

# FROM SEPHARAD TO THE NEW WORLD FROM SHTETL TO THE PAMPAS

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Jews were living on the Iberian Peninsula even before the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Between 132 and 135 A.D. there was another violent, if unsuccessful, uprising in Judea against the Roman occupation. Many Jews fled, particularly as it was forbidden, under threat of capital punishment, to set foot inside Jerusalem. As a result, many of these Jews increasingly settled in Spain.

The Jewish culture soon flourished on the Iberian Peninsula. Shortly after Constantine the Great converted to Christianity, however, Jews found themselves once again under tremendous pressure. Local Christian rulers demanded their conversion to Christianity. Peaceful times gave way to an era of forced baptisms and deportations. When North African Moslems advanced towards the Iberian Peninsula, the Jews were accused of siding with them. In 711, Arabian troops conquered Spain, thus temporarily ending this anti-Semitic wave. Although the Jews, like other non-Moslems, were subjected to restrictive practices and laws, they were nevertheless respected as “people of the book”. As a result, the first centuries of Arab rule brought peace for the Jews and ushered in a heyday or “golden age” for Judaism in terms of culture and science.

The situation changed in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. New Arab rulers initiated a series of persecutions and, at the same time, armed clashes between Cross and Crescent Moon became more frequent. Eventually, however, Christian Spain was able to celebrate the victory of the Reconquista – Spanish ground had finally been re-captured from the Arabs.

Initially, the Christian king and his nobles pursued Jewish-friendly policies. However, these soon gave way to increasing hostility towards Jews from the Church and other citizens. In 1391, after the Catholic priest, Ferdinand Martinez, preached an inflammatory sermon in Seville, a rabble stormed the Jewish quarter there, killing thousands. Survivors who refused to be baptized were sold as slaves to Moslems. Within weeks this “holy war” had spread to Cordoba and Toledo. Tens of thousands of Jews were killed in further riots. An even greater number escaped with their lives, but only by denying their faith. Jews, who chose baptism over death, were called Conversos (converts) or Marranos (pigs).

## Spain and the Inquisition

Developments in Spain corresponded to the rest of Europe at the time. As early as 1215, Pope Innocent III dictated, at the 4<sup>th</sup> Lateran Council, that Jews must dress differently. The Talmud was forbidden at times and burned. When the Plague raged across Europe, from 1348 to 1353, Jews were accused of causing it and were persecuted. From 1391, Jews in Spain were officially forced to choose between execution and forced baptism.

With the start of the Inquisition in 1480, under Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, Jews were again targeted for persecution – including the Conversos who had outwardly converted to Christianity to save their lives. Many of the forced converts among the Spanish and Portuguese Jews became victims of the Inquisition and died on the pyre. From 1481 to 1808, over 200,000 Jews were brought before the courts of the Spanish Inquisition. At least 30,000 of them were publicly executed. The grand inquisitor Tomas de Torquemada, installed by Pope Innocent VIII, was responsible for expelling all Jews from Spain – except the Conversos – on March 31, 1492. In 1497, they were likewise expelled from Portugal.

### Christopher Columbus opens the way to the New World

Some of the expelled Sephardim (Jews from the Iberian Peninsula) settled in Latin America. This path had been opened by Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón in Spanish), who called himself a “servant of the house of David.” Recent sources suggest that Columbus was actually a Jew who had undergone forced baptism. His first journey was financed by Luis de Santángel, the son of a baptized Jew, to whom Columbus appears to have had a close relationship. When the flotilla reached Cuba on October 28, 1492, Columbus sent two Marranos, Santángel and Sanchez, to scout out the land. The Sephardim were thus the first Europeans to set foot on Cuba. Columbus, Santángel and Sanchez were united in their goal of finding a new homeland for the expelled and dispossessed Spanish Jews. Columbus’ second journey was financed with Jewish money which the Spanish royals had gained by selling confiscated Jewish possessions.

Many Jews and Conversos did later indeed find new homes in North, Central and South America and the Caribbean. But the reach of the Inquisition soon extended beyond the Iberian Peninsula into the so-called “New World” (including Mexico, Peru, etc.). The Jews found no rest; even those who were forcefully baptized and took new names were persecuted and murdered.

The Sephardim account for around half of the Jewish population in Israel today and less than 20 percent of the Jewish population worldwide. The term, Sephardim, has been incorrectly used to describe all Jews not of Ashkenazy descent.

