

Language and education among the Jews of Afghanistan
From the 19th to the mid- 20th centuries

"Jerusalem is the synagogue of the world"

(Mullah Yosef Melamed Garji)

In Jewish history, little is known about the organization and intra- as well as extra-communal relations of Jewish communities in Afghanistan. What were their means of communication, education and knowledge transfer? Did they read and produce texts in Hebrew, alongside Aramaic and Judeo-Persian? In this article, we will examine these issues with the example of the Garji family, whose members served as rabbis and educators for Jews in Afghanistan and beyond, throughout the 19th to the mid-20th century.

Examining their writings in the context of social and religious life will shed light on some of the major transformations Afghan Jewish communities experienced in this period. The use of Hebrew exemplifies a central argument in this description: Afghan Jews were affected by and part of the society and culture in which they lived, including the incorporation of the respective values and norms. Nonetheless, they were also distinct in many aspects. The use of Hebrew signifies this duality: it was a means to uphold a (religious) Jewish identity, but in its absorption of and application to Persian texts and literature, as well as a means to translate religious writings to a Persian speaking audience through Judeo-Persian, it reflects the local embeddedness of the Hebrew used by Persian speaking Jews. The examples presented below emphasize the role of Afghan Jews as educators and authors in order to show their expertise in religious education, often expressed and transmitted through Hebrew texts. The forms of knowledge and knowledge transmission might have differed from the ones established in Europe and among European Jews; that however should not lead to the conclusion that they depended upon European forms of knowledge in order to be acknowledged as learned members of their communities. As we aim to show on the following pages, they fulfilled these positions in their own right.

1. Social and cultural aspects of Jewish life in Afghanistan

Extant literature on the modern history of Jews in Afghanistan is scant: they pop up as a marginal subgroup in treatises on Jews in Muslim societies more generally (e.g. Deshen 1978; Ben Zvi 1968), or in connection with Bukharan and Iranian Jews (Bezalel 1999; Kupovetsky 1992; Netzer 1969). Works specifically about Afghan Jews tend to focus on selected aspects such as folk traditions or their emigration to Israel. In Hebrew, comprehensive writings have been compiled by Ben Zion Yehoshua-Raz, who has covered aspects of Afghan Jewish history and culture (1969), life cycle events (1973) and immigration to Israel (1992). As members of the Afghan Jewish communities, Reuven Kashani and Zebulon Kort contributed significantly to expanding the knowledge on Afghan Jewish communities in Afghanistan and Israel, but hardly any of their writings were translated from Hebrew and thus remained largely inaccessible to international academic audiences. In 1942, Erich Brauer published an anthropological article covering their economic status, marriage customs as well as aspects of family and communal life. This focus was somewhat continued in publications by Seroussi and Davidoff (1999) about musical traditions, Bar 'Am-Ben Yossef's edited volume on wedding rituals (1998) or Hanegbi and Bracha's *Afghanistan: The Synagogue and the Jewish Home* (1991). Selected aspects of Afghan Jewish history were also published in *ABA - Journal for the Study of the Jews of Iran, Bukhara and Afghanistan* which is published in Israel irregularly since 2007. Then, characteristic for the historiography of Jews from the Middle East, there is a body of literature from European travelers and missionaries who visited the region throughout the 19th and early 20th century (e.g. Beth Hillel 1832; Neumark 1889; Vambéry 1867; Wolff 1860; Fischel 1937). Some of these accounts strongly exoticize (i.e. romanticize and/or look down upon) the regional culture and with it, the Jewish communities they encountered. Even those who do not display such stereotypical descriptions are, as results of the transitory nature of the encounters, limited in their ability to grasp how Afghan Jews saw themselves as a community and as embedded in the social context in which they lived.

Contemporary scholarly work on the modern history of Afghan Jews comprises the book by Sara Koplik on economic and political aspects from the mid- 19th to the mid-20th century, and Sara Aharon's book (2011), which describes the Jewish

communities of Kabul before emigration as well as their lives after settling in the United States. In addition, a number of journal articles was published recently that deal with trade networks and mobility of Jews in Afghanistan, Central Asia and Iran (Marsden 2023; Loy 2023; Sadjed 2024).

This article refers to these works, but differs substantially by providing an inside perspective: Benzion Yehoshua Raz hails from an Afghan Jewish family and as part of his decades-long research on the history of Persian speaking Jews has conducted interviews with many who still lived in Afghanistan. Yet, this article does not reduce the results gained from this research and first-hand knowledge to exclusively cultural or intra-communal descriptions, but proposes an argument applicable to the study of Jewish communities in Muslim societies more widely: providing a description that is not driven by “national” ideologies, we aim to delineate aspects of Jewish life that were markers of difference in respect to the majority society, while at the same time also allowing an understanding of how Afghan Jews felt as and were part of the society in which they lived. With this perspective, we pursue a twofold aim: first, to show that Jews in Afghanistan were not illiterate, backwards and ignorant communities but showed outstanding initiative and knowledge in the realms of education and publication; and second to soften the boundaries between Jews and non-Jews through a focus on their practices and interactions. To achieve this, we will first take a closer look at the role of languages spoken by Jews in Afghanistan.

1.1. Language

Throughout the modern history of Jews in Afghanistan, the spoken language for both men and women was Judeo-Persian, or to be precise, Judeo-Dari. Jews in Afghanistan shared the dialect spoken by Jews from northern and eastern regions of Iran, but only a few could read and write in Persian. Those who were literate used the Hebrew alphabet for writing Persian, which came to be known as Judeo-Persian.¹

As spoken language, Judeo-Dari differed slightly from the Dari non-Jews would speak. However, it is not known that the Jews in Afghanistan developed a distinct local dialect such as Bukharan Jews or the many Iranian Jewish communities, where

¹ We use the terms “Judeo-Persian”, “Judeo-Dari” and “Dari” interchangeably. Judeo-Persian is the overall term for writing Persian in Hebrew letters, while Dari is the dialect of Persian spoken in Afghanistan.

for example Yazdi (spoken in the city of Yazd in central Iran) displayed a distinct syntax compared to Hamedani (in north-west Iran). This is due to the fact that most Jews came to Afghanistan from other places such as Iran and Central Asia. In addition, today's national borders of Afghanistan were drawn only rather recently and Jews in Balkh, for example would speak a Bukharan dialect of Persian (Bukhori or Judeo-Tajik), because the city was ruled by the Khanate of Bukhara and later Maimana until 1751. Two dialects of Judeo-Persian prevailed in Afghanistan: (1) *Herati* or *Yazdi*, a dialect from Mashhad, Iran, to where many Jews originally from Yazd in Central Iran had moved in the 19th century. (2) *Gilaki* was also used by Jews from Mashhad, but by those who had come to Mashhad from Gilan, a province in Iran at the Caspian Sea in the 18th century. In addition, there was a “merchant language” called *Lo Torai* (literally: not of the Torah) - a combination of Hebrew and Persian that non-Jews would not understand. This language was based on biblical Hebrew, but the word structure and intonation was based on Persian syntax and grammar. For Muslims, it sounded Persian, but they would not understand what was being said. A few examples are: *Kasher kardan* (making kosher); *Berakha kardan* (blessing the food); *Vayivrah kon!* (Leave immediately!)²

Aramaic was used to a limited degree as well: only a few besides the rabbis studied the Talmud in Aramaic, but on Fridays before the beginning of Shabbat the men used to read the verses of the weekly Torah portion twice in Hebrew and once in the Aramaic Onkelos translation. It was a halachic rule that they made sure to follow (Kort 1977). At home, the father of the family would tell Torah stories with legends in Dari on Shabbat. The Jews had almost no knowledge of Pashto, one of the official languages of Afghanistan since 1936.

Hebrew spoken by Afghan Jews should be divided into two periods:

Biblical Hebrew, called *Leshon Ha-Kodesh* (the sacred language), was mainly used for religious worship. It was taken from the Bible, the Mishna, the Sages and Midrashic literature and especially used in prayer books, during holidays and fasting days. Children learned this liturgical language in order to read prayers and the Torah in the synagogue. Women and girls, who were exempt from these religious duties, did not study in an educational setting and many of them could not read and write.

² Yehoshua-Raz 2013, p. 61; Kort 1968.

Modern Hebrew was introduced to the Jewish communities from 1928-1930 by the teacher Naftali Abrahamoff, following the reforms of King Amanullah Khan (r. 1919-1929). Abrahamoff was born in 1905 in Herat. As a child, his family immigrated to Marv (now Turkmenistan) after which they immigrated to Palestine in 1913. Naftali was educated in Jerusalem and qualified as a teacher at the David Yelin Seminary.

According to his pupils in Herat, he succeeded in changing the idea of “Jerusalem”, by which Afghan Jews referred to the Holy Land, as a heavenly place to a wasteland that awaited Jewish pioneers to build on it. In addition to modern Hebrew, Abrahamoff taught Jewish children in Afghanistan Zionism and national songs of *Eretz Israel*.

