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“Walls” around the Torah: The 16th-Century Candia - Kahal

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The Jewish Community of 16th-century Candia was shaped both by the experience of distinctiveness and separation from the Greek Orthodox majority by which it was surrounded, and by the sense that it was, at the same time, connected to – if not a part of – that greater community.

Candia’s Jews, while in the period living within a walled, separate quarter, understood this condition as emblematic of their purity as much as of their confinement. Simultaneously, while living beneath a constant Christian gaze, Candia’s Jews felt as much motivated by that gaze to constantly refine their piety, as they did persecuted by it. Jewish-Christian interaction was thus configured by Candia’s Jews as an opportunity to consolidate, and reflect upon, the meaning of Jewish identity – an identity which they wished to endorse in the Jewish and the Christian realms alike. To be sure, the Jewish community of the period did not experience life in Crete as easy; like most other Jews of the period many hardships were experienced at the hands of Christian overlords. Nevertheless, in the Cretan instance, Jews were able to find in their circumstances not merely abjection or oppression. They were able also to draw from their

Christian surroundings a potent sense of their own community as being a model of purity and piety.

In 1571 there were approximately 800 Jews living in Candia (1). The island of Crete as a whole had twice that number (2). We know of chronic difficulties in the community’s four synagogues in managing to gather together the quorum of ten men (the minyan) required by Jewish law for proper services. It is unclear whether this difficulty was due to the reduced size of the community, or the laxity of its observance; likely it was a combination of the two.

The one major extant internal source (3) for Jewish life in Candia during the sixteenth century is the *takanot kandia vezichronoteha*, a collection of civic documents compiled by the Cretan Rabbi Eliyahu Kapsali in the mid-sixteenth century. Many of the statutes it contains were issued by him, but the collection also includes important rulings made by his predecessors (4). Kapsali, of both Romaniote and Sephardic heritage, was a Greek-speaking Jew, and came to be one of the most important Rabbinic figures of the region.

A recurrent theme of the documents of the *takanot kandia vezichronoteha* is the small size of the community. Despite its modest dimensions, however, the community in Candia centered around four different congregations: *beit hakneset hagadol* (“the great synagogue”), *beit hakneset shel kohanim* (“the synagogue of the Kohanim”), *beit hakneset shel ashkenazim* (“the synagogue of the European [Jews]”), and *beit hakneset hagavoha* (“the upper synagogue”; that is, the one located on the city’s higher ground) (5). The *beit hakneset*

shel ashkenazim was Ashkenazic only in title; the accepted liturgy of all four of Candia’s synagogues in Kapsali’s day was that of the Romaniotes, or “indigenous,” Greek-speaking Jews.

Candia’s four synagogues were all located fairly close to one another, a function of the Venetians’ policy that Jews live in segregated ghettos, or, to use the Venetian term, *zudeccas*. (Following the Ottoman conquest of the island in the seventeenth century, this stricture was lifted, and the urban geography of the Jewish community became relatively more dispersed) (6). They were all in the heart of the *zudecca*, a neighborhood that the Greeks referred to as the *evraiki* (ἔβραϊκή). (7) The neighborhood was located against the walls of the old city (the *cittù vecchia*), extant since the Arab conquest of the 9th century.

Significantly, the Jews themselves often referred to their neighborhood as the *kahal*, a distinctive usage of a term that in most other Jewish contexts designates not a geographical space but a conceptual one, referring to the congregation of Jews as a whole and designating something that, roughly, can be translated as “community.” Candiot *takanot* and rabbinic writings of the sixteenth century, however, often used the term *kahal* in reference to the physical space in which that community lived (8).

