

Culture in the Time of Tolerance:  
*Al-Andalus* as a Model for Our Own Time

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Even though I have been teaching at Yale for about fifteen years, and even though my office is about a block down Wall Street from the Law School, I first met Anthony Kronman only a few months ago. I actually picked a fight with him after a brilliant talk he gave on the Enlightenment, a period I, as a medievalist, feel ought not to be particularly glorified since it is so conspicuously responsible, along with the Renaissance, for that demonization of the Middle Ages to which we are, unfortunately, the heirs. But Tony obviously enjoyed the fight, and at the dinner after the talk, after multiple glasses of very good wine, he left me speechless when he said his notion of the perfect place to live would be where the religions of the children of Abraham all tolerate each other and where, in the peace of that tolerance, and in the shade and fragrance of orange trees, we could all sit and talk about philosophy and poetry. That, I said to him, is a place I know very well indeed. It existed in any number of different political configurations over nearly eight hundred years, and it was and has been called many names, all of them imprecise for different reasons: *al-Andalus* in Arabic, *ha-Sefarad* in Hebrew; the names of a half-dozen different cities when they were at its center; Castile at other moments. Never—I had to break it to him—had it ever been California, although parts of California's manmade landscapes do echo and remember many of its loveliest features: the tiles, the courtyards with fountains, even the orange and palm trees. I am here tonight to talk about that place, a remarkable medieval culture rooted in pluralism and shaped by religious tolerance. And to show some of it to you, because despite its having existed in one

form or another for nearly eight centuries, it is largely obscured from our view, because we most commonly tell political and ideological rather than cultural history.

I am going to begin by showing you three spectacular buildings, built within years of each other, and conspicuously and unembarrassedly dependent on each other. The first of these, the Alhambra, was built in Granada over the course of about a century, beginning roughly in 1250, and was just being finished in the early 1360s (FIG. 1). The second and the third were built right on its heels, before the plaster on the first was even dry: one in 1360 in Toledo (FIG. 2) and the other in 1364 in Seville (FIG. 3). The last half of the fourteenth century is actually very, very late in the history of al-Andalus, which is the name I will mostly use tonight and which is the name most commonly applied to the Islamic polity that, from about the mid-eighth century on, had existed in Europe. I will return to the beginning of the story in a bit, so bear with me while I tell a part of the end of this story, as we look at these lovely artifacts, which were all built long after al-Andalus, properly speaking—i.e., as a significant Islamic kingdom—had been dismantled and, indeed, destroyed.

More than a century before, from 1212 to 1248, all of the principal Andalusian cities had fallen to the Castilians: among them the ancient capitals of Córdoba, which had been the seat of the caliphate; and Seville, the magnificent, orange-tree-scented abode of the Almoravids and Almohads, the last Muslims to rule over more than one Andalusian city. After 1248, standing by itself in its splendid and snow-capped mountain stronghold, lonely and surrounded, was Granada. For the next two hundred and fifty years, under the rule of a single dynasty called the Nasrids, Granada was in crucial ways a very different place from what al-Andalus had been. Among other things, there were no *dhimmi* (the Peoples of the Book), no Jewish or Christian populations, in that cornered place. This mono-religious state was a unique phenomenon since those Muslim settlers had first arrived in the eighth century. Deep inside their rugged mountain stronghold, the Banu Nasr, the descendants of the first Nasrid, turned ever more inward, becoming progressively more purely Islamicized. During that first half of their long and Iliad-like besiegedness, they built for themselves the fittingly sepulchral monument now known as the Alhambra, from the Arabic “The Red Fort” (FIG. 1).

But even though the Muslims of Granada existed in a state of cultural isolation, and in that state produced this remarkable monument to the pure power and pleasure of Islamic ornamentation, the rest of what had once been al-Andalus did not. Indeed, the other two buildings that you have already glimpsed, and that are so clearly loving tributes to and adaptations of the marvelous style of the Alhambra, are not only *not* from any other part of Islamic Spain—there was no such thing—but are from places that the conventional and largely unquestioned historical narratives cannot even begin to account for. Those narratives do not know what to do with these buildings, and even less with the vast body of literature from the Andalusian universe, because they are driven to tell the story of failures instead of successes; because, as with most history, the narratives are trapped and often tripped up by knowing how it all comes out.

