By the Rivers of Iberia:  
Exile and Homeland in Andalusian Jewish Poetry

The origins of the expression may remain obscure, but for hundreds of years, Jews have concluded their prayers on both Yom Kippur and Passover with the injunction, “Next year in Jerusalem!” Even today, following the success of the Zionist movement in establishing a modern state in the ancient territories of Israel and the acquisition by modern Israel of Jerusalem, the tragedy of Diaspora remains enmeshed in the collective Jewish psyche. The lamentation of so many generations in exile perseveres.

The preeminent role of exile in the Jewish consciousness and its profound impact in determining the past two thousand years of Jewish history has not resulted in a significant degree of scholarly interest on the topic of Diaspora in poetry or literature from Judaism’s Golden Age in Spain. Rather, the adoption by the Jewish literati of Arabic poetic techniques, in addition to the infusion of such “foreign” thematic influences as romance, chivalry, Neoplatonic spiritualism, and Aristotelian rationalism dominate current scholarly discourse. When the topic of exile appears in the poetry of medieval Andalusian Jews, scholars most often appropriate it to advance an argument concerning Neoplatonism. As a discrete subject, the question of exile rarely receives consideration. Yet a distinct genre of “exile poems” exists among the wealth of poetry produced during the Golden Age of Jewry in Spain. Like the anonymous psalmist before the rivers of Babylon who declared, “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither,”

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* The term “Golden Age of Spanish Jewry” is contentious, as no universally recognized definition for the expression exists within the academic community. For the purposes of this essay, the expression “Golden Age” will be used to reference the flowering of Jewish cultural activity between the tenth and twelfth centuries.

** An exemplary study of the conflict between linguistic traditionalists and those favoring the infusion of foreign conventions into Hebrew poetry can be found in Ross Brann’s The Compunctious Poet (particularly pages 23-58).

*** Such scholars include, for example, Raymond Scheindlin, Adena Tanenbaum, Yosef Tobi, and to a lesser extent, Ross Brann.
Spanish poets like Moses ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi sang “songs of Zion” that recounted both the plight of exile and the intense desire for national repatriation.¹

At one level, the exile poems function as complex Neoplatonic metaphors for the destitute and disoriented soul in its quest to know God, and such an interpretation has dominated scholarly discourse on Andalusian, Jewish poetry concerning the topic of exile. Most scholars have dismissed any discussions of the circumstances of Diaspora as a mere trope by which to convey the “true content” of the poems’ philosophical deliberations.² Yet in so doing, these scholars discard a viable alternative interpretation of these exile poems in favor of a myopic reading that limits their ability to understand the poems’ meanings, social contexts, and political implications. Neoplatonic introspection and ethno-nationalist lamentation coexist in these exile poems. This concourse reveals the complexity of the Andalusian, Jewish identity, as heir to both the Jewish aspirations for national repatriation and the Greco-Arabic philosophical tradition that was the patrimony of Spain.

The exile poems reflect the struggle of the Andalusian Jew to reconcile his two conflicting identities. By predicing the individual’s attainment of spiritual actualization upon the restoration of the collective Jewish community to Zion, they illustrate how Iberia’s Jews persisted in understanding themselves at some profound, spiritual level, as strangers in Spain. Though many Andalusian Jews considered Iberia their homeland and retained strong emotional connections to the states in which that had acculturated to become courtiers, doctors, philosophers, scholars, and poets, the Jews of Spain always remained social outsiders, never fully assimilating into the dominant cultural orders under which they lived. As these exile poems reveal, the objective of national restoration superseded all other loyalties for the Jews of

¹ Psalms 137.1-137.5.
medieval Spain, as they understood even their personal spiritual ambitions to be dependent upon the fulfillment of this objective. Though an abundance of “exile poems” exist, this study will advance its argument by focusing primarily on the works of Moses ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi, in particular the poems “Come Let us Seek the Spots,” “Thou that Graciously Attendest,” “Songs to Zion,” and “Jerusalem.”

