

**DOÑA GRACIA NASI:**  
**“She Grew A Name Like The Name Of The Holy Greats”**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My interest in this topic originated in 2006 after reading Naomi Ragen's novel entitled *The Ghost of Hannah Mendes* and launched me on the quest to learn more about the Sephardic Jews of Spain and Portugal and Doña Graça Nasi. I had hoped that my research would inspire some sort of concert experience, but alas, nothing emerged and I decided to shelve the idea. Fast-forward to 2011, and the stars aligned. Thank you to **Naomi Ragen, Andréé Aelion Brooks** (author of *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graça Nasi*), my ever inspiring **teachers at HUC-JIR** and **mentors in the field** that enabled and enabled me to finally find my voice in this endeavor.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my exceptional grandparents, **Arthur Sohn and Annette Sohn Hirsch, Ruth Fajerman Markowicz** and especially, my sole living grandparent, **Philip Markowicz**, whose biblical and philosophical writings and conversations, and whose life inspires and amazes me every single day. All of your legacies live on, and I am proud to have the privilege of standing on your shoulders.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Who has seen, as you [people of Israel] have, the Divine mercy reveal itself in human guise, as [God] has shown and continues to show you for your succor?*

*Who has seen revived the intrinsic piety of Miriam, offering her life to save her brethren? the great prudence of Deborah, in governing her people? that infinite virtue and great sanctity of Esther, in helping those who are persecuted? the much praised strength of the most chaste and magnanimous widow Judith, in delivering those hemmed in by travail?...*

*It is she [Doña Graçia Nasi] who aided you with motherly love and heavenly liberality in the dangerous and urgent necessities which you experience... Succoring the multitude of necessitous and miserable poor, refusing no favor even to those who were her enemies... In such wise, with her golden arm and heavenly grasp, she raised most of those of this people from the depths of this and other infinite travail in which they were kept enthralled in Europe by poverty and sin; she brings them to safe lands and does not cease to guide them, and gathers them to the obedience and precepts of their God of old...*

~Samuel Usque, *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel*, 1553<sup>1</sup>

These words derive from an exquisite, dramatic, and hopeful source meant to console the exiled Spanish and Portuguese Jews. Not only does Samuel Usque feature Doña Graçia Nasi prominently within it, but he also dedicates the entire book to her, declaring that she is the “heart of her people.”

A man of culture, a well-respected writer, poet, and historian of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Usque was well versed in the Bible – both Jewish and Catholic versions. A Portuguese *Marrano* living in Ferrara, Italy, he wrote the famous *Consolaçam as Tribulaçoẽs de Yisrael* (*Consolation for Tribulations of Israel*) out of concern for and in support of the persecuted and expelled Jews from Spain and Portugal, and dedicated it to “Gracia

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<sup>1</sup> Translation by Cecil Roth (Cecil Roth, *Dona Gracia of the House of Nasi* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society Of America, 1992), 77.)

Mendesia” (Doña Graça Nasi). Published in 1553 in Ferrara in Portuguese, it is a full-blown narration of the history of the Israelites since the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, but it centers on the sufferings of the Jews in Usque’s time, and provides hope that salvific prophecies will ultimately be fulfilled.<sup>2</sup>

Usque was not alone in praising this unique woman. The famed rabbi of Constantinople, Joshua Soncino, wrote in his introduction to his *Responsum 12*, “[Doña Graça Nasi] would bring to light justice without stealing anything from the labors of others.” Upon her death, he eulogized that, “...her righteousness [would] stand forever.” The poet, Sa’adiah Longo, composed an elegy to Doña Graça Nasi in his work *Shivrei Lukhot*<sup>3</sup>, characterizing her as, “...the supreme leader...” who “nursed [the Jews] from her breast.” The famed Talmud scholar Immanuel Aboab of Portugal wrote in 1629: “Whosoever should undertake to tell of the noble deeds and rare virtues of Doña Graça would have to write entire books.”<sup>4</sup> To him and others, Doña Graça Nasi’s “name and the memory . . . will forever be a part of the marrow of [our] bones.”<sup>5</sup>

The remarkable woman who came to be known as Doña Graça Nasi was born in Portugal in 1510 and was raised as a *Marrano*—a term used to designate a Jew who converted to Catholicism outwardly but maintained a Jewish identity privately. Jews of Spain and Portugal who converted to Catholicism are also referred to as New Christians, *Conversos* or sometimes Crypto-Jews. While these terms may have subtle differences in

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<sup>2</sup> "Usque," JewishEncyclopedia.com, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14614-usque> (accessed October 30, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Also known as *Seder Zemanim*

<sup>4</sup> *Nomologia* pg 304 (published by his heirs)

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Usque, trans. Martin A. Cohen (translator). *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel (Consolação às Tribulações de Israel)*, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1965), 37.

meaning, for the purposes of this thesis, I will use “*Marrano*” to refer to converts who maintained a secret Jewish identity.

As a *Marrano*, the focus of my thesis was known for most of her life by her Christian name, Beatrice de Luna.<sup>6</sup> Her parents had emigrated from Spain to Portugal in 1492 and were forcibly converted along with the other remaining Jews there in 1497.

Doña Graçia Nasi was the wife of the successful European banker Francisco Mendes. His early death catapulted Doña Graçia Nasi,<sup>7</sup> then twenty-six years old, to the helm of one of the most distinguished and successful banking and shipping houses of Renaissance Europe. She and her family were often on the move – settling in Lisbon, then Antwerp, Venice, Ferrara, Constantinople and, almost certainly, Tiberias at the end of her days.<sup>8</sup> It seems that Doña Graçia Nasi’s primary motive for maintaining and developing her family’s wealth was to maintain her influence so that she could support and finance Jewish humanitarian causes. From the beginning, despite the fact that she and her family might have been elevated to the rank of nobility, she refused to turn her back on her heritage and her people.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Her husband’s Catholic surname was Mendes, but she was always known in the Christian world as “de Luna.” While to modern readers this may seem like a precursor to feminism, this practice was common in Spanish culture.

<sup>7</sup> Gracia, her given name in Hebrew would have been Hannah, meaning grace. Gracia was from the Ladino. Nasi comes from the Hebrew, meaning “prince”, and is a term of respect. Doña Graçia’s father was called *el naci* or *nasi* because he represented the Jewish community before rulers and administrators. She reclaimed this title upon returning openly to Judaism. (She never took her husband’s name, as it was not the fashion of the day.)

<sup>8</sup> Andreé Aelion Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Dona Gracia Nasi - A Jewish leader during the Renaissance* (New York: Paragon House, 2003) 463-464.

<sup>9</sup> Both Dona Gracia’s husband (Francisco) and then his brother-in-law (Diogo) named her sole heir and executor to the House of Mendes’ business and fortune. It is hard to believe that they would have entrusted her if she was not going to continue their noble efforts on behalf of *Marranos*. Diogo’s will in Antwerp shows the Mendes’ dedication to their

This thesis unfolds in sections that lead us to Usque's comparison between Doña Graçia Nasi and biblical women. The biography I provide in chapter one will help to explain why she earned such illustrious accolades and dedications in her generation and the next, yet remains virtually unknown to the Jews of today. What compelled her, I will ask, to remain loyal to her Jewish faith, even under the Inquisition's threat that forced her to live outwardly as a Catholic? As a Reform Jewish woman and cantor, I will expound in chapter two upon the importance of *shalshet hakabbalah*, or the chain of tradition. I will show how the Bible intersects with real people and creates pathways for the continuation of Oral Torah in a modern framework. In this endeavor, I was especially drawn to Usque's comparison of Doña Graçia Nasi with the Biblical foremothers: Miriam, Deborah, Esther and Judith. He described the unique characteristics of each foremother in relationship to Dona Gracia Nasi's attributes, which has taught me how biblical and historical figures can "come to life" and inspire us millennia later. In chapters three through six, I examine Usque's characterizations of the four women and then analyze them through the prism of Dona Gracia Nasi's life story. In this way, I hope to lift our foremothers from the parchment and inspire contemporary Jews to reexamine our sacred narratives and themselves.

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heritage and their people by leaving 1600 Flemish pounds to aid the poor. One hundred pounds annually was to be distributed in 3 equal parts to aid prisoners, to clothe the naked and to help orphans. Additionally, as soon as she moved to the Ottoman Empire, she immediately contributed to every major effort to assist her fellow Jews, including those *Marranos* seeking to return to their heritage. (Roth, *Doña Graçia of the House of Nasi*, 40 & 123.)

**Part I:**

**DOÑA GRAÇA NASI:  
AN ADDITION TO “ORAL TORAH”**



## Chapter 1.

### “Her”-Story: Background and Biography

Doña Graçia Nasi lived in a turbulent era. Royal edicts and papal measures led to the conversion and/or exile of hundreds of thousands of Jews across Europe. The Iberian Peninsula was particularly hard hit.

Throughout her life, Doña Graçia Nasi was known by several different names, depending upon the historical circumstances. Her various names are emblematic of the various roles she played throughout her life, whether chosen or forced upon her. For example, upon being born to a *Marrano* family, she was immediately given two sets of names, Beatrice de Luna - the name she was baptized with, according to Portuguese law and to the family's forced adopted religion of Catholicism, as well as her secret Jewish name – Gracia (Hannah in Hebrew). In accordance with the fashion of the era, after marriage she never acquired her husband's family name, but the family business she inherited and led was known as the “House of Mendes.” After publicly reclaiming her Jewish identity, she would add the illustrious formerly-used family reference of “Nasi” to her family name,<sup>10</sup> whose biblical meaning of “prince” designated nobility.<sup>11</sup> Finally, she

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<sup>10</sup> Doña Graçia Nasi was descended from the ancient house of Benveniste, one of the oldest of noble Spanish Jewish families, who became known as physicians and counselors to kings. Because of their status, the family was referred to as the “House of Nasi.” Alan Mayor Sokobin, “Three Courageous Women of Commerce: 16<sup>th</sup> Century – Doña Graçia Nasi, 17<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> Century – Gluckel of Hameln, 19<sup>th</sup> Century – Rebecca Gratz” (lecture presented at the Philip Markowicz Instructor in Judaism and Jewish Biblical Studies, University of Toledo, Ohio, April 18, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> “*Nasi*” occurs 132 times in the *TaNaKH*. The first use is in Genesis 17 in reference to the twelve “princes” who will descend from Ishmael. The second is in Genesis 23 when Abraham is recognized as a “*nasi elohim*” (a godly prince). Later uses of “*Nasi*” refer to Israelite leaders of Judea and the leader of the Sandhedrin. The Romans recognized the “*Nasi*” as the “patriarch of the Jews”.

would become known as simply, “*La Señora*,” the name bestowed upon her in her time, to express great respect and love.<sup>12</sup>

In this chapter, I set the historical backdrop for Doña Gracia Nasi’s coming of age and adulthood. The context, as will be shown, is crucial for understanding who she was and what she accomplished in her lifetime.

### The Political and Religious Prologue: Iberian Peninsula circa Sixteenth Century

Sanctioned by Pope Sixtus IV in 1478, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella established the Inquisition in Spain to unearth and punish heretics. Officially, Jews who had converted to Catholicism (known as *Marranos*)<sup>13</sup> were subject to the Inquisition if they were suspected of secretly maintaining their practice of Judaism to various individual degrees or urging other *Conversos* to return to Judaism.

In 1492, all Jews in Spain were given a choice: convert to Catholicism or be expelled. Hundreds of thousands fled to various parts of the world, often facing peril and resulting in unsuccessful journeys. Pirates captured some on the high seas<sup>14</sup> and sold

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<sup>12</sup> Dolores J. Sloan, *The Sephardic Jews of Spain and Portugal: survival of an imperiled culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2009), 117.

<sup>13</sup> “*Marrano*” derives from the Castilian term meaning “swine.” The derogatory term was applied to those Jews who had converted (i.e. *Conversos* or “New Christians”) but who were still secretly practicing Judaism. Some say, though, that “*Marrano*” comes from the Portuguese word “*marrar*”, i.e. forced, or from the Aramaic-Hebrew “*Mar Anus*,” a forced one. These terms *Marrano* and *Converso* are often used interchangeably, but for purposes of clarity here, I will use *Conversos* for all Jews who were converted to Catholicism, and *Marranos* will be used for those *Conversos* who kept some Jewish practices. It is also worth noting that some non-*Marrano Conversos*, were unjustly accused of Judaizing and punished nonetheless. Sometimes this was merely done as an excuse to acquire their assets. (“Marano,” JewishEncyclopedia.com, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10388-marano> (accessed August 8, 2012).)

<sup>14</sup> High seas, in maritime law, encompass “all parts of the mass of saltwater surrounding the globe that are not part of the territorial sea or internal waters of a state. For several

them into slavery, and others suffered a similar fate when ship captains were hired to take them, supposedly, to safety. Many died of disease or malnutrition under desperate conditions. Approximately 50,000 found refuge in Portugal under King Joao II (including 600 of the Jewish wealthy elite).<sup>15</sup> His 'humanitarian' gesture was well compensated, as those permitted to come to Portugal were not only affluent, but skilled craftsmen, including munitions makers. The Spanish Jews were attracted to Portugal's proximity, familiar culture, and similar language.

However, soon after the Jews arrived, King Joao II died and his cousin, Manuel I, inherited the throne. Unmarried, he soon became engaged to Ferdinand and Isabella's eldest daughter, Isabel. Her parents consented to the marriage so long as Manuel ousted the Jews from Portugal, as his future in-laws had. Not wanting to part with the wealth that the Jewish community contributed to his kingdom's economy, Manuel found another way. In 1496, the Portuguese king issued an edict of expulsion to his Jews, forcing them to leave the country within nine months. Some left immediately; most were not as fortunate. For, as they readied to leave, the King prevented the Jews from leaving by closing the ports. He then rounded up the Jews and forcibly baptized them. However, he somewhat mitigated the impact of conversion by promising that if the Jews agreed to go along with his order, there would not be investigations into the *Conversos*' private religious practices for at least twenty years.

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centuries beginning in the European Middle Ages, a number of maritime states asserted sovereignty over large portions of the high seas. Well-known examples were the claims of Genoa in the Mediterranean and of Great Britain in the North Sea and elsewhere." ("High Seas (maritime law)," Britannica Online Encyclopedia, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/265375/high-seas> (accessed August 30, 2012).)

<sup>15</sup> Andreé Aelion Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi - A Jewish leader during the Renaissance* (New York: Paragon House, 2003), 15.

Nevertheless in 1506, Dominican friars exploited the *Marranos* as scapegoats for a plague ravaging the area. Near Easter, which fell approximately at the same time as Passover, the friars accused some *Marranos* of slaughtering lamb and poultry, according to Jewish custom, and preparing matzah and bitter herbs for the Jewish festival. Officials arrested the offenders but released them soon after. However, two Dominican friars, who remained angry about the infraction, ran through the streets crying “heresy” and called for the death of the Judaizers.<sup>16</sup> Within two days 2,000 *Marranos* were murdered. King Manuel punished the rioters and then extended the “waivers” to the *Marranos* for an additional twenty years. He even lifted the ban on *Conversos* leaving the country and removed the social, political and economic discrimination between Old and New Christians.<sup>17</sup>

#### *Simchat Bat: A Baby Girl is Born*

Manuel held to his word. Thus, for a period of time, the *Marranos* lived nearly on par with other Catholics and had the right to own property and engage in business as any other inhabitant of Portugal. It was during this period of relative safety that a baby girl was born (c. 1510) and baptized Beatrice de Luna<sup>18</sup> to a family originally from the Aragon region of Spain.

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<sup>16</sup> Judaizers were those who adopted the beliefs, customs or character of a Jew. “Judaizer” (“Judaizer,” Dictionary and Thesaurus - Merriam-Webster Online, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/judaizing> (accessed August 2, 2012).)

<sup>17</sup> “Lisbon Massacre,” Zionism & Israel, [http://www.zionism-israel.com/dic/Lisbon\\_Massacre\\_1506.htm](http://www.zionism-israel.com/dic/Lisbon_Massacre_1506.htm) (accessed August 30, 2013).

<sup>18</sup> Her Jewish name was Gracia, the Iberian equivalent of the Hebrew name, Hannah. Though she would only publically proclaim Gracia as her name later in life, I have chosen for the sake of clarity to use Doña Graçia Nasi throughout. (Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 300-46.)

The daughter of Alvaro and Phillipa de Luna grew up in a privileged environment; her father even had connections to the royal court<sup>19</sup>. Because of her family's means, she was well educated in a variety of subjects, including reading, writing, foreign languages, music, poetry, literature, history, politics, and mathematics.<sup>20</sup> Like many other *Marrano* families in Portugal, the de Lunas lived as Catholics in public and Jews in private, observing as many *mitzvot* as they could. Despite these difficult circumstances, Alvaro and Phillipa instilled a deep commitment to Jewish heritage in their daughter. Notably, during the Inquisition, *Marranos* typically imparted the teachings, rituals, and commandments of Judaism to females, as they traditionally kept the home—the only possible place of privacy for Jewish observance.<sup>21</sup> Most likely, such instruction enabled Doña Graçia Nasi to be a future carrier of her heritage.

