

## Chapter 4

# Stones of Memory: The Toledo Epitaphs

And seven days prior to his death  
He sent away his dove  
To find him a resting place  
She found a place to rest her feet  
Then her husband followed after her.

—From the epitaph of Meir haLevi Abulafia (who died in  
Toledo of the plague, Marheshvan 1350)

THE PLAGUE CAME late to the lands of Castile, having traversed the eastern end of Iberia and ravaged Catalonia, Aragon, Valencia, Navarre, and Granada. It also lingered, appearing late in 1348 or early in 1349 and slowly tapering into 1351–52. As the case of Castile illustrates, the pandemic was experienced differently in different regions, both in its epidemiological impact and in the responses of communities and institutions. Mortality was high but not as high as in Catalonia and Aragon. Even within the kingdom, the effects of the plague were variable, and apparently more destructive in the lowlands than in the mountains. (This was also the case in Aragon, where the dry, cooler mountain climate provided a less hospitable setting for fleas and possibly their carriers.)<sup>1</sup> So, too, it spread more quickly—and efficiently—in the towns along commercial and pilgrimage routes and, according to one older study, struck rural areas more severely than urban ones. Its general impact was harsher on the poor than the elite, although the predictable categories of professional men were eroded, and the loss of bailiffs, notaries, jurists, and priests disrupted the institutions and rhythms of daily life.<sup>2</sup> Castile's best-known victim was her king, Alfonso XI, who died in 1350 in Gibraltar, where the plague took no side in wars of religion and expansion.<sup>3</sup>

The few studies of the plague's impact in Castile point to familiar signs of stress and depopulation: higher labor costs, a spike in ecclesiastical benefices, neglected farmland, and pleas for relief in debts owed to Jews. One old study invokes anti-Jewish hostility as part of a larger array of "violent psychological reactions" in severely afflicted areas.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, there is little evidence that anti-Jewish violence typified the reaction to this first outbreak of the plague; the second wave, in 1361–62, was a death blow to a number of struggling settlements and towns and may have tapped a greater sense of desperation and rage. In 1349, however, the records of such violence are not there. The distinct history of Castilian Jews leading up to this period may be part of the explanation: their role in royal administration and resettlement of the frontier, as well as their historical visibility as courtiers, scholars, translators, astronomers, and physicians, both in the orbit of Toledo, the capital of Old Castile, and in the penumbra of a perpetually migrating royal court.<sup>5</sup> Among physicians, Castile's lack of a university and university culture also permitted Jewish physicians to flourish in high circles; many of these men still derived their knowledge of medicine directly from Arabic sources and composed in that language.<sup>6</sup> This does not mean that Christian Castile, like other European kingdoms, was free of hostility or prejudice toward its Jews, although (and partly because) royal protection of Castilian Jews remained strong. Even though the years preceding the Black Death show signs of interfaith tensions, especially between local urban elites and their Jewish counterparts, this region had long been characterized by what historian Maya Soifer Irish has described as an "evolution of accommodations for the Jewish minority."<sup>7</sup> In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, a distinctive social, political, economic, and cultural structure in Castile kept tensions in check, and this difference made itself felt during the years of the Black Death.

This chapter examines an unconventional source of documentation for Jewish responses to the Black Death in Castile, a set of more than two dozen epitaphs written for Jewish victims of the plague in Toledo in 1349 and 1350. Significantly, none of these epitaphs refers to anti-Jewish violence as a compounding cause of death—a sharp contrast to the situation in Provence, Catalonia, Aragon, Valencia, and central Europe, where Jewish communities were routinely attacked on suspicion of causing the plague. Many of the epitaph texts, moreover, are polished literary compositions. In addition to details of biography and lineage, they trace a chronology of the epidemic in the most important Jewish center in Castile and among its major dynastic families. The formal conventions that gild the lives of the deceased with expressions of piety, honor, and righteousness shed light on the construction of public memory as it crystallized

around the lives of powerful Toledan Jews in a time of crisis. That construct was intended for later generations as much as for the immediate survivors.

But that is not all that they can tell us. Even when the sentiments that they express are heavily dependent on conventional formulations, the authors of these texts often succeed in balancing cliché and idiosyncratic description, permitting us to glean details of private life behind the measured lines of public eulogy. As Rachel Greenblatt has noted of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century epitaphs in the Jewish cemetery in Prague, this is a special kind of literature: in material form as well as in language, it marks a meeting place of public and private, living and dead. In their elegant platitudes and careful portraiture, in their stonework and their verses, the epitaphs of Toledo are exceptional in their artistry; but like lesser exemplars, they pay homage to the ways this community wished to remember the dead and hence themselves. At the same time, they testify to a reciprocal and ongoing traffic between the here and hereafter in which the dead also played an active part as intercessors for the living. They, too, were asked to remember.<sup>8</sup>

The preeminence of the Toledo Jewish community makes this investigation important in other ways. The post-expulsion dominance of Castilian identity among Iberian exilic communities may have contributed to the silence of Jewish sources on the Black Death in Iberia, if only by overshadowing other experience and records. Alternatively, the instability and crisis of later Castilian-Jewish history may have dulled memory of a disaster that gave way to graver, more irrevocable kinds of crisis. Either way, Castilian memory of the Black Death may have accorded it less significance than subsequent catastrophes.<sup>9</sup> Then, too, as this book argues, even communities that were more severely affected, such as those in Catalonia, found it possible to rely on familiar tropes and forms of commemoration in the wake of the Black Death. Rupture did not characterize their commemorative efforts except in cases where extreme violence made such commemoration impossible. Nonetheless, the Castilian experience, which did not include anti-Jewish violence, also seems to have been shaped by the milder impact of disease, at least in 1349–50. In each regional case, different factors influenced the forms of commemorative activity and the subsequent fate of written texts.

The artistry of the Toledo tombstones is unique to Toledo; no other community in Iberia or outside it seems to have adopted their physical form, and none can match the sophistication of their texts. There has been a recent flurry of interest in Jewish gravestones and an attempt to theorize burial practices and analyze epitaph texts.<sup>10</sup> Each new excavation has also brought new controversies over the fate of human remains.<sup>11</sup> Over the last few decades, too, there has been

a smattering of articles or collections treating Jewish epitaph poetry in Amsterdam, Italy, and the New World, all postmedieval exemplars. Among them, the literary flourishes of Amsterdam Jewry's seventeenth-century gravestones, the poetic texts published by David Malkiel from northern Italy, and even the mix of Hebrew, Spanish, or Portuguese poetry that adorned the headstones of wealthy and prominent Jews in Bermuda or Jamaica, clearly sustain a literary tradition with origins in Castile.<sup>12</sup> The Toledo epitaphs thus hold interest far beyond their chance inclusion of almost thirty records of death by plague, and I will try to suggest their wider meaning in these pages.

This chapter examines the Toledo plague epitaphs as literary texts, material remains, and cultural artifacts: What do they tell us as expressions of literary commemoration in a time of catastrophe? And in what ways do they point to beliefs, rituals, and cultural practices that go beyond the chiseled words on stone or paper? I begin with the story of how these inscriptions have come down to us.

