The Faux Europeans

The dispute, as stated, was long-lasting, waged in multiple settings and, unlike Saul Joseph’s polemic, rarely targeted a specific scholarly or intellectual framework, instead relating to broader political and scientific tendencies. One may, however, detect in Yehuda’s critical discourse the main group of intellectuals that he confronted over the years, which he called the “Russian Maskilim.”

Already in an early letter to Yellin he expressed acidic criticism of these “Russian Maskilim” (intellectuals) who, as he saw it, “appropriated Hebrew literature like landlords and made themselves the custodians of Judaism although they never knew what it demanded of us [them? him? ממנו]” and what goals it seeks to attain (Yahuda, “Letter to David Yellin,” 1899). Although he did not explain exactly who these Russian Maskilim were, his descriptions imply that they were, foremost, members of Hebrew Haskalah circles that were sprouting across the Russian Empire at that time—circles that, he confessed, influenced his intellectual world at the outset of his career:

Admittedly, I learned a great deal and will forget a great deal; in particular, I wished to free myself of the theories and opinions that the Russian Hebrew literature bequeathed to us. So I made a strenuous effort to dislodge the power of their influence over my mind so that no spirit of madness should inundate me and continue to widen the internal divide between my past and my future, because I was greatly fearful that I, too, would fall into the clutches of the malignant disease that has sunk roots in the hearts of the Russian Maskilim and turned their doctrine into an admixture of Slavic, German, and French inspiration. As such, their literature abounds with tumult and deadening confusion of views. To this day it retains the putrid and corrupt spirit that distances it from the true Hebrew soul, which has known the nature of the Hebrew culture since antiquity, that exalted and sublime culture established by our prophets and seers, due to which our Sephardi poets and sages, and Maimonides the codifier [המאסף] did not act in this manner, for what has this craft got to do with them? (Yahuda, “Letter to David Yellin,” 1899, 4–5).

By implication, the Russian Hebrew Haskalah dominated Yahuda’s world, and by moving to Europe he managed to break free of its influence and connect with what he identified as the authentic Hebrew culture. He first came upon the Russian Maskilim as an adolescent in Jerusalem who became involved in the local Hebrew Haskalah circles that had formed in the 1880s and 1890s. His studies in Germany exposed him to another group of Russian Jewish intellectuals, who attended German universities as he did. It is no surprise, then, that in his letter to Yellin in 1899, Yahuda emphasizes these Russian intellectuals’ distance from the Hebrew and European culture:

Indeed, how different they are from each other. The former are true intellectuals who know Judaism, Jewish history, and [Jewish] literature down the generations. Their European-ness, however, has overwhelmed them so badly that the yearning to find overt ideas even in the sweetest views in our literature has nestled in them, whereas the Russian writers usually lack all this knowledge as I have already said, and therefore their labors are not clean but rather jumbled, confused, and, in particular, lacking in unity. It is European literature in the camp of Israel that today’s writers wish to find (ibid.).

Yahuda’s “Russian Maskilim” exhibit the Orientalist traits, common in Germany at the time, that were brought against the “Ostjuden,” the Jews of Eastern Europe (Aschheim, 1982). Yahuda’s angle of observation, however, is not solely European; it also embodies his own freighted encounter in Jerusalem with the Russian Jews of the First Aliya. In this context, by criticizing the “European-ness” of the “Russian Maskilim” he liberates himself from years of cultural and intellectual domination. In the encounter in Jerusalem, the “European-ness” of these Russian Jewish intellectuals helped him draw a line between them and the local inhabitants (the Old Yishuv Jews and the Arab residents of the country). Decades later, Yahuda would describe, not without irony, this encounter in Jerusalem in an article in Yellin’s memory after the latter’s death in 1941:

So when this “intelligentsia” began to immigrate to Eretz Israel from abroad, they, like the teachers and officials who had been sent from Paris, paraded about like “Europeans,” opening a new abyss between those who had come from abroad and the natives of the country. These “Europeans” looked down on the indigenes, including those who had already more-or-less freed themselves of the influence of the old generation, and considered them culturally and educationally deficient. Even many of those who went to the [Jewish] villages from Russia, Galicia, and Romania, who were much less developed than some of the natives of Eretz Israel, purported to be “Europeans” because they wore starched shirts and long trousers, even though those [pieces of clothing] were not always the epitome of cleanliness and completeness. To them, the Ashkenazim of the old generation walked in the benightedness of their illiteracy and piety and the Sephardim were “Asiatics” who were unfit for inclusion in “European” company. As soon as one of them could stammer in French or chatter in Russian, stammer-stammer here and chatter-chatter there, he already joined the cream of the “intelligentsia.” I remember visiting David Yellin when he still dressed like a Sephardi and his house bustling with “intellectuals,” including peasants from the farming villages who were [intellectuals] in name but not in practice, or guests from Russia, they would give me a sidelong look as though I were a creature out of place in those surroundings. Yellin had to whisper to them that the “breeze of the Haskalah” blew under my Oriental Sephardi clothing and that I was more “intelligent” inside than I looked on the outside. I would gaze around me and marvel about any number of those “Europeans” who had neither education nor wisdom, their clothing being the sole marker of their European-ness and their splendor (Yahuda, 1946: 240–241).

This mordent and acidic description of “European-ness” and “Sephardiness,” centering on an encounter with new representations and labelings of identities and cultures, embodies several salient elements of Yahuda’s criticism of the Russian Jewish intellectuals. It also captures an important moment in the biographies of Yahuda and Yellin and the history of ethnic relations between Ashkenazim and Sephardim. The fact that Yahuda offers this critique in an article in Yellin’s memory adds various dimensions to it. In those years, Yellin was involved in Hebrew Haskalah circles in Palestine and across the Russian Empire. He, like Yahuda, published his articles and studies in Hebrew in the periodicals of the Hebrew revival.

The trenchant criticism that Yahuda expressed in his letter to Yellin in 1899, at an early stage of his career, represents the dynamic between his intimacy and connection with the circles of the Russian Hebrew Haskalah and the negation and rejection of the same circles that would appear in his polemic with two intellectual circles—Judaic Studies and the Zionist movement—over the shaping and representation of the Sephardi legacy.

Below I examine this controversy by tracing Yahuda’s movements at three points in time in different spatial and imperial settings and contexts (the Ottoman Empire, Europe, Spain, and the British Empire).

On European Soil, 1896–1913

Yahuda’s polemics over the shaping of the “Sephardi legacy” in the Judaic Studies and Hebrew Haskalah circles of his generation centered on two main questions:

1. the status and influence of the Hebrew language and literature on the shaping and development of Hebrew thought and poetry in Muslim Spain /Andalus;
2. the formulation and translation of the Sephardi/Andalusian legacy amid the modernization of Hebrew culture and Jewish identity.

Addressing the first topic, Yahuda emphasized the study of medieval Sephardi poetry and thought. Relating to the second, he accented the representations of the Sephardi legacy and the potential of translating them into political and cultural models with which the Jewish political and scientific discourse in Europe might be shaped. Although the two topics appeared together and were not separate in the controversy, it is important to establish their bounds and trace their tangents and intersections.

At the very start of his writing in the Hebrew press, Yahuda stressed the dominance of the Arabic culture and language in the output of the Jewish poets of medieval Spain and noted the disregard of this aspect in Judaic Studies scholarship. In one of his first articles on this topic, published in 1903, Yahuda stressed the importance of Arabic literature in the Sephardi Jewish legacy and rued the Jewish scholars’ ignorance of this body of work:

If many were the Hebrew Sephardim who enriched our literature with their respected works, their poems, and their linguistic flourishes, many too were the Hebrew Sephardim who earned eternal repute in Arabic literature and were praised by all historians and chroniclers [of that literature] in Spain. The latter, however, have not attracted the attention of today’s scholars and literature as have the former because they did their work outside the field of our literature, sowing, planting, and raising fruit in the field of others. Therefore, their memory has not come down in our literary history and only in small random bits do we find a small chapter that speaks about some Hebrew poet [who created] in the language of Arabia and even then treats him with little intention and no serious thought, citing him only by chance among their other remarks (Yahuda, 1946: 171).

According to Yahuda, the disregard of Arabic texts in Judaic Studies traces to the labeling of the Arabic language and culture as extraneous to the Jewish culture. Contrarily, he wishes in his articles to identify Sephardi poetry and thought as part of the Arab legacy of Muslim Spain, in which Arabic was foundational in the Sephardi Jews’ creative outpouring:

The Arabic influence is so salient in everything they wrote and studied that one perceives it in everything they composed in our language. Even though they were among the fathers, builders, and perfectors of [Hebrew], they felt the proximity of the two languages so strongly that they even used some Hebrew verbs, words, and expressions in their Arabic sense. And needless to say, the influence of the spirit of Arabic was deeper than anything written in Arabic about the sciences of language, philosophy, and all applied wisdoms; even in halakhic writings, it appears in the style, the syntax, and the use of innumerable words and expressions borrowed from the Muslims’ laws (the *fikh*). In their responsa, too, their style is very close to that of the Muslim decisors and their responsa (their *fatwas*) (Yehuda, 1946: 137–138).

In a letter to an unknown addressee in 1899, Yahuda describes the connection with the Arabic language in the literature of medieval Spanish Jewry more explicitly: “Almost all of our Sephardi poets’ works are inspired by Arabic poetry; it is hard to find in them even one new idea of which the likes are not found in one of the Arabs’ poems! Once I tried to note in the margins of Hebrew poems that I had read the stanza of Arabic poems that corresponded to them in both ideas and manner of phrasing, and I found for almost every Hebrew stanza a corresponding Arabic one. I found not even one new idea! In al-Harizi in particular, nearly all poems are all copies of Arabic poems (apart from the sacred ones) and none is original.” The Hebrew poets’ works, according to Yahuda, offer nothing either new or independent; they are but translations and imitations of coeval Arabic poetry. This, he adduces, attests to the inferiority of Hebrew poetry relative to the Arabic: “Anyone who reads Spanish Arabic lyrical or poetic literature will realize how impoverished our own literature is in both its quantity and its essence. The Spanish period was the Golden Age of Arabic poetic literature because Arabic poetry rose to extreme heights of pleasantness and intellectual wealth at that time” (Yahuda, “Letter to an Unknown Addressee,” 1899, quoted in Toby, 2000: 20).

