

## **The controversy on the Theosophical Society in**

### **Basra: An Anti-Theosophy booklet in Arabic**

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#### **Introduction**

The Theosophical Society developed in India in the late nineteenth century. Boaz Huss argues that many Jews were involved in the development of the movement in India. In 1927 a branch of the Theosophical Society, "Association of the Hebrew Theosophists", was founded in Basra by Kaduri E Ani, an Iraqi Jew who immigrated to India and later returned to Iraq.

The establishment of the Theosophical Society in Basra led to a religious controversy within the Jewish community which surfaced as part of the political changes of the era. The Jewish leadership in Basra and Baghdad took sides in the conflicts, and led to the intervention of the British authorities and Muslim judges. Many Jewish newspapers across the Indian Ocean highlighted the debates.

In this article I would like to introduce this debate as part of a large Jewish network whose members traveled along Indian Ocean routes, and along with goods moved people and ideas from place to place across the sea.

A literary "product" of the dispute was The Upright Guide (الدليل الصالح), a small booklet in Arabic, edited by Isaac Said Nattan and formulated the Anti-Theosophy

position. The booklet was published in Amara, Iraq (Al-Hadi Printing House<sup>1</sup>) in 1932, and probably does not exist anymore in the libraries. I found a rare copy of this brochure and I would like to present its main arguments. A reading the text will assist in understanding the cultural climate of Jewish religious scholarship in Iraq and the region of the Indian Ocean.

I will portray the life of the editor, Isaac Nattan. His biography will illustrate the story of the Jews in modern Indian Ocean, and the relationships between the various countries along the coast. Nattan himself was a "participant" in the Jewish network of the Indian Ocean, and the course of his life passed between Yemen, India, Iraq and finally Israel.

### **The Indian Ocean trade**

My basic assumption is that relationships between Yemen, Iraq, India and the Far East were based on trade. The Indian Ocean connected between India, Yemen and the Mediterranean and I think the common space made possible the creation of a framework for the Jewish community of the Indian Ocean.

But in order to understand the phenomenon we need to go back in time to the Middle Ages. In those days, if you had to go to India, you had to pass through Aden, the port city of Yemen near the Indian Ocean, toward the Red Sea. There is no need to stress

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<sup>1</sup> In the Iraqi National Library and Archives I found some books that were published there. The publisher was Sayyed Abed Muttalib al-Hashimi, and he began to print in 1929. See: Abu Taleb Al-Hashimi,

العمارة الكحلاء في العقد الثالث من القرن الماضي.

pp. 151-152. [<http://abutalibhashimi.com/Al-Amara%20Al-Kahla/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%B5%D9%84%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%B9.pdf>]

the importance of trade with India and in the Indian Ocean, which was called Bahar Alhind. The trade with India was the basis of the international economy within the Mediterranean world, and we can draw a detailed picture with the help of the Cairo Geniza.<sup>2</sup>

The commercial relationship led people to move from place to place, and the most interesting aspect for me is how ideas and books also moved following the trade and the people traveling along these routes.

These ties continued even after the medieval trade steadily dwindled. The network did not disappear in modern times and continued to exist until the mid-twentieth century.

So we can see connections in the eighteenth century between the Jews of Yemen and the Jews of Cochin. Yemenite Jews fulfilled religious functions for Cochin Jews and Bene Israel. For example, Rabbi Yechiel Saadi's handwriting was found by Rabbi Prof. Simcha Assaf when he visited India.<sup>3</sup> Saadi introduced rules on various matters including the laws of manumission. No wonder that on the basis of these relationships, members of the Indian community married women from Yemen, as it appears in the *Messauadeh*, *Memoirs of the Court of Sana'a*.

In the nineteenth century the ties between Yemen and Baghdadi Jews who lived in the Far East were strengthened. In recent times a new class of Jews in Yemen was created, Jews engaged in international trade and were called Ghalabim, importers and exporters of goods from Yemen. The beginning of this process was in the eighteenth century, but it grew substantially in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>2</sup> Shlomo Dov Goitein revealed through decades of work the letters of merchants that were deposited in the Geniza, and published some of them. In the last ten years, Prof. Freidman, a student of the late Goitein, completed the work and the Ben-Zvi Institute has published the volumes.

<sup>3</sup>

A good example is the story of the Suleiman Hibshush Firm. In the 1880s Hibshush established trade relations in Aden and India and these new connections were used to build a family company engaged in trade between India, Aden and Yemen. Initially the family imported tobacco to Yemen and soon entered the coffee export business. The company's strength was largely due to its ability to create a network of branches throughout the commercial world, where each branch had a local agent, who was trusted by the family for decades. This contact was often Jewish, mostly from outside Yemen, who shared the Judeo-Arabic language with them. However, in some cases the agents were foreigners or Muslims and the correspondence was conducted in Arabic or European languages. This created relationships with agents like Gabir Levy in Port Said and Sassoon of India.

