Rabbi Moshe Capsali 1420-1495

Rabbi Capsali was born in the Island of Crete (today Greece) in 1420. Not much is known about his early life, except that he went to study Tora in Germany, became a rabbi and then in 1450 he settled in Constantinople (modern day, Istanbul).

Rabbi Capsali became very prominent thanks to his closeness with the Turkish Sultan Mehmed the Second, also known as “The Conqueror”. Mehmed II brought the end of the Byzantine empire and conquered Constantinople in 1453. He was one of the most powerful men on the planet in those days. The Sultan appointed Rabbi Capsali as the Chief Rabbi or Hakham Bashi of the Ottoman empire.

As the Chief rabbi of the Empire, rabbi Capsali was in charge of appointing other rabbis and supervising the collection of taxes coming from the Jews. He also acted as a civil judge. It is said that the Sultan’s respect for the rabbi was because, disguised as a civilian, Mehmed II was present one day while Capsali was rendering his decisions and he assured himself that the rabbi was incorruptible and impartial in his judgments.

The Sultan appreciated so much Rabbi Capsali that he assigned him a seat beside the Mufti, the Muslim highest authority, and above the seat of the Christian patriarch.

One of the most important contribution of Rabbi Capsali to Am Israel is that thanks to his favor with the Sultan, the Sultan opened the gates of his empire to tens of thousands of Jewish refugees who were escaping form the horrors of the Inquisition in Spain and from persecutions they suffered in many Christian countries. The Sultan allowed and even encouraged the Jewish refugees to build homes, synagogues and houses of study (Bate Midrash), and to practice their religion freely.

In 1492, towards the last years of Rabbi Capsali’s life, the

great tragedy of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain took place. His advanced age notwithstanding, Rabbi Capsali dedicated himself in soul and body to help the victims of the expulsion. Many Sephardic Jews were captured by pirates when escaping from Spain and were sold as slaves. Rabbi Capsali personally traveled to various Jewish communities in his country to collect funds for Pidyon Shebuim, to redeem these Jews. It was thanks to rabbi Capsali that the most prominent Sephardic communities in those times flourished in Constantinople and other cities of the Ottoman empire.

Rabbi Capsali died in 1495 at the age of 75 he was succeeded as Hakham Bashi by Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi.