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The Jewish Diaspora and the Ottoman Empire

By: Cooper Smith

In reading the histories of empires, cultures and civilizations it is inevitable to find a trend of overlapping interactions between different groups of people. The notion that nations can be neatly placed in adequately drawn boundaries is a very modern one. Even in the most homogenous nation states there is at least one identifiable group with sufficient differences from the general body of people to constitute themselves as a minority group. To look at the history of an empire's dominant people and extrapolate it to be the history of all peoples living within that empire would be to omit the countless testimonies of minority populations. When reading history, more often than not, one will eventually come across the testimonies of Jews. The widespread historical accounts of Jews are attributable to the unfortunate history of exile, dispersion, and expulsion, which they have sustained for more than two millennia. In this paper I will be exploring the history of Jews in the Ottoman Empire. Knowledge of Ottoman Jewish contributions is essential to understanding the history of the Ottoman Empire. This paper provides insight on the impact Ottoman history had on its Jewish communities and how the responses from those communities drove Ottoman historical development.

Prior to its expansion, the territories of the Ottoman Empire possessed some pre-Ottoman Jewish populations. From Greece in the north, Iraq in the east, Egypt in the south, and Palestine in the west the growing Ottoman Empire brought many Jewish communities under its rule during its period of expansion. The Jewish populations outside of Palestine formed over several centuries of conquest and relocation by the Achaemenid, Macedonian, and Roman (Byzantine) empires, lands which would come under the domain of the Ottomans. Upon the Conquest of Constantinople by Sultan Mehmet II in 1453, one of his first decrees pertaining to the city was to

initiate a policy of relocation of Greek Christians and Romaniote Jews to the newly named imperial capital of Istanbul. Far from intending to be a policy of captivity, Mehmet wished to revitalize the city after it had sustained decline, plague, and siege over several decades. To make Mehmet's "Rûm" a truly cosmopolitan city he needed Jewish and Christian communities within the capital. As early as the 15th Century the Ottomans saw a Jewish presence in the power center of the empire as essential to becoming a great, formidable power in the style of Rome. The Romaniote Jews of Greece would constitute the largest Jewish population of the city and enjoy more privileges in business than any other class. This high position of the Romaniotes would diminish after only a few decades with the arrival of new Jewish immigrants escaping persecution in Christianized Iberia.

The Romaniote Jewish population absorbed by the Ottomans would be superseded as the dominant Jewish population in the empire with the arrival of Sephardic Jews fleeing persecution in Iberia. On March 31, 1492, the personal union of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile issued the Alhambra Decree ordering all Jews within the kingdoms to convert to Christianity under penalty of expulsion. Wishing to retain their Jewish identity, many of the Sephardi fled to neighboring Christian states, which had not imposed such edicts. In response to the Edict, Mehmet's son and successor Sultan Bayezid II adopted a policy of toleration and acceptance that facilitated a great migration of Sephardim into Ottoman territory. Like his father, Bayezid understood the benefits which a Jewish class could bring:

Ottoman sovereigns already knew from experience that some Jews could be useful to them. They did not need to wait for the Sephardic emigration to have among them Jewish doctors or important businessmen, Italiotes or Romaniotes, who, by the way, would never be entirely eclipsed by the success of the Sephardim. Another saying commonly attributed to Bayezid II clearly suggests this: "Ferdinand is said to be a well-advised prince, but he impoverishes his kingdom and enriches mine." In sum, Bayezid continued the straight line of pragmatism manifested by his father, Mehmed II, but whereas Mehmet II had

brought that pragmatism to bear mainly for the benefit of Istanbul, his renascent capital, its effects would be more broadly disseminated under his successor.¹

