

The Jews of Moslem Spain: A Gendered Analysis

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Eliyahu Ashtor was the author of a pioneering work on the history of the Jews in Moslem Spain. This article examines the presence or absence of women in his three volume work. Included are mothers, sisters, daughters and wives, both real and imaginary, who are mentioned in The Jews of Moslem Spain. Interestingly enough, many of them remain anonymous until this very day.

Re-reading the three volumes of Eliyahu Ashtor's *The Jews of Moslem Spain* from a gendered perspective proved to be an eye-opener.¹ What role did women have in Spanish Jewish history from the eighth until the twelfth century?² Where were they appearing in Ashtor's depiction and in the lives of the eminent men about whom he devoted so much time and space? What can we learn about real men's and women's lives? What were Ashtor's sources of information?

In the first volume, no women are mentioned until page 160 in the chapter dealing with the life of Hasdai ibn Shaprut, a most central tenth century figure. Ashtor informs us that "although most of his contemporaries were married [...] and involved in family matters [...] he remained a bachelor". Poznanski discovered a letter sent from Rome in the 940s to ibn Shaprut which led him to ascertain that the recipient of the letter was a bachelor without children. The diplomat-physician was asked by the author of the letter why he was not interested in taking a proper lovely bride for himself who could be a helpmate, ליתן לו בנים ובני בנים עושקים במפנינים יקרה. The reference was to a woman who would give him sons and grandsons who would then devote themselves to what is more valuable than pearls, namely Torah; this is a reference to Proverbs 3.³ Ashtor assumed that **the** reason ibn Shaprut remained single was because he was devoting all of his energies and time to his profession and chose "not to take the responsibilities of marriage upon himself".⁴

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¹ The English translation of the Hebrew original of volume one was published by the Jewish Publication Society of America (JPS) in Philadelphia in 1973.

² A more up-to-date assessment can be found Levine Melammed 2012: 257-273.

³ See Poznanski 1914: 290, n. 1 where he wrote that "le destinataire était célibataire sans enfants."

⁴ Ashtor 1973: 161.

Interestingly enough, the only solid information about dealings this diplomat had with women pertains to non-Jewish women, namely, Toda the queen of Navarre⁵ and a Byzantine noblewoman in Constantinople, most likely a reference to Helena, the wife of Constantine.⁶ The only mention of a Jewish woman associated with ibn Shaprut is in reference to his mother: upon her death, he approached his secretary, ibn Saruk, at midnight, to request that he compose an elegy for the occasion “and to his great surprise found him already engaged in doing so”.⁷ Ibn Shaprut was obviously occupied with male-oriented activities, functioning at the court in predominantly male surroundings in his diplomatic dealings with the caliph and various missions as well as in his role as a physician. From what we can assess, his world was restricted to limited interactions with women, mainly, to negotiations that were part and parcel of his duties.

Progressing chronologically, the reader of these volumes encounters Dunash ibn Labrat. Ashtor charted his movement from Fez to Iraq where he studied with Sa’adiah Gaon and then to Cordova once he was mature. In Ashtor’s opinion, ibn Labrat “did not wander from one country to another, but remained in Cordova, becoming the poet laureate of his generation”.⁸ Here, unfortunately, Ashtor seems to have erred. Fleischer noted that most probably as the result of unpleasant dealings, ibn Labrat left Andalusia;⁹ the consensus seems to be that he left in the 960s.¹⁰ The analysis of various copies of verses written by the poet as well as by his wife found in fragments from the Cairo Genizah reveals that he did not remain in Cordova. Fleischer’s adept organization of this material indicates that ibn Labrat left his wife and infant in Spain for an undetermined period of time.¹¹ Since these fragments were found in Egypt, a real possibility exists that he made his way there. This husband and father elected to abandon his family despite the fact that he clearly admired and loved his educated wife who remains nameless. When he assessed ibn Labrat’s whereabouts, Ashtor was apparently not yet aware of the discovery of the verses

⁵ Ibid.: 178-180.

⁶ For more details about this couple and the complications created by the ruling family, see Ibid., 1:189-190, 247.

⁷ Ibid.: 246.

