

Ottoman–Jewish Relations in the Sixteenth Century: Legal Status, Economic Integration, and Court Influence

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Abstract

This article examines the multifaceted relationship regarding the interaction of the Ottoman state with its Jewish subjects during the sixteenth century, a period marked by both imperial expansion and the consolidation of communal structures. Drawing upon Ottoman archival records, contemporary chronicles, and European travel accounts, the article examines how Jews were positioned in terms of legal rights and obligations within the Ottoman millet system, their economic integration into imperial markets, and their growing influence in courtly and diplomatic affairs. The article highlights how the Ottoman policy of pragmatic pluralism facilitated Jewish settlement, especially following the Iberian expulsions, and ensured legal protections alongside communal autonomy in religious, educational, and juridical matters. Particular attention is given to the roles of Jewish financiers, physicians, and diplomats who operated at the highest levels of the imperial court, as well as to the emergence of influential figures such as Joseph Nasi and the Kira women. By situating Jewish–Ottoman relations within the broader Mediterranean context, the article reveals the dynamic interplay between imperial interests, minority agency, and cross-cultural exchange. The findings contribute to ongoing debates on tolerance, their incorporation and the strategic role minority groups played in the politics of early modern empires.

Keywords

Ottoman Empire; Jews; Sixteenth Century; Millet System; Joseph Nasi; Court Influence; Economic Integration; Sephardic Diaspora; Religious Autonomy; Mediterranean History

1- The Ottomans and the Jews in the 16th Century

The sixteenth century marked a pivotal era in the history of Jews within the Ottoman Empire, as political expansion, economic growth, and religious diversity shaped the contours of imperial society. By this time, the empire had inherited a rich mosaic of Jewish communities from earlier Byzantine and Islamic periods, while also absorbing new arrivals—most notably the Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal. Ottoman rulers, guided by a pragmatic approach to governance, incorporated these communities into the millet system, granting them religious and communal autonomy in exchange for loyalty and service. This environment allowed Jewish merchants, financiers, physicians, and diplomats to flourish, fostering networks that connected the empire to the broader Mediterranean world. Understanding this dynamic requires first recognizing the deep historical roots of Jewish presence in Anatolia and the precedents of coexistence established long before Ottoman rule.

Anatolia was not an unfamiliar land for Jews before Ottoman rule. Historical evidence shows Jewish communities in the region as early as the 4th century BCE, and according to the Torah, organized settlements existed by the 6th century BCE. Some scholars argue that monotheistic ideas—centered on the worship of a single universal deity, El or Elohim—began to take root in Anatolia at this time. Such beliefs resonated with nomadic peoples, whose mobility made carrying idols impractical. This early exposure to monotheism may explain why Jewish religious thought, especially its emphasis on divine unity, found a receptive environment in Anatolia’s spiritual and cultural landscape¹.

The rise of Islam in the 7th century brought significant changes to the historical paths of Muslims, Jews, and followers of Christianity. In Medina, a sequence of political and military confrontations between 624 and 627 CE led to the defeat or removal of the Banu Qaynuqa, Banu Nadir, and Banu Qurayza. Later, during the caliphate of ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (634–644 CE), the remaining Jewish groups in the Hijaz were also expelled. Apart from this early episode, Muslim–Jewish relations—especially in the East and al-Andalus—were often marked by coexistence and cooperation. Under Islamic rule, non-Muslims (*ahl al-dhimma*) paid the *jizya* tax in return for guarantees over their safety, property, and freedom of worship. This policy, recognized by Muslim historians and affirmed by Western scholars such as Edward Gibbon, countered the stereotype of Islam as inherently intolerant².

