

SEPHARDIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

By Shelomo Alfassá *



*This paper is an official educational tool for the Zionist Timelines
and the 'Israel at 60' programs of The Jewish Agency for Israel.*



This paper is dedicated to the memory of Hayim Azşes of Jerusalem

*Lover of Israel
Diligent Scholar
Proud Sepharadi
Zekher Saddiq Librakha*

* Shelomo Alfassá is the U.S. Director of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries. His is the former Executive Director of the International Sephardic Leadership Council, and is a well known writer and international advocate for Sephardic Jewry. Mr. Alfassa is the author of "A Window Into Old Jerusalem," "Ethnic Sephardic Jews in the Medical Literature," and "Reference Guide to the Nazis and Arabs During the Holocaust." His personal Website is www.alfassa.com.

“Up to 1812, there was only one Jewish community in Jerusalem in modern times. Although the holy city comprised various places of worship. In that year, an 'Ashkenazi' community was founded, along side the original 'Sepharadi.'

--Prof. Shelomo Dov Goitein (1954)



Introduction

OVER THE MANY CENTURIES, while the Jewish people were exiled from *Eres 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 *Eres 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, been often eclipsed in the historical narrative.

Few documents and small bits of history exist on Jewish national liberation and the development of *Eres 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 for 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 *Eres 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 Toledo, *Al-Andalauis* (modern day Spain). In the following well known poem, one of his many, HaLevy laments about his passion for Eres 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.¹*

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 *Marbeshvan*, 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 God for everything.” Maimonides was not the only early Sephardic figure that sought to travel 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

¹ A published collection of 24 of HaLevy’s poems, along with poems by other Hebrew authors, is *The Penguin Book of Hebrew Verse*, edited by T. Carmi.

those Spanish kingdoms. Like Maimonides, Nahmanides demonstrated he was a true intellectual, a Sephardi who set the mold for other who followed—he was a man of faith, man of Torá, and a man of the world. He arrived in Eres 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 Torá that he had begun in Spain.

Aliyah Expands

In their desire to dwell in Eres 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 Eres 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 Torá, this taking place under the open sky, while guarding the herd. Even at that early period, the Spanish rabbi noted there were some twenty-three established 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 Hebron after 1492. With the large resettlement of Jews into Hebron in 1540, led by Hakham Malkiel Ashkenazi, the prominent *Avraham Avinu Synagogue* was built.

Upon making Aliyah from the Italian city of Bartenura, the 15th century Sephardic rabbi, Ovadia, wrote, “In Hebron 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 Hebron for many months.”

Mass Aliyah Under the Turks

The most notable influx of Jews into Eres 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 *sedaka*, charity, to the Jews in Eres Yisrael, large sums going to communities in Safed, Jerusalem and Hebron.²

The years 1516-1517 would be the commencement of the influx and rebuilding of serious Jewish community life in Eres Yisrael. The influx of Iberian Jews in the 16th century raised the Jewish population of Hebron and other cities to a point higher than it had been during the Roman occupation nearly 1,500 years prior.³ One of the reasons why Spanish Jews had 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 that had settled after the 1492 expulsion in cities such as Ottoman Salonika, Sarajevo and Sofia, could now travel to and settle down with *no passport required*. Many did go to the holy land as this was regarded as a religious duty.⁴ Both Shelomo Alkabetz, author of *Lekha 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.⁵

It is well recognized from documents found in the *sijill* (Muslim court records) of Jerusalem that Sephardim had a fairly sophisticated community established already 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,

² Goodblatt, M.S. *Jewish Life in Turkey in the XVI Century*. New York: JTS, 1952. 109

³ *Jewish Encyclopedia*

⁴ Goodblatt 110 (Rabbi De Medina of Salonika ruled that there was no danger involved with traveling to Jerusalem since it was part of the Ottoman Empire.)

⁵ Goodblatt 110

shoe making, blacksmithing, saddle making, jewelry making, clothing making and clothing sales. They were physicians, and even had a hospital established as early as 1579.⁶ They had a cemetery, they were money lenders (to Jews, Christians and Muslims), and they were involved with real estate transactions. These trades and established businesses were the pedestal, the proto-infrastructure of what would later become the business and commercial network that the early State of Israel would build itself upon.

Modernization

To the credit of a Sephardic-American philanthropist is due the opening of the Jewish community from the cramped Old City of Jerusalem to develop 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 at 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. Figurative 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 also a new experiment for the Jews who previous came from the Diaspora to die within the holy city, to now venture life out of its massive walls; and indeed it was not an easy task to establish people in the suburban colony of "Touro." Further, 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 something that the Jerusalem Jews dreaded.

Gradually, the Jerusalemites 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.

