RABBI YAAKOB ELYICHAR

and his

MEGILLAT PARAS

On the History of the Basra Community
in the years 1775–1779

BY

MEIR BENAYAHU

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ELYICHAR FAMILY IN SPAIN AND EREẒ-ISRAEL

It is by no means clear how the exiles from Spain, who had taken refuge in Ereẓ-Israel, whether at the time of the expulsion or at some later period, formed themselves into communities, developed creative life and turned the land into a centre of Judaism. There was no continuity in the succession of generations and no distinctive traces are left of those early settlers: wave upon wave of immigrants swept over their settlements and changed them. The links are particularly loose during the period from the Spanish expulsion till the end of the 17th century. The traces of the refugees' descendants, who had laid the foundations of Jewish re-settlement of Ereẓ-Israel, have disappeared from the land, and it seems that the dearth of our sources of information is not the only reason for this.

The Abulafia family offers the only example of continuity. Its head, Rabbi Yaakob Abulafia of Safed, was the grandson of Rabbi Yaakob Berab, a refugee who had re-established Rabbinical ordination and whose grandsons and their descendants have been living in Safed, Tiberias, Hebron and Jerusalem up to the present time. However, during the 17th and 18th centuries there was hardly a Rabbi from this family who did not feel compelled to emigrate for some time. The position changed from the second half of the 17th century, particularly in Jerusalem. Members of the Meyuḥas family,

for instance, not only lived in Jerusalem generation after generation, but also held leading positions in the community. There are also many other families whose existence in this country is known to date back a hundred to a hundred and fifty years.

We know of no exiled scholar who migrated to Erez-Israel at the time of the Spanish expulsion and whose descendants have been living continuously in this country up to the present time. But there is one family whose continued residence we know to date back to the 17th century, yet whose existence in this country has been found to be of greater antiquity, and whose head Rabbi Yosef Elissar was one of the first exiles to come straight from Spain to Safed. The history of this family may, on consideration, go to show how the Jews moved about within the land of Israel from one community to another and how they succeeded in consolidating Jewish settlement of the land and in remaining in the country even under the harsh and dire conditions prevailing then in Palestine. Our information is mainly restricted to one of the scholars of this family, Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar, a contemporary and neighbour of the well-known Rabbi, Ḥayyim Yosef David Azulai (ḤIDA). The biography of this scholar, it seems, is characteristic of the problem we have outlined above.

The origin of the name Elyichar has been much discussed by scholars. Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar, Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar's grandson, was of the opinion that the name derived from the Hebrew word *yosher* [righteousness, honesty],[1] and

1 As quoted by A. L. Frumkin, *Toldot Ḥakhmei Yerushalayim*, Vol. 3, p. 202.

that his grandfather was the first to be called by that name. Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar was identified by some with Rabbi Yaakob Vilna, by others with Rabbi Yaakob Vilna's son, and by others still with the son of Rabbi Nissim Ḥayyim Yeruḥam, son of Rabbi Yaakob Vilna.[2] They all held the view that Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar was the first member of the family to be called by this name. They failed to notice that Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar wrote his name in Hebrew with double *yod* and that already in the 17th century there lived in Jerusalem one Rabbi Abraham Elyichar. This in itself suffices to show that the family name was none other than the name of the town Híjar in Aragon, where a Jewish community, famous for its Hebrew press, had once existed, and that the prefixed letters *el* stood for the Arabic definite article *al*. In the same way, we find a number of Sephardi families, named after their place of origin, such as El-Sarakosti, which in course of time became "Saragosi".

The father of the family in Erez̤-Israel was Rabbi Yosef Elissar. His name figures among the seventeen Rabbis, most of whom were counted among the great scholars of Spain, who came straight from Spain to Erez̤-Israel, and are signatories to a letter from Safed 5264 (1504)[3] — the earliest document we possess from Safed after the expulsion from Spain. And indeed, there was a family in Aragon by the name

2 M. Benayahu, "Rabbi Yaakob Vilna and His Son and Their Attitude to Sabbatianism", Jerusalem, 1(4), *Yeshayahu Press Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem, 5713 (1953), p. 212.

3 M. Benayahu, "A Document of the First Generation of Spanish Exiles in Safed", *Prof. S. Assaf Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem, 5713 (1953), p. 115.

of Híjar.[4] An interval of more than 150 years separates Rabbi Yosef Elissar from Rabbi Abraham Elyichar, and we learn nothing more of the family during the whole of this period, although we possess copious information on the golden age of Safed, and the names of many Rabbis and other personalities from that epoch have come down to us.

We know nothing about Rabbi Abraham Elyichar who lived some five or six generations after Rabbi Yosef Elissar except through his son who signed his name "Yosef son of my master and father, the pious Rabbi Abraham Elyichar, of blessed memory".[5] This suggests that Rabbi Abraham Elyichar died before the year 5470 (1710) and, presumably, had also lived in Jerusalem like his son. Did the members of the Elyichar family leave Safed at the time of its decline, after the year 5352 (1592), when many of the Rabbis moved to Jerusalem and Hebron? In any case, it is worth noting that in none of the places where the refugees from Spain settled do we find any other family of this name, and that the one which settled in Erez-Israel consisted of a single hereditary line.

The first member of the family known to have lived in Jerusalem is Rabbi Yosef Elyichar. On the title page of the book *Nagid u-Mezaveh*, he is stated to be a resident of the

4 The Spanish historian Amador de los Rios includes among the families compelled to change their religion the families of Híjar and Ixar in Aragon. José Amador de Los Rios, *Historia Social Politica y Religiosa de los Judios de España y Portugal*, Vol. 2, Buenos Aires, 1943, p. 66.

5 See the preface to the book *Nagid u-Mezaveh*, Amsterdam, 5472 (1712).

Holy City of Jerusalem. It seems that he was a Cabbalist or of Cabbalist leanings.

With the increase of oppressive measures against the Jews in Jerusalem, a number of its Rabbis fled to Hebron, including Rabbi Abraham Iẓḥaki, the *Rishon le-Ẓion* [the Chief Rabbi] whom we know to have been in Hebron in the month of Sivan in the year 5468 (1708).[6] It is possible that Rabbi Yosef Elyichar also moved to Hebron. As a result of those oppressive measures, Rabbi Abraham Iẓḥaki was commissioned as an emissary from Jerusalem to Turkey and Western Europe, and from the preface to *Nagid u-Meẓaveh*, it appears that Rabbi Yosef Elyichar accompanied him. In Amsterdam in the year 5472 (1712), he printed the book *Nagid u-Meẓaveh*, the work of Rabbi Yaakob Ẓemaḥ, from a manuscript which was in Rabbi Iẓḥaki's possession. From Amsterdam Rabbi Iẓḥaki returned to Turkey and thence to Jerusalem, probably in the year 5476 (1716), and with him, presumably, Rabbi Yosef Elyichar.

As already mentioned, Rabbi Yosef Elyichar moved from Jerusalem to Hebron. In about the year 5480 (1720), he married the daughter of the Cabbalist Rabbi Yaakob Vilna who had come to Ereẓ-Israel with Rabbi Yehudah Ḥasid's group. The latter was touring abroad at the time, but his family resided in Hebron, after the remnants of his followers had been expelled from Jerusalem. In Hebron Rabbi Yosef Elyichar figured among the scholars and heads of the community.

Even at Hebron he was not at rest. Those had been hard

6 M. Benayahu, "On the History of the Connections of the Moroccan Rabbis with Ereẓ-Israel", *Sinai*, Vol. 35, 5714 (1954), p. 333.

years for the Hebron Jews. In 5487 (1727), the community's debt amounted to 15,000 pesos, apart from interest at the rate of 20%. Tribal strife and rebellion had raged around Hebron for a long time. The same year the heads of the community wrote: "Because of the hostilities that have been raging in this town for the last three years, Hebron has become divided into two camps." The Jews were compelled to pay heavy taxes for the maintenance of the army and the debt rose to 19,000 pesos. The Hebron community sent two emissaries to Western Europe, Rabbis Yom Tov Krispi and Abraham Gedalia, and among the signatories to their commission, which was dated Elul 5487 (1727), we find Ḥayyim Yosef, son of Abraham Elyichar.[7]

Barely two or three years had elapsed when he, too, was commissioned together with Rabbi Eliahu Ben Arḥa, the Rabbi of Hebron. In 5490 (1730) they were in Tripoli.[8] We should have known nothing of this mission but for a document found in the records of the Verona community, which shows that the emissaries pursued their journey to Italy and made a round of its cities until the year 5493 (1733).[9] In the month of Tevet they appeared before the community and asked for "aid to help ransom prisoners" in Hebron, and the public donated fifty ducats for the purpose. It seems that in the same

7 See I. Ben-Zvi, "Four letters of Emissaries from Hebron and Safed to Pisa", *Sinai*, Vol. 30, 5712 (1952), p. 85; "Ereẓ-Israel Emissaries to Italy", *Sinai*, Jubilee Volume, 5718 (1958), p. 18. The name Ḥayyim was added to him for the first time in these documents.

8 Rabbi Abraham Khalfon in his *Seder Ha-Dorot*, Photostat in my possession.

9 See Document A below.

year they returned to Hebron. Shortly afterwards Rabbi Elyichar died. In documents of subsequent years, his name does not appear among the signatories.

His son, Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar [10] was born in Hebron,[11] some time after the year 5480 (1720). His father was abroad on missions and died suddenly when he was quite young, so that he received most of his education at the hands of his mother. Being the daughter of Rabbi Yaakob Vilna, she received a subsidy from the money sent from Germany for the Ashkenazim through Erez-Israel agents at Constantinople. In their letters to Sheikh Raḥamim Kohen of Jerusalem dated 12th Tevet 5515 (1755) and 4th Elul 5516 (1756), we find that 10 piastres were given to the "daughter of Rabbi Yaakob Vilna" [12] in Hebron. His mother remained in Hebron until shortly before her death. In the summer of 5541 (1781) she moved to Safed, where her son resided, and died there in the month of Ḥeshvan 5542 (1781).[13]

We have no information about the early life of Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar. A note in *Zikhron Maasiyyot ve-Nissim* [A Memoir of Stories and Miracles] of Rabbi ḤIDA on "Rabbi Abraham Israel with Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar at Lazaretto,

10 Rabbi Yosef Elyichar also had a daughter. In a letter dated 5538 (1778) Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar mentions his sister's son.

11 In his letter to Rabbi ḤIDA he writes: "my holy town and native land is Hebron..." The letter was published by A. Elmaleḥ, *Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, 5689 (1929), p. 322.

12 The Jewish Theological Seminary, New York, Ms. no. 115, fols. 121 and 130.

13 Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar's letter to Rabbi ḤIDA was written in the week of *Parashat Mikez* and he writes that the week before marked 30 days since her death. *Mizraḥ-u-Maarav*, ibid., p. 323.

Livorno" [14] is instructive. In these notes Rabbi ḤIDA recorded stories and miracles which happened to him from the time he set out on his missions from Hebron in 5513 (1753) until 5539 (1779). The previous note is about the termination of his mission to Pisa. The matter which Rabbi ḤIDA alludes to did not occur in 5533 (1773), for in that year Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar was in Arabistan. Rabbi Abraham Israel had left for Italy in 5511 (1751) on a mission from Jerusalem, together with Rabbi Mordekhai Rubio, and both were in Livorno in 5513 (1753).[15] If Rabbi ḤIDA had anything at all to do with the matter he alludes to, then it must have been in Elul 5513 (1753), because that was when he arrived in Livorno, and it is possible that both Rabbis Abraham Israel and Yaakob Elyichar happened to be there, in other words, Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar had also been there earlier. If not, this information may be assigned prior to the 20th Shevat 5513 (1753) (the date of the letter). It is more likely that when Rabbi ḤIDA was in Lazaretto, Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar was there too.

It seems that from Italy he proceeded to Poland. On the title page of an unknown second edition of *Erez Ha-Ḥayyim*, by Rabbi Abraham Ḥayyim Hakohen, which was published at Zolkov,[16] soon after the year 5511 (1751), the following

14 M. Benayahu, *Rabbi Ḥayyim Yosef David Azulai*, p. 554, para. 171B.

15 The Ms. of their commission is in the collection of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York; photostat in Ben-Zvi Institute.

16 A copy, unique it seems, is in my possession: see M. Benayahu, "Unknown Edition of the Book *Erez Ha-Ḥayyim* by Rabbi Abraham Ḥayyim Hakohen", Kiryat Sefer, 5716 (1956), pp. 265-267.

statement appears: "And today it was brought to the printing press by two emissaries, Yosef, son of Rabbi Netanel of Dubno, of blessed memory, and Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar, a grandson of the famous Rabbi Yaakob of Vilna." Yosef of Dubno is not mentioned among the Rabbis of Erez-Israel, nor is it known whether he had gone with Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar to Italy. In the same document from the Erez-Israel agents at Constantinople dated 12th Tevet 5515 (1755), it was stated that a fixed grant of "10 piastres was given to Yosef of Dubno",[17] i.e., they were in Poland in 5514 (1754), and by the winter of 5515 (1755) had already returned to Hebron.

The nature of this mission is not clear. It seems that the two men were in Poland on behalf of the Ashkenazim of Hebron, who, so far as we know, did not have a committee of their own. The number of Ashkenazim in Hebron was very small and it is doubtful whether they had any communal organization. The letter sent on their behalf to the Metz community in 5525 (1765) [18] is of interest. Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar is a signatory to it as one "of the guardians" of the few Ashkenazim in Hebron. In that letter they point out that seven years had elapsed since they had last received their contribution, i.e., since 5518 (1758), and perhaps these were contributions fixed by the above-mentioned emissaries during their stay in Poland. In 5525 (1765), 200 livres were received from the Metz community and receipts were sent "signed by all members of the Ashkenazi community now present in this holy city." They apologize that they are not numerous "as

17 See note 12 above.
18 See document B.

a number of them had left the town because of their poverty, but they are due to return."

The signatories to this letter are Rabbi Shemuel son of Rabbi Shaul and Yaakob son of Yosef, descendant of the famous Cabbalist Rabbi Yaakob of Vilna. Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar thus concealed his Sephardi family name and mentioned his Ashkenazi parentage only. From the letters of the Erez-Israel agents at Constantinople we can deduce the poverty of the Ashkenazim in Hebron. In the month of Tevet 5515 (1755), a fixed grant was given to Yosef of Dubno and to Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar's mother. But in Elul 5516 (1756), "15 piastres," were given "to Rabbi Hayyim of Vilna," who is none other than Rabbi Ḥayyim Hakohen, the author of *Erez Ha-Ḥayyim* who went to Hebron in 5510 (1750) and lived there till 5525 (1765).[19]

Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar went abroad a second time. He was sent this time by Hebron on a mission to the Arab countries. In 5523 (1763) he was in Baghdad and just before his return the poet Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ, the Rabbi of the community, wrote a panegyric in his honour.[20] Before long Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar was again sent abroad on behalf of Hebron — this time to Turkey. In 5528 (1768) he was in Sofia and the Rabbi of the community, Rabbi Reuben Bakhar Yaakob, recorded in his book: "I have heard of Rabbi Abraham Iẓḥaki of blessed memory from Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar,

19 *Rabbi Ḥayyim Yosef David Azulai*, Vol. 2, p. 357.

20 See below p. 62. Some mistakes have crept into the Mss. of the poems of Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ; whether this date is erroneous or not is a matter for enquiry, as the allusion is to his mission in 5533 (1773).

emissary of the holy city of Hebron, who visited this town towards the end of 5528 (1768)." [21] Rabbi Reuben Bakhar Yaakob, who was also a poet, wrote in his honour a poem on the snuff which Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar used to take, but had given up. From this poem we learn of the influence exerted by his personality and the great success of his mission.[22]

From Bulgaria he crossed over to Serbia. We possess a Ms. from the year 5531 (1771) describing his influence and success in the community of Monastir. Yaakob Ḥazzan dedicated a trust for "the Yeshivah 'Minḥat Erev' for the study of the Torah so that my name be remembered and I shall have a share with them in the world to come, as the trusted Rabbi and excellent judge, Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar, emissary of the Holy City of Hebron, pledged the members of the Yeshivah, who, even today, are studying Torah without remuneration".[23]

Around the year 5530 (1770) he returned to Hebron and was one of the thirteen community leaders who, on 15th Av 5532 (1772), signed Rabbi ḤIDA's commission to France.[24]

21 Ms. *Shomea u-Mosif* by Reuben Bakhar Yaakob, fol. 47b. The Ms. was in Rabbi Eliahu Mani's library and is now in the possession of his granddaughter Zemirah Mani, Prof. Yoel Rakaḥ's wife, in Jerusalem, and I take this opportunity to thank her for allowing me to inspect it.

22 See below, Rabbi Reuben Bakhar Yaakob's poem, verse 20.

23 Document B.

24 Shabatai Toaff, "Second Commission of Rabbi ḤIDA", *Ha-ḤIDA Memorial Volume*, Jerusalem, 1959, p. 201. Photostat of document reproduced in *Rabbi Yosef Ḥayyim David Azulai*, Vol. I, facing p. 40. Rabbi Ḥayyim Halevi Polako told his grandson Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar, that "he had land and houses in the Holy City of Hebron". *Luaḥ Ereẓ-Israel* 6, p. 39.

Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar was a close friend of Rabbi ḤIDA,[25] who himself had returned to Hebron from Egypt on the 24th Sivan 5529 (1769). Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar was a frequent visitor of his *Bet Midrash*, and was wont in modesty to call himself Rabbi ḤIDA's "little pupil" while referring to him as "my master and Rabbi, the crown of my head... my lord king", although he was nearly fifty years old at the time, the same age as Rabbi ḤIDA. Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar helped him in his literary works and copied manuscripts for him. They became great friends and Rabbi ḤIDA mentions in his book a number of commentaries belonging to him. Even after they parted Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar remained in correspondence with him.

In 5532 (1772), the elders of the Hebron community decided to send emissaries abroad — Rabbi ḤIDA to Western European countries, where he had been twenty years before, and Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar to Arabistan, which he had visited ten years previously. Though their destinations were different they travelled together as far as Egypt. They left by caravan on the eve of the 1st of Ḥeshvan. Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar was accompanied, it seems, by his son Ḥayyim, who was with him at Basra, and by his nephew, his sister's son, who in 5538 (1778) was in Baghdad.[26]

Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar's mission did not include Egypt, which was not one of the Arabistan countries. Why, then,

25 Even his mother was fond of Rabbi ḤIDA and in his letter to Rabbi ḤIDA dated 5542 (1782), Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar writes: "may all the prayers and benedictions which she prayed for you and your children come true and be visited upon the head of the *ẓaddik*," *Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, loc. cit., p. 323.

26 See document H.

did he choose the long and dangerous overland route rather than set out from Acre by boat? It was a period of rebellion and hostilities between the local governors and the Egyptian rulers. Abul Dahab, the commander of Ali Bey's army, had conquered most of Erez-Israel, reached Damascus and afterwards turned and fought against his own master. Jaffa and Acre changed hands several times. Under these circumstances travel by land and sea was dislocated. The Russian navy intervened in favour of Ali Bey, and with its assistance the coastal cities of Acre and Sidon were taken by Daher El-Omar, Ali Bey's ally.[27] It may be that the roads were safer on the Egyptian side than through the cities that were conquered or occupied by Abul Dahab's armies.

Their journey was not without adventures. The Sheikhs Yutah and Samou molested them. They set out for Egypt in the large caravan of a bedouin chieftain who was going to war against Ali Bey, "who had camped near Jaffa," on the orders of Abul Dahab.[28] The Hebron community was indebted to the Sheikh to the sum of 5,000 ducats and doubts had arisen whether it was advisable to join his caravan, as "it was not unlikely that he would arrest and torture us until we had paid" Hebron's debt. Rabbi ḤIDA tells us of a talk between the Sheikh and Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar which ended in their deliverance. He addressed Rabbi Yaakob roughly, saying: "You are from Hebron? I have a claim against Sheikh Aslan,

27 I. Ben-Ẓvi, *Erez-Israel Under Ottoman Rule*, Jerusalem, 1955, pp. 28–30.

28 For details, see Rabbi ḤIDA, *Maagal Tov*, Freiman's edition, Berlin, 5681 (1921), p. 49 ff. I have corrected the text according to the Ms.

time will tell." "Aslan", replied Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar, "is your slave, and what the slave has is his master's property." But near El-Arish they were compelled to part from their caravan, because its men did not consent to rest on the Sabbath.

While they were alone in the desert, a bedouin sheikh came up to them on the Sabbath and asked them for money. Rabbi ḤIDA urged him to wait till nightfall and gave him some raisins. They felt they were in great danger, and at night they moved away without any of them knowing where they were going. In Rabbi ḤIDA's own words: "On Saturday night we were in great distress because it was pitch dark, frightening and rainy. We walked eight hours in the night and met up with a large caravan which was starting on its journey, but we had no strength to proceed and stopped there from distress and fatigue. Later on we plucked up courage and set out on our journey."

While in the heart of the Sinai Desert, a little way out of Catia, they met a *Kashef* (a petty district officer), who had fled from Ali Bey, and made friends with him. He was bound for Bilbais, while the caravan was on its way to Cairo. Rabbis ḤIDA and Yaakob Elyichar could not agree on which road to take: "And Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar wanted to proceed with the caravan, whereas Rabbi Naḥmias and myself preferred to go with the *Kashef*. Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar was obliging and gave the Arabs our biscuits and fruit and they obeyed him for this reason. He told the Arabs to lead our camels alongside the caravan. I became angry at that, we dismounted from the camels, scolded the Arab who had been leading us and set out on foot to Bilbais. Rabbi Elyichar re-

buked us the way he would common and ignorant men, but we held our peace and proceeded on foot." [29] Rabbi Elyichar continued with the caravan, but finally he realized that Rabbi ḤIDA's course was the better one. "Finally, the Arab came up with his camels to take us to Bilbais, and we arrived there." On their arrival Rabbi ḤIDA reproved Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar: "I spoke to Rabbi Elyichar and made good my reproof. I told him 'I agree that in matters of Torah you are superior to me, but in worldly matters you know nothing!"

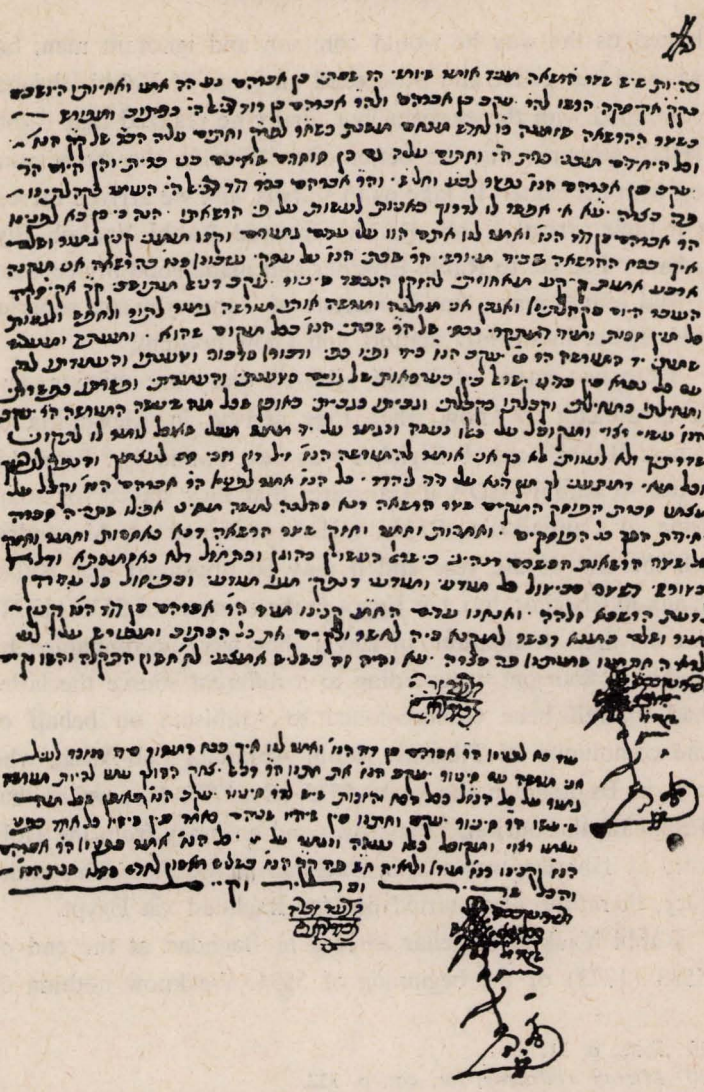
Here two pages of Rabbi ḤIDA's diary are missing, and it is difficult to know when they arrived in Alexandria or where Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar was next bound for. From his letter to Rabbi ḤIDA it transpires that they stayed for some time in Cappadocia. Rabbi ḤIDA remained in Alexandria till the end of the year and it may be presumed that Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar, too, left Egypt in the summer of 5533 (1773) for his final destination. In Egypt they were accompanied by Rabbi I. Sourjon; [30] according to a different source the latter had himself been commissioned to Arabistan on behalf of the community of Tiberias. Rabbi Abraham Leb-Arieh, who was in Baghdad in the years 5535–38 (1775–78), writes that Rabbi Iẓḥak Sourjon,[31] the *dayan* and emissary from the Holy City of Tiberias, was also in Baghdad at the time. This emissary, therefore, also started out for Baghdad via Egypt.

Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar arrived in Baghdad at the end of 5533 (1773) or the beginning of 5534. We know nothing of

29 Ibid., p. 51.

30 *Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, loc. cit., p. 322.

31 Rabbi Abraham Leb-Arieh, *Hekhal Melekh*, Salonica, 5574 (1814), fol. 2b.



Document from the *Bet-Din* in Basra (1775)
At the head the signature of Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar

his activities in this community except that he ordered from a scribe the writing of a scroll of the Pentateuch for one Abraham Turjeman of Hebron, and that he prevailed on Rabbi I. Ben Ḥardun to send a scroll of the Pentateuch with *rimonim* [silver bells] "to the sacred synagogue of the Holy City of Hebron." [32] In that year, 5534 (1774), he moved on to Basra. The judges of the *Bet-Din* of this town, Rabbis Yaakob Bakhar Ḥayyim Yosef Elyichar, Zekhariah Ben Raḥamim and Iẓḥak Laniado, confirmed a bill written in Akiska in 5534 (1774), and in the month of Heshvan 5535 (1774) [33] gave written confirmation to Abraham Ben David Daniel, the holder of the bill, "who resides here in our community of Basra."

The same thing happened to Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar in Baghdad as had happened to his colleague, Rabbi Abraham Leb-Arieh, an emissary from Jerusalem. He arrived in this community after the epidemic of 5533 (1773), in which Rabbi Ẓedaka Ḥuẓin, the Rabbi of Baghdad, had met his death, and was offered the vacancy, although he was temporarily replacing the Rabbi of Basra. At that time the news reached him of the death of his wife in Hebron. He then married Raḥmah, daughter of the President of the community, Yaakob Aharon Gabbai, who was a banker.[34]

In the month of Nisan 5535 (1775), Basra was besieged by the Persian army. The siege lasted thirteen months, at the end of which Basra capitulated and the Persian army ruled there for four years. Basra was sealed off and Rabbi Yaakob

32 See Document D.

33 Sassoon Ms. 1029 C-B, *Ohel David*, p. 993.

34 See below, *Megillat Paras*, note 3b.

Elyichar was compelled to remain there. The Hebron community was obliged to send another emissary and chose one of the Rabbis of Hebron, Rabbi Nissim Ovadiah, who set out on his mission in 5536 (1776), it seems, and arrived in Baghdad.[35]

Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar declared a fast and said prayers for the safety of the Jews and the defeat of the Persian army. He encouraged the people and restored their spirits. In a letter he sent to Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ of Baghdad in the year 5539 (1779), he expressed his wish "that we may return to the town where my fathers are buried." The state of emergency came to an end with the withdrawal of the Persian forces from Baghdad in the month of Nisan 5539 (1779). Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar had now to care for two small children, born to him in Basra, where he stayed till 5541 (1781). During this period he also engaged in business with his father- and brother-in-law.

Early in 5541 (1781) he accompanied the members of his family up the river Tigris to Baghdad; when he reached Korna, he prepared to return to Basra to transfer his effects. Shortly afterwards he left Baghdad for Damascus. As his son Ḥayyim was in debt to the Arabs,[36] he hesitated to return to Hebron. Friends, men of substance from Basra, who had fled to Damascus "and the rich man, Natan Farḥi", he writes, "had shown me the right path, and directed me to this sacred place,

35 See Letter in Ms., in Sassoon's collection, U-229. This letter was written at the time, as the emissary asks to be informed "of news from Basra. May God cancel all oppressive measures against you, all Israel and the Jews of Basra."

36 *Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, loc. cit., p. 322.

Safed," where he arrived in the month of Sivan 5541 (1781).

Throughout those years no Jews had lived in Safed. On his accession to the throne in 1773, Abdul Ḥamid I set about restoring order in the administration of the Empire. Daher was killed in 1775, and Ḥassan Pasha of the Royal Fleet appointed Aḥmad Jazzar (who had destroyed the house of Daher) Governor of Sidon, who established his seat of government at Acre.[37] In the year 5538–9 (1778–9), the Jews returned and settled in Safed.[38]

Aḥmad Jazzar was interested in developing Safed and, therefore, encouraged the Jews to settle there. He cancelled all their old debts and ordered his men to protect them from false accusations. He allowed them to rebuild its ruined synagogues, and proclaimed that anyone rebuilding a ruined house would automatically become its owner.[39] As the Farḥi family were the financiers of Aḥmed it was only natural for them to advise Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar to settle in Safed.

Of the resurgence of the Jewish community of Safed we learn from a letter dated 5543 (1783) written by the community's notables with Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar's signature at the head, and which reads as follows:

"And God granted the land its wish, for He regretted all its ruins and consoled His people through the orders of its new ruler... who had proclaimed: 'Who among you —

37 I. Ben-Zvi, *Erez-Israel Under Ottoman Rule*, pp. 30–31.

38 Officials of Safed in Constantinople wrote in Tishri 5544 (1783): "For about 5 years Jewish settlement of the land has been making great strides with a greater population than in the beginning." *Zion*, Volume 5, 5693 (1933), p. 158.

39 *Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, loc. cit., p. 322.

may God be with him — desirous of living honourably, will come to settle on the good land . . .' The ruins were rebuilt for the residence of the Children of Israel with the synagogues and *Batei-Midrash* constituting a "little sanctuary" [Ezek., 11,16], each day bringing new additions, each man and his house, learned and well-known men and many respectable householders have come [40]. . . We had to borrow money with interest to build synagogues and *Batei-Midrash* . . ." [41]

Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar realised on coming to Safed what the future held in store for its community "which is becoming like a new city in Yehudah. It is small and its inhabitants are few, but one thing they have — a devoted shepherd in the person of the thoroughly learned Rabbi Abraham of the

40 *Zion*, loc. cit., pp. 156–157.

41 What a difference between the text of the letter dated 5543 (1783), sent to the Diaspora with an appeal for funds, and that of Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar to Rabbi ḤIDA in 5542 (1782), inviting him to assume the Rabbinate of Safed. In the first we hear lamentations, whereas in the second we hear jubilations: "Permission is also given to rebuild the synagogues as they were before, and now, thank God, three synagogues have been built, two for the Sephardim and one for the Ashkenazim," etc. (*Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, 3, p. 322). In Yaari's view this letter mentions "the earthquake of the year 5520 (1760) and the beginning of the building enterprises with the immigration of the *Ḥasidim* who had come to settle." According to him, officials in Constantinople say that "because of the earthquake at Safed, no emissary from Safed was sent for several years, but for about 5 years, i.e., since the arrival of the *Ḥasidim*, extensive rebuilding has been going on in the town." (*Sheluḥei Erez-Israel*, p. 662). This, however, is not the case. The author did not grasp the significance of the historical events mentioned in the letter, which contains no mention of the matters to which he refers.

house of Leon, together with his scholarly brother, Rabbi Michael — may they live long — who have determined to restore this sacred place, and, by the will of God, will find favour with the Pasha who has come with His Majesty the King's *firman*. For all that wicked family of Daher has died and disappeared... and the said Pasha has been kind to them, and issued *firmans* on all taxes and rates and other expenses, so that only 2,000 sovereigns will be payable annually and no more. And for this purpose a fund with income was established in Constantinople from which this sum would be drawn, the remaining income being devoted to private expenses and the Rabbis of the several congregations... And now these persons have undertaken to reform municipal matters down to the last details, except for the Yeshivah, as to which some delay occurred in fixing a session in which Rabbis and scholars would assemble, as is the custom." [42]

Many were ready to come to Safed to assume the Rabbinical office. However, the heads of the community decided not to accept a Rabbi unless it be someone "who would illuminate this place with the light of the Torah and with greatness — one of the great and well-known men of the generation who would raise the standard of the community in every respect." They authorised Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar to make the offer to Rabbi ḤIDA, knowing that many would follow in his wake and come to settle in Safed and rebuild it.

Although Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar had devoted himself entirely to the rebuilding of Safed, he was ready to transfer his residence to any other place in Erez̤-Israel that Rabbi ḤIDA

42 *Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, loc. cit., p. 322.

might choose, and indeed had asked him "whether I should make this place my permanent residence or stay in this country without a fixed place of abode until my lord comes to one of the towns of Erez-Israel."

