Eliyahu Montalto (1567–1616), physician to the King of France

I am writing the second volume of my book "Forgotten Giants", in which I recount the history of lesser-known Sephardic rabbis (see here). This volume focuses on rabbinic leaders after the expulsion from Spain, mainly from the 17th century. While writing about Rabbi Shaul Levi Mortera, chief rabbi of Amsterdam, in the early 1600s, I came across a name I did not know: Rabbi and Doctor Eliyahu Montalto. His story is fascinating, and I've been reading about him for several days. Today, I decided to write about him and share his incredible biography with you. I feel that remembering his example is both a source of inspiration and an act of justice—Tehiyat HaMetim: reviving and rescuing from oblivion the memory of our forgotten Jewish heroes.

May the meritorious acts of our ancestors inspire us to love God and our Torah, to value our present religious freedom—which we take for granted—and especially the privilege of having our own Jewish State, Medinat Israel!

Enjoy the reading!

FROM PORTUGAL TO PISA

Eliyahu de Luna Montalto was born around the year 1567 in the city of Castelo Branco in the Kingdom of Portugal. He was the son of Antonio and Catarina Aires, who were *anusim*, Jews forced to convert to Christianity. He was officially baptized as Felipe.

He studied medicine at the University of Salamanca and later at Coimbra in Portugal. He settled in Lisbon as a physician, where he married Jerónima de Fonseca, the daughter of a family also forced to convert to Christianity in Portugal in 1497.

In 1593, he moved to Livorno, which offered residence and professional freedom to Jews and conversos from Spain and Portugal. There, he began to practice medicine professionally, and his wisdom was such that his reputation grew rapidly.

In 1606, he published his first medical treatise, *Optica intra philosophiae et medicinae aream*, a scientific work on visual processes in which he combined medical observations with philosophical and biblical references. For example, he developed an innovative theory claiming that vision originates in the brain—not in the eyes—based on a literal reading of Exodus 20:18: "All the people saw the voices."

During the same period, he taught medicine at the University of Pisa, where he was considered for the highest chair in the medical faculty. Little by little, as he reconnected in Livorno with his Jewish origins, he moved toward a more spiritual life. As a first step, he changed his original name, Felipe (which means "friend of horses"), to Filoteo (which means "friend of God").

IN THE VENICE GHETTO

In 1607, Dr. Montalto made the most critical decision of his life: he left Pisa and moved to the Venice Ghetto, where he renounced his Christian identity and began openly practicing Judaism. He was welcomed by the Jewish community, which had around 6,000 members, many of whom lived in poverty and desperately needed a good doctor. In Venice, he adopted the Hebrew name "Eliyahu," and his wife, Jerónima, took the name Rahel. From then on, he lived fully as a practicing Jew. His first mentor or influencer was Daniel Franco, who was eventually burned at the stake in an *auto-da-fé* for his Jewish

faith upon returning to Portugal.

While in Venice, Montalto studied *Halakha* (Jewish law) and Jewish philosophy while continuing to practice medicine. His teacher was the famous Rabbi Yehuda Aryeh de Modena (1571–1648). Montalto actively participated in the ghetto's life and was part of the community's leadership. His tomb refers to him as "Rab" (rabbi), which suggests that at some point, he officially received that title in Venice.

His high cultural level and deep knowledge of Christianity allowed him to debate non-Jews on an equal cultural background with solid arguments.

In 1612, he represented the Jewish community in a public debate in Padua against a Dominican friar. The friar's unexpected withdrawal from the debate solidified Montalto's reputation as a polemicist and defender of Judaism.

COURT PHYSICIAN IN PARIS

Years earlier, in 1605, Montalto had passed through Paris on his way back from the Netherlands. There, he was summoned by the royal court to treat Leonora Galigai, lady-in-waiting and childhood friend of Maria de Medici, wife of King Henry IV of France. Galigai suffered from what was then diagnosed as *bulbus hystericus*, a psychosomatic disorder. At the time, mental illnesses were usually treated by Christian clergy through exorcisms since such conditions were believed to be caused by demonic possession.

Rabbi Montalto treated the patient using a professional medical approach. He prescribed Galigai a regimen of diet, fresh air, walks, exercise, and abstinence. According to experts George M. Weisz and Donatella Lippi, this method could today be considered an early form of psychotherapy—and it was revolutionary for its time. Over time, the patient improved significantly, and Dr. Montalto's reputation grew further. His

fame spread, and many expected him to be appointed as the official physician of the Parisian court.

However, King Henry IV of France strongly opposed his formal appointment because Montalto was Jewish. Although the king respected him for his knowledge and accomplishments, he would not allow him to remain at court.

