

The Jews of Aleppo

By Sarina Roffé

Few cities can match the glory of Aleppo, Syria, a city that spans Jewish history from the days of King David over 3,000 years ago. Aristocratic and noble, Aleppo was the crown of Jewish splendor in the Sephardic world.¹

The Jewish presence in Syria dates back to Biblical times and is intertwined with the history and politics of Jerusalem. According to the book of Samuel and Psalm 60, Aram Soba, the Biblical name for Aleppo, was part of the extended area of Israel. Throughout the millennia, great Talmudic sages record Aleppo's unbroken record of communal peace and spiritual productivity. Early Jewish travelers to the area included Benjamin of Tudela in 1173, Sadai Gaon in 921, and Rabbi Petachya of Germany in 1170-80.²

"It is hoary Aleppo legend, both Jewish and Muslim, that the patriarch Abraham had settled for a period in Aleppo in his wanderings from his native Ur. He is believed to have milked his cows there. *Halab*, the Arabic name for Aleppo, is the Aramaic, Hebrew, and Arabic for 'milked.'³

According to "the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac spent part of their lives in what is now Syria. During and after the late Biblical period, and until the late 19th Century, Syria and Eretz Israel were often territories of the same superpower and were sometimes considered a single entity. The Talmudic Sages ruled that some of the religious laws that pertain only to the land of Israel (chiefly in the realm of agriculture) apply to Syria as well."⁴

The foundation for the Great Synagogue in Aleppo is believed to have been constructed by King David's General, Joab ben Seruya (circa 950 BCE), after his conquest of the city (2 Sam 8:3-8); it is still sometimes referred to as Joab's Synagogue. The architecture of the synagogue was heavily influenced by the designs of Muslim mosques.⁵ For example, the ark of the synagogue is an exact copy of a mosque's *mihrab*.

Walter Zenner dates the building of the Great Synagogue to the fifth Century of the Common Era. The synagogue was destroyed during the rule of Tamerlane in 1400 and was rebuilt in 1418. In 1947 anti-Zionist groups burned the synagogue, which was in an abandoned state by 1995.⁶

The politics of the region depended on the rulers. With the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of Rome, the Romans placed restrictions on Jews. These were lifted with the Arab conquest in 636 CE, when Islamic caliphates began ruling the region. From

¹ Joseph A.D. Sutton, *Aleppo Chronicles* (New York, 1988) p.18

² Ibid.

³ Joseph A.D. Sutton, *Aleppo Chronicles* (New York, 1988) p.18.

⁴ Israel Yearbook and Almanac News, 1995, p. 195.

⁵ The Influence of Judaism by Islam, www.hebron.com/influence.html

⁶ Walter Zenner, *A Global Community, The Jews from Aleppo, Syria* (Detroit, 2000), p. 35.

the seventh Century until the end of Ottoman rule, the Jewish community was self-governed.⁷ Self-government entitled the Jews to freedom of religion, a separate court system ruled by local rabbis to handle internal disputes, and military protection. In return for political and military protection, the Jews were given *dhimmi* status, meaning they had to adhere to certain rules and pay a poll tax, which was based on the number of men in the community, and did not have to serve in the military. *Dhimmi* status did not entitle Jews to the same or equal rights as Muslim citizens, however. They, along with their Christian counterparts, were of a lower status than Muslims and disputes between a Christian or Jew and a Muslim were settled in the government court, which was ruled by Islamic law.

By the tenth Century, many Jews emigrated from Iraq to Syria, due to political unrest. This brought about a boom in commerce, banking and crafts in Syria.⁸ During the reign of the Islamic Fatimids, the Jew Ibrahim El Kazzazz ran the Syrian administration and granted Jews positions in government.⁹ For many years, the Jews lived comfortably under Muslim rule, secure in their place as *dhimmi*, a protected people. Living in a non-democratic state, both Jews and Muslims remained apolitical.

“One aspect of this low profile was that new synagogues could not be built. Furthermore, Jews had to justify the existence of older houses of worship by stressing their antiquity, such as the Great Synagogue of Aleppo to Joab the son of Seruya. Ceremonies such as blowing the *shofar* and celebrating Purim had to be conducted so as not to disturb their Muslim neighbors.”¹⁰

The Jewish community that evolved in this setting developed a different kind of politics to govern their people. The community was governed by the *hakham bashi*, or chief rabbi. Paying and collecting taxes and obtaining patronage were forms of political participation. Yet the treatment of Jews was also based on the current Muslim ruler and the economics of the time. If things got worse economically, the treatment of Jews deteriorated. When times were good and the economy was booming, Jews were treated well, so long as they stayed in their place and did not upset the balance between the two religious groups.

Various historians confirm that “the situation for the Jews varied under successive conquerors, as rulers imposed and removed restrictive laws. At times, Jews reached great heights...”¹¹

Aleppo was the center of Jewish life for many centuries. Distinguished rabbis studied there and it was a center of significant Torah learning. Among the reasons for Aleppo’s importance in Jewish learning is a document known as the Aleppo Codex. It is believed that a member of the famous Ben-Asher family wrote the Aleppo Codex over 1000 years

⁷ Joseph A. D. Sutton, *Magic Carpet: Aleppo-in-Flatbush*, (New York, 1979) p. 205.