While it is true that Bayezid's policy of toleration benefited the whole of the empire in the same fashion that Mehmet's policy of relocation benefited Istanbul, there were much wider implications than simply an influx of capital and more people to work professional occupations. By allowing the Sephardim to freely move and settle within the empire, Bayezid laid the foundations for a culturally unified Ottoman Jewry. At its height, every corner of the Ottoman Empire possessed a unique Jewish community. Under Bayezid's successor, Sultan Selim I, and his successor, Sultan Suleiman I the Magnificent, the Ottoman Empire obtained territories in Syria, Iraq, Arabia, Yemen, Egypt and Morocco, each possessing its own long-established Jewish communities. Each of these communities possessed their own religious traditions, language, and history. Far from being a cohesive body, each community held negative perceptions of other Jewish communities and professed a superiority in their own culture. With the integration and dispersal of Sephardim across the empire, the Ottomans established a common Jewish class, unified in religious traditions, language, and cultural history. It is this shared history of expulsion and integration that made the Sephardim a distinct Ottoman variety of Jew.

While the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire was ruler over Muslims and non-Muslims alike, his non-Muslim subjects possessed obligations and privileges distinct from those of his Muslim subjects. Many of differences in status between the Muslims and the "People of the Book" were commanded by the Quran itself, and therefor fell under the body of sharia. While Muslims were

¹Abdelwahab Meddeb et al., *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013). 178.

obliged to pay the zakat and provide military service, non-Muslims had no such obligation, and were instead compelled to pay the jizya tax as compensation for their protection by the state.² Besides the Quran's mandates on how rulers are to treat non-Muslims, the Sultan allowed his non-Muslim subjects to enjoy partial governing autonomy through the millet system. Through their respective millets Christians and Jews were able to choose leaders in their local communities. These leaders would intercede with the Sultan on behalf of their millets, govern the millets according to their customs, and act as overseers for the faith. One notable deviation from this model was the Jewish millet in Jerusalem. After the Ottoman conquest of the 16th Century the Jews of Jerusalem possessed the privilege of selecting their own local Rabbis, but this privilege was revoked in the 18th Century. In place of an autonomous Jewish millet, a handful of wealthy Sephardic Jews in Istanbul were given the authority to appoint local leaders for the Jerusalem millet.³ Along with the positions held in the millets, Jews exercised political influence through other offices and occupations. A sort of secular Jewish governing position existed in the nasi. This secular leader would represent the interests of his local Jewish population, and conversely, execute the will of the local Ottoman administrators, particularly in tax collecting. In the realm of foreign commerce Sephardic merchants (like Yosef Nasi and Saloman Ya'is) engaged in trade between the empire and the European powers and were held in high esteem in the Sultan's court.⁴

In the early days of the Ottoman Empire the Jewish population enjoyed the free practice of their religion, economic stability and prosperity, and positions of authority within their semi-

² Quran 9:29.

³Bruce Alan Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). 62.

⁴José Alberto Tavim, "Sephardic Intermediaries in the Ottoman Empire," *Oriente Moderno* 93, no. 2 (2013): 454–76, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22138617-12340026>. 459.

autonomous millets and within imperial offices. This comfort that Jews enjoyed in the Ottoman Empire after the catastrophe in Iberia fostered various cultural and religious developments. Building on older traditions and common experiences, these new developments would touch Jewish communities around the world and capture the attention of Ottoman and Jewish authorities within the empire. The greatest development in Jewish religion to come from the Ottoman Empire was a Kabbalistic Messianic religious movement known as Sabbateanism.

Sabbatai Sevi, the founder of Sabbateanism, was born August 1, 1626. In the Hebrew Calander this day was the 9th of Ab in the year 5386. In addition to being born on the Sabbath, Sabbatai was also born on the day that the First and Second Jewish Temples were destroyed, a date which was believed to be the birthday of the Messiah in Rabbinic tradition. Born in Greece to a merchant father Sabbatai's family moved to Smyrna as it was developing into a major commercial hub in the empire. Sabbatai quickly became proficient in Talmudic studies and Jewish law, being ordained hakham, or rabbi, at age eighteen. He later went on to study Kabbalah, a school of Jewish mysticism, which holds that God exists as an unknowable, unmanifested *En-Sof* that created the universe through a series of emanations. He is to have said that the *Tif'ereth*, one of the emanations, or Sephirot, of God was the true manifestation of the unknowable Godhead, the God of Israel known by the unspeakable Tetragrammaton. Sabbatai was known to go through episodes of religious ecstasy, followed by episodes of deep depression. For this the rabbis of Smyrna took him to be ill or possessed, and so they did not take immediate action against him when he publicly ate forbidden foods, spoke the unspeakable name of God, and violated other commandments. Sabbatai, claiming to have been anointed as the Messiah with oil by the patriarchs, asserted that these acts were indications of the Messianic age and the world to come. In the early 1650s he was cast out of Smyrna by the rabbinic authorities.

