

Lecture 3: Synthesis and Dissolution—Ashkenaz and Sefarad at the Crossroads, 1200-1500

TEXTS

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1: LETTER TO THE DOMINICANS AND FRANCISCANS OF PARIS, Lateran Council, 20 June 1239

1 To the bishop and the prior of the Dominicans and the minister of the Franciscans in Paris:

2 If what is said about the Jews of France and of the other lands is true, no punishment
3 would be sufficiently great or sufficiently worthy of the crime. For they, so we have heard, are not
4 content with the old law which God set forth in writing through Moses; they even ignore it
5 completely and affirm that God set forth another law which is called “Talmud,” that is “Teaching,”
6 handed down by Moses orally. Falsely they allege that it was implanted within their minds and,
7 unwritten, was there preserved until certain men came, whom they call “Sages” and “Scribes.”

8 Fearing that this law might be lost from the minds of men through forgetfulness, they reduced it
9 to writing, and the volume of this far exceeds the text of the Bible. In this is contained matter so
10 abusive and so unspeakable that it arouses shame in those who mention it and horror in those who
11 hear it.

12 Wherefore, since this is said to be the chief cause that hold the Jews obstinate in their
13 perfidy, we, through apostolic letters, order you to have the Jews who live in the kingdoms of
14 France, England, Aragon, Navarre, Castile, Leon and Portugal forced by the secular arm to give up
15 their books. Those books in which you will find errors of this sort you shall cause to be burned at
16 the stake. You will silence all opponents through use of ecclesiastical censure without right of
17 appeal. You will also report to us faithfully what you have done in this matter. But, should all of
18 you be unable to be present at the fulfillment of these instructions, someone of you, nonetheless,
19 shall carry out its execution.

Source: Robert Chazan, *Church, State, and Jew in the Middle Ages* (New York: Behrman House, 1979), pp. 223-224.

2: The Disputation of Barcelona, Hebrew account by Ramban

Source: Chavel, ed. and trans.

1 Our lord the king commanded me to discuss with Fray Paul in his [and his counsellors']
2 presence in his [royal] palace in Barcelona. I replied, saying, "I shall do according to the command
3 of my lord the king [only] if you will permit me to speak freely, and for this I desire the permission
4 of the king and the leave of Fray Ramon de Penyafort and his colleagues who are here."

5 Fray Ramon (de Penyafort) answered, "[Permission is granted] with the proviso that you
6 do not say anything objectionable [to our faith]."

7 I said to them, "I do not wish to enter with you in a discussion about this [entire matter].
8 However, in the course of the disputation, I must be free to speak [my mind] just as you are free to
9 speak whatever you wish. [Of course], I have [sufficient] knowledge of good taste [so that I will]
10 not overstep the bounds thereof, but I must have freedom of speech." They all gave me leave to
11 speak freely.

12 Thus, I began by saying, “[Previous] disputations between gentiles and Jews concerned
13 many facets of religious observances upon which the fundamental principle of faith is not
14 dependent. However, in this royal court, I wish to debate only about matters upon which the
15 entire controversy is contingent.”

16 They all replied, saying, “You have spoken well.” Thus, we agreed to speak first on the
17 subject of the Messiah, [this is], whether he had already come, which is the belief of the
18 Christians, or was still to come, which is the belief of the Jews. Afterwards, we would discuss
19 whether the Messiah is really G-d or is really mortal, born of a man and a woman. We would then
20 discuss that the Jews hold the true Torah, or whether the Christians fulfill it.

21 Frat Paul commenced by asserting the he would prove from our Talmud that the Messiah,
22 whom the prophets foretold, had already come.

23 I retorted, “Before we debate on this [point], I wish that he would teach me and inform me
24 how it is possible [to prove his assertions from the Talmud.] I have heard that while Fray [Paul]
25 traveled in Provence and many [other] places, he made a similar statement to many Jews, at which
26 I am very much amazed. He should me [now] whether he intends to state that the Sages of the
27 Talmud believed that the Nazerene was the Messiah and that they further believed that he was
28 [both] an actual [mortal] man and a true diety, which is the opinion of the Christians...

