

# **Changes in the Social Status of Urban Jewish Women in Iraq as the Nineteenth Century Turned\***

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## **Foreward**

[1] During the nineteenth century Arab countries underwent an awaking process, which included their Jewish populations. This awakening manifested itself in the imitation of western models of education, culture, literature, poetry and theatre, as well as in the modernization of everyday life. Although the process was slow, the lives of Middle Eastern women, including Jewish women, were considerably influenced by this renaissance.

[2] The awakening of Babylonian Jewry began with the establishment of the Alliance Israélite Schools in Baghdad, which opened for boys in 1864 and for girls in 1893. Girls' school inaugurated a series of changes and far-reaching improvements in the lifestyle of educated urban Jewish women during the first part of the twentieth century. These positive changes involved Jewish women, mainly in the large cities; however they did not transform the social status of Jewish women as a self-conscious, collective, and fully formed group. Furthermore, these women failed to translate their personal achievements into a well worked-out and significant social phenomenon, nor could they alter the attitude of male society around them, or gain recognition as a separate and equal social factor.

[3] The changes in the life of Babylonian Jewish women should be examined against the background of the inferior and limited social status of their non-Jewish, usually Muslim, counterparts. One must consider the elements that influenced their lives and shaped their self-image, namely the local customs and social circumstances of the Jewish and non-Jewish environment.

[4] Very little has been written about the lives of Iraqi Jewish women. This was due to their confinement to the home, and to lack of exposure to the outside world. Travel books and memoirs relate very little information about the women in the Middle East, and even less about Jewish women. By compiling information that lies dispersed in books, various newspapers and primary documents, we shall attempt to outline the social and cultural evolution undergone by the Iraqi Jewish female population.

### **A. The Influence of the Environment and Customs**

[5] Throughout the history of the people of Israel, the image of Jewish women was shaped in accordance with biblical laws, and a long tradition of legislation, regulations and customs established by Jewish sages. In addition, in Iraq there is no doubt that the influence of the Arab-Muslim society and the social status of the Muslim woman had a great impact on the Jewish women.

#### **1. The Social Status of Muslim Women**

[6] The status of the Muslim woman was predominantly determined by the Qur'an and by its interpretations. Male superiority was based on a verse from the Qur'an: "Men have the advantage over women." (1) This phrase was interpreted to mean that men are more privileged than women, and that women's duty is to obey them, because men are to pay *mahar* [bride price, dowry] and other expenses upon marriage. In fact, this interpretation compares the Muslim woman to an acquired commodity. The Qur'an also determines that the advantage of men over women stems from the will of God, according to the verse: "Men's supervision over women is decided by the will of God that has favoured one over the other." (2) Commentators expanded on this definition and concluded from the rest of this verse that men rule over women, and are allowed to beat their wives: "If disobedience is suspected, distance them [your wives] from your bedrooms and whip them."

[7] The nature of intimate relationships with women was based on the verse: "Your women are your

ploughing ground; plough them at your will,” (3) which according to the commentators meant that women are a fertile ground for procreation: “plough as much as you desire, standing up, sitting down and or lying down, through the front or the rear.” This argument was reasoned by the verse: “God desires to be lenient on you because a man was created weak,” (4) meaning, man was created feeble and impatient towards women and lust.

[8] Establishing man's status and superiority in the Muslim society was not sufficient for the Qur'an; it also constrained women in many areas. For example, the Prophet of Islam demanded that Muslim women separate themselves from the customs of the pre-Islamic Jihalia period, and commanded them: “Remain in your homes and do not make yourselves up as in the Jihalia days.” (5) The commentators expanded their interpretation to read that women should not reveal their faces, and must veil themselves in front of strangers. The proof text for this custom was taken from Mariam 19:17: “She took the veil and hid her face from the stranger.” (6)

[9] From the above, several duties and obligations of the Muslim woman are made clear: she must offer absolute obedience to her husband; she should be confined to the home and cannot leave home without his consent; and is forbidden to speak to other men unless through a divider. Worst is the ease with which a man can divorce his wife. In various Muslim countries, such as *Shi'ite* Iran, women are considered to be of utmost defilement, next to a corpse. (7)

[10] In 1872, an Arab writer protested against the inferior status of Muslim women by urging that the derogatory attitude towards women has ruined them. They became their husbands' branded slaves; husbands battered, cursed and humiliated them. Nonetheless, the author's suggestions for improving women's lot were not very extreme. He suggested advancing women's education rapidly, yet recommended providing only limited instruction, which would enhance their reasoning, but not to a degree that would give rise to added freedom, and cause them to neglect their duties to home

and family, lest they would cease to obey their benefactors. (8) In 1910 another writer, Jamil al-Zahawee, was dismissed from his position as a law professor in Baghdad because he protested against the Islamic divorce laws and the custom of wearing a veil.

[11] During the first half of the twentieth century there were only a few major changes in the status of women despite the increasing number of schools for girls and the advancement in women's education. The Muslim Arab woman remained materially and socially inferior, and discrimination against her was evident in all areas. For instance, if a wife disobeyed her husband and left him, the husband was allowed to get her back with the help of the police and even imprison her in *bait al-ta'a* (house of obedience). Only in 1960 was the elimination of this law discussed in Egypt. The custom of confining Muslim women and segregating them from the company of men who were not family members continued despite minor changes that occurred as women became better educated. (9) Social life centered on the men. Women remained outside the social and public realm. This situation had growing implications on the family life of the Jews.

## **2. The Influence of Local Customs and Lifestyle on the Jews**

[12] The majority of Iraqi Jews lived in a Muslim community, which also supported an Arab Christian minority. They were primarily influenced by the Muslim *Sunnis*. Close to 90% of Iraqi Jews lived in the big cities, mainly in Baghdad, and they adopted the customs of the urban Islamic population, particularly the customs of confining the woman to the home without any contact to the outside "kingdom of males." (10)

[13] Though Jewish women were isolated from the company of men like their Muslim counterparts, within their home and families they were more independent and they enjoyed a more elevated status than the Muslim women. Due to the contact with tourists, merchants and other visitors from the west who arrived in Iraq in the beginning of the nineteenth century, as well as with teachers of the

Alliance Schools, the Iraqi Jewish community felt the influence of western culture, and made a conscious effort to imitate it. Moreover, contact with the young Iraqi Jews who immigrated to the west, specifically to United States, at the turn of the nineteenth century also brought liberal attitudes towards women.

