

CHAPTER THREE

Jewish Life in the Middle Ages

THE HISTORY OF THE Jews of France cannot be reduced to a series of expulsions. Nor can one speak in their case of a uniform history, but rather of a history that varies from one region to another, from one regime to another, with the gap between north and south becoming more pronounced from the thirteenth century. The great expulsions from the kingdom in the fourteenth century reinforced this regionalization. During this period, the Jews may be divided into two distinct groups: those of the *langue d'oïl*, in the center and the north of the kingdom, and those of the *langue d'oc*, with subdivisions even within the communities of the south, in the autonomous provinces of the kingdom. Their history is also one of communal organization, of an economic and cultural life that evolved with the vicissitudes experienced by Jews on French soil and again displayed particular regional characteristics.

In the thirteenth century, the Jewish population remained below 50,000. During the same period, in Paris, despite a growth due to immigration from Normandy and Champagne, their number did not reach 1,000.¹ In the counties of Provence, they were fewer than 10,000 (rising to 15,000 on the eve of the Black Plague in 1348).² Communities numbering between 500 and 1,000 persons were an exception; generally, they were smaller. Seventy percent of localities having no Jews were villages, whereas 77 percent of localities having a Jewish presence were market towns or cities.³ Rural settlement existed, but the tendency was toward urbanization.

COMMUNAL SPACE

The organized community (*kahal*, in Hebrew) was, before everything else, an essentially urban phenomenon. It appeared in Europe in the tenth century and, three centuries later, supported a network of officers and institutions. Communal organization was required by the very status of the Jew in Christian and Islamic society. Having to be ruled and judged in accordance with rabbinic law, the *halakhab*, it was incumbent upon the Jews to gather together and form an entity endowed with its own institutions that could supply those services that were indispensable to the pursuit of Jewish

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life in conformity with tradition. The community took care of the individual from birth until death, as a member of the collectivity, assuring personal security and representation before various powers and creating a framework of institutional solidarity capable of meeting the needs of the most impoverished.

Rights and Duties

As such, the community was also a fiscal entity that raised the taxes owed to the sovereign or lord in proportion to the assets possessed by its members, the assessment being based on the declaration of individual members or on an estimate of the value of their assets—the rich paying for the indigent, good debtors for bad. Each person having an income was taxable, including widows and women owning property. In certain communities, talmudic scholars were exempt from paying tax. The question of the tax due to the authorities was a matter of major concern to community leaders. In addition to this tax there was the tithe (*ma'aser*) paid by the members of the community in order to finance its internal activities, in particular responsibility for the poor, and, if necessary, the regular tax. The Jewish community appears, then, to have been a sort of microcosm, relatively autonomous both within the larger society as a whole and in its relations with other communities. For ritual purposes, however, small communities depended on larger ones, which had the infrastructure needed to furnish the required services.

This regime of autonomy generally did not prevent different communities from maintaining close relations, nor their delegates from joining to take decisions by common agreement and in the mutual interest of their congregations. From the twelfth century, these synods multiplied without, however, leading to a structured and permanent form of intercommunal organization. In times of crisis, they made it possible for communities to act in concert. It sometimes happened, in periods of respite from persecution as well, that decisions taken by one community came eventually to be applied in others by virtue of their soundness, as was the case in the eleventh century with the prohibition of polygamy and of divorce without the wife's consent. Each community was responsible for payment of its taxes, but in the event of external pressure, at the level of the kingdom, province, or seigneurie, several communities might form ad hoc associations (known as *collektas*) in order to facilitate the collection of monies owed.

The community granted or recognized the right of residence (*hezkat ha-yishuv*) in a given locality to a newcomer by the unanimous vote of its members. Originally intended to keep out those who might undermine

communal discipline, this arrangement later served to exclude the shopkeeper or moneylender whose competition was feared. Criminal offenders were liable to excommunication in the locality (*berem ba-yishuv*).

