

Sephardic Contributions to the State of Israel

Shelomo Alfassa

Each month IMAGE Magazine will bring you a different part of this fascinating history. Here we begin with a brief introduction and cover the history of Sephardic contributions by Judah Touro and Moses Montefiore.

Over the many centuries, while the Jewish people were exiled from Eretz Yisrael (the land of Israel), Jerusalem, Safed, Hebron and other holy cities, retained a sparse Jewish population, fed by a small but constant stream of pilgrims. A cursory examination of Jewish personalities demonstrates that Sephardim took it upon themselves to migrate to and fortify Eretz Yisrael, driven by a sense of historic yearning for their ancestral home. Centuries later, Sephardim continued to not only settle in the land, but were key players in its modern development, although this fact has, regrettably, often been eclipsed in the historical narrative.

Few documents and small bits of history exist on Jewish national liberation and the development of Eretz Yisrael, and how the country came to be with assistance and nurturing offered by Sephardic Jews. It is with tremendous ignominy that the Sephardim have been almost completely marginalized in the modern Zionist record of history. Whether they came from Spain, North Africa or the Middle East, what is fact and needs to be remembered is that Sephardim played a considerable role in the State's origins and modern fruition.

Throughout their centuries in the Diaspora, Sephardim developed and devoted a sense of philosophical and spiritual nationalism that prepared the foundation which modern Zionism stood on, and the resulting fruit which is the return of the Jewish people to their land.

The revival of the sentiment of

longing for Eretz Yisrael can be principally assigned to Yehuda HaLevy (1080-1141) who was one of the greatest Spanish Jewish poets. He was born in the Muslim city of

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Toledo, Al-Andalus (modern day Spain). In the following well known poem, one of his many, HaLevy laments about his passion for Eretz Yisrael as he makes a miserable mention of the destroyed glory of Israel, the vanquished *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple):

My heart is in the east, and I in the uttermost west.

How can I find savor in food? How shall it be sweet to me?

How shall I render my vows and my bonds, while yet

Zion lieth beneath the fetter of Edom, and I in Arab chains?

A light thing would it seem to me to leave all the good things of Spain,

Seeing how precious in mine eyes

To behold the dust of the desolate sanctuary.

In another poem, entitled, "In Remembrance of Jerusalem" he laments:

*Beautiful land,
Delight of the world,
City of Kings,
My heart longs for you from the far-off west.*

I am very sad when I remember how you were.

Now your glory is gone, your homes destroyed.

If I could fly to you on the wings of eagles,

I would soak your soil with my tears.

In 1166, at the young age of 31, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, Maimonides, wrote, "And on the first day of the week, the ninth day of the month of Marheshvan, I left Jerusalem for Hebron to kiss the graves of my forefathers in the Cave of Makhpela. And on that very day, I stood in the cave and I prayed, praised be G-d for everything." Maimonides was not the only early Sephardic figure that traveled to the holy land.

Rabbi Moshe ben Nahman, Nahmanides, was the leader of Spanish Jewry in the end of the turbulent 13th century. He was officially the chief rabbi of both Aragon and Catalonia, as well as the respected leader of Jews outside those Spanish kingdoms. Like Maimonides, Nahmanides demonstrated he was a true intellectual, a Sephardi who set the mold for others who followed—he was a man of faith, man of Toráh, and a man of the world. He arrived

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in Eretz Yisrael in 1267 from Barcelona at the age of 72. He settled in Jerusalem where he established a synagogue in the ruins of an old crusader-period church; this synagogue was used by all sections of the Jerusalem community for centuries, growing significantly as the Jewish population bloomed in subsequent centuries. It was in Jerusalem that Nahmanides spent the last years of his life finishing his monumental commentary on the Torah that he had begun in Spain.

Aliyah Expands

In their desire to dwell in Eretz Yisrael, during the 14th century, Jews dangerously traveled on Christian ships from Spain to the ports of Alexandria and Beirut. The literature mentions Jews from Spain going to Damascus and Jerusalem, many settling farther south in Hebron. One man in particular, a Sephardic astronomer fleeing the island of Majorca in 1392, dreamed of seeing the "peaceful habitation" of Jerusalem. Jews are known to have embarked from Castile and made their way to the ports of Catalonia and Valencia. Jews from Saragossa were actively involved with helping their fellow Jews travel to Eretz Yisrael.

As early as 1333, there is an account from Hakham Yishak Hilo, originally from Aragon, then later of Larissa (Greece), who arrived in Hebron and observed Jews working in the cotton trade and glassworks. He noted that in Hebron there was an, "ancient synagogue in which they prayed day and night." He found the Jews occupying themselves with cattle-raising. He told that even while the rabbis of the congregations were with their flocks, they taught their disciples Torah, this taking place under the open sky, while guarding the herd. Even at that early period, the Spanish rabbi noted there were some 23 estab-

lished Jewish villages.

During this period of great change, a certain Menahem ben Moshe Bavli, author of the book *Ta'amei HaMisvot* (The Reasons for the Misvot) migrated from Baghdad and became one of the pioneers that settled in Hevron after 1492. With the large resettlement of Jews into Hevron in 1540, led by Hakham Malkiel Ashkenazi, the prominent

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Avraham Avinu Synagogue was built.

Upon making Aliyah from the Italian city of Bartenura, the great 15th century Sephardic rabbi, Ovadia, wrote, "In Hevron live 20 Jewish families, all of them scholars, some of them descendants of the Marranos, who came to find refuge under the wings of the Divine Presence... I lived in Hevron for many months."