⁶ Cohen, Amnon. *A World Within: Jewish Life Reflected in Muslim Court Documents from the Sijill of Jerusalem (XVIth Century)*. Part 1. Philadelphia, Center for Judaic Studies, 1994. 163

Moses Montefiore (1784-1885), was an Italian-born Sephardic Jew, and may be remembered as one of the single most important figure in the history of Eres 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, in an attempt to enable the Jews of Eres 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 had 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.

Jaffa

The small town of Jaffa was just as important to the modern development of Eres Yisrael as Jerusalem had been to religious life for Jews centuries past. In the 17th century, there were very few Jews in Jaffa, probably because of the lack of structures suffered after the major earthquake which occurred in the previous century. Because of this, it was said Jewish travelers suffered oppression and humiliation while passing through the town. When Jews arrived at Jaffa, the community in Jerusalem would be notified and a man would be sent with camels, donkeys or mules to transport the new arrivals to Jerusalem.

At Jaffa, Isaiah Agiman, a Jewish banker of Constantinople, purchased a lot for the purpose of building an *Habnasat Orchim* (a wayfarer's home) for

Jewish pilgrims.⁷ The house was afterwards transferred to the Sephardic community of Jerusalem, who settled some Sephardic families there.

The Sephardic community established the first school in Jaffa in 1838 known as *Or Torá* which could educate 180 boys at a time. The school was built with funding from Jacob Menasce (1807-1882). The Menasce family was originally named *Levi*; they had migrated from Morocco to Hebron and later to Cairo where the name *Menasce* was adopted.⁸ An international businessman, Jacob, was given Hungarian nationality and called *Baron de Menasce* by the Emperor Franz Joseph in 1876.

It was not until the year 1841 that the petite Jewish community received a great impetus,⁹ when the old rabbinic statute prohibiting Jews to settle in Jaffa—for fear that a settlement here would interfere with pilgrims visiting Jerusalem—was abolished (1840) by Rabbi Abraham Hayim Gagin. Gagin was the first chief rabbi in Eres Yisrael to be called *Habam Bashi*.¹⁰ Gagin, like all who would hold that Turkish title, was recognized by the Ottoman government as the sole leader of all the Jews in the holy land.

During the years after the First World War and into the late 1930's, wealthy international investors, such as the Menasce family, became involved in the development of Eres Yisrael. Many did not live or even travel to the land, but from afar purchased land, established large plantation companies, and developed commercial, construction, and industrial undertakings which were the roots of the construction of modern-day Jerusalem, Haifa, and Tel Aviv.

A Growing Community

With the termination of the post of *nagid* during 1516, the Jewish communities in Ottoman Jerusalem and surrounding cities became autonomous.¹¹ It was during this period, one of increasing Sephardic immigration, that the framework was established for what would later be the modern-day rabbinate and Jewish community social structure. In 1665 the first chief rabbi was chosen, Hakham Moshe Galante, he would preside over all the Jews in the

⁷ Gordon, Benjamin Lee. *New Judea: Jewish Life in Modern Palestine and Egypt*. Philadelphia, 1919.

⁸ Bierbrier Morris L. "Egyptian Pedigrees: The de Menasce Family" *Los Muestrros*. Numéro 16, Septembre 1994.

⁹ Gordon. 34

¹⁰ 1842

¹¹ David, Abraham. *To Come to the Land. Immigration and Settlement in Sixteenth Century Eretz-Israel*. Tuscaloose: University of Alabama Press, 1999. 82

holy land. This Turkish born rabbi was the first of 31 men that would hold that title, as of 2007.

In the critical years leading up to what would eventually become the modern State of Israel, the Ottoman government maintained security, facilitated trade, and introduced reasonable rates of taxation in Eres Yisrael allowing Jewish life to flourish there. Jews enjoyed a secure and integrated existence in 16th century Jerusalem, we can see this from the day to day activities that can be extracted from the Islamic court documents from the period.¹² While most Jews in Eres Yisrael were poor, during the 15th and 16th centuries, some Sephardim in Eres Yisrael, Egypt and other locations were able to attain great wealth. They were not only tradesmen and manufacturers, but they were accepted into the Ottoman government, albeit on a low level, functioning as tax collectors.

Not since the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, had Jewish society in the holy land taken strides to regain a resemblance of normalcy, until after the arrive of the Sephardim. The Sephardim helped establish the roots of the economy, and were essentially the ambassadors to the Turkish government, for all the Jews that would eventually start flooding in, especially in the 19th century. Traveling to Eres Yisrael in the first few years of the 20th century, a British observer noted:

Jewish immigrants are not only distinct in dress, dialect, and mode of living from these native Jews, but are amongst themselves divided by the barrier of language, the Spanish Jews being utterly unable to understand or to make themselves understood to their brethren from Northern and Central Europe, though they employ the Hebrew characters in writing; and by manners, the Spanish immigrants, owing their long existence in the country, being more Oriental than the newcomers. The Sephardim have adopted the Eastern garb and head-dress, and, besides the Spanish mother-tongue, also speak Arabic.

It was the Sephardic Jews which were the only accepted Jewish community by the Turks, and often when a situation arrived in regard to Ashkenazim, the Turkish governors would seek either the Jewish community leader—an elder known as the *shaykh al-yahud*, or the head rabbinical figure—the *dayan* (rabbinical judge) for consultation.¹³ Since they had lived under Muslims in Spain, North Africa, Turkey and other locations, and they spoke

¹² See Cohen's *World Within*.

¹³ The latter was known after 1841 as the *hahambashi*.

the language of the Muslims and understood their culture, the Sephardim were natural intermediaries between the Islamic authorities and the entire Jewish community. In addition, the Ashkenazim did not speak Spanish and they were not allowed to learn Arabic, by order of their rabbis.¹⁴ During that period, it was the Spanish language (which the Sephardim had brought from Spain to the Ottoman Empire) that was the *lingua franca* of the Sephardim and their Jerusalem leaders. While Arabic may have been a vehicular language for the region, among the *va'ad haedah basefaradit bi'yrualayim*, the *Sephardic Community Council of Jerusalem*, Spanish was the language spoken by the men that stood at the head of the community; it was the leader of the *va'ad* that was recognized by the Turkish authorities as the only representative of the entire Jewish settlement. In this account provided to us as late as 1868, we still see the Sephardim as the representative Jewish body to the Turkish government:

The Jews are divided into two sects, the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim. The Sephardim are of Spanish origin, having been driven out of that country in 1497 by Ferdinand and Isabella. They were at first twittered among the great cities of the Turkish empire, but they gradually congregated in Jerusalem. Though they have been long resident in the Holy City, comparatively few of them speak Arabic; a corrupt Spanish is their language. They are subjects of the Sultan, but are permitted to have their own rabbinical laws. Their Chief Rabbi is called *Khakham Basbi* by the Turks; his Hebrew title is “the Head in Zion.” His principal interpreter has a seat in the *Mejlie* or “council” of the city...the Ashkenazim have a chief rabbi, but the only authority acknowledged by the government is the *Khakham Basbi* of the Sephardim.¹⁵

Building the City of Kabbalah

Rabbi Yosef Saragossi (c.1492), of Spanish extraction, is known to have been exiled from Sicily. After a brief residence in Beirut and Sidon, Saragossi finally

¹⁴ Abbott, George Frederick. *Israel in Europe*. New York, MacMillan and Co. 1907. 504 (Later, in the late 19th century, Ashkenazi rabbis once again restricted the Arabic language. The rabbis declared a *herem* [excommunication] against teaching “non-Jewish” languages such as Arabic because they risk weakening “the barriers of Ethnic Jewish separatism.” While this herem stuck in Eres Yisrael, it was not accepted in Egypt and Europe. See: Baumel, Simeon D. *Sacred Speakers: Language And Culture Among The Haredim In Israel*. 122)

¹⁵ Murray, Josias Leslie. *A Handbook for Travellers in Syria and Palestine*. (2 vols). London: John Murray, 1868. 1:78-79

settled in Safed, where he established a *yeshiva* (religious school) that brought together Jews from Iberia and North Africa. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Safed became the center of Jewish learning and esoteric study under legendary rabbinical figures including Yosef Karo, who wrote the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Code of Jewish Law*), which Jews follow even to this day. It was there among the hills of Safed that *kabbalah*, which had been brought from Spain, exploded into an international phenomena, being accepted and injected into worldwide Jewish liturgy and practice.

Following the massive 1812 plague and the devastating 1837 earthquake which killed thousands of Jews, Safed was rebuilt after being funded by Montefiore and repopulated by a wave of *aliyah* (immigration) from Morocco, Algeria and Persia. These Sephardim carried on the tradition that was brought to Eres Yisrael in previous centuries by the Spanish speaking kabbalists such as Yosef Karo, Moshe Alshech, Abraham Galante, Moshe Mitrani, Moshe Cordovero, Abraham Lañado, Hayyim Vital and others. The Sephardic contribution to the study, expansion and implementation to kabbalah in Eres Yisrael is well known and stands on the authority of history.

Sephardic Hebrew Goes Mainstream

While history records Eliezer Ben Yehuda, (1858-1922) as one of the most influential persons who contributed to the character of the modern State of Israel by reviving the Hebrew language—contrary to what many know—is that the Sephardim never stopped using Hebrew and always had a tradition to use it. We know that learned men used the holy tongue to converse in matters of Jewish scholarship in Hebrew. As an example, we know that even in the 15th century, a Spanish Jew in Eres Yisrael would give his weekly *derasha* (sermon) in Hebrew. The Hebrew language as we know it today, the daily language used in modern Israel, tracks its revival to the Sephardic scholars of Spain and North Africa as early as the 10th century, based upon the Tiberius model from the 7th and 8th centuries.