Administration

The community was led by the seven *boni homines* of the city, called *shri'ah torei ha-ir*. These notables carried out the combined duties of politician, judge, arbitrator, and paymaster. Over time, dynasties of notables devoted to communal service emerged. In principle, the *parnas*, who was in charge of financial administration, was responsible for relations with the public authorities. In the Midi, Jewish administrators held the title of consul, but in fact they were only the delegates of the city's non-Jewish consuls.

The general assembly of members having the right to vote was the principal authority of the community, whose leaders were chosen in free elections by this assembly. External pressures were not inconsequential despite the steps taken to avoid them. Gradually, alongside the senior administrators of the community and the guardians of its customs, men of letters achieved prominence. Foremost among these men was the rabbi, who established himself as a spiritual leader and who at the beginning of the thirteenth century drew a salary without, however, having to renounce his business interests. The community also employed a cantor, a scribe, and, where rabbinical courts existed, magistrates' assistants. Communities long functioned as associations of persons subject to the same duties and taxes, but did not have responsibility for all religious activities.

Gathering Places

All the communities disposed of a synagogue, which was a place of prayer but, more than this, the seat of the community's activities—the place where Jews socialized. Some contained an oven for the preparation of unleavened bread (*matzah*) during Passover and were equipped with a ritual bath (*mikveh*), though this might be located elsewhere in the Jewish quarter. Religious study was conducted in the synagogue. The faithful had their own seats, which they purchased; almost nothing was provided for women, who in the best case gathered in a room or neighboring building that communicated with the synagogue by a window. Large communities possessed a hospice that served both as a hotel for visitors passing through and, if necessary, as a hospital. Some had their own meeting room, their own slaughterhouse, a communal oven, a marriage room. It fell to the commu-

nity to provide a Jewish funeral for all its dead. It possessed its own cemetery, outside the Jewish quarter and often outside the city, the administration of which was typically entrusted to a holy brotherhood, the *hevrah kaddisha*, whose members voluntarily saw to all arrangements relating to death. Other fraternities devoted themselves to visiting the sick, providing for dowries for indigent young ladies, and otherwise to charitable works, religious study, and prayers. Each community had its own charity fund for easing the plight of the poor, who were very numerous. Each also looked after orphans and dealt with the ransoming of prisoners (*pidyon shevuyim*).

Education

In wealthy families, education was provided by preceptors. Communities were gradually to assume responsibility for the education of poor children of the male sex (girls having no official access to learning). For a long while the two systems coexisted. Thus the *heder* came into being as a place offering primary instruction to the children of the community. Pupils were taught writing and reading in Hebrew characters—the characters used to transcribe the vernacular language. There they also learned the rudiments of arithmetic and geometry. Teaching was centered for the most part, however, on reading of the Bible and its translation into the vernacular language. A basic introduction was also provided to the Talmud, which later would be at the heart of the higher, nonmandatory education dispensed at the rabbi's home.

It was common for students in the course of their studies to attend various talmudic academies (*yeshivot*), in different countries, in order to receive instruction from renowned teachers, notably in Champagne, Normandy, the Île-de-France, and Narbonne. In certain schools, for example in Languedoc, scientific instruction was available, particularly in medicine and astronomy, in addition to the traditional curriculum. In certain southern communities, it was also possible to study secular philosophy.

Justice and Legislation

Within the community, Jews themselves administered justice in religious matters, including matrimonial law, and had the upper hand in adjudicating civil disputes between co-religionists, at least insofar as such litigation was authorized or tolerated. Criminal matters did not come within their purview. The rabbinical court (*beit din*), which gradually established itself as an institution, drew its authority not from the sovereignty of the law

but from the adherence of the members of the collectivity to a common discipline. Over time, the rabbi came to be primarily responsible for the administration of justice, a task in which he was assisted by other judges (*dayanim*).

Communities held on to this prerogative, as a measure of their autonomy, and long tried to prevent their members from bringing suit before a non-Jewish court. Many Jews, however, appeared before Christian civil courts, even ecclesiastic courts. Acts of excommunication were not enough to check this trend, which grew as the power of communities weakened, no longer having the means to defend themselves or to enforce the authority of rabbinical courts. The penalties imposed by these courts ranged from excommunication (*herem*) to corporal punishments.

