

# **BALKAN JEWISH IDENTITY; SEPHARDIM UNDER OTTOMAN RULE: DESIRE FOR ASSIMILATION OR SEPARATION?**

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**Abstract.** This paper analyses the various ways the Sephardi Jews tried to preserve their ethnic identity in the 17th –19th centuries in the Balkan lands under Ottoman rule.

The year 1492 was a milestone in the life of the Jewish community. It is the year they were expelled from Spain. Because they were forced to change their religion as a group, the hegemony they had retained for centuries in the Iberian Peninsula ended.

The Jewish community 500 years after expulsion from Spain still try to keep their ethnic characteristics in whatever country they have chosen as their second home. Judaism is both a family oriented and a temple oriented religion. The Jews that emigrated to Ottoman lands, similar to the ones that emigrated to the United States, tried to keep their ethnic characteristics by following strict religious rituals both in the family and in temples.

Although the Jewish groups in Ottoman lands tried to keep their ethnic characteristics by sticking to various rules such as getting married within the community, giving Jewish names to their children and following rituals, they also showed some marked differences. The Jews in Turkey together with members of the group that had immigrated to Holland, England, France, North Africa and the Balkans belong to the Sephardi (Spanish) group, whereas eighty percent of the Jewish community in the U.S and the Slavic Lands and Israel are called Ashkenazi (German) and are descendants of the group from the Rhine valley. The expulsion from Spain resulted in deep grievances in the Jewish community. The break-up of families, the high percentage of sickness and death caused during the hard conditions of immigration and the economic difficulties suffered by the group resulted in the belief that this was a punishment given by God to the Jewish community.

Because of various travels and immigration, it would be more proper to speak of plurality when speaking about Balkan identity. Balkan Jews continued to

live in the mosaic of various cultures in Ottoman lands preserving their language and various ethnic characteristics. Starting with the 18th century, the West began to play an important part in the formation of the Balkan identity. After the loss of the Ottoman-Russian war, Ottomans lost Serbia and the borders of the Ottoman lands were finalised. Bosnia- Herzegovina became a part of Austria- Hungary in 1908. In the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries the Jewish community tried to keep their religious and ethnic characteristics under the guidance of religious leaders (Rabbi) and various religious schools. In 1860, the establishment of Alliance schools in Paris by aiming at preserving religious and cultural unity was successful in uniting the dispersed Jewish community.

This paper will aim to analyse the various ways the Sephardi Jews tried to preserve their ethnic identity in the 17th –19th centuries in the Balkan lands under Ottoman rule.

One way the Jews who immigrated to Ottoman lands tried to keep their identity and ethnic characteristics was by aiming to control the financial dealings of Ottoman lands. The fact that they had relatives everywhere and knew several languages, was a determining factor. Jewish women also had an important power. They could easily penetrate the private world of the harem, with the pretext of bringing clothes and jewellery to the ladies. Some of the Jewish ladies became close friends and conspirators of the wives of the Sultan and lost their lives in this service (Benbessa 1998: 137).

Although other non-Moslem communities had worked as negotiators and merchants in rivalry with the Jews, it was in two fields that the Jewish minority in Turkey excelled: in international finance and the textile industry (Banbessa 1998: 137). In the 16th and 17th centuries the wool industry showed a marked development. The use of technology and the raw materials being supplied easily from the Balkans was another factor supporting the development of this industry. Before the migration of the Jews there was a local textile industry but their produce was limited to coarse wool. The Jewish merchants brought the raw wool they had bought from the Balkan villages to towns such as Salonika and developed it there. The Salonikan materials were especially prepared for Ottoman lands. The Janissaries were the number one consumers. The minority groups were forced by the government to pay a tax (*cizye*). The Jewish community paid the tax to the Ottoman government in the form of material.

