

KIVUNIM Goes to Spain

March 5-11, 2018



Monday, March 5, 2018: We make our way to Ben Gurion (lately almost our home away from home!) and depart at 615 am on ElAl Flight # 395 arriving at Madrid's ES (Adolfo Suarez Barajas) International Airport at 10:50 AM. After getting processed through Passport control and security and get our baggage and we will be in Spain!

Our travels to Spain and Portugal are very powerful journeys of this extraordinary year. Every KIVUNIM alumna has reached these days with a sense of awe at the wonders we have seen in people, places and things from came before. The world is a truly magnificent place filled with a difference and sameness that together make up the human experience. These next 3+ weeks are no exception as they contain within them one of the most remarkable chapters in Jewish history equally unknown as so much else that we will learn and experience this year. It is a tale of ups and downs and ups again. It is a tale of amazing cultural integration coupled with unique particularism.

In 1492, when Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand ordered the Jews expelled from Spain, it is estimated that its 300,000 Jewish residents represented 1/2 of the entire population of the Jewish world. When the process was over, 1/3 had fled (with most welcomed with open arms by the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire), 1/3 had converted to Christianity (most secretly remaining Jewish for several generations - some to the present day), and 1/3 would ultimately be burned at the stake by the forces of the Inquisition for lapsing back into Judaic practices. Many fled to Portugal where their initial treatment was better. Some of these refugees made their way to Amsterdam and from there to central Europe as far as Lithuania (maybe farther). (Many seemingly Ashkenazi Jews, like the many generations in my family, actually have their roots in Spain and Portugal and are as much Sephardi as they are Ashkenazi Jews!)

On Sunday morning we will begin a bus ride through history traveling from Cordova, Spain to Belmonte, Portugal and we will complete the journey we begin today – a journey across the borders of time as well as space. In Belmonte in the northern part of Portugal we will visit a beautiful rather new Synagogue where the following statement hangs in its entry hall, the first Synagogue in that part of Portugal in at least 500 years. It reads in Portuguese and in Hebrew, here beautifully and sensitively rendered into English by Rabbi Dov Lerea, former Director of KIVUNIM (2010-2013):

The thread of continuity was never severed from this place
Here, in the Village of Belmonte
Here, in this very house and the houses adjacent,
the heart of the Jewish quarter,
Full, robust Jewish lives have thrived since antiquity.
In the wake of royal edicts and decrees, the Jews of this village, like other Jews throughout
Spain and Portugal, were forced to denounce their faith –
while safeguarding their Jewishness in the safety of their homes.
Nevertheless, here, the flame was never extinguished...
Here, in the homes of the village, the Jews kept the sacred commandments of Judaism,
and throughout these five hundred years, transmitted our tradition orally
from generation to generation.
They did this clandestinely, keeping Shabbat in their hearts,
while appearing in public worship with their neighbors on Sundays.
They were coerced into leading double-lives...
They were careful not to falter in-between the stumbling blocks of Jewish and Christian
customs, lest they fall into the hands of the Inquisition and its underground.
They recited the blessings over hallah and wine, mumbling to themselves silently, in the dark,
during Christian prayers, while guarding their Jewishness in the interiority of their souls.
Here the Jewish soul did not walk into oblivion...
Here the Jewish soul remains eternally.

**For from the midst of the past, shall the future arise,
and from the dark mist of medieval days shall the future emerge....**

These powerful words convey the enormous surprise, powerful and elegant in its majesty that sits right below the surface this week in Spain. It's not only

what we see and who we meet, it's the presence of a 500-year-old secret that will surround us wherever we turn. What possessed these people to remain loyal in the face of such overwhelming threats and challenges. How did they manage to transmit belief and practice over hundreds of years without Rabbis or teachers or schools or Synagogues? How is that possible?

For many years I resisted taking KIVUNIM's teacher program to Spain. Many would suggest it and I would say back: "But there are no Jews there..." And the way we left...with such brutality...I just kept shoving it to the bottom of the list. But when we began our student program I made the decision to go. And over the last 12 years I have realized the enormous error of my former ways. In fact, my own personal insight came, interestingly enough, in Turkey. We were having dinner in the Old Age Home and one of our students was speaking to a resident...in Spanish...but the resident was speaking back in Ladino. It was essentially the same language, 500 years apart. At that moment I gained an understanding that had eluded me. What does it mean for a people who have been thrown out of a country to continue to speak the language of that country ... not for one generation or two but for 500 years!?

