

## BETWEEN RECOGNITION AND EXCLUSION

### *ABRAHAM SHALOM YAHUDA'S PROFESSORSHIP IN MADRID IN LETTERS AND PRESS REPORTS*

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#### **Abstract**

This article reexamines the intellectual and political trajectory of Abraham Shalom Yahuda (1877–1951) through the lens of his Spanish career, situating his professorship at the Universidad Central de Madrid (1915–1923) within the broader dynamics of philosephardism, Orientalist scholarship, and Zionist debates. As the first Jew in modern Spain to hold a full academic chair, Yahuda became a symbolic figure in a national project of cultural reconciliation, intended both to atone for the expulsion of 1492 and to serve Spain's geopolitical ambitions in Morocco. Drawing on contemporary press reports, correspondence, and institutional records, this study reconstructs the reception of Yahuda's lectures, the political and academic expectations invested in his appointment, and the contradictions that eventually led to his resignation. The analysis highlights how Yahuda's Sephardic background, German scholarly training, and Zionist engagement positioned him as an intercultural mediator whose vision of Jewish modernization emphasized dialogue with Arab culture. His Madrid years, at once celebrated and contested, reveal the opportunities and limits of cultural brokerage in early twentieth-century Europe. By reassessing this episode, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of how Jewish scholarship functioned as a site of symbolic politics and how mediators like Yahuda navigated the tensions between recognition and exclusion, nationalism and universalism, colonial policy and cultural dialogue.

**Keywords:** Abraham Shalom Yahuda, Sephardism / Philosephardism, Jewish–Arab relations, Intercultural mediation, University of Madrid, Zionism

#### **Introduction**

Abraham Shalom Yahuda (1877–1951) embodied one of the most complex intellectual trajectories of Jewish scholarship in the first half of the twentieth century. Born in Jerusalem into a prosperous Baghdadi family with Sephardic roots, educated in the major centers of German Orientalism, and later engaged in international Zionist politics, Yahuda moved between multiple worlds. He belonged to a generation of Jewish intellectuals who were at once products of European scholarly training and representatives of non-European cultural traditions. This dual orientation – simultaneously Western and Eastern, Sephardic and Arab, Jewish and universal – granted him a distinctive position that could be both an advantage and a burden. His

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life and career illustrate the dilemmas of Jewish modernity at a moment when identity, scholarship, and politics were increasingly entangled.

Among the various chapters of his career, Yahuda's years in Spain form a particularly revealing case. In 1915, he was appointed to the first modern professorship in Jewish studies at the Universidad Central de Madrid, thereby becoming the first Jew to hold such a position in modern Spain. This event was celebrated in the press as a symbolic act of restitution: the country that had expelled its Jews in 1492 now offered an academic chair to a descendant of Sephardic heritage. Yahuda's appointment was closely tied to the philosephardic movement, a current of thought that presented Sephardic Jews as potential agents of Spain's cultural revival and colonial ambitions, especially in Morocco. His lectures, which focused on the medieval legacy of Iberian Jewry and the enduring vitality of Sephardic traditions, attracted wide public attention and were received as a sign of Spain's willingness to reconnect with its Jewish past. In this sense, Yahuda was not merely a professor but a cultural mediator, enlisted in a national project of symbolic reconciliation and geopolitical reorientation.

Yet Yahuda's Spanish career was marked by deep contradictions. While celebrated as a representative of Sephardic renewal, he soon encountered administrative hostility, professional jealousy, and political indifference. The same state that had supported his appointment was reluctant to provide the institutional resources necessary for his work, and Yahuda gradually found himself marginalized. By 1923, he resigned from his post in Madrid and withdrew from a position that had once seemed to epitomize the convergence of Jewish scholarship and Spanish cultural politics. This trajectory – from enthusiastic welcome to disillusioned departure – reflects both the opportunities and the limits of philosephardism as a framework for Jewish-Spanish rapprochement. It also highlights the precarious position of Jewish intellectuals who were expected to embody symbolic roles while navigating the realities of national and colonial politics.

At the same time, Yahuda's work in Spain must be situated within a broader intellectual horizon. Trained under Theodor Nöldeke in Strasbourg and well connected to Ignác Goldziher in Budapest, Yahuda belonged to the central networks of German and Central European Orientalism. His scholarship, however, was never confined to philology alone. He emphasized the importance of Arabic-Jewish cultural relations, argued for the recognition of Judeo-Arabic literature as a foundational element of Jewish intellectual history, and envisioned Jewish renewal in Palestine as inseparable from dialogue with Arab culture. These perspectives were not marginal to his identity as a Sephardic Jew from Jerusalem but central to his vision of modern Jewish life. His intercultural approach distinguished him from many of his contemporaries and brought him into both collaboration and conflict with Zionist leaders, most notably Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau. While Yahuda was committed to the Zionist cause, he consistently warned against dismissing Arab perspectives – a warning that proved prophetic in light of the conflicts that soon engulfed Palestine.

This article approaches Yahuda's Spanish career as a case study in the politics of intercultural mediation. It seeks to show how his appointment in Madrid was shaped by the convergence of Spanish philosephardism, European Orientalist scholarship, and Zionist debates about Jewish-Arab coexistence. By drawing on contemporary press materials, correspondence, and institutional documents, the study reconstructs the reception of Yahuda's lectures, the symbolic weight of his professorship, and the eventual breakdown of his position. In doing so, it argues that Yahuda's Spanish years reveal more than a biographical episode: they illuminate the

structural dilemmas of Jewish scholarship in early twentieth-century Europe, where questions of identity, politics, and cultural representation could never be neatly separated.

Ultimately, Yahuda's experience in Spain encapsulates the paradox of being both insider and outsider. Celebrated as a representative of Sephardic legacy, he remained vulnerable to exclusion. Trained in the most rigorous philological traditions, he insisted on the importance of non-European intellectual resources. Engaged in Zionism, he advocated dialogue with Arabs at a time when such views were unwelcome. His Madrid appointment, therefore, must be read not only as a moment of recognition but also as a story of disappointment, one that speaks to the broader challenges of Jewish modernity. By examining Yahuda's role in Spain, this article aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how Jewish scholarship functioned as a site of intercultural negotiation, and how its practitioners sought to reconcile intellectual ambition with political reality in a rapidly changing world.

The postwar correspondence between Max Nordau and Ignác Goldziher (Scheiber, 1956) epitomized the rift in modern Jewish thought: Nordau's call for Zionist nation-building contrasted with Goldziher's loyalty to an assimilated Hungarian-Jewish identity. Abraham Shalom Yahuda entered this contested field as a third voice. As a Sephardic-born orientalist, he sought to mediate between Jewish and Arab traditions, and his Spanish career made him a visible actor in the politics of intercultural mediation.

### **The relationship between Nordau, Goldziher, and the young orientalist Abraham Shalom Yahuda**

As the postwar correspondence between Max Nordau and Ignác Goldziher revealed their diverging visions of Jewish identity – one advocating Zionist nation-building, the other remaining loyal to an assimilated Hungarian-Jewish existence – both men repeatedly referred to a younger orientalist whose trajectory they followed with keen interest: Abraham Shalom Yahuda (Scheiber, 1956; Ujvári, 2024). In their eyes, Yahuda represented not only the promise of scholarly succession but also a potential mediator between competing models of Jewish modernity.

The orientalist and renowned manuscript collector Abraham Shalom Yahuda was born in Jerusalem into a prosperous Jewish family. On his father's side, his lineage traced back to Baghdad, from where the family had relocated to Palestine in the 1850s. According to Yahuda, both his grandfather and father were born in India and had acquired British citizenship (Gonzalez, 2019, pp. 407, 410). His maternal ancestry was Ashkenazi, of German origin. Yahuda's intellectual development was significantly shaped by his older brother, Isaac Benjamin Ezekiel, thirteen years his senior. By the age of eighteen, Yahuda had already published two independent scholarly works.

In 1895, Yahuda commenced his university studies, attending leading institutions in several German cities, including Heidelberg and Strasbourg. His doctoral dissertation was supervised by the eminent Semitist Theodor Nöldeke (1836–1930). During these formative years, Yahuda became acquainted with Ignác Goldziher and initiated a long-lasting relationship with Max Nordau. It was also in this period that he became actively involved in the Zionist movement, attending the First Zionist Congress, where he emerged as a dedicated follower of Nordau.

From 1904, Yahuda spent a decade lecturing at the Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums in Berlin. Even during this period, his name had already

been associated with plans to establish a chair in rabbinic language and literature at the Universidad Central de Madrid. This would have represented the first modern university professorship in Jewish studies in Spain—a remarkable prospect, considering that until then no Jewish scholar had ever held more than a nominal academic post in the country (Gonzalez, 2019, p. 410).

In one of his early letters (12 May 1920), Yahuda conveyed Goldziher's greetings to Nordau and reported on the grievances he had encountered at the University of Madrid, which had drawn Goldziher's disapproval. Nordau, however, believed that his friend in Pest lacked a full understanding of the situation – otherwise, he would likely have judged it differently. Yahuda had initially relocated from Jerusalem to Madrid during World War I but had since moved on. Nordau found this wholly understandable, remarking that “Yahuda had rendered great service, but ingratitude had become his reward. In Spain, he had neither an academic nor a personal future ahead of him,” and, given his age, he had every right to seek new opportunities elsewhere (Scheiber, 1956, pp. 205–206).

In a subsequent letter (18 June 1920), Nordau elaborated extensively on the injustices Yahuda had endured in Spain. He offered Goldziher a cultural explanation, attributing much of the problem to what he saw as the volatility of the Spanish temperament: an initial outpouring of enthusiasm quickly followed by apathy and abandonment. Having followed Yahuda's career in Spain for five years, Nordau did not blame individual colleagues so much as the indifference of the state. As he wrote:

*“As for our friend Yahuda, allow me to enlighten you briefly. I have been in the closest confidence with him in Spain for five years. I have witnessed firsthand his efforts, struggles, successes, hopes, and disappointments, and based on these experiences, I can assert with certainty that those whom you recommended warmly welcomed him upon his arrival in Madrid. However, they are Spanish. I am not sure if you fully grasp what that means. Upon first meeting, the Spaniard is all fire... After that, the fire completely extinguishes... Those who truly championed the creation of the Yahuda Chair... were the first to recognize and regret that the government would neither offer nor enable the conditions necessary for him to exercise not only his scholarly expertise but also his political and organizational talents. They remain grateful for what he achieved in—and for—Spain, despite adversity and great obstacles”* (Scheiber, 1956, pp. 206–207).

The initiative to establish Yahuda's professorship was never merely academic; it emerged from both intellectual and political considerations. At the time, Spain was redefining its colonial ambitions through the creation of the Moroccan Protectorate. This new geopolitical context necessitated the development of academic institutions, in collaboration with France, whose own cultural influence in the region was growing. Scholarship thus became an important tool of colonial policy, particularly in efforts to gain the support of Moroccan Jews for Spain's territorial and economic expansion. Within this framework, Yahuda emerged as an ideal candidate.

Spanish authorities sought someone capable of offering academic courses on Jewish life and medieval Iberian Jewry, conducting foundational research in these fields, and delivering public lectures on broader Jewish topics. The goal was to attract both Spanish students and Moroccan Jews to institutions within the Protectorate, home to an estimated 25,000 Sephardic Jews – where France had already begun establishing educational footholds (Gonzalez, 2019, p. 412; Meyuhav Ginio, 2015; Ojeda-Mata, 2017). Crucially, the ideal candidate had to possess a Spanish, and more specifically Sephardic, cultural background. These expectations aligned with the

broad cultural-political phenomenon of philo-Sephardism in Spain. Advocates of this ideology saw a revived Jewish presence – especially in economic life – as a potential engine of national renewal. It was framed both as a symbolic atonement for the 1492 expulsion and as compensation for Spain's territorial losses following the Spanish-American War of 1898 (Gonzalez, 2019, p. 413).

Yahuda's name was frequently invoked in conversations between Miguel Asín Palacios, professor at the University of Madrid, and Ignác Goldziher, the pioneering Islamicist, who publicly praised Yahuda's scholarship. In his diary entry dated May 1913, Goldziher wrote:

*"On the 11th, the Spanish Consul here delivered to me a letter dated the 3rd from Professor Miguel Asín Palacios of Madrid, forwarded by the Spanish Government, requesting me to: (1) recommend a qualified instructor to the University of Madrid for the newly proposed rabbinical course, and (2) inaugurate this emerging discipline with a series of lectures on Jewish literature in Spain, thereby dignifying the initiative"* (Goldziher, 1978, p. 276).

The next day, he continued:

*"I deem Yahuda as the destined Sephardic candidate of Providence, and I approached him with the query of whether he would accept this position. Thus, the sin of 1492 finds redemption through scholarship in 1914"* (Goldziher, 1978, p. 276).

Goldziher was a vocal supporter of the new department and encouraged Yahuda to embrace the philo-Sephardic dimension of the initiative. He believed that the foundations of all Jewish religious culture were deeply rooted in Sephardic traditions, particularly through figures such as Judah Halevi and Maimonides. He urged Yahuda to assume a leading role in the Sephardic Renaissance. Years earlier, Goldziher had also encouraged Yahuda to participate in the founding of Cairo University. However, negotiations with the institution's inaugural rector (later Sultan Fuad I) failed – primarily due to Yahuda's insistence that Hebrew be included among the Semitic languages offered (Gonzalez, 2019, p. 414).

Taken together, these exchanges and initiatives illustrate how Yahuda's professorship in Madrid was never merely an academic appointment but a symbolic project at the intersection of philosephardism, colonial policy, and Jewish scholarship. His role was shaped as much by the expectations of political and cultural mediation as by the demands of scientific expertise.

### **Yahuda, the intercultural mediator**

What, then, predestined Yahuda for this unique position? He occupied an exceptional place within German Oriental Studies, shaped by an unconventional identity: a native of Palestine with a Baghdadi background, strong Jerusalem ties, and deep roots in the Sephardic world. These elements permeated his writings and thinking on Jewish modernization, Zionism, and the Jewish-Arab question.

Although Yahuda's academic training paralleled that of other German-Jewish Orientalists of his generation – he, too, studied in the major German centers where Oriental Studies bridged Islamic and Jewish scholarship – his intellectual profile was distinct. His research centered on the Jewish-Muslim world and on Hebrew-Arabic linguistic and cultural connections (Evri, 2019). This orientation later resonated with

his appointment in Madrid, where the revival of Sephardic traditions was tied to Spain's cultural politics.