The letter of 5553 (1793) is signed by eight notables and Rabbis of the Jewish community, the first signatory being Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar and the last, who was second in importance, being Rabbi Abraham of the house of Leon. From this we may conclude that Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar acted as Rabbi and presiding judge of the community. Indeed Rabbi Reuben Bakhar Yaakob, who was appointed Rabbi of Safed — Rabbi ḤIDA not having consented — recorded in his register for 5556 (1796), that he had come across a "divorce suit settled by our teacher, Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar in Safed".[43]

We have no additional information at present of the early years of the restoration of Safed, and this is as far as our information goes as regards Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar's activities in Safed. He died about seven years after he had settled there.[44] Rabbi Moshe Galante, the Rabbi of Damascus, who must have met him there in 5541 (1781), delivered a funeral oration in his honour, but only its title has come down to us: "At the news of Rabbi Yaakob Elishah's (!) death on

43 Ms. *Shomea u-Meshiv*, Records of Divorce Proceedings, fol. 33b. See note 21 above.

44 His wife Raḥmah seems to have married again. In an Act of the Safed *Bet-Din* of 5571 (1811), it is mentioned that "the woman, Mrs. Raḥmah" and her husband Moshe Mirandah, had sold a vaulted room in their court-yard, which bordered on the south the houses known as Rabbi Ḥayyim Elyichar's." Y. M. Toledano, *The Register of the Bet-Din of Safed*, Jerusalem, B/H, 5715 (1957), pp. 238–9.

the eve of *Rosh Hashanah*, 5549 (1788). Alas, the bereavement suffered by the Land of Israel, a great man and a thoroughly learned Rabbi, a great teacher, a great and excellent judge." [45]

We possess interesting evidence as to the character of Rabbi Yaakov Elyichar in a poem written in his honour by Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ, the Rabbi of Baghdad. His appearance was impressive and he was a charming person. Rabbi Reuben Bakhar Yaakob writes "ever since I have known him I have liked him like honey..." Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ in his poem, says: "My soul longed and craved for you".[46] His charm was an integral part of his personality, and not mere show. When he appeared he illuminated the whole community like a star, and when he was preparing to go sadness spread over it:

"And when you appeared and illuminated our land, it then yielded its produce, and when you prepared to go, sadness and heavy clouds enshrouded it."

The poet recalls impressions from Rabbi Elyichar's speech: "How sweet your statements and metaphors, when you stand before the crowd!" He exercised great personal influence on the public and the poet extols him and says that if his generation were worthy of him, "he would crown its head."

Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar wrote a number of books which have been lost as a result of the persecutions and vicissitudes which marked the community's life in Safed. As already mentioned, Rabbi Reuben Bakhar Yaakob had seen the record

45 Ms. Jerusalem 8° 2229, fol. 311b.
46 See below p. 60.

of a divorce suit tried by him. One question which he had asked Rabbi ḤIDA, probably when he was in Hebron, was published by the latter in his book *"Ḥayyim Shaal"*. Rabbi ḤIDA introduces it with the words, "At the request of the thoroughly learned scholar, the excellent judge, our teacher Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar — may he live long." [47] Rabbi ḤIDA recalls him with affection and writes of him: "A fountain and a well of lime which never loses a drop, kind and honest Yaakob whose study is complete, painted, adorned and engraved with vermillion, the perfect scholar and excellent judge, our Rabbi and teacher, Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar . . ." He mentions him in his books a number of times.

Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar was a poet. He wrote *Megillat Paras* [the Scroll of Persia] to commemorate the miracle that befell the Jews of Basra. In it he recounts the fall of Basra, its occupation by the Persians and their withdrawal from it in the years 5535–39 (1775–79). Five more of his poems have come down to us, all of which are published in the Hebrew edition of this book.

Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar had a son and a daughter from his first wife whom he married in Hebron, and two sons from his second wife, born in Basra. His eldest son, Ḥayyim, named after his grandfather (it seems that he was also called Yosef), was born in Hebron in or around 5510, and seems to have been a businessman. He had borrowed money from the Arabs of Hebron, and for this reason they had refrained from returning to their native town when they came back from abroad.

47 Responsa, *Ḥayyim Shaal*, Vol. II, Livorno, 5556 (1796), No. 7, fol. 14a.

In 5533 (1773), he (Ḥayyim) journeyed with his father. At that time he was engaged to the daughter of Rabbi Mordekhai Bajayo, one of the Rabbis of Hebron.[48] During the Persian siege of Basra, he became very weak and ill, and left for Baghdad for medical treatment. On the 7th Av he returned to Basra "for they did not treat him with befitting courtesy because of the oppressor and of what happened to them."[49] Towards the end of their stay in Basra, Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar again sent him with all the family to Baghdad and requested Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ "to see if he can help him over his illness, as he is aggrieved from sorrow and illness." When Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar returned to Ereẓ-Israel, his son parted from him and left for Aleppo, it seems to his father's brother-in-law, Rabbi Eliezer Shaul Gabbai.[50] Rabbi Ḥayyim Elyichar lived long and in 5597 he came to Jerusalem where he met his nephew, Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar.[51] Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar's daughter married Rabbi Yosef Danon who, in 5543 (1783), was one of the Rabbis of Safed.[52]

Rabbi Eliezer Yeruḥam Elyichar was born in Basra in 5535, and Moshe Shemuel was born a year or two after him.[53] Both settled in Safed, where the first was educated and "was ap-

48 *Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, loc. cit., p. 324.

49 Document F.

50 "My son Ḥayyim is still in Aleppo, as he was ill for about two years and had gone there for treatment." *Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, loc. cit., p. 324.

51 *Luaḥ Ereẓ-Israel* 6, p. 40.

52 Letter dated 5542 (1782), *Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, loc. cit., p. 324. He had been in Smyrna and in 5542 returned to Safed.

53 Thus it transpires from Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar's letter of the year 5542 (1782), *Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, loc. cit., p. 324.

pointed head of the ritual slaughterers. He was also a religious judge (*dayan*) and a cantor of the Constantinople congregation. He was always studying his books, and was not interested in worldly matters." [54] In Tammuz 5583 (1823), he moved to Jerusalem because of Abdallah Pasha's persecutions. Less than a year later, on 19th Adar II, 5584 (1824), he died.[55] His brother Moshe Shemuel Elyichar was also a *dayan* in Safed.[56]

Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar's sons also bound their fate with that of Safed. The Farḥi family, who had prevailed upon Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar to settle in Safed, had appointed his son Ḥayyim Elyichar as "secretary and agent of the house of the great and righteous minister... Ḥayyim Farḥi" — the financial minister of Aḥmad Jazzar Pasha in Acre.[57] Throughout the years in which the Farḥi family acted as agents of the

54 *Luaḥ Erez-Israel* 6, p. 41.

55 Frumkin-Rivlin, *Toldot Ḥakhmei Yerushalayim*, 3, p. 204. For the text of his tombstone, see Asher Leib Brisk, *Ḥelkat Meḥokek*, Part 3, Jerusalem, 5661 (1901), line 14, p. 54. His wife was a sister of Ḥakham Rabbenu Bakhar Abraham, one of the *Parnasim* of Jerusalem. Her son testifies that she was "a virtuous woman, renowned in Jerusalem for her wisdom and intelligence." (*Luaḥ Erez-Israel* 6, pp. 39, 46). She related to Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar the history of the family in Safed and Jerusalem.

56 In a Ms. document of Safed, of Elul 5580 (1820), in the Ben-Zvi Institute, he is the third signatory. It concerns the emissary, Rabbi Raḥamim Modai, who had then returned from Constantinople.

57 *Luaḥ Erez-Israel* 6, p. 40. In his letter to Frumkin, Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar adds that he was a cantor in the *Bet Midrash* of the noble Ḥasid, the late Rabbi Ḥayyim Farḥi in Acre and that he managed all his expenses. (*Toldot Ḥakhmei Yerushalayim*, 3, p. 202).

Pasha, Rabbi Ḥayyim Elyichar was liaison officer between the Jewish communities and the Ottoman government and between the Jewish communities in Ereẓ-Israel and Constantinople.[58]

Relations between Aḥmad Jazzar and the Jews and his adviser Ḥayyim Farḥi were subject to changes which left their mark on the position of Rabbi Ḥayyim Elyichar. Aḥmad died in 1804, and Suleiman Pasha was appointed in his stead. He, too, chose Rabbi Ḥayyim Farḥi as his financial secretary and the latter exercised considerable influence on Suleiman Pasha. In 1919, the latter died and Rabbi Ḥayyim Farḥi promoted Abdallah Ibn Ali, who was Suleiman Pasha's slave,[59] to the Pasha's seat. But Abdallah repaid his kindness with evil and killed him on the 9th Elul 5580 (1820).

Rabbi Ḥayyim Farḥi's death was the signal for intensifying

58 In a letter from Rabbi Israel of Shklov, of the year 5577 (1817), to Rabbi Shlomo PaKh, published by Grayevsky (*Mi-Ginzei Yerushalayim*, No. 17, p. 11). But afterwards the *Perushim* Rabbis requested their emissaries to send their letters otherwise than through Rabbi Ḥayyim Elyichar. In the year 5583 (1823), they wrote to Shlomo PaKh, their emissary in Constantinople, to send his letters with "the Tatar who travels from Constantinople to Acre lest they come into the hands of Rabbi Ḥayyim Elyichar, or by the ships that ply between Constantinople and Jaffa." They also requested him to "arrange with the Post-Office that all out-going letters from there and from Safed to our country and from our country to there, shall not be tampered with by strangers... and also that the banker, who sends letters from Constantinople to Acre, and receives them from Acre, should not delay, so that the letters do not get lost." (*Mi-Ginzei Yerushalayim*, loc. cit., p. 7). Perhaps this change took place after the relations between the *Perushim* and the *Sephardim* had deteriorated.

59 I. Ben-Zvi, *Ereẓ-Israel Under Ottoman Rule*, p. 324.

the subjugation of the Jews in the Galilee by the local rulers. The Jews had no one to support and protect their rights, and were subjected to the arbitrary rule of the Turkish officers.[60] The Safed community dwindled away and it goes without saying that Rabbi Ḥayyim Elyichar's position became intolerable. He fled from his house and was not to be found in Acre. Abdallah Pasha knew that he was entrusted with part of Rabbi Ḥayyim Farḥi's estate and therefore gave orders to find him and bring him to Acre.[61] The Pasha's scribe, who was Rabbi Ḥayyim Elyichar's friend, changed the warrant and wrote it against his brother, Rabbi Eliezer Elyichar, who on the 17th Tammuz 5582 (1822) was arrested and brought before Abdallah at Acre. The Pasha was dumbfounded, but ordered his imprisonment. On that day the Turkish fleet, under the command of Darwish Pasha, blockaded Acre by order of the Sultan,[62] with a view to occupying it and arresting the rebel

60 The Rabbis of Safed testify in the year 5586 (1826): "Since the day the might of Ishmael cut down in fearful wrath Rabbi Ḥayyim Farḥi, of blessed memory, calamities have suddenly come upon us." A. Yaari, *Sheluḥei Erez-Israel*, p. 674.

61 All information about this episode is drawn from the memoirs of the *Rishon le-Zion*, Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar who was then about 7 years old and heard about it from his mother. His memoirs were published in Lunz's *Luaḥ Erez-Israel* 6, 5661 (1901), pp. 39–46. Lunz published elsewhere (*Yerushalayim*, 5, 5661 (1901), pp. 210–217) certain data on Acre and its events according to "a manuscript of one of the oldest men," containing different and contradictory accounts. Rivlin has already remarked that Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar was the elder in question, and this is undoubtedly so (*Toldot Ḥakhmei Yerushalayim*, 3, p. 202).

62 Lunz writes (p. 215) that the Sultan sent the fleet at the request of Shlomo Farḥi who had gone to Constantinople for this purpose.

Abdallah Pasha. The siege lasted nine months during which Rabbi Eliezer Elyichar was interned in the Acre fortress.[63]

In Tevet or Shevat 5583 (1823), Rabbi Eliezer Elyichar succeeded in making his escape from the fortress. Of the manner of the escape Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar wrote: "... He was in prison till 11th Shevat 5583 (1823) ... and he besought the superintendent of the prison to allow him to bore a hole in the wall facing the sea, indicating that he wanted to throw himself into the sea. The superintendent agreed. He put his head out in order to throw himself into the sea and the superintendent forcibly pushed him from behind to ensure his being drowned ... He fell harmlessly into the sea and walked in the darkness of the night in the water along the shore until dawn when he went on the dry land. He was seen by the besieging soldiers and was brought before Darwish Pasha. He recounted all that had befallen him including the story of his escape from Acre. He was asked by the Pasha to disclose, if he knew, the most convenient place from which to take the town, and the Rabbi advised him to proceed to the place known as Telem-el-Fukhar.[64] As already mentioned, the blockade lasted nine months, at the end of which the Turkish fleet withdrew.

63 The text of *Toldot Ḥakhmei Yerushalayim* states that Abdallah Pasha had ordered him to be put to death immediately, whereas in *Luaḥ Erez-Israel* Lunz stated that because of the war he was not taken to the Pasha. In *Yerushalayim* it is stated that he spent six months in prison.

64 *Toldot Ḥakhmei Yerushalayim*, 3, p. 203. Lunz writes that Abdallah Pasha was in collusion with Darwish Pasha. Tel-el-Fukhar is an ancient Tel east of Acre, named Napoleon's Hill.

Abdallah Pasha's spies revealed to him that Rabbi Eliezer Elyichar, who had escaped from the fortress, had known the weak spots of the town, and had informed Darwish Pasha, who, accordingly, attacked the fort at convenient, vulnerable points. Abdallah gave orders to find him and bring him immediately to Acre.[65] On the 3rd Adar 5583 (1823), Abdallah's men went to Safed. One of his Moslem friends who knew about it, informed the Rabbi, who, on the same day fled to Hasbayya, which was then within the administrative province of the governor of Damascus. From there he proceeded to Damascus, where he remained until the month of Sivan. He sent word to his wife in Safed to escape with her child; he, too, left Damascus and they met up on the road.[66] On the 17th Tammuz 5583 (1823), they arrived in Jerusalem.

It is interesting to note that Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar makes no mention in this connection or elsewhere of his uncle Rabbi Shemuel Moshe Elyichar, who was himself at Acre. From a document written in Acre in 5590 (1830), we learn that in 5582 (1822), the Minister Jerimi imposed a fine of a great quantity of soap on all the shops of "Suk Ijfied" [67] and that the name of Shemuel Moshe Elyichar figures together with the three witnesses who signed the document. This means that he was in Acre during Abdallah Pasha's rule, which

65 The text of *Toldot Ḥakhmei Yerushalayim* (p. 203) states that Abdallah went personally to Safed to seize Rabbi Eliezer Elyichar.

66 An interesting description of the escape is given by Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar, *Luaḥ Erez-Israel*, loc. cit., p. 44.

67 The name given by the Turks to the Jews. Benayahu Ms., evidence taken "Here Acre on the 8th Iyyar 5590 (1830)."

lasted till 5592 (1832), when the city capitulated to Ibrahim Pasha.

Rabbi Eliezer Elyichar was fortunate, in that his son Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar (born in Safed on the 23rd Sivan 5577 [1817]) [68] became *Rishon le-Zion* (Chief Rabbi of Erez-Israel) from 5653 (1893) until his death in 5666 (1906). Half a century of the history of Jerusalem is bound up with this Rabbi's life, and he still awaits his biographer.

68 *Luaḥ Erez-Israel* 6, p. 39. His mother married in Jerusalem in 5588 (1828) Rabbi Binyamin Mordekhai Navon (ibid., p. 47) from whom he received his education.

CHAPTER TWO

BASRA DURING THE WAR WITH PERSIA 1775–1779

The Jewish Community of Basra [1] was never renowned for Jewish learning and wisdom. The town's vicinity to the Persian Gulf made it the commercial gateway for the Arab countries, the Yemen and India. A number of European powers had commercial Representatives and Agents in Basra. The Representative of the British East India Company was elevated to Agent in 1763 and a year later was granted consular status. There were also Italian, Portuguese and Dutch merchants. Arab tradesmen brought coffee and bought dates. The British East India Company imported metalware and woollens and exported Persian silk. In the middle of the 18th century travel on the roads to Basra became unsafe. The Portuguese left Basra and the Dutch transferred their business to the Isle of Khárak.[2] The Jews of Basra played an important part in

1 On this community, see Rabbi David Sassoon's article "The History of the Jews in Basra", J.Q.R., New Series, Vol. 17, 1927, pp. 407–469.

2 See Stephen H. Longrigg *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*, Oxford, 1925, pp. 187–188. I am grateful to Prof. Uriel Heyd who kindly drew my attention to this book. One of the reasons why Persia attacked Basra was that Basra had taken away Indian trade from the ports of the Persian Gulf. See P. Sykes *A History of Persia*, London, 1930, Vol. 2, p. 281.

the commercial life, especially in the trade with Persia and India.

A rich and organised Jewish community grew up in Basra. It was headed by a "president" on whom the authorities conferred wide powers. More than once the "president" had acted as adviser and treasurer to the Turkish Pasha, and this fact led the authorities to adopt an easy-going and tolerant attitude towards the Jews. As no spiritual life developed within the community, it is only natural that works from its Rabbis have not come down to us, and even historical sources are very few. We should not be surprised if any historian exploring the life of this community should pass over long periods of its existence for mere want of information.

The most important source for the history of the Jewish community of Basra from the end of the Middle Ages is *Megillat Paras* (The Scroll of Persia), the work of Rabbi Yaakob, son of Rabbi Yosef Elyichar, one of the Rabbis of Hebron who, in the course of his mission in Basra on behalf of his town was trapped there as a result of the Persian blockade. A few of his letters have been preserved which add to our information on the position of the Jews at the time. We also possess a *firman* granted to the president of the community, Yaakob Aharon Gabbai, after Basra was restored to Turkish rule.

