DOÑA GRACIA MENDES (Part 5) and Yosef Nasi, Lord of Tiberias

LONG BEFORE HERZL

In 1536, when the inquisition arrived in Portugal, Doña Gracia and her brother-in-law Diogo Mendes moved to Flanders (Antwerp) and transferred all their assets and businesses there. Yosef Nasi, Gracia's nephew, joined them and when Diogo passed away, he was left in charge of managing the international trade company and the bank: "Casa Mendes". His contacts were at the highest level possible. He had diplomatic and commercial relations with Maximilian, the nephew of Emperor Charles V; with Henry II the king of France, and rubbed shoulders with the European nobility. His ultimate goal was to move all of their fortune and assets to Turkey and avoid the greedy eye of the inquisition that wanted so badly to confiscate his possessions. In 1554 he finally arrived in Constantinople, where he was able to openly practice Judaism. There he married his cousin and fiancée, Reina, the daughter of Doña Gracia Mendes. And now, with Yosef Nasí by her side, Doña Gracia decided to fulfill the biggest and most ambitious project of her life. A project that could be considered messianic: to establish a "sanctuary city" for all the Jews of the world in the land of Israel.

DOGS AND JEWS

There have always been Jews in Israel. They were an unwanted minority. Parias and persona non grata. In the small city of Tsefat, Safed, in the north of Israel, an important Rabbinical center led by Rabbi Yosef Caro was developing, which would later also become a center for Qabbala study. The Jews of Tsefat were mostly Sephardic refugees who, after very dangerous journeys, had managed to reach Israel (I tell this in more detail in my book "Forgotten Giants"). In Yerushalayim Jews –very few– lived in an absolutely miserable situation.

Jerusalem was a city over which, Christians and Muslims had fought, for centuries. The Jews who sacrificed themselves to live in the Holy City were hated by both. I am copying literally (and without euphemisms) a document that will give us an idea of the situation of the Jews of Jerusalem at that time. This horrible text belongs to the book “Il trattato di Terra Santa e dell’Oriente” written by a contemporary Franciscan priest named Francesco Suriano: “These dogs, the Jews, are trampled, beaten and tortured, as they deserve. They live on this earth in conditions of such humiliation that words cannot describe. And particularly in Jerusalem… where even the Muslims treat them worse than dogs.”

TIBERIA: A GHOST CITY

The city of Tsefat was in the municipality of Tiberias, which belonged to the Ottoman empire. But Tiberias itself was practically in ruins. It was a place that nobody was interested in. The Christians did not want it and the Muslims had no claim to it. The destroyed city that had been the most important rabbinic center in Israel for 800 years (200 to 1000) was now abandoned and served as a refuge for bandits and criminals. Doña Gracia then had a wonderful idea: she offered the Sultan to take care of the city of Tiberias, populate it, and develop it commercially in a way that would produce taxes for the royal treasury. In the year 1558 Suleiman gave Doña Gracia the concession of the city and appointed Yosef Nasí as “The Lord of Tiberias”, the governor of the city, who would enjoy total independence to do what he wanted, while the collection of taxes –1,000 gold pieces per year-– was maintained. The project of Doña Gracia and Don Yosef, which had the approval of the Sultan, was that once the city was built, all the Jews of the world would have a place to settle and live in peace and security. Especially those who needed it most urgently: the anusim, the Sephardim refugees from Spain and Portugal, who lived escaping from one place to another in Europe, practicing a religion that had been imposed on them by force. This project would be the realization of Doña Gracia’s greatest dream: after having saved thousands of Jews from the inquisition and captivity, closing the circle, and giving her beloved people the opportunity to live free and safe, IN THE LAND OF ISRAEL!

THE FIRST KEREN KAYEMET

In 1561 Yosef Nasí together with Rabbi Yosef Ben Aderet began the construction of the walls, something essential for the safety and security of the city. They set out to beautify Tiberia and develop it commercially. Just as the Keren Kayemet leIsrael did 400 years later, they began by planting trees: orange trees, pines, and white mulberry trees for silkworm breeding, a very profitable industry that would develop in Tiberias. Don Yosef Nasí also invited the most important Jewish manufacturers in Europe, especially from Venice, to transfer their textile factories to Tiberias. His plan was for Tiberias, “the Jewish State” to become the international center of the textile industry. They also founded a Synagogue and a Bet ha-midrash, a Torah study house, led by Rabbi Elazar ben Yohai.

ALIYA AND FREE TICKETS!

The word that the Jews would have their own “safe place” created enormous enthusiasm. Don Yosef sent ships to various European cities to transfer the anusim for free on his ships. Many Jews, those of Ancona for example, were so poor that they did not have the money to get to the port. There are documents that show Rabbis who collected money to send Shelichim, to locate these Jews and assist them economically so that they could reach European ports and continue the journey toward Ertz Israel. Additionally, a very beautiful mansion was being built in Tiberias: the residence where Doña Gracia Mendes would live, when she very soon come from Turkey.

In December 1564 the city’s protective walls, which exist to this day, were finally finished. The first Jews began to arrive from Portugal, Italy and Turkey, to the promised land, which was now an earthly paradise, where the fresh evening wind perfumed the beautiful city with the scent of pine and orange trees.

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