

ANDALUCIA IBERIA SEPHARAD

“Between Convivencia and Reconquest”



June 12–23, 2025

A Travel Seminar for Vassar Alums, Parents, and Friends
Led By **Dr. Marc Michael Epstein**

Dear Vassar Alums, Parents, and Friends,

It is with great excitement that I invite you to join me on a remarkable journey to ‘Al-Andalus, Iberia, and Sefarad—three amazing destinations encompassed by present-day Spain and Catalunya—a region steeped in history and alive with the interwoven legacies of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This trip represents the culmination of three decades of experience leading travel seminars at Vassar, lovingly shepherding generations of students not only in the classroom but also through the unique programs I’ve been fortunate to create and lead. It is a profound privilege to now share this extraordinary experience with you, as we bridge the transformative learning of Vassar with the rich opportunities for discovery that continue beyond college.

During my time at Vassar, I have witnessed the power of immersive education firsthand. Leading our students through the vibrant streets of Córdoba, the awe-inspiring Alhambra in Granada, and the synagogues of Toledo has deepened their understanding of history, art, and culture in ways that no classroom could replicate. These are not just trips; they are extensions of our shared academic curriculum and of my own research into the dynamic intersections of art, faith, and history. To invite you on this journey is to invite you into that same profound exploration—one enriched by thoughtful discussion, nuanced perspectives, and the unique lens of the Vassar experience.

Unlike the rugged, student-centered trips of my early years, this program is designed with your comfort in mind—balancing luxurious accommodations and a carefully curated itinerary—with the in-depth authenticity that has always defined my approach. Together, we will explore medieval cities and modern marvels, savor the layered flavors of Iberian cuisine, and uncover the stories of a land where cultures converged and thrived. It is a journey for sophisticated learners—one that not only builds upon your own Vassar experience but also aims to forge a vibrant, multi-generational group united by curiosity and a shared commitment to lifelong learning. You will perhaps reconnect with your fellow alums, but also, meet members of the Vassar family who are new to you and share your passion for intellectually enriching travel.

I am particularly thrilled about the opportunity to explore how this region shaped the three major monotheistic religions—a subject central to both my teaching and research. From impressive mosques to the remnants of synagogues to the great Christian sites that yet resonate with shared artistic and spiritual traditions, every site we visit will deepen our appreciation for this crossroads of history. Join us for this unique adventure—a continuation of your connection to Vassar, an expansion of your consciousness, and a celebration of the joy of learning together.

With warm regards,
Marc

Dr. Marc Michael Epstein
Professor of Religion and Visual Culture
on the Mackie P. Davis & Norman H. Davis Chair

Director of Jewish Studies
Vassar College

Academic Staff



DR. MARC MICHAEL EPSTEIN: Winner of the 2015 Jewish Book Award in Visual Arts for *Skies of Parchment, Seas of Ink: Jewish Illuminated Manuscripts*, Marc is the product of a mixed marriage between the scions of Slonimer and Lubavitcher Hassidim and Romanian socialists, and grew up, rather confused, but happy, in Brooklyn, New York. He is currently a professor of Religion at Vassar, where he has been teaching since 1992, and is the first Director of Jewish Studies. At Vassar, he teaches courses on medieval Christianity, religion, arts and politics, and Jewish texts and sources. He is a graduate of Oberlin College, received his PhD at Yale University, and did much of his graduate research at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. He has written numerous articles and three books on various topics in visual and material culture produced by, for, and about Jews. His book, *The Medieval Haggadah: Art, Narrative, and Religious Imagination* (Yale, 2011) was selected by

the London Times Literary Supplement as one of the best books of 2011. During the 80s, Epstein was Director of the Hebrew Books and Manuscripts division of Sotheby's Judaica Department. He continues to serve as a consultant to various libraries, auction houses, museums, and private collectors throughout the world, among them the Herbert C. and Eileen Bernard Museum at Temple Emanu-El in New York City, for which he curated the inaugural exhibition, and the Fowler Museum at UCLA. He is the Director of Beit Venezia, the home for International Jewish Studies in Venice, Italy.

