

## CHAPTER 7

# A Different Voice:

## *Jewish Women in the Lands of Islam (1492-1750)*

### OVERVIEW

Once a strong and united territory, the lands of the Islamic Empire had begun to separate and weaken even before the year 1000 (see chapter 3). The separation of Spain and then North Africa from the Abbasid Empire was only the beginning of this trend. In the West, the Spanish Caliphate divided into small principalities, ruled by warring potentates. In the East, the Mongol invasion of 1258, the Bedouin attacks in North Africa, and the Crusades hastened disintegration.<sup>1</sup> By the end of the thirteenth century, what had been a strong and glorious empire was fragmented and weak; power and prestige were passing to western European Christian leaders.

The Jews in Muslim lands suffered severely as wars and persecutions wreaked havoc with once thriving economies. Many Jews left the Middle East altogether. Then, in the middle of the fifteenth century, the Ottomans appeared, offering a chance for a better life.

### The Ottoman Empire

The Ottoman Empire began with one Turkish tribe that established a bridgehead in Anatolia in approximately 1300. They “expanded relentlessly” from there, north into the Balkans as far as the Danube River, finally capturing Constantinople, the seat of the Christian Byzantine Empire, in 1453.<sup>2</sup> As part of their policy of populating cities with groups of people who were favorable to them, the Ottomans forcibly transferred Jews from the Balkans into Constantinople, now called Istanbul, as well as into other newly conquered areas such as Salonika and Rhodes. This demographic

policy, coupled with the immigration of Spanish Jews, caused the Jewish populations of Istanbul and Salonika to double and triple.<sup>3</sup> With the expulsion of all Jews from Spain in 1492 and the forced conversion of Portuguese Jews in 1497, the steady trickle became a flood.

The hundreds of thousands of Jews who were expelled from Spain were turned away from one port after another. Thousands died on the ships without ever reaching a safe haven. Some went to the land of Israel, still under Mameluke rule, but a great number of these refugees, sometimes alone, sometimes in family groups, were welcomed into the newly ascendant Ottoman Empire throughout the sixteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Known variously as New Christians, *conversos*, or crypto-Jews, many had lived a full generation pretending to be believing Catholics, waiting for an opportunity to escape Catholic Spain and Portugal to a more tolerant environment.

The Ottomans were Muslims and believed in separating and secluding women. Many Jews tended to follow this custom. However, a few Jewish women found broadened opportunities in Ottoman lands, in service to the women of the sultan's court. This handful of women, called *kieras*,<sup>5</sup> became well known and, depending on the power of their noble patrons, sometimes exercised considerable **public power** themselves.

After the Ottomans conquered the Mamelukes in 1516–17, the Empire expanded still further to include Iraq, Syria, and the land of Israel, making the Jewish population of this growing empire one of the largest in the world and certainly the most heterogeneous.<sup>6</sup> Ottoman Jews could be divided into several groups, each with its own language, distinctive culture, and customs.

Throughout the sixteenth century, waves of *conversos* (converted Jews and their descendants) who managed to escape from Christian Spain and Portugal followed the initial Sephardic immigration. They viewed the lands of the Ottoman sultan as a place “where the gates of liberty are always wide open for you that you may fully practice your Judaism.”<sup>7</sup>

#### THE VARIED JEWISH POPULATION IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

- *Romaniot*: Greek-speaking Jews of the Balkans and western Asia Minor.
- *Musta'rabs*: Indigenous, Arabic-speaking Jews of the Middle East, living in Syria, Iraq, Egypt, and the land of Israel.
- *Ma'aravis* (Maghrebis): Jews of North Africa.
- Ashkenazim: Yiddish-speaking Jews from Germany and central Europe. A small number had settled in Egypt and the land of Israel.
- Sephardim: the Jews from Spain and Portugal who spoke their own language (Ladino) and established Sephardic customs wherever they went.
- Kurdish- and Aramaic-speaking Jews from eastern lands.

For their part, Ottoman sultans, eager to expand, hailed Jewish immigration and Jewish skills as an unexpected but welcome benefit. Sultan Bayezit II (1481–1512) was quoted as saying: “Can you call such a king [as Ferdinand of Spain] wise and intelligent? He is impoverishing his country and enriching my kingdom.”<sup>8</sup> During the early sixteenth century, when the Ottoman Empire was at the peak of its success militarily, politically, and economically, a positive attitude toward immigration continued.

