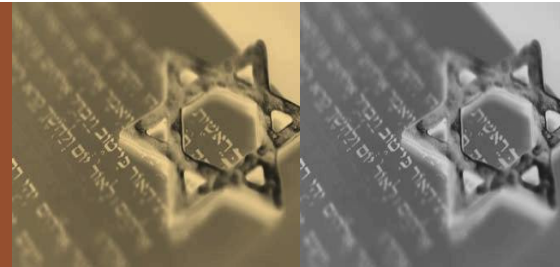


CHAPTER THREE

THE RACE IS ON: THE JEWISH PEOPLE'S STORY. THE PRE-MODERN PERIOD.



INTRODUCTION

We enter a new era, one based in Diaspora. In the last chapter we examined the development of Jewish society and community within a collective whose centre both demographically (until the late second Temple period) and culturally, lay, almost always, in the historic Land of Israel. We witnessed extraordinary changes as the society was transformed from a small tribal society based largely on local communities under the leadership of elders, to a complex and dense society of millions ruled by kings or high priests in a centralized structure built round Jerusalem and the Temple.

We also saw that the Jews for most of the second Temple period lived under the control of different empires who granted them considerable autonomy but not independence. The Romans limited Jewish autonomy considerably and tensions flared as the Romans became a harsh and extortionate occupying power. This resulted in two great revolts in the first of which the Temple was destroyed and the Jews lost almost the last vestiges of their autonomy while the Bar Kochba revolt once again led to a tremendous loss of life and a considerable decline in the fortune of the Jewish population.

In addition we noted in the generations following the tragic loss of the Temple, the rise of a new Rabbinic leadership who saw themselves as the legitimate leaders of the Jews and created a series of scholarly tools in order to try and guide the Jews out of their time of crisis: chief among this was the recognition of a leadership based on mastery of the holy texts. It was this leadership, nurtured at a series of scholarly academies throughout Palestine (the Roman name for Eretz Israel), that developed the great Mishnaic text that would serve as the guide for Jewish life for thousands of years.

But Palestine as a Jewish centre was falling. We saw previously that many Jews left the country well before the destruction of the Temple. However, there were still a couple of million Jews at least still in the land at the time of the Temple's destruction. But Jews were now streaming out of the country and the trend became more and more pronounced in the decades following the Bar Kochba revolt. In time other centres began to flourish on the basis of the scholarly ideology and tools that had developed in Eretz Israel.

Yehuda HaNasi was right. The creation of the Mishnah allowed the development of Rabbinic scholarship in other places in the Jewish world. The word of the Rabbis was spreading. Their ideas on how to move Judaism forward despite the loss of the

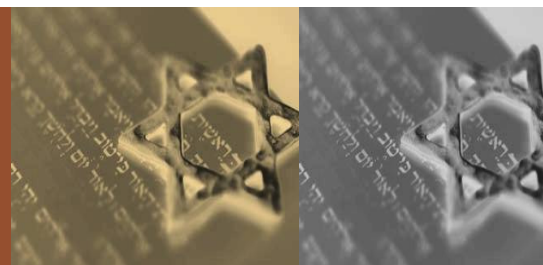


Temple and Jerusalem as physical centres for Jews in Eretz Israel and indeed throughout the world, began to take root in other places. Jewish communities which had been growing for centuries suddenly began to develop their own scholarly institutions and to develop their way of life according to the Rabbinic programme and ideology. The period that we survey here sees a completely new dynamic developing. The centre of the Jewish world – more accurately – the *centres* of the Jewish world – pass to the Diaspora. Eretz Israel is in decline and will never again exert the same influence on the Jewish world and supply the leadership that it had done in the earlier periods. The Jewish world is changing. Centre after centre emerges – and all on the basis of the Rabbinic ideas and practical tools forged in the declining centre.

In this chapter we will examine the dynamics of Jewish community in these emerging centres. We will see the growth and the decline of great Jewish communities, each with their own Rabbinic leadership in different parts of the world. The basis had been laid in Palestine. The results were to be seen throughout the world. The story of the Jews was changing yet again.



CREATING NEW CENTRES: THE EMERGENCE OF THE BABYLONIAN CENTRE



When we examined the picture last time, we noted two large centres of Jewry developing in the last years of the second Temple period, in Alexandria (Egypt) and in Babylon. It looked as though Alexandria was set to become the greater of the two communities, but it fell into sharp decline, suddenly, after two revolts by the local Jews against their Roman masters. The first coincided with the great revolt of the Jews of Israel in the late 60's and the second broke out fifty years later. The Roman crushed both revolts ruthlessly. Many tens of thousands of Jews were killed. The community continued, but its glory had passed. For a great Diaspora centre, history would have to look elsewhere. It looked towards Babylon and it is there that we pick up the story of Jewish community.

Let us view the process from close up. The year is 400 and we are in the town of Sura in southern Babylon. Sura has been an important centre of Torah for almost two hundred years since a yeshiva was started there by the great scholar known as Rav. Since then it has flourished and at the time that we make our visit, the great scholars of Sura are engaged in a very important work. Our guide will be the important scholar Ravina, an important figure in contemporary Sura. We find him on a very busy day involved in something quite fascinating.