Basra's geographical position — the fact that it was a port of great importance for commercial intercourse — and the prospect of filling the Persian treasury with large sums of money from customs' dues on vessels and goods passing through it, from time to time tempted Persian rulers to annex it to their territory. During the 18th century Turkish rule in

the provinces was on the decline and the Ottoman Government, beset with internal problems, failed to secure its authority in the remote corners of its dominion.

Two great battles were fought in Iraq in the eighties of the 18th century: one on the plains of Shahrizor and the other at Basra. The treasury of 'Umr Pasha, the governor of the *Ayalat* of Baghdad, was impoverished and by 1774 was empty. The governor was isolated and powerless. He had but a small army at his disposal with no prospect of reinforcement from Constantinople. But since 1765, Suleiman Agha, a Georgian by origin and an able administrator was ruler of Basra and *Mutasallim* [3] — an appointment which, with the exception of *Kahya,* was the highest in the *Pashallik.*

The commercial prosperity of Basra, since the suppression of the revolt by Abu Laila in 1751, was one of the reasons for the strained relations between the *Mutasallim* and the Shah. In 1773 a plague broke out in Iraq which claimed many lives and destroyed economic life. When it had subsided, Basra was threatened with a Persian invasion. Suleiman Agha was not prepared for it. His garrison was only 15,000 strong and equipped with outdated arms. When he realised the impending danger, he ordered the walls of the city to be repaired, and personally supervised the work. Yaakob Aharon Gabbai, the Jewish banker, filled the treasury with food and munitions. Suleiman informed 'Umr Pasha of the gravity of the situation and requested his assistance, but received no answer.

Persian forces, 30,000 strong, approached Shatt-el-Arab on

3 Apart for an interval of three years from 1768 to 1771: S. Longrigg, op. cit., p. 187.

the 16th March, under the command of Sadik Khan, the Shah's brother, and advanced unhindered. He sent letters to the Turkish authorities and to the British Agent calling for a deputation to negotiate ransom with him. A week later he again threatened and asked for payment of 20,000 rupees. This demand, too, remained unanswered. Meanwhile, the Chaab tribesmen crossed the Shatt past Basra and joined the Persians. Suleiman's forces reacted by establishing a boom of chained boats across the river above the mouth of 'Ashar Creek. Their confidence increased when 200 Janissaries arrived from Baghdad.

On the 16th April, the Persians camped three miles up the river 'Ashar. Three days later an attack was launched on the northern side. The Persians tried to scale the walls and bombard the city; but Suleiman's forces fought bravely. The population encouraged them with loud exhortations and the enemy was defeated. At dawn the heads of the slain Persian soldiers were seen exhibited on the city walls.[4] The author of *Megillat Paras* assigns this success to the prayers of the Jews and points out that during the famine the gentiles had fed on unclean food, but the Jews did not eat forbidden food.

In a second night attack, the Muntafik tribesmen fled from the Turkish garrison at Zubeir. The British Agent, too, seeing the Persian troops advance, sent a British boat to Sadik Khan and escaped with his men by night. The Persians, however, still did not have complete control of the river. The boom of chained boats checked their advance. The Imam of Uman, against whom, a year before, the Turks had refused to help

4 S. Longrigg, ibid., p. 190.

Shah Karim Khan, now came to pay his debt of gratitude: the Imam's vessels held the Shatt towards the end of the summer of 1775, and enabled the besieged to obtain supplies and equipment. Indeed, the blockade was never complete. Though commerce was at a standstill and the town encircled and shut up, it was always possible to penetrate behind the enemy's lines and bring in supplies.

Yaakob Aharon played an important part in the defence of Basra. His trade connections enabled him to organise supplies and equipment for the fighting forces and in various places he succeeded in breaking through the cordon of the siege. This activity of his was commended by the Sultan, and in the *firman* which was presented to him it says: "During the siege and the distress the above-named used his best endeavours and accomplished many tasks worthy of the greatness of our exalted kingdom, in many and various services, namely, he ordered and provided all kinds of expenditure, clothing, all instruments of war to all the fighting forces, all of which he did with consummate ability and perfection." [5] The Turkish army held out but the Persians did not withdraw. They received reinforcements and fortified their positions all around the city.

5 See translation of the *firman* in Rabbi Efraim Laniado's responsum, *Roei Israel*, Jerusalem, 5664 (1904), para. A, fol. 2a; also Longrigg, ibid., p. 195, who points out that the Jewish banker Khoja Yaacub was indispensable to Suleiman Pasha. Rabbi Efraim Laniado minimizes the importance of Yaakob Aharon's achievements (see below), and writes "According to what we heard, there were great men among the Christians, Turks and Arabs in Basra, who did all that Yaakob Aharon did . . . Nor did they fall short of him either in inventing devices or in the provision of expenses." Ibid., fol. 3d and see also 3b–c.

The siege of Basra had been going on for three months before the Sultan was free to consider the position in the East. His advisers thought that 'Umr's removal from Baghdad might ease the position of Basra. Rulers of Baghdad were thereafter appointed in rapid succession but none of them extended any relief to Basra. Salim Sirri, a courtier close to the throne, offered to deliver it and promised to return with the keys of the city, but he lacked the courage to fight.[6]

When the Persian forces encircled Basra, an emissary from Erez-Israel, Rabbi Abraham Leb-Arieh was on his way from Baghdad to Basra. He could neither return to Baghdad nor reach Basra. For some months he wandered from village to village to find a way of escape, but in vain. The notes he wrote at the time contain interesting passages about the hardships he experienced. Despairing of reaching his destination or returning he was compelled to live in Arab villages, where he also spent the late autumn and early winter of 1775.[7] At the height of the siege, however, a few Jews, apprehensive of the Persians ultimately breaking into the town and wreaking vengeance upon them for helping the Turks, succeeded in making good their escape to Damascus.[8] We know of one who reached the town of Muskat on the Gulf of Uman. In a letter of Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar of 1778, mention is made of one Yosef Ezra, son of Hamehannah, who, three years

6 Longrigg, ibid., pp. 180–184.

7 Jerusalem Ms. 8° 3, fol. 192b, 224a, 184b.

8 Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar met in 1781 in Damascus "men of wealth, whom I knew were members of the Basra community, where I lived." (*Mizraḥ u-Maarav*, Vol. 3, p. 322).

before the letter was written escaped from the besieged city of Muskat, where he died.[9]

The enemy continued to bombard the city and its walls. Many houses were demolished and much property destroyed by the fires that broke out.[10] Suleiman had great difficulty in holding out through the winter months of 1775. In early spring the garrison positions were in a very difficult situation. Karim Khan's forces had succeeded in weakening the strategic positions of the fort and advanced nearer the town. Supplies were exhausted, the people were starving and demanded surrender. It seems that Suleiman appealed to Constantinople urging that unless help was forthcoming, the Turkish Sultan's prestige would be disgraced by the Persian ruler.[11] As no reinforcement reached him, Suleiman assembled his advisers who decided to send a deputation to negotiate terms of surrender.[12] The deputation requested Karim Khan not to deal with the Basra townsmen too severely, not to harm aged persons or children and to take only the young men prisoner. The Khan claimed two persons for each of his slain soldiers, and proclaimed he would be satisfied with their ransom.[13]

Early in the summer of 1775, the Persians entered Basra in good military order under Ali Naqi and Ali Mohammad Khan. A week later Sadik, the Shah's brother, entered the town and a garrison force of 6,000 men was stationed in the

9 Document D.
10 *Megillah*, A, 25–26.
11 Ibid., A 34–44.
12 Ibid., B 4–5; Longrigg, ibid., p. 192, mentions a rumour that the governor of Baghdad wrote to Suleiman, advising him to surrender.
13 *Megillah*, B 7–15.

town.[14] The soldiers assaulted the civilians and treated them like slaves. They entered the government building and looted everything. Karim Khan proclaimed martial law and ordered the inhabitants to give up their arms to the Persian command. Suleiman Pasha and the heads of his government were arrested and exiled in chains to Shiraz.[15] Yaakob Aharon, the Jewish banker, was among them. Rabbi Efraim Laniado writes that "He was tortured in various ways — they even wanted to blind him, Heaven forbid. Almost all the money he had in Basra, even that buried in the ground, was taken away from him.

14 Ibid., 17–27; Longrigg, ibid., p. 192. Everyone who refers to this episode writes that the Persian war lasted a full year from April 1774 to April 1775; that the Persians entered Basra in April 1774, and about that time, a year later in April 1775, they withdrew, although it is specifically stated in the *Megillah* that the war began in 1774 and the occupation lasted four years. Cf. also A. Ben Yaakob, " 'Three miraculous days' for the Jews of Baghdad in Basra", *Hed Hamizraḥ*, Vol. 2, issue 8, New Year's Eve, 5704 (1944), p. 14, and see other sources cited there. I have enquired into the origin of the mistake and it transpires that Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar (in his preface to the *Megillah* which he explained in his book *Ish Emunim*) found that the *firman* was given to Yaakob Aharon in the year 1193 Hegira and he thought that it corresponded to the year 5535 (1775) which is not correct — the correct date being December 1779, eight months after the release of Basra.

15 Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar writes that the conqueror was of the opinion that if he "strikes the faithful shepherd" (*Megillah* C 1) he would annihilate the whole community. Longrigg writes that the prisoners were given honourable conduct to Shiraz. A Carmelite priest who was eye-witness to the event wrote in his diary: "The governor with his chief officials, the leader of the Christians, the principal Turk, the headman of the Jews were taken away to Shiraz." *A Chronicle of the Carmelites in Persia*, London, Vol. I, 1939, p. 674. I thank Prof. Fischel who kindly drew my attention to this source.

Nothing remained but such property as he had outside the town and in other countries and villages beyond the reach of the Persian authorities. And I know that when everything he had on him and in Basra had been taken away and he had to save his life, he asked his partners here in Aleppo for a large sum of money out of the funds which lay deposited with them in order to save himself. Nor was this all, for they took his son prisoner to Persia and afterwards took him prisoner, too, ... which shows that the Persians singled him out especially from among all the townsmen." [16]

The Jewish prisoners included the banker's son, Zekhariah ben Raḥamim who, in 1774, signed with Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar an act of the *Bet-Din* in Basra; [17] and Israel Yosef Ben Said, Abdel Pasha El-Kurdi's banker in Baghdad, who died in captivity in 1778. In a letter from one of the prisoners the names are also mentioned of Sheikh Sasson Ḥakham Abraham, a brother-in-law of Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ, and Sheikh Yeḥezkel Eliahu Aharon,[18] both presumed to have been among the prisoners.

Sadik ruled over Basra but did not show much firmness. Most of the time he was absent and authority was entrusted to Ali Mohammad Khan, a coarse and uncultured person, who ruled tyrannically and with great cruelty. The same Hebrew source records: "after a year of toil and exertion for the townsmen of Basra, young and old alike, the Shah's forces occupied the town. They entered, pillaged and looted houses and even killed a number of persons. They beat the population

16 *Roei Israel,* fol. 4d.
17 Document I and Sassoon Ms. 1029 C–B (and note 33 above).
18 Document I.

and punished them pitilessly. Townsmen were brought before the Persian commander and forcibly stripped of all they possessed after they had been made to endure all kinds of torture.[19]

Ali ordered the Jews to ransom themselves and applied against them the full rigour of the law. Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar and the notables of the town found the amounts imposed too heavy for the average Jew and undertook to pay the impost themselves. But this was not enough for the occupying army. They entered houses after ejecting the males and stayed in them days and weeks on end looking for hidden silver and gold. They looted everything and spared nothing. The males were taken into the Persian army and the soldiers raped and defiled the women. The notables of the community assembled the women to find a way out of the predicament. The women agreed of their own free will to burn themselves rather than be defiled.[20] Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar reports that [21] many miracles occurred every day to the Jews of Basra, and Rabbi Efraim Laniado writes: "No words are adequate to describe what they suffered in those days, which neither mind nor imagination can encompass nor words utter..." [22] From another source [23] we learn that a terrible epidemic broke out.

19 *Roei Israel* fol. 4d. The Carmelite priest writes that the ransom which Karim Khan demanded of the inhabitants of Basra amounted to 128,000 tomans. Of this sum the Christians had to pay 18,000 tomas (see note 15).

20 *Megillah* B 53–60. Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar writes in the preface to the *Megillah*: "and many of the Jewesses sacrificed themselves and preferred to be burnt."

21 *Megillah* B 67–69.

22 *Roei Israel* A, fol. 4d.

23 Longrigg, ibid., p. 193.

The position of the Persian army was not strong. They occupied the town and the gardens surrounding it. The tribes of Albu Mohammad and Bani Lam were not affected by the siege, while the tribesmen of Bani Khaled moved southwards. But for the fact that the townsmen were depressed and in low spirits, a general rising could have put an end to Persian rule. Salim Sirri, the Governor of Baghdad and Kaimakam Abdullah sent a deputy to the Persian camp to discuss evacuation. He was accorded a friendly reception and returned with a letter to the Pasha, but, meanwhile, Abdullah died (1777).[24]

The rumours that reached Basra of help from Baghdad and of peace with Persia were the only sparks of hope. In September 1776, news arrived of large sums of money that had reached Baghdad for a war with Persia. In the following spring, an army from the north was daily expected to relieve them. A year later it was said that representatives had met in Shiraz.[25] Meanwhile the occupation continued with disastrous results for the inhabitants. Persecutions and false accusations against the Jews did not cease, and during all these years the army of occupation did not alter its treatment of the inhabitants whom they considered prisoners and slaves. "The town of Basra remained for four or five years under the sway of the Persian King who collected taxes and customs duties on a scale higher than was imposed under Ottoman rule." [26]

Commerce was discontinued and relations with the outside world were severed. "The governor took it into his head to

24 Ibid., p. 184.
25 Ibid., p. 194.
26 *Roei Israel*, fol. 4d.

Letter of Yaakob Elyichar to Saleḥ Masliaḥ (1778)

forbid a woman or child to leave the town, as though trapped in a fortress," writes Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar in 1778.[27] He himself had incidentally visited Basra on a temporary mission as emissary, yet he was compelled to remain in the town unable to continue with his mission or return to Hebron. From this same letter we learn that the position of aliens was better — they could go out of town as far as Korna. The Jews did not know what was in store for them and whether the Turks had waived their rights over Basra. They secretly sent letters to the Baghdad community to intervene on their behalf. They may have asked them to apply to the Porte at Constantinople. This indeed, is the purport of Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar's letter of Adar 5538 (March 1778) to Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ: "To inform us where we stand, that they remember us and consider our position. They should have pity on us and inform us what is being done in the royal court, that we may know what is to become of us — that would be deemed a great favour. If they are afraid to write in Hebrew they can call for my nephew, for he can write in a foreign language... only let them tell us the truth..." [28]

While Baghdad was powerless and sent no help to Basra, Suleiman's only hope and that of his people lay with the tribes. Early in 1778 Ali Mohammad attacked Zubeir and perpetrated a pitiless slaughter of its inhabitants, including a considerable number of Sheikh Muntafik's men. This gave rise to bitter

27 See Document D. In Elul 5538 (1778) he writes again: "My women are in chains, not being allowed to go out of the city wall." Document E.

28 Document E.

feeling against the Persians among his tribesmen. The last encounter between them and the Persians was on a large scale. Ali Mohammad left Basra at the head of a large army with 6,000 horses and 18 boats carrying guns and advanced into Muntafik territory. The soldiers were in a mutinous mood but he reassured them, telling them they could defeat the Beduins as they had vanquished fortified Basra and promised that the loot would be entirely theirs. In order to provide for the necessary food and supplies for the war, he bid his men return to Basra to loot its people and the *sarai*. The Jews were apprehensive of the return of the days of rapine and plunder of 1775.[29] On leaving Basra, Ali Mohammad appointed Mohammad Hussein Khan to take command of the town with a garrison of 2,000 rifles.[30]

Sheikh Muntafik drew up his forces at Fudḥailah, not far from Arja. Retreating steadily, he drew the enemy into a trap in a region of marshy ground that was surrounded on two sides by a tributary of the Euphrates, and on a third side by marshland. The fourth side was held by a section of Thamir's forces.[31] The Persians entered the marshy grounds and crossed them with great difficulty. On emerging they found themselves in the enemy's den. All the Persians that were caught, were killed, the rest leapt into the river; hundreds were drowned while trying to escape by swimming.[32] Ali Mohammad was

29 *Megillah* C 10–30. The Carmelite source states that in 1777 the Persians began to demand the inhabitants give up their daughters, too, and in December of that year they destroyed the city.

30 Longrigg, ibid., p. 194.

31 Ibid.

32 *Megillah* C 44.

among the slain.[33] It is said that only three soldiers returned to Basra, and the bones of the dead Persians marked their defeat for a generation.[34]

When the news reached Sadik Khan he called for reinforcements from Shiraz, and again fear seized the inhabitants of Basra. But he did not regain his former strength. He opened negotiations with Sheikh Muntafik for an honourable submission to Persian rule, but his offer was refused. Early in 1779, returning from a visit to Shiraz to see his dying brother, he built a fort on the left bank of the river Ashar, to cover his withdrawal from Basra in order to take part in the struggle for the Persian throne. The news of the Shah's death came in the middle of March. Sadik summoned the notables of Basra and told them he was returning to Persia with his army and would no longer hold Basra. He entrusted them with the temporary government of the town and promised to release Suleiman Agha and the other prisoners who had been taken to Shiraz. In April 1779 the Persians quietly evacuated the city.

