

In loving memory of my mother, Batsheva Friedman Stepansky, whose forefathers arrived in Zefat and Tiberias 200 years ago and are buried in their ancient cemeteries

Zefat, Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century C.E. Epitaphs from the Jewish Cemetery

Yosef Stepansky, Zefat

Introduction

In recent years a large concentration of gravestones bearing Hebrew epitaphs from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries C.E. has been exposed in the ancient cemetery of Zefat, among them the gravestones of prominent Rabbis, Torah Academy and community leaders, well-known women (such as Rachel Ha-Ashkenazit Iberlin and Donia Reyna, the sister of Rabbi Chaim Vital), the disciples of Rabbi Isaac Luria ("Ha-ARI"), as well as several until-now unknown personalities. Some of the gravestones are of famous Rabbis and personalities whose bones were brought to Israel from abroad, several of which belong to the well-known Nassi and Benvenisti families, possibly relatives of Dona Gracia. To date (2018) some fifty gravestones (some only partially preserved) have been exposed, and that is so far the largest group of ancient Hebrew epitaphs that may be observed insitu at one site in Israel. Stylistically similar epitaphs can be found in the Jewish cemeteries in Istanbul (Kushta) and Salonika, the two largest and most important Jewish centers in the Ottoman Empire during that time.



Fig. 1: The ancient cemetery in Zefat, general view, facing north; the bottom of the picture is the southern, most ancient part of the cemetery.

Since 2010 the southernmost part of the old cemetery of Zefat (**Fig. 1**; map ref. 24615/76365), seemingly the most ancient part of the cemetery, has been scrutinized in order to document and organize the information inscribed on the oldest of the gravestones found in this area, in wake of and parallel with cleaning-up and preservation work conducted in this area under the auspices of the Zefat religious council. The documentation (readings of the epitaphs, photography and text-writing) is voluntarily being done by archaeologist Y. Stepansky and former cemetery caretaker E. Ben-Tovim, within the framework of the Association for the Preservation and Heritage of Zefat and on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, with the constant assistance of Prof. Y. Ben-Naeh and Dr. E. Davidson (epigraphical and historical consultation and editing). Prof. Yitschak Kerem, Prof. E. Reiner, the late Dr. D. Amit, Z. Sehayek, Z. Erlich and other prominent historians and archaeologists were also occasionally consulted; Dr. E. Engel (paleographic analysis of the 'Rabanit Gracia' epitaph), Rabbi M. Stepansky (translation of the epitaph of Meir Benveniste), Dr. Y. Shvitiel (Zefat Academic College), Dr. M. Souroujon and Y. Saness (descendents of Zefat deceased members of the cemetery 'community'), and Israel Antiquities Authority archaeologists D. Avshalom-Gorni, A. Hillman and H. Bron (antiquities inspection) have also all been very helpful in promoting this project. The IAA Conservation Department, Education Department and the Eastern Galilee and Golan District, together with the Municipality of Zefat, *Livnot U-Lehebanot* Institute, Ministry of Housing and residents of Zefat - are all partners in the project for the preservation of Zefat.

Preface: The Ancient Jewish Cemetery of Zefat - History of Research

The ancient cemetery in Zefat is the most complete and best preserved ancient Jewish cemetery in Israel and among the largest and best preserved in the entire Jewish world. Although smaller than the Mt. of Olives Jewish cemetery, it was not as badly damaged as the latter and thus, 16th and 17th century tombstone epitaphs that are visibly-lacking at the Mt. of Olive site (Yizrael 2004a) can still be discerned in Zefat. Despite the damage caused by nature during the past few hundreds of years, coupled with the continuous interments that have impaired the underlying burial layers, thousands of other 18th-20th century gravestones scattered throughout the cemetery on both of its hills, the northern and southern ones, are still visible and many of their epitaphs can still be made out. The ancient cemetery was closed to further burial in 1962

and since then all burials are done in the new cemetery located at the bottom of the slope to the west of the ancient cemetery.

In the early 1960's Yissachar Dov Fetman, assisted by Herschel "Shamis" Hertz, recorded approximately three thousand gravestones with epitaphs, in twenty-four burial plots throughout the cemetery. During those years and until the 1990's some other people, among them Zeev Vilnay and Yaakov Shalom Gefner of Jerusalem, compiled written-guides describing the most prominent graves in the cemetery, while Mordechai Shababo, the "guardian of the graves" and a longtime resident of Zefat, kindly assisted visitors in locating certain gravesites and helped in the documentation that was implemented now and then. In 1990 Amnon Lahav of Kibbutz Megiddo wrote a seminar paper under the guidance of U. of Haifa Prof. Yaakov Barnai (unpublished) on the ancient cemetery of Zefat; Lahav estimated the total area of the cemetery as 86 dunams (noting that the density of burials varies greatly in different areas across the cemetery, from 270 to 1000 burials per dunam) with a rough assessment of forty thousand graves in the entire area. In the early 1990's Rami Yizrael carried out a comprehensive survey in the cemetery on behalf of the religious council and documented some two thousand four hundred gravestones bearing epitaphs, mostly dating to the 18th-20th centuries, comprising about half of all the epitaphs that Yizrael estimated could be seen above the surface in the entire ancient cemetery. He estimated the area of the entire cemetery as 110 dunams (550 m' long north-south, 200-300 m' wide east-west), while surmising that during the 16th century alone the number of burials reached 30,000 (!); altogether, Yizrael assumed that 'tens of thousands' burials, with epitaphs and non-bearing-epitaphs, comprise the entire cemetery that was used consecutively for centuries (Yizrael 2002, 2004b). The survey was halted due to a lack of funds and its results have not yet been published. The historian Haim Sidor voluntarily has continued the survey since then (a more than twenty-five year on-going project) and has compiled a computerized excel-database of the gravestones from the ancient cemetery in Zefat, a project first supported by the Zefat Foundation but today (2018) is continuing very slowly without any financial backing. The database includes, so far (2018), more than thirty five hundred gravestones with epitaphs, more than one thousand of them photographed, and more than seven-hundred of them relatively-positioned on a map-sketch of the cemetery (a more detailed GIS mapping system of the tombstones has yet to be done); Sidor estimates there are more than nine thousand gravestones with epitaphs altogether throughout the cemetery. In another parallel project, Sidor has compiled

a separate data-base that includes approximately ten thousand first and family names from Zefat in the 19th-20th centuries, gleaned from various Jewish and British-Mandate historical sources (existing documents, census reports, voter records, etc.); some two thousand additional names were gathered from the ancient cemetery itself (and not including some five thousand more names written on the tombstones in the new cemetery opened in 1962). This data-base was put at the disposal of the Israel Genealogical Society (IGS), and the names were entered into their EIRI index, supplying new information for their large data base.

Since 1990, parallel to these documentation projects, the government authorities by means of the cemetery endowment ('Hekdesh') and the Zefat religious council, together with the "Committee for Saving the Graves of our Ancestors – Our Forefathers", have been engaged in cleaning, arranging and rehabilitating parts of the cemetery that have been neglected for generations. Within this framework suspended iron bridges were built that lead visitors to the burial plots of venerated persons, first and foremost to the gravesite of Rabbi Yitschak Luria and the other kabbalists buried near him. Hundreds of ancient and old gravestones were re-erected in place and new gravestones were built of fieldstones and concrete in the open areas where the original burial stones are no longer visible above the surface. As part of the work in recent years the ancient burial area in the southernmost part of the cemetery was also partly rehabilitated, on both sides of the channel descending west from the Ha-ARI *miqwe*. Some burial caves with *loculi* and *arcosolia* hewn in the chalkish-rock slope on the southern side of the channel have also been rehabilitated. Based on their style, these caves - including the one popularly called "The Cave of Hannah and Her Seven Daughters" - may be dated originally to the Roman and Byzantine periods. An impressive burial structure with a prominent dome identified in local tradition as the tomb of the prophet Hosea Ben Beeri (although since the second half of the sixteenth century it has been also identified, according to the tradition of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria as brought down by his student Rabbi Haim Vital, with the tomb of Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Hanania) is situated on the northern bed of the channel. In a letter by a student of Rabbi Obadiah of Bartenura from the late fifteenth century CE the tomb of the prophet Hosea Ben Beeri is already mentioned here, although the structure itself is mentioned only slightly later from the 16th century. In this area of the cemetery, on both sides of the channel but particularly along the slope north of Hosea Ben Beeri and up towards the tomb of Rabbi Yosef Karo, quite a few gravestones are exposed that date to the sixteenth century-seventeenth centuries CE (**Fig. 2**).