But let us turn again to these buildings that were so lovingly built in imitation of the Nasrid’s Alhambra. Peter the Cruel is the delightful name we give to the powerful Castilian monarch who was what *The New York Times* would have called “the leader of the Christian world.” In the 1360s his splendid seat was the beautiful old Andalusian city of Seville. His ancestors, going back to Ferdinand III, who had taken Seville from the Almohads in 1248, had mostly preferred this sunny, open, and luxurious city to their venerable old capital Toledo, a far colder, cragged, and closed-in place. Toledo was the ancient Visigothic and ecclesiastical capital of the Iberian peninsula, a vibrant center of science and philosophy. It had been turned over to the Castilian Alfonso VI in 1085 by a weak Muslim ally, marking a dramatic turning point in Andalusian and medieval history: to radically simplify things, it was this event that brought the Aristotelian corpus as well as an extensive body of mathematics, medicine, astrology, and astronomy from Arabic into Latin. But Peter the Cruel not only preferred Seville, he decided to build a splendid new palace there for himself, which he called by its most straightforward name in Arabic: *al-qasr*, “the palace.” The Alcazar, as it was eventually known in Castilian, the other language of the Christian court, was the center from which, with that iron fist that gave Peter his nickname, he governed relatively vast portions of the rest of the peninsula. And he prayed next door, in a vast cathedral of which only the minaret, doors, and ablutions court still stand. It had, of course, once been the Great Mosque of the Almohads, and when the

Muslims lost their last battle for it in 1248, the Christians did what they did everywhere in the peninsula during hundreds of years of what is so misleadingly called a “Holy War”: they walked into the imposing mosque of the city, reconsecrated it, and began to pray there the next day, calling it their cathedral. My students at Yale do not necessarily know that the God of Islam is the God of Abraham, but Christians and Jews in the Middle Ages did. The tomb of Ferdinand III, who was eventually canonized as Saint Ferdinand and who in some narratives is referred to as the Conqueror, was not only built inside that mosque-turned-cathedral, it was inscribed in all the languages of his lands: Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, and Castilian, each language recording the date of the king’s death in its own calendar.

But while the imposing old mosque was fine, the old palaces apparently were not. So Peter brought in workmen, craftsmen, and artisans from Granada, where for several generations they had been at work on that Islamic palatine city’s various extravagantly ornamented buildings. These craftsmen went to Seville to build him a royal palace (FIG. 3) in the same style of the royal palace of his Nasrid rivals, his “Moorish” enemies. A visitor to Peter’s Christian capital and court in Seville would have smelled the same odor of fresh plaster and stucco that still hung in many of the new rooms in Muhammad V’s Granada; would have seen the same Arabic calligraphy, gorgeously and intricately carved into the white stucco-and-plaster walls. Among those visitors in 1364, who would have been struck by the rapid-as-wildfire spread of this decadent new Islamic style, was the young Ibn Khaldun, who would become the greatest and most extraordinarily perceptive historian of the Arabic tradition, elaborating a theory of historical cycles, its layers and declines and falls. Ibn Khaldun, who was from an old Andalusian family that had emigrated to Fez during the last years of the Almohads, was offered the restoration of his ancestral lands by Peter if he would stay on as his vizier. He demurred, but I am sure he always remembered, as he later made his way eastward across North Africa toward an eventual meeting with another of history’s despots, Tammerlane, the way in which the new Christian palaces in al-Andalus had walls that could recite the memories of the Arabic and Islamic past.

