REPRESENTING HISPANO-JEWISH AND SEPHARDIC MATERIAL CULTURE IN SPAIN[1]

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On occasion of the celebration of Spain's national day, last October 12, 2017, I decided to visit the exhibition *The Power of the Past: 150 Years of Archaeology in Spain*, at the National Archaeological Museum (MAN) in Madrid. The display of 150 pieces assembled from different regional museums, was aimed at representing the variegated material heritage emerging from archaeological excavations across Spain since the Museum was founded in 1867. One basic underlying concept in the exhibition was the centrality of the land –the peninsula and the islands– as a crossroads of divergent cultures once established therein, and the objects were chosen to represent them. At a sombre and isolated corner towards the end of the exhibition, and following the item selected to represent the Canary Islands, I noticed a display glass case containing two different sets of objects aimed at representing a new research field: Jewish medieval archaeology. It seemed to me that the exhibition's curator felt the need to include some Jewish items, but doing it as a result of a last-minute urge he/she did not accompany it with a suitable explanation. Paradoxically, and perhaps unintentionally, the location of the glass cases contributed to enhance a sensation of seclusion within the exhibition that did not at all fit with the historical narrative of Spain's medieval Jews, dominated by some preconceived notions, buzzwords such as *Convivencia* –a term originated in the early twentieth-century.

As a historian by training for whom textual evidence provides, among other elements, the framework for an object's interpretation, I tried to inquire about the lack of an adequate contextualization of the chosen items to represent Jewish material culture: the first was a set of four silver platters from Briviesca, a town northeast of Burgos, found during excavation work at the old Jewish quarter destroyed in 1366. This background, and the fact that a hexagram was engraved on the platters surface, had

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been considered enough to display them previously in temporary exhibitions as part of a Passover service (!!). A tiny inscription in Latin script engraved on the back, though, would suggest that the set had originally been made for, and owned by, Christians. We could assume, only hypothetically, that the platters found their way into Jewish hands after being pawned. It is pertinent to raise the question here of **what makes an (or not so-) ordinary object Jewish?** With the exception of a limited typology of Jewish ceremonial objects, a Jewish home was not substantially different from a non-Jewish one, in the past just like it is today, as evidenced by inventories preserved. It is the social use rather than the object's physical form or the manufacturer's initial intention which dictates meaning.

The second object displayed, two reconstructed synagogal lamps, was no less remarkable. They came from the archaeological site of the Lorca castle, in the south-eastern region of Murcia that has been under excavation since 2003, in order to make way for a *Parador*, a national state-run hotel to be built on the hill where written sources locate the medieval Jewish quarter. Despite the fact that no explicit Jewish element was found there, archaeologists were able to identify the ground floor layout of Jewish homes and a synagogue. Among the findings, there was a collection of over two-thousand tiny glass fragments, which through a painstaking and costly restauration process succeeded in re-creating over twenty glass lamps that, according to archaeologists, "were suspended from the ceiling of the synagogue."

Whether the selection was representative of the Jewish past is a basic question that sheds light on the challenge posed by the need of representing the material culture of the Jews, especially when ordinary objects are bereft of any further explanation. The dilemma is not new, and leads us to the problem of **the representation of the (medieval)** Hispano-**Jewish culture** –the emphasis has been traditionally put on the term preceding the hyphen– **and of the (re-)integration of the Jewish social and cultural experience**, as result of the alleged anomaly in Spanish history within the European context, namely, the absence (at least, hardly perceptible presence) of Jews throughout the early modern and modern periods as well into the mid-nineteenth century. I say "alleged," because, on the one hand, Jews did not suddenly disappear after 1492-98 –many converted in order to remain–, and underground migratory

flows, in and out Spain and Portugal, persisted for over one century and a half. On the other hand, Spain's Golden Age culture did not ignore Jews, as the phantom Jew came to gradually replace the flesh-and-blood Jew.

