



RASHI (1040-1105)

RABBENU TAM (1100-1171)

THE RISHONIM

ALTHOUGH *MAIMONIDES IS REGARDED AS MEDIEVAL JUDAISM'S greatest philosopher and intellect, Rashi is its greatest teacher. Since his death almost nine hundred years ago, Jews who study either the *Torah or the *Talmud, Judaism's two most important works, invariably do so with the help of his commentary. Of the many Talmud editions that have been printed since the sixteenth century, almost none has come out without this French sage's glosses. In fact, had Rashi not written a Talmud commentary that explained its difficult Aramaic words and guided students through its intricate and often confusing forms of logic, the Talmud might have become a largely forgotten work.

This greatest of Jewish teachers was born in Troyes, France, in 1040. His full name was Rabbi Shlomo ben Isaac, of which Rashi is the acronym. Throughout his lifetime, only one hundred or so Jews lived in Troyes. That such a great scholar came from so small a town seems quite remarkable, since modern Jews who live in small Jewish communities usually lament that it is impossible to give their children an adequate Jewish education.

As a young man, Rashi spent several years in the *yeshiva in Mainz that had been established by Rabbi Gershom (see preceding entry). When he was about twenty-five, he returned to Troyes and opened his own Jewish school. However, Rashi refused to draw a salary for his work, earning his living instead from several vineyards that he owned. His professional labors were occasionally time-consuming, and in one letter we find him apologizing for the shortness of his response, explaining that he and his family were busy with the grape harvest. In general, however, the vineyards seemed to leave Rashi ample time to work on his commentaries. The last years of his life were marred by the antisemitic *Crusades that swept over France and Germany. Although Troyes itself was untouched by the Crusaders, tremendous devasta-

tion was wreaked elsewhere in Europe. Thousands of Jews were murdered by the Crusaders, thousands more badly injured, and additional thousands impoverished. In addition, there were many Jews who converted to Christianity to save their lives, and who later wished to return to Judaism. Rashi advocated an accepting, tolerant attitude toward them: "Let us beware of alienating those who have returned to us. . . . They became Christians only through fear of death; and as soon as the danger disappeared they hastened to return to their faith."

Perhaps the most noted feature of his commentaries is their succinctness and clarity. He repeatedly revised his commentaries, striving to make them more precise and brief. On one occasion, he allegedly reproved his grandson, Rabbi Samuel, for a lengthy comment on a talmudic passage: "If you had done all the Talmud like this it would have been as heavy as a chariot."

To this day, Rashi's literary style influences Hebrew writing. The great Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik spoke of Rashi as an inspiration, as did Shmuel Yosef Agnon, in his 1966 speech accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In his Torah commentary, Rashi explains terms both on the basis of *peshat* (literal meaning) and *derash* (homiletical or sermonic meaning—see *Midrash*). Often the two are combined in one comment. For example, Genesis 25:21 reads: "Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebecca conceived." Rashi first notes that the meaning of *vaye'tar* (pleaded) is "to pray much and earnestly. Many biblical quotations support this meaning of the word." He then seizes on a peculiar expression in the Hebrew text, noting that *le-nokhach ishto*, although commonly translated as "[pleaded] for his wife," literally means 'opposite his wife,' which is the basis for the talmudic suggestion that 'Isaac prayed in one corner and Rebecca in another.' Not only has Rashi explained to the reader the literal meaning of the Torah's words, he also has conveyed a visual representation of the room in which Isaac and Rebecca prayed. We can well imagine that later on many Jewish couples, plagued by infertility, took up praying positions in opposite corners of the room, in line with Rashi's explanation.

Rashi's predilection for citing talmudic and midrashic legends in his Torah commentary led a later Bible commentator, Abraham ibn Ezra, to attack him sharply: "In [Rashi's] work, there is not one rational explanation out of a thousand." This is, of course, a grotesque exaggeration, although it is true that in his later years, Rashi confided to his grandson, Rabbi Samuel,

that if he had had more time he would have rewritten his commentary to correspond more closely to the text's literal meaning.