Fig. 2: The slope above (north of) the blue-domed Hosea ben Beer mausoleum, facing west.

Many of the gravestones were discerned by David Afnezer, the supervisor in charge of the rehabilitation work on behalf of the Religious Council, and by Eliyahu Ben-Tovim, a former caretaker in the cemetery, while Ben-Tovim began researching the inscriptions and the history of the people mentioned in them. Thanks to their vigilance, many of the ancient gravestones bearing epitaphs were not buried beneath the new gravestones that were erected there; rather they were left in place or re-erected on the spots where they were exposed. Nevertheless, their exposure to the weather conditions of Zefat endangers their future preservation and it is therefore important to fully document the epitaphs as soon as possible – while finding a way for preserving them from the damaging effect of both rain and extreme sun exposure. All of the gravestones were exposed or have been uncovered in recent years within the framework of the rehabilitation work that was done on the surface of the cemetery, and none were revealed in an archaeological

excavation. It is hoped that continuous publication of the epitaphs will encourage the continued research of the cemetery¹, which holds a treasure trove of information about Zefat in its golden era (16th-17th centuries), a time when it was the major Jewish center in Israel and one of the most important in the entire world, side by side with hundreds of more inscriptions that will certainly throw additional light on Zefat's history during the latter centuries when it still was one of the important Jewish centers in Ottoman Palestine.

Finally, and not least important, besides the genealogical information gleaned from the most ancient epitaphs from the 16th-17th centuries (as will be shown below), the more than 10,000 personal names collected by H. Sidor from the cemetery and from other historical documents and sources provide a most-important genealogical data-base that can be used by Jewish families world-wide in finding their family-roots, whether they be Sefaradic, Ashkenazi, Hassidic, Perushi, Western or Eastern lineages. This alone is good reason for continuing the research and recording of the ancient cemetery of Zefat.

The Epitaphs

This list comprises a preliminary publication of 26 epitaphs, the vast majority of which are engraved or chiseled in limestone, except for one that is engraved on a marble tombstone (see below, No. 4). The list is arranged in chronological order, from the earliest to the latest, based on the date mentioned in the epitaph or a date that is based on a historical source. The last gravestones in the list are not dated.

In this preliminary publication, the inscriptions are rendered in their original Hebrew writing, accompanied by photographs of the gravestones; a proposed English translation was added to each. A short evaluation and history (if known) of the individuals mentioned in the inscriptions follow in English. It should be noted that dots or inverted commas were usually engraved above the words written as initials; in our English transcripts we show these as apostrophes. A full Hebrew-reading including the initialed-words in the inscription is provided in epitaph no. 1; others are rendered in their original script only, or with added full-words or English-calendar dates in rounded brackets, while square brackets show reconstructed letters or words that are not specifically seen in the inscription itself.

¹ For preliminary reports published until now, see: Stepansky 2011b: 50; Stepansky and Ben-Tovim 2012; Stepansky and Ben-Tovim 2016; Stepansky 2017.

1. Rabbi Moshe Hadayan (Figs. 3, 4)



Fig. 3: The restored gravestone of Rabbi Moshe Hadayan, looking north



Fig. 4: The epitaph of Rabbi Moshe Hadayan.

Location: Slightly north of the Hosea Ben Beerī mausoleum.

Hebrew epitaph:

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 הלויים / נפטר [ב]שנת ה' רפ"ה'.

קריאה מלאה: 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 זכרוננו לברכה נשיאי הלויים נפטר שנת ה'רפ"ה (1525 לסה"נ).

Preliminary english translation: *This tombstone belongs to the perfect sage, the devout and the humble (?) [man], our honorable master the Rabbi Moshe Hadayan may the memory of this righteous and holy man be blessed, the son of the perfect sage, our honorable master, the Rabbi Yitzhak Hadayan, blessed is his memory, leader of the Levites, deceased in the year 5285 (=1525 c.e.).*

This is the oldest clearly- dated epitaph discovered so far in the cemetery at Zefat. Rabbi Moshe Hadayan is mentioned in a few historical sources. He was one of the heads of the community in Zefat in the early sixteenth century, head of the 'Yeshivat Hatora' academy (together with Rabbi Yosef Iscandrani?) and probably held the position of 'Sheikh el-Yahud' – in charge of the

community tax-collection and representative vis-à-vis government officials. But he was a controversial figure: Musta'arabi scholars complained that he surrounded himself with unsuitable students, and Rabbi Yishmael, a scholar from Damascus, protested about his hostile attitude towards him when he wanted to settle in Zefat (Davidson 2009, I: 72; Arad 2013: 308-310).

2. Rabbi Avraham ben Rabbi Azriel Tarabut (Fig. 5)



Fig. 5: The epitaph of Rabbi Eliezer Tarabut

Location: Slightly northwest of the Hosea Ben Beerī mausoleum.

Hebrew epitaph:

אברהם [רפאל] / ראש ישיבה / פה בצפת אשר / בגליל עליון בן / הגאון כ'מ'ו'ה'ר'ר' (= כבוד מורנו הרב
רבי) / עזריאל טרבוט / ז'ל' נתבקש / בישיבה של / מעלה יום ה' / יא טבת ה' ר'פ'ט' / ת'נ'צ'ב'ה' (= תהיה
נשמתו צרורה בצרור החיים)

Preliminary english translation: Avraham [Raphael] Rosh Yeshiva, here in Zefat in the Upper Galilee, the son of the Gaon our honorable master the Rabbi Azriel Tarabut of blessed memory who was called to a meeting in heaven [on] the 5th day 11 Tevet 5229 (=1529 c.e.) may his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life.

Rabbi Avraham Raphael ben Azriel Tarabut, who died in 1529, was of Italian ancestry and head of an Italian family of rabbis that appears in sources postdating his death in the city of Ancona in the province of La Marche, central Italy (Green 1976). His title of "Rosh Yeshiva" (head of a Torah Academy) and the actual existence of the yeshiva in early 16th century Zefat were unknown until now. It seems he was one of the most important rabbis of Zefat between the generation of Rabbi Peretz Colon (Colobo / Colombo, late fifteenth century) and Rabbi Yosef Saragosi (early sixteenth century), and the generation led by Rabbi Ya'akov Beirav (fourth decade of the sixteenth century). It is almost certain that Rabbi Avraham personally knew the Italian well-known traveler Rabbi Moshe Basula, who was in Zefat during the years 1521-1523 leaving an important account of the city and of his travels, returning afterwards to Italy where he also was a Rosh Yeshiva in Ancona.