Shemuel HaNagid, rabbinical leader and Jewish statesman from Granada, Spain; Yehuda HaLevy, rabbi poet from 10th century Spain; and Ibn Gabirol, a philosopher and poet from Spain, all concerned themselves with Hebrew grammar. For several hundred years under the Arabs, dozens of Sephardic intellectuals developed and analyzed a well constructed system of Hebrew grammar and an in-depth understanding of Hebrew letters. Other Sephardic scholars that on one level or another contributed to what would become a renaissance and eventual complete return of the Hebrew language,

include Menahem ben Saruk, Dunash ben Labrat and Yehuda Hayyuj, all before the 12th century. A great deal of poetry was written by Sephardim in a “purified” Hebrew based on the work of these early grammarians; this literary Hebrew was later used by Italian Jewish poets. The Sephardim of Spain who were developing Hebrew and re-exploring it for cultural reasons, set the stage for a revival of its daily use some 1000 years later. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Eliezer Ben Yehuda started helping to expand Hebrew as the standard language of Eres Yisrael. Ben Yehuda was convinced that the Hebrew living language must have Sephardi phonetic sounds because that was the pronunciation of the transliteration of Biblical names in ancient and modern translations of the Bible,¹⁶ this is why *Sephardit* is the universal standard for speaking modern Hebrew.

It was not great Biblical commentaries in the style of *Rashi* (1040-1105) that allowed the Sephardim to contribute to overall Jewish scholarship, but it was the foundation they laid for people like Rashi (an Ashkenazi in France), and much later Eliezer Ben Yehuda, that was their great contribution to what would become formal written and oral communication for the Jewish people and the State of Israel.

Sephardic Leadership

Early on, the Sephardim established a relationship with the Ottomans where they could slaughter animals in the *kasher* (ritually fit) manner, run their own religious courts, and ensure punishment is metered out in accordance with *halakah* (Jewish law), not Islamic law.¹⁷ When the Ottoman authorities attempted to halt the landing of Ashkenazi Jews at the Port of Jaffa, it was the Sephardim that came to their aid. An example of such is told in this traditional story:

During the period when the Ashkenazim were just starting to migrate toward Eres Yisrael, a group of Hassidim arrived at the Port of Jaffa. They made their way to the Turkish representatives at the shore, who were confused upon meeting them. The Turkish authorities were able to figure out that these men were Jewish, or they indicated somehow they were Jewish, but the men didn’t look like any type of Jews they

¹⁶ World Zionist Organization, “Ben-Yehuda Street”. May 2002. (www.wzo.org.il/en/resources/view.asp?id=1027)

¹⁷ This system remained in place until the British Occupation. See: Bentwich, N., "The Application of Jewish Law in Palestine", *Journal of Comparative Legislation*. 9 (1927), 59-67. 60

were familiar with, as they did not speak any language of the Jews nor did they dress like the Jews they knew. The Turks decided these men may be Jews, but that they may also be spies and so they were arrested and jailed. While the men sat behind bars, the Turks sought the opinion of the chief rabbi, as they respected him, and would not want to do anything to disrespect the Jewish community. The chief rabbi arrived at the jail and at first sight was surprised to see their unusual clothing, he said to them, "*Hermanos, de ande sosh?*" (brothers, where are you from?), but they didn't reply. The rabbi tried again, then he asked the same question in other languages, but the men didn't respond. Eventually, the rabbi started reciting parts of common prayers, and almost immediately one of the Hassidim caught on and started to repeat the prayers, but with a different accent. The rabbi recognized the man had a strange accent, but that they were in fact Jews. The chief rabbi then turned to the Turkish policeman and told him, "They are Jews, a little bit strange, but they are Jewish, you can let them in."¹⁸

Sephardim Build the Land

It is well documented that Sephardic families had lived in Eres Yisrael for generations long before the Zionist movement was even conceptualized. The Sephardi community, until the 1870's, formed the majority of the Jewish population of Jerusalem and the land. The *va'ad haedab basefaradit bi'yrualayim*, the *Sephardic Community Council of Jerusalem*, was the only Jewish community in Eres Yisrael that was recognized by the Ottoman authorities, this organization was said to have been founded as early as 1267 with the arrival of Nahmanides from Spain.