Yahuda's scholarly formation was influenced by a range of intellectual movements: the Jewish Haskalah, the Wissenschaft des Judentums, the Arab al-Nahda (Arab Renaissance), Ottoman reformist efforts like the Tanzimat, and Sephardic intellectual networks. His academic work and political engagement were both rooted in a sustained reflection on Jewish cultural modernization and historical transformation, particularly as they affected Jewish life in Europe and Palestine. Central to his thought was the conviction that a revitalized Jewish culture in Palestine must draw on the long-standing Jewish-Muslim tradition. He emphasized the enduring value of Jewish-Arab cultural synthesis as a resource for renewing Hebrew and Jewish life (Evri, 2019, pp. 337–338).

In Yahuda's approach, academic inquiry and political discourse were inseparable. His insistence on the importance of Arabic and Islamic sources for understanding Jewish and Hebrew philosophy and poetry was not solely grounded in philological or historical arguments; it was also politically motivated. For him, recovering these traditions was vital to the broader Zionist project and to shaping the future of Jewish life in the Land of Israel (Evri, 2019, p. 338).

The cultural legacy of Spanish Jewry had long served as fertile ground for imagining a modern Jewish identity. Nineteenth-century Jewish historians such as Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), Moritz Güdemann (1835–1918), and Leopold Zunz (1794–1886) idealized Muslim Spain as a golden age and a model for contemporary Jewish renewal. This admiration, central to the Jewish Enlightenment, also served to affirm Jews' belonging within European culture. These thinkers assumed that Jewish modernization necessarily aligned with Western ideals and European civilization (Evri, 2019, pp. 338–339).

Ismar Schorsch has shown how Islamic civilization – particularly as mediated by Sephardic culture – enriched Jewish thought with Hellenistic philosophy and a spirit of rational inquiry. This influence, he argues, was instrumental in the 19th-century Jewish assimilation into Western culture. Sephardic mysticism, moreover, offered both a source of pride for emancipated Jews and a vehicle for cultural resistance. It enabled Jewish intellectuals to rediscover a shared classical heritage with German culture, thus creating a paradoxical synthesis: the Jewish encounter with Islam ultimately served as a conduit for Jewish integration into the modern Western world (Evri, 2019, p.339; Schorsch, 1989, p. 66). Such notions of Sephardic legacy provided the ideological backdrop for the philosephardic movement in Spain, which framed Yahuda's professorship as a symbolic restitution.

By the late 19th century, interest in Sephardic heritage among European-trained Jewish scholars intensified, especially with regard to its national and Hebrew dimensions. Yet, curiously, these scholars largely overlooked the Arabic language and its impact on Jewish authors in Spain. Judeo-Arabic texts received little scholarly attention; even foundational works by thinkers such as Yehuda Halevi and Maimonides – originally written in Arabic – circulated primarily in Hebrew translations. Historians have since noted that this neglect reflects a broader tendency within the Wissenschaft des Judentums to emphasize Judaism's Western elements while minimizing its Eastern dimensions. This included downplaying the role of Arabic in shaping medieval Spanish Jewish culture (Evri, 2019, pp. 339–340).

Nevertheless, Andalusian influences continued to resonate in modern Jewish thought, particularly through their convergence with the Arab Nahda. In the late Ottoman period, figures like Yahuda and other Sephardic intellectuals engaged in

multiple cultural movements simultaneously: the Hebrew revival, the Arab renaissance, and the reformist Tanzimat. At the time, these movements were not perceived as mutually exclusive. In the Arabic-speaking provinces of the Ottoman Empire, Jewish modernization and the revival of Hebrew unfolded alongside broader Arab cultural renewal (Evri 2019, pp. 339–340).

Yahuda's involvement in both the Hebrew and Arab renaissances is essential to understanding his views on Jewish-Arab relations. He envisioned a restoration of the Judeo-Muslim bond exemplified by Andalusia, seeing it as a foundation for modern Arab and Jewish renewal alike. Raised in Jerusalem – then a vibrant intellectual center – Yahuda was shaped by a complex confluence of influences: the emergent Ottoman elite, Nahda thinkers, Hebrew Haskalah circles, and European intellectuals who had settled in the city. Within this dynamic environment, Yahuda developed a distinctive approach that blended rigorous scholarship with active political engagement. This synthesis of scholarship and politics would later define his activities in Spain, where his role as professor was inseparable from broader debates on cultural mediation and Jewish-Arab relations.

## **Yahuda and Zionism**

Yahuda first encountered Zionism while studying in Germany, shortly after leaving Jerusalem to pursue his university education in Europe (Evri, 2019, p. 347). He quickly became involved in the movement but soon raised concerns within Zionist circles about their attitudes toward Arabs and Arab culture. His pivotal meeting with Theodor Herzl in London in 1896 marked a turning point: Yahuda advised Herzl to engage with the local Arab population in Palestine and to seek their support for the Zionist cause. He was among the first to recognize the crucial role that Arabs would play in the success – or failure – of the Jewish return to Palestine.

