Rabbi Obadia de Bertinoro (1455-1515), from Italy to Jerusalem

EARLY LIFE

Rabbi Obadiah ben Abraham of Bertinoro, popularly known as “Bartenura”, was born in 1455. He was a student of the famous Rabbi Yosef Colon, □”□□□□, and served as rabbi of his own city, Bertinoro, in the province of Cesena, Italy. There he also worked as a banker. His name is mentioned at the top of the list of bankers authorized to grant loans to Christian residents in an official document of Pope Innocent VIII, dated February 12, 1485. When he was 30 years old, he decided to move in the land of Israel, and settle specifically in Yerushalayim, Jerusalem. We have a detailed description of his journey to Israel – which in those days was neither easy nor short – since many of the letters describing this trip were found and published, as we will mention later on.

FROM ITALY TO JERUSALEM

At the end of 1486 he left his native city. He went through Rome and Naples and finally arrived in Palermo, Sicily, where he spent three months preaching every Shabbat in the local synagogue. In Palermo, the main city of Sicily, there were around 850 Jewish families, all living in the same quarter located in one of the best areas of town. The Jews were artisans, blacksmiths, and farmers. The community leaders of Sicily tried to convince him to stay as Rabbi of that Synagogue, but he refused the offer because his greatest desire was to settle in Yerushalayim. He traveled through Rhodes, Greece, and Alexandria, Egypt, where he arrived in early 1488. From Alexandria, he proceeded to Cairo, where Rabbi Natan ha-Kohen Shoulal, the chief leader of the local

community (naggid), received him with great honors. There, too, he was offered to remain as a rabbi. The leaders warned him that the situation of the Jews in Jerusalem was very precarious and beyond repair, but he again refused. He continued his journey through Gaza– the fourth-largest Jewish city those days (after Jerusalem, Safed, and Hebron)–and from there he moved to Hebron. He finally arrived in Yerushalayim on the eve of Passover 1488. Upon his arrival, he was received by the rabbi of the city, and stayed in his house for the rest of the holiday.

IF I FORGET YOU, OH JERUSALEM…

In those years, Jerusalem was under the control of the Mamluks, a Muslim group that ruled the city until 1517. Some 4,000 Gentile –Muslim and Christian– families lived in Jerusalem. The local Jewish community numbered approximately 70 families. The wealthiest had fled because of the exorbitant taxes demanded by the Mamlukes. The poor had nowhere to go, and their life became unsustainable. Many were literally starving to death. As Rabbi Obadiah writes: "in the city there were many widows and poor old men…those who have some bread to eat…are considered to be rich…". Rabbi Obadiah also says that the person who received him upon arrival was an Italian rabbi, Ya'aqob from Colombano. This man was so poor that he was only allowed to eat a piece of bread during Shabbat, while during the week he ate the dried carob pods that the producers discarded after producing the famous syrup known as "carob honey" .

THE SYNAGOGUES

Rabbi Obadiah also writes that a few years before his arrival, there were some 300 Sifre Torah in Jerusalem–ritual Torah scrolls that are read in the Synagogue. But now, virtually all the Scrolls disappeared. The "me'ilim" , that is, the decorated covers made of fine fabrics that wrap these scrolls; and the decorations that are often made of precious metals,

also vanished because the synagogues were frequently looted. The only Synagogue that still operated in Jerusalem was very precarious, narrow and dark. However, the Rabbi notes that the prayers in Jerusalem were not comparable in their beauty to any other place he had prayed. On Saturday mornings, the rabbi writes, “the men rise an hour or two before dawn to sing the sweet religious poetry (baqashot), …then they recited the Kaddish, and then two officiants (chazanim) began the prayers with the recitation of the Shema Israel, at exactly sunrise (vatiquin).

