Also by Chris Lowney

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# A Vanished World

## Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Medieval Spain

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modern transport, media, and weaponry, no community can "go home to France" and isolate itself from the religious other. Nor can one forcibly reorder another community's lives and affairs, then assume, as Charlemagne did, that it will be possible to separate oneself from the consequences and repercussions. To assume the posture of the outsider is as naïve as to imagine that Muslims, Christians, and Jews can today carve out completely separate futures in a world that will continue to grow smaller with each passing generation.

*El Cid* and *Roland* close with starkly different images. *Roland*'s audiences are left contemplating Christendom's mightiest emperor alone and weeping in the black of night, bewailing "how wearisome my life is." In *El Cid*'s last stanza, the storyteller simply reminds the audience that the Cid is "el que en buen ora nació" ("he who was born in a good hour," or more simply, "the fortunate Cid"). The weeping Charlemagne is trapped on a treadmill to nowhere; the Cid glimpses a way forward.

As the Crusading vanguard seized territory and booty, the scholarly rear guard were to gingerly wander into more prosperous towns and better-stocked libraries than any in Christendom. While the Reconquest lurched along around them, medieval Spaniards thought about the human body and how to heal it, learned new ways of manipulating numbers, reflected on whether their religious faith could ever be reconciled with what science and reason taught them. They learned or recovered knowledge the West had never known or had long forgotten, some of the lost wisdom that Bishop Braulio had so lamented and his friend Isidore had tried to recover.

Some of what Europe learned or rediscovered was mediated by the perpetual minority in this ever changing Spain: its Jewish population.

# 11. The Second Moses and Medieval Medicine

King Alfonso VI, who in 1085 conquered Muslim Toledo (and who banished the Cid in 1089), once proclaimed himself Spain's Emperor of the Two Religions, or so an anonymous Muslim chronicle tells us.

Spain's *third* religion was unworthy of his recognition, it would seem.

But Spain's Jews were sometimes best off when least noted. It rarely benefited them to occupy the forefront of public or royal consciousness. Indeed, it usually redounded to their catastrophic detriment, most tragically in 1492, when tens of thousands of Jews boarded leaky, overcrowded ships and sailed into uncertain exile just as Christopher Columbus struck out for the brighter promise of a New World. Granted a scant four months by Ferdinand and Isabella to embrace Christianity or flee Spain forever, many Jews remained and converted—at least nominally. Large numbers of forced converts surreptitiously honored their ancestral Jewish faith while hoping to escape the potentially fatal gaze of Inquisition authorities determined to round up every last crypto-Jew. Suspected false converts were paraded through Spain's towns and villages in gaudily horrific *autos da fe* (demonstra-

tions of faith), then roasted alive at the stake, the fiery complement to watery exile.

These sorry events were a good many centuries in the future when the heroic Cid romped across Spain's frontier. He died in 1094; his epic poem is dated 1207; the Spanish Inquisition was inaugurated in 1481; and Spain's Jews were expelled in 1492. Yet El Cid's epic dropped its own vague hints of trouble ahead. The Cid's honor code exalted bravery, religious devotion, and fair dealings with others. Well, not completely. One community was conspicuously exempt from the Cid's honorable treatment.

Before venturing into banishment, the Cid coped with what modern entrepreneurs would call a cash flow squeeze. Forbidden from transporting his wealth into exile, the Cid lacked "startup capital" to tide his knights over until they garnered booty from frontier raids. He tricked two Jewish moneylenders, Rachel and Vidas, into advancing 600 gold dinars. Suddenly flush with the gold he needed, the Cid rode off to frontier glory. As he begged divine favor for the adventures ahead, he fashioned a prayer that twisted Christianity's central symbol of love into a mangled emblem of contempt: "Thou [Jesus] didst allow Thyself to be taken by the Jews, and on Mount Calvary in the place called Golgotha they put Thee on the cross."

Rachel and Vidas briefly resurfaced to nag the Cid's lieutenant for repayment of their loan. They were bundled off with blithe reassurances, leaving the audience doubting that the now fabulously wealthy Cid would ever honor his obligation. The same question lingered as the epic closed, not that many audience members enjoying the Cid's heroics would have spared much thought for two swindled Jewish moneylenders. The bit players Rachel and Vidas are hastily sketched stick figures, prefiguring a stock caricature of the Jew in later literature and rhetoric. The canny financiers, a bit too clever for their own good and too eager to profit from a hard-pressed Christian, succumb to the greed that occasions their downfall. No need for the Cid to regret swindling these two. After all, to paraphrase his prayer, the Jews crucified Christ.

Though *El Cid*'s portrait of Spanish Judaism fills a mere twenty of the epic's 3,700 verses, those twenty lines tell enough of a story. One finds in them the roots of a weed that was nursed rather than uprooted,



blossoming into the overgrowth of religious enmity that choked off Spain's Jewish civilization.

But *El Cid*'s brittle caricatures belie the far richer reality of medieval Spanish Jewry in the centuries before the ugly thistle of anti-Judaism attained full bloom. Spain's legacy includes the most creative, prosperous Jewish civilization of the medieval era, and only against this magnificent legacy do Spain's stake burnings, expulsions, and forced conversions emerge in their most horrific poignancy. Spain's Jews created and nurtured what dazzled scholars have called a Jewish Golden Age. Their legacy still enlightens Jewish and world thought, long after the living flame of that Golden Age was swamped in watery exile or snuffed out at the charred stake.

Prominent among Spain's Golden Age heroes is Moses Maimonides, whom the soberly objective *Encyclopedia Judaica* deems "the most illustrious figure in Judaism in the post-Talmudic era." Another modern scholar seconds the judgment in simpler terms, calling Maimonides "the outstanding representative of Jewish rationalism for all time"; chapter 12 will explore Maimonides' enduring intellectual contributions to Judaism. This chapter will focus on Maimonides the physician and on other profoundly influential thinkers and translators who helped rouse European medical science from a centuries-long torpor. This Jewish physician's improbable story begins with the fanatical North African Muslim dynasty that spurred his odyssey from Spain to greatness in the Near East at a Muslim royal court.

Moses Maimonides was thirteen when North African invaders touched down in Córdoba in 1148, like other religiously inspired warriors who had battered Iberia since Tariq ibn Ziyad's 711 invasion. Ascetic Almohad fighters had surged from their Atlas Mountain base (in present Morocco) and dominated much of North Africa before launching their jihad into Spain. Like the eleventh century Muslim Almoravid dynasty they displaced, the Almohads aimed to both shore up a faltering Muslim Spain and restore it to greater religious fervor.

The name Almohad reflects the dynasty's fervent embrace of Islam's core belief: they were the *al-Muwahiddun*, those "who affirm the Oneness of God." In their reforming zeal, these Almohads had no room in their Spain for Jews and Christians equally committed to the same

dogma of God's absolute unity. Judaism and Christianity were proscribed; synagogues were closed. An Almohad commentator was affronted that Jews "had become so bold as to wear Muslim clothing and . . . mingl[e] with the Muslims in external affairs." That outrage was soon remedied. Jews were forced to don distinctive costumes, and both Christians and Jews were pressured to convert. Some did, often in name only. By day they marched to the cadence of new religious practices; locked away at home they recited older, familiar prayers, undoubtedly with greater fervor, and undoubtedly plagued by doubt over the choice they had made. Others fled, and Spain's exilic "sheep walk" began anew as Christians and Jews streamed from Almohad al-Andalus in search of more tolerant spiritual pasture.

Rabbi Maimon ben Joseph, Moses's father, wandered Spain with his three children for nearly a dozen years seeking a hospitable religious climate. In 1159 the family quit Spain for exile further afield. Historical perspective makes it easy to second-guess his choice: What sense to flee Almohad fanaticism by retreating to the sect's North African base? Predictably, a few years later, the family was again on the move, by some accounts escaping an increasingly hostile Morocco only through the compassionate intervention of a Muslim friend.

Nearly twenty years after fleeing Córdoba, Maimonides' family settled in Fostat (old Cairo) in Egypt, where Moses would live, work, worship, raise his son, and die. If exile, persecution, and refugee life hadn't yet sufficiently tested this family's endurance, other grief would. Moses's father died a year after arriving in Egypt. His younger brother David drowned not long after, during a business expedition; he nearly pulled the whole family under with him, for his trading income had supported the extended family. Suddenly, David's life, livelihood, family assets, and precious jewels consigned by customers were all swept away. Moses found himself liable for the lost wealth and sole guardian of his brother's wife and child. The toll nearly crushed Moses's spirit. He seldom rose from his bed through the course of the succeeding year.

What happened next epitomizes the profound resilience of the human spirit and the wonder of an era when a Jew's fortunes could swing wildly with a changing dynasty, a brother's drowning, luck, determination, talent, and often some mix of all these. Moses tapped inner reservoirs of strength that spurred intense creativity and profound religious devotion while bringing him material success. Within two years of his brother's death, Maimonides the Jew, a religious exile from Almohad discrimination, had won appointment as personal physician and advisor to the Muslim al-Fadil, vizier to the famed warrior-sultan Saladin, who had wrested control of the Holy Land from the Crusaders.



