

Encyclopedia on Jews in the Islamic World (EJIW)

Benzion D. Yehoshua: JEWS IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan

The earliest evidence of the existence of Jewish life in Afghanistan is a rock inscription from the year 752 A.D. inscribed in Persian but using Hebrew letters. Afghanistan is a Sunni Islamic state whose variegated population is composed of Persian, Arabic and Mongol conquerors. The west of Afghanistan is a part of the province of Khorasan. In Hebrew sources from the period of the Geonim it appears as a penal colony to which convicts were exiled. The big settlement in Khorasan exasperated the caliph, Omar II, who wanted to limit the construction of synagogues in the years 717-720. This proves clearly that the Jewish settlement preceded the Arab conquest. Arab and Persian geographers point out that the main cities in which Jews lived were: Herat, Ghazni, Balkh, Merv and Nishapur. The Khorasan community was subject to the authority of Pumbedita Yeshiva in Babel. The Balkh community was independent and Islamic sources referred to it as *Bab-el-Yahud* (the Jews' Gate) and *El-Yahudiya* (the Jewess). This community was known primarily for the religious debate between Rabbi Saadia Gaon and Hivi Ha-Balkhi (Al-Balkhi), who published 200 *Massails* in rhyming Hebrew verse, where he tried to show that the Torah had been written by man and had not come down from heaven. He asked critical questions about the Pentateuch, from which the spirit of heresy emanated. In 1170 Rabbi

Binyamin of Tudela publicized exaggerated figures regarding the Jewish settlement in the city Ghazni, which he estimated at 80,000. In 1952 a Jewish cemetery was discovered in Khush-Khak near the village of Ferozkoh-Jam, on the trade route between Herat and Kabul. It had gravestones from 1012-1249, meaning until 27 years after the Mongol conquest of 1222. Fewer than one hundred markers made from basalt slabs with oriental Hebrew script in Judeo-Persian have been found to date. None of them are dedicated to women, children or common people. This custom was common in Afghanistan until recently and it was designed to prevent graveyard rites. In the Tang-I Azao mountain pass, 25 km. south of Jam, rock inscriptions from 752 were discovered (1300 according to another reading). An especially impressive tombstone is that of *Ha-Sar ve-Ha-Tifsar* Moshe ben Efraim Bezalel. It is a splendid memorial dated January 25, 1365, made of marble and cut in the Arabesque style. The Hebrew letters are square. It is written in rhyming Biblical Hebrew. It is evidence of the society's great spiritual and material wealth and that the stone's owner held a state function and was apparently executed. The big settlement in Khorasan is not mentioned in the days of the Mongols' heirs. It seems that the communities were forced to convert to Islam, were wiped out in pogroms or from disease or were forced to emigrate from the region. The many obstinate traditions prevalent among the Afghan Pushtun tribes, Sunni Moslems, ascribe them to the Lost Tribes, tribes of Israel exiled in the eighth century before Christ to Babylonia and from there they moved on to Persia and Afghanistan. These traditions are mentioned in Afghani manuscripts and books beginning in the 16th century. Travelers found great similarities in customs among the tribes that bring the biblical commandments to mind.

It appears that from the ancient community only a few dozen Jewish families remained, and at any rate no more than 600 people. In

1840, a year after the forced conversion of the Jews of Mashhad in northeast Iran, hundreds of Jews began to flee from that Shiite administered area to the Sunni controlled region around Herat, Afghanistan. The Jews found a more tolerant regime that allowed them to return to real Judaism. The new immigrants brought about an economic and spiritual revival in the poor community. They quickly transformed Herat into a commercial intersection for import-export between Persia and India and between India and Asian Russia. The rabbis and leaders from Mashhad set new codes of conduct in the community. In 1856 the Qajari Persian Nasser A-Din Shah invaded Herat in Afghanistan, after a nine month siege, with the aid of Shiite groups from Herat. In October 1856 the Jews of Herat were exiled to a prison camp near Mashhad because of their alleged treachery of the Shiite Islamic faith. The journey continued for 30 days, through heavy snow. Some of the migrants froze to death and others converted back into Muslim and were released. Detainees in the prison camp were subject to constant disease and death for the two years of their imprisonment. Only a British threat to invade Busher in the Persian Gulf forced a Persian retreat from Herat and in 1859 the Jews returned there.

During the Khan wars in Afghanistan the Jews were ordered to fund the war costs and they were often victims of pogroms and blood libels. In 1876 13 Jews were murdered in the city of Maimana. Attacks on Jews continued for years throughout Afghanistan. In 1885 Abd el-Rahman Khan banished Kabul's Jews (30-50 families: about 250 people) citing economic charges – tax and customs duty evasion, transfer of funds abroad and price-gouging on alcohol used in gun powder production. They were ordered to pay a heavy fine and their property was confiscated. The Jews of Kabul were sent to Tashkurghan, near Termez in

present day Uzbekistan, and from there many moved on to Samarkand, under the Czar's authority, where they could make fortunes in commerce.