Communities were ruled by informal sorts of constitutions composed of rulings (*takkanot*) handed down in the past. To these, others came to be added as a function of circumstances. Such rulings were no longer limited in the Middle Ages to rabbinical ordinances; they could now issue from a lay leader in the community or from a rabbi. The community itself was sovereign in the matter of accepting or rejecting proposed rulings. Moreover, these rulings were valid for a single community, and could not be imposed on others. In the main their influence was local, even if certain rulings were recognized, sometimes only after a few centuries, by other communities. Their application was limited in time, which meant that they were regularly renewed. They aimed at supplying a solution to a frequently recurring problem or to a crisis; at settling difficulties that arose in the internal functioning of the community or in its relations with the surrounding non-Jewish world. In some cases, an illustrious, apocryphal ancestry was attributed to a ruling in order to establish its authority.

Certain ordinances closely supervised family life and morality, as well as sexual behavior; others regulated the rights of tenants (*harakab*), the assessment of taxes, and the rights of women; others concerned violent offenses, dress, lending at interest among Jews, and local commerce. These rulings covered all areas of religious as well as social life while at the same time protecting widows and orphans and outlawing games of chance played with cards or dice. In this way a sort of government came into being that allowed the community to function smoothly. Over time these arrangements came to be recorded in registers, thus constituting a sort of law. They were the expression of a communal life that was not without its share of abuses and permissiveness.

In addition to these rulings, and again as a function of circumstances, there were sumptuary laws that aimed at lessening the visibility of those Jews who were likely to arouse jealousy among their Christian neighbors while at the same time punishing a taste for conspicuous consumption. Thus it was forbidden to organize banquets, except on religious occasions;

the number of courses served was limited, as was the number of guests. The wearing of clothes and jewels was also regulated.

Over time a hierarchical society had grown up with its own notables, elected officials, men of letters, and rabbis, and endowed with an organization that was structured and effective owing to the consent and the discipline of its members. Within it unfolded the religious life of the community, concentrated around daily prayers, observance of the Sabbath (*Shabbat*), and festivals. Far from adhering to a single Orthodox model, it embraced a wide range of practices that varied between north and south.

It was only with the emancipation of the Jews after the French Revolution, and the granting of citizenship to them in 1790-91, that the autonomy of the community was abolished and an end put to forms of organization that had endured since the Middle Ages. Until then, Jews could not be imagined outside of their collectivity, owing to the impossibility of their finding a place in the surrounding society, unless through conversion to Christianity. Indeed, the most serious coercive measure that could be applied to a Jew was excommunication, which is to say banishment from the community.

Housing and Dress

Jewish life revolved around the synagogue, a place that served as an agora and provided certain structures required by the various needs of communal life. It is not surprising, then, that Jewish settlement should typically have been concentrated in a street or a neighborhood, where, nonetheless, Christians lived as well. The fact that so many consular rulings were aimed at separating Christians from Jews attests to the existence of interrelations of all kinds, as much in daily life and cultural activities as in the professional sphere.

The Jewish quarter or the Jewish street, which was found in the north as well as in the Midi, was situated in the center of the city, near the castle or the cathedral, in order that its residents might enjoy the protection of the established authorities. The closed ghetto was still far in the future. Here it was a question of streets or neighborhoods having a high density of Jewish residents. The internal necessities of the community and, increasingly, the discrimination practiced toward them led Jews to band together, without their dwellings being completely cut off from those of Christians, at least until the fourteenth century. This was the case, for example, in Paris, where the Jews tended more and more to live in houses grouped around a common courtyard, such as the "Cour de la Juiverie" located just off the Place de la Bastille on the present-day boulevard bearing the same name, or the "Cour Robert," now the rue du Renard.⁴

If housing sometimes suggested a separation, or at least a grouping together, clothing, by contrast, did not distinguish Jews from other residents—hence the need to impose upon them the wearing of the *rouelle*, or badge. The same was true with regard to their daily language.

Trades

In the early part of the Middle Ages, Jews practiced trades similar to those of their Christian neighbors. It was only later that they came to be restricted to a smaller number of occupations.

