

RAMBAM

PART ONE:
THE GREAT
LEADERS OF
SEFARDIC
JEWRY



Dear Friend,

It is with great pleasure that I introduce to you our latest project.

In our quest to provide a first-class learning experience to you, one that you will find enjoyable, satisfying, and leave you coming back for more.

We have decided to create a Curriculum from scratch.

We have incorporated the following features:

- Exciting and stimulating topics
- An overview describing what you will be learning
- Learning material in English appropriately measured to fit into a 40 minute session
- A Language and layout that will not leave you struggling with the text.
- A summary at the end

At the end of the booklet you will find a challenging question to be answered by you

It is our hope that this project serves to broaden your knowledge of key Jewish understandings and inspires you to search for more.

We look forward to providing you with more cutting edge learning experiences in the near future.

Sincerely,

Yehoshua Werde

Director

For all comments and suggestions please feel free to email me:
Director@Torahlp.com



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Introduction

Introduction to the Series

This series is divided into three parts. In the first part, we explore the culture and the Jewish leaders of Andalusia - Muslim Spain that lived there and developed the Jewish culture of poetry, politics, the sciences, and the enter of Torah study in the land where the Rambam was born. While this part will not tell us about the Rambam directly, it will give us background insight into Sefardic culture and the great

culture and the great legends of the Sefardic world that shaped the Rambam's life.

In the second part, we will learn more about the Rambam's life under Muslim persecution, and his revolutionary approach to forced conversions to Islam and the difference between Islam and Chris. We will also be introduced to the Rambam's early works such as his book on logic and commentary to the Mishnah.

In the third and final part, we will learn about the Rambam's life in Egypt, his medical practice, and his service as Saladin's Court Physician. We will also explore the controversy surrounding his approach to Greek philosophy and what led to his books being burned shortly after his passing.

The History of Jews in Spain

We cannot really understand the story of the Rambam without first gaining a familiarity with the country and environment in which the Rambam was born, and without first understanding the rich history and culture of Sefardic Jewry and its leaders.

The first time we find mention of Jews in Spain is in a posuk in the vision of Ovadiah about how the Yidden who were taken into Golus to Spain will return and inherit the cities in the South of Eretz Yisroel:

OVADIAH 1:20

וְגָלַת יְרוּשָׁלַם אֲשֶׁר בְּסִפְרָד יִרְשׁוּ אֶת עָרֵי הַנֶּגֶב:

AND THE CAPTIVITY OF YERUSHALAYIM, THAT IS IN SEPHARAD, SHALL POSSESS THE CITIES OF THE SOUTH.

It is interesting to note that nowadays we already see posuk being fulfilled. If you visit the cities in the south of Israel you will see how they are full of Sefardim!

The Gemorah refers to Spain as Espamia and views it as being the furthest part of known civilization. In fact, the reason why a Chazakah requires three years (i.e., you need to live on a property uncontested for three years in order to claim ownership) is because of Jews who would travel to Spain in the times of the Mishnah:

**אמר רבי יהודה לא אמרו שלש שנים אלא כדי שיהא באספמא
ויחזיק שנה וילכו ויודיעוהו שנה ויבא לשנה אחרת:**

RABBI YEHUDAH SAYS: [THE REASON] THEY SAID THREE YEARS [IS A CHAZAKAH] IS ONLY IN CASE [THE LAND OWNER] WAS IN SPAIN AND [SOMEONE] HELD ONTO [THE LAND] FOR A YEAR, AND THEY WENT TO INFORM HIM FOR A YEAR, AND HE RETURNED THE FOLLOWING YEAR.

Spain was considered the furthest place a person would travel to, in fact, from the Mishnah we learn that it was possible to take a year of travel to reach Spain from Israel or Bavel.

Who were these fathers of Sefardic Jewry? What made them move to Spain? And what type of lifestyles did they lead?

There are stories of Jews in Spain as far back as the times of Shlomo Hamelech. One story tells how Shlomo Hamelech's treasurer Adonirom died in Spain.

Following the destruction of the second Beis Hamikdash, the Roman emperor Vespasian (9-79 CE) who destroyed the Beis Hamikdash and later Hadrian (76-138 CE), who fought Bar Kochba, transported Jewish prisoners to Spain.

Jewish coins that were found in the ancient Spanish city of Tarragona, clear evidence of a Jewish presence there in early times.

The Jews lived in peace alongside their non-Jewish neighbors until the Roman Empire accepted Christianity as its official religion (in the fourth century). The newly Christian rulers of Spain first decreed laws that forbade Christian Spaniards from mingling with Jews and later, in 586-589, King Recared demanded that the Jews either convert to Christianity or be expelled from his lands. (This should not be mistaken with the expulsion from Spain during the Spanish Inquisition that happened almost one thousand years later).

Several years later the Jews were allowed to return and remained in

a state of persecution under the Christians until the Arabic Muslims conquered Spain in 711.

During the conquest, the Muslim's used the Jews, who welcomed their arrival, to hold on to the cities they conquered while they went on to conquer the rest of Spain. When they arrived in a city they were quick to arm the local Jewish population with weapons to defend the city and to take charge of it until they returned from their conquests.

With minor exceptions, Jews lived well under their Arab rulers. In fact many Jews rose to positions of prominence within the Arabic courts.

Jewish Leadership During the "Golden Age"

More than we can learn from the political history of Spain and how it affected the Jews that lived there, we find exhibited by the great Jewish leaders of Spain who preceded the Rambam and who set the stage for the culture into which the Rambam was born.

If you were raised in Jewish Spain one thousand years ago, in addition to Torah you might be taught poetry, logic, mathematics, philosophy, medicine, and astronomy. This was because Spain was then the world's center for wisdom and Jews had free access to the greatest libraries in the world.

The "Golden Age" was a time when it was common for Jews to hold some of the highest positions of political power in the land. From Vizier, to Court Advisor or Court Physician, these Jews achieved ranks second only to the Caliph himself. This was a time when people communicated their ideas and sentiments through poetry.

Many of the Piyutim (poems) we recite in our davening nowadays comes from this time period, many of which were written by personalities we will learn about.

One leader who was responsible for creating much of the good relationships with the Muslim leaders was Chasdai ibn Shaprut, who was the first of several courtiers to the Arabic and later Christian rulers of Spain.

Politics

Never in Jewish history was there a time when the Jews enjoyed so many positions of high office in the royal court than during “Golden Age” in Spain.

In the Muslim world, the ruler was called the “Caliph”, which means the chief Muslim civil and religious ruler who was considered the successor of Muhammad.

High officials were considered viziers. Two such Jewish viziers who were also known for their greatness in Torah, were Chasdai ibn Shaprut who can be credited for transforming Spain into a blossoming center of Torah Jewry, and Shmuel Hanagid who acted as the ruler of Muslim Spain for the Caliph and was considered the most powerful person in the land.

Chasdai ibn Shaprut

(915-975)

Of the great Jewish leaders of Spain, none was as instrumental in transforming Spain into a flourishing Jewish center as Chasdai ibn Shaprut. His high-position in the royal court and his efforts to transform Spain into a world center for Torah study set the stage for what is known by historians as the “Golden Age” of Jews in Spain.

Chasdai’s Rise to Greatness

(This biography as well as the ones that follow were adapted from Talks and Tales by Nissan Mindel)

UNDER THE CARE OF HIS FATHER, YIZCHOK BEN EZRA , THE YOUNG CHASDAI STUDIED THE TALMUD, AND LATER ALSO THE HEBREW, ARABIC AND LATIN LANGUAGES, IN WHICH HE BECAME VERY PROFICIENT. CHASDAI DISPLAYED A SPECIAL INTEREST IN MEDICINE AND BECAME A FAMOUS PHYSICIAN.

CHASDAI’S GREAT SCHOLARSHIP, AND ESPECIALLY HIS FAME AS A PHYSICIAN, ATTRACTED THE ATTENTION OF CALIPH ABARRAHMAN III, IN CORDOVA. THE CALIPH APPOINTED CHASDAI TO BE HIS COURT PHYSICIAN. WHEN THE CALIPH BECAME MORE CLOSELY ACQUAINTED WITH HIS JEWISH PHYSICIAN, AND SAW THAT HE

WAS ALSO A MAN GIFTED WITH GREAT ORGANIZING ABILITY AND STATESMANSHIP, HE APPOINTED CHASDAI INSPECTOR GENERAL OF CUSTOMS, AND HIS CHIEF DIPLOMATIC ADVISER. IN THIS CAPACITY, CHASDAI CONTINUED TO SERVE UNDER THE CALIPH AS WELL AS UNDER HIS SUCCESSOR, HAKAM II, WHO TOOK OVER THE CALIPHATE.

