

The Stranger in Early Modern and Modern Jewish Tradition

Edited by

Catherine Bartlett and Joachim Schlör



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“The Penitents”

Attitudes of Jewish Society to Marranos in Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth-Century Safed

Eyal Davidson

1 Introduction

Solomon Shlumil mentioned an exceptional *Hakham* whom he did not manage to meet in person because he passed away two years before Shlumil came to Safed.¹ Shlumil was referring to Rabbi Abraham Halevy Brukhim (Maghrebi), a native of Morocco and a disciple of Rabbi Moses Cordovero and Isaac (ben Solomon) Luria Ashkenazi (HaAri),² who collected ancient copies of the Zohar and wrote commentaries on it.³ He led a group known as “The Penitents,” instructing them to practice self-infliction and asceticism. After having practiced these acts himself, he instructed that each member be tied up in a sack and that the other members drag him around the entire synagogue, then they were told to hit their peers with stones and roll about on thorn-filled mattresses.⁴ Among the codes of behavior practiced in Safed in the sixteenth century, a book attributed to Rabbi Brukhim was found which reported on a “group of penitents” who spent their time

1 Shlumil moved to Safed in 1602 (Rabbi Joseph [Solomon Delmedigo] from Kandiya, *Taalumot Hokhma* [Basel, 1629], 42a), whereas Brukhim's probably died in 1600. See: David Tamar, *Studies in the History of the Jews in the Land of Israel and Italy* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass Book Publishing, 1986), 175; Benjamin Klahr, *Rabbi Haim ben Attar, His Immigration to the Land of Israel* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1951), 40–42.

2 Mordehai Pakhter, “Reshit tsmikkhat shel safrut hamussar hakhabalit btzfat bemeah hashesh esreh” [“The beginnings of kabbalist ethical literature in Safed in the 16th century”], ed. Yoseph Dan, *Culture and History*, Jerusalem: Misgav Yerushalayim, 1987), 82; Moshe Halamish, “Hamekubalim bemorocco,” *From East and West*, vol. 2 (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 1980), 210–211.

3 *Zohar Hadash* [New Zohar], (Salonica, 1597), in second introduction. See: Yoseph Avivi, *Kabalat haAri* [The Kabbalah of the Ari], A. (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 2008), 216–217.

4 Meir Benayahu, *Sefer toldot haAri* [The history of the Ari], (Jerusalem, 1967), 225–230; See: Fine, *Safed*, 47–53.

praying, weeping, wearing sackcloth and fasting, often up to two or three days a week.⁵

Who were these “Penitents” and what lies behind their extreme asceticism? Rabbi Obadiah Bartenura was the first to coin this concept in the Land of Israel when he described his journeys to Jerusalem and Hebron at the end of the fifteenth century. He coined the phrase “the Penitents coming from the Marranos” and let the world know of this special designation for former Marranos.⁶

The Marranos are Jews who ostensibly converted to Christianity and are known mainly from the end of the fourteenth century, when Jews were persecuted in Spain and Portugal. Marranos began fleeing the Iberian Peninsula at the end of the fifteenth century, at the start of the Inquisition. This movement continued into the next century, influenced by the monarchy and the Church’s treatment of the converts who secretly continued practicing Judaism.⁷ Those Marranos who wished to return and openly practice Judaism were forced on a long and dangerous journey in search of a safe haven, far from the clutches of the Christian Church. During the early Mamluk and Ottoman period, some found shelter in the Land of Israel.⁸ They were regarded as people who had come to “shelter under the wings of the divine presence,”⁹ because they considered it to be the Holy Land and hoped that in its religious setting, they would be able to repent their sin of baptism, which they considered to be a grievous sin, even though it was only performed for show. For example, long after Rabbi ibn Habib had openly returned to Judaism and had become an important Rabbinic figure in Jerusalem, he said that the disquiet about his conversion

5 Solomon Schechter, *Studies in Judaism, Second Series*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication of America, 1945), 297. Cf. *ibid.*, 292. For other practices instituted by him, see: *Tikunei Shabbat* in: Rabbi Jacob Poggetti, *Reshit Hokhmah Hakatsar*, (Venice, 1600) 15a – 19b.

