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“The city was named after an Herb called Mesas in Ancient Spanish”: Rabbi Yosef Mesas’ Testimony concerning his Surname

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RABBI YOSEF MESAS was born in the city of Meknes, Morocco, in 1892. In his youth he studied at the Etz Haim Yeshiva under Rabbi Haim Birdugo, and in time acquired an extensive religious education and was ordained as a rabbinical judge. In 1924 he was elected Chief Rabbi of the city of Tlemcen (تلمسان) in Algeria, where he remained for 17 years (Schwarzfuchs, 2005). In 1964 he immigrated to Israel and settled in the city of Haifa. From 1968 until his death he served as Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Haifa (Mor-Yosef, 2007). Rabbi Mesas left behind a rich literary legacy, including the following books: *Responsa Mayim Haim* in two parts, *Otzar Michtavim*, *Ner Mitzva*, *Zevach Toda*, *Vayizkor Yosef*, *Geresh Yerachim*, a Passover Haggadah (with drawings by Rabbi Yosef Mesas), etc. (Biton, 2002). In his halakhic rulings, Rabbi Mesas reveals his venerable personality and wide horizons, and proves sensitive to modern transitions (Bar Asher, 1999: 367-82; Bar Asher, 2005; Zohar, 2000; Zohar, 2002; Rosenak, 2008).

The first part of his book *Mayim Haim*, on the laws of Orach Haim, was first printed in 1934 in the city of Fez, Morocco. In the preface, Rabbi Yosef recorded the speculated historical origins of the name Mesas and presented the genealogy of the Mesas Family. The family history is based on a pamphlet titled *Tiferet Banim Avotam* (“Sons glory in their fathers”) written earlier by Rabbi Yosef. The pamphlet was published in 1996 as an appendix to the book *Nishmat Haim* by Rabbi Haim Mesas (Mesas, 1996).

In the current article I would like to focus on the first issue discussed by Rabbi Yosef Mesas, i.e., his hypothesis regarding the family’s origins prior to the Spanish expulsion. This study may enrich the research of names by portraying a unique process, whereby Rabbis who are interested in the origins of their surname find time to perform extensive and thorough investigations. As shall be seen below, the writer explores the roots of his family’s surname in Spain, in a multidisciplinary process. This includes a discussion of historical, onomastic, and botanical aspects of the name Mesas. Rabbi Mesas’ research of his family name clearly attests to his open and modern rabbinical personality.

The testimony of Rabbi Mesas: The circumstances that led him to investigate his family history

Rabbi Mesas mentions no explicit evidence indicating that his family had lived in Spain before the expulsion. From the introduction we receive the impression that his claim of Spanish roots is a conjecture. Rabbi Mesas relates that his attempts to identify the origins of the family’s name and history constitute a lifelong quest. He does not reveal the motive for his search for the family history, but his words insinuate that it is not inquisitiveness per se rather he was interested in uncovering an affiliation with those expelled from Spain, with their decisive influence on residents of the city of Meknes and other communities, such as Fez and Marrakesh (Levy, 1985; Chetrit, 2011). There seem to be several possible reasons for his search for roots among this group:

A. Many of the Jews of Meknes had a European appearance. Rabbi Yosef himself had a fair complexion, possibly leading him to believe that he was a descendant of those expelled.

B. In general, the Jews of Meknes (similar to the Jews of Fez and Tangiers) had a Spanish

orientation, i.e., they felt part of the Spanish heritage that permeated Morocco after the expulsion. For example, linguistically, some words in the Jewish-Arabic dialect used by Moroccan Jews came from the Spanish. A good example of the linguistic effect of Spanish Jews is Ḥakitia, a Judeo-Spanish dialect spoken mainly in North Morocco, which has as its base 15th century Castilian Spanish, together with words from other linguistic sources (Benoliel, 1926-8; Chetrit, 1985; Bendayan de Bendelac, 1995).

In regard to halakic laws and Jewish customs, Moroccan Jews retained Spanish customs as opposed to local customs and even led to the imposition of Spanish customs on local residents, for example by embracing Spanish ordinances following the Castilian custom (Bar-Asher, 1990: 1-41; Amar, 1987: 11-30). Moroccan Jews saw themselves as part of the tradition of Spanish Jewish legal decisions. From the 16th century Rabbi Yosef Karo, author of the *Shulchan Aruch*, became a decisive legal authority in Moroccan Jewish law. Notably, the local religious leader, Rabbi Shmuel Ibn Danan of Fez, was the first to embrace the legal decisions of Rabbi Karo, and according to tradition was one of the 200 Rabbis who certified R. Yosef Karo (Abitbol, 1993:24).