Although Yahuda does not repeat this allegation again with such power, it is definitely typical of his tendency to credit Sephardi poetry to a broad Judeo-Arabic heritage in which the Hebrew output operated in the shadow of the Arabic.

Here it is important to stress that Yahuda saw the Arabic language not only as a philological-scholarly tool but also as a broad historical and cultural framework that bonded Jewish and Muslim traditions for centuries. Beyond the importance of the Arabic language, Yahuda wished to emphasize the importance of the bodies of Arab knowledge and traditions in the scholarly process and the gathering of Jewish literature in Spain. In several of his articles in the Hebrew press, he focused on Jewish poets who wrote mainly in Arabic and emphasized works that were published in the Arabic literature:

Therefore, when I see the story of the greatness of these poets—some of whom were also important people and holders of economic posts in the halls of kings, such as R. Hisdai ben Yosef, R. Abraham ibn al-Fakkar, Qasmūna, and others—retold in the Arabs’ books with keen interest and no one bothers to extricate these hidden treasures from their hiding places, I resolved to begin this labor and to bring out the story of these people’s history from the Arabs’ books and to translate it into our language (quoted in Yahuda, 1946: 171).

Yahuda’s approach to Arabic and his appreciation of its importance were not dissociated from the Ottoman and Arab context in which he was raised in late nineteenth-century Jerusalem: the influence of modernization and the Ottoman Reformation; the Arab cultural renewal (foremost surrounding the circles of the Arab *nahda* (Enlightenment)); and the attempts to construct a framework for Oriental-Arabic modernization grounded in linguistic revival and return to Arabic poetic, philosophical, and theological traditions that had sprouted in the eras of Arab-Muslim splendor, including the golden years of Arabic literature and philosophy in Muslim Spain (al-Andalus).[[1]](#footnote-1) Yahuda’s criticism is instructive of the broad context of the Hispano-Jewish legacy in its contact with Arabic thought and poetry in al-Andalus and the revival of the Arabic language and literature that occurred in its light. He sketches the path that this option should follow: a return to the Sephardi heritage by reconnecting with the Arabic language and literature that was written about Muslim Spain. In the continuation of his article, he introduces several Jewish poets who wrote in Arabic in Spain and describes their importance among the Arabic poets of that country as presented in the Arabic chronicles and travelogue literature of the time:

[Abraham ibn al-Fakkar’s] poems and letters were collected in a special notebook by the Arab traveler Salah al-Hamdani, and the author of the history and development of Arabic literature in the land of Spain, Ahmad al-Makri, retells ibn al-Fakkar’s glory with much interest. Here is what he said: “This Jewish sage was a giant of the logic, phrasing, and craft of the language; and many precious poems were sung in it. Anyone who understands the craft of poetry and reads his poems will find it unbelievable that these poems, glorious and flush with lovely and pleasant turns of phrase, emerged from the violin of a Jewish man, for how can it be that God would grace the mind of a Jewish man to sing such glorious songs in the language of the prophet (Muhammad)?” It shows us how prodigious the Jews were in our language and how broadly it was known among these sages, who earned renown in all sciences (Yahuda, 1903: 171).

Yahuda’s criticism of the disregard of Jewish literature in Arabic was also based on his own standing in the Orientalist philological scholarship of late-nineteenth-century Germany. In an article he published shortly before his death, he expressed his critique of the Judaic Studies devotees in the context of scientific methodology and stressed the implications of the attitude in Judaic Studies toward the literature in Arabic for the scientific framework within which it was shaped:

The attitude of our [Judaic Studies] authors toward our literature from the medieval Arab period differs from their attitude toward all other periods in our literature. No sage or scholar would approach the study of Philo or write about him, for example, without knowing Greek, or about Spinoza without knowing Latin, or about Mendelssohn without knowing German. However, apart from a few exceptional individuals, almost everyone who dealt and is dealing with our literature from the Middle Ages is totally haphazard about teaching [learning?] the language on which much of their knowledge and methods draw. Even in regard to their books in Arabic, most of our scholars content themselves with knowing and understanding them in Hebrew translation, which itself is by and large so strongly influenced by Arabic that the most difficult passages cannot be understood without knowing Arabic. Furthermore, many principles, questions, reasonings, and methods are not fully understood unless we know the Arabic environment in which the sages of the time lived (Yahuda, 1946: 137–138).

Here Yahuda points to the scientific *problematique* that besets scholarship in Sephardi poetry and thought when the scholars who pursue it are not fluent in Arabic and base their research not on the original Arabic language of these works but on translations. Continuing his article, Yahuda broadens his claim that research into Sa’adia Gaon, like that concerning the medieval Sephardi litterateurs, must be based on profound familiarity with the coeval Arabic and Muslim literature: “The truth is that the more this matter is studied, the clearer it becomes that there is much in the books of R. Sa’adia Gaon, his views and outlooks, his language and style, and even his debates and disputes, that cannot be fully understood unless we know the Arabic studies that he acquired, the Arabic books that he perused, the Arabic outlooks that he absorbed, and even the views and beliefs of the Islamic faith with which that he dealt when he wrote his philosophy books and even his biblical commentary” (ibid.: 138).

Yahuda considered Sa’adia Gaon the paragon of a Jewish philosopher who operated on the seam between the Arabic language and culture and their Hebrew equivalents: a reformer who led the reshaping of Hebrew in view of Arabic and who interacted with the Arab enlightenment in a blend that preserved the Jewish spirit[[2]](#footnote-2):

Indeed, R. Sa’adia Gaon influenced his contemporaries and successors not only in halakhic writings and Torah exegesis but also from the direction of the Arabs’ general enlightenment, using their sciences and methods to broaden the horizons of their knowledge in order to set Jewish science on new foundations. He opened the gates to accommodate that which was superb and good and honest in the Arab enlightenment into Jewish studies and to perfect [Jewish studies] with an inflow of beautiful and correct [content] from scientific development at that time, also according to both the spirit of Judaism and the flavor of our language and traditions (ibid.: 136).

Yahuda’s presentation of the Sa’adia Gaon model reflects his criticism of the model put forward by his Judaic Studies contemporaries, which was based on subordinating the Jewish culture to the European one. One may find reverberations of this critique in a letter that he sent to Yellin in a very early stage of his intellectual life, in which he describes how the “Russian intellectuals” turned to Western Aryan culture instead of Eastern culture in their efforts to reshape Judaism:

To approach our literature while these writers of ours corrupt the European taste even in books by European authors that they translate. In fact, our literature needs Eastern-ness more than it needs European-ness. How saddened I am when I see authors among us who wish to impart views that are foreign to the spirit of the Nation of Israel, which is fundamentally Eastern. If these people knew the Eastern literature and acquainted themselves with the Eastern culture that our prophets developed, they would not turn solely to the **modern teachings, the fruits of Western culture, and particularly to the Aryan,** which is fundamentally opposed to the spirit of **our own culture. Our Eastern culture** was the product of the human emotion (Yahuda, “Letter to David Yellin,” September 15, 1899, author emphasis).

Yahuda criticizes the path chosen in Judaic Studies for the shaping of Jewish culture, based on a connection with the paths of European modernization and Western culture—both antithetical to the Eastern roots of Judaism. His use of the expression “Aryan culture” as the antipode of the Eastern culture of Judaism also reveals traces of the German Orientalist discourse in Yahuda’s rhetoric, with the philological-cultural binary of Aryan culture and Semitic culture central to it.

At the outset of his career in Europe, Yahuda tried to influence the conceptualization and the approach toward Sephardi thought and poetry among the European Jewish intellectuals of his time. One may find an interesting example of such an attempt in a brief and fascinating dialogue between the young Yahuda and his contemporary, the Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovsky, in 1897–1899. The young Jerusalemite, starting out in Germany, and the young Hebrew poet stationed in Odessa met in Germany at a freighted point of time in Jewish history—the eve of the First Zionist Congress.[[3]](#footnote-3) Yahuda, although still in his first year in Germany, was already involved in Hebrew student circles that operated in German universities and also, indirectly, in preparations for the First Zionist Congress, to which he was a delegate.

The connection with Tchernichovsky came about through Joseph Klausner, a student at Heidelberg at the time.[[4]](#footnote-4) Their encounter began with an exchange of letters and continued with personal encounters while Tchernichovsky was studying medicine at the University of Heidelberg and preparing to publish his first book of poetry in Hebrew in 1898. From the contents of their letters at this time, one can sense the mutual appreciation and formation of a strong friendship. Sephardi poetry was focal in their dialogue, which revolved around the question of its place on the seam between Hebrew and Arabic language and poetics and the implications of this place for the shaping of modern Hebrew poetry. In this relationship, Yahuda was an authority who specialized in Sephardi poetry, with which his contemporary Russian Hebrew poet was not adequately familiar.

Describing their encounter years later, Yahuda placed special emphasis on his attempts to teach the young Hebrew poet the secrets of the meter, rhyme, and poesy of medieval Sephardi poetry as a model for the writing of his Hebrew poetry. He described the way they set up several joint lessons while together in Heidelberg: “Occasionally we scheduled a lesson where we would read the poems of Ibn Gabirol and Judah Halevi. I got much pleasure and contentment from these lessons, seeing that he was becoming increasingly fond of their poetry.” These sessions, however, were cut off several weeks later because Tchernichovsky “began to prepare for a test and I left Heidelberg for the vacation. Our ways parted afterward because he went to Switzerland and I to Strasbourg” (Yahuda, 1946: 277).

