CHAPTER 1

From Expulsion to Revival

Any place reached by the king’s commandment and his decree, a great
mourning for the Jews. And there was great fear … unlike any since the
day of the exile of Judah from his land on foreign soil … and each one said
to the other: Let us be strong for our people and the Torah of our Lord,
from all blasphemer and libeler… We will not renege on our covenant …
We shall go in the name of the Lord our God. And they went powerless,
three hundred thousand marchers of the people to which I belong, from
youth to elderly, infants and women on the same day from all lands of the
king. Wherever the wind was blowing, they would go.

RABBI YITZHAK [ISAAC] ABRAVANEL, Commentary on the Prophets by Rabbi Isaac
Abravanel edited by Yehudah Shaviv, vol. 3, Kings (Jerusalem: Ḥorev, 5771-2010),
Introduction to the Book of Kings, 3 [Hebrew].

The Expulsion from Spain

On 31 March 1492, the Catholic Kings1 Fernando [Ferdinand] (1452–1516) and
Isabel [Isabella] (1451–1504) signed, in Granada – whose gates they had entered
at the end of a campaign against the last Muslim emirates on the soil of the
Iberian Peninsula – the expulsion order applying to all Jews in their countries.
This order was promulgated publicly only on 29 April 1492 and struck the Jews
in total surprise, out of the blue.2 The Jews were allowed a three-month

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1 This title of ‘Los Reyes Católicos’ was bestowed upon Fernando [Ferdinand] king of Aragón
and his wife Isabel [Isabella] queen of Castilla (Castile) by Pope Alexander VI Borgia (Borja)
in 1496 for their achievements in the war against the heretics.

2 On the expulsion from Spain, see A. Mirsky, A. Grossman, Y. Kaplan (eds.), Exile and Diaspora:
Studies in the History of the Jewish People Presented to Professor Haim Beinart on the Occasion
of His Seventieth Birthday (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute for the Study of the Jewish Communities
of the East, Yad Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1991) [Hebrew]; H.
Beinart (ed.), The Sephardi Legacy (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1992)
[Hebrew]; E. Kedourie, Spain and the Jews: The Sephardi Experience 1492 and After (London:
Thames and Hudson, 1992); R. Porter and S. Harel-Hushan, Odyssey of the Exiles: The Sephardi
extension, until the end of July 1492, during which they could convert to Christianity and continue living on the lands of the Catholic Kings. Whoever did not convert and held steadfast to his Jewishness was obliged to leave the country. Jewish tradition has noted that 31 July 1492 was Tisha Be’Av [Ninth of Av] – the date of the destruction of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar (586 BCE) and the date of the destruction of the Second Temple by Titus (70 CE). Actually, the last day of the Jews living on Spanish soil – was the seventh of Av; but Jewish national memory and tradition saw fit to make the expulsion and destruction of Spanish Jewry in 1492 comparable to the trauma of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

When the expulsion order came into force, it put an end to 1,500 years of Jewish presence on the Iberian Peninsula. This was not the first expulsion of the Jews in Europe in the Middle Ages: quite the contrary, this was one of the last, since the Jews had been ousted from England in 1291; from France in 1305 and 1394; and from various cities and principalities in Germany and Italy over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Yet, the expulsion from Spain differed from the previous ones: the Jews considered Spain a homeland. The general expulsion was the culmination of a harsh policy against the Jews imposed by the Catholic Kings from the 1480s: this is the opinion of the historian Ḥaim Beinart who considered the expulsion order the result of deliberate planning. The historian Maurice Kriegel maintains that the decision by the Catholic Kings to expel the Jews derived from their aspiration to put a halt to the inroads of the heresy through clandestine adherence to Judaism (judaizar) throughout their kingdom. The expulsion was the final means adopted by the rulers of the land so as to sever the network of familial and social relations, which had patently been maintained between Jews and apostate Jews who had

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