6 Rabbi Obadiah Bartenura, *Darkhei Tsion* [The Paths of Zion] (Warsaw, 1895), 14b–15b.

7 Asaf, *Anussei Sepharad*, 41–42; David, Safed, 183–184, and referrals to studies in footnotes 1–8; Isaiah Tishbi, *Meshikhiut bedor girushei sepharad veportugal* [Messianism in the generation of the expulsions from Spain and Portugal], (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center of Jewish History, 1985), 24–52.

8 “[...] and they all passed through the Land of Israel, not only the Jews but also the Marranos who have left the Torah, pass there, and thus they are gathered in the holy land” (Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel, *Commentary on the Latter Prophets*, (Amsterdam, 1641), Isaiah 43); Cf. *ibid.* Ezekiel 20.

9 For example: “He came to the Land of Israel to shelter under the wings of the divine presence” (Karo, *Avkath Rokhel*, section 90); “For some of the people of Israel who were gathered from their exile and returned and were sheltered under the wings of the divine presence that the Holy One had made innumerable miracles for them” (Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas, *Reishit Hokhmah*, [Beginning of Wisdom], (Venice, 1579), *Shaar Haahavah* [Gate of Love] 87, 113b).

to Christianity still felt like a dagger in his heart.¹⁰ The inflictions that the former Marranos imposed upon themselves, such as those instituted by Rabbi Abraham Halevy Brukhim, were practiced in the hope that the self-imposed cruel punishments would help soothe their tormented conscience and this is why they were known as “Penitents.”

The subject of the Marranos has been extensively studied, but the world of the Marranos in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century in the Land of Israel has received only scant attention, mainly in studies by Abraham David,¹¹ Joseph Hacker,¹² Israel Bartal and Joseph Kaplan.¹³ This current, brief study will examine historical sources relating to the Marranos of Safed, focusing on how their Jewish neighbors, who did not have any connection to Christianity, related to them. The study is based on a dissertation written under the aegis of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.¹⁴

2 The Portuguese *Qahal* in Sixteenth-Century Safed

Communal life in Safed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was organized in *qahalim* (*sing. qahal*), autonomous administrative units based on the members' city or country of origin. From the fifteenth century, Safed and many other concentrations of Jewish immigrants were administered along these lines, especially communities that came under the rule of the Ottoman Empire who were in favor of protected people (*dhimmi*) organising in autonomous groups along religious-social lines. The *qahal* offered protection to individuals in Jewish society and its leaders were the official representatives when dealing with local or central authorities.¹⁵ The *qahal* was not only an administrative and economic unit, but also a social one which was

10 “[...] and I was purified from the impureness and the dagger of woe that was in my heart was removed, not woe for bread or thirst for water but for what the sin had caused [...]” (Levi ibn Habib, *Responsa*, section 127).

11 David, Safed.

12 Hacker, Links between Salonican Jews and the Community of Safed.

13 Bartal and Kaplan, “The Immigration of Indigent Jews from Amsterdam to Eretz Israel (Palestine) at the Beginning of the Seventeenth Century,” *Shalem* 6, (1992): 175–193.

14 Eyal Davidson, *Hakhmei Tsefat bein hashanim 1540–1615* [The Hakhamim of Safed in the years 1540–1615: their religious and social status, Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 2010].