⁸ *Virtual Jerusalem- Jewish Communities of the World, Syria*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ Zenner, *Global Community*, p. 39

¹¹ *Israel Yearbook and Almanac*, 1995, p. 196.

ago. The text shows the final vocalization and punctuation of the Biblical text. Some believe it is the Biblical text, which Rambam refers to in his *Hilchot Sefer Torah*.¹²

“The Aleppo Codex is the earliest known manuscript containing the entire text of the Bible. Tradition states that Maimonides consulted the Aleppo Codex when he set down the exact rules for writing *Torah* scrolls. Recent research indicates that it is possible that Maimonides sanctified and codified everything he found in the Aleppo Codex. The Codex was copied by the scribe Shlomo Ben-Buya’a in the land of Israel over 1,000 years ago. It was deposited with the Aleppo community at the end of the 14th Century and kept in a small vault in the Cave of Elijah under the Joab Ben Zeruiah Synagogue of Aleppo. The community talisman guarded it for over 600 years.”¹³

For the most part, conditions remained good for Jews in Syria under the Fatimids and later under Ottoman rule. The Ottoman rulers favored the Jews, understanding that the Jews would contribute to a good economy and that they facilitated commerce.

There were two classes of Jews in Aleppo. The wealthier members of the community were bankers or merchants, while lower class members included brokers, grocers or peddlers.¹⁴ Aleppo-born Jewish author, Joseph Sutton, said, "Most Jews were either lower middle-class or very poor. They were craftsman, stall-keepers, cobblers, clerks, peddlers, porters, or others without skills."¹⁵ Besides life cycle events, recreation activities favored "gambling, particularly backgammon, dice, and cardplaying."¹⁶

Walter Zenner describes how the social structure of the community was controlled.

"In Aleppo, women generally did not work outside the home, although some girls and women were domestics in Jewish homes."¹⁷

The occupations of the Aleppo Jews determined their social class standing and their wealth. There was a social class structure that determined marriages.

"The movement of young girls was carefully controlled...Marriages were generally arranged by parents...Cousin marriage of all four kinds was practiced."¹⁸

Aleppo is the second largest city in Syria. In the center of town there is an ancient fortress, or citadel, and a bazaar. The city lies in a semi-desert region in the northwest area of the country. When the Jews lived there, there was a market for grains, fruit, as well as wool and hides. Silk and cotton textiles were also manufactured in the town.

¹² Lehrman, *Algemeiner Journal*.

¹³ *Virtual Jerusalem*

¹⁴ Zenner, *Global Community*, p. 176.

¹⁵ Sutton, *Aleppo Chronicles*, p. 41.

¹⁶ Shlomo Deshen and Walter Zenner, *Jewish Societies In The Middle East: Community, Culture, and Authority* (Lanham, MD, 1982) p. 201.

¹⁷ Deshen and Zenner, p. 180.

¹⁸ Deshen and Zenner, p. 194-195.

Dried fruits and nuts, especially pistachios, were widely sold and eaten. Aleppo was a flourishing trade center during the 16th Century, but its popularity declined when sea routes to India became more popular and efficient. The city was almost destroyed by earthquakes in 1822 and in 1830.

The Jews in Spain Come to Syria

The Umayyad Islamic General Tariq conquered Spain in 711, after which the Jews began to grow in number. The Umayyad kingdom in Spain soon became independent of Baghdad and by the 10th Century had divided Spain into smaller caliphates (areas). Yet the Umayyads retained the Islamic culture, foods and styles of Syrian life, planting the same trees, plants and food crops that their ancestors had in Syria, producing a Syrianization of the Andalusian countryside.¹⁹ Under the Umayyads, the enjoyment of worldly goods was condoned and Jewish tastes mirrored those of Muslims. During the period, luxury commerce thrived and the economy flourished in Spain.²⁰

During the Golden Age of Spain (usually considered the 10th and 11th Centuries), such great Jewish minds as Maimonides, Rav Yehuda Halevi and Nahmanides produced important works. During this early period, Hasdai Ibn Shaprut (915-970), a Jew in the court of the Umayyad dynasty emerged as the officially recognized leader of the Jews. He was a patron of Jewish learning and a statesman during his time. As the first of many statesmen for the Jews, he led and defended the Spanish Jewish community in Islamic Spain.

The highest point of the Golden Age of Spain was during the 11th Century, when Talmudic scholarship, Jewish philosophy and Hebrew poetry peaked. A Sephardic school on the Talmud began in Lucena by Rav Alfasi, the Rif (1013-1103). His compendium, which attempts to arrive at a *psak Halacha*, appears at the end of each tome of the Talmud.²¹ Maimonides, a student of this school, along with his teacher and father Rav Maimon, wrote the Code of Jewish Law during the 12th Century. One of the most important commentaries on the *Chumash* by Rav Abraham ibn Ezra (1088-1167) was written during this time. This period of Jewish scholarship and philosophy, during the Golden Age of Spain, was never again equaled.