Heading the list of these activities was lending at interest, frequently regulated by kings depending on the situation. In the thirteenth century, not only did Jewish lenders make loans at interest; they also handled commercial transactions. In general, their clients were Christians, since lending at interest among Jews was prohibited by rabbinical rulings, even if these were not always respected. Rural residents predominated among this clientele, with artisans making up almost half of the total. The amounts of capital loaned were seldom large. When the liquid assets of Jewish lenders were insufficient to meet the incessant demands placed upon them, they availed themselves of the services of Christian lenders who were richer still—the Lombards. By and large, the role of the Jews in the banking profession in the Middle Ages was limited. Jewish credit, and the worthy purpose it served, began to disappear in the second half of the thirteenth century. In the meantime, lending at interest did not prevent Jews from practicing other trades. It also constituted a secondary occupation for Jewish physicians.

In the north as well as in the south, medicine was a profession in which the Jews excelled. In the south and southeast, the number of Jewish physicians was large. These practitioners did not reserve their talents for Jewish patients alone; in some cities, in fact, they served as municipal physicians. Medieval science in France also owed to Jewish physicians its acquaintance with a certain number of Arabic medical and pharmacological works, of which they were the translators.

In the south, Jews continued still at the end of the thirteenth century to occupy a place in all areas of economic life. Their activities were not limited, as in the north, to moneylending, medicine, and petty artisanry serving the specific needs of communities. In Languedoc they devoted themselves to the grain trade and the tilling of the soil; they held land and houses in fief; they worked as commercial representatives. Nonetheless, at the beginning of the thirteenth century, public service in the region was closed to them; Jewish bailiffs were no longer appointed.

In Marseilles, Jewish men and women alike earned their livelihood as

brokers and auctioneers. Jews were also found in maritime commerce, and in the coral industry, both as traders and artisans, where they enjoyed a monopoly. In Arles, they were involved in the manufacture of soap.

The various campaigns waged against the Jews, the increasingly heavy taxes imposed upon them, and the economic crises and epidemics to which they were vulnerable ended up impoverishing Jewish communities in the south, which until then had been highly prosperous, just as they had the communities of the north.

CULTURAL SPACE

The cultural influence of Jewish communities on French soil likewise requires a regional approach, a distinction again being made between the north and the south. Preeminence went back and forth between the two regions, depending on the period. In the eleventh century, the first flowering of Jewish culture in France, the north dominated; a century later it had fallen into decline, to the advantage of Paris and the south.

The Beginnings

The ninth century witnessed the development of scholarship, above all in Narbonne, which maintained close ties with the academies of Babylonia, the center of Jewish culture. Biblical studies achieved prominence in the south. There, in the mid-eleventh century, the school of Narbonne was led by Moses the Preacher (Moshé ha-Darshan), whose teaching is known to us through his successors.

Nonetheless, it was the schools of the Rhineland and Champagne, devoted to talmudic studies, that shaped Jewish learning during this period. In the second half of the tenth century, an important talmudic school was founded at Mainz. The most illustrious student of this institution was a native of Metz, Gershom ben Judah (more usually Gershom of Mainz, 960?–1030), known as the Light of Exile (*Me'or ha-Golah*). Considered the highest authority in Europe, the master of the Talmud, which had been introduced only recently to the continent, he trained many disciples who later spread his teaching through France, Italy, and Germany. His place in history is due mainly to the rulings (*takkanot*) attributed to him, which were to leave a lasting mark on the life of Jewish communities: prohibition of polygamy, and of desertion of the home by husbands for longer than eighteen months; the need for a wife to give her consent to divorce; the determination of the duties of community members toward its institutions.

Also in the middle of the eleventh century, at Limoges in central France, Joseph Bonifis (Tov Elem) introduced to the West the legal writings of the masters (*ge'onim*) of the Babylonian academies. Indeed, a whole legislative tradition came into being, evidence of a desire to structure communities as autonomous social bodies.

Rashi

With Solomon ben Isaac, better known as Rashi (1039/1040–1104/1105), the northern talmudic school reached its height. Born at Troyes, in Champagne, during the reign of Henri I and trained at the great academies of the day, he returned to his native city in order to devote himself to teaching.