15 Yaron Ben-Naeh, *Yehudim bemamleket hasultanim: hahevra hayehudit beimperiya haottmanit bemeah ha-17* [Jews in the Sultan's kingdom: Jewish society in the Ottoman Empire in the seventeenth century], (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007), 127–128; Hacker, *Hairgun hayehudi*, 288–293; Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis, *Foundation Myths of the Millet System in the Ottoman Empire*, vol. 1 (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), 69–88.

accustomed to absorbing immigrants into the communal framework of the country of origin.¹⁶

Since the Marranos of Spain had not been allowed to leave their country from the Expulsion until 1580, we have to conclude that the immigrant Marranos during this time period were from Portugal and that the Portuguese *qahal* consisted of Marranos.¹⁷ The earliest reference to the existence of a Portuguese *qahal* (or the Portuguese) in Safed is found in the Ottoman tax payers census from 1525, when it numbered 21 families.¹⁸ In 1531, the Inquisition came into operation and many Marranos fled Portugal,¹⁹ often coming to the Ottoman Empire in general, and to Safed in particular. These immigrants probably reinforced the existing Marrano *qahal* in the city. A Christian traveler who visited Safed in 1533–1535 reported seeing Marranos in Safed who had fled from the clutches of the Inquisition, as well as in Jerusalem and cities in Syria.²⁰ The Portuguese synagogue which was handed over in the 1530s²¹ is additional proof of the existence of this *qahal*. The Portuguese *qahal* grew steadily until the 1560s when it numbered 200 families, making it the largest *qahal*, similar in size to the Spanish Castilian *qahal*.²²

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- 16 “When they arrived from the Expulsion, each language organized their own *qahal*. Nobody moved from one *qahal* to another, and each *qahal* takes care of the poor members who speak the language of the *qahal*. Each and every *qahal* is listed in the King’s records [=in the Ottoman tax payer records] separately” (Joseph ben Lev, Responsa, part 2, section 72); “According to the custom that everyone goes to the *qahal* that speaks his language, and not to a different *qahal*” (Moses di Trani, Responsa, Part 1, section 307).
- 17 Haim Beinart, *Teudot hainqivitsia mekor letoldot hayehudim veva’anussim* [Records of the Inquisition as a Source for the History of the Jews and the Marranos], Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, B, vol. 11 (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1967), 2; David, Safed, 195–196.
- 18 Cohen and Lewis, *Population*, 161.
- 19 “When the expellees arrived from the land of Edom with many *qahals* [...] very many of them arrived each time, and it was expected that they would arrive every day” (Ben Lev, Responsa, part 3, section 14). See: Rebeka Cohen, *Kushta-Saloniki-Patras* [Constantinople-Salonica-Patras: Organization of the Jewish community in Greece under Ottoman rule in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries] (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1984), 80; Ruth, *HaAnussim*, 69–73.
- 20 Mordehai Ish Shalom, *Masaei notzrim le’eretz yisrael* [Christian travelers to the Holy Land] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved & Dvir Book Publishing, 1979), 284.
- 21 Jacob Berab, Responsa, Venice, 1663, section 29. See: Azriel Shohat, “Inyanei missim vehanhagot tsibur bekhillot yavan bemeah ha16” [Taxation issues and communal practices in Greek communities in the sixteenth century] *Sefunot*, vol. 11, (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1971–1978), 306, note 28.
- 22 Cohen and Lewis, *Population*, 161.

In 1560, Frei Pantaleao de Aveiro, a Christian Portuguese traveler who may himself have been a descendant of Marranos, visited Safed and met Marranos who spoke to him about their difficult existence in the Land of Israel.²³ Fascinating evidence about the former Marranos' attempts to join the groups of Torah learners in Safed has been found, probably from the same time period: "And so our Sephardic brothers and rabbis, may they be protected and redeemed, [...] and some empty-heads [=ignorant of the Torah] will be found among them, if not [=the exceptions] are the Marranos, who have recently come to the Jewish religion, and among them and their sons, there are some people who are wise, intelligent and understanding."²⁴

No further historical evidence about the Marranos in Safed, nor about their organization as a community, is known until the end of the sixteenth century. The Portuguese *qahal* is no longer mentioned in the census of 1596–1597,²⁵ probably due to a general downturn in the economic and security fortunes in Safed in particular, and in the Land of Israel in general which dealt a mortal blow to settlement in the area.²⁶

3 The Portuguese *Qahal* in Safed at the Start of the Seventeenth Century

The start of the seventeenth century saw a reawakening in Jewish dwelling in Safed.²⁷ The Spanish-Portuguese community leaders in Amsterdam

23 "And other Jews from my country visited me that night in the inn who were pleased to see me. With tears in their eyes, they complained (about their fate) saying that because of their sins they were driven out of Portugal not to the Promised Land, as they had believed, but to the Land of Despair, as could be seen in their eyes and their tribulations proved to them" (Slouschz, *The Yishuv* 335).

