

A decorative border with intricate floral and vine patterns, featuring clusters of grapes and leaves, framing the central text.

PART THREE

*Early Medieval  
Period.*

UNDER ISLAM AND  
CHRISTIANITY

## MOHAMMED (C. 571-632)

IN HIS EARLY YEARS, MOHAMMED HAD GENUINE AFFECTION FOR JEWS and Judaism; he willingly conceded that his knowledge of God came from the Jews. Later, in the Koran, he cited Moses' name on more than one hundred occasions, and claimed that the Arabs were descendants of the \*Patriarch Abraham, through his son Ishmael. In the early years of his new religion, Mohammed even prayed in the direction of Jerusalem and observed the Jewish fast of \*Yom Kippur.

Unfortunately, this deep affection turned to violent fury when the Jews refused to reciprocate Mohammed's goodwill by acknowledging him as a prophet of God. As was the case with Christianity, the Jews believed that what was true in Mohammed's message was not new, and what was new was not true. Further, Mohammed's knowledge of the Hebrew Bible was spotty. In Sura (chapter) 28:38, he has Pharaoh (from Exodus) ask Haman (of the Book of Esther) to erect the Tower of Babel, an episode in the beginning of Genesis. In addition, the Jews—and for that matter, Christians—were presumably not impressed by Mohammed's instruction to beat disobedient wives (4:34).

Unfortunately for the Jews, Mohammed's angry response to their rejection of him was recorded in the Koran, the holy book of Islam. In it Mohammed attacked the Jews and Judaism in several ways. For one thing, he made Abraham a Muslim rather than a Jew: "Abraham was neither Jew nor Christian. [He] surrendered himself to Allah. . . . Surely the men who are nearest to Allah are those who follow . . . this Prophet" (3:67-68). Mohammed accused the Jews of deliberately omitting prophecies about him from their Bible (9:32). Most remarkably, he accused the Jews of not being true monotheists, because he claimed they worshiped the prophet \*Ezra as a god (9:30). This accusation is particularly shocking to modern Jews, most of whom would be hard put to identify who Ezra was.

Unfortunately, the angry words Mohammed hurled at his Jewish opponents have often been assumed by Muslims to be divinely based and applicable to

all Jews at all times. In 2:61, for example, Mohammed said: "And humiliation and wretchedness were stamped upon them and they were visited with wrath from God." In the years before he concluded a peace treaty with Israel, Egyptian President Anwar \*Sadat was fond of quoting this verse to describe the kind of treatment Muslims would impose on Jews when Egypt defeated Israel.

Although Mohammed was furious with the Jews, his ultimate argument was with Judaism. As a rule, any Jew who converted to Islam was fully accepted into Muslim society.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: Their Contacts Through the Ages*; Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*; Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism*, pp. 95-100.



## PACT OF UMAR

### Dhimmiis

THERE IS A POPULAR MYTH IN THE WEST THAT JEWS LIVED AS EQUAL citizens in the Muslim world until the rise of Zionism provoked anti-Jewish feelings among the Arabs. In truth, throughout almost all of their more than thousand-year sojourn in the orbit of Islam, Jews—and Christians too—lived as second-class, and often humiliated, citizens.

Their status was still superior to that accorded nonmonotheists. In areas conquered by Muslim troops, such people were offered the choice of conversion to Islam or death. Jews and Christians, or *dhimmiis* as they are referred to in Islam, were permitted to practice their religion. Their lives were regulated by the Pact of Umar, a document assumed to date from around 720. It mandated that *dhimmiis* acknowledge their subservience to Muslims in many ways. As was the case with blacks in the days of the segregationist "Jim Crow" laws in the South, Jews and Christians were obligated to "rise from [their] seats when [Muslims] wish to sit." Both Jews and Christians were prohibited

from converting anyone to their religions, and were forbidden from trying to prevent any of their adherents from converting to Islam. *Dhimmi*s even had to vow not to raise their voices when following their dead at funerals. A particularly cruel restriction forbade them to ride on horses or mules; this was considered incompatible with their low status. They were permitted to ride only donkeys, and were forbidden to use saddles.

Unfortunately, the Pact of Umar marked only the beginning of anti-*dhimmi* legislation. During the next centuries, and in diverse Muslim societies, Jews and Christians were periodically subjected to humiliating laws. They were sometimes ordered to wear ridiculous outfits, both to make them immediately identifiable and to look silly: In 807, for example, the Abbassid caliph Haroun al-Raschid of Baghdad legislated that Jews were required to wear a tall, conical cap and a yellow belt. (This decree is probably the original model for the \*yellow badge imposed on Jews in medieval Europe.) In eleventh-century Baghdad, Jewish women had to wear one black and one red shoe, and to have a small brass bell attached to their neck or shoe.

Fortunately, there were golden ages when such regulations were not enforced and Jews could reach high positions (see *The Golden Age of Spanish Jewry*), and in the Middle Ages, Jews in the Arab world were generally more secure than Jews in Europe. Nonetheless, in eleventh-century Egypt, the Fatimid caliph Hakim ordered Christians to wear a cross with arms two feet long, while Jews had to wear five-pound balls around their necks, in "commemoration" of the calf's head their ancestors had once worshipped (see *The Golden Calf*). Until their departure from Yemen in 1948, all Jews, men and women alike, were compelled to dress like beggars, in accordance with their lowly status as *dhimmis*.