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Sometime in the early sixteenth century, a Jewish "tourist" to Toledo wandered the extraordinary cemetery of that medieval Jewish community. Who he was, we do not know, nor do we know what motivated him to transcribe almost eighty inscriptions from the tombstones that he encountered there.<sup>13</sup> Some of the stones may already have been uprooted and recycled by Christians, or preemptively dismantled by Toledan Jews on the eve of the 1492 expulsion.<sup>14</sup> A few, according to the anonymous copyist, were in a local home, whose owner had collected and saved them.<sup>15</sup> From that moment on, the story of this *ignoto curioso*, as Cantera called him, is a mystery, until his transcriptions resurface three centuries later in Turin in the royal library founded in 1723 by the king of Sardinia, Victor Amadeus II of the House of Savoy.<sup>16</sup> Cantera and Millás thought that they were donated to the Turin library in 1809 by the Italian Orientalist Tommaso Valperga-Calusio, and copied shortly thereafter by the Paduan Jewish poet and bibliophile Joseph Almanzi. In their account, Almanzi's interest was serendipitous, as the library caught fire soon afterward and many manuscripts were destroyed.<sup>17</sup>

As other records show, this account is not quite accurate. Although Valperga may indeed have owned the manuscript copy in 1809, the collection of which it formed a part did not reach the royal library in Turin until 1818.<sup>18</sup> Sometime later, it was read by Almanzi, who made his own copy and sent it on to his friend the rabbi and scholar Samuel David Luzzatto, otherwise known by the acronym

“Shadal.”<sup>19</sup> Shadal published the inscriptions in 1841, with a brief introduction and Almanzi’s notes. Both the original copy and Shadal’s publication are mentioned in the 1880 catalog of Hebrew manuscripts in the Turin library produced by B. Peyron.<sup>20</sup> Peyron’s entry for the miscellany includes the names of two previous owners inscribed in the flyleaf, one a Jew from Palestra and one from Casale. Both towns are within 100 kilometers of Turin-Mantua. From 1500 until the late seventeenth century, Palestra was governed by Spain, which means that a Jewish presence during those years is unlikely. In the seventeenth century, the region passed to the House of Savoy; the Jewish owners may date to this period, or, alternatively, they may have been earlier owners who lost possession of their books under Spanish rule. The infamous fire mentioned by Cantera occurred in January 1904, and it almost entirely destroyed the collection of Hebrew manuscripts.<sup>21</sup> A number of recent publications based on surviving fragments, painstakingly restored since the 1970s, offer moving descriptions of the state of the tattered remnants.<sup>22</sup> According to Richler, the anonymous transcription, which miraculously survived three centuries of migration and unknown hazards, was not so lucky in 1904; it appears to have been destroyed.<sup>23</sup>

The survival of the actual gravestones also proved precarious. The anonymous sixteenth-century traveler recorded seventy-six inscriptions, but the stones that originally bore them have mostly disappeared. Four transcriptions correspond to stones that are currently in the archaeological museum in Toledo.<sup>24</sup> One, Shadal’s inscription no. 70 (= Cantera no. 82), is for Jacob son of Isaac al-Sarqastan, who died of plague in 1349.<sup>25</sup> The large trapezoidal slab was discovered in the wall of a private home in 1915, where it had been serving as a laundry or wash basin; it was moved to the museum in 1926.<sup>26</sup> A second, Shadal’s inscription no. 1 (= Cantera no. 71), was discovered in a convent in 1930, where it, too, had spent centuries as a washing trough. Reassembled, this five-piece tombstone commemorates a woman called Sitbona. Like Jacob the son of Isaac, she died of plague in 1349. Sitbona was linked by birth and marriage to the Sahwan and haLevi dynasties, two prominent Castilian Jewish families. The survival of her complete tomb illustrates clearly a striking feature of their curious design: the text not only covers five sides of the trapezoidal stone but is inscribed in wraparound form, so that the reader must circle the grave in order to read the inscription. While there is evidence for a medieval Ashkenazi custom of circling a graveyard, the notion of circumambulating a particular grave is not described in the literature.<sup>27</sup> I shall return to this custom below.

A third piece of stone, composed of two fragments, preserves three lines of an epitaph corresponding to Shadal’s inscription no. 43 (= Cantera no. 85). The

deceased is Dona, daughter of Solomon ben al-Bagal and wife of Abraham son of Reb Moses ben Sasson; she, too, died of plague in 1349. These fragments were discovered in 1771 in building debris. Moved to the church of San Nicolas, they were then acquired by an antiquities collector, Domingo Rivera, in 1779. They then passed to Cardinal Lorenzana, who installed them in the public library that he had established in the Palacio Arzobispal. From there, the stones were transferred to the archaeological museum.<sup>28</sup> Finally, two slender fragments of stone, bearing one incomplete line of text, were uncovered in the rubble of a demolished barrio in San Andrés in 1835, the site of a new Seminario Conciliar, and moved to the archaeological museum. Cantera and Millás hypothesize that they once constituted part of the lateral faces of a tomb; the text corresponds to lines 11–16 and 30–37 of Shadal’s inscription no. 10 (= Cantera no. 99). The fuller transcription preserved by the anonymous copyist is an ornate prose and verse epitaph for the famed rabbinic scholar Menahem ben Zerah, who died in 1385.<sup>29</sup>

Another ten fragments or larger stones in granite or clay do not correspond to any of the inscriptions. Two consist of entire trapezoidal stones: one is the tomb of Moses ibn Abi Zardil (d. 1354), secretary of the chancellery to Alfonso XI; and the other is too eroded to identify.<sup>30</sup> These are beyond the reach of this study, but they do confirm the characteristic “truncated pyramid” form of the tombstones unique to the Toledo cemetery.

Of seventy-six inscriptions, twenty-eight describe deaths due to plague between 1349 and 1352. One additional epitaph commemorates a physician who died in the next plague epidemic in 1362, Joseph son of Abraham Makhir (Shadal no. 37 = Cantera no. 96). Following some general remarks, I would like to focus closely on a representative sample. The eight epitaphs that I have chosen provide opportunities for comparison and contrast: two are for women, six are for men; three are for Jews belonging to old aristocratic families in Toledo, and five are for descendants of the towering religious leader Ashkenazi-born Rabbi (R.) Asher b. Yehiel (known as the “Rosh”). Seven of the victims died in 1349, one the following winter; and seven died at home in Toledo, one on the road to Seville. My annotated translation of all twenty-eight epitaphs may be found in an appendix to this book.

In total, nearly thirty epitaphs mark deaths from plague over a two- to three-year span beginning in the Jewish month of Nisan (approximately April) 1349, steadily peaking through the months of Sivan and Tamuz (June–July), and then tapering in Av (August), with three deaths in the winter month of Mar-heshvan 1350 and one in Iyar 1352.<sup>31</sup> Several general observations may be made about this set. Significantly, they are individual graves, graced with individual

memorials. The (Christian) plague cemetery recently unearthed in Barcelona (to the east in Catalonia) is a mass grave, as are the Jewish graves in Tàrrrega and Valencia and, for that matter, other plague burial grounds across Europe.<sup>32</sup> Whatever the experience of plague was in Toledo in 1349, it apparently unfolded without the massive mortality, disruption, or unrest that characterized other locations.<sup>33</sup> Jewish law prescribes a waiting period between burial and the erection of a tombstone; nonetheless, each of these Toledo Jewish worthies found an individual resting place to await commemoration. Likewise, the biographical detail on many of the inscriptions testifies to the familiarity of the writer, or those who prompted him, with the life and activities of the deceased. Those memorial texts that are comparatively scanty may testify to the disruptive effects of a prolonged pandemic. The presence of only one epitaph from the second round of plague in 1362 may equally testify to its harsher impact in Toledo; I shall return to this epitaph below.

Thus, one yield of these texts, long ignored by historians and scholars of literature, is greater knowledge of the effects of the plague in Castile. As other sources and studies have tentatively posited, the impact of the Black Death may have been less severe in urban Castilian settings like Toledo, and more devastating in the countryside.<sup>34</sup> The use of individual graves, the evidence for elaborate and individualized tombstones, and the continuity of literary conventions for eulogizing the dead indicate that however terrible the years of 1349–52 were for Castilian Jews, they did not perceive the pandemic as a rupture with “ordinary” experience. It was an order of catastrophe that forced no break with preexisting conventions for commemoration and no unparalleled sense of loss. This is a markedly different landscape from that found farther to the east or south.

Some of the formal features of the epitaphs deserve mention. Their dating conventions vary. Out of twenty-eight epitaphs for the first wave of plague (1349–52), five list only the year (1349) and no month; seventeen list the month and year but no day; and six record day, month, and year of death. Three of the six epitaphs that include precise dates belong to members of the Rosh’s family: two for his adult sons, Jacob and Judah, who died on the twelfth and seventeenth of Tamuz, respectively, and one for Judah’s son Solomon, who died on the fifteenth of Av.<sup>35</sup> Dating topoi specific to plague deaths may have taken time to solidify. Most of the plague epitaphs convert the Hebrew year 5109 (1349 c.e.) into a word or phrase whose numerical equivalent is 109, sometimes leaving it to the reader to add the millennial count. Several stock phrases dominate, chiefly the Hebrew word for “rest” (מנוחה) or “perish” (לגוע), the latter pulling along with it the biblical expression “Behold, we perish” (האם תמנו לגוע) from the

biblical plague story of Num. 17:34. A few texts simply record the year, 109 = קט"ט; the possibility exists that these deaths were not due to plague. All three of the 1350 deaths inscribe the year as רט"ב, "destruction" or "pestilence," probably from Ps. 91:6; the single death in 1352 cites the biblical verse "by the right hand of my righteousness" (Isa. 41:10), indicating the year with the first word, בימין. The 1362 epitaph simply spells out the year with no acronym.