From the mountains of Macedonia, the deserts of Syria and from the Maghreb, Sephardim came. Moshe ben Avraham Ferrera of Sarajevo settled in Eres Yisrael in 1823, and became head of the rabbinical court in Hebron. Another notable was Hakham Yosef Rafael ben Hayyim Yosef Hazan who had relocated from coastal Turkey to Hebron, later becoming the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem. In 1858, Hakham Eliahu ben Suliman Mani, traveled from

¹⁸ I had heard this story some years ago but I had forgotten the source. Most interesting is that the story was later shared with me by Rabbi Nissim Elnecave of Brooklyn, a rabbi in the Syrian community and a Ladino antiquarian book consultant for Yeshiva University in New York. Rabbi Elnecave was told the story over 10 years ago from Rabbi Eliezer Papo, Coordinator of the Center for Ladino Culture at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev.

Baghdad to Eres Yisrael and was elected Chief Rabbi of Hebron, a post he occupied for forty years.

Sephardic Jews did not go to Eres Yisrael solely for the purpose of living their last days and dying in the holy land. They did not go only to study Talmud while living off of the *halukah*, the charitable distributions made from collections donated from abroad. In reality, many Sephardim went to Eres Yisrael for economic reasons. They were entrepreneurs that were the catalyst for Jewish economic expansion; they were workers that made the Port of Jaffa function on a day to day basis; the Sephardim invested in infrastructure, roads, railroads and the like.

Joseph Amzalak arrived in Eres Yisrael in 1816, he had come from the Sephardic community of Gibraltar, of Moroccan (and most likely Portuguese) ancestry. Hayyim Nissim Amzalak, Joseph's son, was responsible for making positive economic strides for the State which included establishing the modern port and town of Jaffa, which was the early pre-cursor to the establishment of Tel Aviv. Amzalak family land purchases in Jaffa over several generations, helped shape the map of Jewish settlement in Eres Yisrael.¹⁹ Like the Amzalak family, other great Sephardic pioneers that helped make the State what it is today, have been essentially erased or left to obscurity. Sephardim were the ones that help set up cities such as *Petah Tiqvah*, *Rishon L'Sion* and they were instrumental in expanding out of Jaffa and settling in other locations. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* details how Turkish and Moroccan Sephardim were the early catalysts that set forth in turning Jaffa and nearby towns into modern cities. The following speaks about the settlement of a wealthy Turkish-born rabbi that arrived in Eres Yisrael in 1820:²⁰

Tel Aviv's beginnings go back to the revival of the Jewish community of Jaffa in 1820. In that year, a Jewish traveler from Constantinople named R. Yeshaya Adjiman brought the first house in Jaffa into Jewish possession (among the local Arabs it soon became known as "*Dār al-Yahūd*," i.e., "the Jewish house," and it served as a temporary hostel for newcomers). The *Dār al-Yahūd* served as the nucleus around which grew the new Jewish community at the beginning of the 19th century.

¹⁹ It should be noted that marriages occurred between prominent Sephardim such as those among the Valero, Eliachar, Navon and Amzalak families, as it was customary for Sephardim from prominent families to marry into other prominent families.

²⁰ An Index of the work: *Oriental Jews in Erets Yisrael* by Moshe David Gaon, translated by Mathilde Tagger of Jerusalem, in the archives of this writer. (Gaon indicates there were other members of the Adjiman family in Constantinople and Italy and that Eliahu Adjiman of Constantinople was Counselor to the Sultan)

The first Jewish settlers were merchants and artisans originating from North Africa who preferred living from their own handiwork instead of being dependent on *halukah* [charity] in Jerusalem.²¹

Representations to the Ottoman government, in regard to building a railway that would establish efficient transportation of goods from the Port of Jaffa to Jerusalem, were made by a Sephardic Jew. Yosef Navon was responsible for obtaining a concession from the Sultan at Constantinople who signed a *firman* (decree), supporting the idea.²² Navon, a nephew of the Amzalak family, played a significant role in the development of the railroad, and when in 1892 it was finally operational, commerce between the cities greatly improved. In the days before air transportation when the Port of Jaffa was the primary arrival point for anyone coming to Eretz Yisrael from Europe, it was very momentous that rail travel had now shortened traveling time between the two cities from three days to three hours. Navon is also the man who planned the construction of the harbor in Haifa and the *Mabane Yehuda* market in Jerusalem.²³

There were many more Sephardic families that played many a varied role in the development of business and commerce in the new state. Abraham ben Aharon Shlush (Chelouche) opened the first modern synagogue in Jaffa after arriving (without his two brothers who died enroute), from Oran, Algeria in 1840. Twenty-two years before the City of Tel Aviv came into existence, his son, Aharon ben Abraham Shlush, founded *Neve Tzedeck* in 1887 which was the first neighborhood in what would become Tel Aviv. Aharon was a wealthy goldsmith that made land purchases in Jaffa and in the surrounding new districts to establish cemeteries for the Jews. Aharon's son, Yosef Eliahu Shlush, would go on to build some of the first new houses in Tel Aviv. Both he and his brother Yaakov, a bank treasurer, were active in public affairs of Jaffa and early Tel Aviv.

