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The Innocent Converso: Identity and Rhetoric in the Igeret Orhit Genre Following the Persecution of 1391

Ram Ben-Shalom

The main focus of this article is the analysis of an igeret orhit (letter of recommendation carried by itinerant Jews) written, in Hebrew, by Yom Tov ben Hanah, scribe to the Jewish community of Montalbán, in Aragon, on behalf of a teacher by the name of Hayim Caro who, immediately after the riots of 1391, sought to return to his home and family in another community. The article introduces the mediaeval literary genre of the igeret orhit, developed among the communal scribes in Spain, in light of the need of itinerant Jews to prove their identity in an era in which imposture was common. Such letters of recommendation written after the riots of 1391 and the formation of converso society in Spain clearly reflect the need for credentials, attesting to the fact that the bearers were Jews rather than converts. I will also show that the scribes and communal leaders were compelled to distinguish between different kinds of conversos, providing letters of recommendation to those they deemed “innocent”, i.e. those who had remained faithful to their Jewish identity despite their forced conversion. To this end, the authors developed a new rhetorical style, which demands cautious critical analysis on the part of modern scholars. Letters on behalf of “innocent” conversos were not an entirely new phenomenon, however. Their roots can be traced to letters written in the early fourteenth-century on behalf of Jewish converts to Christianity who had returned to their original faith.

The *igeret orhit* was a letter of recommendation carried by itinerant Jews in the Middle Ages, as a means of presenting themselves to the Jewish communities with which they came into contact during the course of their travels. The earliest known letter of this type (probably prior to 930 c.e.), found in the Cairo Geniza, is an appeal to the Jewish community of Kiev to help Ya’aqob bar Hanukah, who had been taken captive, to repay his ransom. Other letters from the Geniza, dating from the eleventh century, were written in Iraq, Egypt, Muslim Spain and Christian Spain. The purpose of such letters was to arouse fraternal feelings and open hearts and often pockets.¹ They were also intended, however, to establish the

1 See Y. Yahalom, ‘The Muño Letters: The Work of a Village Scribe from Northern

identity of the bearer, since imposture and identity change posed little difficulty in an era in which communication was based on letters, the spoken word and hearsay.² For example, Shelomo ben Adret (Rashba) – a leader of Aragonese Jewry in the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries – recounts, in a letter addressed to a number of communities, that

A man stood before you and said that I had sent him, but I did not send him and I did not command him, nor did it come into my mind [Jeremiah 7:31]), and I do not know who he is. And the deceivers have already learned this ugly craft of finding favour or [committing] deception for crumbs of bread [Ezekiel 13:19]. And you, do not believe anything similar of me, until my signature has been identified by those who know it.³

In this passage, Ben Adret notes two kinds of impostors: those who seek to present themselves as prominent and well-born men, and those who use their assumed identity to collect charity. Due to this phenomenon, the need arose, as Ben Adret notes, for letters of recommendation from community leaders or scribes, attesting to the origins, identity and character of the bearer, in order to dispel the suspicions of host communities.

Jews in Mediterranean societies who travelled long distances or from country to country had a particular need of *igerot orhiyot*, or letters of recommendation. Most of the extant letters were written for Spanish Jews seeking to immigrate to Palestine – primarily elderly individuals at first and eventually, over the course of the fifteenth century, entire families, in a growing stream.⁴ Prior to 1391, Jews

Spain', *Sefunot* (New Series) 7, 22 (1999), pp. 23-32, esp. p. 23, and . 1-4 (Hebrew); E. Engel, 'The Wandering of a Provençal Proselyte: A Puzzle of Three Genizah Fragments', *Ibid.*, pp. 13-22, esp. 15-14, and notes 8-9 (Hebrew); on a letter of recommendation to a Christian proselyte written by Shemuel bar Yitshaq Hasefardi see N. Golb, 'A Study of a Proselyte to Judaism who Fled to Egypt at the Beginning of the Eleventh Century', *Sefunot* 8 (1964), pp. 85-104.

2 M. Eliav-Feldon, 'Prince or Pauper? Impostors and Dupes in Early-Modern Europe', *Zmanim* 83 (2003), pp. 14-27 (Hebrew); *Idem*, *Renaissance Impostors and Proofs of Identity*, Basingstoke 2012; R. Ben-Shalom, 'Communication and Propaganda Between Provence and Spain: The Controversy Over Extreme Allegorization (1303-1306)', in *Communication in the Jewish Diaspora: The Pre-Modern World*, S. Menache, ed., Leiden 1996, pp. 171-225.

3 Shelomo ben Abraham Ibn Adret (Rashba), *Responsa* 1, 34, H.Z. Dimitrovsky, ed., Jerusalem 1990, p. 100 (Hebrew). I am grateful to Avriel Bar-Levav for having brought this text to my attention.

4 See J. Hacker, 'The Immigration of Spanish Jews to the Land of Israel and their Bond to It, Between 1391 and 1492', *Shalem* 1 (1974), pp. 106-132 (Hebrew); H. Beinart, 'A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Formulary from Spain', in *Idem*, *Chapters in Judeo-Spanish History*, vol. 1, Jerusalem 1998, p. 67 (Hebrew). See also A. David, 'A Letter

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bearing *igeret orhiyot* also travelled in the opposite direction, from Jerusalem to Spain.⁵ An *igeret orhit* written by the community of Saragossa on behalf of Shem-Tov ben Azriel, a pilgrim to Jerusalem in 1348, describes the purpose of such letters:

And when he should come to a place where he is not known, their [the hosts'] generosity might be lacking, if he does not bear his witness and his testimony in his hand to inform people of his honesty and faithfulness [*kashruto*], to dispel twisted speech, to remove suspicion from the faithful [*ha-keshirim*].⁶

In other words, the support and assistance given to travellers by Jewish communities along the way were contingent upon the wayfarer's ability to allay any suspicions the hosts might have with regard to his true identity.

A traveller's identity rested, first and foremost, upon his lineage. The poet Abraham Bedersi, for example, scribe to the community of Perpignan in the second half of the thirteenth century, tells of a Jew named Abraham, who came to Perpignan from Castile, bearing letters attesting to his descent from the biblical commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra.⁷ Such lineage placed the traveller within the narrow milieu of Jewish intellectual circles originating in Al-Andalus and must therefore have opened doors to him in the Jewish communities he visited.

The author's signature, as we see in Ben Adret's letter, was also a matter of particular concern, susceptible to forgery and thus in need of scrutiny and verification. Ben Adret asked the communities to have his signature identified by those who know it and are thus capable of determining whether it is authentic or a forgery. Rashba was by no means alone in this concern. In an *igeret orhit* written in Perpignan by Abraham Bedersi, on behalf of an emissary of the communities of France who was collecting funds among the Jews of Languedoc for the religious education of poor children, Bedersi recounts that the bearer had also asked him to authenticate the signatures of the dignitaries on another letter, from the Jews of Béziers. Bedersi examined the letter and positively identified the signature of

by the Poet R. Shelomo da Piera Regarding Immigration to the Land of Israel from Spain', *Tarbiz* 52 (1983), pp. 656-659 (Hebrew).