"Shalom to you all. I have been asked to greet you and tell you something of our life in the Yeshiva here. You will, I hope, excuse me for being brief – I could talk for days about what we do here – but today is not really a good day for long explanations. If you look through the door over there, you'll understand why. Look at that sight! Jews learning Torah! Inside the great study hall and out into the various courtyards, filling up every available spot. All of them studying part of the Mishnah and trying to drink in its wisdom and to fathom its depths as much as they can.

Look how seriously they are studying. It's as if they just don't have enough time to learn it all so they are throwing their whole selves into it in the limited time that they have. And the fact is that they're right. They don't have time. Very few of them are professional scholars. Look at them! Most of them are farmers and traders. At least for ten months of the year they are. For two months of the year they become scholars and students of Torah. Every Elul, for the month before Rosh HaShana and every Adar, in the month preceding Pesach, they flood the Yeshivot in their hundreds and thousands. These are the easier months in the agricultural year and people can come together for intensive learning around a part of the Mishnah. I don't know exactly where and when the custom began but it's been going on for centuries.

Here in Sura, one of our greatest Yeshivot, they say it has been going on ever since the great Rav founded the Yeshiva. It was Rav who studied under Yehudah HaNasi and who brought the latter's Mishnah to Babylon. He realized that though there was



a great community here in terms of numbers, the Jews – excuse me for being blunt – were very ignorant. Jews at that point had been in Babylon for almost eight hundred years but it had never been a place of great Jewish learning. So Rav started a Yeshiva here and now, thanks to this and a few other major Yeshivot, we have been producing our own scholars for generations. It is the Mishnah which forms the basis for everything we do.

We've been discussing the meaning of the Mishnah and the Torah ever since the Yeshivah began. Many of those discussions are preserved in our collective memory and in the last few years, we have started to put the record of those discussions together in writing. Here in Sura, it was Rav Ashi who started the project. It'll be huge, just think of it: the records of thousands of discussions of the meaning of the Mishnah and the Torah – this project will last for generations, I'm sure. The heads of the different Yeshivot are getting together and co-ordinating the work. It'll be the first great Babylonian project, and it's so necessary. We need to establish for the generations living today, exactly what the demands of Jewish life are on every individual. The Torah and the Mishnah are clearly the basis, but they must be interpreted, extended to cover every contingency, including those new situations that had not arisen in previous generations. We have to get behind the meaning of our two greatest texts to decide exactly what needs to be done. We will do this. It might take generations but it will be done. Then we will be on the map in a big way.

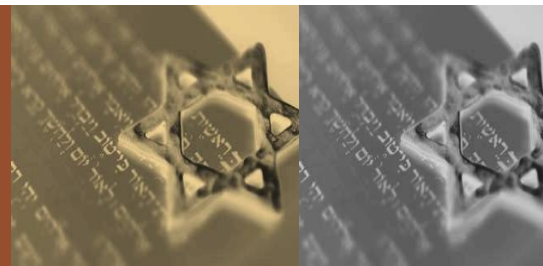
The truth is that we're already on the map in many ways. How do I know? Well the best proof is that the heads of the academies get countless questions from all over the Jewish world, from people – usually Rabbis – looking for guidance. Sometimes the questions are about specific cases – what should be done in such and such a case? What does the law say about this? Sometimes they are bigger issues that need to be examined. It just shows you – our Yeshivot have gained a name all through the Jewish world. We are seen as the experts.

It's interesting, there are still Yeshivot in Eretz Israel and we are careful to talk of them with respect. But the fact is that very few people really see them today as major places of learning. It's hardly surprising. They've had it very hard there with the Romans and the Christians. But it isn't always easy here. We have to be very careful with the authorities. There have been better rulers and worse but we try and keep our heads down and get on with the learning. 'Dina daMalchuta dina' – 'the law of the land is our law', as one of our scholars once said. That's what it's all about when you don't live in your own land. Anyway, you'll have to excuse me. I can't stay talking all day. I might be thought of as knowledgeable, but it's all deceptive. We're all students here. The learning never stops – and it never should. Now I must go and learn."

Ravina was right. Babylonian Jewry was really on the map, and would continue to be for several more centuries. In the course of that period, the great "project" which had been started at Sura by Rav Ashi, would slowly turn into what we know today as the Babylonian Gemara, which together with the Mishnah we know as the Talmud Bavli.



TENSION IN BABYLON: WHO SHOULD LEAD THE COMMUNITY?

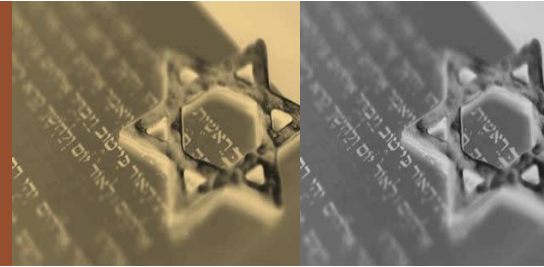


However, Ravina had left out an important part of the picture. As a scholar concerned with the world of scholarship, he gave a picture of the world of the Yeshivot of which he was justly proud. But if we are examining the contours of the community as a whole, we must mention something else. In Babylon, the Jews had considerable autonomy. The head of the Jewish community was called the Exilarch (Resh Galuta). It was a hereditary title that dates back at least to the 2nd century C.E. He was believed to be a descendant of King David and the position was one that commanded great respect among the governing circles of Babylon. Invariably, the Exilarch was part of the king's inner circle and the royal court. He was responsible for collecting the taxes of the whole Jewish community and delivering them to the king. He headed up a whole organizational structure, and received great respect from his community.

