From the 8th to the 12th century, Spain was the land of opportunity for Jews.

By Rabbi Ken Spiro

As the armies of Islam conquered larger and larger swaths of Europe, the Jews of the Middle East saw new opportunities opening up for them in Muslim Europe. One of the best opportunities proved to be Spain, starting with the Muslim conquest of 711 CE. Indeed, things were so good for Jews there, that to this day half the Jewish world is known as Sephardi meaning “Spanish.” (The other half would later become known as Ashkenazi, meaning “German.”)¹

In Muslim Spain, Jews found a symbiotic relationship emerging between them and the non-Jewish world that surrounded them.

¹ While the term Sephardi is often used to categorize all Jews who came from the Middle East/Muslim world, the term is not really accurate. Many of these communities have little or no connection historically with the Jews of Spain. The more accurate term would be Edot HaMizrach or "Communities of the East" which would cover all Jewish communities that are not Ashkenazi. Of course, the Ashkenazi Jews are not necessarily of German origin, they could have come anywhere from Central or Eastern Europe.
The Muslims impacted on the Jews, and some of the greatest Jewish scholars wrote in Arabic. But the impact was much greater the other way around. Indeed, there can be no question that the Islamic world, especially in Spain, did remarkably well because of the large number of Jews who were allowed to operate freely there. The positive impact of the Jews of Muslim Spain is yet another example of the fulfillment of the prophecy: “I will bless you and make your name great. You shall be a blessing. And I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.”

To quote the great Jewish historian Cecil Roth:

*The essential contribution of the Jews, as Jews, to the cultural life of the medieval world, and of medieval Europe in particular, depended basically upon two factors. They were literate, and they were international... Their work as intermediaries between the two mutually-exclusive cultural worlds [Muslim and Christian] was without any doubt the characteristic Jewish function in the Middle Ages: it was a function that they performed by virtue of their specific position and circumstances as Jews. That did not, however, preclude them from making memorable contributions to European civilization as individuals.*

**Jewish Contributions**

The Jewish contributions came in every sphere – whether economic or intellectual. For example:

- Jews excelled in skilled crafts. Jews were excellent tanners, metalworkers, goldsmiths, silversmiths and jewelers. (We see some of these skills surviving today. Yemenite Jews continue their reputation as silversmiths and Jewish diamond merchants are famous the world over.)

2 Genesis 12:2-3.
• Jews excelled in the sciences, particularly in medicine. Jewish doctors were everywhere, among the most famous was Maimonides (whom we will speak about later) and Hasdai ibn Shaprut, the 10th century physician to two caliphs who was considered one of the most influential people in Spain.

• Jews excelled in trade. Jews were the middlemen between the Muslim and Christian worlds, which at this time were engaged in huge rivalry and were not communicating directly with each other. As a result Jews became traders who covered the Far East, the Middle East, and Europe.

• Jews excelled in scholarship. The Muslims were fascinated by classical knowledge, but since they did not know either Greek or Latin, the Jews came in to fill the gap translating these works into Arabic. The Jews also helped to disseminate Arabic scholarship. Some classical scholarship of the ancient world had been lost after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Of that which remained, Jews translated the Arabic texts into Hebrew, then sent the translated texts to Europe, where other Jews translated the Hebrew into Latin – the language of the Roman Empire that was still the language of scholarship in Western Europe.

Some of the greatest Jewish writers and philosophers came from this time period. Three deserve special mention:

• Abraham ibn Ezra, the famed scientist, philosopher, astronomer, and biblical commentator.

• Bachya ibn Pakuda, the famed moralist who authored Duties of the Heart (a book that continues to be a highly popular text in Jewish ethical studies today), examining the obligations of one’s inner life and presenting a system to assess one’s true religious commitment.

• Judah HaLevi, the famed author of The Kuzari, a philosophical novel based on the story of the king of Khazaria. Basing himself on this
reportedly true story, Judah HaLevi imaginatively recreated the debate before the king in his novel, which continues to be popular to this day.

(In the 8th century, the king of Khazaria – a kingdom located between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea – undecided whether he should affiliate with the Christians or Muslims, had great scholars argue before him the merits of the world’s religions, and as a result of this debate converted to Judaism, as eventually did a goodly portion of his country; the history of Khazaria ended in 11th century when it was destroyed by a Byzantine-Russian coalition.)

The Jewish paradise in Spain ended abruptly when a cruel Muslim Berber Dynasty – Almohades – came to power in the 12th century. When Almohades seized southern Spain, they gave the Jews three choices: covert to Islam, leave, or die.

Of the many Jews fleeing Spain at this time was none other than the famed Maimonides (often known as Rambam, the acronym of his full name, Rabbi Moses ben Maimon).

(Incidentally, many of the famous Jews were known by their acronyms. This is because Jews up until this time did not have last names. While Sephardic Jews started taking last names more than 500 years ago, most Ashkenazi Jews did not use last names until forced to by Christian authorities around the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Jews were traditionally known by their first names and their father’s names, sometimes by their tribal names, such as Kohen or Levi, or places of their origin, and therefore, it was easier to shorten so many words to an acronym.)

**Maimonides**

Maimonides was born Moses ben Maimon on the eve of Passover in 1135 in Cordoba, Spain, to a prominent rabbinical family. In his family tree figured King David and Rabbi Judah HaNasi, who had compiled the Mishnah (as we saw in class #39). His primary teacher was his father, Rabbi Maimon ben
Joseph, a Jewish judge, who taught him not only the Talmud, but also the fundamentals of mathematics, astronomy and philosophy.