Rashi's opening commentary on the first verse in the Torah, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1), almost sounds as if it were written with the contemporary Arab-Israeli conflict in mind. "Strictly speaking," he notes, "the Torah should have commenced with the verse, 'This month shall be to you the beginning of months' [Exodus 12:2], which is the very first commandment given to [the Jews]. Why, then, did the Torah begin with the account of the creation? In order to illustrate that God the Creator owns the whole world. So, if the peoples of the world shall say to Israel: 'You are robbers in conquering the territory of the seven Canaanite nations,' Israel can answer them: 'All of the earth belongs to God—He created it, so He can give it to whomsoever He will.'"

His commentary on Genesis 6:9—"Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in his age"—conveys both sides of the well-known rabbinic dispute on Noah's character: "Some of the sages interpret the verse in Noah's favor, by observing that if he had managed to be righteous in such a wicked milieu, how much more righteous he would have been had he lived in an age of righteous people! Others, however, interpret the phrase to his discredit by noting that it implies that Noah was righteous only by the standard of his own generation, but that had he lived in Abraham's generation, he would have been considered a nobody."

Rashi's Torah commentary achieved such wide acceptance that it became mandatory for Jews to review the weekly Torah portion with his commentary. In 1475, Rashi's commentary became the first book printed in Hebrew—even before the Torah itself was. As Dr. Philip Birnbaum has written: "[Torah] with Rashi has meant the average Jewish education everywhere throughout many generations." During the past nine centuries, an additional hundred commentaries have been written—just on Rashi's commentary on the Torah.

If anything, his Talmud commentary filled an even greater need than that on the Torah. The Torah's vocabulary is quite simple. But the Talmud, with its combination of Aramaic, Hebrew and, occasionally, Greek terms, is a far more daunting work. To this day, students of the Talmud are encouraged to read Rashi's commentary as they are reading the text, before trying to deduce the text's meaning on their own.

In every printed edition of the Talmud, opposite Rashi's commentary, is another commentary known as Tosafot. The Tosafot commentary is a cre-

ation put together over two centuries, dominated by five of Rashi's descendants—two sons-in-law and three grandsons. One of the grandsons, Rabbi Jacob Tam (known as Rabbenu Tam), became the leader of the French-Jewish community several decades after Rashi's death. As well as being a first-rate scholar, he was a self-assured and decisive leader. On one occasion, Rabbenu Tam authorized the excommunication of any Jew who questioned the legality of a Jewish **get* (divorce decree) on the basis of a technicality. Rabbenu Tam was concerned that Jewish women would remarry after a divorce, then suddenly find their divorces challenged and themselves accused of adultery.

His most famous dispute was with his revered grandfather, Rashi, and concerned the order in which the Torah texts inserted into the **tefillin* (phylacteries) should be placed. Although the Jewish community has followed Rashi's interpretation, respect for Rabbenu Tam remains so great that some religious Jews don two pairs of *tefillin* each morning, first those of Rashi, then those of Rabbenu Tam (indeed, they are known as Rabbenu Tam *tefillin*).

The term *Rishonim* (First Ones) applies to all Jewish scholars who lived before Rabbi Joseph **Karo*, the author of the sixteenth-century code of Jewish law known as the **Shulkhan Arukh*. Because of the *Rishonim*'s prominence and closer proximity to the time of **Moses* and the Revelation, their writings are usually regarded as more authoritative than those of the post-*Shulkhan Arukh* scholars, known as *Akharonim* (Later Ones). Among the most prominent *Rishonim* are Rashi, Rabbenu Tam, the authors of the *Tosafot*, **Maimonides*, *Nachmanides*, and *lbn Ezra*.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: The selections from Rashi's commentary are drawn from Chaim Pearl, *Rashi: Commentaries on the Pentateuch*. Pearl has published a brief biography, *Rashi*. See also Philip Birnbaum, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Concepts*, pp. 571–572.