The final decades of the 15th century brought catastrophe for European Jewry. In 1492, Spain expelled its Jews following the union of Queen Isabella of Castile and her consort, Ferdinand II of Aragon, which completed the Reconquista with the fall of Granada. The Spanish Inquisition, established in 1480, targeted crypto-Muslims and crypto-Jews—those who had outwardly converted to Christianity but maintained their faith in secret³. The 1492 edict forced Jews to convert or depart within three months; about 50,000 converted, while 100,000–200,000 went into exile. Converts, derisively called *Marranos* (“pigs”), faced constant suspicion, being forced to work on the Sabbath or eat pork as proof of their Christian loyalty⁴.

The expulsion decree barred Jews from returning under penalty of death and confiscation of property, and prohibited them from taking gold, silver, or money. In its wake, Jewish quarters were destroyed and many suffered torture. Karen Armstrong notes that this exile became a central theme in Jewish identity thereafter⁵. Around 80,000 fled to Portugal, where Jews had lived peacefully since the 11th century. This ended after the 1496 marriage of Princess Isabella to King Manuel I of Portugal. Seeking alignment with Spain, Manuel ordered all Jews to leave within ten months. His attempts at forced baptism led to tragedies, including suicides and infanticide⁶. The Inquisition even condemned the dead, as in the case of Álvaro de Montalban, whose corpse was exhumed and burned, and whose estate was seized⁷. From Spain and Portugal, many Jews headed toward Ottoman domains, though most arrived via North Africa and southern Italy. Along the way, pirates and corrupt transporters robbed them, and many died of hunger or disease⁸. By the late 15th century, the global Jewish population had shrunk to about three million—fewer than in the year 1000—due to massacres, epidemics, and forced conversions⁹. Their determination to endure such journeys stemmed from the belief that under Ottoman rule their lives and property would be secure. Sultan Bayezid II reinforced this faith by issuing a decree threatening death to anyone who harmed Jews in his realm¹⁰. Jews were already familiar with Muslim governance, particularly in Spain, where they had experienced comparatively fair treatment. This familiarity, combined with reports of Ottoman tolerance, influenced their decision to seek citizenship and settlement within the empire. The main factors drawing Jews to Ottoman lands included:

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- I. **Guarantee of Religious and Civil Liberties:** Under Muslim rule, diverse religious and ethnic groups lived with legal protection in exchange for the jizya (poll tax). From its inception, the Ottoman state upheld this principle, granting Jews full religious autonomy and safeguarding their lives and property. Many who had been forcibly converted in Europe returned to Judaism upon arrival. An Italian Jew visiting Jerusalem in the late fifteenth century observed that most Jewish residents were Sephardim who had reverted to their ancestral faith¹¹.
 - II. **Communication with European Jewry:** Even before the fifteenth century, the Ottoman Empire had a notable Jewish presence—about 8,000 in Istanbul alone. Local communities corresponded with European Jews, assuring them of safety, autonomy, and the empire’s proximity to the Holy Land. The Turks were often regarded as protectors of the oppressed, a reputation rooted in both Islamic law and Ottoman political tradition¹².
 - III. **Demand for Skilled Personnel:** The empire’s rapid expansion created a demand for skilled artisans, merchants, and professionals. Jews filled key roles in commerce, diplomacy, and especially military production. Despite a papal ban on arms sales to the Ottomans (1363), Francesco II Gonzaga of Mantua defied the prohibition by supplying weapons to Sultan Bayezid II. Spanish Jewish immigrants were especially valuable in helping modernize the Ottoman arsenal¹³.
 - IV. **Theological Views of Ottoman Power:** Some Jews interpreted Ottoman victories as divine retribution against Christian persecution. Joseph Hakohen, a Sephardic exile, argued that God had raised the Turks to punish Christendom, viewing their conquests as signs of the Messiah’s approach¹⁴.
 - V. **Commercial Opportunities:** Once settled, Jews accessed trade networks stretching from the Balkans to India and China.⁸ Their commerce enriched both their communities and the state. It is reported that Sultan Bayezid II remarked on the economic advantage of this policy, stating with irony: “*Who can call such a king [Ferdinand of Spain] wise? He impoverishes his own country while enriching mine*”.¹⁵
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2- The Chief Rabbinate in the Ottoman Empire

