

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

Rabbi Yitzchak HaKohen ben Moshe (Ishtori) HaParchi

Rabbi Yitzchak HaKohen ben Moshe HaParchi was born in the early 1200s to a line of distinguished Rabbis and Sages. His birthplace is unknown – some say he was born in Provence, France, others say in Florenzia, Spain. (Hence his surname – Florenzia comes from the root for “flower” in Spanish, corresponding to the Hebrew *perach*), and still others claim that Florence, Italy, was his birthplace.

More commonly known by his pen name, Ishtori, he was a scholar, physician, geographer, researcher, translator and traveller, and possessed an incredible memory as well as being well versed in Latin and Arabic works of philosophy and astronomy. He studied under the renowned Sages Rabbi Ya’akov Ibn Tibbon and Rabbeinu Asher ben Yechiel (the Rosh).

In 1306, when the Jews were expelled from France, Rabbi Ishtori decided to move with his family to Israel, stopping in Cairo along the way. Upon arriving in Israel, one of the first things he did was dedicate himself to studying the laws and boundaries of *Har HaBayit*, to understand how close he could go to the place of the *Beit HaMikdash* while in a state of *tumah*.

Rabbi HaParchi spent seven long years touring the Land. Torah scholars before

him had toiled to clarify the *halachic* borders of Israel and identify its historical sites, but the vast majority of them had never even set foot in the Holy Land. They had only the text itself to rely on. Rabbi HaParchi set out to understand the Land of Israel through intimate and direct contact. Even Bin-yamin of Tudela, who had travelled to Israel and recorded his findings before Rabbi Ishtori, had only travelled on the standard path through Israel, relying on what others told him about the identity of various locations. Rabbi HaParchi wanted to see every inch of Israel for himself. When determining the identity of a certain location, he took into account the topography, geography and archeology, and compared it with descriptions of the Tanach and rabbinic texts.

During his tours and travels, HaParchi felt it was his obligation to write a book recording his findings. He wrote the first Hebrew book on the geography of Israel, the *Kaftor VaFerach* (the terms used to describe the *menorah* in Shemot 37:17), in 1322. It was later published in Venice in 1549. He published the book under the pseudonym Ishtori HaParchi; some say Ishtori may be a combination of the Hebrew words *ish tori*, touring man.

In his book, Rabbi Ishtori described the flora and fauna of Israel and recorded

the customs of its society (such the traditions of the Jews of Israel and their *halachic* weights and measures). He also discussed the *mitzvot hateluyot baAretz* and the borders of Israel, calculated the *shemittah* and *yovel* and listed 180 ancient towns and sites of the Tanach he had identified on his trips. His work has become an invaluable source of knowledge and information for modern scholarship and research, and is testimony to the depth of knowledge in Mishna, Tosefta, Talmud and Midrash he had absorbed in his younger years.

Whenever Rabbi Ishtori would arrive at a city or town in Israel, he would rejoice. He loved every inch of the Land, as is clear from his writings. He wrote about his hope that the settlement would flourish and grow, and that he saw the suffering of French Jews as a sign of the coming of the Redemption.

After he finished writing his book, Rabbi Ishtori took it to a Yerushalmi Rabbi to receive an approbation. He then settled in Beit Shean, where he worked as a physician until his passing in 1355.

Though he lived well before the modern Zionist movement, Rabbi Ishtori was a Zionist in the true sense of the word; his legacy of concrete love of the Land has left a lasting impact on Jewish history ■