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Journal Title: Sefarad.

Volume: 56 Issue: 1
Month/Year: 1996 Pages: 45-59

Article Author:

Article Title: David.; THE SPANISH EXPULSION AND THE PORTUGUESE PERSECUTION THROUGH THE EYES OF THE HISTORIAN R. GEDALYA IBN YAHYA.

Imprint: Madrid [etc., s.n.]

ILL Number: 23814710

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THE SPANISH EXPULSION
AND THE PORTUGUESE PERSECUTION
THROUGH THE EYES OF THE HISTORIAN
R. GEDALYA IBN YAHYA *

ABRAHAM DAVID
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The closing period of the Middle Ages, from the Spanish Expulsion until the late sixteenth century, saw the appearance of Jewish historiographical compositions of varied length and quality. The majority were written by Iberian exiles or their descendants. Noteworthy works in this genre include: רמר ישיא (Book of Genealogy), written by the well-known Spanish astronomer Abraham Zacuto; רמר קדש (Book of Tradition) written by Abraham ben Solomon of Torrituel; רמר חסן (The Scepter of Judah), written by Solomon Ibn Verga; Consolacum as Tribulaeones de Israel (Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel), written by the ex-converso Samuel Usque; רור ייימים מסעך תרחיו גאומרט reimbue (History of the Kings of France and Turkey), written by Joseph ha-Kohen of Genoa; and רשלמה קדש (Chain of Tradition), written by Gedalya Ibn Yahya, the subject of the present paper.

* This article is based on a lecture I presented in a conference: «1492 - Expulsion des Juifs d'Espagne» (Université de Paris-Sorbonne [Paris IV], May 1992). It has been translated from the Hebrew by Mrs. Dena Orban.


5 The work contains three parts. Parts I-II (Sabbioneta 1554); part III: D. A. Gross (ed.), Jerusalem 1955. A separate collection of Jewish material by ha-Kohen,
The blossoming of Jewish historiography in the sixteenth century was directly connected to the tragic events affecting Iberian Jewry in the late fifteenth century. Sixteenth century Jewish historiography was characterized by the effects of crises on the one hand, and by intellectual openness on the other. Jewish historiography naturally aspired to find a fitting explanation for the question of Jewish existence in the Diaspora in light of the Jewish people's distress throughout the ages, an enigma intensified by the terrible catastrophe which struck Iberian Jewry at the turn of the sixteenth century.

The extent to which we observe the past is reinforced in no small measure by political, social, and cultural considerations. Forces operating in the latter half of the sixteenth century brought severe crises to European Christian society. Among these we must cite the prevailing power of Christianity's foes (as evidenced by the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453), and the internal disintegration which eventually gave birth to the Reformation. In addition, the historiographical awakening in humanistic Renaissance circles strongly influenced the Jews. It was no accident that Italy served as an historical observation point, since this country saw both the arrival and absorption of Jewish exiles from Spain and Portugal, as well as being the main conduit for Renaissance culture. Similarly, it is not surprising that the majority of sixteenth century Jewish chroniclers came from the ranks of Spanish and Portuguese emigrants and their descendants 4.

titled הביא ארצה, was published separately. For a critical edition, see K. ALMBAUD (ed.), Sefer Enaq ha-Ba'aka, Uppsala 1981.


Gedalya Ibn Yahya, the last chronicler mentioned above, the author of Shalshelet ha-Kabbalah, was the scion of a distinguished Portuguese Jewish family, many of whose sons had served in the courts of the kings and rulers of Spain and Portugal for generations. Gedalya's grandfather, David ben Joseph Ibn Yahya, arrived in Italy with his family circa 1497, at a time of forced mass conversions of Jews in Portugal 7. Born at Imola in northern Italy in 1526, Gedalya spent his childhood there; however, for the remainder of his life he wandered about various towns of northern Italy. From his writings and erudition, it appears that he studied with important Italian Jewish sages. Gedalya, a moneychanger by profession, lost considerable capital when forced to leave the Papal States close to the 1569 expulsion decree. He spent his final years in the city of Alessandria in the Piedmont region, where he served in the rabbinate until his death in 1587 8.
work is extant in two versions: a printed edition, of which there are more than fifteen known editions, and a manuscript version. Gedalya's demise shortly preceded the publication of the first edition (Venice 1587). A manuscript of Shalhevet ha-kabbalá with the author's glosses between the rows and in the margins is extant in the Russian State Library in Moscow 11. Probably copied in the late 1560s, this manuscript version differs substantially from the printed edition 12.

