Jews in Portugal and the Beginnings of Polemical Literature

Despite the precariousness in which Jews lived in the rest of Western Europe, the situation of the Portuguese Jewish community was fairly peaceful until the eve of the forced conversion. Of course, this does not mean that Jews lived in Portugal on an equal footing with the rest of the population. Their permanence on Christian lands depended on the goodwill of sovereigns, to whom they were personal property, which explains the resignation with which Jews accepted their displacement and paid their heavy taxes. Tolerance of Judaism implied social and political exclusion, which severely restricted the range of activities they could perform. Jews ended up filling a gap in a society that largely consisted of farmers, warriors, and clerics, by working as traders or artisans and almost monopolizing the exercise of medicine. As a result, thanks to a policy of favour that was probably unique in the European context, few Portuguese cities and towns lacked a Jewish community at the end of the Middle Ages. Royal power, the nobility, and the high-ranking clergy protected and supported Jews for the services they provided as rentiers and tax collectors. However, this alienated them from the majority of the population. This animosity, which mixed religious and economic reasons, was fed by the preaching of Dominicans and Franciscans and by the impression of easy riches that came from what was actually a very precarious situation.

Despite some incidents during the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the situation of Portuguese Jews was enviable when compared to the extreme insecurity that had existed in neighbouring lands since 1391, where waves of forced conversion accompanied by massacres were repeated until the final expulsion of 1492. The ever more critical scenario of the Spanish kingdoms slowly undermined the equilibrium existing in Portugal. The establishment of

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the Castilian Inquisition in 1478 provoked the flight of the *conversos* to Portugal, while the expulsion of Jews from Spain fourteen years later caused an exodus of a total estimated at more than 83,000 people, of whom only a part received authorization to remain in Portugal upon the payment of a large sum of money. Badly received by the Portuguese, reduced to slavery, mistreated by those supposed to bring them to their final exile, and with their children being deported to the island of São Tomé, Spanish Jews ended up joining the Portuguese Jewish community. As a result, Jews accounted for approximately one tenth of the country’s population, a unique fact in the history of Western Christian states.

Regarding religious controversies and apologetic literature, when compared to what happened in the rest of Europe, once again it can be seen that exceptional calm reigned in Portugal at the end of the Middle Ages. In Paris (1240), Barcelona (1263), Tortosa and Sant Mateu (1413–1414), forced disputations increased anti-Jewish exaltation. In Portugal, on the other hand, the Crown appears to have prohibited said religious polemic, and Portuguese writings about the issue were rare. While Jewish converts to Catholicism (such as Pablo de Santa Maria and Jeronimo de Santa Fé) or Spaniards without Jewish origins (such as Nicolau de Lira and Alonso de Spina) wrote violent treatises against Jews, which ended up providing the foundations for the production of polemics in the following centuries, in Portugal only four treatises exist, which were, according to I.-S Révah, imbued with a particularly notable spirit of tolerance and moderation.²

The situation changed radically after the events in the final decade of the fifteenth century. Following the forced conversion in 1497, the barrier that had separated Jews from Christians in Portugal no longer existed. One result was that recent converts were able to hold civic and religious offices from which they had previously been excluded. This new competition, added to by the royal decree forbidding any investigation of the religious behaviour of the former Jews, only coalesced and exacerbated the ‘Old Christian’ feeling of the masses. At Lisbon, on April 1506, exalted by the preaching of mendicant monks, the people unburdened their envy and frustrations in what was the cruellest of massacres in the history of Portugal.³

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³ Regarding the 1506 massacre, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *The Lisbon Massacre of 1506 and the royal image in the “Shebet Yehudah”*, Cincinnati, Hebrew Union College Annual