Rabbi Yehuda Hayyat (d. 1510), and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain

The city of Mantova, Italy

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Rabbi Yehuda ben Ya'aqob Hayyat z"l suffered all the tribulations that fell upon the Jews as a consequence of their expulsion from Spain. His dramatic life story exemplifies the adversities of hundreds of thousands of Jews who were expelled from the Iberian Peninsula for refusing to .abandon their religion

In his book "Minhat Yehuda" Rabbi Hayyat describes the. calamities he lived for about two years

When the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492, about 120,000 of them fled to Portugal. The Portuguese King Juan II, accepted the Jews, but demanded them to pay an exorbitant sum of money to stay there. A year after arriving into Portugal, in 1493, the king decided that Jews could not stay any longer in his kingdom unless they converted to Catholicism or pay again a huge amount of money. The Jews were poor refugees, and when they were expelled from Spain all their properties were expropriated. In addition, it was forbidden for them to take silver, gold, or anything of value. In Portugal, they were living in extreme poverty and were not able to afford the payment that the King demanded

Along with 250 other Jewish refugees, Rabbi Hayyat left Portugal and sailed from the port of Lisbon in a precarious ship toward the coast of Morocco. Conditions on board were so unhealthy that after a few days at sea an epidemic broke out on the ship. In those conditions they would not

disembark into any other port. The ship was taken to the port of Malaga. There, several priests were awaiting for those Jews. When the desperate Jewish passengers asked the Catholic clerics to give them water and bread, the priests refused, unless they accepted baptism …. The poor Jews stayed for five days in the ship. Close to hundred of those Jews chose to convert in order to save their lives. And about fifty of those Jews, among them, Rabbi Hayyat's wife, died of thirst and starvation

After two months, the precarious vessel reached the coast of Morocco. But upon stepping on solid ground, a moorish that recognized Rabbi Hayyat from Spain, accused him of being an infidel and the Rabbi was immediately imprisoned and sentenced to death by Muslim fanatics, who claimed that his religious beliefs and practices offend Islam. To save his life, they said, he had to convert to Islam. If he would do, they would honor him and grant hi all he wishes. For forty days Rabbi Hayyat was imprisoned in a dark underground hole living in inhuman conditions, surrounded by rodents, snakes, and scorpions

In the end, some Jewish refugees from the Moroccan village of Shorshan, who were extremely poor, managed to raise some money to bribe the jailers and save Rabbi Hayyat from a certain death. Rabbi Hayyat gave them in exchange and as a token of gratitude 200 books that he had brought with him from Spain. He escaped to the city of Fes, a little further south. Fes was the refuge of tens of thousands of exiled Jews from Spain. But there too Rabbi Hayyat found only more tribulations

He writes in his book

Fes suffered from a terrible famine… people were forced to" eat grass to survive. Every day I work grinding some grains with my bare hands in the house of a Muslim family to earn a small and this morsel of bread. … like other Jews who

escaped from Spain, we have no home or shelter. And at night, in the winter, we would dig to ourselves into the " .dumps hole, in the outskirts of the city, to sleep

After being in Fes for 8 months, the rabbi narrates, "… a terrible fire broke out in the city and many people died in the flames … After the fire, and as a result of the great drought, over 20,000 (sic.) Jews perished of starvation and epidemics. And when they saw this, many Jews who came from Spain and Portugal, decided to return there, to avoid a " .certain death for them and their children

A contemporary Spanish historian Andrés Bernáldez (1450-1513) writes in his book "History of the Catholic kings" (p. 78) that the Jews who left Fes were victims of all forms of abuse… on the roads they were attacked by Moors, who kidnapped and raped their wives and daughters, and opened their bodies to see whether they had hidden silver or gold in their stomachs

Rabbi Hayyat managed to leave Morocco and embarked for Italy. First, he arrived into Naples, but at that time (1494) Naples was at war and the French King expelled the Jews from the city. Then, Rabbi Hayyat arrived at the port of Venice alone, as he had lost his entire family, and half-naked. When the Spanish Jews living in Venice recognized him, they took care of him. From Venezia, Rabbi Hayyat reached the Italian city of Mantova, where he lived until his last days

HIS WORKS

In Mantova Rabbi Hayyat found and befriended a Sephardic Rabbi named Yosef Ya'abets, who convinced him to write a commentary to the famous mystic (and cryptic) book "ma'arakhot Eloqim". Rabbi Hayyat, far for complaining to God for his terrible fate, called his book "Minhat Yehuda" (The offering of Judah). That is: this book was an offering

that Rabbi Yehuda Hayyat, offered to HaShem for saving his life

This book is considered a seminal work because it explains the most complex principles of Kabbala, and contributed to the spread of Hokhmat haQabbala, a phenomena which reached its peak in the 16th century. Rabbi Hayyat mentions in his book some of his teachers in Spain. Among them, Rabbi Shemuel Ibn Shraga and Rabbi Yosef Alcastilia (also, “Alcastiel”), meaning, from Castille

There is another book, which was never published yet, which consist of 18 questions and answers between rabbi Yehuda Hayyat and Rabbi Yosef Alcastiel. From these 18 questions and answers, 17 are on mysticism and only one on a Talmudic .subject

Although precise details are unknown, it is estimated that Rabbi Yehuda Hayyat died in Mantova, Italy, circa 1510