3. Rabbi Avraham Sorogon (Figs. 6, 7)

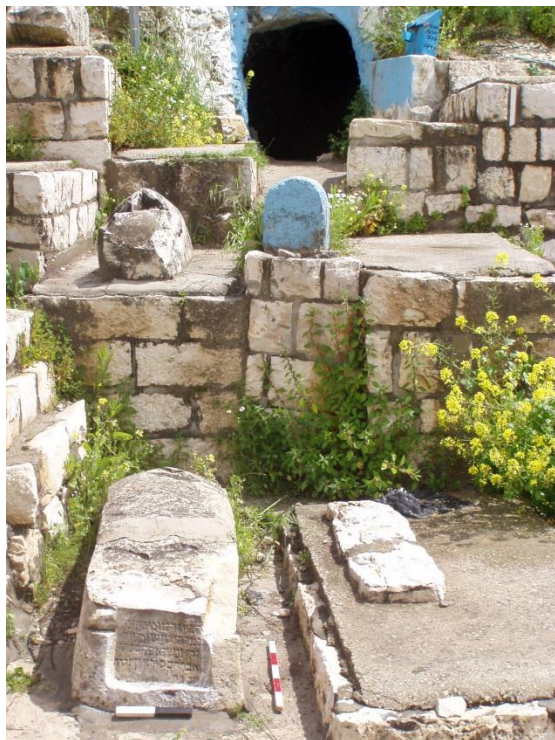


Fig. 6: The gravestone of Rabbi Avraham Sorogon, looking south.



Fig. 7: The epitaph of Rabbi Avraham Sorogon.

Location: Slightly south of the Hosea Ben Beeri mausoleum, in front of the so-called “Cave of Hannah and Her Seven Daughters”.

Hebrew epitaph:

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

Preliminary english translation: *This tombstone and who is interred within, the aged and excellent, elderly and esteemed, our honorable Rabbi Avraham Sorogon, may his memory live in the world to come, [deceased] on Friday the fifth... 5305 (=1545 c.e).*

Rabbi Avraham Sorogon (or Sorojon, Surujon, Souroujon), who died in 1545, was possibly from a Romaniote family, from those exiled to Istanbul by Sultan Mahmud II in the fifteenth century (Ben-Naeh 2007: 65-66) . One of his descendants might have been Aharon Tsurujon, the author of *Beit Aharon*, published in Kushta (Istanbul) in 1648. However, in the opinion of Dr. Moshe Souroujon², Avraham Sorogon was more likely part of the Spanish-jewish Souroujon family, whose roots are in the Curujon area near Madrid.

4. Rabbi Yeshua Halevi (Fig. 8)



The epitaph of Rabbi Yeshua Halevi, son of Rabbi Moshe Hadayan

Location: Slightly north of the Hosea Ben Beeri mausoleum, next to his father Rabbi Moshe Hadayan. The gravestone is made of marble rather than limestone and the letters of the epitaph are in relief. The epitaph is extremely well-preserved.

Hebrew epitaph:

² ד"ר משה סורו'ון, personal communication, 2012 (souroujon@clalit.org.il).

זה / הציון הלז היקר מזהב / ומפז של החכם השלם הרב / הדיין המוסמך המאושר / בכל עניניו הוא מאור
 הגולה / מרינו ורבינו כ'ה'ר' (= כבוד הרב רבי) ישועה / הלוי ז'ל'ה'ה' [=זכרוננו לחיי העולם הבא] בן החכם /
 השלם כמוהר (= כבוד מורנו הרב רבי) משה הדיין / הישיש החסיד / ת'נ'צ'ב'ה' [=תהיה נשמתו צרורה
 בצרור החיים] / שנת ה' ש'ו' ליצירה.

Preliminary english translation: *This tombstone which is worth more than gold belongs to the fully wise sage, The ordained and certified Dayan, The luminary of the exile in all of his matters, our Master and Rabbi, the honorable Rabbi Yeshua Halevi may his memory live in the world to come, the son of the perfect sage, our honorable teacher Rabbi Moshe Hadayan, the aged and devout, may his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life, [deceased] in the year 5306 (=1546 c.e.) since creation.*

Rabbi Yeshua Halevi, who passed away in 1546, was the *Dayan* (religious judge and leader) of the Musta'arabi community in Zefat at the time of Rabbi Ya'akov Beirav and in contact with Rabbi Yisaschar ibn Susan (Davidson 2009, I:70, 75, 81; II:13; Arad 2013:98). Rabbi Yeshua was most probably one of the sages of Rabbi Ya'akov Beirav's yeshiva and it is possible that the title "The ordained and certified Dayan" shows he was among the rabbis who were directly ordained by Rabbi Ya'akov Beirav or under his authority when the ordination was renewed in Zefat in the 1530s. The title "Luminary of the Exile" may express his influence even outside the strict confines of Eretz Yisrael, or may express the local community's deep admiration for him.

5. Meir Ben-Veniste (or Ben Benveniste) (Fig. 9)



Fig. 9: The epitaph of Meir Ben-Veniste

Location: Southeast of the gravestone of Rabbi Yosef Karo, on the roof of the Alsheich Cave.

The epitaph is on a large splendid stone plaque (0.45×1.10 m) that was exposed in the nineteenth century, was covered and revealed again in the 1960's and was covered and exposed once again in the 1990's.

Hebrew epitaph:

לפני עליון כיום יאיר / אם גוף נטמן תוך גוש עפר / במרום שחק נפשו ישאיר / יזהיר זוהר הרקיע / תוך גן עדן
מזהיר מאיר / ראש יחס שבטי ישראל / בן באנשת ושמו מאיר / רודף צדקה וחסד הגביר אדון מאיר בן
באנבנשת ז'ל'ה'ה' [= זכרונו לחיי העולם הבא] / יום ו' ח' לאלול שנת ה' ש'י'ג'.

Preliminary english translation : *Before the One Above, as the day is alight, whilst the body is interred in the Earth, in the highest Heavens the Soul remains, the firmament shines bright, within Gan Eden illuminates Meir, a leader of Israel of distinguished lineage, Ben-Veniste whose name is Meir, pursuer of righteousness and kindness, the lord-master Meir ben Ben-Veniste may his memory live in the world to come. Friday 8 Elul [deceased] in the year 5313 (=1553 c.e.).*

The epitaph was published with a slight omission by Yizrael (2002:217).

Until recently this gravestone was thought to be the oldest epitaph in the cemetery. We now know it is among the earliest, and is the longest and most superbly-done of the ancient epitaphs of the sixteenth century. It seems that Meir Ben-Veniste (or ben Ben-Veniste), who passed away

in 1553 CE, was an affluent and respected Jew that was active in the first half of the sixteenth century in Zefat or abroad. Benveniste (Benvenisti) is the name of a well-known family that has its roots in Spain prior to the exile, whose members were prominent Doctors, Rabbis and community leaders. Davidson suggested identifying the deceased with Don Meir Benveniste who is mentioned in the responsa of Rabbi Isaac Adarbi, *Divrei Rivot*, which was printed in Salonika in 1582 (Davidson 2009, I: 174, note 1).

It should be mentioned that the name Meir Benvenisti is also that of the brother-in-law of Dona Gracia Mendes Nassi (the brother of her husband and the husband of her sister); however, it is hard to propose an identification between the two because Meir the brother-in-law died in Antwerp in the early 1540's, while the date of death on the gravestone is 1553 CE (assuming this is indeed the date of death and not the date when the deceased's bones were reburied after being brought to Israel).

6. Don Shmuel Hanassi (Fig. 10)



Fig. 10: The epitaph of Shmuel Hanassi

The epitaph is on a large splendid stone plaque (0.5 × 0.5 m) adjacent to the gravestone of Meir Ben-Veniste, to its west. No date appears in the epitaph. Behind the stone plaque, is a long gravestone (0.35 × 0.35 × 1.40 m) at the northern end of which is a small recess for an inscription, but no remains of writing could be discerned in it.

Hebrew epitaph:

ופנו לו משכן] [...] / להושיבו על כן בגן עדן נפשי / ומלאך המליץ בצדקתו יליץ / ועצמותיו יחליץ בתוך
 טירות קדשי / ואז יעלה ריח כאור צח זרח / נדיב לב וגביר דון שמואל הנשיא / הגבר הוקם על אדון שמואל
 הנשיא ז'ל'ה'ה' (= זכרונו לחיי העולם הבא).