Saladin's 1193 death brought Maimonides yet a further step forward. He was named court physician to Saladin's eldest son and successor, al-Afdal Nur al-Din Ali. With the prestigious post came personal sacrifice: "I am obliged to visit him [the Sultan] every day, early in the morning, and when he or any of his children or concubines are indisposed, I cannot leave." The sultan's priorities were Maimonides' priorities. "Office hours" for others began only *after* Maimonides returned from court. He recounts receiving patients at his home until all hours, "even while lying down from sheer fatigue. When night falls, I am so exhausted I can hardly speak."

Though the sultan's entourage undoubtedly considered their health concerns urgent, such concerns would not strike dispassionate observers as crises. While father Saladin devoted himself to recovering Islam's lost territories, son al-Afdal and his cohort indulged in sybaritic pleasures closer to home. Dr. Maimonides' *Treatise on Cohabitation* responded to one courtier's request for a "regimen that is helpful in increasing sexual potential, because he said that he has a weakness in this regard." Such attenuated virility may seem unbecoming in a powerful royal, but consider the prince's extenuating circumstances. He complained—if "complained" is the right word—that the "multitude of young maidens" available to him were sapping his energies.

Maimonides' home-concocted virility aid wouldn't lure most modern males away from the more expensive potency aids now marketed by major drug companies. Indeed, one wonders whether an exasperated, exhausted Maimonides wasn't merely toying mischievously with the dissolute royal when he prescribed "a wondrous secret which no person has (heretofore) described: take one liter each of carrot oil, and radish oil, one quarter liter of mustard oil, combine it all and place

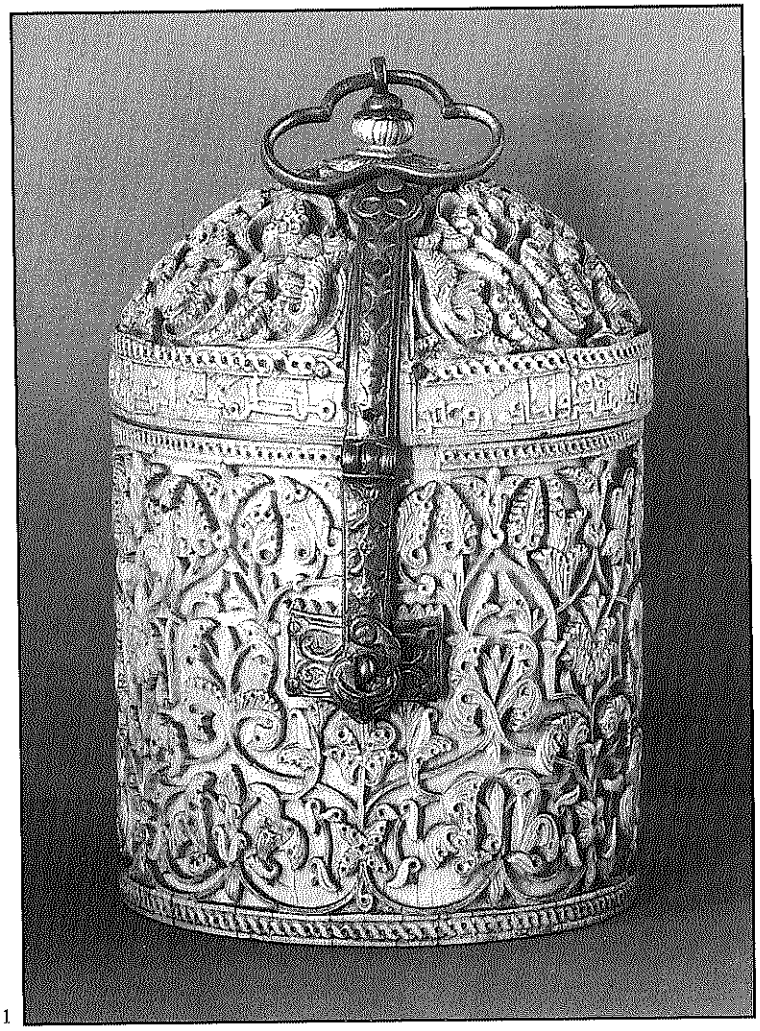
therein one half liter of live saffron-colored ants placed in the sun for a week, then massaged on the member." One hopes for the prince's sake that the ants died before the ointment was applied.

Most of Maimonides' medical secrets were not in fact original. Though one of medieval Europe's outstanding medical minds and a prolific author, he pioneered few new approaches to diagnosis and treatment. Instead, he digested and synthesized medical wisdom inherited from ancient authorities like Galen and Hippocrates, wisdom long lost in the West but revived in the Islamic East. Maimonides' diagnostic indicators of incipient pneumonia seem as if they could be drawn from a modern medical text: "acute fever, sticking pain in the side, short rapid breaths, serrated pulse and cough, mostly with sputum." But Maimonides had merely embellished the insightful diagnosis outlined a millennium earlier by Galen.

Even more striking, however, is the contrast between the Greek and Islamic wisdom synthesized by Maimonides and medicine's primitive state in the Latin West. Christian Europe's so-called doctors were mired in a swamp of ignorance and sinking deeper each passing generation. Sixth-century John of Beverly had castigated nurses who were foolish enough to bleed patients while the moon was in its unpropitious waxing phase. Well, no great surprise: he was writing in the darkest days of Europe's Dark Ages. Yet, seven centuries later, Europeans remained bogged down in the same murky morass. No less an authority than the Aragon royal court decreed in 1312 that barbers should bleed their patients only when the astrological signs were favorable.

Granted, many of the practices that now seem so patently superstitious had also been inherited from those same wise ancients. The great Galen, not some illiterate medieval sorcerer, had linked the efficacy of a bloodletting to the moon's phases. The Greeks had championed the "science" of bloodletting, convinced that the ill suffered an imbalance of the four "humors" constituting the human body: yellow bile, black bile, phlegm, and blood. What better than a therapeutic bloodletting to restore the bodily humors to equilibrium? Although the ancient Greeks and Romans had occasionally endorsed some (in retrospect) bizarre practices, at least they were thinking, debating, and writing. In contrast, the medieval West had descended into an intellectual funk

This tenth-century ivory perfume jar exemplifies the superb craftsmanship and refined sensibilities of Muslim Córdoba. The inscription explains the artisan's inspiration: "The sight I offer [i.e., the jar's shape] is of the fairest, the firm breast of a delicate maiden . . ."



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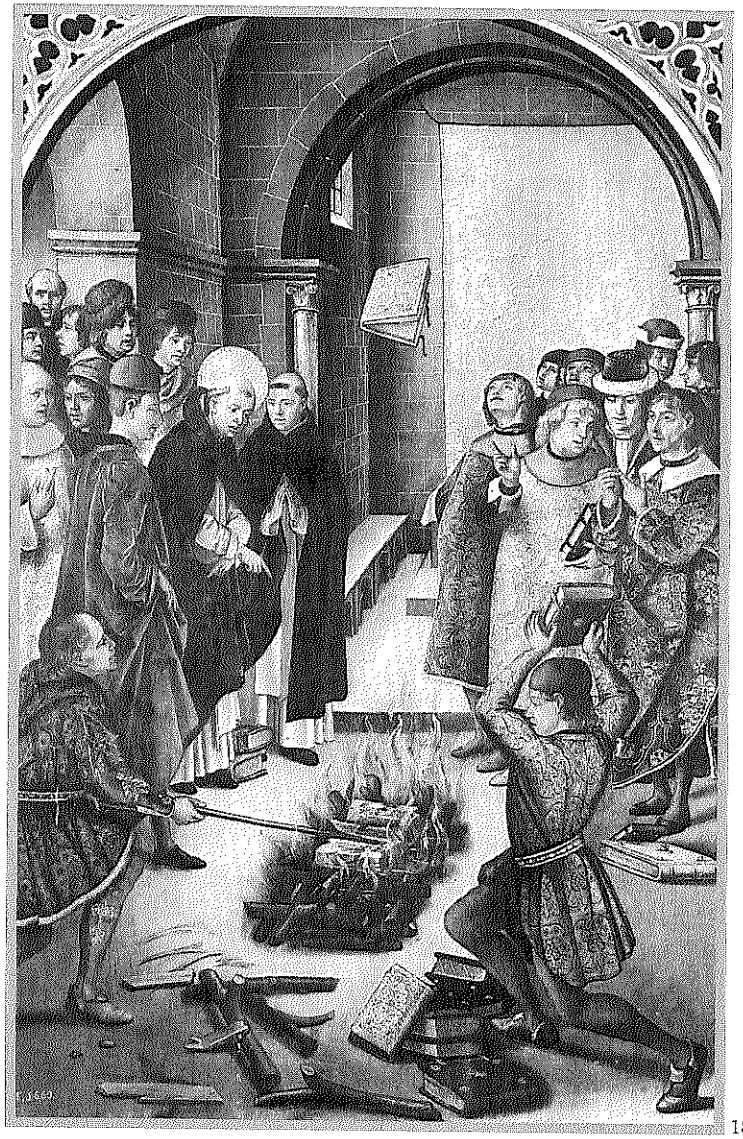
Pedro Berruguete's *St. Dominic Burning Books* depicts the saint's Christian text miraculously leaping from the flames while heretical books are consumed. Not long after this work was painted, Archbishop Cisneros was organizing bonfires of Muslim holy books in Granada.



