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**“A Light in the Dark Ages --
Peace Among Religions During the Golden Age of Spain”
by Mattori Birnbaum
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I once heard a Jewish joke that went something like this: “they tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat!” But there have been times when Jews were not under constant attack. One great example of this is the Golden Age in Spain. It was a time when Jews, Christians, and Muslims were able to live together in relative peace and to enjoy life.

You may be wondering why I would pick this topic for my major Bar Mitzvah project. I learned a little about the Golden Age in Spain last year in 7th grade history class. I wanted to know more about that time period. For example how it was possible for Jews in the Middle Ages, the so-called “Dark Ages,” to live in peace with Muslims and Christians. Maybe more importantly, could there be a Golden Age today in places like the Middle East?

The Golden Age in Spain was a period from 711 to around the 12th century. During this short time in history these three religious groups were able to work, shop, enjoy life, and overall get along. There were advances in many different areas including philosophy, science, mathematics, medicine, and religious study. It was not all perfect harmony. There were still conflicts, corruption, and intolerance. The point is that in the Golden Age life was, on the whole, well, as good as gold.

Before I talk more specifically about the Golden Age, I will set the stage. Jews emigrated to the south of Spain in the 3rd century. In the early 5th century they came under the rule of the Arian Visigoths. The Visigoths were ancient Germanic people, known for conquering territories. In this case they captured the territory from the Romans. The Jews were generally treated well by the Visigoths, although over time the Visigoths became more and more anti-Jewish.

A significant turning point came in the late 6th century when the Visigoth king Recared renounced the Arian faith and adopted Catholicism for political reasons. Under his rule the Visigoths readopted many of the anti-Jewish laws that the Romans had put in place, increasing persecution of the Jews. Conditions worsened over time and included the confiscation of Jewish property, enslavement of Jews, and taking Jewish children away from their parents.

During the rule of the Visigoths, some Jews converted to Christianity and still practiced Jewish law in secret. These people were called Marranos or “swine” in Spanish.

Life under the Visigoths had become so horrible, it is theorized that the Jews actually encouraged the Moors, Berber Muslims from Africa, to conquer the Visigoths. After the Moors defeated the Visigoths, the Jews treated the Moors as their liberators. In fact, they actively fought the Visigoths side-by-side with the Moors and were left in charge of Cordoba, Granada, and other captured cities.

The Muslims gave Jews and Christians a protected status of dhimmi (meaning “People of the Book”), people who cannot be harmed by any Muslims according to the Quran. This was clearly a much better status than the Jews had under the Visigoths’ rule. Jews didn’t have the same status as the Muslims, but during this period Jews were respected and important to society, business, and the government. For example, Samuel Ha’Nagid, a Jewish refugee from Cordoba rose to become the chief minister of Granada.

The conditions were so much better in Spain than in some other places that Jews from all over Europe came to live in Spain. There they helped translate Greek and Hebrew texts into Arabic and other Arabic texts into romance languages. They also worked in botany, medicine, and philosophy among other scholarly jobs. Not only were Jews affecting other religions, but also Islamic culture was affecting Jews. The line between Jewish and Muslim customs and ways was becoming blurred. For example, some Jews would wash their hands and feet when entering a synagogue, a practice originating from Muslims entering mosques. Culturally, some Jews wore clothing in a style that came from the Moors. Arabic sometimes replaced Hebrew or Spanish in Jewish prayers, and some Arabic melodies crept into some Jewish songs.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims were living together in communities that were more neighborly than during most other times in history. For example, the three religions shared municipal baking ovens and bath-houses in towns that could afford them. There were some interfaith businesses. These businesses attracted customers from each other’s faith and they stayed open on each other’s Sabbath. People took it up a notch and even decided to have interfaith friendships and relationships, some leading to marriage. We take a lot of that for granted these days. These were huge steps forward for society during that time.

Jewish culture itself also thrived during this time. Some important Hebrew scholars who lived during that period included Yehudah HaLevi, one of the first great Hebrew poets, and Menahem ben Saruq, who compiled the first ever Hebrew dictionary. Another famous Jewish figure from the Golden Age was Moses Maimonides, one of Judaism’s greatest philosophers, thinkers, and writers. He fled from Cordoba at the age of thirteen to avoid Muslim persecution.

