Aharon Mendel HaCohen (1866-1927), The Ashkenazi Rabbi Of Cairo, Egypt

NATION OR RELIGION?

One of the most fascinating, but not very well known, stories from the early 20th century is the attempt to renew the Sanhedrin, that is, the Jewish Supreme Court. To understand what the Sanhedrin means, you have to mentally get rid of the idea that Judaism is a religion, like Christianity for example, and assume that we Jews are a nation. And as a nation we have a land, Israel; a common language, Hebrew ; a long national history and a Constitution: the Tora. What makes more difficult to understand the notion of the "Nation of Israel" is that for roughly nineteen centuries we lived and survived in the diaspora, guided without an enforcing body by our God-given "Constitution." This never happened with any other people in the world, and so it is difficult to understand and absorb the exceptionalism of the Jewish people, and mentally, we feel more comfortable calling ourselves a religion.

SUPREME COURT

Miraculously, after almost 2,000 years of diaspora we finally returned to our land, Israel. And although we are much better off than almost at any other time in our history, one of the technical problems that we still suffer as a people is that since we did not have our land, we did not have our Judicial Branch. And therefore some details of Jewish law or Halakha were applied in different ways in the different Jewish communities of the world. These differences, which exist in any country with its laws and constitution, are usually resolved by the final verdict of the Supreme Court of Justice , which is the ultimate authority to determine the law. But by

not having a Supreme Court or Sanhedrin these discrepancies did not disappear in our mist, and created, for example, the differences before Sepharadim and Ashkenazim.

FROM RUSSIA TO CAIRO

Renewing the Supreme Court of Justice, a “national” institution, could only be done in the land of Israel. And at the beginning of the 20th century, when more and more Jews were establishing in the Yishub, i.e., “the new Jewish colony under the Ottoman Empire”, a very prominent group of rabbis decided that it was time to renew the Sanhedrin. The rabbi who spearheaded this effort was Aharon Mendel haCohen, an Ashkenazi rabbi born in Tiberia, Israel, in 1866. In 1896 Rabbi Aharon was invited to be a rabbi of a very special and unique congregation: the Ashkenazi community of Cairo, Egypt. This community was made up of Jews who had escaped the progroms in Russia and elsewhere in Europe since 1880. It is notable that in the 1920’s there was a Yiddish radio station and a community Yiddish theater in Cairo. Rabbi Aharon led that community for about 30 years and made it grow and flourish. One of the keys to his success was the excellent relationship he had with the main rabbis of the Sephardic communities of Egypt: Refael Aharon Ben Shimon of Cairo and Eliyahu Bekhor Hazan of Alexandria. In addition, he maintained close ties with two very important rabbis in Israel: Rabbi Abraham HaCohen Kook and Rabbi Benzion Cuenca.

THE PROJECT OF THE CENTURY

Rabbi Aharon wrote many books and regulated the customs of the Ashkenazi community in Cairo. But his most famous work was “SEMIKHAT HAHAMIM” (“The Rabbinical Ordination”), where he formulated his project to officially ordain 71 rabbis and create the new Sanhedrin (also known as Bet haDin haGadol) in Israel. To achieve this, Rabbi Aharon had to bring together most of the worlds rabbis, especially from Europe, and establish an international Rabbinical Council that he called

“The Great Assembly” (in Hebrew: kenesset hagdola) to elect the representatives of the Sanhedrin. In 1903 Rabbi Aharon together with Rabbi Eliyahu Hazan organized a special congress in Krakow, Poland. The expenses were paid by the affluent community of Alexandria and particularly by one of the Jewish patrons of that community, Baron Jacques de Menashe.

RENOVATION OF THE SEMIKHA

The idea of □□Rabbi Aharon was to revive the project of Rabbi Yaakob Berab (1474-1546), that is, to ordain a limited group of rabbis invested with the authority to ordain other rabbis until they form a Sanhedrin. This idea began when the Jews expelled from Spain began to settle in the city of Safed (Tsefat) around 1530. Although this project was not executed until the end, i.e., the Sanhedrin was never established, there were a few results: for example, the Shulchan Arukh , written by Ribbi Yosef Caro (14880-1575) –who was the main student of Rabbi Berab– and his book was accepted by the entire Jewish people (that is: “nationally”) because Rabbi Caro was one of the first rabbis ordained with this new Semikha.

MISSION STILL PENDING

And while the idea of □□Rabbi Aharon had the support of more than 500 rabbis from the Diaspora, Ashkenazim and Sephardim, unfortunately and mainly due to the great conflicts that the Jewish communities of the world suffered in the years before the First World War, this project was also unsuccessful. But the idea of renewing a Sanhedrin once we are established in Israel did not vanish, and Rabbi Aharon project inspired other attempts to renew the Sanhedrin in 1950, and even in 2002 and 2004. And I would not be surprised if these efforts for unification persist. Moreover, I think it is a pending issue, and I believe a prerequisite for the arrival of the Mashiach.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Rabbi Aharon haCohen also contributed to the strengthening of the young Yishub in Israel in the difficult early years of the 20th century. He encouraged a group of Jewish patrons to buy land in Jerusalem. These lands are today very prestigious residential neighborhoods such as Bet Hakerem and Bayit VaGan.

Rabbi Aharon passed away and was buried in Haifa in 1927.

To download the book Semikhat Hakhamim see here .

List of the rabbis that headed the project to renew the Sanhedrin en 1903.

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To see the complete list of rabbis see this: □□□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□