The vast migration of Sephardim changed the composition of all the Jewish communities of the Islamic world. Quickly outnumbering the original Jewish inhabitants, the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking Jews assumed leadership roles wherever they settled, and their rabbis produced collections of responsa and law codes that spread Sephardic traditions and usage throughout the empire.<sup>9</sup> Although initially each congregation of Jews remained separate, within two or three generations, the Sephardic rite was adopted in most of the synagogues of the Ottoman lands.<sup>10</sup> The Sephardim revived education and secular interests as well as the study of Jewish law, which had been neglected among the original inhabitants.<sup>11</sup>

### Decline of an Empire

This favorable climate for Jews lasted about one hundred years. Suleiman I, the Magnificent (1520–1566), was the last sultan to win military victories. Subsequent sultans were weak and less successful. The empire sustained military losses, and the economy went into a downward slide. In the land of Israel, the towns of Safed, Jerusalem, and Tiberius, which had enjoyed considerable prosperity, began to weaken economically. Trade, both foreign and domestic, steadily gave way to increasing competition from the West. Safed, once the eastern center of the Ottoman textile industry as well as a religious and intellectual center of Jewish learning and mysticism, began losing its population. The Jews of Salonika, the largest center of the cloth industry in the empire, managed to maintain and keep control of the commerce in textiles through the eighteenth century, but lost most of their foreign trade.<sup>12</sup>

By 1574, when Murad III became sultan, he curtailed the power of the women in his court. At the same time, he put new laws in place that accentuated a separation of Jews and Christians from the Muslim majority, and the status of the Jews throughout the empire declined sharply. It was under the rule of Sultan Murad III that the *kieras*, the female and usually Jewish liaisons between the sultanas and the outside world, lost power. Under Murad’s successor Mehmed III, **Esther Handali**, the best known and most powerful of the *kieras*, was brutally executed.

By the time of Mehmed III’s death in 1623, the sultanate was considerably weakened and could not maintain its power in face of the increasing

strength of political interest groups. These groups, especially the Janissaries, or *Spahis* (a powerful part of the Turkish military), began to demand some of the commercial concessions that once belonged to Jews.<sup>13</sup>

The slow decline of the Ottoman Empire, beginning just as the sixteenth century came to an end, was never reversed, and the effects were evident among Jews as well. Where Jewish communities were once united, signs of social unrest appeared by the seventeenth century, and from the mid-eighteenth century onward, the number of poor people increased. Jewish communities fell into debt, and “many were on the bread line.”<sup>14</sup>

The poverty and hardship endemic to the Ottoman Empire in those later years was felt by women even more than men, and women’s names appear in the Jewish communal charity rolls far more often than men’s names. Evidence of women’s poverty is reflected in the letters that they wrote—or had others write—to send to relatives. One example of this is the letter written by **Rachel Sussman**, originally of Prague, who lived in the land of Israel.<sup>15</sup>

For both Jews and gentiles, educational decline followed the weakening of the economy. The standard of rabbinical learning, of great importance in the sixteenth century, began to deteriorate. Although scholars continued to write in Hebrew and Ladino, and their works were printed by the many Jewish presses that the Sephardim had brought with them from Spain and Portugal, the literature had only a limited appeal.<sup>16</sup> As the seventeenth century progressed, mysticism and the study of Kabbalah took precedence, spreading out from its center in Safed to other communities. Responding to this heightened interest in the miraculous, fostered in part by the persecution of Jews occurring in eastern Europe (see chapter 6) as well as in Turkey itself, many Jews began to believe that the End of Days was imminent.<sup>17</sup> They waited for a messiah to come and redeem them.

### The Rise and Fall of Messianic Hopes

Shabbetai Zevi, a highly unstable young Jew born in Izmir (Smyrna) into a middle-class family, came to believe that he was the Messiah. He traveled throughout the empire, preaching his own brand of mysticism and gaining a large following, especially among the *convertos*. Women also flocked to him.

Shabbetai married and divorced several times. Facts about his first marriage are obscure but according to Gershom Scholem, it occurred when he was twenty-two or twenty-four years old.<sup>18</sup> Then in 1664, he married **Sarah**, a Polish orphan. Shabbetai returned to Izmir with her and officially announced that he was God’s anointed one. Following this proclamation, Turkish officials had him arrested and gave him a choice between conversion to Islam or death. He chose conversion.

By opting to convert, Shabbetai Zevi stunned Jews throughout the Ottoman Empire and beyond. Most, completely disillusioned, turned away from a belief in the Messiah. But Shabbetai's wife, Sarah, and a small band of Turkish Jews also converted to Islam. Some of these converts later formed a Judeo-Muslim sect known as the Doenmeh.<sup>19</sup>

Although later Jewish scholars tried to remove all mention of Shabbetai Zevi from the records, this proved impossible. As conditions worsened for Jews in the lands of Islam, the concept of messianism, as well as mystical methods to encourage the coming of the Messiah, remained appealing. In the face of rabbinical disapproval, many who had believed in Shabbetai Zevi continued to have faith in his message and practiced his rites in secret. Some women, too, found an appeal in this new system of messianic beliefs and would make their mark in the new religious movements that developed throughout the eighteenth century.

