

Origin of the Statement of Sultan Bayezit II on the Jews

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Introduction

When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, a majority went to the Ottoman Empire where they settled. There has been a traditional story that the Ottoman sultan, Bayezit II (1447-1512), made a statement which spoke about the king of Spain being a *fool* for expelling his own people, a people which then would go on to enrich their new Turkish homeland.¹ There are many variations of this story, but no one seems to know who originally stated it, or if it was true at all. This paper summarizes my findings on the origin of the traditional legend.

The following are a few of the English language variations of the statement:

- *“You call Ferdinand a cleaver king, who has impoverished his own land and made ours rich.”*²
- *“How can you call Ferdinand of Aragon a wise king, the same Ferdinand who impoverished his own land and enriched ours?”*³
- *“A politic king, indeed, must be this Don Fernando, who impoverishes his kingdom to enrich our own.”*⁴
- *“How can you call Ferdinand of Aragon a wise king? He has made his land poor and enriched ours.”*⁵
- *“How can you call Ferdinand of Aragon a wise king, the same Ferdinand who has made his land poor and enriched ours.”*⁶
- *“You call this a wise sovereign, who impoverishes his own kingdom to enrich mine!”*⁷

¹ *Bayezit* is probably the most accurate transliteration from the Ottoman Turkish language; it was utilized by Prof. Stanford Shaw in his books on the Ottoman Empire which he was a noted expert on. Other common variations of the English transliteration are: *Bayezid*, *Bayazid* and *Bajazet*.

² *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*; 1910. 59

³ Telushkin, Joseph. *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion*. 1991. 200

⁴ Mocatta, Frederic David. *The Jews of Spain and Portugal and the Inquisition*. London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1877. 54-55

⁵ Gordon, Benjamin Lee. *New Judea: Jewish Life in Modern Palestine and Egypt*. Philadelphia: Greenstone, 1919. 208

⁶ Dubnow, S. M. *Jewish History*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1916. n.p.

- “They say that Ferdinand of Spain is a wise king, yet he has impoverished his own land in order to enrich mine.”⁸
- “Can you call such a king wise and intelligent? He is impoverishing his country and enriching my kingdom.”⁹
- “You venture to call Ferdinand a wise ruler,” he said to his courtiers—“he who has impoverished his own country and enriched mine!”¹⁰
- “When Sultan Bayazid II learned of Ferdinand’s decree of expulsion, he declared that the Spanish ruler was committing an act of folly and that Spain’s loss of the Jews would be his own gain.”¹¹

Discussion

While any of these statements could have been said by the sultan, we must remember that the sultan spoke Turkish and any of these would have been translations. Since English was not spoke of in the Ottoman Empire, a statement such as this would have been originally recorded in Turkish then translated by a bilingual person. In Constantinople, where the sultan resided, the primary languages spoken were Turkish, Greek, Armenian, and for the Jews, Spanish and Hebrew. The statement by the sultan that we are familiar with in English, would have to have been translated into English from one of the other languages previously mentioned.

Inquiry & Confusion

The attribution of Sultan Bayezit’s statement has been linked to Rabbi Yishak (Immanuel) Aboab (Oporto, Portugal, c.1555 – d. Venice 1628). The Internet demonstrates about 10 variations of the alleged statement by Sultan Bayezit, appearing on >50 different Websites. The footnote listed on all of these Websites indicate: *Immanuel Aboab*, “*A Consolacam as Tribulacoes de Israel, III Israel*. Yet, while attribution of this book is widespread on the Internet as belonging to Aboab, *Consolaçam as Tribulaçoẽs de Ysrael (The Consolation and the Tribulations of Israel)*—this book was not written by Aboab—but actually Samuel Usque (b. Lisbon ~1495 d. Safed c. 1560?).¹²

⁷ Thalheimer, Mary Elsie. *A Manual of Medieval and Modern History*. New York: Wilson Hinkle & Co., 1874. 116

⁸ Haskell, Guy H. *From Sofia to Jaffa: the Jews of Bulgaria and Israel*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994.