Suleiman Agha spent four years in Persia. Thanks to his friend Yaakob Aharon he remained in touch with events in Basra. In Shiraz he made many friends. Hassan Pasha, who was appointed Governor of Baghdad in 1778, sent Naaman Agha to rule Basra on its release. Suleiman was compelled to wait a few months in Howeiza. Upon his entry into the town he received a *firman* appointing him to the *ayalat* with the rank of *Mirmiran*. Within a few weeks of his stay in

33 We learn from the *Megillah* that this occurred on 13th Adar 5539 (March 1779); see *Megillah* C 61.

34 Longrigg, ibid.

Basra, life returned to normal, the port was alive with boats and the markets open.

Because of the hostile demonstrations staged against him, Hassan Pasha fled in October to Mosul. The Sultan decided to unite the three *ayalats* of Sharizor, Baghdad and Basra under the strong rule of Suleiman Agha, who was to hold Baghdad as *Muhafiz*.[35] Accordingly, he left the *Kaptan* as *Mutasallim* in Basra, and in July 1780 entered Baghdad with a strong force.

About eight months after the liberation of Basra, in December 1778, Sultan Abdel Hamid I sent a *firman* to Yaakob Aharon, the Jewish banker, exempting him from the payment of taxes and conferring on him special rights similar to those enjoyed in the Ottoman Empire by subjects of European powers under the Capitulations agreements. The *firman* reached Basra on the first day of Ḥanukkah in 1779, and was feasted and celebrated throughout the town and the *Pashallik*. The local governors conveyed to him their congratulations.[36]

The *firman* recites the important services rendered by Yaakob Aharon during the siege of Basra and specifies that "he shall be exempt from the head tax and from the rates and all charges of kings and ministers, from the slave tax, the wine tax, the expenses of war service and from all manner of taxes whether in force or not in force. He shall not be prevented from wearing green shoes, nor shall anything be

35 Longrigg, ibid., p. 186. That is what Suleiman had wanted, nor did he conceal it from Constantinople. The British Agent helped him considerably and gave him money to send to Constantinople to buy the appointment. Ibid., pp. 195–6.

36 Document J.

withheld from him with respect to food, drinks or clothing... None shall claim from him any tax on his vineyards, orchards or fields or the tax known as *Kassabiya*,[37] nor shall any officer of war or ministers or judges enter his house or his stables so as not to cause him grief — and all this extends to his children and servants." [38]

Yaakob Aharon Gabbai [39] was "president" of the Jewish community of Basra, and his influence on the Pasha was crucial. He was known as "one of the great merchants of Basra".[40] His trade extended far and wide and he had branches in several towns of the East. We know of the branch in Aleppo,[41] and possibly in Constantinople as well.[42] Yaakob Aharon administered the Jewish community with much sense and ability and his relations with Suleiman Agha aided its firm establishment. He supported charitable institutions with his own money [43] and was renowned for his generosity even

37 Ritual slaughter tax.

38 The Hebrew translation of the *firman* was published in four books including the above-mentioned book *Roei Israel*, fol. 2a.

39 Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar calls him in one place "the president, signor Yaakob Kleis". I do not know if it was handed down to him from his grandmother who was the daughter of the "president" or if it is an unauthenticated rumour, see *Luaḥ Erez-Israel*, Vol. 6, p. 39.

40 As in the text of the *firman*, *Roei Israel*, fol. 2a.

41 See note 16 above.

42 See note 63 below.

43 Shortly before printing, Mr E. Ḥaddad kindly drew my attention to a remark of Colonel C. F. Rich, the first British Consul in Iraq, that the building over the tomb of Ezra the Scribe, was built by Khop Yakoob, who is perhaps Khoja Yaakob, *Residence in Koordistan*, 1836, London. Very rare and cited by Sir E. A. Wallis in *By Nile and Tigris*, London, 1920, Vol. 1, pp. 171–2.

beyond Basra. Rabbi Yom Tov Al-Gazi, the *Rishon le-Zion,* writes about him: "I consider it a supreme duty to carry out his wishes especially in view of his great deeds and the repeated performance on his part of religious precepts with a magnanimity for which he is famous." [44]

Having been exiled to Shiraz during the siege of Basra, he was not incarcerated, but used to send instructions for the management of his business in Basra. In Shiraz, too, he helped exiles and members of their families with his money. He received information concerning the Jews of Baghdad and of Basra, but was careful not to write to his close family or other relatives.[45]

On returning to Basra he was restored to his former glory. The *firman* he received from the Sultan, more than merely entitling him to pecuniary benefits — Basra being anyhow exempt from taxes,[46] because of the benefits derived from the collection of port dues — strengthened his position. However, from the halakhic controversy that the *firman* aroused, we learn that the "president" was apprehensive of false accusations by his rivals and therefore urged his friend Salim Effendi, an intimate of the Sultan, to obtain the *firman* for him. The question debated between the Rabbis of Jerusalem and Aleppo, as to

44 Rabbi Yom Tov Al-Gazi, *Simḥat Yom Tov,* Salonica, 1794, 32, fol. 120b. Rabbi Efraim Laniado writes about him "A trustworthy man who utters no lie". *Roei Israel* 2, fol. 9a.

45 Document I.

46 "They have to pay no kind of charges of king and ministers in force or not in force and they are exempt more than the inhabitants of any of the towns of Israel in the Turkish Empire from paying head tax, which is a trifling annual sum." *Simḥat Yom Tov* 32, fol. 119b.

whether Yaakob Aharon was, by virtue of the *firman*, exempt from communal taxes, perhaps indicates that he had thought of transferring his residence to some other town and that the community there had refused to exempt him. Had his position deteriorated since Suleiman Pasha left Basra?

Which was the community in question and when the question arose, we may well surmise. Rabbi Efraim Laniado, one of the scholars of Aleppo, tried to impugn the effectiveness of the *firman*, and Rabbi David Pardo of Jerusalem, who also wrote on the subject, sent his opinion to Rabbi Eliezer, son of Yaakob Aharon Gabbai, in Aleppo.[47] Both sides, and certainly the heads of the Aleppo community and Yaakob Aharon, accepted the decision of the *Rishon le-Zion*, Rabbi Yom Tov Al-Gazi.[48] Rabbi Laniado's attitude may be explained against the background of the Capitulations. In Aleppo many possessed an "interpreter's certificate". Ottoman subjects used to acquire "protection" from European ambassadors by registering as interpreters. This consular protection was in fact more effective than the Sultan's *firman*.[49] They did not pay communal charges, and the authorities, being unable to levy taxes from them, charged the community instead, and the burden ultimately fell on the poor. Merchants and rich men came to settle in Aleppo in order to enjoy such

47 Benayahu Ms. See note 64 below.

48 *Simḥat Yom Tov*, ibid.; Rabbi Yom Tov Al-Gazi writes that he finds it difficult to answer this question because it is not stated where the gentleman thought to transfer his residence, ibid., fol. 120b.

49 See Alexander Lutzky (Dotan), "The *frankos* in Aleppo and the Influence of the Capitulations on its Jewish Inhabitants," *Zion*, 6, 5701 (1941), pp. 56–59.

protection; hence the reason why the registers of the Aleppo community contain decisions of Rabbis denouncing such special rights.

Rabbi Efraim Laniado writes: "The exemption granted by the king to the above gentleman means nothing, nor do we need *Bet-Din* decisions for the purpose... You see the king has exempted the above gentleman, his sons and his servants ... yet his son, coming to settle here in Aleppo, finds that the *firman* has failed him and therefore has obtained an interpreter's certificate from the consul, because the king's exemption is not sufficient, and neither his ministers nor his judges pay heed to it... Even if he wrote to Constantinople he would not be answered, for what does he count for at the king's court? Even if he applied to Salim Effendi, who obtained it for him, he would not answer, unless he were to receive a befitting present, when he might perhaps issue letters for him from the Prime Minister to the ministers of the land... The *firman*, therefore, stands for nothing and for this reason his son was compelled to take another certificate — an interpreter's — from the consul, by virtue of which he may be exempt from acts of the gentiles and of ministers and judges of the country, who can do nothing, as the consul would complain against them to Constantinople, and that would only do them harm." [50]

A number of Rabbi Efraim Laniado's arguments appear very weak: Yaakob Aharon had done no more than others "and the trouble he took during the war was nothing special —

50 *Roei Israel*, fol. 7b.

all the people of Basra did the same." [51] He was opposed to the King of Persia because he was afraid for his own fortune and his person and the members of his family.[52] Had he known the Persian commander would do him no harm "he would not only have refrained from taking steps to keep him out of Basra, but on the contrary, he would have helped surrender the town to him." [53] The *firman* was not given by the Sultan of his own will, but through the influence of Salim Effendi, who acted at the request of Yaakob Aharon. His nephew was in Constantinople at the time "and he acted as intermediary between his uncle and Salim Effendi." [54] According to him, Yaakob Aharon did not deny this but contended that he did not ask for exemption from taxes, but "that no claim or demand or any allegation be made against him except in Constantinople, because he was afraid of those godless men who might make false accusations against him." [55]

51 *Roei Israel,* fol. 3b, and see also fol. 3c: "nor did he engage in anything as aforesaid alone, but together with other men of prominence, though it may be he was the prime mover." (The importance of Yaakob Aharon's activities emerges also from Arab sources. The Christian Iraqi historian Yusef Rizkalla Ghuneima, writes about him that "he spontaneously volunteered to assist the Turkish army and spent huge sums of money out of his own pocket to supply arms to the combatants as well as food to the inhabitants of Basra in their courageous stand against the Shah's forces." *Nuzhat el-Mushtak fi Tarikh Yahoud el-Iraq,* Baghdad, 1924, pp. 164–5. I thank Mr. Ḥaddad for drawing my attention to this source.)

52 *Roei Israel,* fol. 4a.

53 Ibid., fol. 4c.

54 Ibid., para. b, fol. 11c.

55 Ibid., fol. 7c, and see Rabbi Israel Yaakob Burla, *Mekor Israel,* Jerusalem, 1882, para. 42, fol. 81b.

When the governor of a town is informed of the coming of a rich man such as him, taxes on the Jews are increased with consequent loss to the community.

As opposed to Rabbi Laniado, Rabbi Yom Tov Al-Gazi ruled that Yaakob Aharon and his sons may live in any town they choose and be exempt "from all kinds of taxes and rates whether defined or not defined," but as regards "other expenses and public necessities, they must contribute together with the other citizens." [56] This opinion was shared by his son-in-law, Rabbi Mordekhai Yosef Meyuḥas [57] and the *Dayan* Rabbi Israel Yaakob Burla.[58] Even Rabbi David Pardo expresses the same opinion in his long responsum which is still in manuscript: "We conclude that to all intents the gentleman is exempt from all kinds of taxes wherever he may choose to live, as he did not request the king to exempt him, but that His Highness has generously seen fit that it behoved the Crown not to deprive a person of the reward due to him and the king granted him of what is his own." [59]

It is not known whether Yaakob Aharon in the end transferred his residence to Aleppo or to any other place. He died, it seems, in Basra between the years 1782 and 1790. He had several sons. The eldest was Eliezer Shaul.[60] One of his sons, who managed his business affairs together with him, had been

56 *Simḥat Yom Tov,* para. 32, fol. 127d.

57 *Berekhot Ha-Mayim,* Salonica, 1789, para. 193, fol. 195d.

58 *Mekor Israel,* para. 42, fol. 82a and 83a: "Except that he had to contribute in municipal matters where the public spends for the necessities of the town and their preservation . . . as well as charity."

59 The above-mentioned Benayahu Ms.

60 In Document I he is called "Abu Eliezer".

exiled to Persia in 1775, soon after the occupation and before his father was himself exiled there.[61] Presumably this was Eliezer Shaul. From Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar's letter we learn that he had more children. Rabbi Nissim Masliaḥ complained to him that Sheikh Yeḥezkel Abraham did not answer his letters, to which Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar replied: "I, the young one, and the whole of the house of our brother and our lord, signor Yaakob Aharon, count but among the smallest of your father's pupils." Yeḥezkel Abraham is described as "our dear brother" meaning brother-in-law. With this expression he mentions his name again together with another brother: "and I asked my brothers signor Yeḥezkel and signor Shleyim" — a third son of Yaakob Aharon.[62] His daughter Raḥmah was married to Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar in 1774.

Yaakob Aharon's sons were themselves big merchants. They dealt in perfumery and spices which they sold in Arab countries. His nephew, who was in Constantinople,[63] seems to have been his partner in the business, and possibly they had a branch of his firm there. After the release of Basra, Eliezer transferred his father's business to Aleppo and managed it there.

Rabbi David Pardo writes about him: "the exalted gentle-

61 See note 16 above.

62 In the year 5583 (1823) there was in Damascus one Abd Asher Gabbai, in whose house Rabbi Eliezer Elyichar had hidden when fleeing from Abdallah Pasha. Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Eliachar writes that he was "one of his relatives" (*Luaḥ Erez-Israel*, p. 43), was he also a son of Yaakob Aharon or perhaps his grandson?

63 At the beginning of 5540 (Sept. 1779) he was in Constantinople. See note 54 above.

man of Basra, Rabbi Eliezer, son of Yaakob Gabbai, is for the time being a member of the community of Aleppo." [64] He resided in Aleppo, though from time to time he travelled on business to other places. For some time he learnt Torah from Rabbi Eliahu, son of Yosef Shamma Halevi, who was one of the great scholars of Aleppo. He studied especially the laws of circumcision. He himself writes: "in my travels I came to the laudable town of Aleppo and have elected to study there the art of circumcision, that I may carry out this *miẓvah* [divine precept] which is much to my liking." Rabbi Eliahu Shamma wrote a book at his request, *Makhshirei Mila*, in which he summarised all the rules of circumcision. Rabbi Eliezer printed it at his own expense in Livorno and wrote an introduction to it. Eliezer Shaul had a relative in Aleppo by the name of Saleḥ Rafael Ḥayyim Gabbai.

With the death of Yaakob Aharon Gabbai, the importance of the Jewish community of Basra declined, never to recover its former position, and, in 1951, the community as a whole was brought to Israel and thus liquidated.

64 In his above-mentioned responsum, in Benayahu Ms.

CHAPTER THREE

POEMS AND DOCUMENTS

Two poems are published below — one by Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ, Chief Rabbi of Baghdad; the other by Rabbi Reuben Bakhar Yaakob, Chief Rabbi of Sofia.

A. A poem of Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ sent to Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar in 5523 (1763). There are three versions:

a. Sassoon Ms. 57, pp. 135–136 (*Ohel David*, p. 243) written in Baghdad in 5601 (1841) by Yeḥezkel Yehoshua Gabbai.

b. Sasson Ms. 270, p. 13 (*Ohel David*, p. 244).

c. Benayahu Ms., Poems and Liturgy, most of them by Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ and his son, p. 27.

B. The poem by Rabbi Reuben Bakhar Yaakob was written in honour of Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar when he was in Sofia in 5528 (1768), on the occasion of his ceasing to take snuff. This poem is also found in three manuscripts, the most important one being in the possession of Mr. Benayahu, in the above-mentioned manuscript, fol. 43a. This Ms. is in the handwriting of Rabbi David Bakhar Shemuel's son who in several places refers to Rabbi Reuben Bakhar Yaakob as his uncle.

b. Ben-Zvi Institute Ms. — in the book (fol. 84a) of Rabbi Ḥayyim Shemuel Halevi, Rabbi of Yanina.

c. Collection of letters of Rabbi Moshe Sittehon of Aleppo, written in 5588 (1828); Ben-Zvi Institute Ms., p. 183.

Rabbi Reuben Bakhar Yaakob was born in Sofia in 5489

(1729) and studied in Rabbi Shlomo Shalem's *yeshivah*. In 5555 (1795) he emigrated to Erez-Israel, settled in Safed and was elected Rabbi of the community. He died in 5567 (1807).[1]

RABBI SALEḤ MASLIAḤ

The following poem was sent to the thoroughly learned *Gaon* Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar, Hebron's emissary in 5523 (1763).

Paragon of grace, take a poem weighed with the scales
of reason and stemming from my heart;
I extinguish the flame of craving with songs before I fall
ill and go to my grave;
My soul longed and craved for you, your words would
easily cure it;
I explored the stars above and found Venus, Jupiter and
Virgo missing;
I enquired who had gone up on high and taken them
away — he should restore them;
They answered me, "they are gone to illuminate the face
of your friend, they are his special qualities;"
And when you appeared and illuminated our land, it
then yielded its produce;
And when you prepared to go, sadness and heavy clouds
enshrouded it;
How sweet your statements and metaphors when you
stand before the crowd;

1 S. Rosanes, *Korot Ha-Yehudim Be-Turkiya* [History of the Jews in Turkey], Sofia, 5698 (1938), Vol. 4, pp. 106–9.

And if I tried to compare your intellect, my friend, how could you liken the effect to the cause;
The graceful beauty of my friend is original, whereas that of others is borrowed;
And if your era is likened to a candelabrum, you would then crown its head.
And were you like the North Pole, my soul would then revolve around you as in a carriage.
I have preferred to stay within your shadow, and, should you turn to the right I would not proceed to the left.
Accept from me the expression of my song as a present of great wealth, unfathomable and inexhaustible wealth;
And if there be found the defect of a mistake, to you I would address my apology.
Wherefore should I enlarge discourse, I better be tacit, for silence is praise.
Oh, God, may I submit to You my supplication, please accept my prayer as You would an offering;
Grant Your deputy the fulfilment of his desire, and that his way be smooth;
And let Yaakob come safe and sound to Hebron with a great crown of majesty on his head;
And may he return to his holy abode with honours, great riches, and much happiness and joy.