You cannot explain this with a passing comment. This can only be explained by a very intense and continuing tie to the language (and culture) of their ancestors...and it is not Hebrew we are speaking of. Ladino is simply Spanish written in Hebrew letters. It is the language of a vast expansive and rich culture, but also that of the Inquisition, Expulsion, and of forced conversions.

And remember, their ancestors continue to call themselves Sepharadim, SPANISH Jews! When we travel from city to city, we will encounter the physical space of this magic universe of Spanish Jewry. But it will actually be in the spiritual space that we will be looking for an answer to the mystery. As in other parts of the world, the Jewish story is sometimes most powerfully revealed by the ghosts...by the spirits that reside in these places and speak to us through music, art, story, costume, architecture, literature, etc. **But in Spain and Portugal, the ghosts are coming back to life!**

Several years ago we met a young Spanish man, Jaime Casas in the Marrakech Synagogue. KIVUNIM's encounter with Haim is an amazing tale. When we first met he was visiting Morocco doing research. I would learn then that he was raised Catholic and had recently discovered that his childhood fascination with Judaism was likely due to the fact that his ancestors were forced converts in the time of the Inquisition, so-called "New Christians." His encounter with KIVUNIM students opened up a thought that became a reality that moved him first to conversion a few years ago back to Judaism.

Today, after some lengthy discussions, Jaime is now Haim and was ordained a Rabbi at the Leo Baeck Rabbinical School in London last July 2, 2017. (I was

honored to accompany him down the aisle of the New London Synagogue that day as he became Rabbi Haim Casas, the first Spanish born, Spanish Rabbi (in over 500 years!) in a world re-emerging from centuries of invisibility and darkness! Haim will meet us in Seville on Wednesday night and tell you first hand the role that KIVUNIM played in his rather extraordinary life.

Our trip to Spain is also a journey into the so-called Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, when Moslem rule gave Jews a noble and notable co-existence with the majority culture. This cannot be taken lightly given our contemporary conviction that no other religion can coexist with Islam. The creativity of this period of mutuality and interaction is palpable.

We are here to learn from it and to be able to develop the tools to take back with us an increasingly expansive view of life and Judaism. Spain and the Jewish experience it gave birth to, is probably unparalleled in all Diaspora Jewish experience. (Remember the true meaning of “A Dio!” that we learned months ago from Hadas.) I share with you again this remarkable quote from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. I would like to suggest it as the frame within which to seek to understand and interpret our next 10 days...

*“The riches of a soul are stored up in its memory. This is the test of character – not whether a man follows the daily fashion, **but whether the past is alive in his present.** When we want to understand ourselves, to find out what is most precious in our lives, we search our memory. Memory is the soul’s witness.... Only those who are spiritually imitators, only people who are afraid to be grateful and too weak to be loyal, have nothing but the present moment.*

To a noble person it is a holy joy to remember, an overwhelming thrill to be grateful; while to a person whose character is neither rich nor strong, gratitude is a most painful sensation. The secret of wisdom is never to get lost in a momentary mood or passion, never to forget friendship because of a momentary grievance, never to lose sight of the lasting values because of a transitory episode. The things which sweep through our daily life should be valued according to whether or not they enrich the inner cistern. That only is valuable in our experience which is worth remembering. Remembrance is the touchstone of all actions.

Memory is a source of faith. To have faith is to remember. Jewish faith is a recollection of that which happened to Israel in the past. The events in which the spirit of God became a reality stand before our eyes painted in colors that never fade. Much of what the Bible demands can be comprised in one word: Remember.

Jews have not preserved the ancient monuments; they have retained the ancient moments.”

12:00 PM From the airport we will make our way into the center of Madrid and the grounds of The Museo del Prado.

12:30 - 1:30 PM We'll get to the Prado and give you some time for a quick lunch out before our 2 PM entrance to the Museum.

Our first day in Spain brings us to the capital, the center of the country and into one of the truly great museums of the world. The Prado contains one of the finest collections in the world, and will provide an opportunity to see and appreciate the power of the visual arts within Spanish tradition and culture.