It is impossible to know if Ibn Khaldun knew that new Jewish buildings—and there were such things still going up in the late fourteenth century—also had

walls that could speak to those memories. The second building that I showed you (FIG. 2) is in the venerable older capital, Toledo, and it was actually the first great example of the extravagant new Nasrid style built outside of Granada. It had been completed a few years before Peter built the Alcazar, and since there is no record of Peter’s having seen the Alhambra in person, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that it is this building in Toledo, his other capital city, constructed by Peter’s own treasurer and adviser, that opened Peter’s eyes to the extraordinary expressive power of that style. In 1360 Samuel Halevi Abulafia had built for himself and his community a synagogue in the extravagant new Nasrid style, overfilled with that otherworldly stucco relief and, of course, with writing intricately, brilliantly carved into the sparkling white plaster. Some of the writing in this gorgeous synagogue, unsurprisingly, is in Hebrew. And some of it, perhaps surprisingly, is in Arabic, still the language of the cultured Jews in Castile nearly *three hundred years* after the advent of Christian government in Toledo. Most surprisingly, the writing in Arabic includes verses from the *Qur’an* (Koran), a gesture that makes those walls speak to, and about, a history and a memory we are mostly unwilling or unable to understand.

Let me now go back to the beginning of the story and tell it, in a very miniature form, in a way that will both make sense of these buildings and, I hope, suggest how the multiple and complex lessons—positive and negative—that abound here are relevant for our time, and for the sorts of dilemmas which surround us. The story as we conventionally hear it begins in 711 with the crossing of the Strait of Gibraltar, but that is the wrong year to remember. If you tell the story not as a foreign invasion but rather as the foundation of a new polity in a new land, the foundational years are really 750 and then 755–56. Armies had crossed the strait and settlers settled nearly the whole of the Iberian peninsula beginning in 711, but that first generation of Muslims in medieval Europe was, unsurprisingly, mostly made up of outlanders: frontiersmen who had little notion of anything other than being at the furthest outer reaches of a civilization—the Maghreb, the “Wild West”—whose center was months’ travel away, in Damascus.

But in 750 a dramatic revolution occurred in Damascus. The ruling family—the Umayyads, who for a hundred years had been the caliphs, heirs to the Prophet himself—was not only overthrown but brutally massacred by the Abbasids. One plucky young scion of the royal family managed to escape and

clude capture for five years, although he was being hunted by the unforgiving Abbasids. Like most or perhaps all new regimes, the Abbasids felt a powerful urge to create their own legitimacy, breaking from the past they were replacing. They wanted no trace of the older caliphate—indeed, they even moved the capital itself, abandoning glorious but distinctly Umayyad Damascus and moving the center of the Islamic world east to Baghdad. Abd al-Rahman, the prince who was the single Umayyad survivor, miraculously escaped by going west, to the farthest frontier of the then-young and inchoate empire to find refuge among his mother's people, the Berbers. But by the time he got there, many of these tribesmen had settled across the strait from their ancestral North African lands. Abd al-Rahman decided he too would find a new home in those territories already called al-Andalus. In 756, with barely a whimper of opposition from the man who believed himself the emir, the governor, Abd al-Rahman moved into the old city of Córdoba and declared it the new House of the Umayyads, the legitimate continuation of the ruling family that the Abbasids thought they had exterminated and replaced. Here, on the banks of the Guadalquivir—the *wadi-al-kabir* or “big river”—there took possession of the consciousness of this new place a bitter rivalry with Baghdad's claim of descent from the Prophet and the first caliphs.

Once again we are victims of that anachronistic habit of telling history looking backward, as if while it happens it is inexorably going toward its inevitable outcomes. Among the many things about the centuries-long presence of Islam in Europe that are obscured by this, by the fact that the center of Islam was not permanently moved to southern Europe, are all the ways in which the Andalusians thought they were the real thing. Beginning with that first, triumphant, Anastasia-like young man, an Umayyad who believed the Abbasids were illegitimate and murderous pretenders, al-Andalus was in their own minds the authentic continuation of the cultural and religious traditions of Islam. Within a very few years of establishing himself in Córdoba and resigning himself to permanent exile, Abd al-Rahman began to build the most visible symbol of the survival of the Umayyad polity and of the rise of Andalusian Islam—the Great Mosque of Córdoba, which, unlike that in Seville, has mercifully survived the early modern period's virulently anti-medieval biases. Few mosques in the Islamic world speak so eloquently, or so loudly, to that sureness of being at the center of God's universe.

