



1. Rav Maimon, father of the Rambam, **אגרת נחמה**

אחינו בני ישראל הנתונים בצרה, המקום ירחם עליכם במהרה!... היסורים הבאים מאת הבורא על בריותיו הם לתכלית טובה... האומה הישראלית, אשר בה בחר ד' מכל האומות הקדמוניות, לא יחליף אותה ולא ימירה באומה אחרת... והעיקר לבלי להבטל מן התפילה, ואם מפני חמת המציק והאונס לא יוכלו להתפלל את התפילה הקבועה בזמנה, ערב ובוקר וצהרים, יתפללו תפילה קצרה, ובלבד שיוציאו בשפתם מדי יום ביומו, כי המה בני העם הישראלי ובתורתם יחזיקו בקרב לבם...

Our brethren, the Jews who are placed into trouble, may Gd soon have mercy upon you... The troubles which come from Gd upon His creations are for a good purpose... Gd will not exchange and will not trade in the Jewish nation, which He chose among all of the first nations, for another nation... The essence is that one should not cease praying. Even if, due to the anger of the oppressor and due to the compulsion, one cannot pray the established prayer at its proper time, evening, morning and noon, one should still pray an abbreviated prayer. At least, they should recite daily that they are members of the Jewish nation, holding their Torah in their hearts.

Who are the players?

Agostinho Micas / Shemuel Nasi	Father of Dona Gracia
Beatrice de Luna Micas / Gracia Nasi	Dona Gracia Nasi
Francisco Mendes / Tzemach Benvenisti	Husband of Dona Gracia
Ana Reina Mendes	Daughter of Dona Gracia
Diogo Mendes / Meir Benvenisti	Brother-in-law of Dona Gracia (Francisco's brother)
Brianda	Sister and sister-in-law of Dona Gracia (Married Diogo)
Joseph Micas / Joseph Nasi	Nephew and son-in-law of Dona Gracia (Married Ana Reina)

Biography

- 1510 – Birth into a publicly Christian family of Nasi / Micas
- 1528 – Marriage to Francisco Mendes
- 1537 – Birth of her daughter, Ana Reina
- 1538 – Francisco dies; Flight from Portugal to Antwerp
- 1542 – Death of Diogo
- 1544 – Flight to Italy; Strife with Brianda; Venice and Ferrara and Venice
- 1553 – Moving to Constantinople
- 1556 – Ancona
- 1558 – Tiberias
- 1569 – Passes away

2. Cecil Roth, *A History of the Marranos*, pg. 125

Naturally, the first requirement of the Marranos was a translation of the Bible. This was therefore among the earliest products of the Ferrara press, where one based upon the old traditional rendering current among Spanish Jews, literal to a degree, appeared in the same year as the work just mentioned. It was published in two editions, virtually identical. The one, intended for Christian eyes, was dedicated to the Duke of Ferrara, bore the date 1553, and purported to have been produced by Duarte Pinel at the expense of Jeronimo de Vargas. The other, which was for the Jews, was inscribed to Dona Gracia Mendes, contained a list of the Haftarot (Prophetic lessons), gave the year according to the era of the Creation, and furnished the editor and publisher with their Jewish names, Abraham Usque and Yom Tob Athias, instead of the Marrano counterparts. This edition became classical. It was repeatedly republished, in full or in separate books, for many years to come. Frequent re-issues appeared at Amsterdam; and subsequent revised editions were invariably based upon it. It was from the Ferrara Bible that successive generations of the Marranos re-learned their Judaism.

3. Rambam, Iggeret haShemad

From Part I: We would respond to the body of this man's statement even though it is long, weak and burdensome, were it not for our pity upon the great kindness Gd performed with us, meaning the power of speech, as it is written, 'Who gave Man a mouth.' It is appropriate for a person to have greater pity upon his power of speech than upon his property, not increasing his speech, minimizing his discussion....

It is fitting to know that a person should not speak and orate before the nation's ears until he reviews that which he wishes to say once, twice, thrice and four times, studying it well, before speaking... This is regarding speech; when a person will engrave it by hand and write it on a book, it would be appropriate for him to review it one thousand times, were it possible...

From Part II: If the great pillars of the world – Moshe, Eliyahu and Yeshayahu and the ministering angels – were so punished when they raised just a few words against the Jewish people, then how much more so the lightest of the world's lightweights, who would loose his tongue upon the communities of Israel, sages and their students, Kohanim and Levites, to call them sinners and wicked people and non-Jews and people who are disqualified from testimony and deniers of the Gd of Israel! One who writes this in his hand, what will be his punishment? And these people did not rebel against Gd seeking sweetness and benefit, and they did not abandon religion and distance themselves from it in order to achieve benefit and temporal pleasure – "They wandered because of weapons, because of outstretched swords, because of the aligned bow, because of the weight of war (Yeshayah 21:15)."...