It is widely believed that the first persecution of Jews in Spain occurred under the Christians. Rather the first persecution of Jews in Spain occurred under the Visigoths in the 7th Century, not under Christian rule. The next persecution occurred in 1066, under Muslim rule, when more than 1500 Jewish families were killed in Granada, on the Iberian Peninsula. It was widely believed that Joseph ibn Nagrela, a Jew who served the king of Granada, was crucified at the gates of Granada. He was the builder of the Alhambra, and he based its architectural design on the Second Temple.

¹⁹ Jane Gerber, *The Jews of Spain*, p. 31.

²⁰ Gerber

²¹ Leah Cymet, "Sefarad 1492" (Image, July 1999)

The next persecutions occurred under the Christians. In 1391, many Jews were forced to convert to Catholicism. The converted Jews remained in Spain and were called *conversos* or *Marranos*, the Spanish word for pigs. These New Christians could not openly practice Judaism without fear of persecution.

In the late 15th Century King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella wed, uniting the kingdoms of Castille and Aragon. It wasn't long before they took back the last remaining Moorish Kingdom of Granada in the south. Devout Christians, the King and Queen could not tolerate non-believers in their kingdom. It was in the Alhambra that their edict expelling the Jews from Christian Spain in 1492 was signed. Jews had to convert to Christianity or leave the country.

Jews who left Spain fled mainly to the Islamic countries that bordered the Mediterranean Sea. They went to Italy, North Africa, Palestine and to the area we now know as Syria, which was controlled by the Ottoman Empire and whose rulers welcomed the Jews with open arms. Some went to Portugal, but were later expelled.

The Convergence of Two Communities

As Jews left Spain for the Mediterranean countries, many found themselves in areas of the Ottoman Empire that welcomed them. At the time, the Ottoman Empire included Palestine and what is now known as Syria, including Aleppo, Damascus and Beirut. The Ottomans believed that the Jews would inspire trade and encourage economic growth in the region.

The Ottoman Empire was particularly interested in efficient governance. A census was taken of its territories to determine ethnic composition and dispute claims concerning ethnic populations in the Ottoman territories. The empire was divided geographically into administrative units called *vilayets*, or provinces. *Vilayets* were further divided into *sanjaks*, or sub-provinces, which in turn were divided into *kazas*, or cities. A *kaza* might also include small villages that surround it. The chief town of a sanjak was called the *merkez kasasi*, or central *kasa*. Aleppo was a *vilayet*, and encompassed a vast area that included what is now Beirut, as well as numerous outlying villages.²²

Many Jewish families settled in Aleppo, as it was an established center for great rabbinical learning. During the initial settlement period, the Spanish Jews who had emigrated from Spain, remained separate and apart from the indigenous Aleppan Jews. The Spanish Jews spoke Ladino, a mixture of Hebrew and Spanish that was not understood in Aleppo, where the population spoke Arabic and read Hebrew with an Arabic accent. Added to the mixture of native Syrians and Spanish Jews from Sepharad, were Italian Jews, who were commonly referred to as "Francos."

Spanish grandee Señor Shlomo Kassin, who arrived in Aleppo in 1540, led the immigration to Aleppo. Señor Shlomo, who was wealthy, was an administrative genius and was soon appointed head of the community. Señor Shlomo's grandson, Rabbi Yom

²² Dr. David Sheby, *Ottoman Sephardic Genealogy: An Introduction*, p. 3 (Sephardic House, 2001).

Tov Kassin²³, was the first Kassin family member to become a Chief Rabbi in Aleppo. Rabbi Yom Tov's son, Rabbi Yehuda Kassin (1708 - 1784), followed his lead and became a rabbi. He was buried in the courtyard of the Great Synagogue of Aleppo.

It took several centuries, but eventually the two communities – the new Spanish Jews and the Jews indigenous to Aleppo, converged into one and the Ladino language of the Spanish Jews died out by the middle of the 18th Century. Yet the surnames of the families - like Kassin and Labaton - lived on into the 21st Century.

Aleppo in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Until the end of the 19th Century, cotton and silk were the primary exports from the Middle East to Asia and Europe as caravans traveled from East to West. The first signs of serious economic hardship came with the start of the Industrial Revolution,²⁴ which caused a reversal in the flow of trade, compounded with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1867. The combination dealt a bitter blow and ultimately destroyed trading along the caravan routes, which included Aleppo and Damascus. Economic times became bad, then worse.

Culturally, little changed among the Syrian Jews in Aleppo, except their rulers. People became poorer or richer. Boys had a *kittab* school education until their bar mitzvah, after which time they worked. Women in this society were widely protected. Marriages were primarily arranged based on social and economic class.

