

## The Shealtiels of Crete

The lucky few Shealtiels who survived the Iberian massacres of 1391 split into three branches: the Gracians ‘of the House of Shealtiel’ — descendants of Solomon Gracian; the bar Sheshets — North African descendants of the *Ribash*; and the S(h)altiels — descendants of the brothers Yehudah and Moshe Ben Shealtiel (and also of the *Ribash* — through his daughter, who married a Shealtiel cousin).<sup>1</sup>

Like their Gracian (‘of the House of Shealtiel’) cousins, most of the immediate descendants of Yehudah and Moshe BenShealtiel, faced with a sharp increase in Catalunyan anti-Semitism, left.<sup>2</sup> But, *unlike* Solomon Gracian and his son Shealtiel, they sought shelter not in Venice and Crete, but further east in a place which, some fifty years later, would provide a safe harbor and home to their brethren, who had been expelled from Christian Spain: that is, in the Islamic Ottoman Empire.

### Shealtiel Hen (Gracian)<sup>3</sup>

Solomon Gracian and his son were the first to leave, most likely for Venice. Though I am still searching, I have yet to document their life in 15th-century Italy. The presumption that they lived in Venice is, rather, a deduction from the voluminous data at our disposal as to their lives and activities in their next haven, Crete.

Crete, a large and rich Mediterranean island, now part of Greece, was home to Jews as early as 144 BCE. According to Josephus, whose third wife was a Cretan Jew, Alexander, who claimed the throne of King Herod, visited the island on his way to Rome, and the Jewish community gave him generous sums to advance his cause. The island became part of the Roman empire in 67 CE and its Jews were treated like other subjects of Rome: equally. When, in the 4th century, Christianity became the official religion, the status of Jews changed, yet — with the possible exception of the period from 408 to 455

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<sup>1</sup> Recently — and just as I’d concluded that all of Yehudah and Moshe’s descendants can be traced exclusively *via* the Spanish refugees’ next safe harbor, Salonika — I was contacted by David Moore, a Canadian. Researching the family tree of his wife, Annette, he discovered that her French Canadian Catholic ancestors were, indeed, descendants of the Saltell brothers of Provence. They had remained in the area, undergone baptism, and assimilated into the local gentry. Though some emigrated in the mid-19th century to Canada, the family — De Saltel — still lives in France near their former residence, Chateau Marchastel in Languedoc.

<sup>2</sup> I write “immediate descendants” because within a single generation — that is, by 1500 — the *kahya* Shealtiel was already established as head of the Jewish community in Istanbul.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Gracian’ is merely the Catalunyan translation of Hebrew *Hen*, ‘grace.’ Hence the interchangeable use of the surnames.

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CE, when Crete was ruled by Theodosius II, who expelled them — it seems that the Jewish presence was uninterrupted until the Nazi destruction of Greek Jewry. Today, there is only one ‘recognized’ Jew living on the island, my good friend Prof. Nikos Stavroulakis, who rebuilt the *Etz ha-Haim*, a synagogue that had been in ruins for many years. Amazingly, when Nikos dedicated the synagogue, several Cretans, previously believed to be Greeks, showed up for services.

In 823, Crete fell into the hands of the expanding Moslem empire. We have no knowledge of the fate of the Jews at that time but there is no reason to suppose that they fared worse than their fellows in other parts of the empire. One hundred and thirty-seven years later, the island was recaptured by the Byzantines; in 1204, Venice bought it from the Marquis of Monferrat, who had inherited it from Byzantium.

Late in the 14th century — about 1395 — Venice tried to bolster the Cretan economy, then in decline from emigration and epidemic disease, by initiating a policy of liberalization of transfer of capital, combined with tax incentives to encourage the return of entrepreneurs and their capital to the island. Ironically, life in Italy in general and Venice in particular, changed for the worse. Recent Doges had not been as accommodating to their Jewish constituency as their cultured predecessors. Lacking special reason to stay in the newly restricted ghettos, and hurt by limits set on the number of houses to be built by and for Jews, it is no surprise that, given the opportunity, many Venetian-Jewish families, new and old, moved. In a short period, the Cretan-Jewish community almost doubled, to about two thousand. Some of the new settlers were from northern Europe, such as the important Italian-Jewish del Medigos, who originated in Germany; but most were refugees from Spain and Venice, who brought with them not only capital and expertise but, more importantly, their advanced Sephardic culture. Descendants of Solomon Gracian, the Shealtiel Hens of Crete were among the new leaders, in both the religious and business arenas.

In 1669, Venice surrendered Crete to the Turks. The new masters of the island allowed the residents and their local government and administration time to repatriate to Venice. Many Jewish families, mostly the privileged and wealthy, joined the Venetians and moved to Venice and Livorno,

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which began to emerge from the gloom of the Middle Ages into the light of the Renaissance. Some settled in other Mediterranean enclaves like Gibraltar; some, naturally, joined their brothers in Salonika and Istanbul.