Preliminary english translation:

[...] mishkan... prepared [forhim] to sit on a pedestal in Gan Eden my soul, the angel who jests
 justly will jest, and his bones will be strengthened (Isaiah 58:11) within my holy palaces, and
 then will an aroma arise as a pure and shining light, the open-hearted lord-master Don Shmuel
 Hanassi, 'the man who was raised on high' (2 Samuel 23:1), Adon Shmuel Hanassi, may his
 memory live in the world to come

As in the previous case, here too is a man who was probably very well respected and from a distinguished family. Although this epitaph has yet to be entirely understood and translated, Y. Ben-Naeh (personal communication) has proposed that the rare title "הגבר הוקם על" ("the man who was raised on high") is taken from 2 Samuel 23:1 which originally refers to King David ("the oracle of the man who was raised on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob"). It was also one of the appellations of Shabbetai Tzvi who lived in the seventeenth century; but this expression appears already on tombstones of personages already in the sixteenth century, such as in the cemetery in Salonika.

E. Davidson assumed the deceased is the father of Meir Ben-Veniste, who is mentioned in the response *Divrei Rivot* (Davidson E. 2009, I:174, note 150). In his opinion, the father died in 1554, a year after his son. However, the unique name "Don Shmuel Hanassi" and the magnificent style of the gravestone may corroborate the hypothesis that this is in fact the tombstone of Shmuel Nassi, a nephew of Dona Gracia Mendes and the older brother of Don Yosef Nassi (as was suggested tentatively by Y. Ben-Naeh; personal communication). Dona Gracia adopted the two brothers, Shmuel and Yosef, following the death of their parents and Shmuel married Gracia La Chica (Little Gracia), Dona Gracia's niece, the daughter of Brianda and Meir Benvenisti. Don Shmuel Nassi died in 1569, the same year that Dona Gracia passed away in Istanbul. If so, he is probably not the only member of his family whose bones were brought to Zefat for burial. The custom of bringing bones to Israel for interment in the Ottoman period, despite all of the difficulties it involved, was existent and even a fairly common practice (Ben-Naeh 1999: 86-87).

7. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (Fig. 11)



Fig. 11: The epitaph of Avraham Ibn Ezra

Location: South of the Hosea Ben Beeri mausoleum, slightly east of Avraham Sorogon (no. 3). The inscription is engraved within a shallow hollow on the long northern end of the tombstone, similar in style to other 16th century tombstones in the vicinity.

Hebrew epitaph:

הציון הלז / של הישיש / החכם הרופא / המובהק כ'ר' (=כבוד רבנו) אברהם / 'ן עזרא נ'ע' (= נשמתו עדן)

Preliminary english translation:

This tombstone belongs to the aged, the sage and profound (= certified?) doctor, our respected Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, may his soul abide in paradise

This tombstone, uncovered in 2017, was at first erroneously thought to be the gravesite of the famous 12th century commentator Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, however it is quite clear it belongs to the group of 16th century tombstones in its immediate environs – with similarities in both tombstone-style and script-composition (e.g. compare with tombstones 3 and 9). Furthermore, 'The sage Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra the physician' is specifically mentioned in Zefat in the 16th century Responsa of Rabbi Levi Ben Haviv (Responsa of the Ralbach, response no. 93), allowing us a quite firm date of mid-16th century for this tombstone. It seems that Avraham Ibn Ezra was one of a relatively large group of 'certified' ('מובהק') physicians that lived in Tsfat during its heyday years of the 16th century, as is testified by some other physicians that were buried in Zefat's cemetery.

8. Yehuda Hacoheh (not seen on site today)

A small (20 X 25 c"m) gravestone with an inscription that was seen in the past near the tomb of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, among the 16th century graves grouped together in the parcel known as "Helkat Ha-Ari". The inscription was noted and quoted (without a photograph) by R. Yizrael in his 2004 article (Yizrael 2004b: 308).

Hebrew epitaph:

ציון הלזו לנפש נכון (נכון?) / ומאד נעלה כ'ה'ר'ר' (= כבוד הרב רבי) / יהודה הכהן ז"ל נפטר / ביום ששה ועשרים / לחדש תמוז שנת ה' ש'י'י'

Preliminary english translation: *This tombstone belongs to the proper (wise?) and exalted soul of the honorable Rabbi Yehuda Hacoheh who passed away on the 26th of Tamuz in the year 5316 (= 1556 c.e.)*

Yizrael read נכון in the inscription; here, we suppose another possibility for this word: נבון, which is more commonly found in the 16th century inscriptions (as in the epitaph of Shmuel Hacoheh located also in the ARI group of tombstones; see below no. 9).

9. Shmuel Hacoheh (Fig.12)



Fig. 12: The epitaph of Shmuel Hacoheh

Location: East of the tomb of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, on the eastern fringes of the parcel known as "Helkat Ha-Ari").

Hebrew epitaph:

ציון הלזה למזחכן (?) מ'ו'ה' / גביר ונבון כ'ה'ר'ר' שמואל ה' / כהן ת'נ'צ'ב'ה' פטירתו שנת [ה] ש'כ'ב'

Preliminary english translation: *This tombstone belongs to (...?) our teacher the Rabbi Shmuel lord-master and wise [man], the honorable Rabbi Shmuel Hacoen (= the priest), may his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life, deceased in the year [deceased] in the year [5]322 (=1562 c.e.).*

The third word in the inscription is as yet not deciphered; the year seems to read 'ש'כ"ב' (1562 c.e., as written on a newly placed inscription on the southern façade of the tombstone) although a different reading of the year cannot be excluded³.

10. Rabbi Aharon Di-Boton (Fig. 13)

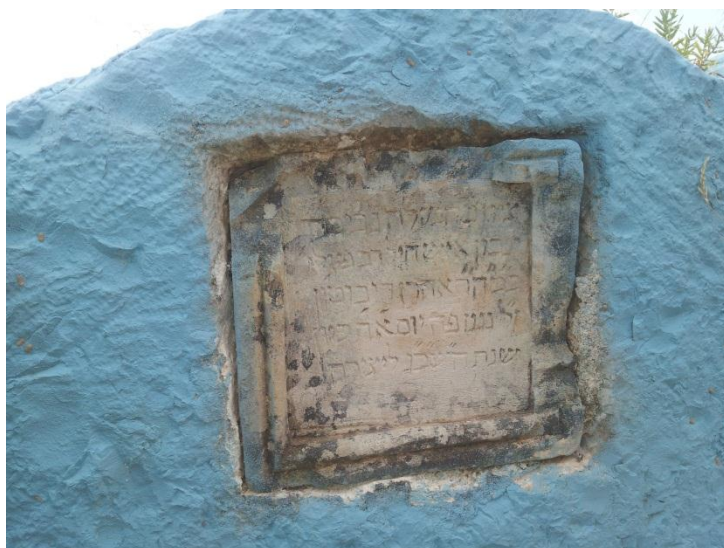


Fig. 13: The epitaph of Rabbi Aharon Di-Boton

Location: North-west of the Hosea Ben Beerī mausoleum, adjacent to the tomb of Rabbi Yosef MiTrani (no. 17).

Hebrew epitaph:

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

Preliminary english translation: *[This] tombstone [belongs to] the exalted lord-master and wise man of valor, a greatly accomplished person, our honorable Rabbi Aharon Di-Boton of blessed memory, buried here on Sunday, the 8th of Sivan, in the year 5323 after creation (= 1563 c.e.)*

³ Tombstone no. 348 in H. Sidor's excel list. His reading of the date is 'ש"י, 1550 c.e.