[14] Due to these factors and many others, Jewish women's emancipation began earlier than that of the Muslim women. The Jewish women of Baghdad were the forerunners of modernization in Iraqi Jewish society, and their sisters in the other big cities soon learned from them.

[15] The fact that Muslim women lagged behind Jewish women hindered the general process of modernisation. Therefore, young Jewish women found it difficult to bring about changes in their social life and status. This situation started to change by the end of World War I and the British invasion of Iraq. During that period, the process of advancement accelerated and modernization began, along with the beginning of secularization among young Jews, particularly the educated classes. Although, the attitude towards women remained outwardly conservative, Jewish women were already enjoying some freedom within their family realm, much like European women. (11)

### **3. The Jewish Woman within Her Family**

[16] The status of the Jewish woman within her home and family was higher than that of Muslim women. Beside the above factors of increased western contact and better education, another significant factor which strengthened her status was the dowry. In the Muslim society the groom paid a *mahr* [bride price] to his bride's parents and treated his wife as his possession and part of his property. Among the Jews however it was customary for the bride's parents to pay a dowry to the groom. These conditions reinforced her status and increased the value of the Jewish woman within her family. In most cases, the amount of the dowry was determined by the couple's social class. Matches among Jews were arranged mainly between people of the same social class which offered

the woman security and obligated the husband to respect her. The woman was regarded as a wife and mother to his children, not a possession.

[17] Religion also contributed to strengthening the status of the Jewish woman. The religious and traditional tasks incumbent upon Jewish women, i.e. lighting of the Sabbath and holiday candles; setting and preparing the table for *kiddush* on Sabbath and holiday events; obligation for *tohorah* [ritual cleanness, purity] and immersion; and like men, the obligation to bless over meals - all had a significant role in ensuring a strong and respectable position for the woman within her family.

[18] From the outside, perhaps, the status of the Jewish women in Baghdad seemed inferior, but the reality was different. Generally, the Jewish woman, especially of the upper classes, enjoyed a respectable, high status at home beside her husband and her children. (12)

### **B. The Ideal Woman as Viewed in the Eyes of the Jews in the Nineteenth Century**

[19] In order to measure the far-reaching changes in the status of the Babylonian Jewish woman, it is worthwhile to examine her situation at the end of the nineteenth century. (13)

[20] The image and the character of the traditional Babylonian Jewish woman were shaped by age-old traditions which did not waver until the end of the nineteenth century. Fractures and deviations from these customs manifested themselves in modern western dress and more independence for women from their families. This phenomenon became a concern for the religious authorities headed by R. Yosef Hayyim who in 1906 published *Hok Ha-nashim* [Laws for Women] in which he reiterated the traditions and etiquette required of Jewish women. His book imparts a reliable description of the life of Jewish women in Baghdad immediately prior to its publication.

#### **1. External Appearance and Hygiene**

[21] "The Jewish women enjoyed a respectable status at home, and she indeed was required to take care of herself and to be meticulous about her dress" (Chapter 1, 12:2). "Her splendour should be in

her neat, simple, clean and modest clothing” (Chapter 13, 38:2). “Her dress should cover her body from head to toe: so that no flesh would be visible apart from her face, neck and the palms of her hands” (Chapter 10, 42:2). The demand to cover the body was so severe that she was prohibited from removing her socks in her home, even on hot days in or in old age (Chapter 10, 42:2, 43).

[22] In order to minimize the influence of European women who uncovered their face and hair, unlike the custom of local women who covered themselves with *izar* or *abaya* [long black coat] outside their home, it was noted in the book that the custom of foreign women is not considered a flaw because this was customary in European countries, among the Jews, as well as the non-Jews (Chapter 17, 42:2).

## **2. Behaviour in Public and at Home**

[23] The Jewish woman was not allowed to be in the company of a man who was forbidden to her according to the Jewish laws. Moreover, she was prohibited from being alone with a non-Jewish man, even if his wife was present (Chapter 44, 90). It was recommended that Jewish women not travel alone on a train or a boat; she was required to be accompanied by a boy or girl who could chaperone her (Chapter 44, 91:1). The demand for the seclusion of the woman from all contact with a male stranger was stringent. She was required to distance herself from anyone she did not know, in order to prevent her from inadvertently touching a man and was restrained from even joking with a member of her family, lest she provoke others, particularly, if she was pretty and adorned (Chapter 1, 12:2). In social functions, she was required to watch and minimize her speech, and control her emotions (Chapter 1, 12:2) because “excessive chattering induces gossip, quarrels and harm” (Chapter 29, 62:2).

## **3. Relationship between a Woman and Her Husband**

[24] "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they

shall be one flesh" (Genesis, 2:24) -- This verse was interpreted to mean that the husband is the one who moves out from his home and attaches himself to his wife. However in the Middle East a woman was compelled to follow her husband to his parents' home, with all the implications therein. Furthermore, the woman was required to surrender her will to her husband by serving him, accepting his authority and listening to his guidance. She was required to respect him as the leader of the family, because a man was considered "the sovereign of his home" (Chapter 9, 34); this included being considerate to him, cheering him up during his anger, even if he acted strangely or did not treat her properly" (Chapter 9, 34:2). Even worse was the demand to treat him patiently while overcoming her misgivings, even if the husband sinned, upset her or beat her (Chapter 9, 35:2). At the same time, the man was not permitted to be angry with his wife, curse, shame, or beat her.

[25] In addition to housekeeping duties, the woman was required to cater to her husband while he was studying the Torah every night, to let him sleep during the first watch of the night, to wake him at dawn, light his candle, boil coffee, prepare his books and to serve him with whatever was needed for his religious obligations (Chapter 34, 69).

#### **4. The Relations with the Husband's Parents**

[26] The woman was also required to respect her husband's parents, obey her mother-in-law and fulfil her wishes, treat her patiently and submit to her when she was angry, and ignore her sister-in-law's resentment towards her. All was done, supposedly, for her good and her husband's good (Chapter 24, 55).