⁸ Ibid.: 261.

⁹ He added supplements and notations to Schirmann 1995: 120 n. 103.

¹⁰ Peter Cole also wrote that a “quarrel with Ibn Shaprut appears to have been behind his departure”; see Cole 2007: 23.

¹¹ Fleischer 1984: 201-202. Some surmise that he might have returned; see p. 201 n. 31.

composed by this woman in Hebrew and the revealing exchange of poems that transpired with her husband.

In the second volume, Ashtor explains that Shemuel ha-Nagid had his heart set on marrying the daughter of R. Yehudah, a *dayan* or judge in the Jewish court of Granada.¹² Halkin informs us that this young woman's family was known as el-Matuni and that one of her brothers was a royal bailiff.¹³ Ashtor writes that although he was an eminent poet and minister, ha-Nagid had not been the preferred groom and was not the bride's family's first choice. Her parents had planned for this anonymous daughter to wed one of their nephews. As fortune or misfortune would have it, her father, R. Yehudah, and this favorite nephew were murdered before the nuptial arrangements were finalized.¹⁴ As a result, Shemuel, their second choice for a groom, was chosen, but according to Ashtor, the marriage did not occur until he "rose to prominence in the royal service".¹⁵ The historian then informs us that once married, ha-Nagid "delighted in the felicity of his homelife".¹⁶ His wife bore him three sons and one daughter; as is well known, his firstborn, Yehosef, was destined to be his favorite.

The reader then encounters a romanticized version of his home life: "He treasured that warming shelter of the family which strengthens man against the storms of life, and even in the difficult years [...] Shemuel dedicated much of his time to his household and to his loved ones".¹⁷ We learn that he was attentive to his sons' education, especially his eldest.¹⁸ He mentioned his wife only once, when writing to his firstborn son Yehosef, instructing him to honor his mother.¹⁹ Very little is known about his second son Yehudah or about his daughter. There are no dates of birth or death for these children; both passed away prematurely. His unnamed daughter probably died around 1044. Ashtor explains that "since Samuel was still

¹² Ashtor 1979: 59.

¹³ Halkin 2000: 135.

¹⁴ Ashtor 1979: 59.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: 61.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*: 65.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 97.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ This is pointed out in Schirmann 1995: 207 n. 119. This appears in an ethical poem sent to Yehosef in 1042 which appears in Yarden 1966: no. 10, p. 40, line 11: ודבר טוב לדודך/ ולשארך, וכבד את חברתך

engaged in a military campaign, he could not bury her but instead had to content himself with writing a lament”.²⁰

This elegy appears in the *diwan* containing the collection of his poetry which was later organized by his son Yehosef; it was placed in the section known as “Son of Psalms” or “After Psalms” (בן תהילים).²¹ The title of this piece is *Martiya*, a קינה or dirge. Here he is consoling this beloved son who is sitting *shiva* for his older sister, clearly upset at having to part from her and worried about what will happen to her. At this time, he advised the nine year old boy not to grieve or mourn in excess for his sister, but rather to direct his energies to praying for his father to succeed in battle.²² At the same time, he explains to his son that while one overcomes and heals from the aftereffects of deaths, losing a sibling is in a category of its own. There is no doubt that this comment is a direct reflection of his own personal and traumatic experience of loss which he expressed repeatedly following the death of his older brother Yitshaq.²³ He felt that his own son needs to realize that his sister’s days are over, for she has been returned to the earth; the fact that she died young means that she will never experience evil in the world. While he never mentions his daughter’s name, age or cause of death, he does relate to the fact that she was a young girl whose family might have indulged her. His concern is for the siblings who lost their only sister, and for their ability to process this loss.

There have been theories attempting to prove that this daughter had been the Arabic poet known as Qasmuna. If this had indeed been the case, as some scholars have surmised, one would expect some mention by her father of her poetic talents. In the extant poems written by Qasmuna, her personal references to being alone create the impression that she was older than ha-Nagid’s daughter would have been. (Some scholars are of the opinion that this poet lived in the twelfth rather than eleventh century.²⁴) In the third volume, Ashtor mentions that “Jewish women, too, acquired a

²⁰ Ashtor 1979: 98.