In the aftermath of Constantinople's capture, Mehmed II named Moses Capsali to serve as Chief Rabbi, alongside the leaders of the Greek and Armenian communities¹⁶. After Capsali, Jewish communities began electing their own leaders. By 1523, the position was recognized officially only for Istanbul, and abolished three years later¹⁷. Until 1835, there was no empire-wide Chief Rabbi; local communities addressed their grievances directly to the state¹⁸. Ottoman Jewry included Romaniots (Greek-speaking Jews), Ashkenazim, Sephardim, Musta'rib Jews, and Karaites¹⁹. Despite linguistic and cultural differences, they were treated as a single millet. Calls for a central Chief Rabbi emerged in the late sixteenth century, but local rabbis—known as kahya or sheikh—continued to lead each community. By the mid-sixteenth century, some rabbis exercised judicial powers, including sanctions. In 1558, a rabbi in Salonika placed under ban those members of the Jewish community who sought resolution of their disputes in non-Jewish courts; a comparable decree was issued in Istanbul in 1563. A 1597 case in Jerusalem shows a Jew petitioning a qadi over an alleged debt imposed by the Sheikh al-Yahud²⁰. Like other religious leaders, the ḥahambaşı also acted as a state-appointed tax collector. The “rav akçesi” (rabbi's money) was equivalent to the pişkeş or maktū' taxes paid by other non-Muslim communities²¹.

3- Settlement and Contributions of Jews Expelled from Europe

Following their forced departure from Spain and Portugal, Sephardic Jews made their homes in Istanbul as well as in other major Ottoman centers including Edirne, Thessaloniki, Bursa, Manisa, Gallipoli, Amasya, Patras, Corfu, Larissa, and Monastir²². With state support and assistance from established Jewish communities, they quickly resumed normal life, bringing material possessions along with European intellectual, scientific, and commercial knowledge. One of their earliest and most important contributions was the printing press. On December 13, 1493—barely a year after their migration—David and Samuel Mahmiyas printed *Arba'ah Turim*, a major work on Jewish law by Rabbi Jacob ben Asher (1269–1343)²³. During Bayezid II's reign, about twenty Hebrew books were published, each bearing the note “Printed under the shadow of Sultan Bayezid.”²³ The earliest publication in Arabic script within Ottoman territory did not appear until 1727, when İbrahim Müteferrika's press, working with a Jewish printer named Yona, produced it⁴.

The late introduction of printing in Ottoman lands stemmed largely from the prominence of calligraphy, which supported a significant workforce in manuscript production.⁵ The beauty and prestige of hand-copied works—often adorned with floral designs and miniatures—meant printed books were not an urgent necessity, especially given low literacy rates. Another obstacle was the belief, shared by some scholars and chroniclers such as Avram Galanti, that the Arabic script, as the script of the Qur’an, should not be handled by non-Muslims.⁶ Additionally, the technical challenges of printing in Arabic further delayed its adoption. Ironically, the first Arabic-script book was printed not in the empire but in Italy in 1514.⁷

4- Sultan Selim I’s Eastern Conquests and Their Religious Significance

The reign of Sultan Selim I (1512–1520) marked a strategic shift from primarily European expansion to conquests in the East. Between 1516 and 1517, the Ottomans brought under their rule all the sacred lands of Judaism—Babylon, Egypt, Judea, Palestine, and Greater Syria—followed by the Hejaz, Yemen, the Maghreb, and Baghdad. Court chronicler Celalzade Mustafa celebrated these victories, styling Selim as “*sovereign of the earth and time, the Sultan of Rum.*”²⁴ For Jewish communities, these conquests were transformative. They gained safe access to ancestral lands, and cities such as Safed and Tiberias became important centers of Jewish scholarship and mysticism. Evliya Çelebi described Safed as a Jewish “Kaaba,” where visiting—even crawling upon its earth or drinking its water—was considered essential to true faith, according to what he called their “misguided belief.”²⁵

