

*During the early days of the Ottoman Empire, two wealthy Anusim fleeing from the Spanish Inquisition — Dona Gracia and her nephew Don Yosef Nasi — were given permission to rebuild the city of Tiveria and create an independent Jewish city-state. What remains today of that early re-blossoming of Jewish life in Eretz Yisrael? **Mishpacha** went to Tiveria to find out*



Blossoms in the Rubble:

In Search of Dona Gracia's Tiveria

Text and photos by Libi Astaire

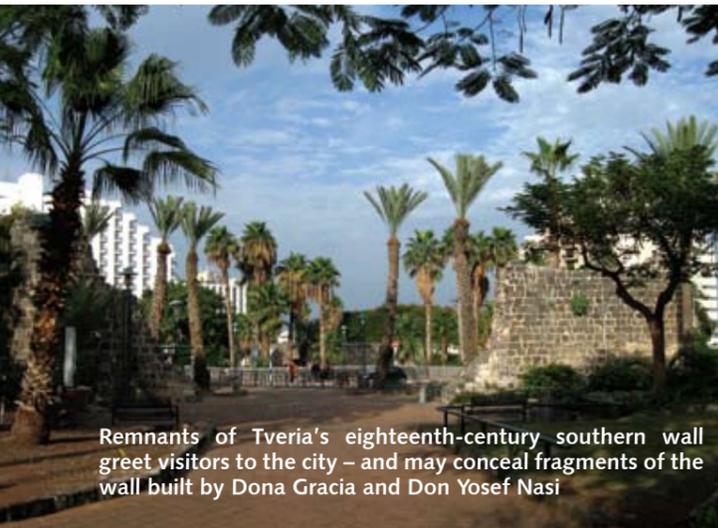
At the end of time, the Gemara tells us in *Rosh HaShanah* 31b, the Redemption of the Jewish People will begin not in Jerusalem or Tzfas, but in the city of Tiveria. And so it isn't difficult to imagine the excitement that must have spread throughout the Jewish world some 450 years ago, when an amazing thing happened: Sultan Suleiman, the mighty ruler of the Ottoman Empire, gave permission to a wealthy Jewish woman named Dona Gracia to buy Tiveria, rebuild it, and establish there a quasi-autonomous Jewish state.

Who was Dona Gracia, and why would a Muslim ruler grant her permission to establish a Jewish state within his empire? What happened to this early attempt to create

a flourishing Jewish community in Tiveria? And several earthquakes and one flood later, is there anything left of Dona Gracia's Tiveria to see?

As is often the case with Jewish history, it depends on who you ask.

A Life on the Run The weatherman promised that it would be sunny. But after my Egged bus pulled out of Afula's central bus station and began its ascent to Tiveria, the dark clouds that had been chasing us ever since we left Jerusalem finally caught us. As big drops of rain splattered against the windshield, I reminded myself that rain is a blessing — even if it made my photographs come out dark and gloomy. Because gloomy or not, I was still lucky. I was in Eretz Yisrael. In another half hour I would reach my



Remnants of Tveria's eighteenth-century southern wall greet visitors to the city – and may conceal fragments of the wall built by Dona Gracia and Don Yosef Nasi

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destination, the city of Tiveria. The same could not be said for two of the central characters in this story: Dona Gracia and her nephew Don Yosef.

But that’s the end of the story. To start at the beginning, we must turn around and go not to the Kinneret, but across the Mediterranean Sea to Spain. We must also go back in time to the year 1492, the year Spain’s Jews were expelled from the country where they had lived and prospered for almost one thousand years.

While many of these Jews fled eastward — to countries in Europe or lands within the Ottoman Empire — some families tried to rebuild their lives in nearby Portugal. One of them was the Nasi family, who had been one of Spanish Jewry’s most illustrious families. When the Portuguese king decreed that all Jews living in his land had to convert — this time exile was not an option — the Nasi family members, like many others, were forced to become Anusim. On the outside, they pretended to be Christians. But within the privacy of their homes, and in the even-more private recesses of their hearts, they remained loyal to their Jewish faith.

In the year 1510 a daughter was born to the Nasim, whom they named Beatrice. But that was for the outside. Her real name was Gracia, which was Spanish for Chana. When she grew up, Gracia married another secret Jew, Francesco Mendez, who came from a family of wealthy bankers.

Sadly, just six years after they were married, Francesco passed away. King John III of Portugal, sensing an opportunity to get his hands on the Mendez fortune, demanded that the

young widow hand over her two-year-old daughter, Reyna, and have the child raised at court — an “honor” that came with a hefty price tag. Dona Gracia took her daughter, along with a few other family members who were dependent on her — including the orphaned son of her deceased brother, who later became known as Don Yosef Nasi — and fled. Her destination was Antwerp, where her husband’s brother had already established a branch office of the family bank, as well as a successful business trading in spices, which was one of the most lucrative businesses of the time. But tragedy struck once again when her brother-in-law also passed away.