The strolling copyist was selective, so we must be wary of drawing demographic conclusions from his list.<sup>36</sup> For instance, only three of our group commemorate women, and two of those three were, respectively, the first and second wives of Judah ben (i.e., the son of) the Rosh. The third, Sitbona, was also distinguished by marriage and pedigree. In addition to the copyist's celebrity bias, the topography of the now-lost cemetery may have posed hurdles to extracting demographic data. Recent research has suggested that medieval Jewish burial practices in Toledo may also have limited the use of headstones to the wealthy or prominent. The dead were arranged in rows, but as the copyist's transcription sequence suggests, they were also clustered by extended family, more or less extending the neighborhood arrangements that they had enjoyed in life.<sup>37</sup> The cemetery was located almost a mile from the Jewish quarter, beyond the medieval walls, in the vicinity of Cerro de la Horca.<sup>38</sup> In 2008, bones were discovered in the area, and the following year, during preliminary construction of a new high school, more than a hundred graves were unearthed. Archaeologists identified the grave sites as Jewish, with remains dating from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries. Subsequent protests by Orthodox Jewish groups, many arriving from outside Spain, successfully blocked further exploration. The remains were reburied in or near the original site, and the Azarquiel High School rose above them, so that, depending on the quality of its construction, the souls of the dead will wait safely for another millennium before receiving new visitors.<sup>39</sup> Until then, we can say almost nothing about the graves of those Jews of Toledo who did not amass fortune or fame in their lifetimes and who were buried in other parts of the cemetery. As for the evidence of the inscriptions, its chief value lies in other sorts of meaning.

The inscriptions do not always indicate ages; and when they do, it is often to emphasize youth and an untimely end. The youngest among the plague victims was fourteen and the son of Judah ben haRosh. None of the seventy-six inscriptions commemorates a young child, suggesting that it was not customary to provide them with tombstones.<sup>40</sup> Hayim, the fourteen-year-old son of Judah ben haRosh, may have been exceptional because of his illustrious family.<sup>41</sup> The next youngest plague victim commemorated was Asher son of Yosef ben Turiel. Asher



was fifteen but had celebrated his wedding shortly before his death, and was recalled as an avid scholar.<sup>42</sup>

Asher, for that matter, is recalled with some of the same encomia that appear in another inscription, this one for the eighteen-year-old Isaac son of Solomon ibn al-Masudia.<sup>43</sup> Both are described as learned youths who are as wise as eighty-year-old men. Asher was a pampered or favored child (ילד שעשועים) who was “pure in knowledge” (תמים דעים). Isaac, too, was a darling son and pampered or favored (בן נחמד ונעים וילד שעשועים), beloved by his friends and also “pure in knowledge” (תמים דעים). Isaac died of plague on the fourth of Tamuz, at the height of the pandemic, and he is described as the son of a sage. Asher also died in Tamuz, but we do not know the day. He had studied with his father, and learned biblical and rabbinic texts. Fifteen-year-old Asher had married “just days before his death,” and left behind him a grieving family. The concluding verses of his epitaph turn away from Asher and toward the survivors, petitioning God to bring consolation and future children to Asher’s grief-stricken father. The father is described in a clever expression as “pained and pining”—וישב אב נכאב ונדאב—a thudding sequence of closed rhymes that echoes the father’s choked grief. However, the same expression appears in Shadal’s epitaph no. 27, which is not for a plague victim but for the twenty-seven-year-old Judah ben Nahmias, who died in 1240.<sup>44</sup> The image of Judah’s grieving father leads off the thirteenth-century epitaph, which begins אב נכאב בלב נדאב—“a father pained with a pining heart.” So, too, young Abraham son of Samuel of the Sasson dynasty, who died in 1354, left a father who was an אב נכאב ונדאב, a pained and pining father, while the deceased Abraham, who had not yet married, was also a favored child of incommensurate wisdom.<sup>45</sup>

In other words, this genre poses challenges. Like all occasional poetry, these gravestone inscriptions rely on encomia, conventional expressions that soften the distinctive edges of human personality. Many of the attributes that adorn the memories of the dead in the Toledo epitaphs appear in more than one of them. Some, as in the case of the grieving father, are not exclusive to victims of plague. On the one hand, we learn that conventions for heaping honor upon the dead and his or her family had evolved among the Toledo Jewish elite long before the Black Death. On the other hand, it is striking how little the existing conventions required emendation in the face of that event. A youth’s untimely death was routinely described in terms of a truncated scholarly trajectory and wisdom beyond his years, and his loss in terms of his parents’ suffering. Likewise, all dead children turn out to have been their parents’ favorites.

And yet, when we carefully compare these chiseled texts, we also discern how tiny variations, additions, or deletions can animate cliché. Abraham son of Reb

Moses ibn Falcon also died young—young enough that he merited the conventional comparison of his wisdom to that of a man of eighty. His was one of the early deaths from plague, in Sivan 5109 (May–June 1349). He was chosen, or select, among sons—another favorite child but enlisting a different idiom. In three un-metered but rhyming lines, he is described as having been plucked, snatched, and plucked again from the world of the living; the epitaph concludes that “he died while his father *and mother* were still living.”<sup>46</sup> Why is Abraham Falcon uniquely mourned by two living parents? The answer cannot be that the other mothers were indifferent to the deaths of their sons. Nor can we argue that the convention was not yet in place, as it is documented in the thirteenth-century epitaph for Judah ben Nahmias. Something about Abraham Falcon’s parents may be different. Perhaps Abraham’s mother had some visibility in the community that the epitaph subtly acknowledges. Or, for reasons lost to history, the poet who composed the epitaph may have wished to draw on a set of affective tropes that sentimentalized maternal as well as paternal grief. The beautiful epitaph for Joseph son of Reb Meir Abul’afia haMerari, in contrast, invokes *only* his mother; the father must be dead. The dead son, Joseph son of Reb Meir, was another newlywed. He is recalled in language that invokes none of the tropes that constitute common currency among the greater collection. His epitaph is also a work of consummate artistry whose author may have spurned the usual conventions.<sup>47</sup>

Cliché and proof-text can be subtly manipulated to suggest biographical detail that the author could not announce explicitly. Sitbona’s epitaph describes her important father, “one of the lords of the land,” who defended the Jewish community against some unspecified political or financial threat. (The father “stood in the breach for God’s people,” another stock phrase that surfaces in other epitaphs for men who had access to Christian kings and courts.) Her husband, Meir, is also described as a bulwark of the people. What is lacking in this long epitaph is any mention of Sitbona and Meir’s own children and their remarkable achievements. Instead, the concluding verses of the text summon phrases from Isa. 54:2, which the biblical prophet addressed to “the barren one” (Israel awaiting redemption), and from Jer. 31:16 and 31:25 (the elegiac passage depicting the exiled Rachel weeping for her lost children). In this way, the author subtly tells us without offending her memory that at the time of her death, Sitbona was childless. In this case, the familiar tropes of biblical passages permit later readers to read between the lines of the memorial text.

Recent studies by Rami Reiner dedicated to the honorifics found in the epitaphs for medieval Würzburg Jews have attempted to sift and sort the various kinds of titles attached to the names of the deceased. Reiner identified several

categories of honorifics referring to professional roles, personal status or piety. A fourth category bestowed social respect and status.<sup>48</sup> The Toledo epitaphs, although fewer in number, offer a richer panoply of honorifics. As in Würzburg, the title “Reb” is used much like our English “Mister,” a generic term of respect that does not indicate particular religious or secular status. Other phrases, such as the expression “to stand in the breach,” indicate a professional status or role by means of a descriptive phrase rather than a specific title. These phrases also predate the plague period. Two plague victims, R. Meir haLevi Abulafia (ben Solomon ben al-Lauwee) and the youthful R. Samuel haLevi ben R. Samuel haLevi Abulafia, are described as a “princely scion” (חוטֵר מִשְׂרָה). The expression, from Isa. 11:1, may allude to a specific function or simply to aristocratic status. Overall, the epitaphs offer a generous selection of adjectives and apposite descriptions of valiant, pious, generous, humble, learned, charitable, faithful, glorious, honorable, noble, pure, modest, splendid, discrete, wise, intelligent, accomplished, righteous, honest, and beloved men, who had the fortune to marry wives or to father daughters who were honest, pious, great, righteous, talented, charitable, humble, gracious, modest, and pure. But this, too, tells us something about the public face of privilege in fourteenth-century Toledo, at least as it saw itself. Service to the community, protection of its learning and wealth, book-learning, diplomacy, good lineage, and generosity were attributes associated with an elite, but remembered for their public value. And what of the private lives of these men and women, lost in one of the cataclysmic and wrenching traumas of the fourteenth century? A closer look at several epitaphs suggests the degree to which we can answer that question.