At eighteen years of age, Beatrice married Francisco Mendes,<sup>22</sup> a much older man and successful merchant. Some historians claim that he was a relative, possibly even an uncle of Doña Graçia's mother. Marrying within the crypto-Jewish community was common to ensure the transmission of tradition, as well as for reasons of safety. As a *Converso* from the age of fifteen, Francisco had a superb Jewish education, was familiar

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<sup>19</sup> Alvaro de Luna traded in silver and because of this international business, he was most probably important to the Portuguese crown for his contacts and knowledge. (Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 22-24.)

<sup>20</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 32-33.

<sup>21</sup> Three shared beliefs of Crypto-Jews were that the Messiah would come to deliver them; that God is One, not tripartite; and that faith in the Law of Moses was compulsory for redemption. (David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 43.

<sup>22</sup> Jewish name, Semah Benveniste. André Aelion Brooks points out in her book that the Benveniste family had been well respected for generations. In fact, in Vatican documents, Francisco's name appears with both his Catholic and Jewish names, "Francisco Mendes Benveniste." Brooks sites an example in a safe conduct document issued October 22, 1546 by Pope Paul III (Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 47-80.).

with Jewish tradition and ritual, and had studied Hebrew. Some sources describe his Jewish knowledge as on par with Spanish Rabbinic scholars of the time.<sup>23</sup> Francisco and his brother, Diogo<sup>24</sup> (who married Doña Graça's sister Brianda<sup>25</sup>) were originally successful dealers in jewelry and spices. As they grew more successful, they expanded their mercantile business into a profitable shipping and banking organization headquartered in Lisbon and Antwerp, with a distinguished clientele, including the Holy Roman Emperor.<sup>26</sup> As the Inquisition loomed over Portugal, they gradually shifted the greater portion of their business to Antwerp as the wealth of 'heretics' was subject to confiscation as part of the Inquisition's protocol.

Only seven years after they were married, Francisco died,<sup>27</sup> leaving Doña Graça, at the tender age of twenty-six, as the sole heir to his business and fortune. Within two years, Doña Graça fled Portugal with her daughter, via England under a ruse, most likely billed as the wedding of Brianda to Diogo. Such a reason enabled her to bring the majority of her entourage with her. This meant, however, leaving the family house, estate and business in Portugal as if they planned to return. In 1537, with the help of Thomas Cromwell, chancellor and chief financial advisor to Henry VIII, they traveled from England to Antwerp (1537). There, Doña Graça joined her brother-in-law as an active and equal partner in the operation of the family's businesses.

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<sup>23</sup> A Rabbinic court ruling in Samuel Medina's Responsum 327 refers to Francisco as a, "Rabbi *Anus*," *anus* from the Hebrew, meaning forced. This meant that Francisco was a forcibly converted rabbi who also led *Marranos* in prayer. (Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graça*, 47-80.).

<sup>24</sup> Jewish name, Meir Benveniste

<sup>25</sup> Jewish name, Reyna

<sup>26</sup> A comparison would be the Rothschild family empire two centuries later

<sup>27</sup> The cause of death is unknown, but is said to have come on suddenly from exhaustion. Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graça*, 75.

While maintaining the business, Doña Graçia Nasi (still known as Beatrice de Luna) dedicated her life to rescuing *Marranos* and trying to derail the Inquisition. Her efforts to rescue *Marranos* and change papal policy by bribing important Catholic officials and emissaries met with some success. Thanks to her money, connections, and shrewdness, she was accepted in society as a Catholic. Still, she longed to be openly Jewish and had convinced her brother-in-law to establish a branch of the business in a location where this would be possible. Unfortunately, Diogo died (1543) before implementation of this plan. His will appointed her the sole administrator of the vast family business empire and trustee of his wife and daughter's inheritance.

As the sole leader of the business firmly ensconced in Antwerp, a great many world leaders coveted her. She offered much to a king in power. For example, after Diogo died, the King of France sought to take advantage of the Mendes family's perceived weakness. Posthumously, the French imperial court accused Diogo of secretly practicing Judaism. If convicted of such a crime, all holdings in France would be forfeited to the crown. Doña Graçia averted this with judicious bribes and a huge loan to the King. At the same time, Doña Graçia received numerous proposals of (arranged) marriage for her daughter, including Don Francisco of Aragon and Marie, Queen Dowager of Hungary, Regent of the Lowlands, and sister of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V<sup>28</sup>. Excuses for her refusal becoming difficult to maintain, it was clearly time to depart.

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<sup>28</sup> Holy Roman Emperor from 1516-1556 and rival to the Ottoman Empire, he inherited the throne through his mother, which stretched from the Carpathian Mountains to the Philippines. (Gad Nassi and Rebecca Toueg. *Doña Graçia Nasi: A Legend in her Lifetime* (Tel Aviv: Women's International Zionist Organization, 1991), 10.

Under the pretense of a trip to take the waters at Aix-la-Chapelle in France<sup>29</sup>, the family and its entourage escaped to Venice (1547), carrying with them as much of their valuables as possible. Once again, as in Lisbon, Doña Graça Nasi left her house, estate and business in Antwerp functioning as if she were to return. Yet, as in the past, she had judiciously transferred assets to Venice over the course of two years.

Doña Graça Nasi's nephew, Joao Miguez,<sup>30</sup> whom she had raised since their days in Lisbon, helped maintain the deceit. Charming and accomplished, he had befriended Prince Maximilian, nephew of the Emperor and the Queen-Regent of the Netherlands while at university. This relationship enhanced his status and multiplied his connections just at the time he was beginning to help Doña Graça with the business. Joao stayed in Antwerp and maintained the day-to-day operation of the family business so as to camouflage the family's escape to Venice.

Once the ploy was discovered, the Antwerp rulers imposed an embargo on the Mendes' property, and charges of heresy were brought against Doña Graça and her sister Brianda. Joao Miguez brilliantly used the law to his advantage, arguing before the Imperial Court that the women were still subjects of Portugal and thus not subject to Antwerp's jurisdiction. In the end, Joao and the Emperor reached an agreement (presumably, money changed hands), and he made his way quietly to Venice to join the family.

A crossroad for commerce between Europe and the Orient, as well as a center of the burgeoning Renaissance, Venice proved an ideal refuge for the House of Mendes.

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<sup>29</sup> Doña Graça Nasi was known to have a stomach condition and would occasionally seek relief at spas of this sort. (Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graça Nasi*, 188-189.)

<sup>30</sup> Twenty-two years old at this time, he later becomes known as Don Joseph Nasi, the Duke of Naxos.



Nevertheless, they strived to reach Constantinople, where the family could conduct their businesses and live openly as Jews.<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, Doña Graça and Joao Miguez began to quietly establish inroads with the Sultan Suleiman. Not one to leave her or her family's welfare to chance, Doña Graça made sure to have an alternative plan at the ready.

Despite the relative safety of Venice, though, disaster struck when Doña Graça's younger sister, Brianda, sought to gain control of the family's assets entrusted to Doña Graça. In a rare insubordination, the former denounced the latter to the Venetian government, revealing Doña Graça's plan to immigrate to Turkey with her fortune to reclaim her Jewish faith (1547). Maintaining her and her daughter's loyalty to Catholicism, Brianda demanded control of their own assets, which were held in trust for them by Doña Graça per both Diogo's will and Doña Graça's. Brianda also sent a message to the King of France with the same accusation, hoping to regain control of the family assets. All plans were spoiled, however, when the messenger himself denounced all three as Jewesses, and the King of France immediately confiscated all of their holdings.

Meanwhile Doña Graça's nephew, Joao Miguez, had become connected to the Ottoman Empire through the Sultan's Jewish physician, Moses Hamon<sup>32</sup>, a former *Marrano* from Spain. As a result, Sultan Suleiman understood the potential riches that could be transferred to his domain upon her move and so dispatched a special messenger

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<sup>31</sup> The thriving Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire were largely made up of those who left Spain after the expulsion. (Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graça Nasi*, 304.)

<sup>32</sup> Hamon came to Constantinople (Istanbul) after the Spanish Expulsion. Originally from the province of Granada like the Benveniste family, it is possible that he was related to Francisco and Diogo Mendes.

of state to Venice with instructions to release her and her property immediately. No further investigation into the charge of Judaizing ensued. Meanwhile Brianda received control of her inheritance and her daughter's guardianship, though ultimately Doña Graçia would re-gain custody of her niece.<sup>33</sup> The two sisters eventually reconciled, and Doña Graçia married off her niece<sup>34</sup> to her nephew, Samuel (Don Joseph's brother), providing generous support for them.

As demonstrated in letters sent by the French ambassador to Venice, Doña Graçia Nasi's arrest had caused a diplomatic crisis on an international scale.<sup>35</sup> Rulers knew the cachet her presence could offer. Doña Graçia refused the Sultan's offer, and instead took her household to the relative safety of the independent state of Ferrara, which was under the protection of the liberal-minded Duke of Ercole II.<sup>36</sup> She resided there only temporarily as the Inquisition slowly encroached and it became clear to Doña Graçia that the only place of refuge for her and the House of Mendes would be under Sultan Suleiman in Turkey. With time, she could make the proper arrangements to pursue a life in the Ottoman Empire.

Maintaining a Jewish identity clandestinely but a Catholic one outwardly allowed Doña Graçia to persist in her efforts to save *Marranos* fleeing the Inquisition. There is a scholarly debate as to when Doña Graçia Nasi was able to reclaim her Jewish identity:

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<sup>33</sup> Drawing on the record of Diogo's will, the Duke of Ferrara awarded custody to Doña Graçia Nasi, which stated that he had full confidence in her, "even as a female." (Brooks, *The Woman who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*.)

<sup>34</sup> Known as "*La Chica*"

<sup>35</sup> Nassi and Toueg, *Doña Graçia Nasi: A Legend in her Lifetime*, 11-13.

<sup>36</sup> Upon his marriage to Renee, the daughter of King Louis XII of France and a follower of Martin Luther, the court in Ferrara was transformed into a meeting place for liberal thinkers, 'heretics', and the cultural elite. (Sloan, *The Sephardic Jews of Spain and Portugal: survival of an imperiled culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries*, 113-115.)

Did it occur in Ferrara or later, when she moved to the Ottoman Empire?<sup>37</sup> The Inquisitorial testimony of Doña Graçia Nasi's senior agent Duarte Gomez, recorded a few years later in Venice, confirms that she was still living as a Catholic in 1552.<sup>38</sup> In fact, according to a papal document, the Pope addressed Beatrice de Luna (Doña Graçia Nasi) as a "daughter in Christ."<sup>39</sup> At the same time, as liberal as he was, the Duke would certainly not have visited her home had she been openly Jewish.<sup>40</sup> This indicates that Doña Graçia almost certainly did not reclaim her Jewish heritage openly until she, her family, and assets were safe in Turkey.

Wherever she went, Doña Graçia supported the Jewish cause, including covert support of Jewish culture. Ferrara was a haven for Jews escaping from oppressive regimes throughout Europe and became a hotbed of Jewish intellectuals, artists, writers, medical researchers, engineers, and printers. The "Renaissance-woman" Doña Graçia Nasi easily blended into this community and was sought after for her patronage of the arts. Among other worthwhile literary projects (e.g., Usque's *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel*), in 1553 she financed the Ferrara Bible, a translation of the Hebrew Bible into Spanish, which enabled *Marranos* who only understood Spanish to access their Jewish heritage.

Interestingly, there were two versions printed. One was intended for public, Christian consumption. It was printed by those using their *Marrano* names, Geronimo de Vargas and Duarte Pinel, and dedicated to the Duke of Ferrara. The second was meant

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<sup>37</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 279; and for a contrary account, Sloan, *The Sephardic Jews of Spain and Portugal*, 113.

<sup>38</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 375-383.

<sup>39</sup> Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews*, (Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies: Toronto, 1990) Vol. 6, p. 2771, doc. 2981.

<sup>40</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 279.

for the Jewish community. It was printed by the same hands but used their Jewish names, Yom Tob Levi Athias and Abraham Ben Salomon Usque, and bore an inscription to none other than Doña Graçia Nasi:

the noble-hearted Jewess... whose merits have always earned [her] the most sublime place among all of our people – both because your greatness deserves it, and because your own birth and love of your land imposes this well-deserved obligation upon us.

Doña Graçia recognized that with the immanent end of the Duke's reign, Ferrara would cease to be a *Marrano* refuge. Throughout Italy, as Protestants grew in power, the Catholic Church fought back with ever stricter repression, and *Marranos* and Jews began to hear the footsteps of the Inquisition once again. As a result, Doña Graçia pursued and won a document of safe conduct from the Vatican, stating that she, her household, and businesses, could depart at any time, "together with merchandise, wealth, animals, sums of money, and all other things, even valuables, day or night, on sea or land, whatever the journey, direction, or place, however unusual, without any impediment to property or person..."<sup>41</sup>

Simultaneously, Doña Graçia sent word to Constantinople that she was ready to come to Turkey. To Doña Graçia's dismay, her sister, Brianda, chose to stay behind, insisting, "that she would like to live and die as a Christian and not a Jew."<sup>42</sup> The Venetians compelled Doña Graçia Nasi to make provision for her two relatives by putting her under house arrest until she deposited the requisite funds in the Zecca, Venice's mint.

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<sup>41</sup> Simonsohn's *The Apostolic See and the Jews*, Vol. 6, p. 2771, doc 2981, dated March 17, 1551. (Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 282-283.)

<sup>42</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 285.

By way of Ragusa (Dubrovnik), where her agents apparently used their Jewish names for the first time,<sup>43</sup> and then Salonika,<sup>44</sup> Doña Graçia arrived in Constantinople in 1553. As noted by Andres Laguna, a contemporary from Segovia, her arrival was one befitting a queen:

One day, a Portuguese lady called Doña Beatrice Mendes, who was very rich, entered Constantinople with 40 horses and four triumphal chariots full of ladies and Spanish servants... she live(s) like a Spanish duke and has the means to do so.<sup>45</sup>

Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent welcomed her with open arms, even exempting her from wearing the dress, which demarcated Jews,<sup>46</sup> and allowing her and her entourage to continue wearing the fine European clothing they were accustomed to. At last safe among her people, she reclaimed her Judaism fully.

Once ensconced in her new community, Doña Graçia Nasi became a generous philanthropist of Jewish causes. She assisted the needy; established and supported schools, yeshivas, and houses of worship; and sponsored scholars and rabbis. Even at her estate outside of the city, she was rumored to host eighty needy Jews at her table every day. Proud of her accomplishments, the Jews of the Ottoman Empire dubbed her “*La Señora*,” or “*Hageveret*” (The Lady). A synagogue in Izmir, which she funded, still bears the combined name of “*Señora Geveret*,” and is currently a part of a large restoration project turning the five synagogues of the old Jewish quarter into a Jewish

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<sup>43</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 311.

<sup>44</sup> Salonika was the city with the highest Jewish population in the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>45</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 316.

<sup>46</sup> Jews in the Ottoman Empire were required to wear a yellow turban or hat, marking that they were “non-believers,” in contrast to the Turks who wore white turbans. Other minorities also had distinguishing colored hats. (Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 306.)

heritage museum.<sup>47</sup> In 1554, after reaching Constantinople, Joao Miguez ‘came out’ as a Jew as well and claimed his Jewish name, Joseph Nasi. Seemingly according to family custom, he married Doña Graçia’s daughter, Reyna, further safeguarding the family business. Joseph Nasi became the very influential and successful Duke of Naxos. Together in all their business dealings, he and Doña Graçia had vast shipping, banking and trading interests, including a monopoly over wine. Doña Graçia remained every bit as involved and influential as her son-in-law, if not more so. In fact, once she died, Joseph Nasi’s business gradually declined and his political influence waned.

In 1554, with the whole family safe, Doña Graçia Nasi was finally at liberty to fulfill the dying request of her husband, Francisco Mendes Benveniste, to be buried in the sacred soil of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Only Jews could fulfill this mitzvah. Along with the internment, Doña Graçia made a substantial donation to the poor to ensure their privilege of burial in the land. Most likely the bodies of her parents were also sent for reburial, but there is no concrete evidence of this.<sup>48</sup>

In 1555, Doña Graçia received news that Pope Paul IV had burned twenty-six *Marranos* at the stake and the imprisoned many more. Galvanized, Doña Graçia Nasi assembled Jewish merchants in Turkey to boycott the papal port of Ancona and divert their business to Pesaro. Rabbi Joshua Soncino, leader of the Turkish Jewish community, opposed such a boycott, arguing that it would harm the Jews remaining in Ancona. He claimed in a Responsa that the *Marrano* refugees could have emigrated to safety in the Ottoman Empire but instead chose to remain to enrich themselves. Without a united

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<sup>47</sup> “The Izmir Project,” LTB Design – Home, <http://www.ltbdesign.com/clientfiles/izmir/newsletter1.html> (accessed December 21, 2013).)