Mass Aliyah Under the Turks

The most notable influx of Jews into Eretz Yisrael came in 1517, after the Ottoman Turks had taken control of the land. With this change

in administration came an influx of Iberian Jews from Salonika to Jerusalem and the surrounding cities. These were the Jews who had been forced out of Spain in 1492, only 25 years earlier. For those Jews, who when in Spain could only dream of living in Jerusalem, this was a life-changing opportunity. During this period Sephardim forwarded *tzedaka*, charity, to the Jews in Eretz Yisrael, large sums going to communities in Safed, Jerusalem and Hebron.

The years 1516-1517 would be the commencement of the influx and rebuilding of serious Jewish community life in Eretz Yisrael. The influx of Iberian Jews in the 16th century raised the Jewish population of Hevron and other cities to a point higher than it had been during the Roman occupation nearly 1,500 years prior.

One of the reasons why the Spanish Jews settled in Jerusalem, Hebron and other locales in the 16th century, was because those Jews had already been subjects of the Sultan. Once the Ottoman Empire expanded to include Jerusalem and the surrounding territories, Jews who had settled after the 1492 expulsion in cities such as Ottoman Salonika, Sarajevo and Sofia could now travel to and settle in Ottoman Safed, and the like, no passport required. Many did go to the holy land as this was regarded as a religious duty. Both Shelomo Alkabet, author of *Lecha Dodi* and Yosef Karo, author of the *Shulhan Arukh*, migrated and settled in the holy land. Rabbi Menahem de Lonzano a scholar and kabbalist went from Constantinople and became Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem.

It is well recognized from documents found in the sijill (Muslim court records) of Jerusalem that Sephardim had already established

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a fairly sophisticated community by the 16th century. Records demonstrate that Sephardim had an established butchery system, a school, and many businesses. While most Jews were poor, there were some well off families in Jerusalem. Sephardim were involved in selling vegetables, spices, soap, cheese making, commercial baking, shoe making, saddle making, jewelry making, clothing making and clothing sales. They were physicians, and even had a hospital established as early as 1579 and they were involved with real estate transactions. These trades and established businesses would later become the business and commercial network that the early State of Israel would build itself upon.

Modernization

A Sephardic-American philanthropist is due the credit for the opening of the Jewish community from the cramped Old City of Jerusalem developing what were essentially suburbs, on land sold by a wealthy Arab. Judah Touro (1775-1854) of New Orleans, USA, whose parents had come from the great Portuguese Sephardic community of Amsterdam, conceived the idea of building dwellings for poor Jews of Jerusalem outside of the city walls as a means of relieving the distressing conditions of his co-religionists of the Holy City. He willed a sum of \$410,000, an enormous amount, for that purpose in trust of Sir Moses Montefiore and the North American Relief Society for the Indigent Jews of Jerusalem. These alms houses, known as *Batei Mishkenot Sha'ananim*, also (erroneously) called Montefiore Houses, were built in the year 1860, southwest of the Old City.

This was quite an innovation, for it laid a foundation for a modern Jerusalem. Figuratively speaking, it

was probably the first time in the history of Jerusalem that its quaint walls were broken through by non-enemies, and in this instance, it was to improve the quality of life for the residents.

It was difficult to find Jews daring enough to live several miles away from the city, because even to walk outside the city boundaries was dangerous, and it was some-

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thing that the Jerusalem Jews dreaded.

Gradually, the Jews of Jerusalem convinced themselves that their fear was unfounded and realized that the inhabitants of the Touro Colony were perfectly contented. Subsequently many new colonies soon sprang up on the Jaffa Road in the western side of the city, and beyond the Damascus Gate.

Moses Montefiore (1784-1885), was an Italian-born Sephardic Jew, and may be remembered as one of the single most important figures in the history of Eretz Yisrael leading up to the modern state. Montefiore

donated extremely large amounts of money to Jews throughout the world, and he focused much of his attention, no doubt in accordance with his own pious religious beliefs, on an attempt to enable the Jews of Eretz Yisrael to become self-supporting in anticipation of a messianic restoration of a Jewish state. To help sustain the Jews that lived in Jerusalem and other cities, and assure their peace, he met with the Sultan, the Pope, and other world leaders to discuss their plight.

Montefiore introduced a printing press and textile factory to Jerusalem and inspired the founding of several agricultural colonies in the area. He was instrumental in expanding the city of Jerusalem out of its old walls, following a terrible cholera outbreak in Jerusalem in 1861 that killed many people. Montefiore helped establish Yemin Moshe, one of the first neighborhoods beyond the city walls; and even though this area was highly dangerous at the time and overrun by bandits, he got the Turks to police the area then offered financial assistance to encourage poor families from inside the walls to move there. Montefiore also established two other neighborhoods on Jaffa Road, one for Sephardim and, one for Ashkenazim.

It was Montefiore who built the famous structure over Kever Rachel (Rachel's Tomb) in Bethlehem so as to preserve it. Montefiore set a precedent with the Ottoman government that demonstrated a Jew could be both a common man, and a statesman; this had positive ramifications for future Jews that went into government service.

We will continue next month. □

Mr. Alfassa is an international advocate for Sephardic Jewry. He has worked with various national/international Sephardic organizations and is currently at the Center for Jewish History in New York.