The Neoplatonists of medieval Andalusia understood the soul, burdened by the materialistic preoccupations of an imperfect, corporeal world, as estranged from its immaterial divine origins. Such estrangement easily evokes the condition of exile, as the soul struggles to regain its understanding of God and return again to its most perfected state. Ibn Ezra regarded perfect happiness as “the attainment of philosophical insight into the nature of the Divine” and as a consequence, scholars have commonly viewed his references to the debased condition of Israel in exile as a conceit to anthropomorphize the condition of the unfulfilled soul.\(^3\) That his text closely links the experience of the individual with the collective experience of Israel appears unambiguous.

For example, at the commencement of his poem, “Come Let us Seek the Spots,” Ibn Ezra implores his reader, “Come, let us seek the spots where dwelled of old/the folk beloved/Fate hath scattered them/And only ruins of their homes remain.”\(^4\) Such a poem would seem, at its outset, to treat explicitly the Diaspora of the Jewish nation. The poet begs the companionship of his reader as he wistfully travels back to the Promised Land, “Those spots of old.” There dwelled the earlier generations of the Jews who had not yet betrayed the love God; later generations

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\(^4\) Moses ibn Ezra, “Come Let us Seek the Spots,” stanza 1.
would incur His ire, and in punishment, be “scattered” throughout the world. In reflection of the spiritual decay that had condemned Israel to its exile, the physical homes of this earlier age had fallen to ruin, an unequivocal symbol of Israel’s status as a homeless nation. Yet as the poet prays that the cry of the gazelle, a well-established medieval metaphor for the nation of Israel, sound soon “for joy, instead of grief,” he closes with a supplication that this joyful song “bring with sweets of love, my soul to life again!”

This abrupt shift in the poem’s subject would seem to confound the quest of the Jews for national repatriation with the quest of the poet to achieve personal, spiritual regeneration. Although the poem’s first stanza easily lends itself to be read as a nationalistic lamentation, it could also describe the tragic condition of the embodied soul, separated from its divine origin, reduced from its initial “beloved” state into one of decay and “ruin.” The anguish of Israel’s exile resembles “the soul’s incarceration in the corporeal world,” and as a consequence, the divine promise to one day lead Israel back into the Promised Land comes to suggest the return of the soul, from the suffering of this “lower world,” to its “Source.”

The experience of the collective Jewish nation serves as a macrocosm for the unperfected soul. The sinful Israelites who endured exile upon losing their former status as God’s beloved people suffered acutely from the impermanence that characterizes human existence. If one concedes that the sinful soul abandons the constancy of God in favor of the evanescence of corporeal life, the unfolding history of Israel comes to function as a prism through which to view the internal, spiritual conflict of the Neoplatonic poet. Andalusian Jewish philosophers, and in

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particular many Neoplatonists, understood rational contemplation of the physical universe as a means by which one could attain profound insight concerning the divine. In light of such a perspective, it would appear unsurprising that ibn Ezra would endeavor to explain the human soul, itself a part of the mysterious divine world, by means of an analogous concept from the physical world of creation.

The parallels between the exiled Israelites longing to return to their national homeland (to seek the spots of old) and the Neoplatonic soul seeking restoration to its “sacred, supernal place of origin and ultimate repose” receive further reinforcement by their ultimate convergence. The restoration of a Jewish nation would logically culminate in the union of the Israelites with their God, as repatriation would concluded with the resettlement of Jerusalem and the reestablishment of the Temple, God’s traditional place of rest. Thus, the soul in search of its source must also long (though perhaps in some more abstractly metaphysical way) to return to Jerusalem, rebuild the Temple, and reside in “ultimate repose” alongside the divine. The Neoplatonic soul and the Diaspora Jews shared not only a common history, but the aspiration for a common destiny. The intensely impersonal voice of ibn Ezra’s contemplative narrator is reconciled with his intensely personal desire for the resuscitation of his soul, allowing the work to operate simultaneously as a lamentation on exile and a Neoplatonic commentary.

Even when not employed as such a direct metaphor for the ambitions of the pensive soul, the subject of exile possessed strong undertones of Neoplatonic spirituality. Judah Halevi strongly opposed rationalist philosophical currents that regarded the refinement of the intellect as

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9 Tanenbaum, *The Contemplative Soul*, 123.


