Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan: The first Sephardic Bat-Mitzva

After being in Tripoli for a few years (see **this**), rabbi Eliyahu Hazan was invited to serve the Jewish community of Alexandria, Egypt, replacing rabbi Moshe Pardo, who passed away in 1888.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Alexandria was a cosmopolitan city, with a strong European influence. The Jewish community was at the vanguard of the socio-economic progress. Those were times of reform and secularization. Jewish education was not popular at all. Many parents were sending their children to the "prestigious" Christian (some of them missionary!) schools of the city. As they struggled to find the delicate balance between Jewish education and the increasing demands of the parents for dedicating more time to secular studies (including: art, tennis and dance) the few Jewish schools of Alexandria did not achieve the desired goals in terms of basic Jewish scholarship, particularly with the Jewish girls. The schools (or the parents) would provide special tutoring in preparation for the boy's Bar Mitzva. The girls, however, were largely ignorant of Judaism and "could not utter a single word in Hebrew".

Attentive to this issue Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan introduced a new ceremony, not practiced until then among Sephardic Jews: The communal celebration of the Bat Mitzva. Unlike the boys' *Bar Mitzva*, which was centered on the reading of a portion of the Tora from the pulpit, the girls' new ceremony consisted in the recitation of some prayers and answering questions dealing with the basic principles of Judaism.

For Rabbi Hazan the Bat Mitzva ceremony served a higher purpose: it allowed Rabbi Hazan to develop an innovative educational curriculum. The new program of Religious studies for girls was a prerequisite for participating in the Bat Mitzva ceremony. Now the girls and their parents, eager to participate of the popular celebration, were provided with a great stimulus to read fluently Hebrew; to learn the basic prayers, and to master the foundations of Judaism.

Rabbi Hazan served the Jewish community of Alexandria for 20

years, until his sudden death in 1908.
He was succeeded by Rabbi Raffaello Della Pergola (from 1910 to 1923) and Rabbi David Prato (from 1927 to 1936). Both from Italy.