When I was revising the Portuguese translation of Etty Hillesum’s letters,¹ I heard the echo of another writer I had read—a little known Portuguese Jewish writer and chronicler, Samuel Usque, the author of Consolaçam ás Tribulaçoens de Israel (‘Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel’). The book was edited in 1553 in Ferrara, Italy, and written at the time of the collapse of the high Jewish civilization in the Iberian Peninsula. In this work, Usque attempts to console his people during a chaotic period and to explain the reason for their tribulations. It is an account of Jewish history and an apology for Judaism.

We know little about the author’s life but the few facts we have reflect the Portuguese Jewish problem. The Jewish question in Portugal cannot be separated from that of the rest of the Iberian Peninsula. In order to contextualize Usque and his work, let us first have a look at the history of Iberian Jewry.

The Tribulations of Iberian Jewry

In 1492, the Spanish Catholic monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand, signed an edict banishing all Jews from their kingdoms. While the expulsion captured the imagination of posterity, it was only the beginning of an overwhelming catastrophe. At the time of the edict, some Spanish Jews decided to convert to Christianity but many crossed over into neighbouring Portugal where, upon payment, they were allowed to remain for eight months. At the end of this term, the number of

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ships leaving Portugal was deliberately limited and few Jews were able to leave the country. Those who could not leave were accused of having violated the entry agreement, and if they then refused to accept baptism were declared slaves. In the same year, children of Jews who refused baptism were taken from their parents and sent to the island of São Tomé, in the Gulf of Guinea, on the western coast of Africa. In 1495 King Manuel came to the throne. Initially, conditions improved and the enslaved Jews were set free. In 1496, however, the Portuguese king decided to marry the eldest daughter of the Spanish monarchs. The condition required by the Spanish Crown was that all heretics be expelled from Portugal—‘heretics’ being anyone not Catholic, including the Castilian conversos. King Manuel was aware that the elimination of an active and enterprising minority such as the Jews represented an economic and cultural impoverishment of the kingdom. There had been cooperation between Christians and Jews in the light of a growing conviction that the discovery of the sea route to India was near.2 Thus, King Manuel played a double game: in 1497, he forbade the Jews to leave the country and ordered a forced conversion. This conversion was singularly brutal. The contemporary historian, Maria José Ferro Tavares, claims that neither Jewish nor Portuguese chroniclers clearly captured the proceedings, as if “the shock and chaos of the event wiped out the specific memories of time and place.”3 In any case, after 1497 all Jews had suddenly become conversos. From then on, rabbinical academies were forbidden, as well as possession of books in Hebrew except medical books. The forced conversion did not prevent the converted Jews, or New Christians—who had to adopt Portuguese identities—from carrying the stigma of being false Christians. Always considered a group apart, they were forbidden to leave the country without a royal permit.4 They were accused of crypto-Judaism by the Old Christians who were suspicious of them and who called them by the derogatory name of marranos, ‘pigs.’ The frequent plague epidemics and other disasters were perceived by the Old Christians as a punishment for accepting them into Portuguese society. In April

2 In fact, Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route to India in 1498.