²¹ Cole 2007: 38. Ha-Nagid’s *diwan* is divided into three; this portion includes a section with twenty-four laments and poems of consolation; see Yarden 1966: no. 15, pp. 50-51. The lament contains 25 lines.

²² Schirmann 1995: 197 n.65 and 207 n. 120. In this lament, ha-Nagid wrote: הבן והתבונן כתב, לך כתבתיהו; לך כתבתיהו. See Yarden 1966: 50, line 10. This lament is included in the category of war poems rather than laments! Ibid., לז.

²³ Yitshaq passed away in 1041. The majority of the laments pertain to the loss of his beloved brother; see Ibid., nos. 86-104, pp. 236-250.

²⁴ For a discussion regarding the identity of Qasmuna and the various stances taken by scholars, see Gallego 1999: 63-75.

reputation for their verse”, he discusses Qasmuna’s poetic line referring to her sense of loneliness and explains that after reading this line, one Arab writer believed that her father (whoever he was) realized that he had to find her a husband immediately, if not sooner.²⁵ In light of the information available to us, Qasmuna was most probably not the young unnamed daughter of the Nagid.

In his lament, ha-Nagid mentions mothers and maidservants, perhaps a reference to his daughter’s nanny, but makes no specific mention of her mother who, despite eventually losing two of her four children, remains extremely silent. Ashtor describes parties that took place in their home,²⁶ most likely the lady of the house was involved in the preparations but again, she seems to have been behind the scenes, directing the servants. Hillel Halkin, who translated a number of ha-Nagid’s poems, refers to a short piece in which “she” extends wishes for his fiftieth birthday which was celebrated in 1043. “If the woman who congratulated him on the occasion was indeed his wife, this marks one of the few times she is mentioned in his poetry”.²⁷ Interestingly enough, ha-Nagid did get involved in trying to lessen the marital tensions resulting from the divorce of another couple, namely Yitshaq ben Khalfon and his wife. After this union ended, the relations between the two families, namely, of the husband and the wife, deteriorated considerably; Khalfon was inclined to involve the Muslim authorities in order to resolve family tensions but ha-Nagid managed to dissuade him from doing so.²⁸ Finally, when Shemuel ha-Nagid died in 1056, Ashtor tells us that his two sons “and other members of his family” were at his bedside.²⁹ Does this include his wife? Why does she play such a silent role in the family dynamics?

By contrast, the spouse of Shemuel’s son Yehosef receives more attention than did his mother. The historian informs us that ha-Nagid, “dedicated to Yehosef’s welfare and anxious for him to have a worthy wife, arranged to have him marry the daughter of his friend Rabbi Nisim, head of the renowned Talmud school at Kairawan”.³⁰ Prior to their marriage, ha-Nagid had utilized his own personal funds to help R. Nisim contend with a difficult financial situation. The wedding that transpired

²⁵ Ashtor 1984: 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*: 126.

²⁷ Halkin 2000: 135.

²⁸ Ashtor 1979: 132.

²⁹ *Ibid.*: 157.

³⁰ *Ibid.*: 164.

is described as “one of the happiest events of Samuel’s life”.³¹ Unfortunately, shortly thereafter the reader is told that it was an unsuccessful marriage.³² Rabbi Nisim’s daughter was apparently learned and possessed fine qualities, but she lost Yehosef’s favor after the novelty of the newlywed phase wore off. Ashtor conjectures that once Yehosef, perceived to have been an exceptionally handsome man, had been initiated into what he calls “sensuous pleasure”, he “became obsessed by his passions”. How our historian knows the following is a mystery but he proceeds with his tale: “Tall, shapely women excited him; his tiny wife – ‘the midget’, as he called her – could not gratify him”.³³ Upon first reading, one assumes that his spouse was simply short of stature, but it seems that Ashtor relied on ibn Daud’s report in the *Book of Tradition* where he declared that she was a ננסת or dwarf!³⁴ This wedding was presumably the result of long distance negotiations in which the match was arranged by correspondence between the two fathers. This groom probably did not see his intended (or a portrait of her) until she arrived for the wedding in Granada; by this point, any objections would have been in vain.

