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# Following in Maimonides' Footsteps, Pursuing His Wisdom

By [Rabbi Laura Geller](#)

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On a recent trip to Spain, Morocco and Israel called "In the Footsteps of Maimonides," the members of our group from Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills were the honored guests at a reception at the residence of the American ambassador to Spain, which became the occasion for a gathering of many of Spain's Jewish leaders.

I told them that we had come there because so much of Jewish tradition and culture was shaped there. Hebrew poetry blossomed in Spain and Morocco because Jewish poets interacted with their Muslim counterparts. Maimonides was born in Spain, and through his studies in Morocco he was profoundly influenced by Muslim philosophers. It is impossible to understand modern Judaism without acknowledging the debt to Muslim and Christian culture during the period we call the Golden Age of Spain, from the ninth through the 12th century.

But it was the well-known Spanish sociologist Victor Pérez-Díaz, president of the prestigious Analistas Socio-Políticos Research Center, who gave the most moving talk of the evening:

"You are about to follow the steps of Maimonides, a wise, practical man," he told us. One "willing to attend to the needs of his own community while addressing the plight of humankind. He left Cordoba early, only 13 years old, but we imagine he kept some memories close to his heart of Spain, or what was then called Al-Andalusia. ... The hard truth is that Maimonides left to escape from the Muslim fundamentalists of that time. He left, but the majority of the Jewish community stayed — for another almost four centuries on both sides of the divide between Muslim and Christian lands. ....

"And then ... came the cruel, merciless blow of the expulsion. The expulsion was done by an ecclesiastical, political and social 'establishment,' with the complicity, acquiescence and open support of society at large. On top of that, the expulsion of those Jews who didn't convert was followed by the watching over, harassment and in so many cases prosecution even of those who did convert. ...

"The Jewish community was completely wiped out of Spain. And we had to wait for almost three-and-a-half centuries to see a glimpse of a Spanish national reassessment of what had been done to the Jews. ... In the last 30 years, some significant efforts have been made to express regrets for what happened. For example, in 1992, the king not only apologized about, but also described how the Jews' parting had created an empty space in Spain. This statement, though, is only the beginning of what needs to be done.

"What has to follow," Pérez-Díaz said, "what's needed, is a change of heart — of society at large. It includes repentance, inner conversion and actual deeds. ... Spain was wrong in expelling the Jews, but not just because Spain put such a disproportionate premium on religious conformity. We were morally wrong and we lost the crucial contribution that ... Jews could have made to a better and more complex society."

Pérez-Díaz went on to talk about some difficult truths, including the fact that, although the Jewish community in Spain is small and discreet, stereotypes of the Jews are widespread. So, also, are negative stereotypes about Muslims.

He concluded: "But, to put it simply, the problem is that Spain is, as of today, a rather unfocused and morally confused society, and this confusion translates into ... the sense Spain may have of its own history. Maimonides offers us, today's Spaniards, some cues, a way to understand our situation, a guide to reach a certain measure of good sense. I hope that we Spaniards will learn from him."

These words provided a lens for us on our travels. And that lens helped us learn from Maimonides — about the significance of our interaction with Islam, and about what happens when a society ceases being tolerant of minorities.

The Golden Age was complicated. At times Jews were powerful allies to the rulers, at other times they were in need of protection. We learned that Maimonides probably became a crypto-Muslim during his years in Morocco, something not often spoken about in scholarship about him.

We met fascinating people, including in the Jewish community in Spain and in the tinier Jewish community in Morocco, which was once vibrant and full of life. We realized that we, Jews in the 21st century from a synagogue in Beverly Hills, are living in another Golden Age — an era better in so many ways than the one we studied, but in which many Jews are not confident that Judaism can be enriched by thoughtful, intentional interaction with other religious traditions.

For me, one lesson jumps out from our trip. Even in this Golden Age of ours, stereotypes of another religious tradition are so rampant that, in Oklahoma, a place where there are very few Muslims, the state's voters could approve a constitutional amendment banning Sharia law even for individuals who seek private mediation. The state amendment passed by 70 percent of the Oklahoma electorate. Few Muslims have actually sought this possibility! But as State Rep. Rex Duncan, explained, "It is a necessary 'preemptive strike' against Islamic law coming to the state." As Jews, where members of our community sometimes seek to adjudicate disputes through a *beit din* as opposed to civil courts, this is indeed another manifestation of a dangerous trend.

Thankfully, a federal judge in Oklahoma issued a temporary restraining order barring the state from adopting the amendment. We live in a country where our federal constitution protects us from what happened in Spain. But we must remain vigilant. Muslim leaders in Oklahoma report there has been an increase in hate mail against Muslims since the election.

We know what Maimonides would say about this. He would be appalled. And he would be proud of the teenagers at Temple Emanuel who are part of a Muslim-Jewish teen dialogue, now in its second year, who met last week for a discussion about Islamophobia and anti-Semitism. The Torah portion the week before their meeting was *Toledot*, "generations." It challenges us to think about what we need to learn and pass on to our children from our ancestors' experience. We know we want to pass on what we learn from "the footsteps of Maimonides."

*Laura Geller is senior rabbi of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, a Reform congregation.*

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