

AS IF THE JEWS HAD NO LORD

By Benjamin R. Gampel

During the ten months that spanned June 1391 to April 1392, the politically shrewd, economically prosperous and culturally vital Jewish communities of the Crown of Aragon and Kingdom of Castile were the victims of the most devastating attacks ever unleashed on the Jews of medieval Christian Europe. As an historian of medieval Sephardic Jewry, what I wrote about these riots that left in their wake hundreds upon hundreds of dead Jews, scores of communal institutions destroyed, and thousands of coreligionists forcibly converted to Christianity has haunted me. What plagued me was not the account of how Jews were assaulted in so many Castilian cities and towns, or the description of how the distinguished Aragonese communities of Valencia, Barcelona and Girona were devastated. What left me shaken was the behavior of the Aragonese royal family - King Joan, Queen Iolant, and Duke Martí, Joan's younger brother and future king, the self-proclaimed protectors of the Jews.

Although the Jews' security was of interest to Joan, Iolant, and Martí, the safety of the Jews was simply one of many interests that competed for their attention. Consequently, the physical security of the Jews and the protection of Judaism devolved into matters of secondary import. While the commitment of the royal family to this minority community may have been genuine and steadfast, concern about beleaguered Jews was not elevated into their primary political consideration. Decisive force was necessary if the unrest was to be kept in check, but effective suppression of the violence by members of the royal family was not forthcoming.

Throughout the riots, the Jews appealed to their lords to safeguard their lives and their property. The Jews' reliance upon their sovereigns was to be expected; they did not have much of a choice. When Hasdai Crescas, great diplomat, grand philosopher and staunch defender of Aragonese Jewries pleaded on behalf of his son and his entourage who had sought refuge with other Barcelonan Jews in the Castell Nou, even this most connected of Aragonese Jewish courtiers, who was a frequent presence in the royal palace in Saragossa, was unable to save his own son. The queen and king may well have been in agreement regarding intervention on his behalf, but they themselves were reliant on the interest and initiative of local authorities, which turned out to be as misplaced as the Jews' reliance on the royal, and even municipal, powers. As late as January 22, 1392, even the royal authorities, looking back over the months of riots, bitterly conceded that it appeared "as if the Jews had no lord."

That the safety of a minority people cannot be assured is not simply a banality of Jewish history, but a truth about the fate of all people and of all groups whose security is dependent on others. However sincere the intentions of the majority society, and the assurances of its leaders, to protect those who are reliant upon them, the security of a minority community is ultimately, for them, not a matter of paramount importance.

Not only minority groups and their members, but also sovereign states, need to fashion alliances in order to safeguard their persons and their interests. This past year, alongside all other Americans, we witnessed members of our American racial, ethnic, and religious minorities inadequately protected in the cities and towns in which they lived. In response, these groups strove mightily to elicit promises of protection from local officials and from those who filled

the highest offices of our land. More recently, we all beheld the Prime Minister of Israel repair to the United States to seek commitments about the state of its alliance with the world's most dominant political and military power, notwithstanding his air of self-confidence about his country's security.

While pleas by minorities for assurances from the powerful, and their emphasis on their loyalty and usefulness to the dominant, are reasonable and necessary, the premise of all who seek protection - that the pledges of the strong would surely make them safe, discomfits me. Time spent with late 14th century Aragonese Jews taught me that the promises of the mighty are only as good as their effective power and, most importantly, can only be of benefit if the ruler keeps the interests of those in need foremost in mind.

Perhaps we can reassure ourselves that in stable societies there are no grounds for minority groups to fear the worst. After all, the Jews enjoyed long stretches in their history when their communities flourished, and they benefitted from a measure of prosperity, material and spiritual. But how can Jews and others protect their own when potential or impending danger looms? Undoubtedly, it is wise not to rely solely on the most powerful, but to cast about for other alliances, even if all parties to this lesser arrangement acknowledge the relative weakness of their mutual assurances. Nevertheless, for any group dependent on others including Jews - and all others - living in Israel, or in the many diaspora communities, the implications for the future are discouraging, and our safety demands that we neither slumber nor sleep.

Benjamin R. Gampel, holds the Dina and Eli Field Family Chair in Jewish History at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and was awarded

the Nahum M. Sarna Memorial Award in Scholarship by the Jewish Book Council for his *Anti-Jewish Riots in the Crown of Aragon and the Royal Response, 1391-1392* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).