

A FEMALE RABBI IN FOURTEENTH CENTURY ZARAGOZA?

Given the current debate, particularly in the United States, over the ordination of women as rabbis, the publication of a curious letter concerning a female rabbi in the Aragonese city of Zaragoza seems appropriate. The letter, dated October 11, 1325, is preserved in the Archive of the Crown of Aragon¹, and was issued by the Infant Alfonso, heir to the throne, while he was himself in that city.

In some respects the letter is clear. It was issued at the request of «Çeti, Jewess, rabess of the female Jews of the major synagogue of Zaragoza»², who states that she has «worked in the office of the rabinatus, said office having been in her possession for twenty years or more». Now, she complains, a Jew is maliciously trying to have her evicted from that office, despite the fact that all the women who attend that synagogue, as well as the leaders of the community («adelantatis»), want her and no one else to exercise the function. The prince writes to the leaders of the *aljama* instructing them that, «if it is your desire and the desire of the said Jewish women that Çeti continue in said office, and that she can [exercise it] better than anyone else, you should not allow anyone to eject Çeti from the aforesaid, indeed you should maintain her in said office and defend her». A royal official, the «merino» of Zaragoza, is ordered to help them in this task when and if they should request it.

Unfortunately, the letter raises more questions than it answers. Most intriguing is the nature of the office which Çeti claimed to hold. To my knowledge, there is no other notice of a woman «in officio rabinatus». If the word «rabbi» occurs in the feminine, it

¹ Archive of the Crown of Aragon [henceforth ACA], Cartas Reales Jaime II, caja 133, #125. The letter does not bear trace of a seal and was not expedited or sent. No copy is found in the corresponding chancery register of the Infant Alfonso.

I would here like to thank Jaume Ripera, Asunción Blasco and Gemma Escribá.

² I have found no further trace of Çeti in the documentation for this period in the ACA, nor has Asunción Blasco Martínez found her in the documentation of the notarial archives of Zaragoza.

generally designates the wife of the rabbi ³, clearly not the case here. It is difficult to imagine how such a position could be challenged, and if Çeti's office depended on her status as wife of a rabbi, she would probably have mentioned such status. Further, the use of the words «officio» and «possessione» imply that the position carries with it either remuneration, prestige, or both, and this is further suggested by the fact that a Jewish male is working to eject her from the position ⁴.

That Çeti was a «rabbess» in her own right is not a very informative conclusion. The title «rabbi» in fourteenth century Zaragoza meant many things, some bearing little relation to what the title means today. The butcher, scribe, cantor, and schoolteacher could all be addressed as «rabbi» ⁵. But the document does contain some clues.

Çeti worked at the «sinagoge majoris», or «major synagogue», of Zaragoza. Her office affected only women, the very women who assert that she has fulfilled it well. Therefore, she must have worked in the part of the synagogue set aside for women, known as the

³ The word is rare. For a late thirteenth century Valencian example see *Obras de S. Pedro Pascual, mártir, obispo de Jaén y religioso de la Merced [1227-1300], en su lengua original [Valencià] con la traducción latina y algunas anotaciones por el P. Fr. Pedro Armengol Valenzuela* (Rome 1906-1907), cited in A. M.^a ALCOVER, *Diccionari Català-Valencià-Balear* (Palma de Mallorca 1930-1962), vol. 1, p. LVIII, «honrada rabina», *ibid.*, vol. 11, pág. 80.

⁴ I would not go so far as to suggest that the challenger wanted to occupy the office himself. He may simply have had another candidate in mind. On the frequent conflicts over this type of office in Zaragoza, see F. BAER, *Die Juden in Christlichen Spanien: Urkunden und Regesten* (Berlin 1929), vol. 1, «Aragonien und Navarra», p. 300, citing ACA, Chancery, reg. 1678, fols. 107r-112r, dated September 28, 1342: «Por razon, que los officios dela aljama de los judios de Saragoça eran apropiados ala dita aljama, assi que ellos metien lures rabis, assi delas sinagogas, como dela deguella, como lures scrivanos, albedin e sayones, aquellos que mas suficientes conoxian, e algunos assi judios como cristianos se infoaven a impetrar del senyor rey delos ditos officios, e aquellos havien a pletiar e a redemir, por sustener lures officios...».