#### **5. The Mother's Role in Her Daughter's Education**

[27] The upbringing of the daughter was the sole responsibility of the mother (Chapter 3, 21:2). The mother was required to train her daughter toward her main mission in life: being a perfect wife who knew how to serve her husband. In order to prepare her for her maternal tasks, the daughter's



sleeping hours were reduced, since a postnatal mother was expected to sleep less while caring for the newborn (Chapter 3, 22:2). The mother was required to train her daughter in crafts such as sewing, knitting, and weaving, so that she would be considered a perfect wife (Chapter 3, 22); to watch her daughter lest she be spoiled, play with young boys and engage in cards games, checkers, backgammon, etc. (Chapter 3, 22:2).

[28] Heavy responsibilities were laid upon the woman in an attempt to humbly and submissively keep the wholeness and peace of the family. In return, she was entitled to self-respect and self-expression in her own home, "her kingdom."

[29] It was not easy for the Babylonian Jewish woman to penetrate the external, isolating wall and the set of limitations that were imposed on her as she struggled to achieve a certain measure of equality in relation to men. In fact, this process began to develop gradually with the commencement of modern education in Iraq and with the initial contact with European Jews who lived in Baghdad or visited at the turn of the century.

[30] The first obvious expression of change among the Jews was the adoption of European clothing. The men adopted western fashion first and the women followed. Later on, changes appeared in attitudes towards women as well as in various social customs.

## **C. Matrimonial Customs among the Iraqi Jews**

### **1. Attitudes towards Daughters**

[31] Sons were valued more than daughters; the father was called by his son's name, even if he was not a first-born. The birth of a daughter was perceived as a blemish and a burden, and the main concern was to marry her as soon as possible in order to get rid of her.

[32] Rather than elation, the birth of a daughter caused depression and sadness in the Jewish family. It was greeted by a *mazal tov* along with a consolation, "Thank God for the health of the mother, "or

"may she be followed by sons." The birth of a son was blessed with "may he be a sign for seven "or" a good sign for a forthcoming blessing." (14)

[33] "Benjamin the Second" in his book *Masaei Yisrael* [*Travels in Israel*] (1859) noted that "when a female is born, the parents would be very worried about the financial expenses ahead... which caused them to marry her at a very young age." (15) In 1929 Aliza Malul best defined the grim feeling expressed within a Jewish family when a daughter was born, "A daughter birth is an eternal curse." The parents chose the groom for their daughter, and the daughter had no right to object. Whoever wanted her could have proposed to marry her. This was articulated in a saying, "the daughter is like a door knocker. Every one can hit on her." Because her family had to save up for her dowry, the daughter was considered a heavy financial load. Spinsterhood was not desirable and became a social and moral stigma; therefore getting married was the aspiration of every daughter who came of age, best described by the popular saying, "A daughter who found a husband is like the destitute who found a jewel." (16)

[34] A woman who gave birth only to daughters was in a difficult situation. Sometimes, the husband [in such a marriage] was even permitted to marry another wife without divorcing the first one, since the chances of a divorced woman remarrying were almost nil.

## **2. A Daughter's Coming of Age**

[35] David Sassoon noted in his book entitled *Masa Bavel* [*A Travel in Babylon*] (1910), that in earlier days, girls got married at the age of nine and boys at fifteen. (17) Benjamin the Second, who visited Baghdad in 1849, reported the custom of marrying daughters at age eight to ten, and sons age eighteen to twenty. He added that the government issued a decree setting up a three-tier system for the age of marriage: a) daughters of the elite class should not marry before the age of ten, b) daughters of the middle class cannot marry before they reach the age of eleven, and c) daughters of

the poor cannot marry before they reach the age of twelve. The lower the economic level of the family the higher the marriage age. He goes on to explain: "And if the maiden does not get married until the age of fifteen she has no hope of marriage, because she would be considered an old maid... also a widow is likely to remain without a man until she dies..." It was further disclosed to him: "there are about 400-500 Jewish widows in the city of Baghdad with no hope of getting remarried..." (18)

[36] Twenty years later, in 1868, Rabbi Shlomo Huchein criticised this unacceptable custom of marrying "the daughters of the city at the age of ten, and sometime at the age of eight or nine; therefore, their match is not successful." (19) Jacob Obermayer treated this matter in 1876: "A son of fifteen years old and a virgin of eleven or twelve cannot marry with love and desire, but forced into the marriage by their parents." (20)

[37] This condition worried the community; in 1894, its leaders reversed the rules. They instituted many new regulations, of which most the important were that a girl should not get married before she reached the age of sixteen. The sum of the dowry and the expenses of the marriage ceremony were also limited. Anyone who broke these regulations was not able to get married or get a *ketubah* [a marriage certificate], and a groom would not be called to read from the Torah. (21)

[38] At the end of the nineteenth century, despite these regulations, families still married their daughters at the age of twelve and thirteen. On the eve of World War I, the situation changed somewhat for the better when the legal age for marriage was raised to fifteen, with the consent of the parents, who set the amount of the dowry. (22)

[39] After the war this situation improved as Jewish society became liberalized and education became more universal, particularly for girls. The average age of marriage was raised to eighteen. Two different accounts reflect the marriage customs, as well as the differences in perception of the

writers. In 1929, Jacob Galyly, a Hebrew teacher, wrote, "The Jewish girl gets married at a very young age, fourteen to fifteen. When she is twenty, she is already a mother to six or more children. Her interests are limited to domestic chores only, and her cultural state is inferior..." On the other hand, another Hebrew teacher, Abraham Rosen wrote in 1932: "Indeed the phenomenon of marriage at the age of fifteen to sixteen has not disappeared completely; but consideration for women's views has increased..." (23) Galyly lived in Baghdad for just one year, and was not involved in local life very much. However, Rosen was in Baghdad for three years and mingled with his students and the community, his accounts are more reliable and current.

