

REZENSION

Ray, Jonathan: Jewish Life in Medieval Spain. A New History

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Reviewed by Tanja Zakrzewski.

With the knowledge that he is adding to a rather saturated topic, Ray concisely summarises the current status quo in research regarding Jews in Medieval Spain. While one strand of research favours *convivencia* and focuses on Jewish-Christian relations, the other focuses on the so-called “golden age” of Jewish life in Spain. Both approaches have their merits. *Convivencia* has recently come under scrutiny since it is often misunderstood (and mistranslated) as a solely peaceful form of coexistence, disregarding the fact that social contact is a morally neutral term that includes friendship and mutual disinterest as well as conflict. While *convivencia*’s focus is on Jewish-Christian relations, whatever form they may take, the golden age refers to an overly positive view of Jewish life in Spain prior to the pogroms of 1391. The pitfall being that this narrative is fostered by hindsight.

Ray positions himself among these approaches, but a little to the side. Rather than keeping religious tolerance as the sole determining factor of *convivencia*, he focuses on the inner structure and internal affairs of Jewish communities in a time where Christians contested Judaism at every turn. Religious tolerance is then complemented by a variety of other driving factors. People have always been motivated by more than just religion, and so Ray considers everyday interactions and asks how friendship, petty rivalries among neighbours, jealousy and love affected Jews in Medieval Spain. Furthermore, Ray refrains from organising Jewish history exclusively along tragic events such as the riots of 1391 or the expulsion of the Jews in 1492, and seeks to point out continuities beyond these events. In fact, he explicitly urges us to “reconsider this narrative of a long and inevitable decline by locating these episodes of anti-Jewish violence in their proper historical contexts” (p. 8) and shifts the focus from seeing these episodes as Christian hostility towards Jews to a general increase in the precariousness of Jewish life itself. Lastly, Ray sets out to show us how diverse Medieval Jewish life was. Rather than conceiving of Jews as a monolith, he reminds us that Jews experienced life differently depending on factors including the region they lived in, their social background, their gender or their marital status, and all these aspects of Jewish life were then again affected differently by outside factors such as the plague, a declining economy and Christian anti-Judaism.

To many, Jewish life in al-Andalus is characterised by religious piety, economic success and a thriving cultural life that expanded into Muslim and Christian society. And while all of this is true to some extent, Ray reminds us that this image of Andalusian Jewry is bound to a very narrow corpus of sources that stem from a very specific group of Jews. Of

course, Juda Halevi's view on Jewish life is important, but it is only one voice from a member of the Jewish elite whose poetry has survived over centuries. Likewise, the correspondence between local politicians and the response literature penned by rabbis from various communities are but small windows into Jewish life and they, too, come from a privileged point of view. The many merchants, carpenters, farmers and, it needs to be emphasised, nearly all women remain hidden in history because they either did not produce written sources, a very limiting methodological bias in historiography, or those sources were lost over time.

Ray briefly walks the reader through the important topics of the period: Jewish-Muslim relations, political discourse under Muslim rule, power struggles within the Jewish communities, differing opinions on what constitutes proper Judaism and cultural contributions such as the poems of Juda Halevi.

In the second chapter, Ray swiftly deals with the thesis of the decline of Andalus Jewry and suggests that we view the period that is marked by the reconquista as a transition period. Many wealthy Jews decided to leave al-Andalus for North Africa or the Levante, many other stayed or moved towards Christian Europe. For the Jewish elite, the golden age of Spanish Jewry may have been over, but for the silent majority life continued under Christian rule. Ray draws attention to another popular misconception: the notion that Sephardi Jews avoided living under Christian rule and exclusively moved to Arabic countries. Ray points out that there are many who either stayed and ignored the greater implications of the reconquista and that there were also many Andalus Jews who settled in the south of France or ventured even further into Christian Europe.