Interestingly, as time went on the Jewish community became a kind of carriage pulled by two horses. The scholarly leadership (the heads of the great Yeshivot) and the political leader (the Resh Galuta) both saw themselves as the legitimate heads of the community. Tensions often broke out between them. At the root of the dispute between the two sets of leaders lay the question what kind of a community was the Jewish community. Was it a religious community – in which case prime of place would go to the Rabbis and the scholars, or was it a secular political community in which the people were religious, in which case the Resh Galuta was the natural head? This is part of a bigger subject that in a sense lies at the core of Jewish existence, not just in Babylon but in all the pre-modern Diaspora communities, the role of the Diaspora Jewish community as a framework for national consciousness. We will examine it in more detail in chapters five and six. For the moment let us just note the tension between the different office holders in Babylon as a symptom of this wider issue.



TENSIONS WITH BABYLON: WHO SHOULD LEAD THE JEWISH WORLD?



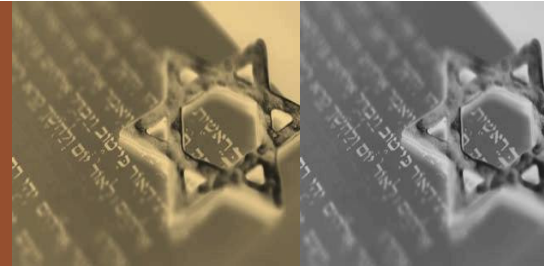
But it was not only inside Babylon that tensions were developing. Tensions were developing *between* Babylon and the older centre in Eretz Israel. In fact, for a while, the Jewish world was a world with two centres. Babylon and Jerusalem as the two centres tended to be called in the discussions that began to break out, (despite the fact that there were almost never any Jews actually living in the city of Jerusalem for most of the time of competition between the two centres), vied for supremacy in the Jewish world. There had been one centre. Now there were two. But should Palestine remain as the major centre in Jewish life, revered for its history and its holiness? Or should Babylon, with its great scholarly institutions and developed institutions be seen as the leading centre? The competition was between the virtual centre and the real centre.

The struggle caused great tensions, and understandably so. A new understanding of the Jewish world was struggling to break through from the confines of the ways that it had always been seen up to now. The theoretical centrality of Eretz Israel was still accepted by Jews everywhere on an ideological level. However, the war was on practical issues. Who should make the decisions for the developing Jewish world? Where would the real authority lie for shaping the future? Both centres were involved in the collection of records of discussions on the meaning of the Mishnah and the Torah. Whose version would ultimately be accepted as the most authoritative by the contemporary Jewish world?

We saw in the last section how those tensions had already started to express themselves in the Mishnaic period. The struggle would be won ultimately by Babylon. At a certain point, it was ridiculous to pretend that there was any real competition between the two centres. There was always respect for the centre in Palestine but it became clear that the real centre had moved elsewhere. The Gemara (Talmud) developed in the Palestinian Yeshivot in a parallel process to the one developed in Babylon, was seen to be less relevant and useful than that developed in Babylon. The battle was won. The Diaspora had come out clearly on top. The Jewish story had moved on.



THE MULTI-CENTRE MODEL: DECENTRALISATION IN THE JEWISH WORLD

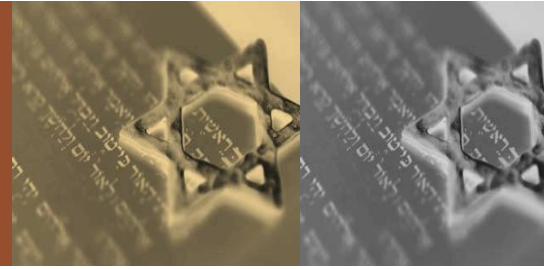


But after hundreds of years, Babylon itself fell into decline. By about the late 10th century the major days of glory had passed. Babylon had made its mark on the Jewish world. Its Talmud and its Rabbinic rulings were revered and observed almost everywhere in the Jewish world, but a complex of political problems, economic difficulties and perhaps plain weariness had sent the community plunging downwards. A large Jewish community of Jews would live in the area until the mid 20th century but the glory days were over for ever. Other communities were making their mark on the Jewish world.

One of the extraordinary features of Jewish history is the fact that as certain communities decay and decline, others always developed to take their place at the forefront of the Jewish world. As Eretz Israel declined, Babylon took its place. In the Diaspora itself, there were sometimes several communities that could be called centres in the Jewish world. If we define a Jewish centre as a Jewish community that affects the Jews in an area much larger than the borders of the community itself, we can for example say that after the decline of Babylon there were several communities that could claim to be important centres. The Jewish world was changing yet again. A multi-centre model was in the making.



THREE CENTRES AS A CASE STUDY: NORTH AFRICA, SPAIN AND NORTHERN EUROPE.



A traveler making his way through the Jewish world around the year 1000 C.E. might find at least three expanding and developing Jewish communities that could claim to be a major Jewish centre. Let us meet one important representative of each of these communities and hear what claims they would make for the primacy of their communities.

