

Sephardic Heritage Update

*A collection of current Essays, Articles, Events and Information
Impacting our community and our culture
A Publication of the Center for Sephardic Heritage*

“Service is the rent we pay for living. It is the very purpose of life and not something you do in your spare time. Education is improving the lives of others and leaving your community and world better than you found it.” -Marian Wright Edelman

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By: David Shasha

Maria Rosa Menocal Resources

In honor of Maria, I take the liberty of presenting a 2002 Op-Ed she wrote for The New York Times, two articles from past issues of the SHU, and some important resources for those who may not be familiar with her many books.

Though we are now left without her physical presence and any work she may have done in the future, the legacy she has left us is substantial and will serve the student of Sephardic history as a critical resource to learn about our cultural past.

Maria was extremely generous over the many years I knew her. She gave freely of her time and provided counsel to me on all matters Sephardic. She lectured for the Center for Sephardic Heritage to promote her books *The Ornament of the World* and *The Arts of Intimacy* and was a strong advocate on behalf of our heritage.

I urge all of those who have not read her books to check them out. You will see in them a most important presentation of a history that is essential to any proper understanding of the Sephardic heritage.

She will be most sorely missed.

David Shasha

On the Passing of Maria Rosa Menocal

It is with a heavy heart and much sadness that I note the passing of our dear friend Maria Rosa Menocal.

Maria's work has been one of the most important tools for the promulgation of Sephardic history and culture. Her many books and lectures have served as a basic tool for those learning about medieval Spain and the brilliant efflorescence of culture that emerged there; a culture that stands at the very foundation of Sephardic Jewish civilization.

Sterling Professor Menocal Passes Away

By: Sophie Gould

After a three-year fight with melanoma, humanities professor Maria Rosa Menocal passed away Monday afternoon.

A Sterling professor of the humanities since 2005, Menocal served as director of the Whitney Humanities Center from 2001 to 2012. She told the Yale Bulletin in 2005 that the WHC is "the University's center for conversations across

the arts and humanities," and spearheaded a period of expansion at the Center, where she appointed 285 fellows from several different academic fields and added new programs such as "Films at the Whitney."

"María Rosa Menocal was among the most brilliant, creative and original of Yale's extraordinary scholars in the humanities," University President Richard Levin told the News on Monday. "Her passions inspired and energized her students and colleagues and shaped a vibrant community at the Whitney Humanities Center."

Levin said Menocal was interested in every medium of "human expression," ranging from politics to cooking and professional hockey. Much of her research revolved around the cultural and religious environment of medieval Spain, and she authored several books on the time period, according to Yale News. Her 2002 book, "The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain," has been translated into several languages and is slated to be adapted into a television documentary.

Menocal served as director of graduate studies and chair of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese before stepping into her role at the Whitney.

Born in Havana, Cuba, Menocal attended the University of Pennsylvania, earning a B.A. in Romance languages, an M.A. in French and a Ph.D in Romance philology. After teaching at Penn and at Bryn Mawr College, Menocal joined the Yale faculty in 1986, teaching Spanish and Portuguese. She became a tenured professor in 1992.

Menocal is survived by her parents, three siblings, husband, ex-husband, two children and one grandchild.

From the Yale Daily News, October 16, 2012

A Golden Reign of Tolerance

By Maria Rosa Menocal

The lessons of history, like the lessons of religion, sometimes neglect examples of tolerance. A thousand years ago on the Iberian Peninsula, an enlightened vision of Islam had created the most advanced culture in Europe. A nun in Saxony learned of this kingdom from a bishop, the caliph's ambassador to Germany and one of several prominent members of his diplomatic corps who were not Muslims; the bishop most likely reported to the man who ran the foreign ministry, who was a Jew.

Al Andalus, as the Muslims called their Spanish homeland, prospered in a culture of openness and assimilation. The nun, named Hroswitha, called it "the ornament of the world."

Her admiration stemmed from the cultural prosperity of the

caliphate based in Cordoba, where the library housed some 400,000 volumes at a time when the largest library in Latin Christendom probably held no more than 400. What strikes us today about Al Andalus is that it was a chapter of European history during which Jews, Christians and Muslims lived side by side and, despite intractable differences and enduring hostilities, nourished a culture of tolerance.

This only sometimes meant guarantees of religious freedoms comparable to those we would expect in a modern "tolerant" state. Rather, it was the often unconscious acceptance of contradictions on an individual level as well as within the culture itself.

Much that was characteristic of medieval culture was rooted in the cultivation of the charms and challenges of contradictions -- of the "yes and no," as it was put by Peter Abelard, the provocative 12th-century Parisian intellectual and Christian theologian. A century after his death, Abelard's heirs, Christian professors and students on the Left Bank of the Seine, were among the most avid readers of the two great philosophers of Al Andalus: one Jewish, Maimonides, and one Muslim, Averroes.

For many who came to know Andalusian culture throughout the Middle Ages, whether at first hand or from afar -- from reading a translation produced there or from hearing a poem sung by one of its renowned singers -- the bright lights of that world, and their illumination of the rest of the universe, transcended differences of religion. It was in Al Andalus that the profoundly Arabized Jews rediscovered and reinvented Hebrew poetry. Much of what was created and instilled under Muslim rule survived in Christian territories, and Christians embraced nearly all aspects of Arabic style -- from philosophy to architecture.

Christian palaces and churches, like Jewish synagogues, were often built in the style of the Muslims, the walls often covered with Arabic writing; one synagogue in Toledo even includes inscriptions from the Koran.

And it was throughout medieval Europe that men of unshakable faith, like Abelard and Maimonides and Averroes, saw no contradiction in pursuing the truth, whether philosophical or scientific or religious, across confessional lines.

This was an approach to life -- and its artistic, intellectual and religious pursuits -- that was contested by many, sometimes violently, as it is today. Yet it remained a powerful force for hundreds of years.