You might legitimately wonder if the power of the visual, not characteristically part of Jewish culture until modern times, was sublimated in the imagery of the mystical tradition that emerged here in Spain. Or you might wonder at how text illumination, often done by non-Jewish artists for Jewish

patrons and Jewish texts became a means of Jewish identification with the very rich tradition of artistic creation that must have surrounded them everywhere they went...and looked. The Prado is home to many great painting and especially the masterpieces of 17th century painter extraordinaire, Diego Velasquez. We have a very special guide, to this collection, Carmen Catala Ena who has worked with KIVUNIM for many years (and a colleague who is also very competent).

4:00 PM We will have a short bus tour of the city with some very special surprises and then make our way to Toledo by our bus for the next 10 days.

7:00 PM Arrival in Toledo and check-in to [The Eurostar Hotel](#) and then we'll walk into the Old City for dinner out. We are all pretty tired and will have an early curfew so we can get some sleep tonight. Awake early as breakfast here

is wonderful with lots of treats to start the morning off in a nutritious and delicious way.

Tuesday, March 6, 2018:

8:00 AM Breakfast and loading the bus.

8:45 AM We meet in the lobby and take a short walk to the old city of Toledo where we will begin our visit to one of the truly glorious cities of Spain. Toledo, is known as the “city of the three cultures” because Christians, Arabs and Jews lived together here for centuries. Behind its walls

Toledo preserves an artistic and cultural legacy in the form of churches, palaces, fortresses, mosques and synagogues. This great diversity of artistic styles makes the old quarter of the capital of La Mancha a real open-air museum, which has led to it being declared a World Heritage Site.



We'll start at The Sephardim Museum that has five rooms that display aspects of the history, religion, customs and manners of Spain's Jewish and Sephardic past.

The "El Transito Synagogue," famous for its rich stucco decoration, which bears comparison with the Alcazar of Seville and the Alhambra palaces in Granada. It was founded as a synagogue by Samuel ha-Levi Abulafia, Treasurer to Peter of Castille, in about 1356. His family had served the Castilian kings for several generations and included kabbalists and Torah scholars such as Meir and Todros Abulafia, and another Todros Abulafia who was one of the last poets to write in the Arabic-influenced style favored by Jewish poets in twelfth and thirteenth-century Spain. King Peter probably gave his assent to the building of the synagogue to compensate the Jews of Toledo for destruction that had occurred in 1348, during anti-Jewish riots that accompanied the arrival of the Black Death in Toledo. The founder eventually fell out of favor with the king and was executed in 1360. The synagogue was converted to a church after the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

From there we will then go to several of the major sites of the city of Toledo, including its magnificent Cathedral. We will be sure to stop at Santo Tome to see El Greco's masterpiece "The Burial of el Señor de Orgaz." El Greco was commissioned to paint the scene by Andrés Núñez, the local Parish priest of



the church of Santo Tomé. The painting was to be for the Chapel of the Virgin at the Church of Santo Tomé, El Greco's very own church. El Greco worked on the painting between the years of 1586 and 1588.

The painting instantly became popular and by 1588, people were coming from all over Spain to visit and study the Spanish painting. Its fame was due in part to the depictions of contemporary noble men from Toledo within the painting itself, as well as its artistic merit. This feature was actually mentioned in the

contract for the painting, as it was common for noblemen to attend the burials of other noblemen, and Andrés Núñez wanted the painting to accurately represent real life.

The painting still remains in the same chapel today. Here it has undergone some restoration to try and stop the effects of time. It was first cleaned in 1672 and has been the subject of restoration works in 1943 and 1975.

From there we will visit Santa Maria La Blanca Church/Synagogue. No one knows for certain when it was built because we have scarce documentary information taken from inscriptions elsewhere. Based on this information some historians claimed that this is the so-called New Yosef ben Susán Synagogue who died in 1205. Others suggest that it could be the so called Yosef ben Susán Synagogue, backed by David ben Salomón Abí Darham in 1271.

