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My topic today, that of the Jewish community of the island of Rhodes, is the culmination of a long intellectual journey that began with very broad topics and interest in various aspects of the history of Sephardic Jewry. How did my intellectual interests bring me to this small island community? I don’t have any personal connections to Rhodes though I knew of the island, of course, as part of that vast Ottoman world of the eastern Mediterranean and a corner of that world with a very interesting Jewish community. As my interests led me to an investigation of what happened as a result of the Holocaust to the eastern Mediterranean Jewish communities, I was intrigued by the story of Rhodes and the demise of its Jewish community in 1944. From this vantage point, I began an inquiry that traveled backwards leading me to discover that there is a unique story here to be told, a story that in many ways provides snapshots of multiple facets of the Ottoman world, including the collapse of that world. And so, through this unique community and case study, I decided to rethink some of the themes and issues I had explored in my earlier work but grounded in one very distinctive place.

Though the title for this lecture suggests that my story begins in the nineteenth century, like all historians, I need to first excavate an earlier past to show the various transformations of this community over time and what these tell us about non-Muslim existence in the Muslim world. I traverse borders with Rhodes Jewry to different regions in comparative contexts, and in modern times to new diasporas, to colonialism, to nation-states, ending with the eventual collapse of that world.

We start with the Byzantines. There existed a small Greek speaking Jewish community in Rhodes in the Middle Ages. The island was given to the Knights of St. John in 1306 when they left Crusader Palestine and its tiny Jewish community fell under their rule. The community saw periods of toleration and persecution, even forced conversion. There were very few Jews on the island when the Ottomans conquered it in 1522 doing the great siege of Rhodes which left an indelible mark on the imagination of Western Christendom as the culmination of a series of catastrophes for it that marked the rise of the Ottoman Empire. It is as of 1522 that we begin to see the making of Ottoman Jewish Levantine community on the island.

The historical memory of the Jews of Rhodes fixes its Ottoman origins to the arrival from the Iberian Peninsula after the expulsion of 1492. But the historical reality is that none of these Sephardi Jews arrived directly from there. Here we have to consider Ottoman population settlement policies—of how Ottomans populated the lands that had been conquered: 150 Jewish families from Salonica were brought over by the Sultan to populate the ruined city of Rhodes and to make it an active commercial center. This moving of the populations was known as sürgün, which in modern Turkish usually means exile and expulsion, but in the Ottoman context also designated fertilizing, making grow. Sürgün was not necessarily a punitive policy. The Ottoman empire moved populations frequently for strategic and economic reasons, and the 150 Jewish families brought from Salonica were part of this Ottoman settlement policy one can observe in various parts of the empire. (Many Turkish tribes had been moved from Asia Minor to the Balkans over the years).

Hence a brand-new Jewish community, a Sephardi one, arose in Rhodes after 1522. As occurred elsewhere in Ottoman lands, these Jews swamped demographically the pre-existing small group of Greek-speaking Jews on the island. The latter were Judeo-Hispanicized. The Greek speaking Jews with their distinctive culture and
customs came to be absorbed into the Judeo-Spanish world.

We can observe that this new Sephardi community emerged spatially in the city right next to the new Muslim one. The Jews were settled near the citadel, the center of Ottoman military power in the inner city, in an area that from then on was called the Juderia, the Jewish quarter. The demographically majority Greek population of the island was not allowed to inhabit inside the city walls. Greeks could enter and trade there during the day but would have to leave at night. Only Muslims and Jews were permitted to live inside the walled city. The Juderia that remained intact to this day in Rhodes occupied about one quarter of the city. Hence the ethnic organization of the island came to have a spatial dimension in the city of Rhodes. The Jews were to be found only in the city as were the Muslims who lived there with the exception of three Muslim villages outside Rhodes town. Greeks who constituted the majority of the population of the island lived in rural villages and in settlements that came to make up the suburbs of the city. Hence here we find a microcosm in the Ottoman world, perhaps more demarcated than other places where the religious/ethnic spatial lines were not so clearly distinct, though with similar settlement configurations that can also be seen in other cities such as Ankara where the Jews were also to be found right next to the citadel.