### **3. Dowry and Marriage**

[40] The parents of the Jewish daughter had to pay a dowry to the groom. The money for the dowry had been saved since her birth so that she could marry as early as possible without delays. Indeed, while some men may have preferred lineage in a wife to money, the majority still wanted a dowry; which contributed to the custom of early marriages. In marrying off their children, parents of both the bride and the groom looked for a match in status, ancestry, wealth and honor. (24)

[41] For many years, poor and even middle class women suffered from the requirement of a large dowry, and the many accompanying expensive presents to the groom's household due at every holiday and on other occasions. Many could not get married because their parents were not able to afford these outlays. Rabbis and community leaders struggled with this phenomenon. Frequently, they published "decisions" and "resolutions" and protested in the synagogues against the situation, but were unsuccessful in most cases. In 1921, a "resolution" signed by the chief rabbi, religious judges, dozens of rabbis, the chair of the religious council [*Majlis al-Ruhane*] and leaders of the community, determined that it was necessary to eliminate any custom or situation which required large wedding expenses. (25) But apparently these new regulations could not solve the problem.

Yerahmiel Assah from Hulata, an envoy on a mission to Iraq in 1947-1948 reported, "I have encountered a hopeless situation among the Jewish youth. Our Jewish sisters are left hopelessly unwed for lack of a dowry..." (26) An association titled "The Association for Welfare to Marry off Poor Unwed Jewish Girls" (Jim'eyat Mesa'adat el-Banat el-Isra'iliyat el-Fakirat lel-zawaj) was established to provide financial assistance to poor Jewish brides. Records have been found showing that in the 1940s, this association staged plays in Arabic to raise money for its cause. (27)

[42] If a father was unable to come up with the money for the dowry, severe conflicts affecting the other family members might arise disrupting family life. In 1924, conscious of these forces, a group of young intellectuals [*maskilim*] attempted to change the practice of dowry. They insisted that it was the groom's responsibility to build the new household, as customary in the non-Jewish Iraqi society. Many grooms who benefited economically were not too happy to concede such a change. However, so ingrained was the bridal dowry among the Jews that the initiative failed. Possibly the move also failed because of fear that Jewish girls might end up like Muslim women, where the Muslim husband paid the dowry, [as the Sages (*ha''zal*) noted in their regulations concerning the marriage certificate (*ketubah*): "So that it should not be easy for him to divorce her" (Talmud Bavli, Ketubot, 11a).]

[43] Marriage customs remained conservative. Young Jewish women, even well educated ones, found it difficult to meet eligible young men. (28) An observer described the condition of the Iraqi Jewish girl in her parents' home and her own home after her marriage (ca. 1946):

The life of the girl here is gloomy. She is confined to a "jail", and her father is in charge of it... All her life she is humiliated, depressed and discriminated; she cannot move one step without asking for permission... when she finally leaves her father's domain, her situation does not change. She is not liberated, but moves on from darkness to further

humiliation... She is forced to sit idle, without uttering a word about the man she has to live with for the rest of her life. She had never known him, nor had a chance to converse with him even once... this is how the girl lives – “she is being sold and bought.” (29)

[44] Another custom was that the bride was required to show the groom's female relatives the blood stained sheets after the wedding night as proof of her virginity. This custom was still in place in Jewish society even among intellectuals, until the massive immigration to Israel in the 1950s.

[45] The opportunities for meeting young men were rare. This situation started to improve in the 1930s, when a few young women started to frequent Jewish family clubs in Baghdad and Basra.

(30) In addition, young women and men met when they started to study together in classes and while working outside the home. But the constrictions on marriage did not change during the late 1940s, as described by the envoy Yerahmiel Assah:

There are no marriages out of love or mutual acquaintances. The woman "acquires" the groom, and the lowest sum is over one thousand Dinars... This is an epidemic in Judaism. Regarding this matter, there are almost no exceptions, and those exceptions which take place are disowned by their families. In various house visits, I was shocked to watch the harshness of this phenomenon of ageing spinsters, because they could not afford a dowry. (31)

#### **4. The Bride in Her Mother-in-Law's Home**

[46] The status of the young wife was inferior. The young couple usually lived in the home of the groom's parents. The family was patriarchal; however, the groom's mother ruled over the household, utilising the aid of her unwed daughters and her daughters-in-law. One of the requirements of the bride was to obey and compromise with her mother-in-law. As Rabbi Yosef Hayyim in his book, *Hok ha-Nashim*, continuously preached.

[47] The bride's life in her mother-in-law's home was not easy and could give rise to many crises in the family. The tense relationship between the women received considerable attention in folklore and proverbs, such as a verse from a popular Muslim song: "Would you like to know what happened between the bride and her mother-in-law, it's been two days that they are constantly bickering..." (*ben al-kanah u-maret el-'am ma terdun el-Zar, hal-yum zarat yumen yit'arkun kel mishwar*). The verse's deeper meaning denotes restlessness in the family. [This was reiterated by the Sages: "A bride and her mother-in-law are like a tiger and a goat living together." (Midrash Ma'aseh Torah, sha'ar 4). ]

[48] Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the status of the woman in her husband's parental home remained inferior. The husband controlled his wife. Every bride in this household was allocated one room for herself and her husband, and sometimes her subsequent children. Only when the house became too small to include all the married sons would a son and his family move out to their own home. (32) Change occurred in the 1930's when some young couples began to move out of their parents' homes right after the wedding.

### **5. Iraqi Jewish Women in the Eyes of Foreigners**

[49] In 1910, Akiva Ettinger, a visiting agronomist, lectured about his trip to Mesopotamia and described the Jewish women of Baghdad:

They dress like Muslim women. They cover their faces with a veil in the streets. Also at home the family life of the Jews is just slightly different than that of the Arabs. Women can never dine with foreigners, and not even with their husbands. (33)

[50] Furthermore, Yerahmiel Assah in the late 1940s painted a gloomy picture of the Jewish woman and her family life:

The family life is devalued. The wife is like a slave; when the family members dine, she

cannot join with them to the table, even not on Sabbath. In the house I visited, I have not yet seen the mother, the homemaker, dine with her family. She eats her meals on the kitchen floor. Surely, there are exceptions, but they are like a drop in the ocean... (34)

[51] These accounts may distort the reality. They were written by foreigners who came across these families incidentally. From my own personal experience, I know that dining separately and on the kitchen floor does not indicate the inferior status of the woman in her home, but originates elsewhere. In very conservative homes, women did not join the husband in entertaining guests, who are not relatives, even if they are dignitaries. There was no custom either for eating at set times with all family members, except for Shabbat and festivals, when the mother would join the table, set by herself, with all other family members. Only on rare occasions or in poor families were these customs not followed. Sitting on a low stool in the kitchen was also not exceptional in the Middle East, where dining on a rug or a reed-mat was customary even during festive entertainment.