## BIOGRAPHIES

**ABERLIN, RACHEL MISHAN OF SAFED, MYSTIC**

(16th century)

Born into a family of mystics, Rachel was the sister of R. Yehudah Mishan, one of Isaac Luria's disciples. Rachel Mishan married Yehudah Aberlin of Salonika after he immigrated to the land of Israel in the mid-fifteenth century and settled in Safed. Yehudah became head of the Ashkenazic community there and was close to the rabbi and their mystical circle. When he died in 1582, his widow, Rachel, enjoyed a certain amount of prestige, and by 1590 she had established her own court either in Safed or Jerusalem. She had long been an admirer of Isaac Luria, and after his death, she allied herself with his closest disciple, Ḥayyim Vital. Vital and Aberlin were close associates for many years and appeared together in Jerusalem and Damascus. Vital held her in the highest regard and

lived in her home for some time, together with his wife and children.

It is mainly through Vital's writings that we know about Rachel Aberlin. Beginning in 1578, Vital reported her visions and her prophetic words. She first saw a pillar of fire hovering over Vital's head as he preached in the synagogue. At other times, Vital wrote, she saw visions of the prophet Elijah.

Aberlin acted as an advisor to other women mystics, including the daughter of Raphael Anav, a young, unnamed girl whose mystical prowess is also reported by Ḥayyim Vital.<sup>21</sup>

**FRANCESA SARAH OF SAFED, MYSTIC**

(16th century)

This pious woman lived in Safed, the center of the kabbalistic movement, during the sixteenth century and had a personal *maggid*, a spiritual guide who spoke with her and foretold future events. She may have been the only woman in Safed who communicated with such a spiritual advisor, although the phenomenon was known among men.

Even though most women in the Middle East were not even expected to pray regularly, reports about Francesa Sarah refer to her as a holy woman and authenticate her personal revelations. Ḥayyim Vital, one of the principal disciples of Isaac Luria, in his book *Sefer ha-Ḥezyonot* (*Book of Visions*, 1594), wrote: "I was in Safed. . . . A woman was there, Francesa Sarah, a pious woman, who saw visions in a waking dream and heard a voice speaking to her, and most of her words were true."<sup>22</sup> She predicted a plague and

## THE ROLE OF THE MAGGID

The concept of a *maggid*, a supernatural being who communicated directly with one individual, had been introduced into Judaism by the Sephardic scholar Yosef Taitazak, and was an accepted phenomenon in the kabbalistic circles of Safed. The famous Yosef Caro, author of the *Shulḥan Arukh*, claimed that his *maggid* spoke to him, advised him on the law, gave him the words to write, and offered personal advice.<sup>20</sup>

insisted that the community leaders ordain a fast to prevent the catastrophe. They did as she demanded, and there is no record of plague coming to Safed at that time.

**FREḤA BAT AVRAHAM OF MOROCCO, POET AND SCHOLAR**  
(18th century)

Freḥa bat Avraham was born in Morocco and lived in Tunisia. A member of the prominent Moroccan Bar Adiba family,<sup>23</sup> Freḥa was probably born in the 1730s. She moved with her father and brother to Tunis, Tunisia, because of the persecutions of the Jews of Morocco that occurred from 1728 to 1757.

She wrote in Hebrew, and one of her poems, expressing hope for redemption, is among those that have been preserved. For the Bar Adiba family, however, the safety and redemption for which Freḥa yearned were elusive. In 1756, Tunis was attacked and conquered by the Algerians, and many in the Jewish community were forced to escape the subsequent persecutions. Freḥa's father and brother also fled but, for some unknown reason, Freḥa did not accompany them. When her father and brother returned to Tunis they searched for her but she was never found. It was assumed that she died or was killed during the disturbances.

To honor her memory, Freḥa's father, R. Avraham, built a synagogue in her name. He located the ritual bath on the site where her bed once stood, and the Holy Ark marked the place of her library. The fact that she possessed her own library (although it might have included only a few books) indicates that Freḥa was educated. Yosef Benjoie, an early twentieth-century writer, called her *rabbanit*, a word that usually implies a very learned

FRANCESA SARAH,  
MYSTIC OF SAFED

In those days there was a wise woman who did great deeds in the upper Galilee, in Safed—may it be rebuilt and reestablished quickly in our time—and her name was Francesa and she had a *maggid* to tell her and to announce to her what will happen in the world. And the sages of Safed tested her several times to know if there was substance in her words and of all that she would say not one [of her prophecies] was left unfulfilled. Once she sent to the sages of Safed and said to them that they should enact a fast day and they should stand up for their lives with prayers and entreaties, and do charitable work, “perhaps God will be kind to us and we will not perish [Jon. 1:6] in the plague, God willing.” . . . Immediately the rabbis decreed a fast day . . . from the small to the large, from man to woman, from the baby to the nursling, and R. Moshe de Koriel stood up to preach to the community, and she, even she [Francesa] sat with part of the worthy women who were, in that generation, in a second story at the back of the synagogue to pray with the community. . . .<sup>24</sup>

woman.<sup>25</sup> Another writer stated: “She was well-versed in Torah and wrote Hebrew compositions and poetry.”<sup>26</sup>

Freḥa's synagogue became a place of pilgrimage for the Jewish women of