In this period, the established Jewish communities in the county of Champagne enjoyed a genuine prosperity arising chiefly from its political and economic importance. The region's fairs probably contributed to the demographic, economic, and institutional development of the Jews of Champagne, who worked in a variety of businesses, trading in clothing, precious stones, silk, gold, and silver. In rural areas, they lived off their vineyards and gardens. Rashi himself, in fact, was a winegrower. At the same time a flourishing cultural life was emerging under the influence of the Rhenish centers and, in particular, the teaching of Gershom of Mainz and his disciples, as well as of the masters of the talmudic academy of Narbonne, which left its mark on Rashi's work, testifying to the interaction between communities of the north and south.⁵ It was at Troyes that Rashi was to produce a complete commentary on the Bible and the Babylonian Talmud.

His biblical commentaries were made up of short notes, or glosses, the object being to give the explicated term the sense that was most appropriate to its context. While relying on the exegetical heritage of his predecessors and drawing selectively on traditional sources, Rashi aimed above all at restoring the obvious meaning or "plain sense" (*peshat*) of the verse in question. In this regard he belonged to the same movement as the Christian exegetical school that had grown up in the eleventh century and that assigned primacy to the literal aspect of sacred texts. The decline of this tendency was soon to be witnessed, however, in the last quarter of the century, in both the Jewish and the Christian worlds.

Likewise, in his commentary on the Talmud, Rashi closely followed the text, explicating it in a clear and precise style. He confined his attention to the talmudic literature itself, without resorting to mystical, philosophical, or even allegorical interpretations. This amounted to an exegesis of the text by the text.

In both his biblical and his talmudic commentaries, Rashi used French

words to explicate difficult Hebrew or Aramaic terms. His readers spoke French—more exactly, the Champagne dialect of the period, but this was very different from the French spoken today. These words, or *lo'azim*, transcribed in Hebrew characters and numbering about 3,500 in the commentary on the Talmud, 1,300 or so in the commentary on the Bible, refer to the daily life and technology of the time; as such, they belong to the archaeology of the French language.⁶ Thus one finds, for example, *bocier* (peasant), *bersedor* (archer), *barde* (axe), *viz* (spiral staircase), *jafraite* (armoire), *fiçoleter* (to chat), *menusier* (to cut into tiny pieces).⁷

Rashi's glosses are still today an integral part of the education of observant Jews; it is difficult to conceive of biblical or talmudic studies without making reference to them. The influence of Rashi and his school made itself felt in later centuries, and in the Christian world as well. The *Postillae* of the Franciscan Nicholas of Lyra (1270?–1349), standard commentaries on the Bible until the sixteenth century, transmitted Rashi's commentaries to Catholics (and, later, Protestants) and to the first modern translators of the Bible—further evidence of cultural transmission between the Jewish and Christian worlds in the Middle Ages.

Rashi's *responsa*,⁸ responses to questions posed from 1070 onward by Jewish religious authorities regarding legal, ritual, or other questions concerning their communities that were compiled by his disciples from their notes, constitute a rich mine of information about Jewish life in the Champagne region.

The Tosafists, Disciples of Rashi

The school of talmudists founded by Rashi and his teaching was perpetuated by his grandsons and their disciples over several generations stretching from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries, from the reign of Philip I to that of Philip the Fair. This prestigious line of scholars produced "supplements" (*tosafot*) to Rashi's commentaries, whence their name *ba'alei ha-tosafot*—literally "the Supplementers," or Tosafists. The origin of these additions is inseparable from the activity of the talmudic schools, where students' questions drew responses from their teachers and so gave rise to debates. They were thus recorded initially as independent notes of variable length, written on sheets of paper. Compilation of these notes with a view to publication was undertaken in the thirteenth century.

Most of these supplements were composed in the Middle Ages, but only a fraction of them figure in modern editions of the Talmud. In current versions one finds, on the same page, the text of the Talmud itself (*gemara*) in the middle column; Rashi's commentary (*perush*) in the inside column; and the supplements (*tosafot*) in the outside column. The authors of the

latter material studied the text of the Talmud with the purpose of restoring its supposedly perfect coherence, removing apparent contradictions between different passages treating the same question, comparing the probable meanings of the text with interpretations given by commentators (Rashi foremost among them), and subjecting these interpretations to criticism, checking talmudic sources and offering fresh insights from which they drew practical conclusions for daily life.

