

Article from the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, ed. Wayne Dynes (New York: Garland, 1990).

Note: no footnotes could be published with this encyclopedia article. Also, the diacritics needed for accurate transliteration from Arabic were not available.

The asterisk indicates a reference to another article in the *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*.

Jews, Sephardic. The splendor of the Jewish culture of medieval Spain (“Sepharad,” in Hebrew) would be hard to exaggerate. In a symbiotic relationship with Muslim and then Christian rulers, Jews enjoyed from the eighth through the tenth centuries (in al-Ándalus) and from the eleventh through the fourteenth centuries (in Christian Spain) as much stability and legal protection as they had ever had. They prospered economically and demographically, and made up a larger proportion of the population than in any other European country. During some periods Jews considered Spain a historically Jewish country, and their new homeland.

Jewish intellectual life and the Hebrew language were reborn in Spain. There was the greatest flowering of Hebrew poetry since Biblical times, and Hebrew was used for the first time for secular poetry. Pioneering work was done in Hebrew grammar, lexicography, and comparative Semitic linguistics; Spanish Jewry produced philosophers and scientists; Jews participated in government as nowhere else in Europe. Except for the Ashkenazi Jews of central Europe, Spain was quickly recognized by all but the most isolated Jews as their intellectual and religious leader. Although the history is complicated, and during the twelfth through the fifteenth centuries

most of the Jewish population lived in Christian rather than Islamic territory, the fate of the Jews in the Iberian peninsula was linked with that of Islam. The decline saw Kabbalistic mysticism reach its greatest development, and an influential intellectual contribution to *aliyah* (the return of Jews to Israel) in the Zionist poetry and travels of Judah ha-Levi. The legacy of this cultural hothouse survived within Judaism into the seventeenth century, and the Judeo-Spanish identity and the Hasidic and “occult” offshoots of Kabbala to the present. Much of Spain’s great Catholic culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has also been revealed to be the work of converts or descendants of converts. Before idealizing the era, however, one must remember that Spanish Jews were no less intolerant than their contemporaries of other religions, and perhaps more so. With Hebrew as a lingua franca to talk to Jewish merchants anywhere, Jewish traders from al-Ándalus dominated the European slave trade. “Slavs,” from whose name the word “slave” is derived, were brought from eastern Europe to al-Ándalus for sale. Jewish doctors created eunuchs for export to other Islamic countries. Sephardic Judaism was also very misogynist, at times more than the often quite misogynist Islamic culture. Sometimes (as with the Almoravids) there are suggestions of a proto-feminism in Spanish anti-Semitism, as there are at other times in the Christian campaign to expel Islam from the peninsula.

A link between Spanish Jews and homosexuality is suggested by circumstantial evidence; it is also a common theme of Spanish anti-Semitism. The first known condemnations of homosexuality in the peninsula, in the seventh century, coincide with harsh penalties against Jews. The well-documented

Jewish role in the introduction of Islamic rule to Spain, and the thriving of Jews in that culture, where homosexuality was tolerated and sometimes openly encouraged (*Spain), is itself circumstantial evidence of Jewish sexual behavior. Under Christian rulers who were tolerant of homosexuality, such as *Juan II and Enrique IV, Jews thrived; under those intolerant, such as Ferdinand and Isabella, Jews suffered. Judaism was spoken of by those hostile as a contagious condition, a charge familiar from homophobic literature of many periods. Jews were accused of having introduced homosexuality to Spain (through the Moors); after they were expelled from Spain in 1492 and briefly took refuge in Portugal, Jews were accused of having introduced homosexuality into that country. The countries in which they finally settled after the expulsion were those more tolerant of homosexuality: the Ottoman empire and to a lesser extent Italy. Satirical poetry of the thirteenth through fifteenth and seventeenth centuries frequently associates Jewishness with sexual perversion. In the twentieth century, "Jew" was used in Spain as an epithet meaning "homosexual," and homosexuals were often referred to as a "sect."

What has taken the matter out of the realm of coincidence and anti-Semitic fantasy has been the recovery of secular Hispano-Jewish poetry, much of which is "refined, sensual, and unabashedly hedonistic." This was virtually unknown a century ago, and some has only been saved in the famous Cairo *genizah* (storeroom of old manuscripts). It is far from being completely translated or assimilated, although some Hebrew texts have been known, and seemingly discussed in some circles in Spain, for over fifty years. In it pederasty is widely found, and while male-female love is by no means absent, it is less

prominent than in Hispano-Arabic poetry. There are scores of pederastic poems, by the greatest Jewish authors of the period: Ibn Gabirol, Samuel ha-Nagid, Moses Ibn Ezra, Judah ha-Levi, and others. In addition, strong love between adult males, such as Moses Ibn Ezra and the younger Judah ha-Levi, is found in the poems. Male-male love was used as a religious metaphor; Israel's love for God was expressed as love of a male. In different poems Israel takes sometimes a male, at other times a female role.

These poems are frequently referred to by later Sephardic poets, and one must conclude that they circulated widely at the time, and were not viewed as something which needed to be kept secret from other Jews. (Being in Hebrew, they were of course unknown to non-Jews.) The conclusion seems unavoidable that they reflect widespread homosexual behavior among Sephardic Jews, at least until they moved to Christian territory in the late eleventh century, after which the pederastic poetry tapers off. As homosexuality was treated much more secretively by Jews living in Christian Spain, by the converts and descendants of converts who were to dominate Spanish intellectual life in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries, and by Sephardic Jews who chose exile from Spain over conversion in 1492, its extent is impossible to determine. It is probably reflected in the androgyne of the Kabbala, and in the mystery and fearful power surrounding the Hebrew language, which permitted access to secret, untranslated texts. Among the converts there are occasional suggestions of sympathy with what may have been considered a heritage, even if it was no longer expressed in sexual activity and only known through vague oral transmission, the pederastic poetry having been lost or forgotten.