Yahuda describes how Tchernichovsky struggled to recite Sephardi poetry in its Arabic meter, which was different from that typical of modern Hebrew poetry:

The thing [Tchernichovsky] found hardest when he read the Sephardi poems was their Arabic meter, which he was unable to accentuate as he did when reading his own poems, particularly because he was unaccustomed to pronouncing the Sephardi accent. Of all the meters, he found the “wafir” and the “mutakareb” the most pleasing because they are easy and close to the Roman meters in European poetry (ibid.).

What stands out in Yahuda’s account is the schism that occurred in Hebrew poetry as it migrated from medieval Spain to fin de siècle Europe. He associated this with the rejection of the connection of this poetry with Arabic poetry at that time. The Russian intellectuals’ estrangement from the style of Sephardi Hebrew poetry, with its roots in Arabic poesy, also surfaces. In a letter that he sent to Tchernichovsky at this time, Yahuda emphasizes the importance of in-depth study of Arabic in preparing for study of and research into Sephardi poetry:

Now I wish to conclude by reinforcing what you said about the attention our writers should have paid to the Arabs’ poetry and literature, because there is much to learn from them in understanding our ancient biblical poetry and, more so, in penetrating the spirit of the Hebrew poetry from the Arabic period in Spain. To do this, however, it is first necessary to produce students who know Arabic thoroughly, particularly in Eretz Israel, who will not teach it frivolously as is done in the schools there, just to satisfy the requirements, a language that the students will banish from memory (Yahuda, “Letter to Shaul Tchernichovsky,” quoted in Yahuda, 1946: 276).

A different stance on the nexus of Sephardi poetry and Arabic was expressed by the heads of the Hebrew Haskalah movement at the time. In their anthology about “Shirat Yisrael” (1906), Yehoshua Hana Rawnitzki, Bialik, and Simcha Benzion gave a critical account of the effect of Arabic meter and language on Sephardi poetry, treating this as a foreign element in Hebrew poetry:

The poets who used this [Arabic] meter may have found some kind of pleasantness in it at their time. In our time and place, we find no pleasantness in it, and accordingly, we did not fear occasionally to correct the punctuation in the body of the poems after the poets had disrupted it for the sake of meter. Furthermore, due to their enslavement to the meter, the poets sometimes had to distort several words and thus disserve the spirit of the Hebrew language. Occasionally, difficulties in style and foreignness also came to light through the influence of the Arabic language and poetry, which was very powerful among all poets of those generations (Rawnitzki, Bialik, and Benzion, 1906: v–vii).

Bialik argued similarly several years later in a lecture in Odessa about Judah Halevi’s poetry. Bialik described Halevi’s imitation of Arabic meter as a factor that put his poetry at a distance from the model of the original Hebrew poetry—an act of emulation that, he believed, attests to “exilic” influence in his works: “R. Judah Halevi did acknowledge this corruption and initially opposed the imitation of Arabic form, but ultimately he was also swept away in the exilic current of the foreign burden that it imposed on the poetry […]. It is a woe of [the Jewish] exile to which even its leading savants are inextricably enslaved” (Shiniak [לא מצאתי שם זה ברשימת המקורות], 2009: 17).

Yahuda tried to revise this conceptualization in his dialogue with Tchernichovsky and persuade the latter, unsuccessfully, to adopt Hebrew with a Hispano-Arabic meter, the form of Hebrew that has the tenor closest to Arabic, as a model for the restoration of the Hebrew language that, he hoped, “will finally spread the Sephardi accent in Eretz Israel and should be accepted throughout the Diaspora.” This did not disabuse Tchernichovsky of his belief that “every poet has the right to pursue a discourse in his own spirit and to weigh his rhymes according to his taste and feeling” (Yahuda, 1946: 278).

In describing Tchernichovsky’s difficulty in connecting with the meter, the accent, and the rhyming of Sephardi poetry, Yahuda emphasized the European frame of thought that obstructed this outcome: “A letter that I wrote in response to one of his letters appears in one segment. I find that he wrote to me about our Sephardi poets, [saying] that he does admire them but cannot surmount the difficulty that the ‘Oriental phraseology’ of their poetry, which is so far from his European point of view, presents to him” (ibid.: 277).

As their correspondence continued, Yahuda again criticized the Jewish intellectuals’ disregard of the Arabic output of the Jews of Spain, an oversight that originates, among other factors, in their Orientalist approach:

I would like to call your attention to our poetry from the Arabic period in Spain. Precisely due to my awareness that our authors treat these “Oriental” poets of ours lightly because their poetry is not to their taste and its full delightful and sublime beauty is beyond their grasp, I would like you to study it, and I promise you, as one poet to another, that with your poetic sense you will understand the poetry of the giants of poetry from that time much better than do the interpreters who are often wrong due to their ignorance of the Arabic language and poetry that had such an influence on their poetry. After all, even Samuel David Luzzatto, the finest and most expert of all the commentators, was unable to explain, due to his path, what was difficult and strange about it (Yahuda, “Letter to Shaul Tchernichovsky,” 1897, quoted in Yahuda, 1946: 276).

The recurrent use of the term “Oriental” in Yahuda’s dialogue with Tchernichovsky is not by chance. Yahuda invoked this non-Hebrew word deliberately in order to stress the European origin of the terms that the Jewish intellectuals in Europe had imported into the modern Jewish discourse. Thus, it seems, he wishes to allude to the negative aspects of the culture of the East that this term embodies and to the impact of the “Orientalist” paradigm on the European Jewish discourse of his time.

In his dialogue with Tchernichovsky, Yahuda attempted to neutralize the “Orientalist” spirit in the latter’s conceptualization of Sephardi poetry and to propose an alternative reading from a Judeo-Arab perspective and not a European one. His dialogue with Tchernichovsky was short-lived; the hope Yahuda pinned on this connection did not come to fruition. Despite his sense of a squandered opportunity, their dialogue in its initial stage, a highly crucial one in the modernization of Hebrew and the shaping of Judaic Studies, affords an interesting glimpse at an encounter between different approaches toward Hebrew poetry and the role of Arabic language and culture in the process.

The model that links scholarship in Sephardi poetry and thought with the resumption of contact with the Arabic paths of knowledge and culture, which appears in Yahuda’s discourse, proposes a different political and scientific track from that formulated in the European Judaic scholars’ discourse. In the third moment of the dispute in Eretz Israel/Palestine, in the 1920s, the debate over the shaping of the “Sephardi legacy” as a Judeo-Arabic one in the Jewish political discourse at the outset of the British Mandate would take on additional dimensions. On the seam between these two focal points—the Jewish political and scientific discourse in Europe and the Jewish political discourse in Eretz Israel/Palestine—I will focus in the coming pages on Yahuda’s term in Madrid as chair of Hebrew literature at the local university and on the way this period of his life molded his dialogue about the Sephardi legacy and identity.

In the Spanish State

On the front page of the November 6, 1913, edition of the *HaHerut* newspaper, the following piece appeared under the headline “Sepharad and the Sephardi Jews: Dr. Abraham Shalom Yahuda—in Favor of a Jewish Return to Spain?”

A very surprising report arrived from Berlin: our townsman and friend, the esteemed Dr. Abraham Shalom Yehezkel Yahuda, a teacher at the High Academy of Science in Berlin, is inclined to return the Jews to the Land of Spain. Is it so? Is it possible? […] Here’s what they report from Berlin: Dr. Abraham Shalom Yahuda is now being hosted in Spain. He was received in Madrid with great honor by the viziers and ministers of the kingdom and by representatives of the Spanish Government who were willing to be seen with him. According to what we’ve been informed, Dr. Yahuda has decided to begin teaching at the Academy of Science in Madrid (Ben Attar, *HaHerut,* November 6, 1913).

The dramatic tenor and the sensational headline of the report framed Yahuda’s trip to Spain in 1913 as part of a surreptitious scheme of global magnitude. True to the Zeitgeist, the editor suggests that imperialistic interests lurked behind Yahuda’s visit to Spain and that the event had political implications:

They also report that Dr. Yehuda presented the Government of Spain with weighty proposals in favor of an attempt to steer Jewish immigration toward Spain. The Government accepted his proposals enthusiastically and, rumor has it, has already pledged a fair sum of money to the Jerusalem scholar for his travels to the cities of Morocco, where he will investigate and examine the state of our brethren in that country and, after doing the necessary research and propagandizing, will strive to bring a large number of young Moroccan Jews to Madrid as their brethren’s vanguard there. The Spanish Government is willing to help such immigration as best it can and, to this end, has apprised Dr. Yahuda of its goal: to teach the Hebrew language in the High Academy in Madrid so as to restore the Jews’ affection for the country that had been their second homeland after Eretz Israel many generations ago (Ben Attar, *HaHerut,* November 6, 1913).

The terse and somewhat pompous report, which the editor promised to follow up in coming editions, is of symbolic importance although inaccurate in its details.[[5]](#footnote-5) The contents of the report reflect several political issues that would be fundamental in Yahuda’s discourse during his stay in Spain, from the day of his arrival in 1913 to his departure in 1920:

* the option of “return” (symbolic and actual) of the Spanish Jewish diaspora to the Spanish state;
* the nexus of Spanish imperial and national interests and the Jewish question in Europe;
* the question of the Sephardi legacy and its heirs.

Yahuda was first invited to Madrid in September 1913 to give a lecture series on “The Giants of Spain in Science, Poetry, and the Administration and Economy of the State in All its Branches,” in the aftermath of which he was invited to inaugurate a chair in Jewish Literature at the University of Madrid.[[6]](#footnote-6) Politicians, scholars, clerics, and government ministers were involved in the process of establishing the chair, which was completed in 1915. Even the King of Spain was asked to approve personally the exceptional appointment of Yahuda, a British citizen, as professor at a Spanish university.[[7]](#footnote-7) Imperial and national political interests underlay the creation of the chair and Yahuda’s appointment to it. The background of the establishment of the chair and its operation in its first few years transcended the scholarly context and included broader political and cultural contexts.