The Jews were a highly visible and significant segment of the population of the city of Rhodes and came to compose up one fifth of its total population during various stages of its history. In terms of percentage this was surpassed only in Ottoman Salonica in the Sephardi world. Here we find all the classic features of Ottoman-Jewish communities: the Rhodes Jewish millet1, quasi-autonomous under religious and secular leadership with its law courts, educational system, charitable bodies did not differ from the rest of the Jewish millet in different parts of the Empire. Like many other centers, certain families eventually emerged as economically and socially dominant. Names of these families such as Alhadef, Notrica, Menashe, Gaon traverse the history of Rhodes Jewry. Most members of these families were by no means rich. But the richest ones remained visible in the public domain over the centuries. The vast majority of the community remained poor, eking out a tenuous existence in petty trade and commerce. The socio-economic profile of the community conformed to what one can observe in other Jewish communities of the Ottoman Empire.

An interesting aspect of the history of Rhodes Jewry that has not been explored before is the close links that it forged with western Asia Minor just beyond the sea. While this community originated in Salonica, its history converged with that of its counterparts in Asia Minor. Most of the trade and commerce of Rhodes was with this area, with the ports and towns in the hinterland easily accessible from the island. Throughout the Ottoman centuries members of the Rhodes Jewish community traveled to these places, conducted trade there and indeed settled there, in an area ranging from Izmir and Bodrum to the north to all the way to Antalya in the south. Frequently a substantial section of the Jewish population of the towns in this area such as Milas came to originate from Rhodes. This emigration is clearly seen in the tax records of the city. In the 1840s, one-third of all the Rhodes Jewish taxpayers were no longer on the island—they had settled in Asia Minor communities. Of

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1 In the Ottoman Empire, Greeks, Armenian and Jews were the officially recognized non-Muslim religious groups, each one known as a millet. Each millet enjoyed significant juridical autonomy under Muslim law.
course this development is connected directly to the rise of western Asia Minor as an economic powerhouse in the Ottoman Empire and its integration into the new industrializing world economy of the 19th century. The rich agricultural lands of the area became major exporters to Europe and further afield in this period. Steamships began to establish as of the 1830s the maritime trade routes linking Europe to the Eastern Mediterranean, and Istanbul to Alexandria in Egypt, with stopovers in Izmir and Rhodes. Dramatically increased commercial activity had a major impact on the various populations of the area.

An interesting twist to this economic boom was the development of the sponge trade in the Dodecanese in the 1830s and 1840s. Increased demand in Europe spurred this export trade. Greek divers harvested sponges from the sea and merchants on the islands, principally in Rhodes sold these abroad at huge profit. The trade was dominated by Greek and European mercantile families that had settled over the centuries along the eastern Mediterranean, many of them rising to the position of consuls of European states there. Jewish merchants tried to get into this trade but could not succeed because of one very major turning point event, the famous blood libel of 1840 in Rhodes. The blood libel was a fixture of anti-Jewish action in the Christian world with Jews being accused of killing a child and using the blood for the manufacture of matzah, the unleavened bread in use during Passover. 1840 is known for the major blood libel of Damascus which galvanized European Jewish public opinion. Much less known is the blood libel in Rhodes which was also covered by the European Jewish press. Jews were accused of the killing of a disappeared Christian child on the island. Local Greek merchants as well as European consuls active in trade were among the accusers. Jewish leaders were imprisoned and tortured by the Ottoman authorities in response to the accusations. The Rhodes Jewish community appealed for justice to Ottoman central power via Jewish leaders in Istanbul. This was supported by a delegation sent by European Jews, and the imprisoned Jews were released. The local governor who had been collaborating with the European consuls was relieved of his duties.

We can see here the blood libel affair ending in the usual way in the Ottoman Empire with the central authority exercising its authority to protect the Jews against attacks from other groups, frequently their Christian economic rivals. Still, in this instance the blood libel accusation succeeded in quashing the attempt by some Jewish merchants to break into the sponge trade. This trade would collapse a few decades later with the invention and widespread use of artificial sponges. This constituted a major economic blow to the island in many ways. There are thousands of Ottoman documents about the sponge trade and its ramifications. It would be quite fascinating to study this in a way similar to Sarah Abrevaya Stein’s wonderful book on plumes.  

As we focus on the Jewish community of Rhodes in this period it is important to stress that this is not only the era of great economic transformation accompanying growing European economic presence in the eastern Mediterranean. This is also the famous Tanzimat period in the Ottoman Empire, the era of westernizing reforms instituted by the Ottoman state, beginning a process of building and rationalizing an administrative state with increasing centralizing ambitions. The reforms also opened the Ottoman administration to non-Muslims,

