

# Great Controversies



**Medieval Period  
700's - 1400's**

**The Development of  
Ashkenazim and  
Sefardim**

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Dedicated by  
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in memory of  
her parents

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Shana bas Arye Leib z"l

# Great Jewish Controversies

## Ashkenazim and Sefardim

Yechezkel Freundlich

- A. Jews settle in Babylonia for over 1500 years
  - a. Prior to First Temple Destruction (586 BCE) to about the year 1000 (CE)
    - i. Relatively stable existence, autonomous
  - b. Beginning in 900s, begins to lose influence, power and population
    - i. Rav Saadya died in 942; constant strife between Gaonim and Exilarch
    - ii. Economic reasons (Muslims curtailed many trading rights), constant Muslim wars (caused heavy taxation), expropriation of property, move away from rural homes of the Yeshivas to the big cities (Baghdad)
    - iii. Babylonian fundraisers reach all fledging communities throughout the world, eventually sending out major scholars themselves
    - iv. The Four Hostages
      - 1. R' Avraham ibn Daud (Ravad I, 1110-1180) in Sefer Kabbalah describes "a special causative act from the Holy One": A privateer (in 960) pirates a ship and sold 4 great sages to Alexandria, Egypt, to Kairouan, Morocco, and to Cordova, Spain where they were ransomed and became leaders.
  - c. World's economic center moved to Europe from the Middle East
    - i. Muslim (Spain) and Christian (Italy, France, Germany, Austria and Britain)
    - ii. Babylonian Jews follow, splitting into two major (completely different) communities of "Ashkenaz" and "Sefard" (with those remaining behind called "Persians")
- B. Lands of Sefard (Spain, Portugal)
  - a. Majority of Jews migrate naturally with the Muslim hosts through N. Africa and into Spain and Iberian Peninsula (which by 715 was under Muslim rule)
  - b. Muslim society was most cultured and educated in the world
    - i. Music, art, poetry, philosophy, religious tolerance
    - ii. Warm sunny climate, without harsh winters
  - c. Jews (400,000) rise quickly, socially, financially, influence, culture
    - i. Prime Ministers, bankers, generals in the Army, poets
      - 1. Chisdai ibn Shaprut (915-990) court physician (linguist, scholar) official courtier and diplomat of the Caliph
        - a. Commissioned Menachem ibn Saruk to write Hebrew dictionary.
        - b. Donish ibn Labrat
      - 2. Don Issac Abrabanel (1437-1508) was treasurer of King Afonso V of Portugal

3. Don Abraham Senior (1410-1493) (wealthiest men in Spain, personally financed Columbus, armies that drove Moors out of Spain; instrumental in marriage of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile)
- ii. spoke and wrote Hebrew, Arabic and developed Ladino, many spoke Latin (connecting them to Christian Europe)
  1. wrote poetry, not all religious - for all occasions
  2. legend: Ibn Ezra (1089-1164) delivering Shaloch manos to Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi (1075 - 1141), finished his poem for him - became his son in law
- iii. studied philosophy, which included physics medicine, astronomy, pharmacology
- d. Rav Yitzchak Alfasi (RIF) arrives in Cordova in 1088 and establishes long line of great Sefardi Torah giants (Ri Migash - Rambam)

*Sefardic Jewry was affluent, well positioned in general society, explosively creative in Torah scholarship, the arts and sciences. It wore an outward expression of confidence, optimism and security - it was the Golden Age of Spain. (Rabbi Berel Wein, "Herald of destiny")*