By tracking Yahuda’s discourse during his stay in Spain, one detects the processes of change in the manifestations and representations of the Sephardi legacy as it migrated from Germany to Spain—from a category of knowledge and scholarship into a category of identity, from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era, and from the modern Jewish discourse to the Sephardi one. It is fascinating to compare these processes in the transposition of the Sephardi legacy to the literal Sephardi space and their manifestations in the European Jewish political and scientific discourse. Namely, the transition manifested itself in Europe in the context of the Jewish question and the marking of the Jews as a threatening and alien player in the European political discourse. In Spain, in contrast, it was one element in the processes of national reformation that were sweeping the Spanish state, including the restoration of Sephardi Jewry to the Spanish historiographic and national discourse. In other European countries, the presence of Jews was sometimes specified as a problem or a disturbance in the formation of collective national identity. In Spain, contrastingly, an interesting process developed, in which the Jews’ symbolic return to historiography and collective memory fit into the rejuvenated Spanish national narrative. [[8]](#footnote-8)

In Chapter 1, I described how the Sephardi Jews’ return to history and culture was linked to two concurrent processes in Spain at this time: (1) the reshaping of Spanish historiography and national identity, and (b) the Treaty of Fez and the acceptance of Spanish protectorate rule in northern Morocco.

These two contexts—the national and the imperial—did not exist in dissociation; they complemented each other in many senses. Yahuda’s activity in Spain in 1913–1920 and the way the Judeo-Spanish identity and culture were phrased in his discourse during those years acquired their form in view of these two processes. In an article that he published in the *Hed HaMizrah* newspaper shortly before his death, Yahuda, reminiscing about his term in Spain, described the imperial and national context that led to the founding of his chair at the University of Madrid:

When Spain annexed parts of Morocco, in northern Africa, at the time of the Algeria conference several years before World War I, it was the first time since the Jews were exiled from Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492 that 25,000 Jews were gathered under Spanish rule. Notably, world Jewry knew nothing about modern Spain and still feared it as the land of the Inquisition. On the other hand, thanks to important assistance to Spain from the Jews of this region in assuming power in this part of Morocco, in both commercial and political terms, the Spanish Government and King Alfonso issued a state statement of sympathy toward the Jews. One of the measures that they took in this direction was the establishment of a chair in Medieval Hebrew Language in Spain at the country’s principal university, in Madrid, not only as an expression of friendship but also in acknowledgment of the importance of the Jews’ role in Spain in all fields of science, literature, and other walks of life over a period of several centuries (Yahuda, *Hed HaMizrah,* January 6, 1950).

Here Yahuda alludes to the imperial context of the renewed interest in the Sephardi Jews’ history and culture in the Spanish national discourse. Spain’s acceptance of the mandate for northern Morocco under the Treaty of Fez tied into the identification of the native Jewish inhabitants of Morocco as part of Spanish history and culture. The establishment of a chair in Hebrew language also stemmed from of a broader trend, rooted in the middle of the nineteenth century, of renewed interest in the history and culture of the Sephardi-Jewish diaspora among Spanish scholars and politicians. Yahuda describes this in his article:

Everyone knows that the Jews have large communities in the Balkan lands, Turkey, the Netherlands, and England. […] In many of them, mainly in the eastern Balkans, they still speak a Spanish that has preserved the ancient properties of the old Spanish language as it was spoken in the fifteenth century, before the exile of 1492. This fact has awakened a movement in Spain to establish relations and to connect with “Spain’s lost sons.” Angel Pulido headed a program that proposed to organize the gradual return of these Jews to Spain and to forge strong bonds with communities of Sephardi Jews all over the world, thereby earning their sympathy for the new and liberal Spain. And it should be said that important Spaniards from all classes and all political persuasions, including the board of priests [חבר הכמרים?] and conservative elements of the nobility, were among the supporters of this scheme (ibid.).

The appearance of the Sephardi Jews’ historical and cultural legacy in the modern Spanish public discourse, as Yahuda tells it, is bundled with national interests of the Spanish state. Also latent here is its complement: The restoration of Sephardi Jewish heritage on Spanish soil offers a path of Jewish modernization that is alternative to and detached from the frameworks and organizing rationales of the European discourse.

One of the focal points of Yahuda’s scholarly activity in Spain was the construction of an alternative scientific model that matched the Hebrew language and culture with their Arab counterparts on the basis of the Andalusian cultural and philosophical model. One of the threshold conditions that Yahuda established in creating the chair at the University of Madrid, for example, was the inclusion of Hebrew (along with Arabic) in compulsory studies at the Spanish university due to its importance in Spanish history and culture. In one of his biographical articles, he described how this came about:

When I agreed to hold the chair, I attached the explicit condition that Hebrew be compulsory at the Department of Philosophy just as Arabic is, and just as every student who wishes to earn a doctoral degree in Hispanic culture must pass a test in Arabic, so must he be tested in Hebrew. This made the University of Madrid the first and only [institution] in the world that declared Hebrew a required subject. […] When King Alfonso asked me why I insisted so vehemently on this condition in regard to Hebrew, I explained to him that the Hebrew culture attained great heights in Spain because there it blossomed, grew, and reached a level that influenced the Hispanic Enlightenment just as the Arabic culture had (Yahuda, *Hed HaMizrah,* August 5, 1949)*.*

During his stay in Spain, Yahuda attempted to construct a scientific roadmap with which the “Sephardi legacy” could be shaped. This program, unlike the framework of Judaic Studies and Wissenschaft des Judentums in Europe, predicated itself on the intersection of the Arabic legacy and the Hebrew one. Yahuda’s position in the Spanish state at the turn of the twentieth century allowed him to promote a different approach to the study and representation of the Sephardi Jewish legacy, outside the shadow of the “Jewish question” and the issue of integrating Jewry into the European Western culture. In his scholarship and his public and political activity in Spain, Yahuda tried to put together a model that would combine the Sephardi/Andalusian model of integrating Arabic culture and Hebrew culture with the possibilities of Jewish modernization at the dawn of the twentieth century.

In his non-scholarly political and public activity in Spain, too, Yahuda put images of Sephardi Jewish identity and culture to much use. In World War I, for example, he invoked the Sephardi legacy and the Jews’ connection with Spanish culture and history to recruit the heads of the Spanish state to defend the Yishuv (the Jewish community in Palestine.) At the very beginning of the war, he tried to persuade King Alfonso of Spain to extend his patronage to that community by designating it part of the Judeo-Spanish diaspora:

At the very beginning of the war, I prevailed on [King Alfonso], with the help of the British envoy and my high-ranking friends in the Government, to take an interest in the Sephardi Jews and, perforce, in all Jews. I always used [the expression] “the Sephardi Jews” because only thus could I convince him to help us, and the king’s intervention did encourage the Government to intervene in our favor in many cases (Yahuda, 1951: 72).

In his conversation with the Spanish king, Yahuda emphasized the linguistic, cultural, and historical ties that bound the Sephardi elements of the Yishuv to the Spanish state. In his talks with the Spanish leadership, Yahuda stressed the (Sephardi) Jews’ affinity for the Spanish language and how they maintained their identity in exile for centuries:

He [the head of the Spanish ministry] asked us whether there are many Sephardim in Palestine. I replied: “More than 40,000 Sephardim are asking you to help from far away, in the same language in which your mother sang those lovely and delightful lullabies to you” (ibid.: 43).

Yahuda’s meetings with the King of Spain and his attempts to recruit him for the defense of the Yishuv were also documented in an article that appeared in *Hed HaMizrah* in 1949. In this piece, the writer, Dr. Y. Harozen, presented some of Yahuda’s remarks in one of his meetings with King Alfonso:

O my esteemed King! The Jews of the Land of Israel are the descendants of the descendants of the subjects of your forebears’ forebears! Nearly all of them—loyal descendants of R. Judah Halevi, R. Solomon ibn Gabirol, and Maimonides. They are fluent in the Castilian language and I knew how to sing and recite the delightful poetry of Spain even before I reached Madrid. Will your heart observe all those who speak your language and belong to your country’s history as they drink the Turkish tyrant’s hemlock cup, and be silent? (Harozen, *Hed HaMizrah,* August 5, 1949).

Yahuda invokes the Sephardi Jewish heritage for the political goal of recruiting Spain to help the Jewish community in Palestine. A painstaking reading of Yahuda’s political intercession with the Spanish headship in World War I reveals a new matrix of metaphors of Sephardi identity and heritage, different from the one that flowed from his writings while he was in Germany. The emphasis was now given to the Spanish element of this legacy: an affinity for the Judeo-Spanish language, the historical and emotional connection with the Spanish state, and the preservation of Spanish poetry and folklore. This change in Yahuda’s discourse may be associated with his activity is a political player in the changing imperial and national reality. Yahuda, like Jewish political operatives of his generation, was attentive to changes in imperial power relations and shaped his discourse accordingly. When he strove to recruit the heads of the Spanish state, he emphasized the Sephardi Jews’ loyalty and affiliation with Spain; at other stages of his activity, he stressed their loyalty and affiliation with the Ottoman Empire and the Arab culture. This change may also be associated with the range of images of the Sephardi legacy and identity at that time and to the changing form that Sephardiness took on in different political and social contexts.

The images of return and loyalty of the Sephardi Jews to Spain were not greeted smilingly in much of the Jewish world. The more the discussion of the symbolic and actual return of Jews to Spain escalated, so did the public polemics in the Hebrew and the world Jewish press concerning the implications of this option.

The intersection of imperial interests and proposals for a Jewish repatriation to Spain was debated in a string of articles that appeared in the Hebrew press at this time. For example, in an article published in the *Do’ar HaYom* newspaper in 1920 headlined “The Return to Spain,” featuring a discussion of the Spanish Government’s then-current offer to the Jews to repatriate themselves and be naturalized, the writer described the imperial interests that underlay the proposal:

Spain, as we know, is an imperialistic government like all the countries of Europe, and in recent years it has embraced the colonial method and begun to spread its snare across Morocco. For this purpose, it needs the Jews, particularly the Sephardi Jews, as mediators between it and its colonies, it needs Jewish capital to attain its aspirations, and it needs Jews who will serve as commercial, financial, and political middlemen. Spain, it is true, does not conceal all this. Back when it first urged us to repatriate, it did not hide its situation and admitted explicitly that it hoped to be built by the Jews, just as it declined amazingly after the Jews left. Accordingly, we suspected it and did not heed its proposals and invitations (Gur, *Do’ar HaYom,* November 17, 1921).