⁹ Fine, Lawrence. *Safed Spirituality: Rules of Mystical Piety, the Beginning of Wisdom*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1984.

¹⁰ *Jewish Encyclopedia* ‘Bajazet II’

¹¹ Goodblatt, Morris. *Jewish Life in Turkey in the 15th Century*. New York: JTS, 1952. 118

¹² Ferrera 1553. Translated into English by Cohen, Martin. JPS 1965.

Aboab seemed to have mentioned Bayezit, but according to the late Prof. Shmuelevitz, this was in Aboab's *Nomologia o Discursos Legales, Compuestos por el Virtuoso Hakam Rabi Imanuel Aboab de Buena Memoria*.¹³ Nonetheless, even if Immanuel Aboab was correct, he too would have had to read it or heard it somewhere, receiving it as secondary knowledge, as he was born a half century after the Jews started to arrive in Turkey. Consequently, even if Aboab may have said it, he still is not the original source. This seems to be an error, possibly committed by one person, and propagated over the World Wide Web by unsuspecting others who never researched the derivation of the quote.

This type of error may not be unique; we experienced a similar error in the case of "The Edict Response by Isaac Abravanel." In 1492, the Christians issued an "Edict of Expulsion" against the Jews, this was an actual legal directive issued by Spain. However, in 1999, I came across an unusual paper entitled "The Edict Response." This document was attributed to Rabbi Isaac Abravanel, who allegedly wrote a 1500 word plea for Ferdinand and Isabella to reconsider their expulsion order. A sample from "The Edict Response" follows:

Hear, O heavens, and give ear, King and Queen of Spain, for I, Don Isaac Abravanel, speak unto you. I and my family are descended directly from King David. True royal bold, the blood of the Messiah, runs in my veins. It is my inheritance, and I proclaim it now in the name of the God of Israel. The unrighteous decree you proclaim today will be your downfall. And this year, which you imagine to be the year of Spain's greatest glory, will become of Spain's greatest shame.

My research demonstrated that this was a work of fiction, posted on the Internet, extracted from the 1988 book *The Alhambra Decree* by author Dr. David T. Raphael;¹⁴ there was never a real document called the "Edict Response." At the time, I was Director of Research for Sephardic House (today the *American Sephardi Federation*) in New York, and we issued a statement to the public telling people this was not an actual historic document. Our Internet-distributed clarification encouraged many universities and individuals to remove it from their Internet sites. At the same time, however, others ignored the call for clarity and thus it remains on the Internet even to this day—with people saying (and others believing), that it is an actual historic document! If one was to have tracked down the origin of "The Edict Response," like that has been done for the Sultan Bayezit statement, clarity would have been achieved.

¹³ (Amsterdam 1629) 195

¹⁴ Dr. David T. Raphael has written other books relating to the 1492 expulsion, including *The Cavalier of Malaga* (novel); *The Expulsion 1492 Chronicles: An Anthology of Medieval Chronicles Relating to the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain and Portugal* (non-fiction anthology); and *The Conquistadores and Crypto-Jews from Monterrey* (non-fiction). He also wrote and directed the documentary film *Song of the Sephardi*.

Dr. Chaim Raphael (1908-1994), the noted historian and once Oxford University don, stated in his *The Road to Babylon*, that Mehemet, an earlier sultan, had developed a pro-Jewish policy and that in 1453 issued a welcoming proclamation immediately after the Turks captured Constantinople. Raphael says this was the foundation for the later warm reception by Bayezit II.¹⁵ Mehemet declared:

Who among you of all my people that is with me, may his God be with him, let him ascend to [Constantinople], the site of my royal throne. Let him dwell in the best of the land, each beneath his vine and fig tree, with silver and with gold, with wealth and cattle. Let him dwell in the land, trade in it, and take possession of it.”¹⁶

Discovery

I have come to find that the original attribution of the statement of Sultan Bayezit II was made by Rabbi Eliyahu Kapsali (1450-1555).¹⁷ Haham Shelomo Rosanes of Bulgaria (1862-1938), one of the most central yet often overlooked historians of Jewish life in Turkey, wrote in his 1910 book, that “Kapsali was then a young man” when he recorded the statement that the sultan had made.¹⁸ Rosanes indicates Kapsali had recorded it in his *Deve Eliyahu*.¹⁹