Commentary. It will be noted that the author of this poem expresses his thoughts on the subject of his praise in superlative terms, and a casual reader of its first lines might mistake it as addressed to a member of the fair sex. But this is precisely the way Jewish religious scholars express their ad-

miration of the learning of colleagues who have attained a high degree of erudition. He tenders a poem which he has carefully weighed — thereby signifying the serious character of his composition, weighing it with the scales of reason and coming from the very depths of his heart; it is not mere flattery. He burns with the desire to see him and talk to him to the point of falling seriously ill, and he tries to quench the flame of his craving with poems, but his friend's words would easily cure it all. He has scanned the skies and found that Venus, the symbol of light (this planet is called in Hebrew by the equivalent of the English word "glow"); Jupiter, the symbol of Justice (the Hebrew word for this planet expresses this connotation) and Virgo, the symbol of purity (in Hebrew it is expressed by the word for "virgin") are missing, but they had not been robbed as he had suspected — they had diverted their course to dwell with his friend who embodies these symbols of light, justice and purity, for he is a Rabbi and therefore a judge.

And when he appears, his appearance is a blessing, so that the land yields its produce, but when he prepares to go, then sadness and darkness spreads all over. When he harangues a crowd, his wise statements are so sweet, being so balanced and reasoned, that it is impossible to compare his intellect with that of others — it is like divinity — a prime mover, not the consequence of some extraneous cause; and that is the real constituent of the beauty he admires in his friend, a beauty in essence, not borrowed as in others. That is why he prefers to remain in his company and abide by his choice. And therefore he asks his friend to accept his verse as a gift of supreme value and if any fault be found in it, he apologises

in advance. He need not enlarge in eulogies, as he likened his friend to divinity for whom silence is praise (Psalms, 65,2). He finishes with a prayer that all his friend's desires be fulfilled and that his way be smooth (in contrast to Jeremiah, 8,15), that his efforts be crowned with success and that he should return home in good health (Genesis, 33,18) spiritually and materially satisfied (borrowing the idea from Proverbs 8, 18).

RABBI REUBEN BAKHAR YAAKOB

The Snuff Poem written for Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar, who used to take snuff but subsequently abandoned the habit.

Much would I laugh and scoff at one who breathes powder into his nose,
Who buys an overlord and a watchful patron ever angry
When he denies such powder to his nostrils, and ready to smite him mercilessly in his wrath,
Yet he will not rest nor have peace of mind unless he prevents his hand taking it.
To a slave I liken him — not to one that is liberated and goes out by himself [the allusion is to Exodus, 21,3, which deals with a slave who is to work six years and then go free — i.e., a temporary slave],
But one who will serve his lord all his years from beginning to end.
Each real slave is sold against his will, yet this one is sold willingly, even with his own money.
Every moment he feels his bosom to find his box, its contents and intent.

Imbued with such fear of losing them, and in constant inner anxiety;
And he says that someone is always trying to steal them.
Therefore, he always watches over them and ties them to his garments, to its fringes.
Therefore I much would laugh at such ground powder, even at him who takes it,
Who needs it all the time like food, bread and meat.
Lucky is he who would eulogise a friend, a brother and a perfect man [cf. Genesis, 25,27, where Jacob (Ya-akob) is said to be a "perfect man"] whose name is Yaakob from the branch of Elyichar,
Who has overcome his impulses and proclivities and liberated himself when he came here.
Had he not hastened to control himself, he would have been bitten and devoured as by a lion.
But had he taken the powder, he would have to carry it on his shoulders
Because of its great weight, like bundles of straw and hay.
And today he is a liberated man and worships an only God without being stiffnecked.
And if since I have known him I have loved him like honey, then now like wafers of the honeycomb.
No wonder he has succeeded in his mission, being honest and trustworthy.
My prayer to Him Who dwells on high, that the righteous shall flourish with his kin (cf. Psalms 92,13).

THE DOCUMENTS

Most of the information on the period when the Elyichar family first settled in Erez-Israel, until and including the era of Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar, is to be found in Mss. kept in various libraries all over the world. Even *Megillat Paras*, which was published a few times, had not until now been issued in a scientific critical edition. Its text is uncertain and its context distorted. The following are some of the documents published in the Hebrew edition of this book:

A. Receipt of the members of the Jewish Community of Verona for the contribution to the community of Hebron to the emissaries, Rabbi Yosef Elyichar and Rabbi Eliahu Ben Arha. 22nd Tevet, 5493 (1733). The Records of Verona, Ms. in the National and University Library, Jerusalem, no. 4° 553, fol. 183a.

B. Letter of the heads of the Ashkenazi community in Hebron to the *Parnasim* of the community of Metz. 13th Nisan, 5525 (1765). Carmoly Ms. (Kirchheim list, no. 183). See his book *Itinéraires de la Terre Sainte*, Brüssel, 1847, p. 230. The Ms. was transferred to the Municipal Library in Frankfurt and was thought lost. Prof. Abraham Naftali Zvi Roth of Mainz looked for the Ms. at my request and succeeded in finding it. He was kind enough to send me a photocopy of it, and I take this opportunity to thank him. The Ms.'s reference today is Hebr. oct. 47. Bd. 5 and the letter is on fol. 45. It is written in Ashkenazi cursive script and there is no doubt that it is the handwriting of Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar. The names of the fathers are written in Sephardi Rashi script.

C. An endowment fund donated by Yaakob Ḥazzan to the Minḥat-Ereb Yeshivah in Monastyr, made at the suggestion of Rabbi Yaakob Elichar when he was there. 17th Iyyar, 5531 (1771). E. Deinard Ms. 228, fol. 19. Now in the Jewish Theological Seminary Library in New York.

D. Letter sent by Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar from Basra to Rabbi Saleḥ, son of Rabbi Yosef Masliaḥ, in Baghdad, dated 11th Iyyar 5538 (1778) (Sassoon Ms. E-229 — *Ohel David*, p. 399). Since they had met in Baghdad three or four years previously, their acquaintance had ripened into a close friendship, which had been interrupted with Elyichar's departure for Basra. The letter deals with his activities as emissary in Baghdad and with his new office as Rabbi of Basra. Basra followed Baghdad customs and in the letter Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar enquires of Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ about a certain custom of Baghdad.

E. A letter to the above dated 27th Elul 5538 (1778) (Sassoon Ms., D-229) answering the matters dealt with in the previous letter.

F. A letter to the above. From its contents it appears that its date is 10th Elul 5539 (1779). (Sassoon Ms., P-229). Reply to a letter received from Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ. The letter was written after Basra was restored to Turkish rule. In this letter, too, he mentions the matters dealt with in both the previous letters.

G. Letter from Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar to Rabbi Nissim, son of Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ (Sassoon Ms., X-229), written two days after the previous letter, 12th Elul 5539 (1779). Rabbi Nissim Masliaḥ had complained that he had sent him three letters but had received no reply. Rabbi Elyichar had

Letter of Yaakob Elyichar to Nissim Masliaḥ (1779)

received only one letter a year before and had answered through the town of Grin. The letter deals with business matters of Sheikh Aharon Gabbai. At the end of the letter there are a few lines from his son Ḥayyim Elyichar in his own handwriting.

H. Letter from Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar to Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ, written while on board a boat on the Tigris near Korna between 16 and 21 of Ḥeshvan 5541 (1781) (Sassoon Ms., I-229). Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar had accompanied his family to Baghdad and was to return to Basra to collect his effects and follow after them. At the end of it there are a few lines from his son, Ḥayyim Elyichar in his own handwriting bearing date 14th Kislev.

I. Letter in Arabic from Zekhariah, son of Raḥamim, a prisoner of Basra in Shiraz, to Rabbi Saleḥ Masliaḥ, 21st Tevet 5538 (1778) (Sassoon Ms., C-229), regarding Israel Yosef Ben Said, the banker of Abdallah Pasha El-Kurdi, who died in Shiraz; the letter contains information on the state of the prisoners in Persia.

CHAPTER FOUR

MEGILLAT PARAS

The 2nd Nisan, the day the Persian army evacuated Basra, was declared a holiday by Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar; no work was to be done and no supplications to be included in the morning prayers. Every year the Jews of Basra would send gifts to their relatives and friends on that day, hold dinner parties, drink till they became drunk and go for walks to gardens and orchards. R. Yaakob Elyichar wrote a special *Megillah* in poetic form, called "Megillat Paras", on events in Basra during the siege of the town and its subsequent occupation and also songs which the Jews of Basra used to sing every year on the anniversary of the miracle, for about a century after the event. Its celebration was thereafter discontinued and of the miracle nothing remains except the memory. R. Yaakob Elyichar's descendants, however, both in Safed and in Jerusalem, continued until a few years ago to celebrate that day and to read the *Megillah*.

The Megillah is divided into three chapters:

CHAPTER A. The period of the siege which lasted a full year from 5535 to 5536 (1774–5). This chapter is made up of verses divided into four sections, each group begins with a letter of the alphabet in alphabetical order and this letter is repeated at the beginning of each of the four constituent

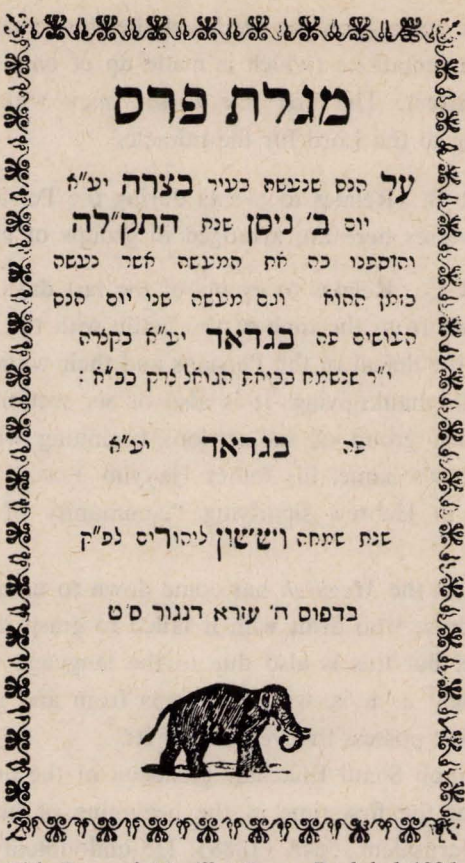
parts of the verse — on the model of the third chapter of the book of Lamentations (which is made up of only three parts for each letter). The first five verses open with words of thanksgiving to the Lord for the miracle.

CHAPTER B. Relates to events during the Persian occupation. The verses here are arranged in groups of six sections.

CHAPTER C. Relates to events of the last days of Persian rule in Basra from the time of the battle with the Beduins in the desert, the defeat of the Persians and their withdrawal and finishes with thanksgiving. It is also of six sections. It is an acrostic, each group of six sections beginning with a letter of the author's name, his father Ḥayyim Yosef's name and the words in Hebrew signifying "community of Basra, be strong".

The text of the *Megillah* has come down to us in a corrupt form and those who dealt with it failed to grasp its historical significance, but this is also due to the language of the *Megillah*, fraught as it is, with fragments from and allusions to the Bible. We possess five versions of it:

1. R. Yaakob Shaul Eliachar, grandson of the author, published it for the first time at the beginning of his book *Ish Emunim*, Jerusalem, 5648 (1888). He undoubtedly possessed the original text of the *Megillah*; but as he met difficult and unclear passages in it, he re-edited it and almost stripped it of its original form. He altered words, re-ordered verses and deleted lines which he replaced by his own. It seems, he did not know that R. Yaakob Elyichar's father's name was Ḥayyim as well as Yosef, and therefore, deleted the verses beginning with the letters of Ḥayyim in Chapter C.


מגלת פרס

על הנס שנעשה בעיר בצרה יע"ה
יום ב' ניסן שנת התק"לה
והוספנו כח את שמעשה אשר בעשה
בזמן חמוץ וגם מעשה שני יום שנם
העושים שם בגדאד יע"ה בקמרה
ו"ר שנשמח בכיחת הגואל עדק בב"ה :

פה בגדאד יע"ה

שנת שמחה וישעון ליהודים נפ"ק

בדפוס ה' עזרא דנגור ס"ט

Title-Page of *Megillat Paras*, Baghdad 1906

2. R. Ezra Reuben Dangur's *Megillat Paras*, being a special brochure, printed in his own printing press, Baghdad 5666 (1906), of eight folios (11,5×17,5 cm). His text was a Ms. written in Basra, but he also made use of text (1) above, correcting and amending it at his discretion.

3. Sassoon Ms., para. 154 in *Asaf Hamazkir*, written in 5573

(1813), (*Ohel David*, p. 517). This text, with comparisons from Dangur's edition, appears in Rabbi David Sassoon's article, "The History of the Jews in Basra", JQR, New Series, Vol. 17, 1927, pp. 440–447.

4. Ms. in Mr. Yeḥiel Eliachar's possession (16 pp., 10×15,5 cm). Written in Basra. It contains important versions. This Ms. and the previous were written, it seems, from dictation, as is evidenced by a number of corrupt passages.

5. *Megillah* on parchment, copied by R. Yaakob Shaul Eliachar in nine columns, 15 lines each. This text is similar to the Mss. and it seems that he introduced alterations only afterwards, when he undertook to print it.

Apart from *Megillat Paras*, R. Yaakob Elyichar wrote several poems, of which five have come down to us, and these are published in the Hebrew edition of this work.

MEGILLAT PARAS

PROLOGUE

(An Alphabetical Acrostic)

Let the redeemed of the Lord speak (Ps., 107,2)
Of the miracles to my multitudes,
The community of Basra, my faithful people,
In the name of the Lord the eternal God. (Gen., 21,33)
I will thank God every year
And appear before Him with singing, (Ps., 100,2)
And will ask of You, Oh Lord, who are for ever,
(Lam., 5,19)

Make us now to prosper. (Ps., 118,25)
I have sought Thee wholeheartedly, (Ps., 119,10)
For Thy wondrous works, (Ps., 145,5)
And will bless Thee, (Gen., 22,17)
Blessed be the Lord for evermore. (Ps., 89,53)
Great is the Lord and highly to be praised, (Ps., 145,3)
Divides the spoil among the mighty, (Isa., 53,12)
He also provides for suckling and child,
He is our redeemer for ever. (Isa., 63,16)
He prescribes judgment for the prisoner in prison,[1]
Raises the poor out of the dust, (Ps., 113,7)
Seeking the good and doing wonders,
(Esther, 10,3; Exod., 15,11)

1 The author probably refers to Yaakob Aharon Gabbai.

Thy word is true for ever. (Ps., 119,160)
He has shown His powerful might,
Praise Him for He is highly exalted, (Exod., 15,1)
And His hand has gotten much,[2] (Job, 31,25)
Who keeps truth for ever. (Ps., 146,6).

CHAPTER A

It was in the year of Obstruction,[3]

2 The author's implication is that God had performed a great deed in saving Basra.

3 The author begins his poetical narrative by borrowing from Ezekiel, 1,1. It has always been the pride and distinction of Hebrew writers and especially the poets among them — who are restricted in their choice of words by considerations of metre and rhyme — to borrow and collate expressions from the Bible, to embellish their style, illustrate their ideas and harmonise the object of their thoughts with allusions to Biblical events and sayings. This, in turn, reflects on the literary erudition of the individual writers and the extent of their knowledge of the deep recesses of Biblical implications, thereby throwing light on the various meanings borne by phrases thus borrowed and ideas so adapted. Strewn all over the text of this *Megillah*, are numerous quotations from the Old Testament, as noted in the body of the text, which shows the author's remarkable knowledge of the Bible.

Beginning, as stated, by borrowing from Ezekiel, the author, like that prophet, first mentions the date of the period about which he proposes to speak and the place where he was. The "year of Obstruction" is derived from the fact that according to the Jewish calendar, the enumeration of the year at the time he speaks of, spells the word in Hebrew which means obstruction (the Hebrew numbering is denoted by letters of the alphabet — not by numbers). It is a coincidence, because in that year (5535 — 1775) the town of Basra was besieged by the Persians and thus met with troubles which obstructed its normal development and life.

And I was among the exiles [3a] (Ezek. 1,1)
And my people was like a sick woman [3b]
Whose womb was pregnant with the world's troubles.
(Jer., 20,17)

A wolf from the deserts and he is Khan, (Jer., 5,6)
The elected prop and stay of the Persian King,
Zeid Karim Memukhan by name,[4] (cf. Ps., 37,20)
The object of God's everlasting wrath. (Malakhi, 1,4)
The bands of the wicked and an army,[5] (Ps., 119,61)

3a The author's native land and residence was the Holy Land, and at the time of the narrative he was in Basra, and much against his will, for he could not leave Basra because of the siege. In this respect he resembles the prophet Ezekiel, who prophesied in Babylon.

