

Ephraim Nissan

Purim of Saragossa, Purim of Siracusa*

This brief communication offers a few considerations and provides an overview of recent research about a festival ascribed by some to Jews from Siracusa (Syracuse in Sicily) – as argued cogently as early as 1910 – but sometimes ascribed to the Spanish city of Saragossa.

1. Siracusan Jewish Collective Memory/Imaginary?

Unlike Father Christmas by the latter character's very definition (but not unlike St. Nicholas in popular Christian traditions), in Jewish narratives Elijah's supernatural intervention¹ is not confined to his traditionally alleged visit to Jewish homes on the first night of Passover. His typical role, as early as anecdotes included in the Talmud, is as *deus ex machina*.

Sometimes it looks as though an author felt a compulsion to credit Elijah with such a role. During the Middle Ages and the early modern period, several local Purim-like minor festivals were instituted by several Jewish communities, to commemorate a miracle, or their being saved, or some dangerous event being followed by relief. One such local Purim is Purim Saragossa – actually, it is sometimes claimed,² of the community that used to live in Siracusa, Sicily, which eventually was chased from Sicily in 1492 along with the rest of Sicilian Jewry; the festival (on the 18th of the month of Shevat) has been celebrated by families originating from either Siracusa (or Saragossa), as far apart as Ioannina and the

* L'autore, per sua scelta personale, ci ha chiesto di poter utilizzare criteri redazionali diversi da quelli tradizionalmente seguiti nelle nostre riviste. Glielo abbiamo concesso con piacere essendo, comunque, anche i suoi criteri in pieno uso a livello internazionale [n.d.r.].

¹ Elijah folktales or reworked folktales are either scattered within more general collections, or clustered in special sections, or even made into a self-standing book: Peninnah SCHRAMM (ed.), *Tales of Elijah the Prophet*, foreworded by the folklorist Dov Noy (Jason Aronson Inc., Northvale, New Jersey, 1991) is a collection of 36 stories from various sources. More in general, about the character and function of the wonder-maker, see E. YASSIF, *The Function of Ose-Pele in Jewish Folk-Literature* (in Hebrew), in «Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore» 3 (1982), pp. 47-66.

² As early as David Simonsen, in D. Simonsen, *Le Pourim de Saragosse est un Pourim the Syracuse*, «Revue des Études Juives» 59 (1910), pp. 90-91.

Epirus region of northwestern Greece, Aydin in western Anatolia, Milazzo, and Smyrna in Anatolia, Constantinople, and Jerusalem.

Why was Saragossa replaced for Siracusa? An answer, or part of the answer, is found by checking in “Carta II: nomi dialettali delle località esplorate e degli abitanti” of the *Atlante Linguistico Italiano*.³ In that map of autonyms (how people call their place), Siracusa is called

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A special scroll, to be read in public on the day of Purim Saragossa, is associated with Purim Saragossa. It is called *Megillát Saragossa* (*Scroll of Saragossa*). It relates how the Jewish community escaped a trap set for it by a renegade, who wanted the ruler to become angry with the local Jewry for supposed lack of respect. His plan failed, and the ruler punished him. The end of the scroll is patterned after a formula that on the real Purim is uttered after reading the Book of Esther from a scroll. Instead of “Cursed be the evil Haman”, in this case the text states: “Cursed be the evil Marcos”. Instead of “Blessed be Mordecai, the Jew”, in the Saragossa Scroll one reads: “Blessed be Ephraim, the sexton”.

The guilt ascribed to the Jewish community was that when coming to greet the King, they were carrying the empty cases of the *Torah* scrolls, and the parchment scrolls were not inside. Such behaviour is not unconceivable, because one would rather avoid carrying around in a procession outside the synagogue the *sifrei-Torah*, the parchment scrolls of the Pentateuch: such a concern is not unusual, as the scrolls together with their wooden cylindrical cases are heavy, and in the unfortunate event of one of them falling, the community should fast in atonement.