At the First Zionist Congress in Basel the following year, Yahuda reiterated the importance of negotiating with Arab leaders and urged Herzl to develop a strategy in that direction. However, Herzl dismissed the proposal, prioritizing immediate negotiations with the great powers and regarding talks with the Arabs as unnecessary. Yahuda later identified this rejection as a key contributing factor to the emergence of the Palestinian Arab question and the long-standing Zionist-Arab conflict. He saw it as symptomatic of the arrogant attitude of many European Jews toward Arabs—a mindset that, in his view, only deepened mistrust and laid the groundwork for future hostilities (Evri 2019, p. 348).<sup>2</sup>

## **Academic Career in Spain: Between Recognition and Disappointment**

In 1914, Abraham Shalom Yahuda accepted an invitation from the Spanish government to deliver a series of lectures on Jewish history and literature in Madrid. Shortly thereafter, he was unanimously elected as a corresponding member of the Royal Academy of History (Real Academia de la Historia), becoming the first Jew in modern Spain to receive this honor.<sup>3</sup> These events were widely reported in Berlin,

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<sup>2</sup> Later, Nordau was deeply affected by the fact that, despite his recommendation, he was not elected in 1920 to one of the movement's key bodies, the Greater Actions Committee, even though his expertise – particularly regarding the Arab question – was sorely needed (Schulte, 1997, pp. 353–354).

<sup>3</sup> "Dr. A. S. Yahuda, Dozent der Berliner Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, der im Auftrag der spanischen Regierung in Madrid eine Reihe von Vorträgen über jüdische Geschichte und Literatur gehalten hat, ist jetzt zum korrespondierenden Mitglied der Madrider Geschichtsakademie ernannt worden. Die

where Yahuda was based, and highlighted as significant milestones in both his personal career and the broader Spanish-Jewish rapprochement.

Less than two months later, the *Vossische Zeitung* published a detailed article on Yahuda's visit, emphasizing the significance of his lectures and the enthusiasm they generated among Spanish intellectual and political elites.<sup>4</sup> Held at the Academy, the lectures attracted prominent university scholars and members of the Madrid elite. Yahuda's fluency in multiple languages, particularly his near-native Spanish, was noted with admiration.

Of particular importance was Yahuda's final lecture, which addressed the cultural legacy of Jews in Spain and the contemporary status of Sephardic communities in the Eastern Mediterranean and Morocco.<sup>5</sup> The article underlined the timeliness of the topic, as Spain had recently renewed its interest in its former Jewish citizens—driven by both political and economic considerations. Although the plight and potential "return" of Sephardic Jews had been a topic in the Spanish press for over a decade, events in the Balkans and Morocco had brought it to the fore once again.

The Spanish government, across party lines, had expressed consistent support for the repatriation or cultural reintegration of Sephardic Jews, and maintained cordial relations with major Jewish communities abroad. Yahuda's visit and the public reception of his lectures were understood as part of a broader philosephardic campaign aimed at reconnecting Spain with its Jewish past. The *Vossische Zeitung* correspondent emphasized how Yahuda's appointment aligned with this national sentiment and was widely viewed as a timely and symbolic gesture.<sup>6</sup>

A week later, another report announced the government's plan to establish a university chair in rabbinic literature at the University of Madrid.<sup>7</sup> Yahuda, described as a Berlin-based orientalist of high distinction, was to be its inaugural holder. In December 1915, this plan materialized in the form of a royal decree officially appointing Yahuda as full professor in the Department of Jewish History and Literature. The appointment was unanimously supported by the Ministry of Education, the Faculty of Arts, the Academy, and leading historians, and was hailed as an act of cultural restitution.

One week later, a brief news item related to the topic appeared, reporting that the Spanish government intended to establish a university chair in rabbinic literature in Madrid, aiming to make the capital more attractive to Sephardic university students. The department was to be led by Professor Yahuda, a scholar active in Berlin. The press did not engage in a detailed examination of his person again until 1916.<sup>8</sup>

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genannte Akademie hat in ihrer letzten Sitzung einstimmig Herrn Dr. Yahuda gewählt, als ersten Juden, dem in Spanien diese Ehre zuteil wird." (Dr. A. S. Yahuda, lecturer at the Berlin Institute for the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, who delivered a series of lectures on Jewish history and literature in Madrid at the behest of the Spanish government, has been appointed a corresponding member of the Madrid Academy of History. At its most recent session, the Academy unanimously elected Dr Yahuda, making him the first Jew to receive this distinction in Spain." (*Vossische Zeitung*, 23 February 1914, 4).

<sup>4</sup> Ein Berliner Hochschuldozent in Madrid. *Vossische Zeitung*, April 12, 1914, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Original title: *Jüdische Kultur in Spanien und gegenwärtiger Stand der Juden spanischer Herkunft (Sephardi) im Orient und in Marokko*.

<sup>6</sup> *Vossische Zeitung*, April 12, 1914, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Vossische Zeitung*, April 20, 1914, supplement.

<sup>8</sup> Der erste jüdische Hochschullehrer in Spanien. *Vossische Zeitung*, 6 February, 1916, supplement.