By now, her nephew had grown up, and so Dona Gracia and Don Yosef jointly took over the management of the Mendez financial empire. Hashem blessed their efforts, and they became two of the wealthiest people in Europe. However, it is not their great wealth that won them an esteemed place in the annals of Jewish history. Rather, it is what they did with that wealth to help their unfortunate brethren. For instance, they employed hundreds of secret agents who ran an “underground railroad” system that transported to safe havens Anusim fleeing from the Spanish Inquisition. They also used their banking empire to help Anusim either transfer their assets to more hospitable countries, or to provide financial assistance to those who had been forced to flee with only the clothes on their backs.

Yet despite their great wealth, they were also the victims of evil plots that were devised by jealous and greedy rulers. Charles V of Spain and his sister Queen Marie, regent of the Netherlands, for instance, decided to make a “*shidduch*” for Reyna with an elderly Spanish nobleman of dubious character. For their efforts, the rulers expected the Spaniard to pay them a hefty “*shadchamus*” fee, which would come from the bride’s dowry money. Dona Gracia, of course, looked upon the proposed match with horror. When Queen Marie demanded that the stubborn businesswoman give her consent to the match, Dona Gracia’s reply was brief and to the point: she would rather see her daughter dead.

It was a brave answer, but it meant that Dona Gracia and her family once again had to flee, this time to Venice. A few years after they arrived, Dona Gracia was arrested for “Judaizing,” and a freeze was put on her assets.

The rest of the family managed to flee to Ferrara. Don Yosef used his contacts to request help from Sultan Suleiman, the powerful ruler of the Ottoman Empire. The sultan saw the value of having Dona Gracia and Don Yosef move their financial empire to Turkey, and so he threatened Venice with military action if she wasn’t released. The Venetians let her go.

The family moved to Istanbul (formerly Constantinople), the magnificent capital of the Ottoman Empire, in the year 1553 — and their fifteen-year flight from the Spanish Inquisition finally came to an end. For the first time in their lives, they were able to live openly as Jews and go by their Jewish names — and Reyna was finally safely married to a Jewish man, her cousin Don Yosef.

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But no sooner had one adventure-filled chapter in their story ended than an even more exciting one began.

The Señora, the Don, and the Holy Land The sultan encouraged Dona Gracia and Don Yosef to carry on with their vast trading empire, and their wealth continued to increase. But for Dona Gracia, her greatest satisfaction still came from helping her fellow Jews, which she could now do openly. From her magnificent palace located on the shores of the Bosphorus, she supported yeshivos, hospitals, and other institutions. She also sponsored the printing and publication of thousands of manuscripts. And it is said that every day, eighty poor people dined at her table. Her generosity was so legendary that she became known by the honorary title “La Señora” — The Lady.

Yet Dona Gracia had one dream that still remained unfilled: she longed to end her days in Eretz Yisrael. That was not such an impossible dream, since the Holy Land had come under Ottoman rule in the year 1516. Former Anusim were settling in Jerusalem, Tzfas, and elsewhere, many of them through her assistance. So why shouldn’t she follow their example?

For reasons that remain unknown, she decided to settle in Tiveria, which, at the time, was in ruins. Tiveria’s beginnings were humble — it was founded by a son of King Herod in the year 20 CE — but after the Bar Kochba Revolt and the expulsion of the Jews from Jerusalem, Tiveria became the Sanhedrin’s final location. By the end of the second century, Tiveria had become an important center of Jewish learning, and it’s believed that both the Mishnah and the Talmud Yerushalmi were compiled there. The city once again experienced a decline after the tenth century, and by the beginning of the twelfth century only about fifty Jewish families called it home. A traveler who visited the place in 1522 wrote: “Tiveria was formerly a great city . . . but now it is desolate and waste, heaps of black stones, as though it had burned by fire.”

All that began to change in the year 1558, when Dona Gracia made a deal with the sultan to lease the city for a yearly fee of 1,000 ducats. Her dream was to establish a community of Torah scholars and to return the city to its former glory. However, she didn’t act alone. As always, she consulted with her nephew Don Yosef.

Don Yosef had his own ideas about what to do with the city. For years his dream had been to create an independent, economically viable safe haven for any Jew who needed a place of refuge. When a war broke out between the sultan’s two sons — and Don Yosef supported the victorious elder son, Prince Selim — Don Yosef finally got his chance to put his dream into action. Prince Selim convinced his father to grant Don Yosef ruling authority over Tiveria and seven neighboring villages. Although the residents of the territory would have to pay taxes to the sultan, Eretz Yisrael would now have something that it hadn’t had for some 1,500 years — a quasi-independent Jewish city-state ruled by a Jewish leader.