24 Rabbi Issahar Ibn Sussan, *Elshrakh el-sousani lekismet gaza altura velhaphtarot vehmesh megillot antiohus*, in David Solomon Sasson, *Ohel Dawid*, 1, (London: Oxford University, 1932), 66.

25 Wolf Dieter Hütteroth and Kamal Abdulfattah, *Historical Geography of Palestine, Transjordan and Southern Syria in the Late Sixteenth Century* (Erlangen: Palm and Enke, 1977), 52.

26 See, for example: Joseph Hacker, "Ayn poranut baah leolam ela bishvil amei Haaretz" [The Payment of Djizya by scholars in Palestine in the sixteenth century] *Shalem*, vol. 4, (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi Publishing, 1984): 98–100; Joseph Hacker, *Ki anashim ahim*, 249–326; Halil Inalcik, *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, Cambridge University, 1994), 433–434; Camal Kafadar, "The Ottomans and Europe," in *Handbook of European History 1400–1600 Late Middle Ages: Renaissance and Reformation*, 1, (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 69–89.

27 Meir Benayahu, *Dor ehad bearetz* [One generation in the land] (Jerusalem: Yad Harav Nissim, 1978), 100–103; *ibid.*, "Teudot mi'italya bezman hurbana shel kehilat tsfat" [Records

encouraged indigent people in their city to emigrate, in particular to the Land of Israel.²⁸ In 1609, an armistice was signed between Spain and Holland, followed by increased Dutch maritime movement from Italian ports to the Levant. These ships were laden with merchandise and merchants, among them Jews.²⁹ This is probably why Marranos were to be found in Safed at the beginning of the seventeenth century.³⁰ In 1610, a letter of support was sent from Safed to Modena, mentioning the Portuguese *qahal*.³¹ During the same period, the warden of Venice’s Jewish community received money to support residents of Safed who were “part of the Portuguese nation,” and could be assumed to have been members of the Marrano *qahal*.³²

4 The Attitude of Safed’s Sephardic *Hakhamim* to the Former Marranos

A discussion of attitudes to the former Marranos needs to be seen within a wide-ranging context of social, historical, geographical and halakhic aspects. Different scholars and thinkers have evaluated the act of ostensible conversion to Christianity and have judged the Marranos, as well as the question of how to relate to the Marranos who took on a lifestyle that set them apart from Jewish society.³³ However, within the confines of this brief study, we will only examine the point of view of Safed’s sixteenth-century *Hakhamim*, focusing on Rabbi Jacob Berab, his disciples and their disciples – the first, second and third generation after the Expulsion who certainly had first-hand familiarity with the world of the Marranos.³⁴ Rabbi Jacob Berab had a bitter disagreement

from Italy at the time of the destruction of the community of Safed], *Eretz Yisrael*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 1954): 244–248.

28 Bartal & Kaplan, “The Immigration of Indigent Jews,” 175–188.

29 *Ibid.*, 188–189.

30 Hacker, *Links between Salonican Jews and the community of Safed*, 283–284.

31 Abraham Elmalih, “Miginzei He’avar” [From treasures of the past], *East and West*, vol. 3, (Jerusalem: Journal for the Exploration of the East and Judaism in the Diaspora, 1929): 320–321.

32 Daniel Carpi, *Betarbut harenesans ubein homot hagetto* [Between renaissance and ghetto culture and between the ghetto walls: Essays on the history of Jews in Italy in the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries] (Tel Aviv: University of Tel Aviv. Publishing Project, 1989), 241–243. See: David, *Safed*, 195–196.