<sup>48</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 80.

front, the boycott effort collapsed and even backfired, when the Pope threatened to expel all Jews from Italy and excommunicate the Duke of Urbino (the noble of Pesaro) for heresy. In response, the Duke proceeded to expel all the *Marranos* from his city.

Owing to the good will and wealth of Doña Graça Nasi, the Pope did relent and release some of the monies of accused agents of the House of Mendes that were being held. But even her influence could not save the *Marrano* prisoners, who either committed suicide or were burned at the stake.

Despite this defeat, during the final years of her life, Doña Graça Mendes dreamed of resettling the land of Israel. After a life of wandering, her greatest hope was to go to the Holy Land. To that end, she negotiated a deal with the Sultan to begin rebuilding the ruined city of Tiberias.<sup>49</sup> Negotiations took two years, but finally a deal was brokered. In 1560, the Sultan leased the ruined city of Tiberias and several surrounding villages for 1000 ducats annually. Doña Graça Nasi envisioned resettling Jewish refugees of Europe there.

A smattering of Jews had already returned to Safad and Jerusalem, inspired by the words of pseudo-messiahs, but the pragmatist Doña Graça Nasi believed that an agricultural base was essential for creating a sustained Jewish presence: she had workers

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<sup>49</sup> Tiberias, named by King Herod after his emperor, Tiberius Claudius Nero, was an important location to Jews because it had been a burial site of some of ancient Israel's luminaries. As the legend goes, around the time of the Roman siege of Jerusalem in 68 CE, the great first century rabbi, Yochanan ben Zakkai, was said to have been smuggled out of Jerusalem in a coffin. He settled in Tiberias, which under his tutelage became a leading center of Jewish learning and scholarship. The *Mishnah*, the first codification of Oral Jewish law, along with the Jerusalem Talmud was compiled in Tiberias. The famous Rabbi Akiva, a student of Ben Zakkai's disciples, was buried in Tiberias. Tiberias at one point was the seat of the ruling body of seventy elders under the leadership of the "*nasi*." Although Tiberias did not remain a center for Jewish learning over time, it continued to be considered sacred ground, especially in the eyes of Sephardi Jews. Even Maimonides was buried there. "Tiberias," JewishEncyclopedia.com, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14386-tiberias> (accessed August 23, 2012).

build a protective wall around Tiberias, clear ruins, and construct homes, including a mansion for her near hot springs. To facilitate the development of a textile industry, they planted Mulberry trees for silkworms, and date palms, orange groves, vineyards, gardens and pine trees to replenish the earth.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, Doña Graça Nasi founded a *yeshivah* in Tiberias that came to rival that of Safad. It is generally presumed that Doña Graça Nasi lived in Tiberias until her death in 1569.

Despite Don Joseph's appointment as governor of Tiberias, the colony did not survive Doña Graça Nasi's death. Nevertheless, Doña Graça Nasi's daughter, Reyna, perpetuated her mother's good work. She supported Jewish learning through institutions, such as *yeshivot* and synagogues, as well as the publication of holy books, even establishing a printing press in Constantinople for this purpose in 1593.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Nassi and Toueg. *Doña Graça Nasi: A Legend in her Lifetime*, 20-22.

<sup>51</sup> Nassi and Toueg. *Doña Graça Nasi: A Legend in her Lifetime*, 23.



## Chapter 2.

### Shalsholet Hakabbala:

#### Honoring Memory And Legacy In A Jewish (vs. Historical) Context

וְלֹא אֶתְכֶם (29):<sup>13</sup>

לְבַדְכֶם אֲנִי כֹרֵת אֶת־הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים  
הַזֹּאת: <sup>14</sup>כִּי אֶת־אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁנֹו פֹה עִמָּנוּ עַד הַיּוֹם  
לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֶת אֲשֶׁר אֵינָנו פֹה עִמָּנוּ הַיּוֹם:

“I make this covenant, with its sanctions, not with you alone, but both with those who are standing here with us this day before YHVH our God and with those who are not with us here this day.”<sup>52</sup> (Deuteronomy 29:13-14)

This passage illuminates the idea of *Shalsholet Hakabbalah*<sup>53</sup> for me. Although I may not have been physically standing at Sinai with Moses and the Israelites, I am included in this covenant with God. In her 2005 book, *Praise Her Works: Conversations with Biblical Women*, Penina Adelman writes, “We are the heirs to the ancestral strength chronicled in the Torah. We need only to study it deeply in order to receive our sacred legacy.”<sup>54</sup> As I will show in these pages, Samuel Usque drew a parallel between Doña Graçia Nasi and the biblical foremothers Miriam, Deborah, Esther, and Judith. What did he mean by this? How did our biblical ancestors live through Doña Graçia Nasi? And further, how do they live through us?

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<sup>52</sup> JPS Translation

<sup>53</sup> The Chain of Tradition/Receiving or The Inheritance of Torah

<sup>54</sup> Penina Adelman, *Praise Her Works: Conversations with Biblical Women* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), p. xx.

Let us return to the opening passage. Note how ‘standing’ appears in the first part of verse 14, but not in the second. *Midrash* explains that those “standing here with us this day” are the Israelites who stood at Mt. Sinai when God gave the Torah.<sup>55</sup> The second part of the verse, “those who are not with us here this day,” refers to the prophets and sages whose revelation and wisdom will fill the pages of *Nevi'im* (Prophets), *Ketuvim* (Writings), and Talmud. They are not standing, because they have not yet come to be. This interpretation permits the rabbis and scholars to include all of the written Torah (i.e. the TaNaKH) and the “Oral Torah” in the revelation at Sinai.

*Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 28:6 by Rabbi Yitzhak further explains,

The prophets received from Sinai the messages they were to prophesy to subsequent generations; for Moses told Israel (Deuteronomy 29:14): ‘But with those who are standing here with us this day before YHVH your God and with those who are not with us here this day.’ It does not say, ‘those that are not here standing with us this day’ but rather ‘not with us here this day’ – these are the souls that will one day be created; and because there is not yet any substance in them, the word ‘standing’ is not used with them...

Rabbi Amy Scheinerman<sup>56</sup> finds an even more expansive and inclusive view in the Talmud (Tractate Shavuot 39a), where the phrase, “those who are not with us here this day” includes all the future generations of Israel, as well as all who will enter the Jewish People through conversion.<sup>57</sup> This interpretation expresses Reform Jewish values and is consistent with my personal understanding as well.

The above reference of “Oral Torah” begs further clarification. Traditional Judaism teaches that YHVH not only provided Moses with the written words of the

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<sup>55</sup> *Midrash Exodus Rabbah* 28:6

<sup>56</sup> Rabbi Scheinerman is a hospice rabbi, a teacher and writer. She is also the president of the Baltimore Board of Rabbis, as well as of the Greater Carolinas Association of Rabbis.

<sup>57</sup> Amy Scheinerman, "Who's on First? On Sinai? In Moab?," *Taste of Torah*. <http://taste-of-torah.blogspot.com/2009/09/whos-on-first-on-sinai-in-moab.html> (accessed August 18, 2012).

Torah on *Har Sinai*, but also provided him with the Torah *sheb'al peh*, literally Torah by mouth, or what we refer to as the Oral Torah. The written Torah, compiled by Ezra the Scribe during the Babylonian exile, around 600 B.C.E., is considered our fixed and sacred text, the basis of Judaism, which we read and study throughout the year, and re-read and re-study every year, eternally, as Jews. Much debate and compromise ensued about what was to be included and excluded, as seen in the Talmudic passage describing the process of canonization in 100 CE.<sup>58</sup> Some regard it as the basis of Western civilization. To me, it is the most important written work in the history of humankind, with multiple layers of meaning woven into its intricate fabric.

The compilers used remarkable foresight, and seemed prescient in their knowledge of human psychology and development, by recognizing that we are all of our own time, and that civilization evolves in its ideas and outlook. At the same time, it is essential to consider that the compilers of the Bible inhabited a particular time and place, which informed their worldview (note, for example, patriarchy). I believe that in the notion of progressive revelation inhered in the process of compiling the Torah. They believed, as do we, in the idea of an ever-advancing concept of morality, normative behavior, and conceptual understandings of God. That civilization develops and advances is the foundation of the Oral Torah concept. After all, the Torah itself was oral until Ezra. These brilliant and insightful scholars realized that society and its ideas would continue to evolve.

Hillel the Elder, rabbinic leader and Mishnaic commentator, emphasizes this in the following enlightening story from the Talmud:

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<sup>58</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Bathra* 14b-15a

A gentile came to Hillel seeking to convert to Judaism but was troubled with the idea of an Oral Torah. The first day, Hillel taught him the correct order of the Hebrew alphabet. The next day he reversed the letters. The gentile was confused: "But yesterday you said the opposite!" Hillel replied, "You now see that the written Torah alone is insufficient. We need an Oral Torah to explain God's Word." (Talmud Shabbat 31)

If Hillel hadn't said it, who would dare to say that the Torah is, "insufficient"?

Discussion of Oral Torah obviously includes its prime example, the Talmud, the compilation of rabbinic discussions on the meaning of the laws in the Torah and how they should be interpreted. This codification of learned discussions and opinions about how passages in the Torah were to be applied to circumstances of the day, I believe, was meant to be a model, not the final word. The Talmud itself demonstrates how codes of behavior are informed by their era.

The Medieval Jewish philosopher and physician, Maimonides, wrote his *Mishnah Torah* in reaction to what he viewed as corruption of some rabbinic judicial interpretations of Torah taking place in his time. In his many writings, he sought to make Jewish law accessible to the layperson, most notably his "13 Principles of Faith" which appear in poetic restatements in most siddurs as *Yigdal*.<sup>59</sup> Four centuries later, Joseph Caro compiled the *Shulchan Aruch*, whose shortened version remains a guideline for many traditional Jews. Our Reform movement, in my view, remains loyal to the concept of the Oral Torah, as it strives to interpret the TaNaKH's teachings in our own time and place (e.g. the role of women in Jewish public practice).

The existence and authority of Oral Torah demand that each of us seek contemporary meaning from the Torah. In our own day, we persist in telling the story of the Jewish people. The Oral Torah that we create (through any number of media,

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<sup>59</sup> Often referred to as "The Jewish Creed." Jakob J. Petuchowski, "The Creed Should Be Sung," in idem. *Theology and Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 20-31.

including writing, art, music, etc.) becomes part of this record and an essential companion of the written Torah. We have only to look at the eloquent opening of *Pirkei Avot* as proof of this “*shalsholet hakabbalah*”:

(א) מִשְׁנֵה קִבֵּל תּוֹרָה מִּמּוֹנֵי וּמִסֵּרָה לִיהוֹשֻׁעַ וִיהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים וְזִקְנִים  
לְנָבִיאִים וְנָבִיאִים מִסֵּרָה לְאַנְשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה: הֵם אָמְרוּ

Moses received the Torah at Sinai and handed it on to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the members of the Great Assembly.<sup>60</sup> (*Pirkei Avot* 1:1)

This “foundation stone” describes the workings of the chain of tradition stretching from Moses to Judah the Prince, the rabbi who compiled the Mishnah. “Thus,” in the words of two prominent Reform rabbis, “the Mishnah, the product of the rabbis, those who argued that the Oral Law had been given at Sinai together with the Written Law, is inseparably linked to Moses who first received the Torah.”<sup>61</sup>

In her groundbreaking book *Standing Again at Sinai*, the feminist Jewish thinker Judith Plaskow, initiates her discussion with Torah, which she defines as the living memory of the Jewish people. Torah is equated with the Jewish past. Although women have been a part of this past, we have not played an active role in recording it. For women to reclaim Torah, we must redefine and incorporate our past. Plaskow suggests three vehicles for doing so: history, *midrash*, and liturgy.<sup>62</sup> Rabbi Rebecca T. Alpert continues this idea in her review of Plaskow’s book, describing the prodigious accomplishments of Jewish feminists in pursuit of this goal. In her potent words:

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<sup>60</sup> Translation by William G. Braude from *Sefer Ha-aggadah*, edited by Bialik and Ravnitzky.

<sup>61</sup> Leonard Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky ed. and trans., *Pirkei Avot: A Modern Commentary on Jewish Ethics* (New York, NY: UAH Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>62</sup> Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a feminist perspective* (New York, NY: Harper San Francisco, 1991), 36.

Access to Torah becomes an active process that requires both knowledge of what has gone before and an imaginative approach to reconstructing it. All Jewish life benefits from this kind of creativity and engagement with the Jewish past.<sup>63</sup>

Over the many years and in the various congregations that I have served as a cantorial soloist or student cantor, Jewish leaders have repeatedly invoked the passage from *Pirkei Avot* during *b'nei mitzvah* ceremonies. It is particularly meaningful when said during the Torah Passing Ceremony, a relatively new ritual wherein the Torah is literally passed down from generation to generation before being read. This ritual is our generation's embodiment of "*shalshet hakabbalah*." The ritual emphasizes the idea that each generation must not only study the Torah they receive, but also must seek to find renewed meaning in it and thereby contribute to Torah *sheb'al peh* (Oral Torah). Just as individuals may see the same words in the weekly *parashah* with different eyes each year, so do subsequent generations see similar and different meanings in the Torah.

How shall we Jews tell our story? Unlike history, "the academic discipline generally defined as a brand of knowledge, often chronological, that records and explains past events,"<sup>64</sup> Torah is not a history book, even though parts of it have been proven historically accurate through archaeology. We look to the original source: the biblical text. Different than a historian's position, as clergy, and particularly as a cantor, I don't think my primary role is to disseminate "plain history".

Lucy S. Dawidowicz points out in her book, *What is the Use of Jewish History?*, that Jews have the longest historical record of any people. She asserts that Jewish history

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<sup>63</sup> Rebecca T. Alpert is a rabbi and former Dean of Students at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Rebecca T. Alpert, "Standing Again at Sinai," Free News, Magazines, Newspapers, Journals, Reference Articles and Classic Books - Free Online Library. <http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Standing+Again+at+Sinai.-a013535518> (accessed August 14, 2012).

<sup>64</sup> "History," Dictionary and Thesaurus - Merriam-Webster Online, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/history> (accessed May 1, 2012).

from the beginning has maintained a balance between remembrance of the past, life in the present, and hope for the future. Furthermore, our history has been shaped for thousands of years by kings, prophets, and priests, and then rabbis, scholars, and philosophers. “It was they who molded Jewish historic consciousness out of the events of the past, appropriating history in the service of Jewish survival and of the survival of Judaism.”<sup>65</sup> In Reform Judaism, the shaping doesn’t become fixed at some medieval moment but continues to this day and beyond.

In the modern period, and certainly as Progressive/Reform Jews, it is our duty to know our past and use that knowledge to help us guide our future. History is important, but as clergy there is something more that we are doing. I believe we help to make and shape memory and legacy by studying the lessons in our Torah and relating them to what has happened subsequently and what is happening now. Yosef Yerushalmi jests that, “If Herodotus was the father of history, the fathers of meaning in history were the Jews.”<sup>66</sup>

As a musician at the nexus of secular and religious worlds, a cantor needs to be able to interpret and incorporate history with Torah (Written and Oral), in order to help create meaning in and give meaning to her/his life and the lives of others. My hope is that for my congregants and others whose lives I touch, in various ways, styles, and environments via music, I will inspire, spiritually uplift, invite into community, comfort, and give expression to joy, sorrow, and everything in between. I will help them learn liturgy, *TaNakh*, and the Jewish narrative in order to discover meaning, concepts,

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<sup>65</sup> Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *What is the Use of Jewish History?* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1992), 5.

<sup>66</sup> Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1982), 8.

philosophies, and ideologies of Judaism – whose ultimate goal, I believe, is to create good human beings in a good society.

The ultimate and infinite Jewish narrative, Torah, informs our identity from creation to revelation to redemption. It instructs with parable and contains laws, the latter couched in the terms of its era, “in ethical form and contained in historical narratives of an ethical character” as a model for each generation.<sup>67</sup> The *Jewish Encyclopedia* describes the framework of the Pentateuch as, “historical narrative bound together by the thread of chronology.”<sup>68</sup> Our role in renewing Torah year in and year out enables Jews to see that we are continually going through this process of creation-revelation-redemption. Recognizing this can help us to see our connection to each other and to our earlier selves.

(1) מַה־שֶּׁהָיָה הוּא שֶׁיְהִיָּה וּמַה־שֶּׁנַּעֲשֶׂה  
הוּא שֶׁיַּעֲשֶׂה וְאֵין כָּל־חֲדָשׁ תַּחַת הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ:

“What was is that which will be, and what has been is that which will be; and there is nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Scholars assert that aside from Shabbat, Yom Kippur and Passover were the most important holy days kept by *Marranos*. Commemorating the departure of the enslaved Jews from Egypt as described in the Exodus story and elsewhere in the Bible, this was the occasion for dramatizing the ideal of freedom as a religious objective in the life of the Jews and in the collective life of the Jewish people from exile and degradation. Therefore, the following excerpt from the Passover Haggadah may have been well-known and quite meaningful in the community of oppressed people:

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<sup>67</sup> "TORAH," JewishEncyclopedia.com,  
<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14446-torah> (accessed May 1, 2012).

