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The Myth of the Pure Sephardi: Sephardi Tahor

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The Hebrew letters *samech tet* (ט"ס) traditionally written after someone's name is said to stand for *Sephardi Tahor* [S"t]. This two word phrase translates as "pure Sephardi." T-a-h-o-r is an English spelling, a transliteration of the Hebrew word for something that is spiritually pure. It has been seen many times of late added after ones surname, apparently indicating that one is "pure Sephardic," that the person does not have any non-Sephardic ancestry in their pedigree.¹ There are many meanings to what S"t might stand for, however only one may be the true meaning.

A most popular view is that the letters *samech tet* (S"t) are an abbreviation for the Hebrew words, *sofo tov*² this means *good end or may all end well*.³ It was said this is from when the period of persecution was upon the Sephardim in Iberia, and people did not know if they would survive. Remember, Jews were persecuted throughout history and it is only over the last 100 years that most Jews could live relatively easy, knowing they would die of old age, natural death, instead of being persecuted, starved or beaten in the end.

Rabbi Elazar M. Teitz states that the meaning of S"t was *sin tin*, an Aramaic translation of the expression *afar va-efer* (dust and ashes). He said it could be used as "a form of modesty in the signature." He said such was the practice of Haham Zebi (who was an Ashkenazi).⁴ Teitz

indicated his source for this meaning is Rabbi Yehudah Leib Maimon,⁵ who mentions it in one of his volumes of *Sarei HaMeiah*. His proof is not only that an Ashkenazi used the expression, but "the fact that among the *talmidei chachamim* [Talmud scholars], no one used it in addressing others, but only with respect to himself. Any meaning such as *Sefaradi Tahor* or *seifei tav* could just as well have been applied to the addressee as well as the writer."⁶ Haham Zebi Hirsch ben Jacob Ashkenazi was born in Moravia, his wife and daughter were killed in the Hapsburg siege of Buda.⁷ He fled to Sarajevo, then under Ottoman rule, where the Sephardim appointed him their Haham.⁸ From 1688 to 1709 he lived in Altona, Germany, where he was recognized as an eminent scholar of *halakha*, questions being submitted to him from many parts of Europe. In 1707, Ashkenazi was elected rabbi of the triple community of Altona-Hamburg-Wandsbeck and in 1710 was appointed chief rabbi of the Ashkenazi Jews in Amsterdam. There his 12-volumes of *responsa* were published in 1712.⁹

So this begs the question, why would a leading Ashkenazi rabbi sign his name with S.T.? It has been said, "Surely, there was no special reason in those days (late

¹ Some use *Sephardi tahor* to indicate that they are "Pure Spanish." (*samekh-tetim*)

² or in Aramaic *Sefa Tava*

³ See the sources in Meir Heilprin, *Hasimanim Ve-Hakinnuyim*, p. 188 This theory is supported by Zunz in his *Zur Geschichte and Literatur*, pp. 314, 455.

⁴ Interesting to note, the last Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Schneerson thought S"t meant "pure Sephardi." In a letter he once wrote: "I am fairly certain that your father Eliahu, of blessed memory, and his ancestors, proudly added to their signature "s.t." which, according to one interpretation, means Sefardi tahor -- of pure Sefardic descent. Ref. *L'Chaim* April 7, 1995 - 7 Nissan 5755; 363: Metzora.

⁵ 1875-1913

⁶ Mail.Jewish Mailing List Volume 39 Number 79 Jun 12, 2003.

⁷ Buda (now Budapest) had both Sephardi and Ashkenazi Jews in the 17th century. The Jews sided with the Ottomans during the Austrian reconquest in 1686, and only 500 Jews survived the Austrian siege; the Jewish quarter was ransacked and Torá scrolls were burned. Expulsions, violence and anti-Jewish legislation marked the Hapsburg's rule. From 1686-1689, Jews were not allowed to live in Buda.

⁸ It has been mentioned that it is most likely that he was given the name *Ashkenazi*, to distinguish him (from local students) while studying and living in the Greek-Macedonia area. He studied at the yeshiva of Elihu Cobo. During his stay at Salonika, Ashkenazi devoted himself mainly to an investigation of the Sephardic methods of study. He went on to become the Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam.

⁹ He used S"t in numerous *responsa* including: nos. 5, 6, 10, 12, 14, & c.

17th-early 18th century) in Austro-Germanic areas to take special pride in one's supposed *Sfardi* [sic] lineage."¹⁰ We also know that his son, Rabbi Jacob Emden also appended S" T to his name.¹¹ On the idea that Sephardim that departed Iberia in the 15th century and resettled in Ashkenaz might have appended their name with S" T, Shmuel Arons at Hebrew University in a discussion on language, makes mention of S" T:

After the Spanish Expulsion, the Jews who went North into the Ashkenazi hinterlands [sic] came to speak according the Ashkenazi method. I know of no examples of "sefardi tahor" families in Europe using the old pronunciation of Spain while in Europe.

