'Atiqot 110, 2023

Fifteenth to Seventeenth-Century CE Hebrew Epitaphs from the Jewish Cemetery at Ẓefat (Safed)

Yosef Stepansky[1]

More than 100 previously undocumented Hebrew epitaphs (many of them fragmentary) dating from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century were uncovered in the ancient Jewish cemetery of Ẓefat (Safed) through the initiative of the Safed Religious Council. This is by far the largest corpus of ancient Hebrew inscriptions found in one site in Israel. Information gleaned from the engraved names of the deceased attests to a diverse and vibrant Jewish community that existed in the city during these centuries, according with accounts in other historical sources. The study of the epitaphs enriches our knowledge concerning,for example, the existence of certified physicians in Ẓefat and the presence of an unrecorded *yeshiva* (Talmudic Academy). Interestingly, most of the deceased were honored by the addition of formal titles, such as 'Rabbi,' for men, and 'Dona,' for women. This study describes in detail 28 of the most complete and legible epitaphs, attesting to a wide range of local and foreign Jewish ethnicities.

Keywords: tombstones, epitaphs, inscriptions, Safed, Hebrew, Judeo-Spanish, names

Introduction

Ẓefat was the largest populated center in Palestine toward the end of the fifteenth and at the beginning of the sixteenth centuries, in the twilight years of the Mamluk rule and soon after the Ottoman conquest of 1516. The city's Jewish community was also the largest in the region, numbering some 300 households, as mentioned in several Jewish historical sources, including vivid descriptions by an anonymous student of Rabbi Obadiah of Bertinoro from 1495 (Yaari 1971:151) and by Rabbi Moshe Basola from 1521 (David 1999:61–64). According to Ottoman registers of land, population and revenue, the Jewish community of Ẓefat reached a peak of almost 1000 households in the middle and third quarters of the sixteenth century, equaling the Muslim population of the city (Cohen and Lewis 1978:158–161; Schur 1983:49–50, 59). This was certainly the result of Jewish immigration to the

[1] Yosef Stepansky, Israel Antiquities Authority.

Fig. 1. The ancient Jewish cemetery of Ẓefat, aerial view northwest (May 13, 2022); note the tomb of Rabbi Yosef Karo, covered with a blue canopy, at top left.

Ottoman Empire in general, and to Ẓefat in particular, in the wake of the expulsions from Spain and Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century. Even during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Ẓefat's population and economic stature greatly diminished, the Jewish community was still the largest in the land, with several thousand individuals (Schur 1983:49–50), surpassing in size the important communities of Jerusalem, Gaza and Hebron. It is, therefore, no surprise that numerous tombstones from the late Mamluk and early Ottoman periods are found within Ẓefat's Jewish cemetery.

Renovations at the Jewish cemetery (Fig. 1), undertaken by the Safed Religious Council since the 1990s, a project named 'Hekdesh Bet Ha-'Almin' (hereinafter, Hekdesh), involved the removal of topsoil, resulting in the uncovering of ancient pre-1700 CE tombstones with engraved Hebrew inscriptions. As of May 2022, more than 100 inscribed ancient epitaphs have been uncovered.[2] All the tombstones were made of worked limestone, apart from

[2] It is noteworthy that the short epitaphs on extant tombstones of the well-known Rabbis and Kabbalists of the sixteenth century, Yitzchak Luria, Moshe Cordevoro, Shlomo Elkabetz and Yosef Karo, are not part of this study as they were almost certainly inscribed after 1700 CE, while the original older epitaphs of these historic personalities did not survive.

one made of marble that belonged to Rabbi Yeshua Halevi (Stepansky 2018:6). The finds comprised *in situ* rectangular-shaped tombstones, with the epitaphs engraved either on their long or short side; broken fragments of engraved tombstones found away from their original context; and stone plaques, not in their original position, that most probably originally stood upright besides the tombstones. Many of the inscriptions are fragmentary and hard to read, but some are complete and readily decipherable (Stepansky, in prep.). This is by far the largest concentration of ancient Hebrew inscriptions in one site found so far in Israel. The collection of epitaphs from Ẓefat can best be compared to those of much larger Jewish cemeteries of the early Ottoman period in Istanbul (Rozen 1994) and especially, Salonica (Thessaloniki; Emanuel 1963; 1968), although Ẓefat's epitaphs are less elaborate than those in the latter cemeteries. Longer, more elaborate and better preserved Hebrew epitaphs are known at the Ẓefat cemetery from the nineteenth century (Bernstein 2007). It is noteworthy that the earliest Ottoman-period epitaph known from the vast Jewish cemetery on the Mt. of Olives in Jerusalem, dating only to as late as 1636/7, is considerably later than the Ẓefat tombstones considered here (Yizrael 2004b:165).

About thirty of the inscriptions have been published in preliminary studies (Stepansky and Ben-Tovim 2012; 2016; Stepansky 2018; 2020), while a non-academic document detailing the Hekdesh work was also published (Afnezer 2019).[3]

This publication presents a selection of the most well-preserved and informative epitaphs, including some that have not been previously published, offering new insights as to the making of Ẓefat's Jewish community in the fifteenth–seventeenth centuries. Importantly, none of the epitaph-bearing tombstones were uncovered in systematic archaeological excavations, and as of June 2022, most of those uncovered remain exposed to weather damage. Workers of the Hekdesh have etched over the incised letters of many of the inscriptions and/or filled them in with black paint, while the tombstones were usually painted in blue, as was done with hundreds of other tombstones without inscriptions (Afnezer 2019); this was done without consulting archaeologists or conservation experts. Photographs taken by the author of some of the inscriptions before they were painted over are included here, while no additional such photographic documentation by others was found. This state of affairs makes the thorough documentation of the inscriptions an urgent matter.

---

[3] For a report on the history of research at the ancient cemetery and a list of scholars who have facilitated the research or assisted in the preliminary publications, see Stepansky 2018:1–4. Thanks are also due to the following for their help in deciphering the inscriptions presented here and in identifying or reconstructing the spelling of certain words, names, sayings and place names in the inscriptions: Irit Green of Radio Sefarad, Madrid; Dr. Ruth Lamdan of Tel Aviv University; the Onomast Dr. Alexandre Beider, Sorbonne University, Paris; Dr. Uri Safrai, Herzog Academic College; and the two anonymous readers of the manuscript, who also contributed several important insights to this research paper. All photographs appearing in this paper were taken by the author, unless stated otherwise. While systematic drawings of the inscriptions are certainly warranted as is customary with any ancient script-bearing artifacts, this task has not yet been achieved due to lack of funding. It is hoped that future research will correct any errors that may have occurred in the present work, with the aim to ensure accurate identification of the interred individuals and possibly further identification of those who remain anonymous.

THE EPITAPHS

The 28 inscriptions presented here were either part of tombstones, usually long and rectangular, or appeared on a stone plaque that was probably originally positioned in an upright stance beside the tombstone. Some of the studied inscriptions could be grouped according to family relations (5a–b, 6a–b, 7a–b, 13a–b) or other connecting characteristics (10a–d, 12a–b, 16a–b; see below). The locations of all the epitaphs within the Jewish Cemetery of Ẓefat are shown in Fig. 2.[4]

Fig. 2. The southern part of the ancient Jewish cemetery of Ẓefat, with marked locations of the inscriptions presented in this paper (orthophoto image reprinted under a CC BY license, with permission from The Survey of Israel [gov map], 2021).

[4] The location of the tombstones was recorded in a GPS survey in 2020 under the auspices of the IAA Eastern Galilee District, in a collaboration between Yosef Stepansky, Ania Kleiner and Anastasia Shapiro.

1. Moshe Hadayan (Fig. 3; Stepansky and Ben-Tovim 2016:224; Stepansky 2018:4–5; Afnezer 2019:226–227)

Transcript:

הציון הלז של החכם / השלם הח׳ הע׳ כ׳מ׳ו׳ה׳ר׳ / משה הדיין ז׳צ׳ו׳ל׳ בן / הח׳ הש׳ כ׳מ׳ה׳ר׳ יצחק / הדיין ז׳ל׳ נשיאי הלוים / נפטר שנת ה׳ ר׳פ׳ה׳

Reconstructed epitaph:

הציון הלז של החכם השלם החסיד העניו(?) כבוד מורנו הרב רבי משה הדיין זכר צדיק וקדוש לברכה בן החכם השלם כבוד מורנו הרב רבי יצחק הדיין זכרונו לברכה נשיאי הלויים נפטר [ב]שנת ה׳רפ״ה (5251 לסה״נ)

Translation:

This tombstone belongs to the perfect sage, the pious and humble, our revered master the Rabbi Moshe Hadayan may the memory of this righteous and holy man be blessed, son of the perfect sage, our revered master, the Rabbi Yitzchak Hadayan, blessed is his memory, leader of the Levites, deceased in the year 5285 (=1525 CE)

This well-preserved and dated inscription, appears on a small limestone plaque (35 × 35 cm) that was probably attached to or placed beside a larger tombstone. It may be a typical formula of sixteenth-century Jewish epitaphs at Ẓefat. The exceptional state of preservation is attested by the presence of the small dots over the letters of abbreviated words, which were a common occurrence in ancient Hebrew inscriptions. The tombstone marked the grave of one of the most important rabbis of early sixteenth-century Ẓefat.

