



KALIMI

KALIMI, the word used to refer to the Jews of Iran in modern Persian usage. The word “kalimi” derives from the Arabic root KLM meaning to address, to speak, but the appellation in this context is derived directly from the specific epithet given to the prophet Moses as Kalim-Allāh, as indicated in the Qur’ān: *wa kallama Allāhu Musā taklim* “And to Moses God spoke directly/face-to-face” (Q.4.164). Jews in the Qur’ān itself are referred to both as Yahud and Banu-Esrā’il.

It seems that this use of *kalimi* as a designation for Iranian Jews is of a fairly recent origin, for it does not occur either in Judeo-Persian literature or in Persian texts prior to the 20th century. As the citations in Dehkhodā’s *Loġat-nāma* illustrate, the appellation was not restricted in the past solely to Jews but was bestowed on many Muslims as well. The earliest occurrence of the word, usually in plural form, is found in Šāhin’s *Ardašir-nāma* (1333) where the word refers to the biblical people of Israel fighting their enemies (Netzer, 2001).

After the creation of the General Registry Office (Edāra-ye taḡt-e aḡwāl) in 1924, Jews were apparently required to register their religious affiliation in their ID cards as *kalimi* meaning Jewish. The reason for choosing the word *kalimi* instead of, for instance, *yahudi* or *musawi*, is not clear. It may be surmised that the word *kalimi* carried a more positive connotation than other alternatives. It is also possible that the word *yahudi* would have evoked an association with the derogatory term *johud*, though *johud* and *yahud* both come from the same root and in the past did not carry any pejorative connotations (Netzer, 1992; for the pejorative associations of the word see



Dehḡ-odā and Moʿin’s dictionaries). The words *yahut* and *jahud* meaning the same, with no derogatory connotation, are attested in Middle Persian.

Jews of Iran and Tajik-speaking Jews of Central Asia call themselves *yisrāel*. In some local Jewish dialects such as Judeo-Eṣfahāni the term used is *jid*. The Tāt-speaking Jews in the Caucasus call themselves *johur*. The names or appellation *kalimi* or *johud* for Jews are not in use in Arab countries where instead the name *yahud* is applied.

According to the report given by Yusof Cohen, the Jewish representative in the last Majles (1976-79) of the Pahlavi period, he was successful in having the Majles discourage the abovementioned practice. One may understand from the report that the registration of the name *kalimi* in the Jewish ID cards was not required by any law and that such registration depended upon the personal and hence arbitrary decision of the officer concerned, and that this custom applied only to the Jews and not to the other religious minorities. It seems therefore that this requirement was not applied in all times nor applied consistently in all towns and cities of Iran (Cohen, pp. 133-36). However, Jews of Iran continue to use the appellation *kalimi*, and also *yahud*, for their organizations, e.g., *Anjoman-e Kalimiyān-e Tehrān*, *Sāzemān-e Bānovān-e Yahud-e Irān* (est. 1947), among others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Y. Cohen, *Gozāreš va ḡ-āṭerāt*, Los Angeles, 1993.

A. Netzer, “Johud or Yahudi,” in *Čašm-andāz* (A Jewish Iranian Monthly published in Los Angeles), 1992, p. 25.

Idem, “Vāža-ye kalimi va mozu’hā-ye marbuṭ-e be-ān,” in *Čašm-andāz*, 2001, pp. 24-45.

(Amnon Netzer)

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