The Moyal family, originally from Morocco, had come in the mid-19th century and made several significant contributions to modern life in the land. Aharon Moyal and his sons Shalom and Eliyahu were some of the early settlers who helped shape modern Jaffa. The family had come from Rabat in 1856. David ben Yosef Moyal was born in Jaffa in 1880 and became one of

²¹ EJ: 'Tel Aviv-Jaffa'

²² Adler, Elkan Nathan. *Jews in Many Lands*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1905.

²³ Laqueur, Walter. *Dying For Jerusalem: The Past, Present and Future of the Holiest City*. Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2006. 90

the earliest lawyers in the burgeoning city of Tel Aviv after returning from his studies in Beirut.²⁴ Shemuel ben Abraham Moyal was a teacher that established a modern school in Jaffa.

The area of Tel Aviv known as *Neve Sha'anani*, a neighborhood that has become a major transportation hub, containing both the new and old Tel Aviv Central Bus Stations was built on the land owned by a Sephardic merchant named Aharon Matalon. He was a grower of oranges who had come to Jaffa from Baghdad in 1808.²⁵ Other members of the Matalon family were involved with real estate in Jaffa.

The Bejerano family from Bulgaria were prominent in the establishment of the food industry and especially the lucrative production of commercial fruit juice which helped the budding economy.

The Valero family, a Spanish family with roots in Italy and Constantinople, had a significant role in the financial establishment of the state. Yaakov Valero was an importer/exporter that had established the *Bank Valero* at Jerusalem in 1835; this bank is remembered as the first private modern bank in Eretz Yisrael. This Sephardic Jew had come from Constantinople in 1835 and 13 years later established what would become a banking empire.²⁶

The Recanati family, an old Spanish family that had lived in Italy had migrated from Salonika to Jerusalem in the 19th century, were also influential in banking. Yehuda Leon ben Shemuel Recanati, head of the Jewish community in Salonika, desired to play an active part in the formation of the new country and he understood that the fledgling economy needed financing in order to grow and prosper. So with his partners, Yosef Elbaz and Moshe Karaso, they founded the *Eretz Yisrael Bank* in a store in Tel Aviv. The bank was unique, as it lent money to individuals and not just organizations and business, as other banks did. It later changed its name to *Israel Discount Bank* and went on to become one of the largest in the country. Since 1935, Recanati's bank has helped develop many prime areas of Israeli commerce and industry. In regard to the Sephardim in business and banking, noted historian and professor Walter Laqueur remarks in his *Dying for Jerusalem*:

Generally speaking, the Jerusalem (and Jaffa) Sephardim were active and successful in trading. They knew many languages, and the banks trusted them—in fact, some of the banks were owned by them. The

²⁴ Gaon index

²⁵ Gaon index

²⁶ Today Valero oil is the largest refiner in North America with near 5,000 retail fuel stations.

had the right connections, first in the Ottoman government and then with the British authorities who, on the whole, preferred ‘native Jews’ to the Zionist new comers. (As the British noted, the Sephardim, like the upper-class Arabs, also had better manners.)²⁷

Professor Laqueur records that of the many British-appointed judges during the period of the Mandate were Sephardim such as Mani, Azulai, and Bardaki. And he tells how many of the early professors at *The Hebrew University* were Sephardim, such as Franco, Racah, Toaff, Tedeschi, Cassuto, and Bacchi.²⁸ Laqueur recalls that the Sephardim even had a *Sephardi party* in the Knesset early on.

Modern Sephardic *Zionism*

The notion of a “return” from exile, to make aliyah and establish a home in their ancient land, was an integral part of Jewish life everywhere, especially among the Sephardim. Fifty years before what Ashkenazi historians have labeled “The First Aliyah” (1880), there was an aliyah of Jews from North Africa (1830).²⁹ But even by that time, Sephardim had already been living in Eres Yisrael for many centuries and already had an established communal and religious infrastructure which would become the foundation for what would later evolve into the office of the chief rabbinate and the basis for the pioneering Israeli government.

Prof. Samuel David Luzzatto (1800-1865), the renowned Sephardic scholar and professor at the rabbinical school at Padua, Italy stated in 1854 that “Palestine must be peopled by Jews and tilled by them, so that it may flourish economically and agriculturally, and take on beauty and glory.”