Persecution of the Jews during the Golden Age didn’t just affect Moses Maimonides. In fact, it began to increase way before Maimonides’ time, starting in 722, only about 11 years after the Muslims conquered the Iberian Peninsula. That is when the Muslims began to battle with the Christians for power and control over the peninsula. As the Muslims’ authority and government began to crumble so did protection of the Jews, leading to increased anti-Semitic activity. Anti-Semitism became so bad over time that, for example, in 1066 most of Granada’s Jewish population was massacred. During that event, Jewish vizier Joseph ibn Naghrela was crucified when a powerful Muslim mob attacked the palace in Granada. It is estimated that up to 4,000 Jews were killed in one day.

The prosperity that the Jews and Christians enjoyed under Muslim rule during the Golden Age varied from place-to-place and from time-to-time. Some Muslim rulers were more tolerant than others. However, when a scapegoat was needed, the ruling Muslims would often point to the Jews and Christians.

The end of the Golden Age was marked by increasing religious persecution, in large part due to the arrival of new Muslim tribes from Africa at the end of the 11th century and at the beginning of the 12th century. They conquered parts of Spain and the rest of the Iberian Peninsula. Their religious tolerance depended on the specific ruler in power, but in general they were much less tolerant than the Muslims who ruled earlier during the Golden Age.

Another blow to religious tolerance was the ongoing battle between Christians and Muslims in other parts of Europe, which intensified in Spain in the 11th century. Once again, religious tolerance was very dependant on who was in control. Similar to the Muslim rule, the Christian rulers' treatment of their Jewish subjects varied depending on who was in control at what time and where the area in question was. Ultimately, the Reconquista, which was Christian Europe's attempt to re-conquer formerly Christian territories, such as Spain, led to the Spanish Inquisition in 1492.

That's a brief history lesson on the Golden Age of Spain. Now let's fast-forward to the 21st Century, to our present-day world. Can what was achieved then happen in the modern-day world?

The short answer is "Yes." In New York people of all ethnicities, lifestyles, and religious groups generally live together in relative peace, although there can be differing points of views. For example, in my school there are families who are Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, along with combinations of these three and some who don't follow any religion at all. There are families with a single mother or father, two mothers or two fathers, some with one mother and one father, and some children live with other legal guardians. Some families have a lot of money, others have less. There are dual-income households, single-income households and no-income households. You get the picture. Misunderstandings do arise but for the most part these families in my school community live and work together, and respect each other.

However, not everything is good and peaceful in New York City. Earlier this year, a conflict started over a project called Park51. The plan of the project was to build an Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero. Some people have confused this with building a mosque, which they do not believe should be built so close to the World Trade Center site (because some people associate the destruction of the World Trade Center with all Muslims, as opposed to a group of very bad terrorists). I think that blaming a whole religion for the acts of a few people illustrates that there still is intolerance here.

Nowadays, there are a number of organizations who support interfaith relations. One organization is the Interfaith Center of New York, whose mission is to increase "respect and mutual understanding among people of different faith, ethnic, and cultural traditions" and to foster "cooperation among religious communities and civic organizations to solve common social problems." The Interfaith Center holds regular forums to discuss issues and foster understanding and tolerance. They also educate high school and college students, teachers and others about the history and cultural heritage of the different faiths. This information helps different communities to develop a better understanding of each other, leading to decreased prejudices and misunderstandings.

Now, broadening the view to all of America, there are certainly people who hold racist or stereotypical opinions about others. But the original idea for America was to be a land free from religious intolerance and persecution. On the national scale, there is much more at stake than just what you find in New York. There are even more religions and ethnic groups that have to find ways to live peacefully with each other.

On a national level, The Interfaith Alliance is an organization that “celebrates religious freedom by championing individual rights, promoting policies that protect both religion and democracy, and uniting the diverse voices to challenge extremism.” They promote federal legislation. They also help religious leaders and politicians to maintain the boundaries between church and state. In addition, The Interfaith Alliance sponsors events for people to meet others of different religious groups to increase interfaith dialogues and ultimately to eliminate prejudices.