The Building Begins Don Yosef never visited his new “empire.” In Turkish politics, absence did not make the heart grow fonder. It only gave your enemies an opportunity to plot to destroy you. Don Yosef therefore entrusted the rebuilding of Tiveria to a trusted friend,



Torah giants such as Rabbi Akiva and the Ramchal are buried in Tveria, but the final resting place of Dona Gracia is a mystery

Yosef ben Adereth, who was a descendant of the illustrious Catalan rabbi known as the Rashba, Rav Shlomo ben Adereth.

The first task was to rebuild the city's walls, to protect the future residents from the marauding Arabs who roamed freely throughout the countryside. Ben Adereth hired a crew of Arab workers and at first the work went smoothly. But when an unhappy Arab sheikh started a rumor that the new Jewish settlement would spell the end of Islam, the workers revolted and fled.

European leaders also voiced their complaints. However, by this time Don Yosef had become one of the sultan's most skilled and indispensable diplomats. The sultan therefore ignored the Europeans, threatened the Arabs, and the work continued. The walls were rebuilt, and houses and a synagogue were constructed. Don Yosef, having decided that silk manufacturing would be the community's principle means of support, shipped mulberry trees to the Holy Land. Only one thing was lacking — Jews.

Don Yosef sent out a call, which was soon answered. By the 1560s it wasn't just the Anusim who needed a place of refuge. A spirit of religious intolerance had swept across the Italian peninsula, and therefore many Italian Jews were eager to join the new project. However, most of them never made it to the Holy Land. In some cases, their cruel rulers refused to let them leave. Others succeeded in fleeing, only to fall into the hands of Barbary pirates or the ransoming Knights of Malta.

However, some Jews did reach Tiveria, including some seventy important scholars, and for a few short years the fledgling community rivaled the nearby city of Tzfas. But the Torah community suffered a severe blow in the year 1569, when Dona Gracia passed away.

Despite her great fame during her lifetime, the events surrounding Dona Gracia's death are shrouded in mystery. Although she supposedly made plans to travel to Eretz Yisrael in the year 1565, it's not known if she ever reached its shores. It's also not known where she is buried.

All that is certain is that she was greatly mourned by the common people and the great *rabbanim* alike.

After the death of his aunt, it seems that Don Yosef gradually lost interest in the community he had helped to found in Tiveria. Although he continued to use his wealth to support yeshivos and help Jews fleeing persecution, international political intrigues consumed more



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and more of his time. Then Sultan Selim II, who had become the sultan in the year 1566, passed away in 1574, and one of Don Yosef's bitterest enemies ascended to the throne. This new sultan, who was biased against the Jews, informed the aging Jewish diplomat that his services were no longer needed.

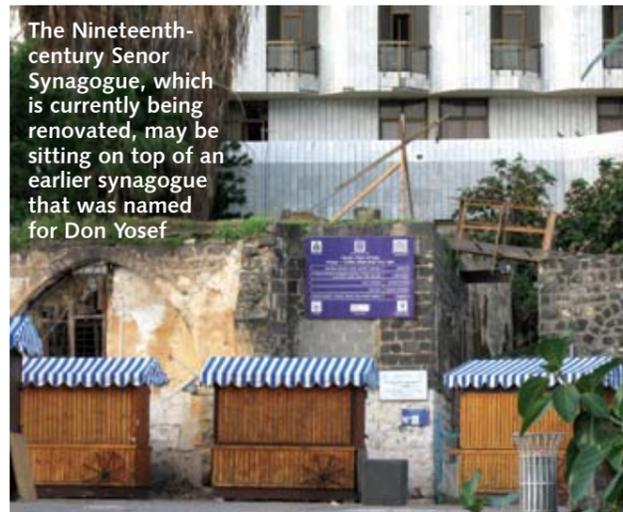
Don Yosef's personal troubles affected Tiveria's Jewish population, which began to be attacked by its Arab neighbors with alarming frequency. The community suffered another severe blow when Don Yosef passed away in the year 1579. He was buried in Istanbul, in the cemetery at Cassim Pasha; oddly, however, as with his aunt Dona Gracia, there is no record of where his grave is located or what was inscribed on his gravestone.

Even though Tiveria had lost its two patrons, the community didn't immediately disband. However, by the mid-1600s, Tiveria once again languished in a state of ruin and desolation. It did experience yet another revival when Rav Chaim Abulafia and Rav Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk both established communities there in the 1700s. But, as the saying goes, that's another story.