Yahuda himself related directly to the possibility of the Sephardi Jews’ returning to Spain as a Spanish national interest. Writing in *Hed HaMizrah* in 1949, he noted that the Spanish Republic of the 1930s showed the same tendency. He reported how the Spanish Government had consulted with him about the resumption of scholarship in Hebrew language and Golden Age literature as part of a strategy of reaching out to the Sephardi diaspora and encouraging it to repatriate:

When Republican Spain was proclaimed, the Spanish Government invited me to consult about how to resume the study of the Hebrew language and the literature of the Jews’ Golden Age because they noticed the absence of lectures at the university in Madrid from the day I left Spain in 1920. The Government also wanted to know what measures it should take so that the Sephardi Jews in Salonika, Constantinople, and Izmir, and the other Balkan cities would be able to return to and settle in Spain. […] So when Republican Spain was proclaimed, many applied to the Government for permission to enter Spain. Although I did not take such an interest in the question of the Jews returning to Spain, I produced a program of Hebrew studies and will propose to the Government that it establish under its patronage a high academy for Jewish studies in Córdoba for Moroccan Jews and Sephardi Jews from other countries who wish to affiliate with it (Yahuda, *Hed HaMizrah,* August 5, 1949).

In 1920, Yahuda left Spain and the chair that he had established at the University of Madrid in order to prepare for the post that had been offered to him at the Hebrew college soon to be founded in Jerusalem; three years after the Balfour Declaration and the onset of British rule (before the official Mandate went into effect)—a decisive period in the political history of Palestine. As Yahuda himself attested in his memoirs and letters, he saw this moment as an opportunity to link his scholarly project with his political project and hoped to mate the shaping of the Sephardi legacy in the scientific and political discourse with solving the “Arab question” that had erupted in full fury in Palestine. Armed with this insight, he reached Jerusalem in December 1920 at the invitation of the mayor to give a lecture in Arabic to Arab scholars and local public leaders about the Arab-Sephardi legacy in the Middle Ages.

Back to Palestine

On Monday, December 13, 1920, Professor Yahuda lectured at the Jerusalem Cinema, next to Damascus Gate, about “Arabic Culture and Art in Spain.” The lecture took place under the patronage of the High Commissioner and in the presence of an audience of Jewish and Arab dignitaries and high government officials. The mayor, Raghib Bey a-Nashashibi, introduced the speaker, praised this son of Jerusalem profusely, and retold the history of his magnificent family.

In the Hebrew press, it was reported that the lecturer spoke for two hours, in crisp, wonderful Arabic, to an audience including the heads of the Transjordanian tribes, Arab schoolteachers, intellectual youth, and others, telling the story of the greatness of the Arab culture in Spain, recalling the Jews’ contribution to literature and art, and urged the Arabs to revive that glittering era in conjunction with the Hebrew Yishuv in Eretz [Israel]—and it was added that this is the first time a Jewish scholar “spoke to the Arabs in their language about their culture and magnificence of yore” (Ben Hanania, 1959: 186).

Yahuda’s lecture about the Arab culture in Spain, delivered in Arabic before a packed house of intellectuals and the local Arab public leadership, was an exceptional event in many respects. Ahead of the festive occasion, organized by the Municipality of Jerusalem and Mayor Nashashibi, invitations in three languages—Arabic, Hebrew, and English—were distributed around town. The soiree was attended by Herbert Samuel, the High Commissioner, who also delivered remarks after Yahuda’s lecture; the heads of the new Mandatory administration, and the leaders of the city’s Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities. It should be borne in mind that these were the first days of British rule in Palestine; Britain’s support of establishing a Jewish national home was strongly resisted by the local Arab leadership. In this atmosphere, the lecture received mixed responses in the local Hebrew and Arabic press and touched off mordant polemics among Arab intellectuals as to its contents.

However, even though Yahuda gave a similar lecture in Jaffa before an audience of local scholars and Arab dignitaries, and although that event also earned public reverberation in the press, the lectures did not generate the requisite momentum and were quickly swept away in the tide of events that flooded Palestine at the time.

Yahuda himself ascribed immense symbolic value to these lectures. They signified the intersection of his scientific world and his political vision and the fusion of the diverse levels of his essence—Jerusalem, Spain, Arabness, Jewishness. They also marked the path of his return to Palestine after about a quarter of a century in Europe. He intended his visit to pave the way for his final return to Jerusalem and his integration into the city’s political and scientific environments. At this time, he received an official invitation to serve as a professor at the formative Hebrew college (the Hebrew University) in Jerusalem. His arrival from his seat in Spain for the purpose of lecturing, and his focus on the Sephardi-Arab legacy and its role in shaping the Jewish and Arab societies in Mandatory Palestine, only amplified the symbolism of the occasion.

At this point, Yahuda was immersed in two polemics with the Russian Maskilim, decades old, that became sharper and intersected in the 1920s: one with the heads of the Zionist movement over how to solve the “Arab question” and the other with the Judaic scholars about studying, gathering, and interpreting medieval Sephardi poetry and thought. Sephardiness featured in both polemics and acquired form in different ways—as a historical legacy, as a political and cultural model, as a collective identity—during his lengthy visit to Palestine.

Yahuda’s lecture in Jerusalem, as stated, was devoted to the Arab history and culture in Muslim Spain and that culture’s towering achievements in science, literature, philosophy, and architecture. In his remarks about the Golden Age of the Arab culture, one may detect motifs that typified the discourse of the Arab intellectuals who populated the circles of the *nahda*.[[9]](#footnote-9) The return to the Arab Golden Age served them as a model and source of inspiration for the revitalization of the Arabic language and culture. Yahuda described the greatness of the Arab culture in Spain and stressed the Arabs’ contribution to scholarship, science, philosophy, and literature. Avraham Elmalih published much of his lecture in *Do’ar HaYom*:

For two hours or so, the esteemed professor […] spoke about the chronicles of the Arabs and the giants and scholars of Arab culture, reviewed periods in the Arabs’ history for the audience, called the dignitaries and scholars among them by name, and mentioned their endeavors in literature, science, scholarship, poetry, medicine, art, and philosophy. He spoke about the Arabs’ rule in Spain and northern Africa, spoke of Arab women’s intellectual and scientific accomplishments, and noted that one library in Córdoba contained some 400,000 Arabic manuscripts apart from others in Hebrew, Persian, Hindi, and European languages. The Arabs—the speaker said—were the first to compose dictionaries in “encyclopedia” form; Ibn Khaldun was the founder of the philosophy of history; the Arabs were the first to establish mobile battlefield hospitals. They also excelled in astronomy; astronomical observatories of the most outstanding kind were found in Córdoba and Seville (A.E., *Do’ar HaYom,* December 15, 1920).

In the second part of his lecture, Yahuda showed pictures of architectural structures, grand mosques, and remnants of Arab art from the Arab period in Spain, and explained their context in time and place. These visual exhibits “[gave] those in attendance a direct look at the glory and the magnificence of the Arabs in antiquity. As if they were alive, I beheld the remnants of Arab art, the mosque[s] and minarets of Córdoba and Seville; their homes and palaces; their springs and marketplaces.” The audience was thrilled “and broke into thundering applause when pictures of three Arab kings in Spain appeared before their eyes.” This revival of Arab Spain’s Golden Age took place “in a pure, polished, and highly fluent Arabic style” in Yahuda’s lecture (ibid.).

The use of pictures in the lecture seems to have been uncommon in those days and Elmalih’s remarks give the impression that they lent the event an additional symbolic dimension. The legacy of medieval Spain was shaped, in visual and other ways, through an Arab prism and in Arabic.

After describing the achievements of the Arab legacy in Spain, Yahuda concluded the lecture by presenting the political and cultural model that this legacy embodied, in his opinion, in the context of the political issues that had arisen pursuant to the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the inception of the British Mandate for Palestine:

After the lecture was over, the esteemed speaker continued to sermonize on several matters related to the current role of the Arab people that dwells in Eretz Israel, irrespective of religion and race, under British rule. He emphasized that if the Arabs now have an opportunity to restore their ancient enlightenment, it is solely thanks to the victory of those governments that fought for the persecuted peoples’ rights. If the Arabs now wish to revive their brilliant past and enlist the goodwill of these governments, and particularly that of Great Britain, which is willing to help them as best it can, then they should share their generous spirit by allowing the other persecuted peoples to enjoy the rights that the British Government recognizes. [One of these peoples is] the Jewish people, the national rights of which, along with those rights that history and justice recognize, are acknowledged not only by Britain but by all the powers. Only if that tolerance and spirit of freedom that prevailed during the efflorescence of the Arab Enlightenment in the days of the Abbasids in Baghdad generally, and in the land of Spain particularly, return to dominance in the revival of their enlightenment now, in such a way that now, too, they will allow all races, irrespective of religion and race, t**o collaborate in reviving the Enlightenment in the lands of the East,** each and every people in accordance with its character, traditions, teachings, and chronicles, and the special spirit of its enlightenment—only then can **a general and brilliant Eastern enlightenment** be reborn that will include all the lands of the East, **in which the peoples of the East will participate,** and “the sun will rise in the East once again” (ibid., author emphasis).

