

**JEWISH PEOPLE ALWAYS *ON THE MOVE*:  
JEWISH TRAVELERS IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

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**Abstract.** The essential starting point of this study has to do mostly with movements of people in Medieval times throughout the world, but paying special attention to the particular way Jews moved from one place to another in those times. Its main purpose is to understand why they dared such dangerous travels, even risking their lives, suffering most of the times really painful conditions; or, to put it in another way, which were the motivations that impelled them to set out on a travel of that kind. My tentative contention is that, reflecting on how they moved about in medieval times, and for which specific reasons they did so; we may understand better some of the features that made Jews identifiable throughout history.

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**1. Introduction: roads, maps and motivational factors for travelling<sup>1</sup>**

When we try to imagine for what purpose people travelled in the Middle Ages, several reasons come to mind. On occasion, we find out that what induced medieval people was not so different from what induces us today. Same as nowadays, in medieval times the first reason to travel has to do with trade, in the broadest sense of the term. There were, as there are today, less tangible motives affecting the soul directly that could matter more than pragmatic and mundane reasons. Nevertheless, trade was, and it is still today, one of the most powerful reasons to leave one's hometown. In fact, potential trade with new merchandise may have been an enormous temptation at the time, and a reason strong enough to risk one's life. Travelling was hazardous indeed, uncomfortable and troublesome.

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<sup>1</sup> The web of 'The Harvard WorldMap Project' <<https://worldmap.harvard.edu/maps/5080>> is one of the main and most accurate studies about this subject nowadays.

Few main roads had been paved by the Romans; mostly roads were made of dirt that quickly turned into a river of mud when it rained. However, despite the painful conditions and the dangers medieval merchants had to face, they managed to travel long distances and, actually, trade routes were really busy (Block et al. 2000).

Merchants encountered another difficulty when they set out on a journey, which was no less important than the one mentioned above. They had few indications as to the most accurate route to take. To get an idea of the hard task they dared to undertake, we need only to imagine starting a journey without a map, or to be more precise for the actual world: without Internet. Nowadays, maps are indispensable, but in those days they did not exist as we know them today. It is well known that in medieval Europe no one knew about Ptolemy's *Geographia*. The Arabs were the ones who used it to develop their own geography. Up until the 12th century, when geographer Al-Idrisi went to Palermo to the Court of Roger II, there was no direct cooperation between European and Arab geographers (Crone 1968:25). For the most part, they were based on what news travellers brought back when they returned, if they returned at all. Moreover, accurate maps took a long time to develop. It took much longer than we may think and, truth be told, some centuries after the period approached in this study, maps continued to be far from accurate or complete. Still in the 19th century they were not accurate enough; as we know for the continuous complaints of travellers of that time. The famous writer Stendhal, indefatigable traveller, gives us an example, as he considered the maps of his times a complete fraud: "D'après ces menteuses de cartes géographiques qui, comme tout le reste de sots travaux du siècle, décrivent sans avoir vu, je m'étais figuré que la route de Bayonne à Pau était une belle route de montagne; loin de là; rien pour l'imagination; c'est une route qui constamment descend carrément et sans nulle espèce d'art..." (Stendhal 1981:19).

Before the development of portolan charts in the 14th century; that defined routes around the Mediterranean, most maps were intended as summaries of knowledge and not as an actual spatial record. The portolan charts were navigational maps based on compass directions and estimated distances observed by the pilots at sea. They were actually rough maps, based on accounts by those medieval sailors who sailed the Mediterranean and the Black Sea coasts. The origins of these charts are not clear, having no known predecessors despite their accuracy compared to other maps of the period. There were really very few maps, and most people would never have seen one; typically, topographical descriptions were verbal (Baker 1967, Black 1987, Broc 1980, Campbell 1987).

In this day and age, the first thing we do, once we have decided where to travel, or sometimes even before, is to look at a map. It may encourage us to undertake the journey or, to the contrary, it may compel us to give up the plan. We know more or less what we can expect and therefore we reach a decision after weighing the *pros and cons*. It may be that, after seeing a project in that way, the whole thing seems to be less *exciting*. However, even today, travelling continues to be fascinating, appealing and even hazardous, depending on the destination. Thus, if

we consider medieval travellers planning their journeys under far less secure conditions than today, we cannot avoid thinking of the colossal uncertainty involved, and how brave they were. Perhaps their courage and audacity was that of reckless people ignoring the real dangers; or they were simply forced by terrible necessity. Perhaps both, it is impossible for us to know. The fact remains that they dared to undertake incredibly long voyages with little knowledge of what they might encounter along the way, particularly in the Early Middle Ages. F. J. Gómez Espelosín expresses it rightly, and even when referring to ancient times his reflection serves also for medieval times. He says that the outside world was a blank page on the traveller's mental map, which was not always filled in the right way. The remnants of a geographic reality that was still poorly perceived and imprecisely recorded intermingled dangerously with the demands of fantasy. The ignorance of the real geography is evidenced in the persistence of certain errors throughout the old literature, some of which even crossed the borders of the old world (Gómez Espelosín 2000:20).