"Shalom to you. I am the Nagid of Kairouan, Abu Ishak Abraham Ibn Atta, and I welcome you to our community. I understand that you are touring some of the major communities of the Jewish world today. A generation or so ago it would have been clear where you needed to start your journey. Any journey to the great centres of the Jewish world, let us say a hundred years ago, would have started in Babylon, but today it is more questionable. Babylon has fallen on hard times. There are still some great scholars there and some of the academies still function. But the Jews there are badly oppressed and it is hard to believe that Babylon will ever regain its great glory. The truth is that I myself send money to aid the Yeshivot in Babylon. That is what we more fortunate Jews have to do when times are hard for our brothers.

At least they are not hard for us in Kairouan. You know where we are, I presume, some 125 kilometres south of the town of Tunis in North Africa. We, of course are a far greater town than Tunis, both for Jews and non-Jews but I mention Tunis because many people are more familiar with it since it is nearer the coast of North Africa. But we are the ones who should be known, I hope it is clear to you.

We are an old and distinguished town dating back to the conquest of North Africa by the Arabs after the time of Muhammed in the years when Islam was greatly expanding a little over three hundred years ago. We Jews have been here from the early years of the town – there are those who say from the beginning, though I myself am not so certain. We have thrived here. We are a wealthy community involved in commerce on a very grand scale.

I am in a slightly different position. I am a doctor, court physician to the Emir Badis, the ruler of the whole area. I have been appointed the Nagid, the leader of the Jewish community and the Jews accept me as such. I am also a general in Badis's army and when the need is felt I take to the battlefield. It is not necessarily what I feel like doing, but there are things in life which one does because of one's position and this is one such thing. It does not take much of my time. Thank goodness I still have time for my Jewish studies. I study at the Yeshiva with the great scholar Rabbi Hushiel. It is he who has brought such distinction to our Yeshiva. He is an outstanding halachic expert but there are those who say that his son Hananel is destined for even greater things. No doubt, if things go well, the son will take over



the scholarly leadership of the Yeshiva and the community as a whole after his father.

Would-be scholars flock here from many places. We have students from Spain, from all of North Africa and from Italy, and that is as it should be. Our community flourishes, our Yeshiva flourishes and I myself flourish. What a shame that Babylon has fallen on hard times. May it rise to prominence again, but may it share its glory with us here in Kairouan. May we continue to enjoy cordial relations with the Moslem rulers here and may our commerce continue to thrive. We, in any case, are here to stay."

We move north east, but not too far.

"Welcome to the glories of Andalusian Spain. And welcome, specifically, to our great city, the great Moslem city of Cordova. I understand that you have visited Kairouan and met with Jewish leaders there. Kairouan is a great and important centre indeed, but it is secondary in the Moslem Jewish world – to the wonders of Andalusia, southern Spain and specifically, to the charms and glory of this, our greatest city.

We are truly blessed in Spain. We came here with the Moslems some three centuries ago and since then we have been treated, on the whole, very well indeed. I say "we" as if I myself am from here. I am not. I am the Rabbinic leader of the community, but in truth, I, Hanoch ben Moshe, was born in Babylon and arrived here with my father, when I was still a child. It is a long and painful story which people still tell here, how we actually ended up in Spain. We were captured by pirates while at sea – we had come to the area in order to raise money for the communities of learning in Babylon - but we had the luck to be ransomed and we ended up here in Cordova.

My father's learning was immediately recognized and he was championed by the great leader of the community, that wonderful scholar and patron of Jewish scholarship, Hasdai ibn Shaprut. He soon became the head of the Yeshiva here, and our family has led the community in Halachic scholarship ever since. I see myself as a Jewish son of the community here and I am glad to do so. This has to be one of the greatest cities in the world. General scholarship abounds and many Jews take advantage of it. We have great Jewish philosophers, scientists, grammarians, mathematicians, and the vast majority of them are good Torah true Jews, faithful to our ancient traditions.

I myself am of a somewhat more conservative cast but I cannot deny the great strides in scholarship made by our more worldly Jews. I have many discussions with my students, many of whom are drawn towards the subjects of scholarship in the non-Jewish world. They tell me that the whole world is God's glory and ask how can we think of limiting ourselves only to our relatively narrow realm of Halacha? I don't agree that the Halacha is narrow – for me it represents the entire world, but I understand their concerns and as long as they feel that they can merge the two worlds together, the Jewish world and the outside world, I will not take issue with them. We are well treated and feel close to the educated Moslems who rule our city.



In recent years there have been incursions of other kinds of Moslems, less tolerant and more fanatical, into the turbulence of our society, but I am confident that we can hold them at bay and by respecting the world around us, it will learn to respect us too. 'Dina daMalchuta dina', an old Babylonian phrase which guides us to this day."

Our last journey takes us much further north.

"These lands of the north can be hard places to live. There is much rain and we have many storms. Many years there is snow. It is cold for me, I confess. Thank God that the study house is well heated. It enables me to teach my many students. They are younger and seem hardly to feel the cold, so great is their devotion to Torah. They learn Torah all day, from me and some of my colleagues. This Yeshiva that we are building up here in Mainz, has become very popular in the Germanic lands of Ashkenaz. More and more young people arrive here to study every year. Most of them have the luxury of being able to study full time for a few years. Their fathers are wealthy merchants who want their sons to get a good Jewish education before returning home to work in the family business. Many of them will work in the large scale trade practiced by their fathers. They will perhaps sail on their fathers' boats down the Rhine river, to the lands of southern Europe. It will be warmer there. Only from that point of view do I envy them at all.