In religious life, gender segregation provided women with an opportunity for social time and for leisure activities, such as card playing. It was unusual for girls to receive any formal education until well into the 20th Century, although a limited number of girls attended Alliance Israelite Universelle schools. Marriages were generally arranged after a girl had her first cycle, often as young as 13 or 14. Teenage girls and marriage women adorned their arms with gold bangle bracelets, a tradition that carried forward to the present time.

Before a wedding took place, the groom's mother would send gifts to the bride, including money to go to the *mikvah* (ritual bath) where she would prepare herself for her wedding night, and a white handkerchief. The handkerchief was used to clean the bride after her first union with the groom. Girls were prepared for their lives as wives and mothers, learning sewing, meal preparation and how to manage a household. Cooking was a religious effort in order to uphold the laws of *kashrut* and convey the Syrian culture to their children through food and annual traditions.

Few women worked and they rarely shopped. In the Middle East it was customary for the husband to arrange for a stock of staple items and to market since it was assumed that he was the better negotiator. Women were highly respected and honored because their work

²³ Laniado

²⁴ Deshen and Zenner.

as mothers and homemakers was important. They kept their heads covered, and if they went out in public, their faces.

Jews were observant as rabbis and community leaders governed the community. The Ottoman government did not keep birth records for the Jewish communities, although individual rabbis kept records of *brit milahs*, marriages and deaths.

According to Zenner, from the mid-19th Century on, “the Ottoman government appointed a chief rabbi (*hakham bashi*). This individual represented the Jewish community before government agencies and could be a powerful individual in the community in his own right. Rabbis often came from families, which had a long tradition for providing the community with *hakhamim*,”²⁵ as did the Kassins and the Labatons.

The *hakham* was distinguished by the size and color of his turban and the long-wide sleeves of his outer garments.²⁶ While it was customary for everyone to wear an ankle-length robe with a sash around the waist, the *hakham bashi* was a government official and wore a finer robe with ceremonial orders and medals, and gold and silver embroidery. The *hakham bashi* had two government-appointed bodyguards who carried his Staff of Office and cleared the way for him.²⁷

Aleppan rabbis were learned in *Kabbalah* and Talmudic legal tradition. The rabbis dealt with cases of Jewish law ranging from spiritual to civil cases including marriage, inheritance, business contracts, torts, building regulations and Jewish rituals.²⁸ Aleppan Jews had a well known reputation for respecting rabbinic authority.²⁹

Worldwide politics began having an influence on Syria in the early 19th Century when European powers sought equal treatment for Christians and Jews. Jewish contractual positions with the government disappeared, but civil service positions were created. Heads of the religious communities such as the chief rabbi, were appointed positions. The *jizha* tax was a substitution for military service and was eliminated. In 1908 the Young Turks, who succeeded the Ottomans in certain areas, began conscripting Jews into their Army, spurring a mass emigration of Jews to the Americas.³⁰

Then, just prior to World War I, the Ottomans lost control of their empire. For the first time, Jewish men were being sought to serve in the army to fight in the Balkan Wars. Overnight, Jewish men were secretly being sent away to avoid military service. The first wave of Syrian Jews who went to America escaped military service in a conflict with which they did not agree. Syrian Jews arrived in Mexico City, Mexico, Buenos Aires, Argentina, New York, Chicago and other American cities, although most came to New York.

²⁵ Walter P. Zenner, “Reinterpretation of a Tradition by a Transnational Elite: The Rabbis of the Aleppan Diaspora,” unpublished paper, November 2000.

²⁶ Deshen and Zenner, p. 174.

²⁷ Joseph A. D. Sutton, *Magic Carpet: Aleppo-In-Flatbush* (New York 1979) p. 214-215.

²⁸ Deshen and Zenner, p. 174.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Zenner, *Global Community*, p. 39

Emigration from Syria halted during World War I and many families were separated. After World War I, the French took control over Aleppo and it, along with Damascus, became a French Mandate. Travel required a French passport or travel paper. Jews who had passports from European countries were exempt from local taxation, which was a drain on the finances of the local Jewish community.³¹ Massive emigration from Syria occurred again during the period after World War I and continued until the mid-1920s, when the Great Depression began. The emigrés from the early 20th Century migration populate what is known today as the Syrian Jewish communities of Brooklyn and New Jersey.

The Ottoman Empire, which encompassed what is today Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and other territories, fell early in the 20th Century. The region was divided into areas controlled by France and Great Britain. Palestine was under British Mandate. Syria was under French control. The Republic of Turkey was established in 1923. Syria gained its independence from France in 1946.³² Attacks against Jews, who remained in the Syria after World War I, increased. Pogroms in 1947 left Jewish shops and synagogues destroyed. Thousands of Jews left the country for America and Palestine.

The pogroms and destruction also placed the cherished Aleppo Codex in great jeopardy.