The Ottoman sultans ruled their subjects of different ethnic origin by the “millet system”. “The Classical Ottoman political theory held the view that the territory and everything on it belonged to the dynasty- sultan.” (Karpas, 7) Millets consisted of people belonging to the same faith. In some as Karpas observes: “the millet system emphasised the universality of the faith, and superseded ethnic and linguistic differences without destroying them.” (Karpas, 143) “The leadership of the community at the grassroots level, that is in the villages and in town quarters, consisted of the representative of the religion; the priest or rabbi and the cultural head of the community itself, usually a prominent layman living there. Family was the foundation of the community as well as the chief institution which preserved and transmitted culture. The Millet system favoured the fusion of the family and the community.” (Karpas, 142)

The 17th century was a time when economic conditions showed a marked change. One of the major reasons was the fact that the Ottoman armies had to resist the European armies equipped with newly developed war technology. For the Ottoman Empire to keep up with the cost of the new army of janissaries became more and more difficult and the rise and the price of grain supported the development of the black market. The Jewish merchants could never regain the importance they had in the 16th and 17th centuries. From the 17th century onwards, it was the English and the Dutch merchant companies that gained importance in the Ottoman international trade.

In spite of the difficulties, the Jewish community tried to keep their importance in trade. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Izmir, instead of Salonika became the major city of commerce. In the 18th century, the importance of Jews in trade decreased. There were various reasons for this: fires, plagues and religious crisis like Sabatayism. The world was changing whereas the Ottoman Jews were still involved with older mercantile jobs like tax collecting, money-lending, usury, etc. The Jews also suffered during the reforms of Sultan Mahmut who closed the commissary of Janissaries. This affected deeply the Jewish community who were the main suppliers of the Janissaries.

Another way the Jewish community tried to preserve their identity was by giving great importance to the protection of their culture. After the migration of the Jews, Salonika, Adrianople, Izmir and Istanbul had become the main centres of culture. The rich families in the big cities would collect books and form open

libraries for the people to use. The first Hebrew publishing house was established in Istanbul in 1493 and others followed. The Jews who came to Ottoman lands in the Balkans brought with them important books of culture and sponsored the establishment of cultural centres, schools and libraries. The local Jewish schools, (*Talmudei Tora*) were the main centres for the spreading of the Jewish culture.

An effective measure taken was the establishment of the Alliance Israelite Universelle reflecting the desire to institutionalise the solidarity of the Jewish nation. In 1840 when a religious person, Father Thomas was lost and found dead, it was the Jewish people who were blamed; many were prosecuted and some lost their lives. Powerful Jewish people, like the Rothschilds, decided to do something to protest against this false accusation and obtained a declaration both from the Sultan in Istanbul and the minister of the Egyptian king, Mehmet Ali. The event resulted in the uniting of the Jewish community against other nations and beliefs. The Jews of Western Europe believed that since amelioration of conditions was possible for the Jews of the West, it was also possible for the Jews of the East. What was needed was to establish new schools and educate the future generations well. An important legacy of the Alliance schools was the spreading of the French language among Balkan Jews. The fact that they spoke French mixed with Spanish and with a slight accent added a distinct specificity to Sephardi Jewish identity. As could be seen, the establishment of the Alliance schools was a major step in the preservation and strengthening of the Jewish identity.

In the late 18th century “Haskala”, the Jewish word meaning culture and intelligence, was marked among Jews of central and Eastern Europe. It was inspired by the European Enlightenment movement, but had a distinctly Jewish flavour. Haskala advocated a change that would result in the discarding of the ghetto environment and revision of traditional Jewish education. New subjects were added to the curriculum and the first modern Hebrew periodical was published in 1789 (Britannica, IV: 939). Orthodox Judaism believed that the Haskala movement threatened to destroy the tightly knit fabric of Judaism, Haskala in turn fought against rabbinical orthodoxy, and Hassidism, charging them with fanaticism and superstition.