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from which no medical writer of note emerged for nearly a millennium after Galen; worse yet, most volumes of classical authors had been lost in barbarian rampages. Absent any stimulus to progress, European medicine regressed. Baseless practices like bloodletting became further encrusted with layers of folk medicine and superstition as so-called physicians stumbled around a dark medical alley.

A little light was shed onto these archaic practices from the Islamic East, often enough mediated by Spain. A decade or so before Maimonides' family fled Spain, the Italian Gerard of Cremona arrived in Toledo, destined to unlock a treasure trove of Greco-Arabic medical knowledge for fellow Europeans. Gerard was one of a long procession of European scholars drawn by Spain's intellectual riches. Gerbert of Aurillac, the French mathematician and future pope, had been one of Spain's first intellecutal pilgrims in the tenth century. A polyglot, multinational scholarly parade followed. The Slav Hermann the Dalmatian settled in Spain's northeast and completed the first translation of the Quran into a European language in the early 1140s. The Italian Plato of Tivoli labored over astronomical and mathematical texts from his base near Barcelona. The Briton Daniel of Morley first headed to Paris, but distressed at its intellectual aridness, journeyed to Toledo and found the libraries and intellectual stimulus he sought.

Toledo, most sophisticated of Spain's scholarly centers, boasted one of Europe's most diverse ethnic and cultural mixes even before these scholar-immigrants arrived. It was a thriving Muslim city when Alfonso VI conquered it and proclaimed himself Emperor of the Two Religions. Many Muslims had remained, despite Christian rule. Three generations later, the Almohad invasions had chased Jews and Christians from Spain's southern coast. While some, like Maimonides, fled Spain completely, others headed for Christian Toledo, its architecture and customs evoking the Andalusian culture with which they were so comfortable.

So a scholar like Gerard of Cremona entered a Toledo already crawling with every conceivable ethnic and religious permutation. Christian immigrants from Spain's north had trailed the Reconquest armies; Muslim Toledans were pursuing livelihoods under Christian rule; Arabic-speaking Christians and Jewish refugees arrived from

al-Andalus after the Almohad invasions. There was no shortage of language coaches to help new arrivals master alien Arabic texts. Nor did creed or ethnicity stifle academic partnerships, as, for example, Archdeacon Dominic Gundisalvi of Toledo teamed with the Jewish scholar Avendauth.

One final ingredient was needed to ignite the cultural explosion. Twelfth-century academics plied an even less lucrative trade than their modern counterparts (if that's possible). There were no universities to speak of; a steady teaching post, a paid sabbatical, and academic leave are all inventions of a much later age. Medieval scholars often relied on the Church's patronage. To humanity's good fortune, an early wave of scholar-translators arrived just as the enlightened Archbishop Raymond of Toledo resolved to sponsor the *re*translation into Latin of Arabic translations of Greek classics by Aristotle, Galen, and others.

Gerard of Cremona emerged as the most prolific translator-scholar of the whole medieval era. One medieval chronciler reported that Gerard was staggered by what he discovered in Toledo, and, "seeing the abundance of books in Arabic on every subject, and regretting the poverty of the Latins in these things, he learned the Arabic language." The indefatigable Italian ferreted through Toledo's libraries, churning out translations of at least seventy major works previously unavailable in the Latin-speaking West.

Translators like Gerard didn't follow a predefined road map. After all, there was no master list of ancient manuscripts and no way of knowing which would be most enlightening. Translators gravitated toward whatever struck them as most interesting. As Gerard's colleagues put it in a rather frivolous remembrance, their mentor worked like a "wise man who, wandering through a green field, links up a crown of flowers, made from not just any, but from the prettiest."

Medicine was one of the fields that struck Gerard as, well, "prettiest." He provided Europe's first translation of the *Canon of Medicine,* an exhaustive treatise on health and medicine by the eleventh-century Persian philosopher-doctor Ibn Sina (Avicenna in the West). As Gerard plowed through the *Canon*'s million words, he could not possibly have predicted Avicenna's long-lasting impact on Western medicine. The *Canon* is the most famous text in medical history, and Gerard's translation was the first of at least thirty editions prepared over the succeeding five centuries. Spain's medical school at Salamanca was still using Avicenna's text in 1650, probably an all-time record for a scientific textbook—a record that unfortunately speaks less to Avicenna's undoubted genius than to the abysmal pace of progress in Western science. However advanced the medical science of our own age, one dearly hopes that fledgling neurosurgeons in 2650 will not still be consulting the same textbooks as did the class of 2004.



Though medical science did (fortunately) eclipse Avicenna eventually, the so-called Prince of Physicians fully anticipated modern practice in at least one field. Medieval pharmacology was a vibrant business with unregulated apothecaries and quacks peddling every conceivable potion for every conceivable ailment. The physician to tenth-century Córdoban Abd al-Rahman III sought to cure a caliphal earache by pouring a dove's blood into the ear of his imperial patient. Maimonides' premodern virility recipe was no more outlandish than this medieval Celtic concoction for combating baldness: "Let calcine [i.e., burn] a raven, his ashes boil in sheep's suet, and rub to the head, it cures." Humanity's health concerns haven't much changed in a millennium: preening, insecure males still guarantee a booming market for impotence and baldness remedies.

But if health concerns have changed little, the regimen for testing prospective cures fortunately has. Government agencies review extensive clinical trial results before approving drugs for sale—almost exactly what Avicenna proposed a millennium ago. He advocated group trials to ensure statistical validity, recommended human trials as a late stage of drug testing, and stressed the need to monitor each drug's long-term impact and potential complications.

Unfortunately, not all of Avicenna's ideas were thoroughly grounded in the scientific values of observation and experiment. It's no coincidence that medieval medicine's great authorities all seemed to be philosopher-doctors: Avicenna, Maimonides, and another brilliant Spanish Muslim named Averroes. No tormented appendicitis sufferer today would relish an appendectomy inflicted by some stereotypically tweedy, pipe-smoking philosopher ever prone to distracted absorption in deep thought. But educated medieval Europeans saw nothing odd in

the joint profession of philosopher-doctor. Indeed, quite the opposite. Those falling under the sway of ancient Greek wisdom revered philosophy as the highest science, uncovering logically demonstrable and therefore unquestionable truths. Study of the human body was only one part, and most definitely a subsidiary part, of the broader intellectual quest for timeless certainties. Ancient and medieval Europeans understood the term "philosophy" much more broadly than moderns do, as encompassing the sciences and all other fields that pursued truth via rational speculation.

Scholars like Avicenna arrived at truth by *deduction* from basic principles, not by the *inductive* process of scientific method, where hypotheses are tested by observation and experiment. The medical pioneer Galen was convinced of the (in retrospect) wacky theory that the body was constituted of four humors not because of detailed *observation,* but because the theory elegantly paralleled Aristotle's *theory* that the whole material universe was constituted of four elements (fire, earth, water, and air). The same reverence for philosophical truth (and for Aristotle) infected medieval thinkers like Avicenna, who summarily dismissed apparent facts that happened to contradict Aristotle's theories: "Although their [the physicians'] view appears to be superficially more plausible," he once wrote about a disputed point, "the philosopher's [Aristotle's] view is really the correct one." Why? Because Aristotle said it.

Nor were medieval philosopher-doctors particularly interested in *verifying* the so-called truths that reason uncovered. Avicenna boldly parroted Aristotle's conjecture that there were three heart ventricles furiously pumping away inside us, never attempting to investigate the claim. Thus, even as Avicenna and others liberated Christendom from numerous medical fallacies, they also misdirected medicine by emphasizing theory over experimentation. Avicenna and contemporaries belittled surgery, for example, as little better than manual labor to be performed by hacks.

On the one hand, Avicenna's systematic compendium pushed European medicine forward. His medical texts exposed Europeans to the valid insights of ancient Greek physicians, as updated by Muslim scholars in the Near East. More important, he helped rescue medicine from dominance by amateur folklore and transformed it into a professional discipline. But Avicenna's approach was not thoroughly scientific. And because he held Europeans in his thrall for centuries by dint of his sheer genius, Europe long lacked the confidence to identify his shortcomings and steer medicine onto more solid scientific grounds.



The quest for greater professionalism faced another stumbling block. All well and good that translators like Gerard of Cremona gamely exposed Europe to Avicenna's wisdom. Unfortunately, Gerard preached science to a society more interested in faith. At about the same time Gerard labored to translate Avicenna's massive *Canon,* the French monk (and saint-to-be) Bernard of Clairvaux was advising his fellow Christians, "To consult physicians and take medicines befits not religion and is contrary to purity." A full century later, the Fourth Lateran Council of bishops in 1215 seconded Bernard's sentiment: "[We] order and strictly command physicians of the body, when they are called to the sick, to warn and persuade [the sick] first of all to call in physicians of the soul." In one respect, these churchmen were giving sage advice: one undoubtedly increased one's chances of reaching old age by steering clear of the barbers, surgeons, village healers, and assorted charlatans passing themselves off as the medieval equivalent of doctors.

But Bernard was not protesting medieval medicine's deficient quality. Rather, he feared that medicine was violating the fundamental Christian disposition to lodge trust in God rather than man. With the Roman Empire's collapse, the sparse medical care available to the public had fallen disproportionately into the laps of cathedrals and monasteries, much as the Church had similarly served as illiterate Europe's educator of last resort. The Church's involvement in health care worthily honored the legacy of Jesus, who spectacularly healed the blind, deaf, and lame during his short life.