Rabbi Aharon Di-Boton is most probably related to the family of Rabbi Avraham Hiyya Di-Boton (1545-1592) of Salonika, author of the 'Lehem Mishna' commentary on Maimonides's 'Mishne Tora', possibly a cousin of his father Moshe⁴.

11. Rabbi Avraham Di-Boton (Fig. 14)



Fig. 14: The epitaph of Rabbi Avraham Di-Boton

This tombstone was seen in 1990 near the tomb of Aharon Di-Boton, slightly south of the latter. Today (2018) it is not visible on the surface⁵.

Hebrew epitaph:

ציון הלז מהרב[ם] (= מהרב? מורנו הרב? מורנו הרב בן מלכים?) / השלם חסיד ועניו / כ'מ'ה'ר' אברהם די
בוטון / ת'נ'צ'ב'ה'

Preliminary english translation: *This tombstone belongs to the Rabbi (our master? descendant of kings?), the perfect devout and humble [man], our honorable Rabbi Avraham Di-Boton, may his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life*

The tombstone is uniquely ornamented with incised depictions of pomegranates and a lily. This is probably not Rabbi Avraham Hiyya Di-Boton (1545-1592) of Salonika, author of the 'Lehem

⁴ The year of passing, 1563, precludes the possibility that this is the grave of Aharon, the son of Rabbi Avraham Hiyya Di-Boton, who himself was born in the second half of the 16th century (Ben-Naeh 1998; 2014b). It is more feasible that Aharon, who is buried in Zefat and belongs to the generation of Rabbi Moshe Di-Boton (who passed away in Salonika 1570, the father of Rabbi Avraham Hiyya), was a cousin who came to Zefat from Salonika during the 16th century, establishing the Eretz-Yisrael branch of the Di-Boton family.

⁵ The tombstone was photographed by Amnon Lahav of Kibbutz Megiddo in 1990. I thank him for permission to publish the photograph.

Mishna' commentary on Maimonides's 'Mishne Tora' (Ben-Naeh 1998; 2014b), but rather a cousin of his living in Zefat, possibly the son of Aharon (no. 10), or maybe a grandson of Rabbi Avraham Hiyya. On the other hand, one cannot entirely rule out the possibility that here we have an actual member of the Salonika clan (maybe even Rabbi Avraham Hiyya himself?) whose bones were brought for reburial here in Zefat.

12. Rabbi Moshe Baruch (Fig. 15)

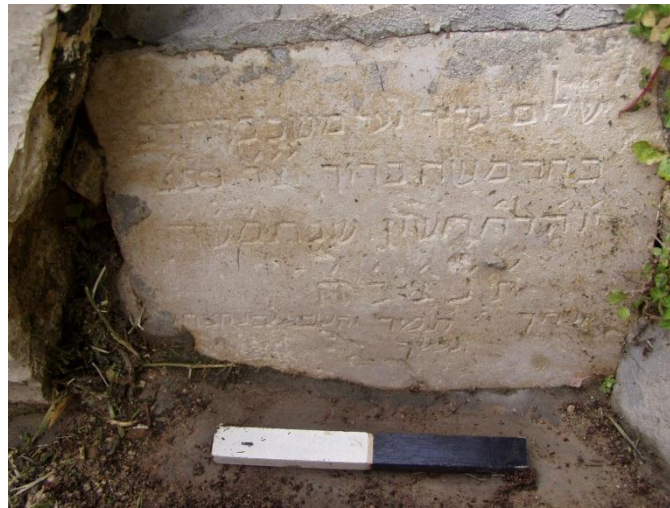


Fig. 15: The epitaph of Rabbi Moshe Baruch

Location: North of the Hosea Ben Beerī mausoleum, near the cave of Rabbi Ya'akov Beirav and the Holy Alsheich.

Hebrew epitaph:

שלום עליך ועל משכבך הרב / כ'ה'ר' [= כבוד הרב רבי] משה ברוך ז'צ'ל' [= זכר צדיק לברכה] נפט[ר] / יו']
 = [יום] ה' לח' חשוון שנת משה / ת'נ'צ'ב'ה' [= תהיה נשמתו צרורה בצרור החיים] / ונחך י' תמיד והשביע
 בצחצחות / נפשך.

Preliminary english translation: *Peace be upon you and on your [death] bed, our honored Rabbi Moshe Baruch, blessed is the memory of this righteous man, deceased on the 5th of the month of Cheshvan in the year 'Moshe' ([5]345; 1584 c.e.), may his soul be bound up in the bond of everlasting life, 'and the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire with good things'.*

Rabbi Moshe Baruch was a Rabbi in Edirne (Adrianople) and in Damascus and a disciple of Rabbi Yosef Karo in Zefat (*Responsa – Avkat Rochel*, No. 113). The date of his death is 5

Heshvan 1584. The verse “and the Lord will guide you continually and satisfy your desire with good things” is taken from Isaiah 58: 11.

13. Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Nun (Figs. 16, 17)



Fig. 16: The gravestone of Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Nun, looking south



Fig. 17: The epitaph of Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Nun

Location: Slightly northwest of the of Hosea Ben Beeri mausoleum.

Hebrew epitaph:

זאת המצב[ה] / לרופא המובהק / החסיד כ'ר' [= כבוד רבנו] / יהושע 'ו' [= אבן] נון / נ'ע' [= נשמתו עדן].

Preliminary english translation: *This is the tombstone of the profound [= certified?] doctor the devout our honorable Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Nun may his soul abide in paradise.*

Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Nun was one of the most intriguing figures in Zefat in the sixteenth century. He is retrospectively portrayed in the writings of Rabbi Shlomo Shlomil of Dreznitz in 1608 as an affluent Dayan and Master ('Head') of all the Roshei Yeshivot (Heads of the Torah Academies) in Zefat, managing the funds received from the Jewish communities in the exile and financially supporting all of the scholars and poor people of the city. He is also mentioned as unsuccessfully begging Rabbi Chaim Vital as a small unashamed child would do into revealing to him the Torah [Kabalistic] secrets of the ARI (Avivi 2008, I: 41). But his fame was earned in 1585 (?) after he finally succeeded in publishing six hundred pages of Rabbi Chaim Vital's

pamphlets ('קונטרסים') which are the first writings of the ARI to be distributed among the public. According to Shlomil's account, when Rabbi Chaim Vital was ill ("lying on his deathbed for a whole year"), Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Nun bribed Moshe Vital, the brother of Rabbi Chaim Vital, with "50 gold coins in order that he would bring him the books and in order that he would return the books to him after three days". Moshe Vital did as he was requested. He secretly took six hundred pages from his brother's house and gave them to Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Nun who managed to gather one hundred scribes, each one charged with copying six pages during the course of three days. After the three days of copying, the pages were returned to their original place in the house of Rabbi Chaim Vital, "and at that very moment our honored master and teacher (Vital) regained his health... and from that day forth the books were circulated amongst exceptional individuals..." (Avivi 2008, I: 41-42; *Shivhei Ha-Ari*, p. 13). Presumably Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Nun copied the writings of Vital in 1585, at the end of the ten year period of the "deed of agreement" ('שטר התקשרות') commencing in 1575 preventing him and another eleven kabbalists from revealing what they heard from Yitschak Luria and from Rabbi Chaim Vital and requiring them to follow the instructions of Rabbi Vital their master (Avivi 2008, I: 38). Another surprising reference is that of Rabbi Yosef MiTrani, who mentions that Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Nun 'was killed' ('נהרג') in the year 5345, which is also the year 1585 (Bentov 1978: 23, note 43; Davidson 2009, II: 40, note 648). Could it be that his death occurred close to the time when the writings of Rabbi Chaim Vital were removed against his will from his house, and maybe even as a result of this act? (Stepansky 2011a:13; Stepansky 2011b:51).