Anyway, when they come here, I, for my part, am happy to teach them. They come to me with their eyes shining. "Rabbi Gershom" they say to me, "we have heard that this is the place we must study and you are the teacher with whom we must study". Their praise is sweet to my ears, I don't deny it, but I am most pleased that they want to learn Torah. And this is real Torah.

I know that you have met great scholars in North Africa and Spain, and I don't deny that interesting things are going on there but in those communities, they water down their Jewish studies with all sorts of other worldly subjects. They mingle a lot with the general population, Moslems I understand, and that it seems, has gone to their heads. Here things are different. We have contact with the non-Jewish population too, of course. Jews must make a living and most Jews have a lot of contact with non-Jews in the course of their daily work as traders or artisans. When you sell things in the marketplace or make things that people need, you can hardly cut yourself off from your customers. Indeed that's the reason why we are reasonably treated here. We are useful. We supply all sorts of services that the non-Jews would find it hard to perform without us. We are literate, educated, and hardworking. We are not farmers like most of the peasants who live around us. The vast majority of us are town dwellers. Once, in our own country, we were a nation of farmers. Look at the Mishnah if you don't believe me. Yes, the people here need us and we need them, I don't deny. We must have contact with them.

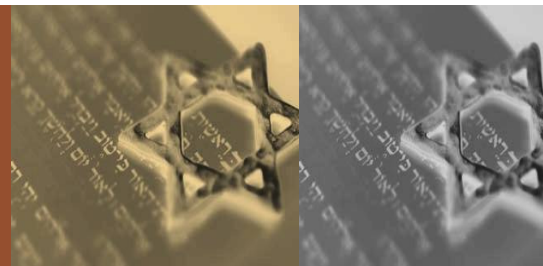
Sounds like Spain? No, no, far from it! There is a big difference here. We buy and sell from the non-Jews but we would never mix socially with them. They are lowly types, for the most part illiterate, uneducated: what would we gain from having too much to do with them? Their books are not our books: they hold no interest for us. Most of



them are blasphemous, talking of the man they hold to be their God. That's the Christians for you. We keep ourselves away from their world. They don't treat us badly. We are protected by the rulers of the city and it enables us to hold our own here and to make this a centre of Jewish learning, warming the cold and profane world around us with the warmth of our lives and our learning. This is the life that we are meant to lead. This is what we do to bear witness to the greatness of God's world. This is our role on earth."



COMPARING AND CONTRASTING: EXAMINING THE MODEL



Three glimpses of the Jewish world as it existed around the turn of the new millennium. Kairouan, Cordova and Mainz. All thriving centres. It is not by chance that two of the people we have met have been Rabbis and scholars. The scholars and Rabbis in the pre-modern periods were among the important leaders of the communities. They were not the only leaders to be sure. There were others, community officials like Abu Ishak Abraham of Kairouan, who might or might not be scholarly (Abu Ishak Abraham was, as it happens), but who were important leaders by virtue of the fact that they were among the wealthiest members of the community. They formed the political leadership of the community, not so different perhaps, from the partnership between elders and priests in the tribal communities of the Bible. Just as we saw in Babylon in the partnership between the Resh Galuta and the heads of the great Yeshivot, all of the Diaspora communities of the pre-modern age shared such a dual leadership. In theory, most of the inhabitants would have pointed to the scholars as their leadership. In practice, however, power was shared by the representatives of the two groups, with the details varying from community to community.

Let us examine a little more closely the three communities that we have surveyed. At the time of which we are speaking, the first two communities, Kairouan and Cordova, situated in the Moslem world, owed their Jewish community to the Moslem take over of those lands. Both communities were about three hundred years old. Mainz, on the river Rhine in German lands, was a younger community. Jews had lived in the general area for a couple of hundred years but the large important urban communities were relatively new, less than a century old at this time. In truth, in all these lands, Jews had longer histories but all of them had seen misfortune in past centuries and the original communities had all but vanished.

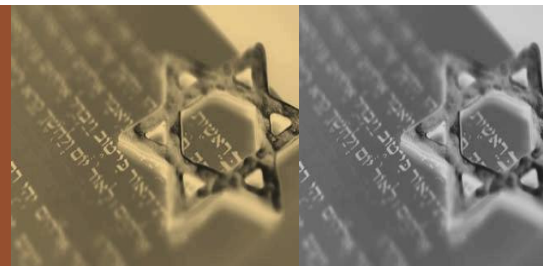
All the rulers were pleased that the Jews were there. Both the Moslem and the Christian rulers had been tolerant towards the Jews and had encouraged them to enter their cities because of the potential use of the Jews as an educated urban elite group who could play an extremely valuable role in the economic and administrative fields. They were also seen as a loyal element of the population posing no threats to the ruling group, because, unlike much of the population over whom the rulers governed, the Jews had no power with which they could threaten the rulers. Other groups might call in outside armies on occasion. The Jews had no outside armies on whom they could call. Jews constituted no risk for rulers. Jews might praise the idea of '*Dina daMalchuta Dina*' but they had no choice. It was the only strategy available for essentially powerless people relying on their usefulness and their perceived loyalty to ensure their acceptance in the outside world.