Whether it is because of our mistaken notions about the relative backwardness of the Middle Ages or our own contemporary expectations that culture, religion and political ideology will be roughly consistent, we are likely to be taken aback by many of the lasting monuments of this Andalusian culture. The tomb of St. Ferdinand, the king

remembered as the Christian conqueror of the last of all the Islamic territories, save Granada, is matter-of-factly inscribed in Arabic, Hebrew, Latin and Castilian.

The caliphate was not destroyed, as our clichés of the Middle Ages would have it, by Christian-Muslim warfare. It lasted for several hundred years – roughly the lifespan of the American republic to date -- and its downfall was a series of terrible civil wars among Muslims. These wars were a struggle between the old ways of the caliphate -- with its libraries filled with Greek texts and its government staffed by non-Muslims -- and reactionary Muslims, many of them from Morocco, who believed the Cordobans were not proper Muslims. The palatine city just outside the capital, symbol of the wealth and the secular aesthetics of the caliph and his entourage, was destroyed by Muslim armies.

But in the end, much of Europe far beyond the Andalusian world was shaped by the vision of complex and contradictory identities that was first made into an art form by the Andalusians. The enemies of this kind of cultural openness have always existed within each of our monotheistic religions, and often enough their visions of those faiths have triumphed. But at this time of year, and at this point in history, we should remember those moments when it was tolerance that won the day.

Maria Rosa Menocal is director of the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale and author of "The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain."

From The New York Times, March 28, 2002

The Culture of Translation

By: Maria Rosa Menocal

Throughout medieval Europe Arabic had a far more powerful impact on the transformation and shaping of culture than most narratives of our history reveal. This was true not only in Spain, where Arabic was the lingua franca of educated people of all three religions for many centuries, but far beyond. The new and often revolutionary cultures of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe were often provoked or shaped by an Arabic culture that traveled throughout Europe in many guises, in translations of a hundred varieties, in attitudes about culture, or in songs that were sung and heard and then played again in a different language. It would even be fair to say that European culture from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries is a culture of translation whose monuments are not only new texts in a new language but, no less, the memory of the older language and civilization.

I did my Ph.D. in Romance philology and was originally interested in the texts and culture of the Provençal

troubadours, and their successors in Sicily and Italy. I only began to study Arabic when it became obvious to me that the universe in which those troubadours lived was one saturated with the many trappings of the rich material cultures of al-Andalus, which was the Arabic name for the Islamic polities of the Iberian peninsula. After the collapse of the Umayyad caliphate of Cordoba at the beginning of the eleventh century (the result of catastrophic civil wars among the Muslims themselves, an episode which marks the beginning of the tragic rise of fundamentalist Islam as a dominant force in the peninsula) and throughout the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, this "Andalusian universe" was, for the Christians of what we call "northern Europe" or "Latin Christendom," not a separate and inaccessible world—either geographically or linguistically. On the contrary, these groups were more and more linked by dozens of new avenues of cultural commerce, which ran the gamut from trade itself to the intermarriages with the royal families of Christian kingdoms, themselves profoundly Arabized.

So I learned Arabic—and I am amused, many years later, at my own naiveté—so that I could "prove" that the poetic revolution of eleventh- and twelfth-century Languedoc had its roots in the flourishing bilingual Andalusian song traditions of more or less the same time period. The first article I ever published was on the much-disputed etymology of "troubadour"—which in fact has a perfectly plausible Arabic etymon, perhaps two. The apparent mystery of where the Provençal "trobar" comes from—this was one of the classic unsolved etymologies in the field of Romance philology—is not so great a mystery if the Arabic *taraba*, "to sing, to entertain by singing," is considered.

But it is hugely difficult to reconstruct an episode in our cultural memory that was purposefully annihilated when the great libraries of Arabic books, hundreds of thousands of them, were nearly completely destroyed by the Inquisition in the sixteenth century. Nor should we forget that this burned library was not exclusively, nor perhaps even predominantly, "Islamic" but rather one that had for so long been considered the shared patrimony of both Christians and Jews—and, in the Toledo that was the capital of translations of medieval Europe, this library was the principal wealth of the Castilians of all three religions. Not only did uncounted and uncountable texts perish but, at least as important, so did the broader and more diffuse memory of a significant Arabic past. In our commonplace assumption that the Umayyad heritage was cultivated only by Muslims—and, concomitantly, that the Christian culture that triumphed at this time was culturally anti-Arabic as well as politically and ideologically anti-Muslim—we perhaps inadvertently accede to the violence done to historical and cultural memory during the century that those libraries were burned. It is only through the act of restitution of a different kind of memory, a different sense of the cultural texture of the time, and not through any kind of textual proofs, that we can ultimately decide that it might be just as plausible to discuss Ibn Hazm as Ovid when we speak of the culture of

courtly love. And to do this not because any of those long-haired singers of love had ever necessarily read either one—they were a bit more like rock stars than like scholars—but rather because of what we can assume about the ambient culture, what was "in the air."

Medieval literary culture is in general terms—even without the problem of the Arabic connection—susceptible to historical invisibility in many of its incarnations. And how much truer this is for that rich culture of translation of the middle ages that runs the gamut from the scientific and technological materials with which the translation movement from Arabic to Latin began in the early twelfth century to the translations of so much of the imperial culture of *Adab* (the vast "genre" in Arabic traditionally translated as "belles lettres" but perhaps better understood as "humanistic study") into Castilian at the end of the thirteenth century—and which ended up including works like a version of the *mi'raj*, the apocryphal narrative of the Prophet's ascent to Heaven and descent to Hell whose connection to Dante is still bitterly disputed.

