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SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF JEWISH LIFE IN OTTOMAN EGYPT

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Historical Background

Jews have lived in Egypt, probably uninterruptedly, since the days of the Second Temple, if not earlier. Under Muslim rule, some of the greatest Jewish minds, like Maimonides, flourished there. In 1492 and subsequent years, when some of the Jewish exiles from Spain and Portugal found refuge in Egypt, the country was being administered by local rulers, the Mamluks — freed slaves who had been coopted into the families of the governing elite. The in-fighting between the Mamluks facilitated the Ottoman conquest of Egypt in 1517 and Ottoman rule there over four centuries.

Ottoman rule in Egypt can be divided into two unequal parts. For almost three centuries, from the Ottoman conquest to the invasion of Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798, Egypt was a typical Ottoman province. The following time span of somewhat more than a century, from Napoleon's invasion to the First World War, was a period of westernizing modernization and gradual change from Ottoman to European rule. After the war, Egypt gradually succeeded in freeing itself from British occupation and became independent.

Continuity and change were reflected in Egyptian Jewish society,

and economy no less than among the other inhabitants of the country but, naturally, not always in the same manner. While Ottoman rule in Egypt was Sunnite Muslim, like the Mamluk regime, it was (at least in its early days) more centralized politically, more prosperous economically, and better in enforcing security in daily life. It was also more appreciative of the commercial and other benefits which the Empire could derive from its minorities. The semi-autonomous status enjoyed by the religious communities enabled these populations, including the Jews, to maintain their cultural life and to

achieve, at times, important positions and financial affluence. However, they never achieved political significance — at least, not as a community — and whatever involvement they had in the country's affairs was mostly in the economic field. Consequently, we shall focus on the Jews' demography, cultural creativity, economic activities, relations with neighbors, and the impact of modernization.

Demography

At least a part of the limited activities of the Jewish community in Ottoman Egypt can be attributed to its small size in both absolute and relative numbers, as well as to its distribution. Although all the data we have, before the first complete census in 1897, are hardly more than estimates, they give us an idea of the small size of this group.

Jewish exiles from Spain and Portugal arrived in Egypt, probably by land via the Maghreb countries. Some of them went on to Palestine and a few of these returned to Egypt later, mainly for economic reasons. Others settled in Egypt, joining the extant Jewish communities in various towns, chiefly in the Delta or near the Nile. Very few Jews inhabited the villages, as they seem to have been more keen on commerce and business than on agriculture. Even those few (sometimes a family or two) who lived in the villages were involved in some sort of commerce. Their religious precepts, as well as their preference for Jewish education, induced them to settle in Cairo, Alexandria, Damietta, Rosetta, al-Mansura, and al-Mahalla al-Kubra. Much later, with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, Jewish merchants and commercial agents settled in Suez and other towns near the Canal.

The total number of Egypt's Jews, estimated at about 7,000-8,000 by a French traveller in 1730, diminished to about 3,000 at the time of Napoleon's invasion and rose to approximately 5,000 in the first half of the nineteenth century. There were some 10,000 Jews in 1882, when the British occupied Egypt, and their number rose to 25,200 by 1897, to 38,635 by 1907, and to 59,581 by 1917. Various factors were responsible for these far-reaching changes. The decline in Jewish population in the last two-thirds of the eighteenth century was a by-product of the gradual weakening of authority and security and, insofar as Jews were concerned, their increasing replacement by Christians in many lucrative jobs. There may also have been a devastating pogrom among Cairo's Jews in 1734-1735.

Contrariwise, Jewish increase in the nineteenth century and later reflected both the improvement of security under the rule of Muhammad Ali and his descendants, and then under the British authorities. Moreover, Jews, along with others, were attracted by economic opportunities, chiefly after the inauguration of the Suez Canal in 1869, and they migrated to Egypt in growing numbers, particularly from Yemen, Eastern Europe, and other lands where they were persecuted (as well as from Palestine, during the First World War). In addition, there were in Egypt, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, about 2,000 Karaites.