This is relevant in understanding what would happen to all three of the communities mentioned. We visited them because at the time in question they looked like the leading communities in the Jewish world, worthy successors to the declining centre in Babylon. However, in a few generations all three of them would be sliding downhill at an alarming pace, never to recover their former greatness.



COMMUNITIES RISE, COMMUNITIES FALL



Cordova was the first to suffer crisis. About ten years after our visit, the whole town was sacked as a result of political feuds between different groups. The Jews suffered together with everybody else, and fled to other places. Over succeeding generations, they would slowly rebuild the community even as the town as a whole struggled to rebuild itself. But in the mid-12th century, the Jews of Cordova would suffer again, this time specifically as Jews. Forced to convert to Islam after the invasion of a fanatical Islamic group of North African warriors, they would convert or flee.

One who did flee was the young Moshe ben Maimon, subsequently to gain fame as Maimonides, the great scholar of the eastern world, who lived most of his life in Egypt. The community would recover when the Christians conquered it from the Moslems but almost the whole community would be destroyed in the late fourteenth century in a great massacre from which there would come no real recovery. The small Jewish community that continued there would be thrown out of Spain in the great exile of the Spanish Jews in 1492.

Kairouan would suffer its first major blow about half a century after we visited there. An Arab invasion from Egypt would take the lives of many of the Jews and see the great community institutions destroyed. It recovered partially after that but a century later, it would become a city earmarked for Moslems only. From then on no Jew would live there for more than seven hundred years.

Mainz would last the longest as a major centre. But almost a hundred years later, at the end of the eleventh century, the community would be decimated at the time of the first Crusade. The Yeshiva would be destroyed as would many of the buildings identified with the Jews, and almost all of the great scholars would die as part of the thousand or so Jews killed in the massacre. Jews would return to Mainz, but they would suffer hardship after hardship. Massacres and exiles would follow each other regularly over the next centuries. Never again would the community attain anything like the significance that it had at the time of our visit.

In examining these three communities we see a pattern which occurs time and time again in Diaspora Jewish history. Each of these three communities rose because they were seen as serving the interests of the surrounding population or at least of the rulers of the area. In their rise, they developed valuable community institutions and leaderships, at least partly in the mould of the scholarly leadership foreseen by Yehuda HaNasi. They each became a powerful and important centre, influencing culturally the lands around them. Each of them fell, sooner or later. This is the Diaspora story in a nutshell.

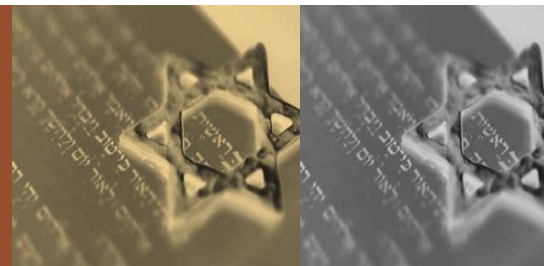


We see that they rose to strength when pragmatic political leaders realized that it worked to their own interest to grant rights and privileges to Jews in order to attract them to their own areas. They realized that they could benefit from the presence of the Jews in their areas. And they accepted the price that they had to pay, granting the Jews what they needed more than anything else: economic opportunities, control over their own lives and ability to live their lives as they wanted from a cultural and religious point of view, and protection from violence. As long as the rulers were pragmatic, meaning that they acted in their own best interests, the equation worked. The rulers gave protection, economic rights and autonomy to the Jews. The Jews filled the economic and social functions that the rulers desired.

When did it go wrong? In one of several circumstances. Either the Jews no longer filled the valued role and they were therefore expendable. Or the rulers ceased to be pragmatic and were ruled by ideology. Or the rulers lost control over the people that they ruled. In any one of these three circumstances the Jews were in trouble. Between these three factors, Cordova, Kairouan and Mainz all ceased to rise. All of them slipped into decline and left the centre stage of Jewish history.



OPEN COMMUNITIES, CLOSED COMMUNITIES?



We'll come to the implications of this rise and decline model in a moment. Before we do, it is worth mentioning another aspect that has become clear through our glimpse into the three communities. All of these communities were halachic communities. All of them had accepted the legacy of Rabbinic Judaism. Each of them developed at their centre, great institutions of learning that based themselves on the Mishnah of Yehudah HaNasi as extended through the Talmudic commentaries of Babylon and Eretz Israel. But they were producing very different types of Jews!

The Jews of Mainz, that great and important centre of Ashkenaz, were producing a Jew who was much more based exclusively on the cultural world of traditional Jewish learning. This was a Jew for whom the Torah and more especially the Halachic literature – the Mishnah, Gemara and halachic law-codes – comprised virtually the whole programme of study. But more than a programme of study, what we see here is an attitude towards being Jewish. A Jew in Ashkenaz, as Rabbenu Gershom (as he was called) explained, was one who did not look for connection with the cultural world around him.

Jews in Cordova or Kairouan on the other hand, revelled in the contact with the outside world, from which they felt they could learn a large amount and gain knowledge and education that would stand them in good stead as Jews and human beings in a wider world. Some authorities in those countries had their reservations about this trend of openness to the scholarship of the outside world. We have heard this from Rabbi Hanoch ben Moshe in Cordova. But he was in a minority. More typical was the optimistic outlook of Abu Ishak Abraham in Kairouan who embraced the outer world and all it stood for while approaching the world as a good and faithful Jew. A discussion between the three men, for example, on the desirable program of study for a Jewish boy, would have displayed vast differences and not a little tension.

Why did this come about? How can we understand the differences between the outlook produced among the Jews of Spain and North Africa or Italy (another example of such a community in the 15th and 16th centuries) and the outlook of the Jews of Northern Europe and Eastern Europe (from the 15th century onwards)? We suggest that it was not so much connected with developments among the Jews themselves but rather about what the Jews thought about the non-Jewish population among whom they lived.



We can imagine, for example, the words of Rabbenu Gershom on the subject.

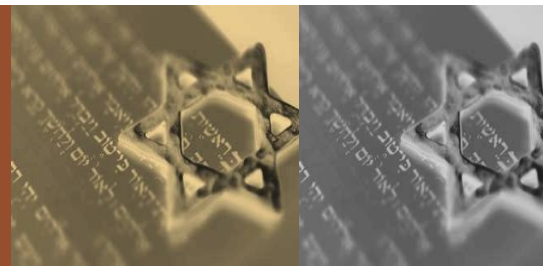
"I can't imagine why any one would want to open up and spend time socially with the non-Jews. They have nothing to offer us. They are ignorant and illiterate. So many of them like nothing more than to fall into a drunken stupor at the height of a celebration. I don't like them and I don't trust them. Better to stay among ourselves and stick close to our own way of life."

To which Abu Ishak Abraham might well reply. *"I don't understand why you say something like that. When I look about me, I see people of great intellect. I am surrounded by literate and learned people with whom it is a delight to converse. I love their language and their poetry. I find their philosophy interesting although there are some of its basic ideas that of course I can't accept. But why would any one want to give up on anything like this sublime thought which challenges me to think constantly in very new and different ways?"*

And Hanoch ben Moshe would be somewhere in the middle, an odd figure, living in Cordova with a more closed and suspicious outlook, from one point of view an intermediary between the two worlds of the north and the south, from another point of view a slight oddity, slightly out of step with the worlds in which he lived and not totally comfortable perhaps with either. Two different worlds, one Rabbinic legacy, two types of Jews.



WANDERING JEWS? WHERE SHOULD ONE WANDER?



Let us return to the centres that slide into decline as circumstances changed in one of the ways which we outlined previously. As Jews found themselves in more and more difficult circumstances in one place or another, many of them tended to leave. We have mentioned the young Moshe ben Maimon who left Cordova with his family when he was thirteen years old. But his story, a story of exile and wandering, was repeated by countless Jews all over the world. How could this not be the case in a world in which there was so much uncertainty, a world at which, in any time, the fortunes of a community could change drastically, causing many to pick up the wanderer's staff and seek a better life elsewhere? Maybe the fact that ultimately no Jew felt totally at home in the deepest sense anywhere in Diaspora made it easier for Jews to leave one country for another as times became hard?

Whatever the case, Jews were often wanderers. They were, to a large extent, an international community, perhaps the world's first, in the sense that in many ways they saw the world as their homeland. Without special attachment to any one Diaspora land, it was easier for them to envisage moving, more so perhaps than people who felt that they lived in their own native land, and could not imagine moving elsewhere. So the Jews moved when they had to, but interestingly enough, the different contrasting worlds of the Jew stayed separate. Jews from the world of Ashkenaz and Jews from the Moslem world, tended to move to other places in their own cultural orbit rather than penetrate the world of the other Jew.

When the first expulsion of Jews from a whole country took place (the Ashkenazi Jews of England who created a community for two hundred years and who were expelled in 1290), they merged back into the Ashkenazi world of France and Germany from which they had come. When the Spanish Jews left Spain in their many tens of thousands in 1492, they went almost exclusively to other lands within their cultural universe where Jews lived. This was very interesting. Spanish Jews had lived under Moslem rule for centuries and subsequently, most of them passed into the control of Christian rulers for several more centuries. But culturally, most of them tended to feel closer to the cultural world of Islam than to the world of the Christian.

When they left, they tended to go to lands which were under Moslem control or where there was a Moslem heritage even in the distant past. Most went to Portugal, some went to North Africa, many went to the Ottoman (Turkish) empire and some went to Italy. Why Italy? It was not a Spanish or Eastern community: it had not been under Moslem rule. But Italy was the one place in Europe where Jews had also encountered an attractive external culture as a result of the Italian Renaissance and had broadened their horizons as a result. Very few Jews went from Spain to the

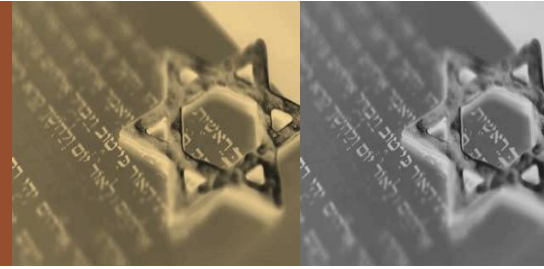


Christian lands of North or Eastern Europe. To a large extent these worlds stayed apart.

The important thing to understand is this. In this whole rise and decline model, as Jews moved from place to place, new centres rose on the ruins of the old ones. If Spain rose from the decline of Babylon, the Ottoman Empire rose as a Jewish centre on the ruins of Spain. As Ashkenaz went into decline, Eastern Europe started to rise. In a later generation, as we shall see, when Eastern Europe went into decline, the refugees from there built and strengthened other communities – America and the English speaking world, South America, and of course, Palestine. The Jewish story can be likened to a series of waves, swelling and declining. When one wave breaks, another moves in from behind to take its' place.