Retrieving the Past: Politics of Display

The *Museo Sefardí* ("Sephardi Museum") in Toledo was established in 1964, and after some halting beginnings inaugurated in 1971 as the "Spanish National Museum of Jewish History and Culture." I want to dwell for a moment on the circumstances of its creation, by quoting a passage of the decree through which it was founded, since to a large extent this is the basis of the historical construct behind the current display and has served as a model for other exhibitions elsewhere in Spain:

> […] The interest featured by the history of the Jews in our country is twofold: if, on the one hand, its study is appropriate for an adequate knowledge of Spanish culture, given the age-old presence of the Jewish people in Spain, it is also indispensable for the latter's culture and history, as result of the assimilation of the Hispanic genius and mind that part of their families experienced during a long period of coexistence. If we ignore this, the various facets displayed by the Sephardic personality in the different communities where they settled throughout the diaspora cannot be understood.
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> In the desire to keep and to strengthen the ties that for centuries have linked the Sephardic [Jews] to Spain, it seems exceptionally opportune to establish a Museum dedicated to bearing witness of the Hebrew-Spanish culture. Towards this end, there is no more adequate framework than the revered site of Samuel Leví's Synagogue, today known as El Tránsito Synagogue, in Toledo, [that] like no other city in Spain [is] imbued with Hebrew elements [...].[2]

On the one hand, this passage states that Spanish culture and history cannot be understood without taking into account Sephardic Jews who, in turn, have assimilated "Hispanic genius and mind." The claim was not new, and parallel statements were advocated by, among others, the unlikely conservative German-Jewish writer Máximo

[2] *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (State Gazette), April 11, 1964, p. 4560 (decree no. 874/1964).

José Kahn, who settled in Toledo in the 1920s.[3] On the other hand, there is a desire to strengthen the ties taken for granted between two different parties, Sephardic Jews and Spain. Toledo, a place where "Hebrew" elements were so conspicuous, stands in as a synecdoche for the centuries-long Sephardic experience.

Let's analyse the two premises referred to previously by taking a look at the historical background, at a time when the word "Sephardi" was more acceptable than "Jew" –that (very often) had a pejorative connotation: in the late 1950s, Franco's authoritarian regime was trying to move forward in the international stage, and Sephardic Jews were seen as a suitable asset. Another compelling motivation was the Catholic Church's increasing openness toward the Jews in advance of the celebration of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Some landmark events bear witness to this: in 1959 the National Library of Spain hosted a World Sephardi Bibliographical Exhibition; and one year later, the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) established a short-lived Institute of Sephardic Studies, headed by a Spanish Jew –at this early stage, Jews were only exceptionally seen as stakeholders since Jewish communal life was not recognized by the State until 1968–, that fostered the celebration in June 1964 of a Symposium of Sephardic Studies in Madrid.

At the time the Sephardi Museum opened its doors, it could boast a magnificent building (national monument since 1877) and a few significant items gathered on permanent loan from other museum collections. However, in the absence of any prior public or private Judaica collection tradition in Spain, the need to structure the contents arose. Then, it is necessary to ask who was telling whose story, to whom, and why?

The departure point was a narrative –that predated the Museum's establishment– aimed at revealing the ways in which Sephardic Jews had been immersed in Spanish culture, and rooted in a century-old construction process of a modern "Sephardic" identity that conceived them as diasporic Spaniards with a rather loose Jewish personality. At the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, and following in

[3] In his early American exile he claims that "El judaísmo sefardita no es solo una de las creaciones que han salido del magno molde hispánico, sino, recíprocamente, también una de las matrices que han ido formando la existencia española," see *Apocalipsis hispánica* (México: Editorial América, 1942), 147.

the steps of other western powers, some Spanish politicians and intellectuals had fostered the idea of Sephardic Jews in both the western Maghreb and the eastern Mediterranean as economic and cultural agents, through a dialogue which led the latter to be seen as custodians of immutable centuries-long Spanish traditions and language. In parallel, there was growing interest in ethnography and folk heritage studies on the part of conservative philo-Sephardic publicists, Hebraists, and Hispanic studies scholars all imbued with a pan-Hispanic approach. Back at home, the shared coexistence of Jews, Christians, and Moslems in the distant past was perceived as an exotic touch that enhanced the early development of tourism beginning in the second decade of the twentieth century.