I am a little less naive now, I think, than I was when I thought that by learning Arabic I could prove that the songs of William of Aquitaine were a part of a canon of songs that included those of the Taifas of eleventh-century Spain, and I am certainly not going to try to prove to you that Dante did read one of the translations of the *mi'raj* that were made while Brunetto Latini was in Toledo, although in fact I believe both of these things to be true. This is, instead, a "quixotic" matter, and the real task is to be able to evoke the looks and smells and sounds of the libraries, both literal and metaphoric, that were destroyed, and to conjure a vision of how things we already know but that we keep in separate spheres of our memory were more likely interwoven. How, for example, the repeated bans on the teaching of Averroist propositions issued in thirteenth-century Paris reflect a certain intimacy with still-Arabic Toledo of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, among other things because translations are not value- or culture-neutral.

Translation was at the heart of a great deal of the vigor of early Islamic culture, and although I cannot do it much justice here it is necessary to begin with an evocation of the remarkable translation projects of the seventh through ninth centuries for which the Abbasids are justly famous. While the Umayyads of both Damascus and Cordoba were culturally voracious and syncretistic, it was not they but the Abbasids of Baghdad—and in Baghdad—who sponsored the astonishing multigenerational project to translate major portions of the Greek philosophical and scientific canon without which, arguably, much of that canon might have been permanently lost. This establishment of a scientific and philosophical tradition is far more complex and deeply engrained in Islamic culture than the word "translation" conveys, since these texts ended up in Cordoba's libraries—and later Toledo's, and thus Paris's and Bologna's—because they became so central to a tradition

of commentary and exegesis. This powerful intellectual and overtly rational tradition is iconic of this chapter in the history of Islamic culture: imperial in its capacity to both absorb and internalize and recycle so many of the cultures it encountered. It also plays a crucial role in making the culture of Arabic so much more than Islamic, and thus ultimately so accessible to Christians and Jews, beginning with those who worked in the incomparable libraries of Cordoba, which were legendary throughout Europe already during Umayyad times.

But Cordoba, unlike Baghdad, had no culture of translation at all, and the Cordobans themselves could not read Greek. They didn't have to, and in fact by the time they got those texts they were already a part of a scholarly tradition that lived in Arabic. It also never seems to have occurred to anyone in Cordoba to translate anything into Latin. And why should they have? Every civilized person—including the Jews and Christians who were citizens of Cordoba—could of course read Arabic, and the uncivilized people who lived to the north, beyond the mountains, well, after all, it was up to them to come and learn Arabic if they wanted to be able to read real philosophy or if they were curious about how astrolabes could so radically alter navigation. And a handful did. But mostly they did not.

It is not, in fact, until Toledo becomes the Castilian capital and—not coincidentally—that the Castilian monarchy brings the monastic empire centered in Cluny, France, into the picture, into Spain quite vigorously and intimately, that there is any real translation activity in the West to speak of. The venture that begins at that point is not unlike its antecedent in Baghdad, a complex project of intellectual renewal and cultural enrichment. Part of what we see in these developments is that the economy of a translation culture is predominantly one of demand, not supply—and just as in Baghdad the movement was driven by Muslims who wanted to read the Greek texts but couldn't read the language in which they were then available, in Europe the movement is driven by Christians, many from outside the peninsula, who could not read Arabic but were profoundly interested in the riches of what was at that point a distinctly Arabic library.

With the conspicuous exception of the translation of the Quran commissioned by Peter the Venerable, the first generations of translators and the texts they translated from Arabic into Latin were scientific and technological in their makeup. These men weren't translators in any mechanical or detached sense; we would understand them and their culture better if we called them the scholars and the public intellectuals of their time. Robert of Ketton, to whom the Abbot of Cluny was forced to pay exorbitant sums before he would agree to translate anything as completely uninteresting to him as the Quran, was a mathematician at heart and was the man responsible for the translation of al-Khawarizmi's great work of algebra (*al-*

jabr). He was a key player in the introduction of the number system that would revolutionize computation in the west and make all modern calculations possible, what in English we call the Arabic numerals.

The great age of philosophic commentaries and translations follows on the heels of the years when science and technology were the major interests, and it coincides with that moment when the greatest of the Andalusian philosophers lived and wrote, and when their Aristotelian contemplations of the variety of questions we refer to as "faith versus reason" provoked such intellectual upheaval throughout Europe. By the time Averroes and Maimonides were writing their mature works, at the end of the twelfth century, the "schools" of translation of Toledo and the rest of the network for getting these works out of Arabic and into Latin were so sophisticated and developed that they were being read in the major intellectual centers of Latin Christendom almost as soon as they were available in Arabic. A century after its becoming a Christian rather than a Muslim city, Toledo was perhaps the most cosmopolitan city in Europe, its population that legendary mix of Christians, Jews, and Muslims whose principal commerce was what we would call intellectual property. The language of that international community and of the library, both ancient and modern, that was the source of Toledo's wealth, was unambiguously Arabic, by then nearly two centuries removed from being principally the language of an Islamic polity.

In Toledo Arabic was the lingua franca of an international community of scholars, many of whom came from the farthest corners of Europe to study both the great language and its great texts. And there it was not only the academic language but also one of several languages spoken by most of the ordinary citizens of the city: the considerable Muslim community that had never left, the substantial and in fact increasing Jewish population, the old Mozarab Christians, who had lived there since the time of the Caliphate, and even many of the new Christians there, the Castilians. It was not just spoken but also seen in most of the city's architecture and heard in its music and instruments, in sum an integral part of an eclectic cultural fabric. Toledo's citizens also shared the Romance vernaculars, and especially, as time went by, the one brought from the north by the new rulers: Castilian. By the middle of the thirteenth century, Castilian would take center stage in the third and final phase of Toledo's two centuries as the world's preeminent center for the dissemination of Arabic learning and culture.