CRUSADES

WHEN I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD AND MY FAMILY WAS SPENDING SEVERAL days at my grandparents' house, I took with me a one-volume history of the world, written for children. Having just read the section on the Middle Ages, I piped up in the middle of a holiday meal, "Weren't the Crusaders wonderful people, risking their lives for God?" There was an eerie silence at the table, much as if I had proposed substituting pork chops for my grandmother's gefilte fish. I came to understand later that the word "Crusades" reverberates very differently in the ears of Christians and Jews. For some, perhaps many, Christians the Crusades represent a high point of religious idealism: They admire the Crusaders for forsaking their careers and homes, and sometimes sacrificing their lives, to capture Jerusalem from the Muslims. For most Jews, the word "Crusades" has two very different associations: murder and forced baptism.

In 1095, when Pope Urban II called for the Crusades to regain Palestine from the "infidels," tens of thousands of Christians set out for the Holy Land. Those Jews unfortunate enough to live in the cities through which the Crusaders passed were generally offered the choice of conversion or death; a few lucky communities were permitted to pay a large bribe to be left unmolested. In May 1096, Crusaders besieged the Jewish community of Worms, Germany. The local bishop offered to save the Jews from their attackers if they converted to Christianity. Almost all of the Jews refused, and eight hundred were murdered.

Approximately twelve thousand Jews were killed in the early months of the First Crusades—often, it must be noted, against the will of local bishops. These Jews are regarded by Judaism as having died *al * kiddush ha-Shem*, in order to sanctify God's name. The weekly Sabbath morning service still contains a petition to the *Av ha-Rakhamin* (Merciful Father) to remember them, and to avenge their blood. This *Av ha-Rakhamim* prayer, probably composed during the Crusades of 1096, speaks of "the holy communities who offered their lives for the sanctification of God's name. They were beloved and pleasant in their lives, and not parted [from Judaism] in their deaths."

In 1099, when the Crusaders captured Jerusalem, they gathered all the city's Jews into a synagogue and burned them alive. Afterward, they banned all non-Christians from living in Jerusalem.

Some Jews saved themselves by converting to Christianity: After the Crusaders left, many of them tried to return to Judaism. In those cities where secular rulers were in control, they were permitted to do so; in jurisdictions where the Church was dominant, however, they were forced to remain Christians. More than a century later, in September 1201, Pope Innocent III formalized this prohibition in a papal bull: ". . . he who is led to Christianity by violence, by fear and by torture, and who received the sacrament of baptism to avoid harm receives indeed the stamp of Christianity . . . [and] must be duly constrained to abide by the faith [he] had accepted by force."

For the Jews, the Crusades signaled a terrible decline in their fortunes in Europe. For centuries afterward, they found themselves subjected to violent attacks, libelous accusations, and expulsions. See *Kiddush ha-Shem, Blood Libel*, and the next five entries.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: An extensive overview of the Jewish experience during the time of the Crusades is found in Leon Poliakov, *The History of Anti-Semitism: From the Time of Christ to the Court Jews*; the quote from Pope Innocent III is cited on p. 47. See also Robert Chazan, *European Jewry and the First Crusade*.



FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL

YELLOW BADGE

JESUS WAS A JEW, HIS APOSTLES WERE JEWS, HIS MESSAGE WAS TO THE Jews, and the Jews, the only people who knew him, rejected the claims Christianity made on his behalf. Not surprisingly, the Jews' very presence became a considerable irritant to some Christians, particularly to the deeply antisemitic Pope Innocent III.

At the Fourth Lateran Council, convened by Innocent in 1215, the Church decreed that Jews living in Christian lands were at all times to wear a distinctive badge on their clothing. This badge, generally a solid yellow circle sewed on to an upper garment, was periodically reimposed on European Jews for hundreds of years. It became the model for the *yellow star that the Nazis forced Jews to wear during the Second World War. Historians Max Wurmbrand and Cecil Roth have written that "the result of the introduction of the badge was to mark the Jews apart from other men as a different and inferior race, liable at all times to insult or attack."

