiddush Hashem* or *Iggeret Hashmad* leave no doubt that the family settled in Fez as Jews: "The advice I give to myself, and the view that I adopt for myself, for my dear ones and give to all who seek my advice, that one should leave such places [where forcible conversion is decreed] and go to a place where he can keep his faith and fulfil the Torah with no coercion and no fear, should leave home and his children and everything he has …"[46] Such advice could not have been given by someone who had spent a considerable number of years as a crypto-Jew. There should be no doubt that R. Maimon's decision to settle in Fez was due to its position as an important Torah centre, home to a prestigious yeshiva.[47]

The head of the academy where R. Moshe ben Maimon and his brother studied was R. Yehudah ha-Kohen ibn Susan. Maimonides also made the acquaintance there of another scholar from Spain who found refuge in Fez: Yosef ben Yehudah ibn ʻAknin. There, too, Maimonides met his disciple R. Yoseph ben Yehudah ibn Shimʻon, a native of Fez, to whom he sent his *Guide for the Perplexed* after he settled in Aleppo. Alharizi – who translated the *Guide for the Perplexed* – dedicated his translation to him. Introducing him as "a prince of Spain, a lover of learning, Joseph by name", he presented him with a laudatory poem:

> Peace, Wisdom's knight! In your passioned fight
> For knowledge, never your spirit tire
> Though 'gainst your hand and bright command
> Godless and ignorant men conspire ...[48]

45 H. Schirman, "Elegies on the Persecutions in Israel, Africa, Spain, Germany and France", *Kobez al Jad, Minora Manuscripta Hebraica*, Mekitze Nirdamim, Jerusalem, n.s. III [XIII] 1939, pp. 31-35 (Hebrew); the reference to Fez is found on p. 35.

46 *Igrot HaRaMBaM,* Y. Shilat (ed.), Shilat, Jerusalem 1987, p. 55 (Hebrew).

47 See R. Saʻadiah ibn Danon, "Maamar ʻal Seder Ha-Dorot", published in *Ḥemdah Genuzah,* Z.H. Edelman (ed.), Gruber & Euphrat, Königsburg, 1850 [= photocopy ed., Zion, Tel Aviv 1961] (Hebrew); Y.L. Hacohen Fishman, "The Life, Books and Activities of Maimonides", Y.L. Hacohen Fishman (ed.), *R. Moshe ben Maimon*, Jerusalem 1935, p. 18.

48 Judah Alharizi, *The Book of Tahkemoni, Jewish Tales from Medieval Spain,* D.S. Segal (ed. and trans.), Littman Library, London and Portland 2001, p. 389.

In respect to his contemporaries, Alharizi found no Moroccan Hebrew poets of real calibre except for Yoseph ben Yehudah ibn Shim‘on. While “the world’s greatest sages, the crowns of the ages” had lived in Morocco before the persecutions of the Almoravids and forcible conversions, only one poet now remains – R. Yoseph ben Yehudah. Apart from ben Yehudah’s poems, he could find “in the areas of Morocco [Ma‘arav] no other sweet and beautiful song.”[49] In one of the poems he dedicated to him, Alharizi calls him *Ner Ma‘aravi* – ”The Light of the Maghreb”.[50] Like his teacher, Yehudah was also a physician.[51]

Fez was undoubtedly an attractive Torah centre: the number of scholars from all disciplines who lived and/or worked there is impressive and increases as research in the field continues. R. Yehudah ben ‘Abbas, author of the dramatic piyyut *Et Sha‘are Ratzon* which is sung in all Sephardi synagogues on Rosh Hashanah before the blowing of the shofar, was also from Fez. Although he also eventually moved to Aleppo, Yehudah ben ‘Abbas was the product of twelfth-century Hebrew scholarship in Fez.[52] Alharizi reports the great admiration the Jews of Aleppo displayed for him as the greatest poet of all.[53] In his *Tahkemoni,* Alharizi refers to him with appreciation mixed with criticism: “Rabbi Judah ben Abbas, too, turned his steps towards the East and brought to Song’s feast lines succulent and fat, if others less than that; and still others dry and flat”.[54]

