HAHAM JACOB SASPORTAS

1610-1698

The existence of a Jewish community in London was openly admitted and accepted only at the beginning of 1656. Till then those who were in the country lived as Marranos and were accustomed to attend for worship in accordance with the forms of the Catholic Church in the Chapel at the Portuguese Embassy. But Carvajal, a zealous Jew, had a private synagogue in his own home.

The events which led to this recognition are another story. Here we are concerned only with how Jacob Sasportas came to be invited to become the Haham of the London community. He was born and educated in North Africa, but his reputation as a Talmudic scholar spread from the town of Tlemcen where he held his first appointment as rabbi. At the age of 37 he fell out with the government and was dismissed. He then wandered throughout Europe, principally in Germany, Italy and England—as well as Amsterdam where his ambitions lay.

In Amsterdam, Jacob Sasportas met Manasseh ben Israel before the latter went on his mission to England. Soon after, Sasportas made his peace with the Sultan of Morocco who sent him on a mission to the King of Spain. He then returned to Amsterdam.

In the meantime, the London Community’s developments had aroused the desire for a spiritual head of higher learning and standing than was possessed by Moses Israel Athias, a relative of Carvajal, who had come to London from Hamburg to take charge of the services in his synagogue.

The choice fell on Jacob Sasportas, known for his scholarship and no doubt helped by the successful diplomatic mission he had accomplished for the Sultan of Morocco, and so in 1663 he was invited to come to London as Haham and Hazan. He came early in 1664—and left the following year, terrified by the Great Plague from which Athias (among many others, of course) died.

He returned to Amsterdam and became one of the principal rabbis there. He served for 17 years and died in 1698. He was widely respected for his scholarship and for his courage and outspokenness, especially against the Shabbatean movement. He published his responsa in 1737 under the title Ohel Ya’akov, but his most well-known work is Zizat Novel Zevi, a collection of letters in which he answered and attacked Shabbatai Zevi. This work is one of the main sources for the study of the Shabbatean movement which he saw as being opposed to the traditional concept of the Messianic era, and also as a revolution against established institutions and rabbinic norms.

He never returned to London after his flight from the plague, but he remained in correspondence with many of his acquaintances and in particular with his successors in the office of Haham. It says much for his personality that when he died he was mourned as much in London as in Amsterdam.
The Cauninos at Oran, then a Spanish colony, remained loyal to the Spanish kings, who were at war with the Moors. Members of both families competed for the office of government interpreter (see JACOB, B. AARON SASPORTAS). It may be added that Aaron Sasportas, the earliest known member of this family, was a descendant in the tenth generation of Nahmanides (Jacob Sasportas, i.e. No. 24). The more prominent members are the following:


Jacob ben Aaron Sasportas: Rabbi, cabalist, and anti-Shabbatian; born at Oran 1610; died at Amsterdam April 15, 1668; father of Isaac b. Jacob Sasportas. He became rabbi successively of Tlemcen (at the age of twenty-four), Morocco, Fez, and Salé. About 1648 he was imprisoned by the Moorish king, but succeeded in escaping with his family to Amsterdam (c. 1653). He stayed there till the disorders in Africa ceased, when he was called back by the King of Morocco and sent on a special mission to the Spanish court (c. 1650) to ask for aid against the rebels. On his return he was invited to the rabbinate of the Portuguese community of London (1654). According to David Franco Mendes (in "Ha-Messorah," 1788, p. 169), Jacob had accompanied Manasseh b. Israel to London in 1655. Owing to the outbreak of the plague in London in 1665, Jacob went to Hamburg, where he officiated as rabbi till 1673. In that year he was called to Amsterdam and appointed head of the yeshibah Roter Torah, founded by the brothers Pinto. Two years later he became dayyan and head of the yeshibah at Lecorn, and in 1689 he returned to Amsterdam, where he was appointed head of the yeshibah Ez Hayyim. After the death of Isaac Aboab (1694) he was appointed rabbi of the Portuguese community, which office he held till his death.

Jacob was one of the most violent antagonists of the Shabbatian movement; he wrote many letters to various communities in Europe, Asia, and Africa, exhorting them to unmask the impostors and to warn the people against them. He wrote: "Toledot Ya'akov" (Amsterdam, Anti-Shabbathian, 1632), an index of Biblical passages found in the aggadah of the Jerusalem Talmud, similar to Aaron Pesaro's "Toledot Aharon," which relates to the Babylonian Talmud only: "Ohel Ya'akov" (8.)