The article informed Berlin readers that in the spirit of tolerance – a value particularly emphasized within academic circles – the royal decree issued on December 1, 1915, appointed the distinguished orientalist Dr. A. S. Yahuda as full professor in the Department of Jewish History and Literature at the University of Madrid. The appointment underscored the outstanding importance of the Jewish-Spanish period, and there was unanimous consensus regarding his appointment among the Ministry, the Faculty of Arts, the Academy, and historians alike.

The report also noted that in the spring of 1914, Yahuda had delivered several lectures in Madrid on Jewish civilization in Spain, which could be interpreted as a prelude to this professorship. The Spanish government strongly promoted the realization of the plan, which was supported by academic and political circles regardless of their religious, political, or ideological affiliations. The consensus was founded on the cultural significance of one of Spain's most important historical periods, and political circles hoped to attract young Jews living in the Spanish-Moroccan territories. Among the reasons emphasized was that Jews living in these areas occupied a higher economic and cultural status than the Moors and, through the maintenance of ancient Spanish traditions and language, had preserved a connection to the motherland despite the expulsion of their ancestors four centuries earlier.

Another motivation behind Yahuda's appointment was the desire to eliminate a "historical stain," as the Spanish conservatives and liberals alike wished to declare tolerance to the outside world and no longer tolerate Spain's association with the Inquisition. The press and public opinion supported the initiative, and newspapers across the political spectrum welcomed Yahuda's appointment. The new professor received an unusually ceremonious reception at the university. In a powerful inaugural lecture, he spoke about the significance and potential of the newly established department, as well as about those times when "great scholars and statesmen of his people earned Spain respect and renown through their scholarly work and outstanding merits." These ideas were echoed in the speeches of the university rector, Conde y Luque,<sup>9</sup> and the dean of the Faculty of Arts, Elias Tormo,<sup>10</sup> both of whom praised the former cultural and scientific role of Spanish Jews. They emphasized that the appointment of a Sephardic Jewish scholar as a professor at the country's premier university symbolized a change in Spanish collective consciousness; the nation sought to return to an era when its citizens, regardless of race or religion, could work together to promote culture and science.

Yahuda became the first Jewish university professor at the University of Madrid – a modern, secular institution – where he headed the Department of Rabbinic Language and Literature. This appointment clearly demonstrated Spain's commitment to the Sephardic community and Jewish scholarly endeavors. In this process, the paradigm of East and West served as a starting point, and Yahuda acted as a mediator at various intersections – geographically, academically, ideologically, and in the context of great power ambitions and imperial politics. He was an intercultural intermediary, with the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula providing excellent inspiration (Friedman, 2019, p. 438).

During his years in Madrid, Yahuda considered his task to be twofold: on the one hand, the preservation of the history of Jews in Spain; on the other, the renewal of their culture and the promotion of reconciliation between Spain and its Jewish

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<sup>9</sup> Rafael Conde y Luque (1835–1922) was a Spanish jurist and politician who served as rector of the university from 1903 onwards.

<sup>10</sup> Elías Tormo y Monzó (1869–1957) was a Spanish art historian.

heritage. Simultaneously, he supported other Jewish causes. In the nineteenth century, Jews had begun to slowly return to the Iberian Peninsula in small numbers, and Yahuda's interest was strongly aroused by the emerging modern Jewish community in Spain. In connection with this, he contributed to the establishment of Madrid's first modern synagogue and to the founding of Jewish organizations in Barcelona. He also maintained close relationships with Spanish scholars, intellectuals, and politicians motivated by the desire to acknowledge their nation's Jewish past. He sought to enlist foreign Jewish scholars in this cause as well. Like many other Western Jewish intellectuals, Yahuda regarded Spain as a vast Jewish archive – a Jewish space to be reclaimed, cultivated, and nourished. In his interpretation, this mission combined scholarly activity with the representation of Jewish political interests, involving Spain, the Spanish Philosephardic movement, the British Empire, and, above all, the Zionist project, which he vigorously supported, even as he became increasingly aware of his diminishing, if not entirely fading, role within it (Friedman, 2019, pp. 439–440).<sup>11</sup>

Spain served as the stage for Yahuda's first attempt to establish an academic program. Until the end of his life, he worked to promote the dissemination of (Near) Eastern and Semitic studies and endeavored to institutionalize these fields in several countries, including Spain, Germany, Great Britain, the United States, and Palestine.<sup>12</sup>

After obtaining the position of department head, Yahuda publicly elaborated his plans: in education, he envisioned a genuine reform of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, adapted to the Spanish political context. In Berlin, following Abraham Geiger's footsteps,<sup>13</sup> he had taught biblical studies and Semitic philology, but he did not transfer this model wholesale; rather, he tailored his teaching portfolio to the Spanish context. He framed Hebrew language instruction within a comprehensive linguistic and intellectual system, highlighting the extensive Semitic language family and the numerous internal and external influences affecting Hebrew.