King Aman Allah (*Amanulla*) Khan's rise to power (1919-1929) brought reform (influenced by Ata Turk) to all areas of life including the abolition of the veil (*burka*). At the king's initiative and with his support modern teachers came to Afghanistan, including the educator Naftali Abrahamof, who came from Jerusalem and tried to establish a progressive educational system, to the displeasure of the community rabbis who placed obstacles in his path. In the coup to overthrow the king in 1929, the teacher was forced to run for his life and seek asylum in Iran.

The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and Lenin's New Economic Programme (N.E.P.) led to the flight of 4,000 Bukharian Jews to Iran and Afghanistan between 1924 and 1935, on their way to the land of Israel. Afghanistan's Nazi orientation and the activity of hundreds of German agents within Afghanistan's borders led to the disenfranchisement of Jews from their livelihoods (prohibition against international trade) and the concentration of the Jews in key cities. In August 1941, following the Russian-British invasion of Iran earlier that month and the threat of an invasion of Afghanistan, the German agents were removed to British camps in India until the end of the war. The Bukharian Jews, like the Afghan Jews, suffered from blood libel, slander and imprisonment. In addition to the Germans there was also provocation by Haj Amin el-Husseini, who wanted to found a Pan-Islamic movement under his leadership.

The ostracizing of Afghanistan at the end of the Second World War led to harsh famine leaving the Jews poverty-stricken. Many became beggars. 46 Jews were thrown in jail for possession of wine, illegal

according to the tenets of Islam. Nine of them were sentenced to five years imprisonment and the remaining 37 were released with a heavy fine of one hundred thousand rupees. Compatriots in Israel tried to help their oppressed brothers who wanted to join them in Israel, but their efforts failed until the gates of Afghanistan opened after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

After the pilgrimages of the nineteenth century there were three waves of immigration from Afghanistan to "Jerusalem" [nickname for the land of Israel]. The first wave of 350 people was between 1882 and 1914, following an attempt to draft the Jews into the Afghan army. Among the immigrants there were rich Jews who contributed to the building of Jerusalem. The second wave was between 1933 and 1939 – this was immigration of distress, partly legal and partly illegal, with 2,000 people. The third wave took place after the establishment of the State of Israel. At the time there were 4,000 Jews in Afghanistan. About 2,000 came as soon as the gates opened and the rest trickled out until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The community was run by the spiritual leader, the *mullah*, from the Garji family. The position was hereditary, remaining with them down the generations. The *Vakil*, also called the *Kalontar* – the president – answered to the *mullah* and handled tax problems and contact with the authorities. The *Vakil*, a volunteer, was a rich man who could read and write the Arabic alphabet. Education was functional, serving ritual needs throughout the year and the human life cycle. Exceptional students could be cantors, slaughterers or *Mohels* (circumcisers) but not spiritual leaders. The Garji "heir's" education was far more comprehensive than that of any other pupil and he had his father's extensive library at his disposal. Rabbis

in the national leadership could be only from the Garji family and later on also the Siman-Tov family. One Jewish delegate sat in the *Panchat*, a type of high court in which there were five representatives from the groups in the general population that discussed civil actions. The Jews did not need the state courts, as problems were solved within the community in an ad-hoc court that discussed business or family disputes and imposed punishment (whipping or fines and ostracism against anyone who refused to obey court decisions). Court rulings were supported by the authorities. It is not known if there was any crime and there were almost no divorces in the community, for as a community of forced converts, there was a fear of illegitimacy if the divorce decree was not done properly and the woman remarried and gave birth from the new husband. The man who tired of his wife or did not have a son took a second wife. Cleansing of the dead and burial were not institutionalized but done on a voluntary basis as sincere charity (*Gemiluth Hessed shel Emeth*).

The death rate among children and youth was very high in the community, but was low in relation to the Moslem society. Reasons for the death rate were early marriages, death of babies from diseases and epidemics like plague, small pox, malaria, pneumonia, whooping cough and damage from circumcision. Many women died in childbirth. There is evidence that the death rate among children reached 50% and more. Protection was based on magic and folk remedies, faith in demons and spirits, which were equally deadly.

The Jewish year was rich in events. If during the week there was little nourishment, on the Sabbath the Jews ate like kings. They spent long hours at prayer, study and feasting. The Days of Awe began in the month of Elul and continued into the holidays of Tishri. Those are days of soul-searching and meetings with friends, acquaintances and family. The events of the Days of Awe ended with the *Simhath Torah* celebration,

considered the most joyous of the year. On *Purim* they celebrated the downfall of the enemies of the Jews and on Passover the spring holiday with trips into nature. *Shavuot* (Feast of Weeks) was called *Mo-edi Gol* - the Flower Festival. The human life cycle was accompanied by many mystical ceremonies beginning with protection of the pregnant woman, birth and protection of the newborn. Education matched the Jewish education in the East where the youth was trained in ritual observance. Girls did not receive formal schooling and were trained by the mother and grandmother to maintain a Jewish Kosher house and in cooking, sewing and weaving. The main event in the woman's life was her wedding, with all the accompanying events and ceremonies. Girls married at about the age of twelve, following their first menstrual period. Boys married when they reached the age of eighteen. A young woman who did not find a groom immediately was intended as a second wife for an older man or a disabled groom. Marriages were arranged by the parents through matchmakers. The preparations and ceremonies took weeks. On the day of the wedding there were several mystical ceremonies to protect the groom from "knotting" that could make him impotent.

