

A Hebrew Expense Account from Edirne, c. 1735

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Context

Academic interest in Ottoman food consumption and cuisine advanced impressively in the last two decades, both in correlation with the general trend of cultural studies and material culture; and with Turkey's growing interest and attraction with its Ottoman imperial past.¹ Yet, very little has been done in regard to the culinary culture of Sephardi-Ottoman Jews besides the work of Karen Gerşon Şarhon, who mostly deals with the later phase – late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.² This article presents two Jewish expense accounts, which are practically shopping lists, the only ones found to date from the Ottoman realms. This is part of a larger project, and it demonstrates the importance of Hebrew manuscripts as a source for original data, in this case for food culture and food consumption among Ottoman Jews.

Ottoman Jewry at the eighteenth century remained an urban society, but was different than that of the sixteenth century. It was more homogenic, Sephardi in its nature, and culturally much closer to the surrounding Muslim society and acculturated in it, both in the western parts of the empire, and in its Arabic speaking regions. Each

¹ See for example: Tülay Artan, "Aspects of the Ottoman Elite's Food Consumption: Looking for "Staples", "Luxuries", and "Delicacies" in a Changing Century", Donald Quataert (ed.), *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550-1922: An Introduction*, Albany 2000, 107-200; Suraiya Faroqhi and Christoph Neumann (eds.), *The Illuminated Table, the Prosperous House: Food and Shelter in Ottoman Material Culture*, Ergon in commission: Wurzburg, 2003; Suraiya Faroqhi, *Surviving Istanbul: Struggles, Feasts and Calamities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, Koç University: Istanbul 2023; Elif Akçetin and Suraiya Faroqhi (eds.), *Living the Good Life: Consumption in the Qing and Ottoman Empires in the Eighteenth Century*, Brill: Leiden 2017; James Grehan, *Everyday Life and Consumer Culture in 18th Century Damascus*, University of Washington Press: Seattle-London 2007; Amy Singer (ed.), *Starting with Food: Culinary Approaches to Ottoman History*, Princeton University Press: Princeton 2011. For books that are more focused on Ottoman culinary, some written with nostalgic tone see: Arif Bilgin and Özge Samancı (eds.), *Turkish Cuisine*, Ankara 2008; Priscilla Mary Işın, *Sherbet and Spice: The Story of Turkish Sweets and Deserts*, London 2013; id., *Bountiful Empire: A History of Ottoman Cuisine*, London 2018; Marianna Yerasimos, *500 Years of Ottoman Cuisine*, Istanbul 2015; id., *Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi'nde Yemek Kültürü*, Istanbul 2019.

² See for example Karen Gerşon Şarhon, *The Kitchen*, in: Yaron Ben Naeh (ed.), *Turkey*, Ben Zvi Institute for the Study of Jewish Communities in the East: Jerusalem 2009, pp. 273-280 (Hebrew); Avraham Elqayam, "Sabbatean Cookery: Food, Memory, and Feminine Identity in Modern Turkey", *Kabbalah*, 14 (2006), 7-46. I am about to publish in the *Festschrift* for Prof. Tamar Alexander an article that will relate to Ottoman Sephardi culinary the 16th - early 19th centuries.

Jewish family belonged to a congregation (*'kahal'*) – paying its taxes and praying in its synagogue. These communal organizations supplied their members with various services (a synagogue for prayer, a graveyard, kosher meat, religious teaching and a judicial body) and mediated between the individuals and the Ottoman authorities. Other services, such as mutual aid and care for poor sick were supplied through benevolent societies.

It is only recently that the Jewish community of Edirne received some scholarly attention.³ In the 1730's the community which may have mounted to around 3000 souls was comprised of 12-13 congregations, headed by a joint governing body and two chief rabbis. Dozens of those Jews were of *Istanbullu* origin, who moved to Edirne because of their dealings with the imperial court and the army. While being somewhat under the shadow of Istanbul, Edirne's community and its rabbis were in some respects a center of Jewish life for the south eastern parts of the Balkans.

Researchers of Ottoman Jewry have at their disposal a plethora of Hebrew, Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, and some European sources, both in print and in manuscript. Hundreds of Hebrew manuscript volumes and thousands of documents from Ottoman Jewish communities, are at our disposal, but many of them are still understudied. Most of the volumes are of rabbinic nature reflecting the ongoing studies of various aspects of Jewish law, thought and religious culture. Yet, at time, a patient reader may find surprising documents – either personal autobiographic scribbles (such as dreams), notes on climate or historic events, deeds, or whole manuscripts that are of a different nature, e.g. popular medicine and magic, private correspondence or business matters.