In nineteenth-century Palestine, before the Arab-Zionist conflict, Jews had to walk to the left of Muslims because Islam identifies the left side with Satan. When meeting a Muslim on a narrow sidewalk, a Jew was required by law to step into the road and let him pass. Synagogues had to be located in hidden, remote areas, and Jews could pray only in muted voices. In his book *Stirring Times*, James Finn, the British consul in Palestine in the 1850s, described how "Arab merchants would dump their unsold wares on their Jewish neighbors and bill them, safe in the knowledge that the Jews so feared them that they would not dare return the item or deny their purchase."

As for the twentieth century, Albert Memmi, the noted French-Jewish novelist who grew up in North Africa, summarized the Arab-Jewish condition

as follows: "Roughly speaking and in the best of cases, the Jew is protected like a dog which is part of a man's property, but if he raises his head or acts like a man, then he must be beaten so that he will always remember his status." In June 1941, more than six hundred Jews were killed in a full-scale \*pogrom in Iraq.

The *dhimmi*'s inferior status explains why many Jews from the Arab world supported the idea of a Jewish state as vigorously as did their European brothers. Indeed, in large measure because of their bitter historical experience, the Jews in Israel who come from the Arab world tend to be disproportionately represented among the groups least willing to trust and make compromises with the Arab world.

SOURCES: Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam*; Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*; Norman Stillman, *The Jews of Arab Lands: A History and Source Book*. The terrible discrimination under which Yemenite Jewry lived is described in S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs*, pp. 74-78. The low status of Jews in nineteenth-century Palestine is detailed in David Landes, "Palestine Before the Zionists," *Commentary*, February 1976, pp. 47-56. The Albert Memmi quote is from his *Jews and Arabs*, p. 33. See also Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism*, pp. 100-107. A general overview of Islamic antisemitism is found in Jane Gerber, "Anti-Semitism and the Muslim World," in David Berger, ed., *History and Hate*, pp. 73-93.



## SA'ADIAH GAON (882-942)

### *The Gaonim*

IN THE CENTURIES FOLLOWING THE \*GREAT REVOLT AND THE \*BAR-KOKHBA rebellion, Babylon (modern-day Iraq) replaced Palestine as the major center of Jewish religious creativity. It was at Babylon's great \*yeshivot, located in the cities of Sura, Nehardea, and Pumbedita, that the standard edition of the Talmud (known to this day as the \**Babylonian Talmud*) took shape. From the eighth century, the heads of the Babylonian yeshivot were known as *gaonim* (singular, *gaon*, a word that in modern Hebrew means

“genius”). The *gaonim*, spiritual leaders for all Babylonian Jewry, answered religious questions posed to them from throughout the Jewish world, and supervised the installation of the *Resh Galuta/Exilarch* (see next entry), Babylonian Jewry’s political leader.

During five centuries of *gaonim*, we know of only one who was not a native of Babylon: the Egyptian Jew Sa’adiah ben Joseph. That the foreign-born Sa’adiah was appointed to head the Sura yeshiva reflects the extraordinary regard in which he was held. In addition to being the greatest Jewish scholar of his age, Sa’adiah was a fiery leader who did not back off from confrontations. When Exilarch David ben Zakkai insisted that Sa’adiah support a legal and financial ruling he had issued, one which the *gaon* regarded as self-serving and erroneous, he refused. The exilarch continued to pressure Sa’adiah, and eventually he and the *gaon* excommunicated each other. For the Jewish community, this made for a very serious rift. It would be as if the president of the United States and the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court each declared the other unfit for office. Sa’adiah appointed another exilarch, and the exilarch appointed another *gaon*. As the battle raged, the charges traded by the two sides grew increasingly acrimonious and ludicrous. At one point, Sa’adiah’s opponents accused him of bribing government officials on the Sabbath—a preposterous charge. After many years, Baghdad’s wealthiest Jew, a banker named Bishr ben Aaron, finally arranged peace between Sa’adiah and the exilarch.

Today, however, Sa’adiah is known for his writings, not his political fights. He is most renowned for his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (*Sefer Emunot ve-Deiot*), the first systematic philosophical explanation of Judaism. That this tenth-century book is still in print (the English edition is published by Yale University Press) almost eleven hundred years after it was written indicates its extraordinary significance. Sa’adiah also translated the Bible into Arabic, and prepared a uniform prayerbook for the Jews living in the Arab world.

Sa’adiah also wrote extensive critiques of the \*Karaites, a Jewish sect that preached biblical fundamentalism, and that attracted many followers of mainstream Judaism. Sa’adiah endeavored to show that the movement’s literal understanding of the Torah’s words often made nonsense of the Torah’s message. So many Karaite scholars responded to his attacks that, *nine hundred years later*, a nineteenth-century Karaite scholar published *Karaite Literary Opponents of Sa’adiah Gaon*, a compilation of no fewer than forty-nine counter critiques of the man Karaites regarded as their foremost Jewish opponent.

A fitting tribute to Sa’adiah was rendered more than two centuries after his

death by Moses \*Maimonides. In his *Epistle to Yemen* the great Jewish sage wrote: "Were it not for Sa'adiah, the Torah might have disappeared from the midst of Israel."

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: Alexander Marx, *Essays in Jewish Biography*, pp. 3-38; Sa'adiah Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, translated by Samuel Rosenblatt; Henry Malter, *Life and Works of Sa'adiah Gaon*.