C. The wish to be affiliated with Spanish exiled Jews may also have to do with the fact that they had earned themselves a prominent place in the historical memory of Moroccan Jews as a powerful social elite, as manifested in their large numbers, the high intellectual standards of their leaders, their economic supremacy (commerce and mediation between Muslims and Christians), and their political and spiritual prestige, factors that facilitated the dominance of Jews expelled from Spain over the Jewish population as a whole (Toledano, 1911: 69-71; Bentov, 1986; Hirschberg, 1965: 245-47; Corcos, 1966; Gerber, 1980: 40-50, 113-20).

The search for family roots: Method and data analysis

In fact, Rabbi Yosef admits that the most ancient source to mention the name Mesas postdates the Spanish expulsion, which took place in 1492, by about one hundred years. This is evident in the signature of a Tunisian sage named Yehuda Ben Itzhak Mesas that appears on a consent to the homiletic book *Shesh Knafayim*, written by Rabbi A. Hacohen and published in the year 1590.

Rabbi Mesas reported difficulties with his inquiries into the source of the family name and its ancestry, in the absence of any historical information or established oral traditions. Although he was no historian and had no organized method of historical investigation, in my opinion Rabbi Yosef managed to construct a reasonable genealogical-investigative model using the means at his disposal. Rabbi Mesas utilized a variety of sources to explore his family history:

1. A search for oral traditions passed down through the generations.
2. Testimonies encountered randomly and sought intentionally from both Jews and non-Jews.
3. Information received by consulting with experts and intellectuals – pharmacists, book collectors, scholars, and newspaper readers, for example information from the Jewish-Polish newspaper – *ha-Be'er* and newspapers from France.
4. The Tlemcen community registry. Rabbi Mesas obtained the Jewish community registry of the city of Tlemcen. This document exists only in manuscript form, but has not yet been published. As stated by Rabbi Prof. Amar, few community registries from Maghreb countries were preserved, most from the 18th century and subsequently. The registries are an important source for exploring the history and members of the community and they included decisions reached at management meetings and popular gatherings held at major synagogues and also, among other things, the names of community members (Amar, 1997: 13).
5. Data recorded in marriage registries and dowry registries - In various communities it was customary to record the obligations of the groom towards the bride as written in the “ketubah” (Jewish prenuptial agreement) as well as details of the dowry in case the “ketubah” was lost. These

notations include data on the names of the bride and groom, their families, and other practical information (Attal & Avivi, 1991: 13-20).

6. Family trees of grooms and brides as recorded in “ketubahs”. In some Moroccan communities it was customary to record the family tree of the groom or bride, particularly in prominent families (Amar, 2003: 149-52).

7. Deeds of sale.

8. Headstones (On headstones as a historical source see: Emmanuel, 1963, I: 11-26).

9. Signatures and names mentioned in ancient books and manuscripts.

Side by side with his presentation and discussion of the sources, Rabbi Mesas also reveals the methodological difficulties that he encountered in his research, for example, the possibility that the name “Mesas” may appear in other forms such as “Mashish”, and whether these are variants of the same name. Some of the sources proved problematic as well (lacking dates, misphrasing, etc.).

Source of the name Mesas (مساس) – Sources and testimonies gathered by Rabbi Mesas

It is a well-known fact that many Jewish Spanish family names originate from the cities from which the families were expelled, such as Seville, Toledano, Cordoba, Marciano, and others (Slouschz, 1927: 234-35). Based on the testimonies he collected from many people, Rabbi Mesas raises the possibility that his family name originates from the ancient city of Mesas near Madrid (Mesas, 1934: 14). The city was named for the locally abundant medicinal herb “Mesas”. Many residents of the city, both Jews and non-Jews, embraced the name of the city and of the herb as their family name. He writes:

And when he asked for my name and my family [the commissar of the city Wagda] and I told him, he said that is an ancient Spanish family, and at the end I asked him if he could provide me with an explanation of the name and he answered: Its simple. The name comes from a large ancient city named Mesas near Madrid, capital of the Spanish kingdom. And the city was named after an herb called Mesas in ancient Spanish, which grew there in profusion and served for medicinal purposes and is abundant to this very day, and families from this city, both Christians and Jews, named themselves for their homeland as a token of their love. [...] I have also heard from a few friends that the name Mesas is common among Christian families, the French, and the Spanish (Mesas, 1934: 14).