However, most of today's scholars, based on the building's grandiose architecture, and the archaeology's results say that this is the Main Synagogue of the Toledo Jewish Quarter. It was built at the end of the 11th century by ibn

Alfache, advisor and ambassador to Alfonso VIII, who was openly sympathetic toward Jews. After a fire in 1250, the synagogue was rebuilt. Recently, attending to his profuse decoration similar to the nazarí art some investigators suggest dating the construction in the 14th century. But in any case these former Synagogues convey clearly the significant Jewish presence that once lived here.

Finally we will visit The Toledo Cathedral ranked among the greatest Gothic structures in Europe. Inside, the cathedral contains important masterpieces including a spectacular baroque high altar and two paintings by El Greco.

The Toledo Cathedral stands on the site of the Great Mosque of Toledo, which itself had replaced a Visigothic church. Built from 1226 to 1493, the long process is reflected in Toledo Cathedral's variety of styles. Many historic events have been hosted in the cathedral over the years, including the proclamation of Joanna the Mad and her husband, Philip the Handsome, as heirs to the throne of Spain.

The primarily **13th-century** architecture of The Toledo Cathedral was inspired by the Gothic cathedrals of France such as Chartres, but the squat proportions give it a Spanish feel, as do the wealth and weight of the furnishings and the location of the elaborate choir in the center of the nave.

By now you will understand why Toledo is considered one of the most beautiful and charming cities in Spain and you are sure to experience a sense of what it must have been like to be a citizen of this city in medieval times, whether Jew, Christian or Moslem. **But most important, here in Toledo a truly amazing thing happened. The great works of what we call Western Civilization were resurrected from the Dark Ages, when books were burned and culture sent underground. Alphonso X, the Christian King of the re-conquest was (uncharacteristically for a King) an intellectual. From the beginning of his reign, Alfonso employed Jewish, Christian and Muslim scholars at his court, primarily for the purpose of translating books from Arabic into Castilian, which had the effect of fixing the forms of Spanish itself. What is little known is that these teams primarily translated from Arabic to Hebrew and then from Hebrew into Latin...requiring scholars of the three religions to work cooperatively with each other. His inner circle, included Jewish and Christian courtiers. From these origins in Toledo are kernels of big things waiting to be realized, 800 years after they were begun. What's your role?**

Some of the intellectual work of these scholars centered on astronomy and astrology. The early period of Alfonso's reign saw the translation of selected works of magic (Lapidario, Picatrix, Libro de las formas et las ymagenes) all translated by a Jewish scholar. These were all highly ornate manuscripts (only

the *Lapidario* survives in its entirety) containing what was believed to be secret knowledge of the magical properties of stones and talismans (charms).

12:30 - 1:30 PM We'll have our picnic lunch and then board the bus for an approximately 5 hours ride through the territory of La Mancha to the grand city of Granada. We will arrive for dinner out and check-in to our Hotel where we need to get to sleep early as our tour tickets for the Alhambra are at 8 am!

Wednesday March 7:

Early Breakfast and then we can easily make our way to the Alhambra where we are scheduled for 8:30AM. We will visit the Alhambra Palace under the guidance and direction KIVUNIM's very competent and knowledgeable guide, Berthus de Boer (and 2 colleagues so that our stay is maximized in smaller

groups).
Granada is historically a very significant city and our time here will prove very important to fully understand the power of the mix of cultures that took place here in Adalusian Spain.



On a hill overlooking Granada, the

Alhambra—a sprawling palace-citadel that comprised royal residential quarters, court complexes flanked by official chambers, a bath, and a mosque—was begun in the thirteenth century by Ibn al-Ahmar, founder of the Nasrid dynasty, and was continued by his successors in the fourteenth century. Its most celebrated portions—a series of courtyards surrounded by rooms—present a varied repertoire of Moorish arched, columnar, and domical forms. The romantic imagination of centuries of visitors has been captivated by the special combination of the slender columnar arcades, fountains, and light-reflecting water basins found in those courtyards—the Lion Court in particular. This combination is understood (from inscriptions) to be a physical realization of descriptions of Paradise in Islamic poetry.