Abrahamoff kept a diary, which was published in a series of articles in the newspaper *Ha Yarden*.³ Yehoshua-Raz received the original diary from Liora Bernstein, Abrahamoff's daughter, and published it with notes and an introduction (Yehoshua-Raz 2013, p. 238-270). The diary is an important document of an eyewitness in which Abrahamoff describes not only important events, but also customs, traditions, daily life, beliefs and Jewish-Muslim relations. Due to Abrahamoff's criticism of the British, they forbade the publication of his diary, after which he stopped writing. We will return to his role among the Jewish community in Herat in **section 4** of this paper.

Before Abrahamoff's arrival, children studied in the *midrash*, a school dedicated to the study of the Torah. They studied religious laws and had to be able to read Hebrew from the prayer book or the Pentateuch, even if they did not understand the meaning of the words. The teacher, called *mullah* like Muslim religious teachers, supervised them in translating Biblical Hebrew into Dari by memorizing word by word (Yehoshua-Raz 1992). The vast majority of Jews in Herat left with the Russian invasion in 1979. At that time, some immigrated to Israel and others moved to Kabul.

1.2. An example of interconnection: Siman-Tov Melamed's *Hayat al-Ruh*

Siman Tov Melamed embodied the unity of the Persian-Jewish culture in which he lived and worked. He was born in the middle of the eighteenth century in the city of

³ Newspaper in Hebrew published by the Revisionist Zionist Movement between 1934-41.

Yazd in central Persia, lived in Herat and later was the spiritual leader in Mashhad with intense connections to Bukhara. A number of correspondences provided by Yitzhak Ben-Zvi indicate various relations between Yazd and Mashhad (Ben-Zvi 1969, p. 297 ff.). For example, it was common for rabbis from Yazd to teach in Mashhad and Bukhara. When Siman-Tov moved to Herat, he became a teacher and *dayan* (religious judge). In Mashhad he served as religious leader as well (cf. Ya'ari, 1972, p. 134-35 and 282 ff.). He passed away between 1799 and 1826 (Basch Moreen 2013; Garji 1913, p. 35, 2).

His literary work included three great works: *Hayat al-Ruh*, *Ha-Azharot*, *Tafsir* for *Pirkei Avot*⁴ and a large number of poems in Persian and Hebrew. They were copied and distributed among the Jews of Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. He composed *Piyyutim* (Sg. *Piyyut*, sacred song) in Judeo-Persian and Hebrew, which were sung in synagogues and in private homes at family events such as weddings and circumcisions.

Hayat al-Ruh (Life of the Soul), Siman-Tov's most important work, was completed before 1778, while he was still in Herat (Netzer 1999, p. 56-95). The book was printed in Jerusalem in 1898 by the Gol-Shauloff brothers (see p. 15 below). *Hayat al-Ruh* is a compilation of ethical speeches, Jewish and Sufi philosophical and mystical sources and poetry in the style of Iranian literary masters like Saadi and Hafez:

According to Basch-Moreen the book contains “numerous biblical and postbiblical sources, such as Targum Onqelos, the Babylonian Talmud, Midrash Rabba, and the Alphabet of Ben-Sira, as well as to the works of Jewish philosophers, such as Sa'adya Gaon (d. 942), Hasdai Crescas (d. 1410/11), and Joseph Albo (d. 1444), and to ancient Greek philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, and Galen, whose teachings he did not know firsthand but derived primarily from Jewish philosophers. Melammed also quotes from the works of classical Persian poets, especially Sa'di's (d. 1292) *Gulistān* (Pers.: Rose Garden).”⁵ However, Siman-Tov did not always reveal the origins of his writings. *Hayat al-Ruh* contains about 180 poems, in Judeo-Persian and Hebrew, of which approximately 150 were written by Siman-Tov himself and 30

⁴ Ha-Azharot: poetical composition on the 613 commandments of the Torah; Tafsir le-Pirkei Avot: “Ethics of the Fathers”.

⁵ Vera Basch-Moreen, “Hayat al-Ruh”, in: Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World. (n.d.). Brill.

are from Persian poets whose names he did not mention. Some poems have alternate verses in two languages, Hebrew and Persian or Aramaic and Persian. He also quoted a verse from the Koran in Arabic (Netzer 1969).



Image 1: Cover of *Hayat al-Ruh*, published in Jerusalem 1898. Photo: Yehoshua-Raz.

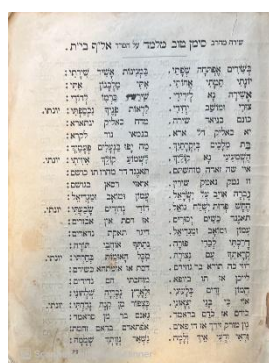


Image 2: Judeo-Persian and Hebrew *piyyut* in *Hayat al-Ruh*. Photo: Yehoshua-Raz.

There are many examples like *Hayat al-Ruh* that testify to the multiple sources of knowledge and literary traditions that Persian speaking Jews resorted to (Rubanovich 2015). Now let us turn to some of the actors who produced these texts. The following chapter is devoted to the Garji family, a family in which the role of religious educators and pillars of the community was passed on for many generations.

2. A lineage of spreading the Hebrew language

From the 19th century to the last generations of Jews in Afghanistan, the Garji family was most influential. The surname Garji indicates the family's origin from Georgia. The Garjis might have been exiled in 1610, along with Sunni Kurds and Christian

Armenians, to Iran, in particular to Qazvin, Gilan and other places along the Caspian Sea. In 1746, Nadir Shah resettled some families from the province Qazvin to the northeastern province of Khorasan of today's Iran, in order to strengthen trade and to religiously diversify the population in Shi'ite dominated border regions. While emigration from Mashhad to cities in Afghanistan and Central Asia had already taken place before the forced conversion of the Jews in 1839, after this event about 1,500 Jews, including members of the Garji family, left Mashhad to Herat. There they became leaders of the community. The dialect they spoke was Gilaki, which was prevalent in Gilan and Mazanderan on the southern shore of the Caspian Sea (Yehoshua-Raz: Behind the Silk Curtain, p. 132).

The Garjis served as spiritual leaders in different places in Afghanistan as well as in several Central Asian cities. They continued to serve as rabbis, educators, judges (*Dayanim*), preachers, commentators of the Bible and literature, and as writers of chronicles, recording the events of their time.

The education of the rabbis of the Garji dynasty was quite different from the education of other members of the community. In addition to Torah education they had access to the rich library in the rabbi's house, which held books that through booksellers were imported from Jerusalem and European countries, where Hebrew printing existed. Intense study of these books qualified them to be spiritual leaders of the community. Members of the Garji dynasty served in all the key positions among the Jews in Herat: spiritual leadership, management of the traditional Jewish education system and *Kalontar* (lay head of the community and its representative before the Muslim authorities). They also served as cantors, performed circumcisions and slaughtered the meat according to Jewish law for members of the community. Local rabbis in northern Afghanistan did not compete with the Garji family.

The Garjis were community rabbis in a traditional sense, accompanying their communities from birth to the grave, taking part in days of joy and sorrow. In Jerusalem, three generations of rabbis from the Garji family taught for about eighty years in the Talmud Torah *Bnei Zion* and yeshiva in the Bukharan neighborhood (*Shkhunat ha-Bukharim*) which was established in the late 19th century in Jerusalem.

The Talmud Torah school *Bnei Zion* was established in 1894 by rabbi Avraham Aminoff Talmudi, one of the leaders of the Bukharan community in Jerusalem. In 1919, following the First World War, the school had financial difficulties and was

facing closure. The institution turned to the organization *Agudath Israel* for financial help and patronage, which they accepted. Therefore, the management came under an Ashkenazi organization, but most teachers and pupils were Jews from Muslim countries. Some of the teachers were of Afghan and Persian origin. Three generations of the Garji family taught Hebrew at this school: Mullah Mattatya, Mullah Yosef and Mullah Binyamin. Some of the great rabbis from the Muslim world, for example Ovadia Yosef, who would become Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, studied at *Bnei Zion*.

In the following, we will introduce five consecutive generations of prominent educators and rabbis from the Garji family, geographically starting out from Mashhad, to Herat, Marv and Jerusalem. The rabbis inherited their roles as religious authorities from their fathers, generation after generation, mastering Hebrew perfectly. Below the table, we will discuss selected members of the family in more detail.

