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Yom Tov Assis. *The Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry: Community and Society in the Crown of Aragon, 1213-1327.* London and Portland, Ore.: Littman, 1997. xvi + 380 pp. $69.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-874774-04-4.

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This work by Assis, along with its companion volume (*Jewish Economy in the Medieval Crown of Aragon, 1213-1327*, Brill 1997), constitutes the most thorough and in-depth analysis we have to date of Aragonese Jewry of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As a humanist, and not an economist, I must confess I find the volume on community and society the more enjoyable of the two, since it shows glimpses of the human faces of this fascinating period: the leadership and greed of the wealthy, the frustration of the poor, the acts of criminals and adulterers, and the efforts of generous individuals to establish charitable funds and care for the sick and dying, just to name a few of the mini-portraits in the book.

Assis's book covers the reigns of Jaime I (1213-76), Pedro III (1276-85), Alfonso III (1285-91), and Jaime II (1291-1327) and is composed of six parts: legal and political conditions, Jewish self-government, inter-communal relations, the Jewish quarter, Jewish society, and religious life. The text is complemented by useful maps showing the extent of the crown of Aragon and all of the major Jewish communities in it, appendices explaining the monetary system in the Crown of Aragon and showing a family tree of the monarchs during this period, a glossary defining non-English terms, and a bibliography.

The first three parts concern the political situation of the Jews of Aragon. Assis makes very clear, here and throughout the book, the complex, delicately-balanced, symbiotic relationship between the kings of Aragon and the Jews. In Part One, Assis explains the interdependence of the two. The Jews provided services and money to the crown; in exchange, the King provided a wide range of charters and privileges to the Jewish aljamas (communities). These privileges regulated taxes, subsidies, and other payments and also granted the Jews the freedom to live their lives according to Jewish law and with a certain amount of security. Among the privileges the Aragonese Jews received–for a fee–were the following: the right to maintain a communal government and appoint its officers, to maintain a Jewish cemetery, not to be imprisoned in the synagogue, to have Jewish prisoners kept within the juderia, to repair a synagogue, to take a particular oath in court, to slaughter and sell kosher meat. The Jews were, of course, considered the king's property, and other charters concerned their physical safety and the behavior of Christians in the juderia. The king tried to limit strictly the Church's influence over the Jews, but his control in this arena declined steadily during the fourteenth century, as evidenced by the pogroms of 1391.

Part Two explains the system of self-government in the Crown of Aragon. Assis makes an admirable attempt to clarify the terminology used for the Jewish administrators–variously known as berurim/muqademin/ne'emanim in Hebrew and adelantados/secretarios in Aragonese–yet the distinctions are still fuzzy to the reader. He emphasizes that although the Jewish leaders had broad control over their communities, this very power was granted to them by the king, who thus undermined their authority. The king often stepped in to settle appeals, disputes, and the pleas of individuals who felt they were receiving unfair treatment. After describing the tradition of "aristocratic oligarchy" that ruled the aljama (p. 76), Assis goes on to trace the protests of the poor Jews, who struggled to gain representation in the communal government. It is a welcome change to read about the different socio-economic classes among the Jews, since many histories could leave the unaware reader with the impression that all Jews were wealthy.

Part Three describes the loose systems of inter-communal cooperation. The County of Barcelona was subdivided into four collectas for tax-collection purposes. In other words, the smaller aljamas submitted their taxes to the largest aljama in their region–Barcelona, Gerona, Lerida, or Tortosa–and these communities acted on their behalf in interactions with the king and his representatives. Aragon and Valencia had even less inter-communal cooperation.

Throughout the discussion of the Jews' political situa-

tion in the first three sections, Assis shows that although the kings' policies toward the Jews seem very inconsistent, there was in fact a guiding principle behind them: the king acted according to his own self-interest. Certain actions seem inconsistent at times because what was in the king's best interest sometimes was, but other times was not, in the best interest of a Jewish individual or community. The kings understood that their own well-being–particularly financial–depended in no small part on the financial well-being of their Jews. Thus, for example, the kings often demanded additional subsidies from the Jews in order to finance a Reconquest battle. Such a move was good for their own coffers, but detrimental to the Jewish community. When such subsidies became overwhelming to the communities, and the Jewish leaders complained to the king, the king readily reduced his demands and eased the terms of payment, thus maintaining the peace and economic stability of the community. In order to retain this important source of money and services, the king needed to keep the Jews relatively happy and free to carry on their Jewish lives. Both the royal decrees and the royal exemptions from them served the same end.