Yehosef seems to have had contact with various non-Jewish women during his rather chequered career. Ashtor relates the story concerning various wives of the Berber King Badis who maligned him.³⁵ When he became entangled in a complicated plot (that eventually led to his downfall), he sent some women “to inform a number of respected natives of the king’s plot”.³⁶ Yehosef was deeply involved in court intrigues and often turned to women for help: upon one occasion, he turned to those in the harem who favored Badis’s nephew, Yehosef’s candidate for heir to the throne.³⁷ Unfortunately for him, these machinations did not succeed; in the pogrom that ensued in 1066, he was murdered, Jewish women were raped and the community of Granada suffered considerably.

Among those who successfully found refuge during the pogrom were Yehosef’s widow and their son Abu Nasr Azariah; the two subsequently fled to Lucena. Ashtor describes their life transition: Rabbi Yitshaq ibn Gayat, who had

³¹ Ibid.: 164.

³² Ibid.: 165.

³³ This marriage is analyzed in *ibid.*: 165.

³⁴ Ibn Daud 1967: 57, lines 181-182. The Hebrew original states: ולאחר מכן נתחתן בו ושלה בתו לרב יהוסף הנגיד לאשה ולא מצאה חן בעיניו מפני שהיתה ננסת. אבל היתה בעלת תורה ויראת שמים

³⁵ Ashtor 1979: 169.

³⁶ Ibid.: 174.

³⁷ Ibid.: 182.

enjoyed the support and encouragement of Shemuel ha-Nagid and his son Yehosef for many years, welcomed the two survivors as he considered it his duty to care for them. Due to his efforts, “the community of Lucena allotted them funds which sufficed to maintain them with dignity”.³⁸ This widow merited special attention because of her husband’s and father-in-law’s past good deeds. This rabbi’s daughter, sent away from her own family and home in Kairawan to marry an eminent man in Granada who did not care for her, was again uprooted after her husband was murdered. In essence, she and her son became welfare cases; as it turns out, her son was not destined to live a long life either.³⁹

Any woman who might have played a role in the short life of Shelomo ibn Gabirol remains an enigma. Ashtor states that his father died in Malaga when he was young.⁴⁰ Schirmann writes that he was at the beginning of his youth when his father died after a long and difficult illness and that his son suffered severely from the loss.⁴¹ His mother was not destined to reach old age either, but there is some confusion as to the age of her son when she died. Ashtor depicts the poet as having lost both of his parents in childhood and thus became a depressed youth “weeping and lamenting his own fate”.⁴² He depicts him as a young man who might not even have remembered his mother, surmising that this might account for his solitary and almost anti-social stance. It is more likely that he was in his mid-twenties when fully orphaned. More recent scholarship dates his mother’s death to 1045 when he already would have been twenty-three years old.⁴³ Ashtor infers that the “absence of any reference in his poetry to family life implies that he was a bachelor all his life”.⁴⁴ The fact that he was sickly and died relatively young, in my opinion, must have had a significant role here as well. Thus far we have two bachelors, ibn Shaprut and ibn Gabirol, one unhappy husband (Yehosef ha-Nagid) and his father Shemuel who

³⁸ *Ibid.*: 193.

³⁹ Ibn Daud 1967 refers to the honor given her and her son Azariah in Lucena on p. 57. He continues with remarks concerning the fate of this young man, for whom R. Yitshaq had great plans, but it seems that Azariah died at the age of twenty; see p. 60.

⁴⁰ Ashtor 1984: 30. Ashtor writes here that he was “still a young lad when his father died. A short time before his father’s death, Solomon’s mother had also died, and since he had no brothers or sisters, he remained all alone in the world.”

⁴¹ Schirmann 1995: 263; he mentions the fact that ibn Gabirol wrote at least six laments after his father’s death. In one of them he refers to himself as $\gamma\eta$; see note 39.

⁴² Ashtor 1984: 31.

⁴³ While Ashtor believed that his mother died prior to his father, other scholars place his mother’s death as a bit later in his life. See Cole 2001: 3.

