



The Sword and the Red Hat: the Dress of Jewish Physicians Throughout the Ottoman Empire

A espada e o chapéu vermelho: o vestuário dos médicos judeus no Império Otomano

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Abstract: The Jewish sources that describe the non-medical dress and accessories of physicians are few. The current article focuses on the attire of Jewish physicians in the Ottoman Empire in the 16th-19th centuries. Two major issues regarding clothing items worn by Ottoman Jewish physicians are conspicuous in the halakhic historical literature: the hat worn by physicians and the practice of carrying a sword. Written testimonies and illustrations indicate that unlike other Jewish men who wore a yellow hat, Jewish physicians wore a red or blue hat, colors considered more prestigious. The elongated hat they wore was, however, shaped differently than that of Muslim physicians such that they could be discerned from their colleagues.

Keywords: History of clothing. Jewish physicians. Ottoman Empire.

Resumo: As fontes judaicas que descrevem o vestuário não médico e acessórios de médicos são escassas. O artigo atual concentra-se no traje de médicos judeus no Império Otomano nos séculos XVI-XIX. Dois problemas principais relacionados aos itens de vestuário usados por médicos judeus otomanos são evidentes: o chapéu usado pelos médicos e a prática de portar uma espada. Testemunhos escritos e ilustrações indicam que, ao contrário de outros homens judeus que usavam um chapéu amarelo, os médicos judeus usavam um chapéu vermelho ou azul, cores consideradas mais prestigiosas. O chapéu alongado que usavam, no entanto, tinha uma forma diferente da dos médicos muçulmanos, de modo que podiam ser distinguidos de seus colegas.

Keywords: História do vestuário. Médicos judeus. Império Otomano.

Introduction

Studies on Jewish clothing in eastern and western communities show that over the generations Jewish garments were formed and shaped by the encounter between intra-cultural and external elements, namely the world of Jewish law and custom and the links formed in different spheres between the Jews and their surrounding societies, religions, and cultures. Moreover, though non-Jewish Christian and Muslim society marked and excluded the Jews by means of dress codes, the Jews



themselves were also interested in segregating themselves from general society in order to preserve their unique religious character.¹

1 Purpose of the article

The Jewish sources address the physician's clothing are few. We find no Jewish sources that describe the non-medical dress and accessories of physicians in a detailed and organized manner. In this article I will focus on the attire of Jewish physicians in the Ottoman Empire in the 16th-19th centuries. I shall focus two issues: wearing red hat and carrying a sword.

2 The dress of Jewish doctors in the Ottoman period

The Ottoman Empire embraced the principles of the Muslim faith, whereby Muslims are not on par with members of the other monotheistic faiths. Jews and Christians were legally defined as protected individuals (*dhimmi*) who must pay a poll tax (*jizyah*), but they were also entitled to protection by the authorities. The rulers set a list of regulations aimed at perpetuating the low status of the Jews, such as typical clothing for each religious group. Later, different colors were introduced for their clothes, hats, and shoes, and they were forbidden to build taller buildings than those of Muslims, ride horses and mules, own Muslim slaves, purchase land, and carry swords.² In fact, only in the mid-nineteenth century did these restrictions begin to lapse following reforms introduced by the empire in many areas, including the treatment of *dhimmi*s. These reforms, announced in a list of edicts and regulations, were known by the general name of "*Tanzimat*".³

3 Wearing a red hat

In the Ottoman Empire, physicians belonged to the upper social class.⁴ Most of the Jewish physicians served as elders of the community and its representatives to the authorities and some were Torah scholars. As befit their high status, Jewish physicians were distinguished by their special dress. According to the testimony of German physician Leonhart Rauwolff (1535-1596), who travelled throughout the land of Israel and Syria in the latter half of the sixteenth century, Jewish physicians wore a tall hat made of red felt, while according to the testimonies below other Jews wore a yellow hat. He writes: "There are also some Jewish physicians, which instead of the yellow turbans, wear red high hats of scarlet they exceed in number the Turkish ones that go clothed like commonly more able and learned because they can read the

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¹ JUHASZ, 2014, p. 15-30.

² BAT YE'OR, 1985, p. 30, 56-57; GARDET, 1954, p. 348.

³ KAWTHARANI, 2018, p. 51-65.

⁴ AMAR; LEV, 2000, p. 71.



physical books of Galen and Avicen [=Avicenna] in their original languages Greek and Arabic which they generally understand”.⁵

Side by side with the written literature, illustrations made of Jewish physicians can also help identify their typical clothing items. A book by Nicolas de Nicolay, published in 1568, portrays the Medico Guideo, i.e., the Ottoman Jewish physician. Nicolay explains that instead of the yellow head covering (Tulbant iaune) that distinguished the Jews, Jewish physicians wear a red-crimson hat.⁶ Nicolas’ book also includes an illustration of a Jewish physician wearing a tall hat worn by the Sephardic Jews, a long, short-sleeved caftan, and carrying a book, a detail that appears in illustrations of other Jewish physicians as well (figure 1).