### RESH GALUTA/EXILARCH

RESH GALUTA LITERALLY MEANS "HEAD OF THE GALUT" (DIASPORA), the official title for the lay leaders of the Babylonian Jewish community. Most Jews are surprised to learn that this position existed until the twelfth century C.E. According to Jewish tradition, the men who held the position, known in English as "exilarch," were direct descendants of King David. The exilarchs' major responsibility was to represent the Jewish community before governmental authorities.

As a rule, the exilarchs worked in close partnership with Babylon's two leading rabbis who headed the \*yeshivot at Sura and Pumbedita. The religious leaders and the *Resh Galuta* were interdependent; the exilarch appointed the heads of the yeshivot, who in turn had to approve the appointment of a new exilarch. This approval was not just a formality. Although the exilarch was an inherited office, it was not automatically bestowed on the oldest son; the rabbis and leading Jewish businessmen had the right to choose the son they deemed most appropriate. In one famous eighth-century case, the facts of which are widely disputed, the oldest candidate, Anan, was passed over because the rabbis regarded him as a heretic. Incensed, he broke with the Jewish community and founded the Karaite sect (see next entry).

The twelfth-century Jewish traveler Benjamin of Tudela visited Baghdad in 1168 and was deeply impressed by the extraordinary respect accorded the exilarch David ben Hisdai. Benjamin reports that en route to his weekly meeting at the caliph's palace, the exilarch's carriage was preceded by horse-

men who called out along the way, "Make way for the son of David." Jews, and even Muslims, rose to their feet in the exilarch's presence.

At varying times, the exilarchs were assigned very broad powers, including the right to tax the Jewish community and to fine and imprison offenders. The twelfth-century rabbi Petahiah of Regensburg wrote of an exilarch who maintained his own prison.

In time, many of the exilarch's religious powers were transferred to the rabbinic leadership, while the state assumed their political powers. As a result, the role of exilarch died out in the Middle Ages.

Nowadays, one sometimes hears it said of Jews aspiring to leadership roles in the American Jewish community that they want to become the new *Resh Galuta*.



## KARAITES

THE KARAITES BROKE AWAY FROM THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF eighth-century Baghdad to form a separate sect. The movement rejected the \*Oral Law, and insisted that the Torah be interpreted literally. As a result, the Karaites soon practiced strikingly different rituals from the rest of Jewry. For example, they understood Exodus 35:3 as forbidding the use of any kind of fire on the \*Sabbath and thus spent the day in darkness. The resulting sense of gloominess was further exacerbated by a Karaite prohibition on leaving one's house throughout the Sabbath except to attend synagogue.

Due to an argument over the meaning of Leviticus 23:15-16, the Karaites observed the holiday of \*Shavuot (which commemorates the giving of the Torah) on a different day than did the rest of Jewry, and did not observe \*Hanukka at all because the holiday was not mentioned in the Bible.

Widely accepted Jewish observances, such as the donning of \*tefillin (phylacteries) and the prohibition of eating milk and meat together, were rejected on the grounds that they were not specifically legislated in the Torah, only in the Oral Law. Even when Jews and Karaites agreed, such as on the right of an



unhappily married couple to divorce, problems arose. The Karaite religious officials issued divorce decrees that were differently worded and formulated from those of the rest of Jewry, so that the rabbis eventually declared Karaite divorces invalid.

A popular medieval story claimed that the sect arose out of a political fight within the Baghdad Jewish community. A Jewish exilarch (see preceding entry) who was childless had two nephews, Anan and Hananiah. When the exilarch died, Anan, the older child, normally should have succeeded him. However, the Jewish communal leaders mistrusted his character and religiosity, and awarded the office to Hananiah. The outraged Anan founded an illegal breakaway group, and was soon imprisoned and sentenced to death. A fellow inmate told Anan that his only hope for survival was to convince the caliph that he was not a rebel against Judaism (if he was, the Jews had the right to demand his death) but the leader of an altogether different religion. Anan succeeded in doing so, and thus Karaism was born.

Whether this story accurately depicts the movement's origins, or was invented in order to discredit Karaism, is impossible to ascertain. The Karaites, who label the story as fiction, claim that their sect represents the true religion of the Bible, and that it was the \*Talmud and the Oral Law that introduced ill-needed changes into Judaism. Indeed, Karaism might well have derived from remnants of early Jewish sects such as the \*Sadducees, that had challenged the validity of the Oral Law since the Second Temple era.

During their first centuries, the Karaites had considerable success in winning adherents to their cause. The tenth-century scholar \*Sa'adiah Gaon devoted a great deal of energy to refuting their interpretations of Torah and Jewish law. He might not have succeeded in convincing many Karaites, but his writings did help stem the tide of Jews going over to the Karaite camp. Since Sa'adiah's time, the Karaite community was never again very large, although it has never gone out of existence—no small accomplishment for a sect that is now some twelve centuries old. At varying times, the Karaites established centers in Israel, Spain, the Byzantine Empire, and Egypt. In the late Middle Ages, there were significant Karaite outposts in Lithuania and the Crimea. In nineteenth-century Russia, the Karaites were officially designated as a new religion and were thus spared the czar's antisemitic legislation. This change of classification literally saved thousands of Karaite lives a century later when Germany invaded the Soviet Union. In one of the most bizarre episodes of the \*Holocaust, the German authorities asked three Jewish scholars (Zelig Kalmanovitch, Meir Balaban, and Yitzchak Schipper)

whether the Karaites were biologically Jewish. To save the Karaites' lives, the three scholars lied, saying the Karaites were not of Jewish origin.