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especially in local municipal councils. Hence we begin to see as the 19th century progresses the growing presence of non-Muslims in these councils in Rhodes. Some Jewish names such as Alhadef, Notrica, Menashe, Gaon, all begin to be seen in state administration records. Still, non-Muslims did not occupy top state positions but were to be found in the lower rungs. Paradoxically, sometimes the very top positions were occupied by figures distrusted by the Sultans. Rhodes was in the Ottoman period an island of exile for those who were distrusted by the sultans or who were their political opponents. So for example a prince of the famous Giray family of Crimea who had challenged the sultan at the end of the 18th century was expelled there. This was a different kind of expulsion and exile than what we would think of these days: the person in question was given a house and supplied with the means of economic livelihood and sometimes appointed to high administrative office. The most famous such figure who was exiled to Rhodes was Namık Kemal who was the great patriot, reformer and critic of the sultan who became governor of the island in 1884. Islands are frequently places of exile because they are difficult to escape from. Rhodes was once such island, though it was never considered a hardship location.

Rhodes Jewry was a classic traditional Ottoman community beginning to undergo some major changes towards the end of the 19th century. As mentioned above, Tanzimat reforms, had begun to bear fruit. To these was added a new vector of change, the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle. This French-Jewish organization had established schools among all the major Ottoman Jewish communities by the end of the century. Rhodes Jewish communal leaders campaigned many times as of the 1880s to have an Alliance school established there. Among them was the future historian of Turkish Jewry, Avram Galante. Galante was born in Bodrum in Asia Minor to a family whose origins were in Rhodes. He was brought to the island for his elementary and middle school education and then went to Izmir where he studied in the famous Ottoman Turkish high school there (idadiye). After he finished his studies he came back to Rhodes as a teacher in the local idadiye. He became deeply involved in the affairs of the Jewish community and militated for the creation of a European-style school for the Jewish children on the island. He was successful together with a few other communal leaders in persuading the organization to create such an establishment there in 1900/1901. Galante is also noteworthy as the author of the first history of Rhodes Jewry which was published in 1935. He was also the first to memorialize the community by publishing in 1948 the first account of the Holocaust on the island (two of his sisters and their families had perished then).

What the Alliance achieved is something that one can observe later will deepen in the Italian period, the reorientation of the Jewish community increasingly towards Europe. This accelerated a trend that had already begun by the Ottoman elites themselves who were increasingly looking to emulate Europe at that time. The Alliance schools soon became the only Jewish communal schools on the island and established French as the language of instruction among Rhodes Jewry. French became the first European language that embedded itself next to Ladino. Hebrew remained important as the language of religion and of rabbinical learning.

In spite of the emergence of a handful of families as wealthy merchants and bankers by the end of the nineteenth century the bulk of community remained desperately poor. This constituted a main push factor that led many Jews to emigrate, a movement that began from the 1890s onwards to the Americas, to Africa,
especially towards southern Africa, to what is now Zimbabwe, and later Congo, and then South Africa. Rhodesli communities were established in the United States in Los Angeles, Seattle, Montgomery Alabama, and in New York City. Hence a global Rhodesli diaspora emerged in the twentieth century. Like many immigrant groups, the Rhodeslis did not lose contact with the island. Many men left first and then returned to find wives and then left again. In this respect the Rhodes Jewish diaspora was not unique. I should note here that what did make it unique was that it formed the only large Sephardic presence in sub-Saharan Africa.

The month of May in 1912 is a major turning point in the history of Rhodes. The Italians conquered the island. This was not thought-out design. Italy had long wanted its own empire like those of other European powers; it attacked Libya in 1911 but was met by fierce Ottoman resistance, mostly in the form of guerilla warfare. The Italian military then decided to attack other areas of the Ottoman Empire to force the Ottomans to give up Libya. There was an abortive attempt for force the Dardanelles straits by the Italian navy which was quickly repulsed. It then attacked Rhodes which did not have much of an Ottoman military presence and conquered it and the Dodecanese island chain quickly. The plan was to hold it briefly as part of a hoped for bargain over Libya. But other events intervened. Only a few months later the first Balkan War broke out, to be followed by the second Balkan War, and then World War One in 1914. So Italy held onto the islands whose status remained uncertain for a long time, until the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 when finally the Dodecanese islands were ceded by Turkey under great pressure from the European powers to Italy, much to the dismay of the Greek population there and of the Greek state that considered Rhodes and the rest of the Dodecanese Greek.

It is interesting to note that the Muslim population of Rhodes did not become subject to the forced population exchange between Greece and Turkey, because the island was now under internationally recognized Italian rule. Hence to this day there is a Turkish population in Rhodes.