God's universe, in al-Andalus, had three principal and interlocking features which are at the heart of its importance for us, and which were in its own time at the heart of that culture's extraordinarily vigorous well-being: ethnic pluralism, religious tolerance, and a variety of important forms of what we could call cultural secularism—secular poetry and philosophy—that were not understood, by those who pursued them, to be un- or anti-Islamic. Of course, all three are inherently possible in Islam. One might even say they are inherently mandated by Islam. But few Islamic polities have done it as well as al-Andalus did, nor for as long, nor with greater long-term impact and dazzling results. The Christian Alcazar and the Jewish synagogue we have just looked at are two of its most visible tokens, but they are far from unique.

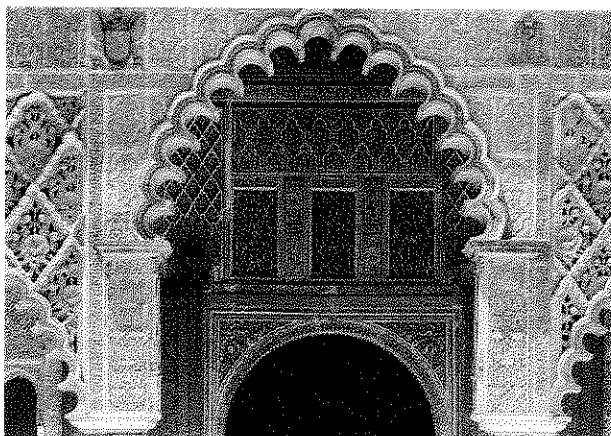
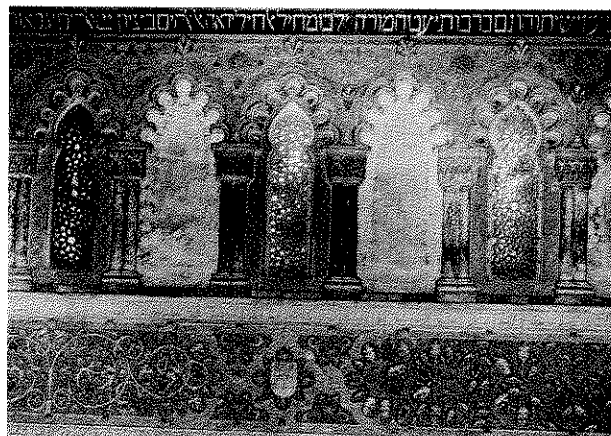
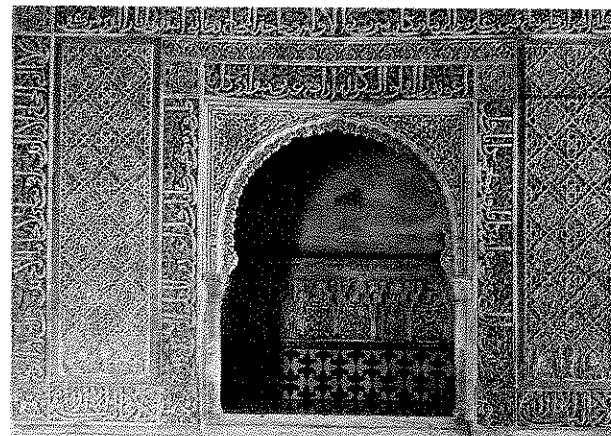
So let us look at these core qualities and values that so shaped medieval culture. Beginning but not ending with the line of Umayyad caliphs who, after Abd al-Rahman I—himself half-Syrian and half-Berber—were almost without exception the sons of former Christian slaves from the far north, the Muslims of al-Andalus were striking in their ethnic diversity. The leadership and much of their sometimes imaginary ancestry were Syrian; most of the foot-soldiers were first-generation, immigrant Berbers; and the inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula, from whom within a few generations the majority of the Muslims descended, in part or in whole, were ethnically no different from those who remained Christian: Celto-Iberians and Romans and Visigoths. There were also substantial communities of Jews who had arrived in Iberia with the Romans and who had been notoriously abused and even enslaved by the last of the corrupt Visigothic governments. The Jews were certainly not the only group in the eighth century optimistic that the Muslims would be more benign rulers than the Visigoths had been. The number of Muslims in Iberia grew exponentially during the next several hundred years not because more “Arabs” came to live there, but because the original inhabitants of the peninsula converted to the dominant faith in overwhelming numbers.