The poets and intellectual leaders of Sepharad were also Biblical scholars, indeed those who founded modern Biblical scholarship. Besides compiling the first dictionaries of Biblical Hebrew, they examined the chronology of the Bible, detecting for the first time the two Isaiahs and identifying the Pentateuch as post-Mosaic. As they saw the Bible as their national as well as poetic and religious source, their views on Biblical homosexuality (to which Biblical chronology is very relevant) are worthy of reconstruction, though not yet studied in any Western language. That Samuel ha-Nagid claimed descent from and identified with King *David, however, suggests that he perceived David, Israel's great poet-king and symbol, as predominantly homosexual. The *Song of Songs*, traditionally interpreted as portraying love of God from a symbolic female viewpoint, and whose role in the Kabbala is well-known, was of course taken as the work of David's son Solomon. Although modern archeology does not support it, Sephardic Jews dated their presence in Spain from the time of David and Solomon, when Jews accompanied the Phoenician traders; the Phoenician king Hiram was a friend of David and Solomon.

These Biblical experts must have noted the homosexual temple prostitution which reached its peak during the reigns of David and Solomon (Deut. 23:17-18; 1 Kings 14:24, 15:12, 22:24; 2 Kings 23:7; see *Kadesh). Ha-Nagid never tired of talking of his Levite origin, to which he ascribed his talents as a poet, and Judah ha-Levi ('the Levi') also chose to emphasize that fact; it is possible that they saw a link between homosexuality and the Levi priesthood, which figured prominently during the times of the two great kings. When one finds verse claiming that "If Moses could have seen...my friend, ...he would

not have written in his Torah ‘Do not lie with mankind as thou liest with women’” (Schirmann, “The Ephebe,” p. 65), one can be sure that Biblical homosexuality was seen somewhat differently than it commonly is today.

Granada. No part of Hispano-Jewish history is more fascinating than is that of Granada. Granada was Jewish before Islam reached the peninsula, and early Arabic writers repeatedly called it a Jewish city, “Garnata al-Yahud” (Granada of the Jews). The Zirid kingdom of Granada emerged as an independent entity after the breakdown of centralized Islamic authority in Córdoba, and insecurity in that city led distinguished Jews to move to Granada. Granada was in the eleventh century the center of Sephardic civilization at its peak, and from 1027 until 1066 Granada was a powerful Jewish state. Jews did not hold the foreigner (*dhimmi*) status typical of Islamic rule. Samuel Ibn Nagrilla, recognized by Sephardic Jews everywhere as the quasi-political ha-Nagid (‘The Prince’), was king in all but name. As vizier he made policy and--much more unusual--led the army. In his poetry, the main source for his military career, there is found a disturbing joy in gory combat in the name of the lord of Israel. It is said that Samuel’s strengthening and fortification of Granada was what permitted it, later, to survive as the last Islamic state in the Iberian peninsula.

All of the greatest figures of eleventh-century Hispano-Jewish culture are associated with Granada. Moses Ibn Ezra was from Granada; on his invitation Judah ha-Levi spent several years there as his guest. Ibn Gabirol’s patrons and hosts were the Jewish viziers of Granada, Samuel ha-Nagid and his son Joseph. One cannot avoid the conclusion, for which there is also evidence in the memoirs of the last Zirid

king, that homosexuality and pederasty were the norm in aristocratic Jewish and Muslim circles in Granada.

In a startling thesis, Bargebuhr has proposed that the Alhambra (*Granada) was begun during this period. On the basis of a poem of Ibn Gabirol first published in 1941, plus architectural evidence, he has proposed that the Fountain of the Lions was part of a Jewish temple-palace, whose foundations can still be seen. According to Bargebuhr, it was undertaken by Samuel ha-Nagid's son and successor Joseph, 1000 years after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Joseph did not have his father's political skills, however, and was assassinated in 1066 during the only anti-Jewish pogrom in Islamic Spain. While the Jewish community of Granada reestablished itself for some years, this marked the beginning of the end, and a turning point in Sephardic history. Judah ha-Levi's Zionism has the fate of Zirid Granada as its immediate background.

The final period of independent Granadine history, the Nasrid kingdom of the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, is very imperfectly known (*Granada). Estimates of the size of its Jewish community vary greatly, and little is known about its intellectual life, nor is it known to what extent the Alhambra we know, with an esthetic called homosexual (*Granada), reflects the putative original Jewish temple-palace, although it might. Some Jews and involuntary converts to Christianity fled to Granada from the newly hostile Christian Spain; they were warmly received by the Jewish community there. After conquering the city Ferdinand and Isabella had the Jewish quarter razed as a site for the cathedral, and Jewish inscriptions obliterated. They

left nothing (other than the Fountain of the Lions) to remind one that Granada was once a major Jewish city, even, briefly, a new Jerusalem. The unexpected decision to expel all Jews from Spain was made in Granada only three months after its conquest.

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1986). Stanley Rose, "Anti-Semitism in the *Cancioneros* of the Fifteenth Century: The Accusation of Sexual Indiscretions," *Hispanófila*, No. 78 (May, 83), pp. 5-6. For a general introduction to Sephardic Spain at its peak, Rudolph Kayser's *The Life and Time of Jehudah Halevi* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1949) is still of value.