In the 1660s Sabbatai made his way to Jerusalem. It was during this time that he established a relationship with Abraham Nathan Ashkenazi, or Nathan of Gaza. Indeed, it was the work of Nathan of Gaza that propelled Sabbateanism into an internationally recognized religious movement. Nathan, also a scholar of the Talmud and Kabbalah, claimed to have received a revelation from an angel declaring Sabbatai Sevi to be the Messiah. Though Nathan did not reveal this prophetic vision, Sabbatai publicly proclaimed himself to be the Messiah in Jerusalem. Nathan's second prophetic episode occurred as a possession of his body by a spirit of God in the presence of a congregation of rabbis in Gaza. In 1665, Sabbatai left Jerusalem after he was excommunicated by the rabbis there. He traveled throughout the Levant preaching his Messianic mission. In the meantime, Nathan of Gaza published religious work on his revelations, preaching the Messianic mission of Sabbatai. More than the actions of Sabbatai himself, or even the doctrines of the movement, the Messianic fervor stirred amongst the Jewish population was mostly the doing of Nathan's authorship:

More decisive, however, than the esoteric doctrines that were evolved and crystallized during the following months in Nathan's letters and homilies, was the explosive force of the messianic message as such. It appealed to the people as a whole, stirred up longings, and triggered a mighty emotional upheaval... It is a remarkable fact: the mighty wave of penitence and messianic fervor was unrelated to whatever Sabbatai did or did not do in the months following his expulsion from Jerusalem... The messiah functioned as a slogan or image rather than as a living personality. Unencumbered by his actual presence, the movement developed rapidly by following the lines of popular apocalyptic tradition.⁵

It was not the esoteric, mystical elements of Sabbatai's religion that drove Jews to follow him, but rather an appeal to traditional Jewish Messianism: the belief that a Messiah would come from the line of David, who would fill the world with justice, and return the Jews and the Lost Tribes of Israel to the Holy Land in Palestine. This was a prospect particularly attractive to the

⁵Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah, 1626-1676* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 252.

Sephardic Jews in the Ottoman Empire who had not forgotten the hardships that drove their ancestors from their old homeland. Word of Sabbatai's messiahship spread throughout Europe and even into Jewish settlements in the Americas.

In preparation for the Messianic age and the world to come, many Jews in the empire sold their possessions and left their occupations, devoting themselves to the Sabbatean movement. To Sultan Mehmed IV this presented a direct challenge to Ottoman authority. In 1666 Sabbatai Sevi entered Istanbul. It was during this time that Sabbateans believed that Sevi would place the Sultan's crown upon his head and commence the Messianic age. Upon his arrival in Istanbul, Sabbatai was arrested and imprisoned, but this did not discourage his followers. It only emboldened their belief in the coming messianic age. Under the order of an Ottoman vizier Sabbatai was brought to Adrianople and presented an ultimatum: convert or die. The day after this ultimatum was presented to him, Sabbatai Sevi was brought to Sultan Mehmet, and it was before him that he renounced his Judaism and converted to Islam. While the apostasy of Sabbatai Sevi would be the end of the Messianic movement for most of his followers, several families of devoted Sabbateans joined him in his conversion. These individuals, known as the Dönme were crypto-Jews, acting openly as Muslims but practicing Jewish Kabbalah in secret, believing that Sabbatai's outward Islam was simply the last component of his plan before he ushered in the Messianic age.