33 For example: Asaf, *Anussei Sepharad*, 19–60; Baer, *Toldot HaYehudim BiSfarad HaNotzrit*, 364–400.

34 Rabbi Joseph Berab was born in Castile, Spain in 1474. After the Expulsion, he emigrated to North Africa, Jerusalem and Safed, where he settled, probably in 1535. In Safed, he was

with Rabbi Levi ibn Habib, who had been expelled from Spain, had settled in Jerusalem where he was considered the greatest scholar of his time.³⁵ The disagreement centered on Berab's plans for renewing the ordination of Rabbis (*semikha*) and establishing the Sanhedrin, thus laying the foundations for judicial and halakhic centralization, which would have overwhelming power and influence over the entire Jewish world.³⁶ At the height of the polemic between them, Rabbi Berab surprised his friend, when he publicly exposed Habib's past as a Marrano. Rabbi Levi ibn Habib was furious and countered that Berab's intention had been to publicly shame him.³⁷ Rabbi ibn Habib was fully aware that Jewish society of the time did not look favorably on former Marranos and considered it to be a stigma. Therefore, he feared that his social and religious status would be harmed.

Why did Rabbi Jacob Berab take such a drastic step? This must be seen against the backdrop of his campaign to renew ordination in Safed. Berab threw the full weight of his authority and influence behind the success of this move. One of the reasons he gave for wishing to renew ordination was the need to ease the way for Marranos wishing to return to Judaism: According to halakha, the punishment for the gravest sins is excommunication (*karet*). A person wishing to do penance for such sins may do so by receiving thirty-nine floggings. However, this punishment may only be administered by the Sanhedrin. The contemporaries of the expellees from Spain believed that converting to Christianity was on the same par as these grave sins, even if it was

distinguished by his great knowledge of the Halakhah. He founded a Yeshiva that attracted diligent learners and was considered to be "The Rabbi of all the Hakhamim of Safed" (Rabbi Elazar Azikri, *Sefer Haredim*, Venice, 1601, 53b). See Haim Zalman Dimitrovsky, "The Bet Medrash of Rabbi Jacob Berab in Safed," *Sefunot*, vol. 7, (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1963): 43–96.

35 Solmon Zalman Havlin, "Rabbi Levi ibn Habib – Ralbakh," *Yeshurun*, vol. 11 (Jerusalem & New York: Yeshurun Institute, 2002): 864–890; 14 (2004): 997–1011.

36 Meir Benayahu, "Hidushah shel HaSemiha" [The Renew of the Semiha], 4th ed., *Jubilee Book in honour of Yitshak Baer* (Jerusalem: The Israeli Historical Society, 1961): 248–269; Abraham David, *Aliya vehityashvut be'erezt yisrael beme'ah ha-16* [Immigration and settlement in the Land of Israel in the sixteenth century] (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass Book Publishing, 1993), 148–150; Jacob Katz, "Mahloket hasemikha bein Rabbi Yaakov berav ve haralbakh" [The ordination dispute between Rabbi Jacob Berab and Rabbi Levi ibn Habib] *Zion*, vol. 16, (Jerusalem: The Historical Society of Israel, 1951): 28–45.

37 "Afterwards he wrote [...] and praise to the Lord my name did not change [...] meaning that the Name of God was not profaned by me in any one of the letters, so that the Heavens would not be angry with me. Thus far, his words. This is terrible slandering, and instead of admitting the truth and answering properly, the Hakham caused my name to be harmed and embarrassed me, by reminding me of early sins" (Levi ibn Habib, *Kuntris HaSemikha*, 305b).

done by coercion.³⁸ Rabbi Levi ibn Habib opposed the ordination initiative and was the main force preventing its renewal. This seems to be why Rabbi Jacob Berab felt it necessary to make such a serious slur to ibn Habib's honour. He could not understand how ibn Habib of all people, who himself was a former Marrano, could stand in his way, barring the way for the Marranos to return to a full Jewish life. Rabbi Berab's initiative was not implemented, but the very fact that he waged a halakhic campaign to enable the Marranos to return to Judaism is evidence of how he believed they should be treated. According to his approach, the way must be found to bring the Marranos back to Jewish society and find halakhic solutions to achieve this goal.

