In 2018‒19, S. J. Pearce was a fellow at the University of Michigan Frankel Center for Judaic Studies, in a group I organized on medieval and early modern conceptions of “Sephardic identity.” At the end of the year, the center published the 2019 Annual, a collected volume of short pieces from each fellow summarizing the year’s projects. Pearce contributed a compelling meditation on the changes made to Judah ibn Tibbon’s Ethical Will in a recent Hasidic edition of the text. She notes that in the English introduction to the edition, the editor Pinchas Koraḥ makes the bizarrely inaccurate claim that the Ibn Tibbon family was driven from its home in Granada by “Gothic” persecutions, when in truth, they fled north to Provence after the Almoravids were conquered by the rival Almohads in the mid-twelfth century. The Visigoths, of course, belong to a history that unfolded four centuries earlier, but Koraḥ’s historical
revisionism effectively erases Arabic culture from Judah Ibn Tibbon’s cultural background and replaces it with an imagined Germanic enemy, more familiar to a twenty-first-century Hasidic reader. Pearce’s essay drives home its point by including an image of the eagle-shaped fibulae brooches that are among the jewels of surviving Visigothic art. The image is eerily ironic, suggesting the Reichsadler, or imperial eagle, used by German empires for centuries, including by the Third Reich. Pearce’s essay on the Korah edition, juxtaposed with the aquiline Visigothic imagery, makes clear the high stakes of reading—or misreading—the artefacts of Iberia’s medieval cultural history in the present and the critical importance of scholarly work that sheds light on cultural contact, hybridity, syncretism, and transfer.

What this essay explores on a very small scale, The Andalusi Literary and Intellectual Tradition successfully examines across a large historical canvas. The book provides an innovative and thorough reading of Judah’s Ethical Will, but even more importantly, it paints an evocative picture of his entire cultural world, allowing us to grasp the essential role of Arabic in the life of Iberian Jews. One of the most valuable aspects of the book is its method: through a close reading of a single text situated within a capacious historical and literary frame, Pearce successfully brings to light broad currents of Iberian cultural history through the most intimate and individual of cases: the language of a father to his son. It is poignant to listen in on this Jewish father’s hortatory (and sometimes reproachful) advice, above all when the subject is the importance of studying Arabic. As historiography is just now beginning to appreciate the constitutive role of Islamicate civilization in the growth of “western” literary and intellectual history, the vision provided by Pearce’s work is timely and its findings meaningful for many fields.

The Ethical Will provides a unique perspective on the prestige of the Arabic literary tradition at the moment that Iberia was transitioning from the dominance of Arabic to the flourishing of Romance languages. This presentation of large historical trends through the details of a personal exchange reminds me of Benjamin Gampel’s brilliant chapter “A Letter to a
Wayward Teacher,” from David Biale’s 2002 collection *Cultures of the Jews*, which uses a letter from Joshua Halorki (later Jerónimo de Santa Fe) to his teacher, the convert Solomon Halevi (Pablo de Santa María), to illuminate the challenges faced by Jews upon the decline of Jewish-Christian relations at the close of the fourteenth century. Like Gampel’s chapter, Pearce’s book uses one intimate document to paint a vivid picture of Jewish culture at a moment of radical transition, providing a model of scholarship that resists a simple caricature without forfeiting clarity of argument. Her work is commendable for the span of issues she summons from the *Ethical Will*, including not only linguistic prestige (chapter one), but also the library as a cultural artefact and bibliographic writing as a trans-cultural genre (chapter two), the place of the Hebrew Bible (including the Bible in Arabic) next to Arabic models including the Qurʾān (chapter three), the role of Arabic models in Hebrew poetry (chapter four), the use of translated Arabic prose in quotation and excerpt (chapter five), and the survival of Judah’s ideas about Arabic models in later intellectual and literary circles, particularly through the mode of fiction (chapter six).

The Ibn Tibbon family is historically important by any measure, not least because both father and son made valuable contributions to Jewish intellectual history. While the father Judah became well known for his translations of Judeo-Arabic works into Hebrew—including Sa’adya Gaon’s *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Bahya ibn Paqūda’s *Duties of the Heart*, and Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari*, among others—his son Samuel was just as famous on account of his Hebrew translations of Aristotle, Averroes, and above all various works by Maimonides, including the *Guide for the Perplexed*. The Hebrew translations made by both men, and especially the Hebrew version of the *Guide*, would be used by countless Jewish intellectuals in subsequent centuries, in effect displacing the originals to such a degree that more readers knew the versions made by the Ibn Tibbon family than knew the original works. Yet even as the translations seemed to eclipse their original versions, they also were instrumental in preserving those works from obscurity and disseminating Judeo-Arabic culture in Christian Iberia and beyond.
The story of the Ibn Tibbon family is, as Pearce makes abundantly clear, a fitting representation of the larger history of Iberian Jews in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when the culture that had flourished under Islamic rule in al-Andalus was transplanted, much transformed, to Christian territory in northern Iberia and southern France. Judah’s words to Samuel give voice to “a textual program that emphasized the continuing cultural prestige of the Arabic language for Arabized Andalusi Jews who had been driven out of the Islamic world and into Latin Christendom” (8). How many prominent Jewish authors of the period were not affected directly by these migrations? In the 1090s, the poet Moses ibn Ezra was driven from his home in Granada by the Almoravids, lamenting his fate as he wandered among the “savages” of northern Iberia. Similar fates befell Abraham Ibn Ezra, Abraham Ibn Daud, and perhaps most famously of all, Maimonides himself. And Judah was not an outlier in his views about this tradition. He follows the example of these earlier authors, among whom “the model of an Andalusi cultural translator in exile already existed.” Yet Ibn Tibbon embraced this role “without ever explicitly taking on the mantle of the rhetoric of nostalgia” (21). In Pearce’s reading, the Ethical Will is at once personal and universal, offering a snapshot of this cultural moment by capturing Judah ibn Tibbon as he remembers the world he left behind and as he urges Samuel to preserve and transmit the riches of that world to new generations.

