An Iberian chemistry

It was a time and place to blend Muslim and Jewish cultures

By Fouad Ajami

Long before the rise of Spain and Spanish culture, before that special run of historical events that took the Iberian Peninsula from the Catholic sovereigns Ferdinand and Isabella to the golden age of Cervantes and El Greco and Velázquez, there was another golden age in the peninsula’s southern domains. In Andalusia’s splendid and cultured courts and gardens, in its bustling markets, in academies of unusual secular daring, Muslims and Jews came together—if only fitfully and always under stress—to build a world of relative tolerance and enlightenment. In time, decay and political chaos would overwhelm Muslim Spain, but as the first millennium drew to a close, there had arisen in the city of Cordova a Muslim empire to rival its nemesis in the east, the imperial world around Baghdad.

We don’t know with confidence the precise population of Cordova in the closing years of the 10th century. The chroniclers and travelers spoke of a large, vibrant city, which could have had a population of some 250,000 people. One 10th-century traveler wrote with awe of a city that had no equal in Syria, Egypt, or Mesopotamia for the “size of its population, its extent, the space occupied by its markets, the cleanliness of its streets, the architecture of its mosques, the number of its baths and caravansaries.” Cordova had no urban rival in Western Europe at the time. Its equivalents were the great imperial centers of Baghdad and Constantinople, and cities in remote worlds: Angkor in Indochina, Tchangngan in China, Tollán in Mexico.

City life. A Pax Islamica held sway in the Mediterranean region, and Cordova’s merchants and scholars took part in the cultural and mercantile traffic of that world. In fact, the city made a bid of its own for a place in the sun in the early years of the 10th century. One of its great rulers, Abd al-Rahman III, had taken for himself the title of caliph—or successor to the prophet Mohammed—and staked out Cordova’s claim to greatness.

In the seven or eight decades that followed, the city would become a metropolis of great diversity. Blessed with a fertile countryside, the city had some 700 mosques, 3,000 public baths, illuminated streets, luxurious villas on the banks of the Guadalquivir River, and countless libraries. Legend has it that the caliph’s library stocked some 400,000 volumes.

Andalusia was a polyglot world, inhabited by Arabs, Jews, Berbers from North Africa, blacks, native Christians, and Arabized Christians called Mozarabs, as well as soldiers of fortune drawn from the Christian states of Europe. The Jews did particularly well in this urban world of commerce, philosophy, and secularism. The Jewish documents of that age depict a truly cosmopolitan world in which Jewish merchants traveled between Spain and Sicily, to Aden and the Indian Ocean, from Seville to Alexandria. Jewish academies were launched in Cordova, Granada, Toledo, and Barcelona. By the end of the 10th century, Iberian Jews had declared their independence from the Talmudists of the Babylonian academies in Baghdad. A rich body of Judeo-Arabic literature became the distinctive gift of this age.
Terror and plunder. Even given these great cultural accomplishments, the success—and the hazards—of the Andalusian world are best seen through the deeds and valor of the Muslim soldier and strongman of Cordova, Almanzor. Cordova’s de facto ruler, the first minister of the court in the final years of the 10th century, Almanzor was an able and ambitious ruler descended from the early Arab conquerors of Spain. He had risen to power in 976 and made the caliphate an instrument of his own ambitions. By some estimates, Almanzor led more than 50 expeditions against neighboring Christian states. In 997 he undertook his most daring symbolic campaign, sacking Santiago de Compostela, the Christian shrine and pilgrimage center in Galicia. He laid waste to the church and took the church bells for the Great Mosque of Cordova. Three years later, in the year 1000, he cut a swath of terror through much of Castile and plundered Burgos. He died on horseback in 1002, on his way back to Cordova from a military campaign in La Rioja.

Almanzor had given Cordova’s political center a military vocation but undone its prosperity at the same time. He had brought into this Andalusian setting wholesale contingents of Berber tribesmen from North Africa, and the enmity between Berbers and Arabs would push the Cordovan world into its grave. What unity the Andalusian political structure had once possessed was irrevocably lost. The opening years of the 11th cen-
The Spanish rabbi-poet Judah Halevi lived in a society in which he and other Jews were socially powerless and influenced heavily by the dominant Islamic culture. Still, he used his poetry to explore both conflict and harmony among Arabs and Jews. An outgoing physician and court poet with many friends, he wrote a collection of secular poetry and a huge body of religious verses, some of which have made their way into modern Jewish prayer books. (His famed Ode to Zion has been read for centuries in religious services.) The poetry brought forth a deeper sense of Jewish spirituality that had been unheard of in previous generations.

