The Jewish World of the Sixteenth Century, Part Ⅲ

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Introduction

• Purpose of the lectures
  – Introduce a flavor of the first century of the “early modern” period in Jewish history
  – Identify several key events that have shaped Jewish history ever since that time

• Who am I
  – Former senior intelligence officer at CIA
  – Developed an interest in Jewish studies later in life
  – Began teaching adult Jewish education as a second career
Bibliography

• Wikipedia a very good place to start
• Encyclopedia Judaica best for individual topics
• My favorites
  – R. Scheindlin, A Short History of the Jewish People
  – J. Neusner, A Short History of Judaism
  – R. Seltzer, Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History
  – D. Frank and O. Leaman (eds), History of Jewish Philosophy
  – E. Barnavi, A Historical Atlas of the Jewish People
  – D. B. Ruderman, Early Modern Jewry: A New Cultural History
Approach

• Background to the sixteenth century
• The Jewish world in four chapters
  – The expelled Iberian Jews (the Sefardim)
  – The new Kabbalists
  – Rabbis and intellectuals
  – The eastward expansion (Poland)
The Medieval Jewish World

• Jewish communities throughout Europe, N. Africa, W. Asia
  – An important part of the Islamic expansion (622 – 1492) into N. Africa, Iberia
  – In Italy continually since destruction of Second Temple (70 to present)
  – Invited to be a part of Charlemagne’s empire

• Authority decentralized through most of the period
  – Rabbinical authority in Baghdad until 11th century
  – Authorities in Jewish law in N. France, Spain, Egypt, Italy
  – Networks for trading goods and legal opinions widespread
Jews in Sefard & Ashkenaz

- **Sefard**: Jewish communities in Iberia, N. Africa
  - Jews active in civil service, commerce, literary world under Muslim control (through 13th century)
  - During and after Reconquista, Jews stayed and worked for Christian rulers (11th-15th centuries)

- **Ashkenaz**: Jewish communities in Holy Roman Empire (9th – 14th centuries)
  - Invited to immigrate by newly Christianized local rulers
  - First Crusade (1096) a watershed in Jewish continuity
  - Jewish communities routinely pillaged in 12th - 13th centuries (Germany, France, England)
  - Blood libels in 12th – 14th centuries kept communities at risk
  - Expulsions from W. Europe led to invitations from E. Europe
The Fifteenth Century

• Medieval world transformed to the Early Modern world

• Spain
  – Beginning in 1391, a century of increasing persecution of Jews and “New Christians”
  – Creation of Inquisition to root out Christian heresies
  – Culminates in expulsions, 1492, 1497

• Poland
  – Continuing expulsions from Germany
  – Polish kings protect Jews from local persecutions
  – Lithuania expels but quickly rescinds expulsion for economics

• Ottoman Empire
  – Empire growing in size & influence
  – Jewish immigration moderate mid-century
  – Jews formally invited after expulsions from Iberia
  – Became numerous in Istanbul and Salonika
The Wandering Sefardim

• The Jews of Spain
  – Not the New Christians (conversos, marranos)
  – Remained Jews in spite of increasing persecution
  – Expelled in 1492, 200,000 – 250,000 Jews in Spain at the time
  – 50,000 converted rather than leave

• Jews of the Expulsion
  – Estimate of 200,000 left, 10% died en route
  – 90,000 to Ottoman Empire, 40,000 to Northern Europe, 30,000 to North Africa, 5,000 to Americas, rest elsewhere
  – Maintained much of their culture, including language (Ladino) and a distinct liturgy
The Expulsion: Immediate Effects
Sefardim in 16th Century
Those Left Behind: The New Christians

• 100,000 – 200,000 Spanish Jews converted to Christianity in 15th century
  – Some forced (pain of death)
  – Some volunteered (social/economic advantages)
  – Moslems faced same problems
• New Christians, AKA conversos, marranos found conversion was a mixed blessing
  – Many found distrust from the “real Spaniards”
  – Others accused by Inquisition of not being Christian enough (some practiced Judaism in secret)
• Following the expulsion, many New Christians followed their (former) coreligionists into exile (but many did not)
Life in the New Diaspora

• Who were the Sefardim?
  – Jews who remained Jews throughout
  – Jews who had converted and had returned to Judaism
  – Jews who had converted, went into exile, and remained Christian!