The unconverted Christians and Jews, called the *dhimmi*, of al-Andalus, were thus not very different ethnically from their brothers and neighbors who did convert; and soon enough they were not very different in other crucial ways, since Christians and Jews were thoroughly and mostly enthusiastically Arabized within a relatively short period of time. The Andalusian Christians were even

called the Mozarabs or *must'arab*, or “wanna-be-Arabs,” and there is a wonderful Latin lamentation from Alvarus, a ninth-century churchman of Córdoba, complaining that young Christian men can barely write decent letters in Latin but are so in love with Arabic poetry that they can recite it better than the Muslims themselves. Identity, here as in the rest of medieval Europe, was a very complex thing and many people did not shy away from embracing what would seem impossibly contradictory to others—to Alvarus, for example, or to us moderns, nurtured from the Renaissance on to believe that harmony and unity and coherence are good and advanced things.

One of the least appreciated features of Islamic culture, that vital part of it that comes directly from the poetry-loving and word-worshipping desert culture of the pre-Islamic Arabs, is the way that from the beginning it embraced the possibility of contradiction—as, I believe, poetry-centric cultures are bound to do. F. Scott Fitzgerald once famously said that the test of a first-rate mind was the ability to hold two contrary ideas at the same time. By that measure, which I think is essential for there to be true religious tolerance and the sort of cultural vitality that can come from that, Andalusian culture, and by extension much medieval European culture, was first-rate indeed. There are dozens and dozens of wonderful examples of this, little-known because we tell the story as if they, like us, were striving to be unified creatures: ergo, Arabs spoke Arabic, religious people were pious and would not have cultivated erotic poetry, and Christians spent all their time crusading against the enemy.

Let me tell you a story to try to debunk some of this. It is the story of the Golden Age of the Jews. Not “A” golden age but “*The*” Golden Age, and its first chapter, if we tell the story right, is in Mecca. The story explains not only why that amazing synagogue (FIG. 2) was built in Toledo but also why the wealthy and educated nineteenth-century Ashkenazy Germans who settled in New York sometimes built synagogues that look like mosques. It all makes sense, but only if we begin with poetry. Much of the history of the stunning poetry of the pre-Islamic period (an era that in Arabic, since Muhammad, is referred to by that half-poetic, half-theological characterization of the *Jahiliyya* or “The Age of Ignorance”) is lost in the desert sands, but stunning shards do survive of an oral poetic tradition of great complexity and refinement. The poems are usually referred to as odes or, more revealingly, as the “suspended” or “hanging” odes,