This was the basis for two hypotheses offered by Rabbi Mesas. The first is that Mesas is the Arabic name of an herb, which was used by the Spanish in the Muslim period (711-1492 AD). In Morocco the herb was called “Mesasa” and it was commonly used in Meknes for medicinal purposes. The second hypothesis is that Mesas was originally the Spanish name of a plant. The name was brought to Morocco by Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 and some of them were named for it. These hypotheses will be further discussed below.

According to R. Joseph Mesas, the name Mesas is common among Christian families, the French, and the Spanish. He did not mention the Muslims, but in fact the name also exists among this religious group (Taïeb, 2004: 117 no. 880).

Research hypotheses regarding the origins of the name Mesas

Before turning to the suggestions offered by Rabbi Mesas, we shall refute hypotheses proposed in the research on the origins of the name Mesas. Abraham Itzchak Laredo (1978: 844-45) suggested four possibilities in his book on the names of Moroccan Jews:

A. The name of a plant, as evidenced by Rabbi Mesas.

- B. The name of a region or city in Spain or Portugal (see below).
- C. Originating from an Arabic term meaning barber.
- D. Originating from the term Mesa, which means table.

Joseph Toledano (1983: 251-54) suggested that the name originates from the Arab term “mosus”, which means “tasteless” or “lacking salt”, while David Corcos (1972: 225) as well as Jacques Taïeb (2004: 117 no. 880), claimed that this is a given name used by Moroccan Jews, originating from an Arab source (“muchchâch”) meaning philanthropist. This name is not common among Jews but exists among the Arab population.

These interpretations were provided factually, without clarifying their underlying rationale. For example, the term “lacking salt” is unclear. In addition, when mentioning the explanation cited by Rabbi Mesas, identifying the name as a plant, the plant is not specified and no scientific criteria are presented.

In the next few lines I would like to focus on the hypothesis offered by Rabbi Mesas. In order to explicate the circumstances and underpinnings of his speculation we must clarify two main points: A. Is there indeed an ancient Spanish city named Mesas, and if so what is its current location; B. What is the “Mesasa” plant, and is there any historical basis to the claim that it was brought to Morocco following the Spanish expulsion.

Identifying the city of Mesas and its Jewish community

Several towns called Mesas currently exist:

A. In Spain – “Mesas de Ibor”, in the Cáceres region in western Spain. Laredo suggested that the name may refer to La Masas in the province of Cuenca ou d’Oviedo in northern Spain (Laredo, 1978: 844-45). There is another city in central Spain named Cuenca, but there is no doubt that Laredo is referring to the city in Oviedo.

B. In western Portugal – in the vicinity of Vagos in the Aveiro region.

C. In the United States. But this is of course irrelevant to our discussion.

Based on the fact that Jews lived in Cáceres before the expulsion (Rubio & Antonio, 2005), we can assume that the most logical location of the family’s origins would be “Mesas de Ibor” in Spain. Sources and documentation of the Jews of Cáceres from the 1492 expulsion were published by Haim Beinart in his book “The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain” (Beinart, 1994: 247, 278-79, 379-80). We presume that the name Mesas originated from the topographical character of the region. One meaning of the Spanish term “mesa” is tableland or plateau. The word “mesas” is the plural form, meaning tablelands or plateaus. Thus, “Mesas de Ibor” means the “Plateaus of Ibor”, a river that flows near the city. If so, the name Mesas does not indicate an ancient city, rather probably the name of a region. According to the testimonies collected by Rabbi Mesas the city of Mesas is close to Madrid, however, in reality the Cáceres region is about 200 km. west of Madrid, and thus not close. We assume that Rabbi Mesas’ informants were interested in stressing its proximity to the major and most prominent city in the area. In contrast, Oviedo in northern Spain is much further from Madrid, and thus Laredo’s suggestion seems less relevant.

