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POVERTY, PAUPERS AND POOR RELIEF  
IN OTTOMAN JEWISH SOCIETY\*

RÉSUMÉ

L'article suivant analyse la vie des pauvres et l'attitude adoptée à leur égard la société juive de l'Empire ottoman, du XVI<sup>e</sup> au début du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les pauvres ont vécu en marge de la communauté une vie de misère, sans force interne ni directive. La situation de ces pauvres est étudiée ici sous l'angle de la place qu'ils occupaient au sein de la communauté, de la vie qu'ils menaient au jour le jour et du degré de culture dont ils disposaient. L'aide individuelle et institutionnelle était fondée sur l'héritage traditionnel, le sentiment de solidarité, les mentalités et les comportements ambiants des citadins ottomans qui traitaient la pauvreté comme un phénomène naturel, inhérent à la société. Son but n'était ni de faire disparaître la pauvreté ni de lutter contre les inégalités sociales et économiques, mais de garder en vie les indigents. Cette attitude contribua avec succès au but souhaité: la conservation des conventions et de l'ordre social au sein de la société juive dans l'Empire ottoman.

SUMMARY

This article investigates poverty and the treatment of the poor amongst Ottoman Jews. Jewish society was an urban, class-oriented society, with a large marginalized sector of poor, who were barely living on a small daily income or on charity. Poverty was more than just an economic or material state, and had clear cultural and social implications. The difficult lives of the poor were the background for social strife that intensified as class differences grew. Charity was the main instrument to assist the poor. Either individual or communal, it was based on Jewish tradition and heritage, and was affected by the cultural atmosphere, mentality and behavioral patterns of Ottoman city-dwellers who treated poverty as an inherent and natural social phenomenon. The purpose of communal and individual charity was not the eradication of poverty, nor concern for the spiritual welfare of the poor, and certainly not a

\* This article is based on chapters from my doctoral thesis, written under the guidance of Prof. Joseph R. Hacker: Y. BEN-NAEH, "Jewish Society in the Urban Centers of the Ottoman Empire during the 17th Century (Istanbul, Salonika, and Izmir)", Jerusalem 1999. The reader may refer to the bibliography and footnotes in the dissertation. In this article, I have primarily used sources that were not discussed in my thesis.

change in the social structure and economic parity, but mere survival of the needy. Most important were the wages of the giver — personal prestige and heavenly reward. Without declaring it, community philanthropy was supposed to preserve the existing social order and to strengthen it, as well as the traditional values of Jewish society. In retrospect, the totality of the above mentioned activities intensified communal solidarity and strengthened its unity.

Poverty is neither an absolute nor a one-dimensional concept, but a complex, multi-faceted economic, social, and cultural reality. By its very nature it involves a relative situation of poverty as compared to wealth, at a certain time and place. This article investigates a hitherto unknown aspect of Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire, poverty and the lives of Jewish paupers in the cities of Western Anatolia and the Balkans, and to a certain degree in the Arab provinces as well. The time frame under discussion ranges from the second half of the 16th century through the first half of the 18th century.

We shall first discuss the dimensions and image of poverty, and then study the ways in which Jewish society coped with poverty within the cultural context that uniquely characterized Ottoman Jewry.

### 1. Poverty and paupers

The category of poverty discussed in this article is first and foremost based on the official definition by the department of finance of the Ottoman state, a definition created in order to assess the taxes on the citizenry, which was also accepted by the Jewish community. There is a reasonable basis for the assumption that property served as the basis for the definition of wealth and poverty, since the majority of taxes were levied as a certain percentage of property value. As of now, we do not know the precise indices for property assessment, nor the tax bracket limits. Poor meant those who owned a minimum amount of property, as well as those who had absolutely nothing to their name. The masses of workers were therefore dependent on their manual labor, subject to the mercies of economic and climatic fluctuations.

Poverty resulted from various factors, some unavoidable: a) plagues or accidents that caused loss of the ability to work or the death of the primary breadwinner. Widows and orphans were left without any income, and became a burden to their relatives or even a public burden. b) Periodical reasons, such as climatic fluctuations, natural disasters or war. We might add to that market fluctuations and political and economic crises, such as conditions prevailing in the Empire from the late 16th century through the

1620's. c) Structural reasons associated with the character of the economy and patterns of employment.

One gets the impression of a gradual impoverishment, primarily from the late 17th century onward<sup>1</sup>. The protected non-muslim residents of the Empire (Dhimmis), who, in addition to their political weakness, were required to pay annual poll tax (*Jizye*) and higher rates of customs, suffered more than other Ottoman subjects. The increase of the burden of taxation and more widespread levies in order to finance the continuous wars from 1683 until the Treaty of Karlowitz (1699), made life much harder for the lower and middle classes. The increasing exposure to cheap European imports in the 18th century substantially worsened the situation of masses of Jewish artisans.

There are not many sources for a study of the statistical breakdown of the society and the scope of poverty. On the surface, it seems as if the population censuses taken to levy the tax are an excellent indication of the socio-economic distribution of the Jews in the large cities, but in fact this is a very problematic source. There is evidence that data transmitted to the authorities were consistently and intentionally false, since tax rates were set accordingly. It was not only in the interest of the community as a whole to provide the state with false reports, but individuals, too, attempted to conceal their precise economic situation from the community's tax assessors. Nevertheless, a comparison of the ratio of the classes from 17th century census figures from various cities reveals similar data, and shows that the figures are not totally unreliable. In general, we may estimate that the number of wealthy was between five and ten percent of the community; the middle class made up between a third to three quarters; while the poor constituted half to three quarters of the community. The large number of poor and what it meant for the financial balance of the community is evident in a question dealing with one of Bursa's congregations in 1672. Bursa had been one of the flourishing commercial centers in western Anatolia, and this question provides unique data on the social composition of its Jewish population. Out of sixty assessed people, there were four rich men, fourteen middle-class (who owned *keren*, "capital") and forty-two poor, explicitly defined as "those with no capital, but only earn their daily bread" that is to say, true proletarians. Only half of the latter were capable of paying the annual *jizye*, which was less than five *gurush*, and a minimal sum for the com-

1. In Bursa, within ninety years, the percentage of taxpayers in the high tax bracket dropped from 48 % to as low as 11 %; the number of middle-range taxpayers rose from 31 % to 54 %, while the number of the poor rose from 21 % to 35 % (H. GERBER, "Jews in the Economic Life of the Anatolian City, Bursa, in the 17th Century: Remarks and Documents", *Sefunot* 16, 1980, p. 254). On the social stratification and the differences in life styles see: M. Rozen, *A History of the Jewish Community of Istanbul: The Formative Years, 1453-1566*, Leiden - Boston 2002, pp. 197-221.

munity. The other half were "extreme paupers, from whom we cannot take even the smallest coin (*prutah*), and would not even pay under threat of imprisonment»<sup>2</sup>.

The sector of the poor might be divided into three categories<sup>3</sup>. a) The first group was the "hard kernel" of poverty, including households or individuals with no breadwinner (such as orphans and elders, especially widows) or his lack of ability to provide livelihood due to disability, chronic illness, or madness. Those who belonged to this category were exempt from all taxes, and were the main beneficiaries of charitable deeds. Added to the local poor were itinerant alms-gatherers, who wandered from community to community, collecting money for various purposes. b) The second group consisted of the proletariat, who had to live on their daily earnings, lacking any property or any economic security to lean on. They, too, were entirely exempt from taxation, and were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Poverty was quite often hereditary (see below). It seems that newly arrived immigrants also belonged to this category, since their integration into the economy and the labor market was usually at the simplest and lowest level. c) The third group consisted of small merchants and artisans, or those with jobs in the community administration who had a bit of meager property (such as a few household goods, a small amount of money, goods, or tools or even a small shop or a flat), and who lived on a daily or weekly salary or revenue from an asset or some sort of principal. Any damage, even temporary damage, to the ability to support the dependents, a natural calamity such as fire or drought, that raised the price of basic commodities for survival (water, bread, grains) could drive the family to extreme poverty and starvation. This sector paid the head tax and other taxes to the government at the lowest rates possible, and a minimal sum to the community. Often enough, they did not pay any direct tax to the community, but only did so indirectly, through the *Gabellas* on food<sup>4</sup>.

2. That is to say, approximately twenty out of sixty members of the community lacked anything: they had nothing whatsoever: R.H. BENVENISTE, *Baei Hayei*, "Hoshen Mishpat", Part II, Salonika 5548 (1788), resp. 72, p. 69a. At the beginning of the 18th century, R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen of Izmir stated that "most of the world is poor (R. ELIYAHU HA-COHEN, *Me'il Sedakah*, Izmir 5491 [1731], p. 131b).

3. This division parallels the three concentric circles that Gouton and Pullan drew, based on their data on northern Italy and Lyon in the 17th and 18th centuries. Hardcore poverty was usually between 4 %-8 %, with the second group approximately 20 %, and the third comprising between 20 %-50 % (S. WOOLF, *The Poor in Western Europe*, London-New York 1986, p. 6). For similar figures, see R. JÜTTE, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 195-196.

4. For documentary evidence on the impoverishment of members of this class in Istanbul in the mid-18th century, see the Istanbul community ordinance of 5404 (1744): Y.M. TOLEDANO, "The Tax Regulations in Istanbul in 1744 and the State of the Community at the Time", *Sarid u-Falit* 1, 1945, p. 28.

## 2. The experience of poverty

When we try to understand the meaning of poverty in the everyday life of the individual in this era, we find that, in contrast to Europe, where a wealth of sources have provided material for numerous studies, there are very few data relating to poverty in the Ottoman cities. No wonder that there has been almost no treatment of this topic in general, nor about the Jewish poor in the Ottoman Empire in particular<sup>5</sup>. Scholars wishing to research the image of Jewish society are forced to rely mainly on internal sources: halakhic (Jewish law) literature, sermons, community regulations, and the stylized and flowery letters of recommendation given by community officials and rabbis to aid the poor; as well as folklore (stories, songs and proverbs) of which at least a part originated in the lowest strata of Jewish society, and which illuminate hitherto unknown facets of the social conditions. In addition, the state and type of the sources make it more difficult for us to reconstruct the way in which the poor saw themselves, and how poverty seemed to those around them.

We shall take a closer look at poverty in the life of the individual — from the material lack, through social status, and the cultural implications of poverty.

### a. The material experience of poverty

The experience of poverty was absolute, and was expressed primarily in the harsh conditions of subsistence: those who supported themselves by manual labor and lacked a profession, or worked on the lowest level of specialization, and who received daily or weekly wages. Economic distress forced women to participate in the role of breadwinner for the family — as simple manual laborers or as peddlers. The poor lived under harsh physical conditions in crowded courtyard houses, known as "yahudi hane", musty cellars, or on unventilated lower floors, in poor and filthy neighborhoods. Very often, an entire extended family, not only the nuclear family, crowded itself into one room<sup>6</sup>. Their diet was poor in quantity and in quality, and

5. For studies of poverty and the poor in the Ottoman city, see for now: A. MARCUS, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century*, New York 1989, pp. 212-218; ID., "Poverty and Poor Relief in Eighteenth Century Aleppo", *REMM* 55-6, 1990-92, pp. 171-179; O. PERI, "Waqf and Ottoman Welfare Policy", *JESHO* 35, 1992, pp. 167-186. A. Singer, of Tel Aviv University, is now conducting a research on these topics.

6. See a source from Egypt regarding several families living in one room: "And they divide the dough, and every one eats of his bread alone with his wife and child in his particular place", cf R. Yeshua' SHABABO ZEIN, *Sha'arei Yeshua'*, Jerusalem 1988, Section 7, 4, p. 139b. On living conditions, see Y. BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), pp. 124-127, and the references to sources. Also see: M. ROZEN, "Public Space and Private Space among the Jews of Istanbul in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries", *Turcica* 30, 1998, pp. 338.

usually consisted of relatively low-priced foods such as bread, rice, cereals, vegetables, cheese and water. Their sole possessions were usually a few eating utensils and some clothing. Clothes were old and shabby; in many cases, purchased second hand, or donated by relatives and deceased people. Clothing often swarmed with lice or disease microbes. Poor pupils were eligible for a suit of clothing once a year<sup>7</sup>. The fact that old clothes constituted nearly the entire possessions of the absolute paupers is evident from inheritance records, such as the wills recorded in the *sijillat* (the muslim Court records) of Jerusalem. In a document from the year 960 (1553), we see, for example, that a shirt, wool cloak, and several head-coverings, were recorded as the only objects left by a Jew who died in the city<sup>8</sup>.