Perhaps some of the medieval travellers who had the courage to dare the travel had something like a map before parting. However, if that were the case, it would have been a conventional, schematic map with more or less detailed routes; nothing more than that. The travellers themselves, as we have pointed out, were the ones who contributed to the mapping of the known and unknown world, although the outcomes of their efforts were not always very reliable. The news they brought was said to be exaggerated, and they were accused of telling about things they had not actually seen, but that had been told to them by another traveller. Aware of their bad reputation, they tended to fight strongly against the possibility of not being believed. Indeed, they used to allude to the reliability of their accounts with strong determination.

The expression of travel book veracity as a virtue of the book itself continued to be essential for centuries; so much so that it was made fun of by the genius of Jonathan Swift long after Middle Ages. Swift, who wrote about it at the end of his most fantastic book, made a precise point of what we are saying:

*Thus, gentle Reader, I have given thee a faithful History of my Travels for Sixteen Years, and above Seven Months; wherein I have not been so studious of Ornament as of Truth. I could perhaps like others have astonished thee with strange improbable Tales; but I rather chose to relate plain Matter of Fact in the simplest Manner and Style; because my principal Design was to inform, and not to amuse thee. It is easy for us who travel into remote Countries, which are seldom visited by Englishmen or other Europeans, to form Descriptions of wonderful Animals both at Sea and Land. Whereas, a Traveller's chief Aim should be to make Men wiser and better, and to improve their Minds by the bad, as well as good Example of what they deliver concerning foreign places. I could heartily wish a Law were enacted, that every Traveller, before he were permitted to publish his Voyages, should be obliged to make Oath before the Lord High Chancellor, that all he intended to print was absolutely true to the best of his Knowledge; for then the world would no longer be deceived as it*

*usually is, while some writers, to make their Works pass the better upon the Public, impose the grossest of Falsities on the unwary Reader* (Swift 1995:261).

We should remember that in those days there were legendary elements even in the most reliable of works; if truth be told, travellers' writings were to be mostly legends in form of travel books. Travellers were somehow aware of the importance of what they told upon their return, but they could not avoid reporting extraordinary things that were not always true. Perhaps they did it unintentionally; they had in mind their own concept of the world and when they adapted it to the real world, something got lost along the way. We should also take into account that more than once the credible was much more powerful than the actual truth, simply because the latter, at times, was so implausible for the recipient as to elicit disbelief. This, for instance, was the case of the widely known anecdote on the subject of ice that occurred between the Dutch ambassador and the King of Siam:

*The King of Siam. As it happened to a Dutch ambassador, who entertaining the king of Siam with the particularities of Holland, which he was inquisitive after, amongst other things told him that the water in his country would sometimes, in cold weather, be so hard that men walked upon it, and that it would bear an elephant, if he were there. To which the king replied: Hitherto I have believed the strange things you have told me, because I look upon you as a sober fair man, but now I am sure you lie* (Locke John Locke 1690: Lib. 4, cap. 15.5).

One way or another, the outcome was that medieval travellers had little notion of the hazardous enterprises they were willing to undertake. Despite all the hostile factors against them, they kept on travelling and were not necessarily compelled to do so by force, as explained above. They dared to embark upon dangerous journeys, risking their lives, but not for commercial reasons alone, even if trade, as we have said, was one of their main reasons, there were other motivations. Following commerce in importance, the second best-known reason to travel was pilgrimage, for Christians, Muslims and Jews alike. And, apart from these two key reasons people had at the time to travel long distances, we may also add other equally important reasons, such as migration, political exile, military manoeuvres, missionary work, exploration, improvement of health, and ambassadorial duties.

Another reason, perhaps not easily perceived, but nonetheless relevant, was curiosity. Mere curiosity is an everlasting human condition that pushes humans to venture into the unknown from the moment they are born. Perhaps it was not the most persuasive reason to travel at the time, but it certainly cannot be discarded. By mere curiosity we are not referring to banal inquisitiveness. We intend to discuss the primeval and innate need to know what the world is like beyond the boundaries of the homeland. Such were the reasons and the risks. Depending on the nature of the journey, we may also surmise the rewards if a traveller daringly embarked upon an adventure and it met with success.