Chasdai's Fame

CHASDAI RENDERED GREAT SERVICE TO HIS LAND BY ESTABLISHING GOOD DIPLOMATIC AND COMMERCIAL RELATIONS BETWEEN THE ARAB CALIPHATE AND THE CHRISTIAN KINGDOMS, AS FAR AS BYZANTIUM (CONSTANTINOPLE/ISTANBUL IN MODERN DAY TURKEY). THE FOREIGN DIPLOMATS WHO HAD OCCASION TO MEET CHASDAI, THOUGHT VERY HIGHLY OF HIM, AND PRAISED HIM TO THEIR COURTS. EMPEROR ROMANUS II OF BYZANTIUM SENT CHASDAI A MEDICAL TEXT BOOK WRITTEN IN GREEK, WHICH CHASDAI WITH THE AID OF OTHER SCHOLARS TRANSLATED INTO ARABIC.

Chasdai's Jewish Contribution

OWING TO HIS GREAT WEALTH, WISDOM, AND HIGH RANK, CHASDAI WAS IN A POSITION TO OFFER GREAT HELP TO HIS BRETHREN. HE WAS THE NASSI (HEAD) OF ALL THE JEWS OF SPAIN, AND DID ALL HE COULD TO IMPROVE THEIR ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL POSITION. A GREAT TALMUDIST HIMSELF, CHASDAI BUILT SCHOOLS AND ACADEMIES TO SPREAD THE KNOWLEDGE OF TORAH, AND INVITED TALMUD SCHOLARS OF RENOWN TO TEACH THERE, SUPPORTING BOTH THE SCHOOLS AND THE SCHOLARS FROM HIS OWN MEANS. CHASDAI ALSO SUPPORTED THE GREAT BABYLONIAN ACADEMIES IN SURA AND PUMBADISA, AND KEPT UP

A REGULAR CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE GAONIM IN BAVEL AND NORTH AFRICA.

CHASDAI SURROUNDED HIMSELF WITH MANY FAMOUS HEBREW SCHOLARS AND POETS SUCH AS MENACHEM BEN SARUK, AND DUNASH BEN LABRAT. MENACHEM BEN SARUK, THE FAMOUS HEBREW GRAMMARIAN, WAS IN CHARGE OF CHASDAI'S HEBREW CORRESPONDENCE. UNDER CHASDAI'S INFLUENCE AND WITH HIS SUPPORT, HEBREW POETRY AND SCHOLARSHIP BEGAN TO FLOURISH IN SPAIN, MARKING THE BEGINNING OF THE GOLDEN ERA, WHICH PRODUCED SUCH OUTSTANDING PHILOSOPHERS AND POETS AS RABBI YEHUDA HALEVI, IBN EZRA, IBN GABIROL, THE RAMBAM, THE RAMBAN, AND OTHERS.

IT WAS DURING THE LIFE OF THIS GREAT JEWISH LEADER, THAT THE FAMOUS GAON RABBI MOSHE BEN CHANOCH ONE OF THE "FOUR CAPTIVES," REACHED THE SHORES OF SPAIN. MANY OF OUR READERS MAY BE FAMILIAR WITH THE EXCITING STORY OF THE FOUR GAONIM FROM BABYLON, WHO, BY THE HAND OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE, WERE TAKEN PRISONER BY PIRATES ON THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA, AND SUBSEQUENTLY HELD FOR RANSOM IN THE LEADING JEWISH COMMUNITIES OF THOSE DAYS, NAMELY EGYPT AND KAIRWAN, ITALY AND SPAIN. THESE FAMOUS JEWISH SCHOLARS WERE QUICKLY REDEEMED, AND THEY SET UP JEWISH CENTERS OF LEARNING IN THEIR NEW PLACES OF REFUGE. THUS, WHEN THE FAMOUS BABYLONIAN ACADEMIES, WERE EVENTUALLY DESTROYED, THE TORAH HAD ALREADY ESTABLISHED ITSELF IN FOUR NEW CENTERS.

WHEN RABBI MOSHE BEN CHANOCH WAS BROUGHT

TO CORDOVA, HE WAS REDEEMED BY THE LOCAL JEWISH COMMUNITY. DISCOVERING THAT THE REFUGEE WAS THE FAMOUS GAON, MOSHE BEN CHANOCH, CHASDAI SET HIM UP AS HEAD OF A GREAT TALMUDIC ACADEMY IN CORDOVA. TO FOSTER JEWISH TALMUDIC STUDIES, CHASDAI PROCURED MANUSCRIPTS OF THE TALMUD FROM THE BABYLONIAN ACADEMIES, AND GAVE THEM TO THE STUDENTS OF THE CORDOVA ACADEMY FOR STUDY. FOR MANY YEARS, SPAIN WAS ONE OF THE LEADING TORAH CENTERS IN THE WORLD.

The Jewish Kingdom of the Khazars

A VERY INTERESTING HISTORICAL DOCUMENT WAS LEFT BY CHASDAI IN THE FORM OF HIS CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE JEWISH KING OF THE KHAZARS. FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS, THE KHAZARS WERE A MIGHTY PEOPLE WHO LIVED ON THE STEPPES BETWEEN THE DON AND VOLGA RIVERS. THEIR REALM STRETCHED WESTWARD AS FAR AS KIEV. THE KINGS OF THE KHAZARS WERE POWERFUL RULERS WHO INTERMARRIED WITH THE FAMILIES OF THE BYZANTIAN AND ARABIC MONARCHIES. IT IS NOT CLEAR WHEN THE KHAZARS DECIDED TO GIVE UP THEIR HEATHEN WAYS AND ACCEPT JUDAISM AS THEIR FAITH. THE KHAZAR JEWISH KINGDOM CAPTURED THE IMAGINATION OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE OF THOSE DAYS. CHASDAI WAS EAGER TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THEM, FOR HE HAD ONLY SCANT REPORTS OF THE KHAZAR KINGDOM WHICH HE RECEIVED THROUGH DIPLOMATIC CHANNELS. CHASDAI DECIDED TO MAKE PERSONAL CONTACT WITH THEM. IN THOSE DAYS DISTANCE MADE IT VERY DIFFICULT TO MAKE OR MAINTAIN CONTACT WITH REMOTE COUNTRIES, AND BEING THAT THE KHAZAR KINGDOM WAS AT THE EASTERNMOST END OF EUROPE, IT

SEEMED ALMOST AN IMPOSSIBLE TASK.

CHASDAI, HOWEVER, WAS A MAN OF DETERMINATION. HE ADDRESSED AN AFFECTIONATE LETTER IN HEBREW TO YOSEPH, THE KING OF THE KHAZARS, AND SENT IT TO HIM WITH A SPECIAL EMISSARY, YIZCHOK BEN NASAN. WHEN YIZCHOK REACHED CONSTANTINOPLE, HE WAS DETAINED BY THE BYZANTIAN AUTHORITIES, WHO FEARED A DIRECT ALLIANCE BETWEEN SPAIN AND THE KHAZARS. ON THE PRETEXT THAT THE ROADS WERE NOT SAFE, CHASDAI'S EMISSARY DID NOT OBTAIN THE FACILITIES TO CONTINUE HIS JOURNEY TO THE CAPITAL OF THE KHAZARS.

CHASDAI WAS NOT DISCOURAGED. HE SENT ANOTHER EMISSARY, YIZCHOK BEN ELIEZER, BUT THIS TIME BY WAY OF HUNGARY AND RUSSIA. AIDED BY THE JEWS OF THOSE COUNTRIES, CHASDAI'S SECOND EMISSARY MADE HIS WAY TO ITIL, AND DELIVERED CHASDAI'S WARM GREETINGS TO YOSEPH.