It is also known that Rabbi Meir was caught [to be compelled] for *shmad* in one of the *shmadot* in which the sages of Israel were killed. Those who knew him said, "Are you not Meir?" To which he replied, "I am not." They said to him, "Eat this if you are not a Jew," and there was pig before them, and he said, "I will eat it willingly," and he pretended to eat it but he didn't eat it....

From Part III: I will now explain the error in which this one who increased emptiness fell. Achav ben Omri, who denied Gd and worshipped idols – and about whom Gd testified, "There was never another like Achav" – fasted for two and a half hours, and then, the sages taught, the decree upon him was voided... Gd did not cheat him of the reward...

If Gd would give good reward for small good deeds for these well-known heretics, then how could Gd not reward Jews who were forced into *shmad* and who performed mitzvot in private? Would there be no distinction for him between those who performed mitzvot and those who did not, those who served Gd and those who did not?...

From Part IV: Know that in all of the *shmadot* of the time of the sages, they were instructed to violate the mitzvot in some action, as the Talmud records that they were told not to involve themselves in Torah, not to circumcise their children, or to live with their wives when they were *niddot*. But in this *shmad* they are not obligated to do anything, only to speak. One who wishes to fulfill all 613 mitzvot in private may do so, without liability....

When we are asked whether one should be killed or make this declaration, we tell him to declare it and not be killed. But he should not remain in that king's land, but rather he should sit in his house until he leaves it if he must, and he should engage in his activities in secret, for we have never seen such a remarkable *shmad*, in which one is not compelled in anything other than speech....

One who faces this *shmad* must follow the conduct I advise: That he should place between his eyes to practice and fulfill all mitzvot he can practice. Should it occur that he violate many mitzvot or desecrate Shabbat, he should not transport anything he is prohibited to transport [on Shabbat], and he should not say, "What I have already violated is greater than that regarding which I am now careful." Rather, he should be careful in anything he is able....

4. Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yesodei haTorah 5:3-4

בשעת הגזרה והוא שיעמוד מלך רשע כנבוכדנצר וחביריו ויגזרו גזרה על ישראל לבטל דתם או מצוה מן המצוות, יהרג ואל יעבור אפילו על אחת משאר מצוות...
...אחת משאר מצוות...

וכל מי שנאמר בו יהרג ואל יעבור ועבר ולא נהרג הרי זה מחלל את השם.... ואעפ"כ מפני שעבר באונס אין מלקין אותו...

During the time of a decree, when a wicked king like Nevuchadnezzar arises, decreeing upon Israel to nullify their religion or one of their commandments, the Jew should be killed rather than violate even one of the other [non-Big Three] commandments...

Regarding anyone for whom the law is to be killed rather than violate the commandment, and he violated the commandment and was not killed: He desecrates G-d's Name... but because he was compelled, we do not punish him.

5. Rabbi Yehudah haChasid, Sefer Chasidim 704

יש שנהרג על קידוש השם ויש צדיקים שאין נהרגין אלא מתים בידי שמים על מטותיהם ואילו היו בשעת השמד היו נהרגין ולמה יפסידו, אלא שפוחתין להם מן השכר כנגד טובת הנאה שחפצים שלא לבוא לידי כך כדי שיחיו ויולידו בנים ואותם הנהרגים עודפים עליהם שכר כנגד הנאת העוה"ז שלא קבלו

Some people are killed to honor Gd's Name, and some righteous people are not killed, but rather they die at Gd's Hand upon their beds. Had they been in a *shmad* situation, they would have been killed, so why should they lose? Their reward is only reduced by the benefit they received in fulfillment of their desire not to enter such a situation, but to live and bear children. Those who are killed receive greater reward, for the benefit they did not receive in this world.

6. Maharil, Responsum 99

ועל דבר הקדיש ליתמי הקדושים, אנא לא שמיע לי מה שכתב מר בשם רבינו הקדוש, אבל שמעתי אחרים אומרים כן ולא השגחתי בהם כי נראה לי דבר פשוט דיש לאומרו, וטעמא דידי מאבלות שכתב מהר"ם דהוי מטעם משפט רשעים בגיהנם י"ב חדש... וכן שמעתי מרבתי דהכי נפק עובד' בגזיר' פראג שיש שרצו שלא להתאבל על הקדושי', וסוף הסכימו הגדולים בימים ההם להתאבל. והיא גופא נראה לי אע"ג שהם קדושי עליון ובמדרגה העליונה ואין בריה יכולה לעמוד במחיצתם מ"מ מי מפס דיש עבירות שצריכות מיתה משונה וצערא דקברא כמו שכתב ר' שמחה... דאי לא תימא הכי מי שיש לו אב ידוע ומפורסם בתורה ובחסידות מנעוריו אטו מי לא בעי קדיש, הא מיתה ממרקת ויום כפורים ותשובה, וזימנין איכא כולהו בהד גברא. אלא חיישינן...