“When the synagogue was torched in 1947 during a pogrom, the Codex was saved and hidden. In 1957, it was smuggled out of Aleppo to Israel, where it was presented in 1958 to President Yitzhak Ben-Zvi. It is housed in the Ben-Zvi Institute. Of the original 487 leaves, only 295 leaves remain. The Aleppo Codex is believed to be the most authoritative, accurate and sacred source document, both for the Biblical text and for the vocalization and cantillation. It has greater religious and scholarly import than any other manuscript of the Bible.”³³

After the birth of the State of Israel in 1948, persecution of Jews remaining in Syria was common. The Jews were no longer permitted to own property, travel or practice their occupation. Jews who tried to leave the country were persecuted. The Muslim *dhimmi* laws were strictly enforced. Those Jews who were permitted to travel for business purposes could not travel with family members because the Syrian government feared that they would flee. The Syrian government feared that Jewish men would join forces with Israel and fight against them in the Israeli Army.

During a 10-year period in the 1980s, a collection of Jewish Holy objects was smuggled out of Syria through the efforts of then-Chief Rabbi Avraham Hamra. The collection included nine ancient Bible manuscripts, known as the *Ketarim*, each between 700 and 900 years old. In addition, there were 40 *Torah* scrolls and 32 decorative boxes in which the Sephardic *Torah* scrolls were held. The collection was taken via Turkey, in stages to the Jewish National and University Library of the Hebrew University in Israel. The

³¹ Zenner, *Global Community*, p. 40.

³² *Shrine of the Book*.

³³ *Ibid*.

smuggling was necessary since official requests for permission to take them out of Syria were denied.³⁴

Never forgetting their Syrian brethren, community members from Brooklyn, New York often bribed Syrian government officials to help get those relatives still in Syria out of the country. Negotiations between America's President George H. Bush, with heavy lobbying from Jewish Americans of Syrian birth, and Syria's President Assad, resulted in Syrian Jews being granted exit visas to America as tourists in the early 1990s. Ironically, Assad's demand that they not leave the country as emigrés gave the Syrian Jews whom entered America yet another ten years of persecution. In the United States as tourists, they could not practice their chosen profession, obtain licenses, and apply for public assistance or travel outside the United States.

In the year 2000, Brooklyn's Syrian community, led by the Sephardic Voter's League and the Council for the Rescue of Syrian Jews, was able to gain passage of federal legislation to change the immigration status of the immigrants. Their new legal status allows them to work legally in the United States, obtain working documents (green cards) and apply for citizenship.

³⁴ Internet: www.SephardicCafe.com/syria.html, "Syrian Sephardic Items Rescued," July 23, 2001.

Brooklyn's Syrian Jewish Community

As the Middle East suffered economic depression, these Middle Eastern Jews began looking for a better life for their families. Syrian Jewish émigrés began arriving in New York City and the Americas in the early 20th Century, about 1908. While many settled in Manchester, England, Mexico and South America, specifically Argentina, the majority settled in New York City, especially in the borough of Brooklyn, creating the largest Sephardic population outside of *Eretz Israel*.

The Jews of Aleppo and Damascus migrated to the United States in the early twentieth Century for three basic reasons. First, an economic decline in Syria crippled their ability to earn a living. Second, the Young Turks, a rebel group responsible for the overthrow of the Ottoman sultan, were conscripting Jews into the Army. Third, the rise of Zionism led to increase anti-Semitism in the Middle East region.

The Syrian Jewish community in New York originally consisted of two groups, Jews from Aleppo and Jews from Damascus, Syria. At first the convergence of the two groups was not easy. The Aleppan Jews thought of themselves as more knowledgeable, largely due to their history in Syria as a center of Jewish learning. The Aleppans, or *Halabis*, followed the traditions of *Aram Soba*. The Damascene Jews or *shammies*, prayed in a different house of worship, although in Brooklyn the two groups lived side by side and socialized.

As the Syrian Jewish community in Brooklyn grew, it established its own clearly defined infrastructure, including a cemetery, synagogues, religious schools, ritual baths, and a community center. At the same time, the Syrian Jews became assimilated into society, through dress, language and basic education. However, they continued to nurture and preserve their heritage, values and culture, as they knew them in Syria. While members of the community learned and did business with the secular world, they clearly established parameters under which they operated. Parents, concerned that their culture and religion not be compromised by secular influences, controlled social liaisons and marriages, although arranged marriages were no longer forced. Inter-marriage with non-Jews was banned.

Moral values, including religious observance of *kashrut* and the Sabbath, as well as *tzedekah*, *chesid* and other *mitzvot*, were expected. Until the late 1950s, most Syrian children attended public school and boys received their Hebrew education from a *Talmud Torah* (a place for Jewish learning), at the *k'nees* or shul.

When the Syrian Jews came to America, they were limited in what they could do to support their families. Most men had no more than an eighth grade education and they did not know Yiddish or English so factory jobs were not desirable. Many became peddlers, an occupation that allowed them to observe the Sabbath, or small shopkeepers. They sold household items, linens, doilies, curtains and tablecloths. Both commercial and

kin ties bound the immigrants from Aleppo with those who remained in Syria. Most had liquid assets.³⁵

In those early years, the New York-based Hebrew Immigration Aid Society helped to settle the newly arrived Jews. The Syrian arrivals were often placed in apartments on the Lower East Side with Ashkenazic families. Linguistic differences made it difficult for the two different types of Jews to co-mingle. The Ashkenazim did not understand the Syrians Arabic language and Hebrew accent. The Syrians were unaccustomed to the bland foods served by Ashkenazic Jews. The patrician Spanish Portuguese Synagogue on the Upper East Side did not welcome the immigrant Syrians, whom they considered low class.