The geographical distribution of Egyptian Jews during the early generations of Ottoman rule maintained itself, *grosso modo*, later on. A preference for inhabiting cities and towns, no doubt due to occupational structure and to security considerations, was evident. Between 80 and 90

percent of Egypt's Jews lived in Cairo and Alexandria combined, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Cairo predominated throughout, but the Jewish population in Alexandria rose constantly, in both absolute figures and percentagewise, due to that city's growing role in commerce and tourism, as Egypt's largest port. Other Jews lived in other ports (e.g. Port Said) or towns (e.g., Tanta and al-Mansura), where commerce and tourism attracted them.

Cultural Creativity

According to the official census of Egypt in 1907, the Jewish population enjoyed a high rate of literacy: 556 boys and 313 girls out of every thousand could read and write. Probably the high ratio of literacy had not been very different (at least among males) in previous centuries of Ottoman rule. Such literacy, along with the religiosity of the community was bound to bring about cultural creativity. This was chiefly expressed in writings of a religious nature in earlier centuries, to which were added other genres in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Until quite late in the nineteenth century, Jewish writings in Ottoman Egypt were almost exclusively in Hebrew. Hebrew was the common literary vehicle for Egyptian Jews, although they also communicated orally and in business in other languages. And, since most of their intellectual activity was focused on religion, it was natural for it to be expressed in Hebrew. Then westernization started to impact Egypt culturally. Almost simultaneously, Jewish immigration grew, and writings in Arabic, French and other languages became frequent.

The modest number of works produced by Ottoman Egyptian Jews is

probably an outcome of the absence of active yeshivas during most of the period discussed. As a result, many, probably most, of the prominent Jewish sages in Ottoman Egypt came from abroad — mainly from Spain, Palestine, Turkey, and North Africa. They arrived as part of the Jewish migration to Egypt, which was considered a land of both plenty and relative safety. Migration was facilitated by the relative ease of travel within the Ottoman Empire. Among the Jewish immigrants, those from Spain made a crucial contribution in the sixteenth century, by injecting into Jewish traditional scholarship in Egypt their wisdom and expertise.

The traditional Jewish writings of the Ottoman period may be divided into several categories.

Commentaries

Commentaries on the Holy Books, chiefly the Talmud, were written in Egypt mostly in the sixteenth century, and were largely the work of Jews exiled from Spain or under their influence. Among the greatest of these scholars, Rabbi Ya'akov Bei-Rav, born in Maceda near Tullitula, author of important commentaries, spent only a few years in Egypt before settling in Safed. Another rabbi from Spain, Rabbi David Ibn Abi Zimra, and his star pupil, Rabbi Bezalel Ashkenasi, wrote important commentaries on the Talmud, not all of which have come down to us. Other scholars wrote their commentaries on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*, the *Turim* and the *Shulhan Arukh*. These commentaries flourished in Ottoman Egypt for a while, and then declined — for the genre was chiefly intended for study in yeshivas, of which there were very few in Egypt after the sixteenth century.

Halakhic Works

This was probably the area which attracted most traditional scholars, for rabbinical advice and rabbinic court decisions on controversial points were constantly needed within a religiously-oriented community. Many of these opinions and decisions were collected in Egypt, at the time and later, and published as compendia of Responsa (in Hebrew, *she'elot u-teshubot*). These were generally printed in Venice, Istanbul, and elsewhere outside Egypt (which had no Hebrew printing press until the nineteenth century). One of the greatest of the Responsa writers, in the early eighteenth century, was Rabbi Yosef Nazir, whose opinions were considered binding by many rabbis and judges at that time and later.

Sermons

The Hebrew sermon (*derashah*), delivered on festive and other occasions, played a significant role in community life, in Ottoman Egypt as elsewhere. Most of these sermons offered explanations on the Holy Books or dealt with matters of public morals according to the ethical principles of Judaism. Practically all seem to have been delivered in Hebrew, to audiences that apparently were able to understand that language with ease. Since this literary genre was considered scholastically less serious than others, very few of these sermons were printed, and those that are extant have survived in manuscript only.

