Facing the Sea:
The Jews of Salonika in the
Ottoman Era (1430–1912)

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Afula, 2011
1. Origins, Settlement and Heyday, 1430–1595

Jews resided in Salonika many centuries before the Turkic tribes first made their appearance on the borders of Western civilization, at the Islamic world’s frontier. In fact, Salonika was one of the cities in whose synagogue the apostle Paul had preached Jesus’ teachings. Like many other Jewish communities in this part of the Roman (and later the Byzantine) Empire, this had been a Greek-speaking community leading its life in much the same way as the Greek pagans, and later, the Christian city dwellers around them. The Ottoman conquest of Salonika in 1430 did little to change their lifestyle. A major upheaval did take place, however, with the Ottoman takeover of Constantinople in 1453. The Ottoman Sultan Mehmet II, the Conqueror (Fatih in Turkish), aimed to turn the former Byzantine capital into the hub of his Empire, a world power in its own right on a par with such earlier grand empires as the Roman and the Persian. To that effect, he ordered the transfer of entire populations—Muslims, Greeks, and Jews—from other parts of his empire to the new capital in order to rebuild and repopulate it. Among these groups was the entire Jewish community of Salonika. From that moment onwards, the members of this community constituted the congregation (cema’at in Turkish) of Selanik in Istanbul, and any of them who tried to return to Salonika were sent for and duly brought back to the capital escorted by a sultanic guard.¹ Salonika itself had meanwhile been populated by Christians who returned to the city after its conquest, voluntary Muslim settlers, and other Muslims who were forced to move to the city in 1478. This method of forced transfer of entire populations according to the needs

¹ Responsum of R. Yosef ben Shelomoh Taitatzaq (d. 1539) issued ca. 1520, in M. Benayahu, “Haskamot ‘Hezqat ha-hatzerot, ha-Batim ve-ha-Hanuyot’ be-Saloniqi, u-Pisqelim shel R. Yosef Taitatzaq ve-Hakhmei Doro” (Accords Regarding the Ownership of Courts, Houses and Shops in Salonika, and the Rulings of R. Yosef Taitatzaq and His Contemporaries), Michael 9 (Tel Aviv: The Diaspora Research Institute, Tel Aviv University, 1985), pp. 109–111; R. Levi Ibn Haviv (ca. 1480–ca.1541), Responsa (Lvov, 1865), sec. 136.
of the Ottoman state, is referred to in Turkish as sürgün; the people subjected to it were tied to their new places of residence as were their descendants.

It is very likely that in the period between 1453 and 1492 there were no Jews in Salonika at all. At least, they do not appear as taxpayers in the Ottoman records (tahrir defterleri) of 1478. They reappear in 1492 with the settlement of the Jewish expellees from Spain and its territories in Southern Italy. From a township of 10,414 residents in 1478, Salonika had become a town of 29,200 residents by 1519. The greater part of these new residents were the Jewish expellees. It is very likely that in the period between 1453 and 1492 there were no Jews in Salonika at all. At least, they do not appear as taxpayers in the Ottoman records (tahrir defterleri) of 1478. They reappear in 1492 with the settlement of the Jewish expellees from Spain and its territories in Southern Italy. From a township of 10,414 residents in 1478, Salonika had become a town of 29,200 residents by 1519. The greater part of these new residents were the Jewish expellees. ² Salonika had become a favored destination for these expellees for two reasons: (a) it was the first major port in the Ottoman Empire where the ships transporting them laid anchor; (b) more than 14.5 percent of the Muslim population of the city prior to the expulsion from Spain were engaged in the textile industry, with a further 16 percent in the leather industry.³ These were popular occupations among the Iberian Jews as well. It seems that information regarding the favorable conditions for such industries in Salonika had spread very quickly among the expellees, who kept pouring into the city. Presumably, this was especially true for refugees whose first port of arrival was not Salonika. While the Ottoman tahrir of ca. 1500 counted 822 Jewish households and 15 unmarried Jews, in the 1519 register we find 3,143 such households and 930 unmarrieds; in 1530, 2,645 households and no unmarrieds; in 1567, 2,883 households and 2,271 unmarrieds; and in 1613, 2,933 households and 2,270 unmarrieds.⁴ The Ottoman data, however, should not be taken at face value. The shifting total of unmarrieds implies that the numbers are not necessarily authentic but the result of negotiations between the community and the authorities.⁵ Moreover, we have definite evidence that