Students had already expressed positive opinions about Yahuda's classes in Berlin; he taught in a way that vividly brought the past to life for them, especially the medieval Jewish-Spanish culture. Many of his pupils pursued academic careers,

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<sup>11</sup> Yahuda acted as the unofficial spokesman for the Zionist movement in Spain, during which time he frequently corresponded with Weizmann. Due to his deep knowledge of Spanish society, he sought to enlist Spanish and Portuguese scholars in support of the Hebrew University cause (Gonzalez 1919, 425).

<sup>12</sup> Yahuda positioned himself as a *moderner Shtadlan*—a respected member of the Jewish community with influential connections—who primarily acted as an intermediary between the Jewish population and political decision-makers. Despite his dual role as *Shtadlan* and scholar, and his appointment as a department head, he did not necessarily aspire to the secularised academic positions that were a central ambition for many nineteenth-century German Jewish scholars. Nor did his research interests focus exclusively on Jewish studies, despite his residence in Madrid potentially suggesting such a specialisation. Rather, Yahuda was more concerned with the establishment of both Jewish and non-Jewish institutions, a goal made possible by his European education and extensive linguistic skills.

During his time in Madrid, for example, he entered into negotiations with the Prussian government concerning the establishment of a department at the University of Berlin devoted to the cultural history and literature of Arabs in Mesopotamia and the Near East. He discussed this initiative with Max Nordau, who was likewise in exile in Madrid at the time. Yahuda expressed frustration with the state of Arab historical and literary education in Germany, as well as with Germany's perceived lack of influence in the region. He argued that university-level instruction ought to go beyond the teaching of grammar and phonetics in Semitic languages, which he considered antiquated and reductive, relegating Oriental studies to the status of auxiliary sciences in the service of Old Testament scholarship. He also underscored the importance of strengthening Germany's presence in North Africa (Gonzalez, 2019, pp. 408–409, 418).

<sup>13</sup> Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) was a German theologian and writer, and a prominent figure in the modern Jewish reform movement in Germany.

holding important positions at universities both in Spain and abroad. Not least, he supported female university students and advocated for the training of women rabbis (rabbinas) (Gonzalez, 2019, pp. 416–422).

However, Yahuda's activities in Spain soon encountered difficulties. The university administration's aloof attitude persisted throughout, viewing him as a suspicious foreigner who had not even naturalized.<sup>14</sup> Further tensions arose from Yahuda's increasing absences from Spain beginning in 1918, when he accepted invitations as a guest lecturer at several venues. Although these absences were eventually accepted in Madrid as justified research trips, disputes continued due to their growing length. Yahuda, for his part, believed that by maintaining his scientific guest lectures abroad, he was serving not only scholarship but also political interests, particularly contributing to closer relations between England and Spain (Gonzalez, 2019, p. 447).

By 1918, it became clear to Yahuda that his vision as department head no longer aligned with his original goals, either as a scholar or regarding his colonial aspirations. Although he enjoyed the support of the Spanish Minister of Education and numerous liberal politicians who defended him against attacks within the faculty, he ultimately chose to resign. Yahuda's tenure in Madrid lasted from December 1915 to 1920, though he officially resigned only in 1923 (Gonzalez, 2019, p. 427).

Yahuda's professorship in Madrid thus symbolized Spain's attempt at reconciling with its Jewish past and projecting a tolerant image abroad. At the same time, the very contradictions that marked his appointment foreshadowed the difficulties that would eventually lead to his resignation

## Summary and Conclusion

This study has examined the entangled intellectual trajectories and ideological tensions connecting Max Nordau, Ignác Goldziher, and Abraham Shalom Yahuda—three figures who, despite their divergent backgrounds and commitments, participated in shaping the contours of modern Jewish thought and identity during a period of dramatic cultural and political transformation. By analyzing unpublished correspondence, autobiographical texts, and contemporary press sources, the research has sought to reconstruct a network of discourses in which ideas of nationalism, assimilation, orientalism, and cultural mediation intersected, clashed, and occasionally converged. At the heart of this inquiry lies the figure of Abraham Shalom Yahuda, whose scholarly and public career offers a lens through which to reassess the role of intercultural negotiation within the broader context of Zionism and Jewish modernity.

Max Nordau and Ignác Goldziher, often viewed as ideological opposites – one an impassioned Zionist and critic of European decadence, the other a staunch defender of assimilation and a pioneer of Islamic studies – both regarded Yahuda with a combination of admiration and expectation. For Nordau, Yahuda represented a kind of intellectual heir: a young, multilingual scholar rooted in the East yet trained in the

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<sup>14</sup> Yahuda, a British citizen, declined Spanish citizenship, which was a prerequisite for holding a professorial chair. Instead, he invoked a nineteenth-century legal provision permitting foreign nationals to serve as professors of foreign languages, thereby making the case that Hebrew was a living language. Criticism of this decision came chiefly from the conservative right and the religious press (Gonzalez, 2019, p. 415).