We may obtain some idea of the horrifying conditions of the poor during the late 17th century from a vivid description by R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen of Izmir, a large, bustling, Ottoman trade city:

... and also the misadventures that befall the poor person, who does not die but hopes for better times, he sees his little ones, who ask him for bread, but he has no bread to break; he sets out to beg, but he does not know whereof to turn and whither to go, he looks and stares into the face of each passer-by perhaps they will recognize his sorrow and support and succor him, but there is no one who pays attention, because there is no prophecy in the passer-by, and so he goes hither and thither, wandering all around the city, until his knees fail him from fasting, and he has no more strength to walk, all this while his mind is about his children being enveloped in pangs of hunger, and in the grip of an insatiable appetite, and his miserable wife as she sees the distress of her children she looks out of the lattice to see why her man tarries in coming home, she hears his footfalls and thinks, here he comes, she looks out and sees a man carrying grain, bread and food, but he passes on, and she says to herself, it is not he, there is no unfortunate such as he, she returns to her children in sorrow and sighing, and without any hope left she cries out, alas, my children... As for him, added to his distress is the heaviness of the *kharaj* [poll tax] and the debts of thousands and ten thousands, his heart fails him, and he grieves in distress for his children and wife who are waiting for him, for he knows not if he will find them alive or faint or dead, and the whole day he makes the utmost effort in the bazaars and the streets perhaps he will find something to sustain them and heal their blow, but, near evening, he is in a panic since he is empty-

7. Used clothing was purchased in specially designated markets called in Turkish *bit bazar*. The needy did not hesitate to purchase the clothes of those deceased from plague, a custom that contributed to the spread of infectious diseases. On the *halbashah* see a short discussion in Y. BEN-NAEH, "Jewish Confraternities in the Ottoman Empire in the 17th and 18th centuries", *Zion* 63, 1998, pp. 312-313.

8. A. COHEN & E. SIMON-PIKALI, *Jews in the Moslem Religious Court*, Part I, Jerusalem 1993, Documents no. 421-422, p. 369; *Id.*, *Jews in the Moslem Religious Court*, Part II, Jerusalem 1996, Document no. 463, p. 483. Relatives and neighbors might have taken the more valuable belongings, but we do find registration of wills that included rich fabrics, varicolored and costly clothing, household utensils, jewelry, goods and cash.

handed, and when he sees that the evil is borne down on him he takes off the veil of shame from his countenance and makes bold as shame covers his face until it changes color... he draws near to the foodseller begging him to have pity on him and give him a loaf of bread, and he returns to his home with a meager amount of bread, and with great worry, and when his wife and children see him they turn to him, in whose hands their life depends, and they grab and devour the bread in his hands that sustains them and immediately run to the water to fill their bellies from the lack of bread and fall down like sick without any strength... and when his wife and sons see that they have no hope in him they go outside to walk around and look in the city garbage heaps perhaps they will find some leftover fruit skins that have been cast aside or perhaps some dry bones that they can scratch food from them in order to revive themselves and if there is nothing there they go in different directions to knock on the doors of the generous for a piece of bread, and their poor mother carries the infant on her shoulder and sets forth to beg food to keep her alive because she can no longer bear the sight of the suffering of her small children, and her husband calls after her as she goes forth, perhaps God will have compassion on you, and you will find food for me as well, and so we see the father and the mother and the children separated one from another for the entire day lacking everything.<sup>9</sup>

We see here an extremely painful reality of the life of the poor in the cities of the Ottoman Empire: families with nothing, about to die of hunger and disease, dependent on handouts for their daily sustenance. The sensitive and perhaps slightly exaggerated description tendered by R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen shows that the long-term material distress involved severe mental anguish, the distress of the poverty-stricken man forced to take to the streets with the hope that passers-by will take note of his distress and give him alms. At a later point, the poor person loses the remainder of his self-respect, goes begging at doorways, asking for a loaf of bread, usually garnering insults and mockery. Curses and disgrace, mainly from those with money, are a recurring motif in the belles lettres and writings of the mussar masters preaching on correct behavior. If a poor man was lucky enough to be invited into the home of a rich man, he made the utmost effort not to show his shameful condition of poverty and tried not to damage the rich man's property with the swarms of lice on his body and his filthy feet. R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen described a chain of misunderstandings, based on the absolute alienation of the rich and their total lack of awareness of the living

9. R. ELIYAHU HA-COHN, *Shevet Mussar* (literally, "Rod of moral behavior"), Constantinople 5772 (1712), p. 30b-30d. In the folktales about Juha, the Judeo-Spanish parallel of Nasr-ed-din Hoja, we find additional details about the experience of poverty, including poor nutrition, used and torn clothing, lack of household goods, various types of occupations characteristic of the lower classes, and more. The folk proverb that concretizes the horrors of poverty "Guay del Prove i de su dia negro" means "Woe to the poor man and to his black day," in A. ALKALAY, *Dichos i Refranes Sefaradies*, Jerusalem 1984, p.132; and a similar proverb *La proveza es la mas grand Hazinura*, "Poverty is the worst sickness of all", *ibid.*, p. 133.

conditions of the poor. This misunderstanding ended with the rich man's ascribing the poor with a long list of bad qualities, and regretting his charitable behavior<sup>10</sup>. However, not all of the poor were ashamed of their poverty: some made itinerant begging and wandering around collecting alms a way of life, and there are historical sources describing an aggressive and loud-mouthed style of begging in the streets<sup>11</sup>.

The poverty-stricken were those who suffered most from the diseases and plagues that struck residents of the large cities almost every year, with especially high mortality rates. It is not surprising, however, in view of the combination of factors of filthy, overcrowded living quarters, lack of proper ventilation, and lack of heating in winter, little and non-nutritious food, and hereditary, long-term poverty that led to weak bodies. To these factors one might add the lack of awareness of how to prevent disease, and to a certain degree a lack of means to pay an expert physician and to purchase expensive medicines<sup>12</sup>.

The poor man lived in a state of existential insecurity, constantly dependent on his employer and the aid of relatives and charitable souls, frequently haunted by tax collectors and creditors. His life was at stake, and without aid from relatives, neighbors, or one of the communal organizations, he would die, even under normal circumstances<sup>13</sup>.

#### b. The social experience of poverty

Added to the existential uncertainty and the constant awareness of the need for the kindness of strangers was the social distress. Ottoman Jewish

10. *Shevet Mussar*, 30d-31a. To counteract the alienation, the author proposes that children be educated to get to know the poor by getting closer to them so that as adults they will not hold themselves separate from them and set themselves totally apart from them: R. ELIYAHU HA-COHEN, *Midrash ha-Imari*, Salonika 5584 (1824), p. 44a.

11. A Jewish folk saying notes the variations in style among those begging for alms: *El turko dimanda Sedaka en kantando, el grego yorando, el djudio en malkiziendo*, "The Turk begs for alms with a song; the Greek with a cry, and the Jew with a curse", M.D. ANGEL, *The Jews of Rhodes*, New York 1998, p. 141. The behavior of Jewish beggars was noted also by the Englishman North, who mentions a local saying according to which the Jew begs for alms while holding a staff, i.e., with threats (L. LANDAU, "Content and Form in *Me'am Lo'ez* of R. Jacov Culi", Ph.D. diss., Jerusalem 1980, p. 165. Compare to the description from a Jewish source from the 18th century: "And everyone who hears the words of the poor and the wanderers and the curses that they curse and the cries that they yell out, his hair will stand on end" (R. 'EZRA MALKI, *Ein Mishpat*, Istanbul 5530 [1770]; *Hoshen Mishpat*, 10, p. 105c).

12. If the sick could not be aided by a doctor of the society for the aid to the sick (*biqqur holim*), they had to suffice themselves with self-diagnosis and folk remedies. Regarding the aid societies to the sick, see Y. BEN-NAEH, "Societies", pp. 289-290, 314.

13. During years of drought and terrible economic distress, many died of hunger. Thus, for example, the testimony of the Englishman Henry Jessey about the death from hunger of hundreds of women in Jerusalem during the 1650s (M. ISH-SHALOM, *Christian Travels in the Holy Land*, Tel Aviv 1965, pp. 354-355).

society, very much like its neighbors, was a class-oriented society, stratified on the basis of distinguished ancestry, wealth, and scholarship. The Jewish community was officially divided into three socio-economic classes: wealthy, middle-class, and poor; each of these containing sub-categories. At the top of the hierarchy were the men of wealth, the owners of capital, large-scale lessors or merchants who were close to the Sultan's Court and to leading government officials, while at the bottom rung lay the masses of daily wage workers and the unemployed. The economic hardship that necessitated the work of women, in many cases outside of the home, contributed to the disgraceful image of poor women in a society that valued women segregation and modesty.

The individual's social standing within the community was known to the public through his tax assessment, his public roles, family ties, amount of dowries designated or given to his daughters, the amount of charity dispersed, and, of course, gossip. Often, the individual took a great deal of trouble to demonstrate his status both in the domestic sphere as well as in public life.

The determinants of status were intertwined, and real life demonstrated that scholarship and lineage tended to join together with wealth<sup>14</sup>. Wealth and political power were always contributing to one another — high economic status was the *a priori* condition for the attaining of leadership positions, while a position of leadership in the community helped increase personal wealth and prestige. Thus, at the head of Jewish society stood an elite of limited number, whose members usually were outstanding in their distinguished lineage, wealth, and wisdom, with interwoven marriage and financial ties. The poor remained outside of this circle, bereft not only of capital, but also of any political power (see below).

Attainment of wealth and social status was a dearly desired goal that remained but an unattainable wish for many<sup>15</sup>. A certain degree of flexibility and mobility between classes did take place, but it was uncommon. Theoretically, each individual had the possibility of acquiring prestigious status and attain a position of leadership and influence in a legitimate manner, through the power of ambition and personal talents in three main ways: a) becoming wealthy by luck or skill — usually by leasing tax-holdings, trade,

14. On the link between wealth and honor, see the proverb *Ay Paras ay onor*, "Where there is money, there is honor": A. ALKALAY, *Dichos*, *op. cit.* [above, n. 9] p. 129) and similarly, *Al riko todos los tyenen por sayvo*, "Everyone considers the wealthy to be wise": *ibid.*, p. 130.

15. Folk proverbs clearly transmit this feeling. For sayings dealing with wealth and poverty, see, for example, A. ALKALAY, *Dichos*, *op. cit.* (above, n. 9), pp. 129-133; see also the section on the power of money, pp. 134-137.

or supply to senior officials; b) scholarship, which usually meant achieving a prominent level of Jewish scholarship, or c) marriage with a person of higher social status. In practice, however, under the prevailing social and economic circumstances, a poor person found it extremely difficult to extricate oneself from poverty, lacking the basic capital in order to forge ahead. He could not afford to devote long years to learning, and marriages were pre-arranged among people in the same class. The poor lacked the necessary additional resource of useful social connections<sup>16</sup>. Descending the social order was not uncommon; it was due mainly to impoverishment in the wake of natural disaster, death of a patron, and similar circumstances<sup>17</sup>.

The lowly status of the community's poor was especially evident in the synagogue, which was the main arena for the exhibition of social relations, seating arrangements (poor people sat in the seats considered as unimportant), honorary tasks and the atmosphere that very well reflected the class character of Jewish society. As they were not able to donate money or expensive artifacts, they did not receive the due desirable honors<sup>18</sup>.

The poor, therefore, suffered from humiliation and social isolation, often, too, on the part of relatives whose lot improved; and such feelings did not disappear even in their darkest hour<sup>19</sup>. Those who became impoverished and the poor suffered so much that there were among them those who preferred death to a life of distress and shame, and committed suicide<sup>20</sup>. In death as in life, the poor man was in the company of his own social class — buried in a public burial ground, with a simple gravestone, and often without any mark.

16. The difficulty in climbing up the social ladder is the background for the great popularity of folktales in which poor folk suddenly become rich through finding a treasure, making a wish, marrying a rich beauty, etc.

17. See, for example, *Shevet Mussar*, pp. 48b-48c.

18. R. Eliyahu HA-COHEN criticized the discrimination against the poor in a picturesque manner. See *Shevet Mussar*, pp. 110d-111a, 112a.

19. See, for example, *Shevet Mussar*, pp. 14c-14d; *Me'il Šedakah*, p. 114d. A similar reality is reflected by the folk proverb stating *El prove i el hazino ni paryentes ni amigo*, "The poor and sick have nary a relation and nary a friend;" and *Ni proves ni hazinos no tyenen ayuda de los vizinos*, "The sick and the poor no neighbors' help have they": A. AL-KALAY, *Dichos*, op. cit. (above, n. 9), p. 131.

20. See testimonies from the spirits of suicides with whom R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen succeeded in communing: "... and that I hung myself because of my lack, it being near my wedding and I had no wherewithal for the wedding expenses and I chose death over life due to the shame." (another spirit speaks:) "I had debts and I could not withstand the suffering, and I was greatly afraid that I should need others and I chose death over life and I swallowed a death potion" (R. ELIYAHU HA-COHEN, *Minhath Eliyahu*, Salonika 5784 (1824), pp. 6c-6d. Note on honor now see: Y. BEN-NAEH, "El onor no se merka kan paras: Honor and its meaning among Ottoman Jews", *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore* XXIII (2004) [Hebrew, in Press].

### c. The cultural experience of poverty

To the material and social dimensions of poverty one must add the cultural experience, as the social position of the individual was mostly a direct result of his socio-economic status. The documentary sources in Hebrew that were preserved give us a glimpse primarily into the life of the community's rabbinic and economic elite, and especially about its norms and ideals, while the masses left almost nothing to hint at its patterns of daily life, feelings, and desires. Although we lack any concrete knowledge relating to the "culture of poverty" but there are hints that these strata of society were closer to the surrounding society, and that their religious practices were not up to par according to the halakhic authorities. Here we may also raise the question of the link between poverty and transgressing religious commandments, accepted morals, and communal standards regulations. There is no research about the correlation between poverty and delinquency in Ottoman society, or the association between them. It seems that Western ideas, according to which poverty testified to some sin or served to mark those destined for a life of crime, were slowly dribbling into Jewish society, probably through former Marranos who left the Iberian peninsula during the 16th and 17th centuries<sup>21</sup>.

