Medieval Israel Class #7: The Redeemers: The Semicha Controversy and Dona Gracia's Dream

Timeline

1440 Printing press invented

1492 Columbus discovers America

1517 Ottoman conquest of the land of Israel

1530s False Messiahs Shlomo Molcho and David HaReuveni

1538 Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem

1538-39 Semicha controversy

1540 Rabbi Malkiel Ashkenzai buys the old Karaite section of Hebron and builds the Avraham Avinu synagogue

1556 Ancona Affair

1560 Dona Gracia Nasi asks the Sultan for permission to lease Tzfat

For Jews As Well

Soon there came out of Portugal a noble whose name was Shlomo Molcho. He was of those who had fled there in the days of the Inquisition. While he was still a youth he served as one of the secretaries of the king. But when he saw David Reubeni, the Lord touched his heart and he returned to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and he was circumcised. . . Soon he became the wisest of men, arousing much wonder. He went to Italy and with great daring spoke of the Divine Law in the presence of kings. . .He became learned in the wisdom of the Kabbalah. . .he preached to large audiences in Bologna and in other places. (Emek HaBakha, Joseph haKohen, 1575)

Jews in Ottoman Jerusalem

Jerusalem, notwithstanding its destruction, contains four very beautiful long bazaars, such as I have never before seen, at the foot of Zion. They have all dome-shaped roofs and contain wares of every kind. . .all the necessaries of life, such as meat, wine, olives and sesame oil can be very cheap. The soil is excellent but it is not possible to gain a living by any branch of industry, unless it be that of a shoemaker, weaver or goldsmith.

I have taken a house close to the Synagogue. In the court where my house is there are five inhabitants, all of them women. . . All possible winds blow in Jerusalem. It is said that every wind before going to its destination come to Jerusalem to prostrate itself before the Lord. . . (Rabbi Ovadiah of Bartenura, 1488)

What Do the Sources Say?

ואני סבור שאם תהיה הסכמה מכל התלמידים והחכמים למנות איש בישיבה כלומר שיעשוהו ראש, ובתנאי שיהא זה בארץ ישראל כמו שהקדמנו, הרי אותו האיש תתקיים לו הישיבה ויהיה סמוך ויסמוך הוא אחר כך את מי שירצה. לפי שאם לא תאמר כן לא תהא אפשרית מציאות בית דין הגדול לעולם, לפי שצריך כל אחד מהם שיהא סמוך בלי ספק והרי כבר הבטיח ה' בשיבתם באמרו ואשיבה שופטיך כבראשונה, ושמא תאמר שהמשיח ימנה אותם ואף על פי שאינם סמוכין, הרי זה מוכחש, לפי שכבר ביארנו בהקדמת ספרינו זה שהמשיח לא יוסיף בתורה ולא יגרע ממנה לא בתורה שבעל פה. ואני סבור שהסנהדרין תשוב לפני יגרע ממנה לא בתורה שכתב ולא בתורה שבעל פה. ואני סבור שהסנהדרין תשוב לפני התגלות המשיח וזה יהיה מסימניו אמר ואשיבה שופטיך כבראשונה ויועציך כבתחלה ואחרי כן יקרא לך עיר הצדק, וזה יהיה בלי ספק כאשר יכשיר ה' לבות בני אדם וירבו במעשה הטוב ותגדל תשוקתם לה' ולתורתו ויתרבה ישרם לפני בוא המשיח כמו שנתבאר בפסוקי המקרא (פירוש)המשנה לרמב"ם מסכת סנהדרין פרק א)

If there was only one judge in *Eretz Yisrael* who possessed *semichah*, he should call two other judges to sit with him and they should convey *semichah* on 70 judges at one time or one after the other. Afterwards, he and these 70 should join together to make up the Supreme *Sanhedrin* and grant *semichah* to others to make up other courts.

It appears to me that if all the all the wise men in *Eretz Yisrael* agree to appoint judges and convey *semichah* upon them, the *semichah* is binding and these judges may adjudicate cases involving financial penalties and convey *semichah* upon others.