The former Spanish speaking Chief Rabbi of Ottoman Bosnia, Rabbi Yehuda Alkalay (1798-1878), desired the redemption of the Land and of the people and during his life wrote extensively on this subject in an effort to promote the idea. Alkalay became noted through his propaganda in favor of the restoration of the Jews to Palestine. By reason of some of his projects, he may justly be regarded as one of the precursors of the modern Zionists headed by Theodore Hertzl. His work, *Goral la-Adonai (A Lot for the Lord)*, published at Vienna, in 1857, is a treatise on the restoration of the Jews, and

²⁷ Laqueur. *Dying For Jerusalem*. 90

²⁸ Laqueur. *Dying for Jerusalem*. 92

²⁹ Ram, Hana. *The Jewish Community in Jaffa: From Sephardic Community to Zionist Center*. Jerusalem: Carmel Press, 1996. 51

suggests methods for the betterment of conditions in Palestine. At one point, Alkalay drew up a practical program which he was going to offer to the Sultan at Constantinople that would allow the Jews to rent Eres Yisrael for an annual payment,³⁰ not unlike how railroads lease land over which their rails pass. Alkalay suggested the formation of a joint-stock company, such as a steamship or railroad trust, whose endeavor would be to induce the Sultan to cede the land to the Jews as a tributary country, on a plan similar to the international precedent that existed, based on which the *Danube Principalities* were governed. To this suggestion were appended the commendations of numerous Jewish scholars of various schools of thought. The problem of the restoration of the land and to the betterment of the conditions of the people there were also discussed by Alkalay in *Shema' Yisrael (Hear, O Israel)*, 1861~1862, and in *Harbinger of Good Tidings*. The *Jewish Agency for Israel* states that:

Hertzl's grandfather, Simon Loeb Hertzl, was a disciple of Rabbi Judah Alkalay who for most of his life had been a preacher in Semlin, near Belgrade. This rabbi astounded his congregants, however, when among other pronouncements, he published a textbook declaring that establishing Jewish colonies in the holy land was a necessary prelude to the redemption. Theodore must have been influenced by his grandfather who, like the rabbi, favored Jewish national unity through an all-embracing organization—and particularly through the intercession of affluent Western Jews.³¹

Hertzl's paternal grandfather Simon Loeb Hertzl, reportedly attended the Alkalay's synagogue in Semlin [Serbia] and the two frequently visited. Grandfather Simon Loeb Hertzl "had his hands on" one of the first copies of Alkalay's 1857³² work prescribing the "return of the Jews to the Holy Land and renewed glory of Jerusalem." Contemporary scholars conclude that Hertzl's own implementation of modern Zionism was undoubtedly influenced by that relationship.³³

The late Haham Solomon Gaon, the chief rabbi of the *Spanish and Portuguese Congregation of London* and a preeminent Jewish scholar of the 20th

³⁰ *Kitve Rabbi Yehuda Alkalay*, Jerusalem, 1954: vol 1. qtd. in. Laqueur, Walter. *The History of Zionism*. London: Tauris Parke: 2003. 55

³¹ "Hertzl's Biography." www.jafi.org.il/education/Hertzl/answers.html (July 2007)

³² Judah ben Solomon Hai Alkalay, *Destiny of the Lord*. Vienna 1857 qtd. in Peters, Joan. *From Time Immemorial*. Chicago, Harper & Row, 1984.

³³ Sachar, Howard. *A History of Israel*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976. 6-7; and Bein, Alex. *Theodore Hertzl*. Philadelphia, 1940. 5; 15.

century, stated that many historians called Alkalay “the precursor of the modern Zionist movement.”³⁴ In a 1973 speech originally delivered to the *Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland* in London, Haham Gaon discussed how Rabbi Alkalay promoted what we refer to today as *Zionism*:

He went to Vienna, Berlin, Paris and London. In 1852, he visited London and founded the Society ‘*Shalom Yerushalayim*’ for the colonisation of the Holy Land. Although this Society came to an end immediately after his departure from Britain there is no doubt that this enthusiasm for the cause he propounded must have left some impression and thereby, to some extent, paved the way for the appearance of Theodor Hertzl in London in 1895 for that memorable meeting of 30th July, 1896, when he addressed the Jewish masses in Whitechapel under the chairmanship of Dr. Moses Gaster [1856-1939], the Haham of the Sephardi community.

Haham Gaon told that Hertzl found the Ashkenazim in England less interested than the Sephardim, and that the Zionist Federation found great support from the Sephardic community, while Dr. Adler, the Chief Rabbi of the Ashkenazim maintained an “uncompromising opposition” to Hertzl. Gaon said that on February 7, 1917, a number of Zionists met with the director of the British Foreign Office, at the home of Dr. Gaster.³⁵ This meeting with the director ultimately led to the *Balfour Declaration* which gave the Jews a state. Yet, reasonably so, Haham Gaon lamented how the role Dr. Gaster played in the establishment of the Zionist movement has not been more recognized by the historians of Zionism.