Some Jews interpreted Selim’s military triumphs as heralding the fulfillment of messianic prophecies. They drew a connection between his name and a verse in the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 19:1) that proclaims, “See, the Lord is riding on a swift cloud on His way to Egypt,” proposing that the Hebrew term *tez* (“swift”) held the same numerical value in gematria as the name “Selim.” Elijah Kapsali, a Jewish chronicler, reported that some believed Egypt’s conquest would speed the Messiah’s arrival and mark the outset of the return of Israel’s scattered exiles²⁶.

5- Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent and the Flourishing of Jewish Life

The sixteenth century is often described by Turkish and Jewish scholars as a “golden age” for the Jewish community under Ottoman rule. While Jews had lived in Ottoman lands

earlier, sources before this period were sparse; from Suleiman's reign onward, Jewish communities appeared more regularly in chronicles, archival records, and European travel accounts. Expelled Sephardim rapidly adapted, aided by state protection and established communities. From the start of his reign, Suleiman supported Jews and resettled them in major cities such as Istanbul and Thessaloniki. After capturing Rhodes in 1522, he encouraged Jewish settlement there and granted rights to operate a sulfur mine on nearby İncirli²⁷. The conquest integrated the existing community under the Knights of St. John with new arrivals. Elijah Kapsali recorded that it brought joy to Jews who had suffered persecution and allowed many forcibly baptized individuals to return to Judaism²⁸. Following the conquest of Buda and Pest in 1526, thousands of Jews migrated voluntarily to Ottoman lands²⁹. Many were sent to Thessaloniki and other cities, with the state providing ships for transport. Grateful communities likened Suleiman to King Solomon and saw him as a sign of the Messiah's approach. Kapsali drew parallels between Selim I and Suleiman I and the biblical David and Solomon, suggesting the Temple would be rebuilt under another "Suleiman."³⁰ Not all Ottoman officials welcomed Jewish prosperity. Grand Vizier Rüstem Pasha, described by Busbecq as greedy and of humble origins, urged Suleiman to expel the Jews. Suleiman rejected the idea, comparing the empire to a garden enriched by the colors of diverse peoples—Turks, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews—and affirming that God delights in such variety³¹.

6- Jewish Physicians and Court Influence

Jewish physicians held a unique position within the Ottoman imperial structure, serving not only as medical experts but also as trusted confidants and intermediaries in political and diplomatic affairs. Their expertise in medicine, often combined with multilingual abilities and extensive networks across Europe and the Mediterranean, made them indispensable to the court. Many enjoyed direct access to the sultan and key figures within the imperial court, which allowed them to exert influence on matters extending beyond the sphere of health care. Their proximity to the ruling elite not only elevated their social standing but also provided opportunities to advocate for the interests of their communities. This privileged position often extended to their families, allowing them to secure lasting social and economic advantages. Among the most prominent examples of such court-affiliated physicians was the distinguished Hamon family, whose service to the Ottoman sultans spanned multiple generations and became

a symbol of Jewish integration and influence in sixteenth-century imperial life.

I. The Hamon Family

Among the most prominent Jewish families of Suleiman's reign was the Hamon (Amon) family, court physicians for three generations. Originating from Granada, Jozef Hamon served Bayezid II and Selim I for twenty-five years; his son Moses Hamon rose to even greater influence under Suleiman, overseeing medical services in Hungary. French envoy Nicolas de Nicolay, visiting in 1551, described Hamon as over sixty, deeply respected, and skilled in both Hebrew and Turkish—possibly the author of the first Turkish-language work on dentistry³². Beyond medicine, Moses Hamon defended Jewish rights. In Amasya before 1530 and later in Tokat, he intervened in blood libel cases, persuading Suleiman to punish false accusers and decree that such allegations be handled only by the Imperial Council³³. He accompanied the Sultan on the Baghdad campaign, returning with scholar Yosef Tavus, who later published a Judeo-Persian Torah translation. After Hamon's death in 1565, his son Jozef succeeded him as *hekimbaşı*, serving both Suleiman and Selim II.