### C. Lands of Ashkenaz (France, Germany)

- a. Opposite of their Spanish cousins in almost every way imaginable
- b. Jews were a highly literate, educated minority living amidst of enormously illiterate, boorish, drunk, violent and highly superstitious society Christian society.
  - i. No understanding of sanitation, health, medicine
  - ii. Demons, fairies and witches
  - iii. No accurate measures of time, clocks, calendars
  - iv. Cold dark winters - literally in the Dark Ages
- c. Legend ascribes Jewish communities in Germany during Ezra's return to build the Second Temple, and their later destruction during the Crusades to their haughty refusal to return
- d. Charlemagne (742-814) invites Jews to settle and develop his Holy Roman Empire
- e. Historians estimate by end of 8<sup>th</sup> century, only 5000-10,000 Jews, from whom all of Ashkenazic Jewry would descend
- f. Not integrated into society
  - i. Education was exclusively Torah and Talmud - no art, science, philosophy, poetry, Latin
  - ii. Lived in ghettos to protect themselves from Christians who saw them as necessary evil
- g. Rabbeinu Gershom (960-1040)
  - i. Head of Mainz Yeshiva (in effect ended supremacy of Babylonian yeshivas)
  - ii. *Cheirim of Rabbeinu Gershom* - Convocation of rabbis and enacted far-reaching social laws -
    1. Prohibition against polygamy
    2. Wife must consent to divorce
    3. Automatic reacceptance of returning Jews from Christianity

#### 4. Prohibition of opening and reading mail/letters

##### h. House of Rashi (1040-1105)

*As perhaps with no one else in Jewish scholarship, Rashi's personality shines forth from his scholarly works. Rashi is modest and unassuming, of simple faith and uncomplicated vision. He is soft and gentle, compassionate and respectful, concise and inquisitive of life. He has no philosophic problems, never feels under attack or pressure, is never apologetic and is always intellectually honest. He is never too embarrassed to say "I do not know," nor too restricted to propose an interpretation that "my heart tells me," nor too timid to disagree even with his mentors when he is convinced of the rectitude of his position, although basically he is non-argumentative and not interested in asserting personal positions. His goal is to hold the student's hand and guide him through the intricacies of the text, acting as a mother who helps her child cross a busy intersection. He is tolerant of humanity, of its foibles and errors, and is confident of Divine justice and salvation. He loves the Jewish people – even the backsliders and former apostates – the Land of Israel and, above all, the Torah of Israel. His love for Torah shines forth from every word of his writings. His wording is simple, direct and brief, while at the same time containing unfathomable depth and intricacy. He is our first grade teacher spreading honey on the page and making Torah sweet, and he is our post-graduate mentor when, after laborious years of Talmudic study, we begin to see the genius of his felicitous phrase and unerring choice of words and examples. He is a seamless person, Aggadic and Halachic, rational and mystical, poetic and simple. He demeans no one and uplifts everyone. He is unmatched in Jewish history." (Rabbi Berel Wein, "Herald of Destiny")*

#### D. Trauma and Tragedy – Crusades and Inquisition

##### a. Crusades begin in 1096; last until 1272

##### i. Jews "live through it" – constant survival mode

1. Poems reflect broad picture of Jewish suffering: intense and somber elegies, without time or interest for musings on life, philosophy, love, beauty or human foibles

##### b. Inquisition begins with massive Pogroms throughout Christian Spain in 1391

- i. James II of Aragon's Decree of expulsion stayed for 100 years but eventually enforced in 1491
- ii. Indescribable century for a community nearly 800 years old
- iii. Marks the end of Spanish Jewry

#### E. Two Independent Communities

##### a. Italy

##### b. Provence

#### F. The melding of two worlds in the Shulchan Aruch

##### a. R' Yosef Kairo (1488-1575), known as the Mechaber or Beit Yosef

- i. from exiles of Spain, eventually settles in Sefad and authors Code of Jewish Law, *Shulchan Aruch* (1565)
  1. Based on RIF, Rambam and Rosh

##### b. R Moshe Isserles (1520-1572), known as the Rama (Krakow, Poland)

- i. Writes addendum to it – instead of a separate work – including the customs and traditions of Ashkenaz lands

*Mechaber: Increased meals on Chanukah are optional (i.e. not a mitzvah), for the Sages did not establish these days as days of "food and joy" (as they did on Purim).*

*Rama: There are those who say there is "a little mitzvah" in them, for these days were the days when the Temple was rededicated. The custom is to sing songs of praise at the meals in order to establish it as a festive meal. Some say you should eat cheese and dairy products, since the miracle came about over cheese that Yehudis fed the enemy*