I wish to present here two rare scribbled lists concerning food, both written by the same hand. I found them in a Hebrew manuscript whose provenance – according to the names mentioned, and the fact it originates from the private collection of Prof. Abraham

³ See Rifat Bali's volume, and especially Karagedikli and Ben-Naeh's article in it: Güler Karagedikli & Yaron Ben-Naeh, "The Communal Authority in the Edirne Jewish Community: Reflections on the Names, c. 1720-1820", in: Doğa Filiz Subaşı & Rifat Bali (eds.), *The Jewish Community of Edirne*, Libra Press: Istanbul 2024, pp. 65-91. For a more comprehensive description of Ottoman Jewry in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century see Yaron Ben-Naeh, *Jews in the Realm of the Sultans*, Mohr-Siebeck: Tübingen 2008.

Danon (Edirne 1857- Paris 1925) - is probably Edirne. A few dates inscribed in it suggest it was written during the 1730's.⁴ The manuscript holds less than 10 quarto pages and contains a very sporadic bookkeeping - various accounts, donations and expenses, charity money, book titles, and even details of a few dowries. The anonymous author, who was undoubtedly a religious scholar, and perhaps even managed a rabbinic academy (*yeshiva*), left two lists concerning food and food prices: the first document is an account of daily expenses covering three days; and the other is a list of groceries bought for two Saturday (*shabbat*) meals, as well as the prices paid for them. We also don't know the quantities bought nor the number of the intended diners, and why these specific lists and none others were scribbled in that notebook. Nevertheless, it still gives us an idea of the relatively simple, local ingredients used for a somewhat festive dinner at a home of a middle class or even upper middle-class Jewish family, as the presence of meat, chicken and fish suggest. Meat and eggs were important sources for protein, together with legumes (here probably under 'vegetables') and cheese and other dairy products. The latter are absent here on account of Jewish dietary laws that forbid their consumption with meat. The presence of various cereals reveals their central place in contemporary diet. This is even accentuated when noticing the absence of rice from the lists. Rice was not an accessible popular commodity until the second half of the eighteenth century.⁵ Another absentee is a sweetener (such as sugar or honey) or even some sweet pastry, evidently as these were still expensive, markers of elite status, and reserved by ordinary families for the most festive meals. Fruit and coffee seem to have served as a dessert. Noteworthy is the purchase of coal, drinking water, and ready-to-eat bread.

⁴ University Library for Languages and Civilizations in Paris, Ms. no. 8, System no. 990001833290205171. Courtesy of "Ktiv" Project, The National Library of Israel, Jerusalem. [https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH990001833290205171/NLI#\\$FL58789983](https://www.nli.org.il/he/manuscripts/NNL_ALEPH990001833290205171/NLI#$FL58789983)

⁵ For some references that claim that until the eighteenth-century rice was prestigious and that routine consumption of rice characterized the kitchens of the elite and the imperial court, see Artan, *Aspects*, p. 126, 175-6; Yerasimos, *500 Years*, p. 107. Rice was important enough so that portions of rice (as well as purified butter and honey) were distributed to the Sultan's guests and to the senior artists who took part in the 1720 celebrations in the capital: Sinem Erdoğan İşkorkutan, *The 1720 Imperial Circumcision Celebrations in Istanbul*, Brill: Leiden 2021, p. 103-4, 107-8.

These rare lists supply first and foremost a new source for the study of Jewish cuisine in the center of the Empire. In fact, these scribbles might have been shopping lists of any *Edirneli* or *Istanbullu* home during the ‘Tulip Age’ (1718-1730). They are important for the understanding of material culture and especially food consumption among non-elite, middle-class people – Jews and non-Jews alike – in the larger Ottoman cities.

Transcription

fol. 2r

יום ב פ' 25

איג'ארי טוטון 24

בשר 16

ביצים הוצאה 06

נרות 09

יום ג' בוקלוז 24

קא[ני] 12

לחם [נו]פירות 06

יום ד' קמח תבלין 64

בולגור 51

פחם 156

fol. 7r

צורך הוצאת שבת

קמח וסולת 50

בשר ותרנגולת 60

דג 15

נרות איי אין לה 15

אודה 15

פירות ויין 50

תבלין, ירקות ופלפלין 30

נישאטטי [ו]מלח 9

ביצים 9

שמן 6

[סה"כ] 259

מים 18

[סה"כ] 277

ג'ורקג'י 18

[סה"כ] 295

Translation

fol. 2r

Monday, 25 p

Tobacco for smoking 24⁶

Meat 16

Eggs 6

Candles 9

Tuesday

Bokloz [?] 24

Coffee 12

Bread, fruit 6

Wednesday

Flour and spices 64

*Bulğur*⁷ 51

⁶ The coin is not specified but it seems the prices are quoted in *pāre*, each is 1/40 of a *ğuruş*.

