

The story of the Iberian Crypto-Jews

Part 2: Golden Age

Eric Aizenstros

The Story So Far

- We have reviewed the potential origins of the Sepharadim, ranging from archaeological and textual evidence from Roman Times, to perhaps veiled references to an origin in the First Temple period.
- We also reviewed the fate of these Jews under the control of the Visigoths after the Roman Empire fell in Iberia, which was a mixed-bag, but often ended badly for the Jews.
- We have reviewed the Islamic conquest of Iberia and how the Pact of Umar discriminated against the Jews, but also gave them rights.

A side note

My presentations will not contain references to aid with aesthetics, but I will make a written account available at some stage. It will be my telling of the story, but in more detail than covered in the presentations and will contain references.

A brief overview

- This was the setting that allowed the Golden Age to occur.
- It is debateable how long it lasted, but most would outline the 8-11th centuries as the peak of this period. This was under Moorish rule.
- Perhaps the 12-13th centuries could also be considered a sort of Golden Age as well, as Jews were accepted in Christian lands as well, but without the same degree of success.
- By the 14th century, the situation for the Jews worsened, in now what was mostly reconquered Christian Iberia.

Why the Golden Age?

- For Diaspora standards, Jews had rights and privileges. The discriminatory aspect of the Pact of Umar was frequently not enforced. For example Jews could often repair synagogues.
- Jews were allowed to study religious texts at will, and most crucially, allowed to open academies of Jewish learning. This allowed increasing numbers of Jews to be well educated in religious texts, allowing new insights to be formed, written down and propagated.

Why the Golden Age?

- Jews were also given freedom in secular matters.
- Jews were allowed to do business relatively freely.
- Jews had a huge advantage when it came to business.
 - Jews were usually multi-lingual, vs Gentiles who mostly spoke one language.
 - Jews were well versed with abstract thinking, from their Jewish studies.
 - Jews often had international contacts, in the form of other Jewish merchants.
- Hence Jewish communities became very wealthy. Jews were mostly middle class or above. This was unheard of in other parts of the Diaspora.

Why the Golden Age?

- Jews also excelled in other secular matters:
 - Medicine and other sciences.
 - Poetry. The “Hollywood Actors of the day” were poets, who often had international followings.
 - Literature and linguistics. In particular, the Sepharadim were great developers of Hebrew poetry. This was almost unique in the Diaspora, as Hebrew had ceased to be used apart from religious study.
 - Diplomacy. Perhaps helped by their abstract thinking and linguistic skills, Jews were often gifted diplomats. Hence they were employed by royal courts.

Personalities of the Golden Age

- Judah HaLevi (1075-1141):
 - Travelled between Muslims and Christian parts of Spain, due to sporadic persecution.
 - Was a very successful poet and physician.
 - Eventually tired of being in the Diaspora and made his way to Egypt on his way to the Holy Land. He apparently received such a warm welcome (again the “rockstar” poets), that he stayed there for the rest of his life.
 - His best known religious work was a philosophical work called the Kuzari, which seeks to explore aspects of Jewish philosophy.

Personalities of the Golden Age

From Judah HaLevi's "The Physician's Prayer:" (translated by Nina Salaman)

"My God, heal me and I shall be healed, Let not Thine anger be kindled against me so that I be consumed. My medicines are of Thee, whether good Or evil, whether strong or weak. It is Thou who shalt choose, not I; Of Thy knowledge is the evil and the fair. Not upon my power of healing I rely; Only for Thine healing do I watch."

Personalities of the Golden Age

- Hasdai ibn Shaprut (c915- c975):
 - Born in Jaen, Spain.
 - Was a great Biblical scholar in his own right and was physician to the caliph Abd-ar Rahman III in Cordoba.
 - It was for his diplomacy that he is most well known.
 - He allegedly wrote a letter to the King of Khazaria in an attempt to establish a correspondence. He actually got a reply in what was a fascinating exchange. Since Khazaria was located in what would be Eastern Europe today, this was quite an achievement. Unfortunately it was soon absorbed into the neighbouring Slavic kingdoms.