That narrative, preserved with slight changes in the museum display, is a seamless fifteen-century-long continuum linking the lands of the Bible with the Jewish presence in a given region, modern-day Spain, –regardless of the fact that the history of the Jews does not evolve around the same geography– under disparate dominations, and leading teleologically to the expulsion(s). The many gaps and anomalies in the fragmentary history of the Jews in Spain and the Hispanic world are hidden, or worse still, artificially filled, and, as if by magic, the story re-emerges in the modern Sephardic Mediterranean diaspora. Questions regarding cultural and linguistic identities, or historical breaks and continuities are not addressed, and no space is set aside for showing Jewish subcultures and multi-ethnicity. To give just one example: Throughout the fourteenth century, Toledo was the home of halakhic (religious legal) authorities that upon their arrival did not speak the native languages, as in the case of the Cologne-born rabbi Ašer b. Yeḥiel (d. 1327) and his children, being preceded by the Catalan Yona Girondi. Later on, it was the case of the scion of a French Jewish family, Menaḥem b. Zeraḥ (author of a popular halakhic manual), and fragments of whose tombstone can still be contemplated in the museum's Garden of Memory. But no explanation is given on how it was possible for them to climb into the religious élite of a bilingual (decreasing) Arabic and (growing) Ibero-Romance vernacular local Jewish society.

When entering the museum, one has to consider:

a) The exclusively designed and magnificently decorated building that needs absolutely nothing else, but a contextual museographic explanation, in order to avoid the subjugation of the visitors' attention, misleading them into thinking that all medieval synagogues in Castile were like this one[4] (just as medieval churches are not like the Sainte-Chapelle). Jewish synagogal-centred life may fit well within a pre-modern conception of ~~a~~ Jewish society and would contribute to emphasize a twofold archaeological and aesthetic approach to Jewish experience. Also exceptional is its Moresque decorative style, imported from Nasrid (Moslem) Grenade with the aim of addressing a Jewish, and maybe Christian, audience with a political message: the royal alliance between a powerful King and his court-Jew, Samuel ha-Levi (assuming a symbolic representation of the community, regardless of the legitimacy of the latter's claim).

b) The collection of religious and ceremonial artefacts, and archaeological items, conceived more as a memorial to a world of belief, forcibly left behind –a "morgue," in the ironic expression of the NYT museum cultural critique Edward Rothstein–, than as a tribute to the continuity of Judaism in the present-future. The content is structured along two axes. The first is the chronological, tainted with some flaws –not the least of which are the historical gaps– that are not satisfactorily resolved. It comprises: 1) the pre-expulsion period, and 2) the "return" of the Sephardic Jews, including artefacts on permanent loan from Spanish Morocco familial heirlooms. The viewer is confronted with an artificially constructed single shared Jewish and Spanish identity. It is legitimate to question whether this single linguistic and cultural identity has any substance in such a *longue-durée* approach. Rather, the opposite may be true. The second axis is the traditional Jewish life cycle, by means of Jewish objects related to different rituals, holidays and ceremonies, displayed in the upper women's gallery –though paradoxically women are poorly represented.

Several leitmotifs are progressively unfolded as **background** for the **collection display**: continuity with the past (designed with a total absence of rough edges), return and restauration (of the Jews), and, not surprisingly if we consider that it is a State-

[4] See Jaume Riera i Sans, *Els poders pùblics i les sinagogues. Segles xiii-xv* (Girona: Call de Girona, 2006), probably the best study on the political background, but also the architecture and interiors of western Mediterranean medieval synagogues.

funded museum, a clear-cut Spanish identity. The most problematic gap is related to the **traumatic interruption of Jewish life in Spain** after the 1490s, which following a period of darkness, would automatically give way to the Sephardic Jews. But this transition is not so simple, and no proper treatment is made of the Spanish and Portuguese New Christian, some of them transfigured around 1600 into New Jews and settled in Mediterranean and Atlantic metropoles. What could be the reason for their absence? One could suggest the **different attitudes towards the reverse directions in the conversion process**: when Jews gradually become New Christians (from the late fourteenth century on, at least), and successfully assimilate (birth pangs aside) into the Spanish predominantly Catholic society, they are represented in coherence with the formal teleological narrative (just as in Spanish historiography). When, in turn, Spanish (or Portuguese) New Christians turn, even if to a lesser extent, into New Jews, they pose a challenge to the received narrative that tends to turn a peculiarly blind eye to this reverse. In other words, the museum (and also historiography) seems more preoccupied with the choice of Jews becoming full-fledged Catholic (and Spaniards), than with their freedom to remain (or, in the case of New Christians, become) Jewish.

The emphasis on multiculturalism, *Convivencia*, or *conversos*, without discussing the problem of Judaism's survival in early modern Spain, dominates the official historiographical narrative. In other words, **an antique form of particularism** (Judaism and the Jews) **evolves into a new welcome form of universalism** (through a Spanish model), so that **group (Jewish) identity is finally defined by the alleged negation of one's own group identity**. The museum's interest in blurring tensions between Jews and non-Jews makes the Spanish past look more enlightened, and the Jewish past less particular (more Sephardic, less Jewish). In subtle ways the museum's universalizing impulse tends to de-emphasize its Jewish element.