The reality reflected in Hebrew language sources shows that a great deal of certain criminal activities may be attributed to the lower classes of Jewish society, and with good reason. The economic and social polarization, the geographic distribution, and the overt and covert religious pressure caused the weakening of self-discipline, mainly among the poor masses<sup>22</sup>. A large group of people at the margins of Jewish society felt deprived and scorned by the leadership, mainly because it was unfairly represented, and in practice did not take part in various decisions. The feeling of being passed over, of injustice and alienation, most probably led many to become culturally and even politically close to the surrounding society<sup>23</sup> and perhaps even encouraged converts to Islam, primarily among those who expected an improvement in their social and economic status. Married and single immigrants who reached the large cities alone in search of work

21. Compare H.H. BEN-SASSON, *Hagut ve-Hanhagah*, Jerusalem 1959, pp. 69, 76. In Amsterdam, the perception of poverty was outstanding not only as a socio-economic condition, but also as a cultural class, in this case negative. This perception was apparently characteristic of the Spanish and Portuguese in the West.

22. On the behavior of the masses, see for example Baey HAYEI, *Hoshen Mishpat*, Part II, 72, p. 69c.

23. Thus, for example, Jews cooperated with the riffraff that included Christians, Muslims, and janissaries in the riots and looting that accompanied the uprising in Istanbul in the winter of 1688 (BEN-NAEH, loc. cit. [above, n. \*], p. 351).

lacked familial restraints, and were prone to religious and moral delinquency. The two main factors in forming the correlation between poverty and crime were the harsh economic conditions and ignorance. Objectively, economic hardship made it more difficult for the poor to obey the halakhic injunction not to work on the Sabbath or Jewish holy days, to purchase kosher foodstuffs (which were more expensive than others), to adhere strictly to the rules of modesty and to devote hours to Torah study, since most of their time was spent in the pursuit of their daily bread<sup>24</sup>. The sources show us clearly that there is an additional fact: at the close of the 17th century and during the first quarter of the 18th century, there was a broad *stratum* of "ignoramuses" within the Jewish masses, lacking even basic knowledge of Judaism, and that due to their illiteracy and ignorance, they committed many offenses<sup>25</sup>. These families sent their children out to work, thus they were prevented from entering school and taken out of any orderly education, in such a way that the cycle of poverty and ignorance perpetuated itself and widened. The rich literary production in Ladino beginning from the 1720's was supposed to redress the balance, as testified to by the apologetic introductions of the writers and translators.

### 3. The poor within the community

Aside from the economic burden placed on the community by poverty, the existence and presence of the poor had many implications for various spheres of community life. The discussion below explores the social tension

24. R. Eliyahu ha-Cohen and others claimed that poverty which meant difficulties in staying alive, the pursuit of livelihood, density of living quarters, and other factors, caused the loss of self-respect and modesty, indecent behavior and crime: *Shevet Mussar*, 30a-30b; *Me'il Sedakah*, p. 26a, *Hemdut Yamim*, "Holidays and Festivals", Izmir 5491 (1731), pp. 46c-46d. The idea that poverty and riches are indecent qualities in man and bring about the transgression of all of the commandments in the Torah (R. ELIYAHU HA-COHEN, *Hut shel Hessed*, Izmir 5625 [1865], p. 27a) is also expressed by R. Ya'akov KHULI, *Me'am Lo'ez*, Exodus, Constantinople 5493 (1733), *Beshalah*, pp. 143b-144a. There were poor people who tried to maintain a proper Jewish way of life despite the difficulties of life, and the writer of the *Shevet Mussar* praised them for this: *Shevet Mussar*, p. 31b.

25. Not only do the "ignoramuses" make light of the forbidden acts on the Sabbath and the mortifications of fast days, but they are so sunken in ignorance and lack of knowledge that in these places, there are so many "ignoramuses" that they don't even know the *Shema Yisrael* ("Hear O Israel") prayer nor the Eighteen Benedictions prayer (R. Aharon AMARILLIO, *Pnei Aharon*, Salonika 5558 [1798], *Orah Hayim*, 2, p. 3a). See also R. Ya'akov KHULI, *Me'am Lo'ez*, Genesis, Constantinople 5490 (1730), *Lekh Lekha*, p. 74a; R. Isaac MAGRISO, *Me'am Lo'ez*, Numbers, Constantinople 5524 (1764), *Mattoth*, p. 151a. However, we barely have any expressions of opposition to religious authority or manifestations of atheism as in Western Europe.

that characterized the Jewish communities of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, and the struggles around the question of whether the poor are entitled to the privilege of participating in communal decisions and leadership<sup>26</sup>.

#### a. Social tension

The class stratification in the Jewish community involved constant social tension. Economic growth increased the gaps in the Jewish community and aroused many discussions on the topic of social justice, charitable giving, the status of the poor, and other related subjects. The Jews' relative autonomy in internal matters and the method of tax collection left the shaping of the character of the self-leadership and the determination of the taxation procedures to internal decision-making. This, in turn, paved the way for internal dissension on these topics, which of necessity expressed class interests. The opposing interests between rich and poor, for example, on the question of taxation, became more pronounced mainly during times of economic crisis and increase in the tax burden<sup>27</sup>. Among the painful phenomena which aroused deep bitterness and resentment were tax exemptions, the practice of handing over poor people to the authorities for not paying taxes, the determination of tax brackets, and other various ways some wealthy individuals used in order to avoid paying (on the whole or proportionate) taxes with other members of the Jewish community<sup>28</sup>. Given this reality, solidarity deteriorated among community members<sup>29</sup>.

Only a few of the expressions of social tension have survived, and a very small portion of the evidence reflects the voice of those who considered

26. This topic was explored in full in my doctoral dissertation: BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), pp. 142-146.

27. This went on to such an extent, that some people claimed that the lack of unity, mutual hatred, differences of opinion, and deep-seated divisions among Jews were what caused their hardship and are what delay the coming of the Messiah: *Hemdut Yamim*, "Holidays and Festivals," pp. 178b-178c.

28. The disagreements regarding taxation in the 17th century clearly express class interests. Among the most frequent topics of disagreement were the issues of progressive taxation (division of the tax burden in an irregular way, either according to funds or number of people, setting the tax ceilings, exemption of the poor and the scholars, and levying gabellas. On this topic, see also BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), pp. 146-147.

29. M. ROZEN, *In Mediterranean Pathways*, Tel Aviv 1993, p. 166. Rozen discussed this issue more extensively in her article on the Jewish community of Salonika during the second half of the 16th century. According to Rozen, the solidarity that existed among members of the community was similar to solidarity existing among a minority group protecting itself from its environment, more than the solidarity which is inherent in members of an internal organization vis a vis other organizations. In this context, Almosnino's evidence about the tensions between rich and poor is especially interesting, as well as the tensions within the classes themselves: P. ROMEU FERRÉ (ed.), *Moisés Almosnino, Crónica de los Reyes Otomanos*, Barcelona 1998, p. 184.



themselves deprived and injured — members of the lower and middle classes. What remains in the rabbinic literature are mainly hints and indirect evidence of the critical views of those opposing leadership circles. Among the writings of scholars and thinkers with strong social content, we must particularly note R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen of Izmir<sup>30</sup>. Additional evidence of social tension may be seen in the book *Hemdat Yamim*, apparently composed in Izmir during the 1720's, and the harsh words it quotes (even if not original) fit the difficult reality depicted in other contemporary sources<sup>31</sup>. Many rabbis avoided any comment, even when they observed corrupt practices, due to their family ties with the leadership class, and their dependence on them for their livelihood and honors. Hebrew poetry of the period constituted another let out for expressing social and moral criticism. Several examples are found in the ironic and critical poems of R. Israel Najara and R. Menaḥem de Lonzano in the late 16th century, and the first two decades of the 17th century. These two lived most of their lives in the Syrian-Palestinian province, but were also acquainted with some Anatolian communities. About fifty years later, R. Moshe Yehuda 'Abbas, who lived in Egypt, expressed himself with great bitterness in one of his poetical letters sent to R. Avraham ha-Yakhini, a noted preacher in Istanbul, regarding the painful social injustices in a community, which he did not identify by name<sup>32</sup>.

It is difficult to determine whether we might speak of a continuous exacerbation of relations between the classes escalated, or, what is more likely, it was a matter of temporary episodes linked to fluctuations in economic conditions. It may very well be that urban Jewish society was influenced by what was happening in their immediate environment; we need only mention the social tension that was prevalent in most of Anatolia in the late

30. See below quotations and further references. For the only treatment of the social trend in his writings, and regarding his connection to the *Sefer Hasidim* ("Book of the Pious") see S. WERSES, "R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen of Izmir," *Yavne* 2, 1940, pp. 166-168.

31. Other such sources are the writings of R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen and the regulations of R. Haim Aboul'afia. The compiler of *Hemdat Yamim* copied many sections from *Divrei Hakhamim* by the preacher R. Leib Pochowitz. It is clear that the redactor found similarities between the social situation and the religious situation in the communities of Eastern Europe; even the social rebuke seemed relevant enough for inclusion in the book.

32. "... they take property from orphans and from women and take from them every asset that they own in order to repay their debts while the poor among my people are imprisoned in their own homes, and each one in distress shall they eat and drink the blood of the abject while the latter try and collect the money to pay their Jizye. The rich are placed at the head of the people while the poor are in the dungheap; the rich have removed any compassion from themselves and hearken not to the moans of the poor" (M. WALLENSTEIN, "A Poem by Mosheh Yehudah Abbas [Ms. 2580, Neubauer]", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 1, 1956, pp. 165-171). See also R. Israel NAJARA, *Mesaheqet ba-Tevel*, Safed 5348 (1584), 3a-b and more.

16th century and the first quarter of the 17th century<sup>33</sup>. The renewed appearance of social criticism towards the end of the 17th century may be attributed not only to the worsening of economic conditions, but also to the increase in the status and political power of the *hakhamim*, the rabbis, and a growing sense of self-assurance on their part. During the 18th century, the sense of increasing isolation on the part of the surrounding muslim society was added to the worsening economic distress, with dire consequences for Jewish society.

Another line was drawn between the masses of poor who were usually completely ignorant of any learning, and the scholarly class, primarily those among them who held positions in the community. It is a commonly held belief that the attitude towards *hakhamim* and Torah scholars was one of esteem and respect, but apparently not all felt this way. Folktales preserve the voice of the masses to a great degree, and clearly hint at the tension between these two groups. This tension stands out in the stories of the 'God loves the heart' type<sup>34</sup>. In these folktales, the innocence of the simple, unlearned individual is what is most cherished and beloved by God, while the learned scholar in his official capacity is revealed as the one who is not truly wise, and although knowledgeable is lacking any feeling. It may very well be that the increasing tension between the groups might be linked to some regulations passed in various communities during the late 16th century against the appointment of communal rabbis (*marbitzei Torah*)<sup>35</sup>.

The tensions and social conflicts in the larger communities proved to be fertile ground for the outbreak of Sabbateanism, and does much to explain some of the rapid dissemination of the Sabbatean beliefs. A document by the Dutchman Thomas Koenen confirms this hypothesis: he explicitly mentioned that the poor had hopes of dividing up the property of the rich Jews who did not accept Shabbatai Zevi as Messiah<sup>36</sup>.

33. Expressions of the tension in Anatolia may be found in books of advice to rulers, as well as in poetry. The writers who sing dirges on the setting of the Empire and withering away of its institutions, also complained about the improper social situation. A good example is the satirical poem by historian Mustapha 'Ali, written in the 1580's: A. TIETZE, "The Poet as a Critic of Society: A 16th Century Ottoman Poem", *Turcica* 9, 1977, pp. 120-125.

34. As quoted by T. ALEXANDER, "Elohim Ohev Lev: To the Study of Judeo-Spanish Folktales", in I. BEN-AMI (ed.), *The Sephardi and Oriental Jewish Heritage*, Jerusalem 1982, pp. 296-302; ID., *The Beloved Friend-and-a-Half*, Jerusalem-Beer Seva 1999, pp. 222-231.

35. For more about the tension between the community and the rabbis, see BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), pp. 355-357.

36. T. KOENEN, *Ydele verwachtinge der Joden getoont in der Persoon van Sabethai Zevi* (A. Lagawier and E. Shmuely transl.; Y. Kaplan int. & notes), Jerusalem 1998, p. 70. On the identification of the poor as believers, versus the non-believing hated rich see also the words of Nathan of Gaza: G. Scholem, *Sabbatai Zevi - The Mystical Messiah 1626-1676*, London, 1973, pp. 742, 746. We do know that among the believers were also Rabbis and wealthy people.