KING YOSEPH OF THE KHAZARS REPLIED IN HEBREW, ANSWERING ALL OF CHASDAI'S QUESTIONS CONCERNING THE HISTORY OF THE KHAZARS AND THEIR ACCEPTANCE OF JUDAISM. KING YOSEPH TOLD HIM HOW HIS ANCESTOR, BULAN, DECIDED TO GIVE UP HIS HEATHEN BELIEFS IN ORDER TO ACCEPT ONE OF THE THREE LEADING FAITHS, JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY, OR ISLAM. KING BULAN THEN ARRANGED FOR THEOLOGIANs OF EACH OF THE THREE FAITHS TO PARTICIPATE IN A DEBATE IN HIS PRESENCE, IN WHICH EACH OF THEM WAS TO PROVE WHY HIS FAITH WAS THE TRUE ONE. WHEN THE DEBATE WAS OVER, BULAN WAS CONVINCED THAT THE JEWISH FAITH WAS THE TRUE FAITH; AND HE, TOGETHER WITH HIS ENTIRE FAMILY, AND FOUR THOUSAND KHAZAR NOBLES,

FORMALLY ACCEPTED JUDAISM. GRADUALLY, THE MAJORITY OF THE KHAZARS FOLLOWED THE EXAMPLE OF THEIR KING, AND ACCEPTED THE JEWISH FAITH.

UNFORTUNATELY, ABOUT THE TIME WHEN CHASDAI'S LETTER REACHED KING YOSEPH (ABOUT 4710), DARK CLOUDS APPEARED ON THE HORIZON OF THE KHAZAR KINGDOM. THE RUSSIAN AND BYZANTIAN RULERS COMBINED TO DESTROY THE JEWISH KINGDOM OF THE KHAZARS, AND ABOUT 15 YEARS LATER, SVIATOSLAV OF RUSSIA DEFEATED THE KHAZARS AND DEVASTATED THEIR LAND, INCLUDING THEIR CAPITAL OF ITIL. NEVERTHELESS, THE KHAZARS CONTINUED TO PLAY AN IMPORTANT PART IN THAT SECTION OF THE WORLD FOR ANOTHER CENTURY. THEREAFTER, THEIR FORTUNES WANED ALTOGETHER, UNTIL THEIR FATE BECAME UNKNOWN.

AT ANY RATE, THE EXCHANGE OF EPISTLES BETWEEN CHASDAI AND KING YOSEPH OF THE KHAZARS THROWS MUCH LIGHT ON THE HISTORY OF THE KHAZAR KINGDOM WHICH MIGHT HAVE OTHERWISE REMAINED QUITE OBSCURE.

CHASDAI DIED IN CORDOVA AT THE AGE OF ABOUT SIXTY, SADLY MOURNED BY ALL JEWS, AND BY ALL THOSE NON-JEWISH FRIENDS WHO WERE PRIVILEGED TO KNOW HIM.

Shmuel Hanagid (982-1055)

SHMUEL, THE SON OF YOSEPH IBN NAGHRELA, OR BETTER KNOWN AS RABBI SHMUEL HANAGID (THE RULING PRINCE) WAS BORN IN CORDOVA, SPAIN, IN THE YEAR 982 (18 YEARS BEFORE

THE CLOSE OF THE 10TH CENTURY OF THE C.E.) HE WAS A PUPIL OF THE GREAT RABBI CHANOCH, WHO HAD BEEN BROUGHT TO CORDOBA IN A MIRACULOUS WAY AMONG THE "FOUR CAPTIVES." SHMUEL ALSO STUDIED LANGUAGES, MASTERING ARABIC AND LATIN IN ADDITION TO HEBREW.

Shmuel Hanagid's Rise to Fame

IN THE YEAR 1013, WHEN CIVIL WAR IN CORDOBA CAUSED WIDESPREAD PERSECUTION OF THE JEWS, SHMUEL WAS FORCED TO LEAVE CORDOBA TOGETHER WITH NUMEROUS OTHER JEWS, AND SETTLED IN MALAGA. THUS THE GREAT ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL JEWISH CENTER OF CORDOBA WAS ALL BUT DESTROYED AT THAT TIME, BUT SIMULTANEOUSLY ANOTHER GREAT JEWISH CENTER WAS COMING UP THAT OF GRANADA, THE NEW CAPITAL OF THE ARABIC KINGDOM. SHMUEL MADE HIS WAY THERE, AND SETTLED DOWN IN BUSINESS IN THAT CITY. AT THE SAME TIME HE NEVER GAVE UP HIS STUDIES, AND WAS HARD AT WORK IN THE STUDY OF THE TALMUD AND SCIENCES WHENEVER HE FOUND TIME FOR IT. SOON HE BECAME KNOWN AS A GREAT POET AND WRITER, NOT MERELY IN HEBREW BUT ALSO IN ARABIC. HIS PERFECT MASTERY OF THE ARABIC LANGUAGE, GRAMMAR AND LITERATURE BECAME KNOWN TO THE VIZIER ABU-AL-KASSIM-IBN-AL-ADIPH. THE VIZIER INVITED HIM TO HIS HOUSE TO MAKE HIS ACQUAINTANCE. HE WAS SO IMPRESSED BY HIS SCHOLARSHIP AND WISDOM THAT HE APPOINTED HIM AS HIS PERSONAL SECRETARY AND ADVISER. THE MORE THE VIZIER KNEW HIS JEWISH FRIEND THE MORE HE BECAME CONVINCED OF HIS GREAT STATESMANSHIP AND GREAT POLITICAL ASTUTENESS, AS WELL AS OF HIS HONESTY AND RELIABILITY. THE VIZIER DID NOTHING WITHOUT FIRST CONSULTING SHMUEL.

ONE DAY THE VIZIER BECAME VERY ILL, AND CALIPH HABUS CAME TO VISIT HIS DYING VIZIER. THE CALIPH TOLD THE VIZIER HOW SORRY HE WAS TO SEE HIS ABLE AND DEVOTED MINISTER GO, WHEREUPON THE VIZIER CONFESSED TO HIM THAT HE OWED ALL HIS SUCCESS TO HIS ABLE JEWISH SECRETARY AND ADVISER. AND SO WHEN THE VIZIER DIED, THE CALIPH APPOINTED SHMUEL IN HIS PLACE.

THE OFFICE OF VIZIER WAS THAT OF MINISTER OF STATE, THE HIGHEST OFFICE NEXT TO THE CALIPH HIMSELF. AT THE SAME TIME RABBI SHMUEL RETAINED HIS POSITION AS THE RABBI OF HIS GREAT AND FLOURISHING COMMUNITY, AND ALSO AS THE DIRECTOR OF THE TALMUDIC ACADEMY OF GRANADA. HE NEVER STOPPED FOR A MOMENT TO CARE FOR HIS BRETHREN, AS WELL AS FOR HIS LAND, AND SERVED BOTH WITH EQUAL DEVOTION. AS COMMUNAL RABBI AND DIRECTOR OF THE ACADEMY, RABBI SHMUEL HANAGID (AS HE WAS NOW CALLED BY ALL HIS DEVOTED BRETHREN) ENCOURAGED THE STUDY OF THE TORAH, AND GRANADA BECAME A GREAT TALMUDIC CENTER.

AS TO HIS ATTITUDE TOWARDS HIS ENEMIES WHO ENVIED HIM THE HONOR AND ESTEEM HE ENJOYED, IT CAN BEST BE SEEN FROM THE FOLLOWING STORY: ONE DAY, WHEN SHMUEL HANAGID ACCOMPANIED THE CALIPH THROUGH THE STREETS OF GRANADA, A WICKED ARAB PERFUME VENDOR CALLED SOME INSULTING WORDS IN THE DIRECTION OF THE JEWISH VIZIER. THE CALIPH BECAME FURIOUS. HE ORDERED THE OFFENDER BROUGHT BEFORE HIM, AND URGED THE VIZIER TO HAVE HIS TONGUE CUT OUT IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE LAW OF THAT TIME. INSTEAD OF

PUNISHING HIM IN THE WAY THE CALIPH URGED HIM TO DO, RABBI SHMUEL GAVE THE OFFENDER A PRESENT AND SAID TO THE CALIPH, "NOT MERELY HAVE I CUT OUT HIS BAD TONGUE, BUT I HAVE GIVEN HIM A GOOD ONE INSTEAD."