Large Zionistic Sephardic communities existed in Sofia, Bulgaria and Salonika. At the latter, Avarham S. Recanati translated Yehuda HaLevy’s Zionistic poetry into Ladino for the masses to be inspired. Recanati but was one of those responsible for bringing Zionism to the heart of the masses. Prof. Minna Rozen points out that the Zionist cause in Salonika was represented in songs, manuscripts, and through various poetic formats. The poetry, known as *Shirei Ziyon*, included poetry mentioning a longing for Zion, exalting the

³⁴ Solomon, Gaon. *Address to the Zionist Society of Salisbury, Rhodesia*, June 28, 1951. 47

³⁵ Solomon, Gaon. *Speech to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland*, 1973. (The Contribution of the Sephardim to Zionism) WZO: www.hagshama.org.il/en/resources/view.asp?id=1683

Zionist endeavor, poems about the journey to Eres Yisrael, and poems of redemption and lamentation.

Jews in Ottoman Monastir (the modern Macedonian city of Bitola), developed several sophisticated Zionistic societies for boys, girls, and adults. Money was collected for Zionistic causes and blue and white became popular colors even early on. Hebrew was being taught and plays in the language were being conducted.³⁶

Discussion

Prof. Shelomo Dov Goitein, one of the most famous Jewish orientalists once wrote:

Up to 1812, there was only one Jewish community in Jerusalem in modern times. Although the holy city comprised various places of worship. In that year, an “Ashkenazi” community was founded, alongside the original “Sepharadi.”³⁷

The Ashkenazi secular Zionists that arrived at the beginning of the 20th century were quick to build up their new communities, but they were even quicker to pave over and forget the history of Jews that had already been living in the land. The term “Old Yishuv,” which they utilized, had pooled all the Jews living in Eres Yisrael together as a group of essentially religious and unproductive members of society. They, the *modern elite* Jews, had set out to create a new settlement, a “New Yishuv.” Compounding this are myths being propagated by books and Websites that perpetuate myths and subjectivity like the Old Yishuv had “lived unproductively off the donations of Diaspora Jews.”

The motive for the research and writing of this paper came in May 2007, after I received a request from a major American Jewish organization indicating it need assistance in developing a proper repose to an email it had received discussing comments made by an American man, a follower of a major Hassidic movement of Judaism. The man had wrote:

³⁶ Cohen, Mark. *Last Century of a Sephardic Community: 1839-1943*. New York: Foundation for the Advancement of Sephardic Studies and Culture, 2003. 156-168.

³⁷ Goitein, S. D. “Congregation versus Community an Unknown Chapter in the Communal History of Jewish Palestine.” *Jewish Quarterly Review*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954. 292

If it weren't for European Jews, there would be no Israel. The Sephardic Jews were pervasively Arabic, Persian and to a lesser extent, Indian. They had nothing to do with the Jewish state and only came after the establishment to escape the recriminations they experienced, particularly in Arab lands.

Of course this indefensible remark is only one man's absurd opinion, and even though he is correct in mentioning Jews were displaced from Arab countries, notably some 900,000, he is erroneous in saying they were "Arabic, Persian and to a lesser extent, Indian," and he is completely mistaken in his initial sentence indicating that, "If it weren't for European Jews, there would be no Israel." The man obviously did not know the history of Sephardic Jews in Eres Yisrael, and that Sephardic Jews fought bravely, side by side, with their Ashkenazic brothers on the battlefield in 1948—fighting for the very survival of the new country.

At the time, Yitzhak Navon, was head of the Arab section of the *Haganah* in Jerusalem; Navon went on to become the 5th President of the country. His Turkish family has lived in Jerusalem for over 300 years and they can trace their ancestry back to the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492. Other Sephardim became involved with the initial government of Israel. This included Yisrael Yeshayahu, a Jew from Yemen that served in the first Knesset and remained there from 1951-1977. Shlomo Hillel, a Jew from Iraq, served in the Knesset in various capacities between 1952 and 1992, including serving as Speaker of the Knesset.

The marginalization of the contributions made by the Sephardim to the history and development of the State of Israel continues today, as television documentaries and books continue to come out from an Ashkenazi-centric worldview. While the universities have increased the number of classes that discuss either directly (or indirectly) the Sephardic experience, ignorance continues to remain high. In addition, the *yeshivot* that are educating young rabbis in the Ashkenazi oriented pedagogic system, do not include *history* as part of their formal curriculum; any history that may be discussed, is typically legendary stories and flowery biographical accounts of Ashkenazi rabbinical personalities.

It should be remembered that Sephardim were wealthy bankers, entrepreneurs, merchants, communal leaders, rabbis and even well-respected members of the Sultan's administration. As a Jew, being in the government, in

any capacity of the Sultan that had control of the holy land—was to be a *de facto* ambassador for the Jewish people; intercourse between the Sephardim and the Ottoman government helped increase the overall condition of the Jews in Eres Yisrael to a level which money could never match.

Sephardim participated in helping to develop new communities while the State was as still being born, and they played significant roles in the early modernification of the land and communities which would become the modern and free State of Israel.