Fig. 3. Epitaph of Moshe Hadayan, looking north (2014).

2. Yosef Palenci (Fig. 4; Afnezer 2019:254)

Transcript:

הציון / הלז של / היקר המעול(ה) כ׳ה׳ר׳ / יוסף פאלנסי ע׳נ׳ (עדן נשמתו?) נפט׳ / בחודש אלול שנת הרמ׳ב׳

Translation:

This tombstone belongs to the beloved and perfect, our revered Rabbi Yosef Palenci (in Eden is his soul?), deceased in the month (or, on the ninth of the month?) of Elul year 5242 (=1482 CE)

The inscription appears on a relatively large square tombstone, quite uncommon in Ẓefat, engraved in a shallow Moorish-styled hollow. If the reading of the date of death, *הרמב*, is correct, referring to 1482 CE, then presently this is the oldest dated tombstone inscription in the Ẓefat cemetery, ascribed to the late Mamluk period. Several undated inscriptions from Ẓefat may be ascribed to the early sixteenth century, predating the Ottoman conquest of 1516, possibly including a member of the Iscandari family (Afnezer 2019:249–250; Stepansky, in prep.). The name on the stone indicates that this individual's place of origin was probably Palencia, Castile, northwest Spain.

3. Avraham Trabot (Fig. 5; Stepansky 2018:5; Afnezer 2019:230–232)

Transcript:

אברהם [רפאל] / ראש ישיבה / פה בצפת אשר / בגליל עליון בן / הגאון כ׳מ׳ו׳ה׳ר׳ר׳ עזריאל טרבוט / זל נתבקש / בישיבה של / מעלה יום ה / יא טבת ה׳ר׳פ׳ט׳ / ת׳נ׳צ׳ב׳ה׳

Fig. 4. Epitaph of Yosef Palenci, looking southwest (2022).

Fig. 5. Epitaph of Avraham Trabot, looking north (2020).

Translation:
Avraham [Raphael] Rosh Yeshiva, here in Ẓefat in the Upper Galilee, the son of the Gaon our revered master and Rabbi Azriel Trabot of blessed memory who was called to a meeting in heaven [on] the 5th day 11 Tevet 5229 (=1529 CE) may his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life.

The inscription is engraved on a slightly fractured plaque, presenting one of the best-preserved dated inscriptions from Ẓefat. It belonged to the grave of a head of a Torah Academy ('*rosh yeshiva*') in Ẓefat that is not known from the historical sources. Rabbi Avraham Trabot is mentioned in a lone historical source as being a resident of Ẓefat (David 1993:121), while the Trabot Family is recorded in central Italy at a later time, from the sixteenth century onward (Green 1976).

4. Avraham Sorujon (Fig. 6; Stepansky and Ben-Tovim 2016:226–227; Stepansky 2018:6; Afnezer 2019:120–121)

Transcript:
הציון הלז ומי בתוכו / נגנז הישיש ומעול]ה[/ זקן ונשוא פנים כ׳ה׳ר׳ / אברהם סורוגון ז׳ל׳ה׳ה׳ (= זכרונו לחיי העולם הבא / (יום ו׳ ה... / ה׳ש׳ה׳

Translation:
This tombstone and who is interned within, the aged and excellent, elderly and esteemed, the revered Rabbi Avraham Sorujon, may his memory live in the world to come, [deceased] on Friday the fifth… 5305 (=1545 CE)

Fig. 6. Epitaph of Avraham Sorujon, looking south (2011).

This well-preserved inscription is engraved in a shallow hollow of an *in situ*, complete rectangular tombstone, along its northern edge. Avraham Sorujon (or Sorojon, Surujon, Souroujon) is possibly a member of the Spanish-Jewish Souroujon family, whose roots were in the Curujon area near Madrid, or he may have belonged to the Romaniote community of Jews of Greek descent that was resettled in Istanbul by Sultan Mehmed II in the fifteenth century; the Turkish word Sürgün refers to the Ottoman practice of relocating entire communities within its territories.

5. Yosef MiTrani (5a; Fig. 7) and his wife Lady Gracia (5b; Fig. 8; Stepansky and Ben-Tovim 2016:238–241; Stepansky 2018:16–18; Afnezer 2019:216–220)

5a. Transcript:

מה לעם כי יבכו תמיד כי נחלו על שבר יוסף /אם עליו אדמה תזעק אחרי מות רב עוד יוסף /האבן הזאת
אבן השתיה כי שם / .....רק ספר תורה חתומה (?) / ..... אל למד פרשה (?) / ..... תזעק כי שם /
.....ם נאוה (נאום ?) של ישראל /.....אבי התעודה / .....[ז׳]ל׳ה׳ה׳ בן מרנא / [ורבנא משה מטר]אני
ת׳נ׳צ׳ב׳ה׳ אשר / נח נפשיה בק[ושטא]נדינה ביום שבת / קדש י׳ד׳ לתמוז ש׳נ׳ת׳ ה׳ש׳צ׳ט׳

Translation (the last 4 of 12 lines of the original epitaph; see Fig. 7):
…. Son of our master [and Rabbi Moshe MiTr]ani may his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life whose soul came to rest in K[ushta]ntina (Istanbul) on the holy day of Shabbat the fourteenth of Tammuz in the year 5399 (1639 CE)

Fig. 7. Epitaph of Yosef MiTrani, looking north (2020).

Fig. 8. Epitaph of Lady Gracia, from above (2020).

5b. Transcript:

המסתופפת בצל הרב / בחייה וגם אחרי מותו / מצאה בית והיתה / מנוחתה הרבנית / מרת גרסייא נ׳ע׳

Translation:

She who is under the shade of the rabbi during her lifetime and also after his death has found a home and her resting place has come to be, the Rabanit Lady Gracia, may her soul abide in paradise

These two epitaphs are especially interesting, as they belong to the graves of Yosef MiTrani, also known as 'The Maharit', the most important rabbi of Istanbul in the early seventeenth century (Bentov 1978; Ben-Naeh 2006:228, 304; 2010b; Vaya 2021:20–21), and Gracia, who was most probably his wife. Rabbi MiTrani, born in Ẓefat to Rabbi Moshe MiTrani (The 'Mabit', 1500–1580 CE), was apparently brought back to Ẓefat posthumously from Istanbul (קושטאנדינה, in the line second to last of the inscription), after passing away in 1639, probably being accompanied by his wife Gracia, who subsequently passed away and was buried near her husband in 1652.

Although the tombstone inscription of Rabbi MiTrani is fragmentary and partly unreadable, it is one of the longest epitaphs in the cemetery. The partial transcript given here, with complete deciphering and translation still pending, is based on a photograph of the stone plaque in its entirety, after being put together from its broken parts by the Hekdesh.

The small tombstone plaque of Gracia, found 5 m south of her husband's, bears a finely etched inscription and is ornamented on the bottom left with an incised image of a bird or lily. If the image is indeed that of a bird, it may refer to Psalms 84:4, mentioning a bird who "has found a home" ("גם ציפור מצאה בית"), recalling the words in the epitaph מצאה בית; the word מסתופפת in the epitaph also has a parallel in that same chapter, Psalms 84:11. On the bottom right of the inscription, above the letter ר of the word מרת, is an incised V, the nature of which is unclear. Gracia's identity is not explicitly mentioned in the epitaph; however, she was probably Rabbi Yosef MiTrani's wife (Y. Ben-Naeh, pers. comm.), herself from a prominent family (Vaya 2021:20) and deserving the title 'Rabanit' (female rabbi) in her own right, as she was proficient in *Halakha* (Jewish religious laws) and described as such in writings by her son (Toledano 1960:57; Stepansky 2018:17–18).

6. Yitzchak of Seres (6a; Fig. 9) and his wife Dona Jamila (6b; Fig. 10; Afnezer 2019:252–254)

6a. Transcript:

כ״ר יצחק / די שריש / נ״ע

Translation:

Our revered Rabbi Yitzchak Di Seres may his soul abide in paradise

Fig. 9. Epitaph of Yitzchak of Seres, looking north (2020).

Fig. 10. Epitaph of Jamila, looking north (2020).

6b. Transcript :

ציון דונא / גאמילא די / ר יצחק שיריש / ס״ט (= סיפיה טב או סימנא טבא)

Translation:

The tombstone of Dona (Lady) Jamila Di (the wife of) Rabbi Yitzchak Seres S”T (may he be well, or may he have only good fortunes, i.e., the husband was still alive at the time of his wife’s passing)

This is another interesting pair of husband and wife, which is unknown from the historical sources. The husband’s short, clearly readable inscription is engraved in a shallow hollow at the northern end of the tombstone. Seres is today modern Serres in Thrace, northeastern Greece. Although both inscriptions do not mention dates, based on their style and wording they should be assigned to the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. The initials ס״ט (S”T), appearing on Jamila’s epitaph, refer to her husband, who outlived his wife, while only in later centuries did the abbreviation receive the meaning of ‘pure Sephardi’ (ספרדי טהור).