⁴ Idem, “When did the Sephardim Arrive in Salonika?” p. 211.
⁵ Ibid., p. 208.
the numbers from 1530 were partly the product of a dialogue with the
Ottoman authorities, and those of 1567 were definitely the result of even
lengthier negotiations between the community and the central
administration in Istanbul—a process that lasted two full years, in the
course of which special envoys from the Salonika community resided in
Istanbul to conduct these talks. Further census numbers were always the
product of discussions between the two parties regarding the tax rates, and
do not reflect reality.

Salonika was not the final port for all who arrived there, and many of
them stayed for a certain length of time before continuing elsewhere.
Migration patterns depended on the refugees’ ability to make a living in
the city. Many of them were successful, while others moved on to seek
their fortunes elsewhere. The story of Jewish settlement in the city is an
incredible saga of human endurance and the power of survival. The first
arrivals were destitute. Many of them had lost all or part of their family
during the voyage from Spain. Especially difficult was the emotional
situation of the many who had lost children and were unable to beget
others. Hanging over their heads was the knowledge that many family
members and friends were forced to stay against their will in what was
referred to in Hebrew as ha-shemad, a term meaning at the same time both
“conversion” and “extermination.” Even more dispiriting was the effort to
make sense out of the horrible ordeals they had suffered, and the death of
innocent children. In spite of the trauma they held onto life, established
new families, and prospered.

R. Shemuel de Medina (1506–1589), one of the prominent rabbinical
authorities of Salonika, wrote in the second half of the sixteenth century
that “the children of Israel who were coming from the lands of the Gentiles
to take refuge under the wings of the great king of Togarma [the Ottoman
Empire–MR], may his glory be exalted, came as wanderers, strangers and
destitute. No one imagined that they would buy courtyards…but later…the

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6 See note 65 below.
7 See below, pp.10-13.
8 Medina, Responsa, Even ha-’Ezer, sec. 15.
ben Meir Garson”), in Michael 7 (Tel Aviv: The Diaspora Research Institute, Tel Aviv
University, 1982), Salonika Sermons, March 1500, pp. 134–135.
10 Ibid., Salonika Sermons, Sermon for Shavu’ot (Pentecost), 14 May 1500, p. 143.
children of Israel succeeded in acquiring immovable assets with God’s help.”

In the introduction to the work *Lev Avot*, a commentary on the tractate Avot by Shelomoh ben Yitzhaq le-Veit Halevi published in Salonika in 1565, it was written: “printed in Salonika, Mother City [in Hebrew, ‘ir moledet], grand city, city of a great king, under the reign of our master the king, Sultan Süleyman, may his glory be exalted.” In addition to the meaning of “metropolis,” the use of the term ‘ir moledet with reference to Salonika just seventy-three years after settling there testifies to a strong sense of emotional affinity with the city. Such an expression as Mother City was previously unheard of in the Jewish Diaspora. The available sources suggest that by the beginning of the eighteenth century, Salonika’s population had risen to 65,000: almost half its inhabitants (30,000) were Jews, along with 10,000 Greeks and 25,000 Muslims. Given the fact that the early years of the eighteenth century were a time of plague and general deterioration in the city, it would not be unreasonable to estimate the Jewish population of the city in its heyday (i.e., the mid-sixteenth century) as having ranged between 35,000 and 40,000 people.

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