Maimonides was only 13 when his family was forced to leave Spain. After wandering homeless for many years – wanderings during which his father died – Maimonides and his brother David finally settled in Fustat near Cairo, Egypt. There Maimonides continued his Torah studies, while his brother David, a dealer in gems, supported the family. When David perished in a sea voyage in 1166, the burden fell on Maimonides.

Maimonides refused to make money from his Torah knowledge, and therefore, in order to earn a living, he became a physician, having begun his study of medicine years earlier. Within a short time, he was so famous as a healer that he was appointed physician to the Court of Sultan Saladin in Cairo. He was also appointed the chief rabbi of Cairo.

In addition to being a famous doctor and healer, Maimonides was a prolific writer.4 Of his voluminous works – most of which were composed in Arabic but written with Hebrew characters – four stand out as perhaps the most famous:

- **Commentary on the Mishnah** – his explanation of the Mishnah
- **Mishneh Torah** – his greatest accomplishment, a monumental compendium covering all of the Oral Law, also known as Yad Hazakah
- **Guide to the Perplexed** – a philosophical treatise which discusses traditional Jewish thought and compares it to classical Greek philosophy; it is considered the single greatest philosophical work ever produced by a Jew
- **Discourse on the World to Come** – his explanation of the Messianic Age which includes the Thirteen Principles of Faith

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During his time, the writings of Maimonides were highly controversial. Some of his statements were deemed too radical, others were simply misunderstood. At one point, his works were banned, and after his death in 1204, burned at the instigation of some rabbis. However, when nine years later the French king Louis IX ordered the Talmud burned, Jews interpreted this as a “measure-for-measure” punishment from God for the burning of the works of Maimonides. Indeed, the rabbi who instigated the ban and burning, Rabbi Jonah Gerondi, subsequently repented for doing so and authored the book *Sha’arey Teshuva* (“Gates of Repentance”) as a form of atonement for his derogatory statements about Maimonides.

Today the works of Maimonides are universally accepted and revered. Indeed, Maimonides is known in the Jewish world as one of most important of the *Rishonim* or “the First Ones,” who between 1038 and 1440 added significantly to Jewish scholarship.

It is far beyond the scope of this overview to discuss the dozens of great rabbinic personalities who were the *Rishonim*. Despite the very difficult time of Jewish history in which they lived, they insured that it became also one of the greatest periods of Torah scholarship. The impact of the *Rishonim* was monumental and, together with the rabbis who created the Talmud, they played a pivotal role in transmitting the Torah and shaping the law and practice of Diaspora Judaism.

However, there is one whom we must mention. In addition to Maimonides, he was among the most famous of the *Rishonim* – he was the French rabbi, Solomon ben Isaac, known the world over by his acronym: Rashi.

**Rashi**

A question may be asked here, how did Jews end up in France?

First of all, Jews were living in France when it was a far-flung outpost of the Roman Empire, but for a long time these Jewish settlements were small. The expansion came through some interesting quirks of fate.
Jewish tradition has it that in the 8th century, Charlemagne, the King of the Franks, seeing how helpful Jews were to the Muslims, asked the caliph to send him a few rabbis, knowing that once he had rabbis more Jews would follow.

Additionally, Jews were frequently kidnapped by pirates who knew that their fellow Jews would pay handsomely to redeem them. There is a legend concerning four captives, rabbis from the Babylonian community, each of whom was ransomed by a different Jewish community. According to the legend, a small group of French Jews put up a lot of money to redeem Rabbi Nosson HaBavli on the condition that he come and start a yeshiva in their community in France – which he did.5

Rashi, the most famous of the French rabbis was born Solomon Ben Isaac in 1040 in France, though he was sent to study in a yeshiva in Germany.

After he completed his studies, Rashi returned to France and settled in his hometown of Troyes. Just like Maimonides, he refused to make money from his Torah knowledge, earning a living instead from several vineyards that he owned.

Rashi had an absolutely encyclopedic knowledge of the Written and Oral Law. He took it upon himself to answer some of the most obvious questions that come up when reading the text of the Jewish Bible; this is why today so many editions include his explanations alongside the text.

Another thing that Rashi did was to write a commentary on the entire Babylonian Talmud. Today, this commentary appears on the inner margin of virtually every Talmudic page. We find his explanations indispensable because as we move further and further away from Mount Sinai, it becomes harder and harder to understand the nuances of Jewish law.

5 The story is assumed to be a legend and the actual creator of the first yeshiva in France was probably Rabbi Gershom Me'or HaGaolah (965-1040). However, the story does reflect the grim reality of kidnap and ransom which was an unfortunate feature of Jewish life during this period.
Rashi did not have sons, but he did have two very famous daughters, Miriam and Yocheved, whom he educated in the Talmud. Rashi’s daughters married great scholars and fathered great scholars. Rashi’s sons-in-law, his students and his descendants became part of a group of scholars that is known as the Ba’alei HaTosefot, meaning “Masters of Addition.” The Ba’alei HaTosefot added commentary to the Talmud which is featured on the outer margin of every Talmudic page. The best known of this group is Rashi’s grandson, Rabbi Jacob ben Meir, also known as Rabbeinu Ta’am.

Rashi lived until 1105, and he survived the first Crusade, which saw the slaughter of about 30% of the Jews of Europe.

According to Jewish tradition, he met one of the leaders of the Crusade, the Norman nobleman Godfrey de Bouilllon. As Godfrey embarked on the Crusade to liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims, Rashi told him that he would succeed, but that he would come back home with only two horses. In response, Godfrey vowed that if Rashi’s prediction was wrong, he’d kill him upon his return.

As it happened, Godfrey came back home from the Crusade with only three horses, but as he entered the archway to the city of Troyes, the center stone of the arch fell and killed one of them.

In the next class, we will see just what role Godfrey de Bouilllon played in the Crusades, and how this shameful period in history came about.