DR. VICTORIA ATLAS holds a PhD in medieval Spanish culture and history from the University of Alcalá de Henares (Spain) and M.A. in Spanish and Latin American Cultures from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She's also the official guide of the Historical Synagogue of Madrid, the only official guide licensed to guide in Hebrew in Spain, and a lecturer on Bible in Art at the Institute of Biblical and Ancient East Studies.

ALEX SPECTOR KOBZEV was born in Chisinau, Moldavia. At age 8, he emigrated with his family to Haifa, Israel. A true citizen of the world, he's been living in Catalonia for nearly two decades and has been working in the field of active tourism in the Pyrenees, whether as a ski instructor in Andorra or logistic assistant on tours in the Iberian peninsula.

TOUR ITINERARY

Wednesday, June 11

DEPART NEW YORK

Arrive at JFK Airport Terminal 8 to **check in with the group and depart for Madrid.**

Day 1: Thursday, June 12

ARRIVE IN MADRID

Early a.m.: Arrive at Madrid International Airport. We will be met by our trip logistician, the charming **Alex Spector**, and **Dr. Victoria Atlas**, our principal Madrid guide.

Morning: **Panoramic tour** by bus, including many different sites such as the Retiro Park, Puerta de Alcala, Salamanca neighborhood, Las Ventas Bullring, Real Madrid's Bernabeu Stadium, Madrid's most famous fountains (Neptuno and Cibeles), and Castellana Avenue.

Afternoon: **Free time** to explore the Retiro Park and Botanical Gardens.

Evening: Festive **welcome dinner** and trip orientation.

Accommodations: VP Plaza España Design

Located in Madrid's vibrant Plaza de España, VP Plaza España Design combines luxury with contemporary style. Enjoy spacious rooms with city views, fine dining, and the rooftop Sky Bar overlooking Madrid's skyline. With Gran Vía, the Royal Palace, and top attractions nearby, this hotel offers a chic and convenient stay in the heart of the city.

Day 2: Friday, June 13

MADRID'S RICH CULTURAL HERITAGE

Morning: **Madrid Archeological Museum**, a complete "introduction" to the art of three religions—Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—in a single museum. Truly a journey through Spain's ancient past, from the earliest prehistoric artifacts to treasures of the medieval era. Highlights include the iconic *Lady of Elche*, a stunning Iberian limestone bust with intricate headdress, and perfectly preserved Roman mosaics that bring ancient scenes to life. Visitors can explore Greek, Phoenician, and Egyptian artifacts, along with Visigothic and Islamic art, which together showcase Spain's dynamic role in world history. The museum's immersive exhibits make it an exciting dive into the cultures that shaped the Iberian Peninsula.

Afternoon: **Visit Prado Museum**, one of the world's premier art museums, including the greatest works of the Spanish masters like Goya and Velazquez, but also exquisite Italian Renaissance paintings, a bunch of superlatively fleshy works by Rubens, Titian, and what is, hands down, the best collection of Netherlandish art anywhere—including the Netherlands. The Prado is home to what, in Professor Epstein's opinion, is the best painting ever: Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (and also many other amazing paintings by Bosch and Breughel). We will also view the often overlooked

19th-century history paintings depicting the cataclysmic events of 1492 which reveal how the Spanish have viewed their complicated past. Generally, tourists get an hour or so in the Prado, but you can spend as much time as you like this afternoon.

Evening: Shabbat begins at 9:30 p.m., with earlier Shabbat activities for those interested, **or a free evening to explore on your own.**

Overnight: VP Plaza España Design

Day 3: Saturday, June 14 **MADRID, THE CAPITOL BY FOOT**

Morning: Free time to explore Madrid.

Afternoon: A walking tour through **Madrid de los Austrias** and the **Literary Quarter** is like stepping into the heart of old Madrid! We will visit the **Plaza de la Villa**, where the 15th-century **Tower of Los Lujanes** stands as one of the city's oldest buildings. Then, dive into the narrow, winding streets that lead to the remnants of Madrid's **Original Shouq** (Arabic: "Market"), where vibrant shops, hidden boutiques, and charming local artisan stalls create a colorful blend of past and present. The **Literary Quarter**, with its cobblestone paths and plazas, boasts cafés and quaint bookstores where Spain's literary giants like Cervantes once roamed. Every corner tells a story, blending Madrid's Andalusian Muslim roots with the grandeur of the Habsburg era and the lively bohemian charm that make this area a must-see.

