Rabbi Abraham Azulay (1570-1643) and the Sultan's Sword in Hebron

From FES to HEBRON

Rabbi Abraham Azulay (also "Azulai) was born in the city of Fes, Morocco, in 1570. The city of Fes was a very important Jewish center where many Jews found refuge when they escaped the expulsion from Spain.

The family of Rabbi Azulay also came from Spain (Castilla). Living in Fes was far from being in a paradise. Apart from the constant persecution by Muslim extremists, the area was very poor and often suffered from long droughts. Rabbi Shaul Serero says that in the Jewish community of Fes, between 10 and 20 people died every day… of starvation. After one long drought that lasted for more than 3 years, Rabbi Azulay left Fes and headed towards the land of Israel. Traveling by sea was extremely dangerous. When rabbi Azulay arrived near the port of Capotakia (Port Said) a great storm destroyed his ship and all his belongings sank. Miraculously, Rabbi Azulay survived and arrived (presumably swimming) to the coast. This miracle was never forgotten by Rabbi Azulai. And as a sign of his eternal gratitude to HaShem for this miracle, Rabbi Azulay designed his signature in the shape of a boat (see illustration above).

From HEBRON to GAZA

Once he arrived in Israel he settled in the city of Hebron (also known as Kiryat Arba) where he met with the great rabbis of that time such as Rabbi Eliezer Arha and others. But a terrible epidemic broke in 1619 and rabbi Azulay had to leave the city of Hebron and he moved to Yerushalayim. But the plague also reached Jerusalem, and Rabbi Azulay moved to the

city of Gaza where he lived for some years. At that time 70 Jewish families lived in Gaza. Some families were engaged in agriculture and others in commerce, since Gaza was part of the trade route between Syria and Egypt. The Rabbi of Gaza between 1620-1625 was the illustrious rabbi Israel Najara (a native of the Spanish city Nájera), who befriended rabbi Azulay . In Gaza, Rabbi Azulay wrote two of his most famous books: a commentary on the book of the Zohar "Hesed LeAbraham" ("The goodness that God did with Abraham", in reference to the fact that he himself, Abraha, was twice saved from the terrible epidemic that claimed so many lives). He also wrote "Ba'ale Berit Abram", a mystical commentary on the Tora.

COMMENTARY ON THE MISHNA

Rabbi Azulay is known for his mystical writings but he also wrote a few traditional rabbinical works. One of the least known books of Rabbi Azulay, is "ahaba bata'anuguim", a beautiful and extensive commentary on the Mishna. In this book, unfortunately not as well known as his books on mysticism, Rabbi Azulay explains the elementary meaning of the words and ideas of the Mishna —following the footsteps of Maimonides— incorporating the commentaries of the Talmud, the midrashim and other famous books, including Geonim, Rishonim and the Shulhan Aruch. He also mentions the teaching of some rabbis who lived in Erets Israel on those days , and of whom nothing else is known to us, like Rabbi Soleiman Ohana and Rabbi Yosef Ashkenazi, the "Tana from Safed". This book was republished in Israel recently (1985, Seder Neziqin). It was edited among others by Rabbi Masud Ben Shimon (had the privilege to study under him in my youth) and the introduction of this new edition was written by none other than Rabbi Obadiah Yosef (see the book HERE. We also present HERE a link where you can download the comment of Rabbi Azulay on the Mishna of Pirque Abot, (courtesy of hebewbooks.org).

When the plague ended, Rabbi Azulay returned to Hebron, where

he lived until the end of his days.

THE SWORD IN THE CAVE of MAKHPELA

In 1643 the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, Mohamed IV, the most powerful man on earth in those days, visited the land of Israel and came to Hebron, and following the Muslim tradition, went to pray in Me'arat HaMakhpela, the cave where Abraham, Yitshaq and Ya'aqob are buried. At the time, there was a very deep hole on the floor of the hall dedicated to Yitshaq Abinu, through which there was access to the interior of the original cave of Makhpela. But nobody entered there, since it was considered very dangerous, perhaps due to the absence of oxygen, the presence of toxic gases, etc. The Sultan came very close to the hole and when he bent to take a closer look his valuable sword, made of gold and ornamented with diamonds, fell down the hole. The Sultan sent a pair of soldiers tied with ropes to bring the sword back, but both died. The local Arab leaders decided that they would not risk the lives of other Muslims and demanded the Jews, under the threat of extermination, to bring back the Sultan's sword. Rabbi Azulai, who was 73 years old at that time, volunteered for the risky task and after an incredible experience he was able to recover the sword of the Sultan (see the full story on the Hebron webpage, http://en.hebron.org.il/history/ 228).

HIS DEATH

Rabbi Azulay died the day after he emerged from the depth of the cave of Makhpela, Friday Ereb Shabbat, Perashat Haye Sara (that is, today!).

Rabbi Abraham Azulay is buried in the old cemetery of the city of Hebron. His grave, as was the custom in Hebron, carries no inscription, not even his name (I think this was done as a gesture of deference to our Patriarchs, buried in that city).

One of his great-grandchildren was the famous Rabbi Hayim Yosef David Azulay, also known as the Hida (1724-1806).