When Syrian Jews first came to New York, men often came alone until they could afford to bring their families. The Arabic speaking Jews were uncomfortable with their Eastern European brethren and found solace and comfort in the kitchen of Rose Cohen Misrie of Beirut. Rose and her Aleppan husband, Israel Misrie, opened the Egyptian Rose, a Lower East Side restaurant that was a haven to Syrian Jews arriving from the Near East.

In addition to eating, there was talking, bargaining, trading, card games and *toleh* (Arabic for backgammon). Rose spun her tales and her storytelling made the restaurant feel like home. A different menu of Middle Eastern cuisine was prepared each day and everyone ate what was prepared. The Egyptian Rose was the place to be, especially for men who came to New York without their families.

It was common for Aleppan men with rabbinic training to work as merchants, rather than as judges or full-time scholars, since they considered it preferable to earn a living through secular means. Unlike East European Jews, trade rather than secular education was the road to economic mobility.³⁶

Eli Hedaya, a Syrian Jew, came to the United States in 1905 at age 12 and immediately became a peddler, or door to door salesman. "I used to buy supplies from Natan Labi, who was then on Washington Street, although Jewish. I would buy a dozen or dozen and a half 'pieces' at a time, which I sold as a peddler.... working at age twelve or so was common in Halab. At that age a boy went to work to support, help feed the family, [sic] among the poor."³⁷

Syrian Jews owned a number of retail ventures. Some opened stores at beach resorts in Rhode Island, Virginia and along the New Jersey shore, where they sold souvenirs, jewelry, sweatshirts and T-shirts. Many merchants sold linens, doilies, handkerchiefs and tablecloths. Others tried their luck in different cities around the country such as Buffalo and Nashville, but returned to New York City, when life as a Jew became difficult.

³⁵ Walter P. Zenner, "Reinterpretation of a Tradition by a Transnational Elite: The Rabbis of the Aleppan Diaspora," University at Albany.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Sutton, *Aleppo Chronicles*, p. 259.

Atlantic City, New Jersey became a summer resort where many Syrian Jews had summer stores. Hedaya said "The Boardwalk at Atlantic City had a number of busy linen stores, some operated by Jews, some by Christian Syrians; Madeira Lace Shop was Jewish."³⁸ Another Syrian Jew, Basil David Cohen recalled "I worked in the South for three years, and when I returned to New York, I brought back \$3,000 or \$4,000. I took out a peddling license..."³⁹

Before long, the Syrian Jews began praying in their own separate areas. In 1911, a dozen or so Syrian Jews united under the name *Kehillat Shaare Sedek* and built a synagogue on the Lower East Side. A *Talmud Torah* for the children opened from 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. daily and on Sunday mornings. Members of the community, most of them businessmen, taught the classes. There was no rabbinical leadership until the arrival in 1910 of Rabbi Yitzhak Shalom zt'l, who helped and supported thousands of Aleppan immigrants as they established themselves in the New World.⁴⁰

Over time, the Syrian Jews opened more and more retail establishments, selling merchandise similar to what they had offered when they peddled door-to-door. The businesses were family operated and the merchants favored employing other members of the community. Some Syrians banded together and formed wholesale establishments or began to manufacture clothing. Importing children's clothing from the Far East became a tremendous source of income, particularly after World War II. Evidence of this is found today as the owners of manufacturing companies such as Catton Bros. (children's clothing), Baby Togs, the Children's Place, Lollitogs, Jet Set and Jordache jeans all bear Syrian surnames.

After World War II, Syrians expanded from the garment business into the electronics business and opened chains of stores like Nobody Beats the Wiz or wholesale outlets like Soundesign. Republic National Bank was owned by Aleppans, as well as chain stores like Duane Reade, Rainbow Shops and others. Syrian importers still sell to K-Mart, Wal-Mart, and J.C. Penney stores.⁴¹

After living on the Lower East Side in the 1920s, the Syrian Jews began moving to Bensonhurst, a Brooklyn neighborhood, where they established a cemetery (in Staten Island), two synagogues, a *Talmud Torah* and a ritual bath on 67th Street near 20th Avenue. The Damascene Jews prayed at Ahi Ezer Synagogue on 71st Street, led by Rabbi Murad Maslaton, while the Aleppan Jews prayed at Magen David Synagogue, built in 1921, on 67th Street.⁴²

A *souk* or shopping area that specialized in Middle East imports, developed in Bensonhurst with all the stores the Syrians needed, carrying an array of items similar to those in Syria. The *souk* had food shops, grocery stores and kosher butchers operated by

³⁸Sutton, p. 266.

³⁹Sutton, p. 324.

⁴⁰*Princely Wisdom*, p. 99.