In recent years, Jewish scholar Daniel Lasker has offered a provocative theory on why the Karaites never became a mass movement; after all, Christianity and Reform Judaism too had rejected the Oral Law, but had much greater success than did the Karaites in gaining adherents. "An apparent reason for [Christianity and Reform Judaism's] attractiveness," Lasker answers, "was their renunciation of Jewish law as a means of salvation. If Anan had similarly encouraged a release from talmudic legislation without replacing it with his own, more stringent, code, he might have won more followers." Later Karaite teachers *did* modify some of the more stringent regulations, but by then, Lasker concludes, "the fate of the contest had already been decided."

Today there are approximately ten thousand Karaites, most of whom live in Israel. They are ruled by their own rabbinical courts. See *Pharisees and Sadducees* and *Oral Law*.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: Daniel J. Lasker, "Rabbanism and Karaism: The Contest for Supremacy," in Raphael Jospe and Stanley Wagner, eds., *Great Schisms in Jewish History*, pp. 47–72. The quotes cited in this entry are found on p. 72, n. 50, and p. 65. An account of the Nazi query to Jewish scholars about the Karaites' origins is found in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 10, p. 776; Leon Nemoj, trans. and ed., *Karaite Anthology*.



## CAIRO GENIZA

IN THE JEWISH TRADITION, SACRED WORKS, SUCH AS TORAH SCROLLS, prayerbooks, and the Talmud, are regarded as too hallowed to be thrown out. When they become unusable, they are generally buried in the ground—indeed, in 1988, several Torah scrolls that had been partially burned by vandals were publicly interred in a New York cemetery. Alternatively, they may be stored above ground, as was done in the medieval Ezra synagogue in Cairo. A large attic called a *geniza* (storing or hiding place) was set aside to store holy

papers and books. With the passage of time, medieval Egyptian Jews, confident that the room's contents would be left unmolested, began storing other important documents there. The Cairo Geniza soon contained personal letters, business correspondence, historical documents, and an extraordinary variety of religious writings.

For hundreds of years, the material lay undisturbed and uninspected. There was a superstition among the Jews of Cairo that disaster would befall anyone who touched the sacred papers (similar perhaps to the belief that a curse would befall anyone opening Tutankhamen's tomb). But more than superstition dissuaded would-be probers from inspecting the Geniza. The room was hardly accessible; it had no doors or windows and could be reached only by a ladder leading up to a large hole on the attic's side.

The Geniza finally was opened in 1896. Shortly thereafter, its contents were examined by the great Jewish scholar Solomon \*Schechter. Under his direction, some 100,000 pages of the Geniza material were transferred to Cambridge University in England, where Schechter taught for many years. A permanent scholar is still employed, *a century later*, to oversee studies of the collection.

In the years since they were discovered, the Geniza's 250,000 documents have been recognized as one of the great treasures of Judaica. Perhaps the most famous find was of most of the Hebrew original of the \*Apocryphal Book of Ecclesiasticus, which was previously known only in its Greek translation. More significant, however, was the uncovering of numerous documents on the history of Jews in Egypt and Israel from the time of Mohammed until the First \*Crusade. Nothing had previously been known about this period. Much material on the history of the \*Karaites was also uncovered. One great scholar, Shlomo Dov Goitein, spent fifty years studying the Geniza's holdings, on the basis of which he published five volumes, entitled *A Mediterranean Society*. Goitein depicts with extraordinary detail the day-to-day religious, intellectual, and social lives of medieval Arabic Jewry.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza* (five volumes); Geoffrey Khan, "Twenty Years of Genizah Research," in the *Encyclopedia Judaica Year Book 1983-1985*, pp. 163-171.

## THE GOLDEN AGE OF SPANISH JEWRY

THE TENTH TO TWELFTH CENTURIES ARE KNOWN AS THE GOLDEN Age of Spanish Jewry, and are often regarded as the closest parallel in Jewish history to the contemporary golden age of American-Jewish life. During these three centuries, many Jews were invited to hold high government positions, and Jewish religious and cultural life flourished.

Throughout the Golden Age, most of Spain was ruled by a series of remarkably tolerant Muslim leaders (this was before Spain was reconquered by the Christian world. Muslim rule started in 711 and lasted in parts of Spain until 1492.) Hasdai ibn Shaprut, the outstanding Jewish personality of the tenth century, epitomized the success Jews could achieve during this time. He served as personal physician and diplomatic adviser to two caliphs, represented the government on numerous diplomatic missions, and was widely regarded as one of the most influential people in Spain. Hasdai was a deeply committed Jew, and was very willing to use his power and influence to support Jewish scholars and Jewish schools.

He is particularly remembered for a moving correspondence that he carried on with King Joseph, one of the last of the Jewish leaders of Khazaria (see next entry). In Hasdai's letter to the world's only Jewish monarch, he expressed his deep wish that he and his fellow Jews could also have political independence. King Joseph was impressed by the eloquence and intelligence of Hasdai's letter, and invited him to come serve in his government. Whether he would have done so is a moot point; within a few years Russia had conquered Khazaria, and the Jewish kingdom was destroyed.

