

OUR SERIES ON LEADERS WHO HAVE SHAPED ZIONISM
CONTINUES WITH SOME OF ZIONISM'S EARLIEST INFLUENCERS

Rabbi Levi Ibn Chaviv

Defender of Yerushalayim

Born in Spain in 1483, Rabbi Levi Ibn Chaviv (also known as the Maharal Chaviv or by his acronym, the Maharlbach) was the son of Rabbi Ya'akov Ibn Chaviv, author of the aggadic commentary *Ein Ya'akov*.

From the age of nine, Rabbi Levi led a rather nomadic life. His family was expelled from Spain in 1492 and they fled to Portugal, from where they were expelled once more in 1498. They then moved to Saloniki, where Rabbi Levi studied under his father's auspices and learned to become a *sofer stam*. It was there that Rabbi Ya'akov passed away and Rabbi Levi completed his father's unfinished manuscript of the *Ein Ya'akov*.

In 1513, Rabbi Levi moved to Israel for a short period. Unable to earn a living, he returned to Saloniki, then moved to Damascus, and Aleppo, all the while determined to return to the Holy Land.

In 1525, Rabbi Levi moved to Tzfat, where he spent a short amount of time before finally settling in Yerushalayim, where it didn't take long before he was appointed chief rabbi of the city. He had a burning passion for Yerushalayim and spent his life building and defending the holy city.

After the Spanish expulsion, many Jews came directly or indirectly to settle in

Israel. Most of them settled in Tzfat, away from the Muslim and Christian threat in Yerushalayim. The Jews of Yerushalayim were few and impoverished, while Tzfat was flourishing spiritually and financially in the height of its "Golden Era." Although he could have stayed in Tzfat, a breeding ground for the greatest rabbis and leaders of the time, Rabbi Levi chose to move to Yerushalayim, despite the difficult conditions, decrying the abandonment of the Holy City.

He wrote at length encouraging Jews to live there and criticizing the Jews of Tzfat for forgetting the holy city. When a plague broke out in Yerushalayim, spreading quickly because of cramped conditions, Rabbi Levi remained in the city while many families fled.

One of his most famous rulings is his opposition to renewing *semicha*, halachic rabbinic ordination. According to the Rambam, if all of the rabbis and leaders of Israel agree to it, *semicha* as was performed in the times of the *Mikdash* can be renewed. In 1538, when the rabbis of Tzfat got together to renew the *semicha*, Rabbi Levi was not consulted. Outraged they could consider such a thing without taking counsel with the Rabbi of Yerushalayim, Rabbi Levi wrote to them to declare his objection, claiming *semicha* needed to come first

and foremost from Yerushalayim. The project was halted.

Rabbi Levi also wrote extensively on the rejuvenated *Mitzvot HaThuyot BaAretz*, *mitzvot* which were not kept in exile but were suddenly relevant in Israel. His halachic responsa were compiled into the Maharlbach Responsa, a fundamental source in *Mitzvot HaThuyot BaAretz*.

Another famous responsa of his addresses the *halachot* of *Purim Meshulash*, a rare occurrence when Shushan Purim falls out on Shabbat (like this year). Such a Purim occurred when Rabbi Levi served as Chief Rabbi of Yerushalayim. At the time, the Jews didn't know what to do. Having returned from exile, they had no tradition regarding when the *mitzvot* of Purim should be performed in such a circumstance. Rabbi Levi taught them the answers.

He also wrote a commentary on the Rambam's laws of *Kiddush HaChodesh*.

Rabbi Levi Ibn Chaviv passed away in Yerushalayim in 1545. After his passing, the Jewish community in Yerushalayim, which he had worked so hard to cultivate, dwindled, and many moved away. Nevertheless, his legacy as a defender of Yerushalayim as the center of Torah and Jewish life, and his *mesirut* toward the holy city, remains. ■