17. Avraham Ibn Shushan (7a) and his widow (7b; Fig. 11; Afnezer 2019:245)

7a. Transcript :

[צי]ון מהיש[יש] / ..... נשוא פנים כמהר / אברהם ן׳ שושא / ן זצ״ל

Translation:
The tombstone of the aged … esteemed our revered master Rabbi Avraham Ibn Shushan may the memory of this righteous man be blessed

7b. Transcript:

אלמנת הישיש / כמ׳ה׳ר אברהם ן / שושאן זצ״ל

Translation:
The widow of the aged our revered master Rabbi Avraham Ibn Shushan may the memory of this righteous man be blessed.

Two recently uncovered, small fractured tombstones of another pair of husband and wife, Avraham Ibn Shushan (אברהם ׳ן שושאן; discovered in 2021) and his anonymous widow (אלמנת אברהם ׳ן שושאן), are placed as part of a large group of displaced, small-sized tombstone inscriptions northwest of the Mausoleum of Hosea Ben Be'eri; the two stones were originally found in separate locations. It is possible, that Avraham Ibn Shushan (or Susan) was related to the well-known Rabbi Yisachar Ben Susan (יששכר בן סוסאן / שושאן 1510 to >1574), author of the book 'Tikun Yisachar' (printed in Venice in 1579) who lived in Ẓefat in the sixteenth century.

Fig. 11. Epitaphs of Avraham Ibn Shushan (left) and his widow (right), from above (2021).

8. Yehoshua Ibn Nun (Fig. 12; Stepansky 2011:13; Stepansky and Ben-Tovim 2016:234–235; Stepansky 2018:13–14; Afnezer 2019:220–222)

Transcript:

זאת המצב[ה] / לרופא המובהק / החסיד כ׳ר׳ / יהושע ׳ן נון / נ׳ע׳

Translation:
This tombstone is of the profound doctor the pious our revered Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Nun may his soul abide in paradise

This short inscription (15 × 15 cm), inscribed on the northern short end of a long cylindrical tombstone, is worn, but still readable. The name on the tombstone is recorded in several historical sources as an important rabbi in Ẕefat in the second half of the sixteenth century, who is said to have bribed the brother of the well-known scholar of rabbinic teachings, Ḥayyim Vital, into secretly giving him his brother's manuscripts for circulation, and possibly paying with his life for this transgression in 1585 (?; Stepansky 2018:14). If, in fact, the tombstone belonged to this individual, then we gain an important piece of information about him having also been a certified physician (לרופא המובהק).

9. Avraham Ibn Ezra (Fig. 13; Stepansky 2018:9; Afnezer 2019:146–147)
Transcript:

[ה]ציון הלז / של הישיש / החכם הרופא / המובהק כ׳ר׳ אברהם / ׳ן עזרא נ׳ע׳ (=נשמתו עדן)

Translation:
This tombstone belongs to the aged, the sage, the profound doctor, our revered Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, may his soul abide in paradise

Fig. 12. Epitaph of Yehoshua Ibn Nun, looking south (2022).

Fig. 13. Epitaph of Avraham Ibn Ezra, looking south (2022).

Another physician, whose tombstone was uncovered in 2017, is known to have been a resident and doctor in Ẓefat from a Hebrew source of the first half of the sixteenth century (Stepansky 2018:9). The long cylindrical shape of the tombstone and the style of the text parallel those of the two nearby sixteenth-century tombstones of Avraham Sorujon (No. 4) and Yehoshua Ibn Nun (No. 8).

10. Lady Preciosa (10a; Fig. 14); Mirena Rosa (10b; Fig. 15); Donya Lidisya (10c; Fig. 16); Donya Reyna wife of Rabbi Gedalya Halevi (10d) (Fig. 17). These four inscriptions mention Judaeo-Spanish (Ladino) female names of undoubted Iberian descent .

10a. Transcript (Afnezer 2019:188–189):
זאת / מצבת קבורת הגבירה / היקרה מרת פריסיושה נ״ע / בת [ה]חכם השלם ה[חסיד] / כמ... [בו]נפוש ן׳ אלקסטנטיני / ז״ל... [אשת?] הגביר כר שמואל / הלוי ז״ל נפטרה יום ו׳ ערב ר״ח ניסן / שנת ה׳חד׳ש הזה לכם ראש / חדשים

Translation:
This is the tombstone of the beloved Mistress Lady Preciosa may her soul abide in paradise, daughter of the wise, the perfect and pious, our revered teacher… Bonfus Ibn Elcostantini may his memory be blessed … [wife of ?] the Lord our revered Rabbi Shmuel Halevi may his memory be blessed, deceased on Friday Rosh Hodesh Nissan in the year ‘Hahodesh’ Hazeh Lachem Rosh Hodashim (Exodus 12:2; assigning numeric values to the Hebrew letters of ‘Hahodesh’ [‘החדש’] gives the year 5312 of creation = 1552 CE)

This is the largest and most elegant ancient tombstone of a woman found so far in the Ẓefat cemetery, bearing a well-incised epitaph engraved in a shallow hollow with an ‘ogee’-arch design on the face of a large, fractured limestone plaque. The name *Preciosa*, Spanish/ Ladino for precious (similar in meaning to the Italian name Bela), discloses the Spanish descent of this individual. Her father’s name ‘Bonfus Ibn Elconstantini’ reveals his probable connection with Istanbul. However, a tombstone of a woman who probably the sister of Lady Preciosa, Ḥana, is known from Salonica (Emanuel 1963:54, Tombstone 74; מרת חנה...נ׳ע בת החכם השלם החסיד דון בונפוש אלקוסטנטיני...). If the latter provenance for this family is correct, Lady Preciosa’s uncle (her mother’s brother) may have been the well-known historian Yosef Hacohen, author of ‘Emeq Ha-Bakha’ (The Vale of Tears) and other chronicles. The tombstone of Preciosa’s apparently well-to-do husband (גביר = lord, rich man, while she herself is also termed גבירה, mistress), Shmuel Halevi, has yet to be found, and while he is not known from historical sources, he may be connected to other known rabbis of Levitic descent, whose tombstones are found in the Ẓefat cemetery (Stepansky 2018:4, 6–7). It is possible that Preciosa passed away outside the country, possibly in Salonica, and was brought to burial in Ẓefat posthumously, as was probably the case with other burials in Ẓefat (e.g., No. 5: Yosef MiTrani, who was brought to burial from Istanbul) and hence, her husband’s grave may not be present at Ẓefat. The date of death (1552 CE)

Fig. 14. Epitaph of Lady Preciosa, looking north (2022).

Fig. 15. Epitaph of Mirena Rosa, looking north (2022).

Fig. 16. Epitaph of Donya Lidisya, looking south (2020).

Fig. 17. Epitaph of Donya Reyna, looking south (2011).

and the tombstone's extravagance parallels the fine tombstones of the well-to-do Benveniste Family found nearby (Stepansky 2018:7–9).

10b. Transcript:

זה / הציון מן הבכורה(?) (הבחורה?) (הכבודה?) / מרת מירנה / רוסה תנצבה

Translation:

This is the tombstone of the first born (?) (the unmarried? or, the revered?) Lady Mirena Rosa may her soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life

This small tombstone plaque bears a short inscription engraved in a stylized, arc-designed shallow hollow. The Latin names disclose the deceased's Spanish descent. If the word הבכורה should be reconstructed as הבחורה (the letter כ being inscribed erroneously instead of a ח), then Mirena would probably have been a young unmarried woman.

10c. Transcript:

ציון היקרה מ״ר (מעשה רב?) / דוני׳ לידיסי׳ / בת כ׳ר׳ שלמה / פאלנזי נ׳ע׳

Translation:

The tombstone of the beloved m"r (creative?) Donya (Lady) Lidisya the daughter of our revered Rabbi Shlomo Palenzi

This small plaque bears an inscription with the Latin name Lidisya, disclosing the deceased's Spanish descent. The father, Shlomo, may have originated from Palencia (as in No. 2) or possibly from Valencia.

10d. Transcript (Stepansky and Ben-Tovim 2016:243; Stepansky 2018:20–21; Afnezer 2019:235–236):

ציון זה / מהיקרה דוני׳ / ריינא אשת כ׳ר׳ / גדליה הלוי נ׳ע׳

Translation:

This tombstone belongs to the beloved Donya (Lady) Reyna the wife of our revered Rabbi Gedalya Halevi, may her soul abide in paradise

This previously unknown name is of the wife of Rabbi Gedalya (a well-known student of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, *ARI*, who lived in Ẓefat in 1570–1572 CE) and sister of Ḥayyim Vital. Her name, Reyna, was one of the most popular names among Jews of Spanish descent, equivalent to Malka in Hebrew, meaning queen. Although the plaque is fragmented, the entire epitaph, with its well-carved letters, seems to be complete.