In his preface to the printed edition of Shalhevet ha-kabbalá, Gedalya stated his intentions as follows:

I chose to divide this work into three parts: the first part being the chain of Jewish tradition from Adam until the present; the second being to inform you of some of the principles concerning celestial bodies and the heavenly world, the formation of the embryo and its development, and about magic — all this with great brevity ... and about coins and measurements in the Mishnah; the third being the chain of Gentile sages, and the persecutions of Israel, and the noteworthy innovations in each generation 13.

Gedalya devoted the second section of the third part of Shalhevet ha-kabbalá to a special discussion, showing through brief, continual description, the oppression, persecution, edicts, and disturbances that were a way of life for diaspora Jewish communities in medieval Europe. In this context, Gedalya attempts to provide an answer to the question of Jewish existence in the Diaspora. This problem engaged the attention of other first and second generation historians following the destruction of the Jewish community in the Iberian peninsula, including Abraham Zacuto, Solomon Ibn Verga, Samuel Usque, and Joseph ha-Kohen 14, who often added tales of persecution to their chronicles in order to express their intense anger, or used expressions of anguish to show their hatred for Christianity, in whose name such wanton acts were committed. Others hoped through their account to instill in their readers the spirit of Jewish martyrs throughout the ages.

Shalhevet ha-kabbalá is an important source of information concerning the decisive events affecting the Jewish communities of Spain and Portugal in the last decade of the fifteenth century, especially the forcible mass conversions and the final destruction. For his information regarding the disturbances, Gedalya relied to some extent on other sources, of which only a small portion have been identified. Concerning several events occurring in Spain and Portugal, Gedalya preserved family traditions transmitted by relatives who had previously held high positions at the royal court. By presenting a brief survey of highlights from Shalhevet ha-kabbalá, I intend to illustrate Gedalya's historiographical methods as well as to pinpoint his unique contribution to the documentation of this crucial historical period.

Gedalya very tersely describes the founding of the Spanish Royal Inquisition — established in 1481 at Seville. Any conversos suspected of observing Jewish customs or maintaining ties with their forefathers' faith were charged and investigated by the Inquisition, whose jurisdiction was immediately extended over all of Spain 15. Gedalya adds that, during this period, one third of the Spanish Jewish population was baptized to Christianity 16.

Gedalya also summarizes aspects of the 1492 Expulsion, very briefly recapping the Expulsion Act issued following the Christian conquest of Granada in that year 17. On this point Gedalya contributes nothing new, with the exception of his numerical estimate of the exiles, who in his opinion numbered approximately six hundred thousand 18. Although found in other sources 19, this number is

11 Gimberg collection no. 652.
12 I am preparing a critical edition of Shalhevet ha-kabbalá based upon this manuscript, to be published by the Ben-Zion Dinur, Center for Research in Jewish History. References or quotations from the printed edition (Venice 1587) will be cited as: P.; references or quotations from the abovementioned manuscript will be indicated as MS.
13 Shalhevet ha-kabbalá, p. 4v.
14 See nos. 3, 4, 5.
16 P. 115v. This information has been confirmed in a paper by Prof. H. Beinart, who has devoted many years to the study of the Spanish conversos. See H. Beinart, «The Records of the Inquisition — A Source of Jewish and Converso History», Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities 2 (1967) 211-227.
17 P. 112v, 113r-114r, 115v-116v; MS. 207v-208v.
18 P. 115v; MS. 207v.
undoubtedly an exaggeration. Don Isaac Abravanel — a prominent Jewish spiritual figure in Spain at that time — cites three hundred thousand Jewish exiles. The actual number of exiles is unclear. Demographically based evaluations by serious scholars range from approximately one hundred and seventy thousand exiles, to one hundred and twenty thousand, or even much less. On this basis, we are justified in concluding that any demographic evaluation of the number of Spanish exiles is pure speculation.