The number of Jewish physicians in the court rose significantly during Suleiman's reign.¹ By 1536, four of seventeen palace physicians were Jewish; by 1548, fourteen of thirty-two (44%) held that distinction, with families such as Hamon and Ben Yaha prominent. A seventeenth-century record shows sixty-four of eighty-five palace physicians were Jewish, though numbers declined by the late 1600s, with only three remaining by 1804³⁴. Palace physicians—Muslim, Jewish, or Christian—were required to pass an examination by the *hekimbaşı* to receive a medical license (*ehliyetname*). Muslim doctors often followed Avicenna and Galen, while Jews incorporated European methods. Nicolay observed in 1554–55 that most physicians and intellectuals in Ottoman lands were Jews, attributing their success to reading medical texts in Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek³⁵.

II. Donna Gracia Nasi

The Nasi family was among the most influential Jewish intermediaries between the Ottoman Empire and Europe. Born in Portugal into a converso family, Donna Gracia (Luna) married Francisco Mendes, a fellow converso. Together they built a banking empire extending credit to monarchs such as Francis I of France and Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire³⁶.

After her husband's death in 1537, she assumed control but was accused by relatives before Venetian authorities of secretly practicing Judaism. Her assets were seized, prompting her nephew, court physician Don Joseph Nasi, to appeal to Sultan Suleiman. The Sultan sent an envoy demanding her release and right to migrate to Ottoman lands with her wealth³⁷. Settling in Istanbul in 1553, Gracia lived in Galata in an elegant house noted by Hans Dernschwam³⁸. Her daughter's marriage to a palace physician's son further strengthened her court ties. Once established, she financed synagogues, schools, and relief for Jews under the Inquisition, with her fortune estimated at 400,000 ducats. Suleiman's role in her case reflects his self-image as protector of all subjects, Muslim or non-Muslim. Evliya Çelebi later described Jewish-majority neighborhoods such as Hasköy, Galata, and Ortaköy, where synagogues sometimes outnumbered mosques³⁹. In 1556, when conversos were arrested by the Inquisition in Ancona, Suleiman wrote directly to Pope Paul IV demanding their release as Ottoman subjects; some were freed, others executed⁴⁰. This episode illustrates both Ottoman diplomatic reach and the empire's role as a sanctuary for Jews amid European persecution.

III. Don Joseph Nasi: Power, Patronage, and Politics

A leading converso who reclaimed his Jewish identity in Ottoman lands, Don Joseph Nasi—Donna Gracia's nephew—arrived in Istanbul in 1554, underwent circumcision, and abandoned his Christian name João Miques. Stephan Gerlach observed in 1577 that many Jews in Christian lands raised children secretly as Jews and returned to open practice upon reaching safe havens like Istanbul⁴¹. Nasi's political skill and commercial expertise made him central to Ottoman relations with France and Venice. When France defaulted on a 150,000-ducat debt, Suleiman, at Nasi's urging, authorized seizure of French goods in Ottoman ports⁴². Appointed court physician and honored as *Frenkbeğ oğlu*, he married Reynia, Donna Gracia's daughter, consolidating wealth and influence. Together, they established a banking house financing monarchs, tax farms, and the lucrative wine trade⁴³.