## The Epitaphs: Select Readings

*Shadal No. 1 (= Cantera No. 71): Sitbona, Daughter of Judah b. Sabwan, Wife of Meir haLevi*

The first epitaph transcribed by the Toledo tourist was for a woman, and he prefaced the text with the words “On the headstone, this is what was written for this woman.”<sup>49</sup> The epitaph opens with a dramatic command to the mourners and later visitors to clear the path to the cemetery and to sanctify the plot where Sitbona lies buried; the poet may be alluding to a formal procession and circuit. These opening verses draw on Isa. 62 and Exod. 3, the former proclaiming redemption and the latter proclaiming proximity to the divine. The application of this language to a woman is striking. The woman herself is named only after a drumroll of apposite praises:

That goodly plot where a noble and aristocratic woman is buried,  
 a great woman,  
 She is Madam Sitbona. (lines 4–6)<sup>50</sup>

The name Sitbona, which baffled Luzzatto and Almanzi, is documented in another Toledo epitaph not belonging to the plague set. Cantera and Millás parsed it as a combination of the Arabic *sit* (lady) and the female name Bona. As Sitbona’s gravestone has survived, we can see that the text of the inscription fills all five sides of the trapezoidal granite stone. The inscription begins on top, with three even lines inscribed lengthwise, and then continues onto the inclined facet directly below. Each of the four sides holds three evenly spaced lines, which are read as a wraparound text: it would be necessary to circle the stone three times to read the whole inscription. Moreover, the “line breaks” do not correspond to breaks in phrasing or meaning but are subordinated to the visual geometry, producing a chiseled surface that is completely regular and includes no blank area.

Yet the text has its own internal structure and propulsion, which emerge when it is printed. The mourners are commanded to clear the way for Sitbona, a great and noble lady. She is great and noble—first, because she is descended from the aristocratic Sahwan dynasty; her father is recalled as a lord of the land and benefactor “who stood in the breach for God’s people.” Sitbona’s husband, Meir haLevi son of Reb Isaac haLevi, was a great man who defended the community. The phrase used to describe Meir, *hoshen yeshu’ot umigdal*, a stalwart of



FIGURE 2. Sitbona’s tomb. Granite tombstone in the form of a truncated pyramid, with inscription in Hebrew characters, 1349. Museo Sefardi, 0007/001. Photograph by Rebeca García Merino. Courtesy of the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, Spain.

salvation and fortress, is uncommon in this collection. The first two words come from Isaiah 33:6, and many modern translations note that their combined meaning is unclear. The medieval glossators Rashi and Radaq understood the phrase to mean that the people's faith and ritual observance might serve as a bulwark in a time of trial. If our poet understood the phrase this way, he implies that R. Meir has lived an exemplary life of piety that has somehow served his community in a time of stress.

Literally circled by these figures of male authority, Sitbona reappears. She died of the plague in June 1349, the "year of REST," and a righteous life prepared her for her heavenly journey and merited her a spacious resting place for eternity. The last and third line of circling text anticipates the End of Days and Sitbona's future resurrection. First the poet, and then God, addresses Sitbona directly:

At the end of days, He will raise you up and compensate your actions.  
 There is hope for your future with the resurrection of His pious few.  
 He will say to you, "Do not grieve!  
 Shake off the dust! Arise and return!"<sup>51</sup>

As noted above, several of the closing verses allude to passages in Isaiah and Jeremiah that suggest that Sitbona was childless at the time of her death. Even the choice of the verb *da'av*, echoing Jer. 31:25 (24), reminds us of the epitaphs' generic trope for a bereaved father, *av nid'av*. The elegant shift in speaker from the poet to God, executed in the penultimate line, was a standard feature of the popular *muwashshah* lyrics, hinging the body of the song to its concluding *kharja*, often spoken by a different character in the song. Its appearance here is a sign that the author of this inscription was familiar with the cultural forms and attitudes that characterized upper-class Jewish tastes in Castile. Finally, the conclusion of the text executes a pleasing circle thematically, moving from its opening command to the procession to clear the path to God's intimate command to Sitbona. The first call is to the living who accompany the dead woman to the grave; the second call is to Sitbona, as she continues her journey alone.

*The Family of the Rosh: Epitaph Nos. 3, 4, 5, 6, and 42 (= Cantera Nos. 76, 75, 84, 11, and 42)*

The fame achieved by R. Asher ben Yehiel in his lifetime did not fade with his death, and he remains a monumental presence among scholars of halakha as well as rabbinic decisors today. Born in the heart of Ashkenaz, he was the leading student of R. Meir of Rothenburg, whose death in prison may have contributed to

R. Asher's decision to emigrate. In the early years of the fourteenth century, he made his way from Cologne through Provence to Barcelona. By 1306, the year of the great expulsion of French Jewry, he had found a mission and new home in Toledo, the capital of Old Castile, where the Jewish community appointed him rabbi of Toledo and head of the local Jewish academy.<sup>52</sup> Whether the Rosh, as he is called, ever fully acclimated to the more freewheeling atmosphere in Toledo is debatable. He sought to impose a systematic, austere, and Ashkenazi brand of piety on the Jews of Toledo and beyond, although over time he seems to have tempered the public formulations of some of his religious views.<sup>53</sup> R. Asher fathered eight sons and two daughters, some born in Germany. Yehiel, the eldest, was praised for his brilliance, but died young.<sup>54</sup> The second son, Solomon "the pious," led an economically precarious life characterized by extreme piety. Despite his poverty, he married the daughter of an established family in Toledo, and died shortly after his father.<sup>55</sup> The third son, Jacob, was a prolific author; among his enduring works on ritual and religious law was the *Arba' Turim* (Four Columns). He, too, left Germany as a child with his father. Like his brother Solomon, he struggled to make ends meet but had a formidable scholarly reputation. His epitaph stresses his religious learning and writings.<sup>56</sup>

According to Jacob's epitaph, he also suffered from poor health, and died in pain on the twelfth of Tamuz. He was buried in the family tomb that his father had erected and to which he refers in his will, the fifth of the sons to join the Rosh there, "two to his right and three to his left."<sup>57</sup> Scholars Freimann and Havatselet thought that he had died in 1343.<sup>58</sup> As for the family tomb, it is mentioned in the Rosh's final testament and suggested by the tight cluster of family epitaphs in the copyist's transcriptions. Noteworthy in Jacob's epitaph, too, is an expression that we have seen already in Sitbona's: the Lord will call to the Rosh and his sons to "ascend the sacred path" to their heavenly destination. Once again, the physical journey from the walled city to the cemetery becomes a liminal passage traveled, however temporarily, by inhabitants of both worlds; it is a "sacred path."<sup>59</sup>

Judah, the fourth son, was not initially encouraged to seek a scholar's life. A childhood illness damaged his vision, and a woman practitioner nearly blinded him. A second (Jewish) woman managed to restore some of young Judah's eyesight, but she unfortunately died before the treatment was complete, leaving him with poor eyesight for the rest of his life.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, it is Judah who would go on to inherit his father's mantle, assuming his post as Toledo's chief rabbi and directing the school that he had founded there for over two decades after his father's death. Although he was never a prolific scholar, his surviving

writings include a last will and testament written prior to his death in 1349. He was married twice, first at the age of fifteen, to a daughter of his brother Yehiel's, and then to Miriam, the daughter of his brother Solomon.<sup>61</sup> The remaining brothers were Eliakim, a scholar and financier; Moses (who died sometime before his brother Jacob); Eliezer, who managed the family charitable trust; and Simon (d. 1341). Two daughters were married in Toledo: one to Judah Cresp, who later left Toledo; and one to Isaac Aldabi, "the Hasid of Toledo." The daughters' names are lost to history.<sup>62</sup>

R. Asher (the Rosh)'s family tomb housed most of his sons.<sup>63</sup> A second cluster of family members found themselves in a different cemetery "neighborhood." Together, their epitaphs testify to the toll exacted by the plague, with five family members succumbing over a three-month period. Jacob's son Solomon died in Nisan (April–May). Judah's wife Miriam and son Hayim died in Sivan (June) and Judah himself in Tamuz (July). Hayim was only fourteen, Solomon a year older. Judah was seventy-nine at the time of his death.<sup>64</sup> The addendum to Judah's will dated Sivan 5109 (1349) refers repeatedly to financial decisions that Judah makes in his and his wife's names, so she was still living at this point.<sup>65</sup> Another of Judah's sons, Solomon, died in Av (July–August).