Figure 1: Medecin Juif, A Jewish physician in the Ottoman Empire wearing traditional costume. Woodcut of Nicolas de Nicolay, *Les quatre premiers livres des Navigation et peregrinations orientales* (1568)

According to Rubin, this is a portrait of Moses Hamon (c. 1490–1554) who served as physician of Suleiman the Magnificent.⁷ In the title of the engraving and also in Nicolas’ text the figure is presented as “Medecin Juif”, namely, a “Jewish physician”, with no specific link to Moshe Hamon, such that Rubin’s statement requires further proof.

Eugene Roger, a seventeenth century French missionary, recorded his observations of his travels in the book “La terre saint” (The Holy Land, 1646).⁸ He includes in the

⁵ RAY, 1693, p. 343.

⁶ NICOLAS DE NICOLAY, 1568, p. 105. This is also reported by Hans Dernschwam (1568-1494) in the middle of the 16th century. See RUBENS, 1967, p. 40.

⁷ RUBENS, 1967, p. 30. On Moses Hamon see HEYD, 1963, p. 152-170.

⁸ ROGER, 1646.



book an engraving by French painter and engraver Henri Bonnart, entitled “Juif de la Terre Saint” (Jews of the Holy Land),⁹ depicting a Jewish physician wearing fancy blue and red clothes and a tall hat that resembles that of the physician in Nicolay’s compilation (figure 2). Notably, this hat was typical of Jewish physicians, while Muslim physicians wore different hats (figure 3).



Figure 2 : Juif de la Terre Sainte
Eugene Roger, La terre sainte (1646), engraving by Henri Bonnart

9 On Henri Bonnart and his engraving see BRYAN, 1886, v. I, p. 155-156.

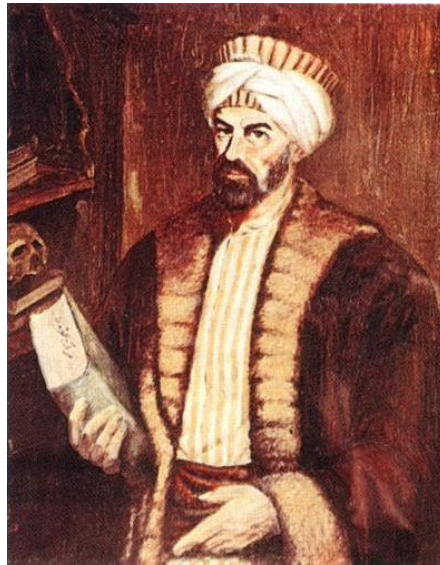


Figure 3. Şânîzade Mehmet Atallah Efendi (c. 1771–1826), an Ottoman kadı (qāḍi), physician and historian

4 Carrying a sword

In the Middle Ages, discriminatory regulations were also introduced with regard to carrying objects that symbolize an affiliation with the higher classes. One such status symbol was the sword, which was used not only for purposes of defense or as a weapon in military settings but also in everyday life as an expression of power, authority, domination, and justice.¹⁰ Carrying a sword was permitted to members of certain classes or to different functionaries and distinguished between these and those not so entitled, who were considered inferior. Throughout the Ottoman Empire, wearing a sword was a practice of the elites, such as governors, aristocrats, and consuls.¹¹ Jews were not allowed to carry weapons, however it is known that in rare cases notable Jews were granted this privilege.

One example is Raphael de Picciotto, Austrian consul in Aleppo, who was granted a hereditary title by the Austrian Emperor on August 11, 1806, whereupon the title “de” was added to his name.¹² French traveler Volney (1757-1820) relates that Raphael de Picciotto shaved his beard so that he could wear the official uniform and a sword. Yaron Harel, however, rejects the assumption that this indicates the loss of his Jewish identity, as these were merely external signs. As far as known, Picciotto remained a faithful Jew and was also a learned Torah scholar.¹³

¹⁰ On the symbolism of the sword in different cultures in the world see DEUTSCHER, KAISER; WETZLER2019, p. XIX, 119-186; JONES, 2023, p. 4.

¹¹ JONES, 2023, p. 37-74.

¹² BROWER, 1937, p. 263-265; HAREL, 1997, p. 171-186.

¹³ HAREL, 1997, p. 177.



Carrying a sword as an indication of the high social status of physicians is described in the written literature and in illustrations. Notably, only few sources attest to this practice and the impression is that it was not common. A portrait of renown physician and alchemist Paracelsus (circa 1493-1541), who lived and operated in Austria and Switzerland, shows him wearing extravagant clothes and holding a large impressive sword (figure 4).



Figure 4. Portrait of Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (Paracelsus). Etching by Romeyn de Hooghe (1645-1708).

There is no way of knowing whether he was indeed accustomed to carrying a sword or whether the artist used it to express his significant medical authority. In any case, many pictures of medieval and early modern European physicians do not show them with swords or weapons, aside from military European physicians (figure 5).



