

ABSTRACT

THE SEPHARDIC DIASPORA IN NORTH AFRICA FOLLOWING
THE EXPULSION FROM SPAIN ON THE RELATION BETWEEN
TORAH AND PHILOSOPHY

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The relationship between the Torah and philosophy fueled many medieval controversies. At the one extreme one finds the rationalist position – those who mandated the study of philosophy and rational inquiry, seeing in these a yardstick by which biblical exegesis could be properly evaluated. On the other end of the spectrum, one finds conservative elements that viewed secular disciplines as a foreign transplant; they denied the validity of philosophy and the sciences and touted the preeminence of simple faith. Between these two extremes lay the gamut of intermediate positions– figures who though they may have acknowledged the validity of philosophy, rational inquiry, and secular disciplines, were careful to put these in their place, emphasizing the preeminence of the Torah over the sciences.

Even after the expulsion from Spain, Jewish thinkers and commentators expressed their views on the matter; however while the issue had been studied in the context of the Sephardic Jewry in Italy and the Ottoman Empire, the Sephardic Diaspora in North Africa were yet to merit comparable scholarly attention.

Thus, in the present article I would like to shed light on the issue among the Sephardic Diaspora in Fez, Thalmasan and Algiers, in the 16th-17th centuries. A review of their writings indicate that they held the intermediate positions, that they acknowledged the validity of philosophy, rational inquiry, and secular disciplines, but were careful to put these in their place, emphasizing the preeminence of the Torah over the sciences. While their approaches may not express any innovative ideas, their study is vital for a full picture of the controversy throughout the ages, as well as to the clarification of the Jewish thought that was formed in North Africa.