**The Yellow Badge in Jerusalem – Discriminatory Decrees against Jews in the Late 16th Century**

In the second half of the 16th century, the situation in the Land of Israel in particular began to deteriorate, as it did across the entire Ottoman Empire: natural disasters, market collapses along with cracks in its military might. The first to suffer from the difficulties were the ethnic minorities, above all the Jews. The ruling power's hold over those provinces geographically remote from the central government in Istanbul was tenuous, and it was the local rulers who essentially controlled the situation. They did as they pleased in their own territories even though they were official subjects of the government.

The death of Suleiman the Magnificent in 1566 heralds the beginning of the Ottoman Empire's decline, but in essence, the central government had already began to lose its influence during the reign of Sultan Suleiman. The high hopes that had been pinned on the Ottoman government, which did appear to be quite promising in its early years, turned out to have only a short term effect. Although the period of relative political quiet continued during the reign of Sultan Selim II (1566-1574) too, the soaring inflation throughout the empire had a strongly adverse effect on market development. Moreover, the taxation method was changed and the Ottoman authorities imposed heavy taxes on the individual citizens rather than on the communities. At the beginning of the reign of Sultan Murad III (1574-1595), the signs of the economic and governmental crisis exacerbated throughout the entire empire, and especially in the Land of Israel. The large and important Jewish population in Safed, which reached the peak of its development in the mid-16th century, declined and weakened dramatically. The Jewish city that had been established in Tiberias by Dona Gracia suffered economic collapse and was abandoned.

This lecture will focus on events in Jerusalem in the latter half of the 16th century, in which the Jewish community continued to exist. First of all, in Jerusalem too the Jews faced enormous difficulties in their efforts to cope with the existential challenge of daily life. This was manifested in the demographic situation.

A. Cohen and B. Lewis, *Population and Revenue in the Towns of Palestine in the Sixteenth Century*, (Princeton and New York, 1978), p. 94.

The table shows that the Jewish community grew until the mid-16th century and then diminished but did not cease to exist.

But beyond the economic situation, the Jewish minority suffered from government decrees. In 1565 discriminatory decrees began to appear, inter alia – decrees on dress.

Johann Helffrich: M. Ish-Shalom, *Christian Pilgrims and Pilgrimages*, (Tel Aviv, 1966), p. 301.

Johann Helffrich, a Christian traveler who visited the Land of Israel in 1565, provided the following testimony: "The Christians wrap a two or three colored scarf around their heads, the Jews an entirely yellow scarf, the Muslims a white scarf and the Armenians a blue scarf, so that it is possible to recognize each sect according to the color of its scarf."

The 'yellow badge' is a term that reminds Jews of their darkest period in history, the Holocaust, but it transpires that the Jews who lived under Muslim rule were on occasions required to wear yellow identification marks on their clothes. This is far from being a 16th century invention, but rather a familiar phenomenon dating back to the Fatimid period in the 11th century.

A. Cohen, *Ottoman Documents on the Jewish Community of Jerusalem in the Sixteenth Century*, (Jerusalem, 1976), p.47.

In a document dating from 1554, found in the state archive in Istanbul and translated by Amnon Cohen, the sultan approaches the *kadi* and the *sanjak-bey* of Jerusalem, asking them to find out why Jews who violated the yellow scarf law inside the synagogue were harassed. He asks them to stop this and not to interfere in what goes on inside the Jewish synagogues. What is the background to this decree, which the sultan himself is required to look into?

The key to understanding this issue lies in the *halakhic* ruling examined by Rabbi David Ben-Zimra, the leading 16th century Jewish sage in Egypt, who towards the end of his life – in 1588 – moved to Jerusalem and died in Safed. A Jew who prays the *Shacharit* prayer in the morning must don a *tallit* or prayer shawl and wrap the *tefillin* or phylacteries around his arm and head. According to the *halakha*, first of all it is necessary to wear the *tallit* and then put on the *tefillin*, and there are those who are accustomed to doing this in their house and then leave for the synagogue already wrapped in the *tallit* and *tefillin.* Rabbi David Ben-Zimra was required to look into the existing situation at the time in Jerusalem, when Jews first put on their *tefillin*, left home for synagogue, and then only once inside the synagogue did they don the *tallit*, thus not adhering to the order of actions laid down by the *halakha*.

The reason for this change of order is due to the decree on dress. A *tallit* is customarily white with black stripes, and Jews were forbidden to wear such attire in public. It appears that the local Muslim authorities in Jerusalem tried to enforce this law inside the synagogue itself, namely to prohibit Jews from wear the *tallit* during prayers. The sultan, who espoused freedom of worship and internal autonomy for the Jews, heard of this and forbade it.

The decree on dress was just one of a series of discriminatory decrees. Rabbi Shmuel de Uçeda, in his book *Leḥem Dim'ah*, describes a law in Jerusalem requiring a Jew to move aside when walking in the street if a Muslim should come towards him. This was clearly a decree designed to humiliate the Jew. Alcarotti, a 16th century Christian chronicler, recounted the following story:

Alcarotti, in N. Schur, 'The Jewish Community of Jerusalem in the 16th – 18th Centuries according to Christian Chronicles and Travel Descriptions,' in A. Cohen (ed.) *Jerusalem in the Early Ottoman Period*, (Jerusalem, 1979), p.368

"After they slaughtered all the dogs that had been contaminated with an infectious disease, they buried them in the Jewish cemetery, and the Jews came with their usual tone of arrogance and impudence, and said that the cemetery is designated for their bodies and not for dogs, but the response given was that they are all dogs."

This incident involved Abu Seifen, a local ruler in Jerusalem, who was especially ruthless and often maltreated minorities. During his time, these acts of persecution reached a peak. At the time, in the 1580's, Rabbi Haim Vital was the Rabbi of Jerusalem. Abu Seifen demanded that Rabbi Haim Vital pray for rain, threatening him that if his prayers did not succeed he would kill him. Rabbi Vital was forced to flee to Damascus.

Abu Seifen issued a decree to close the synagogue, the only synagogue that existed in the city at the time. This is a synagogue that was built back in the Mameluke period, and already in the 15th century it was at the focus of a legal dispute. A mosque was built adjacent to the synagogue, and the Muslim clergy approached the sharia court with a demand to close down the synagogue, based on a variety of different pretexts. Although this was a Muslim religious court, the *kadi* rejected their claims, time after time confirming the Jewish ownership of the location. The struggle lasted for decades, continuing into the Ottoman period, and only came to its conclusion in the time of Abu Seifen. At that time the Muslims once again appealed against the legality of the synagogue, complaining in court that the Jews who pray there do so loudly and thus disrupt the prayers held in the nearby mosque. In 1587, the governor issued a decree prohibiting the use of the synagogue.

The discriminatory decrees against the Jews in Jerusalem during the second half of the 16th century teach us an important chapter of history about the Ottoman rule and its attitude to the ethnic minorities, during a period of general crisis throughout the empire. The Jews clearly suffered from the economic crisis that affected the empire, but incidents of religious or racial persecution were a purely marginal phenomenon. Jerusalem was an exception to this rule, apparently due to its religious status and its holiness to Islam, as well as the considerable impact it had on religious zealotry.