5 As recounted by David ben Shueib of Calatayud in Aragon, in Yitshaq b. Sheshet (Ribash), *Responsa* 508, Jerusalem 1974-1975, p. 159 (Hebrew): "A Jew came here from Jerusalem, [bearing] a letter of recommendation (*shetar orhot*), stating that he had left there two years and four months previously, going from city to city in France and Ashkenaz. And it is a year [now] that I have seen him in Barcelona as a gleaner of stalks [collector of alms]".

6 H. Beinart, 'A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Formulary', letter 5, p. 75.

7 See A.M. Haberman, 'Igerot orhiyot by Qalonymos ben Qalonymos and Abraham Bedersi', *Otsar Yehudei Sefarad* 11-12 (1969-1970), p. 27 (Hebrew).

Yosef bar Meshulam of Béziers. He then added his authentication of that signature at the end of his own letter.⁸

The *igeret orhit* can thus be seen as a sub-category of the epistolary genre – more specifically, of the “letter of compassion” [*igeret rahmanut*] type. The necessity and consequent pervasiveness of such letters, however, also resulted in a certain depreciation in their value, since the formulae they employed tended to repeat themselves – increasingly so as scribes began to resort to fixed patterns. Abraham Bedersi thus wrote, in his recommendation of Abraham Ibn Ezra of Castile:

And I, as I come to bestow my generosity upon him, to write of him, to tell of his honesty to the faithful of God’s love, the noble of the land, pursuant to his petition, let things not be said of me at will, let them not speak arrogantly of me, to say to me, you wish [merely] to chatter and you scatter poetry like ashes, for that is not the way I am. God forbid and far be it from me to lie in the generosity of my spirit. I have not sought [merely] to raise a din with my letters, and the message of my poem is dearer, in [times] when vision is uncommon [1 Samuel 1:3], than all that went before it.⁹

In this letter, Bedersi offers a glimpse of the discourse regarding the *igerot orhiyot*. On the one hand stands the petitioner, the subject of the letter, who has asked the writer for his recommendation. On the other hand stands the writer, who accedes to the petitioner’s request. The greater the writer’s reputation and renown, the greater the value of the letter. This state of affairs is reflected in a letter written in Saragossa by Hasdai Crescas (d. 1412), leader of Aragonese Jewry, on behalf of Moshe Sarqosniel, who sought help in providing dowries for his daughters:

Thus spoke the man to me, that [his words] might sprout wings¹⁰ to do kindness and truth with them. And he implored me greatly and asked only

8 Letter by Abraham ben Yitshaq Bedersi, in *Hotam Tokhnit*, G. Polak, ed., Amsterdam 1865, addendum (published by S.D. Luzzatto from an earlier publication by Y.L. Dukes, in *Orient* [1851], cols. 281 and 385), p. 24: “All precious things my eye has seen among the signatories to the letter and I knew some of their signatures, and my heart saw the signature of the honourable R. Yosef bar Meshulam and recognised it and said it is the hand of my brother in Béziers and I myself shall sign as well, to give a sign and portent, a sign of truth, in the hand of the religious emissary, to [my] recognition of his face and gestures and accession to his pleas. Thus spoke he who resides here in the holy community of Perpignan, I, Abraham bar Yitshaq Bedersi”.

9 ‘An *igeret orhit* from Abraham Bedersi’, in A.M. Haberman, ‘*Igerot orhiyot*’, p. 27 (Hebrew).

10 Proverbs 23:5.

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that I write and sign [my name to] his words with ink in a letter.¹¹ And since I have known him for a long time, I acceded to his request and I shall write and sign, that he might find favour in the eyes of those who see him.¹²

Another letter, probably written by one of Crescas' circle in Saragossa in 1406, describes its subject as one who "has fallen on his face to the ground, crying and pleading with us".¹³ Abraham, son of Don Moshe Ibn Shenaz, courtier to the Castilian king, who fled the 1391 riots, lost all of his property and was robbed along the way, is also described as having pleaded with the communal scribe of Saragossa to provide him with a letter of recommendation, for the purposes of which he was compelled to present his life story and family pedigree.¹⁴

The message conveyed by this discourse is that such letters were not taken lightly nor given easily, but required petitioners to provide writers with a compelling reason to accede to their requests. In the case of Moshe Sarqosniel, Hasdai Crescas stressed the fact that his letter was based on personal acquaintance with the petitioner, while Crescas' own standing made the usual description of the petitioner's good character unnecessary.¹⁵ Abraham Bedersi noted that Abraham Ibn Ezra bore letters attesting to his descent from the Ibn Ezra family: "And his letter – a letter from the rabbis of his community – attests to hi[s lineage]", but immediately added that "we saw that his traits take after his stock, and the quality of his bearing attests to his origin".¹⁶ In other words, the petitioner's appearance and behaviour also betrayed his ancestry, as well as his ties to the families of the Jewish elite. Bedersi's letter on behalf of the French emissary, beyond authenticating the signatures on the *igeret orhit* from the Jewish community of Béziers, also takes note of the bearer's manner ("recognition of his face and gestures"): "and I myself shall sign as well, to give a sign and portent, a sign of

11 Jeremiah 36:18.

12 H. Beinart, 'A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Formulary', letter 16, p. 83. The letter may have been written in 1391.

13 Ibid., letter 34, p. 102. See below, n. 22.

14 H. Beinart, 'A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Formulary', letter 9, p. 78: "And he came and poured out his speech before him and the matter of his father's greatness, culminating in a cloud that came from above the stars of Heaven. As often as I speak of him I earnestly remember [him] still; my heart yearns for him, my compassions are kindled together. And he wept and pleaded with me that I might serve him as a mouth". See Ibid., p. 70. On the freedom of movement of Jews between the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, see M. Diago Hernando, 'La movilidad de los judíos a ambos lados de la frontera entre las coronas de Castilla y Aragón durante el siglo XIV', *Sefarad* 63 (2003), pp. 237-282.