Under Selim II, Nasi's power grew. Entrusted with large payments to Prince Selim, he was rewarded with several Aegean islands, styled "Duke of Naxos," though he governed through deputies⁴⁴. His disputes with France over debts led to further seizures of ships, later moderated by Selim to preserve diplomatic ties⁴⁵. One of his lasting contributions was the

reconstruction of Tiberias. With support from Gracia, he secured a firman from Suleiman to rebuild the city as a Jewish refuge, completed in 1565. Many historians consider him a precursor to modern Zionism⁴⁶. Though some European accounts alleged that Nasi influenced Selim II toward the Cyprus campaign—possibly by supplying fine Cypriot wine—his real achievements included reducing taxes on Jews in Thessaloniki and removing discriminatory housing laws⁴⁷. By 1574, Sokollu Mehmed Pasha labeled him a “murderous enemy,” but Selim continued to protect him. Nasi died in 1579; his fortune was confiscated, partly returned to his wife. Bernard Lewis observed that no other Jew in Ottoman history matched his influence⁴⁸.

IV. Salomon ben Nathan Eskenazi: Diplomacy, Power, and Jewish Integration in the Ottoman State

Salomon ben Nathan Eskenazi (1520–1602), known in Ottoman records as Almanoğlu,⁴⁹ emerged as a prominent Jewish diplomat in the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth century. He was born into a family of German-Jewish origin, and his career would place him at the heart of significant political and diplomatic developments of the era. He studied medicine in Kraków and served as physician to King Sigismund II Augustus of Poland before arriving in Istanbul in 1564. Initially practicing medicine, he soon acted as interpreter at the Venetian embassy, mediating between ambassador Marcantonio Barbaro and Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha. His multilingual skills and political acumen enabled a rapid transition from medicine to high-level diplomacy, particularly during the escalating Ottoman–Venetian tensions over Cyprus. When the Venetian ambassador was imprisoned, Sokollu entrusted Eskenazi with peace negotiations⁵⁰.

At a time when anti-Semitism was intensifying in Europe and Venice was preparing to expel its Jews, the Ottoman appointment of a Jewish envoy was unprecedented. Under Ottoman pressure, the Venetian Senate rescinded the expulsion, persuaded by Eskenazi’s emphasis on Jewish contributions to the empire’s military industry. This achievement not only safeguarded Venetian Jewry but also restored cordial Ottoman–Venetian relations. His standing rose further during the Polish succession crisis after Sigismund II’s death. Backed by Sokollu, Eskenazi successfully promoted the Ottoman-supported candidate, Henry II, cementing his role as a trusted court figure. Diplomats acknowledged his influence, often sending gifts directly to him,

and he was rewarded financially by both Venice and the Porte⁵¹. Eskenazi was not free from controversy. Accusations of nepotism and corruption arose, including accepting bribes for appointments and securing commercial privileges for his brother Paulus, who enjoyed duty-free trade in Ottoman lands. Stephan Gerlach noted such favors and described the social prominence of Jews in cities like Buda, Pest, and Edirne. Court-connected Jews—including Abraham, Hayim, and Johann—regularly received gifts from foreign envoys⁵².

Economic difficulties under Murad III, including budget deficits and currency devaluation, fuelled resentment toward Jewish prosperity. Moshe Sevilla Sharon claims that Murad, under pressure from the ulema, secretly decreed the execution of all Jews; Turkish historians, however, contend that the order merely restricted luxury clothing for non-Muslims⁵³. Eskenazi, together with Esther Kyra and palace women, reportedly helped prevent harsher measures. The Ottoman commitment to protecting Jewish subjects also extended beyond imperial borders. Sokollu once summoned the Roman envoy to demand restitution for a Jewish merchant from Zeng near Buda whose property had been seized—an example of consistent state policy toward Jewish protection⁵⁴.