Kabbalistic Works

Books dealing with mystical philosophy, the Kabbalah, were few in Ottoman Egypt, although one of its greatest exponents, Rabbi Itzhak Ashkenazi Luria (Ha-Ari) spent 28 out

of his 38 years (he died in 1572) in that country. However, some of the works written by Luria and his disciples were very probably conceived and discussed during his Egyptian period.

Poetry and Prayers

Although the poetry of the Jews in Ottoman Egypt cannot aspire to compare with that of the Jews in Spain, some of it is worthy of note. Much of it was directly inspired by the Hebrew poetry in Spain, up to and including the seventeenth century. Rabbi Moshe Abbas, who lived in Rosetta in that century, has left such poems. Not surprisingly, much of the Hebrew poetry in Ottoman Egypt (not all of which has reached us) had a preponderantly religious character.

Secular Literature

In the nineteenth century, along with the traditional literature — such as Responsa by illustrious rabbis in Cairo (like Raphael Ben Shim'on) and Alexandria (like Shlomo Hazzan) — a secular literature began to develop. Part of it was still in Hebrew, such as a book for language study with a Hebrew-Arabic dictionary, by Abraham Kestin (1910). However, more works by Jews began to be published in Egypt in other languages, reflecting both the heterogeneous Jewish immigration into Egypt, and the decline in the status of Hebrew in favor of more frequently used local languages, such as Arabic, French, English, and Italian. Books published in Arabic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries dealt with such subjects as Jews and Karaites, the basic elements of the Talmud, or poetry. Several Jewish newspapers and periodicals appeared, mainly in the twentieth century, frequently in French or Ladino. Examples are: *Le Messager Sioniste* (1902),

Misraïm (1904), *La Vara* (1905-1908), *La Tribuna* (1906), *La Luz* (1906), *Revue Israélite d'Égypte* (1912), and *La Renaissance Juive* (1917). After the First World War, *Israël* was published in Hebrew, French, and English. The plurality of languages employed by Egyptian Jews contributed to the decline of their culture, since the number of potential buyers and readers of books and newspapers in each of these languages was thus much smaller, and reduced sales, in turn, curtailed publication efforts.

The Economy

The Ottoman conquest of Egypt spurred the economy in general: agriculture was improved, irrigation methods were developed, administration of finance was supervised more closely, and international commerce, in particular, was encouraged in order to increase Ottoman revenues. Merchants, especially, had greater freedom of action. Egyptians exploited the free communication that Egypt enjoyed throughout a large empire, from the frontiers of Morocco to those of Iran, and the particular advantage of the country's direct access to both the Red and the Mediterranean Seas. Even the discovery of the sea-route around South Africa hurt Egypt's advantages only briefly.

Egypt's Jews quickly integrated into the new Ottoman economic system. Their main occupations were characteristic of an urban minority: internal and foreign commerce, as well as financial transactions on both the private and public level.

However, one also reads about Jews who were physicians, translators, and artisans. Jews flourished in Egypt chiefly in the first fifty years of Ottoman rule; later they suffered, along with all the business

people, from the political and economic deterioration in the country. Nevertheless, their impact on economic and commercial life continued, and they maintained their importance by diversifying into additional branches: they dealt in gold, silver, and expensive textiles, as well as in medicines — since some Jews were physicians and pharmacists.

Commerce and Finance

However, the Jews remained, primarily, in local and foreign commerce. In the latter spheres in particular, they used profitably the experience gained by Jewish immigrants from Spain and other lands, as well as international contacts among Jews elsewhere, as in Livorno and Marseilles. Many exiles from Spain and Portugal, including Marranos and their descendants, who settled in Egypt, served as middlemen in international commerce, for instance in the spice trade. It seems that their knowledge of foreign languages was also helpful.

The involvement of Egyptian Jews in commerce reflected their socio-economic status under Ottoman rule. Most of those who engaged in internal commerce belonged to the lower- or middle-class, while those involved as merchants or middlemen in international commerce were frequently of the upper-class and quickly grew wealthier. The local merchants included owners of workshops and shops in the local bazaar; street peddlers; peddlers in the villages; and merchants engaged in commerce in textiles, silk clothes, jewelry, iron, oxen, mummies (for the preparation of medicines), wine, sugar, and pepper. The government had a monopoly on wheat, so Jewish merchants bought wheat from it and resold it.