Yahuda’s concluding remarks mingled various political and cultural issues; his use of the intersection of the Arab legacy in Spain and the Balfour Declaration, and the British Empire and the liberation of the oppressed Arab peoples, is not free of demagogic rhetoric. While using the rhetoric of the *nahda* circles concerning the restoration of the grandeur of the Eastern Arab culture, he also tries to invoke it to promote the British-Zionist initiative concerning a national home for the Jews. Also embodied in these remarks, however, is the political vision that Yahuda had already enunciated as a young man in Europe, linking the Jews’ return to Eretz Israel to their return to the Eastern culture and their alignment with the general modernization of the East.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Here one may detect the echoes of his dispute with the Judaic scholars over the Arab nature of the Sephardi legacy and its importance for understanding the Jews’ philosophical, literary, and scientific achievements within it. In a similar vein, Yahuda wished to shape the Sephardi legacy as a shared platform on which the Jews may connect with the East by reconnecting with the Arab bodies of knowledge and tradition. So he states in his early letter to Yellin in 1899, cited above:

In Eretz Israel, however, this is possible only if the young emerge from the coma of their inundation [מצולתם] and ignorance and wish to liberate themselves, to some extent, from the teachings and views that their parents bequeathed to them. Then they will return to their Easternness **in the land of the East** and turn their hearts to the literatures of the peoples of the East generally and Arabic literature particularly. By so doing, they will enlighten themselves and thus enlighten the lives of our people in bygone days before it changed its Eastern character, accepted too much outside influence, and reached out to peoples who are alien to its spirit. [These peoples] gave rise to new inner aspirations and tendencies and poured new currents into [the Jewish] mind so that [Jewry] slowly distanced itself from its natural ways of life, adopting new ways and means until it shed its Eastern inspiration and accepted a different pattern in its state of mind, thinking, and outlooks. Those periods were blanketed in darkness and the surviving holy books were not fully interpreted. Unlike the other peoples of the East, however, [the Jews] left numerous books and writings behind; they may give us an accurate concept of their ways of life, customs, and outlooks, and the entirety of their spiritual property and the great and broad Arabic literature will give us with much material for this wish of ours. Therefore, I fully believe that only thus will we attain our goal; we need not be afraid of taking our hypotheses and assumptions too far and attributing to our people contents that it has never had; after all, they are found among the other peoples of the East. Or has it been forgotten that our people was more developed and enlightened than were our neighbors because we retained the books of the Bible? (Yahuda, “Letter to David Yellin,” September 15, 1899, author emphasis).

As stated, Yahuda’s lecture and the political and cultural options that he proposed in it were extensively covered in the local Hebrew and Arabic press. In its aftermath, Eliezer Ben-Yehuda described the occasion excitedly in a series of articles in *Do’ar HaYom*: “It’s the first time, particularly in our city, that a Jewish scholar spoke to the Arabs in their language about their culture and magnificence of yore.” Noting with emphasis the audience’s silent attention to every word, Ben-Yehuda testified: “In front of me and behind me, to my right and to my left, sat many of the ‘wisest’ and most enlightened among the Arab sect in our city, and my ears heard, at almost every moment, a sound of contentment, like a cry of ‘Amen,’ exiting from their throats.” This happened, he opined, because “the ‘inferior’ Arabic language was burnished and spiced with every rule in Arabic grammar. This pleasant way of lecturing and the commentator’s Eastern image had the effect of true enchantment on the entire audience” (Ben-Yehuda, *Do’ar HaYom,* December 17, 1920: 1).

Yahuda’s lecture also touched off a debate in the local Arabic press after the famous Iraqi poet Maruf al-Rusafi, then an instructor at the Arab teachers’ college in Jerusalem who attended the lecture, placed an open letter in this press. “The Jews,” he emphasized, “are in fact our cousins because they are the offspring of Isaac and the Arabs are the offspring of Ishmael.” He added, “We Arabs do not hate the Jews on account of their Jewishness. On the contrary: due to their Jewishness it is our duty to befriend them and love them and not to hate them because they are racially close to us. I note explicitly that we hate the political idea that the Jews have espoused, as a result of which we fear that we will have to leave the country after political rule passes into their hands” (quoted in Ben Hanania, 1959: 187–188).

The Iraqi poet’s letter touched off a tumultuous debate in the Arab press concerning the ability to distinguish between the Jews and the Zionist movement and between political struggle and cultural partnership. *Do’ar HaYom* published a translation of an article by Hassan Sadki al-Dejani, editor of the newspaper *Al-Quds al-Sharif,* expressing a more skeptical opinion about Yahuda’s lecture and its significance for the Palestine question. He found it amazing that a Zionist speaker (Yahuda) would praise the Arab culture even as the Zionists were trying to drive the Arabs off their land. Then he accused Yahuda of making a manipulative attempt to drive a wedge between Christian and Muslim Arabs:

Last week, Professor Yahuda lectured at the cinema house in Jerusalem about the Arab culture in Spain, by invitation of the Municipality. All the luminaries of Jerusalem from all communities attended this lecture, as did his Excellency the High Commissioner. The lecturer spoke excellently and showed us pictures of ancient fortresses, tall buildings, outstanding art, and remnants of the Arab antiquities from the time they were in their prime. All this is well and good. We do not, however, understand what the lecturer had in mind when he said, every time a mosque appeared, that today this mosque is a Christian house of worship and that mosque has become a cathedral, and the like. Was it the esteemed speaker’s purpose to pit Muslim passion against Christian [passion]? […] I, too—the editor says—attended that lecture and was amazed to see a Zionist stand up to praise the ancient Arabs and urge their grandchildren to resurrect their culture, even as the Zionists are striving to evict the Arabs from their land and their homes. This lecture, in our opinion, is merely oil poured onto a wound or soap smeared on a hangman’s noose. The Zionists can trust the Arabs to regard anything that flatters them as the *Morning Post* said—a means of driving them off their land (editorial, *Do’ar HaYom,* December 24, 1920).

Dejani’s critical and skeptical tenor attests to the powerful impact of the Balfour Declaration and the close relations between the leaders of the Zionist movement and the Mandatory administration on the local Palestinian discourse. It also testifies to the wide gap between Yahuda’s remarks on the connection [the Jewish connection?] with the East and Arab culture and the Zionist leaders’ discourse and actions at the time.[[11]](#footnote-11) The distance was also reflected in the way the Zionist leadership received Yahuda at the time, particularly in response to his proposals concerning the “Arab question,” as it was known then. In a letter to Eliezer Ben-Yehuda in 1922, Yahuda explained that his interaction with the local Arab leadership during his visit to Eretz Israel in late 1920 and early 1921, which from his perspective engineered a real change, had not only failed to win the support of the Zionist leadership but also “their outward apathy and their inward resistance, their belittling and dismissal of its practical value, even as our greatest enemies among the Arabs and the Catholics were left trembling and agitated by the impression that I made and the **real** action that I took vis-à-vis more than thirty Muslim dignitaries headed by Khalil, and precisely thanks to Nashashibi’s propaganda they set out to fulfill it, to protest against \_\_\_\_ [חיפו] and against the Muslim-Christian Arabs and their goals” (Yahuda, “Letter to Eliezer Ben-Yehuda,”June 20, 1922, author emphasis).

In Yahuda’s rendering, the discrepancy dates back to Herzl. In an article that he published in *Hed HaMizrah* shortly before his death, he describes his having stressed the importance of the “Arab question” back at the First Zionist Congress in a *tête-à-tête* with Herzl:

I urged [Herzl] to appoint a special committee to study the [best] ways to approach the Arab problem and to adopt a well-defined and clear Arab policy. I stressed that more than 80 percent of the inhabitants of Eretz Israel are Muslim Arabs, that a large proportion of them have no enmity toward us, and consequently they can be won over for our program, and that contrarily, in any event, there is there a small minority of Christian Arabs who have always loathed us and served as tools in the hands of all the various churches, particularly the Catholic ones, to weaken the Jewish influence. I [also] repeated what I had told him in London about the Sultan and explained effectively the difficulties the Sultan will face if he enters into negotiations with the Jews **without taking the Arab inhabitants into account.** Dr. Herzl insisted that **the inhabitants of Eretz Israel have no standing in this matter,** that the Sultan is the decision-maker, and that no one in Eretz Israel will be so audacious as to resist his orders **once the country is opened up to mass Jewish immigration** […] (Yahuda, *Hed HaMizrah,* October 7, 1949, author emphasis).

Yahuda and other local Sephardi leaders saw Herzl’s disregard of the local Arab leadership and his focus on negotiating with the Ottoman Sultan as a grievous error, and Yahuda repeatedly apprised Herzl of the importance of “establishing closer relations with the Arabs of [Palestine] and explaining to them the Zionists’ intentions and the great advantages that would be theirs if they would cooperate with us sincerely” (ibid.).

In the same article, part of a series of autobiographical submissions to *Hed HaMizrah* in the last years of his life, Yahuda drew a connection between Herzl’s disregard of his warnings on the Arab question at so early a stage and the Zionist leadership’s disregard of his advice on the same topic over the years:

I realized from everything he said about the Arabs that he had been totally misled by his representatives in Palestine, most of whom had come from Russia and other East European countries and had no firm grasp of what the Arab problem was about. And these were the “experts” on whose opinion he set his bearings. I left the Congress realizing that nothing would be done about the Arab problem in Palestine. All of my subsequent efforts to advise other Zionist leaders of the importance of [having] an Arab policy were fruitless. [So it was] even after the Balfour Declaration, when it would have been much easier to reach an understanding with the moderate Arabs than before World War I under the Turks’ rule. All my warnings and comments to Benin [לבנין] were in vain. This is not the place to deal with this topic in full. However, I can state confidently that had they followed my political path, especially in Herbert Samuel’s first year as the High Commissioner, when a large number of the most respected Arabs in Palestine, numbered among their nobles and scholars, supported my political path to mutual understanding in contrast to the exertions of several anti-Zionist British officials, some of the violent events in Eretz Israel would have been averted (ibid: 11).