Optional visits: Reina Sofia Museum or Thyssen Bornemisza Museum.

Evening: Shabbat ends 10:32 p.m.; **free to explore.**

Overnight: VP Plaza España Design

Day 4: Sunday, June 15 **THE GLORIES OF TOLEDO**

Morning: Drive to Toledo. Introductory drive around the city walls with photo opps of breathtaking vistas.

Afternoon: We will visit the **Cathedral of Toledo**, a breathtaking masterpiece of Gothic architecture. Built on the site of a former mosque, it is replete with towering spires, intricate stonework, over 750 dazzling stained-glass windows, and a rich treasury. The former **Jewish Quarter** is home to two of the few remaining Iberian synagogues, which, ironically, survived because they were appropriated as churches. **Shmuel HaLevi Abulafia's Synagogue** was turned into "Nuestra Senora del Transito." The space features exquisite Islamicate stucco designs, and now houses the **Sephardic Museum**, which contains artifacts and exhibits that illuminate the life of Spanish Jews before the expulsion in 1492. Nearby stands the **Great Synagogue**, "converted" into the church of **Santa Maria La Blanca**. It is an architectural wonder of delicate white arches, Mudejar carvings, and a forest of columns embodying the fusion of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic influences that defined Toledo's past. We will also visit Toledo's oldest standing mosque, **Bab al-Mardum**, a perfect example of Islamic architecture with its

graceful horseshoe arches, geometric designs, and intricate brickwork. Like the synagogues, it was appropriated and “converted” into the Church of Cristo de la Luz in the 12th century, with a stunning Romanesque apse added. Finally, we will visit three Mudejar monuments in Toledo. The church of **San-tiago del Arrabal**, known as the “Mudejar Cathedral” of Toledo, impresses with its striking brick façade and scalloped Islamic arches. **Santa Cruz**, which now functions as a museum, is a former hospital with stunning Mudejar details and houses an array of medieval and Renaissance artworks. Finally, the church of **San Roman** features a beautiful Mudejar interior and Visigothic remains, in a captivating blend of styles.

Evening: Group dinner at **Madre Tierra Vegetarian Restaurant**, with musical entertainment with authentic period instruments and traditional Sephardi vocals by the amazing artist Ana Alciade.

Overnight: Eugenia de Montijo, Autograph Collection

Set in a former palace in Toledo’s historic center, Eugenia de Montijo combines modern comfort with classic elegance. Just steps from the Toledo Cathedral and Alcázar, this boutique hotel offers luxurious rooms and a tranquil spa, perfect for exploring Toledo’s rich heritage.

Day 5: Monday, June 16

CÓRDOBA, THE MOSQUE THAT BECAME A CATHEDRAL

Morning: Drive to Córdoba. Introductory walk around the city.

Afternoon: A visit to Córdoba’s famous **Cathedral-Mosque** or Mezquita, is a mesmerizing architectural masterpiece that weaves together centuries of history, art, and religion. As you step inside, you are greeted by a forest of 856 red-and-white horseshoe arches and ancient columns, remaining from the original 1,293. These columns, crafted from jasper, marble, and granite, create the iconic forest-like effect within the mosque, contributing to its mesmerizing and expansive atmosphere and stunning design that creates an almost hypnotic sense of infinite space. Originally built in the eighth century as a mosque during Córdoba’s golden age under Islamic rule, the structure’s Islamic artistry is unparalleled, with intricate geometric patterns, delicate stucco carvings, and an exquisite mihrab, or prayer niche, adorned in Byzantine mosaics. But what makes the Mezquita truly unique is its appropriation as a Christian building: in the 16th century, a massive Renaissance cathedral was plunked down right in the heart of the mosque, with soaring vaults and intricate altars that create a dramatic contrast to the graceful arches of the mosque. This juxtaposition of Islamic and Christian elements within one structure speaks to Córdoba’s complex history and cultural fusion, making the Cathedral Mosque both deeply moving and a highly disturbing monument to Christian cultural imperialism. We will consider the relationship between the Muslim and Christian prayer spaces—the conversion of mosques to churches, the “seam” of religious imperial supersession that both joins and separates the two, and the variety of metaphors that have been applied to this edifice but all which fail to fully explain it.