As far as kaddish for the orphans of holy ones: I never heard what the master (Or Zarua?) cited from our holy master (Maharam?), but I have heard others say this and I did not listen, for it appears obvious to me that one should recite kaddish. My reason is from avelut, which Maharam says is observed because the wicked are in Gehennom for twelve months...

I heard from my masters that some people wanted not to mourn for the holy ones after the decree in Prague, but the sages of those days decided to mourn. This appears correct to me; although they are the highest holy ones, on a high level such that none may enter their perimeter, still, who could guess? Some sins require an abnormal death and the pain of the grave, as Rabbeinu Simchah wrote... Otherwise, if one had a father who was known and famed for greatness in Torah and piety from his youth, would his death not require kaddish? Death cleanses, as do Yom Kippur and teshuvah, and sometimes a person experiences all three, but we are still concerned...

7. Rabbi Yisrael Isserlein, Terumat haDeshen, Responsum 199

שאלה: כל העבירות שנאמרו בהן יעבור ואל יהרג כגון בשאר עבירות בר מע"ז וג"ע וש"ד, אם יתרצה אחד ליהרג כדי שלא יעבור ובא למלוך, האיך מורין לו?

תשובה: יראה דהאי מילתא תליא בפלוגתא דרבוותא. הרמב"ם כתב על כה"ג שאם ימסור עצמו ליהרג הרי זה מתחייב בנפשו... ובס' מצות קטן כתב דמידת חסידות הוא ליהרג ולא יעבור כה"ג... והיה נראה והואיל דפלוגתא דרבוותא אזלינן לקולא באיסור בסכנת נפשות, כדפסק תלמודא... אמנם י"ל הכא דלענין קידוש השם שלא הקפידה תורה על אבוד נפשות מישראל, ואמרה מסור עצמך על קידוש השם לא ילפינן לה משאר ספיקא דלית בהו משום קידוש השם. ונראה דלפי הענין ושרואין אנו כוונתו מורין לו.

Regarding the sins for which we say to violate rather than be killed, aside from idolatry, sexual immorality and murder: Were one to desire to be killed rather than transgress, and were he to ask us, how would we direct him?

It appears that this is subject to rabbinic debate: The Rambam wrote that if he would give himself to be killed, he would be liable for his life... The Sefer Mitzvot Katan wrote that it would be pious to be killed rather than transgress...

It appears that since this is a rabbinic debate we should rule leniently regarding a threat to life, as is ruled in the Talmud... However, one could say that regarding sanctifying Gd's Name the Torah is not concerned for the loss of life from Israel; the Torah says: Give yourself to sanctify Gd's Name. Therefore, we do not deduce from other cases of doubt regarding law, in which sanctification of Gd's Name is not involved. It appears that we should rule for him based on the specific case, and based on what we discern of his intent.

8. Baalei haTosafot, Responsum 128

והואיל והנכסים בחזקת יתמי, אין להוציא מידם אלא בראייה ברורה. ואילו שהם אנוסים נראה שהם פסולים להוציא ממון. דהואיל וקיימא לן בע"ז יהרג ואל יעבור והנה עינינו הרואות שרוב ישראל מוסרים עצמם ונהרגים על קידוש השם, ואפילו ריקים שבנו, ואפילו אחד מני אלף אין כופר, הבא להכשירם להוציא מיתמי עליו הראייה. וגם לכאורה נראה שבני אדם שהם אנוסים שהם יכולים לישמט לאלתר, והם מאחרים כמה ימים, נמצא שיש לחוש שאע"פ שתחילתם באונס סופם ברצון. וגם מסתמא אי אפשר שלא עברו עבירה אחת שלא באונס אלא לתיאבון. ומשומד לתיאבון פסול לעדות לכ"ע אפילו מדאורייתא... וגם העולם מחזיקים אותם גרוועים מאד שלא להתחתן בהן ובקרוביהם, יותר משאר בעלי עבירות.