11. Elchanan Elkalai (Fig. 18; Afnezer 2019:247)

Transcript

ציון הלז מהנבון / ומאד נעלה כ׳ה׳ר׳ / אלחנן אלקלעי נ״ע

Translation:

This tombstone belongs to the wise and very dignified the revered Rabbi Elchanan Elkalai may his soul abide in paradise

This well-engraved inscription appears on a small stone tablet. Members of the Elkalai Family, originating from Alcala, northeast of Madrid, Spain, are known from sixteenth-century Ẓefat (Bernstein 2007:108), and include the mother of Yosef MiTrani, 'The Maharit' (see No. 5a), who was the second wife of Moshe MiTrani (Bentov 1978:16; Vaya 2021:20). The surname Elkalai also appears on several tombstones in Salonica (Emanuel 1963:90, No. 180).

12. Yehuda Naʻamias (12a) and Yitzḥak Ibn Naḥmias (12b; Figs. 19, 20; Afnezer 2019:256)

12a. Transcript:

ציון זה של החכם השלם / החסיד הענו סובל יסורים / כ׳ה׳ר׳ יהודה נעמיאש ת׳נ׳צ׳ב׳ה׳

Translation:

This tombstone belongs to the perfect sage, the pious and humble, who has suffered greatly, the revered Rabbi Yehuda Naʻamias may his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life

12b. Transcript:

הציון הלז / של כבוד / החכם ר׳ יצחק / ן׳ נחמיאש ז׳צ׳ל

Translation:

This tombstone belongs to the revered sage Rabbi Yitzḥak Ibn Naḥmias may the memory of this righteous man be blessed

Fig. 18. Epitaph of Elchanan Elkalai, looking north (2020).

Fig. 19. Epitaph of Yehuda Naʻamias, looking north (2020).

Fig. 20. Epitaph of Yitzchak Ibn Nahmias, looking north (2020).

Both tombstones are relatively small, and that of Yitzḥak Ibn Naḥmias is fractured and poorly preserved. The difference in spelling of the family name, Naʻamias/Naḥmias, is noteworthy. These personalities are of Iberian descent: the name Yosef Naʻamias (יוסף נעמיאס) is recorded in Toledo as early as the end of the eleventh century. A known personality from sixteenth-century Ẓefat is Yitzhak the son of Yaʻakov Naḥmias (יצחק בן כה״ר יעקב נחמיאש; David 1991:446; Davidson 2009, II:49), while the names of other individuals with this surname appear on tombstones in Salonica, dated between 1520 and 1530 (e.g., ן׳ נמיאש; Emanuel 1963:47, No. 60). Other people with the surname Naḥmias or Naʻamias are documented around the same time as residents of Italy and the eastern Ottoman Empire (Avivi 2008a:222, 298–299, 378; 2008b:610, 668, 725, 806).[5]

13. Aharon De Botton (13a) and Rachel De Botton (13b; Figs. 21–23; Afnezer 2019:209–211)

13a. Transcript (Stepansky 2018:11; Afnezer 2019:209–211):
ציון מהנעלה גביר / ונבון איש חיל רב פעלי׳[ם] / כ׳מ׳ה׳ר׳ אהרן די בוטון / ז׳ל׳ נגנז [פה] יום א׳ ח׳ סיון / שנת ה׳ ש׳כ׳ג׳ ליצירה

Translation:
[This] tombstone [belongs to] the exalted lord and wise man of valor, a greatly accomplished person, our revered master Rabbi Aharon De Botton of blessed memory, interned here on Sunday, the eighth of Sivan, in the year 5323 after creation (= 1563 CE)

13b. Transcript (Afnezer 2019:209):
ציון הלז / מצבת קבורת רחל / אומללה אשר קוננה / נפשה בחייה בת החסיד / העניו כ״ר אהרון די בוטון / זצ״ל נקברה יום / ד׳ ד׳ לניסן שנת השל״ה

Translation:
This tombstone is the memorial of the wretched Rachel whose soul had bemoaned in her lifetime, daughter of the pious and humble our revered Rabbi Aharon De Botton may the memory of this righteous man be blessed, buried on Wednesday, the fourth of Nissan, in the year 5335 (after creation, i.e., 1575 CE)

A pair of long rectangular tombstones (Fig. 21), a rare occurrence at the Ẓefat cemetery, retains the original dated inscriptions *in situ*, within shallow niches on the narrow northern ends of the tombstones. The western tombstone belongs to Aharon De Botton, who passed away in 1563 CE (Stepansky 2018:11; Afnezer 2019:209–211), while the eastern one belongs to his daughter, Rachel De Botton, who is mentioned in the epitaph as having passed

[5] The family name Naḥmias continues to be a widespread name among present-day Jewish families in Israel, many of whom immigrated from North Africa in the twentieth century.

away in 1575 CE after having had a miserable life. When uncovered, the inscriptions proved hard to read and consequently, the tablets were uprooted, cleaned, read and reinstalled in their original niches (Afnezer 2019:209); subsequent to their cleaning the two inscriptions still remained rather hard to read, especially that of Rachel (see Fig. 23). Aharon De Botton

Fig. 21. Tombstones of Aharon De Botton (right) and daughter Rachel (left), looking south (2020).

Fig. 22. Epitaph of Aharon De Botton, looking south (2022).

Fig. 23. Epitaph of Rachel De Botton, looking south (2022).

and his daughter Rachel were probably members of the well-known De Botton Family of Salonica (Ben-Sasson et al. 1998; Ben-Naeh 1998), whose most prominent personality was Avraham Ḥiyya De Botton (1545?–1592), the author of the commentary on the 'Mishne Torah' of Maimonides, 'Lehem Mishne' (Ben-Naeh 2010a). The wording מצבת קבורת רחל is probably a quote from Genesis 35:20, referring to biblical Rachel, wife of Jacob, who left this world prematurely during childbirth.

14. Yitzchak Pinto (Fig. 24; Stepansky and Ben-Tovim 2016:243; Stepansky 2018:21; Afnezer 2019:121)

Transcript:

...מהישיש כ׳ר׳ / יצחק פינטו / נ׳ע׳

Translation:

… [The tombstone] of the aged our revered R. Yitzchak Pinto may his soul abide in paradise

This epitaph, although short and fragmentary, is one of the best preserved examples from graves of the members of the Pinto Family, a noble rabbinic dynasty, of which Yitzchak Pinto may have been one of the founding fathers.

15. Binyamin Italiano (Fig. 25; Afnezer 2019:254)

Transcript:

ציון הלז מהיקר ומעולה כ׳ה׳ר׳ / בנימין איטליאנו ת׳נ׳צ׳ב׳ה׳ נגנז פה / ביום ב׳ ז׳ יום לחודש סיון שנת ה׳ש׳ל׳ט׳ / ליצירה

Fig. 24. Epitaph of Yitzchak Pinto, looking south (2020).

Fig. 25. Epitaph of Binyamin Italiano, looking north (2020).

Translation:
This tombstone belongs to the beloved and perfect our revered Rabbi Binyamin Italiano may his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life, interned here on Monday the seventh day of the month of Sivan in the year 5339 after creation (= 1579 CE)

The date registered for this epitaph by Afnezer (2019:254) was mistakenly the sixth of Sivan, while here it is given as the seventh of Sivan 5339, which was in fact a Monday, the first of June 1579. This was the day after the Shavu‘ot holiday in the Land of Israel, which was considered the second day of the holiday in the diaspora. It is possible that Binyamin Italiano passed away on Shavu‘ot in Ẓefat, the day before he was buried, or in the diaspora (Italy?) and was brought to be buried in the city on the seventh of Sivan. If the latter, the word נגנז (interned) could specifically refer to the reburial of the bones.

16. Yehuda Hacohen (16a; Fig. 26) and Shmuel Hacohen (16b; Fig. 27)
These two sixteenth-century tombstones of Cohanim (priests) are part of a group of graves termed ‘the plot of the Kabbalists’ (*Ḥelkat Hamekubalim*), located on the upper northern section of the ancient cemetery. They include the tombstones of the well-known Rabbis Yitzchak Luria (the *ARI*), Moshe Cordovero, Moshe MiTrani, Shlomo Alkabetz and Elazar Azikri. Despite the location of the two tombstones among the graves of well-known historical figures, they both belong to unknown personalities. The two tombstones bear finely incised and dated inscriptions.

16a. Transcript (Yizrael 2004a:308; Afnezer 2019:44–45):
ציון הלז לנפש נבון / ומאד נעלה כהר׳ר / יהודה הכהן ז׳ל נפטר / ביום ששה ועשרים / לחדש תמוז שנת ה׳ ש׳י׳ו׳

Translation:
This tombstone [belongs to] the wise and exalted soul our revered R. Yehuda Hacohen blessed is his memory, deceased on the twenty-sixth of the month of Tammuz in the year 5316 (= 1556 CE)

Fig. 26. Epitaph of Yehuda Hacohen, looking south (2020).

Fig. 27. Epitaph of Shmuel Hacohen, looking west (2022).