Sabbateanism was not simply an isolated religious fad in the Ottoman Empire. Sabbatai's mystical messianism embodied two challenges the Ottoman Empire had to address in the centuries after its era of conquest. Under Mehmet IV's reign the Ottoman Empire saw a surge in the influence of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism. These innovative Sufis established a monopoly over the position of Imam, or preacher, in the mosques of major Ottoman cities and interior

territories. To address this pressing issue Mehmed instated a purge of Sufi mysticism. This purge against Sufism was extended to Sabbateanism for its mystic elements. The Ottoman Empire was also faced with problems in its bureaucracy during the 17th Century. Throughout the empire, bureaucrats acted more as local rulers rather than imperial administrators, taking tax revenues from their provinces and swelling their purses. Sabbatai further confounded this problem in the bureaucracy in his travels through the empire. During his time in Cairo he received the support of the leader of its Jewish community, Raphael Joseph Celebi. Prior to the conquest of Egypt by the Ottomans in the 16th Century, the Egyptian Jews were governed under a rabbinical authority known as the nagid. After the Ottoman conquest this office was abolished and replaced by the çelebi. The çelebi was a secular bureaucratic position charged with acting as the financial authority within the Ottoman provinces. This position, even outside of Egypt, was a traditionally Jewish position, following the trend of establishing secular Jewish authorities to act as governing agents for the empire over its Jewish subjects.⁶ Sabbatai's claim of Messiahship threatened the secular nature of these positions, since many çelebi were followers of Sabbatai and believed he would take control of the empire. Mehemet could not tolerate a man who could threaten the loyalty of his Jewish subjects and Ottoman bureaucrats.

Sabbateanism as a breakaway movement was not an anomaly in Ottoman history. Rather, it served as a precursor to nationalist independence movements, which would bring about the diminishment of Ottoman territorial holdings in the 19th Century. Nationalist fervor in the Balkans created the momentum for successful independence movements in Greece and Bulgaria. The loss of control over Balkan territories was accompanied by a long period of corruption

⁶Jane Hathaway, "The Grand Vizier and the False Messiah: The Sabbatai Sevi Controversy and the Ottoman Reform in Egypt," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117, no. 4 (1997): 665–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/606448>. 668.

within the military classes and self-aggrandizement of the tax-farming ayan class, which the Ottoman Empire relied on for receiving government revenues. To reverse this trend of decline the Ottoman Empire initiated the Tanzimat Period, an era of reform intended to create modern state institutions. The reform period began with the Hatt-i Humayan of 1839, a decree of royal intent issued by Sultan Abdulmejid I. The proclamation declared the commitment of the state to the creation of institutions that would protect the life, honor and fortune of its subjects, execute a uniform system of taxation, and ensure a regular system of levying troops.⁷ The expressed goal of these reforms was to foster within the hearts of the Ottoman subjects a love for the Sultan and for their Ottoman homeland. In the eyes of the Sultan, providing equal justice to non-Muslim subjects, and securing their lives and property, would cultivate within them a new Ottoman identity, or Ottomanism. This Tanzimat project was extended further with the Hatt-i Humayan of 1856. Among the reforms issued in this decree, the administration of temporal property was transferred from the religious leaders of the millets to secular assemblies; all Ottoman subjects were admitted into military academies regardless of faith; and the mixed tribunals to hear cases between Muslim and non-Muslim subjects were established.⁸ The reforms of the Tanzimat between 1839 and 1876 had a substantial impact on what it meant to be a Jew in the Ottoman Empire.