Gershom Scholem discussed the social background for the outbreak of the Sabbatean movement and its huge success, and noted the correlation between social class and belief, with masses of believers contrasted with an elite that denied Shabbatai Zevi's messianism. However, he later on dis-sented from this explanation, emphasizing that the relevant sources were slanted and mostly written after the events, and therefore unreliable. It seems that we must go back and seriously consider the explanation that during its highest point, the Sabbatean movement was first and foremost led by masses of poor and minor employees in religious-rabbinic hierarchy. This view considers the Sabbatean movement as somewhat of an expression of an already existing broad popular protest against the difficult political and economic conditions of the mid-17th century, in and outside the community, and of popular longing for an ideal-messianic leader<sup>37</sup>. In this sense, Sabbateanism is similar to contemporary heterodox Muslim sects (for example, the Kadizadeliler) characterized, among other traits, by their call for social justice and anti-establishment protest, mainly against the Sultan and his Court<sup>38</sup>.

#### b. The poor and their participation in community life

In the Sephardic Jewish communities of the Levant, social and political status was a direct result of personal status, which, as mentioned above, was the totality of ancestry, wealth, and the ability to contribute to the community. Those who lacked property and did not pay taxes had no respect and were barred from influence — no right to elect or to be elected, to vote and to influence public matters. Only if those poor were scholars did they have any public standing. Jewish public leadership was, therefore, in the hands of an extremely limited elite. Moreover, the Jewish social values and method of leadership had actually perpetuated the nearly unchallenged control of the wealthy and those close to them. The interests of the highest level of scholars, who were linked to the wealthy families, were identical to that of their benefactors, and so, actually, *halakhah*, or Jewish law, in accordance with its interpretations by the scholars from this circle helped the wealthy and strengthened their position.

37. Compare Scholem's foreword to his book on Shabbetai Zevi in Hebrew and the English edition of the same book: G. SCHOLEM, *Shabbatai Zevi and the Sabbatean Movement in his Lifetime*, part I, Tel Aviv 1957, pp. 3-5; *Id.*, *Sabbatai Zevi — The Mystical Messiah 1626-1676*, London 1973, pp. 3-7. His position on this issue rested on a mistaken theory, which held that the large communities in the East were enjoying a period of flourishing at the time. A comparison to the social foundations of Hasidism, and to Dinur's thesis on this issue is unavoidable.

38. L.T. DARLING, *Revenue Raising and Legitimacy*, Leiden-New York-Köln, 1996, p. 292.

The demand of the wealthy "to rule over" their communities was supported by the majority of the *poskim*, the rabbinic arbiters of Jewish law of the 16th and 17th centuries. Some of the most prominent 16th century rabbis laid down a kind of social covenant that regulated relations in the Jewish community. They would compare the society to a body in which certain limbs were the leaders (head, face) while others were meant to be led (rear, legs), and required every person to know his place and position, and to behave accordingly. The wealthy were worthy of leadership, and in exchange for power, they were responsible for the maintenance of communal services including the support of its poor. Those among them who were officeholders were eligible in front of the Ottoman state. On their part, the poor were required to express their thanks in submissiveness and in absolute obedience to the heads. Oppositional and rebellious behavior was considered to be insolent ungratefulness, unacceptable and damaging to the proper order of things. The rabbinic authorities were quite outspoken, expressing themselves quite bluntly against any such straying from their proper place by the masses, a behavior which would result in social chaos<sup>39</sup>. In the first half of the 17th century one of Salonika's most eminent rabbis, R. Haim Shabtai, fiercely attacked the masses' demand to participate in the leadership, while protecting the status quo with the claim that it should be done this way because the majority of community issues deal with monetary matters. As an afterthought, the latter regretfully mentioned that the uprising by the masses and their lack of obedience became a too frequent occurrence, and corrupted the acceptable social norms<sup>40</sup>. These bold words did not prevent other rabbis from expressing different opinions, and it seems that during the course of the 17th century, the clear-cut stance of the halakhic authorities in support of the right of the wealthy to be in control had slightly weakened, apparently in view of ongoing social changes. As of now, we have no concrete evidence of the correlation between professional occupation, organization and position in internal community politics before the second half of the 18th century, as is demonstrated by Ya'akov Barnai's study of Izmir, where artisans in the Jewish guilds demanded political power<sup>41</sup>.

39. On Almosnino's social views, see M.Z. BENAYA, *Mosheh Almosnino of Salonika*, Tel Aviv 1996, pp. 26-35. For example, see his important sermon: *Me'ametz Koah*, Venice 5348 (1588), the first sermon, p. 15b, as well as his commentary on the Book of Ruth, *Yedei Mosheh*, Venice 5357 (1597), Ruth, pp. 61a-b.

40. See R. Haim SHABTAI, *Torat Haim*, Part II, 40, p.128c; *ibid.*, part III, 34, pp. 51a-b.

41. See Y. BARNAI, "Outline of the History of Jewish Society in Izmir in the Late 18th Century and the Early 19th Century", *Zion* 47, 1982, pp. 69-76.

Daily life of the congregation was regulated and organized by elected leadership, but certain issues such as authorization of communal regulations (*haskamoth*) were supposed to be decided by all the members who paid taxes. The principle of majority rule had been accepted by everyone for centuries, but the essential nature and character of the "majority" had not been permanently settled. This fact opened up the way for many differences of opinions in the communities. As expected, the wealthy determinedly opposed decision by majority of votes, and demanded limiting this principle to a majority of wealthy and distinguished people (*rov binyan*, literally "the major [part] of building") or at least, a majority of the taxpayers. The public demanded the application of the principle in an absolute manner, and to define majority as the numerical majority. The increase in the number of situations in which a few wealthy people found themselves pitted against numerically greater opponents, obligated the leading rabbinic arbiters in the Ottoman Empire of the 16th century to make a ruling in principle on this issue. By the second half of the 16th and during the 17th century, there were several concurrent opinions on the problem of co-opting the poor in community leadership<sup>42</sup>:

a) All are equal in all matters regarding public decision-making "and we must continue to follow the majority of the public's opinions" even if the minority are "wiser and wealthier."

b) In all monetary matters, it is specifically the opinion of those with money that must be followed. This determination, based on a ruling by Rabeinu Asher (d. 1327, Spain), is open to various interpretations, since nearly every issue is liable to include something covered by the definition of "matters touching upon monetary affairs," even the appointment of office-holders. Among the most outstanding spokesmen of this opinion was the eminent Salonikan rabbi, Shmuel de Medina (d. 1589/90).

c) R. Yosef Mitrani, the leading rabbi of Istanbul during the first third of the 17th century (d. 1639), developed the second approach, and interpreted Rabeinu Asher's words to mean that "every leadership dealing with monetary affairs shall not behave any way except according to the majority of those paying the tax." According to his statements, whoever pays any amount of tax whatsoever should be among those counted, since for him the tax he pays, as meager as it is, constitutes a considerable sum. Over time, we can see a clear strengthening of the "democratic" trend taking the part of equal votes for each taxpayer. During the late 17th century, this approach was accepted in Salonika as well.

42. For a more extensive discussion and detailed references, see BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), pp. 145-146.

#### 4. Coping with poverty

It was difficult to escape poverty. Not only were the poor visible everywhere, but each person knew that he could easily become destitute. We may investigate the attempt to cope with the problem of poverty both on the theoretical plane of thought that dealt with the acceptance and explanation of the existence and meaning of poverty; as well as on the practical daily level, in taking care of the numerous needy people. The very fact of the existence of institutions and establishment of so many networks for assistance and aid testify to the perception of poverty as a basic social phenomenon, with the charitable givers not denying poverty but trying to help the most needy to survive.

##### a. Coping with poverty on theoretical level

It was clear to everyone living at that time that poverty and wealth alike were the result of divine decree for each individual. This belief did not prevent people from having doubts and second thoughts about the reasons for the unjust division of monetary resources in the world, and wondering about the purpose of suffering. Many of the poor were extremely bitter about the severity of their cruel fate, and tried to understand the purpose of their long suffering. Answers, and hope were to be given by those who were supposed to understand God's will — thinkers, commentators, and preachers.

Despite the methodological difficulties facing the researcher, popular literature is a very valuable source for the study of Ottoman Jewish society. Not only does the class-economic conflict between rich and poor exist in the folk literature, but it is the very central topic in various literary genres; and Tamar Alexander-Frizer claims that it far outshines all the other conflicts discussed in the literature. The folktale reflects the daily hardships without any beautifying or idealization, while at the same time it presents a fictional situation which although is obviously improbable or even impossible, reflects the desires and heartfelt wishes of the downtrodden poor, their attempts to cope emotionally with poverty, and their attempts to extricate themselves from their distress — a wish that the poor themselves knew would not materialize, except by magical means<sup>43</sup>.

43. T. ALEXANDER-FRIZER, *The Beloved*, pp. 101-106. More than one half of the total of seventy-three "Salonika stories" deal with the social and economic conflict. The problem of dating, of course, causes great difficulty to the scholar, but we may assume that similar stories were circulated even before the 19th century. On the identification of the rich man as a stingy miser, ignoramus, and not devout; in contrast to the poor man who is the true good

For the most part, the contrast between the poor man and the rich man did not end with property ownership. Evil qualities such as wickedness, miserliness and cruelty were ascribed to the rich man, while the poor man was described as an opposite type — goodhearted, innocent believer in God. An additional character, usually a figure of mockery, was the *nouveau riche*. In tales of conflict between rich and poor, the rich man is usually properly punished, losing all his possessions and suffering, while the weak poor man wins and receives his just reward. In this manner, the stories did not only serve to comfort and amuse, but also were a catharsis and a safety valve for trends that threatened the stability of the social structure. Other stories were intended to facilitate acceptance of the decree of fate, as it were, and thus weaken and suppress the desire for social mobility. Thus, for example, the archetypal and frequently told tale on the poor man who remained poor despite various efforts to enrich him<sup>44</sup>.

Preachers and commentators throughout the ages were asked to explain the reasons for poverty. They did so primarily in answer to questions from the public, and as part of the attempt to soften the sting of social tension through conciliatory theories that explained the inequality. In their attempts to strengthen Jewish social unity, they raised conciliatory claims based on already existing ideas in Jewish thought that emphasized the mutual need of the communal office-holders and the classes. According to the "theory of organs," which was also prevalent in contemporary Ashkenazi communities, society was one body, with each organ having its own importance and value<sup>45</sup>. All shared the belief that reality resulted from divine decree, under God's constant supervision. Moreover, "the world is like an ever-turning wheel", that, while at certain times certain people are wealthy, at other times, others are wealthy<sup>46</sup>. Among the most frequent explanations for the unequal distribution of wealth were: a) Wealth is awarded according to one's deeds<sup>47</sup>. The wealthy have built up merit, and are eligible for Su-

person, educated, and modest, see also R. Menachem DE LONZANO, *Shtei Yadot*, "Tova Tokhahath", Venice 5378 (1618), p.136a. For stories about the stingy rich man, see, for example, M. KOEN-SARANO, *Djoha ke Dize?*, Jerusalem 1991, p. 332; T. ALEXANDER & D. NOY (eds.), *The Treasure of Our Fathers*, Jerusalem 1989, pp. 85-87, 140-141.

44. M. KOEN-SARANO, *Konsejas I Konsejikas*, Jerusalem 1994, pp. 202-204; ID., *Kuentos del Folklor de la Famiya Djudeo-Espanyol*, Jerusalem 1986, pp.176-178; T. ALEXANDER & D. NOY, *ibid.*, p. 152. See also stories about fate that may not be avoided, both for good and evil: T. ALEXANDER & D. NOY, *ibid.*, pp. 67-69, 91-93, 222-224.

45. J. KATZ, *Masoret u-Mashber* ("Tradition and Crisis"), Jerusalem 1953, pp. 231-232. Also see the writings of R. Yosef Katzavi on mutual responsibility "Since (the people of) Israel are holy they are considered to be as one body, and when seized by one limb all feel it" (R. Yosef KATZAVI, *Rav Yosef*, Constantinople 5496 [1736], "Selected Sermons", p. 11d).

46. Compare R. Ephraim of Loncic, BEN-SASSON, *Hagut ve-Hanhagah*, *op. cit.* (above, n. 21), p.106.

47. This claim was stated by the author of the *Me'am Lo'ez*, Exodus, *Beshalah*, 143b.

preme grace through the merit of their good deeds. As a direct result of this perception, the poor's religious observance was doubted, and they were required to respect the rich and to submit to them. b) Wealth is a temporary deposit intended for a specific purpose, primarily for the good of the poor, and the upkeep of Torah scholars. He who wins possession of wealth is being tested — and if he does not pass the test, and fails to use his wealth for worthy purposes, his wealth will be taken from him. The moralistic writers sharply denounced wasting money on a life of luxury, fine clothing, expensive jewelry and splendid homes<sup>48</sup>.

