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The Nasi Family and the Reconstruction of Tiberias in the second half of the 16th century

By Abraham David*

Abstract

Aus verschiedenen Quellen geht hervor, dass nach der osmanischen Eroberung des Nahen Ostens (1516/17) Sultan Süleyman der Prachtige (1520–1566) die Absicht hatte, die grösseren Städte in Eretz Israel wieder auf- und auszubauen. Mit dem Wiederaufbau der Stadt Tiberias betraute er Doña Gracia und Don Joseph Nasi, die am Sultanshofe nicht ohne Einfluss waren. Wiewohl beide über alle notwendigen Fähigkeiten verfügten, den Wiederaufbau von Tiberias ins Werk zu setzen, geriet das Projekt dennoch infolge widriger äusserer Umstände nach einigen Jahren, noch zu Don Josephs Lebzeiten, ins Stocken. Dank tatkräftiger Intervention und des Geschicks von Solomon Ibn Ya'ish, der gleichfalls zu den Höflingen des Sultans zählte, gelang es gegen des 16. Jahrhunderts jedoch noch einmal, das Projekts zumindest für eine kurze Zeit weiterzuführen. Vier in jüngster Zeit bekannt gewordene Quellen, die über diesen Teil der Geschichte von Tiberias Auskunft geben, werden im vorliegenden Artikel vorgestellt.

The conquest of the Land of Israel by the Ottomans in the year 1516 heralded a new era during which the country began to flourish. The oppressive Mameluke rulers were routed. The Land of Israel became a safe and thriving part of a large, strong and well-organized empire.

A number of sources indicate that after the Ottomans began to rule in the Land of Israel, the local population increased considerably, the Jewish population as well. Twenty to twenty-five percent of the people lived in the cities, and the remainder in the countryside. During this period, industry and agriculture all began to develop at a rapid pace.

The rule of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566) is considered the Golden Age of the Ottoman Empire. During this time the empire expanded significantly and its borders were fortified: In the east, to the border with Persia, in the north, Central Europe – almost at the gates of Vienna and in the south, Egypt and large parts of North Africa.

During this period, a number of outstanding construction projects were undertaken in the Land of Israel, and the country experienced a period of

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economic prosperity. Various steps were taken to fortify the major cities, both to keep out the Bedouins and to help create one central supervisory government.

One of the first major projects of the Ottoman ruler was to build walls around the major cities and to fortify them. The current wall around the city of Jerusalem was built by Suleiman the Magnificent between 1537 and 1540. The wall around Safed was built in 1549. In Jerusalem, this Sultan engaged in a number of engineering projects to solve the city's water problem. Solomon's Pools (south of Bethlehem) were repaired and their water flow directed to Jerusalem. The large reservoir *Birkat al-Sultan* was repaired with a water trough – a path above for pedestrians. Suleiman built additional aqueducts on the city's outskirts in order to divert water to various troughs throughout the city.

Agriculture, industry, and trade all began to develop rapidly at this time. A number of oil presses were built in Jerusalem, a soap factory was established, flour mills were built, and the linen weaving industry was introduced. In Jerusalem, the government encouraged the expansion of trade, and the markets established in Mameluke times were expanded and renovated.¹

Suleiman's economic initiative in the Land of Israel was felt to a much greater extent in Safed. He turned his attention here swiftly. He increased the city's superior geopolitical situation with an all-encompassing development of its industrial infrastructure. An extensive textile industry was

1 In the beginning of the Ottoman regime and its attitude to the provinces was written a lot. On the case of the Land of Israel, in general, see: BERNARD LEWIS, *Notes and Documents from the Turkish Archives*, Jerusalem 1952; BERNARD LEWIS and AMNON COHEN, *Population and Revenue in the Towns of Palestine in the Sixteenth Century*, Princeton 1978; IZHAK BEN ZVI, ארץ-ישראל ויישובה בימי השלטון העותמאני, Jerusalem 1962, pp. 1-123; URIEL HEYD, *Ottoman Documents on Palestine, 1552-1615*, Oxford 1960; AMNON COHEN, *Economic Life in Ottoman Jerusalem*, Cambridge 1989; AMY SINGER, *Palestinian peasants and Ottoman officials*, Cambridge 1994. From a Jewish point of view, see: BEN ZVI, ארץ-ישראל (note 1), pp. 137-220; AMNON COHEN, *Jewish Life under Islam, Jerusalem in the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1984; AMNON COHEN, *A World within. Jewish Life as Reflected in Muslim Court Documents from the Sijill of Jerusalem (XVIth Century)*, Philadelphia 1994; AMNON COHEN and ELISHEVA SIMON-PIKALI, יהודים בבית המשפט המוסלמי, חברה, כלכלה וארגון קהילתי בירושלים, Jerusalem 1993; ABRAHAM DAVID, "The Jewish Settlement in Palestine at the Beginning of the Ottoman Empire (1517-1599)," in: ALEX CARMEL, PETER SCHÄFER and YOSSE BEN-ARTZI (eds.), *The Jewish Settlement in Palestine 634-1881*, Wiesbaden 1990, pp. 86-141; ABRAHAM DAVID, *To come to the Land, Immigration and Settlement in 16th Century Eretz-Israel*, translated by Dena Ordan, Tuscaloosa and London 1999.

established, which gained a worldwide reputation for its wool and silk production. Much of the textile production was destined for export, and Jews appeared to have played a noteworthy part in this industry.

The Spanish refugees were especially involved in Safed's textile industry, because wool manufacture was a highly-developed industry in Spain, where it had been the Jews' main livelihood.²

Urban development and construction in the Land of Israel was also directed elsewhere, to Tiberias, for example. Until the middle of the 16th century, no Jewish settlement had been known in that city. Jews who immigrated to the Land of Israel during the beginning of the Ottoman rule did not find their way to Tiberias, as they did to Jerusalem and Safed or other places because the city was desolated and in ruins. In the words of the Italian Jewish traveller, R. Moses ben Mordecai Basola (1480–1560), who travelled around this country between 1521 and 1523:

Tiberias was a great city and its lake forms its wall [...]. At present it is desolate and waste [...]. No man can go there for fear of the Arabs, except at the time of the caravan when many travel under the protection of the Safed governor.³

From some Hebrew and non-Hebrew sources, it seems that already in the middle of the 16th century there was a small Jewish settlement in Tiberias.⁴ Pierre Belon (1517–1564), a French traveller, naturalist and diplomat, who visited the Holy Land as a Christian pilgrim, writes in 1547 that there were also very small Jewish settlements in Tiberias's vicinity, in: Kfar Nahum, Beit Saida and Corazim.⁵

In the 1560s, rumours spread that major reconstruction work will be undertaken in the city with the assistance of Sultan Suleiman, the expansion

2 Economic life in the Land of Israel was more prosperous at that time in Safed, see: LEWIS/COHEN, *Population and Revenue* (note 1), pp. 155-169; DAVID, *To come to the Land* (note 1), pp. 36-47, 189-195; ABRAHAM DAVID, על במותי ארץ הצבי, Jerusalem 2013, pp. 17-25 (English section), pp. 175-204 (Hebrew section).