“the height of human perfection,” but held God to be ultimately incomprehensible to the human mind.  For Halevi, religious experience, not philosophical ardor, served as the only genuine source of insight into the soul or the divine. Ibn Gabirol’s proclamation that “Only through introspection, only by contemplating the mystery of his soul will he [man] find his God”—a presumption echoed in ibn Ezra’s use of the exiled Israelites as an analytic type by which to approach the metaphysical mysteries of the soul—was condemned by Halevi as audacious for attempting to know God by intellectual means.  Nevertheless, Halevi remained committed to the Neoplatonic precept that the soul constituted a product of divine love, which, when embodied, existed in an unperfected state.

With no pretension to explore the condition of the soul through such cryptic, intellectual devices such as metaphor, Halevi’s exile poetry expressed a conscious awareness of the intersection between national repatriation and the regeneration of the individual spirit. In his poem “Jerusalem,” Halevi begins by conjuring within his mind the “beautiful heights” on which stood Jerusalem, the “city of a great King.” He does not, like ibn Ezra, probe the history of this initial scene, though his city abounds with rich symbolic value, as the patrimony of both the legendary David who founded it and the God whom David served. Instead, Halevi considers the impact of such an image on his soul, as he confesses how, “From the western coast my desire burns towards thee.” Though he laments the decline of Jerusalem’s former glory and the destruction of its Temple, Halevi longs only to return to the city, to “fall on thy broken stones and tenderly kiss them,” to mingle his tears with the dust of its ruins.

14 Tanenbaum, The Contemplative Soul, 188-190.
The redemption envisioned by the poem is intensely personal: “the taste of thy dust will be sweeter than honey to me.” Yet Halevi’s spiritual quest remains inextricably linked to this exile from the city of Jerusalem. Whereas Zion served as an intellectual starting point for ibn Ezra to commence his contemplation of his metaphysical aspirations, the satisfaction of Halevi’s soul requires reunion with his homeland, his ambrosial “honey.” Halevi held as ideal the “unmediated, first-hand knowledge of God” acquired through the combination of humility and devout adherence to canonical revelation, which he considered “the divinely ordained path to spiritual growth and fulfillment in this world and the next.”

The Jewish law, strictly construed, demanded the performance of various rites occur within Jerusalem. Without possession of Jerusalem and without the existence of a Temple, the religious law that allowed individuals to achieve closeness with the divine could not be fulfilled.

The communal tragedy of exile becomes, for Halevi, a personal, spiritual crisis. As he wrote in *The Khazari*, “the desired outcome is that the human soul become divine, that it withdraw from its senses and observe the supernal world, delighting in viewing the angelic light and in hearing the divine speech.” Such a Neoplatonic telos, however, required an observation of the “Law whose teachings and prescribed observances enable you to attain this spiritual degree.” Because such Law, for Halevi, equated to the Mosaic Law revealed to the Israelites at Sinai, the individual soul could not discover its divinity so long as it remained exiled from Jerusalem, unable to perform the Temple rites.

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19 Halevi, *Kitab Al Khazari*, 73.
Although Halevi, in his poem “To Israel, in Exile,” imagines God declaring unto the Israelites “Let them not exult, those who say, ‘Zion is desolate!’—For My heart is in Zion,” such a statement could just as easily have issued forth from Halevi himself.\(^\text{20}\) As a symbol of both passion and conviction, it would appear reasonable to surmise that the heart of Halevi, who longs to return to Jerusalem only to “fall on thy broken stones and tenderly kiss them,” remains alongside that of his God in Zion. Those Jews without such strong attachment to their homeland, those who “exult” while dismissing Zion as desolate, can never attain the divinity of their human souls, as they cannot fully practice the perfected “Law” bequeathed directly unto Israel by God. They mistake their lives in Spain as sweet to the detriment of their souls, as the man who has come to understand the true sweetness of Jerusalem’s honey-like dust sees “all the good of Spain is light; and a light thing to leave it.”\(^\text{21}\)