Beginning in Athens In November, we have seen the almost eternal power of architecture to capture the human imagination and sustain it over centuries and millennia. Now with the Parthenon, Delphi's Oracle, Meteora's monasteries, and the Taj Mahal all in our mind's recall **we see before us the greatest expression of Moorish Architecture in the world.** At every turn of a corner we have shapes and vistas that are simply captivating...enjoy it. *(Maybe there is a clue here as to why so many Synagogues have been built in Moorish style containing all of the elements that make the Alhambra so special. Oh, you didn't know that the Park Avenue Synagogue, B'nai Jeshurun Synagogue (BJ) and Central Synagogue...three in Manhattan alone are designed this way... Mosques disguised as Synagogues! Now what shall we make of that piece of information?!*

The Alhambra, with its continuous occupation over time, is currently the only preserved palatine city of the Islamic period. It constitutes the best example of Nasrid art in its architecture and decorative aspects. The Generalife Garden and its vegetable farms represent one of the few medieval areas of agricultural productivity. These palaces were made possible by the existing irrigation engineering in Al-Ándalus, well established in the Alhambra and Generalife with technological elements known and studied by archaeologists. This constituted a real urban system integrating architecture and landscape, and extending its influence in the surrounding area with gardens and unique hydraulic infrastructures.

The residential district of the Albayzín, which constitutes the origin of the City of Granada, is a rich legacy of Moorish town planning and architecture in which Nasrid buildings and constructions of Christian tradition coexist harmoniously. Much of its significance lies in the medieval town plan with its narrow streets and small squares and in the relatively modest houses in Moorish and Andalusian style that line them. There are, however, some more imposing reminders of its past prosperity. It is nowadays one of the best illustrations of Moorish town planning, enriched with the Christian contributions of the Spanish Renaissance and Baroque period to the Islamic design of the streets.

After spending the morning in the Alhambra we will be challenged to make sense of the cultural biases of our times that do not reflect the genius and beauty of the Islamic world that we see here and which we will see over Shabbat in Cordoba. If only our home communities could see what we have seen. And of course if only the radical Islamists could understand and appreciate their own legacy as well. "What a wonderful world it would be!"

12:30 PM: Picnic lunch and then onward to Sevilla!.

4:30 PM: We arrive in Sevilla, check-in to our hotel and immediately meet with Rabbi Haim Casas! Meeting Haim will be another one of those amazing

human encounters that take place throughout this year all over the world. And then, after we have gotten to know each other Haim will take us on a walking tour of some sections of the city.

The Jewish quarter of Seville included the current districts of Santa Cruz, Santa María la Blanca and San Bartolomé and it was separated from the rest of the city by a wall which came down from the start of Conde Ibarra Street, passing through Mercedarias Square, as far as the city wall. There is a consensus amongst historians that since very ancient times Jews had commercial relations with the Iberian tribes. Thereafter, Jewish ships started to arrive at the famous *Tarsis*, in other words, the magnificent Spanish region which owes its name to Tartesus or Guadalquivir.

The 20th century in Seville saw the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, decisive cultural milestones such as the Ibero-American Exposition of 1929 and Expo '92 and the city's election as the capital of the Autonomous Community of Andalusia.

Seville's most significant cultural heritage sites include: The Cathedral, Alcázar and Archivo de Indias. Together these three buildings form a remarkable monumental complex in the heart of the city. The cathedral and the Alcázar – dating from the Reconquest of 1248 to the 16th century and imbued with Moorish influences – are an exceptional testimony to the civilization of the Almohads as well as that of Christian Andalusia. The Giralda minaret is the masterpiece of Almohad architecture. It stands next to the cathedral with its five naves; the largest Gothic building in Europe, **it houses the tomb of Christopher Columbus**. The ancient Lonja, which became the Archivo de Indias, contains valuable documents from the archives of the colonies in the Americas.

Thursday March 8:

8:30 AM Breakfast

9:15 AM We meet Haim and make our way to the Foundation for the Three Cultures, a unique institution founded by the Kings of Morocco and Spain and shepherded by Andre Azoulay, Senior Advisor to King Mohammed VI of Morocco (who will meet with us in his home-town of Essourira, Morocco on March 22nd). When the 1992 Seville World Expo concluded it was decided to convert the Moroccan Pavilion into a permanent center for the advancement of co-existence and multi-cultural appreciation and exchange. We will hear from one of the Directors about their work, about their successes and failures and the challenges ahead. You can certainly ask about internships available.

11:30 AM We will make our way back to mainland and find a nice park for our picnic lunch, spend a bit more time before or after exploring Sevilla and then make our way to the closeby highlight of Cordoba!