⁷ Parboiled cracked wheat

Coal 156

fol. 7r

The needed expenses for Saturday

Flour and semolina 50

Meat and chicken 60

Fish 15

Candles [are in the] 15

Room 15

Fruit and wine 50

Spices, vegetables and pepper 30

Wheat starch⁸, salt 9

Eggs 9

Oil 6

[Total] 259

Water 18

[Total] 277

Maker/seller of cakes and sweet buns or doughnuts⁹ 18

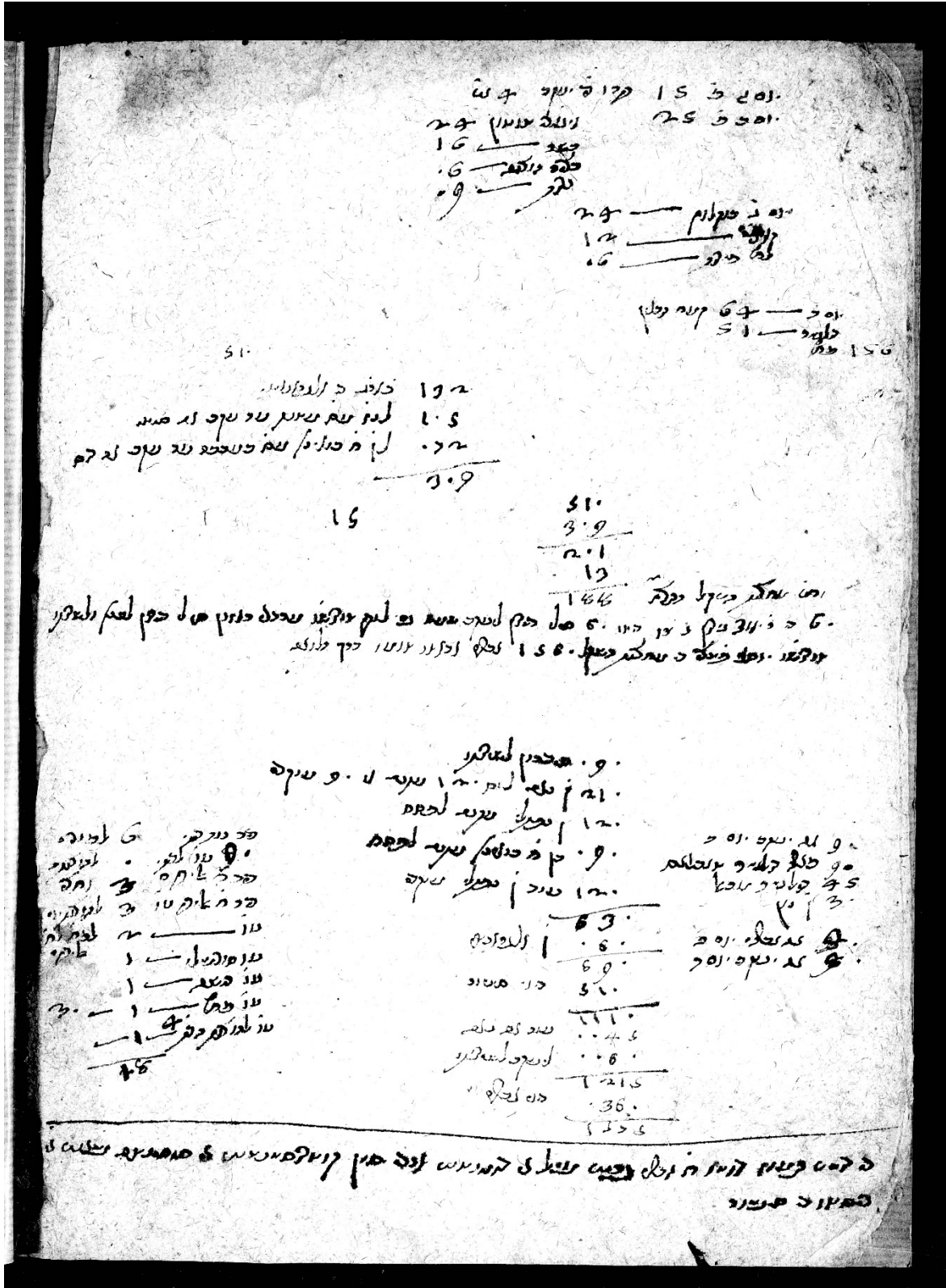
[Total sum] 295

⁸ *Niṣāsta*

⁹ *Çörekci*

Facsimile

fol. 2r



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