CORRUPTION

Rabbi Bartenura complains about the widespread corruption in Jerusalem. He recounts as an example that a Muslim man killed his own mother, slashing her throat with a knife, in a moment of rage. When they brought him before the local court, the murderer justified himself by saying that he was drunk. Muslims are forbidden by their religion to drink alcohol, and therefore they do not produce or sell alcoholic beverages. What was then the verdict of the judges? The court blamed the Jewish community for producing wine, which caused this man to get drunk and murder his mother. The judges, who were always looking for some economic benefit, imposed a fine of 6 gold coins on the Jewish community, and the murderer was set free.

FROM YOUR RUINS I WILL BUILD YOU. □□□□ □□□□□□□□□

Rabbi Obadiah committed himself to restore Yerushalayim, and he did that, single-handedly. He had to personally take care of all the material needs of the community. Including, for example, digging the graves in the Jewish cemetery and burying the dead, as no one else was able, or strong enough, to engage in this religious duty. The Rabbi then decided to devote his effort to raising funds for the Jewish community of Yerushalayim. He reached out to his family, friends and acquaintances in Italy, who generously provided him with funds to assist the poor. Over time and thanks to the solidarity of

the Italian Jews he was able to establish charitable institutions and medical infirmaries for the sick. Emanuel Hai Camerino of Florence, who was in charge of administrating Rabbi Obadiah's state in Cesena, would send him 100 ducats (gold coins) every year, to which he added another 25 ducats from his own pocket for charity. In this way the Jewish community grew and also the name of the main benefactor: Rabbi of Bertinoro. Since he arrived in Jerusalem, he brought a huge blessing to the entire city. Within a few years, thanks to Rabbi Obadiah's excellent reputation for integrity in Jerusalem, Muslims themselves were turning to him for legal disputes and business disputes, knowing of his wisdom and honesty.

FROM CASTILE TO JERUSALEM

In 1492 the Jewish world was shaken by the news of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. The refugees soon arrived in Turkey, Egypt, Safed and also in Jerusalem. Rabbi Obadiah became the spiritual leader of these refugees and helped them to support themselves, since they arrived without any money, and in order to stay in the city they had to pay the tax to the Mamluk government, the jiziah, which was charged per person. Which meant that with the increase in the Jewish population, the already heavy taxes increased even more. However, after a few years, these Jews who came from Spain with nothing but had professional skill and training in international trade, began to grow economically, and the Jewish community of Yerushalayim flourished again! As a token of their enormous gratitude to their benefactor, the refugees from Spain and Portugal granted Rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro the best gift he could have dreamed of: they built him his own Yeshiba (rabbinical academy) in Yerushalayim! The first Yeshiba in Jerusalem after 1200 years!

Rabbi Obadiah was named "abi hayishub", patron or maximum benefactor, of the city of Jerusalem.

He died in 1515 and his body rests in the Har HaZetim (Mount of Olives) the most famous cemetery in Yerushalayim.

REVIVING THE HEBREW LANGUAGE

Rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro is primarily known for his commentary to the Mishnah, a text that comprises the oral rabbinical traditions, that is, the application and details of all the precepts of the Torah. The Mishnah is usually studied in conjunction with the Gemara (Talmud) which explains, expands and elaborates on the details of the Mishna. Maimonides was the first rabbi to write an independent commentary on the Mishnah. Rabbi Obadiah followed his example and wrote his own commentary, which became the most popular for centuries. To the point that it is difficult to find an edition of the Mishnah that does not contain the "Bartenura commentary". Rabbi Obadiah's book was more accepted than Maimonides' commentary because Maimonides originally wrote his commentary in Arabic, while Rabbi Obadiah's commentary was written in Hebrew.

Aside from this work, Rabbi Obadiah also wrote a book on Rashi's commentary to the Tora called *amar neqe* (See Daniel 9:7, □□□ □□□ "Pure Wool"). He also wrote three long letters describing in detail his journey and containing invaluable descriptions of the people and customs of the Jewish communities he visited in his journey from Italy to Jerusalem. These letters were addressed to his father and his brother and were published under the name "Darkhe Ẓion" (the Roads leading to Zion, Jerusalem) and "HaMasa le-Eres Yisrael" (The journey to the land of Israel) .