2 PM We will check-in at the [Maimonides Hotel](#), located more centrally than is even possible in this charming and very beautiful city. Cordoba was also the home of one of the greatest and most unique figures of Medieval (and maybe all of) Jewish history, Hasdai Ibn Shaprut (915-975) and an impressive list of other creative Jewish forces. Hasdai was a great Jewish scholar and statesman. He was born in Jaen, Spain, about the year 915. His father, Isaac ben Ezra, was a man of great learning and wealth. Under the care of his father, the young Hasdai studied the Talmud, and later also the Hebrew, Arabic and Latin languages, in which he became very proficient. Hasdai displayed a special interest in medicine and became an accomplished physician. Hasdai's great scholarship, and especially his fame as a physician, attracted the attention of Caliph Abarrahman III and he appointed Hasdai to be his court physician.

When the Caliph became more closely acquainted with his Jewish physician, and saw that he was also a man gifted with great organizing ability and statesmanship, he appointed Hasdai Inspector General of Customs, and his chief diplomatic adviser. In this capacity, Hasdai continued to serve under the Caliph as well as under his successor, Hakam II, who took over the Caliphate several years later. Hasdai rendered great service to his land by establishing good diplomatic and commercial relations between the Arab Caliphate and the Christian kingdoms, as far as Byzantium. The foreign diplomats who had occasion to meet Hasdai, thought very highly of him, and praised him to their courts. Emperor Romanus II of Byzantium sent Hasdai a medical textbook written in Greek, which Hasdai, with the aid of other scholars, translated into Arabic.

Owing to his great wealth, wisdom, and high rank, Hasdai was in a position to offer great help to his Jewish brethren. He was the Nasi (head) of all the Jews of Spain, and did all he could to improve their economic and cultural position. A great Talmudist himself, Hasdai built schools and academies to spread the knowledge of the Torah, and invited Talmud scholars of renown to teach there, supporting both the schools and the scholars from his own means. Hasdai also supported the great Babylonian academies in Sura and Pumpedita, and kept up a regular correspondence with the Gaonim (leading Talmud Authorities) in Babylon and North Africa, (notably Kairwan). Hasdai surrounded himself with many famous Hebrew scholars and poets such as Menachem ben Saruk, and Dunash ben Labrat. Menachem ben Saruk, the famous Hebrew Grammarian, was in charge of Hasdai's Hebrew correspondence.

Thus, under Hasdai's influence and with his support, Hebrew poetry and scholarship began to flourish in Spain, marking the beginning of the "Golden Age," which produced such outstanding philosophers and poets as Rabbi Yehuda Halevi, Ibn Ezra, Ibn Gabirol, Maimonides, Nachmanides, and others. It was during the life of this great Jewish leader, that the famous Gaon Rabbi Moshe ben Enoch one of the "four captives," reached the shores of Spain.

There is a legend of the four Gaonim from Babylon, who were taken prisoner by pirates on the Mediterranean Sea and subsequently held for ransom to be paid by extraordinary Jewish scholars, physicians, lawyers, diplomats and businessmen many of whom possessed a thorough and refined knowledge of both Judaism and of the Hebrew language. These famous Jewish scholars were quickly redeemed, and they set up Jewish centers of learning in their new places of refuge. Thus, when the famous Babylonian academies, were eventually destroyed, the Torah had already established itself in four new centers. When Rabbi Moshe ben Enoch was brought to Cordoba, he was redeemed by the local Jewish community. Discovering that the refugee was the famous Gaon, Moshe ben Enoch, Hasdai set him up as head of a great Talmudic academy in Cordoba.

To foster Jewish Talmudic studies, Hasdai procured manuscripts of the Talmud from the Babylonian academies, and gave them to the students of the Cordoba academy for study. For many years, Spain was one of the leading Torah centers in the world. Here Yehudah Halevi lived and wrote poetry, both religious and secular. Here the Hebrew language reached a zenith only comparable to modern times in Israel, and probably far superior in language quality and originality to anything we produce today.

A very interesting historical document was left by Hasdai in the form of his correspondence with the Jewish King of the Khazars. For hundreds of years, the Khazars were a mighty people who lived on the Steppes between the Don and Volga Rivers. Their realm stretched westward as far as Kiev. The kings of the Khazars were powerful rulers who intermarried with the families of the Byzantine and Arab monarchies.

