

## THE EARLY ACHARONIM - OTTOMAN EMPIRE

### TURKEY AND GREECE - 15th - 17th CENTURIES

Although Jews had been living in the Balkans and Turkey since the Second Temple era, they had suffered greatly under the Byzantine emperors. The Jewish community remained small and insignificant. But by the 14th century, many European Jews of Ashkenazic extraction began to emigrate to Greece. The Jews of Hungary, expelled in 1360 by Louis the Great (king of Hungary and Poland), also joined the oppressed German Jews and settled in Greece in significant numbers. As for the Jewish community on the island of Crete, it, too, was founded by these Ashkenazic emigres. Plus, the island of Corfu (under Venetian domination since 1386) began to be settled by Greek Jews in addition to a substantial Italian Jewish community that gradually moved there.

As for Turkey, the 14th century saw the emergence of a new, powerful entity. The Turks, under Osman (1288-1326), began to steadily extend their dominion into Greece and its neighboring countries. This entity would later be known as the Ottoman Empire which was now in the first phase of its formation. In 1453 Constantinople - the proud capital of Byzantium, the Eastern Roman Empire - was captured by Mehmet II. Mehmet issued a proclamation welcoming all Jews to his country, and he took special pains to settle them in his new capital of Constantinople. When the Spanish Jews were expelled from their homeland in 1492 and were later followed by Portuguese Jews in 1497, Bayezid II opened the portals of the Ottoman Empire to all the escapees. Sephardim settled there in great numbers, particularly in Constantinople, Salonica, and Smyrna. They soon became the dominant strain, dominating Jewish life in all of these communities.

The old Jewish community had possessed some scholars of note who were greatly involved in the rescue and resettlement of these Western European Jewish immigrants. But these new arrivals soon founded yeshivot and communities of their own. Among them we find many men of

distinction such as R. Yosef Caro who wrote most of his monumental Beis Yosef while living in Adrianople, Turkey. Many Greek Jews also rose to distinction during this fifteenth century. A striking feature of the Torah literature of this age is the richness of its responsa literature. This included the resolution of financial and marital disputes, as well as great debates regarding difficult halachic cases that arose among the Torah giants of that generation.

In 1516-1517 Selim I conquered Syria and Eretz Yisroel. A fresh wave of emigration to the Holy Land now began. For centuries thereafter, the Turkish communities - especially that of Constantinople - enjoyed a special relationship with the communities of Israel. In times of trouble Constantinople would be the first address towards which they would turn. A number of the scholars of Eretz Yisroel also served as rabbis of the Turkish capital, most notably R. Yosef Trani (Maharit).

During the first two centuries of the Ottoman Empire Jews enjoyed substantial influence at Court. Many of the sultans had private physicians who were Jewish. They in turn used their position to better the lot of their co-religionists. Jewish power reached its zenith during the reigns of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1566) and Selim II (1566-1574). When the Venetian Republic in 1550 imprisoned the extremely wealthy Portuguese converso, Dona Gracia Mendes, on charges of judaizing, her kinsman (later her son-in-law) Don Yosef Nasi appealed to the Sultan via intermediaries. He pointed out the financial advantage to the Sultan's empire should the banking house of his family, and its assets, be moved from Venice to Turkey. Because of the intervention of the court physician, Moses Hamon, the Sultan sent a special ambassador to Venice to negotiate for Dona Gracia's release.

The extremely capable Don Yosef was now introduced to Suleiman, and he gradually began to win the Sultan's confidence. Yosef later backed the interests of Suleiman's older son, Selim, against those of the younger, Bayezid. Upon Bayezid's defeat, Yosef was admitted into the inner circle of advisors to Sultan Selim II, and was given the region of Tiberias (desolate

since the time of the Crusaders) for redevelopment as a Jewish region. To give the area an economic basis, mulberry trees were planted for the purpose of raising silkworms. At this time many of the Jews in the Papal States, who were now suffering under the cruel and tyrannical rule of Pope Paul IV, also now settled in Tiberias. One entire town emigrated en masse and settled there. The banishment of the Jews from the Papal States in 1569 further strengthened this resettlement. As for its local yeshiva, Dona Gracia Mendes gave it her total financial support.

When Selim II ascended the throne, Yosef's fortunes reached a high point. The Sultan elevated him to the nobility, and appointed him Duke of Naxos and the Cyclades ( a group of islands in the Mediterranean). Don Yosef was responsible for much of the delicate maneuvering of Turkey's international politics, and nearly involved it with a war against Spain. He was also largely responsible for Turkey's declaration of war against Venice in 1571, and the resultant conquest of Cyprus. In the field of Torah scholarship, Don Yosef and his mother-in-law were instrumental in bringing scholars to Constantinople and were also responsible for the finances of their yeshivas. They also founded a printing press using Hebrew letters at the Nasi estate of Belvedere in Constantinople where they sponsored the publication of many important works.

Many other Jewish notables were influenced in the Turkish court after Yosef Nasi. The wealthy ben Yaish family, possessing a strong tradition of scholarship, supported a yeshiva and were the gracious patrons of R. Yosef Trani for decades. In general, Turkish Jews of the 16th and 17th centuries were the most prosperous Jewish group in all of Europe and Asia. And as a result Jewish scholarship was able to thrive in this tranquil and relatively free atmosphere.