Evening: Free time to explore

Overnight: Las Casas de la Judería

A charming collection of restored Andalusian houses in Córdoba’s Jewish Quarter, Hotel Las Casas de la Judería surrounds guests with courtyards, fountains, and antique decor. Located near the Mezquita-Catedral, it offers a serene stay that immerses guests in Córdoba’s history and beauty.

Day 6: Tuesday, June 17

SEVILLA, HEART OF ANDALUSIAN SPLENDOR

Morning: Drive to Sevilla (Day trip). Introductory walk around the city.

Afternoon: Sevilla's treasures are dazzling, beginning with the majestic **Sevilla Cathedral**, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world, where towering vaulted ceilings and lavish altars create an awe-inspiring sanctuary. Within its walls rests the supremely sappy tomb of Christopher Columbus, adding a layer of Art Nouveau kitsch to its grandeur. Just a short walk away, the **Torre del Oro**, or "Tower of Gold," glitters along the Guadalquivir River. Originally built by Andalusian Muslims as a defensive watchtower, its golden reflection on the river at sunset is a sight to behold, hinting at Sevilla's rich past as a vital port of the Spanish Empire. Completing the trio is the **Royal Alcázar of Sevilla**, a breathtaking palace complex that weaves together Andalusian Muslim and Renaissance architecture in lush gardens filled with fountains, exotic plants, and hidden courtyards. Walking through the Alcázar feels like entering a sultan's paradise, a vibrant testament to Sevilla's cultural legacy and the splendor of Andalusian craftsmanship.

Late Afternoon: Exclusive "**Flamenco Experience.**" A visit to the Flamenco Museum, a "Cajon" workshop, (in which you will be asked to participate, so bring your dancing shoes!) and concluding with a special performance by some of Spain's top Flamenco artists.

Evening: Return to Córdoba

Overnight: Las Casas de la Judería

Day 7: Wednesday, June 18

CÓRDOBA, CITY OF MAIMONIDES

Morning: Explore Córdoba's **Jewish Quarter**. The **Maimonides Statue** honors one of the most influential Jewish philosophers, physicians, and scholars of the medieval world. Born in Córdoba in 1135, Maimonides, known variously as **רבי משה בן מימון** or **מוסי בן מימון** or **רמב"ם** [Maimon ben Moshe Rabbi] **בן מימון** [Maimon ben Moshe Rabbi] is celebrated for his works on both Jewish law and philosophy, most famously the *Guide for the Perplexed*, which sought to harmonize religious faith with reason. Maimonides fled Córdoba with his family around 1148 due to the arrival of the Almohads, a strict Berber Muslim dynasty from North Africa who demanded that non-Muslims convert to Islam, leave, or face persecution. Maimonides' family left Córdoba so that they could observe Judaism in safety. After years of traveling and seeking refuge, the family eventually settled in Fez, Morocco, and later in Egypt, where Maimonides continued his work and gained renown as a scholar and philosopher. He was also a famous physician and served the Sultan of Egypt. His work was much admired and he wrote medical treatises that were consulted for centuries.

Córdoba's **Synagogue**, built in 1315 is a rare gem, one of only three remaining medieval synagogues in Spain (we will have seen all of them!) Its decidedly modest exterior conceals an intricately adorned but intimate interior, where delicate Mudejar stucco work reveals patterns of vines, geometric designs, and Hebrew inscriptions of prayer and blessing. We will be treated to a vocal musical rendition of some of the texts found on the walls.