15 See below Hasdai Crescas' letter on behalf of Moshe Sarqosniel.

16 'An *igeret orhit* of Abraham Bedersi', in A.M. Haberman, '*Igerot orhiyot*', p. 27. See below, n. 27.

truth, in the hand of the religious emissary, to [my] recognition of his face and gestures and accession to his pleas".¹⁷

Part of the same discourse, between writer, petitioner and the numerous recipients of the letter in the various Jewish communities, was the awareness in the mind of the writer that what he wrote would be disseminated far and wide, and would reflect not only on the image and identity of the bearer, but also – perhaps even foremost – on the writer's own image and on that of the community he represented. The quality of the communal scribe's writing and rhetorical devices were central to the projection of a positive collective image. Thus, for example, Yitshaq b. Sheshet (Ribash – one of the most prominent Aragonese halakhists in the second half of the fourteenth century) complained to the community of Teruel regarding a letter he had received that was full of grammatical errors: "I was surprised at a such an honourable community and holy congregation, that you have not considered hiring a learned scribe from whose hand would issue nothing that is unfit. For in truth, in order to spare their honour, I was unwilling to show that pamphlet to anyone".¹⁸

Beyond flowery rhetoric however, a letter of recommendation had to be credible and persuasive in its description of the bearer. Bedersi thus wrote: "Far be it from me to lie in the generosity of my spirit". The widespread practice of "scattering poetry like ashes" resulted in a depreciation in the value of such letters, compelling writers to employ a degree of skill capable of bridging the gap between eloquence and authenticity. The preacher Yitshaq 'Arama, author of *'Aqedat Yitshaq* and scribe to the community of Calatayud in the second half of the fifteenth century, wrote a number of *igerot orhiyot*, including one "regarding a foolish man named Moshe", also viewed as a parody on the genre, expressing the author's discomfort with the role of professional advocate in a predetermined scenario.¹⁹

The need for *igerot orhiyot* increased in Spain following the events of 1391, with the first of the mass conversions and the formation of *converso* society. At this point, a new formulaic element was introduced into the letters, indicating that Jews who travelled both within the Iberian Peninsula and beyond sought recommendations attesting to the fact that they had remained faithful to their

17 Letter by Abraham ben Yitshaq Bedersi, in *Hotam Tokhnit* [Not paginated].

18 Ribash, *Responsa*, 452, p. 278. See E. Gutwirth, 'Italy or Spain? The Theme of Jewish Eloquence in Shevet Yehudah', in *Daniel Carpi Jubilee Volume. A Collection of Studies in the History of the Jewish People presented to Daniel Carpi upon his 70th Birthday by his Colleagues and Students*, M. Rozen et al., eds., Tel Aviv 1996, English Section, p. 47.

19 A.M. Haberman, 'Melitsot and Poems by R. Yitshaq and R. Meir Arama', *Otzar Yehudei Sefarad* 8 (1965), letter 6, p. 96 (Hebrew).

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religion and were not one of the “New Christians”.²⁰ This is apparent in a number of letters written after 1391. For example, a letter written by the community of Saragossa (after 1412) on behalf of a relative of Hasdai Crescas, Meir bar Todros bar Hasdai, prior to his departure, includes the phrases “lest he be suspected of being one of the dispersed survivors of the decrees, over whose heads floated water [i.e. were baptised] in fear and haste, despair and cowering”, and “he cried and pleaded with us to attest to his faithfulness [*kashruto*]”.²¹ Another letter, from 1406, written for David bar Shemuel ha-Levi of Epila, who wished to visit a number of Jewish communities in Spain in order to raise money for his daughter’s dowry, emphasises that David implored and beseeched the author “to tell you that he is a Jew whose taste remains in him and his scent has not changed [Jeremiah 48:11], [and to tell you] all that has befallen him”.²² A further dowry letter, from 1403, written on behalf of Yosef bar Yitshaq Shuqran, states that the petitioner had wept and implored the representatives of the community of Saragossa “to attest to his faithfulness, to tell you, O mountains of Israel [Ezekiel 36:8], that he is a Jew”.²³ An anonymous Aragonese Jew who sought to immigrate to the Holy Land following the riots and mass conversions is described in a letter by the scribe of the community of Saragossa, Shelomo da Piera, as having “asked us insistently, to tell of the uprightness of his heart and the cleanness of his hands”. Da Piera continues: “Therefore [...] we verily attest to his constancy in adversity and conduct, and to his reputation as a faithful Jew, and that he did not mingle with those that are given to change [Proverbs 24:21] and [with] children of strangers [Isaiah 2:6]”.²⁴ In the same letter, Da Piera also writes:

Survivors of the sword of terror, [who have] escaped the events and occurrences, as they wander and go wherever they may go throughout the land, within community and congregation and in the council of the upright, they are not be believed when they say that they have escaped the fowler’s snare and from the straits, if not from the mouths of scribes, from the mouths of books [i.e. letters], that attest and speak their righteousness, with the signatures of men of renown, famed in the gates.²⁵

20 See E. Gutwirth, ‘Lineage in XVth Century Hispano-Jewish Thought’, *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos* 34, 2 (1985), pp. 86-87.

21 H. Beinart, ‘A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Formulary’, letter 39, p. 105; E. Gutwirth, ‘Lineage’, p. 87.

22 H. Beinart, *Ibid.*, letter 34, p. 102. See also *Ibid.*, p. 69, n. 37. The letter reads: “And he fell on his face to the ground, crying and pleading with us”.

23 *Ibid.*, letter 20, p. 87.

24 H. Brody, *Beiträge zu Salomo Da-Piera’s Leben und Wirken*, Berlin 1893, letter 4, p. 22.

25 *Ibid.*

Da Piera describes here a new phenomenon, whereby Jewish communities no longer trusted travellers to vouch for themselves that they had managed to escape the riots without converting. The communities now demanded that travellers present a letter from a communal scribe, signed by respected figures, attesting to the fact that they had not converted to Christianity. We thus learn that the presentation of Jewish credentials was a *sine qua non* for collecting charity and receiving assistance and hospitality from the various communities.²⁶

Moreover, contrary to earlier practice, whereby communities were often satisfied with a general impression of a petitioner²⁷ and some supporting testimony, the Saragossa community began to employ a method of investigation or examination to authenticate the claims of petitioners, to ascertain whether they were telling the truth and were not converts – as evidenced by a dowry letter from 1401: “And after the investigation and examination of his words found them to be entirely true, we decided to satisfy his will and accede to his request”.²⁸ A letter from 1410 reveals that the community of Saragossa had corroborated the personal history and character of the petitioner Yehudah bar Yosef, “from the mouths of truth-tellers”.²⁹ Another letter from 1410 describes the tribulations of Moshe of Lisbon, who set out to find his sons and lost all of his possessions, noting that he was reputed to be of a respectable family,³⁰ and that “these and similar things we have verified, and should not be doubted”.³¹ In other words, the author stressed that Moshe’s story had undergone a process of verification – corroborating hearsay and examining testimony – rendering the letter completely trustworthy. Representatives of the community of Lisbon, who signed an *igeret orhit* in 1424, on behalf of Shemuel Habib, an immigrant to Jerusalem, noted that

26 It is worth noting that some letters of compassion from the same period make no reference to the issue of credentials. See, for example, H. Beinart, ‘A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Formulary’, letter 23, pp. 89-90. In letter 29, *Ibid.*, p. 95, from 1407, there is no direct reference to credentials, although Hasdai Crescas does note there, that Zerayah Bonafed of Barcelona was “a brand saved from the fire of the decrees, for he was not [present] among the congregation on the day of chastisement and wrath” – effective proof that he had not converted.

27 The expression that appears repeatedly in the letters is “the appearance of his face bears witness to his character” (based on Is. 3:9). See, for example: H. Beinart, ‘A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Formulary’, letter 12, p. 81; letter 21, p. 88; letter 29, p. 96. See also A.M. Haberman, ‘*Igerot orhiyot*’, p. 27: “And the appearance of his face bears witness to [the fact] that he is a descendant of the great and renowned sage, grammarian and one of the foremost rhetoricians, Abraham Ibn Ezra”.