<sup>68</sup> "TORAH," JewishEncyclopedia.com,  
<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14446-torah> (accessed May 1, 2012).



בְּכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר חַיִּב אָדָם לִרְאוֹת אֶת עַצְמוֹ  
כְּאִלּוּ הוּא יָצָא מִמִּצְרַיִם.

In every generation mankind must see itself as if they, personally, came out from Egypt. (Mishnah Pesachim)

The Exodus story continues to reimagine itself in the Jewish experience and in Samuel Usque's time via the story of Doña Graçia Nasi in his *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel*. Doña Graçia Nasi's extraordinary narrative and its impact, and Usque's conception of her as embodying our foremothers was inspiring in her time and can be motivational in our time, as Reform/Progressive Jewish communities seek to see ourselves through and be inspired by those who came before us. Samuel Usque created, by his insights on the four biblical foremothers Miriam, Deborah, Judith and Esther, a means for Doña Graçia Nasi to inspire his generation. (One could say that his *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* was his contribution to Oral Torah.) I hope this study will do the same for ours.

As Torah commands us to “remember” Amalek,<sup>69</sup> that we were once slaves,<sup>70</sup> and that God has a hand in our lives;<sup>71</sup> as a Reform Jew in the modern world, I believe Jewish history and Torah is essential to understanding who we are today. Furthermore, our Torah study shapes who we will become as its insights inspire us to continue to live out the core ideals that Judaism teaches.

*Encyclopedia Judaica* notes: “Doña Graçia was certainly the outstanding Jewess of her day, and perhaps of the entire period between the fall of the Jewish State and the

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<sup>69</sup> Deuteronomy 25:17

<sup>70</sup> Deuteronomy 5:15

<sup>71</sup> Deuteronomy 6:12

present.”<sup>72</sup> How many people have even heard of her?! Much of past Jewish accomplishment, especially that achieved from the dawn of Christianity until the modern era, has been ignored or excluded from the history commonly taught in schools. The role of women in history has largely been ignored or minimized. When one blends those tendencies together, we are left with a giant gap in our history and its telling.

The following four chapters explore at fuller length *shalshet hakabbalah*, Usque’s “Oral Torah” on Doña Gracia Nasi, in which he draws comparisons between the her and Miriam, Deborah, Esther, and Judith; and thus, begin to fill in the historical lacuna. By documenting this, I pray that Jews today, especially women, will be able to see, relate to, and further understand the value of Torah. Studying Torah is not, to me, an act in and of itself. It is an impetus to live ethically.<sup>73</sup> When we “see” ourselves in the historical texts of our past, we expand the likelihood of living Torah.

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<sup>72</sup> “Gracia Nasi,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 12 (Macmillan Reference USA, 2006), 838.

<sup>73</sup> Penina Adelman, *Praise Her Works*.

**Part II:**

**WALKING IN HER FOREMOTHERS' FOOTSTEPS**

### Chapter 3. Miriam and Doña Graça Nasi

#### *Sing A New Song Unto God.*<sup>74</sup>

As introduced earlier, Samuel Usque's eloquent and fitting description of Doña Graça Nasi in his *Consolaçam as Tribulaçoẽs de Yisrael* (*Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel*) deserves deeper probing and analysis. Usque compared his subject to legendary women found in the *TaNaKH* and also in the Catholic Bible - Miriam, Esther, Deborah, and Judith. In this chapter and the three that follow, we will examine the attributes and qualities of each of these female characters, as described in the Bible and in *Midrash* to contextualize Usque's comparison to Doña Graça Nasi.

Employed as an organizational devise, I'll use in part the ancient rabbinic tradition of text study called *PaRDeS*. The word *pardes* in Hebrew means orchard and in this acronym each letter represents the way one begins to discover the richness within. *Pey* is for "*P'shat*," the plain or literal meaning of the text. *Reish* is for "*Remez*," the hinted or suggested meaning of the text. *Daled* is for "*D'rash*," the insights, moral and philosophical meanings gleaned from the students study. Finally, Samech represents "*Sod*" or the secret meaning within the material.

First, I'll remind us of Usque's urtext, in other words, his defining quote about Doña Graça Nasi. Then, I'll look at the *p'shat* or each woman's summarized story, following the simple written text. Then through the devices of *remez* and *d'rash*, I'll explore the congruencies between each biblical woman and how their lives were revived through the life of Doña Graça Nasi. Finally, offerings of a hidden meaning, a *sod*, for

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<sup>74</sup> Psalm 96:1; I use this as an inspiration from Miriam's quote in Exodus 15:21, "Sing to YHVH, for he has triumphed gloriously."

each will not happen at the end of each of these chapters, but will appear as a conclusion in the thesis total.

### P'shat: Miriam

According to Samuel Usque, Doña Graçia Nasi was imbued with "...the intrinsic piety of Miriam, offering her life to save her brethren...."<sup>75</sup> Who was Miriam? Why is she considered intrinsically pious? In which biblical story or stories do we learn of Miriam as a savior of her brethren? Finally, how are Miriam's attributes reflected in Doña Graçia Nasi and/or how did she exemplify these Miriam-like qualities?

In the Torah, Miriam is the daughter of Amram and Yocheved, the sister of Moses and Aaron, and the grandmother of Betzalel. Miriam is mentioned by name a total of ten times in the Torah and an additional two times in the *TaNaKH*.<sup>76</sup>

וַתִּתְּצֵב אֶחָתָּו מִרְחֹק לְדַעַה<sup>4(2)</sup>

מִה־יַּעֲשֶׂה לִּי:

She first appears, though, as simply "אחתו" ("his sister"), in the book of Exodus, after Pharaoh's decree that all newborn male Hebrews be killed by "casting them into the Nile." After casting infant Moses in a basket among the reeds of the Nile, Miriam watches from afar as Pharaoh's daughter (Batya) discovers the babe and decides to keep him as her own. Miriam then steps forward and suggests that Moses' mother, Yocheved, become the child's wet nurse. (Exodus 2:1-10)

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<sup>75</sup> Samuel Usque, *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel (Consolação ás Tribulações de Israel)*, 1st ed., trans. Martin A. Cohen (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1965), 230.

<sup>76</sup> Exodus 15:20-21; Numbers 12:1, 4-5, 10, 15; Numbers 20:1, Number 26:59, Deuteronomy 24:9, I Chronicles 5:29, Micah 6:4

Miriam's next appearance is once again in Exodus. Fleeing the Egyptians, the Israelites have crossed the Sea of Reeds. Here, she is referred to as, "Miriam the prophet, sister of Aaron." Miriam leads the women in song and dance, exalting God for the Israelites' redemption. (Exodus 15:20-21)

(15) וַתִּקַּח מִרְיָם הַנְּבִיאָה אֲחֹת אֶהֱרֹן אֶת־הַתֵּף בְּיָדָהּ וַתִּצְאֶן כָּל־הַנְּשִׁים  
אֲחֵרֶיהָ בַּתְּפִלִּים וּבִמְחֹלֶת׃ וַתַּעֲזֹן לָהֶם מִרְיָם שִׁירוֹ לַיהוָה כִּי־גָאָה גָּאָה  
סוּס וָרֶכֶב רָמָה בָּיִם׃

The reader of the Bible next encounters Miriam after the Israelites receive the Ten Commandments as they wander through the desert on their journey toward the Promised Land.

(12) וַיֹּאמֶר  
יְהוָה פְּתָאֵם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶל־מִרְיָם צֹאוּ  
שְׁלַשְׁתֶּכֶם אֶל־אֶהֱל מוֹעֵד וַיֵּצְאוּ שְׁלֹשָׁתָם׃

Miriam and Aaron chastise their brother Moses for marrying a Cushite woman, and then follow up with the complaint that they have not received proper credit for their roles as intermediaries between God and the Israelites. God immediately summons the three siblings to the Tent of Meeting and reprimands them for not understanding the unique relationship between God and Moses. Following this incident, Miriam develops *tzara'at*, a skin disease generally referred to as leprosy, turning her skin "white as snow". (Numbers 12:10)

וַיִּהְיֶה כִּשְׁנָיִם וַיָּהֲעֵזֶן סָר מֵעַל הָאֶהֱל  
וַהֲגֵה מִרְיָם מִצִּרְעַת כַּשָּׁלֵג וַיִּפֹּן אֶהֱרֹן אֶל־מִרְיָם  
וַהֲגֵה מִצִּרְעַת׃

The final mention of Miriam in the context of the Israelite narrative is in Numbers 20:1. The Israelites arrive in Kadesh at the time of the new moon, Miriam dies and is buried there.

(20) וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל־הָעֵדָה מִדְּבַר־צֹן בְּחֹדֶשׁ  
הָרֵאשִׁוֹן וַיֵּשֶׁב הָעָם בְּקִדְשׁ וַתָּמָת שָׁם מִרְיָם  
וַתִּקָּבֶר שָׁם:

Other references speak of her in the past, reminding the Israelites of God, and of Miriam's important role in their collective narrative. The first is in Deuteronomy 24:9, which discusses skin afflictions and adherence to laws for treatment of the disease, as instructed by the Levites instruct, lest God afflict them, like Miriam. The next occurrence describes her, equally, with Aaron and Moses, as a child of Amram. Finally, in Micah 6:4, Miriam is recalled as a leader in the Exodus story.

#### Remez and D'rash:

"...the intrinsic piety of Miriam, offering her life to save her brethren...."

Merriam-Webster defines intrinsic as, "being a part of the innermost nature of a person or thing," and pious as, "showing reverence for deity and devotion to divine worship."<sup>77</sup> Though it is the first time we meet Miriam by name, in Exodus 15:20-21, we learn that she is a prophet, the sister of Aaron, a leader of all the women, a singer, drummer, and dancer. As a prophet, we assume that she is devoted to God, but we learn more concretely, in Exodus 15:21, that she is a believer in YHVH through her actions in leading the women in praising YHVH with rhythm (drum), song and dance. Thus, in

<sup>77</sup> "Pious," Dictionary and Thesaurus - Merriam-Webster Online, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pious> (accessed August 15, 2012).

multiple but integrated ways, Miriam expresses and demonstrates her love of YHVH, as all Jews are similarly commanded in Deuteronomy 6:5 (*v'ahavta...*), “you shall love YHVH your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” While thought inheres in the spoken word, dance and music expand the love of God as an expression of body and soul.

As a further proof of Miriam’s piety (and also her wisdom and brilliance), we can closely examine her actions regarding the infant Moses. She did not actually violate Pharaoh’s decree – she did actually cast the infant boy into the Nile. However, as a pious person (and the infant’s sister) she could not kill a child by drowning, so she created a basket that floated and trusted the fate of the infant to God. Events proved her faith well founded. Notwithstanding the rescue, had Pharaoh’s minion been called to task for her role in the matter, she could truthfully say that her actions should have resulted in the baby’s death. But the protection of the basket meant she would not have had to witness her brother’s drowning.<sup>78</sup>

Though Shifra and Puah are identified as Egyptian midwives<sup>79</sup> a *midrash* suggests that Miriam was actually Puah (Exodus Rabbah 1:13).<sup>80</sup> As Puah, Miriam demonstrates faith in God, or, at the very least, fears her God more than the mortal Pharaoh. Pharaoh’s astrologers have foretold of a Hebrew-born male who will usurp the Egyptian’s throne.

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<sup>78</sup> Norma Rosen, *Biblical Women Unbound: Counter-tales* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1996), 100-101.

<sup>79</sup> The Hebrew is ambiguous. “מִלְדּוֹת הָעִבְרִיִּית” could mean either “Hebrew women who are midwives” or “Midwives to the Hebrews.” Though Rashi’s thinking is that Miriam was Puah, Abrabanel and Samuel David Luzzatto interpret the text’s meaning as “midwives to the Hebrews.” (Alana Suskin, “Passover Torah Teaching,” *Be’chol Lashon – In Every Tongue*, <http://www.bechollashon.org/resources/holidays/Torah/Passover-Torah-Teaching.php> (accessed November 14, 2012).)

<sup>80</sup> "Rabbi Samuel ben Nahman said: It was a woman and her daughter, namely Yocheved and Miriam."



As a result, Pharaoh orders the midwives, Shifra<sup>81</sup> and Puah, to kill all newborn Hebrew males. Defying Pharaoh, the midwives do not comply, even though they understand that their disobedience is most likely a death sentence. As an aside, Doña Graçia Nasi was known to have “defied kings.” Andreé Aelion Brooks uses this phrase as part of the title of her biography of Doña Graçia Nasi, *The Woman Who Defied Kings* (Paragon House, 2002).

The story continues, saying that the midwives became God’s partners in creation by granting life to the Hebrew children (Exodus Rabbah 1:19). In turn, the Torah continues, God awards the midwives with the perpetuation of the Israelite nation. Because they showed reverence, God “made them houses.”

וייטב<sup>20(1)</sup>

אֱלֹהִים לְמִילְדֹת וַיִּרְבֵּה הָעָם וַיַּעֲצְמוּ מְאֹד׃ וַיְהִי כִּי־  
יֵרְאוּ הַמִּילְדֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים׃

What does the Torah mean by “houses”? Rashi says: “The houses of the priesthood, the Levitical family, and the royal family, which are called houses, as it is written: And he built the house of the Lord and the house of the king, (I Kings 9:1), the priesthood and the Levitical family from Yocheved, and the royal family from Miriam, as is stated in tractate Sotah 11b.”<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, this exemplifies the statement from the Mishnah, Sanhedrin 4:5, “Whoever destroys a soul, it is considered as if he destroyed an

<sup>81</sup> Interpreted as Moses’ mother, Yocheved (Shemot Rabbah 1:13)

<sup>82</sup> *The Complete Jewish Bible with Rashi Commentary*, [http://beta.chabad.org/library/bible\\_cdo/aid/9862/showrashi/true](http://beta.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/9862/showrashi/true) (accessed August 8, 2012).

entire world. And whoever saves a life is considered as if he saved an entire world.”<sup>83</sup>

Miriam, as Puah, saves many Israelite males and, as her crowning achievement, rescues baby Moses, who will grow up to lead God’s people out of Egyptian bondage to redemption. She is, on some level, a “mother” of Israel, re-birthing Moses by saving his life and that of his people.

Another *midrash* depicts Miriam as God-fearing and a savior. *Midrash Hagadol* explains that when she was a child, after Pharaoh issued his decree to kill all newborn Israelite males, her father, Amram, divorced Yocheved, her mother. He preferred the latter to the risk of his wife bearing more male children only to have them killed off. Furthermore, because Amram is a leader in the community, the other husbands also divorce their wives. According to the *midrash*, Miriam berates her father, claiming that he has gone even one egregious step further than Pharaoh. After all, her father has eliminated the possibility of female children as well. With this, Amram remarries his wife, the other men follow suit, and thus Miriam saves the future generations of Israel.<sup>84</sup>

Both in this story, and as a midwife, Miriam challenges the status quo, aspiring toward positive outcomes. So, too, did Doña Graçia Nasi. Repeatedly over the course of her lifetime, she defied kings (and the Pope) and behaved in ways that served to benefit and perpetuate the Jewish People. This was especially evident in her efforts to help the *Marrano* population.

Because the *Marranos*’ future was precarious, Doña Graçia defied odds in an effort to shepherd her people to safety. We see this concretely when she intervened on

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<sup>83</sup> The quotation is also found with a small variation in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 37a. Here the text specifies the saving of a Jew versus a soul.

<sup>84</sup> Penina Adelman, *Praise Her Works: Conversations with Biblical Women* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 58.

behalf of the *Marranos* in Ancona. Upon his rise to pope, Paul IV decided to rid the papal states of *Marranos*, who were engaged openly in Judaizing. At the Pope's order, one hundred *Marranos* were rounded up in the Italian port city of Ancona. Not only were they arrested and tortured, but their ultimate end was to be burned at the stake. Having prominently and safely established herself in Turkey for two years, Doña Graça lobbied the Sultan to intervene. Although the Sultan complied by reaching out to the Pope, his request to release the prisoners was rejected. She then attempted to rally the Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire to band together and support an economic boycott against Ancona to protest the situation. She refused to give up on saving even a single life. Historian Cecil Roth singles out this boycott as, most likely, the first time Jews applied unified proactive political and economic action to defend Jewish interests.<sup>85</sup> As he put it: "It was amazing that it was a woman who had taken the lead in this gallant demonstration, that it was not always necessary for Jews to suffer passively."<sup>86</sup> Like Miriam, Doña Graça Nasi fought for her people and enabled their continuity.