The *tosafot* constitute a collective work. The names of their authors have nonetheless not been forgotten. Among the most famous Tosafists, who number in the hundreds, four from the twelfth century may be mentioned: Rashi's two grandsons, Samuel ben Meir, or Rashbam (1085–1158), an outstanding and original biblical commentator, and Jacob ben Meir, known by the name of Rabbenu (Our Master) Tam (1100–1171); Tam's nephew and successor Rabbi Isaac, known by the acronym Ri the Elder (1120–95), and Samson of Sens (1150–1230).

It was also in the twelfth century that Simha ben Samuel of Vitry (d. before 1105) composed the first real liturgical compendium of the Jews of the north of Europe, the *Maḥzar de Vitry*. Then there were Judah Leon of Paris (1166–1224), leader of the school of Paris, whose period of glory in the thirteenth century coincided with the decline of Champagne as a religious center; his pupil Moses of Coucy (thirteenth century), author of the legal code entitled *Grat Book of Precepts*; his other disciple, Yehiel ben Joseph of Paris (d. about 1265), who, after the death of his teacher, took over as head of the Parisian rabbinical center and also established a branch in the Holy Land, at Acre, the Grand Collège de Paris (*Midrash ha-gadol mi-Paris*); Eliezer ben Solomon of Touques (d. before 1291); and Perez ben Elie de Corbeil (d. about 1295), author of the *Little Book of Precepts*. These men, who were also winegrowers, animal breeders, and shopkeepers, ran schools in Champagne, Normandy, Lorraine, Burgundy, Île-de-France, and England. Their disciples spread the movement to Bohemia, Russia, and Germany.

The schools functioned thanks to the benevolence of wealthy teachers who welcomed students into their homes or to the philanthropy of private individuals. The activity of these scholars also included consultations (*responsa*), which reflected the preoccupations of the Jews of northern France: the composition of rabbinical treatises and codes of religious obligations; poetry and communal work; the redaction of rulings and the convocation of synods. The condemnation of the Talmud in 1240, following a religious disputation in which Tosafists had participated (the leader of the Tosafist school of Paris serving as the spokesman of Judaism), and then the burning of the Talmud in 1242 (or possibly 1244), delivered a fatal blow to the Paris school.⁹

The Provençal Exegetical School

Provence, which in the vocabulary of the Jews of the Middle Ages stretched from the Pyrenees to the Alps, distinguished itself more in science, philosophy, and the codification of laws and customs (*halakha*), influenced as it was by ideas coming from Spain and the Mediterranean. At the same time it drew attention to itself by its talmudic schools, notably those of Narbonne, Lunel, Montpellier, and Arles. These schools and their students were to set the tone for the intellectual life of the Provençal communities as a group for a certain period.

The most famous of these talmudists was Abraham ben David of Posquières (1120–98), known by his acronym Rabad. His celebrity was connected chiefly with the polemic he brought against the *Mishneh Torah* of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), also called *Yad Ha-Azakah* (literally “Strong Hand”), a code of Jewish law finished in Egypt about 1185 that it was feared might supplant the Talmud. General in its treatment, written in a clear and precise style, taking care to bring out fundamental principles without citing sources, and with an interest in settling controversies and establishing norms, this compilation of the *halakha* stood diametrically opposed to the exegetical school represented by Rabad. Rabad rejected the very principle of codification, defending an analytical approach based on the standard texts and the chronological classification of the laws that made his works rather dense and difficult to read. Another peculiarity of Maimonides’ code consisted in the fact that it also reserved a place for philosophical and ethical reflections. The debate thus clearly opposed two schools: the traditional school of exegesis associated with the line of disciples descending from Rashi, on the one hand, and the philosophical school, on the other, which was soon to enjoy its moment of glory in the region.