Another decision at the Fourth Lateran Council, accepting the doctrine of transubstantiation as official Church dogma, seemingly had no relevance for the Jews. The doctrine simply meant that the wine and wafer used in the Catholic Mass were assumed to be miraculously transubstantiated into the actual blood and body of Jesus. But within thirty years, this dogma led to the annihilation of the entire Jewish community of Berlitz, Germany, which was charged with kidnapping a wafer and torturing it. The Berlitz massacre unfortunately was not a unique event. "In Prague, in 1389," a historical study of antisemitism notes, "the Jewish community was collectively accused of attacking a monk carrying a wafer. Large mobs of Christians surrounded the Jewish neighborhood and offered the Jews the choice of baptism or death. Refusing to be baptized, three thousand Jews were murdered. In Berlin, in 1510, twenty-six Jews were burned and two beheaded for reportedly 'desecrating the host.'"

The decisions made at the Fourth Lateran Council helped fulfill the vision for the Jews Pope Innocent III had earlier articulated in a letter to Count Nevers: "Jews, like the fratricide *Cain, are doomed to wander about the earth as fugitives and vagabonds, and their faces must be covered with shame."

SOURCES: Max Wurmbrand and Cecil Roth, *The Jewish People*, pp. 140-142. The passage on Jewish suffering occasioned by charges of host desecration is from Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism*, p. 86-87.

BURNING OF THE TALMUD

THE TWO LITERARY PILLARS OF JUDAISM ARE THE BIBLE AND THE *Talmud. While the Bible has become a central document in Christianity, the Talmud has remained of interest almost exclusively to Jews. In the medieval world, some Christian leaders concluded that if the Talmud were destroyed, and Jews were left only with the Bible, they would be more amenable to converting to Christianity. On fifteen occasions, Catholic officials, sometimes even popes, declared the Talmud a forbidden work and ordered it burned. The most famous such burning occurred in 1240 after the Talmud was put on trial in Paris and convicted of blasphemy.

Ironically, it appears that Jewish zealots helped provoke this terrible event. Three French rabbis, outraged by supposed heresies in *Maimonides's *The Guide to the Perplexed*, approached the Dominicans and asked that the book be burned. The Dominicans, who directed the French Inquisition, obliged, and took advantage of the unexpected request to start looking into other Jewish texts as well.

Several years later, Nicholas Donin, a Jewish apostate, submitted a memorandum to Pope Gregory IX leveling thirty-five accusations against the Talmud, among them that it allegedly expressed hatred for Christianity and blasphemed against Jesus and Mary. King Louis IX of France ordered the Talmud to be put on trial. At the trial, Rabbi Yechiel of Paris, head of the rabbinic defense team, declared before Queen Blanche: "We are prepared to die for the Talmud. . . . Our bodies are in your power, but not our souls."

The predetermined verdict, of course, was guilty. Two years later, on June 17, 1242—in response to an order issued by an inquisitorial committee—twenty-four wagonloads of handwritten volumes of the Talmud were cremated.

Despite the fourteen subsequent instances in which the Talmud was

burned, it remains today alive and well, and still constitutes the core curriculum at most rabbinical schools.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: Hyam Maccoby, *Judaism on Trial*, pp. 19–38; Jacob Marcus, ed., *The Jew in the Medieval World*, pp. 145–150; Yvonne Glikson, “Burning of Talmud,” in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 15, pp. 767–771.



JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DISPUTATIONS
MOSES NACHMANIDES AND THE DEBATE
IN BARCELONA, SPAIN, 1263

Jews have long had a reputation for being a verbal, sometimes argumentative people. The great Yiddish writer Isaac Peretz characterized them as “a people who can’t sleep and don’t let anybody else sleep.” The least favorite arguments in which the Jews have ever engaged, however, were with Christian opponents in Western Europe during the Middle Ages.

The debates were generally ordered by monarchs acting at the behest of Catholic priests. The Church’s goal in arranging the disputations was clear: If their priests could defeat the Jewish representatives, masses of Jews would recognize the truth of Christianity and convert. To make it harder on the Jewish participants, the Church hierarchy imposed sharp limitations on the arguments they could use. They were forbidden, for example, to say anything that could be regarded as offensive to Christianity, with the priests generally the judges of what was offensive. Not surprisingly, the Jews regarded the debates as a no-win situation; if they were bested by the priests, they would be expected to convert. If they came out ahead, however, they might well find themselves, and their fellow Jews, subjected to physical attacks.