28 H. Beinart, *Ibid.*, letter 36, p. 104.

29 *Ibid.*, letter 12, p. 81.

30 *Ibid.*, letter 19, p. 85: “We have heard it said that this Moshe is very great in the eyes of his people. The faithful of his land, the honourable of his locality have attested [to the fact] that he is a good [man], and of a respectable family”.

31 *Ibid.*, letter 19, p. 86.

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they “had investigated and examined carefully, and found it [to be] true and right that he had acted valiantly [*hayah le-ish hayil*] in the period that had passed”.³²

It is worth noting that dowry letters and letters of compassion for the needy written later, toward the mid-fifteenth century, by the Saragossa community scribe Shelomo b. Shelomo Hazan, no longer contain references to the petitioner’s Jewish credentials, or to meticulous inquiries into his identity or character.³³ This may be attributed to a clear demarcation of the boundaries between Jewish and *converso* communities, and the completion of a process of consolidation of new collective identities in both societies.³⁴ As a result of this process, *conversos* found it increasingly difficult to pass freely into the Jewish camp, thereby attenuating the Jewish communities’ need to scrutinise the religious identity of travellers.

We must remember that most of the Spanish Jews who converted to Christianity during the first great wave of conversions, in 1391, were forcibly baptised during the riots. The second wave, which coincided with the Tortosa Disputation (1413-1414) and especially the preaching of Vicente Ferrer – beginning in 1411 in Castile, and from 1412 to 1416 in Aragon – was mostly voluntary, or the result of spiritual and legislative (Valladolid statutes, 1412) pressure that limited the possibilities of Jewish existence.

Although the phenomenon of forced conversion was viewed with disfavour by the Aragonese Crown, ordinances were issued in September 1391 forbidding *conversos* to bear arms or travel to Muslim lands, both for economic reasons and to prevent them from returning to Judaism. The *conversos* were considered Christians according to Canon law, and those who reverted to their former faith were regarded as heretics. In 1393, King Juan I issued the first regulations for the isolation of *conversos* from Jews in Aragon, prohibiting them from living or eating together. The *conversos* were placed under the supervision of the bishops. Although the Inquisition initiated relatively few proceedings during this formative period, the king’s officials conducted a number of trials against *conversos* who had attempted to flee Aragon or secretly observed Jewish rituals, and against Jews who helped them.³⁵ Yitzhak Baer succinctly described the relationship that had developed between Jews and *conversos* at the time:

32 Ibid., letter 3, p. 74.

33 Ibid., letters 42-47, pp. 108-110.

34 R. Ben-Shalom, ‘The Social Context of Apostasy among Fifteenth-Century Spanish Jewry’, in *Rethinking European Jewish History*, J. Cohen and M. Rosman, eds., London 2008, pp. 173-198.

35 Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, Philadelphia 1961, II, pp. 124-126; M.D. Meyerson, *A Jewish Renaissance in Fifteenth-Century Spain (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World)*, Princeton N.J. and Oxford 2004, pp. 53-57. In the Kingdom of Valencia the conversos were persecuted severely by the inquisitors. In April 1394 the King Juan I, ordered Bartolomé Gaçó, the general inquisitor in the Kingdom of Valencia, to cease the persecution of the conversos of

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Many of the *conversos* went over to the enemy camp immediately after they were baptized, though the outbreaks were still continuing, and tried to demonstrate their zeal for their new faith. Such people forced their families and friends to change their religion and became the chief instigators against the local Jews. Others wavered for many years after their baptism, and some of these even practiced a few of the Jewish rites in secret until they either succeeded in escaping from Spain or wholeheartedly accepting the victorious religion and themselves began to persecute their former brethren. Still others, ostensibly devoted to their new faith, remained secretly friendly to their old community. Money was their greatest resource.³⁶

One *igeret orhit* that sheds some light on the relationship between Jews and *conversos* during this period can be found in an epistolographic formulary by Yom Tov ben Hanah (Abenhanya) of Montalbán, in the Kingdom of Aragon, partially preserved in ms. Oxford, Bodleian Library 1984. The formulary was edited by the author's son, Yosef, who prefaced each letter with a brief explanation of the circumstances in which it was written.³⁷ This particular letter was written on behalf of a teacher by the name of Hayim Caro, who had lived in Montalbán for three years. According to the editor's explanation, the teacher had arrived in Montalbán bearing a letter of recommendation from another community, but in the aftermath of the events of 1391 ("the time of the unprecedented decree"), which struck Montalbán in August,³⁸ he wished to leave the city and return to his family, to which end he required a new letter. The letter follows in its entirety:

Burriana, which had resulted in a massive flight. In September 1394 the king ordered Bartolomé Gaçó, not to pressure the conversos of the city of Valencia, since more than 50 converso families left the city. See: J. Hinojosa Montalvo, *The Jews of the Kingdom of Valencia from Persecution to Expulsion, 1391-1492*, Jerusalem 1993, pp. 119, 457 doc. 219, 463 doc. 232; See Y. Baer, *Ibid.*, pp. 471-472, n. 21 on the *auto de fe* in Majorca in 1407, and burning of a *converso* who had twice attempted to return to Judaism. See also: N. Oeltjen, 'Kings, Creditors and Converts. The Impact of Royal Policy and Corporate Debt on the Collective Identity of Majorcan Conversos after 1391', *Sefarad* 73 (2013), pp. 133-164.

36 Y. Baer, *History*, p. 133.

37 On the author and the manual see R. Ben-Shalom, 'The Courtier as the "Scepter of Judah": The Letters and Panegyrics to Courtiers of Yomtov ben Hana, Scribe of the Jewish Community of Montalbán', *El Prezente* 6 (2012) [*Ot Letova: Essays in Honor of Professor Tova Rosen*], pp. 196-224 (Hebrew); and my article below in note 99.

38 R. Sainz de la Maza, 'La aljama judía de Montalbán (1307-91)', *Anuario de Estudios Medievales* 14 (1984), pp. 345-391, esp. p. 391, doc. 26; M.Á. Motis Dolader, *La Comunidad judía y conversa de Montalbán (siglos XIII-XV)*, Zaragoza 2006, esp. pp. 36 and 41-45.

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He also [answered and said] to a lame teacher of children, by the name of Hayim Caro, who had come here to Montalbán bearing a letter of recommendation (*shetar orhit*), and lived among us during the time of the unprecedented decree, and asked my father to give faithful testimony on his behalf, in his letter. And he said as follows:

One who walks in his innocence³⁹ and treads with uprightness. If his ankles bend and stumble.⁴⁰ The hand of his rule⁴¹ is a voice unto him.⁴² Speaking in righteousness,⁴³ with a strong hand,⁴⁴ his words raise up one who falls.⁴⁵ And his outstretched arm⁴⁶ will surely lift up⁴⁷ the bent of knee⁴⁸ that his feet might stand.⁴⁹ [While] the scoundrel⁵⁰ falls before all his brethren.⁵¹ He falls [until] his appearance is marred unlike that of any man.⁵² No one takes him by the hand.⁵³ All his intimates and friends revile him,⁵⁴ his dear ones and neighbours withdraw.⁵⁵

Therefore you, heads of the communities of Israel.⁵⁶ Look upon and see with a merciful eye this man who approaches you,⁵⁷ his name written in the book *Hayim* [also: the living]⁵⁸ Caro, his face is set⁵⁹ to return to his

39 Proverbs 20:7.

40 2 Samuel 22:37; Psalms 18:37.