THE MODERN IMPLICATIONS OF THE WANDERING JEW. PERSONAL HISTORY



If we could only know the whole of our family story we would be able to say some extraordinary things. A teenage girl in the U.S.A. might be able to make a statement like this.

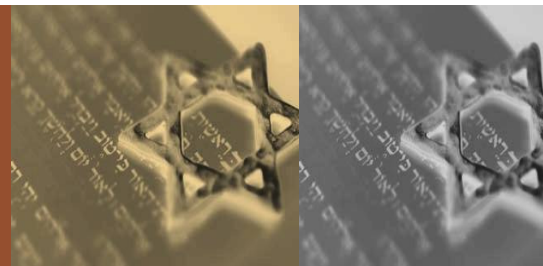
"I was born in America, and my parents and grandparents too, but my great grandparents came from Poland and Lithuania where they lived for several hundred years. Their ancestors came from Germany (Ashkenaz as it was called) where they lived in Mainz, a town on the river Rhine. They had been there for about five hundred years. Prior to that, the family had lived in Italy for about four hundred years and they had come to Italy in the third century from Eretz Israel where they had been since the return from the Babylonian exile."

Or a teenage boy in Israel might make a similar statement with different ports of call.

"I was born in Israel while my grandparents came from India. They were only in India for about a hundred years. Prior to that they had been in Iraq, to which they had come two hundred years earlier as merchants from Turkey. They had been in Turkey for some two hundred years since their arrival from Spain. The family had lived in Spain for about four hundred years, having made the crossing over from Morocco in North Africa, to which they had come from the community of Kairouan. They had been in Kairouan for some two hundred years after their passage from Babylon to which they had gone at the end of the First Temple period with the destruction."



COMMUNITIES THAT DID NOT WANDER: ISOLATED JEWRIES



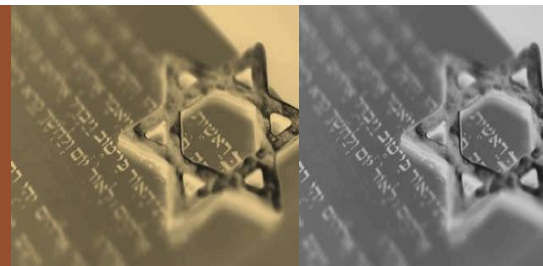
It should be noted that not all stories are so complex. There were some communities which stayed stable for many generations with little inflow or outflow. At a certain point in time, whatever their roots, these communities basically froze and stayed in place for millennia. Examples of such communities are the Yemenite community and the Ethiopian community. Let us briefly look at each of these.

Yemenite Jewry was a world unto itself since the early centuries of the Common Era when there was a considerable influx of Jews from Palestine and from the Babylonian area. Many Yemenite bedouin are known to have converted to Judaism in the ensuing centuries but from that time on we know of very few Jews who enter Yemen. We also know of very few Jews who leave. The result was a community of Jews who were cut off from many of the main currents of Jewish history happening elsewhere in the world. For at least the last thousand years of their stay in Yemen, the Jews experienced much hardship and persecution. The rules of Islam against non-believers were very strictly enforced and the Jews were, on the whole, a downtrodden group constantly humiliated by Moslem rulers.

The **Ethiopian Jews** were in certain ways in a similar position. The origins of the Jews in Ethiopia are unclear but we know of them as a separate group from some time in the middle ages. However, it seems as though their origins must be earlier since the form of Judaism that was extant among them was a Biblical form of Judaism and they knew nothing of post Biblical or Rabbinic Judaism, celebrating neither Purim nor Chanukah for example. They knew very little Hebrew. Their scriptures were in their language of Ge'ez. They lived in their own village communities headed by their own holy men and priests. They form perhaps the supreme example of a community of Jews who were so isolated that their version of Judaism diverged considerably from the mainstream developments in Rabbinic Judaism.



THE STORY SO FAR: SUMMING UP PART TWO



One thing that should be clear in all we have talked about is this. The classic Jewish community is a creation of Diaspora. The roots might lie in the sovereign or semi-sovereign centuries of Jewish life in Eretz Israel but the community as such, the community that formed the basis of Jewish life for the majority of Jewish history, was born in Diaspora. The Rabbis might have forged the blueprint in their struggle for the Jewish future in the generations after the destruction of the second Temple, but the plan was put into practice in the Diaspora.

Each community was slightly different, each time and place offered a slightly modified version of the original idea. But the idea of Jewish community was the backbone of Jewish existence in a hundred countries during dozens of generations. Without the framework of a Jewish community, it seems safe to say that the Jewish people would have disappeared, as so many other ancient peoples did over time. The fact that they lasted through history until the modern age, often in such difficult circumstances, says something about the power of the idea and the reality of Jewish community.

This, then, is the Jewish people's story in the pre-modern world. We have surveyed the dynamics of the community as it developed in the Diaspora through thousands of years. The rules of the game would change in detail from place to place and from time to time, but essentially the framework would stay the same. When the modern world dawned, however, the rules of the game *and the game itself* would change out of all recognition. It is to this that we shall now turn.