R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen of Izmir is one of the very few who dealt extensively with the question of poverty, and his book *Me'il Sedakah* (literally "Coat of charity") is a mine of sources on this subject. In this book he presents a series of sayings and statements regarding poverty and the poor. According to him poverty is part of standard human reality, and a concrete manifestation of divine will. Not only do the poor serve as the shining example and paradigm of the fickleness of the fate of human beings, and thus moderate the rich people, they are preferred by God, and are beloved by him; God, as it were, is pleased by the poor<sup>49</sup>. In one of his essays, he tried to provide an answer to the material and emotional distress of the poor:

... And as for you, the poor man, since every day that you live on this earth you add on the observance of commandments, thereby increasing your reward in the world-to-come, why are you sick of your life, even though they are full of sorrow, why are you not happy with the additional merit you earn for the commandments that you perform each day... and knowing this, you should suffer the sorrow of poverty with love, and bear in your mind that the sorrow of poverty is little when considering the value of the reward for the deeds that you are earning every day that you are alive, and if you are sorry that your poverty causes you to lack respect from people, and even earns you contempt... consider only the honor awaiting you in the world-to-come, when you stand before those who are greatly respected for their superior degree of holiness, angels and sainted righteous with heavenly crowns attached to their heads... and of what use is respect to you, and if they hate you because of your poverty, what of it, and what care you, since your Creator loves you and his

48. *Shevet Mussar*, p. 4b. On the obligation of the rich to donate money for poor and captives, for the synagogue, to buy books and support *yeshivot* and scholars, see *ibid.*, pp. 9b-d.

49. Among the expressions are: "The poor man is full of Commandments (has performed many Commandments) the poor man has been tested by God, the poor is the one who brings the *Shekhinah* (the divine Presence) on earth... the poor man is beloved of the Omnipresent... the poor man is God's moral staff... the poor man is very important to God... God loves the poor... the poor are the messengers of the All-Merciful... and they are the ones who hope for the coming of the Redemption (*Me'il Sedakah*, pp. 73c-74a). Also *ibid.*, p. 76d; and in a source intended for the broader public: R. Yitzhak ARGOTI, *Me'am Lo'ez*, Deuteronomy, Preface, Istanbul 5533 (1773), p. 7a.

50. *Shevet Mussar*, pp. 14c-14d.

Presence is upon you... and if you are sorrowful that your words are not heard, as it is written: "the wisdom of the unfortunate is scorned," keep in mind that the Holy One blessed be He hears you... and if your distress that people do not become friendly with you nor bring you to banquets with them but you dwell in solitude... and if you are sorrowful that no-one invites you to any large or small feast think of the delights that are prepared for you in Paradise<sup>50</sup>.

In another place, he wrote that due to their way of life, "the poor are very nearly like angels"<sup>51</sup> while ourdays reader wonders what kind of reception he received from his listeners, and whether any of them caught the bitter irony hidden in his words.

The attitude of the community towards the poor was ambivalent: On one hand, aid existed, based on a feeling of brotherhood and mercy towards the luckless, and on the religious value of this commandment (see below); on the other hand, there were contempt, suspicion, and rejection towards the poor, in particular towards the itinerant poor and strangers, who were suspected of being swindlers and criminals. Members of the upper classes looked suspiciously at them, seeing idle, fraudulent people of bad character. Even among those who agreed to help them there were those who did not hesitate to heap derogatory abuse on them<sup>52</sup>. It was towards these people that R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen directed his defense of the poor, thus representing a minor voice in the community—a very limited group of independent rabbis who had a powerful sense of social sensitivity, and did not hesitate to express it. He defended the poor, whose difficult life circumstances caused them to be reviled in so ugly a light. In his writings, he censures the wealthy for their way of life and reproves them about their alienated and overweening attitude towards their brethren<sup>53</sup>.

The remnants of the criticism against the wealthy that survived are mainly directed against the pursuit of luxuries and against people who refrained from helping the needy. It is possible that at the close of the 17th

51. "It is known that the rich are closer to bestiality, they fill their bellies with food and drink; not so the poor, who are closer to the spiritual, without food and drink, and stripped of all of those material items that they desire, like excursions, and they are closer to being like angels who do not eat, neither do they drink, nor do they sleep and therefore the Holy One blessed be He loves them" (*Me'il Šedakah*, 74b).

52. This despite the explicit prohibition in the *Shulhan 'Arukh, Yoreh Deah*, 149, d. See the lively description by R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen of Izmir: "And even at the moment of giving a coin to the poor man they reprove him by saying the poor are not decent, they are swindlers, they are not of good character, they cannot behave in the way of all flesh but are likened to beasts, they are not part of the community, and other ugly sayings they say about them (*Me'il Šedakah*, Preface, p. 1a).

53. According to R. Eliyahu, the wealthy do not know that their wealth is only a temporary deposit destined to allow them to give alms: *Me'il Šedakah*, p. 10b; R. ELIYAHU HA-COHEN, *Midrash Eliyahu*, Izmir 5519 (1759), p. 18c.

century and at the beginning of the 18th, greater emphasis was placed on social issues, apparently due to the deteriorating economic situation of many, and the worsening of the relations between the classes within the community<sup>54</sup>. Those who were sensitive to the social situation also attacked those who cheated the poor and became rich on their backs: usurers, speculators, and others<sup>55</sup>. Preachers and Rabbis linked the signs of anti-social behavior with a drop in the overall moral level and religious observance. A fine example for this linkage is found in the writings of R. Haim Benveniste in the mid-17th century:

This generation has broken wide open the bonds of propriety, with no person protesting that they have left the House of God and this generation is full of so many breaches and have committed so many offenses, and the robbing of the poor and their sighing... everyone acts as is fit in his own eyes... and the will of the Torah has been breached<sup>56</sup>.

#### b. Coping on a practical level

Very little is known about the way in which the poor attempted to cope with their bitter fate. We can only guess that the day to day struggle with the hardships of existence was an individual matter, dependent on the personality of the needy, his needs, and circumstances of his life. A young and fertile woman left without a breadwinner always had the possibility of remarrying, as well as finding some income-producing employment even prostitution. Others, old men and women, and children used social networks for aid. The first circle was that of family relatives, who were obligated, both legally and morally, to come to their aid. If these were unable to help, the needy person would swallow his pride and turn to the next circle of people close to him — neighbors and co-workers, based on the solidarity and the closeness among members of the guild or the society to which he belonged. The last place to go would be the charitable aid institutions of the congregation or the community — through the rabbi or the charity treasurer. When there was no other way out, and the pauper lost all remnants of

54. See for example *Mesaheket Batevel*, pp. 3b-4a; *Shtei Yadot, Tova Tokhahath*, pp. 124b-125a, 138b. In contrast, see R. ELIYAHU HA-COHEN, *Me'il Šedakah*, 74b; 126c; *Shevet Mussar*, 15b-15c; *Hemdath Yamim*, Holidays and Festivals, p. 247b; 280d; *Hemdath Yamim*, Sabbath, Izmir (5491/1731), p. 18d and following.

55. For additional examples, see the "regulations" (*taqqanot*) of R. Haim Aboul'afia, the end of the book *Hanan Elohim*, Izmir 5496 (1736).

56. Baey HAYEL, *Even ha-Ezer*, 14, 25a. The question deals with marriages made in jest. In another source, from the first quarter of the 17th century, it says: "And our brethren who dwell in the Land, the orphan will not receive fair judgment and the dispute of the widow will not be brought before them" (R. SHLOMO IBN HASON, *Beit Shlomo*, Salonika 5480 [1720], "*Hoshen Mishpat*", 38, p. 142a).

his self-respect, the last resort was to beg for handouts — in one's native city, or a more drastic step — setting out on a begging journey, which often lasted months and years. Enjoying free food distributed by Muslim *waqfs* and using other services that they offered, was another option<sup>57</sup>. An entirely different way of coping with poverty was to leave the framework of society entirely and turn to crime and lawlessness — picking pockets, thievery and robbery, or the prostitution of young men and of women. Converting to Islam was always an appealing solution.

This chapter deals mainly with the ways of helping, both formal and informal, on the part of the individual and the community to the poor and the needy.

##### 5. Jewish society and the practice of charity

The Jewish Ottoman community felt itself obligated to supply basic religious services such as education and burial, a place for prayer, etc. In addition, it provided minimal social welfare for its members; both on an individual voluntary basis and in a public and institutionalized way. Not only did these activities require considerable resources, they also required suitable institutions, management and organization.

It seems that there is a direct line stretching from the communities of Iberian peninsula of the 14th and 15th centuries through to activities that characterized the communities of their descendants in the cities of the Ottoman Empire<sup>58</sup>.

There is no equivalent to it in other contemporary Jewish communities including the Spanish-Portuguese communities in Western Europe. Members of the community considered the act of giving charity as one of the characteristic traits of a Jew, as the idealized proverb testifies: "Judyo ki no

57. There are no documents, but I have no doubt that the majority of the *waqfs* did not discriminate among the needy. R. Joseph Karo allowed Jews to take charity from non-Jews when not in public: *Shulhan 'Arukh, Yoreh Deah, 254, a*.

58. The leaders of the Jewish communities of the Iberian peninsula did not consider themselves obligated to perform philanthropy on behalf of the weaker segments of society, but it was a matter for personal initiative. Rising social unrest and the rise of the societies brought about the establishment of means by which to care for the needy, and only from the 14th century onwards were there charitable funds and benevolent societies to aid the poor (Y. ASSIS, "Poor and Rich in the Jewish Society in Mediterranean Spain", *Pe'amim* 46-47, 1991, pp. 130-131; ID., "Mutual Help and Aid in the Jewish Communities in Spain", in H. BEINART (ed.), *Moreshet Sepharad: The Sephardi Legacy*, Jerusalem 1992, especially pp. 260-264). As regards Jewish communities within the Ottoman Empire, we lack real scholarly studies, and as of now have studies only in relation to Cairo: M. LITTMANN, "Egyptian Jewry in the XVIth and XVIIth Centuries", Ph.D. Diss., Ramat-Gan 1978, pp. 242-268.

ayuda a otro non ay" i.e., there is no Jew who does not help his fellow Jew<sup>59</sup>. The Ottoman Jewish community's unique way of taking care of its poor is more observable from the late 16th century onwards — and is characterized in its organization, its scope, and variation. The Jewish community was in this respect an exception in its environment as well — both in relation to Muslim society, as well as in relation to other religious communities in the Empire. The various types of Christian congregations did, in fact, act on behalf of their own poor, but this aid did not match the high degree of organization and the intensity of the aid extended by the Jewish community to its poor<sup>60</sup>.

Among the religious obligations of Islam for its believers is the commandment of charity, or *zakat*. This was intended to prove the believer's faith in the next world, and to help him attain merit in the Last Judgment. However, the principles of government in a Muslim state, and, of course, in the Ottoman state as well, did not obligate it to be concerned for the social welfare, nor the economic or cultural well-being of its citizens. In the absence of Western-style municipal authorities, these lacks were filled through the institution of the *waqf* who distributed food and provided education and medical care for the indigent; and through the daily voluntary actions among family members, guild members and neighborhood residents<sup>61</sup>. The Muslim public and its rulers considered poverty to be the decree of fate and a natural aspect of human existence. Poverty was not considered to be a problem or a phenomenon that should be stamped out, and begging was a legitimate way of life: it was not a social crime, and did not carry a negative stigma. No-one even thought of requiring the poor to perform manual labor, or to associate them with crime and social deviance.

In Europe, the situation was completely different. Since the beginning of modern times, the image of poverty underwent a change. The population of

59. M.D. ANGEL, *The Jews of Rhodes*, op. cit. (above, n. 11), p. 141.

60. The aid extended by the Christian community to their needy was voluntary, while the Jewish community levied taxes for this purpose. Foreigners recognized the special character of the Jewish community, as in the comment by Biddulph. In his letter from Aleppo in the year 1600, that there are no beggars among the Jews, since they take care of each other: Part of a Letter of Master William Biddulph from Aleppo, in S. Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrims*, VIII, Glasgow 1905, pp. 271-272. Another interesting source is the words of an Armenian churchman of the 18th century, praising the Jews of Istanbul for their charitable aid institutions: P.J. INJILIAN, *18. Asirda Istanbul* (H. Andreasyan transl.), Istanbul 1976, pp. 23-24.

61. Many of the institutions of the *waqf* were linked to the compounds of the mosques, and in addition, there were neighborhood *waqfs* that operated in the neighborhoods (see above, n. 7). Testimony of European travelers who reached Istanbul and other major cities in the Ottoman Empire show the great profusion of charitable deeds of individuals, and the concern of the *waqfs* for the poor as dominant phenomena in the life of the city.

the poor was no longer identical to those struck by an unfortunate fate and unable to support themselves, and their rising numbers and variation brought about both a change in the way in which society related to its poor, and to a change in values. Henceforth, West European Christian society tended to consider the paupers and tramps a threat to the public order. The poor were delineated from society, and required to work. The law had unconsciously made a connection between poverty and idleness, and what is more with crime and delinquency; and it was decided that it was worthy and proper to educate the poor, and to improve their lives, by coercion if need be<sup>62</sup>.