3 ABRAHAM DAVID, *In Zion and Jerusalem: The Itinerary of Rabbi Moses Basola (1521-1523)*, Jerusalem 1999, p. 92.

4 See: JOSEPH BRASLAVSKY “למפעלו של דון יוסף הנשיא בא” in: ירושלם, קובץ החברה, העברית לחקירת ארץ-ישראל ועתיקותיה / *Journal of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society* (dedicated to the memory of Abraham Mosheh Luncz), Jerusalem 1928, pp. 67-77; JOSEPH BRASLAVSKY, “לפרשת טבריה מימי דון יוסף נשיא עד אבן-יעיש” in: ציון / *Zion* 5 (1939), pp. 45-51 = JOSEPH BRASLAVSKY, עבר ושרידים, לחקר ארצנו, Tel-Aviv 1954, pp. 182-183, 191-196.

5 PIERRE BELON DU MONS, *Les observations de plusieurs singularitez et choses memorables, trouvées en Grece, Asie, Iudée, Egypte, Arabie, et autres pays estranges*, Paris 1553, p. 148. A short discussion on his testimony has been done by BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 192-193.

of the city's Jewish settlement included. The above plans have been associated with the names of two major Jewish personalities and members of the 16th century Turkish Jewish community. Both had an almost identical social background, as they were first and second generation of Portuguese Conversos. Their names were: Beatrice de Luna (c. 1510–1569) and Don João Miques (Micas or Migas) Mendes (c. 1520–1579), her nephew. After having returned to Judaism, both of them adopted Jewish names: Beatrice de Luna became Doña Gracia, and her nephew and son in law Don Joseph Nasi (as we will see below).⁶

Both of them had escaped from Portugal in 1537 when the Inquisition started to rage there throughout the 1530s.⁷ They first settled in Antwerp (today in Belgium) where they became involved in the family's banking business, which was started by her husband Francisco Mendes Benveniste

6 Several monographs and numerous studies were written on those two distinguished persons and their economic, diplomatic and political activities in Europe as well as in the Ottoman Empire during the third quarter of the 16th century. Only a selection of them would be mentioned here: Comprehensive biographies about them were written by CECIL ROTH, *The House of Nasi*, Part I: *Doña Gracia*, Philadelphia, PA 1947; Part II: *The Duke of Naxos*, Philadelphia, PA 1948, and republished several times [Hebrew translation: *בית נשיא (Beit Nasi)* by SHLOMO SIMONSOHN, Tel Aviv 1952; Spanish translation by REBECA TRABB, Part I: *Doña Gracia Mendes*, Buenos Aires 1953. Part II: *El duque de Naxos*, Buenos Aires 1954]; PAUL FREDERIC JEAN GRUNEBBAUM-BALLIN, *Joseph Nasi, duc de Naxos*, Paris 1968. The last biography on Doña Gracia appeared fifteen years ago, written by ANDRÉE AELION BROOKS, *The Woman who defied Kings: The life and times of Doña Gracia Nasi*, St. Paul, MN 2002; MARIANNA D. BIRNBAUM, *The Long Journey of Gracia Mendes*, Budapest 2003. – For more recent studies on both of them, see: ARON DI LEONE LEONI, “Documenti e notizie sulle famiglie Benvenisti Nassi a Ferrara,” in: *La Rassengna Mensile di Israel* 58 (1992), pp. 111-125; HERMAN PRINCE SALOMON and ARON DI LEONE LEONI, “Mendes, Benveniste, De Luna, Micas, Nassi: The State of the Art (1532–1558),” in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* 88 (1998), pp. 135-211; ABRAHAM DAVID, “New Jewish Sources on the History of the Members of the Nasi-Mendes Family in Italy and Constantinople,” in: *Henoah* 20 (1998), pp. 179-188; ROBERT BONFIL, “Business, Politics and Philanthropy of the Powerless – Doña Gracia Nasi as metaphor,” in: *Italia* 21 (2012), pp. 7-41.

7 On the inquisition in Portugal at that time see: ALEXANDER HERCULANO, *Historia de origem e estabelecimento da Inquisição em Portugal*, Lisboa 1885; English translation by JOHN C. BRANNER: *History of the origin and establishment of the Inquisition in Portugal*, Stanford 1926, and republished – with a prolegomenon by Josef Hayim Yerushalmi – in New York 1972; ARON DI LEONE LEONI, *La nazionale Ebraica spagnola e portoghese negli stati Estensi*, Rimini 1992, pp. 81-86.

(c. 1500–1536) who passed away while still in Portugal. This business was a kind of joint venture of Beatrice de Luna and her brother in law Diogo Mendes Benveniste (c. 1490–1543), which developed activities in most of the major European countries. In the course of their extensive financial activities the two, but especially João Miques developed contacts with various European rulers. Those contacts were useful and helped great numbers of Conversos then attempting to flee the Inquisition in Portugal.⁸

Beatrice de Luna (Doña Gracia) arrived in Venice in 1546, where she became embroiled in a serious entanglement with her sister Brianda (Reyna) who did not hesitate to denounce her as a Judaizer. As a result, Doña Gracia was arrested, but with the help of her nephew who had connections with various European rulers she was released soon. From Venice, she moved to Ferrara, where many Conversos had returned to their forefathers' faith. Here she threw off the disguise of Christianity, adopted her Jewish name Gracia Nasi again and continued to render any assistance to Portuguese Conversos refugees.⁹

In 1553, Doña Gracia moved to Istanbul, and a year later her nephew followed her. Here, he also re-converted to Judaism, changed his name to Joseph Nasi and married Doña Gracia's daughter Brianda (Reyna). In Istanbul, they continued their commercial and financial activities and enjoyed positions of status and influence at the court of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. Their philanthropic activities were manifold, including the establishment of Jewish centres for learning, such as: *Yeshivot* and *Batei Midrash* in Istanbul and elsewhere. They both were deeply involved in important diplomatic activities outside Turkey's borders. Don Joseph played a particularly active role and was involved in various political relations with countries and powers, in which the Turkish government was interested. In the course of

8 See: ROTH *Doña Gracia* (note 6), pp. 21-49; SALOMON and LEONI, "Mendes" (note 6), pp. 135-155, 179-193; BROOKS, *The Woman who defied Kings* (note 6), pp. 101-206.