Name	Generation	Location	Role
Mullah Abraham	1th	- Mashhad (Herat (1840	Founder of and teacher Herat's <i>midr</i>
Mullah Mordechai	2th	- Mashhad (Herat (1840	Taught in Herat's <i>midr</i>
Mullah Mattatya 1844-1917	3th	Herat - Jerusalem	Chief rabbi and teacher .Herat's <i>midr</i> Writer and chronicler .communal hist
Mullah Yosef Melamed 1869-1936	4th	- Herat - Marv Jerusalem	Rabbi, teacher, <i>mo</i> (circumciser), ritual slaughter and aut
Mullah Yehezkel 1875-1953	4th	Herat	Rabbi, teacher and aut
Mullah Asher (1882-1955)	4th	- Herat Jerusalem	Chief rabbi, mohel, ri slaughterer, cantor and teac
Mullah Shmuel ben Shlomo (no date of birth (and death available Cousin of Mattatya	4th	Herat - Marv	Rabbi, writer and bookse
Mullah Binyamin (1902-1974)	5th	Jerusalem	Rabbi, teac

2.1. Mullah Mattatya Garji (1844-1917)

In 1857, Mullah Mattatya Garji wrote the chronicle *Korot Zemanim*. It contains episodes from public and private life, by use of Hebrew-Oriental letters. The language is rich and studded with fragments of verses from the Bible, Talmud and mishnah. Among other events, he describes the deportation of members of his congregation from Herat to a caravanserai near Mashhad, of which he was part. The background to this even was that in 1856, Nasr ad-Din Shah, King of Persia, launched an attack on Herat. Following the British threat of an invasion to Bushehr, the Persians retreated from Herat, taking the Herati Jews back with them - claiming they were Persian subjects. Many died on the way to Mashhad, where they were held for two years until they were freed and returned to Herat (Levy-Girush Herat, pp. 85-89; Sahim 2014; Yehoshua Raz 1997 p. 101-111 and 157-160).

נגזר מאת המלך, מלכו של עולם, ונתן בלב המלך [הפרסי] לגזור עלינו גלות להסיענו ממדינה זו [העיר] הראת] ולהגלותנו למשהד. וביום ט"ו בשבט שנת תרי"ז [9 בפברואר 1857] התנפלו עלינו נוגשים, מכת הרג ואבדן לאמור: 'צאו מבתיכם כי כן נגזר מאת המלך'. והוציאו את הכול – אנשים ונשים וטף – ממקומם, ולא נשאו פנים לא לזקן ולא לנער. ואין חומל ואין מרחם. ותיהום העיר מזעקת עניים ויתומים. ולא הספיקו הגולים לקבוץ ממונם ולהכין צידה ובמשך ג' ימים הוציאו את כולנו חוץ לעיר למקום הנקרא מוסקלא. ויום י"ט לשבט [13 בפברואר 1857], הסיעו אותנו משם וקרוב לשלושים יום היינו בדרך וסביבנו גייסות גויים וגם משמים היה שלג וברד וקור וכמה נפשות גָּנְעוּ בדרך מרוב הקרירות ומחוסר לחם וכמה צרות אשר לא יסופר. חודש אדר, קרוב לפורים [מארס 1857] הגענו למדינת משהד ולא הניחו לנו להיכנס לעיר, אלא הכניסונו לגדרות בהמות, למבצר אחד הנקרא באב קודראת, מקום צר ובית כלא, והיינו לחרפה ולביזיון. וכמה בני אדם המירו את דתם מרוב הצרות. ובעוונותינו נתקיים בנו 'מחוץ תשכל חרב ומחדרים אימה' [דברים לב כה], כי הנוגשים כל היום מכים ורודים מכת אכזרי על העונש שהטילו עלינו ועל אי תשלום דמי שכירות הגמלים, שהביאונו מהראת, והגמלים היו רכוש המלך. ורוב הרוכבים [הגולים] היו עניים ואומללים והטילו השכירות על שאר העם [האמידים]. ומצד אחר היה בר מינן חולי ומגיפה ומתו כמה וכמה נפשות ועוד צרות אשר תקצר היריעה מהכיל... היינו שם במשך שתי שנים, ובסוף שתי שנים נתכפרו עוונותינו ותעל שוועתנו אל ה' ונתן בלב המלך לתת לנו רשות שנחזור

למקומנו [לעיר הראת]. ובחודש כסלו שנת ה'תרי"ט [דצמבר 1858] נסענו ממשד וביום שני בשבת, י"ג
ל'טבת [תרי"ט – 20 בינואר 1859] נכנסנו להראת איש למקומו, וברוך מרחם על הבריות

The translation reads:

"It was decreed by the king, the king of the world, and it was given in the heart of the [Persian] king to decree to drive us from this country [the city of Herat] and to exile us to Mashhad. On the 15th of Shevat 5617 [February 9, 1857] we were attacked by invaders, a plague of killing and destruction, saying: 'Come out of your homes, for so it was decreed by the king'. They took everything: men and women and children out of their places and did not show respect to either the old man or the youth. There was no mercy. The noise of the city was crying out for the poor and the orphans and the exiles did not have time to gather their wealth and prepare a side. During three days they took all of us out of the city to a place called Musallah.⁷

On the 19th of *Shevat* 5617 [February 13, 1857], they drove us from there and for nearly thirty days we were on the road and we were surrounded by Muslim troops and also from the sky there was snow and hail and cold and several souls died on the way from the coldness and lack of bread and several troubles that did not will be told.

In the month of Adar, close to Purim, [*Adar* 5617/March 1857] we arrived near the city of Mashhad and they did not let us enter the city and put us in cattle fences, in one fortress called Baba-Qudrat, a narrow place and a prison, and we were disgraced and contempt. Some people converted their religion [to Islam] because of the troubles. In this injustice, we will live in 'The sword without, and terror within' [Deuteronomy 32, 25], because those who approach us all day beat us with a cruel blow for the punishment they imposed on us and for not paying the rent for the camels, which brought us from Herat, and which were property of the king. Most of the riders [the expatriates] were poor and miserable and imposed the rent on the rest of the people [the wealthy]. On the other hand, there was sickness and pestilence, and many souls died, and other troubles that are too many to fit on the canvas.

We were there for two years, and our sins were atoned for and our prayers went up to God, and it was in the king's heart to give us permission to return to our place [to the city of Herat]. In *Kislev* 5619 [December 1858] we traveled from Mashhad and on Monday, 13th *Tevet* 5619 [January 20, 1859], we entered Herat. Blessed be God who has mercy on people".

Korot Zemanim was written in Hebrew a year before Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was born, who was awarded the title of "Revitalizer of the Hebrew Language". Ben-Yehuda (born Eliezer Yitzhak Perlman; 7 January 1858 – 16 December 1922) was a Russian-Jewish linguist and journalist. He is renowned as the lexicographer of the first Hebrew dictionary and was the editor of the Newspaper *Ha-Zvi*, one of the

⁶ Rabbi of the congregation, educator, preacher, chronicler and commentator. Born in Herat 1844, died in Jerusalem 1917. Kashani 1971, p. 144-143. Yehoshua-Raz 1997, p. 159.

⁷ Musallah is a former Islamic religious complex located in Herat. Much of the 15th-century building is in ruins today.

first Hebrew newspapers published in Jerusalem. Ben-Yehuda was a driving force behind changing Hebrew from a liturgical to a literary language. However, as most of his European contemporaries, Ben-Yehuda ignored the use of Hebrew that existed among Oriental Jews many years even before he was born.

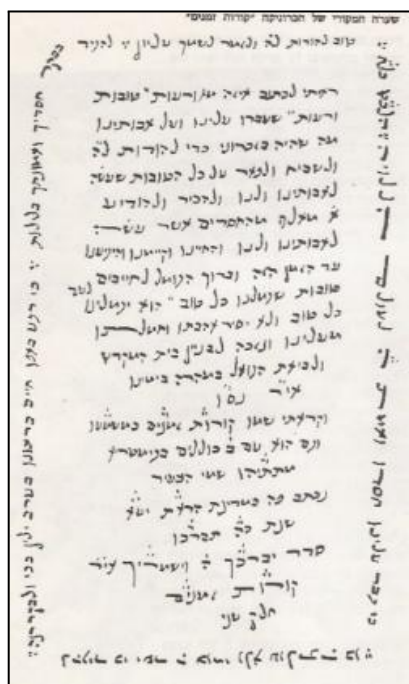


Image 3: Original cover of *Korot Zemanim* ("Events of our time"). Photo: Kashani (1971).

Reuven Kashani, a member of the Afghan community, found the manuscript of the chronicle in the Genizah of the Afghan synagogue in Jerusalem *Yeshu'a ve-Rahamim*. The Chronicle is written in the Oriental Hebrew script (as evidenced by the title page presented here). Kashani deciphered the manuscript and published it in 1971.