This great cultural revolution—the vernacular revolution that would establish the new languages of Europe as the legitimate languages for high culture, lyric poetry first and foremost—began in the Iberian peninsula in the eleventh century, in an astonishing combination of political maelstrom and cultural flourishing. The political story is itself quite revealing, since the caliphate was succeeded by

a number of city-states, the *Muluk at-Tawaif*, which were at great odds with each other and competing, often ferociously, for the succession to Cordoba, a competition to some extent political and military, but just as ferociously cultural. But now there is a Christian dimension to all of this, since some of the Christian kingdoms to the north—both to the east and to the west—enter this competition for the Cordoban succession. It is in this competition that Toledo comes out on top and thus begins its translation enterprise. This is in many ways a moment shockingly—for us anyway—nonideological, quite different from how we have come to imagine this age of "crusade" or "reconquista": any given battle in the eleventh century was far more likely to be between two Islamic Taifas than between an Islamic and a Christian one. The most decisive political events of the eleventh century, leading up to the taking of Toledo, were the murder of Sancho of Castile, a political assassination most likely engineered by his brother Alfonso VI, and the assassination of the great al-Mamun of Toledo, probably engineered by his rivals in Seville. But there is far more than mere lack of true ideological division here, there is also a shared cultural universe. At the end of the day all those Christian and Muslim warriors and kings were all likely to be interested in listening to the same thing, the whole range of new Andalusian songs that were the rage throughout the peninsula—and the Jews too are a vital part of this remarkable picture.

Let me tell you about the general of the armies and vizier of the Taifa of Granada, a city founded shortly after the sack of Cordoba by the Zirid dynasty from Morocco. Ismael Ibn Nagrila was an extraordinarily gifted young man who, with his family, had fled from Cordoba during the years of the Fitna, one among thousands of refugee families who carried their memories of Cordoba—and much Cordoban culture—with them far and wide. The Nagrila family, merchants, settled in the old port city of Malaga. But the young Ismael was a prodigious scholarly and literary talent, and at some point he was apparently discovered by the far less cultured member of the new Zirid court a little ways inland in this new place called Granada (*Madinat Gharnata*) and was hired to write the letters and other documents that the vizier was supposed to be writing.

But one day the king, Badis, discovered the truth of the matter, got rid of the old vizier who had been passing off Ismael's superb Cordoban education and Arabic style as his own, and brought the young man himself to court to be the vizier of this new and still rough place. Now, Ismael was in fact a Jew. In the original settlements in the area near the river Darro where the Zirids created their new city there was a substantial Jewish community, at the top of the dominant hill, called *Gharnat al-Yahud*, "Granada of the Jews." But this had little to do with Ismael's success at the court, although it did give him a religious community he would also lead. At the Zirid court he succeeded because he was a Cordoban who could bring that cultural luster to this rough new place and, most of all, because he was a

superb writer of Arabic. Before too long, to his duties and achievements as a man of letters were added military triumphs. As the head of King Badis's armies he led many a successful campaign against other Muslim Taifas and wrote sometimes breathtaking poetry about these exploits, calling himself—in one famous poem about his triumph in a series of battles against Granada's rival Taifa of Almeria—the David of his age.

Ismael is indeed well remembered in the history of the Jewish people and of Hebrew letters, known there as Shmuel ha-Nagid, his Hebrew name, a name that pays honor not only to his Jewishness but also to the fact that he became the nagid, or the head, of that old and substantial Jewish community of Granada. Perhaps not surprisingly, he is remembered not so much as the military champion of a Muslim army but rather as the first of the series of poets of this tumultuous eleventh century who reinvented Hebrew poetry. But both aspects of his life are integral to the complex culture here: the Jew as the leader of a Muslim state and army, as well as the towering poetic father, the David of a brand-new Hebrew poetry, the first since the other David to use Hebrew beyond the liturgy for poetry that could speak of love, and illicit love, as well as all other aspects of human life beyond the synagogue.

This is in fact a story that speaks iconically to the ways in which Arabic—in ways that far transcend its attachments to Islam—plays the expansive and revolutionary role that it does, and how Jews and Christians had understood themselves to be, in the first place, Cordobans; and then, after there was no more Cordoba, legitimate heirs to their versions of the culture that had been created and nourished by the Umayyads. The eleventh century is also one of the many historic moments that reveal that exile can lie at the heart of great cultural achievement. Curiously, even classical Arabic poetry reaches its peak at this moment, so that in Andalusian letters the great achievements of the "classical" period are contemporaneous with the literary counterculture, the poetic avant-garde that crystallizes throughout the peninsula in the eleventh century. So the truth is that the Cordoban exile Shmuel ha-Nagid is part of an entire landscape overrun with poetic experimentation, nearly all of which is attached to Arabic in some way, and which ultimately needs to be understood—no matter what the "surface" language—as the offspring of that great poetic culture of Arabic.

The case of the new Hebrew poetry is perhaps the clearest and worth dwelling on. The Andalusian Jews had long been not only Arabophone but comfortably a part of the literate elite, and what the complexities of Arabic letters and especially poetry revealed to them was a universe of poetic and linguistic tolerance. At some very profound level a pious Jew could unashamedly recite a pre-Islamic ode or a homoerotic poem because a pious Muslim could. Poetry

and piety were not to be confused with each other, and this was at the heart of the great power of Arabic as a literary culture (and at the heart, too, of Alvarus's lament that young Christian men were in love with Arabic poetry). The new Hebrew poetry was thus born not out of "translation" in any conventional way but out of that intimate understanding, gleaned directly from the use of Arabic as a religious and a secular poetic language, and born not in the comfort of Jewish society of Umayyad Caliphate but rather in the exile of the Taifas. There, for the first time in a thousand years, Hebrew was brought out of the confines of the synagogue and made as versatile as the Arabic that was the native language of the Andalusian Jewish community and, almost miraculously, it was once again used as the language of a vibrant and living poetry. Listen to that voice as it has been rendered by one of the master translators of that new Hebrew in our own time, Peter Cole:

*I'd give everything I own for that fawn who betrayed me—
my love for him locked in my heart.*

He said to the rising moon:

"You see how I shine and dare to be seen?"