In the summer of 1568, four of the leading rabbinical authorities in Safed sent a letter to the community of Kandiye (present-day Heraklion, the capital city of the Greek island of Crete). Three of the signatories were students of Rabbi Jacob Berab – Rabbi Joseph Karo, Rabbi Israel di Curiel, Rabbi David ben Zimra and Rabbi Moses di Trani. In the letter, they wrote strongly against the practice that had reached their ears about former Marranos who had settled among Jews and were being cursed and humiliated, even being called “apostates.” The Rabbis of Safed strongly denounced this behaviour and called for the excommunication of all those who harmed the Marranos. The reason for their stance was the halakhic principle that they were “locking the door in the face of penitents” and preventing Marranos from returning to Judaism.³⁹ These *Hakhamim* came to the aid of the former Marranos who had left Christian society, but had not yet returned to Jewish society.

One of the signatories, Rabbi Joseph Karo discussed the case of an “apostate,” a Jew, who had three sons, who converted to Christianity. In his will, the Jew wrote that the son who would go to the Land of Ismael to take shelter under the wings of the divine presence would receive the inheritance.⁴⁰ What is the “Land of Ismael”? A land ruled by Islam. What was the father's intention? That he himself would no longer return to Judaism, but he hoped that his sons would. To prove his sincere will to return to Judaism, the son had to leave the Christian land and move to a land that was under Muslim rule. One of the sons did indeed return to Judaism and “came to the Land of Israel to shelter under the wings of the divine presence,” whereas the other two sons preferred to continue living as Christians. One of these two moved to a Muslim country, and then demanded to receive his share of the inheritance since he felt he had

38 Levi ibn Habib, *A Treatise on Ordination*, 280a; See, David, *Safed*, 189–190.

39 Eliyhu Shmuel Hartom and Moshe David Cassuto, *The Regulations of Kandiye*, A (Jerusalem: Makitzei Nirdamim, 1943), 147–148.

40 Karo, *Avkath Rokhel*, section 90.

fulfilled his father's condition by living in the "Land of Ismael" even though he had not returned to Judaism. This story encompasses the tragedy of a man who, against his will, was forced to live as a Christian and of his family who was torn apart because of religious decrees. Rabbi Joseph Karo denied the Christian son any right to the inheritance, but he considered the son who returned to Judaism to be a fully-fledged Jew who was entitled to the inheritance. In this case, Rabbi Karo's attitude to this Marrano who returned to Judaism and to a Jew who did not convert was identical.

Rabbi Moses Cordovero, another student of Rabbi Jacob Berab, gave a kabbalist explanation about the Marranos. He said that although they were blemished, this was only an external flaw that did not influence the essence of their internal being. Therefore, they needed to do penance for this blemish and thus remove the barriers that hid their purity.⁴¹ He believed that baptism was a forgivable sin, and that following a full return to Judaism, the Marranos should be permitted to fully reintegrate into Jewish society. One of Rabbi Karo's students and one of the greatest sages in Safed, Rabbi Moses Alshikh also tried to encourage the Marranos, stressing the exalted standing of those who had survived apostasy. He argued that they were on a higher level than martyrs who died sanctifying God's name.⁴²

Rabbi Solomon Alkabetz, a Kabbalist in Safed and brother-in-law of Rabbi Moses Cordovero shared the same approach. He compiled a prayer for the Redemption, asking God to look down on the trials and tribulations of the Marranos from when they decided to leave their comfortable homes to go on a long, dangerous trek fraught with danger and move to a strange country where they faced a difficult economic situation and lived under harsh rulers.⁴³ In truth, this prayer must be seen in a wider context, in that it is not

41 Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, *The Zohar on the Pentateuch with Commentary of the Ohr Yakar* (Jerusalem, 1995), Deut. 22:25.