⁴⁴ Ashtor 1984: 40.

might have been content with his wife, but neglected to mention her in his prolific writings.

Ashtor also includes the saga of the changes in rabbinic succession in the tenth century and how the chance arrival of a great scholar in Cordova revolutionized the level of Jewish scholarship in Spain. One woman's fate is part and parcel of this story. Once again his source is ibn Daud who tells the tale of the four great scholars travelling by ship to a convention but could not reach their destination because they were taken prisoner by pirates. Only one of the scholars, R. Moses, was accompanied in his travels by his wife and son named Hanokh. This poor woman, who sought to avoid being raped by the commander, turned to her husband for advice with a question presumably worded in Hebrew (!), asking whether or not the drowned will be resurrected. Upon hearing his affirmative reply, she then heroically leaps overboard, leaving the rabbi a widower and their son Hanokh motherless. The father and son arrive in Cordova in the 950s.⁴⁵ The courage, insight and moral purity of this woman seem not to have been taken into account when assessing the son. Ashtor informs us that "in character he was like his eminent father. He was a man of noble traits, modest and unassuming, a person who did not aspire to greatness, who was likable and hard to provoke".⁴⁶ Ashtor did not discern any maternal influence here.

This R. Moshe succeeded in aligning himself and his son with women from the Ibn Falija clan which, as ibn Daud claims, was "the greatest of the families of the community of Cordova".⁴⁷ Hanokh and his daughter both married an ibn Falija. Once again, there is no record of the names of Hanokh's martyred mother, of his wife or of his daughter. The rabbis were the important figures here; the women were merely vehicles for perpetuating the patrilineal line and seed. Ashtor emphasizes the importance of marital ties elsewhere in his history, explaining that distinguished families took care to obtain brides for their sons from families of appropriate status and to wed their daughters to scholars. Thus Shemuel ibn Alkhatush married the sister of an Egyptian scholar named Netanel ha-Levi in the late eleventh century,⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibn Daud 1967: chapter 7, p. 46, lines 12-16.

⁴⁶ Ashtor 1973: 356.

⁴⁷ Quote from English translation of *Book of Tradition*, p. 66, line 65; the original Hebrew appears in chapter 7, p. 48, lines 42-45. Ashtor mentions this family and its importance a number of times; see Ashtor 1973: 299, 365. This family was also known as Palyadj and Palache.

⁴⁸ Ashtor 1979: 292.

while the father of Yitshaq ibn Ezra's wife was a *nagid*.⁴⁹ Sometimes these matches involved a move to the groom's parents' home or hometown for the bride, which might be in a different city or country. Ashtor mentions problems that sometimes resulted when the wife was less than enthusiastic about leaving home. He also refers to the arrangements made by travelling husbands whose wives ask for divorce papers as security in case the husband does not return by a specified time.⁵⁰

Ashtor, the historian with a literary bent and an inclination to embellish along the lines of the medieval Muslim historians whom he had earnestly studied, chose to end his magnum opus with a detailed description of Jewish life in eleventh century Moslem Spain. Note, please, that this Jew and his family are all imaginary! Thus he describes the loving relationship this AbuYa'kub has with his imaginary wife, Dona, who, believe it or not, has a name of sorts!⁵¹ He supposedly loved and respected her so much that he did not take a second wife;⁵² since she bore him a son and daughter, he had already fulfilled his duty. She prepares him wonderful meals and treats him as the "apple of her eye". Ashtor even describes the virtual outfit she is wearing on the eve of Sukot, and how she prevents their children from misbehaving. Her husband showers her with gifts, but when she engages in too much chatter, he tells her that he's tired.⁵³

The reader is informed that only the boys attend school; educated women like the aforementioned wife of R. Mosheh or the unloved wife of Yehosef ha-Nagid, most likely had been taught by private tutors. This imaginary Jew's son reports his progress in school while the mother stresses their daughter's progress in spinning. Basing his assumption on a rabbinic responsum, Ashtor writes: "A girl's education was the function of her mother, who taught her spinning and various other forms of domestic work. Whether to make a living or to supplement the income or to pass the time, women spent many hours spinning, a craft they learned while still very young. In sum, the education of a woman was very meager".⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Ashtor 1984 :180.

