

The Period of the Geonim

The Muslim conquests were an important agent of unification for the Jewish communities throughout the diaspora. From the seventh century onwards the vast majority of Jews were under single rule and part of a large network of commercial ties connecting the different sectors of the Muslim empire. After the Arabs conquered the Maghreb ("the west" in Arab geographic terminology, designating North Africa and Spain), thousands of Jews immigrated there, mostly from the east (particularly from the areas of Iraq and Iran of today). The Jewish demographic map reflected a diversity largely due to incessant migrations. Nevertheless, there was a stable framework – a

central authority which delegated some of its prerogatives to each community. Existing prior to the emergence of Islam, this structure was consolidated when the Muslim caliphate embraced a world of immense dimensions, obeying first Damascus and then Baghdad.

The seat of spiritual authority of the Jewish world was the yeshivah (academy). Between the eighth and eleventh centuries this was not simply a learning institute, but also the supreme court and source of instruction for all Jews. The head of the yeshivah, the *gaon*, was regarded as the highest religious authority, but his responsibilities also included organizing the courts, appointing judges and community leaders as well as scribes, ritual slaughterers and other officials. The *gaon* was authorized to dismiss any one of these, and it was he who exercised the powerful weapon of excommunication.

The *geonim* became incontestable leaders of the Jewish world as a result of two developments. The first was the conflict between the heads of the academies and *rosh ha-golah* (the exilarch) who officially represented the Babylonian community to the authorities. The two Babylonian academies, the yeshivah of Sura and the one in Pumbedita, were transferred to Baghdad in the early ninth century and continued to carry the names of their former locations. Before then the exilarch had held full authority, and he nominated the heads of the academies who were regarded as spiritual leaders only. But in time, the heads of the academies acquired more power; the office of exilarch persisted, but essential secular functions were taken over by the *geonim*.

The second development involved conflict between the center in Palestine and the Babylonian *geonim* over hegemony in the diaspora. The yeshivah in the Land of Israel had traditionally been responsible for the communities in Palestine, Syria, Lebanon and Egypt; the Babylonian center had jurisdiction over the communities in Iraq, Iran and Yemen. The North African communities were autonomous and solicited by both rival centers. Ties between the communities were bilateral: the communities sent their halakhic questions and donations to the *yeshivot*; and the heads of the academies in turn supplied answers and commentaries (*responsa*), as well as laudatory poems and honorary titles, tokens of respect for their supporters.

In the competition over North Africa the Babylonian *yeshivot* gained the upper hand. The centralized structure of the caliphate, the authority of the Babylonian Talmud, and the fact that many North African Jews had come from the east and preferred to address their questions and send money to their country of origin – all these combined to the advantage of the Babylonian *geonim*. In the tenth century the supremacy of the Babylonian center was unequivocally established, and the *geonim* were responsible for fashioning the thought of all the Jews within the Muslim world. More than any other, the figure of Saadiah ben Joseph (882–942) best



1. Moses's canticle (Deuteronomy, 32). Page from an 11th or 12th-century Bible in a Babylonian or Persian hand. Called "Solomon's seal," the six-pointed star begins to appear in Hebrew manuscripts of that period, first in Muslim lands, then in Spain and Germany.

Accession of the Abbasids

Letter of Pirkoi ben Baboi

Paltai bar Abbaye, *gaon* of Pumbedita

The calendar polemic

Saadiah, *gaon* of Sura

750 810 842 921 928



757–761: Yehudai ben Nahman, *gaon* of Sura, suggests that the Jews of Palestine follow the Babylonian custom; the latter, however, prefer to maintain their own written traditions which were established in the Jerusalem Talmud.

786: Arguing that most Jews throughout the land no longer owned land, the heads of the Babylonian academies and the exilarch proclaim regulations which differ from those of the Talmud.

c. 810: Letter of Pirkoi ben Baboi to the Jewish communities in North Africa: he tries to convince them of the superiority of the Babylonian Talmud over the Jerusalem Talmud.

