Rabbi Tam ibn Yahia (1475-1542) and the fire in Constantinopla

Rabbi Tam ibn Yehia was one of the most important rabbis of his generation. He was born in Lisbon, Portugal, in 1475. In 1496, when the Portuguese Jews had to choose between converting to Christianity or leave the country, Rabbi Tam escaped to the city of Constantinople, today's Istanbul, Turkey. There, he acted for some time as a member of the rabbinical court of the famous Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi (□"□□). After the death of Rabbi Mizrahi, Rabbi Tam inherited his position and was assigned as the spiritual leader of the Jewish community in Turkey.

Rabbi Tam's relations with the government of Turkey were excellent. Firstly, because Rabbi Tam was also a renowned physician and became one of the most trusted doctors of the Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1494-1566). Second, because Rabbi Tam mastered the Turkish and Arabic languages, and he was an expert in Islamic law [sic]. His son Gedalia ben Tam (Rabbi of Thessaloniki, Greece) wrote in his book of Jewish history Shalshelet haQabbalá "my father's knowledge of Islamic Law was so great that Muslim judges [= Imams] often consulted with him regarding their decisions. "

At that time, all countries in the Middle East, including Syria, Egypt and Israel, were under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Being the chief rabbi of Turkey conferred Rabbi Tam the rabbinical authority over all the rabbis of the Middle East. Thus, Rabbi Tam, was permanently consulted not only by individuals but also by his colleagues from across the Middle East, who sought his verdict when there was some debate or discussion among them.

The importance of the prestige of Rab Tam in the court of Suleiman the Magnificent should not be underestimated, also from the political standpoint. Thanks to the excellent relations of Rabbi Tam with the Sultan, all Jewish communities in the Middle East enjoyed the favor of the Sultan and the Ottoman Empire, which often meant the difference between life and death of a Jew , or the destruction or survival of entire Jewish communities.

Rabbi Tam was also a prolific writer. One of his students, Rabbi Binyamin Motal, wrote that Rabbi Tam composed:.. … "The book Ma'ase Nisim, a commentary on the Rif . Al Hanisim, a commentary on the Ran . And he also wrote a very extensive book with the records of all his halakhic rulings. A collection of thousands of Halakhic questions, sent to him from all over the world, and his responses, including his analysis and verdicts. He also wrote tens of thousands of explanations of the Gemara, commentaries on the Tora and the Midrashim, sermons, books on science, etc. "

The reader may wonder, how is it possible that a Rabbi of the stature of rabbi Tam, who was so famous and prolific in his time (in my opinion he was a "Maimonides 16th century") is so little known in our time?

I think that there are two possible answers to this question: First, that unfortunately most Sephardic rabbis are ignored and unknown. This historical injustice is being reversed and although much remains to be done, gradually the Hakhamim Sephardim are more and better known. The second answer is that, in the particular case of Rabbi Tam ibn Yehia, there was a tragic factor which contributed to pushing his name into oblivion. In 1541 there was a terrible fire in the city of Constantinople. This fire claimed many lives, and consumed virtually all the books of Rabbi Tam ibn Yehia. Such was the pain Rabbi Tam suffered seeing the work of his life consumed by fire, that, according to his students testimony, his death in 1542 was partly due to the sadness and grief he suffered by

the loss of his manuscripts.

All what is left to us from the work of Rabbi Tam is a small compilation of some of his comments on the Rif (Derekh Tamim), and a collection of just 213 rabbinical responses (Ahole Tam) in a book published by his grandson, Don Tam ben Gedalia, in Venice, Italy, 1620.

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