*And the circle was set in the sky like a pearl in a dark girl's
hand...¹*

This subject, love—and most of all unrequited or betrayed or unfulfilled love—was at the very center of all the new poetries, and love as the ultimate quest and unsatisfiable longing was by far the favorite theme for many singers and poets who, as the eleventh century progressed, were more and more the stars of their times. This would be even more true in the twelfth century. Among the various progeny of classical Arabic poetry the most scandalous—and ultimately most popular—were bilingual songs called *muwashshahat* (or "ring songs" *muwashshaha* means "sash," "circle," or "girdle"). *Muwashshahat* broke all the rules of classical Arabic poetry and allowed a female voice singing in the vernacular to come inside the song with the classical Arabic male poetic voice. During the last decades of the eleventh century this song form became wildly popular throughout the peninsula—and far beyond it as well. It flaunted Andalusian hybridness, weaving together the "mother tongue"—the Romance vernaculars, first and foremost—and Arabic, the classical and paternal language. And it was performed to rhythmic dance music played on all the new great instruments of the age—drums and guitars and lutes, nearly all new arrivals from the Arabic-speaking empire, nearly all just becoming known to those who had lived beyond the borders of the caliphate. Like the new Hebrew poetic language and its brave new songs richly infused with "Arabness," the new Provençal tradition may have been born not out of "translation" in the strictest

(and modern) sense of the word, but rather out of cultural yearning and admiration and exposure. The Pyrenees were far from a restraining frontier, and the language of Barcelona scarcely different from that of Narbonne—so that, finally, the first generation of troubadours of Languedoc were anything but strangers to this land, and could scarcely have avoided knowing about the stunning bilingual ring songs which were the latest cultural rage—along with all other manner of luxury material goods that were acquired voraciously by Aquitanians.

Part of what needs to be restored in our imagining of these historical circumstances are the material aspects of a moment in which, in the courts of Languedoc, the jewelry boxes of the women who could afford them were engraved in Arabic. The markets of al-Andalus and the Mediterranean were ever more open to the rest of Europe and—once again—what is crucial is not so much a detailed inventory of all the goods then available, the extraordinary level of luxury introduced into northern Europe at this point, but instead the style this introduced, a style associated with the "Arabic" world *tout court*, especially with al-Andalus, a style that involved living well, whether that meant being able to eat well-spiced food or to use luxury fabrics for the clothes one wore—or to hear great music played after dinner, perhaps by singing girls captured in battle. Thus the first great songs of the vernaculars of Europe, those songs which Nietzsche famously said defined the very essence of our culture, were sung in courts also graced with exquisitely carved ivory boxes, perfectly executed and engraved astrolabes, and of course those new musical instruments on which all those love songs were sung. And they were all part of a very Arabic world.

¹ *Selected poems of Shmuel Ha-Nagid* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

"The Culture of Translation" is a translation and adaptation of "La culture des traductions: l'arabisation invisible de l'Europe et l'invention du moderne," one in a series of six lectures given during May and June 2003 at the Institut du monde arabe in Paris.

<http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-culture-of-translation>

From Words without Borders website

Lecture Review: Maria Rosa Menocal at Congregation Beth Torah, May 29, 2002

A refrain that is repeated throughout our community like a mantra is: "We must preserve our noble Sephardic heritage." This mantra has become an empty sign of a shell game that has stolen the self-perception and identity of a generation – or two, or three – of our children. When the actual Sephardic heritage comes a-calling, those who have intoned the mantra seem to be missing in action.

A good friend of the Center for Sephardic Heritage, Maria Rosa Menocal, recently placed our history and culture on a very public map by composing an eloquent and timely popular monograph on the role of Muslim Spain in Western civilization.

For those of us who truly care about Sephardic heritage, Professor Menocal, a prominent academic who teaches at Yale University, originally came to our awareness over a decade ago when she published her seminal work *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History*, a book that corrected the false notion that Arabic culture had nothing to do with Western Civilization.

Professor Menocal's thesis was that the advances of Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire were in large measure due to the cultural preservation undertaken by Arab-Islamic civilization in the High Middle Ages.

Unknown to many, the Arabs in the East and the West, from Baghdad to Cordoba, embarked on a massive project to preserve the classics of Athens and Rome. Philosophers such as Ibn Rushd and Ibn Sina reclaimed the Platonic and Aristotelian corpus, the historian Ibn Khaldun redrew the map of our sociological understanding of human history, scientists such as Ibn Haytham reworked the sciences and mathematical formulations of the ancient Greeks while an endless stream of poets and literati fused the ancient Greek meters with the epic odes of the Arabian bards.

This Arab culture was a startling amalgamation of pious religiosity, penetrating philosophy, sparkling aesthetics and dazzling literary pyrotechnics fueled by the political advances of Islam in the Middle East and beyond. While Europe had been ravaged, as the historian Edward Gibbon has meticulously detailed in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by the Barbarian hordes of the North and the Tartars of the East, the Islamic world ascended like a shining star over the firmament of Civilization.

The role of Jews in this newly emerging civilization was crucial to the advancement of the Arab-Islamic culture itself as well as for the internal progress of Judaism. It was during this formative period that a new consciousness, philosophical and literary, emerged among the Jewish elite. In the wake of the closing of the Talmudic corpus in the 5th and 6th centuries, a new class of rabbinical leadership developed after the Islamic conquests. Delving critically into the literature of Greece and Rome, these rabbis served to redefine the way in which Jewish literature and praxis were to be understood.