Though the philosophies of ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi diverge on critical issues like the role of introspection in facilitating knowledge of the divine, both remained committed to a distinctly Neoplatonic end. The embodied soul existed in an imperfect state, and as a consequence, “ultimate felicity” resided in attainment of a profound understanding of God, the soul’s return to its “supernal place of origin and ultimate repose” where, according to Halevi, it could itself become divine.\(^\text{22}\) The exile of the Hebrew people could be seen as both a metaphor for, and an obstruction to, this ultimate spiritual quest. Though the writings of ibn Ezra more easily lend themselves to the former interpretation, and those of Halevi to the latter, the motif of exile remains strongly linked to Neoplatonic discourse on the aspiration of the individual’s soul.

\(^{20}\) Judah Halevi, “To Israel, in Exile,” stanza 1.

\(^{21}\) Judah Halevi, “Songs to Zion,” stanza 1.

\(^{22}\) Tanenbaum, The Contemplative Soul, 120-122, 180.
Most contemporary scholarship has contented itself with this reading, circumscribing these exile poems as Neoplatonic allegories.\(^{23}\) Despite his position that the distinctly Jewish themes of lamentation and exile provided a “complement” to the philosophical concerns of Iberian “intellectual life,” Raymond Scheindlin argued that “the tendency of the imagery of love to move in the direction of a philosophical allegory of the relationship of the soul or of the cosmos itself to God goes together with a weakening of the national theme.”\(^{24}\) Similarly, Adena Tanenbaum has diminished the relevance of the nationalistic rhetoric of Judah Halevi. In her opinion, “Halevi appropriated the familiar language and imagery of the collective and historical exile and redemption to voice regret for spiritual stumbling and hopes of personal deliverance.”\(^{25}\)

The exile poem, they would appear to argue, constitutes a subgenre of the philosophy poem, not an independent genre in and of itself.

As such, the exile poem would be expected to focus, like the philosophy poem, solely on “pure philosophical thought.”\(^{26}\) It should remain unconcerned with the preoccupations of the external world and “free of any binding social call.”\(^{27}\) Yet a reading of these exile poems that interprets each poem as the aggregate of its individual symbols, rather than contextualizing it in a Neoplatonic superstructure, renders such a conclusion untenable. Jewish intellectuals during the Golden Age of Andalusian Jewry conceived of their circumstances in terms of examples provided by scripture.\(^{28}\) Samuel ibn Nagrela (Samuel HaNagid), for example, interpreted


\(^{26}\) Yosef Tobi, *Proximity and Distance* [Boston: Brill, 2002], 214.

\(^{27}\) Tobi, *Proximity and Distance*, 214.

himself as “the David of my age,” by virtue of his extraordinary political power and military success.29 Jews had long drawn upon the stories of the Bible to explain the analogous situations of their present. In his prophesying the destruction of Judah and the eventual restoration of the Israelites to Zion, Jeremiah likened the impending slavery in Babylon to that of Egypt.30 The exodus from Egypt served as a sort of analytic “type.” It contextualized the direness of the Babylonian invasion and forewarned the dispersal of the Israelites into a second slavery by associating the events of the present with those of an analogous past situation.

Similarly, in Talmudic times, rabbis symbolized the struggle between Israel and Rome in terms of the story of Jacob and Esau. The wickedness of the biblical Edom, the nation derived from the progeny of Esau, was “seen to prefigure the cruel affliction of Israel by the Romans.”31 Edom, however, also symbolized the Babylonians, as Psalm 137 implores the judgment of God against the Edomites for “the day of Jerusalem’s fall.” 32 The Edomites of most ancient antiquity, the Babylonians that sacked Jerusalem, and the Romans who would destroy the second Temple coalesced into a rich, multifaceted symbol, as each generation looked to the examples of the past to contextualize the confusions of its present. That Samuel ibn Nagrela chose to commemorate his status as “the most extraordinarily accomplished Jew not only in Spain but anywhere in medieval Christendom” with the epitaph of David would suggest that this tradition of interpreting the present by means of multidimensional symbols, whose potency evolved with generations of use and reuse, remained alive and well in medieval Iberia.

