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**Matt Goldish: Jewish Questions**

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CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF  
 OTTOMAN-ITALIAN WARS (GREECE, 1716)

(Hakham Solomon Amarillo, *Kerem Shlomoh*, H.M. #29 and 31)



### Introduction

Lepanto and Patras are neighboring cities in southwestern Greece. Lepanto is best known to historians as the site of a critical naval battle in 1571 in which the Ottoman fleet was beaten by Christian forces. Nevertheless, the city of Lepanto itself, which had become a Venetian port in 1407 and later fell to the Turks in 1499, remained in Ottoman hands. From 1687 to 1699 Lepanto was reoccupied by the Venetians, but at the peace of Karlowitz it reverted to Ottoman control once again. Patras had a small Jewish community since ancient times. The town was held by the Ottomans from 1460 until the Venetians took it in 1532. Throughout the seventeenth century the Ottomans and Venetians fought back and forth over Patras, and the Jewish population fled when life there became untenable. When the Turks decisively recaptured Patras in 1715, the Jews returned and lived in relative peace. It is presumably on the background of these battles that the following episodes occurred.

Bibliography: *EJ*, s.v. "Greece," "Patras."

(29) *Question*: Reuben owned a house in the city of Lepanto that was mortgaged to the *Vakıf* [Turkish religious foundation], and he could not find the means to redeem it from them. It remained in the hands of the Turks who ran the *Vakıf*, for Reuben had given them permission to sell the house in order to pay the debt he owed them. Now, no Jew would purchase the house from the Turks without the permission of Reuben, until finally Reuben came and gave permission to Simeon to buy the house from the Turks. Simeon did indeed buy the house from the Turks, and they prepared a deed for him according to their laws, statutes, and customs.

After Simeon had purchased the house, the city was given up to the

Christians, who had been fighting for it. The house was already in the buyer's hands under the Turks, as was mentioned, before the Christians captured the city. But then, the Turks came back and took the city away from the Christians! A rule was issued by the sultan that anyone owning a house in that city would continue to own the land, but the structure would now belong to the sultan. Anyone who wanted ownership of his house would have to pay the value of the structure to the sultan. Builders were brought to calculate the value of every house structure. Simeon came and paid the sultan the value of his house—the one he had previously purchased from them when they held the mortgage on it. They made him out a deed according to their law and custom.

Now, the heirs of Reuben have come forward to file suit against Simeon and remove the house from his possession without paying any money or price. They claim the house belonged to Reuben, their benefactor, and they know nothing whatsoever about what all occurred concerning the house. Simeon's version is explicit and needs no proof. Guide us, our teacher and righteous instructor, as to whether Reuben's heirs have a legitimate case against Simeon and can take the house from him without payment or price. For he has two deeds in hand, one showing he bought the house from the Turks in charge of the *Vakif*, and the second from the government, as mentioned above. Moreover, the first purchase took place with Reuben's permission. May your reward be multiplied by heaven.

**Response:** [Hakham Amarillo replies that it is obvious Reuben's heirs have no case.]

(31) To Larissa (may God preserve it), at the request of the wise and great Rabbi Moses Mishan (may God watch over him!), in the month of Tevet 5476 [1716].

**Question:** Instruct us, our teacher, the great light of Israel, concerning that which has happened under the sun and is already known to be true. The city of Old Patras was in the hands of the Greeks for thirty years. Some of the homes belonging to Jews, members of our covenant, had been destroyed and were rebuilt under Greek rule. Others were completely destroyed, and in their place are orchards and olive groves.

After thirty years, the sultan (may God raise him up) waged war and battled his enemies until he overcame them and captured all these cities, including Old Patras. A decree was announced stating that all men, women, elders, and youths should return to their dwellings, their courtyards and fortresses, but with the following condition: any house that

was built new under the Greeks must be sold, and its proceeds deposited in the coffers of the sultan (may God raise him up), whether it belonged to Turks or to Jews. However, any that was not built new, but remained as it had been under the rule of our lord the sultan (may God raise him up) in earlier years [before the Greek conquest] would be given for each person to return to his birthright, whether Muslim or Jew.

We now come to solicit the view of our master [Hakham Amarillo], so he will guide us in which path to take in dealing with houses that were built new, and sold according to the command of the sultan (may God raise him up). If a house had belonged to Reuben, and was bought [from the sultan through forfeiture] by Simeon, does the transaction stand up and remain valid according to the [Jewish] laws and statutes, or not? May your reward be multiplied by heaven.

**Response:** [Hakham Amarillo says that according to both Jewish law and communal agreements, Simeon may keep the house; Reuben no longer has a claim on it.]