Several great Jewish poets and philosophers flourished in the Golden Age, the most renowned of whom was the poet and philosopher Judah Halevi (see next entry). A half-century before Halevi lived the poet and philosopher Solomon ibn Gabirol, whose writings deeply influenced the medieval Christian world as well as the Jewish. In addition to his philosophical and poetic talents, Ibn Gabirol possessed keen psychological antennae: "Would you

know who is your friend and who is your enemy?" he asked in *Pearls of Wisdom*. "Note what is in your own heart." Elsewhere in this same work, he wrote: "My friend is he who will tell me my faults in private." Another Jewish thinker during the Golden Age was Bakhya ibn Pakuda, whose systematic presentation of Jewish moral theology, *Duties of the Heart* (*Khovot ha-Levavot*), is still studied in \*yeshivot throughout the world. Reflecting the unusually good relations then existing between Jews and their neighbors, Bakhya mentioned in his introduction Sufi Muslims from whom he had learned, and even referred to them as *hasidim* (pious men). One does not find many similar expressions of warmth for non-Jewish teachers in other medieval Jewish writings. The outstanding figure of the Golden Age's last period was Abraham ibn Ezra, a Bible scholar whose commentary on the Torah is still studied by religious Jews.

Even the Golden Age, however, had its share of dross. In 1066, there was an antisemitic outburst against Joseph ibn Nagdela, the rather haughty vizier to the king of Granada. Rumors were spread by Joseph's enemies that he was plotting to betray the kingdom to its enemies, and take over the kingship. The palace in which he dwelt was attacked. Joseph hid in a charcoal cellar, and tried to blacken himself in disguise. To no avail. He was murdered and fastened to a cross. The Granadans then launched an enormous \*pogrom; by the time it was over, close to four thousand Jews were dead. Nevertheless, in the rest of Spain, Jewish life flourished for almost another century.

Unfortunately, when the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry did end, it was with a bang, not a whimper. In the twelfth century, the Muslim \*Almohades, who had come to power in North Africa, gained control of Spain. Suddenly, the prosperous and successful Jewish community found itself confronted with three unpalatable alternatives: conversion to Islam, exile, or death. There were subsequent improvements in the condition of Spanish Jewry, but the process that would culminate with the \*expulsion of Spanish Jews in 1492 had already begun.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: Max Margolis and Alexander Marx, *A History of the Jewish People*, pp. 308-333. Unfortunately, as regards Hasdai ibn Shaprut, there is reason to believe that power went to his head. Another surviving example of his correspondence is far less edifying than the letter he wrote to the king of the Khazars. Menahem ibn Seruq was a poet who had worked at one time for Hasdai, and indeed had written the original draft of the Khazar letter. The two men had a falling out, and Ibn Seruq subsequently wrote a letter to Hasdai in which he complained: "They beat me before your eyes, divesting me of my robe on the holy day of rest and plucking my hair on the holy Sabbath. . . . And on the festival day . . . you

ordered my home to be destroyed." Hasdai's response was curt and arrogant: "If you did wrong . . . I have already meted out punishment to you; and if you have done no wrong I have already led you to eternal life." Ibn Seruq refused to back off. "Now when you said, 'If you did wrong and if you have done no wrong,' Is it proper to judge on an 'if'? . . . You are made of the same stuff as I," he courageously chided the leader of Spanish Jewry, "and He who made me is your Maker. . . . And though justice be delayed now, I await the day of judgment . . . [when] the mighty cannot resort to force." The exchange between Ibn Seruq and Hasdai ibn Shaprut is cited in H. H. Ben-Sasson, ed., *A History of the Jewish People*, pp. 452-453.



## JUDAH HALEVI (C. 1080-C. 1142)

### The Kuzari

THE COUNTRY OF KHAZARIA WAS LOCATED BETWEEN RUSSIA AND Turkey, and populated by people of Turkish stock. A Khazar tradition relates that about the year 740, the religiously unaffiliated king Bulan hit upon a novel method for choosing a religion. He invited Jewish, Christian, and Muslim representatives to argue before him the merits of their separate faiths. In the end, Bulan chose Judaism: Although he did not insist that his subjects follow his example, many did.

Whether the royal family of Khazaria's conversion to Judaism came about exactly in the manner described in this tale, we probably will never know. What we do know, however, is that a Jewish kingdom of Khazaria existed as an independent state for more than two centuries. Unfortunately, communications in the medieval world were infrequent and slow: By the time world Jewry learned about Khazaria, the country was enjoying its last days of independence. In 969, it was conquered by Russia.

Approximately 150 years later, Judah Halevi, the greatest Jewish poet of the Middle Ages, wrote a philosophic masterpiece set in Khazaria, *The Kuzari: A Book of Argument in Defense of a Despised Religion*. In this philosophical novel, he imaginatively reconstructs the arguments that the different religious spokesmen might have made before King Bulan. Early on, for example, the king probes the religious views of the Christian and Muslim

representatives, both of whom clearly state that, with the exception of their own religion, they regard Judaism as the highest faith. To Halevi, it is obvious why the religious spokesmen would make such a statement. Christianity and Islam acknowledge God's revelation to Moses, and thus believe that the Torah is true, only that it has been superseded by a subsequent revelation. However, neither religion believes in the equal truth of the other's revelational claims.

So impressed is King Bulan by the positive statements he hears about Judaism that he decides to summon a rabbi to the encounter. The remainder of *The Kuzari* consists of the king's dialogue with this individual.