The Jewish share in international commerce was even more varied. Ottoman Egypt was an important center for the slave trade until its abolition in the 1860s, and Alexandria and Cairo had large markets for the sale of slaves imported from Africa, Asia, and the Slavic lands. Jews shared in this trade, although they had to deal chiefly in pagan or Christian slaves, as the law forbade them to buy and sell Muslim ones. However, their international commerce was more diversified than this. From Palestine they imported olive-oil soap, and sold there rice, spices, and wheat. From Syria they imported raw silk and textiles, and from Ethiopia, parrots; from the Maghreb, olive oil and ostrich feathers; from Crete, wines. From Rhodes, they imported textiles and sulphur, and sold there pepper; in Anatolia and the Ottoman Balkans, they bought woolen and cotton textiles, silk, furs, tar, wax, dried fruit, wood and iron utensils, and sold there skins, rice, wheat, barley, dates, coffee, sugar, and perfumes. In the Italian lands (mainly Ancona, Ferrara, and Venice), they bought chinaware, textiles, woolen and silk clothes, hats, copper, iron, tin, zinc, paper, and coral, and sold there raw linen and cotton, skins, dyes, ostrich feathers, rice, spices, and coffee. Generally, the most intensive commercial relations of Ottoman Egyptian Jews were with Italy, Anatolia, and the Balkans.

The Jews in Ottoman Egypt served as middlemen and in other financial functions. The exiles from Spain and Portugal, in particular, brought with them knowledge of foreign languages, and acted as translators. Their living in towns and ports was particularly conducive to such work. They practised this profession either in business establishments or in the offices of foreign consuls in Cairo and Alexandria; in the latter case, their job was

often hereditary. The languages they usually knew were Arabic, Turkish, French or Spanish, as well as Italian — the language of Mediterranean commerce at the time.

The financial affairs that Ottoman Egyptian Jews were mainly involved in were money-changing, lending at interest, working in the mints, and renting the collection of taxes. Money-changing was very much needed, as Egypt was a center of Mediterranean commerce (and later of tourism), and numerous currencies from various lands were freely used there. Inflation, since the end of the sixteenth century, could be profitable, of course, for those with rapid and complete knowledge of fluctuations in the monetary rates. As a result, large sums of ready money found their way to certain Jews, who not only became wealthy, but had the available cash to invest or lend at interest. For some of the loans, pledges were demanded, such as jewels or merchandise. The legal interest was ten percent, but frequently it amounted to more, due to insecurity or to the decline in the value of money.

Not a few Jews served in official or semi-official capacities in Ottoman Egypt. Some rented the collection of taxes or of customs duties (thus earning the hostility of both the local population and of foreign merchants). Others worked in, and a few were even directors of, the mint; these persons also provided the gold and silver for the coins. The most famous of these was Abraham Castro, an exile from Spain, who was appointed director of the mint in Egypt soon after the Ottomans conquered the country in 1520 or 1521; he served in this and other capacities, official and private, for several years.

All the above data refer mainly to the Jewish economy in the sixteenth

and seventeenth centuries. The economic decline of Egypt during the eighteenth century was hard on the Jews, many of whom became impoverished. During that century and much of the following one, very few Jews occupied key positions. Most busied themselves modestly with local commerce, or worked in a growing number of artisan occupations such as saddle-makers, shoe-makers, carpenters, iron-mongers, tailors, embroiderers, dyers of textiles, and the like. Fewer Jews were employed in the mints, money-changing, or renting the collection of taxes and customs — for the simple reason that they did not have sufficient capital to partake in these ventures.