Turning back to the epitaph, its wording is surprising as well. If indeed this is the tombstone of the above notable figure, instead of accolades as a prominent director of Yeshivot, wealthy person and philanthropist, who contributed to disseminating the teachings of Ha-ARI, the titles 'profound doctor' (probably referring to him as being a certified physician who received a degree in Medicine) and 'devout man' ('Hassid') are written, and nothing more. No date of death appears on the gravestone, though the year may be engraved on the bottom part of the stone that is still buried underground.

The discovery of Rabbi Yehoshua Ibn Nun's epitaph raises new questions about his life and calls for more in-depth research into this intriguing historical mystery.

14. Rabbi Moshe Tzahalon (Fig. 18)



Fig. 18: The epitaph of Rabbi Moshe Tzahalon

Location: North-west of the Hosea Ben Beeri mausoleum and west of the cave of Rabbi Yaakov Beirav and the Holy Alsheich. The epitaph is worn.

Hebrew epitaph:

א... פ'נ'....הראש כל / בקדושה הישיש החכם / משה צהלון ז'ל'ה' (= זכרוננו לחיי העולם הבא) /
נתבקש.....ש / אל מ'ש'ה אמר עלה אל ה'

Preliminary english translation:the head of all....in holiness the aged, the sage... Moshe Tzahalon may his memory live in the world to come, who was called to a meeting in heaven [on]... in the year 'Moshe' ([5]345; 1585 c.e.).

Rabbi Moshe Tzahalon is the father of Rabbi Yom-Tov Tzahalon (The Maharitz, 1559-1638), a well-known rabbi and rabbinic authority (*posek*) in Zefat in the 16th-17th centuries.

15. Rabbi Elazar Azikri (Fig. 19)



Fig. 19: The epitaph of Rabbi Elazar Azikri (2009)

Location: In the burial plot of Ha-ARI, adjacent to the tomb of the ARI, on its northwestern side.

Hebrew epitaph:

ציון / היקר קדוש / ר' אלעזר נ'ע' (= נשמתו עדן) / ש'ס'.

Preliminary english translation: *The Tomb of the beloved and holy Rabbi Elazar may his soul abide in paradise, [5]360 (= 1600 c.e.).*

The epitaph was exposed in 2009, but the original plaque bearing the epitaph was broken and was covered over and today it is buried beneath a new gravestone built of fieldstones and cement (Fig. 20).



Fig. 20: The gravestone of Rabbi Elazar Azikri after it was re-erected (2011)

The original gravestone without the inscription plaque is placed above the new gravestone.

Instead of the original epitaph, a new marble stone was set in place across the western side of the

new gravestone. It is engraved with the following wording: Here rests the soul of the divine and holy Rabbi Elazar may his soul abide in paradise, [5]360 (=1600 c.e.).

Rabbi Elazar Azikri, born in Zefat, was one of the most important rabbinic figures of the city in the sixteenth century. He is considered a leader in Jewish outreach and repentance and founder of the Sukkat Shalom movement. He wrote Sefer Haredim and the famous liturgical poem Yedid Nefesh. The year of decease on the epitaph accords with the historical sources - 1600 c.e.

16. Mazal Tov, wife of Rabbi Elazar Azikri (Fig. 21)



Fig. 21: The epitaph of Mazal Tov, wife of Rabbi Elazar Azikri

Location: Three meters north of Rabbi Elazar Azikri. The gravestone of his wife, Mazal Tov, was discovered in 2009.

Hebrew epitaph:

מזל טוב / בת ה[חכם ר' / אברהם...

Preliminary english translation: *Mazal Tov, [daughter of the] sage Rabbi Abraham...*

Rabbi Abraham is the son of Rabbi Yaakov Beirav, one of the greatest rabbis of Zefat in the 1530's. Today the gravestone of Mazal Tov is concealed beneath the floor of the women's prayer plaza in the Ha-ARI plot and covered with transparent plastic. A new marble stone with a new inscription was placed on the bottom part of the ancient gravestone: "Here lies the pure and modest, the righteous woman Mazal Tov Azikri, may her soul abide in paradise, daughter of great persons, daughter of the perfect sage the excellent Dayan Rabbi Abraham Beirav. Granddaughter of the perfect sage the Rabbi of the sages of Zefat Rabbi Yaakov Beirav, the

memory of this righteous and holy man be blessed, wife of our Rabbi Elazar Azikri, the memory of this righteous and holy man be blessed”.

17. Rabbi Yosef MiTrani (The ‘Maharit’) (Fig. 22)



Fig. 22: The epitaph of Rabbi Yosef MiTrani

Location: Adjacent to the gravestone of Rabbi Moshe Tzahalon, at the entrance to a cave west of the 'cave of Rabbi Yaakov Beirav and the Holy Alsheich'.

The epitaph, found in 2008, is broken and fragmentary, but its preserved parts were glued together on a cement plaque. The readable parts of the epitaph were deciphered by Y. Ben-Naeh and E. Ben-Tovim.

Hebrew epitaph:

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 נאות (נאום?) שם (?; שדי?) 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 שנת ה'ש'צ'ט'

Because of its fragmentary character, we refrain from translating all the lines and instead comment on certain aspects concerning the inscription and its historical background:

The date of decease is 14 Tammuz 5399 (= 1639 c.e.). Rabbi Yosef MiTrani was the son of the famous Rabbi and *Posek* Rabbi Moshe Ben Yosef MiTrani (The 'Mabit', 1500-1580), buried in the cemetery in Zefat near Ha-ARI. Yosef was born in Zefat in 1568 and was an important rabbi in his own right, a student of Rabbi Shlomo Sagis, the son-in-law of the ARI. In 1586 he married, possibly to the daughter of Rabbi Avraham Hiyya Di-Biton of Salonika (Ben-Naeh 2014b), and bore children – Moshe (b. 1587), Avraham (b. 1590), Shlomo (b. 1596), Yeshaya/Yeshua (b. 1601), Hana (d. 1602) and Barzilai (d. 1650). In the year 1606 he settled permanently in Istanbul (Kushta), where he was the head of yeshivot and an important *posek* for many years, author of *The Responsa of the Maharit*, *Zofnat Pa'aneach* and other books (Trani 1861; Ben-Tov 1978; Ben-Naeh 2014a; Davidson 2009, II: 77-78). He died in Istanbul (Kushta; ק[ושטא]נדינה as written in the epitaph, line 11) in 1639 and his sons Moshe and Yeshaya sent his bones to be buried in Zefat near his father. In the introduction to *The Responsa of the Maharit* (Trani 1861) his son Moshe writes: "We had the honor to return you to your original holy place in the land of the living... thus I said Moshe (Ha-Mabit, the father of Yosef) had the privilege of receiving the bones of Yosef ". It seems that his widowed wife accompanied the bones to Zefat and settled in the city until she herself passed away thirteen years later (see below, tomb 17).

18. The Rabanit Lady Gracia (Fig. 23)



Fig. 23: The epitaph of the Rabanit Lady Gracia

Location: Five meters south of the gravestone of Rabbi Yosef MiTrani. No date of death.

Hebrew epitaph:

המסתופפת בצל הרב / בחייה וגם אחרי מותו / מצאה בית והיתה / מנוחתה הרבנית / מרת גרסיא נ'ע' (= נשמתה עדן).

Preliminary english 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.*

The Hebrew expressions *מסתופפות* and *מצאה בית* which appear in the epitaph, are taken from Psalm 84: 4, 11.

The gravestone was discovered in 2008 and was attributed at first to Gracia, the wife of Rabbi Yehuda Hakim, a Kabbalist and sage who lived in Zefat in the nineteenth century (1820-1897), whose grave is located in the cave of the Holy Alsheich, ca. 20 m east of this gravestone. In recent years the Hakim family erected a new gravestone that also incorporates the original epitaph, and a new copy of the original epitaph with an addition in parentheses explaining who the rabbi that is mentioned in the inscription actually was (Rabbi Yosef Yehuda Hakim, may his virtue stand us in good stead, Amen; **Fig. 24**).