Another issue is that Judaism is about belief, not race. Jews are not a race, you cannot convert "into" a race. Thus you cannot be a *Tahor Jew* (Pure Jew). You may be Jewish on both sides of your family, but this is solely to be examined from a genealogical stand point, not one of race, or purity. It can be supposed that S" T was first introduced by the *marranos* (secretly practicing forced converts) who were proud of the fact they never intermarried with Christians or other non-Sephardim. Thus it would have been a way to tell the world "we are Pure Sephardi," even though they were not externally Jewish. Many of these converso descendants arrived in Salonika and other locales where Sephardim had already resettled *en masse* during the 16th century, and it can be conjectured it was a way for them to inspire trust and confidence in their lineage, especially when the issue of marriage was at hand.

Conversely, another theory mentions that Sephardim wrote S" T after their name to indicate the person had a non-marrano descent, in other words, he never strayed away from Judaism.¹² He was proud of this fact—and he told the world by noting it after his name. It has even been alleged that S" T might stand for *Sanct*, denoting martyrdom.¹³ The use of S" T has been seen in the writings of many Jews of various backgrounds and languages. A revision of the *Kzat Yossef Hatsadik* (Yossef

ha-Sadik) printed in Baghdad in 1892 appearing in Judeo-Arabic indicated it was brought to print by one Shelomo Bechor Chulin that signed his name with S" T.¹⁴ Other well known persons who included S" T after their name are Haham Yossef David Azulai, Hatzair Suleiman ben David Zarom and Natan ben Yehudah Noah.

With the existence of multiple theories, we can only show one most likely is correct and that is that S" T does not mean *Sephardi Tahor*, but it does denote *sofo tov*. We know this because documents exist from prior to the attacks of 1391 on Jews in Spain. Rabbis Asher ben Yehiel,¹⁵ David Abudarham,¹⁶ and as we have stated, Haham Zebi and his son Rabbi Jacob Emden all have added S" T to their names. Thus S" T has been used prior to the Spanish persecution against the Jews, and also S" T has been used by Ashkenazim. Leopold Zunz a prominent 19th century German Jewish scholar has pointed out that S" T was used as a prayer, and for nothing else. It had no relation to the Sephardim other than if a Sephardi used it as such, hopeful for a *sofo tov*, "may his end be a good end." S" T thus seems to be an abbreviation used to demonstrate humility or *anivus* in Hebrew. Humility is a positive trait for all Jews and one especially important for the pious. To have a sense of humility if to realize you are but one of the creatures of the Creator, and you have an understanding that God is in control, not you. Everyone will meet an end, but the person writing S" T is indicating to God, and if he was superstitious—then also to that factor—that his end will be good.

Many people have heard that "if you are not Ashkenazi, you are Sephardic". However this response, which has been issued by numerous Sephardic and Ashkenazi authorities alike, is a surrender to the politically correct environment that has existed since the mid 1970's. It has been stated as a way to make everyone "feel good" without the responsibility to respect history or accuracy. Typically, it is espoused by secular "authorities" and by anti-religious persons (including much of the media) who really have no desire to examine

¹⁴ This is a Judeo-Arabic adaptation of the story of Joseph popular among eastern Sephardim. The scribe was Hayim Barukh Benjamin Haham Solomon, a member of the Shanghai community of Indian and Egyptian Jews.

¹⁵ Responsa, iii, no. 6; xiii, no. 20. (Eminent Talmudist; born in western Germany about 1250; died in Toledo, Spain, 1328).

¹⁶ He was a tax-collector and elder of the congregation of the Jews of Tudela during the reign of Sancho the Great, king of Castile and Leon (1258-95). See *Introduction to Abudarham*.

¹⁰ Boruch Merzel: Mail.Jewish Mailing List Volume 39 Number 82 Jun 17, 2003.

¹¹ Sheelath Yabez, I, nos. 2, 5, 7-10; ii, nos. 3, 68 & c.

¹² See the sources in Meir Heilprin, *Hasimanim Ve-Hakinnuyim*, p. 188

¹³ Zimmels, H.J. *Ashkenazim and Sephardim*. Marla Pub.; London, 1976.