The most famous of all Jewish-Christian disputations was between the apostate Jew Pablo Christiani and Moses Nachmanides, one of the greatest Jewish scholars of the Middle Ages. Several priests worked as counselors in conjunction with Pablo Christiani throughout the encounter. The debate

was held in the presence of the Spanish king James of Aragon, and Nachmanides secured rare permission from the monarch to speak without fear of censorship or retribution. He addressed three questions:

1. Has the *Messiah come as the Christians say, or has he yet to come as the Jews say?
2. Is the Messiah divine as the Christians say, or human as the Jews say?
3. Do the Jews practice the true law or do the Christians?

To the first question, Nachmanides answered that Jews do not believe that Jesus was the Messiah because he did not fulfill the messianic prophecies delineated in the Hebrew Bible. Most important, he did not usher in an age of universal peace as *Isaiah had prophesied: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" (2:4). Not only have Isaiah's words not been fulfilled, Nachmanides said, but worse, Jesus' followers often have been great spillers of blood.

Nachmanides argued that the central issue separating Christianity and Judaism was *not* the issue of Jesus' messiahship, but whether or not Jesus was divine. There was no basis in Judaism, Nachmanides said, for believing in the divinity of the Messiah or, indeed, of any man. To Nachmanides, it seemed most strange "that the Creator of heaven and earth resorted to the womb of a certain Jewess and grew there for nine months and was born as an infant, and afterwards grew up and was betrayed into the hands of his enemies who sentenced him to death and executed him, and that afterwards . . . he came to life and returned to his original place. The mind of a Jew, or any other person, cannot tolerate this." Nachmanides told the Spanish monarch, "You have listened all your life to priests who have filled your brain and the marrow of your bones with this doctrine, and it has settled with you because of that accustomed habit." Had King James heard these ideas propounded for the first time when he was already an adult, Nachmanides implied, he never would have accepted them.

Nachmanides's opponents tried to have his "blasphemies" silenced, but he refused to back down. He was engaging in no gratuitous insults, he insisted, and his priestly opponents could hardly be impartial judges as to what arguments should or should not be permitted.

With regard to the third question, whether or not Jewish law was still binding, Nachmanides answered that nothing had changed in the character of the world or of mankind to make the Torah's commandments superfluous.

All of King James's good intentions notwithstanding, when the debates ended, Nachmanides found it prudent to leave Spain and emigrate to Palestine.

The two other famous Jewish-Christian debates were far sorer episodes. The first, held in Paris in 1240, ended with the burning of the Talmud (see preceding entry). A much longer debate in Tortosa, Spain, in 1413-1414, was held under "siege" conditions. Jewish rights were already being attacked in Spain, and the rabbinic participants in the twenty-one-month debate feared for their lives whenever their arguments angered their Christian opponents. At the end of the debate, new ordinances were issued in Spain lowering the Jews to the status of pariahs.

It is probably fair to say that Christianity—or any religion for that matter—was not at its most sublime when it had political power. The Jewish/Christian disputations are as good a proof of that as any.

SOURCES: An extraordinarily fine book on the subject of Jewish-Christian debates is *Judaism on Trial: Jewish-Christian Disputations in the Middle Ages*, by the English-Jewish scholar Haym Maccoby. Maccoby analyzes the major debates and translates them as well. See also H. H. Ben-Sasson, "Jewish-Christian Disputations and Polemics," in his *Trial and Achievement: Currents in Jewish History*, pp. 257-285.



EXPULSION OF JEWS FROM ENGLAND, 1290

WHILE MANY JEWS ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE *EXPULSION OF SPANISH Jewry in 1492, few know that Jews have been expelled at one time or another from almost every European society in which they have lived. They were expelled from France in 1306 and 1394; Hungary between 1349 and 1360; Austria in 1421; numerous localities in Germany between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries; Lithuania in 1445 and 1495; Spain in 1492; Portugal in 1497; and Bohemia and Moravia in 1744-1745. Between the fifteenth century and 1772, Jews were not permitted in Russia: When they were finally admitted, they were restricted to an area known as the Pale of Settlement.

