Rabbi Hayim Benveniste (1603-1674) and the false Messiah Shabbetai Zevi

In the picture above you can see Balat*, the old Jewish quarter*
Rabbi Hayim Benveniste was born in Istanbul, Turkey in 1603. At the time the city was called Constantinople and had a very large and thriving Jewish population, formed primarily by Jewish refugees who were expelled from Spain in 1492. While the poor Sephardic Jews were rejected from everywhere else in the world, or forced to convert to Christianity or Islam in order to be accepted, the Turkish Sultan Bayezid II (1481-1512) formally invited the expelled Jews from Spain to come to Turkey. And he issued a law forbidding persecution or discrimination against Jews throughout the Ottoman Empire. Jews settled in two major cities: Constantinople and Salonika (=Thessaloniki, which became the only city in the world in the 16th century with a majority Jewish population). Over time more and more Yehudim arrived in Turkey, not only in Spain Portugal and Spain but also from Poland, Germany, and France.

Rabbi Hayim Benveniste came from a prestigious family of Rabbis who came from Spain. In his youth, he studied with the great luminaries of Turkey, including Rabbi Yosef Miterani. At the age of 21, Rabbi Benveniste was chosen as one of the two chief rabbis of Smyrna, together with the famous Rabbi Aharon Lapapa.

In 1665 the false Messiah Shabetay Zevi came to Turkey. He enjoyed enormous popularity in virtually every Jewish community in the world, Sephardic and Ashkenazi. The suffering of the Yehudim was so intense that people blindly clung to what they perceived as a ray of hope. Shabetay Zevi was very charismatic, and he was also supported by many Rabbis. Rabbi Hayim Benveniste and his colleague Rabbi Aharon Lapapa were

the main opponents to Shabetay Zevi in Turkey. In Shabbat, December 12, 1665, Shabetay Zevi burst into the main Synagogue of Smyrna, confronted Rabbi Benveniste and caused a huge uproar in the community. Many Rabbis, and most people were captivated by his charisma (and surely pressured by their great despair) and Shabetay Zevi became virtually the highest authority of the Jewish community in Turkey. Rabbi Benveniste was overwhelmed by this situation. Rabbi Aharon Lapapa, which continued vigorously opposing Shabetay Zevi, was expelled from the community (sic.).
Most other Rabbanim supported Shabetay Zevi. This weird situation lasted for nine months. Shabetay Zevi went to meet the Vizier and was threatened by him to convert to Islam or be executed. (It is believed that the Sultan Mehmed IV told him: "If you are so powerful and can do miracles as you say, I will ask my soldiers to shoot 10 arrows at you. If you're still alive, I myself will become one of your followers". Shabetay Zevi did not accept the challenge and chose conversion to Islam). When he converted, though some of his followers said it was only a temporary strategy of the Mashiah, Rabbi Benveniste and others realized the great deception. This whole story was very painful and very harmful, not only for the Turkish Jewish community, which was the epicenter of this movement but also for almost all Jewish communities around the world for years.

BOOKS: Rabbi Benveniste wrote many very famous books. Among them: *"Keneset Hagedola*", a book of four volumes about the Tur Bet Yosef and Shulhan Arukh. This book is so important that the famous rabbi HIDA (Rabbi Hayyim Yosef David Azulay, 1724-1806) said that a rabbi can not issue a verdict (pesaq) without consulting the Keneset Hagedolah. "□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□ □□□ □□ □□□□□□ ,□□□□□ □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□ □□□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□ □□□ □□□□ □□□ □□ □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□ □□□□ □□□□□□ □□□ □□□□ □□ □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□ □□□□ □□□□□ □□□□ □□□□ □□□□ ,□□□□□ □□□□ ".

He also wrote BA'E HAYE, a book of rabbinic Responsa, that is, questions and answers about many cases that occurred in the

community and required a rabbinical expert opinion. This book also serves as a great historical document to study the details of the Jewish life in 17th century Turkey.