

CATALUNYA AND THE MYTH OF SEPHARAD

by Teresa Calders and Esperança Valls*

It is well known that the concepts of state and nation do not always coincide: there are nations without a state and states that endeavour to demonstrate that they are a nation. This last group develop all kinds of mechanisms to prove their status, with purportedly historical events that took place back in the mists of time. In order to show that Spain as a state corresponds to a unique nation, Spanish historians have had to distort history. Once the myth is created and assimilated in the collective imagination, it is difficult to uncover the falsehoods and correct the situation.

An example of this practice is the use to which the term Sepharad has been put. In Israeli Hebrew, the current Spanish state is called Sepharad; but Sepharad never corresponded to what is nowadays known as Spain, either in antiquity or in the Middle Ages. The first appearance of the term Sepharad is in the Bible in the Book of Obadiah, verse 20. In this fragment, Sepharad refers to a place in Asia Minor. For unknown reasons, from about the time of the Gaonim of Babylon, this name began to be employed to refer to land on the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim rule. Later its use was extended to include the whole of Castile. However, it was never used to refer to the land of

the Catalan-speakers. The territory that in the present day is known as Spain was not known by this name until well into the sixteenth century. From then on the word Sephardim has been used to refer to all descendants of the Jews that were expelled from the Peninsula.

For a long time, researchers from abroad (Kauffman, Benedikt, Septimus, Schwarzfuchs, Toaff, Dinour, Assis, Touati-Wachsstock and so on) and from Catalunya (Feliu, Riera, Maravall...) have demonstrated, published and otherwise spread the idea that Sepharad is the term the Jews used in mediaeval times to refer to Muslim lands on the Iberian Peninsula. Among



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other sources, these writers based their assertion on numerous testimonies of mediaeval Jewish authors that perfectly distinguished between Catalunya and Sepharad. Rabbi Yitshaq Sheshet Perfet, Isaac Lattes de Montpellier, Avraham ibn Daud and Maimonides himself are some examples. The failure to accept that the Jews of the Catalan-speaking territories of mediaeval times were not part of Sepharad is to falsify history. Such an act leads to a series of errors that are hard to justify.

If the Catalan Jews had lived in Sepharad they would be Sephardites and would have spoken Sephardi. Nothing could be further from the

truth: the Jews, in this respect, were no different from the Christians. The differences between the Jews that lived in areas of the peninsula ruled by Muslims and those that lived in areas ruled by Christians are remarkable and are amply documented.

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Another aspect we must not forget is that mediaeval Catalan Judaism is unique since it is the fruit of the



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confluence of three different currents: the troubadour poetry and the Kabbalah originating in Provence; Tosafist thought from Central Europe; and Arab poetry and the interest in the linguistic and grammatical studies imported by the Jews that fled the Almo-had Dynasty. These tendencies came into harmony, developed and gave rise to figures of a unique nature who undertook outstanding work in the fields of science, exegesis, medicine, poetry, prose, law, linguistics, cartography and so on. Figures such as Nachmanides, Shlomo ben Aderet and Meshullam of Piera, to name but a few.

The mediaeval Jews that lived under Christian rule on the Iberian Peninsula, which they referred to collectively as the 'Land of Edom', or specifically with the name of each kingdom, possessed characteristics that included their vernacular, social customs, political organisation, liturgical rituals and so on that were not Sephardi but rather Catalan. In the same way that a Christian from Castile showed special traits that distinguished them from a Christian from Catalunya or Galicia, so did the Jews. The supposed unity of the Jews at the time of their definitive expulsion in 1492, seeing them as a well-defined,

compact collective known as Sephardite, is mere fantasy. It makes no sense to allow it to continue to exist. What is more, this myth does not help us to label the Catalan Jews that fled around the time of the events of 1391. Neither does it help to answer why the Jewish communities installed in Africa and various points around the Mediterranean before 1492 also came to be known as Sephardis once their fellow Jews from the Peninsula joined them.

The Jews, like the Christians living under the Catalan monarchy, developed their own activities in an independent territory that was neither Tsarfat (contemporary France), nor Sepharad (modern-day Spain). These were the lands where Catalan is spoken: Catalunya, Mallorca, València and Roussillon (as well as a part of Occitania), Provence itself and the Languedoc. It consisted of a Jewish Occitan-Catalan cultural area of a highly homogenous

nature, giving rise to a uniquely Catalan variety of Judaism. An awareness of a Catalan identity (which, as we have seen is by no means solely political) is well-documented in Hebrew texts of the period. We see how they are maintained throughout the early period of the Diaspora, until a point is reached where, while never ceasing to be Jews, those in exile lost the memory of their Catalan past at an unknown period of time. A subsequent distortion of history led them to believe that they and the rest of the Jews expelled from the Peninsula were Sephardis. The intention of this falsehood was to consolidate a supposed political, cultural and linguistic unity that never actually existed. If we wish to be faithful to history, therefore, when we wish to refer to mediaeval Jews that lived in Catalan-speaking lands, we must be precise and speak strictly of Catalan Jews.

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