Between 1948 and 1967, almost all the Jews of Aden, Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, though not officially expelled, fled these countries, fearing for their lives.

However, the first countrywide expulsion occurred in England in 1290. The motives seem to have been a combination of economic tension and religious hatred. Many noblemen, heavily indebted to Jewish moneylenders, wished to rid themselves of their creditors. The British monarch, King Edward I, supported the idea of expulsion; he, too, coveted the Jews' property, and upon their expulsion he and other members of the royal family confiscated much of it.

The local populace was more apt to support the expulsion on religious grounds. The people had been conditioned to hate Jews by centuries of anti-semitic calumnies, and by accusations of ritual murder—the *blood libel itself originated in England. Only thirty-five years before the expulsion, nineteen Jews were hanged without trial in the city of Lincoln, falsely charged with crucifying a young boy named Hugh.

The order of expulsion was issued on July 18, 1290. The Hebrew date was the ninth of Av (see **Tisha Be-Av*), the saddest day in the Jewish calendar, a fast day that commemorates the destruction of the two Temples.

The Jews were not permitted back into England for almost four centuries, until the rule of Oliver Cromwell in the 1650s. Even during their years of exile, however, antisemitism did not abate. In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written a century after the Jewish expulsion, the author accused the Jews of ritual murder, and two centuries later, Shakespeare depicted a Jew as a moneylender who collected his debt in human flesh (see *Shylock*).

Strangely enough, as deeply antisemitic as England was during the Middle Ages, there seemed to thrive in the country a strong, if small, current of philosemitism. At the very time Zionism was spreading among nineteenth-century Jewry, there evolved in England a Christian Zionist movement that influenced the later issuance of the *Balfour Declaration in 1917.

SOURCE: Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin, *Why the Jews? The Reason for Antisemitism*, pp. 81-83.

SPANISH INQUISITION (1481-1808)

Marranos

THE SPANISH INQUISITION WAS A PERVERSE ATTEMPT TO SAVE people's souls by torturing their bodies. Since only Christians of pure faith could go to heaven, the Inquisitors reasoned, and all others would be sentenced to the eternal torments of hell, it made sense to temporarily torture people of impure faith until they accepted Jesus, and thereby save their souls from the never-ending tortures of the next world.

Contrary to a popular misconception, the Inquisition was not directed against Jews, but against all supposed heretics, particularly former Jews who had converted to Christianity. Since these Jews had generally converted under duress, either to save their lives or their livelihoods, the Church had good reason to mistrust their sincerity. Inquisition officials, aided by informers, continually and carefully scrutinized these new Christians. If any of their actions indicated that they might be secretly practicing Judaism—perhaps they were observed never to eat pork or cook on the Sabbath—these “new Christians” were summoned before the Inquisition. The Inquisitors, all of whom were priests, asked the accused if they were secret Jews. If they confessed immediately, and supplied the Inquisition with names of other secret Jews, they got off lightly: a religious ceremony at which they made a public confession, and suffered various humiliations. If they were convicted of being secret Jews and only then confessed, they were guaranteed a less painful execution: They were strangled before being burned at the stake.

Those people who refused to confess even after being convicted, or who were courageous enough to acknowledge that they were still Jews, were repeatedly tortured to force them to concede the truth of Christianity. During the centuries in which the Inquisition had power, thousands of secret Jews were put on the rack, had water forced down their throats after their noses were pinched shut, or subjected to other tortures. All these actions were

carried out by priests who claimed to be motivated only by love of the people they were torturing.

Those Jews whom the Inquisitors couldn't win back to Christianity were burned at a public ceremony known as an *auto-da-fé*. Among the Inquisition's thousands of victims a Jew named Balthazar Lopez stands out for the ironic sense of humor he displayed till the last moments of his life. In June 1654, Lopez was sentenced along with nine other secret Jews to be burned at the stake. His confessor persuaded him at the last moment to avoid the worst tortures by verbally declaring that Christianity was true. Lopez did so, whereupon another priest told him to rejoice, as his repentance meant that he would now enter Paradise. As the hangman prepared to strangle him, the same priest asked Lopez if he was truly repentant. "Father," he said, "do you think that this is a time to joke?"