When we consider Turkey, we see that there are presently two groups of Jews: one of them is the Sephardi Jews who keep their ethnic rituals, having their weddings in the synagogue, and observing the traditions of the Sabbath. This group

has been living in Turkey for more than 500 years and working in various sectors in Turkey such as law, the media, trade, finance, medicine and have become very successful in the fields they have chosen. The trade route between Europe and Asia was controlled by the Ottoman Empire. The Sephardi Jews had an important role to play in this trade as negotiators between the Moslem and Christian companies, as tax collectors and merchants. They were especially active in the textile trade, importing materials from Italy and exporting cotton and silk from the Balkans and the East. In the 19th century, during the decline of the Ottoman Empire, this group suffered both financially and physically because of the loss of trade and also because of fires and cholera.

The other group of Jewish origin living in Turkey that concerns us is called the Salonikans or the “converts”. Officially they are Moslems and practice Moslem ways but it is well known that this closed community has practised the teachings of Sabatay Sevi until recent times. For more than half a century, members of this group who are in their eighties and nineties now, would always marry one within their close family circle. Families have separate cemeteries and they speak with a slight accent. Probably, after the establishment of the country of Israel, the converts decided that those who wanted to go to Israel should go, but the remaining ones should aim at integration.

Thus, starting with the people who are now in their fifties and sixties, intermarriage ceased and they are losing their ethnic identities. Another reason why the converts have decided to marry outside their close family circle may be due to health concerns. The race was becoming unhealthy, due to intermarriage. The desire for assimilation is more marked in this group.

There are few documents about the life of Sabatay Sevi. He was born in 1626 in Izmir to a Spanish descendant Jewish family. From his early years, Sevi was devoted to reading religious books and had learned the Kabbala. He had married twice at a very early age but had rejected his wives saying “I am married to the Torah” (Küçük 2001: 224). When Sevi reached the age of eighteen there was a general unrest in Europe and loss of belief. People were waiting for a Messiah who would save them. Sevi believed that he was the long-awaited Messiah.

When Sevi announced that he was a prophet in Izmir, his group of believers increased. The chief rabbi of Izmir sent people to turn him to traditional Jewish faith; but he declared himself a prophet to the people and the rabbis excommunicated him,

which caused his fame to increase and to spread. The years 1648–68 were devoted to his travels; he went to Athens, Cairo, Salonika and Jerusalem. The Salonikans were deeply involved in Kabbalistic activities so Sevi tried to obtain the acceptance of these people (Küçük 2001: 242).

In December 1665 he formally announced his priesthood in a synagogue (Küçük 2001: 242). He wanted to change many of the rituals of the practising Jews saying: “a new Messiah has come, so there will be joy and celebration instead of the serious rituals”(Küçük 2001: 259). In this point Sabatayists shared similar beliefs with the Hasidim stressing the joyful aspects of their religion.

The rabbis of Izmir were worried about Sabatay Sevi’s popularity. The news reached Istanbul and Sevi was brought there. The head official questioned him and Sevi denied that he was a prophet and said he was a plain Jew (Küçük 2001: 272) but Sultan Mehmet IV was not satisfied with the answer so he asked Sevi to accept the Moslem religion. Sevi accepted Islam (it is believed only in appearance) in 1666.

Sabatay Sevi’s acceptance of Islam had a demoralizing effect on his followers but many continued to believe in him. Sevi secretly announced his 18 commandments after being declared a Moslem. According to these, the converts should decline to marry members of the Moslem community, in appearance they should appear to be practising Moslem customs (such as sacrificing lamb on religious holidays and fasting) not to attract attention, circumcision for boys should be accepted.

How Sabatay Sevi’s movement could persist to our days is a taboo subject. Recently, several books and documents have been published, most importantly Ilgaz Zorlu’s *I Am a Salonikan* and Soner Yalçın’s *Efendi*. These publications caused a lot of pro and con articles to be written but the Salonikans of Turkey neither accepted, nor officially denied these claims. Even to our day, this group of people have been known as “converts” or “Salonikans.”