It would be logical to think that the story being told should have been infused with an incomparable degree of **trauma**, not only because of the many expulsions, but also because of the conversion phenomenon and the conflicting *converso* identities. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the case of the museum, the container, the magnificent synagogal architecture, –but synagogue converted into church anyway, not to say a word of the unsettling current status of the "Santa María la Blanca"

synagogue– is at odds with its contents, that tell a story of socio-religious conflict automatically leading to conversion and assimilation. Another challenge is posed by the radical shift from traditional medieval anti-Judaism to the more recent philo-Semitism that is never addressed. Right after the historical narrative reaches the Spanish Golden Age (not so for the Jews), it abandons any effort to explain matters of substance and turns into a more neutral (and less dangerous) space, that of the daily life cycle. After the visit, we are left with a very vague notion of **what Jews believe in** or **how and why they "came back"** to Spain from their diaspora, regardless of any geographical consideration.

The other Spanish museum worthy of the name is the *Museu d'Història dels Jueus* ("Museum of the history of the Jews"), established by the Girona municipal council in 2000, and inaugurated later on at different stages. The display includes items on permanent loan from other museums, and aims at a comprehensive presentation of the region's Jews, their contribution to Catalan history and culture, and a predominant focus on (local) identity and (medieval) daily life. No attempt is made to extend the short chronological span –barely five centuries–into a later diaspora, because it could certainly introduce dissonances in the main narrative purpose. The permanent collection is distributed along eleven sections: the origins, the *call* or Jewish quarter, the Jewish community, the family, the synagogue, the *fossar* or cemetery, cultural life, economy, conflict, conversion, and material heritage. The lack of a monumental building forced curators to put all the weight on the museographic display, and temporary exhibitions dealing with current issues contribute to add dynamism to the museum. Alas, at the end of the journey, the visitor is left with satisfactory answers concerning basic questions as to what the relations between these and other Jewish communities across the Iberian Peninsula and beyond were like, or if this Jewish subcultural identity was as homogeneous as shown here, and finally how it was possible that such a brilliant experience derailed so dramatically.

The Past in the Future

Let me briefly summarize where we stand: a) Spanish, and to a great extent, also Portuguese, Jewish museography is still bound by a past (obviously) dominated by

medieval times; b) the anomaly of the centuries-old Jewish absence gap has not been adequately resolved yet, and the current artificial teleological narrative hampers finding a satisfactory solution; and c) the pursuit of economic profit, not the least through tourism –and a growing public demand for a virtual Judaism–, and even, the concern with reshaping memories and creating modern identities, do not allow us to focus on the construction of a solid project, including a sincere and critical dialogue with the past led by historical research. Taking this into account, I would advance a few basic ideas for **representing Judaism, the Jews, and Jewish artefacts, when there is a lack of objects**.

First, there is an urgent need to define where we understand regarding the Jewish material culture of Sepharad. Material heritage is the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a social group that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present, and bestowed for the benefit of future generations. In consequence, **Jewish material culture** (not only the result of archaeological research) is to be understood as the evidence of Judaism in objects, architecture, and art. It is the result of the practice of Judaism as a way of life in its historical and legal context, with regulated norms that allow organizing daily life, including space, assigning meaning to objects, and specific purposes within a Jewish social setting. In consequence, its study and interpretation require a detailed knowledge of Jewish culture in its diversity. Material culture has been traditionally understood as tangible, but more recently, the spatial turn in Jewish studies has opened the analysis of intangible structures, invisible to the uneducated eye, that are necessary to keep the practice of daily activities within the framework of Jewish religious rules. This reference to the intangible within a display of material culture is justified by the impact that they have on daily life. I am referring, but not only, to the *ʿerub*, or symbolic alteration of a boundary, provided in Jewish law for extending the strict limits placed upon movements of persons and goods on the Sabbath, and thus, accommodating the laws to the needs of daily life. **Sepharad** is necessarily a polysemic word and we have to use it in a deliberately imprecise way, with a cultural and religious meaning in mind, rather than a geographical and political one. Depending on the cultural and chronological context, and also on the perspective, it can be identified with evolving

cultural realities, rather than with fluctuating border demarcations. In its late-medieval setting, Sepharad designs the meeting and Jewish crucible of several matrix cultures: Andalusian, (Ibero-Romance) vernaculars, and the different varieties of Jewish subcultures beyond the Pyrenees. In the post-expulsion context, Sepharad is to be understood attached to a cultural experience in a different geographical context.