The family epitaphs constitute a natural group; given the proximity of the deaths, the same author, perhaps even Judah, may have been responsible for composing them. Their stolidity contrasts sharply with the more literary exemplars. It is, however, consistent with the religious values upheld by R. Asher and his sons, who were determined to bring Ashkenazi rigor to what they judged to be a laxer piety among Toledo's Jewish elite. Whoever composed these epitaphs had a sense of the family's historical importance. More than elegant turns of phrase or stylistic motifs, he has opted to insert biographical details into his texts, emphasizing also the preeminence of the family patriarch R. Asher, whose shining attributes were exemplified in the lives of his sons. I begin with the epitaph for Judah's second wife, Miriam, daughter of his older brother Solomon (Shadal's epitaph no. 3 = Cantera no. 76).

Miriam's identity is refracted through her husband's, and she is chiefly recalled for her wifely virtues. Her epitaph opens with praise for a "gracious woman" (*eshet hen*) whose industry and modesty brought honor to her household. The epitaph consists of nineteen lines, short bursts of unmetred verse that achieve poetic weight by means of rhyme and syntactical anaphora. The rhyme pattern (*aaa bb cc dd eee ffg h ii j*) is irregular but dominated by couplets. The first rhyming triplet emphasizes the deceased's energetic virtue with a string of active and transitive verbs: this "gracious woman" attained [virtue], set [table],

poured [wine]. The second tercet links this activity to its chief beneficiary, her husband, Judah, and, by extension, the people; the lines rhyme *te'udah, Yebudab, Yebudab* (the Law, the territory, the people/man). Between the two tercets, three couplets inform us that this woman was humble and modestly veiled. She is "Madam Miriam," daughter of Solomon ben haRosh and wife of his brother Judah, who illumined the mysteries of the Torah until God's wrath fell upon the community. As the husband's honor was reflected in the modest concealment of his wife, now his shame is revealed with his people's uncovering.<sup>66</sup> The double echo of "Judah" points to the husband as well as the eponymous nation. Plague has come to punish a straying people, and the diligent Madam Miriam has preceded her husband to find a secure resting place. In the final couplet, the husband journeys to a front-row seat in paradise while the wife accompanies him faithfully. The epitaph ends with a rabbinic proverb, "the wife of a friend is accounted a friend."<sup>67</sup>

In his will, Judah ben haRosh recommended to his sons that they marry in the family. He married his brothers' wives, he explained, because they had been raised among scholars and were familiar with the rigors of scholarly life: these women knew how to care for their husbands without making undue demands.<sup>68</sup> These are, in fact, the attributes that the epitaph celebrates in Miriam, honoring her personal stature and reputation for piety. The concluding proverb derives from a discussion of whether one must stand in the presence of a scholar's wife, just as would be done in the presence of her husband. The Talmud argues in favor of extending to the spouse the gesture of respect accorded to the scholar. Ironically, a medieval debate over whether this principle derived from Written or Oral Law (Torah or rabbinic custom) had already drawn the Rosh's attention. According to Miriam's grandfather and father-in-law, the precept was rabbinic and lacked scriptural authority. Does this undercut the final compliment bestowed upon her by the inscription on her tomb? Or is it a straightforward acknowledgment by men (both as mourners and as later readers) that this woman's labors on behalf of their teacher and friend had earned her respect as their friend as well? The reader must decide.

Judah's will and testament, an ethical will that included a family history, autobiography, and advice to his sons, were drawn up in November 1342; an addendum dealing with practical distribution of his assets and a trust fund for his descendants is dated a month prior to his death. The ethical will mentions the early death of one son.<sup>69</sup> The plague would take two of Judah and Miriam's remaining four children: Hayim and the eldest son, Solomon. Hayim died on the nineteenth of Sivan (June 6), in the same month as his mother. He was fourteen



and presumably living under his parents' roof. Four lines survive of his epitaph; either the fuller inscription was illegible to the copyist, or this was all that was written. Despite its brevity, this epitaph ignored the rapidly emerging topoi of the genre. Hayim's father is described with an abbreviated honorific, ה"ה (H"HR), perhaps "the exalted sage" (He-hakham HaRam) or "the brilliant and exalted" (Ha-muvhaq veHaRam), since similar formulations are spelled out in other epitaphs. Since the meaning is not certain, I have left it untranslated. The entire text reads:

He died in the storm at the age of fourteen  
 Reb Hayim son of H"HR Rabbi Judah ben haRosh, may his memory be a  
 blessing  
 On the nineteenth of Sivan in the year LIFE IS HIS [= [5]109]  
 He ascended to the light in the Light of life.<sup>70</sup>

One other plague epitaph also refers to death in a storm, Shadal's no. 44 (= Cantera no. 79), for David son of Joseph ben Nahmias, who died in Tamuz (July–August) "in [the] storm and tempest" of plague that "ravaged the land and left it waste and totally consumed." The storm in question may be metaphorical or an allusion to violent weather conditions (which, in turn, may have been associated with the corrupt air assumed to cause pestilence). In Hayim's case, the numerical value of "LIFE IS HIS" supplies the plague year; the eulogist devised this unique expression to highlight Hayim's name, which means "life." The final pun on the "light of life" also alludes to Hayim.

The epitaph for Hayim's father, Judah ben haRosh, is consistent with the eulogist's preference for emphasizing patriarchal lineage and biography over literary flourishes.<sup>71</sup> Judah's epitaph gives the year of his death, "109," without mentioning the plague. Technically, we cannot be sure that plague was the cause of his death, even though the date falls in the middle of the pandemic. Judah was seventy-nine in 1349, and had lost a wife and child in the preceding weeks; he could have died of many things. However, I include him here as part of the plague group because he died amid these losses and, directly or indirectly, with some relation to them. The epitaph begins in the voice of the memorial stone calling attention to itself:<sup>72</sup>

I stand as a sign and memorial  
 That under me is buried  
 The body of the man Judah ben haRosh.<sup>73</sup>

The next four lines are devoted to Judah's father, R. Asher ben Yehiel (the Rosh) and his journey from Ashkenaz to Toledo, after which the text returns abruptly to chronicle Judah's life:

He married the daughter of his brother Rabbi Yehiel on the eve of Sukkot  
 5066  
 After Rosh Hashanah his wife died and was laid in the dust.<sup>74</sup>  
 Then he remarried  
 The daughter of his brother Rabbi Solomon  
 God granted him the people's favor  
 So that he held his father's post immediately upon his death  
 And for twenty-one years directed the academy of his fathers  
 He died on the seventeenth of Tamuz in the year [5]109.<sup>75</sup>

This is plain language. Judah's first marriage is described literally as "after the Day of the Throne, his house came to be buried in the dust / Then he built himself a firm house." The euphemistic use of "house" (*bayit*) for "wife" is rabbinic and barely metaphor for a religious Jew. So, too, the "Day of the Throne" would have been a familiar expression for the New Year, the Day of Judgment (God on His throne). Both expressions are standard rabbinic idioms. Where Judah's eulogist did exert himself was in the epitaph's final few lines, which begin with a proverb and conclude with three loosely connected images:

A son brings joy to a wise father  
 And in his place, the fruit of the righteous will flourish [like] a tree of life<sup>76</sup>  
 Let him find shelter and rest in the shade of the God of Israel in whom he  
 trusted and had faith  
 And may he rest until he stands in his allotted place at the End of Days.<sup>77</sup>