The second half of the book focuses on the social, as opposed to political, life of the Aragonese Jews. Section Four explains the basic elements of the Jewish quarter: the synagogue, the slaughterhouse, the bakery, and the cemetery. In Part Five, Assis describes a number of aspects of daily life, including the charitable confraternities established by lower and middle class Jews, rituals around marriage and family, and moral conduct, including the high level of crime in the juderias and problems such as gambling and prostitution.

The last section discusses the clash between two major trends of Jewish thought: the Maimonideans or rationalists, and the tossafists, or those following Franco-German traditions. Unfortunately Assis does not make sufficiently clear the differences between the two groups, and the reader unfamiliar with these groups will be left without a clear sense of the content or significance of the debate. Assis also points out that the community had the right to monitor religious practice and punish offenders.

Although Assis makes an effort to recognize the existence of different classes and individuals in the Jewish community, *Aragonese Jewry* often fails to give an overall sense of "what life was like" during these centuries. This weakness, however, is due to no fault in Assis's scholarship–to the contrary, his research is meticulous, and surely tedious at times–but rather to the nature of the documents themselves. Even archival resources as rich as those of Aragon/Catalonia can never give us a complete vision of medieval life. Particularly in the last three parts of the book, we are faced with a fascinating and tantalizing pastiche of individual anecdotes. Due to the nature of human record keeping, we learn only about the problems, the exceptions, the conflicts, the crimes. Assis is aware that the documents at his disposal do not discuss the true daily life "of ordinary and well-behaved Jews, simple and hard-working craftsmen, loving husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, friends and neighbors"; rather, we learn "of thieves, rapists, prostitutes, men of violence, and the like" (p. 279). We can never truly know what an "average" Aragonese was like.

Despite the inevitable gaps in the sources, it becomes clear that in some cases the same individuals were at the same time men of wisdom and men of selfishness; a few are mentioned as both communal leaders and those accused of crimes. This information requires us to revise our idealistic image of the medieval Iberian Jew. In this sense, Assis has succeeded in presenting a more complex portrait of the Aragonese Jews: men of great intellectual, political, and economic power, and also mere men, with ambitions and jealousies, wives and families. The phrasing of the previous sentence points out another gap–in the documents, not the research–women. Since their power was little, they merited few mentions in the royal and religious texts.

Aragonese Jewry is a wide-ranging and, wherever possible, in-depth study. Its conclusion, however, does not live up to the breadth of material; rather, it highlights the Maimonidean conflict as evidence of the "intellectual giants" produced in the Crown of Aragon, such as R. Judah Gerondi, R. Moshe ben Nahman (Nachmanides), and R. Shelomo ben Adret. Given Assis's emphasis throughout on giving equal attention to the lower and upper class Jews, it is surprising that the conclusion does not summarize more satisfactorily the role and importance of the lower class during this time period.

Assis's volumes are a welcome addition to earlier studies on Iberian Jews, such as those by Abrahams, Amador de los Rios, Baer, Motis Dolader, Neuman, and Regne, among others. Most of the documents on which Assis bases his narrative are not widely accessible, and much less so in English, so this book provides huge quantities of new facts for all those interested in medieval Aragonese Jewry. The primary question I am left with is to what extent the situation of the Aragonese Jews can be generalized to that of the Castilian Jews or those of other

kingdoms. Several times Assis mentions the similarity of the Aragonese Jews and other communities (pages 77, 140, 155, 211, 315 mention instances in which Aragon was similar to Castile), yet on other occasions he specifically states that the Aragonese Jews were unique (e.g., "Jewish society in the Crown of Aragon developed characteristics that distinguished it from the rest of Iberian Jewry," p. 237). He notes both similarities and differences when he writes, "[d]espite their political, social, and economic differences, and even some religious variations, the Jews of the Hispanic kingdoms of Castile and Leon, Navarre and Portugal, Aragon and Catalonia were united by their common broad cultural and religious Judeo-Arabic heritage, which we may conveniently call Sephardi" (p. 300). Although he also points out that the Aragonese were much more influenced than the Castilians by the Ashkenazi Jews of France and Germany, it would appear that the Jews identified more strongly as Jews than as members of a particular region or kingdom.

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