But these gospel accounts could be read two ways. Every Christian agreed that Jesus challenged followers to minister to the sick, but not all commentators interpreted that challenge as encouragement to understand the science of medicine. Some drew exactly the opposite conclusion: Jesus's miraculous healings demonstrated that only God held power over illness and health, and that humans should trust divine rather than human intervention. As a result, a large dollop of faith was

often stirred into medieval pharmaceutical compounds. A tenth-century manuscript prescribed, "Against dysentery, a bramble of which both ends are in the earth, take the nether root, delve it up, cut nine chips with the left hand and sing three times the Miserere Mei Deus and nine times the Pater Noster [i.e., the Our Father]."

Other medieval Spaniards could have steered European medicine onto the right track. Among Gerard's many translation projects were excerpts of a treatise by the Spanish Muslim Abu-l-Qasim, also known as Abulcasis (936–1013). Whereas our blunter age offers up books with titles like *Medicine for Dummies,* the more considerate Abulcasis christened his masterwork *The Recourse of Him Who Cannot Compose (a Medical Treatise on His Own).* Unlike Avicenna, who sniffed at medicine's messy practicalities, and Christian theologians, who shunned it on theological grounds, Abulcasis seems to have gotten his hands quite dirty in the everyday travails of yanking decayed teeth, delivering squalling infants, setting fractures, and cauterizing wounds.

*Seems* to have gotten his hands dirty. Though scholars are unsure to what extent Abulcasis actually practiced surgery, his writings on surgery, translated by Gerard of Cremona, became the practical companion to Avicenna's theoretical *Canon.* Abulcasis baby-stepped readers through the basics of repairing hernias, amputating limbs, treating abdominal wounds, removing bladder stones, and even fashioning artificial teeth from beef bone. He not only provided instructions for common surgeries but illustrated the tools of the trade. His encyclopedia depicted more than two hundred dental and surgical instruments, many of them apparently designed by Abulcasis himself and some of them previously unknown in the West: a tonsil guillotine, the syringe, a prototype of the plaster cast, and the use of animal gut for sutures. No medieval surgeon could ring up a local medical supplier for a new forceps. Forced either to engineer one's own tools or coach some blacksmith to do so, Abulcasis's sketched prototypes were invaluable to medieval physicians. Unfortunately, copyists embellished each new edition with their own exotic renderings of Abulcasis's tools, treating the surgical instruments as decorative doodles that prettied up the manuscript rather than as life-saving equipment.

Abulcasis and Avicenna accounted for only a tiny share of the flourishing Arabic-language medical literature. Historians have catalogued medical writings authored by some seventy Muslim scholars during the period from 800 to 1300. In contrast, the full medical school library at Europe's showcase University of Paris shelved a grand total of nine volumes at the end of the fourteenth century.



What did Maimonides add to this mix other than his dubious formula for rejuvenating a libidinous sultan? He made few groundbreaking contributions to diagnosis or treatment, but there was something original in his medical work: a holistic vision that a healthy life paid equal attention to body, environment, and spirit alike. Maimonides was not the first to advocate a "healthy mind in a healthy body," an idea already promoted by his classical sources. But he articulated a further-reaching, more integrated notion of human health than either his ancient sources or even most moderns. As a Spanish Jew, he straddled a fault line of medieval civilizations. His viewpoint was unique: the Islamic East exposed him to the most developed medical knowledge of his day; as a rabbi's son, he filtered that knowledge through a religious vision of the human person.

In our modern specialist culture, the doctor tends to the body, public health specialists to the environment, psychologists to the mind, and preachers to the soul. Maimonides would have balked at rigid demarcations among medicine, public health, psychology, and spirituality. The human person is a whole being, not divided into slices. Body, mind, and soul are interrelated. What sense does it make to segregate health practitioners into arbitrarily narrow, rigid boxes of expertise? Maimonides instead treated the continuum of body, soul, spirit, and environment. Long before public health researchers documented the correlation between asthma incidence and inner-city pollution, an intuitive Maimonides warned against the health risks endemic to city living: "Comparing the air of cities to the air of deserts and forests is like comparing thick and turbid waters to pure and light waters . . . And if you . . . cannot emigrate from the city, at least try to live on the outskirts."

Maimonides staked out even more adventurous arguments by exploring the nexus between psychological and physical well-being. Modern research linking positive patient attitudes to speedier recovery

from serious illness wins only grudging acknowledgment from many medical professionals who are accustomed to treating only the body's physical machinery. Yet Maimonides pressed doctors to consider their patients' emotional state and not just their bodily parts: "One must pay attention and constantly consider emotional activities . . . In all these the physician should not give precedence to anything before improving the state of the psyche by removing all these (extreme) emotions."

Maimonides' final step along the body-environment-spirit continuum was his boldest, suggesting that the *soul's* health could impact the *body's,* that religion and medicine are complementary and related disciplines, utilizing different tools but ultimately linked. Body and spirit are inseparable, and physical health and happiness entail proper attention to spirituality. Worldview, values, and religious practices do not merely concern the afterlife but this bodily life as well. Illness could be caused or exacerbated by what might be called "moral unhealth." In such cases, treating the body as a machine was useless; rather, said Maimonides, "These situations can (only) be obtained through speculative philosophy and from moral admonitions of the [religious] Law."

In fact, speculative philosophy and religious law absorbed the greater part of Maimonides' mental energies. Though Maimonides the physician complained that his labors left him so exhausted he could hardly sleep, he was not too drained to focus his incisive intellect on his religious faith. If his contributions to medicine are limited, his contributions to Jewish thought were revolutionary. The same Greek wisdom that buttressed his medical knowledge spurred daring analyses of Jewish law and Scripture. His approach would alternately invigorate and terrify his Jewish contemporaries.

# 12. Rethinking Religion

## *"To Long with an Exceeding Longing"*

Imagine the mind-set of Maimonides, who championed this advice for a healthy night's sleep: "A person should not sleep on his face or on his back but on his side; at the beginning of the night on the left side and at the end of the night on the right side." Forget entirely whether the odd regimen actually benefits health. Who would bother to wake up in the middle of the night and calculate whether it's time to flip over?

Well, Maimonides apparently. Now imagine the same disciplined mind-set applied to Judaism's sacred tradition, anchored by its Torah ("Law"). Narrowly understood, the Torah comprises the Hebrew Bible's first five books (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Orthodox Jews understand this Written Law as God's direct revelation to Moses atop Mt. Sinai, immortalized in the Exodus episodes that culminate in Moses's presentation of God's Ten Commandments to a Jewish nation forlornly wandering the desert in search of their Promised Land.

The Mt. Sinai revelations also included a body of Oral Law, so Jewish tradition holds. More fragile than hand-copied parchments, the precious Oral Law was inscribed not on stone tablets but on Moses's heart and mind, then passed from one generation to another of Jewish religious leaders and eventually compiled as Talmud (Hebrew for "teaching" or "learning") in the fifth and sixth centuries.

We often perceive law with a negative connotation: certain behaviors are proscribed to prevent civilized societies from disintegrating into chaos. But Jewish tradition celebrates law's equally rich positive dimensions. Proscriptions declaring certain foods unclean sanctify the totality of human existence, reminding pious Jews to reverence God even in the minutest details of daily life's most mundane chores. When the gospel Jesus famously rails at the Pharisees' punctilious observance of their seemingly arcane laws, the Pharisees never get to tell their side of the story: that the treasure of Jewish law was a divine gift enabling Jews to heed Scripture's injunction to keep the Lord's word ever on their hearts, minds, and lips.

Like any compilation of ancient religious wisdom collected over centuries, the Torah and Talmud are messily organized, to say the least. Inconsistencies abound, starting with two contradictory Creation accounts that tumble unapologetically from Genesis: in its first chapter, the human person *finishes* God's creative activity; yet a chapter later, Adam is molded from clay *early* in God's creative endeavors, even before vegetation is introduced to Eden. Similarly confused is the beloved tale of Noah's ark. In Genesis 6:19, "two [animals] of every sort . . . male and female" waddle, slither, hop, or gallop up the ark's gangway. Yet a few verses later, Noah's embarkation orders are inexplicably different: "Seven pairs of all clean animals . . . and a pair of the animals that are not clean."

Apparent contradictions are equally rife throughout the Talmud's often-dueling interpretations of scriptural texts and expansive, free-wheeling digressions. Competing or contradictory scriptural interpretations are never reconciled, nor does a workable index enumerate competing interpretations. A devout Jew hoping to reap Talmud and Torah wisdom relating to Sabbath practices, for example, undertakes an exasperating harvest of countless scattered citations.

The disciplined, well-ordered Maimonides sought to rescue the devout Jew who lacked Talmud texts or the education to decipher them, or who simply wanted to understand his or her Sabbath duties clearly. Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* (*Repetition of the Law*) eschewed encyclopedic compilation of competing rabbinical viewpoints to offer instead his judgment of the "correct" interpretation of Jewish law wherever



possible. Maimonides inherited over a thousand years of learned rabbinical commentary, yet was bold enough to assert that "a man who first reads the Written Law and after that reads this [*Mishneh Torah*], will know from it the entire Oral Law and will have no need to read any other book besides them." True to his word, he painstakingly parsed Jewish law on marriage rituals, sabbath practices, clean and unclean foods, prayer, and countless other matters. The *Mishneh Torah* closes by imagining Jewish history's longed-for end time: "In that era there will be no famine, no war, no envy, no strife." Wisdom and knowledge, rather than unbridled pursuit of earthly delights, will characterize this halcyon age: "The things that are now vague and deeply hidden will be revealed . . . and the land shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."