The stance of the Jews was influenced by the prevailing opinion in their environment, and the wealthy and important members of the Jewish communities in Europe — both in the Ashkenazi communities as well as in the western Sephardic communities, remotely related to the Sephardic communities in the Ottoman Empire. They considered begging and the life of wandering beggars a social deviation, and made every effort to keep such people away from their midst, people who were classified as behaving immorally, and who were potentially suspect of every transgression<sup>63</sup>. The Spanish-Portuguese Jewish community of Amsterdam provides an illuminating example: Yosef Kaplan described the regulated concern for the reputation and the respected image of the community and the “nation” as much as for the well-being of its poor, a concern which was manifested in various ways, some of them quite harsh. The heads of the community associated certain moral qualities and cultural-religious status with poverty, and in general considered poverty and beggary a social ill, as well as being scandalous and shameful behavior. The attitude was especially severe towards the Ashkenazi poor. The image of the refugees who reached Amsterdam was so low, that “Ashkenazi” soon became a synonym for pauper. The presence of the poor Ashkenazi refugees damaged the honorable image of the Portuguese-Jewish nation and constituted a threat to the morality of its young. Among

62. For an updated summary, see R. JÜTTE, *Poverty*, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3). On poverty and the attitude towards poverty in Europe, see also S. WOOLF, *The Poor*, *op. cit.* (above, n. 3), pp. 18-30.

63. Y. KAPLAN, “Attitude of Spanish and Portuguese Jews to the Ashkenazi Jews in 17th Century Amsterdam”, *Transition and Changes in Modern Jewish History: Essays Presented in Honor of Shmuel Ettinger*, Jerusalem 1987, pp. 400-204; 410-412; *Id.*, “Jewish Refugees from Germany (Ashkenaz) and Poland in Amsterdam during the Thirty Years War and the Pogroms of 1648 until 1660”, in R. BONFIL, M. BEN-SASSON, Y. HACKER (eds.), *Culture and Society in Medieval Jewry*, Jerusalem, 1989, pp. 587-619; I. BARTAL & Y. KAPLAN, “Emigration of Indigent Jews from Amsterdam to Eretz Israel (Palestine) at the Beginning of the Seventeenth Century”, *Shalem* VI, 1992, pp. 175-179.

the methods of action were reeducating and providing labor, limitations on the distribution of charity, and encouragement of emigration<sup>64</sup>.

What were the motivations for the act of charitable giving, both for the individual and the overall community? Why did Ottoman Jewish communities take upon themselves the burden of such expensive philanthropy more intensively than had ever before seen in any other religious community, during times when its own financial situation fluctuated? We may observe several reasons for this:

a) A pure philanthropic feeling, a sincere human emotion<sup>65</sup>.

b) The tradition of charity and benevolence (*hesed* in Heb.) in medieval Jewish communities, finally codified in the Code of Jewish Law. Summing up these laws of charity in the *Shulhan 'Arukh* reflects, to a certain degree, the actualities of life in the Sephardic Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire, and it seems that it mainly influenced the formation of the attitude of the more learned members of the community, and to lesser degree that of the community as a whole in its relation towards its poor and towards poverty<sup>66</sup>. The Jewish heritage on this subject includes several points regarding the feeling of mutual responsibility, the belief in its importance, and in the high regard for the commandment to give charitably both on the personal and the communal level, while on the other hand, there was a primordial fear of divine retribution as the penalty for failure to fulfill this commandment<sup>67</sup>. Charity matters in the rabbinic literature show the influence of

64. Y. KAPLAN, “The Self-Definition of the Sephardic Jews of Western Europe and their Relation to the Alien and the Stranger”, in B.R. GAMPEL (ed.), *Crisis and Creativity in the Sephardic World, 1391-1648*, New York 1997, pp. 132-133, 136-138. See also Y. KAPLAN, “The Portuguese Community in 17th-Century Amsterdam and the Ashkenazi World”, in J. MICHMAN (ed.), *Dutch Jewish History II*, Jerusalem 1989, pp. 23-45. Now see also T. LEVIE-BERNFELD, “Financing Poor Relief in the Spanish-Portuguese Community in Amsterdam in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries”, in J. ISRAEL & R. SALVERDA (eds.), *Dutch Jewry: Its History and Secular Culture*, Leiden-Boston-Koeln 2002, pp. 63-102.

65. “... if according to charity to the poor and visiting the sick and consoling the mourners and clothing the naked and burying the dead all of these shall obligate them the intellect and the person is forced to become sad and pained at his brother's trouble in order to distance the sorrow from himself, and the sorrow which he is experiencing and hurting at the pain and sorrow of his brother who is forced, at any rate, to provide benevolent deeds for them and to distance that very sadness from himself” (R. Shlomo LEVET HA-LEVI, *Divrei Shlomo*, Venice 5356 [1596], the sermon on *Vayera*, p. 74d).

66. There is a wealth of raw material on this subject in Y. BERGMAN, *Ha-sedakah be-Yisrael*, Jerusalem 1944. Also see, of course, summing up the laws of charitable giving as codified in R. Joseph KARO's book of the 16th century, *Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah*.

67. For a literal rendering of this feeling, see the fears of members of the community that if they refuse to give charitable funds, the cry of the poor will increase in the city, and with this transgression it is possible that numerous and evil troubles will befall us... (*Ein Mishpat, Hoshen Mishpat*, 10, p. 105c). The religious inspiration was the prime source for philanthropic activities in Christian countries as well, and it may be that it increased during the time of the Counter-Reformation (S. WOOLF, *The Poor*, *op. cit.* [above, n. 3], p. 24).

*kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism) and consists an important issue in the Hassidic customs that it inspired from the second half of the 16th century onwards. Kabbalistic reasons given for the commandment of charity explained its degrees of merit and its charm, as well as the great importance attributed to the giving of charity, mainly in its link to prayers<sup>68</sup>. The timing of giving of charity at specified moments in a person's life, and even during the prayer time, testifies to considering the act as a sanctified religious act. This is added to its important role in popular opinion as a means of protection, gaining success, and way to obtain divine kindness and benevolence in return. Disbursing charity was in a dimension higher than philanthropy. Among the motivations was the belief in the power of *sedakah*, "charity," as a kind of insurance before God, as a commandment whose recompense would be paid in the "world to come," and as a charm to save the individual from death and other misfortunes. Charity was considered an especially efficient mean for elevating the soul of the departed, who could no longer act by himself to correct his misdeeds; this is why many left explicit instructions in their will for this purpose, specifying sums and beneficiaries<sup>69</sup>. Many people used to make vows, personal penalty oaths of money, or contribute under various occasions such as mourning and joyful occasions, out of a feeling of mutuality between themselves and God, as if the giving by one individual could bring in its wake protection, divine giving, and fulfillment of the contributor's deepest desires. The general body of the community was considered as a single individual in this case, and philanthropy financed with public money also provided for the good of the community in its entirety. Preachers and rabbis claimed that generous behavior towards the needy elicited similar behavior by God towards his people, and that the fact that they helped the poor was likely to improve the situation of the Jewish people<sup>70</sup>.

c) Manifold contributions served as the sign of religious devoutness and superior social status of the donor, and all in all, it was part of the proper behavior worthy of the ideal Jew. Thus, donating charity was a way of acquiring gratitude, fame and prestige. The social importance of the act was greatly enhanced when it took place in the synagogue, mainly on Sabbath and festivals, when, in its public setting, it also took on a competitive as-

68. On the place of the Kabbalah in the encouragement of the act of charity, see: M. HALAMISH, *Kabbalah in Liturgy, Halakhah and Customs*, Ramat Gan 2000, pp. 382-400.

69. Compare A. MARCUS, *The Middle East*, *op. cit.* (above, n. 5), p. 214.

70. See, for example, *Me'ametz Koah*, the second sermon, p. 20b. This idea is also expressed in words of R. Yaakov KHULI: "this sign shall be in your hands if you have pity on the poor, surely you will receive mercy from Above" (*Me'am Lo'ez*, Exodus, *Mishpatim*, p. 235b).

pect. Donors received immediate and ongoing esteem by the congregation for their donation, even if their motives were very mundane. Doña Gracia Nasi was and is the perfect example of benevolent behavior towards local and foreign needy people, actions which earned her her fame<sup>71</sup>.

d) Philanthropic acts were integrated in the community efforts to safeguard social stability. Moreover, the concern for individual poor strengthened the legitimacy of the heads of the community to control and justified their claim to leadership.

e) The fear that young Jewish orphans and desperate adults would convert to Islam. This fear of conversion characterized other weaker groups who dreaded assimilation into the society of the majority<sup>72</sup>.

f) Influence of the surrounding society. The source of the primary and constant influence was undoubtedly Ottoman Muslim society: As a rule, we may say that it was under its influence that the personal tendency to aid was intensified, and a tolerant attitude was set towards poverty and beggary. In like manner, Jews were influenced by the Ottoman custom of establishing sacred trusts, or waqfs, and established trusts (*heqdeshim*), whose income was intended to finance various activities for the benefit of the needy. This might explain the difference in attitude of the Jewish communities of the Islamic lands and in Europe to their poor, despite their common heritage.

The Jewish community was influenced also by trends and processes that took place in Europe during that period. As long as Jews and former Marranos continued to reach Europe — people from the Iberian peninsula, Western Europe and Italy, they undoubtedly affected and internalized stances and opinions that prevailed in those places.

The importance of charity in Jewish life and in social consciousness is attested by its meaningful place in the founding constitutions of the benevolent aid societies in the 17th and 18th centuries. Philanthropy and charity were among the most outstanding and highly considered personal qualities (with special merits after death), and this was prominent in the eulogies for the departed. Although we could have expected mention of charitable deeds in gravestone inscriptions, a close study of the corpus of inscriptions from Salonika shows that in reality any mention of the deceased benevolent

71. See Se'adia Longo's eulogy in her memory: R. Se'adia LONGO, *Seder Zmanim*, Salonica 5354 (1594), pp. 42a-47a. And also C. ROTH, *Doña Gracia of the House of Nasi*, Philadelphia, 1948, pp. 123-133.

72. This explanation is put forward as well by Marcus, who thus tried to explain the difference between the Muslim society and the organized actions of non-Muslim minorities and other weak groups (A. MARCUS, *The Middle East*, *op. cit.* [above, n. 5], p. 217).



deeds is extremely rare. This despite the fact that during the 17th century and especially during the 18th century, there prevailed a tendency for very long inscriptions on the gravestones, designating the deceased honorifics, distinguished lineage, scholarship, and observance of the commandments. The paucity of the finds does not offer any indication of gender or social differences among donors<sup>73</sup>.

Not everyone was happy to contribute, and in the sources there are complaints regarding the failure or even resistance to give charity. This quality was primarily denounced when it appeared among the wealthy. The refusal of the elite members to provide for one purpose or another caused those socially below them to refuse to give, as well, thus leading to a doubling of the evil deed. Most instructive on this point is R. Haim Palachi describing life in Izmir during the first half of the 19th century:

... And how disgusting is the behavior of the miser wealthy that when the charity collectors come to them [the rich] and especially on Passover and Sukkoth [Tabernacles] so that they may give charity to be distributed to the decent poor and to the needy scholars, they do not want to [give], and on the contrary, they kick and rage at them, and throw them out with rebuke, and slam the door after them... besides that they cool [discourage] the charity collectors causing them to neglect their job saying [thus do the wealthy behave towards the poor]<sup>74</sup>.

There is evidence for a trend that opposed in principle the provision of regular and extensive aid to the poor. Views of this sort were heard and discussed in Izmir in the late 17th century, and are documented in the writings of R. Eliyahu Ha-Cohen. Ha-Cohen bitterly opposed them, and speaks of his struggle against those who took the hard line, some of whom based themselves on their claim of economic difficulty. Apparently, these were the Portuguese Jews, former Marranos, who imported to the Levant the "rational" and practical approach that was gaining weight in Western Europe. They sought to reduce the community's regular support of the poor, and demanded to designate the support only to those who were unable to support themselves, and send the healthy ones out to work. A similar opinion was

73. Emmanuel presents a very idealistic picture in his book, prettifying the past without any actual basis: "The *gvirim* [wealthy patrons] and their wives did not have the attitude of pride and of scorn towards their poor brethren, but rather fraternity and mercifulness." (Y.S. EMMANUEL, *Matzevot Saloniki*, Jerusalem 1963, p. 20). In the 17th century, there were hardly any other details added beyond the name of the departed and the date of his passing, and most relevant epitaphs are of the 18th century: See nos. 619, 623-624, 812, 1165, 1175, 1177, 1214, 1240.

74. R. Hayim PALACHI, *Tokhahat Haim*, Part III, Izmir 5634 (1874), p.139a. See also *ibid.*, p. 82b.

aired by R. Raphael Mordechai Malki, a former Marrano who had immigrated to Jerusalem from Livorno in the 1670's and became one of the community's leading figures<sup>75</sup>.

#### 6. Aid recipients

The responsibility of the community and its leaders was first and foremost towards its poor, as regards their material and spiritual welfare, during their lifetime and at death. Philanthropy did not stop at the borders of the congregation or the community — the feeling of mutual responsibility and existence of spiritual, economic, and family ties between communities in and outside the Empire led to individuals and communities extending aid to foreigners and to other communities. There were usually not enough existing resources, and so inevitably there were priorities that were set in order to determine precedence for eligibility for aid. The charitable organizations primarily acted for those who lacked any means of support and the most destitute — widows and orphans, disabled, and mentally ill. Others had to provide for themselves through family, community, or begging for alms.