It would be wrong to presume that the Jewish community suffered no hardships in Turkey. Although they were allowed to practise their beliefs freely, from a social point of view, they faced certain difficulties. The two most important difficulties they faced during the Ottoman Empire were discrimination and segregation. They were called “zimmi”. Although the “zimmi” were considered second-class citizens, they were protected by the law and had a legal status. For their

protection under the law they had to pay to the Ottoman authorities a tax called "cizye". The restrictions were more prominent in the daily life. "The houses and living quarters of the zimmi could not be constructed higher than those of the Ottomans. Their hairdos and apparels had to be different from those of the Ottomans and they could not ride noble animals like the horse or the camel. They could not carry weapons, neither could they marry a Moslem" (Benbessa 1998: 78-79).

When we consider the state of the Jewish community in Turkey at the end of the 19th century, besides the very poor and the very rich, the majority could be classed as "middle-class".

The rich Jews were located in major towns like Istanbul, Izmir and also in places where the exporting of local goods was prominent like Tire, a small town 100 km from Izmir. Many Jews became really rich because of the export of raisins, cotton, cereals, etc. The 19th century saw the establishment and the rapid development of the tobacco industry in Turkey. In tobacco factories, women and children constituted fifty percent of the working force. There were various jobs open to the poor members of the Jewish community: they were porters, window cleaners, water carriers, tinkers, peddlers, etc.

Amongst the many positive works of the alliance, the work they did to ameliorate the work conditions of poor members of the community should be noted. With the initiation of the Alliance an apprenticeship program was started which produced excellent results. The Alliance endeavoured to dissuade its pupils from engaging in "easy" unprofitable crafts such as tin work or shoe making and to direct them towards crafts that required a degree of technical skill, such as carpentry, cabinet work, clock-making, jewellery, electricity and mechanics (Braude 1982: 228).

The Alliance was successful in establishing the new education system and the apprenticeship system but failed in their endeavour to lead the Jewish citizens to agriculture. The Alliance had succeeded in establishing agricultural colonies in Palestine and wanted to do a similar job in Anatolia. With this intention extensive farms were purchased but unfortunately draughts, infertility of the land in certain regions and sickness resulted in the collapse of this system.

In 1876, Abdülhamit ascended to the throne and a new era started for the Ottoman Jews that would last for 33 years. A division should be made between the Ottoman Jews and the Jews living outside Ottoman territory. It is necessary to make

this differentiation because of the different attitudes shown by these groups towards Zionism. The Jewish community living in relative peace in Ottoman lands wanted to continue doing so and followed the Zionist movement with caution.

The reign of Abdulhamit II (1876-1909) and the establishment of The Committee of Union and Progress (1906) were important times in the development of the relations between the Jewish community and the Ottoman administration. It is interesting to note that the Jewish community in Turkey did not support the Zionist currents in Europe, thinking it would endanger their relatively secure position here. The Alliance in France was working against the spread of Zionism in Istanbul asking for the help of the last rabbi, Nahum, on this important issue. A lawyer from Vienna, Dr Theodore Herzl, was the person who had initiated the first Zionist congress in Basel in 1897. The aim of the Zionists was to obtain a homeland for the Jews in Palestine. In an article published in "Die Welt" Herzl observed: "Today, more than ever, Turkey is in need of financial aid and can only find this from the Jews. We don't want to buy a state from the Sultan; we are only trying to establish a land under the protection of international law, for our race who can not reside elsewhere" (Yetkin 1996: 125). Abdülhamit answered this request saying: "I can not sell a span of land from this country because this land belongs not to me but to my people who have conquered it by shedding their blood" (Yetkin 1996: 125).

