

A Sample from ...

HISTORY, POLITICS & LOSS
SELECTED WRITINGS OF SHELOMO ALFASSÁ

by

SHELOMO ALFASSÁ

TABLE OF CONTENTS

From Babylonia to Barcelona: Uniting of East and West	13
Population Movements Complicate the ‘Who is Sephardic’ Question	18
Qairawan: Between East and West	23
An Overview of the Berber Jews of Morocco	26
Origins and Stigma of the Iberian Garment of Shame, the <i>San Benito</i>	32
Origin of the Statement of Sultan Bayezit II on the Jews	54
The Tree of Wisdom: Rabbi Isak Alfassi	62
The Classic of Constantinople: <i>Me’am Lo’ez</i>	66
Pride of the Sephardim: Haham Yossef Karo	72
Sephardic Contributions to the development of The State of Israel	78
The Four Sephardi Synagogues	106
A Sephardic Perspective on Hebron	109
History of Various Sephardic Organizations in the United States	118
The Little Known Oriental Bureau of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society	127
The Forgotten Jews of the Lower East Side: Greeks, Turks and Syrians	133
The Turkish Jews in America	140
The Myth of the Pure Sephardi: <i>Sephardi Tahor</i>	144
Fortune Telling and Palm Reading are Not Part of Judaism	152
Origins of Noise Making to Wipe Out the Evil Name on Purim	165
The Evil Eye in Contemporary Sephardic Culture	179
How the Turks Saved the Jews from Genocide	183
Spain: Selling Culture to Jews or Selling Out Jewish Culture	185
Nazi Hatred Dwells in the Arab World	191
Beware: Revisionism is Thriving in Iran	197
Iran Diverts Attention at Opening of UN Council in Geneva	201
The Call to Abandon Haifa: An Echo of History	203

Modern Day <i>Dhimmis</i> , Awake	205
Let us not be Cowards!	209
Finally Fighting With Dignity	212
Remodeling Benazir Bhutto into a Saint	216
Sharon has ‘Isabella Syndrome’	221
Beleaguered but Beloved, Gaza	224
Gaza, Jewish Once and Forever	227
Palestine: According to America, it’s Here!	232
Shekel to Become Euro? Another Nail in the Coffin	236
One Hundred Years Later: 1903-2003 Where are we?	240
Turks Unfairly Remain a Hated People	244
The Vatican and its Friends Are Not Your Friends	249
<i>Andalusi</i> - What’s In a Name?	254
An Examination of the Sephardic Surname ‘Miles’	258
The Two Men Named Don Luis de Carvajal	262
The Champion of Zion: Hakham Mordehai Eliyahu	266
A World Now Gone: What Have We Lost	272
Jewish Refugees: Real Victims Deserving Real Recognition	276
Armenian Propaganda Campaign Alive and Well in Jerusalem	281
Last WWI Vets Dying, Get You Thinking About Your Family	284
Remembering Sephardic Veterans	286
Farewell Madonna	292
Remembering Cecil Roth on the 35th Anniversary of his Passing	296
Professor Stanford J. Shaw: A Personal Appreciation	301
Judy Frankel, the Ladino Songstress, 65	304
Thoughts on the Death of a Righteous Muslim	307
Rabbi Shelomo Shaul Kassin (1908-1982)	311
Reverend Samuel Benaroya of Seattle (1908-2003)	315
Death of the Hahambashi	318

Death of The Chief Sephardic Rabbi Of Jerusalem	321
Death of the Grand Rabbi of Tunisia	323
Lamp of the Greek Jews has Dimmed	326
Hank Halio, 91 - A Sephardic Cultural Icon	331
Reverend Abraham Lopes Cardozo (1914-2006)	334
The Great Kabbalist of Jerusalem: The Passing of a Much Loved Rabbi	338
Remembering Chief Rabbi Jacob Meir	342
About the Author	347

Note: the page numbers will not correlate with this sample.

From Babylonia to Barcelona: Uniting of East and West

Many in the Jewish world often argue about who is “Sephardic.” But what many people forget, is that the Jews of both Iberia (Spain and Portugal) and the Mizrahi lands such as Babylonia, developed, and still share, common religious and cultural bonds. The shared religious traditions that the Sephardim developed and came to possess, were based upon unique religious traditions, collective ideals and customs that has been nurtured from the Iberian/North African Atlantic seaboard to the eastern portion of the Fertile Crescent for at least 1,500 years.

Little more than six decades after being liberated from the bonds of Christendom, the Jews in what is today modern Spain, were greeted by Rabbi Natronai who had traveled from Babylonia. In 772 CE he spread the teaching of the Babylonian Talmud to his Hebrew co-religionists who had been hungry to learn. Through his actions, Natronai was able to bring the standard practice of Judaism, as it was in Babylonia to the budding Jewish centers of Torá in Spain. It can be said, because of his actions, that the communities of the East and West were forever linked, and Sephardic Jewry proceeded to advance.