Gedalya recounts that following the expulsion edict, issued on March 31, 1492, the authorities made determined efforts to avoid deporting those Jewish notables who held high positions in the monarchical administration and economy, especially courtiers, moneylenders, and tax farmers, by applying extreme pressure upon them to convert to Christianity, since authentic Jews were forbidden to remain in Spain from the end of July of that year. By these acts the rulers hoped to prevent significant economic damage to the Spanish crown:

Even though they [the Spanish authorities] exiled the Jews, they closed their borders [to prevent their emigration] so that the kingdom would not remain empty. Because many of the Jews were rich and clever, they were forced to convert. Many met their death as martyrs.

We know from other sources of Jews who succumbed to this pressure, and converted to Christianity, like R. Abraham Senoer and his son-in-law, R. Meir Melamed. The former held a rabbinical

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20 There are many studies of various aspects of his personality. See, for example, B. NETANYAHU, Don Isaac Abravanel: Statesman and Philosopher, Philadelphia 1972.

21 See Abravanel’s preface to his commentary on Isaiah 46:3; the preface to his commentary on Kings; his book קוף הים, Ferrara 1551.


23 See n. 17 above.

24 As Y. BAER notes in his קוף הים, fol. 227r, that one hundred and twenty thousand Jews crossed the border into Portugal. This information is found in another contemporary source. See Y. BAER, A History, vol. 2, pp. 510-511; H. BEINART, «The Expulsion» pp. 36-37; IDBM, The Expulsion, pp. 269-272.

children to São Thomé, a desolate island in western Africa \(^{31}\). In his words:

The king cleverly inquired whether all the [Spanish] exiles had paid their taxes according to their status. Upon discovering that many had not paid, he was filled with rage, and he took their sons as security. The children, aged three to ten, were exiled to a parched and desolate island named São Tome, which was uninhabited because of the \(\text{עַרְבָּא} \(^{32}\), which are deadly poisonous snakes. Most died from snakebite, while others starved to death. Only a small number were rescued \(^{33}\).

This terrible episode of child deportation to São Thomé Island is well documented in both Jewish and Portuguese sources \(^{34}\).

I would like to direct special attention to two stories found in \(\text{Sha'arei ha-kabbal} \) which reflect the hostile attitude of the autochthonic Jews in Portugal, and in Rome as well, towards the Spanish exiles immediately following the Expulsion. The first story deals with Gedalya's great-grandfather, R. Joseph Ibn Yahya, a leading figure in the Lisbon Jewish community whose attempts to persuade the local Jews to welcome and to grant assistance to the Spanish exiles who had crossed the border into Portugal met with harsh resistance. Upon realizing that he was powerless, R. Joseph Ibn Yahya left Portugal, and relocated in Italy \(^{35}\). As Gedalya recounts:

\(^{31}\) This event will be discussed later. 

\(^{32}\) In Portuguese, \(\text{lagartos} \) means 'alligators'. R. Gedalya mistakenly interpreted \(\text{lagartos} \) as 'snakes', even though the original source (see n. 34) stated: 'alligators, serpents and other very venomous vermin' (G. I. Gelbart edition). 

\(^{33}\) MS. 208v; p. 115v-116r. 