Identification of the herb “Mesasa” and possible relocation of the name from Spain following the expulsion

Regarding the conjecture whereby the name Mesas originates from the “Mesasa” plant. The names “(al)-masasa” (المصاصة), “Massasah” or “Mesaisa” in Moroccan Arabic; in the Darija dialect, الدارجة is the term used for *Plantago major*, called in English Great Plantain or Common Plantain (Henceforth: “Plantago”) (Boulos , 1983:146). The *Plantago* genus includes about 260 annual and biennial species (see Picture 1). The different species have various names in Arabic jargons. For example, Moroccan Jews call the psyllium (*Plantago ovata* Forsk.) – “merwah” (مرواح), and the Jews of Tunis and Algeria call it “anim” (الانيم) (Krispil, 1987: 570).



Picture 1: *Plantago major*. From: Woodville, W., *Medical Botany*, vol. 1: t. 14 (1790); accessed via http://www.plantillustrations.org/species.php?id_species=804751

As stated by Rabbi Mesas, the different *Plantago* species have been considered popular and significant medical plants since ancient times. In traditional medicine they are used to treat a variety of illnesses, for example stomach and bowel ailments (Hooper, 1937: 154-155; Lev, 2002: 176-177; Boukhira, Mansouri & Bousta, 2013:666).

The *Plantago* genus has a cosmopolitan distribution. According to scientific botanical literature, some species of *Plantago* are common in Spain and Morocco, for example *Plantago serraria*. According to research by Enrico Rico Hernández, a Spanish botanist from the University of Salamanca, in 1981, this species grows in the Cáceres region, and as stated - in Morocco as well (Hernández, 1982; Maire, 1952). The modern-day Spanish term for *Plantago* is “Llantén”, and we found no association with the term “mesas” in modern or ancient Spanish.

Proof that the term “Mesasa” was used to designate *Plantago* in Darija in medieval times is provided by R. Moshe ben Maimon (Maimonides, Hebrew acronym: RaMBaM), the renowned Jewish theologian and physician (on his name and biography see: Langermann, 2007). In the 12th century he mentions terms for *Plantago* species in his medical glossary “Lexicography of Drugs” (Maimonides, 1969), one of the most thorough glossaries of medieval medical literature. This lexicon describes medicaments common throughout the Orient – plants, animals, and minerals – their various designations in different jargons and dialects, as well as their basic characteristics. The compilation aimed to identify different terms used for medications throughout the Muslim world, from India to the Spanish coast (Serri, 2007: 113-119).

In entry no. 213 he brings various names derived from the plant's morphology, as well as its names in Spanish and Moroccan, and he writes: "Lasan al-hamal is "the dog's tongue" or "the mouse's tail", also termed "cold and peace", and in Spanish its name is blanten, called al-masasa (المصاصة) by the Maghreb people" (Maimonides, 1969: 66, no. 213). Thus, Rabbi Mesas' second hypothesis, that "Mesasa" is a Spanish name commonly assumed in Morocco after the plant was brought to Morocco by Spanish exiles, lacks foundation, as the term "Mesasa" had been in use in Morocco for several centuries prior to the expulsion.

Summary and Conclusions

The speculations surrounding the origins of Rabbi Mesas' family and family name are vague and it is difficult to determine their exact source. Following lengthy research, Rabbi Mesas arrived at two possibilities – the name originates either with a local Moroccan plant or a plant brought from Spain following the expulsion. Rabbi Mesas does not reach a final decision, aware of having no clear and sufficient proof for either suggestion.

Our analysis suggests several explanations for the name Mesas:

- A. Assuming that the family was named Mesas from before the Spanish expulsion, it originates from the name of the city "Mesas de Ibor".
- B. The family name evolved in Morocco following the family's association with the Plantago plant called "Mesasa" in Darija (which they used for cures or sold), similar to other families that acquired names of this type, such as Zafrani, named after the saffron plant, an important spice and curative (*Crocus sativus*, زَعْفَرَان) (Laredo, 1978: 138; Guggenheimer & Guggenheimer, 1992: 853).
- C. The family was named Mesas before the Spanish expulsion, after "Mesas de Ibor", but later on in Morocco the surname became associated with the local "Mesasa" plant, thus connecting the Mesas region in Spain to the Plantago growing there.

Rabbi Mesas handles this genealogical issue using a variety of sources, undoubtedly testimony to his intellectual skills and wide horizons, as this investigation required the gathering of testimonies, data, and relevant details from various fields.

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