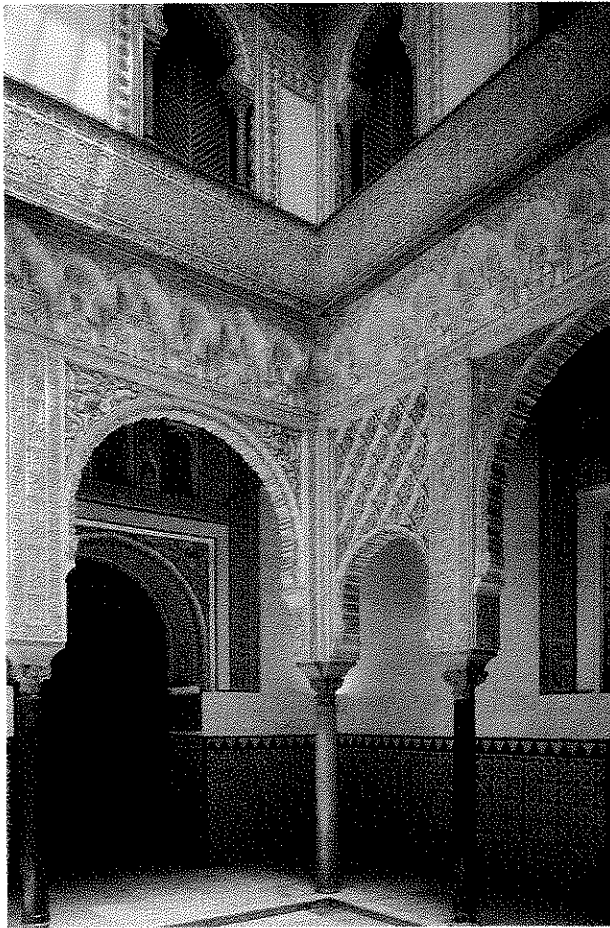


FIG. 3

a curious expression from the most telling anecdote about them. Whether it is historical or apocryphal, the anecdote recounts that the many Arabian tribes held an annual poetry competition when they congregated in Mecca. The winning poems would be embroidered in gold on banners and then hung on display at the ancient shrine, that impenetrable black rock at the heart of the city. Perceived as the house of God, that mysterious black rock would eventually become the symbolic heart of the new religion as well, the Ka'aba that pilgrims still circumambulate in Mecca and toward which Muslims pray. When Muhammad came in from the desert and stood in that town pronouncing the revelation he had received from God, he was a Prophet whom God had instructed to "recite" (the opening words of the *Qur'an* and "*Qur'an*" itself mean "Recitation"). But he was also conspicuously a part of that oral tradition, with a highly developed reverence for the power of poetic language.

Muhammad's arrival at the heart of pagan Mecca to preach, to recite verses, many of them powerfully lyrical and hermetic, was an act that in and of itself had eloquent resonance, that was clearly a part of that public poetic tradition that had hung banners embroidered with poems in the village square. The love of the language itself was a key part of that pre-Islamic Bedouin culture that first received and shaped the new religion. These desert warriors were also poets (and great lovers of poetry) of extraordinary delicacy and sentimentality. And, as the story of the hanging odes illustrates, nothing was prized more highly than language itself, the inevitably complex and contradictory language of poetry; nothing was more worthy of being turned into gold and placed at the center of Mecca itself. Until, that is, Muhammad's uncompromising monotheism stripped that pagan place of its idols, but, perhaps incongruously, left what might have been the most powerful idol of all, poetry itself. Poetry, both pre-Islamic poetry, and afterward, poetry that was from the Islamic period but was still uncompromisingly secular, not only survived the coming of Islam but flourished. Indeed, the pre-Islamic odes were collected by Islam's first generation of scholars and then canonized as the only hermeneutic key capable of unlocking the linguistic treasures of the *Qur'an*.

The extraordinary political, economic, and social well-being of the Jewish communities of al-Andalus was enabled by the very generous interpretation of the *dhimma*—the mandate that the other "Peoples of the Book" be protected—

by the Umayyads, and after them, by what we might call the neo-Umayyads, the competitive city-states, Christian and Muslim alike and not aligned at all by religion, that replaced the caliphate. These political factors are well known and invariably cited as the keys to the spectacular cultural success in virtually every area that justifies the title “golden” for the period, although why it was that the Andalusian Muslims understood the *dhimma* in ways that seem extravagant is not much talked about. But in any case, the post-Solomonic revival of Hebrew as a language for secular poetry, which is the earth-shaking transformation of Jewish culture unique to that time and place, cannot be understood merely as the result of progressive social policies and most of all cannot be understood without understanding that first-rate poetic culture that was Arabic. The centrality of Arabic poetry in the life of all educated men in al-Andalus meant that the educated Jewish community came to know it and write it and in some profound way covet it, because it was so at odds with their own relationship to Hebrew, with which they had, for hundreds and hundreds of years, a dried-out, formal, purely liturgical relationship. Pious Muslims could recite the *Qur’an* in God’s own sacred language, but for the Muslims God did not hoard His language or keep it locked up in His temples, and so those same Muslims could also do a thousand different things in Arabic. Most of all, they could read and write and sing love poetry. God, it turned out, had a first-rate mind Himself, and perhaps not only tolerated but enjoyed contradictions, didn’t even mind being made love to in the same language that you might use for your lover. Any more than He minded — the Jews learned this too then — that his good servants in Baghdad wanted to speak that impossibly rational and unbelieving language — philosophy — that had been invented by the Greeks. The Abbasid caliphs thus devoted extraordinary time and energy and money to making Greek into Arabic, to making Aristotle too a vital part of the happily inconsistent conversations of the Muslims.