Judah's work would please his father. His "fruit" (progeny) will flourish like a tree—not any tree, but the tree of life whose fruits bestow immortality upon men. Judah himself will find shade in God—extending the tree imagery—and rest there until he rises at the end of time, a messianic reading of Dan. 12:3. This epitaph tells us how Judah wished to see the long arc of his life. If he did not draft it himself, whoever did compose it was familiar with the autobiographical section of his will, which enlists some of the same phrases.<sup>78</sup> Compared with Sitbona's epitaph, Judah's is prosaic; his distrust for "foreign" knowledge apparently embraced poetry as well as philosophy and science.<sup>79</sup>

Judah's epitaph is followed by a brief epitaph for his nephew, Solomon the son of Jacob. Solomon died in "the year of REST," the term frequently used to indicate the year 5109 (1349), based on the numerical value of the Hebrew word for "rest" (109 = מנוחה). The entire epitaph reads:

Torah Piety Humility  
 The lot and the portion  
 Of Solomon son of Jacob ben haRosh, may his memory be a blessing.  
 He came to his ancestors in Nisan in the year of REST.<sup>80</sup>

The biblical expression "lot and portion" (חלק ונחלה) appears four times in the Hebrew Bible, always in connection with the Levites, who must be provided for because their role as cultic functionaries deprives them of land. The phrase also appears in Gen. 31:14, where Jacob's wives, Rachel and Leah, complain that their father has failed to provide for them because he is jealous of Jacob's prosperity. Thus the eulogist delicately implies that Solomon son of Jacob ben haRosh was dedicated to religious learning or piety but poor and supported by others.

One final plague epitaph belongs to a member of the Rosh's family who was buried among "the rabbis," a section of the cemetery that also included the Rosh's son, Simon, and Judah the son of the Rosh's son Eliakim.<sup>81</sup> Shadal's epitaph no. 42 mourns Judah ben haRosh's eldest son, Solomon, who died on the fifteenth of Av (July 29) in 1349, after his parents and brother Hayim.<sup>82</sup> From a literary perspective, the text is richer than others commemorating family members who died of plague. It begins with a reference to the stone that originally bore the inscription:

Touchstone and precious hewn stone  
 A beautiful crown and glorious diadem  
 For beneath it is buried the sapling of understanding and wisdom  
 The branch of the tree of knowledge and cunning  
 The most splendid among young men  
 Who walked in the way of his Lord and ever applied himself  
 To read the laws and ordinances and precepts  
 He is Rabbi Solomon, may he rest in paradise.<sup>83</sup>

The opening lines gesture to the granite marker that stands like a crown over Solomon's grave, a young man distinguished by his love of learning. The text

consists of rhyming, unmetred couplets, perhaps better described as rhymed prose. As we have already seen in several of the family epitaphs, the middle section is dedicated to the father of the deceased, here R. Judah ben haRosh, “the sage, the great rabbi, the breath of our nostrils, the star of our dawns, the light of our eyelids, chief among the exiles of Ariel.”<sup>84</sup> And since R. Judah is the son of R. Asher the Rosh, this must also be noted. The text then turns back to Solomon, concluding:

He died of the plague on the fifteenth of Av in the year of REST  
 He went up from his territory  
 To see the beauty of the Lord and to visit God’s Temple in His heavenly heights.<sup>85</sup>

The first line, describing Solomon’s “ascent” to heaven from earth, cites 1 Sam. 6:9, a biblical plague account, and perhaps reminds the mourners of the altitude of the burial ground;<sup>86</sup> the second line alludes to Ps. 27:4, where the psalmist asks that he be permitted to dwell in God’s House forever, beholding “the beauty of the Lord” and seeking His Temple.

To summarize, these epitaphs are relatively plain by comparison with others in the corpus. The prose is stolid, and the encomia emphasize piety and zeal for religious law. The group demonstrates the tight cohesion of the Rosh’s family and the centrality that he held in their lives—mimetically represented by his centrality in the longer epitaphs. The unmetred texts make sparing use of rhyme and frequently conclude with a biblical verse or rabbinic proverb that either uses the name of the deceased or celebrates him or her for a particular virtue. How different this sternly pious approach was from that of other elite Toledo Jews may be glimpsed in the epitaph for Sitbona. To draw the distinction more sharply, I look at two more examples. One is the epitaph for young Joseph son of Reb Meir Abulafia, who died of the plague shortly after his marriage, at the age of fifteen. The second is for a later victim, Joseph haLevi Abulafia, who died in October–November 1350.

*Joseph son of Reb Meir Abulafia haMerari, Shadal No. 17 (= Cantera No. 66)*

Who are you here, O groom,  
 Who has built an eternal dwelling place?  
 Behold you are shut in the cleft of the rock  
 Why did you hasten to leave  
 With the woman you loved?<sup>87</sup>

The composer of this epitaph has left us a poignant lament for a young man's untimely death. The text opens with a direct address to the dead youth. The burial stone does not gesture to itself ("here I stand," "beneath this stone is buried," or some such expression) but is gestured to by the speaker, who asks the dead man why he is shut up in the rock of his tomb. We learn immediately that the recently married Joseph died with his young wife. The introductory verses rhyme *aaabbc*, where the *b* rhyme is an internal rhyme mimetically "burying" the youth in the "buried" rhyme of the verse: *ve-hinkha 'atzur benigrat hatzur*. The epitaph continues with another tercet leading to couplets, unmetred but built on grammatical stress patterns that create a rhythmic effect. We have already seen this technique of playing rhyming tercets off couplets, where triple rhymes inaugurate a section of text. In this epitaph, a second tercet introduces a new thematic section, in which the deceased Joseph tells us his story.

I am the man  
 Who has seen desolation and destruction  
 Blood and pestilence  
 The days of my youth were cut short  
 Suddenly, in the prime of my life,  
 Young and tender in years,  
 Evil, unending illnesses snatched me away. (vv. 6–12)<sup>88</sup>

The dead youth tells us that he was cut down in the prime of youth amid great devastation. In quick succession, he alludes to Lam. 3:1, and then to Isaiah's and Jeremiah's evocations of "desolation and destruction" (*shod ve-shever*). The allusion to Jer. 48:3, describing the destruction of Moab, specifically refers to the wailing of the kingdom's youth. The cause of this man's death was a harsh and lasting illness—here the poet cites Deut. 28:59, in which God threatens to punish Israelite disobedience with conquest, famine, and sicknesses that are "evil and unending." The medieval commentators Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Rashbam gloss the odd expression as referring to "plagues" that have not been seen before and that do not go away, readings that surely resonated for this epitaph's readers.

The dead boy describes his fate. Illness and pain drove him to abandon home and inheritance, including his recent bride. His abandoned "house" is described in the words of Jer. 12:7, where God's destruction falls upon livestock and land; his desolate household echoes Jeremiah 44, where God threatens the Israelites in Egypt with sword, famine, and plague that will annihilate young and old. The youth laments that he was struck down before he had any heir "to

inherit from me and recall my name / among my people” (v. 23). Instead, he must recall himself:

It is I who must say, here I am!  
 And let the one who hears what befell me have pity on me  
 Joseph son of Reb Meir, may his rest be honorable, known as Abulafia  
 haMerari  
 That is my name forever and this is my memorial. (vv. 25–28)<sup>89</sup>

Joseph belonged to the prominent Abulafia dynasty, although his particular identity, as he feared, has been lost to time.<sup>90</sup> He describes himself as “haMerari,” referring to one of the sons of the biblical Levi (Exod.6:16) but perhaps intended for its lexical association with bitterness.<sup>91</sup> Joseph’s plea to be remembered bares the reciprocity of the bond between the mourners and the mourned. It was a bond that would be succeeded over time by a reciprocity less raw but still powerfully linking the worlds of living and dead, first in the pilgrimage of family and friends who knew the deceased, and later in the visits from those who never had but who might earn a connection as they circled and read. Elliot Horowitz has noted the queasiness of religious authorities confronted with cemetery practices that seemed to encourage praying *to* the dead. In his words, “the channels between the living and the dead could never be hermetically sealed,” and Horowitz traces an intractable belief in the power of the dead to intercede on behalf of the living.<sup>92</sup> Even Judah ben haRosh, he observes, referred in his will to visiting the graves of the *tsaddikim* (righteous ones), where he offered a prayer that he passes on to his children—a prayer that Horowitz describes as “cautiously worded,” to avoid the outright impression that the dead are being asked to do something on his behalf.<sup>93</sup>