9 See: ROTH *Doña Gracia* (note 6), pp. 50-81; BENJAMIN RAVID, "Money, Love Power Politics in Sixteenth Century Venice: The Perpetual Banishment and Subsequent Pardon of Joseph Nasi," in: *Italia Judaica* 1 (1983), pp. 159-181; MARIA GIUSEPPINA MUZZARELLI, "Beatrice de Luna, Vedova Mendes, Alias Doña Gracia Nasi: un' ebrea influente (1510–1569 ca.)," in: OTTAVIA NICCOLI (ed.), *Rinascimento al femminile*, Roma / Bari 1991, pp. 83-116; SALOMON and LEONI, "Mendes" (note 6), pp. 175-177, 193-204; DAVID, "New Jewish Sources on the Nasi-Mendes Family" (note 6), pp. 179-188 (more bibliographical entries on pp. 180-181 n. 7); BROOKS, *The Woman who defied Kings* (note 6), pp. 209-296; BONFIL, "Business, Politics and Philanthropy" (note 6), pp. 7-41.

these activities¹⁰ the Sultan appointed him Duke of the island of Naxos,¹¹ which was under Turkish rule. Doña Gracia died in 1569 and Joseph Nasi ten years later.¹²

As mentioned above, until nearly the middle of the 16th century, there is no information about a Jewish settlement in Tiberias. Apparently, this town was not an attractive or a popular destination for immigrants arriving in Ottoman Eretz-Israel, who preferred to settle in Jerusalem, Safed or elsewhere. The Tiberias “renewal project” in the 1560s, however, experienced a brief flowering when, according to contemporary sources, rumours were spread about a plan to make the town a major city. It is not clear to what extent the plan was implemented. However, the project started in the late fifties or beginning of the sixties of the 16th century. Different sources offer different versions of that matter. Some sources emphasize Don Joseph’s part in implementing the project, while others say that it was his aunt Doña Gracia who did that, backed by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent.

The best research on this matter was done by Joseph Braslavsky, a distinguished historian, and published in two of his articles; the first of these two articles was written already more than eighty-eight years ago.¹³ The

10 Cf. Appendix II (pp. 56-57 below).

11 This island is located in the Aegean Sea.

12 See: ROTH *Doña Gracia* (note 6), pp. 83-184; ROTH, *The Duke of Naxos* (note 6); CECIL ROTH, “Joseph Nasi, Duke of Naxos, and the Counts of Savoy,” in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* (New Series) 57 (1967), pp. 460-472; CECIL ROTH, “Joseph Nassi, duca di Nasso, e di Savoia,” in: *La Rassegna Mensile di Israel* 34 (1968), pp. 464-474; C. H. ROSE, “New Information on the Life of Joseph Nasi Duke of Naxos: The Venetian Phase,” in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* 60 (1970), pp. 330-344; AGUSTIN ARCE, “Espionaje y última aventura de José Nasi (1569–1574),” in: *Sefarad – Revista de Estudios Hebraicos y Sefardíes* 13 (1953), S. 257-286 = in: AGUSTIN ARCE (ed.), *Miscelanea de Tierra Sancta* 4 (1982), pp. 289-317; DAVID, “New Jewish Sources on the Nasi-Mendes Family” (note 6), pp. 186-188; BROOKS, *The Woman who defied Kings* (note 6), pp. 299-473; GÜNES ISIKSEL, “A letter of shahzade Selim to Charles IX of France on the ‘Nassi Affair,’” in: *Cadernos de Estudios Sefarditas* 7 (2007), pp. 245-254 (for more bibliographical entries, see: *ibid*, pp. 246-247, no. 6); JOSÉ ALBERTO RODRIGUES DA SILVA TAVIM, “Portrait of the ‘Senhora’ with manifold nuances: D. Gracia Nasi à l’oeuvre and the fictional D. Gracia,” in: *El Prezente – Studies in Sephardic Culture* 3 (2009), pp. 45-61; JOSÉ ALBERTO RODRIGUES DA SILVA TAVIM, “La ‘Materia Oriental’ en el trayecto de los personalidades judías del Imperio Ottomano: João Micas/D. Yosef Nasi, Álvaro Mendes/D. Shelomo Ibn Ya’ish,” in: *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 7 (2010), pp. 211-232.

13 BRASLAVSKY, “לפרשת טבריה” (note 4), pp. 67-77 = BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 180-190.

other one was written more than seventy seven years ago.¹⁴ Since then, we have some more sources as well as different interpretations in some points.¹⁵ So it would be worthwhile to analyse the major sources again, along with other sources that in the meantime have been discovered and enable us to offer new interpretations.

The famous Italian Jewish historian Joseph ha-Kohen (Avignon 1496–after 1577 Genoa?) and the French consul in Istanbul, both write about the major contribution made by Don Joseph Nasi to the rebuilding of Tiberias in 1563/4. According to Joseph ha-Kohen's account, the reconstruction project was orchestrated by Joseph Nasi's representative, Joseph ben Adret who built the wall around the town. Joseph ha-Kohen summarized Don Joseph Nasi's Tiberian project as follows:

Then Don Joseph Nasi came to Ferrara, among those who escaped from the iron cauldron, Portugal and lived there for some time. Thence he went to Turkey, where he found grace in the eyes of the king Suleiman, who loved him greatly. And the king gave him the ruins of Tiberias and of seven country townships around it, and made him lord and prince over them at that time. And Don Joseph sent thither R. Joseph Adret [Ibn Ardut], his attendant, to rebuild the walls of the city, and he went and he too found favour in the king's eyes, and he gave him sixty *aspry* each day. And the king sent with him eight men born in his house, and gave him the order written and sealed with the imperial seal, and recommended him to the pasha of Damascus and the pasha of Safed. Saying: All that this man desires of you shall ye do. The law was given in the king's name, saying: All builders and porters who are in those cities shall go to build Tiberias and he who does not go shall bear his sin. There was there much stone, for Tiberias had been a great city before the Lord, before the hewer went up against them, and there were twelve Synagogues there in the days of R. Ammi and R. Asi. And he commanded the inhabitants of these seven townships to make mortar to do the work, and more also and there was there moreover much sand, for the Lake of Tiberias was near to them. But the Arabs were jealous of them, and a certain sherif who was advanced in years arose and called in the ears of the inhabitants of that land, saying "Do not permit this city to be built, for it will be bitter for you in the end, for I have assuredly found it written in an ancient book, that when the city that is called Tiberias is built, our faith

14 BRASLAVSKY, "לפרשת טבריה" (note 4), pp. 45-72 = BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 191-215.

15 Surveys of the rebuilding of the town of Tiberias as done by Doña Gracia and Joseph Nasi; see: ROTH, *The Duke of Naxos* (note 6), pp. 87-137; DAVID, *To Come to the Land* (note 1), pp. 29-33; BROOKS, *The Woman who defied Kings* (note 6), pp. 431-450.

will be lost, and we will be found wanting. And they harkened unto his voice, and they were unwilling to go to rebuild the walls. “At that time, an end was made to the building of the walls” of Tiberias, and R. Joseph ben Adret was very sad, and he went to the pasha of Damascus and called before him: “Ho! My Lord! For the inhabitants of the country towns refuse to do the king’s bidding”. Then the pasha was afraid, and he hastened to send thither, and they took two of the heads of those peoples, and brought them down in blood to Sheol, so that those who remained might see and not act presumptuously furthermore [...]. Now the city of Tiberias which they built was one thousand and five hundred cubits in compass. And the work ended in the month of Kislev, in the Five thousand three hundred and twenty fifth year. And Don Joseph greatly rejoiced, and gave thanks unto God [...]. Joseph was very great, and his report was in all the earth.¹⁶

Another account of Don Joseph’s part in the Tiberias reconstruction plan is found in one of the letters of the French consul to Istanbul dated September 13th, 1563. This consul was opposed to Don Joseph’s initiatives:

Miques received a licence from the Sultan to build beneath the city of Safed a city on the coast of Tiberias in which only Jews shall live. He intends to begin his great project, for it is believed that he wishes to declare himself king of the Jews.¹⁷

This writer as we have seen was not one of Don Joseph’s admirers, and his true intention seems to have been based on the rumour which was going around Istanbul concerning the activities of Don Joseph in reconstructing Tiberias to make it seem as if the latter intended to revolt against the Sultan and crown himself king of the Jews of the Land of Israel.

