Rabbi Ya’aqob Berab (1474-1546) and the renewal of Rabbinic ordination

Rabbi Ya’aqob Berab was born in the town of Maqueda, near Toledo, Spain, in 1474. His teacher was the celebrated rabbi Isaac Abohab, Gaon of Castilla. After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492 he fled to Fes, Morocco, where he was chosen the rabbi of the city being just eighteen years old. From Morocco he went to Algeria, Jerusalem, Egypt, Damascus until he finally established himself in Safed (Tsefat), Israel. In Tsefat Rabbi Berab conceived the idea of *hiddush hasemikha*, the renewal of the rabbinic ordination. For more than a thousand years, since the times of the Mishna, the Rabbinic ordination which was transmitted from Rabbi to student since the times of Moshe and Yehoshua’ was lost. As rabbi Yosef Caro, one of Rabbi Berab students and contemporaries wrote in the introduction to the Shulhan ‘arukh, because of the large and long Jewish Diaspora, the Jews had too many Halakhic traditions and customs. And since the times of the Sanhedrin, Jews have not had a centralized authority accepted by all Jews which could formulate a uniform Law for all Jews. Now, once a relatively large Jewish community was established in Israel, the renewal to the rabbinic ordination was a real a possibility. Following Maimonides (Pirush haMishnayot, Sanhedrin 1:1 □□ □□□□□□ □□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□ □□□□□□ □□□ □□□ ,□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□ □□□□□ □□□□□) “If all rabbis in Israel appoint and ordain one rabbi, that assigned rabbi can rule for all of them and, furthermore, he could ordain other rabbis”. In 1538, twenty-five rabbis assembled in Tsefat and ordained rabbi Ya’aqob Berab, giving him the right to ordain any other Rabbis who would then form a new Sanhedrin. Rabbi Berab then ordained among others rabbi Yosef Caro (1480-1575), and rabbi Moshe Miterani (1500-1580). Rabbi Levi Ibn Habib (□”□□□), the chief rabbi of Yerushalayim, was opposed to the renewal of the ordination and had many disputes with rabbi Berab. More opposition to the renewal of the Rabbinical ordination came from the Ottoman empire. The Turkish authorities perceived that the renewal of the ordination would open the possibility for a new Sanhedrin, virtually a Jewish independent Congress, which might ultimately lead to a sovereign Jewish State. Fearing for his life, rabbi Berab fled to Egypt and in 1546 he ultimately returned to Tsefat where he died at the age of 72 years.

The “Renewal of the semikha” project established by rabbi Ya’aqob Berab was discontinued after his death. Still, a few more rabbis were ordained by Rabbi Ya’aqob Berab before he died. Althought there are some debates about it, it seems that the following rabbis were also ordained by him: Rabbi Israel Curiel (1501-1573) and Rabbi Abraham Shalom (d.1557) both served in the Bet Din, Rabbinical court, of Maran Yosef Caro in Tzefat. Rabbi Moshe Cordobero (1522-1570) Rabbi Yosef Sagis (d. 1573). Rabbi Yosef Caro ordained Rabbi Moshe Alshekh (1508-1593, Safed). Rabbi Moshe Alshekh then ordained Rabbi Hayim Vital(1543-1620). We know of a few other musmakhim. For example: The grandson of rabbi Ya’aqob Berab, Rabbi Ya’aqob Aboulafia, from Damascus; his student Rabbi Yoshiahu Pinto (1565-1648), also from Damascus, and his grandson, rabbi Hayim Abulafia (1660-1744). Although these rabbis were musmakhim, they never exert, or claimed to have, a superior authority over other rabbis.