2. An Elijah / Ḥarvoná Parallel in the *Scroll of Saragossa*

In the Purim Saragossa narrative, Elijah warns a communal officer. The King is going to request that the Jews open the wooden cases and show the Torah to him. Woe would befall them, if the cases are empty. Like Ahasuerus, the King’s wife, Sarah, is Jewish, and in the Purim Saragossa narrative the King detains her, lest she warns the Jews. When the King is made to see the parchments inside the cases, he and Sarah rejoice. Only in the post-reading formula of the real Purim, the curse for Haman and the blessing for Mordecai are followed with: “Cursed be Zeresh” (i.e., Haman’s wife, who was among those advising Haman to hang Mordecai and feel even better), and: “Blessed be Esther”. Such a portion for female characters is absent from the ending of *Megillát Saragossa*. In both cases (the real Purim and the

³ Rome, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato – Libreria dello Stato.

Saragossa Purim), at this point this generalisation follows: “Cursed be all the evil ones, blessed be all of Israel”.⁴

And finally, in the Saragossa scroll there is the statement: “And also the prophet Elijah is remembered for good”. This is patterned after the ending of the post-reading formula of the real Purim: “And also Ḥarvoná is remembered for good”. This additional mention involves a character, Ḥarvoná, whose appearance in the story is short, and who is one of the minor ones, yet his intervention in the unfolding of events was quite timely for promoting the desired outcome. That character, Ḥarvoná, is the one who, when Queen Esther denounces Haman to King Ahasuerus, and the latter, surprised and upset, leaves for the garden and then, on coming back, rebukes Haman who was imploring Esther while leaning on her couch, interferes and tells the King that Haman had prepared, in the courtyard of Haman’s own house, a gallows or pole for hanging Mordecai, who had intervened in the King’s favour. Then Ahasuerus orders Haman to be hanged on that same gallows. According to the Jewish tradition, Ḥarvoná’s behaviour was not out of love for Mordecai, but rather out of hatred for Haman; on the face of it he would not look as an ideal parallel for Elijah. Yet, the parallel with the role of Ḥarvoná in the final formula does occur in the Saragossa scroll, so Elijah can be credited. The parallel is shown in Figures 1 and 2.

⁴ The given passage, with the final formula of the Saragossa scroll, is reproduced on p. 314 in one of the volumes of the series edited by Yom-Tov Lewinski, with an anthology of disparate texts (including literary passages and folkloric descriptions) concerning the various Jewish festivals. Namely, in Y. -T. LEWINSKI (ed.), *Séfer HaMo‘adim*, Vol. 6: *Purim, Lag Ba’Omer, Tu Be’Av*, Dvir, Tel-Aviv 5725 = 1964/5, 7th reprint (in Hebrew).

PURIM

male	Haman	Mordecai
female	Teresh	Esther
collective	Evil ones	All of Israel
helper		Harvoná
	cursed	blessed