42 Rabbi Moshe Alshikh, *Torat Moshe* (Venice, 1601), Lev. 22:33.

43 "And if among them are those who changed their honour [=religion] on a bitter day, and will raise their hands in prayer to a strange god, You yourself knew the heart of man, and You knew how much pain is in his heart [...] and how many people were burnt at the stake sanctifying Your name, and how so many people chose to strangle their soul and sacrifice their sons and daughters so as not to desecrate Your holy name, and poured the evil water over them [=were baptized] and in the depths my soul shall weep, even if one or two days, he will surely flee [...] They will sprout hair from famine, attacked by demons, and some of them came on the open seas and storm washed over them, they wandered and travelled from sea to sea, from north to east, and some of them fell victim to the sword, and the beautiful young boys and girls fainted from thirst [...] There are not enough word to say what befell Your children and all the sorrows that befell them by the hand of the gentiles and the kings. And throughout all their sorrows, they kept Your Torah, they did

directed only at God but also at society. He expected his fellow Jews to respect and appreciate the Marranos and recognize their sincere desire to return to Judaism.

We have so far shown a forgiving and empathic attitude taken by the *Hakhamim* in sixteenth-century Safed toward the Marranos who wished to openly return to Judaism. It would thus be expected that they would become fully integrated into Jewish society. However, this was not the case.

Another of Rabbi Jacob Berab's students, Rabbi Moses di Trani, who was also a signatory on the above-mentioned letter, discussed the question of the Marranos who wished to reintegrate into Jewish society. He ruled that they were indeed permitted to return after being flogged, but this applied only to the Marranos who replaced their openly Jewish adherence with Judaism practiced in secret. However, their offspring were deemed to have been born to women who were not halakhically Jewish and were thus defined as bastards (*mamzerim*), and therefore were not permitted to marry *bona-fide* Jews and become part of the Jewish community.⁴⁴ Di Trani stressed that this was not a specific issue of the laws of marriage, but a question of principle regarding the attitude to Jews who accepted Christianity and willingly dropped the laws of Shabbath observance and kosher food. In another discussion on whether the Marranos were eligible to serve as witnesses in Rabbinical courts of judgement, di Trani discussed whether they were defined as profaners of the Shabbath and “idol worshippers in public” which would render them as unfit to be considered Jews.⁴⁵

A closer examination of Rabbi Moses di Trani's writings shows that in his rulings, he is not opposed in principle to the Marranos becoming part of society but is only concerned with the halakhic-technical aspect. In practice, however, his rulings lock the door on the possibility of their becoming accepted into Jewish society, prevent them from marrying men or women who do not have a Christian background and even sever the generation of the Marranos from their offspring's generation.

not abandon it [...] and now their spirit inspired them to ascend to Zion, the mountain of the Lord [=the Land of Israel], to honour her stones and to rebuild her ruins, they have all come and gathered to You [...] and have left behind all their possessions and pleasures, they did not desire silver or gold, but to come to the Land of Israel. And now this Land is abandoned and destroyed, and desolate and the gentile residents who rule over the land are evil and sinners, and Your servants are whipped every day, and Your servants come to Your land [...]” (Werblowsky, *A Collection of Prayers*, 152–153).

44 Moses di Trani, Responsa, Part 1, section 19.

45 Ibid., section 170.

A lengthy discussion on this problem, between Rabbi Yom Tov Tzahalon, a student of Rabbis Joseph Karo, and Moses di Trani and one of Safed's prominent *Hakhamim* at the end of the sixteenth century and beginning of the seventeenth century, illustrates the opinions of many *Hakhamim*. The discussion begins with the case of a family who had led a Marrano way of life for 120 years and the assumption that the offspring of this family did not marry according to Jewish law and were defined as gentiles. However, after Rabbi Tzahalon put forward many proofs to justify this approach, he presented a counter-approach that the Marranos generally intermarried with each other and did not marry gentiles and therefore there were mitigating circumstances for bringing them back into the fold of the Jewish people.⁴⁶ These halakhic discussions give a glimpse of the enormous social barriers facing the Marranos, which definitely increased their social isolation.

Indeed, these discussions did not only have halakhic implications. The positive approach shown to the Marranos by the Sephardic thinkers and halakhic authorities in Safed, was in contrast to other authorities who were unforgiving in their attitude to the Marranos. Rabbi Elisha Gallico, a student of Rabbi Joseph Karo, argued that the Marranos' decision to ostensibly convert to Christianity was wrong and instead, they should have fled the Christian country.⁴⁷ According to Gallico, if fleeing was not an option, they should have been prepared to die rather than convert.⁴⁸ This opinion was also held by Rabbi Elazar Azikri, a student of Rabbi Moses di Trani,⁴⁹ and by Rabbi Samuel de Uçeda, a student of Rabbi Elisha Gallico.⁵⁰

We have shown two approaches to the question of the Marranos: those who supported them and tried to find a fitting and appropriate solution, and those who exacerbated their situation, citing either halakhic or ideological reasons, and thus made it more difficult for them to integrate into Jewish society. In the 1720s, a Christian traveler Eugène Roger, visited Safed and confirmed the

46 Rabbi Yom Tov Tzahalon, *Responsa* (Venice, 1694), section 148.

47 "Even though you see the intention of the king to coerce and to force, and to whip you, and beat you with terrible inflictions so that you will abandon your religion, do not be shocked and remain in the minefield, rather you should quickly ask if there is a place where you can be saved and then leave to another country, so you will no longer be under his rule [...]" Rabbi Elisha Gallico, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Venice, 1578), 11a.

48 "He should not be frightened by the king who is forcing him to convert, however, if there is no way that he can be saved, neither by escaping, nor in any other way, so he should be strong and be prepared to die, sanctifying God's name" (*ibid.* 92a). Cf. *ibid.*, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (Venice, 1587), 11a.

49 Rabbi Elazar Azikri, *Sefer Haredim* (Venice, 1601), 17b.

50 Rabbi Samuel de Uçeda, *Lekhem Dimah* (Venice, 1600), 95b.

difficulties faced by the converts who wished to return to Judaism. He wrote that the long-established Jews in the Holy Land refused to marry Jews of Spanish descent, fearing that they were descendants of the Marranos.⁵¹

5 Epilogue

The former Marranos wished to find a resting place in Safed during the early Ottoman period and wanted to become equal members of Jewish society, without the stigma of conversion attached to them. However, it seems that their wish was not to be easily realized. Although leading Sephardic authorities and thinkers were supportive of them, others had a stricter attitude and made it very difficult for the Marranos to be integrated into Jewish society. As we have shown, a feature of communal life in sixteenth-century Safed was the *qahal*. The very existence of the Portuguese *qahal*, otherwise known as the Penitents *qahal*, with its unusual and atypical leaders, may be proof that they continued to exist as a separate entity of former Christians. This distinction damaged their status in Jewish society and, despite efforts of Rabbis and leaders to integrate them, made it harder for them to become part of the community.

In the Holy Ark of the Alshikh synagogue in the Old City of Safed, there is a silver Torah scroll breastplate with the abbreviation *lamed “kuf kuf bet ayin tav”* from the year “*tsadi dalet kuf*.” Neither the full meaning of the abbreviation nor the year is clear. The year may refer to 1434 or perhaps, using the “excluding the thousands [years]” method, it may refer to 1934. According to Mina Rosen’s suggestion, the abbreviation may refer to “*kehal kodesh b’aalei teshuva*”⁵² (the Holy *Qahal* of the Penitents). Could this possibly be a reminder of the Marrano *qahal* in Safed that did not leave its mark on the historic annals of Safed?

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51 Mordehai Ish Shalom, *Masaei notzrim le’eretz yisrael* [Christian travelers to the Holy Land] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved & Dvir Book Publishing, 1979), 333.

52 Rosen, “Ma’amad hamustarabim”, 74. See: Eyal Davidson, “Tsfat sha’ar hashamayim” [Safed, the gate to heaven], in *Safed and All her Alleys*, ed. Eyal Miron (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2006), 104.

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