3b *Raḥmah*, the word used in the Hebrew text, means "her womb". It is believed in the East that when a woman dreams she is with child, she is to anticipate trouble, and the author here speaks of a sick woman who, because of her troubles is described as pregnant.

Another meaning, more remote, is that the author's wife was named "Raḥmah" an Arabic name meaning "mercy." She is said to have been pregnant at the time and the meaning is not only that the community of Basra was "sick", but that the author's personal position was difficult and delicate because of his wife's physical state. But it is doubtful if he meant to introduce in a narrative of public events any hints of his domestic position.

4 The author seems to hint at Sadik Khan who conducted the hostile attacks against Basra on behalf of the Shah, Karim Khan. The former is likened to Haman, who is also known by the name Memukhan, and like Haman, deserves God's eternal wrath.

5 The author expresses his contempt at the human qualities of the Persian warriors, whose commanders he describes as godless and whose soldiers are described as the dregs of mankind, and both of them "branch and rush" are said to be the world's shame and deserving everlasting hostility.

Pitched against me, against the palace,
The Persian army, palm-branch and rush, (Isa., 9,13)
Everlasting shame and everlasting hostility. (Jer., 23,40)
The wrongdoers hid pits for me [6] like briers, (Micah, 7,4)
The best of them would pervert justice,
The just God injures and cures, (Ps., 100,5)
God is good for ever.
The adversary has stretched out his hand (Lam., 1,10) against Basra,
And set me as his mark,[7] (Lam., 3,12)
Kindled fires like piles of fuel,
Frightening like eternal fires. (Isa., 33,14)
His right hand steady as an adversary,[7] (Lam., 2,4)
The smoke rising from a chimney,
As an eagle stirs up her nest, (Deut., 32,11)
To become everlasting desolation. (Jer., 51,26)
Burning torches like bees [7]

6 By the "wrongdoers" the author means the Persians, who hid pits they had digged for "me". The author, as in the book of Lamentations, identifies himself with the object of the enemy's attack. But he adds, God injures and cures, an adaptation of 1 Sam., 2,6: "God kills and brings to life, etc.".

7 The enemy aimed at taking Basra, and that is allegorically indicated by the stretching of his hand, by holding his right hand steady to inflict unfailing injury and to set Basra as a mark for his missiles, and as an eagle stirring up her nest, the enemy exhorted his soldiers to shoot burning torches into the city, to spread fright and destruction; the smoke rising from the fires curls up as from chimneys, and the flames are so intense that they would set mountains on fire. The author expresses his dismay, saying there had never been anything like it. All this is to make the inhabitants believe that the city is destined to be destroyed and thus compel them to surrender.

The archers fired steadily,
The flames set mountains ablaze, (Ps., 83,15)
There has not been anything like it ever.[7] (Joel, 2,2)
Out of the straits I called upon the Lord,[8] (Ps., 118,5)
And my King in holiness answered,
He Who rules by His might forever, (Ps., 66,7)
Drew a bow to the vessel. (1 Kings. 22,34)
The floods lifted up their voice, (Ps., 93,3)
All the peoples melted away, (Exod., 15,15)
The Supreme God, their Redeemer, girded Himself,
We thank Thee, everlasting God.[9]
Declare the glory of God (Ps., 19,2)
For He provided me with my allotted bread (Prov., 30,8)
While I was pent up in the city,[10]
Thy throne, God, is everlasting. (Ps., 45,7)
The worshippers of Bel ate all unclean food,[11]
(Isa., 46,1; Jer., 51,44)

8 The enemy's activities described in the previous verses inevitably caused distress; God was called on to help and He answered. The author seems to hint at the initial success of the defenders of Basra, who drove back the first Persian attack. It would appear that the enemy's headquarters were in a vessel in the Shatt-el-Arab waters and the success of the besieged is metaphorically indicated by the drawing of a bow at the vessel.

9 This expresses thanksgiving at Divine intervention in favour of Basra in the first encounter already mentioned.

10 The author, as already mentioned, identifies himself with the besieged city.

11 The author says that the non-Jewish besieged inhabitants ate any ritually unclean food, whereas the Jews adhered strictly to their ritual food laws and for not abandoning the "utmost bound" of their religion they would never starve.

My people were upon the highest places, (Prov., 9,3)
Nor would they starve even unto
The utmost bound of the everlasting hills. (Gen., 49,26)
Terror and the pit are come upon us,
And our eyes run down on seeing, (Lam., 3,47–48)
The enemy break through our walls —
The gates of the world ruined for ever.[12] (Ps., 24,7; Isa., 61,4)
North and South and its boundaries, (Ps., 89,13)
He ordered his mountains,
And his people cried and told him,
"The righteous shall never fall".[13] (Prov., 10,30)
In his pride he cursed his deity
Fixed mounts for his batteries,
Made them available for summer and winter
To stay in them for ever. (Ps., 49,12)
The enemy saw that no Moslem
Ransomed his co-religionists,
Quarrelled with me for a year and we complied —
The ungodly prosper in this world.[14] (Ps., 73,12)
The Turkish governors saw the injustice
Done to the land, went about the country,

12 "The gates of the world" is an allusion to the commercial importance of Basra.

13 "North and south" — the other directions being implied in the words "and its boundaries". By the word "mountains" he seems to mean the officers, i.e., he ordered them to take their positions all around the city. But the besieged continued to hold out.

14 As the Persians failed to obtain enough money in ransom for the Moslems, they resorted to the Jewish community, and negotiations between the Persians and the Jews in this respect lasted a full year at the end of which the Jews had to comply. The author wonders how the ungodly thrive.

Sent messages — whose is the land?
The ancient hills bowed [15] (Habakkuk, 3,6)
I strayed like sheep in distress —
O God, let me live through distress —
And Basra complains, saying:
"Take away my glory for ever." [16]

CHAPTER B

(An Alphabetical Acrostic in Reverse)

When the year completed its course, (2 Chron. 24,23)
In the first month of the year,
Then the afflicted soul transgressed, (Isa., 58, 10)
They went out to the enemy to make him a gift
and provide a stay and staff for myself (Isa., 3,1)
For the Lord will not cast off for ever.[1] (Lam., 3,31)

15 The poet shows here the impotence of Ottoman rule. The governors sent messages to the central government for reinforcements to save Basra; but they, whom the poet compares to "perpetual hills", bowed, and resigned themselves to the necessity of surrender.

16 The author laments the weak position to which Basra is reduced on the eve of its surrender. They only asked that they may survive the ordeal that awaited them.

1 Again, the author begins by determining the time of the events he is about to relate, i.e., a year after the siege of Basra had begun, when its inhabitants, afflicted with hunger and privation, could hold out no longer. The idea of rebellion denotes that the surrender was much against their will and a necessary evil, that the Persians were not welcome. The gift was the surrender, in return for food, the "stay and staff", in the hope of recovering their loss in the future.

A man of high degree (1 Chron., 17,17)
Suleiman, the head of the government,
Advised: "let us surrender
To the Persians, for a lion has come up, (Jer., 4,7)
Perhaps we may thus procure some bread . . .[2]
They sent ministers to the Persian authorities —
Are they sheep or foes?
Let old age and youth live,
And assess those who are not yet young men,
Answer me, Releaser of prisoners,[3] (Ps., 68,7)
With singing and everlasting joy. (Isa., 35,10)
The wicked, the tyrant,
The kindler of fires,
That gird themselves with firebrands, (Isa., 50,11)
Who fell at the city gate, —
Two persons to expiate the death of each one,
But I fear God, (Gen., 42,18)
And will not keep rancour for ever.[4] (Jer., 3,12)

2 The suffering was so great that the governor of the town himself advised surrender, comparing the Persian enemy to a lion that had come out of the thicket to destroy the land (Jer., 4,7); surrender was therefore inevitable.

3 Notables were sent to negotiate the terms of surrender. They asked the Persians how they would treat the inhabitants, whether as sheep for slaughter or as foes to be exterminated. The terms were that the elderly and the young would be left alone and that the adult young men would be taken prisoner. They were to be assessed for ransom. As though the poet was sceptical about the sincerity of the Persians, he appeals to God as Releaser of prisoners (they were all prisoners at the enemy's mercy) to give the true answer. (Ps. 68,7)

4 The author refers here to the human qualities of the Persian

Cassia, calamus and cinnamon,
Everything having money's worth,
Hoarded in your houses,
Give up in ransom for the multitude,
The stranger had cast his eye
On the wealth of the city,
Amassed in times gone by.[5]
They captured me in a net as a bird, (Lam., 3,52)
I have borne his burden, (Gen., 49,15; Isa., 9,3)
He sent in his forces
And engines of war, (Ezek., 26,9)
Seized the whole castle,
To become everlasting caves.[6] (Isa., 32,14)
The gates were opened for them
And the accursed came in,
On the 27th of the first month,
The bow of the mighty was broken — (1 Sam., 2,4)
Inherited property became stranger's patrimony.[6] (Lam., 5,2)

soldiers who fell in the battle for Basra, and reports that the Persian command stipulated that for each of them, be they wicked, tyrants or kindlers of fires — who had laid the town waste — the inhabitants have to forfeit two of their inhabitants, but that fearing God the Persians allowed them to redeem their lives by the payment of ransom.

5 The enemy took in ransom money and goods of any description amassed by generations of thrift and care.

6 The inhabitants of Basra were as defenceless as a captured bird, and had to accept the terms offered them, heavy though they were. The forces and equipment which the enemy poured into the city threatened complete destruction and compelled obedience. And so the gates of the city were opened for them to come in, for the bows of their defenders were broken and useless. Bitter feeling is expressed in these lines at the entry of

Plunderers broke into my place
On the 2nd of the second month,
They sinfully encircled me like bees,[7] (Ps., 118,11)
And with anger persecuted me. (Ps., 55,4)
Within my own walls I was imprisoned,
Its bars closed upon me for ever. (Jonah, 2,7)
Bucklers and all instruments of defence, (Ps., 91,4)
Swords, lances from all corners
He gathered into government offices,
To be handed to those sitting first in authority (Esth., 1,14)
A nation with no truth in its words — (Ps., 5,10)
A strong and ancient nation.[8] (Jer., 5,15)
He was advised to arrest the viceroy,
And the elected of the population,
Including one blessed of all children, (Deut., 33,24)
To be sent to the town of the masters
And remain there for ever
As bondsmen.[9]

the Persians who took away the legitimate property of the population.

7 To secure the forcible acquisition of property, the enemy in great numbers broke into the houses, encircling the occupants like revengeful bees filled with consummate hatred. The fact is also mentioned that people were not allowed to leave Basra.

8 Not only were the inhabitants robbed of their belongings, but were also ordered to surrender all arms so as to render them altogether defenceless. The author hints that this was not done in good faith but to facilitate the process of molestation, adding that there is no truth in the enemy's words, and as the Persians were in a strong position as victors, no resistance could usefully be offered.

9 Reference is here made to the arrest of Suleiman Pasha who, by virtue of his office as governor represented the Sultan's

He persuaded the wealthy with his pride
And suave words to increase his funds;
Each to bring his offering
Out of his own property, a gift from the cattle of his getting,
(Gen., 31,18)
But betrayed his moral degradation
By compelling those who could not pay.
He collected money from the first among nations [the Jews],
And gold from the others.
He was full of deceit and fraud, (Ps., 10,7)
Against my people;
Oh, God, gird Thyself with the remaining wraths [10] (Ps., 76,11)
And Thy name will become everlastingly great. (2 Sam., 7,6)
My servants, Pashas and their assistants,
Seeing the suffering of a faithful nation,
Undertook to become guarantors,
Both rich and poor suffered,
May God requite them and their children
A hundredfold forever.[11]

authority and was, in a sense, his viceroy; and to the arrest of the notables from among the inhabitants, including one described as the best amongst all his father's children — meaning Yaakob Aharon Gabbai, the president of the Jewish community, who, incidentally was the author's father-in-law. They were all sent to Shiraz, then capital of Persia and, therefore, the residence of the "masters", to stay there as prisoners-of-war indefinitely.

10 The collection of money and the robbery of property is so resented that the author implores God to gather all His wrath to wreak vengeance on the enemy for their fraudulent and deceitful practices.

11 The author refers to the heavy sums imposed on the Jewish population for the payment of ransom which they could not

I was tormented as an antelope in a net, (Isa., 51,20)
The soldiers occupied houses in turn,
And have aimed their arrow, a poisoned word, (Ps., 64,4)
My flesh shuddered for fear of them,[12] (Ps., 119,120)
From this generation for ever. (Ps., 12,8)
The gentiles are sunk down, they thought to avoid
The pits dug by the evildoers,
And the wives, who served as perfumers, (1 Sam., 8,13)
Lament, ah, brother, and ah, sister; (Jer., 22,18)
But my people were beside still waters, (Ps., 23,2)
By the everlasting mercy of God.[13] (Ps., 52,10)
From my tent Sadik Khan is departed and gone,
The hater of my crown,
Ali Mahmad, came out of the villages,

afford to pay. Therefore, the elders of the Jewish community felt compelled to stand bail for them, and thus the whole community suffered, big and small.

12 It is traditionally held by the Jews of Basra that the Persians had ordered their soldiers to live in the houses of the civilian population, to compel them to pay the ransom. Their talk was so inconsiderate and rough that it was as bitter and painful as arrows.

13 The author says that the gentiles attempted to avoid the wiles of the Persians, who intended to extort money from them by accepting soldiers into their houses and having their wives serve them. The reference to perfumers is from 1 Samuel, 8,13, where the prophet warns the children of Israel that the king will make of their wives perfumers, cooks and bakers, and the author, as in other places in this work, shortens his quotations from the Holy Scriptures and mentions only perfumers, confident that the well-versed reader will complete the quotation in his mind, which he has shortened for purposes of rhyme and metre. The author reports that as a result, the gentiles sank in their attempts into perversion and had cause to lament.

Who desired their money,
An enemy and a foolish shepherd,
Who will, forever, be with fools.[14]
Adulterous like Zimri,
He infringed the rule of following the lion
Rather than another man's wife, (Berakhot, 60a)
Whom he cruelly caused to be brought to him.
At this my hair bristled,
And I loathed life.[15] (Job, 7,16)
He made the holy seed and the stock thereof (Isa., 6,13)
The object of his attention,
And enquired about the women's house,
To be delivered to him for corruption.
All the elders and the women,
One and all in mutual comradeship
Gave themselves up to die.

14 The author here refers to the fact that Sadik Khan had been absent from Basra most of the time and, therefore, the actual government of the town was in the hands of Ali Mohammad Khan, whom he describes as possessed of a passionate desire for money and as a foolish ruler (shepherd) who is always in the company of fools. Desire in Hebrew is cognate with the name Mohammad, and the author identifies his (Ali Mohammad's) name with his desire for money as one of his characteristic features.

15 The rule referred to is that laid down by the Rabbis: to follow a lion to his den rather than follow another man's wife, which is a crime under religious law punishable by death. The author also refers to incidents in which women were taken by force and raped, at which, he says, his hair bristled and he loathed life. The story of Zimri is told in Numbers, 25, and adduced here to show that the Persians were steeped in vice.

Such a thing is not done in Israel, (Gen., 34,7)
A whore eats and wipes her mouth (Prov., 30,20)
A girl that chanced to be seduced.
Remember the former things of old.[16] (Isa., 46,9)
Sanctified and mighty one, Oh Lord, (Isa., 5,16; Ps., 89,9)
You have slept like a fruitful vine, (Ps., 128,3)
Have given the testimony unto the tribes of the Lord,
Do not hand it over to the wild beast.
Whoso keeps the fig-tree shall eat the fruit thereof,
(Prov., 27,18)
And shall eat and live for ever. (Gen., 3,22)
Generation after generation people
Give thanks aloud,
The whole virtue of an innocent dove
Is that no adulterous eye saw her beauty.
A beautiful and chaste bride (Ketubot, 17a)
And I will betroth you unto me forever.[17] (Hos., 2,21)

16 The enemy now directed his attention to the women of the Jewish community, whom he intended to defile. Women's house in this context, means the women's rooms in every house. But all the leaders and the women of the community assembled to consider the position and the women themselves decided they would die rather than be defiled. In a Jewish community it is impossible for women to behave like whores and say that they had done no wrong. It is not the same as when a girl is accidentally seduced.

By "the former things of old" the author is probably referring to the story of the defilement of Dinah, the daughter of Jacob (Gen., Chap. 34), which provoked the children of Jacob into killing all the males in Shekhem.

17 In these lines, the author expresses his prayer that, though God was silent, He was like a fruitful vine which seems asleep for a time but again flourishes in the spring. God's testimony, if

Proud men sitting in authority,
Have taken counsel and Akhan advised —
This nation is as ashes in a stove,
Put it on a stand
And you shall have great booty ready at hand,
As ransom for their souls,
And the problem is solved forever.[18] (Ps., 49,9)
Those who are not lords have dominion over us, (Isa., 26,13)
God's nation between buyers and sellers,
Like a bunch of reeds.
They even looted trifles —
Oh, Lord, whose justice is eternal,
Who increases strength to him that has no might,[19]
(Isa., 40,29)

handed to others, would be disregarded. The metaphor of the fig-tree is intended to convey that a man who has taken the responsibility of rearing a family should exclusively enjoy its fruits, and the virtue of an innocent dove — the chaste girl of Israel — is that no adulterous eye can enjoy her charms, as, according to the prophet Hosea, a bride is betrothed for ever.