Contemporary and later Ottoman *firmans* (Sultan’s decrees) as well as Christian pilgrim accounts indicate that the moving force behind the plans to build, develop, and fortify Tiberias was Doña Gracia, an influential personage in Suleiman’s court, as we mentioned above. There are several Sultanate decrees which refer to the activities of Doña Gracia in Tiberias

16 JOSEPH HA-KOHEN, *Sefer ‘Emeq ha-Bakha (The Vale of Tears) with the chronicle of the anonymous Corrector*. Introduction, Critical edition, Comments by KARIN ALMBLADH (Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis – Studia Semitica Upsaliensia, vol. 5), Uppsala 1981, pp. 93-94. This paragraph is translated by ROTH, *The Duke of Naxos* (note 6), pp. 136-137.

17 ERNEST CHARRIÈRE, *Négociations de la France dans le Levant, ou Correspondances, mémoires et actes diplomatiques des ambassadeurs de France à Constantinople [...] Venise, Raguse, Rome, Malte et Jérusalem, en Turquie, Perse, Géorgie, Crimée, Syrie, Égypte, etc., et dans les États de Tunis, d’Alger et de Maroc*, 4 vols. Paris 1848–1860; reprint New York 1964, vol. II, p. 734. See: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), p. 183.

rebuilding which have been published by Uriel Heyd.¹⁸ The first one that is not connected to Doña Gracia, is related to exchanging for an annual payment. In 1560 the sultan Suleiman the Magnificent granted the concession to Tiberias and its environs, including permission to colonize the city. The income from the area was allocated to the food charity in Damascus. Damascus was the capital of a province in which was included Tiberias.¹⁹

In the end of 1565 and 1566, the aforementioned Sultan sent *firmans* confirming the leasing of Tiberias and its environs to Doña Gracia and granted her permission to erect a perimeter wall around the city both to the head of Damascus *Waqf* and to the *defterdar* (Ottoman top official in charge of the finances) of the Aleppo region. The Sublime Porte set force the conditions of the lease as follows:

A Jewess named Gracia has undertaken to pay the fixed annual sum of 1,000 gold pieces [for the concession for Tiberias] together with the villages in the vicinity on condition that all income from the area belongs to them [her].²⁰

Another decree was sent to the commander of the *yeñiçeri* (Janissaries, the Sultan's elite units) in Damascus dated May 13th, 1566, reveals that the Sultan had confirmed the leasing of Tiberias and its environs to Doña Gracia.

A Jewish woman named Gracia who is leasing the taxes of Tiberias and other villages which are to be dedicated to my royal charity home in Damascus has now sent a man who has made a request to me and she has announced the following: several of the Janissaries gatekeepers from Damascus who were appointed by my orders and posted the fort of Tiberias are being negligent in fulfilling their duties. And I have therefore ordered that when this order of mine shall arrive, you are to examine the situation, if some of the Damascus Janissaries who have been appointed as gatekeepers to guard the abovementioned fort are indeed being negligent and lax in fulfilling their duty as the woman mentioned above has said, then you have to find other honest people from among the Damascus Janissaries and to appoint them and employ them as gatekeepers in place of those who have as aforesaid been negligent and lax in fulfilling their duty.²¹

18 See: URIEL HEYD, "תעודות תורכיות על בניינה של טבריה במאה הט"ז," in: ספונות / *Sefunot* 10 (1966), pp. 193-210. Heyd published both the original documents with Hebrew translation (see also the English section, pp. 13-15).

19 Published by HEYD, "תעודות תורכיות," (note 18), pp. 202-203, and earlier in an English translation by HEYD, *Ottoman Documents* (note 1), pp 139-142.

20 See: HEYD, "תעודות תורכיות," (note 18), p. 204. English translation quoted from DAVID, *To come to the Land* (note 1), p. 31.

21 HEYD, "תעודות תורכיות," (note 18), pp. 207-208.

The Sultan who leased Tiberias and its environs to Doña Gracia ordered the Janissaries commander of Damascus to conduct the gatekeepers (Janissaries) in Tiberias for doing their job correctly.

Another piece of evidence that Tiberias had been leased to Doña Gracia is given in the words of a Portuguese pilgrim, the Franciscan monk Pantaleo di Aveiro who visited the Land of Israel in approximately 1565. In his travelogue, he writes:

At the time, we left Jerusalem, I heard from Portuguese Jews about a Portuguese Jewish woman who had escaped that kingdom with a great deal of property, and who had thus become very powerful and had a great name in those countries. She bought this city of Tiberias from the Sultan for the price of a large sum of money and payment of a perpetual tax of one thousand crusados per year, and that next summer she and all her family will leave Istanbul to live there and together with her all the Jews who will be following her. Upon hearing this news, all of the Jews who live in the Land of Israel are full of great happiness, for their hope that if these people come and settle here the Messiah will come.²²

There are some other sources from that time and later in the 17th century about Doña Gracia's activities in Tiberias.²³ In 1566, the traveller and merchant Christoph Fürer von Haimendorf (1541–1610) writes in his itinerary: “Near Tiberias’ hot wells several beautiful buildings are being built by a rich Jewish woman with the permission of the Ottomans”.²⁴

22 PANTALEAO DE AVEIRO, *Itinerario de Terra Sancta*, Lisboa 1596, fol. 262-263. This is the second edition which is more complete. Recently his itinerary was discussed by GÉRARD NAHON, “Saudade: Portuguese Testimony to Jewish Nostalgia in Jerusalem and the Galilee in the Sixteenth Century,” in: *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 8 (2011), pp. 125-147. Nahon appends and annotates the paragraphs which include information on Jewish life in the Land of Israel. Regarding Doña Gracia and the Tiberias rebuilding project, see NAHON, “Saudade” (ibid.), pp. 143-146. – On this testimony about Doña Gracia's involvement in rebuilding Tiberias, see: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 196-201; NAHUM SLOUSCHZ, “הישוב בא”י וסוריה במאה הט”ז,” in: NAHUM SLOUSCHZ (ed.), קובץ: החברה, העברית לחקירת ארץ-ישראל ועתיקותיה, מוקדש לזכר ד”ר א. מ. מזיא, Jerusalem 1934, pp. 331-334.