The Inquisition went after dead heretics with equal fervor. On one day in the late 1480s, the bones of one hundred dead people who had lived as secret Jews were exhumed and publicly burned.

The Spanish Jews who converted to Christianity but who lived as secret Jews became known as Marranos, a contemptuous term meaning "swine." Marranos kept their identities hidden from all except immediate family members and other people whom they knew to be Marranos. Sometimes they would descend into their cellars to carry out Jewish rituals in secret; the cellar was where they usually conducted the *Passover *Seder. Marranos almost always kept their young children ignorant of their Jewish identity, telling them about it only when they reached an age at which their discretion could be trusted. Many Marranos subsequently escaped from Spain, and headed toward more tolerant European societies, especially Holland.

Over the centuries, almost all of the Marranos who did not leave Spain and who were not caught by the Inquisition, assimilated into Spanish society. Historians have long noted the strange anomaly of staunch Spanish Catholics bearing such names as Levine. For centuries, some Marrano families, particularly in Portugal where the Inquisition was established later than in Spain, maintained secret traditions faintly echoing their Jewish origins. In the twentieth century, a group was discovered in Portugal which did not eat pork on Saturday, though they had no idea how this custom had originated. In recent years, an increasing number of people of Spanish descent who were raised as Catholics (many of them in the southwestern United States) have come to rabbis and told of Jewish practices long carried out in their families (such as

lighting candles on Friday night). Some of these people have subsequently converted to Judaism.

SOURCES: Cecil Roth, *The Spanish Inquisition*; the story of Balthazar Lopez is found on pp. 129-130. See also Max Margolis and Alexander Marx, *A History of the Jewish People*, pp. 460-469.



DON ISAAC ABRAVANEL (1437-1508)

DON ISAAC ABRAVANEL WAS PERHAPS THE HIGHEST-RANKING JEW IN A foreign government since the time of *Joseph and the Pharaoh of Egypt. Abravanel was the finance minister for King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain. Whereas Joseph started as a slave in Egypt, then rose to a position of status and power, for Abravanel the power and glory came first. In his later years, when the Jews were expelled from Spain (see next entry), he accompanied them into exile. Ferdinand and Isabella were upset by Abravanel's decision; they urged him to embrace Christianity and exempt himself from the expulsion decree. More loyal to the God of Israel than to the monarchs of Spain, Abravanel refused to do so.

As great as Abravanel's diplomatic talents were his scholarly achievements. His commentaries on the Bible, written during the years he held high government office, are still studied by Jews. The commentaries are written in a more modern tone than those of many of his contemporaries. When dealing with the biblical institution of monarchy (I Samuel 8) Abravanel notes similarities and differences with the prevailing social structure in Europe. While he often argues against christological interpretations of verses, he willingly accepts on occasion interpretations of Christian exegetes: "Indeed," he writes in his commentary to I Kings 8, "I regard their words on this matter to be more acceptable than those of the rabbis to which I have referred." His commentaries also include comprehensive introductions to the prophetic books in which he draws comparisons between the style and method of the various prophets.

According to one account, which some dismiss as legendary, when Ferdinand and Isabella issued the order of expulsion against the Jews of Spain, Abravanel approached them to offer an enormous bribe to cancel the decree. While the discussion was still going on, Tomás de Torquemada, head of the Spanish Inquisition (see preceding entry), came in, flung his cross on the floor, and cried out to Ferdinand: "Will you betray our Lord Jesus for thirty thousand dinars as Judas did for thirty pieces of silver?"

Recognizing that his cause was hopeless, Abravanel escaped to Italy, where he continued to write Bible commentaries and works of philosophy in which he tried to console the demoralized, exiled Jews.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: Ben Zion Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*; Jacob S. Minkin, *Abravanel and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*; Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought: From Maimonides to Abravanel*, pp. 179–195.