⁵ See note 4 above, and F. BAER, *op. cit.*, pp. 246 (teacher of letters); 194 (butcher); 238 («rabi o maestro» of a confraternity in Huesca); 221 («capellanus sinagoge»). See also J. RÉGNÉ, *History of the Jews in Aragon*, Hispania Judaica, vol. 1, ed. Yom Tov Assis (Jerusalem 1978), entry #2733, for a scribe called rabbi. It is possible that, in the early fourteenth century at least, chancery usage approximated the meaning of the Jewish *rabinus* to that of the Christian *clericus*.

«casas de las mulleres de la... sinoga Mayor»⁶. The job was carried out in public, giving rise to the possibility of confrontation between her supporters and the opposing faction during its exercise, or the authority of royal officials would probably not have been invoked. With this in mind, my guess is that she served as *shammash*, a kind of salaried beadle or sexton, charged with the custody of the women's section of the major synagogue and perhaps the *mikveh*⁷.

It cannot be denied that much of the above is conjecture. The document remains a curiosity, a reminder of our ignorance of the daily life of medieval Jewish women, an ignorance which is only emphasized by the recent progress made in our understanding of Christian female piety. As to Çeti, unless an answer is found in the responsa literature or further archival evidence emerges, we will never know exactly what sort of rabbi she was, nor what she meant to the women who praised her services.

Archivo de la Corona de Aragon, Cartas Reales de Jaime II, caja 133, #125:

Infans Alfonsus, illustrissimi domini regis Aragonum primogenitus eiusque generalis procurator ac comes Urgelli, adelantatis aliame judeorum Cesarauguste, gratiam suam.

Ex parte Çeti, judee, rabisse judearum sinagoge majoris Cesarau-

⁶ A. BLASCO MARTÍNEZ, *La judería de Zaragoza en el siglo XIV* (Zaragoza 1988), p. 145, note 832. On p. 146, she equates the «casas de las mulleres» with the «sinoga de las mujeres» on the strength of an equivocal document which describes a piece of property bordering on what it calls the «sinoga de las mujeres de la sinoga mayor de la dita juderia» (note 840), a phrase which makes little sense and which is probably a scribal error for «casas de las mulleres de la dita sinoga Mayor», as it appears in note 832. There was indeed a separate «sinoga de las mujeres» in Zaragoza. See, for example, M. SERRANO Y SANZ, *Orígenes de la dominación española en América*. (Madrid 1918), p. X, note 12: «sobre la obra que ha de fazer el maestre en la sinoga de las mugeres», and A. BLASCO MARTÍNEZ, *op. cit.*, note 841, «rabbi de la sinoga de las mujeres». But apart from the equivocal designation above, which is not found elsewhere, there is little reason to believe that it formed part of the major synagogue. There was also a separate «sinoga de las mujeres» in Huesca, with its own rabbi, in 1340. See ACA, Cancillería, reg. 868 fols. 25r-26r, cited in F. BAER, *op. cit.*, pp. 289-290. Jaume Riera has informed me of a document from the Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Barcelona, dated 1379, which mentions a «sinogam vocatam de les dones» in the «Call Major» of Barcelona. This synagogue was situated next to the «balneis frigidis», probably the *mikveh*.

⁷ The existence of a *mikveh* is assumed, though no documentary or archaeological trace of one exists.

guste, fuit nobis humiliter supplicatum quod cum ipsa judea in officio rabinatus laboraverit et in possessione eiusdem fuerit per viginti annos et ultra, et quidam judeus liuore ductus nitatur ipsam eicere de possessione predicta, quamquam vos et omnes judee que ad dictam sinagogam veniunt, ut asseritur, ipsam judeam nec aliquam aliam personam velitis omnino in dicto officio remanere, dignaremur sibi super hiis de oportuno remedio providere. Quare ipsius Çeti supplicatione benigne admissa, vobis dicimus et mandamus quatenus, si de beneplacito vestri et dictarum judearum processerit, dictam Çeti esse in dicto officio et [po]tiri eodem potius quam aliquem alium, ipsam Çeti non permittatis per quemquam eici a possessione predicta, immo ipsam manuteneatis in ipso officio ac etiam deffendatis. Mandantes per presentes merino Cesarauguste vel eius locumtenenti quod super hiis prestat vobis auxilium et favorem si et quando inde fuerit requisitus.

Data Cesarauguste, quinto idus oc[to]bris, anno Domini millesimo CCC° XX° quinto. Sigilletur.

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