There is no telling how Yahuda’s proposals and set of linkages would have changed the political situation after the Balfour Declaration. His manner of speaking, however, echoes his years of disputation with the Russian Jewish intellectuals who had risen to dominance in the Zionist leadership where the Arab question was concerned—a polemic that crested in the early 1920s. The narrative of exclusion recurs in the memoirs of additional Sephardi intellectuals of his generation. For example, in an article written in memory of Yosef Navon, a leading personality in the Jerusalem Sephardi community in the Ottoman era, Yahuda describes how the heads of the Zionist movement ignored Navon’s offers of assistance in formulating political strategies toward the emergence of the “Arab question” after the Balfour Declaration. After meeting with Navon, Yahuda reports:

After the Balfour Declaration, [Navon] offered the Zionist Executive his services and was willing to work with it in order, particularly, to improve our relations with the Arabs, because he still had good friends among them who respected him and remembered the favors he had done for them while in Jerusalem. But he did not find an attentive ear; the leaders and their underlings treated him with utter disdain, almost contempt, until he could no longer put up with their hauteur. They condescended to him as though he was “some Orientalist,” a benighted adventurer who wanted to go fishing in turgid waters. Had they marshaled the wisdom to put his knowledge and experience with the Arabs to use, our opponents among the British could not have used them to our disadvantage. But they misunderstood the matter and danced to the tune of these Englishmen’s ditties, thus deepening the abyss that they had dug for us and poisoning the Arabs so that they hate us. When we contemplate the past in view of the actions that have come down to our times, we see how badly the leaders disserved our people with their myopia and their placement of every competent person in areas in which they were incompetent (Yahuda, *Hed HaMizrah*, November 11, 1949).

Yahuda links what he considers the Russian Jewish intellectuals’ Orientalist attitude toward the Sephardi-Arab legacy to their view of the Sephardi Jews and their place in the Yishuv leadership. Of special interest in this context is his account of his dispute with his contemporary and close friend David Yellin at this critical time. In his memorial article for Yellin, Yahuda describes how he pleaded with Yellin to distance himself from establishment Zionist politics and create an Eretz Israel movement that would embrace a different political model of Jewish nationhood and the “Arab question” from the dominant model in those years:

But I must mention one thing because it was my main bone of contention with him. From the day Balfour issued his declaration, it was clear to me that if [Yellin] understood how to use his power and public status and had joined me and others who shared my view at the conference in London in 1920, those in Eretz Israel would have been much better off than they were then and than we would be afterward. The Arabs would have been more sanguine about us and Arab “politics” would have behaved in a manner totally different from the version embraced by those in power, who neither knew nor understood anything about the matter. But he remained in the thrall of the arrivistes and looked down on the Old Yishuv, the foundation on which Zionism was built. Regarding the college, too, he would have waived his entitlement vis-à-vis the fundraisers and the job-awarders and yielded the post that he was supposed to have received. I had any number of debates and claims and responses with him in this whole matter, and whenever I thought I had persuaded him to take part in leading the movement against those who had burst in, I found him in their company (Yahuda, 1946: 243).

The convergence that Yahuda finds between the political discourse on the “Arab question” and the scientific discourse that shaped the establishment of the Hebrew University was not random. At this time, as stated, Yahuda received a proposal from David Yellin and Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, members of the university’s founding committee, to serve as professor at the “college.” Farther on, he even received an official letter of invitation, including financial terms and course list, to a professorship at the institute for Eastern studies that the university was about to establish. Yahuda accepted the appointment and prepared to move to Palestine. He considered joining the Hebrew University an opportunity to promote the convergence of the two discourses, the scientific and the political, at a dramatic moment in the formation of the Yishuv and its relationship with the country’s Arab population. Later, however, the appointment fell through under circumstances that became controversial and variously interpreted over the years.[[12]](#footnote-12) On several occasions, Yahuda traced the cancellation to opposition among high-ranking players in the Zionist leadership—such as Chaim Weizmann, Menahem Ussishkin, and Nahum Sokolow—to his vision of the Hebrew University and to his positions on Jewish–Arab relations in Palestine after the Balfour Declaration and on solving the Arab question.

In a letter to Eliezer Ben-Yehuda at the climax of the affair, Yahuda set forth the points at which his scientific polemic and his political one converged.[[13]](#footnote-13) He described the covert and overt ways the Zionist high-ups thwarted his involvement in the Arab question just as they had derailed his appointment to the university professoriate. He recounted the mixed messages he had received from Weizmann concerning his plans to combine scientific endeavor at the Hebrew University with pursuing a solution to the Arab question:

You know that when I returned from Palestine to London about a year and a half ago, after the Commissioner and his deputy wrote to Weizmann that, in their opinion and according to their wish, it is necessary and useful to try to keep me in Palestine, I had a talk or two or three with him and explained everything to him. […] It was still possible to clear away many of the hurdles and foresee many of the hazards. […] He thanked [me] for everything; assured me willingly and in total acknowledgment that everything I had told him was true; expressed his regret that I had not approached him earlier, etc., etc. […] Again I believed him and his associates and, in particular, I believed he would keep his word in this matter, which was very important to me and which I had presented to him as the most essential and fitting way to prepare the right path to peace with those among the Arabs who sympathize with us, and to war against those who are hostile to us and are bad in faith, mind, and thought. And this is how it turned out: the establishment of a department for Semitic studies and scholarship and languages. He found it essential because I had explained its usefulness against the danger that already loomed then: that others would come and block many paths to us (Yahuda, “Letter to Eliezer Ben-Yehuda,” June 20, 1922).

Continuing with his letter, Yahuda reports how Weizmann’s support failed to materialize and became camouflage for covert resistance to him and his views. Weizmann’s people sent him negative messages, rejecting his advice and torpedoing his appointment to the university underhandedly. Yahuda wrote about his years-long polemics with Weizmann in several places; late in life, he would write a book (published posthumously—Yahuda, 1952) about an event [an incident?] that he had with Weizmann in World War I. He then describes how Sokolow had presented him to the British envoy William Ormsby-Gore, who had come from London to look into the possibility of promoting contacts with Jews and Arabs in Palestine, as unpopular with the Arabs and the Zionists:

When Ormsby-Gore asked him about me, wanting to see me and hear my views about the Arab question, Sokolow told him that I was not popular with anyone in Eretz Israel and that I had angered the Arabs (!) with intrigues of which the **Zionists** in Eretz Israel wanted no part, and that he had to beware lest I cause harm, heaven forbid (Yahuda, “Letter to Eliezer Ben-Yehuda” June 20, 1922, emphasis original).

The squandering of the political option was coupled with the squandering of the personal option in Yahuda’s narrative. Continuing, he described how Ussishkin explained the menace of Yahuda’s scientific and political involvement as flowing from his urging of Jews to assimilate into the Arabs’ culture:

Ussishkin told his comrades in London and also his friends who told this to me and are not suspected of anything, heaven forfend, of being among his opponents, that everything I was doing in Eretz Israel was dangerous from the national perspective because I am too close with the Arabs and am fond of their erudition and language, and, what is more, that my saying that the [Jews] in Eretz Israel should learn Arabic, study their scholars, and acquaint themselves with their history, culture, and enlightenment, should be considered a form of assimilation into the Arabs, heaven forbid. [Ussishkin] said this even though we had talked it over and I had explained to him what I had in mind, and after he had told me that it was all propaganda for nothing but benefit and utility (ibid.).

Reverberating in Ussishkin’s remarks, as Yahuda presented them in his letter, is Yahuda’s call, in his lecture to the Arab intellectuals in Jerusalem, for the revival of the Sephardi-Arab legacy as part of the modernization of all Eastern peoples. This urging was apparently perceived as overly sympathetic to the Arab culture. The opposition of the Zionist leaders, the disappearance of the professorial appointment, and the upturn in violence and struggle between Jews and Arabs prompted Yahuda to return to Europe and focus once again on his scientific endeavors. As he stated in his letter to Ben-Yehuda:

I also realized that you cannot do anything of substance if you stand between the two camps and fight for both sides. Therefore, I decided to return to the sanctuary of science [literally: the tent of the Torah] and look forward to the opportunity to head for work and not for war, for action and not for disputation (ibid.).

It is of interest to examine Yellin’s role in this affair particularly in view of his place in the dispute with Saul Abdalla Joseph in those very years. Yellin was one of the most prominent Yishuv natives who joined the Zionist leadership in the Mandate era. He was a key figure in the establishment and shaping of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and an instigator of the invitation to Yahuda to serve as a lecturer there. When the opposition to Yahuda’s appointment began to rise, however, Yellin did not come to his defense openly. In an emotional, stormy letter to Yellin at the crest of this affair, Yahuda noted Yellin’s “silence” in the whole process and saw it as possibly indicative of collaboration with the opponents:

Those who rejected me with all kinds of lies and fictions [did so] solely due to fear of my honesty and effort **and you knew this** back then. I regret that I was wrong about you. At your best opportunity to display freedom of action and full acceptance of me when the elections to the Assembly of Electees took place, [you] behaved in a way that **others** (after all, I was not there and knew nothing) understood and interpreted as covert opposition to me. It was also the only time you mentioned that I am your “relative.” No! It’s the wrong way and the wrong destination! (Yahuda, “Letter to David Yellin,” November 5, 1922, emphasis original)

In the continuation of his letter, Yahuda attempts to blur the personal aspects of the matter and fit it into broader power struggles between the Zionist movement leaders who had seized the leadership of the Yishuv and the Palestine-born whom they had crowded out. In this context, he construes Yellin’s abstention in the affair as yet another indication of his submission to the hegemony of the Zionist leadership and its usurpation of the Yishuv leadership:

I am pained about the matter as such, and it also troubles me that the only man [David Yellin] who should and could have raised the banner of freedom for those of Eretz Israel ceded all his dignity and influence, enslaving himself to tyrannical caretakers who trampled on the heads of the native-born, banished the finest of [them], and did not allow them to develop their strengths and carry out their holy labor for their nation and country. Whatever may come of it, I will remain loyal and, to my way of thinking, if I cannot change people I’ll try to keep people from changing me (ibid.).