Unlike Spain, where the well-preserved Catalanian archives are rich with the footprints of the business, commercial and real-estate activity of its Jewish residents, the life of the Shealtiel-Gracians in Crete is documented exclusively by Jewish sources. Whatever records the Venetian colony kept, none are found in Crete. They were either destroyed or taken to Venice by the retreating Italians upon the capture of the island by the Ottoman armies.

## **The Shealtiel *Haggadah***

London; Summer, 1989. Joseph Saltiel, an eighteen-year-old New Yorker, is unprepared for the surprise awaiting him at the British Museum. On a family vacation in England, the recent high-school graduate is browsing his way through the manuscript section, looking for the Shakespeare folio, when, out of the corner of his eye, he sees a beautifully illuminated Hebrew manuscript in a glass box. This colorful document is the *Haggadah*, the Hebrew prayer and ritual for the celebration of Passover at home. The carefully handwritten text is ornamented with spectacularly colorful images depicting scenes from the story of the 'liberation from bondage' in Egypt. Curious, Joseph steps closer to inspect the manuscript. Reading the plate describing it, he is amazed to find that the 13th-century work, written in Barcelona, was once the property of "The Aristocratic Sephardic family of Shealtiel." Both Joseph and his father, Victor, are thrilled with their discovery, but it is not until they become involved in organizing the first Shealtiel world reunion that Victor tells me of his son's wonderful 'find.'

The Museum acquired the manuscript — known both as the 'Shealtiel' and the 'Brother' *Haggadah* — in a Sotheby auction of the William Bragge collection, held 7-10 June 1876. Among the other items in the auction were gems, smoking pipes, manuscripts, and early editions of Cervantes. Graciously bowing before Miles' known persuasiveness, the Museum's administration agreed to our request for a copy of the entire *Haggadah* ... stipulating only that a Museum photographer do the

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work, and that we pay for it. We accepted their terms gladly and in a short time received two sets of colorful prints.

The manuscript's artistry, the mastery of composition, the delicate and graceful application of paint, and the imaginative attention to detail are all similar to that of the four other *Haggadot* produced in 14th-century Barcelona: the 'Sister,' the 'Sarajevo,' the 'Golden,' and the 'Barcelona.' The 'Sarajevo' is thought by historians such as Cecil Roth to have been owned by the *Nesiim*. I believe that all the Barcelonian *Haggadot* were produced for them, but the 'Brother' *Haggadah* is the only one clearly 'labeled' as 'ours.' The illustrations of the actual text and the beautifully drawn Passover scenes, are artistically stunning. The manuscript includes not only the text of a 'regular' *Haggadah*, but a *machzor* (festival prayer book), with several otherwise unknown prayers that time forgot. On the back cover, an owner, presumably from the family for whom the *Haggadah* was made, informs us that he sold the book to his brother-in-law Moshe, son of Keves; hence the name 'Brother.' The date of sale: June 1402 (in the Hebrew calendar, the month of *Sivan* in the 5,162nd year since the Creation). Just below the very last paragraph of the text appears a statement of ownership by the "Humble Abraham Hen, son of the great Rabbi, the physician Yehudah, son of the great Rabbi and physician Emanuel Hen of the House of Shealtiel."

The very fact that the *Haggadah*<sup>4</sup> was sold to an English collector is an important element in our tracing of the Shealtiel Hens from Crete to western Europe.

## **Eureka! The Escutcheon**

With implicit faith in my father's dogma — that the Shealtiel coat of arms *did* survive — I sought its whereabouts in libraries, museums, and any other likely repository in Spain. To no avail. I did derive some solace from an earlier and very important find, in Barcelona, which at least confirmed the existence of a Shealtiel shield. I ran across this in a court document of 1302 that used the Latin phrase *Scutiferium* ['armigerous' or arms-bearing ] *Saltell*. (The case involved a Shealtiel ancestor, Astruch

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4 Catalogued: Or MS 1404 f6v.

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Saltell, son of Saltell Gracian) But, alas, the crest is not described. Then came my big break — in fact, two of them, in one week, with both pointing at the Historical Museum of Crete.

The first was a phone call from the producer and director of the Shealtiel documentary, Ilan Ziv. Preparing to meet, at my urging, with Nikos Stavroulakis, Ilan — ever the perfectionist — had read all Nikos' books. Well, there he'd found it, in cold print: in a book on Jewish synagogues in Greece, Nikos had written about the Shealtiel coat of arms. I, naturally, own all Nikos' books, but — by an extraordinarily unfortunate oversight — I had somehow never read the chapter on Crete.