This epitaph was written on a small plaque, attached to the northern narrow end of a rectangular tombstone. It is located today beside the famous tombstone of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria. The year 1556 on the tombstone makes it the earliest in the 'plot of the Kabbalists', preceding the death of Moshe Cordovero by fourteen years and of Yitzchak Luria by sixteen years.

16b. Transcript:

ציון הלזה למזה בן מזה / גביר ונבון כ׳ה׳ר׳ שמואל ה / כהן ת׳נ׳צ׳ב׳ה׳ פטירתו שנת [ה] ש׳ו׳כ׳ב׳

Translation:

This tombstone belongs to the 'sprinkler son of a sprinkler' the lord and wise our revered Rabbi Shmuel Hacohen may his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life, deceased in the year [5]328 (=1568 CE)

This epitaph was inscribed *in situ* in a shallow hollow on the eastern, long side of a rectangular tombstone, located east of Yitzchak Luria's. The phrase at the beginning of the inscription, 'Mazeh ben Mazeh' (*מזה בן מזה*), refers to the sprinkling of water with ashes of the Red Heifer, a term designating a member of the distinguished lineage of a priestly family (see Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 28a).

17. Moshe Albotini (Fig. 28; Afnezer 2019:237–238)

Transcript:

מ[שה] (?)... / אלבוטיני זלהה׳ בן הרב הדיין / כ׳מוה׳ר יהודה אלבוטיני זצ׳וק׳ל

Fig. 28. Epitaph of Moshe Albotini, looking north (2020).

Translation:
Moshe(?)… Albotini may his memory live in the world to come the son of the Dayan our revered master Rabbi Yehuda Albotini may the memory of this righteous and holy man be blessed

Part of the tombstone, inscribed with the words הרב הדיין and זצוק״ל, had broke off after its discovery, and the words were handwritten on it by Afnezer (2019:237), with the final word of the inscription, זצוק״ל, placed below the original epitaph. The first name, 'Moshe', was reconstructed by Afnezer after having found a small stone fragment adjacent to the tombstone bearing the letter מ (Afnezer 2019:238; see Fig. 28).

The fragmentary epitaph is of some significance, as it belonged to a historically known figure of Portuguese descent from the sixteenth century, the father of which—mentioned in the inscription—is also well-known. Rabbi Yehuda Albotini, the father, was a rabbinical judge (*dayan*) in Jerusalem during the first decade of the sixteenth century (David 1993:169; 2013b:42*–43*), grandson of Rabbi Yosef Ḥayun, the leading rabbi in Lisbon during the second half of the fifteenth century (Hacker 1983). Yehuda Albotini's son Moshe is recorded in Ẓefat in the first half of the sixteenth century, and it is conjectured that he originated from a family of conversos who returned to Judaism after the Portuguese expulsion of 1497 (David 1993:116–118; 2013b:56*).

18. Halevi Ibn Elkabetz (Fig. 29; Afnezer 2019:246)

Transcript:

...דה (?) הלו[י] / ן אלקבץ / נ״ע

Translation:
…da (?) Halevi Ibn Elkabetz may his soul abide in paradise

The surname of the deceased is well-known, and it is possible that the inscription refers to a family member of the famous Kabbalist Shlomo Halevi Elkabetz, the lyricist of the liturgic poem 'Lecha Dodi'. Shlomo Elkabetz, himself of Spanish descent (although it is likely that he was born, or at least spent his early childhood, in Salonica; Pachter 1994:17–18), immigrated to Ẓefat in 1536, along with Rabbi Yosef Karo. The partially preserved first name in the inscription may be reconstructed as Yehuda, in which case the name is not known among the historically documented family members of Shlomo Halevi Elkabetz. Alternatively, provided that the letter 'ד' in the partial first name could in fact be the letter 'מ', the name can be possibly reconstructed as Shlomo ('[של]מה'), with the possibility that the tombstone belonged to Rabbi Shlomo Elkabetz. This suggestion may not be far-fetched, as the traditionally accepted location for this grave, in the '*Ḥelkat Hamekubalim*' (see above, No. 16), is not considered well-established; some accounts by nineteenth-century travelers, coming through Ẓefat, do not mention witnessing the gravesite of this particular rabbi at the plot (Afnezer 2019:37–39).

Fig. 29. Epitaph of Halevi Ibn Elkabetz, looking north (2020).

Fig. 30. 'LeKol Bochim', looking north (2020).

19. 'LeKol Bochim' (Fig. 30)

Transcript:

לקול בוכים ....

Translation:
to the sounds of weeping

This inscription comprises only two short words, the second of the two representing only part of a word, which has also become illegible due to weathering. The inscription may refer to an important personality in Ẓefat of the sixteenth century. Although the expression of agony, קול בוכים, may be part of a tombstone epitaph, it is also the name of a commentary on the Book of Lamentations (Megillat Eicha), written by the well-known Rabbi Avraham Galante of Ẓefat, published in Venice in 1589. The gravesite of Rabbi Avraham Galante has long been sought after. He was an important student of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero and of his brother Rabbi Moshe Galante, and viewed by his contemporaries as an especially strict adherent to *pious customs (Hanhagot*). The fragmentary stone may be part of the original tombstone of Rabbi Avraham Galante, highlighting the fact that even a small part of a broken tombstone with inscribed letters from the Ẓefat cemetery may have tremendous historical value.

DISCUSSION

Only a few Hebrew inscriptions engraved on stone are known from the Galilee throughout the entire time spanning the Fatimid, Crusader–Ayyubid, Mamluk and Early Ottoman periods (1000–1700 CE),the vast majority of them from the Jewish cemetery of Ẓefat. The few rare instances known outside Ẓefat are the inscribed stones mentioning 'Gaon Ya'akov' in Gush Ḥalav (Stepansky 1999) and 'Avraham Ben Yeshaya Hameshorer' in Tiberias (Stepansky 2008:2052; 2016: Site 70 [Plaza Hotel parking lot], Fig. 1), both not found in their original context.[6] Three other well-known inscriptions claimed to have been discovered in the vicinity of the gravesite of Maimonides in Tiberias—the epitaphs of David Hanagid and Natan Bar Mazliah (Stepansky 2016: Site 18 [The Rambam Burial plot], Figs. 6, 7) and that of Elyakim Naḥuandi (Stepansky 2016: Site 12 [Mimuniya Neighborhood (North)], Fig. 2)—are probably forgeries from the 1920s (Hillel 2022:184–233, 235–280). This highlights the great importance of the gravestones uncovered in the Ẓefat cemetery, as authentic inscriptions whose provenance is unequivocal.

Much of what is known about the Jewish community of Ẓefat in the late medieval period comes from the Ẓefat grave epitaphs. Only few archaeological excavations were undertaken in the Jewish Quarter of Ẓefat, uncovering remains from before the eighteenth century (Barbé and Cinamon 2009; Hillman 2012; Dalali-Amos 2013; Shivtiel, Frumkin and Bar-Matthews 2020:47–51), the most important being 'The Khan of the Jews' (Damati 2004). None of the excavations yielded artifacts bearing Hebrew inscriptions.[7]

It is estimated that of the hundreds of pre-1700 CE tombstones uncovered in the Ẓefat cemetery, not more than c. 10% were inscribed, some by professional scribes and others by unskilled ones (e.g., Nos. 2, 8, 10c and 19). The rarity of tombstones with epitaphs may be due to the fact that they were costly to produce, and it is likely that most common folk could not afford this luxury. We may further conjecture that most of the common folk buried their dead without erecting a tombstone at all.

The 28 epitaphs presented here indicate a substantial variation among the deceased, in the level of investment put into the construction of the tombstones and the carving of

---

[6] An undated graffiti inscription: 'Yitschak Bar Koma', inscribed on the western wall of the Cave of Elijah in Haifa, could be medieval, although the vast majority of the other inscriptions in the cave, more than 150 Greek (and one Latin) inscriptions appearing on its eastern and western walls, are Byzantine or earlier in date (Ovadiah 1969). To this corpus we may add the personal seal of Naḥmanides (The Ramban), found in the 'Akko Valley and dated to the thirteenth century (Reiner 1999:59), although it is not an inscription on stone. Other such inscriptions etched by Jewish visitors in medieval times surely await discovery through surveys of the interior walls of burial caves in the vicinity of Gush Ḥalav and other sites in Upper and Lower Galilee.

[7] The earliest inscription inscribed on stone that exists in the Jewish Quarter is a graffiti in Hebrew on the southern wall of the *ARI* Ashkenazi synagogue, provisionally dated to 1745 CE. It reads: שלמה מיהי / יוסף קאטאלנו / איר(?) התקה (Stepansky 2011:36–37).

the inscriptions, and the extent of their preservation. The following common features are identified among the epitaphs:
1) The sole use of the Hebrew language, with only some of the names of the deceased given in other languages, mainly Judeo-Spanish (see below);
2) A common use of expressions, e.g., the term ציון הלז, 'this tombstone', appearing at the beginning of an epitaph, and the abbreviation נ״ע for נשמתו עדן, 'may his soul abide in paradise', at the end;
3) A shared use of the Jewish dating system in those tombs which mention the date of death, where the number of years is calculated 'since creation' (ליצירה);
4) A reference to all men as 'respected rabbis', applying either the full term or initials before the personal name of the deceased (e.g., כ׳ה׳ר׳ר׳, כבוד הרב רבנו, 'our revered rabbi'; כ׳מ׳ה׳ר׳, כבוד מורנו הרב רבי, 'our revered master rabbi').