29 [Fray Paul] then began, “Behold, Scripture states, *The scepter shall not depart from Judah,*
30 *etc., until ‘Shiloh’ cometh* [Genesis 49:10].” [The word *Shiloh*] refers to the Messiah. The prophet
31 [Jacob] is thus saying that Judah will always retain power until the Messiah will come from him. If
32 so, since you have neither one tribe nor a ruler’s staff today, the Messiah who is of his descendants
33 and who has the rulership must have already come.

34 I replied, “The purpose of the prophet [Jacob] is not to state that the kingdom of Judah
35 will never be devoid of power at any time [until the advent of the Messiah]. Rather, he is saying
36 that [power] will never be removed from him completely. The intent thereof is that as long as
37 kingship continues in Israel, it belongs to Judah. If their kingdom will be [temporarily]
38 discontinued because of sin, [the kingship] will return to [the tribe of] Judah [when it will
39 ultimately be restored]. The proof for my words is that for many years, before the Nazarene, Judah,
40 not Israel had been divested of royalty, and for many years, monarchy ceased both in Israel and in
41 Judah, because in the seventy years during which [the Jews] were exiled to Babylon, there was no
42 royalty whatsoever in either Judah or Israel. During [the era of] the Second Temple, there was no
43 king over Judah except for Zerubbabel and his sons, who ruled only a short period of time. The
44 people then remained [without a king] for 380 years, during which time the priests of the House
45 of the Hasmoneans and their servants [the Herodians] ruled, until the destruction [of the Second
46 Temple]. Certainly, now, when the people are in exile, [they have no ruler from Judah], for if there
47 is not people [with their own homeland], there is no king.

48 Fray Paul answered, “Although the Jews had no kings during all those times, they
49 nevertheless had men of authority [who were descendants of the House of David]. Thus did they
50 interpret in the Talmud: ‘*The sheivet (scepter) shall not depart from Judah.*’ This alludes to the
51 Exilarchs in Babylon, who ruled the people with the *sheivet* (rod). [The verse continues], *nor the*
52 *ruler’s staff from between his feet.* This alludes to the descendants of Hillel who teach Torah in public
53 [in the Land of Israel]. Today, however, you have no such ordination as it was known in [the era
54 of] the Talmud, and that authority [of the Exilarch] has ceased. Today, therefore, no one has the
55 right to call himself ‘Rabbi.’ Their calling you ‘*Maestro*’ (Master) is a mistake, and you are using
56 that title falsely.”

57 I answered scoffingly, “This matter is not among [those agreed upon for] disputation,
58 Nevertheless, you are not saying the truth. ‘Rabbi’ is not the rendition of ‘*Maestro*’; ‘Rav’ is
59 identical with *Maestro*, and in the Talmud, [scholars] are called ‘Rav’ [even] without ordination.
60 However, I will agree that I am neither a Master nor even a proficient scholar.” I said this [last] by
61 way of good taste, and I returned [to the matter at hand] saying to him, “I will inform you that our
62 Rabbis of blessed memory intended to explain the verse, [*The scepter shall not depart from Judah,*
63 etc.], only with regard to real kingship. However, you do not understand law and statute except for
64 the few homilies with which you have accustomed yourself..”

3: The *Zohar*, trans. Daniel C. Matt, selections.

1 *Beresbit*, “In the beginning” (Genesis 1:1): At the beginning of the authority of the King,
2 He engraved engravings in luster on high. A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the
3 concealed of the concealed, from the beginning of Infinity (*Ein Sof*)—a cluster of vapor forming in
4 formlessness, thrust in a ring, not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all. As a cord
5 [or spectrum] surveyed, it yielded radiant colors. Deep within the spark gushed a flow, splaying
6 colors below, concealed within the concealed of the concealed of the mystery of Infinity (the *Ein*
7 *Sof*). It split and did not split its aura, was not known at all, until under the impact of splitting, a
8 single, concealed, supernal point shone. Beyond that point, nothing is known, so it is called *Reshit*,
9 *Beginning*, first commandment of all.

10 “The enlightened will shine like the radiance (*zohar*) of the sky, and those who lead many
11 to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever” (Daniel 12:3). *Zohar*, Radiance! Concealed of
12 concealed struck its aura, which touched and did not touch this point. Then this *beginning* (*reshit*)
13 expanded, building itself a palace worthy of glorious praise. There it sowed seed to give birth,
14 availing worlds. The secret is: “Her stock is seed of holiness” (Isaiah 6:13).