41 The phrase “*yad kelalo*” (translated here “the hand of his rule”) may derive from the Talmudic expression “*negot hai kelala beyadekha*” (BT *Shabat* 147a), with the words inverted for the alliterative effect of “*kelalo-qol*”.

42 See 1 Kings 19:13.

43 Isaiah 62:1. See also *Midraš Tehillim*, S. Buber, ed., Vilna 1891, repr. Jerusalem 1976-1977, Psalms. 20, s.v. (3) *davar aher*, pp. 174-175, where the phrase “speak of righteousness” is associated with the Israelites’ acceptance of the Torah.

44 E.g. Exodus 13:9; Deuteronomy 30:34.

45 Following Job 4:4.

46 See Deuteronomy 30:34; Psalms 136:12.

47 Deuteronomy 22:4.

48 BT *Sanhedrin* 88b.

49 Zechariah 14:4.

50 1 Samuel 25:25; 2 Samuel 16:7.

51 Genesis 25:18.

52 Isaiah 52:14

53 Following Judges 16:26.

54 See Job 19:19.

55 Job 19:14. See also Numbers 2:5; *Ibid.* 27; and Nahmanides on Genesis 18:18: “*shekhenav ha-honim ‘alav*”.

56 Numbers 1:16.

57 Genesis 24:65.

58 Psalms 69:29.

59 See Habbakuk 1:9.

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own land,⁶⁰ to call on the peace of his righteous home⁶¹ and his children. And if he wrestled mightily⁶² not to give his covenant.⁶³ It has left no mark⁶⁴ on his conduct.⁶⁵ Known in the gates.⁶⁶ He walks uprightly.⁶⁷ His ways are ways of pleasantness⁶⁸ and his paths are paths of the river of knowledge (*nehar de'ah*)⁶⁹ and wisdom. May they be his portion.⁷⁰ He has resided with us here in Montalbán for three years joining the Lord's inheritance,⁷¹ dwelling in his tents.⁷² He who sustains the living (*Hayim*) by the mercy⁷³ of the Most High that he shall not fall⁷⁴ in his faith, [that he] shall live⁷⁵ and his bread will not lack,⁷⁶ and he who takes pity on him will [in turn] have pity taken on him by his Maker.⁷⁷ Or whether by the counsel of his prudent soul⁷⁸ [will] not withhold good from him to whom it is due.⁷⁹ May his eyes behold⁸⁰ God's restoration of the captivity of Zion,⁸¹ to afford consolation to him and to his mourners.⁸² Amen, may the Lord do as⁸³ you desire and as [this] writer desires, pained and anguished⁸⁴

60 See Isaiah 37:7.

61 Following Job 8:6; 5:24.

62 Following Genesis 30:8.

63 See e.g. Num. 25:12.

64 See e.g. Ya'aqob b. Asher, *Arba'ah Turim*, Vilna 1923-24, *Even ha-'ezer*, *Hilkhot gitin*, 130: "And if the witnesses do not know how to sign, the forms of the letters are outlined for them on the bill of divorce, with a finger or something else **that leaves no mark**, which would render [the bill] unfit, and they fill it in with ink".

65 See Proverbs 20:11: "Even a child is known by his deeds, whether his conduct is pure and upright"; Isaiah 62:11.

66 See Proverbs 31:23.

67 Following Song of Songs 7:10; Isaiah 33:15.

68 Following Proverbs 3:17.

69 Following BT *Berakhot* 58b: "The ways of the heavens are as clear to me as the paths of Nehardea".

70 Following Exodus 29:26.

71 Psalms 127:3.

72 Following Genesis 25:27.

73 From the *Amidah* prayer.

74 Psalms 21:8.

75 Numbers 24:23.

76 Isaiah 51:14.

77 Following Isaiah 27:11.

78 Following Proverbs 27:9.

79 Proverbs 3:27.

80 Following Isaiah 17:7. The entire phrase in the letter is reminiscent of "May our eyes behold Your return to Zion" in the *Amidah* prayer.

81 Following Psalms 126:1.

82 Isaiah 57:18.

83 Jeremiah 28:6.

84 See Lamentations 5:17; Isaiah 1:5.

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at the events of the time. I sit astonished⁸⁵ by the turmoil (*mehuman*), pillage (*bizeta*) and destruction (*harvona*).⁸⁶ Small in merit and doing the bidding of the great [men] of his community. Speaking words of request and supplication. Yom Tov ben Hanah.

Written and signed in the first decade of the month of Kislev, in the [week] of the portion Return to your land and your birthplace and I will deal well with you.⁸⁷ Selah.⁸⁸

In his letter, Yom Tov ben Hanah stresses Caro's considerable efforts to remain Jewish: "And if he wrestled mightily not to give his covenant. It has left no mark on his conduct. Known in the gates. He walks uprightly. [...] He who sustains the living (*Hayim*) by the mercy⁸⁹ of the Most High that he shall not fall in his faith".

It is worth noting that the letter was probably written in November 1391, only three months after the violent events of that year.⁹⁰ While the letter by the community of Saragossa on behalf of Meir bar Todros was written at least twenty-one years after the riots and shortly before the second wave of voluntary conversions, the Montalbán letter shows that at a distance of only a few months from the riots, Jews already harboured fears of being identified as Christians. Jewish aversion to baptism was, at the time, closely linked to the concept of martyrdom (*Kidush ha-Shem*), and was probably among the reasons for such letters of recommendation.⁹¹

85 Ezekiel 3:15.

86 Esther 1:10, and Targum I, ad loc.

87 Genesis 32:10.

88 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Ms. Mich. 155 (formerly 809) [Neubauer 1984] [IMHM 19146], fols. 267v-268r.

89 From the *Amidah* prayer.

90 The letter closes with the words: "Written and signed in the first decade of the month of Kislev, in the [week] of the portion Return to your land and your birthplace and I will deal well with you [Genesis 32:10]. Selah". In 1391, 1 Kislev fell on 30 October, and the weekly Torah portion of *Va-Yishlah*, from which the verse is taken, was read on Saturday, 11 November. The letter would thus have been written between 5 and 8 November (7-10 Kislev). The letter could also have been written in 1394, since 1 Kislev fell on 26 October in that year, and the portion of *Va-Yishlah* was read on Saturday, 7 November. The letter would thus have been written between 1 and 4 November (7-10 Kislev). The later date, however, presumes that Hayim Caro would have arrived in Montalbán very close to the beginning of the riots (August 1391), continuing to reside there until November 1394. He would thus have lived in Montalbán for three years and several months, which would be consistent with the assertion in the letter that "He has resided with us here in Montalbán for three years". It is more likely, however, that Caro departed from Montalbán in 1391, as the letter intimates that the riots were the direct cause of his decision to return home.