⁴¹Sutton, *Aleppo Chronicles*, pp.103-104.

⁴²*The Spirit of Aleppo*, Sephardic Archives

community members. Here women could purchase imported spices, such as *kamoon* (cumin), *parhat* (allspice), *habtlebedegeh* (a black seed), as well as grains such as *smead* (*semolina*), that were needed for their cooking. They also purchased dried tamarind, a fruit used to make *oot*, a paste made from the tamarind fruit that is used to flavor *lahamajene*, *meshe* (stuffed zucchini) and other Syrian specialties.

Meyer's Ice Cream Store on Bay Parkway and 69th Street was a common hangout for Syrian teenagers and young adults. Summers were spent with long days on the beach in Coney Island, then a popular summer resort.

In 1932, Brooklyn community leaders invited Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin of Jerusalem, to come to the New York as the chief rabbi of its growing community. Rabbi Jacob had established a reputation in the *Bet Din*, and as a *Kabbalist*, teacher and *Gaon* (*great leader*). He was also the son of esteemed Rabbi Shaul Kassin, a Syrian rabbi from a long rabbinic dynasty. Rabbi Jacob agreed to become chief rabbi and moved to Bensonhurst with his family in 1933. His leadership and guidance was paramount to the shaping of the Syrian and Sephardic community in Brooklyn.

During these times, weddings and bar mitzvahs were simple, generally with the ceremony held in the synagogue and the reception held in the family home with food cooked by the women. Guests squeezed in and out like sardines, dancing to Arabic music and stuffed their faces with homemade Syrian delights, all the while enjoying the homelike atmosphere of being among family and friends. One photo of the bride and groom recorded the event for posterity. Those who could afford it held wedding and bar mitzvah receptions in Ahi Ezer Congregation on 71st Street in Bensonhurst, and hired professional musicians and a photographer.

Many Syrian Jewish families who hosted receptions in their homes, purchased foods from Esther and Selim Salem, son of Rabbi Abraham Salem. In the 1940s, the couple built a commercial kitchen in the backyard garage of their home on 63rd Street just off 21st Avenue. The family's seven children and Rabbi Abraham Salem lived in the house. The basement was converted into a storage area for gallons of pickles and imported Syrian spices. There were huge ovens, trays and freezers to store the food.⁴³

Theirs was the first kosher Syrian catering available in New York. The Salems catered weddings, bar mitzvahs, a *sebit* (Saturday lunch meal) after Saturday morning services, and numerous parties throughout the growing Syrian Sephardic Jewish community in Bensonhurst. Members of the Sephardic community would trek up the narrow side alley to the Salem's backyard kitchen, especially in preparation for holidays and special events, to purchase her goodies. The smells would emanate from the kitchen and greet you like a breath of fresh air.

Summer vacations in Bradley Beach, along the New Jersey shore, became commonplace, as hundreds of families rented or purchased summer homes there. This started a popular social season where young boys and girls could meet and find a suitable spouse.

⁴³ Based on personal observation by the author.

The Syrian Jews made their next move in the 1940s. The wealthiest members of the community moved to the Ocean Parkway section of Brooklyn where they purchased private homes. In just a few years the entire community became clustered around Ocean Parkway, which was later dubbed by author Joe Sutton, "Aleppo in Flatbush."

By the mid-1950s, there was widespread community feeling that the *Talmud Torah* education offered was not sufficient to satisfy the need for religious education of the children.

Sutton says: "A few hours each day in the afternoon *Talmud Torah* were perceived as inadequate, insufficient to foster the development of young men and women who would perpetuate the Syrian community's accustomed pattern. A Syrian day school was a revolutionary innovation; none had ever been remotely conceived of in Aleppo and Damascus."⁴⁴

Chief Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin, whose own children attended public school, called for the opening of a Jewish day school or elementary yeshiva. In response, the Syrian community built two yeshivas - *Magen David Yeshiva*, which was primarily Aleppan, and *Ahi Ezer Yeshiva*, which primarily served the Damascene Syrian community, although the separation between Damascene and Aleppans dissipated in later years.

In the first and second generations, most parents did not consider a college education necessary or desirable for their children. Most sons went into family businesses, thus the argument for higher education as an economic necessity was weak. Parents did not want their children to be exposed to secular influences, as this might promote too much assimilation. But over time this trend was reversed and today most young people from the community attend schools of higher education. The community boasts artists, dentists, psychiatrists, physicians, attorneys, writers, decorators, real estate professionals, photographers, social workers and even a Harvard physics professor.

Many of these professionals remain in the community with their client base. The insular nature of the community was clearly preserved by Rabbi Jacob Kassin during and after his lifetime. He was able to encourage intramarriage among Syrian Jews through approved social occasions that encouraged young people to meet.

The Syrian Jews continued in Brooklyn as a cohesive group. Their religiousness and devotion to Judaism is evidenced by the infrastructure of synagogues, yeshivas, high schools, *mikvehs* (ritual baths), a community center and several community subsidized senior citizen apartment buildings.