In 1895 and 1898, Mullah Mattatya went on pilgrimage to Land of Israel. His travel diary also entails a description how an epidemic broke out and how it affected his travels:

ובימים אלו היה חולי באלכסנדריה של מצרים וסביבותיו ולכן כל ספינה הבאה מאותם המקומות [שבהם היה החולי] אינם מניחים אותם לבא וחוששים שמא יתפשט החולי בר מינן גם במדינות אחרות ולכן מנהגם להוציא כל אנשי הספינה ממקומה אל מקום אחד ביבשה עם ממונם וכל אשר להם ומעמידים אותם בשמש ותחת האור כדי שיסור רוח החולי מהם. יש ספינות שמעכבים אותם ה' ימים ויש ו' ימים ויש ט"ו

ימים כפי כובד החולי כן גוזרים רבוי הימים ולזה קוראים קראנטינא ולסיבה זו אותם ספינות שלא הלכו במקום החולי שכר הספינה כפלים, לפי שלא יש לו קראנטינא. ואנחנו בחרנו בספינה הזאת ביוקר בלא קראנטינא ויום ד' בשבת ערב ראש חודש תמוז תרנ"ו (10.6.1896) באה הספינה לכפר א' [אחד] הנקרא ...שאקיץ והיא רחוקה מאיזמיר כמו ו' שעות⁸

ובתחילת ליל ד' בשבת [רביעי], ז' לחודש ניסן [התרס"ח – 8 באפריל 1908] נסעה הספינה [מביירות] וביום ה' בבוקר היגיע (ה) הספינה ליפו ונכנסנו ליפו בשמחה ואחר ד' שעות ישבנו למסילת הברזל [=רכבת] ולעת ערב באנו לרחובות [הבוכרים] גבול ירושלים תוב"ב [תיבנה ותיכונן במהרה בימינו] ועגלה [=רכבת] זו דהיינו מסילת הברזל כולנו ישראלים אנשים [=גברים], נשים וטף בשירה ובזמרה ובהגיענו לרחובות [הבוכרים] יצאו ובאו לקראתנו כמה אנשים [=גברים], נשים וטף מיושבי ירושלים תוב"ב וישבנו בעגלה פאיתון [דיליז'נס] ובאנו בביתם של האחים מ' ישראל גול

Translation:

"In those days there was a disease in Alexandria, Egypt and its surroundings, therefore every ship that came from those places was not allowed to enter due to the fear that the disease will spread to other countries as well. All passengers were transferred to one place on land with their money and everything they have and put in the sun and under the light so that the spirit of the sick will be removed from them.

There are ships that delay them for 5, 6 and 15 days, according to the severity of the patient and this is called quarantine. For those ships that did not go to the place of the sick, the fare is doubled, according to the fact that it does not have a quarantine. We chose this ship at a high price without Quarantine and on Wednesday, 29 Sivan 5656 [June 10, 1896]. It came to a village called Shakitz and it is about six hours away from Izmir.

At the eve of Wednesday, 7 Nisan 5668 [April 8, 1908]⁹ the ship left [Beirut] and on Thursday morning the ship arrived in Jaffa port and we entered Jaffa happily and after 4 hours we set on the railroad [train] and in the evening [we arrived at the train station in Jerusalem]. We sat in a *Faytun* [diligence] wagon and we came to the house of the brothers M. Israel Gol at the Rehovot ha-Bukhrim a quarter near the border of Jerusalem."¹⁰

Another of Mattatya Garji's books, *Ong le-Shabbat*, contains three parts: first, "beautiful requirements and precious hints" regarding the Torah, *Haftarot*¹¹ and the Pentateuch. The chapters of the book appear according to the order of the Sabbaths of the year. In the second part, *The Psalms of David*, he added sermons to the book of Psalms, which the members of his congregation knew by heart. The third part is called

⁸ Garji, *Massa'ot*, p. 275.

⁹ Probably Mullah Mattatya's second journey to the Land of Israel.

¹⁰ Garji, *Massa'ot*, p. 275.

¹¹ A chapter from the Book of Prophets read in the synagogue on Sabbath.

The Book of the Temple, in which he wrote interpretations and requirements regarding the Talmud. The book ends by praising of studying *Kabbalah* of Rabbi Yitzhak Luria (1534-1572).

The target audience of his books were male members of the community who mastered Hebrew. His community numbered about 4,000 people, including women and children. The traveler Ephraim Neumark writes about the personality of Mullah Mattatya:

“A teacher and a slaughterer (in Herat) whose name is Mullah Mattatya. He will not benefit from the public purse because he will take and give a little to revive the souls of his household (he sold spices during some hours of the day) and they will call him by the name ‘Hasid’ [Pious]”¹².

2.2. Publishing

In Jerusalem, Mullah Mattatya Garji’s books were printed at Raphael Haim Ha-Cohen’s printing press. Ha-Cohen (1884-1955) was one of the first printers in Jerusalem and a community activist.¹³ He was born in Shiraz, Iran, was educated by his father and later by private tutors and came to Jerusalem in 1890. There he learned the profession of printing and became one of the founders of the Association of Book Printers in Jerusalem. In 1913, he founded a private printing house.

Another Afghan Jew engaged in publishing was Israel Gol-Shauloff, who published Siman-Tov Melamed’s aforementioned book *Hayat al-Ruh*.

¹²Neumark, 1889, p. 78

¹³ He was a judge of the Hebrew Magistrate’s Court and in 1903 founded, together with his brother and others, the association of the Persian community “Lovers of Zion”, which dedicated to improve the spiritual and material condition of the members of his community in the city. The association also founded and maintained several institutions, including a synagogue and the Talmud Torah school *Orach Chaim* (Ha-Kohen 2000; Mizrahi 1959, pp. 220-23).

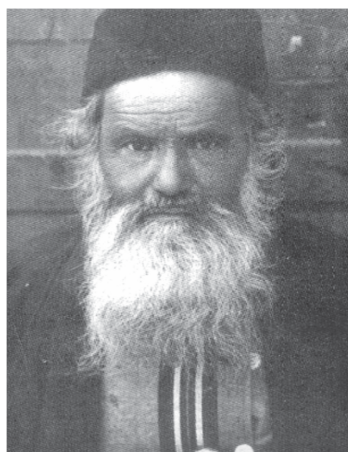


Image 4: Mullah Israel Gol-Shauloff (Herat 1859 – Jerusalem 1929). Photo: private.

Among the first settlers from the Afghan Jews in Jerusalem were the brothers Israel, Netanel and Binyamin Gol, who were born in Herat. They were among the founders of the Bukharan Giv'at Shaul neighborhood in North Jerusalem, where new settlers from Bukhara, Mashhad and Afghanistan arrived and they vigorously engaged in the publishing of Judeo-Persian books. They published the first manuscripts of Judeo-Persian writers, initiated translations of sermons and religious stories from Hebrew into Judeo-Persian. The main translator was Mullah Shim'on Hakham¹⁴.



Image 5: Left: The author Avraham Mapu (1808-1867). Right: Shimon Hakham (1843-1910); Center: Title page of the Judeo-Persian translation of *Love of Zion* (1908). Picture: Kashani (1971)

¹⁴ Yehoshua-Raz, 1997, pp. 440-443.

The publisher Yedidia ben Yosef Harati asked Mullah Shimon Hakham to translate *Love of Zion* by Avraham Mapu to Judeo-Persian. The book's imaginative descriptions of the Biblical period inspired the readers to immigrate to the Holy Land and Bukharan Jews named their children Amnon and Tamar after the heroes of the novel. The translator added his own poetry to the book that are not in the Hebrew original. It was very successful among the Judeo-Persian speaking communities and had the status of a holy book. The translator wrote in the conclusion:

Whoever reads this book of stories once will certainly not smell its fragrance; whoever reads it twice will smell a little of it; whoever reads it three times will understand the truth and will penetrate to the depth of all its words; but whoever has read the book a hundred times, until he remembers its words by heart, will read it a hundred and one times”.¹⁵

2.3. The next generations

2.3.1 Mullah Yosef Melamed Garji

Mullah Mattatya's son Mullah Yosef Melamed was a successful merchant. On his way to Jerusalem he stayed in Marv, in today's Turkmenistan, for seven years (1903-1910), where he worked as rabbi, taught Torah and religious laws, educated pupils, and served as ritual slaughterer and circumciser. His son, Mullah Binyamin writes that the Bukharan (i.e. Central Asian) community in Marv begged his father to stay in the city and serve as a chief rabbi and spiritual leader. In the preface to the second edition of *Edut bi-Yehosef* by Mullah Yosef Melamed Garji, his son Mullah Binyamin describes his father's path as an educator: “As a teacher and as an educator, father loved his pupils very much... how much trouble he invested until the child understood the basics of reading and writing. His hands would hold the hands of the young pupils and he would ennoble his great personality in the minds of the children.”

