

Brief biography of the Don Isaac and Don Judah Abravanel (circa late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries)

Contributed by [Rachel Aleksander](#)

Source: Cecil Roth's "Introduction" to his edition and translation of Leone Ebreo's *Dialoghi d'Amore*

The family of Abrabanel was without a doubt among the most illustrious of those which adorned Spanish Jewry in the Middle Ages. Like more than one other in the Iberian Peninsula, it boasted descent from the house of David; but it did not depend on this remote and hypothetical ancestry for its distinction. From the thirteenth century onwards, it was active in public and communal service. It provided the Court of Castile with many tried servants; and in the fifteenth century, it reached its zenith in Don Issac ben Judah Abrabanel, statesman, financier, and exegete, who for upwards of a generation was among the dominating personalities in Jewish life and at the same time a considerable figure in European politics. The eldest of the latter's trio of stately sons was named Judah after his grandfather. In accordance with convention, he was called also (in allusion to the benediction of Jacob—'Judah is a lion's whelp') Leone or Leon, being thus known in subsequent life as Leone Ebreo, or Leon the Jew.

Judah Abrabanel was born in Lisbon, not much later than 1460. In 1483, on the death of King Alfonso (in whose service he had been), his father, Don Isaac, was suspected of complicity in the conspiracy of the Duke of Braganza against the new ruler and had to flee for his life, with the men-at-arms thundering at his heels. He found refuge at Toledo, where he immersed himself in his studies. His family accompanied him. It must have been with mingled delight and regret that Judah saw his father summoned from his bookish retirement to enter the service of Ferdinand and Isabella, whom he assisted in raising money both for the siege of Granada and for the first expedition of Columbus.

Hard on this followed the crowning tragedy of the Expulsion of the Jews (now no longer necessary to Castilian greatness) from Spain, and that that famous scene when Don Isaac threw himself before the feet of his royal master and mistress to obtain the rescindment of the decree. It was in vain, and the scholar-statesman's family left the country at the head of the exiles. Not all, however; for in order to exert pressure upon these influential leaders a plot had been laid to kidnap Don Judah's little son, in the expectation that this would weaken their determination and induce them to adopt Christianity. To forestall this, the child was sent with his nurse to Portugal, where he was seized by order of the King and in the end was forcibly baptised. The recollection of this outrage remained poignant in the father's heart: and twelve years later he wrote a touching elegy, commemorating the tragedy which had embittered his life.

The Abrabanel family settled in Naples, where Don Isaac was once more summoned from another period of enforced literary retirement to enter the royal service. Don Judah, too, was henceforth in the public eye—not as a man of affairs, but as a physician, who brought to Italy the still famous traditions of Andalusia. The French invasion of 1494 and the wars which followed in its train caused the family to become wanderers once again. Don Judah lived in succession at Genoa, Barletta, Venice, perhaps [almost certainly] Florence. Ultimately, he was summoned back to Naples, where, overlooking past injuries he became body-physician to the Spanish Viceroy, Don Gonsalvo de Cordoba, the 'Great Captain'. The position which he now enjoyed is testified to by a document of 1520, which informs us that, in recognition of his services, 'Master Leon Abrabanel, the physician', together with his family and his household, were exempted from all tribute. This is almost the last reliable mention of Leone Ebreo which has thus far been traced [as of 1937]: and it is to be presumed that he died not long after.