The crucial figure in this transition was the Ga'on Se'adya al-Fayyumi who lived in Egypt and Babylonia in the 9th and 10th centuries. Rabbenu Se'adya effectively created a new Jewish culture accessible to speakers of Arabic, a language that was soon to become the lingua franca of the

Middle East and the learned language of scientific discourse throughout the civilized world. Arabic texts were disseminated throughout Europe and the Far East.

Professor Menocal in her brilliant new book *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, traces this story through the paradigmatic figure of the Umayyad prince Abd al-Rahman who left his native Syria when his ruling family the Umayyad clan were being run out of town by the Abbasids who were based in Baghdad.

Abd al-Rahman's story is a rags-to-riches tale of a man who narrowly escaped his own death and founded one of the most brilliant civilizations that the world has ever known. Professor Menocal puts it this way:

Stylistic openness, the capacity to look around, assimilate, and reshape promiscuously, was chief among the virtues of Islamic style, and had come West as a key part of the Umayyad aesthetic. In casting about in this alien landscape to find the building blocks for his monuments, and in taking from them freely, whether they were part of the Christians or the Romans, the homesick Umayyad prince knew he was following in the tradition of his Syrian forefathers. The Great Mosque of Cordoba, with its unmistakable gestures of respect and longing for the most important Umayyad sites of the old world, became as lovely an example as one might want of living dialogue with the past, a way of bringing the past to life, or of rewriting it so that it is intelligible in the present. (p. 60)

In this passage we see the cardinal principles of the Levantine mentality: A veneration for the past, a deeply resonant concern for aesthetic and moral principles, a vast emotional reservoir for the soul and spirit and a pragmatic concern for translating and assimilating the best of what human culture has bequeathed to us.

Rather than closing himself and his new kingdom off from the world, as would be the wont of many tyrants, Abd al-Rahman began the Muslim takeover of Spain with an homage to the past in the service of the present.

The Jews of Spain welcomed a respite from the prison that had been created by their Visigothic hosts of the previous centuries. Like Jews all over the former Roman empire, now a part of the second-rate world of Byzantium, the Jews of Spain had been virtual prisoners of a nascent Christian culture that had eviscerated the glorious heights of Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, humanists both, who had extended their hands to all members of the Roman Empire. In a world that had evolved from the transformations of Constantine, the emergence of a rigid and troubled Catholic domination had left non-Christians (and non-Trinitarian Christians such as the Arians) out in the cold – bereft of their civil rights and human standing.

This fact, as Professor Menocal has consistently pointed out, has been lost on many people who have developed a jaundiced and prejudicial view of the Arabs and Islam. This benighted view, unfortunately, has even been transferred to the Arabized Jews of Spain and the Middle East whose civilization has been reduced to a minuscule factor in modern Jewish culture.

The lack of appreciation for Medieval Arabic civilization, the foundation of our own Sephardic culture, has been calamitous for the evolution of an understanding of who we are as Sephardim.

In her new book, Professor Menocal cites the brilliant figure of the legendary Jewish courtier Hasdai ibn Shaprut, one of the most eminent leaders in Jewish history:

The Andalusian Jews ... assimilated into the Islamo-Arabic culture of the Umayyads and remained a devout and practicing religious community, with its religious language intact. Hasdai, growing up as a child of a prosperous (but not culturally unrepresentative) Jewish family, was thoroughly educated in two separate but complementary spheres: that of an observant Jew, learned in Hebrew and its biblical and exegetical traditions, in order that he might be at ease in the company of rabbis, or be a rabbi himself; and that of an intellectual at ease in the most cultivated Islamic society. Hasdai was a scion of a Jewish intellectual class so successfully assimilated within the sparkling Umayyad culture of al-Andalus that they had themselves become prominent contributors to it. These men were visible and significant participants in the flourishing of letters that, by the time Abd al-Rahman III was caliph and Hasdai his vizier, had made Cordoba as serious a contender as Baghdad, perhaps more so, for the title of the most civilized place on earth. (p. 86)

This political evolution within Jewish society served to integrate Sephardic Jewry into the world orbit. In contrast to the insular and hermetic culture of the Ashkenazim, a culture that still maintains great ambivalence with the idea of assimilation and integration into the universal order (and has, in its Zionist variant, been utterly baffled by the world of Islam), the Jews of al-Andalus, wonderfully mapped out by Maria Rosa Menocal, were able to develop a sophisticated culture that did not stint or sacrifice its Jewish orthodoxy.

In her recent lecture at Congregation Beth Torah sponsored by the Center for Sephardic Heritage, Professor Menocal framed her presentation of our Sephardic history with a little-known anecdote (repeated as well a couple of weeks back at a conference by Juan Goytisolo, the eminent Spanish novelist, a man who also has crucial and formative links to Medieval Andalusia) concerning the fate of the famous "Sarajevo" Haggadah, a book that is one of the most well-preserved icons of the old Sephardic world.

The story, found in the epilogue of *The Ornament of the World*, has to do with the care and love of a Muslim family

whose patriarch, a librarian in Sarajevo, had not only saved the precious Haggadah from the paws of the vicious Nazis, but had saved actual Jews from the harsh and unsparing fate of the Camps. Some half a century later, in yet another ethnic and religious bloodletting perpetrated by the Serbian heirs of Hitler and his Nazis, the Sarejevo Haggadah was saved once again – this time from the burning of the great library of Sarajevo, the final outpost of Islamic culture in a Europe that some 500 years after the Spanish Expulsion, had now become free of Semitic culture as it was known in Spain.

The daughter of the librarian had saved the Haggadah and held onto the letter of commendation given to her father by the government of Israel for his work during the Nazi blight. She and her family were spirited out of Milosovic's inferno by a caring Israeli family who had been touched by the tale and wanted to reciprocate the gesture of so many years ago. The Muslim Albanians found themselves living on an Israeli Kibbutz!

