Rabbi Isaac Abulafia (1830-1910) and the Education of the Jews of Damascus

RAISED BY HIS GRANDFATHER

Rabbi Isaac Abulafia was born in Damascus, Syria, in 1830. He came from a family of great luminaries dating back to the famous Ribbi Hayim Abulafia, who renewed the settlement of the Jews in the city of Tiberia at the beginning of the 18th century (see here). While still very young, possibly at the age of 10, Rabbi Isaac moved to Tiberia where he was raised by his grandfather, Ribbi Hayim Nissim Abulafia, who was also his Tora teacher. Soon after, Rabbi Hayim was chosen as Rishon LeZion, Chief Sepharadic Rabbi of Israel, so together with Rabbi Isaac and the rest of the family they moved to Yerushalayim. Soon Rabbi Isaac began to shine for his intelligence and his dedication to the Tora, and at age 23 he was sent to represent the Yeshibot of Israel in various Jewish communities around the world, where he was received with many honors for his knowledge, his honorable presence and his refined personality. From all over the world, including other cities in Israel, he received Halachic questions that he solved with his great illustration and his originality.

FAT COWS IN DAMASCUS

In 1861, when his grandfather died, Rabbi Isaac decided to return to Damascus where he served as one of the rabbis of the prestigious Rabbinical Court of the city. In 1873, when Chief Rabbi Rab Aharon Bagdadi passed away, Rabbi Abulafia was offered to serve as Chief Rabbi. At that time Damascus was a city with a vibrant Jewish community. A visitor from France, Rabbi Yerucham Ashkenazi who arrived in Damascus in 1859, wrote in his travel memoirs that many of Damascus's Jews were

affluent and famous for their generosity. The wealthiest had their own rabbinical library, which function as a small Yeshiba. Their greatest ambition was to support Talmide Hakhamim, Tora scholars, to study there.

SKINNY COWS

But in 1875 all this changed. The political situation was no longer the same, and the new government imposed higher taxes and more regulations that limited trade, especially imports and exports, which was what many Jews did there. Several of these affluent and generous community members left Damascus and went to Aleppo, Beirut (Lebanon) and other cities in the area. Rabbi Abulafia then decided that he had to create new opportunities to ensure the economic future of the young Jews of his community, helping them learning professions such as accounting, pharmaceutical, etc. so they do not depend only on trade. The Rabbi made a kind of alliance with the organization "Kol Israel Chaberim" which later became known as the "Alliance Israélite Universelle"; this French-based Jewish institution provided funds for this purpose.

SCHOOLS WITH BENCHES!

Thus, in 1880 Rabbi Abulafia, with the approval of other Damascus rabbis, promoted the creation of a school where, apart from Tora, students would also learn to read and write in Arabic and French. Jewish schools were modernized and for the first time, students had benches to sit on, because until then they studied sitting on the floor. Rabbi Abulafia made sure that this type of education was also available for poor families. The most revolutionary thing Rabbi Abulafia did was also establishing a school for women, something very rare at that time. He was able to motivate parents by establishing a symbolic payment of "Half a Franc" to each family that sent their children to study there.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

But in the long run this undertaking was not a 100% success… Over time parents and students demanded more and more training

in secular matters, at the expense of Torah studies. But the more serious problem –that the Rabbis unfortunately noticed when it was already too late – was that the Alliance exerted an enormous influence causing the secularization of many Jews in Damascus and other Sepharadic communities in Turkey, Greece, the Middle East and North Africa. And although this should be the topic of a separate chapter, I will briefly relate what Rabbi Eliyahu ben Hayim SHELITA, who knew this subject first-hand, told his students in one of this recent classes: "In the Alliance, the teachers who taught mathematics or French language (secular European Jews or Gentiles) were young, dynamic, kind, and dressed in the latest European fashion. For Jewish studies, however, the Alliance would usually hire as a teacher an older man, generally poor and retired, who did not speak French, who had no modern pedagogical training and who was not dressed in a European style. The students *naturally* admired the secular teachers and aspired to become like them. This, inadvertently (or some believe that this was a sophisticated assimilationist strategy, that the rabbis at that time failed to foresee) the young students in the Alliance who did not admire the old Hakham, began to look at the Tora with those same eyes, and unfortunately religious practice became for them something to un-admire, outdated and irrelevant. Rabbi Ben Hayim also explained that in virtually all communities where the Alliance arrived, secularization increased, and vice versa.

A JEW NEVER GOES TO ISRAEL. A JEW "RETURNS" TO ISRAEL.

Back to Rabbi Abulafia, he had only one daughter, who married the famous : "Señor" Hayim Moshe Laniado. Her son-in-law, who belonged to an aristocratic family, assisted the rabbi in publishing his books. Rabbi Abulafia's most known work is "Pene Yitschaq," a monumental six-volumes collection of Rabbinical Responsa (see the first volume of this book here).

In 1909 Rabbi Abulafia left the city of Damascus and returned to his beloved Eretz Israel to settle in Tiberia, the city of

his ancestors, where he died a year later, on Adar 15, 1910.

(*The story of his father, Rabbi Moshe Abulafia, is very sad, tragic and a bit complicated. So I will include it in the context of an article that I will dedicate especially to the subject: The Blood Libel of Damascus, 1840).*