Kapsali was chief of the Romanoite Jewish community and had been a rabbi in Constantinople for more than 30 years.²⁰ He was the head rabbi at Constantinople when the large influx of Spanish Jews arrived in 1492.²¹ Rabbi Kapsali mentioned the sultan’s statement in his *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* (*Minor Order of Eliyahu*). In regard to Kapsali’s *Zuta* as a historical source, Aleida Paudice in her March 2006 paper “Elia Capsali,” posted at *Historians of the Ottoman Empire*, wrote that:

E.C. [Eliyahu Kapsali] intervenes several times to explain his aims and his conception of history, and employs different techniques to deliver his message.

¹⁵ Raphael, Chaim, *The Road to Babylon*. New York: Harper, 1985. 134

¹⁶ Sachar, Howard. *Farewell Espana*. New York: Knopf, 1994. 76

¹⁷ My thanks to my colleague and teacher, Rabbi Nissim Elnecave, rabbi in the Syrian community of Brooklyn and Sephardic antiquarian cataloger at Yeshiva University library.

¹⁸ *Diverei Yemei Yisrael BeTurgema Helek Rishon* (*Words on the Days of the Children of Israel in the Ottoman Empire*) 6vols. Tel Aviv, 1910 / reissued 1930.

¹⁹ Ch. 74, p.12 [Thanks goes to Rabbi Nissim Elnecave, my colleague and friend, the Sephardic and Ladino antiquarian archivist at Yeshiva University for bringing Rosanes’ remarks to my attention.]

²⁰ Rabbi Moshe Kapsali (1420-1495) was the first chief rabbi of the Ottoman empire, he was Eliyahu Kapsali’s great uncle.

²¹ Shmuelevitz, Aryeh. “Capsali as a Source for Ottoman History, 1450-1523.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3; Oct., 1978. 339-344 (Kapsali’s *Zuta* was written while Kapsali was quarantined on Crete during the plague of the spring and summer of 1523. The *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* was published in Hebrew by the Ben Zvi Institute and Tel Aviv University. Two volumes (Jerusalem, 1975, 1977) A. Shmuelevitz, S. Simonson and M. Benayahu annotated the 1975 version. There is also a French translations: Simon Sultan Bohbot. *Chronique de l’expulsion*. (Paris, 1994). For location of Kapsali’s original manuscript, see: “Hebraica Ambrosiana.” Charles Berlin *Speculum*. 1975)

Paying greater attention to the sources and their use, E.C. inserts anecdotes on the everyday life of the Jews under the Ottomans as well as long poetic and rhetorical compositions to comment on the events which he considers most relevant. As such he intends to convey his complex conception of history and not only to describe a power and its historical evolution...The second book contains an account of the reign of Beyazid II...This book includes an account of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and a general history of the Jewish communities there.²²

Haham Rosanes indicated that Bayezit's courtiers attributed the original statement to the Sultan himself. Kapsali's statement attests **that the king of Spain was considered in the court circles of Constantinople to be a great fool for having enriched an enemy with productive citizens at the expensive of his own kingdom.** In regard to this, Prof. Mark A. Epstein states, "While the statement is often attributed incorrectly to the sultan himself, it is probably an accurate reflection of the views then current in the Ottoman capital."²³

The *Jewish Encyclopedia* records that Kapsali's *Seder Eliyahu Zuta*, a history of the Turkish empire from the earliest times down to the year 1522, is an important contribution to general history, as well as to the history of the Jews, it notes that Kapsali was "a reliable historian."

²² *Seder*, vol. 1, chaps. 40-83 ottomanhistorians.com/database/pdf/capsali_en.pdf (September) 2007

²³ "The Leadership of the Ottoman Jews in the 15th and 16th Centuries." in Braude, Benjamin; Lewis, Bernard (eds.) *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982. 1:105 / (Kapsali's *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* was divided into four parts and had over 150 chapters that includes an introduction in which he explains the reasons for writing it and mentions his sources.)