It is not clear when the Khazars decided to give up their former religion and accept Judaism as their faith. The Khazar Jewish kingdom captured the imagination of the Jewish people of those days. Hasdai was eager to learn more about them, for he had only scant reports of the Khazar kingdom that he received through diplomatic channels. Hasdai decided to make personal contact with them. In those days distance made it very difficult to make or maintain contact with remote countries, and being that the Khazar kingdom was at the easternmost end of Europe, it seemed almost an impossible task.

Hasdai, however, was a man of determination. He addressed an affectionate letter in Hebrew to Joseph, the King of the Khazars, and sent it to him with a special emissary, Isaac ben Nathan. When Isaac reached Constantinople, he was detained by the Byzantine authorities, who feared a direct alliance between Spain and the Khazars. On the pretext that the roads were not safe, Hasdai's emissary did not obtain the facilities to continue his journey to the capital of the Khazars. Hasdai was not discouraged. He sent another emissary, Isaac ben Eliezer, but this time by way of Hungary and Russia. Aided by the Jews of those countries, Hasdai's second emissary made his way to Itil, and delivered Hasdai's warm greetings to Joseph.

King Joseph of the Khazars replied in Hebrew, answering all of Hasdai's questions concerning the history of the Khazars and their acceptance of Judaism. King Joseph told him how his ancestor, Bulan, decided to give up his heathen beliefs in order to accept one of the three leading faiths, Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. King Bulan then arranged for theologians of each of the three faiths to participate in a debate in his presence, in which each of them was to prove why his faith was the true one. When the debate was over, Bulan was convinced that the Jewish faith was the true faith; and he, together with his entire family, and four thousand Khazar nobles, formally accepted Judaism. Gradually, the majority of the Khazars followed the example of their king, and accepted the Jewish faith.

Unfortunately, about the time when Hasdai's letter reached King Joseph, dark clouds appeared on the horizon of the Khazar kingdom. The Russian and Byzantine rulers combined to destroy the Jewish kingdom of the Khazars, and about 15 years later, Sviatoslav of Russia defeated the Khazars and devastated their land, including their capital of Itil. Nevertheless, the Khazars continued to play an important part in that section of the world for another century. Thereafter, their fortunes waned altogether, until their fate became unknown. The exchange of letters between Hasdai and King Joseph of the Khazars throws much light on the history of the Khazar kingdom which might have otherwise remained quite obscure.

Hasdai died in Cordoba at the age of about sixty, sadly mourned by all Jews, and by all those non-Jewish friends who were privileged to know him.

When you walk through these streets this Shabbat, carry these stories and the images they provoke with you. Yehudah Halevi, Maimonides, a community of Jews speaking and writing in Arabic; a Jewish world comparable only to our own world in its freedom of creative expression and religious life, and on and on. In these moments, our presence in these places gives back continuity in the face of the discontinuity that history delivered to Spanish Jewry.

History surrounds us here and invades our consciousness. Just across the street from the Casa de Sepharad, the very unique Museum of Jewish Cordoba is the Synagogue where it is believed Maimonides himself prayed. Along these streets, New Christians likely prayed in silence, closing their windows to make certain that no one heard their voices. Friday night and Shabbat, when we sing and chant we will certainly awaken those “ghosts” and remind them of what once was theirs, and today is slowly but surely returning. This is the eighth Shabbat KIVUNIM has spent here in Cordoba. Our Shabbat Services are the first egalitarian services in the history of Spanish Jewry. It's not often that something we do in our lifetimes goes into the record books. This is one of those times!

3:00 PM We will begin our visit to Cordoba with Haim's personal tour of the Casa de Sepharad. This private museum displaying the collection of two remarkable people (neither of them Jewish) with the goal of reestablishing through memory the significant Jewish cultural and religious heritage that resides here in Cordoba.