Menahem ben Solomon ben Meir, called Meiri (1249?–1315?), one of the first modern commentators on the Talmud but also inclined toward philosophical speculation, was among the last heirs of the exegetical school. Also deserving of mention are authors of religious codes, such as Isaac ben Abba Mari (1120?–1190?) and his kinsman Abraham ben Nathan (1155?–1215?), called *Ha-Yarhi* (“of Lunel”).

Translation, Philosophy, Kabbalah, and Poetry in Provence

In an urban setting of relative calm and economic prosperity, Provence rapidly became the center for translation of Arabic texts into Hebrew. The arrival in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries of Arabic-speaking Jews

fleeing the wars of Muslims and Christians in Spain led to an important influx of philosophical ideas as well.

The Kimhi and Ibn Tibbon families distinguished themselves in the domain of translation. In the one, Joseph Kimhi (1105–70) and his son David (1160?–1235), and, in the other, Judah ibn Tibbon (1120–90) and his son Samuel (1150–1230), translated the great classics of Judeo-Arabic thought from Arabic into Hebrew, including the works of Saadya Gaon (882–942), Ibn Gabirol (1020?–1057?), Judah Halevi (before 1075–1141), and Baiya ibn Pakuda (second half of the eleventh century). Not simply translators in the modern and usual sense of the term, these scholars also performed the work of grammarians and lexicographers in order to create a philosophical vocabulary as well as concepts in a target language, Hebrew, that did not yet dispose of them. They also devoted themselves to the translation of Greek and Arabic scientific works, particularly in medicine. The texts of the physician, philosopher, and mystic Avicenna (980–1037) and, especially, of the philosopher Averroes (1126–98) were translated from Arabic into Hebrew. Spanish Jews trained in their homeland in Arabic astronomy brought it with them to Provence; some invented astronomical instruments, others translated works from Latin. Important cultural interactions may be noted among the Christian, Jewish, and Islamic worlds in which these writings circulated and exercised their influence upon all the thinkers of the period.

Samuel ibn Tibbon produced a translation of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* (1200) that appeared before the author's death, in 1204, and with his collaboration. This cornerstone of medieval Jewish thought, an attempt at reconciling the traditional tenets of the Jewish faith with the Greco-Arab philosophical heritage, henceforth available in Hebrew and therefore accessible to non-Arabic-speaking Jewish communities, was to find itself for at least two centuries at the center of heated intellectual disputes.

The first controversy broke out around 1230 and resumed again toward 1303. Similar passions were aroused in the Christian world at about the same time. In 1210, the council of the ecclesiastic province of Sens forbade the reading of the "natural books of Aristotle as well as their commentaries, whether in public or in private, on pain of excommunication," and in 1228 Pope Gregory IX warned theologians against "profane novelties." After several decades of administrative opposition, however, Aristotelianism triumphed by the end of the thirteenth century.¹⁰ The church's reservations with regard to Aristotle were not unremissive of the fears aroused in certain Jewish intellectual circles by the success of Maimonidean thought. The debate over Maimonides' work concerned the dangers of philosophical research for faith. It also served as a cover for fierce power strug-

gles among supporters of the two camps. Opponents of Maimonides followed in the tradition of the northern masters, who in their hostility toward philosophy likewise condemned his work and attempted to prohibit or restrict the teaching of secular sciences. This fratricidal war lasted for many years, undergoing a dramatic series of ups and downs. It invited interference from Spanish rabbis in the affairs of the communities of southern France, which gave rise in turn to excommunications and counter-excommunications. In 1233, the *Guide for the Perplexed* and the *Sefer ha-Middot* (Book of Knowledge, the philosophical introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*) were publicly burned by the Dominicans at the request of the anti-Maimonideans, in Montpellier according to some, in Paris according to others. Maimonides appeared as a heretic in the tense climate of the time, when the church was attempting to check the spread of the Albigensian heresy in the region. None of this was enough, however, to prevent Maimonidean studies from being pursued in Provence.