There are countries with similar views and practices to those in the United States toward religious, ethnic, and other differences. Unfortunately, intolerance remains a problem here and in other countries, but especially in regions like the Middle East. It all depends on the history of those particular countries and what their cultures teach them.

Most people don’t think of Europe in the Middle Ages as being a time of relative peace and tolerance. But that’s what the Golden Age in Spain was. I have some ideas about why there was a Golden Age then, and if there is any hope for one today in places like the Middle East, which I’d like to share with you.

What made the Golden Age in Spain special was that the people in charge, the Moors, supported other religions and respected the Jews and Christians who lived under their rule. In most cases in Europe back then the governments would just want their specific religious group to be in charge. They did not allow people from other religions to be too successful.

The Moors were in control but they let Jews and Christians be a part of the government. One reason that the Moorish government supported the Jews was because they initially both had a common goal; to get rid of the Visigoths. That common goal gave them something to work together on, which they ended up doing, and it created a means for them get to know each other. This gave them a chance to develop some trust and respect for one another.

When the Moors eventually did defeat the Visigoths and conquer their land the Jews were treated very well, as I mentioned earlier in the paper. The Moors’ idea for running this empire was also used in the 10th century by Holy Roman Emperor Otto the 1st (who I actually portrayed for the 7th grade project that inspired me to write this paper). Otto and the Moors had the philosophy that anyone who lived in the land that they conquered potentially had value. The conquered people could be used to pay taxes and to serve as warriors, merchants, farmers, and in other professions. Also many of the conquered people had special skills that could be used by the government to improve the quality of life for all the people in the land. Some of these skilled people included inventors, historians, and scientists. Since it was a time of peace, these skilled people could really shine and be creative, which is what enabled those living during the Golden Age in Spain to make so many advances in so many fields.

Just as hard as it is to believe that there was a Golden Age in Europe in the Middle Ages it is difficult to imagine that there could be a Golden Age in less tolerant parts of the world today, such as in the current-day Middle East. However, I believe that it is possible to make a Golden Age in the Middle East between Israel and the other countries.

The first step toward a Golden Age in the Middle East, as with the Golden Age in Spain, is to find a common goal or purpose that can bring the people of the Middle East together. The second step is typically an outcome of the first step and that is to grow respect and trust. While the countries would be in communication with each other they may make better relationships among one another. The third step is that the governments need to support the idea of co-existing and work hard to convince their citizens. Finally, even beyond co-existence, the governments would have to treat each other with respect and value each other. Once these steps have been achieved the Middle East would be well on its way to cooperation, peace, and a Golden Age for the people who live there.

One of the biggest reasons for people in situations like the Middle East to hate each other is that they don't know people from the other communities. The hatred and dislike that exist in the Middle East have been passed down from generation to generation. The reasons for these feelings might not apply today; in fact they may have been caused by misunderstanding and miscommunication in the first place. Also, there is pressure from the rest of society that wants each individual to believe these stereotypes, even if someone actually has a different point of view. People change and many of the stereotypes in the Middle East about others are probably not true. When you know someone you're much more likely to trust and respect them and there's less of a chance for misunderstanding.

Seeds of Peace is an organization that gives teenagers from places in conflict the skills to be able to understand and coexist with their enemies. I learned about it during a City Congregation Kidschool class when a counselor at Seeds of Peace visited our class to talk about the program. The teens come to a camp in Maine from Israel, Palestine, Egypt, South Asia, Cyprus, and the Balkans. Many of the teens arrive at camp considering other campers to be their enemies. Positive work by groups like Seeds of Peace make it more likely that there can be a Golden Age in the Middle East today.

To summarize, throughout history Jews have been persecuted, but there was a time when we lived in relative peace and harmony with other religions. One such extraordinary time was during the Golden Age in Spain, which surprisingly took place in Europe in the Middle Ages, also known as the Dark Ages. Based on why the Golden Age in Spain was able to happen in the Dark Ages, I believe there can also be a Golden Age in the Middle East during contemporary times. It will be difficult and will take time but it is certainly possible.

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**The City Congregation for Humanistic Judaism
30 W. 26th Street, #11L, New York, NY 10010
212-213-1002 / info@citycongregation.org**