This story is not mere romance or illusion. The deep and abiding cultural ties between Jews and Muslims might be found in the classical texts of the Jewish rabbis such as Bahye ibn Paquda's Duties of the Heart, Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed and Se'adya Ga'on Book of Beliefs and Opinions, all of which are essential guides to Jewish belief and spirituality. The cultural ethos of the Sephardim is calibrated toward what we have termed the "Levantine Option," that sense of effusive liberality that has been encapsulated by the Arabic term *suffeh*, the largesse and sense of hospitality and manners that was the hallmark of our grandparents.

Professor Menocal's lecture was a shining moment in the ongoing project of reclaiming our past. Particularly in the current political climate of cultural exclusion and prejudice, a climate that has served to re-ghettoize Jews after centuries of progress to make their place in the larger world. The principles of tolerance and humanism, endemic to the Sephardic/Andalusian condition, echoed and resounded throughout her hour-long talk.

The effusiveness and liberality of the Hispano-Islamic civilization discussed by Professor Menocal, in keeping with the expansive ethos of our noble Sephardic heritage, the world of our progenitors, starkly contrasted with the new culture of abrasion and isolation that now holds sway in our community, an importation from the more limited vistas of the Ashkenazim who have rarely felt at home outside of their Jewish skins.

Those attending the lecture were captivated by the brilliance of Professor Menocal, and her deep and abiding concern and care for the preservation and articulation of our past. But the sparse turnout reflected the miniscule interest of our own community in its own past and identity.

For all of the blathering about progressive values within certain sectors of the community, there is precious little

concern for the deep and abiding intellectual values of the past. The relinquishing of our Sephardic identity has been disastrous for our own self-understanding and particularly for the self-image of our youth, a generation that is taught virtually nothing about who they are and where they come from.

The lecture was yet another attempt at self-definition that was ignored by the vast majority of educated people in our community, particularly those involved in education and communal service. The absence of any sense of engagement with Sephardic culture on the part of the pedagogical class in our community has led to the cultural and intellectual cul-de-sac we currently find ourselves in.

And even in the demeanor of some who came to the lecture, incredulous at the presentation of the superiority and splendor of the Sephardic past and its practical application to our present state, one could see the alienation from self that plagues our community.

Rather than develop a deep and abiding respect for who we are and where we have come from, many of our community leaders and intellectuals have chosen to continue to pay "lip service" to the idea of the Sephardic past, but in reality have become beholden to the dysfunctional Jewish present with its endemic prejudice and scandalous infighting. There is no real movement toward a clear and rational understanding of the fact that we have come from an illustrious culture and civilization that has spoken forcefully to many of the ills that have sadly overtaken us.

The presentation of Maria Rosa Menocal, for those who came to listen with an open mind, posited a culture that rose to the very height of the human endeavor. It is this culture that we have been trying to preserve and promote from within our own community, a community that languishes today with little of the moral or intellectual excellence of past generations.

David Shasha

From SHU 23, June 20, 2002

Restoring the Andalusian-Arabic Tradition in Western Civilization: An Homage to Maria Rosa Menocal

Maria Rosa Menocal, The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History: A Forgotten Heritage (Second Edition, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, First Published in 1987)

In the earlier part of the 20th century the study of Sephardic/Andalusian history and culture was a very important and valued part of Jewish and general studies. The seminal works of Harry Wolfson and S.D. Goitein

reconstructed a conceptual and historical Mediterranean universe that was filled with poetry, philosophy, economic and social advancement, and a great thirst for applying rational and scientific principles to the sacred traditions of the great monotheisms of the Classical period. Wolfson and Goitein produced important studies of Levantine culture and society that showed not a static and inert civilization, but a deeply learned and innovatively dynamic community of scholars and religious sages who spearheaded the great luminescence of the Arabic hegemony over knowledge and culture in the medieval world. Against those scholars who saw the term "Sephardic" as one which indicated Hispano-Christian Latinity, Goitein and Wolfson both well-understood that Sephardic meant, first and foremost, the Jewish ties to Arab-Levantine civilization.

The relationship of Arabic civilization and culture to what was termed the "Dark Ages" in Europe has been a deeply contentious issue that has served to create divisions and confusion in the study of Modern culture and its Renaissance and Enlightenment antecedents. The question remains, how exactly was it possible, as scholars have said, that the entire Greco-Roman patrimony was somehow "lost" for many centuries and then was "mysteriously" rediscovered at the time of the great Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries.

Were there no lines which could be seen as connecting the Classical world with the Renaissance of Dante, Petrarch and Cervantes?

How is it that the texts of Plato and Aristotle were missing from the Europe of the Dark Ages and then somehow all of a sudden emerge in the age of Aquinas?

Back in the late 1980's, a scholar of medieval Hispanic culture and literature teaching at the University of Pennsylvania attempted to provide answers to these questions in a groundbreaking and seminal work whose significance and importance has only increased over the years since its first edition.

The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History was one of the first books that I read in my long and arduous reclamation of my own cultural past. When I first read the book in 1990 – when it was re-issued in paperback – the book came to me as a startling revelation: Menocal had clearly showed, in the wake of Edward Said's arguments in his study *Orientalism*, that Jews and Arabs were written out of history by a Europe that wished to display its own achievements as being utterly and completely unique to its own civilization.

The polemic over Western civilization became quite acrimonious in the years that Said and Menocal were writing their books. After many centuries of Western imperialism and political hegemony over the Eastern world, the very idea that Arabic civilization could have formed a

bedrock platform upon which the Western culture was scaffolded was an idea that could not even be entertained. The great achievements of the massive efforts of the Sephardic Jews and Andalusian Arabs to translate and transmit humanist culture and philosophy were elided in favor of a new historical model which served to erase scholastic giants such as Moses Maimonides, Averroes, Ibn Hazm and many others who were associated with the creation of Arabic culture and civilization in its Golden Age.