Indeed, Provence was also the homeland of Levi ben Gershom, commonly known as Gersonides (1288–1344). Born in Bagnols and considered to be the greatest philosopher after Maimonides, his most famous work remains *The Wars of the Lord* (1329). At once a philosopher and theologian, commentator on Averroes and biblical exegete, talmudist, mathematician, and logician, he was also the inventor of an astronomical instrument. Two of his scientific works were translated into Latin in 1342 at the order of Pope Clement VI. Gersonides' daring and independent work was to exert a great influence, though his orthodoxy was regularly found suspect, as well as his faithfulness to the spirit of the Bible and of tradition. Additionally, the physician Moses of Narbonne (1300–1362), a man of encyclopedic learning, was to comment on the Arabs Al-Ghazzali (1058–1111), Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185), and Averroes, and above all on Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed*, whose philosophical teachings he interpreted in a resolutely Averroist sense.

Provence, land of philosophy, was also a land of mysticism. It is there that the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Brighness), the first document of theosophic kabbalism, was compiled on the basis of oriental sources between 1150 and 1200. Languedoc furnished the first great figures of a tradition that was destined to grow and prosper, and eventually eclipse the philosophical movement: Abraham ben Isaac, president of the rabbinical court of Narbonne (d. 1180), and especially Isaac the Blind (1160?–1235)—grandson of Abraham ben Isaac and son of the previously mentioned Abraham ben David of Posquières—who developed a contemplative mysticism. Born in Provence and along the coast of Languedoc, the kabbalah was rapidly transplanted to Catalonia, which maintained close political and cultural ties with these regions. It was ultimately in Spain that, in the

thirteenth century, there appeared a text that later was to acquire canonical status in kabbalist circles: the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (Book of Splendor), attributed to Moses of Leon (1240?–1305) and his school.

Poetry did not remain in the background in a region as rich in intellectual production as Provence, and poets attempted to rival their Spanish counterparts. Joseph ben Hanan Ezobi (thirteenth century), a native of Orange; Abraham Bederzi (1230?–1300?), *Ha-Badrashi* ("of Béziers") and his son Yedaya Bederzi (1270–1340), known as *Ha-Pemini* ("The bearded one") and the author of *Beḥinat Olam* (Examination of the World), a book of moral maxims that enjoyed a considerable success; and the troubador Isaac Ha-Gorni (thirteenth century) were the principal representatives of this tradition of liturgical and secular poetry.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Jews of the South

THE SUCCESSIVE EXPULSIONS from the kingdom, and then from those areas that subsequently came under its sovereignty, in principle closed the doors of France to the Jews. In the sixteenth century, they were encountered in small numbers only in a few areas, typically in the south and east, under certain regimes and particular conditions. Their fate remained tied to circumstances and whatever usefulness they might offer. The long Middle Ages, which for the Jews lasted until the final decades of the Ancien Régime, was no longer marked by the same pace of cultural development as in preceding centuries. By virtue of this, the late medieval period represents a break in the history of the Jews of France. Their communities, save the one in the southwest, were exhausted. Confined to a small number of areas, inward-looking, and relatively cut off from the rest of the diaspora, they no longer had enough strength left to sustain the remarkable cultural ferment they had known since the eleventh century. What is more, they were to remain isolated from the Renaissance in Europe.

THE COMTAT VENAISSIN AND AVIGNON

At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the last vestiges of the Jewish presence in Provence, and therefore within the boundaries of the kingdom of France, were henceforth concentrated in two localities coming under papal authority: the Comtat Venaissin, definitively restored to the Holy See in 1274, and Avignon, which it acquired in 1348. In fact, at the end of the Middle Ages and then during the Renaissance, Jews found sure refuge only in the papal states, whether in Italy or in France, while elsewhere in Europe they were persecuted or simply expelled. Jewish presence in the region is attested since the twelfth century. During this period, they were the only non-Catholics authorized to stay in the Comtat Venaissin and Avignon and to practice their faith.

How did it happen that in the sixteenth century—a century marked by a hardening of Rome's position toward the Jews, in the aftermath of the Counter Reformation—the Jews should have been tolerated in papal possessions? A series of pontifical bulls, among them the famous *Cannimius absurdum* of Paul IV in 1555, worsened their condition and restricted their