When Rabbi Nachman Betito (1845-1915), one of the leaders of the North African community in Jerusalem and Chief Rabbi Raphael Meir ben Yehuda Panigel

Mullah Shim'on Hakham (Bukhara 1843 - Jerusalem 1910), son of Rabbi Eliyahu of¹⁵ Baghdad and great-grandson of Rabbi Yosef Maman (Tetouan, Morocco 1752-Bukhara 1822). Poet and biblical commentator and translator from Hebrew to Judeo-Persian (Tajik dialect). Among his 32 books is the translation of Avraham Mapu's novel *Love of Zion*

(1804–1893) the Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem arrived in Marv to collect donations for the benefit of the many poor people in Jerusalem, Mullah Yosef served as their translator from Hebrew to Persian. After immigrating to the Land of Israel, Mullah Yosef, following in his father's footsteps, served for 25 years as teacher in the Talmud Torah *Bnei Zion* in the Bukharan neighborhood in Jerusalem.¹⁶

In his commentary on the book of Psalms *Edut bi-Yehosef*¹⁷, Mullah Yosef Melamed Garji also presents autobiographical elements and anecdotes from the community's history. For example, in the interpretation for "Thy servants take her stones and the dust therefore" (Psalms 102, 14), he explains that it was customary among Afghani Jews to place a bag of dust from the Mount of Olives in the grave under the head of the deceased. In his commentary to "O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple, they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble" (Psalms 79, 1) he recounts the events in Hebron in 1929. In the second edition of this book, he mentions the Jaffa riots of 1936.

Mullah Yosef's ideology was encapsulated in the saying "Jerusalem is the world's synagogue," meaning that the Torah and the Land of Israel are tied to each other. He did not idealize the Land of Israel, however, for he added that it also harbors enemies of the soul and enemies of the body. He believed that evil inclinations were stronger in the Land of Israel than in the Diaspora, but that the struggle with these inclinations was a virtue, since "the land of Israel is acquired through suffering" and abstinence refines the soul. In accordance to the Torah, Mullah Yosef saw settlement in the Land of Israel as tied to suffering, including in regard to the soil: Even when it would not rain for a year, this would cause a softening of the soul and people's attention would be tuned to redemption.

Edut bi-Yehosef is also an enlightening source on Afghan Jewish customs and beliefs. Mullah Yosef outlines an ideological subtext for the "Love for Zion" as an expression for the aspirations of the Afghan Jews. He contrasts the virtues of the Land of Israel with the disadvantages of Afghanistan. In chapter 87 of the Psalms, he presents 15 virtues unique to the Land of Israel, based on religious-mystical motives that place

¹⁶ See: Binyamin Garji's introduction to his father's book *Edut bi-Yehosef*, second edition 1972. In his introduction, he refers to his father Mullah Yosef's pronounced style and rich knowledge of the Hebrew language.

¹⁷ Psalms 81, 5.

Jerusalem as the spiritual center of Judaism. He harshly criticizes those among his fellow men who are eager for money and whose hearts are not devoted to the Holy Land.

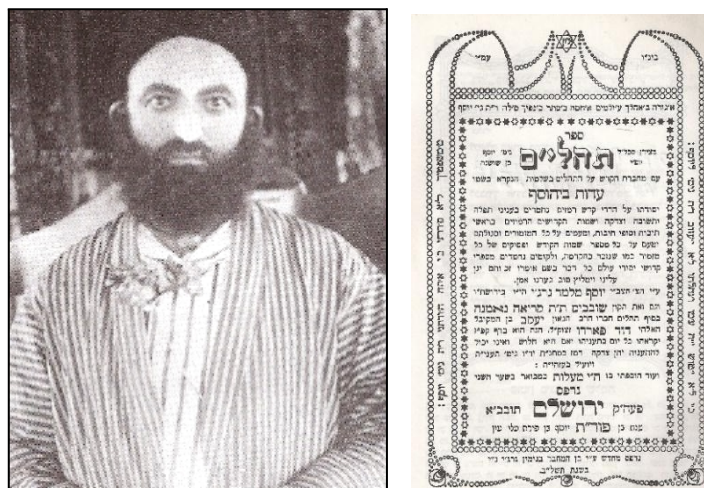


Image 6: Left: Mullah Yosef Melamed Garji (Herat 1869-Jerusalem 1936), Right: *Edut bi-Yehosef*, commentary of Psalms (Jerusalem 1926).
Picture: private.

2.3.2. Asher, Samuel and Yehezkel Garji

Mullah Asher, son of Mattatiya Garji, was born in Herat on 22.1.1882. He made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the company of his father and helped him publish the *Azharot* of Siman-Tov Melamed. He married at the age of 17. After his father immigrated to Jerusalem, he was appointed at the age of 26 as head and rabbi of the community and held this position in Herat's synagogue for 40 years until his immigration to the Land of Israel. Like his ancestors before him, he served as a teacher and educator and spiritual leader, ritual slaughterer, circumciser and a cantor. His rulings in the law of appointees were accepted without appeal. Mullah Asher composed a poem dedicated to David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister. Mullah Asher died in Jerusalem in September 1961.

Mullah Shmuel was the cousin of Mullah Mattatya. In the introduction to his book *Minhat Shmuel* (Samuel's gift), Published in 1902, he writes:

“From my childhood, I longed and longed to travel in gardens and orchards, the *Pardes*¹⁸ of the Torah. All my days I erred in their love to hear innovations and buy my necessary books as I saw fit. Seeing that it is impossible to buy endless books, when the land is long and wide as the sea and I have not money to realize this desire. I said in my heart: ‘I wish I was a bookseller’.”

His dream came true in the city of Marv, where he served as a slaughterer and a teacher for young children. To earn a living, he sold books that he imported from Jerusalem and from Jewish communities in Europe¹⁹.

Yehezkel, another son of Mattatiya Garji, was born in Herat in 1875. He received his rabbinic education from his father and immigrated to Eretz Israel around 1914. Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, he published the book *Hanukat Zion* (Zion’s Chanukah). The Hebrew words *Zion* and *Yehezkel* in Hebrew numerology both represent the number 156, therefore Mullah Mattatya had a calling to be involved in the preparation of this book, which included matter of the law, ethics and liturgical poetry. The book supplements the chronicles *Korot Zemanim* of his father, including the story of the conquest of the city of Maymana by Na’ib ‘Alam Khan and the ensuing pillaging and killing of over 10.000 people, including thirteen Jews on the 14th of March 1876. Mullah Yehezkel died in Jerusalem in January 1953.

2.3.3. The last generation

Binyamin Garji, son of Mullah Yosef, was born in Herat in 1902 and immigrated to Eretz Israel at the age of 11. He taught at the Talmud Torah *Bnei Zion* for fifty years, where his father and grandfather had taught before him. Besides being a gifted educator, he also served as rabbi for the Afghani, Mashhadi and Bukharan Jews in Jerusalem and accompanied their families through the life cycle from birth to death. Mullah Binyamin was a man of kindness and a captivating sermonizer.

¹⁸ *Pardes* (פרד"ס) is a concept from Kabbalistic Biblical exegesis. The term, sometimes also rendered PaRDeS, is an acronym formed from the initials of the following four approaches: *Peshat* (פְּשָׁט) – "surface" ("straight"), also in the sense of literal (direct) meaning. *Remez* (רִמְזָה) – "hints" or the deep (hidden or symbolic) meaning beyond the literal. *Derash* (דְּרָשׁ) – "inquire", "seek", comparative understanding, as given through similar occurrences. *Sod* (סוֹד) – "secret", "mystery", the esoteric/mystical meaning.

¹⁹ Garji, 1902.



Image 8: Mullah Binyamin Garji. Picture: Garji family.

After this overview of some of the most important figures in the realms of education and publication, we now return to Afghanistan and discuss the major transformations of the educational system from the 19th to the early 20th century.

3. The *midrash*²⁰

From a pamphlet published in the memory of Aghajan Reuven Cohen, who was the Vakil (representative of the Jews before the authorities) in Herat, we learn about the educational system, which was brought to Herat from Mashhad in the 19th century. Aghajan Cohen studied in the Beit midrash of Mullah Mordechai Garji in Herat. The studies took place in the hall in the courtyard of the Garji Synagogue. He was admitted at the age of three and at the age of five already knew how to read the Torah. The *midrashim* in Afghanistan taught Hebrew for religious purposes, i.e. observing Jewish *mitzvot* (commands) and worship. This included prayers, reading the Pentateuch, memorizing the Book of Psalms and studying Jewish laws. The language of teaching was Hebrew, Judeo-Persian (Dari) and Aramaic. Most of the pupils studied until the age of 13. Afterwards they were sent to the trading cities as merchant apprentices. Outstanding pupils of wealthy parents continued to study until the age of eighteen and by then they served as ritual slaughterers, circumcisers and cantors in the trading cities where merchants from the community operated. The chief rabbinate in Herat was a privilege of the Garji family.