Afternoon: We visit **Casa de Sefarad**, a cultural center showcasing traditional Jewish artifacts, music, and stories of Córdoba's once-thriving Jewish community, offering visitors a powerful and intimate look at the city's diverse past. We will meet with the people responsible for the creation of this private historical project in the Jewish Quarter. Explore the **Archaeology Museum of Córdoba**, a small museum containing artifacts from Roman and medieval Córdoba. Optional excursion to the **Alcazar of Córdoba**, the fortress and garden complex built for the Castilian monarchs on the model of Islamic palaces.

Evening: Group dinner at Casa Mazal, offering Sephardic-style cuisine (kosher options available) and musical entertainment. **Free to explore.**

Overnight: Las Casas de la Judería

Day 8: Thursday, June 19

GRANADA, THE JEWEL OF 'AL-ANDALUS

Morning: Drive to Granada

Granada was the last stronghold of the Andalusian Muslims before it fell to Isabella and Ferdinand in 1492. We will have a special tour of the magnificent **Alhambra Palace** and **Generalife Gardens**. This palace was the site of the infamous Alhambra Decree, mandating the expulsion of Jews from Christian Spain in 1492. We will discuss the contrast between the glory of the palace and the terrible weight of the Expulsion. We will consider the relationship between the Court of the Lions in the palace complex and the accounts of the palace of Shmuel Ibn Nagrela (993–1056), perhaps the most politically influential Jew in Muslim Spain. Talmudic scholar, grammarian, philologist, soldier, merchant, politician, and influential poet Ibn Nagrela served as vizier to the vizier of Granada, Abu al-Kasim ibn al-Arif and, ultimately, as assistant vizier of state to the Berber king Habbus al Muzaffar.

Afternoon: Visit the **Albaycn**, the old Muslim neighborhood, with its narrow streets and beautiful white houses, now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Guided visit to the **Realejo**, the former Jewish Quarter and the site of the original town bearing the name **Garnata al-Yahud**. The neighborhood was the hometown of the scholar and translator Samuel ben Yehudah ibn Tibbon (1150–1230), a statue of whom stands in the center square. Explore the streets and traditional neighborhood, site of a host of legends of the former Jewish community.

Evening: Group dinner in an elegant restaurant overlooking the Alhambra, with Spanish Guitar Duo. **Free to explore.**

Overnight: Hotel Palacio de Santa Paula, Autograph Collection. Housed in a former 16th-century convent on Granada's Gran Vía, Hotel Palacio de Santa Paula, Autograph Collection combines historic elegance with modern luxury. Its serene courtyard and gourmet restaurant create an ideal base for visiting the Alhambra and exploring Granada's cultural sites.

Day 9: Friday, June 20

BARCELONA, CITY OF MODERNISME

Early breakfast at the hotel in Granada.

9:30 a.m.: Fly from Granada to Barcelona

Morning: Panoramic bus tour of Barcelona. We start with a panoramic bus tour of Barcelona beginning at **Montjuic** (the Mountain of the Jews) including amazing views over the whole of this fantastic city.

Stop for a **guided visit** of architect Antoni Gaudí's unfinished masterpiece, the **Sagrada Familia Church**, a unique and awe-inspiring place of worship.

Our tour will also take us to the other landmarks Barcelona is famous for such as the **Plaça de Catalunya**, the plaza which marks the beginning of the **Passeig de Gràcia**, the most stylish street in Barcelona where we will be able to see more of Gaudí's extraordinary buildings, **Casa Batllo and Casa Mila**.

Evening: Shabbat begins 9:12 p.m., with Shabbat activities for those interested. **Free to explore.**

Overnight: ME Barcelona

In Barcelona's center, ME Barcelona offers sleek rooms, a rooftop pool with city views, and a spa for relaxation. Just a short walk from Plaça Catalunya and Passeig de Gràcia, it's the perfect spot to enjoy Barcelona's architecture, shopping, and vibrant atmosphere.