Personalities of the Golden Age

- Hasdai ibn Shaprut (c915- c975):
 - It was said of him by the famed Arab historian Ibn Hayyan:
 - “"Hasdai ibn Shaprut, that unique man of his generation the likes of whom could not be found amongst the servants of any other emperor in the world, because of his high culture, the depth of his cunning, his sharp discernment, and his exceptional cleverness.”

Personalities of the Golden Age

- Moses ben Maimon a.k.a Maimonides (Rambam) (1135-1204):
 - Born in Cordoba, but had to flee due to increasing persecution. Fled eventually to Fostat, Egypt. Became physician to the sultan, Saladin.
 - Acted as a judge, teacher and mediator for the local Jewish community. Interestingly, he never accepted payment for these services. Hence his daily routine was extremely hectic, and exhaustion may have had a role in his death.
 - His incredible legacy of Jewish philosophy and scholarship is almost unparalleled. It is said about him “from Moses to Moses, there was none like Moses.”

Personalities of the Golden Age

- Moses ben Maimon a.k.a Maimonides (Rambam) (1135-1204):
 - Famous works include the Mishneh Torah, a summary of Jewish Halacha and The Guide to The Perplexed, which was mainly a philosophical work, vigorously defending the non-corporeality of G-d.
 - Was known for having a rationalistic bent, leading to great controversy and even rejection of his works during his lifetime.

Personalities of the Golden Age

- Moses ben Nachman a.k.a Nachmanides (Ramban) (1194-1270):
 - Lived in Gerona, Aragon (today Catalonia), for most of his life.
 - Had a successful careers as a physician and also wrote commentaries on the Torah and Talmud, which are still in use today.
 - Actually had a relatively peaceful life (in Christian Spain) until the Disputation of Barcelona in 1263.
 - He was compelled to debate a Jewish convert to Christianity, Pablo Christiani, regarding whether the Messiah had come, whether He would be Divine, and which of Jews or Christians had the true faith. Given freedom of speech, his arguments greatly impressed the King of Aragon and was rewarded.

Personalities of the Golden Age

- Moses ben Nachman a.k.a Nachmanides (Ramban) (1194-1270):
 - However, the Church sanctioned a written account of the Disputation which Ramban had issue with, so he wrote his own account. Both accounts are still extant.
 - Ramban was tried for writing his account. To defend himself, Ramban said that the Church account was false and he had written down nothing more than what he had said when he was given free speech. The King found justice in his defence, but exiled him for two years to appease the Church.
 - This turned into permanent exile for a 70 year old man. He made his way to the Holy Land and died in Acre in 1270. He has a synagogue named after him in the Old City of Jerusalem, which was (according to tradition) founded by him while in exile.

Personalities of the Golden Age

- Moses ben Nachman a.k.a Nachmanides (1194-1270):
 - I hope by now we have some sympathy for Ramban.
 - We now start to see the Golden Age coming to an end.
 - This verse comes to mind:
 - “Do not weep for the dead or mourn for him, but weep continually for the one who goes away, for he will never return, or see his native land.”
(Jeremiah 22:10)

Is there Biblical precedent for the Jew's success in exile?

- Perhaps.
- The story of Joseph when he was given gifts to interpret dreams.
- The story of the Book of Daniel comes to mind in particular.
 - “youths without blemish (referring to Daniel and his companions), of good appearance and skilful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace...
“(Daniel 1:4)
 - “As for these four youths, God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding in all visions and dreams.” (Daniel 1:17)

Spiritual truths from exile

- I'm also reminded of how the New Testament uses exile to teach us spiritual truths.
- Whether we are physically “at home” or in exile on Earth, really we believers are all exiles from Heaven, while we await our Saviour. We can not get too comfortable on Earth.
 - “Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 5:8)
 - “But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 3:20)
 - “For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” (Hebrews 13:14)

Next Time

- The Golden Age comes to an end.
- The Jews are reminded that they are destined to wander in exile as we read about their eventual expulsion.