• Three major issues for Sefardim
  – Psychological: second expulsion
  – Theological: what did it mean to be Jewish among the Sefardim
  – Political: how did the rabbis' authority change in exile?
New Beginnings

- Sefardim in Istanbul, Salonika, Italy, Amsterdam entered areas with older Jewish communities
- Established their own communities with little cultural interchange (many became dominant)
- Culturally Spanish enclaves that persisted for centuries
- Weakening of rabbinical authority throughout Sefardic communities
The New Kabbalists, Background

- Jewish Mysticism probably originated around first century
- Based on a profound need to know God, not just God's laws
  - Some want to see/hear/experience God "up close"
  - Others want to understand how God thinks, acts, chooses
- Became "Kabbalah" around 1000, with recognition of God's emanation as key to knowing God
- *The Zohar* in late 13\textsuperscript{th} century became focus of Kabbalists
Sacred Literature Cycle

Body of Sacred Literature

New Commentaries
New Historical Events
New Source Material
New Editing

Enhanced Body of Sacred Literature
The Spread of Kabbalah
The Zohar

• Collection of mystical commentaries on the Torah
• Issue of its antiquity
• Compiled by Rabbi Moses from León, Spain, 1280s
• Classic form of Jewish literature: the *Midrash*
  – A form of exegesis on the Bible that dates to Talmudic times (200 CE and later)
  – “Fill in the blanks” left by Biblical terseness
  – Stories that illuminate the meaning
  – Traditionally organized by the part of the Torah
  – Major part of the *Zohar*, but far wilder and more imaginative than most classic *Midrashim*
Safed (Tsfat)

- Kabbalah transformed after 1492 expulsions
- Community of mystics formed in Safed, in Ottoman Empire
  - Became an important commercial city with exiles
  - Realities of double exile reinforced, exile of the soul
  - Messianism again became important
  - The need to achieve redemption was widespread
- Community responsible for popularizing Kabbalah
- Kabbalah became widely known 1550-1600
- Two primary Kabbalists
  - R. Moses ben Jacob Cordovero
  - R. Isaac Luria
R. Moses Cordovero (1522-1570)

• One of the greatest theoreticians of Kabbalah
• Mystical philosopher, mystic & tsaddik
• Worked on problems of the “mind” of God
• Literary stylist, most work preserved
• Some contemporary Kabbalists consider themselves “Cordoverians”
R. Isaac Luria (1534 – 1572)

• The ARI
• A visionary, imaginative mystic
• Wrote very little himself, work transcribed and interpreted by his disciples
• Created new theosophical structures (internal workings of the Godhead) and creation stories
• Died very young (38)
• Many contemporary Kabbalists trace their ideas directly to Lurianic Kabbalah
Lurianic Creation

- Key concept is contraction (*tsimtsum*) & expansion (*hitpashtut*)
  - *Ayn Sof*—the unknowable aspect of God—initially occupies all of the material & spiritual world
  - *Ayn Sof* withdraws to leave room for something else (*tsimtsum*)
- With a single emanated beam of spiritual energy into the void *Ayn Sof* creates the material world
  - Energy is so intense, it shatters the containers God created to hold it
  - Lets evil (represented by the broken containers) into the broken world
- The task of the Jewish people is to repair the containers, gather up the energy, and “mend the world” (*tikkun olam*)
- Idea of *tikkun olam* has become central in nearly all contemporary Jewish life
- "Broken world" idea comes directly from "double exile" experience
Summary

• Medieval Jewish history
  – Followed Islamic expansion and often remained after contraction
  – Invited to participate in Western European economic expansions
  – Often expelled when economic value (or religious acceptability) declined

• Sefardim
  – Jews and their descendents expelled from Spain and Portugal
  – Moved throughout Ottoman Empire and Europe
  – Brought with them a distinct culture that exists to this day
  – Mixing of Jews and conversos led to weakened Jewish identity

• Kabbalists in Safed
  – Built on esoteric mystical tradition
  – Innovated thinking about nature of God
  – Began the "popularization" of Kabbalah that exists to this day