23 See: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 184, 190, 200-201.

24 CHRISTOPH FÜRER VON HAIMENDORF, *Itinerarium Aegypti, Arabiae, Palaestinae, Syriae aliarumque regionum Orientalium*, Nürnberg 1620; ²1621, p. 96 [German edition: *Christoph Fürers von Haimendorff, Ritters [etc.] Reis-Beschreibung. In Egypten, Arabien, Palästina, Syrien, etc: mit beygefügeter Landtafel, vnd derselben Erklärung [...]*, Nürnberg 1646, p. 278]. On this testimony, see: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 184, 190.

It appears that both, Don Joseph Nasi and Doña Gracia, were actively involved in the rebuilding and recolonizing of Tiberias with Jews. Our informants, Joseph ha-Kohen and the French consul in Istanbul suggest that while Don Joseph served as go between and coordinator of the construction, Doña Gracia role primarily consisted in furthering the town's development which included the responsibility for leasing the site from the Ottoman authorities.²⁵

The above-mentioned historian Joseph ha-Kohen adds also some words about Don Joseph Nasi's initiatives to develop the textile industry in Tiberias, like the textile industry that flourished in Safed founded a generation earlier. He writes:²⁶

Don Joseph ordered and they planted many mulberry trees to feed the silkworms,²⁷ and he ordered wool to be brought from Spain to make cloth, like the cloth that they make in Venice. For the man, Joseph was very great, and his report was in all the earth.²⁸

Don Joseph's and Doña Gracia's comprehensive plans to turn Tiberias into a Jewish centre by means of encouraging massive immigration apparently roused broad interest in Italy in which made quite a sensation. At least, this may be understood from a letter written by the Cori community in Campagna region (Central Italy) between 1566 and 1569, asking their coreligionists for assistance to implement their immigration to the Land of Israel and their projected settlement in Tiberias:²⁹

Now when the groaning and the prayer of the holy congregation of Cori and their tribulation became great, and their weeping became extremely heavy,

25 As briefly discussed by BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 190, 200-201. His assumption is that Doña Gracia was the driving force behind the rebuilding and colonizing of Tiberias, whereas Don Joseph Nasi was merely the intermediate figure in the Tiberias rebuilding project. This assumption, however, is very unlikely and unacceptable, as we can learn clearly from the above-mentioned sources and those to which we will refer below.

26 See: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 187-188; DAVID, *To come to the Land* (note 1), pp. 36-38, 189-190.

27 In a *firman* from 1560 regarding leasing the town of Tiberias, there is a reference to production of silk, see: HEYD, *Ottoman Documents* (note 1), pp. 140-142.

28 JOSEPH HA-KOHEN, *Emeq ha-Bakha* (note 15), p. 94. This paragraph was translated by ROTH, *The Duke of Naxos* (note 6), p. 137.

29 This letter has been published by DAVID KAUFMANN, "Don Joseph Nassi, founder of colonies in the Holy Land and the community of Cori in the Campagna," in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* 2 (1890), pp. 291-310.

behold, there came unto us the voice of the coming of the announcer and foreteller of peace [...]. Yea, there came to these poor and miserable Jews who are eager to go out from this exile. One who announced good tidings and grace and mercy to the holy congregations. We speak of the crown and glory and grace and honour of the Prince, the Lord and Noble, head of those who are first and foremost among men, the pillar of exile, in whose fair semblance and praise is the king's diadem and greatness, yea the man exalted on high [...] the exalted and aggrandized [...] our Lord Don Joseph, to whom the Lord God caused to be given the land of Tiberias, wherein God chose to be the sign and symbol for our redemption and the salvation of our souls [...]. According to tradition, Jews will initially return to Tiberias, and be transported from there to the Temple.³⁰ We have heard from the corner of the land the songs of glory addressed to the righteous one, the Nasi, the aforementioned lord, that he has lavished money from his purse and arranged many places, such as Venice and Ancona, ships and help, in order to put an end to the groaning of the captive [...] to bring out the prisoner from duress and from the dungeon those who dwell in this dark and dreary exile: above all, those who have been brought low and who cannot by themselves go thither with their households [...]. We have, indeed, learned that many have already set out and crossed the seas, with the assistance of the communities and the aforementioned Prince. It has been told us, moreover, that he seeks especially Jews who are craftsmen, so that they may settle and establish the land on a proper basis. Truly, "great is the good that he hath stored up [...]. On hearing all this, we became stirred with a single heart and went as one man [...] to the Synagogue. There at our head was Rabbi Malachi Gallico [...] who is employed in our community... There we made agreement among ourselves... about our proposed journey hence, to go to dwell under the pinions of the Almighty, at the bidding of the honoured lord, the Prince in Tiberias [...] so as to give proper order to this journey [...]."³¹

It is not clear what number, if any, of Cori's Jews eventually succeeded in reaching Tiberias.

Although primarily motivated by political reasons, we cannot discount the influence of the contemporary messianic atmosphere on the colonization effort, as is hinted at in this letter by the Cori Jews:

Our Lord Don Joseph, to whom the Lord God caused to be given the land of Tiberias, wherein God chose to be the sign and symbol for our redemption and the salvation of our souls [...]. According to tradition, Jews will initially return to Tiberias, and be transported from there to the Temple. We have

30 This sentence is missing in the Roth's translation, see below.

31 KAUFMANN, "Don Joseph Nassi" (note 29), pp. 307-308. This paragraph was translated by ROTH, *The Duke of Naxos* (note 6), pp. 128-129.

heard from the corner of the land the songs of glory addressed to the righteous one.³²

The same motivation for settling in Tiberias according to the Sultan's order to build the town appears in three anonymous letters from Italy, probably from Mantua, which has been published by myself, as you will see below.³³

The motivation for settling in Tiberias following the Sultan's decree to build the town appears in other sources from Italy. More than twenty years ago I have found new sources about the interest of Italian Jews in settling in Tiberias after the reestablishment of the town by the Ottoman authorities. The library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America hosts a manuscript, an epistolary of 253 letters from the second half of the 16th century.³⁴ This collection was apparently edited and copied by a member of Colonia family in Mantua.³⁵

It seems that in this epistolary there are three anonymous letters which were not written by the same hand. In each of these letters which are written in poetic style, we can find references to the interest in settling in Tiberias at that time.³⁶

In two of them, the reference is rather laconic. In the first,³⁷ the writer states that he is ready to go to Tiberias for the coming Holy day, but does not make clear whether he intends to settle there, or merely to visit the place:

[הנני מוסכם ללכת בטבריא בחג הבע"ל [הבא. עלינו לטובה] בע"ה [בעזרת. השם] – I am agreeable to going to Tiberias for the Holy day that will shortly arrive, with help of God.