The rabbi argues that the truth of Judaism is a historical fact: Judaism began with a divine revelation before hundreds of thousands of people. Had the Jews in the desert not heard God's voice at Sinai, they would never have accepted the statements in the Torah recording that they had. Therefore, except for converts, Jews trace their religious roots back to people who personally experienced God's presence at Sinai.

An unappealing feature of *The Kuzari* is Halevi's belief in the Jews' inherent spiritual superiority. Only Jews, he believes, can be prophets. But though Halevi's thinking has a definite racial bias, it would be unfair simply to dismiss him as a racist. After all, the whole thrust of *The Kuzari* is the effort to persuade a non-Jewish king to become a Jew. When the king challenges the Jewish spokesman's chauvinism—"Thy words are poor after having been so pleasant"—and points to the Jews' low status and great sufferings throughout the world, the rabbi answers that Jewish suffering is voluntary and therefore no disgrace. If Jews would only consent to convert to Christianity or Islam, they could immediately stop all persecution. But few choose to do so.

*The Kuzari* is passionate about the Jews' need to return to their homeland. Just as Halevi saw the people Israel as uniquely spiritual, so he saw a unique spirituality in the land of Israel, and believed that Jews could only achieve their full religious vitality in the Holy Land (a major reason Halevi remains one of the most popular Jewish philosophers among religious Israelis). At the book's conclusion, the Jewish spokesman informs the king that he is planning to emigrate immediately to Israel.

In Halevi's case, fact followed fiction. Late in life, he left Spain and made the arduous journey to Israel. In many ways, he had been preparing to go there for much of his life. "My heart is in the East," he had written in his most famous poem, "but I am in the ends of the West." Unfortunately, almost as soon as Halevi arrived in Jerusalem, an Arab horseman killed him.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, translated by Hartwig Hirschfeld, with an introduction by H. Slonimsky; Meyer Waxman, *A History of Jewish Literature*, vol. 1, pp. 227–231, 333–339; Jacob S. Minkin, "Judah Halevi," in Simon Noveck, ed., *Great Jewish Personalities in Ancient and Medieval Times*, pp. 181–201.

The problem of racism in Halevi's thinking has been addressed by Dr. Norman Lamm, president of Yeshiva University: "Only a deliberate misreading of the *Kuzari* . . . can mistake it for a precursor of modern racialism. . . . At the end of the book, the king converts to Judaism—surely an astonishing conclusion to a tract supposedly elaborating an exclusive doctrine of Jewish racialism" (*The Condition of Jewish Belief*, p. 128). See also D. M. Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars*.



### ALM OH A D E S

THE ALM OH A D E S WERE A FANATICAL AND POWERFUL GROUP OF MUSLIMS who offered Jews and Christians the choice of conversion to Islam or death, although sometimes they were "humane" enough to offer exile as a third option. Their sudden appearance in Morocco and Spain in the twelfth century inaugurated a horrendous decline for Jews living in the orbit of Islam.

Before the Almohades's ascendancy, all Muslims regarded Jews and Christians as "people of the Book" (that is, the Bible): Both religions were tolerated because they were monotheistic. As long as "the people of the Book" willingly accepted the public and private humiliations of living as *\*dhimmis*, Islam guaranteed them the right to live.

The Almohades, however, formulated a religious rationale for revoking this tolerance. Their leaders claimed to have uncovered an ancient teaching of \*Mohammed, according to which the Muslim tolerance of Jews was to end after five hundred years. If at that time the Jewish Messiah had not arrived, the Jews were to give up their religion and become Muslims.

In 1146, Abd al-Mu'min, the builder of the Almohade empire in North Africa and Spain, offered the Jews of Fez, Morocco's capital, the choice of Islam or the sword: Shortly thereafter, nearly every Jew in Fez was murdered. The few Jews who did convert were kept under constant surveillance, and those caught keeping Jewish rituals were executed.



In response to Almohade threats, tens of thousands of Jews fled Spain and Morocco for more tolerant environments. The most famous victim of the Almohade persecutions was Moses Maimonides (see next entry), who fled with his family from Spain to Morocco to Egypt. Shlomo Dov Goitein, the great historian of Jewish life under Islam, sums up the Jewish century under the Almohades in one sentence: "All the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition were anticipated under Almohade rule."

SOURCES: Salo Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. 3, p. 124; S. D. Goitein, *Jews and Arabs: Their Contact Through the Ages*, p. 80.



### MAIMONIDES/RAMBAM (1135-1204)

IF ONE DID NOT KNOW THAT MAIMONIDES WAS THE NAME OF A MAN, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, one would assume it was the name of a university. The writings and achievements of this twelfth-century Jewish sage seem to cover an impossibly large number of activities. Maimonides was the first person to write a systematic code of all Jewish law, the *\*Mishneh Torah*; he produced one of the great philosophic statements of Judaism, *\*The Guide to the Perplexed*; published a commentary on the entire *\*Mishna*; served as physician at the court of the sultan of Egypt; wrote numerous books on medicine; and, in his "spare time," served as leader of Cairo's Jewish community. It is hardly surprising that when Shmuel ibn Tibbon, the Hebrew translator of *The Guide to the Perplexed* (which had been written in Arabic), wrote Maimonides that he wished to visit him to discuss some difficult points in the translation, Maimonides discouraged him from coming:

I dwell at Fostat, and the sultan resides at Cairo [about a mile-and-a-half away]. . . . My duties to the sultan are very heavy. I am obliged to visit him every day, early in the morning, and when he or any of his children or any of the inmates of his harem are indisposed, I dare not quit Cairo, but must stay during the greater part of the day in the palace. It also frequently happens that one of the two royal officers fall sick, and I must attend to their healing. Hence, as a

rule, I leave for Cairo very early in the day, and even if nothing unusual happens, I do not return to Fostat until the afternoon. Then I am almost dying with hunger . . . I find the antechamber filled with people, both Jews and gentiles, nobles and common people, judges and bailiffs, friends and foes—a mixed multitude who await the time of my return.