If so, why did the Sages suffer anguish over the institution of semichah, so that the judgment of cases involving financial penalties would not be nullified among the Jewish people? Because the Jewish people were dispersed, and it is impossible that all could agree. If, by contrast, there was a person who had received semichah from a person who had received semichah, he does not require the consent of all others. Instead, he may adjudicate cases involving financial penalties for everyone, for he received semichah from a court.

The question whether *semichah* can be renewed requires resolution. (Maimonides Mishneh Torah Sanhedrin Chapter 4 Halacha 11)

Rabbi Levi ibn Habib (1475 – 1546)

יושב ירושלים נאנח בשברון מתניים כי יראה חרבת בית מקדשה סביב צעיר הלומדים החונים לפני המשכן סביב

Did it Work?

A rapist is sentenced by three judges, if the judges have been given semicha in Eretz Yisrael. **And today, when we have no one with semicha**, we excommunicate him until he makes restitution. . . (Shulchan Aruch Even HaEzer 177:2)

Lecha Dodi by Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz (1500-1576)

Come, my friend, to meet the bride; let us welcome the presence of the Sabbath.

"Observe" and "Remember the Sabbath day," the only God caused us to hear in a single utterance: the Lord is One, and his name is One to his renown and his glory and his praise.

Come, etc.

Come, let us go to meet the Sabbath, for it is a well-spring of blessing; from the beginning, from of old it was ordained,—last in production, first in thought. Come, etc.

O sanctuary of our King, O regal city, arise, go forth from thy overthrow; long enough hast thou dwelt in the valley of weeping; verily He will have compassion upon thee.

Come, etc.

Shake thyself from the dust, arise, put on the garments of thy glory, O my people! Through the son of Jesse, the Bethlehemite, draw Thou nigh unto my soul, redeem it.

Come, etc.

לְּכֶה דוּדִי לְקְרַאת כַּלָּה � פָּנֵי שַׁבַּת נָקַבְּלַה

שָׁמוּר וְזָכוּר בְּדִבּוּר אֶחָד הִשְׁמִיעָנוּ אל הַמְיֻחָד ה' אֶחָד וּשְׁמו אֶחָד לְשֵׁם וּלְתִפְאֶרֶת וְלִתְהִלַּהּ

לִקְרַאת שַׁבָּת לְכוּ וְנֵלְכָה כִּי הִיא מְקור הַבְּרָכָה מֵראשׁ מִקֶּדֶם נְסוּכָה סוף מֵעשָׁה בְּמַחֲשָׁבָה תִּחִלָּהּ

> מְקְדַּשׁ מֶלֶךְ עִיר מְלוּכָה קוּמִי צְאִי מִתּוּךְ הַהֱפֵּכָה

רַב לָךְ שֶׁבֶת בְּעֵמֶק הַבָּכָא וְהוּא יַחֲמוֹל עָלַיִרְ חֶמְלָּהּ

הִתְנַעֲרִי מֵעֶפָּר קוּמִי לְבְשִׁי בִּגְדֵי תִפְאַרְתֵּךְ עַמִּי עַל יַד בֶּן יִשַּׁי בֵּית הַלַּחְמִי קַרְבָה אֶל נַפְשִׁי גָאלָהּ

והוא יחמול עליך חמלה
התנערי מעפר קומי
לבשי בגדי תפארתך עמי
עורי עורי שיר דברי
התעוררי התעררי כי בא אורך קומי אורי
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Dona Gracia Mendes: Jewish Redeemer

1510 born in Portugal as Beatriz de Luna

1528 married to her cousin Francisco Mendes

1538, Francisco dies, Beatriz and rest of the family leave for Antwerp

1542 Diogo, Francisco's brother and business partner dies, leaving the business to Beatriz

1544 Venice

1549 Ferrara where Beatriz can finally live freely as a Jew. She takes the name Gracia/Chana Nasi

1553 Istanbul

1556 Ancona affair

1560 leases Tiberias from the sultan

1569 dies in Istanbul