The profound Arabization of the Andalusian Jews was due in great measure to those contradictory, first-rate values of Arabic culture itself, and to the especially generous acceptance of paradox in al-Andalus. Tolerance of “others” is one thing, and a very good thing indeed, but the effects of taking pleasure in contradiction within one’s own identity can be even richer. It became possible to be a pious Jew who could recite a pre-Islamic ode or a homoerotic poem or take the

peripatetic tradition seriously, in great measure because pious Muslims did it. The community of Jewish intellectuals and leaders absorbed and came to believe in the fundamental moral of the story: internal tolerance of contradictory identity is the basis of a superior and first-rate language and identity. And so it was that the Andalusian Jews began, in the first part of the tenth century, to cultivate Hebrew as a language that could transcend the devotional and theological uses to which it had been limited for time nearly immemorial.

For the first time in a thousand years, Hebrew was brought out of the confines of the synagogue and made as versatile and ambidextrous as the Arabic that was the native language of the Andalusian Jewish community. Almost miraculously, Hebrew was once again used as the language of a vibrant and living poetry, what we call secular and vernacular, because the immensely successful Jews of al-Andalus decided that their God and His language too should be great enough, first-rate enough, to transcend prayer, to not mind sharing the language of erotic love. Why should Hebrew too not be the vehicle for contradictory ideas? It was because devout Jews had learned to love the same heterodox love poetry in Arabic that pious Muslims loved to recite that it became possible to read a Biblical text like the *Song of Songs* with its full compliment of erotic charges, and even to decide that what had once made Hebrew great was precisely that ability to write poetry that not only lay outside the synagogue, but that might well contradict the teachings of the synagogue. A new Age of David was brought into being, and in one of the hundreds of remarkable poems of al-Andalus, the Jewish poet Ismail Ibn Nagrila even says it aloud: “I am the David of my Age.”

That David of his age was also, by the way, the Jewish vizier of the Muslim city of Granada at the turn of the eleventh century, and for two decades the enormously successful military leader of its armies. We know about his exploits, and thus about Granada’s victories against other Muslim cities, from various sources but especially from the poetry he wrote. Ibn Nagrila is mostly remembered by his formal title, the Nagid, for he was also leader of the Jewish community of Granada. It was he, a first-generation refugee from Córdoba at the time of the disastrous fall of the caliphate, who almost immediately began building a substantial castle on the hill that the Jewish community had settled. Samuel the Nagid laid out a new and far fancier place for the Jews living on that hill, part fortification and part cultural show of force; and after him, his son would



expand it decoratively, laying out elaborate gardens on the adjacent grounds. But little remains of their eleventh-century buildings, the palace and gardens built by two generations of Córdoba Jews in exile, almost certainly out of the Córdoba conceits that had created the Great Mosque and the fairy-tale-like gardens of the caliphal palatine city of Madinat al-Zahra, almost certainly in the Umayyad style that was what they loved, and missed deeply. Some believe, but others do not, that the unique fountain in the Court of the Lions is a survivor from those original Jewish palaces. But nothing is sure because palace and gardens alike were thickly, spectacularly built over, layer upon layer, until they became the fabled Alhambra of the Nasrids, the last Muslims of Spain. Eventually it would directly inspire the most gorgeous synagogue of Christian Spain, where it is not so strange, after all, to see verses from the *Qur'an* on the walls.

