

# The Jewish World

## TWO CULTURES: ASHKENAZI AND SEPHARDI

From earliest times Jews endured exile and persecution, moving from country to country, fleeing discrimination in search of tolerance. Two distinct Jewish cultures emerged - Ashkenazi and Sephardi. These cultures developed separately, in separate geographic locations.

Ashkenazi Jews are those who settled in the area between Western and Eastern Europe and Russia. Their language was Yiddish, a Germanic dialect that included a high proportion of Hebrew or Hebrew-derived words. Yiddish was written in Hebrew lettering and was spoken by Ashkenazi immigrants throughout America, England and Southern Africa. The Sephardi world was mainly concentrated in countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Almost all the lands they lived in before the 17<sup>th</sup> Century were under Islamic rule. Ladino, also called 'Judeo-Spanish', was their language. The term 'Sephardi' is derived from the Hebrew word for Spain.

Ashkenazi Jews were more isolated, often confined to areas where they were forced to live and work. From the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, their history is largely one of persecution and expulsion. Despite their impoverishment and isolation, Ashkenazi Jews were concerned with spiritual and intellectual values.

The Sephardim, although not accorded full equality under Muslim law, lived in a much more tolerant society. Under Muslim rule, Jews in Spain experienced a 'golden age' of peace, prosperity and intellectual and cultural achievement. This equilibrium was shattered with the Christian 'reconquista' (re-conquering) of Moorish Spain at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century. Thousands of Jews were massacred in violent riots and those who survived were forced to convert to Christianity by the Inquisition on pain of death. In 1492 all Jews were expelled from Spain. They scattered to North Africa, Europe and the Middle East.

Both Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews observe the religious rituals, major festivals and the Sabbath. The liturgy and customs may differ, but the importance of the festivals and commandments remains central to Jewish life everywhere.

*Blowing the Shofar (Ram's Horn) in preparation for the High Holy Days*