The title 'rabbi' on the epitaphs does not necessarily mean that all men were actually rabbis; in some cases the term was used to respect the deceased, even a layman, whose family had the financial means (or the social need) to commission the erection of a tombstone with an inscribed epitaph. This suggestion is reinforced by the fact that the term rabbi was used in reference to most men, including common folk, in documents and letters of the sixteenth century (e.g., Lamdan 1996:94, 97). On the other hand, only one of the women mentioned in the epitaphs is designated 'rabanit', a term usually used today in reference to the wife of a rabbi. In Inscription No. 5b, the term refers to an exceptionally learned woman, 'Rabanit Gracia', who apparently earned the title in her own right. Although Gracia was most probably the wife of a rabbi, Rabbi Yosef MiTrani, she was described as a source of her husband's *halakhic* learnings in a eulogy written about her by her son (Toledano 1960:57; Stepansky 2018:17).

In several other textual sources from the sixteenth century, this term was apparently also used as a way of conferring love and respect to a woman by her children and not necessarily as a reference to her stature of learning. This we find in reference to the wife of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (sister of the Kabbalist Shlomo Elkabetz), where her son Gedalya describes her as a "Righteous Rabanit", and even compares her with the Shekhinah, the Holy Presence (Moshe Cordovero 1587:39); the wife of Shlomo Elkabetz, mentioned by her son Moshe (Shlomo Elkabetz 1585:178); and Jamila, the wife of Ḥayyim Vital, mentioned by her son Shmuel in his notes on his father's compilation 'Sha'ar Ha-Gilgul' (Hayyim Vital 2017:173). The rule in medieval Jewish society was that the women's role was first and foremost as housewives (Lamdan 1996:9–10, 21–26, 54–60, 94–106). While some consider the woman Torah scholar, Asenath Barzani of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in northern Kurdistan, to have been an actual rabbi, acting as the head of the local Torah academy (Melammed and Melammed-Levine 2000), this was a rare case indeed. Still, Jewish society of that period is known to have had its fair share of women mystics, with those of sixteenth-century Ẓefat especially renowned for being learned and able of offering sage advice (Chajes 2002).

Also of interest is the occurrence of pairs of tombstones, although not common in the Ẓefat cemetery, either of husband and wife (Nos. 5a–b, 6a–b, 7a–b) or father and daughter (No. 13a–b). Of these, only the tombstones of Aharon De Botton and his daughter Rachel were discovered *in situ*, adjacent to one another, while the others are plaques found some several meters apart. Another rare instance of an *in situ* pair of tombstones are two previously published adjacent plaques of Rabbi Shmuel Picchio and his daughter Ya'alat Chen Sultana (Stepansky 2018:22). Burial in pairs may have occurred when space remained available near an existing grave. The difference of only seven years between the dates of death of Rabbi Aharon De Botton (1563) and his daughter Rachel (1575) indicates that the family may have reserved the parcel next to the rabbi's grave for a family member.

The ancient cemetery epitaphs also offer insights of historical significance (for medieval cemeteries in Europe, see Baumgarten 2017). For example, the epitaph of Avraham Trabot (No. 3), noting that he was a "Rosh Yeshiva here in Upper Galilee," revealed a previously unknown *yeshiva* from the early sixteenth century, establishing that its head was a resident of Ẓefat and not brought there posthumously (as in the case of Rabbi Yosef MiTrani, No. 5a).

It is also noteworthy that the term 'Upper Galilee' appears in a dated early sixteenth-century grave epitaph (1529 CE). This region was perceived in sixteenth-century Jewish theology as the location of the 'footsteps of redemption', where the messiah (referring in this case to the 'Messiah Son of Joseph') will first appear. In the middle of that century, this belief was widely promoted by Shlomo Alkabetz and others (Paz 2006:246–249). While Ẓefat was already described as part of Upper Galilee in earlier sources, as in a manuscript from 1336 (Reiner, *Sefer Hayishuv*: Safed 11–20, No. 15), the material evidence from the city's cemetery reinforces what is known of developments in Jewish theology within an early sixteenth-century context.

This study allowed the association of known personalities appearing in the epitaphs, and several of the anonymous individuals, with specific Jewish communities ('*kehal'*), or groups, present in late-medieval Ẓefat, adding to our knowledge of the social composition and heterogeneity of the city's ancient population. The Jewish communities of sixteenth-century Ẓefat are listed in the Ottoman registers of 1525/6, 1555/6 and 1567/8: the Musta'rib, Frankish, Portuguese (probably including conversos; David 2013b:54*–56*), Maghrebi, Spanish (from Cordova, Castile, Aragon-Catalan and Seville), Italian (from Apulia and Calabria in southern Italy, and a community from central and northern Italy, generally referred to as 'Italiano'; David 1993:120–121), German and Hungarian (Cohen and Lewis 1978:154–161). Additional communities are mentioned in other, mainly Jewish historical or hagiographic sources: Romaniote—a Greek-speaking community, Provencal (= Frankish?; David 2013a) and Sicilian, as well as communities associated with particular synagogues (e.g., the 'Beit Ya'akov' and 'Kehal Gadol' communities), or important rabbinical personalities (e.g., the commune of disciples following Rabbi Yitzchak Luria during 1570–1572, ending with his untimely death). Thus, Ẓefat's late-medieval cemetery reflects its composition of

various Jewish communities, as it does again only in the nineteenth century (Bernstein 2007). As could be expected, most of the epitaphs from Ẓefat belong to descendants of the Spanish and Portuguese deportees expelled from those countries toward the end of the fifteenth century. One person of Spanish origin (Yosef Palenci, No. 2) was buried in Ẓefat as early as 1482 CE, ten years before the large Spanish expulsion of 1492. Some of the names of the deceased, although written in Hebrew, are probably Judeo-Spanish (Ladino), which was the most common language used in day-to-day life in Ẓefat (Davidson 2009, I:98). These include epitaph Nos. 10a–d: Lady Preciosa, Mirena Rosa, Donya Lidisya and Donya Reyna. The presence of the title don/donya is in itself an important indicator of such descent, where there are no other indications of the deceased's origin. However, we should be cautious with such interpretations, as a first name of Arabic origin occurs in the case of the epitaph of 'Dona Jamila the wife of Rabbi Yitzchak Siris' (No. 6b); hence, the title 'dona', in this case, may represent the origin of her husband, while Jamila could have been from the Musta'rib community. On the other hand, a woman by the name of 'Donya Jamila' from sixteenth-century Ẓefat is known to have sent a letter written in Judeo-Spanish to her son in Alexandria (one of several Judeo-Spanish letters discovered in the Cairo Genizah; Lamdan 1996:56–57). It may be summarized that the Iberian, both Spanish and Portuguese, communities of Ẓefat, comprising the majority of Jews living in the city throughout most of the sixteenth century (David 2013b), are the most widely represented among the grave epitaphs. It seems that many, if not most, of the expelled conversos arriving at Ẓefat were part of the Portuguese community (David 2013b:54*), and at least one of their members seems to be included in the group of epitaphs presented here (Moshe Albotini, No. 17). The Portuguese community became one of the largest in mid-sixteenth century Ẓefat, with as many as 200 households, second in size only to the Spanish Castilian community (Cohen and Lewis 1978:160).

The Italian community is also widely represented in the inscriptions, confirming the strong connections between the Jews of Ẓefat and the well-established Jewish communities of Italy. The latter were among the most important in the Jewish world, with Kabbalists greatly influenced by the writings of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria and compiled by Rabbi Ḥayyim Vital. Epitaph No. 15 of 'Binyamin Italiano' relates to an Italian Jew, buried in Ẓefat, who was possibly a member of Safad's Italian Jewish community. The epitaph of Rabbi Avraham Trabot (No. 3) indicates a connection with the well-known Italian rabbinical Trabot Family of Ashkenazi descent, originally from eastern France. Also Rabbi Yosef MiTrani (No. 5), and his well-known father, Rabbi Moshe MiTrani (the 'Mabit'), are descendants of the thirteenth-century Italian Rabbi Yeshayahu Di Trani. Further, the epitaphs attest to the Spanish ancestry of the famous Rabbi Ḥayyim Vital, whose father, and possibly he himself (Davidson 2009, II:34), immigrated to Ẓefat from Calabria in southern Italy. The rabbi's sister, 'Donya Reyna' (wife of Gedalia Halevi; No.10d), most probably indicates the original Spanish provenance of the family, unknown until the discovery of her epitaph.