While Miriam could demonstrate her piety openly, Doña Graça Nasi, as a *Marrano*, could not. No known documents exist that speak directly to Doña Graça Nasi's level of Jewish practice as a *Marrano* in Europe. However, prior to her arrival in the Ottoman Empire, where she openly reclaimed her Jewish faith, she demonstrated belief in God and *mitzvot* by supporting the publication of the Ferrara Bible in the

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<sup>85</sup> Dolores J. Sloan and Jonathan Kirsch, *The Sephardic Jews of Spain and Portugal: survival of an imperiled culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2009), 118-119.

<sup>86</sup> Cecil Roth, *Doña Graça of the House of Nasi* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society Of America, 1992), 174.

vernacular and in Ladino.<sup>87</sup> This act allowed her own generation, and those to come, access to God's word. In fact, many of the Sephardic prayers are excerpts of different passages from that very edition of the Bible. Though they are printed in Spanish, they adhere closely to the letter of the original.<sup>88</sup> Only a deeply pious woman would support such an enterprise at such a precarious time.

Both Miriam and Doña Graça Nasi are attentive to their respective families. *Midrashim* speak to Miriam's desire to assist her mother in birthing the next generation, her chastisement of her father, and her concern about Moses' exogamous relationship. Doña Graça Nasi, too, involved herself in her family's affairs. She went to great lengths to ensure her relatives were well taken care of, making sure that funds were available and arrangements made prior to moving from one locale to another. She used the family fortune to bargain for the safety of her family, friends, and other Marranos. It was said that, in Turkey, she hosted a weekly meal for anyone in need.<sup>89</sup> Doña Graça Nasi even refused her sister's wish that she make a financial break with the family. She preferred to expose the family's finances to unwanted scrutiny rather than run the risk of Brianda and her daughter at risk of being charged with Judaizing.

Finally, a number of *midrashim* speak about the meaning of Miriam's name, from "מר" meaning "bitter," referring to how the Israelites were embittered with hard work designed to break both their bodies and spirits.<sup>90</sup> In a modern *midrash* by Judith Antonelli, Miriam's strength of character is connected with her name, translated as "bitter

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<sup>87</sup> Sloan and Kirsch, *The Sephardic Jews of Spain and Portugal: survival of an imperiled culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries*. Jefferson, 113.

<sup>88</sup> L. Wiener, "The Ferrara Bible," *Modern Language Notes* 10, no. 2 (Feb., 1895): 41-43, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/view/2919209> (accessed October 29, 2012).

<sup>89</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graça Nasi*, 429.

<sup>90</sup> Exodus Raba 26:1; Athalya Brenner, *A Feminist companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 116.

sea.” “Her name...indicates her capacity to swim against the tide of society when necessary.”<sup>91</sup> Just as Miriam, a woman, prophet and leader, swam upstream; so too did Doña Graça Nasi. Upon his deathbed, Doña Graça’s husband, Francisco, forever changed her life, his dying wish making her his successor. From her biography alone, it is clear that she took the bull by the horns, determined to do whatever it took for the survival and legacy of the family and the Jewish people. For all this and more, Doña Graça Nasi demonstrated “the intrinsic piety of Miriam, offering her life to save her brethren.”<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Judith S. Antonelli, *In the Image of God: a feminist commentary on the Torah* (Jason Aronson, Inc., 1995), 348.

<sup>92</sup> Samuel Usque, *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel (Consolação ás Tribulações de Israel)*, 230.

## Chapter 4. Deborah and Doña Graçia Nasi

### *The Children Of Israel Came To Her For Judgment.*<sup>93</sup>

According to Samuel Usque, Doña Graçia Nasi possessed, “...the great prudence of Deborah, in governing her people...”<sup>94</sup> Who, then, was Deborah? How was she prudent in governing her people? And, how did Doña Graçia Nasi exemplify this Deborah-like quality?

#### P’shat: Deborah

The *TaNaKH* twice glimpses into the life of Deborah in the Book of Judges, chapters four and five, in prose and then in celebratory song, respectively. When she is introduced in chapter four, she is described as a prophet, the wife of Lapidoth,<sup>95</sup> and a judge of Israel. As a judge, her moral authority is highly regarded, and she appears as easily accessible to the people of Israel, sitting outdoors, as she does, in public view (Judges 4:4-5).

וַיְבֹרָהּ אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה אִשְׁתִּי לַפִּדּוֹת הִיא שֹׁפֶטֶת  
אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵת הַהִיא:

As the story continues, the *TaNaKH* shows that God is with her, communicating to the Israelites through her and giving her strength and wisdom to listen, guide, and act. Oppressed for 20 years by the Canaanite king—presumably as a punishment for doing

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<sup>93</sup> Judges 4:5

<sup>94</sup> Samuel Usque, *Consolation for the tribulations of Israel (Consolação ás Tribulações de Israel)*, trans. Martin A. Cohen, 1st ed., (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1965), 230.

<sup>95</sup> Lapidoth is possibly the general, Barak, or a wickmaker. J. Zohara Meyerhoff Hieronimus. *Kabbalistic Teachings of the Female Prophets: The Seven Holy Women of Ancient Israel* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2008), p. 157.

wrong in the sight of God after Ehud's<sup>96</sup> death (Judges 4:1)—Israel, under Deborah's guidance, has sufficiently atoned. Now, the time has come for the tribes of Israel to rise up again and fight for their independence. Commanded by God, Deborah sends for a general, Barak, relaying to him that the time is right to strike and that she has devised the military plan of action they are to execute. Though she assures him that God will be with Israel in this battle, he is hesitant to move forward without Deborah, the Prophet of God, in his company. "And Barak said to her, 'If you go with me I will go; but if you don't go with me, I will not go.'" (Judges 4:8)

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ בָּרַק אִם־תֵּלְכִי עִמִּי וְהִלַּכְתִּי וְאִם־לֹא  
תֵּלְכִי עִמִּי לֹא אֵלֶךְ:

Bible scholars attribute the so-called Song of Deborah (Judges 5:1-31) to Deborah and Barak and theorize that it was passed down orally, *l'dor vador* (from generation to generation), until it was written down and codified.<sup>97</sup> Dated before the time of King David, it is considered one of the oldest examples of Hebrew literature.<sup>98</sup> Interestingly, it is more or less a poetic reiteration of the events narrated in chapter 4, with some additional material, including details of how the victory over Sisera was won. Credit for uniting the Israelites in this endeavor is given to Deborah but also, ultimately, as would

<sup>96</sup> Ehud appears in Judges 3:12-4:1. He was the son of Gera from the tribe of Benjamin. Ehud was instrumental in delivering the Israelites from oppression by the Moabites by tricking the king of Moab and killing him. He then led the tribe of Ephraim in seizing the fords of the Jordan River, ultimately killing the Moabite army. This led to an 80-year period of peace for Israel. "Ehud (biblical figure)," Britannica Online Encyclopedia, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/180903/Ehud> (accessed January 1, 2013).

<sup>97</sup> Deborah G. Felder and Diana Rosen. *50 Women Who Changed The World*. (New York: Citadel Press Books, 2003), 15.

<sup>98</sup> The song uses literary devices that are similar to those found in literature from the ancient Phoenician city of Ugarit, c.15<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> Centuries B.C.E. William F. Albright, "The Song of Deborah in the Light of Archaeology," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 62 (1936): 26-31.

be expected, to God as the consummate deliverer of the people of Israel.<sup>99</sup> How do we understand God, specifically, as a player in this drama? The storyteller describes how Sisera and the Canaanites put up a fierce fight against the Israelite armies, but a “storm,” reminiscent of that when God became manifest at Sinai, helped with the latter’s victory.

(5)4 יהוה בצאתך משעיר בצעדך משדה אדום ארץ רעשה  
גם-שמים נטפו גם-עבים נטפו מים: הרים נזלו מפני  
יהוה זה סיני יהוה מפני יהוה אלהי ישראל:

YHVH, when You came forth from Seir,  
Advanced from the country of Edom,  
The earth trembled;  
The heavens dripped,  
Yea, the clouds dripped water,  
The mountains quaked  
Before YHVH, The One of Sinai,  
Before YHVH, The God of Israel.<sup>100</sup> (Judges 5:4-5)

Remez and D'rash:

“The great prudence of Deborah, in governing her people...”

The fact that the Book of *Shoftim* (Judges) labels Deborah a “judge” and a “prophet” at the outset calls attention to her being a well-respected leader among her people.

(4)5 והיא יושבת תחת-תמר דבורה בין הרמה ובין  
בית-אל בהר אפרים ויעלו אליה בני ישראל למשפט:

She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel, in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come to her for decisions.<sup>101</sup> (Judges 4:5)

<sup>99</sup> Walter J. Harrelson, *Interpreting The Old Testament* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 134-138.

<sup>100</sup> JPS translation

<sup>101</sup> JPS translation



Additionally, she had the power and capability to “send for and call” the army general, Barak, and even “command” him and the rest of the Israelite tribal armies (Judges 4:6). In fact, Barak refused to strike without her, inferring that she was the prudent one, the “brains of the organization” (Judges 4:8). Barak’s response illustrates both his faith in Deborah’s vision of victory, carrying with it God’s approval and perceived help, and his need for her presence as co-commander.<sup>102</sup> One could regard the partnership between Doña Graçia Nasi and her husband’s brother, Diogo Mendes, as analogous.

Finally, we read in Judges 5:15, “And Issachar’s chiefs were with Deborah....”<sup>103</sup> Rashi explains this statement by reminding us that Issachar’s chiefs “are the Sanhedrin, who were occupied in Torah and ‘knew how to treat the times’ (I Chron. 12:32). They are always [cooperating] with Deborah to teach Israel statutes and laws.”<sup>104</sup> In contrast to the biblical text’s clear admiration for her, some of the famous Talmudic Rabbis did not share as rosy a view of Deborah. Miki Raver, in *Listen to Her Voice: Women of the Hebrew Bible*, points out that our “Talmudic sages labeled Deborah arrogant, haughty and boastful. Rabbi Hillel said she was punished and the Holy Spirit was taken from her because she boasted that: ‘I, Deborah, arose a mother in Israel.’ (Judges 5:7). Rav Nachman said her name was “hateful because she was arrogant.”<sup>105</sup> It is unclear how these interpretations stem from the text at all. Perhaps, it was a means to disparage the accomplishments of biblical women - a means for putting contemporary women “in their

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<sup>102</sup> Felder and Rosen, *50 Women Who Changed The World*, 14.

<sup>103</sup> JPS translation

<sup>104</sup> "Shoftim - Chapter 5 - Tanakh Online - Torah – Bible," Judaism, Torah and Jewish Info - Chabad Lubavitch, [http://beta.chabad.org/library/bible\\_cdo/showrashi/true/aid/15813/jewish/Chapter-5.htm](http://beta.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/showrashi/true/aid/15813/jewish/Chapter-5.htm) (accessed December 1, 2012).

<sup>105</sup> Babylonia Talmud, Megillah 14b

place”. As the feminist Talmudic scholar Leila Leah Bronner suggests, not one sage offers a different interpretation; odd, as the Talmudic tradition usually provides alternative viewpoints. Judith Baskin observes that, “admirable biblical women are represented in negative terms because their actions question rabbinic Judaism’s constructions of appropriate female roles.”<sup>106</sup> The same might be said of Doña Graçia. Notably, Gerolamo Maretta, one of the Duke of Ercole’s first emissaries, hinted in a letter he wrote, after seeing Doña Graçia Nasi in Antwerp, that she did not seem the equal of men. This seems at odds with the generally permissive attitude, in the day, towards this widow of means and her extraordinary wealth and connections.<sup>107</sup>

It is modern commentators, though, who do justice to Deborah’s spirit and legacy vis-à-vis Doña Graçia Nasi. Emphasizing Deborah’s inimitability, J. Zohara Meyerhoff Hieronimus points out that she held a

unique role ... as the first judge to be called a prophet and the only woman to have such a role in the life of the People of the Book... Deborah’s life teaches us about communal moral order: an emancipation from tyranny leading to self-rule by the self-governed and a beautiful order according to the Creator’s Word. Deborah’s life shows us the importance of following God’s Law and practicing charity and justice.<sup>108</sup>

Like Deborah, Doña Graçia Nasi, most likely understood that her privileged position was meant for a higher purpose. Because of her great power and a somewhat self-appointed judicial and social authority, *Marranos* looked to her for assistance. She responded, willingly and eagerly, whether providing a place to stay upon reaching relative safety in

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<sup>106</sup> Judith Reesa Baskin, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press, 2002), 31.

<sup>107</sup> Andréé Aelion Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi - A Jewish leader during the Renaissance* (New York: Paragon House, 2003), 150.

<sup>108</sup> Hieronimus, *Kabbalistic Teachings of the Female Prophets: The Seven Holy Women of Ancient Israel*, 162.

Antwerp or secretly arranging for passage to safety on any one of her armada of ships.<sup>109</sup>

Additionally, as a service to the needy in her community, she hosted as many as 80 guests per day for a meal at her home in Galata outside of Constantinople.<sup>110</sup>

Doña Graçia Nasi, more than any other Jew of her time, worked tirelessly to emancipate the people of Israel. Her efforts to keep Jews safe culminated in organizing the purchase of Tiberias in the Jewish Homeland from Sultan Suleiman, which, arguably, was a concrete step toward the Jews' formal return to the Holy Land. Deborah did the same for the Israelites in her time. When she led the Israelites to victory over the Canaanites, she created an important symbol—crucial in the development and survival of a unified nation characterized by faith in God and God's law.

In the *midrashic* text Eliyahu Rabbah, the Rabbis ask,

How is it that Deborah, a woman, became a prophet and a judge when Phinehas the son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron still lived? Was not Phinehas' lineage more illustrious? The prophet Elijah responded: “. . . whether Jew or gentile, man or woman, . . . the spirit of *Adonai* rests upon him, who merits it according to his deeds.”<sup>111</sup>

Deborah was indeed such a woman: meritorious in her own generation and throughout time.

Finally, in drawing parallels between Deborah and Doña Graçia Nasi, it is valuable to examine the meaning of the former's name. The Hebrew “*devorah*” is translated into English as “bee.” In unvocalized Hebrew, “*devorah*” [bee] and “*devarah*”

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<sup>109</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 152-160.

<sup>110</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 429.

<sup>111</sup> "B'shalach, 5761," Home – URJ, [http://urj.org/holidays/shabbat/intro/exodus/?syspage=article&item\\_id=4285](http://urj.org/holidays/shabbat/intro/exodus/?syspage=article&item_id=4285) (accessed December 26, 2012).

[word] look the same because they share the same consonants.<sup>112</sup> There is a *midrash*, therefore, which points out the interchangeability of meaning between the two words. Thus, “*Devorah*” suggests that either “she rules like a queen bee” or “she is eloquent of speech, which would make sense for a judge and prophet.” Another *midrash* compares the Jewish people and the Torah to bees: “Just as bees swarm behind a leader, so too are the Jews led by the sages and prophets.” (Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:6)

Finally, Rabbi Rafael of Bershad said:

They say that the proud are reborn as bees. For, in his heart, the proud man says: “I am a writer, I am a singer, I am a great one at studying.” And since what is said of such men is true: that they will not turn to God, not even on the threshold of hell, they are reborn after they die. They are born again as bees which hum and buzz: “I am, I am, I am.”<sup>113</sup>

For Deborah one could make the case that as a “bee”, she lived to “speak” the “word” of God.

Another linguistic point worth investigating is Deborah’s identification as “*eshet Lapidot*” (Judges 4:4), “a wife (or literally, woman) of Lapidoth.” Though it is possible that she was Lapidoth’s wife, “*lapidot*,” translated into English, means “torch.” Perhaps as an “*eshet lapidot*,” Deborah was simply “a woman of fire,”<sup>114</sup> interpreted as one of the lights of Israel shining bright unto the nations (or l’goyim). Rabbi Levi ben Gershom, a medieval commentator, supports this reading, portraying Deborah as a fiery, prophetic preacher, who calls her people to penitence.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, a common commentary found

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<sup>112</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), 300.

<sup>113</sup> *Journal of Synagogue Music*, vol. ix, no. 3 (November 1979).

<sup>114</sup> Miki Raver, *Listen to Her Voice: Women of the Hebrew Bible* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 97.

<sup>115</sup> “Visual Midrash - Tali Education Fund Collections.” אסופות מדרש אמנות - קרן תל"י - מדרש ת <http://www.tali-virtualmidrash.org.il/ArticleEng.aspx?art=30> (accessed December 26, 2012).

in an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Hebrew Bible notes that, "...a capable and skilful woman is described as 'fiery as a torch'." Alongside appears an alternative interpretation from the philosopher Gersonides (Provence, 14th century), "She reached such a high level of prophecy that the light of fire surrounded her when she prophesised, just as the Torah reports of our master Moses."<sup>116</sup> Furthermore, the Song of Deborah sings in Judges 5:31, "Let those who love [God] be like the powerfully rising sun."<sup>117</sup> Deborah in this era and in her way, perhaps, exemplifies the rising sun, the fire, giving strength to the people of Israel, acting prudently in her governance to serve God and the best interests of the Israelites. Doña Graça Nasi displayed this fiery behavior many times in her life, particularly when she sought to foster support from the leading Rabbis in Constantinople to support the *Marranos* held in Ancona.