Lacking Hebrew printing presses, work was mainly traditional, passed down from father to son and mother to daughter. Folktales and songs were customary and passed down by oral tradition. Pupils also learned the *Dastak* tradition, calligraphic copying of classical works that passed from generation to generation. If the scribe was talented he could also make original works that were bequeathed to the following generations. The Jewish *ketubah* (marriage contract) before the age of printing was one of the most beautiful in the Jewish world. Contact with the Jerusalem printers at the end of the 19th century contributed to the pilgrims' printing works that had passed through the generations in

Hebrew and Judeo-Persian and distributing them among the members of their communities and other Persian speaking communities. After their immigration to the land of Israel, the Gol-Shaulof Brothers set up a publishing business in Jerusalem that printed books in Judeo-Persian and distributed them in Iran, Afghanistan and Bukhara. The Jews of Afghanistan also had a musical tradition, mainly hymns in which they expressed their yearning for the Holy Land. Jews did not play instruments as it was considered inferior.

The number of Afghani Jews is estimated at ten thousand today. They married with other communities, but keep their traditions and customs. Synagogues with the special Afghani wording were built in all of Israel's cities. Over the years studies have been done on the community's history and folktales collected. Two community bulletins come out regularly with memoirs and community information. The community's well-to-do established a scholarship for the community's students and a yeshiva for rabbinic training. There is another big community of Afghan Jewry in New York.

Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz

Khorasan, Khurasan

Khorasan is often mentioned in Arab sources and in medieval Arab writings. The province, today divided between Afghanistan and Iran, is in northeast Iran and northwest Afghanistan on the Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan border. Its borders were never fixed and changed over the years.

The term Khorasan means land of the sun or the eastern land, a term used to indicate the eastern part of the eastern Persian Empire and generally accepted as a nickname for the Great Persian Desert, Dasht-I Kabir. The main cities in the region were Nishapur, Bukhara, Samarkand, Marv (Mari), Balkh, Gazni and Herat. In the early Moslem Middle Ages Turkish, Persian, Eastern Orthodox and Arab tribes settled here. Khorasan earned the name "Second Arabia" and contemporary historians called it the "Colony of Basra". Some of the greatest Moslem scientists and creators grew up and worked in Khorasan along with some Jewish personages.

The Jews in Khorasan were mentioned in Arab literature of the middle ages, but mainly in medieval Rabbinic and Karaite biblical commentary. Khorasan is mentioned as the exile home of the Lost Tribes. There is evidence of dense Jewish settlement that dealt in commerce and supported the yeshivas of Babel.

A settlement not mentioned in the written sources is Ferozkoh in the village of Jam, in which 88 gravestones with eastern Hebrew lettering and text in Judeo-Persian have been discovered to date. The markers are

dedicated to important personages only (no graves were found for women, children and common people). The stones discovered are from the years 1012-1249 (27 years after the Mongolian invasion of 1222). The gravestones are evidence of a materially and spiritually affluent community.

Among the descriptions of the dead we find: *Aluf* (a senior rabbinical position), *Rish Sidra* (Head of Yeshiva), *Hakham*, *Melamed* (teacher, educator), *Yashish*, *Zaken* (nickname for leader and educated man) and *Poked Toman* (senior military or administrative function).

Twenty-five km. south of Jam in the Tang-I Azao mountain pass three stone inscriptions were found in Judeo-Persian with Hebrew lettering, apparently from the year 752. In Kandahar a marble tombstone was unearthed, beautiful for both its design and its text, cut in square Hebrew letters and rhyming verse. The tomb is dedicated to *Ha-Sar ve-Ha-Tifsar* HM Moshe ben Ephraim Bezalel, who was apparently executed. The gravestone is evidence of a well-to-do community, both materially and spiritually.

Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz

Kabul

Kabul has been the capital of Afghanistan since 1773. Kandahar was the capital beforehand. Kabul has a population of a million and a half residents. Today there is only one Jew left. The city was founded three thousand years ago. Due to its location on the route to India and the Khyber Pass, important conquerors such as Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and others passed through it.

It seems that Jews lived in Kabul in a special section or ghetto from the 12th century. The geographer Idrissi (1099-1166) wrote in his book on India that there were many Moslems in Kabul and it had a quarter in which the Jewish infidels lived. Many Jews served in Nadir Shah's army, accompanying him on the road to India. Some settled in Kabul as Nadir Shah's treasury guards. Ahmed Shah (1747-1773) brought 250 Jews from Mashhad to Kabul. The missionary Joseph Wolf who visited Kabul in 1832 found fifty Jewish families and one synagogue. "Binyamin the Second" (Yosef Israel 1818-1864) visited Kabul in the middle of the 19th century and found very few Jews of Bukharian origin. The traveler Neumark visited at the end of the 1880s and found six Jewish families. Neumark also reported that until 1885 the Jews were exempted from paying taxes but Emir Abd el-Rahman Khan (1880-1901) imposed heavy taxes on the Jews after taking power. In 1886 he accused the Jews of price-gouging in alcohol production for use in making gun powder, in smuggling capital abroad and tax evasion as middlemen in the marketing of the indigo dye from India to the Jews of Bukhara, considered experts in the dying of cloth. After confiscating the Jews' property he exiled them to the city of Tashkurghan, known also as Khulm, in the north, about 100

km. from Termez in southern Uzbekistan. From there they moved to Samarkand, which was governed by the Russian Czar.