The third chapter is dedicated to those Andalus Jews who fled to the northern part of the Iberian Peninsula or well into France in order to escape Almohad persecution in the regions remaining under Muslim rule. Ray points out how the Christian rulers were delighted to welcome Jewish intellectuals, artists and philosophers – something that is often overshadowed by knowledge of the events in the 14th century. Within the Jewish communities, the struggle to define what constitutes Judaism intensified in the context of Catholicism and its missionary efforts and often anti-Jewish sentiment. Ray summarises very concisely the competing answers to the question of how far Jews should and could integrate into Christian society without losing their Jewish way of life. He does so in a manner that does not overwhelm readers who may not be that familiar with rabbinical discourse and Jewish theology, thus making his work accessible for a variety of scholars and students alike.

When dealing with the 14th century, Ray immediately addresses the elephant in the room: The traumatic event of 1391 that ultimately paved the way for the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. He also points out how the anti-Jewish violence of 1392 could not have been foreseen at the beginning of the century and how we often let it overshadow the previous decades. Those decades, of course, saw conflict between Jews and their Christian neighbours, but mostly within the Jewish communities or between Jewish communities. Ray readjusts the focus and has us take a closer look at the rivalries between Court Jews and their community leaders, between different socio-economic groups within a community and disputes between communities from different towns. Furthermore, he offers brief descriptions of Jewish contributions to advances in the fields of medicine and science as well as their pivotal role in local and international trade networks.

Jewish life, despite the peak in violence from Christians, mainly took place in Jewish spaces and revolved around everyday issues. One of the most pressing issues in Jewish everyday life was poverty, and, seeing as the community leaders did not prioritise the needs of lower-class Jews, these Jews took matters into their own hands. They formed mutual aid organisations that mimicked community structures on a smaller scale, they brought petitions before the court in order to pressure their rabbis and community elders into action. The 14th century was rife with intra-communal change and reform, sometimes fuelled by conflict and sometimes fuelled by solidarity and common goals.

The 14th century was indeed so rife with calamitous events (p. 168) that he dedicates another chapter to this century, but this time with the broader political and social context in mind.

Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities were already set upon by on-going wars between Castile and Aragon, civil wars within these kingdoms and the economic collapse that followed. To make matters worse, the plague arrived in the peninsula in 1348 and consequently ravaged its population. The equalising effect of the plague did not last long, however, and soon Jews were made the scapegoat for the tragedies that befell Spanish society in the second half of the 14th century. Again, Ray stays true to his *modus operandi* and describes Jewish responses to these events despite the chapter's broader focus.

The following sixth chapter deals with the anti-Jewish pogroms of 1391 and the long-lasting effects they had on those Jewish communities that survived the attacks and the consequences for Spanish society in its entirety. The mass violence was followed by often forced mass conversions, thus creating a new social group: the Conversos. The emergence of the Conversos as a social group in its own right caused tension within the remaining Jewish communities as well as within Christian society. Ray breaks down the complexity of shifting boundaries, contested loyalties and social tension in a manner that is accessible for readers who are not as familiar with these intricacies as scholars of Jewish history in Spain.

It is almost impossible to write about Spanish Jews in the 15th century without addressing the expulsion of the Jews in 1492. Therefore, Ray strives, and succeeds, in taking the focus off the looming but not inevitable expulsion and again meticulously puts Jewish life at the centre of this very difficult chapter. Major historical events, no matter how traumatic and dramatic they may be in the grand scheme of history, often have little to no impact on the everyday life of common Jews. Whether they were aware of the Disputation of Tortosa, whether they personally felt the rising tension between Christians, Conversos and Jews or whether they knew that the Catholic Monarchs contemplated expelling the remaining Jews did not change the fact that they still went about their daily life. They still worked, attended weddings, watched their children play and complained about life's little inconveniences.

Historiography often reduces Jews to victims being tossed from tragedy to tragedy and yet Ray manages to show us their humanity and their perseverance in the face of adversity.

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