Since the assets are held by the orphans, one may not remove them other than with clear proof. Those who were compelled are ineligible to cause money to change hands [via their testimony]; since we say regarding idolatry that one must be killed rather than transgress, and most of Israel, even the empty ones among us, give their lives and are killed to sanctify Gd's Name, and even one in one thousand does not deny Gd, therefore the burden of proof is upon one who would accept them [as witnesses]. It also appears that those who are compelled can escape soon after, and yet these people delayed for days, and so there is room to suspect that what began with compulsion concluded with volition. Further, it is likely impossible that they did not violate a single sin for desire, without compulsion, and one who assimilates in order to feed desire is invalid as a witness according to all, even biblically... Further, the world assumes such people to be most lowly, and does not wed them or their relatives, moreso than with other transgressors.

9. Rosh, Responsum 32:8

על אודות הנשים אשר לא היה להם כח לעמוד בהיכל המלך, ובעת הגזרה החליפו מפני אימת מות; וכאשר מצאו נס ונמלטו, חזרו לדתן. אמת הדבר כי מאד הרעו לעשות, וצריכות חרטה ותשובה וקבלת יסורין יותר מהמחליפין שלא בשעת הגזרה, כי פרהסיא הוא; ושעת הגזרה אמרו חז"ל אפי' לשנויי ערקתא דמסאנא אסור לשנויי. ודוגמא לדבר, למלך גדול שהיו לו הסרים למשמעתו, וקצתם סרו מעליו ושוב נכלמו וקבלם המלך. לימים נזדווג לו מלך גדול בחיל כבוד, ואותו המלך קבץ כל משרתיו ואמר להם: אתם רואים שכנגדי ידו תקפה עלי, אשר יבחר בי ובכבודי יקרב אלי, ויערו נפשם למות עלי. מקצתם נזדווגו אחר המלך וקצתם נסוגו אחר והמלך נלהם ונצח להם; והנסוגים אחר בקשו להשלים עמו בתיקון קל, כאשר השלימו כבר הסרים מעליו, ולא נאות המלך לקבלם כי אם בתיקון רב. כן מלכו של עולם, מתפאר בישראל כאשר מוסרים נפשם לקדושתו; כמו שנאמר: ויאמר לי עבדי אתה ישראל אשר בכך אתפאר

Regarding women who lacked the strength to stand firm in the king's palace, and during the decree they changed [their religion] due to fear of death, and then they fled when they could, and returned to their religion: It is true that what they did was very bad, and they must regret it and repent and accept suffering to a greater extent than those who change [their religions] at other times, for this was public, and the sages say that at the time of a decree one may not even alter a shoelace.

This may be compared to a king who had many followers, and then some of his followers strayed, until they were embarrassed and the king accepted them back. Some time later he battled a king who had great armies, and he gathered all of his servants and told them, "You see that my opponent has a stronger hand than I do. Those who choose me and my honor should draw near, and give their lives to die for me." Some of them followed the king, and some of them retreated. The king fought and won, and those who had retreated wanted to make peace with light repentance, like those who had strayed originally. The king did not agree to accept them without great repentance. So, too, the King of the Universe glories in Israel because they give their lives for His holiness, as it is written, "And He said to me: You are My servant, Israel, in whom I am glorified."

10. Rashi, Responsum 70

מן המשפחות המתגרות זו בזו בחירופים וגנאים, ונשמע לקהל קבלון וגזרו עליהם שלא ירגילו בכך. וקפצה אחת ונשבעה קודם גזירת הקהל שלא יקבלו עליהם הגזירה ולא חדלו מחירופיהם. וקפץ אחר והזכיר [לן] שנשמע בימי השמד. ועמד אחד מהם ואמר לזה, הס מהזכיר שהרי נגזר על כך, ולא הזכיר לו מי גזר עליה. ועכשיו נודע שרבינו גרשם גזר שכל המזכיר זה יהא בנידוי.

Two families fought with attacks and insults, and the community caught wind of it and decreed that they not continue thus. One of them jumped up and swore that his family would not accept the decree, and they did not cease their attacks. The other jumped up and reminded him that he had assimilated during the time of *shmad*. Another arose and said, "You cannot mention that, for it has been decreed!" without mentioning who had issued the decree. Indeed, it is now known that Rabbeinu Gershom decreed that one who mentions such a thing should be ex-communicated.

Books on Dona Gracia

History

- Dona Gracia and the House of Nasi (Cecil Roth)
- The Long Journey of Gracia Mendes (Marianna D. Birnbaum)
- The Woman who Defied Kings: The Life and Times of Dona Gracia Nasi (Andree Aelion Brook)

Historical Fiction

- Daring Daughter of the Covenant, Emilie Barnett
- The Ghost of Hanna Mendes, Naomi Ragen