Towards the beginning of the 20th century the Jews began to migrate from Herat to Kabul, but the dead were returned for burial in Herat, a distance of a thousand km. The assassination of the king, Habbib Alla Khan, in May 1919, led to the outbreak of rioting in Kabul. The Jews gathered in the synagogue and hid their property in water holes. There was another attempted coup in 1929. Most of the rebellions and attempted coups were the result of British, Russian or German meddling. The Jews were in the middle and feared for their lives and their property. They always found safety in the synagogue.

In the 1930s Jews began to flee Uzbekistan following Lenin's Economic Programme (NEP). The refugees, who numbered several thousands, preferred to live in the capital Kabul and work in commerce. They drew envy from the local merchants, Shiites, Sunnis and Hindis – who inflamed the rabble against the Jews and framed them with stories of blood libel, kidnapping children and cursing the prophet Mohammed. The Afghani orientation then was towards Nazi Germany and hundreds of German agents were posted as shadows in all the government ministries, writing legislation against the Jews. One of the central subversives was a German henchman, the Prime Minister Mohamad Hashim Khan, who had previously served as ambassador in Berlin. While serving as prime minister he supported the decrees against the Jews, which included occupational disenfranchisement and the Jews' concentration in a few important cities. The German and Arab provocations led to pogroms against Kabul's Jews. Dozens of Jews were injured and no one offered them assistance. Two young Jews were thrown in prison and the mob demanded to stone them. The Jews were prohibited from handling food and riding horses or in cars. The Jews were forced to pay a special tax as

foreigners. After the war, famine broke out due to Afghanistan's being ostracized. The opening of the gates to Israel after the founding of the State allowed the oppressed Jews to find sanctuary, but in 1950 116 Jews in dire straits requested that they be brought to Israel.

There were two synagogues in Kabul, one for the Bukharian Jews and the other for use by the Jews who came from Herat to live in Kabul. The direction of prayer was west, towards Jerusalem. In 1966 the remaining Jewish children studied in a Moslem school that held classes on the Sabbath.

Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz

Herat, Harat

Herat is a city and province in western Afghanistan and a part of Khorasan, situated in the fruitful valley of the Hari-Rud river. The city is mentioned in various forms: Areia and in ancient Persian inscriptions by the name of Haraiva. Alexander the Great, who built the city in the fourth century BC, called it Alexandria de Arya. The Sassanians turned Herat into a military center that defended the borders from the Parthians. When an Arab army conquered Khorasan in 652, Herat surrendered without a fight. The Mongols captured the city in 1221 and massacred the population. The city changed hands many times in history despite its walls and fortified stronghold. The city was a commercial center due to its location on the trade routes passing from the Mediterranean Sea to India and China.

The Jewish settlement in the area was ancient but very few traces of it remain. In Ferozkoh of the Ghor region about 240 km. east of Herat, there was an ancient Jewish community as indicated by graves inscribed in Judeo-Persian from the years 1012-1249. The Persian historian al-Guzgani Minhadj ad-Din Abu Omar recounts in his book *Tabaqat-I Nasiri* that in the days of Harun al-Rashid (786-809) the Jews served as mediators among the tribes of the Ghor region. Islamic sources make many references to the Jewish settlement in Khorasan including the city of Herat. Omar II specially ordered that the synagogues not be destroyed but also banned construction of new ones, proving that the Jews preceded Islam. The Pushtun tribal tradition states that *Bnei-Israel* were the ones

who drove out the Ghaznavid Dynasty, for whom they had previously fought as mercenaries. It seems that these early Jews converted to Islam, emigrated or were killed off. Until the beginning of the 19th century we have no evidence concerning Jewish settlement in the area. By 1840 there were about twenty families there. In the same year about 300 families of forced converts who escaped from Mashhad in Shiite Iran settled in the Sunni Herat and returned to Judaism. When the forced converts arrived in Herat they found between 20-40 families and one synagogue. They enjoyed religious tolerance among the Afghans. They brought about an economic turnabout in Herat, making it a commercial center. The immigrants from Mashhad spoke a special dialect called *Giliki* that they had brought to Mashhad from Gilan and from Qazvin, their previous home. The veteran population spoke *Harati*, a dialect much closer to the Dari spoken by the Afghans. In 1856 Herat was conquered by the Persians who considered it part of Iran. The Persians expelled the Jews to prison camps near Mashhad but after the "Paris Peace" about two years later, the Jews returned to Mashhad. At the same time there were about 5,000 Jews in Herat. These Jews were sympathetic with the British and provided them with aid in intelligence, offered them interest-free loans, served as guides, helped in the release of POWs and presented British officers to the governor of Herat. The British returned the favor by bringing the Jews back to their city from the prison camp near Mashhad. The Jews in Herat did not live in a ghetto, but near the Moslems in the old town, on either side of the Iraq market near Iraq Gate. The typical house was two stories with a porch looking out on an inside courtyard with a water hole in the center of the yard. The court was surrounded by high walls made from sun-dried bricks and plastered with mortar and straw. The gate would be locked at night. The city of Herat was the center of Jewish life in Afghanistan. The great rabbis of the Garji family lived

