Rabbi Refael Aharon Ben Shimon and the Ashkenazi community of Cairo

Rabbi Refael Aharon ben Shimon was born in Rabat, Morocco in 1847. His father and main teacher was Rabbi David ben Shimon. In 1854 his family decided to emigrate to Israel and settle in Yerushalayim. There, in addition to his rabbinic studies, Rabbi Ben Shimon learned European languages. Besides Hebrew and Arabic, the Rabbi spoke fluently Italian, French and Spanish. In 1890 he was invited to serve as the Chief Rabbi of the important Jewish community of Cairo, where he would stay until 1921.

Rabbi Ben Shimon was a pioneer in assessing and determining the status of new Halakhic innovations of the modern world. Both in the area of □□technology and new social trends.

In his most famous book, umitsur debash (see here) the Rabbi examined the legality of new issues. For example: the use of electricity and matches in Yom Tob; the use of funeral wagons driven by gentiles to bury a dead person during Yom Tob; the evaluation of the engineering of the water supply system of the Nile River in Cairo, to asses if those waters could be used in a Mikve, (□□□□□□ □□□) etc. He also dealt with social sensitive issues such as prevention of suicide; the status of children of mixed marriages and the legality or nullity of marriages performed in private ceremonies. In this last case, for example, many7 marriages ended up being fraudulent, because the husbands surprisingly and without warning, disappeared from the country, and returned to Europe, leaving these young wives abandoned and unable to remarry (□□□□□□).

The way that Rabbi Ben Shimon approached this case is a good example of his admirable Halakhic attitude and his humility. The Rabbi decided to forbid and nullify these marriages (□□□□□ □□□□□□□), but despite the fact that in 1893 the Pasha (Turkish Sultan) designated him as the exclusive rabbinical authority of Egypt, he understood that this important halakhic decision could not be taken without consensus. Rabbi Ben Shimon then consulted with Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan of Alexandria and also with

Rabbi Mendel HaCohen, who was the rabbi of the Ashkenazi community in Cairo. All agreed to invalidate these private ceremonies and free these women from their state of ‘aguna.

Let’s look a little more in detail at the Ashkenazi community in Cairo (sic.). This community was created as a result of the progroms that affected Europe throughout the 19th century. The community had its own synagogue and kept its customs and traditions. Rabbi Aharon Mendel HaCohen arrived in Cairo from Tiberia, Israel. He and Rabbi Ben Shimon were very good friends and worked together for the benefit of the entire Jewish community. Rabbi Ben Shimon had Rabbi Mendel as part of his Rabbinical court and always sought his consent. The relationship and camaraderie between these two rabbis was known throughout the Jewish world as an example of teamwork and mutual respect between a Sepharadic and an Ashkenazi rabbi, something that was not very common at the time.

In 1903, Rabbi Mendel along with Rabbi Zvi Makowsky (vaashiba shofetaikh) wanted to re-establish the Sanhedrin (hiddush hasemikhá) in Israel. That is to say, a Supreme and universal Rabbinic Court that, among other things, would (i) resolve all the disagreements between rabbis, Sepharadim, Ashkenazim, etc., and arrive at a uniform, final and mandatory Halakhic decision for all. Also (ii) it would officially assign the Rabbis who would serve in communities of the diaspora on behalf of this Sanhedrin.

Rabbi Ben Shimon, while enthusiastic about the idea, was a little skeptical, and in a beautiful letter addressed to his colleague Rabbi Mendel (which can be found in nehar mitsrayim heleq bet, pp. 583-587), he tried to dissuade him. The opposition of Rabbi ben Shimon was based solely on practical considerations: in present times, he said with pain, there are so many divisions among the Jews, that it will be impossible to persuade all rabbinical leaders to renounce to their local authority and assign a court above them. Unfortunately, Rabbi Ben Shimon was right and the project never came to fruition.

In 1921 Rabbi Ben Shimon emigrated with his family to Israel and settled in Tel-Aviv. His house was also his synagogue and the rabbis of Tel-Aviv consulted with him permanently on the most delicate subjects of Jewish law.

Rabbi Ben Shimon died in 1928 and was buried in the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem.