



Beyond Tolerance and Persecution: Reassessing Our Approach to Medieval *Convivencia*

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In 1992, the quincentennial marking the expulsion of the Jews from Spain brought with it a flurry of studies on medieval Jewish, or Sephardic, civilization. In the succeeding dozen years, Spain has become an increasingly “hot” subject for medievalists and Judaicists alike, and new courses on the diverse cultural legacy of the Iberian Peninsula have continued to appear at colleges and universities throughout the Europe, Israel, and North America.¹ The proliferation of such curricula has been aided by the publication of sourcebooks and readers that have enabled even nonspecialists to offer courses on medieval Iberia that highlight the important contributions of Muslims, Jews, and Conversos to the broader history of the medieval Iberian world.² The historiographic motif that runs throughout this new interest in medieval Spain is the subject of *convivencia*, or coexistence—a term that has been used to describe the tripartite society of medieval Iberia ever since it was introduced by the great Spanish philologist and historian Américo Castro in the 1940s.³ In recent years, this term has been embraced and distorted by an ever-widening group of academics, journalists, and politicians, a phenomenon that increasingly challenges historians of medieval Spain to return *convivencia* to its original context.

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In the field of Jewish Studies, the fascination with the relative acceptance of Jews in medieval Spain and the resulting rapprochement between the Sephardim and their host societies date back to the German-Jewish *Wissenschaft* historians of the late nineteenth century. Frustrated by the Jews' problematic encounter with modern European culture, the founders of Jewish Studies thought they had found, with the medieval Sephardim, a paradigm of a Jewish society that could integrate into its host culture without losing its own identity.⁴

Over the course of the past 50 years, Hispanists and scholars of Jewish history have taken up the discourse on the nature of *convivencia*, using it as a lens through which medieval Iberian civilization might be understood. The debate has traditionally centered around two polarized views. Some regard medieval Iberian society as a model of tolerance and cross-cultural interaction. This, indeed, was the original stance of both Castro and the Jewish historians who preceded him. Whereas the *Wissenschaft* scholars sought a paradigm of Jewish-gentile symbiosis, Castro and his followers hoped to explain the unique character of Spanish civilization and believed that the answer was the contributions of Iberia's Muslim and Jewish societies. They argued that *España es diferente*—"Spain is different"—from the rest of Latin Christendom, its civilization the product of a unique religious and cultural frontier that brought Muslims, Christians, and Jews together in close contact with one another.

Castro's vision of Spanish history as the result of cross-cultural influences was challenged by his lifelong critic and counterweight, Claudio Sánchez Albornoz, who saw Muslims and Jews as having little impact on the formation of the Spanish character, and who argued that medieval Spanish culture is best characterized by conflict, not cooperation.⁵ Although a somewhat altered version of Castro's thesis has generally won out among most Hispanists, the corrective offered by Sánchez Albornoz has found increasing support within Jewish Studies, especially among scholars assessing Jewish life in Muslim Iberia. Influenced, in part, by the deterioration of Arab-Israeli relations since the 1960s, a number of critics of *convivencia* have countered the idyllic view of an interfaith utopia in medieval Spain, pointing out the persecutions against Jewish populations under the Muslim Almoravid and Almohad dynasties of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the widespread Christian pogroms and forced conversions of Jews in 1391, and the cycle of forced conversions, expulsions, and inquisitorial harassment of Jewish and Muslim communities throughout the late medieval and early modern periods.⁶

To be sure, recent decades have witnessed the publication of more nuanced studies of Sephardic interaction with gentile culture, many of which have wisely substituted geographically and temporally limited portraits for the broad canvases favored by the likes of Castro and Sánchez Albornoz. Nonetheless, the tendency to couch the discussion of medieval *convivencia* in terms of either persecution or tolerance has proved to be remarkably durable. Scholars continue to gauge the Jewish experience in medieval Iberia in terms of their treatment by Muslims and Christians, and to search for the moment when Spanish coexistence and cooperation fell victim to the exclusivism that had already swept across much of Europe.⁷

One of the principal reasons for the persistence of this oversimplified view of *convivencia* has been the topic's recent popularity both among nonacademics (as evidenced by a profusion of articles and editorials in the popular press) and among scholars of adjacent fields of academic inquiry, including literary criticism and political science.⁸ Two recent articles in a leading travel magazine illustrate the degree to which the term has taken on a life of its own—albeit a life that continues to reflect back on its initial, academic context. One piece, entitled “Long Live *Convivencia!*,” notes that the term best characterizes the desire for peaceful relations and mutual respect held by native Spaniards as well as by that country's growing population of immigrants from North Africa. Writing about the meaning of *convivencia* in contemporary Chilean society, another author notes: “It is an extremely useful word, at least in Chile, because it means ‘coexistence’ or ‘living together.’ And the Chileans—unlike, for example, the Israelis or even the Spanish—take great pride in their *convivencia* skills.”⁹ That this definition retains echoes of Castro's original points of reference—Spain, Jews, Muslims—gives some indication (if only as a negative proof) of how the widespread use of the term has the potential to distort discussion of this topic. Indeed, the nonspecialists have emerged as the dominant voice in the debate on medieval Iberian history, and, as a result, those of us who write and teach on the Jews of this period continue to confront this old, polarized discussion of *convivencia*.

The subject of medieval *convivencia*, including the term's recent popularity as a catch phrase outside of academia, is one that can occupy a much longer study than what I present here. The following observations are thus offered not as a resolution to this dilemma, nor as a full exposition of the topic of Jewish-gentile relations in medieval Iberia, but rather as a suggestion of a way to reorient the discussion on this topic. It is my hope that some of the points I present will be helpful to those who are dealing with these same issues, whether inside or out-

[3]

*Medieval
“Convivencia”*

●
Jonathan Ray

side the classroom, and whether for the Muslim or the Christian period of Hispano-Jewish history.

[4] Jewish Social Studies

By focusing on Jewish legal status, or on the *mentalité* and attitudes of the majority culture toward the Jews, the discussion of convivencia within scholarly circles often becomes reduced to the question “Was it good for the Jews?” In my opinion, comparing levels of tolerance under Muslim and Christian rule (that is, where was it *better* for the Jews) offers little variation on this theme.¹⁰ Instead, I would like to pose the following: What were the attitudes of the medieval Sephardim themselves? How did they view their social, political, and economic relationship to gentile society? I will endeavor to answer these questions, first by looking at the stance of medieval Jewish authorities toward what scholars today often label as manifestations of convivencia. I will then move from attitudes to actions, looking briefly at some of the ways in which individual Jews navigated between the various boundaries of identity in Iberian culture. Several aspects of this reassessment of medieval convivencia are also applicable to the Jewish experience in Muslim al-Andalus as well as to other premodern Jewish communities. For reasons of convenience, however, I have attempted to narrow my analysis to Jewish life in Christian Iberia during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.¹¹

I propose that it was specifically those aspects of medieval convivencia most frequently lauded as ideal—that is, those of an open and accepting society—that medieval Hispano-Jewish authorities found to be the most problematic. For Jewish spiritual and communal leaders, at least, the real problem was not the exclusion but rather the acceptance of Jews. After all, a certain amount of exclusion and “intolerance” (to use a popular anachronism) was to be expected. Theologically speaking, Jews understood themselves to be in Exile among the Nations as divine punishment for their sins. But Christian and Muslim permissiveness presented these leaders with a much thornier problem. How do you prevent the social, economic, and political assimilation into non-Jewish society of the constituent members of your communities? How do you maintain social cohesion, religious identity, and a controllable taxbase when Jews are allowed to settle outside of their designated quarters, dress like gentiles, socialize with gentiles, and even take gentile lovers?

It should first be pointed out that the permeability of religious and social boundaries on the Iberian Peninsula predates the Middle Ages. As early as the Council of Elvira in the early fourth century, we have evidence that Jews and Christians socialized together, that they intermarried, and even that Christians asked Jewish leaders to bless their

crops. Although anti-Jewish policies generally prevailed under Visigothic rule, the problems arising from the accessibility and attraction to various aspects of gentile society and culture once again came to pose a formidable challenge to Jewish authorities throughout the Muslim period. During the high Middle Ages, royal authorities in Christian Iberia generally took a laissez-faire attitude toward the social interaction of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Laws that were meant to separate and distinguish members of the three religious communities, such as those drawn up at the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, were generally ignored. Despite the recurrence of negative representations of Jews and Muslims in the Christian literature of the Reconquest, ballads and poems such as the *Cantigas de Santa María* nonetheless reflect a society in which social, cultural, and economic relations between individuals of all faiths remained remarkably open and fluid.¹²

It was precisely this openness to heterodox groups that was a cause of concern for Jewish authorities. In the thirteenth century, leading Jewish moralists and would-be reformers Jonah Gerondi and Todros ben Joseph Halevi Abulafia of Toledo addressed the issue of the ethical conduct of Spain's Jewish communities.¹³ Although their sermons and writings are filled with standard calls to greater piety (such as observance of Shabbat and support of scholars and the poor), both also point to excessive social interaction with non-Jews as the leading cause for the low state of Jewish morals.¹⁴ Abulafia, who was writing while his young relative and namesake (Todros ben Judah Halevi Abulafia) composed erotic verses about Muslim women, even blamed such intermingling for a recent royal backlash against Jewish civil servants. This last case is instructive, in that Abulafia clearly (and perhaps deliberately) misinterprets the cause of King Alfonso X's anger with his Jewish courtiers. Christian sources regarding the incident mention only that the Jews were accused of redirecting royal funds to the king's rebellious son.¹⁵ Abulafia was less interested in the particulars of this crisis than in using it as an opportunity to attack larger issues of acculturation. That Abulafia, or other reformers, should seek to explain the vicissitudes of Jewish life as a result of moral laxity comes as no surprise. Yet their frequent emphasis on the seductiveness of gentile society, and of gentile women in particular, is worth noting. Such anxiety over the ease with which Jews could and, evidently, did cross one of the most significant boundaries separating them from the gentiles can also be found in contemporary mystical treatises and in the observations of foreign scholars such as the French talmudist and preacher Moses de Coucy.¹⁶

Behind the pietists' complaints of sexual transgressions and the more pragmatic concerns of Jewish communal officials (which I will

[5]

Medieval
"Convivencia"

●
Jonathan Ray

discuss further, below) loomed the great and abiding fear of Diaspora Jewry: conversion. In medieval Spain, anxieties that acculturation might lead to assimilation and the abandonment of the Jewish community were not unfounded. Even prior to the mass conversions of 1391, there is evidence that an increased familiarity with Christian society had already convinced many Jews to adopt Christianity.¹⁷ And for many Jews, the rise of a Converso society in Spain in the decades following 1391 helped to sustain the allure of Christian intellectual and material culture. Recently, Eric Lawee has shown how fifteenth-century Jewish intellectuals wrote admiringly of several aspects of Christian society, even as they continued to reject the Christian faith and its theological underpinnings.¹⁸ This somewhat ironic dichotomy between the condemnation of wide-scale Jewish attraction to gentile material culture and the concomitant admiration of Christian piety and religious solidarity can be seen in Solomon Alami's *Igeret musar* (Epistle on Morality). Alami, who witnessed the events of 1391 and the subsequent decline of much of Iberian Jewry, echoed the contemporary notion that the Jews' fate was a result of their own religious laxity. What is of interest in his assessment is the portrayal of Christian society as the custodian of proper social and religious boundaries between the different faiths:

Because we arrayed ourselves in their apparel, they have clothed us in different garments, so that we might appear as aliens in their midst and arouse derision and contempt in the sight of all; and because we have trimmed the corners of our beards and our hair, they have compelled us to let our beards grow long like mourners.

Far from lamenting what modern scholars identify as the rise of "intolerance" in Spanish culture, Alami juxtaposes Jewish religious negligence with gentile righteousness, and he praises the Christian world for providing wayward Jews with a model of religious cohesion and devotion:

How much our rich coreligionists could learn from their Christian neighbors! The Christian princes and barons rival one another in efforts to promote and uphold their religion, and to train their youth in the pious sentiments of their ancestors. Our Jewish rich despise their faith, and permit the teachers of religion to eat the bread of sorrow and poverty.¹⁹

Despite such views of Christian religious vitality, the depiction of Christian secular culture as a garden of forbidden delights remained an enduring image among Jewish writers of the late Middle Ages. This view of gentile society is reflected in a well-known letter written by the

fourteenth-century rabbi Yehoshua ha-Lorki to his erstwhile teacher, Pablo de Santa María (né Shlomo ha-Levi), after the latter's conversion to Christianity. Struggling to comprehend the path taken by his former mentor, ha-Lorki set forth a number of possible motivating factors, among them the following:

Perhaps your appetitive soul longed to climb the rungs of wealth and honor which everyone desires, and to satisfy the craving soul with all manner of food, and to gaze at the resplendent beauty of the countenance of gentile women.²⁰

Rabbinic concerns about sexual liaisons between Jews and Christians (itself a representation of the general seductiveness of Christian society as a whole) are also reflected in contemporary Christian literature. In the story of Marisaltos, a well-known Castilian folktale that appears in Gonzalo de Berceo's *Milagros de Nuestra Señora* and in Alfonso X's *Cantigas de Santa María*, a beautiful Jewess is discovered with her Christian lover. Enraged, the leaders of the Jewish community cast her from a cliff, only to have the Virgin Mary intervene and save her. The story offers a fairly common message of Christian forgiveness (and divine favor) over and against Jewish harshness and obstinacy, but the sense of Jewish outrage at such relationships is not without historical merit. A responsum in the collection of Asher ben Yehiel, the leading rabbinic sage of Castile in the early fourteenth century, records the case of a Jewish widow near the town of Coca who had caused a scandal by taking a gentile lover and becoming pregnant. Upon hearing about the situation, the great courtier-rabbi Yehudah ibn Waqar took it upon himself to punish the widow. His letter to Rabbi Asher, in which he describes the steps he took toward meting out justice, is particularly illuminating.

After obtaining sufficient testimony that the woman in question was indeed guilty of fornication with a gentile, Ibn Waqar hesitated before openly condemning her and her behavior. He explained:

Since I was afraid that perhaps she might be converted, it did not seem [wise] to me to sermonize and to judge on this matter in public. I thus brought this matter concerning the gentile before Don Juan, may the Lord preserve him, while in Coca. And he responded that this was not a matter for him to decide, since she was a Jewess, but that we should judge her according to the laws of our Torah.

By Ibn Waqar's own account, the Christian Infante, Don Juan, seems to have been far less disturbed by the interfaith relation than his Jewish counterpart. Furthermore, the mention of the woman's poten-

[7]

Medieval
"Convivencia"

●
Jonathan Ray

tial conversion underscores Jewish anxiety over the very attractive option that Hispano-Christian society presented to medieval Sephardim. Finally, Ibn Waqar resolves that the woman is to be disfigured, both as a means of preserving the dignity and authority of the Jewish legal system and to send a cautionary message to other Jewish women. His concern that this is not an isolated occurrence, and that other Jews could be easily enticed to commit similar transgressions, is unambiguous. His letter continues:

[A]ll of the [Jewish] communities in the vicinity of Coca share rumors, and thus the knowledge concerning this “whore” will spread among the non-Jews, who will look scornfully at our laws, and in order that the women should hear and not be like her. It occurred to me that since the matter received so much notoriety, that she should be punished by cutting off her nose in order to destroy the shape of her face which she adorned for her paramour, and that she pay the lords of the city a certain amount of money.

In his response, Rabbi Asher applauds Ibn Waqar’s decision and echoes the courtier’s apprehensions regarding the potential humiliation posed by her conversion:

You have judged well to duly punish her so that she would become despised by her paramour. This matter should be carried out immediately in order that she not be allowed to escape by means of conversion.²¹

Nor were pietists alone in regarding the relative openness of gentile culture as inherently problematic. If rabbinic authorities were most alarmed by Jewish sexual liaisons with gentiles, Jewish communal officials were primarily concerned by the development of social and political ties between members of their communities and Christian institutions.²² The most common manifestations of this phenomenon were the chronic problem of *malshinim*, or informers, and the less celebrated yet equally distressing custom of Jews taking their legal cases before royal, municipal, and even ecclesiastic courts.²³ Although Jews were granted the right of judicial autonomy in cases between members of their own faith, they had a difficult time establishing their courts as the sole recourse for Jewish litigants. Christian and Jewish sources both document the common practice of Jews turning to non-Jewish judges, often after not receiving the verdict they wanted from their local Jewish court.

Despite the formal recognition of Jewish autonomy, the challenge posed by gentile courts as a potential alternative for Jewish litigants was

an issue throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The more receptive these courts were to Jewish appeals, the greater the threat to Jewish legal and communal authority.²⁴ In the lands of Christian Iberia, Jewish willingness to patronize gentile courts was encouraged by the friendly reception that they (and their financial inducements) often received there, which was an indirect product of the system of social and political structures we refer to as *convivencia*. In medieval Spain, Christian tribunals had jurisdiction over cases involving both Jews and Christians, and Jewish presence in these courts as well as the subsequent relationships they established with Christian judges were a part of the fabric of their daily lives. For many Jews, the voluntary expansion of these relationships into the realm of ostensibly internal communal affairs was a logical expedience. A responsum by Solomon ibn Adret deals with one case in which communal officials, helpless to prevent their members from adopting local Christian customs regarding inheritance, merely declared that such practice falls within the category of *dina de-malkhuta dina* (the law of the land is binding), a tactic that sent Ibn Adret into a fit of rage.²⁵ Such cases show that the average Jew and even his communal leaders understood themselves to be living in a relatively open marketplace of competing communal organizations and institutions.

This fact raises another issue in the study of *convivencia* that merits reconsideration. For Spain, as well as for other cultural borderlands of the Middle Ages, scholars have tended to examine the cross-cultural contacts of various religious and ethnic *groups*. In doing so, they have focused their attention on issues such as the status of each group (Did Jews have equal rights with other minorities?) and cultural borrowing (To what degree were Jewish thought and attitudes shaped by other cultures?).²⁶ Such an approach has been a valuable means of analysis for intellectual and cultural histories, but it does little to illuminate our understanding of daily life. It is my supposition that, by focusing on the individual rather than on the group, we will gain greater insight into the social history of Iberian Jewry and perhaps be able to avoid some of the chronic problems of “myth and counter-myth” that have so far dominated this subject.²⁷

Indeed, though the attraction of gentile women and gentile courts might have been the principal concerns of Jewish spiritual and communal leaders, the degree to which individual Jews took advantage of what we might call the “opportunities of *convivencia*” is not limited to these areas. On the contrary, medieval Sephardic Jews tended to resist any policies that would restrict their social and economic movement within the larger society. The great territorial expansion of Christian Iberia

[9]

Medieval
“Convivencia”

●
Jonathan Ray

[10]
Jewish
Social
Studies

during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries created an immediate need for settlers to help develop the economic and governmental infrastructure of former Muslim lands. The dynamism and fluidity of Spanish society during this period afforded Jews a relatively high degree of social mobility, and many Jews responded by assuming several of the features of Christian identity. Among these was Christian dress, particularly clothes commonly worn by Christian burghers and nobles, which many Jews adopted in order to assume greater personal status and, in some cases, to avoid financial burdens. Such practices were sharply denounced by Jewish leaders, including Gerondi, who chided Jews for attempting to hide their religious identity from gentiles in order to avoid paying special taxes. Christian legislation aimed at regulating Jewish dress was only loosely enforced, and decrees such as the one issued at the Castilian *Cortes* of 1268 that prohibited Jews from assuming Christian names reflects Jewish interests in acculturation and integration as much as it does a Christian campaign to exclude them.²⁸ Another significant way in which Jews were able to approximate the status of conquering Christians was their ownership of Muslim slaves. Christian victories and their later success in quelling Muslim rebellions greatly increased both the number of Muslims who became enslaved and the involvement of Jews in the trade and ownership of these slaves.²⁹ In contrast, the Jews themselves were protected under royal decree from being enslaved by the conquering Christians.³⁰

The rapid expansion of Christian society during the high Reconquest also undermined efforts by both Christian and Jewish leaders to maintain separate residential neighborhoods for members of the different faiths. Many of the Jews who migrated to the newly conquered territories settled outside the limits of the official Jewish quarter, maintaining only the most tenuous ties to the Jewish community. Throughout the peninsula, leaders of Jewish communities repeatedly ordered their members not to move their homes or businesses outside of the quarter, and not to sell land within it to Christians, though to little avail.³¹ The nature of Jewish landownership also mirrored that of many Christians. Not only were Iberian Jews permitted to own land, but the types of lands they owned, as well as the social and economic status they derived from these properties, closely paralleled the experiences of other urban groups on the peninsula.