Source: Daniel C. Matt, ed. and trans., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 1 (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004).

4: GENERAL ORDER OF EXPULSION, King Edward I of England, 1290

1 Edward, etc., to the treasurer and barons of the Exchequer, greetings:

2 Whereas our parliament held at Westminster on the quindene of Saint Michael [15 days after the
3 festival of St. Michael, counting the day of the festival] in the third year of our reign [October 13,
4 1275], we, moved by solicitude for the honor of God and the well-being of the people of our
5 realm, did ordain and decree that no Jew should thenceforth lend to any Christian at usury upon
6 security of lands, rents, or aught else, but that they should live by their own commerce and labor;
7 and whereas the said Jews did thereafter wickedly conspire and contrive a new species of usury
8 more pernicious than the old, which contrivance they have termed *curialitas* [ostensibly a gift but
9 actually a subterfuge for usury], and made use of the specious devise to the abasement of our said
10 people on every side, thereby making their last offense twice as heinous as the first; therefore we, in
11 requital of their crimes and for the honor of the crucified, have banished them from our realm as
12 traitors. We, being minded in nowise to swerve from our former intent, but rather to follow it, do
13 hereby make totally null and void all penalties and usuries and whatsoever else in those kinds may
14 be claimed on account of the Jewry by actions at what time soever arising against any subjects of
15 our realm. Being minded that nothing may in any wise be claimed from the said Christians on
16 account of the said debts except only the principal sums which they have received from the said
17 Jews, we decree that the said Christians do verify the amount before you by the oath of three true
18 and lawful men, by whom the truth of the matter may the better be known, and thereafter pay the
19 amount to us at such convenient times as may be determined by you. And to that intent we
20 command you that you cause this our grace so benevolently to be read, and to be enrolled in the
21 said Exchequer, and to be strictly observed, according to the form above indicated.

22 *Written myself at King's Clipstone, 5 November, in the 18th year of our reign [1290]*

Source: Chazan, *Church, State and Jew in the Middle Ages*, pp. 318-319.

5: ACCOUNT OF THE EXPULSION FROM CASTILE-ARAGON, 1492

1 And in the year 5252 [1492], in the days of King Ferdinand, the Lord visited the remnant
2 of his people a second time [the first Spanish visitation was 1391], and exiled them. After the King
3 had captured the city of Granada from the Muslims, and it had surrendered to him on the 7th [2nd]
4 day of January of the year just mentioned, he ordered the expulsion of all the Jews in all parts of his
5 kingdom—in the kingdoms of Castile, Catalonia, Aragon, Galicia, Majorca, Minorca, the Basque
6 provinces, the islands of Sardinia and Sicily, and the kingdom of Valencia. Even before that the
7 Queen had expelled them from the kingdom of Andalusia [1483].

8 The king gave them three months' time in which to leave. It was announced in public in
9 every city on the first of May, which happened to be the 19th day of the Omer, and the term ended
10 on the day before the Ninth of Av.

11 About their number there is no agreement, but, after many inquiries, I found that the most
12 generally accepted estimate is 50,000 families, or, as others say, 53,000 [This would be about
13 250,000 persons.] They had houses, fields, vineyards, and cattle, and most of them were artisans.
14 At that time there existed many [Talmudic] academies in Spain, and at the head of the greatest of
15 them was Rabbi Isaac Aboab in Guadalajara. Rabbi Isaac Veçudo in Leon, and Rabbi Jacob Habib
16 in Salamanca. In the last named city there was a great expert in mathematics, and whenever there
17 was any doubt on mathematical questions in the Christian academy of that city they referred them
18 to him. His name was Abraham Zacuto...

19 In the course of the three months' respite granted them they endeavored to effect an
20 arrangement permitting them to stay on in the country, and they felt confident of its success... The

21 agreement permitting them to remain the country on the payment of a large sum of money was
22 almost completed when it was frustrated by the interference of a prior who was called the Prior of
23 Santa Cruz... But the time had become short, and they had to hasten their exodus from Spain.
24 They sold their houses, their landed estates, and their cattle for very small prices, to save
25 themselves. The King did not allow them to carry silver and gold out of his country, so that they
26 were compelled to exchange their silver and gold for merchandise of cloths and skins and other
27 things.