In contrast, Joseph’s epitaph reminds us that the dead also needed help. Plainly, the dead young man beseeches his visitors to pray for him. Not only has he no children to fulfill this solemn task, but his father must have predeceased him, too; when the epitaph swivels finally to the trope of parental grief, only Joseph’s mother appears, a mother “afflicted and distraught,” bitterly weeping and alone. The biblical subtexts stretch finely from the opening through this final section of the text to embrace the figure of the grieving mother, a kind of *pietà* whose image must have been familiar in the streets of Toledo. “Distraught and desolate” comes from Isa. 54:11, where it refers to the feminized image of the people Israel, “afflicted and distraught and unconsolated.” But the second half of the verse is God’s promise to set carbuncles as their “building stones” and sapphires as their foundation, a

corollary promise that the reader would have understood to be signified materially in the chiseled stone before him. The disconsolate mother who has lost her son Joseph has “sent off” her daughters before him, so that she remains alone. Shadal thought that the poet referred to daughters who must have married and left the home, and Cantera supposed that they were dead. We will never know who was correct; the terrible image of the solitary, grieving mother is what lingers. She is, moreover, “bereft and barren,” in the words of Isa. 49:21, another biblical promise that lost children shall be restored. In 1349, that was a promise that demanded superhuman faith.

Several themes, all of them reinforced by an artful web of biblical proof-texts, elevate this text beyond its affecting surface narrative. Some of these proof-texts allude to biblical stories in which plague befell the Israelites in punishment for their sins. Other proof-texts, primarily from Jeremiah and Isaiah, describe devastation and plague that have wrought destruction on agricultural land and livestock as well as humans; depopulated city and countryside; and are accompanied by famine. Many of these biblical verses also locate this devastation in Egypt, a rich and bounteous land to which Israelites have fled in search of security and wealth. Together, these subtexts offer a commentary on the pandemic that violently stripped young Joseph of his future and life. They “make sense” of the plague as a rebuke to the laxity of Jewish life in a comfortable exile, a punishment for straying from the path laid out for them of old. Some of the contours of their punishment correspond to those suggested by the documents assembled by Cabrillon, Callico, and others—neglected land and livestock, food shortages, and famine. What the gap was between the death of Joseph son of Meir and the composition of this epitaph is impossible to say, but if the stone was not erected until the following year, some of the economic and environmental impacts of the plague would have been amply in evidence. Others had been a fact of life in the years preceding the pandemic.

Equally important is that the author of this epitaph wrote fluidly and well, tapping old and new conventions to bring to life the voice of a young man whose real life had abruptly ended. The simple lines, the shift from the opening tercets to effortless couplets, the careful insertion of the date and cause of death, pose a stark contrast to the angular, tense prose of the Rosh family compositions. Yet even among the wealthy and cultured Jews to whom the Rosh struggled to sell his version of religious piety, it was possible to believe that the plague was a rebuke for the worldliness of their lives. That view was not the sole possession of some mythical “popular” stratum of Jewish society, as if only the uneducated feared God’s wrath in the wake of devastation. Very few men and women who

lived through the plague years of 1348–50 were willing to dismiss the role of an almighty and angry God in unleashing it upon them. Even physicians were reluctant to abandon this view, as seen in Chapter 3. (The sole Toledo epitaph from the epidemic of 1361–62 invokes this belief, too.)

But, again, how many of the hallmark features of this epitaph are new? Beyond the dating conventions, the answer is that they are not new at all. For instance, as noted in the beginning of this chapter, Shadal's epitaph no. 27 also memorializes a young son and grieving parent. In this case, the young man, Judah ben Nahmias, was twenty-seven years old—hardly a child, and yet depicted through his father's eyes as:

His youngest son and delight of his eyes  
 The most beloved among children  
 Young in years  
 Greater than elders in understanding.<sup>94</sup>  
 The father bewails his loss:  
 I am the man who has seen affliction  
 For I shall go down mourning to Sheol to my son  
 To make my tomb beside him while I live,  
 For when my time shall come.

And so the father spoke in bitterness of heart  
 My son my son  
 Wait until my turn comes  
 Rest in sweet sleep  
 Your father will come see you  
 My tomb beside your tomb  
 In the grave I have dug for myself.<sup>95</sup>

The epitaph concludes with the anticipated details of name and date: Judah son of Moses ben Nahmias died on the twenty-second of Tevet 5000 (= 1240 C.E.). The family is one of the old elite families of Jewish Castile; several of its fourteenth-century members are documented among the plague epitaphs. The pathos of the inscription, with the overpowering image of Judah's grief-stricken father, summons familiar biblical prooftexts from Lam. 3:1 (the same verse put into the mouth of young Joseph son of Reb Meir), Gen. 37:35, and 2 Sam. 19:1. The Genesis passage describes Jacob mourning at the falsely reported death of his youngest son, Joseph, while the 2 Samuel context is that of King David mourning his beloved son



Absalom. In Judah ben Nahmias's epitaph, the father's speech also directs the reader's attention to the physical placement of a family plot, with two tombs side by side. The formulation "my tomb beside your tomb" (*ve-etzel qevuratkha qevurati*) finds an alliterative response in the "tomb" and "hewn" that follow (*be-qivri asher kariti li*). The former expression plays on the loyal Naomi's words to her mother-in-law in the book of Ruth (Ruth 1:16), inverted now so that the parent must follow the child. The sentimentality in Judah's thirteenth-century epitaph, like the artful mix of poetry and prooftext, are echoed in the epitaph written a century later for Meir's son Joseph. In other words, the memorialist for the plague victim felt no need to invent new ways to commemorate the dead; nor did he seem to struggle with the idioms at his disposal. Minimally, this suggests that the catastrophe represented by the Black Death in Castile in 1349 was not perceived in the cataclysmic terms that found expression to the east. Or perhaps, we might equally say that the death of a child is its own cataclysm, and the scale of surrounding catastrophe has nothing to do with it.

*Joseph haLevi, Son of Rabbi Solomon haLevi al-Lauwee Abulafia, Shadal No. 22 (= Cantera No. 91)*

To further illustrate my point that the poetic conventions utilized in the Toledo epitaphs are conventions of continuity more than rupture, let me conclude our sample with an inscription from the tail end of the pandemic, Marheshvan 5111 (= October–November 1350). The deceased was Joseph haLevi, son of R. Solomon haLevi of the al-Lauwee Abulafia family. Joseph died in Seville, a long way from Toledo, but was brought home for burial. The route between Toledo and Seville—the respective capitals of Old and New Castile—was well trafficked, and Jewish courtier-bankers acting as diplomats or financiers, as well as Jewish physicians, would have found it a familiar journey. Another brief plague epitaph from this collection commemorates a young physician from the famed Sasson (or Shushan) family who also died "on the border of Seville" at the age of twenty-five.<sup>96</sup> Seville, an early frontier city of the Reconquest, had grown to rival Castile in prominence. Interestingly, it had its own Jewish burial ground, but it must have been important to these Toledo families to bring their loved ones home.<sup>97</sup>

Joseph haLevi performed some diplomatic function for the king. The opening lines of his epitaph, with their motifs of aromatic spices and compounds, may hint that he had some medical training. The lines also gesture to the physical tombstone: Joseph is buried in a northern plot—invoking Gen. 33:13—stirred by a breeze that wafts perfumed scents over his grave. The stone marker is hewn from a "helping stone," used by women in childbirth but also referring to

the biblical site Even haEzer, encountered in 1 Sam. 5:1 and 7:12. Under the stone lies Joseph, who is described in a long series of encomia and paired attributes. These are followed by a series of parallel constructs that etymologically, homophonically, or thematically bind subject and verb, so that, for example, “Privilege is privileged” or “honor is graced.”