Muslims and the Jews did not want the island to go to Greece and given that return to Turkish control was now impossible they preferred Italian rule and resisted Greek irredentism. The policy of Italianization began in earnest once the Dodecanese became formally an Italian possession. In 1925 the Alliance schools became Italian establishments and Italian displaced French as the language of instruction. The Italian rulers developed the fantasy that imagined the Jews as the main vectors among the native populations of “Italianness” (Italianità) because the Jews already spoke Ladino, a Romance-based language close to Italian. They favored the Jews among all the other groups, a classic divide and conquer policy of imperial domination. The Jews responded in kind and became loyal subjects under the new regime. Fascism under Mussolini had already triumphed in 1922, before the formal annexation of the island after the Lausanne Treaty. So the Jews of Rhodes were under Fascist Italian rule during the entire period of Italian rule except for the first ten years. Mario Lago, the first civilian governor of the Dodecanese (1923-1936) was relatively liberal in outlook and was largely pro-Jewish. A rabbinical seminary was created in 1928 under his aegis in order to spread Italian influence amongst Sephardic

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3 Jews from Rhodes in the diaspora came to be known by this Ladino inflection of theTurkish word Rodoslu which means “of Rhodes.”
4 8 October 1912 – 30 May 1913
5 29 June 1913 – 10 August 1913
Jewry. It lasted for 10 years. It is ironic that this rabbinical seminary that came to be the last such establishment in the Judeo-Spanish world was a product of the Italian colonial imagination and policy.

Italianization of course had its limits. The influence of four centuries of Ottoman rule did not disappear overnight. The Jewish community remained in many ways under the imprint of its Ottoman past. Relations between Jews and Muslims remained strong. The Turkish newspaper, Selam that was founded in 1926 and that lasted for a decade had as its editor-in-chief the Jewish journalist Hizkia Franco, and was very much part of a Muslim-Jewish joint enterprise. It used the Ottoman Arabic script even after Turkey switched to the romanized alphabet in the 1928. A great many of the articles in the newspaper were written by Hizkia Franco.

The latter is a very interesting figure. His life provides several insights into the world of Rhodes Jewry in the the last decades of its existence. He was born in Rhodes but grew up in Milas in southwestern Asia Minor. He received his initial education in Rhodes and then went back to Milas and then moved to Izmir. In Izmir, with his cousin, Gad Franco who would go onto become one of the major jurists of Kemalist Turkey, he established a Ladino newspaper, El Komersyal and was active in another one, El Nuvelista. He went on to become the president of the Izmir Jewish community and guided it through World War I. Hizkia Franco moved to Rhodes definitively in 1920 and was very active in the Jewish communal administration there, becoming three times the president of the community. He was also active in the administrative council of the rabbinical seminary. He edited two ephemeral Ladino newspapers in Rhodes. Most of his journalism on the was in Turkish, in the newspaper Selam. He also became the foreign correspondent in Rhodes of at least two Istanbul Turkish-Jewish newspapers and remained resolutely pro-Turkey in outlook. This is in evidence in his defense of the Turkish record on the island in the face of some negative depictions penned by Italian Jews. He was very favorably disposed towards the new Kemalist project in Turkey. He shared much of the political outlook of his distant relative Avram Galante whom I have mentioned before. Galante was an ardent supporter of the Turkification of the Jews of Turkey and supported Kemalism in spite of being critical of the alphabet change of 1928.

Hizkia Franco hence illustrates in his activities the continuity with Ottoman times, an aspect of Rhodes Jewish history in the Italian period which is not usually mentioned. 1912 appeared in retrospect like an Italian new dawn, but the old Ottoman world did not disappear overnight. The vast majority of the Jews of Rhodes had family ties in Turkey; they do not appear to have had any significant ties with Greece—even though 400 years ago they were brought from Salonica. Most had relatives in Izmir and in the cities of Asia Minor. The newspapers Selam is in many ways a perfect reflection of this aspect of their world, and Hizkia Franco is arguably its last representative, also in the realm of Ladino newspaper culture, continuing to write for Ladino newspapers in Turkey until his death in 1953.

