

Who shall I say is calling?

"Torah. Piety. Humility.

The lot and the portion

**Of Solomon, the son of Jacob ben haRosh, may
his memory be a blessing**

**He came to his ancestors in Nisan in the year of
5109"**

From a tombstone in

Toledo

It is the spring of 1349 or 5109 on the Hebrew Calendar, and the Plague reached Toledo, the capital of Old Castille, before it was Spain.

Between 1348 and 1353, it is estimated that 30 to 60 per cent of the population of Europe died from the Plague caused by the bacterium *Yersinia Pestis*.

Who shall live and who shall die?

My talk is based on the book "After the Black Death," by Rabbi Susan L. Einbinder. She is a Professor at the University of Connecticut. She writes about the epitaphs on tombstones from the

ancient Jewish cemetery in Toledo and the anti-Jewish violence which broke out at the time of the Plague.

*From a tombstone in
Toledo*

She is Madam Sitbona,

* * * *

**She died of the plague in the month of Sivan in
the year of 5109.**

* * * *

Happy are you and happy your lot

**For your piety and righteousness were abundant
And you have provided well for yourself on your
journey.**

From your skillful acts

And the rectitude of your charity and deeds

Find a spacious place in the garden of paradise

**AT the end of days, He will raise you up and
compensate your actions.**

**There is hope for your future with the
resurrection of His pious few.**

**He will say to you, "Do not grieve. Shake off the
dust! Arise and return!"**

Anti-Jewish riots did not come to Toledo, but in Catalonia, there was plague and violence.

In the summer of 1348, the Plague reached the region of Barcelona. On May 17, anti-Jewish riots broke out in Barcelona and spread westward. In Tarrega, 70 miles due west of Barcelona, the Jewish quarter was attacked on the Tenth of Av. (The NINTH was the Sabbath when the fast was not observed). According to a 1349 petition submitted by local Jews, "certain individuals" in Tarrega incited "the people" to break down the gates to the Jewish quarter with axes and other arms, after which the

mob proceeded to vent its wrath. With a cry of "death to the traitors!", they entered Jewish homes with "spears, stones, and arrows", looting property and burning financial accounts.

Rabbi Chayim Galipapa, in nearby Huesca, reported:

"And the people of Tarrega also rose up and struck their Jews, and more than three hundred souls were lost. They dragged them to an empty cistern and looted their goods. Those who survived fled for their lives to the home of (Christian) acquaintances and stayed hidden until the fury had passed. On

that rash day, they were left naked (stripped) of all they owned but without shame."

Moses Nathan and his brother Solomon Nathan were financiers. They lent money to the municipality of Tarrega and the king. Moses was also a man of letters. His writings in Catalan and Hebrew have survived.

His lament "Mi gam bakhem" was written for observance of the Ninth of Av in 1349. Rabbi Einbinder believes it was based on the riots of the 10th of Av 1348. She detects allusions to the Plague.

Moses Nathan wrote

- 1. If only one of you would shut the doors,
whose bucket does not overflow,**
- 2. Who does not weep for the destruction of
Jerusalem, the joyous city of multitudes.**
- 3. Wail and beat your hands for the finest gold,
how pure gold has dimmed.**
- 4. I heard the lion's roar and the voice of the cub
on the day I left the prosperous town**
- 5. Going barefoot on unknown paths, hungry,
thirsty, and penniless.**

6. I failed to tend my splendid house, my very own vineyard; strangers consumed it and laid it waste.

7. Look, O Rock, for they have destroyed Your Sanctuary, and taken possession of my towers.

8. they have [filled] spring and land [with stones]. The king's palace and his storerooms

9. They have turned into rubble. They have ruined and polluted David's fortress, which was built for defense.

10. The destruction was worse because there was no one anywhere to pay heed when men tormented their brothers.

11. The faithful city was filled with injustice.

There was no one to judge between claims or blood.

12. The grievances of orphans and widows were not judged, for trustworthy men were gone.

**13. My familiars have ceased supplicating You
--- those who protect us and turn back Your
wrath.**

**14. Return me from captivity to Your
cornerstone, to my mother's house, my parent's
room.**

**15. Do this once more for the sake of Your
righteousness: forgive my debt and erase my
sin.**

**16. Take comfort, for relief will come. Joy will
increase; sorrow and sighing will flee.**

**17. *"Gather the flock of My pasture from city
and kin, for Torah shall come forth from Zion."***

**18. Rejoice with her in joy and gladness: in her
are found Torah and sounds of song.**

So wrote Moses

Nathan

"Tarrega's victims cannot be embraced by current theories of trauma," Rabbi Einbinder writes. Their writings suggest that the survivors did not see themselves as victims. They may have felt betrayed by powers greater than they. They may have felt chastised by God or by civil or religious authorities. Their world may have been shattered by pestilence, war, famine and fear. But they did not cease thinking in terms of community and rebirth.

As an individual survivor, Moses Nathan described himself, his loved ones and his home--in the language of communal honor and dignity, order, and meaning. It would take other kinds of blows,

recurring waves of plague and violence, new kinds of terror, and heartbreaking loss to render that language inoperable, Rabbi Einbinder writes.

The following is on the tombstone in Toledo of Reb Meir haLevi:

His soul also yearned and ached

To serve in God's dwelling in His holy place

To be a light in the light of life

. . . .

And seven days before his death

He set forth the dove from him

To find a place of rest

And she found rest for her foot

Then her husband followed her

**At the End of Days when the bones of the
sleeping are stirred**

May God give light to the eyes of them both.

With the plague of 5780 still with us, with fears of a second wave before the first wave has retreated, how are we dealing with our prospects? With thankfulness that we are alive? Mourning those

who succumbed? Fearful of the future? Confident in God?

When we read Unetanah Tokef today, we will experience it as we never have before.

On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed - how many shall pass away and how many shall be born, who shall live and who shall die, who in good time, and who by an untimely death, who by water and who by fire, who by sword and who by wild beast, who by famine and who by thirst, who by earthquake and who by plague,

As Leonard Cohen interpreted Unetah Tokef in his
song:

And who by fire, who by water

Who in the sunshine, who in the night time

Who by high ordeal, who by common trial

Who in your merry merry month of May

Who by very slow decay

And who shall I say is calling?