WHEN CALIPH HABUS DIED AND HIS SON BADIS SUCCEEDED HIM, RABBI SHMUEL RETAINED HIS VIZIERSHIP. IN FACT THE CALIPH ENTRUSTED HIS ABLE VIZIER WITH MANAGING ALL THE AFFAIRS OF STATE, AS HE HIMSELF WANTED TO ENJOY HIMSELF FULLY, WITHOUT CARRYING THE BURDEN OF ANY STATE MATTERS WHATEVER.

Shmuel Hanagid's Jewish accomplishments

RABBI SHMUEL'S FAME GREW DAILY, BUT AT THE SAME TIME HE REMAINED AS MODEST AND AS AFFECTIONATE AS ALWAYS. HE WAS PARTICULARLY KIND TO SCHOLARS, AND MANY JEWISH TALMUDISTS, PHILOSOPHERS AND POETS WERE HIS CONSTANT GUESTS, RECEIVING THEIR FULL SUPPORT FROM HIS OWN MEANS, SO THAT THEY COULD ENGAGE IN THEIR STUDIES AND CREATIVE WORK UNDISTURBED. AMONG THEM WAS THE FAMOUS JEWISH POET RABBI SHLOMO IBN GEBIROL. HE ALSO MAINTAINED MANY SCRIBES TO COPY IMPORTANT HEBREW BOOKS, AND GENERALLY DID EVERYTHING POSSIBLE TO FURTHER THE CAUSE OF THE TORAH AND JEWISH CULTURE. RABBI SHMUEL IS ALSO THE AUTHOR OF A WORK ENTITLED "MEVO HATALMUD" (AN INTRODUCTION TO THE TALMUD) THAT WAS LATER PUBLISHED WITH MOST EDITIONS OF THE TALMUD AT THE END OF MESECHES BRACHOS, AND WAS EVEN TRANSLATED INTO LATIN.

SHMUEL HANAGID DIED IN GRANADA IN THE YEAR 1055, SADLY MOURNED BY THE JEWISH AND ARAB POPULATION ALIKE. HE WAS

SUCCEEDED BY HIS SON RABBI YOSEPH HANAGID.

Poetry

One of the distinguishing features that sets the Golden Age in Spain apart from other periods in Jewish history, is the emphasis on poetry. Poetry was the way people communicated with each other, it was today's idea of creative writing.

So many of the Piyutim we say in davening come from this time period, and most notably from one scholar who lived in the Rambam's hometown of Cordoba in the years just prior to the Rambam's birth:

Rabbi Yehudah Halevi

(c. 1080 - 1141)

While Ibn Shaprut and Shmuel Hanagid were instrumental in the political realm, much of what we have from Jewish scholars in Spain at that time comes to us in the form of poetry. None was as well known for his poetry as Rabbi Yehudah Halevi who lived shortly before the Rambam was born and who wrote many of the poems we still recite in our davening today.

IN THE HISTORY OF OUR PEOPLE, WE FIND A NAME THAT MAY WELL HAVE BEEN WRITTEN IN GIANT TYPE A FOOT HIGH—RABBI YEHUDAH HALEVI.

LITTLE IS KNOWN OF HIS LIFE AND PERSONAL HISTORY, FOR HE LEFT NO ACTUAL RECORD OF HIS LIFE. HE WAS BORN IN TOLEDO ABOUT 1080. HIS FATHER, SHMUEL, RECOGNIZED HIS SON'S GENIUS WHEN THE BOY WAS STILL YOUNG, AND PROVIDED HIM WITH ALL THE NECESSITIES OF LIFE, SO THAT THE BOY MIGHT STUDY AND WRITE, UNTRoubLED BY ANY FINANCIAL BURDENS. HERE IN TOLEDO HE SPENT HIS DAYS IN INTENSE STUDY OF THE TALMUD AND IN VARIOUS SECULAR FIELDS, SUCH AS, ARABIC POETRY, WHICH WAS VERY COMPLICATED, HEBREW GRAMMAR, PHILOLOGY (STUDY OF LANGUAGE), PHILOSOPHY AND MEDICINE.

YEHUDAH HALEVI LIVED IN VERY CHAOTIC TIMES. IN SPAIN, THERE WAS A CONSTANT STRUGGLE FOR POWER BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE MOORS (MUSLIM ARABS). SEEKING PEACE AND QUIET, YEHUDAH SET OUT FOR ANDALUSIA (A PROVINCE IN SPAIN WHICH THE CHRISTIANS HAD NOT YET CONQUERED). HERE, YEHUDAH STUDIED WITH THE GREAT RABBI YIZCHOK ALFASI (THE RIF) AND CONTINUED TO WRITE POETRY. ALTHOUGH STILL VERY YOUNG, YEHUDAH ATTRACTED MUCH ATTENTION FROM GREAT SCHOLARS AND POETS. HERE, TOO, HE BEGAN A LASTING FRIENDSHIP WITH THE POET MOSHE IBN EZRA WHO GREATLY ADMIRERD THE YOUNG MAN'S GENIUS.

FROM CITY TO CITY YEHUDAH WANDERED, MAKING THE ACQUAINTANCE OF GREAT MEN WHEREVER HE WENT, WINNING THEIR ADMIRATION AND WRITING ODES IN THEIR HONOR. FINALLY, HE SETTLED IN CORDOBA. BUT HE DID NOT EARN HIS LIVELIHOOD THROUGH WRITING POETRY. HE PRACTICED MEDICINE AND THUS HE WAS ABLE TO SUPPORT HIMSELF.

Yehudah Halevi and The Land of Israel

ALL THROUGH RABBI YEHUDAH HALEVI'S POETRY ONE FEELS THE STRONG CURRENT OF HIS GREAT LOVE FOR THE LAND OF ISRAEL. WITNESSING THE SUFFERING OF HIS FELLOW JEWS, HIS HEART WAS HEAVY WITH SORROW AND GRIEF. IF ONLY THE JEWS WOULD RETURN TO HASHEM AND WIN HIS FAVOR THAT HE MIGHT RETURN THEM TO THEIR HOMELAND TO DWELL THERE IN PEACE AND TRANQUILLITY! MANY OF HIS MOST BEAUTIFUL- POEMS ARE EXPRESSIONS OF HIS GREAT LOVE, AND LONGING FOR THE HOLY LAND. AS THE YEARS WENT BY, HIS DESIRE TO GO TO THE LAND

OF ISRAEL GREW, AND FINALLY RABBI YEHUDAH DECIDED TO UNDERTAKE THE LONG JOURNEY WHICH WAS DIFFICULT AND FULL OF PERIL. ALTHOUGH MANY OF HIS FRIENDS TRIED TO DISSUADE HIM, IT WAS OF NO AVAIL.

ONCE AGAIN, YEHUDAH TOOK HIS ROD AND SET OFF ON HIS TRAVELS, BUT THIS TIME THE GOAL WAS HIS BELOVED ZION. ONCE AGAIN, HE WON THE FRIENDSHIP AND ADMIRATION OF EVERYONE HE MET. EVERYWHERE HE WAS WELCOMED BY GREAT SCHOLARS AND DISTINGUISHED STATESMEN. BUT EACH MOMENT HE SPENT GAINING NEW STRENGTH FOR HIS JOURNEY, MADE HIM IMPATIENT AND EAGER TO PROCEED ON HIS WAY. FINALLY HE ARRIVED IN CAIRO. ONLY ONE MORE STEP AND HE WOULD BE IN THE LAND OF HIS DREAMS. ALL HIS LIFE HE HAD WAITED FOR THIS MOMENT. THERE, WHERE THE SPIRIT OF HASHEM RESTED, HE WOULD SPEND THE REST OF HIS DAYS, STUDYING HIS LAW, PRAISING HIS NAME. THOUGH HE ENJOYED HIS STAY IN EGYPT, HE COULD SCARCELY AWAIT THE MOMENT OF HIS DEPARTURE.

THE HOLY LAND AT LAST! THERE IT LAY BEFORE HIS EYES. THE GATES OF YERUSHALAYIM ROSE BEFORE HIM... LEGEND HAS IT THAT SEEING THE DESOLATION OF HIS BELOVED LAND, RABBI YEHUDAH HALEVI WAS OVERCOME WITH EMOTION AND LOVE. HE TORE HIS ROBES, AND WALKING BAREFOOT, SANG HIS "TZIYON HALO TISH'ALI." AN ARAB HORSEMAN, JEALOUS OF RABBI YEHUDAH'S LOVE, WHICH HE KNEW HE COULD NEVER EMULATE, RODE HIM DOWN. AND SO, RABBI YEHUDAH DIED, ON THE BELOVED SOIL OF THE LAND OF OUR FOREFATHERS AND PROPHETS, SINGING HER PRAISES WITH HIS LAST BREATH.