The vision epitomized Maimonides' conviction that God had created a rational world, blessed the Jews with a rational law, and gifted humans with the intellectual prowess to decipher God's ordered design of nature. Accordingly, the *Mishneh Torah* did not merely elaborate *what* the Law taught but *why* one interpretation was demonstrably superior to another, or *why* a certain Genesis passage should be understood metaphorically, not literally. Maimonides believed that revelation was reasonable and would not contradict what logic or science could discover independently.

Maimonides explored these ideas in the *Guide for the Perplexed,* a follow-up to the *Mishneh Torah* for educated Jews whose faith had been shaken by exposure to philosophy and its reasoned dissection of assumptions about ethics, religion, and the human person. The Islamic world had rediscovered long-forgotten works of Plato, Aristotle, and the other ancients. Maimonides sought to teach fellow Jews that philosophy—and by extension, all science and rational inquiry—was not only compatible with their beliefs but would enhance faith and deepen understanding of Jewish law.

More to the point, practicing philosophy—*thinking*—was distinctly divine behavior that embodied one's *most* God-like trait. Maimonides analyzed a beloved Scripture passage to prove his point. What did God mean on that sixth biblical day of creation by declaring, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness"? Surely not that human beings

physically resemble God. Faces and internal organs are common to all earthly creatures, and however superior the human may consider his snout to the manatee's, the difference between physical attributes is relative rather than absolute. Rather, God's "image and likeness" had to refer to some quality uniquely differentiating humans from other animals, "which no other creature on earth possesses . . . [therefore] on account of the *Divine intellect* with which man has been endowed he is said to have been made in the form and likeness of the Almighty." Applying one's divine intellect to interpret religious law and Scripture was, therefore, God-like, prayerful activity. Or, as Maimonides put it elsewhere, humans must strive to "harmonize the law with what is intelligible."

Maimonides may not have feared unfettered rational inquiry to harmonize faith and reason, but not all his contemporaries were so sanguine. Some Jews feared he had pried open a Pandora's box. Who should decide, for example, which passages of Scripture and which articles of faith were open to rational scrutiny, and whose reinterpretation was valid?

Maimonides scandalized some by applying his logical scalpel even to the beloved Genesis passages portraying the God of creation. Genesis depicted an unmistakably fleshy, potter God who, after a misty rain softened the earth, "formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." Many generations later, the God of Exodus chiseled out Ten Commandments, "and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables." How else to mold the human or hammer out commandments but with Divine Hands? But literal interpretation of such passages made no sense to Maimonides. However extraordinary a pair of Divine Hands one might imagine, the fingertips would mark the *finite limit* of their reach. Yet God was an *infinite* being and therefore a purely *spiritual* entity. Moreover, physical bodies have *parts,* yet Deuteronomy assured Jews that God is One.

Maimonides understood the Creation story as anthropomorphic metaphor that helped simple minds grasp the harder to fathom concept of a spiritual Deity creating a material world out of nothing. He railed against rabbis who clung to literal interpretation of such stories: "Most ignorant of human beings and more erring than the beasts, their brains being filled with the superstitions of old women." His theological musings betrayed a deep debt to the ancient thinkers he studied in Spain and in the Islamic East. Plato and Aristotle, for example, had glorified the intellect as seat of the human soul. Maimonides likewise portrayed the intellectual soul as "God's image and likeness" and shook many Jewish contemporaries by asserting that this soul, freed of the meddlesome body after death, might live eternally with God.



One medieval rabbi wrote of devout Jews deeply dismayed by Maimonides' teaching about this purely spiritual afterlife, "Their hope had turned to despair and their longing had been in vain." For as they understood Maimonides, their bodies would perish, and "Only their souls will hover about the world and fly in the air like angels."

Maimonides' death-defying spiritual soul, though perfectly compatible with Greek wisdom, was alien to his own Jewish tradition. Deuteronomy's authors would have fumbled futilely for a suitable Hebrew word to express so alien a concept. Even later books of the Hebrew Bible, which explicitly begin to broach a concept of afterlife, contemplate bodily resurrection rather than some disembodied spiritual paradise. The prophet Daniel assured (and warned) Jews, "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." One medieval rabbi accordingly attacked Maimonides' Greek-inspired notion that glorified the intellectual soul over the body: "In what way is the soul of the righeous man superior to his body . . . ? . . . both . . . [body and soul] have an equal hand in their righteousness as well as their wickedness."

Maimonides' ideas about God and afterlife were not all new; some had even won fairly wide acceptance among well-educated Jews. But never had a Jewish thinker, and rarely a philosopher in any of the three monotheistic traditions, so comprehensively pondered questions that many modern believers never seriously grapple with: What is God like? What does it mean to be a human person? Should I accept Scripture, law, and revelation as written, or are they open to interpretation?

Maimonides' incisive intellect and unflinching embrace of philosophical method prompted a crisis in Judaism. What was later dubbed the Maimonidean Controversy swept Spain and southern France as

rabbis debated Maimonides' opinions. Passionate letters traded charges and excommunications. The controversy featured the unlikely spectacle of Jews denouncing Maimonides to Christian inquisition authorities. Not that Jewish rabbis regarded inquisitors as authorities on anything Jewish, but some derived satisfaction from seeing Maimonides' works in flames, even in Christian-kindled bonfires.

Still, however ingenious his effort to reconcile reason and faith, Maimonides' most profound gift to modern generations may be his simple piety and humility before God. The brilliant archrationalist who saw so much farther than his contemporaries also saw and accepted the human mind's inability to fathom God's infinite majesty, power, and goodness. "Our knowledge," he wrote, consists in knowing nothing more than that "we are unable truly to comprehend Him." Even our "endeavor to extol Him in words, all our efforts in speech are mere weakness and failure." Because our finite minds cannot plumb the infinite, we can only accurately proclaim what God *is not,* never what God *is.* A devout Maimonides finally falls silent in awe, urging believers to heed the fourth Psalm's admonition: "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still." Or, as Maimonidies expressed it in the words of another psalm, "Silence is praise to Thee" (Psalm 65:2).

The depth of Maimonides' devotion belies the stereotype of a remote intellectual sterilely divorced from emotional engagement with his God. Rather, as Maimonides exclaimed, "When a person contemplates His great and wondrous works and creatures, and from them obtains a glimpse of His wisdom which is incomparable and infinite, he will straightway love Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great Name."

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Maimonides' twelfth-century analysis of sacred texts and religious belief foreshadowed an approach that discomfits many twenty-first-century believers committed to literal interpretation of Scripture: God said what God meant, and humans should not question but simply obey. The Maimonidean Controversy prefigured a struggle that became only more challenging across centuries as scientific method, literary deconstruction, archaeology, and historical criticism developed and



evolved. It was one thing for Maimonides to suggest that God didn't literally mold Adam with divine hands; many of his contemporaries had already relinquished literal interpretation of this passage. But where draw the line? It became quite another thing some four centuries later when Galileo argued from natural reason that the earth revolved around the sun, defying a scriptural worldview stubbornly defended by Catholic churchmen. Or when modern Muslims reject coreligionists who entice would-be suicide bombers with the promise of literally passing to a place populated by "Companions with beautiful, big, and lustrous eyes" (much less whether anyone will get there by taking his or her own life and that of innocent humans).

Maimonides encourages us to believe that faith need not fear reason. Applying God's extraordinary gift of intellect to dearly held beliefs does not affront the Creator, but praises God. Yet, at the same time, he teaches the limits of our intellectual capabilities. The genius Maimonides who ultimately falls silent before the Creator God gives pause to all who would make man the measure of all things.

The struggle to marry faith and reason gripped not only twelfth- and thirteenth-century Judaism, but Islam and Christianity as well. Two ingenious Spanish Muslims were to ignite in Islam the same intense intellectual friction that the Maimonidean Controversy sparked in Judaism. Indeed, in the course of a century, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity would each be wracked—and forever changed—by the struggle to reconcile faith and reason, philosophy and theology, and, in a sense, modernism and orthodoxy. One Spanish Muslim, Averroes, would distinguish himself as his era's foremost thinker, surpassing even Maimonides and out-thinking any contemporary philosopher in Christendom. Utterly rejected by his own Muslim community, he would inspire the most creative generation of Christian thinkers in a millennium.

Averroes would be brought to prominence by a friend and mentor, Ibn Tufayl, whose only surviving complete work, a slender allegorical tale, challenged his Muslim coreligionists and warns of the awesome responsibility humans inherit as stewards of God's creation.

. . .
My darling boy was taken, and his good name
. . .
He's twelve years old; I haven't seen him since—
So are my sins repaid!
I rage, but only at myself;
There's no one else but me to bear the blame.
I chased him from mere troubles to a trap
. . .
—But how can I control myself when he is lost?
That is the thought that sickens, strangles, slashes me;
That is the razor, sharper than any barber's blade,
That rips the membrane of my aching heart
. . .