One likely starting point for the study of material culture are the "underground archives" through archaeological research. Besides synagogues, funerary spaces have resisted unscathed for the most part until relatively recently, and they (and the epigraphic evidence) provide more information about Jewish life than about death. Cemeteries document not only religious rituals, but societal organization, even the variegated religious currents. It is true, though, that new socio-political stakeholders have to be taken into account –no less than the economic interests of archaeological companies. Secondly, the synagogue understood as a micro-space and as tangible and intangible visualization of Judaism. Beyond architecture, and epigraphic symbolism, the synagogue, lying at the centre of Jewish life before the Emancipation, has to be understood from a social and political perspective. And finally, and maybe more relevant for our purposes here, there is the need of contextualizing Jewish objects through the study of textual evidence –outside synagogue and home, Jewish artefacts enjoyed little visibility. I propose here a perspective shift towards the construction of the ethnography of the Jewish past (and present), as a key for identifying objects that otherwise are left unattended, or, on the contrary, to describe others as trifles. It would be futile to try to understand the Jewish experience in front of a display of Jewish ceremonial objects, some authentic, some fake, and some copied. The previous considerations can be applied to the different museographic projects across the Iberian Peninsula.

What comes next?

All these considerations bring us to the original question: what should a Jewish museum contain, I mean, besides displaying the medieval past or the Jewish life cycle, and which new directions should it explore? We are told that museums are ideal

places for fostering dialogue and creativity, and also research, not just to display objects. After all, a museum needs stories with strong arguments, and the items should be of secondary importance. The museum should confront, too, current challenges, including taboos that need to be broken. Here are a few ideas for a museum of the history and culture of the Jews in Spain and in the Hispanic world.

1) Traditional anti-Judaism or, even more modern anti-Semitism, has played an important role in the shaping of modern Spanish culture, up to the point that the Jewish symbolic presence has had more weight than the real one. As result, iconography fills the country's geography with clichés and images representing Jews that to a great extent help to understand current attitudes. Some of the images are even associated to historic places and they have left a mark on material culture and art. Just to give a few examples: the visitor to the ("Corpus Christi") synagogue in Segovia is confronted at the entrance with a 1902 large painting by Vicente Cutanda, representing the desecration of the host libel that lies behind the conversion of the building into a church. The same is true regarding the Holy Child of La Guardia blood libel, represented in some eighteenth-century frescoes by Francisco Bayeu in the Toledo cathedral cloister. Should it not be appropriate for a museum to discuss the context of these representations that appear over and over again?

2) Mobility and migrations are phenomena associated to the Jewish experience, in the past as well as in the present. No place is given in the museographic display, whether permanent or temporary, to show how inward migratory flows, whether medieval or (the less known) contemporary (originating in Hungary and Morocco, or more recently in Argentina-Uruguay, and Venezuela) have contributed to shape the Jewish community in Spain, as we know it today, and the phenomenon remains largely unknown. Outward migrations, too, are part of a centuries-long Spanish exile that needs to include Jews.

3) Related to the previous subject, nobody would object today to the (re-)integration of the medieval Hispano-Jewish literary and philosophical output into the Spanish culture. The process has been advocated by Spanish erudites and scholars since, at least, the seventeenth century. In contrast, the same has not been yet accomplished for the early Sephardic and Hispano-Portuguese Jewish authors. If we already consider

Ibero-American colonial authors within the range of Hispanic literatures, should we not include, too, some Sephardi Jewish authors of the early Ottoman Empire, as part of a larger Spanish culture? The subject is not at all represented in museums.

4) Finally, if we are to confront the past, we have to deal with the traumatic expulsions, and with how communal property was handled. I am not talking about recent property claims (even symbolic ones). But this is a subject that should be given more space in the museographic exhibitions, especially when a display in a former synagogue or a Jewish space tries to hide the fact that the buildings were used for other purposes in the centuries that followed.

These are only a few different subjects and ideas that may help us to start to think about a new narrative framework for a more comprehensive twenty-first century museum of the Jews in Spain.