German academic tradition, capable of translating Zionist ideals into viable cultural and institutional forms. For Goldziher, Yahuda embodied the vitality of Sephardic traditions and the possibility of reconciling Jewish scholarship with Arab-Islamic thought. Though Goldziher remained skeptical of political Zionism, he supported Yahuda's initiatives in Spain and praised his erudition. Their correspondence – both direct and indirect – reveals Yahuda as a shared point of reference, a figure who could potentially bridge the epistemic and political divides that separated his two older interlocutors.

Yahuda's mediating role must be understood not only in biographical or institutional terms, but as a deliberate intellectual project. His academic work, public engagement, and political involvement were animated by a coherent vision: the renewal of Jewish culture through the reactivation of Judeo-Arabic traditions. In contrast to dominant currents in European Jewish scholarship that privileged Western models of progress and emancipation, Yahuda turned to the Islamic world – and particularly to the legacy of medieval Sepharad – as a source of cultural resilience and continuity. He argued that the historical symbiosis between Jews and Muslims offered both a precedent and a paradigm for the reconstruction of Jewish life in Palestine. This position set him apart from many of his Zionist contemporaries, who tended to view Arab culture either as an obstacle to be overcome or as a marginal element in the narrative of national revival.

Yahuda's engagement with the Arab world was neither naive nor romantic. Rather, it was grounded in a critical awareness of the geopolitical and institutional challenges that confronted efforts at Jewish-Arab reconciliation. His experiences in Madrid – initially marked by official recognition and academic success, later by marginalization and disappointment – underscore the vulnerability of intercultural projects in the face of bureaucratic inertia, political volatility, and racialized exclusion. Yet these setbacks did not deter Yahuda from pursuing his vision. Through his writings, lectures, and correspondence, he continued to advocate for a model of Zionism that recognized the cultural and ethical imperative of coexistence.

Yahuda's early warnings about the Zionist movement's neglect of Arab agency and sensibility proved prophetic. As the conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine escalated, the possibility of mutual understanding receded. Still, Yahuda's legacy invites a reconsideration of historical alternatives. His insistence on the importance of Arabic language and culture, his critique of European intellectual provincialism, and his conviction that Jewish modernization must engage rather than suppress its Eastern dimensions mark him as a critical voice within the history of Jewish thought – one that resists both the erasures of assimilationism and the insularity of nationalist orthodoxy.

In this regard, Yahuda's significance lies not simply in his achievements – as a scholar, educator, or diplomat – but in the questions he posed and the dilemmas he confronted. How can a minority culture articulate its own sovereignty while remaining open to the languages, memories, and claims of others? What does it mean to be faithful to a tradition that is itself the product of cultural hybridity? And what role can scholarship play in navigating the fault lines of identity, politics, and historical responsibility?

These questions remain pressing today. In an era marked by renewed nationalist fervor, epistemic closure, and the resurgence of ideological binaries, Yahuda's intercultural ethos offers a valuable counterpoint. His life and work remind us that identity is not a fixed essence but a process of negotiation—at once intellectual, emotional, and political. As such, Yahuda challenges us to imagine a

Jewish modernity that is both rooted and relational, particular and dialogical, historical and forward-looking.

Ultimately, Yahuda's mediating position – between East and West, between tradition and innovation, between Zionist aspirations and Arab recognition – reveals the multiplicity of Jewish responses to modernity. Rather than seeking to resolve these tensions through assimilation or exclusion, Yahuda embraced them as the generative terrain of cultural creativity. His legacy, while often overshadowed by more prominent figures and dominant narratives, endures as a testament to the possibility of coexistence in a fractured world. In his work, the intellectual becomes a messenger, and the scholar a bridge – between past and future, between peoples and languages, between memory and hope.

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## **ELISMERÉS ÉS KIREKESZTÉS KÖZÖTT**

### **ABRAHAM SHALOM YAHUDA MADRIDI EGYETEMI TANÁRI IDŐSZAKA LEVELEK ÉS SAJTÓBESZÁMOLÓK ALAPJÁN**

UJVÁRI HEDVIG

A tanulmány Abraham Shalom Yahuda (1877–1951) spanyolországi akadémiai pályáját vizsgálja, különös tekintettel a Madridi Központi Egyetemen 1915 és 1923 között betöltött professzori tisztségére. Az elemzés a filosefárdizmus, az orientalista tudományosság és a cionista gondolkodás metszéspontjában értelmezi Yahuda szerepét, aki az első zsidó professzorként a modern Spanyolországban a kulturális megbékélés és önreprezentáció szimbolikus alakjává vált. A forrásalapú vizsgálat feltárja a madridi évek politikai, tudományos és identitásbeli ellentmondásait, valamint azt, miként vált Yahuda tevékenysége a befogadás és kirekesztés, a nacionalizmus és univerzalizmus közti közvetítés esettanulmányává.

**Kulcsszavak:** A. S. Yahuda, Goldziher Ignác, Max Nordau, Madrid, Wissenschaft des Judentums