Possible representatives of the Magreb (Morocco?) are Rabbi Avraham Ibn Shushan and his anonymous widow (No. 7a–b). Members of this community, including several mystics,

comprised an important group in Ẓefat, already present in the city in the early sixteenth century. The synagogue originally named 'Eliyahu Hanavi' (already described as 'ancient' in 1522; Yaari 1976:138), and later renamed 'Ari Sefaradi' sometime after the death of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria in 1572, belonged to this community. The well-known Pinto family, although mainly associated with the Moroccan Jewish community during the last century or so, was originally of Spanish descent. Rabbi Yitzchak Pinto (No. 14) belongs to this earlier chapter in the genealogical history of the family. This family is found from Spain to North Africa, Syria, and apparently, Eretz Israel (e.g., Rabbi Yoshiyahu Pinto of Damascus, and others of the family known from Ẓefat from the seventeenth century onward; Bernstein 2007:443–444).

Some other communities are also represented in the Ẓefat cemetery. At least two of the rabbis appearing in epitaphs, Moshe Hadayan (No. 1) and his son, Yeshua (see Stepansky 2018:6–7), are mentioned in early sixteenth-century sources as important figures of the Jewish Musta'rib Arabic-speaking community of the city (Arad 2013:98, 308–310). Avraham Sorujon (No. 4), if in fact from a Romaniote (i.e., non-Sefaradi) family resettled in Istanbul in the mid-fifteenth century (see above), may have been a member of the Greek ('Grigos') Romaniote synagogue in Ẓefat, mentioned in sixteenth-century sources (Hacker 2001). Several members of the Ashkenazi community of Ẓefat are mentioned in various sources (David 2016), most prominent of which is Rabbi Yitzchak Luria Ashkenazi (although he was in Ẓefat for only two years, 1570–1572, and only half Ashkenazi from his father's side). A tombstone of 'Raichele Ashkenazit', possibly the wife of Yehuda Eberlin, head of the Ashkenazi community of sixteenth-century Ẓefat (see Stepansky 2018:22–23), may represent a member of this community.

Another small group represented in the cemetery of Ẓefat are several physicians, the epitaphs of two of which are included in this study: Yehoshua Ibn Nun (No. 8) and Avraham Ibn Ezra (No. 9). The two epitaphs provide the first material evidence of physicians living in the city in the early Ottoman period, likely practicing medicine. In the Jewish cemetery of Salonica more than 100 doctors, who passed away between 1504 and 1799 CE (Emanuel 1963:20), are found; some are described as 'profound' (הרופא המובהק), most probably referring to their credentials as certified physicians (e.g., Emanuel 1963:31, No. 15 and 40–41, No. 40), as is the case with such epitaphs at Ẓefat. In the Jewish cemetery of Istanbul too, there are many physicians, some of which were also prominent figures in the courts of the Sultans (Ben-Naeh 2006:251, 263).

Several inscriptions in the Ẓefat cemetery point to connections between the city's Jewish community and important centers of the Jewish diaspora, such as Istanbul and especially Salonica. Rabbi Yosef MiTrani (No. 5) was brought to Ẓefat for burial from Istanbul posthumously, and Avraham Sorujon (No. 4) may have been a descendant of a Jewish family from Istanbul. A non-systematic comparison between Ẓefat's tombstones and the hundreds of tombstones recorded by Rozen (1994; 2016) in the Hasköy Cemetery in Istanbul from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (the earliest dated from 1581) reveals similarities in the formulations of the epitaphs, although those of Istanbul are usually more elaborate. Salonica was the largest and most diverse center of Jewish life within the Ottoman Empire

during the sixteenth century, including a large cohort of the descendants of deportees from the Iberian expulsions (Hacker 1978; Rivlin 1998:194–213; Mazower 2004:46–63). Among the inscriptions described in this paper, several seem to refer to personalities connected to families in Salonica. An inscription from Ẓefat mentions 'Binyamin of Salonica' (see Stepansky 2018:20).[8] Such inscriptions also include those of Lady Preciosa (No. 10a), Elchanan Elkalai (No. 11), Yehuda Na'amias and Yitzchak Ibn Naḥmias (Nos. 12a–b) and Aharon and Rachel De Botton (Nos. 13a–b).[9]

When compared to the cemeteries of Salonica and Istanbul, that of Ẓefat is less extravagant, and the epitaphs are shorter and more concise. It is quite possible that some of the more elaborate tombstones in Ẓefat, e.g., those of Preciosa (No. 10a) and the Benveniste family (see Stepansky 2018:7–9), belonged to affluent individuals who were brought to the city for burial posthumously, or came to it in their last years to be buried in the Holy Land. These were also common practices in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries also in other important Jewish centers in Palestine (Ben-Naeh 1999:86–93), incurring very high expenses. As early as the mid-fifteenth century, Ẓefat was described by Yitschak Ibn Alpera of Malaga as the site where all rabbis choose to be buried (Yaari 1976:110), although this may have been an exaggeration. However, none of the inscriptions from Ẓefat specify that the remains of the deceased were brought for reburial from abroad, and only in the case of Yosef MiTrani (No. 5a) do we know from a historical source that his remains were brought from Istanbul. Still, it is the view of this author that the Ẓefat cemetery was probably a preferred burial destination for well-to-do Jewish personalities from abroad. It is possible that certain phrases used in some of the inscriptions, such as 'interned' (נגנז; Nos. 4, 13a, 15), may allude to the reburial of bones.

Only a small part of the corpus of Jewish burial epitaphs from Ẓefat was presented here, offering a glimpse into the life and makeup of the city's vibrant and diversified Jewish community in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. It is hoped that the study of these epitaphs, as well as additional, recently uncovered ones, will be expanded in the future to include a more comprehensive epigraphic examination of the inscriptions and their comparison with those from cemeteries of other important contemporary Jewish centers, such as Salonica, Istanbul and Cairo.

---

[8] Among the 1850 tombstones recorded in the Jewish cemetery of Salonica, the name of the city itself is rarely mentioned, and in the few cases in which it is, e.g., on the tombstone of Binyamin Philosoph from 1571, it is written [עא]' שלוניקי (Emanuel 1963:145, No. 331), while in Ẓefat the spelling is שאלוניקי (Stepansky 2018:20), as it widely appears in books printed in Salonica.

[9] Also buried at Ẓefat are members of the prominent Benveniste Family, well-known in Salonica and Istanbul (Stepansky 2018:7–9).

REFERENCES

Afnezer D. 2019. *Matzevot Mesaprot: Discoveries and Exposures of The Rabbis of Safed in the Fifteenth–Sixteenth Centuries*. Ẓefat (Hebrew; English summary).

Arad D. 2013. *The Musta'rib Jews in Syria, Palestine and Egypt 1330–1700*. Ph.D. diss. The Hebrew University. Jerusalem (Hebrew; English summary, pp. i–ix).

Avivi Y. 2008a. *Kabbala Luriana* I: *The Lurianic Writings until 1620*. Jerusalem (Hebrew; English summary, pp. V–VIII).

Avivi Y. 2008b. *Kabbala Luriana* II: *The Lurianic Writings after 1620*. Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Barbé H. and Cinamon G. 2009. Ẓefat. *HA–ESI* 121 (February 15). http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=1039&mag_id=115 (accessed 29 August, 2022).

Baumgarten E. 2018. Reflections of Everyday Jewish Life: Evidence from Medieval Cemeteries. In *Les vivants et les morts dans les sociétés médiévales (Actes du XLVIIIe congrès de la SHMESP, Jérusalem, 4–7 Mai 2017)*. Paris. Pp. 95–104.

Ben-Naeh Y. 1998. The Rabbinic Family de Boton in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: Family Tree. In M. Ben-Sasson, W.Z. Harvey, Y. Ben-Naeh and Z. Zohar eds. *Studies in a Rabbinic Family: The de Botons*. Jerusalem. Pp. X–XI.

Ben-Naeh Y. 1999. The Jewish Community of Istanbul and Eretz Israel Jewry in the Seventeenth Century. *Cathedra* 92:65–106 (Hebrew; English summary, p. 212).

Ben-Naeh Y. 2006. *Jews in the Realm of the Sultans: Ottoman Jewish Society in the Seventeenth Century*. Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Ben-Naeh Y. 2010a. Boton, Abraham de. In N.A. Stillman ed. *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*. https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/boton-abraham-de-SIM_000198 (accessed 8 August, 2022).

Ben-Naeh Y. 2010b. Ṭrani (Miṭrani), Joseph ben Moses di, the Elder. In N.A. Stillman ed. *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World*. http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopedia-of-jews-in-the-islamic-world/trani-mitrani-joseph-ben-moses-di-the-elder-SIM_0021530 (accessed 8 August, 2022).

Ben-Sasson M., Harvey W.Z., Ben-Naeh Y. and Zohar Z. eds. 1998. *Studies in a Rabbinic Family: The de Botons*. Jerusalem.

Bentov H. 1978. Reshimot Historiot Shel Rabbeinu Yosef MiTrani. In Z.Y. Leitner ed. *Tshuvot vi'Piskei Maharit Ha-Hadashim L'Rabbeinu Yosef MiTrani*. Jerusalem, Pp. 1–28 (Hebrew).

Bernstein A. 2007. *Mirror Images Integrated: The Living Society versus the Cemetery in the Nineteenth Century Community of Safed.* Ph.D diss. University of Haifa. Haifa (Hebrew; English summary, pp. I–XII).