91 See R. Ben-Shalom, 'Kiddush Hashem and Jewish Martyrology in Aragon and Castile in 1391: Between Sepharad and Ashkenaz', *Tarbiz* 70 (2001), pp. 279-300 (Hebrew).

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Seven letters by the Saragossan communal scribe Shelomo da Piera, written after the 1391 riots, attest to the same phenomenon. Some of the letters generally refer to the honesty and moral conduct of the petitioners (who often travelled with family members), while some explicitly address the issue of conversion, noting that the petitioner had remained faithful to Judaism.⁹² Contrary to the letter by Yom Tov ben Hanah of Montalbán, most of Da Piera's published letters cannot be dated, and closer analysis has shown that at least some are related to the preaching of Vicente Ferrer (1412-1416), rather than to the immediate aftermath of the events of 1391.⁹³

The letter by Yom Tov ben Hanah is different, however. Contrary to most of the letters of recommendation published to date, which attest explicitly to the bearer's non-conversion, Ben Hanah hints at the fact that Caro had not managed – despite all of his efforts – to avoid baptism. Unlike other *conversos* however, Caro clung to his Judaism, which is why Ben Hanah called upon others to support him. It is in this vein that I believe the passage should be understood: “It [baptism] has left no mark on his conduct [his observance of the precepts of the Torah]”.⁹⁴ The word “conduct” also appears in the context of conversion and loyalty to the Jewish faith, in a letter by Shelomo da Piera: “we faithfully attest to his constancy

92 See above the letter of Shelomo da Piera on behalf of an anonymous Aragonese Jew who sought to immigrate to the Holy Land. Of the seven letters published by Brody, five refer to petitioners travelling to the Land of Israel. See J. Hacker, ‘The Immigration’, p. 113.

93 See, for example, the letter of recommendation on behalf of Yehudah ben Baqah of Huesca, who sought to immigrate to the Land of Israel “following the decrees”, in H. Brody, *Beiträge*, pp. 16-18. The letter stresses the missionary sermons, rather than the murder of Jews, as the primary cause of conversions (Ibid., p. 17): “They speak words and the sound of words against the Most High and against the God of gods, as one of the scoundrels; and to persuade of left that it is right with smooth talk, with ill-gotten gain, they prophecy delusions, to destroy all flesh wherein is the breath of eternal life they brought the flood of the cursing water, and life unto the bitter in soul with the lie of their libation, they immersed as they are wont to do to all who lack immersion”. Letter 2, written for a family travelling to the Land of Israel “following the decrees”, also stresses the Christian sermons (Ibid. p. 19): “And a band of violent men gathered together; to destroy the remnant that remained, and with curled lip [utter] words against the Most High”. Regarding the dating of these letters, see also F. Baer, *Die Juden im christlichen Spanien: Urkunden und Regesten*, Berlin 1929, I, d. 445, p. 699.

94 On the meaning of “leaving a mark”, see also *Qohelet rabah*, 12, s.v. 1 [11], *Divrei hakhamim*: “Like a nail, which leaves a mark even after it is removed, so one whose sins cause him [to fall] and the sages stretch out their hand against him, even if he returns, a mark remains”. The connection here between a “remaining mark” and sin, may hint at baptism. See also BT *Sotah* 19b, “when its mark remains” with regard to the ordeal of the “straying woman”. See also above n. 64.

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in adversity and conduct (*u-fe'ulato*), and to his reputation as a faithful Jew",⁹⁵ and probably derived from Isaiah 62:11: "Say to the daughter of Zion: 'Behold your salvation comes; behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense (*u-fe'ulato*) before Him'". The word *u-fe'ulato* in this verse is explained by the biblical commentator David Qimhi (Radaq) as follows: "The meaning of *u-fe'ulato* is the good conduct that they showed toward God, in upholding his Torah and precepts in the diaspora, despite [their] great misfortunes". In other words, the word *pe'ulato* is associated with religious observance in the diaspora. Thus, contrary to Da Piera, who unequivocally attests to the bearer's "constancy of conduct", Ben Hanah asserts that "it has left no mark on his conduct". This is a subtle literary hint intended, on the one hand, to reveal the truth about the petitioner's baptism, while protecting the reputation of one whom the author considered part of the Jewish people.

The opening of Ben Hanah's letter would also appear to refer to the issue of conversion:

One who walks in his innocence [*be-tumo*; also "perfect" or "unblemished"] and treads with uprightness. If his ankles bend and stumble [...] his words raise up one who falls [...] [While] the scoundrel falls before all his brethren [...] No one takes him by the hand.

Ben Hanah describes two types of people: the innocent (who is simple in his faith), and the scoundrel.⁹⁶ When the innocent man falls and stumbles, he is helped, gets up and recovers. When the scoundrel falls, however, he receives no help, and his friends and intimates desert him. In light of this introduction, Hayim Caro is presented as one who has indeed fallen and been baptised, but since he is one of the innocent, the author appeals to the communities to extend assistance to him.

This interpretation of the letter also affords some insight into the character of the author – the communal scribe of Montalbán, Yom Tov ben Hanah. On the one hand, he harbours no illusions regarding the reality of the subject's conversion, which he reveals by means of clever textual intimations that will not harm the bearer, displaying the sophisticated literary ability of a superb epistolographer.⁹⁷

95 See above the letter of Shelomo da Piera on behalf of an anonymous Aragonese Jew who sought to immigrate to the Holy Land.

96 Two types of people also emerge in the opening of a letter written on behalf of Don Yosef ben Almali: "Shall we call a king a slave of slaves? A scoundrel and man of blood, upright and innocent? [For] righteousness befits the righteous. Wickedness the wicked". See Ms. Oxford, 1984, fol 263v; R. Ben-Shalom, *The Courtier as the Scepter of Judah*, pp. 200-203.