Figure 1

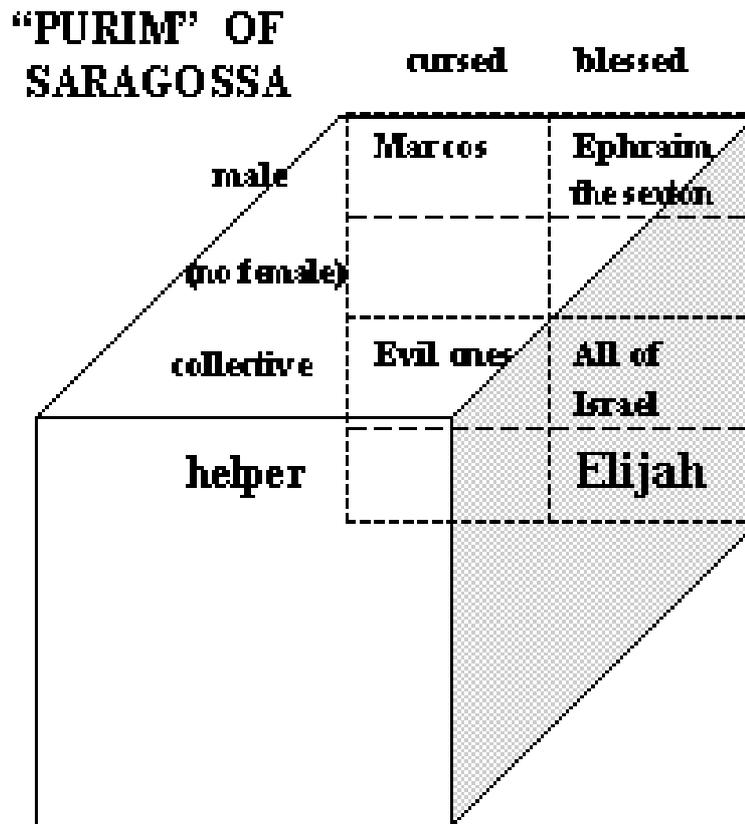


Figure 2

3. A Spanish Setting, from a Spanish Teller, and Tamar Alexander's Interpretation of Variants

This section is based on the account of the Purim Saragossa tale as analysed by Tamar Alexander,⁵ who considered three versions.⁶ The first version was told by Binyamin Molkho of Barcelona in Judaeo-Spanish to the Milanese-born, Jerusalem-based Matilda (Matilde) Koen-Sarano (her family is originally from Aydin, then Rhodes). The story is claimed to have taken place in Saragossa, Spain. «The unique aspect of this tale lies in the process of adaptation that it embodies: much more

⁵ On pp. 82-84 in T. ALEXANDER-FRIZER, *The Heart is a Mirror: The Sephardic Folktale*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan, 2008. Translated by Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum from Hebrew. Originally *Ma'aseh ahuv va-chetsi* [*The Beloved Friend-and-a-Half*], Magnes Press, Jerusalem 1999.

⁶ The Arne & Thompson tale type code for the story about the Saragossa plot is AT 730*G.

profound that the mere mention of the name of the city, the tale explains how the name of the city was changed from Saldoba to Saragossa». ⁷

According to this version, Sarah, a Jewish woman, is the wife of the King of Aragon. On the national holiday, the populace has to pay honour to the King. Among these, year after year, a Jewish delegation carries the scrolls of the Law (Torah) in their arms. Actually, but this was their well-kept secret, they were carrying empty cases, without the scrolls inside, to avoid desecration. ⁸ An apostate from Judaism, Marcus, ⁹ spilled the beans on them: he told the King about the subterfuge of the empty cases. The King was therefore ready to mete punishment to the Jewish community, by exposing their delegation's deceit during the ceremony. This plan did not unfold in that manner: «That same night, the rabbi of the Aragon Jewish community dreamt the same dream three times. It forewarned him to put the Torah scrolls into their cases at once». ¹⁰ The rabbi behaves accordingly.

The next day, when the king ordered the Jews to open the cases, the scrolls were in place. Full of joy, the king ran to his wife, Sarah, who was imprisoned in the palace until the matter was resolved, and cried, 'Sara goza, Sara goza!' ['Sarah rejoice, Sarah rejoice!']. The city was henceforth called Saragossa in memory of the miracle that occurred there. ¹¹

The character of a Jewish queen is not essential for this folktale, as shown by a version of it that Tamar Alexander herself recorded from Salonika-born Rivkah Perez. In that version,

there is no mention of a Jewish queen. Instead, the name of the city comes from members of the Jewish community whose sorrow turned to joy following the miracle

⁷ ALEXANDER, *The Heart is a Mirror*, cit., p. 82.

⁸ As though being brought to the King for a secular purpose would be a profanation. Consider however that as mentioned earlier, such cases, all the more so when full, are quite heavy, and that should a Torah scroll fall to the ground, a day of fast would be decreed for the local Jewish community to observe in atonement. By contrast to Mediterranean and Oriental Jews, among Ashkenazi Jews the scrolls are wrapped in cloth without a wooden case.

⁹ An anecdote is also known from much more recent times. Allegedly, shortly before the Austrian emperor Franz Joseph was to visit a Jewish communal building, a person intending mischief removed the portrait of the Emperor. The Emperor noticed that, and took umbrage. Allegedly (but this appears to be apocryphal: the Emperor would probably not have been impressed with such a justification), one of the Jews present explained that adult male Jews wear their phylacteries on weekdays, but on Saturday, the holiest day of the week, they do not; this is because the phylacteries contribute holiness to the weekdays, whereas Saturday is *itself holy*, so phylacteries are not necessary. Likewise, at all times when the Emperor was not there, his portrait was on show in the building, whereas on the very day that the Emperor in person was present, there was no need for his portrait to be shown.