Under Muslim rule, urban property had been tied to gardens, vineyards, and orchards located outside of the town walls, and the transition to Christian rule did little to alter this basic urban landscape. It was thus commonplace that Jews who settled the cities of southern Iberia were also involved in the cultivation of small plots of land and came to own a

variety of urban and rural properties in much the same way as other settlers. Additionally, some Jewish settlers possessed larger tracts of farmland beyond the municipal sphere and others participated directly in the exploitation of rural lands as did their Christian and Muslim counterparts. Aharon Abinafia, courtier to Pedro III of Aragon, was granted ownership of two entire villages in the kingdom of Valencia, whose inhabitants were mostly Muslim.³² Indeed, the Castilian legal code *Las Siete Partidas* prohibited Jews from employing Christians as domestic servants but allowed Jews to engage them as agricultural laborers, and a contemporary letter by Pope Gregory X complained of “possessions that the Jews and Saracens cultivate or that they give to others to cultivate.”³³ In 1297, an Aragonese royal privilege protected the rights of Jewish laborers who had migrated to the rural district near Alicante, in Valencia, in order to participate in the harvest there.³⁴

In addition to owning large estates, some Jews were granted rights to own and operate mills, saltworks, and olive presses. The ownership of flour mills is particularly interesting, because it has ramifications that extend beyond economic opportunity and utility. In medieval society, the ability to control such mills was generally a sign of seigneurial power and gave Jews a small entry into a feudal (or, at least, quasi-feudal) system from which they were typically excluded.³⁵ The availability in some rural areas of a large Muslim labor force even allowed Jews to act as landlords in a style analogous to that of Christian *caballeros villanos*, or urban non-noble knights, whose rise to prominence is one of the hallmarks of social change in thirteenth-century Castile.³⁶ Initially, the *caballeros villanos* derived their social rank from demonstrations of military prowess, a quality for which there was no parallel among the Jews. However, as the battles of conquest became fewer and farther between, these urban knights continued to cling to their hard-won status and honor as a hereditary distinction and vigorously attempted to blur the lines between themselves and the lower nobility. In this respect, they are indeed comparable to their wealthy and ambitious Jewish neighbors.

The Jews’ attempts to assume features of Christian identity and the corresponding efforts by Jewish (and to a lesser extent Christian) officials to prohibit such behavior were part and parcel of a broader Iberian phenomenon. The pan-peninsular movement to resettle the new territories increased the already peripatetic nature of Iberian society, and the opportunities for military glory and economic advancement opened by the conquest of these regions also helped to challenge the existing social order. Jewish merchants and wealthy landholders were as affected by these sweeping social changes as were

[11]

Medieval
“Convivencia”

●
Jonathan Ray

their Christian counterparts, and many joined these upwardly mobile Christians in imitating the dress and customs of their social superiors.³⁷

[12] Here we see something approaching a true example of *convivencia*. Not only did Jews show a greater concern for personal advancement than for religious or communal solidarity, but in doing so they demonstrated their identities to be as much a product of the prevailing historical processes and social dynamics of the age as they were of the discrete traditions of the Jewish community.

Jewish
Social
Studies

Conclusion

Thomas Glick has argued that, both in Muslim and in Christian Iberia, inherent tensions between members of the three faiths were created by the “dominant caste” that sought to restrict groups religiously yet not economically. Glick, whose studies on the subject of *convivencia* are among the most insightful and cogent work in this field, seems here to overestimate the degree of control that both the crown and the Jewish *kahal* (communal government) had over the actions of individual Jews during this period. To my mind, the inherent tensions that Glick correctly identifies arose not from official policies (which were always subject to suspension for Jews with money or connections) but from the ability and willingness of Iberian Jews to construct identities that transcended the limits of their religious communities.³⁸

In this article I have sought to redirect the current discussion of *convivencia* in medieval Iberia and to move beyond the questions of tolerance and persecution. First, I have suggested that we reexamine some of the traditional hallmarks of *convivencia* by focusing on the attitudes and actions of medieval Jews themselves, rather than on perceptions of the Jews held by the majority culture. In doing so, we see that Jewish spiritual leaders and communal officials viewed the accessibility of gentile culture as one of the primary challenges to Jewish religious piety, social cohesion, and political autonomy.

Second, the subject of *convivencia* has heretofore always been viewed as a product of group dynamics—that is, the “coexistence” of different groups constructed by religion or ethnicity. What I am suggesting is that, though Jews do retain an important identity qua Jews, in their own eyes and in the eyes of their contemporaries, it is nonetheless important to recognize that they also possessed a number of other characteristics and associations that contributed to their overall identity. As with periodization, we use groups as a way of studying history while understanding that there is a certain arbitrary quality to the way