RABBI YEHUDAH HALEVI'S POETRY IS TIMELESS—STILL AS BEAUTIFUL AND FRESH TODAY AS IT WAS HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO WHEN IT WAS WRITTEN. ALTHOUGH HE WROTE OF MANY THINGS, HIS LOVE FOR HASHEM, THE TORAH AND THE LAND OF ISRAEL FAR OUTWEIGHED HIS OTHER INTERESTS. HIS TRUE PIETY WAS EVIDENT IN EVERYTHING HE WROTE. MANY OF HIS POEMS, WRITTEN FOR THE HOLIDAYS AND FASTS, WERE INCLUDED IN THE MACHZORIM. HIS ODES TO ZION, OR ZIONIDE, A SERIES OF MOVING DIRGES BEWAILING THE FATE OF ZION, EACH ONE BEGINNING WITH THE WORD "ZION," FORM THE CONCLUDING DIRGES OF THE "KINOTH" WHICH WE SAY ON TISHA B'AV.

RABBI YEHUDAH IS FAMED NOT ONLY FOR BEING THE GREATEST POET OF THE MIDDLE AGES BUT AS AN OUTSTANDING PHILOSOPHER AS WELL. HIS GREAT WORK, THE KUZARI, ORIGINALLY WRITTEN IN ARABIC AND LATER TRANSLATED INTO HEBREW, IS A MASTERPIECE OF JEWISH PHILOSOPHY. IN HIS PRAISE OF JUDAISM, RABBI YEHUDAH SHOWS HIS DEEP-THINKING MIND AND HIS GREAT INTELLECT.

THROUGHOUT THE AGES, RABBI YEHUDAH HAS LIVED THROUGH HIS POETRY AND OTHER WORK. AND HE WILL CONTINUE TO BE IMMORTAL - A SPRING THAT WILL NEVER DRY FOR ALL THOSE WHO COME TO DRINK AT HIS FOUNT SEEKING SPIRITUAL BEAUTY AND GODLY WISDOM.

Halachah

While the Rambam's story is set amidst a culture in which poetry and politics played a big role in Jewish life, the Rambam's greatest contribution was in the area of Halachah. We therefore cannot fail to

mention the stories of his teachers, teachers he may not have seen in his physical life, but ones who gave the Rambam his approach to Torah and Halacha. These are the Rif and his disciple, the Ri Migash:

The Rif

(1013 - 1103)

RABBI YITZCHAK ALFASI, ONE OF THE GREATEST OF THE EARLY CODIFIERS OF JEWISH LAW, WHOSE NAME IS FAMILIAR TO ALL STUDENTS OF THE TALMUD, WAS BORN IN KALAT IBN HAMAD, A VILLAGE NEAR FEZ, IN NORTH AFRICA, IN 1013 OF THE COMMON ERA. HIS NAME "ALFASI" (OR ALFES) MEANS (IN ARABIC) A NATIVE OF FEZ. HE IS ALSO KNOWN AS RIF (FROM THE INITIALS OF RABBI YITZCHAK FASI).

THE RIF STUDIED THE TALMUD UNDER THE FAMOUS RABBINICAL AUTHORITIES RABBENU NISSIM AND RABBENU CHANANEL IN KAIRWAN, A CITY NOT FAR FROM FEZ, WHICH, BY VIRTUE OF THESE TWO GREAT LUMINARIES, WAS THEN ONE OF THE LEADING CENTERS OF TALMUDIC LEARNING. AFTERWARDS HE RETURNED TO FEZ, WHERE HE BECAME THE HEAD OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY. WHEN HIS TWO GREAT TEACHERS PASSED AWAY (ABOUT THE YEAR 1050), RABBI YITZCHAK ALFASI BECAME THE GREATEST RECOGNIZED TALMUD AUTHORITY OF HIS DAY, WHICH WAS THE SECOND GENERATION AFTER THE PERIOD OF THE GEONIM CAME TO AN END, WITH THE CLOSING DOWN OF THE GREAT YESHIVOTH IN BAVEL.

IN 1088, AT THE ADVANCED AGE OF 75, RABBI ALFASI WAS FORCED TO FLEE FROM HIS NATIVE LAND, BECAUSE TWO WICKED MEN, A FATHER AND A SON, DENOUNCED HIM AS A TRAITOR TO

THE GOVERNMENT. WHAT THE CHARGE WAS IS UNKNOWN, BUT SINCE IT WAS THE TIME WHEN THE MOSLEM MOORS OF NORTH AFRICA WERE FIGHTING THE CHRISTIAN KINGDOMS OF SPAIN AND TAKING OVER THE IBERIAN PENINSULA, IT MAY BE ASSUMED THAT THE RIF WAS ACCUSED BY THE TWO SCOUNDRELS OF SOME POLITICAL OFFENSE, WHICH ENDANGERED HIS LIFE.

THE RIF FLED TO SPAIN, WHERE HE WAS RECEIVED WITH GREAT HONORS AT CORDOVA AND GRANADA. A YEAR LATER HE WENT TO LUCENA, WHERE HE SUCCEEDED RABBI YITZCHAK IBN GHAYYAT AS HEAD OF THE COMMUNITY. HERE THE RIF ESTABLISHED A YESHIVAH WHICH SOON BECAME MOST FAMOUS, AND ATTRACTED DISTINGUISHED SCHOLARS.

ONE OF THE YOUNGEST OF HIS STUDENTS WAS RABBI YOSEPH IBN MIGASH, WHO CAME TO LUCENA AT THE AGE OF TWELVE AND FOURTEEN YEARS LATER SUCCEEDED THE RIF AS HEAD OF THE ACADEMY. RABBI ALFASI HIMSELF APPOINTED HIM AS HIS SUCCESSOR, ALTHOUGH HIS OWN SON RABBI YACOV WAS ALSO A GREAT SCHOLAR. AMONG HIS STUDENTS ARE BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN ALSO THE FAMOUS POETS AND SCHOLARS RABBI YEHUDAH HALEVI AND RABBI MOSHE IBN EZRA, WHO COMPOSED POEMS IN HONOR OF THEIR TEACHER.

RABBI YITZCHAK ALFASI'S GREAT AND MONUMENTAL WORK IS HIS HALACHOS, BETTER KNOWN AS THE ALFES, OR RIF. IT IS A "DIGEST" OF THE TALMUD, FOLLOWING THE ORDER OF THE TALMUDIC MESECHTOS, BUT LEAVING OUT MUCH OF THE DISCUSSION AND AGGADIC MATERIAL IN ORDER TO GIVE THE PRECISE AND DEFINITE HALACHOS. IN ASCERTAINING THE

FINAL DECISIONS, HE RELIED ON THE AUTHORITY OF HIS GREAT TEACHERS RABBEINU NISSIM AND, ESPECIALLY, RABBEINU CHANANEL, AND ON HIS OWN VAST KNOWLEDGE OF THE TALMUD, BOTH THE TALMUD BAVLI AND YERUSHALMI, AND THE TALMUDIC LITERATURE OF THE GAONIM AND ALL OTHER RABBINIC LITERATURE THAT HAD BEEN WRITTEN BEFORE HIM.

THE WORK WAS AT ONCE ACCEPTED BY ALL JEWS AS A WORK OF THE HIGHEST AUTHORITY, AND IT BECAME THE BASIS OF FUTURE CODES OF JEWISH LAW. IT WAS SAID OF THIS GREAT WORK THAT "IT COULD HAVE BEEN WRITTEN ONLY WITH DIVINE INSPIRATION."

THE RAMBAM, WHO WAS A PUPIL OF THE RIF'S PUPIL, RABBI YOSEPH IBN MIGASH, CALLED THE RIF "MY TEACHER," AND SAID THAT THE WORK WAS ALMOST PERFECT. HE ADVISED HIS STUDENTS TO STUDY IT CAREFULLY TOGETHER WITH HIS OWN YAD HACHAZAKAH.