31 Tanenbaum, The Contemplative Soul, 129.
32 Psalms 137:7.
From this perspective, the exile poems of ibn Ezra and Halevi come to appear much more like literal calls for national solidarity and repatriation. If accepted as a common symbol for the Israelites, the gazelle of ibn Ezra’s “Come Let us Seek the Spots” who “wails in Edom’s keep, or Ishmael’s chain,” evokes a strong socio-political commentary on the status of Andalusian Jewry. Edom could represent either Christianity, as the spiritual heirs of the Roman “Edomites,” or Islam, the temporal heirs of the Babylonian “Edomites” and the sovereigns of territory once held by the actual Edomite nation. The expression “Ishmael’s chain” could serve to clarify the association of Edom and Islam, or it could differentiate the anguish experienced by the Jewish gazelle at the hands of the Christian “Edom’s keep” and the Muslim “Ishmael’s chain.” In either circumstance, his tormentors reduce the Jew to a state of suffering and enslavement, as he “wails,” futilely bound to the chains of servitude.

In this despair, the gazelle weeps, “for her beloved One, estranged, the bridegroom of her youth.” Judaism conceived of the nation of Israel and God as lovers, once united together in the land of Zion but separated, at least for a time, by the transgressions of law that resulted in Diaspora. Though the bridegroom of Israel’s youth would represent God, the estrangement of the relationship resulted from the exile of the Jews from Zion. To remedy the gazelle’s mourning and transform her song from one of grief to “joy” would require restoration of Jewish sovereignty in Israel, for without it, the Israelites could not achieve that “ultimate union” of “eternal love” once enjoyed in those idyllic “spots where dwelled of old/the folk beloved.”

Ibn Ezra expounds further on the desolation of exile in his poem “Thou that Graciously Attendest.” God had made Israel “like a vineyard” planting its “tender vines” in the soil of

33 Moses ibn Ezra, “Come Let us Seek the Spots,” stanza 2.
34 Moses ibn Ezra, “Come Let us Seek the Spots,” stanza 2.
Zion.\textsuperscript{36} There, the Israelites remained secure and prosperous. Uprooted from their land, the vines of Israel, much like the vines of the grape, shriveled to mere “branches,” stiff and lifeless, as they embarked upon an exile in which they were condemned to “dwell, like the dead, among the shadows.”\textsuperscript{37} In exile, the Jew suffers intense “misery” and “grief.” All that pass him hiss at him in disdain. His enemies despoil his wealth and murder his people indiscriminately, as they stripped off branches of the familial vines of Jacob and “heaped them up,” with callous indifference, “in the road.” The redemption for which ibn Ezra prays, the “deliverance” he pleads his God to hasten, entails the liberation of the Jewish nation from their “forgotten” status, incarcerated in a “prison of their woe.”\textsuperscript{38}

Because the origin of such “woe” resides in the Jew’s status as exile, his deliverance would require restoration to the land of Zion, where he could once more root his “tender vines” and prosper like a “vineyard.” Though the “prison of their woe” could be interpreted as a Neoplatonic metaphor for the unfulfilled, embodied soul, the poem explicitly addresses the anguish of Diaspora. The Jews of medieval Iberia, ever conscious of their national history and its complex symbolism, would most likely have understood their exile, following the razing of the Second Temple by the Roman “Edomites” as paralleling the captivity that followed the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonian “Edomites.” If the captives in Babylon would compose songs of remembrance “by the rivers of Babylon,” it would appear logical that their Iberian “antitypes” would also lament their exile from Zion.\textsuperscript{39} To dismiss the subject of national repatriation and read such exile poems as “philosophical allegories” neglects their dialogue with

\textsuperscript{36} Moses Ibn Ezra, “Thou that Graciously Attendest,” stanza 3.

\textsuperscript{37} Moses Ibn Ezra, “Thou that Graciously Attendest,” stanza 2.

\textsuperscript{38} Moses Ibn Ezra, “Thou that Graciously Attendest,” stanza 1.

\textsuperscript{39} Psalms 137:1.
the Jewish past and their voice as a momentary present in the continuously unfolding saga of Jewish history.