Sephardic history, and continue to look at Sephardic Jews as some sort of exotic species near extinction. Because of this, I have developed what I (and others) feel is an accurate and objective statement on the subject on who is a Sephardic Jew:

Sephardic Jews make up the second largest division of the Jewish population. The Sephardim have their historic roots in Spain, Portugal, North Africa as well as Mesopotamia and Arabia. They developed and shared common religious and cultural bonds with their fellow co-religionists from the Iberian/North African Atlantic seaboard to the eastern portion of the Fertile Crescent for at least the last 1,500 years. Sephardim have developed and possess a shared relationship based upon unique religious traditions, collective ideals, customs and ethnicity.

At this point we should clear the air, albeit briefly, explaining why Sephardim in Spain and Sephardim in North Africa are related. The “who is a Sephardi” issue will not be explored here deeply, but it must be touched upon in order to clarify the S”T issue. If you read or hear someone say they are *Sephardi Tahor* because their ancestors came from Spain—and they indicate that only the Jews descending from Spain can use S”T after their name, they may be demonstrating ignorance of the history of their own people. Frequently, I have heard from fellow Sephardim that Jews from North Africa are not Sephardim, this must be addressed.

Remember, it is neither the food, nor music which unite us, it is our Jewish religion, our Torá. Few realize that little more than six decades after being liberated from the bonds of Christendom, the Jews of what is today modern Spain, were greeted by Rabbi Natronai who had traveled from Babylonia. In 772 CE he spread the teaching of the Babylonian Talmud to his Hebrew co-religionists who had been hungry to learn. Through his actions, Natronai was able to bring the standard practice of Judaism, as it was in Babylonia to budding Jewish centers of Torá in Spain. It can be said, because of his actions, that the communities of the east and west were forever linked, and Sephardic Jewry proceeded to advance.

It should also be remembered that over many centuries, population trades existed between Europe and Africa. Whether they were done on an individual basis such as in the case of the *RIF* Rabbi Isaac Alfassi who went from North Africa to Spain, or as the RaMBaM did, departing Spain for North Africa, they occurred. But it was not only individuals, entire families left, both nuclear and extended, as did large population groups. Back and forth, across the 14 mile expansion of water from North Africa to Andalusia, Jews migrated for various reasons over the centuries. There were even large groups of Jews who fled Babylonia for North Africa, plausibly, ultimately, settling in Spain. It is known that Qairawan in Tunisia was an important intermediary point located between east and west, especially when large scale migrations of mainly Babylonian Jews immigrated in the course of the 9th and 10th centuries. This fourth holiest city of Islam served as a relay point for funds and intellectual materials between the Jewish communities of Spain, Babylonia and Eres Yisrael.¹⁷

In our modern day, some people continue to claim to be *Sephardi Tahor*. These include both Jews who have been speaking Judeo-Spanish from birth, as well as those which have converted to Judaism (returned) from backgrounds they consider to be of *converso* descendants. The latter groups sometimes insist their families have only married with other *Sephardi Tahor* families, but they don’t have documents to prove this, only verbal stories, some handed down, others not. On top of this, they do not realize the actual meaning of S”T, and have thus, like so many others, jumped on the “purity” bandwagon. While some Jews whose ancestors lived in medieval Spain might refer to themselves as *Sephardi Tahor*, they should be cognizant of the history of their own people. Sephardim may be distinct from the Ashkenazim for many reasons, but to indicate that they are “pure” is preposterous. For only if you have generations of *ketubot*, marriage

¹⁷ Near the end of the 10th century Rabbi Hushiel ben Elhanan, president of the yeshiva at Qairawan died. When the distressing news arrived in Spain, the community mourned greatly for he was a much beloved leader. As a community, they held a public fast day in his honor on the behest of Shemuel HaNagid who organized memorials in Lucena, Cordoba and Granada, sending dispatches to all other Spanish cities to do the same.

contracts, from hundreds of years back, could you even attempt to proclaim such a grand declaration.

Over a period of 400 years, while the majority of world Jewry was living under Muslim rule in both the east and west, Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewry grew, and a shared intellectual tradition framed around *halakha* (law) and *minhag* (tradition) flourished. Although music, food, and folklore are all important ties, the tie that binds Jews from both traditional Mizrahi and Sephardi lands is one that is based upon a historic epoch of history in which religious framework served to unite communities of people, who by geography, had been separated. Torá is what brought them together then, Torá is what keeps us together now.

Of course we don't know when S"t was laid down on paper for the very first time, but what we do know is what documents have been handed down and we realize from what type of people they have come from. The use of S"t by pious observant Jews was not an indicator of social status based on some sort of desire to show the world, *I AM A SEPHARDI AND YOU ARE NOT!* In fact, the narcissistic desire to elevate yourself in social circles is not in line with the Torá. In reality, historically, the two letters S"t were written by the humble Jew, the spiritual Jew, maybe even the superstitious Jew, to hope for the best for himself at the end of his life when it was time for him to go to the grave.