842–855: Paltai bar Abbaye, *gaon* of Pumbedita, sends the Talmud and its commentaries to Jewish scholars in Spain.

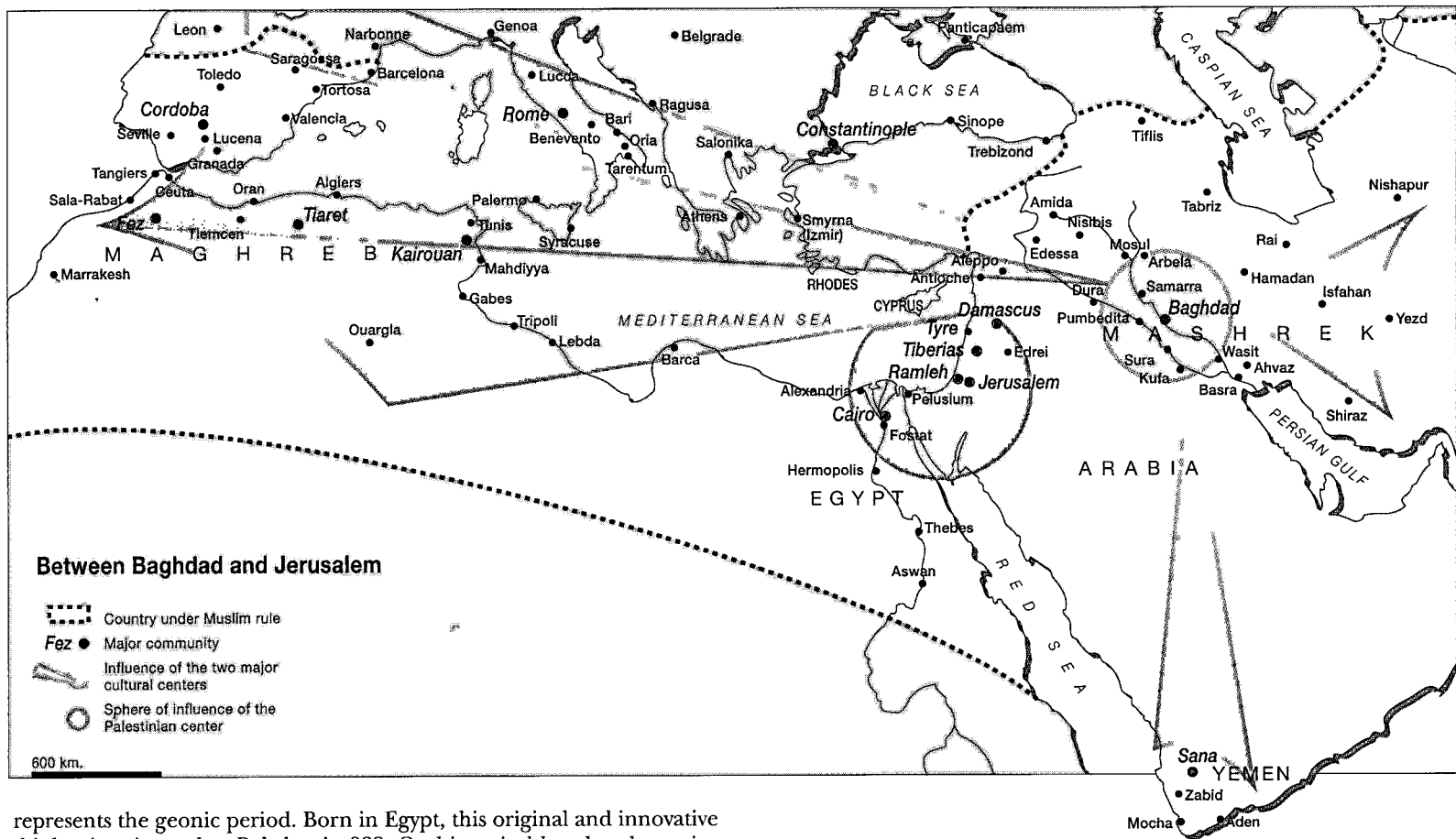
857–875: Amram ben Sheshna is *gaon* of

2. The Caliph of Baghdad receives the two rival leaders of the Jewish community, Saadiah Gaon and David ben Zakkai. Reconstruction.