In creating a centralized system of administration, many of the local, secular positions held by Jewish elites were abolished and the responsibilities and powers of those positions were placed in the hands of new Ottoman authorities. Inspection of local markets and the

⁷ The Rescript of Gülhane – Gülhane Hatt-ı Hümayunu

⁸ Rescript of Reform – Islahat Fermanı
(18 February 1856)

administration of charitable endowments were placed into new Ottoman offices.⁹ Ottoman officers acted as intermediaries between the Sultan and local Jewish leaders. The old practice of tax-farming was abolished, and so were the old taxes that they collected. A uniform, progressive income tax was established and collected by state-employed tax collectors. In the Dardanelles, Jews found this new system to be particularly favorable, as it allowed them to retain more of their wealth, since the tax collector enjoyed his employment by the Sultan's pleasure and possessed no ability to keep a portion of the taxes for himself.

Along with centralized administration and mixed Ottoman courts, the Ottoman Empire reformed its legal system to be more easily understood and navigated by non-Muslim subjects. The result of this reform was the Mecelle, a civil code which retained the criminal and civil framework of the sharia while incorporating the commercial and maritime legal elements of the Napoleonic Code. These sets of reforms created conditions very favorable for Jews living in major Ottoman cities. Instead of having to deal with different sets of local Jewish authorities when conducting every-day activities, Jews need only heed the Ottoman authorities who exercised a uniform set of rules throughout the empire. This was particularly pleasing to the Jewish middle class and merchant class living in these major cities for the ease of carrying out economic activity. Indeed, because Jewish life became so reliant on the health of the state, when the empire suffered, so too did the Jewish merchant class. This reality was encapsulated in the First Crimean War. The economic damages sustained by the Ottoman Empire because of the war had a direct impact on Jewish communities. This sparked calls by local Jewish leaders to their communities to support the Ottoman war effort, invoking a sense of patriotic and philanthropic

⁹Mustafa M. Kulu and Seçil Akgün, *A Brief History of the Dardanelles Jews During Early Tanzimat Years, 1839-1845* (Middle Eastern Technical University, 2005). 92.

duty to support Ottoman soldiers. From demonstrations like these it is evident that, at least concerning the economic life of urban Ottoman Jews, the Tanzimat reforms were successful in creating within Jews a vested interest in the survival and success of the state, and through this, a sense of patriotism with the Ottoman Empire.

While Ottomanism brought Ottoman Jews within the fold of the nation's economy and political community there still existed points of confrontation between Muslim and Jewish subjects. These areas of conflict existed within the spaces of shared importance by people of multiple confessions, spaces which were integral to the daily social and religious life of Ottoman subjects. One of the most notable incidents of intra-Ottoman religious confrontation was sparked over the burial of a Baghdadi Rabbi in 1889. In mid-September of that year the revered Baghdadi Jewish Rabbi Somekh passed away. Consistent with Jewish burial practices the Rabbi had to be buried immediately after his passing. The Jewish congregation wished to bury the Rabbi in a burial shrine revered by both the Muslims and the Jews of the city. To transport the body to the shrine, the Jewish congregation had to pass through the Muslim neighborhoods of the city. They did this during an outbreak of cholera, violating the city's quarantine protocols. The Muslim residents of the city responded with violence, compelling the local Ottoman authorities to break up the fighting and arrest the participants. While Muslim detainees were released shortly after the incident, the Jews who were arrested during the altercation remained in Ottoman custody even after the quarantine had been lifted. The Baghdadi Jews petitioned the Sultan for their release, but this request fell on deaf ears. Seeing that the Ottoman state would not come to their rescue, the Baghdadi Jews relayed the testimony of their persecution to Jewish and European newspapers outside of Europe, bringing international attention to their situation. In response to this pressure, the Sultan freed the prisoners and removed the local governor who had imprisoned

them. This was only a minor victory for the Baghdadi Jews, as the governor was simply relocated to another position in the Syrian Province. They were also ordered to relocate the body of Rabbi Somekh to a Jewish cemetery. This order was justified under Islamic law, as according to the sharia, a non-Muslim could not be buried in an Islamic holy shrine, and the Jews had not established that the burial shrine was an area of Jewish religious importance. This exercise of power by the Ottoman government conveyed to Jews within and outside the Ottoman Empire that even with full economic and political integration into the modern state experiment, there would always be areas of life where the Jewish minority would be marginalized. Events like the one in Baghdad drove Jews away from identifying with a declining empire that did not fully respect their rights and towards a movement which advocated for the establishment of a national Jewish identity.