## 2. Jewish diaspora

“A wandering<sup>2</sup> Aramean was my father, he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, he and just a handful of his brothers at first, but soon they became a great nation, mighty and many” (Deut 26:5).

Obviously, people belonging to different cultures, periods of time and geographical areas, might have had their own particular reasons to travel, which were not necessarily universal. And, of all the people travelling in the Middle Ages, we would like to pay special attention to Jewish people and the way they moved across the known world. The way they travelled was quite particular and expressed a lot about their own way to viewing the world around them. The very beginning of the existence of Jewish people as an identifiable group commenced with a long journey: that of Abraham, the wandering Aramean. The Jewish history, as we know it today, was passed mostly in Exile. From Abraham parting from Ur of Chaldea to the exodus from Egypt; from the moment they lost political control of their own land and were dispersed, first in the Middle East and the growing Roman Empire and then throughout the known world, most of Jewish history takes place in the Diaspora. Indeed, after the Babylonian captivity, there were always more Jews outside Palestine than within.

They lost what we may call today a country of their own very early. From the second century A.D. onwards, we find them moving from one place to another forced by different circumstances, periods and geographical areas. This constant movement, which recalls the so-called ‘wandering Jew’, did not prevent them from preserving their entity as an identifiable group throughout the centuries. Indeed, spread out as they were, they still managed to be an easily recognisable people in the Middle Ages.

We could reflect here some of the most important of Jewish migrations throughout history, but we are afraid of missing the point, since there are so many. Any one of them would be subject matter for a study of its own, and therefore we have chosen not to go into the subject in greater depth. We intensely recommend the reading of the last studies on Jewish Diaspora; in especial the work edited by Mark Avrum Ehrlich on Jewish Diaspora; and also the work more specific of Howard Wettstein<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew term translated here for ‘wandering’, generally means ‘to perish’ or the like, and a meaning ‘to go astray’ or ‘to be lost’ is also attested. Thus, we can translate it as we do here: ‘travelling about with no clear destination’; but without forgetting the ambivalence in the Hebrew text that is clearly reflected in the classic versions, starting with the Greek that reads ἀπέβαλεν, “lose”. This is not the place for extensive explanations on the readings of the Targum, Peshitta and Vulgate, but we wanted to point it out briefly because we consider it important to highlight that our reading is not a unique one.

<sup>3</sup> Complete references at the end.

### 3. Jewish 'on the move': religion and language

To start with, it would be useful to consider what Jewish people had in common with any other travellers of the period, in order to avoid the mistakes we ordinarily make when studying medieval Jewish communities in Europe. We usually tend to point out how they differed from the majority among whom they lived, and we insist so much on it, that in the end we forget that they did indeed belong to the land where they were born and, after a few generations, they saw that place as their own. Firstly, they were Jews, and no doubt they formed a clear identifiable group through generations but, they were also part of the land where they were born, that was their homeland. Thus, Jewish people shared the same motivations and fears as anyone else when they roamed far from home. And all this could not be better expressed than in the words of a famous Jewish poet and translator Yehudah Al-Harizi (c. 1170-1230).

We have chosen Yehudah Al-Harizi to express it because he was not only a poet and translator; he was also an adventurous traveller whose journeys took him far from Spain where he was born, and into Israel, Syria, and Mesopotamia. Although he was not the most remarkable Jewish traveller in the Middle Ages, his words are still those of a well-seasoned one. He wrote a precise summary of what travelling meant then and even now, and what it is probably the essence of leaving one's culture, period and homeland behind. In fact, his view came to be one of the most accurate and unique expressions of the incomprehensible need that drives humans from one place to another. In his classical work, *Tahkemoni*, he draws on his own experience to write about the benefits and drawbacks of travel. First, he evokes the unfavourable conditions for travelling with these words:

*Wandering is confusion, travelling a disgrace, the departure is fearful. Anyone who migrates from his own country and leaves his circle of friends fills his soul with evil and cannot raise his head. The sun will hit him, storms will knock him down, sultriness will burn him, rain will drown him, and wind will blow him away... If he walks, then he will know pain and disease because the stones will hurt him, thorns will encircle him, and he will despise the world... If by sea, the waves will engulf him and the sea will be enraged. The sea will unleash its weapon-like fury. Then his mood will change; he will curse his life and despise the world... In fact, all this will befall he who leaves his place of residence, like a bird that migrates from its nest... (Reichert 1965, Schirmann 1965, Segal 2001).*