This polemic was predicated upon a Eurocentrism that sought to erect false and misleading barriers between Renaissance and Enlightenment Europe which was seen as reconstructing the classical civilization of its Greco-Roman past with nary an antecedent other than its own grit and perseverance.

The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History is a book constructed along the lines of an argument that is predicated upon a close reading of poetry and poetic influence. Such an argument might appear esoteric and narrow until we come to realize that poetry was a lingua franca in the pre-modern world that corresponded to the popular culture of our own times. The emergence of an Arabic vernacular poetry in Spain in the form of the *zajal* and the *muwashshaha* created a popular and populist cachet that served as the rock and roll of its time (a theme that Menocal would explore in her *Shards of Love*, another great study of the glories of the Sephardic past).

Poetry, intrinsic to the emerging Sephardic/Andalusian culture, was something that, as Menocal skillfully shows, paved the way for the Courtly love poetry of the Renaissance in Europe. Prior to the absorption of this Arabic poetry, European culture produced an epic literature along the lines of *Beowulf* and the Arthurian canon. The development of the love lyric in the Troubadour tradition in France and Italy was an outgrowth of the love poetry that was written in Arab Andalusia:

I believe that we can justify a very different reading of the narrative of medieval Europe from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries. Our reading of that text would tell us a story rather different from the one we have grown up with of the role and the fate of the Arabs who became Europeans at that time but who never lost their own language or cultural patrimony. Our reading would note that at one time or another during the Middle Ages the intellectual and artistic centers of unconquered Christian Europe literally teemed with the activity sparked and fueled by continued contacts with al-Andalus and its material, cultural, and intellectual offspring. The parts of Europe never conquered by Islam were nevertheless strongly affected through the more complex, and often more compelling, mechanisms of cultural and intellectual imperialism.

We can understand that a Eurocentric approach to history and culture would seek to hide this notion of Arabic

influence. The idea that there is a monolithic Western civilization has been embedded within our general study and even within the parochial teaching of Jewish culture and history. Within the Jewish framework the idea that its traditions and its culture are uniformly and homogeneously Ashkenazic/European has been a new and dangerous standard that has served to eviscerate the very conceptual heart and the intellectual core of Jewish knowledge in both its scholastic as well as populist aspects.

The forced repression of the Sephardic/Andalusian model has had religious repercussions. Modern Judaism has adopted increasingly more and more obscurantist forms of behavior be it in its fundamentalist or its nationalist aspect. This Ashkenazi-based Judaism is one that has – like its Western counterpart – closed itself off from a pluralistic way of seeing its own origins and historical epistemologies. In the case of modern Judaism the suppression of the Sephardic paradigm has been a complete and unmitigated disaster; as Western culture seeks to open itself to new and multiple ways of seeing and interpreting its past as that past functions to service the present, Judaism is now beholden to reductive ways of dealing with its own history – serving to create new and often dangerous mentalities that cause fear, paranoia and an existential hermeticism that has caused to isolate Jews from the general culture at a time when that culture has turned expansive and pluralist.

After the publication of *The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History* a number of equally important landmark studies were published that took on many of the priorities of the Menocal book: Ammiel Alcalay's *After Jews and Arabs*, Ross Brann's *The Compunctious Poet*, and Victor Perera's *The Cross and the Pear Tree* all re-explored the richness of the Sephardic past in ways that served to put that culture on a firm footing for the contemporary age. The great series of historical novels by the Arab writer Amin Maalouf on aspects of the Andalusian and Arab world further provided evidence of this rich and varied culture. These books were enriched by the paperback reprinting of Goitein's *A Mediterranean Society* in 1999.

As Menocal points out in her new afterword to the book, 1992 saw the publication of a number of new studies that have illuminated the world of Muslim Spain. The most important of these, the two-volume anthology of scholarly essays edited by Salma Khadra Jayyusi called *The Legacy of Muslim Spain* has now been complemented by Menocal's own popular study *The Ornament of the World* and the masterful volume of scholarly essays edited by Michael Sells, Raymond Scheindlin and Ms. Menocal *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: The Literature of Al-Andalus*. In addition, we can point to the wonderful popular study released last year by Richard Rubenstein *Aristotle's Children* which bookends Professor Menocal's *Ornament*. The latter two books study the history of Muslim Spain as it relates to the emergence of the European Renaissance.

The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History was one of the most important books in my own intellectual formation. Its brilliantly formulated arguments restored the glory of the Sephardic/Andalusian past and provided a more scientific and reasonable foundation for our understanding of the richness and depth of Western civilization. Rather than giving in to the Eurocentric prejudice of much of Western scholarship, the book tore loose from the shackles of racism and obscurantism to reconstruct what in essence was "The World of Our Fathers"; a phrase that once signified the Yiddish roots of Jewish culture but in reality served a student such as myself to reconnect the lines that have anchored Jewish culture in the Middle East and Levant.

This seminal and brilliant book is the first chapter to a story that Menocal has completed with the publication of *The Ornament of the World*. She has told this epochal story with great fluidity and stylistic grace backed with a fierce critical and scholarly rigor. Her writing is a marvel of passion and fiery enthusiasm that sparks the reader to delve deeper into this brilliant and dazzling cultural universe where poets and philosophers were an innate and fundamental part of a humanistic culture that had not abandoned its traditional religious past, but served to exalt that past while blazing new paths in rationalism and scientific inquiry.

For those who seek models of thoughtful spirituality and enlightened religiosity, the writings of Maria Rosa Menocal are a beacon in a sea of darkness. Her sense of what we have repeatedly identified as "The Levantine Option" has made her in her own right a seminal figure in the ongoing struggle to reclaim our Mediterranean past at a time of great strife and confusion.

The Arabic Role in Medieval Literary History is a landmark of the first order and its republication is a cause for great joy and celebration. We will forever be in its debt.

From SHU 104, May 20, 2004

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Website

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