The physically-bounded space of the *kahal* clearly influenced the Jewish community’s understanding of itself, and the physical unity it enforced also fostered unity of a communal and religious sort. The usage of the term *kahal* to signify both a physical and a conceptual sphere shows that the two – communal self-perception and physical space – worked hand in hand. Particularly significant in this regard is the use of the term *homa*, which means “wall”; specifically, the boundary wall common to ancient and medieval cities. All three of Crete’s cities – Hania, Rethymon, and Iraklion (Candia) – are walled cities. The looming presence of the city walls, along with the demarcated space of the *kahal* is reflected in numerous Jewish Candiot texts. The centuries-long experience of boundedness and demarcation, combined with the relative homogeneity of the (largely Romaniote)

Jewish population, is reflected in rabbinic and civic writings of the period.

A recurrent theme in Cretan *responsa* and *takanot* of the period is the *homa* – the city wall – and its role as protector of the entirety of the Jewish community. The *homa*, then, was not perceived so much as something that locked the Jews outside of society, as a barrier that protected the Jews from outside dangers to the unity and integrity of the community. The introduction to *takana* twenty-one (Candia, 1363) uses the term *homa* no less than six times in its opening paragraph (9). Although significant portions of the text are missing or obscured, we can nevertheless ascertain its basic gist:

In the year 5123 of the creation, the third day of the month of Nisan, in the island of Crete, the congregation of Israel, headed by our esteemed president Rabbi David son of the esteemed Rabbi Yehuda. The *condostablo* (10) [addressed the congregations and all the] synagogues with one heart and one agreement and as one person said: ...we shall build fences around the torah in order to distance [missing from text]. [And we shall be] guarded and we shall build an army and a wall...to guard the torah; we shall build a glorious wall...from the stone of Solomon we shall build, in order to prevent violators from throwing in trouble; and all the congregation answered and said: I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers that guard and protect the mitzvot as they are told from Sinai; there we shall appoint and assign guards on the walls of the torah...and the *condostalbo* answered: upon your walls, Jerusalem, I appoint guards.” (11)

The text is rich in multiple meanings that interweave elements drawn from the Bible, from the immediate physical space of Venetian Candia, and from the ubiquitous image of sacred Jerusalem. The dominant interplay is between the “fences” established around the torah – the “extra” laws created by Rabbinic oral tradition to protect the core laws of the torah – and the physical “fence” – the *homa* that surrounded the Jewish community of Candia. A second is the equation of Candia and Jerusalem, walled cities both. Finally, the *homa*, far from being regarded as a confining or punitive

boundary, is compared instead to the protection of Jerusalem (Psalms, 122, 144, 147) and the towers of the Song of Songs (8:10), and its very rock (read here as “the stone of Solomon”) is endowed with special meaning. Thus the specific physical circumstances of Jewish life in sixteenth century Candia were woven into the community’s self-perception as pure, protected, and keepers of the torah, and the immediate conditions of daily life woven into the broader history of the Jewish people at large.

The homa both strengthened the specific kahal of Candia, and provided a metaphoric means of linking it to the broader kehila – the community of all Jews. It also provided the metaphoric means of tying the diasporic nature of Jewish life in Crete to the imagined life of Jews in Jerusalem, and the means of seeing Candia itself as a sort of Jerusalem. The repeated references to the homa and its unifying effect upon the kahal are a powerful reaffirmation of psalmic promises of Jerusalem. As such, they painted Candia as a holy city, and its ordinances as binding. Finally, as with the term kahal, the usage in this context of the word homa is significant. The usual rabbinic term for the “fences” around the Torah is gader, “fence.” In Kapsali’s text, however, homa – “wall,” specifically the fortification wall of cities of the period – was substituted for the more common rabbinic term, presumably because it carried more potent symbolic valence for his community.

During the course of the fifteenth and particularly the sixteenth centuries, the Venetians undertook an aggressive and far-reaching programme of fortification and refortification of Crete. This was a response both to technological advancements, and to the rise of Ottoman power. The development of artillery (at the end of the 15th century) and the implementation of the “ramparted front” (from the 16th century on) brought about substantial construction on the already existing fortifications of Candia, Hania, and Rethymnon, and the building of new fortresses along the coast. The Jewish communities of the northern cities, living as they did at close quarters to these fortifications, saw on a daily basis the ongoing construction of walls, towers, and other defenses – indeed were often forced to participate in it. Their importance as

devices of protection rather than of confinement was underscored, and helped foster religious metaphors which gave them deeper meaning.