Hebrew was studied by memorizing it. The studies were conducted in a hall where about 200 boys were sitting on carpets in groups of ten. Despite the intense cold there was usually no heating. The boys who showed proficiency were transferred to a more

²⁰ The *midrash* was also called *mullahi* and was headed by a mullah and young teachers, called *Khalifeh*.

advanced group regardless of age. There they additionally had lessons in Bible interpretation. The teaching method resulted in the Afghan child knowing the Pentateuch and passages from the Bible and especially the Book of Psalms by heart. Cohen (1934) and Gul (1984) describe the schools as follows: When a child reached the age of three, he was brought to the *Beit Midrash*. To calm the new child, sweets were distributed. As a virtue for success, the Mullah wrote on a hard-boiled egg verses from the Bible related to learning. The boy ate the egg and hoped to succeed in his studies. After the morning prayer they ate breakfast which included a slice of bread and a cup of tea. After that the studies started. At noon, the municipal cannon fired to announce lunch time and everybody went out. When the shadow moved to a certain line, classes resumed until four o'clock. The pupils went to the synagogue for the evening prayers and then went home. At the end of each stage of the studies, the parents brought a gift for the teacher and sweets to the children of the group. After most of community had left Afghanistan, among the few that remained were the teachers Binyamin Gul and Simcha Garji. The teaching method remained the same and in the absence of many teachers, the parents hired Muslim teachers to teach the children Dari and Pashto.

Aharon Bezalel, who was born in Herat 1926, describes in his book *Lehaniach Bracha* (To Leave a Blessing),²¹ memories of his family life and the Jewish community in Herat and his early years in Jerusalem. He recalls that there were two classrooms - one of Mullah Asher Garji and the other of Mullah Yehoshua Amram: "The class of Mullah Garji was a large and long room and he called it *Beit Midrash*. When we arrived, we took off our shoes and put them in the hallway, at the other end of which was a restroom and since we didn't have to ask permission to go there, they served as a refuge for many of us. Mullah Yehoshua was sitting on a high chair with a stick in his hand. Mullah Asher was sitting on a cushion with a small table in front of him, from which he controlled what was happening. He was a handsome man and very authoritative and to this day when I describe God I see Mullah Asher before my eyes" (cited in Kashani 1992, p. 42).

²¹ *Lehaniach Bracha* - Memories of a Jewish Boy from Herat in Afghanistan, published by the Ben-Zvi institute and the Hebrew University, Jerusalem 2009.

Each group had a *Khalifeh* (young teacher) and he would read the chapter that the group would learn that day. There were groups that learn the letters of the Alef-Beit (alphabet in Hebrew), others studied the Torah or *Tafsir* (translation and commentaries in Judeo-Persian). The books of prophets and scriptures we studied in Judeo-Persian only. Advanced groups studied *Mishnah*. At the end of the day Mullah Asher examined each group separately.

The Mullah had a variety of punishments, lighter and heavier, and a cabinet where the “instruments” were kept: *tchub* (Pers. wood or stick), to hit the palm of the hand; *falak* for blows on the feet. The children brought the sticks to carry out the punishments from the thatch covering the sukkah.

During the studies there was a lot of commotion in the hall. The children memorized their chapters aloud while pacing up and down the hall. The *Khalifeh* would say out loud the prayer *Shema Israel* and blessings. “We would repeat after him and at home our father made sure that we memorized the important verses from the Torah. My sister Rachel says that my grandfather, Mullah Moshe, would gather his three older grandchildren and would memorize verses with them, and she, who was exempt from studying, would stand on the sidelines and listen. To this day she remembers these verses.” (...) After we learned to write letters and words, we learned to write a letter to father [the men often engaged in trade in distant cities]. The letter was in Hebrew starting with: 'My father, my lord, crown of my head'. Later we switched to Judeo-Persian in Hebrew script and we would ask father for various requests. All the letters were in the same wording.” (cited in Yehoshua Raz 1992, p. 48).

Poor children usually dropped out sooner. Although Mullah Asher did not charge tuition fees from poor children, the children had to help support the family. Few pupils made it to the last stage of learning, which included kosher slaughtering techniques. At the end of their studies, they were required to slaughter a chicken in front of several authorities.

The graduates read texts such as *Ein Yaakov* by Rabbi Yaakov Habib and his son Rabbi Levy ben Yaakov Habib²². Advanced pupils were required to read a Hebrew text and simultaneously translate it into Judeo-Persian. The pupils also knew passages from the *Zohar* (The book of *Kabbalah*) by heart. A boy who read the prayers well became entitled to learn to write and copy the Hebrew Oriental script and eloquent letters in Judeo-Persian.

At a higher level, students learned the Onkelos in Aramaic, which was read before the weekly portion from the Pentateuch. A gifted child studied the commentary of Rashi and the *Mishnah*. When Passover approached, they studied the Song of Songs; for Shavuot the Book of Ruth; for *Sukkot*, the Book of Ecclesiastes and for Purim, the Book of Esther.

An important source for learning Judeo-Dari at a high level, which was widespread among the Jews of Afghanistan, was the *dastak* (lit. handiwork): a notebook in which one copied poems and songs in Dari and in Hebrew - both in Hebrew letters. Most men carried the *dastak* from childhood to old age.

4. Attempts to reform Jewish education

In the late 1920s, an educational institution was opened, which broke the monopoly of the Garji family. It was the *Midrash* of Mullah Yehoshua Amram, where in addition to sacred studies, children also studied arithmetic, painting²³ as well as music under the guidance of the blind Mullah Yosef Bakhchi who accompanied himself with an Indian harmonium.²⁴ The establishment of this institution caused conflicts in the community after parents moved their children from Mullah Garji's to Yehoshua Amram's school. It is doubtful whether Amram's institution was a financial success, because he had to earn his living by selling spices in his shop.

²² A collection and interpretation of most legends found in the Babylonian and the Jerusalem Talmud compiled by Rabbi Ya'akov ben Habib, who wrote two parts of the book, Seder Zera'im and Seder Mo'ed, and died in the middle of his work. The book was completed by his son Rabbi Levy ben Habib, published in Thessaloniki in 1516.

²³ Accounting knowledge is essential for a community whose main livelihood is trading. Mullah 'Amram drew and illustrated the content of the lesson, for example, when they studied the treatise *Zera'im* he drew an oat with wheat grains and the students recognized the plant in the drawing: Gandom - חיטה (wheat). Yehoshua-Raz, 1997, p. 437.

²⁴ Bakhchi's songs are preserved in the Israeli Institute of Religious Music. He instilled the poetic tradition in the members of the congregation and their children. See: Yehoshua, A Father's Will, p. 96.



Image 9: Left: Mullah Yehoshua 'Amram (Herat 1896 – Jerusalem 1980). Right: Mullah Yosef Bakhchi with an Indian harmonium. Picture: private.



Image 10: Herat: The *midrash* of Mullah Yehoshua 'Amram (seated on the right). Standing on the left: junor teachers (*Khalifeh*). Picture: Kashani (1975).

Avraham Emmanuelli Filosof (1895-1945) described how from the late 1950s Afghan Jews would send their children to study abroad (i.e. to the Soviet Union) since they were relatively prosperous. With the rise of Amman Allah Khan [1892-1960] to power and the cooperation of his government with the Soviet Union, a handful of young Jews went to the Soviet Union for university studies for foreigners and workers that mainly trained agents. The Afghan government was ready to establish modern schools for Jews, but the devout among the Jews opposed this, fearing assimilation,

recruitment into the Afghan army and the undermining of the social structure of the community [Shabtai, interview].

Reuven Kashani (1975, p. 64) describes the attempts of the Alliance Israelite Universelle school to introduce French-Jewish education in Afghanistan, but there was strong opposition to this both from the authorities who feared Western intrusion into Afghanistan and from the community.²⁵ However, a letter Yehoshua Raz received from Mr. Y. Weil of the Alliance in Paris, said that they were not aware of such an attempt (letter dated 15th December 1976). It might have been an initiative of the Alliance branch in Iran.

From an interview Yehoshua Raz conducted with Abba Na'amat, we learn about an attempt from the officials of the Afghan Ministry of Education to win the Jews of Herat over for public schools in 1927. Mr. Sarjuki, director of the Ministry of Education, asked to register the Jewish children that were gathered in the synagogue where Mr. Sarjuki had told them about the importance of public education and school books provided by the government. On that day, the pupils were released from their studies and the Rabbis Yaakov Garji and Yaakov Siman-Tov argued with Mr. Sarjuki. The Jewish women demonstrated near the synagogue, dressed in black with a black rope around their necks. Only three parents were willing to enroll their children in the state school. A commotion arose and the crowd attacked the three, who were seen as damaging the solidarity of the community.

Due to the reaction of the community, the Afghan Ministry of Education left, understanding that the Jews were not yet ready to send their children to state schools (Abba Na'amat, interview 1974).

A second attempt to impose secular state education on Jewish children was made in early 1936. The newspaper *Davar* (March 20, 1936) reported from a special informant that the authorities were trying to persuade the Jews in Kabul to send their children to government schools, where they would learn the native and foreign languages as well as various subjects. The opening of a special government program for Jews sounded like a new decree in the ears of the 400 Jewish families in Kabul.

²⁵ Yehoshua-Raz 1997, p. 437-439.

The Jews expressed fear that their children would convert to Islam and be conscripted into the Afghan army. This time, too, the Jews repeated their protest and announced a public fast, in order to pass the evil decree. It seems that as a result of pressure exerted by European Jewish organizations on the Afghan government, the latter stopped pressuring the Jews in this matter.