SASPORTAS: Spanish family of rabbis and scholars, the earliest known members of which lived at Oran, Algeria, at the end of the sixteenth century. The name seems to indicate that the family originally came from a place called Scispotas (= "six gates"; comp. Jacob Sasportas, "Ohel Ya'akov," Nos. 21, 68). Later it was mispronounced, "Sasportas," "Saporta," and "Saporta," and Jacob Sasportas himself gives his name in an acrostic as נדנננ. A Sasport family lived later in Montpellier, France. The Sasportas family, with XI., 5.
SASPORTAS, JACOB (c. 1610–1698), rabbi, a fierce opponent of the Shabbatean movement. He was born and educated in Oran (North Africa) and became widely known for his talmudic erudition. After his appointment as rabbi of the Tlemcen community the neighboring communities also recognized his authority. However, when he was 37 years old he was dismissed by the government; he then proceeded to wander throughout Europe, visiting many communities in Germany, Italy, and England (he was offered the position of haham of the Sephardi community in London in 1664 but left the next year because of the plague). His main ambition was the rabbinate of Amsterdam, but he did not achieve it until 1693, when he was 83 years old. Personal bitterness deriving from his lack of a congregation which could serve as a base for his activities colored his attitude in many disputes. He was a staunch defender of the rabbinate and the traditional halakha and throughout his life was involved in polemical disputes. Many of his responsa were collected in the book Ḫel Yeḥak (Amsterdam, 1737), published by his son, Abraham.

Sasportas was largely known, however, for his collection of letters, Zīṭẓot Ḫel Zevi, comprising his answers to various Shabbatean letters and pamphlets, as well as the original pamphlets themselves. The work therefore became one of the main sources for the study of the Shabbatean movement during the lifetime of Shabbetai Zevi. At the time of the dispute Sasportas lived in Hamburg, so that most of the material in his collection is mainly concerned with Western Europe and Italy, but he had some success in his efforts to obtain material from the East as well.

Arranged in chronological order, the work covers the years 1666–76. In the main it consists of letters received by Sasportas, his answers to them, some letters which he wrote on his own initiative, and some comments on the development of the Shabbatean movement. Nearly half of it concerns the year 1666, from the first announcements of the appearance of Shabbetai Zevi until his conversion to Islam at the end of that year. The second part is dedicated to the events following the conversion, 1667–68, and describes the “failure” of the Shabbatean movement. The third part consists of letters written in 1668–69, and is mostly directed against the renewed Shabbatean propaganda, which tried to exploit the conversion of the Messiah in order to introduce new norms of behavior suitable for the period of messianic fulfillment. The last four pages deal with the period from 1673 to 1676, sketching some of the main events of these years.

Sasportas’s bitter denunciation of the Shabbatean movement, its prophet Nathan of Gaza, and its believers (some of whom were his former friends), is based upon various ideological concepts. First was his adherence to the traditional conception of the messianic age; in great detail he pointed out the differences between what was happening at that time and the traditional ideas concerning the messianic era. He also saw the new movement as a revolution against established institutions and rabbinic norms, fearing that they might be set aside through the influence of Nathan of Gaza and other Shabbatean thinkers who laid claim to the faith of the populace without any appeal to rabbinic tradition. His hatred was also based on his own unfounded suspicion that the new movement contained anti-Christian elements, revealed in some utterances of Nathan, in the “strange deeds” of Shabbetai Zevi, and in the behavior of their followers. He frequently compared the new movement with Christianity and feared that the Shabbateans would follow the ancient example.

Sasportas’s book is the fiercest attack upon Shabbateanism written during the early years of the movement. However, I. Tishby and R. Shatz have proved that the published work does not reflect his attitude during the period before Shabbetai Zevi’s apostasy. By comparing Sasportas’s original copies with the version prepared for publication they demonstrated that in many instances he falsified his own letters, changing phrases and adding passages to show that his opposition was far more thorough and resolute from the beginning than it really was, and he glossed over his own hesitation and half-belief in Shabbetai Zevi during the months in which the movement reached its peak. The full version of Zīṭẓot Ḫel Zevi was first published by I. Tishby from the only complete manuscript in 1954. For a long time, however, it was known only in the shortened version (Kīḏur Zīṭẓot Ḫel Zevi) printed in Amsterdam in 1737, by Jacob Eiden in Altona in 1757, and lastly in Odessa in 1867.