Responding in a letter of his own, Yellin admitted that it was Yahuda’s political stances in his dispute with the Russian Maskilim and key Zionist leaders that had defeated his appointment to the university faculty:

Let’s say it plainly: They didn’t hire you because you always opposed them openly. They weren’t eager to hand you a responsible position in their project, making you the head of this department but in disagreement with others’ views when you wish. First of all, now you too should not judge the others until you stand in their shoes, and you have to ask yourself: If I were them and I had to appoint people to various tasks and my opponents demanded that I appoint them, would I myself do this?—Please do your own reckoning; then you’ll know whether you would have done it or not. Second, it’s also impossible to demand that the other change his mind about me by necessity. Might they have found that your way, which fits your temperament, is not the safe way to victory? If you cannot justify anyone and find errors in Weizmann, Sokolow, Ussishkin, our High Commissioner, Ahad Ha’am, and everyone who the public considers a leader, why rage at them? Are you the only one who’s right? (Yellin, “Letter to Abraham Shalom Yahuda,” January 22, 1922, in Yellin, 1976: 167–168).

By implication, the main reason Yahuda was spurned, in Yellin’s judgment, was Yahuda’s personal spat with the Zionist leadership. Continuing, Yellin disapproves of the trenchant criticism of Ussishkin that Yahuda expressed in his letter to him and cites his responsibility for the escalating severity of the Arab question and the violent incidents between Jews and Arabs:

You say: “They sang praises to the leaders of the nation and you saw how the count of Jewish casualties will mount!” I already told you about these “praises” and need not repeat myself. Just the same, you too should not go overboard. If we are fated to become casualties, the curses that we hurl at our leaders will also be useless. You write here about Ussishkin that “He is utterly unconcerned about whether victims fall on the altar of the Land [of Israel] if only he remains in place.” I know Ussishkin and his deficiencies, too, but I think you have no right to go so far as to consider him such a criminal, a sinner, and a degenerate (ibid.)

The letter implies that Yellin and Yahuda hold different attitudes toward politics, the Zionist Executive, the Arab question, and the future of the Yishuv, *inter alia.* Yellin takes Yahuda for a pessimist who analyzes events in black-and-white and tends to polemics and criticism, and himself as an optimist who keeps arm’s length from political affairs and tends to consent and fit into the mainstream.

This binary places Yellin in the mainstream and leaves Yahuda out. Symbolically, it describes Yellin’s distancing from Yahuda as the corollary of his attempt to fit into the dominant political and scientific discourse. Yellin’s attempt to reduce the reason for the rejection to personal motives and the question of character and temperament is somewhat reminiscent of the way he emphasized Joseph’s argumentative and bellicose nature and used this to reinforce his claims vis-à-vis the Judaic scholars. Unlike the narrative that Yellin offered, however, the affair of Yahuda’s non-appointment to the Hebrew University was explained in various forums over the years within a broader political and social context, usually in connection with the exclusion of Sephardi Jews from the power centers of the Yishuv.[[14]](#footnote-14)

At the farewell event in Yahuda’s honor before he departed from Palestine, held at the Halutsei Mizrachi center in 1921, the scientific and political establishment that had frustrated his appointment to the Hebrew University professoriate already came under criticism. Avraham Elmalih, attending the soiree, lauded Yahuda’s famous scientific achievements: “In the world of science generally and in recent days in our country particularly, among our neighbors […] anyone even slightly familiar with the Arabic press knows how helpful were the lectures of this great brother of ours among the various races in our country.” However, since “no one can appreciate all these things, […] so great a scholar as this native of our country has to leave the country. […] If Professor Yahuda were from Ekatarinoslav or Eishishok, the people in charge of positions here would have invented a post for him, they would have created a special post so that he would come to the country.” However, Yahuda is “a son of Jerusalem who grew up there, got this education there, and went to Europe for advanced studies, and he will wish to return [to Jerusalem] in order to share with us the light of science and erudition that he acquired there. It is altogether his disaster that he is a Jerusalemite who became head-and-shoulders superior to everyone here who holds plum positions—this is why he has to venture far from the land that he loves. The day will come, however, that we will be privileged to see him serving grandly at the Hebrew college on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem” (editorial, *Do’ar HaYom,* February 24, 1921: 2). Elmalih made this paean to Yahuda in the political and social context of the early 1920s Yishuv, in which native-born Sephardim oscillated between criticism of and struggle against their exclusion and marginalization from the Zionist leadership of the Yishuv and attempts to integrate into and adapt to the new political framework.

In a critique that he published in *Do’ar HaYom*, Moshe David Gaon described the way the Spanish press of the time presented the ways in which Sephardim were being barred from the Zionist leadership. Thus he wrote about the criticism of Yahuda’s exclusion from the Hebrew University as expressed in newspapers in Spain:

The various and sundry insults, the greatest and most numerous [insults] that the leading Zionist institutions are inflicting on the Eastern ethnicities in Eretz Israel, are definitely drawing blood and are most vigorously reflected in the rich Spanish press. Important newspapers often mention, as if intending to cause outrage, the erudite Dr. Abraham Shalom Yehuda of Jerusalem, “who, despite being one of the few of this generation in his discipline, has to migrate from city to city due to his Sephardi origin while the Zionists have established a university in Jerusalem as a smokescreen—an institute of *haute couture* that’s meant to employ their own people.” And please don’t take this rhetoric in the Spanish press lightly; in my opinion, it lays bare our disgrace—beyond villainy, beyond criminality, malice, and injustice. Please be so good as to remember this detail, too, that you’ll read in our country’s newspapers; it drove me to amazement and puzzlement when this scholar reached Jerusalem in the summer of 1929 to visit family members and the administration of the college invited him to lecture there. Why should his portion be smaller than that of all other passersby?—They have no shame; they don’t even know how to blush (Gaon, *Do’ar HaYom,* January 12, 1930: 2).

It is fascinating to see how Gaon links the Spanish state and its connection with the Sephardi Jews in Palestine to their relationship with the Zionist institutions. Here Yahuda’s “Sephardi origin” is given a double meaning: as an ethnic identity in connection with the Zionist discourse and with the Spanish state. Within this connection, one can trace the transformation that the Sephardi identity and legacy underwent in Yahuda’s discourse at the three moments investigated in this chapter: in Europe, Spain, and Palestine.

The squandering of the political and scientific option in the early 1920s and, in general, of Yahuda’s return to Palestine also marks the terminus of his disputation with the Russian Jewish Maskilim. Yahuda returned to Europe and, even though this dispute left various manifestations in his writing, he increasingly distanced himself from Zionist movement circles and the scientific and political vocation of dealing with the Sephardi legacy. He devoted most of his last twenty years to polemics with the Biblical Studies community on issues relating mainly to the question of when the biblical text was written.

Joseph’s and Yahuda’s intellectual project was rich, diverse, and decades-long. Both scholars acted as investigators and collectors of Sephardi thought and poetry and both attempted, within these disciplines, to create an alternative to the European and Western orientation of the Haskalah movement, Judaic Studies, and modern Hebrew literature. In their dialogue with all of these, they constructed their own alternative interpretive model of the Sephardi legacy, one that emphasizes its internal Hebrew–Arabic and Jewish–Muslim connection.

Both men were rejected, each in his own way: the former for meddling with the poetry project in his integration [שילובו של המפעל? או של יוסף?] into Europe, and the latter for advocating the possibility of including the Arabs in the scholarship and politics of Eretz Israel/Palestine.

1. On the *nahda* period and the revival of Arabic language and literature, see Levy, 2007, and Al Ariss, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For expanded treatment of the Yahuda’s connection with Sa’adia Gaon, see Behar and Evri, 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Yahuda was involved as a student in Heidelberg, and afterwards in Frankfurt, in marshaling support for the first Zionist Congress among Jewish students in the universities of Germany. He even took part in the Congress itself as a representative of the Frankfurt community. He was, he claims, the youngest delegate at the Congress in Basel (Yahuda, 1949). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yahuda’s encounter with Klausner in Heidelberg in those years and their relations in preparing for the Zionist Congress are no less interesting, particularly in view of their tangential academic and public path in those years as against the divergent evolution of their political and scientific careers. Klausner, unlike Yahuda, received a post at the Hebrew University at the outset of that institution and became one of the shapers of the Hebrew Literature department, whereas Yahuda, whose appointment was rejected at the last moment, remained on the fringes of the Jewish scholarly discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The promised continuation of the report did not appear in subsequent editions, possibly because the newspaper began to deal intensively in the War of the Languages that had erupted just then, dictating the agenda for much time to come. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In Spanish, the chair was called the Cátedra de Lengua y Literatura Rabínica, the chair of rabbinical language and literature. In Spain, Medieval Jewish literature was known as “rabbinical literature” (Yahuda, 1949). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In his meeting with the king, Yahuda informed the monarch that he was a scion of the Sephardi Benshuehan family, whose patriarch was Don Joseph Benshuehan of Toledo, loyal servant of King Alfonso VIII of Castile (Yahuda, 1950). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For elaboration on this process, see Shinan [??], 2001, Ginio Meyuhas, 2008; Friedman, 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. For elaboration, see Al Ariss, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. For expanded treatment of Yahuda’s lecture in Jerusalem and its reception in the Arabic press, see Evri, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For elaboration on Yahuda’s lecture and its ensuing polemics, see Evri, 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Yahuda’s full correspondence with the founding committee of the Hebrew University, chaired by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and David Yellin, is preserved in Yahuda’s personal archives at the National Library. [full name] [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Yahuda’s relationship with Eliezer Ben-Yehuda began when the young Yahuda published articles in Ben-Yehuda’s newspapers before he moved to Germany. They remained in close contact over the years. Yahuda was involved in publishing Ben-Yehuda’s dictionaries and helped immensely in raising funds for this purpose in Germany. He also helped Ben-Yehuda’s son, Itamar Ben-Avi, during the latter’s stay in Europe as a young man. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The affair of Yahuda’s leaving / non-appointment to a post at the Hebrew University and his return to Europe has been mentioned in several articles over the years, usually in a critical context toward the Zionist and the Yishuv leadership, which torpedoed the appointment and excluded him from any position of political influence. See Gaon, 1930, 1936; Ben-Yaakov, 1942; Ben Hanania, 1959. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)