Rabbi Yehuda Bibas (1776-1852)

Today, I would like to start writing about one of the most prominent Sephardic rabbis of modern Jewish history, Rabbi Yehuda Bibas. His thoughts and ideas have strongly influenced the history of the nation of Israel in ways that affects us today and hopefully for ever. The irony is that so little (virtually nothing) has been written about him. Barely, a few lines in the Jewish encyclopedias. Even his last name was not properly recorded. One can find Bivas, Bibas, Vivas and even Vidas. Such the fate of many (too many…) Sephardic rabbis from the last five centuries who did so much for Am Israel and were unjustly forgotten by all of us.

The information I got is from a rare book in Spanish ("Mi padre: David Elnecave", written in 1985 by one of his descendants: Señor Nissim Elnecave (1910-1986). Recently, an article about Rabbi Bibas appeared in the Hebrew version of Wikipedia. In the English Wikipedia there is still nothing.

I got all this information thanks to my friend Rabbi Nissim Elnecave from Miqdash Eliyahu, Brooklyn, who is very knowledgeable in the history of Sephardic Jews.

Today I will share with the readers only part of his biography, and hopefully in the coming weeks we will get more familiar with his creative ideas and his contributions to Am Israel.

Rabbi Yehuda Bibas was born in Gibraltar (G.B.). From his mother side, he was the grandson of the famous Moroccan rabbi Chayim ben Attar, the Or-haChayim-haQadosh (1696-1743). From his father side they belonged to the Moroccan Jewish community of Tetuán, Spanish Morocco. Rabbi Bibas study as a child in Gibraltar an after the death of his father he moved to Livorno (Italy) to live with his grandfather. Livorno had a very prestigious and educated jewish community. Rabbi Bibas received in Livorno most of his Jewish and secular education, including his title as a physician. He then returned to Gibraltar where he established himself as the Rosh Yeshiba. To his Yeshiba attended students from England, Italy and North Africa. In 1810 he came to London, where he met with the

famous Jewish activist and philanthropist Sir Moises Montefiori (Livorno 1784- London 1885). By now, the reader understand that rabbi Yehuda Bibas spoke perfectly English, Italian, Spanish and Hebrew, and he was a rabbi and a Physician. In 1831 rabbi Bibas was appointed as the Chief rabbi of the Corfu Island (today belongs to Greece). Corfu had a very heterogenous and prosperous Jewish community, among them the 'Corfiot Italians', Jews from Venice that found refuge in that beautiful Island.

To be continued….

(If any of the readers has more information or a picture about Rabbi Yehuda Bibas, they are welcome to email me at : rabbibitton@yahoo.com)

The Jewish community of Corfu and the Shoa

"When Italy surrendered to the Allies, the island was occupied by the Germans on September 27, 1943. After a period of deceptive calm, on June 8, 1944, an ordinance was passed, according to which all the Jews were to remain in their homes. About two hundred Jews succeeded to flee. On the dawn of the following day, the Germans arrested all the others and deported them to Auschwitz via Athens. The Nazis and the mob looted their homes and shops. Out of 1900 Jews of Corfu, about 180 survived the Holocaust. Many of them emigrated to Israel or settled in big cities. In 1946 the Community had 140 members; the Synagogue and the school were almost ruined. As time passed the Community re-formed and resumed normal life. Today it is composed of 65 members who continue their course."

Read more about the Jews of Corfu **here**

Previously we explained (see **here**) that Rabbi Yehuda Bibas served as the chief rabbi of the island of Corfu (today's Greece) from the year 1831 to 1850. The influence of rabbi Bibas, however, was not restricted just to his own communjty. During those years he traveled to numerous Jewish communities in Europe and North Africa with a clear message: **We, Jews, must come back to Zion.**

But why *now*?

Rabbi Bibas saw a rare window of opportunity for the Jewish people in the fact that many countries in those days revolted against the ruling empires and achieved their independence. Living in Corfu, gave him the privileged perspective of being a direct witness of the Greek revolution against the Ottoman

Empire between 1821 and 1832, and the ensuing Greek victory which lead to their independence. Israel, called Palestine in those days, was also under the ruling of the Ottoman Empire. Rabbi Bibas estimated that the Jews were capable then to obtain their own independence, since the Ottoman Empire was weaker and in a process an inevitable decline. According to rabbi Yehuda Bibas:*"The jews must conquer militarily the land of Israel from the Turks in the same way the Greeks conquered their own land from the Turks."*

As we explained last week, Rabbi Bibas argued that the concept of *teshuba* needed to be understood then also as a call for returning to Israel. If you analyze carefully the book of Debarim Chapter 30:1-11 you will find that *teshuba*, mentioned there eight times, appears as the idea of *national reconciliation with HaShem*. Same as exile in the previous *persahiot* was the outcome of national abandonment of HaShem, coming back to Israel is seen as the peak of reconciliation between Am Israel and our God.

Rabbi Bibas had practical plans and ideas to inspire the Jews to come to Zion. His plan, which we will explain in more detail B'H next week, might be summarized with one single word: "education".

Previously (see **here**) we mentioned that Rabbi Yehuda Bibas served as the Rabbi of the Island of Corfu (today, Greece) from 1831 to 1850. Rabbi Bibas' activity and vision was not limited to the Jews of Corfu. He traveled through Europe and North Africa visiting Turkey, the Balkans, Vienna, London, Germany, Hungary and Prague and many more Jewish communities.

The main message that he preached to all Jews was TESHUBA. He expanded the meaning of *teshuba* (literally: "return") from the conventional meaning of returning to God to the idea of a *teshuba kelalit* or *political teshuba*: the return of the Jews to the land of israel.

By living in the Diaspora he said:

"We are giving our back to God, as our rabbis explained: A Jew that lives outside Israel is like a Jew without a God. And why we are living in the exile, going from city to city to look for our livelihood? Didn't the Tora say that Israel is a land that HaShem constantly oversees? A land in which you will not eat bread in poverty? Isn't it a land that lacks nothing?

Every time we eat we give thanks to God for the good land that He granted us"

Rabbi Bibas message of *teshuba* as active return to Zion made a powerful impact against the background of the Reform movement, very popular in those years. The reformers wished to introduce changes in the prayers, organs and music in Shabbat services, etc. but mainly they aimed to erase the memory of Zion, Jerusalem and Israel. The most important goal of the reform movement was to assert that Judaism is a religion without any national element. A Jew should have exclusive allegiance to Germany, for example, and not aspiring or praying to eventually going back to Israel.

"In conformity with these views, the Frankfort Rabbinical Conference of 1845 voted that all petitions for the return to the land of our fathers, and for the restoration of a Jewish state, and a Messiah that will take the Jews to Palestine, should be eliminated from the prayers books."