Several of the scholars resident in Fez also received a secular education, some even studying under Muslim teachers. Such a figure was Yoseph ben Yehudah ibn Shim‘on, who specialized in philosophy, mathematics, and medicine. Since Maimonides could not have studied medicine during the period his family wandering between Cordova

49 Rabbi Yehudah Alharizi, *Tahkemoni,* A. Kaminka, (ed.), Schuldberg & co., Warsaw 1899, p.185; see also p. 362.

50 Ibid, p. 405.

51 Ibid, p. 364.

52 D. Schwartz, “*Meharsim, Tamudiyyim* and *Anshei Ha-Ḥokhma* – Judah Ben Samuel Ibn ‘Abbas’s Views and Preaching”, *Tarbitz*, LXII (1993), pp. 585-615; H. Touito, “On the *Piyyut ‘Et Sha‘are Ratzon’* by R. Yehudah Shmuel ibn ‘Abbas”, *Talpiyot* [Annual of the Mikhlalah, Tel Aviv], X (1998), pp. 406-421.

53 Rabbi Yehuda Alharizi, *The Wanderings of Judah Alharizi: Five Accounts of his Travels*, J. Yahalom and J. Blau (eds.), Ben-Zvi Institute, Jerusalem 2002, p. 185 (Hebrew).

54 Judah Alharizi, *The Book of Tahkemoni,* (above note 48), p. 46.

and Fez, he must have received his medical training in Fez. In his works there are references to experts of medicine from Morocco – *al-Maghrib.* On numerous occasions he writes in reference to medicine: "In our land, al-Maghrib …" This great Sephardi physician clearly received his medical training in Morocco.[55]

When R. Maimon decided to leave Fez following the death of R. Yehudah ibn Susan for the sanctification of G-d's name in 1165, Maimonides had been studying in the city for more than five years and had presumably absorbed much of the Jewish and general scholarship it had to offer during some of the most formative years of his life. The apparently legendary tradition that the *Guide for the Perplexed* was studied in Fez by Jews and Muslims is not necessarily an unrealistic fantasy. It is more than reasonable to assume that the essence of his philosophical views, as found in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, was shaped and developed in Fez. It was there that he discussed his philosophical interpretation with his disciple Yosef ben Yehudah, and most probably with others. Even Muslims were in touch with him. The tradition that the manuscript found today in the Muslim library in Fez is the version in Arabic script of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* studied by Muslims reflects a certain reality.

A very interesting piece of information appears in Yosef ibn Kaspi's will. In chapter 14, Kaspi complains bitterly of the criticism made by Jews against Maimonides. His sense of affront is made all the deeper by his note that Christians studied the *Guide for the Perplexed* in Latin translation while Muslims studied it in Arabic script:

> Woe unto us that we have sinned! Jews despise or neglect the *Guide* nowadays, though the purpose of that treatise is to demonstrate the existence and unity of God. The Christians honor the work, study and translate it, while even greater attention is paid to it by the Mohammeddans in Fez and other countries, where they have established colleges for the study of the *Guide* under Jewish scholars.[56]

Kaspi had heard that Muslims studied Maimonides' book. In 1332, he decided to travel to Fez to observe their study method. It was then that he saw the text in Arabic transliteration.

55 M. Meyerhof, "The Medical Work of Maimonides", S. W. Baron (ed.), *Essays on Maimonides*, AMS Press, New York 1941, pp. 266-268.

56 See Kaspi's will in I. Abrahams (ed.), *Hebrew Ethical Wills,* JPS, Philadelphia 1926 [= fac. ed. 1976], p. 154.

Epilogue

In conclusion, I wish to suggest that alongside the profound influence exercised by Sephardi Jewry on the Jews of Morocco following the expulsion of 1492 and the forcible conversion of Portugal in 1497 – an influence which is generally recognized – we should also acknowledge the role played by Jews of the Maghreb in shaping and promoting the culture of Sepharad – from its inception and up until the end of the so-called "Golden Age" of Spanish Jewry in the twelfth century. This article is a modest attempt to remedy a historiographical injustice by to giving credit to Moroccan scholarship for its major contribution to the rise of the Jewish Sephardic culture that received the title, the "Golden Age."