

Mark D. Meyerson. *A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. xx + 272 pp. index. illus. map. gloss. bibl. \$37.95. ISBN: 0-691-11749-7.

In the introduction to *A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain*, Mark Meyerson announces his goal to revise the master narrative of Sephardic history by providing a new and more detailed view of the vicissitudes of Sephardic history than the facile division between Golden Age and decline. The vehicle for this historical revision is a detailed case study of the Jewish community of Morvedre (modern-day Sagunto) during the fifteenth century.

A Jewish Renaissance begins in the wake of a tumultuous era (roughly 1391 to 1415) of physical and intellectual assaults on Iberian Jewry that led to waves of mass conversions to Christianity, and marked the rise of a hybrid society of New Christians, or Conversos. New light on the relationship between the surviving Jews and their former coreligionists is one of several contributions of this meticulously researched and illuminating study. Meyerson is clearly at home with his archival sources, showing methodological dexterity and a keen eye for revelatory details. He

combines the Spanish academic model of deep local history with the more expansive style of a North American scholar seeking to situate the Jewish experience in a broader historical and historiographic trajectory. The result is a fresh, insightful, and highly nuanced portrait of the social and political intricacies of a Hispano-Jewish community.

The titular reference to a Jewish Renaissance, though ostensibly an allusion to the reestablishment of Jewish cultural vibrancy after the trauma of 1391, might just as easily recall the political intrigues of Machiavelli and the Medici. We are introduced to powerful Jewish clans whose rivalries and relationships with the rest of the Jewish community (*aljama*), the Christians of Morvedre, and the crown are portrayed in all the richness and complexity of a Renaissance drama. Meyerson eschews the common practice of measuring the vicissitudes of Christian tolerance toward the Jews. Instead, he calls attention to internal conflicts within the *aljama* and the way in which Jews replicated Christian uses and abuses of power in their relations with each other and with their Muslim neighbors. Chapter 5 in particular deals with such political machinations, demonstrating the Jews of Morvedre to be firmly integrated into the urban political landscape of fifteenth-century Iberia.

In chapter 6, Meyerson focuses on the relationship between Jews and Conversos and the intricate web of kinship and commercial ties that still linked members of these two groups throughout the fifteenth century. A leitmotif of this chapter, and indeed a central argument of the book, is the ability of Morvedre's Jews to adapt to the new political and social realities of interfaith relations after the great conversions of 1391–1414. Amid the continued pressure from Christian missionaries and the extension of inquisitorial influence, Jews joined with Conversos and Old Christians to establish a *modus vivendi* in which personal and business relationships continued to flourish.

In the final chapter, "A Chill Wind from Castile," Meyerson illustrates how Aragon's union with Castile helped to cut short Morvedre's Jewish revival and set its community on a course toward expulsion. It was only in the final decades of the century that local preferences for innovation and accommodation with regard to interreligious relations gave way to the irresistible forces of royal control, Catholic Reform, and exclusion.

As he mentions early on, Meyerson labors against a historiographic tradition forged by pioneering Judaica scholars such as Yizhak Baer, whose *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain* remains the leading historical synthesis on Jewish life in medieval Iberia. Baer argued that there existed a teleological line from the rupture of interfaith *convivencia* in the fourteenth century and the eventual expulsion of the Jews from a united Spain in 1492. Though the Baer thesis, as it has come to be known, has come under attack in recent decades, there has yet to appear a full-length study that cogently and convincingly challenges these long-standing assumptions about the inevitability of Hispano-Jewish decline. Happily, Meyerson's account goes a long way to redress this flat, monolithic treatment of Jewish life in the decades leading up to expulsion. This accessible and convincing

study of Jewish cultural revival and intercommunal relations holds great appeal to all those interested in Spanish or Jewish history.

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