Finally, Deborah's part in the Israelite's victory, together with her celebratory song, provide inspiration for later generations and solidify her status as one of the greatest heroines of Jewish history.<sup>118</sup> Deborah and her attributes live on in Doña Graça Nasi. The words of the 11<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish philosopher and poet Shlomo Ibn Gabirol, are as illustrious of Deborah as they are of Doña Graça Nasi:

The BEE

*Hear, O Israel, the Lord is one...  
that ye remember and do all my commandments*

Take, little bee, your time with your song,  
in your flight invoking the prayer called "Hear" –  
declaring and stretching "the Lord is *one*,"  
raising on high the hum of *remember*

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<sup>116</sup> Pnina Nave Levinson, "Deborah - A Political Mother Myth." (lecture presented at from Bet Debora on Women in the Bible, Stuttgart, December 1, 1991).

<sup>117</sup> Hieronimus, *Kabbalistic Teachings of the Female Prophets: The Seven Holy Women of Ancient Israel*, 171.

<sup>118</sup> Felder and Rosen, *50 Women Who Changed The World*, 16.

to He who put honey under your tongue  
and gave you the gall to drive out foes.  
It's true, in your eyes, you're small –  
but your being transcends *the things that swarm*,  
and the choicest words are yours. Your merit  
refines you: you're pure as the birds of the air.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Peter Cole, *The dream of the poem: Hebrew poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950-1492* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 83-84.

## Chapter 5. Esther and Dona Gracia Nasi

*Perhaps, You Have Attained To Royal Position For Just Such A Crisis.*<sup>120</sup>

In a manner similar to his comparison of Judith, Miriam, and Deborah, Samuel Usque wrote of Doña Graçia Nasi as one who had, "...that infinite virtue and great sanctity of Esther, in helping those who are persecuted..." Who was Esther? How did she reveal her virtue and sanctity? How was she instrumental in aiding her people against their oppressor? Finally, how are Esther's characteristics seen through Doña Graçia Nasi?

### Brief Summary of *Megillat* Esther

The narrative in *Megillat* Esther, the Scroll of Esther, takes place in Shushan, the (fictional) capital of the Persian Empire. The reader joins the story as King Ahasuerus holds a kingdom-wide banquet. When the King orders his queen, Vashti, to appear at the banquet wearing her crown, she refuses, causing the king to banish her. Subsequently, a beauty pageant is held to choose a new queen, and the Jew Mordecai positions his niece, Esther, as a contender. Under his guidance, she keeps her Jewish identity a secret. In the end, she is chosen to join the King's harem, and wins his favor and is crowned Queen Esther.

Mordecai soon thereafter learns of a plot to kill King Ahasuerus and reports it to Esther, who warns the king. Gratefully, the king records the event in the official record. Meanwhile, a courtier named Haman is promoted to be the King's right hand man. He relishes his power and decrees that the King's subjects bow to him, Haman, whenever he

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<sup>120</sup> Esther 4:14, JPS Translation

passes. The Jews, including Mordecai, refuse to bow to any man, taking the position that doing so would be an offence to the one true God. Angrily, Haman turns King Ahasuerus against the Jews, seeing to it that he approves a decree calling for the destruction of all the Jews in the kingdom on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Adar.

Mordecai implores Esther to intercede on behalf of the Jews. She worries that the King will banish her for approaching him without being summoned (the normative behavior of a harem bride, even the queen), but nevertheless risks her life for the sake of her people. The King receives her and accepts her invitation (the excuse she gives for breaking protocol) for a banquet she has planned in the King's and Haman's honor.

One night, the King awakens, unsettled. He pulls out his official record, and, in the course of his reading, learns of the plot against him and his savior, Mordecai. The following day the King tells Haman that he plans to honor the man in the kingdom most important to him. Haman naturally believes that the king is speaking of him. To Haman's surprise and disappointment, on the day he thought he would be honored, not only does Mordecai the Jew not bow down to him, but the King instead honors that very Mordecai for his saving his life. Then, at the banquet, the King is so overwhelmed by what Esther has planned; he offers to grant her whatever she requests. Esther reveals her Jewish identity and asks the King to save her and her people from the annihilation Haman has manipulated the king to decree. The King grants her wish and sentences Haman to death for his devious role in the affair. Mordecai is promoted to the King's advisor. Although the decree against the Jews is not repealed, they are granted the right to defend



themselves. The Jews miraculously destroy their enemies and in celebration and commemoration, the Feast of Purim is established.<sup>121</sup>

#### P'shat: Esther

In the Bible, Esther is first introduced as Hadassah, Mordecai's niece and adopted daughter, since her parents' death. When the King decides to seek a new mate, "shapely and beautiful",<sup>122</sup> Mordecai takes Esther to the palace to participate in the King's selection process. Coached by her Uncle Mordecai, she does not reveal her heritage to anyone. (Esther 2:10)

לֹא־הִגִּידָה אֶסְתֵּר אֶת־עַמָּהּ וְאֶת־  
מִלְדּוּתָהּ כִּי מְרַדְּכִי צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תִגִּיד׃

Under the excellent tutelage of the harem women's guardian, Esther pleases the King and becomes his favorite. He rewards her by crowning her queen and throwing the "banquet of Esther"<sup>123</sup> for his officials and courtiers.

Established firmly in the palace, still concealing her true identity as a Jew, Queen Esther next serves as vital messenger to the King. While checking on Esther at the palace gate, Mordecai overhears a plot to assassinate the King. He relays his knowledge of this conspiracy to Esther, who reports it in Mordecai's name to the King. Confirming the authenticity of the plot, the King arrests the conspirators and has them executed, the whole drama being duly recorded in the King's book of annals.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Esther 1:1-10:3

<sup>122</sup> Esther 2:7

<sup>123</sup> Esther 2:18

<sup>124</sup> Esther 2:19-23

The next encounter broadens Esther's significance further and for all time. She is given the opportunity to play a crucial role in saving the Jewish people. Under Haman's direction, the King set his seal upon an edict to, "...destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews..."<sup>125</sup> (Esther 3:13)

לְהִשָּׁמִיד לְהָרֹג וּלְאַבֵּד אֶת-כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים

Mourning their ordained fate, Mordecai and the Jewish community rend their garments, dress in sackcloth and brush ashes on their faces, fast, weep, and wail. When word of such behavior reaches Esther, she sends a messenger to Mordecai directing him to stop. He implores Esther to act on their behalf to save them. Esther informs him that she can do nothing without being summoned to the King's presence, or else she might suffer the same fate as her people. Mordecai responds to Esther that there is no safety in silence.

"...And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis."<sup>126</sup> (Esther 4:14)

כִּי אָם־<sup>(4):14</sup>

הַחֲרָשׁ תִּחְרִישִׁי בָּעֵת הַזֹּאת רֹחַ וְהִצָּלָה יַעֲמֹד לַיְּהוּדִים  
מִמָּקוֹם אַחֵר וְאַתָּה וּבֵית-אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אָם־  
לָעֵת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת:

Esther finds the strength to act. She calls upon her attendants and the Jewish community to join with her in a fast on her behalf. Meanwhile, she devises a plan to approach the King.

Made up and dressed in royal garb, Esther places herself in view of the king and catches his eye. He invites her into the inner court and affectionately offers her whatever

<sup>125</sup> JPS Translation

<sup>126</sup> JPS Translation

she wishes. Playing the shrewd and good wife, she requests nothing but the king's and Haman's presence at a feast she has prepared especially for them.<sup>127</sup>

At the feast, the king again asks Esther if there is anything she desires. This time the beguiled King Ahasuerus goes so far as to offer her half his kingdom. The time being ripe, Queen Esther replies,

וַתֵּעַן אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וַתֹּאמֶר (7)  
אֶם־מִצָּאתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב  
תִּנָּתֶן־לִי נַפְשִׁי בְּשִׂאֲלָתִי וְעַמִּי בְּבִקְשָׁתִי: <sup>4</sup>כִּי נִמְכְּרָנוּ  
אֲנִי וְעַמִּי לְהַשְׁמִיד לְהַרְגוֹ וּלְאַבֵּד וְאֵלּוּ לַעֲבָדִים וּלְשִׁפְחוֹת  
נִמְכְּרָנוּ הִחַרְשָׁתִּי כִּי אֵין הַצָּר שׁוּה בְּנוֹק הַמֶּלֶךְ:

If Your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people as my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. Had we only been sold as bondsmen and bondswomen, I would have kept silent; for the adversary is not worthy of the king's trouble.<sup>128</sup> (Esther 7:3-4)

Stunned and outraged, the King demands to know who would do such a thing. Esther seizes the moment and indicts Haman. The king leaves the room momentarily. Upon his return, he misinterprets Haman's pleas for mercy as an attack on Esther. Immediately, King Ahasuerus condemns Haman to death by public impaling.<sup>129</sup>

Though all seems at this point a happy ending, Esther's work is incomplete. She appeals to the King one more time to rescind his previous order to annihilate the Jews on the thirteenth of Adar. Deeming it impossible to annul the previous edict, a new pronouncement is signed by the King allowing the Jews to defend themselves against this threat of extermination. After hearing reports of the fighting from around the kingdom,

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<sup>127</sup> Esther 5:1-8

<sup>128</sup> JPS Translation

<sup>129</sup> Esther 7:5-10

Queen Esther returns once more to the King, asking for a one-day extension. He grants her wish, and the Jews once again avert destruction.<sup>130</sup>

According to *Megillat Esther*, Mordecai recorded this story and prescribed the Jewish feast of Purim to be celebrated and remembered. Then in confirmation, Queen Esther, with full authority, wrote the scroll of Purim, concurring in all the events and observances.<sup>131</sup>

Remez and D'rash:

“That infinite virtue and great sanctity of Esther, in helping those who are persecuted...”

Merriam-Webster defines virtue as, “conformity to a standard of right,” or, more simply, “morality.” Esther did make a moral choice when she elected to champion her people’s wellbeing. In fact, when Mordecai tells Esther that she must go to the King to try to stop the Jews’ annihilation, she first refuses, fearing for her life. Mordecai’s then allows her to come to her own conclusions regarding her ultimate action (or inaction).

כִּי אִם־<sup>14(4)</sup>

הַחֶרֶשׁ תַּחֲרִישִׁי בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת רֹחַ וְהִצָּלָה יַעֲמֹד לַיהוּדִים  
מִמָּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית־אֲבִיךָ תִּאֲבְדִּי וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־  
לְעֵת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעַת לַמְּלָכוּת:

...if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter... Who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.<sup>132</sup>

Further emphasized in the next generation’s teaching from the Babylonian

Talmud, Shabbat 54b:

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<sup>130</sup> Esther 9:12-19

<sup>131</sup> Esther 9:20-32

<sup>132</sup> JPS Translation

כל מי שאפשר למחות לאנשי ביתו ולא מיחה - נתפס על אנשי ביתו,  
באנשי עירו - נתפס על אנשי עירו, בכל העולם כולו - נתפס על כל העולם  
כולו. אמר רב פפא: והני דבי ריש גלותא נתפסו על כולי עלמא. כי הא

If one can protest the misdeeds of his or her household, yet does not, the person becomes guilty with them. If a person can protest the misdeeds of one's townspeople and does not, the person is guilty with them. If one can protest the misdeeds of the entire world and does not, that person is guilty with them.<sup>133</sup>

When Doña Graça Nasi (who also hid her Jewish identity) catapulted to an influential position at a young age, she did not have the “choice” as to whether or not to help her fellow *Marranos*. Doña Graça Nasi felt that doing nothing, and essentially remaining silent, would benefit neither her, nor, ultimately, her people. Similarly, in a far more recent reference, the prominent and outspoken Protestant pastor, Martin Niemöller<sup>134</sup> said regarding the Holocaust;

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out--  
Because I was not a Socialist.  
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out--  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--  
Because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me--  
And there was no one left to speak for me.

Like Mordecai's suggestion in *Megillat Esther*, perhaps Esther (and Doña Graça Nasi) was put in powerful positions for the very purpose of acting as saviors for their people. Doña Graça Nasi could have lived an easy, comfortable life as a very rich Catholic in her home country of Portugal, just as Esther could have remained the favored

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<sup>133</sup> “Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 54b-55a,” Welcome to On1Foot, <http://on1foot.org/text/talmud-shabbat-54b-55a> (accessed January 11, 2013).

<sup>134</sup> Niemöller (1892-1984) was a prominent Protestant pastor who emerged as an outspoken public foe of Adolf Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps. (<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>)

queen of the kingdom, or even received half the kingdom for herself. But she made a different, far nobler, choice, and is later reflected in the actions of Doña Graçia Nasi. The latter spent her adult life employing her stature and money to influence to mitigate, as much as possible, the dangers that faced her people.

Important to note, *Megillat* Esther is the only book of the *TaNaKH* where the name of God does not appear. Yet the Jews of the era, according to the scroll, worshipped God through various observances, in particular fasts. Moreover many biblical books note the commonality of Jews “observing fast days in commemoration of national calamities” (Zechariah 7:5, 8:19).<sup>135</sup> In *Megillat* Esther, the Jews engaged in fasting after learning of Haman’s edict of extermination. Mordecai leads a community-wide fast, including mourning rituals, such as rending garments, dressing in sackcloth and ashes, and crying. In a similar vein, once Esther accepts her role as potential savior, she calls for a three-day fast in order for her people to conjure support (i.e. from God) to approach the king, since doing so was an act punishable by death.

In a modern *Midrash*, Tamara Cohen draws a parallel between *Megillat* Esther and the story of the Binding of Isaac. In Genesis 22, Abraham attempts to sacrifice his son, as instructed by God. Though an angel stops the act, Abraham’s obedience to such an outlandish and frightening request, proved his faith in God. The Torah describes Abraham as “*yirat Adonai*” (God-fearing).<sup>136</sup> According to Cohen, Esther, at her defining moment, “confronts the possibility of sacrificing herself.” In this way, “she is

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<sup>135</sup> *JPS TaNAKH*, 1801.

<sup>136</sup> The actual text is “*yirei elohim*” from Genesis 22:12, but when describing in more modern Hebrew the terminology commonly used is “*yirat Adonai*.”

like Isaac, but a knowing Isaac.” In Esther’s own words: “...if I am to perish, I shall perish!” (Esther 4:16).<sup>137</sup>

לְךָ כְּנוֹס אֶת־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוֹשָׁן  
וְצוּמוֹ עָלַי וְאֶל־תֹּאכְלוּ וְאֶל־תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה  
וַיּוֹם גַּם־אֲנִי וְנַעֲרָתִי אֲצוּם כֵּן וּבִכֹּן אָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ  
אֲשֶׁר לֹא־כֹדֶת וְכֹאֲשֶׁר אֲבֹדְתִי אֲבֹדְתִי:

Referring to the importance of Esther and the Scroll, Rabbi Irving (Yitz)

Greenberg, a contemporary theologian, explains that the fact of the Book of Esther’s presence in the *TaNaKH* can be understood as a lesson in how God acts in the post-Prophetic age, or the modern age. God doesn’t operate as a supernatural force; rather God is “in the center of life, present in the natural and in the redemptive process in which the human is co-partner.”<sup>138</sup> In other words, Esther put her life in God’s hands, but gave herself to the task at hand. She didn’t wait, as the old story goes, for a supernatural God to come and save her from the coming flood.<sup>139</sup>

The truth is that there is very little evidence about Doña Graçia Nasi’s religiosity, except for her financial support of the writing of the Ferrara Bible, until she reclaims her Judaism upon settling in the Ottoman Empire. As a *Marrano*, she maintained the appearance of a Catholic when need be, but often opted to worship privately in the chapel

<sup>137</sup> Penina Adelman, *Praise Her Works*, 186.

<sup>138</sup> Leonard S. Kravitz and Kerry M. Olitzky, *Esther: A Modern Commentary* (New York: URJ Press, 2010), pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>139</sup> The old story: There was a guy drowning in the ocean. He prayed to God to save him. A few minutes later a boat came and offered to pick him up and take him to shore. The drowning man refused and the boat left. Another boat came and offered to save the man and he said no, and the boat left. Finally a third boat came and said I can help you. Once again the drowning man said no. When he died he said to God: I trusted you. Why didn't you save me? God said: I sent you 3 boats!

built in her home as was the custom for the wealthy.<sup>140</sup> Perhaps, in the famous words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, Doña Graça Nasi “prayed with her feet.” Her devotion to the Divine was visible in her actions – including, shepherding *Marranos* to safe territory, providing them with food and shelter, supporting a way for the uneducated to learn the Bible in their native language, among many other recorded acts of philanthropy and political influence on behalf of her people.