This long middle section constitutes the bulk of the epitaph. The rhetorical pairs have no biblical source, although the use of personified pairs appears throughout Hebrew Scripture, and a popular late antique hymn enlists just this technique and may have echoed in the writer’s mind.<sup>98</sup> The medieval author felt free to compose a series of these doublets untethered to sacred text. The passage reads:

Lineage and rank are his stewards  
 Humility and Greatness his merchants. . . .  
 Generosity is glorified  
 And Humility resplendent  
 Splendor is evident  
 And Honor is graced  
 Aptitude and Deed take pride.  
 How can a book contain his praise? (vv. 8–18)<sup>99</sup>

The contrast with the Rosh family epitaphs is striking: where the Rosh family epitaphs emphasize genealogy over self-promotion, and biographical data over elegant encomia, the epitaph before us does the opposite. Its interest in historical fact is minimal: Joseph’s epitaph includes his name, his father’s name, and the date and place of his death. The year is spelled טקט, whose numerical value is [5]111, meaning “pestilence” or “destruction.” The epitaph’s concluding verse incorporates the name of the deceased, here “in Joseph’s tent” (Ps. 78:67). It is an eerie allusion, as Psalm 78 contains a lengthy recounting of biblical history, seen as repeated cycles of Israelite straying and divine punishment, culminating with the election of David as king. The eulogist may simply have wished to signify Joseph’s final resting place, or he may have read the verse like Rashi, who glossed “tent of Joseph” as Shiloh in the hills of Ramatah, hence an allusion to the rocky ascent to the grave.

What might we know of Joseph b. Meir when we completed circling his tomb? We would know his name and family and that he had risen to prominence as one of the elite courtier Jews who served the Castilian king. We would know that he died in Seville, perhaps on a diplomatic or medical mission, and that his body was returned to Toledo for a distinguished burial. We could, moreover, recognize that his

family wished to eulogize him in language characterized by rhetorical grace, style, and a sustained tension between poetic license and sacred tether. Certainly, the cultured milieu of an old Sephardic family has shaped this text and the way contemporary readers were supposed to respond to it. The same courtly tone characterizes the stately epitaph for Madam Sitbona, whose gender and widowed status encouraged the writer to stress personal virtue more than aristocratic tastes. In contrast, a sterner vision of what constituted good living—and death—speaks to us from the plague epitaphs belonging to family members of the Rosh. Yet in their own way, the writers of these inscriptions also recognized conventions of the genre and adapted them for their clients and needs.

Significantly, there is very little indication that the nearly thirty epitaphs commemorating plague deaths of 1349–50 felt a need to break with received conventions as they are represented among the other inscriptions preserved by the anonymous copyist. Likewise, there is little suggestion that the formal expressions of mourning and praise underwent any evolution as the plague continued to rage. In this context, it is useful to conclude with a look at the sole epitaph preserved in this collection that memorializes a victim of the next plague outbreak in 1361–62. The dark tone of this epitaph is a product of its biblical allusions, which create a subtext of disease and suffering and imply a divine source for the plague that ended a physician's life. The result is not so much a startling divergence from the 1349–50 epitaphs as a reprise of their plaintive elegance in a minor key. Shadal's epitaph no. 37 (= Cantera no. 96) is for Joseph son of Abraham Makhir. From its very first words, the text echoes the biblical Job describing his lamentable physical degradation to his friends and begging them to comfort him instead of accusing him. Job's wish that his words might be engraved in iron for eternity open Joseph's epitaph, followed by allusions to the finely wrought metalwork of the priestly ephod, and the psalmist's wry and weary assurance that the rich die as well as the poor, despite their wealth and property. The reference to the finely engraved work of the priestly ephod was also exploited by the writer of Shadal's epitaph no. 37 (= Cantera no. 96), for Joseph son of Reb Abraham ben Makhir. The writer of the 1362 epitaph twists the meaning of the verse from Ps. 49:12 to have the dead man wish for his "names" to be read "across the lands"—I think a wish for the engraved text to be legible from afar.<sup>100</sup>

If only my words might be written  
 Carved forever in stone  
 Engraved in fine relief  
 So that their names are legible across the lands (vv. 1–4)

Joseph, a physician, was a faithful practitioner. A “jar of manna” and a “balm of Gilead” allude to medical learning that he had acquired from his father, Abraham, also a physician, and would hopefully pass on to future generations. The epitaph thus nods to a dynastic legacy—as indeed it was, for the Makhir physicians were known from their origins in Montpellier prior to the 1306 expulsion. This passage constitutes the core of the text, which then gives Joseph’s full name and the date of his death (in the month of Kislev 5122 = December 1362). Joseph was “gathered to his people” (Num. 27:13), and “departed from his place” (Jer. 4:7), to “go up on the way to his own land” (1 Sam. 6:9) to God’s heavenly Temple. As we have seen in earlier examples, the phrases suggest a procession and journey that the deceased must complete on his own. But in this case, the terse formulas carry other meanings: the brief citation from Numbers alludes to Moses’ inability to enter the Promised Land, the clipped allusion to Jeremiah 4 comes in the context of a ravaging “lion” (for Jeremiah, the king of Babylonia) who will descend from the north and lay the land waste, and the final phrase from 1 Samuel 6 is taken from a description of a plague outbreak that has befallen the Philistines for having taken the Israelite Ark. The Philistines send the Ark back on the road toward their Israelite enemies, reasoning that “if it goes up on the way to its own land,” the plague that they are suffering must be an act of God. If the Ark veers and travels in another direction, the plague was merely due to “chance.” By tapping these allusions, the writer elegantly eulogizes the dead Joseph, while managing to allude to suffering and illness, perhaps in the line of duty, and death by plague that was explicable only as an act of God. The same idiom, in fact, appeared in one of the earlier epitaphs, Shadal’s no. 57 (= Cantera no. 86), for R. Meir son of Abraham ben Sasson, who may also have been a physician and was certainly a high-ranking Jew in his community. Even the concluding image of the dead Joseph ascending the road to God’s Temple alludes, so Rashi tells us, to King David at the end of his life. Taken together, the tautly phrased verses seem grimmer than the exemplars from 1349–50. Of the two phrases found in earlier texts, the description of the finely wrought engraving on the tomb was attested among the pious Rosh family epitaphs; the other expression (“jar of manna”) was arguably a conventional accolade for a physician. Neither carryover, in other words, marks continuity of a theological doctrine or a valorized moral attribute beyond that of continued respect for the prominent dynasties of Jewish physicians. Here, however, the physician’s fate is analogized to Job’s, both in terms of a progressively debilitating and disfiguring illness and an ultimate recognition that his condition is divinely ordained. As a source for comparison, one epitaph is not much to go on, and certainly some of our earlier

epitaphs made one or both of these points. At the same time, there is a weariness to the consolations proffered by the later eulogist that may suggest a grimmer epidemiological and social context to his text—speculation, to be sure, but worth considering.

Generally, the range of imagery and narrative formats in the Toledo epitaphs was wider than those found among recently excavated tombstones in Würzburg, which remind us more of the austere piety found in the epitaphs for Judah ben haRosh and his kin. The Toledo epitaphs also maintain their individuality and elegance even as they grapple with multiple deaths among families and friends—perhaps an indication that the mortality levels in the city were lower than those found elsewhere. Here, too, the paucity of 1362 epitaphs may suggest that this second plague wave struck the community harder and with greater disruption to commemorative institutions. In the 1349–50 epitaphs, the preservation of biographical details is sometimes meager and may reflect some lack of information among survivors pressed by crisis and sorrow. Nonetheless, the production of graceful epitaphs that express a range of religious and cultural outlooks, the traces of ritual processions and customs that presume regular access to the Jewish cemetery, and an ongoing connection to those who are dead—all these things testify less to physical and psychological shattering and rupture than they do to resilience and a presumption that life and the living resume and go on. Significantly, not a single one of the Toledo plague epitaphs commemorates a victim of anti-Jewish violence.

In Aragon and Catalonia, in contrast, the Black Death was inseparable from the experience of devastating violence, so much so that the memory of violence would outweigh that of the plague. We turn to that story in Chapter 5. It is hard to say what etched this moment so lightly in Castilian Jewish memory—the milder impact of the pandemic, the later shock of violence in 1391 and the early fifteenth century, or a combination of these and other factors. But it is worth noting that among the exiles from Spain who would scatter across Europe, North Africa, and the New World, it was the Castilians whose identity and memory would come to be identified with the world of “Sepharad.” The hegemonic stamp of Castile on postexilic Iberian identities meant that after 1492, the narratives, voices, and traumas of other Iberian communities would be buried under the ruins of Castilian Jewish history. I will return to these thoughts in conclusion.