Since the very essence and precise purposes of charity were never defined, the category included a wide variety of activities. Not infrequently budget limitations caused halakhic decision makers and community leaders to make painful decisions regarding questions of precedence and change from one type of charity to another, or between an internal goal and a more important external goal. Was sustaining Torah scholars in Palestine more important than supporting the family members of the donor who lived in his own city? What should take precedence — aid for the ransom of captives from another city or ransoming pawned ceremonial articles or perhaps payment of the community's debts and the release of people from jail? The Code of Jewish Law had, indeed, determined a certain hierarchy of preferences, but left certain areas unclear and did not prevent endless dilemmas

75. "And they say that due to our many transgressions there is poverty in the world and paupers have increased, we should their sustenance ... as it is in ... [to take care of them all] ... they find the answer, therefore, we shall seek which among them are the most needy such as the blind and crippled, and the others remaining shall go out to work until eventide... let this decree be known to all the inhabitants of the city lest they help them, and everyone who acts in defiance of this decree shall he then be punished... and the criminals and those (among the officeholders and influential people) who talk are the very minority of the few, because not all of the wealthy are busy doing away with charity" (*Me'il Sedakah*, pp. 131a-131b). See also *ibid.*, p. 22c; *Midrash Eliyahu*, p. 13d. For Malki's opinion, see R. Avraham MIRANDA, *Yad Ne'eman*, Salonika 5564 (1804), p. 40a; see also M. ROZEN, *Jewish Identity and Society in the Seventeenth Century*, Tübingen 1992, pp. 152-153.

and controversies<sup>76</sup>. Local destitute were basically preferred to foreigners, according to the ruling that "the poor of your city take precedence." The poor of the local congregation took precedence over the city's poor, and the city's poor came before those who were not citizens. Palestine was unique in this respect, and from the late 17th century it became common use to give precedence to the needs of Palestinian communities, and their emissaries received special treatment. Another factor was the concept of *piquah nefesh*, which means that the life of a person is more important than anything. This rule was also open to broad interpretation, and was usually used to promote and justify a foreigner against a local, as in the case of ransoming captives.

Besides the poor who suffered from permanent or seasonal poverty, there were three most frequent types of needy, who usually were not members of the community: those who came collecting money for the redemption of captives or to provide dowries for indigent or orphaned brides (*hakhnasath kallah*), and other itinerant poor.

Jews were known for their concern for their brethren; buccaneers and brigands who spoiled merchandise and people were sure of ransom for their Jewish captives. During the 16th through the 18th centuries, there were two types of captives in the Levant: 1) prisoners of war who usually fell into the hands of Ottoman soldiers or their allies, the Tatars, and who were brought to be sold in border cities or in the slave markets of Istanbul; 2) captives of the many pirates swarming over the Mediterranean sea. The relatively large number of Jews who traveled between the region's harbors frequently fell victim to this latter sort of attack. These captives were usually brought to be sold in Southern Italy, or imprisoned in Malta, until the negotiations for their ransom were concluded with one of the well-known societies for the ransoming of Jewish captives in Italian cities; or until obtaining the ransom money by one of the captives who was freed for this purpose, and set out to raise the funds from private sources, or through a begging journey. Istanbul and Izmir were important centers for gathering monies for ransoming captives, and there were very close ties between them and the societies for the ransoming of captives that operated during the 17th century in Venice and Livorno<sup>77</sup>. The organized efforts redeem and help the captives from Eastern

76. It is the obligation to put one's relatives first, to give precedence to the poor of one's own town over the poor of another town, and to put the poor of Palestine over the poor of those who live outside of the Land of Israel (*Shulhan 'Arukh, Yoreh Deah, 251, 3*); as for marrying off poor virgins, there is no act of charity greater than this (*ibid.*, 249, 15): but at the same time "redemption of captives takes precedence over giving livelihood to the poor and providing them with clothing, and there is no greater commandment than redeeming the captive" (*ibid.*, 252, 1).

77. On the ties of the communities of western Anatolia and the southern Balkan with Italian communities in this respect see M. BENAYAHU, *Relations between Greek and Italian*

Europe who were brought by the Tatars to the slave markets of Istanbul during the 1640's and 1650's, demonstrates the close ties between communities and diasporas and the feeling of mutual commitment, and constitutes an early example of overall Jewish feeling of solidarity<sup>78</sup>.

Desperate individuals, who had no means of providing dowries for their daughters set out to beg enough money that would enable their daughters to marry someone of the same or higher social class<sup>79</sup>. The vagaries of fate often brought about the bankruptcy of the wealthy and to the loss of all their property, and some of them set out to gather alms in order to repay their debts.

In another category was the material aid to the Jews of Palestine, which was an Ottoman province. Besides individual giving, community budgets included sums explicitly designated as "donations to Palestine" or "charities for Palestine." Besides that, large sums of money that individuals and communities contributed were sent to support individuals and congregations in Palestine. During the 17th century, the institution of *shadar* — the emissary of the rabbis of Palestine — was more firmly established. Contributing to the four holy cities (Jerusalem, Safed, Hebron and Tiberias) was gradually more and more institutionalized, especially from the second quarter of the 18th century, with the establishment of the Committees of the clerks in Istanbul<sup>80</sup>.

Our sources reveal two types of beggars — one was local, while the other type was a person who, due to the vagaries of fate, was forced to exile himself from his home and beg for money for a particular purpose. When he achieved his purpose, he returned to his own city, family, and profession. At present, there are no sources about Jewish professional wanderers, for whom the life of a tramp or itinerant beggar was their way of life, as in central Europe<sup>81</sup>.

*Jewries*, Tel Aviv 1980, pp. 26-59. Regarding the matter of captives see for example ID., *Dor Ehad ba-Aretz*, Jerusalem 1988, pp. 361-381. For more on this topic, see BEN-NAEH, "Societies," p. 309.

78. For references regarding this affair, see BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), p. 259, n. 660.

79. See, for example, the writ given to a Jew of Salonika who set out to beg for contributions in Italy so that he could marry off his daughter in the year 5411 (1651), M. BENAYAHU, *Relations, op. cit.* (above, n. 77), pp. 285-287. On the aid to orphans see BEN-NAEH, "Societies", p. 315.

80. Y. BEN-NAEH, "The Jewish Community of Istanbul and its Ties with the Jewish Community in Palestine during the Seventeenth Century", *Cathedra* 92, 1999, pp. 68-71, 77-84. On the 18th century, see Y. BARNAI, *The Jews in Palestine in the Eighteenth Century*, Tuscaloosa 1992.

81. For more about the professional wandering beggars who wandered between the European communities, see for example M. FRIEDMANN, "Letters of Recommendation for Jewish Mendicants", *Michael* II, 1973, pp. 34-37.

The establishment distinguished between decent and thus deserving poor, who were impoverished or of modest families, many times even educated, and between those who were not decent or proper, and who should be barred from receiving charity<sup>82</sup>. A decent person who was forced to collect alms would receive a letter of recommendation or a writ from the rabbi of his congregation, in which the writers would emphasize that the bearer of the letter was of a good lineage (*ben tovim*) and a decent person, that twists of fate and not, God forbid, his own sins had brought about his lowly situation. It was often mentioned that he himself had been a wealthy and honored person and a donor of charity. Since the person was ashamed of his condition, and as he was unaccustomed to collecting alms, the letter would serve as his mouth on his journey. Often, the letter emphasized the danger to himself or his family, asking the public to give generously to correct the life-threatening situation, promising that the heavenly reward for fulfilling the commandment of charity would be worthwhile in this world as well as in the next. In the cities which he visited during his wanderings he received additional writings (*hathimot*), literally "signatures," but in fact signed endorsements from rabbis on the original letter, verifying its authenticity and contents. Compassionate letters in flowery language asking for generous aid to the poor (writs aid to the indigent, to marry off brides, ransom captives, and similar causes) had been accepted practice in Spain and in Europe already by the Middle Ages, and was quite widespread in the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire. Collections of missives and forms of missives of this kind are preserved in print, and in manuscripts.

The great number of scoundrels and imposters, who did not hesitate to forge such letters, led to caution and selectivity in charity distribution, both on the part of individuals and by the community. Local and foreign poor were permitted to collect alms only after they received authorization by those appointed by the community, and if they lacked such an authorization, the public was actually forbidden to aid them<sup>83</sup>.

82. R. Raphael Mordechai MALKI demanded that proper/modest poor should take precedence over those who were not decent. According to him, there is no heavenly reward for aiding the "good for nothing empty-headed" (A. RIVLIN [ann.], R. Raphael Mordechai MALKI, *Liqqutim mi-perush 'al ha-Torah*, Part I, Jerusalem 1923, p. 27).

83. See, for example, the description of matters in a written source from Istanbul, of the last quarter of the 16th century: R. Eliyahu IBN HAIM, *Maim 'Amuqim*, Constantinople (n.d.), second pagination, pp. 52, 83a-84a. Compare to the community regulation of Fez from the year 5438 (1678): R. Avraham ANQAWA, *Kerem Hemer*, part II, Livorno 5631 (1871).

## 7. Ways of providing aid

### a. Private and voluntary giving

Giving charity was one of the clear obligations of individuals in the community, and already by the beginning of the 16th century, it was considered as one of the most prominent signs of congregational affinity, similar to praying in its synagogue and paying taxes<sup>84</sup>. A person who considered himself different, cut off, or exempt from participating in community public life and especially its duties, usually refused to contribute to charity as well. Such, for example, were temporary resident foreign merchants, called *orhim* (guests)<sup>85</sup>. Personal aid was made concrete both in the provision of food, clothing, or money to the needy themselves, as well as in the donation of funds and property to the community's charity fund; special importance was attached to the contribution of the women who provided food and clothing to the poor who went collecting from houses, and many of the preachers and eulogizers noted and praised women's deeds on behalf of the needy<sup>86</sup>. This framework of activities was more acceptable to the needy, who preferred to seek aid first from their extended family, neighbors, and colleagues, and only afterwards to try other options. From the aspect of the varied ways of helping and their scope (from the aspect of givers and those benefiting) it seems as if the personal channel was the most meaningful, despite the fact that we have very little knowledge of this manner of giving.

### b. Institutional giving

As we have said above, the institutionalized giving, nearly entirely undocumented prior to the second quarter of the 16th century, was much more developed in comparison to the situation in the Iberian peninsula prior to the Expulsion, and different from the commonly accepted practice in the Jewish communities in western Europe. It was clear that the degree to which the community was able to aid the poor was a direct result of the

84. BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), p. 265.

85. Regarding the law forcing a person who settled in a city to participate in some forms of charity, see *Shulhan 'Arukh, Yoreh Deah*, 256, 5.

86. "... and so it is already known that for every blessing and praise with which we shall praise the dear women the main thing is charity, which is considered of equal weight to all of the other commandments together, because this commandment is attributed to them because their custom is to stay at home, that the pious woman, when she gives charity, has extremely high merit since the act of charity is extremely great, and found among women more than in men, since it is a very common custom of pious women to have food ready and prepared for the poor person (R. Yisrael BENVENISTE, *Beit Yisrael*, Constantinople 5434 [1674], pp. 33c; 35c; 36d).

economic capability of the community's individuals, but it also depended on their individual generosity. The community aided its poor members in three main ways:

a) Exemption from taxes, mainly from the head tax, the *jizye*. Had the community not paid the head tax on behalf of its poor, the latter would have been imprisoned.

b) Providing food and money to the needy poor such as the *soleth* contribution, (literally, "flour meal") apparently distributed according to a list of names that was updated from time to time by the charitable fund collectors (*gabbaim*). The preference for institutionalized help is well attested in a report of a German traveler named Hans Darnschwamm who visited Istanbul in the mid-16th century: "The Jews do not allow any of their own to go about begging. They have collectors who go from house to house and collect into a common chest for the poor. This is used to support the poor and the hospital..."<sup>87</sup>

c) Setting up institutions and services for the benefit of the Jewish masses (*Talmud Torah*), providing elementary Jewish education, aid to the sick and the needy, aid in marrying off poor orphan girls, burying the dead paupers, and more. The hospitals apparently served as lodging places for poor travelers, as was the custom in Europe<sup>88</sup>. Most of the services were provided through societies founded for a specific purpose, such as *biququr holim* — society for visiting the sick.

d) During the 18th century, an additional method of aid developed — the overall leadership (*koleluth*) of each community became sort of banks, and provided yearly interest on deposits that poor people, widows, and orphans, and scholars deposited with them. Often, this legalized interest (*hekhsher*) was the only means of livelihood for those who were unable to work to support themselves<sup>89</sup>.

A list of the main types of aid that a big urban community extended is found in a source from Izmir from the first half of the 19th century:

"... and God forbid the cancellation of all of the benevolent deeds and charitable acts that people are wont to perform in for the community as usual on a

87. Quoted in ROTH, *Doña Gracia*, *op. cit.* (above, n. 71), p. 96.

88. For example, see the community regulation of Salonika of 5320 (1559): I.R. MOLHO & A. AMARILLO, "A Collection of Communal Regulations in Ladino from Salonika", *Sefunoth* II, 1958, pp. 33-34. Another regulation from Salonika of the same year mentions the provision of travel money to poor travelers: *ibid.*, p. 34.