In the late 1950s, the community opened Shaare Zion Congregation, a large synagogue with a magnificent domed sanctuary and social hall on Ocean Parkway between Avenues T and U. Rabbi Jacob, his son Rabbi Shaul, his assistant Rabbi Abraham Hecht and his

⁴⁴Sutton, *Aleppo Chronicles*, p.69.

son-in-law Rabbi Baruch Ben Haim, married thousands of couples there. The community also used the 67th Street synagogue for funerals and Sabbath services.

By the 60s, the community had grown more affluent. Bar mitzvahs and weddings were celebrated with fancier parties and receptions. Shaare Zion acquired a dedicated kosher caterer for its magnificent social hall, where receptions were commonly held.

With the increased affluence, homes were refurbished or rebuilt with the finest materials. Women dressed in the latest designer fashions. More affluent members of the community were spending their summers in Deal, New Jersey, an area much more prosperous than Bradley Beach. Before long, the entire community abandoned Bradley Beach as a summer retreat and began their summer vacations in and around Deal, in Long Branch, West Long Branch and Oakhurst.

The influence of the Kassin rabbinical leadership led Brooklyn's Syrian community to shed secular education in favor of more Jewish and Torah learning in a controlled yeshiva environment. *Talmud Torah* education, or after-school Jewish study programs, were virtually eliminated from the community by the late 1960s. Most children attended one of the two community yeshivas or Yeshiva of Flatbush, an Ashkenazic school with an excellent reputation. As the community grew, other yeshivas opened to meet the demands of different religious and educational philosophies as well as economic circumstances. Today there are over a dozen *yeshivot*, as well as high schools.

Leading the movement towards yeshiva education was the Kassin family. Rabbi Saul Kassin, eldest son of Rabbi Jacob, taught for over 32 years as a teacher at the *Magen David Talmud Torah* and then the Yeshiva. The children and grandchildren of Rabbi Saul Kassin attended *Magen David Yeshiva*, as did the children and grandchildren of his sisters and brothers.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, marriages are rarely arranged, and marriage to non-Jews is uncommon. Most Jews in this community maintain their Orthodoxy with full knowledge received from their yeshiva education of the reasons for their customs and traditions and a full understanding of Jewish law. Secondary education is much more common and widely accepted than it was 30 years ago.

Some traditions have grown depending on a family's means. For example, the tradition of sending money to a bride so she can prepare for her wedding night by visiting the *mikvah*, has grown into *swanee*. The *swanee* maintains the same tradition of sending gifts to the bride, such as a nightgown or *peignoir* set, perfumes, an evening purse and jewelry. But over time the gifts have become more and more elaborate and today it is widely accepted that gifts are also bought for the groom by the bride's parents. The *swanee*, or collection is sent to the home of the bride where it is put on display for friends and relatives and is an occasion for celebration. The celebration can be a tea, held during the daytime, where coffee and desserts are served, or in an evening. Generally, *shob el boz* (made from cornstarch and sugar) or *el mazee*, a white drink made from almond juice is served. In addition, two desserts, *knafe* and *baklava*, are a must. *Knafe* is a dessert

made from shredded phyllo dough and ricotta cheese. *Baklava* is a dessert made from pistachio nuts flavored with sugar and rose water and wrapped in phyllo dough.

Today's weddings have come to meet a certain set of standards, generally a formal reception held in a social hall. Women shop for dresses, each trying to outdo the next one with up-to-date styles. They take great care with personal grooming. While a band may have been acceptable entertainment for a wedding in the 70s, today it is common to see multiple types of music, including violins and harps during the ceremony, a disc jockey for the reception and Arabic music in a separate area for more senior guests. The events are recorded with both still and video photography.

Interestingly, the opposite has happened in the celebration of *bar mitzvahs*. A *bar mitzvah*, which occurs just prior to the boy's 13th Hebrew birthday, is a rite of passage. The *bar mitzvah* reads his *Torah* or *Haftarah* passage in *shul* and can then be counted as a man for purposes of a *minyan*, which requires 10 Jewish men for the saying of certain prayers.

There are far fewer formal *bar mitzvah* celebrations with elaborate receptions than before. Since most children attend *yeshiva*, nearly every synagogue has a youth *minyan*, where young boys are expected to attend and pray, providing them with a routine that evolves into a lifelong practice of praying and religious observance. By the time the *bar mitzvah* occurs, the boy is usually so skilled at reading the *Torah* in synagogue that the rite of passage is a formality. For others, the *bar mitzvah* has the same significance it always did, but is celebrated differently. Celebrating the event with a trip to Israel where the *bar mitzvah* boy can read his passage at the *kotel* in Jerusalem is preferred. Many believe that the experience of a *bar mitzvah* in the Holy Land combined with traveling in Israel will solidify the foundation of Jewish learning in preparation for lifelong observance of Judaism.

Today, Rabbi Shaul J. Kassin, eldest son of Rabbi Jacob S. Kassin, is the Syrian community's chief rabbi. The community has built an admirable infrastructure of Jewish life in Brooklyn, New York, with linkages that spread all over the world.