He goes on to describe at length, and even lovingly, all the virtues of setting out on a journey, after the unappealing description above:

*Travel is salvation, wandering a blessing. Whoever travels will achieve his goal, whoever walks the way governs his will, and whoever wends his way collects his fruits. He who remains seated will seem a silent stone. When walking, he can see new faces and cure the deepest injuries of the heart. His happiness will be renewed, his splendour will shine, his worries will calm, his sadness will go far from his thoughts and he will return to his country with his pockets full of*

*money. His luck will hold. He will find that people treat him with consideration and that at crossroads all eyes will be upon him.*

### 3.1. Religion

We read here universal reasons for travelling, shared by nearly everyone now and then. However, Al-Harizi, as a Jew, includes reasons of his own people. What is it, then, that distinguishes the Jewish people from other travellers? Perhaps, the unique nature of their early dispersion. An also the inexplicable instinct to remain a specific group across the centuries, despite that dispersion. They travelled for all the above-mentioned reasons, but also, and perhaps mostly, to remain in contact with their fellow Jews scattered around the world. It was not only a need to remain in contact; it was also a commandment coming directly from the Lord. In the book written by the medieval Jewish traveller *par excellence*, Benjamin of Tudela he expresses it with these words<sup>4</sup>: “All Israel is dispersed in every land, and he who does not further the gathering of Israel will not meet with happiness nor live with Israel. When the Lord remembers us in our exile and raises those born of his anointed, then everyone will say: I will lead the Jews and will bring them together” (Adler 1907:17).

It aptly expresses what travel meant for Jewish people, and about preserving a single identity. For them, travel was a way to re-establish lost contacts, permitting them to retain their faith intact while living in isolation among alien religions worldwide for thousands of years. This has to do with what we have already said, that after living in a place for generations, they felt of that place as theirs but, at the same time, they did not lose their awareness of being part of a clearly identifiable group in any country where they lived. They belonged to the place of their birth but the awareness of being spread around the world accompanied the Jewish communities throughout the ages, and with it, the desire to communicate with their fellow Jews scattered to the four corners of the earth. They preserve the feeling of belonging to something specific, the impression that they can hold on to something that is uniquely their own.

Their interest in their own affairs is perfectly perceived in their travel accounts. When we read Jewish books of travels, such as the one by Benjamin of Tudela, we realize that they paid an inordinate amount of attention, too detailed and almost irritating, to every aspect of the Jewish communities they visited. He mentioned every possible rabbi, perhaps to confirm the unquestionable existence of the Jewish people as a tight-knit group despite their dispersion. Thus, they had a very real reason of their own to move from one place to another, anchored in the dispersion of the Jewish people early on in history. But, on the other hand, that same dispersion was also highly convenient when they travelled as the Arab chronicler Ibn Said said:

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<sup>4</sup> There are many translations and critical editions of Benjamin’s book. In English, the most relevant one continues to be the critical text, translation and commentary done by N. M. Adler used here.

*The Jewish nation, with the exclusion of any other nation, is the house of prophecy and source of apostolate. The majority of prophets – God bless them and may they rest in peace – were born there. This nation lived in Palestine, where their first and last king lived, until they were expelled by the Roman emperor Titus, who destroyed their kingdom and banished them in all directions. Thus, there is no place in the known world without a Jew living therein; neither East, West, North, nor South (Poliakov 1961: vol 2, 114).*

What the Arab chronicler said was totally true in the Middle Ages, when there were Jewish communities spread out all around the Mediterranean Basin, allowing Jewish people to travel conveniently from one Jewish community to another. Sometimes they lived apart in the country they inhabited, but even so they were perfectly at ease in it thanks to their profound knowledge of their surroundings. This familiarity with the territory they lived in, allowed them to move from one country to another somehow without trespassing beyond the boundaries of the Jewish communities. Perhaps these special conditions permitted Jewish travellers to move about quite safely and, even when travelling alone, they could arrive far; even if we cannot know this for sure, it seems quite possible. When they arrived at a Jewish community, they received essential news about the world around them. They learned all about its perils and advantages and then, with all this precious information, they started out for their next objective. Jewish people were not the only ones who could travel this way. There were other known cases, such as the Muslims, who could also travel afar as easily as though the territories they crossed were under Muslim control. This is perfectly represented by the journey of the most famous Muslim traveller of all: Ibn Battuta<sup>5</sup>. However, the case of Jewish people is completely different because it did not depend on any power of their own. They were not an empire. Their ‘advantage’, if we may call it such, was timeless. Empires came and went, whereas the Jewish chain persisted for centuries.