Amazingly, on the very same day, while in Israel, I was reading an old article by a former teacher of mine, Professor Zvi Ankory of Hebrew University; and, again — in the course of a discussion of Jewish social life in 16th-century Crete — Dr. Ankory had written about a controversy surrounding the coat of arms of one Shealtiel Gracian.



In the mid-16th century, a member of the Shealtiel Hens of Crete stirred up an imbroglio that was to ripple throughout the Jewish world. Graziano<sup>5</sup> Shealtiel was a wealthy and influential member of the community and close to the royal court of Venice. The controversy erupted when Shealtiel requested that his family's coat of arms, along with a long list of his ancestors, and the family title, *Nasi*, be posted above the ark of the 'Tall Synagogue.' What was more, Graziano asked that one of those illustrious ancestors be styled *Gaon*.

The coat of arms — a magnificent white marble escutcheon — depicts a lion with the traditional attributes of the Lion of Judah: a human face, a crown on its dignified head, and a sword in its raised front paw. It was proudly labeled, in Hebrew, *Degel Machane* ['the coat of arms of'] Don *Shealtiel Hen*.

The lion perfectly matches that on the seal of the Kalonymos family of Narbonne, which — considering the connection between the families — is no surprise. *Don* is likewise understandable, as it was a Catalunyan title given to the family at least two hundred fifty years earlier.

Shealtiel — clearly not afflicted with an excess of humility — renovated the synagogue out of his own resources. He presumably felt that his request was not out of line, considering this

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<sup>5</sup> 'Graziano' is an Italian form of 'Gracian.'

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contribution, as well as the fact that members of his family had served as important rabbis whose rulings and scholarly works were quoted in *Responsa* of some of the greatest religious authorities, such as Jacob ha-Levi, Yoseph de Tarni, Jacob Loeb and Yosef Caro. However, Eliyahu Capsali, rabbi of the ‘Tall Synagogue’ and Crete’s most noted religious figure, refused, requesting that the foremost rabbis of the era — including the above Caro (author of the *Shulchan Aruch*), the prestigious David ben Solomon ibn Avi Zimra (known as the *Radbaz*), and de Tarni of Safed — rule on the request. The fact that those same rabbis had, in the past, written admiring reviews of the scholarly works of the Shealtiel Gracians played no part in their conclusions.

The rulings — in the form of *Responsa*, and therefore not, in theory, contaminated by personal prejudice — were unanimously supportive of Capsali’s position. Their rationale: the lion on the crest was shown in raised relief (that is, emerging into three dimensions), and therefore a statue (*Tzelem*). When the congregation ritually bowed to the ark, or so their theory went, the perception would be that they were bowing to a statue ... an act, smacking of idolatry, that was utterly prohibited by Jewish law. Subsequently a settlement was reached and the coat of arms mounted upon the outside wall, above the entrance to the synagogue. It is unclear whether the genealogy was part of it. The principal in this dispute was very likely Shealtiel Hen, son of Emanuel and brother of Yehudah, the same person whose silver finials, left with his wife, were sold for the purpose of ransoming the captives mentioned in the *Takanot*.



A few days later, while visiting the Saltiels of Istanbul, I called the Museum at Herakleion, Crete, told them of my family interest in the coat of arms and arranged to visit them a week later. From Turkey, Gila and I flew to Salonika, where we met Miles, who had flown in from London, Lukia and David Saltiel, and Telis Nachmias. We spent a few days planning the next Shealtiel world reunion and after a brief visit to Bulgaria to meet with the Saltiels of Sofia and to see Simone, who was doing volunteer work with the Jewish community there, flew to Crete.

Arriving at Herakleion in the late evening, I insisted we stay at the hotel (if you can call it that) across the street from the museum. I wanted, so I told Gila, to be close to our family crest. I also knew that the hotel was built on the foundations of my ancestors’ ‘Tall Synagogue.’ I didn’t sleep at all that night; I simply kept imagining how I would feel about finally realizing my dream. Gila didn’t sleep either, but for other reasons: the room was small and chilly and offered no extra blankets; the traffic

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noise never ceased. It seemed as if the entire population of Crete was riding motorcycles, all at once, in front of the hotel. I told Gila, “It’s worth it. In a few hours we will see the coat of arms.”

The night finally over, I jumped out of bed, half frozen, dressed, took Gila’s hand and ran across the street to the museum.

The doors were locked; pinned to them, a small handwritten note, in Greek. I had to drag the hotel clerk to the door; he read us an announcement that the museum was *closed for repairs, indefinitely*.

I called Nikos, who lives in Chania, two hours away. He was ill, but strong enough to tell me that this was merely a classic example of the Balkan mentality — the fact that a museum has agreed a visit does not mean that the management knows, or would care, that the building will be closed for repairs. To say that I was unhappy would be the understatement of the year. An hour later, we flew to Athens, then back home.