Notes

1. Bracha Rivlin, ed., Pinkas Hakehillot Yavan, p. 97. It is difficult to obtain fully accurate numbers, in part because what records exist record number of households rather than number of individuals.

2. In addition to the 800 in Candia (Kandiye), there were 300 in Hania (Hanya), an unknown (but tiny number) in Rethimnon (Resmo), and a small but unknown number scattered throughout the rural areas of the island. Rivlin, p. 155 (Hania), p. 407 (Rethimnon); Ankori, *Jews in the History of Medieval Crete* (on Jews in rural Crete).

3. That is, generated by the Jewish community itself. While Venetian documents give some idea of the juridical and administrative history of the Jews, only the takanot (communal ordinances) give us any glimpse into their social and cultural history. They are the central source for the material in this chapter.

4. Elias S. Artom, Humbertus M.D. Cassuto, eds., *sefer takanot kandia: Statuta Iudaeorum Candiae. Eorumque Memorabilia*. Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1943.

5. Benayahu, rabi eliyahu kapsali, *ish kandia*, p. 92; *takanot kandia*, p. 107.

6. Zvi Ankori, *Jews and the Jewish Community*, p. 314; Molly Greene, *A Shared World: Christians and Muslims in the Early Modern Mediterranean*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 86; Zvi Ankori, “From Zudecha to Yahudi Mahellesi: The Jewish Quarter of Candia in the Seventeenth Century.” In Saul Lieberman, ed., *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume* (Vol. 1), Jerusalem: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1974, pp. 63-127 (cited also in Greene, p. 86).

7. Venetian documents use the terms zudecca, giudecca, judayca, and iudaica. Greek terms include ιουδαϊκή, ιουδαία, and εβραϊκή (or

ορβακή, as the late Byzantine Candiot local usage had it). Turkish documents refer to the yahudi mahallesi (“the Jewish district”).

8. Zvi Ankori argues that the term was used exclusively to denote a physical space, until the arrival of Sephardim “introduce[d] into Cretan society, too, a congregational connotation of the term kahal” (p.315). It seems, though, that both usages – the conceptual and the purely physical – were from early on common in Crete. Indeed, as early as 1463 we see takanot from Crete that use kahal in the sense of “community.” See, for example, takanot kandia, number 25, p. 14.

9. Only fifteen lines of the takana’s first paragraph are extant. takanot kandia, pp. 13-14.

10. That is, civic leader of the Jewish community.

11. The phraseology invokes both the Song of Songs (8:10, “I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers”) and the 122nd psalm (“Upon your walls, Jerusalem, I appoint guards”). Psalm 147, for instance, reads “praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!... For he strengthens the bars of your gates... He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances.” See Ioanna Steriotou, “Le fortezze del regno di Candia. L’organizzazione, I progetti, la costruzione,” in Gherardo Ortalli, ed., Venezia e Creta. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Iraklion-Chania, 30 settembre – 5 ottobre 1997. Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1998, pp. 283-302. The psychological circumstances attendant upon the closed-in Jewish ghettos of northeastern European cities were quite different. While in Crete the walls reminded Jews to keep their faith pure by keeping the mitzvot and not falling into laxity of practice, Vital has argued that the state of being enclosed underscored the distinctions between the Jewish world and the non-Jewish world. See *A People Apart. The Jews of Europe, 1789-1939*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 22. Candia’s walls were protection not so much from the outside world as from the possibilities for failure inherent in all people. At the same time, however, they were a reminder of the impending arrival of the Ottomans – an eagerly awaited reality.