## **6. Baghdad's Jewish Women in the Eyes of the Locals**

[52] In order to understand conditions of Jewish life in Baghdad, one must remember that the father was the patriarchal ruler and head of the family within the domestic realm. While the Jewish woman, confined at home had no public role whatsoever outside her family circle, managed the household without her husband's intervention and within her home and family she was well respected. (35)

[53] According to Hayyim Cohen, "The role of the woman was to manage her household and to produce offspring, to serve her husband without joining him to the table, but to dine in the kitchen. However, gradually this custom faded and remained in practice only among women of the older generation." (36) This development was also described by Shlomo Shapira: "The wife was a mother, a homemaker, functioned as an educator, advisor and a partner to the domestic problems, and her



word was the final decision. The husband was the father of his children as well, but the connection between them was formal and practical..." (37) Yehuda Atlas defined this differently: "It would a mistake to view these customs as enslaving the wife, as all the family members held the wife in high esteem." (38)

## **D. The Jewish Women outside Her Home: Occupation, Charity and Welfare**

### **1. Occupation**

[54] Iraqi Jews, except for the Jews of Kurdistan and village dwellers, did not value manual labour and treated physical and daywork with contempt. The Baghdadi Jew was even embarrassed if his daughter had to resort to manual labour. (39) Jewish women, especially in Baghdad and other urban centres, usually did not work outside the house. Needy families, widows and divorcees who were forced to find employment preferred to work at home in sewing, weaving, embroidery, etc. Others trained in para-medical professions, such as midwifery and healing, or served delicate social functions, such as matchmaking or as *mashti* [an assistant to the bride and the groom on their wedding night]. (40) These occupations were socially tolerated and did not foster any disrespect for the women who worked in them. In contrast, poor women who worked as servants, launderers, bakers, singers, musicians in weddings, and mourners in funerals, suffered an inferior status. Poor Jewish women acquired a reputation for being very efficient in crafts, and contributed to the family earnings.

[55] Records note that in 1876 there were as many as a thousand dressmakers and a thousand wool and silk embroiderers in Baghdad. (41) These statistics seem exaggerated. Ephraim Neumark, a traveller to Baghdad in 1884, reported that Jewish women were employed in silk interweaving, mostly for fabrics needed for Muslim girdles and turbans. The materials were delivered and returned to their homes by the managers. Even upper class women and rabbis' wives worked in

these occupations. (42) Maurice Cohen, an Alliance School Teacher in Baghdad, reported in 1884 that women were employed in many crafts, particularly sewing and embroidery. (43)

[56] It is possible to say that through the Twenties Jewish women were mostly employed in domestic occupations. This situation began to change in the 1930s and 1940s with the spread of secular education among Jewish girls, who started to work as teachers, clerks and other professions.

## **2. Women's Philanthropies**

[57] Iraqi Jewish donated philanthropic contributions were often directed towards writing Torah scrolls or the construction of synagogues and schools to commemorate their departed relatives including, interestingly, the wives and daughters of the donors. The Laura (Rima) Kahdouri's Kol Yisrael Haverim Girls School, the Rahel Shahmoon's Boys School, the Mas'uda Shemtov Synagogue are examples. Likewise, living women contributed to the building of schools like Rivkah Daniel Boys' School (1902), Tova and No'am Nurriel's Schools (1903) and Mas'udah Salman's School (1932) which bore their own names. (44) Additionally, Iraqi women abroad supported rabbis back in their native countries. For example, a woman donated funds to publish the *Kanon al-Nisa (Hok ha-Nashim* or Laws for Women). Another woman philanthropist donated £6000 in 1925 for the welfare of Baghdad's rabbis. (45)

## **3. Social Welfare Activities**

[58] In 1929, Rahel Hayyim initiated Beit Hinukh Silas Kahdouri, a school for the blind, in order to teach them a trade, so they can live respectably.

[59] In 1932, a Jewish women's organization was established specifically to assist needy, expectant mothers. It opened a maternity ward in the Meir Alias Jewish Hospital in Baghdad, which offered free care to poor families. These women distributed milk, medicines and clothing. The organization also provided for the destitute after the June 1941 Farhud pogrom against the Jews in Baghdad. (46)

[60] In July 1946 two Jewish women, Rimah Avraham al-Khabir and Victoria Salman, were given the Red Crescent award of excellence by the Iraqi government - an indication that Jewish women's volunteer work outside their homes was becoming important and recognized by the secular public.

(47)

## **5. The Enlightenment and Modernization**

### **1. The Beginning**

[61] Thanks to the spread of modern Western education in the second half of the nineteenth century, the status of Jewish women slowly but continuously improved. It began with the establishment of the Alliance Boys School of Baghdad in 1864, from which a generation of educated (*maskilim*) graduates initiated reforms for their female contemporaries, particularly in the areas of education and culture. In 1893 these *maskilim* inaugurated the first Alliance Girls School in Baghdad; with its opening, the improvements in the condition and status of Jewish women were expedited. (48)

[62] Parallel to the advancement in education, changes in women's fashion took place. At first, the change was limited to the imitation of western fashion, and then it brought along the removal of the veil (*pushi*) and ended finally with the disappearance of the *abaya and izar*, the robe which Arab women wore outside their home, and the adoption of western clothes in public. The progress in education and modernized fashion were indicative of the beginning of the liberation of the woman.

Legally however, there was no equality yet between women and men. Women in Muslim countries did not have the right to vote or be elected to the parliament, regional or local municipalities.