3. Two pages of a manuscript containing a parashah (a portion of the Pentateuch according to the traditional order of reading the Bible in the synagogue). The text, from Numbers 13, is decorated in the style of 11th-century Egyptian Korans. Egypt, 1106–1107.

8th–11th Century



represents the geonic period. Born in Egypt, this original and innovative thinker immigrated to Babylon in 922. On his arrival he played a major role in the most significant medieval Jewish polemics: the debate over the calendar which revolved around the question of the precise date of Passover. Until then only the yeshivah in the Land of Israel proclaimed the dates of the festivals; using Saadiah's arguments, the Babylonian center now successfully established its authority. From 922 onwards, most Jewish communities in the diaspora were to celebrate Passover on the date decided upon by the Babylonian academy. This polemic, together with the conflict which arose a decade later between the *gaon* and the exilarch, made Saadiah ben Joseph the incontestable authority for all Jewish communities in the Muslim lands – a position which was to be overshadowed only by Maimonides three hundred years later.

Letter of Sherira Gaon

End of the geonic Period

Sura. His *Seder* ("Order of Prayers and Blessings"), is the oldest extant order of Jewish prayers; it became influential in many communities in North Africa and Europe.

882: Saadiah ben Joseph is born in Faiyum, Egypt. During his years of study in Egypt (until 915) and in Palestine (until 922) he wrote several works, including a Hebrew-Hebrew dictionary (*Sefer ha-Agron*) and an anti-Karaite polemic.

c. 920: Following a dispute with the head of the academy who was supported by the court bankers, the exilarch Ukba is expelled by the caliph to Kairouan in Tunisia.

921–923: The polemic over the calendar, between the Ben Meir family, the Palestinian *geonim*, and the Babylonian community leaders supported by Saadiah ben Joseph. Summaries of the arguments are dispatched to the diaspora communities, most of whom accept the authority of the Babylonian center.

926: Saadiah ben Joseph writes his *Book of Documents and Deeds*, part of a larger

halakhic work which he intended to write; this is the first work on Jewish law written in Arabic, and the first divided according to topics rather than by association of ideas, in the manner of the Talmud.

928: Saadiah ben Joseph is appointed head of the Sura academy by the exilarch David ben Zakkai.

c. 931: A power struggle develops between Saadiah Gaon and the exilarch who appointed him: the exilarch nominates someone else as head of the Sura academy, Saadiah in turn appoints another exilarch, his adversary's brother. During these years Saadiah, forced to go into hiding for four years, wrote his major philosophic work, *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*: an attempt to find rational proof for the dogmas of the Oral and Written Law.

937: Saadiah returns to his position as head of the academy, where he will remain until his death in 942.

987: The famous letter by Sherira Gaon to the Jews of Kairouan listing the generations



4. A Hanukkah lamp. Bronze, Egypt or Syria, 12th–13th centuries.

of the Sages since the time of the Mishnah down to his own time; the ties between the Babylonian yeshivot and the North African communities are consolidated.

1004: Hai ben Sherira is nominated *gaon* of Pumbedita in his father's lifetime. Writing several halakhic works, he wishes to strengthen the ties between his academy and diaspora communities. In a letter written in 1006, he tries to no avail to impose his authority on the Spanish rabbi, Hanokh ben Moses.

1005–1007: Hushiel ben Elhanan, and later his son Elhanan (or Hananel), emigrate from Italy and settle in Kairouan.

1015: Hai Gaon confers the title of *nagid* on Rabbi Abraham ben Nathan; the latter, a physician at the Tunisian court, had collected large sums of money for the Pumbedita academy and sought to strengthen the ties between that yeshivah and the Maghreb communities.

1038: Death of Hai ben Sherira; end of the *geonim* period.