18 The author reports the debate among those in authority regarding the payment of ransom by the Jews. The mention of Akhan, on the one hand, creates a phonetic recollection of Ali Khan, while on the other hand, it establishes some similarity between Ali Khan's advice to loot private property and the deed of Akhan in violating the vow of forfeited booty (See Joshua, 7). He says the Jewish community is like ashes in a stove to do with as you please — you will not burn your fingers in handling it. You can put all the spoils on a stand and have it all at your disposal and the pretext of payment of ransom to justify it. The problem was thus solved, and the advice was adopted as is shown in the following lines of the text.

19 The enemy behaved as if they were his property and traded

To Him I shall speak thus
Of His miracles to the dispersed communities,
And His daily accomplishments
Are more than can be told.
For His mercy is great toward us,
And the truth of the Lord endures for ever.[20] (Ps., 117,2)

CHAPTER C

(The Hebrew acrostic in this chapter is equivalent to: "I, the young man, Yaakob, son of Ḥayyim Yosef Elyichar, Basra Community be strong.")

When he had been a long time, (Gen., 26,8)
He planned to exterminate an innocent people;
But the merciful God
Paid him measure for measure, (cf. Sotah, 5b)
Coals of broom smothered him, (Ps., 120,4)
And he sleeps a perpetual sleep.
The enemy, as wicked as Haman,

with them as he would with a bunch of reeds. To show his complete domination, he looted everything and spared not even trifles. The author invokes the divine sense of justice to redress this obvious wrong.

20 The author says that he would submit his grievance of Israel's looted property and the other wrongs committed by the Persians against the Jewish community — to God, in the same way and to the same extent as he would expound His miracles to the other Jewish communities, that they may know the power and mercy of God, whose daily accomplishments in their favour are more than can be numbered, and despite all our troubles, when all is said and done, and the balance is, so to speak, drawn up, His mercy weighs overwhelmingly the heavier in the scales.

Said, I shall smite the faithful shepherd
And all the flock is at my mercy,
Once its blood has been shed;
But in the net that he had hidden, (Ps., 35,8)
He caught reproaches and everlasting abhorrence.[1] (Dan., 12,2)
The keeper of mercy for generations
Lifted up my leader from the dust, (Ps., 113,7)
The way of the just is straight (Isa., 26,7)
To look after Israel,
Saying to the prisoners, go forth, (Isa., 49,9)
You and your sons for ever.[2] (Jer., 35,6)
The haughty conqueror followed his own impulse
And sought to impose his regime
On the surrounding Arab tribes,
Relying on his numerous soldiers;
He did not know that darkness was his hiding-place, (Ps., 18,12)

1 The Persians thought that by taking Yaakob Aharon Gabbai, the president of the Jewish community, prisoner, the whole community and its riches would be at their disposal, just as Haman thought of taking control of the Jewish community in Persia after their leader, Mordekhai, had been put to death. But now, as then, their plan was frustrated, for in their attempt to realise their aims, they only brought shame and contempt upon themselves.

2 The author describes the man whom the Persians had imprisoned as having risen from the dust — from the lower social strata, by his just and honest behaviour. Such men rise, from time to time, to look after the Jewish community and watch over the personal property and liberty of its members, and it all comes to pass through the merciful vigilance of God.

The reference to God's mercy is from Exodus 34,7, where He is described as extending mercy to the thousands.

With those who descend into the pit for ever.[3] (Ezek., 26,20)
He went forth and waged war
With wiles and deceit,
But was utterly routed (Num., 14,45)
And pursued unto the city wall,
And his officers returned by stealth
For that is their perpetual possession. (Lev., 25,34)
Proudly and with a deceitful heart,
He addressed his forces,
The spoils obtained at the point
Of the sword will be divided amongst them
By officers appointed for the purpose.
I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, (Exod., 15,9)
With you, for all future generations. (Gen., 9,12)
A thorn to hurt, an arrogant evildoer, (Ezek., 28,24; Exod., 9,17)
He blasphemed the Name and cursed; (Lev., 24,11)
Stubborn, a drunkard and a glutton (Deut., 21,20)
He changed his demeanour and boasted to his troops, (Ps., 34,1)
"I have broken the yoke of Basra." (Jer., 2,20)
Perverse and murderous, (1 Sam., 20,30)
He saw that his men refrained
From attacking a quiet and unsuspecting people, (Judg., 18,27)
Yet through the scent of water they will bud (Job., 14,9)
And their inheritance shall be for ever.[4] (Ps.,37,18)

3 Having taken Basra, the Persians planned to extend their dominion over Arabian territory. For this they counted on the non-existent valour of their army. The author says that here again, the Persians, by their own action, defeated their own aims: they exaggerated the strength of their own army and underrated the strategy of the Arab Bedouins, and as a result, were defeated.

4 This is the gist of the Persian commander's address to his

At night he came to the palace,
And killed its occupants,
Shed their blood on a rock, (Ezek., 24,8)
Looted the place, sparing nothing,
Even the door with its bolt,
Like the places that are desolate of old.[5] (Ezek., 26,20)
Fright and snare fell upon us (cf. Lam., 3,47)
And hardships accumulated
As the people witnessed
The leader's dead body,
Become a stinking corpse,
A beautiful and prosperous city
Become a wilderness and a perpetual hissing. (Jer., 18,16)
God's discernment is past searching out, (Isa., 40,28)
He turned his plan against him,
And found means for redemption, (Lev., 25,26)
In a full dress battle;
But true to the everlasting covenant, (Jer., 50,5)

soldiers. He ordered them to attack peaceful tribesmen in their own tents. In the slaughter that ensued many of the Muntafik Arabs were killed. When subsequently a full battle was planned, the Persians refused to fight, being afraid of the Bedouins. They were, however, urged on to fight by their commander who told them that they who had conquered fortified Basra need not fear the Arab nomads, who live a desert life on the mere scent of waters. He also promised them that the booty will all be theirs.

5 As an example for his suggested attack on the Bedouins in their tents, he attacked a palace, slew its occupants and shed their blood on the rocks — that it remain uncovered and visible to all; he then looted the place completely, sparing nothing, not even the bolt on the door — making it the picture of a permanent ruin.

Contrived his burial in Arabia.
The way was contrary to him, (Num., 22,32)
In his greed he suffered nought to escape; (Job, 20,20)
He clothed himself with cursing as with his raiment
(Ps., 109,18)
From the sole of his foot to the crown of his head
(2 Sam., 14,25)
Upon his face to destroy him.[6] (Deut., 7,10)
Out of this world forever.
They emerged like bears,[7]
A multitude of friends,
Their faces — faces of flame (Isa., 13,8)
And came upon Arab brooks
Whose waters abound and increase
From everlasting even to everlasting. (Neh., 9,5)
In their fright they crossed
Brooks of the Arabs and forests, (cf. Isa., 15,7)
Camped between the passes (1 Sam., 14,4)
And near the marshes,
On the dust of the world (Prov., 8.29)
Where he thought to be forever.
Your glorious right hand, Oh God, (Exod., 15,6)
Sustained him who dwells alone.
His men were slain, none was spared;
The Euphrates fenced them in
To drown them — officers and men.

6 The author here describes what awaited the Persians in their projected attack against the Arab nomads. They were donning a curse, as they would a garment.

7 The Rabbis recorded that the Persians "were as hairy as bears".

The corpses of the slain were dispersed
In the river as by a storm, (cf. Num., 21,14)
And the people of Basra in jubilation
Sang: "Is Ali among the dead?" [8]
Who is like unto Thee, Oh God, among the Gods
(Exod., 15,11)

Thy name endures forever. (Ps., 135,13)
But the flesh of the others [9] bristled,
They put on mourners' garments,
Sent messages and messengers —
Basra is jubilant with thanksgiving sacrifices
Made fat with blood of lambs, (Isa., 34,6)
Till they wearied of it for ever.
The news came suddenly to him
And he sounded the alarm
To join forces with his brother;
On hearing this I shook with fear,
Underneath are the everlasting arms.[10] (Deut., 33,27)
He gathered forces by the hundred
And came and throned it as before

8 This is a description of the effects of the Persian defeat at the hands of the Arab Bedouins and the consequent delight of the Basra inhabitants. The statement, "Is Ali among the dead" is an adaptation of 1 Sam., 10,11: "Is Saul among the prophets?"

9 "The others" refers to Hussein Khan, Ali Khan's lieutenant in Basra, and his assistants.

10 The sudden news of the Persian defeat surprised the Shah who, with his brother Sadik, hastened to send reinforcements to Basra — to refute the suggestion of weakness after defeat. The inhabitants were disturbed by this move, which, they explained was intended to punish them for their jubilation at the Persian defeat.

As an example and sign of encouragement,
Eyes dimmed for fear of him,
I remained in hiding
From the enemy, a perpetual servant.
For days on end
The enemy molested me,
Ready to devour me alive;
They did not know that God always
Sits in judgment for Israel.
On the 13th Adar, a day of gathering,
Their mighty leader died.
The light of their sun darkened
And Persia's glory shorn,
Like the palace of a stranger
that will never be rebuilt.[11] (Isa., 25,2)
On the 28th Adar came the herald
Leaping upon the mountains (Song of S., 2,8)
With news of the death of the brother;
And I am afraid of the enemy,
The Persians may destroy the town —
As though by strangers overthrown, (Isa., 1,7)
Saltpits and a desolation, for ever. (Zeph., 2,9)
They have set gins for me, (Ps., 140,6)
I wept day and night
And would exult in pain (Job, 6,10)
And my supplications bore fruit:

11 The author here describes the effect of Ali Khan's death, which psychologically operated as a fatal blow to Persian prowess and prestige — like the ruin of a palace which had no prospect of being rebuilt.

Oh, God, Thou wilt not spare Thy mercies
For they have been from of old. (Ps., 25,6)
And God saw the affliction of my people (Exod. 3,7)
And put fright into the heart
Of the man I had devoted to destruction, (1 Kings, 20,42)
The latter said: To my people, my nation,
Behold I go unto my people, (Num., 24,14)
Put someone else in my stead
To rule you in peace and security." (Isa., 32,17)
I am small and despised, (Ps., 119,141)
Whom God has shown his miracles this day,
As through the prophets of old.
My enemy has been driven out from here,
And my people, big and small,
Rich and poor, live for ever.[12] (Ps., 133,3)
The wealth of this town (Jer., 20,5)
And the destruction of the beasts
Which made them afraid, (Habakkuk, 2,17)
Atonement for their souls,[13]

12 The news of the Shah's death, which followed hard upon Ali Khan's, had aggravated the apprehensions of the inhabitants of Basra for their personal safety and for the fate of their property. They were afraid that these successive mishaps might induce the Persians to make a show of strength against them. Hence, they were taken by surprise when Sadik Khan assembled their notables to inform them of his decision to withdraw to his own country. This unexpected turn of events was regarded as the miracle.

13 The author looks back on the wrongs done by the Persians during the siege and the occupation of Basra as expiation for the sins of its inhabitants. But the withdrawal of the Persians was an act of justice, showing that they had gained nothing from their

And righteousness as a mighty stream, (Amos, 5,24)
I shall be happy and rejoice
Like the bridegroom rejoices, (Isa. 62,5)
This day in all the years to come
This is my God and I will glorify him (Exod., 15,2)
This is the day we hoped for, (Lam., 2,16)
We have found and seen it; give it great honour,
Until the prophet Elijah comes,
Until all generations for ever. (Ps., 106,31)
My voice to God pours out its speech (Ps., 102,1)
And my spikenard sends forth its fragrance, (Song of S., 1,12)
Accept his song as Thou wouldst his sacrifices (cf. Hosea, 14,3)
And send me Thy redeemer —
For He wishes to be merciful to His anointed,
To David and to his seed for evermore. (Ps., 18,51)
Rejoice, people of Basra, in your God,
This day in the first month is a feast for you,
God gave you a president over your tribes
And you and your leader have returned;
May God increase you more and more, (Ps., 115,14)
Even as the stars for ever.
In your distress you called unto Him (Ps., 118,5)
And He saved Jacob — every man and his house;
Israel, the lot of his inheritance,
He has shown you His greatness
As the sun when it goes forth in its might, (Judges, 5,31)

campaign against Basra, and, from the inhabitants' point of view, counterbalanced the losses they had sustained — and this was the occasion for happiness.

To bless in His name for ever. (1 Chron., 21,13)
Be strong, my people,
Send each other gifts,
Rejoice on musical instruments, (Ps. 88,1)
Be happy, boys and girls, eat fruit and cakes,
And praise God over wine,
For He shall reign for ever. (Ps., 146,10)

Therefore, we are bound to thank, praise, laud, glorify, extol, adore and honour Him Who has performed all these miracles for our fathers and ourselves. Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and for evermore. From the rising of the sun unto its setting, let the Lord's name be praised. The Lord is high above all nations and his glory above the heavens. Who is like unto the Lord our God, Who dwelleth on high, looking down upon heaven and earth. He raises the poor out of the dust, and lifts the needy out of the dunghill, to seat them with princes, even with the princes of his people. He turns the barren housewife into a joyful mother of children. Praise the Lord.

Then recite the prayer *Nishmat Kol Ḥai* [The soul of every living being] till "from eternity to eternity Thou art God", and then the following:

We thank Thee, O Lord our God and the God of our fathers, the God of all mankind, our Creator and the Creator of the universe, blessings and thanksgivings to Thy great and sacred name, because Thou hast kept us alive and sustained us; mayest Thou keep us alive and have mercy on us and grant us perfect redemption and gather our exiles to Thy holy courts to observe Thy laws, and to do Thy will and

serve Thee with a perfect heart; and we shall offer up to Thee our obligatory sacrifices, the regular daily sacrifices and the additional sacrifices according to rule, and we shall also offer the thanksgiving sacrifice, and shall thank Thee in a new song for our redemption and the liberation of our souls, for which we thank Thee, Blessed be God, to whom all thanks are due.

After the prayer, the cantor shall declare in the synagogue: "Gentlemen, today work is to be suspended, because of the miracle which the Lord, blessed be He, performed in those days at this time."

"And I have witnessed that thereafter the local Rabbi said a memorial prayer in honour to the scholar Rabbi Yaakob Elyichar of blessed memory — I wish I were to lie under the place where his feet are . . ."

"And the people then take walks in the gardens and orchards to rejoice and drink wine and spirits in commemoration of the miracle which the Lord, blessed be He, wrought for Israel, and refrain from all work whatsoever and during the meals they shall sing the following song as on a day of deliverance.

In the year 5535 (1775), the city of Basra, our town, was besieged by the Persians, as from the 7th of Nisan and on the 2nd of Nisan in the year 5539 (1779) they withdrew from here, our town. We have therefore confirmed and accepted and undertaken for ourselves and our descendants, to make of this day, the 2nd of Nisan, a day of festivities and rejoicing and to read on it the prayer *Yehi Shem* in the town of Basra, and no work shall be done, and the cantor declares in the synagogue: "Gentlemen, today work is to be suspended in

honour of the miracle. We have made it a custom in Basra to read on the same day this *Megillah,* because the miracle is described therein; and during the meal after the *Megillah,* we shall recite the poem: "The day of deliverance and of miracles." And may the Lord soon send us salvation, amen, may it be his will."

THE PRESENT BOOK IS A TRANSLATION OF A BOOK OF THE SAME name which was originally published in Hebrew in 1950 by the Ben-Zvi Institute of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Some minor details have been omitted from the present edition. The Hebrew documents, the main points of which are to be found in the body of the text, are not included. The book was originally translated by the late Shlomo Yehuda, and Mr. Anthony Benjamin arranged the translation for publication.

The late Mr. Hai Meir Elyachar showed great interest in the history of the Elyachar family and encouraged the author to complete the work. His brother Colonel J. R. Elyachar of New York — may he live long — took the initiative to edit the English edition and undertook to publish it at his expense, in order to preserve the memory of his brother.

Hai Meir Elyachar died in Jerusalem on the 24th of Sivan, 5733 (1973). He was the son of Rafael Yehoshua Elyichar (5629–5672/1868–1912), son of the well-known Rabbi Nissim Binyamin Mordekhai Elyachar (died 5694), son of the *Rishon le-Zion*, Rabbi Yaakob Shaul Elyachar. Mr. Hai Elyachar was educated by his grandfather who was a very learned scholar and devoted all his energy to the teaching of *Torah* and the development of the educational establishments of the Sephardi Community in Jerusalem; he studied at the Tiferet Yerushalayim Yeshivah and was fortunate enough to learn *Torah* there from Rabbi Ben Zion Meir Hai Uziel, who after years became *Rishon Le-Zion*. He was endowed with understanding, a good memory and a well-developed critical sense. He was a businessman but never neglected his love for *Torah*, poured over books and was a well of informa-

tion on life in Jerusalem in the last two generations. It is a pity that he did not take up writing, for he could have enriched our knowledge of Jerusalem some two generations before the establishment of the State of Israel. Blessed be his memory.