Similarly, the Jewish community did not allow women to vote or be elected to any community institutions. (49)

[63] At the dawn of the twentieth century, with the growing influence of the West, secularism began to penetrate into a small stratum of Jews who were more assimilated and already did not observe the

Sabbath and ate non-kosher food. (50) Bringing down the most fundamental religious laws of Babylonian Jewry prepared the ground for future developments, including the growth in women's education and their liberation from the traditional and familial restraints.

[64] By 1909, rabbis such as Rabbi Shimon Aaron Aba Agasi were protesting against this development. In his eulogy delivered at the funeral of R. Yosef Hayyim in 1909, Agasi recounted the "sins" of the assimilationists one by one: publicly desecrating the Sabbath, eating forbidden foods in non-Jewish restaurants, and attending theatre. Concerning the "sins" of women, he warned against the "lack of modesty of women who started to dress in the style of Christian immoral conduct [i.e. Westerners] revealing their necks and uncovering of their heads." He blamed the teachers and educators at the Alliance Schools in "distancing the daughters of Israel from faith in God." (51)

## **2. The Modern Education of Young Women**

[65] During the nineteenth century and the beginning of the 20th century, Babylonian Jews did not consider education of young women important. The young woman was raised to be a mother, learning from her own mother housekeeping skills like cooking, cleaning, sewing, etc. The rich and well-to-do might hire private tutors to teach their daughter *Tefilah* and Bible. At the turn of the twentieth century, some parents began sending their daughters to the *heder* [afternoon Hebrew school] at the age of three or four to study with the boys for a year or two. Some parents even started to send their daughters to kindergarten. (52)

[66] In most cases the education of girls lagged behind the schooling of boys in duration and in comprehensiveness. This stemmed from the prejudice of religious authorities and conservative circles, who believed that women did not require modern education. Nevertheless, in light of the success of its first girls' school in Baghdad, the Alliance Israelite [*Kol Israel Haverim*] opened

schools for girls in cities and towns throughout Iraq (see chart below). At first, only the daughters of the rich attended these schools, but later, poor girls followed, thus bringing a change of social values throughout the economic spectrum.

[67] The following is a list [adapted from Leven's book] of Alliance Israelites schools founded in Iraq according to the year of their establishment:

<b>The City</b>	<b>For Boys</b>	<b>For Girls</b>
Baghdad	1864	1893
Basra	1903	1913
Mosul	1906	1912
Hillah	1907	1911
Amarah	1907	
Khanaqin	1911	

[68] Narcisse Leven noted on the positive attitude of Iraqi Jews in supporting modern education:

..."the most interesting thing, among the Jewish communities in Mesopotamia, which were so religiously devout and behind modernization, is the fact that the schools' founders did not encounter the obstacles, which stand in the development of every new institute. The parents did not fear the new stream of study, even the rabbis, in the course of time, sent their own sons to these schools."

(53)

[69] Despite Leven's complimentary statement, there were, at first, difficulties and objections towards a change in the status of women. In 1886, the community objected to the establishment of a trade school for girls in Baghdad, which delayed its opening for seven years.

[70] As more schools opened, the attitude of Iraqi Jews to girls' education began to change. In the first decade of the twentieth century the number of girls enrolled tripled from 132 in 1900 to 399 in 1910. In contrast, the number of boys enrolled went up from 254 to 475.

The following table indicates the number of boys and girls in the Alliance Israelite Universelle Schools in Baghdad, according to the annual reports of the Anglo-Jewish Association (AJAR):

<b>Date</b>	<b>Jewish Population</b>	<b>Male Students</b>	<b>Female Students</b>	<b>Total Students</b>
1899-1900	35,000	254	132	386
1900-1901	35,000	296	166	462
1901-1902	35,000	350	190	540
1902-1903	40,000	350	201	551
1904-1905	40,000	404	170	574
1905-1906	40,000	546	430	976
1906-1907	40,000	504	398	902
1907-1908	40,000	462	332	794
1908-1909	45,000	434	395	829
1909-1910	45,000	475	399	874

[71] AJAR annual reports noted in appreciative tones the growing awareness of the Jews of Baghdad to the importance of girls' education. The 1898 report noted: "...the number of girls in girls' schools increased. The school became more and more popular. The rich, as well as the poor, desire education for their daughters at the Alliance." (54) The 1900-1901 report observed that "...the number of girls increased by 34 as compared to the previous year.... The steady growth indicates that the Jews of Baghdad recognize now the importance of girls' education..." (55) The 1901-1902 report emphasizes that 'after six years of existence, [girls' schools] no longer experience objection. Now, the parents are eager to register their daughters but unfortunately there are no more vacancies and many had to be refused...." (56) The 1907 report contended that "the influence of modern education was far reaching, and caused early marriage to become quite rare..." (57) In the school year of 1905-1906, even co-ed English classes were initiated. (58)

[72] Nevertheless, many Jews still objected to sending girls to schools even after World War I. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Anwar Shaul, a writer and journalist, condemned this narrow view. (59) However, despite the mounting difficulties the conservatives could not halt the spirit of progress and the spread of female education, particularly after World War I. It is possible to assume from the rate of openings of new girls schools from the growth in number of girls enrolled compared

to the growth in the number of boys enrolled, and the total number of Jews in Baghdad, that there was a change in the status of Jewish girls, as well as a more positive attitude toward the need to advance her education:

**Data on all Jewish schools in Baghdad**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Name of School</b>	<b>Number of Male Students</b>	<b>Number of Female Students</b>	<b>Total Jewish Population</b>
1900				
	1. Midrash Talmud Torah	2000 approx.		
	2. Alliance Boys School	254		
	3. Alliance Girls School		132	
	Total	2254	132	35,000
1921				
	1. Albert Sasoon	560		
	2. Lora Kadouri		1071	
	3. Norel	327		
	4. Aharon Salah (Noam)	324	135	
	5. Gan Menahem Daniel	100	275	
	6. Ta'avan	419		
	7. Midrash Talmud Torah	2300		
	Total	4030	1481	50,000
1948				
	32 Schools	10,943	3818	80,000 approx. (60)

[73] From the mid-30s young women of fifteen to eighteen were allowed to attend classes at the Shamash Jewish Secondary School in Baghdad. In the beginning of the 1930s Jewish girls started to enrol in secular state run educational institutions. Young women studied in a seminary for teachers, and some even graduated. In 1941 a number of Jewish women graduated from the faculty of Law. From the late 30s and on Jewish, Muslim and Christian women were allowed to enrol in law,

medicine, pharmacology and economics, along with men. Within ten years (1941-1950), sixty Jewish women graduated from the faculties of pharmacology, medicine, law and others. (61)

### **3. Progress and Change after World War I**

[74] With the beginning of the British mandate, it was impossible to halt Western influence.