# 20. Columbus, a New World, and the End of History

## *"A Deed Forbidden by Every Faith"*

Easy to overlook among refugee-burdened ships crowding Spain's harbors in the summer of 1492 would have been a three-ship flotilla being readied for an August departure. While thousands of Jews and Muslims sailed south to North Africa or east to Turkey, ninety sailors readied the *Niña, Pinta,* and *Santa María* to head west. While King Ferdinand was slowly tightening the noose around Granada throughout the 1480s, the Italian adventurer Christopher Columbus was vainly pitching an expedition plan to Portugal's King João II. João's advisors had pooh-poohed Columbus's absurd idea of reaching the Indies by sailing directly west. João's navigators were making increasingly venturous sallies along the African coastline; they were committed to opening a route to the Indies by reaching Africa's southern tip and heading east.

Ferdinand and Isabella's initial response to Columbus's scheme had been almost as discouraging. They met him in 1486, with their crusade to drive Muslim power from Granada weighing heavily on their minds and pocketbooks. With war draining their resources, Columbus was lucky the monarchs hadn't dismissed outright his far-fetched plan. Instead, they referred it to a commission headed by Queen Isabella's confessor, friar Hernando de Talavera. Isabella trusted Talavera; he could

read; he knew Scripture. That more or less sums up his qualifications to head the commission. As Columbus's son put it, "There were not so many geographers then as now, [so] the members of this committee were not so well informed as the business required."

Not so well informed indeed. Some commissioners argued that if Columbus sailed west he could never get back, for they imagined the ocean sea sloping in such in a way that Columbus "would be going downhill and so could not return . . . even with the aid of the strongest wind." Equally grave theological objections were piled on top of this "scientific analysis." Columbus's world map seemed to situate the Antipodes at the globe's far south. Yet Church tradition affirmed that Jesus's apostles had preached the gospel message "to the ends of the earth," and because no record existed of an apostolic visit to these so-called Antipodean tribes, it was obvious that neither they nor the place they supposedly inhabited could possibly exist.

There were, of course, better reasons to have doubted Columbus, starting with his badly flawed assumption that he would reach Asia after sailing a mere two thousand or so nautical miles west. Neither Columbus, Talavera, nor, for that matter, any other European understood just how large was the globe they inhabited: a two thousand-mile journey would have stranded Columbus in mid-Atlantic, a good eight thousand miles short of Asia and well short even of the Americas (which, of course, were nowhere at all on Columbus's map).

Credit Columbus with perseverance, if only the perseverance of a desperate man running out of options. While Talavera's commission dilly-dallied and Ferdinand waged war on Granada, Columbus drifted toward abject poverty and solicited support from anyone who might further his suit with the king and queen. It paid off in late 1491 with his second royal audience. The steady progress of their Granada siege had brightened the monarchs' outlook and placed them in a more expansive frame of mind. Romanticized accounts portray Columbus withdrawing from the royal court without a formal commitment, only to be chased down by royal messengers summoning him back to the monarchs' presence with the good news that Granada had just surrendered. Relieved of ongoing siege costs, it suddenly seemed no great hardship to subsidize half of Columbus's expedition expenses.



However their discussions unfolded, Columbus's fine-tuned second pitch struck economic, messianic, religious, and geopolitical chords that all rang sweetly to the monarchs. He later wrote in his diary that after promising "all of the profit from my enterprise should be spent in the conquest of Jerusalem . . . your Highnesses smiled and said that it pleased them." The Ottoman Turks had gained a menacing foothold on Christian Europe's eastern flank, and Columbus portrayed Ferdinand's takeover of Muslim Granada as prelude to a cataclysmic global showdown with Islam. His expedition would reconnect Europe with supposed long-lost Christian kingdoms cut off by Islamic territory in between. By reuniting the forces of global Christendom, Ferdinand and Columbus would unleash a unified assault that Islam surely could not withstand. Such grandiose considerations aside, there were straightforward attractions to Columbus's plan, not least the chance to leapfrog Portugal's steady imperial progress by establishing overseas colonies for Spain.

So, in August 1492, Jews and Muslims sailed toward exile and Columbus toward a New World. He brought along a fluent Arabic speaker, presuming that with Islam's broad global dominance, any peoples he encountered before finding his lost Christian tribes would likely be Arabic-speaking Muslims.

Columbus wasn't the only one concerned about effective diplomacy with Islam. Friar Hernando de Talavera, chairman of the erstwhile commission that so gravely doubted Columbus, had since been named archbishop of the newly conquered Granada. He showed considerably more imagination in the role than he had when assessing Columbus's navigational plans. Talavera met regularly with Muslim religious leaders, had Christian liturgical prayers translated into Arabic while attempting to learn the language himself, and founded a school to train Christian preachers to serve what he hoped would be a growing Arabic-speaking flock. To be sure, his initiatives were geared to lure Granada's Muslims to Christianity, not exactly embodying the spirit of the surrender treaty pledge to "ever afterwards allow . . . all the common people, great or small, to live in their own [Muslim] religion." But Talavera at least refrained from the heavy-handed approach that other royal advisors advocated in this moment of Christian triumph.

That heavier fist fell soon enough. Archbishop Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros of Toledo toured Granada in 1499. No surprise that this future inquisitor general and cardinal promoted an uncompromisingly aggressive brand of proselytization. He eschewed Talavera's patient, dialogue-based ministry, preferring the more efficient approach of pressured mass conversions. Lest any of Granada's Moors misunderstand the message, Cisneros had copies of the Quran immolated in great public bonfires. As their holy book smoldered, so did Muslim resentment. Cisneros cited the riots that inevitably ensued as proof that Talavera's tactics had been too soft for so stiff-necked a people, never mind that Cisneros's own provocations had actually incited the unrest. Goaded by Cisneros and others, Ferdinand and Isabella summarily voided Muslim rights under the decade-old surrender treaty, issuing a new edict requiring Muslims in Granada and Castile to convert or be exiled, the same dilemma over which so many Jews had earlier agonized.

As Granadans stewed over the injustice that a treaty entered in good faith had been unilaterally revoked from a community now stripped of all military power and negotiating leverage, one bitterly aggrieved Muslim appealed to the Ottoman sultan in Constantinople:

> Therefore ask their Pope, that is to say, the ruler of Rome, why they
> permitted treason after having [granted] amnesty,
> And why they harmed us with their betrayal with no wrong or crime on
> Our part?
> . . .
> As for him who grants a treaty and then betrays it, that is a deed forbidden by every faith.

In the event, most Granadans converted, but the same writer describes their dim view of their new faith: "It was the fear of death and of burning that caused us to convert . . . we accept neither our change of religion nor what they say on the subject of the Trinity."

Columbus's glory days lasted only about as long as the Granada surrender treaty. His October 12, 1492 landfall at the island he christened San Salvador (also known today as Watling Island in the Bahamas) vindicated his decision to sail west, even if what he had discovered was not exactly the Asian island of Cipangu (i.e., Japan), as he believed. Spain's grateful monarchs named him Admiral of the Ocean Sea and governor general of all he discovered. Yet, within a half dozen years, Spain's interest in his New World was already waning. While he gushed over the New World's incomparable promise, veterans of his voyages instead described a miserable backwater tyrannized by Columbus's overbearing rule. Columbus could staff his third voyage of 1498 only by enlisting convicts to round out his crew. Two years later, Ferdinand and Isabella dispatched a legate to the Americas to investigate persistent reports of Columbus's harsh leadership style.



The Admiral of the Ocean Sea was returned to Spain in chains in late 1500. Deeply insulted, he kept the shackles "as a memorial of how well he had been rewarded for his many services." He set out to vindicate himself, scraping together raw material for what later appeared as his *Libro de las Profecías* (*Book of the Prophecies*). Spaniards may have begun regarding him as a tyrant who had stumbled on a few worthless spits of land, but Columbus regarded himself as a man of destiny, leading a great apocalyptic journey that was hastening history toward the conversion of the whole world to Christianity. Or, as he rather grandiosely imagined, "God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse."

His *Book of the Prophecies* teased out-of-context snippets of Scripture and Bible commentary to bolster his case. Isidore of Seville hadn't dared guess when the world might end, but Columbus seized on Alfonso the Wise's world history to argue differently. From the world's creation, Columbus asserted, "according to the account of King Alonso which is considered the most certain," only 155 years remained until the 7,000th anniversary of creation, "in which years I said above according to said authorities, the world must end." With so little time remaining, there was much to do before the Messiah's Second Coming, starting with Jerusalem's reconquest and the conversion of all humanity to Christianity. Columbus saw himself catalyzing this unfolding drama of human history careering toward its climactic close.

The *Libro de Profecías* was never circulated beyond Columbus's own intimate circle during his lifetime. But if it had been, it would probably not have been dismissed as the kooky musings of a man slowly coming unhinged. Millennial speculation was rife in Spain, and fevered predictions won currency even at the royal court. King Ferdinand's courtiers honored him with the unwarranted epithet "King of Jerusalem," a sobriquet Ferdinand apparently liked so much that he used it himself. In 1496, Pope Alexander VI christened Ferdinand and Isabella "the Catholic Monarchs." The lofty tribute was at a minimum truer of them than of Pope Alexander himself: this notorious Borgia pope, a Spaniard who remains the poster child of corrupt Renaissance pontiffs, purportedly maintained an incestuous affair with his illegitimate daughter, Lucrezia, while elevating another of his illegitimate offspring to the rank of cardinal.