WHEN RABBI YOSEPH CARO, SEVERAL HUNDRED YEARS LATER, COMPILED THE SHULCHAN ARUCH, WHICH BECAME THE STANDARD CODE OF JEWISH LAW, HE USED THE ALFES TOGETHER WITH THE CODES OF THE RAMBAM AND RABBI ASHER BEN YECHIEL (ROSH) AS THE THREE PILLARS OF HIS WORK. RABBI YITZCHAK ALFASI PASSED AWAY AT THE RIPE OLD AGE OF 90 YEARS IN LUCENA (SPAIN), ON THE 10TH DAY OF IYAR (OR SIVAN), IN THE YEAR 1103.

In his Commentary to the Mishnah, the Rambam writes of the Rif's Sefer Halachos:

RAMBAM, INTRODUCTION TO COMMENTARY ON THE MISHNAH

ההלכות שעשה הרב הגדול רבינו יצחק זצ"ל הספיקו במקום כולם,

לפי שהם כוללים כל תועלויות הפסקים והמשפטים הנצרכים
בזמננו זה כלומר זמן הגלות, וכבר בירר בהם כל השגיאות שנפלו
בפסקי קודמיו,

THE HALACHOS THAT THE GREAT RABBI, RABBEINU YITZCHOK
OBM SUFFICES IN PLACE OF ALL OF [THE PREVIOUS WRITINGS OF
THE GEONIM], BECAUSE THEY INCLUDE ALL THE CONCLUSIONS IN
HALACHAH AND THE LAWS THAT ARE NEEDED IN OUR TIMES, I.E.,
DURING EXILE. HE CLARIFIED ALL THE MISTAKES THAT FELL INTO
THE HALACHIC CONCLUSIONS OF THOSE WHO PRECEDED HIM...

In a sense, the Rif brought the geonic period to a close—the last of the
Babylonian geonim, Rav Hai Gaon, died when the Rif was 25 years old;
the Rif himself was called Gaon by several early halachic authorities.

Rambam's Teacher: The Ri Migash

(1077-1141)

RABBI YOSEPH IBN MIGASH WAS FORTUNATE TO BE BORN
INTO ONE OF THE NOBLEST JEWISH FAMILIES OF SPAIN. HIS
GRANDFATHER, ALSO CALLED RABBI YOSEPH, HAD PLAYED AN
IMPORTANT ROLE AT THE ROYAL COURT OF GRANADA, AS ONE
OF THE ASSOCIATES OF RABBI SHMUEL HANAGID. YET THE SAME
POLITICAL CATASTROPHE THAT BEFELL THIS GREAT MAN'S SON,
RABBI YOSEPH HANAGID, DROVE RABBI JOSEPH AWAY FROM THE
COURT OF GRANADA TO SEVILLE, WHERE HE WAS SOON AGAIN
ONE OF THE FAVORITES OF THE CALIPH.

RABBI YOSEPH'S FATHER, RABBI MEIR IBN MIGASH, WAS A MAN
OF GREAT KNOWLEDGE AND INFLUENCE AMONG HIS JEWISH
AND NON-JEWISH COMMUNITY MEMBERS. THE YOUNG JOSEPH
WAS THEREFORE BROUGHT UP WITH ALL THE CARE AND THE
EDUCATION POSSIBLE IN THOSE DAYS. HE WAS ONLY A YOUNGSTER

WHEN HIS GREAT RABBI, RABBI YITZCHOK BEN BORUCH ALFASI (THE RIF), RECOGNIZED THE EXTRAORDINARY GIFTS OF THE CHILD AND INFLUENCED HIS ILLUSTRIOUS FATHER THAT HE ENCOURAGE HIM TO CONCENTRATE EXCLUSIVELY UPON THE STUDY OF TORAH, PROMISING THAT HIS SON WOULD ACCOMPLISH GREAT THINGS.

RABBI MEIR IBN MIGASH, HIMSELF A TALMUD SCHOLAR, LENT A WILLING EAR TO THIS SUGGESTION OF HIS SON'S TEACHER, AND HE SENT YOSEPH, THEN HARDLY TWELVE YEARS OLD, TO LUCENA, WHERE THE SCHOLAR OF THE TIME, RABBI YITZCHOK ALFASI (THE RIF), HEADED THE TALMUDICAL ACADEMY. THIS FAMOUS SCHOLAR WAS THE FIRST ONE TO EXTRACT THE HALACHOS (LAW DECISIONS) FROM THE DISCUSSION OF THE TALMUD, IN THE MONUMENTAL WORK, KNOWN AFTER HIS NAME, AS THE "RIF." HE WAS ALSO THE FULLY RECOGNIZED HEAD AND SUPREME AUTHORITY ON ALL QUESTIONS OF JEWISH LAW FOR THE JEWISH CENTERS OF THE WORLD. IN HIS YESHIVAH STUDIED THE FUTURE "GIANTS" OF ISRAEL. RABBI YITZCHOK BEFRIENDED THE YOUNG CHILD AS IF HE WERE HIS OWN SON, AND GAVE HIM EVERYTHING HE HAD AND KNEW. FOURTEEN YEARS, DAY AND NIGHT, THE TWO STUDIED TOGETHER.

WHEN THE RIF FELT THAT THE END OF HIS DAYS HAD COME, AT THE RIPE AGE OF NINETY YEARS, HE DID NOT APPOINT ANY OF THE OLDER SCHOLARS, OR EVEN HIS OWN WORTHY SON YACOV AS HIS SUCCESSOR, BUT THE TWENTY-SIX YEAR OLD RABBI YOSEPH BEN MEIR OF SEVILLE. IN THE MESSAGE TO THE JEWISH WORLD, HE ACCLAIMED HIS YOUNG DISCIPLE AS "A SCHOLAR WHO WOULD HAVE BEEN OUTSTANDING EVEN IN THE DAYS OF MOSHE RABBEINU."

AS WAS TO BE EXPECTED, THE WIDE WORLD DID NOT KNOW TOO MUCH ABOUT THE YOUNG MAN AND THOUGHT HIS APPOINTMENT IMPROPER FOR SUCH AN EMINENT POSITION, PREVIOUSLY HELD BY HIS GREAT MASTER. YET, WITHIN A SHORT TIME THE YOUNG SCHOLAR WAS ABLE TO GAIN THE DEEP RESPECT AND WORLD-WIDE RECOGNITION OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY LEADERS, AND HE WAS OFFICIALLY INSTITUTED AS THE SUCCESSOR TO RABBI YITZCHOK ALFAZI, AS THE HEAD OF THE ACADEMY OF LUCENA, AND WITH IT, AS THE SUPREME AUTHORITY OF THE JEWISH WORLD.

RABBI YEHUDA HALEVI, THE GREATEST JEWISH POET, WHO HAD ALREADY WRITTEN A POEM IN HONOR OF RABBI YOSEPH'S WEDDING, EXCLAIMED ON THAT DAY: "TODAY THE HAND OF TRUTH REMAINED VICTORIOUS, AND JUSTICE STOOD BY HIS SIDE. . . . HASHEM HIMSELF IN HIS DIVINE DECISION SELECTED YOU."

THE GREAT CONFIDENCE WHICH THE HOLY RIF HAD IN HIS DISCIPLE WAS FULLY JUSTIFIED. LUCENA BECAME THE CENTER OF TALMUD STUDY; AND THE JEWISH COMMUNITIES OF EUROPE, AS WELL AS OF BAVEL AND EGYPT, CALLED UPON RABBI YOSEPH IBN MIGASH TO DECIDE THEIR RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNAL PROBLEMS.

THE YOUNG SCHOLAR WAS INDEED FULLY GROWN TO SUCH AN IMMENSE TASK, AS WE CAN SEE FROM YEHUDA HALEVI'S LINE: "THE SEARCHERS FOR TORAH WANDERED FROM CITY TO CITY TO LEARN THE LAW. . . . GO TO YOSEPH, SAID A DIVINE VOICE; HE WILL TELL YOU THE PROPER WAY."

AMONG THE THOUSANDS OF STUDENTS WHO FOLLOWED THIS CALL WAS RABBI MAIMUN, -THE FATHER OF THE RAMBAM. HE BECAME ONE OF THE GREAT DISCIPLES OF RABBI YOSEPH, AND LONG AFTER HE HAD LEFT SPAIN TO LIVE IN EGYPT, HE WAS AN ARDENT ADMIRER OF HIS TEACHER. HE IMBUED HIS OWN SON WITH THIS RESPECT AND ADMIRATION FOR THE WORK OF RABBI YOSEPH IBN MIGASH, WHO SPEAKS OF HIM WITH THE GREATEST POSSIBLE REVERENCE.