At the eve of the establishment of the state of Israel, there were approximately 4,000 Jews in Afghanistan and more than a thousand members of the community lived in the Land of Israel. In the 1970s and until the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (December 27, 1979) Jewish children in Kabul attended a non-Jewish state school, where studies were conducted in French.

4.1. Naftali Abrahamoff

As part of the reforms of King Amanullah Khan, Naftali Abrahamoff arrived in Afghanistan in 1928. Amanullah Khan had invited teachers around the world to come to Afghanistan to promote the level of education. Abrahamoff was destined to change Jewish education. Despite the relatively short time he was in Afghanistan, his influence was great. He taught the children of the community from 1928-1930, for the first time with textbooks in modern Hebrew, after which the Jewish Agency continued to supply the communities with them until the last days of active Jewish communities in that country.

Abba Na'amat speaks admiringly of the teacher Abrahamoff who introduced the slogan: "We are Hebrew, we will speak Hebrew and we will learn Hebrew" (interview, 1975). They studied religious studies, prayers in the poetic style of the Sephardim in Jerusalem, and additionally to Hebrew as a spoken language, learned arithmetic, English and songs like the *Hatikvah*, which would become the national anthem of the state of Israel. They had exercise classes and breaks between classes, which was a novelty in Afghanistan. His innovations upset many parents.



Naftali Abrahamoff (1905-1968). Photo: Liora Bernstein-Abrahamoff.

Although Abrahamoff received the backing of the governor of Herat to take over the entire Jewish education, he preferred to leave the decision with the parents. Abrahamoff aroused the anger of the Mullahs of the community who saw the young man with his bare head and clean-shaven beard as harming their livelihood, corrupting the youth, desecrating the Sabbath and harming traditional education patterns. The community was divided in two camps: the “conservatives” continued to send their children to the old *midrash* while the progressives sent their children to the new school.²⁶

In his diary, Abrahamoff describes his first meeting with the community:

"The rabbi's wife thinks I am a goy and is bothering me. She explained to me: 'Today is the holiday. The rabbi is in the synagogue and it is impossible to see him.' I was barely able to explain to her that I was Jewish and that I had come to spend the holiday in their place. The rabbi understood the matter and immediately led me to the synagogue with great joy. After a long prayer I went with the rabbi to his house, inside a large and beautiful *sukkah* decorated with carpets and pictures from the Holy Land. As is the local custom, we sat on the carpets opened with Kiddush. The *sukkah* was full of people who had come to visit the rabbi on the holiday. From the long journey [35 days] I had become extremely weak. I felt exhausted and sick, and the large and strange crowd that was suddenly received in the rabbi's house asked me endless questions all at once. They annoyed me to death. I was therefore happy to

²⁶ Naftali Abrahamoff wrote in his diary about a seventeen-year-old orphan boy who served the rabbi as a servant and could not read (the Pentateuch). Other pupils nicknamed him “Rosh 'Arel” (blockhead). Abrahamoff took this orphan into his care. Soon the boy learned to read and on the Sabbath before his father's memorial day, he read the Torah and *Haftara* aloud in the synagogue.

accept the offer of the *kalontar* and I went with him to his spacious and good home."

27

Abrahamoff pledged to work in Afghanistan for five years, but during the revolution against Shah Amanullah Khan in 1930, he took his own life across the Iranian border.

5. Girls' education

There were hardly male members in the community who could not read and write. Jewish women however, who were exempt from prayers and most of the duties of religious worship, usually were not taught to read and write Hebrew. The Afghan king Amanullah did not impose his attempt to reform the status of women on Jewish society. The Jews of Afghanistan adopted the Talmudic rule: "Whoever teaches his daughter Torah, it is as if he taught her vanity" (Babylonian Talmud, *Sota*, p. 1 of the Mishnah). An educational institution for girls did not exist and only a few fathers taught their daughters to read and write. Daughters were educated by the grandmother and mother to fulfill their duty as Jewish women and mothers. They were taught marriage laws, purity laws and kosher laws along with managing a household. Upon receiving her first period, a girl was usually married. From the moment of the marriage ceremony she was under the control of her mother-in-law and her husband. The situation of Jewish girls was the same as that of Muslim girls. However, this does not mean that girls or women were not familiar with cultural and religious texts. The transmission rather took place orally. When the father read Shahin's Torah²⁸ at the Shabbat table. There were also a few *Khalifeh* who brought their little daughters with them to school from ages 3-11.

In the mid-1950s, about four years after the great emigration, only about 200 Jews remained in Herat. The *midrash*, which until the mass emigration was intended for boys only, was also opened for girls. Zilpa Cohen and her sister Dina, whose father was impressed by the status of women in Russia, sent them to the *Midrash* under the leadership of *Khalifeh* Binyamin Gol. Dozens of pupils studied in the "Mullah Asher"

²⁷ Benzion Yehoshua-Raz, 2013, pp. 238-270.

²⁸ Maulana Shahin Shirazi, born in the 14th century, is considered the greatest Judeo-Persian poet. Shahin composed a number of long poems dealing with the stories of the Bible and connecting the stories of the Torah and Midrash with motifs from the Persian literary and poetic tradition (Basch-Moreen 2013).

synagogue hall. About 40 girls sat separately from the boys. Zilpa Cohen was seven years old. They first learned the letters of the alphabet and later the simultaneous translation from Hebrew to Dari (Judeo-Persian). Each pupil had a close mentor from among the older pupils. The pupils learned from books sent by the Jewish Agency. When they came to Israel, most knew basic Hebrew, got good jobs and continued their studies at the university. Women, although not having received formal education in Afghanistan, had daughters and granddaughters who were integrated into the educational system in Israel and attained academic achievements.

6. Poetry

In the absence of Hebrew printing in Afghanistan, a tradition of copying prevailed. From the moment a boy learned to read and write, his masters trained him in calligraphic writing and the tradition of copying poems, from the Bible and from translations. In the *midrash*, they learned calligraphic copying in a personal, illustrated notebook known as *dastak* - into which the students copied holy songs, stories of philosophers such as Ibn Gavirol's *Azharot* (Warnings), sermons, tales and poems in Judeo-Persian and Hebrew. The *dastak* passed from father to son. Boys would sing these poems then in the *midrash*, at the synagogue, at public and family events and at home.

For weddings (i.e. during the week of the canopy), the groom was accompanied by groomsmen (*sakdush*) who sang songs from the *dastak* in honor of the bride and groom and in honor of the crowd. One of the popular songs is “*El Ram Hasin Yah*”, which is sung to this day.²⁹ Some songs were composed by the members of the community and accompanied by musicians, most of whom were Muslims.

Conclusion

The above examples show that the Hebrew language accompanied the Jews in Afghanistan in many areas of life. Until the early 20th century, Hebrew served as a sacred language solely for liturgical purposes.

Parallel to the development of political Zionist thought and activity, which introduced the notion of the Holy Land as a nation state, Afghanistan underwent

²⁹ A modernized audio example can be found here:
<https://gani.piyut.org.il/page/32983?lang=en> (accessed April 23, 2024)

a process of modernization, which also targeted the educational system. While the Jewish authorities of Afghanistan were initially opposed to both public schools and the innovations teachers from Jerusalem introduced among them, the latter eventually were successful in replacing the traditional, religious schools with modern schools that included secular studies and Zionist thought. In Herat, Naftali Abrahamoff, not only introduced and established Modern Hebrew, but also changed the idea of Zion from a sacred concept to a political and national one. Hebrew acquired a new meaning as the connecting thread between the “diaspora” and the “homeland” of the Jewish people as the language of communication between these different Jewish communities.

Bibliography

Abrahamoff, Naftali, Two years in Afghanistan. Diary published in Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz, *Behind the Silk Curtain: Persia-Iran, Afghanistan, Bukhara*, Jerusalem, 2013.³⁰ (Hebrew).

Bar‘Am-Ben Yossef, No’am, ed. *Brides and Betrothals: Jewish Wedding Rituals in Afghanistan*. Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1998.

Basch-Moreen, Vera, *In Queen Esther’s Garden: An Anthology of Judeo-Persian Literature*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

Ben-Zvi, Itzhak, *Nidkhei Israel*, Third Edition, Jerusalem, 1963 (Hebrew).

Ben-Zvi, Itzhak, *Studies and Sources*, Jerusalem 1969 (Hebrew).

Beth Hillel, Rabbi David. *The Travels of Rabbi David D’Beth Hillel: from Jerusalem, through Arabia, Koordistan, part of Persia, and India to Madras*. Madras: privately printed, 1832.

Bezalel, Itzhak. “‘Edah bifneh ‘atzmah: Yahadut Afghanistan v’hitovah ben ‘edot Paras ve-Bukhara.” (A Community of Its Own: The Jews of Afghanistan and Their Classification between the Jews of Iran and Bukhara.) *Pe’amim* 79 (spring 1999), pp. 15–40 (Hebrew).