Likewise, the exile poems of Judah Halevi endeavor to liberate the Jews of Spain from their complacency, as they mourn the exile of the Israelite from Zion. Zion may lie “in the cords of Edom,” corrupted by their various Christian and Muslim overlords into “a land of howling beasts and owls… a heritage of thorns and thistles.” Yet the poet reminds his reader that the land was no different when given by God to the Jewish forefathers. With the name of the divine in their hearts, these “fathers” drew sustenance; the barren deserts of Canaan became for them like “a park among flowers.” The mere dust of Zion could render trivial “all the good of Spain,” for it promised Halevi a regeneration of the spirit, a taste sweeter than even that of honey.

Among the delights of Spain, he could taste no sweetness, as Zion remained strangled by the tyrannous “Edom,” perhaps less a direct allusion to any single contemporary nation than a symbol of illegitimacy, as Esau had forfeited his birthright as the eldest son unto Jacob. Like the mourning of the Babylonian exiles, often tempered by their access to material wealth and public power, Spain’s Jews would exult in their prosperity and dismiss Zion as “desolate,” though this land of thorns and thistles, beasts and owls, remained the home of Israel’s God. Those who rejoiced among “all the good of Spain” knew not the transcendent sweetness of repatriation, which rendered all other tastes dull. Such false exultation amounted to nothing more than “grief” as Halevi, the “harp” of Zion’s songs, dreamed for the end of his people’s

40 Judah Halevi “Songs to Zion,” stanza 2.
42 Genesis 25:29-34.
“captivity.” Whereas the exiles at the rivers of Babylon hung their harps, unable to sing of Zion amidst the misery of a foreign land, Halevi sounds a clarion call for national redemption. The Israelites suffer captivity, though the “heart” of God remains in Jerusalem amidst the “broken stones of Temple,” stones which the “tears” and “love” of the Jewish nation might return to “former glories,” as the dust of Zion restores sweetness to bitter life of the Jew “bound” in exile.45

The Neoplatonic metaphors for individual spiritual actualization exist in these exile poems alongside such traditional aspirations for Jewish autonomy. The two themes reinforce one another, not only because an analogy exists between “the plight of the embodied soul, the alienation of the individual, and the exile of the nation,” but because the project of the Jewish Neoplatonist remained closely linked to that of national restoration.46

In order to attain that felicity of “insight into the nature of the Divine” which makes divine the human soul, the individual must seek the return of his soul to its sacred source, its place of ultimate rest. Because the soul was “hewn from the divine,” this return to a “supernal place of origin” required the union of the soul with God. For Halevi, such an ambition required a strict observance of Mosaic Law, as revelation represented the “ordained path to spiritual growth and fulfillment.”47 Mosaic law, in turn, demanded a return to Zion. In exile, the law could at best be closely approximated; its most mystical rites and rituals required the restoration of the Temple system, which could only be accomplished with the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in Jerusalem. Perhaps the implications of such logic explain why “the mature Halevi

44 Judah Halevi, “Songs to Zion,” stanza 5.
45 Judah Halevi “Jerusalem,” stanza 1; Judah Halevi, “Songs to Zion,” stanza 1.
46 Tanenbaum, The Contemplative Soul, 119-120.
became alienated from the social and intellectual elite of Jewish Andalusia, and resolved to leave behind all the good things of Spain for the spiritual regeneration promised by the dust of the ruined Shrine. Yet in Jerusalem could Halevi discover the divine potential of his human soul, and thus, he renounced the privilege he enjoyed in Spain and concluded his life by travelling in pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

Yet even those Jews who held “philosophical insight” as coequal to the traditional religious experience so revered by Halevi understood God’s dwelling place to be the land of Israel, and most specifically, the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple. Though the soul might seek an intellectual understanding of God that Halevi would have condemned as hubristic, its reunion with the divine could not be complete without some form of physical return to Zion. Spiritual actualization required the restoration of Jewish sovereignty in Israel. This territorial repatriation not only enabled but facilitated such Neoplatonic spiritual aspirations, and as a consequence, ibn Ezra links the regeneration of his soul to the cessation of Israel’s enslavement in exile.