(Hizkia Franco in 1944 escaped from the Nazis to Turkey. He could not stay there because he had never taken up citizenship in the new republic, having left in 1920. He made his way to British-mandatory Palestine. He returned to Rhodes in 1948. The Jews had disappeared from the island because of the Holocaust. He eventually moved to the Belgian Congo where one of his sons had established himself, and then to Salisbury (Harare), Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and died there in 1953. He penned one the very first accounts of the the Holocaust in Rhodes, The Jewish Martyrs of Rhodes and Kos; the book was written in French then translated by
I gave the year 1936 as my endpoint of this lecture. This is the year that constitutes a turning point in Rhodes because the long-serving governor, Mario Lago, left then and was replaced by a die-hard fascist, Cesare Maria De Vecchi. The skies darkened steadily for the Jews with the passage of Italian racial laws in 1938 which De Vecchi applied with determination on the island. Many Jews were dismissed from their jobs. Those Jews who had come to the island as of 1919 and their descendants were expelled and the Italian island citizenship that they had acquired was nullified. Close to a third of the island’s Jews had to leave as a result of these developments. German troops arrived on the island in 1943 after the fall of Mussolini. The Germans feared that the Italians would switch sides and occupied Rhodes, a highly strategic location in the eastern Mediterranean, to prevent this from happening. (The island was heavily bombed by the British at this time, with many of the bombs falling on the Jewish quarter. Many Jews fled from Rhodes town to outlying villages to escape the bombardment). The end for the Jews of Rhodes came swiftly in July 1944, when the entire community was deported to Auschwitz where it was exterminated.

I have been referring throughout my talk to various aspects of the very rich history of the Jews of Rhodes. Rhodes Jewry moved from being a classic Ottoman Jewish community to a distinctive trajectory under the Italians. And here I need to emphasize that this is the only Judeo-Spanish community of the core Ottoman Sephardi culture area that did not encounter a nation state after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire—instead it encountered colonialism. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed, Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia, and last but not least, Turkey emerged as post-imperial nation states. The path of Rhodes Jewry is in many ways the road not taken by the rest of the Ottoman Judeo-Spanish word. It resembles in fact the trajectory of most of the Jewish communities in majority Muslim lands that encountered imperialism and colonialism directly, to be followed by new nation states in the age of decolonization. The colonial experience is largely paradigmatic for most of the Jews in Muslim lands in modern times. Not so for the core Judeo-Spanish communities of the Ottoman world. Whereas the Jews of North Africa, the Jews of the Fertile Crescent, of actually of Iraq, of Egypt, all encountered, one way or another, European direct rule at various stages, Rhodes Jewry is the only community of the core Ottoman Judeo-Spanish area that saw a similar development. That makes its modern history exceptionally interesting.

The collapse of the old Ottoman order had profound consequences and heralded the rise of new nation states, economic dislocation, war, conquest, and last but not least was accompanied by ethnic cleansing. The Jews of Rhodes fell victim to the most extreme version of the latter. The history of Rhodes Jewry in modern times provides us a unique vantage point from which to observe the end of the old Levant and the Middle East.
AVERROËS LECTURES ON JEWISH COMMUNITIES IN MUSLIM LANDS

Averroës is the Latin name of ibn Rushd, the 12th century Andalusian polymath whose philosophical works integrated Islamic traditions with Ancient Greek thought. Over subsequent centuries, his commentaries on Plato and Aristotle came to influence Jewish and Christian thinkers throughout Europe, among them Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas, and Baruch Spinoza. The choice of Averroës as the name for the Lecture Series is significant because it points to a history of Cordoba’s Jewish-Muslim relations and the connections between Averroës and Maimonides, both of whom were committed to intellectual exchange and communal life across religious boundaries.

The Center for Near Eastern Studies (CNES), founded in 1957, is one of the earliest research centers at a U.S. university promoting interdisciplinary studies of the Middle East and the Islamic World. Over the decades, the Center has attracted an outstanding faculty and developed a world-class multi-lingual library collection for Middle East research. We offer an intellectual home for scholars from all over California, along with independent scholars from around the world who contribute to our lively programs of colloquia, lectures, conferences, teacher workshops, and public events.

The Series. Underwritten by a generous anonymous donor, this lecture series focuses on Jewish communities living in Muslim lands prior to the 20th century. In addition to shedding light on this often-neglected history, the lectures will serve an important outreach role to local community colleges and high schools in the Los Angeles metropolitan region, inviting students interested in the topic to attend the discussions.

Organized by the Center for Near Eastern Studies, the Averroës Lecture Series is cosponsored by UCLA’s Alan D. Leve Center for Jewish Studies and Center for the Study of Religion. The program offers quarterly lectures over two years by experts from around the world, publishes an occasional paper series, and culminates in a major conference featuring young scholars engaged in cutting-edge research on the topic.

The series builds on UCLA’s strength in having a large number of faculty across disciplines whose research touches on this topic, as well as a number of research centers interested in a series exploring the experiences and legacies of Jewish communities in the Muslim world.

CNES is extremely grateful for the vision, innovation and generosity of this donor whose valuable contribution has enabled us to expand programming at the Center.