Eskenazi's career reflects broader patterns of Jewish integration in Ottoman life. Jews served as physicians, financiers, tax collectors, performers, and scribes—roles dating back to pre-Ottoman Turkish principalities. Ibn Battuta recorded, with astonishment, the honor shown to a Jewish physician in the court of Sultan Mehmed b. Aydin in the fourteenth century, even above Qur'an reciters⁵⁵. In the aftermath of Istanbul's conquest, Mehmed II selected Gaetali Giacome, an Italian Jewish physician who converted to Islam as Yakub Pasha, as a vizier⁵⁶. By the sixteenth century, Jewish physicians were producing Turkish medical texts, including some of the earliest works on dentistry. Jewish activity extended to theater, commerce, and manufacturing. In Salonica, Jewish women and children made Janissary uniforms, and literacy was encouraged to secure administrative posts. Cooperation between Jews and Janissaries was common; in 1556, a Muslim official mistreating Jews was dismissed by court order. According to Amnon Cohen, Jews often hired Muslim guards to protect their quarters, reflecting pragmatic coexistence⁵⁷.

Financially, Jewish bankers operated networks linking Istanbul, Bursa, and Damascus, enabling safe fund transfers across the empire. Despite Islamic prohibitions on interest,

Muslims often borrowed from Jewish lenders. Excessive rates sometimes drew state intervention, as when the governor of Rhodes was ordered to regulate Jewish lending practices. Eskenazi's career, therefore, not only highlights a singular figure in Ottoman diplomacy but also illustrates the depth of Jewish participation in imperial politics, economics, and society throughout the sixteenth century

7- The Ottoman Empire and Jewish Women: Power, Patronage, and Political Intrigue

Historical narratives often depict women as passive victims of war and displacement, their lives defined by the loss of fathers, husbands, or sons. For Jewish women, such hardships were compounded by centuries of exile and the persecutions of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisitions. Patriarchal biases in historical writing and within Abrahamic religious traditions further obscured their agency, with medieval Islamic historiography rarely recording women's names or roles. Yet, scattered sources reveal that Jewish women within the Ottoman Empire—especially during the sixteenth century—could wield notable influence, enjoying palace access, forging ties with sultanas, and participating in diplomacy and court politics. Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, the Habsburg ambassador, recounts meeting a Sephardic Jewish woman fluent in Spanish and associated with Mihrimah Sultan, who was the daughter of Sultan Süleyman and married to Grand Vizier Rüstem Pasha. On the eve of a military campaign, she publicly accused Busbecq of unlawfully entering a rented house; fearing her influence, he bribed her into silence⁵⁸. Stephan Gerlach likewise recorded the esteem Jewish women held at court, noting their reputation for sorcery—real or imagined—shared with women of the imperial harem.

Among the most prominent was Esther Kira (Esther Handali), whose political and economic power rivaled that of Donna Gracia Nasi. Their influence grew under Nurbanu Sultan, consort of Selim II and mother of Murad III⁵⁹. While Sokollu Mehmed Pasha dominated Selim's reign, his assassination in 1579 created a power vacuum that elevated female intermediaries, notably the kira. Under Murad III, Esther Kira became kilercibaşı (chief chamberlain) to the valide sultan, influencing the distribution of timars and zeamets, accumulating wealth through patronage⁶⁰, and mediating for Venice in Cyprus⁶⁰. Kira women were vital conduits for sensitive intelligence. In 1584, Venetian ambassador Gianfrancesco Morosini learned—via a kira—that Queen Catherine de' Medici had appealed to Safiye Sultan for naval aid against Spain. Venetian ambassador J. Soranzo similarly used a kira's assistance

in resolving a Dalmatian border dispute⁶¹.