THE SPANISH EXPULSION, 1492

"IN THE SAME MONTH IN WHICH THEIR MAJESTIES [FERDINAND AND Isabella] issued the edict that all Jews should be driven out of the kingdom and its territories, in the same month they gave me the order to undertake with sufficient men my expedition of discovery to the Indies." So begins Christopher Columbus's diary. The expulsion that Columbus refers to was so cataclysmic an event that ever since, the date 1492 has been almost as important in Jewish history as in American history. On July 30 of that year, the entire Jewish community, some 200,000 people, were expelled from Spain.

Tens of thousands of refugees died while trying to reach safety. In some instances, Spanish ship captains charged Jewish passengers exorbitant sums, then dumped them overboard in the middle of the ocean. In the last days before the expulsion, rumors spread throughout Spain that the fleeing refugees had swallowed gold and diamonds, and many Jews were knifed to death by brigands hoping to find treasures in their stomachs.

The Jews' expulsion had been the pet project of the Spanish *Inquisition, headed by Father Tomás de Torquemada. Torquemada believed that as long as the Jews remained in Spain, they would influence the tens of thousands of recent Jewish converts to Christianity to continue practicing Judaism. Ferdinand and Isabella rejected Torquemada's demand that the Jews be expelled until January 1492, when the Spanish Army defeated Muslim forces in Granada, thereby restoring the whole of Spain to Christian rule. With their most important project, the country's unification, accomplished, the king and queen concluded that the Jews were expendable. On March 30, they issued the expulsion decree, the order to take effect in precisely four months. The short time span was a great boon to the rest of Spain, as the Jews were forced to liquidate their homes and businesses at absurdly low prices. Throughout those frantic months, Dominican priests actively encouraged Jews to convert to Christianity and thereby gain salvation both in this world and the next.

The most fortunate of the expelled Jews succeeded in escaping to Turkey. Sultan Bajazet welcomed them warmly. "How can you call Ferdinand of Aragon a wise king," he was fond of asking, "the same Ferdinand who impoverished his own land and enriched ours?" Among the most unfortunate refugees were those who fled to neighboring Portugal. In 1496, King Manuel of Portugal concluded an agreement to marry Isabella, the daughter of Spain's monarchs. As a condition of the marriage, the Spanish royal family insisted that Portugal expel her Jews. King Manuel agreed, although he was reluctant to lose his affluent and accomplished Jewish community.

In the end, only eight Portuguese Jews were actually expelled; tens of thousands of others were forcibly converted to Christianity on pain of death. The chief rabbi, Simon Maimi, was one of those who refused to convert. He was kept buried in earth up to his neck for seven days until he died. In the final analysis, all of these events took place because of the relentless will of one man, Tomás de Torquemada.

The Spanish Jews who ended up in Turkey, North Africa, Italy, and elsewhere throughout Europe and the Arab world, were known as *Sephardim—*Sefarad* being the Hebrew name for Spain. After the expulsion, the Sephardim imposed an informal ban forbidding Jews from ever again living in Spain. Specifically because their earlier sojourn in that country had been so happy, the Jews regarded the expulsion as a terrible betrayal, and have remembered it ever since with particular bitterness. Of the dozens of expulsions directed against Jews throughout their history, the one from Spain remains the most infamous. In the 1930s, Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel isolated one

consoling feature in Spanish Jewry's terrible sufferings: "The Jews [of Spain] . . . had held imposing positions [before their expulsion]. The conquest of the New World was accomplished without their collaboration. Had they remained on the Iberian peninsula, they most probably would have taken part in the enterprises of the conquistadores. When the latter arrived in Haiti, they found over one million inhabitants. Twenty years later one thousand remained. The desperate Jews of 1492 could not know what a favor had been done for them." See *The Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, The Spanish Inquisition/Marranos, and Abravanel*.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READINGS: Max Margolis and Alexander Marx, *A History of the Jewish People*, pp. 470-476. The Heschel quote is from his German book *Don Jizchak Abravanel*, and is cited in Hillel Goldberg, *Between Berlin and Słabodka*, p. 203, n. 53. Jacob Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World*, pp. 51-55.