### 3.2. Hebrew language

There was another link between Jewish people closely connected with their religion, and that, like dispersion, it was convenient for travel. I am referring to Hebrew, the most Sacred Language, in which the Old Testament was written. In medieval times Hebrew was sometimes used by Jews to communicate, but above all it was the language in which the Torah was written, and it was the Jews' responsibility to preserve it. Ordinary Jews often forgot Hebrew owing to the convenience of speaking the languages around them in their new land. This was despairing to educated Jews, who eagerly tried to highlight the importance of preserving the Hebrew language. We know, on account of some testimonies by the most important grammarians of the time, the distress they felt at the increasing

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<sup>5</sup> Serafín Fanjul, in the introduction to his translation of Ibn Battuta travel book, expresses it clearly when he says: “...su relato no presenta interés documental, ni tampoco hace falta: su novedad estriba en ser un viajero del Islam...” (cf. Fanjul and Arbós 1981:31).

disregard for their language. To them, Hebrew was one more vital link between the Jews dispersed throughout the world.

One illustrative instance of this deep and heartfelt concern is that of Sa'adya Gaon, who wrote that he decided to carry out his work as a grammarian by the fact that Jewish people were abandoning Hebrew as a language. In prologue to his famous *Egron*, he writes:

*I have seen many Israelites who do not understand the common of literary language, let alone the difficulties of it. When they speak, most of what they say is far removed from the rules of proper speech... In the year 101, after the destruction of our holy capital, we began to abandon the Sacred Language and spoke in foreign languages... We were dispersed to all the corners of the earth, the islands and the sea. There was no nation without our exiled people. Among these nations we educated our children. We learnt their language and concealed the beauty of our language with their babbling. This is not fair... Our heart is troubled because of it and our mind is afraid that the Sacred Language will disappear from our lips (Allony 1961:61).*

In later periods, this distress appeared constantly in the writings of other masters of the Hebrew language, such as Shlomo ibn Gabirol. He was the sublime poet, perhaps the most excellent among the excellent, and without any doubt one of the maximum connoisseurs of the Hebrew language having a mastery of it without equal. He said in his *'Anaq*: "I do know that the Sacred Language has been destroyed and almost disappeared. No language stranger for them than their own language, the Hebrew. They stopped to be familiar with the Hebrew language. One half speak the language of Christians the other that of Arabs, so obscure... With you, remainder of Jacob, will contend the Lord if you forget the Elected language!" (Brody & Schirmann 1974:91).

Jews always prayed in Hebrew, but we do not know for sure till which point they made use of it in order to communicate among them. These testimonies could reveal that Hebrew was used in one way or another not only for praying. Perhaps the average Jews did not speak it properly, but it seems they knew it. Thus, depending on the origin and education of the travelling Jew, it could be assumed that he could use Hebrew as a *lingua franca*. It is true that we can but guess this last point, having no direct testimonies of the fact, but if the most known writers of the time complained about the poor use of Hebrew, it must be that it was in fact used. If that was the case, we have another peculiarity of Jewish people that was a reason to be in contact and, at the same time, an advantage when making it.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Therefore, the reasons that impelled a medieval Jew to face such long journeys as that of Yehudah al-Harizi or Benjamin of Tudela, were not only those of a common traveller. They shared with any other traveller that mixture of curiosity, wish of adventure, need of making money, we have talked about above. However,

they had their own particular motivations and their own way of travelling. Their origin, history and particular identity made of them of a different kind while moving on around the known world. The acute and penetrating historian P. Johnson opens his most famous work *A History of the Jews*, with a paragraph that expresses accurately the open unresolved question of how Jewish identity persists throughout history almost intact in its essence. He explains why he decided to write his book with these words:

*My second reason was the excitement found in the sheer span of Jewish history. From the time of Abraham up to the present covers the best part of four millennia. That is more than three-quarters of the entire history of civilized humanity. I am a historian who believes in long continuities and delights in tracing them. The Jews created a separate and specific identity earlier than almost any other people that still survive. They have maintained it, amid appalling adversities, right up to the present. Whence came this extraordinary endurance? What was the particular strength of the all-consuming idea which made the Jews different and kept them homogenous? Did its continuing power lie in its essential immutability, or its capacity to adapt, or both? These are sinewy themes with which to grapple (Johnson 1987).*

He wrote a colossal work to understand this and other questions about Jewish people, but after all the precise answers he gave, the truth is still not clear. We think that reflecting on how they moved about in medieval times, and for the specific reasons they did so, we may guess another feature that made Jews identifiable throughout history and we get closer to a more precise answer.

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