\(^{34}\) There are several descriptions of this event in Jewish sources. The most detailed, which was R. Gedalya's source, is found in Samuel Ulgue, \(\text{Consolação as Tribulações de Israel} \), chaps. 26-27. See also the English edition by G. I. Gelbart, \(\text{A Consolation} \), pp. 334-346, 351-354. On the other Hebrew sources reflecting this issue, see A. David, R. Gedalya Ibn Yahya, pp. 109-111, 317-318; I. Tshery, \(\text{Messianism in the time of the Expulsion from Spain and Portugal} \) [in Hebrew] Jerusalem 1985, pp. 24-25, 41. The Portuguese sources are mentioned by M. Kayserling, \(\text{Geschichte} \), p. 115; M. J. Pimenta Ferro Tavares, \(\text{Os Judeus} \), pp. 256-257, 272. 

\(^{35}\) We have some biographical data regarding R. Joseph Ibn Yahya. He was born in Lisbon in 1428, left Portugal in 1493 or the beginning of 1494, and died in Ferrara in 1498. See A. David, R. Gedalya Ibn Yahya, pp. 112-113, 320-323. 

Know that those God-fearing Jews willing to go into exile to Portugal numbered 300,000 \(^{36}\). The majority of these exiles were poor, and Portugal could not readily contain all these Jews. The heads of the Jewish communities in the kingdom of Portugal took counsel to decide how to deal with the large number of Spanish exiles. They decided to strenuously attempt to prevent the exiles from entering Portugal so as not to make themselves loathsome in the eyes of the king, the courtiers, or the inhabitants. My great-grandfather of blessed memory, the notable Don Joseph Ibn Yahya, objected to this great wrong in God's eyes, saying it was an act of scorn and provocation to close the gates of salvation to their brethren. He suggested that at the very least, they donate half their property to feed these souls, and rent boats to transport them from Portugal to Fuz and other kingdoms. The [Portuguese] Jews refused to listen to the abovementioned notable. As a result, the exiles were forced to negotiate with the king of Portugal for entry; making an agreement as well that if required to leave, they would pay for boats he would provide. For the present, they had to pay a levy of two ducats per person. Some time later, due to an outbreak of pestilence in the city, the exiles wished to depart, and approached the king with a request for boats... When my great-grandfather, the notable, saw that his brethren rejected his advice, arbitrarily following the willfulness of their hearts in closing the gates of salvation to their exiled Spanish brethren, he elected to flee from that kingdom with his sons. In [5]23 (1493), he went to Italy \(^{37}\).

The second story regards the appearance of Spanish refugees at the gates of Rome. The Roman Jews responded by petitioning Pope Alexander VI to bar their entry into the Papal State. Not only did this pope reject their proposal, furthermore, he decreed that the Roman Jews be deported, and Spanish exiles allowed to settle in their stead. The Roman Jews were forced to pay a substantial sum in order to cancel the papal edict, as Gedalya relates:

I heard that the Roman Jews approached the pope with an offer of 1000 gold crowns to bar Spanish Jews from entering Rome. This was due to their fear of making themselves loathsome in the eyes of the town's noble courtiers. This angered the pope, and he asked them how they could treat their brethren so cruelly. He decreed that

\(^{36}\) On the number of Spanish exiles who entered Portugal, see above p. 50. 

\(^{37}\) MS. 208v-209r; p. 115v-116r.
the local Jews be exiled instead. As a result, the local [Jews] had to spend large sums in order to annul this decree, and some Spanish Jews entered Rome.38

A very similar story is found in Solomon Ibn Verga’s Ṣafet ha-kabbalá. I believe, that although Gedalya was familiar with this historiographical treatise, occasionally relying on it in the composition of Ṣafet ha-kabbalá, he did not copy this story directly from Ibn Verga’s work.

Although these two stories about the Portuguese and Roman Jewish communities may contain legendary elements, both at least partially reflect reality. In my opinion, their main significance lies in their portrayal of the objections made by autochthonous Jews against integrating the newcomers. Apparently, the local Jews feared competition for their positions, jobs, or businesses. Moreover, the local Jews were unable to finance even a temporary stay for the exiles.40

Recently, I found some Hebrew sources which indicate that a similar situation existed in Italy three generations later, in 1569, when Italian Jews were expelled from the Papal States. These exiles were also unable to receive adequate assistance from the Jewish communities outside the Papal States for even a brief period.41

On the other side of the coin, there is no doubt that philanthropic activities were undertaken for the Spanish exiles who arrived in Italy after the Expulsion. Gedalya mentions the Jewish philanthropist R. Yehiel Da-Pisa, a scion of the famous, wealthy Da-Pisa banking family, whose branches were situated in various Italian towns during the Renaissance period.42 According to Gedalya, R. Yehiel attempted to provide support for the Spanish refugees who came to Italy after the Expulsion.

38 MS. 209v, P. 116r.
who were intimately involved in the economic development of Portugal:

When the king heard of their intention to depart, he feared that the kingdom would remain like an empty fishing net, for the Jews were extremely numerous, and they possessed most of the kingdom's wealth.

This point of view is confirmed by a Portuguese source, which mentions that the Portuguese secretary of state warned King Emanuel I in a special memorandum of the potentially devastating economic effects which could result from the Portuguese Jews' expulsion. Five years earlier, the Spanish government had faced similar problems.

Gedalya also summarizes Samuel Usque's account of the 1506 Lisbon bloodshed, when more than four thousand New Christians were brutally murdered. The riots resulted from the discovery that some conversos had celebrated the Passover Seder that year.

A turning point in the history of the converso community in Portugal was the establishment of the Royal Inquisition in 1531. Like its Spanish counterpart established fifty years earlier, its function was to investigate New Christians suspected of observing Jewish customs. Consequently, many conversos fled Portugal for various points in Europe and the Orient, a fact clearly reflected in Jewish and Portuguese sources. Gedalya, who very briefly records this event, appends some important details to his account. He notes that from the inception of the Portuguese persecutions until 1540,

more than twenty thousand conversos left Portugal and returned to their original faith, mainly in Muslim countries, namely in the Ottoman empire.

Some maintain that from the beginning of the persecutions until 1530 (1540), more than twenty thousand conversos left Portugal and returned to Judaism in various corners of the world, in Greece and Turkey.

We have no evidence confirming or contradicting Gedalya's numerical estimate. But, indeed, we do know that many Portuguese conversos did find their way to the Orient. Gedalya also indicates the existence of an important contemporary converso center in Ferrara (northern Italy), where conversos could openly return to their forefathers' faith, even though the town was under Christian hegemony. As Gedalya states:

In that year (1535), Ercole, the Duke of Ferrara, allowed the conversos fleeing Portugal due to persecution by the Inquisition, and who had been inspired by God to return to Judaism to settle in Ferrara, and to perform circumcisions as well. Converso immigration to Ferrara continued each year, and [a community] exists to this day.

Our knowledge of the converso center in Ferrara and its central figures is unsystematic and random in nature. We have some information on the Mendes-Nasi family, Dona Gracia and her son-in-law Don Joseph Nasi, who transferred their financial activities from Antwerp to Venice and afterwards to Ferrara, where they

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51 Namely, the establishment of the Royal Inquisition in 1531.
openly returned to Judaism
as well as about the Usque family who actively assisted the conversos and ex-conversos arriving in Ferrara. Two of its outstanding members were the ex-converso Samuel Usque, the well-known historian mentioned earlier, and his brother Abraham Usque, who founded a press in Ferrara in order to publish Jewish literary material for the Portuguese ex-conversos. Both families played a prominent role in helping conversos return to Judaism.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it seems that Gedalya cannot be viewed as he was by many scholars, merely as a simplistic eclectic. Although Gedalya was content with commonplace material gathered and selected from a few well-known chronicles in his historiographical treatise, nevertheless he was not simply an indiscriminating copyist. Rather, as we saw, especially in the examples cited from the part of his work concerning the persecution of Iberian Jews, Gedalya attempted to supplement and enrich the bare facts with new information as well as to shed new light based on additional Jewish and non-Jewish sources. To these efforts we must apparently add his numerical estimates, as well as his recording of various factual details. Gedalya's aim was to provide information based upon his understanding of the situation and upon personal observation. It is these aspects that establish his place in sixteenth century Jewish historiography.

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