BESIDES TEACHING MANY GENERATIONS OF FUTURE SCHOLARS, AND BESIDES RESPONDING TO THOUSANDS UPON THOUSANDS OF QUESTIONS ABOUT THE INTERPRETATION OF THE JEWISH LAW, RABBI YOSEPH BEN MEIR WROTE A COMMENTARY ON THE TALMUD. UNFORTUNATELY MOST OF THE MANUSCRIPTS WERE LOST DURING THE CENTURIES OF TURMOIL AND PERSECUTION IN SPAIN. HOWEVER, THE COMMENTARY ON TWO MESECHTOS (THE TRACTATES BABA BASRA AND TO SHAVUOS) THAT HAVE BEEN PRESERVED, SHOW HOW GREAT IS THE LOSS OF THE MISSING WORK. FOR THEY ARE FULL OF THE DEEPEST KNOWLEDGE, WHICH IS ALMOST ENCYCLOPEDIAIC, OF THE VARIOUS SOURCES AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE HALACHAH. HE ALWAYS TRIES TO ENTER EVER DEEPER INTO THE MEANING OF THE VARIOUS OPINIONS OF THE TANAIM AND AMORAIM, AND BASES HIS OWN DECISIONS UPON THE MOST RELIABLE SOURCES. MANY OF THE HALACHOS OF THE "RI MIGASH" ARE CONTAINED IN THE TESHUVOS OF THE RAMBAM, IN THE "BAAL HAMA'OR" OF THE EMINENT YOUNG SCHOLAR RABBI ZERACHYA HALEVI OF GERONA, AND IN THE FAMOUS COLLECTION "SHITAH MEKUBETZES" OF RABBI BETZALEL ASHKENAZI. ALL OF THESE FRAGMENTS OF THE MONUMENTAL SPIRITUAL WORK OF RABBI YOSEPH IBN MIGASH GIVE EVIDENCE '

OF HIS AMAZING SCHOLARSHIP. YET AT THE SAME TIME THEY BEAR THE EARMARKS OF HIS MODESTY AND RESPECT FOR THE OPINIONS OF OTHER PEOPLE.

RABBI YOSEPH BEN MEIR IBN MIGASH CONCENTRATED ENTIRELY ON THE STUDY OF THE TALMUD, TO WHICH HE DEVOTED HIS LIFE'S WORK. HIS ONLY OTHER INTEREST LAY IN COMPOSING "PIYUTIM," POETIC PRAYERS, GLORIFYING HASHEM AND HIS WORK, OR POINTING OUT THE IMPORTANCE AND HISTORICAL ROLE OF THE VARIOUS JEWISH HOLIDAYS FOR WHICH THEY WERE WRITTEN.

WHEN RABBI YOSEPH BEN MEIR IBN MIGASH DIED (ON THE 30TH DAY OF NISSAN, 1141) AT THE AGE OF SIXTY-FOUR YEARS, THERE WAS NO ONE TO STEP INTO HIS EMINENT PLACE. THE CENTER OF TALMUDICAL STUDY MOVED FROM SPAIN NORTHWARD TO FRANCE AND GERMANY, WHERE RASHI AND HIS SUCCESSORS CREATED THEIR MASTER WORKS OF TALMUDIC SCHOLARSHIP.

RAMBAM, INTRODUCTION TO COMMENTARY ON THE MISHNAH

אספתי מה שנודמן לידי מהגהות אבי זצ"ל וזולתי בשם רבינו יוסף הלוי ז"ל, וחי' ה' כי הבנת אותו האיש בתלמוד מפליאה כל מי שמתבונן בדבריו ועומק עיונו, עד שאפשר לי לומר עליו לפניו לא היה מלך כמוהו בשטתו

I COLLECTED ALL THAT I FOUND FROM THE NOTES OF MY FATHER OF SAINTLY MEMORY AND OTHERS IN THE NAME OF RABBEINU YOSEF HALEVI [IBN MIGASH], AND AS HASHEM LIVES, THE TALMUDIC UNDERSTANDING OF THE MAN AMAZES EVERYONE WHO UNDERSTANDS HIS WORDS AND THE DEPTH OF HIS PROFOUND SPIRIT. HIS EQUAL HAS PERHAPS NEVER EXISTED!

Responsa: Ibn Migash and Honey in Wine

We find that the Rambam often quoted the Ri Migash in his Teshuvos. In fact, in one teshuvah we learn that it was common practice for Jews to wine and dine with their Muslim neighbors. A question was asked of the Rambam whether a Muslim (Islam isn't considered idolatry) who touches the wine of a Jew prohibits the wine.

The Rambam answered that while Muslims do not practice idolatry, nevertheless the Chachomim prohibited any wine touched by a non-Jew, even by a little baby. However, the custom by the great sages of Spain is that when a Muslim enters and they are in the middle of drinking wine, they add a little honey to render it unfit for the Mizbeach, and thus it can no longer become Yayin Nesach.

What is interesting about this Teshuvah is that it tells us about the Golden Ages that is was a time that great Jewish sages would often drink wine with the Muslims, The Rambam says that ever the Ri Migash would often drink himself wine with Muslims and would add honey so as not to prohibit it.

RAMBAM'S RESPONSA, 269

שאלה בדבר השתייה על מיני זמר וכו'. ושתית היין שדורכים הישמעאלים. יורינו רבינו ושכרו כפול מן השמים.

התשובה ידוע, שעצם הזמר והניגונים כולם אסורים וכו'. ואלה הישמעאלים אינם רחוקים מעבודה זרה כמו שהזכרתם יותר מקטן בן יומו, שאמר רב שהוא מנסך, והלכה כמותו ותכלית מה שהקלו כל הגאונים בינם של אלו, (שיהיה) מותר בהנייה, ותו לא, אבל (שיהא מותר) בשתייה, לא נשמע זה משום בעל הוראה. והלכה למעשה בפני כל גאוני מערב, כאשר קורה, שנוגע ישמעאלי בין שלנו נגיעה המחייבת ניסוך, שאוסרים לשתותו ומתירים למוכרו כדין יין הישמעאלים עצמן. וכאשר קורה, שנכנס גוי או ישמעאלי אצל אנשים בשעה שהם שותים, הם ממהרים לערב קצת דבש בין אשר לפנייהם ושותים עמו, ואמרו: כבר נפסל לגבי המזבח והיה בכלל מיני השכר, והעיקר (אצלנו שאין) מנסכין לעבודה זרה

אלא יין הראוי ליקרב על גבי המזבת. כך הורה רבינו יוסף הלוי זצ"ו לברכה, וכך עשה כמה פעמים הלכה למעשה, הוא וכל גדולי ספרד וכו'

QUESTION ABOUT DRINKING OVER SONG ETC. AND DRINKING WINE CRUSHED BY MUSLIMS, GUIDE US OUT RABBI AND YOUR REWARD WILL BE DOUBLED FROM HEAVEN.

THE ANSWER IS KNOWN, THAT MUSIC AND SONG ARE ALL FORBIDDEN ETC. AND THESE MUSLIMS ARE NOT FAR OFF FROM AVODAH ZARAH AS YOU MENTION ANY MORE THAN A CHILD OF ONE DAY OLD THAT RAV (AVODAH ZARAH 57A) PROHIBITS THE WINE HE POURS, AND THE HALACHAH IS IN ACCORDANCE WITH HIM. AND THE LENIENCY OF THE GEONIM ABOUT THE WINE OF THESE [MUSLIMS], IS ONLY THAT IT SHOULD BE PERMITTED TO BENEFIT FROM IT, AND NOT MORE, BUT TO SAY THAT IT SHOULD BE PERMISSIBLE TO DRINK, THIS WAS NOT HEARD FROM ANY TEACHER.

AND THE CUSTOM IN PRACTICE BEFORE ALL THE GEONIM OF THE WEST [I.E., NORTH AFRICA AND SPAIN], THAT WHEN IT HAPPENS THAT A MUSLIM TOUCHES OUR WINE IN A WAY THAT PROHIBITS IT, WE PROHIBIT TO DRINK IT AND PERMIT SELLING IT, AS IS THE RULE IS WITH ALL MUSLIM WINE.