¹⁰ ALEXANDER, *The Heart is a Mirror*, cit., p. 82. Alexander makes no reference to the claim that the tale was originally of the Jews of Syracuse.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83 (the brackets are Tamar Alexander's).

of the Torah scroll cases: 'saar [sorrow] i gusto [joy and pleasure]', hence the name Saragossa.¹²

Yet another version of the folktale, recorded from Raḥel Levy, is also related by Tamar Alexander, who remarks: «In this version, Elijah the prophet appears, leads the rabbi of the community to the synagogue, and instructs him to return the scrolls to their cases». Saragossa and the Saragossans are mentioned, but: «Unique to this version is the shift in emphasis from a story about the origin of the name of the city, Saragossa, to a family tale that describes how the Bechar family of Turkey, formerly of Saragossa, celebrates the miracle that took place there».¹³

Tamar Alexander remarks that typologically, there is a connection to blood libel tales:

The third subtype of the blood libel tale involves a dream in which the community rabbi or sexton is warned that a vial of blood is situated among the holy books in the synagogue. In a more symbolic description, the dreamer sees the synagogue going up in flames, and the rabbi or sexton hurries there to find and get rid of the vial and save the Jewish community from a grave allegation.

Among the Sephardim, the vial motif was often replaced with that of an appearance before the king with the empty cases of Torah scrolls. This modification can only take place in Sephardic versions of the tale, as it is connected to the tradition of Sephardic Jews and Jews from the Islamic lands of placing the scrolls in cases of wood, not cloth, as is customary among Jews of Ashkenazic origin. From the outside, therefore, it is impossible to tell whether a wooden case is empty or if it houses a Torah scroll. It is difficult to determine which came first, the tale or the custom, but it may be that the tale is the source of the custom.¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 83 (the brackets are Tamar Alexander's).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82. I am unconvinced by the claim in the last sentence of the quotation. As to blood libels, here is some bibliography on that subject, privileging Italian publications: F. JESI, *L'accusa del sangue: Mitologie dell'antisemitismo*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2007 [Morcelliana, Brescia 1993]; R. TARADEL, *L'accusa del sangue: storia politica di un mito antisemita*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 2002; M. INTROVIGNE, *Cattolici, antisemitismo e sangue. Il mito dell'omicidio rituale*, Sugarco, Milano 2004; T. CALIÒ, *La leggenda dell'ebreo assassino. Percorsi di un racconto antiebraico dal medioevo ad oggi*, Viella, Roma 2007; S. BUTTARONI (ed.), *Ritualmord Legenden in der europaischen Geschichte*, Boehlau, Vienna 2003; Y. YUVAL, «"They Tell Lies: You Ate the Man": Jewish Reactions to Ritual Murder Accusations», in A. SAPIR ABULAFIA (ed.), *Religious Violence Between Christians and Jews: Medieval Roots, Modern Perspectives*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York-Gordonsville (Virginia), 2001, pp. 86-106. Also see e.g. T. CALIÒ, *L'"omicidio rituale" nell'Italia del Settecento tra polemica anti giudaica ed erudizione agiografica*, in «Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa» 38. 3 (2002), pp. 475-508. For Italy, the most important case of blood libel is that of Trento; see D. QUAGLIONI, «I processi contro gli Ebrei di Trento. 1475. Il procedimento inquisitorio», in J. C. MAIRE VIGUEUR-A. PARAVICINI BAGLIANI (ed.), *La parola all'accusato*, Sellerio, Palermo 1991, pp. 282-294; A. ESPOSITO, «Processi contro gli Ebrei di Trento (1475). Le confessioni», *ibid.*, pp. 294-306; A. ESPOSITO-D. QUAGLIONI, *Processi contro gli ebrei di Trento (1475-1478)*, Vol. 1: *I processi del 1475*, CEDAM, Padova 1990 (on behalf of the Dipartimento di Scienze Giuridiche of the Università di Trento); E. TREVISAN SEMI, «Gli *haruge Trient* (gli assassinati di Trento) e lo *herem* di

4. Elliott Horowitz's Interpretation of the Purim of Saragossa

Elliott Horowitz discussed in a book the imaginary of violence associated with Purim.¹⁵ Chapter 10 in his book is entitled "Local Purims and the Invention of Tradition". The first section is "Purim of Saragossa".¹⁶ That section begins by quoting two English-language stanzas from *The Miracle of the Scrolls*, a play by Louis Newman, the rabbi of a Reform synagogue in upper Manhattan. That play "was published in 1947. It had appeared in mimeographed form, however, as early as 1936, apparently for the purpose of being performed in Temple Rodeph Shalom".¹⁷ Horowitz then notes:¹⁸ "Danish scholar David Simonsen's article¹⁹ cogently arguing [*quod corrige*: argues] that the 'Purim of saragossa' was actually the Purim of Syracuse – in southern Sicily". Newman, like some scholars (not all of them), accepted that claim.

Other scholars had reported that early in the twentieth century there were still some Jewish families in Janina (Ioannina, northwest of Athens) and a larger number in Istanbul who continued, on that date [the sixteenth of Shevat] to celebrate a special Purim. Not only in the Balkans but also in Jerusalem the Purim of Saragossa/Syracuse continued to be observed in modern times. In fact, it seems to have survived in Jerusalem longer than almost anywhere else. In 1882 Moshe Slatki published in Jerusalem a version of *Megillat Saragossa*, recounting the alleged events upon which the eponymous Purim was based. [...] Slatki had no independent way of knowing, of course, that the sixteenth and seventeenth of Shevat were still observed as days of fast and feast, respectively, in the 'native city' of Jerusalem's 'Saragossans' – whether that city was located in northern Spain or in southern Sicily. But he clearly did not suspect that former residents of that 'Saragossa' might have invented a local Purim that had allegedly been observed there before their expulsion, perhaps as a means of enhancing their sense of cultural patrimony, which would include the possession of venerable traditions that it was their sacred duty to perpetuate.²⁰

Horowitz then elaborates on invented traditions in various cultures. He believes that the tradition was invented indeed, e.g. because of the occurrence of symbolic numbers. He also notes that whereas the story claims that Marcus was eventually

Trento nella tradizione ebraica», in I. ROGGER-M. BELLABARBA (ed.), *Il principe vescovo Johannes Hinderbach (1465-1486) fra tardo Medioevo e Umanesimo: Atti del Convegno (Trento, 2-6 ottobre 1989)*, Edizioni Dehoniane, Bologna 1992; A. ESPOSITO, «Il culto del beato Simonino e la sua prima diffusione in Italia», *ibid.*, pp. 429-443; EAD., «La morte di un bambino e la nascita di un martire: Simonino da Trento», chapter, E. NISSAN, «"Questo rito selvaggio": contesto moderno e sfondo antico di un mito infamante antiebraico», in V. MARCHI, «L'orribile calunnia». *Polemiche goriziane sull'omicidio rituale ebraico (1896, 1913)*, Kappa Vu, Udine 2010, pp. 227-239.

¹⁵ E. HOROWITZ, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2006.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 279-286. ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 279. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 280. ¹⁹ See SIMONSEN in fn. 2 above.

²⁰ HOROWITZ, *Reckless Rites*, cit., p. 280.

hanged, Newman's play rather has "the Jews petition the king (successfully) for their former co-religionist to be pardoned".²¹

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 284. The Purim Saragossa narrative appeared in Italian, too, in a variant from the informant "M.C.S., 1988", under the title "Saragosa" (the incipit is "La città di Saragozza, in spagnolo Saragosa [*quod corrige: Zaragoza*], si chiamava ordinariamente Salduba"), on pp. 109-111 in a collection of Sephardic stories, originally told in Judaeo-Spanish and transcribed, edited, and translated by the Milan-born, Jerusalem-based Matilde Cohen Sarano. Namely, in M. COHEN SARANO, *Le storie del Re Salomone, e le leggende del profeta Elia, e racconti di re e sultani, e di ricchi e di mendicanti, ecc. ecc.* (in the series «Il filo rosso» of Sansoni, Gruppo Editoriale Fabbri, Milano 1993). The Sarano family was from Aydin in western Anatolia, then moved to Rhodes, whence her parents moved to Italy. There is a detail that stands out, in the version of the Purim Saragossa tale she recorded. It is stated that the King of Aragon had married Sara, who came from a Jewish family – from... Salonika! Obviously, this is an anachronism, as even though there were "Romaniot" Jews in Greece at the time the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula arrived there (and in Anatolia) after their expulsion from Spain in 1492, Salonika only became a conspicuous Jewish community with the massive settlement of Jews speaking Judaeo-Spanish. At the time when Salonika, about two years before the First World War, was conquered by Greece from the Ottoman Empire, the majority of the workforce in Salonika consisted of Jews. The city was long known as "the Jewish Republic", and it wasn't until the influx of Greek refugees from Ionia in the early 1920s that the Jews of Salonika became a minority, before being wiped out by the Nazi Holocaust. To make room for the Ionian Greeks, the Greek authorities dismissed all Jews from jobs in the port of Salonika.