there and set the tone for Jewish life in Afghanistan. It was a merchant community at every level, from the peddlers to the international traders who exported karakul furs to Europe as well as carpets and dried fruit. The merchants left their families in Herat and journeyed to commercial cities for periods of six months to a year, returning home in long caravans that continued for weeks. They reached home towards the important holidays of *Rosh Hashana* (the Jewish New Year) and Passover. The merchants were in danger. For example, 13 Jewish Herati merchants were killed in the commercial city of Maimana in 1876.

The Jews of Herat wore different clothing from the Kabul Jews whose dress was European in style. The Jews of Herat dressed in typical Afghani apparel while their women did not cover their faces, unlike the Afghan women.

Every few years the city of Herat changed hands in the Afghan inheritance wars and the Jews paid for the revolts. Their property was plundered and there were also casualties. After each pogrom the Jews of Herat were aided by the Mashhad converts who considered the Herat Jews as close kin. Following Afghanistan's Nazi turn during the Second World War, trade with Afghanistan was boycotted and the Jewish merchants found themselves penniless. In mid-August 1945 there was a heavy famine in Herat and they needed the assistance of Afghanistan's Jews in the land of Israel.

Community life in Herat was supervised by the Mullah from the Garji family, who insisted that his followers keep all the religious commandments. Anyone absent from the synagogue or not fulfilling the commandments without a convincing reason was punished by the rabbi and anyone who refused to accept his authority was excommunicated until he recanted. The Mullah appointed slaughterers and *mohels* (circumcizers). He supervised the cemetery and the *mikveh* (ritual baths).

The community was organized in patriarchal fashion, meaning that the heads of extended families led the group. Among the distinguished families were Garji, Siman-Tov, Amram, Bazal (Bezalel), Kohen, Gol, Eliyas, Herati, Shabtai, etc. The Mullah's announcements were publicized by the crier. Community expenses were covered by contributions made by those who received Torah honors on the Sabbath and Festivals. The Jewish center in Herat provided, as necessary, rabbis, teachers, cantors, slaughterers and *mohalim* (circumcizers) to the following settlements: Kabul, Balkh, Maimana, Mazar-i Sharif, Shibbarghan, Andkhuy, Kaleh Nov, Aqchah, etc. They worked under the supervision of the watchful *Mullah* in Herat and according to his direction.

There were four synagogues in Herat, in which 300 worshippers could pray at once. They faced west – towards Jerusalem. The *Dukhan* (a high wooden platform) for the cantors stood in the middle. Synagogues were decorated with floral pictures. The floor was covered by carpets and the worshippers sat on mattresses along the walls. The Sephardic version of prayer was used and previously the Rabbi Sa'adiya Gaon's version had been used. The house of study and ritual bath were in the courtyard. One of the synagogues was named after the Garji family. The Deep (*choghur*) Synagogue was used by the ancient Herati community. The most decorated of the synagogues was called Mullah Yoav and the fourth was called Gol Synagogue. Worshippers removed their shoes outside the synagogue. The seating arrangement was fixed according to the worshipper's status. One of the synagogues is used by Moslem children today as a *Madrasseh*.

The rabbis preached equally for love of God and love of Zion. Beginning in the middle of the 19th century pilgrims from Herat went to the land of Israel for *Ziyahra* (pilgrimage) and returned with the title *Haji* that gave

them great prestige in the community. Between 1882 and 1914 300 people migrated from Herat to Jerusalem, including the wealthy and the needy, for religious motives. The affluent built houses and concentrated in the Beit Israel and Bukharian quarters in Jerusalem. They built the *Yeshua ve-Rahamim* Synagogue. Another wave of immigrants from Herat came between 1933 and 1939. This was from distress. Along with the official immigration there was illegal immigration, totaling 1,700 people. After the establishment of the State of Israel another 2,000 came from Herat.

Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz

Balkh

Balkh is a very old city and it was one of the important cities in the oriental kingdoms. The province was noted for its orchards, horse-breeding and minerals but mainly its location on the international trade routes to China and India, which attracted conquerors and immigrants, among them Jews. The Balkh region served as a meeting place for Persians, Indians, Arabs and Chinese. The city was first conquered by the Moslems in 670. Control of the city was contested by the Bukharian emirate and Afghanistan. In 1855 the Emir of Afghanistan Dost Muhamad Khan (1793-1863) conquered Balkh, taking it from the Bukharian emir. The Jews of Balkh spoke Tajik-Jewish, the language of Bukhara's Jews.

The rebellion against the central authority in Baghdad was expressed in sanctuary for cells abandoning Islam but also for those leaving normative Judaism. In Balkh there were members of cells that the Rabbi Sa'adiya Gaon called *Nivdalei Benei Israel* (Separated Benei Israel) or "people who are called Jews".