If the Walls Could Speak Tiveria may be small, but there is a fair amount of history tucked away in its streets. In the center of town a few Roman ruins lie not too far away from the remains of a Crusader-era gate, which are just a few steps away from a late Ottoman-era governor's residence. Tiveria is also the location of the final resting place of some of Am Yisrael's most illustrious scholars and leaders — including Rabi Akiva and his pious wife Rachel, the Rambam, the Ramchal, Rav Chaim Abulafia, and Rav Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk. But what remains of the city that was built by Dona Gracia and Don Yosef?

According to some opinions, nothing. Others, however, claim that traces do still remain, if we know where and how to look.

I decide that a logical place to begin my search is the street bearing Dona Gracia's name. But even though it's scenic, thanks to the remains of an eighteenth-century fortress that is located there, a lonely street sign is the only thing that links it with La Señora. I therefore head across town to the next site on my list: Tiveria's famous southern wall.



After an earthquake destroyed the walls built by Don Yosef's emissary, the walls were rebuilt in the 1720s by a popular Bedouin leader named Dhaher al-Omer, who also encouraged the rebuilding of Tiveria's Jewish community by inviting Rav Abulafia to settle there. A few years ago, an Israeli archaeologist named Dr. Yosef Stepansky conducted an excavation of Dhaher al-Omer's southern wall, at a section located between HaBonim and HaGalil Streets, on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority — and the remains of an earlier wall were discovered. When was this earlier wall built, and by whom?

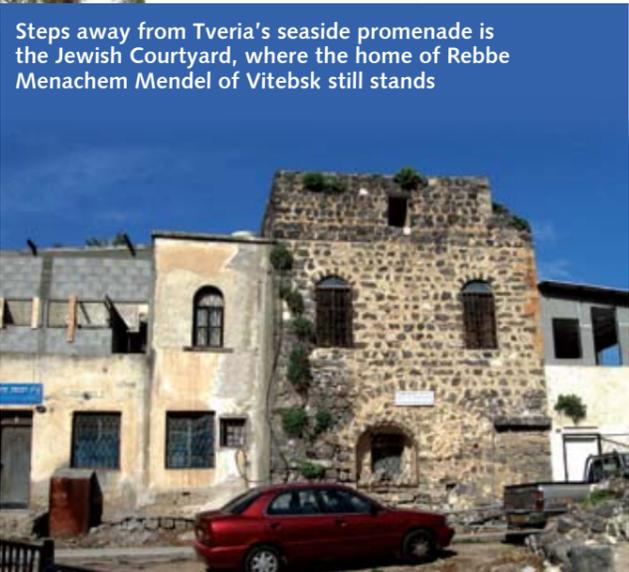
In his report, Dr. Stepansky cautiously suggests that this wall might have been part of the rebuilding commissioned by Dona Gracia and Don Yosef. Or maybe not. The findings are too inconclusive.

Disappointed, I next go to the Jewish Courtyard — which is just a few steps away from the seafront Promenade. On the southern side of the square stand the Etz Chaim Synagogue that was founded by Rav Abulafia, the Karlin-Stolin shul built on the site of the shul founded by Rav Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk, a Chabad shul, and a Sephardic synagogue. I'm sure they all have interesting stories, but since they were all established later, I continue my search until I see a dilapidated building sitting by itself on the other side of the square, nestled modestly between a few touristy tchotchke stalls and the towering Caesar Hotel.

A closer look reveals that this seemingly abandoned building is actually the "Señor" Synagogue. According to the Ninio family, who are currently restoring it, the synagogue was founded by an ancestor of theirs, Rav Chaim Shmuel Hacoheh Konorti. Rav Konorti came to Tiveria from Spain in the year 1837 — the year that an earthquake devastated the city. The synagogue was part of the community's efforts to rebuild.

While the historian Cecil Roth doesn't disagree with this assessment of the synagogue's post-1837 history, he wasn't at all certain that the "Señor" being referred to was the nineteenth-century rabbi who built the present structure. Recalling that synagogues supported by Dona Gracia were known as "Kahal de la Señora," the British historian wondered if the present-day synagogue is in fact sitting upon the remains of an earlier one, which was built with funds donated by Don Yosef and therefore named after Tiveria's illustrious sixteenth-century patron.

If Cecil Roth's hunch is true, the "Señor" synagogue is presently the only tangible, albeit tenuous, remnant that links modern Tiveria to Dona Gracia and Don Yosef. But even if there's no connection, one thing is certain: wherever a synagogue in Tiveria is being rebuilt and wherever a renewal of Jewish life is blossoming, from their abode up above, Dona Gracia and Don Yosef are surely smiling. ■



Steps away from Tiveria's seaside promenade is the Jewish Courtyard, where the home of Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk still stands