After weeks of slow recovery from the flu, Nikos agreed to help. And indeed, he drove to Heraklion and argued for hours with the staff, which insisted that a certain stone was in fact the coat of arms, an assertion Nikos doggedly rejected. No, he explained, the coat was described as bearing a Hebrew inscription. Finally he located it in a storage room. It was worth it, he assured me.

The Museum authorities refused Nikos’ request to take a picture of the white marble escutcheon and of course they wouldn’t dream of allowing anyone to fashion a replica.

Nikos was wonderful. He encouraged me to file a formal request with the Antiquity Authority for permission to make a replica. Time passed *sans* reply. The fact that Greek law plainly states that the Authority must answer a request within fourteen days clearly bothered no one.

I decided to step up the pressure. Yechezkel Barnea of Jerusalem, former Director General of the Foreign Office, former Ambassador to Greece and husband of a distant Shealtiel cousin, put me in touch with the current Israeli ambassador to Greece. The Ambassador agreed to help and wrote a letter to the authorities.

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In its response, the Museum claimed (a) they had never received any request; and (b) no such coat of arms existed! Realizing, in acute frustration, that I must do something radical, I wrote a press release and sent a draft to the ambassador and the Minister of Antiquity. The next day, while attending our Salonika reunion, I received a call from the Ambassador. My threat had had the intended effect. The Museum would allow pictures to be taken; what was more, they would allow me to take a replica.



Amazingly, one hundred years after the ‘Tall Synagogue’ controversy, another member of the family — the noted rabbi, scholar, and “collector of rare books” Abraham Joseph Salomó Graziano from Pesaro, Italy — commented directly on Caro’s ruling. Abraham was a great-grandson, on his mother’s side, of the famous Italian rabbi Azriel Trabot, son of Jechiel Trabot of Macerata (died 9 July 1569). When the Jewish congregation of Ascoli, in the province of Lamarca, Italy, was exiled in consequence of a Papal Bull dated 26 February 1569, the congregants took their shrine with them. The ark was a work of art: carved and gilded walnut, resting on two crouching lions of the same wood. The lions, mouths opened to roar, were realistically depicted.

It was Azriel, the last rabbi in Ascoli and the first in their new location — the welcoming Pesaro — who was entrusted with the ark. Azriel was revered in Italy, so pious a man that his rulings were sought after by all Italian rabbis. To Abraham, the Caro *Responsa* was not only an implicit criticism of his Cretan family but had the potential of reflecting negatively on his admired great-grandfather, Azriel. Hence his commentary, which did not question the validity of Caro’s ruling but distinguished the Cretan Graziani case from the Ascoli ark. The lions of “his” ark, he concluded, were licit, since they appeared at the bottom, not the top, and therefore would not unduly attract the attention and devotion of worshippers.

It is interesting to note that Elyahu (Elijah) Capsali, son of a former chief rabbi of Crete, kinsman to the former chief rabbi of the entire Ottoman Empire and noted scholar and historian in his own right, was a long-time rival of the famous Sephardic family. Himself a *Romaniot*, he openly wanted the title *Gaon* to be his alone.

The Shealtiel crest was mounted above the entrance of the ‘Tall Synagogue’ as long as it was in use. The arms were found in the synagogue’s ruins; after years of neglect in storage, they are now on proud display at the Herakleion Museum.



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### **In the Footsteps of the Gracian-Shealtiels of Crete**

As noted above, Crete passed from Venice to the Turks in 1669; many well-to-do Cretan Jews thereupon chose to remove to Venice or Livorno. The latter — known also as ‘Leghorn’ and ‘Liorna’ — was an independent principality, owned by the Medici, which distinguished itself in its attitude toward its Jewish subjects. As early as 1548, Cosimo I invited New Christians to settle in his domain, with a clearly implied promise of religious tolerance.

Some forty-five years later, on 10 June 1593, Ferdinand I, pleased with Livorno’s development as a major port — superseding the declining Pisa — issued another invitation to Jews, this time explicitly guaranteeing full religious freedom, full Tuscan citizenship and the right to own land. By the time the ‘Venetians’ fled Crete, conditions in Livorno were ripe for settlement by Jews. Within twenty years, the population of the Jewish community in Livorno exploded from a few hundred to three thousand. Among them were members of the Shealtiel Hen family. We have very little documentary evidence as to their exact whereabouts. The scattered records suggest a commercially affluent family but stripped of its past glory. For reasons unknown to us, this Shealtiel branch split and even their name changed — some spelled it ‘Saltiel,’ some ‘Chaltiel,’ while many more kept the name ‘Gracian’ in its Italian version, Graziani. And relocated yet again...

*Remarks by Moshe Shaltiel, 25 June 2009, Herakleion, Crete*