Alexander's indiscretions notwithstanding, he rightly discerned the glimmer of hope that the expectations so many centuries ago invested in Spain and her monarchs might finally be fulfilled. Isidore had exclaimed that Spain was the "ornament of the world." The late ninth-century author of the *Chronicle of Alfonso III,* writing when Muslim power dominated Spain, recalled Jesus's parable of the tiny mustard seed becoming the greatest of trees and predicted that a decimated Christian Spain would rise again, and "the well-being of Spain and the army of the Gothic people will be restored."

Such prophecies may have seemed laughable when the guerrilla Pelayo was holed up in Spain's mountainous north as the last thing standing between Islam and total domination of Iberia. Or when the ninth-century King Alfonso II founded a small church in northwest Spain to commemorate the miraculous discovery of St. James's remains at Compostela, preoccupied with hanging onto his tiny kingdom, not reconquering all Spain for Christendom.

The barely flickering dreams of recreating Visigoth glory blazed to life only many generations further along Pelayo's jagged family tree, when Alfonso VI in 1085 claimed the old Visigoth capital of Toledo and the renegade Cid battled his way soon after through Muslim territory to the Mediterranean coast. Fernando III's thirteenth-century conquest of Córdoba and Seville gave that Reconquest dream concrete



shape, though its promise remained unfulfilled for over two more centuries, until the Catholic Monarchs in two busy decades united Christian Spain, vanquished the last remnant of Muslim rule, expelled Spain's Jews, and opened a New World. Given all he accomplished, no wonder Ferdinand was prophesied as the monarch destined to reclaim Jerusalem for Christendom and restore Spain's place at the head of nations, as Isidore had so fondly hoped.

The Eden that was Visigoth Spain had been a homogeneous Christian kingdom, at least as reinvented in the imagination of later chroniclers. By delivering Jews and Muslims the ultimatum to convert or leave, the Catholic Monarchs had restored Spain's Edenic purity. Indeed, as a fevered Columbus saw it, Spain stood on the verge of casting the whole New World in the same pristine mold: "Your Highness ought not to consent that any foreigner do business or set foot here, except Christian Catholics, since this was the end and the beginning of the enterprise, that it should be for the enhancement and glory of the Christian religion."

Columbus saw the jigsaw of world history finally falling into place with Granada's fall, the Jews' expulsion, and his own New World discoveries. But not everyone shared Columbus's vision of the Messianic age, and not everyone saw it arriving on Columbus's timetable.

Perspective is everything, and from exile in Italy Isaac Abrabanel viewed history from a rather different vantage point. Shunted from Spain to Portugal to Italy as Europe's doors swung shut behind them, Jews lamented the pressed conversions of grandsons and grandfathers to Christianity and longed for the Messiah's promised advent to redeem the wandering Jewish nation, liberate Jerusalem, and gather the Jews into a promised land. Redemption could not come soon enough for long-suffering Jews, so it's understandable that Isaac Abrabanel divined in the scriptural tea leaves a more imminent Messianic arrival than Columbus did.

Like Isidore of Seville and Columbus, Isaac also saw world history unfolding in great epochs paralleling the biblical days of creation. Christian Isidore had believed humanity's sixth (and Messianic) age had been initiated by Jesus; the Jewish Isaac still awaited a Messiah to usher in that sixth age. He found hope in the Book of Daniel's opaque

imagery, where the prophet had plaintively wondered how long Yahweh would allow His "sanctuary" to be "trampled underfoot." Isaac read in Daniel this unambiguous heavenly rejoinder: "for two thousand and three hundred evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary shall be restored to its rightful state." Abrabanel composed his *Wells of Salvation* in the year 1496, calculating that from the biblical division of the kingdom of Israel exactly 2,300 years would have passed in the year 1503, one year for each of the prophet Daniel's evenings and mornings. Isaac scratched out his calculations, consoling himself that Israel's redeemer would soon make himself known, indeed must already be alive amid the Jewish diaspora's scattered communities. Perhaps even among Isaac's own circle of Spanish exiles in Italy.

As it turned out, Israel's redeemer didn't arrive in 1503. Instead, Judah Abrabanel that year composed his doleful lament over his son's forced conversion to Christianity.

One year later, Queen Isabella died. Garbed in a Franciscan habit, she was entombed in Granada's cathedral, its one-time grand mosque. She followed the great tradition of St. Fernando III in Seville and Alfonso VI in Toledo, two other Crusader monarchs whose remains patiently await the resurrection of the dead in mosques-turned-cathedrals in the cities of their greatest Reconquest triumphs. Isabella's husband, Ferdinand, joined her a few years later. Despite the Catholic Monarchs' many accomplishments over their long reign, the epitaph chiseled onto their sepulcher pointedly memorializes just two: "Destroyers of the Mohammedan sect and the annihilators of heretical obstinacy [i.e., of the Jews]."

Columbus died in 1506. His will set aside money to fund Jerusalem's liberation from Islamic rule. It's not known whether this wish was heeded, and if so, how the fund was used.

The Messiah didn't arrive to end the world in the mid-1600s, as Columbus had confidently predicted. The world had, however, changed a good deal by then. The descendants of those Granadan and Castilian Muslims forcibly converted to Christianity in the early 1500s remained as stubbornly (though clandestinely) committed to their former faith and customs as the poet had predicted: "It was the fear of death and of burning that caused us to convert . . . we accept neither our change of religion nor what they say on the subject of the Trinity." Arabic remained a living language in Granada a century after its Muslims were forcibly converted.



By 1609, Spain's monarchs had grown exasperated with these recalcitrant *moriscos* as an embarrassing blot on efforts to mold a homogeneous Christian Spain. They were expelled from Spain starting that same year. It had become unacceptable not only to be a Muslim or Jew, but even to be descended from Muslims or Jews. The renegade Cid had regarded honor a distinction earned through deeds rather than inherited through blood: the trustworthy Muslim Abengalbón merited honor; the treacherous Christian infantes of Carrión did not. Though Spaniards still lionized the semilegendary Cid as a national hero, the code of honor he exemplified had been supplanted. *Limpieza de sangre* ("purity of blood") became more the criterion of honor than deeds, and bloodline increasingly dictated what roles one might play in Spanish society. Descendants of Jews and Muslims were barred from holding most public offices or from entering most religious orders.

With the 1492 extermination of Muslim rule in Spain, St. James the Moor Killer had seemingly outlived his militant usefulness and could have been retired to bestow once again undivided attention on the grieving, lame, repentant, or merely curious who thronged Compostela each year seeking St. James the Pilgrim's favor. But Santiago the militant was drafted to combat a new enemy. Some four decades after Columbus first dropped anchor in the New World, the Spanish adventurer Francisco Pizarro stumbled on an unimaginably wealthy Inca civilization centered in what is today Peru. As his grossly outnumbered conquistadors plunged into the battle that many surely assumed would end their lives, they howled Spain's traditional battle cry, *Santiago y cierra España* ("St. James and close [ranks] for Spain"). One soldier afterward swore to seeing St. James swoop down on a white horse to lead the miraculous Spanish victory that day, just as he had miraculously intervened to battle Islam along Spain's frontier. So the battle-weary apostle embarked on a new phase of his career, its reminders still resonant in South American atlases, from the benignly named Santiago, Chile, to the more sinister-sounding Mexican town of Matamoros ("Muslim Killer").

Thanks in part to Inca gold, Spain entered what historians typically

call her Golden Age. The age was golden in one obvious respect, as precious metals lifted from New World colonies gilded Spain's altars and financed her European conflicts. Yet, in other respects, the Golden Age label is at a minimum incomplete. For this was at least the *third* Golden Age Spain had enjoyed. Spain's Islamic Golden Age had blessed Europe with new models of architecture, mathematics, ceramics, agriculture, philosophy, medicine, and astronomy, to name a few disciplines among many. Spain's Jewish Golden Age had nurtured Europe's most prosperous, accomplished, and largest Jewish population, and through Maimonides and Moses de León bequeathed masterworks that still fundamentally influence Jewish thought and worship.

The enduring contributions of medieval Spain's Muslims and Jews reveal an unfortunate gap in Spain's third Golden Age. Cleansed of non-Christians and striving for homogeneity, Spain's encounter with alien cultures now occurred almost exclusively beyond Iberia's borders, most notably in her New World colonies. And what she extracted from that Golden Age encounter with other civilizations was for the most part only, well, gold.

Tourists to Spain are everywhere reminded how profoundly Spain once benefited from her encounter with Islamic civilization, from Córdoba's cathedral rising from the roots of her dizzyingly arcaded great mosque, to the Almohad minaret that dominates Seville's skyline as its cathedral bell tower, even to Moorish churches in northern provinces never ruled by Muslim Spain. Visitors to the Inca remains at Machu Picchu can't help but note that Inca architects might have made an equally profound contribution to Spanish masonry and construction technology. But the Spain of this (third) Golden Age was no longer forced to encounter and absorb the gifts of foreign civilizations on her own home soil and perhaps had lost the knack of doing so elsewhere.