During the nineteenth century, due to the relative stability of the government and the country's rapid economic development (plantations, railways, the Suez Canal), the general economic situation improved. One now reads about some wealthy Jews like the Cattaui, or bankers like the Mosseris, as well as about a growing number of intellectuals and white-collar professionals such as physicians, lawyers, and agronomists. Quite a few of those businessmen and professionals benefitted from the foreign protection extended to them by their consulates in Egypt. Most of the others, however, practised the urban occupations of earlier centuries; the numerous immigrants to Egypt adapted themselves to existing conditions. The only entirely new occupation was tourism. In the last third of the nineteenth century, Egypt became a noteworthy tourist attraction, chiefly for West Europeans, but also for all sorts of Christian pilgrims to Palestine, who made a detour to Egypt on their way. Jews and members of other minorities living in Egypt's ports, who had knowledge of foreign languages, and connections with rela-

tives and friends abroad, entered the tourist industry — chiefly dealing in the sale of souvenirs, money-changing, and related occupations.

Relations Between Jews and Non-Jews

The social and economic relations of Egypt's Jews with their neighbors were complex and changed over time. In the first three centuries of Ottoman rule, Jews lived within the framework of their semi-autonomous community, in which they were granted (as were several other religious minorities) the administration of their own internal affairs. Beyond that, the Ottoman governors of Egypt and their representatives related chiefly to certain Jews, or groups of Jews, rather than to the entire community. For instance, they favored or persecuted Jewish tax-collectors depending on their need for the services of these middlemen. Sometimes, too, their attitude was conditioned by religious fanaticism toward the minorities. In general, all Jews and Christians had to pay a poll-tax, called *Jizya* or *al-Jawali*. Almost always, these two communities were required to separate themselves from the Muslim majority by wearing different clothing and headgear. Similarly, they were barred from owning Muslim slaves of both sexes. While this discrimination against Jews paralleled that against Christians, in many respects, as in their cemeteries and burial processions, Jews apparently suffered more.

The relations of the Jews with their Christian neighbors in Ottoman Egypt differed from those with the Muslim rulers and the majority population. Sources tell us of deep religious emotional conflict and economic competition between the two minorities who were involved in similar occupations, which sometimes erupted in verbal,

or physical, antisemitic violence by Christians against Jews.

During the nineteenth century, Jews obtained a standing of political equality, but continued to be treated as social and economic inferiors, by both Muslims and Copts. They were often humiliated in public by Muslims, while Christians were responsible, since 1870, for instigating at least half-a-dozen blood libels, that absurd calumny that accuses the Jews of using Christian blood for ritual purposes. Generally, the more modernized and westernized Egypt became in the nineteenth century, the better was the situation of the Jews — at least insofar as the authorities were concerned. This was certainly so after the British occupation in 1882. The non-Jewish population, on the other hand, chiefly under the impact of budding nationalism, sometimes took a different stand.

The Impact of Modernization

Modernization — usually expressed in Ottoman Egypt by the penetration of Western ways of thinking and be-

havior, as well as by changes in the political system and economic structure — left its impact on the Jews no less than on local Muslims. While a sizable core of Egypt's Jews were (and have remained) conservatively orthodox, many were secular-minded and open to modernization. The numerous immigrants who arrived in Egypt in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were an obvious target for modernizing trends. Knowledge of foreign languages assisted this, too, particularly since many upper-class Jews — at the end of Ottoman rule and in independent Egypt — considered, as did other groups, use of French or English as a sign of culture. Foreign schools, such as those of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, helped to prepare students who were open to the impact of Western modernization. All this was reflected in a diversity of schools, newspapers, and books in various languages, that serve as an indication of the increasing cultural, social, and economic cleavages among Egypt's Jews.

Egyptian rabbis, in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were

well aware of the religious-secular cleavage which modernization was causing among Jews. They tried assiduously, each in his own way, to fend off the danger of splits in their communities. In their courts of law and in their writings, they offered various suggestions about maintaining the old traditions, but also indicated reasonable behavior patterns compatible with the new times. These referred to such matters as food, clothing, transportation, entertainment, and technological innovations. Their success was limited for as the entire world became more open and change accelerated toward the end of the Ottoman Empire, the Jews in Egypt also changed and became increasingly modernized. After the First World War, this process became ever more evident. While some Jews, particularly in the Old Quarter in Cairo, remained traditional in their beliefs and customs, most became Europeanized, resembling the foreign communities in the cities of independent Egypt, most particularly in Alexandria.