After the assassination of Henry IV in 1610, Queen Maria de Medici—now regent of the young Louis XIII—summoned him again to Paris. In a letter dated May 6, 1611, Montalto clearly stated the conditions under which he would accept the position:

- Papal permission to reside in France as a Jew and to practice Judaism openly
- Authorization to bring ten Jews with him to ensure a daily *minyan*, including a *shochet*
- Exemption from working on *Shabbat*
- The right to freely practice his religion and eat *kosher* food for himself and his companions

It was the first time someone of his stature had dared to present such a request, which was unprecedented in Renaissance Europe.

To the surprise of many, these bold and historically unparalleled conditions were accepted by Queen Maria de Medici. Thanks to her family's connections with the Vatican, the Pope, Camillo Borghese, issued a dispensation (*heter*) allowing Montalto to practice Judaism in France. In September 1612, Montalto was officially appointed *Consiliarus et Medicus*—Counselor and Physician—to the royal court. He became the first Jew to publicly—and notably—practice his faith in Paris since the expulsion of the Jews from France in 1394. Among the ten Jews who accompanied him from Venice was his student and assistant, Shaul Levi Mortera.

DEFENDER OF THE JEWS

During his time at court, Montalto protected converso Jews, who were constantly attacked and discriminated against. In 1615, he prevented the dissolution of the community of conversos in Bordeaux and intervened to stop the expulsion of several conversos who were caught celebrating the *Pesach* Seder in Paris.

In 1614, he published his second medical work in Paris: *Archipathologia*, dedicated to Maria de Medici. This psychological treatise of 817 pages addresses 18 types of mental and neurological disorders, including melancholy, epilepsy, insomnia, vertigo, and coma.

DEATH AND BURIAL

In November 1615, Montalto accompanied the royal family on their journey to Spain for the wedding of Louis XIII to Anne of Austria. On the return trip to France, as they approached the town of Tours, Montalto contracted a plague and passed away. It was February 17, 1616—29 Shebat, 5376.

France had no Jewish cemetery at the time, and in his will, Montalto requested that his body be taken to Amsterdam, where his children lived, to be buried in the Jewish cemetery of Beth Haim. Queen Maria de Medici ordered his body to be embalmed—an exceptional measure—and personally funded its transfer.

His son, Moshe de Luna Montalto, and his disciple, Rabbi Shaul Levi Mortera, accompanied his body on the funeral journey to the Jewish cemetery in Amsterdam.

HIS JEWISH WRITINGS

Rabbi Montalto wrote two polemical treatises in defense of Judaism, responding to Christian attacks. The first was a

Portuguese treatise on Isaiah 53, the chapter that describes the “faithful servant of God” who suffers persecution and pain because of his devotion to God. Rabbinic literature has always taught that this “Servant of God” refers to the people of Israel, while the Church interpreted it as referring to Yeshu.

When presenting the Jewish arguments, Rabbi Montalto was not only refuting the Christian reading but also seeking to educate the conversos—who had been indoctrinated by Catholic priests and teachers—to correctly understand this fundamental text for the first time in their lives.

His second book, written in Italian and titled *Proposizioni convenevoli e inconcusse*, rejects the Christian notion of redemption through vicarious sacrifice, i.e., through the suffering of Yeshu. Montalto explains that, according to the Torah, when a person transgresses, they are personally responsible for their wrongdoing and can only be forgiven if they recognize their sin, confess it—not to a clergyperson, but directly to God—and commit to correcting their conduct. Thus, Judaism emphasizes personal responsibility for sin and *Teshuba* , personal and direct repentance, as the path to individual redemption.

Another manuscript attributed to Montalto is a *pesaq halakha*, an eleven-page rabbinic responsum on the topic of Shabbat rest. As a physician, Montalto sometimes treated patients on Shabbat in critical cases, traveling in a covered wagon driven by non-Jews. Someone objected to this practice before the rabbinical court of Venice. The responsum, filled with rabbinic references and written in cursive Italian-Hebrew handwriting, may have been penned by Montalto’s assistant, Rabbi Shaul Levi Mortera.

HIS GRAVE

The location of his grave appears in a painting by the artist Jacob van Ruisdael, painted between 1650 and 1655, where his white tomb stands at the center of the canvas.

The Hebrew inscription on his tombstone was likely composed by his main Torah teacher, Yehuda Aryeh de Modena:

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The Hebrew is poetic—an artistic work worthy of the great Sephardic rabbinic composers of the time. Some elements and references I can try to decipher, include the use of the Hebrew word *har* (mountain), as a play on his surname "Monte Alto"; the allusion to his ties with both the poor of his people (in the Venice ghetto) and the royalty, demonstrating his profound humility; the mention that his body was embalmed for transport from Tours to Amsterdam (Ya'akov); the textual reference to the burial of Yosef (and Yaakov); and finally, the phrase that he "walked with God," echoing God's commandment to Abraham Abinu.