At the zenith of the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry, the Holy Land suffered the scourge of the Crusades. Amidst the devastation wrought by Christian and Muslim armies, Jews looked on, as though “left out by history,” as foreign empires battled to determine the fate of their homeland. History unfolded with the Jew resigned to the role of passive observer, consoled only by his faith in “the certainty of God’s love for Israel” and “the guarantee of its future

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redemption." In the midst of such sorrow and helplessness, these exile poems maintained not only the Jew’s claim to legitimate sovereignty over Zion but the strong spiritual tie between the Israelites and Israel that had sustained Diaspora communities for centuries against the temptations of assimilation. Jeremiah had prophesied that God would redeem the Israelites from exile in Babylon as he had delivered their ancestors from Egypt, and similarly, Jewish tradition held that God would restore the children of Israel to Zion in “ultimate union” and “eternal love,” from their prolonged exile in the lands of Roman “Edom.” This promise had gone unfulfilled for nearly one thousand years and as the Jews stood powerless to influence let alone prevail in the cataclysmic struggle between Christianity and Islam for control of the Holy Land, some must have questioned if, as the Christians and Muslims claimed, the Jews had indeed forever lost the favor of God.

By linking traditional hopes for national restoration to Neoplatonic concerns regarding the individual soul, this genre of exile poems appropriated Greco-Arabic philosophy as a source of independent validation for the Jews’ perpetual hope. So long as Jews believed that God resided most fully in Jerusalem, they could not abandon their faith in repatriation and acquiesce to exile. To do so was not only collectively defeatist but denied the individual’s capacity to most fully realize the divinity of his own soul. The Spanish Jew could become an acculturated courtier-prince, like Samuel ibn Nagrela or hold as scandalous any submission to another temporal law, electing to “suffer as outsiders distinguished by faithful and total witness to the

53 Scheindlin, The Gazelle, 36.
Regardless, the individual Jew remained inextricably bound to the fate of his community, as the fulfillment of his spiritual yearnings demanded restoration to Zion. The Jew could never conceive of himself as first and foremost an Andalusian without forsaking both his God and his soul. Although the exile poetry of Judaism’s Golden Age in Spain vividly reflects the experience of the Jews as exiles in Iberia through its confluence of Jewish religious conviction and Andalusian philosophical tradition, such poetry ultimately reminded the Spanish Jew that he remained but a temporary visitor in the land he called his home.

As the modern Jew concludes his Passover prayers with the exclamation, “next year in Jerusalem,” he participates in a tradition of national preservation and identity affirmation that perhaps began with an anonymous exile at a riverside in Babylon who proclaimed: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!” The exile poems of Spain’s Golden Age represent a critical moment in the historical evolution of this custom. While they affirm the Jewish willingness to bear the “misery” and “grief” of a thousand years in exile, these poems struggle to articulate the Jew’s proper role in his adopted society. Non-Jewish philosophies, such as Neoplatonic theories of happiness and the soul, coexisted alongside the traditionally Jewish yearnings for return to Zion. These philosophies, however, were employed to remind the Jews of the gravity of their collective exile, as it only exacerbated the estrangement of each individual soul from its divine source. The exile poems of Moses ibn Ezra and Judah Halevi predicated Jewish participation in the cultural discourse of the Diaspora world on an unwillingness to abandon the age-old hope of national restoration. The consciousness that these poets fostered has remained a primary characteristic of the Diaspora mindset into modern times, such that not even the creation of the modern State of Israel in 1948 has proven sufficient to erase from the

56 Lowney, A Vanished World, 99.

57 Psalms 137:5.
collective Jewish consciousness the sense of “otherness” that for so long has marked the Jews. Though the days of compulsory exile have come to an end, the modern Diaspora Jew, however acculturated, rarely assimilates completely into his adopted society. Like his Andalusian forbears from Spain’s Golden Age, he remains acutely aware that, despite the tolerance and pluralism that pervade his world, he abides as a spiritual stranger in the land he calls his home.
Works Cited