89. Testimony of this may be seen, for example, in the community regulation of Constantinople from the year 5504 (1744): Y.M. TOLEDANO, "Tax regulations", *loc. cit.* (above, n. 4), p. 27. The permission to make loans at interest from the monies deposited by widows and orphans requires an in-depth study. As of now, see BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), p. 270.

regular basis in all their details: 1. Visiting the sick. 2. (Support of) ten wastrels. 3. Cemetery (maintenance). 4. Clothing the naked and the orphans as well as young children studying Torah. 5. Distributing funds to the decent poor every Friday before the Sabbath. 6. Providing for the marriage of orphan girls. 7. Distribution of funds to orphans every week. 8. Distribution of funds to widows on holidays and festivals. 9. Provisions for the way for emissaries from Palestine and from other countries. 10. Torah study [which] is equal in value to all (of them)<sup>90</sup>."

The institutions and the mechanisms for the aid to the poor usually worked very well, but during times of war, famine or plague, when the number of needy increased greatly, and resources scarce, their capability of providing aid lessened considerably. To a certain extent, acting on behalf of the poor was complemented by the regulations against luxury. They were meant to blur overly prominent material expressions of the social gaps, and to prevent the intensification of the social tensions between the classes<sup>91</sup>.

A contrasting way of coping with poverty was to distance the poor from the community through helping them immigrate to Palestine. During the second third of the 18th century, the rate of immigration from the cities of the Ottoman Empire increased, and many of the hundreds who immigrated annually to Palestine were poor. There is no doubt that the improvement in the living conditions in Palestine, thanks to the activities of the four Committees of clerks in Istanbul, played an important part in the encouragement of immigration; however, we should not fail to take into account the motive of expelling the poor, similar to the custom of the leaders of the Amsterdam Spanish-Portuguese community a century previously. It seems to me that there lies in this an explanation for the efforts and great amount of resources invested in Palestine by the *koleluyoth*, even under the most pressing financial conditions<sup>92</sup>. In Jerusalem itself, the large number of poor immigrants caused constant distress already in earlier centuries. R. Raphael Mordechai Malki which was previously mentioned, demanded the limitation of settlement by the poor in Jerusalem, claiming that the community was in financial distress and unable to support them properly<sup>93</sup>.

90. R. Haim PALACHI, *Massa Haim*, Izmir 5634 (1874), letter het, p. 17c.

91. For example, see the "Regulations that were passed by the glorious R. (Haim Abul'afia) may the Lord preserve and rescue him" at the end of R. Yitzhak Nissim IBN JAMIL, *Haim va-Hesed*, Izmir 5496 (1736), Regulations 7, 12, 13, 17, 18. The declared purpose of most of the regulations was to prevent jealousy on the part of the non-Jews, but many of them were intended to prevent competition, expenses, and conspicuous consumption by those who could not afford it. See A. BASHAN, "Sumptuary laws — The Social and Halakhic Background", *Haguth* 4, 5740/1980, pp. 41-68.

92. Y. BARNAI, *The Jews in Palestine*, p. 158. On the practice of sending Jews away from Amsterdam during the second quarter of the 17th century, see: I. BARTAL & Y. KAPLAN, "Emigration", *loc. cit.* (above, n. 63), pp. 175-193.

93. R.M. MALKI, *Liqqumim*, *op. cit.* (above, n. 82), p. 24.

– Sources of funding.

The sources of funding that served to finance the charitable activities of the community were varied, with money given by community members directly and indirectly:

a) The act of charitable giving was one of the key characteristics of belonging to the community. Contributions and donations were collected weekly in boxes that were set up in the synagogues, each box devoted to a different cause, or willed as bequests dedicated to *heqdash* (endowment) or for a specific purpose<sup>94</sup>. The *gabbaim*, or collectors, concentrated the funds in the “community chests” and from it, they made regular weekly disbursements of money to the needy. We must emphasize that the giving was in many forms, and not necessarily direct handouts of cash, but rather in kind — distribution of food, giving clothing, and other similar donations were the most conventional forms of giving<sup>95</sup>. The community was allowed to sell, exchange, and do as it wished to with the assets of the bequests. When a congregation split in two or more, as often happened during the second half of the 16th century, its assets were divided, including the charity collections, since these were considered to be joint property

b) The proceeds of the direct taxation (the *tamid* and the *aricha*) and occasional obligatory levies. The taxpayers were required to pay a set fee for charity according to their estimate. Often, a special collection was taken, usually according to the regular tax assessments, in order to finance some urgent charity<sup>96</sup>. Special collections were taken up before Jewish holidays, and we know the names of some of them, such as the special Purim collection, the *ma'ot Purim*, and the *shalosh pe'amim*, (literally “thrice”) collected before the three major festivals<sup>97</sup>.

c) The *gabella* was a tax levied on kosher foodstuffs and on certain commodities. The use of the *gabella* as an indirect tax for financing charity was already common in Spain, and came back to use in the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century. Its importance as a financial tool increased during

94. On dedicated trusts and the profits from such specific bequests see BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), pp. 267-270.

95. This may have been because it was easier for the donors, or because it was done to ensure that the charity would go directly for the purpose intended. As we have mentioned, R. Elyahu Ha-Cohen's description above described over one hundred ways of private and collective aid. The writer details all of the occasions on which people would vow or donate to charity (*Me'il Sedakah*, pp. 79d-80b).

96. R. Yosef MITRANI, *Responsa*, part I, 5 Constantinople 5401 (1641), p. 4b.

97. R. Moshe GALANTE, *Responsa*, Venice 5368 (1608), 60, 31c; R. Shmuel Yaffe ASH-KENAZI, *Yefe 'Einaim*, Venice 5491 (1631), 110b.

the following centuries as charity funds decreased due to financial constraints<sup>98</sup>.

The community made every effort not to disturb or halt the functioning of activities on behalf of the poor. Periods of hardship, crises or difficult financial conditions made it harder both on individuals and on the community to raise money and to allocate resources for philanthropic purposes, but even then wealthy members who provided for the community tried to come to its aid and to fulfill commitments previously made.

– Those who performed the charitable deeds.

Actions of charity and kindness were carried out through two official apparatus: one acted as the direct arm of the community through the funds and the bequests managed by community office holders; the second was the various confraternal societies. The societies were semi-formal bodies that acted on behalf of the community to provide welfare services, education, and other types of social services, and in exchange, part of their budget was covered with the *gabella monies*<sup>99</sup>. Among those hired by the community leaders to take care of the poor we find the following:

a) The collector (*gabba'i*) and the treasurer (*gizbar*) of the charities. The terms are usually mixed, and it seems both dealt with the collection of the pledges from the individuals, administering the funds, caring for the assets of the bequests, and the distribution of money and food to the needed—whether on a one-time basis, or whether weekly according to lists (*lista*) they held.

b) The rabbi of the congregation (*hakham, marbitz Torah*), and the chief rabbis (*rabbanim kolelim*) of each town fulfilled an important role in the welfare system. We encounter them as the ones who write recommendation letters, and as those urging and arousing the congregation in their Sabbath sermons to donate for one cause or another<sup>100</sup>, and also as dealing with collecting and disbursing charity to local and foreign poor and other needy.

c) With the intensification of centralization process and the formation of the joint leaderships known as *koleluyoth* during the second half of the 17th

98. On the *gabella*, see BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), pp. 158, 265, 283. See also the Istanbul tax regulation of 5504 (1744): Y.M. TOLEDANO, “Tax regulations”, *loc. cit.* (above, n. 4), p. 28.

99. See BEN-NAEH, “Societies”, p. 289. Further see A.S. AMARILLO, “Philanthropic Organizations in Salonica”, *Şefunot XV*, 1971-1981, pp. 105-133.

100. BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), p. 198, and n. 299. On the role of the congregational rabbi in the distribution of charitable contributions, see *Shulhan 'Arukh, Yoreh De'ah*, 256, 6.

century, some of the philanthropic activity passed over to their hands, and the yearly budget of the community included clauses for these needs<sup>101</sup>. At present, it is unclear what the relation was between the community activities and the municipal actions, and how were they coordinated.

d) Additional semi-official organizations that fulfilled a very important role in aid to the poor were the confraternal societies. Their deeds, methods of action and of financing showed components of personal as well as institutional actions. The number of societies and their various types increased as the population impoverished, and the role and importance of the communal organization in the life of the individual weakened<sup>102</sup>.

### Conclusion

Hebrew sources usually provide us with knowledge of the upper echelons of Jewish society. The present article deals with a hitherto unknown aspect of the past of the Jewish Oriental communities of Muslim countries: poverty and charity in Jewish Ottoman society and explores ideas and practices of charity in their contexts.

Jewish society in the large urban centers of the Ottoman Empire was a class-oriented society, with a large sector of poor that comprised its majority. The variation in occupations that characterized Ottoman Jewry was the main cause for the differentiation on the basis of economic class. Other reasons, usually periodical ones, caused the pauperization of many. The poor were actually at the margins of society, barely living on daily income or on charity. Poverty, which was usually hereditary, was more than just an economic-material situation, and had clear cultural and social implications. The poor were unable to participate or influence, and certainly not lead. The difficult life of the poor was the background for social tension and strife that intensified as the class differences grew wider.

Jewish communal leadership considered itself obligated to provide at least a minimal level of welfare for the community's poor, and reserved considerable resources for this purpose. This concern distinguished it from other religious communities in the Empire. Communal charity was funded by the public in various ways, either directly or indirectly, voluntarily or compulsory. The community's activities in this sphere were greatly assisted

101. See for example the budget of Istanbul in 1772: R. Avraham Avigdor, *Zkhor le-Avraham*, Constantinople 5607 (1847), *Hoshen Mishpat*, 56, p. 63c; and Y.M. TOLEDANO, "Tax regulations", *loc. cit.* (above, n. 4), p. 27. On the creation of the *koleluth* and its activities, see BEN-NAEH, *loc. cit.* (above, n. \*), pp. 180-186.

102. On the societies see BEN-NAEH, "Societies", and especially pp. 303-308.

by the confraternal societies whose popularity grew steadily, and by individuals benevolent and voluntary deeds. Beneficence thus took many forms and was affected by various agents.

At the basis of the communal policy and the individual Jew's attitude towards poverty and the poor were: a) Jewish tradition and heritage, as they were known in pre-expulsion Iberian peninsula. They are best concluded in the *Shulhan 'Arukh*, the Code of Jewish Law, written in Safed during the third quarter of the 16th century. b) Cultural atmosphere, mentality and behavioral patterns of Ottoman city dwellers. The affect of the Ottoman environment may be seen mainly in the way poverty was treated as an inherent and natural social phenomenon. This perception is the source of the difference between the stance of the Ottoman Jewish community in these matters as compared with the attitude of European Jewry — both by Ashkenazi Jews as well as the Spanish-Portuguese.

On the surface, the commandments to provide charity and aid the needy were of the most important values in the life of the individual Jew and the Jewish community, and the needs of local and foreign poor and needy were devotedly taken care of. The ideal picture depicted in the rabbinic literature as well as in proverbs and popular stories, and later on by memoir writers and historians, was often quite far from the harsh reality. The demand for aid always outstripped the funds available, despite the combined efforts, and various constraints forced difficult decisions to be made daily. In any case, even during crises, individual and communal aid did not cease. Calls for limiting the disbursement of funds and demands for a total change in policy towards the poor, had little influence.

The purpose of communal and individual initiated charity was not the eradication of poverty, nor concern for the spiritual welfare of the poor, and certainly not a change in the social structure and economic parity, but rather relieving the suffering of the deserving needy preventing death of starvation and sickness. Of no less concern were the wages of the giver — strengthening his social standing, personal prestige and heavenly reward. Without declaring it, community philanthropy was supposed to preserve the existing social order and to strengthen it, as well as strengthening the traditional and moral values of Jewish society. In retrospect, the totality of above mentioned activities aided the preservation of the unity of the community and a high degree of internal solidarity.

Philanthropic deeds took place within the framework of community regulations, values and norms. Charity was reinforcing social and communal hierarchies and reflected the social interactions between donor and recipient, on both personal and communal planes. Coping with poverty and

dealing with the poor and the act of giving also reflect several of the characteristics and traits of Ottoman Jewish society: a society of literate people, an esteem for lineage and scholarship, an overall Jewish solidarity, a high degree of organization and a liking for order, and a certain tolerance towards immigrants and wanderers. Characters of their mentality might be discerned: deep belief in divine Providence and submission to the decree of fate, belief in divine retribution in the world to come, and a feeling of mutual responsibility between all Jews<sup>103</sup>.

103. M. BONNER, M. ENER & A. SINGER (eds.), *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts*, New York 2003; J.-P. PASCUAL (dir.), *Pauvreté et Richesse dans le monde Musulman Méditerranéen*, Paris 2003; A.K. RAFEQ, *Making a Living or Making a Fortune in Ottoman Syria, Money, Land and Trade: An Economic History of the Muslim Mediterranean* (N. Hanna ed.), London – New York 2002, pp. 101-123; A. SINGER, *Constructing Ottoman Beneficence: An Imperial Soup in Jerusalem*, New York 2002.