97 It is interesting to note the connection between Hayim Caro's physical condition – he was lame – and the imagery employed by the scribe: "One who walks [...] If his ankles bend and stumble [...] his words raise up one who falls [...] will surely lift up the bent

On the other hand, he shows sensitivity and sympathy toward *conversos* who continue to adhere to Judaism, in complete contrast to those whom he defines as “scoundrels”. The figure of the “innocent *converso*” that arises from Ben Hanah’s letter is very similar to the way in which Profayt Duran, a *converso* himself, perceived his own identity, at about the same time. At the end of his *Epistle Be Not Like Your Fathers* (1394 or 1395), written for his friend and fellow convert En David Bonet Bonjorn who had converted out of a professedly sincere desire to embrace Christianity, he wrote:

For you have always known that my intentions were good, **as demonstrated by my deeds. I am innocent in my faith** [*tamim ani be-emunati*] in the Lord my God, with all my heart and all my soul. [...] And ever since I have adhered to this faith, I have discovered no new ephemeral knowledge whatsoever, nor have I changed my ways, and that which I believe now is the same as that which I have believed these past twenty years.⁹⁸

Similarly, Ben Hanah stressed that Hayim Caro “shall not fall in his faith”. Both Ben Hanah and Duran contrasted the figure of the “innocent” (perfect in his faith and unblemished) with that of the “scoundrel”. Such “scoundrels” were also *conversos*, but – unlike Hayim Caro and the other “innocents” – took advantage, in Ben Hanah and Duran’s opinion, of the forced conversions of 1391, to distance themselves from the Jewish community and Judaism. This is supported by other works in the formulary, which I discussed elsewhere, including a poem by Ben Hanah, in which he refers to a group of evil and wealthy *conversos* as “scoundrels and men of blood”.⁹⁹ In a similar vein, Profayt Duran exhorted David Bonjorn not to include his father’s name in his signature, for had his father been alive he would have preferred no son at all to a son like him. What is more, he remarked,

of knee that his feet might stand”. Ben Hanah clearly considered the impression his letter would make on future readers, and therefore created a link between its content and Caro’s physical appearance. See: E. Shoham-Steiner, *Involuntary Marginals: Marginal Individuals in Medieval Northern European Jewish Society*, Jerusalem 2007, esp. pp. 32-37 (Hebrew).

98 Profayt Duran, ‘Epistle Be Not Like Your Fathers’, in *The Polemical Writings of Profiat Duran*, F. Talmage, ed., Jerusalem 1981, p. 83. See: M. Kozodoy, ‘The Hebrew Bible as Weapon of Faith in Late Medieval Iberia: Irony, Satire, and Scriptural Allusion in Profiat Duran’s *Al Tehi ka-Avotekha*’, *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 18 (2011), pp. 185-201, esp. p. 185, n. 3.

99 See the curse of Shimei son of Gera in 2 Sam. 16:7; R. Ben-Shalom, ‘Conflict between Jews and Converts in Aragon Following the Persecution of 1391: New Testimonies from the Formulary of Yom Tov ben Hanah of Montalbán’, *Sefarad* 73 (2013), pp. 97-131.

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Bonjorn's father was certainly mourning for him in the next world.¹⁰⁰ Such harsh words written to an old friend are emblematic of the binary contrasts employed in the portrayal of *conversos*, and the marking of the convert Bonjorn as the villain.

I believe this letter of recommendation for a *converso* is not an exception, but reflects a wider phenomenon in the immediate aftermath of the 1391 riots, whereby Jewish communities had not yet decided how they should relate to *conversos*, whose socio-religious standing had not yet been determined. It is in this light that we should view Hasdai Crescas' letter on behalf of Moshe Sarqosniel – previously understood as a letter of recommendation for a Jew. The petitioner, Moshe Sarqosniel, is presented as a man desperate with worry for his two daughters who have reached marriageable age, compelling him to seek the help of wealthy Jews in other communities in order to provide dowries for his daughters. The letter lacks the usual testimony to the petitioner's character, and the appeal for support relies mainly on his personal acquaintance with the author, Hasdai Crescas.¹⁰¹ This letter, however (possibly written in 1391), like Ben Hanah's letter, intimates that the bearer is a *converso*. It begins as follows:

He who walks in a field of tithes, to gather herbs,¹⁰² as if before the sword¹⁰³ of misfortune, is a child of the Hebrews.¹⁰⁴ Formerly known in Israel¹⁰⁵ as Moshe Sarqosniel from his boyhood and youth,¹⁰⁶ shaken away like the locust,¹⁰⁷ torn from the tent of his trust,¹⁰⁸ he abandoned his home, forsook his inheritance,¹⁰⁹ and went to graze in another land.¹¹⁰

The letter notes the events of 1391 ("the sword of misfortune"), as well as the petitioner's departure from his community. It also asserts, however, that the bearer is "a child of the Hebrews", and that he was "formerly known in Israel" as Moshe

100 'Epistle Be Not Like Your Fathers', p. 83. See E. Gutwirth, 'Religion and Social Criticism in Late Medieval Rousillon: An Aspect of Profayt Duran's Activities', *Michael* 12 (1991), esp. pp. 142-145; M.N. Kozodoy, *A Study of the Life and Works of Profiat Duran*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America 2006, esp. pp. 120-133.

101 See above the letter of Hasdai Crescas on behalf of Moshe Sarqosniel.

102 2 Kings 4: 39.

103 Leviticus 26:37.

104 Exodus 2:6.

105 1 Samuel 9:9; Ruth 4:7.

106 Numbers 11:28.

107 Psalms 109:23.

108 Job 18:14.

109 Jeremiah 12:7.

110 Deuteronomy 29:27; Jeremiah 22:26; Isaiah 27:10. Quoted from H. Beinart, 'A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Formulary', letter 16, p. 83. See also *Ibid.*, n. 71.

Sarqosniel, i.e. that his original Hebrew name was Moshe Sarqosniel, although (and this is not stated explicitly, but only intimated) he now bears a new, Christian name. The expression “formerly in Israel” (*lefanim be-Yisrael*) denotes previous circumstances that persist in an altered fashion,¹¹¹ and according to Maimonides is “an adverb of time having the meaning: before or ancient”.¹¹² In Spain, we find that the expression was used in relation to converts who had assumed Christian names.¹¹³ Pharaoh’s daughter’s exclamation, “This is a child of the Hebrews” (Exodus 2:6) was also apparently used at that time in reference to *conversos*, as evidenced by another letter, written by the community of Saragossa on behalf of a *converso* baptised at Valencia in 1391, subsequently appointed emissary of the king of Aragon.¹¹⁴

111 See, for example, David Qimhi (Radaq) on 1 Samuel 9:9: “‘For he that is now called a prophet’ – According to Rabbinic tradition, the prophet Samuel wrote his book [the Book of Samuel], and this event occurred at the end of his life, for Samuel died in Saul’s lifetime, and Saul ruled for only two years. What then is ‘formerly’ and what is ‘today’? It may be explained that the statement that a prophet was formerly called a seer is [from the perspective of] the day on which Samuel wrote this [passage], and ‘formerly’ does not mean that it had ceased [to be so], but that formerly, that is the term that Saul and his servant had used, as they said ‘Is the seer here?’, ‘Where is the seer’s house?’, but soon thereafter, in the days of Samuel, in which prophecy burgeoned, and the words of the prophets went forth in Israel, both in chastisement and in [telling] the future, seers were also called prophets, as the word prophet (*navi*) denotes speech, as in [the expression] ‘*niv* [speech] of the lips’ [Isaiah 57:19], although they [*navi* and *niv*] do not derive from the same root. And in the days of Samuel, there were those who used the older word ‘seer’ and those who used the word ‘prophet’. And the meaning of [the word] ‘seer’ is that he sees with the vision of prophecy, the future or what he is now commanded to say. And so ‘This was formerly the custom [...] a man drew off his shoe’ [Ruth 4:6] [means] that formerly and on that day as well, this was the attestation – and so to this day – for an acquisition of any kind”. See also Ibn Ezra, commentary on Ruth 4:7; and Nahmanides, commentary on Deuteronomy 22:17.