Ties with India had been established already in the nineteenth century, although the family did not have a regular agent. Tov Hibshush's testimony to Menachem Kapeliok said that sometimes they used Macramim, the Ismaili Muslims of Yemen, many of whom were in India, as representatives of the Hibshush in India. On the other side, the Macramim of India used the Bombay branch of Hibshush to convey information to their "crypto" Muslims colleagues in Yemen, because the king of Yemen persecuted the Ismailis in Yemen, so they had to conceal their faith. Tov Hibshush also maintained ties with the Indians who lived in Yemen, particularly in Aden, a community which was called banyan in Hindi.<sup>4</sup>

The result was that everywhere in the Far East, India and abroad established communities of Baghdadis were accompanied also by Yemenite Jews - usually in religious roles and alternatively as domestic servants.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the Hibshush Company had ties with Shah Prenji Jethabha who was living in Aden.

Now I want to show that texts and knowledge were exchanged in the same network. An exploration of a popular song of Yemenite Jews suggests that several texts from the Arabic Dialect of the Baghdadi Jews penetrated into Yemen, and I think this happened through the printing press of Iraqi Jews in India and the contact between Yemenite and Baghdadi Indian Jews.

One good example is Hannah and Her Seven Sons, a story told in II Maccabees. The brothers and the mother refused to bow down to a statue and were executed.

In Baghdad a Jewish Arabic text was written on this episode. It was called Qisat Hannah (The story of Hannah). Yitzhak Avishur maintains that this text first appeared in Baghdadian Judeo-Arabic in a copy dating from 1836. Apparently, it made its way to Yemen and in Yemen it was called Qussat Hannah. The prayer is usually read on Tisha Beav, the eve of the Ninth of Ab.

It is interesting that texts moved also in the opposite direction, from Yemen to India and Baghdad.

Here is an example: Menashe Yehezkel Maslih, one of the Baghdadi group, lived in Bombay and after some time immigrated to Jerusalem. He published a book named "Musalli El-Waket", or "Passing Time". In the second volume appears a story about Morie Yahya Abiyad Rabbai from Sana'a who died in the Mauza exile in exile in Mauza. "The story of Mori Yihye Abyad, may he rest in peace. Mori yihye Abyad was a completely righteous man from the city of San'a... and died in the desert in the

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time of the Muza decree" [Translation from the Judeo-Arabic]. Here we can see that a story from Yemen moved into a book of a member of the Baghdadi group in Bombay.

## **Basra and the Jews**

In my opinion, the context and the framework of Indian Ocean Jews will allow us to understand more precisely the argument in Basra. Basra city was a major port in the Indian Ocean. The advantage was that it stood at a crossroads of both sea and land.<sup>5</sup> No wonder that in the city developed an important Jewish community, whose leaders were closely related to the Mamluk regime of the eighteenth century. A fascinating study of Zvi Yehuda teaches us that the power of leadership was so great that Christian leaders were accused of the murder of Jews for religious purposes during Easter. It turns out that the Mamluk period supported the Jews.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the decline in the power of Jewish community in the nineteenth century, it was still an important port city. In the twentieth century the British authorities established a modern harbor and the city developed.

As said, the movement was founded in Basra in 1927 by Kaduri E. Ani. After selecting Ani as president of the community, the Theosophical club became a central factor, and met with resistance from community rabbis and old dignitaries. The conflicts (1931-1936) were championed by the Jewish leadership, and led to the authorities' intervention. The Basra community split in two, but the leaders were able to finally reach a compromise in 1936.

Haim Cohen wrote about Ezra Zion,<sup>7</sup> school teacher whose nickname was Isaac Said Nattan, who composed, or rather edited, the booklet against the Theosophists.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See for example:

<sup>6</sup> See:

<sup>7</sup> I think Cohen confused Isaac Nattan with Rahamin Zion "a native of Baghdad. Grew up in Basra. He was active in Jewish and Zionist circles, and even started a Jewish library, activities which were

In fact his real name was Isaac Said Nattan. He born in South Yemen at 1897 and when he was 13 years he immigrated to Bombay where his father was a rabbi at the Sassoon Synagogue. He learned at a British school and studied in the years 1918-1919 at a British College. At the same time, he was a cantor in the "Tiferet Israel" synagogue and a teacher at the Jewish School. In 1923 he went to Iraq to study at Bet Zilkha yeshiva, as wrote the chief rabbi of Baghdad, Benjamin H. Moshi, Sivan Hatarzav:

"גלה לבבל מארץ הודו לפני כמה שנים למען השתלם בלימודי הש"ס והפוסקים... נתעסק בתור מורה השפה האנגלית של הקהילה הישראלית".<sup>9</sup>

He taught at Al-Wataniya School in Baghdad and Alliance School in Amara.

After the beginning of the affair, the Rabbi of Basra wrote several letters to rabbis in the West to ask their opinion. One of them was Rabbi Leo Jung from New York, who wrote several letters on the subject and strongly opposed the Theosophists.<sup>10</sup> Isaac Nattan translated the letters from English into Arabic and published them in a small booklet in Arabic: Al-Dalal Al-Salih. Nattan was the right person to write the booklet: He knew the Theosophical culture from India, the world of religion and Arabic from Yemen and Bet Zilkha Yeshiva in Baghdad, as well as English from the British college from Bombay.