I dismount from my animal, wash my hands, go forth to my patients and entreat them to bear with me while I partake of some slight refreshment, the only meal I take in the twenty-four hours. Then I go forth to attend to my patients, and write prescriptions and directions for their various ailments. Patients go in and out until nightfall, and sometimes even, I solemnly assure you, until two hours or more in the night. I converse with and prescribe for them while lying down from sheer fatigue; and when night falls I am so exhausted that I can scarcely speak.

In consequence of this, no Israelite can have any private interview with me, except on the Sabbath. On that day the whole congregation, or at least the majority of the members, come to me after the morning service, when I instruct them as to their proceedings during the whole week; we study together a little until noon, when they depart. Some of them return, and read with me after the afternoon service until evening prayers. In this manner I spend that day.

Maimonides's full name was Moses ben Maimon; in Hebrew he is known by the acronym of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, *Rambam*. He was born in Spain shortly before the fanatical Muslim Almohades (see preceding entry) came to power there. To avoid persecution by the Muslim sect—which was wont to offer Jews and Christians the choice of conversion to Islam or death—Maimonides fled with his family, first to Morocco, later to Israel, and finally to Egypt. He apparently hoped to continue his studies for several years more, but when his brother David, a jewelry merchant, perished in the Indian Ocean with much of the family's fortune, he had to begin earning money. He probably started practicing medicine at this time.

Maimonides's major contribution to Jewish life remains the *Mishneh Torah*, his code of Jewish law. His intention was to compose a book that would guide Jews on how to behave in all situations just by reading the Torah and his code, without having to expend large amounts of time searching through the \*Talmud. Needless to say, this provocative rationale did not endear Maimonides to many traditional Jews, who feared that people would rely on his code and no longer study the Talmud. Despite sometimes intense opposition, the *Mishneh Torah* became a standard guide to Jewish practice: It later served as the model for the \**Shulkhan Arukh*, the sixteenth-century code of Jewish law that is still regarded as authoritative by Orthodox Jews.

Philosophically, Maimonides was a religious rationalist. His damning attacks on people who held ideas he regarded as primitive—those, for example,

who understood literally such biblical expressions as "the finger of God"—so infuriated his opponents that they proscribed parts of his code and all of *The Guide to the Perplexed*. Other, more liberal, spirits forbade study of the *Guide* to anyone not of mature years. An old joke has it that these rabbis feared that a Jew would start reading a section in the *Guide* in which Maimonides summarizes a rationalist attack on religion, and fall asleep before reading Maimonides's counterattack—thereby spending the night as a heretic.

How Maimonides's opponents reacted to his works was no joke, however. Three leading rabbis in France denounced his books to the Dominicans, who headed the French Inquisition. The Inquisitors were only too happy to intervene and burn the books. Eight years later, when the Dominicans started \*burning the Talmud, one of the rabbis involved, Jonah Gerondi, concluded that God was punishing him and French Jewry for their unjust condemnation of Maimonides. He resolved to travel to Maimonides's grave in Tiberias, in Israel, to request forgiveness.

Throughout most of the Jewish world, Maimonides remained a hero, of course. When he died, Egyptian Jews observed three full days of mourning, and applied to his death the biblical verse "The ark of the Lord has been taken" (I Samuel 4:11).

To this day, Maimonides and the French-Jewish sage \*Rashi are the most widely studied Jewish scholars. Contemporary yeshiva students generally focus on the *Mishneh Torah*, and his *Book of Commandments* (*Sefer ha-Mitzvot*) a compilation of the Torah's \*613 commandments. Maimonides also formulated a credo of Judaism expressed in thirteen articles of faith, a popular reworking of which (the *Yigdal* prayer) appears in most Jewish prayerbooks. Among other things, this credo affirms belief in the oneness of God, the divine origins of the Torah, and the afterlife. Its twelfth statement of faith—"I believe with a full heart in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may tarry I will still wait for him"—was among the last words said by some Jews being marched into Nazi gas chambers.

Maimonides was one of the few Jewish thinkers whose teachings also influenced the non-Jewish world; much of his philosophical writings in the *Guide* were about God and other theological issues of general, not exclusively Jewish, interest. Thomas Aquinas refers in his writings to "Rabbi Moses," and shows considerable familiarity with the *Guide*. In 1985, on the 850th anniversary of Maimonides's birth, Pakistan and Cuba—which do not recognize Israel—were among the co-sponsors of a UNESCO conference in Paris on Maimonides. Vitali Naumkin, a Soviet scholar, observed on this

occasion: "Maimonides is perhaps the only philosopher in the Middle Ages, perhaps even now, who symbolizes a confluence of four cultures: Greco-Roman, Arab, Jewish, and Western." More remarkably, Abderrahmane Badawi, a Muslim professor from Kuwait University, declared: "I regard him first and foremost as an Arab thinker." This sentiment was echoed by Saudi Arabian professor Huseyin Atay, who claimed that "if you didn't know he was Jewish, you might easily make the mistake of saying that a Muslim was writing." That is, if you didn't read any of his Jewish writings. Maimonides scholar Shlomo Pines delivered perhaps the most accurate assessment at the conference: "Maimonides is the most influential Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages, and quite possibly of all time" (*Time* magazine, December 23, 1985). As a popular Jewish expression of the Middle Ages declares: "From \*Moses [of the Torah] to Moses [Maimonides] there was none like Moses."