The end of the 19th Century saw the emergence of a new Jewish political movement. This movement, in the same vein of the nationalism which swept Europe during this period, advocated for the creation of a Jewish nation-state. The political organization and financial support for this new movement of Zionism was born in Europe, but considerations on the prospect of a Jewish state were ever-present for Ottoman Jews, and like in Europe, Ottoman Jews possessed a diversity of views on the proper role of Israel in Jewish life. To Ottoman Rabbis in the 19th Century, the Land of Israel possessed a great deal of religious importance but should not have been considered as a destination for Jewish immigration. To these Rabbis, only those Jews who were living in Jerusalem at that time should be financially supported, and only those elderly Jews able to afford the pilgrimage should be encouraged to live in Jerusalem. The time of Jewish return to the holy land, the Rabbis argued, was an event reserved for when the

messiah arrived.¹⁰ This argument proved to be unpersuasive to many Zionists, particularly secular Zionists, who were bent on creating a Jewish homeland rather than fulfilling messianic prophecy. By the 20th Century the first Aliyah, or Jewish migration to the Land of Israel had occurred with the support of Jewish philanthropy organizations and the sanction of the European colonial powers. Ottoman Jewish support for the Zionist project was evident at this time. One Sephardic publication in support of the Zionist project refuted the opposition to this migration by Palestinian Muslims in Jerusalem:

Many Muslim leaders in Jerusalem expressed their fear of the foreign Jews who arrive in the country and remain [here] under the protection of foreign governments, do not adopt Ottoman citizenship, do not learn the language of the state and do not take part in the duties of the homeland. . . . But these people [who criticize the immigrants] forget that many [Jews] wished to adopt Ottoman citizenship but were prevented from doing so by the [Ottoman] government itself.¹¹

The Sephardic author expressed that the Jewish immigrants of Palestine desired, but were denied, Ottoman citizenship. From the perspective of Ottoman Jews, this was simply another instance of the Ottoman state failing to fully incorporate Jews into the Ottoman body politic. All means of coexistence were exhausted, the only avenue by which Jews could enjoy all their rights without compromise would be with the existence of a Jewish state.

With a Jewish homeland emerging in the early 20th Century, Zionists worked to create institutions that foster a new national identity. To the Zionists, these institutions would need to instill within the nation the best component of both Jewish and Palestinian culture in order to create a cohesive identity out of the many Jewish groups emigrating from across the globe. This new “Hebrew” identity would supersede the Jewish identity which had been held by the

¹⁰Matthias B. Lehmann, *Ladino Rabbinic Literature and Ottoman Sephardic Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). 158.

¹¹ ”The Time Is Here”: Ha-Herut

Diaspora in all countries they resided. One of the institutions created to instill this new Hebrew identity was the Herzlia Gymnasium. This institution taught youths on Jewish history and religion. The school also contributed to the revival and reconstruction of Hebrew from a dead language to the living, spoken language of present-day Israelis. The first country to give certification to the Herzlia Gymnasium was the Ottoman Empire. This accomplishment helped to legitimize the educational projects of Zionism, and which could not have been accomplished without the activism of Ottoman Jews.¹²

The history of Ottoman Jews is a testament to the fact that history is not a closed system. Historical events cannot simply be attributed to forces which are internal. Rather, internal and external forces exert themselves and interact with each other to produce the outcomes we live with today. The history of Ottoman Jews also informs us that the end of one history is the beginning of another. Though the Iberian Jews were expelled from their native Spain and Portugal, their descendants would live on to play a pivotal role in Ottoman political life and the formation of the modern Israeli state.

¹² Arieh Bruce Saposnik, *Becoming Hebrew: The Creation of a Jewish National Culture in Ottoman Palestine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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