Fig. 24: The new gravestone of the Rabanit Lady Gracia, looking south

The ascription of the gravestone to the wife of Rabbi Yosef Hakim is problematic, since a gravestone that is attributed to Gracia, wife of Rabbi Yosef Yehuda Hakim, which is also listed in the records of the religious council, is located in another burial plot (parcel 25, the Sefaradi parcel on the northern side of the cemetery). The dominant Sephardic style of the script in the epitaph also suggests that it predates the nineteenth century (E. Angel, personal communication). Therefore, as Y. Ben-Naeh has proposed (personal communication), it seems that this gravestone should be ascribed to the wife of Rabbi Yosef MiTrani who is buried nearby (and whom she married in 1586; see above, tomb 16). Rabbi Yosef's son Yeshaya writes of his mother's death in 1652, labeling her 'the Rabbanit':

"אמי המעטירה הרבנית מ"ך (= מנוחתה כבוד) כי באה השמועה ביום ה' ז' לכסלו שנת התי"ג שנפטרה בבית עולמים ט"ו לאלול התי"ב..."

(Bentov 1978: 3; taken from Manuscript of Sermons and Eulogies of Rabbi Yeshaya MiTrani, Adler Manuscript 263, The Seminary Library in New York [Hebrew]). In the eulogy to his mother he noted her unique qualities describing her as the source of the learning's of her husband and of his students (Toledano 1960: 57):

"לפי שכל לימודו של אדוני אבי הרב ז'ל'ה'ה' (= זכרוננו לחיי העולם הבא) ותורת תלמידיו ממנה יצאו
כבושים..."

That being the case, this woman was granted the title of 'Rabanit' in her own right, and we learn from the gravestone that her name was Gracia (and possibly, as stated above, she may have been the daughter of Rabbi Avraham Hiyya Di-Boton of Salonika). Based on the aforementioned source, Rabanit Gracia died in 1652, thirteen years after her husband and after reaching old age. It is possible that Gracia made aliyah to Zefat when her husband was brought for burial and remained there until her death, which may explain the verse in the epitaph

"...וגם אחרי מותו מצאה בית והיתה מנוחתה"

"...and also after his death has found a home and her resting place has come to be"

The manner, in which women made aliyah after they were widowed, particularly from rabbinical families, is well-known and documented (Ben-Naeh 1998: 87-89; 2007: 321). At the time of her death in Elul her son Yeshaya was in Istanbul where he received the news only in Kislev 5413 (November 1652), some three months after her passing.

Another possibility, although slightly far-fetched, is that this Gracia is the daughter of Rabbi Emanuel Abuhav (d. 1628, in Jerusalem) and the wife of the Zefat kabbalist and emissary Binyamin Halevi from the first half of the 17th century; after going on Aliya she supported for many years charity funds and directed two yeshivot in J'm and in Zefat, thus possibly earning the title 'Rabanit' (Orfali 1997: 15).

It was at first conjectured that this could be the gravestone of the famous Dona Gracia Mendes Nassi; however, this is difficult to accept for a variety of reasons. Nevertheless, we cannot exclude the possibility that the bones of Dona Gracia (whose burial site is unknown until today) were also brought for reburial in Zefat, like other distinguished Jews from Turkey in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries CE.

19. Avraham Ibn Nun (Fig. 25)



Fig. 25: The epitaph of Rabbi Abraham Ibn Nun

Location: North of the Hosea Ben Beeri mausoleum. There is no date of death.

Hebrew epitaph:

הנכבד כ' ר' (= כבוד רבנו) / אברהם בן נון / נע (= נשמתו עדן) .

Preliminary english translation: *The Honorable Our Rabbi Abraham Ibn Nun may his soul abide in paradise.*

It is possible that Rabbi Abraham Ibn Nun is the brother of the aforementioned Rabbi Joshua Ibn Nun. The title "הנכבד כבוד רבנו" indicates that he served in a high position, though not necessarily a teaching one.

20. Hacham Yosef Falcon (Fig. 26)



Fig. 26: The epitaph of Hacham Yosef Falcon

Location: North of the Hosea Ben Beeri mausoleum. There is no date of death. The gravestone is broken and the inscription is fragmentary.

Hebrew epitaph:

זה הציון ... / החכם הסופר ... / יוסף פלקון נע (= נשמתו עדן)...

Preliminary english translation: *This is the Tombstone ... The Sage and Scribe ... Yosef Falcon, may his soul abide in paradise...*

It seems that Hacham Yosef Falcon is a relative (father? brother?) of Rabbi Eliyahu Falcon (or Falco/Faalcon) and of Yaakov his son. Rabbi Eliyahu Falcon is one of Ha-ARI's distinguished disciples and a signatory of the deed of agreement not to divulge the writings of Ha-ARI in 1575 (Davidson 2009, II: 28). Yosef Falcon is mentioned in an 18th century manuscript written by Yosef ben Yoel Bibas as the source of several Chidushai Tora⁶.

21. Rabbi Binyamin of Salonika (Fig. 27)



Fig. 27: The epitaph of Rabbi Binyamin of Salonika

Location: North of the Hosea Ben Beeri mausoleum. There is no date of death.

Hebrew epitaph:

ר / בנימין / שאלוניקי

Preliminary english translation: *Rabbi Binyamin Salonika.*

The gravestone is narrow and long (width 0.25 m, length 1.0 m).

⁶ Rare book and Manuscripts, Columbia University: "חידושים ופשטים על התנ"ך", NY COLUM X 893 B 469 ; I thank Mordachai Mutola for informing me of this source.

At the top of its northern side is an inscription inscribed on the surface of the stone inside a shallow triangle. This may be Rabbi Binyamin ben Matityahu, a known personality in 16th century Salonika (Y. Ben-Naeh, personal communication), or possibly Rabbi Benyamin Kazis, one of the sages of Salonika who moved to Istanbul (suggested by E. Ben-Tovim). In any case, it seems that toward the end of his life he emigrated to Zefat and was buried there.

22. Donia Reyna wife of Rabbi Gedalya Halevi (Fig. 28)



Fig. 28: The epitaph of Donia Reyna, wife of Rabbi Gedalya Halevi

Location: North of the Hosea Ben Beerli mausoleum. There is no date of death.

Hebrew epitaph:

ציון זה / מהיקרה דוני' / ריינא אשת כ'ר' / גדליה הלוי נ'ע' (= נשמתה עדן)

Preliminary english translation: *This Tombstone [belongs] to the beloved Donia Reyna the wife of our honorable Rabbi Gedalya Halevi, may her soul abide in paradise.*

Donia Reyna was the wife of a well-known disciple of Ha-ARI, Rabbi Gedalya Halevi, and his grave might be located near her to the east. According to the Book of Visions (Sefer HaChezyonot) by Rabbi Chaim Vital, Rabbi Gedalya Halevi's wife was Rabbi Chaim Vital's sister (Faierstein 2005: 53). Gedalya Halevi was also among the signatories on the deed of agreement in the year 1575 not to divulge the writings of Ha-ARI.

23. Rabbi Yitzchak Pinto (Fig. 29)



Fig. 29: The epitaph of Rabbi Yitzchak Pinto

Location: South of the Hosea Ben Beeri mausoleum, in front of the 'Cave of Hanna and her seven sons' (slightly south and above Avraham Sorogon, tomb no. 3). Uncovered by D. Afnezer in 2000.