## From the Shtetl\* to the Pampas\*\*

### Ashkenazim, Jews and their descendants from Central and Eastern Europe in the Spanish-speaking world

*\* A Shtetl, also Stetl or Schtetlech (Yiddish) is the name for settlements with a high percentage of Jews in Jewish areas of eastern Europe prior to World War II.*

*Yiddish is the everyday language of non-assimilated Ashkenazy Jews. It is a language without a country, spoken all over the world. It is the most important folk language of Jews living in or originating from Central and Eastern Europe.*

*\*\* The word “Pampa” is of Quechua origin. This indigenous language is spoken in the South American Andes. It means “plain” or “field”. In colloquial language it is also used in the sense of a “sparsely populated, lonely or remote area”. The almost treeless steppe is found in South America, especially in Argentina.*

In the Middle Ages, the Ashkenazim accounted for only a small proportion of the total world Jewish population. Today, they represent the majority. Increasing emigration from Germany around the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup>/14<sup>th</sup> century, led to the use of this term, which later came to also include Jews originating from northern France, northern Italy and England. The Ashkenazim developed their own culture in modern Poland-Lithuania. By the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they accounted for 90 percent of all Jews world-wide.

World War II and the Shoah (Holocaust) caused great waves of refugees to flee to the USA, South America and especially to Ashkenazi-founded Israel.

According to a study by the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, today's Jews are about 80 percent Ashkenazim. This corresponds to 10 million people. Important cultural centers of Ashkenazy activity are New York City, London, Antwerp, Manchester and Berlin.

The great majority of Jews who immigrated to Palestine (as it was known at the time), aided by the Zionist movement, were Ashkenazim. They were the founding elites in Israel. Larger numbers of Sephardim and Mizrachi's (see below) came only after the State of Israel had been founded. Evidence of the cultural gap between Ashkenazim and other Jewish groups, in terms of political influence, customs, faith, education, traditions and language can still be observed in Israel today. Many still suffer social discrimination, although to a lesser extent than in the State's initial decades.

## From Maimonides\* to Borochov\*\*

### Adot HaMizrakhi – the Community of the East, the Orient

\* Moses Maimonides, aka Moshe ben Maimon, born in 1135, was an Andalusian - North African Jewish philosopher, law expert and physician. He grew up in Cordoba, Spain, and for decades was considered the intellectual head of the Oriental Jews and one of the greatest Jewish scholars ever. He died in 1204 in Cairo, Egypt.

\*\* Itamar Borochov, born in 1984, is an Israeli jazz musician, descended from a Bukharian family. He grew up in Jaffa and has lived in New York since 2006. He has composed for the New Jerusalem Orchestra and recorded with the Israeli rock musician, Dudu Tassa. With his father, the multi-instrumentalist Yisrael Borochov, and his brother, the bassist, Avri Borochov, the Borochov Dynasty has interpreted Jewish-Bukharian songs.

Mizrachim (Mizrakhi) is the common name for Jews from the Near East, Arab and other Moslem countries. These include the Mountain Jews, Indian Jews, Jews from the Caucasus and Georgia, as well as Jews from Asia and Africa. The Hebrew word "mizrakh" means east, which explains the wider meaning of the term.

Some of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries fled to Islamic countries, to north Africa and to the Balkan countries.

The “Sephardim” (Sepharad is the Hebrew name for Spain) sought refugee status in many Islamic countries where Jews were already living. Over the centuries, the traditions and customs of the immigrant Sephardic Jews mixed with those of the native Jews in these countries. Later the term “misrakh” was used in Israel for their descendants (e.g. from Iran, Iraq or central Asia). In this context it is a neutral term.

Unfortunately, the term is not neutral in other contexts, where it indicates the status of Mizрахim – discriminated and suppressed persons. Used in this context, it refers to persons whose cultural traditions were delegitimized and suppressed by the Ashkenazi-European establishment in Israel. In intellectual circles, especially among post-Zionist university academics, the term is used to refer to all non-Ashkenazi Jews (including the Sephardim). In this sense, the Ashkenazim can be seen to belong to the predominant European-western powers and the Mizрахim to the colonized peoples of the south and east.

To escape persecution in their Arab homelands, many Mizрахim immigrated after the State of Israel was founded, supported and promoted by the Israeli authorities. Upon arrival, they were housed in tent cities, and so began the difficult, decade-long process of their integration, which included overcoming social and cultural discrimination. Today, both Mizрахim and Ashkenazim hold prominent positions in the army and government.