After Esther's death c. 1590, Esperanza Malchi succeeded her, expanding the role's political scope. Chronicler Yosef Kohen claimed Ottoman officials seeking promotion prostrated before her. This power provoked Janissary and ulema resentment⁶². In 1597, preacher Mevlana Abdulkirim Efendi denounced palace corruption, was imprisoned, and triggered Janissary unrest. Although Sheikh al-Islam Sunullah Efendi's fatwa forbade killing a dhimmi, it allowed exile. Nevertheless, sipahis murdered Malchi, dragging her body through the Hippodrome⁶³. British envoy John Sanderson recorded that one son died with her, another escaped by converting to Islam (becoming Aksak Mustafa Çavuş)⁶⁴, and a third fled abroad; their fortune was seized⁶⁵. These careers show that Jewish women close to the palace navigated a precarious blend of opportunity and danger. As intermediaries, financiers, and confidantes, they benefited from the empire's pragmatic pluralism, even as visibility made them vulnerable to intrigue and violence. Their status reflected the broader privileges of Ottoman Jewry, distinguishing them from their European contemporaries.

8- Rights Granted to Jews in the Ottoman Empire

1. Jewish communities living under Ottoman rule enjoyed civil, religious, and social rights unparalleled in much of contemporary Europe, fostering loyalty that earned them titles such as *Millet-i Sâdıka* ("The Loyal Nation") and *Evlâd-ı Mûsâ* ("Children of Moses").
2. **Protection of Life, Property, and Faith** – Security of life and property, full religious freedom, and communal identity preservation without state interference.
3. **Communal Autonomy** – Rabbis oversaw marriage, divorce, and education; the state avoided intervention.
4. **Access to High Office** – Jews served as court physicians, interpreters, diplomats, and financiers, often honored with titles.
5. **Literary and Intellectual Freedom** – Publishing allowed in Hebrew, Ladino, and Spanish, though not in Turkish or Arabic until the nineteenth century.

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6. **Synagogue Construction** – Permitted in centers like Salonica, Tiberias, and Safed.
 7. **Legal Protection** – Decrees countered blood libels and protected graves, with some cases reaching the Imperial Council.
 8. **Military Exemption and Jizya** – Exempt from service in exchange for a fixed jizya, often subsidized for the poor⁶⁶.
 9. **Dress and Social Identity** – Luxurious clothing permitted, though turban colors marked religious communities.
 10. **Individual Legal Liability** – Only the accused faced punishment; no collective penalties.
 11. **Urban and Commercial Integration** – Jews lived and worked alongside Muslims with few restrictions.
 12. **Respect for Religious Observance** – Guards protected synagogues on holy days; markets avoided Sabbath conflicts.
 13. **Contribution to Print Culture** – Jews pioneered Ottoman printing in Hebrew and Ladino; collaborated in İbrahim Müteferrika's first Turkish-language book (1727).

These privileges, grounded in law and custom, sustained Jewish loyalty and underscored the relative tolerance of Ottoman governance compared to much of early modern Europe.

Conclusion

The sixteenth century was a transformative period for Jewish life in the Ottoman Empire, defined by both security and opportunity under imperial rule. The millet system provided a legal framework that recognized Jewish communal autonomy while integrating the community into the broader administrative and economic fabric of the state. The arrival of Sephardic Jews from Iberia, welcomed by Ottoman authorities for their skills and capital, revitalized urban economies from Istanbul to Salonica and beyond. Jewish physicians, merchants, and diplomats emerged as trusted intermediaries between the empire and foreign

powers, shaping not only commerce but also high politics. Figures such as Joseph Nasi demonstrated the potential of minority actors to wield influence at the highest levels, while the Kira women opened rare channels of political and economic agency for women in the Ottoman context.

At the same time, this integration was neither complete nor without tension. Economic privileges and political proximity to the court occasionally provoked resentment, while broader currents of interfaith relations shaped the limits of tolerance. Nevertheless, the Ottoman–Jewish relationship in the sixteenth century stands as a compelling example of pragmatic governance: the empire recognized the value of incorporating a capable minority into its system, balancing Islamic legal traditions with the demands of imperial realpolitik. By examining this relationship through legal, economic, and socio-political lenses, the study underscores the role of Jews as both beneficiaries and contributors to the Ottoman imperial project. This historical case offers enduring insights into the possibilities and challenges of coexistence in pluralistic states.

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