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: Isadore Twersky, ed., *A Maimonides Reader*; Salo Baron, "Moses Maimonides," in Simon Noveck, ed., *Great Jewish Personalities in Ancient and Medieval Times*, pp. 204-231; Jacob S. Minkin, *The World of Moses Maimonides*; Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Maimonides*; David Yellin and Israel Abrahams, *Maimonides*; Leon Stitskin, trans. and ed., *Letters of Maimonides*; Abraham Halkin, trans., *Crisis and Leadership: Epistles of Maimonides*—discussions by Dr. David Hartman follow the text.



## BAN ON POLYGAMY

### *The Takkanot (Decrees) of Rabbi Gershom*

THE TENTH-CENTURY RABBI GERSHOM OF GERMANY IS CREDITED WITH a number of legal decrees that dramatically raised the status of women in Jewish law, and updated Jewish morality in other areas. The three most famous laws attributed to him were bans against polygamy, divorcing a woman against her will, and reading other people's mail.

The ban on multiple wives is the best known of these decrees, even though polygamy had not been widely practiced among Jews for at least a

millennium. Of the more than fifteen hundred rabbis mentioned in the Talmud, we know of none who had more than one wife. Nevertheless, plural marriage was never outlawed and was still practiced occasionally.

Rabbi Gershom regarded polygamy as a *\*khillul ha-Shem* (desecration of God's name) because Jews were seen as having a lower morality than their monogamous Christian neighbors. Rabbi Gershom might also have been influenced by the curious fact that although Torah law permitted polygamy, Torah narrative opposed it. Virtually every polygamous relationship described in the Bible is miserably unhappy. For example, although \*Sarah herself encouraged \*Abraham to take Hagar as a concubine, the two women ended up hating each other. Two generations later, \*Jacob married the sisters \*Leah and \*Rachel: The unhappiness resulting from this polygamous marriage spilled over into the next generation, as Leah's sons hated Rachel's firstborn son, \*Joseph. Much later, the Bible described disapprovingly the numerous wives taken by King \*Solomon, because they introduced idolatry into Israel. Thus, although the Bible permits polygamy, its clear preference seems to be "one man, one wife." "Therefore," the Torah teaches in Genesis, "shall a man leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and they shall be one flesh" (2:24). Indeed, the most obvious evidence of the Torah's preference for monogamy is that the first human beings God created were \*Adam and Eve, not Adam, Eve, and Joan.

Unlike their European brothers, the Jews living within the orbit of Islam, where plural wives were a status symbol, felt no self-consciousness about polygamy, and did not accept Rabbi Gershom's ban. In 1948, when Israel was created, some Jews who emigrated there from the Arab world, particularly from Yemen, came with more than one wife. The government permitted those marriages already in existence to stay in force, while forbidding any new polygamous marriages. Today, therefore, the ban on polygamy is universally accepted in the Jewish state and throughout the Diaspora.

Rabbi Gershom's decree that prohibited divorcing a woman against her will corrected a long-standing injustice in the Jewish legal code. Under biblical and talmudic law, a man could divorce his wife against her will for virtually any reason. The rabbis tried to inhibit men from doing so by demanding a hefty alimony payment (see *Ketuba* and *Get*), but this was not always a sufficient deterrent. Since the time of Rabbi Gershom, divorce has to be mutually accepted by both parties.

The decree banning the reading of other people's mail was particularly important at a time when letters were not sent through an impersonal government office, but entrusted to messengers. Although the decree might seem self-evident, Rabbi Gershom had good reason to think it was necessary. Even today, many people do not regard mail as private property in quite the same way they regard other personal possessions. They are apt to have fewer scruples about reading other people's mail without permission than about borrowing other people's cars without permission. From the perspective of Jewish law, both acts are strictly forbidden. When I lived in Israel, I occasionally would see written on an envelope flap "*Takkanat Rabbenu Gershom* [The Decree of Rabbi Gershom]," a reminder to would-be snoopers of this tenth-century ban on reading mail addressed to someone else.

There is a special poignancy to a fourth decree of Rabbi Gershom. This one forbids reminding Jewish apostates who have returned to the Jewish community of the sin they had committed. Rabbi Gershom himself had a son who was forcibly converted to Christianity and died before he could repent. Nonetheless, he carried out the laws of mourning for him.

The comprehensive nature and humanitarian concerns of Rabbi Gershom's decrees earned him a title, which is almost invariably appended to his name in Hebrew, "*Rabbenu Gershom Me'or ha-Golah* [Rabbi Gershom, who brought light to the Jews in exile]."

SOURCE AND FURTHER READING: Louis Finkelstein, *Jewish Self-Government in the Middle Ages*, pp. 20-35.