the
jewish
presence
in palestine

by
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israel academic committee
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discriminations, persecutions, and massacres of the variegated Moslem sects—Arab Omayyads, Abbasids, and Fatimids, the Turkish Seljuks, and the Mamluks. Jewish life had by some historic sleight-of-hand outlived the Crusaders, its mortal enemy. It had survived Mongol barbarism.

More than an expression of self-preservation, Jewish life had a purpose and a mission. It was the trustee and the advance guard of restoration. At the close of the fifteenth century the pilgrim Arnold Van Harff reported that he had found many Jews in Jerusalem and that they spoke Hebrew. They told another traveler, Felix Fabri, that they hoped soon to resettle the Holy Land.⁵

During the same period Martin Kabatnik (who did not like Jews), visiting Jerusalem during his pilgrimage, exclaimed:

The heathens oppress them at their pleasure. They know that the Jews think and say that this is the Holy Land that was promised to them. Those of them who live here are regarded as holy by the other Jews, for in spite of all the tribulations and the agonies they suffer at the hands of the heathen, they refuse to leave the place.⁶

At the height of their splendor, in the first generations after their conquest of Palestine in 1516, the Ottoman Turks were tolerant and showed a friendly face to the Jews. During the sixteenth century there developed a new effervescence in the life of the Jews in the country. Thirty communities, urban and rural, are recorded at the opening of the Ottoman era. They include Haifa, Sh’chem, Hebron, Ramleh, Jaffa, Gaza, Jerusalem, and many in the north. Their center was Safed; its community grew quickly. It became the largest in Palestine and assumed the recognized spiritual leadership of the whole Jewish world. The luster of the cultural “golden age” that now developed shone over the whole country and has inspired Jewish

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⁶ Justin V. Frasek, Martin Kabatnik (Prague). Quoted in Michael Ish-Shalom, Masaei Notzrim Be’eretz Yisrael, p. 265.
spiritual life to the present day. It was there and then that a phenomenal group of mystic philosophers evolved the mysteries of the Cabala. It was at that time and in the inspiration of the place that Joseph Caro compiled the Shulhan Aruch, the formidable codification of Jewish observance which largely guides orthodox custom to this day. Poets and writers flourished. Safed achieved a fusion of scholarship and piety with trade, commerce, and agriculture. In the town the Jews developed a number of branches of trade, especially in grain, spices, and cloth. They specialized once again in the dyeing trade. Lying halfway between Damascus and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast, Safed gained special importance in the commercial relations in the area. The 8,000 or 10,000 Jews in Safed in 1555 grew to 20,000 or 30,000 by the end of the century.\(^7\)

In the neighboring Galilean countryside a number of Jewish villages—from Turkish sources we know of ten of them—continued to occupy themselves with the production of wheat and barley and cotton, vegetables and olives, vines and fruit, pulse and sesame.\(^8\)

The recurrent references in the sketchy records that have survived suggest that in some of those Galilean villages—such as Kfar Alma, Ein Zeitim, Biria, Pekiin, Kfar Hanania, Kfar Kana, Kfar Yassif—the Jews, against all logic and in defiance of the pressures and exactions and confiscations of generation after generation of foreign conquerors, had succeeded in clinging to the land for fifteen centuries.\(^9\) Now for several decades of benevolent Ottoman rule, the Jewish communities flourished in village and town.

The history of the second half of the sixteenth century illustrates the dynamism of the Palestinian Jews—their prosperity, their progressiveness, and their subjugation: In 1577 a Hebrew printing press was established in Safed.

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\(^8\) Bernard Lewis, *Notes and Documents from the Turkish Archives* (Jerusalem, 1952), p. 15ff.

The first press in Palestine, it was also the first in Asia. In 1576, and again in 1577, the Sultan Murad III, the first anti-Jewish Ottoman ruler, ordered the deportation of 1,000 wealthy Jews from Safed, though they had not broken any laws or transgressed in any way. They were needed by Murad to strengthen the economy of another of the Sultan’s provinces—Cyprus. It is not known whether they were in fact deported or reprieved.10

The honeymoon period between the Ottoman Empire and the Jews lasted only as long as the empire flourished. With the beginning and development of its long decline in the seventeenth century, oppression and anarchy made growing inroads into the country, and Jewish life began to follow a confused pattern of persecutions, prohibitions, and ephemeral prosperity. Prosperity grew rarer, persecutions and oppressions became the norm. The Ottomans, to whom Palestine was merely a source of revenue, began to exploit the Jews’ fierce attachment to Palestine. They were consequently made to pay a heavy price for living there. They were taxed beyond measure and were subjected to a system of arbitrary fines. Early in the seventeenth century two Christian travelers, Johann van Egmont and John Hayman, could say of the Jews in Safed: “Life here is the poorest and most miserable that one can imagine.” The Turks so oppressed them, they wrote, that “they pay for the very air they breathe.”11

Again and again during the three centuries of Turkish decline the Jews so lived and bore themselves that even hostile Christian travelers were moved to express their astonishment at their pertinacity—despite suffering, humiliation, and violence—in clinging to their homeland.

The Jews of Jerusalem, wrote the Jesuit Father Michael Naud in 1674, were agreed about one thing: “paying heavily to the Turk for their right to stay here.... They prefer being prisoners in Jerusalem to enjoying the freedom they could acquire elsewhere.... The love of the Jews for the Holy Land, which they lost through their betrayal [of

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10 Lewis, p. 28–33.
11 Travels: (London 1759) quoted by Ish-Shalom, p. 388.
Christ], is unbelievable. Many of them come from Europe to find a little comfort, though the yoke is heavy.”

And not in Jerusalem alone. Even as anarchy spread over the land, marauding raids by Bedouins from the desert increased, and the roads became further infested with bandits, and while the Sultan’s men, when they appeared at all, came only to collect both the heavy taxes directed against all and the special taxes exacted from the Jews, Jewish communities still held on all over the country. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries travelers reported them in Hebron (where, in addition to the regular exactions, threats of deportation, arrests, violence, and bloodshed, the Jews suffered the gruesome tribulations of a blood libel in 1775); Gaza, Ramleh, Sh’chem, Safed (where the community had lost its preeminence and its prosperity), Acre, Sidon, Tyre, Haifa, Irsuf, Caesarea, and El Arish; and Jews continued to live and till the soil in Galilean villages.

But as the country itself declined and the bare essentials of life became inaccessible, the Jewish community also contracted. By the end of the eighteenth century historians’ estimates put their number at between 10,000 and 15,000. Their national role, however, was never blurred. When the Jews in Palestine had no economic basis, the Jews abroad regarded it as their minimum national duty to insure their physical maintenance, and a steady stream of emissaries brought back funds from the Diaspora. In the long run this had a degrading effect on those Jews who came to depend on these contributions for all their needs. But the significance of the motive and spirit of the aid is not lessened: the Jews in Palestine were regarded as the guardians of the Jewish heritage. Nor can one ignore the endurance and pertinacity of the recipients, in the face of oppression and humiliation and the threat of physical violence, in their role of “guardians of the walls.”

However determined the Jews in Palestine might have been, however deep their attachment to the land, and

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