⁵⁰ Ashtor 1973 :278. This is a problem that troubled rabbis throughout the medieval world; see, for instance, Grossman 2004: 74-76.

⁵¹ Ashtor 1984: 65.

⁵² Ibid: 147.

⁵³ Ibid.: 147-148.

⁵⁴ Ibid.: 93. He bases his statement upon the responsum of Yosef Abitur, *Ginze Kedem* 3:63; see p. 270 n. 119.

Abu Ya'kub seems to attend synagogue by himself or with his son. Despite the fact that there is a women's section and the family is celebrating the festival of Sukot, his wife stays home. After returning from prayers on the second night of the holiday, her husband has a quick meal in order to run off to an all male elaborate meal, a blatantly segregated activity.

Ashtor inserts a few comments that provide some insight into the social reality of the Jewish community. There is mention of an interesting burial custom of putting "precious items such as gold and silver rings into the grave" especially in women's graves, "who were sometimes buried with their headwear of gilded embroidery".⁵⁵ This might be related to the belief fostered by Sa'adya Gaon that one is resurrected in one's funeral attire.⁵⁶ Elsewhere, Ashtor mentions the fact that most Jews attend public bathhouses, where men and women bathed, "usually on different days or else during different hours of each day. But individual bathhouses for men and for women also existed".⁵⁷ He seems to be completely oblivious to the social implications of bathhouse attendance for women, which went far beyond halakhic or hygienic requirements. Men who did not provide their wives with the required entrance fee were looking for trouble. Rabbis were known to admonish husbands attempting to limit their wives' access to bathhouses; they seemed to comprehend the important role they played in the limited social life available to these women.⁵⁸

Ashtor mentions the presence of maidservants, noting that a bride often brought one with her. He also refers to the legal problems that can arise due to their presence resulting from relations developing between Jewish men and non-Jewish servants, the subsequent birth of children, and religious obligations that do or do not apply to these situations. In a discussion of how the prayer leader should be chosen, he explained how one candidate was rejected on the basis of his sexual preferences. This fellow, "one who was known to seek the company of women – was dismissed".⁵⁹ He then alludes to a rabbinic responsum concerning a "cantor who frequented brothels and, according to testimony, also had homosexual relations with

⁵⁵ Ibid.: 119.

⁵⁶ For a discussion of this phenomenon and the attitude of Sa'adya Gaon as well as the Talmud, see Goitein 1967-1988, Vol. 5 :161 and 5 :550 nn. 188-189.

⁵⁷ Ibid., Vol. 3 :130.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of medieval bathhouses, see Ibid., Vol. 3: 216-217 and Vol. 5 :96-97.

⁵⁹ Ibid., Vol. 3 :141.

a youth”⁶⁰. One wonders which of the two activities upset the congregation more; male homosexual relations were common in the surrounding Muslim society and frequenting brothels was not always frowned upon in Spanish Jewish communities.⁶¹ Nevertheless, one can understand why a congregation might express a strong preference for a leader of prayers to lead a more conventional life.

Whether imaginary or real, Ashtor presents a rather limited picture of life for women in Moslem Spain. Unlike Shlomo Dov Goitein, who displayed an uncanny sensitivity and awareness of the most minute details of women’s lives and their role in society, Ashtor, on the whole, is content to mention a number of anonymous mothers, wives and sisters in passing. In his imaginary couple’s life, he makes an attempt to add a loving wife to the male scene, and even describes, albeit briefly, the education girls lacked, women’s burial customs, maidservants, clothes worn on the holidays and attention given to and received from a loving husband. It is unfortunate that the majority of the data he provides appears in the virtual description. We are left to wonder about ha-Nagid’s wife and daughter, ibn Gabirol’s mother and whether there were any women in ibn Shaprut’s life. It is hard to imagine that women played such an insignificant role in Jewish life from 711 on, but until more material is unearthed, we might have to suffice with Ashtor and his imaginary yet loving couple.

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⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ See, for example, Assis 1988: 52-53.

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