In the pre-Islam era a Jewish settlement was established close to Balkh called *El Yahudia*, or *Yahudan el kubra* (Great Judaism) and also *Bab el Yahud* (the Jews' Gate), indicating a large concentration of Jews. After the Moslem conquest the name of the place was changed to *Maimana*, city of truth or righteousness. The geographer El-Mukadesi (10th century) noted that there were many Jews in Balkh. The Arab chronicler Makrizi (14th century) reported that Sennacherib exiled the Jews to Balkh also. It appears that forced conversion of Jews to Islam and later the Mongol conquest erased the Jewish existence. Evidence from the end of the 17th century showed that there was no Jewish presence at the time. The traveler Ephraim Neumark reported, at the end of the 19th century, on the ancient Jewish settlement that at the time included forty families and a big old synagogue. Mullah Shmuel Harati was head of the community; the traveler raised the possibility that some of Bukhara's Jews were originally from Balkh and indeed among Bukhara's Jews there were people whose family name was Balkhi. A famous figure from Balkh was Hivi al Balkhi, who wrote a critique of the Scriptures in 200 rhyming *Masail*. Rabbi Sa'adiya Gaon considered him a heretic. In the beginning of the 20th century Rabbi Yehuda Eliazarov and Rabbi Shlomo Tzofiov went to Balkh to oversee religious life and to prepare ritual baths. Missionary Wolf says that in the beginning of the 19th century he lived in the house of Mullah Yehuda Bakhshi in Balkh. In the 1930s the community was in decline. There were some illiterate people in their number.

Hundreds of Nazi agents were active in Afghanistan in the 1930s and they influenced the Afghan government's policy towards the Jews. The Jews were dismissed from their jobs and concentrated in a few key cities, including Balkh. The Jews lived in a ghetto, but the German engineers paved a network of roads in the Jewish ghetto, oddly enough. The houses of one hundred Jewish families were destroyed and their residents were evacuated outside the city, left out in the open. The government proposed that the Jews send their children to Moslem families with the clear intention of converting them to Islam. The synagogue was destroyed.

There were a few Jews in the Balkh region who worked in agriculture. Jewish vineyard owners leased their land to Moslems. The community was mainly one of peddlers who left their families in Balkh, safe within the walls, and worked at *Mahaleh Gardi* – peddling from the backs of asses in the neighboring villages from Sunday through Thursday. Some had small notions shops in Balkh and other worked in silk dying. The affluent among them sold cotton. The biggest merchant was Mussa Gol, who had ingenuity and international contacts. He bought up all the cotton and wool from the sheep in the Balkh region, ginned it on the carding machine and exported it to the Soviet Union. In exchange, the Russians gave him cloth, kerosene, sugar, leather goods, Primus stoves and porcelain dishes that he sold in Afghanistan, at a great profit. He exploited the olive yield in the Balkh region to produce oil and soap. He also owned a brick-making factory. With his wealth he was able to provide the king of Afghanistan with an airplane.

Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz

Gol-Shaulof, Mullah Binyamin

Mullah Binyamin Gol-Shaulof (Herat 1859-Jerusalem 1929), publisher, entrepreneur in construction and public figure. He was one of the first settlers in Jerusalem from among the Afghan Jews together with his brothers, Israel and Natanel. They were sons of Shaul Gol, a forced convert of Mashhad, Iran who found asylum in the tolerant Sunni city Herat in 1840 and with his family returned to open Judaism. Binyamin was born in the city of Herat and left for Jerusalem in 1894. In the latter he built the infrastructure for the absorption of potential immigrants. He and his brothers encouraged Jews throughout central Asia to come to Jerusalem. He purchased land for them, built houses for them and helped them settle in the quarter he founded next to the Bukharian quarter and called *Giv'at Shaul* – after their father, Shaul. In the beginning the immigrants could live free of charge in the *Hekdesh* houses built by the group's affluent for this purpose. He and his brothers established a synagogue (Nov. 12, 1901) in which they prayed in the version used by the Jews of Afghanistan. At the end of the 19th century Jerusalem became the printing center of the Jewish world. Their important undertaking was therefore the establishment of a publishing company in Judeo-Persian, in which they published translations from Hebrew and also issued manuscripts brought by pilgrims from the Judeo-Persian cultural expanse in Bukhara, Iran and Afghanistan. Pilgrims who came for a short time took advantage of this period to print a book that they took back with them to distribute among their compatriots. Binyamin was also famous among the rich Bukharian population in Jerusalem that chose him as a member of the Bukharian Committee although he was from Afghanistan.

In the foreword to his publications he even presented himself and his brothers as Bukharian Jews, a rich ethnic group with a fine reputation in those days. There were also many marriages between the Gol family and Bukharian families at this time. A few years later he founded the Afghani Jewish Committee and served as its chairman for thirty years.

Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz

Garji, Mullah Matityah

Mullah Matityah (Herat 1845-Jerusalem 1917) was son of Rabbi Mordecai Garji and rabbi of the Afghan community and in the land of Israel, teacher and educator, gifted preacher, chronicler, author of commentaries and sermons, admired by his community. He served as educator to the community children, instructor, preacher and spiritual leader and often political as well when he represented the community before the authorities. He was the descendant of a rabbinical and teaching family previously in Mashhad (his grandfather Mullah Avraham and his father Mullah Mordecai) and then in Herat and Jerusalem. His was a family of forced converts that escaped from Mashhad in Iran – a fanatical Shiite stronghold, and came to Herat, Afghanistan in 1840 and returned to open Judaism. His family name Garji apparently indicates that his forefathers were exiled by Nadir Shah from Georgia to Mashhad (1732-1747) together with other minorities, Kurds, Sunnis and Armenians, who were transported to Mashhad as a counter against that leader's sworn enemies, the Shiites. Matityah's education was that of a rabbi's son where the rabbinate goes from father to son. Fathers would drill as much Torah into their sons as was possible and the bibliography to his book *Oneg le-Shabat* –sermons in Hebrew on the Torah and Prophets

and the five scrolls (Jerusalem, 1913) – shows us the extent of his knowledge and familiarity with the works both by the Sephardic and Ashkenazi sages. In 1896 he made a pilgrimage (*Ziyara*) to Jerusalem on foot with his son Asher, a journey that took ten weeks. On March 29, 1908 he immigrated to Jerusalem and was appointed the rabbi of both the Bukharian and Afghani communities in Jerusalem. Wealthy Bukharians also funded the publication of his books. His text *Tehiloth David* includes a collection of sermons on the Book of Psalms, the favorite among the Jews of Afghanistan. His book *Sefer Beith Ha-mikdash* does not deal with the subject of the Temple, but offers commentaries on the Mishna by Geonim over the generations. His historical awareness (Lest we forget) made him special in his community. There are two versions of the chronicle *Koroth Zemanim* (Times History). The first expanded text was written in real time and describes the community's history between the years 1839 (the forced conversion of Mashhad Jews) and 1904 (following his visit to the land of Israel that year). The second, shorter version was written with the perspective of time and ends in 1913. It has a Holy Land flavor to it. The chronicles, including his travel journal to the land of Israel in 1896, shed light on the Holy Land at the end of the 19th century. The chronicle follows the events of the period in Afghanistan methodically – the Persia-Afghanistan War; the Britain-Afghanistan wars and the Khan wars. All is written from the perspective of a small oppressed community fighting for its life. The Jews were required to fund the struggles of the internal warfare. At the same time he mentions the community events and those from his personal life that illuminate demographic and social phenomena from the community's life. The chronicles were written in rich Hebrew and sprinkled with linguistic gems and quotations from the Holy Scriptures and the Midrash.

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Garji, Mullah Yosef

Mullah Yosef Garji Melamed (Herat 1869-Jerusalem 1937), son of Mullah Matityah Garji, rabbi of the Afghan community and in Jerusalem. In 1903 he requested to immigrate to the land of Israel. On his way he reached Merv (also Marv and Mari) today in Turkmenistan, where the local Jews (Bukharian, Afghani and Mashhadi) pleaded with him and he agreed to serve as their leader, rabbi, educator, *mohel* (circumciser) and ritual slaughterer for seven years. In 1911 he arrived in Jerusalem and served as spiritual guide to both the Bukharian and Afghan groups. He was an educator who raised generations of pupils, a preacher, cantor, *mohel* (circumciser) and slaughterer. They say that he paid his own money to serve as *mohel* (circumciser) for the sons of the poor Yemenites in Jerusalem. His most important undertaking was his original commentary to the Book of Psalms *Edduth bi-yehosef*, printed in Jerusalem in 1926. He explained the psalms in Hebrew while presenting the events of the times in the land of Israel and in Afghanistan. At the same time he outlined an ideological doctrine for *Ahavath Zion* (Love of Zion) and the land of Israel. He compared it to Afghanistan, listing fifteen virtues to the land of Israel, including religious-mystical motives and Jerusalem as the spiritual center of Judaism. He also mentioned the land's physical advantages such as the climate, food quality, livelihood, low prices, modern and preventive medicine and the low death rate in comparison with Afghanistan. The motto of his ideological perception stated that "Jerusalem is the world's synagogue", that the Torah and the land of Israel are tied to it. He did not idealize the land of Israel. He added that there are enemies of the soul (missionaries) and enemies of the body (Arabs) and the evil inclination in the land of Israel is stronger than

in the Diaspora. In his eyes, this struggle was a virtue since "the land of Israel is acquired through suffering" and abstinence refines the soul. The book is also an enlightening source on customs, beliefs and opinions.

In 1926 he was chosen Deputy Chairman of the community's committee that was comprised of "The Seven Best Men of the Congregation" who were active in the environs of the *Yeshu'a ve-Rahamim* Synagogue, the spiritual center for the Jews from Afghanistan. Activity included establishment of aid institutions, education and *Hevra Kadisha* that handled burial of the dead on the Mount of Olives.