AND WHEN IT HAPPENS THAT A CHRISTIAN OR MUSLIM ENTERS WHEN PEOPLE ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF DRINKING, THEY QUICKLY MIX IN SOME HONEY INTO THE WINE THAT IS BEFORE THEM AND DRINK WITH THEM. THE [SAGES] SAID: [BY ADDING HONEY] IT BECOMES INVALID FOR POURING ON THE MIZBE'ACH AND BECOME LIKE ALL TYPES OF BEER. AND THE MAIN THING IS THAT (HERE, WHERE

THEY DON'T) POUR WINE FOR AVODAH ZARAH, UNLESS IT IS WINE THAT IS SUITED TO BE BROUGHT ON THE MIZBE'ACH.

THIS IS WHAT RABBI YOSEF HALEVI OF RIGHTEOUS AND HOLY MEMORY TAUGHT AND THIS IS WHAT HE PRACTICED HIMSELF ON MANY OCCASIONS, HIM AND ALL THE GREAT SAGES OF SPAIN.

The Rambam's Yichus

The Rambam's yichus dates back to Rebi Yehudah Hanasi and ultimately to Dovid Hamelech. In the conclusion of his commentary on the Mishnah, the Rambam lists his family Yichus that includes seven generations of Dayanim, Chachamim, and Rabbonim:

CONCLUSION TO RAMBAM'S COMMENTARY ON THE MISHNAH

אני משה בר' מימון הדיין בר' יוסף החכם בר' יצחק הדיין בר' יוסף
הדיין בר' עובדיהו הדיין בר' שלמה הרב בר' עובדיהו הדיין זכר
קדושים לברכה.

I, MOSHE, THE SON OF MAIMON THE DAYAN, THE SON OF RABBI YOSEF HACHACHAM THE SON OF RABBI YITZCHOK THE DAYAN, THE SON OF RABBI YOSEF THE DAYAN, THE SON OF RABBI OVADIAHU THE DAYAN, THE SON OF RABBI SHLOMO THE RAV, THE SON OF RABBI OVADYAHU THE DAYAN MAY THEIR HOLY MEMORIES BE BLESSED.

The Rambam's Birth

ואני מצאתי בספרים קדומים שנולד בערב פסח יום שבת שעה
ושליש אחר חצי היום שנת תתקצ"ה ליצירה, וא"כ היה בן ששה
שנים כשנפטר ר' יהוסף הלוי,

I FOUND IN ANCIENT BOOKS THAT [THE RAMBAM] WAS BORN ON THE EVE OF PESACH ON SHABBOS AT 1:20 P.M. IN THE YEAR 4995 TO CREATION, IF SO, HE WAS SIX YEARS OLD WHEN RABBI YOSEF HALEVI (IBN MIGASH) PASSED AWAY.

The Rambam's Youth

The fact that the Rambam was only six years old when the Ri Migash passed away, nevertheless, in Shalshelles Hakabalah, R' Gedaliah ibn Yichya (1515-1587) tells a legend of how the Rambam was born with learning disabilities but was miraculously transformed and escaped his home-town to learn under the Ri Migash.

SHALSHELES HAKABALAH

קבלתי מזקן א' ואמר לי שזה המעשה ראה כתוב בקוגטרס ישן והוא כי זה ר' מיימון לא היה רוצה לקחת אשה ויהי כמו בחצי ימיו בא לו בחלום איש אחד וצוה לו שיקח לו לאשה בת קצב פלוני שהיה עומד בעיר אחרת קרובה לקורדובה. והרב היה מהתל מזה החלום ויראה לו זה החלום פעמים רבות עד שבחר ללכת אל העיר ההוא וגם שם חלם לו פעמים רבות זה החלום עד שלקחה ותהר לו והוליד ממנה הרמב"ם ותקש בלדתה ותמת. ואח"כ לקח לו הרב אשה אחרת ויהי לו בנים אחרים וזה הרמב"ם היה קשה ההבנה מאד ומעט רצון היה לו בלמוד ואביו היה מכהו עד כי נואש ממנו וקוראו בן הקצב ויגרשהו מביתו והרמב"ם הלך לו לבית הכנסת וישן. ויקץ ומצא עצמו נהפך לאיש אחר. וברח מפני אביו וילך אל עיר שהיה שם הרב ר' יוסף ו' מיגאש והתחיל ללמוד ממנו והפליג להתחכם אחרי הימים הרבים שב אל קורדובה ולא הלך אל בית אביו אך ביום השבת התחיל לדרוש ברבים דברים נוראים ואחר הדרשה קמו אביו ואחיו וישקוהו ויקבלוהו בסבר פנים יפות ע"כ.

I HEARD FROM AN ELDERLY MAN WHO TOLD ME THAT HE SAW THIS STORY IN AN OLD BOOKLET THAT RABBI MAIMON [THE RAMBAM'S FATHER] DIDN'T WANT TO MARRY, AND WHEN HE WAS ABOUT MIDDLE AGED A CERTAIN MAN APPEARED TO HIM IN A DREAM AND INSTRUCTED HIM TO TAKE THE DAUGHTER OF A CERTAIN BUTCHER WHO LIVED IN A TOWN NEAR CORDOBA AS A WIFE. RABBI [MAIMON] WAS SCEPTICAL ABOUT THE DREAM UNTIL

IT WAS SHOWN TO HIM MANY TIMES UNTIL HE CHOSE TO TRAVEL TO THE TOWN AND THERE HE AGAIN DREAMED THE DREAM MANY TIMES UNTIL HE TOOK [HER AS A WIFE]. SHE BECAME PREGNANT AND GAVE BIRTH TO THE RAMBAM, HOWEVER, SHE DIED IN CHILDBIRTH. RABBI [MAIMON] LATER MARRIED A DIFFERENT WOMAN WHO GAVE BIRTH TO OTHER CHILDREN.

THE RAMBAM HAD DIFFICULTY WITH COMPREHENSION AND HAD LITTLE INTEREST IN LEARNING. HIS FATHER WOULD BEAT HIM UNTIL OUT OF DESPERATION HE WOULD CALL HIM "THE SON OF THE BUTCHER" EVENTUALLY HE KICKED HIM OUT OF THE HOUSE AND THE RAMBAM WENT TO THE SHUL TO SLEEP. WHEN HE AWOKE, HE FOUND HIMSELF TRANSFORMED INTO A DIFFERENT PERSON.

HE RAN AWAY FROM HIS FATHER AND WENT TO THE CITY WHERE RABBI YOSEPH IBN MIGASH WAS AND BEGAN STUDYING [UNDER HIM]. [THE RAMBAM] WAS QUICK TO LEARN WISDOM AND AFTER A WHILE HE RETURNED TO CORDOBA. HE NEVER WENT TO HIS FATHER'S HOME AND INSTEAD ON SHABBOS HE LECTURED IN PUBLIC WONDERFUL THINGS. AFTER THE LECTURE, HIS FATHER AND BROTHER AROSE AND KISSED HIM AND RECEIVED HIM WITH A GLOWING FACE.

In the next part, we will learn how, at a young age, the Rambam was forced by extremist Almohad Muslims to leave his home town of Cordoba and ended up wandering from place to place across Spain and parts of North Africa. We will learn about the Rambam's opinion on conversion to Islam and about the Rambam's early works.

Concluding Question:

Based on the above description of Jews in Spain during the "Golden Age," why do you think it was called the "Golden Age" of Spanish Jewry?

Main Points

- Jews lived in Spain since the destruction of the Beis Hamikdosh (and perhaps earlier)
- For several hundred years Jews were treated with some degree of Tolerance by their Muslim Rulers
- Several Jews including Chasdai Ibn Shaprut and Shmuel Hanagid rose to positions of prominence in the Spanish Muslim court
- Poetry was the method of communication of the day, in fact, many of the piyutim that we recite in our davening were written by Spanish poets most notable of which is Rabbi Yehudah Halevi
- Following the decline of the Yeshivos in Bavel, the world's center of Jewish learning moved to the Yeshiva in Lucena, Spain under the leadership of the Rif and later the Ri Migash
- The Rambam descended from Rabi Yehuda hanasi and a long line of dayanim and rabbis of Cordova
- The Rambam may have been born with learning disabilities and later miraculously transformed

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