Rabbi Ben-Zion Cuenca (1867-1937) And The Hebron Massacre Of 1929

HIS CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

Rabbi Ben-Zion Cuenca was born in the old city of Jerusalem in 1867. His surname, Cuenca, corresponds to a province of Spain in the area of Castilla-La Mancha. The family was part of the Jews expelled from Castile and Aragon in 1492. The family settled in Thessaloniki (Greece) and lived there for 3 centuries. His father, Abraham Cuenca, emigrated to Erets Israel around 1850. Before he was ten years old, the rabbis and teachers considered the young Ben-Zion as an *'iluy* (a child prodigy) and allowed him to wear the Tefillin at that age given his extraordinary knowledge and maturity. Aware of his son's ability, his father devoted his resources to hiring the best teachers and mentors who also provided his son with a vast secular education, especially in the fields of Jewish history and languages.

RABBI OF RABBIS

Rabbi Cuenca got married at 15, something that was not uncommon in those days, to Esther, a second cousin, and they lived in the old city of Jerusalem. Then they moved to Yemin Moshe, the first Jewish neighborhood built outside the walled city sponsored by the famous philanthropist Sir Moshe Montefiore. At the age of 30, Rabbi Cuenca established a Yeshiba "Tiferet Yerushalaim". In this Yeshiba, which also included general studies, were educated among others Israel's chief rabbi Ben-Zion Meir Hay Uziel, the famous Sephardic Hebrew writer Yehuda Bourla, and Rabbi Moshe Nissim, the father of another Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Isaac Nissim. Rabbi Cuenca was also very active in the religious Zionist

Mizrahi movement. He was the Head of the Rabbinical Court of Jerusalem and excelled also as a community leader. He founded, raised the funds for and directed the first Sephardic Nursing Home in modern Jerusalem.

THE MASSACRE OF 1929

The second holiest city in Israel is Hebron –acquired by Abraham Abinu 4,000 years ago– which is the burial place of our patriarchs and matriarchs. In the 1920s, about 800 Jews and about 20,000 Arabs lived in Hebron. In August 1929 the Arabs spread false rumors in their communities saying that the Jews were carrying out "mass killings of Arabs." Until that moment Jews and Arabs had lived in relative peace. Sepharadim lived in Hebron for centuries (see below the testimony of a survivor). And the Ashkenazi Jews had recently arrived and established the famous Slabodka Yeshiva, also known as Yeshivat Hebron. On August 23, 1929, a Friday night, a massacre against the Jews began that lasted for three days. Shouting "Death to the Jews" thousands of Arabs armed with knives and axes looted Jewish houses, destroyed the Synagogues; tortured and murdered 67 Jews in cold blood: men, women and children, including rabbis of the two communities. The survivors moved to Jerusalem, and Hebron was left without Jews for the first time in hundreds of years.

STARTING OVER

Nine months after the massacre, Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Abraham Kook and Sephardic Chief Rabbi Yaakov Meir signed a statement calling for volunteers to return to Hebron: We call on *"… all the people of Israel to support our request and rebuild the great Jewish community Hebron … For the holiness of our nation and for our establishment on this land, we are required not to let the blood of our brothers be spilled in vain: we have a duty as the people of Israel to respond to this call by rebuilding and reestablishing the city of the patriarchs"*. In 1931 the Jewish settlement of Hebron was resumed and the rabbi

who bravely lead that community was Rabbi Ben-Zion Cuenca. He lived in Hebron until 1936. That year the violent conflicts were renewed and the Jews had to leave. They only returned to Hebron 31 years later, after the Six Day War.

HIS LITERARY WORK

One of Rabbi Cuenca's most important contributions was the creation of the extraordinary Halakha Journal called "haMe-asef," a collection of halachic studies and articles by hundreds of rabbis, Sephardi and Ashkenazim from Israel and the diaspora. Presenting so many rabbis of different origins united in the same Journal was a very important positive innovation at that time. Rabbi Cuenca was in charge of all the stages of this publication, which was published for 19 years. The first volume appeared in 1897. Rabbi Cuenca was, of course, one of the main contributors. Two themes stand out in HaMeasef.

The first, everything related to the precepts associated with agricultural work. These commandments only apply in the land of Israel (*terumot, ma'aserot, shemita*, etc.) and therefore this theme remained dormant for centuries. But now, as the establishment of the Yehudim in the Yeshub of Israel took hold, these laws had to be applied again.

The second topic that interested Rabbi Cuenca was to give a rabbinical response to new inventions (electricity, new means of transportation, etc.). An example that can be seen in this link is the Rabbi's response to the use of the train on Shabbat or Yom Tob.

At the beginning of each article Rabbi Cuenca introduces a brief biography of the writers, which given the tremendous lack of information we suffer from, especially about the Sephardic rabbis of the late 19th century, constitutes an invaluable contribution to modern Jewish history.

FINAL WORDS

Rabbi Yehuda Fishman Maimon wrote: “Rabbi Cuenca was a fervent Zionist, an extraordinary Rabbi and a man of the deepest faith… an illuminated Sage in Tora and Wisdom, who professed a tremendous love for the Creator and for humanity. And I think it would not be an exaggeration to say that there is no one left to replace him or no one who can imitate him…”.

Rabbi Cuenca died in Yerushalayim in 1937 and is buried in the Jewish cemetery on the Mount of Olives, Har HaZetim.

המאסף

גליון שבועי

מוקדש לתורה ולתעודה

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רבנינו וטובי חכמי
זמננו בארץ ובחו"ל.

ע"י העורך
בן ציון אברהם
קואינקה

ירושלם

תמוז תרנ"ו. לפ"ק

Testimony from a survivor of 1929 Hebron Massacre, Miriam Sasson (Hebrew)