Purim, too, might be regarded as the spiritual working through the physical. At the end of the scroll, Mordecai, and Esther establish a series of physical, outward ways to observe Purim: giving gifts of food and money and achieving joy achieved through feasting and drinking. Such outward acts, according to one commentator, were meant to "destroy and kill the bodies of the Jewish people... not their souls (as, for example, was the endeavor of the Greeks at the time of Chanukah) ... hence, the salvation is commemorated by physical means...."<sup>141</sup>

It is important to add that there is an absence of any sort of supernatural action in *Megillat Esther* – no parting of the sea, no messages from God. Purim commemorates how God is concealed within the everyday world.<sup>142</sup>

Esther, too, is instrumental in aiding her people against their oppressor. Esther pleaded for her own life, and her people’s, and revealed herself as a Jew (Esther 7:4). Because of Persian law, the king’s decree could not be repealed. So King Ahasuerus, responding to Esther’s request, authorized his new royal advisor, Mordecai, to send out another royal edict giving the Jews the right to bear arms in self-defense.

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<sup>140</sup> Brooks, *The Women Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graça Nasi*.

<sup>141</sup> *Levush Mordechai, Orach Chaim* 670:2.

<sup>142</sup> Yanki Tauber, “Esther’s Story: The 2 versions of Purim,” *Week In Review in MeaningfulLife.com*

[http://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article\\_cdo/aid/2816/jewish/Esthers-Story.htm](http://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/2816/jewish/Esthers-Story.htm)



Prior to his death, Francisco Mendes, Doña Graçia Nasi's husband, reportedly spent significant time and energy lobbying the Pope and the King of Portugal to stave off the enactment of the Inquisition in Portugal.<sup>143</sup> Clearly, he lost this battle, but he did succeed in brokering an, "understanding in King Manuel's laws of 1497, stating that there would be no investigations into [the *Marranos*'] private religious practices in the home for at least twenty years..."<sup>144</sup> As someone who spent a great deal of his energy and risked his life and that of his family to help his community, a case could be made that he would not have entrusted his wife with his business without knowing that she would continue this important and holy work, a judgment that was confirmed by his brother's will, leaving her in charge of the combined family fortune and businesses.<sup>145</sup>

André Aelion Brooks deduces from her research that Doña Graçia Nasi, even and especially as a Catholic, would have had access to a Bible that included (both Judith and) Esther. Brooks argues that such characters might have inspired Doña Graçia Nasi. As Brooks suggests, the idea of a woman as a leader and protector, "...may well have seeped into Doña Graçia's impressionable mind... Later on, and significantly, the Jewish people in the Ottoman Empire would embrace this most traditional of Christian terminologies for Doña Graçia herself, dubbing her simply *La Señora*."<sup>146</sup>

The stories overlap in more ways than one. Of course, both Esther and Doña Graçia Nasi possessed secret identities (as Jews). Both initially kept their Jewishness hidden in order to rise to (and remain in) their esteemed positions. Each also prevailed

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<sup>143</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 45.

<sup>144</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 62-63.

<sup>145</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 137.

<sup>146</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, 27.

upon political rulers and succeeded in helping their people: In Persia, the Jews were granted the right to take up arms and defend themselves against their enemies. In Tiberias, the Jews were allowed to lease land.

It is thus easy to imagine how *Megillat* Esther may have provided Doña Graçia Nasi with inspiration, strength and purpose.<sup>147</sup> As the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Schneerson poignantly writes in his article, “Esther and the Modern Jewish Woman: Shining Examples for All,”

It is noteworthy and significant that although--as the *megillah* tells us--both Mordechai and Esther were instrumental in bringing about the miracle of Purim and saving our people, the *megillah* is not named after both of them jointly, nor after Esther and Mordechai in that order, but solely after Esther. Here is a pointedly emphatic message for every Jewish woman about her unique role in Jewish life. ...[*Megillat* Esther] emphasize[s] the extraordinary potential of every loyal Jewish daughter to shape the future of her family, with far-reaching consequences for the environment and even for the entire Jewish people.<sup>148</sup>

All of these parallels undoubtedly drew Samuel Usque to make the comparison between Doña Graçia Nasi and Esther explicit. The story of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions contain elements of the Purim story, and was, in a way, “the Purim story” of Doña Graçia Nasi’s era. Esther 9:31 says, “These days of Purim shall be observed at their proper time...” Sages over the years have interpreted this passage as “‘In their times:’ In the specific time of each.”<sup>149</sup> In fact, these observances have developed into a “Second Purim” known as “Purim Katan.” Purim Katan developed as an anniversary of

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<sup>147</sup> Penina Adelman, *Praise Her Works*, 187.

<sup>148</sup> Menachem M. Schneerson, “Esther and the Modern Jewish Woman: Shining Examples for all.”

([http://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article\\_cdo/aid/1454/jewish/Esther-and-the-Modern-Jewish-Woman.htm](http://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/1454/jewish/Esther-and-the-Modern-Jewish-Woman.htm))

<sup>149</sup> "Shushan Purim | | Orthodox Union." Jewish Holidays, Torah, Jewish Jobs, Tuition Affordability, Kosher Certification, Jewish Teens. [http://www.ou.org/torah/article/shushan\\_purim#.UPIR3ejOZis](http://www.ou.org/torah/article/shushan_purim#.UPIR3ejOZis) (accessed January 11, 2013).

any day when a community escaped from a catastrophe or destruction. In these communities, efforts have been made to celebrate their deliverance/survival after the pattern that Mordecai and Esther established, that is, with festivities and a reading from a specially written *megillah* of that community's story. Some examples include the Purim of Castile, or, from the twentieth century, the Purim of the Casablanca Hitler.<sup>150</sup>

This tradition is especially poignant to me, given my family's roots. In 1629, my ancestor, Rabbi Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller, the Rabbi of Prague and the author of the famous commentary on the Mishnah, *Tosefet Yom Tov*, proclaimed as a Second Purim for his descendants the second day of *Rosh Chodesh Adar* to commemorate his deliverance from death.

Usque's *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* might be considered his generation's *Megillah*—with its protagonist Doña Graçia Nasi, who redeemed her people from the Hamans of her day.

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<sup>150</sup> A "Hitler Purim" was proclaimed by the Jewish community of Casablanca (North Africa) on the 20th of Kislev (1942) because on that day it was saved from the Nazi invaders and their followers. A special *Megillah*, the "Hitler Megillah," was composed ("...and the month which was turned for us from sorrow to rejoicing and the making of holiday and the giving of gifts to the poor. Cursed be Hitler, cursed be Mussolini... etc...." From the Hitler Megillah).- Casablanca Purim Katan, celebrated on the 2nd of Kislev, commemorates the Jewish community there being saved from anti-Jewish riots and Nazi occupation in 1943. ("Shushan Purim || Orthodox Union." Jewish Holidays, Torah, Jewish Jobs, Tuition Affordability, Kosher Certification, Jewish Teens. [http://www.ou.org/torah/article/shushan\\_purim#.UPIR3ejOZis](http://www.ou.org/torah/article/shushan_purim#.UPIR3ejOZis) (accessed January 11, 2013).)

## Chapter 6. Judith and Doña Graçia Nasi

*They All Blessed Her With One Voice, Saying: You are the glory of Jerusalem.*

*You are the joy of Israel. You are the honor of our people.*<sup>151</sup>

As Samuel Usque's words reveal, the admirer of Doña Graçia Nasi compared her as well to the biblical Judith. He characterized Doña Graçia Nasi as having, "the much praised strength of the most chaste and magnanimous widow Judith, in delivering those hemmed in by travail."<sup>152</sup> Unlike the other characters, Judith does not appear in the *TaNaKH*, but is found instead in the Apocrypha of the Catholic Bible.

The Apocrypha is a collection of fifteen books written in Hebrew over a period of three hundred years, from the last two centuries before the Common Era to the first century of the Common Era. While not included in the Jewish biblical canon of twenty-four books, these books were included in the Latin Bible, or Vulgate, and became part of the Roman Catholic canon. The Church father Jerome translated the Vulgate into Latin from Hebrew and Aramaic between 382-405 CE. The latter has been the standard version of the bible for Roman Catholics for over a millennium and a half. Notably, only priests and scholars knew Latin; the vast majority of people could not read or understand the Vulgate. Presumably, the writer, scholar, and *Marrano* Usque was multi-lingual and thus well-versed in The Vulgate.

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<sup>151</sup> Vulgate Judith 15:10 "...benedixerunt eam omnes una voce, dicentes: Tu gloria Jerusalem; tu lætitia Israël; tu honorificentia populi nostri:"

<sup>152</sup> Samuel Usque, *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel (Consolação ás Tribulações de Israel)*, trans. Martin A. Cohen, 1st ed., (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1965), 230.

P'shat: Judith

The Book of Judith tells of a devout and loyal young Jewish widow who delivered her people from the Assyrians. Like many Jewish stories, Judith's is one of redemption for the Jewish people, even containing the literary device of a song of triumph, like the Song of the Sea and the Song of Deborah, to encapsulate and celebrate the narrative and God's part in it.

The book's namesake was the young wife of a well-off farmer from the town of Bethulia in the northern hills of Ephraim in Judea. She was beautiful, intelligent and devout. Her husband died suddenly while reaping the harvest. Though young and desirable, she did not remarry and remained in mourning for him, living quietly on the farm in seclusion.<sup>153</sup>

Meanwhile, because they shunned his decrees, the Assyrian king, Nebuchadnezzar, sent his commander, Holofernes, to invade and conquer the Middle Eastern region, including Judea. Upon seeing the approaching army, ambassadors approached the king with peace offerings and an affirmation of Nebuchadnezzar's kingship. This was not enough for the king, "...for he had decreed to destroy all the gods of the land, that all nations should worship Nebuchadnezzar only, and that all tongues and tribes should call upon him as a god." (Judith 3:8)<sup>154</sup>

The Israelites were afraid and worried about their fate and the fate of the house of God, the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. At the behest of the high priest Joachim, they prayed to God for strength and deliverance:

[They] . . . cried to the God of Israel all with one consent earnestly, to not give their children for a prey, and their wives for a spoil, and the cities of their

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<sup>153</sup> Judith 8

<sup>154</sup> <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bib/poly/jdt003.htm>

inheritance to destruction, and the sanctuary to profanation and reproach, and for the nations to rejoice at.

Israel then prepared for war. When Holofernes learned of their rejection of his King Nebuchadnezzar, he set off to destroy the Israelites. Cleverly, instead of attacking by sword, Holofernes cut off the Israelites' water supply. Broken, the Israelites wanted to give up, but the mayor begged them to give God five more days before giving themselves over in defeat.

Upon hearing of the Israelites' bargain with God, Judith summoned the strength to come out of mourning and confront the city council, relaying that, "God is not as man, that He may be threatened; neither is He as the son of man, that He should be wavering. Therefore let us wait for salvation of Him, and call upon Him to help us, and He will hear our voice, if it please Him" (Judith 8:16-17). Judith declared to the counsel that she had a plan that she would deliver on God's behalf, saying, "God will visit Israel by mine hand" (Judith 8:33).

After praying to God and affirming God's ultimate power over all,<sup>155</sup> Judith threw off her mourning garb and made herself beautiful once again. She descended from Bethulia and was brought before Holofernes. Judith prostrated herself before him, showing reverence to Nebuchadnezzar.<sup>156</sup> Thus, Holofernes offered her protection, and she pledged herself to Nebuchadnezzar. Telling of the Israelites' "unlawfulness," she shared her plan to defeat her own people. Mesmerized by her beauty and cunning, Holofernes believed her story in earnest.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Judith 9

<sup>156</sup> Judith 10

<sup>157</sup> Judith 11

Trusted by Holofernes, she joined him for a party. And later, alone with Judith in a tent, Holofernes passed out after drinking too much. In the dead of night, Judith cut off his head, took the bloodied object with her and returned to her people. She then “took the head out of the bag, and showed it, and said unto them, behold the head of Holofernes, the chief captain of the army of Assyria, and behold the canopy, wherein he did lie in his drunkenness; and the Lord hath smitten him by the hand of a woman.” Upon seeing this, the Israelites’ belief in God was restored.<sup>158</sup>

But Judith’s plan was not yet fully executed. She ordered Holofernes’ head to be placed on a stake at the highest point of the city walls for all to see. When the Assyrians noticed, they ran to check on Holofernes and, upon seeing only his remains, they were bereaved. At this very moment, the Israelites attacked and won. The High Priest blessed Judith and made an offering to God, pledging everlasting obedience. Out of joy and reverence, Judith led the women in song and dance, the men following and joining as well.<sup>159</sup> In the end, Judith returned to her life of seclusion in Bethulia. When she died at 105 years old, she was buried with honor, and Israel mourned her for seven days.

Remez and D’rash:

“The much praised strength of the most chaste and magnanimous widow Judith, in delivering those hemmed in by travail...”

The beginnings of the Book of Judith are shrouded in mystery. Scholars speculate that it was originally written in Hebrew, but there is no definitive evidence to date.

Additionally, Judith is not referenced in the Mishnah, Talmud, or other rabbinic literature

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<sup>158</sup> Judith 13

<sup>159</sup> Judith 15

until approximately the 11<sup>th</sup> century. At this time, the character and story of Judith begins to appear in liturgical poems, commentaries on the Talmud, passages in Jewish legal codes, and Hebrew folktales. The “Judith *midrashim*” are loose manuscripts – some published and some not, some attributed and others anonymous, some written early on and others as late as the sixteenth century.<sup>160</sup>

In several *midrashim*, Judith’s story is linked to the Jewish festival of Chanukah, as both concern God’s saving miracles. Other commentators draw parallels between Judith and Esther. Both are beautiful and seductive Jewish heroines who save their people from being killed by foreign kings. Rashi’s grandson, the Rashbam,<sup>161</sup> for instance, credits Esther for the chief miracle of Purim and Judith for that of Hanukkah.<sup>162</sup> In fact, at times, the Book of Judith is referred to as *Megillat Yehudit*, the Scroll of Judith, echoing *Megillat Ester*. Moreover, the Vulgate contains a late addition, which notes that the day of victory for the Jews in the Book of Judith is observed as a holy day<sup>163</sup>—similar to that of the festival of Purim.

All this explains in part how Usque’s vision comparing Doña Graçia Nasi to Judith, a character from the New Testament, makes sense after hundreds of years of renewed interest, Jewish and otherwise.

Comparable *midrashim*, one by Nissim ben Reuben, the Ran,<sup>164</sup> and another in the *Kol Bo*<sup>165</sup> (section 44) tell of how Judith gave Holofernes cheese to eat. This cheese

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<sup>160</sup> Kevin R. Brine, Elena Ciletti, and Henrike Lähnemann, *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across The Disciplines* (Cambridge, U.K.: OpenBook Publishers, 2010), 23-36.

<sup>161</sup> Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (1085-1174)

<sup>162</sup> Tosafot on Babylonian Talmud Megillah 4a

<sup>163</sup> Vulg. Judith 16:31

<sup>164</sup> The Ran lived from about 1310-1375 CE



made him terribly thirsty causing him to drink more wine than usual, making him fall into a deep sleep and allowing Judith to execute her plan.<sup>166</sup> While Doña Graça Nasi was hardly seducing political leaders of her era, there can be no doubt that her wealth and stature were intoxicating to men, just like Judith's beauty and, in this *midrash*, her cheese. Her promise of family money and business savvy certainly influenced prominent men and monarchs to the *Marranos'* advantage.

The theme of redemption found in Judith's story also reverberates in Doña Graça Nasi's biography. For Jews, redemption works on many levels. According to Lurianic Kabbalah, man is put on earth in order to repair the broken shards that resulted during creation – a process known as *tikkun olam* (repair of the world). In the Reform movement's siddur, *Mishkan T'filah*, Rabbi Adam Sol explains that the phrase "*tikkun olam*" derives from rabbinic legislation to remedy injustice, whether social or legal. In his words: "The Jewish idea of redemption compels us to imagine a perfect world, a world that has reached its full potential... Redemption helps us to look beyond our lives towards a world of possibility."<sup>167</sup>

Doña Graça Nasi did just that. Born a *Marrano* in Inquisition Portugal, following the death of her husband, she was catapulted to the head of her family's prosperous and influential shipping and banking business. She became an unlikely leader of *Marranos*, who used her fortune and power to redeem others. As she moved her financial empire through Europe, she helped them resettle and ultimately reclaim their

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<sup>165</sup> *Kol Bo* is a collection of Jewish ritual and civil laws. Its author is unknown, but because of its similar content to *Orhot Chayim*, Joseph Caro and others believed the author to be the same, Aaron ben Jacob HaKohen.

<sup>166</sup> The Ran on Alfasi, Shabbat 10a (on Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 23b)

<sup>167</sup> Elyse, Frishman, ed., *Mishkan T'filah: A New Reform Siddur*. Complete Volume (weekdays/Shabbat/festivals) ed. (New York: CCAR Press, 2007), 591.

ancestral faith in the Ottoman Empire. Once there, she did not rest, but took steps to fulfill the ultimate dream of returning the Jewish people to *Eretz Yisrael*.