With Islam and Christianity locked in a battle of religious giants, the Jewish minority in medieval Spain was left with few privileges. Although some Jews felt at home in an Islamic society, many, like Halevi, longed for a world in which their own people could rise to the top.

In fact, the years between 900 and 1200 in Spain and North Africa are known as the Hebrew “golden age,” a sort of Jewish Renaissance that arose from the fusion of the Arab and Jewish intellectual words. Jews watched their Arab counterparts closely and learned to be astronomers, philosophers, scientists, and poets.

Signs of status. But this was a time of only partial autonomy. Jews were free to live in the Islamic world as long as they paid a special tax to Muslim rulers and submitted to an order forbidding them to own Muslim slaves. Jews had their own legal system and social services, were forbidden to build new synagogues, and were supposed to wear identifying clothing.

These restrictions led to a profound sense of alienation for some Jews. It was, says Raymond Scheindlin, professor of medieval Hebrew literature at New York’s Jewish Theological Seminary, a demoralizing daily reminder “that you are part of a losing team.” Halevi reacted to that message. To him, life in Spain—though comfortable in between harrowing bouts of persecution—was like slavery compared with the life intended for Jews in Palestine.

Allied neither with the crescent nor the cross, Halevi instead focused on a different destiny. To him, the Jews were a calamitous and wounded people, unsure of their place in human history. He wanted Jews to believe what he was confident of: that Hebrew was superior to Arabic, Palestine to Spain, and they were the chosen people.

When he was 50, Halevi underwent an emotional upheaval and decided to devote himself to God by going on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Legend has it that he met his death upon finally arriving in Israel, where he was run over by an Arab horseman. With the vision of Jerusalem set before him, he recited the last verse of his Ode to Zion.

—Lindsay Faber
prospered as courtier and chief minister. He saw through the splendor and the hazards of that world. In a poignant poem, entitled “A Curse,” he wrote of his wandering and exile: “Heart like a pennant / On a ship’s mast, in a storm; / An exile is ink / In God’s book. Across my soul, and every shore; / And all on whom wandering is written / Are driven like Jonah, and scavenge like Cain.”

**Distant memory.** It twisted and turned, that world that had risen in the West. Ten years after Neghrela’s death, his son and heir, Joseph, was killed by a mob in Granada, in an anti-Jewish riot in which some 1,500 Jewish families perished. By then the unity of the Andalusian world had become a distant memory. The age that followed was dubbed the *mulak al-tawa’if*, a time when warlords and pretenders carved up Muslim Spain into petty, warring turfs. No fewer than 30 ministates claimed what had once been a coherent domain. The robust mercantile economy eroded.

Calamity soon struck this world. In 1085, Toledo, the ancient capital of the Visigothic kingdom, was conquered by Alfonso VI, King of León. For Christians this was a sign of divine favor, and the conqueror claimed no less than that. “By the hidden judgment of God,” a charter of Alfonso read, “this city was for 376 years in the hands of the Moors, blasphemers of the Christian faith…. Inspired by God’s grace I moved an army against this city, where my ancestors once reigned in power and wealth.” Cordova itself fell in 1236. Its conqueror, Ferdinand III of Castile, claimed the Great Mosque of Cordova in a “purification” ceremony, and his bishops consecrated it for Christian worship as the Catedral de Santa María. The foundations of the Great Mosque had been laid down in the closing years of the eighth century, and successive rulers had adorned and enlarged it. It was the symbol of Andalusian authority, a sublime architectural wonder into which rulers and patrons poured their reverence and ambition, their desire for a new Muslim frontier as grand as the best Baghdad or Damascus could boast. In the peninsula, one people’s golden age was always another’s decline. What had once been a land of three faiths would in time be cleansed of its Muslims and Jews. A militant new doctrine—called *limpieza de sangre*, or “purity of blood”—would dispense with all that tangled past and its richness.

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