Thriving on the new lessons taught by Rabbi Natronai, the Spanish Jews realized there was much more to be learned, and later reached out from *Al-Andalus* (Spain) to Gaon Amram ben Sheshna (c. 850 CE) in Babylonia for assistance. In the West, the demand for a written guide to prayers had been desperately needed. A proper written guide of the accurate oral blessings and prayers had to be developed, because Judaism as it was being practiced throughout entire communities was at risk of being lost due to ignorance. Initially this was a problem, as there

had been a prohibition in the East on writing down sacred blessings, but this was about to change and with it-the practice of Judaism would perpetually be revolutionized. Contact with Gaon Amram was initiated by Rabbi Isaac bar Simeon, head of the Jewish community in Al-Andalus. Isaac had directed a great many questions which effected his community to the Gaonim around 850 CE. His numerous inquiries were answered with a surprising response which forever changed world Jewry. Isaac was sent a written guide book on prayers which Amram assembled for them. The book which was known as the *Seder Amram*, (Order of Prayers) came with a dispatch that read:

By God's mercy may there be much peace on you and your children, on all scholars and students, as well as on all our Israelite brethren living there. Greetings from us and from Rabbi Zemah, the president of the judicial court, from the teachers and sages of the Academy, from its pupils and from the city of Sura! All are well...We think of your welfare and keep you in our memory.

Up until this time, there were no prayer books, and many Jews understood there was merely a rabbinic ruling to recite a list of 100 blessings daily. Although Natronai had provided earlier directives to the thriving Jewish community on this issue, it was the *Seder Amram* which helped the community really understand day to day Judaism as it was being practiced in Babylonia, and how the sages thought it should be practiced elsewhere.

Amram was the first to compose a logical arrangement including prayers for the whole year as well as the pertinent laws. This book filled with ancient *tefillah* (prayers), is the oldest surviving one which had been handed down, one developed from much earlier rabbinical scholars of the *Tannaim* and *Amoraim* period. The *Seder*, *Yesod ha-*

Amrami, was sent to the community of Barcelona. This book was interspersed with decisions from the *Talmud* and with notes of customs prevailing in the *yeshivot* of Babylonia. This hand written volume contained morning and afternoon prayers, evening prayer (without the *Amidah*), the bedtime *Shema*, prayers for *Shabbat*, *Yom Tov*, as well as many others prayers. The book was a success and reached popularity among the Jews all over Spain, and even beyond into France. It was this very Babylonian prayer book which originally was sent to Spain, then copied, that became the standard in the West. At the time when Ashkenazi Jewry was still in its infancy in Dark Age Europe, this book went on to develop into the later framework which would become the subsequent German/Polish liturgies.

A catalyst for further expansion of the traditions as they were practiced in the East to the West, belongs to Rabbi Hasdai ibn Shaprut (915-970 CE) the principle Jewish leader of Muslim Spain. While the Chinese were inventing playing cards and the Vikings were exploring desolate Greenland, Muslim Cordoba was thriving as Europe's intellectual center and the world's most populous city. There, Hasdai appointed Rabbi Moshe ben Enoch to the head of the Talmud school of Cordoba. With this action by Hasdai, the Jews were able to detach themselves from their intellectual dependence on the East. Even the Muslim leader, the caliph, considered this a favorable shift, as he wanted to be independent from anything to do with the East himself, even if this was not necessarily an Islamic matter.

Rabbi Moshe ben Enoch was a young man, one of the four scholars that traveled from Sura (in Babylonia), in order to collect contributions for their *yeshivot*. Traveling to raise funds was a common, but potentially dangerous Jewish practice. A traditional story tells of Moshe's arduous ordeal. While sailing on the Adriatic Sea near the coastal city of Bari, he, together with his wife and young son, as well as their traveling

mates, were captured by Islamic pirates. Legend holds that the Muslim captain became lustful for Moshe's beautiful wife, but she would entertain nothing of the sort. In a moment of anguish, she asked her husband whether those who were drowned in the sea could look forward to the Resurrection when the *mashiah* (messiah) arrives, and when Moshe answered her in the positive saying: "The Lord said, I will bring them back from Bashan, I will bring them back from the depths of the sea," she jumped overboard, drowning herself in the depth of the ocean.

The centuries lend to a variation of the story, but it has been told over generations that Moshe was taken to Cordoba with his young son Enoch to be sold as slaves. There they were redeemed by the Jewish community about 948 CE. Soon after, Moshe went to a house of learning, took a seat in the corner, and listened quietly to a Talmudic discourse by Nathan, a *dayan* (judge) of the Cordoban *Bet Din* (court). Moshe, a stranger dressed in rags, made remarks which attracted attention of the men in the room. His further detailed explanation of the passage which Nathan had quoted-as well as his swift answers to all questions addressed to him, astonished the entire assembly. Nathan was so overwhelmed with Moshe's wisdom, he was said to have voluntarily resigned that same day, and considered from then on himself as a pupil of Moshe. The affluent community of Cordoba treated Moshe with great respect and honored him immediately by electing him as rabbinical leader of the community. At the time, Moshe was still under the eyes of his captors. But after intervention by Shaprut (who was said to be rejoicing because of Moshe's election), he was able to intercede on his behalf to the caliph, Abd al-Rachman, who soon ordered the bail dropped, even though his captives wanted increasingly more riches after finding out their prisoner was a learned Jewish man. According to Ibn Daud (1110-1180 CE), because of Moshe ben Enoch, Spanish Jews obtained independence from the Babylonian yeshivot, and became the,

“chief diocesan authorities for the majority of Jews in the Islamic world.”

Over a period of 400 years, while the majority of world Jewry was living under Muslim rule in both the East and West, Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewry grew, and a shared intellectual tradition framed around *halakha* (law) and *minhag* (tradition) flourished. Although music, food, and folklore are all important ties, the tie that binds Jews from both traditional Mizrahi and Sephardi lands is one that is based upon a historic epoch of history in which religious framework served to unite communities of people, who by geography, had been separated. Torá is what brought them together then, Torá is what keeps us together now.

Image Magazine, April 2005 & Israel National News, March 11, 2005

www.alfassa.com for more information