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Garji, Mullah Asher

Mullah Asher Garji (Herat 1882 – Jerusalem 19XX), son of Mullah Matityah, who provided his son with a quality education meant only for rabbis' sons. In 1896 he accompanied his father to the Holy Land on foot, a youth of 14. He married at the age of 17. He helped his father publish *Ha-Azharoth* by Rabbi Siman Tov Melamed, the rabbi of Mashhad's Jews before they were forced to accept Islam, in Hebrew and Judeo-Persian. After his father's immigration to the land of Israel in 1908, Mullah Asher, 26, was appointed to lead the community and he continued in the position forty years until he immigrated to Israel. He served, as his forefathers before him, as teacher and educator, *mohel* (circumciser), slaughterer and cantor. He led his community with courage, wielding great authority. In

disputes between neighbors, in petty justice and capital offense laws the Mullah ruled with the powers' backing. Jews did not need the non-Jewish courts and the Mullah's authority was recognized by the entire community. He was a frequent guest of the state's rulers, including the Prime Minister. He held the public's funds and he was entitled to whip a member of the community who disobeyed his orders. Among his directives was a prohibition to hire Moslem musicians for Jewish celebrations. The flood of immigration in 1950, after the establishment of the State of Israel, worried him. He feared that the community would shrink such that its status would be damaged and therefore requested that it be selective and gradual as he directed. This roused unrest among the youth who wanted to immigrate. They complained to the governor of Herat, who ordered Mullah Asher to leave Afghanistan within ten days. Thus the door was opened to mass immigration, reaching 3,000 members of the community. Upon his arrival in Israel, Mullah Asher published a liturgical poem dedicated to David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel. He was received with honor by the second president, Yitzhak Ben-Zvi but his status in the community in Israel eroded.

Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz

Garji, Mullah Binyamin

Mullah Binyamin Garji (Herat 1902 – Jerusalem 1974). He was the son of Mullah Yosef and grandson of Mullah Matityah. He immigrated to the land of Israel in 1911. Eventually he replaced his father as leader of the group in Jerusalem and became a *Darshan* (preacher) who charmed his audience. He worked as a teacher and educator for children in *Talmud Torah* in Bukharian quarter in Jerusalem for fifty years, raising generations of pupils and admirers thanks to his liberality and humanism. He accompanied his community – Afghani, Mashhadi and Bukharian Jews – in happy times and sad and provided them with spiritual and legal support. He headed the charity *Ahavath Hessed* that aided the needy discretely. He was active in his support of the oppressed community members in Afghanistan and worked to bring them to Israel. He reissued his father's book *Edduth bi-Yehosef*, adding a foreword in which he described his father.

After his death the community's rabbinical Yeshiva *Midrash Binyamin* was founded and dedicated to his memory.

Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz

Amram, Mullah Yehoshua

Mullah Yehoshua Amram was born and died in Herat (19th - 20th Century). He was considered a progressive educator in comparison with the teachers and educators from the Garji family. As a teaching assistant he made use of the blind musician Mullah Yosef Bakhchi who played the harmonium and aroused the pupils to learn the liturgical poems popular among Afghanistan's Jews by heart. Mullah Yehoshua excelled in drawing and for his students, who learned in three languages – Hebrew, Aramaic and Judeo-Persian – he drew the items being studied. They learned the Torah, Mishnah, and selections chosen from the *Midrash* and *Talmud*. The best students also learned from the Kabbalic *Zohar*. Towards each holiday he prepared his students for all the relevant commandments for each occasion. Mullah Amram taught his pupils to write poetic epistles in Judeo-Persian and to do simultaneous translations into that language of Biblical and Mishnaic texts. He taught them the tradition of *Dastak* that included calligraphic copying accompanied by ornamental drawings of poems that came down through the generations and the *Sayings of the Sages of the Mishnah*. The more talented students also added personal works, anecdotes and homiletic literature. The students, members of the merchant class, also learned arithmetic. Study of the Midrash in the 1920s struck at the Garji family monopoly, causing disputes. Mullah Yehoshua Amram's livelihood was barely enough and he was forced to sell spices a few hours each day.

Benzion D. Yehoshua-Raz

Siman-Tov, Mullah Yaakov

Mullah Yaakov Siman-Tov (Herat 1850 – Jerusalem 1928). Chief Rabbi of Herat, Afghanistan. He immigrated to Jerusalem in 1922 and died six years later, aged 78. He was buried on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Siman-Tov was one the more distinguished families among the Jews of Mashhad and Afghanistan. The most famous was Rabbi Siman-Tov Melamed (died 1823), philosopher and poet. His theological book in Judeo-Persian, *Khayat el-Rukh* deals with 13 principles of Judaism and Judeo Asceticism and Sufism. His book *Azharoth-Bayom ha-shelishi* deals with 613 *Mitzvot* (Commandments). The Siman-tov family came to Afghanistan from Mashhad in Iran at 1840, after being forced to convert to Islam. In Herat, the family returned to open Judaism. Sixteen years later all the forced converts were deported to a prison camp in Mashhad. Two years later they returned to Afghanistan with British help. The family raised rabbis, leaders and activists.

Mullah Ya'akov Siman-Tov was a spiritual leader of his community and a teacher who preached for Love of Zion and for leaving the bitter life in exile and to make *Aliyah* to the land of Israel. In the age of 72 he left Herat and after long trip on his donkey he arrived to Land of Israel. His immigration convinced many others to follow him. The Jerusalem Municipality dedicated a street to him. Some rabbis in the community today came from Siman-Tov family.

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