Chajes J.H. 2002. In a Different Voice: The Non-Kabbalistic Women's Mysticism of Early Modern Jewish Culture. *Zion* 67:139–162 (Hebrew; English summary, pp. XIII–XIV).

Cohen A. and Lewis B. 1978. *Population and Revenue in the Towns of Palestine in the Sixteenth Century*. Princeton.

Dalali-Amos E. 2013. Ẓefat, Tarpaṭ Street. *HA–ESI* 125 (December 4). http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=5394&mag_id=120 (accessed 21 June, 2022).

Damati E. 2004. Khan al-Pasha (The Khan of the Jews) in Light of the 1996 Salvage Excavation in Ẓefat. *'Atiqot* 46:113–133 (Hebrew; English summary, pp. 135*–137*).

David A. 1991. A Legal Decision from the Court of R. Moses Cordovero in Safed. *Zion* 56:441–446 (Hebrew; English summary, p. XXXII).

David A. 1993. *Immigration and Settlement in the Land of Israel in the 16th Century.* Jerusalem (Hebrew).

David A. ed. 1999. *In Zion and Jerusalem: The Itinerary of Rabbi Moshe Basola (1521–1523)*. Jerusalem.

David A. 2013a. From Sixteenth-Century Provence to Eretz-Israel. In A. David ed. *Jewish Settlement in Eretz Ha-Zvi: Texts and Studies on Late Medieval Jewish History in the Land of Israel.* Jerusalem. Pp. 17*–25*.

David A. 2013b. The Spanish Exiles in the Holy Land. In A. David ed. *Jewish Settlement in Eretz Ha-Zvi: Texts and Studies on Late Medieval Jewish History in the Land of Israel.* Jerusalem. Pp. 26*–57*.

David A. 2016. Between Ashkenaz and the East in the Sixteenth Century. In A. David ed. *A Jewish Mediterranean Society in the Late Middle Ages as Reflected from Cairo Genizah Documents.* New York–Jerusalem. Pp. 49–68 (Hebrew).

Davidson E. 2009. *Safed's Sages in 1540–1615*: *Their Religious and Social Status* (2 vols.). Ph.D. diss. The Hebrew University. Jerusalem (Hebrew; English summary, pp. I–VI).

Emanuel I.S. 1963. *Precious Stones of the Jews of Salonica* I *(1502–1680 CE).* Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Emanuel I.S. 1968. *Precious Stones of the Jews of Salonica* II *(1681–1938 CE).* Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Green Y. 1976. The Trabot Family [Italy, 15th–19th centuries]. *Sinai* 79:147–164 (Hebrew).

Hacker Y. 1978. *The Jewish Community of Salonica from the Fifteenth to the Sixteenth Century: A Chapter in the Social History of the Jews in the Ottoman Empire and Their Relations with the Authorities.* Ph.D. diss. The Hebrew University. Jerusalem (Hebrew; English summary).

Hacker Y. 1983. Rabbi Yosef Hayun and the Generation of the Expulsion from Portugal. *Zion* 48:273–280 (Hebrew).

Hacker Y. 2001. 'Greeks'—Upon Us, Safed in the Sixteenth Century: A Chapter on the History of the Support to the Jewish community of Eretz Israel and Its Independent Organization. *Shalem* 7:133–150 (Hebrew).

Hayyim Vital: Sha'ar Ha-Gilgul (S. Vital ed.). Jerusalem 2017 (Hebrew).

Hillel M. 2022. *Hazon Tavrimon: Forged Documents Produced by the Toledano Brothers of Tiberias.* Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Hillman A. 2012. Zefat, The Sepharadic Synagogue of Rabbi Yizhak Lurieh. *HA–ESI* 124 (August 7). http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/Report_Detail_Eng.aspx?id=2017&mag_id=119 (accessed 29 August, 2022).

Lamdan R. 1996. *A Separate People: Jewish Women in Palestine, Syria and Egypt in the Sixteenth Century.* Tel Aviv (Hebrew; English summary, pp. VII–IX).

Mazower M. 2004. *Salonica—City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430–1950.* London.

Melammed U. and Melammed-Levine R. 2000. Rabbi Asnat: A Female Yeshiva Director in Kurdistan. *Pe'amim* 82:163–178 (Hebrew).

Moshe Cordovero: Perush Seder Avodat Yom Hakipurim. Venice 1587.

Ovadiah A. 1969. Inscriptions in the Cave of Elijah. *Qadmoniot* 7:99–101 (Hebrew).

Pachter M. 1994. *From Safed's Hidden Treasures: Studies and Texts concerning the History of Safed and Its Sages in the Sixteenth Century*. Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Paz Y. 2006. Holy Inhabitants of a Holy City: How Safed Became One of the Four Holy Cities of Eretz Israel in the 16th Century. In M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz eds. *A Holy People: Jewish and Christian Perspectives on Religious Communal Identity*. Leiden–Boston. Pp. 237–260.

Reiner E. 1999. Jews in the Crusader Kingdom. In S. Rozenberg ed. *Knights of the Holy Land: The Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Israel Museum Catalogue 422). Jerusalem. Pp. 49–59.

Reiner E. ed. Digital Edition. *Sefer Hayishuv 1099–1517, Mador Retzef Hayishuv* III: *From the Crusader Conquest to the Ottoman Conquest* (Hebrew). https://www.ybz.org.il/?CategoryID=684 (accessed 25 August, 2022).

Rivlin B. ed. 1998. *Pinkas Ha-Kehillot: Yavan*. Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Rozen M. 1994. *Hasköy Cemetery Typology of Stones*. Tel Aviv–Philadelphia.

Rozen M. 2016. A World Beyond: Jewish Cemeteries in Turkey, 1583–1990. Tel Aviv. https://jewishturkstones.tau.ac.il/#/ (accessed 21 June, 2022).

Schur N. 1983. *History of Safed*. Tel Aviv (Hebrew).

Shivtiel I., Frumkin A. and Bar-Matthews M. 2020. Underground and Subaerial Water Systems of Zefat during the Intermediate Islamic Period. *Cathedra* 175:35–56 (Hebrew; English summary, p. 165).

Shlomo Elkabetz: Manot Halevi. Venice 1585.

Stepansky Y. 1999. The 'Yeshivat Geon Yaakov' Inscription from Gush Halav: An Archaeological Find That Sheds Light on Medieval Galilean Jewry. *Cathedra* 93:67–80 (Hebrew; English summary, p. 180).

Stepansky Y. 2008. Tiberias. *NEAEHL* 5. Pp. 2048–2053.

Stepansky Y. 2011. *The Field of Holy Apples: The Ari Ashkenazi Synagogue in Safed.* Ẓefat.

Stepansky Y. 2016. *Map of Tiberias (39)* (Archaeological Survey of Israel). Jerusalem.

Stepansky Y. 2018. Zefat, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century CE Epitaphs from the Jewish Cemetery (February 13). https://genealogy.org.il/2018/02/03/zefat-16th-17th-century-ce-epitaphs-jewish-cemetery-yosef-stepansky/ (accessed 21 June, 2022).

Stepansky Y. 2020. Epitaphs from the 16th and 17th Centuries in the Ancient Jewish Cemetery of Zefat: An Archaeological Site with a Genealogical Contribution? *Proceedings of the Symposium on Genealogy and the Sciences, Rehovot, December 17–18, 2018*. New Haven. Pp. 123–126.

Stepansky Y. In preparation. *The Safed Ancient Cemetery Inscriptions: A Catalogue*.

Stepansky Y. and Ben-Tovim E. 2012. Zefat, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century C.E. Epitaphs from the Jewish Cemetery. https://www.antiquities.org.il/article_eng.aspx?sec_id=17&sub_subj_id=650 (accessed 21 June, 2022).

Stepansky Y. and Ben-Tovim E. 2016. The Ancient Jewish Cemetery in Zefat: Epitaphs from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries CE. In T. Grossmark, H. Goren, M. Abbasi, Y. Seltenreich and Z. Greenberg eds. *Tel Hai Galilee Studies* II. *Zichron Ya'akov*. Pp. 221–248 (Hebrew; English summary, pp. XIX–XX).

Toledano Y.M. 1960. *Otzar Genuzim*. Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Vaya I. 2021. *The Mabit and His Generation.* Jerusalem (Hebrew).

Yaari A. 1971. *Letters from the Land of Israel*. Ramat Gan (Hebrew).

Yaari A. 1976. *The Voyages to Eretz Israel of Jewish Travelers from the Middle Ages to the Beginning of the Era of the Return to Zion*. Ramat Gan (Hebrew).

Yizrael R. 2004a. The Ancient Jewish Cemetery in Safed. In R. Yizrael. *Milestones in the Study of the Land.* Jerusalem. Pp. 297–313 (Hebrew).

Yizrael R. 2004b. The Ancient Sephardic Cemetery on the Mount of Olives. In R. Yizrael. *Milestones in the Study of the Land*. Jerusalem. Pp. 161–201 (Hebrew).