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potentially life-threatening in Iraq in the 1930s... Both Rabbi Jung and Rahmin Sion were frequent contributors to Israel's Messenger, a monthly English newspaper published in Shanghai". They both wrote responses published in Israel's Messenger and were highly critical of theosophy.

<sup>8</sup> See.407-401 עמ' (1965) 4, המזרח החדש ט"ו, (1965) 4, עמ' 407-401.

<sup>9</sup> Family collection.

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Jung (1892-1987) was the rabbi of the Jewish Center on W. 86<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan and a professor of ethics at Yeshiva College.



Because of writing the booklet he was prosecuted and fined a hundred rupees. It seems that after the affair he decided to return to India.

The Theosophical world view searched for divine wisdom everywhere, in every religion and pagan spirituality movements. Huss has taught us that the Jewish members of the Theosophical movement see the connections between their movement and the Kabbala and they started to explore the Zohar.

I would like to argue that in this way we can understand the opposite movement. Perceptions of idolatrous elements within Theosophy played a pivotal role in resistance to it. The Yemeni origin of Nattan allows me raise the hypothesis that his participation in the campaign against Theosophical reflects not only the conservative camp's religious affiliation, but also the impact of the Darada'e movement of Yemen. The movement was founded in Sana'a, Yemen, in the early twentieth century by Rabbi Yahya Qafih and was influenced both by the Rationalistic-Maimonides movement in Yemen and European Jewish Haskala. A center of opposition was rooted in resistance to the Kabbalah, defined by them as idolatrous and undermining claims of the uniqueness of God. So it is a reasonable conjecture that the rational world view also influenced Isaac Said, although his father was a Mequbal.

Another example of the uneasiness of any mention of gods and idolatry by Yemenite Jews is the song of Shlomo Dahyani. Dahyani was a Yemeni singer, who sang a song that presents the dilemma in relation to Indian culture with all its ingredients of idolatry. The song "Ab Tere Siva" was first sung by the famous singer Amirbai

Karnataki (ca 1906 - 1965) in the "Kismet" film (1943).<sup>11</sup> The song was known throughout Yemen and especially Aden, where Dahyani was in those years. The opening line of the song is: "Ab tere siva kaun mera Krishan Kanhaiya", the translation of which is "Without you I have no one in the world, O Lord Krishna". Dahyani changed the words and sang: "Ab tere siva kaun mere ishq ki naya", which translates as "Without you, what other Love Boat I have".<sup>12</sup>

The way I present now the dispute is not consistent with the description presented by Haim Cohen and David Sagiv in their research on the debate in Basra.

Haim Cohen describes the political debate and the accusations of corruption from young people in the community led by Kaduri E. Ani.

Zvi Yehuda study presents the broad context of political debate taking place within this community. In those days, a generation of educated young Jewish people who opposed the financial elites and oldest rabbis who ruled the community organizations took to the streets. At the same time in Basra, Hilla and Baghdad there were attempts by young reformers to take over the leadership of the community. All these attempts ultimately failed due to the young people's lack of experience and because of the Iraqi authorities' support of the traditional leadership.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The film was one of the biggest successes in the Hindi cinema.

<sup>12</sup> I want to thank achia Anzi and Sajida Ben Tzur.

<sup>13</sup> See: צ' יהודה, יהודי בבל באלף השני לספירה, אור יהודה תשע"ג, עמ' 68-74.

David Sagiv emphasizes the modern dimension of Theosophists who wanted to advance the status of women, among others, in Basra.<sup>14</sup>

Another insight might be that intra-community ties among the Eastern Jews of Islamic countries, based on kinship, religion, ideology, common language and economic ties were created and stabilized before the immigration of Eastern Jews to Israel. The Republic of letters established by the Baghdadis in India, and their family in Iraq, which included: popular, legal, and high literature, deepened the Eastern Jews' awareness of a common identity, at the very least among those who have the Indian Ocean in common. No wonder that the only the Journals of the Far East and Al-'Alam Al-Isra'ily<sup>15</sup> wrote about this story. This argument undermines the position of scholars who saw the rise of Oriental Jewish identity as a modern Israeli phenomenon, but this requires further study. In this lecture, I wanted to show that a study of the relations between Indian, Iraqi and Yemenite Jewish communities offers some insights that can change the perception of Jewish identity in modern times.

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<sup>14</sup> See: 88-73 עמ' ד, ירושלים תשס"ד, 1952-1914, קהילת יהודי בצרה

<sup>15</sup> About this Journal see: "אלעאלם אלאסראאילי": מקומו בעולם העיתונות היהודית והערבית במזרח התיכון על רקע התמורות בקהילות היהודיות בסוריה ולבנון, 1948-1921, עבודת דוקטור, בר אילן 2012.