Still, if foreign cultures no longer blessed Spain, those exiled from Spain blessed their adopted homelands. By some estimates, 20 percent of the world's Jews, and half of Israel's, trace their lineage to Iberia's Jewish exiles, the so-called Sephardim, named for the biblical land of Sepharad (Obadiah 1:20) that became identified with Iberia in Jewish discourse. Many Sephardim fled to Ottoman Turkey, North Africa, or Italy after the 1492 expulsion. A few years later, many fulfilled the



centuries-deferred dream of return to the promised land, albeit not accompanied by a hoped-for Messiah but with the tolerant forbearance of the Holy Land's Muslim rulers.

Some returnees settled a remote, hilly corner of the Mideast where Israelis, Lebanese, and Syrians today maintain vigil over each other's border patrols. Sixteenth-century Safed held no such interest for military strategists, or for many others except textile weavers. A few mystics climbed winding trails through infertile hills to found a community of prayer and study a half-mile above sea level and close to the traditional burial site of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, that revered second-century spiritual leader under whose name Moses de León had penned the *Zohar.*

Many Safed settlers traced Iberian roots; Joseph Caro's family hailed from Toledo and Moses Cordovero's from Córdoba. They nursed a revival of Jewish spirituality like the reawakening once sparked by Moses de León and the Iberian kabbalists. An Egyptian Jew, Isaac Luria, joined the Safed community after spending the better part of a decade absorbed in meditation and reflection on the *Zohar;* after two intensely productive years in Safed, an outbreak of plague cut short his life. One noted scholar has deemed the Safed movement "one of the most significant and remarkable chapters in the history of Judaism."

Like the ancient Greeks and Christian Isidore, the Safed kabbalists wondered where human history was going. Their Hebrew Bible taught them, like Isidore, to regard human history not as a meaningless cycle but as the journey forward of fallen humankind toward redemption. Yet it was not easy for sixteenth-century Jews, long ago scattered from Jerusalem by the Romans and more recently shunted from Spain, to read history's tea leaves optimistically. History's pattern seemed to vindicate the ancient Greeks: an ever recurring cycle, often of tragedy and humiliation.

Yet, the Safed kabbalists taught, it was the Jews' duty not merely to suffer history's misfortunes in passive vigil for the Messiah, but to strive to bring the Messiah into their midst. They were called to accomplish *Tikkun olam,* the "perfecting" or "setting straight" of a disordered world where evil too often conquers good. Humans were tasked and privileged to restore the perfect order that had reigned on that seventh

day when God finished His creative work and pronounced it all very good. The Jews would accomplish this awesome task by praying with a pure heart and virtuous intent, by wishing no evil on another, and by following God's commandments. Moses Cordovero exhorted his followers to understand that "in everyone there is something of his fellow man. Therefore, whoever sins, injures not only himself but also that part of himself which belongs to another."

Indeed, each human act of goodness or evil figured into the great drama of salvation history by hastening or delaying the hoped-for redemption. Every single moment of every single life was endowed with supreme significance. It was no longer the Messiah's task to achieve redemption and humans' merely to wait, hope, and pray for it, but the whole Jewish nation was swept up into that task of healing the world of that catastrophe whereby evil had entered the world. Tens of thousands of Sephardim, descendants of these exiles from Spain, live and pray in Jewish communities scattered all over the globe, many of them, like these Safed mystics of long ago, undertaking the prayer and good works that redeem a fallen humankind.

What does medieval Spain teach us about history? Are we going forward, or trapped in a meaningless cycle, or merely lurching about from generation to generation, foolishly deceiving ourselves whenever we imagine we have discerned in events some pattern where none really exists? Though much has changed in the centuries since seventh-century Isidore pondered Spain's history, not everything has. In 1834 the Inquisition was abolished in Spain; in 1966 Spain's Constitution formally established the principle of religious toleration; in 1978 the government proclaimed Spain a country without a state religion. Muslims, Christians, and Jews continue to believe in the same One God. Today, even though few Muslims and fewer Jews call Spain their home, all three faiths are practiced freely there, as for so many centuries in medieval Spain. The optimistic can only regard this as a sign of humanity moving forward.

Isidore of Seville's encyclopedia taught us to count more efficiently on our fingers; Pope Sylvester dazzled contemporaries with Hindu-Arabic numerals and his superabacus; Spaniards today brandish pocket



calculators packing power to solve problems that all medieval Spain's Christian, Muslim, and Jewish mathematicians together could never have tackled. Isidore imagined a world surrounded by the ocean sea and populated with headless Blemmyes and one-legged Sciopodes; Alfonso's multifaith translation teams prepared the celestial maps and configured the astrolabes that enabled sixteenth-century navigators to remap that primitive, poorly understood world sketched out by Isidore; today, astrolabes are arcane museum pieces, and astronauts and chauffeurs navigate with previously unimaginable precision by global positioning satellite systems. Who can behold human knowledge surging forward and possibly parrot Aristotle's morose plaint that "each art and science has often been developed as far as possible and has again perished," a conjecture that seems more wrongheaded with each passing generation.

And yet.

Those same global positioning systems that so comfort chauffeurs also target munitions far more lethal than the swords, rocks, and spears with which Fernando III assaulted Seville and Córdoba. Has humanity progressed when one fighter pilot needs but seconds to obliterate more fellow humans than a Reconquest army could slay in a lifetime? Or when sophisticated aeronautical equipment enables suicide-pilot fanatics to immolate two great towers and thousands within them in September 2001? Or when a cell phone's exquisite electronics help madmen to shred trains and the lives of Spanish commuters in March 2004?

In one undeniable respect there is terrifying truth in Aristotle's claim that all we've achieved in every art and science could perish. If the twenty thousand years or so of human history is reduced to a day, in the last ten minutes of that long day we've acquired and multiplied at a frightening pace the capacity to exterminate our species and reduce our earthly habitat to a lifeless husk, annihilating along the way those few remaining manuscripts of Isidore's encyclopedia, those Romanesque churches lining the Santiago pilgrimage route, the silver casket protecting Santiago's remains in Compostela's cathedral, the grand Umayyad mosque from which rises Córdoba's cathedral, the Nasrid Alhambra

where Ferdinand and Isabella marked the end of Muslim Spain, and all else that we consider the patrimony of our shared human civilization.

Aristotle never foresaw the terrible power we would someday harness, nor did the medieval Spaniard Ibn Tufayl, who nonetheless presciently proclaimed humanity's duty "not to root out a whole species." Ibn Tufayl's Hayy could withdraw to his isolated island and contemplate God in solitude. No such solitary island remains. Instead, technology has shrunk the globe and transformed our whole world into medieval Spain: we Jews, Christians, Muslims, believers of all other faiths, and those who profess none are now and forever thrown together by technology, whether that reality delights or dismays us. We can neither wish away the religious other nor pretend he or she does not exist.

The globe has become one of those medieval Andalusian villages, where we buy from and sell to each other, brush against one another in streets and alleys, marvel at or recoil from each other's beliefs and habits, hear the cry of muezzin and cantor and chorister, and find that the music, words, and ideas of Muslim, Christian, and Jew have seeped into a pooled cultural groundwater. Humanity in the twentieth century empowered itself to become copreservers of God's universe. And so, as those Safed mystics observed, redemption or catastrophe now lies with us.

What will we make of our new medieval Spain? Will we realize humanity's potential to live and work harmoniously alongside those who worship differently, as medieval Spaniards did at their best? Or will we, like them, veer off into a violent thicket, forever imbibing the poison of our own resentments? Our troubled age has sometimes mirrored medieval Spaniards at their very worst: killing the innocent in God's name, expelling the "infidel," rallying coreligionists by slandering other faiths, refusing to understand our neighbor's sacred beliefs, and infringing his or her right to worship God freely. Wherever such acts trample human dignity and freedom, no just and lasting peace can be possible. Resentment and anguish, for a time submerged, inevitably erupt anew in violence that mimics the pessimistic cycle of history imagined by the ancients: "and new wars again shall arise, and a new Achilles go to Troy."



Still, even in medieval Spain's saddest stories one finds not the stultifying air of inevitability but the realization that humans could have chosen to act differently. Those ancients who imagined history's ever-repeating cycle were only observing what they and predecessor generations had wrought by misusing what may be God's most wondrous gift: entrusting humans with free choice and, as a result, stewardship over the created world's destiny. Medieval Spain teaches that history's pattern is shaped by us, not imposed by gods. We choose to adopt Santiago the Killer's ever-resentful posture, where each backward glance through history is a prelude to settling old scores. Or, we choose Santiago the Pilgrim's optimistic journey forward, glancing back to learn the lessons from our past that might enable reconciliation in our future.

All three faiths counsel adherents to look forward toward this brighter future, where, as Maimonides describes, "there will be no famine, no war, no envy, no strife . . . and the land shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." That happier future will not come to pass through some lucky turn of history's wheel, but when we each play a part in what the kabbalists called *tikkun olam,* the "setting straight" of our disordered world.

It is true, as Isidore of Seville surmised, that "the remainder of the age is known to God Alone." But it is equally true that the One God worshipped by Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike has endowed us with the freedom to shape the remainder of this age, to make of it a never-ending cycle of antagonism or to leave old antagonisms behind to undertake hopeful common pilgrimage forward.