Pearce identifies a number of fascinating issues at play in Judah’s will, a bequest to Samuel both in words and in physical books. The form he employs is ostensibly that of the ḥeva’ah, or Jewish ethical will tradition that derives from biblical models (such as Jacob’s instructions to his sons in Genesis 49:1‒33, or Moses’s instructions to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 32:46‒7). Yet as Pearce shows, the text also resembles, perhaps more so, the medieval Arabic wasiya tradition of bequest literature, attested in Judeo-Arabic in earlier documents preserved in the Cairo Genizah. Judah’s text seems to blend these genres, indicating a flexible and harmonizing approach to appropriating Arabic models in Hebrew. This stands in contrast to Judah’s own advocacy of a literal, often word-for-word
adherence to Arabic original texts and his complaint (like Saʿadya Gaon before him) about the relative poverty of Hebrew (a view that anticipates a similar claim about Latin made a century later by Roger Bacon). Judah’s testament seems to express simultaneously a will to conserve and a will to create, a deep respect that leads the translator to preserve and transmit the past, and a creative spark that takes its inspiration in Arabic models. As Pearce puts it, “As much as Judah was meticulously literal in his rendering of text, he was also a cultural conduit who channeled his belief in the superiority of the Arabic language and of al-Andalus to transmit and preserve a wide range of texts” (22).

Pearce’s analysis is so valuable because it drives at the heart of what makes medieval Iberia both a fascinating historical topic and an illuminating focus of historical analysis: the role of language as an embodiment of cultural prestige. Much scholarship has focused on Iberian architecture and literary topics and genres as spheres where cultural symbiosis is observable, but less attention has been paid to the topic of perceptions of language. The topic of linguistic prestige offers a clear window onto cultural interaction on both an intellectual and a practical, quotidian level. In looking at how Ibn Tibbon communicates the high status of Arabic among intellectual Jews, Pearce underscores the reality that Arabic was for a time the de facto intellectual and artistic language of the Mediterranean, a rich soil from which both the Jewish and the Latin Christian worlds drew aesthetic and scientific nourishment.

Yet this cultural encounter is too complex to be summarized simply as a question of “influence.” The dynamics at work in Ibn Tibbon’s will can stand in for a larger dialectic of translation and appropriation unfolding in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries across the Mediterranean and throughout Europe. Pearce’s book is relevant for contemporary cultural history in a range of fields because its analysis tracks that larger movement, and in doing so, it engages with questions that are still relevant and hotly debated today: What is translation? What is linguistic meaning? What is originality and what tradition? Judah raises these questions, in his way, and offers answers to his son as both a gift freely given and a charge devolved...
onto him. Pearce’s consideration of this dialectic of translation as it plays out between Islamic and Jewish culture, between originals and translations, or between one generation and the next, leads her to ponder thorny issues of the hermeneutics of reception. What is the significance, she asks, of Jews reading the Hebrew Bible in Arabic, or receiving Arabic philosophy as Solomonic wisdom in a Romance-speaking world? When, to paraphrase Borges, is the original unfaithful to the translation? Above all, it allows her to highlight the relationship between language understood as a medium of communication and language transmitted as a thing of value. Pearce’s book succeeds in showing that Ibn Tibbon’s *Ethical Will* can work as a kind of skeleton key to unlock some of the most central and meaningful questions relevant to the study of medieval Iberia.

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When it came time to choose an image for the covers of the Frankel Center Annual, the design editor suggested we might feature the image of the Visigothic eagle-shaped *fibulae*. I hastily answered that, as Pearce well explains, it would be inappropriate to paint the Jews of Iberia (as Koraḥ’s text does) as heirs of Visigothic rather than Islamic culture. What image might we use instead to represent the theme of Jewish identity in Iberia? As I reread her book, the answer was clear immediately: The private synagogue of Samuel Halevi in Toledo, now the Sephardic museum of the city. This one of Iberia’s best-preserved medieval synagogues, a legacy of one of those Jews whose forebears migrated north along with their memories of Jewish life under Islamic rule. But its walls are also decorated with Hebrew inscriptions from the Bible alongside a handful of Arabic inscriptions, and nearby there is a dedication to the Christian King in Hebrew and Romance. Here, perhaps more clearly than anywhere else, one might see on display the worldview that Judah ibn Tibbon communicated to his son Samuel in the *Ethical Will*, reminding him: “On every Sabbath, read the weekly portion [of the Bible] in Arabic, because it will be useful to you in developing your Arabic vocabulary and in translation” (211). It is this compelling linguistic and cultural symbiosis—purposefully bequeathed in Ibn Tibbon’s will, nostalgically evoked in Samuel Halevi’s synagogue—
that defined Iberian Jewish culture, and that *The Andalusi Literary and Intellectual Tradition* brings to life. Pearce’s work shows that inheriting al-Andalus means understanding and remembering that symbiosis as a living legacy, as Iberian Jews continued to do for centuries after they migrated north and east, and as meaningful historical scholarship like Pearce’s can do for us now.


Szpiech, Ryan, editor. “Sephardic Identities, Medieval and Early Modern.” *Frankel Center Annual*, 2019. quod.lib.umich.edu/f/fia