32 See: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 193-194, 199-200. A similar tradition on redemption starting in Tiberias is mentioned in another contemporary source, see ABRAHAM DAVID, "מקורות חדשים לחידוש הישוב היהודי בטבריה במאה ה-16," in: אריאל / Ariel 105-106 (1994), pp. 82-83, 86 = ABRAHAM DAVID, על במותי ארץ הצבי, Jerusalem 2013, pp. 244-249, and below, p. 50. This tradition has been found already in the Babylonian Talmud, bRH 31b: "From there [Tiberias] they are destined to be redeemed" (English translation in the Schottenstein edition). This tradition is also known from Christian sources, see the testimony of PANTALEAO DE AVEIRO, above, p. 45. More popular is the tradition that the redemption will start in Upper Galilee, see: DAVID TAMAR, אשכולות תמר, Jerusalem 2002, pp. 166-167.

33 DAVID, "מקורות חדשים," (note 32), pp. 81-86.

34 New York Mic. 9799.

35 In this letter collection some members of that family are mentioned.

36 The letters have been published by DAVID, "מקורות חדשים," (note 32), pp. 81-86.

37 Fol. 17v.

The second reason he brings is that the redemption is coming soon and will begin in Tiberias.⁴³ This town is now being rebuilt according to the Ottoman sultan's decree. Furthermore, there is a rumour that the descendants of the Ten Tribes are gathering to conquer some countries:

הלא תדע מאמ' [ר] הנביא שאמ' [ר] אם יתמהמה חכה לו, כי ישועת ה' כהרף עין, ואם שמת לבך אל השמועה כתבתי אליך כי המלך תוגר צוה לבנות עיר טבריה, וכי מסורת בידינו שמשם תתחיל הגאולה. מצורף אל יתר השמועות יצאו מפי אנשי' [ם] נאמני' [ם] מהעשרת שבטי' [ם] אשר יצאו – ממחיצתם ובאי' [ם] לכבוש שאר ארצות (Habakkuk)⁴⁴ who said: Though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not be slack. If your heart sinks at this news, I have written to you that the King of Togar,⁴⁵ has commanded to build the city of Tiberias, and we have a tradition in our hands that the redemption will begin in that place. In addition to the rest, there have come rumours from the mouths of trustworthy people regarding the Ten Tribes, who have left their confines and are coming to conquer the rest of the lands.

The yearning for redemption was always accompanied by an interest in the fate and the existence of the descendants of the Ten Tribes. We can therefore interpret the writer's conviction that if the descendants of the Ten Tribes are beginning their struggle with some of the nations, this will lead them to the Land of Israel,⁴⁶ and may be seen as the first step of the redemption.⁴⁷

It is not clear how successful Don Joseph Nasi was in increasing the immigration to Tiberias, nor it is clear to what extent the town functioned as a textile centre.⁴⁸ Anyhow, ten years later the Jewish settlement in Tiberias underwent a crisis that brought about the breakdown of the community. Don Joseph Nasi was still alive at that time, he died in 1579. Many left

43 On this tradition see above, note 32.

44 Habakkuk 2:3.

45 The Turkish sultan.

46 See: ADOLF NEUBAUER, "Where are the Ten Tribes?" in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* 1 (1889), pp. 14-28, 95-114, 185-201, 408-423. For a short introduction into this topic, see: ABRAHAM DAVID, (1260-1517) הממלוכית בתקופה היהודית בתקופה הממלוכית, in: YVONNE FRIEDMAN and JOSEPH DRORY (eds.), ספר ירושלים, Jerusalem 2012, pp. 362-363.

47 At that time, as before, the descendants of the Ten Tribes were identified with the Jews living in Prester John's kingdom – Ethiopia; see: ABRAHAM GROSS, "עשרת השבטים ומלכות פרסטר ג'והן – שמועות וחיפושים לפני גירוש ספרד ואחריו," in: *Pe'amim* 48 (1991), pp. 5-41; ABRAHAM DAVID, מלחמות ההשרדות של יהודי ממלכת פרסטר ג'והן בסופם של ימי הביניים על-פי מקורות עבריים, in: Jubilee volume dedicated to Menahem Schmeltzer (in press).

48 See: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 184-185.

the community, especially upper class people, and only the poor remained.⁴⁹ It might be that the collapse of the Jewish settlement in Tiberias during the lifetime of Don Joseph Nasi is related to the efforts of the heads of the Franciscan Order to make the plan fail to revive Tiberias' Jewish community. We have found evidence to this assumption in the diary of the Franciscan friar Bonifacio Stephano di Ragusa who wrote at the end of fifties or the beginning of the sixties of the 16th century:⁵⁰

Due to its multitude of snakes, Tiberias is an uninhabitable city [...]. The infidel Jew Zaminex [Don Joseph Nasi] hoped to expel the snakes [namely the Muslims] and settle his brethren the poisonous vipers [namely the Jews] there, to turn our church into a Synagogue. In order to stand in the breach, I consulted in utmost secrecy with Rustem Pasha and Ali Pasha [namely the governor of Damascus] and they promised me that no such thing would come to pass during sultan Suleiman's lifetime. Their deeds matched their words.⁵¹

Undoubtedly the above testimony is a combination of truth and fantasy. There is no proof or document indicating that there was any delay in reconstruction plans during the time of Sultan Suleiman. If there had been one, Joseph ha-Kohen certainly would have discussed it in his records. There was, however, a temporary halt in the construction program, but this was due to the interference of some Arabs who were punished later by the Pasha of Damascus for that. Furthermore, the Tiberias construction program was of specific interest to Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent who certainly would not have admitted anything being one to stop it.

On the other hand, it is possible that there is some kernel of truth in the information that Franciscans were attempting to sabotage the Jewish settlement plan for the Land of Israel in general, especially in Christian holy sites,⁵² as had been the case in Jerusalem for a long time during the Mameluke period from the first half of the 14th century onwards.⁵³

49 See: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 188-189, 201-202.

50 See: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 194-196.

51 BONIFACIO STEPHANO RAGUSINO, *Liber de Perenni cultu Terrae Sanctae et de fructuosa ejus peregrinatione*, Venice 1875, p. 268. Braslavsky quotes this paragraph in Latin together with Hebrew translation; see: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 194-195. An English version of that paragraph was printed by DAVID, *To come to the Land* (note 1), p. 32.

52 Regarding Tiberias, see: NATHAN SCHUR, בטבריה על-ידי "מדינה יהודית" דונה גראציה מנדס ודון יוסף נשיא והכשלתו בידי הפרנציסקאנים in: אריאל / Ariel 53-54 (1987), pp. 44-50.