Hebrew epitaph:

... מהישיש כ'ר' / יצחק פינטו / נ'ע' (= נשמתו עדין)

Preliminary english translation: ... *the aged, our honorable Rabbi Yitzchak Pinto, may his soul abide in paradise*

E. Ben-Tovim suggests that this Yitzchak Pinto is from the 17th century family of Yoshiyahu Pinto, son-in-law and in-law (מחותן) of Rabbi Chaim Vital (both buried in Damascus in the 17th century). Another Yitzchak Pinto, a great-grandson of Daniel, son of Yoshiyahu Pinto, is also known from the 18th century, and a Pinto family tradition notes his burial in Zefat, while yet another tombstone from the 19th century with an identical name is located in a cave north of the ARI tombstone; all these show for a probable consecutive presence of the Pinto family in Zefat during the last centuries.

24. Shmuel Picchio (Fig. 30)



Fig. 30: The epitaph of Shmuel Picchio

Location: North-East of the Hosea Ben Beerli mausoleum. A fragmentary inscription.

Hebrew epitaph:

... שמואל בן הרב (?) / ב'ר' שמואל פיג'ו / ...

Preliminary english translation: ... *Shmuel the son of Rabbi (?)...the son of Rabbi Shmuel Picchio...*

Shmuel Picchio (פיג'ו, פקו, פיג'יו, פיקייו), the grandfather of the deceased, is probably a member of the well-known Spanish-Jewish family deriving originally from Christian-Spain. After the 1492 expulsion the family dispersed, some going to Turkey, others to Italy. It is possible that the grandfather is Rabbi Shmuel son of Rabbi Yosef Picchio, who signed a letter sent from Jerusalem in the first half of the 16th century urging Jews to come to Eretz Yisrael (Yaari 1971: 178-181). Another tombstone, in a cave north-east of the ARI tombstone, may also be related to this family (possibly Yosef, father of Rabbi Shmuel?).

25. Yaalat Chen Sultana the daughter of Rabbi Shmuel Picchio (Fig. 31)



Fig. 31: The epitaph of Yaalat Chen Sultana the daughter of Rabbi Shmuel Picchio

Location: Next to the above; probably also fragmentary.

Hebrew epitaph:

יעלת חן סולטנה / בת החכם כ'ר' שמואל / [פיג'ו] ז'צ'ל' (= זכר צדיק לברכה) /

Preliminary english translation: *Yaalat Chen Sultana the daughter of the sage our honorable Rabbi Shmuel [Picchio] blessed is the memory of this righteous man...*

Sultana, a common name for Jewish women, is probably the daughter of the above Shmuel, or possibly the daughter of the grandfather Rabbi Shmuel Picchio (פיג'ו, פקו, פיג'יו, פיק'יו). 'Yaalat Chen' (Proverbs 5:19; Talmud Bavli Tractate Eruvin, 54) as an adjective is known from one of the poems of Yehuda Halevi ('יעלת חן רחמי לבב שכנתיו מעודך').

26. Rachel Ha-Ashkenazit (Fig. 32)



Fig. 32: The epitaph of Rachel Ha-Ashkenazit

Location: On the slope of the hill, west of the grave of Rabbi Yosef Karo, north of and adjacent to the raised pedestrian path. There is no date of death.

Hebrew epitaph:

ציון / מהצנועה / מרת רייצלה / אשכנזית נ'ע' (= נשמתה עדן)

Preliminary english translation: *The gravestone of the modest Lady Raichele Ashkenazit, may her soul abide in paradise.*

Although there is no date on the epitaph and it is inscribed Raichele and not Rachel, this could be the tombstone of Rachel Ha-Ashkenazit, wife of Rabbi Yehuda Iberlin, head of the Ashkenazi community in Zefat and a well-known figure in her own right in Zefat in the sixteenth century. Rachel dreamt dreams envisioning Rabbi Chaim Vital as a non-earthly being, sometimes even as a Messiah; Rabbi Chaim Vital's living quarters are noted as being situated in the attic of her house in Zefat (Faierstein 2005: 104). Her house was apparently located in the Alsheich Alley in the middle of the Sephardic section of the old Jewish Quarter in Zefat (where the courtyard of the Shaki family home is today?), as Rabbi Moshe Alsheich established his Beit Midrash, which exists to this day, 'in her courtyard' (Faierstein 2005: 51; Stepansky 2011b: 51). Although Rachel followed Rabbi Chaim Vital to Damascus, it is certainly feasible that in the end, she returned to Zefat (Vital passed away and is buried in Damascus). If this is in fact her tombstone – we may see in the inscribed name 'Raichele' an early-Yiddish pronunciation for Rachel that was common among the Ashkenazi community members of Tsfat already in the 16th century.

A Summary and list of additional epitaphs

So far more than fifty gravestones bearing epitaphs from the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries CE have been exposed in the old cemetery of Zefat. Twenty six of them are described here, the earliest from 1525 CE and latest probably from 1652. They are dispersed throughout the southern hill of the cemetery, among groups of more recent tombs and not always *insitu*; we believe that their preservation, at least preventing damage to the epitaphs (by covering those gravestones that are air-exposed to the elements?), is an urgent task.

Among the epitaphs not described here (and hopefully will be included in future works) are the gravestones of the following personalities⁷:

Rabbi Abraham Shalom, one of the most important Rabbis of Zefat in the sixteenth century (Davidson 2009, II: 5);

Rabbi Avraham Galanti⁸, a prime student of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero and performer of *Hanhagot* (= pious customs; Fine 1984: 41 – 46; Davidson 2009, II: 25); tradition points to him as the founder of the first building erected on the cave of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in Meiron ;

Rabbi Elisha Galicco⁹, an important student of Rabbi Yosef Karo and well-known preacher (Davidson 2009, II: 7);

Rabbi Binyamin Italiano (d. 1579);

Rabbi Yeuda (Yehuda) Elgazi (d. 1560) and his son Yosef;

Rabbi Yosef Ibn R"osh (= Avraham Sagis), teacher of Rabbi Elazar Azikri and whose son Shlomo married the daughter of the ARI;

Lady Mira, daughter of Shmuel Ben Benveniste;

Rabbi Shlomo Distilia;

'Ibn Migas Halevi' (probably Avraham Ibn Migas ben Yitzchak Halevi, from Istanbul and student of Rabbi Yosef Karo mentioned in his responsa *Avkat Rochel*);

Donia Esther (wife of Avraham Ibn Migas?);

Yom Tov Bahalul;

Rabbi Moshe el-Boutini (ben Rabbi Yehuda, who immigrated to Zefat from Portugal at the beginning of the 16th century and then to Jerusalem);

'The doctor [---] Ben Shlomo';

A cave with ten tombstones, some of them mentioning 'Narbonne'

⁷ Most of the following have been noticed and partly studied by E. Ben-Tovim; a few are listed in the excel-list of tombstones compiled by H. Sidor. H. Sidor has also listed several more ancient tombstones that were recorded by Yizraeli but are not seen today; a few more were noticed by him throughout the years and added to the list. Some of these seemingly have dates that go back to the 16th century and even further back to the first half of the 15th century (!). However, caution is required for there is a possibility that the dates of decease that were inscribed on at least some of the stones were written without the first letter נ – thus a 19th century inscription can be erroneously dated to the 15th century 400 years earlier. We hope to study all the potentially-ancient epitaphs that can be seen and read, and fix all potential discrepancies in the readings of all the ancient inscriptions available.

⁸ No. 3272 on Sidor's excel list.

⁹ No. 3271 on Sidor's excel list.

(e.g. 'ציון הנבון כ'ר' דון יוסף די גרבוני נ'ע'), possibly belonging to the Provencal Kahal (community) of Jews in 16th century Zefat, led by Rabbi Moshe Galanti (Narbonne – on the shore of the Mediterranean in Provence in southeastern France, close to the border with Spain); 'Reina D'Reina' – about whom one of the tales of Tsfat maintains that every man who ever married her died within a year...

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