Casa de Sepharad, is where our dear friend Haim Casa began his Jewish journey, serving as their program director for several years. This amazing private museum is the result of a love affair with Spanish Jewish history by a wonderful Catholic couple (Rosanna and Sebastian) who have made their lifetime collection available to the public. They have artifacts, music, dance, jewelry and even a Synagogue, dedicated by Jacki Kadosh (the President of the Jewish community of Marrakech) in memory of his father, Henri Kadosh. We will hold Shabbat services here tomorrow night and Saturday morning. On our first Shabbat visit to Cordoba, probably 7 years ago, we conducted the first egalitarian minyan and the largest by far of any Jewish religious service in the city of Cordoba in over 500 Years. We are still setting records this Shabbat!

Living here in Cordoba over Shabbat, you will be delighted by the winding streets and alleyways of this charming old city, **the birthplace of Maimonides, the greatest Jewish philosopher (and one of the greatest thinkers of humanity) of all time. We will seek to answer the many questions that emerge in visiting Spain. What really was going on here? Why the richness of Jewish civilization? Why the advancement of Hebrew language? Why the climate of creative thought and imagination? How do the cultures in which we live affect our bodies and our souls? What feeds the brain? What stops its growth? What lessons from all of this are relevant today and in particular, tomorrow?**

7:00 PM We will have dinner out tonight (there are so many restaurants and interesting places to eat) and meet up for a special program of Flamenco Dance that Haim has arranged for us.

Friday March 9:

8:30AM: Breakfast

9:15 AM We will meet our guides right outside the Hotel lobby and then cross the street and visit the **Mesquita. The Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba is the most important monument of all the Western Islamic world**, and one of the most amazing in the world. The evolution of the “Omeya” style in Spain is resumed in the history of the Mosque of Cordoba, as well as other styles such as the Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque of Christian architecture. It seems as if the place that the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba occupies nowadays was dedicated, from ancient times, to the cult of different divinities. In this same place, and during the Visigoth occupation, another building was constructed, the “San Vicente” Basilica. On top of this basilica and after paving half of the site, the primitive Mosque was constructed. This basilica, of rectangular shape, was shared for a period of time between Moslems and Christians. After the Muslim enlargement, the Basilica became the property of Abderraman I, who destroyed it to construct the first “Mosque Alhama” or main Mosque of the city. Nowadays, some of the constructive elements of the Visigoth building are integrated in the first part of Abderraman I’s construction.

The Great Mosque has two different areas: the courtyard or “arcade sahn“, where the “alminar” (minaret) is constructed (beneath the Renaissance tower) by Abd al-Rahman III, and the “haram” or praying hall. The interior space consists of a forest of columns and red and white arches giving a strong chromatic effect. The site is divided into 5 different areas, each one of them corresponding to the different expansions that have occurred.

Originally built as a church, after the Muslim conquest the Mesquita was confiscated for use as a mosque and greatly expanded until it became the second-largest mosque in the world. It is regarded as perhaps the most accomplished monument of the Umayyad dynasty of Cordoba. After the Spanish Reconquista-, it was returned to its original use as a church. Today it houses the main church of the diocese of Cordoba in Spain.

This afternoon we will also visit the Andaluze Museum to expand our understanding of this city and its unique history.

3:30PM We return to the hotel for showers and some down time and then to get dressed for Shabbat and meet in the lobby at 5:30 for our short walk to the Casa de Sepharad for candlelighting, Kabbalat Shabbat, and then vegetarian dinner at the Mazal Restaurant specializing in dishes of the Sephardic tradition. Candlelighting is at 6:02.

After a wonderful dinner and some singing and dancing we'll make our way back to the hotel for a good night's sleep.

Shabbat שבת March 10: Our Shabbat Tefillah this week is our own in the private Casa de Sefarad Synagogue. No mehitzah and no early start. We'll head over for a 10 am beginning following breakfast in the hotel.

Shabbat lunch will again be vegetarian, as there is no Jewish community here, only (and I say that only lightly!) history. This afternoon is free to use as you wish...but don't forget where you are and what spirits are walking around with you. Look down at the cobblestone streets and up at the balconies and imagine what was here.

Havdalah is at 7:25, location to be announced following which we will dinner out. We will have an extended group meeting and then you are free. Enjoy.

Sunday March 11:

8:00 AM Earlier breakfast followed by check-out, packing the bus and then off to Belmonte, Portugal....a drive that will take us most of the day...so you will have more time to relax, view the beautiful scenery...and just fill your head with words and thoughts and images. It's a very reflective time in a very reflective place.