It is not difficult to see the similarities between Judith and Doña Graçia Nasi. Significant as well to both Judith's and Doña Graçia Nasi's stories, both were widowed at young ages and neither remarried. The Book of Judith gives no reason why Judith did not remarry, but in Doña Graçia Nasi's life remaining a widow allowed her to continue to be in charge of the business, of the family, and of herself. Had either Judith or Doña Graçia Nasi remarried, both would have been subject to their new husband's bidding. As widows, each followed her own conscience, using her cunning and inner strength to put the interests of the Jewish people ahead of her own. Therefore, Usque's description of Doña Graçia Nasi as, "the much praised strength of the most chaste and magnanimous widow Judith, in delivering those hemmed in by travail," is exceedingly appropriate.

As we read in the liturgical addition to the *Amidah* for Purim and Chanukah:

עַל הַנִּסִּים, וְעַל הַפְּרָקוֹ,  
וְעַל הַגְּבוּרוֹת, וְעַל הַתְּשׁוּעוֹת,  
וְעַל הַמַּלְחָמוֹת, שְׁעָשִׂיתָ לְאַבוֹתֵינוּ  
וְאִמּוֹתֵינוּ, בְּיָמֵי הָהֵם בְּזִמְנוֹ הַזֶּה.

We thank You for the miracles, for the redemption, for the mighty deeds and saving acts, brought about by You, and for the wars which You waged for our ancestors in the days of old, at this season.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Elyse, Frishman ed., *Mishkan T'filah: A New Reform Siddur*, 556.

## CONCLUSION

Doña Graçia Nasi's nearly-forgotten incredible life story inspired me to write this thesis. Samuel Usque's insights provided me with a vision for realizing it in a unique and appropriate context, given who I am—a woman deeply committed to realizing the sacred within us, and who I am becoming - a professional Cantor. My strongest desire is to use my talents and abilities to pass down the Jewish biblical and historical legacy.

Usque offered his “Oral Torah” to support and comfort the persecuted Jews and *Marranos* of the Iberian Peninsula. He regarded Doña Graçia Nasi as the embodiment of women from the past: Miriam, who with “intrinsic piety,” “offer[ed] her life to save her brethren;” Deborah, who “governed her people with great prudence;” Esther, who with “infinite virtue and great sanctity,” “helped those who [were persecuted];” and Judith, who with “strength of the most chaste and magnanimous widow,” “. . . delivered those hemmed in by travail.” In my study, I re-discovered verses from texts related to each foremother to illuminate the life of Doña Graçia Nasi. Like Miriam, Doña Graçia Nasi sang “a new song unto God.” (Psalm 96:1) As with Deborah, “the Children of Israel came to her for Judgment.” (Judges 4:5) In a way similar to Esther, perhaps she did “attain . . . [a] royal position for just such a crisis.” (Esther 4:14) Finally, akin to Judith, “they all blessed her with one voice, saying: You are the glory of Jerusalem. You are the joy of Israel. You are the honor of our people.” (Vulgate Judith 15:10)

The more I learned about this woman's amazing life and self-appointed mission, the more I wondered whether she was acting on the Iberian belief, stemming from medieval Hebrew literature, that “it was part of the divine plan to bestow wealth and

important political connections upon certain specific individuals for the express purpose of helping their people.”<sup>169</sup> (See Esther verse, above.) Moreover, I am reminded of the mystical legend that in each generation there are thirty-six hidden and humble righteous people in the world, whose character and deeds are so exemplary that were it not for them the world would come to an end. While only God truly knows, I fully endorse Doña Graçia Nasi as a “*lamed vavnik*” in her generation.

It seems that this folktale has multiple roots. The two Hebrew letters that represent the number 36 are *lamed* (30) and *vav* (6). As a result, these thirty-six are referred to as the *Lamed-Vav Tzadikim*. In the story of Sodom and Gemorrah in Genesis, Abraham bargains with God for a reprieve to save the city from destruction, which is contingent on finding ten righteous individuals. The city fails to reach even this minimum requirement. Perhaps, though, it foreshadowed the “*lamed vavnik*” legend. The Talmudic sage Abbaye adds a comment to second century Palestinian Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai<sup>170</sup> saying that, “there are never less than 36 righteous in the world who greet the *Shechina* every day, for it is written (in Isaiah 30:18), “Blessed are all who wait for Him (*lo*),” and *lo* (him) is numerically equal to 36.” (Tractate Sukkah 45b) The great modern scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, posits that the number thirty-six, “originates from ancient astrology, where the 360 degrees of the heavenly circle are divided into 36 units of ten, the so-called ‘deans.’” Scholem thinks that Abbaye was ‘Judaizing’ a pagan concept, seeing the cosmological forces as human figures. In addition, Scholem theorizes that the legend was influenced by medieval Islamic

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<sup>169</sup> Salo Wittmayer Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, vol. XVIII (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967-69), 82.

<sup>170</sup> Considered by the tradition as the author of the Kabbalistic text of the Zohar

mysticism, which tells of forty saints who “live unrecognized by their fellow men while contributing to the continued maintenance of the world through their good deeds.”<sup>171</sup>

Whatever the legend’s source, in my view Doña Graçia Nasi (Beatrice de Luna) earned a place on this esteemed list. Sa’adiah Longo sums up her essence perfectly in his 1594 work, *Shivrei Lukhot*: “She grew a name like the name of the holy greats.”

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<sup>171</sup> Pilologos, "The Thirty-Six Who Save the World," *The Jewish Daily Forward* (New York), May 22, 2008, The Thirty-Six Who Save the World (accessed October 21, 2012); and Zwerin, Raymond. "Rabbi Zwerin's Kol Nidre Sermon 2002," Internet Archive: Wayback Machine, [http://web.archive.org/web/20030118221508/http://americanet.com/Sinai/resources/sermons/Zwerin\\_YKKN02.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20030118221508/http://americanet.com/Sinai/resources/sermons/Zwerin_YKKN02.html) (accessed October 21, 2012).

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## **APPENDIX**

## **TIMELINE OF DOÑA GRAÇIA NASI'S LIFE**<sup>172</sup>

- 1478: Pope authorizes the establishment of an Inquisition in Spain
- 1483: Francisco Mendes (Benveniste), her future husband, born in Spain
- 1485: Diogo Mendes (Benveniste), her brother-in-law and business partner, born in Spain
- 1492: Expulsion of the Jews from Spain
- 1497: Forced conversion of all Jews in Portugal
- 1506: Massacre of conversos in Lisbon
- 1510: Birth of Beatrice de Luna (Doña Graçia Nasi) in Lisbon
- 1512: Diogo Mendes sent to Antwerp to develop European business outside the Inquisition
- 1522: Birth of her nephew, Bernardo Micas (Don Samuel Nasi)
- 1524: Birth of her nephew and business partner, Juan Micas (Don Joseph Nasi)
- 1526: Final reference to Alvaro de Luna, Doña Graçia's father, in extant records
- 1528: Marriage of Doña Graçia to Francisco Mendes (Benveniste)
- 1531: Creation of Antwerp bourse/stock exchange
- 1531-6: Authorization of an Inquisition in Portugal amid numerous delays
- 1531-1555: Escape network for conversos developed, supported and expanded
- 1534: Birth of Ana Mendes (Reyna Benveniste), daughter of Francisco Mendes and Beatrice de Luna (Doña Graçia)
- 1535: Death of Francisco Mendes
- 1537: Departure of Doña Graçia and family member from Lisbon and arrival in Antwerp

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<sup>172</sup> "Events/books - The Doña Graçia Project." Home - The Doña Graçia Project. <http://www.donagraciaproject.org/works.htm> (accessed August 9, 2012).

1539: Diogo Mendes marries Brianda, Doña Graçia's sister, in Antwerp

1540: Birth of La Chica (Graçia Benveniste) Doña Graçia's niece, in Antwerp

1543: Death of Diogo Mendes leaving Doña Graçia in sole control of family assets

1544: Queen Marie and Emperor Charles try to wed Ana to disreputable nobleman

1545: Doña Graçia and family members flee Antwerp and arrived in Venice

1548: Doña Graçia leaves hurriedly for Ferrara

1549-1552: Doña Graçia becomes a patron of printing and literature

1552: Doña Graçia returns to Venice and departs for Ottoman Empire

1553: Doña Graçia arrives in Constantinople

1553: Abduction of La Chica in Venice; first printing of Ferrara Bible

1554: Ana (Reyna) weds Don Joseph Nasi in Constantinople

1555: Roundup of *Marranos* in Ancona and Inquisition trials of the House of Mendes' family agents in Venice

1556: Burning of *Marranos* in Ancona and death of Brianda in Ferrara

1557: La Chica marries Don Samuel Nasi in Ferrara

1560: Doña Graçia acquires lease on Tiberias and fosters Jewish resettlement

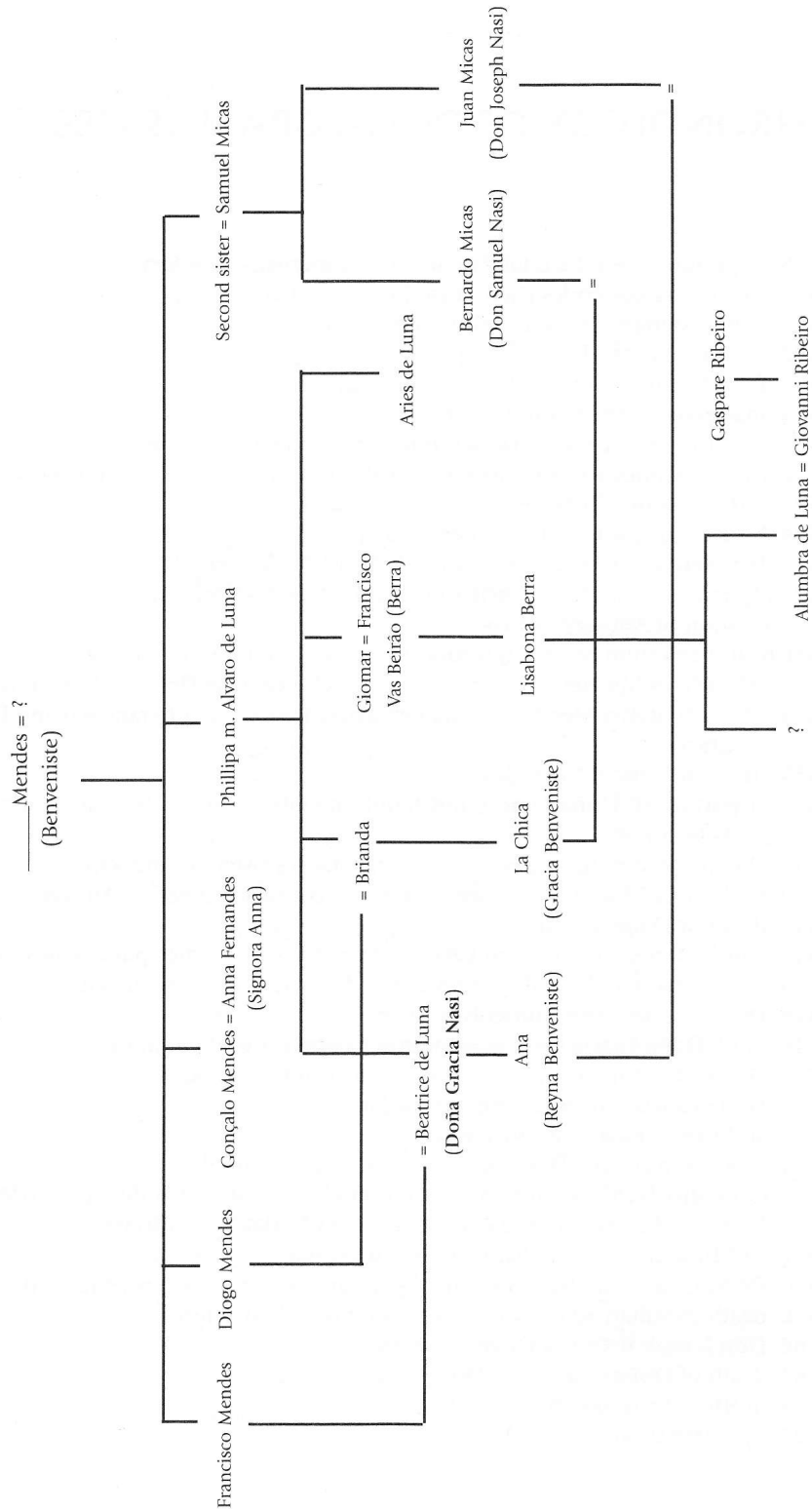
1566: Death of Sultan Suleiman and accession of Sultan Selim II

1566: Don Joseph becomes Duke of Naxos

1569: Death of Doña Graçia (and Don Samuel)

## FAMILY TREE<sup>173</sup>

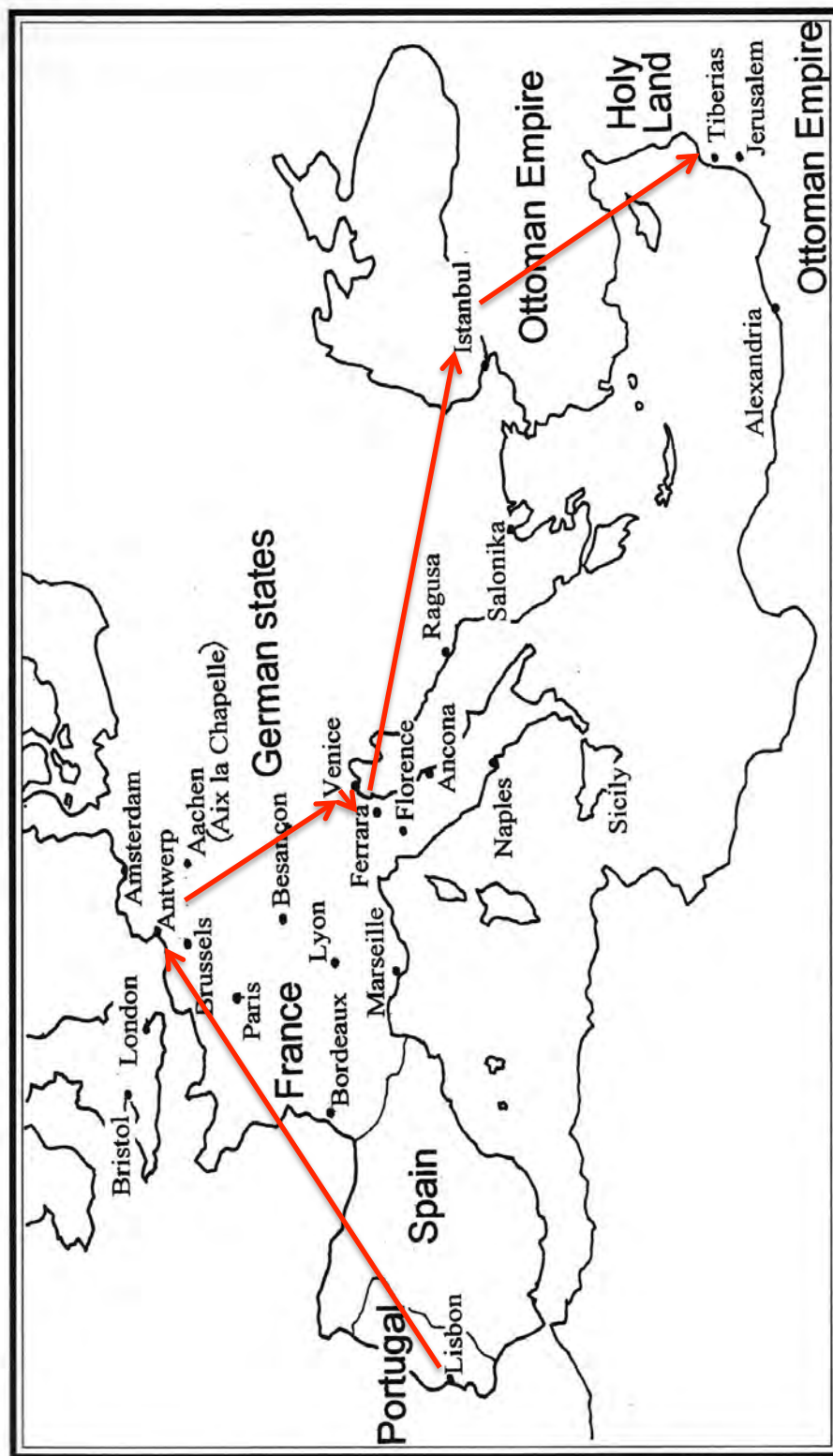
### FAMILY TREE: MENDES (BENVENISTE)-DE LUNA FAMILIES



<sup>173</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Gracia Nasi*, p. xiii.



# MAP OF DOÑA GRAÇIA NASI'S ROUTE<sup>174</sup>



Map of Doña Graçia's travels and regions of concern.

Drawn by Graham Stone of Northwood, Middlesex, England

<sup>174</sup> Brooks, *The Woman Who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Doña Graçia Nasi*, p. xiii.