Gradual changes affected lifestyle and dress, in particular the elimination of the veil. In 1929,

Ya'acov Galyly wrote: "Like local women, the Hebrew woman in Baghdad is still wearing a veil to cover her face and an *abaya*, when she leaves home. The married woman wears an *izar*, an overcoat which covers her entire body..." (62) In contrast, Abraham Rosen, his successor, wrote in 1932:

"...during the last ten years young Jewish girls stopped covering their faces like their Muslim neighbours and their female ancestors. However, many women, especially from the lower classes, have not abandoned this custom. But, they belong to the minority..." (63) The wave of

modernization paved the way for Baghdadi Jewish women to discard their traditional attire. With the British Mandate, Jewish men began to appreciate women who adapted external western customs in clothing, hairstyle and etiquette, and soon enough women were required to become familiar with other western conventions and behaviours. (64)

[75] Changes during the British Mandate should be evaluated in view of the conditions, which existed in Iraq prior to WWI. Already in 1906, Rabbi Yosef Hayyim noted in his book *Laws for Women* that a woman is forbidden from cutting a dress design that reveals parts of her body.

According to *Ha'-olam* [a Jewish periodical] in 1909 (65), "The Jews of Baghdad resisted foreign influences until today, they still wear long garments and colorful special headdress. Women always wear a veil by which they are distinct from men [?], like all Muslim women..." *Ha'or* (1910) (66)

another Jewish periodical comments, "Jewish women in Baghdad wear typical Muslim dress. On the street we see them covered only with a veil..." (67)



[76] By the 1920s, Jewish men had preceded their Muslim counterparts in adopting European clothes and customs. When it came to their wives' habits they remained conservative.

Nevertheless, Jewish women were less isolated and more liberated than Muslim women. (68)

Among Muslims, the opposition to removing the veil was very strong. Even some Jewish women would not abandon their face covering. When they finally lifted them, conservative and traditional authorities fiercely opposed changing the old '*khilia*' (a non-transparent veil) into a *pushi* (a light, transparent version). Eventually however they could no longer enforce their will on the young generation. During the 1930s, veils disappeared almost entirely from Jewish women, and some young women even ceased wearing the *abaya*. (69)

#### **4. Jewish Women's Theatre in Baghdad**

[77] In the traditional, conservative society of the Jewish community in Baghdad, public performances by women had been unacceptable. As modern education revolutionized the dress of the Jewish Iraqi women, it also engendered minor changes in the cultural realm. In 1908, the play "Queen Esther" was staged at the Girls' Alliance School in Baghdad by the senior class girls, even though religious authorities considered theatre a corrupting element, diverting youth from traditional learning.

[78] With the British Mandate, performances by women in front of men or mixed audiences increased. Gradually it became easier for women to get permission to participate in shows and other events. On August 17, 1929, the play "The Voice of the Heart" was staged by Kol Israel Haverim Co-ed School. The announcement for the play noted only boys' names in full while the girls' names were listed in an abbreviated form for reasons of modesty. This demonstrated that the prohibition on meetings between boys and girls outside the family circle still existed, although by this time both young male and female students were seen in public with uncovered face and modern dress.

[79] Only in the 1940s did the participation of female students in co-ed performances on public stages become acceptable. Interestingly superstitions about dramatic roles for women were quite prevalent. Some parents did not want their daughter to play unattractive roles, which might bring a curse upon them. A female student from the Laura Kahdouri School who played the role of Haman was warned that she would not find a husband. (70) These superstitions were one more hurdle young women faced on their road to modernization. In this light one can appreciate the developments of Jewish women in Iraq in the 1940s. Another area where they were active was the Zionist social underground.

[81] The cultural and social revolution that took place within the Babylonian Jewry in the 1930s and 1940s came as a result of the British Mandate, Western influence and developments in technology and communication. The definition of women's roles loosened, restrictions against young woman decreased, pioneering women began to be seen in the workforce as teachers, educators, nurses etc. Co-ed classes were permitted, women's marriage age rose, the number of couples who married out of love grew, the number of children among young families decreased, and women's dress styles became westernized. In the clubs, Jewish women appeared in fashionable clothes, and men wore formal black tie attire. Additionally, there were co-ed dance balls and family parties.

[82] After the June 1941 pogrom, Jewish women returned to the traditional *abaya* and the veil for safety reasons. Moreover, this costume became an effective way of transporting weapons and other materials by the *Ha-halutz* and the *Haganah* underground movements in the 1940s. (71) Thanks to their activities in these movements, females achieved complete liberation socially and publicly. But this matter would need a detailed research paper by itself.

**END NOTES**

1. *Qur'an*, The Cow [Baqarrah] 2:228, page 48. [Shakir: "...and the men are a degree above them..."] The citations from the *Qur'an* are in line with the well-known commentary from the *al-Jalalin*. Also, the commentary has been compared with two Hebrew translations of the *Qur'an* by Y. Rivlin and A. Shamash. [Editor's note: For the convenience of our readers, we included M.H. Shakir's English translation of the *Qur'an* for each of the cited verses. Shakir's translation is available on the Internet at <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/> Another excellent site on the *Qur'an* and its various interpretations is found at the following link: <http://www.arches.uga.edu/~godlas/primsourcisl.html> ]
2. *Qur'an*, The Women [Nisa] 4:34, page 110. [Shakir: "Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made them to excel others and because they spend out of their property, the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen as Allah has guarded; and {also} those on whose part you feel desertion, admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them..."]
3. *Qur'an*, The Cow [Baqarah] 2:223, page 47. [Shakir: "Your wives are a tilth for you, so go into your tilth when you like..."]
4. *Qur'an*, The Women [Nisa] 4:28, page 109. [Shakir: "...and man is created weak..."]
5. *Qur'an*, The Allies [Ahzab] 33:33, page 57. [Shakir: "And stay in your houses and do not display your finery like the displaying of the ignorance of you..."]
6. *Qur'an*, Marium 19:17, page 404. [Shakir: "So she took a veil (to screen herself) from them..."]
7. Ashkenzai, 102.
8. Fat-h All-ah Marrash, 586, 768.
9. Baer, 46, 47, 56, 59.