112 Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines, Chicago 1963, I.37, p. 86.

113 See Don Yitshaq Abravanel’s reference to the convert Paulus de Sancta Maria, formerly Rabbi Shelomo ha-Levi, bishop of Burgos. Yitshaq Abravanel, *Mashmi’a yeshu’ah* (The Announcer of Salvation), in Idem, *Commentary on Prophets and Writings*, Tel Aviv 1960-1961, 3.7, p. 461 (Hebrew): “Recently, however, a scholar of our own people who left the fold of the faith in the kingdoms of Spain, **formerly called in Israel** Shelomo ha-Levi, who later became a great prince among the Christians and was bishop of Burgos”.

114 See F. Baer, *Die Juden*, I, d. 471, p. 757: “The dignitary who bears this letter is of the seed of the House of Israel, taken among the **children of the Hebrews** who passed under the rod of the oppressor in the decree of Valencia, and he has grown and been weaned in the faith that he adopted then”. Baer estimates that the letter (reprinted in H. Beinart, ‘A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew Formulary from Spain’, letter 37, p. 104) was written in the years 1407-1410. See also H. Beinart, ‘A Fifteenth-Century Hebrew

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Hasdai Crescas thus revealed, by intimation, that the bearer of the letter was a *converso*, but also conveyed the message that – to his mind, so soon after the events of 1391 – nothing had changed. He considered this *converso* part of the Jewish people, and therefore called upon charitable Jews to contribute toward the dowries of his daughters, in keeping with ancient Jewish custom.¹¹⁵

I believe that the *converso* letters by Yom Tov ben Hanah and Hasdai Crescas belong to a sub-genre of the *igeret orhit*, intended to attest in writing to the Judaism of returning *conversos*. Such documents were not invented in 1391. They are mentioned in Bernard Gui's *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis*, completed around 1323. Gui was inquisitor of Toulouse, operating throughout southern France in the second decade of the fourteenth century, and was also responsible for the burning of the Talmud in 1319. At the beginning of the *Practica*, he describes a Jewish ritual centred around immersion for the readmission of returning *conversos*, during the course of which candidates were required to repudiate Christian belief and promise to observe the precepts of the Torah. Following the ceremony, according to Gui, the “re-Judaised” (*rejudayzatus*) *converso* was provided with an official document (*carta*), which served as “a means of testimony” (*instrumentum testimoniale*) before all other Jews (*ad omnes alias Judeos*) that they might trust him and should treat him with kindness (*ut sic possint eum recipere et confidere de eodem et benefaciant ei*).¹¹⁶ This was, in effect, an *igeret orhit*, which enabled the returning Jews to be welcomed in other communities.

Although Bernard Gui and other inquisitors, such as Jacques Fournier, may have exaggerated in their descriptions of Jewish “anti-baptism” rituals, further documents from Provence (e.g. the records of Bertrand de Cigotero of Toulon, written in 1321), as well as the *Responsa* literature, confirm the existence of some Jewish ritual of this type, with immersion serving as a central element,

Formulary from Spain’, p. 69; R. Ben-Shalom, ‘The *converso* as Subversive: Jewish Tradition or Christian Libel?’, *Journal of Jewish Studies* 50 (1999), pp. 259-283.

115 Another letter (date unknown) recommends Abraham ben Vidal Debesaldon (de Besalú) – a Catalan *converso* (from Castelló d’Empúries, near Besalú), who returned to Judaism in Guadalajara, in Castile, where he married a local Jewish woman. Abraham arrived in Saragossa, after having been robbed upon leaving Castile in search of his mother and brothers. The letter stresses the fact that he is part of the Jewish people: “And he wept and implored us, we who are here today, some of the inhabitants of Saragossa, who have heard tell of his forebears, that we might say to all his people, the people of the sons of Israel, all that has befallen him, that he might find favour in the eyes of the inhabitants of the land”. See H. Beinart, *Ibid.*, letter 10, pp. 78-79, and n. 65, in which he suggests that the letter may have been written either in 1290, or after the decrees of 1391. It is unclear why Beinart cites the date 1318 in his text (*Ibid.*, p. 70).

116 See B. Gui, *Manuel de l’inquisiteur*, G. Mollat, ed. and trans., Paris 1964, p. 8.

although slight differences emerge between the practices in Spain and Provence.¹¹⁷ Bernard Gui's account of a "testimonial document" given to *conversos* in the early fourteenth century would thus appear to be credible, and may thus be seen as the earliest evidence of this sub-genre of the *igeret orhit*.

The figures of Hayim Caro and Moshe Sarqosniel appear in the *igeret orhit* genre as "innocent" *conversos* who remained, in the collective consciousness, members of the communities of the Jews of Spain. If my interpretation of the distinction between "innocents" and "scoundrels" in Ben Hanah's letter is correct, this would reinforce Yitzhak Baer's observation that the religious gap and social tension between Spanish Jews and a large and powerful group of *conversos* estranged from Judaism began to develop as soon as the riots died down, as early as November 1391. Despite the growing distance between *conversos* and Jews, community leaders apparently sought, at first, to distinguish between various kinds of *conversos*, to whom they accorded different kinds of treatment. In this sense, such behaviour can be seen as a continuation of the hybrid approach of both rejection and attraction that characterised the attitude of Jewish (and Christian) society to converts throughout the fourteenth century, prior to the events of 1391.¹¹⁸ The *igeret orhit* was one of the tools at the leaders' disposal. In the context of this traditional genre, and as part of the sub-genre of the *igeret orhit* intended for returning conversos, communal scribes were called upon to invent new rhetorical devices that would allow them to include the society of "innocent" *conversos*. The *igeret orhiyot* on behalf of Hayim Caro and Moshe Sarqosniel offer examples of the ways in which the authors – Hasdai Crescas and the communal scribe of Montalbán, Yom Tov ben Hanah – managed to bridge the gap between epistolary rhetoric and reliable information regarding the identity of itinerant *conversos*, by means of subtle hints and intimations.*

117 Y.H. Yerushalmi, 'The Inquisition and the Jews of France in the Time of Bernard Gui', *Harvard Theological Review* 63 (1970), pp. 317-376; J. Shatzmiller, 'Converts and Judaizers in the Early Fourteenth Century', *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981), pp. 63-77; Y.T. Assis, 'Juifs de France réfugiés en Aragon (XIIIe-XIVe siècles)', *Revue des études juives* 142 (1983), pp. 285-322, esp. pp. 299-302; P. Tartakoff, *Between Christian and Jew: Conversion and Inquisition in the Crown of Aragon, 1250-1391*, Philadelphia 2012, pp. 125-128.

118 See Tartakoff, *Ibid*; A. Guerson, 'Seeking Remission: Jewish Conversion in the Crown of Aragon, c.1378-1391' *Jewish History* 24 (2010), pp. 33-52.

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