Even in 1492 it might all have come out differently. Isabella was a direct descendant of the Castilians Peter the Cruel and Ferdinand III and Alfonso the Wise, all of whom had lived and reigned and prayed in their very first-rate capitals of Toledo and Seville where God had no problems with Arabic on the walls or with Jews as counselors. On the first of January, Isabella marched up that hill of Granada first settled by the Jewish vizier of Muslim Granada, dressed in what the chronicles call “Moorish clothes” and accompanied by a husband arranged for her by her own Jewish advisers, many of whom walked up that hillside with her. The Capitulation Agreements she signed, in the gorgeous main reception rooms of the Alhambra — which she took over as her own *casa real* and in which she would live — incorporated the same sort of generous *dhimma* that Andalusians apparently expected in principle, a guarantee of religious freedom for the Muslims of Granada. The tragic events of the rest of that year, which make all of these things painfully ironic, should not seem to us inevitable and long-sought, as we are taught, but rather as they seemed to those who lived through them: radically incomprehensible. For this catastrophic event the Muslims had no useful analogue, and thus no great consolation. But the Jews did, and the last day of their expulsion was carefully made to coincide with the anniversary of the destruction of the temple, the 9th of Ab, which that year happened also to be the day in early August of 1492 that Columbus left the port of Palos. When he landed in the New World, his official translator was a Jew, presumably by then

“converted,” who spoke Arabic to the no-doubt baffled Tainos in Cuba. I am a descendant of that conversation.

And Tony is a descendant of the blue-tiled patios with orange trees and fountains that were first built to ward off homesickness by the Sevillians, Granadans, and Córdoba Jews who were the majority of the settlers of that part of the New World that includes California. And some of you are the descendants of everything that found refuge in the East instead. Many of the refugees from the catastrophe — the evitable, not the inevitable catastrophe — of 1492 in Granada, must have been reassured as they sailed into Istanbul, into the extraordinary port that is visible from here, across the water, to see that the old first-rate God lived here, that His Church had been made over not too many years before with lovely, paper-thin minarets. Hagia Sophia, the heart of Eastern Christianity, was transformed in 1453 into a mosque, and an iconic mosque at that. The Ottomans also made a new home for the Jews, who arrived with their Haggadahs (one of which was recently re-rescued from the barbaric shelling of the Oriental Institute of Sarajevo) and their fifteenth-century Spanish, which their children speak to this day; and many of the Andalusian values in Islam found refuge and appreciation here too, including the extraordinary boatload of love poetry in Arabic that had for so long been the pride and joy of so many Spaniards — Andalusians, Sephardim, whatever we call them — for whom the language of the poetry you recited, and the name of God in your prayers, and the clothes you wore, and the science you believed in did not have to “harmonize” with each other and could even argue with each other and violently disagree and still be loved and authentic. Maimonides was a Jew and a “Greek” — the second Moses and a rational philosopher — both with equal love and authenticity, and he wrote “The Guide for the Perplexed” in Arabic.

But why should I say these things when there was an Andalusian who said them much better? Ibn 'Arabi, still revered today among Muslims as the greatest of Sufis, was a twelfth-century Sevillian who was a slightly younger contemporary of the Córdoba Jews Maimonides and Ibn Rushd. The philosophers will, I hope, forgive my giving the last word to the poet, and to one of his loveliest love poems, a poem where the line between erotic and spiritual love is not at all clear, and whose final verses embody so much of this Andalusian ethos.

*A white-blazed gazelle  
Is an amazing sight,  
Red-dye signaling,  
eyelids hinting,*

*Pasture between breastbones  
And innards.  
Marvel,  
A garden among the flames!*

*My heart can take on  
Any form:  
Gazelles in a meadow,  
A cloister for monks,*

*For the idols, sacred ground,  
Kaaba for the circling pilgrim,  
The tables of the Torah,  
The scrolls of the Qur'an*

*I profess the religion of love;  
Wherever its caravan turns  
Along the way, that is the belief,  
The faith I keep.*

*Like Bishr,  
Hind and her sister,  
Love-mad Qays and the lost Layla,  
Mayya and her lover Ghaylan.*

—Translation by Michael A. Sells, available in *Stations of Desire: Love Elegies  
from Ibn 'Arabi and New Poems* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2000).