³⁰ Chapters of Abrahamoff's diary were also published in *Ha-Yarden*, issues 234 (14.2.35); 236 (17.2.35); 238 (19.2.35); 240 (21.2.35), 244 (26.2.35); 247 (1.3.35); 255 (11.3.35); 259 (15.3.35); 284 (15.4.35).

Deshen, Shlomo. *Yehudim ba-Mizrah: Bibliografiyah Sotziologit Nivheret*. (Jews in the East: A Select Sociological Bibliography) Tel Aviv: Institute for Social Research, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Tel Aviv University, 1978 (Hebrew).

Dupree, Louis, *Afghanistan*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1980.

Filosof, Avraham Emmanueli, A collection of articles. Edited by Aharon Pinhassi, Jerusalem 1960 (Hebrew).

Fischel, Walter J. "The Jews of Afghanistan." *Jewish Chronicle*, March 26, 1937, supplement 4-6.

Garji, Shmuel, *Minhat Shmuel* (A gift of Shmuel), published by Shim'on Hakham, Jerusalem, 1902.

Garji, Mattatya, *Oneg le-Shabat* (A pleasure to Sabbath: Hymns to Temple David), published by Rafael Chaim Ha-Kohen, Jerusalem 1913, re-print 1976 by Benzion Yehoshua Raz.

Garji, Yehezkel, *Hanukat Zion*, Jerusalem 1914.

Garji, Yosef Melamed, *Edut bi-Yehosef* (Testimony of Joseph). Jerusalem 1926, reprint: 1972, 1975 by Benzion Yehoshua-Raz.

Gol, Zeev. The Herat community in Afghanistan (1839-1976) Unpublished thesis. **Efa** 1984.

Ha-Kohen, Rafael Chaim, *Avanim ba-Choma* (Stones in the Wall), Rafael Chaim Ha-Kohen publishing house, Jerusalem, 2000 [1970].

Hanegbi, Zohar, and Bracha Yaniv. *Afghanistan: The Synagogue and the Jewish Home*. Jerusalem: Center for Jewish Art, Hebrew University, 1991.

Reuven Kashani, *The Jews of Afghanistan*, Institute for Research on the Jews of Afghanistan, Jerusalem 1975.

Kashani, Reuven. "Al Yehudei Afghanistan." (On the Jews of Afghanistan.) *Shevet Ve'am*, 1/2 (Spring 1958): pp. 155–158.

Kashani, Reuven. *Mi-Minhagei ha-Yamim ha-Noraim etzel Yehudei Afghanistan*. (From the High Holiday Customs Amongst the Jews of Afghanistan.) *Shevet Ve'am* 1/3 (Autumn 1958): pp. 106–110.

Kashani, Reuven. "Minhagei Yehudei Afghanistan b'Hag ha-Pesah." (Customs of the Jews of Afghanistan during Passover.) *Shevet Va'am*, 1/4 (Spring 1959): pp. 109–114.

- Kashani, Reuven, *Garji-Massa'ot* (Travels of Rabbi Mullah Mattatya Garji from Afghanistan to Israel in 1896 and 1908). *Shevet-Ve-'am*, 9 (1980), pp. 263-289.
- Kashani, Reuven, Korot Zemanim by Rabbi Matatya Garji of Afghanistan, *Shevet ve-'Am*, 1, (1971), pp. 136-159.
- Kohen, Avraham. *Kuntres Zikhron 'Olam* (Memorial Pamphlet for Aghajan Reuven Kohen), Private publication, Jerusalem 1934.
- Kort, Zebulon, "Yehudei Afghanistan be-Eretz Yisrael." (Jews of Afghanistan in the Land of Israel), *Mahanayim* 114 (Adar II 5728 [Spring 1968]): 80–83.
- Kort, Zebulon. "Bat Ha-Melech she-Hafchah l'Zer Prahim." Tel Aviv, 1974.
- Kort, Zebulon. *Sipurei-'Am mipi Yehudei Afghanistan*. (Folktales from the Jews of Afghanistan.) Edited by Haim Schwartzbaum. D'vir, Jerusalem, 1983.
- Kort, Zebulon, "The dialects of the Jews in Afghanistan (Yazdi or Mashhadi)", *Yeda' 'Am*, 18 (1977), pp. 43-44.
- Levi, Azaria, "The Expulsion from Herat (1856-1859)", *Pe'amim* 14 (1983), pp. 77-91.
- Loy, Thomas. 2023. "Cross-Border Biographies: Representations of the 'Bukharan' Jewish Self in Changing Cultural and Political Settings." Special issue: Narratives of being Jewish in the Persianate world, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 22 (3): 256–276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725886.2022.2090240>.
- Marsden, Magnus. 2023. "Adjusting Scales: Jewish Trading Networks in and beyond Afghanistan, 1950-present-day." *History and Anthropology*; doi: 10.1080/02757206.2023.2288649.
- Mizrahi, Hannina, *Yehudei Paras* (The Persian Jews), Devir, Tel Aviv 1959.
- Missions à buts éducatifs-IV; Rapport de la mission en Afghanistan, UNESCO (May 1952).
- Mishaël, Between Afghanistan and Land of Israel (Memoirs of the president of the community in northern Afghanistan), Jerusalem 1981.
- Netzer, Amnon, "Siman-Tov Melamed: a Persian-Afghan scholar and his book 'Hayat al-Rukh'", *Pe'amim: The Jews of Afghanistan, Bukhara and Persia*, 79 (1969), pp. 56-95.
- Neumark, E. *Massa'be-Erez ha-Kedem* (A Journey to the Orient) edited by A. Yaari, Levi Epstein publishers, Jerusalem 1947.

Rubanovich, Julia. *Orality and Textuality in the Iranian World: Patterns of interaction across the centuries*. Brill, 2015.

Sadjed, Ariane. "Iranian, Afghan, or Central Asian? Patterns of Mobility among Persianate Jews in the 19th and early 20th centuries", Special issue edited by Zeev Levin: Neighbors and Strangers: Muslims, Jews and other Minorities in Central Asia and the Caucasus in the 19th and 20th centuries, *Central Asian Survey*. Doi: 10.1080/02634937.2024.2339389

Sahim, Haideh. "Two Wars, Two Cities, Two Religions: The Jews of Mashhad and the Herat Wars" in: *The Jews of Iran. The History, Religion and Culture of a Community in the Islamic World*, Houman Sarshar (ed.), London: I.B. Tauris, 2014, pp. 75-108.

Seroussi, Edwin, and Boaz Davidoff. "L'Mehkarah shel Masoret ha-Musika shel Yehudei Afghanistan." (On the Study of the Musical Tradition of the Jews of Afghanistan.) *Pe'amim* 79 (Spring 1999): 159–170.

Shamash, Hanukkah ben Aga Jani, *Tafsir Im Afes* (Poem about the sacrifice of Yitzhak). Jerusalem 1902, reprint 1996 by Benzion Yehoshua Raz.

Vambéry, Hermann, *Meine Wanderungen und Erlebnisse in Persien* (Wanderings and experiences in Persia) Nürnberg: Nomad Press, 1979 [1867]

Wolff, Joseph, *Travels and Adventures of the Rev. Joseph Wolff in Persia, Bokhara, Cashmeer, etc.* Vol 1. Saunders, Otley, and Co, London, 1860.

Ya'ari, Abraham, *Books by Bukharan Jews*, Kiryat-Sefer, Vol. 18-19, National Library, Jerusalem, 1972.

Yehoshua, Benzion, "Chapters in the Creation of the Jews of Afghanistan in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century", *Shevet ve-Am*, Second Series IV (9), pp. 290-315. Jerusalem, 1980.

Yehoshua Raz, Benzion, *An apple from the tree of knowledge (Fifty Folktales from Afghanistan by Raphael Yehoshua-Raz)*. Zur-Ot, Jerusalem, 1986.

Yehoshua, Benzion, *Tzavaat Av - A Father's Will* (13 Folktales from Afghanistan by Raphael Yehoshua-Raz). Introduction and added notes by Tzipora Kagan, Haifa: Folktales Archive, 1969.

Yehoshua Raz, Benzion, *Behind the Silk Curtain - Peoples and Jews in Persia-Iran, Afghanistan, Bukhara*. Carmel, Jerusalem, 2013.

Yehoshua-Raz, Benzion, *From the Lost Tribes in Afghanistan to the Mashhad Jewish Converts of Iran*. Mossad Bialik, Jerusalem, 1997.

Interviews held by Benzion Yehoshua with: R. Kashani (Jerusalem, 14.6. 1974); Sh. Dadash (Lod 6.7.1976); A. Na'amat (Beit-Shemesh, 2.10.1974; 18.1.1975); Zevulun Kort (Tel Aviv 26.1.1987). Files of the interviews are preserved in the oral documentation section, the National Library, Jerusalem.