53 On the struggle between the Franciscans and the small Jewish community in Jerusalem which lasted since 1335, see; ELCHANAN REINER, 'ואיך? שהרי ירושלים, see;

It also might be that the decline of the Jewish settlement in Tiberias started already in the lifetime of Don Joseph Nasi (he died in 1579, as said above).⁵⁴ However, a small Jewish community lived there after his death. Tiberias was also home to a Yeshivah (Jewish academy) headed by Rabbi El'azar ben Yoḥai.⁵⁵ It is unknown when this Yeshivah was founded, we know however, that Doña Gracia financially supported it for years. After her death (1569), the Yeshivah continued to exist, at least until the early 17th century, thanks to support of Jews from the Diaspora.⁵⁶ Since the Synagogue was located in the city's eastern part, close to the city wall on the shore of Lake Kinneret, it can be assumed that the Jewish quarter was also located in the eastern part of Tiberias.⁵⁷

Several years after the death of Don Joseph Nasi (1579), the concession for Tiberias was granted by the Sultan in unknown period (but after 1585) to another influential Jewish political figure at the Sultan's court, i.e. to the former Portuguese Converso Álvaro Mendes (1520?-1603) who was born and lived in Portugal and later in various places in other European countries and for some decades, in the time of Queen Elizabeth I (1558–1603), was involved in diplomatic and commercial relations with the English crown. In 1545 (?), he was sent to the Portuguese East Indies in order to

(לחוד וציון לחוד!', השכונה היהודית בירושלים לאחר התקופה הצלבנית (המאות הי"ג-ה"ט"ו) in: YOSSI BEN-ARTZI, ISRAEL BARTAL AND ELCHANAN REINER (eds.), נוף מולדתו – מחקרים בגאוגרפיה של ארץ-ישראל, ובתולדותיה. מוגשים ליהושע בן-אריה, Jerusalem 1999, pp. 292-314.

54 See: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 188-189, 213-214; DAVID, *To come to the Land* (note 1), pp. 32, 188.

55 On him, see: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 207, 210; DAVID, *To come to the Land* (note 1), pp. 145, 229.

56. BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 207-213; DAVID, *To come to the Land* (note 1), pp. 32, 188. This Yeshivah is mentioned in a recently discovered document from the Cairo Genizah, which is preserved in library of the Alliance Israelite Universelle in Paris (AIU VII D, 58). This document, a decree issued by the *Beit-Din* (Rabbinical court) in Cairo in 1592, refers to the collection of a widow's *Ketubbah*. The *Beit din* ordered that the property be distributed among the family members, but a certain part of it be assigned also to the philanthropic obligations of the late husband, such as a contribution to שבטבריא תלמוד תורה, i.e. the Yeshiva in Tiberias. See: ABRAHAM DAVID, בית בירב בארץ-ישראל ובמצרים במאות הי"ז-י"ז, in: היספניה יודאיקה / *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 11 (2015), pp. 26-27 = Abraham David, חברה יהודית ים-תיכונית בשלהי ימי הביניים לאור גניזת קהיר, Jerusalem 2016, pp. 36-37.

57 See: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), p. 209; DAVID, *To come to the Land* (note 1), pp. 32-33, 188.

farm diamond mines, because he was also involved in the trade of precious stones and spices from India to England.⁵⁸ In 1585, he moved to the Ottoman Empire. In Salonika, he returned to Judaism and shortly after settled in Istanbul where he served as a courtier at the Sultan's court. Since then, he was known again by his Hebrew name, Solomon ibn Ya'ish. He continued his activities as an international trader between the East and the West and took part also in diplomatic missions as a delegate of the Sultan.⁵⁹ Before 1594, he held the position of Duke of Mytilene.⁶⁰ A few years after Joseph Nasi passed away (1579), the Sultan granted him the lease on Tiberias and its vicinity.⁶¹ Before his death, Solomon ibn Ya'ish (he died in 1603) had appointed his son Jacob to succeed him. On ibn Ya'ish's son it was said that "He built [in Tiberias] many buildings and a handsome palace, and he was much beloved by the Arabs."⁶²

In conclusion. It seems from various sources that as part of the efforts of the Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent to rehabilitate the major cities of the Land of Israel. In the early 1560s, he entrusted the responsibility to rebuild the city of Tiberias to Doña Gracia and Don Joseph Nasi, who both were distinguished courtiers of the Sultan's administration. While these two possessed the practical ability to carry out the reconstruction of Tiberias, the project began to decline after a number of years due to various external factors, still during the lifetime of Don Joseph Nasi. It seems that thanks to the intervention of Solomon Ibn Ya'ish, one of the Sultan's courtiers, there was an – apparently short lived – revival of the construction of Tiberias towards the end of the 16th century.

58 See: LUCIEN WOLF, "Jews in Elizabethan England," in: *The Jewish Historical Society of England Transactions* 11 (1928), pp. 24-33, 56-91

59 On him and his position in the court of the sultan, see: WOLF, "Jews in Elizabethan England" (note 58), pp. 24-33, 56-91; ABRAHAM GALANTÉ, *Don Salomon Aben Ya'eche*, Istanbul 1936; ROTH, *The Duke of Naxos* (note 6), pp. 205-216; SALO WITTMAYER BARON, "Solomon Ibn Ya'ish and Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent," in: SIDNEY B. HOENIG and LEON D. STITSKIN (eds.), *Joshua Finkel Festschrift – In honor of Joshua Finkel*, New York 1974, pp. 29-36; TAVIM, "La 'Materia Oriental'" (note 12), pp. 211-232. The latter emphasizes the activities of Joseph Nasi and Solomon ibn Ya'ish as traders between India and the western world in all kinds of commodities, such as: precious stones, spices etc.

60 Better known as Lesbos, located in the Aegean Sea, opposite Turkey.

61 See: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), pp. 214-215.

62 See: BRASLAVSKY, לחקר ארצנו (note 4), p. 215.

Appendix I:

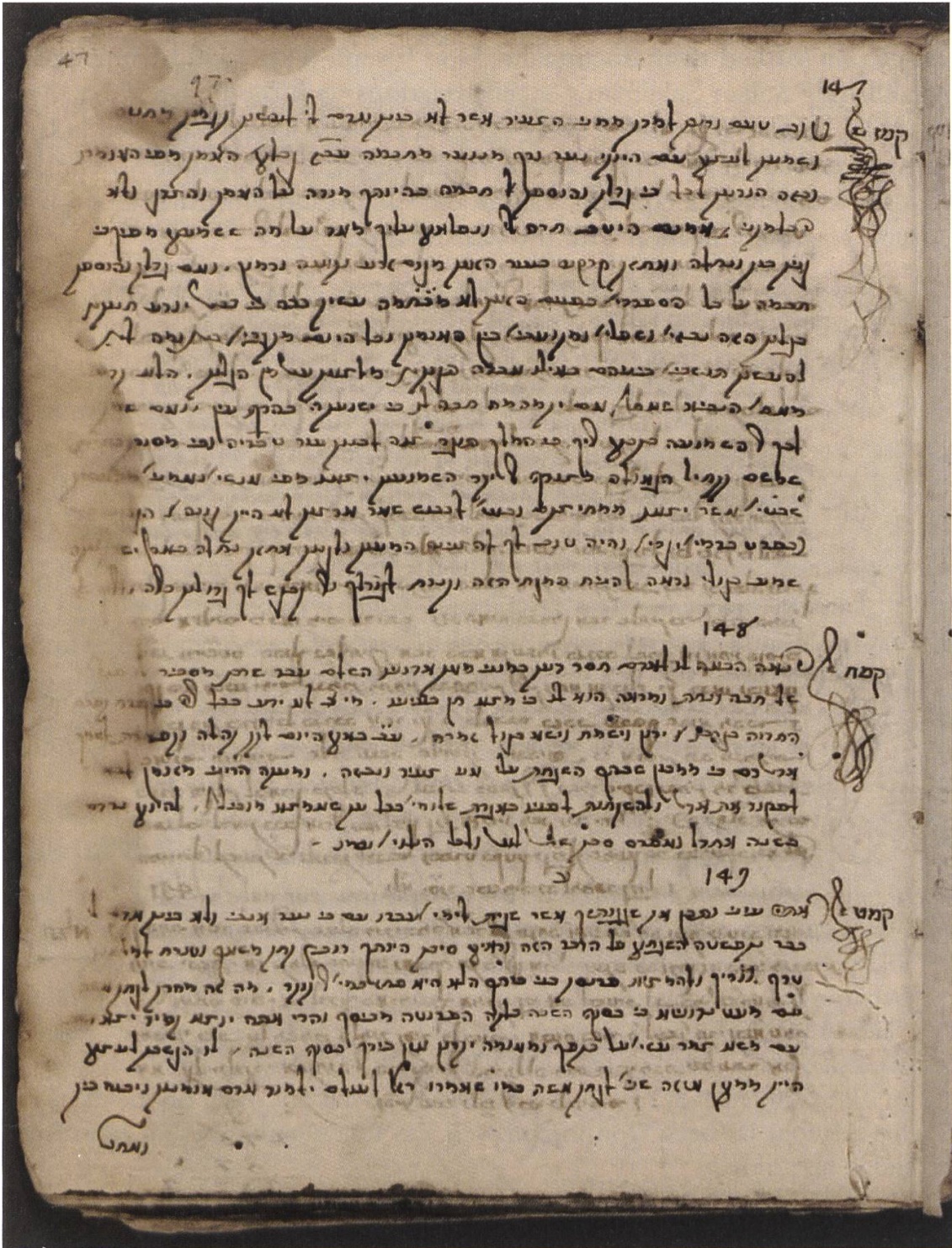
Anonymous letter regarding the settling in Tiberias.⁶³

You have learned from me, your junior, good judgment and reason, though I do not have the intelligence to arrange arguments. You listened to my advice despite the fact that I am young and lacking wisdom. Nevertheless, I have received the truth from the very mouth of he who spoke it, and thereby, you have made known to all that you have enlarged and added to general wisdom by admitting to the truth and to justice, and you have not put me to shame. Indeed, I was greatly disturbed and shocked by what I heard from your own mouth, that you purchased a home and portion of land in this city - a place for planting and figs and pomegranates. And, if you enlarged and added wisdom to all of the Sephardim in this, know that you have not done this wisely, because His Honour knows that in our dwelling in this exile, we are despised and humiliated and abhorred among the nations and they constantly provoke us, and how can we become residents among them, as though we have lost our hope of ever coming out of this exile. Do you not know the words of the Prophet (Habakkuk)⁶⁴ who said, "Though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not be slack." If your heart sinks at this news, I have written to you that the King of Togar,⁶⁵ has commanded to build the city of Tiberias, and we have a tradition in our hands that the redemption will begin in that place. In addition to the rest, there have come rumours from the mouths of trustworthy people regarding the Ten Tribes, who have left their confines and are coming to conquer the rest of the lands. You should not have purchased this land, and especially for large sums of money, it would have been better if you put aside the money for the purchase of a portion and inheritance in the Land of Israel. Now, listen to my voice, find a way to nullify this purchase and be satisfied with your lot, do not seek great things such as these, and may peace be with you.

63 This letter can be found in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, Mic. 9799, fol. 47r (first paragraph, number 147).

64 Habakkuk 2:3.

65 The Turkish Sultan.



*Anonymous letter regarding the settling in Tiberias
New York, JTS Ms. 9799 p. 47r (first paragraph, number 147)
Courtesy of The Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary*

Appendix II:

As can be learned from documents, Don Joseph Nasi was instrumental in establishing Sultan Suleiman's special relations with the Polish King, Zygmunt II August.⁶⁶ In a collection of copied Hebrew letters compiled in Italy in the second half of the 16th century, the following anonymous friendship letter is found, which contains a short and vague bit of information on Don Joseph Nasi's connection with the Polish King:⁶⁷

[57v] I come *as a dog that returns to its vomit*,⁶⁸ but *the love destroys men's sense*⁶⁹ and *many waters will not extinguish it*⁷⁰ to inquire after your good health and welfare, for in your happiness will my own heart also rejoice. I heard indirectly that Signore Joseph Nasi, may he be exalted, sent a special messenger to the king of Poland, accompanied by assistants and slaves, and great honour was shown to him and to his entire retinue and he showed him the treasure house and all the silver, gold, and his objects and the entire contents of his treasures. He did not prevent him from seeing all his happiness.⁷¹ However, the business of that messenger is unknown there [...] and it was not known precisely what crimes he was accused of having committed, I will leave something to discuss another time, and say "Have peace from the Lord of peace"⁷² and from me, your son, so-and-so of such-and-such [...]

66 A letter has survived, signed by the Turkish Crown Prince, Selim II, and dated March 2nd, 1562, which was sent to the king of Poland, Zygmunt II August, and personally carried by Don Joseph Nasi as part of the diplomatic activity between the two countries. That letter was published by J. W. HIRSCHBERG, "Udział Józefa Nasi w pertraktacjach polsko-tureckich w r. 1562," in: *Miesięcznik Żydowski* 4 (1934), pp. 426-439. Though ROTH (*The Duke of Naxos* [note 6], p. 235 n. 20), already mentioned this letter, he did not dwell on the details of the relations between Don Joseph Nasi and Polish authorities, as Hirschberg did in his article.

67 For further details on that letter and its historical context, see DAVID, "New Jewish Sources" (note 6), p. 186.

68 Cf. Proverbs 26:11.

69 Cf. Midrash Bereshit Rabba 55:8 (cited in the name of R. Shim'on bar Yoḥai).

70 Cf. Song of Songs 8:7.

71 In the manuscript was written in Hebrew אשרו, namely: "his happiness". It seems he meant to write in Hebrew עשרו, namely: "his wealth".

72 This is an abbreviated version of the formula (greetings) ואתה תתענג על רוב שלום ומאת אדון השלום.

Handwritten text in Hebrew script, likely a letter or document, showing dense cursive writing on aged paper. The text is oriented vertically on the page, with the top of the page at the bottom of the image. The ink is dark, and the paper shows signs of age and wear.

Joseph Nasi connected with the king of Poland (see above p. 40-41)
London – Montefiore collection 464, p. 57v