10. Years later, in 1950, Shoshana S., who had been a member of the Zionist underground organization in Iraq, discussed this phenomenon, noting that: “Jews were greatly influenced from the surrounding Arabs that treated their women like an old piece of furniture.” See Shoshana S., 5.
11. Coke, 204.
12. Information in this section (3) is based on my own personal experience and therefore, although they do exist, no sources have been documented. For example, on the status of the woman in her home, see *Laws for Women*, 12:2.
13. Fearing implications from the Iraqi government concerning the title of the book “Kanon al-Nisa” (Laws for Women), the cover of the book lists Livorno as the publication place, whereas in fact the book was printed in Baghdad. See Ben-Ya‘acob. *Rabbi Yosef Hayyim of Baghdad*, 76. Translations from the *Kanon al-Nisa* are mine. Due to the multiple citations in this section, they are included in the text, instead of the endnotes.
14. Hayat, 20.
15. Second Binyamin, 47.
16. Malul, 2.
17. Sassoon, 200.
18. Second Binyamin, 47.
19. Huchein, 35.
20. Obermayer, 146.
21. *Maggid Mesharim* (April 1894) 5:28.

22. Cohen, 162. I should add that, my mother, who was born in 1897, agreed to get married when she was eighteen; whereas her oldest sister, twenty years her senior, got married at the age of fourteen.
23. On the last two citations, see Galyly; Rozen, 6. I should add that I was a student of these two teachers.
24. Hayat, 20.
25. Ben Ya'acob, "Matrimonial Customs in Baghdad," [Hebrew] 82.
26. Assah, 634.
27. Moreh, 96.
28. Horesh, 126 note 62. (An interview with a Seniora Moreh: "The Jewish Woman in Iraq," by Asperance Cohen, Project (50)11, dated 18.2.1967).
29. Leah, 380.
30. Cohen, *Jews*, 162, 164.
31. Assah, 632. It should be noted that an Iraqi dinar was equivalent to a British Sterling, and that 1,000 dinar was a large sum of money.
32. I'd like to share an anecdote from my personal life: I was born in 1917 in Baghdad and had lived with my parents in the home of my paternal grandfather. With the expansion of the family, we moved into a rental residence in 1928.
33. Ettinger, 2.
34. Assah, 632.
35. Hayat, 20.
36. Cohen, *Jews*, 164.
37. Shapira, 14-16.

38. Atlas, 32.
39. Shemi.
40. Ben Ya‘acob, *Rabbi Yosef Hayyim*, 138: The task of the *Mashti*’s was to guide the bride, and sometime the groom, on how to behave on their first night together. She usually sat on a chair and waited outside their communion chamber. When they came out, she spread the good news.
41. *Ha-Maggid* 20:2 (January 1876): 12.
42. Neumrak, 46.
43. Cohen, “1844 Annual Report.”
44. Ben Ya‘acob, *Babylonian Jewry*, 296:13; Meir, “Development of (Secular) Education,” 430. Regarding the school Mas‘uda Salman, see Al-alam Al Israeli, “A Letter from Baghdad,” (Beirut, May 9, 1932), 4.
45. On the Mandani Beit Midrash see Horesh, 4; On the Talmud Torah see *Do‘ar Hayom* 7 [July 1925]: 4; On the financial support for the book *Laws for Women*, see Ben-Ya‘acob, *Rabbi Josef Hayyim*, 71:43/a; On the donations to the rabbis, see *Do‘ar Hayom* 7:249 [Aug. 1925]: 3.
46. On the Beit ha-Hinukh, see Ben Ya‘acob, *Babylonian Jewry*, 297, and about maternity wards, see Twena, Vol. 6, 189-190.
47. *Naharyim, an Organ of Babylonian Jewry* 2 (August, 1946): 8.
48. Leven, 30-31.
49. Cohen, *Zionist Activities in Iraq*, [Hebrew] 21. See also, Cohen, *Jews*, 167.
50. Cohen, *Activities*, 17.

51. Agasi, 308.
52. Twena, Vol.5, 17. On girls in Hebrew schools and kindergartens, see Cohen, *Jews*, 162.
53. Leven, 128-131; Cohen, *Activities*, 16, 131.
54. *Anglo Jewish Associations Reports* (London: 1898-9) 28, 23.
55. *Reports*, (1900-1) 30, 29.
56. *Reports*, (1901-2) 31, 24.
57. *Reports*, (1907-8) 37, 21.
58. *Reports*, (1905-6) 35, 28.
59. Ben-Hananya, 6.
60. On the Talmud Torah, see Twena, *Dispersion*, Vol. 5, 60. On the data for 1921, see idem. 231.  
On the Jewish population of the same year, see Cohen, *Activities*, appendix 8, 226. On the data of 1948, Twena, Vol. 5, 229, and on the Jewish population of the same year, see Cohen, *Jews*, 74.
61. On the 1930s, see Rozen, 6. On 1941, see Cohen, *Activities*, 21, see also idem. On the years 1941-1950; Shohet, 267.
62. Galyly.
63. Rozen, 6.
64. Moller-Lantset, 203-205.
65. *Laws for Women*, chapter 17, 42.
66. "Jews in Baghdad," [Hebrew] *Ha-'Olam* 3 (February 1909): 16.
67. Ettinger, 2.
68. Coke, 202-204.
69. Moller-Lantstet, 206.

70. On the participation of girls in theatrical performances, see Moreh, 76, 82, 88, 92-93. On the attitude of the Jewish religious leaders towards theatre, see Agasi, 308.

71. Shohet, 188, 238-239.

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