According to Herzl, the only condition that Adülhamit could accept was the placing of the Jews in areas outside Palestine; such as Anatolia, Syria, Mesopotamia, etc. which could not be accepted by the Jews (Yetkin 1996: 126). Tahsin Paşa summarised the reasons for Abdülhamit's refusal of the suggestion observing that the Palestine area was near sacred places and there was always trouble in these places. So he did not want to add a Jewish problem to the already existing ones.

Abdlhamit had declared the constitutional monarchy soon after his ascension to the throne but for a short while. Finding fault with the politicians for the loss of the war against Russia, he soon suppressed the Ottoman Parliament. The Council of Union and Progress was founded by the intellectuals in Turkey who had run away from the oppression of Abdülhamit in 1906. Their aim was to bring peace and prosperity to the different races living under Ottoman rule, Moslems and Christians alike. Salonika, at the end of the 19th century, was an important port and trade centre. It hosted a large number of wealthy Jews, many of whom supported the efforts of the Council of Union and Progress that they hoped would help their



political aims within the Ottoman Empire. However, the council could not clearly see the danger coming from Europe; soon Tripoli was lost to the Italians and Macedonia to the Balkan countries. After the loss of the First World War, the council also disintegrated.

Presently, besides the Salonikans who have been more or less assimilated there are the Sephardic Jews who keep strictly their ethnic rituals; having their weddings in the synagogue and observing the traditions of the Sabbath. In Hebrew, there are no names for the days of the week. The seventh day is Sabbath and the other days are called the first day, the second day, etc. On Friday afternoon Sabbath starts and the women of the household prepare food and men do the shopping for two days. This rule is still observed in many households. During Sabbath no food is cooked and electricity and elevators and cars should not be used. But now because of the demands of modern life only the Friday dinner ceremony of Sabbath is observed. Men go to the Synagogue to pray and women light the Sabbath candles. On Friday night the whole family gathers at the mother-in-law's house for Sabbath dinner. Most of the Jewish families try to keep this ritual, but there have been some modifications. Now, the couples go to their mother-in-law's house if they are not invited to an important party elsewhere, such as a wedding. Since most young Jewish women are working and don't have much time, and want to see their own mothers as well, one week they go to their in-law's house to dine, and the next week to their own mother's house.

The Jewish community in Turkey also try to preserve their ethnic identity in Turkey by preserving the traditions and rituals of Judaism such as Bar Mitzvah, going to the synagogue and marriage ceremonies. The religious ceremonies in synagogues are not organised prayers. There are frequent repetitions to allow for the new-comers to join in. In Turkey synagogues also serve as a meeting place for the Jewish community. People like to come a little early to be able to talk with their friends and share the latest community news.

When the male child of the family is 12 years and a month old, there is a ceremony for the initiation into adulthood. From this age on the father is not responsible for his son. The young boy is expected to obey the laws of his religion. Similar to the circumcision ceremonies in Turkey, Jewish families try to arrange very fancy Bar Mitzvah ceremonies.

Marriage is very important for the Jewish community because it determines the continuation of the race. The mother has a special role in the Jewish family because the child accepts the religion of the mother. Presently, in Turkey, there have been many inter-marriages between Jewish and Moslem families. Now both communities say that when the child is of age he can decide which religion to choose.

The Reviewer of Sir Harry Luke's *The Making of Modern Turkey* observed: "In the days of the Sultans Turkey was less like a country than like a block of flats inhabited by a number of families which met only on the stairs" (Luke, 8). Now all that is changed. The Jewish community show a marked desire for integration by speaking Turkish without an accent, giving Turkish names to their children and making close friends with Turkish families. So we can say that although the most devout Jews try to keep their exact rituals the rest of the population show some tendency to be more lenient in social and religious matters. Still the continuation of a Jewish community is as strong as ever with their ethnic customs and rituals in Turkey. This shows the determination and the remarkable group identity of this group in their perseverance to keep their ethnic characteristics and at the same time to adapt to the conditions of the country they have chosen as home.

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