Day 10: Saturday, June 21

BARCELONA, THE EXEMPLARY EXAMPLE/THE RAMBLAS

Morning: We will visit three monuments of Gaudí's, including **Casa Milà**, the last private residence he designed, which was built between 1906 and 1912. It is popularly known as La Pedrera, or "the stone quarry," a reference to its unconventional rough-hewn appearance. We will also visit **Casa Amatller**, the neo-Gothic modernist masterpiece of Josep Puig i Cadafalch, built 1898–1900. Finally, we will explore the former **Hospital de Sant Pau**, a complex built between 1902 and 1930 by Lluís Domènech i Montaner. Composed of 27 pavilions connected through long underground galleries within its large green space, this UNESCO World Heritage Site complex is the largest Art Nouveau architectural ensemble in the world.

Afternoon: A ramble along the **Rambles**, Barcelona's iconic boulevard that stretches from Plaça de Catalunya to the bustling Port Vell, flanked by trees, street performers, flower stalls, and historical buildings. We will visit **La Boqueria**, Barcelona's famous market, considered one of the best in the world, where you will have the opportunity to taste various local specialties, freshly squeezed fruit juices, *turrón*, a traditional nougat made with almonds and honey, or *churros* dipped in thick, rich chocolate.

We will then have a **guided walk** through the **Gothic Quarter** and then the **ancient Jewish Quarter**, with a **synagogue** that may date to the third century (presently not open for visitors).

Evening: Shabbat ends 7:46 p.m. **Free to explore**

Overnight: ME Barcelona

Day 11: Sunday, June 22

GIRONA & BESALÚ, GEMS OF CATALUNYA

Morning: Drive to Girona. We will experience Girona's incredible Christian architecture, including its most celebrated icon, the Romanesque and Gothic **Cathedral**, which has the widest Gothic nave in the world. In the *Game of Thrones* series, these stairs were used as the exterior for the Great Sept of Baelor in King's Landing. Girona's so-called "Arab baths" have a fascinating history. The first public baths in Girona date back to 1194. In 1285, the complex was partially destroyed during a siege but the site was important enough that in 1294 King James II commissioned Ramon Taialà, a citizen of Girona, to rebuild them, and he did so in Andalusian Muslim (formerly called "Mooresque") style. In 1342, they were owned by Arnau Sarriera, the personal physician of Peter III the Ceremonious. It seems that during the Middle Ages, some of the rooms were used temporarily as a mikveh by the city's Jewish community. In 1617, they were bought by a community of Capuchin nuns, who integrated them into their convent. Finally, we will walk through the restored **Call**—what was once Girona's old Jewish neighborhood and continue to the **Bonastruc Ca Porta Centre**, a center of Jewish life and culture, where an excellent **museum** displays a synthesis of Jewish life, lore, historical, and mystical traditions of Spain.

Afternoon: Drive to Besalú. Explore the picturesque medieval City of **Besalú** where we will visit the ancient **Mikveh**, an important site of the city's historical Jewish heritage.

Early Evening: Return to Barcelona. Festive **farewell banquet** together at **Roots and Rolls**, Barcelona's premier vegan restaurant. **Free to explore.**

Overnight: ME Barcelona

Day 12: Monday, June 23

RETURN TO THE USA

Free morning in Barcelona!

Bus transfer to the Barcelona International Airport for the return to the U.S.

Arrive Barcelona Airport Terminal 1 to check in

Depart Barcelona Airport for NY

Arrive JFK Airport Terminal 8

COST OF THE TRAVEL SEMINAR

\$6,950 per person double occupancy (\$1,700 additional single supplement), includes:

- Domestic flight from Granada to Barcelona
- All ground transfers in Spain/Catalonia
- All guides, site admissions, and fees
- 4-star accommodations, double occupancy
- All breakfasts
- Welcome dinner in Madrid
- Dinner and musical performance at Casa Mazal, Córdoba
- Dinner and musical performance at Madre Tierra, Toledo
- Dinner and musical performance overlooking the Alhambra, Granada
- Farewell banquet in Barcelona

Not included in the rate:

- Domestic flight to JFK (if needed) or international flights
- Transportation to and from JFK airport
- Lunches
- Dinners (except the dinners mentioned above, which are included)
- Travel insurance
- Personal expenses

To reserve your space on the tour or for questions, please email [***vcalumspain25@gmail.com***](mailto:vcalumspain25@gmail.com)