28 One hundred and twenty thousand of them went to Portugal, according to a compact
29 which a prominent man, Don Vidal bar Benveniste del Cavalleria, had made with the King of
30 Portugal, and they paid one ducat for every soul, and the fourth part of all the merchandise they
31 had carried hither; and he allowed them to stay in his country six months. This King acted much
32 worse toward them than the King of Spain, and the after the six months had elapsed he made
33 slaves of all those that remained in his country, and banished seven hundred children to a remote
34 island to settle it, and all of them died...

35 Many of the exiled Spaniards went to Islamic countries, to Fez, Tlemçen, and the Berber
36 provinces. On account of their large numbers the Muslims did not allow them into their cities, and
37 many of them died in the fields from hunger, thirst, and lack of everything... Many ships with
38 Jews, especially from Sicily, went to the city of Naples on the coast. The King of this country was
39 friendly to the Jews, received them all, and was merciful towards them, and he helped them with
40 money... On account of their large number, all this was not enough. Some of them died by famine,
41 other sold their children to Christians to sustain their life. Finally, a plague broke out among
42 them, spread to Naples, and very many of them died, so that the living were wearied of burying the
43 dead.

44 Part of the exiled Spaniards went over sea to Turkey... A few of the exiles were dispersed in
45 the countries of Italy, in the city of Ferrara, in the [papal] countries of Romagna, the March, the
46 Patrimonium, and in Rome...

Source: *The Jew in the Medieval World*, pp. 59-64.

6: HANHAGOT (PIOUS CUSTOMS) OF THE ARI

1 Melancholia is, by itself, an exceedingly unpleasant quality of personality, particularly in the
2 case of an individual whose intention is to acquire esoteric knowledge and experience the Holy
3 Spirit. There is nothing which impedes mystical inspiration—even for someone who is otherwise
4 worthy of it—as much as the quality of sadness.

5 Additionally, the quality of anger, aside from serving as an obstacle to mystical inspiration
6 altogether, [has other injurious repercussions]. My teacher, of blessed memory, used to be more
7 exacting when it came to anger than with all other transgressions, even in a situation where a
8 person loses his temper for the sake of some religious obligations... This is because all other
9 transgressions “injure” only a single limb of the body whereas the quality of anger “injures” the soul
10 in its entirety, altering its character completely. This is the issue: when an individual loses his
11 temper, his holy soul deserts him altogether; in its place a spirit of an evil person enters. And this
12 is the esoteric meaning behind the verse: “You who tear yourself to pieces in anger...” (Job 18:4).
13 For such a person actually tears his holy soul, rendering it unfit at the moment of his wrath and
14 anger...”

15 [On Shabbat:] These were the practices of my teacher, of blessed memory: as soon as he
16 had finished the morning service on Friday, he would walk to the synagogue or to his house of
17 study. If there was a proper Torah scroll there, he would remove it from the Ark and read the
18 portion for the coming Shabbat, twice in Hebrew and once in Aramaic translation. He used to read

19 the Hebrew from the Torah scroll and he had a certain student who would read the Aramaic
20 translation after him from a book in which it was found. My teacher would recite the Aramaic out
21 loud, following the student's reading. He would adopt this procedure, verse by verse, until he had
22 completed the portion. ...

23 After having read the portion he would ritually immerse himself in the preparation for
24 Shabbat...He used to say that having read the portion an individual already possessed the power
25 with which to receive the extra sanctity of Shabbat. And therefore, he desisted from immersing
26 himself before reading the portion...

27 Know that an individual must immerse himself twice in a row, first for the purpose of
28 divesting his soul of weekday "garments," and the second time in order to honor Shabbat and
29 receive extra holiness. ...When you climb out of the ritual bath avoid drying yourself off with a
30 towel so as to permit the body to absorb the Shabbat's waters.

Source: Lawrence Fine, *Safed Spirituality: Rules of Mystical Piety, the Beginning of Wisdom*, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), pp. 65; 74.