Figure 5: Military physician and his apprentice

Artist: Erhard Schoen Provenance: Germany Collection: Grafische Sammlung Albertina, ca. 1535

A halakhic debate on wearing a sword by Jewish physicians can be found in the writings of R. Moses Ḥagiz (1672-1750), an eighteenth-century Jerusalem sage.¹⁴ He writes:

In these countries where it is customary to wear a sword on one's thigh, Jewish physicians too are allowed to wear it on weekdays but never on the Sabbath. And indeed, to save even one Jewish soul there is room to be lenient and allow transgression of a *shevut* prohibition decreed by the sages, such as this and connecting a wagon.¹⁵

R. Ḥagiz, who lived under Ottoman rule, describes a reality in which physicians wore swords, but he does not note where this custom was practiced. As noted by Miri Shefer-Mossensohn, in pre-modern Ottoman society a considerable portion of the men carried weapons and this custom was evident among all social classes.¹⁶ We have yet to find explicit testimonies that the sword was part of the customary attire of Ottoman physicians, in either written texts or illustrations of physicians.

If this was a valid custom in the land of Israel and the vicinity or if some physicians practiced this custom personally to demonstrate their status, it is to be assumed that these were physicians who were known to the authorities. Ottoman territories

¹⁴ On R. Moses Ḥagiz see BENAYAU, 1948, p. 1-28; PROMKIN, 1928, v. II, p. 124-134; YA'ARI, 1951, p. 363-371.

¹⁵ ḤAGIZ, 1887, 65a.

¹⁶ SHEFER-MOSSENSOHN, 2007, p. 547.



encompassed different types of physicians, of which the most prominent were “certified” physicians, called in Jewish sources “distinct physicians” (*rofeh muvhak*) or “expert physicians” (*rofeh mumhe*), who had studied at recognized institutions, and “popular” physicians who had received no recognized medical training and were not explicitly mentioned in the official records.¹⁷ Hence, it is to be assumed that physicians who wore swords as a sign of their status were those who had been officially certified by the authorities and who served in the supervised public sector.

R. Ḥagiz relates to the practice of wearing a sword among physicians in general and does not specifically indicate a certain Jewish physician or a question he was asked on the matter by one of the Jewish physicians. Hence, it is hard to know for certain whether he is describing a realistic situation where Jewish physicians wore swords or if this was a theoretical halakhic debate where a practice in non-Jewish society was projected on Jewish physicians. We shall further note that in illustrations of Ottoman Jewish physicians they are not portrayed with a sword or any other weapon and it seems that these objects were not distinct characteristics.

R. Ḥagiz permits Jewish physicians to carry weapons only on weekdays and not on the Sabbath. But he does not explain the reason for the halakhic deliberation, his underlying considerations, and his decision. With regard to weekdays, he permits this because the physician must demonstrate his status and this does not stem from a desire to resemble the non-Jewish environment.

The issue of wearing weapons on the Sabbath in the public domain was discussed in ancient Jewish sources. In the Mishna in Tractate Shabat (6:4) the *Tannaim* (Jewish sages in the Roman period) are disputed in this matter. According to the sages, wearing a weapon is an abomination and therefore it is forbidden, while R. Eliezer claims that weapons are decorative instruments for men and therefore it is permitted, and the halakha follows the sages. Physicians wear a sword not in order to save lives but rather it serves as a type of “jewelry” intended to demonstrate their status and authority and therefore it is forbidden. R. Ḥagiz claims, however, that if not carrying weapons will prevent the doctor from reaching the patient and treating him, then this should be permitted as it is only a prohibition introduced by the sages.

Conclusion

Two major issues regarding clothing items worn by Ottoman Jewish physicians are conspicuous in the halakhic historical literature: the hat worn by physicians and the practice of carrying a sword. Written testimonies and illustrations indicate that unlike other Jewish men who wore a yellow hat, Jewish physicians wore a red or blue hat, colors considered more prestigious. The elongated hat they wore was,

¹⁷AMAR; LEV, 2000, p. 72-73; DRIANOV, 1935, p. 49; MURPHY, 1992, p. 376-403.



however, shaped differently than that of Muslim physicians such that they could be discerned from their colleagues. R. Moshe Hagiz essentially permitted Jewish physicians to carry a sword, however this does not mean that it was a common custom. Carrying a sword was customary among men in the early Ottoman period, in all social classes. We have yet to find testimonies that swords or other weapons were an inseparable part of the attire of physicians or a distinct mark of their status. Some physicians may have boasted a sword or dagger, but no conclusions can be reached from this regarding physicians at large.

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Fig 2: Juif de la Terre Sainte. Eugene Roger, *La terre sainte* (1646), engraving by Henri Bonnart .From: *Recueil d'estampes de Costume du XVIIe Siecle*, Paris, ca. 1680.

Fig. 3: Şânîzade Mehmet Ataullah Efendi (c. 1771–1826), an Ottoman kadı (qāḍi), physician and historian

Fig.4: Portrait of Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim (Paracelsus). Etching by Romeyn de Hooghe (1645-1708). From: The Dutch edition of Gottfried Arnold's *History of the Church and of Heresy*, 1701. From: Wellcome Images, <https://wellcomeimages.org/indexplus/image/V0004461.html>

Fig. 5: Military physician and his apprentice. Artist: Erhard Schoen Provenance: Germany Collection: Grafische Sammlung Albertina, ca. 1535.



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